

Robert Duncan

By Kallan Dana

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A mystery story but in the original sense of the word—mysterium—meaning ‘something hidden’. This is because we never learn the truth about the titular and seminal character Robert Duncan who imposes himself at a night out family dinner. So it’s like we’re sitting in, a stranger, politely listening to everything yet getting more and more drawn into the intrigue unfolding before us. The ‘enigma’ surrounding Duncan is played against a slightly raucous plentitude of dysfunctional family foibles and indiscretions that end up being both funny and quietly sad. This is traditional storytelling and we were impressed by the author’s mastery of craft: pitch perfect voice, vivid characterizations and nimble prose. Fiction that starts out small and expands into something much, much more. (Spacing and format are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE(S) (for the love of language):

I had tried to badger my parents about why she’d left without a goodbye, but Dad just turned quiet and Mom got all snippy and scolding, saying that I was ungrateful and demanding and didn’t I realize that some children worked in sweatshops twenty-four hours a day? And then she said that Stacey had moved to New York City and wouldn’t be coming back.

Alice had grown so boring. I had vague memories of the youthful Alice of my earlier childhood, the old fun Alice. I don’t know if I would have noticed her decay had Mom not pointed it out to me over time with dig after dig, her comments about Alice’s tummy expansion and drooping butt cheeks. Like hypnosis, they snuggled into my brain until I could no longer see Alice but for her increasing proximity with the ground as her fat sunk her closer and closer to death.

Robert Duncan insisted we go to Frida Holla! for lunch because he wanted to get his picture on the wall. He'd seen Frida Holla! on TV when it was featured in an episode of *Man Vs. Food*. Now he needed to see the place in person.

Frida Holla! is a Tex-Mex casual-dining restaurant in the center of Hillsdale, a suburban shopping district seven miles out from downtown Portland. The menu is famous for its infamously spicy Great Balls of Fire, five deep-fried habanero cheese fritters with mystery green sauce on the side. If you eat all five balls, you get your picture taken and placed permanently on the "Hall of Flame." Most people order them for the gimmick, split one with a friend, and spend the rest of the meal sweating, shoveling rice and sangria down their throats.

It was big news that Robert Duncan was visiting because it was the first time he'd come to Portland since he'd started online-dating Alice two months ago. Alice was my mother's cousin and Robert had known them both back in California, where he still lived. In the week leading up to his visit, Mom and Dad grew very interested in discussing him. Though they had never mentioned him before, they began whispering his name all the time. When I woke up from nightmares and opened my window to see if they were home yet, I could hear conversation from the porch, Mom and Dad's voices swirling with the voices of strangers and muffled music from our old speakers. Robert Duncan, Robert Duncan, Robert Duncan. Sometimes Dad would say his name quiet and low and the rumbling of conversation would evaporate. I'd hear only breathing and bodies shuffling until the silence ended with Dad erupting in cackles, Mom and all the strangers following his laughter like hyenas.

When I'd asked Dad who exactly Robert Duncan was, he told me Robert Duncan was Alice and Mom's next-door neighbor growing up, but when I asked Mom the same question, she'd said that he was Grandpa's business partner, and then at dinner when I'd asked a third time, Mom said, "no, he was a year above us at our private high school in Beverly Hills," and then Dad said, "honey, you're losing your mind, Robert Duncan was your brother's best man," and then Mom had said "babe, you drink too much and its making you lose your memory. Robert Duncan was a local newscaster," and then they both lost track of the conversation and started bickering about weapons of mass destruction.

That Saturday Pip and I got to go to Frida Holla! early because Dad was picking up our Christmas tree and Mom was taking her third bath of the day. Alice passed us both Pez containers from the front seat when we got inside the rental car. Pip's was Bugs Bunny and mine was a movie director named Roman Polanski. I didn't know who he was but Alice told me my mother was going to find it hilarious.

