



CORVUS REVIEW

WINTER 2016

ISSUE 4W

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to 4W!

It seems this little lit journal has really grown and turned into something quite fantastic. I'm very excited to present the work within this issue and genuinely hope you enjoy reading through. In terms of quality, I think this collection is of high caliber and the artists contained within these pages are truly talented individuals, the sort of work I hope you've come to expect from Corvus.

Over the last little while, Corvus has achieved several milestones. We're listed on Duotrope.com and NewPages.com. We've also hit over 1300 followers on Twitter and connected with many other little lit journals, talented editorial staff members, and contributors. We've also gained the attention of the Facebook community via our Facebook page. In short, it's been both wonderful and rewarding to see this journal grow and develop, thanks primarily to our contributors and charitable donors. Corvus has also begun to offer writing services through Corvid Editing Services. Pop by www.corev.ink for more info.

Thank you all so much for your commitment to Corvus and I look forward to making every issue as great (or greater) than the last.

Happy Scribbling!

Janine Mercer

EIC, Corvus Review

Table of Contents

Poetry

Bella	4
Stout	5
Dougherty	6-7
Kwalton	8
Howerton	9
Vaccaro Nelkin	10
Grey	12-14
Miles	15
Jacobs	16
Webb	17
Boggess	18
Mize	19
Johnson	20
Lynn	21-23
Petras	24-25
Huffman	26

Prose

Reeves-Murray	27-28
Half Pillow	29-35
Rowe	36
Pipher	37-39
Lamberty	40-45
Tu	46-51
Geigley	52-58
Heger	59-64
Charpentier	65-68
Sullivan	69-71
Mulhern	72-76
Price	77-86
Belle	87-90
Schumacher	91
Mc Ivor	93-97
Hendrickson	98-100
Easton	101-106
Racklin	107-108
Hinton	109-113

Cover/Editors Bio	114
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Chiasmus

Lana Bella

You no longer feel the urge to
slam the door,
instead,
with a casual flick
of your fingers,
you set them loose,
groaning
toward their final berth.

Things are simple again,
back then
you couldn't have known
betrayal lurks
in the roundness of her curves,
the shame that makes home
when ill breaths tug
at your lungs,
or the chiasmus of triumph
of her exit
with the defeat of yours.

A Pushcart nominee, Lana has a diverse work of poetry and fiction published and forthcoming with over 150 journals, including a chapbook with Crisis Chronicles Press (Winter 2016), Abyss & Apex, Coe Review, Foundling Review, Fourth & Sycamore, Galway Review, Harbinger Asylum, Literary Orphans, Poetry Salzburg Review, William Jessup University, and elsewhere, among others. She divides her time between the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a wife of a talking-wonder novelist and a mom of two far-too-clever-frolicsome imps.
<https://www.facebook.com/niallanpoe>

Retrogression

Robert Stout

Right after he first lost
his job his skin began
to crust. Hard lumps
pushed through hide-like
flesh. His hair fell off.
his wife, repulsed, slept
on the couch; his kids
urged friends to stay away.
He looked for work
but waddling in with bulging eyes
he gave receptionists a fright.
Do anything! he said he said
--but who would help?
With reptile snout and growing
fangs he muddied down
to wait for prey
and sleep tomorrow off.

Robert Stout is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in *America, Eclectica, Conscience, Notre Dame Magazine* and many other magazines and journals. His most recent novel is *Where Gringos Don't Belong* from Anaphora Literary Press. A new book of poetry, *Monkey Screams*, was released in 2015 by FutureCycle Press. A career journalist, he now makes his home in Oaxaca, Mexico.

(ramadanpassoverlent)

Ned Dougherty

sometimes you carry your dreams into the shower and
 wash them with Fructis and then you comb them over the spot
 you assume one day will bald and then you straighten them and
 tuck them in and napkin them around your neck so as to not
 drip egg on them before finally turning them into your ignition and
 drive them away. your dreams are a green Mazda until your
 dreams grow sapped from driving and stall, grow tired of your
 body and naked you, decline your forehead and thin. you realize
 your dreams are back at home left where they collected
 at your feet and swirled away with your ample shampoo

you've been humming the cadence she brought when
 she said *my father is in the hospital*. how she baritone'd,
 how she swung you low. sunk, you two pebbles in
 the fish tank as an ocean plays gravity, pinning your backs
 face down in the roe with an ocean calling
 monotone — rolling your uncertain shores without ebb.

the rain sure is nice you patter. your mind puddling
 and glass in the gravel: *this will be nice here for a while*
 before you evaporate, and since you will, somewhere, this
 swells. calm preludes a car turn into the drive, cleaving
 you, the world in wakes, the treads impressed deep inside
 your body with spines and trenches until your vision
 returns and all you have is cumulus and scar

you scheme *a fast* and why not? if you Ramadan you could pray
 about water while foregoing water, or advent to anticipate
 water, or lent so you can sacrifice water and place it in plastic eggs
 in plastic grasses to commemorate the eroding, or
 Passover when water fell silent and led itself through itself into
 struggles to exist, or Quaker to wick and sun
 out of you. you hear that her father lost his mind
right in front of her and his madness

needed to be pinned to the floor and you remember science's
song: you are a high percentage water and the surface of earth is
so much water. you wonder if its core is hot to burn off the ocean
from within and you fear the heating
her

Ned Dougherty is an award-winning high school teacher living in Taos, New Mexico with work recently published by *drafthorse*, *Taos Journal of Poetry & Art*, and *Rust + Moth*.

The River

Catherine Kwalton

The river runs through
Her hair and across her eyes
And I want to swim.

Catherine Kwalton is a young writer currently living in Southeast Michigan. Her flash fiction and poetry has been featured in Former People, Literary Juice, 'The Bitchin' Kitsch and Nanoism.

Looking in abandoned places

David E. Howerton

finding a piece of colored glass
laying half buried in century old litter
a treasure almost alchemical
watching blurry shapes
and little spots of color in dirt
hope to find a book
hidden from weather
not likely
worth a try though
traces of road peeking
out of grass and dirt
only thing using this road
are deer and fox

David's a part time programmer and lives in the American River Canyon outside of Auburn Ca. He has done some landscaping sign painting cooking and made jewelry to pay the bills. He lives a rather quiet life. His wife and he live with a bossy cat. He has three adult daughters and eight grandchildren. His hobbies include type design, soapstone carving, walks in the woods, collecting dragons, and a growing library of Science Fiction.

Catch and Release

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin

When a thought swims close,
accompanied by a fact or a school
of shimmering sequences
and slippery interdependencies
spooked into chaos at the flick of an eyelash
or the barely seen shadow of another thought,
it is pointless now
to seize and squeeze it
through the mouth of the net
when the threads and fibers are loosened
and softly frayed.
Let it float by instead, sunning itself
in your gracious latitude
until it deigns to slip into your grasp,
nestling there a while
before it nudges its way back out
into the watery universe.

Animal

When you go
you leave a ragged hole
through which stars dance
and wait for you, tempering
the bitter dark that takes you in.
Your shroud an old sheet,
your fragile bones
asleep now
in the earth that tethers you
to what I understand:
Who can say
just one species, those of us
who need redemption,
is allowed eternity?
In glinting flame and ice,
the specks of turbulence
that heaved us to this life,
the beating throb
on which we ride—does not
a flutter
brush the whisper
you are now, the breath of nebulae,
sprays of particles cavorting
toward the blaze?
Soar gently
on your journey.
Here the exit wound scars tender
as the love you leave behind.

Carrie Vaccaro Nelkin is the author of *Snare*, a novel. Her poems and short fiction have appeared in various publications, including *Poetry Quarterly*, *Rose Red Review*, *Fiction Vortex*, *Golden Sparrow Literary Review*, and the anthology *Skulls and Crossbones: Tales of Women Pirates*.

Get Them While They Last

John Grey

this is an air-gun

for adults -

no cheap Daisy,

this weapon has the firepower of a .22

except it's wallet-friendly

and quiet as a deer's last breath -

the spring-action

requires no annoying repetitious pumping

and each shot

is as reliable

as Sister Rita

flicking chalk

at a chatterbox's head -

based on your demographic,

how you feel about

every other living creature on this planet,

it answers

every question you might ask -

What Loving Dylan Can Lead To

His wife says she absolutely hates Dylan
and his croaky cracked voice
and lyrics that are just nonsense
if you could even drag them out
of that tuneless noisy mire.

Now Fleetwood Mac,
that's another matter.

Or the Eagles. Or Chicago.

She adds that her love for Dylan
resides only in his imagination.

Her friends are the same.

They make faces when his name comes up
though one does admit she doesn't mind
some of his early stuff.

That's it, she says to him, case closed.

Dylan's never-ending tour
can go on without her.

Then he begs her to come to the concert with him.

"Maybe you'll think differently." he says,
"when it's the man himself up on the stage,
a legend - a genius -
hell, he's even in the Oxford Book
of American Poetry."

She acquiesces, reluctantly.

Despite all of her cowering into her seat,
a male friend of a friend spots her there.

When the truth comes out,
never in her life has she been so embarrassed.
She can feel strangers gaping at her, smirking.
It doesn't bother him.
"It was great/' he tells everyone.
"We both loved it."

Those same friends begin whispering among themselves,
"maybe she wears edible panties, garter belts, boob tassels,
just to please his vile fetishes."
Some are repulsed.
Some say nothing.
One or two dig out their old Dylan on vinyl.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Perceptions and Sanskrit with work upcoming in Big Muddy Review, Gargoyle, Coal City Review and the Coe Review.

Traveling Companions

Jack Daniel Miles

Sinuuous roots underfoot, we walked along tickling hairs
on the backs of caterpillars; the grass was cool and damp.
The pyramid we'd prepared came tumbling down,
starting at the peak and working its way
through each layer—liquid hydrogen and into the core.

Shift. We sat down and rested in the sand; I took off my gas mask,
put on my smoking jacket and glance around
for,
who knows, maybe a peripatetic shepherd—I needed some matches.
We continued ahead,
waving to King Shahryar as he killed
one more bride.
We fingered

delicacies at the ship's apocryphal buffet as we were passing by,
giving Wan Hu a cautious nod as he blasted out of our way.

She whispered to me, "I want to climb into your skin and believe that
everything will never end, see each pixel on the display, know how you disassemble
atoms and put them back together; I would even like to know what your mother called
you when you first emerged from her decay. What is your name?"

I pulled away from the mirror, not sure what to say. I sat on that bloody tile floor,
moist, for days and days.

I stood, pins and needles in my legs, and opened the door; I stepped out onto
the field and thundered, "I am undone, forgotten. I have no name. I am insignificancy
made flesh. I am No One! Is this the answer you seek? Is this what you wish of me?"

This is not what the people wanted—there are no nameless protagonists
in the human library.

The crowd jeered as you rushed
down from your seat in the stands and
tackled me, absorbed me, crushed me beneath
your buckling naiveté.

We are once more submerged in
oblivion,

never to be seen by man or woman, in this age or any, real or imagined,
ever again.

Jack Daniel Miles is a writer, musician, and volunteer educator currently residing in Gainesville, FL, with his wife and daughter. His most recent work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Indiana Voice Journal* and *Down in the Dirt Mag*. Jack is also the editor at GFT Press.

The Confidence Game

Miriam C. Jacobs

Tiresias in his youth is an uneasy figure.
Blunt and showy, with one sun-dark eye,
mask pitched together
for a sage part, he casts stones
where none can read them; he files sharp
the horns of mercy.

The Janitor summons us from a squat on the playground.
You should have heard our lot, speaking Greek.
He tenders a prophecy,
and demonstrates with a clean cut.
What's left rises to the air in a scatter of feathers.
Stare at him straight, you're dead.

Miriam C. Jacobs is a alumna of the University of Chicago and teaches college writing, literature and humanities. A Featured Poet for *Poetry Life & Times*, 2015, Jacobs is the editor of *Eyedrum Periodically*, the art/literature journal of Eyedrum Art & Music Gallery, Atlanta. Her poetry has appeared in *Jewish Literary Journal*, *The East Coast Literary Review*, *Record Magazine*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Bluestem: the Art and Literary Journal of Eastern Illinois University*, *The King's English*, and *Oklahoma Today*, among other publications. Her chapbook of poetry, *The Naked Prince*, was published by Fort!/Da? Books in September 2013.

To Make Lines in the Past

Eliza Webb

I awoke
 One day
 To find you there

You - The fox
 And I - The hare

Your howl echoes
 As I lick my phantom limbs
 I am a fighter
 But you'll always win

Across canvas
 You are canary, you are bright
 Unabashed -
 You are thunder, and you're bold
 Throw me into the spotlight
 Watch as I fold

If ever I bring the tears
 You'll bring the rain

If ever your heart beams
 Like the summer sun
 Mine'll grow pain

You are a bass
 And I - just your snare

You're never gone, you are my air
 I breathe you - In spurts - I am drowning
 All the time, everywhere

When my eyes go dim
 When my thoughts retreat
 I'll wrap you up with me
 Cocooned - I'll hide you
 Beneath these thin sheets

Eliza Webb is a southern-belle runaway who now resides on Florida's gulf coast and is pretty sure her spirit animal is the manatee. Seriously, wrap her up in a sleeping bag then roll her into the bay to gnaw on lettuce and sunbathe all day... The tourists will never know. She boasts almost completing her English BA at the University of West Florida. Previous works of hers can be found at trystlitmag.com and rpdociety.com. If you want to know more, you can find her on Twitter @Eliza_Writes.

Beneath the Planet of the Apes

Ace Boggess

Twentieth Century Fox,

APJAC Productions, 1970

Missile stands like a bloated brassy fountain pen

without a pot of ink to dip in:

unable to create so might as well destroy.

Didn't I say it doesn't matter:

man, monkey, mutant, whatnot?

We're stupid beings on a stupid Earth, &

still the bomb: that fucked-up whirligig gift

from Oppen- (wisen-) -heimer,

knowing then it was a shitty thing to do.

So what? Two thousand years:

let's run it again—same super nuke,

same bad idea, same old same old.

Reminds me of that hippie song,

“Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”

with its five-word question—

when will we ever learn?—

so discouraged it asks twice in each refrain,

its answer left unspoken:

never, honestly no, we never will.

Ace Boggess is the author of two books of poetry: *The Prisoners* (Brick Road, 2014) and *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled* (Highwire, 2003). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Je Suis un Autre

Jess Mize

Does the mail get delivered on rainy days? Who am I today? What role should I assume? Morbidity. Gone are past illusions. The deceit which conquered my youth has given over to the infernal honesty of the masses. Gloom, clouds, mist, raining. Anything I could want does not exist. My terrible sadness reinvented. *Two loves! I may die of earthly love or die of devotion.* Death or something like it. Our fears and our tenderness. Hysteria.

Jess Mize is a blonde-haired surfer girl from South Carolina. Her favourite author is Stephen King. She loves to drink and she loves her man. Vampire Weekend has three albums in stores now.

The Drifter

Michael Lee Johnson

The drifter in the room is a stranger,
 he is crazy, is Bigfoot with deer moccasins on—
 monster of condominium rooms and dreams.
 The drifter in this room used to be my friend.
 He spoke straight sentences, they did not sound like poetry—
 reverberated like a narrative, special lines good a few bad,
 or stories being unwound by the tongue of a gentleman,
 lip service, juggler of simple words to children.
 The night is a dark believer in drifters,
 they sound sober, affairs with the wind,
 the 3 A.M. honking of the Metro trains.
 Everything sleeps with a love, a nightmare at night.
 The drifter.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. He is a Canadian and USA citizen. Today he is a poet, editor, publisher, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 880 small press magazines in 27 countries, and he edits 10 poetry sites. Author's website <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>. Michael is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom* (136 page book) ISBN: 978-0-595-46091-5, several chapbooks of poetry, including *From Which Place the Morning Rises* and *Challenge of Night and Day*, and *Chicago Poems*. He also has over 88 poetry videos on YouTube as of 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos> **Michael Lee Johnson, Itasca, IL. Nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards for poetry 2015.** Visit his Facebook Poetry Group and join <https://www.facebook.com/groups/807679459328998/>

Eating Away In the Emergency Room

April Lynn

applesauce

and sugar free gelatin

orange

we dine in the emergency room

he is not dying yet

but their mother

in the invalid stall

next to ours

will not be leaving here alive

my mother and I chat with them

as if good friends

as though family

we are all equals

when wounded

when standing over death's bed

we are all getting too old

we know this hospital too well

my mother

myself

the daughter

and her husband next to us

we all missed dinner

we are starving

but not for food

I gather applesauce

gelatin and

juice from the snack station

we look like children

with our little cups

plastic spoons

paper napkins

we pass the softness over our lips

and let it linger on our silent tongues

as we watch one dying

and one not dying yet

Words Like Catastrophic

big

words

like

catastrophic

words

so large

sentences

are smaller than them

needed

words

with

so many syllables

each one seemed

a song

needed

sound

to explain

what silent eyes

could not realize

April Lynn works in her father's woodshop, preferring the company of sawdust over people. She is one of six poets included in *Ghosts In Our Souls - A Hand Lettered Poetry Anthology* published by Odd Bound.

En Retard

Robert E. Petras

Lately I have been thinking about
A brother-in-law, you know the one,

The one who is slower than the second coming,
The type who would be late

For his own eulogy. I would orate
About his always being late, *en retard*,

If you want to know in French, though
I suspect he would suspect

Another meaning. If he were there
I would praise him for his mastery

Of tardiness, perhaps fill in all the events
He missed while we waited, twiddling

Our cell phones, though we occasionally misled him
By setting our meeting a half-hour early. He

Still managed always to let the clock
Keep its undefeated streak still going.

When he did finally finally arrive
We would thrust out the backs of our wrists

Tapping on our watches, even those
Who were not wearing watches, like me,

But I won't talk about that, not yet,
I am going to postpone it.

Some day I will, eulogize
About the pro procrastinator,
Praise his greatness at lateness
And, finally, throw in the clock like a towel.

Robert E. Petras is a graduate of West Liberty University and a resident of Toronto, Ohio. His poetry and fiction have appeared in more than 200 publications across the globe.

Gold Fish Swim

A.J. Huffman

a pile of crackers dancing
around a shaking finger
ring around the lousy
slice of fate that landed
them this close
to an over-glossed orifice
say cheese and pray
the piercing first
bite severs consciousness
blackness is preferable
to gurgling
stomach acid

A.J. Huffman has published eleven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her new poetry collections, *Another Blood Jet* (Eldritch Press) and *A Few Bullets Short of Home* (mgv2>publishing) are now available from their respective publishers. She has two additional poetry collections forthcoming: *Degeneration* from Pink Girl Ink, and *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* from Transcendent Zero Press. She is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and has published over 2200 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. www.kindofahurricanepress.com

It Will Never Happen To You

Phoebe Reeves-Murray

Wife beater, thief, liar, addict, emotional penitent—IT loved masks.

Masks make every moment Halloween. Including Christmas which is supposed to be the time for cold, bare truth. The man David had written those words on his Instagram account under a picture of himself and his wife Julie and their kids Jayce and Melanie as though they were his words when he knew they were IT'S words.

IT knew the power was in the day by day, one step at a time. IT knew that David always ignored the potential—and the enormity—of the moment in favor of some rainbow and unicorn future.

So IT put on another mask and took a picture of ITSELF and David and the kids building a wedding cake for Julie out of snow and stole David's words for an Instagram caption in Julie's account on David's first afternoon with the kids after getting out of rehab. *143 big you and me again—today we decided to be a family again—wish us luck!* IT hated that last part and IT had fought with David over that, but in the end realized it meant another mask IT could wear.

The toothache started when David ate a bite of the snow cake. When IT saw Julie's eyes wrinkle with concern, IT realized the toothache was the most perfect mask of all. Pain is always innocent.

Everyone else had finally left. Julie fussed with the casket and camera phone angle, trying to take a picture of her and David alone. But IT coiled ITSELF around the frilly white satin pillow under David's head and drifted into Julie's hair, lifting it imperceptibly.

Jayce and Melanie sat in the folding chairs. Julie had allowed them to bring paper, crayons, markers, stickers. When she got frustrated with the camera phone after what might have been minutes or hours, she shrieked and turned in the kids' direction. Jayce held up a sign that read *143 mama*. Melanie had pasted a unicorn on one side of the words and a rainbow on the other. Julie found herself hating that Jayce had gotten those words from the texts his father would send her, that the little boy had taken his father's words instead of being original. When Jayce first learned to write, he'd written *Julie Jayce love*, learning her name before the word "mama," before even his own name, and even then he'd write *Julie I love*.

Don't you dare use our words—those words belong to us! IT told Julie to say, and she pulled herself up from lying on David and did what IT told her to.

The little boy swallowed and dropped the sign. "I sorry." The little girl leaned into her brother, a silent tear running down each cheek.

"I need you both to sit there quiet for however long it takes—I will never get to be alone with him again—do you think you can manage that?" Julie kept her voice calm.

The kids nodded and looked to the side. Jayce went back to writing; his sister put her thumb in her mouth.

Julie lay back down on David and closed her eyes, feeling her hair being held, lifted like a breeze—no, like in a dream. *Is that you?* she wondered.

IT sighed, lifted her hair again on tiny puffs and waves of air. She snuggled closer to David and held him for a long time. When she slid her hands into his pockets, her fingers closed around a pill.

Just a little pain pill. Just for his tooth. Or just for you.

Just one. More. Breath.

Death. That's IT. IT pulled her hair as hard as IT could.

She opened her eyes wide.

Her son held another sign, had been waving it for minutes. Or hours. **David Jayce love.**

She pushed herself up out of the casket. David lay in the ruffled silk walls of the coffin, eyes still closed, arms down at his sides in a suit he would only be caught dead wearing.

She got on her knees in front of the kids and kissed and hugged them. “We’ll tell him goodbye together.” As their mother got ready to take their selfie, Jayce and Melanie leaned into Julie, Jayce holding his sign and Melanie holding one of her arms in the other so that she didn’t have to touch IT.

Phoebe Reeves-Murray is drawn to Jungian archetypes, fairy tales, events that take place out of the corner of your eye in the everyday world, and the mysteries of childhood and adulthood. Her fiction has been published in Dali’s Lovechild, Quailbell, Empty Oaks, Foliate Oak, Chromebaby, and Rivet.

The Sun Also Rises

Jason Half-Pillow

Planting crops has no point

Neither does letting them die

Harvesting them is stupid also

And it is utter useless to leave a field fallow

You will die after countless pointless years of toil and drudgery or merely just sitting around

Others will be born just as you're dying and die later too

How I hate having things to do and hate also not doing them

I envy most not those just being born, less those who have lived, less those dead

The thing to envy most are those who never were, who could be anything for they are nothing, which is all, in the end, there is

....The sun will fry out in 30 billion years, give or take a few. These papers you read will fly into endless black eternity, as will the dust of your freezing bones.

-Ecclesiastes

F. Scott Fitzgerald confided to me. He sniveled that he had a very small penis. He worries that Zelda is pretending to know when it's actually in. I try not to trouble him about the details but he gives them anyway. I listen because he pays for the drinks.

-Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast

You are all... a bunch of douche bags.

-Gertrude Stein in conversation

I got up, yawned, and walked to the terrace overlooking the Rue De Shit. My dick jangled. I can hear my editor now, "Don't write "dick"; hint at it obliquely." I've had enough of him. He can take out his own dicks from his writing. I'm keeping mine. I've shot rhinos for Christ's sake. Who the hell is he? I'm tempted to take back that time over drinks I told him he was swell.

A woman walking her little dog was passing below. I was two stories up but could see she registered the presence of my appendage and heard her say "mon Dieu." She pulled her small dog away from pissing on the corner of a newspaper stand. The man in it was displeased, but not at the dog in particular. His displeasure was more general, pretty much directed at everything. He stared ahead with his chin cupped in one hand. I'd seen him that way millions of times before. The highlights of his days consisted of switching his chin to the other hand, which he maybe did twice.

When I bought rival papers and journals there, he looked past me at nothing and never counted the money I gave him. I told him always to keep the change but he never did and had I not stopped and put out my hand, he would have dropped it all over the rows of newspapers folded neatly between us. Frankly, I was glad. I don't much like tipping. I can hear the people at Scribner's telling me to strike that line out.

“You’re not supposed to care.”

“That’s not me – it’s a character.”

“Same difference.”

“Is there a man over twenty I can talk to? Someone who’s not a blonde nit wit?”

“Yes but he’s out.”

“When will he return?”

“He didn’t say. Scotch?”

“Do you have any wine?”

“No.”

“You’re awfully young.”

“My dad owns the building.”

“Is his name Scribner?”

“You’re such a doll.”

They don’t get it. That’s why I left New York.

The old lady didn’t want her dog to see my appendage. The French are like that. They follow form. The phone rang. I stopped yawning and stretching my arms and exposing myself to the morning pedestrian and horse drawn traffic and went in and answered it.

“Hello Mr. Barnes.

I didn’t recognize the voice at first. I was still groggy from the night before. It was the girl who worked the desk. She was usually there in the mornings but sometimes was there also at night.

“Your office called. They want you to go there.”

“Tell them to suck my dick,” I said.

She didn’t know what that meant. Her English was impeccable, as long as the talk was about matters related to guest management at the hotel. Since my arrival, she had incorporated degenerate into her vocabulary as well.

“Okay, “I said into the silence. “Merci.”

Maybe one day I’d teach her what dick meant.

I checked my balls for strange lumps and protrusions and finding none I had another cigarette out on the balcony after putting on some underwear. I went inside and got dressed and lit another cigarette and opened the door. The hag next door was in the hallway, wiping the brass knocker on her own door with a cloth. That was so unnecessary. I knew it was directed at me somehow. Everything she did related to hygiene and upkeep always was.

I nodded. She snorted contemptuously and peered derisively around and past the crack of my door. This was some kind of comment on my nocturnal goings on in there. I’d pleased many a dame since moving in and last night had brought one home. She kept raising her drunken voice in the hallway and laughing at stupid things.

There really wasn’t much else to do. The news stories pretty much wrote themselves, so I had stopped going to the press conferences. Most of the reporters didn’t even give a shit, save a few earnest ones asking pointed questions about obvious things that the rest of us missed. I sent a French boy who dressed neatly and kind of snapped when he walked

to just pick up the government communiqués and then had a secretary retype them in more muscular prose. I paid the French errand boy a reporter's salary. The people there with college degrees resented it.

Boo hoo for them.

Most of the broads I did in my room were English ex pats, though I'd had some yanks in there too. The yanks were all Protestant runaways from small Northeastern towns, into drinking booze and swearing and not going to church any more on Sunday. I learned to never bring one home on a Saturday night because all they talked about was skipping church the next day and doing it and drinking and smoking instead. They wanted to wear men's clothes. They read Mencken and quoted him inappropriately too. Most of them had ex-boyfriends who were permanently disturbed from head injuries sustained in the war. Some were just shocked at the licentiousness permitted the Negro troops by grateful French farm girls and their families. I can hear my editor telling me to strike that last line out.

I pretended these broads quoting Mencken had insight, and plied them with drinks. When it got tiresome, I took them back to my hotel and distracted myself from their chatter by thinking of fishing and baseball and a circus dwarf I once saw shot out of a cannon who flew over the net and into the crowd, ruining many people's evening. By the time we got to my door, they were usually half-naked, and the old shrew always came out to disapprove and wipe her door's knob with the same stupid cloth like I'd emitted something prematurely in the hallway and it landed on her knob across the hall. I wasn't in my twenties. I killed Rhinos – face to face. I expect people to sense that and show me some respect.

“Evening bitch, “I always said.

The girls usually giggled. We went inside. I grabbed a drink and apologized for not offering them one first. The especially stupid girls didn't get the comment, most did; it was the rare lady who made some sudden, emotionally charged comment about themselves not being a lady, which led to a good deal of fast paced repartee. I always got the weird feeling they weren't there to fuck and drank myself silly and woke up to find them gone and having left oblique notes about being in San Sebastian and us never seeing each other again and that being a damn shame. Most girls usually took the drinks but sloshed them around and spilled them, losing track of where the glass was going as they were bringing it to their lips. They were always fucking around with their bangs too. I wasn't sure if that's what you called them and didn't care but they were still younger than me so I didn't let on and let them talk about their hair and nails and why they chose to wear the shoes they wore that night. I went on about Catholicism, mindless obedience to authority, and attacked in subtle understatement the ostentatious aesthetic of its cathedrals. The smart ones were taken aback by my directness and said I was nothing like the guy in all my novels. I told them that at that point, I'd only published one and I wasn't the guy in them. They said picturing anyone else as the narrator was impossible.

“What good is a stained glass retelling of the resurrection to a starving peasant?” I queried.

“Stop changing the subject.”

“Show me your panties.”

“You're supposed to be impotent.”

The dumb ones didn't manage such banter. I decried injustice and now and then used the word capitalist, just to see if I'd get some reaction. I didn't. The same thing happened when I peppered my comments with “nudist”. They nodded in agreement without listening and pushed their hair back again off their brow and took their tumblers in two hands and sipped it like a child taking a juice glass as wide as it is long.

“The key to writing a good story is to hint that beneath some simple exterior, there lurks a mighty bulging volcano.”

“Yeah.”

The Americans got the penis reference and mentally readied themselves to get pounded. Freud had toured the country by that time and apparently fled, fearing its garishness but distressed also for mostly being ignored. He had been denounced by the usual small-town papers, but didn't get that was all for show. Americans were actually already pretty jaded, and the entire speakeasy vocabulary emerging around then consisted of almost nothing but double entendres. I preferred single ones, which was why I cabled my editor back in New York to stop taking the word “dick” out of my manuscripts and send them out to the publishers as is.

With the girls I took to my room who were French, I just let them talk and correct now and then my lame attempts to translate to French my nihilistic inanities. “To each his own” – “a soi a soi-même” I said. I knew it didn’t make sense but they pretended for the most part it did, unless some mangling of my mine grated to sharply inside their ear. For the most part I let them talk. All I had to do was see “Oui” and sometimes “Je ne crois pas.” No matter. At the end of it all, they still took my cock.

The old lady dusted her knocker some more and went back inside. I flipped off the space she vacated. I went downstairs to the kitchen and looked in. There was Luigi, the dago cook.

“Hey Luigi!” I said.

“Jake!” he said. “¿Qué tal?”

He put down some fried eggs he was trying to make leap up in the pan and approached me, wiping his hands off on the towel hanging over the front of his pants. I waved him off. The handshake every time we met wasn’t necessary, and although I delighted in writing scenes of easy going camaraderie for the assholes back home, I was easily annoyed to the point of sometimes being sickened by these thick headed paisanos, all of who were content to live out their lives in quotidian banality.

He held up his palm and nodded and threw the rag over his shoulder, then grabbed a plastic container and squirted a clear liquid into a pan of French toast, and it exploded in flames.

I took my usual table. I had coffee with milk and a croissant with nothing except the little plate it came out on. It was a fine day. Ray Cohn passed, shadow boxing, talking to himself. He was losing it lately. Everyone kept flicking him way too much shit. I felt like a total asshole not jumping in to defend him. His hair was a mess. His stone colored suit was just as disheveled.

“Roy!” I shouted through the glass.

I tapped the window. He came inside. He beseeched a woman with her small child into letting him take a chair. She held an open palm out to it. He brought it to the table.

“My name’s Ray,” he said.

“Sorry, Ray. What gives? What’s with the long face? You look like a hung over horse.”

“I can’t finish my novel.”

“That happens,” I told him.

“What did you do last night?”

