



# Hive Avenue

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# **HIVE AVENUE**



**A LITERARY JOURNAL**

Hive Avenue Literary Journal

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Designed by Damia Walker

Cover Art: *The Archer* by Vianny Nolasco

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### **MISSION STATEMENT**

Hive Avenue is rooted in the belief that art is vital for the sustenance of life and has the strength to unite a community.

Our mission is to foster the professional development of writers, poets, and visual artists, to promote communication, connection, and the feeling of kinship.

Here at Hive Avenue, we aim to showcase the tastes and talents of both established and emerging writers in the global community – dare we say, hive?

Hive Avenue strives to cultivate an environment of appreciation; a sanctified space for all to be able to breathe and to read.

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# War Theater

by Roy Bass

The man shouts at the television: *We don't want to look weak! Something must be done!* The politician holds the map in his teeth. Shouts, *March! Surrender!*

The words a corridor for his hatred. Can you feel them?

Government issued hands? Are they calloused with fright? Or purpose?

Towering in their power, are they a sign of delivery?

Know the boys they once belonged to. Understand the men they now belong to.

Watch open mouths. Listen. The sound of war is their emptiness.

If you don't hear what's coming, it already came for you.<sup>1</sup>

See a woman a man a child remnants of  
a family.

Staying a mother a father a daughter under a sheet on  
Sunday morning.

They fall next to the war memorial, become war memorial,  
they lie in the bombed street next to an untouched suitcase,  
grey and upright as if an exclamation  
to the question marks made of their bodies.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The man turns off the television. He sees only his reflection.

<sup>2</sup>Is this too much war for war?

# **In response to an Obama poster hung in a dorm window**

by Callie S. Blackstone

they hung  
a bunch of bananas  
on the door handle.

The hall reeked  
of overly ripe fruit--  
long after she held  
the mottled, brown  
fruit in her black hands.



# blocked

by Jillian Castoro

we tried to make music

but my voice box was too tight & impossible  
to weave into the beat & the guitar strings  
snapped under those fingers & the car crash  
smell bled into my pores & bullets can be  
removed but anyone will tell you that the hot  
metal burn never stops lingering to be heard  
& when we're sunken in such a fleshy mess  
it feels like pressing a long swollen bruise to  
think about the beginning hurts to imagine that  
first june that early simmer the time we finally  
kissed & your teeth felt like the sun breaking  
open singing *the world finally makes sense* like  
the credits easy rolling on my old life & it burns  
to think about how we never would have dreamt  
of digging holes in each other like this 4 hands  
on the wheel spun off into a cursed burgh & just  
because you were drunk driving doesn't mean it  
didn't happen doesn't mean we didn't carve the  
names of our kids into my skin & now i'm  
blocked & wringing out your ghost in every  
corner & anyone who sees the scars & the way  
i'm grasping the weeds will say it's over they're  
just so tangled up there's inevitable bloodloss  
in pulling away

we made music  
it just sounded so different  
than we dreamt

# Cathedral light

by Logan Chace

We sat on her pool patio with our legs dangling in water, watching the dusk fill up with rainclouds. I had been telling her about Maggie when the rain started falling slowly in large drops. Sarah grabbed my hand: “Let’s jump in.” The pool water was warm as the air grew cooler around us, and we looked up at the sky, squinting into the rain. It began to downpour, and we spread out on our backs, floating tranquilly in the wavy torrent; we hovered on the undulating water cables, as if the currents of rain that plopped on our faces and the liquid underneath told us that everything we wanted was right there, right then: the sky reflecting a certain rapture. I sank beneath and rested on the pool floor, opened my eyes, and listened to the muted drumming—water on water. We had forgotten to turn the pool light on, so the water was murky gray like an old movie. The bright colors from her house inked through, making it appear as cathedral light—the water’s silky underbelly like stone; its surface, the stained glass. I heard the twinkle of wind chimes above. As I saw her push against the wall on the other end of the pool and glide towards me underwater in her baby blue bathing suit, a giant bird fluttered inside my ribcage and soared; I could still feel the branch wobbling from where it took off. And then I was a fish, jerked out of the water by a hook, desperate to catch my breath.

# First Home

by Nellie Cox

The exterior was a sad yellow  
like the caked goo on the mouth  
of a well-used mustard bottle.

In a polaroid:

I am newly five  
sitting on my red Schwinn  
tassels winking on chrome  
duplex in the background.

From Juanita, my father wagons me  
down to the beach. We share churros  
and hear the walruses bark on the docks  
their whiskers long, their tusks prehistoric.

We test coin pushers in the pier arcade  
and grimace at the crabs crammed tight  
in their tank, white undersides exposed  
in the glass. Countless legs skitter and tap.

