



CORVUS REVIEW

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COVER ART

“Fragment 172”

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FLASH/NON/FICTION

Switches

Susan Price

The name came in at 6:59 AM.

Calvin glanced at it casually, not even taking the time to comprehend it before looking over his switchboard. To him, they were just a series of shapes on a small slip of paper. Finding the same series of shapes on the board in front of him took a little more time, but he eventually located them. He flipped the white switch that corresponded to the name, and then stood up. He stretched and yawned -- a loud, joint-cracking sound. It had been a long night, and he was ready to go home.

On his way out, Dave, the new guy on first shift, passed him in the hall. He didn't much care for Dave; where Calvin was quiet and reserved, Dave was boisterous, bordering on obscenely loud. He also had an endless fount of questions; question, after question, unending, which made Calvin want to strangle him. As he saw him coming, Calvin tried to slink past but Dave called out to him.

"Calvin! Man! How's it going? How was your vacation?"

"Fine," Calvin said shortly.

"Really?" Dave eyed him critically. "Go anywhere, or just stay-at-home type thing? You're still pretty ghostly, you know."

"Home." Calvin moved to step around him, but Dave didn't seem to notice.

"Right. So, how was the night shift? You flip any switches?"

Calvin shrugged. "One, right before I clocked out."

Dave chuckled. "Clocked out. You weren't the only one to clock out!" He slapped his leg and guffawed at his joke; Calvin just shook his head.

"I don't see how you can laugh at this," he said. He glowered at Dave, causing him to flinch.

"It's just a joke. What is life that we can't joke now and then?" He shifted from foot to foot, then exclaimed, "Oh, yeah! I wanted to ask you a question."

Calvin grimaced; hadn't he been doing that already? Dave didn't seem to notice.

"What would happen," Dave began, and then faltered. "How do I ask this? Okay, here goes. What would happen if we got the name of someone we knew? I mean, would we have to flip poor little Grandma's switch?"

Calvin bit back a sarcastic retort, instead replying with exaggerated patience, "They told you that in training, remember? We don't get names of people we know. That's what the extensive background checks were for."

"Right!" Dave grinned in relief, flashing his perfectly straight and white teeth. "Flipping switches is fine, great money, but I would really hate to snuff out ol' Grandma, you know?"

"Excuse me." Calvin stepped around him and headed to the door. Behind him, he heard Dave shout, "Hey, what are you doing when we shut down for Christmas?"

Calvin pretended he didn't hear him and kept walking, although he began to think about the three weeks he would have off. To keep up morale, the switchboard was shut off the two

weeks before Christmas and for one week after. The population could live a peaceful three weeks, secure in the knowledge that government-sponsored tragedy would not strike over the holidays.

Calvin planned on spending time at the beach with his wife of ten years, Sandra. It would be good to get away somewhere warm, where there was relative peace and quiet. He missed solitude above all else, and this time of year, the beach would be mercifully deserted – one of the last places left where humanity didn't teem.

After an uneventful commute through the frigid morning, Calvin arrived home about thirty-five minutes later. Meeting him at the door was Sandra; she was a plain, homely woman, with mouse-brown hair that fell to her shoulders and pale skin. The one striking feature she had were her eyes. They were an emerald green, and Calvin felt he could get lost in those eyes despite their owner's otherwise unremarkable physique.

Smiling, she took his coat. "Did you have a good night?" she inquired as she ushered him inside. She was always mothering him, and it rather annoyed him. He felt uncomfortable and awkward when women cried, and Sandra was a crier, so he would never say anything about how much she annoyed him.

"About the usual," he replied. He never went into details about his job to her. It would never do, to upset her.

"I have breakfast on the stove, the usual. I put the orange juice out just as you like it, too."

"Thank you," he said. He wished that, just once, she would make pancakes.

As he sat down to eat, Sandra took her place across the table from him.

"I was reading in the paper that the world's population has reached the ten billion mark. Can you believe it? Ten billion!" She shook her head. Calvin ate his eggs quietly and said nothing.

"Well, I trust that the authorities will ensure everything continues to run smoothly. Don't you think?"

Calvin grunted out an unintelligible reply, but Sandra went on as if he said nothing.

"But still. Ten billion! How on Earth will everyone get fed? The more people there are, the less resources there are to take care of them."

Please shut up, he silently implored. Instead, he sighed and rubbed his temples. "That's why we have the switchboards."

Nodding, she smiled. "Of course. Do you have a headache? You seem rather distant. Should I get you an aspirin?"

"No, dear. I'm fine. I'm sorry I'm not very animated. It's been a long night, and I'm tired."

He stood up and took his now empty plate to the sink, where he began to wash it. Sandra stood as well.

"Sweetie, let me do that," she said. "You've been at work all night. You should relax."

Without a word, he handed the dish over to her and made his way into the bedroom to lie down. In the living room, he could hear Sandra fussing about, rearranging this and straightening that. She would be conscientious about letting him sleep, so she would wait to vacuum until he had left for work again tonight. He drifted off to sleep to the murmurs of the television set.

Calvin slept deeply that morning. He dreamt of the beach where his family had vacationed when he was a child; in his dream, he was back there on that secluded paradise, diving in and out of waves as blue and shimmering as crystal. The sun was shining down upon him, warming him from the toes up. In the distance, he spotted a lone figure waving at him; a golden woman drenched in sunlight. When he saw that beautiful figure, all his worries disappeared in an instant. He first began to walk, then full out sprint, toward the goddess ahead of him.

Waking from the last vestiges of the dream before reaching the woman, he opened his eyes and stared upward. The sun had shifted in the sky, sending shards of light through the blinds to dapple the ceiling. He really needed to get some blackout shades, he thought.

He inhaled deeply. Sandra was cooking again; it smelled nice, a bit spicy. He had a feeling it was spaghetti. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was just past four. Time to get up.

As he entered the kitchen, Sandra looked up from the pot she was stirring. "Good morning! Or afternoon, rather. I'm making dinner – your favorite!" She took the lid off the saucepan with a flourish, revealing its contents of an orange-red sauce.

"Looks good," he lied. He had hoped for fettuccine.

He went into the living room and spent the next thirty minutes listlessly flipping through channels. News, reality tv, generic dramas, and more news. He stopped as a beautiful blonde woman appeared on his screen – the same woman in his dream, he realized. Her name was Amber Marsh, and she was a correspondent stationed in the Washington, DC location. Calvin watched with interest as she interviewed the president, who declared that the switchboard policy that the government had implemented two years ago was a success; America had plenty of food, a surplus even, set aside for a rainy day. The dangers of past population explosions were remedied now with the methodical elimination of excess humanity. Everyone had a fair shake in this new America. Blah, blah, blah. He tuned the president out and focused intently on Amber, and as he stared, he noticed that her eyes were as blue as the waters of the ocean he so longed for.

"Calvin! Dinner!" Sandra called from the kitchen, her voice cutting through Calvin's thoughts like a cleaver. Sighing, he flipped off the television and trudged into the kitchen.

He ate in silence while Sandra twittered away about nothing and everything. He occasionally indulged himself in a bit of daydreaming while she spoke, thinking about his dream of the beach. He was happy that Sandra had agreed to spend Christmas with him there; they both needed the time away, and he hoped that it would help alleviate some of the dissatisfaction he had been feeling lately. She had never been there, she said, and she was looking forward to finally seeing the place where he had spent the happiest days of his childhood.

As he daydreamed, he found himself slowly replacing Sandra with Amber – the vision from his dream. She was laughing and the sun formed a halo on her blonde hair. Her eyes, as blue as the sea, sparkled with light and mischief as she took his hand and led him onto the warm sand. He found himself growing excited by the prospect of visiting that idyllic fragment of his past, even for just a few days.

"Calvin?" Sandra's voice snapped him out of his reverie, and he needed a moment to get his bearings once again. He was disappointed to find that he was back at the table.

"Yes dear?"

"Are you all right?" She looked concerned.

Smiling, Calvin shook his head. "I'm fine, dear. I'm sorry, my mind just wandered a bit."

She patted his hand. "You work too hard. It's fine. I shouldn't bother you."

"No, Sandra, it's okay. What was it you said?"

"I said that Mother and Father have asked us up to Sheboygan for Christmas. Wouldn't it be lovely to go?"

Calvin felt as if he had been punched in the gut. "What about..." His voice came out as a whisper; he paused to clear his throat and began again. "What about the beach? We have reservations already."

"Well," Sandra hesitated. "I was thinking about that and, well... it wouldn't seem very Christmas-like to be on a beach, now would it? I mean, to me Christmas is all about family, and snow, and hot cocoa. Like that song, 'White Christmas.' None of that would be at the beach. Don't you think?" She twisted the napkin in her hands as she looked at him, her eyes pleading as they began to well up. "My family is just dying to see us. But if you *really* want to go..."

"No," he said at last. His voice was hoarse and he had trouble speaking, but he thought he hid it well. "You haven't been to see your family for a while. We should go to Sheboygan."

Her green eyes, hard as emeralds, cleared up instantly, and she beamed as she cleared the dishes. "I'll call them immediately! Those reservations can always be rescheduled for the summer, right? There will be more people then, more things to see and places open then."

While Sandra chattered away to her mother, Calvin took a shower. He was surprised to realize that, although his trip to the beach had been denied, he felt nothing. No gripping despair, no anger. No joy. Nothing but a profound blankness, and in a way, he had come to expect this would be the way things went. Sandra got what she wanted, always. Clenching a fist, he drew back to punch the wall; at the last instant, he restrained himself and dropped his arm.

He turned the hot water to full blast and scoured his body with the rough sponge he liked to use. The heat from the water turned his skin bright pink, and the sponge left his body raw. He savored the feeling and scrubbed harder, drawing blood on his chest.

Once he stepped out of the shower, he toweled off and finished the rest of his preparation routine: brushing teeth, combing hair, shaving. Liberal use of antiperspirant; he used the strong stuff, none of the flowery, perfumed stuff that Sandra used, and certainly not the deodorant only type that Dave wore, which left ridiculous wet rings under his arms. He never wanted to embarrass the kid, even though he was annoying at times, so he never mentioned it to him.

He examined himself in the full-length mirror of the bedroom. He was middle-aged, and he was looking it; his short, black hair was parted to the side, and his pale body was developing a slight paunch. He had toyed with the idea of growing a mustache, but after Dave had mocked him by saying it looked like a fuzzy caterpillar sleeping on his lip, he had shaved it off. Turning, he dressed in a simple outfit of khaki slacks and a blue polo shirt.

Stepping out of the bedroom, he closed the door softly. Sandra was sitting in front of the tv, eating chips and sipping on soda. She was getting a little soft too, he noticed, but he would never mention it.

"I'm leaving," he said.

"I have your dinner!" Standing up, chip crumbs flying from her lap, she rushed into the

kitchen, returning a moment later with a brown paper bag and a thermos. "Ham sandwiches and some fresh veggies. And coffee."

Of course it was, he thought. "Thank you, dear," he said instead.

Kissing her on the cheek, he took the bag and left. Behind him, he heard the locks engage.

He wanted to be alone for a bit, so took his time getting to work, taking surface streets instead of the interstate. They were packed with holiday shoppers and the streetlights were adorned with cheerful Christmas decorations of red and gold. The sun was setting, and with it, the wind had begun to pick up, blowing the first few flecks of snow from incoming clouds. Sandra would be happy to see the snow come in.

When he arrived at work, Dave was waiting outside the building. He was pale and the cigarette he tried to light trembled between his fingers.

"Hey Calvin." He paused to take a deep drag off the cigarette, then exhaled a cloud of blue smoke slowly. "I got my first flip today."

Calvin paused in front of him, then asked, "Was it everything you hoped it would be?"

Shaking his head, Dave began to sob, deep, broken, strangling sounds. Calvin looked around for any means of escape, but couldn't find any without being rude.

"I can't do this. I don't know how you've done it so long. I mean, we're killing people! I can't..." he choked back his words, then continued. "I can't do this. I quit. I'll find something else, anything else."

Calvin shook his head. "You thought about them. They told us in training not to think about it. But it's okay; it's just not for you. No harm."

Nodding, Dave turned and stumbled the rest of the way to his car, a silver Mustang. A very macho car, Calvin noted.

After watching him go, Calvin turned and went into the building and made his way to his dark cubicle. He turned on the harsh, white light of the under-cabinet fluorescent lights. The switchboard lay out before him, awash in glaring light, the name of every man, woman, and child of the city lined up in perfect symmetry across it. He took his place before it, and for the moment, he was a god.

He reached over to his desk radio and turned it on. Light Christmas music streamed out over the speakers. Sighing, he eased back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The tinny alarm jarred him awake some time later. Jerking, he sat bolt upright as the small slip of paper printed out beside the neat rows of switches. The somber Christmas songs he had been listening to had been replaced with the upbeat tempo of "Run Run Rudolph," which he found slightly grating. He left it alone, however.

Once the name finished printing, he picked it up and glanced at it, preparing for his ritual of locating the corresponding shapes, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw the name: Amber Marsh. *His* Amber. The one shining spot in his otherwise dull existence, the golden goddess of his dreams.

Visions of Amber began assaulting his brain. Amber at work, interviewing the President. Amber on the beach of his dreams. Her smile, her outright laughter when she did the puff piece about monkeys at the National Zoo last month. He began to hyperventilate and his heart thundered as if it were trying to escape his chest. Closing his eyes, he began the deep breathing exercises that Sandra swore by. Slowly, very slowly, his rapid breathing came back to something

like normal. His palms stopped sweating.

When he had his panic under control, he opened his eyes. “Run Run Rudolph” had been replaced with “White Christmas.” He looked back at the slip of paper sitting on his desk. It looked harmless enough. Just a piece of white paper.

Calvin picked it up and located the switch with Amber Marsh’s name under it, yet still he hesitated. What was his problem? He had done this a million times before, and it wasn’t like he knew her personally. She was just a talking head on the television, but still, his hand faltered over her switch.

He thought of Sandra, sitting at home with her chips and her television. He recalled her bright smile and her gentle, mothering hands fussing about him daily. Dear, sweet, gentle, smothering Sandra.

Strains of “White Christmas” intruded into his thoughts, and a switch inside Calvin flipped; a calm washed over him, leaving him devoid of emotion. Moving his hand away from Amber Marsh’s switch, he reached across the board and flipped a different one.

Refolding

Kate Lunn-Pigula

'So many people are shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them' – Sylvia Plath.

The three girls were gossiping again. *Well*, thought Malcom, *they haven't been girls for a long time*. Their high-pitched complaining irritated Malcom when they first moved to H40, the old classroom that was currently masquerading as their office, but he wondered if he could work without their chirping now. It was background noise, like the music that's on in the supermarket. And the absence of their chatter usually meant something bad had happened, like the time that Susan and Sally had fallen out for some reason. Janice hadn't known who to side with so she just hadn't spoken. The tense atmosphere had gone on for days. It had been awkward, and Malcom rarely picked up on things like that.

Now, though, they were talking about the new computer system that would be coming in over the summer break. They were crowded around Susan's computer, looking at the intranet page Malcom had seen that morning.

'It won't work,' said Susan, flatly. She was the one that he really didn't understand. She seemed not to like him and he didn't know why.

'It might,' said Sally. She was a friendly, optimistic sort of person.

'Jane in accounts said she'd been on a course and that it was rubbish. We should just keep this one. We're used to it.'

'Of course they let accounts have a go first,' said Janice, who looked genuinely forlorn.

'You know why, though?' said Susan, ignoring Janice, 'Him upstairs made a deal with a different company.' She lowered her voice theatrically. 'I bet it was when he was drunk.' 'Him upstairs' was how Susan referred to the headmaster, even though his office was in another building. She preferred the previous headmaster.

'He's nice enough, though, Sue,' said Sally. Sally was generally nice towards everyone. 'I don't think he's a real alcoholic.' Malcom had never really met the current headmaster; he didn't like going out for lunch anymore.

Malcom was the only man in this office; well, except for Tom, but he had his own room. Malcom was the timetabling department now. The other three had admin-type jobs too, but he was never sure what they actually did. They were sitting in an old classroom; they'd moved in together a few years ago. He hadn't got on well at first, but then they had accepted him. They let him in on some things now, they respected him now. Malcom glanced at the three of them gossiping. Susan was becoming irate, more high-pitched. She became almost scary to Malcom when she was like this – she got a cleaner fired last year for some perceived slight. Janice had said that the cleaner hadn't deserved it. Sally was nodding her head vaguely now, the light from the window highlighting what Malcom's ex-wife would have called her 'awful grey roots'. Janice was the shortest and looked a little like a sheep. She had the lowest voice, though, which was easier on his ears.

Malcom didn't want to retire. He knew he was supposed to in a few years but he had been thinking about asking Tom if he could work until he was 70. Work was his only real source of social interaction these days, apart from Eddie and his pub friends. He was used to the work and the office. The rooms and when they were free, and the sun that got in his eyes at around

noon. He was even quite fond of the heating that came on in the summer but didn't seem to work in winter, which caused Sally, Janice and Susan to always Google the temperature that you should legally be sent home at. They had two thermostats for this purpose, but it had never got cold enough.

He supposed that he wouldn't have to face thoughts of retirement for a few years, at least. And they liked him, now, the other people in the office. What with the office being an old classroom, hid away in a decrepit building, they had four cheap desks, sort of facing each other, which were really old wooden school desks. Susan said that one day the computers would break the tables and it was a 'health and safety nightmare,' but Malcom was sure that wasn't true. They seemed sturdy enough, very old fashioned wood. A part of his desk just before his keyboard read 'Jan and Chris 1985 4ever,' graffitied with a pen. He wondered about Jan and Chris. He got married in 1985. He thought about his wedding mindlessly, wondering where Karen was now, as he tapped away on his apparently ancient keyboard. The IT guys often scoffed when they had to fix something in H40. They were 'museum pieces'. But they were faster than Malcom's computer at home. He didn't see the problem with them, but he always agreed with the IT people anyway, which made them happy.

He didn't like to leave this room at lunch, not anymore. At lunchtime the girls would go to the staff room or dining hall or wherever it was, and they would leave him in peace. Since they found out about Claire, they always asked him if he wanted anything and he usually said no. Once he'd asked for an apple. He was touched when they brought it back for him. They said it was no problem, it was free anyway. But he'd been grateful. He'd met Karen in a staff room and that hadn't turned out well. It was best for everyone if he didn't mix. His path never crossed with the children. They had no reason to come to H40, and Malcom was usually there before they arrived and left after they left. He liked to watch cartoons on his computer at lunchtime, it cheered him.

He glanced at the picture of the little blonde girl on his desk. She was smiling and waving, sunlight in her hair. 'Oh, what a lovely picture,' Sally had said when he first brought it in. 'She looks a lot like you.' Yes, they liked him now.

Sally, Janice and Susan were now talking about how much work they had to do, which was one of their favourite topics.

'It's not right,' said Sally. 'They don't know what it's like.'

'Well! Him in there never comes out to see how much work we have to do,' said Susan, gesturing towards Tom's room. They all murmured agreement. But they all knew he was in there so Sally and Janice kept quiet.

They wouldn't have as much work to do if they stopped gossiping, thought Malcom, but he would never say that to them. Their manager, Tom, hadn't suggested that either. But they were very careful to say those sorts of things out of earshot – they respected hierarchy and tended to be sickly sweet to Tom's face.

There had been talk of their rag-tag team of admin-type people moving to another building, or at least redecorating this room, but it had never happened. The old chalkboard was their noticeboard, which Tom always wrote on, even though he was only a few feet away all day. He rarely came out to talk to them, and Malcom had enjoyed complaining about this with Janice, Sally and Susan. It had been fun to join in with them, like he was part of something.

He hadn't been included in their conversations much at all, for years. If he did pipe up with something they would treat him with cautious indifference. But last year he'd found a little toy that he put on his desk because it amused him, it was a little yellow animal-thing dressed as a mechanic.

'Oh!' Sally had said, as if she was understanding him for the first time. 'Is that a present from a grandchild?'

Malcom felt that he should say yes. He saw Sally's face change. He wasn't quite sure why, but that was when they all started being nicer towards him. They saw him as a hardworking old granddad, a stiff upper lip type, they said. They wanted to hear about his granddaughter. Janice especially; she wanted grandchildren but her own kids were being slow, even though two of them are married now, she'd said. Malcom never knew why he'd said granddaughter, instead of grandson. But it felt right.

The day after Sally asked about the present he brought in a photograph of a little blonde girl. He'd found it on the internet, looking for a girl who looked like she could be related to him.

Last week, Susan had asked if Malcom had a more up-to-date photograph. Malcom had panicked and scoured the internet, but had been unable to find anything of the same child model. He felt strange looking for pictures of children. So he had said that he just didn't see her much. Susan had a small smile on her face. Susan often made Malcom feel nervous and he didn't know why.

He realised that their chattering had stopped and they were grabbing their coats and switching their computers off and fluttering goodbyes towards him and each other. Malcom had been staring out of a window, he had been folding a piece of paper up tight in his hand. Neat, clean folds like he was making a paper aeroplane. He realised he hadn't taken his black fleece off all day and stuffed the paper into his pocket.

'Night, Tom,' said Malcom, knocking on his boss's door. 'Remember I've got the dentist first thing in the morning.'

'Right-o. Have a good evening, Malcom,' came the reply. Tom was always the last to leave the office and some days he rarely came out. He probably should see them all more, it wasn't really fair on them. But he was a nice guy, so he wasn't going to complain about him.

The bus ride home was awful. He hated leaving work at the same time as everybody else. He hated all of the people crammed in like sardines. He tried not to think about them all there together, and was just looking forward to his evening alone. He was relieved to get home to privacy at last.

He unlocked his front door, took off his black work shoes and placed them carefully by the doorway. Karen would have said that they needed polish but he didn't have any. He put the TV on. He hated silence. This was his little ritual. The TV always went on first in the evening. It meant that he was alone again, apart from the people on TV. He never opened the curtains of his little house and he liked it dark. He didn't want people looking in, seeing him. He had never liked people staring at him. He remembered when Karen used to laugh at the hump he was getting on his back, because he sat hunched over computers all day. Called him Quasimodo. That had been a nickname towards the end.

He could have a real grandchild out there, that would be nice. The TV played bright and loud adverts, overpowering his small dark room. But he knew he didn't have any offspring, not

really. He and his wife hadn't had sex in those last months. There was no way. They hadn't been using contraception for years. One of them was barren and they had both been sure it was him.

So she left and he didn't like people getting too close anymore. They would know too much about you and would be able to use it against you. He walked into his dark kitchen and looked into the freezer. A chicken curry for dinner tonight, he thought. That'll be good. He removed the cardboard and pierced the see-through lid a few times and put the tray into the microwave. The smell of the spicy-bland sauce, tinged with burning plastic, reached his nostrils. It didn't make him feel hungry, but you had to eat to survive.

He thought about his ex-wife as the microwave whirred. He'd thought about her a lot recently. He'd tried looking for her online but had never been able to find her. She had probably changed her name, probably multiple times, knowing Karen. He'd thought about getting a dog for company but had never got around to it, just like he had never got around to fixing the hole in the roof, which was getting bigger, or meeting another woman and getting re-married. Karen was the one who got things done.

He removed his steaming dinner from the microwave, turned it out onto a plate so that it looked even worse, and ate it in front of the TV. He flicked through the channels until he found a family movie. He loved kids' movies. He thought about watching them with the little blonde girl he said was his granddaughter. She looked like a Claire in her photo, so he'd started calling her that at work. He and Claire would watch these silly films together and laugh. He'd gone to the cinema a few times to watch the clever, colourful animations. But he wasn't there with a child. A grey-haired old man wasn't supposed to see kids' movies by himself. One woman gave him a dirty look and grabbed her children by the hand, dragging them away from him. He didn't go again after that.

He looked around at his house. He had lived here a long time now. He put the used plate on the floor. He would wash it up, eventually. His aunt would have barked at him for leaving it on the floor after eating. In fact, she would have frowned upon his watching TV when eating dinner. She frowned upon a lot of things. He always wondered if his mother would have been nicer, but he never dared ask. He couldn't even really ask his dad that. They didn't have that kind of relationship.

He liked his dark, comfortable house. He couldn't remember ever having anybody over since he moved here, about twenty years ago now. He felt weird when the gas-man came to read the meter, like the gas-man was invading his privacy. He didn't like letting people into his own space. So, he supposed, it was for the best that he didn't have a grandchild anyway. What if it didn't feel welcome?

It was strange that Malcom had never really wanted children but now he really wanted grandchildren. And, he thought, you couldn't have grandchildren without having children first. It was Karen who wanted the IVF which, in the early 1990s, hadn't been up to much, not really. But she wanted to leave him, because they knew it was him, and have babies while she still could. He met her when she was 22, and their first conversation had involved babies. He wondered where Karen was now, maybe she had grandchildren.

Well, good luck to her, thought Malcom. She wanted them. *The trouble with me is I never knew what I wanted. I still don't.* Was he doing life wrong? He felt like he'd been doing everything wrong since he was a child and he didn't know how anyone managed to do things right. He'd been a timetabling person in schools all his life, since he left school at 16 with bad

grades, and he'd never had a promotion. He wasn't promotable. He was dependable, though. He always got work finished. He was good at his job. Too good, Sally used to say that they didn't talk to him much because he spoke like a computer: room A37 is free from 14:00 – 16:00, she said, in a robot voice, but it didn't seem like a very accurate impression to Malcom.

He watched the TV. Cartoons were like a hug, he watched them when he was a child when his aunt was out. It made him feel nice to watch them, calm. He hadn't watched them when he lived with Karen, of course; the one time he had she said that he'd been mocking her. 'Don't you even want children?' she'd asked. Rather than explaining his love for cartoons to her, the thought of which felt exhausting, he decided to say that he wasn't really watching them and that he'd been asleep. She was then worried about him sleeping so early in the morning and that maybe that affected his sperm. He didn't watch them again, when Karen was in, after that.

He had lost interest in most adult's programmes now, except when he didn't mind what was on. He'd lost interest in the news because he didn't understand what was happening anymore. He had a collection of cartoon DVDs, hidden away behind shelf doors under the TV. He didn't know who he was actually hiding them from, because he never let anyone in. But, like the woman who reacted to him in the cinema knew, old men weren't supposed to watch these films by themselves. He supposed he was an old man now. What if Eddie came round and saw his films? He wouldn't be able to explain why he liked them. He'd always kept them hidden. Maybe a child would understand. Most adults didn't seem to understand anything. Most of the time he still felt like a little boy, doing everything wrong. But cartoons never judged him.

He opened his cabinet and the sight of all of the colourful DVD covers made him smile. He ordered lots of DVDs online, so much so that a website sent him a 'Happy Father's Day' email last June. They thought he was a young dad. They recommended bottles and nappies to him now. But at least he got his DVDs. He picked out another one to watch. It was his special treat at the end of a working day. He'd wash his plate up soon.

The dentist's appointment had been routine, and Malcom found himself getting into work at a respectable 10:17. But he knew that something was off as soon as he walked into H40. Sally didn't respond when he said 'morning,' even though she was staring at him, and Janice said it through gritted teeth. What had happened? As he walked past them, he saw them turn towards each other and raise their eyebrows. Susan wasn't there.

He had barely sat down at his desk when Tom came over to him. Malcom knew Tom had to do a lot of the finance things for the school, but he had never asked him about his work. Malcom realised he had no idea what Tom did all day.

'Can you come into my office, please, Malcom?' asked Tom in a hushed voice. Had Malcom messed up a room booking? He had never done that before. He was still clutching his bag as he walked into the office. Tom's office was a smaller old classroom linked to their main office. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in here. There were lots of papers with complicated sums on the desk, it was a mess. There was a picture of a woman and two children, which must have been Tom's family. Malcom noted that Tom had a better computer than the ones in the office.

'Well, Malcom,' said Tom, sitting down on his side of the desk and gesturing that Malcom take a seat. He had just been standing there, waiting for orders. Tom was looking at

him as if he were strange. Had the trip to the dentist made his jaw swell up? It didn't feel swollen. It still tasted fresh and clean. Malcom had no idea what might have happened. 'You've got yourself into quite a bit of trouble.'

'Why?' he asked. He felt small. He hadn't realised he was doing it until Tom looked at the shapes his hand was making in his pocket: he was fiddling with the piece of paper he'd folded up last night. He didn't know why fiddling with paper comforted him, but it always had. People here used to think it was weird and then when he said he had a granddaughter they accepted his strange habit. He felt like he was making another faux pas and he didn't know why. Why was it so difficult to fit in?

Watching Malcom play with the paper in his fleece pocket had made Tom look even more worried. Malcom took his hand out of his pocket and rested it on his lap. He wished he could fiddle with that bit of paper again, it was comforting. Malcom wondered how Tom coped. He stared at Tom's green and blue checked tie, his crisp white shirt. How did he get those uncomfortable clothes to look so nice? Especially when he had a family and a more demanding job than Malcom had. He always looked put together and Malcom had no idea how he did it.

'I'll just say it,' said Tom. 'The photo of your so-called granddaughter,' he said. There was emphasis on the 'so-called'. 'Susan found it online last night. The exact same photo. It was on a news website. It's a stock photo, apparently.'

Malcom wanted to explain that it had made people interested in him, want to talk to him. Who cared if it was fake? He'd just wanted them to like him. And they had, when they thought he was a doting grandad. Maybe there was something more. He couldn't get in trouble just for that, surely? His heart sank when he remembered Susan getting the cleaner fired last year. He had never liked Susan. She had it in for him, for some reason. She had it in for some people and she must have it in for him. What had he done to her?

But he didn't say any of this, he didn't know how to articulate it.

'It's made a lot of the workers very uncomfortable,' said Tom. But there were only three other workers. 'You know what a place like this is like, Malcom. We can't let something like this get out. It's a school, for Christ's sake. What were you thinking?'

Tom started rummaging through one of his desk drawers. For the first time Malcom was glad that Tom had an office with a door. *What did Tom do in here all day, anyway?* That was one of the things you said to fit into their office group. Tom pulled out a folder from one of the drawers.

'I'd like you to take early retirement, Malcom,' said Tom.

Malcom didn't understand. He wanted to make an eloquent plea, to explain everything, for these people who he had worked with for years to like him again. But he'd never been one of those people.

'Your colleagues,' said Tom, gesturing to the door, 'don't want to work with you anymore. It's difficult. They all have real kids and grandkids, Malcom and they want to... protect them.'

Malcom couldn't understand what Tom meant by this. He felt numb, his mouth was suddenly dry. He didn't know what to do.

'Now,' continued Tom, grabbing a folder with Malcom's full name on it, 'you were going to retire in a couple of years anyway. And we wanted to keep this quiet, but this department is

going to be streamlined soon, probably. We would have asked you to take early retirement in the near future regardless.'

'I don't want to retire,' said Malcom in a quiet voice.

'Malcom, we're not asking. People will go to HR with this if you stay, and we would have asked you to leave in a few months anyway, probably. Just...'

Tom dragged a hand through his thinning hair and looked Malcom in the eyes for the first time since he came into his office. 'Don't you see that it's a bit weird? I'm doing the kindest thing for you here.'

Malcom didn't understand. All that time he'd worked with him, years and years, and Tom was looking at him like he was a total stranger, like he didn't know him. Malcom didn't know what to do, what to say, so he just turned and left the office.

'You'll thank me, soon,' said Tom in a quiet voice just before Malcom's hand reached the doorknob.

Sally, Susan and Janice were huddled together around Susan's computer. They were suddenly quiet; Malcom knew that they had just stopped talking to stare at him. He hated people staring at him. At least Malcom had been right about something - when the girls were quiet it was time to worry. Sally and Janice looked scared of him, but he wasn't quite sure why. Susan was looking at him like he was a joke. He remembered that look from his last months with Karen, when she called him Quasimodo. He remembered his aunt looking at him like that, too. He didn't understand women. But, come to think of it, he didn't really understand men, either. He didn't say anything. What could he say? They looked like they would bite him if he said anything to them, even 'goodbye'. He had worked with them every day for three years and they didn't want to say goodbye and he didn't understand.

He automatically walked over to his desk. But he didn't have anything to pick up, did he? No pictures because he didn't have anybody to have any pictures of. He was still clutching his battered work bag. He left the stock photo of the little girl on his desk. He felt bad for the picture of Claire, he hoped she wouldn't be lonely. He hoped nobody would tear the picture up, poor girl.

You couldn't trust people, he thought, as he walked down the hallway for the last time. This is what you get for wanting to join in. He had tried all his life to join in, tried hard, and it always went well for a while, but then people let you down. They're cruel to you because you're not like them. He just wanted to do his job and get people to like him. Why was he always being punished for that? He would go back to his tower, his DVDs. He realised that he hadn't actually seen Eddie for months. *He must be ok with his Mrs now.* Malcom would go back and watch his DVDs. His cartoons never let him down.

A Brief History of My Hair

Ann Liska

Rita, my hairdresser, slaps a stack of magazines on the table in front of me. "Have a look through these, then," she says. I'm her last client of the day. Rita's been doing my hair ever since I arrived in Abu Dhabi and looked up her salon on expatwoman.com. I always get the same cut and the same color, and now I've told her I want something different.

"What about the color?" Rita asks. She's a professional, and very polite, but still I can hear the faint edge in her voice. I'm a steady client; I tip well and don't demand much. I sense that Rita wonders if I've suddenly turned into a diva.