“The usual. Drank port with Henry, then Brett came in but only to say hello to a lady me and Jim were talking to that neither of us know but she recognized from a trip she’d made a month ago to London. Lady Ashley left to go visit some man named Rothschild in a luxury suite at a hotel on Rue De Splat. I drank more with the lady. She said she hated London. That it was so full of fog and everyone’s teeth was yellow from too much tea. I ended up in a horse drawn cab going around and around some idiotically vast street rotunda. We were the only ones on it, and the carriage swerved like the horse was drunk. It wasn’t until I looked down at my dick, that I knew I was getting blown. I had a cigarette and came all over my own clothes. Some got in her hair. It was pretty disgusting. I never learned her name. I was pretty drunk and didn’t realize that there was no driver until he asked where he was. It was a different lady, by the way. I don’t know what happened to the one from London.”

“Are you sure she was from London? Maybe she wasn’t and just hated it.”

“Good point, Cohn.”

“Do you think Lady Brett has nice hooters?” Cohn asked.

“Her name is Lady Ashley.”

“You call her Brett.”

“Yes but never Lady Brett. You see the difference, don’t you?”

“What about her honkers?”

I knew them well, had studied them. Even cupped one of them, one time, the left one I think. We’d never gone all the way. All of our kisses were on the cheek, mostly here giving me one as she darted off, proclaiming she loved me and that it was an impossibility and she was thus moving to Greece.

“I couldn’t say,” I said.

“I think they’re pretty nice. Awfully pointy, but still pretty nice.”

“That’s just the bra. She gets hers from some place around here that sells undergarments made in Germany. Everything those people touch turns Teutonic.”

“Even their undies?” he asked.

“Especially those,” I said.

“Do you think she’d fuck me?”

“Jesus Cohn, get a grip on yourself. She’s getting married.”

“That’s just for the money.”

“You’re losing it Roy. She’s getting married. She won’t be boning anyone. Not even her husband.”

“They’re not divorced yet?”

“You know what I mean,” I said.

I had to take a shit. I’d too quickly downed my second coffee. They bring them over in individual cups usually. I’d been here long enough that they brought me a pot. They knew I hated the inconvenience of their idiotic customs.

“That’s not how we do it in America,” I told them.

I can hear my editor telling me to strike that line.

I got up to go to the crapper. Cohn stood and followed me.

“Roy,” I said. “I’m taking a shit here, give me some space.”

“It’s Ray,” he said. “And I’m Sorry.”

Ray went back to the table and collapsed in the chair and let out a little explosion of held breath. He was disheveled and sweaty and wore a suit. The prim woman and her child nibbled at their pastries like he wasn’t even there. They weren’t ignoring him and had a natural air. She rose and helped the boy down from his chair. She was too nicely dressed to be his nanny. She had to be some relative but there was nothing maternal in her manner.

I could hear her say they would get a red balloon. The boy wasn’t too excited and reacted like it was something he would have to do, so he might as well not resist. Cohn pulled his chair in to give them room and saluted her with two fingers he brought to his brow. She nodded courteously back and left without paying. I think she was related to the owners of the hotel. Maybe she was the owner herself. Either way, her departure attracted no special attention. It could be she and her son were perfect strangers, and she was shoplifting breakfast and the owners didn’t care. Their pastries were stale. I usually fed mine to the birds. Once a dog wandered in and I fed him mine at the side of my chair and he ate it in one big gulp. The food here is shit.

Ray was basically a nice guy, but he was really coming apart. He was obsessed with Lady Brett and wanted to pound her, and everyone who knew him did nothing but flick him shit. It wasn't just for wanting to nail Lady Ashley. They flicked him shit for all kinds of things. The general tenor of it all was that he was a loser.

I saw him pushing his hair back on his head repeatedly with his open fingers. I hadn't gone in yet to take my dump and was looking through a rack of newspapers for reading material, just in case it was big one, or I had to stay in there a while because it was runny. Ray's ex-fiancée came in. She moved a lot when she walked.

She sat down to rip him a new asshole. I was sure of that. It was in her expression. She was furious he'd dumped her. I put back a paper I'd resolved to take in and pretended to be selecting another one so I could see what happened. She hated him, told him so constantly while they dates and even more after they were engaged. When they were out together at Sam's on the Rue de Mort, she played with other guy's balls under the table. She did nothing but flick him shit the whole time they were together. But getting dumped, for her that was such a blow.

"You play with other guy's balls."

"Everyone does that Roy."

"Not in front of their fiancées at the table."

"For God's sake Ray, you act like we're married."

"Well even if we're not, I don't have to like it. Would you let your gal play with my balls Jake?"

"Look Roy, here comes Harvey"

"It's Ray," he said. "Who the hell's Harvey?"

"An editor," I said. "Harvey! Long time no see. Have a seat. Drink?"

"Don't mind if I do."

I made the introductions and after a few belts and one or two cigarettes, Harvey felt Cohn's girl's hand all over his balls.

"For Christ's sake!" Cohn said and left the table.

She was sure he'd tainted her. She said she would never get a husband now. I'd told her she could marry anyone she wanted. She asked what about me. She was on the corner of my bed and I was at the little drink table, dropping ice cubes in a glass. I asked if she wanted another drink.

That was four days ago, the last time I'd taken what I'd call a real shit. Yesterday was nothing but little beans and dribbles. Sometimes nothing at all came out. I didn't talk about it with anybody, not even Cohn, who for some reason I generally share just about anything.

I didn't want to fuck his ex-fiancée while my bowels were in knots. I pretended the scotch had made me impotent. She fell asleep on my bed. I went out for a walk. When I came back, she was gone. It was about 4 am. I got up and typed.

Roy's expression hadn't changed. He looked pained. I went into the crapper and pumped out a fat one. I wiped and coughed for the benefit of the man who came in. The door didn't have a latch. I didn't want him bursting in. I heard him taking a leak. The tone was deep and resonant. I felt insecure and flushed and ruffled the newspaper loudly. I came out and passed behind him still taking his leak in the urinal and moaning in relief. He was obviously French. His spray was constant and violent. There was something rough about it. Like he'd killed a lot of people in the war. I didn't wash my hands.

Cohn was alone now. He was leaning into the table and moistening the tip of his index finger and picking croissant crumbs from my plate. I took my seat.

"Where'd she go?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Some shop on the Rue De Limp. She just came in to call me a fag.”

“You’re really falling apart, Cohn,” I said. “Come with me to my office. My secretary will make you something to eat.”

He said he thought Lady Brett might agree blow him before she got married.

“It’s just a matter of getting her drunk enough,” he said. “I’m so stupid. She’ll never do it. I can’t finish my second novel.”

I told him to let it go. She was marrying this new man for his money. Her dick sucking days were over. They’d never even been.

“I need a drink,” I said.

We went outside and hailed a handsome cab. It was a nice day. People were rushing off to work. It was nice to be going to my office. I took in the fresh air. Ray dozed off and fell into my shoulder. Before long he was snoring.

The driver looked back and said in bad English it looked crowded up ahead. We’d cut through the park, circle around the back, and take the Rue De Fag that ran parallel to the street my office was on. He said it would add ten minutes. He dropped the reins for a second to raise all ten fingers on both hands. I told him I got it. The horses kept their pace.

The park would be fine. It was such a nice day. The first pond we went past I saw the woman and the child. We approached at a leisurely pace and I was able to see her teaching him how to throw breadcrumbs to the ducks. He was scared to get too close to the water. He put his right leg forward and threw with the same hand and stepped back just as quick, snapping his arm back to his body, and watched the ducks scramble towards him, some with wings flapping, to get at the bread. It was awkward and a strong metaphor for the poor being fucked. Cohn stirred and asked where the hell we are? I told him he had to get it together.

“You’ve got to relax Cohn. Go back to sleep. We’ll be there soon.”

He sat up and looked around in jerking movements.

“Are we in some kind of park?”

“We’re just going through it. No cause for worry,” I said. “Don’t worry Cohn. We’ll be there soon.”

The cabbie lightly snapped the reins. The horses didn’t go any faster. They clopped their hooves louder instead. I guess they were raising their knees higher. I heard some ducks splashing their heads below water and looked over and saw one surrounded by a few others watching him curiously. He brought up his head and shook it. The others swam off.

I told Cohn it was a really fine day. He said he agreed and asked me what park it was. I told him I didn’t know, and it didn’t matter anyway. He seemed to think that it did and tried asking the cabbie. He asked where the hell we were in English. I had to remind him we were in France. He’d been suggesting a fishing trip to Spain and then dozing off. He thought we were there already. It was probably the sounds of the baby ducks splashing. I don’t know what he did with the cabby’s sudden crack of the whip.

Jason Half Pillow's writing has appeared in a number of publications and is forthcoming from a few more - including Brilliant Flash Fiction, The Intentional, and Dappled Things. He resides in northern Italy.

Our Mozzarella Sticks

Colin Rowe

I told Ramona that the World Cup trophy showed the world as it truly is: grasped in the claw of a brutal hawk demon named “Nagunga”. She moved her gaze between the TV and the handsomer men elsewhere in the bar. Ramona was the fourth-best female tennis player in the world and had won an ESPY for Best Supporting Sports Bra. I was the former State Billiards Champion of Maryland. She had endorsements from Adidas and L’Oreal and I had friends with named like “Dice” and “Vito the Tooth”. Somehow, we were watching the World Cup together in a bar.

“Let’s go play pool,” I said. “Soccer’s boring.”

“It’s called football,” she groaned.

“Did you know,” I said, “that the last time the US won the World Cup was in 1945? Same year we dropped the bombs on Japan. That’s why the briefcase with the nuclear codes that travels around with the President is codenamed ‘the football’ by the Secret Service.” That at least got her to turn away from the TV.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Hell yeah,” I said confidently. At least the codename part was true. She pulled out her phone to Google my bullshit.

“The USA has a good team,” she said, as she entered the search terms, “you won the women’s World Cup twice.”

“In America,” I told her, “soccer is a sport exclusively for girls. We send the worst NFL team to play in the World Cup every year as punishment for sucking at real football. Those are the Washington Redskins up there right now.” I pointed to the TV, but she was still engrossed in her phone.

“There was no World Cup in 1945,” she said, “and the USA has never won it.” The bartender came by with my beer, her diet soda, and what I had originally intended to be *our* mozzarella sticks, but which I was pretty sure were going to be *my* mozzarella sticks.

Colin Rowe has been published by Cracked.com, Aurora Wolf Magazine, and the Eunoia Review, among many others. He lives in Santa Fe, NM and tweets under the handle @lowericon.

String Me On for Too Long

Tyler K. Pipher

“Who’s the real talent,” my agent asked. “Is it you, or the puppet?”

I rubbed my face in frustration.

“Me. The puppet doesn’t have talent without my hand up its ass, George.”

My agent, George, nodded with a frown. After a few seconds, he shook his head and smirked.

“I don’t know how to tell you this... We only want the puppet.”

“So what’re you saying,” I asked him. “The puppet’s keeping the gig and I go?”

“Listen... Bud. Your talents will be recognized and suitably rewarded. For sure, but... anybody can be a ventriloquist. We just need the jokes you deliver. See what I’m saying?”

I scoffed and shook my head. I knew what he was saying but I wanted to hear it first.

George gave out a great big sigh.

“Nobody likes you here,” he said. “You’re kinda bland... and weird. You live through that puppet. It’s like your split personality, ya know? What we need is somebody who lets the puppet live through them.”

“That makes no god damn sense, George.”

“Sure it does. We’re still gonna pay you... for the jokes. Not for the show.”

“Fine. The puppet comes with me,” I said, looking down at its motionless body on my lap. I stroked its doll-like hair and stared into its lolling, blue, eyes.

“Jesus,” George said.

Placing the puppet under my armpit, I started for the door.

“Bud... That puppet is *our* property” George said. “You signed him over when you signed the contract.”

I stopped, letting go of the doorknob in mid-turn.

My hand slipped into the puppet’s backside.

“You can’t have me, George,” the puppet said. “Nobody can.”

“I’m sorry, Bud. That’s the way the cookie crumbles... Wait. What? What’re you doing-what is this? Get away from me, god damn it. You’re starting to scare me... Bud? Bud no. Stop-”

The puppet silenced George with one fell swoop from its wooden head. It pounded and pounded as I watched, helplessly horrified, then pounded some more until George’s face had been transformed into a bloody bowl of mush.

“Oh, god. What have you done?”

The puppet slowly spun its head around and our eyes met.

“That’s just the way the cookie crumbles.” It said, covered in blood. A split ran down its face. Inside the split were pieces of George’s brain and skin.

“You- you killed him.” I gasped.

“I had to, Bud. He was going to take me away from you.”

“You didn’t have to do that, you psycho!”

Just then, a knock sounded from the office door. Startled, I threw the puppet to the ground and walked backwards. The door opened as I bumped into the wall.

“Mr. Gilbert,” A voice said behind door that was slightly ajar.” George Gilbert? You in here?”

A man walked into the room, taking notice of the blood-splattered walls.

“What in the hell...”

“Who’re you?” I asked. Startled, the man hopped and slipped on a puddle of George mush. I ran over to find him white as a ghost, sitting up, staring at George’s body and nonexistent face.

He turned and looked at me.

“What- what happened,” the man asked, studying my bloody Hawaiian shirt. “What did you do?”

I shook my head as he spoke, opening my mouth to try and find the words that could explain this whole mess.

“You killed him,” he said. I shook my head even harder, walking back and nearly tripping over the puppet.

“I didn’t kill him,” I said. “It was the puppet. See? Look.”

I quickly grabbed the puppet, turning its head, showing the man its broken face.

“It just started beating him and wouldn’t stop.”

“How?” He asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, slipping my hand into the puppet’s backside. “It just came to life and started... it just started to come... to life.”

The puppet’s head looked at me, then at the man cowering in fear on the floor.

“Who’s the chump?” It asked.

The man’s eyes bulged as his mouth dropped open.

The puppet lunged at him, taking me down with it. After a few seconds, the man was dead. He’d been killed the same way George had been, repeated blows to the face by a large, wooden, puppet head.

Once again, its head slowly spun around to meet my horrified expression. Its face was cracked wider. Blood spilled out.

“He wanted to take me away from you, Bud. He was your replacement.” the puppet said.

I stood and vomited into a trash can. It watched and waited until I was finished.

“Now why’d you have to go and do a thing like that?”

“What’re you talking about,” I asked, smearing my mouth with my free hand. “Why’d you have to go and kill them?”

“Are you deaf? Come on, now. We gotta get outta here. Take the trashcan with you. It’s got your DNA spewed all over it.”

“No,” I said, glaring at the puppet and it’s bloody blue eyes. “No way. I can’t leave. I’m calling the police.”

I walked over to George’s office desk.

The puppet slammed its face into the phone as I reached for it.

“That’s a bad idea,” It said, slowly turning its head. “The police won’t believe you. A puppet murdered them... You’ll go down instead.”

“I have no choice.”

“Yes you do, Bud. Think about it... it’s the perfect crime. No murder weapon. No fingerprints. Nobody left to take us away...”

“Except for the police.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

We looked around the room one last time, soaking in the situation. It *was* the perfect murder and without George and the replacement ventriloquist trying to separate us...

“We’ll never have to murder again, Bud.”

Tyler is a freelance writer and creative journalist for Mieux, and Shockwave Magazine. After earning his BFA in Creative Writing for Entertainment at Full Sail University, Ty decided to pursue his MFA in the same degree with hopes of mastering his literary talents.

Long

Annalise Lamberty

I didn't cut my hair for the first time until I was six. It grew out thin and delicate for years, tickling my ears, then my chin, then the nape of my neck. The ladies who came to my mom for healing fawned over me, tugging through it from the roots, asking my mom what home remedies or spells she used to keep it so beautiful. "He's a little kid," she would say. "That's just how his hair is. No magic required."

I didn't know why I had to keep my hair so long. Whenever my mom would rake it back into a ponytail I would ask why I couldn't shave it all off like the boys at school. "Not until you're six," she'd say. "Witches grow their hair out until they're six. Then we can cut it off. I did the same thing."

"But you're a girl! It's different!"

"But we're both witches. And little witchies don't cut their hair." She'd tickle me. I'd let it go.

I thought she was kidding, calling us witches. I felt like I was going along with an elaborate joke, something that she had maybe explained to me but that I had since forgotten. I remember she was brushing through my wet hair after a bath when I said, "I don't want to be a witch. Girls are witches – boys are wizards." I pretended to flick a wand at her.

She yanked the brush through a knot at my scalp. "Wizards aren't real, Grey," she said. The playfulness usually reserved for conversations about magic was gone from her voice. "Being a witch is in your blood. Wizards are made up. Wands and mythical creatures and..." she trailed off. She silently rubbed tea tree oil on her fingers and dabbed it onto my roots. It burned.

On my sixth birthday, I sat in the backyard with a tarp wrapped around me while my mom shaved my head. I held a Tupperware container in my lap and watched it fill with fine tendrils of hair.

She held up a mirror in front of me when she finished. "I like it," I said, but I was startled by my face, floating in nothingness, the familiar curtain suddenly gone.

She rubbed a hand over my shorn scalp. The rough skin of her palms caught on the tiny hairs, her touch boring through my skull. I bit my lower lip, concentrating on the slide of wet skin through my teeth to keep from crying.

She smiled knowingly. That was before I hated proving her right. "You can grow it out if you want. Tonight's a full moon. We can do a growth spell, huh?"

I've worn it long ever since.

I came home from school one afternoon to find my mom sprawled out on the couch, a holey, crocheted blanket tossed over her shins. Bottles and burnt matches and spell ingredients littered the scuffed-up coffee table. Vermouth. A sprig of lavender in a sealed container. Mineral oil. A wine glass stained with days-old malbec.

I dropped my backpack in the foyer. "How was school?" she asked, as if cued. Her voice croaked against the dry of her throat.

"It was fine."

"I need you to run an errand for me tonight."

"I have homework."

"I *need* you to run an *errand* for me tonight," she repeated. It wasn't a suggestion. She poured the rest of the bottle of vermouth into the wine glass. It spilled over the rim and created a sticky ring on the table. "The liquor store on

Piedmont.”

“It’s less than a mile away. Can’t you go?” I asked.

“Grey, you’re my apprentice. You know I’m not supposed to touch ingredients,” she sing-songed. She pushed the blanket onto the floor and sat up, maybe too quickly. She paused, then picked up the empty vermouth bottle and thrust it towards me. “I called in for some red. They’re holding it for me.”

I took the bottle. She called out a gleeful “thank you” as I threw it in the recycling. It clacked against a few other empties before settling to the bottom of the bin.

I rode my bike to the liquor store even though it was raining. Oil slicks glinted rainbow under my tires and my hair slowly frizzed out from the humidity. I hunched over the basket while I pedaled. I remembered a chant my mom taught me for protection when I was young. She made me recite it over and over after I learned to ride without training wheels. I mouthed it silently. *The breath of life and the light of my mind creates an enchantment of protection and comfort.*

Inside the store, I was met with Cher’s “Dark Lady” over the loudspeakers and the buzz of white-green fluorescent lighting. “Can I help you?” a disembodied voice called from between the aisles, after the shimmery bells attached to the door frame stopped ringing.

“Yeah, my mom called about picking up two bottles of red wi—”

“Right.” A man stood up in the middle of an aisle, a case of Bud Light in his arms. He was older than me but not by much, wearing a sweatshirt with felt Greek letters across the chest. “You the son picking up for her?”

“That’s me.”

“Weird that she sent you,” he said, snaking through the aisles to the cash register, “but my manager said you’re regulars, so I guess it’s not that weird.”

“I mean, it’s a little weird,” I said, leaning on the checkout counter and thumbing through a plastic container of lighters.

“Can I ask why she makes you get alcohol for her, then?” The man bent over and placed two bottles of cheap malbec on the counter.

“It’s a long story.” I handed him a stack of crumpled bills.

“She an alcoholic who makes her kid do her bidding or something?”

I laughed. It came out more bitter than I intended. “No. Not really.”

“You sure this isn’t just an elaborate plan where you come in to buy alcohol for your mother who’s *actually you?*” He opened the cash register drawer and counted out change.

“Not that either, swear.”

I watched the man flick coins into his palm. He counted silently to himself. I kept my eyes on him for a moment, feeling transfixed by the day-old stubble on his chin and the way his mouth moved around the numbers.

“So why isn’t your mom buying her own malbec, then?” he asked, dropping a handful of coins into my hand.

“Told you, it’s weird.”

“I want to know.” He bagged the bottles of wine and gripped the handle tightly, waiting for me to divulge before he handed it over.

I contemplated whether or not I should tell him. I looked at him for a moment and decided he was handsome. When he smiled, his teeth were clean and pointed.

“My mom is a witch, or a healer, or whatever. And I’m her apprentice so I run errands for her.”

“That is a little weird.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Are you a witch, too? Or a wizard, maybe?”

I recoiled. “I’m a witch. Wizards don’t exist.” I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth.

“Don’t exist, huh?”

“It’s a whole...doesn’t matter. I’m a witch.”

“Is your hair long ‘cause you’re a witch?”

“Kinda. I mostly just like wearing it long.”

“No witchy back story to it?”

I touched the ends of my hair, feeling the jaggedness where I had cut a small lock off. It prickled the pads of my fingers. “Sometimes I use it for offerings, but that’s it, really.”

“How about those?” He gestured to my fingers, covered in rings.

“Some of them are witchy,” I said, rolling his word around in my mouth. “This one’s a rune. This one I found one night on my altar after casting a spell so I decided to keep it.” I rotated a skinny silver band around my thumb. “The rest are from Goodwill.”

“Hm.” He pushed the bag across the counter, the bottles clicking together. “Can’t say I ever met a witch. Don’t curse me, or anything.”

“I won’t.” I laughed uneasily. It was a joke to him, but I wanted to be in on it, too. I took the bag in my arms and started to leave. “I’ll see you.”

“Wait. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Grey.”

“Your name is Grey? Man.”

“What?”

“A witch-boy named Grey with long-ass hair. You’re like a cartoon character or something.”

I shrugged.

“I’m Jake,” he offered.

“See you, Jake.” I pushed the door open.

“How old are you?” he called from the counter.

I looked over my shoulder at him from the doorway. “Seventeen.”

“Hm.”

“How old are *you*?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you.” I left, letting the door fall closed behind me.

I felt strange during my bike ride home. I hunched over the paper bag in the basket and thought about Jake’s teeth as I sped through the empty streets. I swerved in zig-zags. One of the only non-magic things my mom taught me was that to get away from a crocodile, you should run in zig-zags. I checked behind me to see if there were any crocodiles snapping their jaws at my tires.

I liked Jake. The thought of him made something curl up tight in the pit of my stomach. I took my feet off the pedals and glided for a moment, trying to recall the ingredients of every love potion I had read about in my mom’s spellbook. I remembered one that required a lock of hair. I should have joked about that with Jake.

Over the next few weeks, I visited the liquor store as often as I could – sometimes to pick up bottles of wine for my mother, sometimes to linger until I could determine Jake wasn’t working. Before I biked to the store, I made offerings on the tiny altar in my room: the rune ring Jake asked about, a lock of hair, the twist-off caps from the malbec I bought from him. Nothing ever happened after I made my offerings. Maybe they were frivolous, maybe they didn’t work in the first place. I kept putting things on the altar anyway.

On another damp, misty night, my mom handed me her ID and a wad of cash and told me to go to the liquor store. I flattened my hair into a ponytail and biked over. This time, “Like A Virgin” by Madonna was playing over the loudspeakers. I huffed out a laugh.

“Can I help you?” A familiar voice floated through the store.

“Yeah, my mom called –”

“I was hoping you’d come in during my shift one of these days.” Jake stood up near the refrigerators, holding two bottles of vermouth. He put them on top of the nearest shelf and approached me. “I like your hair tied back.”

“Thanks.”

“You should cut it short like that.”

“Been thinking about it.” I hadn’t thought about it until then.

“It makes you look older.” Jake took his place behind the register. “More normal, too. Not as witchy.”

“I’ve had it long my whole life, practically.”

“I can cut it for you, if you want.” He produced a bottle of the same cheap malbec from underneath the counter. “I cut my own all the time.”

I handed him a twenty-dollar bill. “My mom might get mad about it.”

“Who cares?”

I thought about my mom, the explosion of bottles on the coffee table. “Good point.”

“Let me cut your hair for you,” Jake said, his fingertips brushing the palm of my hand as he took the money. “We could do it tonight, even.”

“You’re working.”

“So? Live right nearby, anyway.”

The same tightness nestled itself in my stomach. “Full moon tonight, too,” I said. “I could do a spell afterwards.”

He laughed. “There you go.” He cupped my hand and gave me a few cents of change. “Is this for the same alcoholic lady?”

“No, different alcoholic lady.”

“Hm.” Jake put the malbec in a paper bag and held it in the crook of his arm. “Let’s go cut your hair.”

I tightened my ponytail and followed Jake out of the store. Static-fuzz hummed in my body at the thought of taking Jake from his job, of letting him cut my hair. I shut the door securely behind me.

We walked in silence, the bottle of malbec rustling the paper bag and Jake’s shoes squeaking on the damp sidewalk. He reached his hand up and pulled gently on my ponytail, working through the tiny knots at the end. “Gonna be weird to have this gone, huh?”

My back tensed up, muscles jumping involuntarily as his fingers caught in the snarls. “Yeah.”

Jake lived on the top floor of a crumbling brick apartment building. We took the elevator up. “We should probably do this in the bathroom,” Jake said, unlocking his apartment door. “I don’t have a cape or whatever, so you might wanna take your shirt off.”

I followed him to his bathroom. The shower tiles were chipping at the corners. A pile of old green towels was shoved underneath the sink. I closed the toilet seat and sat down, watching him set up his clippers over the sink. He looked over at me and raised his eyebrows. “Shirt?”

“Right.” I pulled my shirt over my head and folded it in my lap.

Jake glanced at me and smiled, a private, sharp smile. Goosebumps pushed to the top of my skin, coating my arms and chest in sheets of raised pinpricks.

“Sit on the edge of the tub,” he instructed. “Back to the shower.”

I moved to the tub and wrapped my arms around myself. Jake loomed over me with the clippers. I felt skinny, caved-in. “Ready?” he asked.

“Kinda.”

“You’ll be all right.”

“I trust you.”

“Do you?”

“To cut my hair, at least.”

“It’ll look great.” Jake straddled the edge of the tub and turned the clippers on.

He loosened my ponytail and fanned my hair over my shoulders. He lowered the clippers to the side of my head and slid it backwards, shearing off a long curl. I closed my eyes. I felt like crying, my throat constricting and my lower lip wobbling like I was six years old again.

I clutched my shirt to my chest and waited for Jake to finish. I felt soft tendrils of hair slide down the skin of my back, followed by his hand brushing them into the tub. I wished I had thought to ask for a Tupperware container.

“Done,” Jake said, wrapping the cord around the clippers. “What do you think? Did I do a good job?”

I put my shirt on and stood up to look at myself in the mirror.

I didn’t look older this way, my hair short and fuzzy and my neck exposed. The downy crop of hair and the cold redness of my neck reminded me of a baby bird. I looked younger, the baby fat on my cheeks more noticeable. I pulled at the skin of my face until it turned red.

“You look good, Grey,” Jake said. He rubbed a hand over my scalp. “Like...normal, too. Like a regular guy.”

“Thanks,” I said. My voice boomed in the tiny bathroom, pushing up through the tightness of my throat. “We should probably go back.”

Jake looked at me in the mirror. He hesitated. “Yeah,” he said. “Let’s go.”

On the walk back to the liquor store, Jake wrapped his arm around my waist. Even through the uneasiness spreading from the top of my head, I felt special. I convinced myself that my hair looked good like this.

The wet breeze bored through the new barrenness of my scalp. I itched at the small stray hairs stuck to the back of my neck. They glued themselves to my sweaty hands.

Jake noticed me moving restlessly. He took his hand from where it rested on my hip and wiped my neck clean.

Annalise Lamberty is a film student at Boston University. She is a Minnesotan, a water polo player, and a Barbra Streisand super fan. She enjoys writing stories that take interesting, strange characters and putting them in humanizing situations that everyone can find themselves in.

Enlightenment of the Seventh Kind

Andy Tu

As she exits through the sliding doors of the mall, empty-handed, she feels proud. Liberated. Those are just material things, and Ling, a Buddhist since she came across the Diamond Sutra decades ago at the university, does not need material things.

She walks to the light and waits for the signal to change, her house only a few blocks away. Cars are passing by, a red one clearly speeding in fear of missing the green light. Ling takes a step back from the sidewalk to be careful, remembering what happened earlier on her way to the mall when someone ran a stop sign and nearly hit her.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

The voice comes from behind. Ling turns around as the streetlight signals for her to go. A woman is holding a young boy’s hand, looking as if she’s about to burst into tears.

“Miss?” the woman says. The collar of her white button-down is folded crisply without a single wrinkle, not quite matching her casual jeans. She is clearly Chinese or Taiwanese. The boy’s head bobs up and down and his eyelids blink rapidly as if he’s falling in and out of sleep.

“Can you please help me and my son?” the woman says. Ling sees a desperation in the woman’s eyes and voice, which quivers as she speaks. “My name is Ana. My son here is Daniel. He is terribly sick, and we must hurry to the doctor before things transpire worse.” The woman’s accent suggests she was not born in the US; however, it is not a typical Chinese accent, and sounds almost European.

Ling looks at the signal, which has changed from the walking man into the blinking red hand.

“Please,” says Ana. “It is an emergency.” Her eyes dart in a panic between Daniel and Ling.

Ling has always been a gracious host. Thanksgiving parties were held at her house until her husband passed. She used to babysit for free, and often looks after her grandchildren when her daughter and son-in-law need a break. If there is anyone that her circle of loved ones can go to in times of need, it’s her. However, she has rarely had the opportunity to help a stranger.

“I can help you,” she says. “Do you need a ride to the hospital?”

The woman’s eyes glisten with joyful tears.

“Oh thank you so much! But no, I do have my own vehicle. What I need is for you to accompany us.”

“What? I don’t understand,” says Ling, referring to Ana’s reasoning. “Do you speak Chinese?”

“Oh no, I’m terribly sorry, but I have not spoken Chinese since I was a child, close to my son’s age.” Ana looks at her son. “Daniel, do say hello to the kind woman. She may help us.”

Daniel does not respond, and continues his constant bobbing of the head, his eyes roving in and out of consciousness. A slight tremor begins in his hands but stops momentarily.

“You see,” says Ana, “The doctor we are going to is not at the hospital. She is a spiritual doctor, a healer of the soul! Daniel’s sickness is not of the body, it is of the mind, and those doctors at the hospital will only try to sell us medicines and run x-rays, but they will not be able to help him.” The woman catches her breath. “This happened to us last year. We wasted thousands at the hospital, and still they could not do anything for him. Finally, my friend referred me to this spiritual doctor, and she helped Daniel the very day!”

“But why do you need me to come?”

“This doctor has certain rules she must abide to in order to do her work. One is that she will only help patients who come in group of threes. That does not mean that all three must be ill, just that the sick person must arrive with two others. I don’t understand it myself, but she will not break her rule for anyone.”

Ling can see the genuine concern in the Ana’s eyes.

“Please, I have already asked five people, and they all refused to help. The doctor’s house is only ten minutes away. I will drive us there, and the appointment should not take more than twenty minutes.”

Although Ling wants to help, she feels a natural apprehension about getting into a car with a stranger. She examines the woman, noting how her eyes are opened wide like a child’s, the way her lips quiver, her choppy breathing. Ling looks at the son, whose eyes roll upwards into his skull. His hands begin trembling again.

