



# CORVUS REVIEW

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The Ear  
Alisha Mughal

I left the house that morning because I felt trapped inside — stifled within those whitewashed walls, looming over me blank and silent and expectant. Intimidated by the boxes piled high that needed unpacking.

I couldn't get any window to open and I couldn't breathe. There didn't seem to be enough fresh air around me. It was stuffy, the house, full of only my own stale breath. Stuffy especially when compared to the day beyond those stuck windows. The clear blue sky, the sunlight like the tawny pages of an old book that flooded the lane winding away from the house and toward the town, the playful breeze that stirred and flirted with the skinny branches of the still-naked trees. It made me feel left out, overcome with a palling sadness that a part of me could not abide by, the part of me that saw the vibrant and open day, not the part of me that felt sorry for and lingered over my body trapped within the house. It was the part of me that wanted me to be active in the day, walking that warm lane and feeling the cool air carousing with my hair. It was the part of me that won because I stepped out. And I walked.

I thought as I walked. About myself. I walked to the field that roamed a way before the entrance to the town, the field with the tall gnarled grass and the dilapidated church. The sky was so clear — a glazed blue that looked like a frozen lake at dusk, right before the sun leaves the lavender sky in a pink and orange blaze. The expansive field itself — seeming without end, meandering to meet the sky at the horizon, the grass tilting in the breeze like the softly-rippling waves of a calm sea, the only interruption the leaning church that with its overgrown pathways seemed a floating glacier — seemed to exude the yellow light for the day. It was the tall grass, baked beige and white, that seemed to glow. But, as I walked into the field, I noticed that near the ground the grass was budding green, as if secretly, like a face blushing pink beneath a mask.

I made my way into the grass, parting it with my arms in front of me as I walked. It reached up to my waist. I had no aim, I just walked. Until I found myself in a small clearing in the grass, a little way away from the church. It was really just the tall grass flattened, as though someone had been lying there with the dry grass beneath them a scratchy mattress. In a little corner on the ground, on top of the flattened grass, was a small pile of rocks. Or pebbles rather.

I looked up around me and then down at the pebbles again. I assumed that whoever was here had collected these pebbles and had been throwing them at the church, which more than anything now was a collection of beams lazing uselessly against still-standing beams, whatever was left of the framework, a useless and decaying skeleton. I don't know why I assumed this — it just seemed like something I would do. And why should my thinking be any different from someone else's?

I picked up a pebble. It was smooth and round and looked more as though it belonged at the bottom of a raging river than in this field. I threw it toward the church. It struck a beam, I could tell not which, and about me exploded a flat sound, like a car

backfiring. I picked up another, and again threw it without aim at the church. The flat sound splintered through the air and fell away just as flatly without an echo. A frail beam fell over and down from its leaning position, down with a tedious thud, sending up a cloud of dust like a trapped ghost whose hem had been caught for the longest time beneath an edge of the beam. It was satisfying — the throwing, the inevitable flat sound that at the same time felt substantial because it was so loud.

I threw another pebble, and then another, thinking, as I carried out my novel but inefficient demolition method, about oranges. I remembered a day when I was a kid, like this one, filled with the same soft yellow light. I remembered white linen curtains billowing in a warm breeze like the one that now played with my hair. I was eating oranges and wondering how whoever made them filled the tiny pulp packets with juice. I remembered my mother laughing and then telling me that it was God who did that, all by himself, and that no task was too outrageous for God. I remembered imagining myself carrying out the task but then, growing impatient, giving it up, deciding it impossible that God wouldn't have given up.

My eyes still on the church's framework, I reached my hand down again and found myself holding something warm and soft, not cool and hard and smooth as the pebbles had been. Not absolutely malleable either. I looked in my hand and found myself holding an ear, a human ear. Reflexively, my hand jerked away from under it and it fell to the bed of flattened grass. I wiped my hand on my shirt with my eyes still on the thing. I looked around. There was nothing there in the wide yellow field but the leaning dead church. Nothing there but the clear sky above.

I kneeled down to get a closer look at the ear. I half expected it to move, to get up and walk away, but it didn't. It lay there, looking beige and pink and *alive*. I poked the lobe with my finger and it was still warm and soft, gave slightly under my touch, not at all as I'd expected a *dead* body part to be — tough and waxen. There was no blood on it. Where it had been severed — if it had been severed — from whatever head it belonged to there was a pink demarcation line, no gore. Just an inoffensive pink, like a still-healing wound before it becomes dense and dry scar tissue. I pulled out an unused tissue from my jeans pocket — because I always carry tissue because you never know when you'll need tissue — and scooped up the ear with it. I wrapped it up in the tissue and made my way out of the field. I kept the small parcel in my hand, feeling that putting it in my pocket wouldn't be right.

I walked the dusty lane away from the field and the dead church and into town, to the Sheriff's Department. Away from the golden field under the gauzy sky, the town was grey, simmering under a thunderhead that seemed to have snuffed all the yellow out from the day.

The Sheriff and his buddy Roy Palmer, each apparently without a care, were rocking sleepily on the porch of the Sheriff's Department in their rockers, their black straw panama hats nudged to the far nether regions of their heads, each reclining deeply. Roy was chewing on the nubile green base of a long blade of grass that ended frayed and far away from his mouth — he'd probably plucked it from the yellow field. The Sheriff was chewing on tobacco, a silver metal spittoon near his legs, which I kept my distance from.

"Howdy, Katie," the Sheriff said from his rocker, turning his tan, weather-beaten face up toward me and brushing his grey hair, still speckled with some stubborn black, out of his eyes. Roy nodded in my direction and the blade of grass quivered, waving a nervous hello.

"Hello Sheriff Truman. Hello Roy."

"I hope you and your husband are settling into our little village nicely," the Sheriff said. I told him that we were. I didn't tell him that after two weeks I still hadn't unpacked anything but the barest of essentials.

"How's the new house?" Roy asked. I told him it was divine. He smiled proudly. I didn't tell him about the windows. "And how's Tim?" he asked.

"He's away on a work trip."

"So soon after the wedding?" the Sheriff asked, astounded.

"He better not keep that up, or you'll never get any children up in that big house," Roy said. The Sheriff nodded slowly in agreement. I felt myself growing hot under my shirt, red in the face. "It's not right," Roy went on, shaking his head and looking meaningfully out beyond the porch rails. "It's not right for a young woman to be all alone in that big house."

I laughed nervously, and before he could say any more of what had already been said to me by so many strangers, I said: "Sheriff, I found something in the field with the old church that I think you should look at." I handed him the parcel.

He rocked his rocker forward, spat in the spittoon, and leaned up out of his recline, making the rocker moan and whine under him. He took the tissue from my hand and plucked the edges away to expose the ear that still looked alive and warm. He whistled through his teeth. Roy leaned toward the Sheriff in his rocker, and, seeing what the Sheriff saw, his eyebrows shot up and his lips parted, the green root of the grass held on for its life to the moistness on the inside of his lip.

"This, now this is something," the Sheriff said, his eyes still on the ear.

"Where did you say you found it?" Roy asked. I told him the old church field, with the old church.

"What are you going to do?" I asked the Sheriff.

He looked up at me. "Well, I guess we'd better find its owner," the Sheriff said.

"I wonder who it could be," Roy said, and his brows furrowed and his teeth began working furiously on the green root of the grass.

"Well, maybe we should take some dogs to the field," I suggested, thinking the body it belonged to might not be far away.

The Sheriff nodded at me with his eyes back on the ear, nodded as if he didn't really hear me, or wasn't listening. Roy's eyes suddenly shot open wide and the blade of grass fell from his mouth onto his lap.

"That explains it!" Roy exclaimed, slapping his thigh. His hat fell off the back of his head.

"What explains what, Roy?" the Sheriff asked, turning attentively toward Roy. The mountainous cloud looming overhead rumbled, making the Sheriff's Department tremble and rattle.

"Tommy Babbitt — you know, old lady Babbitt's son? Old lady Babbitt of Babbitt's Department Store," Roy said, nodding excitedly.

"Yes, Roy, I know who Tommy Babbitt is." The Sheriff turned toward me. "He just got in last week from the city. He was studying music at the university," he explained. "He's off for the summer now."

"It's his ear!" Roy exclaimed, slapping his knee again. The blade of grass that was on his lap slid down onto the wooden planks of the porch.

"He's dead?" I asked, slightly terrified, but they didn't seem to hear me.

"How do you know that, Roy?" the Sheriff asked, having turned toward Roy again.

"I saw him!" Roy said, nodding. His greasy grey hair fell down into his eyes and he didn't brush it away. "I saw him, on my way here earlier, running around like a chicken that just lost its head. He was stopping everyone he came across, asking them if they saw it. His ear!"

"You don't say," the Sheriff whistled.

Roy nodded. "He even stopped me! But it sounded like gibberish what he was asking me. I didn't make much of it on account of I thought he was just talking nonsense like they do in the city. But it makes sense now! He was in hysterics, I tell you. The poor kid." Roy lowered his head then, as if in mourning.

"Well," the Sheriff said, easing back into his chair. "Mystery solved." And he extended his arm, offering the ear back to me.

"But —"

"You'd better hurry," Roy interrupted me. "That poor boy's probably out of his mind with worry."

I took the ear from the Sheriff and bundled it up again. The Sheriff leaned his rocker back and it creaked and moaned. As I walked down the steps of the Sheriff's Department the spittoon thumped with the tobacco spat out from the Sheriff's mouth.

I went to Mrs. Babbitt's store, which was two doors down from the Sheriff's Department, thinking maybe her son would be there. I didn't know him, I didn't know

where he could be found. She told me that he was supposed to be helping her with the store this summer, but wasn't feeling well today and so I'd probably find him back at the house. And then she tried to sell me a sandwich because she thought I looked hungry, but I told her that I was fine and asked for her address.

The Babbitts lived in a white house not far from Babbitt's Department Store. A clean white house with a well-manicured green lawn that looked like it might belong to a pastor but it just belonged to Mrs. Babbitt who owned Babbitt's Department store.

As I got nearer the house, I heard a clamour from within — as of many things being shoved and thrown about, among them some musical instruments that wailed as they were manhandled.

I knocked on the door and the ruckus ceased. The sound of a chair's legs protesting against a hardwood floor and then the unbolting of the lock. A young man opened the door narrowly, a young man with wet, red eyes and shaggy and dull long brown hair.

"Yes?" he uttered in a guttural voice, as if he'd spent the whole day wailing.

"Tommy Babbitt?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Did you lose your ear today?" I felt so foolish.

His eyes shot open wide, he blinked and the tears that had been swilling around in them vanished. His hand fell away from the door and it flung open wide. He stood there before me, his hands at his sides, as if he'd forgotten his body. "Yes," he whispered. And then, "Yes!" he exclaimed stepping up close to me.

I offered him the white parcel. He took it from me greedily — which I suppose he ought to have — and tore away the tissue. He was left with the beige-pink ear that still looked alive in his palm and he looked up at me with twinkling eyes. He ran away from the door into another room in the house. And before I thought about leaving he was back, his hair tucked away behind his two ears.

"It ran away from me, the daft thing," he said with a trembling laugh, as of one making light after being reunited with a loved one long thought to be dead.

"Your ear? It ran away from you?" I asked, slightly puzzled.

He laughed nervously and shrugged his shoulders. "I've been practicing quite a bit lately. I play the french horn, among other things, and I have a very important recital next month — I've been preparing for it. I guess my ear just got tired of all the noise." He laughed nervously and shrugged his shoulders.

I didn't know what to say.

"Thank you so much," he took my hand in both of his and shook it enthusiastically. "Where did you find it?" he asked.

“In the field with the old church, the old church that’s falling apart. You know the field?”

“Of course! I was there earlier, throwing stones, trying to clear my head for a bit, and then I took a nap and that’s when it must have gotten away from me!” He was clutching his forehead, as if furious with himself for not thinking to search the field.

“Well,” I went on, “I was there just now, and I came across, I’m guessing, your pile of pebbles and I started throwing them at the church — just because, I guess. There was no one around.” I paused and looked at him. He was leaning toward me slightly, deeply interested in my story — which I suppose he ought to have been, it was, after all, about *his* ear. “It was under that pile of pebbles. I took it to the Sheriff and Roy Palmer told me that it might be yours, and so I came here.”

“The poor thing,” he said and his hand went up to his right ear. “It was hiding from me.”

I laughed nervously and shrugged. “I guess,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “Well, I’ll let you get back to your practicing.”

“Thanks again — thanks so much!” said Tommy Babbitt.

I walked back toward the house. On my way I passed the field. I looked across it and it didn’t anymore seem to be imbuing the day with light. The thunderhead that brewed over the town had grown and it now loomed sinisterly over the field, making the yellowed grass seem dirty and wet, even though it hadn’t begun to rain yet.

I quickened my pace, but was drenched before I got back to the dusty house whose windows wouldn’t open.

On Dating a Married Man  
Christina Maria Kosch

And you're going to get a job because that's what seventeen-year-olds do. It'll be at some mediocre retail store and you'll meet the guy you're supposed to fall in love with. You'll talk Bukowski and poetry and music and everything you love. But you won't fall in love with him, you'll fall in love with your boss instead. And I know what you're thinking, *he's probably so old*. You will be right, but that will not stop you. You're going fall in love with his immaturity and his demeanor and the way he speaks to you like you're as mature as any adult he knows, but you're *not*. Remember that.

You're going to learn that he has been married to his high school sweetheart for six years. You'll learn that the marriage isn't going well, but you'll already know by the kiss he gave you in the stockroom shortly after you started there.

You will sacrifice everything. You will sacrifice softball, school, and your friends. You won't go to prom because there is no way you can casually walk into the Radisson's ballroom with a thirty-two-year-old hanging on your arm and you'll feel too guilty taking anyone else. You will be sucked in. You won't be able to play softball because one time during a game he will sit next to your history teacher and you will panic on the field and wonder if they are talking about you. You will find out later that they talked about their school days instead because weirdly enough they both went to college together. No, your history teacher will not ask who he is there supporting.

He will tell you that he will leave his wife, but *he will not*.

Your grades will drop too. Mom and Dad don't question it because they know the divorce put you in a really bad place and they are taking the blame. You have spent so much time at work and they worry you are taking on too many shifts, but they don't question if you are actually there and you wouldn't tell them the truth anyway. When your *boss* gets promoted, you will be crushed and he will be upset, but not devastated because this new store is much closer to his home. He knows you are crazy enough about him to keep coming anyway. Luckily, Mom and Dad will scrounge up enough money to buy you a used car to smooth over their bitter divorce. You'll have the freedom to go wherever, but be careful because you'll end up at his store all the time, off the clock, and still letting your grades fall lower and lower. Because right now, this will be the most important thing in your life. You will think that you have found someone that loves you more than anyone before. You'll think he loves you more than Mom and Dad combined.

And you will be thinking about him instead of thinking about your AP chemistry class, or your titration lab, or college. And before you know it, he will take over your life. You will become so intertwined with him that you find connections to him in everything. You'll see a substitute teacher that looks like him at lunch, you'll pass a car that looks like his and snap your neck trying to see if it was him. But this kind of relationship will be new to you. You'll think you're better than other girls because your boyfriend is established and can buy you things and knows so much more about life than other guys your age.

He will tell you that he will leave his wife, but *he will not*.

Two months will pass and somehow you will have still kept this a secret. This will be your very own Pandora's Box. If you exposed this to the world, the world would never forgive you because remember, you're dating a *married* man. So you take your little box everywhere you go and keep it with you like a close friend. It is tempting because you want the world to know how in love you are with this *man*, but you need to remember that you are young. I know you don't think age matters, but it does.

But one day, you will be brave enough to go to his house. You will get into your car and drive to his hometown. You'll park your car in front of some rundown Chinese restaurant and he will pick you up to take you the rest of the way there. You will pass through the gate to his community and you will wonder how he can afford a home like this and then you will start to wonder what his wife does, but you'll have to stop yourself before getting too deep. When you get to his home, you will hurry inside because the neighbors will talk if you're spotted and you have both decided that one day he will be the one to tell his wife that he's leaving.

You will find a deep comfort in his home, but you won't be able to place it. It'll seem like the family isn't falling apart and this is something you have never felt before. When it comes time, you will pretend like you aren't a virgin because you don't want to freak him out, but you will lose your virginity on their worn leather sofa because going into their bedroom would make everything too real. This moment will be nothing like you dreamed of because it hurts more than any *Teen Vogue* article said it would and besides, this isn't his first rodeo. When he sees the blood he will know it's yours. On the outside he will laugh it off to keep you calm, but you'll know on the inside that he *is* freaking out.

He will be playing with your hair when you catch a glimpse of his wedding picture on the wall that you hadn't noticed before. You'll now be able to put a face to his wife. She will no longer be "the wife", she will be a real person with a soul and family and a *husband*. And this is when you will really realize that you are the mistress. You are ruining this marriage. Then you will feel so dirty that you'll tug on your shorts and you'll put your bralette back on and you'll question everything you've been doing so far. This should be enough to keep you away, but it won't.

He will tell you that he is leaving his wife for you, but *he will not*.

You will grow extremely distant from your friends. You will look into colleges and as much as you will tell yourself not to pick a college near him you do. And everyone will question why you chose to go there and you will lie to them because no one can know...still.

And one night he will call you at 4:32am because he suddenly can't take the guilt anymore and you'll hear the phone click and you'll be stuck wondering why he has chosen this moment to ruin his own life. You will lie there in disbelief until you hear your phone buzz again and you won't even let it ring twice. You'll start by yelling, but then you'll hear his raspy crying voice that you've only heard once before when his mom died. He won't be

able to speak and you'll demand to know what happened. He will finally tumble over his words and say, "My wife is pregnant."

He did *not* leave his wife.

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You will be twenty-two and graduating college and happy that you don't have to take care of a child that isn't even your own.

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You will be fifty-four and you will be sitting around a table with your closest friends laughing at the silly mistakes you made as a teenager. You will google his name for fun and come across his obituary instead.

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You will be seventy-nine and you will come across a woman in the supermarket that has his strawberry colored hair and chestnut eyes with grown kids of her own and you will question if that is his daughter, but your old hands will tremble instead and you'll walk toward the dairy section.

Lois and Sarah  
Gregory Jeffers

It was going to be one hell of a long trip back, that's all I had to say. If only I could have flown home. I'd always wanted to fly.

It was the stuman's fault. That's our name for homo sapiens. Stuman. Short for stupid human.

Me? I'm Lois, a young termite, and I was just doing my job. Hank, down at chamber 17 – that's where I work – Hank gets this pheromone message from HQ that the colony is low on water. Sends my work column to the surface. We're to invade the water reservoir of the espresso maker on the kitchen counter, and bring back all we can carry. Sounded easy enough. Except that Hal, Sarah and I are the three schnooks – in the front of the column, of course - who happen to be climbing down the water reservoir wall when stuman decides to remove it and carry it over to the sink for cleaning.

Whoosh. Just like that, the three of us are swirling in an eddy at the edge of the sink strainer. Thank god Sarah and I were able to glom onto some garbage. Not so lucky, Hal. He's down the drain. Oh well, another male who's never going to get to be king. But then, most of them don't.

The king and queen in a termite colony mate for life. The queen can live for about forty-five years. Sounds good, right? Well, if you're the king, get over it. Yeah, you get to mate for life, swell, except that it's *your* life, not hers. And that might be a year, tops.

Still, it could be worse. You could be an ant. The ant king only gets to mate once. Must be some pretty high testosterone levels in those anthills. All these ex-kings with nothing to do but whack off. Although, when you think about it, that's probably true of most kings.

And you really don't want to be a male bee. Dig it: the drone that is "lucky" enough to mate the queen loses his member. Painful death, I suppose. And don't even get me started on spiders or praying mantises. Ew.

Which is just one reason I am happy to have been born of the female persuasion. The other cool thing is, as a female there's about one in a thousand chance I might get promoted to the Winged Caste. Man, would I love to fly. And if that happens, there are really good odds that there'll be some sex involved on swarm night. *Then* there is about one in a million chance of becoming queen of my very own nest.

Not that the queen thing gets my juices going that much. I mean it's a lot of work laying twenty thousand eggs a day.

But anyway, there goes Hal down the drain and Sarah and I are left to try to get out of the sink.

"Sarah, you okay?"

"Yeah. Shit. I hate swimmin'," Sarah says. "What is this crap, cabbage?"

"Come on. Get on your feet, we have to get out of here."

"Get out of here? This here is a stainless steel sink, Lois. You ever try to get out of a stainless steel sink? 'Course not, cause you're just a kid. You should be tending to the nursery, or the queen, or cleanin' the chambers, not foragin'."

Sarah can get pretty worked up when she's wet. She likes me though. I know she doesn't mean to be mean. She's older and stuck firmly in the Working Caste, and well, you know how older working gals can be.

But she's a fighter and I know she'll get us out of this mess. She would have been Soldier Caste if her jaws had been just a tiny bit bigger. That's why she's top termite in our column. She likes to remind the rest of us. "That's why I's in front," she often says, "Case there's trouble."

But I think she's a big softy who has accepted her fate in life and she just keeps putting two feet in front of the others.

I lock mandibles with her to pull her out of the strainer, and give a tug. She doesn't look that good draped in slaw, but I don't want to make a scene, so I simply say, "There," and brush some of the garbage off her head.

Sarah leads the way across to the sink wall she reckons is the driest. Methodically, she picks her way around the water drops, stopping occasionally to make sure I'm okay or simply to curse. Most of the way up, I pray the stuman does not return. Probably working on his coffee jag or chomping on something with very little fiber.

It takes us most of the morning, but we finally get out of the sink.

"Now we just gotta hope the jerk doesn't return with a sponge," Sarah says. She coughs a little. Then a couple of good hacks.

I don't mention she would be in better shape if she would lay off the charred wood fibers for a couple of weeks. She's not in a very good mood to begin with, so I keep my trap shut about that and instead ask in my small voice, "A sponge?"

"Yeah, they get this notion to wipe down the counter tops every fifteen minutes or so. Obsessive-compulsive species. Don't get me started. You ever seen how they behave in a group? Absolutely no swarm intelligence." She walks off across the counter, muttering, and I follow.

I hate counter tops. Not only because of this new sponge thing, but also ants. Ants! Eek! (Lions and tigers and bears.) God save us.

It's times like these that really make me aspire to the Winged Caste. Sitting back in the mound listening to The Steve Miller Band or Spooky Tooth. Getting high on a little bamboo. Then, on the big night, sprouting wings and spinning up into the sky. Looking over the far horizon into universes I can only imagine.

But no, Sarah and I are out here risking our skinny little abdomens to get water for the rest of them.

Well, *mine* is skinny.

"Are you day-dreamin' again? Get your butt in gear."

"No," I say. I don't want to remind her again that anatomically we don't actually have butts. "I'm just keeping an eye peeled for ants."

"Don't really need to keep your eyes peeled for those big black bastards. Can see 'em four feet away. Come on, I want to make it to the cover of the salt and pepper shakers by two."

Sarah can be such a taskmaster. I remember one time when I was first assigned to her column. We were working the stump of a mango tree and a couple of the guys needed to take an excrement break, so they disappeared behind a leaf, you know, for just a couple of seconds. Well, Sarah got all over their shit so fast. I felt embarrassed for them.

We arrive at the salt and pepper shakers just as the digital clock on the microwave clicks to one-fifty-eight.

“Good work, Rookie.” She lets her antenna brush against my forehead. I am tuckered out, but proud. “Let’s rest here for a minute,” she says.

“Where’s our next cover, Chief?” That always makes her feel pretty good when I call her that. When I call her Chief. “The sugar bowl?”

“You gone crazy, Girl?” She looks at me like I *am* crazy, her eyes split wide like a frigging grasshopper. “Sugar bowl bound to be hiding some mother-fucking ants.”

“Oh,” I say, twitching one antenna.

“No. We’re headed for the toaster.”

We make it to the toaster a little before four.

“I reckon we got time to belay down to the kitchen floor and maybe even make it over to our snug little plywood home below the coffee maker before it gets dark.”

“I sure hope so, Sarah. I don’t see so well in the dark.”

“Course not, bitch. You a termite. Now, let’s go.”

Call me a wuss, but I hate walking downhill. Down walls, down cabinets, down trees. I’m not a gecko for crying out loud. I don’t have those sticky little hairs on the bottom of my feet. Course, they don’t have antennae. And they have like zero chance of growing wings. So, there are tradeoffs.

I fall a couple of times. But no biggie, I have an exoskeleton, right? The third fall, I land on a cabinet knob and sprain my left center leg, but it doesn’t slow me down too much. We still have plenty of daylight when we reach the floor and I am feeling pretty darn optimistic. I mean, as optimistic as a bug can be.

“Shit, watch out, Lois!” Sarah dashes toward the baseboard. I know dash is pretty exaggerated language for describing how termites move, but she did move pretty fast. The loud claps of human shoes on the tile coincide with dark shadows and I look up to see the sole of a size-ten falling out of the sky directly toward me. I shudder and beat it hard for the wall, the shoe missing me by a hair.

We hang tight to the baseboard, waiting for them to leave.

“Hell and damnation,” Sarah says. “It’s cocktail hour. You think stumans act like fools reg’lar, you jus’ wait.”

“I hope we don’t have to stay here much longer,” I say. “It’s going to be dark soon.”

“Hush up and follow me. Stay as close to the wall as you can.”

The detour makes the route longer, but by dusk we reach the open shelf unit. Our home is a mere three feet above. No more than an hour. Hour and a quarter, tops.

“Alright, Little Sister,” Sarah says, “one last climb.” She looks tired. I’ve never seen Sarah tired before and it worries me. I need to be brave.

“Yeah, Sarah, we got this!” I air-five in her direction, thinking of *my* little sisters and how we would take breaks during cleaning chores. We would air-five, then hop around in little circles giggling the way termites do. You know.

But now we start the ascent.

We reach the bottom shelf without incident.

“One more to go, Sarah,” I say, mustering the last of my hopefulness. “Hang on.”

“Sarah be doin’ fine. You jus’ save your breath.”

She *isn’t* doing fine. I can hear her huffing and puffing like a rutting aardvark.

But she makes it. We are on the top shelf—our shelf—just below counter height. Nearly dark, and the stumans have left for the dining room. A small ceiling light is set on dim, and the bowls and cups on the shelf cast long shadows across the plywood.

Another ten minutes and we will be home.

Then, appearing between us from around a gravy boat, the biggest, blackest ant I have ever laid eyes on. He is up on his hind legs and about to pounce. This sucker is about eight times my size.

“Eek! An ant!” I can’t help it. I swear that’s what I say.

And then he does. He pounces and his mandibles close around my thorax like a vice. Some of my breakfast squirts up into my mouth. Cedar. Or mahogany. Who can be discerning in a crisis?

“Bringin’ home the bacon,” he sings in his sick basso profundo ant voice.

I smell my own bile, now. And yes, I know we all think we can’t smell our own, but that’s nonsense.

“Bringin’ home the bacon,” he repeats like it’s some kind of freaking nursery rhyme or something. He lifts me high in the air and starts to carry me off. “Bringin’ home the bacon.”

“Like hell you are, mother-fucker.” It’s Sarah and she is all over this guy’s neck like a noose. Next thing I know she’s got her mandibles on one of his eyeballs and *bloomp* it pops out of his head like a skink’s egg and rolls across the shelf, lodging under a stack of Blue Willow saucers.

The ant goes completely hen-shit, dropping me and turning his attention to Sarah. She’s tough, but in less than a second she is done-in, her thorax separated from her abdomen by the ant’s terrific jaws.

The ant stumbles off blindly, clutching his head, reaches the edge of the shelf and teeters. In a moment of terrified desperation, I rush toward him and give him the final nudge. He plummets to his death.

I pull myself over to Sarah’s head and thorax, trying to pay attention to her last gasping words, but her abdomen and rear legs are thrashing in the distance and it is really distracting.

“Lois. Keep the faith, Little Sis. You will fly, someday. You will.”

“Oh Sarah, I love you so much. I know you don’t think your life amounted to much. But so many of us look up to you.”

“Whatchou talking about?” She was really sputtering now. “I never said nothing about my life not amountin’ to much.”

“Oh,” I say weakly. “That’s not what I meant.” I shrug.

She regurgitates a little something, then chokes for a second, and that’s it.

Dead as a doornail. Her abdomen thrashes for a couple seconds longer, then it too, gives up the ghost. Or half of it.

I am sad beyond any despondency I have ever known. My best friend has died saving me. It is a pain too big for my body to contain. I lie here for what seems like days, unable to move. I know it has only been hours, however, and now the stumans have returned, turning up the lights. The aching in the back of my thorax is growing in intensity, and I wonder if the bastardly ant has pierced my armor. I gaze longingly at the corner of the shelf where the opening of my home tunnel beckons. I realize that I will never make it

home. I will never see my sisters again. And I will never be Winged Caste. Just a stupid girl's dream.

Then the top of our nest explodes in pink and white and I fear the worst. Have the stumans discovered us and hired the dastardly Orkin guy to destroy our entire colony with some new and yet more painful conflagration?

But in an instant, I realize that the explosion is the eruption of five thousand of my sisters blasting through the tunnel. There is the flapping of twenty thousand wings overhead soaring past me, creating a breeze that cools my burning back. I stare in wonder as the swarm rushes toward the light in a frenzied ballet. I recognize many of the faces of my sisters and the overwhelming pheromone scent screams of celebration and new life.

I pull myself up onto my feet and my back is rupturing in such pain that I am sure my insides are about to burst through my exoskeleton.

And now they do. Four beautiful silken wings burst forth and they flutter of their own accord and then flap furiously, carrying me off the plywood, slowly at first, then faster and faster, and I gain control over this thing, this rapturous flight, this rite of initiation.

And I fly straight up into the teeming mass of my swarm, doing barrel rolls all the way up. At the top of my lungs, I shout out a prolonged proclamation.

"Parrrrteeeee!"

"Any boys up here?"

Never Again  
Thomas Elson

"John, come in and eat. You'll be late for your meeting," said his wife.

"Ja, Ja. I know," said John who continued to stand on the porch and ponder his options. "I'm waiting for Lawrence."

John braced as if expecting the Great Plains wind to sweep down and knock him over. As if traveling over a familiar road, the wind drove over the land and crudely clawed at houses, then punched over fields uprooting trees, destroying crops. His great grandfathers stood on similar land in a similar country after the Seven Years War ended and waited for their sons.

"Never again," he heard them say to themselves.

He had sat next his grandfather in wagons, carriages, Model T's, Diamond T's, Studebakers, and Desotos. These same men had sat beside their grandfathers for hundreds of years before him. They had fought against depressions, droughts, burnt crops, sun-parched cattle, bank failures, and land repossessions, but this one charged at John in full armor.

John's left eye squinted against the smoke from the Camel cigarette that dangled from his mouth. His jaw as firm and determined as his stance. The skin on his hands echoed the color of the skin on his head. Earlier he had honed his straightedge against the leather and linen strop hanging by the sink, shaved with his right hand, then slapped some sparingly applied Palmolive after-shave against his cheeks. He polished his wingtips with Shinola, then washed his hands with Ivory soap.

He turned his head when the sun's reflection against the plow in the field hit his eyes. To the east, the advancing winds caused his amber wheat to wave toward, and then tilt against, the irregular gusts. The drought had broken weeks earlier in this part of the state, and the rains filled the creek that ran through his property. The Ninescah River flowed steadily for the first time in years.

He hesitated for a moment, considered waiting outside, thought better of it, turned, opened the screen door, walked through the living room past a crucifix at the hall entry, a picture of the Blessed Virgin, several lifeless photos of parents and grandparents, First Communion pictures of his daughters, and the senior class picture of his only son. And on a far wall, under the picture of the Last Supper hung his validation from the President.

His muscular hands clasped behind his back, he held himself erect with just the hint of a pooch under his belt - a source of great pride to a man who had been hungry most of his life.

His poverty appeared to be behind him. His bank, lumberyard, grocery store, gas stations, and contacts through his ancillary businesses provided him with the cushion necessary to eat roast beef twice a week with boiled peas, mashed potatoes, gravy, a mound of bread with soft homemade butter on the recessed butter dish with a saber-shaped butter knife next to it.

He sat at the dining table with a ten-inch carving knife near his left hand, sharpened and ready to carve more helpings of beef. An out-of-place dainty coffee cup and matching saucer rested within easy reach. After John carved the roast beef, he used the same knife to gently lift the thick cream from the top of the glass milk bottle and ladle it into his coffee.

John almost dropped his carving knife when he heard a noise, possibly his son's brown and white DeSoto. He pushed himself from the table and moved toward the living room. He hurried to the screen door, looked through, saw no one, looked again and watched waves of familiar faces surged toward him - grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, older cousins - he could call out the names of each one. Young cousins, younger grandchildren, great grandparents. Some of them he had never seen before, most of them lived before photography was invented, but he knew them. Their young faces and bodies, no longer stooped and grey, their skin unscarred and unscathed, eyes clear and hopeful with most of their life ahead of them. He squinted to filter the smoke from his Camel cigarette, then shook his head. His posture and head tilt were the same as his grandfather. His face younger, but the same face. John had lived this story many times and knew something in his blood was interlaced and repeating.

The events leading to his meeting, had begun almost two hundred years earlier, when his ancestors left the Rhineland in 1763, migrated to the Ukraine, and in the 1873, came to America. John lived on the land his great-grandfather homesteaded.

He saw his grandfather's ancient horse-drawn plow resting on a rise gleaming from the backlight of the rose-tinted setting sun. He saw what used to be a land of flat plains and bare unsettled fields with short grass and wildflowers. But he saw even further.

He saw sons forcibly removed from their homes by Prussian recruitment officials and made to serve in the Prussian army during the Seven Years War. Most of them died, not in battle, but from malnutrition. "Wie Hunde," repeated an ancient fatigued voice, "Wie Hunde." English rolled in John's mind, "Like dogs."

"Never again," he repeated.

He saw his great, great grandfathers standing in the church square in the Rhineland listening as Catherine the Great's manifesto was read, offering them land ownership and freedom from military service.

They abandoned their villages with the names of Herzog, Obermunjou, Katharinestadt, Marienthal, Antonino, and Schoenchen. They left their churches with cupolas, domes, and tri-crosses; their cemeteries and aboveground caskets with iron tri-crosses; their schools taught not from the Bible, but from books on mathematics, reading, and history.

They left the Rhineland, and they settled in the Ukraine on the south Volga River, a land of flat plains and bare unsettled fields with short grass, wildflowers, and settlements of Tartars and Cossacks. Within days, they were attacked by Kazahb-Kirghiz tribesmen. Over fifteen hundred were captured, only half successfully ransomed, the rest killed or enslaved. The survivors established villages along the Volga River with the names of Herzog, Obermunjou, Katharinestadt, Marienthal, Antonino, and Schoenchen.

They built churches with cupolas, domes, and tri-crosses, laid out cemeteries and laid their dead to rest in aboveground caskets with iron tri-crosses attached. Their schools taught not from the Bible, but from books on mathematics, reading, and history.

Less than one hundred years later, his grandfather stood and listened as an emissary of Tsar Alexander II reinstated taxes and ended their exemption from the military. The Volga-Germans were no longer a special people.

"Never again."

Shortly thereafter, American railroad agents distributed handbills touting the glories of the Homestead Act. Families could own one-hundred and sixty acres of land by doing what they had done for centuries. Less than ten years after Lincoln's assassination, the first Volga-Germans arrived in America. They carried the names of their small towns - Herzog, Munjor, Katharine, Marienthal, Antonino, and Schoenchen - and established those towns along the Ninescah River. They brought their religion and churches with cupolas, domes, and tri-crosses; their cemeteries with aboveground caskets with iron tri-crosses; their education taught not from the Bible, but from books on mathematics, reading, and history; and called their five-year-old students "kindergartners."

They carried the legendary Turkey Red wheat, from the Ukraine, down the Volga, navigated the Black Sea, traveled through the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean, past the Strait of Gibraltar, over the Atlantic, to America, then over the Appalachians, down the Ohio River, crossed the Mississippi, forded the Missouri, crossed the Great American Desert. Their quest stopped at a sutter village of forty souls in Ninescah County.

When they entered America, they were Germans who had never been to Germany, then lived in the isolated Southern Volga region of the Ukraine for a hundred years.

Their daily lives in America mirrored their lives in other countries. In almost two hundred years nothing had changed - not clothes, not food, not customs, nor religion, not the names of their towns, and certainly not their temperament.

They lived midway between the situs of the Spanish Flu and the military installation of Ft. Riley. The Great War of 1914 brought deaths from the flu pandemic as mothers and fathers were buried in hurriedly constructed coffins. Each family that walked away from the gravesite was forced to rebuild without the presence of a mother, father, or child.

Years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, came Pearl Harbor, FDR's speech the next day, war declared, then Germany declared war on America, and America reciprocated. Men volunteered. More men were drafted.

Each month brought increased demands for more troops, which John translated as the sons of men he had known all his life - men he had sat next to in school and served Mass with on Sundays.

Eighteen months later, John and two other men, the county commissioners in Ninescah County, were asked to serve on the local draft board. Days later, certificates of appointment from the Selective Service arrived signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was validation that they finally belonged. John placed the certificate in the hallway beneath the crucifix near the dining room.

"Look, come here," John said to his family, in his rich liquid accent. He pointed to his name, then the President's, "Now, we are Americans. President Roosevelt himself signed it." His children mirrored his excitement. His wife did not.

Later, after the children had left, his wife said, "Does this mean you'll send my son to war, John?" Then she made the timeless sound of a displeased wife and mother, and walked away - the universal signal that discussion had concluded.

The meeting should have started ten minutes ago, and John was late. The two other men had begun the set-up. Thomas Brungardt, still grieving his son's death, was the tallest of the three men, his hair still thick and dark brown, asked, as he unfolded the legs of the meeting table, "Where is John? He's never late. Did he talk to you?" Thomas, the youngest

member of the draft board, lost his son during the Battle of Guadalcanal. "Never again," Thomas had said to no one but himself.

"Not me. If he told anyone, it would be you," said Karl Gottschalk, his accent thicker and his carriage more old country than the others. He was the oldest of the three men and walked with the same forward lunge as his grandfather - as if he were charging toward everything in front of him. Karl had watched as his son descended hobbled and shriveled from a Santa Fe railroad passenger car in 1942, and spent his days staring at the trees on his father's backyard.

John walked in, set a half-pint of Canadian Club in the middle of the table, nodded. Thomas took a nip, held the bottle up as if in salute, and handed it to Karl who repeated their ritual. When the bottle returned to John, he nipped at it, placed it on the floor, apologized for being late. "I was waiting for Lawrence." They knew.

John sat and waited. They all knew what their ancestors would have done.

The names had been drawn by lottery, but it was the board's custom to vote on each number selected. John waited for the others to vote. Thomas read Lawrence's, looked at John, and said, "Nay." Karl Gottschalk shrugged, said, "Aye."

It was John's turn, and he sat silent. "John, you can abstain. It is your boy," said Thomas.

John knew what his vote would be. He felt the reverberation of echoes from the Rhineland, from the Volga. Each a repeat from centuries earlier. Mothers looked at fathers and asked, "Are you going to allow them to kill my son? You'll end your life with no sons."

In time, his progeny would spread from Ninnescah County to California, then sweep across the country again to South Carolina. They would become teachers, principals, nurses, printers. A few would continue to farm, others became cogs and captains of industry, grunts and Captains in the Marine Corps. They would serve honorably and be decorated. Some would be wounded, a few severely, some would not survive. Many would live out their lives within ten miles of the original homesteads, more than a few would return in their old age, and at least one would complain that foreigners were taking over his county. None would see and feel what John did on that day.

John cast his vote, and, without saying another word, left the room, walked home.

As he approached his house, he saw the brown and white DeSoto in the driveway. Lawrence walked toward him. Father and son looked at each other. Lawrence knew. He stood, not like a little boy, but as an adult. "Poppa," he said and rushed forward.

John embraced his son - felt himself trembling, grew embarrassed by his tears, then released himself without releasing his son.

"Never again," John said to no one but himself.

There Once Was a Man from Nantucket...  
Bob Iozzia

There once was a man from Nantucket...who moved to Arizona because he developed a seafood allergy and could no longer stand the way everyone sounded like either the Gorton's Fisherman or upper-crusters from 1930s-era films.

Early in his attempt to assimilate in Arizona, he alienated many locals who hated how he smelled like fish and spoke like an upper-cruiser from 1930s-era films. Now that was an ironic kettle/black boomerang, if ever there was one.

Not wishing to risk an emotional meltdown by dealing with the problem by himself, he swallowed his pride, and for once consulted his imaginary wife, whose name changed from fantasy to fantasy. Sometimes, she was the bespectacled pharmacist Sheila with neck tattoos and spikey black hair with purple tips. Sometimes, she was the spikey purple-haired-black-tipped perpetually-randy Janeece, a gynecologist's assistant who occasionally liked to bring her work home.

The morning of this day, she was former nun and current community college adjunct professor of *English for Illegals* Mary Elizabeth Margaret Catherine, a bit dazed and confused for having just been in a minor traffic accident. He explained his concerns to her but became agitated when she couldn't focus due to the trauma of her fender-bender (and being make-believe, to boot).

Seeing no other recourse that would suit his selfish needs, in the afternoon he filed for a no-fault divorce in the imaginary court of Judge Catherine Margaret Elizabeth Mary Rubenstein, the sister of his chosen ex-wife. Because they were both pretend, the sisters had not previously met. "Lucky for me," he mumbled over his breath, "but the judge's Morse code-type eye blinking and dolphin voice are off-putting. I hope I can adequately represent myself under such hardship."

And then remembering that all was fantasy, the man fast fluttered his mind's eye to his honeymoon with new pretend wife Shaniqua, a thrice-widowed poison enthusiast from the Little Dublin section of Tel Aviv. Ironically, her voice was dolphin-like, except a bit deeper, which was not so off-putting. In fact, with its slight Israeli twang and Irish brogue, the voice had a soothing lilt.

"I've made dinner reservations at the Poison Mushroom Café," she dolphin-clicked/squeaked- brogue/twanged. "One of us will love the food there."

Once there and seated, she commented on how uncrowded it was. "Usually, people are dying to get in here. Oh, well, the fewer witnesses, the better, I suppose."

She ordered for both, "He'll have the Amanita Widowmaker Tacos, and I'll just have champagne and an alibi," she said to the imaginary waitperson.

'I can't even fantasize safely anymore,' the man thought.

"I heard that, of course," his new make-believe bride said. "Now eat your goddamn tacos."

"No way," he said as he ran out the door and scenario.

He packed up his life and moved it back to Nantucket. He still had a seafood allergy and hated how everyone sounded like either the Gorton's Fisherman or upper-crusters from 1930s-era films, but at least it was a familiar and safe hatred.

“I like Nantucket,” said his new fantasy fiancé with black and purple-tipped neck tattoos, Margaret Mary Catherine Elizabeth Skjeggstad. “It seems like a good place to raise a pack of werewolf vampire children whose minds I will have poisoned with hatred for their father.”

Imaginary marriage wasn't all the man cracked it up to be. He fleetingly imagined rescuing someone's happy dog from their yard. “I'll dye its hair black with purple tips, and teach it to sniff out danger. On second thought, it will be just my luck that the dog will have an anti-rescuing from a perfect life agenda and will rip out my throat.”

And so, the man moved his life back to Arizona, where he met a nice friend with benefits— imaginary former oceanographer Iris Bailey, who liked his fish smell, neck tattoos and Morse code-type eye blinking. But even better than all that, she quickly put up with his faint upper-cruster accent because it sounded like dolphin click-squeaks and had a soothing Israeli twang/Irish brogue.

Bitter Rain  
Brandon Stanwyck

Stormy nights are the worst. X has to piss herself to keep warm. It doesn't last, though. The merciless torrents flush away every bit of bladder-producing heat.

None of the pedestrians who encounter X on a daily basis know her name, and they'd rather not learn it. Most don't acknowledge her whatsoever. Like the cigarette-smoking woman—tonight donning an ivory overcoat with matching stilettos, gilded hair drawn into a topknot so tight that it provides a makeshift facelift.

The pasty smoker's cigarette-less hand strangles the faux-wooden handle of a humongous black umbrella whose canopy could shield three women, if called upon, from the relentless downpour. God forbid a rogue droplet dampen this bitch's dainty figure...

Muscle memory compels X to offer a palm, in case the smoker has even a morsel of change to relinquish. (Earlier, a student had given X a dollar, which had enlivened her spirits.) The smoker, of course, doesn't dole out anything. She focuses on the storefronts across the street, as if they're worth looking at, and releases a cloud of cancer from her tar-laced lungs. The dull ticks of her skinny heels against the soggy sidewalk fade as she trudges on toward the posh bar she's meeting her wretched friends at for appletinis and gossip.

X's slab of cardboard, no longer the luxury piece it used to be, squishes beneath her as she adjusts her ratty blanket's coverage.

Despite tonight's harsh tempest, X attempts to sleep...while sitting up. Just as she's nodding off, a brigade of dead leaves flutter nearby. The tough little rust-colored soldiers work, futilely, to evade the unremitting rain. One combatant in particular, catches X's attention.

This one is...distinct. Much greener, livelier. Rectangular, with clear edges. And unique imprints. X picks it up with a grimy mitt and scrutinizes it thoroughly, though she already knows what it is.

A hundred dollar bill.

She cannot remember the last time she held so much power between her fingertips. She grips it tighter, rubs it with her thumbs.

X hears approaching clanks and clacks. Oh shit. Bugeyes. With a stolen shopping cart, full of soda cans. She hastily stuffs the bill inside her jacket and dashes back to the sodden cardboard. She plays it cool, knowing what he'd do if he knew about the money. The din of loose aluminum grows until he halts directly in front of her.

Their eyes lock. Bugeyes knows. Somehow the bastard knows. From inside the wobbly cart, he retrieves a metallic apparatus designed to grab objects from high up, undoubtedly a tool he has pilfered from a dumpster.

Bugeyes' free hand jets out, tacitly demanding that X fork over the bill. She doesn't budge. His dirty palm fills only with rain water. Fed up, he raises the grabber above his head and brings it down hard. Her forearm, lifted in defense, absorbs the blow.

Bugeyes lashes X again and again, knocking her to the flooded pavement. Adamant in refusing to cough up the cash, she bear-crawls away as he clubs her savagely, dead set on her surrender. To his frustration, she remains obstinate. His final, mightiest thwack is to the back of X's head.

She drops face-first into the wet concrete, barely conscious, vulnerable—prey not only to her attacker but the bitter rain as well. Bugeyes crouches down and searches X until he finds what he wants. Without a hint of remorse he snatches the money, chucks the grabber into the cart, and moseys along. Clanking and clacking into the tumultuous night.

X, mostly recalibrated, rises to her hands and knees. In pain all over, and still somewhat shaken, she skulks back to the stupid hunk of cardboard and collapses. Moments from sweet sleep, X can only recall Bugeyes looting the pockets of her pants...

She wiggles her grubby fingers into her jacket and withdraws the hundred.

Bugeyes, the dumb fuck, had taken the single. All that bull for a dollar. For the first time in a long time, X laughs.

Blue Ice  
Justine Manzano

Staring at the waxy figure resting within its polished wooden coffin, I had to wonder why the real bastards in this world always died a bit too late.

Nick's smug voice played in my head, a memory from long ago screaming back to me. "In the end, I always win with her. Always."

I snorted a laugh as I leaned down and kissed his cheek for show. I wished he could hear me when I whispered my next words, but maybe he could. If the whole Priestess of Blevin debacle had any truth to it, he might be floating behind me. I hid my face against his dark curly hair, slicked down and reined in like it never was in life.

"It's hard to win when you're dead, asshole."

"Ana," my sister's hoarse voice, still choking back tears, greeted me. "I'm so glad you could make it today." She approached, and though her nightmare was finally over, she looked more worn than she ever had when she'd been enduring it. Her eyes were sunken into her face, her mouth a tight, thin line. Her dark hair, graying around the edges, was pulled back severely, fastened into a tight bun.

"You know I wouldn't leave you to bury him alone, Becca." The answer may have been testy, but the sentiment was true. There was no other reason I was here. I certainly wasn't here to hear his final words, to listen to his voice again.

"I know," she said, but she glanced away, and I realized she didn't know, couldn't possibly understand the lengths I would go to for her.

My parents had died years ago and Becca was all I had. We were only a little over a year apart. She had been my lifeline in this world, and Nick had already driven enough wedges between us that I sure as hell wasn't going to continue the pattern.

I straightened my dress, an ill-fitting garment for an ill-fitting funeral. "How are you holding up?"

Becca's lips pursed, and tears filled her eyes. "I miss him already."

I struggled not to shake my head, or worse, yell at her, scream that she had been given her life back, and she didn't appreciate it. Instead, I muttered a dispassionate, "I'm sorry."

She dabbed at her eyes with a balled-up tissue and nodded.

"Rebecca!" A voice called to her, and I glanced up to find her father-in-law, Dr. Bill Sawyer. Dr. Bill, as I liked to call him, was a tall man. His dark hair and beard was threaded through with silver, both in need of a trimming. His rosy cheeks peeked through the hair. He wasn't a large man, but he was rounded and soft, and every time I saw him with his wife, I wondered how he could have possibly reared a man like Nick.

Becca rushed to Dr. Bill and sobbed into his chest. He wrapped one arm around her and the other around the waist of his tall, strong-boned wife, Sue.

I didn't follow. I knew they needed this, to be together. I didn't fault Bill and Sue for Nick's actions. Unless there were some serious deep dark secrets in that family, Nick was just born a miserable piece of shit, one that Bill and Sue seemed to feel guilty about every time he stirred up some kind of trouble.

I glanced around the room I would be stuck in for the next hour, pretending to grieve the un-grievable. It was fuller than I had expected, people hovering around to pay

their respects to the man of the hour. A quiet buzz filled the air as people recounted stories among themselves, remembering Nick with more warmth than I'd felt for him in years.

The room was acceptable, with eggshell walls, and row after row of cushioned grey chairs. There was a velvety red curtain draped across the wall behind the coffin, and the centerpiece was ringed by flower arrangements sent by family and friends. Resting on stands to the left of the coffin were two poster-sized collages of photographs. Nick and my sister, Nick and his parents, Nick and his boys club of friends. I wandered closer to it, my eyes drawn to one image in the corner.

It had been a long time ago. I had lost my job, and Nick had bailed me out. All Becca had needed to do was say the word. It was times like those that confused me, times where I forgot who he could be and liked him. We worked together for six months in his office building. He was jovial, encouraging, exactly who Becca had fallen in love with. The picture on the collage was of us sharing a drink at an office function. I could practically taste the warm amber liquid sliding down my throat.

There was a lot that I would give to be drinking that same drink right now, just to deaden the pain of mock solemnity performed for Becca's sake.

A small commotion by the door tapered off, people hushing each other, urgently. I turned toward the room's entryway to discover a woman entering in long blue robes that swept along her ankles. The robes had a hood, and she pushed it back from her face to reveal silver hair and a well-lined face. High Priestess Wallmeyer. I could still remember the first time I heard of her.

I didn't like to think of that oddly cold day in May when the secrets of several government administrations were finally revealed. For years, the United States government had been working on ways to pierce the veil between life and death, and when they finally managed it, they didn't pierce it, they tore a hole in it.

The Priestesses of Blevin, a cadre of women from a small town in England, had been playing with these forces for much longer than we had. Led by High Priestess Wallmeyer, they came forward, promising to mend what the government had broken. Still, once the possibility was revealed, nobody wanted to give up their newfound contact with those they had lost.

Though the Priestesses refused to reach through the veil for just anybody, at any time, they had struck a deal with the two worlds to allow people one final chance to speak with their dearly departed. Unfortunately, their time was sparing and they were in high demand which meant this privilege was only to be given at a price.

A price Dr. Bill had gladly paid to speak to his dear son once again. And he must have paid a high price to land High Priestess Wallmeyer herself.

"Attention, mourners," Priestess Wallmeyer intoned, her rigid posture belying her kind tone. "I will now attempt to awaken the deceased, so you may speak your final words to him. I must find him, pull his soul from the ether and return it to his body. It can only stay for as long as my power can be maintained. To do so, I will need your concentration. I will need to connect with you all, hand in hand. Please surround me. Link yourselves in a circle surrounding your beloved. Once we begin, do not break from the circle. It will destroy our connection with him and send him back before you're ready."

Of course, you couldn't break the circle. If you did, you'd be able to unravel the deception. This was what a wake was, now that the world had changed—a sick marionette

show, orchestrated by a so-called holy woman before people too desperate to perceive the falsity. I took the hand of strangers on either side of me, their hands rough and calloused, and allowed my eyes to drift closed, listening to this charlatan call out to Nick, trying to bring him back.

I couldn't believe she would actually accomplish it. I knew she did something to reanimate the corpses, make them speak, but I'd believe it was Nick when I saw him. *Really* saw him.

Behind my eyes, memories replayed. Memories of all the times Becca called me, crying during arguments, as he screamed in the background, his voice bellowing loudly enough to frighten me, despite my much thicker skin and much further distance. Memories of pouring rubbing alcohol on the cuts on her hands, given to her when Nick had thrown her through their pretty glass coffee table. Memories of calling the police, only to have her drop the charges against him. Memories of that smug look on his face as he told me he would win, he would always win, and I fought not to tear him apart, end his life right then and there, free my sister forever from his grasp.

I was too smart for something like that. An act like that would require more thought and less spontaneity.

The crowd gasped, and I realized my eyes were still sealed shut, lost in the drifted pieces of old worn videos playing along the backs of my eyelids in flickers, a tableau of violent arguments and hospital visits, interspersed with my good memories of Nick, dancing with him at his wedding, playing board games around my living room table with my ex-boyfriend Dan, phone calls begging for gift ideas and eventually, engagement ring options, all of the little intimate moments that forge a familial connection. We weren't blood, thank God, but we were something, and that something would have made it difficult for me to separate the man from the monster until the one day he nearly killed her and she swore she would leave him.

I threatened him. One day, I'd see the life drain from his eyes. He'd given his smug response. He'd always win with Becca. It would always be him before me. And then she had taken him back.

She always took him back.

I opened my eyes. Nick was sitting up in the coffin, green eyes scanning the room, a curl escaping his slicked hair, dangling down the center of his forehead. He looked exhausted, his brow coated in a sweaty sheen, like he'd run from Hell to this place at top speed. It must have been quite a trip.

He scanned the room. "Mom? Dad? Becca?"

"We're here, Nicky," his mother cooed, leaning forward, trying to run to her baby, but her husband and Becca held fast. I wished she would run to him. Then, he'd be gone.

This didn't feel like a parlor trick. Whenever he entered the room, I felt his weight, like he had latched onto me, desperate to drag me down into Hell with him. After all, he'd always said, "You're too good, Ana." Sometimes it was a loving phrase, when I had done something nice for him. Sometimes it was cutting criticism, like when I had refused some wild scheme he had planned, something he intended to pull my sister into.

I felt that weight now, felt closer to fire and brimstone, flames licking at my heels. He'd always brought out the worst in me.

“Nicholas Sawyer,” High Priestess Wallmeyer said. “You have been summoned forth by your family to speak your final words. You may say anything you wish to those who mourn you.”

He nodded, slowly, his eyes darting around. “Right. I’m dead.”

His mother sobbed.

“No, Mom, please don’t cry,” he said, glancing around at the other mourners.

“Um...thank you all for coming?” He flashed a boyish grin.

I rolled my eyes. The Boy Scout charm that had wooed Becca was enough to make me vomit.

“I...uh...can’t say something to all of you, because I know I’m not supposed to be here long, but I did want to thank you all for your roles in my life. And...um...thank you Mom, thank you Dad, for always taking care of me and supporting me through everything. I love you both, always.” Then, his darting eyes settled on my sister, and he grew serious, his mouth taut, his eyes sliding shut for a moment. “Becca, I’m so sorry I wasn’t a good husband to you. I know I made terrible mistakes, and I wish I could go back in time and change all of it. Go back to when we were just kids, meeting at the school library, and reading side by side, with your head on my shoulder. Remember that?”

“Of course I do,” she said, her voice thick with tears. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” His words were sorrowful, his light eyes rounded and darkened by pain, tears pricking at the edges. “Maybe, in another lifetime, I’ll do better by you. Be the man you deserved.” He swallowed hard, like he couldn’t speak through his pain, and Becca sobbed, openly.

I wished I had taken her hand.

Maybe this had been a good thing. Maybe he had seen the error of his ways and admitting them would help Becca to move on. Perhaps I shouldn’t down this process so much. There could be something to closing the wounds you shared with someone you loved.

He shook his head, eyes downcast. “I just wish I could hold you and tell you that. I wish that hadn’t been stolen from us the way it was.”

“Stolen?” The look in Becca’s eyes spoke of her desire to pull his soul into her and keep him there forever. “It wasn’t stolen. You left us. You poisoned yourself with anti-freeze and you left us.”

Nick looked stricken. “What are you talking about?”

My hands flexed. I wanted to pull away, end this now before Becca was sucked into another of his manipulations, one she would chew on for the rest of her life like a wad of cud.

“We shouldn’t discuss this,” Dr. Bill answered. I almost wanted to kiss him on his bulbous, reddened nose.

“Dad,” Nick said, and it had the edge of a sharpened razor blade, that sound that said he was not to be toyed with, as though you always owed him an explanation. “I think I deserve to know how I died.”

“How much do you remember?” Becca asked, eyes wide and innocent. She had no idea what she was doing. “Do you remember what happened that day? Any of it?”

His mother howled.

"We had another argument," he answered, slowly, his eyes pointed skyward as though the memories he was looking for would tumble out of the wood paneling. "You left."

Left and said she was never coming back. Just like the time before. I glanced to her. Makeup deftly covered the bruise I'd seen on her cheekbone. Well-practiced application.

"I called Ana."

I tried to pull my hands free, but the two strangers on either side of me held on tight.

Becca's head swiveled in my direction slowly, a question in her narrow eyes. I glanced away, unable to meet her eyes. "Why would you call Ana?"

"I needed advice, of course. I wanted to know what I should do about you, about how I could get you to listen to me." He had his pleading, kicked puppy look, his eyes round, voice sorrowful, longing. "I called her and asked her to come by so we could talk."

The room grew silent, as everyone began to realize the inconsistencies between what everyone believed and Nick's version of events. Nick always had a 'version of events'.

I still felt the weight of Becca's gaze on me. I examined the scuffed toe of my black boots.

"She ignored your call," Becca muttered. "Of course she did. That's why she didn't mention it. The guilt."

"Or, maybe she was too drunk to remember," Nick said.

My head shot up. "I would never drink with you," I spat.

"But you brought me all those sugary-sweet drinks," Nick said. "You said we'd sit down and talk about it. Blue ice martinis. One after another. I was so upset that you left me, Becca baby. That's the last thing I remember. Blue ice martinis and they were extra sweet. You said it was anti-freeze?" He squinted as though shocked. "I drank anti-freeze? That's crazy. I wouldn't do that."

"Ana..." Becca's voice was shaking. When my eyes met hers, tears reflected the room's light. Like a moth, I couldn't look away from it.

"The police already ruled it a suicide," I said through gritted teeth. "And I can't believe you're looking at me that way because *Nick* said so."

"Becca," Nick said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Don't do this. Don't get angry at her." Becca turned her eyes to him again, but Dr. Bill and Sue continued their murderous glares in my direction.

"Becca, we both know I was never perfect. I can see more clearly now. I know what I've done, how I've messed things up. Of course Ana would want to protect you. I'm sure she didn't want to hurt you. You know how she is. She's been on her own forever. You're all she has." His eyes cut to me, his gaze open and warm, his lips twitching at the corners. "I want you to know that I forgive you, Ana. I forgive you."

The words rang in my ears, blocking out all other sound, rendering me numb. I couldn't feel anything, not the fingers gripping mine, not the harsh stares pinning me in place, not the overwhelming disgust of everyone in the room. I ignored Nick as he turned his attention toward those he held dearest, saying his final farewells. I barely felt it when the hands that held mine dropped them.

The sound of Nick dropping back into his coffin was like a thunderbolt, snapping everything back to life around me. I heard the cries of the gathered. Heard Dr. Bill comforting Sue, who sobbed into his suit lapel. The only person not making a sound was the loudest person there.

Becca's stare screamed at me. How dare you, it said. How dare you take him away from me? As though losing him hadn't been a favor. As though the rest of her life wouldn't be easier, safer, without him there.

"Get out," she finally spoke.

"What?" I heard what she was saying. I understood, but I couldn't accept it. My feigned mishear was one last chance for her to take it back.

She marched up to me, her eyes hard, her fists clenched, a posture of dominance she had never imagined around the one person who needed to see it the most. "You get the hell out of here before somebody in this room decides revenge is the answer."

I was stunned. I shouldn't have been. All roads had led here. "You believe him."

"Why would he lie?" Becca hissed. "He's dead."

Dr. Bill moved in closer to Becca, speaking to me over her shoulder. "You can trust, this will be investigated."

"Investigate all you want." I forced the words through my throat, but it was tight and the words were strained. I took one last glance at the people in the room. Even the High Priestess looked alarmed.

Turning on my heel, I kept my head held high until I was out of the funeral home and a block away. It wasn't until I was at a nearby bar, ordering a drink that I allowed myself to sag. Propping myself against the rotted wood counter, I allowed my brain to process all of it. I'd been running on auto-pilot for quite a while. No thought, just action. Ever since my parents died, all I'd been, all I wanted to be, was Becca's protector.

I snatched my drink off the bar almost the moment the bartender set it down, never bothering to register the man or his face. All I could see as I gulped the fruity drink down my throat was Nick's smug grin.

It hadn't mattered. Nothing I had done mattered. It didn't matter if I was guilty or innocent. In the end, Nick won. In the end, Nick always won.

I lowered my glass onto the bar. Not a drop of the blue ice martini remained.

"Damn, that was fast," the bartender smiled. "How'd you like it?"

Before I left, I ripped a twenty-dollar bill from my pocket and slammed it down onto the bar.

"I've made better."

Children Who Run After Doves  
Eva Ferry

There are two kinds of children. Children who rush after doves in a piazza and will not give up until they see the flock disband in the wind. And children who don't.

James, my brother, was the former. He was otherwise a nice, if unremarkable, boy. He drank his milk and ate his greens with a deep expression of concentration on his face, as if doing what was right was very important to him. Every morning he spiked his hair in front of the mirror and every lock stayed in its place until he went to bed at night. Every time my father drove us to the piazza, as soon as he caught a glimpse of the doves from the car, he transformed. He waltzed in his loafers, arms waving, and wouldn't stop until he sent them all back to the sky.

What he really wanted was to hold a dove in his hands, cuddle it against his chest. He once did so at a farm we visited with school, bumbling brown fingers palpating the dove's neck of the purest white. The doves never understood him, or his intentions. It tended to happen with James.

I ran after doves once, many years later, in the days where I had resigned myself to not having James in my life anymore. The sight of a deserted piazza at sunset brought him back to me. I ran on my heels until I saw the rotten beasts disperse in the breeze. At the top of my voice, I bid them not to come back.

I walked. After a minute, I looked back to find the doves perched on the stones.

I walked on. Because I will never be the type of child who runs after doves.