"I'll keep the color," I say, though I'd thought about changing that, too. Something extreme: platinum blonde or silver grey. Well, maybe next time.

Rita goes off to mix up some strawberry blonde, a color my hair never actually was, and I leaf through the magazines. The models look impossibly young. There are all sorts of styles: everything from simple bobs to weaves and multi-colored extensions. One girl appears to be wearing a bird's nest on her head.

"I'm sorry, Rita. I'm sure everybody does this, coming in and not knowing what they want."

Rita doesn't answer. She begins to apply the color mixture; it stings.

"I used to wear my hair like this, but I don't know. Maybe I'm too old now." The style is a modified pixie cut. The model can't be older than twenty or weigh more than 100 pounds. I'm over sixty and as for my weight, well.

"Do you have a picture?" Rita asks. But the only pictures I have of my younger self are the ones in my head.

Rita's Filipina assistant takes me off for a brisk shampoo and head massage during which I nearly fall asleep. When she leads me back to the chair, Rita has taken my suggested hair style on board. She's also regained her cheery disposition, and chatters as she cuts.

"Ever see those trash TV shows? You know - the ones where they try to make you over or whatever." Rita has put most of my hair into clips on top of my head, like a surgeon sectioning off a tumor. She attacks the remaining hair with her scissors, coming at my head in oblique angles.

After critiquing the makeover shows, Rita and I proceed to solve the world's problems as more of my hair falls to the floor. We discuss parenthood, grandparenthood, religion, politics, climate change, Kim Kardashian, Victoria Beckham, and other topics of world-altering importance. I'm usually a quiet person, but Rita's practiced patter gets me started talking more than usual; it's almost like being drunk or drugged. My head feels alarmingly bare, but I don't say anything. When the steady clipping finally stops, it seems too quiet, like during a snowfall back home.

The woman in the mirror is not my younger self. She's old and fat. But in her face is the me I thought I'd never see again. The shorter hairstyle shows off my eyes and cheekbones, and as for my chins, somehow they seem lifted too.

The office I manage is staffed by Muslim women who cover their hair. Most expats don't – it's not required or expected, unless visiting a mosque. So my ladies are used to seeing the chin-length asymmetrical bob I've worn since for years. When I walk in with my newly shorn head, they are startled.

"What salon do you go to?" Noura asks. She is from a very conservative family and lives in a multi-generational home. Outside the office, she wears the full face covering, the *niqab*. She is covered in a designer *abaya* and matching *shayla* trimmed with Swarovski crystals. At office lunches, she will not eat if men are present.

"You color it too, yes?" Amna wants to know. As she speaks she adjusts her *shayla*; Noura does that a lot, too. I think maybe they comfort themselves with this gesture, fidgeting with their headgear. It's like a security blanket.

Amna is a new mother, working shorter hours so that she can go home to breastfeed, and she's even shyer than Noura. Before I worked here, I never imagined there could be women shyer than me.

"Yes, of course I color it." I give them the name of Rita's salon.

"Is that your natural color?" Sara asks.

I laugh. "I haven't seen my natural color since I was fourteen," I tell them.

"It's nice," Haya opines. "But you could curl it in the front...and hair spray." She gestures in the air above her pretty face, her headscarf. Sara and Haya are Lebanese. They have adapted the Islamic dress requirements to their own tastes, adding vests and jackets, high-heeled boots and gold jewelry. Sometimes, just to see if I'm paying attention it seems, they wear jeans.

Our boss is on his way and, guiltily, I break up the conversation. We've been talking about my hair for twenty minutes.

One of my sisters was blessed with curly hair. Jan was allowed to grow out her red locks, but the rest of us were given pixie cuts. Mom lamented the fact that three out of four daughters took after her in the hair department. "Stick-straight!" Mom said.

In the early '60s, the styles of my mother's youth gave way to Jackie Kennedy's bouffant. By age 12, my friends and I were all sleeping on pink rollers. In the morning we would unroll our hair, comb it out, and spray it with Aqua Net. If it still looked flat, we'd back-comb it with a teasing comb, or "ratting" comb, so called because the artificial volume resembled a rodent nesting in one's hair. Over the "rat", we would comb the top strands of our hair and then spray it all again. In my high school yearbook, several amazingly high hairdos are visible, though mine is not one of them. I had my hair done that day, but hated the way it turned out. I went home in tears, washed my hair, put it in a ponytail and then drove to the Bill Williams Studio to have my picture taken.

To view our yearbook now is to observe a sea change in hair styles. No one but me had a ponytail. Ratted-up and sprayed hair prevailed among a certain segment. These girls had boyfriends and maybe were not virgins. They wore black clothes, white lipstick, and a lot of eye makeup. They sometimes beat each other up after school, tearing out each other's ratted-up hair. Once in awhile, one of them would leave school, and it was rumored that she was pregnant.

By my junior year, 1968, everybody in America wanted to be a California Girl. Straight hair was the goal - long and blonde, with just a hint of curl at the ends.

To get this effect, wash your hair and put some Dippity-Do hair gel on it. Comb it out and put it in a high ponytail at the top of your head. Wrap this around an empty orange juice or beer can and leave it there all night. (Best to sleep on your stomach.) In the morning, undo it all and brush.

It worked; I wore this hairstyle all through college and well into my first job and my marriage.

At my high school, 90% of the students were Jewish and none of them had straight hair. The method I used would not work for them, so they grew their hair long, then bleached it and then...ironed it. I watched my girlfriend Rachel do this once and I can tell you it's not easy. I offered to help, but Rachel said it was too weird.

My girls – women – who work for me here have their own lives and value systems. It's not my place to question them or judge. But sometimes, I do wonder if they ever envy me the simple pleasure of my hair, unbound, open to whatever possibilities await.

She Was a Good Listener

M.J.luppa

What they say about Angels is exactly right—they stay too briefly, and in my case, my Angel left after a horrible fight over whether or not fresh plums should be refrigerated. I had bought them at the East River farmer’s market that morning, and after rinsing them clean, I left them out to air dry in a ceramic bowl on our small kitchen table. When Angel came home, she noticed that the plums were making their own weather in the bowl, and immediately began to scold me for exposing them to the elements. “Entropy,” she screamed, fluttering about our tiny apartment—her wings unfolding with precision as she grabbed whatever she could carry—this time, the birdcage, with its pair of zebra finches going mad against its thin bars, and her large soft brown leather hobo bag slung over her shoulder like sagging elephant testicles—she stormed out the door, raced down four flights of stairs, and spilled out onto the street. I watched her leave without saying a word. *Why stop her?* Newton would say, ‘An object at rest (that’s me) stays at rest and an object in motion (that’s Angel) stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.’ I didn’t move for a very long time. I stared at the open door—inviting; still, I needed to think. *What just happened?* A tiny milky feather spun a bit on the floor. The apartment was weirdly silent, filling up with twilight. I stood up, looked over my shoulder to the corner where the birdcage once stood, and longed to hear their squeaker toy-beeps. *What to do?* I grabbed a plum and planted it in my mouth. I closed my eyes and took a deep bite. It was sweet and juicy at room temperature; and my teeth didn’t ache, like they usually did when something is too cold. *This*—I held the bitten fruit out in front of me—*This is just right*. I finished it off, half-listening for footsteps on the stairs. There were none. *Who am I kidding?* Angel was gone. I knew I shouldn’t leave the apartment door open this long, but I did, just to be sure. I ate all the plums, waiting on the couch. I must have dozed off when I heard Harry Crawley, my next door neighbor, return home after playing a gig at the Blue Note. He stopped in front of my open door and leaned in: “Knock, knock—Alex, you there—dead or alive?” “Barely,” I answered. “You want me to close the door?” “Yeah, close it... Angel left hours ago... She took the birds.” Without another word, Harry closed the door. I heard the snick of the lock and his feet shuffling down the hallway to his apartment. It was time to call it a night.

Morning came, and day moved into night, into the next day as predicted. I drew bright red Xs across the days on our customized photo calendar, marking each day without Angel. Seeing candid shots of us at Coffee, Coffee Café, Prospect Park, around the corner laundry, made me wonder if Angel was real. Months passed. I could barely remember her voice. Whenever I’m walking, which is all the time, I think I catch a glimpse of her. But, it’s never her. *What were the odds of not ever seeing her again?* This became my single thought that carried me through the hundred days of autumn. *What were the odds?*

Brooklyn in autumn is better in classic black and white films, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. I seem to be watching them dance room to room, with the sound off. I don’t want to hear them say ‘I love you, darling,’ only see it in their eyes. *Actors!* They make it look so

effortless—the way they hear a full orchestra at just the right moment. *Kiss*. I look up from my computer to see how it ends. I click the television off and look back at my work, trying to come up with a branding strategy for a new athletic wear market that caters to casual marathon runners. You know, the corporate-hip runners, who have dirty martinis with extra olives in their water bottles. They hardly break a sweat, catching a subway three blocks after the crowded start, riding for fifteen minutes, and getting off two blocks away from the finish line. On Facebook, you will see them with their water bottles raised high, their big smiles of I-got-away-with-it, and their followers with 50+ strong thumbs up, proving they did get away with it. *Who am I to judge?*

I can hear Harry moving around in his apartment. He's looking for something, and he can't find it. He's in a heavy-footed hurry, stopping at my door, *knock-knock*.

"Come on in, Harry, it's open."

Harry opens the door with his mug in hand. He tips it over. Nothing spills out.

"Fresh coffee in the pot, help yourself."

He nods and goes into the kitchen area and pours himself a cup, then comes back to where I'm working, with his mug pressed to his lips. He looks over my shoulder.

"Good?"

He nods—smiles and takes another deep swallow.

"New job?"

"Yep, athletic wear for the faux fit—sweat-less shirts and pants."

"I hate running."

"Me, too."

"Alex, you seriously make great Joe, man. I mean, this hits the spot."

"Help yourself, Harry."

"I think I will. I'm feeling it."

"I can see that. Jamaica-Me-Crazy."

"Is this freelance or your dream job?"

"Yeah, it's pointless and possibly deadly, like meetings with clients."

"I hear ya, man, meetings are such a conflict of interest."

"Yeah, they sure are."

"How are you doing? You sure are playing a lot of gigs."

"Yeah, it's good...*really* good. Going on tour for a few months."

"Where are you going?"

"Europe, ten cities. I'll be leaving in March. It will give me time to sublet my place. Do you know anyone who would like to live next door to you?"

Harry pushes his hand against my shoulder, in that 'just kidding' kind of way.

"I was going to ask you to take me with you."

He pushes me again.

"Oh, I get it, you can drink my coffee here, but you can't see a traveling mug in the future.

Thanks a lot, Harry."

"You got the funds to go to Europe, man? This isn't on me."

"I get it, Harry. Send postcards, you know I live vicariously."

"Will do," he answered, a bit sheepishly. "I'm going to get another refill and head back to my place. I need to practice some new material. I won't bother you, will I?"

“Nope, you never do. I’m almost finished with this and I have an appointment in—yikes, an hour, I better get going, too. Like, our people say, Harry, here’s your hat, what’s your hurry.” I stand up and open the apartment door for him.

“Yeah, I can take the hint. See you later, Alex.”

The meeting went well, but they always do. People love me. I’m such an agreeable guy. Now I have another job where I get to practice my degrees in Philosophy and Communications. I am basically a bona fide confidence man. *This is my life?* Here I am, standing on the verge of turning sixty, and what have I accomplished? My fiction is just *fiction*—made up in my head, but not on paper. I could take up smoking skinny cigars and hanging out at open mics, hoping to muster the courage to talk with that closed circle of just-published creative writers—the ones who have their petulant sneer fixed on their faces, like they’re trying to locate a bad smell. I love the way they wear disdain like privilege—like cats, they can say or do something that’s so offensive on so many levels, and not even flinch; they just look away as if it’s obviously no big deal. Come to think of it, this was Angel’s one flaw, and she didn’t like it when I called her out on her many prejudices. She said I was a hayseed, an Upstate hillbilly, living where? Western NY? Everyone know Upstate is White Plains. Everyone knows NYC and its five boroughs is the alpha and omega. Chrissakes, I’m never going to fit in. Angel is good and gone, and I’m still here on a train going nowhere. I looked up and saw my stop’s sign, Bedford Avenue, flash before my eyes. I exited the train, moving among the crowd on the platform, and walked up the flight of stairs to street level where I stood in the chilly twilight air. I couldn’t go home to nothing. I shoved my hands in my pockets and began the long walk towards the East River State Park.

In the many minutes that it took to get there, I was numb to the cold, the premature Christmas lights, the noise of the busy streets—all I could think of was the heaviness in my heart, like a jar of pennies, shifting back and forth. My chest ached. When I got to river’s edge, I stopped on the promenade to look across the way at the city’s buildings, full of lights, reflecting off the slightly ruffled water. I never do well in situations where I am seemingly suspended in the air that’s sky-water-earth—I jumped—arms outstretched as if I were going to greet the baby Jesus.

I jumped as if nothing mattered—thoughts of turkey, scented candles, new wool socks just seemed so silly. I jumped, just to feel something. *Cold*—the water was very cold, and I, I was sinking fast in the swell of small waves coming over my head. I held my breath and went under, trying to see if I could find bottom. I came up quickly, hands held up above my head, then something poked me in the back. It felt like a finger, and I reached behind me and grabbed hold of it—it was a hand. *Oh, jumpin’ Joseph, it’s a dead body. I’m holding some stiff’s hand.*

When I flipped around, I lost hold, but quickly found the body bobbing next to me. It was plastic and slippery, and as I slid my hand down its arm and over its torso, I realized it wasn’t human, but a mannequin, and it was floating, whereas I was not. I grabbed her around the waist and together we doggie-paddled towards the pylons, where I managed to get us both out of the water. We sat on the bank, this doll and me, soaking wet and stupid, so stupid—the look of surprise on her face and mine. *Oh, my aching ass.* I looked around, praying that there were no police in the area to question what I was doing. I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, but I knew I had to get up and act invisible. *No problem, I can do this.* I stood up and put my

arms around her, and we began to walk. The two of us, in one big, soggy hurry down the path and out of the park, 1-2, 1-2, 1-2-3— eyes straight ahead—all the long way home.

When we finally got home, I was frozen. I tore off my stinky clothes in the threshold of the apartment and put the doll in the corner where the birdcage once stood; then jumped in the shower, letting the spray of hot water pass over me until I could feel my wrinkled fingertips. *I was alive. She saved me. No one needs to know about this. Not even Harry.* By the time I was dried off and in a warm set of flannels, I knew that this incident had to be kept quiet. I looked up, sensing eyes were watching me, and saw the doll in the corner—her eyes, full of scorn, looking straight through me. I grabbed a throw off of the couch and draped it over her head and around her figure. She needed clothes, and hair, and shoes. Strangely, she looked like she was warming up. For now, she'll have to wear this makeshift poncho. I smoothed her shoulders.

“Tomorrow, I'll find you something better, I promise.”

The next day I woke to bars of sunlight passing through the cracks in the blinds and surrounding my bed. I reached through the bars and pulled myself upright on the mattress. The bars didn't vanish. I was in prison. I sat there, looking at everything in my room—the gooseneck lamp, the stack of books on the floor, the water glass on the nightstand, the clothes dripping off the chair—all were in the same exact place as the day Angel left. Nothing had moved. In fact, lifting something up would no doubt leave an outline of dust. I decide to make a break for it. It was time. I jumped—in quick steps, I slipped through the living room, heading to bathroom; then into the kitchen, and ending up on the couch where I red X-ed the day, November 15th, without looking. Soon, it would be Thanksgiving. I looked over at the doll in the corner and saw that she had slid a bit, her forehead pressing against the wall. I got up and went over to fix her. In daylight, I could see that she had moveable limbs, so I brought her to the couch and sat her down next to me. Her hand pointed at my computer. Following her direction, I opened it and began to work. She watched everything I did, without interruption. Her blue eyes seemed amused, not full of scorn like the night before. I continued to work, but I could feel her boredom, so I turned on the flat screen to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. This time she watched and I continued to work quietly. By the end of the film, I was finished with emails and client work, and ready to go out and find her some decent clothes.

“Listen, I'll be back in an hour. I'm going out to find you something to go with your blue eyes. Why don't you rest awhile? We went through quite an ordeal last night, don't you think?” I left without hearing her answer, but she seemed to nod a yes as she tipped over to rest her head on one of the couch pillows.

Outside, the day was beginning to lose its November chill. The sun was bright and bold, shining off of every surface. I walked not two blocks with my head held slightly down to avoid the glare, and to my good luck, I found a box full of women's clothing left by the tenant garbage cans. I stooped down to take a closer look: Hardly worn. Size six. A blue silk scarf, with an Escher bird and fish design. *This is just too good to be true.* I scooped the box up and headed back home.

Is this fate? Finding the box in less than ten minutes was beyond my wildest dream; and yet, this felt like a dream. I was grinning, my chin resting on the top of the box. I managed to

get the entrance door open, without putting the box down, and headed up the wide circular granite stairs. Floor to floor, I could smell the foods from faraway places; I could hear the news, and music, and an argument in 201. Harry passed me on the third-floor stairs.

Hey, Alex, you have company staying with you?

“No, no company.”

“Really, I’d swear I heard voices coming from your apartment.”

“I must have left the flat screen on.”

“Oh, that makes sense. What’s in the box?”

“Clothes. Nothing to speak of.”

“Yeah? Did you score some new threads?” He peeked into the box. “Whoa, these aren’t for you, are they? Are you trying to tell me something, Alex?”

“No, no,” thinking fast, “I was asked by some friends to help with costumes for a new play going up at the Brick Theatre in a couple of weeks.”

“Ah, sounds good. Let me know when it opens, I’d like to see it.”

“Right, I will.”

“I’m off tonight. Wanna grab a bite and do something?”

“Maybe. It all depends on... I’ll let you know, later, okay? Box is getting heavy and I don’t want to hold you up. I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, later.”

The sound of footsteps rising and falling echoed on the staircase. I was soon home free. I set the box down on the floor next to the door. The flat screen was off. The doll was sitting upright on the couch, arms raised in hello—her look of surprise—glad to see me.

I walked over to the couch and helped her to her feet. As I pulled her forward, her hood fell away from her head and I saw a name written in cursive at the base of her neck: *Mary. Mary.* *Mary* is a good name; certainly better than calling you Doll.

“*Mary*, I picked up some clothes for you. Let’s see if they fit.”

We waltzed over to the box and I stood her up in the corner again. Unpacking the clothes, I couldn’t believe how perfect everything was—a complete outfit. Although no undergarments, but Angel always said it was healthier for women to go commando. *What did I know?* I found it quite provocative, and I think that was the whole point—some kind of an allure. So I dressed her in slim-fitted black jeans, a slinky gray vee-neck overshirt, and made a neatly folded head scarf that hid her baldness and accentuated the color of her eyes. Too bad this box didn’t have a wig, but that would be too far-fetched. Who would believe that luck? I gave *Mary* a spin to see her from all sides.

“*Mary*, you look like some kind of wonderful.”

I took her back to the couch and, once again, made her comfortable. She watched me as I began picking up the apartment. I turned on Pandora, and to my surprise Cheryl Crow’s song, “A Change Would Do You Good” began blasting out of the speakers. *A sign from the universe.* *Mary* seemed delighted by the lyrics. How fitting, seeing the situation we were in. I kept cleaning. The final sweep of the broom found the stray gray feather—everything into the trash, bundled up, and taken downstairs to the can corral for tomorrow’s pick-up. All signs of Angel were gone.

Coming back inside, I found the apartment less oppressive—actually airy, and this felt

good. Mary had one arm up, in that 'you-did-it' high five. *I did it.* I sat down next to Mary and told her the whole story. How I met Angel, and Mary listened intently, without any fatigue. She listened with her eyes. Mary understood me more than I understood me. *I said everything.* Mary leaned her head against my shoulder and we sat in silence for a long time. Night was coming on. *Everything was out in the open.* Angel was *never* coming back...

Knock, knock—Alex, are you home?

The First World War Considered as a 2D Tournament Fighter

Zach Smith

A few quarters are thrown into an arcade cabinet. Like so many others, our player thinks he will win the game quickly. He selects Gavrilo Princip, the computer opponent is Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Stage is an alley in Sarajevo. The Archduke's life bar is quickly shaved down as he does little to prevent the damage. After two rounds he stands wobbly and unconscious, while Gavrilo Princip uses his finishing move, a gunshot to the head.

In the second level our player finds himself in Ypres, the opponent is a young Gefreiter with a distinctive mustache. He is tricky, one of the fastest characters in the game. For his finishing move (which our player unfortunately gets to see firsthand) he puts on a gas mask. The screen fills with a yellow gas. Gavrilo is covered in blisters then explodes. To go for a heightened state of reality the arcade cabinet comes with a vial of mustard scented salts that is opened in front of a fan so that the player can in a way smell the gas. As perverse as it might seem, the arcade has tripled its sales of hotdogs and soft pretzels since the machine was installed.

The sensory overload confuses our player and he accidentally chooses the British Field Nurse as his next player. Anticipating a quick defeat he gets his quarters ready, but to his surprise the nurse is actually quite powerful and defeats the young Gefreiter quickly. Her finishing move makes our player questions why this game is available for children.

In round three the nurse takes on an Ottoman Soldier in the Arabian Desert, a 16-bit rendition of the theme from Lawrence of Arabia plays, and pixels move in the background in imitation of a mirage. After an intense battle the nurse is standing on wobbly legs. The Ottoman runs off screen and returns with an overstuffed leather chair and foot rest, and sits with cigarette and sunglasses while the British Field Nurse is obliterated by a beam of intense sunlight.

Our player throws more quarters into the machine and selects T.E. Lawrence, who for a finishing move, levitates the Ottoman, pixelating him into a 16-bit mirage.

In the fourth level (the last year of the war) Lawrence finds himself on the deck of the Lusitania, fighting Paul von Hindenburg. Hindenburg uses a stage specific finisher in which he ties Lawrence to the deck, and jumps overboard just before the ship is torpedoed.

Our player chooses his last available character... Uncle Sam.

Once Hindenburg is defeated and the Lusitania is avenged, our player moved on to Flanders Fields to fight the sub-boss Kaiser Wilhelm II. The battle is tough, going down to the tiniest blot on the life bar for each character, but in the end Uncle Sam wins by throwing the Kaiser high into the air and firing fireworks at him which rain down in a sparkling star spangled banner (with a small caption beneath reading: "Eat at Joe's").

Our Player has made it to the final battle. The opening movement of Beethoven's 9th playing in the background of a stage simply called Europe. The opponent is a pale gray ghost, in a patchwork of different cultures, roughly twice the size of any other opponent, is name: the Spirit of Europe.

The final boss is the hardest yet, but he is no match for the fresh Uncle Sam.

With a final hit the Spirit of Europe is defeated; his body begins to quake, and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (the last movement of the 9th Symphony) begins to play. The spirit

erupts, a hundred ghosts fly out of him in all directions, each one a different nationality, he shrinks in size until he is gone forever.

The music continues playing as the screen fades to black. A scrolling dialog reads: "Congratulations! You have completed: World War Tournament Fighter, the Old Spirit of Europe has been defeated and the world has been changed forever. (If anybody has won this war it was you.)"

An option is given to play again without charge as a reward, but our player passes the free game off to a younger kid.

The only question remaining is: will there be a sequel?

Close Call
Shawn Yager

I walked over to the window and opened it. It opened so easy, like it was meant to be. I swung my leg up over the windowsill, my head turned in the direction of the bathroom door. On the other side of the window, I was greeted by a rusty fire escape and an alley.
I felt like I had just jumped out of an airplane.

*

We sat around the apartment, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. The people around me kept their feelings hidden behind blank expressions. Or maybe I was just terrible at reading their faces. I've always been that way.

Once a girlfriend got angry with me for that. "I shouldn't have to tell you how I'm feeling," she said, and then she clammed up for the rest of the night, just did her shots and watched her TV.

Anyway, I felt like we should have been talking about the job we just pulled. What went right, what we could improve on. What next. You would think that people would want to talk, especially since this was a big job, with a big payload, but no. I felt it went great, but no one here seemed to share my feelings.

I got antsy.

Should I have been the guy who got the ball rolling? No. I'll be the first to admit that I'm a follower, not a leader. When I'm in a group, I do what I'm told. I don't order people around. I don't come up with ideas. I'm just a grunt. I like it that way. No one likes the leader. If something goes wrong, the boss is quick to put the blame on the crew. Not me, though. Someone gives me shit I just give it right back. They keep me around, though. I guess I'm good at what I do.

*

I was surprised at how bright the sun was. Hadn't seen the sun in a long time, I guess. If I were a kid on a day like today, my aunt would have been on my ass to turn the TV off and go play outside in the street. We didn't have a yard. The nearest park was a haven for junkies, even in broad daylight, so I was never allowed to play there--but I did anyway. Which may explain how I ended up in my present situation, all these years later. Not that I ever got hooked on junk, luckily. But as they say, if you want to get rich, don't become a junkie, start supplying junkies.

OK, no one ever said that. But you get my drift.

*

Anyway, if I get too antsy, shit starts to break.

My knuckles were still sore from the last time I got too antsy.

I stood up and started pacing.

As I paced, I pulled out a pack of cigarettes. I walked over to a guy sitting on the edge of the couch, Bill. His girlfriend, Sue, was sitting next to him and staring at her phone. The light from the screen made her face look milky white. Normally quite foxy, she now looked like a wax statue that was about to start melting. I asked Bill for a light.

"Oh, sure," he said. He took a lighter out of his shirt pocket and handed it over.

"Thanks," I said, using it. I handed it back, and said, "How's it going?"

"Great, you?"

*

The fire escape ran along a row of four windows.

*

It was like we hadn't seen each other in a couple of weeks and then we ran into each other at some corner store buying cigarettes and condoms. You know how it is, you catch up real quick and then you say, "Well, see you later," or something like that, and you go your separate ways. We weren't like that. We'd worked together for a good long time, and talked quite a bit. Even got a little personal.

"So, Bill, what the hell is going on?" I asked in a harsh whisper. "What are we doing here?"

*

I tried the first window. "Dammit!" It was locked from the inside and the curtains were drawn. I had no intention of banging on it. I didn't need the extra attention if someone was home.

*

He looked at me, held my gaze for a minute as if he was wondering whether he should tell me anything.

"We need to be sure that it's safe to leave."

"OK. Now we're getting somewhere. I'm just getting awful tired of sitting around, you know."

"You and me both, brother. Just hang in there a little while longer. Then we can get the hell out."

"Come on, it already feels like it's been forever."

"You want go out there and have the cops snag your ass as soon as you're out the door? It can't be much longer. Here, take one of these pills, they make time go faster." Bill reached into his pocket.

"No thanks," I said. "That stuff doesn't work for me. I'd have to down the whole bottle."

He shrugged, and thrust out his hand. We shook.

"Thanks again for the light."

*

I tried the second window. "What the hell!" I growled. It, too, was locked. I was normally not afraid of heights. Right now, though, where all that supported me was a few thin rusty iron beams, no railing, that swayed in the breeze? Hell yes, I was afraid of heights!

*

We were waiting for it to be safe. To be honest, I wasn't sure what Bill was talking about. You wait for it to be safe and it just makes it easier for the cops to find you. I'm not one for waiting, in case you haven't figured that out by now. I'm one for moving around--it's harder to hit a moving target. Again, that's just my opinion.

As I paced, the rest of the group stared at bed bugs laying eggs in the light sockets, totally unaware of me.

*

I didn't hold out much hope for the third window. I figured it would be locked, and it was. I still muttered a heartfelt, "Shit!" before moving slowly on. I had stopped looking at the

pavement below me and trained my eyes on the end of the fire escape. There was only one window left. If this was locked, I didn't know what I would do.

*

I felt like I was in Vegas--with all the blinds drawn, we couldn't tell if it was day or night. At least, that's what I've been told that the casinos are like out there, I've never been. With my luck, I'd lose all of my money and wake up naked and stuck to a cactus out in the middle of the desert.

I had to relieve my bladder, so I walked into the bathroom. The shower curtain was pulled back, and in the tub were a few duffle bags, the "payload."

I felt like opening one up.

You shouldn't mess with those, I thought. You might get caught.

I stood there for a second--two thoughts canceling each other out.

I hated it when that happened. I couldn't make a decision. One of the many things I found annoying with myself. A crook with a conscious? Come on. Another thing that I found annoying about myself was that I had a weakness for strippers down on their luck. And wouldn't you know it, the only kind of strippers I ever ran into were down on their luck.

"Screw it," I said, and unzipped a bag.

The sound of the zipper seemed loud. Even though the door was shut, I glanced over my left shoulder to make sure no one out there heard the sound. Peeking through the keyhole, I could see that everyone was still zonked on Bill's pills, frozen in time.

I stuck my hand inside the bag. I felt a pistol. then felt what could only have been a stack of bills. I pulled it out a little, just a corner. I grinned. I kept my body between the money and the people in the other room as I put the stack into my pants pocket. Then I did the same thing with the pistol.

I was no longer feeling so antsy.

There was a window by the sink.

*

"Sweet Jesus!" I cried as I approached the last window. It was open a crack, just enough for me to get my fingers under it and open it wide enough for me to fall through in a sweaty heap. I didn't care if I fell onto Grandma's eggs and bacon. I just wanted off this goddamn fire escape.

Fortunately, I didn't fall onto Grandma's eggs and bacon, although I was getting hungry. I actually fell onto the landing of a staircase. The fire escape was still deserted when I stood up and glanced out the window to see if anyone was following me.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, and looked down. Cops were breaking down a door.

Well, that just goes to show that you should never wait until the coast is clear. Better to be a moving target.

"Well," I said to my team-mates, "see you when you get out, guys."

They had to expect something like this, I thought, feeling the gun and the cash in my pockets. It's like the big stores, they budget in a certain amount for loss of revenue due to shoplifting. OK, maybe they don't do that, how should I know. But it would make sense if they did.

It was just a little advance payment, that was all. Besides, I wasn't being greedy. Just

one gun, just one bundle of cash. I put my life on the line for these guys. It's what I deserve. No hard feelings? Call me if you ever need my help again. You know how to reach me.

"Don't move."

It sounded like only a cop could sound, so self-assured, so confident. The kind of confidence that only comes from carrying a gun legally, of course. But without a gun?

"Put your hands on your head. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law--"

"There's been a mistake, officer," I said, still with my back turned. "You got the wrong guy."

"Oh, I'm sure," he said as he found the gun and the cash.

"I was just holding the gun for a friend," I said as he handcuffed me.

"What about the money, huh?"

"Oh, well, the money's mine. I won it fair and square on a scratch ticket."

"Right."

I scowled. You can't talk to cops. They take everything so seriously.

My Mother's Lovers
Ilene Dube

Mack was the man who laundered my father's shirts. Once a week he delivered them to our house in a tall cardboard box with crisp white folded layers, carefully wrapped with strips of light blue paper. My mother, wearing a white silk robe with soft blue ribbon woven through the lace trim, stood on one foot in the doorway, the other foot wrapped around the first, as she talked to him.

He had a nursery behind his laundry shop, and he often brought her newly incubated shrubs. My father planted the young azaleas and rhododendron in our front bed, and then Mack would come to check his babies. He'd talk endlessly to my mother about how to care for them. It seemed so boring to me, pruning and fertilizing. He'd squat in the bed, a little man with a shiny pate caressing their mutual offspring.

I don't think she loved him. He always had a toothpick dangling from his rotting teeth. My mother was an attentive listener, and they stood there in our doorway talking for hours. When she came back inside, she'd be lost in another world. Anything I'd say, her response was, "Uh huh." I'd have to ask a question a hundred times before she even heard me. Was she thinking about him? I think she loved that he loved her. I know she loved the shrubs. My father didn't even bring flowers.

I remember finding a piece of paper on the kitchen counter one morning while they were talking, and I began ripping it, slowly, carefully, at the corner. I ripped it into the tiniest pieces I could make with my fingers. By the time I was done and had a nice little pile of confetti, they were still talking. I got a bowl out of the cupboard and filled it with the shreds. I put my creation at the center of the kitchen table. When my mother finally came in and saw it, she called me a little monster. But I had never seen a check before.

My mother's second lover was Paul Stack. He was our uncle. Actually, she loved Paul Stack before she ever met my father. He was a dancer, and he'd hold her in his arms and whirl her around the dance floor. She was Cinderella being whisked off by Prince Charming. He also danced on ice with women in flesh-colored tights and short skirts. My mother loved him madly, but he was too old, he told her, and so he introduced her to his cousin, my father.

Our family album has, at its very beginning, black and white photos of my mother and father and Paul Stack at the beach, on the volleyball court, in a boat. Paul Stack had broad shoulders when he was young. I can see why my mother loved him. Also, when he had hair, it was blond and curly. There's a picture of him in his sailor uniform, and my mother is kissing his cheek. She's wearing a flapper style white dress with a pleated skirt and a big sailor collar, trimmed with blue anchors at its corners.

Paul Stack danced through their wedding, and during my childhood, we watched home movies of Paul Stack figure skating and dancing with the most beautiful women in the world. Paul Stack travelled to Toronto and Switzerland four times a year for skating competitions, but he never married. Whenever he was in port he'd come to our house. My mother cooked his favorite foods – sweet potato pie, sweet potato soufflé, candied yams, pork chops with sweet potato sauce. They'd talk for hours while my father put us to bed, did the dishes. It all seemed kosher. He was our uncle.