Frida Holla! had a big blow-up Santa cactus in front of their entrance and a piñata shaped like a roasted and stuffed pig. "Do you think when you break it open, intestine-shaped candies fall out?" Robert Duncan nudged me, winking.

The hostess smiled widely as we walked through the doors. "Hola mis amigos! And hello chico and chica!" She waved at me and Pip. Her big boobs stretched her *Fiesta* t-shirt in opposite directions. She led us through the restaurant into the outdoor section, a clear plastic tent filled with big circular tables. In the corner, underneath a large bright green and red "FELIZ NAVIDAD" sign, were three squat, mustached and sombreroed men: a trumpeter, an accordionist, and a guitarist.

The hostess seated us at a round table and gave me and Pip color-in-the-lines cartoons of Santa Claus and an old sour cream container filled with stubby, unwrapped crayons. Robert Duncan ordered four piña coladas. “Make half of ‘em *virgin* for the *virgins*,” he said. She erupted in laughter, jiggling her *Fiesta* t-shirt boobs.

“*Rapido!*” Robert Duncan shouted at her butt as she hurried back inside. The mariachi band started playing “Little Drummer Boy.”

“Rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,” Robert Duncan sang along. “Keep it up, boys!”

A waitress showed up with our piña coladas. “Feliz Navidad, folks! I have—” She cut herself off while setting down the drinks and shot her eyes back and forth between Pip and me nervously. “Well! Hello, you two!” It took me a moment to recognize her. She was our old babysitter, Stacey.

After three years of watching us, Stacey had abruptly stopped coming to our house about a year ago, right before my tenth birthday. I had been very sad. Stacey said that when I turned ten she was going to pierce my ears but because she’d left I had to go to the mall instead. Stacey was beautiful, like Britney Spears or how the First Lady used to look. Stacey wasn’t actually a babysitter full time—she was an actress. One time, Dad and I had even gone to see her in a musical that she was in, all the way out in Gresham. The musical was *Oliver!* and she sang the prettiest song in the show. Dad had told me it was a surprise that we were going to see the musical—so not to tell Stacey—and also that it was a secret—so not to tell Mom. He bought us a conveyor-belt sushi dinner in exchange for my word and said that he’d decided to take me and not Pip because he knew I could keep quiet and also that I would be on my best behavior at the play. He told me that it was going to be nice daddy-daughter time and it really was. The

conveyor-belt sushi was delicious. We got to stack the plates up as we finished our rolls, and that was how they calculated the price, by counting how many plates you had stacked. And Dad had let me drink two Shirley Temples and eat fried ice cream after, and during the musical, the two of us would make eye contact and squeeze each other's hands like we were in on a private joke whenever Stacey came onstage. Stacey was so happy when we saw her after the show. People in the lobby kept coming up to her to squeeze her shoulder and tell her how talented she was and Dad and I gave her a bouquet of red roses and a card that he had written. He didn't let me read the card but whatever it said was amazing because Stacey opened it up, started crying, and kneeled down to me to tell me that my father was a good man.

I had tried to badger my parents about why she'd left without a goodbye, but Dad just turned quiet and Mom got all snippy and scolding, saying that I was ungrateful and demanding and didn't I realize that some children worked in sweatshops twenty-four hours a day? And then she said that Stacey had moved to New York City and wouldn't be coming back.

But there Stacey was at Frida Holla! She had cut her pretty blonde hair and died it ugly green.

I got so sad seeing her. She had been five minutes away from our house this whole time, driving on the same roads we drove on, getting gas from the same gas station, shopping at the same grocery store, walking on the same sidewalks as me but never saying so, either just missing me every day or intentionally hiding when she saw me, pretending to be just any other stranger.

"STACEY!" Pip screamed, reaching out to her dumbly and knocking over the sour cream container of crayons. A few tumbled off the table and Stacey bent down to pick up the scattered remains.