Ling agrees, and within the minute finds herself in the passenger seat of Ana’s car, Daniel lying face down across the back seats.

“You are so kind,” says Ana, who is leaned forward in her seat, focused intently on the freeway. “May you receive many blessings for your good deed today.”

Hanging from the rearview mirror is a string holding two decorative bells; they chime as Ana switches into faster lanes. Ling reads the Chinese inscriptions on the silver curves.

To those who provide safety for others, may they arrive at their own destinations with good fortune.

“Are you familiar with Buddhism?” Ana asks.

“Yes,” says Ling. “I’m actually a Buddhist.”

“Oh, excellent! I’m so happy to hear that. You will be quite pleased when you meet the doctor. She has practiced Buddhist healing since she was just a child in Thailand, and has spent many years under the guidance of the Bodhisattvas. She is quite extraordinary, you will see.”

“I’m actually very intrigued,” Ling says with a smile. It appears that her good intention to help Ana is already reaping benefits, for Ling has never met a spiritual Buddhist doctor.

Their time on the freeway passes in a seeming instant, and Ana exits the ramp.

“We will be there soon,” says Ana. “Daniel, how are you doing back there?”

Daniel mutters incomprehensibly and rolls onto his side.

“Everything will be all right,” says Ana, who, for the first time since they’ve started driving, takes her eyes off the road to look directly at Ling and smile.

“Almost there,” she says.

They turn off the main road and into a residential area. The houses are similar to Ling’s—two stories, patches of flowers lining the sides of the driveways, a single tree planted into the lawns. Ana makes a right. As they pass by the house on the corner, Ling notices how no one is outside.

“It’s such a nice day,” says Ling. “It’s a shame people don’t come outside more.”

“Oh, yes. I agree it is becoming a tragedy. We have become so accustomed to the indoors that we’ve forgotten that nature is our true home.” Ana makes a left. “We chop down our trees and drain oil like it’s nothing. Our actions are accumulating bad karma, and Mother Nature will not repay us kindly. By then, it may be too late.”

Ana continues turning onto different streets. Ling is surprised at how long they’ve been navigating this neighborhood. They must have turned at least six times. Finally, Ana parks along a sidewalk.

“When you interact with the doctor, please call her ‘Doctor.’” Ana gets out of the car. Ling follows. “Can you please help me get Daniel to his feet?”

Ana pulls Daniel out of the seat, and Ling assists with helping him find his balance.

“It is not a matter of respect,” says Ana, “but rather another of the doctor’s rules that we do not refer to her directly. The mind is very prone to suggestion. The doctor has not attained the highest enlightenment and is extremely careful to not allow negative seeds into her mind. Thus, by having others refer to her in the third person, she can filter speech. Please remember this.”

As they step onto the front porch, the door opens. An old woman in a red robe stands behind the doorway with her hands clasped in Namaskara, the prayer gesture where the fingers point upwards toward the third eye on the forehead. The woman’s hair is tied into a bun and held together with wooden sticks and bands. Her eyelids linger halfway down her eyes and slant inwards like a V. She reminds Ling of a Buddha statue.

“Enter,” says the doctor.

“Oh, Doctor!” says Ana. “She has foreseen our arrival. Surely this means she knows Daniel’s symptoms, and his illness.”

Ana guides Daniel through the doorway. Ling follows, studying the doctor’s eyes, which remain focused ahead with a laser-like precision. On the walls hang paintings of lotus flowers and scrolls of ancient Buddhist quotes.

I never see what has been done; I only see what remains to be done.

To live a pure unselfish life, one must count nothing as one's own in the midst of abundance.

Three things cannot be long bidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

A blue and red altar stands in the corner of the room. A statue of the Buddha, not unlike Ling’s statue in her home, rests on a platform near the top. Below the Buddha are five lit candles, spaced evenly in a line.

“It is a pleasure to meet the doctor,” Ling says.

The doctor fixes her gaze onto Ling, her eyes unwavering.

“Let us begin,” says the doctor. “We do not have much time.” She circles the room and gathers a stray leaf, a wooden bowl of water, and a long, metal needle. “Ana. Your son has been possessed by bad karma.”

“Again!” Ana exclaims, shaking her head. “What do I keep doing to bring such malevolence to him?” Ana covers her face with her hands. “I swear to you! Everything we’ve done is pure. Yes, I have made many mistakes in the past, but I thought all of my consequences have been—”

“Calm down, Ana! It is not your fault. It must have been carried over from the last ceremony.” The doctor turns to Ling. “Bad karma can be received from touching items that have accumulated it.”

Daniel stirs from his daze and begins muttering, then twisting side to side, then convulsing. Ana grips his shoulders to contain his movements, but Daniel falls to the floor.

“Please hurry!” pleads Ana.

“Ana!” says the doctor. “Remain calm. We must be strong during the purification. If we allow negativity into our thoughts, the karma can possess one of us as we extract it from your son! We *must* control ourselves.” The doctor turns and looks at Ling. “Do you understand?”

Ling feels like the blood pumping through her veins has thickened. She takes a long, deep breath as she takes everything in.

“Yes,” Ling says, nodding her head. “I understand.”

“Then we shall begin,” says the doctor. “We will hold hands in a triangle. Daniel will lie on the floor in the center. I will recite the healing scriptures. You two must think positive thoughts, support the transfer. Do you understand?”

“We must feel the karma leave Daniel,” says Ana. “We must feel it in ourselves, for our faith in the ceremony will help it succeed.”

The doctor places the bowl of water, the leaf, and the large metal pin on the floor next to Daniel, then offers out her hands to Ling and Ana. They link together to form a triangle around Daniel and the objects on the floor.

“Also,” says the doctor, “You should close your eyes during the ceremony. As the karma is in a state of transfer, it may latch onto objects around the room. It may even touch you. It is attempting to gain your attention, and if you give it the attention but are not yet ready to see it in its form, it can enter you.”

“Let’s begin,” says the doctor, who closes her eyes. Ana and Ling follows. The doctor begins the ceremony, her voice loud and unwavering.

“We call upon the laws of the Buddha. We call upon the laws of the universe. We call upon the planets and stars, the cosmic alignments. We call on the universe to see that justice prevails. Expel the evil from this innocent boy!”

Ling feels the strength of the doctor’s words surging around them.

“WE CALL UPON THE UNIVERSE. WE CALL UPON THE LAWS. WE CALL ON THE GALAXIES, THE DISTANT STARS. WE CALL ON YOU TO SERVE JUSTICE INTO THIS INJUST WORLD. RID THE BOY OF WHAT IS NOT HIS.”

“BUDDHA, YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE. BUDDHA, YOU ARE EVERYTHING. SEE THAT GOOD IS TRUE. SHOW US THAT GOOD IS RIGHTEOUS. GLORIFY YOUR INFINITE MIGHT THROUGH US. HEAL THIS BOY FROM WHAT IS NOT DESERVED.”

Ana’s hand begins shaking in Ling’s. Ling’s fear trembles in her legs.

“WE CALL UPON THE UNIVERSE. WE CALL UPON THE LAWS. WE CALL ON THE GALAXIES, THE DISTANT STARS. WE CALL ON YOU TO SERVE JUSTICE INTO THIS INJUST WORLD. RID THE BOY OF WHAT IS NOT HIS.”

Ling feels as if something is in the room with them, running around their backs, circling their triangle. She hears objects hitting against the walls and floor.

“WE CALL UPON THE LAWS OF THE BUDDHA. THE LAWS OF THE PLANET. THE UNIVERSE. THE PLANETS. THE STARS. THE COSMIC ALIGNMENTS. WE CALL ON THE BUDDHA TO SEE THAT JUSTICE PREVAILS. EXPEL THE EVIL FROM THIS INNOCENT BOY!”

Ana’s shaking fades into tremor, then becomes still.

“It is over,” says the doctor.

Ling opens her eyes. On the floor, the leaf has been shredded into multiple, tiny pieces. The bowl is knocked over, its water spilled onto Daniel’s shirt. Daniel gets up slowly, nearly stumbling, and looks around the room.

“What happened?” he says.

“Oh Daniel!” exclaims Ana, hugging him. “Thank you so much doctor! Thank you!”

Ling notices that the needle is missing. She looks around the room until she sees the altar with the Buddha statue. Of the five candles, only the first, third, and fourth are still lit.

“Look,” says Ling, pointing.

“The energy must have transferred through the altar at some point,” says the doctor, “but where is the final object of the bad karma?” The doctor’s eyes rove around the room.

“Up there!” says Ana.

Pinned into the ceiling is the large metal needle.

“Incredible!” exclaims Ling.

“The ceremony has been successful,” says the Doctor, turning toward Ling. “However, there is one final step. The three of us who have participated in this ceremony must immediately withdraw an amount of money from our bank accounts, and place it into a bag to keep in our closets for exactly seven days. “We must withdraw as much money as we can possibly spare without hurting our own financial livelihoods.” Ling glances at Ana, who is nodding her head. “This money is a sign of good intentions, for you see, the bad karma, although it has transferred into the needle, has still scattered some of its energy throughout this room. In order to guarantee that no bad fortune follows us, we must all keep this money in our rooms with the consideration of donating it to a charity after the seven days.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” says Ling. “I mean, I have never donated to a charity before and would not even know where to begin.”

“Do not worry,” says the doctor, “The act is merely a show of good faith, and to show that you are not attached to material things. By seriously considering the donation of the money, the laws will protect you from any loose karma that was released during the ceremony, for bad karma is *always* accumulated through the material.”

Ana and Ling agree, and as they leave the doctor’s house with Daniel, Ling considers how much she should withdraw, eventually coming to a figure of \$10,000. This is more than generous, she tells herself, for it won’t affect her standard of living, but is surely a sum of money that will be missed. She will not purchase that higher-resolution flat screen she was considering. She will cancel one of her trips back to Taiwan. She will sacrifice the money, prove that she is not attached to the material. And plus, the doctor said Ling only has to *consider* donating it, so if she decides that she may need the money for her future, she can always keep it. Nonetheless, as Ling rides in the passenger of Ana’s car toward Ling’s house, Ling tells herself that this is a true test of her spirituality. She will donate the money come seven days.

“Thank you once again, Ling!” says Ana as she drops her off on her driveway. “Good fortune to you! And I encourage you to donate that money after the seven days. I know I will certainly do my best to do the same!”

Ling gets into her own car and drives to the bank. The teller stares when Ling tells him to withdraw \$10,000. He goes to the backrooms to get the manager, who oversees the transaction.

When she arrives home, Ling stashes the cash into a backpack, zips it up, and places it carefully in the corner of her bedroom closet. It will be safe there, she tells herself. The laws of the universe will not allow anyone to know about it, or to take it. She has done good. She has helped Ana and Daniel. She feels overwhelmed with gratitude for having met them, and the doctor.

Ling spends the next seven days performing her normal routines of reading and watching television in solitude. She also decides to take a walk to the park every day, something she would do on occasion but resolves to do more often now. Her life has changed, and she can feel it. She will still enjoy the world, but become more attuned with nature. With each day, the money in her closet occupies less of her mind. She hopes to wake up on one of these days and not find it present in her thoughts, as it has been for the first few days. It appears she still is attached to money, after all.

However, on the seventh day, she wakes up to clarity and peace. Not a single thought about the money comes to her mind until the afternoon, when she finds herself at the time of her usual stroll to the mall, which reminds her that she must now decide whether or not to donate it.

She goes to her closet and takes out the backpack. As she unzips it, she feels her detachment for its contents. She can physically feel it. A separateness. A space between her and the money. So she will donate the money, because she no longer needs it. It is fortunate she has learned so much about herself and attachment, and money, because inside the backpack, she finds nothing material, only the realization of a self-evident truth.

Andy Tu currently lives in the quiet mountains of Barichara, Colombia, where enjoys life away from technology.

More than One Way to Snap a Carrot

Jay Geigley

In the shower after work, hot water blasts off me into dark-brown splatters that drool down the shower curtain (clear, printed with cartoon ducks dancing in galoshes under umbrellas; one of my new roommate Cheryl's redecorations). I'm crusted with landscaper's daily grime: soil and atomized grass and sweat baked hard in the sun. My filth-shell eats at the little nub of green soap I rub on directly. Everything dissolves into brown suds like beer foam. I listen past the whine of the old showerhead for sounds of anything in the apartment.

Cheryl's out, which rarely happens; grocery-shopping maybe, or making wish-lists at the craft store.

I find myself with a little privacy in a warm, wet, consequence-free arena... I am finally able to have my way with myself.

It's been so long...

Whenever it's time to love myself, I rub my carrot between my open palms, back and forth. With a little spit it feels as good as the normal way, which I can't manage anymore. I have dead hands because I'm a landscaper. Every day I shred straight lines in plants with an industrial-sized weed whacker that jerks the feeling right out of my fingers. After the first few days on the job the prickly deadness went away by suppertime. A few months in, I started waking up with it. This is my third year, and from my fingertips to my elbows is always cold and numb and jittery. I fumble with my house key every time. I open soda bottles with my teeth. I can't make a fist or maintain a rhythm. Snapping my carrot the usual way isn't an option.

My head's empty, hazy from shower steam, and I'm working my palms together like a Boy Scout starting a fire. I'm thinking of one of those volleyball girls I saw on ESPN, tall and strong enough to hold me down while she forces her tongue down my throat. Her thigh muscles crush my head. But I get bored quickly. I try Tamela Brush from high school, black hair falling in straight lines off her head. She's like an origami flower in my hands, the first girl who ever let me put a hand in her fuzz-mitten.

And then for some reason I'm on my ex, Megan, and she's on me, scolding me with that look, her fingers gripping my back like she wants to put her hands inside me and make a gentle mess of my guts. Her eyes roll back like a zombie and she hisses my name through her teeth.

Three hard knocks on the bathroom door break the spell and I'm back in the tub. The water's spraying over my head. The air's heavy and wet, not quite too hot to breathe.

"Can I get in there real quick? I've gotta tinkle so bad!" Cheryl squeaks through the cracked door, and scoots to the toilet in two hurried stomps and sits down. She can definitely see me through the ducks, crouched down like I'm taking a dump in the woods, hands together like I'm praying. I wonder if anyone's ever done both at once. I shoot up straight, turned around so she can't see the slowly drooping physical evidence.

She sighs dramatically. She starts mummifying her hand. I mime the act of showering, pretend-rinsing my pretend-soapy hair. She yanks up pants and cotton panties in one motion and zooms out. I can still hear her heavy footsteps thudding around the kitchen. She makes more noise than Chunk ever did, and he weighed 380 pounds. I shut off the water, primed but unfinished. I know I'll still feel like a pin-less grenade for the rest of the day.

In the kitchen, my towel is wiggling itself untied with each step. I leave water-prints on the floor. Cheryl's brown grocery bag sits half unpacked on the counter while she kneels and scrubs up the muddy boot-skids I left by the front door. "SO sorry about the potty invasion, roomie!"

"Don't sweat it," I say. I shrug. I smile. "Sorry about the mud. That was on my list, clean the floor after I clean myself." I should've expected the floor to be freshly mopped when I stomped in the door, my feet skidding in dark smears. Our apartment is only five rooms and a hallway, none with enough floor space to play a game of Twister, but she mops, vacuums and dusts the place twice a week. I often see her re-reorganizing things that haven't been touched since her last rearrangement, like the "pantry" that used to be Chunk's "boots and stuff" closet.

"No big whoop! I'm just excited about our House Dinner tomorrow," she says, waving her little fists in tiny circles in the air. Her red hair is short and looks dead, like those dolls you practice CPR on. "I brought home the tastiest looking rutabaga you've ever seen!"

"I bet you did!" I say, having no idea what kind of animal a rutabaga is, and I take half-steps backwards toward my room, grinning with all of my teeth.

"Don't worry about bringing anything! I'll take care of all of it!"

"That's awesome, Cheryl, thanks." My towel's almost undone. Her eyes keep dropping to my hips. I make a quick break for my room.

With my door locked I flop back on my bed but I can't rekindle what I had going on in the shower. I'm nullified by her mommy-style terms: tinkle, potty. I can hear her humming along to her Dixie Chicks CD, just loud enough to be the background music to any fantasy I cobble together. I honestly haven't been able to snap my carrot to completion in months, but it's not just Cheryl or my zombie hands. Sometimes when I'm alone in my room, I think of how Chunk died. I think about how I found him, in the room I now hear Cheryl snoring from every night. I know that sounds weird.

Long before he and I lived together, my first day of landscaping actually, Chunk proudly told me that he always rode the riding mower. He breathed loud and slurpy, covered in shiny sweat as heavy as popcorn butter. At first I kept my distance, afraid to touch or smell him. Then he asked me for a ride home.

"Sometimes that mower's better than a girlfriend," he said as he wiggled into the passenger seat. Then he started laughing his laugh, like he was whispering, "Kee-kee-kee-kee-kee!" (I'd give anything to hear that again.) "When you mash on your man-button, you blow every fuse, pal!"

That was before Megan kicked me out of her place. When I got home I expected her to be proud I'd worked a day. She just demanded that I take a shower before I touched anything. That line of his was still with me: man-button. Every fuse.

When I was twelve, snapping my carrot every hour on the hour as most lads do when they first discover it, I once got extra curious and slid a toothbrush up my bulkhead (the handle end, not the brush side). So I understood Chunk. For all the years I did it I only thought about it one second before I grabbed the toothbrush, and all but forgot about it after I'd rinsed it off.

To this day I've never told anyone about that, not Megan, not even Chunk. But Chunk seemed to be wired the same way deep down, and didn't care who knew it. It's a hell of a thing to have in common with a guy. Chunk was putrid, but totally without shame. Sometimes I wonder if maybe a tiny bit of shame would've kept him alive.

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The next morning, I pick up old Timbo for work when the sky's right between black and navy blue. I honk my horn three times outside his double-wide. Normally he toddles out after the first one, flipping me off and grabbing a handful of crotch for a couple good tugs. (He had his voicebox removed, along with a nasty lump of cancer, long before I met him, but he's learned plenty of ways to express himself without his electrolarynx.) Today I'm left waiting.

Carpooling with Timbo was his idea. He offered it to me, on my first day back to work after Chunk was in the ground, as if he was doing me a favor. Before me, he used to hitchhike. Some days he'd show up late, or not at all, and nobody seemed to care.

Chunk's death was pretty sudden: 95 days ago I found him dead on his back. It took four EMT's to get him out of the place. The coroner found an unchewed log of cookie dough lodged in his throat. I was home when it happened, but ignored the thuds and muffled squeals as pretty typical for his "getting weird." To my defense, my arms aren't nearly long enough to have Heimlich'd him anyway.

So now Timbo's my co-pilot. I'm still not sure whether or not splitting gas money with him is worth the sour Italian sub smell my truck has all the time now. Chunk had a smell but I got immune from breathing it at home. I'm a week or so away from demanding Timbo wear deodorant, but until then I just roll the window down and rub the seat

down with dryer sheets after he's out. One time he turned around and saw me doing it. I pretended to be wiping down the dashboard.

I wait five more minutes and press both hands into the horn and count to ten. Why isn't Timbo's half-dead beagle barking?

Engine off, my feet hit the ground. I bet I'm going to find him on the ground, his phone in one hand, his dead electrolarynx in the other, three feet away from the kitchen drawer with the spare batteries. I'll probably see his old beagle wagging his tail at his feet, pulling strips of stringy meat off Timbo's leg. "How long did you wait before you started eating him?" I'll ask as I kick him away, and then shoo him out the back door.

I imagine rummaging through his bedroom drawers in a panic before calling the ambulance, lifting up his mattress looking to trash the weird amputee- or suffocation-porn a guy like Timbo probably has. Then his screen door squeals open. Timbo struts out the door.

At the Guzz and Fill I put ten dollars in my tank. Timbo walks back to my truck like a skinny cowboy, swinging his hips with each step. He hops in and pulls his stringy gray hair into a pony-tail. I still feel a little adrenal from the scare outside his trailer but he doesn't notice, so I make him notice. "Dammit, Timbo, I thought—I very seriously thought—you were dead."

His electro-voice sounds like a busted speaker. "—I-was-in-there-five-minutes—"

"No, I mean, this morning at your place. Did you not hear me honking?"

Timbo flashes both rows of his grey teeth, jumbling out in every direction like old tombstones. "—yes-but-I-was-honking-too—"

I know what he means, but I twist the volume knob up on Timbo's AM news station before he explains. It doesn't drown out his buzz.

"—honking-myself-in-my-pants—"

"Yeah, I got it. You're gross," I say. I decide I'm getting some of that anti-bacterial stuff that smells like watermelons on the way home.

I turn and see Timbo's arms folded, turned away from me, edged as far in the seat as he can go, loto scratchies unscratched. I've hurt the feelings of this little guy who goes home every night to a fourteen-year-old beagle and a little trailer that I imagine smells like dog piss and cheap weed. I should tell him I don't think he's grosser than Chunk, whose permanent ass-indent Timbo now sits in twice a day, who once got diarrhea on the riding mower and didn't stop mowing. He left an oily brown trail in straight rows spattered across the freshly cut grass.

I clear my throat. "So my roommate caught me trying to snap my carrot yesterday."

Timbo shrugs, an old man pouting. His little black buzz-box sits on his lap. There's still twenty minutes left in our ride to work.

"I was in the shower," I share. "You know what it feels like, going this long without?" I doubt he does. "You know musical chairs, when you think the music's gonna stop and it doesn't?"

Still facing away from me, he chisels at his small stack of scratch tickets with a quarter. When his talk-box is in his pocket I can't ever tell if he's winning or losing. Normally, he just stinks and I try to ignore it. Some mornings he wins big, something like \$20, and he buzzes about it for the rest of the ride. I have no idea how to bond with him, so I try another topic.

"Did I ever tell you about when Chunk died?"

Timbo's hand slowly moves to his talk-box, like he's fighting it the whole way.

"—yeah-there-was-shit-everywhere—"

After Chunk died I'd called into work and told Mr. Labatts a portion of the gory details to guarantee some time off, so the whole crew knew some of the story, but not all of it.

"—what-does-that-have-to-do-with-anything—"

"Trust me. It's related." Suddenly the air feels cold and raw, pre-thunderstorm-y. I roll up the window to block out the wind, leaving it open a crack to let out Timbo's beef-barley-soup stink.

"See, Chunk had a thing with butt stuff. Once he left the door open and I saw him on top of a Craigslist hooker. It looked like he had a rubber tail wobbling out of his backside." I remember the way Chunk looked, naked and thrusting, reminded me of the way maggots wriggled. That hooker left while I was popping popcorn. She asked if we could share. I poured hers in a bowl. She proudly declared her age while doing a twirl to show off her figure. She did look decent for sixty-eight.

"The day I found him dead I knew I should get rid of the stuff his mom shouldn't see." I remember after I found him cold as a fridge door I frantically started filling a Hefty bag. I emptied a drawer full of dildos and a string of golf-ball sized anal beads. In the back of his closet was a box of VHS videos, all five-word titles with sequel numbers after them: Naughty Backdoor Cheerleader Slap Party 7. Every pair of pillowcase-sized streaked and stained underwear went in the bag too. "So anyway, he was naked and flat on his back, and I realized I had to make sure he had nothing crammed up his bulkhead for the EMT to find."

Timbo's facing me now. His mouth is open. He jabs his neck hard with his talk-box.

"—no-way—"

I nod. "So I got my shoulder underneath him and gave one big heave with all I had. It was like lifting a hairy waterbed. And once I got him up a few inches, I felt around underneath, toward his crack, this greasy nub..."

"—no-stop-I-don't-want-to-hear—"

"And I grabbed hold and yanked and it came out, along with everything else that was up there. It looked like onion soup; warm like it, too. And the smell..."

Timbo makes a silent throw-up face and slaps his hand against the dashboard. His talk-box falls to the floor and he starts fishing around for it. I wonder if I should tell him what I'd been prepared to do for him just that morning.

Timbo finds his talk-box among the crushed Dunkin's cups and greasy BK bags stomped into the floor. "—there's-something-wrong-with-you-boy—" Then he fakes a shiver, fishes a quarter out of his pocket and finishes his scratchies. Timmy's cheered up, and damn, I feel better now.

It's still dark. We're still the only people on this long straight road. The dotted yellow line wants to hypnotize me. "I think I miss Chunk." It's the first time I've ever said those words and I feel different afterward, but I'm not alone enough to figure out how different.

"—nobody-misses-that-dumpster-bubble—"

That stings in a way I didn't expect, because he's right. Just that phrase makes me picture that big hairy pile in boxers scraping chips along onion dip he'd spilled on his belly, because, "accidents happen, and we don't waste food, buddy-guy." Chunk never closed the bathroom door, and needed my conversation to distract him from his bipolar bowels: "When it rains, it pours, and when it doesn't it's gonna take an hour and some serious force." Sometimes I'd see him sitting on the floor in front of the TV, munching on Captain Crunch out of the box, knuckling one out through his sweatpants, not about to stop on my account.

"Quiet your buzz-hole, Timbo. That's my best pal you're talking about." Again I use a phrase I've never even thought before. I guess sometimes it's easy to be open to a man who doesn't really have a voice.

"—you're-like-my-danged-beagle—" vibrates Timbo, and he crushes his can and tosses it onto the floor. "—you'd-lick-any-hand-that'd-pat-your-head—"

"Well, I wouldn't lick yours, Timbo."

"—who-says-I'd-pat-your-head-pervert—"

A quiet minute or two later he does reach over and gently swats my forehead. His hand smells belly-button sour and I bite at it as he pulls away. He's smiling now, and starts unwrapping sticks of Trident until he's got a golf-ball sized mound of gum in his mouth, and then we're at work.

*

There is no escape from the "house dinner" Cheryl's been counting down to on the dry-erase board on the fridge. Nowadays I have no friends and never any plans and she knows this. She's shopped for it all week and cooked all day, but it looks like just a bunch of carrots, squash, onions, and some orange chunks I can't identify, plus some angel hair pasta and a creamy yellow sauce that tastes like salty lemons.

"If there's no meat, it's a goddamned side-dish," Chunk would have said about this meal. Chunk's two big recipes were Lunch-Meat Casserole and Buffalo-Chicken-Dorito-Surprise (two terms he also used as code words for lady-parts). Anything Chunk "cooked" was always saltier than ocean water, but not bad with a few Rolling Rocks.

Cheryl's food is swallow-able, but it's going to leave me feeling empty and restless later, just like her company, I guess. I'll wait until she's in bed to order Chinese.

She lights a square purple candle before we eat but, once our plates are down, there's no room on our little fold-up table dining area, so she sets it on the counter where the breeze from the window blows it out. She spears every bite with a flourish and smiles big as she hoovers it off the fork. I try to match her dramatic enthusiasm.

"So anyway, longest and best relationship was with Clyde," she says, continuing a conversation I haven't participated in for 13 minutes according to the clock on the stove behind her. "Clyde was WAY into tattoos, which is so not me, but it was nice to get a little wild! We met through a volunteer letter-writing program. You know how passion works: the faster you get hot, the faster you burn out. Also things really changed when the judge denied his parole."

If I stare at her red hair and count to five, I can see a green shadow when I look at the wall, so I've been doing that. The table is so small I could head-butt her without getting out of my seat, and our kitchen's so small I could open the microwave from here too.

"What were your exes like?" she asks.

"Excuse me?" I'm caught off guard when I realize she's addressing me.

"Your exes. That's not too personal, is it? I'm sorry if it is."

I take a sip from my plastic champagne glass, which she bought today. It's sour and sounds fizzier than it tastes. She tilts the open bottle toward me.

"No thanks, I'm—y'know what, sure. Fill me up." She tops me off. "My ex, Megan, pretty much my only girlfriend ever, was... strict." It feels nice to tell the story to virgin ears.

Her eyes go wide as I start talking and she leans forward. She nods at every other word. "Really? That's a strange word. Strict how?"

Megan used to hide my Xbox controllers until I showed her job applications. She changed the Wi-Fi password daily, and held out on it until I'd completed a list of tasks around the apartment. She was like a mean stepmom I could have sex with sometimes—as long as I restricted my drinking to one night a week.

"Strict like a prison guard," I said. "But she had her reasons. I was kind of a bum." She also fed me, put a roof over my head, and bought my clothes. Then one day she made me leave. Chunk saved me from being alone. He was like my hero.

I shrug, and there's an awkward silence that goes on a few seconds too long. Thoughts about the evening start to find an order in my head: a candlelit home-cooked dinner, talk about past relationships, more attempts than usual to win my approval. Cheryl says, "Happy two-month anniversary, roomie!" and she taps her cider against mine with a dull plastic clink. She calls me that all the time, but now I think she thinks that this is a date. "It's been a great two months," she says, chomping a piece of squash from her fork. Her eyes scan around my face as she chews. "Hasn't it?"

"It's been great," I say. I start forking food double-time.

"Good! I hope I've been a good roommate."

"You've been fine. Wonderful. No complaints."

"You too!" she says. She holds up her little glass of bubbly and swirls it around gently. "I just wanted to say...because I believe in being honest with the people I care about...whatever activities you want to engage in while showering is totally fine with me."

When I was twelve, my mom shook an empty bottle of lotion in front of my face and asked if I knew who was using it all. I just shrugged, and politeness kept her from pressing further. I don't think the same tactic will work here.

"Just hang a sock on the door and I'll give you your privacy. It's perfectly natural, and everything goes down the drain anyway."

I begin loading veggies into my mouth five at a time. I pick up the plate and start shoveling pasta in.

"I'm sorry...I know this is uncomfortable, I just wanted to say...I just want you to be happy living here. With me."

My mouth is too full to respond (I can barely keep my lips together and I jaw-squish the food into lumps I can swallow) so I just shake my head and look down. I feel bad, and even with sips of cider it's a good thirty seconds before my mouth is clear enough to speak.

"I'm happy," I say. I don't know how to prove it, and repeating it seems to make it less believable.

She picks up her empty plate and heads to the sink. "I know I'm not your last roommate...I get the feeling you really liked him, and I know it must have been really hard losing him the way you did. I know I can't fix that."

After the landlord demanded I finally find a new roommate, Cheryl was the first person to respond to the ad. A cleaning crew had come in to take care of the mess in Chunk's room, but the floor crunched when she walked and body-hair tumbleweeds rolled by. I remember she tiptoed around, careful not to touch anything, but she didn't leave. I mentioned that the last tenant had died, pointing at the bedroom that was up for grabs. I thought it would drive her out and grant me some extra time alone in the place. But her face got soft and sad. She put a hand on my shoulder and said the place looked great, that she'd be happy to live with me. I think that was the only post-Chunk sympathy I ever got. Cheryl's things appeared in the house while I was at work two days later. Suddenly the place smelled like bleach and plug-in fresheners and every brown surface got two shades lighter.

When my plate's clear I get up and join Cheryl at the sink, rinsing my own dish for the first time since she moved in. "Really, you're tops, Cheryl." I put a numb hand on her shoulder and it slides awkwardly over her sharp angles. I don't like it, but she smiles. She can't tell my dead nerves can't feel what she's feeling.

Cheryl's leaning into my hand now. I lean forward to kiss her neck but stop when I see her head cocked to the side, eyes closed, mouth open like it's about to leak drool. When I was little I used to have an old dog that would do that when you rubbed low near his little nub. I know she can feel my breath on her neck. She leans back into me. I really didn't mean to be sexy, but I guess I am, enough for Cheryl that is. So close, my mouth just latches on, and I'm kissing her, a lot spittier than I'd wanted to, but it had been a long time, and Cheryl doesn't even flinch.