Personal Hygiene  
Shelby Leet

There is no event that can make you question your life choices quite like having your ass stuck to the roof of your apartment. Harlan's horoscope this morning made it seem like it was going to be a pretty decent day: Gemini—Stay the fuck off my lawn. Well, he had done exactly that, yet here he was by late afternoon, blood pooling slowly to his face and a suspiciously lightbulb-shaped burn on his hip punctuating his thoughts with intermittent stings of pain.

It started the way most catastrophes start—with an off-brand household cleaner. Usually Harlan had a natural disinclination toward any nondescript fluid in a spray bottle, but the door-to-door salesman had been more than just insistent. This bloke had banged his fist on the door until he had warped and dented the particleboard that served as Harlan's only barrier between the hamster-cage smells of communal filth and the apartment hallway.

Harlan had wrenched the door open and been greeted with a face full of spray that sparkled on his skin, itched his eyes and smelled like a lemon's taint. The salesman said a lot of things in a language he couldn't distinguish (if it was, in fact, a language) but the one word Harlan understood was clean. He rubbed at his tortured eyes like a horsefly and tried to fan his rage for the salesman, but he couldn't deny that the cleaner must be working - he felt an urge to delete his search history coming over him.

Harlan tried, as the salesman let himself in, to tell him that he was not interested. The salesman rambled on in tongues, spritzing the television, the framed pictures of other peoples' cats, the cushions of every chair, and almost every single toaster in the bathroom—all the while muttering over Harlan's protests in a language that was not unlike Cthulhu in a chatroom, littered with clean...clean...clean... And the salesman could not be reasoned with. Harlan tried being calm, he tried being assertive, he tried pantomiming; nothing. It wasn't until he was desperately chewing on tinfoil while wearing a dishcloth that was streaked with the grease of fried chicken that he thought to try the obvious. He used a translator app on his phone to detect the language, but after it captured the first few syllables, his phone began to melt. A common glitch with the old rotary models.

He couldn't get the salesman out until the damned spray bottle was completely emptied, at which point he stood in the middle of the living room and nodded satisfactorily. He clapped a hand on Harlan's shoulder and winked at him, then handed him the empty bottle and left.

So, this is what it is to be hygienic, he thought to himself as he drifted aimlessly above his lemony kitchen table. There was a layer of skin that was left behind on his ceiling lightbulb - the thickening smell of cooked bacon now served as a warning that he was getting too close again. He closed his eyes and stretched his arms out a bit, resigning himself to the helplessness of his new position. It wasn't so bad, and it wasn't even entirely unfamiliar. In fact, he very much doubted he was the only person floating helplessly through a nonsensical world with a constant pain in his ass. His was just lightbulb-shaped.

A Love like Dying Fish  
Neil Ellis Orts

The first thing Harold noticed about Florence was the shiny brass fish in her hair. He'd just finished his shift at the Java Genie and on his way out when that shape caught his eye. She was ordering a lemon grass tea, his favorite of the decaf varieties, and he couldn't help but stare in his open-mouthed way. She was skinny, probably an inch or so taller than his 5'8". Her hair was a dark shade of mousy, a little curly, and too short to need any kind of clip. The busy pattern on her backpack, he then realized, was an aquatic scene. He found the clip and backpack interesting, but when he checked out her ass, he could see it was clearly her wide black belt that held up her hip-hugger jeans.

So, he was prepared to continue out the door when she turned around. He ignored the overbite and the tits that matched her ass. His eyes went to her necklace—another fish—her earrings—fish—and her belt buckle, clearly one of those Christian fish like you see on car bumpers but his one was filled in with blue and red stones, the kind you buy in bulk at craft stores. It was her bright yellow t-shirt, however, that made him whisper, "Whoa." It said "FISH 'R' LIFE" in glittery pink puffy paint.

She caught him staring at her. She smiled and said hi. He didn't blink. He didn't move. He was suddenly afraid she was some weird Christian chick and she was about to ask if he was saved or something. "Cool shirt," he said, but kept his hand on the door. He was prepared to bolt at the first sound of "Jesus."

"Thanks," she said. She moved to the condiment counter and squeezed honey into her tea. As she stirred, she watched him not blinking or moving. She considered his almost black hair falling over his right eye, the faded U2 t-shirt clinging to his scrawny torso, his baggy corduroy pants barely hanging on his hips. Her eyes narrowed. "You're no some kind of Christian, are you?"

"Uh—no—"

"Because I get that a lot," she said. "You know, some Christian boy sees my fish and he thinks 'here's a nice Christian girl.'"

"I wasn't thinking that." His left shoulder spasmed.

"Good, 'cause I'm not. I mean, fish are very spiritual creatures and they do give me life—I believe that—I do, but don't go looking me over like I'm someone to take home to your Christian mama."

Harold saw possibilities. "Cool." he said. "I'm Harold."

She stood with one narrow hip poked out to the side. "Florence. Care to join me, Harold?"

And so, Harold found himself sitting across the table, slack-jawed and amazed as Florence took half an hour—and it seemed no more than three breaths—to answer his initial question, "So you're, like, into fish?" Her response was an avalanche of metaphysical information on the calming and curative powers of fish. "Not dolphins or whales," she clarified. "Beautiful creatures, yes, but not fish. Fish are the channelers of ancient and primal energies. Remember, fish evolved into land creatures, dolphins evolved into sea creatures. Fish, therefore, are progressive, dolphins, regressive." Harold stared at her, his

one eye concealed, lips never quite closed. He occasionally squeezed in a "huh" or "cool," and while he didn't understand much of what she said, it gave him a boner.

"So, how about you?" Florence asked. "What's your fish story?" She smiled and Harold lost his entire vocabulary. "That was a joke," she said.

"Yeah."

Florence leaned forward, over her empty tea cup. "So, like, you're into fish, too?"

"Oh. Yeah." Harold suddenly felt on the spot. His shoulder twitched again. "Yeah. Like, I used to be really depressed," he said and left out a half-assed attempt at overdosing on over-the-counter drugs. "Then I spent a week at my brother's house, you know, housesitting," he said and left out that he lived in his brother's garage apartment and was perpetually behind in rent. "He and his wife were out of town so I watched their cable," he said and left out that his brother had some premium adult channels. "I fell asleep each night on their couch, next to their aquarium," he said and left out how early in the week he had mistook some kind of tank chemical for fish food. "By the end of the week, I woke up feeling great," he said and left out how he had no idea too much of that chemical would send every last fish in the aquarium to a slow death. "So, you know, I keep fish around and I feel lots better.," he said and left out that he buys goldfish every week and lets them die because he is convinced that absorbing their life force as they're dying keeps his depression at bay. He twitched. "And since then I've been able to hold onto this job, like almost three months, now, because I'm not so depressed and stuff," He added his current success at the Genie because he'd found chicks prefer a dude with an employment history, but left out that he was worried that she hadn't mentioned anything about dying fish. "I guess I haven't, like, studied it the way you have," he concluded.

"That's an amazing story," she said, "but it totally confirms what I've been feeling. I mean, I sort of stumbled onto all this, too, when someone gave me a small aquarium. I mean, where else do you learn about this but experience? There's not a fish spirituality shelf at Barnes and Noble."

"Yeah," he said and spasmed at the word "spirituality."

"But if I have anything to say about it," she said, "There will be one day."

"Like, what do you mean?"

"I'm working on my book—*Fishy Epiphanies*." She paused. "Cute, right?"

"Yeah." Harold wondered how her overbite affected making out.

"You know, you're the first person I've met who gets it. It's a sign I'm on the right track, that I'm not the only one. I wish I could stay here and talk for hours, but I have a doctor's appointment to keep." There was an awkward pause and Harold was about to make a move when Florence leaned forward. Harold throbbed below the belt. "Let's exchange phone numbers and e-mail. I don't want to lose track of you."

"Oh, sure," Harold said and she got a notebook out of her backpack. She pulled out a sheet of paper and tore it in half, gave half to him. They wrote down their respective contact info.

"Great," she said. "Feel free to call anytime. I totally want to talk to you some more." She left and Harold sat at the table, giving his boner time to deflate. She seemed into him, but she sounded sort of religious about the fish thing. Religious chicks unnerved him. He looked at the piece of paper with her phone number. Her e-mail name was "fishflo." Under her name, she drew a fish. It was clear that she was going for something a little different

from the Christian fish symbol, but he couldn't help but think of his Baptist grandmother, who drew a fish symbol on every religious birthday card—which is to say *every* birthday card—she ever sent him.

The thought of grandma took care of his boner. He shoved the paper in his pocket and stood up. He had some shopping to do before going home.

Harold got off the bus at the Petland farthest from where he lived. He used to go to a pet store closer to home, but after about four weeks of buying goldfish at least once a week, he started noticing that the store's employees were whispering and nodding in his direction.

So he started rotating his purchasing destinations, which sort of sucked because the big stores were where he felt most anonymous but were spaced all over the city. The smaller, independent stores recognized him after two or three visits, but at least with a few weeks in between, they didn't start whispering as soon as he walked in.

No one would call Harold the excitable type but he definitely felt something excitement-like as he approached the fish department. It was like his senses became sharper even as he became more relaxed. The nearest comparison he could make was getting high, but the fish thing was even better than pot. Florence sounded like she had a big vocabulary. He bet she could put it into words.

He lingered among the aquariums, looking over the different kinds. He always ended up with goldfish because they were cheap and died easily, but he liked other species. He had experimented but found one fish life force worked pretty much as well as another. Best to stick to ones that keeled over quickly. Bettas, for example, seemed to thrive in their own waste. He thought he'd have to renew that Prozac prescription before that one betta kicked the bucket. So after admiring the tetras and rainbowfish, and placing his hand on a couple of tanks to feel the vibrations of the fish, he got a clerk to help him get his usual three goldfish. He always got three. With careful feeding, he could spread out their deaths over a week. He believed in pacing his fish fixes.

He imagined Florence would admire that. It was almost like restraint or—what was the word that one religious chick had used? Discipline. Religious chicks were into discipline and not in that cool way. Once he figured out the difference between the religious discipline and the more fun kind, his grandma seemed a little more consistent and a lot less creepy all at the same time.

Twice, now, thinking about Florence led to thinking about Grandma. He'd have to stop that. It was unsettling.

Harold's older brother, Gerald, was sitting on the front porch of his house when Harold got home. Gerald was four years older and seventy-five pounds heavier than Harold. Gerald was a computer programmer geek with a taste for tight white undershirts that showed off his man-breasts. As kids, they'd spent hours discussing their rhyming names, Gerald was especially intrigued that the rhyme was achieved via different vowels and would mispronounce their names exaggeratedly to make his point. Hay-rolled. Gee-railed. Gerald still found this amusing which is only one reason why Harold avoided him as much as possible. Had it not been for the mostly free rent, Harold would have been so out of there months ago.

"Hay-rolled," Gerald called, scratching his wet armpit. "You go buy you some more goldfish?"

Harold kept walking and tried not to make eye contact. "Yeah."

"All those fish you killed, you could have paid for a full month's rent by now."

"They're not that expensive."

"Yeah, look, I don't care if you're up there with some sort of fish-sacrificing cult. Carla's not going to let me keep you there rent-free forever."

*Fish cult.* Was that what he was doing? Was that what Florence was starting? The thought stopped him in his tracks momentarily and then he shrugged it off and said, "Whatever."

"Whatever nothing," Gerald said. "Carla and me, we're going to start a family soon, you know? Procreating. We're going to need the cash to feed the offspring."

Carla, Carla, Carla. Harold hated Carla. She was the type of chick that sent Harold around the bend. She was totally hot but into overweight computer geeks. "I'm working on it," Harold said.

"Right. Well, for God's sake, could you at least start flushing those dead fish instead of digging up our backyard? All those shallow graves stink some days."

Harold walked away muttering. "Dude, your lawn's never looked better."

Florence rode her bike home from her gynecologist appointment, excited that her yeast infection had completely cleared up. It was another piece of evidence. Fish heal.

On second thought, maybe she should leave the yeast infection out of her book. Being a young woman and starting a spiritual movement around fish would be hard enough without drawing attention to women's health issues. Jesus could heal that woman's flow of blood without crude comment, which made Florence jealous of Jesus. She always felt a sort of kinship with the alleged son of God, if only because he knew how hard it was to start a new movement. Still, imagine if he'd said the flow of blood had been stopped by fish? Yes, she would leave out this yeast incident.

Jesus probably also benefitted in that he didn't need hundreds of dollars in aquarium equipment. Maybe growing up on the Sea of Galilee served him in the same way her tanks did for her. If only he'd known enough not to eat the fish.

"Floie?" Florence cringed at the voice coming from the back porch. "Floie, how did your appointment go?"

"It was fine Mom." Florence walked her bike to the back porch where she chained it. "All cleared up."

"Oh, that's good. You know I told you it would be. "

"I know, Mom."

"Well, listen, Floie, did you talk to your boss today, about getting on full time?"

"No, Mom."

"Oh, I wish you would. I could really use the rent money."

"I'm working on my book, Mom."

"I know, Floie, and I want you to follow your bliss or whatever it is you're doing. But honestly, your father, God rest his soul, didn't turn the basement into an apartment so I could live off a third its market value."

"I know, Mom. I'll pay you back all the back rent as soon as I get the book published and I get started on the seminar circuit. I promise."

Florence's mom sighed. "Okay, dear. Will you be up for supper?"

Florence sighed. "Yeah. Six?"

"That's fine."

Florence trudged the four steps down to her apartment door and let herself in. Her mother had a way of stealing her joy. She wished she could afford to move, but until she got her book out there, there was no way she could afford more than she was paying her mother. She wasn't going to expend more psychic energy at her clerical drone job at the university and she certainly wasn't going to move back in with her mother, so this was the arrangement for now. She shook off that last thought. The idea of being the sort of person who still lived with her mother at the age of 27 made her feel off-balance.

She had over an hour before supper. She moved from tank to tank to tank, to all the aquariums lining her small living room and said hello to each individual tetra, goldfish, and angelfish. She called them all by name and each responded to her vocal and aural vibrations. She dropped in their food and they ate.

Then she sat down in the middle of the room on a pillow, in the age-old posture of meditation—cross-legged, hands turned up and resting on her knees. She saw no reason to reinvent the wheel entirely. She received the aural emanations of the fish and she sent them hers. She told them about Harold, how now there were two who understood the power of fish, and how if her cell rang in the middle of this meditation, she'd have to take the call.

Harold didn't call that night, but it wasn't because he wasn't thinking of her. In fact, when he turned on the TV to take his mind off of her, he realized that Florence bore a striking resemblance to Marge Simpson, at least in the face. Marge had bigger hair and better tits and Harold wondered if Florence would consider implants. These thoughts unsettled Harold, so he lit a joint to calm his nerves, but all that did was lower his self-control and he ended up whacking off to a cartoon.

And that was the first thing he thought of when Florence walked into the Java Genie the next day. She walked in the door, gave him her buck-toothed grin, and he thought, "Holy shit, I spooxed over Marge!" None of his fish had died overnight so he was ill-equipped to cope. His shoulder started twitching and it went on a little longer than usual.

"Hi," she said. Florence wondered if her fish theories would help eventually help his spasms.

"Uuuh—" he said and turned as he wiped his hair out of his eyes. "Hi."

"I was hoping you'd call last night," she said.

Harold stood there with his mouth open too long. "Yeah, I meant to, but it, you know, got late and stuff."

"I really want to hear more of your story."

"Cool."

Florence was working harder than she wanted to. She sighed. "So Harold, what time do you get off from work?"

"Uh, three."

"Three. Okay," Florence said. "Are you free after work?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Harold." She spoke slowly to make sure he understood. "Would you like to do something together—with me—after work?"

"Oh! Yeah. Yeah, I'd totally like that." Harold hoped he didn't appear too eager.

"Okay, then." Florence wished he was a little more eager about it. "Well, I'll have a lemon grass tea and one of those cranberry scones."

"Oh. Sure." Harold gave her a one-eyed smile and set to work getting her tea. She watched him draw the hot water. For a skinny guy, he had a decent ass, or that's what she chose to think, his sagging pants not really offering much evidence one way or the other. She wished he was a little brighter, but then she remembered Jesus and how his disciples weren't too bright, either. Maybe there was hope.

"Five seventy-eight," Harold said. Clearly, knowing the barista wasn't going to save Florence anything on her tea expenses. She paid him and looked around.

"Well, Harold, I'm going to just park it over in that corner there and do a little work on my book until you get off, okay?"

"Yeah. Cool."

"Okay, then. You be thinking of what you might want to do after work." Harold just nodded. "Okay, then." Florence took her tea and scone, set them on the corner table and shimmied her backpack off her shoulders. She fidgeted a bit and wished the Java Genie had an aquarium. She really could have used some fish just then.

When she looked up at the bar, another customer was giving his order to Harold, but Harold's eye was on her. That made her smile and the customer had to give Harold his order again. It wasn't a tank full of fish, but seeing that calmed her down enough to focus on her writing—but not so focused that she didn't glance up, now and then, to make sure Harold was still watching her.

By three o'clock, Harold had no more thought of what he might like to do than he had thought about quantum physics. His only thought during those two hours of exchanged glances was, "Whoa, I think she's into me."

So Florence, in desperation, suggested he come over and meet her fish. There wasn't a direct bus route to her house, so they walked. She pushed her bike because he walked too slowly for her to ride alongside.

"Well, here we are," Florence said as she led him down the steps to her apartment door.

"Cool."

She opened the door and invited him in and he couldn't believe his eyes. "Whoa," he whispered.

"Harold, meet the co-authors of *Fishy Epiphanies*." Harold's mouth was even more open than usual.

She took him tank to tank and introduced each individual fish to him. When she finished, Harold whispered again, "Whoa."

"Yeah, I have to admit they're pretty cool," Florence agreed. She gave Harold a chance to say something more but he was busy having that excitable-ish feeling he got at Petland. "Okay, then," Florence said. "Look, you just wait here and enjoy the fish. I need to run to the girl's room. All that tea, you know."

"Cool." he said, never taking his eyes off the largest aquarium.

"Okay, then. Be right back." She would have liked a bigger acknowledgment that she was leaving the room, but he seemed totally into the fish. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Once he was alone, Harold put a hand on the big tank, feeling the energies of the fish tingling in his palm. Like a slow reel, the tank drew him closer and closer until his left cheek was pressed against the glass. Had the tank been large enough, he would have pressed his entire body against it. This was much better than Petland.

When Florence returned, she melted at the sight of Harold pressing himself against her aquarium. He may not be the brightest neon in the tank, but it was clear he loved fish. She stood silently, watching his communion, happy to see him so happy. For that one instant, she felt good about her first disciple.

"You do love them, don't you?" she said.

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Harold let go of the aquarium and stepped back. "It must be like really expensive to replace all these fish."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, like when they die and stuff."

"Well, yes, I lose one now and then, but—" Florence suddenly had a bad feeling.

Harold suddenly remembered he hadn't mentioned absorbing fish life energies.

"What do you mean when they die?" Harold didn't answer and wondered if he could just run out the door. "Harold?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Harold?"

"Like 'fish 'R' life,' you know?" He drew the "R" in the air as he said it.

"Right."

"Oh man, I thought we were on the same page or something." Harold saw no way out and with his halting "likes" and with his shoulder twitching like a jackhammer, he spilled the entire story to Florence, whose fists started to clench as he told it. He looked to the aquarium and wished one of the fish, any of them, would belly-up for him just then. Explaining himself took a lot of energy.

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh my God, oh my God." Her fists unclenched and she crumbled into a straight-back chair, staring at Harold. "What are you? Some kind of ichthyal vampire?"

"Huh?"

"I thought I found someone else who understood." She buried her face in her hands. "It's the Jesus thing all over again."

The mention of Jesus brought Harold's grandmother to mind again. "Whoa, don't get freaky on me now."

Her head snapped up. "Freaky? Me? You're sucking the life from fish and you're calling me freaky?"

"You're the one bringing up Jesus and stuff. I thought you said you weren't, you know, a Christian."

"No, no. Oh my God, you don't understand at all. I'm talking about how Jesus' followers corrupted his message. You know, how he's preaching 'love your enemies' and then, boom, a few centuries later you have the Crusades."

"Oh. Yeah," he said, uncomprehending.

"Yeah, well, okay then. Maybe you should just leave. I mean, the first person I find who gets the whole fish energies thing and he already corrupts it. God, in a few centuries, my movement would make the oceans ichthyological wastelands." She buried her face in her hands again. "I'm so depressed."

"Hey, don't." Harold knelt in front of Florence. "I mean, you know, I don't know." Then, in a moment surprising for both of them, Harold said, "Maybe you could teach me or something."

She looked into his one, unblinking eyed. She pushed his hair back so she could see both eyes. "You mean it? Because Harold, I really do believe this, I'm serious. Fish give me life and joy and healing, but it's not just receiving it. It's not becoming some black hole for their energies. Life, joy, healing—it's cyclical or it doesn't sustain. Do you understand me, Harold?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess."

Florence, doubtful, studied his face. If she could turn around this one fish killer, maybe there was hope for her movement in the long run. Maybe her *Fishy Epiphanies* really could help other people if she could just help Harold. "Okay, then," she said. "Let's try something."

Soon they were both sitting on the floor, cross-legged, facing each other, knee to knee. Florence took Harold's hands and turned them palm up in hers and then she rested hers in the valley between their knees. Florence felt his shoulder start twitching and she tried to not let it her distract her. She told him to imagine the fish energies not only entering him, but cycling through him, renewing in each cycle as they passed from fish to him to fish to him. She could feel him trying. She could feel him dropping in and out and she could feel that teaching him would be very tiring. But she could feel him trying. His spasms even stopped, or mostly.

They both hoped the fish would survive the lesson.

Dinner  
Taylor Mihocik

I don't feel like listening to the gossip about Mrs. Benson at the moment. Was she secretly pregnant? Did she get plastic surgery? Is she writing a novel?

The reality is that Mrs. Benson had gastric bypass surgery. I know because she told me when I walked in on her packing up her desk. I had thought the room was empty and I was going to use the bathroom to puke. It ended in a warm hug and no vomit until I got home.

While this conversation is happening around me, I struggle to maintain my focus on their faces and smile. No matter how hard I try, how hard I squeeze my cheeks and direct my mental concentration on narrowing back in on their faces instead of the wide frame of blurriness that my eyes are sitting on; it won't budge. The fog is worse today than usual. I'm tired.

"Seriously, I don't know how they're still married. Mrs. Benson is like, what, 350 pounds? It doesn't make sense. She never eats at lunch, she just sits at her desk and reads the same book every day." My eyes snap back into focus on Rebecca's face. Finally.

"Maybe she's self-conscious. She knows you're watching because she's already big." I keep my eyes on the table as I speak.

"Doubtful, Anna. I bet she's starving herself. That will probably take ten years to work at this point," Rebecca throws her napkin down on the table and looks over my shoulder at someone walking out of the cafeteria. She shoots them a smile and waves.

"Maybe she's sick. You don't know why she's her size. I think it's kind of cruel to judge her when you have no clue what's going on in her life." Kristen's gaze darts to my face and then away before Rebecca notices. I notice, and my face heats up.

Kristen is onto me. She's never said anything, but she's been offering to use the restroom with me after lunch more often than usual, and while I appreciate her attentiveness, it's starting to piss me off. It's impossible to throw up quietly and the longer I wait to do it, the more it rots in my stomach and the heavier it feels until it's pure acid burning my throat instead of half-eaten food in the bushes behind my house. Most of the time I prefer to stay empty rather than having to force it back out. But when I do have to throw up, I prefer to do it by myself.

I wait for her to say something to me about it. She never does.

"Why are you so defensive of her? Didn't she give you a D on your last paper?" Rebecca tilted her head and gave Kristen a perplexed look. "She obviously doesn't take care of herself. There's no use in pitying someone who doesn't help herself."

"How do you know she doesn't help herself? Are you there with her when she eats dinner every night or when she goes to the gym?" Kristen snaps, her fists clenching on the table.

I watch her.

"You're probably one of those assholes who laugh at overweight people at the gym. They're there to work on themselves. Not everyone can eat 3000 calories a day and still weigh 110 pounds, Rebecca. Stop being so fucking judgmental." Both Rebecca and I stare at Kristen silently for a moment. Kristen's chest heaves as she struggles to gather herself. It's clear that this conversation is upsetting her, and I desperately want to change the subject.

"You got a D on your last paper? Wasn't that about masculinity and maternity in *The Sound and the Fury*? I remember reading over that and I thought it was amazing," I said to Kristen, noticing the gratefulness in her eyes and the slowing of her breathing.

"Yeah, I guess I accidentally switched tenses in the middle and my paper was 'riddled with insidious pronouns.' I don't even know what that means." Kristen spoke as she kept her eyes on me, while I meticulously cut my chicken patty into 20 pieces. Her food remains untouched.

"I'm pretty sure it's when you use two pronouns that don't agree with each other in gender or number," Rebecca warily adds. My vision blurs a little.

"I think that's pronoun disagreement. Insidious pronouns are when you introduce a phrase or idea, then refer back to it with just a word like that or which. That or which refer to a specific noun, not an entire phrase," I mumble as I abandon my chicken and shakily pack up my bag, taking caution to hide the ink on my palm.

"Ooooookay," Rebecca breathes, "either way, Mrs. Benson is a shitty grader. Maybe she'll come back with a shorter stick up her ass."

"Yeah, maybe." Kristen picks up her tray, glances down at my mutilated chicken parmesan, and dumps her lunch in the trash.

#

10/12/2013

133lbs

- coffee with cream - 27 calories
- banana- 100 calories
- 2 granola bars- 180 calories
- grilled chicken patty - 110 calories
- 1 cup of steamed broccoli- 55 calories

Total: 472 calories

I copy down the list on my hand into my food journal, immensely disappointed in the number of bullet points I have for today. Five bullet points. I failed five times today. Yet even with that number, my stomach growls and I feel accomplished because the hunger is still there. Still reminding me that I was somewhat successful. With my current weight, I only ate about one third of what I should to maintain. That means I have a negative of 1000 calories today. Meaning if I do this again for the next three days, I can lose a pound. If I double that, I can lose two pounds.

I turn to look at my body in the mirror. My stomach feels like cement. I poke and prod at the loose fat hanging over my jeans as I hold my shirt up to my chest, and the amount of give underneath my fingertip closes my throat.

I stare for what feels like hours until I put on my pajamas and go to sleep.

#

I no longer put cream in my coffee. The container of my favorite creamer has sat untouched in the fridge for about a week now. No one notices. The bitterness of the black

coffee helps keep my stomach at a constant buzz, making me not want to eat even though my brain is bawling.

Cream is 27 calories if I get out the measuring spoons and do it correctly. That's half a serving of broccoli or a quarter of a banana. Three wheat thins. Nine pieces of gum, because you ingest calories just by swallowing the gum spit. I've started counting those calories too.

When Kristen shows up at her locker next to mine, I notice the dark circles under her eyes. I hand her a piece of gum and unwrap my own, making a mental note to add it to my list.

Three.

"You okay? You look tired." I shut my locker door to make eye contact with her, my bag now about a hundred pounds heavier. I slouch under the weight on my right shoulder.

"You just saying that because I didn't wear makeup today?" Kristen gives me a half-smile and tightens her backpack straps. We start walking toward first period.

"Of course. You look hideous without makeup, don't I tell you that often enough?"

Kristen gives me a full smile this time and leans sideways, nudging me into someone walking into the opposite direction. "I'm good, I just haven't been sleeping well."

"Anything you want to talk about?" I pause and look at her, noting the hesitation on her face. I can tell that it's something serious that's been bothering her.

"Do you ever feel like you're not good enough? Like no matter how hard you try, everything keeps spinning out of control?" She searches my eyes for something. I shift my weight and reply honestly.

"Always. My grades have been ridiculously bad lately. I can't seem to pay attention to anything anymore because my brain feels like it's stuffed full of cotton. Is that how you're feeling?"

She visibly sags with relief. "Yes! That's exactly how I've been feeling. I just keep fucking up even though I set daily and weekly goals for myself. I have no motivation. How do you do it? You always seem like you've got it together. Like it's effortless. How?" Frustration knots her brow as she turns back to look at me while she walks through the doorway to our classroom.

I don't know what to tell her. I didn't realize that I was that good at putting on a show, and I feel a twinge of guilt for being fake to my best friend. I just don't know how I can tell her how ugly I really am.

She doesn't need to know about it. This isn't her burden. I sit my bag down on the desk next to hers and sigh.

"Honestly, you just have to fake it until you make it. Bullshit everything enough to stay even in all of your classes. Don't be afraid to be mediocre. It's senior year, and you stress yourself out enough as it is, Kristen. Just try to relax."

Kristen quickly masks a look of disappointment, then seems to take what I said into consideration. "You're right. I do spread myself too thin sometimes."

As she opens her mouth to say something else, the substitute walks in and smiles brightly at all of us. We stare back. It's too fucking early. Kristen faces forward in her seat and pulls her notebook and a pencil out of her backpack, while I stare down at my hands folded on the desktop.

First period, even though it's shorter than the rest because my school has a rotating block schedule, is excruciating. Morning is when my body fights back the hardest, because I've spent the night sleeping and it expects food. It doesn't understand. Even my mind doesn't agree with me most mornings, because I have to physically sit on my hands so that I don't pull a granola bag out of my bar and shove it down my throat like a rabid animal. The only reprieve I get in the morning is that my headache usually hasn't bloomed yet, so my mind is a little clearer. I get to experience the high of being empty instead of the lash-back I get by the end of the day where it takes all of my being not to falter.

I float. But what comes with the floating is the dreaminess of not being able to pay attention to my teacher because my stomach is growling and contracting so hard that the people around me notice. It feels like my intestines have wrapped themselves around the rest of my organs and are holding them hostage. I either get the high and stomach pains or fogginess and physical apathy. It's impossible to win.

I'm fine. This is normal. I hold it together until the bell rings, and Kristen and I gather our things for third period. My hand twitches with the urge to grab that granola bar. I resist. Kristen watches my hand stray to my backpack and then jerk back to my side and gives me a questioning look, but says nothing.

"Rebecca is out today," I tell Kristen, carefully watching her face for a reaction. We both hate her but refuse to do anything about it due to the fact that we've been friends since childhood.

"Thank god. I didn't want to say anything, but I don't think I can handle her today. I'm just not in the mood to listen to her cruelty."

I'm surprised at her candor.

"You noticed it too? She definitely has been a lot meaner lately. I wonder if there's something going on with her."

"She's probably just mad because Sean has been flirting with Jordan during gym. I heard he even followed her into the locker room after swim practice last week," Kristen's face is a mixture of pity and anger. I can relate.

"Doesn't mean she needs to take it out on other people by being a bully."

#

11/20/2013

128 lbs

- 1 slice of wheat toast- 75 calories
- 3 pieces of gum- 9 calories
- 1 apple- 95 calories
- Luna bar- 190

Total: 369 calories

There's always room for improvement. I compare the pictures from a few months ago to the picture I took a few minutes ago; now you can see my hip bones, but they still sit underneath a thick layer of fat on my stomach. I chase the heavy feeling at the base of my neck and the burn in my gut that comes with accomplishment. That bobble-head feeling is peak.

Do they notice? Do they see the thick warm blanket on my head, or hear the creak of my numb fingers? Do they see the cement shoes I wear as I slam my way down the hallway, leaving broken floor tiles in my wake? I revel in the fact that this is mine. No one notices, and I don't want them to until I'm perfect.

I draw lines on my most recent picture with a sharpie, indicating the changes I would like to make and outlining the bones I want to be able to see. I warm myself up by running my hands up and down my collarbones, my ribs, and, my hipbones.

#

One day Kristen snaps on Rebecca, knocking her books out of her hand and forcing herself into Rebecca's personal space. Kristen is screaming, but I'm underwater. I honestly couldn't tell you what the argument was about, but I know that it's serious. I stand with my books in my hands silently, struggling to string the words together that were hurled in between the two of them and sometimes in my direction, while a circle forms. Cell phones are raised like antennas above the circle, desperate to catch the right angle.

Everybody loves a good girl fight.

It's anti-climactic. Mrs. Benson shoves her way through the crowd and steps between the two of them, and while she tries to get an explanation out of them, I admire Mrs. Benson's figure.

She's lost a little bit of weight, and it shows. She looks good. Still large, but there's a new light behind her eyes that had always been dim before. Now those eyes are glittering with anger and moving with her mouth as she yells at both Kristen and Rebecca. Her mouth is beautiful as it undulates, pushing and pulling at her face. The silent dance is bewitching. I stare unblinkingly at her face while ushers Rebecca to the principal's office.

I only stop paying attention to Mrs. Benson when Kristen sways. By this point, most of the crowd has dispersed and I'm still standing in the same spot, observing. Mrs. Benson reaches her hand out to steady Kristen, but before her fingers clear the distance Kristen hits the floor. That's when I force myself to move. I make it to Kristen eventually, but by the time I register what has happened, Mrs. Benson is pushing people back to give Kristen some space while another teacher dials 911.

She's beautiful on the ground. Her face is pale and her cheeks are stained a soft pink. Her lips are parted, with a slight breath pushing in and out, hollowing her cheeks and emphasizing her sharp cheekbones. I don't stop staring until they load her onto a stretcher and someone we both know nudges me and tells me to call Kristen's mother. I oblige, explaining that she passed out and is on the way to St. Luke's.

#

They tell me she has EDNOS. Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. More fucked up than me, it seems. Bulimic and anorexic at the same time. Her mother cries and I hold her hand, while I wonder how I missed it.

You have to be there for her, they say. It's important to support her recovery right now, and that may mean staying away from her if you can't encourage healthy eating habits. I don't know what the fuck that means.

"You have to be there to help give positive reinforcement if you're going to be in her life throughout this recovery process. This means encouraging regular eating habits, and providing reasonable emotional support," the dietician tells me, her eyes searching mine.

"I can do that."

“Good, now we’ll discuss her treatment and what her life is going to look like for the next few months, possibly the next year depending on the rate of her recovery.”

#

I tape a picture of me and Kristen on my mirror, and focus on her slight figure next to mine as I draw lines on my own body. This picture was taken about a week ago. I haven’t changed since then so I know my diagram will be more accurate.

Later, Rebecca comes over and we sit cross-legged on my bed while we discuss what happened to Kristen.

“Honestly, I knew she had been looking more tired and stressed lately, but I thought she was just worried about her classes. I was so wrapped up in my own bullshit with Sean that I wasn’t really being a good friend to her...or you, either.” She glances up at me apologetically. “I’m really sorry, Anna. I’ve been fucking up a lot lately.”

“It’s okay. We knew something else was going on. You just have to learn how to channel your frustration into something productive, like exercise or a hobby or something”.

“Yeah, I’m working on it with my therapist.”

I look at her, shocked.

“I know. I have a therapist now. I really am trying, I swear. I have anger issues.”

We discuss Rebecca’s feelings for a bit longer, before I ask the question. “So, how much did Kristen weigh, you think? She was pretty small.”

Bipolar Coach Trip  
Tim Frank

They came in dribs and drabs to the bus stop, tired, weary and stoned from the olanzapine and the lithium, exhausted by the early hour of 8am because they usually rolled out of bed by at least 2pm. Their bags were full of nibbles that they attacked as soon as they were seated – Kit-Kats, Dime bars, crisps and diet Coke, plastic wrappings crackling all up and down the coach. Everyone was bulging at the belly and the cheeks, weight they'd all gained within months of their diagnosis and couldn't shake off no matter how much Yoga, Spin classes or brisk walks they took. Eating less was nigh on impossible so they got used to buying bigger clothes from M & S and being misunderstood by the masses, lurking in the shadows of the public's consciousness.

Kate and Simon arrived, bickering and bitching, having got lost in the maze of streets around Soho despite the detailed directions on Google Earth and in that period they had broken up for the fifteenth time. The depression made them see each other as hopeless losers and their love affair doomed, but the highs brought them together again without fail. When their moods didn't match, one high the other low, they just fought and bullied each other, sometimes entering into stony silences, sometimes fiery exchanges, accusing each other of real or imaginary betrayals. The only solution was to spend money or eat.

Samantha came alone and packed her bags into the bottom of the coach silently, not sure where she was on the mood scale that morning and uncertain how her temperament would dip and slide for the rest of the day. She sucked on a giant lemon lollipop, looking childlike in pigtails despite being over thirty and having gone through it all, both sides of the coin. But going through it all never prepared her for doing it all over again and so she braced herself for a difficult day.

Martin played the stock-market on his I-Phone and was constantly chattering to himself as his next deal was dispatched. He didn't say a word to anyone but yipped and yapped to himself, eyes fixed on the phone and generally being antisocial as the highs and lows of the stock market sent shivers down his spine. He popped a benzodiazepine to chill himself out and took in the view of the gathering coach trippers seeing nothing but shadows under their eyes and a slight sense of blooming hyper-mania.

Shez was a Muslim but thought he was Christ that day and the coach trip a good opportunity to proselytise. He was thin and not on any prescribed drugs. He was there to help a group of people who clearly needed it. They were lost and he knew the way and he was going to tell them...eventually, because at that moment the light was filling his chest and his mind was churning like a tumble dryer on magic mushrooms. He needed a moment to compose himself so he sat alone at the front trying to avoid eye contact with the new comers shuffling on board, squeezing their waists down the aisle and picking their special spots that suited their assorted moods at that specific time of the morning, taking into account the angles of the light, the proximity to the street and how alienated they felt by the other fellow sufferers.

David was the guide and he had bipolar too, though it was pretty much under control since the late nineties and he'd only been sectioned twice in the eighties when he was a teen. He was on Lithium, Elilim, Lorazepam, Olanzapine and Risperidone and because of that he was fine, sensible and a terrible bore, always speaking in a deep monotone voice

sending the intense drowsy, like a powerful sedative without the perilous addictive side effects.

They were heading for the Somme to see the trenches and nobody really knew why this was appropriate for a group with bipolar but everyone seemed willing to buy into the theory that something therapeutic would come of it, as if some mythological boon would be bestowed upon them if they faced down the grim realities of World War I.

David droned on about the air conditioning and what to do in case of panic attacks, seizures and nausea ('feeling it right now' someone murmured). He explained, with a slight drawl, the procedures for the fire exit, the toilet and the vomit bags. He described the general plan for the day and called on one and all to be understanding and to try and not judge each other because everyone had their 'story' and their reasons for being whom they were. He reminded everyone to take their pills when needed and encouraged the group to relax because it would be a long journey – his usual rap for every trip he took, even boring himself now.

By the time they'd reached the boat Kate had moved away from Simon and seated herself beside Shez. She munched from a box of Cheerio's and wiped her nose with her free hand, having noticed something irresistible and glorious about Shez yet she didn't dare disturb him as he was making a list of names from the group who he felt could be possible followers in the name of Christ - him. He sensed Kate peeking at his list and he scrunched it into his pocket and began to stare at the row of cars lining up to board the ferry. Kate kept her silence except for the crunching of her cereal and her sniffing sinuses, trying her best not to fall for Shez.

Simon peered over at Kate and Shez. She'd had affairs before, mainly in secure hospitals with delusional in-patients. She was easily influenced by the God fearing, the demagogues and the truth seekers that had lithium injected in their asses once a month. Vengefully he eyed Samantha up and down, finding her ankles to be thin, sharp and attractive and he thought 'she'll do.'

'Hey,' he said in a sonorous baritone that he used whenever he was coming on to someone.

Samantha was chewing on her lolly-pop stick - the lolly long gone - and she gave a wide smile and shifted over to another seat, allowing Simon to move in next to her. They began babbling about pills, mania, breakdowns, mental hospitals and doomed love affairs – the usual scene. Before they knew it they were kissing under the blasting air-con, their tongues slipping and slithering and Kate was on her feet screaming, stamping her feet, and yelling to be let off the coach - damning the entire group as a bunch of misfits. David said there was no turning back and blocked the aisle, taking a few slaps in the chest from Kate as she dropped the Cheerio's and began to sob. Shez crossed her off his list.

Martin was oblivious to the outburst. He was in line to make two grand off his current deal and he was sweating from his forehead, drips forming at the peak of his nose -but he was calm and centred. He never felt nerves during a deal but suffered chronically after, win or lose. When he won he couldn't sleep for days and was unable to stop his legs from quivering. When he lost he fell into a deep trough where the world seemed meaningless and he lost his faith in the cosmic ordering of the universe and was unable to face the light for days, sleeping till the afternoon and cutting diagrams in his arms with a Stanley knife.

Once they boarded the ferry they all headed for the bar and knocked back Sambuca's and depth-chargers, smoking on the balconies and watched the waves form at the base of the ship like the moods shifting and changing in their minds. Samantha was the first to vomit but she wasn't the last and the effect of the medication and the booze made everyone low and mean. Samantha ignored Simon and Shez ignored Kate. David kept his thoughts to himself but he'd seen it all before and stuck to his orange juice and a rollie before rounding everyone up for the last leg of the trip. Soon they'd be at the Somme and the purpose of the trip would be revealed.

David gathered the group by the bus and said a few words about safety and how alcohol can be detrimental to the health of those with the illness and taking pills so he begged those who drank to take it easy and to try and get some sleep and be nice to one another. Everyone was fed up with him, his miserable tone of voice and tedious announcements. They all regretted they had come.

When they reached the Somme it was pelting down with rain creating a thick layer of mud that drenched the group's shoes and added another layer of gloom to the already grim mood. David showed the group the trenches, gabbled on about trench foot and how soldiers had to stand guard at night as bombs shrieked overhead and the men would sleep on their feet with their eyes open. 'Feeling that right now,' someone chirped in.

Shez got lost in one of the tunnels and felt the hand of the devil on his shoulder in the dark. In fact it was Kate but her face, clouded in the murky light, looked like a masked avenger out to steal his healing powers. He screamed as Kate pushed her mouth onto his and he swatted her away as her cries were swallowed by the sound of the rain.

David called the group to attention and they all stopped their snooping around, all completely non-plussed by the experience. Then silence swept across the fields as the rain came to an abrupt halt and one could hear a few depressed groans as the group realised they were going to be lectured again, except for Martin who let out a yelp as his wi-fi crashed.

'The reason I take these trips,' David began, 'is I feel it's an important stepping stone to learn about our illness.'

'Oh god,' someone sighed.

'And the reason for that is this: the sands of time and the ebbing and flowing of history are an insightful metaphor for the bipolar illness itself. By that I mean times change, events transform and the past become the present ever moving into the future just like our illness moves and alters. What happened here is another episode that modifies into dust. We are all changing, us more than most, and we must learn to see the past as another event beyond our grasp. We need to understand it and move on. The Somme is us and we are another piece in this puzzle of mutating life.'

There was a stunned silence. Someone perked up and said, 'I don't really understand, but that's probably the most profound thing I've ever heard.'

The group stood blinking at their muddy shoes, sorry for judging David as they had and were ready to move on but the silence just got longer and someone began to weep as the rain came down again and they all felt somewhat unnerved by the experience.

'Right,' David said, 'who's for a drink?'

They holed up at a cheap hotel a few miles from the front line at a place called, somewhat distastefully, The Firing Range. They all bought bottles of Bacardi and vodka

from the bar and the barman did them a deal on strong cigarettes and mixers. They all amassed in Kate and Simon's double room, despite the fact they were still ignoring each other and the rest of them were wasted by 9pm, playing strip poker, truth or dare and other suicidal drinking games involving revelations about their chequered pasts mostly to do with an array of sexual acts and mental disturbances.

Samantha was a dark horse. They went round the room each asking a question about what particular debauched act someone had committed and if they'd done it they had to drink a shot. Once the group had nearly run out of questions and Samantha had drunk each time they asked her if there was something she hadn't done and she said quizzically, 'I don't understand the question,' then leaned to one side in a stupor, trying to stop her eyes from spinning to the back of her head.

Martin was still fixed on his I-Phone as it wavered drunkenly in his hand, still without any reception and not knowing whether his last deal was a success and thus unsure how he should be feeling, high or low, stressed and anxious or bleak and miserable, so he played along with the drinking games in a state of limbo.

David had drunk two Czech beers and was knocked out stone cold. He rested his head on Samantha's lap and snored like a chimpanzee, puckering his lips every few minutes and giving the odd hiccup.

Shez was still on fire, convinced he was The One and that this bunch of degenerates, now of all times, needed his healing hands and his wide-eyed innocence. But he'd crossed most of the group off his list of followers and decided this time the Second Coming would fly solo and change the world single-handedly. The alcohol was really messing with his brain though and some doubt was edging into his mind. Could he really be as mad as this rabble?

Kate banged a plastic fork against a near empty bottle of gin and got everyone's attention although most of the group were horizontal, drooling and holding back the vomit collecting in their bellies.

'They all died for us!' she said, breaking down into tears with childlike ease.

'Who did? Whose dying?' someone said in a panic.

'I'm dying,' Simon said raising his hand aloft then letting it fall, slapping himself on the cheek.

'No, the soldiers. You know, at the Somme. It's just so sad, it fills my heart with despair.'

'You're just drunk. Take a tablet, you always forget and get sentimental,' said Simon.

'No it's not that. I mean for god sake why does everything have to come back to the illness? Can't I have a mood that isn't judged by that, a thought even, something that's real and true? Samantha all those guys you've been with, that's real, you wanted to do that and you did it, just because you were manic doesn't mean it wasn't genuine. And Shez the amount of times you've been in and out of hospital for taking paracetamol and lorazepam and threatening to jump off low rise buildings in crowded areas...that's real. And Simon even though you're an arsehole and I don't want to speak to you you're still my closest friend and I can see that now. Martin, you're antisocial and bad tempered and you ignore everyone including your kids but given half a chance there's a real man underneath the veneer. And David, if you can hear me, the tedious monotone voice with a beautiful spirit

hidden somewhere deep inside, well, it's just perfect. Like I said the soldiers died for us so we can, you know...live.'

'I love you Kate,' Simon muttered, his body collapsing under him.

'I'm Christ!' Shez piped up.

'We know you are,' everyone said, and with that the lights seemed to transform into a vital glow, everyone gradually sobering up, and as one they all headed for a sublime never-to-be-forgotten soaring high.

Infancy  
Jon Serri

I'm not sure what I heard first, the doorbell or Tommy's cries. I quieted Tommy with a pacifier and considered the door. Another ring and then a soft, rhythmic knock. Dawn from 7C's knock. I opened the door and Dawn handed me a Crock-Pot before I even said hello. In her mid-forties with blondish hair but black roots and eyebrows, Dawn held the positions of Social Activities Chair and Pool Safety Supervisor in our building. She often slipped fliers under my door promoting bingo, adult swims, and pool volleyball games. These papers smelled of perfume and contained handwritten messages cajoling me to join the fun. Stuff like "Serving up Volleyball Fever this Saturday!" and "Margarita Sundays! Make Mondays Less Manic!" She included smiley faces in her notes and made excessive use of exclamation points.

"It's stew. Beef. It'll be better tomorrow. The flavors need some time to settle. Tommy can probably handle the broth and veggies. Is he in there?" Dawn said.

I opened the door a little wider to reveal Tommy lying on the living room floor, but Dawn took this as an invitation to enter. She grabbed the Crock-pot from my hands and walked towards the kitchen.

"All these apartments have the same layout," she said.

I reached for a bottle of wine from the counter and poured a glass for myself and one for Dawn.

"A little early for me but grandfather used to say it's five o'clock somewhere."

I nodded and we clinked glasses.

"You're very brave, you know?"

"How do you figure?"

"Raising this little guy all by yourself. Not many men can handle that kind of challenge."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"You never ask for help or anything. All the women in the building know about your situation. We all want to help. Each of us in our way." She dragged a finger along the coffee table and flicked the accumulated dust towards the floor. "Nobody should be alone in this world. Everything's too hard as it is. To be alone, that's too much."

I tried to think of something to say about loneliness but she just kept going.

"I divorced when Mary was sixteen and Theresa thirteen. Now they're starting lives of their own. But you have a long way to go before that happens."

I took another sip of wine. "We're not divorced or anything."

"You have a soft face, you know? You could be so angry if you wanted to but it looks like you don't have a care in the world."

I shrugged.

"You should bring Tommy over to play some time. We can have drinks while he stays occupied."

She knelt down besides Tommy and looked at me in alarm. "Oh my. I think he's burning up," she said.

"No, that can't be."

But Dawn was right. Tommy had sweat through his Superman onesie. The sheet below him felt damp and his face was flushed.

"Who's your pediatrician? Is he in Riverdale?"

Christine's departure left many things hanging in the air. I had no idea who Tommy's pediatrician might be; still, I knew enough to say otherwise.

"She's in the city. I don't trust the doctors around here."

"I hear that. Should I call for you?"

"I appreciate everything. The stew, company. But I need to handle this on my own. Can you let yourself out?"

Dawn looked around with a pained expression that reminded me of the old Sally Struthers infomercials set in remote African villages. "So brave. Please let me know when everything turns out okay."

"Will do."

I turned to the Internet for help and constructed a plan of action. I went to the bathroom, filled the tub with cold water, and emptied the contents of the medicine cabinet into the sink. No thermometer but I located the children's aspirin and crushed one up in a glass of water. I put the concoction in a bottle and Tommy, what a good kid, drank the thing down in minutes. I carried him to the tub and dunked him in and out of the water. He squirmed and struggled and let out the occasional cry from the depths of himself but I held a firm grasp and kept to the task of cooling him down. The sleeves of my shirt clung to my forearms and water splashed against my face. After ten minutes of the tub, I wrapped him in what looked like the cleanest towel and placed him on the couch. I looked in his eyes and there seemed to be a mix of understanding and doubt in his expression. It was the kind of look my dad used to give me when I made an error in a little league game or broke a dish while clearing the table. Tommy and I sat there just staring at each other. Then he giggled and I thought *what am I doing here* and put him to bed.

With Tommy asleep I poured myself a tall vodka and splashed a little lemonade in the glass. Dawn's stew sat on the kitchen table. I reached in and picked out a potato and then a carrot and popped them in my mouth. Good stuff. I contemplated a piece of meat and chewed on it, gristle and all. I wiped my fingers on my pants and went to the couch with my drink. The mini-crisis had been averted but calamity could strike in earnest at any moment. I opened the laptop and started to search through local pediatricians. Reviews both good and bad filled the screen. Warnings of malpractice and complaints of backed up toilets and surly staff members juxtaposed celebrations of offices with dancing bear wall decals and baby activity centers modeled after European cities. I just wanted a place where sick children didn't cough on each other. I didn't know the first thing about choosing a doctor. Did I want male or female? Jewish or Asian? Then I saw the name of my former pediatrician: Dr. Vincent J. Rella. I remembered Dr. Rella as a jovial man who made every

trip to the doctor's office a time of laughter and fun. He would call all of his patients by these ridiculous names; it was a bit that made me seize with laughter. On one visit I might be Sandy Longstockings from Delaware, next time I'd be Sir Humbert Livingstone from Cambridge. None of it made sense, but for that moment you didn't care about your fever or the possibility of strep throat. You just laughed. I visited with him until I graduated from college. It seemed perfect. My son would go to my pediatrician. This is what families do. Share experiences that they look back on with fondness. I felt good. I walked to the kitchen, grabbed a spoon, and cradled the Crock-pot against my side like a football. The stew tasted delicious.

Little had changed in the waiting room since I sat there as a patient nearly twenty years earlier. Brown wall-to-wall carpeting covered the floor, a magazine rack rested between two windows that seemed painted shut, the air-conditioner dripped water on the rug below. In the middle of the room, someone thought to place a child sized table and chairs. Toy trucks, dolls, robots, and dinosaurs lay strewn about the table. Tommy sat on my lap and we looked at everybody in the room. A red haired boy clutched his mom's dress with one hand and picked his nose with his free fingers. Two girls in matching polka dot skirts pieced together a puzzle of a lion or a tiger. I turned Tommy away from the scene and tried to hold his gaze. His eyes were grey when Christine left but now seemed closer to blue. I balanced his unsteady legs on my thighs and brought him to eye level. If I looked closely I could make out a reflection of myself in his pupils. He smiled but then squealed and I wondered how much he knew. Did this kid realize he had no mom and what he did have was pretty average?

"Tommy," the nurse called. "He'll see you now."

Tommy and I were staring at a chart detailing the infant respiratory system when Dr. Rella walked in. He looked older than any doctor I had ever seen. He used a cane for support and took small steps through the doorway. The whole process, him opening the door, shuffling in, and then closing the door, took some effort; he sighed as if he was about to say something but that sigh only presaged a much longer sigh. A spit bubble rested on his lower lip; he hadn't shaved in some time. He looked at Tommy and then me and then back to Tommy again as if trying to determine our relationship. Then he smiled and pointed at me.

"Tommy."

I pointed to my right. "He's the Tommy. I'm the father. Chase."

"It's a joke, Chevy. I know who's who. Who am I?"

I wondered if I made a terrible mistake in coming here.

"Another joke, Fletch. Let's try and have some fun in here. So what can I do for you?"

I explained the previous night's happenings, beginning with the fever. I mentioned Christine and how there was no number just a postcard, and I didn't know who Tommy's pediatrician might be--I had never been allowed in on those decisions. But then I found

myself describing the stew and Dawn and all the other women in the building. As I spoke, Dr. Rella picked up Tommy and held him to the ceiling, he laid him on his belly and patted his head, he checked his ears, eyes, nose, and mouth, occasionally pausing to turn towards me and nod. Then Dr. Rella sat Tommy up on the table and moved a stethoscope over his back and chest.

“So how have you been feeling?” he said.

“Oh, you mean me. Worn down. Tired. I’m not really sure I know what I’m doing with any of this. When he ran that temperature I couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, so we came here.”

“Well you did well with that. Let’s see what Tommy thinks.”

We all sat in silence, the two of them staring at each other, Tommy’s small round face only inches away from the doctor’s scruff. Tommy nodded and smiled and turned to me.

“He’s doing a fine job,” Tommy said.

I looked towards Dr. Rella. “What?”

“I mean the man has his struggles don’t get me wrong. Entirely too much alcohol and marijuana and he isolates himself more than is healthy for him or me. But he does his best. What else can I ask for?”

I waited for a response from Dr. Rella, an acknowledgement of incredulity, an exclamation, a look of amazement, shock, and wonder. The enormity of the moment could even kill the old man. Instead he rubbed his scruff and gestured for Tommy to continue.

“But there are issues. Serious causes for concern if you will. I haven’t been to a doctor in well, since Mom left in January and I believe we are in July. Stop me if I’m mistaken here. So I must be behind on immunizations and who knows how my length and weight are progressing.”

I screamed. Tommy flinched and started to cry and Dr. Rella shook his head at me.

“Just let the boy speak.”

I searched around the room for a camera and then opened the door in hopes of finding the film crew who orchestrated this talking baby ruse. But there were no cameras, just a nurse in the hallway with a stack of manila folders. We locked eyes.

“Did I hear a scream from in there?” she said.

I closed the door and sat on the floor. Tommy and Dr. Rella stared down at me.

“He does this far too often you know. Just sits in bewilderment.”

“That’s unfair!” I said in spite of myself.

“But I do love him Doc, really I do.”

“I know you do Tommy. Chase, do you know Tommy’s social? I’d like to start building his file up.”

“I have it written down here. One moment.”

“101524684.”

“You memorized your social?” I said.

“It’s amazing what these little minds are capable of,” said Dr. Rella. “Tommy when’s your birthday? You look to be about a year.”

“June 15<sup>th</sup>, doc. I’m a Gemini through and through.”

“What does that even mean?” I said.

“Do you recall Tommy’s pediatrician’s name? I’d like to get his files over here.”

“No clue.”

“Tommy?”

“Rodriguez. A lovely man of Puerto Rican descent out of Riverdale.”

“Excellent. Let me see what we can do about getting those immunization records. I’ll send Shelly in here to get you weighed and measured while we’re at it.”

Dr. Rella made his way to the door but I kept my eyes on Tommy. I heard him humming to himself. It sounded like Willie Nelson. I thought back to the trip home from the hospital. Christine wincing with each bump on the road, looking out the window into some other place I couldn’t see. Once we arrived home she went straight to our room with Tommy. I slept on the couch for that first week and watched old westerns. *The Red Headed Stranger*. *Barbarosa*. Christine would bring him out for a visit here or there and explain it was essential to align their clocks. Who was I to argue? Whenever Christine passed out I would slink into our bedroom and lift Tommy from the bassinet. I’d take him to each room of our apartment and show him around. He never made a sound.

Tommy stopped humming and rubbed his eyes. At one point he looked like he wanted to get going again but instead he lay down. I watched his eyes flutter; he always fought sleep, and he whimpered a few times as he searched for a comfortable position. The first few nights after Christine left, I rocked Tommy until he’d fall asleep but every time I went to put him down his eyes popped open again. He didn’t cry but he wouldn’t sleep unless I rocked him. Then when I knew he was *really* asleep, the kind of sleep you just don’t startle from, I couldn’t put him down. I’d just sit in his room and rock him.

Tommy coughed and yawned and dragged me out of the memory. I went to pick him up but instead just rubbed his back and turned off the lights. It was the least I could do.

The awkward silence between talking baby and father was one I had never imagined. What could I say? With the playing field leveled my typical banter of weather related observations, identifying the colors of cars we passed, and singing along to Top 40 radio felt desperate. I had to meet this issue head on with no hesitation.

“No more secrets, Tommy.”

He rolled his eyes and turned to look out the window.

“I mean it Tommy. We might be in for some really big changes.”

“Watch where you drive.”

What would you do with a baby that could talk? I pictured us on Oprah, maybe Ellen. I could start a Shit My Infant Says Twitter account so the world could relish his observations on life, politics, and the decay of the American Dream. Throwing out the first pitch at Yankee Stadium, a trip to the White House, our own reality television show, all of this seemed tenable. Money would never be an issue. College would be paid for but Tommy wouldn’t even need college. Or if he did he’d be matriculated at Harvard by the age of 8 (great season of reality TV). Then there was Christine. The regret she’d feel would be

paralyzing. And of course she'd want to come back. But that door had closed and been locked and that key was no longer.

"Tommy, we can be famous. We can do anything we want."

Silence from the boy.

As we pulled into the driveway I heard the sounds of bingo emanating from the pool. "B. Seven-teen. B. Seven-teen."

Dawn held a microphone in one hand and spun the rotary cage as the balls careened towards their destiny. The whirring of blenders mingled with the cheers from a kickball game. A conga line formed by the cabanas.

"I. Fif-Teen. I. Fif-teen. Still no bingo? She said. "Chase, I see you two in the driveway over there. Park that heap in twenty minutes and come down here for some fun."

I pictured us down there. Tommy by the barbecue warning Ted from 5C that he shouldn't grill over a direct flame. The three nursing students from the top floor huddled around us, amazed that this prodigy, this marvel of science had sprung from my loins. I turned the ignition off but caught Tommy's reflection in the rearview shaking his head from side to side.

"Just drive," he said. "We can go anywhere you want but here."

He grinned and then started to clap his hands, but the gesture was different from previous times. It was no longer a mindless expression of joy, instead the clap implored and demanded.

I executed a flawless three-point turn and drove onto the service road before accelerating towards the highway. As we crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge I imagined a scene: Tommy and I pull into a diner outside of Albany. Tommy doesn't speak, but drools and babbles at the waitresses. A red haired waitress named Wendy carries over a high chair and calls me *sugar*. I fumble over myself trying to get Tommy in the high chair and knock over a glass of water. Wendy cleans up my spill and places a fresh setting on the table. We order pancakes and scrambled eggs and a vanilla milkshake. Wendy tells me to save room for pie. Patrons smile and wave at Tommy and he waves back and blows kisses. *Adorable* they say. I laugh and thank them. We are a family. We are who everyone expects us to be.

Inanimate Object Fibromatosis & Asbestos Leprosy  
Brett Petersen

“Pish!” said Asbestos Leprosy to Inanimate Object Fibromatosis, “I can construct a much better castle, one tenfold more fortified against spherical invaders than your rust-eaten shack.”

The two were sitting cross-legged on the dayroom floor playing block bombardment. The game consisted of hiding little green soldiers in fortresses of blocks, throwing tennis balls at them and seeing which soldiers got knocked down and which remained standing. Portions of afternoon snacks were doled out based on whose fort could sustain the least amount of casualties.

“Don’t you think I already know that?” Iof pouted. “How come you get to be a genius at building block forts and know all these big words from reading the Oxford English Dictionary like it’s a comic book? You make me feel stupid sometimes.”

Al glared at Iof. “Whenever I suggest the notion of teaching you, you always happen to be in the middle of some ‘other business’ and can’t be bothered with any sort of instruction by which you might better yourself.”

Iof groaned.

“Observe,” said Al, “the lack of reinforcement at your cathedral’s topmost level makes it vulnerable to strikes from above.” She scooted a few paces back, winked an eye, stuck out her tongue and tossed the ball in a high arc. “I wager none of your men will make it through the night.” The ball crashed through the roof, toppled the delicate steeple and landed in the sanctuary where Iof had hidden his entire platoon. Inspecting the wreckage, Al was first to point out that not a single man had survived. “It appears that your long anticipated three o’clock bag of Doritos belongs to none other than this fair lady,” she pointed at herself with her thumbs, puffed out her chest and closed her eyes as if posing for a statue to be carved in her honor.

Iof rolled his eyes.

“Hark, my loyal subjects,” she projected for the whole room to hear. “I am Queen Alise Bestis Leproso; Albatross of Ward B! My rule has been ordained by the Heavens! To look upon me is to perish, for my aspect is that of Beauty itself!”

Iof said nothing.

As Al posed for the statue carvers and soaked up the admiration of her worshippers, she failed to notice that Iof had hobbled into the corner, clutching his right arm in pain.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“Iof, cease your caterwauling, I won fair and square!”

“It hurts, it hurts!”

“Iof, whatever is the matter?” Her fantasy collapsed and she turned around.

Iof’s fingers were hissing and splitting open, revealing Lincoln log bones.

“Iof!” She rushed to his side, grabbed him by the shoulders and spun him around. She gasped in horror at what she saw.

His arm was transforming into the very blocks she had, just a minute ago, knocked down. She had been warned about this, but could never have been prepared for the real thing. Tears were coming. She wanted to hug him, comfort him and tell him it was okay, but

she had to maintain her façade of hardness. Only babies cried about boo-boos. It couldn't be that painful. Iof was just being a drama queen. Al's stomach was ice and her bowels were a maze of lead pipes. The metamorphosis was spreading to Iof's elbow, bicep and shoulder with alarming speed.

She shouldn't have been so coarse with him before.

By the time the nurses arrived with the syringe, Iof's entire arm was a series of alphabet blocks spelling 'O-M-E-G-A.' The nurses laid out a blue mat, grabbed Iof's arms and legs, pinned him to the mat face-down and pulled down his pants. One of them spiked his left buttock with an anti-transformative vaccine.

"No comforting gesture will be of use to him now," Al told herself. "He is no longer a babe. He needs to procure a pair of stones if he is to succeed in harsh times such as these."

On the surface she was a girl of steel, but in reality, her ego was doing all it could to prevent total shutdown. The tears that wanted to spill out onto her cheeks had to be stuffed down, deep into the pits of her lungs and ovaries, places dark things went to hibernate until puberty, the days of Judgment, the countdown having already started.

Evan, her favorite nurse, approached. "Let's go to your room, okay sweetie?" If anyone could see through her attempts to keep her face expressionless, it was Evan.

"Okay," Al muttered half under her breath.