And then there was Art. Art was my father's best friend. Rhonda, Art's daughter, was my best friend. Gracie, Art's wife, was my mother's best friend. One summer evening my parents threw a party. My mother wore a yellow silk dress with spaghetti straps. Rhonda came for me, and we played dress up with my mother's old clothes and makeup. We went outside to show off, and chanced upon my mother and Art in the gazebo. They were discussing which side of his pants he wore it on.

"Well, yes," my mother said when she heard us giggle. "Some men wear it on the right, and some men wear it on the left." My mother had to know about things like this – she was a fashion designer. She had to design men's pants accordingly. Did they need a special little pouch? We had always assumed it would slide into place in a pair of trousers.

Rhonda and I chatted endlessly on the phone about the boys at school. Which side did he wear his on? And what about the history teacher? Was he a lefty or a righty?

We stuffed balloons with dryer lint and made our own little dildos. We experimented: which side would we wear it on, if we had one for real?

Art was a dentist. An aunt told me a story about Art that she read in the newspaper, long ago. He had put a girl under with nitrous oxide, then seduced her. When I asked my parents about it, they said it never happened. Why would he do that to a patient? My father said Art, a handsome and charming man, didn't have to take women unknowingly. My father had the same innocence about my mother's affair with Art.

Two times a year, we went to have Art check our teeth. My mother had glistening white pearls, evenly spaced, cavity free. Art made sure of that. I imagined him polishing the loveliness of her teeth with his tongue.

He examined my brother and me first, leaning in with his starched white shirt with buttons down the side, big broad shoulders. His eyes, twinkling blue, peered into my molars. Art was one of those dentists who keep their tan year-round.

Art had a vacation home on a lake in the mountains, with a sailboat and a powerboat, on which he took Rhonda water skiing. Rhonda skied as if it were one more boring thing she had to do.

I relaxed in the reclining chair as Art probed with that sharp metal pointy thing. His hands were so clean. He made sure you saw him wash them before he put them in your mouth. This was before surgical gloves. Art never had any black in the pores of his hands, the way my father did after working on our car. Art never worked on the car. He brought it to a garage.

His face was on top of mine, his breath in my mouth. Art never had bad breath. Sometimes, in the morning when he woke up, my father had bad breath.

I closed my eyes. It was my dream that my mother would leave my father for Art. We could speed around in his boat, live in his country house. Everything would be as clean as his dental tools and crisp white shirt.

When Art was done examining us, he gave us our prizes. Little plastic sets of teeth, or sometimes a creepy rubber bat. Then we could go on our way while he examined my mother. We played pretend games in the waiting room, and he seemed to take forever to look at my mother's teeth. I could hear them talking and talking and talking. What did grownups have to talk about?

The first time Rhonda came to my house, we were 4. She had a doll that drank water from a baby bottle and then wet a diaper. I was jealous. My dolls didn't do anything. I wanted to play with her doll forever, but she found it all so boring.

During our parents' courtship, we ate out at the Chinese restaurant on Sundays, and while our parents flirted, we told dirty jokes under the table. We said words like boobies and tushies, and laughed our heads off. We hid in my attic and filled sketchpads with pictures of genitals. We were getting away with murder while our parents cavorted.

I remember my father once finding our artwork and showing it to my mother. A self-described progressive, she laughed. My father got angry. He said she was encouraging us.

We went away for a ski weekend. Rhonda and her family could really ski. They had done this sort of thing before. We didn't even have the right clothes, and we had to rent our skis. When my father found out how much the lift tickets cost, he said we could only ski one day. No wonder my mother wanted to leave my father for Art.

The resort we were at had a comedian that night, and Rhonda was allowed to stay up and watch, so my father relented and let me watch, too. I was not getting half the jokes, but feeling so sophisticated among those who drank liqueurs and blew smoke into the hazy light. To Rhonda, this was old hat. She was blasé.

I think we were in fourth grade when I finally figured out how to turn Rhonda on. We waited till our parents were out of the house, and then we looked up the last names of the boys from school in the phone book. We took turns, disguising our voices as best we could and saying "tushy." Then we'd hang up. After an evening of this, we were simply exhilarated.

All week long, we'd sit in our classes in nervous excitement, fearing that our voices would be detected, we'd be exposed. By late week, our faith was renewed, we'd once again start planning who we would call, what we would say.

In sixth grade, our parents would leave us alone for the evening. We slept at each other's houses, throwing out the Swanson's chicken dinners and vigorously scratching the Jiffy Pop tin along the electric burner. We'd start to watch a movie, and then out would come the phone book.

"Hello, is Davy there?" and when he answered, "Hi, this is Marybeth." Marybeth sat in front of me and had large breasts. She was always at ease talking to boys. "Want to see my n-nip..." We'd slam down the phone with uncontrollable laughter.

Next we took up letter writing.

The advantage of letter writing was that we could get out all the words we had thought up. The disadvantage of letter-writing was that, a week later, my teacher passed out a piece of paper and asked us all to write, "Love, Marybeth," and then sign our names. Fortunately, Rhonda had written the letter for me, and I for the boy in her class. We had anticipated the handwriting analysis.

That summer, our parents joined a beach club where they could lie on the deck in chaise lounges, exposing their bodies. Our mothers played mahjong in their bathing suits and high heels, and our fathers played paddleball.

The first thing Rhonda and I did was to create our secret hiding place. We discovered that the wooden cabanas were built up off the sand, on stilts, and that if you dug deep enough, you could actually get down under there. So we dug. And we dug and we dug, until we had our

very own clubhouse under the cabanas. We stashed our comics and water guns, and by the entrance we carved a skull and crossbones in the sand.

We snuck into the men's room.

We locked the doors to the stalls in the women's room, then crawled out underneath.

We soaked wads of toilet paper and threw them up to the ceiling.

Late at night, we took packets of salt from the cafeteria and poured them into the pool to make it salty as the sea.

We used our water pistols to squirt unsuspecting cabana boys from our secret hideout.

We were bad, and our parents had no idea.

During sleepovers, once the lights were out, one of us would go into the bed of the other. We would take turns scratching each other's backs. Then we would give each other massages.

We decided to give sex a try. Wearing our pink Dr. Dentons – we'd each have our heads at opposite ends of the bed – we scissored our legs, pretending that I was her father and she was my mother,

"Are you sure this is how they do it?" asked Rhonda.

"How else could they?"

"But it's so uncomfortable."

When our parents come home, we'd scurry off to our respective beds.

And then suddenly, without explanation, Gracie was no longer talking to my mother.

My mother tried to warm things up, but Gracie would have none of it.

After Art came Alvin, the interior decorator. A lot of people thought he was gay, but every Wednesday my mother got dressed in her finest clothes, fixed her hair, rouged her cheeks and met Alvin in the city. Occasionally Alvin came to our house to bring my mother fabric swatches. He'd fondle a pin she was wearing. I once overheard him tell my mother she looked beautiful.

Of Pecans and Opossums
Clint Jefferson Farr

“Take the nut. Put it here.” Paw Paw pointed to my hand. “Yeah, right at the base of your middle finger. Alright. Good. Now, put the other nut in the hollow of your palm here. Close your hand over the nuts and squeeze.” I could feel the pecans pinch my skin. “Squeeze hard. If you need to you can bring your other hand over and push on the middle knuckle.”

There was pain and a whimper.

“Can I?” My grandfather knelt next to me.

“I can do it,” and I squeezed until tears pushed out.

The pecans crunched and fell apart in my hand. My three year old cousin clapped. I was eight. The first time I cracked a pecan without a nut cracker.

“Good job, Sunshine.”

“Thanks ,Paw Paw.” I smiled at my grandfather.

He looked genuinely pleased at the cracked pecan. A moment both miniscule and monumental; nothing and everything.

I ran off to find more pecans.

...

Momma dropped me off with Mi Maw and Paw Paw toward the end of summer. She literally dropped me off. She didn’t get out of the car. I slumped out with my bag and slammed the heavy door shut. She made a little wave to Paw Paw and didn’t even look at Mi Maw who was watching from the window. You could tell by the strain of effort mom made not to look in Mi Maw’s direction she knew she was there. She barely mustered an, “I love you,” before she peeled out of the driveway. Her tires sent last fall’s pecan shells flying. Momma disappeared down the road. Mi Maw disappeared from the window. Paw Paw put his hand on my shoulder.

“Come on in then,” he said.

They told me, “Lanie needs to finish her studies at West Georgia College.” I think it has to do with her new boyfriend Miles, but they persisted, saying it was hard to be a single mom and go to university. I was fine with it. Mi Maw and Paw Paw’s house was near a school where I knew the kids and had some cousins. Plus, Paw Paw’s yard was a playground paradise for a kid like me, a kid who liked bugs and who was always skinning her knees.

...

Now, a great hall cuts through Mi Maw and Paw Paw’s single story brick home. I live here now and not much has changed. The hall aligns with the prevailing breeze such that during the brutal Augusts you can throw open the front and back doors to let the honeysuckled breeze flow through. The breeze pushes out the baked air, and leaves bare shoulders in goose pimples.

Four rooms, each with its own iron hearth, stand off the great cool hall. There were two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Mi Maw never left the kitchen except to scold me and my cousins when tricycling on the ancient oak floors of the great hall. Mi Maw didn’t like me in there on a tricycle. (But Paw Paw let me fly). Paw Paw and I often sat at the upright piano to talk and plunk.

...

“Paw Paw, why does Mi Maw hate me?” He was sitting next to me as I struggled through Chopsticks, the only song I ever learned to play.

Paw Paw look down on me, half smiled, "She doesn't hate you, Sunshine. She just puts all her love in those biscuits. She uses it up in the baking and has nothing to show after."

He paused, "And she just don't like people."

I flinched.

"Aw, I wish I was kidding, Emily, but she's disappointed."

"Like in momma?" I ask.

"Yeah, like in your momma," he says, watching me.

I pressed a broken key, thunk, thunk, thunk, "Well, momma is disappointing."

...

Living with momma wasn't fun. I mean, she loved me. I know that. That's not in question.

Our apartment was on the eastern outskirts of Atlanta. That's what momma told me. (From a different talk, Paw Paw once explained to me that Atlanta got so big so fast that it took over towns that used to be completely separate. So, for all I know, maybe we weren't in Atlanta.) There was one small patch of unpaved land at our complex. The kids had long ago killed any grass and all that was left was cement-hard red clay you could play basketball on and one sad little evergreen. During the thunderstorms, the clay turned into a glue which could stick to any fabric. Momma get so mad at me for playing outside on the rainy days. Digging dried clumps of Georgia clay out of the carpet was a large percent of my time with Momma.

There were kids. We got along. They were tough kids though. They knew things they shouldn't. For some reason, they pretty much left me alone when I was at the complex. Sometimes they'd come over for dinner. I'd open up some soup and we'd eat while momma worked on her nursing classes. If one of her boyfriends were over, I couldn't have company, but momma rarely had any boyfriends over during the week. Especially that summer, a guy named Miles, she never had him over. I only met him a couple of times.

Basically, momma and I lived for the weekends, where we would drive the forty miles to Mi Maw and Paw Paw's house. She'd drop me off on Thursday night, then she'd spend that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at the college, so she said.

...

Paw Paw's yard had one large productive pecan tree. He also had a looming oak that threatened to crash through the roof at any time. The oak is gone now, but the pecan tree is still out there. There were two peach trees. (Peach is my which my favorite flower and fruit). A honeysuckle bush marked the town side of Paw Paw's property. I'd sip the pistil of its nectar when the flowers came in spring, sometimes eating so much I'd get sick. Paw Paw made hooch from the grapes on his vines of Muscadine. He packed those grapes into a jar with a ton of sugar and wait for it to naturally ferment.

One of my older cousins snuck a sip once. He said it was nasty.

Part of the yard he let grow wild. No lawn. No garden. No trees. Just a mess of poke grew there. Poke's a weed but you can eat it. It's bitter, but I had developed a taste for it. Paw Paw had never heard of a kid loving poke as much as I loved poke. It tickled him to death so he always made sure there was plenty growing so we never ran out of poke to eat.

...

Little seedy bumps cropped up on my middle finger tip toward the end of that August. “You got warts,” Mi Maw commanded, “it’s from getting your fingernails dirty and not cleaning.”

Mi Maw would let me help her in the kitchen, but not with warts. “You need the treatment,” she said. I was scared.

Momma has talked about Mi Maw’s “treatments”. Momma never told me exactly what the “treatments” were but it was clear they weren’t nice. I always figured this was one of the reasons Momma disliked Mi Maw so much.

Mi Maw was a healer. The older cousins, the ones who had spent more time with her, talked about her laying of hands. When Mi Maw younger, when my momma still lived at the house, the pastor at the time would sometimes let her stay after the Sunday sermon and help folks. The more worldly preacher that followed put an end to that.

“Give me your hands.” I sat next to the breakfast table and put out then out. She grasped my wrists and looked at my warty middle finger. She started muttering and I laughed.

“Don’t laugh Emily. It won’t work. If you believe it works it works. If you don’t it don’t. So you’d better believe ‘cause I’m going to need some help child. Do you believe?”

“No ma’am,” I said quietly, “it’s kind of hard. It’s not what they teach.”

“Don’t get all cluttered up with how things supposed to work child!” Mi Maw’s soft southern belle accent faltered into a harsh country twang. For the first time, I noticed her eyes were green. She was staring at me hard. “Look at me now. Look at me and listen. This is soothsaying. I’ve cured warts, watery lungs, snakebite, and insomnia. Dirt eaters have come to me. Wormy kids and their wormy mommas. I’ve cured preachers, the mayor once, their wives, their babies, their grandbabies, and once upon a time your momma.” She inhaled sharp, “You know better from them?”

“No ma’am.”

“That’s right! They believed so you believe. And that’s not a question.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Mi Maw commenced muttering over my hands and I said not a word. I tried to believe. I guess I did, because the next morning, those warts were gone.

’Tweren’t the “treatments” my momma spoke of at all.

...

Paw Paw sat with me at the piano in the great hall. “Well, you know how the preacher says we’re all sinners.”

“We’re all sinners?” I asked.

“That’s the story right? Sunday school and all that. See, your Mi Maw, I don’t think she can get past that. If you’re a sinner, then you’re bad. She don’t trust nobody. She wants to be a good Christian, she is a good Christian, and she expects you to be a good Christian. But, well, she sees Sean Bob up in the front pew all pious and devoted...and he wasn’t very nice to her at all when they were young. And she sees Ernesta up there...”

“Ms. Ernesta makes the pound cakes!”

“That’s right. Fine pound cakes.” Paw Paw chuckled, “Well, Ms. Ernesta is up there sweating and praising an fanning her faith for all to see, and it burns your Mi Maw because Ernesta used to, well, Ernesta liked the boys.”

I giggled. “She likes cake too.”

“Yeah, well, I like her cakes.”

“Paw Paw! You’re too funny.”

“Ain’t that the truth, Sunshine? Well, so your Mi Maw is disgusted with everybody. Here’s the thing. She’s a sinner too. Right? Sunday School? More than that, your Mi Maw has some deep old knowledge.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She got rid of those warts right?” Paw Paw asked.

“Yes sir.”

“There’s many in our church now don’t find that very Christian. And your Mi Maw can’t ignore them. So, she’s a sinner. She don’t even like herself.”

...

Fall brings pecans. You pick them off the ground, not the trees. Pecan farmers like to harvest right after a thunderstorm when the wind has knocked the nuts down. Crows, the rare raven, song birds, opossums, love pecans.

I love pecans: in a pie, candied, raw, roasted, pralines, and in zucchini and banana breads. Mi Maw’s specialty was pecan pie. Her pie was so well regarded, it was requested by family and friends all over the region. I loved Mi Maw’s pecan pie. It was so filling though; I could only eat a few bites. Mi Maw got mad – brittle, silent - if I didn’t finish a slice. Sometimes I get sick trying to choke a whole slice down so as not to invite her mean look.

Back then, I kept a couple of pecans in my pocket. I rubbed them to a high sheen, like Paw Paw’s bb-gun stock. And they’d get smooth, like they had been dipped into the thinnest layer of velvet you can imagine. For some it’s a lucky rock or a rabbit’s foot. For me, pecans filed away the rough spots.

...

Back in the great hall, I had an epiphany. “That’d be arrogant...to like yourself. You know, Sunday school and all.”

“That’s what Mi Maw thinks. She also thinks nobody is trustworthy. In the eyes of the devout there is no trust, seems to me. Shoot, if you don’t trust nobody, you know, really trust someone, how can you be happy? Just go through life assuming the worst in everybody, all these arrogant sinners. You end up only being happy when things go wrong ‘cause it justifies how you see people. You just going to be miserable. And Mi Maw is.

“Are you happy, Paw Paw?”

“Sure, Sunshine...I ain’t devout.”

I smiled.

“But she loves you?” I ask.

“She does, she’ll just never trust me, or your momma. She can’t comprehend, reconcile I think the word is, that good people do bad things.”

Paw Paw was silent. Then began, “Don’t be too hard on your momma. Your Mi Maw was not...nurturing.”

I nodded.

“And no be too hard on your Mi Maw neither. Your momma was, is, a handful. Especially with her choice of men. Boys, trapped in men’s bodies. Her latest is trash.”

I nodded again. It was true as far as I could tell.

Paw Paw continued, “It’s just not simple or clean. Seems growing up ain’t just learning your schoolin’ or facts or whatnot, it’s learning about the complexity of people: the good, the bad, the gray. And your own ability to let it go and find joy anyway. So I’m sorry you’re growing up so fast these days.”

I looked at Paw Paw, “It’s alright. I’ll be okay.”

Paw Paw laughed, “Yes darling, you will.” He waived to the door to the yard. “Now, why don’t you get you and me a coca cola from the fridge. Provisions. Let’s walk the yard, see what’s available for the picking.”

...

August finally relented to September. The Georgia heat that warps the air uncurled its fist and dissipated, pecan season had arrived.

I went out with granddad in the late afternoons and we’d look up for the olive green fruits and on the ground for the exposed nuts. “Not yet,” Paw Paw said.

The next day? “Not yet.”

So we’d while away the days and weeks of that late summer stringing beans, shucking corn, catching one more catfish out of the slough with liver tied to a hook with nylon from a frayed pair of Mi Maw’s pantyhose.

When the blue jays showed up, Paw Paw said it was getting close. He took out his BB gun and propped it against the porch screen. “Ain’t trying to hit them, Sunshine. Just scare ‘em off the pecans.”

And he pointed to a neighbor downhill from us across the yard. “Plus, Ms. Tanner don’t like it when I’m blasting in the general direction of her place.”

“That makes sense, Paw Paw.”

“So it does.”

That night, a thunderstorm blew through complete with a tornado warning. No tornados, but high winds hit the area. The next day, pecans littered the ground.

...

One of the things I loved most about Paw Paw was how he pronounced pecans like leftover chicken feed, “peckens.”

Except the night of the wind when I couldn’t sleep. His pronunciation wasn’t so funny because he was yelling. “We were just looking for pecans. I haven’t said a damn word to her about Lanie.” It was unusual to hear Paw Paw raise his voice to Mi Maw. Heck, it was unusual for them to be talking period.

“Keep it that way. I’m not sure we want this. I don’t want her to know one way or the other right now. That trash boyfriend don’t want her, her own flesh and blood, and she’s fine with it. Fine with it! Can’t we call the cops?” Mi Maw was still in the kitchen, likely putting aside the ingredients for tomorrow’s biscuits.

Paw Paw sounded tired, “We can’t call the cops ‘cause there’s no guarantee she stays with us or Roger. You know. Lanie could change her mind someday...”

And with that I put two pillows over my head, to drown out the conversation, not suffocate.

...

"Get up Emily. Come on now, get up, Sunshine." Paw Paw's breath stunk of hooch. "There's a possum in the pecan tree."

I went out in my pajamas and bare feet. Stepping outside with Paw Paw in the dark, knowing I was stepping on red ants, worms, beetles and maybe a baby snake. On a hot September Georgia night, the creepy crawlies were everywhere.

Paw Paw held my hand, half dragging me along. He held his antique lantern high in the strong breeze when we got to the pecan tree. "Do you see 'em?"

I couldn't see anything but the lamp. When my eyes adjusted and I saw two little red lights look back at me. Opossum eyes reflect red. The animal shifted its head into view within the dim light, it hissed. What an ugly animal I thought, all teeth, mangy grey hair, and that rat-tail.

"Pretty god-awful looking creature ain't it?" Paw Paw asked.

I nodded my head. Yes it was - scrawny, angry, and kind of desperate. The animal reminded me Miles; I felt bad for thinking that.

...

Daddy died years before that summer. I could barely remember him. Car crash took him. The rural towns and countryside outside Atlanta are spider webbed with narrow twisty two lanes. Mi Maw said it was the drinking, but far as I could tell, everybody drank then. So, maybe it would've happened anyway. My memories of daddy are good. I think he was good. I can't remember.

...

Those hot fall nights the cousins and I would swarm the ice cream maker. We would crank the ice cream maker until the ice cream was so thick we couldn't crank and Uncle Roger took over. When Uncle Roger could crank no more, he handed it over to his dad. Paw Paw would crank until the ice cream seized the paddle like concrete. That ice cream was rock hard. Nobody could crank ice cream as hard as Paw Paw. After all, Paw Paw could snap quarters in half with his fingers. Years of hand tightening bolts as a machinist in the sock factory will give you fingers of granite.

The sock factory has long since closed. I bet nobody's got fingers like that anymore.

The cousins and I would run off the sugar and nuts, in the dark, barefoot, unsupervised, sweaty, ignorant, cussing, hilarious, exhilarated, and hot, so hot.

Most of the time it was vanilla. If we were lucky, it was banana nut made with pecans.

Ice cream nights were maybe the only time I'd see Mi Maw smile.

The night after the possum, cousins and family were over making ice cream. Mi Maw was sitting next to Paw Paw with her head on his shoulder. I crept close. I'd never seen that before. I never saw it again come to think of it. She leaned over and whispered to Paw Paw while he watched the cousins eat and play, "Wish Lanie would stop being so foolish."

"Mm hm. Not much we can do." Paw Paw squeezed Mi Maw back. "She's a grown woman."

"Wish I could soothsay it away."

"I know this hurts, but she's a good kid. We're all gonna be fine hon."

...

The kitchen was Mi Maw's domain. Say what you would about her temper and temperament, but don't say anything about Mi Maw's cooking. She could turn a cup of flour into a feast, and did so, every day, three times a day, for fifty years.

Breakfast started with drop biscuits. Flour, vegetable shortening, some baking powder, mixed by hand and scooped by fingers flung onto a baking pan. While the biscuits baked, bacon and sausage sizzle in the old cast iron pan so well-seasoned the eggs scrambled in the pork grease just slid out. (That pan came along way before nonstick pans were being sold on the late night TV). Then came the packet of instant grits. She never asked if I liked them, just put it on my plate, added hot water from the kettle and a pat of butter. "Stir," she'd say, not unkindly. The biscuits would come out and immediately Mi Maw would open them up with a knife, slap a pat of butter. She'd either smear homemade grape or fig preserves onto the cut biscuits where the jam would melt and mix with the butter. We ate like farmers, though the family had not farmed in 20 years.

Mi Maw had a nut chopper. Some clear early vintage plastic cup, probably toxic by today's standards, equipped with a spring loaded plunger poking out the top. Attached to the plunger, inside the cup, was a radiating star of blades. You would put your pecans into the cup, attached the top, and then slap the springy plunger handle and the blades inside would make quick work of the nuts. It was a very satisfying experience. Chopping nuts with the slap chopper was one of my favorite activities during kitchen duty with Mi Maw.

That fall, a few days after the ice cream, we had a pile of pecans needed chopping. I used my new cracking skills to shell the nuts but progress was too slow for Mi Maw. She showed me something I'd never seen before, a crank handled nutcracker that looked to be one hundred years old. A pecan nestled in a little bowl then cracked lengthwise by a vise attached to a long lever. The lengthwise crack ensure the meat came out pretty and intact, like what you see arranged in the frosting on top of a carrot cake.

I cracked a thousand pecans while Mi Maw watched me and slap chopped newly shelled pecans. "How are you?"

I startled. This was not a typical Mi Maw question.

"Yes ma'am, I'm fine, Mi Maw." Not knowing how best to keep the conversation going I was saved by phone ringing.

Mi Maw went to answer, "Hello." There was silence and a frozen look on Mi Maw's face when she looked at me, "Please leave the kitchen, Emily. Thank you."

I plunked on the piano in the great hall. When the murmurs ended and the phone clanged on its receiver, I walked back into the kitchen.

Mi Maw just looked at me and started slap chopping the pecans. She slapped harder and harder until the damn thing came apart in her hands with a fragrant puff of pulverized pecans.

"Could you set for outside dear and maybe bring in some more nuts? Mi Maw needs a minute."

...

The leaves and pecan husks rustled. I came closer, aware it might be a snake. It was a little cool that late September day, but the rattlers and coral snakes could still be around. I pushed back the leaves and lying on the ground, quivering, now hissing, was a baby opossum.

Small, ugly, with a snout full of teeth and bumpy skin like a snake's shedding, it hissed some more. Scrappy little thing, I thought. I felt bad for the animal, so ugly and little. I wrapped a kerchief around my right hand and picked up the baby opossum. It didn't bite. Just hissed some more. I looked for the mommy opossum, but she wasn't in site or didn't want to be seen.

I was so excited. I'd never seen one so close. I read somewhere in school the opossum was North America's only marsupial and the only marsupial to not live in Australia. Something about being an ancient animal and the two continents touching each other sometime long ago.

It was warm and twitchy ancient history in my hand. I thought it might be getting cold so I closed my fingers around it to keep it warm. So excited, I had to show Paw Paw. Had to keep it warm. I kept my fingers around it. Knowing what was happening, an inkling it was wrong, but for some reason I was unable to stop myself in the excitement of holding a creature so new to me and so ancient to the world. I could finally impress my Paw Paw with something he'd never seen before, something he'd never had done, would never do, squeezed 'til the tears came.

The creature's rib cage gave like a pecan cracking. The twitching stopped.

"Watch you got there?" Paw Paw loomed over me. I unfolded my hand. "What's that? Oh."

Paw Paw looked at me for just a second, ignoring the blood in my hand, "Looks like it fell out of the tree."

"It's so ugly."

Paw Paw lowered his eyes, put a hard hand on my shoulder. "Never seen a 'possum so close before."

"Mi Maw!"

"What?"

I ran off to the kitchen with Paw Paw close behind. I curled through the great hall into the kitchen where a pork shoulder had just gone into the oven for a sandwich later that night.

"Emily?" Mi Maw warily eyed the handkerchief in my hand.

"Mi Maw, can you heal it? Can you bring it back?"

Mi Maw looked down at the dead opossum. She unexpectedly cocked her head, like a confused dog, and looked at me. She looked at Paw Paw.

"Fell out of the tree..."

"I crushed it!" I blurted. Paw Paw shrugged. Mi Maw looked back down at the opossum and gently knelt to my level.

"I appreciate you now believing, Emily. I really do. But sometimes faith isn't enough. Sometimes, things can't be fixed. I'm sorry but I can't bring it back."

I ran outside bawling silly while Paw Paw said he'd get the shovel. "'Suppose we should bury it," he said to nobody.

...

Paw Paw dug from the earth a perfect cube of empty space. I stood next to Mi Maw and watched. Paw Paw laid the opossum, wrapped in a dishrag, into the grave. "You're staying with us," Mi Maw said and gave my hand a squeeze.

"I figured."

Paw Paw quickly covered the opossum. I laid down two very polished pecans like a grave marker and apologized to the animal and its momma somewhere overhead. We walked

through the back door and into the great hall. Paw Paw went to his room. Mi Maw and I went to the kitchen. This was a long time ago. Grieving was a luxury. There was poke to boil, pork to pull, crusts to bake, and pecans to chop...except now with a boring old knife.

Dumbledore
Mike Nachbar

The phone lights up and I press the button to answer it. "Thank you for calling Primewell. What can I help you with today?"

"You're a parasite." I place the voice coming through my headset as a white woman in her early 50s. Her attempt to sound menacing with her folksy accent comes across a bit silly. "You're filthy and I hope you know that."

"What can I help you with today?" I ask. I'm a coverage specialist at Primewell, who helps customers understand the options allowed by their specific health care package.

"My husband's dying and you just sit there. Are you even human?"

The customer profile never shows a name or picture, but the notes on her record show that she has called eleven times this month and been denoted a crimson caller, someone who has an especially difficult time understanding the specifics of her coverage.

"It's all spent," she continues. "My daughter's college fund, my mortgage. I sold my car and I pawned my wedding ring." The clock on my screen shows that she's been speaking for 90 seconds. Our employee grading system awards 25 points for resolving a crimson caller in under five minutes, and 75 if she doesn't call back for 30 days. If this call goes well, I could guarantee a good score for the whole month.

"We've paid for your insurance for 20 years. And you're telling me you're going to stop paying for his treatment and let him die." She has worked herself up to the point that she begins to pant. I wait for her breathing to slow before I speak.

"I understand your frustration. I truly do. My dad died of kidney failure last year." He died of a heart attack twelve years ago, but close enough.

"Then you of all people should realize how despicable this is." Her voice unhinges and she shrieks the last few words.

I count to five on my fingers before I reply. "It shows in your file that you only have bronze coverage."

"Don't you dare give me that technical baloney."

"And on at least three occasions between 2010 and 2012 a representative spoke to you about upgrading your coverage. On all three occasions, you opted to keep your current coverage."

"Money." Her contempt is still there, but I sense her resolve weakening. "That's all it ever is with you people."

"And I am sure that our reps made very clear to you the risks of not upgrading."

No one speaks, but I know better than to ask if she's still on the line. I focus on my stress ball, knowing this silence is tougher for her than it is for me. "I want you to do something," she says, quieter now. "Think about the choices you're making. Hell is real." Then a dial tone. A heaviness fills my chest and I slouch onto my desk with my palms shielding my eyes from the fluorescent rows of lights above.

"Crimson in under five?" A voice across the row asks. It never fails to amaze me how quickly word spreads. People begin to congratulate me and I'm obliged to stand and fist bump over the cubicle walls.

“Great job, Slurp.” My parents named me Andrew Slurbinsky, but my whole life no one’s called me anything other than Slurp. “You think she’s calling back?” My head shakes. It was clear in her voice that something about speaking to me made it finally click for her - the futility of calling, her future as a debt-ridden widow. What can I say, I have a gift.

My boss Duncan walks towards my desk with a three-quarter part in his blonde hair and pleated pants pulled up to his belly button. “Pretty good, Slurp,” he says, and I shudder. Everyone calls me that, but I still hate that he does. “Crimson in under five.” He lifts his arm and I’m compelled to participate in the whitest high five of in history.

“We need to have a meeting later about the orders from corporate to include a caller’s medical condition in the caller notes. We have to iron out a good strategy around that.”

The strategy seems pretty clear cut to me - write down the condition in the caller notes. But there’s not point in arguing. If there’s one thing Duncan enjoys more than convincing the world through his clothing and mannerisms that he’s a 38-year-old virgin, it’s calling pointless team meetings where he can listen to his own voice, waste hours of our time and cause us to miss our monthly quotas. Besides, I’m explicitly forbidden to speak to him today for another reason, so I keep my eyes on my computer screen.

“What do you think Slurp? Any ideas for getting the condition in the case notes?”

“We all must face a choice between what is right and what is easy,” I say.

Duncan scrunches his face. “That’s a good way to put it.” He scratches his chin and I can see the rusty gears turn in his head. “Well we have to do what’s right, don’t you think?”

“We are only as strong as we are united, and weak as we are divided.”

“Teamwork.” He slaps my shoulder. “I like where your head’s at, Slurp.” And with that he walks away, dumb grin plastered on his face.

Sienna lurks behind the adjacent row of cubes. Her brown eyes catch mine and she folds her lips back between her teeth, a trick I imagine she picked up as a child trying not to laugh in church. She walks towards my desk and as she turns the corner I make out the outline of her ass, which looks amazing, even under these awful suit pants she wears.

“How’d I do?” I ask.

Her face loosens into uninhibited laughter. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.” My lips smile, but my face grimaces.

Sienna raises her eyebrows in defense. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hey.” Max approaches from the other side. His long curly hair dangles over his shoulders and a heavy paunch fills his shirt and spills over his belt buckle. “What are you two lovebirds fighting about this time?”

Sienna’s cheeks light up red and she avoids my glance. Max is nonplussed, and has probably never been plussed once in his life. “You heard me, right?” I ask.

“Pretty impressive,” he says. “I didn’t think it was possible, but you went a whole conversation with Duncan using nothing but Dumbledore quotes.”

We all laugh. “The thing you have to realize,” I say, “Is that he doesn’t actually listen to what you say. He just watches your mouth until it stops moving and it’s his turn to talk.”

“Don’t get too cocky. You have to go the whole day, and it’s not even noon yet.”

“Yeah, but if I make it you’re eating that stick of butter at your desk.”

“I know the fucking bet.”

“Lunch?” Sienna asks.

We pile into my hatchback and drive to a park three minutes from the office. We pull lawn chairs from my trunk and we set them up on the grass just past the parking lot. “What do y’all think?” Max asks. “Three ounces of kush for an exterminator seem fair?”

“Three ounces is a lot,” Sienna says.

“Place has a shitload of termites.”

Sienna’s lips curl into a confused frown that makes her look child-like and adorable.