She put the crayons back and smiled. “Hi, Pip—high Zelda! What a surprise!” She changed her facial expression to look at Robert Duncan and Alice. “I’m their old babysitter.”

I felt a guilty constriction in my throat and avoided her eyes.

She pulled out a tiny white notepad from the back pocket of her jeans and held it in her shaky hand. “Our special today is a deep-fried beef—”

“We’re gonna get one order of the *As Seen on TV* special!” Robert Duncan said.

“One Great Balls of Fire it is!” Stacey said, hurrying back indoors. Alice squinted at her butt and told us that she was very pretty for a babysitter.

Just a minute later Mom and Dad came rushing through the plastic doorway to our table.

“Hi, Robert!” Mom kissed him on the cheek and Dad fist-bumped him as they dropped into their seats, both looking flushed. “Did we order drinks already? I could use a drink.”

“You have an old friend here,” Robert Duncan said to Mom.

Stacey peeked her head from the inside of Frida Holla! Mom flicked her arm like she’d been electrocuted, knocking three water glasses over. The water cascaded over the table and into my lap. I squirmed in my seat and got up to waddle to the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” Mom said sharply.

“Bathroom. The water spill got me.”

“No,” Mom said, putting a hand on my shoulder to lower me to the ground. “I’m going to the bathroom now. You stay put.”

“I’ll go with you!”

“No. We use different bathrooms.”

“What?”

“Just sit down, Zelda.”

“Why can’t I come with you?”

“Sit down, Zelda.”

“But I’m all wet.”

“Use a napkin.”

“I already have my napkin in my lap. I’m still wet.”

“Take this.”

I put her dry paper napkin on top of my wet paper napkin and both napkins got wetter.

“Mom—” I pleaded.

“Christ, Zelda.”

“I want to go dry my pants off with the hand dryer in the bathroom.”

Mom stood up and pushed me as I tried to move with her, so I stayed sitting in my wet lap.

Robert Duncan lowered his glasses and wiggled his eyebrows at Dad. “*Draaaaamaaa!*”

Alice laughed.

“When we got here, they gave me a hard time for being barefoot,” Dad said.

“That’s because you’re not supposed to be barefoot in a restaurant,” I said.

Now Robert Duncan wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Looks like we have a smartass on our hands.”

“I’m not a smartass.”

Mom came back to the table, shimmying past the mariachi band and spritzing her custom-made skin spray onto her face, green goo in a bottle with her name in a label stuck-on to the front.

Mom rubbed the goo-spray into her temples. “What are we getting? Guac? Can we get guac?”

“One *Great Balls of Fire* ON ITS WAY,” Robert Duncan belted.

“Oh, Jesus Christ I can’t eat that. My stomach.” Mom said.

There were issues plaguing my mother that seemed to foreshadow my future. The bodily frustrations: intestinal and digestive nuisances, migraines, cellulite and stretch marks, limp curls and dandruff, dead skin on the bottom of her feet that needed to be scraped off with a medieval metal contraption she used in the bath.

“I don’t want *you* to eat it. That dish has got *Robert Duncan* written all over it,” he said. “I’m getting on that wall.”

“Maybe I’ll go in on it with you, Robert,” Dad said.

“No, you will not,” Mom snapped. “Our toilet will be clogged for days.”

“Ew!” said Pip. Brat.

“It makes people really sick,” Mom warned Robert Duncan. “A friend of a friend went to the emergency room. Something about the way they fry it. I can just see my stomach trying to contort itself around the grease.”

“I’m doing it.” Robert Duncan banged his hands against his chest like Tarzan.

“Good luck with that mess tonight, Alice,” Dad adopted the same sinister voice as Robert Duncan. “I have a feeling the little dude may be out for the count.”

“*Robert.*” Mom said to Dad. I squirmed. Somehow I’d forgotten my father and Robert Duncan shared the same first name.

“It’ll all be fine,” Alice giggled. “My man knows how to *take care* of me.”