Evan took her by the hand and escorted her to her bunk on the girls' side of the ward.

Even in the relative seclusion of her room, she could still hear Iof's screams; ululations like those of a trapped animal willing to tear off its own leg to escape the jaws of a predator. Al squeezed her pillow tight around her head. There was a reason she could never let herself get too emotional. The doctors had told her time and again that any spike in her bodily chemicals, including those of her brain, could cause the symptoms of her Asbestos Leprosy to emerge. If that happened, it wouldn't just cause irreparable damage to her body; everyone on the ward would be in danger of contracting the disease. She wiggled the four remaining toes on her right foot and remembered the incident that started it all.

It was the summer of her fourth birthday. Her grandparents had come to visit. Al had gotten upset over spilled Kool-Aid, and a white chunk had broken off of her pinky toe and flown down her grandmother's throat. A month went by. Her grandmother's fingernails and skin disintegrated little-by-little, and when her limbs began to crumble away, her worried grandfather drove her to the hospital.

In the waiting room, the doctors informed Al's family of the dangers of Asbestos Leprosy as they carted away the vacuum-sealed remains of her grandmother. To ensure that no contagious person left the facility, the doctors mandated that the family undergo full-body examinations. Al could never forget the shame of pulling off her shoe and sock and revealing her chalky white toe to her parents and the doctor. At that moment, her parents' love for her retreated like a pair of lizard tongues. She was no longer their daughter: just a disease. The two beings looming over her were not her mom and dad. The evil Doctor-King had transformed them into dragons whose tongues dripped viscous liquid. The dragons had been trained by the Doctor-King to devour lepers and keep the Kingdom disease-free.

At the time, Al had been obsessed with knights and castles and all things medieval. A picture book of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight had been her favorite. She needed to be

strong, she told herself, as the dragons and the Doctor-King rolled up the drawbridge connecting Ward B to the outside world. She needed to become a great warrior like Sir Gawain if she were to someday escape the dungeon, slay the dragons and reclaim her throne.

Evan handed her a PRN and water in a Dixie cup. She swallowed it dutifully and curled up beneath the covers. The desk clock broadcasted in 6:35 bold crimson: time for The Grumbly Bears, a cartoon she and Iof usually watched together.

The rising sun delivered rays of optimism to eyelids gummed with sleep. As everyone on the ward knew; each day was a chance to forget the terrors of those gone by. The boys drew battles between aliens and robots in crayon. The girls played house underneath the mint-colored bench near the toy box. Everyone avoided the blocks as if monsters had hollowed them out and made nests inside them.

Al sat by herself near the TV with her favorite doll, a nude Barbie whose peach-colored flesh had been tattooed with magic markers. Not too fond of the name Barbie, Al had renamed her Emelia Cornwallis V. Whatever Emelia's role had been before she lost her clothes, no one knew. She could have asked Ra, the girl with Rhinoceros Arthritis who had arrived at the ward at least three years before Al, but Ra was notorious for charging at kids with the horn that grew out of her forehead whenever she was forced to make any strenuous movements.

As much as Al was liked by the others, they steered clear of her for the rest of that week. Aware of her closeness to Iof, they didn't want to tip the balance of her grief and cause her symptoms to manifest. Despite the isolation and the perpetual lump in her throat that required her to swallow every three seconds, Al had convinced herself that everything would be alright. As long as she had Emelia and could stroke her bristly hair the way her mother had stroked hers before she had been diagnosed with Asbestos Leprosy, before her parents had become dragons, before they had locked her in this dungeon, everything would be—

Al felt her face glowing hot. Tears were starting to come. "Nay!" She shook her head. "I mustn't cry. I am Queen Alise Bestis Leproso, beloved Albatross of Ward B, and I shan't infect my subjects! I also do not wish to die in this place at this time. My apprentice is nowhere near qualified to take up the mantle if I were to perish. Much more training does he require. The annual gruel hall joust with Ward A is a mere two weeks hence. If he were to recover in time, perhaps we could clinch victory this year. Then maybe we could purchase our freedom and embark on a much nobler quest: a quest to claim the heads of the Doctor-King and the dragons and seize my birthright! As Queen, I could appoint Sir Iof as my personal vizier. Then, together we could—"

There was a flash of red and blue in the corner of her eye. Her heart leapt. She raised her head slowly, bracing for a false alarm. A boy who looked very much like Iof was sitting in a wheelchair by the door of the nurse's station. He was wearing a Graham City Golems football jersey. It had to be him. She rubbed her eyes just to make sure. Yes! It certainly was. Her chest fluttered and the tears retreated into their ducts. His skin was pale, his right arm was in a cast and he looked like he hadn't eaten in a while, but he was okay. As long as

he was breathing and his eyes were open, there was a chance he could recover and be able to joust again.

Evan emerged from the nurse's station door, grabbed the handles of Iof's chair and wheeled him over to where Al was.

Al couldn't keep herself from smiling.

"Look who it is, Iof," Evan stopped just in front of Al. "Your friend Al really missed you didn't she?"

"Uh-huh," Iof mumbled.

Al's smile quickly faded when she noticed that something was off. A column of drool dangled from Iof's lower lip and was making its way to a bib fastened around his neck.

Evan knelt down and looked directly into Al's eyes. "Iof's on some new medicine," he said. "He may have some trouble talking for a while, but he's still the same old Iof. You just have to be patient with him, that's all."

Evan's explanations were borderline magical. He was able to make things okay with words alone, but after a few minutes, the meaning of those words began to sink in. Al felt as though she had swallowed a lump of cigarette ash.

"Iof?" She studied his face. His eyes tried to focus on her, but they darted all over the place as if they had wills of their own; wills that weren't his. His tongue moved around by itself and it seemed to require all of his effort just to keep it under control.

"Iof? Can't you hear me?" She shook him. His head bobbed back and forth like a buoy without a bell.

"He won't be like this forever," Evan seemed to be able to read people's thoughts by looking at their faces. Al sensed that he wanted to give her a hug as well, but couldn't due to the 'no physical contact' rule mandated by the higher-ups. She felt the lump in her throat resurface.

"You mean the elixir you're providing him in order to alleviate his Inanimate Object Fibromatosis is befuddling his brain?" she sniffled.

Evan's eyes looked weak. "Yes," he said. "We don't know much about his illness, but we're doing all that we can to help him get better."

Al believed him. Unlike the rest of the staff, Evan actually cared about the patients on the ward. He even encouraged Al and Iof's friendship. Other staff members would knock a kid down a level or two on the behavioral progress chart for something as innocuous as a kiss on the cheek. In their view, interpersonal relationships were a roadblock on the path to recovery. There was also the painful fact that many patients would not make it to their next birthday. If staff were to become attached to patients, or patients to one another, someone's death could cause a tank in morale that might be fatal to those already fighting for their own lives.

Evan's philosophy was different. He believed that love and friendship between patients encouraged recovery rather than the opposite. His mantra was 'what can we do to speed the recovery process along?' rather than 'what if somebody's loved one dies and their recovery is compromised?'

The next morning, Evan was nowhere to be found. Al kept a lookout for his familiar red pants that could be seen through the window as he approached the front door, but after a couple weeks, she gave up.

Iof's condition was slowly improving. Al had to re-teach him how to pick up the blocks, position the army men and throw the ball. Despite the sluggishness of his progress, he was learning. He'd be able to joust when the time came. Al would see to that.

When he was finally able to speak again, she bombarded him with questions.

"Why do the tinctures used to treat a physical malady such as yours affect your mind so profoundly?" was one of them.

"What?" Iof's face contorted like he'd smelled a skunk. "Can you say it in English?"

Al smacked her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Why-do-pills-used-to-treat-a-body-problem-affect-your-brain?" she said in a robotic monotone.

Iof explained it as best he could;

"I.O.F. is a nerve disease," he said. "All the nerves in your body are attached to your brain. The doctors don't know why my nerves turn my body parts into random objects. They just give me medicine that makes my nerves slower, so when my body parts change, they have more time to give me a shot. If they don't give me the shot in time, my whole body will turn into a house or a tree or a balloon or something and stay that way forever."

"Very peculiar," Al pressed her fist against her chin. "But, time for idle talk has passed. You, sir," she pointed at Iof and then at the unfinished block tower, "have a lot more to learn about proper building technique. If this one yet again fails, I believe a thrashing is in order," she smirked.

"N-no!" Iof played along, pretending to be frightened. "Anything but that. I'll even give you my second taco at lunch today!"

Al giggled. "The Albatross of Ward B cannot be bribed by a mere taco." She closed her eyes and stood with perfect posture. "The penalty for entertaining such a silly notion is five-and-twenty thousand pushups."

"Uh-uh!" Iof began to jerk around like a zombie, "I-I think I'm...I'm turning into a-a castle...help me, Al!"

"For every minute squandered, I'm tacking on ten more," Al snickered.

"B-but I'm still in recovery!" Iof let his head droop until he resembled a feeble Christmas tree with an ornament hung near the top.

It was 5:00 in the morning when Iof was awoken by whispers in the hallway. One staff person was telling another that patient number 0388 was to have surgery on their eye.

Iof's heart leapt. That was Al's number! He craned his ear toward the door to get a better listen. They were saying that her left eye, if not removed within twenty-four hours, would crumble into white powder capable of transmitting Asbestos Leprosy to anyone who breathed it in. Iof's stomach sank. Al had been fine just the other day. He flopped onto his back. What could have caused this sudden change in her health for the worse?

Lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, Iof felt sick. He began to think he might have contracted A.L. himself. His heart was certainly crumbling into something. His whole body ached. He thought of her alone, cold, clothed in nothing but a gown, wearing a brave face but shivering on the inside. He wished he could see her one last time before the surgery.

Was it too late? Had they wheeled her into the operating room already? There was no way the staff would let him leave his room at such an early hour let alone be a guest in the OR.

He had an idea. The ventilation grate on the wall above his bed must be connected to the OR somehow. If he could crawl through it and find his way there, maybe he could wave to her before they put her under and began the surgery. On the outside, Al seemed to be made of iron. But what was going through her head right now? Would something like this scare her? If so, she'd be scared all by herself. Her parents never visited. They wouldn't let any friends or relatives visit either. They were too afraid of the white dust that might flake from one of her body parts and infect them.

"I've got to go see her," Iof balled his fist. "I'll sneak through the vent. They don't call us for breakfast until seven. I've got time. I'm pretty much recovered from my I.O.F. attack. I can do this."

Still in his pajamas, he stood on the bed. The grate was just below the angle of the ceiling. Iof was tall for his age, skinny with long arms. He hooked his fingers around the corners of the grate and tugged. It wouldn't budge. It was fastened to the wall by four screws that had been painted over. Perhaps with a screwdriver, he could chip away at the paint and loosen the screws just enough to weaken the grate's grip so he could tear it from the wall. Of course, tools of any kind including pens and pencils were considered contraband. What could he use? He scanned the room, looking for anything he could break apart to create a makeshift tool. Something hard and straight would be ideal. Then he remembered. He kept a lucky penny hidden between the bed frame and the mattress. Hopefully the staff had not gotten to it during the last room sweep.

He lay on his stomach and snaked his hand into the space. He fished around until his index finger grazed something hard and metallic. He retrieved the 1997 penny from its hiding place. The green oxidation streaks shaped like a crescent moon cradling Lincoln's face were still there. Perfect. He spent the next few minutes chipping away at the paint covering the screw heads, which came off with surprising ease.

With the paint all gone from the screws, he began the painstaking process of twisting them loose enough so that the grate could be torn aside. It was frustrating work and he managed to get a chip of paint stuck under his fingernail. Every ten minutes he'd perk his ears for the sound of footsteps and lie back down when the nurse making the rounds peeked in with their flashlight.

After thirty minutes of unscrewing, lying back down and unscrewing some more, he finally got the grate loose enough to tear out. He had to do it quickly, like a band-aid, because the noise would certainly attract the attention of the staff.

Okay, here goes. 1...2...

On three he pulled with all his might and ripped the grate from the wall. He had no time to worry about whether someone had heard. Al's surgery might have already started. He hoisted himself into the shaft, reached down and replaced the grate.

The dust made him cough. He felt an oncoming sneeze but averted it by pressing hard against the bridge of his nose with both of his index fingers, a technique Al had taught him.

He crawled and crawled, tearing aside spider webs and crunching mouse and cockroach carcasses with his knees. It was pitch dark except for little umbrellas of light pouring in from grates connected to other rooms. He could hear voices behind him. They

sounded frantic. They were searching for him. He had to find his way to the OR fast. He knew it was somewhere to the West. The sun was always visible through the dayroom window in the morning, and in the evening it hid itself where the kids couldn't see. He just had to use his instincts. His desire to find Al, his concern and his love for her would guide him there.

There were shouts from all directions. An alarm had begun to sound. An escaped patient from the rare disease ward must have been a huge deal whether or not they were contagious.

There was a fork in the path. Right, left or straight? He had no time to waste. His intuition said left, so he went left.

More shouts, more banging, beams of flashlights shining into grates ahead and behind. He'd have to keep noise to a minimum if he was to avoid being caught. He was certain that if he kept to the left of where the noises were, he'd find his way to the main building where the OR was.

After a while, the noises stopped and he found himself above a bathroom. Where was it? He was beginning to panic. He'd been crawling for half an hour and still couldn't find the OR. He sighed. For the first time since he began this venture, he felt doubt seeping into his resolve.

"Fuck," he said aloud as he ran his hand through his hair which had collected several inches of dust and cobwebs. "They're gonna catch me if I don't find it soon. They've probably got my exits blocked and are just waiting for me to come to them." He clenched his teeth. "This was a stupid idea. I might as well just come out now and face the punishment they're gonna give me whether I see Al or not. What the hell was I thinking?"

He stretched out, prepared to give up, when his ears picked up a combination of sounds coming from somewhere ahead. There was a rhythmic electronic beeping mixed with the rushing of air and muffled voices.

"Wait a minute," he whispered, "that sounds like..."

The sounds of surgery, it had to be. He felt a surge of adrenaline. This was it. He'd made it. Al was straight ahead. He got to his knees and started crawling once more. Then he heard a sound that made his excitement turn to stone and crack into a million pieces.

"Hey!"

He craned his head as far to the right as it would go.

Poking up from an open grate was the bald head of a hospital security guard. "I found him!" He shouted to some people below. "You gonna be a good boy and come down, or do I have to come up there and get you?"

"Fuck off!" was all Iof could think to say before resuming his crawl toward where Al was having her optic nerve severed by a diamond-tipped scalpel.

There was a creaking sound as the guard attempted to squeeze through the opening which was not designed for anyone, let alone a full grown man to fit into.

Iof crawled frantically. The beeping and mechanical whooshing were getting louder. He was very close.

"Just a few more feet," he murmured.

There was no use keeping quiet anymore. He kept crawling. He brushed aside an abandoned moth cocoon and peered into the grate below him. He saw a blue eye, Al's, staring up at him. There wasn't a single inkling of life in it. She had a breathing mask over

her face and her eyelid was being pried open with a weird retracting device. There were three surgeons clad head-to-toe in caps, masks, gloves and scrubs. One of them held a shiny blade and was about to make the first incision.

“Al...” whispered Iof. “I came to see you. I just wish you could see me.”

He felt a hand grab his shoe.

“Alright, kid, enough is enough,” the guard grumbled. “Dr. Osbourne’s down here in the hall and she wants to talk to you. She says you’re not in trouble, but wants to make it clear that she can’t have patients leaving the ward without permission. Now will you just come down from there without making a fuss?”

“No!” Iof slammed his fist into the floor of the vent. “I’ve had enough of you guys and the way you treat us. My girlfriend’s in surgery and you won’t even let me see her? It’s bad enough you don’t let us hug or kiss each other, but you don’t even tell us when you take someone to get cut open. My mom and dad sent me here because they couldn’t stand to live with a kid who needed to be taken care of. Same thing with Al. Everyone’s scared they’ll catch her disease, but I’m not. I don’t even care if I do. I love Al, and she loves me. We need each other because we have no one else. And you guys sit there and tell us we can’t be together. You probably wouldn’t even tell me if she died. You people make me—”

Iof’s arms and legs retracted, his ribcage split open and his body became a yacht which crashed through the ceiling and landed on top of Al and the three surgeons, crushing them. Al’s eye, which had been dislodged from her pulverized skull, whitened and crumbled, sending spores of Asbestos Leprosy flying through the room like dandelion seeds in April.

Welcome to the Corporation  
Mitchell Waldman

The sign over the door says "Welcome to A-Vix Products." There's a picture of a dolphin next to the "x." Tom wonders what that means as he pulls the door open.

Three months after the grand hoopla of the graduation event, the image of hundreds of tossed mortarboards falling from the sky, his life, with squealing brakes and a thunderous crash, hit the wide black wall of Work. Still living at home and after sixteen interviews (the sociology degree not winning him many points in the job world), he was ready to throw in the towel, take the management trainee position at Burger City, when a woman from A-Vix called him and said he had the job if he wanted it and when did he want to start? That's why he's here in his white dress shirt and pink paisley tie knotted so tightly it's nearly cutting off his breath. Call it what you will -- a case of rapidly lowered expectations, a burst of the bubble, or the shiny face of Reality grinning, canines exposed, winking its cynical, blood shot eye at him -- but that is why he's here, at this moment, on this August day.

A smiling, crew-cutted security guard greets him at the front desk.

"Yes?" the man says, looking up at him. He clears his throat. He smiles.

"Hi, I'm here to see..."

"Name," the frowning man says, staring at his computer keyboard.

"Tom Jinks. It's my first day. I'm the new order processor. I'm here to see..."

"Wait, wait, wait. Slow down. The first name is Tom. T-O-M?"

"Yes, Tom, T-O-M, although I know some people write it like Thom, T-H-O-M, but I..."

"Okay," the guard says, having hunted and pecked the three letters with his left and right index fingers. "Now, slowly, again, your last name?"

"Jinks."

"That's it?" the guard says, staring up from his keyboard at Tom, like he's hiding something.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Jinks is all there is." He grins a goofy grin, just stops himself from letting loose a jittery burst of laughter.

"Jinks, okay. And how do you spell that?" asks the security man, "Dom," as it says on his red and white name tag, although Tom thinks maybe this is a misspelling for his real name or condition, the "i" in his name having been accidentally substituted with an "o." The man is sitting there staring at his keyboard with intense concentration, a sweat droplet starting to run down his forehead.

"J-I-N-K-S."

The man waves one hand in the air. "No, no, no! Not so fast. J (tap) I, okay (tap), got that one..."

It's all that Tom can take. He spurts out "My God, man, you call yourself a receptionist?"

The man looks up at Tom, his eyes hard like bullets. Tom wonders if he spoke too quickly, if the man, Dom, has a gun.

"Listen, pal, I'm a security specialist, not a receptionist, and I'm doing the best I can. Just give me the rest of your name."

Tom sighs. "Okay, where was I? Okay, I gave you J and I. N-K-S, that's all that's left."  
 "Not really," Dom says, "Okay, hold on, "N-K-S. Got it. Now, now, next question. Date of birth?"

Half an hour later, Tom is sitting in an office on the seventh floor of the A-Vix building that looks something like a hotel suite. In front of him, sitting behind a huge mahogany desk, is a large man wearing a white tie with a Mickey Mouse face on it, smoking a cigar, spouting smoke throughout the office. It's all Tom can do to keep himself from coughing, and he can barely see the man in front of him. Jason Reed is his name. Tom's new supervisor.

"Now, Jinks, listen, it's not going to be easy, the kind of work you're going to be doing. We work with a very specialized product in the marketplace. It's a highly sought after product I can tell you. If you have any questions at any time, just break in."

"I do have a question, Mister Reed."

"Yes, Tom, go ahead, what is it?"

"What exactly is this product?"

The man behind the desk starts coughing and hacking. He looks like he's having trouble breathing. His cigar slips from his hand and falls on the desk next to a stack of papers as he starts sliding down in his leather seat. Tom is beside himself, doesn't know what to do. Should he call someone, yell for help, move from his seat at least, open the door, dial someone on the telephone (get up and just sort of slip away from this place altogether and try the want ads again tomorrow?) or should he should he.... What if he's having a coronary or a seizure or aneurysm or something, this man he just met and doesn't know from Adam? The man is turning blue, it seems, through the smoky haze of the office. And why the hell is he smoking cigars, anyway? Don't they have municipal regulations against this?

Finally, against his better judgment, Tom gets out of his chair and walks around the desk. Jason Reed is lying on the floor with his eyes closed. Tom's heart beats wildly. He envisions paramedics standing around the man, police questioning Tom, and, most horrible of all, he envisions himself sitting over the man, trying to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. An involuntary shiver runs through his body.

Tom gasps then as, suddenly, the man's eyes bug open and he starts laughing. "Got ya' there for a minute, didn't I, Jinks? You thought I was having a heart attack or a seizure or an aneurysm or somethin', didn't ya'?"

Tom laughs weakly. "No, Mr. Reed, nothing of the kind. I just thought..." His mind was a blank. What is going on in this place?

The man gets up off the floor, dusting his dress slacks off, adjusting his Mickey Mouse tie back, so that, once again it's crooked, and sits back in his seat.

He clears his throat, then says, "Now, to address your question." "The product we produce is simply referred to by our employees as 'the product.' That is our tradition here and that is how you will refer to it as, young man, do you understand?" Reed's face has turned quite serious, almost angry now. Is the product drugs, Tom wonders? Is everyone here high on "the product"?

"Yes, okay. But wouldn't it be a little easier working with something if I knew what it was I was working with? I mean, what's all the secrecy about?" He smiles slightly to infer

his next question is a joke. "I mean, we're not talking about heroin here, or cocaine, or anything illegal like that, right?"

Reed sits stony-eyed behind the desk.

"Or arms to third-world countries, you know, nuclear warheads, or biological weapons, or the secret formula to the sauce for the Big Mac or anything, are we?"

Still Reed sits stone-faced, not batting an eyelash. His face seems to have turned redder. Meanwhile, his cigar is smoldering on the desk, an orange glow starting at the corner of one of the stacks of papers it landed by, the paper starting to curl up and disintegrate at the edges.

Reed's trance ends as he grabs the cigar, plants it back in his mouth, and points at Tom with a stubby index finger.

"How can I put this to you so that you will understand?" he says, a smile turning up the corners of his lips just slightly, his face red like a medium rare steak. "You will refer to the product as 'the product.' Do I make myself clear?"

"The product'."

"Yes, 'the product.'" They continue to stare at each other, Tom following two beads of sweat working their way down the left side of the beefy man's face. Then, abruptly, Reed snaps to, leans forward and stubs his cigar out in an ashtray at the very front corner of his desk, and next, in a quick motion, douses the small fire in his stack of papers with a smack of his hand. He is left staring at Tom with a smile on his face. "Not that there is anything illegal or immoral about what we produce. There are no secrets here of any kind, actually. It's just company policy, right from up high that we never refer to our product as anything but 'the product.' That's the way Mr. Dusseldorf, our president, wants it, and if that's what he wants, that's the way it goes around here, if you catch my drift. Okay, Mr. Junks?"

"Jinks."

"What? What's that?"

"My name's 'Jinks,' not 'Junks.'"

"Yes, yes," he says, narrowing his eyes at Tom, a thin smile forming on his lips. "I'm sure it is."

He's sitting at his new cubicle, where he's been left by Reed's secretary to wait for his immediate supervisor. (Apparently Reed was his immediate supervisor's supervisor – therefore making Reed his not so immediate, or distant supervisor? – and, he's been told by the secretary, his immediate supervisor is actually to be referred to as his "Team Leader.") There are white walls to his left, in front of him, and to his right. A telephone at the back left corner of his desk, and a wire in-out basket to his right. A thick manual sets before him, which he's been instructed to spend some time reading, to kill time, he assumes. He opens it up. The front page starts, "Welcome to A-Vix Products, home of world-renowned fine quality products. As an employee of A-Vix, you have opened up your life to an exciting world of new opportunities for career advancement, job fulfillment and satisfaction. As a member of the A-Vix Products group...."

"Close that right now, before you get sucked into the propaganda." Tom swivels around in his chair. A short-haired brunette in a black dress with thick black-framed glasses stands before him, hugging a legal pad and pen to her chest. "Sally Goforth," she

says, extending a hand and, in the process, dropping her legal pad. "Oh, shit, I'm so clumsy," she says.

"Here, let me get that for you," Tom says, but he's too late, Sally has already picked up the pad.

"You have to remember that anything you read, anything anyone here tells you, none of it is true. It's all a cover up."

"A cover up," he says, looking right at her.

"Yes," she says, a small, sly smile on her face now.

"A cover up for what?"

"Well," she says, looking down at her shoes now, and looking back up at him after a second. "A cover up for what they don't want you to know."

"Uhh, I see," Tom says, wondering if the woman is all there.

"Well, anyway," she says, hugging the legal pad to her chest, and extending her free hand, "welcome aboard."

He shakes her hand limply. "Thank you. I guess."

She turns to leave, then, just when he thinks she's gone, peeks back around the edge of his cubicle and whispers. "Don't trust anyone, or anything you hear. That's my final bit of advice." Then, as soon as she appeared, she's gone.

He goes back to reading his manual. He reads for about three minutes before someone else knocks on the edge of his cubicle. He cocks his head. It's a thin woman with curly blonde hair in a white pants suit. She's carrying a clipboard. "Tom?" she says.

"Yes." She smiles at him and extends her hand. "I'm Muriel Cole, "your Team Leader."

"Nice to meet you, Muriel," he says, shaking her hand. And then, he can't help himself: "So that would make me a Team Follower."

"What?" she says, looking at him with foggy eyes.

"Nothing, nothing. Just a little joke," he says. She does not smile. In fact, she doesn't (beyond the "What?") seem to react at all, just plods ahead, a starchy smile on her face as she says: "Tom, I want to welcome you to A-Vix products. Have you figured it out yet?"

"Figured out what out?"

"Good, good, that's very good," she says, raising one eyebrow, and quickly jotting something down on her clip board. He has no idea what's she's talking about or writing. She grabs his arm suddenly. "Come on, I'll give you a tour of the place." Then she pulls him out of his chair with a strength that he wouldn't expect from a woman of her slight frame.

She shows him the usual workplace spots: "the coffee/break room to your left, the bathroom down here to your right, the copy/fax room, the computer server room, the file room" ("where," she says, "we keep records of all our files concerning the product"), the conference room, which has a long square desk in it with about twenty chairs around it. But, along the way, she skips a couple rooms, one with a large asterisk on it, another with a question mark on it. At the first of these rooms, he asks her about it as they pass. She stops suddenly in the hallway, looks at him, then, says nothing, but jots a note on her pad. Then she moves forward, apparently expecting him to follow, with no further explanation. When they pass, without comment, the room with the question mark on the door, he decides it would be better not to ask, lest she stop and jot another note about him on her pad.

After the tour of these other rooms, she brings him around to meet some of his new coworkers – Andy, Ray, June, Marty, Paul . . . and several others. Too many to remember. All with pale complexions, dull clothes and unforgettable faces. They could all fit into one big bowl of fellow employees or “teammates” as Ms. Cole tells him he is to call them. And then there is the last of his “teammates,” Sally Goforth with the thick black glasses, to whom he says, when they’re standing in front of her, “I believe we’ve already met.” Sally looks at him incredulously, nervously tapping her pen against the back of her hand and saying, “I think you’re mistaken. I’ve never met you before in my life.” After which Tom stares at Sally, then glances to his left at Cole who he suspects will be jotting a note about this, but--surprise--is not, but, rather, is staring absently in space, somewhere above the computer in Sally’s cubicle. Then, all of the sudden, she bursts out with a loud “Ha!”, just one, then looks at Tom as if that did not just happen, her face the dull color of bored. “Well, ready to start some work?” she asks, then turns to lead him back to his cubicle. (Maybe she should issue him a company leash, he thinks).

As he’s walking away from Sally Goforth’s cubicle he glances back over his shoulder and she’s shrugging her shoulders, an apologetic look on her face.

At his cubicle Muriel gives him a fifteen minute description of what his job entails – answering the phone, entering the orders on the computerized order sheets, printing them out and stacking them in the wire in-out basket on his desk – one copy on the top one on the bottom, the proper manner of answering the phone, “Hello, A-Vix Products, how can I help you today. . .etc. etc. (“The entire procedure is outlined in the company manual on page twenty-two,” Muriel tells him). And there are Internet orders that will be routed to him as well, all of which scratches his curiosity, though he doesn’t bring it up in conversation with Muriel, as to what exactly these orders are for! It’s enough to drive anyone insane!

Once she’s gone he looks over the manual for another half hour, then starts with the Internet orders, processing them in the folder on the computer where incoming orders are stacked. Curiously, the orders say simply “Number of Units” with a number after them and give a customer’s name, address, and the total price. There is a description of the Item as well, which says on Product A, Product B, Product C, etc. The prices vary from \$1.95 to \$1995.00, the product letter coinciding with the price, A being the cheapest, XX being the most expensive. It is very strange. Is this a money laundering scheme? A drug trafficking scheme? Are they selling secret classified intelligence information to other governments? Or is it a used auto parts operation? Who knows and who can tell. In the manual he scours every word for a clue, but none is to be found.

This is the damnedest job he has ever had.

He decides it’s time for a break and makes his way to the bathroom. On the way he runs across the room with the question mark on it and slows down. He stops in front of the door and looks both ways, making sure that no one is looking. He’s sure the door must be locked but tries the handle anyway. He turns it and, surprise, it opens, but what he sees what’s inside he lets out a yelp and closes the door quickly, then looks around again to see if anyone has noticed him. But the coast is clear. His heart is pounding. His palms are swearing.

Could he really have seen what he saw? Five or six suits hung up not just on hangers but on what looked like human skeletons dangling from hangers? He must have been

imagining it. He takes a deep breath, looks both way down the hall, then calmly turns the door handle again, but this time it's locked.

When he gets back to his desk, he starts answering the phone. Apparently, Muriel has gotten his line hooked up.

He answers the phone in the appropriate manner. "A-Vix Products. How can I assist you today?"

"Hey there, pinhead. Let me have 24 units of Product X."

"Certainly. No problem." He opens up his computerized order form. 24 units you say?"

"You got something growing in your ears? Yeah, that's what I said, Beauregard." Okay. Maybe just a cranky old guy.

He gets the man's name, address, credit card number, and enters the 24 units, Product X, and the total comes up automatically. \$ 32,833. Wow, this guy must have a large credit limit on that card.

But, what the hell. Maybe he'll give it a try, try to figure it out. I mean, almost \$ 33,000 the guy's buying and Tom has no idea what for. Is it something Tom could get arrested for? (On his tour with Muriel, he had noticed various cameras located near almost every exit and doorway. There was even one on the way to the restroom. What was that all about?

"So, Mr. Dumas, would you like your purchase gift-wrapped?" No, that was totally out of line. That was definitely not in the employee manual."

There was silence at the other end of the line for a moment. Then the old crab burst out: "What the hell, are you some kind of smart ass or something? Do I have to talk to your supervisor or something? Do you know how long I've been doing business with your company?"

At the word "supervisor," Tom felt a panic in his chest. His first call and already they were asking for his "supervisor." How would that look?

"Ha, ha, just a little joke, Mr. Dumas. No offense intended. Just trying to keep the spirits up, add a little levity to your day. And...give me a break, please, Mr. Dumas. It's my first day on the job."

"Ha. Yeah, okay. Don't worry. This is just between you and me. No offense taken. Just process my order and get the stuff out here. That's all. My lips are sealed."

"Excellent. Thank you. I'll process that order right now. Thank you...and...I mean A-Vix Products thanks you for your business. Have a blessed day." (Yes, that had, in fact, been in the manual.)

"Same to you, young man. Same to you."

Now what the hell was that all about, the blessed business? This place was getting funnier by the minute.

As he sits there staring at the phone, an email pops up on his screen. From Lloyd Lawson, A-VIX CEO. He opens up the email. It's talking about the bad economy, that business is down generally but that there's nothing for employees have to worry about. Our profit margin is stable, the email says. In fact, because of the last month's strong revenue figures, free donuts have been place at the file cabinets that border each group of cubicles.

He hears a sigh, a sort of collective sigh, then sees people, coworkers, droving past him, smiling, smacking lips, rubbing their hands together. "Donuts," he hears one white-shirted stout man with black-framed glasses say as he walks by, Tom feeling the breeze as he walks by. Something out of a comic, a cartoon. He gets up and peers around the corner. There's a small herd of people surrounding an open box of Krispy Kremes. "Blueberry," one person says, "I just love blueberry donuts."

"Okay," Tom says, holding back, keeping himself from diving into the fray, even though he had nothing to eat this morning and his stomach is growling. But...this is just a little bizarre. They're donuts, for Chrissakes.

Just as he's standing there with arms crossed, a voice sneaks up behind him.

"It's great what these guys do for the company. I mean . . . isn't this just a great place to work?"

He turns around to face the person with the exuberant high-pitched voice.

"I don't know," Tom says. "It's my first day."

"I thought you looked unfamiliar."

"Yes," he says. "I'm very unfamiliar." He doesn't know why he says that, but it leaves an awkward moment in their conversation.

"Stacy Highbald," the woman says. She's a plump woman, in a large black dress. And now she's holding her small hand out to him. He shakes her hand. She pumps his heartily. When he lets go of hers he feels the residue of the sweat on her palm, but doesn't want to wipe it off (his first inclination), too awkward, with her standing right there.

"Anyway, welcome. . ."

"Tom. Tom Jinks."

"Welcome, Tom Jinks, glad to have you aboard!"

He feels a sudden shift in the ship, feels like he's about to fall over. He's not sure why, but rests against his cubicle wall, which seems more than a little flimsy.

Stacy grabs his arm with a meaty hand.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah, okay," he says, then straightens up, the little flashbulbs in his head fading out now. "Guess I just haven't got me sea legs yet."

She looks at him oddly. It was a joke, he wants to say. One that followed the "Welcome aboard." Never mind, he thinks.

"Well, as long as you're all right."

"I'm fine, fine," he says, getting off the wall and walking around a bit, to show here he is, in fact, all right.

"Okay, well if you need anything or just want to talk, I'm in cube A 2-121Z. Right down that hallway," she says, pointing down a row of identical cubes.

"Great, Stacy. Thanks."

As he's walking back to his cube he almost runs into another coemployee, who's too busy sucking cream out of a donut in his napkin as he walks, penguin like, to watch where he's going.

"Sorry," Tom says.

"No, my bad," the man says. He's short and round, balding on top with a short-cropped beard.

After a moment of awkwardness, the other man extends his napkin hand, but it has cream on it and, thinking better of it, withdraws it.

“Sorry,” he says again. “Mel Begum. You must be the newbie.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, the newbie. Tom. Tom Jinks.”

Mel smiles. “Good to meet you Jinks. They set you up with anyone for lunch yet? They never think about doing anything like that on a guy’s first day, so if you don’t have other plans, I’d be honored to do the lunch thing with ya’.”

“Cool, Mel. That would be great.”

Tom tells Mel where he’s located, and Mel says he’ll stop by at about five of 12. Then he goes back to his donut and on his way back to his cube.

For two and a half hours he takes orders over the Internet and over the phone, all the time trying to pry information out of the customers as to what it is he’s selling them, but not getting one bit of information. A couple of the customers are almost laughing at him, like it’s a big joke. After a while the intrigue of trying to get information almost makes the job interesting. Every once in a while Muriel shows up to see how he’s doing. She has this way of sneaking up behind him, spooking him a couple times when he doesn’t see her.

He’s just put the phone down where there’s a knock on his cube wall. He looks up to see Mel, the donut eater.

“Five to twelve, Tom. What do ya’ say? About ready for some grub?” No sooner does he open his mouth to answer than Muriel shows up with her clipboard and a strange look on her face.

“Tom?”

“Yes, Muriel?” he says, with a half-cocked smile. He doesn’t like the look on her face.

“I’ll come back,” Mel says, waving, than waddles away.

“Mr. Reed would like to see you in his office.”

“He would? Okay, I was just about to go to lunch with Mel, there, and. . . .”

“Yeah, well, no. He needs to see you now, I’m afraid.” She’s staring down at her clipboard, tapping absently on it with her pencil.

“Sure, okay,” Tom says. Then gets up and follows after Muriel, not knowing what to think.

She brings him to Reed’s office, knocks, then leaves him with the man. He’s still behind his desk with a cigar, just like he had been this morning.

Reed waves him in. “Come in, sit, sit, young man.”

Reed is smiling at him as Tom sits in the leather chair.

“Tim,” he says.

“Tom,” Tom corrects.

“What?”

“My name’s Tom, not Tim.”

“Oh, oh, yes. Sorry about that. I’m sorry, Tim, but it’s not good news. I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.”

Tom’s stomach sinks. Had a customer complained about him?

“Is it something I did? If it is, I’m sorry, I’ll try to do better, I’ll, I’ll...”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” Reed says, taking a pull on his cigar and spouting blue smoke across the room. “There’s been a call for a lay off. Just came in.”

"A lay off? But you just hired me. I don't. . ."

Reed shakes his large head, and bellows with laughter that turns into a coughing fit. Hopefully, Tom thinks, he won't wind up on the floor again.

"Can I get you some water or something?"

Reed waves him off, as the coughing fit dies down. "I'm fine, I'm fine, Son. Sorry about that. It's these damn things," he says, addressing his stogie. "My wife keeps telling me, but. . . I'm just too old and stupid to change my ways, I guess."

Reed gets up from behind his desk and walks over to Tom, puts his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about this, Tim. It's nothing we could control. The word came just a few minutes ago from on high, corporate headquarters. It's the market. The economy. The times. There's nothing I can do about it."

Tom says, "Okay," and gets up.

"Sorry," the older man says, "I wish there was something I could do."

Tom is at the door now, walking down the hall.

"Best of luck to you," he hears behind him as he walks. "We'll send you a check in the mail. A full days' worth. No hard feelings."

Tom walks to the elevator, presses the button, then steps into the padded metal box of the elevator, which zooms down and opens its doors on the main floor. He walks into the lobby, past the "security assistant," who's reading the sports page, who doesn't even look up as Tom, feeling like an apparition, floats through the corporate ozone, through the revolving door, back out onto the street of the Market, the Economy, the Times, and Unemployment, where he loosens his tie, to breathe, breathe, walks across the bridge, where he stops, rips the tie off his neck and tosses it into the water, where it floats for a few feet, then sinks down, down, beneath the sudsy green surface, never to be seen again.

The Subway Men  
Steve Slavin

The subway stations in Brooklyn Heights were built hundreds of feet below ground level. The trains that stop there are either emerging from or about to enter a tunnel that was dug under the East River more than a century ago. There are three large elevators at both the Clark Street and Court Street stations to accommodate the rush hour crowds of commuters.

But these elevators don't go all the way down. They run from ground level to a mezzanine, which is a flight up from the station. When passengers get to the stairs, they're on their own. Of course, this is no problem for the 98 or 99 percent of us who can manage stairs. But the disabled, the frail and elderly, or parents with strollers are out of luck.

Still, there are often kind souls who are willing to assist these folks down the stairs. There was a young man in a wheel-chair who I sometimes saw at the Clark Street Station. My friend, Susan, introduced us one morning. He sat in his chair at the top of the stairs, waiting for someone -- anyone -- to carry him down to the station.

He always wore a suit, and evidently worked in "the City." He never spoke. He just sat there, waiting. So, after having been introduced to him -- his name was John -- whenever I saw him I would say, "Hi John," and then carry him down the stairs.

Trust me, he was very, very light, or I never could have done it on my own. Sometimes another person would come along and offer to help.

I was in constant fear of tripping, or of having someone knock into me. What if I lost my balance? Even macho men are sometimes scared.

What I found so strange was that John never said a word to me. To this day, I don't know if he couldn't speak, or just chose not to.

I think that many passengers -- those who bothered to think about it -- must have admired John for making such a difficult commute each day -- and managing to support himself. In sharp contrast, subway riders are regularly pestered by panhandlers who go from car to car, loudly proclaiming their tales of woe, and asking for spare change.

And here was someone who was certainly much worse off, going to work every day, and never saying a single word.

There's another man I've seen on the subway. He has no legs, just stumps. Like John, he never speaks.

He gets around on a square plywood platform, about 30 inches by 30 inches. You would think it would be supported by four wheels, perhaps skate wheels. But no wheels are visible.

He holds the handles of two circular chunks of rubber or plastic, which he uses to propel himself by pushing them against the floor. He reminds me of Sidney Poitier in the movie, *Porgy and Bess*.

He always wears a sleeveless tee shirt. His bulging biceps, triceps, forearms -- and his powerful torso give him the look of a serious weight-lifter.

I figured out that his platform is supported by a single skate wheel. This was even before I actually saw for myself that it did. And that he would not have been able to get from one car to another if he had more than that one wheel. Even a second wheel -- let alone a third or fourth -- would have almost certainly slipped between the train cars.

He kept a tin can, about the size of a one-pound coffee tin, directly in front of him. He would propel himself a few feet forward, then lift his can. Almost everyone put money into the can.

It would take him a few minutes to work his way through the car. He never asked for "spare change." He never said, "Thank you" or "God bless you." He never even shook the can.

Sometimes he was accompanied by a boy, who looked about six or seven. Was this his son? Was today "Take your child to work day?" And did the boy realize that his father was risking his life every day he went to work?

When they got to the end of the car, the little boy would open the door and step between the cars. The man would catch hold of the door as the boy reached to open the door of the next car.

Sometimes they did this when the train was moving, and sometimes when it was at a station. The question in my mind was this: How could he possibly get from one car to the next? There was a small gap between the cars – about three or four inches.

I watched him closely. He would propel himself forward, quickly reach under the cart, and somehow yank it an inch or two off the floor, and manage to land on the edge of the next car. When he was alone, he had to immediately grab the door handle, pull open the door, and roll himself into the car.

Each time I saw him do that, I could feel my heart in my throat. I wanted to discuss this with the other passengers, but we were all probably too embarrassed to say anything. It would have been far too cold-hearted for strangers to have that conversation.

I never mentioned the subway men to anyone in the neighborhood, although I was curious if anyone knew anything about either of them. All Susan knew was John's name, and even that information was second- or third-hand.

Long after I had moved from the Heights, I ran into my old friend, Mary. If anyone had any information about the subway men, it was she. A Heights resident for most of her life, she always had the latest gossip.

But when she asked if I remembered the guy with the platform, I had a terrible feeling. Seeing the panicked look on my face, she broke into a wide grin.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief. And I said, "Yeah." But I wondered if we were talking about the same guy.

Then she asked, "Would you say there is anything that sets this guy apart from all the other guys with wooden platforms who go car-to-car?"

I nodded "yes."

She smiled. And then, watching closely for my reaction, she held up one finger.

"Mary, you saw that too!"

"Of course!"

"The guy had such ingenuity."

"Ingenuity and desperation."

My eyes began to tear up. This was the conversation we had both been craving. I confessed to her how greatly I admired this man for his determination, his bravery, and for his humility.

"And his love," added Mary.

Now we were both crying.

Baubles in the Grass  
Cassidy Trom Wellons

We bought the place because of the way it looked. One-hundred-year-old wood paneling. Ceilings as tall dumpster edges. Wood floors than turned and turned in middle like they were being sucked into a whirlpool, only they went up instead of down because the place was old and the edges of the rooms were saggy. We bought the place because we liked these things. Or the photos of these things.

Sight unseen, they say. It wasn't our first home flip, and we didn't think it would be our last, but who can say, we say now, the definition of last. So we moved. New city, new life. You'd think we had something to leave behind but we didn't.

We didn't then, I mean.

We had been there six months when they found her. The girl was young. Pink leggings torn at the knees. Pigtails wrapped at the ends by elastics with colored baubles in pink and green and blue. We didn't know how young she was. We didn't know a lot of things except that they found her in our yard, in the back of this decrepit house, stashed between the air compressor and the toolbox Barney had gotten off Craigslist two years back. It's like a crime novel, Barney said. We told each other that we were glad we didn't find her, and we were. Who can imagine?

It's been a year now. We finished the house in March, put it on the market and sold it in three days. We didn't mention the girl because nobody really cares about those things, not those kind of people, not in this kind of neighborhood. She wasn't one of them. We knew this. So when we opened the house for showings, we pointed out the places where the wallpaper had once turned pulverulent at the edges. And the spots where the ceiling once sagged like wet paper. They never cared about these things either, but we told them because we were proud, because we wore the work on our shoulders like badges. We had stayed and finished despite her, we wanted to say, but we didn't.

We left the city after the sale, moved back to Chicago, rented an apartment with the money we'd made. We never said anything, about buying or not buying, but the answer was there. Barney signed up for cooking school. I got a job in a bookstore, working afternoons and weekends mostly.

Then two months ago, Barney moved out. I didn't cry, not for him at least. But sometimes, when the weather's bad or I walk past an old house on the way to work or I've had too much to drink, sometimes then, I cry for her.

Intolerable dickhead recounting a bad experience, a writing prompt from his critique group  
Richard Heby

When the ocean consumed, with overpowering force, what was once my whole life, now gone – memories, secrets, the phone number of the hot chick who works in the circus gift shop on this festive cruise ship – I did not jump after it. My phone, which was THE iPhone 7...plus that I waited on line (or rather paid a Task Rabbit to wait on line) for 5 hours to get, was now in the ocean and I did not jump after it. I did not jump after it despite that there's a picture of my ex on it, in the rain, with her nipples showing through her white t-shirt. And what difference if I had? No amount of rice would have saved it.

When my brother died, my mom and dad came into my room to let me know, and my mom told me to look out for my sister and be there for her, but sis was too little to know him and I was too old to like him yet. He was 8, with cerebral palsy; he fell down the stairs and collapsed a lung. No one was there when it happened. I got home from school and saw him stiff as winter road kill, sprawled on the staircase, his foot touching the second to last stair. He didn't even make it all the way down.

When I was in grade school I used to run up and down the stairs, taunting my brother because I could do it and he couldn't. He couldn't even walk and barely talk so I don't know why that brought me such joy. Maybe because my parents were so preoccupied with him that they rarely had time for me. I guess, Jeff, my brother, had been trying to get on those stairs ever since.

I was 14 when Jeff died and I didn't go the funeral because my parents suggested that I might be too sad, and I agreed, but they took the baby because she wouldn't know better and I went to the park instead and got a bloody nose and no one even punched me that day. I left my bloodstained shirt on so my parents could see but they didn't come home till late and I was asleep.

Anyway, after my mom told me to look after my sister, my dad came up to me, pat me on the left shoulder and said, "your whole life you just try and stay afloat, but we all end up drowning anyway." I don't know if this was in reference to my brother and his hospital bills (that my parents couldn't pay because they didn't have the right healthcare), or it was my dad foreshadowing his own suicide exactly 9 months later.

So I didn't jump in because I didn't wanna drown any faster than I already am...I wanna stay afloat as long as I can and everyone thinks it's selfish but you know on airplanes they tell you to secure your mask first before helping others, and they tell you that for a reason, because you can't be a help to anybody until you help yourself, well at least that's what Jim from AA says whenever he sees me buying Colt 45 at the corner store.

"When you gonna join us again?" he asks mournfully, and instead of telling him that I don't need his high and mighty 12 steps to god, I just say, "I've made my own peace, Jim."

I leave and the clerk adds my purchase to my store tab and I drink about 3 dollars' worth in a laborious swig in the front seat of my truck, and I think of drinking the rest and accidentally crashing into a tree but that sounds like a pain so I just finish the first bottle and go buy another, plus a pack of smokes, and I pay in cash.

"No store credit this time, Mr. Rob?"

"Just cash for now, my friend".

I smoke a cigarette and think of my kid who I haven't seen since her first birthday and I'll probably not get invited to another one of those after what happened to the couch and kitchen that night, a lot of blood...but she's almost 2 now, and I've never been sober on her birthday, not even the day of her birth, and so I want to be sober this year even if I'm not with her. And I have no pictures of her, and I wish I could say Kelly took them all, but no, the photos were on my phone, which is now in the ocean, so yeah, even though I would have drowned it's true that we all drown in the end anyway, so might as well go after something while you're still afloat.

The Box  
Anna O'Brien

Mother gave me The Box for my twelfth birthday. Upon reflection, twelve seems an awfully tender age for such a responsibility.

The Box was small and perfectly square, probably three inches on all sides. It was made of thin balsa wood so soft it would savor the impression of your fingernail, embracing the slivered dent in its grain forever.

Opening The Box on my birthday at the kitchen table under Mother's stern gaze, I held my breath, my heart hammering against my ribs. Mother turned the oil lamp up so I could see better and there, in The Box, stood about twenty miniature people looking up, shielding their eyes from the glare of the lamp.

I released my breath in a whoosh, aware too late that the people in The Box felt it as a gale. One individual fell down. I leaned forward and counted. Yes, twenty. My responsibility now.

Twenty was a reasonable number. Mother had good sense. Twenty was enough to feel I had a community—a respectable population—but small enough for a twelve-year-old to manage. Some children I knew at school were given Boxes containing one hundred or more—practically entire towns. I empathized with these classmates as they struggled to cope with the inevitable riots and fires that broke out in their crowded Boxes. I cringed hearing muffled, tinny shouts as the children walked the sidewalks clutching their Boxes, their eyes red and pinched and shoulders hunched with a burden they knew they could not lift.

I was a nervous child by design, prone to crying fits at the sight of a dead dog on the side of the road or burnt oatmeal on the stove, among other seemingly trivial events. I couldn't trust myself to muster resolve when it was usually required and dreaded the day, chosen by Mother and left as a surprise to me, I was to receive The Box, with all its unknowns and unpredictability. For these reasons, I was grateful to Mother for starting me with twenty.

At the table on my birthday, Mother then served me a piece of cornbread drizzled with honey. I took one more look at my new responsibility, taking stock of the population's general health and character, and replaced the lid. Eating the sweet, rare treat, I felt the relief of a reasonable demand be crushed by the weight of what was expected of me. Somehow, the inhabitants—my inhabitants—had to survive, even thrive. The cornbread, dry and glued with honey, caught in my throat. I choked.

Days passed and I hardly touched The Box, lifting the lid sparingly for a quick check to remind myself they were still in there. My twenty stood quietly, peering up at me, whenever I stole a glance. They seemed sensible. The tension in my shoulders slowly lessened over a few days.

It was understood, perhaps taught at school though I don't recall specifically, that we would receive no advice on how to manage our Boxes. They were a Test. The general message was: manage your Box and you are ready for adulthood. Manage the miniature successfully and you graduate to life-size. It was never clear how our management was evaluated. More disconcerting to me was that I never knew what happened to children who

couldn't manage their Boxes to the satisfaction of this mysterious, omnipotent proctor. They just seemed to drift away.

Passive as I was, I resorted to watching my Box. My inaction was itself an action. Sometimes as I gazed into it, silently thanking them for not building ladders to escape or killing themselves off in mass suicide, I became aware of Mother standing in the doorway, watching. I would turn to look at her, my eyes filled with questions I couldn't ask. She would meet my gaze with a hard stare, devoid of anything readable then leave.

I came to understand that over time, every Box had its ups and downs. Some weeks, unrest left the inhabitants maimed, some died. In other months, the population would remain peaceful and experience growth. Some inhabitants in Boxes I'd heard about built structures. Other times, statues or monuments were erected then destroyed. I believed that if you paid close enough attention, you came to settle into a rhythm with your Box, perhaps almost develop a rapport. Reports of erratic inhabitants, I decided, were merely a reflection on a child's lack of study. I suggested this theory to Mother one day after school. She considered me with hard eyes, lips tight and thin, dark hair in a knot at that lump where spine meets neck.

"Perhaps," she said, refilling my milk glass and returning to a pot of something on the stove. Despite feeling deflated, I marveled that the droplets of condensation on the cold glass would be swimmable ponds in my Box.

Some children, I learned, put things in the Box. Food, iron filings, toothpicks, thread. Others—few, but with a large reputation—were cruel. I heard of one boy who dumped his Box on the table and let his cat loose. Someone else took a magnifying glass against the sun and zapped her Box's inhabitants like ants. I don't know what happened to these children, the results of the Test kept hidden, never revealed, and even to the ones who took it. Was it pass/fail? A scoring system? I never found out.

I don't remember exactly how long I had mine. I never put anything in there, being too pensive and frozen with indecision to decide what exactly to add. Everything had its pros and cons. Add water for hydration and you might drown them. Put in a paperclip for a structure and they might make weapons. Drop a dusting of sugar for food and you could attract ants. My Box didn't seem to need anything. Somehow they managed self-sufficiency without my intervention.

After a while my constant anxiety about their presence waned. The Box stayed on my dresser. I opened it up in the evenings as I studied long division or wrote book reports. I would read out loud or sometimes simply fall into an introspective trance, absent-mindedly gazing into the Box, chin cupped in my hand. Mother would sometimes silently catch me in this reverie as she stood in the doorway, only to disappear into the dark hall if I were to turn my head.

At some point, Mother took the Box away. That was it. I don't know where it went or what happened to those inside. Whether it was subtly indicated through filial understanding—the deafening muteness of bloodlines—or simply no news was good news, I came to surmise I had passed.

And subsequently, I grew up.

Now, heavy with my first child, I'm aware of many new responsibilities that await me. The care and raising of an infant; her education; how to pick what my mother taught me to teach to her; when to give her The Box. Should I plan to do so at twelve? Or later,

perhaps. Let her age a little more. Secretly give her the gift of time, which she will thank me for long after I'm dead.

I gaze in the mirror and see my protruding stomach, noting now how my hair is tied back at the base of my neck. I notice how much the woman staring back at me resembles Mother. If I squint I can replicate her hard, dark eyes. Somehow, I feel, I'll know when the time is right.

Spankies  
Peter Beckstrom

The long fuse snaked down my knuckles danced in the breeze working itself through the school's parking lot. This 'cracker was like an M-80 the same way a sparrow is like an eagle. If these 'crackers exploded in one of your dick-skinners, your clapping days were done. It was more than a game we played; it was a measure of manhood. I felt this pressure to perform even more under Samantha's baby blues.

From the bed of his pickup, Samantha next to him, my buddy Daryl pulled at the crotch of his oily Wranglers. He wore them a size too small to make his package look bigger because his ex-girlfriend told the volleyball team he had a small pecker. I told him not to sweat it because she was a loose whore. Not like Samantha. Samantha was blonde with tits so big you could see her rounding a corner and still have time to comb your hair and brush your teeth. She rolled her cheerleader skirt at the waist. It sat high on her thighs. You could see her gold spankies when she twirled.

"Sonny, you ain't gonna beat me. I had one fuse down jus' inside the cracker before tossin' it." That was a lie, but I wouldn't call him on it. He had enough shit going on between his Mom back on the foil and what he did to the geometry substitute with the protractor. I twirled the fuse like the blade of a helicopter in his direction. My eyes drifted back to Samantha's thighs.

She was waiting for her dad—Randy. Cheerleader practice had been over for thirty minutes. She lied to Randy about when it ended, so he'd get her after the other cheerleaders left. Otherwise, he'd holler and whistle at them. I saw him hit her once in the chainsaw aisle at Fleet Farm when he thought no one was around. I crouched down behind a WD-40 display because I didn't want him to know I saw. Randy was my Dad's foreman at the See-Tac mine and always got on his ass about something or another. I didn't want to be the reason Dad caught more flak. I told Samantha at a Pep Rally I'd whoop Randy's ass if she wanted. She asked if I was an 'ass guy' so I thought she may give me a piece.

"Ain't you even scared a smidge? If that thing goes off in your paw your days of pocket pool during study period are over," Samantha said.

"Maybe then you'll lend me your cue." She gave me a look like I pulled a thumb out her ass and she enjoyed it. The fuse was nearly inside my palm. A pebble of sweat broke at my temple and slid down my sideburn. I heard gravel grind beneath tires. Randy pulled up behind Daryl's pickup in his beat-to-shit Bronco with the windows down.

"Your Daddy know you playin' with fire, boy," Randy said.

Samantha fixated on me or the 'cracker. I couldn't tell. I hoped it was me. My hands got the shakes. Another inch from the fuse vanished into white, wispy smoke. It was nut up or shut up time.

"If you don't tell, I won't tell about you hittin' your daughter." My eyes followed the spark eating away at the fuse. I could hear Randy jam the stick of the Bronco into park. The vinyl crinkled as he leaned into the shotgun seat. Jitters settled into my legs. The fuse was coming to the nub.

"You worthless little shit. I hope that thing goes off in your greasy paw. You'll be just like your Daddy; useless as an asshole on an elbow."

Chewing the inside of her cheek, Samantha looked at her Dad then turned those blues on me. I tossed the 'cracker toward the Bronco's rear window behind him. A tail of curled smoke followed as the 'cracker closed the space between us. Randy didn't have time to move away. He didn't have time to shout. He didn't have time to think about what time he had, but he wore this look like someone just jammed a thumb in his ass and he didn't like it, not one bit.

The 'cracker landed on the backseat and exploded with a sharp snap followed by a deep thwomp. The air expelled from the Bronco smelled like sour Pabst and jean fart. Randy's mouth closed and his eyes turned up reaching for the back of his skull. Blood pooled in the wells of his ears overflowed and trickled down the scruff of his cheeks. I swear I could see chunks of eardrum stuck to his stubble.

"You're crazy, Sonny. What the fuck is wrong with you," Samantha said?! Using the rear, passenger side wheel as a step, she got down from the bed of the pickup. On the way you could see every square inch of her gold spankies.

I thought she would've been impressed or happy—at least not pissed. She'd never give me a piece after what I did, not a nibble. Since I was already in three shades of deep shit for what happened, I went for the gold. My fingers spread, I dug right for the middle of those spankies. I grabbed a handful of her that got me more than just a piece of ass.

Samantha kicked a leg out that caught me square in the reset button; checked me out before my body met the gravel. I must have only been out for a few seconds because when my lights came on Samantha was in the Bronco's driver seat tearing out of the lot, tires spitting roosters of gravel. I'd never forget that handful. I'd remember it every time I was rolled up on some heifer after bar close.

Daryl leaned over the side of the pickup. "You didn't beat me."

I picked myself up and wiped dirt from the seat of my Levis. "Fuck you, Daryl, and your lil' baby dick."

Avuncular Schadenfreude  
Jack Bristow

Uncle Morgan used to always pop his head into my doorway, to inform me of the most terrible headlines from the newspaper.

“Hey, Davey, have you heard the news? There was this huge plane crash in Western Germany. Killed three hundred people--even a few toddlers!”

Externally, I would always nod my head, and thank him profusely for informing me about the latest international tragedy. Inwardly, however, I always wondered why Uncle Morgan took such delight in the ultimate misfortunes of others: Death. Rampant, unjust carnage. It was almost like as though Uncle Morgan had gotten off on the misery of others.

One time I mustered up enough courage to ask my father about it, when Uncle Morgan was at the store. “Uncle Morgan wanted to be an actor, Davey,” Dad explained to me. “It never quite worked out. So he’s a bit jealous of others. He thinks other people have more than him.”

“But why does he like it when they die?” I asked, naively.

“Because,” Dad said, working on a motorcycle engine in the garage, “He feels other people have it better than him. When their relatives die, he feels things have been evened out, as it were. Pass me that wrench, Davey.”

A few weeks later just the two of us were in the kitchen, Uncle Morgan and I. He was making himself a baloney sandwich. I simply walked in to grab some punch from the fridge. While I was pouring the contents from the bowl into the cup, Uncle Morgan seized me by the arm. You could see the sick satisfaction on his face, those bushy eyebrows bobbing up and down with expectation. There was a gleam in those turquoise-colored eyes of his, I swear.

“Hey Davey,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. “Did you hear about that missile attack in Syria? Five hundred dead, including women and children.” As he said the last half of that sentence--women and children--he was practically salivating. You could almost see the spit surrounding his lips.

“Look,” I told him. “I really don’t like to hear stuff like that.”

A perplexed expression engulfed Uncle Morgan’s face. “Stuff like what, Davey?”

“Stuff like people dying,” I said. Finally, I knew I had to do it. I had come clean. I continued: “Airplane crashes, warfare, dead women and children. I just don’t see much humor in that stuff.”

Uncle Morgan held the newspaper aloft, excitedly, passion flowing through his hands, his arms, his wrists. “I’m just quoting what’s in here, Davey. Real news. Real events. Do you want to shoot the messenger?”

I put the punchbowl back into the refrigerator. “Just don’t tell me about it. I don’t want to hear any more about other people’s misfortunes. It disgusts me.”

From then on, Uncle Morgan never repeated those news stories of woe to me. However, he still kept relaying them to my father, my mother, with the same unabashed gusto.

One day, he was in the kitchen, repeating one particularly disturbing story to my father.

"Mother of three, deliberately kills herself, three children, by driving car off dock." He elbowed my old man as read this from the newspaper at the dinner table. He had the newspaper outstretched and was reading the column to my father about the deranged woman, high on opiates and Prozac, who had suddenly decided to kill herself and her three children--two young boys and a small infant daughter--when the phone started to ring. Dad walked over to the phone, picked it up. "Morge, this call's for you." I saw dad hand the phone over to Uncle Morgan, and I saw a look on his face I had never seen before--joy. Unbridled, unrestrained joy.

"Sure. Yeah, yeah. I'll be there at eleven thirty tomorrow morning, sharp. Whatever you say, Mr. McMurphy." Then he slammed the phone down, and made his way back to the kitchen table.

"Who was that," asked Dad, finishing off his eggs.

"It was Princeton Productions," Uncle Morgan said, enthusiastically. "They want me to addition for a part--an actual part! I'm back in business, baby!"

"That's superb, Morge," said Dad.

"Fantastic," my mom said, patting Uncle Morgan on the shoulder.

.....

The next day, Dad was still working on the motorcycle engine in the garage. "Pass me the monkey wrench, Davey."

I dutifully handed Dad the wrench. Then I asked him, "Do you think Uncle Morgan is going to get the part?"

"I sure hope so," Dad said, in an unusual display of candidness. "Uncle Morge doesn't make enough off his Social Security checks. I always have to pay the difference. I can't be taking care of dear Uncle Morge forever."

A few hours later, Uncle Morgan returned home, a sour expression on his face.

"So, did you get the role?" asked mom.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Uncle Morgan went into his room, and fell into a deep depression, sleeping for days. Dad tried to bring him food on a small tray, but Uncle Morgan would have none of it.

"I don't want to eat. I just want to sleep. Leave me the hell alone, George."

Enter day three. Things were getting worrisome, for both mom and dad. They were talking about bringing in a psychiatrist and having Uncle Morgan taken away for something called "psychiatric evaluation"--something I had never heard of, at the time.

Just then, I had a hunch. "I'll fix this," I said, running to the front door and grabbing the newspaper, The Edgewood Eagle, from the doorstep. I brought it into Uncle Morgan's room.

"Hey, Uncle Morgan," I greeted him warmly, happily.

"Go away, Davey. I'm not in the mood, okay?" Uncle Morgan said, forlornly.

"I just wanted to read to you the latest headline is all," I said, sitting myself down on the rocking chair beside Uncle Morgan's bed. I started to read from the newspaper.

I started to read the gruesome story from the newspaper in a chipper tone, merrily, "Family of five, brutally murdered, killed in a late-night robbery gone awry." And then, I began to read from the column. "Among the dead, Joseph Harding, 47; Becky Harding, 43; daughter Lucinda Harding, six; son Bobby Harding, seven; daughter Lindsey Harding, fifteen; and Anthony, the family parakeet, who was found strangled inside his cage."