“Why did you buy that decrepit bar?”

“Told y’all. This crazy ass old hippie sold it to me and my cousin for fifteen grand.”

“Yeah, but how much are repairs gonna cost you?”

“My cousin’s got a contracting business. He’ll get it done on the cheap. And when he’s done I’m walking straight into Duncan’s office and telling him to lick my nuts.”

We laugh. “You’ve fantasized about that exact moment, haven’t you?” Sienna asks.

Max rubs his hands together with relish. “So many times.”

Sienna beams. “Me too. I need like two years to keep Sallie Mae at bay, but that’s gonna be such a great day when I quit.”

“Look at the bright side,” Max says. “At least you won’t be a Primewell lifer like Slurp. What you going on, four years now?”

I nod.

“What’s wrong?” Sienna asks. “You’re so quiet.” I glare back at her and she twists her face like she smelled rotten eggs.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Had a bad call earlier. This lady got really serious and told me hell is real.”

“Oh no,” Sienna says, super sarcastic. “Not your Baptist guilt. Did you tell her Primewell doesn’t cover birth control, I bet she would have loved that.”

I laugh. “I mean what we do is kind of messed up. I guess it’s just getting to me today.”

“Bro, we don’t do anything.” Max sounds irritated, as if he has to explain to me how gravity works. “Think about it this way. Say you wanted to help this lady, and you hopped on a plane to Minnesota. You marched into Timmy Primewell’s office and told him to make an exception for this lady.”

“Our CEO isn’t named Primewell.”

“The point,” Max says. “Is that he’d tell you to put an egg in your shoe and beat it.”

Sienna chortles. “Is he a bully from *Back to the Future*?”

“The point,” Max says, more firmly. “Is that we don’t have any say in any of this. We’re just the messengers.”

“Fuck this.” Sienna crosses her arms. “I need to get high. Who’s holding?”

Max leans back and exhales. “It’s a drought. Not a single pill for sale in all of Tulsa. We could slug some vodka but that’s about it.”

“No,” Sienna pouts. “That’ll just make me slap Duncan.”

“Well,” I offer meekly. “I’ve got some starter fluid in my trunk.” They both glare back at me. “Just saying. Me my friends would huff it back in high school sometimes.”

“That’s low,” Sienna says, mocking offense. “Even for you Slurp, that’s low.” I smile back, knowing for a fact she’ll huff.

“Well,” Max says. “Is the high any good?”

I spray starter fluid onto a dishrag until it's soaked, hold it to my nose and breathe in until the metallic scent stings my throat. I pass the rag to Sienna and fall back into my chair. The sun's glare stings my eyes, so I shut them and listen to the birds' chirps echo in a violent cacophony. A gentle breeze floats under the rolled up sleeve of my dress shirt. "Slurp, it's your turn."

Back at the office I answer calls as I g-chat with Max and Sienna and watch the colors on my monitor melt into each other. "No, there's an error. If you read the appendix we don't start covering lost wages until after we have processed the C-37 form." Sienna sends a gif of a drunk guy running into a glass door. I shudder and pull my shoulders to my ears when I see the glass shatter. "No sir. It states clearly on page A-11 that we do not cover non-standard biopsies." Max sends a picture with the words "I love you" spelled out in pieces of feces.

"I hate you," Sienna types. "Last time I ever open one of your links."

"LOL," I type. Max has sent far grosser images and at this point I am numb to them. "I'm sorry," I say. "But it appears the hospital administrator has misinterpreted your coverage." I hear footsteps behind me and alt-F4 my browser. Over my shoulder I see Duncan and his boss Baker, who must be in town from Minneapolis. Baker wears Italian leather shoes, an angular crew cut, and a perpetually unimpressed sneer. "Again, I apologize for the confusion," I say. They stand behind me, and for once I hope that my call will drag on, so that maybe they will leave before it finishes. "Unbelievable," the voice says. Please, I think. Give me a long tirade about how evil I am. But instead I get a dial tone.

"Slurp, how are you?" Baker asks.

Surprised he knows my name, I stand and turn to shake his hand. Heavy spins overcome me and I fix my eyes on a single tile in the distance to keep my balance. "What brings you to town?"

"I have to make sure this guy isn't partying too hard." He places Duncan in a mock headlock and I could swear I hear Duncan squeal like an injured animal. Am I hallucinating this? Two heavy blinks, and fuck if he still doesn't have Duncan in the headlock. This should be one of the most joyous moments of my entire life, but I am mostly focused on swallowing violently against rising vomit. I probably should have huffed less.

"You know we don't have the real parties until you show up." Duncan, now freed, looks to Baker with these fawning doe eyes.

Baker jabs my upper arm and I feel my knees wobble. "Slurp, I hear you handled a crimson caller today."

Max stands up, watching over his cubicle wall, and I know he's going to try to say I talked to Duncan here and lost the bet. I turn my head to face so far to the left of Baker's face that it would be impossible to reasonably suggest I was speaking to Duncan. This earns me confused looks, which I try not to acknowledge. "Yeah, the caller was unhappy."

"Slurp has impeccable phone skills," Duncan says. "He has really embraced the "Connect and Engage" protocol.

Sweat pours down my forehead and I badly need to sit down. And why is Duncan acting proud of me when we both know he can't stand me? And why are both he and Baker staring at me as if they expect me to say something?

“Umm...” Max walks behind them with this devilish smirk, which only further scrambles my concentration. “Where your treasure is your heart will be also.” Baker and Duncan both scrunch their foreheads, which makes me pretty sure that quote did not remotely fit the situation.

“Wow, that’s quite philosophical,” Baker purses his lips. “What do you have planned this weekend?”

This can’t be good. “Nothing,” I say, quietly.

“Well, Saturday we’re having an all-day leadership training class. Duncan’s going to be there and I think you should come. You’ve impressed me.”

“Thank you,” I mumble. Mercifully, they retreat, leaving me free to collapse into my desk chair, wipe my forehead with a t-shirt from my drawer, and chug a half-full nalgene.

“Hey Slurp,” Max yells, but I ignore him. “Hey, Slurp,” he repeats, and I push down on my desk to give myself the leverage I need to stand. Max is on the other side of the cube wall making a blowjob motion. “Have fun with Baker this weekend.” I deserve that.

I slouch deep in my chair and stare at the ceiling. It sucks I have to have to work this weekend, but it feels good to have my work appreciated. And when I realize that this makes me happy, well, I get really sad.

When I was a kid I sucked at sports. I tried to play trumpet and I would play all the right notes, but never got the rhythm. In school I got C+’s and B-’s. People liked me alright, but no one would have described me as popular. What I’m getting at, and this is depressing to admit, is that this job is the first thing I’ve ever been good at. And yeah, it’d be nice to get a raise and pay off my student loans and move into a nicer apartment with central air. But more, it’s just the feeling of having value to someone. I mean, shit. Baker wants me here on Saturday. No one else cares what I do Saturday. I have worth. Delivering bad news to sick people who don’t buy enough insurance.

A tap on my shoulder makes me recoil. My face heats when I see that it’s Sienna who made me flinch, but when I turn and look she is crying.

“I’m so high,” she mouths. “Can we go outside?”

“Let me knock off a few more calls.”

“Please.” Her eyes get so wide and wet and we both know I can’t refuse. Tears traverse the slope of her puffy, red cheeks and I place a hand on her shoulder. People stare at us but I ignore them. We get outside and she starts to sob. “I can’t do this anymore.” She hugs me and my whole self tingles as her fingers brush the ridges of my spine.

“It’s going to be okay,” I murmur into her ear. “You’ve been high before.”

“It’s not that.” She squeezes me tighter. “They told me at the job fair I’d be helping people. I just told a lady that we wouldn’t cover the surgery from her daughter’s attempted suicide. What we do is terrible.”

Her warm tears seep through the fabric of my shirt and I hate myself for not saying something. She’s right about our job, I’m desperately in love with her and she knows it.

“You’re the only one who understands,” she tells my chest.

I grind my teeth. A month ago, Sienna was fighting with her boyfriend Rusty, who takes double lips of Skoal and has more than once spent a half hour telling me about the variety and uses of truck tires in his garage. She came over to my basement apartment and we sat on the bed watching Netflix. Primewell drug tests us, but at that moment I didn’t care and rolled a

joint anyway. We got high and had sex twice. I work up the next morning with her arm on my chest and got up to make her an omelette. “We were so messed up,” she said. “That was crazy.”

Three days later she texted me, “Me and Rusty made up.” And because I’m a sucker with no self-esteem I texted back, “I’m happy for y’all.”

And now I’m quite literally her shoulder to cry on. I disengage from the hug and study her face. I deal with grieving people all day, and the only people who cry this hard are the ones who still haven’t given up. I sometimes have a hard time reading body language, especially girls, but the way she gazes at me I can tell this moment means something special. I brush aside a loose strand of hair dangling over the middle of her face and gently brush my lips to hers.

Fuck, she didn’t want me to kiss her at all. Now she’s sobbing and she won’t face me or respond when I ask her to talk to me. My stomach turns. “I’ll talk to you later,” I say to no response. “But you know how I feel. We can’t keep pretending.”

As I walk back to my desk I take deep breaths, push my emotions down and maintain a neutral expression. I’m professional, I’m composed, and oh shit, Duncan is standing right at my empty desk. He raises his eyebrows in recognition, and it’s too late to retreat to the bathroom.

His mouth curls into the twitchy smile that exposes the gums on the left side of his mouth. He stares at me when I arrive and the silence festers. For a paranoid moment I wonder if he knows my bet with Max and wants to torture me.

“I’ve been monitoring you carefully today.” His smile broadens. “Your total numbers are good from the crimson caller, but every other metric is poor. You’ve been away from your desk for over 93 minutes.”

You’re right, I’m sorry, and I will work harder to make sure all my numbers are in line. I don’t have to say a lot, just kiss his ring a bit and he’ll walk away. I’ve done it a million times and gotten out of way worse trouble than this. But for some reason, right at this moment, I just can’t bring myself to say it. My mouth opens, but I close it without speaking, before I gather myself. “The truth,” I finally say. “Is a beautiful and terrible thing and should therefore be treated with caution.”

For a glorious five seconds Duncan’s face goes completely blank. Then the smile returns, smugger than ever. “Slurp, leadership is about more than your abilities. And until you see that I can’t recommend you attend the class on Saturday.”

He walks off, and I sit at my desk grinning for no reason. I should be worried for my career, but Duncan’s an idiot and I’ll figure out how to repair any damage I just caused. Winning this bet was worth it. I’m a bit stunned I may pull it off, and I feel prouder of that than I’ve been of anything in a long while. For the next hour, I take calls as I lean back in my chair, toss a stress ball in the air and catch it. I’ve been doing this long enough that I can go on autopilot.

My phone lights up and I answer it. “Thank you for calling Primewell. What can I help you with today?”

“My neck and back are killing me.” The shrill whine belongs to a woman I place in her late 30s or early 40s.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” I have learned to ask this question without sounding condescending.

“Yes, I need to see a doctor.” She wheezes, the unmistakable tic of a smoker. “But first I need to make sure you crooks are gonna pay for it.”

Her file shows copper coverage. There's essentially no chance we will cover her expense, but I ask her questions as a courtesy. "How were you injured, ma'am?"

"A car accident."

My back straightens at attention. "Ma'am, I'm going to ask you some questions and I need you to answer honestly. Were you at fault in the accident?"

Her silences, answers the question. "Yes," she finally murmurs.

"And have you spoken to your auto insurance?"

"They won't cover it."

"Okay, listen to me carefully. If you tell the doctor you got those injuries in an accident, we won't cover you."

"How can you not cover me," she shrieks. She has wound up so much that she begins to cough. "You're health insurance and I'm not healthy. Put your manager on."

"Trust me." I allow her an opportunity to contradict, but she does not bite. "We will not cover it." Her breathing becomes heavier. "So when you speak to your doctor be very careful about what you tell him. Do you understand?"

My monitor turns off and I realize I must have rolled my chair over the cord. I crawl under my desk while I still speak to the caller over my headset. "Ma'am do you understand?" No answer comes. My hand traces the cord back to the power strip, and everything seems plugged in right. Then I realize.

Duncan approaches my desk from his office, accompanied by a pot-bellied security guard carrying a cardboard box. The air drains from my stomach. It happens from time to time here and always just like this. They shut off your computer and phone before you know you're fired, so you can't cause any problems.

Before Duncan begins to speak, his stern grimace twitches into that same half smile from before. "I was listening to that whole call," he says. "What in the world were you thinking? Advising a customer to lie to her doctor."

I shrug. The security guard hands me the box and I place in a few possessions - a stress ball, a few pens, a stapler that belongs to the company but I'm going to take home anyway. "Meet me in my office after you pack," Duncan says. "I'm just so disappointed," he says, looking anything but disappointed as he shakes his head and walks off.

People stare, but when I look at them they flinch as if whatever disease I've contracted spreads through eye contact. I browse my desk drawers and fill my box with loose papers and company t-shirts I never bothered to take home. The security guard hovers two feet away from me. "You can take a step back," I say. "I promise I won't go postal."

"I don't make the rules." He scowls and puffs out his chest as if I'd just challenged him to a fistfight.

Max and Sienna approach my desk with these tentative steps.

"I guess I won't be a lifer after all." I laugh at my joke, but they look even more nervous.

"Dude," Max says, concerned. "What happened?"

"I told a client how to commit insurance fraud." Max gasps but Sienna laughs. "I don't know why I did it. But it felt good to see the customer win. And it felt even better to see Primewell lose." They both laugh this time.

"You gonna be alright, man?" Max asks.

“Yeah, I’ve got a little money stashed away,” I say. “I may need a job as a barback in a few months though.”

Max snorts and smiles. “I got you, dude.” We slap hands and agree to meet at the bar when he gets off work.

Sienna lingers after he walks away. “I...it’s been a weird day.”

I shrug.

“It’s...” She looks down for a moment. “There’s a lot on my mind.”

“You don’t have to say anything right now.”

“I’m gonna miss you here.”

“You know where to find me.”

We hug and she walks back to her desk. The security guard follows me to Duncan’s office. I knock on his open door and he turns from his computer to face me. “You know Duncan, you were right,” I say. “It’s our choices that determine who we are. Far more than our abilities.” He looks back, beautifully befuddled. I walk to the exit, past the box on my desk. I hand the guard my security badge and I leave the building for the last time.

Moonwalk
Ronald Jackson

Sidestroke relaxes me, a drifting forward, like sleeping on my side. It's just me out here tonight, looking up with one eye to a silver moon, which glares back, and if I lift my head to see, its light reflects like scattered pearls off the lapping water. I like swimming way out, where the water comes over my head. You can't find the bottom, you're floating high and free, an eagle riding the buffeting winds, rocking the divine.

I need this. The boys are fishing farther out in the lake. If they're lucky, we'll have grilled tilapia on the beach later. And a cup of red from last week. Petey loves tilapia. Jimmy loves red.

Oh Lord, the shoals! Hot damn, I can stand erect! Catch these moves! I'm cock-of-the-walk—a moon-walking, shit-talking Jesus!

Here come those idiots now, sailing straight at me. Simon and Andy pointing like fools backing the lead billy in a goat race, Jimmy manning the rudder, Johnny dangling off the side like he's in a freaking regatta, Petey stretching toward me like the fanatic he is. I think he likes me *that way*.

Balls. He's fallen in. I'm the closest, so I yank him out and shove him back in the boat, unwrap his arms from around my neck. I send them down-coast, climb back on the reef, and continue my walk as the sea slides in, indigo silk unrolling from a bolt. The mist folds over me, bottling the moonlight, and their voices carry over the waves, agitated and echoing off each other.

Tomorrow, when I talk to the peeps up on the hill, my posse will mingle in the crowd, spread some jive-ass story about this. It's what they do.

Sinkhole Closed, Nothin' to Do
Catherine Moore

By the first of September, the algae count in Burnt Springs was at levels that state officials from Montgomery posted cease-and-desist signage along the water's edge— *No Entry. No Swimming. No Fishing. (means No Drinking y'all)*. For most of the continental U.S. this particular month meant the advent of fall weather, but deep in the south, September was a purgatory between seasons. A holding time for all the summer projects one had failed to complete and would not be finished in the continuing heat. And a time for seeking distraction from fevered ennui.

Fletcher Norris was attempting to stay cool while sitting under the carport by his garage cleaning out a carburetor from an old Chevy suburban that served as his albatross project. A rusted metal fan stood two feet away from his workbench roaring its artificial breeze on high spin. He'd rather be inside his air-conditioned triple-wide but the kids, who were usually swimming at this time of day, had spent their lunch hour belly-aching "nothin' to do's" and then taken over the family room in a marathon of Sponge Bob episodes. And Emmalee had left for the afternoon to attend an emergency meeting of the town's festival committee so there was no noise patrol happening inside the Norris home.

The Burnt Springs Mermaid Festival committee was facing a crisis with the closing of their waters. The entire festival plan centered on a theme of the mythic Burnt Mermaid and moving it away from the springs would ruin the atmosphere. "Not to mention the diving contest, dunking games, inner tube races, and the extra dollars for mermaid hunting cruises," Emmalee told him before leaving him alone with the rug rats. Just as well he didn't go with his wife to the meeting, Fletcher thought while mopping his forehead of sweat. Although the refrigeration of the Masonic Lodge would have been nice, he wouldn't be able to stand the bunch of wet hens running the festival. Fletcher spent another forty minutes pseudo-working on the carburetor then decided to get out of the mounting heat. He walked down his driveway and across to his neighbor's yard.

Kelley Bergeron had crawled up into the Burnt from Louisiana bayou country about a year back. Crawled was the apt description of Bergeron's monstrous RV when it navigated the overgrown dirt road with a Harley trailer in tow. He had parked the beast of a diesel home next to the Smith's old lean-to and hooked it to electricity by running his drop line through an opened window. The former camp became shelter for birds and snakes, but Bergeron managed to keep the raccoons out, "There's only room for one coon-ass around here." He shot anything as big and cunning as a squirrel and lived meanwhile off the ground "as God meant it to be" over the expanse of rubber tires and riveted steel frame. His RV sported a picture of a gator chomping Uncle Sam and the words "Rebel Kell!" painted across the back end. Fletcher liked his neighbor's ne'er-do attitude. He could do without Bergeron's damn purple flag tied to a PVC pole at the end of his drive, but the local Roll-tide crowd would take care of that ugly LSU blemish come later in the football season, Fletcher thought with some satisfaction.

"Kell!" Fletcher called out while pounding the storm door on the RV.

He yelled the name twice more before getting a "Who's dat?" in response. If Bergeron wasn't answering the door it meant he was having a 'shorts day.' Sure enough, when Fletcher entered the den he was in his boxers sprawled on a lazy-lounger. Shirtless and tan, Kelley

Bergeron was one of those fellows who magically looked fit with little effort. If Bergeron made good time with the ladies, it wouldn't surprise Fletcher none. He wasn't one to ask about those kinds of stories, though; Fletcher was a married man. Biblically married not just the legal kind. And in his mind, it made no sense courting temptation in sex talk.

"Hey, padna, get yourself a cool one. You look cooked in da devil's furnace twice." Kelley tipped his beer towards the kitchen. Beads of condensation dropped off the bottom of his bottle on to his bare thigh. It might still be afternoon, but the overheated Fletcher was up to partaking. Bergeron had the TV running, another heat wave oddity.

A guy on TV was explaining to another that they'd use the 55-gallon drum to float a log up.

"What's going on?" Fletcher asked opening a bottle of Purple Haze.

"Claim to be swampers," Kelley said, but by the tone Fletch understood his opinion on that, "Trying to haul up some sinker wood."

The two guys on TV were wearing near-matching flannel shirts as if provided by the show's sponsors. The taller one in blue flannel was walking across a submerged tree holding a rake-like handle with an end-hook to pick and push the log around.

"Get back in," said the smaller flannel TV fellow gunning an underpowered boat engine hoping to pull the en-cabled log on shore. The log twisted under the force and dipped further creekside.

"T'ain't grabbin' good!" the taller blue yelled.

"We'll end tong that deadhead," small flannel said. He brought out a pair of big tongs—rusted old ice block clamps like Fletcher's great-grandparents had lying around the barn. After the tall flannel affixed the antique clamp to the log end closest to shore, the small flannel hopped in the water with the end of the cable, wrapped it under the tong arm, then lead it ashore and tied to the back of a pickup truck.

"Yeah no!" Kelley burst out laughing.

Fletcher had a couple reasons why he befriended Bergeron, the first being the dimples on the man's face. He took one look at this guy last year and decided he'd make nice with him before his wife Emmalee did. Keep your enemy closer as they say. But despite his cajun ways, Bergeron had uncommon sense and didn't mind talking intellectual things unlike the rest of the Burnt. The friendship that started as a babysitting impulse turned out much better. There was nothing intellectual about this show though, especially when the guys on TV pulled out revolvers to shoot into the water since their sonar was broke.

"What in the hell?" Fletcher said and they both looked at each other and laughed again.

"I don't know how these coo-yons get a show, my cousin would make for better TV. Now, Teet's a real swamp logger."

"Teet?"

"Dat's short for petite, like Petite Jean, his daddy being Grand Jean. Teet's always been able to sniff out anything in da swamp—chanterelle 'shrooms, little beaver, gators. Now sinker wood's where da money's at. He's got a nose like a fox, dat Teet."

"So there's real money in this?"

"Mais, yeah! A virgin deadhead haul brings in thousands. I saw one show, a professional now, and he was selling a slab o' bald cypress for ten grand." Kelley flashed his outstretched palm at Fletcher twice for emphasis.

“Southern rivers could be loaded with sinker wood.” Fletcher ran his fingers through his wispy hair thoughtfully.

“True dat, Fletch,” Kelley pointed his finger pistol-style.

“Could be we got us some deadheads in the Burnt.”

“Go on. I’ve been telling Teet to come up and check out da Burnt water. Man, its beautiful tea color, its tannin— preserves wood, ya know. Oxygen depletion and all.” He swigs beer, “Bet it’s a mess of treasure under dat black waterline.”

“Maybe this is worth consideration, Kell,” Fletcher turned his attention away from blankly staring at the TV screen to address Bergeron.

“Trouble is, permits and dat,” Kelley waved his hand dismissively then stood up, adjusted himself, and walked towards the fridge to get another beer.

Emmalee was back home and cooking up Hamburger Helper. Fletcher regretted not taking the previously offered bowl of spiced goodness at Bergeron’s.

“You’ve been at Kelley’s,” she observed after Fletcher planted a kiss on her cheek. He tried on his sweetest smile and took up a kitchen chair prepared to hear her out.

“It was decided to put the festival off until the end of the month. Folks think it may be too cold to wait for October, but shoot, I don’t know where they’ve been living these years. October can be just as warm as September.”

“Warmer some years,” Fletcher agreed.

“Grace insisted that the last day of the month was as far out as it could be rescheduled and you know she calls the shots around here,” Emmalee slammed down a head of lettuce. Grabbed some tomatoes.

“Don’t know why the date matters so much to you, Hon.”

“It don’t, really. I’d just like to see the day when everything doesn’t go the way Grace Johnson decrees. And it would be a heck of a lot easier to change 9/8 to 10/8 on the festival signage.”

Since Emmalee’s employer was a sore spot, Fletcher chose to highlight her latter point, “Very sensible.”

“Sensible doesn’t seem to rule this town.” Seeing Fletcher nod his head she continued, “but rescheduling is the right call. The man from Montgomery was here and by his report the springs are a cesspool of problems—on top of high algae counts, that are toxic by the way, the water tested positive for a ‘PFOA’ and the Chromium ‘6?’ levels are unacceptable. Not sure that even October would bring safer water yet.”

“They’re just trying to scare the daylights out of us until the algae blooms go away.”

“Well, if the algae don’t make you sick then this other stuff gives you cancer. I don’t think my kids should be swimming in there.”

“Look, the Burnt is like one giant sinkhole—the springs—they dry up and then they come back. Nothing lasts forever. It’s nature’s way of flushing.”

“You saying it’s okay for the children to be swimming in a toilet bowl? I hope that’s not what you’re saying, Fletcher Norris,” Emmalee aimed the knife she was using at this point in the culinary effort towards Fletcher’s general direction.

"I'm saying you and I swam Burnt Springs as kids and we never died, so..."

"This is different. The sheriff's department is going to be out riding with the marine patrol, that's how dire it is. They'll be arresting trespassers. I don't want the kids or you going near that water this month."

"Can't wait to break the news to them," Fletcher got up and made a move towards the family room.

"By the way, Hazel left voicemail for you. Don't get no ideas about secret fishing expeditions with him, Fletch. They sounded serious with this enforcement stuff."

Later that evening Fletcher stepped out on the deck to call Hazel in private.

"Hazel Wallace," the voice on the line responded after a couple of rings. He was all business like that, Fletcher thought and answered in kind, "Fletcher Norris."

"Hey, I wanted to catch-up on the campaign. Spoke yesterday with the manager at W.A.L.A. I'd still like to do those radio spots, Fletch, but as you know campaign contributors have been scarcer than hen's teeth. Sheriff Boone has all the money flowing his direction."

Fletcher nodded his head, letting silence act as his answer. He noticed Bergeron flick off the floodlights over at his place. "Hey, remember when I said I might could come up with a financial plan. Well, I got one."

"Tell me."

"You ever heard of sinker wood?"

"Yeah, Georgina picked up a nightstand made of some in Atlanta and it set me back \$800."

"Shit Hazel, you could have just pulled one out of the Burnt."

"Yeah," there was a pause, "you saying there's profitable logs down there?"

"Loads of them, down the deep-water creeks, towards the river. Loads. And the best kind too, naturally stained in that beautiful Burnt water. Leastways that's what my crazy cajun neighbor thinks."

"Huh."

"Crazy being a term of endearment, he's alright even if he's acting the coon-ass."

"Have any experience logging?"

"Some. Mostly his cousin that's got the rig and the know-how."

"Always a cousin," Fletcher could hear Hazel's smile even over the phone.

"Yup. But Kell says we're looking at ten grand on this here venture and that seems worthwhile."

"Ten grand in?"

"Nope, profit."

"Ten grand is an awfully large cash donation for a county campaign, Fletch."

"Best I can figure it, the campaign corporation has to dissolve after the election even if we are flush with funds. So we shouldn't worry about how much we put in the coffers. And you decide what to do with the money, Hazel. Though usually divided among the principles. Spoils of the game as it were."

"Seems too fishy to fly. Undetected."

“How do you think Sheriff Boone’s wife gets a new Cadillac every year? No one’s looking at the damn accounting in this county.”

“You could be right about that, Fletch, but there may be a better way of padding the campaign coffer. I mean, what’s the river regs here— this kind of salvage requires a license, don’t it?”

Fletcher bent his head against the doorframe and rolled his eyes, *these damn law school grads and their regs*. “We’re talking about trees that’ve fallen by an act of God, not by an axe. We can haul out the naturals all day long.”

There was an extended pause on the line and Fletcher couldn’t tell if Hazel was along for the ride or not. “Look, Boone’s the one who operates outside the law. He’s the trespasser. Think about your campaign slogan— You are the native son. Who better to inherit the native woods?”

“I *am* the native son,” there was another pause, “Okay, just do it. Carefully.”

“Yup. I’ll see to it.”

“Why are you interested in the damn festival?” Fletcher asked after Bergeron inquired on an update. They were in Fletcher’s pickup headed to their late night swamp logging. It was only about a week since they first talked plans but Kelley’s cousin understood the significance of having solitary access to the waters and made time to drive up with his ‘litt’l rig.’

“I told Emmalee I’d be up for some alligator wrestling. People would pay to see dat, won’t they?”

Fletcher gave a shrug.

“But she said over her dead body, far too dangerous. Dat cher, she’s sweet on me.” Kelley wore a cocky smile but he could see his charm failed. Fletcher was about to tear into him so he said, “Naw, I know my commandments, Fletch, don’t pay my talk any mind. My mamma raised me right.”

“You’re just full of wind.”

“C’est tout,” Kelley agreed.

“Just don’t blow any in my wife’s direction, you hear?”

Bergeron saluted his assent and fell silent for the rest of the ride.

Fletcher was relieved to see what Bergeron referred to as Teet’s ‘litt’l rig was a full-size catamaran pontoon equipped with what looked to be a large mechanical winch in the middle. Even in the dark Fletcher could see a mangy man figure arranging orange floater buoys and some dive gear on the tube decks. The engine stuttered quietly across the water and Kelley refrained from calling out a greeting in his usual style. He spoke only after they had approached the boat, *Stump Knocker* painted along the side.

“Come see, dis here is my cousin, Teet. He’s da swamp fox I’ve been telling you about.”

Teet’s face was covered in a reddish-brown beard and his features were pinched and pointy including his distended nose. He offered his hand to Fletcher and a wide smile broke under the facial fur. They shook hands rigorously.

“Ca va! Coosin Kell’s padna is ma padna.”

The insects at the shoreline were so loud they sounded like a den of rattlers in an electrical storm. Even with that static, Fletcher could tell he spoke in the kind of dialect that was subtitled on TV.

“Good. I’m good,” Fletcher said emphasizing the guttural sound of his English.

“Bien,” Kelley said, “we’re all good, except dis water, p-yew!” The air was foul in pestilence and toxins; without adieu, they hopped aboard in order to get moving.

“Catch me dat line, ya?” Teet asked pointing at the dock rope. Fletcher untied the boat, coiled the rope, and waited for a signal to push off. Kelley positioned himself under the small canopy at the wheel. Teet nodded.

“Before I get to talkin’, I’ve got something to say,” Kelley said with his hand hovering on the boat throttle.

Fletcher hid a smirk, *lord, this was going to be a long night.*

“If we was to go down in the swamp tonight, I can’t think of better padnas, nor a better view of da moon.”

The three men looked up at the night sky, a ten-day old moon shone through the overhead trees, cascading over massive branches draped with Spanish moss and bromeliads. The haze of surrounding light created a lavender ring around its circumference, like a lunar crown. Three silent prayers were said and then they launched, lights low, running as quiet as possible over the top of the main springs and past the bordering homes. Kelley opened the throttle a bit when they entered one of the tributaries that was unpopulated. Fletcher pointed him towards the upper springs area.

“Good of your cousin to come all this way and help,” Fletcher said, “what’s his take?”

“Go on now, Teet’s happier than a coon in the Friday night trash. Lookey.” Teet was standing on the bow with his hands folded across his chest, hair blowing backwards, and his nose up in the air.

“Allons-y, find us a deadhead,” Teet waved for more speed to his makeshift crew.

“He’ll be mostly signaling, dat quiet one. Feeling da water depth and sensing changes,” Kelley said.

They weren’t too far into the springs when Fletcher heard an incessant buzzing sound, at first thinking it was an insect swarm, and then at Teet’s hand signal realized it was another boat. Kelley switched the engine to troll and they drifted towards the shoreline. Along with the buzz there echoed sounds of a woman’s voice on top of the water, like a song playing. Around the bend an airboat came flying past with the lyrics of “Crazy” trailing behind it. The voice of Patsy Cline lingering after the boat went out of sight again. Fletcher recognized the AirRanger and reckless driver, Eldred Hagan. The kind of person who thought himself above the law, *of course he’d be out here.*

“Night time swamp running— dat’s what it’s all about, ain’t it, Teet?”

Teet responded with a grin and looked back across the water as they moved forward.

“Something in da world had it in for Patsy, poor cher,” Kelley shook his head as they could still make out the muffled singing, “Speaking of the dead, did I tellya Teet’s a walking one? Been bit by every swamp snake known to mankind.”

Teet nodded his head, “mais talk about.”

“Remember dat moccasin who ate through your damn boot to take you out?” Kelley

laughed and turned towards Fletcher, "Pee-o he was dead for about three days till he finally came back to life, bless my soul. Family gathered around bedside burning da incense like it was a holy holiday, weeping and praying, then Teet opens his eyes, looks at the priest and says, Sweet Jesus."

Fletcher surveyed Teet who was still standing on the pontoon's bow, now with his hands raised out over the water to sense the depth. He knew it weren't time for the second coming or he'd have to consider this fellow to a greater extent.

"Yas sir, just about everyone who's lived on da bayou long enough is going to need a little resurrection now and again," Kelley finished up the story before moving on to his next.

It had been a while since Fletcher boated on the Burnt after nightfall. He loved the strange beauty of trees dipping towards a waterline that curled mist back up into their branches. A fecund embrace between sea and land.

"Garh la," Teet said pointing to a darkened branch rising from the water, "Kell!"

"Tu-wee, let's make a pass at dat!" Kelley replied and steered the boat along Teet's directions. They moved slow, Kelley zagging around, "A lot of knees in this spot, Teet, hope it's worth da time."

Kelley trolled and reversed through near impassable shallows, Fletcher had to credit him on steering a boat as well as he did an RV. Finally at the stump in question, Teet grabbed an exposed limb, swung himself across the wet, and walked on the sunken tree. In this stillness, the water algae breathed of malaria and smelled like methane. It stung at their eyes.

"What it look like?" Kelley asked.

"Like wood," Teet grinned, "Pine. Look like a big heart too," he answered for real.

"Dat'll be a couple of thousand." Kelley squinted at Fletch through a haze of gnats.

"Didn't you say an old sinker cypress brought in ten g's?"

Kelley nodded.

"Let's go for something better," Fletcher decided.