“Alice!” Mom said, accusatory and fun-loving.

“Look!” said Pip, showcasing his yellow, tan, and lime-green Santa Claus drawing. Everyone oohed noncommittally.

A different waitress came back to our table. An acne-accessorized redheaded teenager. “Hi folks,” she wheezed. “I’m Wendy and I’m going to be taking care of you for the rest of your meal. Here are those Great Balls of Fire you ordered.” She set them down in front of Robert Duncan. “If one person finishes all five of them plus the entirety of the special sauce, you get your picture up on the Hall of Flame.”

“Where’s Stacey?” asked Pip. Mom shushed him.

“Would we like to add some mains to our apps?” Pale and pock-marked Wendy said. How I looked in my nightmares.

“Yes,” Mom said, pointing to the menu. “This Mexi-Burger. Is it possible to—”

The mariachi band started to play “Jingle Bells” at the same time as the rain began. Through the transparent ceiling, we could see deep and dark puffy clouds. Mom yelled our orders over the noise. Wendy meandered back inside to get our food started.

“This is not persuading me on a relocation, babe.” Robert Duncan said to Alice, rolling a great ball of fire fritter between his thumb and index finger. “We don’t get so much bummer-rain in *Cali*.”

“It’s so tacky to call it Cali, Robert,” Mom said.

“I get it from your Dad, Romes,” he responded, shrugging good-naturedly.

I tried to place Robert Duncan next to Mom’s father in my head. It was hard to merge them into the same scene. My grandpa was pink-faced, mustached, always suited, a living, mystical portal to an unidentifiable past. Mom worshipped him and in exchange he paid for everything. I did not know this while was alive, only after he’d had his heart attack had Dad told

me the truth about the funding of our schooling, our toys, our house, while Mom stayed bedridden with grief for a week. “I don’t really make all that much money,” Dad had confided in me one night when I had been welcomed onto the adults-only-porch.

“My father never called it Cali,” Mom snapped.

“Maybe not to you, girlfriend,” Robert Duncan said.

I pushed my neck upward and backward so that I could stare directly into the clouds and the water slamming onto the plastic above me. I love storms, though once I told Mom that and she reminded me that storms always mean that many people are stuck outside in the cold, soaking wet without a way to get warm and dry. Mom had a penchant for self-righteousness, a quality which Dad always dampened by reminding her of her trust fund and lack of student debt. Robert Duncan bit into the first fritter.

“Woo! That is a little spicy!”

His face had suddenly ballooned, mere seconds after swallowing. His glasses fogged up with sweat and he took them off to rub them into his t-shirt and jiggle his head back and forth. “Woo!” he yelped, pawing at his ears and his chest.

Wendy deposited our entrees and quickly slumped away again. I prayed for acne-less skin and un-greasy hair.

Robert Duncan chomped into his third great ball of fire, licking the green sauce off the corners of his mouth. “After a couple of bites, your mouth starts to tingle and then get numb.”

Alice interrupted to start the love story of her and Robert Duncan.

Alice had grown so boring. I had vague memories of the youthful Alice of my earlier childhood, the old fun Alice. I don’t know if I would have noticed her decay had Mom not pointed it out to me over time with dig after dig, her comments about Alice’s tummy expansion

and drooping butt cheeks. Like hypnosis, they snuggled into my brain until I could no longer see Alice but for her increasing proximity with the ground as her fat sunk her closer and closer to death.

I was noticing fat all the time then. It seemed only a matter of time until something would lock inside me and I would no longer feel capable of eating cheese and ice cream. Stomachs stuck out to me more than faces, as did lumpiness underneath tight clothes, flesh excessively jutting out. I heard Mom whimpering at night, disrobed before her evening bath, or in the morning as she emerged from her morning bath and threw her clothes around, whining about her love handles and chafing thighs. I could not yet muster up this self-loathing urgency in myself. I still loved pizza, candy, hot cocoa, cake, donuts, nachos, hot dogs, but I knew that soon enough I too would regret allowing any calories to slide down my esophagus.