The buzzing of chainsaws our windchimes  
oceanview construction sprouts sleek homes  
with tendrils of concrete and steel beams.  
A billboard announces luxury coastal living  
in modernist Hockney hues: *Coming Soon!*

Beyond our yard, I spy sailboats bobbing past  
the breakwater. Behind the cranes and stacks  
of 2x4s, palms wave and gulls orbit. Blue sea.  
Red bike. Mustard duplex. An eviction notice  
taped to the door.

# Dis Ease

by Pawel Grajnert

the

v

“The Distance between notes -  
Without which there'd be no love,  
No reason to live.”

Spoken like a soul  
Lost on heavy seas -  
All in a mind.

It's a scramble  
Of types:

Dreamt all the while  
Sleeping a lot,  
more than  
is necessary.  
But no more than  
you can help

Rummaging for air,  
grasping  
for space, or

Spreading dis-ease.

# BLAWENBURG, New Jersey

by John Hamel

I.

This valley of red shale  
Stretched between two ridges of trap rock  
Once was fertile  
Enough for farms, now half consumed by houses  
And golf courses; the herds of deer dwindle  
To strays and the random couple.

A kind of paradise,  
This valley soon to be lost, so one might want  
To memorize the place  
Like Adam and make last turns around the land  
To save within the mind what he must lose  
Of what was living once,

All that might have been,  
The family, Eve, and life on the land, to work  
And study, season and generation.  
Now for the greater task: to found it where  
The soil's inevitably poor, to raise a garden  
Where the garden's not; again

Begin where every place  
Is now displaced yet home, where words and things  
Take on a double sense.  
A place, no place; an instant built of long  
Accumulation, long it pours and builds  
And grows within what has

Not yet come to what  
It fully is; and step by step, it draws  
Us on, and runs in first  
To where it loved and those loved there. Its shape  
Remains unfinished, but step by step a part  
Will measure toward a part,

A random place will beat  
With other places, keep pace and rhythm.  
Though incomplete,  
New sounds are born native to the valley  
Long left behind, finally breathed and sent  
Like Adam's as he left.

II.

One could wear out a life wandering this small valley  
And never collect one birdsong and meet  
Only the tumult at the water's edge  
Or wing-fingers of a raptor written on snow and blood.

One could walk for days through the field by the brook,  
Under fading horsetail clouds, and find the deep  
Sliding paths through the brush, by which animals  
Come to drink, overgrown and closed. One could spend hours

Trailing the substance of time, sun and moon, which never meet  
Except in eclipse, when one day, distant hooves  
Strike stones: thundering bodies, tails swishing,  
And suddenly breath snorted in the dark on your neck.

# What dying becomes

by Kevin LeMaster

the blossoms are falling  
from dying vines as  
morning hangs

in suspended animation;  
dewdrops laced across tired  
withering leaves.

a mist of rain makes a sound  
like cicada's wailing call,  
their hulls falling

feather-like to  
the ground. A collection  
of dead trophies

line the garden path, a burial pyre  
of empty bodies crunch  
under the tenderest step

and I am caught waiting  
for everything to die,  
the leaves being last

to the funeral, covering  
all that is left in a dark



moldy brown, waiting

for the resurrection of  
Spring.

# **Papi's Phone Number**

by Karina Guardiola-Lopez

Papi's phone number is still saved in my cell  
I haven't found the time to remove it  
It's been 10 years  
I called a few times  
It now belongs to a Chinese restaurant

I am tempted to order his favorite dish  
Have it delivered  
Place it on my dining room table  
Watch it get cold  
Get old  
Rot, expire  
Become bones

Or instead, reflect and rejoice  
Laugh at his jokes  
Play boleros and look at faded photos  
Swell my belly  
Eat and enjoy his favorite meal  
Feel just like he did, for a moment

# `a`r`b`o`r`e`a`l`

by Eric Lunde

`a`r`b`o`r`e`a`l`  
`b`r`a`n`c`h`i`n`g`  
`e`a`c`h`l`e`a`f`  
`a`w`o`r`l`d`  
`i`n` s`t`u`t`e`r`  
`t`r`e`e`-l`i`k`e`  
`o`v`e`r` t`h`e`r`e`  
`s`t`r`a`n`d`e`d`n`o`t`  
`t`i`l`l`t`h`e`b`r`a`n`c`h`  
`f`o`l`l`o`w`s`  
`c`o`n`t`i`n`u`o`u`s`  
`b`r`o`k`e`n`  
`p`a`t`h`  
`b`r`a`n`c`h` s`k`y`  
`w`a`i`t`o`u`t`  
`t`h`e`m`o`m`e`n`t`  
`o`f` t`h`a`t`c`o`p`y`  
`y`o`u`  
`t`u`r`n`a`w`a`y`f`r`o`m`  
`e`a`c`h`l`e`a`f`I`o`f`f`e`r`

# Folklore

By Josh Megson

Last night I took two instead of one  
and rather than sleeping, everything melted,  
even my dreams.