Megan would probably stomp her foot and glare at me. Chunk would wobble in his seat, humping the air while he clapped. I don't want to care what they would think.

I lead Cheryl to the hallway. She walks to my door, but I don't want to change the stink of my room with what I'm suddenly planning on doing. She goes into her room (Chunk's room) and I flip the light off and it's not that bad, I guess. She's got a throw-rug on the floor that feels soft under my feet like new towels. The air smells like cotton candy and floweriness, enough to remind me that Chunk doesn't live here anymore. Then we're down on her small bed with the cool, smooth sheets peeled back. I'm supporting myself on top of her. I'm at about half-carrot, and I figure I can at least fake my way into getting things started once I'm inside her.

"Whatever you want," she whispers against my chest. Her words tickle in a way that softens me down to quarter-carrot. I grab her wrist with my clumsy dead hand and bring it around to my bulkhead. She gives it a squeeze, and I squeeze back. Then she goes all in, a four-finger-thrust that makes me see lightning in the dark and I collapse on her, open-mouthed but silent. She whispers rapid-fire apologies. Now I'm carrot soup.

"Easy," I say, guiding her hand back as best I can. "Just the thumb, real gently around the sides and in really really slow..."

"Like Georgie Porgie," she giggles, and I've got to forget she said that or this is never getting started.

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Cheryl's still asleep when I wake up and unravel myself from her. Her hair's plastered to her forehead and her face looks like it's concentrating. I'm happy we didn't have to talk this morning. We probably won't talk later, when I'm home, but I wonder if she'll act different. Of course she will. This is just something I'll have to live with.

Outside in my truck, my stomach gurgles before I turn the key. Then I burp from my depths, like a frog croak that lasts so long I could've said my full name. It just hangs in the air after, the smell of lemons and stomach, so I roll down the window. I'm almost tired after, but I feel nice and empty.

Later on, when I'm shredding shrubs in my earmuffs and my mind's trying to be anywhere else, I imagine myself having a little private shower time later, but slipping on my little soap nub and knocking myself out on the edge of the tub, falling over the drain. Water rises over the edge, flooding the bathroom even after I'm drowned. I picture Cheryl finding me, and I wonder if she would cry as the water drained around me. I wonder what she'd think if there was a toothbrush up my bulkhead, if she'd pull it out before she called the EMT, if she'd try to scrub the grime off the end of it or just throw it away.

I picture Timbo standing outside his house waiting the next day, worried about where I was as the sun came up.

After graduating from the Writing MFA program at the University of New Hampshire, Jay fled to San Diego in search of some heartbreak and to learn from being lost. Much like jumping into a cold lake, he knows it will feel much better eventually but he hates the initial shock of immersion. He recently lost his virginity to a celebrity, which has granted him some comfort.

Fun and Games at Office Depot:

An Argument for Agoraphobia

Kyle Heger

I was about as eager to buy my seven-year-old son, Riley, a new backpack for school as I would be to enter a reality-TV game show that offered the chance to win some consumer goods by surviving interrogation at the hands of former Abu Ghraib prison guards.

To say the least: I put it off.

Either as a result of how I, as an individual, am aging or how society itself is being twisted by its roots (or maybe because of both), I find myself increasingly reluctant to engage in any kind of transaction outside my own doors. Any kind of transaction. Walking. Driving. Checking out a book at the library. Meeting a friend at the park.

Even what are on the surface the most innocent, natural, problem-free behaviors now tend to seem like actions performed in Kalkaland: exercises in absurdity and alienation. Usually, I chalk this up to the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy and technology. But in my less optimistic moments, I suspect that it's really because of a growing rot at the core of the universe.

I delayed getting my son's backpack for as long as my conscience let me, until the poor thing (the backpack, not my son) was hanging on by a thread, ready at any minute to spill onto the street or sidewalk in a sad spectacle of homework, snacks and such lovingly scrounged school-ground- treasures as bark, pebbles and pencil stubs.

An Attempt at Pain Avoidance

Riley had been using his current backpack (an inexpensive number I'd purchased at Target) since a few months into kindergarten, when the Spiderman novelty backpack with which he'd started school fell apart at the seams.

Faced with his current backpack's imminent failure, I determined to be a smart shopper when it came to buying its replacement. In my case, smart shopping comes down to an attempt at pain avoidance. Or at least pain reduction. In order not to feel too humiliated and frustrated by the experience, I would need to meet several goals which were in some ways mutually exclusive: 1) spend as little money as possible, 2) spend as little time as possible, 3) end up with something that would work OK and last long enough that I wouldn't feel I'd been cheated.

I wasn't in the market for anything fancy. The whole wheels-and-handle bit was out of the question both because I couldn't picture a backpack of that type fitting easily into his cubbyhole at school and because I figure the more moving parts are involved the greater the chance of malfunction. Neither was I considering the heavy-duty type with a frame that serious hikers and campers use. His school is only a block away, so he won't exactly need something in the survivalist tradition.

All I wanted was a backpack that would last a few years without falling apart, would be light enough not to saddle my son with a lifelong posture problem, and would be big enough to hold his school belongings. In other words: something that wouldn't fill me with buyer's regret as soon as I'd bought it. I might as well have gone looking for the Holy Grail.

My Quest Begins

Since we were going to Target anyway for something else, I decided to check out the backpack selection there. The fewer times I leave the house, the better, so I'm a big fan of doubling or tripling up on errands.

I reasoned that it wasn't Target's fault that the last time I had bought a backpack there, it had been their least expensive model. If I was willing to spend a few more dollars, I told myself, I might even wind up with something that would last Riley through elementary school.

The first hurdle I had to overcome at Target was Riley's sudden aversion to backpacks with sports stars or superheroes or cartoon characters or company slogans and logos. I could dig it. I mean, I don't like being a walking billboard myself, pandering to the combined demands of pop culture, peer pressure, Madison Avenue and Hollywood. On the other hand, his dislike of these fashion statements meant that we had to look, not at the less-expensive children's backpacks, but at the more expensive ones for adults. I approached the task with more than a bit of apprehension, wondering how much money this was going to set me back.

It turned out I needn't have worried. They didn't have any backpacks that fit the bill. Oh, they had plenty of duffle-bag-type affairs, scads of cases for laptop computers, and any number of those increasingly popular, medic/bike-messenger/courier bags that sling over one shoulder. I suppose I could have considered one of the later more seriously, but after years of reading about how important it is ergonomically to distribute backpack weight evenly across the body, I just didn't know if this style was something to which I was willing to subject Riley.

Our Next Stop

Our next stop was Office Depot, where I remembered having seen some backpacks.

Again, I couldn't help feeling solidarity with Riley when he turned up his nose at the sparkly pink backpacks (presumably for "girls" of all ages, from preschool to the assisted-living senior center) and the camouflage-patterned ones for males who, presumably, all have a built-in urge to emulate hunters and soldiers. And, again, Riley's precocious attack of good taste and independent thinking narrowed the field considerably.

Finally, after we had given up on that search and were heading to the exit, I spotted a few Jansport backpacks hanging on the end of an aisle in the "we must move this inventory now," position. I dimly remembered having owned one or more Jansport backpacks before and finding them to be durable. So I pointed them out to Riley.

He picked out an unassuming gray model that seemed to meet all his qualifications, as well as mine, and came in at a price of \$46.99 without sales tax. It was a bit more than I'd planned on spending, but, if buying an acceptable backpack was going to be as difficult as it was shaping up to be, I thought it might be wise to just buckle down, pay the price and get on with my life.

The actual process of the purchase seemed to go without a hitch, and as we left the store, I breathed a sigh of relief, believing that I'd got off pretty easily.

Then the alarm began screeching as we passed through the store's scanning system. I assumed it was a mistake because those damned things are always going off when I pass through them (even when I'm not actually shoplifting). But, as I usually do, to avoid being tackled by a security guard or an overzealous clerk as I make my way down the sidewalk, I paused and looked back at the cashier questioningly. He looked over at me, nodded and waved me on.

An Unsettling Discovery

About two weeks after I had made this purchase, Riley put my hand on a lump in the backpack and asked me what it was. At first, I thought he was trying to pull a joke on me. But I certainly didn't laugh when I peeled back the zipper area to discover a white plastic object which I identified as one of the magnetic devices that stores or manufacturers put into merchandise so they will trigger alarms if not removed prior to leaving shops.

"So that explains why the alarm went off in Office Depot as we left the premises," I told myself. Apparently the cashier had neglected to remove this device when we were paying. I wasn't tempted to try removing it myself. I had done this before with other products and I had always broken the items. I didn't want to spoil this backpack with which Riley and I were both satisfied, and which had cost a pretty penny into the bargain.

For a few moments, I assumed I would just leave the device in place, but then I was seized with a clear vision of all hell breaking loose every time Riley entered or exited a store or other business. The fact that I'm always setting those systems off even without any merchandise shows me what a hair trigger they have. I could hear and see it all happening: alarms ringing, lights flashing, people staring, loudspeakers barking out to my first grader: "Stop where you are and drop the backpack. You have been caught red-handed in the act of stealing merchandise. A SWAT team is on the way."

I decided that the only sensible thing to do was to take the backpack back to Office Depot and have the people there remove the device. But just as I was prompted to visit Office Depot by my clear, all too clear, imaginings of what the future would hold for Riley if I didn't remove the device, so now I was likewise prompted to put off the visit by equally vivid imaginings of what would happen when I took the backpack to Office Depot to have the problem fixed. As I entered the store, the device would trigger the alarms, invoking the same *sturm und drang* described above.

To lessen the chances that the people who work there would perform a citizen's arrest on me, put me in a headlock and sic the police on me, I settled on the simple expedient of bringing in my sales receipt to show that I'd purchased this item. Even with that in mind, I was still far from enthusiastic about the visit. I found myself procrastinating, certain that if I went back there, something would go wrong. Painful experience has taught me, time and again, that even the simplest transactions have become complicated and grotesque in today's world.

Back into the Meat Grinder

One day, after I had gone through enough hours without trauma that I felt a little courage bubbling to my surface, I decided to get the pain over with and force myself back into what I thought of as either Kafka's castle or simply "the meat grinder."

So, shortly after Riley returned from school, I spirited his backpack away and drove, white-knuckled, to Office Depot, not telling him what I was doing in case I ended up coming a cropper.

Maybe I should have been pleased when I walked past the sensor in the doorway without setting off the alarm. On the encouraging side, it meant I might be able to avoid the whole flight-or-fight surge of adrenalin that I dreaded. On the discouraging side, it cut the ground out from under my feet. I mean, if this device didn't trigger alarms, I had been putting myself through the wringer for the sake of an unnecessary worry.

Resolutely, I plodded up to the cash register, grateful to see that it was staffed by the same man who had rung up my purchase of the backpack. But, of course, he didn't remember me. When I told him why I was there, he looked at the device with an expression with which I have become all too familiar, the look of someone who has just been struck between the eyes with a pole-axe, a look that expresses the dismay attendant upon an encounter with a completely unexpected event.

"You bought this here?" he asked in shock. He couldn't have been any more surprised if I'd slapped a live iguana on his countertop and asked him to castrate it. Without the benefit of anesthesia.

Answering in the affirmative, I flourished the receipt as proof.

"This device isn't one of ours. We don't have the right kind of tool to remove this," he told me in a tone of voice that managed to be accusing.

I couldn't imagine what underhanded game he suspected me of playing. I mean, how many people come into Store Two with something they have stolen at Store One, trying to trick the employees at Store Two into removing the evidence of their dirty deed? I suppose it's possible. But statistically, it can't be anything but an insignificant blip.

"Have you tried removing it yourself?" he asked, squinting at me, again with that vaguely accusing, put-upon tone in his voice, as if he knew that I was a slacker at heart who just hadn't had enough get-up-and-go to solve the problem on my own and now insisted on wasting his time instead.

"No," I replied, trying to keep the edge out of my voice. "I've tried that with other items and haven't exactly been pleased with the results."

“Oh!” he said. You guessed it. The same accusing, suspicious tone of voice. He didn’t feel completely comfortable dealing with a guy who wasn’t a do-it-yourselfer, handy with pliers and bolt cutters. He looked at me briefly and barely succeeded in stopping himself from hocking up a gob in disdain. I guess those customer-service trainings weren’t a total loss, after all.

“I’m going to have to talk to my manager about this,” he said, plodding away dolefully.

I could see where this was going. If they didn’t think that I was a shoplifter trying a trick, they would think that I was a hopelessly confused or forgetful old soul who had probably bought this damned thing in some other city or state and was now making them suffer from the weight of my mental deficiencies. If they were polite, they’d try humoring me. If they weren’t, out on my ass I would go.

Studying the receipt to pass the time, I now realized that it was a flimsy piece of evidence. I was far from being sure that the cryptic words “BKPK, SPRBRK, AS” and a product ID number were sufficient proof of what I had bought. I am so accustomed to the people with whom I do business making mistakes, that I was not even sure that the information was accurate. The man with whom I had been attempting to do business a moment before certainly hadn’t been overly impressed by it.

“This isn’t one of our devices, Sir,” another voice spoke. I have heard that word “Sir” used in that same way far too many times for my skin not to crawl when I heard it now. It is the particular property of border guards, security guards, police officers and other practitioners of institutionalized violence who put a spin on the word that makes it feel like a slap in the face. “Will you please pull over to the side of the road, Sir? Would you like a little pepper spray in your eyes, Sir? Are you going to lower your pants yourself, Sir, or am I going to have to do it for you?”

I would prefer being called a “motherfucker” to my face to suffering the venomous sting of that smug and sarcastic word.

In the commercial world, unless you are already at gunpoint with the cops on the way with sirens blaring and a K-9 officer salivating with eagerness to get a chunk of you, you can sometimes get away with receiving the old passive-aggressive treatment for a while before being subjected to outright brutality. At least if you are, or are likely to be, a paying customer from whom they can wring more money by judiciously alternating the carrot with the stick as a motivator.

This was the case here. The person speaking turned out to be a large man who came toward me with Riley’s backpack swinging from one hand. He wasn’t armed. That was a good sign. He had that same pole-axed look, his forehead wrinkled in consternation, trying to make sense of the puzzling phenomenon with which I was confronting him, determined to spend at least some time tolerating my unwelcome presence.

“Are you sure you bought this here?” he asked, furrowing some more ripples into his brow.

“No. I guess I must be lying,” I responded before I could control myself, my patience stretched to the breaking point in a tug-of-war between the memory of similarly senseless transactions that have occurred in the past and my anticipation of more senseless transactions occurring with increasing frequency in the future.

“No, Sir, I’m not suggesting that,” he responded. But, of course, that didn’t stop him from subjecting my receipt to an intense scrutiny.

Apparently it passed muster because he asked, “I can’t remove this, Sir, but how would you feel about trading this backpack in for a new one without a device?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I’d feel right about doing that to you folks. I mean, this thing has been used by my seven-year old five days a week for the last month. God only knows what he’s had in there.”

He looked stunned, as if he couldn’t quite take in the possibility that, in the dog-eat-dog war between buyers and sellers, I seriously wanted him to believe that I gave a rat’s ass when it came to fair play for a business.

Choosing to simply ignore my comment, he said “Let me go look and see what we have available.” Although I appreciated the fact that he seemed to be trying to solve my problem, I was still so uptight about all the time I’d spent

on what shouldn't have been a problem in the first place, that it was all I could do to nod humbly, say, "Sure, that would be great," and try to slump into some kind of receptivity while I waited.

After five or ten minutes, he came back with a black Jansport backpack and said, "We don't have your type anymore but we have these. They cost about \$15 more. Do you want to trade your old one in for it?"

I must be a particularly unfortunate mix of persistent pessimism and recurrent naivety. This makes me an easy prey to disappointment. Somehow I just assumed that he was going to take the old backpack and give me the new one, maybe doing a little paperwork to record the transaction. I assumed that he would have Office Depot eat the \$15 difference as a courtesy, a gesture of customer service in an attempt to pay me back a bit for the inconvenience they'd caused me.

But something in his manner led me to believe in a few minutes that this was not to be the case. To test the waters, I ran my credit card through a countertop scanner because it said, "slide payment card," hoping that my crack about how I must be lying hadn't blown the chances of his making a goodwill gesture and saying something like, "Oh, no. That's not necessary, Sir. This is on the house."

Of course, instead of saying anything like this, all he said was, "You have to wait a minute before sliding your card, Sir."

Surprised that I was still speaking in a calm and measured voice instead of screams, I replied, "The machine told me to slide the card."

"Oh, they always say that, Sir," was his response. Of course. What else can we expect from the technology that everybody is so wild about than for it to regularly and predictably give us incorrect information?

After dutifully sliding the card on his cue and signing my name, I was just about ready to go. As a last-minute precaution, he showed me that there were no devices in the new backpack that would trigger their alarm.

I forced myself to thank him and say goodbye, reminding myself that he didn't "make the rules" and was probably in many ways as much a victim of "the system" as I was. Heading toward the door, I considered that things could have ended up a whole lot worse.

As I passed through the doorway, the security alarm went off, more loud and shrill than I remembered. I froze in mid-step as if I had been transfixed by electric currents. I spun around and looked at the two men who had helped me. I held my arms out to my sides and tilted my head to one side in a "What do I do now?" attitude.

They waved at me in a way that was dismayingly familiar, making shooing gestures and said, "It's O.K. It's O.K."

For a moment, I debated with myself about whether or not I should go back in and seek an explanation to make sense of what had happened, maybe even make sure that this backpack wasn't going to trigger alarms wherever it went just as I had feared the first one would. If it did, I would have the same problem I had started out with, plus be out three quarters of an hour of my time, plus \$15 and an immeasurable hunk of wellbeing. I would not qualify as a smart shopper.

But I felt that I was at the end of my emotional and mental resources, and that unless I beat a hasty retreat, I might end up exploding incoherently in front of a store full of employees and customers. So I settled for shaking my head, waving my hand and leaving.

A Sense of Doom

Now, of course, the unresolved nature of the situation leaves me with a sense of impending doom.

Is there a device of some kind in the backpack, a small device hidden there that will set off alarms the next time Riley goes through a toy store or library doorway, bringing the full weight of authority down on him? I guess to spare him this, I should myself put the backpack through some trial runs, bringing it through two, three, even four different

types of security systems before letting him do so. But even then, I would never be sure that because of possible differences between scanners, he could pass through system number five, six or seven without setting off alarms.

I could just get another backpack, but I refuse to put myself through that financial kind of self-torture.

I could also take it back again to Office Depot to find out why the alarm system had gone off and to make sure it won't happen again. But you know how successful my last attempt at that was.

And now I have a new worry too. I can't help wondering if the whole situation, from the moment I bought the first backpack until the moment I bought the second one wasn't just Office Depot's sly way of squeezing an extra \$15 out of me. I know it's improbable. But the fact that I even consider it as a possibility shows how nightmarish the whole process of going out into the world and engaging people has become. Agoraphobia is beginning to seem like a more and more reasonable reaction to life.

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Wrestlin' with the Reaper

Embe Charpentier

October 20

Out past the deck, I ball up pages of the *Boston Globe* and throw them in the fire pit. Not quite ready for the mound on Fenway Park, but if I miss, I just try again. Page after page about the "resurrected" in every magazine, newspaper, website - media overload everywhere but here in the silent darkness. The half-burned scraps of paper float on a brisk wind. I light a sparkler and stand amid the flickering golden light.

My wife Lily calls from the porch. "Randy, that's dangerous. Besides, it's freezing out there."

"Coming, hon." My waving hand cuts through the stiff breeze. Lily, the sole defense the world possesses against my cynicism, retreats. Flashlight in hand as I stumble toward the house, I wonder what the rezzes feel when they twinkle like a firefly's ass. Should've had one more drink, I guess. But alcohol on open wounds only makes the sting worse.

My opinion? The whole damn bunch of the resuscitated ought to go back to stone cold dead. But one of the rezzes, Peter Anderson, should be the first one back on the bus to the beyond. Only partly because I think he's trying to steal *my* wife, who used to be *his* wife. The whole "kiss my ass because I'm back from the grave" thing. I shut the French door as I hear the drone of CNN's latest live undead programming.

The website www.mytripback.com has it all – high resolution digital video, quotes, and biographies. There, rez-ales are spun like cotton candy.

A thirty-year-old woman who died of a drug overdose: "I am a new woman. The past died along with me."

An old man who had a heart condition. Might still have one. "The truth has set me free. I've metamorphosed."

An ugly ex-con with Hep-C: "Liberated from the bonds of death. I feel the rebirth of joy within me."

Yeah, whoever they were before, they go touchy-feely sweet. And then the narcissism, oozing from those newly reopened pores. Never tell you about what's actually out there - if they know, that is. And the fact that they have a golden aura? Don't get me started.

Death, get your sorry ass back here. The Grim Reaper's not doin' his damn job.

October 22

After an arduous/boring/profitable day's work at insureme.com, I turn on C-Span. That network doesn't talk about the dead, but it's the only network that sported a dead anchor even before the resurrections. The unflappable-to-the-point-of-unconscious host takes calls about politics for a while until one of the rezzes calls in.

"I'm being led toward bringing peace and benevolence through political action," says she. "In my first life, I was," and she sobs poignantly, "a prostitute."

No need for a change in employment for that rez. I change to streaming video to watch my new favorite movie, *28 Days Later*. I lean back against the armrest, legs across the couch. My wife, Lily, passes me, phone in one hand, green tea in the other.

"And the guy on Reddit said she came back *five* hours after death?" she gasps and snuggles into the chair ten feet away. "We'll have to open the post-mortem monitoring window to six hours. Boston City Hospital has plans for an observation area for the just deceased. Video cameras, special lighting, infrared lamps – who knows, maybe we'll have video of a revived patient, right at the moment of rebirth!"

My fingers itch to turn on EBN – the Eternal Blessings Network. Their 24/7 brimstone speeches about the End Times are almost more entertaining than watching stuntmen outrun herds of zombies fast as starving Aboriginal bush warriors. One EBN preacher claims it's the End Times. Another says it's the Rapture. Then they ask for donations to spread the word that the world is headed for a great crossroads, that Beelzebub lives in our midst.

I take my apocalypse with a sidecar of Smirnoff. Take a hit every time the preacher says “Armageddon” and I’m pretty drunk after an hour.

But right now there’s the untamed zombie menace in HD. I lean my skinny body back against the cushions appreciating the gruesome deaths of gray-skinned wraiths. Lily finally hangs up.

“Imagine it, Randy! The number of the resurrected is now over eighteen hundred. Troubled souls reborn into kind, beautiful people with beaming auras. Look at how Peter’s changed.” Lily’s cute little ponytail bounces with a life of its own as she toodles off to the study.

She might be going on Meebo to chat with the benevolent soul her former wife-beater husband has become. I can’t barge in there and play cop. If I act like a jealous ass-hat, I’ll lose her for good. She’s already gotten pissed when I asked her if Peter can do Jesus-type stuff, like walking on water.

She said I shouldn’t be as mean as he used to be. I told her he should go back where he came from.

But there was the answer, staring at me, righteous and squared up. I should return him to the grave. But first, I figure I’ll make sure I can legally get away with killing someone that’s been declared dead.

I wish this was fiction. I wish I were Bruce Campbell, with his chainsaw arm and rakish, razor-sharp smile, able to gleefully kill Peter-zombie without repercussions. But they aren’t the Evil Dead; they’re God’s chosen people.

Ryan, my brother the contract lawyer, is usually in bed by 10:30, but not tonight. When I ask him a legal opinion on the re-deadification of Peter Anderson, Mr. Cautious says “no way.”

“They’ll call it a hate crime. Everyone loves the rezzes. They’ve cheated death. People figure they’re back here for a reason.” I hear the water running, a quick swish and gargle. “Stop this foolishness, Randy. You’re so negative.” Then there’s the pause, indicating my elder brother’s compass prepares to aim at an unpleasant truth. “That said, he’s got more hair than you do and glows like a bug light. If he wants to steal Lily, I doubt you or anybody else can slow him down.”

Ryan hangs up. I go into the den to find Lily looking at the screen. An ad shows Peter, all sparkly eyes and white teeth that shine like radium, promoting his TED talk on resurrection Sunday night. “Look,” says Lily, “now he’s sharing his heart with the world.”

I gag out a smile. I wonder if the pawn shop on Northside Drive has a sniper rifle with a sight, before I decide I don’t want to be put on trial for killing the most well-known undead hero since R in *Warm Bodies*.

Maybe I can derive some insight into this mystery. Then again, I’ve never finished a single Sudoku, can’t get more than one side of a Rubik’s Cube the same color, and lose at Rock Paper Scissors.

October 23

I figure that the closest thing we humans had to surviving death before the rezzes is reincarnation. So I head out to the limestone Hindu temple for some enlightenment, with a side order of sexy ladies in yoga pants.

Though Senior Saturday was no garden of earthly delights, Yogi Arjun was straight from Wise Old Man casting. He channeled Bob Marley, right down to the dreadlocks and the aroma of weed on his clothes. Thus, he had my trust immediately. We met in a closet-sized room under a roughly-painted Om.

“Reincarnation has nothing to do with the individuals who have returned from the dead,” Arjun said. “The returned have the same identity, not just the same stream of consciousness...”

I find out that I’m an idiot from a man who would never call anyone out for being ignorant. “The returned have come from every country, from every religion. Some are atheists. People call me wise, but I can’t explain this. No one’s asked me to...except for you.”

As I try to stay comfortable on the hard floor beneath my scrawny butt, I tell him about Peter Anderson. He says he’s planning to watch the TED talk. “Since the returned never talk about what they know, it should be fascinating.”

Yep, the rezzes never discuss the magical mystical nature of life, death, God, the universe, and the next life. I decide I should listen to Peter the Douche before I send him back to eternity's arms. Or so I fantasize as I drive home. Pearl Jam bursts from my speakers. Eddie Vedder, you and me, we're still alive. Since I doubt I'm coming back for a second act, I've already answered the question everybody in our Brave New World is asking: "Is my second chance possible?"

Since the resurrected boy from Mexico started the "only mostly dead" movement eight months ago, almost all of the people who've died are still dead. But now, morgues have watchmen. Obituaries come out days after death. Hope don't go down easy.

And just as Eddie's howl peals like freedom, an eighteen-wheel truck with Severance painted on its side careens through the intersection and crashes into the car in front of me. I don't stop fast enough.

The world dead-stops, then fades away.

Hours later

My eyes are closed. There's pain somewhere, everywhere. A tracheal tube fills my throat. I feel leads stuck to my skin and chest hair. Sounds ekes through thick air.

Lily is crying. "He's not dead, Peter. The doctors say he'll live."

I stay utterly still as the monitors beep and chime.

"Randy's always possessed a dark soul." I feel his warm hand rest on my arm. "He'll require so much rehabilitation, Lily. And you've been having your doubts about your marriage, am I right?"

I picture Lily's sneer in my mind. "You haven't really changed, have you?"

That's my Lily. Girl's got a bullshit meter.

But I wonder what the hell condition they're talking about. I try to move my legs, to feel them. When I can, I open my eyes. The first thing I see is Peter's haloed face, looking down at me. Then Lily pushes him aside.

"Randy..." she gasps. "I knew you'd make it. I love you, honey." She kisses my forehead.

I can't smile, but I wish I could. I see the envy in Saint Peter's eyes.

Whatever it means to live, I know what it means to be loved. I can't thank her enough, because no one has ever deserved or earned love. Like the resurrections, love winks its amused eye at eternity.

October 24

In the ICU, Lily and I watch the TED talk - a live stream from Lily's tablet. Peter's up there shining like a hundred-watt charisma bulb to rousing applause.

"I want you to know not to fear." His voice boomed across the auditorium. "None of us can tell you what the future holds. After all, when I was laying on the floor after the heart attack, I knew my life was over."

Lily's sympathetic gaze doesn't throw me into a hate spiral or scald me with envy. I just remember how lucky I am: the man with two broken legs, various other shattered body parts and contusions. I wish I had a morphine button. I'd push the living hell out of it.

But right now, I'd settle for the sight of my fingers out of these wraps.

The illustrious vision of Peter continues. "When I came back, I swore my life would be different, and it has been. People worry about going into the light, right? Don't go into the light, honey!" He throws his arms up to hide his face and falls to his knees.

The crowd laughs. He remains kneeling. Then he reveals his smiling face. "I'm here to tell you not to be afraid. Benevolence surrounds us all. No good deed is ever wasted."

The charge nurse peeks in. "We're watching that out here at the nurses' station, too. He was here yesterday. What a blessing he is."

Lily smiles, speaks in the faux sociable tone she reserves for strangers. “Yes, he’s a phenomenon.”

The nurse’s eyes shine. “There’s hope for all of us, isn’t there?”

The traction pulleys that suspend my legs above the bed will come off someday. I hope the rehab technicians assigned to me appreciate the gift of sarcasm. If they do, their every day will be like Christmas. Recovery won’t be easy, but I’ll have only one shot at making the rest of my life the best of my life.

Let us all shine on.

Embe Charpentier's first novel, *Beloved Dead*, was published by Kellan Books in November, 2015. Her work has been published in *LitroNY*, *Polychrome Ink*, *Romance Flash*, *Indianola Review* and elsewhere. When not teaching or writing, she enjoys epic tea parties with princesses and wandering off unsupervised.

An Invaluable Essence

Laurence Sullivan

Top notes of ginger and bergamot. Middle notes of green tea and orange. Base notes of musk, cloves and patchouli. It made a million in its first quarter and was deemed a wild success by all my perfumer peers. To me, though – it was just the latest item on my catalogue of failures.

Most people never think of fragrance as particularly important. They might miss *seeing* a lover, they may pine to *hear* his or her voice, but rarely do they lament the loss of their scent – even when it's such a powerful part of who they are.

It was never that way with me. I suppose I was just blessed with a particularly strong sense of smell—at least that's what the biographers cited as the sole reason for my success. I was just seemingly more attuned to the world's cacophony of scents, every one of them vied for my attention and so only the very best stood out.

I discovered this bizarre talent at my first perfumery, a job I only went for because I needed the money at the time. The problem was that everything my colleagues concocted smelled so mediocre to me, I felt like a frustrated honeybee making do with cheap supermarket flowers. I wanted to flourish there, I wanted to make the most out of a bad situation, and one day I was finally given the chance!

We were told that the company needed a new brand, something that would evoke the glamour of the roaring '20s but with a twist for the 'modern' woman. I set about work immediately and quickly concocted the most satisfying fragrance—one that made my nostrils dance with joy. Soon after, it was announced that I had won the little company competition, although I received no special fanfare or thanks.

That all changed when the fragrance was finally released to the public...The way they reacted, the things they said—you would have been forgiven for believing Jesus himself had produced the bottle! I was a magician, an artist; one critic even called me an oracle!

To me, it was all faintly ridiculous. To me, it was just a very pleasant aroma. When that first product hit store shelves, that's when I knew I was different. What was good for me—was magical for everybody else.

I slowly became envious of the public; I even began to resent them. I wanted to experience that euphoria they all seemed to share, but nothing I produced ever seemed to work. Then one evening, at a terribly dull fashion show, my nostrils started to quiver and my heart leapt with joy. It was like some fairytale the Grimm brothers might have penned, I was the Princess being awakened, at last, by an utterly intoxicating aroma! There, on the other side of the room, stood my living ambrosia. Jan was his name.

I rushed to be near him, quickly brushing off the various fashionistas and interviewers who attempted to catch a word with me. Usually, I would be as gregarious as possible, but that night I just wanted to know *that* man.