I gazed over at Uncle Morgan. I saw him laugh. Then I saw him laugh some more. Before I knew it, he was guffawing up a storm, slapping his knees, as though this was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

## Non-Fiction

### Gabrielle's Mother Donna L. Marsh

She has been gone for fifteen years, gone in body, but the essence of her, of her face framed by her hair, auburn or yellow or brown, depending upon the time of day, the light, whether it is wet or dry, her hair in voluminous curls, her eyes that accuse, or furtively glance because you and she, she and I, share a secret, maybe a smile, an ironic turn of the lip, this is the screensaver in my mind. She is with me more in death than ever she was in body, in life, because that is how it is. To salve your pain points, people say, "She is with you." But they never really expect this to be true.

As I drive my car on long stretches of highway where, at the end of this particular journey, I will sleep two nights in two different hotels alone, waiting for mornings when on each of the two I will visit a high school to talk about writing. On the way to the first hotel, in a small western New York town with little for this city woman to appreciate (no bars, no restaurant, no football on TV), I think of her, my daughter, my Vanessa and the child she might have borne, the baby Gabriel or Gabrielle.

I listen to the NFL channel on Sirius satellite radio, channel 88 hoping to hear of my beloved Saints. I switch off occasionally to hear my music. Football and music. She would have laughed at that. I hated football when she was here. She was the fan. And now my car, my life is bathed in the images of the fleur de lis, as if the New Orleans Saints cast a spell on me. The first time they won a game that I cared about, I sang "When the Saints Come Marchin' In" and that was it. I was owned. Heart. Soul.

But I switch to music on this trip so that I can sing. Songs that I recognize and to which I empty my lungs of air and my vocal chords of sound. This is spiritual exercise. The audible exhale. It took two years after 9/11 happened and she was lost to listen to music, forget singing. The first song I heard when first I began listening again, when I was first ready again to sing--"Touch Me in the Morning." It was the first song I heard and the last one for which I would ever have been prepared.

On this evening, though, I sang, "...with you I'm born again...lying straight within your arms, with you, I'm born again." Again, the most important word in the lyrical hymn; it marked the difference, the meeting place between life and death.

I sing loud for her, my daughter, who has been interred in dirt for almost fifteen years. Why now? Why on this trip? At this point on Route 86 west, minutes before I will arrive in Olean so that bright and way early I can visit Portville High School, why do I wonder now, what was the last song she heard and did she sing as loudly as I just did for her? So I ask her the first of two questions I will ask her out loud on this trip: What was the last song you heard, baby girl?

And this is a really bad place for me to go.

I left Portville on a warm, sun-etched through leaves of birch, and oak and evergreen trees, May afternoon and hit Route 16 toward Buffalo. Vanessa lived in Buffalo at one point in her early twenties. The brilliant panorama of highway cliff to one side, too brilliant, perhaps. I can see too clearly that the road is narrow, that only one car driving in the opposite direction, only one car whose driver might perhaps veer into my lane, can erase me.

Will I feel the impact? I wonder. Will I move painlessly, without seam from one way of being to another? Is that what happened to you? I wonder. Will you hold out your hand to me? Will you be wearing a flowing skirt and will your hair be wild and free as it was when you were here? Will I still be able to smell your fruited scent? Will I feel the impact and pain before I see you for real once again?

You are here with me and I know this. But not in the way I want. Not like that day when we drove from Syracuse to Yonkers and you had just been told by a doctor about a cancer marker in your blood, and you told me about this in code. Almost a by the way.

“You know, Mom, there are markers for cancer in our blood?”

“Our?” I was driving. We had just started the trip from Syracuse, veering to the right at the south end of Syracuse on Route 81. I glanced at you. You were trying to look forward without meeting my gaze. So I knew. You had the marker.

I reached across the front seat with my right hand and cupped it over yours. It was warm. You told me, your voice small, choked, “Don’t keep your cell phone in your lap, Mom. It’s dangerous.”

Your jaw tightened when my tear emerged.

I am about to go to that place, that place of missing her and needing her and alone on a highway, far from home, missing the warmth of Lando’s dogness when I ask the second question that means I am no longer in the present, but with her wherever she is in time or place: Will you take me out to dinner? Tonight? And then I stop asking and say to you, a demand: Take me out to dinner. I need you. And the tears are running down and wetting my lap and I don’t care. Because the grief means I still love you and you are still here.

Sometimes Robert says it’s the wine talking. “You go to that place. Stop drinking.” But now I am sober, stone cold, as we say. And I can’t stand not having a daughter. I can’t stand not having you to call to take me out to dinner or shopping, though you never liked shopping with me. You always wanted to pay your own way. And when we shopped, I did, as my mother did for me, bought you things. Things you could well afford to buy for yourself more than I could afford to buy for you. I understand this now. So, damn it, buy me dinner.

At the end of the drive, I am in Williamsville and I recognize the strangeness of synchronicity: I recognize that I have been here before. On Main Street. More than once. Vanessa lived in Lockport. And before that near Buffalo State, so we drove through Williamsville—the Main Street artery that took us to places we needed to be. We had driven together in those days of life where the road from one part of a city is irrelevant, the destinations all that matter. But now, driving past gas stations and hotels, and small restaurants, I remember the look of brick buildings, dental offices and funeral parlors as if both are ordinary in the same way. We went to the Buffalo Zoo once. Another time to Niagara Falls. And yet again to her apartment where she lived with her high school boyfriend, Mike, a guy she would leave time and time again, and a pot-bellied pig. I was always after her to keep neat and the apartment was as neat as she ever kept anything, except the drawers in the bedroom were all opened and spilling clothes, and as we sat on the floor of her apartment late into the evening, she delivered chips and pretzels and wine to the living room where we listened to the sales host on QVC enticing us to buy a grill, his voice covered by the snorting of the pot-bellied pig.

She was here. I was here. We were here together, driving to someplace else. The destinatory modes of life never matter, when we are all well and safe and alive.

The hotel I am staying in in Williamsville is a Hampton Inn, maybe a mile from the school I will visit in the morning. It is bright, upscale, larger than most of this brand. I go to my room, drop my bags and grab my laptop. The lobby is bright and there is a corner near the dining area where I will open the virtual world and search for a place to dine this evening. There I find a list, and reviews. Creekview. The pictures are beautiful, a fine dining feel. I like the menu—substantial protein. A view of a creek.

But the woman, dressed in the pressed navy blues of Hampton Inn business class tells me it is “not the best choice.” She recommends someplace else, a pub with a solid, stout Irish name that I can no longer remember. I look at the menu. The interior looks dark in the pictures. But I take her advice. I will head to a place with an Irish pubby feel, dark, with hefty burger and I feel my hunger grow. I am hungry though it is only early afternoon and I will wait for dinner to sate my appetite because that is my habit. One meal per day, one good, substantive protein-based meal. Until then I wait.

It’s still warm and sunny when I leave the hotel for a walk on Main Street. It is fully May, that time of year when winter’s bite is clearly past and the spring bakes promise. Across the street from the hotel is a second-hand women’s clothing shop. I walk to the right instead, in the direction of the school I will visit the next morning and the pub I will visit later in the evening. I am hoping there is something interesting to see, to explore. It is only 1:45 and there are too many lonely hours for me to pine for Lando. Is he home, watching television, missing me? I wish you could know him. And so I remember that I need you. And I remember that I can just ask you to come.

Remember when we were here? In Williamsville? I think I can guess where the road to turn off for Lockport is. I recognize the dental office. When one of the guys was driving (Robert? Mike?) I noticed it from the car window.

I see a card shop on a corner, across Main Street. In card shops we find things, the sentiments of the living, the promises we make to one another by habit, marked in ink on paper and wood and plastic. I wait at the light and cross but there is nothing in the shop that holds my interest. I decide that Williamsville has little to say, so I continue back in the direction of the hotel, still thinking of you and deciding you are here.

A couple emerges from a pub. They look to be in their fifties, at least. He is in a navy blue blazer with brass buttons, his hair thick and white and combed back. She is in a pale pink skirt with a beige sweater and she wears nude pumps. Her hair is blonde and bobbed. I stop them.

“Excuse me, are we near Lockport? Do you know which direction it might be in?”

They share a glance and, in a caesura, she turns to me and then away. “This,” she says, “is Williamsville.”

And because this street, this very street is where we once were together, I am, again, with you here. As if in the story of lives we pause, not in the drama of the subject or predicate of the sentence but at the conjunctive or preposition. We are here.

I take you to the second hand store where I find us at the almost end of our walk back to the Hampton Inn. I have shopped for you before. Remember, the days I would go to Marshall’s or TJ Maxx in the just post times, where the newness of you leaving was itself a finding, another thing, in itself a curiosity, an interest? Not yet the powerful loss, the recognition of I will never have you again.

The shop is deep. The entrance is flanked by two racks of clothes, the bait to get the women of Williamsville in the front door—tops and skirts and dresses, shifts mostly, in bright kelly greens and pinks and white. Lilly Pulitzer. I move in. Shoes and handbags: Louis Vuitton and Coach and the Michaels--Jacob and Korrs. We are bored. We touch a few things. I smell them. It’s what I do. Does this still embarrass you?

And then it’s time for dinner. I get into Nando the Fiat and drive the short, distance to look for the pub, realizing that the car needs cleaning out. Empty Diet Coke cans and a few spent tissues, and only one last full can for later. If I were not so hungry and wanting that glass of wine, I would have looked for a car wash first.

The pub came up too quickly and I missed the turn but in not even a mile, I see it--Creekview is on my right, in the parking lot of a strip mall. I rarely make snap turns of the wheel, but I did. And as I pulled into the parking spot next to a dark green, weathered building, I knew that I never would have chosen this. It looked, from the outside, dirty. A mess. I said to you, in that moment of recognition, “fine.” As in “fine-ah!”

And though I thought I might regret not looking harder for the pub, we went in anyway.

As early evening began to fall, the sun still full and sharp if not quite overhead, continued to warm the air, as a pierce of crisp cool, as if a freezer opened only for a second refreshed. I saw to the far end of the restaurant, an outdoor enclosed patio that was next to a creek. I asked to be seated there, but thought for a second about the chill. Would it descend? Would the sun's warmth abandon? How can I say this without making it trite that the creek water at that time of evening held the kind of white light that is like the blade of a knife? Black stones, green, grey, black water with lashes of white lights, water in motion, and above it the greening of trees, some still partly barren; if any day spoke spring, this was it.

I sat at the seat closest to the windows, and noticed the dead flies, and decaying wings of long gone moths, but the view was so grand, I did not care. I looked across the table to where you were not sitting. And I imagined that I was tracing your face with my fingers.

The young server, her hair in a tight ponytail, delivered a glass of Chardonnay and a shrimp cocktail. I devoured the shrimp, the sweet, nutty freshness of them swallowed almost whole. But I sipped the wine more slowly. Cold and dry, it was like drinking from the creek. One glass. I hadn't finished it yet when I had before me chicken parmigiana (grilled, not breaded) with a side of buttered broccoli. So I sipped and savored and wondered why anyone would say there was a better place to dine.

"Another glass?" the server asked.

"One more." Only two glasses and when the meal was finished, I was feeling the swirl. You brought the glory of the creek. Remember? As I left, the earth under my feet less settled, I thanked you. I clicked the lock to Nando, my sweet Fiat, and noticed when I sat that it might not be best to drive. I popped the top on the last Diet Coke and took two big gulps. Then I waited. I thought about how I wanted to hold you so much. And this time, I thought, Robert was right. It's the wine. But only two glasses?

I got out of the car. It was still comfortable, but the warmth was leaving the air. I needed to find a place to be until the wine blur bled out of me. The parking lot was not promising: a hardware store, a Laundromat, some boarded up storefronts. But across the lot, way beyond where I could see the sign, there was some sort of a shop. So I went there.

Angels hung on tiny wires and the scent of white sage hung on everything. There were boxes of stones, and books (all promising a path to other lives or a deeper understanding of this one), and there was sage in boxes, and clocks and figurines, and talisman of all kinds, and the woman proprietor was talking with a man and I didn't want to intrude but I needed to wait, to kill time. And, too, the irony of winding up in a shop like this where people who lived my kind of life, a life of longing for that which she can never hold was sated by trinkets and false promises. Did I roll my eyes? You would have. You would have, in another time, grabbed me by the arm and said, "Fuck this, I'll drive." And the moment I thought that, right after I almost laughed I felt it, the crush of your absence.

And at that moment the man left and it was just me and the proprietor—Jill. Jill with short, yellow blonde hair and deep blue eyes, with a beautifully lined, kind face.

So, I told her. That you were gone. That you had taken me to dinner. That I burned white sage to lose demons and she told me about her three daughters. And then the wine was gone, out of me. I still held the half can of Diet Coke in my hand as I paid Jill for a box of sage cones and a selenium rock. I was tired. Remember? I was going to say goodbye, but then Jill asked:

“Have you seen the waterfall?”

“Excuse me?”

“Across the street. There is a waterfall. You should see it.” She walked me out of the shop, pointed across the six lane intersection to a trestle. “Go past the overpass and there will be a little hill. Go down the hill and you’ll see it.”

I thanked her, but my real life kicked in. Lando is home. He needs me. I don’t really know this city. I’m not going to cross a street and go down a path and take a risk. I thought I’d walk back across the lot to Nando. And drive back to the hotel.

But I did not. My feet moved toward the traffic light. I waited for it to turn green and I crossed. I was just going to peek, but I could see nothing from above and when I passed the trestle, there was a gray paved path. It wasn’t very steep, but it reminded me of paths just like it, paths I walked with you many times in the zoo of my childhood and yours. When I got halfway to the foot of the path, there was a bench, and when I walked to the bench I saw it, all of it, the power of it—the rushing water, the healing, sounds of water crashing onto rock, onto earth. And the brown log, like an immense version of Lando, its stalk touching the bottom and top of the falls.

I cried then on your shoulder, never doubting, not for one second doubting that you had been waiting. I went down to the foot of the hill. There were more benches and people, older couples, a Latino family, the young boy emitted peals of laughter, the kind of laughter that is contagious, that enters you. All the while I watched the scene and the falls, holding my Diet Coke.

And finally I went back up to the first bench and finished my Diet Coke, warm now, not thirsty anymore but drinking it out of habit. Trying to prolong the last moments of sun, before night fell.

I went back up the hill to thank Jill. She was behind the counter, ready to close up. Behind her was a clock, a clock with the symbol, my symbol of the fleur de lis. I told her about my love of the Saints. That the symbol makes my heart beat faster and she waved her hand and said, “Look.”

They were everywhere. In every corner of the shop. Before I had come back again to express my gratitude, I had missed them. Them. The signs of my team, through song

and image and word, the team that had cast its spell, each fleur de lis, now so visible, could not have been more voluminous had they been crafted in neon light.

Jill said, finally, before I walked out of the shop for the last time, "It's the symbol of the archangel Gabriel."

How on earth could I have missed that?

## Flash/ Non-Fiction

The Shootist  
Carl Palmer

My brother asks if I would put his old momma cat out of her misery, handing me a rifle.

Why would you ask me to do that?

You like shooting animals, don't you? You shot the neighbor's dog.

It was in the pack killing Dad's chickens.

You were always shooting rabbits, squirrels and even a deer you shot down the hill  
by Smitty's buzzard barn I helped you drag home through the woods.

It was all meat for our dinner table.

You're in the Army. There's a war, people getting shot.

Aren't you shooting people over there?

I'm a missile systems technician, not a soldier.

I carry test equipment, not a weapon.

What about when you shot Daddy's cat?

We all saw you do that...

~

It was 1971. I was on military leave at the family homestead on Old Mill Road in Virginia for a few days before sending my baby, Kathy and my wife, Judy to stay with her folks in Germany while on my assignment to Korea for a thirteen month tour of duty.

Too nice to stay indoors, the whole family gathers in the front yard shade of the locust trees watching our toddler play on a blanket spread across the ground.

Dad has this stray cat he carried home from the factory yard where he works as night watchman. It's black other than the white scars around its nose and mouth, no front teeth causing it to drool through its split lip, one milky blind eye and only half a left ear. Dad walks up petting the ugly animal and sets it on the blanket beside Kathy.

No one is happy about that move. With everyone looking at me, I say,  
"Get that damn thing away from here right now! If it scratches Kathy, it's dead!"

"She's a good little kitty, she wouldn't hurt anyone."

Almost immediately Kathy screams. My baby is scratched.

I pick up the cat, take a shotgun from the utility room in the house and walk out the back door. Everyone hears the blast from behind the barn. I put the shotgun back in the house and return to my seat at the side of the blanket.

No one says anything, looking between me and Dad.

I wait until that night as Dad is getting ready to leave for work and let him know the cat is locked in one of his chicken coops behind the barn.

...and just so you'll know, I didn't shoot Matt's old momma cat, either.

## Science Flash/Fiction

Orchid, Squirrel, White Hot Star

Russell Hemmell

They first met on an Enceladus-bound probe. It was a rare Cymbidium orchid and he was an alien visitor – no name on records. With eyes-wide receptors, he admired in a stunned silence the color and fragrance of the only biological specimen of the spaceship apart from fruit flies. He rained pearl-like water drops over its stem, raising suspicion among the ship's AIs (he's an intruder) and alerting ground control on Earth Orbital Station.

He didn't care. Gentle and glowing in a golden halo, he explored the ship's remotest corners. He searched for inspiration in the AIs' memories, made humans by their human makers, and he liked what he saw. Delicate features of grace and beauty - crystal eyes, olive complexion and slender limbs. Skin that breathes, nose that twitches, mind that dreams. He became one of them, caressing the orchid's leaves with his brand-new hands and sleeping at its side in a slumber of bliss.

But flowers make for unlikely candidates for space travel, silent company apart. The experiment failed, the orchid died.

The broken-hearted visitor plucked its petals and withered remains, and implanted them into his flesh, to give them new life. A new companion. She grew up a squirrel, ferret eyes in a fluffy red mantel.

Happiness lasted longer, this time - twenty-seven months of that nine-year-travel toward the outskirts of the Solar System, chasing orbital slingshots and playing with asteroids. They enjoyed amazing visions of moonlets and gas giants in their vision cones, and long hours away from the sun path to rest in the shadows. He ignored that lack of gravity undermines soft tissues, sifts calcium out of the bones, and thins blood cells. The squirrel's heart slowed down, while DNA-embedded memories of captive living made her sad and moody.

The morning she didn't open her eyes was the day they crossed Saturn's rings, passing through a cascade of water-ice particles. That's beauty beyond beauty. You could have waited, the visitor said, kissing the rodent's tiny paws.

What will you become now - a dolphin, a man, a woman, an emerald stone, a grain of salt? I can't watch you waste away, not again, not any longer. Every death is a loss that every birth can't compensate in full. Carbon-based creatures seem born and wired to the cycle, but I'm not strong enough.

The visitor took bones and skins and tears, and left the ship - shedding his human form, bending the space-time, heading for the galactic center. Creation, antimatter and recombination - the orchid-turned-squirrel disintegrated in elementary particles and re-emerged into a new shining form, a white-hot nucleus from a nursery of stars. Pulsing x-rays in a glittering flare, it began contracting and transforming, churning out helium from its hydrogen core.

You're dazzling, my love - the visitor beamed, luxuriating in the pristine blue light

- and now you're made to last. For million years, for a thousand revolutions across the galaxy, until fusion is over. It's your turn, to watch me wither and fade.  
Just not yet.

## Art of Avoiding Chores Kitty Shields

There were six kids and a dog in our family, so keeping the house clean throughout the week was a losing battle. My father, the genetic source of our messiness, didn't notice. My mother, the anal-retentive control freak, did. So, at some point in their marriage, probably to keep their marriage, my parents agreed that Saturday mornings were for chores.

That said, I can count on my hands the number of times my father stuck around to actually clean. He was a master bullshitter and a fantastic sneak, especially for a six-foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man. His method was simple: the old bait and switch.

Here's how you avoid a chore in my father's infamous style. First, you set up the mark. My father began the day with the rest of us at the dining table, drinking tea, and eating two or three portions of breakfast. These extra portions were as much because he loved food as they provided an opportunity to assess my mother's mood. Assessing your opponent's mood is critical. For my mother, breakfast involved going over her ever-increasing list of things to do. If she was feeling stressed, this was the moment my father would step in, tell her some jokes, and reassure her it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

After breakfast, we would all break to our starting chore positions. My father disappeared into his office to 'clean,' which really meant pushing paper around. My mother never commented, probably because she was too busy keeping the kids on track. That was her downfall. See, my father would wait, listening for my mother's voice or rather the lack of it. When he couldn't hear her giving instructions, when she was engaged in a task that required more than ninety-percent of her concentration, that's when he'd dangle the bait.

The bait was another chore that he could switch for the ones she'd assigned. Like, he needed to make that deposit before Monday and the bank closed early on Saturdays. Or, the car needed an oil change since it was a thousand miles over the last one. Finding legitimate bait was key and he did it by saving a few adulting errands for the weekend.

Then, my father would make the switch, like any good magician, by distracting his mark with his hands. He would walk into the room and gesticulate wildly as he'd talk, making a case for why he had to run errands at that exact moment. Organizing the garage, which she'd been asking him to do for weeks, was suddenly just not as important as him getting to the bank. Cleaning out the gutters did not compare to making sure the car continued to run. When my mother looked up from her task, she was mesmerized by his gorilla-sized hands.

This routine was clockwork, so much so that us kids would exchange knowing glances over vacuums and dust cloths and then shake our heads as my father snuck out the back door. Over the years, his absence became such an institution that his arrival back home heralded the end of cleaning. The banging of the old car engine as he pulled up and the sound of the door creaking open signaled the real start of the weekend.

He would walk in with fresh lunchmeats, rolls, potato chips, pickles, and tomatoes for a grand feast. He'd peck my mother on the cheek, put the kettle on, and make her a sandwich. Exhausted, my mother would collapse onto a chair, take the offered sandwich, and realize that everything was done. Then, my father would smile, take a sip of another cup of tea, and tell her a funny story from his errands, and she would forget again that he'd avoided all of Saturday morning chores.

So maybe my father's style was really the old bait and switch and food. Bring back food for your mark. That helps avoid arguments and saves marriages, too.

A Good Rodgering  
Jason Half-Pillow

*Santa Cruz, California (U.S.A)*

I was on my way to the downtown Verve café to meet Richard, the coolest dude in the MFA program, who already has a novel published and was related by distant marriage of some adopted third cousin to James Buchanan, President before Lincoln, and, I've discovered, a real bungler who some think more-or-less started the Civil War. I can't remember the name of his novel but do remember it consisted of only one word, with no more than two syllables in it. I never looked at it but, to this day, remain firm in my conviction that it was unreadable.

The MFA types prefer the melodramatic and don't much like me mentioning the mistakes Buchanan made, and how those mistakes may very well have stemmed from a stomach disorder to which he paid much too futile attention while those few threads holding the Union together were steadily fraying – they want to think the war was some inevitability, though shrink even more from saying it, was God's will.

They grow angry listening to me contend that if something is inevitable, it must be willed. That there is no other way. They say, "Not true – it just is; things just are," and turn in a huff. Well, they don't; some do, and those are the ones I remember and those among the whole become "they" before too long. We all do that, don't we?

The thing they really hate, though, is my associating anything infirm with Richard. They really just hate me.

They are a confused lot. Richard's last name is not Buchanan and they always bring Richard up, so, as a student of U.S. History, my mind naturally turns to Buchanan and his intestinal problems. I am related to Davy Crockett and don't have his last name either. People are less impressed by my lineage than Richard's, which was nothing less than a travesty of historical understanding. No Crockett, no Buchanan; no Buchanan, no Lincoln. Someone in the program attended a Buchanan middle school and five others went to Lincolns. Mine was just called "South," named after a coordinate, I guess.

Such jokes are not approved of – the teachers say always choose the simpler word and I should say "direction" for "coordinate"; in no time, someone has said "use not utilize". They've been nodding since I was reprimanded for saying "coordinate" and now the nodding is almost frenetic except Richard; he keeps still to keep his hair in place, or, to be more exact, his hairs in place. He nods with his eyebrows. He raises them and drops his lips into a chimp like frown.

The girls didn't like what I said about Buchanan. That's because they are so enamored to Richard, and my mentioning Buchanan's physical illness in connection to Richard somehow knocked Richard down a peg or two – call it diseased by association. They'd already committed to their sophomoric adulation, so any change would have made them look like sophomoric fools, and they were all graduate students. Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. We are admonished about clichés. I ask where does an idiom stop and a cliché begin and am hated still further.

They were fools, though; all of us were.

All out of state, all paying full tuition, for something millions had that took them all nowhere, but each time I grumbled it was all a big scam, someone mentioned Richard, who'd been in the program two years, and look, he had a book published. I grumbled that the only reason we don't know that Buchanan had a grapefruit-sized goiter was because the skin flaps on his neck hid it. He had the neck of a turkey buzzard. You're jealous, they said. And millions of people don't have MFAs. I said I'd Google it, and was told not to bother. You can't believe what you read on the internet anyway and off they went again in a huff.

I spoke ill of Richard, by implication. Richard? I asked. The guy related to James Buchanan who needlessly plunged our great nation into fratricidal bloodshed? And they always walked off and went back early to class.

For a while I followed them, making my case. Most of the people in the program were girls, so I had to stop. They'd said harassment, and I said they'd have a hard time making that stick and quoted what, for them, were obscure Supreme Court cases that I thought everyone with an undergraduate degree should know.

I said Richard was the Ragged Dick of the program and got reactions that made me bluster and babble through ignored explanations about what kind of a figure Ragged Dick was. Everyone said they disagreed with me and everyone said also they didn't know what I was talking about. I was reported for saying Ragged Dick. That's what they said. I told the teacher – I refuse to say professor – and she said I was reported and I quoted back her admonitions about passive voice. She told me to go see the ombudsman and I desperately wanted to make a pun of that but instead asked where he might be and she said she had no idea.

I told the ombudsman that *Ragged Dick* was a literary character who had come to be shorthand for American upward mobility being a myth and asked hypothetically if it was verboten to reference literary and cultural and historical archetypes in college. I don't think she got what I was saying.

I commented on the décor and asked how she managed to get her desk through the doorway. She had no answer. I mumbled that "sometimes these things can be taken apart," and stood and approached the desk and grabbed an edge and told her, "Paul Bunyan couldn't disassemble this thing," told her it was cherry wood, that cherry wood pipes are best, that all my male relatives smoked pipes but you never see anyone smoking one these days and left, wondering if I still had that old cherry wood miniature Sherlock Holmes' style pipe and remembered my brother had stolen it during his short lived Peter Tosh phase and lost it when he fell asleep during a hash party in a canoe. I received a form letter a few weeks later saying the Ragged Dick investigation was closed. I kept the letter as proof that officialdom used the words Ragged Dick and thusly so could I. In the meantime, Richard's status was impervious to my assaults.

Richard was cool and his coolness radiated far from the wooded campus and all the way down to the flats, and he was thusly admired by the chicks at the Verve café, too. So, I'd devised a pretext to meet him there in hopes of getting some female attention via him, figuring that they didn't know anything about my Buchanan jokes.

They had truly gigantic, ugly abstract paintings on their truly huge, groovy, warehouse style wooden walls that were splintered and varnished unevenly on purpose. Music pumped out from all

directions and no matter how frantically I looked around, I could never find the speakers. They were camouflaged in something. I was sure everyone was being filmed too. Song lyrics interest me, but all I heard there were vocalists letting out short bursts of breath against a louder back drop of computerized drums and synthesizers. They were in tune, at least, but still, it sounded like nothing more than female robots getting nailed by something pneumatic. The music was just another example of how fame was unjust. Somehow, someone got to be the name and face for songs written by a computer and raked in millions. Maybe not, but someone made a lot, and none of it was just.

The cashiers were girls with nose and lip rings and were generally nice. There was a particularly annoying guy of maybe 25, who wore a San Francisco Giants hat and had nose and lip rings and always wore a well-pressed t-shirt that displayed his Asiatique tattoos. He was the assistant manager, and though always speaking cheerfully and helpfully, and even sharing personal information, he was still dull and conventional, and also very condescending. His claim to be a baseball fan was pure affectation.

He seemed to think his authority over his minions of nose and lip and eyebrow ringed girls extended naturally to the rest of us. It was hard to accept, and I could just tell that a lot of guys like me, who went there regularly, wanted to teach him a lesson about the laws of the jungle and kick his ass and, frankly, take one of the new employee girls who imprinted on him like he was some kind of Alpha duck, and well, give her a good rodgering in one of the unisex crappers.

When I got there, Richard wasn't there, so I had a God Damn coffee and got really panicky, and just sat alone facing an empty chair at a table between two others. To my right, were two German girl tourists, and I started with them a pleasantly ridiculous conversation. They giggled the whole time, enjoying, I think, their assumption that I was trying to score and enjoying even more the certitude that I would not. I wasn't trying to score, though the idea did cross my mind, but not at all seriously. To my left was a woman of 40 or 50, maybe pushing 60 – who can tell? – reading the New York Times and just as jittery as I. She was a regular like me and always read the first section thoroughly, and was now on A 13, reading about Putin's invasion of the Ukraine. I couldn't help throw a few incriminating glances at the girls, like the whole thing was their great grandfathers' faults, but when they threw back at me angry, fake pouting faces and then giggled, I laughed right along with them. The woman to my right snapped her paper to a new page loudly in disapproval.

Richard wouldn't show up because every microscopic move he made was consciously done to put you in an inferior place. I really wanted to kick his ass, too, and take all the girls in our MFA program into the faculty shitter and give them all a good rodgering, not to show them all who was boss, per se, but just to make clear to Richard that he wasn't.

But I instead contented myself with telling them all that millions of people out there have had little books published, but few have had printed anything of lasting literary merit, and among those few who had, like Stephen Crane – for example – how lasting the illusion of literary merit had proven to be was up to question. I asked how many of them had really read Faulkner – I mean every word, page to page – and actually understood it, and before the teacher could say I was taking us all off track, I would blurt out, "Just as I thought, none."

I once told the story of a man from Vancouver, BC, that my dad knew, who published a tiny book about his hometown that outlined its cultural mores, and how everyone thought he was a big fucking deal when he got the contract to publish it, and a bigger fucking deal when it was unveiled, and he was scheduled to read from it at Barnes and Noble, or whatever the Canadian version of

Barnes and Noble was, and everyone took to worshipping the ground upon which he tread, only to finish the story by saying that no one showed up at the initial bookstore readings, except a few deaf old ladies and grumpy men with axes to grind, who pestered him with hostile questions and argued he's got the origins of the region's peoples all wrong, to which he did nothing but bluster in return that he wasn't a professor, that it was just a cute little book, meant to be read for fun. Those in attendance who knew him, walked off sadly and left the floor to his psychotic critics. One man stayed to support the author should he return, with his arms crossed, smiling, like the disaster had not transpired.

That was my idiot father, who'd driven us all the way to Canada and checked us into a lousy roadside motel so we could watch all three scheduled readings, though, in the end, there were only two, and we left after the first one. The managers of the store fought with the author, saying he was really putting them in a bind, and that Saturday local author readings couldn't just be cancelled – it wasn't teaching, where you could just ring up a substitute. Well, he told them he wasn't coming, that it was humiliating, and all along, he'd had a gnawing feeling that the book was stupid and doomed to roll right off the assembly line and into the garbage and left and when my dad tried grabbing his elbow at the door, he jerked himself violently free, and went right to his car and spun out of the parking lot and went somewhere and got drunk with one of his Indian friends.

Three months later, my dad and I were back in Canada to go see some Beluga Whales that were on display at the BC aquarium and on the way, we dropped into a grocery store and saw all of his books in a little wire cage on top of a bunch of “as is” summer beach stuff – like inflatable beach balls and Spiderman swim fins – and then, stopping by the same store on our way back to America, I saw someone dumping it all into a dumpster outback and not blinking an eye and thus obviously not giving a shit, noticing only the Spiderman swim fins, which he took out and set next to the dumpster, intending to sneak back and get them sometime after work. My dad had left me in the car, which was why I got to observe the whole thing. I am sure he was buying booze and didn't want me to see. I went and grabbed the fins.

That is what comes of getting a book published. I wrote it all up in a little story and the teacher cancelled the class discussion about it and had me come to her office, where she rebuked me in the strongest way possible for consistently violating the aesthetic tenor of our assignments, and as I was leaving, warned me (incidentally) that my harangues about no one ever rising to the level of my dad's Canadian friend had become disruptive, and I should spare both of us the pain and embarrassment of getting the ombudsman involved. I had no idea what the hell an ombudsman was and before I could ask, she let me know he was a friend of hers but if I ever tried telling anyone she said that, she would deny it.

The German girls got ready to leave and everything was crowded and a tight enough fit that they had to squeeze past my table and on the way to standing up, the one on the bench with me ended up butting her thigh on my leg and then rose and put her butt right in my face, and next fell and braced her palm on my thigh and stayed there for a tantalizing second and pushed up off me and got off and went to her giggling friend at the door, where the two of them said simultaneously, “Bye!” elongating the word in a singing crescendo before giggling once more and leaving through the glass doors, as the music thumped along and some girl sang an alto, “Ah!Ah!Ah!” and then they were gone. I had the distinct impression that what they really wanted from me was a good rodgering, and just at that moment, in walks Richard with a copy of his own book and takes a damn seat and ruins everything – he ruined it because I saw the way they looked back at him after he passed and fell over each other whispering before disappearing at the end of the last giant pane of

glass past which there's the deli everyone goes too next door in two hours, during the lunch time rush.

Richard received from the older lady reading the Times a respectful greeting, like they'd met before, and she had about her the air of a matron, approvingly inspecting his appearance and aura and moving him to the front of an imaginary line of promising stock in front of which she would push some bridal-aged niece or grand-daughter of hers.

She and I are in here together every day and she's never nodded at me. I once asked if she thought Putin might one day send Russia back into Afghanistan, and she gave me a derisive hrumphh and snapped her newspaper open violently to an entirely new page, leaving me to look in shocked wonder at the giant, tantalizing black and white bra and underwear ad and then turn to the person next to me who had to have assumed I was lustfully admiring it and ask her if she ever imagined Syria would actually be a field of American battle.

I couldn't help but feel the same agonizing pain of wanting desperately to take the girl in the newspaper ad into one of the unisex shitters and give her a good old-fashioned rodgering. Then that asshole with the Giants cap came over and noticed me staring longingly at the ad with obvious lust, and then snorted at me and swiped my cup away and asked if I was going to get in line and order something else, and, at that moment in the recollection, Richard asks with similar derision what it was I wanted to talk about, and I say stupidly that I was hoping he'd give me some publishing advice.

I listen to him stammer on, reticent and secretive. It made me think of a guy I knew in high school who wouldn't tell you where he bought his clothes because he feared you going there and buying some for yourself. He asks me if we can switch seats. I know he wants to face the room, so he can see all the chicks.

I would like nothing more than to strip him naked and throw him in the shitter with the assistant manager and yell through the door that neither one of them will be coming out until they've both give each other a damn good rodgering and give that bitch with the Times a stethoscope and make her listen to it all through the door. But, I oblige his request readily and in the small space between the tables stumble over, inching sideways hunchbacked and maladroit and hear again the crack of the woman's paper and marvel that the U.S. really is in Syria.

I find upon assuming the position that his chair wobbles and spend the next five minutes feeling too big in it and constantly looking down at the one leg that is too short and asking what's wrong with this thing? I do that until he abruptly gets up and leaves and says that I'm not even paying attention and I've wasted his time. With his trim beard and wavy hair, he reminds of an offended Cavalier or some bit player in Romeo and Juliet fanning the flames of discord just when it seemed that things had calmed and the stars might be aligned.

He was right – I didn't listen to a word he said, but that lady with the Times did and kept saying, "Interesting!" She didn't care what he said – it would be interesting no matter what. I resolve to, one day, try letting someone talk and punctuate their saying with words like "interesting" and "oh wow" and "what did you do next?" knowing that for me, it wouldn't work. I would be deemed insincerely superficial. If only there was some tool that could pluck out whatever it was that gave me that appearance. I had been left alone and those were my thoughts – that I should try what others do, but it wouldn't work, and it would only draw out more how unlike them I was, and the image I'd

convey in my false robes would be on the wrong side of invidious. Next, I cursed myself for wanting to be what I hated.

\*

For the millionth time since enrolling in that money-sucking MFA program, I resolved to leave town and not bother telling anybody I quit, but instead, I turned up the next day to see how it would go, if anything might change, telling myself that since I'd resolved to quit, I could say and do anything, and if it didn't turn out well, so what? I would just leave. But if it did, well then, that would be...I didn't know the word to say to myself then, and looked up and saw everyone shuffling their papers and getting up and leaving class, three girls walking out smiling with Richard and the teacher standing at the old desk, her reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

She appeared nervous to me, and I realized we were the only two in the room, and I got up quickly and left and said good morning to put her at ease. I was sure she was embarrassed about having threatened me.

So I kept coming back until it seemed she'd put it all behind her and seemed more at ease – stomaching the whole time my growing suspicions that the whole reason Richard had a book published was that he'd given her a good rodgering, and she'd called in some kind of a favor to some idiot friend who'd probably been rodgered a very goodly number of times herself and the guy who rodgered her let Richard have his moment in the sun here in California believing that might finally get him off the hook.

And that was the story I wrote, using names for the characters that rhymed with everyone in our program. I called Richard "Dick for Short," never just "Dick" but "Dick for Short." At one point as he's rodgering the MFA Coordinator "from the rear" in "the Verve Café shitter," there's a banging on the door. It's the woman with the New York Times and the "ASS Manager" with the Giants Baseball cap. They want to know how long it takes to take a shit, for Christ's Sake, and both proclaim loudly, though not simultaneously, that they need to take their own. The door opens, and the two contend to be first through the crack, and the newspaper rips and they both make it through the door and slam it shut and half the paper hangs, a bra ad showing until some vagrant comes along and pulls on it and, tearing the broad ad off, there's a headline regarding nuclear war, with the President saying that history shows those who've started it will lose in the end.

You'd think I'd left the program, but I didn't. The story was turned in and the teacher xeroxed it and everybody read it for the next class's discussion. The teacher sent an email out announcing there would be no discussing the story, for obvious reasons, and reminded students of the import of balancing freedom of speech against other considerations, and included a link with one of her own stories, saying we'd be discussing that instead. I showed up and sat in my usual peripheral spot but it was now center stage. I could feel everyone avoiding me.

I graduated with a lack of honors, the only one. Richard, as they say, petered out, and was reduced to plying some Marxist Teaching Assistant with medical marijuana whenever he needed to give someone a rodgering, which meant her. The assistant was held in low regard by her students and was thus unable to pimp them off to Richard in exchange for relieving them of any fears of low marks on their papers, which they all knew would never occur anyway, as the lack of that practice was tacitly recognized as institutionalized – a way of preserving enrollments in the face of mostly imaginary budget cuts, word of which was bandied about to scare the gullible, or justify moving

even more state funds into activities, the underlying spirit of which, the university system was founded specifically to prevent, if not actually thwart. The point being, that Richard went to her operating under the delusion that he somehow lived in an error where a graduate indenture could somehow terrorize her female charges into sucking his dick, for which she would get Richard's medical marijuana, which he obtained from his doctor, saying it helped soothe his shoulder pain from an old Polo injury, and was then told that if he had a dog or cat with glaucoma to go ahead and exhale the smoke into the pet's face.

"It might help and probably won't hurt," the doctor said.

Richard went back for more, and got a double dosage, with the excuse that he had forgotten to tell the doctor that he also had an old hip injury from a snow walking incident as a child. This time, he said that he had gone with his step father who had lost track of him on purpose, and the whole thing led to him being found by a state police helicopter team. It was all fabrication. The thing of it was, thanks to his fall from grace, most evident in the wizening of his beard, which the girls who once admired him might have called "growth," had they the vocabulary and had they seen him once in a while, and thus had occasion to actually use it, Richard found himself lying all of the time to get what he wanted, and the lies always involved concocted stories, and they were quite good. I know of them because he started hanging out with me more and more. He came to the Verve and looked about anxiously with only finding me in mind, as I could tell from the sudden shoulder dropping relief upon spotting me and then the quick beeline he made to my table, where he quickly took a seat and then spilled out some nervous tale of pressing woe, the main theme of which invariably turned on him not wanting to fuck the Marxist assistant and needing more and more weed and being worried that at one point, he might exasperate his doctor, about whom he then proceeded to talk, but only about his facial movements that, in his paranoia, Richard took to indicate doubt as to the veracity of his latest tale.

"But haven't you only told him about the Polo injury and the snow shoe incident?" I asked him one day.

"Yeah," he said, "but I keep telling him again each time I go in for a renewal and I think I might be changing the details."

"I think they're called refills," I said.

It seems that in the end, I made some kind of a difference in people's lives and could not wait to one day brag of doing so when I was in a new place and no one knew who I was and I could make up all kinds of stories about all the things I'd done. I was beginning to think that's what everybody did. In the meantime, thanks to his leveling, found ourselves on equal terms and became good friends, though there did come a point where I felt the balance tipping. It was the day some girl had been talking to me and it had been going swell and she laughed easily, then he came in all frantic, and saw me, and relaxed and then rushed over, practically already telling the story as he walked, and I thought for a second of a pretext for leaving quickly but realized that it would defeat the purpose – that were I to rush out, the ease I'd established with the girl would be ruined, and, in that way, I would mirror Richard, and I remember wondering if the whole time he'd seemed so pompous and distant and dismissive and self-important and self-absorbed in his former swashbuckling and cavalier days as the graduate creative writing department alpha-male, he had been mirroring me. Richard sat in his now usual abrupt and chair clacking fashion and started in on how he had to get away from the Marxist. The girl looked immediately to her open, large, hardcover text of some

introductory, required course and adopted a pose of study. She gave off the idea of simply being courteous at first but then I realized the abruptness with which I had turned from her to Richard and thought she was thinking that I didn't like her that much after all, that she'd been wrong and be and what had been going on the whole time, and I kicked myself for ruining it when, in about five minutes she got up to leave and did not say good-bye until after I did, interrupting Richard who by that time was saying all he ever did was smoke weed and drink coffee, and I had to do it loudly, over the music too, and it came off as somehow aggressive and turned her off. That I could tell. Nothing had really changed.

The Rewrite  
Myles Wren

Tuesday mid-mornings were typically slow at this coffeehouse, and particularly so on this one.

The proprietor walked around, wiping down tables after being busy earlier.

The only customer who remained was a bearded, bespectacled young man wearing a sweater and a wool cap. His coffee sat atop an unopened copy of "Infinite Jest" while he stared blankly out the large window either at, but more likely through, the electrician who was on a ladder installing a light fixture. He wore a wool cap, too.

"I hate the idea of changing the ending of the story," he thought, "but how many rejections do I need to get the message. 'Wrapped-up too nicely.' More than one editor said it, so..., I don't know. I like that it wraps up, but if they want literary, I can do that.

*'Henrik Lipko, the grumpy old man who was once a good little boy, had a well-attended funeral. I doubt I will.'*

"That can be my new ending. Rubbish. Way too melodramatic. I like it the way it is. Whatever. I'll send a few out like that and see what happens."

With that, he tapped on the window to get the proprietor's attention, and signaled for her to flip the light switch to test the new fixture.

The proprietor hustled over, flipped the switch and the bulb lit-up. She sent the electrician a big smile and thumbs-up.

"At least she likes things to wrap-up nicely," thought the electrician as he began his descent down the ladder.

Don't Dance  
Douglas Clark

I'm sitting in the edge of my bed staring at my shoes. They are white. White with white laces, but black-soled bottoms. I never understood that. My tough blue jeans never really fit right, the same goes for my denim blue shirt. I don't even have to look down at the left pocket to see the numbers stitched onto it. 051575A. You'd think they would give me better clothes for this occasion. It isn't every day that you get executed.

Everything seems so quiet. I can hear Styles' nose whistling as he sleeps in the next cell over. The silence is so loud it almost hurts my ears. It is dark out. The stars are shining too. I have looked out that tiny, barred window a thousand times before, but I never really thought that this might be the last time. I guess I took it for granted. I hate this damn cell. I would do anything to get out of it. I would kill again, if I had to. Now, I think that I might kill to stay in. I'm not supposed to die like this—like a caged dog at the pound no one wants. I have people who love me, Goddamnit.

I guess Reynolds, the guard, thought it would be nice to give me that fucking clock. Only two hours to go. He'd laugh. Asshole. That was a while ago. I keep staring at it. Fifteen minutes to go. Shit. I'm not gonna dance. I will walk out there like a man. Smoke my cigarette and let come what may. I don't want to die. Not in here.

"All right Danick, it's time," I hear Reynolds say. I open my eyes.

No. I couldn't have fallen asleep. NO! Reynolds and that fat bastard Jenkins come in my cell to take me away.

"Get the fuck outta here. It ain't time yet. I got two minutes!" I scream as I look at that fucking clock again. They just shake their heads. My feet feel light. As I stepped out of my cell I felt a warm breeze. Where did that come from? It is March. I ain't gonna dance.

"Good luck, man," I hear floating in the air. I don't turn to look. That was Rallis.

"See ya around, D."

Yeah, sure you will Coplin. See me around where? Others say their good-byes. I don't look. I can remember their voices just as easily as I can recognize mine. This isn't fair. I only killed the one guy. I'm not Ted Bundy. Fuck, Dahmer got life. Why do I have to die, damn it?

"No. No man, fuck this," I say as I raise my arms. "No." Reynolds grabs my arms. So does Jenkins. I feel my feet start to shuffle. I won't dance. "Where's my fucking priest," I scream. I'm not religious. God never did anything for me.

"He's right here." Reynolds says as we turn the corner. The man dressed in black starts talking a bunch of shit I used to here in church. It doesn't mean shit. Does it?

"Hey where is my cigarette?" I ask as I start to struggle to get a hand free.

"You had one with your dinner."

"No," I start to squirm. I could break out into a wild dance right now. "No, I want my smoke. Let me go." I can smell that room. It smells cold. I want my smokes. These guys are evil. Fucking justice. I want that cigarette. Damn this hallway. I could have sworn it was longer. No damn it.

I pull away as they grab me. I feel my body twisting under their grip. Some strange noise escapes my throat. I must sound like a little girl as I squirm. I Won't Fucking Dance!

I stop. They wait. My jaw shudders but I won't cry. I stare at the doorway and exhale. It's over I guess.

"Just relax Danick, don't struggle and this won't hurt a bit."

The guy in white tells me. Who the fuck is he kidding. He ain't the one gonna die. My chest feels heavy. Man, I hate needles. I can't breathe. This table is soft. I can see that big plate glass window. All those people come to watch me die. A bunch of suits. Alice Krumble. I didn't want to kill her son. My eyes are getting blurry.

"No. Let me go." I can't get free. The straps are too tight. "Yeah, I have last words. Get me the fuck off this table." It is still so quiet. "Alice I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't let me die," I scream. I can hear an echo in this white room. The lights are out behind the big glass window. I am all alone. I didn't even feel that needle go into my arm.

I can't feel my feet and my chest is so heavy. Are my hands shaking or is that just my imagination? I can't tell.

"Let it be known that on the Fifth day of March..." I hear. I am so tired. I can't fall asleep. Is this what it's like to die? Am I dead. I can't see. I'm so tired. Maybe I will wake up. Wake up and be in my bed. Or maybe I'll dream.

Delicate Tissue  
Paisley Kauffmann

The electronic ring pierces the dark, cozy bedroom. Robert smacks his lips and clears his throat before answering. Penny combats against a sense of dread and refuses to open her eyes.

"Hello?" Robert says. The question in his voice indicates it is an unknown number.

"This is he," he says and listens. He jerks to a sitting position.

She opens her eyes.

Holding the phone to his ear, Robert gets out of bed. He struggles, awkwardly with one hand, to get both legs threaded into his black pants.

She sits up. Mildly and secretly annoyed, she knows the call has something to do with one of his kids.

"Have you contacted his mother?" He asks, and says, "Okay. I'm on my way." He tosses the phone onto the bed and walks into the bathroom.

Reluctantly, she peels back the down comforter and stands in the bathroom door with her arms wrapped over her chest. "Robert? What's going on?"

He splashes water on his face, pats dry with a towel, and says, "It's Bobby. He's in the hospital. He dove into a pool and broke his neck."

"Oh my god," she says. "I'll go with you."

He nods.

She, anticipating the presence of the ex-wife, washes her face and briefly considers applying a few dabs of make-up. Although Robert and Margaux divorced many years ago, she feels in constant competition with her, a successful lawyer with great skin and long legs. Robert, ready to leave, jingles his keys from hand to hand.

Instead of foundation and mascara, she pulls on her most flattering jeans and slips lip gloss into her back pocket.

In the car, Robert races through the fresh snow, fishtailing and sliding. She grips the armrest and fights the urge to complain.

"What pool?" She asks, contemplating the subzero temperature.

"I don't know," he says. "A hotel? Don't kids still have hotel parties?"

She shrugs. Robert often asks her what kids are up to these days. Their age difference is significant, but she is not privy to the antics of teenagers. She worked two jobs through high school, teenage past times have always been a mystery.

Under florescent lights, she jogs to keep up with Robert's long strides through the hospital corridors. She regrets not applying any make-up. Florescent lighting reflects in green undertones against her blond hair and washes out her fair skin.

Margaux is standing at the nurses' station gesticulating and demanding information in her authoritative, strident voice. Robert places his hand on Margaux's back and she collapses into his arms. Her face is drained of color, and Penny feels perversely satisfied with the pallor replacing her normally rich, olive tones.

"He's in bad shape," Margaux repeats into Robert's shoulder.

Robert ushers Margaux under his arm and signals for Penny to follow to a row of plastic chairs near the vending machines.

"Sit with her," Robert instructs and walks away.

Penny hesitates but does as she is told.

Margaux, wrapped in an expensive-looking shawl, smashes a tired tissue to her nose. "They say he may not walk again."

Shaking her head, Penny considers touching Margaux's hand or shoulder, but any gesture she attempts seems contrived.

"Boys," Margaux says, trying to unfold the damp tissue. "They do such careless things."

Grateful for something to do, Penny stands and says, "I'll find you some more Kleenex." She reaches for a box of economy brand tissues behind the empty nurses' station. Robert, down the hall with the doctor, is covering his face with his hand and shaking his head. The doctor reaches out and squeezes Robert's shoulder. As Penny grasps the tissue box, the fluorescent light fires off the facets of her engagement ring, a large diamond flanked with baguettes set in a platinum band. It is the biggest diamond she has ever seen, and she loves the attention it attracts. She returns to the seat next to Margaux and rapidly pulls three stiff tissues from the box.

"Thank you," Margaux says.

"This changes everything," Margaux chants. "Everything will be different."

Penny pulls another tissue from the box and folds it against her knee.

"He is never going to walk. They don't know if he can even breathe on his own," Margaux says and chokes on a sob.

Penny squeezes her fingers against the ring and it cuts into her flesh.

"He will have to live at home with one of us. At least until—"

Robert returns and stands over them.

"What have they told you?" Margaux asks.

Robert blinks at her.

"Please, please tell me he's going to be okay," Margaux begs.

Robert drops into the chair, and Margaux envelops him in her shawl.

Penny, an invisible, superfluous observer, stands and walks away. Outside, the night is brittle with unquestionable clarity. A group of nurses are gathered in a susurrant smoking circle. Penny approaches and asks no one in particular for a cigarette. There is a long, uncomfortable pause before a young nurse, younger than herself, holds out a white, papery cigarette. Without having to ask, she is handed a lighter.

Penny walks around the hospital and resists articulating the one question bubbling to the surface. It is an unforgivable and obstinate question, *why is this happening to me?* A bus pulls up to the curb with a hydraulic squeal. The fumes sting her nose. She walks towards the bus and the doors fold open like a magic portal to another dimension.

"You getting on?" The bus driver asks.

Penny drops her cigarette in the snow, considers the question, and says, "No."

"Are you sure?"

She steps back. "I'm sure."

The doors snap shut and the bus bounces away from her.

Her feet, wet and cold, begin to ache. She pulls the rough tissue from her coat pocket and wipes her running nose. The streets leading away from the hospital invite her to escape down their unmarked, snow-covered sidewalks illuminated by the moon. Mirages of fairy-tale endings pixelate at the end of each city block. Her fingers are numb, and she checks for her ring. It is still there noosed around her finger. Slipping it off, she stuffs it into the pocket of her jeans.

At the hospital entrance, three yellow taxi cabs pump exuberant exhaust into the frigid air. Penny searches her coat pockets for money. She has seventeen dollars and forty-two cents. It may be enough to get her to the airport. She decides to buy a ticket to wherever the next

available flight is headed. Climbing into the first cab, she rouses the driver from a nap, and says, "Airport, please."

The cab driver sits up in his seat. "Luggage?"

"No luggage."

He shifts the car into drive, and they lurch forward.

"Going somewhere warm?" The cab driver asks, glancing at her in the rearview mirror.

"I don't know, maybe," she answers his reflection. "Where are you from?"

"Iraq," he says, accelerating and merging onto the freeway, "but you don't want to go there."

"I suppose not."

"It's nice here," he says. "Too cold in the winter, but the other seasons are good."

The street lights flash by in regular beats.

"Are you traveling alone?" He asks.

"No," she answers. "I'm engaged. My fiancé is meeting me in..."

She starts to cry. Reaching for the tissue, she recalls her mother handing her two tissues and instructing her to cry until they were both used up. After that, it was time to deal with the problem and move on with life.

The cab driver clicks on the blinker towards the airport exit.

"You can take me back to the hospital."

The driver nods and turns off the blinker.

Shoulders heaving, she cries until the tissue crumbles apart.

The driver rolls up to the exact location they departed from, shifts into park, and says, "You can sit in here for a while longer. It's a slow night."

She nods.

"Do you mind if I turn on some music?"

She shakes her head.

Arabic music fills the space. Quick tempos, sliding scales, and unfamiliar soft words punctuated with glottal utterances.

Closing her eyes, she escapes.

"Miss?" The driver wakes her.

She startles back into her reality.

"I'm sorry, but my shift is over."

She wraps her coat around her and reaches into her pocket for the seventeen dollars. "I only have, well, less than twenty dollars."

He waves it away.

Penny gets out of the warm, fragrant cab and squints at the white and red lights of the hospital entrance. She pulls the ring from her pocket and slips it on. Gazing at her hand, the ring encircles her finger like a constrictor.

Under the scrutiny of florescent lights, she returns to find Robert sitting with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his palms.

Standing in front of him, she places her hands on his shoulders.

He wraps his arms around her waist, and says, "You're here."

"I'm here," she says.

## What Happened to Darren

Jeff Hill

“Who are you?” Darren asked.

At a loss for words, and not really sure if he’s kidding or what, I simply smile and wink. “It’s me, Darren. It’s Daddy.”

He looks genuinely puzzled, then scared, and then, trying to be tough, which is a skill I like to think he inherited from me, he laughs it off.

“I knew that,” he says. “I was just kidding.”

My son. The jokester.

But neither of us really likes what’s going on. Neither of us is really having fun. His mom left when she realized he wasn’t getting better. I took him out of school when I realized that his teachers weren’t going to help him. And I lost my job when my boss made an off-color remark about Darren behind my back that got him slammed against a wall.

But none of that matters, I keep telling myself. I know who I am. I know who he is. And deep down, no matter what the doctors and the lawyers and the social workers say, he knows, too.

“My little jokester,” I say, more to myself than to my son.

Our days are spent in relative isolation. We don’t go out unless we absolutely have to. Groceries are usually delivered. The movies he wants to see are the ones he’s already seen and we own. He doesn’t have any friends, or so he thinks, and it’s gotten to the point where he doesn’t even remember his mom. Or the pain of losing her.

But I do. That’s a memory I wish I could forget. But unfortunately, unlike my son, I don’t have that luxury. I remember everything. Part of me thinks that’s because I don’t have what he has. But a larger part, a more paternal part, knows that it’s because I have to remember. It’s the burden I have to bear. After all, this whole thing is my fault.

The basement window shatters. The noise wakes me from a deep sleep and I can’t decide if I need my gun or the phone, but all the while I am en route to Darren’s bedroom without hesitation.

“Daddy!” he screams, bringing me out of reality and back into my head.

“Daddy’s here, Darren,” I say, forcing back tears at the thought that he really does remember me. Sometimes.

But that emotion is overtaken and overpowered by a more powerful, more primal one when I reach his bedroom door and notice that he is standing by his window, pointing at the neighbor’s house.

“Get away from the windows!” I yell, but it is too late. Another shattered window, this time in my bedroom. Little do they know, I don’t sleep in there anymore. Not since Darren’s mom left us. It never seemed like mine after that day, so I’ve been sleeping in the guest room next to Darren’s.

I grab my son and before he can even react, he’s fallen back into the routine that he can remember. The only thing he can ever seem to consistently remember. The “tuck and shush” as we call it. He curls into a ball as tight as he can and doesn’t make a sound,

clinging as tightly to my neck as he can. He doesn't know why he does it, but it's times like these that I'm glad he still remembers.

We make our way down the hallway and I hear another shattered window, this time in the guest room. My old bedroom is on fire now, and I can't help but wonder what would have happened if I had taken the pills that the doctor prescribed me after Darren and I did what we did. Would I have slept through Darren's cries? Would he have known what to do?

Within minutes, the house is more fire than home and I'm standing outside as the fire department asks questions that neither Darren nor I answer. Darren because he doesn't know how to and me because I don't need to. The firefighters know. The whole block knows. Hell, this whole city knows what just happened to our home and why.

It's because I killed my daughter and blamed my son.

No one would ever really know what happened. To a certain extent, not even me. Sure, I could tell you the events, but everyone knows that's only half of every story. Anyone can give you a plot, a setting, and a series of complications. But what really happened? Who were the characters? I mean, who were they really? That's something you can only answer if you were there. And the only two people who were there are my daughter and my son.

I was technically there, I suppose. But I was so drunk that I might as well have not been. I was supposed to be watching them, and that's not just my wife's opinion. Or the town's. It's mine, too. I get it. I fucked up.

And I've spent every day since paying for it. But I think the worst part about it is that Darren's paying, too. He has what doctors are calling selective memory loss. Usually it's brought on by either a head injury or some sort of traumatic incident. Or, in his case, a combination of the both.

The theory around town is that I drowned her in the bathtub while Darren was taking a nap and then when he found what I had done, I pushed him down the stairs. He forgot because he hit his head. And he continues to forget because what type of monster would do that to his son.

The theory in my head is that my son killed his sister on accident, some sort of game that I'll never truly understand. The best way to figure it all out would be to go back to that night, but that's not possible. We live in the real world.

My son may never recover. My daughter will never return. And my wife is no longer mine. I have to live with what I did. Or didn't do. But there is a silver lining in all of this. My son.

Not only is he still alive. But he'll always forgive me. Every single day. Because, no matter how terrible our lives may get. No matter how angry I may be, or sad, or drunk, or broken...I can always just remind him of the one thing that really matters. I love him.

"Who are you?" he asks again, as he wakes up in the middle of the night, walking toward the motel bathroom.

"It's me," I tell him. "It's Daddy."

He smiles.

And it's enough.

Rabbleroising with Reason  
John Gorman

Archie still felt a little pang for having thrown-in his stock boy apron. Maybe a college grad had no business messing with boxes of Frosted Flakes, but, at the very least, he should've had something lined up. Good sport that he was, Archie kept a buttoned lip and let his girlfriend shine in her moment. Marcy Dibble, queen of chocolate-dipped biscotti, rowing team captain from Dartmouth, purveyor of small miracles, was shaking like a tuning fork. You'd think she was still interviewing for the admin position at Grey instead of celebrating over takeout. She was so moon-juked about taking the first step toward a career in advertising she'd forgotten half of the mumbo jumbo the recruiter had told her except that she started on Monday and it was okay to wear flip flops. Bent over her Kung Pao, she reenacted the scene for Archie's benefit. She swigged some ginger ale before launching into what might have been considered an unpardonable gaffe. After receiving the green light, Marcy kissed the recruiter on the forehead. Archie almost choked on his spring roll when she puckered. Coming from Marcy, however, this was expected. She had a zest for life, shimmering beyond her freckles.

For Archie, unfortunately, nabbing a stable income had become a challenge. You wouldn't think so because of his appetite, and boy did he have an appetite, but despite a tapeworm's digestive tract, Archie was suffering from the great philosophical dilemma "Damned if you do, damned if you don't." Marcy would carry the financial load, if only for a short while longer, of their beef and broccoli brunches, Magnolia Bakery cupcakes, and Friday Night Wine Bar openings. Sooner or later though, Archie had to land something better than coffee shop barista.

When Marcy met Archie she'd considered him a work-in-progress, but her sculpting hands were hell bent on shaping the mensch she saw in him. He did have his pluses. She never met anybody so young, who loved jazz, but couldn't play a lick and spoke about it with a preacher's passion. His intention wasn't to win her over to his musical congregation, but to open her up to something other than Top Forty plonk. After much deliberating, whether or not he could stay involved with somebody who had as much use for Coltrane as she did for coleslaw, Archie finally put his fusspot grit on the backburner. He kept telling himself she was only twenty-one, but then again so was he.

They lived down the hall from each other on the Lower East Side, two blocks from the Ukrainian joint which served the most delicious *varenyky* anywhere and kept a vintage ukulele displayed in the window. There, they split many a late-night blintz and drank their beers, sharing the scabs of their rapidly fusing lives.

They met by way of a mix-up. Archie found his neighbor's bill and a personal-addressed letter from Blue Note in his mail. He decided to knock on 3F's door. Maybe it was a sideman or a jammer. He'd never been nuts about Blue Note, but what a stroke of luck being neighbors with a jazz enthusiast. Marcy opened the door half-expecting a dozen roses or a bronzer-complexioned suitor. Archie was used to this kind of welcome. He held out the mail to his lilac-smelling neighbor and admired her soap-scrubbed cheeks, her pug nose, her gorgeous shoulder-length nut brown hair, combed straight back, and grinned when he

saw the mammoth pimple in the middle of her forehead. There wasn't a dab of makeup to hide it and it sprout from her head like a unicorn. If only he had that much confidence.

She didn't thank him and Archie stood outside till he heard the bolt of her lock and the click of the chain. They bumped into each other a few more times going into the building, passing each other on the stairs and then one day Marcy brought over a bottle of Cab and strolled into Archie's dingy cigar box of a room as if they were old roomies picking up where they last left off. He had nothing better to do and they passed the night jibber-jabbing about the unmapped, post collegiate life. Marcy was comfy enough to reveal her ambitions with her cherubic head, resting on his lap as if Archie were a shrink's pillow. He listened and never mentioned anything about the Blue Note letter. A couple of days later, when he did say something about it and Marcy said the letter must've been a mistake, she didn't particularly care for old tuba music and Archie felt stupid for plying his hopes with such scanty evidence. However, he did feel good being with her, he'd found a short breath of calm. He needed a friend.