“There’s a hair in my quesadilla,” said Pip.

Someone grabbed my thigh under the table. I inhaled and tightened my butt cheeks. “Oops!” Robert Duncan chuckled, moving his hand. He wiped residual sweat off his forehead and looked at my mother. “Romy, what’s the plan gonna be when, uh, Barbara—”

“Bertha,” Mom corrected.

“When she gets older? Is she going to need to keep wearing diapers?” he finished his water and started drinking out of my glass. “Is she going to be sort of retarded—er, mentally-challenged like Alice’s boys?”

“Robert!” Alice squealed. “Hudson and Dusty aren’t retarded!”

“I’m just messing with you, sweetie,” said Robert Duncan. “But Romy, Rob—what’s the deal with the Bertha situation? Is she gonna get, uh, lobotomized?”

“You gonna finish your rice and beans, Z?” Dad asked me.

“Lil’ Zelda here gonna have to change her sis’s diapers forever?” Robert Duncan asked.

“Don’t be an ass, Robert,” slurred Mom.

Robert Duncan kept going, gesturing to Mom and Dad with his glass. “You think it’s a case of inbreeding?”

“What’s inbreeding?” asked Pip. Bother.

Robert Duncan kept going. “You two checked your birth certificates?”

Dad swallowed his drink. “RD, you’re one to talk.”

Mom put a hand against his chest and used her other hand to brush hair out of her face and give Robert Duncan one of her classic talking-tos. “It’s goddamn 2003, Robert. You can’t just go around dropping slurs and spreading rumors anymore. Talking about a lobotomy. Jesus.”

“What’s a lobotomy?” said Pip. Moron.

“I’ve known you since you were a little girl, Romy, come on,” Robert Duncan put a hand on my mother’s head paternally, like he was bestowing knowledge. “You have to be able to have fun with the embarrassing parts of life.”

Robert Duncan giggled and raised two fritter-clasping fingers to his mouth. Just before he took a bite, he winced like he’d been slapped. He gently laid the fritter back onto its plate, pushed his palm, hard, onto his abdomen, and scrunched up his forehead.

We all giggled together as he ran to the bathroom. I was grateful to have someone to rally against.

Mom and Dad stopped laughing to swing their heads toward Alice. She flinched like a bug caught under a jar.

Mom cackled darkly.

“What?” Alice said.

“You must know what I’m thinking.”

“I do not.”

“From when we were kids.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on Alice, you know, I know, Rob knows.”

Alice’s ruddy face turned pale. She narrowed her eyes villainously. “You told Rob that shit, Romy?”

“He’s my husband! Why not!”

“That’s a nasty rumor.”

“Are we getting dessert?” said Pip.

“It’s an old story,” Mom assured Alice. “Everyone knows it. Someone was going to tell Rob at some point. He’s cool. He’s not such a stick-in-the-mud. He likes something a bit obscene. Rob’s a bit of a sicko himself.”

“It’s just a stupid lie from when we were kids,” Alice sniveled.

“I like him fine. So does Rob!” Mom went on. “We can handle scandal. We’re not puritans!”

“We’re glad you’re happy with the motherfucker!” Dad shouted, grabbing Alice’s shoulders. Alice shrieked and jolted in her chair like she’d been shocked. She burst into tears. Dad and Mom tried to invite her back into their joking, but she would no longer make eye contact with them. She hugged her arms around her chest. “Not funny, not funny, not funny,” she repeated again and again. Pip too began to cry. It was like he’d learned a new language from her.