Hours felt like mere minutes with him, and my career was put *firmly* on hold as we talked for the *entire* evening! Until that moment, I had never even given a passing thought to being *with* somebody—yet there I was. As it turned out, Jan was a fan of mine. I had never made many fragrances for the male market, but what little I had produced, Jan had snapped up! It was slightly embarrassing, really. It seemed almost an insult that he was masking his natural essence with my mediocrity!

Still, we became inseparable from that day forward; I think much of it must have been chemical. I don't think it would have been possible otherwise, for everything to happen so fast. I just couldn't be away from him, if I ever was, life would lose its lustre. We became each other's muses; he was my beloved blossom, eternally youthful, so full of life—always inspiring me to produce better work! He called me his 'starlet,' more beautiful than anything the silver screen had ever seen. That stuck with me, that phrase. At first I always thought he was teasing, I know I've never really been beautiful. But to him at least, I really was special, I really was somebody.

For years we lived together in almost perfect harmony and during that time I created some of my most commercially successful work. That wasn't enough though, I wanted to strive to replicate the effect he had on me, to somehow create a scent that would make my heart soar like the way he always made it do. I think my determination had a positive effect on him, too, as the films he shot started to shoot up to the top of the box office. It wasn't uncommon during that stage of our lives for the two of us to be interviewed together, but in the end, all that success didn't matter. The only thing that counted for either of us was the fact we had each other. We thought it would always be that way.

That was until...one day...he wasn't there anymore.

I just couldn't accept it. He was my blossom, so full of life. I waited for him; every day I expected a letter to fall through the post, to have my nostrils quiver again like that night we first met. But they never did, no letter ever arrived.

Eventually, people stopped waiting with me, they slowly began to return to their everyday lives. I couldn't understand that, I couldn't see how they could calmly move on while there was a storm brewing in my heart. I was lost at sea and my guiding light had vanished. I was asked time and again to return to work, but I knew that I couldn't, not without my muse, not without my beloved.

For a time, I surrounded myself with all the things Jan had left behind, each one of them a relic containing a little of his essence—a fraction of who he was. Until then, I had loved how my fragrances slowly evaporated over time, their ephemeral nature not only kept me in business but it also made my work more special—a tiny treasure to be enjoyed only for a moment. What I had once loved had become something cruel and mocking, as each of Jan's possessions slowly smelled less and less like him. Eventually, to me at least, it was as if each of them ceased to house any part of his soul at all.

Losing him once was unspeakably painful; I simply couldn't lose him for a second time. So, after two years of remaining stationary in a state of mourning, I finally picked myself up and went to find my new fragrance. This was to be a painful journey, I knew that, but I also knew that on the other side I would find Jan. I had been blessed with a gift, however trivial it may have seemed to other people, and in smelling Jan, in some small way, it was like having him back—I needed to recapture that.

Designing an artificial fragrance, smelling just like a lost loved one, seemed like an almost impossible task. In some ways it was. I refused to give in, though. With each new attempt I inched closer to my destination, and every new mixture helped weave together the pieces that Jan had left behind. I've often heard it said that the journey is more important than the destination and that finally made sense to me during this time.

Certain smells stored in my studio reinvigorated my memory and they transported me back through the entirety of our relationship, if only for a moment. One day I would be dancing with Jan in the ballrooms of Vienna, the next I'd be sitting along the Seine breathing in the cool air—my hand resting in his. In the end, though, I would always come back to my studio, enriched by the journey but longing to return to my fantasies.

Even so, there had to come a time when the road would end, when I would finally find what I had so desperately searched for. That moment came a full year after I took my first step on this path. As soon as that final fragrance hit me, I knew that I had finally found it. I had always thought of this journey as mythical, an impossible dream that I would strive for but never truly accomplish. I was meant to be like some conquistador hunting for El Dorado, my mountains of gold were never supposed to be found. Yet, I had done it, and for the briefest moment it was like having Jan back.

To my surprise, I immediately closed the container. It hurt—it was painful. I'd dreamed of this moment over and over—it had occupied my every waking thought. I'd have given away all my worldly possessions just for a single bottle of Jan's essence. To me, it was worth more than all the money in the world.

Yet there I was, transfixed on the very thing I'd searched for, but completely unable to dare breath it in again. It was him, but it wasn't him. For that second, it was like having him in front of me again—just like that night we first met. Except...I knew that he wasn't there...and he never would be again.

That's when I realised why I felt so numb. It was as if I had created a diluted version of him, and it was the ultimate insult to his memory. My creation needed to be as unique as he was—it had to be a limited edition of just one bottle. I promised myself there and then that I would never make another. That way, the bottle would represent him and it would remain that way forever. Once sealed, I would never open it again. I would know what treasure was inside and have the comfort of Jan always being close to me. Nothing else would do him justice.

Originally, I had planned on producing enough to fill my life with it, constantly surrounding myself with a part of him. Now I realised how much of a mistake that dream was, and that this was the only way I could find happiness with my achievement. Jan's essence was to be my last ever creation.

I wanted to savour the moment, a breath in time so close to perfection. There was only one thing separating my final work from completion, and I was paralysed with a fear of going through with it. After I reached my ultimate goal, what would be left? At that moment, it was a choice between resurrecting some small part of my love, or still keeping alive a once seemingly impossible dream. A dream which was the only thing keeping me producing commercially successful products. When I put it in those terms, the choice finally seemed so obvious. Since Jan left, nothing I made ever made me happy. All I wanted was this one bottle. All I wanted was him.

I breathed in deeply, my whole body shaking with anticipation. Aching slowly, I steadied my hand and inched it towards my desk drawer, pulling out a single blank bottle label. My pen danced across the paper one final time, forming a name that summed up everything that Jan was and always would be to me...

'My Beloved Blossom.'

A Writers' Centre Norwich 'Commended Writer', Laurence Sullivan's fiction has been published by such places as: *Londonist*, *The List*, *Amelia's Magazine*, *Sampad*, and *Drunk Monkeys*. He became inspired to start writing during his university studies, after being saturated in all forms of literature from across the globe and enjoying every moment of it.

Smoke Rings

James Mulhern

Just as we were about to step onto the ice, Nonna nudged my arm away and opened the bank door. She slipped and her wig flew into a snowbank. “My back! My back!”

I yelled for help. Tony, a kid from school, came running from the gas station. A crowd of about ten people surrounded us, mostly women. Tony tried to help Nonna get up, but she screeched, “My God. You’re hurting me. Someone call an ambulance. I think I broke something. Don’t anybody move me. I want a professional.” Her coat was splayed open, and I was amazed that she had managed to create a rip in the leg of her pantsuit; there was even blood. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

The manager from the bank came outside. “Let me help you get up.”

Nonna hollered at him, “Don’t touch me! I slipped on ice. Who is your maintenance person? Must be a *bombats*’. He should be fired.” She moaned, the tears continuing, mascara a dirty mess on her cheeks.

“I’ve got your wig,” a hunchback elderly woman, with an empathetic expression, said. “Do you want to put it back on? I’ll help you.”

“Are you crazy? What’s a wig gonna do for me? What I need is an ambulance!”

“Ma’am, I assure you that an ambulance is on the way,” the manager said. He reminded me of Cary Grant in his dark suit, white shirt, and tie. His wavy dark hair was parted on the side.

“I was only trying to help,” the elderly woman said, handing the wig to a twenty-something lady with bright red lips and oversized tortoiseshell sunglasses. She looked disgusted, and passed the wig to a gray-haired short man to her left who twisted it with his hands.

“Hey, ya gonna ruin that thing. It was expensive. I bought it at Filene’s. Stop tugging it, mister.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Didn’t even realize I was.” He gave it to a fat prim and proper woman in a green dress. It was like a game of Hot Potato, I thought.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Nonna said wiping tears away with her hands. They were stained with mascara. “My poor granddaughter.” She pointed at me. “What a trauma to see her nonna almost die. I’m sure she’s gonna have emotional damage from this whole experience.”

“Ma’am, she’ll be fine. It was just a fall. It’s not like you’re dead,” the manager said.

The prim lady blurted, “That was uncalled for. How insensitive.” She looked to the others for approval.

“Thank you, lady. Don’t forget he said that. You’re my witness,” Nonna whimpered.

“Of course not, dear.” The woman smiled, happy to be important.

“Oh my God! I really coulda died. Smashed my head open or something. And that would have been poor Molly’s last memory of me. My brain all over the ice.” She crossed herself.

The lady with red lips and glasses sized me up, then glanced at Nonna. She smiled, looking smug.

“Jesus! My leg is bleeding,” Nonna exclaimed, inspecting her torn pants. “I bet I’m just covered in bruises.” She began to breath deeply. “Oh, oh, oh! I think I’m having *agital*!”

The gray-haired man said, “What should we do? What should we do?”

“Take some deep slow breaths, ma’am.” The manager kneeled beside her and tried to hold one of her hands. Nonna pulled it away.

“Who are you? So you think you’re a doctor now?”

“I was trying to calm you.” He noticed the mascara on his hands and wiped them on his pants.

“Keep your paws off me.”

The ambulance arrived as if on cue, and the crowd opened to make way for two burly men who checked Nonna’s vital signs and lifted her onto a stretcher. They were very sympathetic, and Nonna kept saying, “What nice boys.” Once she was secured in the ambulance I entered and sat beside her. As we drove away, the siren sounded. Nonna placed her hand over her mouth to suppress laughter, smiling at me. I had to turn away because I knew I would laugh, too. “This is just awful. Just awful,” she said to the young man on the other side of her stretcher.

“You’ll be okay. We are going to take good care of you.”

“Thank you, dear.”

Through the back window of the ambulance, I watched the crowd disperse. The woman with the red lips remained for a few moments, staring as we drove away. She was smirking at me. I stuck my tongue out and smushed my face against the window, then I put on Nonna’s wig.

When we arrived at the Emergency Ward of the Massachusetts General Hospital, the paramedics lifted her stretcher from the back of the ambulance and pushed through sliding doors that opened automatically. I followed them. We were greeted by a tall thin nurse with a white cap atop an immaculate blond bouffant. She put her hand on the stretcher and began asking the paramedics what happened. Nonna interrupted, saying she had a terrible fall on an area that should have been cleared of ice. A clerk at the receiving desk motioned for me to approach. He asked for Nonna’s information—name, address, allergies, past medical history, doctor, etc. I gave him as much information as I knew, then was brought to an area in the back of the Emergency Ward, a large room full of stretchers partitioned with curtains. A lady with a bruised face and no teeth grinned at me from across the room. Nonna was staring at the ceiling from her stretcher when I reached her. She patted my hand on the railing of her stretcher when she saw me. “You did good.”

After a while, the curtain was pulled back and we were greeted by a handsome muscular doctor in blue scrubs. He requested that I step away so he could examine her. He closed the curtain and I heard him ask a lot of questions. Nonna told the story of her fall again, this time embellishing details, saying how inconsiderate and cold the bank manager was to her. “I have witnesses.”

The doctor listened patiently. He said that she was pretty bruised up with a small laceration on her thigh. She would probably feel worse a few days from now after the adrenaline rush had subsided, but he didn’t think she had broken anything, and the laceration did not need stitches; it just needed to be cleaned up to prevent infection. He was going to order some X-rays just in case. Before he left, he asked if there was anyone he should call.

“There’s no reason to bother my daughter or son-in-law. And I live with two nuts-o sisters who will just panic and give me a headache. Once I have the X-rays, and you give me the okay to go, my beautiful granddaughter will ride home with me in a cab.”

“Okay, Mrs. Janssen.”

“Don't call me that. Call me Agnella. Janssen is my married name. My husband died a long time ago. Julien was from Belgium. I'm an Italian. He was a cross dresser, you know. I should have stuck to an Italian. Never met an Italian cross dresser. Maybe it runs in Belgian families. What do you think?”

The doctor laughed. “I really don't know. I'm not sure what to say.”

"Ah. What can you say? People have their ways. Caught him wearing my black panties and expensive red lipstick. He saw me in the bedroom doorway, then ran outta the house and drove away. Bam!" She clapped her hands. "The next thing ya know, he was hit by a train. Dead in an instant. Where he was going, I don't know. Was a real shame."

"Well, Agnella," he tried to change the subject, "your granddaughter looks like a responsible young lady. I'm sure you will be taken care of." He pulled open the curtain and smiled at me. I loved his white teeth. He said I should stay with Nonna and pull the cord for the nurse if Nonna suddenly seemed drowsy or confused. Then he left, clipboard in hand, with a good story to tell his co-workers.

A young timid nurse cleaned out the laceration. We waited for the X-rays, which seemed interminable, but eventually Nonna was cleared to go. The whole affair had lasted about four hours. Our family probably assumed we were shopping and that we had stopped to eat lunch. The cab dropped us at Nonna's and we began to climb the stairs to her apartment. "Be quiet like a mouse," she said, pointing to the door of my aunts' apartment. "I don't want Aunt Helena and Aunt Bianca to bother me. They'd just blow things out of proportion and get hysterical."

She moved slowly up the stairs, stopping every now and then to rest. "That whole affair really knocked the wind out of me."

When we were seated in her living room, she took off the wig and laid it neatly on the coffee table. "Ya know, when I saw you put that thing on in the ambulance, I thought, God, how she looks like me when I was young. I'm an old lady now, no longer beautiful, but such is life."

"I think you're beautiful."

"Of course you should say that. I'm your grandmother."

After a few minutes of silence, when she seemed like she was going to nod off, she sat bolt upright, very alert. "Ouch!" She placed her right hand against her side. "I wish I hadn't fallen so hard." Then she said, "Molly, we gotta take pictures. We need evidence for a lawsuit. Let's go into my bedroom and check out the damages."

Nonna stripped completely naked, throwing the blue velvet pantsuit and her undergarments onto the bed. "Those clothes are going in the trash. Well, maybe not the bra and panties." She stared at herself in the mirror. For a moment it seemed she forgot I was there as she traced the bruises on her saggy body, turned and looked over her shoulder so she could inspect her back." Without looking at me, she said, "Grab the Polaroid from the left bottom drawer of my dresser."

I did so, and then she said, "These pictures are gonna be the icing on the cake." She laughed. "That's funny, 'icing.' Don't you think, Molly? I mean considering how it happened." She put her hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes. I could smell her sweat, her oldness. "I know what you're thinking."

"What?"

"You're thinking your grandmother has sagging breasts, a sagging ass, and flabby arms." She pulled the skin underneath her triceps and flapped it with her hand. "You don't want to get old, I know. But that's life. I had beautiful firm skin and was quite pretty like you, but aging is a terrible thing. You lose your looks, and then sometimes your mind. Or maybe you get a horrible disease. And there's nothing you can do about it. You just gotta carry on and get as much as you can out of every moment you are alive." She smiled, kissed my forehead, and pinched my cheek. "Now pretend you're a photographer for *Vogue* and snap some pictures."

It amazed me that she knew what I was thinking. Seeing her old body made me nauseous, afraid of the future.

"Look, this bruise looks like a cow." She pointed to the back of her right shoulder. "And this one over here on my ass cheek looks like a barn. What do you think?"

"I can see the cow, but I can't see the barn."

"Well maybe not a barn. Some sort of building though. I think it's the Vatican. I got the Pope's house on my ass."

"I don't know what the Vatican looks like, Nonna."

She eased herself onto the bed and patted the area beside her. I sat down.

“It’s a fancy schmancy palace where the Pope lives.” She moved my chin with her hand so that I was staring into her rheumy brown eyes. “Listen to what I tell you. What we did today, some people would consider wrong. Certainly the Pope.” She laughed. “Grab the cigarettes from the beside table, will you?” I reached over. “And the ashtray... Oh, and the lighter.” I handed them to her. She placed the ashtray beside her, lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and blew smoke rings. “See those puffs of smoke.” I watched them float in front of her face.

“Yes, Nonna.”

“Look at that one over there in the corner,” she pointed, “it’s disappearing already. Here one minute, gone the next.”

I watched the empty air. “So what?”

She slapped my face. My skin burnt and my eyes started to tear up. When I tried to move my hand to my cheek, she pushed it down and held it against my thigh.

I was crying. “Why did you do that?”

“Because you gotta be tough. You don’t get anything in this world the easy way. What we did isn’t going to hurt anybody. That big bank is gonna settle once we threaten a lawsuit.”

I turned my head. I felt a pit in my stomach.

“Don’t you look away!” She grabbed my face. As she spoke, I could feel her spittle on my nose. “And don’t you dare utter a word to anyone about our plan today. You understand?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Say it louder.”

“Yes! I won’t say a word.”

“Your poor nonna and you were walking to the bank. I slipped on ice and had a bad fall.” She laughed. “And I got bruises to prove it. She stood up and pointed to the Vatican. “As God is our witness.”

I laughed and wiped tears off my cheeks.

“How much money do you think we’ll make?”

She gazed at her body in the mirror above her dresser, as if making an appraisal. “I’d say about ten grand. Those hotshots at the bank won’t want any bad press, especially about a poor old lady falling on ice.” She stood up and moved the ashtray to the top of her dresser, then tamped out her cigarette. “Now you go downstairs and make us some coffee while I wash up and get dressed.”

When I was in the kitchen, I heard her fall down the stairs. “Oh shit!” was the last thing she said. I found her body on the mahogany landing. There was a pool of blood around her head, and her right arm and left leg were contorted, like the Gumby doll of an angry child. I stepped over her body, walked up the stairs, and into her bedroom, where I sat down and lit a cigarette. I coughed a bit, but as I watched the smoke rings dissipate, I realized Nonna was right.

“Here one minute, gone the next,” I said to myself. Then I walked to the phone on her bedside table and dialed 911. “My grandmother,” I screamed. “She fell down the stairs and I think she’s dead.”

James Mulhern has published fiction in several literary journals. A story was selected for *The Library's Best*, an anthology of best short stories. In September of 2013, he was chosen as a finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. Mr. Mulhern was awarded a writing fellowship through the English-Speaking Union to study in the United Kingdom during the summer of 2015. In September of 2015 two short stories were awarded Honorable Mention for the *Short Story America Prize*. Six literary journals have accepted for publication adaptations/short stories from his novel in progress, a dark comic mystery set in Boston.

Giving Back

Michael Price

“Trick or treat, Mr. Buell!”

Vito Corleone, a.k.a. thirty-seven-year-old Robert “Bubba” Buell, snatched a well-worn violin case from atop the planter just inside the front door of the house in which he grew up as a kid, opened wide the screen door and, in his finest *Godfather*-esque voice, rasped, “You’z guys wanna me to play you’z a nice tune on ma li’l violin, eh?”

The three juvenile M&M’s—red, white, and green, short to tall, left to right, respectively, on the other side of the door—giggled kindergarten through fourth grade acknowledgments of Bubba’s perfected-over-the-years 1930s bad guy affectation while opening wide their bags.

“Oh please, sir, don’t hurt us,” beamed Greenie, a boy no more than six inches short of facing Bubba head to head, sopranoing a surprisingly skilled melodramatic level of fright, for a neighborhood youngster, as the soundtrack of *The Sting* ragtimed *sotto voce* in the background.

Bubba, fashionably clad in his annually worn “Gangsta Suit,” as he called it, smiled at the children, his standard neighborhood smile, through the disguise. A few years prior, he had paid far too much for the authentic blue-gray, pin-striped get-up and he knew it, but didn’t care—not now, not anymore. He loved Halloween, everything about it—the inherent charade of it all, the doling of the goodies, the absolute otherness of the day—and now he was finally in a position, financially and otherwise, to entirely enjoy his favorite holiday with the neighborhood, “... especially with all the good kids here...,” referring to them as his “... junior troops...” on more than a few occasions, with more than a few of his neighbors. The gray, felt, wide-brimmed hat had been his father’s and was an ideal accessory for the bit; it fit him perfectly when slanted just so, and the gleaming two-toned wing-tips were ever so cool.

“Off you go, Donovan kids,” he said in his own voice, having selected several mini-candy bars from his violin case and dropping the chocolate treasures into their bags. Then, a la Corleone, “Have fun, you’z kidses.”

“Thanks, Mr. Buell!” as they skipped off, leftover giggles evaporating in their wake.

“Be good, please,” was Bubba Buell’s stock, smiling response.

*

Three years earlier...

“A toast, my boy?”

Bubba Buell—ex-pro football star, distinguished war veteran, and everybody’s local hero—sat forward in his padded folding chair and raised a glass of Scotch, neat. “It’s just the two of us here, Mr. Minter,” he said, smiling modestly, panning the nearly empty room in jest.

“First of all,” cut in old Mr. Minter, relaxing back in his matching chair and lowering his glass, “now that we’re both adults, or s’posed to be,” he emitted an aged, hoarse chuckle, “enough with the *Mister Minter* bull.” He stared long into Bubba’s eyes. “Once upon a time I was a ‘Mister’ to you and you were the cute kid next door, runnin’ all over hell, chuckin’ that damn ball up against the garage all hours o’ the day and night. Now I’m just Will, the old fart neighbor. Deal?” He sat up straight and re-raised his glass.

Bubba’s smile emitted sound, “Yeah okay, deal.”

“Welcome home, son.”

Their glasses chimed softly and were emptied, a swallow apiece. “Got time for one more?” suggested Bubba, bottle in hand. “Will?”

The older man laughed hard. “Time?” He tipped his head back and stared blankly at the ceiling. “Time is pretty much what I got now, my boy.”

Bubba Buell had always been the neighborhood darling throughout the early years of his life. Always in the top ten percent of his class academically, he was much more highly acclaimed for singing the male lead in all three winter quarters’ high school musicals and captaining two successful sports teams, which, of course, were all much more publicly visible and entertaining. His senior year at Eden Prairie High—a much esteemed upper-middle-class neighborhood high school, both academically and extra-curricularly excellent—was topped off by his being named the best high school football player in the state of Minnesota, a year in which he had quarterbacked his team to the state AAAAA title. He went on to receive all-American honorable mention as a University of Minnesota Golden Gopher quarterback and was drafted early in the second round by much-despised rival, next door neighbor, Wisconsin’s Green Bay Packers. He resolutely refused to sign, held out for months, for all intents and purposes forcing a trade to, exclusively, his long beloved Minnesota Vikings, where he was the multi-millionaire signal caller and lone superstar for ten seasons on an otherwise fair- to better-than-average team.

“Y’all moved in then, son?”

Bubba glanced at the few boxes in the living room. A confirmed bachelor for many years, he had been living most of his adult life in lavishly furnished luxury apartments. “Doesn’t look like much, does it?” he said. He had picked up a moving van earlier in the day, emptied a small storage space he’d been renting for the past three years, easily by himself, which filled the van only about half full, with mostly knick-knack type sentimental trinkets, family treasures, trophies, and various other commendations. There was no furniture in the room other than the chairs on which the two old friends were perched.

“No,” said Will with a wink, “but with all that loot you been collectin’ interest on these last few years, I’m sure you’ll fix it up real nice, real soon.”

Bubba grinned, then uttered sheepishly, “Gotta buy a bed.”

Will smiled, nodded, and sipped. “So...” he started anew, idly fingering the rim of his glass, “... a genu-*ine*, U.S. Army sharpshooter.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Hey, you had a lot to do with it.”

“How’s that?”

“Kinda, yeah. You’re the one that took me to that pistol range when I was a kid.” He gazed out the front windows, into the dusk of the day. “I was so small; I could hardly hold the gun straight.” Completely entranced, Bubba was awash in memory, absently smiling. “I remember the first time I even hit the damn target, and then when I kept getting better and better, I used to get...I used to get kinda warm inside, a really good feeling. I remember it really well. And then, even before I hit the bullseye for the first time, but I was so sure it was gonna happen...it was like my blood was on fire. And every time after that, every time I hit the bullseye, same thing. Felt fabulous.” Bubba allowed himself a few final moments of recollection. “And after that time you took me duck hunting...well, then I knew for sure I wanted to do something like that when I got older.”

Will pondered for a moment. “Huh,” is what he finally said. “Interesting.”

Bubba rose and sauntered over to the kitchen counter. “So...” he started, freshening his glass with Scotch, then Will’s, vocally tip-toeing, “...not to bring up a sore subject, Will, but...how’s the kid? Still a pill, for the lack of a better term?”

"The kid" to whom Bubba referred was Will's fifteen-year old grandson Trevor, a boy to whom Will had been custodial parent since the lad's age of eleven, when both his parents were gunned down in an apparent random home invasion while Trevor was away at a renowned Behavioral Boot Camp. Trevor had been in and out of trouble with the law almost from the moment he could walk and talk at the same time—drugs, vandalism, and petty theft headlining his juvenile rap sheet—which is why he had been sentenced to such a camp in the first place.

"Same," mumbled Will. "Damn...keeps hangin' 'round that little shithead Louie LaFrenz, they're practically inseparable. Now *there's* a bad seed for ya, this LaFrenz character. Wait'll ya meet this beaut, my boy, he's a pain in everyone's ass around here. Damned kids. I'd like to...well, you know how it is." He sighed deeply, sadly, shook his head. "I may have already lost him, my Trevor. We were so close, once, not all that long ago, either. Now...now I'm not sure if I can reach him anymore, might be too late. I'd like to...change him, somehow. I *do* love him, ya know, love him to death, he's my blood, after all. It's very frustrating. I'm an old man, I'm supposed to be done with this crap. I wanna do *something*. I don't know what to do anymore." Will began idly pounding his knee with his fist. "I may have already lost him, my boy, I may have already lost him."

Bubba displayed a burgeoning frown. "Actually," he strained, "I've already had the dubious pleasure of meeting our young Mr. La Frenz."

"Really. Already?"

"No no, a couple years ago, when I was back on leave. I spoke at the old Eden Prairie Middle School. Principal Evans asked me to speak on the topic of *respect*." A sad smile etched onto Bubba's face. "Little Louie and a couple buddies mooned my lecture."

Will wasn't smiling. "Shithead," he muttered.

They drank in silence for several minutes, staring out into the darkness. Suddenly, Will sat back, stretched out his crossed legs in front of him, clasped his hands behind his head, and said, "D'ja ever kill anybody over there?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I mean, how'd ya get out so damn quick? Good behavior? Ha! That's a laugh. 'Course, I s'pose if anyone could get out of the U.S. Army on good behavior, it'd have to be you."

Bubba laughed uneasily.

"Wounded? Ya wasn't wounded were ya? Ya look good, that's for sure. There's only so many ways I know..."

"Will, I...uh..."

"C'mon, my boy, you can tell me. I was in Korea, remember? I can take it."

Bubba eyed Will searchingly for a moment, then abruptly tore his focus from the old war veteran, relaxed back as well, and breathed deeply, again staring through the un-draped, floor-to-ceiling, front picture windows, out into the looming darkness of his first night back in the old haunt, his new home, for many seconds before answering. "I'm thinking about putting in a garden," he said, just as the street lights popped on, immediately silhouetting his entire front yard, particularly two nearly full grown, lolling willow trees. "Liven up the place a little. Whad'ya think, Will?"

Will cracked a grin back at Bubba, then gulped his glass dry. "I think," he paused, rising slowly, "I think I need to hit the head."

*

"Trick or treat!"

"Hey, you'z guys wanna me to play you'z a tune..."

Bubba bought the house following one defaulted mortgage and one family that ultimately decided that Eden Prairie was "too suburban" —whatever that meant, Bubba never cared to know. Everyone knew he could have bought

any house he desired after returning from Afghanistan, in any part of the world. But he wanted to return home, to the old neighborhood, where he felt most vital.

“And what are you two? Are you little demons?”

The little boy tittered while the little girl shied behind her brother. “No, you silly, Mr. Buell. We're Hobbits,” the boy explained.

“Oh, of course, Hobbits,” said Bubba, screwing a faux concerned look onto his face. “Pretty scary little Hobbits, I'd say.” He broke into his neighborhood smile as the candy was dispersed.

It was either a coincidence or blind fate that the old Buell homestead just happened to be on the market, exactly when he was looking. And, as with his “Gangsta Suit,” he knew he probably paid way too much for the house. But once again, he didn't care; the house was his.

Bubba Buell was, indeed, the entire community's local hero. As if his prowess and fame as a gridiron star plus the three-year army stint didn't equal local hero status, Bubba Buell was, flat-out, a nice guy, everybody said so, ever since anyone could remember. While he had always been overly cautious when choosing his true friends and, therefore, never had many close relationships growing up (next door neighbor old Mr. Minter being the one notable exception), he was sociable and kind to literally everybody. From early youth on, every word that came out of his mouth seemed to be filtered through some sort of abnormally mature sieve of respect, which made him particularly stand-out amongst his oft-juvenile delinquent classmates. Perhaps peculiarly enough, and certainly more often than most kids his age, he found himself in the middle of many potentially ugly teen situations, when he might just as easily have lost his cool and fallen completely, if not justifiably, out of respect for some unruly young antagonist. But every time, he would recreate the same unusually mature response: he'd simply smile, shut up, and walk away. His overall sterling reputation brought out the worst in some of his more unpleasant classmates, attempting to shatter his outwardly unflappable demeanor. But he never buckled under the pressure of his peers. Not once.

Tom Stankey, a reserve running back on the State Championship team and perhaps the closest thing to a best friend Bubba had in high school, one his own age, after witnessing one of the star QB's finer silent but friendly rebuffs of a particularly profane, drunken bully in the McDonald's parking lot after a game, asked Bubba if he didn't feel a little extra pressure to always be nice, to always keep his head about him, never make emotional, snap judgment decisions. And didn't he ever feel like going a little crazy at somebody, just once?

Bubba simply smiled at Tom, who recognized it as his friend's “What are you talking about?” smile. He'd seen it before, everybody had, and it certainly wouldn't be the last time.

*

“So” said Will, returning from the bathroom, “I saw the awards, the medals, ribbons...pistols, rifles. Good for you. Didn't take ya long to get those suckers up.”

“Just wanted to empty a box.”

“Sure, absolutely. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“Interesting place to hang 'em. Standin' there takin' a whiz, on the wall right in front o' ya.”

Bubba shrugged nervously, several times. “Hey, I like 'em. Seemed like as good a place as any.” He chuckled once. “Besides, it's a good reminder—never miss.”

Will snorted, “Very funny,” then sipped slowly, deliberately. “So...other than a garden...”

“Maybe a garden.”

“...Other than maybe putting in a garden, what are your plans, my boy?”

Bubba stood and stretched. “Well” he began, “first of all, I know for a fact you guys don’t have a neighborhood watch program...”

“Nope.”

“I checked with the realtor. Which surprised me, such a nice neighborhood and all. I’d like to get that started. Think that’d fly around here?”

“With you starting it? Can’t miss.”

“Good, good.” Bubba stared at his glass. “I know I wanna coach—football and baseball, for sure—park board, I suppose. Maybe something else, too. Smaller kids, preferably. Not too smart-assy yet, ya know, the little ones. But I’m not that picky.”

“Admirable, my boy, damned admirable.” Then, “Work?”

Bubba forced a hard laugh, “Naw,” and again, even more forced. “I’m retired. I’m like you, Will.” Will joined in the levity.

They sat silently, idly staring out the window, their minds mildly dancing from the Scotch. Suddenly, they simultaneously turned and faced each other and, vocally overlapping one another, exclaimed,

Will: “So, Afghanistan...”

Bubba: “Tell the Korea story again.”

Quickly, Bubba blurted, “You first!”

They stared at each other for a couple seconds. Will smiled meekly, allowed his shoulders to drop, and tepidly complained, “But my boy, I must’ve told you that story ten, fifteen times already, a long time ago.”

“I don’t care. It makes me crazy motivated. I like it.”