For the past few months, Archie had seen plenty of ads for number-crunchers, and he had been weighing in his mind whether or not he'd done the right thing by signing off on his degree. He knew eventually he'd be an accountant, but wanted to do something kooky before joining the rat race. Maybe he needed to go backpacking in Europe. Marcy even suggested this, but Archie wasn't sold on it. Two summers ago, before he turned his tassel, he kept the books for a dentist's office. He hated the idea of all those hacksaw instruments buzzing in the room behind him while he was working out debits and credits.

Marcy grabbed Archie's Blue Moon and took a gulp. She was too excited to properly mess with the chopsticks so she speared a chunk of chicken and bit into it as if she'd just broken from a fast.

"Hey, Archie."

"What?" he said, poking into his fried rice. "Where's all the shrimp?"

Marcy pinched one from his carton, held it between her magnificent, cuticle-free, boy's length fingernails and braced herself before popping the big question. Archie, true to his no-nonsense self, wolfed down the last shrimp and all but licked the final grain of rice off his thumb.

"I hate your sink," Marcy said.

"So."

"I never want to use it again."

"So don't."

"And neither should you."

"Then how will I wash my hands?"

"In my sink."

"Brilliant. So every time I go to the bathroom what am I supposed to do, make a pirouette and prance on over to your place?"

"No."

"Good. I thought you lost it there for a second."

"You'll take two steps from wherever you are and stick your hands under *our* sink."

"What?"

The thought doddered there for a second like the crumpled napkin in Marcy's fist. Archie, the private soul, who had only gotten rid of his parental baggage that came along

with going to a commuter school was now looking at the very real prospect of living with or losing his girlfriend. This was not the kooky crinkle he wanted to add into his life.

He tried to imagine the logistics of showering, shaving, and removing his contact lenses. Sharing a hovel might've been doable had he gone away to Holy Cross as he'd originally planned, but his plans had a way of being undermined. He also, quite frankly, had no inkling where his stuff would go. It took him weeks before he bought a canvas garment rack and he still preferred to pull his shirts and pants out of his gym bag.

"Don't rush me," Archie said as if he were lashing back at his inner dictum. "I need you to do me one small favor."

"You name it."

A couple of days later, Archie knocked on Marcy's door wearing the constipated grin of a mail carrier. Ordinarily, more stoic after settling on his own terms, a second wind of doubts troubled him. All the same, he was going to take Marcy on a short trip over the bridge. When he knocked again and didn't get an answer he decided to get a breath of fresh air. On his way downstairs, he bumped into Marcy, lugging groceries.

"Planning to feed an army?" he said, half-embarrassed the moment it broke from his lips.

"An army of two," Marcy said, poking Archie's stomach. "Where you going?"

"Need to show you something."

"Well, can it wait?"

He looked off. His head fogged back in the funk he'd tried so hard to shake loose from. He appeared hopelessly confounded. Yet his feet carried him down the steps. He grabbed the bags from Marcy and her lips curled in bewilderment.

"There's ice-cream and turkey in there," she said.

Archie nodded as if he'd only begun to understand the ulterior motives behind smokescreens.

"It'll spoil."

Archie marched back up the steps, both hands, carting the goodies, but kept his soft blue eyes narrow and waxed on suspicion. Marcy couldn't press ahead of him, but wouldn't let him get away with dumping the bags outside her door. She made little to-do about putting the things away. By the time they were ready to ship off Archie had already left his funk behind in her apartment.

They grabbed the N-train to Archie's old neighborhood, the second to last stop on the line. Wayne Shorter's "Footprints" played in Archie's head. Something like love or its next closet coordinate filled his lungs. Archie grabbed Marcy's pinkie when they crossed Astoria Boulevard. He pointed out the old dilapidated public swimming pool where he learned the butterfly and to hold his breath underwater for almost a minute. Marcy puffed her cheeks then smacked her flesh and pretended to spit chlorinated water into the face of her tour guide. To his credit, Archie produced a hanky from his coat pocket and began patting dry his sappy wet face.

Before he had a chance to put the hanky back into his pocket, Marcy grabbed it from him and pretended to blow into it, her big brown eyes eager for a reaction. He almost ignored this trivial plea for attention until he caught himself. Even a simple, half-hearted gesture could save a relationship. With a sage's wit and a pick pocket's timing, he whisked

her hand. Marcy peered out at the steel blue ripples of the East River and Archie graciously coaxed her eyes back to the sickly green stone of his childhood pool. It was drained except for a dirty rivulet of rainwater or perhaps it was urine. In the fall, the skaters used the spot to test out their new tricks and dare each other into bashing their skulls. A patch of graffiti as beautiful and intricate as stained glass tagged the far wall.

A mischievous glow emanated from Archie. His dipping knees and gangly arms pointed into a prow, ready to dive. He saw something on Marcy's face that passed for wild fear and he relished it as Marcy snared his wrist. Her warm sinewy hand gave him a shock. He stuffed their clasped hands into his coat pocket and kept it there as a lumpy gift. Whoever wanted to could retrieve it first? Yes, this was a fun game, but he didn't bother mentioning it to Marcy. If she let him break free first, then he'd shack up with her. He set a minimum-clock of five minutes. If she undid her clasp before his then he'd stay put. Maybe he'd lose.

Archie was forever making contingency plans. This time he saw it different. He wanted no part of the afterthoughts. No part of the hurt and rejection. He almost went as far as balking on her offer then rightfully assured himself it was the coward's way out. They'd long passed the pool and crossed the avenue, a gush of traffic streamed by. On the corner, a staggering line of fleet-footed pedestrians waited for two parked buses to peel open its glass doors. They were an ungainly bunch some with greasy hats or caps and a few had papers creased to kill time over local news or sports, but there was one among them that made Archie shudder. He had a brief out-of-body episode, a swirl of inertia nearly tossing him noggin to knees onto the gum-splotched curb. This one man was slight of build, small-mouthed with thin, fraying dirty blonde hair, paling by the sides, salty white on the crown of his head and even in other odd patches, including the wooly gray reaching into his muttonchops. Some lazy spots of beard, freckle, and pimple comprised his humble, fleshy face. He had a crumbled paper bag poking out of his jacket pocket and kept his small ugly head down as he pecked at his bagel as if he were a pigeon. Why Archie singled out this poor slouch from the rest of the line bugged him. The two bus drivers returned, chomping on donuts, ambled together passed their stranded lot, didn't even bother to let anybody on behind them as they climbed onto the same bus. They went on gabbing and gobbling. The poor slouch, Archie marked, wore defeated, hangdog eyes and his chin had suddenly gone scruffier. Archie winced when he had realized he'd seen the flash-forward mugshot of himself.

Archie's fingers were unclasped from Marcy and she was smiling a lover's smile. He had no idea how long his hand had broken from hers and who had done the breaking. Amazingly enough he let the shimmering ebullience of her smile melt his troubles away.

Archie only needed two cardboard diaper boxes and his trusty gym bag to cart over all his worldly possessions. He made a separate trip for his canvas garment rack and carried it like a wounded Collie. It took him a day to graduate from his gym bag. He found he enjoyed the *ting* of hangers along the metal rod of his new wardrobe. He sprung for a plastic socks and skivvies drawer and even made his first decorating suggestion though it was denied. It's true at first he felt like he'd moved into a LEGO house, but he got used to the snug-as-a-bug arrangement.

He impressed himself with his willingness and his ability to live elbow-to-elbow with his girlfriend in the dusty confines of their third-floor studio. A bath a light spilled in through the oatmeal-colored blinds and he was only too happy to press his nose to the pane and stare out. Archie Mullins, roommate, future accountant or bottle-washer, owner of an unlimited Metrocard stared at the bustling men and women as if he'd never seen from this vantage point. His old place had a view of the dumpster, but now that he could peer out every morning at the working stiffs rushing to their destinations he felt a waggle of trepidation.

He watched Marcy slip into her slacks while brushing her teeth. He marveled at her dexterity and that she didn't even need to check herself in the mirror until she was photo shoot finito.

When she returned from her daily grind, Archie had the place stinking of pork chops, skirt steak and fries. Archie was no skillet master, but he knew how to whip up a few things and whatever he couldn't handle he delegated to microwave. Marcy had to love him for it she could barely make pasta without it ending up soupy or soggy. They either drank five-dollar wine or iced tea and when they finished their chow down Archie let the sink sit till the morning. Marcy made no qualms.

They could have gone on like this forever. At least, this was how Archie saw it, until Marcy threw down the gauntlet. She began leaving classified ads next to his pillow, under the bathroom door, and inside the refrigerator. Archie got the drift. He needed to pull his weight. The real question was what the hell would he do to earn his keep? No more box-stacking. Faced with such metaphysical dilemmas, he trooped around the streets of the Lower East Side with an apple in his hand. He ventured further east than he recalled, past the urban take on hanging gardens throughout Alphabet City. He scratched his head, as if he walked off the narrow island, when he passed a row of Hell's Angel's bikes, but then nodded, to himself, when he saw a canopy-free coffee shop with a hand-scrawled chalkboard promising a free cup to anybody who produced a Sumatra-stamped passport. He zeroed in on the Sum in Sumatra and puzzled over whether one or two Ms belonged there. It reminded him of when, in fourth grade, Sister Eloise trumpeted the correct spelling of "colonel." He felt a mental rug pulled out from under him. Betrayed. He then bore his secret affinity for numbers. Balancing equations brought him tranquility.

He crunched the last of his apple and tossed the core in the street. He kicked a pebble out of the heel of his shoe and rubbed the dry, sticky juice between his palms. He counted cracks in the sidewalk and before he knew any better he'd climbed the overpass into the park off Delancey Street. His stomach grumbled and he considered a hotdog, but the slouch-backed vendor looked the type who never bothered to scrub under his nails and Archie had a beggar's batch of change, a lousy, crumpled single and an odd lot of nickels and dimes, and besides, he hated the mean appraisal he got when he plunked down a mess of coins.

The sweet sound of worn brass turned his head. A jangly black man blew into his tenor saxophone. His chapped hands held the instrument with a lover's finesse. Archie studied the musician, how he blew into the sax with a stirring mix of passion and empathy. The frenetic squirm of his fingers along the scales had Archie dizzy with envy. The musician seemed to catch the whisk of the wind within the hole of his sax and played a kind of call and response with it. He threw off a mighty shadow and blared a series of high notes that

tickled the stray hairs at the top of Archie's spine. Then the man switched the pace into a softer, emotionally clarifying version of "Naima", one of Archie's favorites.

He got halfway into the piece then stopped cold and packed up his sax. The clamping case made a muffled plea for more. Archie felt knifed in the gut and he grabbed his last dollar, folded it and handed it to the man with great shame in his eyes.

"Sorry, it's all I got," Archie said and handed it over.

"Keep it man. Got to split."

"Where you going?"

"Ladybird calls." He tapped his wristwatch.

Archie didn't want to intrude so he let the musician hustle off. If it hadn't been clear before he now knew he needed to score his own brass.

He put on his antenna and searched for an instrument. He knew a place over on Orchard, but when he got there the shop looked as if a tornado ripped through it. They were going out of business and were down to a harmonica and a Cassio keyboard. The gawky kid, behind the sawdust-strewn counter, recommended a pawn shop between Clinton and Essex. Archie thanked him to be civil, but there wasn't a monkey's paw chance he'd procure his sax in a Thunderbird-wreaking pawn shop. He stopped at the bank and depleted his savings. The wad of bills was much leaner than he thought, a couple of takeout menus folded over. He tapped at his pocket every so often to make sure it was still there.

Archie walked until he wore a hole in the bottom of his shoe. His big toe was as black and bloated as a burnt marshmallow. Archie grabbed a bunch of postcards from a Persian restaurant and stuffed them in his worn shoe sole and marched on. When his ankles were aching and he felt his legs just about ready to give out from under him he came across a small music shop. The front shelves were filled with guitars both acoustic and electric, the usual suspects: Fender, Gibson, Ibanez, Blueridge, and Taylor. He spotted a chintzy drum set Max Roach wouldn't have bothered hanging his coat. Archie ducked into the back and saw beautiful tribe of woodwinds and then the horns. He got the hiccups.

A fine trombone hung next to an alto sax and behind a glass case half a dozen clarinets lay scattered like noisemakers. Judging from the clutter he figured he could get a sax without having to pawn his kidney. He had five hundred on him. He knew it would hardly be enough to get something decent. He also knew if he spent it all he wouldn't have anything to contribute for rent.

He grabbed a shiny tenor sax off the wall, rubbed his thumb up the rising swirl of brass. He felt like he was cheating on his girlfriend. More to the point, he found his new honey. Archie raised the sax, splayed his legs a bit and got soft in the knees. He put his mouth to the piece and let out a dying elephant call which brought the sales guy over from the front.

"That's a sweet one isn't it," the guy said. "Only five and change."

Archie didn't probe. He knew he meant grand. That was in another league. Still, he didn't part with the sax.

"Had one of those yuppie jerks trying to scam me the other day. We don't sell to their ilk."

Archie found himself taking a few uneven steps back. The firm pinch of reality almost popped the bubble of Archie's good cheer. He then realized the eager salesman was leading him to another "marked down" section. The prices still eluded jazz enthusiast.

"I detect a window shopper," the glib salesman said. "Am I right?"

"Listen, I got about five-hundred," Archie said. "What can I get?"

Head down, slope-backed the salesman pushed off without a rubber sole of pep. Archie wouldn't waste much more time. He took his last gander, smelled the reed and finger buttons and put the instrument where it belonged. The guy came back with a dusty thing that, God help us, might've been lifted from a barn. It could've fit in the Knick's starting forward's shoebox. It wasn't even a trumpet, but a coronet.

"Satchmo played one just like it," the salesman said wiping it down with an ancient cloth.

It was about as far from Archie's dream sax as he could imagine, but it was all he could afford and the guy threw in an extra mouthpiece for four seventy-five. Archie didn't bargain. He actually had a smile when he lumped down his savings. No case to put it. Archie held it with pride and blew out the cobwebs and galumphed through the streets with a new burst of energy. The mangled postcard poking through his toe had the shape of an epiglottis or chewed gum yet he carried himself with dignity and lighter shoulders.

He played "Salt Peanuts" one of Dizzy Gillespie's sillier concoctions and when he hit the refrain, Archie cracked himself up, nearly choking on the mouthpiece. He paid his last visit to the studio and waited until Marcy was home then waltzed in with a troubadour's gait.

Marcy, who had been leafing through *Vanity Fair*, stood and cast a harsh look on the disheveled form passing as her boyfriend. Her eyes glided right over the coronet and she launched into the scolding.

"Where the hell have you been?" Marcy said. "I had drinks with Sid and Fiona and they think you flipped. What's the deal?"

Archie didn't want to, but it was the only rebuttal he had in him, lukewarm and unpolished. He let it rip right from his gut, all the pent-up crud that had been eating at him. He played a loose and imperfect stream of notes and noise. Marcy cuffed her ears. Archie would've bulled on, but he stopped to catch his breath.

"I probably have no business playing it, but if I don't give it a whirl I'll be nothing but pantywaist."

Marcy's pale face went Macintosh red.

"Get out," Marcy said and pointed to the door. For the first time, Archie saw she resembled his mother in her cat eyes and ampersand-curved brows. He dug into his pocket and dropped a twenty on top of the mini fridge. He left his stuff. He put the mouth of his coronet back into swollen lips and played a hideous, sickly green noise that sounded like he was playing underwater in his old swimming pool. He marched out, down three flights of stairs with no intention of taking the subway. He planned on schlepping it over the bridge into Queens. Why not? He had legs, he had lungs.

Dreams of Lillian Wu  
Barbara Taylor

If you die in a dream, it kills you in real life. I don't know how anybody can prove that, but it's supposed to be a fact. I've come pretty close to dying in some of my dreams, and Lillian Wu is often lurking in the background. I haven't seen her since junior high school, but I've decided she's stuck in my subconscious because Michael Held and I put a tack on her chair in science class. This spontaneous act of cruelty was out of character for me, Douglas Vonnagel, but not for Michael. I think of him whenever I hear Tom Jones sing "Not Responsible." Michael didn't consider the gravity of any situation and probably hasn't suffered a moment's remorse over that tack. I'd be surprised if Lillian Wu visits him in dreams. She should, but I'll bet she doesn't.

Many moons ago, back at George S. Patton Junior High, Michael hissed to get my attention from across the aisle in science lab. We were waiting for Mr. O'Day to waltz in wearing his rubber apron and yellow dishwashing gloves, flourishing a fetal pig in an aluminum bedpan like a waiter. We'd groan in unison, holding our noses, and he'd tell us to knock it off, as usual.

"*Vonnagel!*" Michael flashed the tack he had popped off the bulletin board titled "THE AMAZING HUMAN HEART" and jerked his head in Lillian's direction. His mouth twisted into an evil grin, and I knew in an instant what he had in mind. I'd made unfortunate choices from time to time—lying, cheating, and stealing to name a few—but up to this point I had never intentionally inflicted physical injury. Yet I nodded, my head moving up and down as if controlled by a puppet master. I can't remember who put the tack on the chair. Honestly. One therapist offered to hypnotize me in a last-ditch effort to find out once and for all. It didn't work, but I had to pay for the hour anyway.

"Douglas," the balding pseudo-hypnotist said to me, rocking back in his black leather chair and putting his fingers and his thumbs together to form a perfect triangle. "Clearly you're not ready to let go." What a crock.

I recall breaking out in a cold sweat as Lillian approached her chair, I'll say that in my defense. Even now, years later, I can be driving along the Merritt Parkway and out of nowhere I'll remember what Lillian did when she sat down and a chill will go through me like an icicle. Here's what happened: nothing. Oh, she felt the sting, all right. Lillian always looked like she was in pain, and that moment she looked slightly more so. But she didn't make a sound, and I think I know why. It had to do with her harrowing journey from mainland China to the free world.

Heartless as it sounds, her parents shipped her over in a wooden box on a boat. Apparently there was no alternative. When she finally made it to the good old U. S. of A., the Wu family didn't adjust to our way of doing things. They continued to eat their regular diet of slimy fish and vegetables and sent the reeking leftovers to school with Lillian in a Tupperware container with chopsticks taped to the lid. She couldn't speak English at first or anything. But think about it: she had lots of practice shutting up. If anybody found her in that box, they probably would have sent her back to the communists to be brainwashed. She couldn't afford to react to a cramp in her leg or a panic attack.

Some of those Chinese girls are gorgeous, but not Lillian. She had a scrunched-up face like she was trying to hold a grain of rice between her lips. This didn't help with her assimilation—the not smiling—but who could blame her? Have you ever thought how you'd go to the bathroom in a box? We all wondered about that, but nobody ever asked her. She wasn't exactly approachable, if you get what I mean, but I had to square dance with her in gym a few times because I was paralyzed with girls after the whole mess with Joelle Greenblatt calling me Cootie Boy and starting a trend. I'd just lean over the water fountain, gulping, and regretting that life-changing day until Lillian was the only girl left. But she could promenade and do-si-do with the best of them, I'll say that for her. She bowed really well, too. I guess she did a lot of that back in China. And she didn't call me Cootie Boy. She didn't call me anything, come to think of it.

Besides the nonverbal element, Lillian had an odd odor about her. After eating in an authentic Chinese restaurant in San Francisco once, I found out what cooked seaweed smells like. Lillian sprang to mind and thinking about her spoiled the whole California trip for me. It didn't help that I was staying in a Japanese hotel. The Chinese and Japanese cultures aren't identical, I realize, but the oriental theme got to me. The room had a mat on the floor and a Buddhist shrine. Then there was the bathroom with no shower—just a deep tiled tub that took an ocean to fill and there were instructions, in Japanese and English, not to use soap in there because the tub was strictly for soaking. You were supposed to squat on the floor over a drain, turn on the water from the spigot jutting out of the wall, splash water on yourself, soap up, wash your hair, whatever, then rinse off under the stupid spigot. Only then were you allowed into the soaking tub. I don't know if Chinese people get clean this way, but I thought about Lillian the whole time I was there. In fact, I half-expected to bump into her in one of the alleys. I couldn't even take a walk in peace.

One of my fears is that the tack scarred Lillian for life. She had enough emotional scars already. I'm surprised we never ran into each other in a psychologist's waiting room. I toss and turn at night, thinking that Lillian could have become one of those masseuses at a cheesy oriental massage parlor because her self-esteem had to be so low and Michael and I contributed to the downward spiral. I blurted out to the therapist I was seeing at the time that an apology could be in order.

"Making amends," she said flatly, glancing at the pad in her lap. "A key step, Doug." She insisted on calling me Doug. "Perhaps then we can move on."

I wanted to see what was written on that pad. My guess is it was a list of errands she planned to do before going home. When she remembered she had to pick up the dry cleaning, she'd jot it down. *Dry cleaning*. Dry cleaning had absolutely nothing to do with me, and her list was only one of the reasons I stopped seeing her after a few sessions. Another was her annoyed look whenever I brought up Lillian. It was like, *are you kidding? Lillian Wu? Again?*

"Tell me what's been happening lately, Doug. Let's talk about your current goals." That was her response, emphasizing *lately* and *current*. That's the kind of therapist she was. I couldn't wait to get away from the woman. But, before I did, I wanted to finish my thought about Lillian and the 7<sup>th</sup> grade science fair.

"She made a volcano," I explained. "*Papier-mâché*, as Mademoiselle Rothstein would say."

"Mademoiselle Rothstein?"

“My French teacher in junior high school.”

“Where is this going, Doug?” She was jiggling her leg, ever so slightly.

“The volcano didn’t do anything. I mean, if you made a volcano, wouldn’t you want it to erupt? Regurgitate some lava-like substance? Now, that would have been the highlight of the science fair.”

“And your point is—?”

“All she did was put this little metal cup in there with some incense. Chinese people love that stuff. She lit it, and a little plume of smoke came out of the volcano. Everybody stood around, waiting for the lava. But nothing happened. Nothing!” I was getting worked up, so I got off the couch and started to pace. The therapist put her pad up against her chest, probably so I wouldn’t see it was a grocery list. “Lava reminds me of something. My mother never shut up about the poor starving children in China. Well. Mr. O’Day, our science teacher, made yogurt in the lab to demonstrate how bacterial cultures worked and everything. Lillian Wu actually ate the runny, nasty-looking stuff. There was no fruit or anything and it wasn’t even cold. Mr. O’Day was all delighted because he didn’t want his precious yogurt to go to waste. You could tell he was cheap by his taped-up glasses and crappy car. He segued into a lecture about Americans and our free and easy throw-away society while he watched Lillian eat the god-awful yogurt. It was pitiful. That’s why she won the science fair.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her volcano looked like the real thing, I’ll give her that. It was very artistic, sitting there smoking in the middle of all those charts, but, still, *it didn’t erupt*. She won because she ate the *yogurt*. The teachers gave her good grades because she came over from China in a box. They felt sorry for her.”

“Would you like to sit back down, Doug?” she asked, pointing to the couch with her ballpoint pen.

“No,” I said. “I’d like a drink of water.”

“Share what you’re feeling.” Ignoring what I said was nothing new. Taking a break to go the bathroom was out of the question. Once I asked to make a quick phone call and she ignored the request. What if I was having a heart attack and needed an ambulance? She would have kept on asking me about feelings while she wrote *peanut butter* or *car pool* on her pad. All she cared about was the here and now and she didn’t give a damn about anything else. A piece of work, let me tell you.

Flying in the face of authority, I marched over to the credenza where there was a pitcher of water and some paper cups. Obviously, the water was there for her and for clients who deserved it but not for me. I poured myself a cup of water, splashing it around on the tray and the carpet, and took a sip. It was room temperature.

“Do you have any ice?” I asked, pushing the envelope. It’s something I do sometimes, just for the hell of it.

“I’m afraid not, Doug,” she said between clenched teeth. She didn’t argue when I told her I wasn’t coming back to therapy. She didn’t even react when I told her I wanted to work with someone less rigid, but I could tell she was pissed. She didn’t attempt to get “closure” before we parted forever, something all therapists are driven to do. But one good thing came from this session. I decided to look up Lillian Wu and get everything out on the table once and for all. Lillian was the one person who was worse off than I was in junior high

school. That was my point. She was a foreigner, and Michael Held and I consorted to put a tack on her chair. There were no consequences. I deserved to be haunted by Lillian Wu.

Unfortunately, I had no idea what had happened to her. I asked around, but nobody knew. I even called Michael Held at his law office in White Plains.

"What's up, Vonnagel? You got a personal injury problem? Like my ad says on the back of the Yellow Pages, no charge unless I win your case. Naturally, I'll win, and then I collect a third of the settlement."

"I'm trying to locate Lillian Wu."

"Who?"

"Lillian Wu. She went to George S. Patton with us."

"You want to sue somebody named Lillian Wu?"

"No, I want to find her. I thought you might know where she is."

"I'm drawing a blank, man."

"The Chinese girl in science class. We put a tack on her chair."

"Huh?"

"Come on. You know what I'm talking about."

"Jesus, how long ago are we talking here? No, I don't remember anything like that."

"You're saying you don't remember, not that you didn't do it."

He burst out with a familiar snort; the same diabolical sound he made constantly as a twelve-year-old. "Look, I was just on my way to the courthouse when you called. Sorry I can't help you out with this girl thing." I didn't respond. "Hey, one of these days we really should get together and grab a beer or something. Take care, man." *Click*.

But when I was passing by the old neighborhood, I stopped at the house where the Wu family had lived on the off-chance Lillian's parents were still there. Lo and behold, Mrs. Wu opened the door. I knew it was Mrs. Wu because she was Chinese and about four feet tall. It had to be her. Somewhere inside was the yipping of a small dog.

"Mrs. Wu?" I was breathless at the sight of her, like she was Ann-Margret in "Viva Las Vegas."

"What you selling?" she asked, scrunching up her face. She was Lillian's mother, all right.

"I'm Douglas Vonnagel. I went to school with your daughter." Her little black eyebrows shot up. "My family lived in the house with the big rocks out front."

"Big rocks. Okay."

"Maybe you met my parents, Babe and Sarge?" She appeared baffled. My father couldn't stand foreigners and yelled at them like they were hard of hearing. Probably a good thing she didn't remember him. Babe was memorably good looking, an attention grabber, but she didn't frequent PTA meetings at George S. Patton. "Well, I was hoping you could tell me how to get in touch with Lillian." Her chin dropped until it was almost touching her chest. "Did she ever say anything—about me?"

"What your name again?"

"*Douglas Vonnagel.*"

"No. Never heard of you." The yipping continued and a rattling sound.

"Lillian and I used to do-si-do together," I said.

“What you mean, do-si-do?” She said it like a dirty word. I did a few quick dance steps to demonstrate and possibly break the ice here. “You sell dance lessons? Arthur Murray?”

I shook my head and she seemed to relax a little. “I hear a dog,” I said.

“Behind baby gate.” That explained the rattle. The animal was trying to escape from the rumpus room. Again, I thought of Lillian crossing the Pacific in her box, struggling to reach her parents and American shores, only to be maimed by Michael Held and me.

“Did your daughter possibly mention—Cootie Boy?” I stared down at Mrs. Wu’s tiny, embroidered satin slippers.

“Cutie Boy? Who Cutie Boy?”

“Never mind. I’d like to talk to Lillian. Could you possibly give me her phone number?”

“She live in New York City.”

“Oh?” I had a flash of a disheveled, disease-riddled prostitute, roaming Chinatown and eating out of the garbage.

“Park Avenue. Married to rich doctor.”

I swallowed. “Really? Lillian is married to a doctor? A *medical* doctor?”

“What you do?”

“Me? For a living, you mean?” She nodded once. Reluctant to say, I struggled to formulate an answer.

“You go to Yale? Lillian go to Yale. You want to see pictures?” She opened the door a little wider and I stepped in. The smell of seaweed hit me like a bus.

The Wu’s house was a duplicate of our old split-level, except everything was reversed. Our kitchen was on the left, theirs was on the right. I held my breath and stuck my head in there. A nightmarish creature was laid out on the orange Formica counter in all its multi-legged glory.

“Baby octopus,” Mrs. Wu chirped, licking her lips. I took a couple of steps back. “Where you go college?” She wasn’t going to let go of this thing.

“It’s a small one in upstate New York,” I said vaguely. “I’m sure you never heard of it.”

“You graduate?”

“Not exactly.” The corners of her mouth went down. I was disappointing her already.

Instead of the oriental themed décor I was anticipating, the Wu home was furnished in a unique combination of French provincial, La-Z-Boy and plastic palm trees. An elaborate gold and white table in the Wu entryway displayed a bouquet of feathers and two framed photographs—one of a robed graduate with ivy-covered walls in the background, and a wedding portrait of a bride and groom.

“Here Lillian,” Mrs. Wu said, sweeping her hand like one of those Barbie doll girls showing off boats and refrigerators on “The Price is Right.”

I moved closer. Lillian Wu was a knockout in a long white dress holding some lilies. Her smile displayed a full set of glittering, straight, normal-sized teeth. The guy standing next to her looked like the ideal all-American boy/doctor.

“You married?” Mrs. Wu asked. “Engaged? You got girlfriend?” She took my shocked silence as a no on all counts. Instead of feeling relieved that Lillian was doing well and I hadn’t ruined her life after all, I had a flashback of a fetal pig bathed in formaldehyde and

wasn't sure what to do first—throw up or lose control of my bowels. A simultaneous eruption crossed my mind as a possibility.

"Could I use your bathroom?" I gasped.

She pointed upstairs. I already knew where the bathroom was—ours had been on the right so theirs had to be on the left. It was exactly like the one I grew up with except the Vonnagel's had gray-blue tile and the Wu's was gray-green—to my disappointment, there was no spigot and no soaking tub. I had the feeling I was in a fishbowl because the wallpaper was covered with goldfish, as was the plastic shower curtain. I stared into the mirror and thought about Lillian at the sink, brushing her poor little teeth. Clearly she'd had them capped since junior high. Her bathroom on Park Avenue probably featured solid gold fixtures. Lillian of all people had achieved the American Dream. In spite of damaging childhood experiences, Lillian Wu moved on to bigger and better things. Unlike yours truly.

"Cootie Boy," I said into the mirror. My skin was pale and my eyes appeared sunken, like a criminal in a lineup.

I was tempted to peruse the medicine cabinet and sample a little of this and that, but I restrained myself. Thankfully, the sick spell passed and I washed my face with cold water and a fish-shaped guest soap and blotted with a hand towel that smelled like Lillian. When I went back downstairs, Mrs. Wu was still standing in front of the hall table—black shirt, black pants, little cap of black hair—lighting some incense. I had probably interrupted some Buddhist/French Provincial ritual. I imagined the ringing of chimes and little brass bells.

That scent.

"Lillian's volcano," I murmured in a dreamy way. I wondered if it was displayed somewhere in the house, along with numerous other examples of achievement, like her diploma from Yale.

The yipping had become insistent barking.

"You okay?" Mrs. Wu asked, as if not quite sure what I might do next. I got the impression she was ready for me to leave so she could return to her baby octopus or the dog that wanted out.

"I take it Lillian is—happy?" I said, in a fake cheery tone. There might be another element to the story. Something tragic, like under the graduation robe and wedding gown was a wooden leg.

But Mrs. Wu nodded vigorously to indicate everything was just peachy in Lillian's world and headed for the front door. "You hear she model for Vogue? They discover her in Paris, on honeymoon."

"She modeled for Vogue magazine? In Paris? Wow. Gosh. You must be *really* proud. How tall is she, by the way? I mean, she looks a lot taller than I remember." I had to raise my voice over the racket downstairs.

"Taller than you. But not taller than husband. She in graduate school. Columbia. What I tell her you doing now?"

"Oh, that's okay. Lillian probably wouldn't even remember me. It would probably be better if—"

"What you say name is again?"

There was further commotion in the rumpus room. I knew it was the rumpus room because that's the way our house was configured except ours was on the right and the Wu's

was on the left. The baby gate must have given way—I heard a crack like a toy pistol shot—and a little Pomeranian flew up and attacked me on the ankle, through my pants. It was surprisingly painful, like tacks digging into my flesh, but I felt like I deserved it. I didn't cry out though, I just shook my foot to dislodge the furry rat. It flew up in the air and landed on the flagstone floor there in the entryway. That's what we had, too—flagstone in the entryway.

The impact must have stunned the little guy.

"Bad, bad, bad!" Mrs. Wu screamed. I was momentarily taken aback. When she switched into rapid-fire Chinese and made scooping motions in the direction of the limp animal, I considered attempting mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If I saved the dog's life, maybe Mrs. Wu would speak well of me to Lillian. But he revived on his own, shook himself and bared his teeth again.

Mrs. Wu held out her arms and for a moment I thought she was going to hug me, but instead I felt a surprisingly powerful push and the door closed in my face. I noticed then that they had a double-type front door that was different than ours. As I was examining the diamond shaped molding, I heard the deadbolt click. Mrs. Wu and the rat-dog were now peering through the narrow floor-to ceiling window beside the door. She didn't wave or anything—she had a phone with a long cord to her ear, probably the kitchen wall phone—so I turned around, limped to my car and got the hell out of Dodge.

Dreams of Lillian Wu remain an issue.

Prince is Dead  
Michael A. Ferro

When most people buy something frivolous, they forget to ask: Do I need it? Once the item arrives or after they've returned home with the purchase, only then do they usually ask themselves the question. For John Burns, it wasn't he who asked the question of himself, but his infuriated wife, Carol.

"Do you need it?" Carol asked him as they stood in the garage.

John looked at it.

"Do I *need* it?"

"Yes," she said, her arms crossed firmly under her breasts.

John continued to look at it and tilted his head slightly to the side, as if picturing what it might look like speeding off a dirt incline through the air.

"Yes, I need it," he said.

Carol threw her arms into the air.

"You *need* a brand new Corvette!? A goddamn big red \$60,000 Corvette!?"

"Little red Corvette, honey," John said.

"*What!*?"

"It's a little red Corvette."

"Oh, God dammit," she said as she turned toward the door, only to turn right back and cross her arms at him again. "Wait. Wait a minute. Is this because—"

"Prince is dead."

She closed her eyes and her lips pursed tight as a snare.

"You unbelievable ass. It's going back. You're taking it back to wherever the hell you got it."

John smiled as he looked over the car. It gleamed brightly under the large dome light. He watched his reflection grinning back at him in the driver's side window.

"He died so young," John finally said.

"What does that have to do with anything, John!?"

The smile gradually vanished from his face. He lowered his head.

"I remember Prince. I remember that song, honey. Back then, it was just..."

Carol stopped tapping her foot.

"Alex is in his senior year at Berkley," she said. "Do you really think now is a good time to buy a sports car? You don't *need* this. How can we *afford* this?"

"Prince is dead."

"Yes, I've seen the news, John. It's going back."

The garage was silent.

"I know."

She relaxed her stance and let her arms fall to her sides.

"You were doing well these last few years. I thought we'd managed to avoid a mid-life sports car crisis thing," she said. "My radar's up now. I'll be watching the credit statements closely."

For the first time, she looked at the car carefully and they both stood gazing at it, like some stone obelisk. Neither spoke a word.

John walked over to the Corvette's large hood and used his sleeve to wipe off a speck of dirt. He began to hum the song out loud.

"Oh, just stop it," Carol said turning toward the door. "It would have broken your heart when they sliced the thing in two and I took my half in the divorce."

The Great Divide  
Matthew D. Laing

Ever since it flew across the sky, Hueyi and his young daughter Meeya have been on the run and into areas not yet explored by their former tribe. Into areas where the trees and the plants look strange; where the water is a different shade; where there is almost no fresh air to breathe; where strange creatures hang from the trees. But they relentlessly head due south and away from their ancestral home in the Nahu Valley. At one point in their history, the Witlan tribe had been a great community of huts and small farms, but with war and sickness they are the only ones remaining. Hueyi fears that the *Fire Bearers* will find them and take Meeya away. They keep pressing on with great haste.

Long ago he remembered stories from the elders about the Fire Bearers. He still vaguely remembered the fire burning slowly, almost down to the embers, with he and the other children seated in front of the pit and directly across from the three old and withered elders. Each of them had white paste smeared down their nose in a singular vertical line; it was a mark of wisdom and authority. Kug, the oldest of the three, told each of the children about the Bearers, about their flight, and about what they do.

“Careful with them” said Kug, voice quieting. “If you get too close they snatch you up, like a great bird plucking its prey off the ground.” One of the children squirmed. “They glow in many areas, like the sun when it is high in the sky or like the flame of a torch. Never look at their light.”

Hueyi remembered a sudden breeze rattling the bushes and the trees causing all six children to jump in surprise.

“Our elders once told us the same thing and we listened. I have never seen the fire, but I’ve been told that the Fire Bearers are out there, somewhere, and they are waiting – they always have been. They will take you away from our lands, from our people, from all that you know.”

The people part didn’t matter anymore but their home did. Hueyi and Meeya had been used to the vibrant sapphire rivers and streams of the Nahu Valley and the best spots to forage and gather materials. Their lineage fell after an attack from another tribe, where he and Meeya, a child of four, hid and avoided certain death. Meeya’s mother, Atzi, never made it past the night-time raid. She had gone down to collect water just before the other tribe came.

Everything he grew up with – everything his forefathers built vanquished overnight. Huts were burned, food stores were taken, and each of the surviving villagers were slaughtered one by one for religious sacrifice. Hueyi’s gods did not require human sacrifice, but he knew that within this jungle there were other tribes that practiced such outlandish customs. He considered them barbaric and wrong.

They had been on the run since Meeya first ventured into a small clearing near their home and looked up past the forest canopy, up into the open blue sky, and right into its lights. There had been something up there, something resembling what Kug once told him and the other children. It had been black and large and there seemed to be bright flames all about its body—perhaps a giant bird holding many torches. Once he realized that this thing, whatever it was, belonged to these mysterious people, he scooped up Meeya,

grabbed his finest axes and spears, and took off down familiar trails and into the heavily covered forest. They would not return, not ever. There had to be another home in the jungle for them. After all, the jungle is all that they know and it is all that they have ever known.

Hueyi looked around for Meeya, perhaps concerned that *they* snatched her but then saw that she was playing down at the streambed. His father called the stream Rushwater after the swift rapids in its center. The stream marked the furthest point that he had ever been away from their village. Once as a boy he had looked upon these very waters, watching his father fish along the banks. That had been many years in the past. So much changed—so much death and destruction. The stream's waters were still a light teal blue and its rocks brown and dark like the sand beneath. Meeya, as six-year olds were prone to do, splashed her feet in the water aiming for small silver fish nipping at her tanned toes. She had not seen much death in her short life and he meant to keep it that way. She understood great things happened and that their people were gone, but she did not need to know fear or pain. So he kept their journey to himself. He hid away the tales of the Fire Bearers. He tried to make their trek an adventure.

"Hu," she called her father, "I'm hungry." And she continued to splash in the streambed with its cool water staining the lower part of her long loin cloth.

He took a moment to look at his only child and he was always amazed at how much she already looked like her mother. Meeya's hair, jet black, glistened against beams of sunlight breaking through the dense forest canopy. Most importantly she had Atzi's smile—a smile that could bring joy to anyone or anything. It warmed his heart.

"Soon" he said as he grabbed the spear off of an adjacent rock, "I have to fish. Can you not splash until I get our dinner?"

"Okay," she smiled, "I'll splash after."

A short while later they ate a large fish caught from the Rushwater and made an even bed of interwoven palm leaves, a skill he had learned from Atzi when they first lived together in their small hut. It wasn't home but it would do.

Night began to encroach and the jungle awakened. Somewhere not far off a large cat called out into the night, so he stoked the fire and began collecting wood. Fire kept away the creatures but it drew in outsiders and he was not sure how many other tribes would be in this location. While Meeya slept he kept watch and sharpened his axe.

Sleep came to him in waves, each bringing about its own dream and meanings.

He didn't sleep much in these last few years, always having to always worry about raids and attacks from the other tribes. The Fire Bearers never came into his mind; well, not until Meeya looked up into the open sky. When it moved the trees swayed as if they understood the things importance.

But, tonight, and against his own intentions, he did sleep and he did dream.

He dreamt of Atzi and baby Meeya and how happy she had been, how happy everyone had been. The village all came together to celebrate Meeya's birth into the world, down and around the large communal fire pit. Hueyi remembered the constant rhythm of the ceremonial drums – the rattles shaking, and the cheer. Birth was considered by his people to be the single most important aspect of life. They did not worship death or sacrifice to various gods and creatures, but they did worship birth, light, happiness, and

prosperity. *Many gods for many things.* The Witlans lived peacefully contained within their own territory for centuries, and they did not war.

*In the dream Atzi carries the little tan baby down to the fire where old Kug waits, the last of the three elders. He has white paste on his face, that same thick line running down his nose, and beads in his hair. Kug blesses Meeya with the burning of the special crescent leaf; thick plumes of thick and white smoke shroud Meeya's head—*

He always woke from the dream when the baby started to cry as the smoke went into her lungs, sobs as ancient echoes. As he awoke, the darkness made him feel lost until he noticed the small burning embers of the once roaring fire. He turned over and saw Meeya sleeping peacefully with a spider crawling up her arm. He picked up the spider and carried it away from their site.

He was half-way through stoking the fire when he heard something trample through the bushes behind him, a large crash and shuffle. The noise was startling and he realized *what* may be near. He had seen them all the time over his years in his village. The large cats like to stalk their prey until they felt ready to pounce and devour.

Like his father had taught him many times before, Hueyi took out his long wooden spear and wacked the pole against a nearby rock creating a loud and hallowed series of bangs. And he repeated the process until Meeya awoke and stared at him with dark and confused eyes. He put a finger to his lips and motioned for her to be quiet. And she listened. The growling stopped. The creature fled.

"Hu?" Meeya asked with sleepy eyes—

"Sssh" he whispered to her, "go back to sleep. It was just a little monkey." And with that she laid back down and shut her eyes. Hueyi stoked the fire and laid back down himself. "Just a little monkey like you, Meeya" he whispered.

Once again he slept and dreamt of Atzi and Meeya; of a time long gone but still precious. He knew life was once again about to change. They were on the run.

But for now, sleep eased his spirits.

Within the vast sea of emerald green, they continued underneath the dense and enclosing forest canopy. Sunlight rarely seeped in and when it did Hueyi took care to avoid passing directly underneath. The great trees and vines were their cover, their refuge as it had been all their lives. Kug always mentioned that they should be careful about open spaces: *be wary when farming—be wary when hunting.* And they had been.

It was three nights since the call with the panther and he continued to lead them south and into areas that he had never been to and, until today, they had all looked the same. Between the edges of the forest where they now stood, lay a great copper brown field littered with tree-stumps and devoid of plants and bushes save for a few growing in-between the stumps. He had never seen anything like it. The gap was large. It was a graveyard.

In all his thirty-some years in the jungle, contained within their tribal boundaries, he had never seen such an absence of nature. It was almost like a portion of the great sea envisioned by his ancestors but dry and lifeless. He wondered if this were a trap set by the Fire Bearers—but he couldn't entirely be sure. It may have always been like this.

"Meeya" he whispered when she caught up to his side. She had been skipping behind him, but now looked up into his eyes. "We are going to run. Run as fast as your little legs will carry you and I will be behind you. Run like a panther. Run like the wind."

She nodded; eyes in awe by the great emptiness in front of them. She looked fearful yet aware. Hueyi thought that perhaps the child knew of the great impending danger behind them.

“See the trees over there?” he pointed across the gap and towards another portion of the forest looming directly in front of them. “Make it there. Go now and sshh...” And once again put the finger to his lips.

While the little Meeya ran, her jet black hair fluttered in the breeze. Hueyi followed.

A great booming came from above the gap, the trees hugging the clearing violently rustle and sway to the power of *its* wings. Wind gushes past and Hueyi can feel the sweat on his skin now cooling. He then looks up and sees a great mammoth black bird with lights moving with them—no, towards them. He begins to sprint and scoops up Meeya when he reaches her. They dart and he runs faster than he has ever run before.

They make it across and are in the forest as before; relieved by its density and its canopy. But they do not stop, they do not pause. They keep going over plants and down existing dirt trails. In the distance he can hear voices, voices coming from the sky; voices coming from the great bird. *Voices that he could not understand.* His heart raced.

Now things were different.

Aside from the lifeless gap, the forest until that moment had been dense and familiar. It now appeared thin, and there were many more trails – each heading off in various winding directions like a snake slithering through tall jade grass. Meeya spoke less and less and he knew that she was frightened. She too had seen and heard the Fire Bearers at the gap.

They had not eaten much in two days as the streams did not have any fish. There were increasingly fewer edible plants and fruit, and animals seemed rare and hard to come by – not to mention frightened.

Hueyi and Meeya sat near a small stream. Behind them lay a small mattress of interwoven palm. Through the canopy above, the sun was beginning to set. Meeya poked a small stick into the streams slow moving water.

“Hu” she asked and looked up at her father.

“Yes monkey” he smiled, trying to cheer her up.

“Are we ever going back home?” Her dark eyes looked sad. It was near the same expression she gave him when he talked about Azti.

“We can’t any longer,” he said carefully. “You saw that great thing in the sky?”

She nodded.

“Remember old Kug?”

She nodded again.

“He always told us to be wary of that beast, of those people. We have always called them the Fire Bearers.”

“But who are they? *What was that?*” she asked and now turned to face her father. She looked sad. Meeya once loved Kug like a grandfather.

“I don’t know my little monkey. Whatever it is, can’t be good. We need to keep separate and hidden. We need to find a home away from them. Will you help me search, will you keep your eyes peeled?” he smiled.

“When?”

“Soon Meeya” he told her and hoped this was true. “A few more days and we will begin to make a new home. Will you be a big girl and help out your Hu?”

“I will,” now she smiled, “I promise.”

Later that evening Hueyi sat feeding the fire while Meeya snored behind him. He could not sleep, not after everything he had witnessed. And a few hours earlier he heard that booming of the Fire Bearers gliding over the canopy, flying over in short circuits—searching the jungle floor through considerable trees.

Hueyi saw them pass from a distance. At first he feared for their safety, worrying that perhaps the Fire Bearers resembled a tribe, but then realized that it was another jungle tribe heading back the way they had just come.

Ten of them ran across the river each adorned in clothing similar to the Witlan Tribe: notably a loin cloth and white paste smeared on their face and body. They carried bags and spears. Two small children chased behind the adults and they moved with haste.

But he would not break cover.

Other tribes came and took. Other tribes killed and plundered. Other tribes sacrificed. But he wondered why they were moving with such speed. The children looked afraid.

This time Meeya did not speak. She too feared the other tribes.

As soon as the group left his periphery, Hueyi took Meeya’s hand and travelled in the opposite direction. Nothing could be as horrible as those people overhead – those ghastly noises and sounds. The way the trees bent and swayed with such power and force.

It was a hot day and he felt his own sweat bead down his face. They moved with speed and intention. They continued looking for a new home away from legends and enemies.

It had been a great many days since their encounter with the other jungle tribe. The forest continued changing, thinning in sections and providing less and less sources of edibles and fruit. They had not eaten meat for a long while and Hueyi knew that they would need to settle soon. They would need to concentrate on nutrition and a permanent dwelling. Meeya became far too skinny and she often complained about the hunger pains which hurt him more than anything else.

Yesterday he found a strange object on one of the tree trunks. It had been bright red and fluttered in the wind like a small strip of hide. The marker was stuck to the side of a trunk. He presumed that it was to mark a trail, as he used to do by bending the stalk of a plant or by nicking a tree with his axe. He wondered whether they would be at the Great Divide soon.

Kug informed the tribe on multiple occasions about *the Great Divide*, much like his tales of the Great Sea to the east.

“Our jungle is not infinite” the old elder spoke with his deep and raspy voice. “There is a Great Divide out there” he pointed south with his arthritic bony hand, “And we must never reach it. We are safe beneath these trees with our own customs and practices. You see,” he paused and stoked the fire with his cane, “The Great Divide is the end of our way. It is the end of all we know. The jungle dies. The jungle turns to grey dirt. The dirt kills.”

Strange sounds woke Hueyi from his shallowed sleep: strange and frightening noises echoing from somewhere near. He saw bright lights dancing in the distance, illuminating the darkness through the tree line like vibrant stars in the sky. He wondered if it was another tribe, but they could not stay here. There was no food and they were being followed.

Maybe Old Kug had been wrong. Maybe out there was salvation; perhaps life rather than death.

A beam of warm sunlight warmed Hueyi's face and he awoke from a shallow sleep. Beside him Meeya abruptly woke to his movement. He smiled and his stomach rumbled violently. Today they would make their move.

"Meeya."

"Are we going today?" she asked inquisitively.

"Yes we are, my little monkey," he said and then looked up towards the source of the bright lights and noises. The jungle floor sloped upwards ever so slightly but he could see the end of its density -*The Great Divide*- where the thickness stopped—where Kug foretold a great openness...

"Are we going to eat?" she asked, her dark eyes looking for a positive reaffirmation; her dark black hair smooth and glistening underneath the daylight. Atzi's eyes—her mother's hair.

"Afterwards my child," and then he pointed to a large boulder next to where they were seated, "I need you to stay there while I go check ahead. Meeya you need to promise me that you will stay there until I come back."

At first she looked confused, but then she complied. She got up and went over to the large grey boulder and sat with her back against the stone. Hueyi kissed his child on the forehead and then grabbed his axe.

This time he moved carefully, quickly to avoid rustling foliage or snapping twigs. The tough and thick bottoms of his feet acted as leather and he hardly made a sound. For a second he thought he felt the great bird approaching, but then realized it was only a cool breeze coming from ahead of him. Surprisingly his heart raced in his chest. He smelt smoke. He heard strange sounds as he approached the opening. He stepped forward into the opening and realized that he was on top of a great stone cliff. The same cool breeze hit him dead smack in the face. He peered over its face.

Below were things he had never seen before and things he did not or could not comprehend. *Great hunks of metal. Smoke. Lights beyond measure. Dwellings which rose high in the sky. People adorned in strange garb. A vast openness devoid of life—absent of trees and plants, of animals and water. Grey like stones and torn-up dirt—*

He never felt such fear—and then he heard it. From somewhere ahead the great bird thrummed and swooshed and called out to him. But he could not understand. He did not want to understand. He turned back into the jungle—his home. This time he ran. He wouldn't look any longer.

"Meeya!" he called as he approached the boulder. His daughter looked frightened and she had every right to be. Down there were the Fire Bearers. Down there was the Great Divide. Down there was the end of their ways.

"Hu—"

"Let's go" he said, "Run like the wind, my little monkey!"

“But—” she began to cry. He knew she was afraid. She had seen so much already, so much to fear.

“Don’t be afraid Meeya!” he said, giving her his characteristic smile. “Down there I saw a black panther. Remember the one I chased away?”

She nodded and she followed.

He grabbed her hand and they went back into the jungle.

“Peter!” John Swithen called from the right side of the black helicopter hovering over rainforest town of Selem, in Western Brazil. John Pointed down towards Tarem Cliff. “There *they* are!” He had the eyes of a madman.

*By God*, Dr. Peter Menalaus thought as he watched the short and tanned male walk out onto the cliffs face. “He found his way out!”

*But then the male went back into the jungle: and he didn’t just walk, he ran.*

His research team had been tracking the male and the small female for days, for weeks. In all his years studying anthropology and cultures indigenous to the Southern Hemisphere he had never, not ever, believed that they would find an un-contacted group in the rainforest. *It was a find of a lifetime.* What knowledge they would possess of the past—of their rituals and rites leading back before the time of European colonization. He knew the male would turn back. Selem would have been nothing like the man would have ever seen in his life. *A scar in the earth...*

“Call the University in Paulo” Peter said as he scanned the cliff face with his binoculars. He beckoned the pilot. “Head back over and into the jungle—”

John cut him off.

“Peter!” John turned and faced him, “We are not supposed to contact them! You’ve already used the microphone—that’s breaking protocol!”

But he did not care how John thought. He led this team and he would do whatever he wished.

He ignored John and crept over to the pilot.

“Jorge, head back over to that clearing. That logging patch,” he smiled, “Do you think we can land the chopper down there?”

The pilot looked back at him and nodded.

*This was a find of a lifetime.*

After they found them, he would push deeper into the jungle—deeper into the darkness of this unknown swash of wilderness. He wished to bring the savages into the light. To educate the ignorant. To learn from the past. To do both at the same time.

Sapling  
Sara Roberts

Pam stared out of the window at the machinery on her lawn. She remembered when they had planted the apple tree together upon first moving in. They had laughed as they kissed over the sapling in their wellington boots. "It will be a symbol," she had said, "since we're not getting married."

Over the years they had watched it grow, watered it in hot summers and pruned it in the winter. They had enjoyed picnics in its shade, sitting on the Indian rug with the children when they were babies, feeding them apple purée from a homemade pot.

Later they watched them running around the tree with the neighbour's kids and playing with the dog, while Dave knelt down and put his ear to her belly. How she had craved those apples during her third pregnancy, picking them straight off the tree and eating them as she strode through the damp morning grass.

Dave had broken his arm falling off the ladder when he made a miniature sort of treehouse up there for the kids. The two eldest used to 'hide' there while she called them in for dinner and pretended to search the house for them.

When she went back to work, the apples started to stay on the ground and rot. There was no more time for apple purée. The kids ate ready meals and Dave hardly had a chance to see them, let alone tend the garden. He was so often away now, and even when he wasn't working the stress never really left him. By the time he was 40, it had etched a map of new lines on his face and turned his hair grey.

Still, the tree stood strong and tall and Pam enjoyed watching the leaves change colour and flutter to the ground in the autumn. From time to time, she would wade out at dawn, the deep grass curling around her calves, blades slicking themselves to her skin, and stand looking up at its gnarled arthritic branches. She would pick an apple and eat it, resting her forehead against its marbled trunk and tracing the patterns in the bark with her finger, its eddies and swirls, gorges and canyons.

She had witnessed its withering along with her husband's. She stood for hours and just stared at it through the kitchen window after coming back from each of Dave's chemo sessions.

Now it was unsightly; a ruinous island in the middle of a cropped lawn, a single leaf still fluttering like a white flag in the wind.

The estate agent had told her she should have it taken out. It would help to sell the house, he said. It would help if its blackened broken trunk no longer pointed like an accusing finger at the sky.

Shotgun Signs  
Justin Hunter

The movie theater played classics on Tuesdays for two bucks a pop. You had to get there before eleven, though. And they wouldn't serve alcohol even though the goddamn bar is just as stocked in the morning as it is late at night. So, Daryl poured some coconut rum into a plastic bottle of Coke while still in the parking lot. He'd found the rum tucked in the bottom drawer of the dresser at the old motel he stayed at last night. He slid the bottle into his jeans pocket when he walked into the theater. Now, he was itching to pull it out as he waited for the 10:30 a.m. showing of *The Jerk* to start.

His daughter's first movie had been in a theater like this. Small, empty, playing classics like this one. Dani laughed and he laughed and *What's Up Doc?* carried them through to the black-screen credits.

That was before Daryl decided he didn't want his daughter anymore.

An usher walked past Daryl, looking down. Suspecting. Then, he came back and stood next to Daryl. "Sir, is everything all right?"

Daryl kept his eyes on the screen, waiting for the movie. "What?"

"You don't look well."

"I'm not."

"Can I do—do you need anything?"

"I need plenty."

The lights dimmed and the usher gave up and walked away. Daryl pulled the rum and Coke back out and sipped as the movie began.

He wished he could say he was drunk when Steve Martin danced on the porch of that house at the end of the movie. But he didn't feel a thing. He stood, knees popping, and walked out of the theater, past the concession stands, and into the parking lot where the sun had begun to bake the tar.

He stood in the middle of the road before walking to his truck, and he tried to hold the sun's gaze. His eyes burned after a second, and his eyelids shut after two. He used to tell his daughter staring at the sun would make her go blind, but that was when Dani was just a girl. Now, he didn't know what he'd tell her.

When Daryl got to his truck, he tossed the empty Coke bottle in the bed. The bottle of coconut rum in the glove compartment should get him through his day of driving. Johanna used to drink stuff like that. Bay Breezes made with Malibu, Hurricanes made with some other shit that tasted more like Kool-Aid than alcohol. She spent the summers sipping cocktails on the back porch, pretending it wasn't a hundred and fifteen degrees outside.

He and Johanna were still married as far as the law was concerned. But she wasn't going to find anyone new with the way she was, and Daryl didn't want anyone in his life besides their daughter.

He climbed into the cab of the truck and started it up. Most days began like this now. Maybe not with a movie, but with a couple of drinks and too many memories.

Dani had been eighteen when she told them she was moving in with Sharon. Johanna told her it was a great idea, told her she supported it. And that's why Daryl's wife still got to see their daughter.

Daryl shut his eyes and tried to remember the exact words he'd said to Dani. "Ain't no daughter of mine shacking up with a dyke." That was it.

Of course, if it had stopped there, he might not be driving up and down the empty highways of Southern Arizona just to keep from going insane. No, Daryl told his daughter that she was a piece of shit. Human garbage. That if she left his and Johanna's home, there'd be no coming back.

She left, and now all he wanted was for Dani to come back.

But there wasn't anywhere to come back to. Daryl'd been living out of his truck and cheap motels for months since Johanna's thing at work. Somehow, the way Daryl treated their daughter didn't do them in. It was something that happened on the job. From what she would tell him, Johanna had to use her gun and it messed with her head.

He guided the truck onto the back road leading toward the state highway cutting west toward Tucson. Dani was living in a trailer with that same girl across the state line up in Utah. They must have wanted to escape the desert. He couldn't blame them.

Daryl had even driven up there once or twice. Long drive. He'd sat in the bed of his truck, drinking warm beer, and watching the light through the curtains of the trailer's windows. He couldn't just go knock on the door. He'd tried to come back from what he'd done, but Dani wouldn't allow it.

A cloud streaked in front of the sun, dropping Daryl into the shadows. When the cloud passed by and the sun lit the cab again, the light caught the edge of a piece of chrome on the passenger side floorboard. He leaned over and pulled back a rust-covered tarp and looked at the shotgun on the floor. The old 10-gauge wouldn't do much in its current state, but it helped Daryl sleep at night.

Sometimes, just before laying his head back in the reclined driver's seat of the pickup at the end of the day, Daryl would slide the barrel of the shotgun between his lips, careful not to smack it against his teeth. He'd hold his thumb across the trigger, and he'd close his eyes and think. Sometimes about Dani—like how he didn't care who she fucked now, probably didn't care back then either. Sometimes about Johanna—how he missed her forgiving him for everything he'd ever done as they fell into bed together.

And on these nights where Daryl let his tongue run across the cold steel shotgun barrel, he'd let his brain wander until he couldn't stand it anymore. Then he'd pull the trigger.

The dry click of an empty chamber made his blood go cold and his skin tingle.

He'd picked up the shotgun at a gun show after he got tired of passing road signs torn apart by birdshot. If people loved shooting up metal signs on the side of the highway, he might as well give it a try. But he never got around to buying shells.

When Daryl made it to Interstate 10, he went south then caught Interstate 19 toward Mexico. He ducked off I-19 at the first state highway he could find, and he set the cruise control. Yesterday, he drove five hundred miles back and forth across Pima County, Santa Cruz County, and Cochise County. He hit a coyote in the last hour of driving, and that told him it was time to call it a night.

By one in the afternoon, Daryl was fifty miles outside the city. He passed trailers and ranches. A firework stand stood a few yards off the highway. When Dani was twelve, Daryl tried to impress her with a firework show on the Fourth in their backyard. Johanna had told him not to do it, but she was gone to work when he sat Dani in a lawn chair out back.

He lit the first firework without any trouble. The second one, though, exploded on the ground, caught Daryl's arm on fire. He got it put out with just a few burns, but Dani cried the rest of the night.

He'd take that night over any other he'd had in the last few years.

How he'd made it this long was a mystery. Dani was thirty now, had two kids she adopted. That Sharon girl—woman, now—worked at some crisis management company. Didn't make much as far Daryl knew since they were still stuck in that trailer. But Johanna told him their daughter seemed happy.

For the first couple years after Daryl told Dani not to come back, he stayed angry. Couldn't look at a picture of her without wanting to hit a wall. He'd shattered every picture of his daughter they had lined up on the dresser after Dani moved out.

Daryl spun off the cap on the rum, took a drink from the bottle, and then closed it up. He watched a storm build to the south. All show, no go. The clouds puffed and darkened, but when it came down to action, the storm would back off. Like a bully forced to fight for the first time.

Daryl had been fighting for some time now. Fighting himself. Fighting Johanna. Fighting the pain after he got hurt on the job. He broke his back in six spots when that wall came down on him. Now, Daryl wasn't supposed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds. He was supposed to be taking Vicodin to numb the pain. And he was living off the settlement the company gave him.

That happened four years ago. Maybe that's what changed his mind. Made him realize what a piece of shit he was. Or maybe it was Johanna leaving him.

The first time Daryl tried to apologize to Dani, to beg her to let him back in, was three years after she left. Johanna gave him Dani's number, and Daryl called. Sharon answered and even begged Dani to come to the phone, but Daryl heard his daughter in the background.

"I ain't got a daddy," she'd said to Sharon. Then the phone went dead.

Daryl tried once more after the accident at work. From his hospital bed, he scratched out a letter. Said he wasn't worth the time she was taking to read the letter, but he hoped she could forgive him. Said he loved her. Said he might even love Sharon if Dani would give him another shot. He wrote about his own father. No excuse, he'd told her, but his own daddy hated everything. Hate flowed through blood, but Daryl should've been better.

When he got an envelope back from Dani, his heart about stopped. He was out of the hospital by then, laying on the couch at home. He tore it open and found his original letter shredded. He dumped the tiny pieces of paper to the floor, laid his head on the couch, and closed his eyes. He hadn't tried to reach out since then.

Daryl passed a few trailers, some slump block homes, a gas station serving as a grocery store, and a post office. He watched the hawks high in the sky, circling, and waiting. Waves of heat rose from the tar ahead of him, and he imagined the rain coming, cooling the road. He passed the shell of a burnt-out car and an old mattress tossed to the side of the road.

Then, he passed a gun store and hit the brakes.

Daryl pulled to the side of the road and looked at the store in his rearview mirror. It was looking back at him, daring him to break eye contact. He threw the truck in park and stepped out into the dusty hard clay lining the highway.

He walked back to the store and pulled open the door. An old Indian with close-cropped hair nodded then went back to watching daytime television on the black and white mounted behind the counter.

“You got 10-gauge shells?” Daryl asked.

The Indian didn’t look up, but he pointed at a wall toward the back.

Daryl looked at the rifles on racks along the wall, the handguns under the glass. He could look all day, but he wouldn’t be able to walk out with one of those guns until passing the background check, and that would take too goddamn long.

He picked up a box of 10-gauge Remington’s from the shelf along the wall in the back and walked up to the counter. It smelled like sawdust and whiskey in the shop, and it reminded Daryl of working out in the garage when Dani was little. He built her a rocking horse from wood he’d picked up in the neighborhood. She watched him, clapping when each new piece was finished. And he got that thing polished to a shine while he drank cheap booze from a Styrofoam cup.

“What’re you drinking back there?”

The Indian looked up. “What?”

“Smells like something I’d drink.”

The Indian shook his head. “You’re on the reservation, so you assume we’re all drinking, all the time. That it?”

Daryl shook his head and placed the shells on the counter. “Nope, just smells like whiskey. That’s all.”

“Well, you smell like rum.”

Daryl shrugged and pointed at the box of shells. “How much?”

“I’m not selling these to you when you’re drunk.”

“I ain’t drunk.”