I looked outside in time to watch a car swerve into the parking lot. Stacey ran out, swinging open her door and leaving the engine running. She dashed into the front door of Frida Holla! and seconds later burst through the plastic tent entrance and came charging to our table. I was the only person who even noticed her until she was on top of us, pointing a rain-soaked finger at my father. Her eyes were red and raw but when she spoke, her voice was so quiet we had to lean close to understand her. “You broke my heart. And you,” she angled her body towards Mom. “You turned your back on me. I am a person. I too have a heart. I too have a soul. I—”

The restaurant manager escorted her out and gave us our meal for free.

By the time Robert Duncan returned, sad Wendy had already removed the remaining Great Ball of Fire fritter and cleared our whole table.

“No picture up on the wall?” Robert Duncan said softly. We all shook our heads. He looked tired and lonely. “I’ll come back. Get my picture up next time.”

“Next time...” Alice looped her fingers through his.

“Well. Are we still going for another round tonight?” Robert Duncan asked as we reached the rental car. “Keep the party going?”

“Why not?” Mom said, her voice dead. “Zelda can babysit. Can’t you Zelda? Zelda can.” She didn’t look at me. “We’ll just drop the kids off and then we can meet you wherever.”

Mom, Dad, Pip, and I got into the same car.

We gave Pip a to-go churro that put him to sleep. I was thankful. I wanted an easy job tonight. I wanted to fall asleep before Mom and Dad got home. I didn't feel like eavesdropping or being included anymore. Hopefully I would only need to change Bertha's diaper once, if at all. Now that she was nine, the entire diaper-changing process was grosser and more cumbersome. And I had decades to go.

"Hey, Zelda," Mom turned to me as we pulled out of the Frida Holla! parking lot. She leaned back from the passenger seat. "Thanks for babysitting."

I shushed her to keep quiet for Pip. She bowed her head and lowered her voice. "See, look at what a good babysitter you are, Zelda. Very mature, right Rob? Dad's being quiet because he feels emasculated, Zelda. He feels embarrassed to have had a melodramatic screaming match in front of everyone, all done by some teenybopper at a B-grade lunch joint of all places. It's not how he wanted his life to turn out. Right Rob? I'm right, Zelda."

We hit a red light and waited. Mom turned back to me again, giddy.

"The thing is, Zelda, Dad has nothing he needs to be so shameful about. Or, I mean, everyone's got things to be shameful about, but your daddy's are no worse than anyone else's."

Dad kept his eyes on the road. Mom turned back to look at me, smiling like the Cheshire Cat. "I have a story for you, Zelda. It's about Robert Duncan. A family rumor. Everyone knew this about Robert back home, when I was growing up. I think my father told me but it could have been mommy too...hell, it could have been Alice, though she would never admit to that now. We all knew the story. We all repeated it. We churned it out. We reproduced it. Robert Duncan's a bit of a freak, Zelda."

Mom took the whole car ride home to tell the story. I hadn't heard something like it before and it made me nauseous in a way I'd only felt once before in my life, the time I'd snuck into my parents' room after a scary dream and seen them rustling beneath the sheets.

We pulled into our long driveway. We lived in a conspicuous wooden mansion on a dead-end. The house was dressed-up in cascades of Christmas lights, wreaths on all four of our front doors, blow-up reindeers. We paid other people to decorate the outside every year. I don't know who did it; I never saw them. There were all kinds of people who did things for us and it was almost as though they didn't exist. The house just changed from messy to tidied before my eyes every week, without even the scent of some other person infiltrating the house.

One day I'd been sick at home and I'd come downstairs from watching movies on the TV in my room to go pee. When I opened the bathroom door, I'd stumbled into a short lady on her knees, furiously scrubbing our toilet. I'd felt embarrassed and she'd felt embarrassed and I'd gone up to my room and held my pee until I heard her car drive away an hour later.

We had more than the house cleaner. There was a gardener, a landscaper, a woman who came to pick up our dog's shit in our yard. I avoided seeing any of them. We left our house so dirty for other people to clean.