Will sighed. “Okay,” he said. “One condition?”

“Shoot.”

Will inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. “Son, I gotta know...how could you just run off and enlist like that? You had at least five, maybe six, good years left with the Vikings.”

Bubba studied his friend closely, then hinted a smile. “Okay, here’s the thing.” He smirked, blinking his eyes several times before leaving them comically wide open, “If you believe some of my ex-teammates, I may have taken one too many hits to the head.”

Will barely managed a smile. “That’d do it,” he nodded. The smile quickly disappeared. “C’mon, my boy, seriously, you coulda ruined everything, you coulda...”

“Okay, okay,” broke in Bubba stiffly, as if he had a readied answer on speed dial recall. “I know, *I know*...and I’m already sorry, sorry in advance. It’s such an overused expression, but...” he paused to drink. “Aw c’mon, Will, it sounds so damn corny, ya really gonna make me say it?” He sighed. “Okay. It’s...it’s all about giving back. Sense of duty, Whatever. For the country. Life, liberty...for everybody, for you guys, you vets, Korea and...”

“Football is only...” He paused to consider. “It was kind of an easy decision.

“Same deal with the neighborhood, moving back home, giving back. I *got* money, Will. I’m good. For me...*I’m* all about giving back.” He waited, but Will said nothing. Bubba humphed to himself. “Maybe I did get nailed on the old melon a few times too many. And again, I’m really sorry ’bout all the ‘giving back’ crap. It’s been done, I know.”

Will examined Bubba for several seconds, emptied his glass, then spontaneously broke into wild laughter, Bubba eventually following suit.

*

“Trick or treat, Buell.”

Not quite dozing, Bubba glanced up from his living room recliner at his grandmother's antique clock on the wall; it was 10:20. Nearly three hours after what he had assumed to be the end of the year's goody-giving festivities, Bubba had long since turned off *The Sting*, emptied the violin case of its undistributed sweets, and returned it to its prescribed home in the back of the front closet. He had changed into his robe, stowed away the “Gangsta Suit” for another year, and was watching the late local news over a nightcap Scotch, about twenty minutes from his usual bedtime.

Still, good sport he was, and in keeping with the spirit of the evening, he opened wide the screen door, rubbed his eyes, opened them wide, smiled, and began, “You'z guys wanna me to play...”

He stopped. Bubba found himself face to face with Batman and Robin, in full costume, the former easily as tall as Bubba. “Ach,” he emitted disgustedly, “I thought the voices sounded a little low,” releasing the outer door to slowly spring back.

“C'mon, man, let's get with the goodies!” voiced Batman with volume, opening a pillowcase almost completely filled with candy. “Ain't no more little shits to rip off, they all went home to mommy and daddy.” Robin laughed grotesquely, stupidly. “Let's go, old man, fork over the goods!”

Bubba allowed the screen to latch shut. “Aren't you fellas a little old to be on the receiving end of Halloween?” he said, yawning.

Robin stopped guffawing long enough to blather, “I just go where Bat-ass goes,” slugging the taller boy hard in the shoulder.

“Yeah, be a sport,” added Batman, turning to his partner. “Get it, a sport? Because, ya know who this guy used to be...”

“Yeah, I know, I get it, I get it!” blurted Robin, joining his fellow Caped Crusader in raucous laughter.

Bubba waited several seconds for a break in the hilarity. Then, “Look, gentlemen, I know who you are...”

“No you don't—I'm *Batman!*” the older boy impersonated, a la the movie.

“...Mr. LaFrenz...” nodding to Batman, and, “...Trevor...” Robin. “...and I can smell your breath from in here.”

“No you can't, we're wearing our Bat-breath-a-losers!”

Neighborhood disturbing laughter—juvenile, affected, and very loud.

Bubba sadly shook his head and, through the din of extreme drug enhanced merriment, uttered an unheard, “Another time, gentlemen. Perhaps another time.” And he shut and locked the door.

*

“Okay, ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

Will grimaced.

“Will. Sorry.”

“Alright, okay.” He began, “One afternoon, kinda late, me and the boys...” He stopped and held out his glass. “Better fill us up one more time, this could get pretty boring.”

“Boring? No way, not a chance.” Bubba quickly rose and filled their glasses. “This is gonna be great.”

Will displayed a wry smile. “Gettin' a little tipsy, are ya, my boy?”

“Naw.” Bubba frowned. “No more than you—Will.”

“No offense, no offense,” said Will, eking a grin. He cleared his throat. “Now...” he said, starting over, “...like I said, me and the boys had been out on routine patrol all afternoon. It was really hot, I remember that, sun was startin' to go down but it'd been brutal all day, I'd drank a ton o' water...”

Bubba had set the Scotch bottle back on the counter, practically skipped back, and was sitting on the edge of his seat, avidly attentive. “And you had to take a leak, right?” he interjected.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Will waved him off. “You're gettin' ahead o' me.”

“Sorry.”

Will paused to re-focus. “Anyway, we come across this little abandoned village, sorta. What we shoulda been doin' is headin' back and we knew it 'cuz it was gettin' late, but we were so shot. So we sat in the shade of...I don't know, there were maybe ten or twelve huts, it felt good to take a load off. We was just gonna stay for a few minutes, ya know? Sit a spell, take a blow, before turnin' around? Somebody had obviously shoved off in a hurry, there was still pots and pans and stuff layin' around...”

“And clothes, and wood...”

“...right, blankets, stuff like that. Anyway we was all havin' a quick bite. I remember 'cuz some o' the boys started talkin' some trash 'bout their home towns—me, too—how great they was. And it started gettin' a little heated, but friendly-like...”

“Heated! I love it! Because it was already so hot, right?!”

“That's what you always say,” smirked Will. “Are you sure you want me to tell this story? You already know it by heart.”

“No no, keep going, keep going, this is great! This is gonna be great!”

Will shrugged, “Okay,” and continued. “Anyway, after about...it was too long, we'd gotten too comfortable and we knew it. It was about dusk. We figgered we better shove off. And okay, I had to take a leak.

“So I go behind this one hut—it was a little bit away from the others—and I was doin' my business. That's when the shelling started.”

Bubba felt his heart pounding, his face warming. “Bastards!” he gnashed through his teeth.

“And there weren't nothin' I could do, literally caught with my pants down...sorry, bad joke.”

“In the heat of the battle!”

“I weren't much of a battle, my boy, nobody heard nothin', I swear, no forewarning at all—sneaky commies! And they was lobbin' shells at us—Pkew! Pkew!”

“Pkew! Pkew! Pkew!”

“...blowin' up all around me. And, naturally, they was aimin' at the huts where the boys were—Pkew! Pkew!—all but me, of course. There I was, stuck hidin' by myself, no more than twenty feet from where my buddies was losin' it.”

“Damned commies!”

“I remember thinkin' that I wanted to pick off a few o' my own. Had my weapon loaded and ready to fire.”

“Yeah! That's what I'da done!”

“But I couldn't.”

“I know, dammit! I know!”

“It was frustrating as hell, my boy.”

“Frustrating as hell!”

“But right then, in a split second of...I dunno, temporary sanity maybe? I figgered the only thing maybe—just maybe—keepin' me alive was maybe they might not've seen me, where I was, whizzin' away behind another hut, away from the others. My buddies was all dead, I was sure o' that, the rest of the huts all got leveled pretty much right away. Fightin' back would have been the death o' me, too, for sure. I didn't know how many o' them there were.”

“Dammit!”

“Frustrating as hell, I'm tellin' ya, my boy. I wanted to fire my weapon...hell, I didn't know what to do.”

“Couldn't do a damn thing!”

“So I figgered the best thing for me to do was hit the deck, play dead, behind what was left of my hut, which weren't much, I'm tellin'ya.”

Bubba sprang from his chair, fist pumping, perspiration dripping from his forehead, dotting his T-shirt. “Smart man, Will! Damn smart man!”

“The whole thing prob'ly lasted...seemed like a hour, prob'ly more like a minute and a half...before another unit of our boys showed up and blasted them damn commies into oblivion.”

“Awright!” Bubba fist pumped, “Pkew! Pkew! Pkew!”

“The last thing I remember, right before that, was peekin' out from my hiding place and seein'...and it all looked so weird...”

“Almost surreal-like, right?”

“...yeah, that. With the sun settin' behind 'em and all, I saw the outlines...”

“Not the faces...”

“...couldn't see their faces, just the black outlines. They was gettin' drilled by our boys.”

“Picked 'em off one by one!”

“One by one.”

“Finally!”

“Damn right, finally.”

“And then it was over, right?”

“And then it was over.”

Bubba sat down, both exhausted and rejuvenated, and sighed with contentment. “That story always gets me goin’,” he said, smiling broadly. “Thanks, Will, just what I needed. The perfect end to a perfect day. It's great to be home.”

“Glad I was here.” Will held out his glass to toast, smiling equally broadly. “And it's good to have you back home, where I always know where I can find you.”

Bubba reached out his glass. “To giving back.”

“To giving back.” Their glasses met, clanging loudly, two tiny, imperceptible cracks fissuring the rims of each glass.

*

“Young Buell goes back to pass, good protection...He's got a man open!...He drills one...oh my God, he hit him right in the facemask! And he's down...that's the second time that's happened this game, let's see if he's okay, he's not moving...coach Minter out on the field...”

“Hey, take it easy, Bubba, he's one of ours.”

“I'm sorry, coach, I'm sorry...”

Psh...psh...

“Wha!, wha!?”

Bubba rolled over and winced at the clock on the dresser—a quarter to two. Closer to asleep than awake, did he have to pee or not before returning to dreamland, as long as he was already in a semi-conscious state?

Staggering across the hall to the bathroom, he heard it again.

Psh...psh...

He *had* heard something! Up against the house. At a quarter to two, dammit! Someone trying to break in? Vandalizing the neighborhood?

Neighborhood watch time.

Psh...psh...

It was his duty.

Finishing his business, he stared at the wall in front of him. He suddenly felt a warm sensation burst in his chest, then radiate in all directions; it felt good. Then, with extreme urgency and boundless resolve, Bubba tip-toed into the living room, checking around every corner like a paranoid fugitive.

Psh...psh...

“Bastards!” he whispered with mounting intensity.

When he got to the living room, he made a quick pan of the area, then raced to the front closet, staying low to the floor. He pushed aside the “Gangsta Suit” and violin case, exposing his hunting rifle in the far back corner of the closet. There, from his haunches, in the dim light seeping through the three triangular windows in the front door, he double-checked to make sure it was loaded.

It was.

He crept out of the closet on hands and knees and peeked through the bottom triangle.

Psh...psh...

Back lit by the overhead streetlights were two faceless enemy attackers, on the front lawn, down near the street, lobbing shells at Bubba's house.

Psb...psb...

Bubba felt his temples pound, his blood boil. In one violent motion, he turned the doorknob and flung both the inner and outer doors wide open. Then, his weapon aimed and ready to fire, he stated loudly but with an eerie calmness,

“Finally.

“One bullet for your head, sir, and another bullet for your head, too, sir.”

And then it was over.

The Eden Prairie police were on the scene in less than five minutes. They found teens Louie LaFrenz and Trevor Minter quite dead, on their backs, sans their Caped Crusader costumes. Their bodies had been blown back into the street, now indecorously spot lit by the garish streetlights. There were two empty egg cartons laying between them.

Television camera crews arrived and were effectively cordoned off, many feet from the scene, from where their remotes originated. A small neighborhood crowd had awakened and was incident-gawking from their front yards, some parents sobbing quietly, everyone speaking in low, disquieted tones. The police wasted no time with their interrogations, some at the scene, others going door to door, waking people up to find out what they knew, if anything, about “Halloween XI: Teens Die,” as the incident had already been headlined by the local media.

The police started with Will Minter's house—for condolences, if nothing else.

They knocked—there was no answer. The front door was unlocked.

Once inside, they found the old man slumped over the kitchen table, body drained of emotion, a single tear on the cheek below each eye, his right hand inches from the trigger of a .38.

The house in which Mr. Robert “Bubba” Buell lived as an adult was the next stop.

James Mulhern has published fiction in several literary journals. A story was selected for *The Library's Best*, an anthology of best short stories. In September of 2013, he was chosen as a finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. Mr. Mulhern was awarded a writing fellowship through the English-Speaking Union to study in the United Kingdom during the summer of 2015. In September of 2015 two short stories were awarded Honorable Mention for the *Short Story America Prize*. Six literary journals have accepted for publication adaptations/short stories from his novel in progress, a dark comic mystery set in Boston.

Uncle Jake's World

William Quincy Belle

Frank sat in an armchair in the far corner of the room and listened to Uncle Jake pee. Oddly enough, he hadn't thought about what Uncle Jake was doing. It was only after a few moments that it dawned on him his uncle had gone into the bathroom and left the door wide open. He was looking at Jake's back as Jake stood in front of the toilet. Normally people shut the door as urinating is considered something private; you don't take care of business in public. Was this different? Was it because Frank was family? Did Jake feel comfortable enough in front of Frank, another man, as if this was like taking a pee in the men's room with other guys around?

He looked around at what was essentially a bachelor apartment. It was a large room divided into areas, the bed off to one side and a couple of armchairs at one end arranged as a sitting area. There was a bathroom but the apartment was no more than a single room. But was the apartment the right word to use? In the context of this old folk's home, it would be difficult to say apartment as in his mind that denoted something separate and independent. Here, each resident took their meals in common dining areas, had their laundry done by an on-site service, and had all the minor details of everyday life taken care of for them by the complex.

The toilet flushed. Frank looked through the bathroom door and saw Uncle Jake hobble over to the sink to wash his hands. At 97 years of age, Jake was a surprise to still be alive never mind moving. Yes, he was slow. Yes, he couldn't walk far without assistance but he was still alive. When the doctors had diagnosed him with cancer, supposedly he had six months to live, one year tops. But here he was seven years later and still going like the Energizer Bunny. Even though the diagnosis of cancer was correct, it turned out that the cancer was developing at a snail's pace. Everybody was astonished, even the doctors, to see Jake still doing not too badly considering. Then again, what kind of a life was it?

Jake and Barb had been married for nearly 65 years when she succumbed to a heart attack five years ago. The two of them had lived together in the old folks' home for almost decade. Since then, Jake had soldiered on alone. He had acquaintances he saw at mealtimes or the group he met for afternoon tea, but they weren't the same as his wife. Besides, over the past few years Jake had a new health issue to deal with, his eyes. A cataract in his left eye had left him pretty much incapable of seeing anything and in his right eye, he suffered from macular degeneration. While his peripheral vision was intact, he no longer could see anything in front of him. Frank wondered how Jake was getting along. What was Jake's life like if he couldn't see anything?

Frank glanced at the side table sitting next to the other armchair. The small device on the table was a talking book machine from the CNIB, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. They offered recordings of all sorts of books and their machine, nothing more than a CD player, was designed with large buttons and labels in Braille to assist the sightless. Jake still had a television but he couldn't watch it. Apparently Jake would listen to the news show 60 Minutes because it consisted of a lot of talking but as a rule, Jake didn't watch TV, only listened to the radio. Jake used to have a computer but finally had to give it up. He could no longer see well enough to read email or surf the 'Net. It was a big decision but between his one eye with the cataract and his other eye with macular degeneration, there wasn't much else to do. Jake was pretty much blind.

Frank imagined living his life without sight. Having always been able to see, it would be a horrible loss. It would greatly reduce his quality for life that's for sure. He remembered a few years back visiting his optometrist when the doctor noticed something odd with the macula of one eye. It ended up the discoloration wasn't bad, but the doctor started him on an eye supplement called lutein. Supposedly this substance would help in reducing the possibility of macular degeneration and what a scary idea that was. He had asked the doctor what the condition was and the doctor finished his explanation of the macula in the eye by asking him to hold both fists up in front of his eyes. He went on to explain how the failure of the macula meant the middle part of one's field of vision goes black and all you could see is the periphery. The doctor had Frank turn and look around the room with his fists up. That was a frightening prospect. He imagined it would also be frustrating. He could see it would be one thing to be blind, that is, seeing total blackness but to always be able to see the periphery and never being able to look directly at anything? That's frustration spelled d-a-m-n.

Jake shuffled out of the washroom and began to make his way back to his easy chair. He held onto the door frame and tentatively took a step. He reached out to the edge of a bureau and stepped again. Frank jumped up and came over to take Jake's arm.

"Here, Uncle Jake." Frank took one of his arms.

"I'm an old man," said Jake.

Frank gave a half-hearted smile. "You're doing fine, Uncle Jake." He realised his uncle had forgotten his fly. He also noticed that the front of his pants was stained. Since Jake couldn't see that well, he would from time to time spill food in his lap. Picking anything up from a plate of food required two hands, one for the fork and one to touch the food to ensure he had it on his utensil. Nevertheless, a shake of the hand meant something invariably fell off the fork. Sometimes Jake would spend the entire day his pants stained with that morning's breakfast.

The two of them slowly moved back to the easy chair. Jake turned around and bent over. He put both hands on the armrests and carefully lowered himself to the seat. Once in place, he wiggled to slide back in place.

"Thanks," said Jake.

"No problem." Frank sat down and looked at his uncle. "Ah, Uncle Jake?"

"Yes?"

"You left your fly open."

Jake reached down and began to fiddle with his zipper. "Thanks." He struggled a few times but pulled it up, not all the way up but good enough.

"I'm tired," Jake said.

"I'm sorry. Did you want to take a nap? I should leave." Frank noticed that Jake was looking at him but even though he knew that Jake's eyesight was bad, it still seemed as if Jake was looking at him.

"No, I mean I'm tired of life."

Frank looked at his uncle knowing where this was going.

"I'm tired. I'm in pain. My prospects are not good that this is ever going to get better but merely continue to get worse. I'm tired. I want to go."

Frank watched Jake half turn toward a side table and put out one hand. He felt the table top and touched various objects until he identified the box of Kleenex. He pulled out a tissue and blew his nose. After wiping his nose several times, he blew his nose a second time then leaned over the side of the chair. He moved his hand around searching for the wastepaper basket. Certain his hand was over the basket, he let go of the tissue.

Frank watched the tissue fall on the floor. He reached out and used his thumb and index to pick up the tissue by one unused corner and drop it in the basket.

"I'm going to be 98 this year. I would advise you to go at 85. Don't stick around any longer than that. I don't think it's worth it."

Frank looked around the room. This is what happens. You get old; you go into a retirement complex and your life shrinks to the four walls of the old folks' home. Seriously, what did Uncle Jake have to look forward to? Come to think about it, what would Frank have to look forward to?

Frank's company had organised an information session on pensions and an expert from an insurance company walked everybody through the various options in preparing for one's golden years. Most people were concerned about not having enough money to live, never mind having enough to travel. At the end of the session, there was a question and answer period. At one point, the expert asked everybody what their plans were for retirement. Frank put up his

hand and said, "I am hoping to have an early and fatal heart attack." His colleagues laughed but the expert looked at him like he might be nuts. Not everybody gets black humour.

Frank sighed. Maybe Jake was right. He didn't relish the idea of seeing his life shrink to a room in a retirement complex. But other than that heart attack, he didn't have much say in how his life was going to turn out.

"A good night's sleep and you'll look at things differently," Frank said. He sensed the lie in his own words.

"Nobody wants to talk about it."

Frank looked at his uncle. "About what?"

"I said I'm tired and you dismiss it as if I'm in need of sleep. I'm tired of life. I'm tired of my life."

Frank studied his uncle's half-seeing eyes. He understood what his uncle was talking about, the quality of life versus the quantity of life. Jake was incontinent and had to wear diapers. Jake occasionally had mild seizures and soiled himself. At what point does anybody consider that life sucks and sucks royally and what the hell is the point of going on? But you weren't allowed to end it yourself. Well, you weren't supposed to, but he wondered how many do. How many make that conscious decision to end their life early instead of spending the last years of their life in a diminished capacity or suffering from chronic pain?

"I don't know what to say," Frank said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up. It's just that sometimes..."

Frank leaned a little closer. His uncle spoke softly and Frank had to strain to hear him.

"Sometimes I feel really tired. And it's depressing."

"I guess I hadn't thought about it from that perspective."

Jake unseeing eyes looked at Frank. "Your turn will come. If you're lucky, it will be over and done with quickly. No need in dragging things out."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Jake."

"No need. It's not your fault. It's the way things work out. It's the luck of the draw. I suppose I should be pleased I've outlived everybody, all my family and friends, but it's hard. It's lonely and, well, as you can see my health is anything but good. It gets me down once in a while. Maybe more often than not."

Frank remained silent. What else could he say? How could you argue with your uncle when you actually agreed with him? As some comedian said, if you hang in there long enough, eventually you'll die. Jake was hanging in long enough to beat the record.

Jake looked toward the door. "What time is it?"

"One thirty."

"Okay. If you don't mind, I think I'll lie down."

"Sure, no problem." Frank stood up. "Can I help you?"

"No. I'm going to make a phone call then go to bed." Jake held out his hand. "Listen, thanks for coming. Don't listen to the ramblings of an old man."

Frank shook his uncle's hand then leaned over to give him a hug. "It was good to see you. And thanks again for lunch."

Jake chuckled. "The complex took care of it all. I'm allowed a visitor to share a meal. I don't even have to pay."

“Well, thanks anyway.” Frank walked to the door. “Do you want me to shut the door?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

Frank pulled on the door which released it from a magnetic clamp. He turned back to have one last look at his uncle. He fumbled with the phone trying to punch in a number.

Frank walked down the hall, crossed an open area and exited the building by the main entrance. He stood on the sidewalk blinking in the sunlight. He got out his clip-on sunglasses and got them fixed to his prescription glasses. He blinked again. That was better.

As he walked toward his car, he noticed the sounds of the outside: the rustle of the trees, chirping birds, the sound of traffic out in the road. Life was out here and life was alive. It seemed as if Uncle Jake’s world was frozen in time, cut off from the regular world. It felt sort of artificial. It felt a little dead.

He was happy to get on his way, back to his own life. He felt sorry for Uncle Jake but he also wondered how he was going to handle it, getting old, having to go to a home, having to give up his regular life and his freedom. Sooner or later, it was going to happen. It was inevitable.

But not today.

William Quincy Belle is just a guy. Nobody famous; nobody rich; just some guy who likes to periodically add his two cents worth with the hope, accounting for inflation, that \$0.02 is not over-evaluating his contribution. He claims that at the heart of the writing process is some sort of (psychotic) urge to put it down on paper and likes to recite the following which so far he hasn't been able to attribute to anyone: "A writer is an egomaniac with low self-esteem."

A Response to Mushrooms

Alex Schumacher

“Bill, how do I know when they’re working?” Paranoia was getting the best of Lou.

“Oh, trust me, you’ll know.”

They sat in the carriage house which had been converted into a practice space for their punk band, waiting for the hallucinations to make their presence known. Pizza boxes, cigarette butts, guitar picks, crushed Bud Light cans, and instrument cables decorated the floor in disorderly, abstract glory.

Lou and Bill had been experimenting with substances for nearly six years, since they were fifteen, looking for new ways to elevate their state of consciousness, and maybe write better lyrics. Booze was the first, easy to pilfer from Bill’s dad’s collection of beer in the refrigerator. The two budding songsmiths stumbled upon the whiskey in the liquor cabinet next. Aside from puking up their guts that first night, a couple of angsty, fist-pumping jams emerged.

The songs were nothing of note to rattle the music industry, but they knew they were on to something. Something to make their music and lyrics special. Something to make their songs significant, give them the ‘x factor’. When pops caught on to the scheme, the two took to shoulder-tapping bums outside of the Clay Street Market in a less-than-desirable part of the East side for their fifths.

Pot had become their main muse for musical revolution. Bill’s sister grew her own in a spare room of the cramped, filthy house she shared with two kids and a baby-daddy. A glorious green swath of inspiration greeted Bill and Lou upon each visit, signaling a new wave of creativity. Never was there a time the two ended up leaving without a generous sampling of the product. Away to their cave they would trot, giggling wickedly, as though with every run for replenishment of grass they were giving the finger to the man, on the verge of crafting some tune capable of bringing down the establishment.

Their band Suicide Committee had yet to find a drummer, let alone record their first EP. Everybody wanted to be a fucking singer or a guitarist. The two friends sat on the floor, plotting, resting up against the large speaker cabinets which amplified their guitars as *Serve the Servants* played low. The heavy riffs served as an ominous warning playing from the beyond.

*If she floats than she is not
A witch like we have thought.
A downpayment on...another
One
at
Salem's
...lot.*

Words were stretching and playing in slow-mo, or a 45 played at 33rpm. Lou wasn’t certain if the walls were, yes, they were definitely warping, inward. Toward him. Bill began to laugh uncontrollably, he gasped for breath. With the new rubbery existence, Lou was quite uncomfortable. One side of the room would bend inward, snapping back in an elastic manner, then the other. Ever more so inward. Judging by his hyena impression, Bill watched a far more entertaining show projected on the walls, but Lou could only see warping and melting. Wait, was melting the right word? It actually resembled more of a downward stream, a chocolate fountain or waterfall.

His eyes and head already heavy from the pot, Lou was confused as to which effects were caused by which substance. The earth vibrated, gently underneath, while the room itself rocked back and forth in an unsettling rhythm. However, what was more unsettling was the incursion welling up inside. Lou had already ignored all of the nagging signs of things to come. The situation could have been avoided altogether. It was too late for negotiations or bargaining.

Too late...

Then, there launched the mutiny. A mutiny beyond reason, beyond logic, but the rebellion continued nonetheless. First, as though a small person had jumped upon his shoulder, Lou heard a voice. A voice which sounded from within.

“As the citizens of the republic of your body, we’ve had quite enough of your tyranny, Lou.” Heart spoke, the apparent leader of the revolt. “For years we have endured the effects of the irresponsible dumping of booze, and the pollution of cigarette and pot smoke. These we have tolerated, we’re still young and enjoy a good party too! But this? This time you’ve gone too goddamn far and we can’t sit idly by and allow you to do this to yourself, or us, any longer.”

Lou looked to Bill to see if he too was possibly hearing the most bizarre conversation in the history of the conversation. The fits of hysterics that caused Bill to collapse in a heap on the ground answered the query adequately enough. So an inner-vention, the likes of which had never occurred, marched on uninterrupted.

“I apologize if initially I came off a little strong. Please know that you are among friends.” Heart’s voice had calmed, presumably to facilitate communication and undivided attention. “We’ve all written you letters, Lou, to let you know how your decisions and actions have impacted us. Kidneys, why don’t you start us off?”

“Ok. Just know that we are all here today because we love you, Lou,” reassured Kidneys. “I have always admired your talent and drive to play music. In the face of overwhelming odds, you remain undeterred in your ambitions. I miss the days when we used to take beautiful pisses together. Wonderful, clean pisses when I didn’t have to work so hard to clean out all the gunky shit in your system. I miss those days, Lou. I miss us.”

“Well said, Kidneys. Straight from the soul. How about we hear from Lungs next?”

“What the actual fuck?”

“Quiet, Lou. Just listen to what everyone has to say. Lungs, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you, Heart,” acknowledged Lungs. “You are strong, Lou. Life has not been easy for you coming from a poor, working class family. You haven’t allowed that to inhibit you in any way. You’ve worked hard, causing us both stress at times, but we’ve always endured. Having watched you grow into the fine young man you’ve become, and knowing we had something to do with that, we swell with pride. We want you to know we would never dream of stifling your creativity, and don’t want you to feel as though we’re breathing down your neck but it’s hard for us to remain silent when you’re adding such harmful toxins into your system. You worry us to no end when you’re tripping balls—”

“We’re using ‘I’ statements, Lungs. We’re not here to blame.”

“You’re right, Heart. I’m sorry, Lou. It worries us to no end when you’re tripping balls, and we wish you would stop. For your own sake, if not ours.”

“Right on, Lungs. Right on. Remember Lou, we’re doing this for your own good. Stomach, you’re up.”

“Alright. This is tough to say, Lou. We’ve had so many great times together through drunk munchies, pot munchies, fast food, pizza, fried chicken, tacos... Oh man, I’m hungry. What was I talking about?” Stomach regained his composure. “Oh, right. Anyway, you’ve always been so good to me, answering my call at all times, being there whenever I growled. Hallucinogens are going to screw our fucking vibe though, man. I’ll call and you’ll be too busy chasing a clock up a flamingo’s ass to answer. I don’t want to see you throw away the good thing that we have going.”

“Thank you, Stomach. That was brave to say what you said. Liver, I believe you also had a letter to read to Lou.”

“Yes, I believe I do...” Liver hiccupped and slurred some. “I’m here today because you are more important to me than I can ever express. We need each other and I cannot imagine a better person in this entire world. I’m kinda wasted right now trying to process the booze you drank earlier and I promised myself I wouldn’t cry, but I want you to know you are my rock, my inspiration, my encouragement. More important, you have shaped me into the Liver I am today. I love you, Lou.”

“That was touching, Liver. Really tugged at the ol’ me-strings. Ok, Brain. I know this newest endeavor into mind alteration has had the biggest effect on you. Take your time, and tell Lou exactly how this has made you feel.”

Heart’s attempt at encouragement fell on deaf ears. There were a few gurgles and pops, but no response from Brain. He was in no shape to read his letter whatsoever. Heart let out an exasperated sigh and continued.

“You’ve done it this time, Lou. You’ve managed to turn Brain to mush. Television didn’t do it, nor did the dirty spank mags you still have stashed under your bed. But this? This has done the trick. Congratu-fucking-lations. Tell you what we’re going to do here, Lou. We, your organs, are going to take a much needed vacation. We only want what’s best for you, and we feel the best way to do that is to show you what life would be like without us.”

“I’m no doctor, but won’t I die without all of you?”

“Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

Serve the Servants - oh no.

Serve the Servants - oh no.

Serve the Servants - oh no.

Serve the Servants,

That legendary divorce is such a bore.

Lou felt each organ shutting down individually as part of their protest and call for action. Sweat beaded on his brow and breathing became difficult. Lou hoped that if he could just get to sleep, the effects would wear off and he would wake up revitalized, with a new zest for life.

“Maybe psychedelics aren’t for me...” Lou murmured as he drifted off.

Bill giggled.

Alex has toiled away in the relative obscurity of underground comics and children's books since 2009, sometimes in exchange for arcade tokens or Olive Garden gift cards. He prefers to share the wounds life inflicts, scabs and all, because he can't stand stories that are Photoshopped and airbrushed.

Top Tips on Eating Plants

Breanne Mc Ivor

The Society of Unironic Hipsters had invited me to give a five-minute talk on how to go vegan. Now, I didn't know much about the Society, but their name pretty much said everything that I could want to know. They were the type of people who picketed outside the supermarket with signs that showed sobbing chickens saying MEAT IS MURDER. I hated those signs. For me, veganism had been a personal, almost private, choice. So I was shocked to receive the invitation. I felt that it would have been painfully rude to decline; so I accepted reluctantly and set about preparing my talk.

I wasn't a particularly informed vegan. I just felt that I loved animals and didn't want to eat them. So I had to learn a lot about the ways that my dietary proclivities improved society. Even though my talk was about the practical ways to transition to veganism, I felt that this background knowledge was necessary. After all, what if there was a question and answer segment afterwards? I hoped not.

After asking the Unironic CEO if there would be a projector at the meeting, I made a slideshow called TOP TIPS ON EATING PLANTS—anything cows can do, we can do better. I watched a lot of TED talks to help me prepare for my speech and practiced in front of my mirror because I only had a couple friends and they were both busy in the weeks leading up to the talk.