Teet re-boarded and towed the scum off himself. He rummaged through a wet locker and pulled out a square black box. Teet connected the device to the console and set it on the bench beside Fletcher saying, "Densest sink to da bottom." Teet smelled like the rotting vegetation he just came from so he quickly took his position at the bow of the boat.

"We going for deeper water?" Kelley asked his cousin who nodded while stroking his beard, wild-eyed. The gesture sort of reminded Fletcher of Hazel. This was the right call, holding out for a cypress; having nearly promised ten thousand he needed to deliver payday. Fletcher turned on the sonar.

Kelley started the engine and wove back in the channel. "You know how to use dat?" he threw the question to Fletcher.

"It's a fish finder," Fletcher shrugged his shoulders.

"Just be looking for da long shadows."

Fletcher nodded and watched Teet with curiosity. He appeared to be sniffing the swamp as they rode through the final branch of the creek into the Burnt River. He guessed it must have been about fifty minutes' time and he began wondering if they'd hit empty. Second guessing that maybe they should go back for the heart of pine. Kelley, who had succumbed to the

meditation of moonlight on dark water, must have had the same thought— he slowed the pontoon for a turn around.

“Scout da other side,” he called to Teet. They ran halfway back to the creek when Teet threw his arms straight up and signaled to circle.

“La! Got it!” he said excitedly.

“He’s da best,” Kelley lifted his eyebrows and smiled at Fletcher as he spun the pontoon. Fletcher doubted the science of that claim. At the designated spot, he looked at the sonar. It registered only darkness until the display went grey, like sand. That was a big tree trunk down there.

“Yup we’re on it,” Fletcher said.

Teet showed him that the winch no longer had a working button but how touching two live electrical wires together controlled the cable movement— green to red was for up and the green wire meets black for down. Fletcher was used to swimming the springs so he passed on the task involving an electrical experiment and opted for the dive. He began suiting up and Teet shook his head over the swim fins, “Dem for a pool.”

“Teet can tell you difference between pine, cypress, oak with just his feet.” Kelley said. Teet wiggled his gloved feet in emphasis.

“Why?” Fletcher asked.

“Cuz you can’t see under in fine deadhead waters.” Kelley laughed.

After Fletcher dove in he saw what Bergeron meant, the underwater lamp in his hand cast a russet light through the murky water, making the sunken world barely visible. He had never tried this at night, when the river’s tannin water was so dark one couldn’t tell which way was up. Within the heavy silence, he sensed surface only by the movement of current sideways. It was a panicking feeling. A brief flash of light came and went above him. *Was it the pontoon?* A return to complete darkness indicated not—something had moved away. Then the white lightness came again and brushed close to him like a large fin.

Fletcher rose up quickly. He ripped off his gear and hung on the pontoon side, breathing hard, “Mermaid,” he whispered unexpectedly.

“What?” Kelley asked and shook him, “Fletch? Man?”

A burp of trapped air broke surface, Teet emerged from the water after Fletcher, “Sa, okay?”

“He’s okay, just disorientated. Found one?”

They got a thumbs-up signal from Teet before he took the harness end of the cable that Kelley lowered, and submerged again. Fletcher watched the amber color of Teet’s lamp turn to a darker orange as he dropped.

As soon as they started the winch up, the first of the coyotes howled.

“Rougarou?” Teet asked jerking his head right and left scanning the tree lines quickly.

“Naw, ain’t none of those here, Teet. Got themselves a mermaid in dis spring, though. Right, Fletch?”

“That’s what the widows and the fools tell me.”

“Couyon, eh?” Teet said.

“Exactly. Coo-yon.” Fletcher said warming up to the cajun word. Since meeting Bergeron

and adding to his vocabulary, he found it a handy way of calling people idiots without them knowing.

“Or fifollet.”

“Fool’s fire. Swamp lights,” Kelley answered to Fletcher’s puzzled expression. He looked at the murky water that kept everything below view, both dangerous and benign, and added, “Souls of the unbaptized.” A nearly unrecognizable scream came from the trees, which was the beginnings of some owls screeching back and forth.

“Garh la,” Teet said as the cypress appeared at the waterline. Mud and river flushed up along the sides, but the trunk stopped rising because a stub of a limb was caught under a pontoon tube. The winch started a high-pitched squeal like a piston under strain.

“Halt!” Teet threw down his dive gear on the deck.

“Don’t get like me now.” Kelley stopped the winch.

“Catch me dat long sonnaf-a-gun,” Teet said as he lowered the tree trunk a bit.

Kelley handed him a four-foot-long chainsaw.

“Let’s think about this for a sec,” Fletcher said.

Teet didn’t hear him over the sound of the saw, his lanky frame wielding it into the flesh of the water-logged tree. With the branch cut free, the main trunk of the cypress was easily lifted by the winch and rested in its cable hammock between the two tube decks.

“Every log has its day. Ain’t that right, Teet?”

Fletcher rubbed his hand down the side of the large slimy deadhead. Cleaned up and cut, this sunken tree was pure treasure.

“It’s a beaut,” Kelley agreed.

“Whoa, there it is again,” Fletcher said pointing to the water.

Teet dove into the river yippeying, “Mermaid!” He caught hold of her tail and yanked with the strength of a man twice his size. Out of the water popped the white head of an albino alligator.

“Damn!” both men on the boat said.

The ghostly gator spun sideways towards the pontoon, pale jaw gaping, and making a hissing sound. Teet jumped on the gator’s back near the front shoulders. His knees squeezed the animal’s flanks and his hands held on the alligator right behind its jaws and front legs. Between the animal’s thrash forward and Teet’s push, the alligator found its front body pinned against the boat. There was a moment of human amazed stupor at the reptilian pearly white scales and piercing blue eyes before they were shaken alert by the rancid breath of a gator. With Kelley keeping the boat pressed on the gator’s jaw, both of Teet’s hands gripped the alligator’s neck.

“Grab da snare pole while Teet calms it down,” Kelley shouted at Fletcher.

Teet slid an arm forward down the middle of the alligator’s head to cover its eyes. The gator went still but then began to shake violently.

“Dem tail, can’t...”

Fletcher had the snare cable near over gator’s jaw when it rolled left and slipped through the noose. Teet lost one handhold and immediately grabbed the pontoon. The gator continued its spinning roll to turn on Teet who was halfway up, the right side of its jaw came down on Teet’s dangling leg.

“Im nostrils!” Teet yelled.

Fletcher spun the handle on the pole around and punched the gator's nostrils. Its jaw reflexed open and the animal floated briefly stunned by the turn of events, then waved its tail eerily mermaid-like and dipped back into the murky water. Teet was shaking with either laughter or shock as Fletcher wrapped his bloody leg with a towel. There was enough flesh gnashed that it would take stitches to pull the skin flaps back down.

"Pee-o, can't keep you out of emergency rooms, Teet," Kelley said cracking up along with his cousin.

"Guess dat's Burnt Springs' mermaid," Teet said in-between laughs.

"And about a hundred thousand dollars of da alligator leather."

Fletcher sat staring into the water in disbelief. He was past ready to head home.

Antibiotic
Robert Parker

Jeddah cried.

“But you said we were going to see my cousin Jamie!”

That godforsaken name her mother had given her. He hadn't liked it at first but had grown to love it, if only because of who it was attached to. *Grandmother, ancestor of women*, it meant, but this was no ancestor. There was what seemed to be snot coming out of her eyeballs.

“Jeddah,” he said as he reached down and wiped her eyelids clean. She tolerated it the same way his dog used to when he was a kid, squirming yet understanding the necessity of it. “Auntie Kay said Jamie woke up with a fever and that's why he can't come.”

“What's woke up with a fever?”

It was the sort of precious thing she said. Strangers went nuts for it, how she could be such a cartoon. Her hair was a soft tawny brown. Like shit, though he'd never say that to her. He kept his own head shaved. He barely remembered what color it was, though he thought it had to be gray by now, even though he was only thirty-six.

“It means he's sick.”

Her tears gave way to a sympathetic pout. She knew what this was, this thing called illness. She knew it was serious, what it could do to them. She shouldn't have to know, but she did.

“Is he going to be alright?”

“Yes, Auntie Kay's going to take him to the doctor and they're going to fix him up there and he'll be all better.”

She smiled just as quickly as she'd pouted.

“Do you want to go outside? We can go out in the front yard until bedtime.”

“Yeah!”

She squealed as she spoke and ran to the front door. She walked in little stomps like a monster in faded pink toddler sweats with a clunky elastic waistband. The word BOOM was printed on the butt, two letters on each cheek. Half of it had flaked off so that when he washed it he could feel the fabric underneath. They reminded him of a pair of sweats her mother used to wear.

He lumbered behind her and made her wait at the door while he grabbed the toys he thought were appropriate for outside, clutching them to his chest because there were really too many for him to handle. He did this even though she probably wouldn't play with them. She usually just orbited them, acknowledging their existence.

Outside the man passed by with a dachshund. He wore a black sweater like him on this beautiful early spring day, but was thinner and in shorts like a boy. He had those long arms that would dangle like his knuckles were drawing a circle around his thighs. There were kids like that in Jeddah's class, those bird-like nudes he still remembered from glimpses in physical education class. As an adult they were less frightening, maybe even cute, but the ones his age were still monstrous. Somehow though he loved them more than anyone else. He could never figure out why.

The dog was kept on a long leash and hopped like a rabbit around the edge of the driveway. It started barking at Jeddah to follow him. This was what she liked, the animals and the trees and sometimes even the bugs. Toys were of no concern for her. She screamed at it like she'd scream at boy bands when she became a fangirl teenager. She was already girlish in that way. Just like her mother.

* * *

It was dark. There were no sidewalks, just the road, the forest and properties. No one else was outside. Even though he missed the day he was used to going out at night. It wasn't so bad, really, this thing of sunlight being a rarity. He shuffled along impaired by something that kept him too far behind the dog at the end of the thirteen foot leash. *Woah, woah*, he kept saying, along with *stop, slow down*. The dog didn't seem to listen and stomped forward on four little feet. It was like a charging bull. It wasn't long before the man was tugging at it like he was reeling in a fish.

It was mid-March and one of his neighbors still had their Christmas decorations up. Not only that, but they were very bright and were still turned on every night. He resented this like he resented the houses whose owners thought they lived in a crime-ridden urban area and used floodlights to keep their yards completely visible in the middle of the night. They lived far enough out to see more of the stars than people who lived just an hour to the north. Sometimes he could even make out the outline of the Milky Way, especially in the summer. It was a luxury. The bright lights detracted from this, an inferior universe meant to distract.

The dog stopped to sniff at the ground in front of the house with the Christmas lights.

"No – we're not stopping here. Let's go up ahead."

They stopped a few lots down where trees blocked out all the nearby house lights. This is where he peed. It was one of the perks of going out at night, being able to pee when he needed to.

Tonight he didn't have to. He stood where he'd pee the past two nights and looked up at the stars. There was Orion right there, above the nearest house. It was the only constellation he could recognize in an instant, but sometimes he recognized the Big and Little Dippers, Pegasus, the Scorpion. They were the ones he remembered the most from when he was young.

"Hey! Could you stop doing that? You already asked me out."

The voice came from behind him, from the house on the corner of the street. He turned around just in time to watch the front door slam.

"Does she think I'm peeing? I'll pee wherever I want," he said to the dog. "It's one of the perks of only going out at night. How does she know I'm peeing here?"

He knew a tawny brunette lived there with her husband and their dirty blonde daughter and dark-haired son. He'd seen her at a distance and had waved but there was always a dissatisfaction on her face that he thought maybe was there because she wanted to talk to him because he never said anything to her. He'd learned to mistrust the wives in the area. He simply didn't speak to them, possibly because he didn't have one himself. There was also the matter of Candace, the girl with the oak-brown hair he'd gone on a date with. He didn't want to acknowledge that whoever had shouted at him from the house seemed to know about it -- it was too weird for him to want to think about, so he put it out of his mind, somehow knowing

that he'd understand sooner or later. He liked to be alone anyway, and never understood why his neighbors felt the need to shout at him from their lawns. She wasn't the only one who did this. Down the road he had the sudden urge to pee, and he wondered if the woman who'd shouted at him from the house had been the reason he didn't have to do it earlier at his usual spot.

* * *

He walked up the stairs and thought about looking into his sons' rooms. There were two of them, but he knew enough not to open the doors and actually look into their rooms like he would've just five years ago. There was an unspoken understanding between them because they all knew what they might find if anyone decided to poke their heads in at any moment after dark. It was sweet that they'd reached this age. He could reminisce about it like when he smelled an orange peel. He was almost proud of them.

In the master bedroom his wife had stopped reading and was lying on her side with her back to the door. She still had the same cinnamon brown hair he did, before it'd started to gray. There was no trace of yellow. There were mounds of her in a soft pink nightgown that revealed her shoulder blades and which had become tattered from age. She had others, but this one was her favorite. She'd had it for years. It'd become her bedroom skin, something she'd flash at the children in the kitchen the nights she went to bed early. He could already feel it on his hands. He could become an extension of it.

The moment he took a step into the room she inhaled sharply in her waking moment.

* * *

She'd be here tomorrow with the baby. He could already smell the Dreft. He missed it. When she was alive he'd walk around posing with sly tilts and open hands, *Dreft – my new best scent*. Maybe he'd make the same joke with Tanya with a baby in the house, especially now that she was a teenager. But he sort of knew he was saving it for her when she got here from Pennsylvania.

He went into the guest room to see if everything was set up for the visit. If all went well she'd be coming with them in a few months when his electrical contract expired and he'd help set up the new shop in North Carolina. He'd already gone through three visits up to Pennsylvania. He was tired of playing with his daughter, and he was sick of shit. He threw those clothes away. He cleaned the car but hopefully it wouldn't stink when he got back in it to drive Tanya to school.

* * *

He got in the car and looked at the guy who'd just parked in his driveway. They exchanged pleasantries. *Sorry for the misunderstanding. I didn't bring my phone*. The guy had a shaved head and blue eyes. Most every guy he'd seen lately had a shaved head with blue eyes. After he unzipped his pants he said it was *brick* in the car, which he said meant *cold*. He'd never

heard anyone use that word like that. As he moved over to the driver's seat he hit the lights above the dashboard with his back. They were red and blue, like police lights.

"You and your lights. . ." the guy said with a bitterness that seemed like a joke.

* * *

He took a hit from his bowl. He loved the ritual of it. It glowed orange and the comfortable upward numbing followed. He needed to pack it again. It was shitty brick weed but it was all he could really afford this time around. With shitty brick weed when the bowl was almost empty he never knew if he was getting high off the bud or the fumes from the lighter.

He put it to the side; he'd pack another one later. There was a movie to watch. He hated movies – no. Hate was a little strong. He was sick of them. They kept him out of trouble, though tonight he thought he could use some. He used to like trouble, but he'd been too good at getting into it. his is what the weed was for, what the movies used to be for: to keep him out of trouble.

But there were honest kinds of trouble, something that didn't involve orange lights sizzling in the bowl. He put it aside and put the laptop on his stomach. He was lying in the middle of his king-sized bed with his head propped up by three pillows. He was only wearing light blue boxer shorts, which he grabbed at the crotch and rubbed around like he was kneading dough. Tanya was asleep in her room at the end of the hall. he'd probably be out for the rest of the night. There was Erica, but she was all the way in Pennsylvania. If everything worked out she'd be moving his way soon, but until then she couldn't do anything to cure his boredom. But what exactly couldn't he do after she theoretically moved in? He thought about that as he rubbed his junk.

* * *

The next day Jeddah left her toys suddenly and looked out of the window with a despondency he almost welcomed because of how it stilled her – she was always so fidgety. It was overcast and colder than the previous day and it'd been raining, so he didn't suggest they spend the afternoon outside.

"Jeddah, what are you doing?"

"There he is," she said.

"Who's there?"

"The man and his dog," she said.

He got up and went to the window and bent over her. The man and his dog were passing by the house. He was wearing a different sweater but the same shorts. He seemed lost, like he was looking for someone.

* * *

He never did this, he'd said in the email. It'd been five years since he'd been with anyone. *Silence is key*, he also said. There were people sleeping in the house. He wanted him to come in through the garage and walk up the stairs and find him stroking his hard cock in his

bedroom. Then he wanted him to suck his cock. He was a single father, moved there with his daughter five years ago to live a normal life. He never did this, he'd said in the email. He never did this.

He parked at the edge of the long driveway at the bottom of the hill because he was worried the sound of the car would wake people up. The driveway was enormous, but in the distance he could see that the garage was open. There was also a light on in the front bedroom on the second floor; the rest of the house was dark, except for the porch light that illuminated the entire front yard in a strong incandescent yellow. The brightness didn't bother him like it did with the houses on his street, even though it still seemed like a detraction.

The door in the open garage was unlocked like he said it would be. He turned the knob slowly so he wouldn't make any noise. He was an expert at this.

* * *

The kids were asleep and he was pacing. In the front room he was pacing and mumbling to himself under his breath. Sometimes there were hand gestures. He seemed to move with predestined action. It was pouring or else he'd go outside and run around like a psychopath who couldn't remember the last time he tasted human flesh. But instead he was having a one-sided conversation that would never actually happen because the person he was having it with wasn't in the house.

His wife was upstairs. She might not be asleep but she was upstairs, and he'd join her soon but right now he was too agitated to lie in bed with her. This was the cross, when he became a tree.

He took three steps toward the window and there he was. The man he was having a conversation with was walking in the pouring rain, only without his dachshund. They caught glances through a tiny slit in the curtains. A shock wave pulsed through him and he wanted to kill him. He found himself shaping his hands like he was choking him. He thought about going outside to scream at him though he didn't know what for, but he had his guesses.

His wife was upstairs, waiting for him.

* * *

He put the dog back in the house after the walk, then went out again by himself. It'd started to rain, but he didn't care. He walked with the urgency of a horror movie heroin. He thought all eyes were on him, but everyone was already asleep in their houses. His panic grew. The dog didn't like to walk in the rain, so he would do this alone. He didn't care.

* * *

The officer pulled him over on his way into town to work. He was so ashamed of himself. It was only the night after it happened. It was disgusting. He hated himself for it. He was sure that everyone he saw today was going to know why he woke up with a raspy voice and a sore throat.

The officer knocked on his car window and he lowered it. It was raining and he felt bad because the guy had to stand in the rain.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi. Do you know why I pulled you over today?"

"Yeah, my plates are expired."

"I pulled you over because when I pulled your registration, the file we have on record says that it's expired."

He motioned to an envelope in his passenger seat that sat along with some empty soda bottles he'd tossed there. He got it in the mail weeks ago but hadn't even considered opening it. He didn't care about these things as long as the engine still worked.

"Yeah, I got this from the DMV in the mail, but I haven't opened it."

"Let's see what you got."

The officer was friendly and had glistening blue eyes, but he had the sense that if he reached for the envelope too fast he'd freak him out and get shot. This couldn't be the actual reason why he was pulled over – no way, no how. He handed him the envelope. Adrenaline was pulsing through him and he thought he might have to drive away really fast or else he'd get arrested as soon as he came back. It was a strange dynamic. The officer kept his head shaved but the hair had grown back somewhat. It was light, a delicate peach fuzz that at first glance could've been yellow, brown or red when it grew out. They weren't the same at all, it seemed.

He took about five minutes before he came back to the car window.

"Yeah, I just put it back through again and it all came out good this time. It's no problem – really, it's no problem."

As he said this he motioned toward his open mouth and moved his hands downward toward his stomach, then waved his palms gently at the ground.

"I'm sorry – I'm really sorry."

"Really, it's okay. Just put the stickers on when you get a chance. When it's not raining."

The officer said *take care* as he left, but all he could think was how last night had been so wrong...just so wrong...

* * *

"Yeah? There's something else on that, isn't there?"

The guy was angry. He stopped the motion he was making and was suddenly afraid to swallow.

"Did you come in me?" was what he found himself saying. There was no taste to it but there was a texture and he wanted to get out of this car and to a toothbrush or at least spit as fast as possible. He didn't know who he was suddenly, or what was happening. It was all wrong. He'd prepared, but apparently it wasn't enough.

"Oh. . .yeah," the guy said back to him, like it was off script, like he was being corrected into what was supposed to be happening, where there was no punishment happening.

He pulled up his pants, careful not to sit directly on the passenger seat before his underwear was back on.

"I'm sorry about that."

"It happens," the guy said.

* * *

There was a kitchen on the other side of the door inside the garage. He closed it behind him with the same expertise. *Silence is key*. He walked around a hallway making sure no one could hear his footsteps until he saw the stairs leading to the second floor. His heart raced. There were lights still on on the other side of the staircase in a living room with sofas and lamps that could be in any of the living rooms in the development they lived in. It was clean. Very tidy.

He was told to expect cats. Halfway up the stairs an orange cat ran halfway down the steps before it saw him. They caught each other's gazes and they both stared at each other as they both moved up and down the stairs. It was like staring at himself in the mirror. They were both terrified. Eventually the cat bolted past him and scurried to some corner where no one would be able to find him.

To the right of the stairs was the bedroom whose lights had been on outside, but there was no glow from underneath the door. He said he'd be watching a movie, but there was no noise either. Past the bathroom to the left there was a room where the lights were on. Maybe he'd been mistaken. There were various signs on the door telling anyone who came up to it not to go in: *Stop, Do Not Enter, Knocking Prohibited, Silence Area, Quiet Please, Just Relaxing*.

* * *

*Where are you?
 Fuck you fuck you fuck you – there was a woman in the house!
 There's no woman in the house.
 Fuck you, dude. I went there and scared the crap out of some woman. I ran out of the house. Were you playing a trick on me?
 You went to 218 Birch Ln, right?
 I thought so – OMG I ran out of there I thought the police were coming!
 wtf lol
 Fuck you fuck you fuck you! I feel terrible! I scared the crap out of some woman in her own home!
 Would it be easier for you if we meet in the car? I will drive to you or where you want.*

* * *

He opened the door and there she was, holding the baby. He didn't hear her drive up or else he would've gone out to help her. he baby smelled like it needed to be changed. From the look on her face he knew it wasn't going to work out.

* * *

He turned away from the sign marked *Stop* and moved toward the light that was on in the room at the opposite end of the hallway. *Maybe he switched rooms when he heard the car pull in*, he thought.

He walked slowly over to it. The door was cracked. He pushed on it until he could see inside. There was a sleeping woman with her back turned to him. The moment his eyes fell on her she inhaled sharply in her waking moment.

He ran back down the steps trying not to make any noise but he was sure once he was out of the garage and in the driveway someone would come out the front door screaming at him. No one did. He got back to his car and left and told himself that he shouldn't drive so fast away from the house or else it might raise suspicion about why he was on the street to begin with.

"Oh, my God, Oh, my God, Oh, my God. . ."

He was trembling and panting. On the way home he saw a cop car and he was sure it was going to the house he just left.

* * *

He saw the man the next day, again through the window. He didn't want to strangle him anymore. He was with his dog. He looked ashamed. *Good*, he thought.

* * *

Jeddah cried.

"The man and the doggie aren't there anymore!"

He walked over to the window and stared out of it with her. There was what seemed to be snot coming out of her eyeballs.

"They sure aren't, honey," he said. "I guess they left."

Let Rust Be Rust
Zebulon Huset

Rusty had always disappeared inexplicably. When we were kids it was just for minutes, then he'd be back. I'd ask where he was and he'd say, "I don't know," it was how he got the nickname "idiot" which turned out not to be so much a nickname as a brand that was pressed upon him by the cruel and pious children and adults of our small town.

We knew he wouldn't stick around BFE for long after he graduated, but he didn't wait that long. Disappeared one day and just didn't come back. I got a postcard once without anything on it from actual Egypt. Our pyramids were an illusion, trailers tiled against a hill hitch to hitch.

Then he was back. Three years and he'd grown out his hair. His old aversion to shoes had really kicked up a notch. When people asked where he went he said he joined the circus. When I asked where he went he said I wouldn't understand.

But hell, I wasn't wasting too much time interrogating him, pompous little shit, I could go to the bar with my real ID now. Tucker's was where the local girls dressed like Romani girls but local girls'll fuck ya.

Rusty liked girls too. He had that Zen charm to him. Don't say a lot, but say the right thing when you speak. His innate pattern was to be excellent and uninterested. He never verbalized it, but he'd tapped into that aspect of the universe: ladies are predators. Show them a prize not a pet. That little shit hit a thousand the summer he returned. Having high, pronounced cheeks that weren't so pointy as a cartoon princess didn't hurt.

We bonded some, more'n in high school at least. He was still a space cadet, but you understood that that was just Rusty. *Let Rust be Rust* was my new motto. He did a fuckin' magic trick one night. The girl wasn't even that hot, but she fell in love with him that night. Then he disappeared.

Abraca-fuckin-dabra.

I didn't mention that that girl was my first wife. It was when I learned things are never called the first anything until a series has been established. It was The Great War until Hitler's romp around the old playground. She wasn't my first wife until Rusty had poofed a second time, or, that's when she realized I was the cat's pajamas, but not in a good way. I was the cat's pajamas because a cat only has one outfit. It's not a butterfly. If anything I was licked-over ass fur, and who wants to be married to that?

Three even more fickle women, it turns out. Pump action shotgun weddings. Revelatory divorces. Bah, humbug.

Rusty shot me a letter on hospital stationery. Quacks had him locked up. Some BS charges, he didn't go into details. Would I come get him? New Hampshire sounds like an Eden to be locked up in. Time to slither across some borders, I thought.

He was hunched in the lobby's chair as I waited for the paperwork. He didn't talk much. There were a few BS charges: trespassing, resisting arrest, public drunkenness, possession of a small amount of marijuana.

"How can you be trespassing on private property and be drunk in public?" I asked the receptionist with zero-fucks to give. She blinked twice, then picked up her cell phone. "I see you take cash."

Some Eden, the streets had a pauper's hem of dirty snow. What a shithole. We drove the twelve hours home in silence. Like, literally, no music even. I thought he'd turn the radio on, but when he didn't it became a game.

How many miles on the odometer before he said something or turned on the radio. Then I tried to remember what time I got in the car but before I had done the math I conceded to disinterest.

I opened the door and made eye contact with him over the car. "You're welcome."

"Were you waiting for a thank you?"

"No. Could have used some music if you didn't feel like talking."

"Why didn't you turn on the radio?"

"In case you wanted to talk."

"You're an idiot."

No argument there.

Over dinner he asked about Ellie. Yeah, we'd split and yeah, she was still in the park. I see her sometimes sitting on the porch with ear muffs on even in the summer. She seems normal other than that, her late twenties hit her hard and it looks like she straight up skipped her thirties.

I call her Bat Shit around my friends but I'm over her leaving me and might actually give a shit if she killed herself now.

Not that she's made any motions toward that. Just, you know, it was rough at first. Time heals, or whatever. It covers you in scars, I guess.

In the backyard a small teepee crackled like the nightmare of some native. We sat in the dark next to the fire tire. In third grade we'd conceived of the fire pit, an old worn down tire filled with concrete then partially de-tired. Over the years fires encouraged by splashes of gas had melted the remaining rubber into a demonic wave of black frozen in time.

He finally told me why he'd gone from lock up to the looney bin. He told me what he told them.

That he had learned to transcend this plane of existence. That he didn't run away or hide from his problems. As far as everything in this universe was concerned, he just disappeared. But it took a lot out of him to transit and he needed to rest. He couldn't demonstrate. Not for a long time at least, probably years, but he was going back after this, probably forever.

"What's the other plane like? They got good drugs there?"

"It's not like that there. It's hard to explain because all you know is emptiness. This universe is so empty it kind of makes you insane when you first transit. Your eyes work different. It always confused me."

"Is that why you always said you didn't know where you went?"

"Well, that, and because I didn't have a fuckin' clue what was going on. I didn't understand anything about our own universe let alone how to understand my consciousness not being bound by space."

"What does that mean?" I pitched a white spruce log on the fire, toppling the waning teepee. One appendage drooped dark green needles into the flame's mirage roasting their oils until they popped in tiny balloon-bursts of pine. Rust eyed me thoughtfully. Measuring my inability to comprehend.

"You know how atoms are just a nucleus and electrons right?"

"An' Higgs-Bosoms."

Rusty laughed. It was great to hear his laugh again. If his laugh was a landscape, it would go hill, hill hill-mountain which rolls down onto a high plateau and lingers there like it's a quiet hamlet vacation home. He pulled a penny from his pocket, tossed it to me. The fire caught the sharp emboss of its newly minted back. On that shield façade of democracy: E Pluribus Unum.

"Think of that as an atom. The outside edge is the orbit of the outermost electron. See the zero in the date. That's about how big the electrons are. Most everything solid here is made of carbon, so think of six zeroes that size zooming around the penny, and another zero at the center for the nucleus.

There were four digits in just the date, and imagining them as zeroes I was immediately reminded of the last spoonful of cheerios bobbing in the milky bowl.

“Now think of the moon.”

I looked up but the sky was completely clouded over.

“I said *think* of the moon dumbass.” It reminded me of our old family saying.

“Hey, I’d rather be a smartass than—wait.” I shook the empty Leinenkugel can in my hand, crushed it and let out an overly dramatic belch. Rust laughed again. Subversion of expectations. It’s why slapstick was funny. You expect people to walk in a line like normal, not to fall into each other like toppling dominoes.

“Look, I’m trying to make this easier for you. Really the zeroes would be millions of times smaller than that. Like, we’re talking about an atom as the size of the penny, but that’s 173 million times the size. What do you think is 173 million times the size of that penny?”

I thought of the biggest circle I could. “The Epcot Center?”

Rust laughed again and I rode those hills, up the mountain and hung out in his mountain grove for a little bit. When he’s gone I forget how much I miss him. “See, that’s why I like being with you, man.”

“Bigger?” He nodded. “The Death Star?”

“Closer. Try the moon. All I’m saying is—we exist in a vast nothingness on this plane of existence. The density of our matter is...” he looked at me, eyes still pinned a little at the corners. “It’s impossible to explain.”

“Like when you get a Long Island Iced Tea and they fill it to the brim with ice and you drink it quick, then after the ice melts there’s just a tiny teeny bit of flavor left, but you drink it because hey, where there’s flavor there’s effect.”

And we went back into his mountain hideaway.

The next night we went into town. Passing Ellie’s place she sat on the porch with her earmuffs. She perked up from her focused stasis seeing Rusty. He stared, but returned his gaze forward before any overt craning.

She showed up at Tucker’s an hour later looking like a non-crazy person in most ways. Her thick wool socks were pulled over her jeans, but her pale pink lipstick wasn’t outrageous, her hair was in a neat pair of pigtails and she’d even hastily done her nails without making a

mess of things. She looked almost nice, and I was surprised that I was able to think of it just as that.

Just a lady that looked nice.

Rusty was classic Rusty that night. He sat back looking more like a Disney prince than the princess he grew up looking like with those cheekbones. Finally some testosterone had filled his face out a little and damn if he didn't seem to glow.

Like someone who had transcended the plane of existence, perhaps.

When he was prodded to speak, a whole group had gathered, and he tried to explain the big bang with a plastic bag. He sat in the back of a U shaped booth with an old buddy of his from high school and three ladies he'd at one point or another had his tongue inside of.

"This universe is kind of like a container, much much thicker than this bag, but hell, we use what we've got, ain't that right, Tony?" He nodded to Tony, whose left arm came out of the womb like a runt sheep's leg.

Tony tipped his mug in agreement.

"Just imagine this bag is the inner edge of the universe. We're constantly being pulled away from the central plane of existence, an insanely dense place. If this existence is the ocean, that one is a can of tuna. It has a sort of kinetic potential that is immeasurable, but the universe we live in keeps it at bay. But as our universe stretches and stretches."

He raised it over his head and began stretching the plastic bag in front of his mouth. Someone muttered a joke to another that hushed his laugh under the scowl of tableside ladies.

"So the expansion thins the nothingness that keeps the everything of the other plane in its place, and when it gets too thin a little hole in the dam appears and—" he poked his tongue through the tiny hole that had appeared from his stretching. Despite the context, it looked more like tentacle hentai than the big bang, but most of the crowd ate it up.

Most.

"Why don't it just all rush out? The hole get all big?" Jeremy had a bigger beer gut than biceps, but both bulged a little more than he swayed in the gravity softened by six rounds of bourbon.

"It gets plugged up by the matter after just a little bit gets out."

“Nah-uh!” Jeremy scoffed. He looked at the idiot like he had in high school. “When it floods it starts with a crack, but the power of the water breaks that crack open, tears shit apart.” Jeremy’s friends *ca-hucked*.

Rust wasn’t chuckled. “Water is different from matter, though water is matter that doesn’t matter. Anyway, let’s use water.” He stood on the bench, stepped on the table directly above its one support, and, hardly placing any weight on it, dropped down to the slippery painted floor. He had fancy black loafers you had to buy near an ocean or a river.

A water jug sat on the bar beside the server’s terminal. It had been freshly iced in the warm bar. Rust went there and dragged us all behind him like we were caught in his net.

“Who needs water?” Rust began filling glasses and passing them back. He filled and filled and I began to wonder if he had clean forgotten what he was getting at, just saying “Hydrate, hydrate” as the jug emptied. He looped his fingers through four empty pitchers on the bartop and slipped behind it. Both Claire and Clair-with-no-e, the bartender and cocktail waitress were enrapt in his conversation and didn’t stop him.

I forget how well he did that summer he returned. It’s a pretty small hamlet we have here, and he’d seen the backdoor of practically half of its homes.