I watched them fade into blubbery goo,  
the inside of a polar bear heated  
by fossil fuels until the skin falls off the bone.

Inside, all was grippless,  
I begged to hold onto you, or even your ghost,  
I kept sliding, scratching, hoping for once there'd be ground.  
I awoke with slimy residue on my eyes.

The room I was raised in, but is no longer mine  
was a cave of stalactites, but I, dripping away.

Some may call it unnatural  
for your eyes to slide into your esophagus,  
but I've felt it twice too many times to be folklore.

# Thoughts I Had while Quiet, Eyes Closed, with You

by James B. Nicola

The words  
*everything*  
*nothing*  
and  
*something*

are good words to avoid  
at least in poetry  
because mostly they don't mean

anything

a lot like the words

*you*  
*love*  
and  
*me.*

A context is required.

Which, though, is  
the opposite of  
*nothing*:  
*something* or *everything*?

And does that *something*  
mean, or include,  
*one thing* or *anything*

or can it also mean  
*somethings?*

And does *everything*  
mean *all things*,  
or the *all* that is all so *one*?

Like you and me  
all that all ways  
needs context and  
remains to be

seen.

# Journal Entry: Another Day of Rain

by David Prather

How can there be anything left to say  
about rain? But here it is, dancing  
on tree leaves, kissing the long blades

of grass. Today, there's just no making up  
my mind, one minute cloudburst, the next

a mist that hovers directionless  
all afternoon. Coffins have been seen  
floating through streets in Louisiana,

exhumation by flood, bodies adrift  
in the world, the waters of Lethe

or Styx rising to gather all our souls.  
In India falls a blood rain that runs  
through the streets. You'd think it

a curse, or a slaughterhouse of the gods,  
all those mythological creatures

skinned and dressed for allegorical tables:  
hunger and wanting, gluttony and haunting.  
Which is what clouds do all day,

their hazy bodies halfway between  
earth and elsewhere. Sometimes frogs

fall from the sky. I don't know how  
they survive impact, dropped  
from those lofty updrafts onto houses,

into trees, through all those busy streets.  
It is hard not to believe we are

being punished. I know I have been  
unkind. How about you? There are those  
who remember a gel from an unheavenly

sky, something that brought sickness.  
It must have been a sight, people

stepping out onto porches, stopping  
their cars to see this goo shimmy down  
leaves, down windshields, down stems

of plants barely able to support viscous  
matter. What mystery falls upon us?

We are beatified, beautiful  
in the rain. No matter  
how hard we fall.

# I Know Each Word

by Esther Sadoff

Obstreperous, garrulous, loquacious:  
I know each one. The lights get brighter  
when the teacher asks until my brain  
becomes a lightbulb, part heat, part fury.  
I feel warmth rush through my fingers,  
throttling my brain until I try to speak.  
In French class, they turn to look.  
*Somnambulism. To walk in your sleep.*  
Later, we lie on the floor writing verbs  
in our notebooks. I've seen bodies  
swell with pride, shrivel with sorrow.  
I wonder what shape I'm taking,  
remember that I've barely spoken all day,  
moving forward with eyes shut,  
like my sister who rises and rifles  
through the drawers, mumbling in the night.  
My mouth is like a tomb. If I open it,  
a moth might fly out. When do we wake up?



## #512 Suppression

by Ashlee-Ann Sneller

I am holding the past

beneath my tongue, lips  
steam-pressed and cheeks

a flushed heat of pink. I,  
am not stupid. It was in  
university that I learnt the  
body carries trauma.

Memories infiltrate and attach,  
sputter and morph until

it is all you can do not to go to  
ground. I would plant myself

in another city if it meant  
I could get away from you.

The truth though, is a fanged  
poison rushing, running up a throat

constricted. I will not utter  
a word. I will not utter a word. I

will not utter – I will keep  
you lodged in the

back of my throat. Out  
of breath. Hopefully, until the  
end.

# There's a Lexical Gap

by Allegra Solomon

that exists,  
    there,  
        between last fall to this one—  
        an orphaned hole between you and I  
    that persevered from it's frenetic inception in  
a small Appalachian town and  
into my brand new black steeled balcony,  
overlooking the fluorescent yellows of the semi-south  
    just below the Mason-Dixon line.  
I'm asking what we'll call our time between from now on.

Or where Webster would situate our nameless flame between A and Z.  
--where to place our wordless ravaging and your longtime longing  
that burned like August on my back—  
    how to translate the anonymity of air particles between people  
    pressing down on their hearts to un-stoke a stoked fire...  
        But yet,  
    the cardiac consciousness still drifts to thoughts of  
        your hands  
    like a furnace humming rapturously on the sensitive of my being.