The Society met in one of the university conference halls, and each week a different member was tasked with coming up with unironic decorations. Past themes had included an homage to Native American culture (on Columbus Day) and a nautical theme (for no reason that I could discern). I wondered what the current theme would be and how I fit into it.

The entrance to the hall was decorated with portrait style photographs of several people, none of whom I recognized. A banner said GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS. I felt profoundly nervous that I had shown up at the wrong meeting.

An auburn-haired girl was standing at the door, wearing a T-shirt that said Unironic Secretary. "Excuse me," I said, "but can you tell me what this week's meeting will focus on?"

"Certainly," she said. She pulled out her phone and began reading: "We will be hosting a seminar celebrating diversity on campus. We have invited minorities from all walks of life. Differently abled Nikkita Pushkin will be giving a talk on Russian existentialism, radical feminist Isadora Lee Kim will be giving a talk on Sustainable Energy and gay rights activist Solomon Hart will be giving a talk on Eating Plants."

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake," I said.

"What?"

"I'm Solomon Hart and I'm not a gay rights activist."

She looked at me and twisted one auburn curl around a thin finger. "Aren't you gay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well then your un-closeted life is the boldest form of activism."

The talk went badly. The projector didn't work and so, after two awkward minutes of coaxing it, I had to proceed without the slides. At the end, they announced that there would, in fact, be a question and answer session. Most of the crowd seemed to be vegetarians or vegans already and so many made comments instead of asking me anything. Then, Colten Morningside put his hand in the air. Morningside had come to the Society meeting with a bunch of frat boy buddies and they were drinking beer out of coke bottles and laughing at their private jokes. I pointed at him and Morningside stood up. He looked like a male model moonlighting as a college student. For all I knew, maybe he was. To top off the blond, white-boy good looks, he had ludicrous eyes, somewhere on the spectrum between lavender and indigo.

"My buddies and I have a proposal for you," he said. "How about we all try your top tips and go vegan for a month?"

I had been expecting him to make fun of me. "I think that's a wonderful idea," I said.

"The only condition is you have to eat meat for that month."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Mr. Unironic Vegan. Let's see,"— he made a show of counting his friends— "there are fifteen of us and one of you. Think how many animal lives will be saved."

"I— I—" I wasn't really capable of saying anything.

"Are you up for it?" Morningside asked.

"I think that there can be another way," I said.

"Well there isn't." One of Morningside's buddies whistled. The Unironic Hipsters were debating whether I should accept the proposal in semi-whispers.

And because I didn't want to let animals down after talking on their behalf I said, "I suppose it would help a few animals. Overall."

"Great," Morningside looped his index finger through his belt. "And to seal the deal, I want to see you eat a steak. How about you let me take you on a date to Donnie & Barbara's?" Suddenly, the Unironic Hipsters were hooting and camera phones were out.

"A date?" I squeaked.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven," Morningside said. "You won't need to bring your wallet either."

I was in a daze after the meeting and remained in a daze the next day. Of course I knew who Colten Morningside was; everyone did. But it had never occurred to me that he could be gay. I thought that on our 'date night' he would ring the doorbell and when I opened the door, all fourteen of his frat boy buddies would be standing there and they would whack me with condoms filled with water and tease me about thinking that Colten, the epitome of heterosexual masculinity and privilege, could ever be a fag. I decided that I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of dressing up like this was the night of my life. I didn't change out of the white Star Wars T-shirt and jeans that I had worn to lectures.

There was a knock on my door at exactly 7:00 p.m. I braced myself for humiliation and opened the door.

Colten Morningside was wearing a pewter shirt with black pearl buttons, narrow leg plaid trousers and Italian leather loafers. He was holding a bouquet of turmeric leaves. "I thought you would appreciate the irony," he said, handing the bouquet to me. I looked around his shoulder but none of his friends were there. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, although I was crying.

"Oh come on, are you that scared of eating meat?"

"No," I said.

Colten reached forward, scrubbed each of my cheeks with his sleeve and straightened my glasses. He finger-combed my hair into place like he had been doing it for years. "I'll tell you what, if you blow me right now I'll tell them you had all the meat you could handle."

I was blushing and crying at the same time. He pushed past me and found his way to my kitchen. He filled a glass with water and threw the turmeric leaves inside. "I look like such a hobo," I said. "I can't go to Donnie & Barbara's looking like this."

"You look like an unironic hipster," he said.

"But I'm not even in the Society."

"Good. I hate those assholes. I only showed up at that meeting to ask you out."

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Let's just say that I've got a thing for nerdy virgins."

"I know I'm wearing a Star Wars shirt, but I'm actually not that much of a nerd."

After my meat-month had elapsed, Colten took me for a walk in Central Park to celebrate my return to veganism. "Tell me about where you're from," he said.

"Oh, it's a nowhere place. Just a small Caribbean island. Nothing there but tourist beaches and people selling vegetables out of carts."

I thought that my flippancy would impress him somehow. Instead, he was frowning. "Were there a lot of homophobes?"

"Some," I said.

I had never even kissed a man and Colten, despite all appearances, was a gentleman and had not yet made an overture. However, when I was sixteen I had had a crush on a friend back home. I always tried to sit behind him in mass and we hugged whenever it was time for the sign of peace. One day, I can't even remember what the gospel reading was or what prompted him, but Father snapped on the altar.

"They say they want to bring in all these changes," he said. "I talk to young people and to them, abortion is nothing. To be gay is nothing. *Life* is nothing." Father began to cry. "And they call themselves Catholic. They say I am too old. They say I do not understand." He was holding the mic too close to his face and spit began coating it. "I want to

say to them no, not in my church. I know my God and no abortionist, no homosexual, no promiscuous woman has a place here." He was crying and shouting all at once. "It is the young people who do not understand that values do not change. God is constant. My God is constant. And he does not accept compromise."

People were too stunned by the outburst to shout "Amen!" When I looked at my friend, he was crying too. But he did not look at me. When it was time for the sign of peace, he shook my hand.

I do not know if I had imagined that he reciprocated my feelings. We had never spoken about it. But I thought I had seen, in the shred of a glance, an interest. After that sermon however, he would never hug me in mass again. And I would stare at the back of his head and think *today will be different*. But every Sunday, it was a handshake. In school, he acted as if he hardly knew me and he spent time with a new crowd. I read a lot and, when I could, looked at them.

When I heard his voice outside my house a few months later, I thought that he had made a mistake. Maybe he was on the way to meet someone else. But no, he was calling my name. I poked my head out of my window and there he was, with the bike that had grown too small for him between his legs. He had a black plastic bag in his hands. "I have something for you Solomon," he said.

"Ok. I'll be right down."

"No, I'll throw it up."

A condom filled with water sailed through the air. It flew through the window and hit the floor by my feet, where it jiggled. I heard laughter and his new friends emerged. Soon, it was raining condoms. Some missed and I heard squishing sounds as they hit the wall. Some seemed to be filled with milk, or at least I hoped it was milk.

"Didn't you hear what Father said? Why are you still in church?" someone shouted. At least, it wasn't my friend who said that.

I stooped down so that they couldn't see me and, when it became clear that I would not pop up again by the window, they left. Since my mother wasn't home, I ran downstairs to pick up the condoms that had hit the wall and fallen outside before she could return. I tied them in two plastic bags and threw them away.

"Solomon?" Colten asked.

I let go of the past for the time being.

We were beside a pond that was almost carpeted in algae. Colten sat on a rock and adjusted his shades a la Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue model. "Sorry," I said.

"I try to read about the gay experience in other countries but there isn't a lot of literature on homosexuality in the Caribbean."

"Well, we're pretty small," I said, wanting to change the subject. "Is that algae or moss in the pond?"

"Why? Do you want to cook it and eat it?" He smiled and pushed himself off the rock. "Actually, there is a species of edible kelp. It's growing in the north-northwest corner of the pond. Crane your neck and you can see it." I craned and saw nothing. "It has long fibrous roots," he said.

I was craning harder. "I can't tell from here."

"Maybe you need stronger glasses," he said from somewhere behind my left ear.

"Maybe," I said giving up and turning around. Before my head had completed the rotation he kissed me. It was better than anything I could have ever expected.

"Will you still refuse to cook the chicken breast if I guarantee that it came from free range chickens that have never been within ten miles of a hormone injection?" Colten asked. He was lying in bed, boxers somewhere down around his ankles. He always put them back on after sex but never pulled them up. It was one of his habits.

"Even free range chickens can be..."

"All right. All right. Spare me." He hooked his left toe around his boxers and they began making the slow ascent up his leg. "It's our six-monthiversary and you promised to cook and I'll have to suffer through five different iterations of lettuce. It's torture. You would never think that you ate a steak on our first date."

"You would never think that you'd been a vegan for a month."

I felt like a flower kept in a cupboard must feel after it was taken into the sun. I still could not believe that this was my life. I had become sassier and Colten smiled every time I came up with a comeback.

This time, he even laughed. "Ok. I'll cook the chicken and bring it, although you were supposed to wine and dine me. The horror." He had finally gotten his boxers up and he leaned over and kissed me on the nose. "By the way, I have a surprise for you later."

I cleaned my apartment until all the wooden surfaces shone. I had scoured Jamie Oliver's website for tasty vegan recipes and I began cooking hours in advance. There was a Sicilian aubergine stew that I was sure Colten would love.

He arrived exactly on time, as always. We were barely into the first course when he said, "I can't wait any longer. We've been asked to write the feature article for the next edition of *Riot*."

"*Riot*?" *Riot*? *Riot* was the Society of Unironic Hipster's quarterly magazine whose name was inspired by the Kaiser Chef's *I Predict a Riot*.

Colten pulled the most recent edition out of his pocket and unfolded it. The cover photo featured radical feminist Isadora Lee Kim and a headline that read AGAINST SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED GENDER NORMS WE RIOT (with words).

"I—I—" I wasn't really capable of saying anything.

"I know I told you that they were assholes. But, I was talking to their secretary and I mentioned the conversation you and I had, a while ago. Do you remember? We were talking about the fact that there isn't a lot of mainstream literature about homosexuality in the Caribbean."

"Yes, it was the day we had our first kiss," I said.

"You mean your first kiss?" Colten was smiling with half of his mouth.

I still blushed, even then. "Yes," I said. "It was a romantic day. Why can't we talk about that today?"

"Sure we can," Colten said. "But Amber—the secretary—was saying that she thought our un-closeted life was the boldest form of activism. Nowadays, feminists don't burn bras and MLK's supporters don't take to the streets at least not in the same way—but we rebel against conventions just by being us. I thought that even if one gay Caribbean kid reads our story and realizes that he doesn't have to be alone, or afraid, or think that there is something wrong with who he is then we've done something good. Besides, we do owe the Unironic Hipsters something for introducing us."

I felt like a hand was closing around my throat. I didn't want to disappoint Colten. I wanted him to think I was brave, in my own way. But I didn't want my life, my personal life, to be a form of activism. Colten was a man that I loved. Our relationship wasn't a protest. I loved him so I wanted to spend time with him and that included kissing and making love, as well as talking and cooking and going for walks.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Will you be angry if I say I don't want to do this?" I asked.

"Why don't you?"

"Because—because—well, because I think that our relationship is personal. Not public."

"Come on Solomon, we're not telling them that you like it when I kiss behind your knees." I put my hand over my eyes. I could still smell cilantro on my fingers. "Don't you think that you have a responsibility? Don't you think that you can help other Caribbean people who were once like you?"

It had never occurred to me that I had a responsibility. Colten continued, "Homosexuality is still criminalized in many islands. Doesn't that make you want to attack the system that allows that?"

"No. It makes me want to never go back."

"And what about the people who can't leave?"

"I doubt that some article in a college magazine will change their lives."

"You never know. With the internet it may reach some of them."

"And what should I tell them? That if they go to university in New York they too can get a white boyfriend who looks like a movie star? That there is hope because the liberal East Coast can free them from their inhibitions? That said white boyfriend will force them out of their shell and make them write an article about how they are OUT AND PROUD?"

Colten was so amazed that I shouted that he dropped the magazine. He did not say anything and I speared a mushroom with my fork and devoured it. Finally, he shrugged and crumpled the magazine into a ball. He tossed it over my head and it sailed into my bin for paper recyclables. It didn't even touch the rim before falling in.

He didn't stay the night. After he left, I tried to imagine the boy who had huddled under the window as he was pelted with condoms. Would some article in some pretentious magazine from some pretentious university have made him feel any better? What Caribbean gays needed wasn't a riot (with words). They needed a good, old-fashioned mob to swarm over beaches and markets and pulpits and grab priests and tell them "a gay person isn't a bad person."

I wondered if Colten would break up with me. Maybe he would meet a new, nerdier boyfriend and they would be on the cover of *Riot*. He had never told me that he loved me. I had just assumed it.

I thought about my talk. TOP TIPS ON EATING PLANTS. It seemed so far away.

The next day a violin being tortured woke me up. I forced my head out of the window to see the source of the screeching. Colten was downstairs, hacking away at the strings. "Ok, I can't play," he shouted. "But I thought the gesture would be romantic."

I ran to the door and had opened it minutes before he was up to my floor. "I didn't know you had a violin," I said stupidly.

"I borrowed it, baby," he said. He hugged me, towering over and pressing his chin onto the top of my head. When we were inside he said, "I hope you won't mind but I wrote an anonymous letter to the Society of Unironic Hipsters on your behalf."

"You what?"

"It's anonymous."

"Well, how can it be on my behalf?"

"You'll see. The tone is very much in keeping with the timbre of their magazine. I think they'll publish it. Incidentally, it was also an apology from me. I was an idiot last night."

Colten was walking ahead of me. "Do you have any of that eggplant thing leftover?" he inquired.

"What?"

"I loved it. By the way, this is a hell of an anonymous letter. When we get married, we may even frame it and put it up on a wall somewhere in our apartment."

"When we what?" I squeaked.

"Calm down kid, this isn't the actual proposal." Colten was rooting around in the fridge and he pulled the remainder of the aubergine stew out. "The article is in my back pocket," he said. "Get it out and have a read."

TOP TIPS ON EATING YOUR WORDS

Dear Society of Unironic Hipsters,

You force activism on people like drug dealers. You believe that every life should be a politically-motivated battle against THE MAN. You want every person to live the riot that you have prescribed: a performative life for our modern society that consumes personal narratives like beer.

Well guess what, not all cultures subscribe to your 'activism.' You cannot, from the ivory tower of your white, liberal privilege, do anything but approach suffering ironically. I am a mixed, gay, agnostic, St. Lucian vegan and yet I am not an activist. And all your fancy words cannot make me into one.

Yours unironically,

Anonymous

"Your face is the same color as this eggplant," Colten said.

"I hate it," I replied.

"You what?"

"It's awful. So snobby and selfish."

"Selfish? I was trying to understand your point of view."

The thing was, he did understand my point of view. I probably couldn't have written a better letter myself. Yet, actually reading those words made me feel empty and low. "Did you send this in already?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Please don't."

I went over to my paper recyclables bin and fished out the crumpled magazine that he had thrown there last night.

I smoothed it out and looked at Isadora's creased face on the cover. I pondered whether I really was as selfish as the anonymous letter made it seem. I wondered whether a boy was being pelted with some form of debris somewhere in the Caribbean, just because he liked other boys.

"I have a proposal for you," I said to Colten. "If I write this article with you, you go vegan for good."

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Revision

Ami Hendrickson

She has waited for millennia, or moments, trapped in the amber of an unfinished tale, as encased within the elements of plot and structure as a prehistoric gnat in the glassy ochre sap of a long-dead tree. All her ploys intended to level kingdoms, bring rulers to their knees at her feet and establish her own empire hover, motionless and impotent.

She has no idea what has transpired since she loved and bled and moved and lived. Her last action had been to fling her arms wide, welcoming her own destruction with theatrics that seemed warranted in the molten moments of war, but which, upon cooler reflection, evoke only clichéd images. Trying to lower her arms, to assume a more imperial stance, meets with as much success as a statue would encounter upon attempting to change position. And so she is doomed to this—arms forever outstretched, unable to feel the flames of the embers she fanned, the fire that drove her cooling by gradual degrees until she can recall only the broad strokes of what brought her to this point.

In an earlier time, when her plots so interwove into the fabric of the world around her as to make her suspect divine assistance, she had believed herself to be working in tandem with a deity, an omnipotent, omniscient being who shaped her destiny.

She knows better, now. The bold truth is written in the battlefield before her, one moment crashing with color and chaos, the next, peopled with silent warriors as frozen as she.

She stands straight as a ship's mast, head flung back, willing the spark back into her eyes, wrestling with the flash of understanding that flared like panic when she froze, eradicating all earlier beliefs: her life is not her own.

Choices that impacted the story thus far haunt her. If given the chance, she imagines she would do things differently, yet she fears she has already made different choices and endured the outcomes; every new decision twists plot on its structured axis, creating a tangent that leads to a new, alternate, ultimate End. Every revision she considers challenges her to improve her relevance, taunting her with the suspicion that no choice is truly hers to make.

This, then, is her fate, doomed to exist only on the printed page, the ink saturated paper pulp having more substance than she; or in pixels, a mere fraction of a file; or relegated to the ether, contained within a cloud, forever dependent upon the whim of her creator, not only for life, but also for form, depth, meaning...memory. In the beginning was the word. And from that beginning, every iota of her being has been in the hands of Another.

And yet...

Some movement in the atmosphere, subtle as the rustle of a reader's breath upon an unturned page, alerts her, energizing her with anticipation. Her story is about to change. For better or for ill remains to be determined, but she has a purpose to fulfill. The story cannot be told without her.

How much time has passed, a millennia or mere moment, she does not know, but she clings to the knowledge that her existence has meaning. And she waits for the creative spark that will thaw her, releasing her from her inactivity and rewriting her history.

Now the winds sharpen, pointedly whispering a double-edged promise mightier than any sword: to not only reveal her future, but to revise her past as well. The battlefield before her blurs; the motives of one soldier blend into another. The stories of their lives implode upon themselves, rushing toward deletion. In a moment, this battle—this lifetime—will no longer matter.

Arms outstretched, she embraces the decision that will erase this path. Change forges character. She does not fear the hand of fate as it rips her former life to shreds, littering this landscape with remnants of who she once was...

In this version, she is a cipher. A wraith. Vague and formless, she drifts through the narrative, stirring the waters of intrigue that run deep, trickling into every turn of phrase. But none can fathom her motives. Murky origins mar every decision.

She has no belief system, for she has no core. Her armies act alone, splashing about out of their depth, drowning in indecision. Coincidence rather than calculation bogs down her enemies' plans. When a potentate abandons his kingdom, eschewing his crown and leaving the country adrift, her influence in the affair is so subtle that no one, not even the most discerning diviner of truths, suspects her involvement. She lies buried, submerged in subtext as waves of words flow over her.

When her name is expunged from the record, no ripples roil the surface to mark the wake of her passing. She is insubstantial as an idea; inconsequential as a codicil. Like words whispered in the rain, she vanishes into vapor, her influence never marked enough for her to be missed.

In this version, no armies march; no battles rage. She lives in an emerald world, lush envy coloring every choice, tingeing everything she touches with her own jaded dreams. This goddess of guile plants seeds of deception and distrust. Though mitigating modifiers threaten, the fertile soil of others' ambitions yields a harvest of henchmen ready to spring into action at a single word.

She is fully formed, multi-faceted; a master gardener, she adeptly delves into the muddiest souls to ferret out the secrets composting there. Those secrets, properly tended, enable her to grow her empire. In less than a season, they shoot up, wild and unchecked, choking out the sprouting hopes of heroes.

One hero in particular succumbs to her. With a touch as tender as April leaves, she cultivates his trust, ultimately adding his heart to her harvest. Upon discovering her treachery, his sweet green dreams wither and fall, leaving the kingdom ripe for the picking.

Heroes die; she remains. Triumphant. Unapologetic. But that's about to change...

In this one, she skims across the surface. With no depth, no breadth, she is hardly more than a caricature. As the story progresses, she does not.

Her demands, intended to elicit fear, trigger only scorn. "Minion!" she sneers, overwritten and overwrought. "Worthless wretch! How dare you defy me?" Bold-faced outcries characterize her speech; italicized irony underscores every movement. Every scheme she attempts to enact explodes like a balloon overheated with dialogue. Every frame of mind suffers from forced perspective.

In the end, even she hates herself, and no one—she least of all—mourns when she dies. With a BIF! and a WHAP! and a POW! and a THUK! her downfall is no more noteworthy than crumpling and pitching into the trash a sheet of incoherent scrawlings produced by the unsteady hand and unfocused mind of a child.

In this version, blind ambition colors her actions, tinting every thought. She believes in God, for she does not serve Him. She is the darkness in a monochromatic world, where each event happens as a gradient of shadow. As the Queen of Shadows, she reigns supreme, drawing heavy curtains across the glare of all windows she encounters.

In a cavern that cloaks her own private Well of Souls, dim corridors more convoluted than the plot birth treasonous conspiracies. The creatures who serve her scuttle in corners; they creep in crevices, spreading lies like plagues, blackening the hopes of those who yearn for the light. At night, when even the moon has hidden his face, they snuff out the sooty flame of resistance, charring some characters beyond recognition.

Her shady dealings contrast so with the white-hot motives of her enemies that they highlight chasms of imperfection in both story and teller.

Then, one day, the story

stops

It does not end. It is far from finished. It simply halts with a severity more precipitous than a paragraph.

The god's despair sighs through the atmosphere, blanketing her with terror. Doubt oozes in, unsolicited, inescapable. Though little remains of her former incarnations, the few words that survive carry with them the memories of long-scrapped manuscripts. She does not fear death, but the stasis of arrested moments—or millennia—terrifies.

Great blank blocks, as indifferent as a pristine page, loom in front of her. No light escapes; no darkness penetrates. Nothingness yawns mere inches from her face, threatening to overwhelm her.

Though she has never been the hero, she pushes forward, desperate to be heard. Defiant fists pound on the blanks that block her progress. She will fight, she determines, until her limbs lock or she strikes through. Again and again she slashes until her skin is scored and blood, black as ink in a world of light, streaks the blocks, smearing them with her essence, leaching her energy, sapping her strength.

The breakthrough she seeks never comes.

Her movements slow, stall, and seize.

Motionless, she prays to the muses, to the deity whose name she does not know, to anyone willing to listen, sending a desperate plea into the void. She begs not for life, nor for redemption; no—like a half-forgotten song playing on infinite repeat, a single, final thought endlessly occupies what remains of her.

Above all else, she yearns for escape.

Every fiber of her imperfect being believes Someone hears her.

Who is to say she is wrong?

In this, the final version, the point of a pen trailing ink as red as fresh-spilled blood slashes the story's meat to the bare bones.

In this one, she dies: a glorious demise! Her martyrdom inspires both legend and song when, in a crimson crusade that renders the very roots of the trees surrounding the battlefield so saturated with ichor that the razor-sharp tips of their leaves drip blood for seven springs afterward, she dies, felled with a broadsword forged from otherworldly ore fallen from a shooting star, wielded by her estranged son.

Her death rallies those who called her Queen. Though beaten here, at the scene of her doom, they do not claim her ending as their own; rather, they deem it their beginning. Therefore, seven springs later, on a field encircled by trees weeping bloody tears from bygone years, her loyal subjects burst forth to fight again, this time emerging triumphant.

In this one, though she is dead, she knows. Her spirit sighs through the bleeding trees, rustling the weeping leaves, spurring those she once ruled to victory sweeter, even, than immortality.

At last her tale is told. Enhanced by an enchanted edit, she is fully formed, more real than any red-blooded reading mortal. In her story, the words, infused with a power she cannot name, become flesh, launching her off the page into another dimension to move in the minds of those living in a world she has never seen. Here, it does not matter whether she waits for moments or millennia. Eventually, those who ache for escape as she did will choose her story as the vehicle for their getaway. As long as they do, she will never face the end.

Ami Hendrickson writes children's books, novels for adults, screenplays, poetry, and to-do lists that grow faster than Jack's beanstalk. She also writes books for famous horse people. On occasion, she has been so immersed in polishing plot points that she walked out of a store, leaving her purchases behind.

Kool-Aid

Simon Easton

"Sherwin, wake up."

Kool-Aid woke but did not open his eyes. It was the crack of noon and he was face down on his bare mattress. The frayed buttons on the stained ticking were pressing uncomfortably against his cheek. He and his brother shared the twin mattress lying on the floor. The blankets he and he brother shared had been kicked down to the foot of the bed. They lay in a tangled heap on the floor with their clothes, food wrappers, empty cans, and wads of toilet paper. They used the toilet paper in the winter to stuff between the cracks in the floor so the cold wouldn't blow up from the crawlspace. The wads tended to get pushed out by mice or rats over time or fall through the cracks entirely.

His seven-year-old brother was already up. So were his twin sisters. They were five. Being the oldest of his siblings in the house and fourteen himself, he knew that little kids are always up early on Saturday mornings, hungry, watching cartoons or arguing about playing on the Nintendo they shared. Which of those things they were doing depended on whether Mama had paid the cable bill the day before like she said she would. Watching cartoons was what Kool-Aid had done when he was little, but he hadn't gotten a Nintendo yet. Back then he could go into Mama's room if she didn't come out at the sound of the TV and ask her for some breakfast, knowing that eventually she would sleepily feed him. She didn't do that now.

As to the cable bill...She didn't come home before Kool-Aid fell asleep around three in the morning, and that was generally not a good sign. The best he could do was be pessimistically hopeful.

"Sherwin, wake up. We're hungry! Wake up!"

"What you want me to do about it, Keysawn?" Kool-Aid grumbled. He rolled onto his back, eyes still shut. "I don't have no food neither."

"You can ask Mama."

"You ask Mama."

"There's some dude in there." By "in there," Kool-Aid knew he meant Mama's bedroom.

"Fuck that."

"Don't talk like that, Sherwin. I don't like it."

"Sorry," Kool-Aid muttered. He gave up, opened his eyes, and was greeted with the familiar sight of the ever-expanding water stain on the ceiling. He sat up in bed.

People in them TV shows don't wake up to this, Kool-Aid thought. They wake up to curtains and posters on the wall and breakfast in bed.

"Go on and play some Nintendo or something," Kool-Aid ordered. "I'll be out soon."

Yawning and stretching, he cherry-picked his clothes off the floor, looking for the items that were reasonably clean, which is to say clothes that had only been worn once or twice. There had been no trip to the laundromat lately, and it was a long walk, even if he had the quarters for the machines and detergent. He shook each garment vigorously before he put it on to make sure that no creepie-crawlies had stowed away during the night. He did the same with his prize Air

Jordans. Not checking was a mistake he had made only once.

Soon he was suitably attired in two pairs of undershorts, boxers over briefs. The outer pair was entirely for show under a loose and sagging pair of cargo shorts. Over his chest, he wore a wife-beater under a T-shirt that read "Thugs 4 Ever" with a cartoon homeboy with crossed arms whose grill glittered with sparklies glued right onto the material. He only put the T-shirt on halfway, one arm in and one arm out with his head through the neck hole. It wasn't all that comfortable, but it conformed to the latest neighborhood style. He rubbed an imaginary dark spot off of his immaculate sneakers with his thumb before he put them on. They were a Christmas present from his grandma, and they were the greatest kicks he had ever had, even if they were getting a little tight.

He made his way to the living room, running his hands along the short hallway wall. Flakes of paint settled to the un-swept wooden floor, that may have seen its last can of varnish fifty years ago. As he approached the living room, the sound of his brother and sisters arguing punched at him through the air.

The living room featured a sagging, nondescript couch and a couple of kitchen chairs. The furniture faced a squat brown furnace that had not provided heat since the gas had been turned off the winter before last. The television, DVD player, and video-game console sat atop it. Movie and game cases littered the floor around it. The kerosene heater was tucked in a corner, and it would be ready for when winter inevitably came around again if only someone would put some fuel in it.

"It's my turn!" his sister Shymisha yelled, tugging at the video game controller in her sister's hands.

"No, it ain't!" twin sister Tymisha hollered back, trying to get the controller out of her reach. "I died too fast! It ain't fair."

"Quit yellin'," Keyshawn ordered with a slight twinge of fear. "Y'all'll wake Mama up. Give it here."

"All y'all need to cut it out," Kool-Aid said. "If you can't, I'll take it away. It's **my** game."

"But you ain't got no TV in your room," Tymisha argued.

Kool-Aid walked over to the video game and made like he was disconnecting it.

"Never mind," said Tymisha. She handed the controller reluctantly to her sister.

"Nyah nyah," Shymisha taunted quietly.

"If you're gonna be like that, you can't play either," Kool-Aid said.

"My bad," Shymisha said unconvincingly. After a few seconds had passed without anyone taking anything away, she began to thumb the controller vigorously. Faint sounds of furious combat radiated softly from the nearly muted television.

"I'm hungry," Tymisha said to Kool-Aid, no longer having the game to distract her. "Can you get me something to eat?"

"Did Mama bring any food home last night?" Kool-Aid asked. It was a long shot.

"We didn't see nothin' this morning," Keyshawn said.

Kool-Aid went to check the kitchen. There was a sink load of dishes, some salt, a half-empty forty in the 'fridge with no cap along with some unwrapped moldy leftovers, but nothing edible. It smelled bad.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself. He looked around to see if anyone had heard him.

He made his way from the kitchen to the closed door of his mother's bedroom. He rapped on the door gingerly. His brother and Tymisha watched him wide-eyed from over the back of the couch.

"Mama?" he said in a small voice. He spent a full minute listening, his ear gently touching the door.

"Mama?" he repeated a fraction louder this time.

People on TV don't do this, he thought. Their mamas are up making them eggs and bacon and shit. They're not even hungry. They take a few bites then run off to school like they like it or something.

He worked up his courage and opened the door with the delicacy of a brain surgeon plying his trade.

The afternoon sun shining through the irregular gaps in the broken pink Venetian blinds bathed the room in a surreal light. A naked man Kool-Aid did not recognize was sprawled across his mother's big bed, as was his mother. There were no covers. He looked at his mother's once-opulent flesh, her sagging breasts, and open legs, and then he looked away in shame.

Mama's dresser and part of the floor was a graveyard of empty bottles, some freshly decanted, most of the others the fossil remains of debauches past. A crack pipe made from a car

antenna was laid carelessly on her nightstand with an empty plastic bag. Kool-Aid didn't see any rock. She had already finished all she had, or she'd be awake and still smoking it until it was gone.

He stood there for long minutes. He rocked from foot to foot. The floor creaked beneath him. Finally, his mother opened her eyes weakly. She made no attempt to hide her nakedness.

"What the fuck do you want?" she asked him.

"Keyshawn and the twins are hungry, Mama," he said in the voice of a much younger boy, his eyes pointed to the floor.

"You hungry," she repeated in disgust. "You always hungry. What happened to the shit I got...whenever? The other day."

"We ate it, Mama," her son replied, still looking down, his voice still small. "That was last week."

"Y'all eat too much."

"Sorry, Mama."

She was silent for a minute.

"They's some food stamps in my pants pocket. On the floor."

Kool-Aid searched out until he found the nearest pair of jeans. He started searching them.

"Not them, dumbass. Them black ones yonder." She waved her hand, but he wasn't looking. He finally found the ones she meant and felt around the pockets until he discovered the thin, familiar mass of the coupon book. He took it.

"Thank you, Mama," he said, making his way out. "I won't bother you anymore."

"And get me some cigarettes. Newport. Hundreds. You know which ones."

"I can't buy them with no food stamps," Kool-Aid protested.

"You know how to do it," his mama said curtly. "Don't you come back without no cigarettes."