“Well, you’re not right either.”

Daryl shook his head. “Just sell me the damn shells.”

The Indian looked Daryl in the eyes. “Anything else you want to say to me? Maybe you want to ask me to do a rain dance for you, huh?”

Daryl thought about the storm building out to the south, and the Indian went back to watching the television. Daryl pulled out his wallet. He grabbed a twenty and laid it on the counter. “I didn’t mean no offense. This should cover the shells.”

Daryl grabbed the box, but the Indian slammed his hand down on Daryl’s hand. “Watch your mouth next time.”

Daryl nodded and slid his hand and the shells out from under the Indian’s hand. When Daryl was back outside, he opened the case of shells and looked inside as if he was worried he’d just bought an empty cardboard box. He found five rounds stacked in a line inside. Satisfied, he closed the lid and walked back to the truck.

He should have been angry. And maybe he would have been in the past. Maybe he would have been if he were still at home feeling sorry for himself. Or, maybe that old Indian made some sense.

Daryl drove on for another twenty or so miles. He drove until he stopped seeing homes. When he was surrounded by saguaros and mesquite trees and open desert, he searched for a road sign. He found a sign warning drivers that the bridge ahead would ice before the road. He couldn't remember the last time it iced anywhere around there.

He pulled to the side of the road ten feet from the sign. Daryl lifted the shotgun to his lap, grabbed the box of shells, and climbed out of the truck. He went to the tailgate and popped it open. He slid the shotgun into the bed and set the shells on the side rail. Daryl climbed up, feeling his back try to pull apart as he did so.

He picked the shotgun back up and grabbed the shells. Up front at the cab of the truck, he laid the 10-gauge down across the roof and opened the box of shells. He'd seen Johanna clean and load her guns a million times, but she never wanted Daryl to have one of his own. That's why he kept his daddy's old bolt-action at the job site, tucked under a ventilation duct. Until the accident. He never did get that thing back.

When he and Johanna got married, she'd been out of the Air Force for six months. She didn't know what to do next, and Daryl suggested she try to catch on with the sheriff's department. And after all that time, she was still there.

Daryl loaded a round into the shotgun and held the gun across the top of the cab. He aimed for the sign in front of the truck, squinting under the late afternoon sun. He laid his finger alongside the trigger and sucked in the hot air coming off the top of the sheet metal.

When he was young, Daryl's family had big get-togethers. They didn't have a name or a reason for them, but his grandparents had a lot of kids and those kids had kids. He could remember driving from Arizona out to New Mexico with his parents and pulling into the dirt lot of the ranch house. There'd already be six or seven other cars there, and when they'd get inside, the house would be an echo that just wouldn't end. Laughter, shouting, cheering, crying. All of it rolled into one.

He'd taken that away from Dani. He didn't think before he spoke, didn't even think before he thought. Daryl squeezed the trigger.

The birdshot tore a hole in the top-left part of the sign, but he knew about half the pellets went sailing past the sign, cutting through the humid air. He looked out to the south and the storm clouds were getting darker. Getting closer. He loaded another shell.

Daryl started thinking about where he might sleep tonight. He figured he'd be best sleeping in the truck, but if the storm hit, he'd prefer a real roof over his head. He took aim at the sign again, but he stopped. He laid the shotgun on the roof of the cab and wondered what Dani would be doing right about then.

Daryl realized he didn't even know what she did for work. Didn't know what she did for fun. He made a decision years ago—one that he couldn't even understand anymore. He just said things, spoke too much. Didn't listen enough.

After a moment, Daryl slid the remaining shells from the box and tossed the box into the brush off the side of the road. He counted the three shells in his hand, rolled them back and forth. Then, he threw them to the side of the road, leaving the one chambered in the shotgun. He climbed down from the bed with the gun leaned against his shoulder.

He wondered if Dani would have come to the funeral if that wall had killed him. Probably not. He wouldn't go to his own funeral even if they had an open bar.

Daryl climbed into the truck, laid the shotgun on the passenger side floorboard, and cranked the engine. He watched the storm swirl overhead and heard the first rumble of thunder. The storm might have a little go in it, after all. He put the truck in gear then flipped a U-turn in the middle of the highway. It was a half-day drive up to Dani's trailer in Utah, and he wanted to get as far away from that storm as he could.

Tired Evening  
Norbert Kovacs

On a Sunday evening, Mrs. Betty Gruber sat quietly in her living room after dinner, writing her errand list for the next day on scrap paper. She had written down the places to go—the grocery store, the cleaners, and the pharmacy—and tried to make up her mind which to visit, when, without being able. Betty Gruber was used to this kind of indecision. Her worn, creased face showed it as did her light red hair that had lost its best color and was fading into a drab brown. Her pale brown eyes had a cynical, hard expression and her eyelids hung low as if with a perpetually tired feeling. She was at the indefinite stage that lies between fat and thin, a result of many failed diets. She had dressed today without much mind for her appearance. She had on a loose, striped T-shirt and worn khaki pants, less than a favorite, but ready clothes; on her feet were a pair of white, cracked house shoes. At lunchtime, Betty had walked around the neighborhood hoping to feel more alive than she had in the last few weeks. Betty lived in a district of attractive historic homes and went out with a plan to see several of them. She wound up wandering not long after she began, going one street to the next without knowing the reason. “Well, I’m only walking around for fun,” she had thought to re-assure herself. “There’s no harm to it.” Betty walked a long while where she had little interest. The hard asphalt road and the sidewalk reflected the day’s heat and the sun’s glare as she went, bewildering and annoying her. She had considered at times that she was walking from the handsome homes and grand trees she had meant to visit. She did not change course because of it. Betty returned home, tired and unfulfilled, and continued to feel so into the evening.

On the couch separated from her by half a cushion sat her husband Jon. Jon was an absentminded, homely man. He was tall and thin like a celery stalk and had straight, brown hair that lay out of form on his head. His pure, brown eyes were like small chocolates and his dark, thick mustache much like a softened candy bar atop his lips. He wore a gray sports-style sweatshirt and long, relaxed khaki pants, a favorite pair. He was reading the day’s newspaper, his eyes glazed and dull, for the paper had little except political news, but he made to seem interested as if he might hope it into being otherwise. He finally put down the paper and said, as if the theme came naturally for them, “Have you spoken lately with our neighbor?”

“Which one?”

“The ones in the blue house.”

Betty recalled the neighboring family. They were a couple with two children, the woman of the family, a heavy, cheerful person. When she tried to remember the woman’s name, Betty drew a blank. “No, not lately. What about them?”

“They put up a new deck last week.”

“Yes, I saw when I was hanging laundry.”

“Well what do you think? Doesn’t it look attractive?”

“Yes. A very nice, bright red.” *Wasn’t a new deck supposed to look attractive?* she thought. The neighborhood people did a lot to ensure all their homes were. Two houses down, the couple had installed old style front doors that now gave their house an upscale appearance. At the corner, a family had installed a bay window, a standardized model,

nothing beautiful or unique but large and expensive. While unimpressed, Betty had felt obliged to praise it to a friend.

"We may bring it up when we ask them to our party in a few weeks," Jon said.

"You mean the neighbors?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps."

"Whom are we inviting for the party anyway?"

"I'm still deciding, though really I'd be happy with whomever." Betty considered that their friends were all good for talk, so any of them would make good guests. Their parties seemed always to find some way to turn out decently with the friends who came. As she thought this, Betty recalled a party where she had had to talk with her husband's friend Ted Sommers. Ted had told her about the new desk and chair installed in the back room of his electronics store. She had smiled and smiled at Ted as he seemed to talk forever. Betty recalled then her failure to understand a bit of the story her friend Francine told while the other guests listened glued with attention.

"I'll choose some guests for us, but you think of some you'd like too."

Jon picked up the remote control lying on the couch cushion and turned on the TV. The program was an adventure/investigation show that featured a man in a business suit carrying a gun. He walked panting nervously atop some office building. Jon watched the show with interest but Betty could not. Once she caught the image of the main character crawling through an air vent, then, after a long time, a scene where the man was shooting bullets quickly. She lost the narrative somewhere in between and could not piece together what happened. At one point, the man on the screen was running and Jon, very amused, turned and made some comment. Betty watched Jon's lips move but did not comprehend him. Perhaps he said something I should have heard, she thought. The adventure program ended and Jon changed the channel to a comedy re-run that Betty disliked. "I'm going upstairs to take a shower," she said standing.

"Okay." Intent on the TV, Jon did not lift his head to her.

Betty went upstairs to their bedroom and undressed in the adjacent bathroom. She was glad to be free of the clothes that she had worn since the overheated morning and dropped them into the hamper without a second thought. She turned on the water, checking it was warm but not hot, and stepped into the shower tub. She took the soap and lathered her body and limbs, richly and white. However, Betty did not feel clean as she washed because the water seemed to cling to her. She knew the water was not hard (they had tested it) so could not figure why it should feel so. She bent and shifted to clean her body, the water seeming to stick to her the whole time. At last she finished the shower, turned off the water and grabbed a big, cotton towel by the tub to dry herself. As she rubbed the cloth against her, the blood in her limbs warmed and the flesh beneath the towel seemed to resist her motion. She put on a bathrobe that felt too warm for her and stepped from the shower.

Betty walked into the bedroom, got a change of shirt, bra, and shorts from the dresser, and put them on. Her bed lay right by the chair where she sat changing into the clothes and she noted the new white bed sheet and cover for the blanket she had installed that afternoon. Beyond the bed was the bay window; its curtains were pulled back revealing the night sky. The clean, neat look of the bed, seen by the oblique light from the

bathroom, made her think she should lie down in it and rest. She pulled back the sheets, got into the bed sitting up, and covered her legs in the blanket. The white, fresh sheets were cool and smooth on her bare legs. She worked her leg a little against them and enjoyed it. Then she stopped moving and just sat. She felt at ease for the first time that day and gazed out the window at the sky. The night was dark and the stars shone strong and clear. To the side of the window showed the edge of a maple, dense and dark.

A memory suddenly came to Betty. When she was a girl of ten, she and her family had gone one night to a newly cut hay field in the country. Though dark, she had seen the field well, dotted with its tall, golden haystacks and far away, a line of maples at the field's edge. The farmer who owned the field was standing by a large fire in the hay stubble and some stones. He greeted her father, who was a friend, along with her brother and herself when they came to him. The farmer's family stood beside him; his boy and girl greeted Betty. The heat from the fire had come to her wonderful and warm and she had been happy for it after tramping across the cold field. Above her in the night had been a very clear sky filled with hundreds of stars. Beside the fire, she craned her head back far to look at them. They had been a wonderful, great number, each standing clear against the night and Betty had felt the whole universe was there before her. And she had thought then the world was clear, sharp, and bright. She had been happy and she had loved the field, the fire, the farmer's kindness, and the many stars.

Yes, it had been beautiful, Betty thought seated in her bed. But where did that wonder and beauty that she had known go? What had she done to lose it? Why, she asked herself, was she unhappy? Her walks were long and pointless on more days than just today. Jon talked to her and on many evenings, she did not hear him. Betty sat in the bed and tried to think why. But all she managed to tell herself was that she was tired. She might always be too tired now to think why.

Class Walk  
Thaddeus Rutkowski

I'm on my way to the class I teach, but it is the first class meeting and the room is in a new location. I have the street address, but I haven't been to the building before.

I leave on time, and I think I have enough time to get to where I'm supposed to be, but I'm running late. My brother is with me, though I don't know why he is there. I haven't seen him in a long while.

We walk uptown, heading for a certain city street, but it is slow going. Snow covers the streets and sidewalks, and our feet slide with every step.

"It's time to run," I say, and I start to jog. I'm surprised I can run at all.

My brother easily keeps up with me. He's in good shape. "You know," he says, "when I got out of treatment, I couldn't run a hundred yards. Now, I can go for miles."

The class, even though it's the first, is being observed by a faculty member, and I don't know what will happen if I'm not on time. I don't know if I'll be able to make my presentation during the second part. It's a three-hour class, but I might be an hour late. Will the observer wait that long? Or will he or she leave and reschedule?

My brother and I are walking fast now—the jogging is over—on streets that are unfamiliar to me. We had started going uptown on a major avenue, but somehow we left it. I can see the avenue to our right, with cars and buses moving.

It doesn't occur to me to take a bus or a cab.

"What's the plan?" I ask my brother.

"We'll play it by ear," he says, but I don't hear anything.

When we arrive at the corner where the college is supposed to be, none of the buildings look familiar. I see a large brick building, low and about a block long—it looks like a factory, but a sign over the door says it's a cooking school. Maybe the campus of my school will be next to it.

I look around to find the time of day and see a large clock face on a tower. The hands of the clock tell me that the start time of my class has passed.

My brother turns to leave. He is going to his home, far from where I live. However, he gives me his phone number. "Don't write to me," he says. "Don't take twenty minutes or half an hour to write a letter. Just call me and talk to me for five minutes."

When I reach the classroom, I see that it is divided into two sections. I take my position in one section and start to speak. I don't know if the students in the other part of the room can hear me. Probably they can. But they certainly can't see me, or the notes I'm writing on the white board.

I want the students to hand in a short essay, but I realize I didn't assign the reading they needed for preparation. No one has done the essay. No one hands in anything. So we start a language exercise. I write random words on the board—"dig," "digital"—but I don't know if the students will be able to use these words in sentences. That might be asking them to do too much, to write sentences that contain random words yet follow a logical sequence. Nevertheless, that is their assignment. I sit at the front desk while they do their work. I look over the attendance sheet and wonder what happened to the students who aren't there. I imagine close relatives of theirs have died, and the students had to attend the funerals.

After the class, I walk out to the street and find a stand of bicycles for rent. I take a bike from the rack and ride downtown. But as I look at the street numbers, I see they are rising. I see 112th Street, then 116th Street. I reverse direction, but the same thing happens. The street numbers ascend. I leave the grid entirely and find myself on a two-lane road—a blacktop with a double line down the middle and single lines on the edges. I'm in a no-passing zone; I can see that. But otherwise, I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm on a road passing through fields. This looks like where my brother lives. I don't know why this barren country is attached to the island filled with buildings where I live.

Bikini Barista  
Bill Diamond

"Bikini Baristas!" announced the hand-printed sign in bold letters. It would have caught Luke's eye almost anytime, but today, it had a visceral wake-up effect. The late August chill in the mountain air and their eagerness for a morning cup of coffee made it especially eye-catching. Therefore, as they left the small-town motel in Eastern Washington, Luke was pre-disposed to its appeal.

Dona and Luke were in the middle of a three-week driving vacation through the Pacific Northwest. They discovered that, unlike on the East Coast, every town had several drive-up coffee shacks. Looking more closely at the temporary sign, Luke noticed the word "Fundraiser" scrawled above the exclamation that had initially grabbed his attention. He smiled and directed, Dona, who was driving, to turn in. As she made the turn, Dona saw the sign and grimaced. A committed feminist and against any exploitation of women, she gave Luke a skeptical look.

He cajoled, "Come on. It's a fundraiser. It must be for a good cause. And, we really want some coffee." As she reluctantly continued into the drive, he pushed his luck and added, "Besides, I'm sure 'Bikini Baristas' have a special talent for serving up something hot and spicy."

Dona's upper lip curled. She might have left, but by now they were blocked in.

Ahead of them, the busy line was predominantly pick-up trucks. The trucks were filled almost exclusively with guys, who apparently had the same subliminal reaction as Luke to the enticing sign. He commented that these men must be motivated by purely charitable instincts.

With raised eyebrows and a skeptical snort, Dona said, "They better have good coffee."

"I'm sure it's wonderful," Luke replied, trying to suppress a lecherous grin.

The small, wood building was set in the middle of an asphalt lot. A large sign on the end of the building displayed a long list of beverages and prices. Yellow curbs directed customers to both sides of the booth and the line moved reasonably quickly. The strong aroma of fresh-brewed coffee wafted from the shack and whetted his appetite. Luke's anticipation built for an early morning eyeful of a skimpily clad beauty to accompany his warming drink.

It was soon their turn and Dona pulled forward to the drive-up window. Luke eased toward the center console and twisted his neck for a better view of the server. Instead of a shapely woman in a small swimsuit, a very large man of indeterminate middle age leaned onto the window counter and greeted them with a wide smile. He was grossly overweight, covered with curly black hair and, shockingly, was wearing only a tiny black Speedo. It clearly strained against the rolls of his excessive flesh.

Luke's initial stunned reaction was that Bigfoot had taken a job as a barista and wedged himself into the tiny cubicle. This was the polar opposite of what he had imagined. Instead of young and attractive curves, this was an avalanche of unsightly fat. And the server was covered with a noticeable sheen of body sweat. This was the type of body that cried out to be covered, not flaunted. Now it was time for Luke's lip to curl involuntarily. The unexpected pasty display curbed his good humor.

While he was struck speechless by the sobering spectacle, Dona's reaction was the inverse. She was suddenly in an upbeat mood that her sexist fears weren't realized and delighted in Luke's

crestfallen disappointment. With the issue of female exploitation turned on its head, she gave a hearty, "Good morning." Dona didn't appear to share Luke's disgust at the quivering mound of doughy meat leaning precariously toward them and offering to take their order. The thought crossed Luke's mind that all this weight leaning out of the flimsy booth might threaten to topple it onto their car.

Aghast at this disreputable bait and switch, Luke leaned back against the headrest and averted his eyes from the blob. Now, he just wanted to get some coffee and be quickly on their way. Such was not to be the case.

Dona had reverted to her normal chatty self. She cheerfully complimented the hairy host on his skimpy suit and asked about the fundraiser.

When he laughed at the compliment, it caused the rolls of his belly to bounce and flop further over his straining waistband. Luke was concerned the movement would exceed the tensile strength of the swimsuit's material and it would split. The thought further dimmed his desire for coffee, and almost dislodged his breakfast.

The server cheerfully explained they had picked a 'bikini' theme because a portion of the proceeds of each sale today, and all tips, were being donated to a local women's health charity.

Thrilled by the news of the beneficiary, Dona's eyes danced and she said, "In that case, we'll have to get large drinks and a snack." Rather than directly ordering, so they could escape and continue their journey, she engaged the hirsute gentleman in a lengthy discussion about their many varieties of coffee drinks.

Attempting to divert his mind from the near-naked albino walrus in the booth, Luke didn't completely follow the serpentine conversation. However, at some point, there was a baffling debate about the merits of adding various fruit flavors to a mocha latte.

Luke considered himself among the most patient of men. However, ten minutes after turning into an 'express coffee service,' he did not have a drink and only the sour taste of disappointment in his mouth. He was also aware of the obvious impatience of the man in the next car. Luke snickered and thought that if that guy knew about the lumpy vision that awaited him, he wouldn't be in such a rush. Nonetheless, as Dona ignored his nudges to move along, Luke worked on mentally pulling out his hair.

She finally completed her order. Speedo Man turned to Luke and said, "What'll it be for you, mate?"

In no mood for casual banter, Luke placed a simple order for a "decaf with extra cream."

El Gordo's pleasant demeanor suddenly shifted and he looked at Luke like he was crazy. In a tone that made it sound as though Luke had violated the most sacred of a coffee purist's commandments, Sasquatch informed him that they "don't serve decaffeinated."

Luke knew people in the Northwest took their coffee seriously, but he couldn't fathom if the server was joking, or daft, as well as naked. The big man's solemn expression made clear he was quite serious, and condescendingly offended someone would even raise such an issue at his gourmet establishment. Luke had to give him his due. Pulling off condescension is quite a trick when you are standing virtually nude in a glass-enclosed booth in a rural parking lot.

For the second time that morning, Luke was gob smacked. It was already clear to him that this "bikini barista" wasn't going to attract return customers. Now he was being told that a shop

that survives by selling coffee didn't serve one of the two major forms of their product! How did they expect to stay in business? Whatever happened to 'the customer is always right'? He believed he'd stumbled upon why some American small enterprises are going into the crapper.

While Luke's jaw flopped in dumbstruck disbelief, the attendant offered an alternative. Scratching his fat rolls, he mentioned that he could brew a weak "Cafe Americano" which would be almost the same.

Dona must have read Luke's mind. Before he could snap, "If, by 'almost the same', you mean caffeinated and twice as expensive," she smiled at Luke with a glint of mischief in her eyes and said, "That sounds wonderful."

Luke's simple notion of a morning coffee with a side of visual spice had gone entirely askew. Now, Dona had turned on him and gone native. At this point, nothing sounded 'wonderful', and he was in no mood to be mollified by a bear in a booth. Looking at the mountainous rolls of pink flab that fluttered and jiggled with each breath and movement, he gave a defeated sigh. Luke ordered a small, hot apple cider, as much to end the conversation, as out of a desire for juice.

The hefty barista turned to concoct the drinks. When he did so, Luke got a glimpse into the far side of the booth. To his massive chagrin, the second employee was a buxom young blonde in a skimpy, two-piece bathing suit. While brewing a coffee, she seemed to be engaged in some risqué repartee with a broadly smiling truck driver. The other line had clearly won this morning's coffee lottery. As Luke was staring, their server bent to reach for something and flashed a close-up view of his plumber's crack and enormous buttocks that almost poured out the small window. Dona jerked back with a guffaw. Luke near gagged and thought he would be struck blind. Still bent over, the barista reached back and gave a tug on the thin material of his suit. It had no effect on concealing the gaping cavern, but made Luke wonder whether the next stop for that hand was anywhere near his drink.

Scalded by the gelatinous vision, Luke abandoned all attempts to look at the second barista. He momentarily toyed with the idea of asking Dona to pull to the other side of the booth. Putting the chances of that happening at less than zero, he refrained from vocalizing the request. Instead, he gazed into the pine forest covered hills and tried unsuccessfully to purge his mind of the haunting eyesore.

A seeming eternity later, the drinks were ready. The steaming cups were handed across. When it comes to a mixed coffee drink, it is difficult to satisfy Dona. She sampled hers, smiled broadly and then effusively praised the burly mixologist. He beamed.

Dona asked for Luke's wallet. Then, she added a biscotti to the order. Paying the bill, Dona added a big tip. Seeing Luke's incredulous expression, she shrugged and repeated his earlier, "It's for a good cause." The server thanked them and gave a wave with his huge paw.

Pulling onto the highway access ramp, Dona sipped her drink and pronounced that Luke had been right, "It is a good idea to support local causes." Apparently being sincere and not trying to bait him, she continued that the Speedo server had been both a talented barista and a very pleasant chap. Talking as much to herself as to Luke, she chirped, "It just goes to show, we shouldn't jump to conclusions."

Luke had to agree with the latter sentiment: we should never assume. In everyday life, our subconscious desires often bubble up and we act on them before our analytical frontal lobes ever engage. For the umpteenth time, he committed to remember this truism. Perhaps, the searing image of the blubbery barista would make it work this time.

Dona continued, "We'll have to stop the next time we see a sign like that."

Luke didn't say it, but if he was driving and saw such a sign, he planned to accelerate. He also took no consolation in Dona saying he'd been right. Instead, Luke contemplated the source of the black, curly hair floating in his apple juice.

Demon Ball  
Fred Miller

The wheels in the pump whirled and clicked until a gurgling sound alerted her to an almost full tank. She peered through the glass at the numbers, turned and walked across the pavement toward the convenience store entrance, and silently cursed the man who'd conceived of high heeled shoes.

At the door, a gust of cool air assaulted her senses with the odor of hot dogs in a glass warmer on the counter. Ahead of her in line, a man sporting a reversed baseball cap and a bright tee that shouted, "EARL'S BODY SHOP," rocked from one heel to the other and scratched his neck below one ear.

"Af'noon, what'd you need today?" the clerk asked him.

"Gimme a jumbo orange soda and a pack o' filter-tipped menthols."

"Birth date?"

"January, ninety-four.

"Anything else?"

"How's the ball today?"

"Up to seventy-five million."

"Gimme one o' them slips to fill out and a three-way."

"Yes, sir. Comin' right up."

The register sang and a wad of currency changed hands before the man took his sack of requests and sidled down the aisle and pulled a pencil from behind his ear. He eyed the card, wet the lead with his tongue, and placed the nib on a slip now resting on the bleached-out countertop.

"Ma'am?"

"Gas purchase, pump six, on this card please."

"Debit or credit?"

"Credit."

"Whoo," the man down the counter said, "Got a winner, Bo."

"Wha-cha got?" the clerk said.

"Ten bucks on the three-way."

"Excuse me, ma'am. Just sign right here," the clerk said.

"What's the three-way, if you don't mind my asking?" she said.

"Not at all, ma'am, a lotto scratch-off card with three ways to win."

"How much is a card?"

"Two dollars. You want one?"

"No, I never...well, maybe just this once." She replaced her credit card in her purse and handed the man two crisp dollar bills.

"Now, how do I—"

"Step right over here, ma'am," the new lotto winner beamed, "and I'll show you."

She moved down the counter toward a toothy grin, her cheeks flushed from the public display of her interest in the lottery.

"It's easy, ma'am. See here, you just scratch off the ink and look for a lineup of like kinds of dollars. Three in a row and you a winner. What's won, if anything, is...well, would you looky here, Bo. Lady's got a fifty-dollar winner. Wow. And this here's your first try, right?"

Her cheeks warm, she nodded and looked at her watch. "Thank you, gentlemen. I must be going."

"Well, turn in that card and collect your winnin's before you go, ma'am," the local gaming expert said.

By the time her car rolled out of the station into traffic, the memory of her pinched shoes had faded. She'd be late for bridge with the girls at the club and only the gods at Delphi would know how she'd be assessed in her absence.

*Funny*, she thought, her husband's name was Earl, but unlike her new convenience store confederate, her Earl would never have grease on his face or nails. If anything, he'd have had a recent manicure. He'd always been acutely aware of the initial impressions litigation attorneys make on impaneled juries. And in his case, as he'd often reminded her, a very successful litigator.

"Well, hello, Mary Ann. What a lovely dress," one said.

"Oh, thanks, Nell. Sorry I'm late," she said and pulled a chair up to the table.

Another shuffled the cards and rolled her eyes. "As I was saying, she comes in the club wearing fashions that are just so yesterday and pretends it's her new retro look. I suppose she thinks no one's aware of her husband's recent streak of bad luck in his business affairs." She turned toward Mary Ann. "Talking about Grace Tompkins, Mary Ann," she said in an aside.

Eyes remained wide, heads bobbing like a congregation in a summer tent revival. Mary Ann listened and wondered why she tolerated these wags.

"Speaking of husbands, Mary Ann, I saw yours having lunch with Doris Fitzgerald earlier in the club bar."

"Do tell," Mary Ann said without emotion.

"Well, it's no secret. Doris is suing Frank for a divorce. Seems she discovered evidence of unfaithfulness in the pocket of his car."

"News to me," Mary Ann said. "Earl never discusses his cases at home."

Three hours and a low-grade headache later, she was back on the road toward the mall; anything to avoid an empty house. Her cell phone rang and she peered around to see if any police cruisers were around. Seeing none, she grabbed her cell from her purse.

"Honey, I'm afraid I'm going to be late tonight. Don't hold dinner for me," he said.

"That's a shame," she said, frowning in disgust.

"Yeah, I had lunch with a group of businessmen who're facing a nasty lawsuit and I've got to pore over some case precedents tonight."

*Liar*, she wanted to say. "Don't worry about me. Take your time, I know how important this is to you," she said and thought, *you bastard*.

At Neiman's, she bought a dress, a blouse, two pairs of shoes, and a designer purse, the costs adding up in her head. Usually this level of expenditure satisfied her sense of revenge, but not today.

That evening she sat in the bar at Mario's, an upscale restaurant that had been one of their favorites in the early years, and listened to soft jazz wafting from a nearby piano.

"Mrs. Harmon, how nice to see you again. What'll it be?" the bartender said.

"Manhattan, straight up, Bill."

She stared at the bar mirror and wondered how many nights she'd spent alone while her spouse had built his career...and his massive ego.

Two drinks later she wandered out of the bar, having forgotten about dinner. Across the street she could see a neighborhood bodega with fruits and vegetables in prominent display under a halo of lights on the sidewalk. She vetted the offerings, picked up a banana, and strolled into the store.

"Evening."

"H'lo," she said.

He looked down at the banana. "Anything else, ma'am?"

She looked up at the wall behind the small, dark man and scanned the shelves with no discernible plan in mind.

"Got cigarettes?"

"Sure. What brand?"

"Um, Camels will do," she said. She'd not smoked since college, but felt a need to stray from the norm tonight.

He rang up the fruit and smokes and waited for her credit card. And she realized he'd not asked her birth date for assurance she could legally buy cigarettes. Thus, he'd committed a crime under the laws of this state, and one that her husband had used to seal a four-million-dollar verdict. *Earl rarely missed a subtle clue*, she mused, but it appeared he had in conversation with her today.

Stuffing the cigarettes in her purse, she noticed the lotto machine beside the register.

"What's the price of a lottery ticket?" she said realizing in her current state she hardly had the dexterity to scratch ink off a three-way card.

"You mean the Titan Ball?"

"The one that's seventy-five million."

"Yes, ma'am, that the Titan Ball. They're two dollars, Miss, how many?"

"One...no, make that twenty-five."

"You're just in time, lady. They're about to cut off sales for tonight's drawing."

She dug into her purse and found the roll of bills she'd won at the convenience store earlier in the day. She placed the tickets in an inside pocket of her purse, picked up her banana, and walked out into the night air. At the restaurant parking lot she looked at the valet stub number and tucked it into her memory before she gave the ticket to the man.

The next morning, she awoke in a daze, rubbed her eyes, and glanced across the bed. It appeared as if Earl had come in late, but had now left. The red digital bedside clock pulsed 9:34 A.M. She shuffled into the bathroom, looked at the mirror, and frowned. Another day.

Over coffee and a cigarette, she scanned the newspaper for sales and noticed a photo of three people holding a giant fake check with the headline, LOCAL CITIZENS WIN LOTTO MILLIONS. She wondered if her tickets from last night might have won anything. *Silly*, she thought, *of course not*.

*What to do today? Let's see.* She heard the front door open and remembered the maid had a key and was due this morning.

*Maybe I'll call Millie. Lunch at Le Petite Gourmet, yes.*

"Hello, Millie, it's me. I know this is short notice, but how about a late lunch at our favorite haunt... You are? Great, how does one thirty sound? Fine, see you there."

Since traffic in the city was unpredictable, she left early and arrived at the restaurant twenty minutes ahead of time. She gave her keys to the valet and spotted a service station down the block. She had time on her hands and didn't want to sit alone in the restaurant.

The man behind the counter resembled the convenience store clerk she'd encountered the previous afternoon. His eyes darted about and blinked.

"Help you?"

"Yes, I hope so. I've a bunch of lotto tickets and I don't know how to tell if I've won anything," she said with her hand buried in her purse. "Ah, there they are." She reached across the counter and placed the lotto chances in the man's small hands. His eyes focused on the slips, his teeth massaging his lower lip.

"Let's see," he said and placed a ticket into the lottery machine. It buzzed and spit the slip back out. He peered at the screen. "H-m-m, no winner," he said looking at the glowing numbers and tried the next. And the next. By the time he'd reached the last one, she'd become antsy and continued to look at her watch.

"Ding, ding," announced the machine.

"Oh, you gotta winner, ma'am, a hundred bucks." He beamed and opened the register.

"That's nice, but how do they decide it's worth a hundred bucks?" she said.

"You got four outta five matches but missed the Titan Ball at the end. See?" He held up the ticket and pointed out the four numbers she got right and the two she missed. "That's worth a hundred dollars."

She took the money, rolled it in a wad, stuffed it in her pocketbook, and turned toward the door. And over her shoulder she said, "Thanks, I understand it now." She glanced again at her watch, seven minutes late.

"Millie, sorry I'm late."

"Not really late, hon." They exchanged a Hollywood kiss and sat.

"You okay, Mary Ann? You look a bit tense," she said. Millie was a statuesque blonde with velvet skin, a chiseled jaw, and looked as if she'd never wavered an ounce since they'd roomed together at Wellesley.

"Couldn't be better, Millie, top of the world," she said, smiling.

Millie offered her a vacuous stare Mary Ann could not ignore, her long fingers drumming the table cloth. Millie had always been uncanny at reading her moods.

"Okay, okay, so I've got a suspicion Earl's seeing someone."

"No," Millie whispered, leaning forward like a young reporter who'd just flushed out a Washington scoop.

Mary Ann shared what she'd heard at the bridge table and the ensuing call from Earl and the late hours he said he'd been forced to keep last night.

"Well?" she said, eyeing Millie.

"Maybe you're over reacting," Millie said.

"Really?" Her eyebrows rose in surprise. Millie was her best friend, her confidante. How could she defend him?

"Look, Mary Ann, you can analyze this to death, but the fact remains that this is mere speculation. Maybe the girls were mistaken about who Doris was having lunch with in the club bar. After all, you said they'd seen them in a corner booth. You know how dim they keep the lights in the bar. Besides, Earl could have had breakfast with these guys instead of lunch. He's under a lot of pressure as you well know. Perhaps you should reassess this whole scenario." With moon-shaped eyes, Millie gazed at her and waited.

"You're right. I'm probably just jumping to conclusions."

"Sure you are," Millie said.

While they picked over their salads, Millie said, "You need a hobby, a distraction, a passion, maybe. Say, how long has it been since you played tennis?"

"College, not a day after," she said. They both giggled. Millie had been on the tennis team. Mary Ann had chosen the debate society.

"Tell you what, Mary Ann. Why don't you line up a few brush-up lessons with the new club pro and then I'll take you on for a few sets."

"Well..."

"Since you're hesitating, I'd venture a guess you haven't heard much about the new pro."

"No, not yet, I—"

"Picture a twenty-one-year-old Brad Pitt. And I hear he even teaches," Millie said.

"Stop it," Mary Ann said, and they both laughed.

"Well, that's how I heard him described. Why don't you give it a try? I mean it."

"Well...why not?" she said. "I do need a diversion. Wouldn't hurt my figure to get a little exercise. Not a bad idea, Millie."

"Of course not, I thought of it." They both laughed again, the earlier mood broken.

After lunch and a promise of a future tennis match, they walked to the valet station. Mary Ann looked at the numbers on her ticket stub. She'd majored in math in college; numbers had always intrigued her.

When she arrived home, she walked into the foyer and discovered a phone message on the landline from Earl. Why hadn't he called her on her cell? She pulled out her new Galaxy 7 and realized she'd neglected to turn it on that morning. And the fact that it was a Series 7 and her lotto ticket had a 7 in the Titan Ball position did not escape her attention. And she recalled that one of her math professors, along with some graduate students, had used fractal mathematics to challenge the odds in Vegas. Their ensuing successes had gotten them banned from the casinos there. She wondered what the professor was doing now. She hit the replay button to listen to the message again.

"Honey, I've got another late night facing me, but I thought we might meet for a drink at the club around five, before I get back to work. Give me a call when you get this message."

This was odd. Earl never made a habit of working after he'd had a drink. *Whatever*, she thought.

She was waiting in the bar when he arrived. "Hi, dear, how was your day?" he said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Had lunch with Millie. That's about it."

"Oh, and how is the fancy-free Ms. Millie these days?" Earl had represented Millie six months earlier in a contentious divorce suit, and she'd walked away with a cool four million after Earl's fees.

"Millie's fine."

"What'd you girls talk about?" he said.

"Just girl talk."

They bantered back and forth with little substance to the conversation.

"Oh, look, honey, there's the new tennis pro approaching the bar. Alonzo," he shouted. A twenty-something with a deep tan turned and waved.

"Come on over here, Alonzo. I want you to meet my wife," he said.

"Mary Ann, I'd like for you to meet Alonzo Lopez, the club's new tennis pro. Alonzo, my wife, Mary Ann."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Harmon."

"Mary Ann."

"Oh, yes ma'am, uh...okay, Mary Ann. Call me Alonzo or Al."

She felt a film of perspiration dance down her arms. He carried the bronze glow of King Tut's mask and he had azure eyes flanked by a copse of curly, sun-bleached hair.

Earl made polite conversation with the pro until the man in white shorts excused himself for a client awaiting a tennis lesson.

"Nice guy," Earl said.

She remained mute and wondered when and where her husband might have encountered this guy.

"I was on the committee that found Alonzo, as you know." She hadn't known that, but it mattered little. "I convinced my colleagues this was the right guy," he said. Earl had never lacked for self-confidence and wouldn't hesitate to share this data often. Once they'd finished their drinks, he excused himself, pleading a long night of rigorous work that awaited him at the office.

Mary Ann sat for a while and thought over Millie's suggestion of tennis lessons. *Yes, she mused, the perfect diversion of the moment.*

On her way to the car she passed the lighted tennis courts and saw the pro working with a young woman. He stood in a samurai stance, his racket parallel to the ground, the student listening attentively. Mary Ann noticed that in the bright lights his face appeared round like a child's and out of place within the taut curves of his tanned, muscled frame.

He walked behind the woman and pointed with his racket over her shoulder and mumbled something she must have found hysterically funny. He then placed his hands on her hips and had her bend slightly at the knees. Then, catching sight of Mary Ann through the fence, he beamed. He said something to his pupil and walked toward her.

"We meet again," he said.

"Yes, but don't let me interrupt your lesson."

"You a tennis player, Mary Ann?"

"Well, I was in college. It's been a while."

"Interested in a few pointers?" he said, his eyes addressing her from head to toe.

"Maybe," she said, looking down and to the side, toying with him.

"Come by at 11:30 tomorrow and maybe I can show you a few tricks."

"Well...," she said. He winked and turned, not waiting for an answer.

On the way home she thought, *he takes a lot for granted. But then, he's only trying to make a living. That's all it is. Sure.* She stopped at a Chinese restaurant and ordered take-out for her dinner.

At home she pretended to watch a television sit-com and nudged her food around in the containers with chopsticks. *What the hell, I need to get out of this house anyway. The sunshine and the workout will be good for me.* She popped open a fortune cookie and read the message: YOU WILL SOON BE RICH.

Driving to the club the next day she stopped at the convenience store where she'd won her first lotto money and now faced the same clerk.

"Bo?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good morning. I want to play the Titan Ball."

"You want the auto-pick or pick the numbers yourself?"

"Oh, I'll pick my own."

He handed her a slip with the slots to be filled in. She placed the card on the counter, pulled a pen from her purse, and went to work. She knew just what numbers to choose. She could see them clearly in her mind.

She looked up at the clerk. "How much can I put in the game?"

"Much as you want, ma'am."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a checkbook.

"Um, ma'am, sorry, the lottery is strictly cash."

"Oh, thanks, Bo, I didn't know."

She counted out the needed currency and handed it to the clerk.

"Okay, one hundred sixty one dollars on the Titan Ball."

"Uh, ma'am, it's two dollars a play, all multiples of two."

"Right," she nodded, "make it one hundred-sixty dollars." The machine buzzed and spit out the tickets. She stuffed them, along with her one remaining dollar, into her purse.

When she rolled into the club parking lot, she could see Alonzo on the court volleying against two women and keeping both in motion chasing tennis balls. He looked up, smiled, and waved.

Once her lesson had begun, he stood close behind her and guided her arms into the proper position. She soon became aware of his aroma, a musky smell, but a cologne she did not recognize. *Perhaps this is what the French call au naturel*, she thought. She was now aware of the heat of his body. *So this is how he makes his living*, she mused with a smile.

After the basics had been reviewed, each served and volleyed. She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed the game in college. And on a lark she attempted a couple of slams, only to discover his agility and youth. Back came the ball in a rush, landing square in the center of her forehead. She stumbled, but caught herself just as he arrived and enveloped her in his arms to prevent a fall.

"I'm okay," she said, gently pushing him away.

"Please forgive me if I appeared to be taking liberties. I've had a couple of children have fallen, resulting in chipped teeth and unhappy parents. I've grown very sensitive to students who lose their balance," he said.

"Oh, it wasn't you, Alonzo. It was...that, that demon ball," she said. Now more relaxed, they laughed and continued the set. Once again a ball struck her, this time on the arm, and she watched it bounce until it rested on the court. She bent over to pick it up and realized that interested eyes were studying her body. She pretended not to notice and looked at the ball. It seemed to smile back at her. Was this a wicked ball? She didn't know, but she realized the sun's heat was playing games with her head.

"Enough for today, Alonzo."

"Ah, but you were doing so well. Shall we meet again, say, next Monday at four?"

*He was quick*, she thought. *But why not, this was fun and good exercise for her.*

"How much do I owe you?" she said.

"Oh, it will be on your monthly club bill. Don't worry about it," he said.

"Good, I only have a dollar on me," she said.

"Then perhaps you'll join me as my guest for a cool drink, Mary Ann?"

"Another time, Alonzo. Thanks." She'd not forgotten she was an older woman and he was following a proven format to attract the fairer sex into providing a steady stream of revenues for himself.

Days turned into weeks and the tennis lessons went from sporadic to once a week, then twice a week, and finally every other afternoon. And even with his subtle hints, she'd refrained from taking the road to a potential scandal. A number of times she'd refused a drink with him at the club bar because of the wags she knew who would crank up the rumor mills.

And she continued to play the lottery. On a couple of occasions, she'd won nothing and decided she needed to double up on the number of tickets and did so with little thought. But she was careful to hide the evidence from Earl. He'd never understand. Yet maybe she thought she couldn't explain it to him.

Mary Ann knew she could quit at any time. But one day an eerie thought crept into her mind: *Maybe the lotto was her demon ball. No, of course not. Silly idea.*

Earl's nights of professional work never abated. In fact, at best, the two of them met for dinner at the club twice a week. She'd now become an expert on gourmet take-out as well as fast food. Eating at the kitchen table had become her daily evening routine.

Then, one afternoon on the court with Alonzo, everything changed.

"Good practice today, Mary Ann."

"Yeah, despite the long lapse of not being on the court, it's finally coming back to me. Well, I'll see you in a couple of days, Al."

"I suppose you and Earl are out on the town tonight, this being Saturday."

"Um, no, this has become my regular Chinese cuisine night. Earl's deep in legal briefs and such, what he calls legal combat," she said.

"Chinese is my favorite. Helps keep the muscles well-toned."

She could see it in his eyes. And this time she took a different tack. "Well, as a matter of fact I'm meeting my friend Millie for dinner tonight. Why don't you join us and I'll introduce you to the lady who suggested these tennis lessons."

"I'd be delighted, that is, if I am not imposing on you and your friend," he said.

"Not at all. Meet us at the Lucky Dragon on Elm around seven if you'd like to join us."

"Sure, I'd love to," he said.

Around six o'clock, while she was dressing, the phone rang.

"Mary Ann, it's Millie."

"Ready to meet the tennis star in the flesh?" she said and giggled. Earlier she'd called Millie on the way home to share the news of the added guest for dinner.

"Well, that's just it. I'm sorry to do this to you, but friends just arrived unexpectedly from out of town. I must do my duty; they're friends of my parents. Do give me a rain-check. I'm dying to meet this tennis hunk."

"Not a problem, Millie, we'll reschedule it."

But she didn't. To cancel now would seem silly and flighty. Earl would understand what had happened. It would be an innocent encounter now that Millie was to be a no show.

Alonzo was waiting at the restaurant door when she arrived.

"Your friend is on her way?" he said.

"No, unfortunately, Millie had to cancel."

"Uh, that's okay, you and I can enjoy a healthy Chinese feast together," he said.

"Well, I have a better idea, Al. Are you familiar with Mario's Restaurant on Devereaux?"

"Yes, I hear it is quite nice."

"It is and I think I can get us a table this early. Meet me at the valet stand there in ten minutes."

"Great," he said and they departed, going to their separate cars.

*Why did I do that*, she wondered. The restaurant was an old favorite and she was tired of Chinese fare. Besides, she knew the *maitre d'* at Mario's and felt sure she'd be accommodated.

She hailed Alonzo as he arrived at the valet station and they entered the restaurant together to wait for the *maitre d'* to show them to their table.

At that moment she spotted Earl seated across the room arm-in-arm with his date and deep in private conversation. Mary Ann continued to stare until her husband happened to glance up and saw her. His face dropped and his mouth slowly opened.

Mary Ann turned toward Alonzo and smiled. "Take my arm and follow me," she said. "I'll introduce you to my best friend, Millie."

She moved toward the table in a confident gait, the numbers whirling in her head. Eight, nine, ten digits. So this was her demon ball, she thought, and she was about to hit the jackpot.

Hide and Seek  
Kimberly Casey

When you were younger you would find solace in the smallest places. You would hide and imagine you were like Alice, grown to be the biggest person in the room. You'd slip silently between the sofa and the wall, tunnel until you got to the corner of the sectional where space opened up, where you stored your game boy and nerf gun. You would play sniper through the cracks at the ankles walking by, but never pull the trigger - just found comfort knowing you could.

After school, you would crawl into one of the closets, chosen based on your mood. The bedroom closet had glow in the dark stars tacked to the ceiling and pillows and stuffed animals lining the floor. You would collapse here when you needed comfort. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *The Hobbit* would be your go-to reads, taking you away on adventures under the night sky, no matter what time of day.

The hall closet where winter coats were stored was for the dark and stormy days. No decorations here. Just a flashlight and *Bridge to Terabithia* or *Number the Stars*. At the end of each chapter you'd pause and shine the light upward to catch on the coat sleeves and imagine that they were tunnels to another dimension than would open up and take you away if you just wished hard enough.

The rarest, darkest spot was the tiny door in the bathroom that held the laundry hamper inside. You'd pull the basket out, crawl in and tug the basket back in behind you, no flashlight, no books, no distractions. Each limb would reach out and press against a wall, pushing as hard as possible hoping to crack the plaster, make an impact. It never worked. But you'd leave with muscles looser, body lighter, and head a little less clouded.

Now you are older, in a house that was built with no closets - each room open and honest. No places to hide. He didn't notice that when you moved in, but you did, eyes searching for a place you could surround yourself and not be seen.

Some days the shower is an escape. He never questions why you spend so long in there, thinks it's normal. But the curtain is never boundary enough to feel secure, and you leave feeling frustrated, fingers wrinkled and steam rising off your skin.

The car is too much glass, too visible.

You arrange the furniture like a labyrinth trying to create a dead-end dwelling, but he always finds you, asks about dinner or laundry. The phone still rings. The space is still too open, too inviting to outsiders.

He thinks it oddly sweet when he finds you under the bed, the cat curled up in the crook of your ankles humming a song with your eyes closed, trying to tune out the light and the noise from the nearby window. He lies down on the ground and looks across the hardwood at your face pressed up against the cool surface. "Hello beautiful. I see you. Can I come in?"

And you nod, but a knot forms in your throat as he scoots in closer and puts his hand on your shoulder. You want to welcome him in, to share a secret hideout, to build a fort together and keep out the bad guys, but not now. Not here. Not yet.

He starts to worry the day he comes home to an empty house, fruitlessly calling an unanswered phone for hours. You emerge shortly after dark with dirt smeared on your

face, all over your clothes, under your fingernails. He boards up the door to the crawl space after that. Claims that mice were getting in, never speaks of that night.

He stops letting you too far out of his sight after the accident at the Gulf. You went underwater a little too long, engrossed by the feeling of being submerged and every pore of your skin being suffocated at once. Like all the pieces were being pushed back together. The sun shook you awake coughing on the sand, gasping and smiling, lost in a dream.

Now he notices. Sees the way you can't pull your eyes away from the oven, how you smile at how quickly the door snaps shut. Notices you clearing cleaning products from the cabinet under the sink. How you never keep anything in the trunk of your car. How you eye the unfinished attic dreaming of dancing across beams to the perfect dark corner.

Last night he came home and you were in the bathroom, fingers bloody and shaking, pill bottles spilled out of the medicine cabinet, onto the floor, claw marks on the wall behind from you trying to dig your way in.

'I just can't stand it,' you stammer. 'How can someone live so out in the open like this?'

He grabs your favorite blanket and wraps you up, sits you on the couch, nods, locks the front door. He goes through the house slowly, closing each door, pulling the blinds on all the windows, checking their locks. He sits next to you, shuts off the lights, wraps himself up separate, but lightly leaning against you, holding each other upright. And he stays. He stays even when you start crying, stays when you can catch your breath and finally stop. Stays covered and quiet right by your side. And now you are hidden, now you are a secret, now you are safe and sound.

Twenty-Three Years to Turlock  
Kip Hanson

It's 6:17. The party began promptly at 6:00. It's been four years since Todd's seen them, but he knows they didn't wait. His father is nothing if not punctual.

He'd forgotten to buy a birthday gift for his stepbrother. That's not why he's late, but it is the reason he will now be even later, as he exits the Golden State Freeway for the nearest strip mall.

Would the boy understand that Todd had needed to pull over at the rest stop outside Chowchilla and weep? That his hands shook so badly he could no longer grip the wheel. "It's time you get over it, Todd," his father would say. "Face your demons."

The sun is setting over Turlock as he pulls into the Safeway parking lot and steps out of the car. The reek of tired manure and late September tillage fills the air; off to his left the Diablo Range crouches, the beautiful hues of red and orange a reminder of the pastel walls in the room where Todd spent nine years of his life.

He makes his way to the back of the store where the children's games and close-out lawn furniture is stocked. Todd doesn't know what to buy a normal thirteen-year-old; at that age he'd been chained to the floor of a gaily-colored cell in the basement of retail sales executive Robert McDowell's house, a few miles from where Todd now stands.

McDowell constructed that room with his own executive hands, then painted it with the Sherwin-Williams latex his daughter Meredith had selected for her own bedroom, just days before being struck by a delivery truck on her way to school. Her father was devastated and, as a single parent, lonely.

Ironically, the girl was buried in Turlock Memorial Park, five rows over from where Todd's mother would be laid to rest just a few years later, a victim of the grief she'd felt over allowing her son to be kidnapped and—after a yearlong investigation—assumedly murdered. McDowell would sometimes bring flowers to both graves, recompense for the pain he'd caused.

It's true that Todd was kidnapped from the backseat of his mother's idling car as she ran in to the local Quik-Stop for a pack of cigarettes one winter evening, but he wasn't dead. No, he was living beneath Meredith's now empty bedroom, just six houses away from Todd's former residence. Had there been a window in his cell, he might have heard the late-night sounds of his parents' disintegrating marriage.

Todd selects a board game, the only one he knows how to play—The Game of Life—and turns for the registers. He and McDowell played it together repeatedly during his captivity. In the freezer section, Todd veers around a woman with two small children in her cart. The older of the two—a girl—stares as he passes, and Todd rubs at the scars on his neck, the collar marks still visible decades later.

McDowell would have preferred a girl. He made no bones about it, whispering his desires in Todd's ear late at night as they watched MTV and reruns of Footloose, Dirty Dancing. McDowell was a huge fan of pop music, a passion that was eventually his undoing: while attempting to moonwalk one night to Michael Jackson's latest hit, McDowell tripped and fell, rapping his head on the concrete wall near Todd's bed. He was out cold.

Unfortunately for the would-be danseur, he'd inadvertently left the keys in his front pocket, an opportunity of which Todd immediately took advantage. Five minutes later he stood knocking on his father's front door.

It was there that he was told of his mother's death. "It was a car accident," his father said. Todd later found the police report in a box beneath his parent's bed, and learned she was three times the legal blood alcohol limit upon striking a tree in the family car.

His father had since moved north to Modesto and spawned a son with his new wife, to whom Todd would soon deliver a board game, then eat birthday cake and give an awkward hug before leaving.

McDowell was found guilty of three felony counts—kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, and lewd acts with a minor. The defense argued that, due to Todd's being sixteen at the time of his escape, the last of these was consensual. The jury was unconvinced. McDowell received a sentence of thirty-five years at New Folsom.

The cashier is an older man, his back to Todd as he approaches the checkout. It's only after the game sits on the belt that he turns from his chat with the bag boy. "Todd," he says. "You've grown fat."

Todd gapes, his legs suddenly weak. "What...how?"

McDowell smiles, a grin Todd knows well. "Good behavior," he says. "They let me out early."

"But...it's only been twenty-three years."

"My mother's quite ill," McDowell adds. "Cancer."

"Cancer," groans Todd. "Sick."

"Todd. I did my time. Please don't..."

Todd snatches up the game and walks to the exit. In his mind's eye he sees himself driving his car through the plate glass store front; he hears the screams, and the pop of McDowell's skull as that grinning face is crushed beneath the tires.

"I've missed you," comes McDowell's voice as the door slides shut behind Todd; he stumbles, his breath coming now in ragged chunks.

He sets the game on the passenger seat and starts the engine. McDowell stands at the Safeway checkout, patiently scanning barcodes. The bald head reflects the harsh light of the fluorescents, giving his naked skin a sickly hue, like rotten oranges.

This was the man who'd gently sung Linda Ronstadt songs in his ear while fondling him. "Baby, you've been on my mind..."

Todd backs out of his parking spot, puts the car in drive, and accelerates. Maybe there will be another party next year.

Man's Son  
Jenny Butler

There are two worlds. The one inside and the one outside and he had a foot in both. The left foot and the right foot could not walk together but strove like snakes to stretch out in different directions, his slithery serpent-feet like the great cock-headed Abraxas. He tried to live in truth, to contain the luminous and dark within him, to comprise maleness and femaleness, to encompass the evil and the good, god and the devil, but the dragon's barbed tail came to swipe and knock him off kilter.

The part most misunderstood by those out there is how he, like a babe in the woods, was led by the hand through a landscape he did not recognize, through a realm he could not comprehend. Thrust out against his will into 1967's summer-of-love, into a psychedelic haze of confusion. Smiling faces, pink and yellow flowers in their hair, called him "brother," called him "friend." They hugged, shouted joyfully, and he joined the singalong troupe heading for the Haight. Pronounced like "hate" they told him, but he felt there only love.

He let his hair grow long and they sang his songs and he sang theirs and all held hands inside the music. They didn't 'think' – rejecting an analytic process passed down from 'The Man' – and so they weren't divided in their minds. But being from the inner world, the unique view from inside-outside, he could predict the darkness ascending and descending. His mind's eye batted frantically to blink away the visions of cops donning beast-marked foreheads – on their helmets, the great bear-seal of California State – with batons thumping hippies up and down the hill, beating down kids derailed from Vietnam's draft too "Peace" to fight back. He saw bloodied bandanas and flower-buds crushed underfoot, centrifugal black vibes beginning their rotation in the epicenter of peace. He knew what was coming, not just for them, but for this world.

A son of man, raised by the men of the penitentiary, he struggled to navigate this new landscape of coded meanings and sidelong glances. He didn't know the rules or how to learn them. Not at all like prison's mainline, toe-the-line, "stay in line motherfucker!" To him, the world outside was full to the brim of incomprehensible conventions, sneaky smiles and two-faced liars. He wasn't the children's teacher but he tried to help them stand up, for themselves and for the world. He, the wounded enemy, would find a desert hideaway, a cave, and stow the children away. He was to be the avenging one with a key to the bottomless pit. Man's son but a child of God, a hybrid creature – the Death Valley Angel.

Once a cherubic-faced child sold for beer; his small life's worth measured out in amber liquid, not even a tankard or a pitcher but a pint – a small measure! A crass transaction, a spurning, but only adoration for her, his upturned boy-eyes to a mother's face he couldn't hate. Growing up, he wished to be a friend to everything he saw, everything he felt, everything he knew – air, trees, water, animals – and he felt all the way alive! But the thought-games of others caused confusion: they wanted him to kick and lash out in destruction, to be a boy like the other "boys who will be boys". On a darkening day, he held out his hand and wished for

the pretty butterfly to land but what came instead was a Death's Head Moth. It screamed in his face, made buzzing white noise like an electrical transmitter. He never again held out his hand in friendship.

In his caged life, walled in and well defined, he fared better, if better is a shadow-life of a shadow-self. Clarity here – the rules, the regulations, procedures and protocol – all this he understood; knew his number, what was expected, what they wanted. All now rubber-stamped, signed and sealed with a consistent answer: Request Denied. He thinks back on the sad new dawn of the burnt-out sun when the many strands of love and newness became entangled with old dark under-the-noon threads, back to when the shadowy figures asked him to extend the hangman's rope to those nine.

"Not a snitch, never!" he thinks to himself.

But the bigger picture he could explain and make them see, if only the world outside would listen to his testimony of how the black sun's tendrils wrapped themselves around the rainbow like an evil octopus and sullied the rainbow-children's world until all days were grey.

A little troupe, a close-knit Family, tried to bury themselves in the sand. The Man caught their feet and stopped them slipping down the hole, snatched them up before they could enter its vast depths. No chance of escape into the underworld! In a dried blood spider-web of intricate intrigue, even the Scorpio-scorpion was trapped. Love was squeezed out of hearts drip by vibrant drip until no way was left but to strike first, attack or be attacked. Like mistreated dogs, they would turn to bite the next hand that reached, whether foe or friend.

"Could it have been any way but this?" he thinks, as he holds out his hand. Through the bars of the cells, angry and screaming, the Moth-Man is on his way.

Symbol Infection  
Rasmenia Massoud

I never had a wedding, but I had a ring. Not a real wedding ring, a substitute ring. This ring had no jagged edges, no precious stones to fall out and become lost. The petite silver band had two sparkling leaves of Black Hills gold affixed to it; one yellowish-green, the other, pinkish-orange. A tiny silver cluster in the middle looking like miniature bunch of grapes.

That's how most things made with Black Hills gold look. Leaves. Colors. Nothing else like it.

I never took it off because I made a commitment. And because it had always felt like it wasn't even there. It turned out, the commitment was pretty easy to ignore, too. Most things are easy to ignore, unless they're falling apart.

Those stupid leaves and tiny grapes became a symbol of wasted life; a reminder of fifteen years I'd given away for no reason. A token representing a man who despised me and a person I'd ceased to be a long time ago.

Now this fucking symbol won't let go of my hand.

Troy hands me another Captain and Coke. "We tried butter. We tried oil. Maybe we should try to cut it off."

"Yeah?" I taste my drink. Mostly Captain. Almost no Coke. Troy's using the same tired tricks to get me drunk that he used on me fifteen years ago. It's become so automatic for him. He can't even see I'm trying to get myself drunk. "You sober enough to take a hacksaw to my hand without buzzing right through my goddamn finger?"

"No." He shakes his head and grimaces like he's about to deliver terrible news, or an enormous belch. "But you have nine more fingers."

"Screw you, then."

"Yes ma'am." He lifts me up and sets me down so that I'm sitting on the counter top. He's wearing too much cologne, just like he did fifteen years ago. When he still had hair and looked like a rock star. When my clothes, my skin and everything else was tight.

"Ma'am?" I jab him in the shoulder. "Nothing makes a woman feel sexier than being called 'ma'am'."

He moves in closer, bringing the chemical stench of his after shave veneer to my nose. I recoil and he looks wounded, so I say, "Later. I really want to get this damn thing off."

"Do you have a hacksaw?" He's close enough that when he says, "hacksaw," the exhalation blows some of my hair back.

I jump down from the counter. "Of course I don't have a hacksaw."

"Hey," Troy says, swirling his rum and coke, clinking the ice cubes against the glass. "Why did you leave me for him back then, anyway?"

"You were banging a stripper, that's why."

He removes his baseball cap, scratches his balding scalp, then puts it back on. I loathe the cap, but prefer it to the sad old man exposed by its absence.

"Well, you were messing around with someone else, too, weren't'cha?"

"Yeah. Him."

"When did he give you that ring?"

"A couple of years after I met him. Before my fingers turned into fat, pink sausages."

"Why didn't he get you a real wedding ring?"

"I don't know. Maybe because there was no real wedding and no real wife."

"We could try ice," he says.

"That sounds weird. But, yeah. Okay. Let's do it."

I soak my hand in a bowl of ice cubes until it feels like a dead lump of frozen bones dangling from the end of my arm.

The ring slides off, leaving a deep dent all the way around my finger. I hold it up and examine this tiny circle showing me the size my finger used to be when I was someone else.

"All right, then. It's off," Troy says. He slaps me on the ass. "Let's get to it."

"I've got a better idea. Let's take a shower."

"Ooh. Yeah." Troy puts his arms up and thrusts his pelvis, humping the air. I wonder if he's always been repulsive and stupid, if I hadn't noticed it fifteen years ago because I was too young to see beyond the surface of anyone back then.

Or maybe I was just as stupid and repulsive back then, too.

Maybe I haven't changed as much as I'd like to think.

He removes his hat and I follow him into the bathroom, deciding this is better than trying not to choke on the fumes of his cheap man perfume. It's easier to close my eyes and imagine what he used to be than it is to stop breathing.

Or maybe it isn't. I'm too much of a coward to find out.

Every morning since I signed the divorce papers, I need a few seconds after opening my eyes to figure out where in the hell I am. When the bare walls and lack of furniture come back into focus, the past few months surge into my mind and I try to snuggle back into oblivion, but my self-loathing won't allow me that kind of peace.

Every morning, my hangover feels like being born again. My head throbs, like being squeezed and pushed out, fists trembling, throat grunting and wailing in protest of the light, screaming for the comfort of warm, dark silence.

Then I remember that the loser I dated when I was nineteen is snoring next to me, now an even bigger loser than he was back then. It was dumb luck, running into Troy at that Mexican restaurant my friends from work had taken me to as a means of distracting me from the fact that my marriage was about to end.

There I was, slumped over my goddamn chicken chimichanga, reciting all of those, "Oh my, it's been so long" platitudes while trying to act like my life had been fucking wonderful since that day fifteen years ago when we'd left one another for two people who we believed were better options.

We made out in the parking lot, the rest of my cold chimichanga in a Styrofoam box on the dashboard.

I rented the cheapest apartment I could find. Troy helped me move in, and then he never left. An entire week passed by before I figured out he was homeless, living in his truck, or couch surfing with his meth-addled friends. Another week might've gone by without me noticing a thing if I hadn't decided to start smoking again.

This apartment building, it's so cheap that it doesn't have real balconies or patios. What it has instead is a glass door that opens out onto a boxed-in slab of concrete just big enough for two people to stand in and smoke, or look at the depressing, rusty heaps of junk in the parking lot. I'd always ignored it, but after ten years without a cigarette, I had a fresh pack in my hand and was looking forward to standing on my own almost-patio and having a smoke. Alone.

I pulled the blind and there was the back of Troy's stupid head and his goddamn hat leaning against the glass door, his arms wrapped around his legs, knees under his chin. Folded up and crammed in this little space with empty beer cans, like an amateur hobo.

I opened the door. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Oh, hey. You're home." He said this as though loitering on someone's porch is the most natural thing in the world.

It occurred to me that from this angle, I could kick him in the face. But, instead, I said, "I asked you a question."

"I was just waiting for you to get home from work."

"So you creep around my apartment? You don't have anything else to do? Nowhere else to be? We didn't make any plans for tonight. I've seen you every day this week. I was looking forward to an evening by myself."

Out came a pitiful confession, a deluge of his life events that I had no energy to listen to. A combination of words that added together equaled: pity me. No home. No job. No visitation with his kids, who, until then, I was not aware of. The ink on my divorce papers had barely dried and I had this deadbeat from my past wanting me to fix his ego, give him a home and make him whole.

I can't even do any of those things for myself.

I could have told him in that moment to leave, to never come back. Instead, I pointed at the empty beer cans on my almost-patio and said, "You have any more of that beer, or what?"

Every morning since that day, I seethe and think of the words I'll say to get him out of here for good. For the past month, I've rehearsed it in my throbbing head, as though it'll be difficult to get rid of him. As though I have a reason to cling to him.