He returned with four filled pitchers. He lifted the jug, tilted it slightly, the large amalgamation of ice remained unmoved, frozen into one Pangea. He carefully poured a pitcher in, then another, slowly, all directly onto the ice and then the placid surface as the ice remained submerged.

Clay tapped my shoulder. “He better get to something here or more than one of us will speed this along.”

I wasn’t the only one in the bar to’ve married a girl that’d fallen in love with Rust.

He opened the tap on the water jug one last time into a pitcher he’d just emptied. A little sputter of water that slowed quickly. “See?”

He looked at the crowd as if they should have epiphanically shouted “Eureka!” and begun clapping.

“No,” an uneven chorus of at least six voices sputtered.

“You will.”

And with that anticlimactic gesture he loosed us fish from his net and went to take a piss, having consumed four pints of the water he emptied.

Small bubbles of conversation popped up like tiny autonomous universes, each trying to understand meaning in their own interpretations of what they'd witnessed. The small conversations drifted from their points of origin and merged, still unable to come to any consensus.

Rogue black holes that were husbands drifting around and through to play pool or get another round became fond of the phrase "full'a'shit" until it was practically a mantra buzzing about the pub until the bulk split off and exited. The evening had wound down, the bubble of Rust's influence scrubbed from the room as it always was, mostly gone with his presence. But, only mostly, as always. Then Rust returned.

"What did you mean?" Crystal, Gerald's wife asked, eyes larger and blinkier than I'd seen them. She'd drifted away at one point and refreshed her mascara in a corner darker than she realized.

Rusty looked at the jug sweating its condensation low like a Riverdancer. "I was just refuting the Mediterranean theory. Water stopped pouring." He held up the nearly empty water jug. "No flood." He bent over and set it on the ground a foot in front of the jug.

"But what did that have to do with the plastic bagsh?" Crystal raised a hand to her mouth as if it could hide her slur.

"I was just saying that the big bang as we know it isn't a singular event, but one that happens as expansion dilutes that which stops the inner space from escaping."

"Huh?" Crystal persisted.

"Stuff's constantly moving away in this universe. Like a pool break you played in a parking lot instead of with a table. When it gets far enough away from itself the stuff in the other plane pushes another set of balls through, and what happens when they're racked up?" Ice in the jug shifted and water spurted into the pitcher on the floor.

"You break 'em!" Crystal raised her mostly-empty blue-raspberry martini glass in her left hand, but before it could begin its downward smashing motion Clair-with-no-e gripped her wrist and removed the glass from her hand.

"Jesus, drunkie, you think that'll win him over?"

Crystal stuck her blued tongue out at her.

"Go turn your husband's dick blue, some of us aren't married." Clair-with-no-e flicked a drop of condensation at the still extended tongue. She didn't depend on a tip from the women of town, and the men liked that they all hated her. That didn't change their universal smoldering hatred for Rust, though. Clair-with-no-e tried to flick her eyelashes at Rust but one

eye moved quicker than the other and the resulting wave looked more like a slight stroke than anything enticing.

Rust didn't see anyway. He was staring straight ahead. Ellie had a black magician's cloth on the table. The one Rust had given her the night before he disappeared. It had little hidden pockets in it where you slid cards in and it looked like they disappeared.

I remember the change in her happened that night. They sat in that same place and he made a card vanish into the blackness, then with the flick of a wrist it reappeared in his hands.

The Creep Factor
DC Diamondopolous

Tammy had nightmares of the man she saw in her store window. His elongated face chased her through the streets of the San Fernando Valley, her terror mounting like a progression of staccato hits rising up the scales on an untuned piano. She always woke up screaming before the crescendo.

It all began after Rachel had a gun held to her head for a measly fifty dollars. How dumb could the thief be, holding up a pillow-and-accessory shop when Dazzles, Tammy's store three doors away, sold jewelry? It was costume, plastic, some silver, a few pieces of gold, but, a pillow store?

After the police left, Rachel came in screaming and crying, "Why me?" her eyes red and twitching, mouth pinched. Tammy knew what Rachel was thinking: you take in more money than I do, why didn't he put a gun to your head?

She felt that the robbery at Rachel's had been a prelude to something bigger, a feeling—dread. It all came back to the dream. She was at the Pacoima county-fair, at an old-time taffy-pulling contest where the taffy wasn't taffy but the face of the man she saw outside staring in at the window display, his phantom shape morphing into multiple cells until a valley of identicals hunted her.

Tammy had a panic button under the cash register. The counter was next to the back door for a fast escape. A six-foot bank of back-to-back showcases stretched down the middle of the long, narrow store, and ten others lined the east and west walls. The glass doors reflected whoever looked into them and gave her time to assess people. Still, she thought of buying a gun.

Tammy stood at the counter with the computer on. She was browsing through listings of Bakelite necklaces on eBay when the door swung open, the buzzer alarmed. Since the robbery, Rachel entered her store like a bull in search of a red cape.

"They caught the asshole that held me up!"

"That's great."

"The douche spent my money. Cops said I won't get it back." Rachel stood just inside the door, her arms crossed, and her attractive face gaunt.

"At least he's off the streets," Tammy said.

"He'll be out soon enough. And probably come back to rob you."

Tammy sucked in her breath.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I hate coming to work. I'm so afraid."

"I understand." Tammy walked down the aisle. "At least you weren't hurt."

"Emotionally, I was."

Outside, two women looked at the window display. One held a manila envelope, the other several letters. Three months earlier, new neighbors moved in with a shipping and PO Box store. Tammy's walk-in business increased. The customers were a mix of drifters, aspiring actors and models, hopeful reality stars, and self-published writers. They talked about themselves and shared intimate details, as if she were someone without judgment, and perhaps that was the reason, for Tammy saw the best in people, and she had to admit; it made a slow day go by faster.

The two women left.

Tammy was about to speak when the man in her nightmares looked into the window.

“What’s the matter?” Rachel asked. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

He stood hunched over, dressed in a long black coat, looking at the second shelf in the window display.

“Tammy?”

He was a giant but not really. He just appeared that way. His face and extremities belonged to a man seven feet or taller. His features all merged into the center of his enormous face, leaving his jaw and forehead a wasteland of acne craters. And his eyes, they were two dots of sub-zero tourmalines.

Rachael turned around. “Ew, who’s that?”

“I think he has a PO Box next door. He scares me.”

“You’ve waited on him?”

“No.”

“Probably just a looky-loo. It’s the normal-looking guys you have to watch out for. Like the asshole that robbed me.”

The man left.

Rachel opened the door and looked back at Tammy. “I keep thinking the next time someone will kill me. Or you.”

Tammy gasped.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Was she really, Tammy wondered? Even so, Rachel left a chemtrail of gloom behind.

Tammy went back to the counter.

She entered her fourth decade of life without husband or child. She attracted men who used her, takers. It made her feel needed, in control, but they always left anyway. She wanted to change, but habits were stubborn, and men wanted younger women.

She dreamed of romances like those in a Nora Roberts novel. She wanted to love and be loved with a passion that could heat Pluto, someone to share in the distinctions of life, to be swept up a switchback of foreplay and countless orgasms.

She went online to meet guys, lowered her standards to the bell curve, where all she asked for was a man, under sixty, with a full set of teeth and a decent income. Not even the Internet helped.

She glanced at the large framed mirror—impossible not to look at—that hung on the back of the showcases at the end of the counter. There was no other place to hang it, and her customers needed to see their reflection when buying a necklace or earrings.

Tammy was without glamour, in a most glamorous town, lacked charisma in a city brimming with alluring women, but she did the best she could: added extensions to her lank dark hair, wore contacts that tinged her brown eyes green, ran five miles three times a week at Balboa Park. And she was short in a town where the average woman could play professional basketball. She might have a humdrum face, one that no boyfriend ever lied about by telling her she was beautiful, but she had compassion, could discover the kernel of beauty inside another no matter how hideous the person. So it distressed her, made her feel like she wasn’t trying hard enough to discover the inner goodness of the man in the topcoat who looked into her window and tracked her in her dreams. He couldn’t help what he looked like. She worried

that she was turning into a shallow, selfie type of woman.

Tammy passed the day with customers and the occasional consignor who came in to pick up their check or add jewelry and knickknacks to a showcase.

It was a half-hour before closing. The January twilight cast a chill as darkness descended. The street lamps on Ventura Boulevard illuminated empty sidewalks. A light show of pink, blue and yellow neon flashed from the Thai restaurant across the boulevard and into Tammy's store.

She stood at the counter, matching receipts with money she had taken in for the day.

The door opened. The buzzer warned. A gust of cold wind swept exhaust and the smell of frying fish into the narrow store.

The man appeared.

As much as Tammy wanted to see his inner perfection, she felt the sensation of having her skin peeled.

She grabbed the money and the receipts, went into the bathroom, shut the door, and hid her days' worth in a bag behind the paper towels. She looked out the back window. Except for her Honda, the parking lot was empty. Her phone was under the first shelf of the counter. She told herself she was being ridiculous. It was always the ordinary-looking men who were rapists and murderers, not the ones with warped faces and mismatched body parts.

Tammy recited the affirmation that her Buddhist friend Qwan had given her: "I see beauty in all things and in everyone."

She opened the door. The blood evaporated from her brain and left her woozy with fear. "Can, I help you?" she stammered.

He stood in front of the counter, his long arms stretched from one end almost to the other, braced, an anchor for his gigantic head. "I'm looking for a jade ring." His voice garbled like nails thrashed about in a garbage disposal. His pinprick eyes seemed to enjoy Tammy's terror.

She thought about lying, but what if he saw the ring? "I, um, yes. A man's ring?"

"Yeah. A man's ring."

"There's one in the second case in the front," she said, hoping he'd walk away so she could open the back door. What for? To run out? And leave him alone in her store? Stop looking at his appearance, Tammy told herself.

"I want to try it on."

Tammy nodded. She hurried from behind the counter, went around the hanging mirror and down the west aisle with her key poised to unlock the case.

He lumbered toward her as if he wore concrete platforms, his expression smug.

He stood close beside her. Affixed to his long coat was a metallic odor, iron, or was it blood?

Tammy reached in and gave him the ring.

Scars crisscrossed the top of his huge hands and knuckles. He jammed the ring onto his pinkie.

She glanced out the front window, hoping someone would come in.

"How much is it?"

His breath smelled like a jar of old pennies.

"\$285.00."

“Gold.”

“14 carat.”

“Hmm.” He stared at her and massaged the tip of his middle finger back and forth over the jade then tapped the stone with his teeth.

Tammy cringed.

“What’s the best price?” he asked.

“I can take ten percent off.”

“Hmm, \$255.00, even.”

“There’s tax.”

“Not with cash,” the man said. He stared at her. There didn’t seem to be any life coming from his eyes, not human, more reptilian. She expected a forked tongue to shoot out between his lips.

She’d pay the tax. She wanted him out of her store, out of her life, out of her dreams. “All right.”

He held out his skillet sized hand—fingers that looked like they enjoyed pulling the wings off of sparrows—the gemstone dwarfed on his pinky.

“I’ll think about it.” He yanked off the ring and handed it to her. “I’ll let you know, tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Someone else is interested in it. It might be gone by tomorrow.”

“I’ll take that chance,” he said and walked away. The hem of his long coat touched her leg.

She shivered, watched him go out the front door and realized she had sweated through her blouse. The waistband of her skirt was damp. He did nothing overt. He could have knocked her down and run off with the ring. He could have raped her in the bathroom. He could have knotted his wiener like fingers around her neck and snuffed her.

He didn’t want to pay tax. That was all he demanded.

Tammy prayed he wouldn’t return.

The next day was cold, but she kept the back door open. She turned the thermometer up to seventy-five, thankful for the people in the alley: car’s parking, people shouting into their phones, UPS and Federal Express trucks screeching.

When she went home the night before, she had a glass of wine, then another. She had called Qwan, who suggested she meditate. She instructed Tammy to go beyond the physical to the spiritual world to seek answers. Tammy cried out, “I’ve tried that, and I’m still scared to death of him!” Qwan replied, “Focus not on his body but on his soul.” “I don’t think he has one,” Tammy whispered. She said good-bye to Qwan and found divinity in another glass of wine.

At four in the morning, she shot up in bed, the monster in her dream the color of jade. The arms of his coat turned into green batwings. He chased her through the store until she dived into the mirror and vanished.

With three more hours before rising, she heaped the covers on top of her, shuddered, and squeezed her eyes shut. Tears streamed sideways across her cheek.

That morning she put on four-inch heels, and for the first time teased her hair—like her mother used to do—to make herself appear bigger. She carried the only weapon she could

find at home, a souvenir from Disneyland: a tiny Swiss Army knife with scissors attached. She never harmed anyone, even spiders she'd toss outside. For Tammy, all God's creatures were worthy of respect. But nothing could quell her fear of the man.

Tammy polished the counter. She ran the vacuum, swept the sidewalk in front of her store. Her feet hurt from the high heels. When she'd bend over her teased hair would smash into showcases, and shelves.

So great was her anticipation of being murdered, that, she began to think of flower arrangements and who would give the eulogy at her funeral. Her mother would be in shock, her father forlorn. Rachel would be thinking, glad it wasn't me.

Tammy waited and waited. She peeked through the bathroom window whenever she heard a car, truck or motorcycle. She went out the front door and looked in at the PO Boxes. She glanced east then west. Cars backed up on Ventura. A skateboarder headed toward the Galleria, but no man.

That night, after she got home, she finished a bottle of wine, slipped into bed and closed her eyes like the lid on a coffin.

The next day Tammy dressed in her favorite sweater, lavender background with tiny pink hearts, and a navy blue skirt that showed off her athletic legs. Her hair obeyed the brush, and she wore just the right amount of makeup to enhance her features.

She felt invigorated from a good night's sleep and that the man had decided against the ring, and therefore, wouldn't return. How foolish, she thought, to work herself into a panic. Tammy hated being a victim.

She was sprucing up a case when the door opened the buzzer alerted.

A young Asian woman walked in, small and delicate, with long black hair parted down the middle. She went to the right aisle.

Tammy saw her looking into the second showcase. "Can I help you?" she asked, walking toward her.

The woman pressed her forehead against the glass. "My boyfriend wants me to see that jade ring."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah."

"You mean—"

"He was here the other day."

The man had a girlfriend!

"He can't afford it, but he's up for a part in the new James Bond film."

"He's an actor?"

The woman looked at Tammy. "Yeah. He's up for the role of the new henchman."

"Henchman?"

"Yeah, the other actor died. They need to cast someone scary looking."

Tammy felt a hiccup launching in her stomach. "So, he's like getting into the role?"
The hiccup expanded into a chuckle.

"I guess."

Tammy felt giddy. She laughed. "I have a feeling, he'll get the part."

"I hope. What's so funny?"

“Me. I’m laughing at myself. Can I take the ring out for you?” Tammy asked, feeling like the sun, the moon and the stars aligned instantly for her. She felt ashamed for judging him, stupid for being afraid, ridiculous for having nightmares about him.

The woman sighed and stared into the showcase. “No, I’d have to work overtime for a month if I were to buy it for him.”

“Why buy it for him if he gets the role?”

“Even if he gets it, he can’t afford it.” She looked at Tammy. “He has a hard time finding work.”

“Because of his,” Tammy searched for a kind word, “distinctive looks?”

“That, too. People are picky about who they hire. So now he’s trying to be an actor.”

What did she mean by, that too, Tammy wondered?

“He thinks because I’m Chinese, I know good jade. I’m about as Chinese as Taylor Swift. It’s a nice ring. But he’s dreaming.” She turned and walked out the door.

Tammy went back to the counter and sat on the stool. She pondered the meaning behind everything the woman told her. He was trying to be an actor, had a hard time finding work and not just because of his looks. What other reasons? Had he a prison record? Murdered someone? Would let his girlfriend work extra hours to buy him a ring—selfish, but so were a lot of men. She seemed intelligent. But Tammy knew love wasn’t just blind. It could be deaf, too.

She was reaching for her phone to call Qwan when the ringtone let out, “All You Need is Love”.

“Dazzles, Tammy speaking.”

“I was in the other day.”

Tammy’s neck and arm hairs became stiff as antennas. “I remember.”

“Don’t sell the ring. I’ll be in tomorrow.”

“Congratulations,” she said trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

“What for?”

“The role, of the henchman, in the new James Bond movie. Congratulations.” She heard his snicker and then the dial tone. Tammy glanced about as if something could save her. God help me!

The Pirate Who Didn't Know His Ass from a Hole in the Ground
Caleb Echterling

Arrrgh's and tropical waves rolled over a rowboat that labored toward an uninhabited island. On board, a quartet smelly enough to stun a parrot at thirty paces wrestled with a wind-whipped skull and crossbones. The boat plowed into the beach. Bodies lurched forward. A pirate with ribbons tying off the tips of his dreadlocked beard snatched the flag between his good hand and his hook hand, and plunged into the surf.

"In the name of me, Brownbeard the Pirate, scourge of the Spanish Main, vanquisher of the Royal Navy, I claim this island for...also me, Brownbeard the Pirate. Whose sterling achievements I have already chronicled, and will not repeat for a second time." He strutted toward a line of rustling scrub brush with the flagpole protruding from the rear of his pantaloons.

The entourage scrambled to his side. "Boss, where'd you put that flag?"

"In a convenient flagpole-sized hole in the ground that I found after disembarking. Why do you ask?"

"That's no hole in the ground, boss."

"Yarrgh, I've done it again, haven't I?" Brownbeard's hands slithered over his body in a self-administered stop and frisk. "Little help?" One of his fellow buccaneers extracted the Jolly Roger, and planted it on the beach. Brownbeard hopped from foot to foot, yelped, and fell to his knees. His hook hand tore wet gouges from the sand surrounding the flagpole.

"Boss?"

"Shut up. My hemorrhoids are killing me."

Grimy hands yanked on beard-dreadlocks tousled with Queen Anne's Lace with the lusty pulls of grandma ringing the dinner bell. "Boss, wake up. Two sloops flying the Union Jack are blockading Ocracoke Inlet. Forty guns each."

Brownbeard fell out of bed and stroked his flowery mane. "They have cut off our escape. Under the pirate code, I must do what needs to be done to save my crew."

Onboard the *HMS Bi-curious*, a knock rattled the door to the captain's chambers. "An emissary from the pirates delivered an invitation to a dance-off between you and Brownbeard. If you win, he sacrifices his head. If he wins, he gets free passage into the Atlantic."

Captain Discobeats stroked a mirrorball. "Those damn pirates and their crazy code." He threw open his armoire. "Very well, if it will prevent senseless loss of life, I accept."

A rough circle of pirates and sailors shared swigs of rum while drummers pounded a steady beat. Captain Discobeats, decked out in his dress bell-bottoms and rhinestone-studded shirt, cut a rug in the center of the assemblage. Hands and hips moved with mathematical precision. Chest hair flowed from his open collar. A drunken roar greeted the end of his routine.

Brownbeard swaggered into the circle wearing a black tutu. He curtsied to his opponent as the drummers began the beat. His hands joggled the sandy earth where an abandoned fire pit made a blackened depression.

"No, boss, no," the pirates screamed. "Don't shake that!"

The verdict from the judges was unanimous. Brownbeard must surrender his head to the Royal Navy captain, who could claim the bounty of two hundred pounds sterling. The sailors charged with dumping Brownbeard's body in Albemarle Sound found a treasure map tucked inside the waistband of his tutu. After heaving the headless pirate into his eternal, watery resting place, the sailors sent out for the spot marked on the map, an isolated stretch of Ocracoke Island.

Royal Navy boots sprinted across the beach, and over a rise of dunes topped with wispy sea grass. Eyes jumped from the map to the earth. "There's nothing here but a hole in the ground," one sailor said. "What happened to the all the loot?"

The Blue Item
Andrew J. Hogan

Olmec  Press Online

TCC Police Beat, March 18, 5:49 pm - Central Campus

Officers responded to a report from the central campus administration of a woman with 'a blue item on her head' monopolizing the admissions desk personnel by speaking incoherently. She claimed to have several names, to be on medicine to combat hyperactivity, to be a prophet, a medicine woman, a shaman and a nurse of 30 years, to be able to divine the future and to be the victim of six failed marriages. She said her grandmother, who supposedly had left her \$7 million, sent the campus police to check up on her. The officers found she had no warrants, so they told her to leave the admission desk staff alone unless she was going to register for classes. She left the campus.

Reader Commentary

AlwaysReadyForDinner said... Admissions Desk Personnel Are Idiots! Have you ever tried to talk with the people at the admissions desk? Sure, if all you want is to register for a class in person instead of going online, and maybe you were looking for a little human interaction in an otherwise cold and uncaring world (big mistake), they'll get you registered just fine, with a contemptuous comment about how you could do this more easily online – and not bother me so I can keep sitting here picking my nose. If you have any kind of problem out of the ordinary or want to explain why you're taking Food Prep 106 because you hope the girls in the course will be more mature and interested in an older, more mature guy who really appreciates food, well just forget it. They'll claim they need to move on to the next person in line, who just happens to be a hot chick, and they're all smiles and small talk, and while the hot chick gets lots of attention, the geek behind her can just keep text-messaging his mom, who's sitting in her car out in the turnaround waiting to take him home for supper. I just hope the lady with the blue diamond on her head is a shaman and that she got to put a curse on their sorry admissions asses before the storm troopers ran her off public property.

March 18, 2007 at 1:51 pm MDT

June P. Weaver, Associate Director of Admissions, Central Campus said... Admissions personnel are properly trained. We receive very few complaints about admissions desk personnel, and most of the complaints are baseless, usually resulting from the failure of the student to bring proper documentation. The Central Campus is especially difficult for admissions desk personnel because of the large number of homeless or vagrants living in the vicinity who enter the admissions area looking for empty aluminum cans or shelter from the weather. All Central Campus admissions personnel have gone through sensitivity training to handle cases of non-students approaching the admissions desk with inappropriate requests. Mace canisters are

used only in extreme situations – in fact, they have never been discharged on the Central Campus, except once when a clerk accidentally dropped the canister he was showing to his girlfriend. Admissions desk personnel can request assistance from campus security by pressing a panic buzzer under the admissions desk, which is what was done in the case of the woman with the blue item on her head.

March 19, 2007 at 3:21 pm MDT

MopedMakeOutMachine said ... Central Campus is a Zoo. You wouldn't even believe the weirdoes who slink onto Central Campus! You're trying to eat your lunch fast, right, because you got up late for class and you had to type your report at the last minute, and you're trying to read your textbook while you're eating before class in case you get called on by your rat-bastard teacher who thinks you're never prepared, and along comes some homeless guy trying to convince you that God wants you to give him money or the rest of the burrito you're trying to choke down, and the stench of the homeless guy is so bad you're losing your appetite, but it's a two and a half hour class and you know you're going to get so hungry that you hold your nose so you can stuff the burrito down and you can't tell the guy to fuck off (Can I say that online?), so you give him the finger but you start to choke and have to hock up most of the burrito, and then being a good Christian you ask the homeless guy if maybe he would still like it, and the ungrateful bastard gives you the finger. I mean, why do the cops let these guys on campus to bother serious students like us who are trying to study? I'd like to move over to the Southwest Campus next to the rez, where the Indian cops just chase off these homeless guys, because, you know, all the shit the Indians had to put up with from the cavalry and rustlers and all, so they don't take no shit (Can I say that online?) from homeless guys, but I can't get my classes in moped maintenance and repair except on the Central Campus, so I'm stuck here with these crazy assholes.

March 19, 2007 at 4:57 pm MDT

Roslinda LeeAnne said ... Ridiculing the mentally ill is wrong. My sister is schizo, and I think it's wrong to make fun of people like her who can't help themselves. She's had delusions about being somebody else, somebody other people wouldn't just blow off. But then it turns out people don't like her OR the other person she imagines herself to be. She understands, kind of, what's happening, that people are making fun of her and the other person she thinks she is. So now her feelings are really hurt because she couldn't even dream up a person that other people would like. In case you're wondering, she's not the lady with the blue item on her head. My sister hates blue and would never wear a blue item. AND she hates Central Campus because of all the freaks down there. She stalks around the Foothills Campus, where they're all Republicans, walking around talking on their cell phones as soon as they get out of class. My sister has my old cell phone now; it's broken but she can talk to the other person she imagines herself to be about how slutty the other girls dress for the classes that the other person whom my sister imagines herself to be is taking.

March 21, 2007 at 1:51 pm MDT

Homer Brauhaus, Director for Advocacy said ... Please be compassionate. The TCC Central Campus is situated in the principal roosting area for Tucson's homeless and mentally ill vagrant population, roughly a third of whom are veterans with untreated service connected mental illnesses resulting from the current and previous disastrous misadventures in the Middle East

based on fabricated reports of weapons of mass destruction. Services to this population are woefully inadequate, causing a vagrant life style that occasionally impacts on other public services, such as public transportation, recreation areas and higher education, even while fat cats keep piling on one tax deduction after another to finance their home construction projects that are destroying the desert around us. Rather than whining on this web page about the behavior of these unfortunate mentally ill individuals, some of whom have risked their lives defending our way of life from allegedly Islamofascist terrorists and dictators with imaginary weapons of mass destruction, readers should redirect their complaints to the Tucson City Council and the state legislature who have failed to appropriate adequate funds for programs to help the mentally ill homeless. Please check our web page for the e-mail addresses and phone numbers of these city and state officials. <http://www.homesforthehomeless.org/>
 March 21, 2007 at 10:33 pm MDT

Captain Santake, the Imperial Guard of Zardok said ... REPENT HUMAN SCUM! The despicable treatment of the shamanic representative of the Zardok Imperium by the temple palatines shall be avenged on all temple functionaries who do not repent before the commencement of the next Jay Leno broadcast.

March 22, 2007 at 9:44 am MDT

FredU said... Islamofascists disguised as extraterrestrials! It's bad enough that we've got bleeding hearts running around the desert picking up illegal aliens who are crossing the border through our national parks and monuments that would be better off in private hands who could defend them relying on their constitutional right to bear arms guaranteed by the Second Amendment, and taking them to Starbucks for a latte before letting them infiltrate the workplace of American citizens who lose their jobs and have to resort to selling drugs to make ends meet, BUT NOW they are posing as extraterrestrials to scare law-abiding citizens away from speaking out against them for fear of being sucked up into a flying saucer and subjected to bizarre experiments that will leave them incontinent and impotent – and believe me, I know this from personal experience.

March 22, 2007 at 1:56 pm MDT

June P. Weaver, Associate Director of Admissions, Central Campus said ... Further investigation of the incident involving the woman with the blue item on her head has called into question the version reported in the March 18, 2007 *Olmec Press* 'Police Beat.' Coworkers and onlookers have failed to corroborate the account given by Giles Neiderberg, the admissions desk clerk at the time of the aforementioned incident. Further questioning of Mr. Neiderberg resulted in an admission that he had returned on evening prior to the incident from a weekend of drunken debauchery in Puerto Peñasco, most of which experience he was unable to recall, including the citation for public nudity found in his trash receptacle. Mr. Neiderberg agreed to immediately enter an alcohol abuse rehabilitation program, subsequent to which he met Britney Spears, the pop diva, and decided to terminate a promising career in higher education administration to become a roadie for Ms. Spears' future concert tours.

In addition to the vacancy created by Mr. Neiderberg's resignation, the Central Campus admissions staff suffered the loss of half of its personnel because they refused to apologize for Mr. Neiderberg's mistreatment of the shamanic representative of the Zardok Imperium; Mr. Neiderberg was himself unavailable for annihilation due to his institutionalization in the

Slippery Palms Chemical Dependency Rehabilitation Center in Santa Monica, which lies outside of the sphere of influence of the Zardok Imperium.

March 29, 2007 at 3:21 pm MDT

Felicity J.W. Farnsworth-Symthe, Director, TCC Institute for Creative Writing Grammar and Punctuation said ... Whilst the false shadow falls astray, the seed is germinated nonetheless.

The woman, her head emblazoned in a blue aura of light, whose mental state has been characterized as infirm in the *Olmec Press* post because of her seemingly fantastic tales to the admissions clerk whilst she sought to register in the Fantasy Fiction Writing Workshop, WRT 2065, for which I am the humble and happy pedagogue, and in which the blue-auraed woman has participated as a student for nigh on four years, with great success in her academic achievements, but her way was blocked by the aforesaid admissions clerk, who believed her unfit for such intellectual rigor due to the red flag caused by the new writing competency examination requirement, so designed to prevent fledging students from partaking of advanced writing courses for which they lack the adequate preparation, so recently imposed that the blue-auraed student was not forced to engage said requirement whereupon she first registered in the workshop those many years ago. So warmly did the blue-auraed student attempt to bring about understanding in the mind of the aforesaid admissions desk clerk regarding her current enrollment and successful performance in the fantasy fiction writing workshop that the admissions clerk, mesmerized by her blue aura, was struck dumb and dumber and was thereupon made unwilling to override the red flag preventing the enrollment of the blue-auraed student, who then attempted to convince the admissions clerk of her suitability for the course by spinning again the tales she had composed in previous semesters, including stories about a woman who was a nurse, another who was a shaman, a medicine woman, a divinator of the future, a malapert who had had six failed marriages, and a beneficiary of a grandmother's gift of seven million dollars, etc., and the blue-auraed woman being a compelling story teller, the weak-minded admission clerk became confused and misperceived her animated discourse to profess she had herself enacted all of these roles. And so it came to pass, the confused admissions clerk thought it more prudent to refuse to override the red flag, thereby preventing the blue-auraed student's enrollment, on the grounds that he 'didn't want her getting in over her head in a course she wasn't prepared for,' although he did magnanimously offer to discuss it with her further over drinks at the Rancho Pustulario Bar on Second Street after his shift ended. The blue-auraed student, now in great distress over the shambles of her academic career laid waste by the weak-minded clerk, did unfurl multitudinous insults upon him, casting aspersions on his intelligence and ancestry, implying excessive progenitary inbreeding, whereupon the admissions clerk, though weak-minded but still a sensitive heart beating in his breast, took great offense at these calumnious characterizations of his ancestry and forthwith summoned the campus constabulary, who, accustomed to dealing with the deranged and mentally infirm in the thereabouts of the Central Campus admissions desk, escorted the blue-auraed student from the building. Gentle readers, I beseech you to take note that the blue-auraed woman does pay out-of-state tuition and that no state law or college regulation exists to prohibit the enrollment of extraterrestrial species in TCC classes. The blue-auraed woman has over the course of seven semesters brought to my fantasy fiction writing workshop a special perspective and contributed unique information to the benefit of many of

the younger students whose experiences in matters extraterrestrial and aetherial is often limited to the chemically induced.

March 30, 2007 at 4:35 pm MDT

Giles Servant to the Diva said... Dudes, dweebs, airheads, behold the tripendicular dawn! Learn, learn, LEARN from my mistake. Never, never, NEVER dis an alien with a hangover. I mean, when you've got the hangover, don't dis an alien, thinking there won't be payback. Yeah, I had a bitchin' time at Puerto Peñasco, at least so I'm told by my homies, but I totally misdug the chick with the blue diamond on her head. The blue light made feel me like I was still wasted. I totally tried to get the chick into the freakin' class, just so she'd shut up and go away, but the freakin' computer kept beeping at me and flashing a big red X that fried my eyeballs. Finally, no choice, I pushed the panic button, and the Barney's came and drug off the chick after I laid on them all the crap she'd babbled about herself. Was I wasted? Duh! Did I know my coworkers would be nuked by some alien death ray for what I did? Clueless! Jaaney, Butch, Xavier, Molly, they could've sucked it up to the Zardok Imperium and repented for me. Instead they act like I'm groty to the max. And Miss Weaver makes out like they were nuked for standing on principle – *Earth People Don't Kiss Alien Butt...*Where's that written down!

Yeah, so maybe I was lucky to be hanging with Britney in rehab when the death ray sizzled my Admissions Desk compadres. I'm mellow now, baked out in the sun and cooled by ocean breezes. Two lounge chairs down from the Diva, and I can smell her tanning oil. She looks at me, and there's no frown, no little siren going off in the back of her head warning her to move onto to somebody more reliable who smells better and doesn't burp so much. Okay, we're not exactly like tight or anything. I'm not going to be her main squeeze, we'll probably never hook up, but when I carry her bags to the bus or get her a slurpee from the Fat-&-Sugar-Quick-Mart, she's got a kind look in her eyes. I've found my mission on the road; every night, me and the Diva in a new town – anything to get away from the constant stream of freaks at the admissions desk.. Boise, Pierre, Ashtabula here we come!

April 1, 2007 at 12:03 am MDT

Tucson Community College

Job Announcement

4 Positions in Higher Education Administration

An Interplanetary Equal Opportunity Employer

Tucson Community College has 4 immediate openings on its Central Campus for new admissions desk staff. Anyone interested in applying for these admissions staff vacancies should contact June P. Weaver at 206-5543 or AssDirAdm@tcc.edu. The Ruling Prefect of the Imperial Guard of Zardok has agreed to conduct a workshop on appropriate subservience when responding to Imperial edicts and fulminations for new and surviving admissions staff members. Persons with extraterrestrial experience or of extraterrestrial origin* are encouraged to apply. * A valid F-1/ET visa required.