Now I could feel Mom getting annoyed. "Oh, come on Zelda, don't put on your sullen face. We're all exhausted, it's not just you. I'm trying to let you in, Z. I'm trying to make you feel less worried about yourself. Everyone's got fucked up, pathetic little lives, and I want you to be able to have a sense of humor about it instead of just feeling sorry for yourself, like Alice does. Just remember that there's always someone worse off than you."

She handed me a clump of paper and money. “I want to hurry on to meet Robert and Alice. Can you apologize to Dolores for us and give her the cash? You already know the credit card info so you can just order whatever.”

I unbuckled Pip from his booster seat and carried him inside compliantly. He was too tired to cry. I gave Dolores the money and she left immediately, trudging away down the gravel road in her boyfriend’s pickup truck. Pip fell right asleep on the couch next to me. I could smell Bertha’s dirty diaper but decided to leave it for my parents to change when they got home. I bought a movie and ordered pizza and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

I creep into my parents’ bedroom, pushing the door open and stepping to their bed. I see the slithering again, the same convulsions I had seen years before, but I am not afraid this time, I know I can make it stop. I reach a hand out to their combined, blanketed form and push, calling their names. The two-bodied shape stops moving and I step onto the ledge of the bedframe to push myself up, but just as I lift my knee onto the mattress, two heads emerge from the comforter and they do not belong to my parents. It is Robert Duncan and an elderly, frail, emaciated woman with his identical face. Their bodies are sweat-covered and entangled. They smile at me with their closed mouths but inexplicable wet sounds emanate from their bodies, coming from both nowhere and everywhere. Slurping, gnawing, licking noises. I try to step down from the bedframe to run back to my room, but they slink their four hands out and snatch me, sucking me close to them so that I cannot escape.

I’ve had that nightmare almost every night since. A few years ago, I saw a therapist who tried to help me sleep better, but nothing she suggested worked, and I eventually just stopped scheduling

our appointments. I sometimes regret not having told her the story Mom shared with me about Robert Duncan. I know it may be the missing key to unlock “my troubles,” but whenever I’ve tried to speak the story aloud to another, I get a feeling I can only describe as akin to personal disembowelment.

I became mean that day at Frida Holla! And in the years since, I have not been able to resist noticing the atrocities of other people’s spirits. I came to the conclusion, that night, alone on my couch, the children I’d been left to watch beside me, that it was impossible to truly feel sad for anyone but yourself. I couldn’t make sense of the day and the people I knew in any other terms but those.

And even now, sitting on a different couch at a different age in a different city in a different home with different children passed out beside me, I can hardly believe that anyone’s suffering is more important than mine. I am lonely, but I can’t imagine any other way to live my life.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *My most honest writing has come from remembering. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and lived close to a restaurant with the same gimmick as Frida Holla. I got interested in revisiting this location and distorting foggy memories of adult conversation that I had witnessed with half-knowing eyes. My favorite short stories are those with both the familiar and the sinister, stories in which people say unsettling things within an uncanny atmosphere. I also am partial to a child narrator, and I wanted to try building my own.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Kallan Dana is a writer and performer originally from Portland, Oregon. She is an alumna of the National Theater Institute and of Skidmore College, where she studied English and Theater. She has worked under Sarah Hughes, Julia May Jonas, Sue Kessler, and Sunita Prasad and she is the 2020 intern for The JAM at New Georges. Favorite past credits include Julia May Jonas’s *We Used to Wear Bonnets & Get High All the Time* (assistant director, Skidmore College), *The Five Lesbian Brothers’ The Secretaries* (directed by Zoe Lesser), and *RashDash’s Two Man Show* (directed by Erica Schnitzer). She has worked with Dixon Place, Permafrost Theatre Collective, and The Tank and written for the satire site, *Broadway Beat*. Her play, *Playdate*, was first developed in a commissioned workshop production

(directed by Erica Schnitzer) at Dixon Place in September 2019. Her plays can be found on New Play Exchange.