Now, I've just been born again, screaming for the darkness and his after shave is stinking up my sheets. I sit up and nudge him in the ribs. "Get up."

He stirs and grunts. I nudge him again. Hard. "C'mon. Get the hell up."

He grabs my hand. "Jesus. What the hell happened to you?"

I pull my hand back. The dent the ring left around my finger is filled with tiny red bumps. The rest of my hand is blotchy and sick looking. It's almost as though the sight of it is causing a reaction. I start to itch from the place where the ring used to be, all the way to my wrist.

Rubbing my sick finger, I say, "Probably nothing. A side effect from fucking with it too much last night. Just get up. We need to talk."

"We could talk, or we could..." He reaches up, tries to pull me down.

I push him away. "For real. I have to go to work. You've gotta go."

"Work?" He sits up and rubs his face. "I thought you wanted to talk."

"I did. I do." I throw the covers off. Standing is a big adjustment. It takes a moment for the dizziness to fade. "Whatever. We'll talk when I get home from work."

"I'll be here, waiting."

"I figured as much." I'm digging my fingernails into the itchy places on my hand.

"You know, you could just give me a key."

I stare at him, thinking I'd like to throw something at him, but this place is so empty and I don't know that tossing a shoe or a pillow at his face would be satisfying enough. "You know, you could just go get a job and your own apartment, since you don't fucking live here."

He appears to be genuinely confused. "But, we're back together. I love you, you love me, and now that you've finally divorced that jerk-off, everything's all good."

"I don't love you. I never loved you. And I didn't divorce him for you. He left me."

"Well, that doesn't matter. We're still back together."

"No. You were a warm body that was somewhat familiar. Now it's done."

Troy jumps out of bed, pokes his finger in my face. "You're a fucking bitch." He calls me more names, and then makes a dramatic exit, getting dressed and stuffing the rest of his things in his Hefty bag luggage.

I don't look him in the eye as he's doing this. I look at my hand, at the tiny, waning moon-shaped gouges I've left in it and the small, nasty welts that have begun to appear.

Then he leaves. My self-inflicted punishment slams the door on his way out.

By the time I get home from work, a hostile, scarlet rash has spread up to my elbow. I scratch and scratch, the ugly little bumps bursting, the fluid spreading, wetting my skin, then drying. Crusting over. Spreading the infection.

I don't understand why my arm is itching and burning, so I call my doctor's office. The woman with the stuffed-up nose on the other end of the line tells me that a rash isn't an emergency. The doctor has gone for the day. She says if it's life threatening, I should go to the emergency room.

"I can't tell what's life-threatening, that's why I need the doctor," I say. "I need someone else to tell me if my life is okay."

She doesn't know what to say to that. Fucking HMOs.

"It could be a metal allergy," she says.

"No. I removed the metal. My skin can't be allergic to not wearing a ring."

"Could be stress."

I decide this woman is useless, so I end the call and stick my arm under the faucet in the kitchen sink. The water can't get hot or cold enough, so I dig around in my mostly-empty drawers and see a vague, flashing recollection of having a normal kitchen with several types of spatulas and spoons. I curse myself for not owning a potato peeler, or a decent set of kitchen knives.

I pull the blind covering the glass door leading to my almost-patio. There he is, a walking, talking, symbol of my wasted life in a baseball cap, curled up and sleeping one off.

Instead of opening the door, I go into my bathroom. There, on the counter is one of Troy's cheap, blue plastic disposable razors. Looking down at countless tiny pustules on my arm, I think to myself that this is just stress removal.

It can't be any more difficult than shaving my legs.

It's easier to close my eyes and imagine the razor cutting away my bad decisions than it is to stop breathing.

Or maybe it isn't. I'm too much of a coward to find out.

Cardboard Sunrise  
Clio Velentza

Symbols, just like colors, exist only when we see them. Say I never noticed how milk foam clung to your wedding ring when we bumped into each other that windy morning; say the morning was just that, simply windy instead of wild with anticipation as it seemed when strangers' hair whipped my face on the sidewalk. I never put much faith in zebra crossings because of their inherently hallucinatory nature, so I jaywalked right into your ridiculous purple patchwork coat that I once called cartoonish but you still wore at my brother's wedding, where I had vindictively vomited all over it.

Say I never noticed how first time I saw you after all these years I had to relive that shameful memory and almost turned to leave, but thought better of it and caught your arm while that flower truck kept honking and the shrill street backed away, a cardboard sunrise in a school play, and in its place there it was, the drab library bathroom with its jittery neon bulbs, it was cloudy and all was grey except that long string of blood running down the back of your leg, it was very red – I remember thinking this when I opened the door and saw it, it was very red, surely fake – you said you hated synthetic pads but took mine nonetheless, and we disliked each other immediately.

I should have paid attention to all that.

Instead I reached and flicked the foam and I ignored it until you gently retrieved your hand and hid it with a strange middle-class politeness that terrified me, having grown used to the vicarious embarrassment that were your filthy, rebellious manners that so amused our professors. My hands were sweating now, I could still taste the acidity of that night's vomit, all champagne-sour, a delirious resignation to your bad caretaking which left me dehydrated on a wet garden full of demonic twinkle lights for a good long time, until you picked me up and allowed to be kissed with my horrid breath. That kiss came dredging up my breakfast with a vengeance, I could not believe the fear was here, in your paper cup and in the sticky foam as we prattled on, I could see our speech bubbles with the sweet platitudes glowing in soft focus, I had a lot of regrets in a single fast second for the library and for the vomit kiss, so I was hyper-aware of the inflexibility of this floor we stood on. No soft grass, just makeshift hardness.

Salvation came in the form of a pigeon dropping on my shoulder. You laughed and said now *that's* cartoonish, as I wiped it away, glad of the distracting stench. It is a perfect morning for a chance encounter now, if one is up for a skim through pale memories. Its innocence demands to be acknowledged. I can't very well recall, Kleenex in hand, why I got so flustered just now in the first place, it must have been the—

Definitely. I didn't even notice, say, as you were leaving, what color is your hair.

Pigsglue  
Donna D. Vitucci

Maddy Procter stood in the boys' bathroom. Nobody pulled their pants down. Josh and Frankie and Paul loitered by the spots designated for peeing but they stayed tucked in. They also did not run out calling for Mrs. Dobryny, tattling. They watched Maddy, their soles stuck to the checkerboard floor the janitor swabbed nightly with the tarantula-legged mop. Their legs were ice or rubber, and either way, they couldn't escape her. Maddy might be a spider or a virus or Shere Khan. For sure her eyes glittered. For sure she had venom in her teeth.

What she said leaped out and bit them. "Pigsglue had his arm and leg cut off."

"Who's that?" Frankie said.

"My brother."

"Pigsglue?" Josh said, doubting and making fun because how could you not make fun of a name like Pigsglue?

"Yes." Maddy's head adjusted on her neck so she could better stare him down. A patch covered her one eye to make the other work harder. She pierced Josh with her lazy-eye stare. "That's his name. He was in Iraq."

That did it. You couldn't laugh over soldiers. You couldn't make fun of Pigsglue, so you couldn't poke at Maddy either. They didn't say it that day but Pigsglue made Maddy invincible. The name revolted them, her stories of Pigsglue trickled down their spines like ice water, and their wonderings and their supposings and their need to know 'what next' about Pigsglue drew them to Maddy's one-eyed stare every day that week.

The girls and boys bathrooms shared plumbing, were located along the same one hallway. And in the girls bathroom Claire Dobryny sat on an upturned waste basket with her head set against a wall pipe. Third time this morning she'd thrown up. Only the beginning, the precarious time, the hold on or lose it time. She heard the children talking and the name Pigsglue, for no reason she could identify, chilled her. She rubbed her arms, thinking she should have worn a blouse with sleeves.

Maddy Procter's hush-now voice cemented the boys—Claire could just imagine the scene, a scene which she really should get in and break up. As their teacher, she could extinguish Pigsglue with one withering look. She would need to tell Sara Procter her Maddy required a little more listening to, that gory stories were a call for attention at home. That, and Halloween was coming up. Kids liked to spook themselves, they loved spooking their friends.

Even Claire could not resist Maddy droning on: "My mom died when I was a baby. My mom now is really my step-mom, and my brother is in an electric wheel chair."

Frankie snickered. "You mean Pigsglue is in a wheelchair."

"Yesssss," Maddy said, over-enunciating through her newly opened front teeth spaces.

Claire had gone to high school with Sara Baskerton, now Procter. They were acquaintances at best, but she'd attended the same after-prom party where everybody knew Sara got pregnant with the baby she later named Maddy so for certain this one story at least was a lie. From sitting and bent forward upon the upturned wastebasket, Claire

stood, stretched and arched, put her hand at the small of her back and dug her knuckles in there. Eddie did it better but he was setting up the new parameters at Stylo-Tech down in Salem.

The baby was making all her hard parts soft and all her soft parts malleable. The baby was its own little parasite. She did not tell Eddie she'd missed three periods, and he'd been too preoccupied with implementing Stylo's digital infrastructure to notice. Speaking had jinxed three out of three, and she wasn't breathing a word until she started showing. Invoking charm and luck meant she wouldn't visit the doctor or pee on a stick. Some signs you simply had to trust, and anyway by now she knew her own body like a blind man reads Braille.

"My mom and dad put Pigsglue in the freezer and now we can't use the freezer anymore," Maddy was saying, further tantalizing her crowd.

Frankie said, "So he's in with the tater tots and the ice cream?"

The boys busted each other up. Their echo-laughter skimmed along the pipe to batter Claire's head where it set against it, getting rust and old flaking paint into her hair, which was going thin. She read internet articles that said the baby would steal her protein. Probably lead-based paint and asbestos wrapping she leaned into, too, but she just couldn't tear herself away from Maddy's gory story.

"When he was visiting my grandma, Pigsglue burned his leg—"

"You mean the one leg he has left?"

Maddy talked over the interrupting boys: "—he burned his leg on Granny's coal stove, right down so you could see the bone. I saw it there, the white gristle bone."

"Ewwww." The boys laughed and made gross out sounds.

Then an almost weepy voice said, "I don't want to hear your stories anymore." Paul, the quiet one with the cowlick and chapped lips.

"Don't you? Why not?" Maddy said.

"Because they're lies."

Maddy's voice curdled into a perfect blend of innocence and evil. "Are they?"

That was it. Claire exited one bathroom and then pushed open the adjoining lavatory, held the door wide and ordered, "Okay, everybody out."

The boys ambled past, nudging and stepping on each other's heels, and then finally, Maddy trailed. Claire gave her an intense look and said, "You know you don't belong in here," but Maddy defied her with an eye-patch stare and all at once Claire felt what she thought was the tadpole swish of her pregnancy.

When Claire pulled Sara aside in the pick-up lane after school, she advised her of Maddy's tall tales.

Sara scoffed, "Is that what Maddy said? Are you sure?"

*Did I see what I saw? Did I hear what I heard?* Oh, unreliable memory. Claire was rather used to things not being what they seemed. She regrouped quick and said, "I take what the kids say when they come to me with a grain of salt, sure, but this I heard myself."

"Maddy told you?" Sara narrowed her dark, bottomless eyes, nothing lazy about either of them as she gazed at Maddy upside down on the jungle gym, suggesting Claire was not even worth looking at, the way Sara had dismissed her ever since they were teenagers.

"I heard it," Claire said.

Sara looked at her then. Sara Procter, who had always been pretty and pretty exploded plenty of doubt, let the pretty one get away with so much before young bones and blood congealed into adult shapes that resisted change. During the years since high school Sara's eyes had deepened in her skull, her teeth had grown mottled. She said, "But did she tell you?"

Claire backed up an inch. You could hear the gravel slip under her shoes. Even the gravel wanted to hide. "I overheard her say it."

Sara put her hands on her hips, the same body language Claire used to preside over her first graders. She certainly felt scolded when Sara said, "Oh. Then you were eavesdropping on child's play."

Claire did not want to admit she'd been loitering alongside the pipes, half mesmerized and all the way stomach-sick, while she should have been...what? Teacher-ing? Corridor patrolling? Booting Maddy out of the boys' bathroom?

She didn't want Sara to know she was pregnant, not now not ever, and for sure not before she told Eddie. Sara maybe had a peculiar daughter whose imagination tilted wild, but she had a kid, had had a kid since she herself was a practically still a kid, while Claire proceeded childless and desperate to hang on to what, for the first time today, she'd felt duplicating inside her.

Claire stammered. "I don't think I mis-heard. And either way, maybe you should talk with Maddy is all I'm saying. See what she's feeling behind the words of what, you've got to admit, sounds pretty outlandish."

Sara said, "Pigsglue, huh?"

The name of the unknown, undead, unreal brother pinched Claire a little in her belly. She unconsciously set her hand there, and Sara said, "Putting on a few?" Then she called for Maddy and turned with her car keys. "Well, thanks for the heads up."

Maddy climbed into the passenger seat of the beat-down Corolla Sara had wrangled from Ben Procter in the divorce. As far as Claire knew it was just Maddy and Sara out on Passmore Road, despite Maddy's claims to a war vet brother named Pigsglue in a wheelchair or in the freezer or burning his leg skin clean off beside some Grandma's coal stove.

Claire turned back to school to take one more pee before heading home herself.

In the girl's bathroom, the pipes clanked a little as the day turned to dusk and the school's radiator heat kicked on. Just because no one opened a hot or cold water valve didn't mean there wouldn't be other gurgles and burps and coughs in the monstrous old building. Claire sat on the toilet and wound some paper around her hand.

Rumors now had Ben Procter working an Alaskan pipeline, others said he was backpacking through Thailand, and still others claimed he'd joined up with mercenaries. Claire remembered he'd sure liked setting off fireworks and low level explosives, had the sheriff called to his and Sara's for disturbances more than just Fourth of Julys. Maybe after all it was Ben who'd been burned and perched like a glass-stunned bird in an electric wheelchair. Or cubbed in a freezer. Claire shivered. Pigsglue. What a singular creepy name.

Her stomach hurt. She thought she needed supper. When she wiped she saw blood.

Her teeth clamped on her bottom lip as she fled school and got gingerly in her car. She drove home into not-yet-night, an in between timeless hour of fading, refusing to think, and with a storm usurping the sky.

*Call Eddie*, she thought, ducking under the porch awning right before the rain started, but then she remembered she'd kept her secret selfish, so to gush hysterical about maybe losing a baby he didn't even know of—it was not a good sequence. Anyway, her cell phone had gone kaput. She plugged it in the charger, leaned down to click on a lamp, which popped with lightning as the power fizzled out in her's and the surrounding houses.

“Great,” Claire said. The room had plunged suddenly cavernous and as echo-ey as the school bathrooms.

She stood still, blank-eyed and with arms slightly outstretched, tried to gain her bearings. The rain hit the outer walls in great sheets, fierce. Her low center of gravity strained lower, wanted to puddle to the floor, but she resisted. Every piece of Claire had been recruited to sustain what was accruing inside her. Even her heart thudding in her chest was being siphoned, its chambers emptying to what was, or would be, baby. Along the wall, as she walked, her hands pushed at picture frames and other tottering artwork she'd once cherished. Something crashed, and yes, she'd done it. Claire was responsible for whatever fell and broke in this house. She kept moving, she didn't care what she demolished. Finally her two hands gripped the door frame, and she entered the bathroom, crouching like a dowager, her backside bruised by the vanity and then the open toilet.

The storm pummeled the outside, and the inner shadowy walls, they convulsed too. Was something working the windows, the locks? Claire couldn't care, even if it was some phantom burned brother left half a body doing a wheelie in his motorized chair. She imagined Maddy regaling the boys in the bathroom with this new development, how Mrs. Dobryny had faced down Pigsglue and he'd stared, meager in all his diminished capacity except mightily bent on Hoover-ing up hope, sucking it through a goddamned straw. This was where Claire's mind went while her backside glued to the toilet seat and her innards cramped.

One-eyed Maddy with her vibrant, full red lips. How dare she plant her stories in their heads?

All at once power infused the world. The night light above the toilet tank painted the bathroom gruesome, and Claire caught sight of the glow emitted down the hall from the one lamp she'd earlier tried clicking on. Working against gravity, she stood bent as an old grandma, afraid to peer in the bowl at what curled there, the eye in its hurricane, the star-slur of the Milky Way, one more haunting, a clot shadowed by the toilet rim, what you couldn't give shape or name to since it did not belong in the light, was never meant for the light, it was something you probably just mis-heard.

In Water She Is Weightless  
Jessica Hickey

“As soon as I finish this section, I’ll get a snack. No, when I finish this sentence.” Mara tapped at the keys, mindlessly deleting and retyping the word *Experience* over and over. This was something she did when her heart wasn’t in her work and she desperately wanted a break, which was all the time these days. Since quitting her job in HR and restyling herself as a boutique resume writer, she’d been swimming in a steady stream of dully written objectives and ubiquitous References Available upon Request. No longer part of the Coffee Club or the Birthday Committee, Mara now spent her days alone in her apartment fiddling with margins, shrinking font sizes, and straining to pull one more synonym for *managed* out of thin air. “Screw it,” she said as she pushed away from the small desk and headed to the kitchen.

Mara’s apartment overlooking Capitola’s main street was once a seaside motel—The Seabreeze—now converted into a cluster of Spartan apartments whose ocean view made up for their lack of amenities. The peeling stucco exterior and drab interior didn’t bother Mara. She felt this was the charm of a home by the sea, a place bathed in the shadows of palm trees and tickled by the static-y rush of ocean waves. Any place close enough to the beach to grab her board and jog out for a quick surf session was perfect for Mara. Not that she had ever been on a surfboard, of course, but this was the self-image she projected in her mind’s eye. Although she was ungainly in body, Mara imagined herself a surfer at heart, and her beach-themed apartment fit her perfectly. The kitchen, which had been the room next door before the conversion, was absurdly large compared to the tiny bathroom, bedroom, and closet that comprised the remainder of the apartment. But it was fitting enough, in a poetic way. Mara herself had become outsize since moving in.

The weight gain started slowly, as it often does. A few extra pounds when she submitted to a weigh-in at the doctor’s office, the fit of her clothes changing slightly as her shirts began riding up her belly like water quietly receding from the edge of a continent. Soon she found that she couldn’t slide into a booth at restaurants anymore and had to ask for a table when she went to lunch with coworkers. Her office chair developed an unearthly squeal each time she sat down. Mara’s wardrobe had taken a decisive turn for the worse when not even Lane Bryant had anything flattering to sell her. She started wearing loose yoga pants with forgiving elastic waistbands to work. These had the advantage of allowing Mara to both sit and breathe simultaneously, but they weren’t exactly professional office attire. One day when she bent down to pick up a sheaf of papers that had slid off the copier, a pain ran through her ribs so sharp she needed help straightening up and her boss wanted to take her to the emergency room. She convinced him she was fine, but emailed her resignation that night.

On the counter were a few granola bar wrappers from her last snack break and a cereal bowl soaking in soapy water. A collection of spoons and forks gathered in the sink, evidence of the tastes and nibbles that peppered Mara’s workday. She scanned the items on offer in the fridge and sighed—nothing good. She reached for a block of cheddar and sliced

off two thick slabs, weighing their waxy density in her hand. She ate both standing at the counter, then decided they would taste better with crackers and sliced off several more chunks to make a plate. After a glass of chocolate milk, she felt ready to face her work again, for a little while anyway. She was already planning her next snack break.

The little desk in the bedroom called her back to work, but the window beckoned too, drawing the laughter of beachgoers and the smell of salty ocean air into the apartment like a siren song. Mara took up her familiar position leaning on the window sill and resting her head against its frame, watching the people on the street below. She studied the movement of a surfer hoisting his board off the roof rack, deftly swinging it under his arm, and trotting across the sand toward the ocean's foamy edge. In countless hours of daydreaming, Mara envisioned herself as a surfer with the grace and skill to dominate the waves. In the ocean she was weightless—one with the water, with the sunlight refracting at its surface, with microscopic plankton and tangling kelp. She was a diatom, a mystery of indescribable beauty encased in a tiny glass shell, rarely seen by the human eye.

As Mara's mind wandered in the waves, her eyes lit on a woman trotting back to the parking lot, wetsuit dangling around her waist, twisted ropes of hair weighed down under a film of seawater. She carried an orange surfboard painted with white hibiscus blossoms under one arm. As she opened the hatch of her station wagon, a blue piece of paper escaped. Mara watched its arc as it flew into a loop in the air and landed on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. From her window, Mara could see that it was a flyer with clip art of a woman standing beside a longboard. As soon as the car pulled out of its parking space, Mara was out front picking up the flyer. It was an ad for a women's surf clinic for "absolute beginners." The class started in two days and met at Coleman's Cove. Of course she knew the place. She could see it from her window, and hadn't she watched hundreds of new surfers over the years gather in that shallow bay to learn paddling out and popping up?

An hour later, Mara was still browsing the website listed on the flyer, caught in a crushing tension between her heart's desire and the oppressive limits of her growing body. She hovered over the "Register" button, convincing herself she could take the class—she *had* to take the class—when a cold voice whispered, "*You're too fat. You'll never be able to do it.*" Defeated, she dropped the mouse and minimized the screen.

That night, Mara slept fitfully. She woke to the familiar but confusing darkness of midnight and swung her feet out of bed. Her body walked itself to the cavernous kitchen without turning on any lights—she knew the way. Before she even had time to shake off the webs of sleep still pulling her back into a dream world, she was halfway through a tall glass of chocolate milk and a bagel loaded with schmear. She considered the bagel in her hand as if it had appeared out of thin air. It eyed her back, taunting her, egging her on to take another bite though she was far from hungry, a familiar reflux of self-loathing rising in her throat. She reached across the counter to grab a piece of chocolate from the always-full candy bowl, and her rib jabbed her sharply, digging in to what felt like an internal organ and eliciting a cry of pain. The whisper burned in her ear, "*You're hopeless.*" Suddenly, Mara exploded with a force that frightened her, and she hurled the bagel across the room. It

smacked the opposite wall then slid down to the floor, leaving a slimy trail of cream cheese in its wake. Tears flooded her vision and her fists pounded the counter in bitter frustration. She jumped up from her seat and stormed to her desk, defiantly pulling up the surfing class website. Without giving the whispering voice a chance to object, she clicked the looming "Register" button. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she entered her contact and payment information before slamming the laptop shut.

She woke the next morning with a pounding headache and puffy eyes not abated by any amount of cold water. She badly wanted a microwave burrito but, still chastened from the previous night's outburst, avoided the kitchen and went straight to her desk. Waiting for her was a welcome email from Kris, the surf teacher, including a list of what she needed to bring to class. The hissing voice in her head suggested she delete it now and save herself the humiliation that surely awaited her on the beach. Instead, she tried on something new: she ignored that hateful whisper.

Mara hadn't left her apartment much since she started working from home. She would grocery shop and occasionally see friends, but she had drawn inward enough that walking to the surf shop this morning was uncomfortable, both emotionally and physically. After walking the three blocks to get there, Mara stood at the door, giving her heart a minute to settle down before going inside. She approached the sales counter stiffly, as if imitating a rusted tinman. The need to crawl out of her skin was overwhelming, but she'd had enough of hating herself, of fighting the whispers, of late night bagel throwing. And so she kept her feet firmly planted and continued to stand at the counter.

"What can I get you, pretty lady?" Mara handed the beanie-clad man behind the counter a printout of her email listing the supplies she needed.

"I'm supposed to get this stuff. For a class," she said.

He looked at the list, nodded and smiled. "Right on! Class with Miss Kris, got it." He jumped over the counter and began a parade through the shop. "So you're gonna need one of these," he said, pulling a green puck of wax off the shelf. "And this. And one of these," he said, grabbing a tether from a pegboard display. He stopped and looked at Mara. "You have a board?" She shook her head. He leaned in and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "No worries, you can rent one for ten bucks. See how you like it before you drop a grand on your own, am I right?" Mara supposed he was right. "I'm Ben, by the way," he said, extending a hand.

"Mara." Despite Ben's ability to make Mara feel slightly more at ease, a persistent knot grew in her stomach as she anticipated the appearance of the wetsuit and the humiliation of being told they didn't make them big enough for her.

"Ok, last thing you need is a board. Let me see what we have. Be right back."

"And a wetsuit," she managed to squeak out.

"Oh yeah, duh! Almost forgot. Can't go out without a wetsuit. Not if you want to stay in the water longer than five minutes, anyway."

"But do you, um, do they . . . come in my size?" Ben looked Mara up and down, sizing her up. She felt she might lose control of her bowels, throw up, or both right there all over a rack of Roxy hoodies. She fought with all her strength not to run away.

"I might have something," he said thoughtfully. "Wait here."

Ben returned with a wide blue surfboard and a black wetsuit. "Men's size. This should do the trick," he said, handing her the bundle.

"Don't you have something smaller? For the board, I mean? This seems really long," Mara said.

"See, you're just starting out, right? So you want something wide and long, floats better." He winked at her then. "You'll get to those short boards in no time, girl." Mara couldn't tell if Ben was mocking her, but she chose to believe he was being sincere. She couldn't afford not to.

"I'm gonna tell you though, you'll need a hand getting into this thing. It's a tight fit even for a—" Mara's face turned bright red and her eyes filled with hot tears.

"Even . . . for anyone. It's just hard to get into." He tilted his head and looked at Mara, trying to read her face. "I'm sorry. Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying," Mara snapped. Ben quickly rang her up and wished her luck. As she walked out of the shop, Ben called, "Wire hanger! Zipper pull's broken on that wetsuit...if you need a hand."

Mara was already awake when the night transformed to morning, the muted gray of twilight conceding its place to the palette of dawn. It was a chilly morning but the sun was out, scattering sparkles on the water and streaking pink and orange paint across the sky. Mara got ready early, giving herself plenty of time to wrestle the wetsuit and steel her nerves. Soon she stood at the edge of the beach, holding the rented surfboard under one arm. She stared at the small group gathering at Coleman's Cove. Self-consciously, she adjusted her wetsuit. Breathed in, breathed out. Then Mara stepped off the sidewalk and crossed the beach toward her class. With every labored step, her heart beat harder until she felt it throbbing in her throat and the butterflies in her stomach threatened to escape. Step after step, she struggled through the sand, her thigh muscles exhausting their potential energy before was even halfway to the cove. She became conscious of a wheezing rasp she soon recognized as her own breathing. "Oh god, I can't do this," she whispered. The tears came too quickly to push back, and they tripped down her flushed cheeks like water breaching a riverbank. But still she walked. Across the sand, toward the ocean, rented surfboard under her arm. She pushed herself in a way she never had before, and as she labored further down the beach, her chant evolved from "*I can't*" to "*I am*." In an endless loop, the waves rolled in and the kelp swayed and the seagulls cried out. And somewhere in the space between the sidewalk and the cove, Mara became weightless.

The woman with the orange and white surfboard waved her in. "Come on over! You made it just in time."

Mara dropped her board in the sand and looked at the water, the would-be surfers gathered around her, the board at her own feet. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and smiled at herself. "I really did," she said.

Breadwinner  
J. Bradley

Phil's good about changing my bandages after I open myself like a wallet, but that's about it. I ask him when he's gonna contribute to the household since he lives here so much now. Phil shrugs his shoulders, says, "I'm not on the lease."

On the rare occasion I stay overnight at his house, I try avoiding his mother. She glares at me with the one eye she still has when we run into each other in the hallway or when she catches me coming out of his bedroom. When she does this, I focus on a point over her shoulder so I don't stare at the stump of her right wrist, the skinny aluminum pole where her left calf and foot used to be. Phil told me how his father left his mother for someone more whole five years ago even though Phil's father was the reason why Phil's mother became incomplete.

I look at my torso in the bathroom mirror. Phil makes me keep my shirt on, the lights low so he can't see or feel the scars whenever I let him have sex with me. I ask myself why I'm still with him and my reflection just mouths the question back. I open the medicine chest, count what sleeping pills I have left. Maybe Phil's mother might like me more once she sees how Phil isn't like his father, how she'll fawn over what's missing from him.

Natalie Wood  
Shannon Frost Greenstein

## **PART ONE**

It doesn't taste as bad as you would imagine, the seawater. I expected a mouthful of saltiness, but after the first few swallows, it goes down like regular water.

## **PART TWO**

It's not called Hydrophobia. Hydrophobia is Rabies. I don't have Rabies. What I have is *Aquaphobia*. What I have is an absolutely crippling phobia of open water. What I have is the physical inability to be next to, in sight of, submerged in, hovering over, or otherwise in the presence of the sea.

I can't help it. It's been this way as long as I can remember. Even now, as an adult, I'm scared of drowning; I'm scared of the vastness of the ocean, the insignificance of one human life in the midst of an aquatic infinity; mostly, I'm scared of the species that inhabit the bottom. I can't help but fall victim to the childish fears, the mental images of prehistoric monstrosities slowly rising from the depths, untouched by evolution, gargantuan and fanged and merciless hunters.

I loathe water like Natalie Wood loathed water.

And then she drowned.

## **PART THREE**

*Get up, she demands.*

I look up at her groggily through eyelids practically glued together with the crustified remnants of my Aquavue Oasys HydroClear Comfort Care contact lenses. Insane with thirst, my entire soul is parched like the houseplant I had in college that adapted to live on flat Yuengling. We've been slowly allocating our precious liquid for...how long, now?

*Get off the floor and help me.*

...Days? A week? Eternity?

*Mark, you have to get up. I can't do this by myself. Get UP!*

...but it's never enough, and it's basically gone.

I take a deep breath and focus on my wife's face, trying with a foggy desperation to get my bearings. I am surprised to discover that I am lying prone on the bottom of the boat. The last time I came out of my terror-induced suspended animation to check in with the matters of the real world, I had been sitting glued to the padded bench, knuckles white with panic, certain the slightest movement on my part would spill us into the black seawater mere inches below.

I'm having a hard time forming cohesive thoughts. Everything is starting to taste like salt.

*Mark, you need to help me. I think I'm having contractions.*

I am vaguely cognizant of this request, and something clicks in the deep recesses of my fading awareness. Oh, yeah! We're supposed to be having a baby soon! How neat!

I look at her accusingly. "I remember now. This was all your idea."

My tongue is a wooden block in my mouth. I'm speaking, but my mouth isn't even opening. There is a searing pain in my lower back, in my sinuses, at the base of my skull. I would give anything for another handful of seawater, but can't rouse myself enough to lift my arm.

*Mark, it's too early. It's too early for the baby to come, do you understand? Please, please get off the goddamn floor!*

I hear the desperation in her voice and struggle with monumental effort to some closer semblance of full consciousness. My cells are gradually dying by osmosis, electrolyte levels weeping, as the water I've consumed poisons me slowly. I force myself to blink, to purse my cracked lips in an attempt to speak, but I have no saliva. Waves of fear and hopelessness compete with the agony of extreme dehydration, and I find myself praying to a nebulous God in whom I no longer believe.

*Mark, for Christ's sake, help me. Don't you understand? Something hurts, something's not right.*

Steeling myself against what is becoming an all-encompassing nausea, I rise up onto all fours and concentrate on my wife. She is hunched over on the bench, teeth gnawing into her bottom lip, sweat coursing down her face like Pheidippides' after his first and only marathon run. Her pregnant belly is an entity of its own, a real-live person separated from the physical realm by only a layer of muscle, subcutaneous fat, and skin. Then I make the mistake of looking over the side of the boat.

I double over, dry heaving into water which will, I'm certain in my soul, also become my grave. My face is inches from the surface, and my lizard brain screams at me, reminding me of the certain death that lies outside the safe confines of our current floating abode. I jerk away as if jabbed with a cattle prod, drastically rocking the boat and nearly sending my pregnant wife into the ocean.

Collapsing back down between the benches, I look at her pitifully. My voice creaks out with colossal determination, gravelly from lack of use.

"We're going to die."

Though I am barely audible, my wife nonetheless reacts with something akin to rage.

*We're NOT going to die! We're going to get through this!*

She has maintained a stalwart optimism throughout the entirety of this experience, driven by the human life she is currently sheltering. Evolution is on her side now, the biological urge to protect one's offspring at all costs, Darwinian martyrdom disguised as good parenting.

*Try the radio again! Try...*

She breaks off suddenly, squinting through poor visibility in the direction of the horizon.

*There's something out there.*

My brain is starving for fresh water like a fish on land trying to breathe, and her words don't register at first. I'm lost in my thoughts, spiraling downward into entropy, jumping from one memory to another at breakneck speed. I wish I had made out a will. I wish I'd remembered to call my Mother back. I wish I could jump overboard in a show of masculinity, swim through the

fuming sea to find land or another boat, even sit up long enough to try the freaking radio for the millionth time.

*Mark, do you hear me? I see something. Something's coming.*

Something's coming.

*It's really far away. I don't know what it is...maybe it's help! It's coming towards us.*

Something's coming.

## **PART FOUR**

"I think we need an adventure."

I am engrossed in my iPhone, Facebooking and Instagramming and buying everything under the sun with a swipe of my finger via Amazon Prime.

"Mark, did you hear me?"

"Yes. We need an adventure."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think the onset of parenthood is adventure enough, don't you think?"

She goes quiet for a second, and I comment on a photo of an impossibly tiny puppy.

"No. I want an adventure. Something real. Something tangible. We haven't been on a vacation since our honeymoon. And it's not like we'll be able to do it after the baby comes."

She pauses again, and the silence is so loaded that I finally raise my eyes from the glowing screen. The air is charged with tension, and I am suddenly on guard.

"I want to go to the beach. Somewhere tropical. I want to go on a boat."

Suddenly, there is no air in the room.

"Please don't freak out."

My inner eye is flashing images like a projector against the screen of my brain, images of crushing waves and flailing arms and the carnivores below and the cold, cold nothingness as I descend helplessly into the depths. Adrenaline triggered by mortal fear is flowing through my body, and I am sweating.

"I'm not freaking out."

"You're clearly freaking out."

She looks at me plaintively.

"I don't ask you for much. This is really important to me. I love the ocean, and I haven't even been *in* one since I married you. Please give me this."

Torn, I attempt to regulate my breathing, grounding myself with thoughts of my future son gestating in my wife's uterus.

"I swear to you...I swear, Mark, you're not going to drown. You're not going to get eaten. You'll be fine."

I want to believe her.

My eyes drift down to the iPhone on the couch, still illuminated. An old college roommate has posted a vacation photo, which consumes the entire surface of the screen. It is St. Lucia or Turks and Caicos or somewhere, and its pristine white sand and an aquamarine sea, bathing suits and drinks with umbrellas and jet skis.

A sign?

She is looking at me expectantly, hope on her face but the preparation of disappointment in her eyes. Her belly seems enormous, even though she's only 26 weeks. I have a thought out of nowhere, suddenly, and a corresponding mental image: My son, four or five, held up high in the air by a strong pair of arms, the seawater crystal clear and spreading out below him in every direction. My son is squealing with laughter, and so are the arms.

They are mine.

I take a deep breath.

"Fine."

## **PART FIVE**

Do you have any phobias?

With some people, it's spiders. It could be heights or falling. Snakes, clowns, small spaces, the dentist. Everybody has one, I've theorized before, but there are varying degrees of severity. However, all phobias are fundamentally the same, at their core: An obsession, like a poltergeist taking up residence in your brain, haunting every one of your synapses.

It's the fear of pain; the fear of mortality. It's the sense of feeling completely out of control, wholly at the mercy of the elements. It's your involuntary need to avoid the trauma of your phobia in any way necessary, manifesting in hyperventilating at the sight of a black mamba or Ronald McDonald, sweaty palms, weak legs, racing heart. Believe it or not, phobias are an evolutionary benefit, a result of a genetic mutation in some hominid several millennia ago, the first Homo erectus to feel terror contemplating death.

Phobias help us avoid danger. They keep us living, able to produce offspring that live to produce offspring, the whole point of evolution, Darwin validated even as you gingerly open the door with a paper towel because you're horrified by germs. They exist for a reason, and I, personally, feel like we all ought to respect that. I respect, for example, that I am not meant to be a water enthusiast. I'm not usually the sort to choose an All-Inclusive Sandals Resort Package Vacation Including the Chance to Swim with Dolphins!!!! I'm meant to stay dry, much like freshly-permed hair or a Mogwai.

Ergo, the phobia has to be seen as an evolutionary benefit, do you see? There's a reason I was born with aquaphobia. There's a reason it shaped my interaction with water up until two weeks ago. But then I ignored the rape whistle that evolution planted in my skull at the thought of the ocean and boarded a boat.

Survival of the fittest, and I lost my shot.

## PART SIX

Practically unconscious and musing on fear and natural selection, unable to save the day, unable to help as my wife delivers our premature son on the floor of the boat, certain death approaching, the milliseconds between seconds impossibly long, Einstein's theory of relativity put to the test and proven, I find that I hate myself in this moment.

Were I any sort of husband, I'd conquer my phobia through sheer force of will. I'd do the *mind over matter* thing and just sort of *overcome* my phobia, like Nietzsche would. Were I any sort of husband, I would have gotten help for us already: Helicopters flying in increasing concentric circles with search lights, a Coast Guard Ship with life-jackets and bottled water, a clean hospital room with a shower, with a bed, with a bassinet. I'd be a *provider*, a *caregiver*, someone to be trusted when everything goes to hell; I'd act the way that befits the Man of the Family.

Family.

I have a family.

A shaft of light slices through my saltwater-induced psychosis as I force my eyelids open, hyper-alert consciousness descending on me like a high-speed elevator. A family, and we're all in this together, but the other family members are lying prone on the dirty boards and crying, and the *fight* half of the fight-or-flight yin yang starts to win out.

"Tell me what..."

It's pure gibberish, even my thoughts are pure gibberish, but as I'm listening to the tiny wails of my baby, I find the last vestiges of strength in my body...we're talking reserves, we're talking fumes, we're talking the final swan song, here.

"Tell me what to do."

It must be the first time I've spoken in some time, because my wife startles like she's seen a ghost.

*I thought you were dead! You fell down, you were making terrible noises! Mark, Mark, the baby, the baby!!! Is the baby ok???*

The baby is unbearably tiny, covered in varying shades of goo, still attached to my wife; he's pretty blue, and his crying is petering out, and, as I'm watching, his kicking starts to slow.

"I don't think...I don't think he's going to make it."

*YES, he will! Something's coming, it's getting closer, we can get him help!*

Something coming. Yes, I'd forgotten.

I drag myself over to the stern, gripping anything I can find. I look across the expanse of the sea, roiling bile welling up from my stomach, and see the shadow my wife saw approaching before I lost my connection to reality for a while there.

Only...

...an impossibly large shadow, undulating, agile, coming closer through the murky water...

All the millennia of human experience combine in a single moment. I have a flash of intuition, of precognition, and feel immediately crushed beneath the weight of impending danger.

...a fin breaks the surface, razor sharp, glistening crimson and purple against the blue sky...

Suddenly, I feel lucid. I can speak; I can think. The baby is still alive, just barely, and I suddenly want to live more than anything in the world, the survival instinct manifest, like a mother lifting a car off her child after an accident, like that guy who sawed off his arm with what was essentially a butter knife.

But...

"Honey?"

...larger and larger the nearer it gets, wider and longer, close enough now to see a silhouette stretching below the water, a shape I've never seen in nature...

"I don't think..."

...then something immense breaches the surface, displacing a giant wake, my eyes momentarily glimpsing row upon row upon row of gigantic, blade-shaped teeth, a larger-than-life nightmare...

Oh. So *this* is what my wife saw.

"I don't think it's help."

...racing through the water like a torpedo, aerodynamic and deadly, a predator preparing for the kill, ruled by eons-old instinct and the need to hunt...

*What?*

She is weeping. She doesn't hear me. I try again, speaking through the agony between my ears and at the tips of my eyelashes and under my nails and in every single one of my bones. Not caring.

"I don't think it's help."

## **PART SEVEN**

Do you want a joke?

Ok, here it is. What kind of wood doesn't float?

Give up?

Natalie Wood.

Keep Calm and Carry On  
James Mulhern

My grandmother sat on the toilet seat. I was on the floor just in front of her. She brushed my brown curly hair until my scalp hurt.

"You got your grandfather's hair. Stand up. Look at yourself in the mirror. That's much better, don't you think?"

I touched my scalp. "It hurts."

"You gotta toughen up, Aiden. Weak people get nowhere in this world. Your grandfather was weak. Addicted to the bottle. Your mother has an impaired mind. Now she's in a nuthouse. And your father, he just couldn't handle the responsibility of a child. People gotta be strong. Do you understand me?" She bent down and stared into my face. Her hazel eyes seemed enormous. I smelled coffee on her breath. There were blackheads on her nose. She pinched my cheeks.

I reflexively pushed her hands away.

"Life is full of pain, sweetheart. And I don't mean just the physical kind." She took a cigarette from her case on the back of the toilet, lit it, and inhaled. "You'll be hurt a lot, but you got to carry on. You know what the British people used to say when the Germans bombed London during World War II?"

"No."

"Keep calm and carry on." She hit my backside. "Now run along and put some clothes on." I was wearing just my underwear and t-shirt. "We have a busy day."

I dressed in the blue jeans and a yellow short-sleeve shirt she had bought me. She stood in front of the mirror by the front door of the living room, holding a picture of my mother. She kissed the glass and placed it on the end table next to the couch. Then she looked at herself in the mirror and arranged her pearl necklace, put on bright red lipstick, and fingered her gray hair, trying to hide a thinning spot at the top of her forehead. She turned and smoothed her green cotton dress, glancing at herself from behind. "Not bad for an old broad." She looked me over. "Come here." She tucked my shirt in, licked her hand, and smoothed my hair. "You'd think I never brushed it."

Just as she opened the front door she said, "Hold on," and went to the kitchen counter and put her hand in a glass jar full of bills. She took out what must have been at least thirty single dollar bills.

"Here. Give this money to the kiddos next door."

When we were outside, she pushed me towards their house. They were playing on their swing set in the fenced-in yard. In front of the broken-down house was a yard of weeds. A rusted bicycle with no wheels lay on the ground. The young pale girl with stringy hair looked at me suspiciously as I approached the fence. Her brother stood, arms folded, in the background. He had a mean look on his face and spit.

"This is for you," I said, shoving the money through the chain links. The girl reached out to grab it, but most of the bills fell onto the dirt.

"Thank you," she said.

As I walked away, her brother yelled, "We don't need no charity from you."

I opened the door of my grandmother's blue Plymouth; she had the air conditioning blasting and it was already full of cigarette smoke.

She crossed herself. "Say it with me. 'There but for the grace of God go I.' "

I repeated the words with her and we drove to her friend Margie's house, not more than ten minutes away. Margie was a smelly fat lady with a big white cat that hissed at me. She always wore the same navy blue sweater, and was constantly picking white cat hairs off her clothes, while talking about the latest sermon, God, or the devil. Nanna told me when they were young girls, their classmates made fun of her. "Stinky" they called her. And she did smell. Like urine, and cats, and mothballs.

"Don't let him get out," Margie yelled, as the cat pounced from behind the open door. "Arnold, don't you dare run away!" She bent over to grab his tail and groaned at the same time. "My back!"

"Don't worry. I got him." I had my arms wrapped around the white monster. He hissed.

"Why don't you put him in the closet when you open the front door? We go through this every time," my grandmother said, pushing past her towards the kitchen in the back of the house. "I gotta sit down. It's hot as hell out there."

Margie placed a tray of ham sandwiches, along with cheese and crackers on the round grey Formica table. I liked her wallpaper—white with the red outlines of trains. Her husband had been a conductor; he died when he got squished between two train cars.

"I don't know how I feel about all those miracles Father Tom was going on about." Margie placed a sandwich on a plate for me with some chips. "What ya want to drink, Aiden? I got nice lemonade." Her two front teeth were red from where her lipstick had smudged. And as usual she had white cat hairs all over her blue sweater, especially the ledge of her belly where the cat sat all the time.

"That sounds good."

She smiled. "Always such a nice boy. Polite. You'll never have any trouble with this one. Not like you did with Lorraine."

"I hate when you call her that."

"That's her name ain't it?" She poured my grandmother and me lemonade and sat down with a huff.

"That was my mother's name, her formal name. I've told you a thousand times to call her Laura."

"What the hell difference does it make?" Margie bit into her sandwich and rolled her eyes at me.

"Makes a lot of difference. My mother was a crackpot. I named my daughter Lorraine to be nice."

"Well, Laura is . . ." I knew Margie was going to say that my mother was a crackpot, too.

"Laura is what?" My grandmother put her sandwich down and leaned into Margie.

"Is a nice girl. She's got problems, but don't we all." She reached out and clasped my hand. "Right, Aiden?"

"Yes, Margie."

My grandmother rubbed her neck and spoke softly. "Nobody's perfect. Laura's getting better. She's just got a few psychological issues. And the new meds they have her on seem to be doing her good. She's a beautiful human being, and that's what's most important. Besides, who's to say what's normal? My Laura has always been different. One

of the happiest people I ever met." Her eyes were shiny and her face flushed. Her bottom lip trembled. She looked at me. "Don't you gotta use the bathroom?" She raised her eyebrows. That was her signal.

"Yes, I gotta pee."

"Well, you don't have to get so detailed," she said. "Just go."

Margie laughed hard and farted.

I made my exit just in time, creeping up the gray stairs. The old bannister was dusty. The rug in the upstairs hall was full of Arnold's hair. I bent down and picked one up to examine it, then rubbed my pants. Nanna said Margie's room was the last one on the left. Her jewelry case was on top of her dresser. I took the diamond earrings and opal bracelet Nanna had told me about. There was also a couple of pretty rings—one a large red stone, the other a blue one. These and a gold necklace with a cross I shoved into my pockets. Then I walked to the bathroom and flushed the toilet. I messed up the towel a bit so it looked like I dried my hands in it.

When I entered the kitchen they were still talking about miracles.

My grandmother passed our plates to Margie who had filled the sink with sudsy water.

"Of course there was raising Lazarus from the dead," Margie said. "And then the healing of the deaf and dumb men. Oh, and the blind man, too," she said raising her hand and splashing my grandmother.

"Let's not forget about the fish. And the water into wine," my grandmother said.

Margie shook her head. "I don't know Catherine," She looked down. "It's hard to believe that Jesus could have done all that. Why aren't there miracles today?" I imagined a fish jumping into her face from the water in the sink.

My grandmother smiled at me. "Of course there are miracles today. As a matter of fact, I'm taking Aiden to that priest at Mission church. A charismatic healer is what they call him. Aiden's gonna be cured, aren't you, honey?"

"Cured of what?" Margie said.

"Oh he's got a little something wrong with his blood is all. Too many white cells. Leukemia. But this priest is gonna take care of all that."

"Leukemia!" Margie said. "Catherine, that's serious." Margie tried to smile at me, but I could tell she was upset. "Sit down, honey." She motioned for me to go to the table. "We're almost done here."

"You gotta take him to a good doctor," she whispered to my grandmother, as if I couldn't hear.

"I know that. I'm not dumb. God will take care of everything."

We said our goodbyes and when we were in the car, my grandmother said, "Let me see what you got." I pulled the goods out of my pockets while she unclasped her black plastic pocketbook. Her eyes lit up.

"Perfect. She isn't lookin', is she?" I looked at the house. Margie was nowhere in sight. Probably sitting on her rocking chair with Arnold in her lap.

"Now put those in here," she said, nodding towards her bag, and I did.

When we were about to turn onto Tremont Street where the church was, I remembered the gold necklace and cross. I pulled it out of my back pocket and my

grandmother took it from me, running a red light. "This would look beautiful on Laura." In a moment, there was a police car pulling us over.

"Don't say anything," my grandmother said, as we moved to the side of the road. She looked in the rearview mirror and put her window down.

"Ma'am, you just ran a red light." The policeman was tall with a hooked nose and dark brown close-set eyes.

"I know officer. I was just saying a prayer with my grandson. He gave me this gold cross. I got distracted. I'm very sorry."

He leaned into the car. I smiled.

"Is that a birthday gift for your grandmother?"

"Yes. I wanted to surprise her."

"And he certainly did," she said, patting my knee and smiling at the police officer.

"It's a good thing no cars were coming. You could have been hurt," he said. "That's a beautiful cross," he added.

My grandmother began to cry. "Isn't it though?" She sniffled.

The officer placed his hand firmly on the edge of the window. "Consider this a warning. You can go. I'd put that cross away."

"Of course. Of course." She turned to me. "Here, Aiden. Put it back in your pocket."

The police officer waited for us to drive away. I turned and looked. He waved.

"Are you sad, Nanna?"

"Don't be silly." She waved her hand. "That was just an act."

I laughed and she did, too.

We parked. "I need to get that chalice, Aiden. I read an article in *The Boston Globe* that said some people believe it has incredible curing powers. It's a replica of a chalice from long ago, over 100-years old, with lots of pretty stones on it. Experts say it's priceless. I'm thinking if I have your mother drink from it, she'll get better and come home to us. Won't that be nice?" She rubbed my head gently and smiled at me.

I looked away, towards the church where an old man was helping a lady in a wheelchair up a ramp. "Won't God be mad?"

"Aiden, I'm going to return it. We're just borrowing it for a little while to help your mother. I think God will understand. Don't you worry, sweetheart."

We entered Mission church. It smelled of shellac, incense, perfume, and old people. It was hard to see in the musty darkness. Bright light shone through the stained-glass windows where Jesus was depicted in the twelve or so Stations of the Cross.

"Let's move to the front." My grandmother pulled me out of the line and cut in front of an old lady, who looked bewildered. "Shouldn't you go to the end of the line?" she whispered kindly, smiling down at me. Her hair was sweaty and her fat freckled bicep jiggled when she tapped my grandmother's shoulder. The freckles reminded me of the asteroid belt.

"I'm sorry. We're in a hurry. We have to help a sick neighbor after this. I just want my grandson to get a cure."

"What's wrong?" she whispered. We were four people away from the priest, who was standing at the altar. He prayed over people then lightly touched them. They fell backwards into the arms of two old men with maroon suit jackets and blue ties.

"Aiden has leukemia."

The woman's eyes teared up. "I'm sorry." She patted my forearm. "You'll be cured, sweetie." Again her flabby bicep jiggled and the asteroids bounced.

When it was our turn, my grandmother said, "Father, please cure him. And can you say a prayer for my daughter, too?"

"Of course." The white-haired, red-faced priest bent down. I smelled alcohol on his breath. "What ails you young man?"

I was confused.

"He's asking you about your illness, Aiden."

"I have leukemia," I said proudly.

The priest said some mumbo-jumbo prayer and pushed my chest. I knew I was supposed to fall back but was afraid the old geezers wouldn't catch me.

"Fall," my grandmother whispered irritably. Then she said extra softly. "Remember our plan."

I fell hard, shoving myself against the old guy. He toppled over as well. People gasped. His friend and the priest began to pick us up. I pretended to be hurt bad. "Oww. My head is killing me." Several people gathered around us. My grandmother yelled "Oh my God," and stepped onto the altar, kneeling in front of a giant Jesus on the cross. "Dear Jesus," she said loudly, "I don't know how many more tribulations I can take." Then she crossed herself, hurried across the altar, swiping the gold chalice and putting it in her handbag while everyone was distracted by my moaning and fake crying.

"He'll be okay," she said, putting her arm under mine and helping the others pull me up.

When I was standing, she said to the priest. "You certainly have the power of the Holy Spirit in you. It came out of you like the water that gushed from the rock at Rephidim and Kadesh."

"Let's get out of here before there's a flood." She laughed. The priest looked confused. The old lady who let us cut in line eyed my grandmother's handbag and shook her head as we passed.

When we were in front of Rita's house, our last stop before home, I asked my grandmother what "tribulation" meant. And where were "Repapah" and "Kadiddle."

She laughed. "You pronounced those places wrong, but it doesn't matter. Your mother used to do the same thing whenever I quoted that Bible passage." She began to open the car door. "I don't know where the hell those places are. Somewhere in the Middle East...And a tribulation is a problem."

"Oh."

After ringing the doorbell a couple times, we opened the door. We found Rita passed out on the couch.

My grandmother took an ice cube from the freezer and held it against her forehead. Rita sat bolt upright. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You scared the bejesus out of me." She was wearing a yellow nightgown and her auburn hair was set in curlers. "Oh, Aiden. I didn't see you there," she said. She kissed my cheek. For the second time that day I smelled alcohol.

"So do you think you can help me out?" my grandmother asked. Rita looked at me.

"Of course I can."

"Just pull me up and I'll get my checkbook." I suddenly realized all my grandmother's friends were fat.

At the kitchen table, Rita said, "Should I make it out to the hospital?"

"Oh, no. Make it out to me. I've opened a bank account to pay for his medical expenses."

"Will five thousand do for now?" Rita was rich. Her husband was a "real estate tycoon" my grandmother was always saying. He dropped dead shoveling snow a few years back.

"That's so generous of you." My grandmother cried again. More fake tears, I thought.

We had tea and chocolate chip cookies. Rita asked how my mother was doing. My grandmother said "fine" and looked away, wringing her hands. Then she started talking about the soap operas that they watched. My grandmother loved Erica from *All My Children*. Said she was a woman who knew how to get what she wanted and admired that very much. Rita said she thought Erica was a bitch.

When we were home, listening to talk radio in the living room, I asked my grandmother if she believed in miracles, like the ones she talked about earlier in the day with Margie.

"Sure, sure," she said, not looking up. She was taking the jewelry and chalice out of her bag and examining them in the light. I saw bits of dust in the sunlight streaming through the bay window.

"You're not listening to me, Nanna."

She put the items back in her handbag and stared at me. "Of course I am."

"Well do you think I'll have a miracle and be cured of leukemia?"

"Aiden." She laughed. "You haven't got leukemia. You're as healthy as a horse, silly."

"But you told everybody I was sick."

"Sweetheart. That was just to evoke pity."

"What does that mean?"

"Make people feel bad so we can get things from them. I need money to take care of you, Aiden." She spoke hesitantly and looked down, like she was ashamed. "I'm broke. Your grandfather left me with nothing and I gotta pay for your mother's medical expenses. If Margie notices her jewelry gone, maybe she'll think you took it to help your Nanna. I told her I was having a problem paying your hospital bills."

"Sorta like a *tribulation*, right?"

"Exactly, sweetheart."

"Is my mother a tribulation?"

This time my grandmother's tears were real. They gushed like water from that rock in the Middle East. I knelt before her and put my head in her lap. She hugged me, bent down and kissed my face several times. Then she looked out the window. It seemed the tears would never stop.

"Don't worry, Nanna. I believe in miracles, too. Someday Mom will come home from the hospital."

And we stayed like that until the sunbeams dimmed and the dust disappeared and her tears stopped.

In the quiet of the room, she whispered, "Keep calm and carry on" to me or to herself. Or to both of us.

Spreadsheet  
B. A. Varghese

Mal stared at the standard company-issued clock on the wall without blinking and wondered if he could pause time. He felt that if he concentrated hard enough, he could stop the muffled clicks of tightly wound gears turning against each other that tracked the passing of each hour. The face of the clock, which was white with big bold numbers that circled along the black outer rim, looked like a bald-headed man smiling. He relinquished his efforts and instead imagined a collection of toothed wheels working together, pushing the plastic hands of the clock which appeared almost motionless except for a small red thin line that raced around the face. Mal knew that if not for the beeping of the fax machine, the shuffling of busy feet, and the humming of the copier, the ticking of the red hand would be heard as a distinct sound that signaled the end of every second of a minute within an hour.

The clock hung on the far left wall and ticked ten minutes past eleven. Mal's cubicle was one of many that formed a beige maze stretching to all the walls of the third floor. He sat down and the wheels of his worn chair squeaked under the pressure. He felt agitated and shuffled his black shoes within the ring of worn-out carpet underneath his desk. Mal finished off the donut that was in his hand, looked around, and wiped the remaining glaze onto his grey-collared shirt. His shirt looked tight in some places while loose in others and was not tucked into his pants on one side. Outside his cubicle, two coworkers were crouched down on the floor. They taped a sign near the opening to his cubicle and scurried away. The sign said *Will Work for Butter*.

Mal remembered the clock and took note of the time. He let out a sigh and went back to typing on his computer. The clicks of the keys created a symphonic rhythm of a song to which the words were only known in Mal's head. He fixed his eyes on the yellow-beige monitor before him and like a mad pianist, he played his keys with fury, entering line after line of numbers and letters into his spreadsheet. Every now and then, he would glance downward onto his desk to look at the legal-sized mound of papers, but he never stopped typing. At the height of his annual budget concerto, a familiar face popped over the cubicle and startled him.

"How are those numbers coming?" Barry asked. Mr. Barry Johnson was the business manager for the finance department at Precisio Solutions Incorporated, a subsidiary of Helene Industries. He reported to Mr. Jack Mason, the company's Vice President. Barry was also Mal's supervisor.

Mal sat motionless and was taken aback by Barry's bodiless head bobbing over the top of the cubicle, much like the Wizard from Oz. With his spreadsheet symphony interrupted, Mal tried to regain his composure.

"Hello? Earth to Mal," Barry said. His head disappeared from the top and reappeared, along with the rest of his body, in front of the only exit of the cubicle. Barry was clean cut and wore a white, well-ironed, long sleeve shirt tucked tight into his khakis. His pants were smooth and straight all the way down to the cuff which sat on his polished leather shoes. Mal felt that Barry looked like he came fresh off the assembly line of a corporate cloning factory.

“Mal, come on, buddy. Wake up! You read my email? I need you to have those forecasts ready for the meeting. We're gonna show them that we're on top of the game. Mal, are you with me?”

Mal fixed his glasses. “Well, Mr. Johnson—”

“Call me Barry.”

“Mr. Johnson.”

“Mal, we’ve been over this. Call me Barry. Think of me as your father.”

“I wouldn’t call my father by his first name.”

“Right, right,” Barry said. “Think of me as your older stronger brother. Just Barry is fine. I insist.”

“Barry.”

“Yes.”

“Well, uh, yes, I’m with you, about the budget. I’ve been working on them for the last few days. But do we really need to have our three-year forecast ready today? I mean most places have up until the end of June to finish crunching all these numbers. We’re way ahead. I know it’s important, but it would be nice to have more time.”

“Mal, Mal, Mal,” Barry said. “It’s only a draft, right? I mean, come on, that stuff is easy for a calculator jockey like you.”

“I’m not familiar with that term.” Mal adjusted his glasses. “I guess I can try to get something for you before your meeting at four.”

“That really doesn’t instill any confidence in your ability.” Barry crossed his arms over each other and gave Mal a stern look. “I absolutely need them before four. You’ll try?”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll have them to you fifteen minutes before your meeting.”

“That’s more like it. That’s what I want to hear. Mal, you da man.” Barry made two guns with his hands and pointed them at Mal. “Booyahh!”

Barry walked away and the cubicle walls muffled his humming. Mal sat in his faux leather chair and stared at the exit to his cubicle. Every single day for five days a week he saw himself dragging his feet to work, stopping by the staff kitchen to pour a cup of burnt, black, bitter coffee from a stained glass pot, peeking into the mail-room to see if anyone cared to send him any real mail, and then entering through the invisible door of his beige-walled cubicle prison. He was a slave bought by the company at the price of his salary. He exchanged his freedom for a scant sense of financial security. Mal imagined himself breaking free of his bonds and charging through his invisible door holding a lottery ticket in his hands. He ran with the excitement and anxiousness of a fat child dashing toward an ice cream truck. When he reached Barry’s office, he laughed, waved the ticket in Barry’s face, danced, and shouted his resignation. Mal thought of possibly mooning Barry or at least rubbing his butt all over Barry’s desk. A smile grew on Mal’s face and his eyes slowly focused on the clock on the wall. It was noon.

He pulled his chair forward and returned to his typing. The pace of his typing was slow at first. A few clicks then a pause. Then another few clicks and then a shorter pause. This pattern continued until a few minutes later, keystrokes became fluid and flowed smooth, creating yet again his keyboard melody. With the obvious urgency hanging over his head, Mal moved his hands faster over his keyboard. He fixed his focus on the screen, but his eyes darted from cell to cell in the spreadsheet. Numbers and letters appeared with

speed within each cell. He raced through each line item. Utilities. Revenue. Total Expense. Services. Reserves.

"Mal," Barry said.

Like a car skidding on a slick road, Mal's mind crashed and he was thrown clear of his spreadsheet. He turned around in his seat and saw Barry standing there right inside his cubicle as if Barry sprouted up from the carpeted floor.

"Oh God! Yes, Barry!"

"You seem stressed, Mal." Barry pushed some papers aside and sat down on Mal's desk.

"Well, I've been staying up late trying to get the budget done."

"Good to hear that. I got some good news for you. I talked to the VP and I told him that we're all set to go at four o'clock. He was pretty impressed that we were ahead of most of the other departments and he wanted to know who the hard-working bean counter was. I told him that you would be there at the meeting to go over your forecast report."

"What? How is that good news? Barry, I'm not done yet. I can't go into a meeting cold. I don't even know who's going to be there."

"Listen," Barry said. "*Can't* should not be a word in your dictionary. Replace it with *will*. It's that simple."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Don't worry. I will be there too. Finish up and I will see you at the meeting at four." Barry hopped off Mal's desk and exited the cubicle.

Mal stared at the exit of his cubicle again and wished for a real solid steel door. In his thoughts, Mal realized that winning the lottery and gloating wasn't enough, so he imagined that he used his lottery winnings to stuff Barry's mouth and choke him to death. A small crooked smile crept onto his face and he shook himself out of his fantasy to get back to work. Mal placed his hands on the keyboard and began to type. He looked at the spreadsheet on the screen and every key stroke his hands made erased the stresses and concerns of his occupational life. Mal picked up his pace and then the phone rang.

"Hello, Precisio Solutions, Mallory Reve speaking."

"Mally, it's me," his wife said.

"Oh. Hi, dear." Mal cradled the phone between his shoulder and head. He returned to the computer to type again but he couldn't make his fingers move. They just hovered frozen above his keyboard.

"Are you okay? You sound a little off?" she said.

"Yes, I'm okay. Well—"

Mal paused but then took a deep breath and whispered into the phone, "Oh, I'm sorry. My boss is such a jerk. He pulled me into a meeting which starts at four and I'm not done with anything. I can't stand him. Why does he have to micromanage me all the time? I'm not an idiot. I feel like shoving my foot up—"

"Mally," his wife interrupted. "The reason I'm calling is to remind you to pick up the kids from after-school care. I'm working late today, remember? I hope you haven't forgotten."

"What? Damn. Okay. Okay."

"The meeting's at four? Will you have enough time to leave before five to get the kids? I don't want them being there late."

“No. No, I'll be fine. The meeting is probably only an hour long. I think there may be others at the meeting giving reports too, so once I'm done, I can probably leave. Don't worry.”

“Thanks, Mally,” she said. “Sorry your boss is being hard on you. We can talk more at home about it, okay? Bye.”

The dial tone rang in Mal's ear while he said, “Oh. Bye.” Mal set the phone down with two hands and turned his head to look at the screen. He then peeked over his cubicle to look at the clock which continued to keep time even though he wished it would stop for just a few minutes. It was two fifteen.

Before Mal could even place his hands over his keyboard, there was a dull knock on the side of his cubicle wall. Believing it was Barry again, he gritted his teeth and swiveled his chair around hoping to use the momentum to make his stand dramatic but instead froze in his chair.