Fame

Jonathan Yom-Tov

“See here? Where he’s got his hand down my throat? That’s the moment he put it in,” Steve said. He pointed at his phone’s screen and paused the video. The grainy picture showed a patient, was it Steve?, lying on a dentist’s chair. The camera, looking over the dentist’s shoulder, showed him in the act of pulling the patient’s tooth out. The patient was flailing his legs and the dentist’s assistant was moving to hold the patient down. Earl leaned back and brushed his long white hair out of his eyes.

“Are you sure? I don’t see anything out of the ordinary, he’s just taking your tooth out. I think he’s got the forceps there, but I don’t see him putting anything in,” Earl said.

“Dude, I’m telling you, I was there. I felt it. Can’t you see?”

“What kind of dentist has a security camera in his clinic anyway?”

“The kind who puts electronic implants in his patients’ teeth, that’s who.”

Earl straightened and puts his calloused hands flat on the wooden table. His ass hurt from sitting on the bench all this time. If he’d had anything more interesting to do he’d probably have walked away a while ago but there was nothing much to do here except listen to the other patients’ tales. Steve had intrigued Earl from the moment he’d arrived. He didn’t look mad, not at all. Didn’t act that way either. He was a little intense, but no more than Earl had been when he was his age. It took a few days before Earl had been able to find him alone but he’d finally managed it. Now he wasn’t so sure it was such a good idea. Steve sounded crazy as a shithouse rat.

“I dunno Steve,” Earl said.

“Look, ever heard of the Church Committee?”

Earl shook his head.

“MKULTRA?”

“Nope.”

“OK, so MKULTRA was a CIA program intended to develop mind control drugs. They used to test the drugs on US citizens *without their knowledge*. Don’t believe me? Here.” Steve switched to his browser and Googled MKULTRA.

He brandished his phone at Earl’s face. “See? First hit on Google, the Wikipedia article for MKULTRA.”

Steve read from the phone’s screen. “Project MKUltra – sometimes referred to as the CIA’s mind control program – is the code name given to a program of experiments on human subjects, at times illegal, designed and undertaken by the United States Central Intelligence Agency.”

“Still think it’s improbable for a dentist to implant me with a mind control device?” Steve was almost shouting.

“Calm down. Jesus!” Earl said. “OK, so let’s say the CIA was trying to control you. What the hell for? It’s not like you have any secrets they’d want to have.”

“It was an experiment. They wanted to see if it works. The moment I stepped out of the clinic the device started talking to me. At first it said some reasonable things. You know, ‘Go home, get some rest’. But then things it began getting strange. Strange. It started giving me orders. At first I ignored it. But it just kept repeating itself. It was maddening, I couldn’t

concentrate on anything. The moment it gave me a task it would just say it over and over again. It would only stop after I completed it. Then it would give me some rest and then come up with something new.”

“Why didn’t you go to a doctor?”

“I wanted to, don’t think I didn’t. But I was working fourteen hour days and still barely making rent. New York is expensive, you know? I didn’t have time. And in the beginning it wasn’t so bad. It would be like once a day ‘go get a pack of cigarettes from the corner shop’ or ‘ask someone random on the subway what time it is’. Not too bad. But gradually it got worse. Much worse. And that’s how I ended up here.”

“How? What happened?”

“Now, that’s a long story.”

Earl squinted up at the midday sun. “Well, I don’t think either of us is going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, I’ll just go up to the desk and get my pills. Wait for me here and I’ll tell you all about it.”

The café’s speaker blurted out something unintelligible. Steve sipped his water and glanced at Martha. She was sitting across the table from him buried in her Macbook. Last night he dreamed her face had turned into the Apple logo, kind of like that painting by Magritte, only with a silver apple and a woman. Oh, and Martha never wore suits, only fashion from Tokyo’s filthy underbelly. So maybe not like the painting at all. Being around Martha always made his metaphors lame. Martha fingered one of the long pins stuck in the bun of platinum hair perched on the back of her head. Steve racked his brain for a good opening line. It was ridiculous to have to think of opening lines when you’re already sitting in a cafe with a person but there it was. Having a conversation with Martha was never easy. For one thing she kept drifting back to the computer, checking on her email or her app’s stats. For another he felt tongue tied with her. His mind kept racing but he could never think of anything witty enough to make it past his internal critic. Under normal circumstances glib was a word Steve felt fit him well. Along with cool, spontaneous and reasonably intelligent. But with Martha he didn’t feel like himself. He felt like Frankenstein’s monster after a tongue amputation. Except Frankenstein’s monster never suffered from sweaty palms and a clattering pulse.

Martha glanced up from her screen. This was it, his chance to win her attention.

“Did they call my name?” she asked. The V of her immaculate eyebrows overhung icy blue eyes. There was a hint of impatience in her expression. It had been almost ten minutes since they’d ordered their drinks.

“I’m not sure,” Steve replied. Was there a droll retort camped out in the back of his throat waiting to spring into action? Steve waited for a moment but nothing came. “I’ll go find out.”

He got up and walked up to the barista who was beating the coffee machine viciously with the portafilter.

“Hey, any idea when our drinks are going to be ready?” Steve asked over the pounding.

“What did you order?”

“Two tall, nonfat lattes with caramel drizzle,” Steve said, lowering his tone in the middle of the sentence. Now that he vocalized it he felt the order was somewhat effeminate. When

they'd made it Steve had been too nervous to decode the menu chalked up on the blackboard behind the counter and had gone with Martha's order. Now he dreaded the derision he was sure the barista was hiding behind his dispassionate expression.

"Over here," the barista pointed at a couple of glass mugs which stood on the counter. "Sugar's over there if you need it."

Steve took the drinks and headed back. He placed the mugs on the table and sat down on the sofa.

"So, how's the app doing?" he asked. It was disappointing to get back to the same subject but it was a safe bet to assume that Martha would take the bait. Since he'd first met her it was almost all she could talk about. There was something endearing about her monomania. He'd never known anyone who was as passionate about anything as Martha was about her app. She could talk about it for hours. Days even, he suspected, although he'd never put it to the test. And he was happy to listen, it gave him an opportunity to stare at her without appearing creepy.

"Still not enough traction," her glossy pink lips said.

"That's insane, it's such an amazing app." There had to be some way he could help her with the app. Had to. If he only squeezed his brain hard enough he was sure he could come up with one. He'd known from the first it was his only way to her world.

"I know, but I just can't figure out how to get it out there. Programming it was the easy part but I suck at this whole marketing thing. The problem is the network effect. It's like faxes, you know? If only one person has a fax it's worthless, but once you have enough people on board everyone wants one. Here, take a look." Martha whipped out her iPhone and showed it to Steve. There was a picture of her on the screen wearing animated dog's ears and nose. Below her face was a stylized radar screen animation, a dial sweeping round a small circle periodically. "Now if anyone here in this café had my app it would show them my face. If they could recognize me – boom! We'd go out on a date. Everyone I showed it to was super excited by it, it's just that I don't have enough friends here. If I could just figure out a way to get the first couple of hundred users I'm sure it would take off."

"You're right. The only question is how do we get to the early adopters?"

"You're the one who hangs out with celebrities. How do we make my app famous? How do you make a celebrity anyway?"

"Well, I don't actually hang out with them. I just write about them," Steve said. In fact, the reason he'd chosen this café was that he heard Justin Timberlake sometimes dropped by and he was hoping to get a sighting. It would be his story for the week.

Steve's phone rang and he answered without thinking.

"Dude," it was Noah from the office, "where the hell are you? Sofia's freaking out. You better come quick."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"Holy shit! Kim's here. You know Kim. K-I-M. Kimmy. Kim Kardashian."

"Fuck. I totally forgot. I'll be right there, cover for me."

"Yeah, no way. I've never seen Sofia this angry. Just get your ass over here."

Noah hung up and Steve felt a cold sweat wash over him. He didn't much like his job but he needed the money. He didn't have any savings. If he got fired he'd have to go back to his parents and that would be the end of his career.

“What’s wrong?” Martha asked.

“Kim Kardashian’s in town and we’re all supposed to be covering her visit. I totally forgot about it and my boss is going to kill me if I don’t get to the office soon. Actually, she might do that anyway. I really need to go, sorry. I’ll call you. Don’t worry, I’ll solve that traction thing for you.” He didn’t know how he’d do it but he knew he had to. He blew Martha a kiss, mentally kicked himself in the shin for the stupid gesture and ran out to catch the train.

“So you’re a journalist?” Earl asked.

“Kind of,” Steve replied. “Actually, no, not at all. I’m a gossip columnist, or at least I used to be. A journalist is what I wanted to be when I came to New York, but I couldn’t find a job. I had to pay the bills somehow and gossip columnist was the only writing job I could find.” Steve tossed three pills into the air, caught them in his mouth and then spat them out on the lawn one by one like pumpkin seeds.

“You’re not taking those?”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Steve winked. “So what are you in here for?”

“Bipolar. Got arrested on the interstate chasing a car on foot. The driver had thrown a cigarette out the window and I got really mad.”

“Ha ha. Good one.”

“Kid, being bipolar is a bummer. I’ve never been able to hold down a job. My wife left me a long time ago. Usually the pills help, but sometimes I forget to take them and then I end up here.”

“Sorry, dude. I didn’t mean to make light of your situation.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it. I can’t say I’ve ever gotten used to it but at least I don’t take as seriously as I used to.”

“That’s good,” Steve said. “So, what do you do?”

“I fix speakers and sell them on eBay. Those big old boxes that are hard to get nowadays. Oh and I’m also the friendly neighborhood pot dealer.”

“Isn’t that dangerous with the gangs and all?”

“No man. I live in a really small town, there’s no crime, everyone knows each other. It’s a very chilled out location. Best place in the world.”

Earl pulled a Zippo lighter out of his pocket and started fiddling with it. “Now you’ve made me miss it.”

“Who buys old speakers when they can get new ones?” Steve asked quickly, anxious to avoid the potentially sentimental turn the conversation was taking.

“People who appreciate quality. It’s cliché but they really don’t make ‘em like they used to. It’s like vinyl, people say digital music is better but it has no warmth. The new speakers are precise but when you’re listening to good music there’s no substitute for love. And factory made speakers have no love.”

“But they were still made in a factory originally, even if you did fix them yourself.”

“And there’s the difference. When I fix a speaker I put my heart into it. My lifetime of experiences. Broken hearts and sunsets. Scarlet begonias and sugar magnolias.” Earl paused for a moment and looked wistfully into the distance. “I used to tour with the Dead, you know,” he said in a low voice.

“Who?”

"The Grateful Dead, the greatest band that ever was."

"Oh yeah, I've heard of them."

"You've heard of them." Earl repeated, shoulders slumped. "I bet you have."

"What?" Steve asked.

"Never mind. Anyway, when I'm done the box has its own personality. No two are alike."

"Sounds like a good life."

"It is. Except business hasn't been great lately and being here isn't helping. Haven't been able to sell as many boxes as I'd like. My grand niece told me it would help if I opened an Instagram account but it's not working out."

"Show me."

Earl pocketed the lighter, took his phone out and handed it to Steve.

"Only five followers," Steve said.

"And I know all of them personally, which I guess is no good."

"Yeah."

A sparrow landed on the table between them. It twittered cheerfully as it surveyed the surface looking for leftovers. A warm breeze brought down a shower of dry leaves from the tree above them.

"So who's this Kim Kardashian character?" Earl interrupted the silence.

"She's one of the great innovators of our age, and I don't say that lightly. She's famous."

"So what, she's an actress?"

"No."

"Model?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"She's famous."

"Yeah, I get that, but famous for what?" Earl asked.

"That's the innovative part. She's famous for being famous. Extremely famous. And rich. She's pulling tens of millions a year nowadays, maybe more. It all started with Paris Hilton. Wait, if you don't know who Kimmy is there's no way you know who Paris is, right?"

"Not really. Who's he?"

"It's not a he, it's a she. Paris Hilton is one of the heirs of the Hilton family, you know, the hotels? Anyway, a while ago she decided she wanted to be a celebrity. Sadly, she had no talents to speak of and she wasn't especially good looking. Now, your average person would've given up at this point and been content to lead a life of luxury that most people couldn't even dream of. However, Paris is no ordinary person, she has that spark of greatness that propels humanity's best to new heights. She went on vacation to the Bahamas with her boyfriend and they filmed themselves having sex. The tape was "leaked" and bam! Paris was an overnight celebrity. Everyone wanted to get their hands on a video of a rich socialite sucking her boyfriend's dick. It also helped that Paris pretended to fight a legal battle to stop the tape from being published."

"OK, but what's that got to do with Kim Kardashian?"

"At the time Kim was completely anonymous. She was the daughter of Robert Kardashian, OJ Simpson's lawyer. The 'If the gloves don't fit you must acquit' guy. So she was

rich, but she had greater ambitions. She wanted to be famous. She tried to date Nick Lachey.” Steve sighed at Earl’s puzzled look. “Never mind, he’s a celebrity. Just assume that everyone in this story is famous.”

“Now where was I? Oh yes, she tried to date Nick Lachey and get the paparazzi on the trail. She worked as Brandi’s stylist, hung out with Paris Hilton, but nothing worked. Finally, like Newton before her, she decided to stand on the shoulders of giants. She made a sex tape, it got “leaked” too. To spice things up there were rumors it had water sports in it.”

“What, they were doing it in the pool?”

“No, he peed on her.”

“Man, that’s disgusting!”

“Well, it didn’t actually happen. It was just a rumor and it totally worked. Kim exploded onto the scene. TMZ, E! and People just couldn’t get enough of her. She got her own reality TV show. Started modelling. She now has her own clothing line and perfume. Hell, she got so famous she made her *family members* famous. Fast forward to today and she’s still the celebrity queen of the world. If she just mentioned you on her Twitter you’d be instantly famous.”

“OK, I didn’t understand half of what you just said, but she’s famous, I get that. What’s that gotta do with you being here?”

“I’m just getting to that.”

The sidewalk was crowded with rush hour foot traffic. Steve dodged pedestrians like a running back on a hail Mary play. He felt his phone vibrating against his thigh and reached inside his pocket.

“Where the fuck are you?!” It was Sophia.

“On my way to the office. Sorry, I got held up.” Steve panted.

“I don’t care if you were mugged and murdered. I want you at the shoot, about an hour ago.”

“Sure, sorry. Let me get my stuff at the office and I’ll be right there.”

“The year’s most important photoshoot is downtown, not at the office, and it’s happening *right now*. I swear, if you’re not there in ten minutes I don’t want you coming back to the office, ever.” Sophia hung up.

Steve ran towards the subway station. His shirt stuck to his back and he felt drops of sweat collect on his forehead and prepare to descend into his eyes. Anonymous faces zipped past him and he cursed each one for the millisecond delays they imposed on him. He nearly slammed into a huge cop standing at the foot of the subway station’s stairs, then launched himself at a turnstile, slapping his plastic card on the reader and barreling on to the platform. The train arrived just as he did and he pushed his way in. He tried to calm himself and breathed deeply of air dense with millions of humans in a New York summer.

From the speaker the driver murmured something unintelligible and Steve wished he’d stop the useless announcements which no one could understand anyway and concentrate on making the fastest run in the history of the N line.

He got off the train. Twelve minutes. Goddamit. Another five walking to the photoshoot and then eight minutes to get in. Six if he could manage to be charming or intimidating enough. It was impossible to know in advance which approach would be more effective. He took a quick

look in the train's window and combed his hair into place with his fingers. There was no way to dry the sweat stains on his back and armpits, he'd just have to keep his arms down until he got to the air conditioning.

At the door an immaculately coiffed young man wearing thick rimmed glasses, a checkered jacket and a black bowtie stood guard. There were four people standing in line and it didn't look like a very fast one. The man smiled at Steve briefly as he approached. It was going to have to be intimidation. Steve walked past the line right up to the guy with the bowtie. He waved his press pass at the guy's face.

"Scandal, I'm late," Steve snapped and put his hand on the door.

"Hold it, who?" said the young man.

"Are you deaf? Scandal Magazine," Steve said. "They're waiting for me."

"Never heard of it. Sir, you're going to have to wait in line like everyone else."

"Look, I don't know who you are but they're all waiting for me inside. You'd better let me in before you lose your job."

"Sir, please, get back in line." The young man waved a nearby doorman over. The doorman sauntered towards them.

"Is there a problem?" he seemed to have difficulty chewing out the words.

"No, no problem. Just a misunderstanding." Goddamit! Steve fumed as he took his place, last in line. Seven minutes and thirty two excruciatingly slow seconds later the young man interrupted Steve's visions of violent retribution and waved him inside.

The scene of the photoshoot looked like a bizarre time travel accident. On one side of the room were two models wearing cream colored crinoline dresses in the middle of a milling cloud of black clad stylists, makeup artists and hair designers. On the other the photographer stood on the aftcastle of a 19th century whaling ship and shouted instructions to his crew, who were adjusting umbrella reflectors, flood lights and strobes on the deck. And in the middle of the room was Kim. She was piloting an enormous midnight purple crinoline dress. Her lush black hair dangled almost nonchalantly into her sumptuous cleavage. Her perfect jet black eyes majestically ignored the four stylists putting the finishing touches on her.

"Go get her tiger!"

"What?" Steve asked. But there was no one there. It was the voice again. Steve looked around, hoping no one had heard him. He'd learned to ignore the voice since it appeared a few weeks ago, but sometimes it surprised him. "Shut up!" he whispered furiously.

"Just go talk to her. She won't bite."

"Don't interrupt, I'm on thin ice as it is."

"Come on, hotshot, this is your time. You own this shoot."

The voice had turned ridiculously overconfident these past few days, urging Steve to take greater and greater risks. Steve had been able to ignore it so far but he worried that things could get out of hand. Maybe he should go see a doctor. Then again he didn't want to get hospitalized. That would destroy his already slim prospects of making it with Martha.

Martha. What could he do about her? He was a peripheral presence in her world, at best. There had to be a way to make her realize that he wanted her to take him more seriously. Something about the app. It had to be. It was the only thing she cared about. If he could just get people to use it. She would be so grateful.

The stylists released Kim and she started floating towards the ship. The voice murmured something.

"Keep quiet," Steve snarled.

"You know I'm right, it's your only chance. Just do it, you won't regret it," the voice said. Steve felt his tongue grow suddenly dry. His heart beat an uneven march as Kim and the two models converged on the deck of the ship. He made his way to the ship. A small elevator brought Kim up to the deck and Steve used the distraction to quickly climb up to the forecandle. He positioned himself behind the harpoon cannon.

"Then what?"

"I harpooned her."

"You what?!"

"I shot her with the harpoon. The voice was right, it was the only way."

"Wait, wait. What? Why? You killed her?"

"I didn't kill her, I assassinated her."

"It's the same thing."

"Not at all. You know the origin of the word assassin?"

"No, I don't, it doesn't matter. You murdered her. Why did you murder her?"

"Assassinated her. Murder assumes some sort of personal motive. This was something much bigger than that. You see, the word assassin comes from the name given to a medieval Nizari cult. They used to rule a bunch of fortresses in the Middle East. But it wasn't military power that gave them their strength, they had no armies. It was assassination. They assassinated the leaders of their enemies. It was these killings that put fear into their enemies and let them keep their political power."

"You are ape, totally ape."

"And it was my assassination of Kim that gave me my power. A day after my name got out to the press my Instagram had two million followers. A week later, ten million. I put up a link to Martha's app when I got here and they gave me my phone back. It's the highest ranked dating app on iTunes right now. Do you understand now?"

Earl shook his head, unable to speak.

"The moment I killed Kim I got her power of celebrity. I found a new way of getting famous. Not totally novel of course. Mark Chapman got there first. You know who he is, right?"

"John...John Lennon's killer," Earl said weakly.

"Right, and you'd never have known his name if he hadn't killed John Lennon. He'd have been anonymous to this day. So now I'm famous and, more importantly, Martha's app is too."

"You killed her because a voice told you to?"

"What? No. You're not listening. There was no voice. It's just something I came up with so they wouldn't put me in prison. I did it for fame, for love."

"Get the *fuck* out of here," Earl growled. He put his fists down on the table and flexed his muscles.

"Earl, you don't understand. I love her, I love Martha."

Earl half rose.

"OK, OK, you crazy old fuck." Steve said. He got up and hurried away. Before he was out of earshot he turned back. "I mentioned you on Instagram," he yelled. "You're welcome."

Earl turned his back on Steve. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the sound of the breeze. Breath in. Breath out. Breath in. Breath out.

He cursed and opened his Instagram. He had 13,217 new followers.

The Odds

Paisley Kauffmann

Things had gone well, almost perfect. They, with guilty pleasure, behind closed doors, admitted they were happy. Responsible living, good decision-making, and hard work had resulted in robust college funds and retirement accounts. They had satisfying careers, interesting hobbies, close friends, and a rescue dog. However, here he is pushing two crumpled dollars across the sticky counter. "One PowerBall, please."

The clerk, eyes stitched to his phone, asks, "Picking your own numbers or you want the machine to do it?"

"I'll pick my numbers."

The clerk stuffs his phone into his pocket and the bills into the register. He runs his fingers through his greasy hair and taps the screen of the digital lottery machine. Celestially, it glows to life. The clerk hovers his hand over the integers, and says, "Shoot."

He closes his eyes, inhales through his nose, and is repulsed by the scent of fried chicken and hot dogs. The winning lottery numbers float through the mire to the surface.

"Twenty-four." In a blur of complex medication regimens and frequent vomiting, he and his wife had celebrated twenty-four years of marriage. The scent of two dozen roses wafted through the house triggering her nausea. Holding back her hair, he recalled the first time he saw her striding, head high and shoulders back, across their college campus before she slipped on a patch of ice. He raced to help gather her books and find her glasses. She tucked her loose, brown locks behind her ears and frowned at the scratched lens. Even with her furrowed brow and pinched mouth, he thought she was lovely. He gripped her mittened hands, pulled her to her feet, and never let go.

"Okay," the clerk says.

He opens his eyes, and says, "Sorry. Sixty." Per the prognosis, she has sixty days to live. The doctor, rubbing his temples, had informed them of the menacing itinerant mass and granted her six months. Within four months, they accrued a debt of sixty thousand dollars in the high cost of hope. She had always been athletic and vibrant; healthy as a horse. A quotidian ritual, rain or shine, she and the rescue dog jogged five miles before breakfast, while he repeatedly hit snooze. If anyone could beat the egregiously unfavorable odds, she could.

The clerk raises his eyebrows.

"Three." She had endured three rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. The exasperated oncologist had reiterated the intention of chemoradiation was exclusively for pain

management. After each treatment, between bouts of heaving, she apologized for her diagnosis, abandoning him, and the financial burden. She cursed herself for leaving the kids. He had pressed his palms to his ears and shouted at her—swore at her—to shut up. In stunned alarm, she widened her owl-like eyes, large in her bald head, and stopped. That moment is one of his many regrets.

“Twenty-one.” Twenty-one years ago, their son was born. After three years of charting her basal temperature and cervical mucus, they repressed tears of joy until she burst from the bathroom waving the positive pregnancy test. Although difficult to conceive, he was an easy and contented baby with his father’s bright blue eyes and his mother’s natural optimism. Their golden-haired child believes his mother will prevail and live to see him graduate college in the spring. No one has the heart to tell him otherwise.

A man waiting to pay for his beef burrito and doughnut scratches his beard and sighs.

The clerk urges him to continue. “And?”

“Fourteen.” The age of their surprise child: the unexpected and tempestuous daughter. An effortless, yet conflicted, pregnancy provoking tears of frustration after returning to the work force and landing her first corporate account. The relentless morning sickness and fatigue brought her to her knees and to the emergency room for rehydration. After a string of sleepless nights with their screaming newborn, they humorously decided there was an inverse relationship between the ease of conception and the temperament of the baby. Their daughter refuses to accept the diagnosis and rages against the absence of her mother from her future graduation, wedding, and motherhood. He has secretly and regretfully poached her college fund for the experimental, animal-tested treatments. His daughter’s scowl tells him what he already knows; he should be the one fading away, not her mother.

“And your PowerBall number?” the clerk asks, glancing at the line of customers.

His biggest fear, his worst nightmare, is to be alone. “One.”

Spring
Mike Lee

Spring comes early to Central Texas. Winter is a set of Canadian storm systems that, in total, take up at most two weeks of one's otherwise comfortable existence.

This is the time when the live oaks lose their leaves, shrugging them off like an outdated suit, spreading the ground to herald the time of the season.

Irene stood in the street, keys in hand beside her late-model Toyota, staring ahead at a vision.

She wasn't Joan of Arc. There was no Blessed Mother. Instead, she was a redhead with shoulder length hair; her back turned to Irene.

She wore a navy blue A-line dress with a white lace Peter Pan collar and red high-heeled sling backs.

Irene closed her eyes. When she reopened them, the woman had vanished, the street empty except for the fallen oak leaves.

Irene recalled a book cover a client read in the waiting room. That was what triggered the vision. On the cover, the woman stood in front of a flower shop.

The thought that crossed her mind was "I go about things the wrong way." The Smiths' "How Soon is Now?" from back in the day. A classic. She remembered walking into the nightclub one night many years ago with that song playing. How soon is now, what a long time ago that was, indeed.

She pressed the key fob and slid behind the steering wheel, buckled up, and started the engine.

The redhead in navy blue had returned. She now stood in front of the car, her alabaster skin almost translucent and shimmering under the streetlight.

Irene closed her eyes again. Like as before, the woman was gone when she opened her eyes. Taking a heavy breath, she threw the car into gear and drove away.

* * *

"What's going on?"

Irene bit into the breakfast taco. "Hungry."

The restaurant was built a decade ago. Its design, with overdone multiple serrated white-washed mansard roofs, was what southern California once pretended to be, and in Austin, the building reminded her of the trailer park tramp who showed up at prom wearing a shoplifted Betsey Johnson dress.

This architecture decidedly did not belong in south Austin. Sticking out like a sore thumb was a charitable way to put it. The building was awful, dropped in the midst of Central Texas suburban country like an alien spaceship symbolizing the California invasion. And in their big takeover, it was only a matter of time before the neighborhood became a fevered vision of Orange County, squared.

After he related the story about his divorce, Irene offered her opinion.

"I wonder if this involves suck staring a 12-gauge. That is generally what happens when you play slut roulette," she said. Irene has the panache of a belch.

Terry stared at her. She has small eyes. They open wide when they make love. Becomes ageless. Maybe she is 55, sometimes 19, again. The calendar drops to the floor and is kicked under the bed, then.

But he thought, “what a mouth on her.” That never changed in the decades since they last were close. She’s half-Irish and fights like one. That’s her core. All the years of education, professional development and accomplishments, everything needed to achieve success in middle-aged adulthood did not blunt the knife’s edge of her deep-seated anger. Maybe she reserved it for him. Thanks to their past, he provided that comfort zone to express how she really felt about the world around her.

She could be honest to a point with others, but with him she was relaxed. Unwound the tight coils of unexpressed emotions, slackening the taut wiring and opened mind to mouth.

She still loved him. “More than you’ll never know.” She used to say. Irene will say it again, sometime soon. He expected it.

He finally responded. “You didn’t do all that much better, yourself.”

“Don’t think of yourself of the last man standing,” she said.

“I don’t,” he said. “That is why I am here.”

“Why should we do this again?”

“Because we love each other. You ask that question every other day.”

“I ask it to myself every morning. You met my expectations. Took you long enough.”

* * *

While Terry went to visit some of his friends, Irene went shopping. At a vintage shop off of South Congress, Irene saw the navy blue A-line dress. She remembered the vision, and felt odd about it. The dress did not have a lace collar though. She fingered the fabric. Taffeta, and within her price range.

She eventually dared to try this dress on. It was tight on her hips, although otherwise it fit. She decided against buying, leaving it in the booth. Bought a pair of red and black cowboy boots and a blouse, instead.

While checking out, she chatted with the owner, an old friend she barely kept track of outside of when she came to shop.

Irene had known Sally since their punker days’ decades ago. They were fifteen, then, trading on looks to get into bars before Terry faked their IDs on a Photostat camera at his high school. Sally had owned the store since 1995, though with the skyrocketing rents she was having trouble staying in business.

Sally mentioned she was considering moving to a strip mall south of Ben White Boulevard. The rents were still affordable, but the area was not optimal for selling vintage clothing. She did have enough left over from her parents’ inheritance to hang in SoCo for another two-year lease. After that, she’d probably just go totally online and wholesale.

Irene told her about Terry coming back to town. She left out the important details, but Sally knew better. Censoring herself among friends was never Irene’s strong suit.

“So, be honest,” Sally said. “Are you really getting back with Terry?”

“Trouble comes naturally to some women,” Irene said.

“I suppose,” Sally said. “I saw his profile picture on Facebook. He aged well.”

“He did.”

With that, Irene nodded, smiled enigmatically, turned on her heel, and left the shop.

Creating Reality
 Carrie Knowles
 Creative Non-Fiction

My father had wanted me to be a doctor. He felt he owed medicine at least one of his children, and I was the chosen one. My refusal was hardly my first act of rebellion, but it was the first one that truly caught my father's attention.

The second was my decision to become a writer. My father did not want me to be a writer. In fact, he did his best to forbid me to become a writer. I was in college at the time and he argued, he grumbled, he even refused to read or acknowledge my first few published pieces.

We fought. I couldn't understand why he was so adamant about me not becoming a writer. I was angry and stood my ground. He stood his, arguing that if I insisted on becoming a writer I would starve to death and he would never be able to "rest easy."

Those were his exact words: to rest easy.

FACT: This was the last conversation I had with my father. It took place at his bedside in the hospital. There were only the two of us in the room. He took my hand. He turned his face towards mine as if to look at me and said: "Please promise me you'll be anything but a writer...anything...so I can rest easy."

TRUTH: There was something about lying to my father, even when I knew he was dying, that I just couldn't do.

Instead, I held onto his hand. I couldn't say anything. In a few short minutes, before I could gain the courage to tell him I didn't know what else to do but write, his hand became heavy in mine, and his breathing became slow and labored. Within minutes he was silent. He had slipped into a coma and never spoke to me again. He died the next morning.

I never promised him I wouldn't become a writer. You could say I never had the chance, but the truth is this: I couldn't promise him I would give up writing.

Writing was as much a part of me by that point in my life as my blue-grey eyes or my love for him. I had wanted to tell him that I had already gone too far and had long ago lost the option to stop writing. His dying request, however, silenced me for nearly a year.

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask Dad but never did. They were all the unanswered questions about his life that had been gnawing at me for years; where he came from, who he really was, what he loved or hated about his own childhood, what he dreamed of, what our lives together as a family were really like for him, and what was it like to live his whole life in blindness.

Not writing nearly killed me.

After I quit writing, I began to stutter. I had never stuttered before in my life. Once I began writing again, I quit stuttering.

I never did have my questions answered.

There are stories about my father and his life that are only stories. I don't know if they are true. I don't know if they are not true. I just know they are the stories I was told and therefore are now part of my story. They are part of my created reality. They are the fabric from which many of my own stories have been woven.

That is the way life is; things happen, stories get told, facts get sorted, and emotions float to the surface and color the incident. And, when we are pushed to explain who we are or

what we have done about this or that, we knit together what happened to fit the image we have of our lives at that moment. We create a comfortable truth.

It would not be wrong to say the truth of our lives is often elastic. In the sorting and recreating of things from time-to-time, there are things we choose to remember and others we choose to forget. And, because we are always being faced with new discoveries about our lives or the lies of our lives, we often need to create and recreate what happened or at least what we think happened.

Life is full of mysteries.

I have thought about my father's stories a great deal since he died. Ironically, I have never been able to write about them. Some of them, like the story of how and when he was born, are fantastical. Many of the stories of his life as a blind man create more questions than they provide answers to questions. Blindness seemed so natural to him, yet is so baffling to anyone living in a sighted world. Even though I see, blindness is a big part of my world.

Our lives are not the stories, but the stories are our lives. We are all of us collections of stories about our families, our lives, our dreams and our beliefs.

Even though I have never written "my father's story," I have often written about living with Dad. Sometimes I have been conscious of a decision to write about our lives with him, sometimes I have done so unconsciously, only discovering after a story was finished that I had written again about blindness and living with Dad.

His imprint on my life has pushed its way into both my fiction and my non-fiction. The mark it has made on my life has left me questioning the truth of fiction as well as the truth that lies within non-fiction. Even though my father didn't want me to be a writer, the way he lived and how he maneuvered in the world taught me not to trust "facts" so much, but to close my eyes and rely on the emotional truth I could feel rather than see.

FACT: My father was a big man. He had broad shoulders and was six feet tall. He filled a room when he walked into it. People noticed him, not only because he was blind but also because he was someone you would notice. He stood tall, taller than his six feet. He looked at you when you spoke to him. He was not someone most people would forget. He had an almost eerie presence

TRUTH: When your father is blind, you can never say you can't do something because you don't want to do it or because it is too hard to do.

You can never quit anything.

The year my sister, Lolly, was born, Dad was diagnosed with throat and lung cancer. It was 1954 and the arsenal against cancer was limited. The doctors wanted to remove his larynx. Dad refused. He argued that his voice was his meal ticket. He was the field representative for Leader Dogs for the Blind and he traveled around the country raising money for Leader Dogs and also raising awareness about blindness. If he couldn't speak, he couldn't make a living.

Given my father's unique situation, the doctors were willing to try other means to keep Dad both alive and working. At the time, the hospital at the University of Michigan was just beginning to use radiation as a treatment against tumor growth. My father agreed to try the radiation treatments.