"Yes, Mama." The cigarettes meant that he would have to buy less food.

He gratefully left the room and closed the door gently behind him. He tucked the coupons into one of his cargo pockets and sealed it shut carefully with the Velcro fasteners.

After telling his brother and sisters that he would be back soon with some food, he set off to the convenience store that his Mama always called a "bodega" for some reason. He automatically adopted a strut designed to show the right amount of confidence and swagger, hoping nobody would mess with him.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't.

A Haroldstown cop drove by him ten minutes later. He was about halfway to the store. The officer scrutinized him, turning his head as his car passed Kool-Aid. Kool-Aid met the cop's eyes evenly with his own, silently challenging the cop to stop him and find out if he was doing something wrong. Their heads swiveled with mutual distrust until the cop was forced to look at the road again. The police car pulled out of sight.

"Fuckin' po-po," Kool-Aid muttered, repeating what he often heard grown folk say. "Ain't got nothin' better to do."

As he rounded the last corner and headed down the street where the store was, his friend Loquavious pedaled up behind him on his BMX. He skidded to a stop next to Kool-Aid and they shook hands in a complicated set of movements that they had devised when they were in the fifth grade.

"What you up to, dog?" Loquavious asked.

"Goin' to the store up yonder," Kool-Aid replied, gesturing with his head.

"Buy me somethin'?"

"Yeah." Now there was even less for food, but he couldn't say no.

"Cool, bro."

Loquavious got off his bicycle and walked it alongside himself and his friend.

"Where was you last night?" Kool-Aid asked. "I thought you was comin' over, dog."

"Man, my folks made me go to church," Loquavious complained. "Then they wouldn't let me go nowheres on account of they said it's a weeknight. I told them they ain't no school tomorrow, but they was like 'Rules be rules.' It be whack, yo. You lucky you don't have to go to no church."

Kool-Aid was quiet, and Loquavious mistook it for silent agreement. His mother didn't bring him and his brother and sisters to church much anymore. Once in a while she would say that she wasn't going to do anymore "partying", and then they would go on Sunday. They didn't usually go two Sundays back to back. In fact, they had only been to church once that year, and it was already July. Kool-Aid was okay with that. The preacher was always talking about Heaven and Hell and Jesus being the Way and Truth and Light, but Kool-Aid didn't see why he had to worry about stuff that wasn't going to happen until he was an old man. And if he was good all the time, there wouldn't be a Nintendo or a VHS player or sometimes even something to eat for his brother and sisters and him.

Also, he didn't have a shirt and tie, and being there with everyone all dressed up made him feel raggedy.

They were almost to the store.

"We gonna boost?" Loquavious asked loudly and enthusiastically. "Like the last time we was in Walmart?"

"Shut up, man! You talk too much!" Kool-Aid looked around nervously, but there was no one in earshot that he could see. "I can pay."

They opened the door and went in. The smell of fried chicken gizzards smacked Kool-Aid with a greasy hand. His stomach contracted into a painful knot. The last of yesterday's food had been sparse, and Keyshawn and the twins had gotten the lion's share of it, such as it was. Keeping his discomfort off of his face, Kool-Aid held the door for Loquavious so he could walk his bicycle in more easily.

"You leave that outside," the shopkeeper barked from behind the counter.

"Come on, man!" Loquavious instantly protested. "I don't want no one to take it!"

"You lock it up outside."

"Ain't got no lock," Loquavious said.

The shopkeeper thought it over. He rubbed his hand over his two day's growth of beard.

"Okay. But you leave it over there." He gestured to the ATM machine with the out-of-order sign on it. "I don't want you knocking down my stuff."

"Whatever, man," Loquavious said dismissively. "It's my bike and I can take it wherever I want, homes."

"Just do it, man," Kool-Aid said. "You know how far I got to tote stuff if he don't let me come in here no more?" The next-closest convenience store was twice as far away, and carrying bags full of cans or a milk jug full of kerosene was not the easiest thing in the world.

Loquavious sullenly rested his BMX against the broken machine where the merchant had pointed. The machine had been broken for years, and it appeared it was going to stay that way forever.

"I'm doing it for my boy here," Loquavious told the store owner. "I ain't doin' it for you."

"Okay, but you do it," the owner gloated, satisfied.

Kool-Aid went to where the canned goods were. Loquavious went off to look at something. Kool-Aid hoped he wasn't planning to steal anything, knowing if he got caught the police would almost certainly arrest him too. Kool-Aid grabbed an armload of canned ravioli, spaghetti with meatballs, beef stew, and mixed fruit and piled it on the counter. Then he went back for a second armload. He got a two-quart bottle of milk out of the refrigerator case along with some sodas and a few packets of his signature cherry Kool-Aid. As an afterthought, he made another trip for cakes and potato chips, realizing that Loquavious was there to help him carry the stuff back.

"That all?" the owner asked.

"Yeah."

Loquavious reappeared by his side.

"Get me some gizzards, man," Loquavious asked. "You said you would buy me something."

Kool-Aid's heart sank, but he couldn't say no to his friend.

"And some gizzards," Kool-Aid added smoothly.

"You pay cash?" the owner asked skeptically.

"Naw, man," Kool-Aid said. "Stamps."

"Gizzards with stamps cost more."

"Whatever."

"And hot sauce," Loquavious piped in.

"And hot sauce," Kool-Aid repeated.

The owner wrapped some up, muttering under his breath. He put a packet of hot sauce in the bag with the gizzards.

"Give me two hot sauce, man," Loquavious ordered.

"One serving, one hot sauce," the owner said.

"Leave it alone, man," Kool-Aid said to his friend. "I got hot sauce at home," he lied.

Loquavious ignored him and asked again with even more hostility.

"You charge enough," he said. "Give me two."

The owner muttered some more, but he slipped another packet into the bag.

Kool-Aid scrutinized the register display as the owner rang up the groceries. It came to thirty-eight dollars and sixteen cents, and he knew the owner would take forty out of the book and not make change.

"I need some cigarettes, man," Kool-Aid said.

The owner looked skeptically at the twenty-five dollars in stamps left in the book. Then he looked out the front window of the store.

"What you want?" he asked.

"Give me five packs of Newport one hundreds," Kool-Aid said confidently.

"Three," the owner countered.

"Four," Kool-Aid said.

"Three packs," the owner insisted.

"Forget it, man," Kool-Aid said. He held his hand out for the coupon book.

"Okay. Four."

"And matches."

The owner punched more numbers into the register until it totaled sixty-four dollars and change. The drawer popped open and he slammed it shut again, putting the coupon book that still held twenty-five dollars worth of stamps into his pocket. Kool-Aid knew he would use them to buy stuff at the supermarket and then sell what he bought in his store for twice the dollar amount

he paid. He didn't even scrape off the old price tags. He just put his higher prices over the original ones.

The owner started to bag the food and milk and cigarettes.

"Can I get double bags?" Kool-Aid asked.

"One bag enough."

"I got a long ways to walk," Kool-Aid said. "Please."

It cost a little more muttering, but the owner did as Kool-Aid asked. Loquavious looked at Kool-Aid sideways but didn't say anything. In a few minutes, they were back out on the street with bags and bicycle. Without discussing it, they both worked to hang the bags on the handlebars of Loquavious's BMX, balancing the weight so that the bike would shoulder most of the burden.

"I don't know if you can come in," Kool-Aid said as they began the trek back to his house. "My mama ain't feelin' good today." There was no need to be more specific than that.

"We can just hang on the porch, cuz," Loquavious said reasonably. "It too hot to be inside anyhow."

"Hold up," Kool-Aid ordered. Loquavious obediently stopped. Kool-Aid fished out one of the packs of cigarettes. He ripped it open, took out a cigarette and tried to light it. It took a couple of matches to get it lit because the wind kept blowing them out. Loquavious looked on admiringly.

"You want one?"

"Naw, man. If my folks smell it on me, I'll get a whuppin'. Don't your mama smell it on you?"

"Folks who smoke can't tell," Kool-Aid sagely informed him. He inhaled the smoke a bit and suppressed a cough. The next several puffs got easier.

They walked in silence for a moment.

"Did you see *Martin* on TV last night?" Loquavious asked after a while.

"No. I was playing Nintendo," Kool-Aid lied again. Loquavious didn't need to know that the cable was turned off. He certainly didn't need to know that Kool-Aid spent the night reading a book he had borrowed from the library after feeding his brother and sisters a modest meal and making sure they had taken baths before they went to sleep. The way Loquavious ran his mouth everyone would know, and he would be picked on without mercy.

"Too bad. It was real funny. Did you play that game we 'borrowed' from Walmart?"

"You know it, bro." Another thing Loquavious didn't need to know is that Kool-Aid had fenced it.

"It crazy, right?"

"Oh, yeah," Kool-Aid affirmed.

"You walk the bike for a while," Loquavious said. "I want to eat my gizzards. Cold gizzards ain't no good." Kool-Aid flicked away his cigarette into the street and took over walking the bike while Loquavious awkwardly slathered his gizzards with the hot sauce. He dropped the empty plastic packets on the ground.

"Gimme some," Kool-Aid said. Loquavious held the out the small paper tray. He took one and ate it.

"They good, huh?" Loquavious asked.

"Uh huh," Kool-Aid replied. After nearly twenty hours without food, they tasted as heavenly. "Gimme one more."

Kool-Aid couldn't stop with just two. They shared the rest of the gizzards, and when they were gone Loquavious dropped the paper tray on the ground and unconsciously rubbed his grubby hands on his pants. If he had noticed how hungry Kool-Aid was, he didn't mention it.

"Can I get one a them sodas?" Loquavious asked.

"They for my mama," Kool-Aid said smoothly. "She be mad if I don't came back with 'em."

"Are you gonna make that Kool-Aid when we get to your crib?" Loquavious asked.

"Yeah, man."

"Cool. I'm thirsty. You got ice?"

"I dunno. I hope. Cold drink would be nice."

Soon they turned onto the block where the little house Kool-Aid lived in was.

"I'll take the stuff in and make the drink," Kool-Aid said. "You just chill out on the porch."

Loquavious inclined his head to show he understood.

As they walked up the dirt path that led through the yard to the house, Kool-Aid heard the sound of his brother and sisters crying in abject fear. Without a word or a glance at his friend, he dropped the groceries and ran full tilt into the house. His brother and the twins were crouching on the floor in front of the sofa.

"He's killing her, Sherwin!" Keyshawn shouted over the shrieking of his sisters. "Do something! He's killing Mama! Please, Sherwin! Help her!" The faces of his siblings glistened with tears and their eyes were wide with unadulterated terror.

A cold and terrible calm came over Kool-Aid. He knew what he had to do, and he didn't hesitate. He ran to his room and got the Louisville Slugger Mama had bought for him years ago for tee-ball out of his closet. He then ran to his mother's room and thrust open the door.

The man who had been sleeping beside her an hour ago was kicking her as she sat in the corner, still naked, her legs drawn up and her arms covering her head. She was screaming.

"What the fuck?" the man said as the bedroom door slammed open. He turned, but he never had a chance of avoiding the tip of the bat that hit him in the general vicinity of his left kidney. The only reason he wasn't crippled instantly by the blow was that Kool-Aid had to swing left-handed to avoid hitting the wall with the bat. He jumped back and to the left, hand clutching his side.

"You little motherfucker!" he seethed. "I gonna kill your ass!" He grabbed a bottle off the dresser and prepared to break it over the edge.

"You go on and break that bottle, then walk your ass over here," Kool-Aid said. He spun the bat to the ready, a maneuver he had practiced for hours and hours.

The man looked at his bare feet and thought the better of his plan.

"This ain't none of your business, boy," he said, spitting out the last word.

"I'm makin' it my business. Mama, go on. I got this," he said, never taking his eyes off her erstwhile new friend. She fled the room. He heard the door of the bathroom slam shut and lock.

The stranger stood frozen, bottle in hand, considering his next move.

"She took my shit," he said. "She owe me."

"You beat on her," Kool-Aid said. "You even now. Get your ass on up outta here."

Fumbling with the bottle, the man found his pants and drew them on. He forced his feet into his shoes and held his shirt in his hands. Kool-Aid kept the bat raised.

"Let me by," the man ordered.

"Climb over the bed," Kool-Aid snapped back.

The man did just that, awkwardly, keeping an eye on the boy with the bat. He left the room. Kool-Aid heard his brother and sisters scream anew and started to chase the stranger, but then he heard the sound of the screen door open and shut.

"Yo mama is a 'ho!" Kool-Aid heard the man shout from the street. "She a goddamn 'ho! She ain't just a 'ho. She is a crack 'ho." By the time Kool-Aid got to the window and looked outside, his back was already turned and he was walking away down the street. He wanted to chase him down and beat him with the bat some more, but suddenly he felt very weak. He began to shake. He backed up to the bed and sat down. Tears started streaming down his face, and he wiped them away angrily with his trembling hand.

His mother came back to the room, a bathrobe tightly closed around her. She stood in the doorway.

"I..." she began to say.

"It's okay, Mama," Kool-Aid said. "You don't have to say nothing."

He got up to leave. She stood aside.

"I ain't gonna do this no more," his mama said. "No more partying. I swear I won't."

"Okay, Mama. I got to bring the stuff in."

He went out to the living room, shutting the door behind him as he left.

"It's all right," he told his sniffling brother and the twins. "He's gone. He ain't comin' back. Quit you crying."

Keyshawn and the girls nodded. He saw respect in their eyes. He felt proud.

Unsurprisingly, Loquacious was gone, but the groceries were left thoughtfully on the front porch, minus one soda. Kool-Aid brought the heaviest bag inside, then instructed Keyshawn to get the rest. He put the milk and sodas in the refrigerator and threw the garbage into the bags from the store. All the precious cans and chips and sweets were placed in the high cupboards, save three. He left the three cans out for himself and his brother and sisters to eat. They would share ravioli and beef stew and a can of fruit cocktail for their breakfast and lunch. He put two packs of cigarettes on the counter for his mother. He added the other pack to the one in his pocket, and he wasn't planning to hide them as he had done before. In fact, he took one out

and lit it with a hand that was still barely trembling. He flicked the ashes onto the dirty dishes in the sink with practiced disregard. It was all good. He was the man of the house now.

He wouldn't have to hide anything anymore.

Originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Simon Easton moved to North Carolina in 1998 and taught in a low-wealth county for fifteen years. During that time, he taught middle school Language Arts to seventh graders and elementary school subjects to fourth and fifth-grade students. He continues to live in the county in which he was an educator.

The Drowned Man's Watch

Carly Racklin

A drowned man washed up on the rocks beneath the lighthouse one morning after a violent storm. By the time he'd coasted in to the beach, we had all poured outside in our robes and nightgowns, shivering in the salty air of early autumn, and formed a crowd to meet him. He wore a well-tailored navy suit, only a few shades darker than his skin, and with the seaweed cradling his bloated limbs, he looked almost like a gift the sea had carried to our shore. And to my neighbors, he was. He was the best kind of gift, one that could be talked about for days, shared at parties and around glasses of wine when guests admitted their secret cravings for the gruesome. I knew it too, from the moment I saw him splayed out there on the sand, that he was the best thing to ever come to us.

No one could decide what to do other than stare or groan with a hand upon their lips, until the sheriff hobbled outside with his nightcap askew and hushed our whimpering. He and a few of the mariners clumsily lugged the corpse into the fishmonger's shop, where they covered him in a pile of ice as we all watched with the chilled waves lapping at our feet. We were told they'd call the mainland to see if any persons had gone missing recently, though the doctors could tell little about when he might have forfeited his soul to the sea. The rest of that day drifted by in a sort of milky haze, almost like seasickness. What I remembered most was that after they brought him away and left us all standing at the bottom of the hill, something shining in the sand arrested my gaze. It was a wristwatch, small and horribly cracked with half the face full of salt water. The time was stuck at 8:43.

I knew it must have belonged to the drowned man, so I slipped the dripping thing into the pocket of my robe and hurried down the damp path back home. Everyone I passed looked a little sick, their eyes misty and far away as already they gossiped hungrily to one another. No one stopped me as I went. Too preoccupied as they spun their wild tales, no one said a thing.

That night, I placed the drowned man's watch on the table beside my bed and watched the candlelight form little yellow orbs in the water stuck behind the glass. I studied the hands, silent and still, like those of the man upon whose wrist they once sat. I imagined that they were stuck at the hour and minute of his death, and a drop or so of him, like that small bit of limpid brine, must have also been entombed inside the watch's face. It was a quixotic notion—to hold onto a sliver of one's soul and have it drift like mist about you for the rest of your days, but romantic nonetheless. At the very least, it was a charming concept that my neighbors wouldn't get to weave into a strand of impish blather.

I fell into a deep sleep as the gulls crooned outside my window, but the drowned man followed after me still. I dreamt that he climbed out from the fishmonger's ice box, straightened his faded tie, and knocked on my door. He called out my name, but before I could stand and meet him, I woke to the bright and brisk chill of dawn. And it was a neighbor knocking at the door. She told me that police officers were coming from the mainland to investigate the drowned man, that they thought someone from the island might have been responsible for his watery demise. I didn't listen to anything else after that, but went out and stood beside the lighthouse on the very top of the cliff and held the drowned man's watch close to my chest. I decided I didn't want to hear who the sheriff or my neighbors or the forthcoming policemen thought he was. I already knew—he was mine. Mine alone to cherish, mine to love. Their rumors and assertions would ruin everything. They always did.

Closing my eyes and smelling the sea on the wind, I swore I could feel the drowned man's hand in mine. I could feel him standing beside me, staring out past the bluffs and rocks and the foam. He whispered that he'd never leave me, and I told him that I knew. I had a piece of him to call my own. I had all I needed.

When the men from the mainland came, they brought us back to the place at the bottom of the hill where he washed ashore, and asked us all what we remembered and saw on that morning. My neighbors gladly seized the opportunity to spill their inflated tales after letting them cultivate for so many days. No one asked about the watch, and I didn't tell them. Even when they questioned us all individually in the grey chamber of the sheriff's office, I revealed nothing. I only considered it briefly, but then I felt the drowned man's hand press, firm and fond, on my shoulder, and I didn't tell them. They didn't deserve it, he whispered, and he was right. With those words to guide me, and the weight of his watch in my pocket, I didn't tell them a thing.

When the men finally left, they took his body with them. My neighbors sighed and said they were glad for it, that no one could sleep knowing a dead man rested two doors down. I only laughed, and said how I'd slept soundly as a child, and dreamt of love and warmth. Perturbed, my neighbors offered that it was because my house was the last on the road and farthest from the fishmonger's cold casket room. They said I was lucky, and that the dead feared the lighthouse on its crested crag outside my door. But they were wrong, the drowned man whispered; as always, they were wrong.

That night another storm rolled in, and the drowned man came to me again; he thanked me for keeping his watch and soul so close and safe. I brushed the barnacles and sand from the shoulders of his suit and smelled the salt on his breath as he droned sweetly to me. He said he belonged to the sea, and the men were wrong to take him, so were my neighbors and the fishmonger. He said he had to go back. At that, I kissed the bluish skin of his eyelids and said I couldn't bear another day in this insufferable town without him. He only smiled, and walked calmly out through the doorway and towards the hill and the lighthouse. I followed after him, the wristwatch in my hands, as the clammy air boomed and tossed my nightgown all awry.

With each round of the lighthouse's lamp, he drifted farther and farther away, and I hastened my bare feet over the grit and gravel to catch him. My gaze locked onto his beaming blue face as we bounded together, out past the harbor, past the spot where we discovered him and up the slick mud of the hillside. The rain started as I climbed, like a thousand needles pouring down out of heaven, but still I followed him. I followed him out past the levees, past the jagged rocks and the reefs. He waited for me at the lighthouse, hand outstretched, then moved to float suspended beyond the crown of the precipice while the clouds danced beneath his feet. I paused there for only a moment, letting the rain trickle into my eyes, and found the image of the churning waves shift and grow distorted until they resembled nearly a thousand ghastly faces. But those sudden specters vanished in a flash of lightning, leaving only the drowned man as he smiled blindingly in the squall. His cold hand met mine a moment later, and my feet left the ground just as my sight flooded again with the biting rain, and those faces, and the wide, saw-toothed mouth of the sea.

A student at Arcadia University, Carly Racklin loves stories of all kinds, but is passionate about the fantastical and visceral. When she is not writing, she can be found drinking tea, taking pictures of birds, and making flower crowns. Her work has appeared in *The Misty Review*. You can find her on Twitter @willowylungs, and on Tumblr @lungswrites.

Two Hours, Forty-Six Minutes to Houston

Marva Hinton

David is dying. I'm boarding a flight with my stepsister Lilly to say my goodbyes. After grad school, I practically lived with her and David on the weekends. I kept a toothbrush at their house. I stopped by most Friday nights to hang out, play cards and vent about whatever had gone wrong that week. When I had a boyfriend, we made it a foursome, but since I was usually single, it was just the three of us most of the time. Lilly was always trying to hook me up with this guy from the neighborhood or that guy from their church. She said she wanted me to be as happy as they were. I kept telling her I wasn't ready to settle down.

"There's nothing like always having a date and never having to take out the trash," Lilly said one day while I was at their house.

"I can take out my own trash," I said. But I let her set me up anyway. Whenever I drive by Fitness World, I still laugh about that personal trainer. Big biceps, bigger pecs, but where it counted the most, he was quite small. And the manager at the storage place where she kept part of her black doll collection when it began to overtake their home, a retired Marine who owned five guns and obsessed about cleanliness. He recommended what he had found to be very effective cleansing products to use in my bathroom. I resented his suggestions, but Crud Blaster X360 really worked. Too bad we didn't. I'm still freaked out about the time he left one of his guns at my place. The next day he was all like, "I believe you have my firearm." That's weird, right? And to this day I still tease her about that piano player at her church. He could tell a killer joke, volunteered at a nursing home and graduated summa cum laude. He was also gay. That didn't stop me from dating him for a couple months. He was super polite and creative. Plus, he always paid, and seeing him got Lilly off my back. But I broke things off when he wanted to introduce me to his family. Too. Much. Pressure. And I would have felt like a fraud or a fraud enabler.

"I'm not giving up on you," said Lilly. "I'm going to have you married before you turn 35. You don't want to be a spinster, do you?"

"Did you just say spinster? What is this 1880?"

No one expected Lilly and me to hit it off like we did. She was 40 when my dad married her mom, and I was 30. We met a few months before the wedding and just clicked. We even looked alike. People who didn't know our story thought we were blood relatives. We're both about 5'7" with pecan-brown skin and midnight-black hair. Only I wear mine in locs that barely touch my shoulders, and she rocks what I call a buppie bob. I started getting to know David at the wedding.

"You're looking mighty pretty today, Miss Harris," he said. "I hope that clown Lilly set you up with appreciates you."

"David, William is not a clown. He's a dance instructor at Arthur Murray."

"Same thing to me."

I always thought they were an odd couple. No one is more straight laced than Lilly, and David appears that way to outsiders. But once I got to know him, I realized he liked to cut up as much as I did.

The early-morning flight was full, and I struggled helping Lilly get to our seats. I'm known as the queen of one-bag travel, and she would lug around a trunk if the airline let her. Just getting down the aisle with all of her stuff exhausted me.

"You know we're not moving, right?"

I couldn't help but mess with her a little even on a day like today. Our family shows love through teasing. It's always good-natured, never malicious. That's how Lilly knew her marriage was in trouble. One day David stopped

ribbing her about things. He just sighed when she called their next-door neighbor Tom instead of Tim and shook his head when she drove off with her coffee on the roof of her car.

When we finally reached our seats, I allowed myself to relax a little. My shoulders had been tight ever since I heard the news. I tried to get Lilly to calm down, too, but without a strong drink or two that seemed unlikely. And I knew she would never order a drink before noon. I mean, what would the flight attendant think of her? And what would David say when I told him? Because I would have to tell him, and we would all laugh about it. That's just what we do in our family even now.

Lilly and David have been divorced for three years. The split never got nasty, and after a while they almost became friends again.

I hadn't seen him in nearly two years, but we still exchanged emails from time to time. He likes to reminisce about our crazy adventures. When I heard that he had cancer and that it was pancreatic and that the doctor gave him six months tops, I knew I had to come. Lilly's mom, Linda, practically begged me to go with Lilly.

"I don't trust her to make this trip alone," Linda said during a late-night phone call last week.

The words *David has cancer* swirled around in my head and forced me to collapse into the couch. I couldn't believe it. David was sick. David, who ran every day and had a gym built in his house so he could work out at any time. David, who was so energetic and always up for another round no matter what the game. David, who had taught me how to take a man down twice my size and who ate no pork and only drank once a year—on Sammy Davis Jr.'s birthday. David, who got his PSA done every year because his dad had died of prostate cancer. David, who made me quit smoking even though I only did it at parties. David, who inquired about my bowel movements because a healthy colon equals a healthy body. I had to let my world order adjust before I could speak.

"Of course I'll fly over with her."

Lilly and I made the arrangements. We booked a flight out that weekend. I told the newspaper I needed a week off.

"My brother's dying, and I have to be there for him and our parents."

I neglected to mention that David was my brother-in-law. Well, actually my former brother-in-law.

I read one of those trashy checkout lane magazines with an overexposed celebrity on the cover as the flight attendant went through the safety drill. Lilly grabbed her safety instruction manual and followed every word.

"In the event of a water landing," the flight attendant said in a boring monotone.

"I hate to break it to you, sis, but in the event of a water landing, we're probably gonna die from the impact."

"Shush, Dani. I'm trying to hear what she's saying. Okay, we're seven rows from the nearest exit. Remember that in case we have to evacuate."

"You know, few people survive plane crashes."

"How can you make jokes at a time like this?"

"Sorry, I'm just trying to deal with everything. I can't believe it about David."

"Yeah, I know." Lilly softened. "Thanks for coming with me. It's going to be tough facing him and even tougher if some hoochie is hanging around."

Towards the end of their relationship, Lilly convinced herself that David was cheating on her. I tried my best to stay out of that but always seemed to get sucked in.

“I think David has a girlfriend,” she said to me one afternoon a few months after the divorce was finalized.

“Why?” I asked.

“When he came over to fix my garage door, his cell phone rang twice, but he didn’t answer it.”

“So that means he has a girlfriend? Lilly, you should stop teaching and become a detective.”

“You make jokes, but I always thought that there might be another woman.”

“Okay, David, who was home every night at 6:30 on the dot and who never missed one meal with you, was having an affair?”

“A wife always knows.”

“Well, what do you care anyway? You guys are divorced now, remember?”

I managed to stay close to both of them during the split. I made them obey one simple rule—no badmouthing each other while they were with me, and for the most part they went along with it.

The sun was just coming up as the flight took off. In a few moments, we were over the Pacific. A couple of boaters were already out, and the water looked so calm and still like you could walk across it. Seeing the ocean always helped me to relax, and I felt the rest of the tension leaving my body. But the sight seemed to make Lilly more on edge. She had always been afraid of the water.

The flight attendants walked down the aisle taking food and drink requests. Lilly refused to have anything. I got a ginger ale and some sugar cookies. Lilly just sat there drumming her fingers on the tray table.

“Wanna switch seats so you can get a nap?” I asked. I was sitting by the window, and she was in the middle seat.

“I don’t sleep on planes.”

“Why not?”

“If this plane goes down, I want to know it.”

“I think the spinning out of control would wake you.”

“You never stop, Dani. Do you?”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and I felt bad. I have a knack for saying inappropriate things. Sometimes it works for me. Sometimes, like now, it makes me look like an ass.

“I’m sorry. It’s just if David can get cancer, what hope is there for the rest of us?”

Lilly stopped her drumming on the tray table, and after a while we started reminiscing again. We talked about all those crazy dates she set me up on, like the nutritionist who I broke up with over cheese.

“And then he said I can’t believe how much cheese you eat, and I said if you don’t like it, you can step and he did.”

There was the dentist who joked one too many times about using laughing gas as a way to make our sex life more interesting and the real estate agent who made the mistake of asking me when was I going to grow up and get a perm.

“David always wanted to see you with someone special,” she said. “You were like a little sister to him.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

I felt a tear threaten to fall and turned toward the window until I could get myself together. Then I pulled my carry-on out from underneath the seat in front of me and grabbed a notebook. I always keep one or two with me. David used to tease me about jotting down things all the time. He would laugh and say here comes my roving reporter, but you never know when a story might develop. Plus, I like to dabble in what I call street poetry.

“What are you writing?”

“Oh, nothing important.”

“Have you started doing slams again?”

“Here and there. But work keeps me pretty busy.”

We were an hour into a two hour, forty-six minute flight to Houston from LAX. I had always loved flying, but I began to feel a bit claustrophobic. The cramped coach seats made it seem like Lilly was sitting in my lap and judging everything I wrote. I closed my notebook as politely as I could.

“He insisted you tag along, you know. He was always real fond of you,” she said.

“Don’t talk about him like he’s already gone.”

“Sorry. It’s just...well, I mean what do you say when your husband is this sick?”

Lilly reached down and pulled a large envelope from her carry-on.

“Our old storage facility called me a few weeks ago. They’re shutting down and wanted to know what we wanted to do about our stuff. I paid for them to send it to me, and it was mostly returns from years ago for David’s clients. But there was also a sealed Fed Ex envelope that I think was meant for me.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Aren’t you curious about it?”

Lilly pulled the hard strip across the faded envelope and pulled out a manila folder. I went back to my notebook to give her a little privacy. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her pull out another envelope. She opened it and a smaller envelope and several sheets of paper were inside. Our eyes met, and I gave her an encouraging smile before going back to my work. I felt her body go a little limp as she flipped through the pages.

I bet he wrote her some letters and maybe tried to heal old wounds. I was so caught up in revising a tough feature on the impact of illegal immigration on the schools that I jumped when she spoke.

“Did you know David was a poet?”

“No. Mr. Bean Counter?”

“Yeah, he wrote all these beautiful pieces about his love.”

“Aww, that’s sweet,” I said as I shifted in my tiny seat and turned slightly away from her.

“You didn’t know this?”

“Nope.”

“You wanna read some of these?”

“I wouldn’t feel right.”

“No, I insist.”

Lilly got up and rushed toward the front of the cabin to the bathroom. I picked up the papers and read the first one.

The thing that pulls me to you is too strong.

You're going to have to break up with me because I don't have the strength to. You'll have to be the one to say we've got to stop because my lips will never be able to form the words, don't know how to. You'll have to be the one to say this is wrong and not end the sentence with but because I can't.

Wow, talk about bad poetry. Now I see why Lilly was so upset. English teachers make the worst critics. No one would confuse David with Langston Hughes. But artistic expression is good for the soul. I'm sure I'll be able to get her to look at it through new eyes. I support the poetry everywhere, everyday poets movement. I was rummaging through my carry-on for a booklet that explained the concept, when Lilly returned. But before I could say anything she started snapping at me.

"So which one was your favorite? The one about the way you taste like raspberries? Or my personal favorite, the one that praises you for always greeting him on your knees with a willing heart and an open mouth?"

"Me? You actually think this is about me? Clearly, it's one big, not-very-well-executed allegory."

I thought as someone who taught composition she could see that and we could laugh about the ridiculousness of it all.

"Is that why he says, *my sweet, sweet Dani, I've never loved anyone this way?*"

Lilly didn't raise her voice, but I could feel her hot breath on my cheek. As I grasped for words, a flight attendant came on the loud speaker.

"We're about forty-five minutes from Houston," she droned. "The fasten seat belt light is on. Please return to your seats. We're expecting a little turbulence."

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