“You're Mallory Reve, right?” It was Mr. Jack Mason, the VP.

Off in the distance a train hissed ready to leave its station. The wheels strained against its steel rails and a grinding noise penetrated through the building's thick windows. Two employees watched mesmerized by the repetitive motion of the wheels. The lumbering train inched forward with its heavy load and with each turn of the wheel began to gain speed. The employees discussed that the train could gain incredible speed, but would eventually have to come to a stop at the next station and again start its Sisyphean task of gaining momentum.

“Such a life, to start with great effort only to stop and never leave its tracks.”

Mal continued to stare at the VP until he realized the length of the uncomfortable silence. He jumped up and said, “Greetings.”

“You didn't answer my question,” the VP said. “Are you Mallory Reve?”

“Right. Yes, sir.”

“I've heard good things,” the VP said. “Barry Johnson has great ideas, but I know it's people like you who make those plans real. I'm looking forward to reading your report. We'll keep the meeting short, say, half an hour. I'll see you at four.”

“Thank you,” Mal said.

The VP left his cubicle. Mal watched the VP's head bob over the tops of the cubicles down the hall until he was out of sight.

Mal sat back in his seat with a grin. He saw in his mind how the meeting would take place. His presentation of his department's fiscal forecast was spectacular. The spreadsheet, which he worked so hard and long on, was considered by those at the meeting a work of art. The men cheered and clapped their hands in sheer awe while the women, with pouty lips and seductive eyes, stared at him as if Mal became everything they desired in man. The VP raised Mal's hand in victory while confetti fell from the ceiling. There would be no doubt how his boss would feel. Barry objected to all the attention that Mal received, so the VP pressed a button which opened the floor underneath Barry and he plummeted down a long dark hole. Excited by this possibility and by another one less dramatic, Mal snapped himself out of his day dream and started to work on his computer. After a quick

glance at the clock on the wall, Mal murmured, "Okay, it's only three. I can do this. I can show them."

At first he typed at a slow pace, but as his mind focused, Mal was able to type faster and faster. The spreadsheet he worked on had multiple sheets. Each sheet had multiple tables. Each table had multiple columns and rows all of which were composed of cells. Mal flashed through each cell entering letters, numbers, and equations. His hands were a blur on the keyboard and the clicking sound of the keys lagged behind when they bounced off the walls and echoed in his cubicle. This was Mal at his finest. It was at this heightened moment of exhilaration that Mal understood his purpose. Whether it was a sum of numbers, a compounding of interest, a totaling of expenses, or a depreciation of values, Mal entered each of them in their own cell. It was a magical rectangle composed of four lines that created order out of chaos and it was in this realm that Mal was the controller. Mal's eyes widened and he looked up. He saw the planet Earth hurtling in great speed toward him. Mal believed that his speed created a rip in the fabric of reality and he transcended both space and time. His body became transformed and he ascended upward. He looked down and saw that his cubicle along with all other cubicles were just cells for him to control, to fill in, to empty out, to manipulate as he wished. He was no longer a prisoner of his cell but the master of it. He looked up and he saw the earth growing in its size. Then the earth crashed into his forehead, knocked his glasses off, and slammed Mal back into his chair.

"Awesome, man, you knocked him right in the face."

A bit dazed, Mal sat up and rubbed his forehead. He looked on the floor and saw his glasses next to an Earth Day stress ball. Looking upward, he saw half of Garvin's head peeking over the cubicle. Sylvester ran into his cubicle and laughed.

Mal's body stiffened and he clenched his teeth. Both Garvin and Sylvester were coworkers from Sales and were Mal's tormenters since the company picnic last year when Mal accidentally sat down on a small tub of margarine spread.

"Hey, butter pants," Sylvester said. "Looks like my ball is stronger than your face."

"That was an awesome shot," Garvin said. "Sylvester was four cubicles away, man. I can't believe it."

"What do you want, guys?" Mal bent down and retrieved his glasses and the stress ball.

"Oh, nothing much, fatty," Sylvester said. "Just wondering what you're doing. The day was almost over and we realized that we haven't stopped by to harass you."

"Look, I really don't have time for this." Mal fixed his glasses back on his face. "Barry asked me to go to this meeting and I'm getting some numbers for my report. I really don't have time to mess around, so can we do this another time?"

"Barry's not our boss," Garvin said. "We couldn't care less. Plus, you don't do any real work anyway. Most of the time you're just staring at your computer."

"Come on, please," Mal said. "Let me just get my work done. Seriously, we're supposed to be professionals. You guys act like kids."

"Oh, we're professionals. We bring in the money, unlike you." Garvin shoved the legal-sized papers off the desk and onto Mal's lap.

"Listen, fatboy," Sylvester said. "Why don't you contact HR if we're such a problem?"

Mal stayed quiet.

"Nope, I didn't think so. Go ahead, contact them. If you think it's bad now, just wait."

Mal didn't understand the force that held him back. He was angry and tired of their unceasing barrage of ridicule and harassment. It became so much a daily occurrence that Mal no longer felt it was normal if they didn't bother him. This force that held his hands while his heart raged with violence was real and he couldn't move against it. In his mind, he wanted to hurt them but instead could only muster up the strength to stand up, hold the stress ball up in the air, and rip it in half.

"What the hell? You idiot." Sylvester pushed Mal back into his chair.

"Mal, that was mean. We're just playing around," Garvin said.

Sylvester and Garvin started knocking items off of Mal's desk. Pens, a stapler, paper clips, and writing pads bounced downward and settled all over the floor of the cubicle. They finally left when they felt the mess equaled the cost of losing a stress ball.

Mal sat holding the two halves in his hand and his anger mixed with sadness boiled and bubbled up into a thought. In his thought, he went home to explain to his wife his misery at work hoping that she would understand. He wanted to quit. Unfortunately, she didn't understand. A series of insults poured out of her mouth all implying that he was less of the man she thought she married. Mal left the house and bought a gun. He had never bought anything remotely resembling a gun in his life but knew that it was useful in getting a job done. He placed the gun toward his head and before he pulled the trigger another thought bubbled up bigger than the first. Instead of shooting himself, he took the gun to work and hid it in the bottom drawer of his desk. Sylvester and Garvin made their usual rounds of torment and this time Mal insulted them and their mothers. When they went to put their hands on him, Mal fell back in his chair and grabbed his gun from the bottom drawer. Time slowed to a crawl when the first bullet left the muzzle and penetrated Sylvester in the face. The bullet seemed for a while to be stuck behind the cavity of Sylvester's eye, until it emerged again behind his head, exiting with fragments of blood and brain. As if the invisible cord that held his body upright was cut, Sylvester slumped downward, hitting the side of the table. At that same moment, Garvin turned around to run, but another bullet left the gun and entered through the back of his head, propelling his body forward, painting the cubicle wall before him a nicer color than beige. With the movement of time restored to its normal pacing, Mal stood over their dead bodies and shot them a few more times just to make sure. He had seen this in a movie. He realized that he was in a great deal of trouble, so he decided he might as well kill Barry too. With hysterical screams and thumping of running feet reverberating all throughout the building, Mal walked to Barry's office. He contemplated on whether to shoot Barry once, killing him dead, or to shoot him starting at his foot and slowly work up to his head. A bullet for every year Barry was his boss. Arriving at Barry's office, Mal tried to open the door, but noticed that it was locked and saw through the small window of the door Barry's feet sticking out from underneath his desk. Mal poised to shoot the lock, but the SWAT team arrived and opened fire, spraying bullets all over Mal's body. He twitched and jerked with each exit wound, but before he could die, the first and the second bubbles of thought were burst by the third one. It was of his eight-year-old daughter and his four-year-old son kneeling by his gravestone and weeping tears onto his fresh grave.

Mal stopped dreaming and shook his head. He moved toward his computer to finish his spreadsheet for the meeting. He glanced over the top of his cubicle to see the clock on

the wall. This time, Mal noticed that the clock with the face of a bald-headed man looked down upon him with a joyless expression. The man's mouth was twisted downward with news of the current time. Mal's heart sank. It was four thirty five.

Fries and Coffee  
Kate Maruyama

Gilbert's sitting at table 48 in the Hamburger Harbor, down to the bottom of his second cup of coffee. He'll pace himself with the third, make things come out even. He shifts in his jacket so as not to feel the bulge of the gun in his inside pocket. Right now, he just wants to enjoy being here. They haven't brought the fries yet. He's trying not to look amused as he listens to the conversation going on right behind the curtain that separates him from the busboy station.

For some reason, when the wait staff go back there, they forget the world beyond the curtain and converse freely.

Meg the dyke is on Xavi again. "Meg the dyke" being Meg's term, not anyone else's. She makes sure that anyone who comes in contact with her understands that she's queer, she's here, get over yourself. Gilbert admires her pride, even if it seems born of insecurity. She's funny, too. Funny goes a long way with Gilbert. Meg is plain, but fit; her face is sharp and intelligent, but genuine. She doesn't wear makeup, but has a simple, small diamond nose piercing. She's a straight-shooter.

Xavi's complaining that he's saddled with Gilbert today. Xavi's mode of communication is complaining. Normally Meg has zero tolerance for complainers, but Xavi's gay and had a hard upbringing because of it, so she gives him more leeway than her other coworkers.

Xavi says, "Can't I just cut him off? He'll be here for three hours. Total camper."

Meg retorts, "Shut up, bitch. It's a customer. He's a regular, be good to him." Meg's terms of affection are all profanities.

"But it's a four-top, I could totally be making more money."

"Have you looked at your section lately?" She whistles the Ennio Morricone ghost town whistle from THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY. "Stop being a whiny bitch and go give your customer some more coffee."

"Hag."

"Fag."

Xavi comes out from behind the counter with some coffee and a huff. "Here you go sir. I'll be right back with your fries." He gives Gilbert a smile that's almost genuine. Meg made that happen and Gilbert knows it.

Gilbert's been coming here for three months now. He came in the first time because it was a bitter cold windy afternoon and he'd just lost his job. Gilbert worked security at the G Street Macy's for fifteen years. Even though he hadn't had a drink in two years, all it took was one unlocked door at the end of his post to end his pension and any hope of a rehire. He was wandering all the way in from Capitol Hill along M street that day, angry, baffled, passing all of the boutiques and restaurants he couldn't afford to set foot in, having been fired from a store he couldn't afford to shop at, when he came across the Hamburger Harbor. He was looking in the enormous plate glass window set in a darkened wood frame when the door opened and a couple came out, arm in arm. They were a city couple on lunch break from some office job. He could tell at a glance that the man was a Macy's shopper (Hugo Boss cashmere), the woman, JC Penney's (double breasted, plain wool, foreign

made). Boss and secretary on the side. Gilbert's fifteen years on the security beat had given him the skill of quick study. As they left the restaurant in a cloud of warm air, the couple brought out the smell of beer, bar food and warmth.

Gilbert had been saving for those fifteen years. Not enough for a pension, but enough for a coffee and some fries when he felt like it. He closed his hand on the icy cold brass door handle, pulled open the heavy dark wood door and walked inside the polished brass and wood saloon-type restaurant.

Meg was at the host counter that first day. Gilbert didn't know her yet, but she looked him steady in the eyes and gave him a genuine smile as she led him to his table. She's the only person there who still has that smile for him. She walked Gilbert down the two steps to the main dining room, a high-ceilinged number, built as a shop front sometime in the 1800s.

Maybe it was fate that had Meg seat him at table number 48 that day in January. But Gilbert's frayed nerves welcomed the snug booth in the corner where he could survey the restaurant and no one could come up behind him. Every day after that, he came in between the lunch and dinner rush to have a seat, drink his coffee, eat his French fries and plan.

Eavesdropping on the waiters is an added bonus.

Gilbert likes hot sauce on his fries. He mixes about a tablespoon of Tabasco in, adds two shakes of salt and stirs the whole thing up with his first fry. He likes that first fry because the sauces haven't totally mixed yet and it's the first time his taste buds get a hold of that flavor combination. The French fry is still crispy from the fryer, with no wilt. He likes the way the sauce clings to it, the way it has a slightly crunchy snap to it when he bites; this keeps him coming back. Gilbert judges his waiters by who remembers about the hot sauce and who doesn't. Xavi, for all of his complaining, remembers when he comes back with the bottle of Tabasco, the ketchup and the soup bowl full of French fries. It's how it's served here at Hamburger Harbor. Big bowl of steak cut fries for \$4.95. Worth every penny. This, and the \$1.50 refillable coffee brings him in at eight bucks with tip. Gilbert has rationed his remaining cash to help with this payment each day.

The first French fry is so good that he's thinking about putting things off until tomorrow. Just one more day. But his landlord has threatened that if he doesn't pay him in full by tomorrow, he's changing the locks on his run-down Adams Morgan studio apartment. Gilbert has made peace with himself over a lot of things in his life: divorce, not being able to see his children, not being able to drink alcohol ever, ever again, but homelessness evokes a piercing irrevocable dark fear. Joblessness is remedied. Homelessness means that he really, truly has failed.

Meg has gone off to her station and Debbie ducks behind the counter to hang with Xavi. She's 22 and still quite proud of the fact that she gets to have sex with her boyfriend.

She says, "So, you wanna know what happened last night?"

Gilbert can almost hear Xavi roll his eyes. "Okay."

"We were down on the floor? After...you know...*doing it*."

Gilbert has to laugh, remembering when sex was new and worth celebrating. Before it got tired and heavy and complicated.

Xavi stops her, "So Gary thinks he saw the shitter." Gary is the manager. Gary is an asshole.

Debbie is incredulous, "NO."

"He swears he saw this clean cut guy in a suit come out of the bathroom at 12:05. He chased him upstairs, but lost him when he hit the street. Guy's wearing Burberry and running like hell."

The Shitter has been a heated topic of conversation among the wait staff, managers, cooks and busboys for about three weeks now. Every few nights, the busboys, Alberto and Rogelio have gone in to clean the men's room and found shit wiped all over the tile walls of the bathroom. Gilbert wonders what drives a guy to do that. What kind of sickness or shortfall of life makes a guy go into a nice restaurant like this and wipe shit all over the walls. And what does it do for him? Does it soothe him?

Debbie says, "Must not be getting any." Xavi huffs and Debbie walks past Gilbert at a brisk pace, headed to her deuce up in the front window.

Xavi refills Gilbert's coffee with his right hand, running his left through his black hair. Xavi's in his late thirties and has started to get dry wrinkles around his brown eyes. The freckles that run up his cheeks and a patch of dry skin along his jawline make him look vulnerable. Gilbert knows that Xavi's bluster is protective coating. Strip him of his sense of humor and he'd be a naked turtle. Xavi's got incurable soft spots.

Xavi's absent-mindedly watching Debbie at the front of the room when a cloud comes over his face. A smile, then a frown, then a scowl follow in quick succession as the coffee runs over the top of Gilbert's cup...He mutters, "Excuse me." And walks over to Debbie still carrying the coffee pot. Gilbert tries not to look like he's craning his neck as he strains to see.

Debbie looks up and sees Xavi coming. She smiles, but the smile freezes as worry enters her eyes. Xavi has to be loud, for Gilbert to hear him from across the room. The small window table usually swallows all of the sound inside. But clear and echoing, Xavi says, "Oh, so we're dating girls now, are we?"

The gentleman in the window mumbles something Gilbert can't hear.

"No, I will *not* be quiet. It's bad enough you're choosing straight this week, but do you have to strut it right through my house?"

The gentleman gets to his feet. He's got those John F. Kennedy Jr., Georgetown good looks. A tailored raincoat lies draped over the back of his chair. Gilbert can't see his date, but he sees the side of her Capitol Hill blonde hairdo and her booted foot is bobbing impatiently at the end of its long, sleek, crossed, trousered leg.

Gilbert wishes he could hear what the man is saying, but clearly this is not someone who lives out loud. Xavi makes up for it, "Oh, no, bitch, this is *my* house! Take your little Republican whore and get the hell out of here!"

The woman gets to her feet now. She moves past her gentleman friend to leave. It's not her fight. The gentleman doesn't join her. It's his staying there that lets Gilbert know that Xavi has a point.

Meg appears from the bar area and moves next to Xavi in alliance. But the way she puts her hand on his shoulder shows Gilbert that she's trying to get him out of there. She speaks respectfully to the gentleman, her waist at a half bow as her left hand rubs comforting circles on Xavi's back.

Soon Mr. Closeted Washington grabs his trench coat and is out the door. Gilbert imagines that he's a few minutes too late for any hope with that girl. Meg and Xavi walk back toward the busboy station. Gilbert watches Xavi as long as he can before he looks to

his fries like he hasn't seen anything. Xavi is shaking, there are tears in his eyes and his face is blotchy. Meg's mouth is set, determined. Gilbert admires her loyalty and the care she takes with her friends.

She starts in the moment they're behind the curtain. "He's not worth it..."

"Did you see her? Jerry, only ever a bottom *Jerry* had his hand on her knee. Some macho bullshit."

"Guys like that are never worth it."

"What do *you* know?" Xavi's recovering enough to regain his sense of humor.

"Because girls like that..." She takes a moment to formulate. "If he doesn't know who he is then he isn't mature enough for a proper love relationship. He isn't worth your time."

Xavi doesn't say anything. Maybe he's buying it.

Meg says, "It's his loss, sweetheart."

Xavi snorts. Gilbert thinks he's crying. But Meg laughs.

Xavi says, "Did you *see* the look on his face?"

Meg does her best imitation of Xavi, which is pretty spot on, "This is *my* house, bitch!"

Gilbert can tell Xavi has hugged Meg. His voice is muffled as he says, "Oh, I love you. Thank you."

When he comes out to pour Gilbert his coffee, Xavi's face has gone back to normal, with only a slight flush of what passed, lingering. Xavi has more power than he had ten minutes ago. It's these small changes in people that give Gilbert faith.

He's not sure how to kill time 'til closing. He can't camp on a cup of coffee and fries for seven hours. He makes a decision. Since this is the last day, he will come back at nine, after the rush and order a burger. It is the Hamburger Harbor after all and he's never tried one of their burgers.

He leaves at his accustomed time and wanders the streets of Georgetown. There's a fine drizzle in the warm April weather. Built on a swamp, Washington DC has maybe two nice days a year, both of them in April. But this isn't one of them. Either wet and cold or wet and hot, the town has only variations on a larger theme of miserable. Today is the chilly misty variety. Gilbert turns up the collar of his Macy's relegated navy blue mackintosh and heads east on M street. The clouds hang low and close. He walks past, one more time, the boutiques and restaurants he can't afford. Past where M street mysteriously turns into N. Past the picturesque Georgetown Inn where a well-appointed couple with appropriately parallel taste in clothing disembark a taxi and hustle toward the front door.

If Gilbert clears about two, three thousand, he can go back to Maclean as if he's retired. He won't have to tell anyone. He should be able to get some work at the plant. Night shift maybe. Back in Maclean he knows everyone, so they won't ask for references. But if he goes back empty handed, nowhere to stay...it's been twenty years. He's got to at least have some new clothes and enough money to get himself put up in some shitty apartment somewhere. Only people with jobs can get jobs. He knows this. And he owes his brother some money. Just a few hundred dollars, but to return empty handed...he needs this.

He won't have to hurt anyone. They've known him so long, getting in won't be a problem.

He'd clocked everything. 11:30, they start cashing out. Midnight, final cash out. Gary takes the box downstairs to the vault. If Gilbert hides in the downstairs bathroom, he can

wait for him there. It starts to drizzle. He'll catch the bus home. After all, this is his last night.

Gilbert goes back to table 48 at 10 PM. Starving, he orders the number 17 burger, medium-rare. French fries with, of course and instead of coffee, he splurges on a three-dollar lemonade. He goes wild and orders a side of onion rings. Meg smiles and raises her eyebrow when she takes the order, looking like she's proud of him. Or maybe she hopes he's come into some money. She's probably conscious of how close he's sitting when she goes back behind the curtain, so while he hears "Friesandcoffee" which is pretty much his name here, he can't hear what they're saying. One by one, Xavi, Debbie and the stoner waiter, (Gilbert thinks his name is Matt) nonchalantly walk by his table and cast a sideways glance. Each time one walks back to the busboy station there's an array of giggles. Gilbert's pleased at first that he's evoked a reaction, but when waiters start coming over from the other side of the restaurant to look, he knows his being inconspicuous has made him more conspicuous when he ordered that burger. His onion rings arrive first and as he bites through their crisp light batter into the slender ring inside, he comforts himself knowing most of them will have gone home when the time comes.

The burger comes to the table, a slice of Canadian bacon, a slice of American cheese and two slices of bacon on top in the shape of an X, topped with a dollop of Russian dressing. It's beautiful. He's glad he hadn't ordered a burger before tonight, his bank account wouldn't have held out. The first bite of the burger is the best thing he's ever eaten. Salt, bacon, ham, beef, cheese, Russian dressing, tomato, onion and bun come together in the ultimate in American eating satisfaction.

He strings out the eating for a good hour and a half. He wants to settle his bill by 11:30, camp out on lemonade until just before closing. Then, the bathroom run.

Meg comes with the check at 11:15. She says, "Did you enjoy your meal?"

"Oh, yes!" he says this with too much enthusiasm. He blushes.

"I'm so glad. By the way, what's your name? Every day you come in here and I don't know your name."

"George." He's not sure why he feels guilty for lying.

"Well, George, hope to see you tomorrow. Xavi here will see to your lemonade. If you don't mind, I'm going to cash out now and head home." She lays the bill on the table a respectable distance away. Close enough to reach, not smack in front of him like a demand. This everyday moment of respect and grace bring a lump to his throat. He smiles and nods at Meg, who goes back to the kitchen. As he reaches for his wallet, his hand grazes the gun in his inside pocket, warm from its time next to his chest. He remembers himself and breathes deeply. Gilbert takes out two crisp twenties from his wallet. He left only 100 dollars in the bank to avoid fines. He lays the two twenties in the black vinyl folder. Meg is back just as he gets the folder to the table.

She takes the folder and walks away from the table before she opens it. She looks back, saying, "I'll get you your change."

Gilbert wonders if it'll be seen as charity, but he looks on it as a small reward for months of service. He says, "No need."

She turns and walks back to the table, looking at him incredulously. "You gave me two twenties, you know."

"Yeah."

"The bill was twenty one dollars."

"Yeah."

She stands and considers him for a long moment. Meg has such an honest and steady stare that Gilbert cannot hold her gaze. He lowers his eyes. She says, "Thank you."

He looks up and sees that she's smiling. He says, "Thank you."

She's not leaving. "Are you okay and everything?"

"Yeah."

"Cuz this kind of splurging, coming from Mr. Friesandcoffee. Pardon me if I'm intrusive, but it's kind of how someone behaves before they're going to do something big."

Damn.

She continues, "Like... Pardon me, it's just, I lost my brother to suicide."

Oh. Gilbert says, "No! I mean, I'm so sorry. For your brother. But no. Everything's fine." He finds that place of gratitude and the fact that he genuinely likes Meg and musters an encouraging comforting Dad-like smile.

Her eyebrows furrow as she considers further, but he sees that she lets it go. She waves the black folder at him and says, "Okay. Well then. Thank you." And with a slight bend of the waist she turns on her heel and she's gone.

Gary the manager whisks into the busboy station and into the cashier booth with the cash box and his business suit, followed by a cologne-bath wind. He passes the coffee machine, the ice-maker and the iced tea brewer, and flips up the wooden counter that separates the small cashier's room with a clunk. There's nothing but a wooden counter, an adding machine and a footstool in the phone-booth sized space. Gilbert knows this layout because on a slow afternoon when he first started coming in, he went back there pretending that he was looking for the men's room. Only he didn't have to pretend because it was between shifts and the waiters were off doing their side work.

Meg doesn't like Gary. Nobody likes Gary.

The adding machine whirls and Gary says, "Quite a ring tonight. Selling those sides?"

Meg clears her throat. "Yup."

"Atta girl."

"Gary, can you spare me the sexist small talk and just give me my fucking total so I can get out of here?"

Gary's tone is condescending, "Touchy! Okay, honey." He counts out her change.

"Thank you." She turns to go.

Gary calls after her. "You know a little romp in the sack with a real man would clear up those crabbies."

Meg has just reached the door outside the busboy station. Gilbert watches as she rolls her eyes and fumes and thinks of a response. She mutters, "He's not worth it, He's not worth it." She turns around and walks back to poke her head into the bus station. She says with a sarcastic smile, "You have a good night now, Gary."

A class act. If she'd insulted him they'd have gotten into it. But with this comment, Gary shifts in his seat, uncomfortable. He hollers, "Xavi! You're up!"

It will not be a problem to threaten this man with a gun. Gilbert knows his cue. He heads down to the men's room. One stall is occupied. Gilbert goes into another and sits down on top of the toilet lid. He feels for the gun in his pocket.

The guy in the stall next to him is straining a bit, and while Gilbert has smelled shit before and has been up close and personal with some of the uglier aspects of the human body, he finds the close proximity of the stalls, the fact that he could reach out and touch the guy if the wall weren't separating them unnerving.

Gilbert casts a sideways glance under the edge of the stall and sees some very expensive Italian leather shoes with expensive wool suit material draped around them. Pinstripe. The belt is Gucci. This man is too wealthy to shop at Macy's even. Gilbert checks his watch. Five more minutes.

The man stands, pulls up his trousers and does them up. Gilbert's relieved. But he's surprised to hear a rubbery "snap". It's only when he hears the man bend over with a groan and some splashing that he realizes the snap was from a rubber glove. Oh.

The stall door opens and the man steps out. Gilbert hears his expensive shoes click on the bathroom tile and the smearing begins. It's not a sound you would ever want to hear. Perhaps it's the odor or knowing what it is, but Gilbert fights a gag in his throat. He curls his arms around his stomach and feels the lump of his gun against the inside of his wrist. He thinks of Meg. Xavi. And the poor fucking busboys. He needs this money.

Those poor fucking busboys, Alberto and Rogelio, and the door he left open at Macy's. This place has been kinder to him in the past three months than his employers of fifteen years.

He reaches for his gun. He takes a deep breath, the odor making him regret that he has. He opens the door to the stall, clicks back the hammer on the gun, levels it at the man and says, "Drop it."

The remaining shit drops into the sink with a wet smack. The man turns around. It takes a moment for Gilbert to recognize him. It's the JohnJohn handsome Republican closet case. Xavi's ex.

With his security training springing back into place, Gilbert steps forward and pats the man down. He steps back and says, "Lower your hands."

He reaches into his side pocket for the twist ties meant for Gary. He waves the gun at Closet Case and says, "Turn around. Hands behind your back."

"Please, let me go." Panicked, Closet Case looks to the door, down at his hands and then at Gilbert.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. I can't even get into why you would do this, but your lack of respect for a place of business, your rich stupid self-centered thought that doing THIS wouldn't affect people??"

"Please."

"Do you know this place doesn't have a janitorial staff but once a week? Do you know that the busboys, these men who escaped being enlisted in the army in whatever their Central American country was fighting about...these guys who have to work every day of their life to save up enough to get their families out of immediate peril. These are the guys who are made to clean up your shit."

Carefully working around the shit-covered rubber glove, Gilbert pulls the zip ties tight enough to hurt.

Closet stammers, "Please. I'll give you money. My family has money, a lot of it. What would it take, a thousand dollars?"

Gilbert backs up to the door. He pulls it open and leaves it open with his foot. He yells. "Gary!"

"Please. I'll give you three thousand dollars if you just let me go."

Three thousand dollars. Fuck. All this waiting and planning and no money.

But this lying shit needs to go to jail. Gilbert knows that if he lets this fuck buy him off, it will be the first in a series of payoffs on his road to some sort of power. Corporate or political, Closet Case getting away with things needs to stop here.

Gilbert checks his watch. He knows Gary should be coming down the stairs now. "Gary!"

Leather footsteps hit the stairs and speed up when he hears his name called.

When Gary catches view of Gilbert, Gilbert tucks his gun in his jacket. Closet can't see this, he just waits with his face to the wall. Gilbert can see his shoulders shaking.

Gary says, "What the hell's going on here?" Gilbert wants to smack his officious smarmy face. But he stands back against the door, giving Gary a view. Gary's jaw drops.

Gilbert says, "Has Xavi left?"

Gary's processing. "What. What?"

"Has Xavi left?"

"Yeah. A few minutes ago."

Closet speaks up, "I can explain."

Gilbert leaves them. He pokes his head into the kitchen where he knows Alberto and Rogelio will be mopping the floors. "Amigos!" They look at him like he's a crazy white man, but when he says, "El Mierdador!" they toss their mops and come running. It's kind of a made-up word, but they get it. He points them in the direction of the bathroom. Gary's standing there, stunned, with his cashbox still in hand. It would be so easy. But Gary can't be trusted.

Gilbert stops at the bar on the way out. He leans up to the bartender and says, "They caught the shitter, call the cops." The bartender turns to the phone and Gilbert knows it'll take more than a small bribe for Closet to make this one go away.

He steps out into the misty night, which is no colder than when he went in. A warm breeze is blowing off the river, bringing the smell of river water, damp earth and new green leaves. He heads down M Street on the long walk to his apartment. What if he'd gotten caught? Prison's gotta be worse than whatever's waiting for him Maclean. He'd pack his stuff in the car and head out in the morning. Right now he's going to walk the three miles home and sleep until his landlord shows.

Poetry

Un Cauchemar  
E. Smith Sleigh

on occasion night crashes  
through my door and  
calls to me  
it brings the moon  
and the stars to wait with me

sometimes nighttime calls  
forth a gathering of clouds  
they sweep past my window  
they force my eyes upward

dark hours swirl and  
eddy 'round my bed  
after my work is done

night scatters orbbed shaped jewels  
in its dense velvet robe

the nocturnal hours rise in my heart  
before the sun  
blanches my intention

I am a watcher through magnitudes  
of distorted dimensions

Whispers from the Grave  
(Heart attack, 50 years of age)  
Michael Lee Johnson

What happened to 20 acres of farmland tilted toward sun angles,  
those sharp stone edges cool fall comes  
frost fields covered taking ownership of rented, abused, abandoned land-  
10 years Phil has been gone, DeKalb, Illinois farmer.

Did he find salvation in those gold cornfields?  
October orange colors, hayrides, and pumpkin harvest  
of grey, grave bones buried near the deadly bicycle ride.  
Mystery did his lover Betsy  
(defense, prosecuting attorney, Elgin, Illinois)  
stand by his site after she went through mourning,  
the grandstanding at the wake at the farm,  
the dimming of all candles, incenses, and memorial shrine  
she held sacred within her bedroom walls, now faded.

I Edit my Life  
Michael Lee Johnson

I edit my life  
clothesline pins & clips  
hang to dry,  
dirty laundry,  
I turn poetic hedonistic  
in my early 70's  
reviewing the joys  
and the sorrows  
of my journey.  
I find myself wanting  
a new review, a new product,  
a new time machine,  
a new internet space,  
a new planet where  
we small, wee creative  
creatures can grow.

Gravity Theories  
Bill Abbott

Some things weigh more than others,  
Like lives. Some lives weigh more  
Than mine. Some lives are trivial and  
Practically weightless.

Some ideas weigh nothing,  
Ideas like freedom and poetry,  
Ideas like equality. Weight  
Does not equal value, at least not  
All the time.

The gravity is determined  
By how much we can balance it  
Against heavy thoughts  
And weighty counterbalances  
In the overall picture,  
Which seems out of focus from here,  
A blurry photo of lemmings  
Caught in the weight of their instinct.

So I try to balance against the  
Natural tilt, the weight working against me,  
Pushing against the inertia of the inert.

How does one weigh the importance  
If it's not clearly labeled up front?  
What can one use  
To find the gravity  
Of this particular situation?

No Soup for Him  
Milton P. Ehrlich

When I reach  
for him  
he isn't there—  
just an indent  
in his pillow.  
My Napoleon  
scimitar  
hides under  
mine.

Rage stops me  
from breathing  
every time  
he disappears—  
all that's left  
of me  
is a self-hating  
sous-chef  
watching tears  
add extra salt  
to my  
ratatouille.

Now if he  
comes home,  
he can chew  
on a bone  
like a mangy  
junkyard dog.  
He can subtract  
his selfish  
footprints  
from my life.

He will never taste  
my bouillabaisse  
again!

Vigil  
Dixon Hearne

Four years of hot, blood-stained sands and rocket blasts,  
the stench of burning flesh and filthy bodies  
strewn across the desert floor and through the streets,  
where frightened children dodge and weave,  
and mothers wail into the numbing winds and nothingness—  
artifacts of swaggering boast and vulgar pride.



December Journal: Sunday, December 8, 2013  
Don Mager

Unperturbed by dreams and cold night air,  
Jupiter, the moon's glowing crescent  
scythe, and Mars, climb ladder rungs up the  
midnight sky. The blanket cave snuggles  
out night's cold air. Unperturbed by dreams,  
marauder paws wedge up the curbside  
recycle lid. Head-first inside, claws  
shred white plastic bags. Crash and jangle.  
Wine bottles smash splinters of carnage.  
Vomited across the driveway, reek  
rancid bean cans and ice-cream cartons.  
Unperturbed by night's cave-warm sleep, with  
a surgeon's fastidious deftness,  
bandit hands lift morsels to their lips.

No Truce #1  
Kyle Hemmings

We were soldiers on opposite sides  
of the fence. Even our fatigues  
didn't match. But we did manage  
    to forget for a moment  
the old scars and morphine vials  
to make love to the pink & red sunset,  
before we redressed our wounds  
& killed each other with love letters  
    &  
    unsteady hands.

No Truce #5  
Kyle Hemmings

You have me on my knees,  
your MX revolver aimed  
at my sweaty forehead.  
You say the sight of me  
suffering like a rabid dog  
a dingo in the heat of despair  
makes you want to masturbate.  
You come closer  
the hole inside your gun's nozzle  
getting bigger, more intimate.  
In this way, we will both  
reach the end,  
together.

Heart's Freight in Exodus (Inverted Pyramid)  
 4 Electropoems Fresh from the Boob Tube  
 Nathaniel S. Rounds

\*Community Channel (Live)

Through the musky potpourri of the Feverfew explosion comes this meritorious sublimation of one happenstance security guard by the name of Orange Porridge Oobleck, ever the embodiment of craniofacial dysmorphology, bobbing dog-faced over unstrung hands and palsied knees, the sunburnt, curdled mess gesticulating and dancing, his accompaniment a mere hiss of a lament: "I've got elbows for eyes while Paris drowns/I'm a flea-bitten heart in a two-star hotel..."—the whole one-man-parade largely ignored by stagnated lines of cars—their drivers and passengers united in unrolling windows to lean forward and vomit-- on this lonely arm of highway pocked by micro canyons, cliffs, Lilliputian conifers, and moss.

He dances backward into the cloud of fauna and flora, steps forward, then retreats again, one hand holding a flashlight to search shadows and darkness for a few honest men, while a cargo ship announces its typhoon-forced entry over land and across highway and through car-nauseous traffic. The captain of the ship steps out onto the deck and succumbs to the dander of weeds and acrid smoke, his sneeze congruent with the lament of our dispossessed drifter. The two lost souls navigate strange, new waters.

\*Culture Channel (Castigation Soup Hour)

The carp was not partial to bottle rockets  
 He'd lost an argument with his wife  
 The last time he'd tried to expunge all domestic evil  
 It blew up in his face  
 The wick was thirsty for fire  
 And there was no fresh water  
 In sight

\*Marine Life Channel (Being and Nothingness)

Key light, please  
 On the mimic octopus  
 John Q. Schmuckatelli  
 Morphing from one role to the next  
 In British B movies  
 Grabbing a few quid at week's end  
 Then off to the next set  
 Then wandering past the front guard  
 And down the street  
 Into townhouses and back on the block  
 Shape shifting, mirroring, projecting  
 The common view to the well-anchored.

\*Psychology Channel (Los Estúpidos)

As Evelyn Francis McHale fell—neatly attired--  
From the 86<sup>th</sup>- floor observation deck of the Empire State Building  
She had moments to write into a leather notebook  
Before crushing the roof  
Of a United Nations Assembly Cadillac limousine:

“I have decided not to slave for the good people of this city  
(You’ve borrowed on the equity of your salvation  
And have no regrets).  
From today forward,  
I will not stop the world on a dime  
To reach over to Hershey, Pennsylvania  
To get you those cheap chocolates  
You like so much.”

With Torn Sails

Ken Allan Dronsfield

Wild rambling rose of ocular bloom  
salted crackers served with tequila  
worms hide from Robins on the lawn  
ripple chips best to have with clam dip  
swirling icy vortex of inebriated candor  
a toast or two and shovel down ramen  
pin stripe suit with a flamboyant red tie.  
I've lost all sight of that ruthless treason  
reverent sits behind a purple pious cross  
Expedia searches for a ticket to nowhere  
the kibitzer only charges two cents a day  
eyes shining a scarlet glow during twilight  
as darkness arrives the Raven seeks a roost  
the raucous dogs of war howl until sunrise  
reprieve I concede as I'm left on a sandbar  
adrift in this dispirited life with torn sails.

Living Next Door to the Firebug  
Jim Zola

He hides behind brick, the clever pig.  
My castle is clapboard, a tinderbox  
with dusty windows. When I strike  
a match to light the patio grill,  
his curtains rustle. All kids are pyros,  
the leaf pile smudging adolescence,  
newspapers curled into a wisp of print  
as though the stories sprout wings.  
But most of us lose the flame  
when other things stoke our passions.  
Not him. I catch my neighbor gathering  
twigs in oily sacks. Smoke that rises  
from chimneys all down the block  
is whitish gray and hugs the limbs  
of trees. His chimney bellows black,  
angry at the sky. Some mornings I find  
spent matches lined like soldiers along my walk.

The Perpetual Comedy  
Paul Ilichko

The ravages of time extend to me.  
I am mortal and, mortal as I am, am therefore  
subject to time's perpetual comedy.

Pride extends before the fool. Neither  
mortality nor time have time for the proud fool.  
Accept your place in time's own tragicomedy.

Life is a clockwork, wound once and left  
to run its course. Trapped in the prison of time,  
you must run dry your allotted course.

Together, we become a gang of fools. But  
you, the art maker: you can step outside your  
life, can cheat time, can make eternity.

Angels  
Natalie Crick

They choose  
Stark room with  
Wooden floors.

Bald rooms  
Marked by time,  
Stained by death.

They appear  
Out of darkness,  
Nebulous and blanched,

Summoned by moans,  
Wordless prayers.  
They smell of milk.

The Prosaic Rorschach  
Iris Orpi

The condensate clung  
to the glass in droplets

the window framing  
the early spring,  
late evening  
urban scene

sometimes the blemishes  
make the picture

I wanted to say  
it reminded me of  
the way fabric  
sticks to the body and  
skims a woman's curves  
after hours of dancing,  
sweat and freedom  
co-mingling on the surface  
of her bronze skin  
secondhand smoke and  
vigorous strains of rhumba  
giving her a glorious  
worldly air

oblivious of troubles  
and the consequences  
of rain

but really I was thinking  
of the inside of a brushed  
steel kitchen sink before  
I scrub the grease off,  
how tap water clings  
to the metal in streaks  
and beads instead  
of flowing straight down.

One metaphor for rebellion,  
the other for restlessness

and the vapors don't lie:  
it was colder on the inside  
than out

States

Mark Danowsky

After three days of moving you

states away

I return to our old place

help Dad put an 8000 btu ac unit

in my parent's one bedroom two blocks away

then return again

to clean the car out for picking up my mother and brother

at the airport the next day

distracted by the small accumulation under the wipers

while the dog is upstairs winding up

with the coming storm

then maddened

by a rust-speckled razor

buried beneath the twigs and leaves

Waylaid  
Mark Danowsky

at first, there was only ocean  
then hills  
then fake hills

and later, us  
who arrived in the night  
ran amok, ransacked

and all across the land  
awoke with a start  
unfresh, in confused ruination

Wrenched  
Joel Schueler

There is no respite.  
Over me skipped the wind  
one billion moths filled every inch of air,  
my glasses hampered  
the glass is fractured  
by singular wise  
cracks;  
I Love the clankless clunking sound my skull throws as it throbs  
with demonic jurisdiction,  
draped in gunk  
her sails are broken  
the ship has spoken  
her scowling mayday sinks unheard.

Lunch in the Cafeteria  
Michael Minassian

I choose the spotted horse salad  
over the canary sandwich  
even though I know  
the tiny, crisp skull would crackle  
as the brain explodes  
in my mouth.

Yet there is something to be said  
about the horse's tongue  
still flecked with oats,  
its hairy lips kissed  
with blood & thousand island dressing.

The children do not notice  
how dark the room has become  
nor the slack look on the server's face  
behind the dull aluminum counter –  
for them, it is all  
macaroni & cheese  
ritual & dried flowers,  
glue pots & milk:

the cows give up their young  
as well & the principal  
stands in a pail of steaming poetry  
spooning out words  
like a punishment  
as children line up,  
bowls & trays in hand  
waiting for green salads & syllables;  
then move to the library  
where words bake in books  
like bread in a long oven,  
& lunch is merely an afterthought  
or an accident.

Idiot Box  
Ryan Quinn Flanagan

a man should not hide his body under clothing  
the naturalists are rather uncompromising on this point  
women should shed their consumerism like snakeskin  
leave it in a pile on the floor for housekeeping to wonder

the drains are clogged with dirty edicts from the mouthpiece general  
I have forsaken water for seven days  
my brittle xylophone ribs back in the band  
a bearded anarchist to eat our set list for breakfast

a woman should speak when she has nothing to say  
like the television  
many bad breath men in line for the lunch truck

I crawled into your glove compartment when you were not looking.  
With extortionist flashlight and pumpernickel map  
and many other intangibles.

Glue me to your forehead  
so I may replace your eyebrows  
with dreams.

## Flash Fiction Competition: Honorable Mention

Grannibal  
Adam Trodd

Oh, I doubt there'll be crime enough to fill your day officer. You'll have many peaceful weeks in this quiet place. The average age here is seventy five. They didn't tell you it's a retirement community? Well, they've had their fun then, placing one as young as you in our midst. How old are you? Twenty five. I see. You put me in mind of my grandson when he was your age. What age am I? Well, a young gent, handsome and all as you are, shouldn't make an old dame blush by asking her to reveal her vintage. Shame on you! I look young, do I? Well, you'd charm the birds out of the trees, wouldn't you, little officer cherub? You'll fit right in here if you continue with this line of questioning. You think we all look a good deal younger? Perhaps it's the water then or the good diet. We like to eat well here. All of us. Diet is very important. No processed meats. What's that? Yes, indeed, we kill and butcher our own. You catch on quick, officer, very quick. We like that here. Ah, your daddy was a hunter too you say? Well then you'll understand the health benefits of fresh meat. I tell you what, instead of us standing out here in this breeze, why not come in for a cup of something? I see you left your jacket in the car and a hot drink would bring the colour back to those cheeks. Your radio is in the jacket pocket? But what harm, young man? What trouble might there be to break up here? Two old codgers fighting over who caught the fattest trout up at the lake or some such? I'll wager that radio'll be as silent as a dead baby all of the time you're stationed here. Say again? You've not heard that expression before. Of course. Yes, it's local. I suppose it is rather gruesome now that you mention it. The young are so easily upset nowadays. My apologies officer, if I've offended you. Age can coarsen a person. The years seep in like rain and beset the bone and blood. Time is unrelenting and fairness does not enter into the discussion, though I doubt that will be your experience. I can't imagine one as ripe as you turning musty as a wind-fallen apple! No. We couldn't let that happen. We must stop the march of time on your tender streets. But I'm rambling and you look impatient to be gone on your important work. Here, I'll step back out of the doorway and let you in where it's warm. I'll fix you a drink in the pantry while you take a seat there on the settee. Look at you perched all lively in my living room like a squirrel. I'm afraid, officer, I have one demand of you, for now. Can you remove your weapon please, sir? And place it on the dresser just there? My husband, you see, died by his own gun. We said we'd never speak of it again but the sight of them indoors puts a fright on me and throws me back to sorrowful times. Thank you, young officer, you are most obliging. I hope they are all like you these days. Now, why don't I put it just here in the top drawer so I don't get the heebie-jeebies every time I look in that direction? There. Now. Do you take sugar, young sir? Just the one spoon. Very good. And a splash of milk. All done. Get that into you now and feel it do you good. That's it. A good gulp. And another. I'll go and fetch a plate of something sweet. I'm sure I have some leftover cake from the fete on Sunday. You really must come next time, if you're of a mind. Oh dear, you feel funny you say? You can't see straight. Okay. Feeling faint. I see. No, don't stand up, officer. You're stumbling like a fawn. That'll be the barbiturate in your tea. Who's that behind me, you ask? Why, that's Josie. She's my neighbour. Yes, young man, that is a knife in her hand. It's called a belly opener. Like I said,

little officer cherub, we kill and butcher our own. Don't try to move too much. It'll just make things messier. Spread the plastic, Josie, thank you. Now, hand me the knife and phone the others. We dine at eight.

## Flash Fiction Competition: Second Place

Mischief

Christopher Stanley

The monthly indoor market is a cauldron of trouble threatening to boil over. Every stall is crowded, with people of all ages competing for space and bargaining for discounts. Nigel's at a bookstall, flicking through a Latin translation of Winnie the Pooh. He never learned any Latin in school but something about the book has captured his imagination. When his wife was alive she used to laugh at him, saying he was always being distracted by curious things he'd never understand.

"Put that back!" yells the proprietor of a nearby stall.

"If you're referring to this," says the girl, removing a bronze figurine from her handbag, "I bought it earlier. You asked if I wanted a bag and I said—"

"Lying bitch!"

The girl is young—maybe half Nigel's fifty-two years—and even in heels she's short, but her calm self-assurance makes her seem a foot taller than her accuser. Nigel knows he should walk away. He knows it's none of his business. But then he considers the length of the girl's skirt and the pleasing curve of her calves. For the first time since his wife died, he imagines tracing his fingers along the smooth skin of a woman's leg, from her heel to the hemline of her dress. He remembers what it feels like to be youthful and reckless. The excitement of it all.

"I can see you're busy," says the girl, "but if you just try to remember." Her pony tail curls like a question mark into her neck.

"I'm calling security."

"May I help?" asks Nigel. The girl regards him from beneath her haphazard fringe, half a smile playing across her lips. The figurine in her hand is a bronze elf.

"Just walk away," says the proprietor.

Nigel's instincts urge him to retreat but something is stopping him. "She's not a thief," he speculates hopefully. "I saw her give you the money." His insides squirm with this lie and he can feel the market contracting by the second. He picks up another figurine, asking, "How much do these sell for, anyway?"

"Who cares?" says the girl.

"Has Daddy come to rescue his little girl?"

"I'm not her father," says Nigel, a little too quickly.

"There's only one other reason a man like you tries to save a girl like her," says the proprietor, "and I'm telling you it's not worth it. She's a criminal."

Seeking a swift, bloodless resolution, Nigel offers to pay for the figurine but the girl won't let him, saying it's a matter of principle. Nigel's counting the notes in his wallet when she pulls him away from the stall. Behind them, the proprietor casts profanities like spells but his words get lost in the mêlée of the market. Nigel follows the girl through a side door into sunshine.

Outside, she stands on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. Her eyes are so large he's sure he could drown in them. "Don't worry," she says, "I know you only rescued me because that man's a bully."

Nigel feels his cheeks flush and the look on the girl's face tells him she sees it too. "And I know you didn't steal the elf," he manages to reply.

"It's not an elf," she says, retrieving the figurine from her handbag. "Look. It's Loki, the Norse god of mischief."

\*

A week later, Nigel stands in front of the mirror above the fireplace in his living room, straightening his tie ready for work. The last few days have passed in a blur. He needs a haircut. And a shave. Not for the first time, he wonders what his wife would have made of his encounter in the market. Her photo is on the mantel piece, next to the Norse god of everything that had been missing from his life since she passed away.

"It's odd that you didn't know how much it cost," he says.

"Sorry?"

"I asked how much your figurine was and you said, 'Who cares?'"

The girl moves closer to him, until their bodies are touching. "If I remember rightly," she whispers, "we said we'd never talk about it."

When her lips touch his, he feels a spark of electricity—or maybe it's magic—and then nothing else matters.

Flash Fiction Competition: First Place  
 One Throat to Choke  
 Phoebe Reeves-Murray

**I must have time off.**

The text didn't say what kind of time, but Vera knew it meant money. Her iPhone's clock icon continued flicking moments past. Her iPhone recognized the number as assigned to a call center droogie, the "what," but not the "who." Only the number mattered to management as droogies were tracked by "where" and "when," working remotely vs. call center onsite. Hours, minutes, seconds equaled money out. Number 3 of only three employees, Vera was responsible for R&D and HR.

Still rippling ellipses. Then, **You know how I been gonna to adopt the twins?**

Vera's mind swiped through hundreds of hourlies before lingering on an image of an unremarkable woman whose cubby came first at the call center's entrance and who stuffed it with crocheted booties, animals, and endlessly changing plastic plaques bearing jargon like *We can't boil the ocean*, and *Open the kimono*, written in shocking fonts that forced you to stop and read them. Bunny? Sunny. That's the name. Sunny was a talker whose favorite topic dating from her nearly one year ago hire date was her ongoing adoption of baby twins from their life support system for a birth mother.

**Aren't you working now?** Vera tapped another cell to ask John, Number 2 employee, IT god and ex-policeman, to trace Sunny. Sunny was one of the fleet drivecam droogies whose job was watching, listening, and reporting on real time dashcam footage that showed every misstep from eating and not looking at the road to drivers screaming as their trucks slid off the road and crushed them to death. That was where the real money was, for the droogies and the company.

**The babies were having a final supervised visit. The DHS worker had to take a call.**

Vera stopped texting John, watching Sunny's ellipses.

**Then their mother injected them with heroin. Said if she couldn't have them, no one could. The DHS worker called 911. Med Center tried to revive them, but they were overdosed.**

**Are they o—**Vera typed, abruptly became aware of the ellipses on Sunny's end, and instead texted **I'll have to get back to you.**

At the call center, no Sunny. Droogies gathered at break, whispering about GoFundMe for the dead babies.

Two days passed. Sunny reappeared working her dashcam calls.

"You're back so soon," Vera said. *Cremated and buried two days after being murdered?*

"Yes." Booties still dangled from cubby shelving. Today's plaque read *One throat to choke*. "I have to work now."

Vera texted John what happened.

**So? We've got a bereavement policy.**

**Can you check with your contacts?**

**OK. Did you look online?**

**No.**

John confirmed no record of such a crime with local or state police or the Medical Center. No news media whatsoever about two babies ODeD by their birth mother. **What're you gonna do?**

**Not gonna talk about it.**

Vera texted Sunny she needed to produce an obituary.

Sunny produced a word document.

**Where's the real obituary?**

**You wanted an obit for Frannie and the other one. I didn't call the papers.**

After hours, Vera took a photo identified as the twins from Sunny's desk and reverse image searched it. The photo came up identical to one posted on some other woman's Pinterest dated five years ago.

Vera, John, and the CEO met for their morning "cuddle." The room wasn't sound proofed so these staff meetings occurred via text.

**Sounds like she wanted paid time off and her perfect year bonus** John texted.

*We said we'd never speak of it.* Vera glared at her iPhone.

**Don't allow a domino effect** texted the CEO.

The only droogie prize for a year of 100% attendance to listening and watching people get injured or killed was an all-out media party. The company stood to reap infinitely more than droogie Sunny from that upcoming fete. Sunny was to be their shining star outcome. Vera's fingers poised over her iPhone under her colleagues' gaze. *The one throat to choke's not gonna be mine! Not a mental health specialist—not my problem! How could she lie about her kids being murdered?!*

Vera stared at the framed mission statement: Our team will demonstrate how design is the creative vehicle in applying corporate culture for innovation across workforce management to benefit employees with a range of learning and language levels, goals, and physical mobility to help foster meeting customer's needs.

*How could she not?*

**Pay her and move her to a terminal contract** texted Vera.

## Contributor Bio's

Alisha Mughal's work has appeared in some places, most recently in Queen Mob's Teahouse and The Fem. She has a BA in Philosophy from the University of Toronto and currently resides in Ontario, Canada. She was born in Pakistan.

Christina Maria Kosch is an upcoming junior at Washington and Jefferson College where she majors in English and Psychology. She edits poetry and prose for 1932 Quarterly and is the Managing Editor for Wooden Tooth Review. She enjoys quoting Bukowski at inappropriate times. Her heart can be found somewhere in Maine.

Gregory Jeffers stories have appeared recently or are upcoming in Chantwood Magazine, Typehouse, Suisun Valley Review, Every Day Fiction, Grim Corps Magazine, and in the anthologies Hardboiled and Outposts of the Beyond. Other stories have won honorable mentions in Glimmer Train's 2015 Very Short Fiction Contest and Winning Writer's Summer Competition in 2012.

Thomas Elson lives in Northern California. He writes of lives that fall with neither a safe person nor a safe net to catch them. His stories have been published in the Pennsylvania Literary Journal, Red City Literary Review, Avalon Literary Review, Lunar Journal, The 3288 Review, and A New Ulster.

Bob Iozzia primarily writes fiction humor, but has recently discovered that many writers of all genres and he utilize the same words, just in different combinations.

Brandon Stanwyck lives and writes in Cleveland.

Justine Manzano lives in Bronx, NY with her husband, son, and a cacophony of cats. Her short fiction appeared in the anthologies Things You Can Create and Best New Writing 2017, and the literary magazines Sliver of Stone, The Greenwich Village Literary Review, The Holiday Cafe, and Twisted Sister Literary.

Originally from Galicia in Spain and a resident of Glasgow in Scotland, Eva Ferry is currently working on her first English-language novel. Her fiction work has been published in the anthology *Writers at the Hunterian* and the magazine *Salome Lit*.

The organism known as Shelby Leet is of the biological kingdom Animalia. The primate family specifically. The behaviors of the Shelby Leet suggest that it may be a male primate, though there have been multiple rumored sightings of this creature laying fertilized eggs in damp soil in the local park.

Neil Ellis Orts is a writer and performer, living in Houston, Texas. His writing has appeared in literary journals, anthologies, and general interest magazines. His novella, *Cary and John*, was published in 2014. He has recently turned to playwriting, with two short plays produced since July, 2016.

Taylor Mihocik is a part-time writer, part-time student from Ocala, FL. She will be entering graduate school in the summer of 2017 and enjoys scary movies, nature, and chicken wings. She primarily writes fiction, but dabbles in poetry as well when the mood strikes her.

Christopher Stanley lives on a hill in England with his three sons who share a birthday but aren't triplets. In 2016, his stories won multiple prizes and were published in places like *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Jellyfish Review* and the *National Flash Fiction Day* anthology. Follow him on Twitter @allthosestrings

A writer, teacher, and mother, Phoebe Reeves-Murray has worked in the non-profit world for the last 35 years. She loves writing about strange events that take place in the space right next to our own lives. Her story "It Will Never Happen to You" was published in the *Corvus Review*. Her fictions have appeared in *Quailbell*, *Rivet*, and *The Literary Hatchet* among others, and will be upcoming in *Capricious*.

Ryan Quinn Flanagan is a Canadian-born author residing in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada with his other half and mounds of snow. His work can be found both in print and online in such places as: *Evergreen Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Corvus Review*, *Word Riot*, *In Between Hangovers*, *Red Fez*, and *The Oklahoma Review*.

Joel Schueler lives in Wiltshire, England and has had nine works published in seven places, namely *The Aberystwyth Writing Project*, *Atlantean Publishing*, *Inclement Publishing*, *Scars Publications*, *Apollo's Lyre*, *The Dawntreader*, and *Danse Macabre*. He is working on his first novel.

Mark Danowsky's poetry has appeared in *About Place*, *Cordite*, *Gargoyle*, *Gravel*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Subprimal*, and elsewhere. Mark is originally from Philadelphia, but lives in West Virginia. He is Managing Editor for the *Schuylkill Valley Journal* and Founder of the poetry coaching and editing service VRS CRFT.

Iris Orpi is a Filipina writer living in Chicago, IL. She is the author of a novel, *The Espresso Effect* (2010) and two books of compiled poems. She was an Honorable Mention for the *Contemporary American Poetry Prize*, given by *Chicago Poetry Press*, in 2014.

Natalie Crick, from the UK, has poetry published or forthcoming in a range of journals and magazines including *Interpreters House*, *Ink in Thirds*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Chiron Review* and *Rust and Moth*. Her work also features or is forthcoming in a number of anthologies, including *Lehigh Valley Vanguard Collections 13*. This year her poem, 'Sunday School' was nominated for the *Pushcart Prize*.

Paul Ilechko was born in England but has lived much of his life in the USA. He currently lives in Lambertville, NJ with his girlfriend and a cat. Paul has had poetry published and/or accepted recently by *Third Wednesday*, *Dash Magazine*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *MockingHeart Review* and *Slag Review*, among others.

Jim Zola has worked in a warehouse, as a security guard, in a bookstore, as a teacher for Deaf children, as a toy designer for Fisher Price, and currently as a children's librarian. Published in many journals through the years, his publications include a chapbook, *The One Hundred Bones of Weather* (Blue Pitcher Press), and a full length poetry collection, *What Glorious Possibilities* (Aldrich Press). He currently lives in Greensboro, NC

Nathaniel S. Rounds was born into the demise of the Beatles and has since retreated from his Maine home to a secret dwelling in Canada. His latest collection can be read here: <http://clockwisecat.com/2016/02/clockwise-cats-the-prequel/>

Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. His latest collections of poetry/prose is *Future Wars* from *Another New Calligraphy* and *Split Brain* on Amazon Kindle. He loves 50s Sci-Fi movies, manga comics, and pre-punk garage bands of the 60s.

Dixon Hearne teaches and writes in the American South. His work has been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His latest book is *Plainspeak: New and Selected Poems*. His work has been anthologized in the Texas Review Press's *Southern Poetry Anthology: Louisiana, v.4* and *Down the Dark River*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on new poetry and short story collections.

Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D is an 85 year-old psychologist. A Korean War veteran, he has published numerous poems in periodicals such as *Descant*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow*, *Toronto Quarterly Review*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times*.

Bill Abbott is the author of "Let Them Eat MoonPie," the history of poetry slam in the Southeast. He has been published in *Ray's Road Review*, *Radius*, *The November 3rd Club*, and *The Sow's Ear*. Mr. Abbott lives in Ohio and teaches creative writing at Central State University.

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, small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 935 small press magazines in 29 countries, and he edits 10 poetry sites. Author's website <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>.

E. Smith Sleigh's poetry appeared or is forthcoming in *Paper Darts*, *Squalorly*, *Kumquat Poetry*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Pankhearst's Slimline Volume: No Love Lost*, the 4th Issue of *PRISM 'Ekphrasis'*, *The Criterion*, *Silver Birch Press*, *Five2One*, *Rat's Ass Review* and elsewhere.

Tim Frank is an up and coming writer, specializing in the comic and the surreal. He has been published in magazines such as *Bourbon Penn*, *Bartleby Snopes* and *BlazeVox*. He is currently working on a collection of short stories and a semi-autobiographical novel.

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a published poet from Oklahoma. He loves thunderstorms! His published work can be found in reviews, journals, magazines and anthologies throughout the web and in print venues. Ken's poetry has been nominated for two Pushcart Prize Awards and the Best of the Net for 2016.

Brett Petersen obtained his B.A. in English from the College of Saint Rose in 2011. His fictions have appeared in journals such as Polychrome Ink, The Offbeat and Leopardskin & Limes. He is also a cartoonist, drummer and singer/songwriter whose high-functioning autism only adds to his creativity. He lives in Albany New York.

Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including The Waterhouse Review, Crack the Spine, The Houston Literary Review, Fiction Collective, The Faircloth Review, Epiphany, Wilderness House Literary Magazine, The Battered Suitcase, and many other magazines and anthologies. Waldman is also the author of the novel, A Face in the Moon, and the story collection, Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart (Wind Publications), and has served as Fiction Editor for Blue Lake Review. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Cassidy Trom Wellons is a songwriter and fiction writer living in Nashville. She always waves when she merges in traffic.

Richard J. Heby is a published poet, author, and founding editor of Beechwood Review – minimalist writing & art.

Anna O'Brien is a writer and veterinarian currently living in central Maryland. She has had fiction published in Cease, Cows; Scrutiny Journal; Luna Station Quarterly; Panorama Journal; The Reject Pile; and Brilliant Flash Fiction. She loves hiking, travel, coffee, and Labrador Retrievers.

Jon Serri lives in New York City with his wife and daughter. He teaches high school English and avoids complaining about his students. During the summer you can find him at various writer's workshops in New York.

Peter Beckstrom's stories and poetry have appeared in several journals including DogzPlot, Out of the Gutter, and O-Dark Thirty, where his story "Playground Patriots" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Peter is a former U.S. Marine and holds a JD from Stetson University College of Law.

Jack Bristow's work has most recently appeared in The Huffington Post, The Saturday Evening Post, and Mystery Weekly Magazine. Follow him @realjackbristow

A recovering economics professor, Steve Slavin earns a living writing math and economics books. His short story collection, "To the City, with Love," was recently published.

Donna Marsh is working on two books of essays about the loss of her daughter on 9/11/2001, Marsh teaches writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University. She lives in central New York with her husband, Robert O'Connor and her life partner, Landeaux--a Yorkie Bichon.

Carl "Papa" Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, VA now lives in University Place, WA. He is retired military, retired FAA and now just plain retired without wristwatch or alarm clock. Carl, president of The Tacoma Writers Club is a Pushcart Prize and Micro Award nominee. MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever.

Russell Hemmell is a statistician and social scientist from the U.K, passionate about astrophysics and speculative fiction. Recent stories in *Gone Lawn, Not One of Us*, *Typehouse Literary Journal*, and elsewhere.

Michael Minassian's poems have appeared recently in such journals as *The Broken Plate*, *Comstock Review*, *Exit 7*, *Redactions*, and *Third Wednesday*. He is also a Contributing Editor for *Verse-Virtual*, an online magazine. Amsterdam Press published a chapbook of his poems entitled *The Arboriculturist* in 2010.

Robert Joe Stout spent his boyhood in Wyoming and now lives in Oaxaca, Mexico. His fiction has appeared in *Emrys Journal*, *Sin Fronteras*, *The South Dakota Review* and *Two-Thirds North* and other journals. He also is author of *Monkey Screams and Hidden Dangers, Mexico on the Brink of Disaster*.

Don Mager has seven chapbooks as well *Us Four Plus Four (New Orleans University Press)*, an anthology of translations from eight major Soviet-era Russian poets. He was Professor of English at Johnson C. Smith University. Retired he lives in Charlotte, NC with his partner of 36 years. They have three sons and two granddaughters.

Adam Trodd's fiction and poetry have appeared in publications such as *The Irish Times*, *The Incubator Journal*, *Crannóg*, *Banshee*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *The Caterpillar*. He was shortlisted for the 2015 Bath Flash Fiction Award and has pieces in the 2016 and 2017 National Flash-Fiction Day Anthologies. He lives and works in Dublin, Ireland.

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Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of the books *Violent Outbursts*, *Haywire*, *Tetched* and *Roughhouse*. *Haywire* won the Members' Choice Award, given by the Asian American Writers Workshop. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and the Writer's Voice of the West Side YMCA in New York. He received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

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