This was in the very early days of radiation treatment. The medical profession did not quite understand the power of radiation or how much radiation was needed to eliminate tumors. My mother once told me that the radiation they used on Dad was probably ten times

the amount they presently use in cancer treatment. The result: more than 2/3rds of one of his lungs was “burned” by the radiation and destroyed. As for his larynx, the radiation left him with a very heavy gravelly voice and a throat that constantly needed to be cleared.

The last seventeen years of Dad’s life were physically fragile and the threat of his impending death often hung thick in the air. Although we never ever talked about the possibility of him dying, my father would frequently bring up his wishes that there not be a funeral.

As per his wishes, we did not have a funeral for Dad. When he died, his body was given to the University of Michigan Hospital for research.

The week after Dad died my sister, Lolly, and I were at home alone one afternoon. We were downstairs in the kitchen cooking when we heard a dog bark and footsteps coming down the stairs from the second floor. We froze.

We heard a cough and the deep raspy sound of Dad clearing his throat. Then we heard his heavy footsteps taking the stairs one at a time with a dog walking softly beside him. We both wondered if it was Duke, one of his last and most devoted dogs: a dog he would have had to have coaxed at one time to take the stairs.

Silently, we moved together from the kitchen to the dining room in clear view of the staircase, hoping, I guess, to see him one last time. The dog barked again.

“Good boy,” we heard him praise the dog.

We couldn’t see him or the dog but heard Dad pause for just a moment on the lower landing before leaving the house.

Then he was gone.

The Great Cockroach War
Leonard Henry Scott
Non-Fiction

It was Saturday. During breakfast, one small, lone cockroach casually ambled across the kitchen table between the salt shaker and pop's freshly sugared bowl of cornflakes. He paused to notice the strolling little roach; full spoon in hand, mouth partially open. It stopped tentatively between the shaker and the butter dish and cocked its tiny head to one side as if to regard my dad (this great giant who filled up the horizon) with either suspicion or perhaps a kind of clinical curiosity. Pop stared back at the bug. It is hard to know if they actually made eye contact. Yet it did seem as though for one brief moment in time a magical bridge had formed between these two radically different beings. But that moment quickly faded and the roach began to walk away, slowly at first then steadily hastening its gate as it made its way through the maze of breakfast dishes, utensils, and one imposing Aunt Jemima Syrup bottle.

Pop just sighed and continued to stare at the creature. Finally, he lowered his spoon and said softly almost to himself, "We have got to get rid of those people"

My mother, her eyes suddenly aflame and her brunette hair all at once smoking with rage, swung instantly to her slippered feet. Then swifter than a samurai, in one continuous blur of motion, she dampened a paper napkin and brought her complete and absolute wrath mercilessly down upon that poor hapless touring cockroach. It was the ultimate example of wrong place, wrong time. She hastily cleaned off the fresh damp spot on the plastic tablecloth where the little reddish-brown bug had been crushed completely to death (and way, way beyond).

Unfortunately, however, that description is not *entirely* accurate, because the little brown bug was actually *not* a *tourist*. A tourist would have been fine and we would have been happy to give it directions and wave goodbye as it continued on its journey to somewhere else, maybe to some neighbor's house down the street, someone we didn't especially care for. That would have been okay. But, the cockroach had sauntered so casually across our kitchen table that it was as if our kitchen table was its kitchen table. Sadly, that is because it was. That is because our home was also its home, along with its 800,000 uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and friends (just a guess). That was the problem.

None of this was new, of course. Things had been building up over several months. There were a lot of little things at first (not little six-legged variety, they came later). But it was the party was that finally tore it; that brought everything to a head and tied it all up neatly and put a big bow around it. This most recent indignity at the breakfast table seemingly was the whipped cream and the cherry on top of that bow.

It was time and by then, even I knew it. Due to my lowly position on the family totem pole, I was always the last person to know anything of importance relative to the business of the family. My mom, of course, knew it first. She always knew everything first, including many mysterious and mystical things. She would come to precise, clear-cut conclusions about the myriad complexities of life; conclusions that couldn't be borne out by logic or anything in the Encyclopedia Americana or the Bible. But she knew them anyway. She was brilliant. She had decided that the Dundees would be a problem before the end of their second day of residence as renters of our upstairs apartment.

Pop would laugh with a kind of feeble exasperation and say, "Ruth, be patient. They'll be fine. You're making too much of it."

But she persisted; too much noise up and down the stairs all hours, too many the visitors (rough looking people). Then there was all the bumping around and the loud music late at night. Those were her complaints.

But pop was steadfast and optimistic. "Ruth," he'd say, "I'll talk to them, okay?"

As time passed she also observed, "They never seem to put out any garbage." She was right. They rarely did and it was a true mystery. Then later, the roaches began to appear. It had taken them a while to settle in.

But now, he'd finally had enough and the verdict on the upstairs renters was clear. They unequivocally had to go. But the idea of booting them out seemed to fill him up with sadness and disappointment. My mom, on the other hand, was much too busy making a clucking sound with her tongue and shaking her head to be sad. She was red-faced and furious with discontent most of the time.

Pop, on the other hand, was always a very mild mannered and circumspect, never raising his voice above a pleasant conversational tone and taking five minutes to respond to the most uncontroversial question. That Saturday morning, however, he was especially quiet. He sat in his straight back wooden chair beside their bed, empty pipe clenched between his teeth, casually putting his socks on. As I passed the open bedroom door some minutes later, he was still completely consumed by that same mind-engaging task and had yet to finish the first foot.

I felt bad for him. My mom easily simmered into a bubbling rage over seemingly every little problem. She was able to come up with thoughtful solutions for many household problems. Usually, her solutions involved some sort of paint. However, when it came to complex interactional dilemmas, and such, she'd leave those matters to my dad. He was the thinker. He'd twiddle his pipe, furrow his brows and solve the problem.

And this was a truly mortifying problem. We were seeing roaches all over the house, jumping out of drawers, racing madly across the linoleum when we turned on the kitchen light. But now they had moved into another stage of comfort in our house. Now, they were walking blithely (sauntering) across the kitchen table in the middle of breakfast. How brazen can they be? For clean people (which we fancied ourselves to be), this was distressing beyond words.

And we were clean. Well, not so much me, I was still in training after all at 12. But my mother was a fierce housekeeper, always scrubbing things with Bon Ami and steel wool, rinsing things off, folding and putting things neatly away. In our kitchen, there was never a sink brim full of fetid greasy water with pans and dishes and indefinable scraps and food debris floating with a dishrag so icky that you wouldn't dare touch it. No, we ate dinner every day in the dining room, with a full complement of serving dishes and variously sized spoons. Afterwards, curiously it was my dad's job to clean up. If I couldn't think of an excuse to escape, I helped (homework was the best excuse). But always my mom supervised and things were cleaned up pronto. She was such a stickler for cleanliness that you could dump your bacon and eggs on the floor under their bed or anywhere in the most remote corner of our house, scoff them up with a spoon or just lick them off the wooden floor, and not collect a single germ in the process! That is if you didn't mind the varnish. And by the way, under their bed, there may have been some slippers but that was about it. On a clear day, you could look under that bed and see all the way to Yonkers.

But our perception of ourselves suddenly altogether changed in that moment when that little strolling brown cockroach boldly ambled across the kitchen table and not a single eyebrow was raised. That is except for my mother who of course went completely insane.

Pop finally got both socks on and his shoes and his hat (a tan golf cap). My mom and I were standing in the kitchen dismally decrying the unfairness of it all. We heard him talking briefly on the telephone. Then he breezed purposefully past us. Clearly, he was on a mission and he hardly paused in his steady stride toward the front door to politely toss a sentence or two of obligatory explanation over his rapidly departing right shoulder.

"I'm going up the Avenue," He said. "I'm going to see Mr. Novak. I'll be back in a little while."

I followed quickly behind him as he strode through the hall, out the door, and down the tall front steps onto the sidewalk. By the time the front gate finally clattered shut he was already 75 feet down the street. I stood on the front porch and watched as he strode matter-of-factly down Van Buren Street toward Morris Park Avenue half a block away. Although just 5'8", he could stride like a seven-footer.

This was serious, I thought. Mr. Novak was the lawyer on White Plains Road.

Before the Dundees, I had never seen a cockroach in my life. Honestly. But not too long after their arrival we had become experts, German Cockroaches, Asian Cockroaches, big ones, small ones, "water bugs" (yeah right, just a more acceptable term for cockroaches). We knew their habits and propensities, and the egg sacks, My GOD those dreaded sacks! Oh yes, we knew about them. We were practically entomologists.

For many years a nice lady named Mrs. Perkinson and her son, a chiropodist occupied the upstairs apartment. When he died suddenly decided to move in with relatives in New Jersey. The apartment was then rented to some cousins who had moved from Philadelphia (my mother's niece and her family). After a year or so, they bought a house and moved to Long Island. My parents then rented the apartment to the Dundees, a young, upwardly mobile Harlem family bent on improving their condition by moving to the Bronx. They seemed nice and pop; a newly retired letter carrier went on glowingly when he announced that Mr. Dundee (whom he seemed ready to adopt) had gotten a 95 on his postal exam.

"A 95!" He said over and over with such wide-eyed admiration that it made me wonder what pop's score had been. Clearly, it hadn't been 95. But that was then, at the beginning of what seemed to be a perfect match. They were an ambitious young postal family, he of the 95 score, she, a shortish and seemingly inoffensive clerical worker of some sort, and their two reasonably innocuous grammar school children (a boy and a girl). They moved in with their furniture in a couple of weeks. Then, for a week or so thereafter, they came and went uneventfully (notwithstanding my mother's complaints). They were probably busy unpacking their cockroaches.

To me, everything seemed fine until the party.

It was on a warm Saturday night in July. Our big double-hung front windows were halfway open. Some other windows were open just slightly and several doors were closed so that our dining room exhaust fan would create the perfect stream of circulated air throughout the house. It was all done very scientifically, based on my dad's almost obsessive study of the matter, which he was always happy to discuss with me or any random visiting guest for a good ten minutes.

Unfamiliar as they apparently were with the science of exhaust fan-ology, the DundeEs simply opened all of their windows as wide as possible to catch whatever breeze the summer night would grudgingly offer. Then they placed their big fan on the floor in the middle of the living room. The constant hum of it vibrated in our ceiling.

During the party, they probably moved the fan to one side to make way for the dancing. And the dancing and general revelry, which increased exponentially as the evening wore on, eventually promised to bring down the living room ceiling on our heads. Throughout it all there was a constant thump of bass driven music that rattled our lamps and window panes. Although pop had asked them to keep it down within 45 minutes it was louder than before. Of course, there were people outside, across the street down the street; kids, neighbors chatting up the evening and hanging over their front fences. We could see them staring and gesturing at our house as if it was on fire. At some point later in the evening, two New York City Policemen showed up at our doorbell. My mother directed them upstairs. Two minutes later the music stopped and everything was all at once completely silent. Then there was a murmur of talking followed by several rounds of increasing laughter.

Some minutes later we could hear the policemen coming heavily down the long hall staircase. There was some inaudible conversation and someone said, "Thanks for the drink," and the two officers exited through the vestibule and out into the night.

The party continued for some time thereafter, but somewhat more subdued than before. It no longer disturbed the entire neighborhood, just us and perhaps our next door neighbors on both sides. I don't know long it lasted. I went to bed and I remember that I could feel the hum of the music vibrating through the bedposts until I went to sleep. The next morning the first thing I noticed was my mother in the front hallway, angrily rattling a mop and metal bucket. She asked me to carry the bucket of soapy water out to the front porch.

"Take a look at this!" She said.

There were seventeen grey-painted wooden steps leading from the gate up to our front porch. Flowing downward from step to step, was a dried up waterfall of sticky liquid and lumps of indefinable things, which had initially puddled on the porch and flowed down six or seven steps before gathering in one more little dried up lake. It was slick and bright red in the morning light. It looked like tomato juice. Somebody got sick and vomited on our porch. "Bloody Mary, I think," my dad said later and shook his head in disgust. My mother was mortified. She cleaned up the vomit and remained inside all day. Every time the phone rang, she would shout, "Don't answer it!" from wherever it was that she happened to be. She was completely embarrassed.

Our party became the principal topic of conversation for a while among my friends. I had been cautioned in no uncertain terms by my mother, not to discuss the matter. And I didn't. Whenever anyone made a comment or asked me about it, I just shrugged. Then upon my return to the house for a week thereafter, I was subjected to a thorough debriefing.

Early in the afternoon pop returned from his outing. The front door creaked open then slammed closed in its familiar rattling way and my dad walked into the living room. He was smiling, excited and flushed with amazement as if he had just seen the Virgin Mary in the front yard hovering translucently by the rose trellis. He tapped his pipe on the side of the glass humidior on the wooden pipe stand.

"This is really interesting!" He said, barely able to contain the pleasant rush of his words.

My mom came into the room wiping her hands with a large rag. She had been down in the basement putting brown paint on an old wooden chair that she had decided to reclaim and use with her sewing machine.

"I went to see Mr. Novak the lawyer on White Plains Road." He said between a couple loud of pipe clearing sucks.

"Oh?" My mom inquired. "What did he say?"

He stuffed the bowl of the pipe with Bond Street, thumbed it down and smiled broadly. He lit the pipe with a single kitchen match, unhurriedly savoring the moment. Then he puffed a few times and stirred up strings and wreaths, and one huge billow of sweet smelling white smoke.

"He said..."

Pop's eyes gleamed with a kind of peaceful, satisfied joy that I hadn't seen since he told us about how New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer shook his hand and spoke to him at a St. Georges Association Communion and Breakfast in 1950.

Mr. Novak had told him two important things. The first thing was that the easiest way to evict a tenant was for nonpayment of rent. They don't pay, out they go, simple. The second one was that our two-family house was not subject to New York City's rent control law. Therefore, there was no restriction on our ability to raise the monthly rent. In the absence of a lease, we could raise the rent whenever we wanted and charge whatever rent we wanted to charge.

He said "Thirty-five dollars well-spent, I'd say."

Pop was thoroughly emboldened and he did not waste any time exercising his newly acquired legal empowerment. Not five minutes after Mr. Dundee returned home from work that day, he appeared at their front door. Mom and I waited in the living room for his return. It didn't take long. When he came into the room he had a big broad smile on his face. He started to talk, but the rush of words was so jumbled up in his head that he could barely get them out.

"I told him..."

He said finally.

"... That I had decided to raise next month's rent from \$85.00 to \$170.00. And then I left. I said, 'Enjoy your day,' and I left. That's all I said. If he pays it fine. They get to stay and we have more money, but..."

Pop giggled with a kind of devilish glee that I'd had never seen before. He raised his head and stood astonishingly erect, stretching his body upright to the fullest measure of his 5'8" frame.

"...If they pay..."

He said with a grand flourish.

"... I'm going to raise the next month's rent to \$250.00!"

It was so sweetly evil that we all laughed heartily at the prospect (\$35.00 well-spent indeed). We all agreed that Mr. Novak, The Lawyer was a genius. And before the first of the next month, the DundeEs were completely gone and forever out of our lives.

And with their departure, the overdue war against the invading cockroaches could now begin. As the Dundee's moving truck left we sat at the kitchen table and planned the invasion. Then pop and I got into our Pontiac and drove to the big hardware store on Westchester Square to buy equipment and supplies. We roamed up and down the aisles with our list. Ultimately, we bought several new swatters and three new glass bottled flit guns, the large ones. They were

truly menacing, state of the art bazookas of cockroach warfare. We also purchased a full gallon can of Black Flag. I have always liked that name. It conveys the image of total death and destruction. I imagine a dusty, smoke covered battlefield, strewn with the wire-legged, up-turned carcasses of 10,000 dead bugs. And there planted in that corpse-strewn landscape is an actual black flag (inscribed redundantly, "Black Flag") rippling ever so slowly in the fetid, unpleasant air above the carnage.

The war began after breakfast the next day. Each of us had a loaded flit gun. Each of had a new swatter. We had mops, pails, cleaning materials, rubber gloves and paper towels, all of which we left for the present in the upstairs hallway. It was a strange feeling going into that apartment for the first time since it had been reclaimed. As we unlocked the door to go inside, I remembered something my mother had said several weeks into the Dundee's tenancy.

"They never seem to put out any garbage."

We had provided a large metal trash can for them, that was stored under the front steps. Garbage days were twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, but their trash can was rarely used. It was so strange. None of us could ever figure it out. We finally reasoned that they must have had their own special place where they took their garbage.

Her comment had stuck in my head and one night I had a dream about it. I dreamed that while everyone was out of the house I went upstairs to their apartment and went inside, even though I didn't actually have a key. That's the good thing about dreams you never need a key to open a door. You just open it. And so I did and walked inside. Everything seemed perfect at first until I noticed the squad of giant flies the size of baseballs that cruised from room to room like drones. The rooms were neat, nicely furnished. But there was a foul smell throughout, a rotten smell. Then, as I looked at the furniture more closely I realized that there was something odd about all of it. Each piece seemed to be a mosaic of many colorful, drab and decidedly different things. There were banana peels, cores, and stalks, great glutinous masses of unidentifiable stuff, chicken bones, newspapers, junk mail, plate scrapings all crammed and stuck together and formed into solid shapes. The furniture, the decorations, all of it; tables, sofas, cabinets, everything was made of garbage. It was amazing. But the smell of it in my dream was the most amazing thing of all; an intensely pungent synergy of all the vile things the imagination could possibly conjure married into one near palpable sinus-clearing stench.

We walked into the apartment, swatters and flit guns at the ready, fully prepared for total war. We made our way up the inner hallway, encountering no resistance. When we turned on the hall light one fast-moving bug skittered around the corner to the master bedroom. But when we reached the kitchen everything changed.

At first there only a few, one crawled up the wall pop got him with his flit gun, then chased him until he "escaped" to die behind the radiator. As we delved further, into cabinets and cracks by the sink, and under the appliances more and more appeared. Until finally, as we pulled up a loose edge of linoleum, a large group of them scattered and ran like gamblers at a raided crap game. When we untaped a calendar and sprayed into a hole behind it, a great waterfall of cockroaches fell from the wall. For one moment we all suddenly stopped and stared at it in amazement.

As they hit the floor, they ran in 30 different directions, up the walls, around corners. We swatted and shouted, "Get them, Get them!" Cockroaches were suddenly everywhere. They emerged now from every corner and crack, as if we had intruded on some sort of

cockroach convention, all at once appearing in greater numbers than any of us had ever imagined possible. "There's one!" someone yelled. "I see! You got the roach. But did you get the egg sack?!!!" We were now fully engaged. We swatted and flitted, and yelled about roaches and egg sacks. It was a frantic and chaotic battlefield, seething with a great rampage of ubiquitous bugs. We kept swatting and flitting until we began to slip on the slick linoleum (my mom fell twice) in the gathering goo of grime, squashed bugs, and oily Black Flag residue.

We furiously ripped into loose pieces and corners of kitchen linoleum. It was old and frayed and needed to be replaced anyway. It had no doubt provided a safe haven for a multitude of roaches. The first large overturned section of linoleum shimmered with waves of running bugs, their brown shells catching the morning sunlight from the kitchen window. "*Get the big can!*" My mom yelled and I ran downstairs to find it waiting by the front door. When I returned with the heavy duty green rubbery plastic can, pop was busily tearing sheets of linoleum into a myriad of smaller pieces. My mom was furiously swatting bugs and muttering vague inaudible things under her breath. One large particularly frantic roach sought to escape up the kitchen wall. She swatted it into pieces and small flying chunks. Some of its cold, wet remnants simultaneously landed on my cheek and forehead. I yelled with surprise. My mother paused briefly from the cockroach carnage and handed me a piece of paper towel. I stopped only long enough to wipe my face. Then I quickly returned to the battle, one that raged on until ultimately the green trash can overflowed with chunks linoleum and the close kitchen air was permeated with a sweetly thick death giving haze of Black Flag. It caused our eyes to water and made us cough. And so at that point, we all fled the kitchen to find fresh air in the living room down the hall. All along the way between coughing and blinking away penetrating fumes, we chased down and slaughtered the drunken stragglers who lacked the strength or will to escape.

And so with flit guns and angry flailing swatters we pursued them relentlessly from room to room until every empty space hung gray and heavy with the sweet-smelling fumes of death. Finally, when we had completely fumigated the entire upstairs apartment and could bear the choking atmosphere no any longer, we retreated downstairs. And there, waiting for us were many disoriented bugs scattered in disorderly retreat, trying to find a precious breath of pure clean air. And so we chased them about, stomped on them and swatted them, and swept them up into the trash. The next several days amounted to all-out warfare throughout the house. We fought them in every cabinet, crevice and corner until, and chased them down to the basement, their final outpost of resistance until they were all but completely eradicated.

We thoroughly cleaned the Dundees apartment, put down new linoleum, repainted the kitchen. We sprayed the entire house with Black Flag and life returned to normal.

A month or so later, while rummaging through some boxes in the basement, I came upon an apparently lost and confused lone surviving cockroach. It had clearly been through the war and seemed to be limping (perhaps the nagging result of an unhealed swatter injury) as it made its way tentatively across the wide expanse of the basement floor. It wasn't ambling and it wasn't strolling and its sauntering days were over. It was walking, slowly, laboriously, as a decrepit old man headed for the deli to get a chicken salad sandwich. It moved cautiously, tentatively toward the refuge of a shadowy dark corner by the whitewashed front wall. Clearly, from the sheepish look on its face and its wobbly, uncertain manner, it knew full well that it was an intruder here and that this house was no longer its home. It was ours.

The war was over, yet there it was still hiding, still fighting back. This was the Hiroo Onoda of the Great Cockroach War. Onoda was the last surviving Japanese combatant of World War II. He was discovered somewhere in the Philippines in 1974, still in his military uniform, still fighting 30 years after the war had ended. He was sent home to a hero's welcome and would ultimately die in bed at 91.

However, being just a lowly cockroach and not a dedicated (albeit misguided) human soldier, this particular survivor received no such honored treatment. Instead, it was summarily executed; unceremoniously crushed into oblivion with my hard bottomed left slipper. I spent the next five minutes cleaning it off, lest I track some of its goo upstairs. Perhaps that lone surviving combatant was ultimately reunited with his family in some cockroach heaven. I wouldn't know. But it was the last of its kind that we ever saw again in our home.

And our house returned to the sanctuary it had once been, a quiet comfortable place where all the guests were invited and no squatters were permitted.

The upstairs apartment remained vacant. Pop separated it into two halves, each with its own entrance off the upstairs hallway. One day he said that I was welcome to move upstairs if I wished and use the front half as my living quarters. It consisted of the living room and the dining room which were separated by two French doors, and also another small room off the front of the

hallway. I was overjoyed. I painted the walls olive green, a nice contrast to the white doors and trim. And there is where I remained, to live out my teenage years until I left for college.

My parents never rented the upstairs apartment again. I believe giving me those rooms was my dad's way of inviting me to return at some point with my own family, to continue my life in that same house on Van Buren Street where I had always lived. There were so many other two and three family homes on that street that housed up to four generations. It was a long-standing Bronx tradition. Although I'm sure pop always held out hope that I would return someday, it was not to be. When I left the Bronx, I left for good. It wasn't intentional. That is just the way it worked out. In some ways it would have been nice to have stayed there and seen our house recycled through the generations; all of us together in one place. However, I do believe that my failure to return home may have been one of pop's greatest disappointments. But, I think if he were still here I might remind him that his mother Elizabeth felt the same way when he left Alice Street in Poplar Bluff, Missouri in the summer of 1914, never to return.

In the ebb and flow of life, there are many disappointments. I always wanted to be 2' taller and at least 10 points smarter.

POETRY

Hole

Tony Colella

you believe there's a cork at world's bottom
 once pulled would empty oceans

you with sin could pop at any moment & release
 like champagne shaken a demon mob

they cartoon fire, needle fingers and I
 was never afraid of needles and

you knew this as lie because I
 feared everything but especially

(you) which is to say rain, a canceled recess
 when I was young and thought of demons

you saw scribbled black (for eyes) & nothing
 else what was worse than eyes, looking

theirs cooked by pressures, CO₂—an atmosphere
 heavy with it with sin but no hole,

(is) Marianas, maybe, or Antarctica but the important
 thing: I never knew champagne then

you said grape soda, by the Costco case, that pressure
 exploded: how could there not be after such

sin had built for (so long) and you scornful
 after coming in me where the sisters couldn't see

said those years later
 which impregnant pasts
 sex is only silence with
 the right blade
 against the wrong throat

Apparition
Elle Arra

you were the one who took risks—

feet moving among the sepulchers,
unbothered, tilling for bones to connect.

loving me whilst I was without breath— a corpse.

If You Could Call It That
Jeffrey Zable

So many people now gone, but I'm still here
trying not to die for no other reason than being dead
means I wouldn't be able to play my drums, write another poem,
eat a steak, or lie against my wife in bed.
It would also mean obliteration of my consciousness,
unable to remember if I parked my car
in a street cleaning zone on a Monday.
What I do know is that if I live another twenty years,
my last breath will coincide with a gallon of milk
selling for 42 dollars and a loaf of bread for 27.
The world will be a lot more competitive
and only those who are brilliant, cunning, and undaunted
will be living the good life,
if you could call it that. . .

Guru
Laurinda Lind

You showed up in my dream
as a fat priest, leaning
dangerously over water.

You could not discern
yourselves: the one waking
from the one still asleep.

You watched over a green sill
while jackal-headed gods swung
in and out of line. And though

you knew how to right them,
you warned that first you were obliged
to swim to safety yourself.

Death

ilhem issaoui

clad in colours of the cold senectitude
like a cat wet with heavy rain and eerie clamour of fear
hiding behind the wheels
and the lungs breathe heavily
this lachrymose apparition of me reflected on window panes and mute wooden doors and
cracked walls
I was about to die
and let the soul soar
this corpse was about to be kneaded
why had I to live
to hearken to the waltz the most draconian of all
I have quaffed someone's tears, perhaps
and he lives in me

Crocodile
Carl Boon

She spends hours alone
in the bathroom
in the bedroom at night
curtains drawn
scrubbing blood from her fingers
the corners of her mouth
listening for movement—

a scuffling of steps
the scratching of a key
a man reaching for a spoon
for air
where the paint peels.

We come to call this normal
this merging of perception
and reality
this final check of her chin
in the mirror
the tops of her shoulders
the soles of her shoes

for evidence
a suggestion she is not
what she seems to be
and never was
a mystery of tendon
stretched under sweetness.

We must concede her
her meat
for her eyelids bounce
in the morning
her fingers twitch at the tablecloth
her breath dances
when the light appears.

Light and Heat
Michael Hammerle

Death comes swift.
Just when the belly is full
and the coffee near perked.

Death comes for the babies—
the young, the grown,
and the old. More blind than gravity,

but as sure,
and experienced by all animations;
favors the unsuspecting.

A life can vanish
like tears from a windowbed
—photons, the stuff of light, radiating heat,
rose out the moisture—

as a good soul is said to
lift upward.
Time may be an illusion

but Death comes swift
when you are not the one dying,
and its wings ratchet
like the locust's tymbal.

If Death had a thought,
it was after the reaping,
and by design couldn't recall
a specific beyond its own hunger.
I doubt a conscious within/ speaks.

The Haul of Knowing
Ian C. Smith

Dining with holiday pals, doubling as a couple
before more escapism, a new series of *The Bridge*,
adopting my old role responding in conversation
you zoom down a rollercoaster of adventures,
epic glory, comedy, sounding overdone, yet I know
understated, simulacra, due to what's omitted,
because I was there, braiding those risks.

Our hostess probes, Would you do it again?
How long had you been together? eking out archaeology.
You shake greying curls, No, to a re-run,
the creased map of our past unfolding once more.
The luminosity of those days is my treasury, not error.
The second question, about our longevity,
you misunderstand, hearing have for had.

An autistic female detective braves the dark side
probing fraught shadows, her innate honesty
creating crawling discomfort for colleagues and us.
My mind skitters to your other answer,
emphatic, about our union, the haul of knowing.
Too long, you scowled, a chronological *non-sequitur*,
an ozone flash briefly charging the atmosphere.

Enos is Not the Real Family Name

Cathryn Shea

I'm walking in Provincetown and I see "Portuguese bread here,"
and when I stop for lobster bisque I see "Portuguese baked clams"
on the menu because Azores Portuguese settled here,
and I think of my grandfather Anthony
and his explaining to me when I was young
his parents came from Pico and Faial.

I try to release myself from the distraction of the picture window
looking out on the harbor so I can remember what I've been told
and for what I can't remember, invent a history
of how my grandfather and his sisters drove to California
in a black Model T, each packing one suitcase to hold everything
dear to them I guess; I can only project grainy images of them

laughing and worrying their way across the Great Plains and Rockies.
Their parents came through Ellis Island
and settled in Providence, Rhode Island, a place I've never been,
which I think is pretty close to this place I'm visiting,
but I don't have a clue where in Providence to look and I don't have time.

My grandfather blamed the government for its indifference
to immigrants, their family origins and customs.
His real surname *Oliveira* for *olive tree*,
not *Enos*, he would tell us,
his green skin turning pink with this resentment
he took to his grave. The customs officers assigned *Enos*
to multitudes of Azores Portuguese.
He would tell us he loved the name *Oliver*:
He shouldn't be called Enos. He should have been Anthony *Oliver*.

If I could talk to him now, I would tell him
Enos is from ee-NAHs, my great grandfather's middle name
Ignacio, Antonio Ignacio Oliveira
having taken *Enos* as the new family name for the new country
he was entering, the new life in Providence, Rhode Island.

I don't know if Antonio Ignacio Oliveira chose his middle name
or was forced to take it as is last name.
I must steal details from other family histories,
from other stories, and merge the made-up with the so-called facts,

which I can never know. "Great Grandfather was a whaler, Great Grandmother was a tailor" summed up our family lore, with no details of harpoons and thimbles.

CONTRIBUTOR BIO'S

Jonathan Yom-Tov is a traveler turned software engineer. When he's not working or pining for the Argentinian pampas he sometimes writes short stories.

Andrew Hogan received his doctorate in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before retirement, he was a faculty member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, where he taught medical ethics, health policy and the social organization of medicine in the College of Human Medicine.

Paisley Kauffmann is a registered nurse and writer. Her work has appeared in *The Talking Stick*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Corvus Review*, *The Indiana Voice Journal*, *Grey Wolfe Storybook*, and *The Other Stories Podcast*. Believing in the art of practice, she is working on her fourth novel. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband and two pugs.

Andrew Hogan has published more than eighty works of fiction in the Sandscript, OASIS Journal (1st Prize, Fiction 2014), and others.

Caleb Echterling keeps both the hot side cool, and the cool side hot. He tweets funny fiction using the not so clever handle @CalebEchterling. You can find more of his work at www.calebechterling.com.

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer published worldwide. DC's stories have appeared in over fifty anthology and online literary publications. DC won first place for the short story, "Billy Luck" at *Defenestrationism's* summer contest of 2016. The international literary site *The Missing Slate*, honored DC as author of the month in August 2016.

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Ronald Jackson writes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. His work has appeared in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Tar River Poetry*, and other journals and

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Mike Nachbar is an author living in Austin, Texas, where he also programs computers, volunteers with organizations fighting for socialism, and leads a workshop of local fiction and non-fiction writers. He has been published in the Ocotillo Review and Epiphany Magazine.

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Shawn Yager is a voracious reader, the type who would read labels on soup cans if there was nothing else around. Also, of course, he loves to write. Yager has had six stories published, the last appeared online in The Literary Nest. He works with at-risk students in southwestern NH.

Zach Smith has been writing for more than a dozen years. His work has previously appeared in: Crack the Spine, the Short Humor Site, the Ginger Collect, Foxglove, and the Corvus Review, among others. You can find out more about him at his Blog theobscuritiesymposium.wordpress.com.

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Elle Arra, a Michigan native, is an esteemed writer and visual artist currently working and residing in the sultry foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in Madison, AL. Her work has been published in print and online publications such as Apt, Hypertrophic Literary, and more. She also wrote the foreword -Native & Alien - for the book "Some Days, Here" a collection of poems by Tricia De Jesus-Gutierrez.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher and conga drummer who plays Afro Cuban Folkloric music for dance classes and Rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area. His poetry, fiction, and non-fiction have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies. Recent writing in Dime Show Review Journal, Drunken Llama, Jokes Review, Third Wednesday, Futures Trading, Colloquial, Brickplight, Tigershark, First Literary Review, and many others.

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Michael Hammerle is pursuing his MFA at Bennington College. He holds a BA in English, cum laude, from the University of Florida. His fiction has been published in *The Best Small Fictions 2017* selected by Amy Hempel. He has fiction in *New World Writing*, the *Matador Review*, and the *Steel Toe Review*. His poetry has appeared in *Eunoia Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

Ian C Smith's work has appeared in, *Antipodes*, *Australian Book Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Critical Survey*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, & *Two-Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He lives in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, Australia.

Cathryn Shea's poetry has been nominated for Sundress Publication's Best of the Net 2017 and recently appears in *Gargoyle*, *Permafrost*, *Rust + Moth*, *Tar River Review*, *Tinderbox*, and elsewhere. Cathryn's second chapbook, *It's Raining Lullabies*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press in late 2017. Cathryn serves with the editorial staff for *Marin Poetry Center Anthology*. She lives in Fairfax, CA. See www.cathrynshea.com and @cathy_shea on Twitter.