Oh, but *Saudade*<sup>1</sup> and I—  
    I've bathed in her vexing waters until it all climbed  
    into my throat—clawing at my trachea and boiling over into  
        any open space it could fill with the fog of remembered *cafuné*<sup>2</sup>  
        as springtime rain snared on your windowpane. Spilling over my  
chapped lips until I declared my desperate anticipation of the *retrovailles*<sup>3</sup>,  
        the airport jog,  
    the colliding, the colliding.

<sup>1</sup> Portuguese word meaning: a deep emotional state of nostalgia or profound melancholic longing for an absent something or someone that one cares

<sup>2</sup> Portuguese word meaning: the feeling for running your fingers through your lover's hair. There is no direct translation in English.

<sup>3</sup> French word meaning: the happiness you feel upon reuniting with someone after you've been apart from for a long time. There is no direct translation in English.

# Flow

by Trae Stewart

awash in pink, separated by essence of grains and  
beyond generosity, a connection of sorrow.

the elder dancing on knees, collapsed on cartilage...  
he was for us, with us, carrying trepidation.

rusted cotton gins place reconciliation on the table -  
a meal to the starving, distaste, a rush of a turning tide.

peace stomps on salted grass, tears bathed our filth,  
made dirty by others, left alone with stains.

to live, that's retribution.  
penance and revenge, silent under birds' ramblings.

what I want...to flow where nothing is a challenge,  
no tension, smooth like meringue.

hope can deliver, free, but borrowed;  
mine wasn't returned so I wait for where I need to go.

without flow.

# I Thought It Was Me

by Christina Strigas

In a house full of oil paintings  
wooden frames  
with my long legs in the splits up against a wall  
when I was a skinny teenager with big boobs  
cotton candy pink leg warmers  
dancing to jazz ballet to the Genesis album  
*I could live like this*

dancing, writing, living  
but then love hit me  
and moonless nights  
slapped me  
provoked me  
guided me to some guy  
with changing blue eyes  
dark curly hair  
a smart mouth  
a sex drive to match my own

I see myself dancing freely  
my long dark hair along my spine  
my tight black bodysuit  
clutching my heart  
in case it went right side up

I stopped to examine the wineglasses  
the messy rolled joints  
the cocktails of love and sex  
in dark disco corners

I went through the roof  
climaxed to Madonna  
and he buttoned my shirt  
when it kept opening up

another boy tried to rip it off  
and when my breasts popped out of my bra  
I unlocked the door and ran  
back to get closer to darkness.

# Toothache

by Nina Calico Stupar

you saw me manic at the train station  
shotgunning a beer on the tracks like everything was imploding

but it's better to have a good father and lose him to the drink,  
you said

and it's better to be in love and then pretend you weren't

inside i am eating apple core  
and shrimp tails  
and remembering the bookclub when Catherine told me  
how two advil and one tylenol is better for dental pain  
than opiates

now, I am waiting on a floor that is tilted northwest  
like it always is  
on the third story (in these old buildings)

Philadelphia eats apple core  
and shrimp tails  
but i still have to convince you that

last winter i cracked my tooth to the root  
just from standing on my porch  
and screaming with the lights off

it was a premonition of May,  
i think  
that house on fire in the middle of the night

and a neighbor there, red, glowing  
trying to remember  
the name of the woman inside

i confess once at a traffic light  
how in my mind you are already dead  
and in my mind i am too

but that's so boring  
you say, and i say  
but that's not what i mean when i say that

i mean that i am falling asleep  
with my glasses on

and no one comes to take them off

and i mean that when it implodes  
and explodes at the same time  
everything just sort of stays the same

# Pollinator

(for Molly Jones)  
by Taunja Thomson

You are dancing on the pinwheel-orange petals of butterfly weed  
You are wrapping yourself around the lavender stems  
You are winding around snake roots  
You are gushing soil from your sky blue throat

At one time, you bent over to feed cats, held them—thin calicos,  
three-legged black toms as dangerous as night,  
marmalade tabbies with tipped ears,  
that grey striped one with his white mouth & tired eyes

Now your body has succumbed to clay, heart muscle no longer beats,  
eyes no longer scan for strays, hands no longer  
stroke sun-warmed spines arching  
& aching for fingertips that made up for old alley life

And yet here you are before me, monarch wings stretching for current  
on a sun-licked milkweed's starry petals, thimble-bodied  
rufous waltzing between beardstongue  
& bee balm, shaggy bumble rummaging through crepuscular

sunflower. Your humming is a purr spurring me to open my arms,  
feed the tattered tortoiseshell, the timid mama nursing  
frayed kittens, the large angry male  
stitched with old titian scars who will never accept a caress

This garden is yours, Molly—you wove it with words like *grasp*  
*need kneel do yes now*—that alight on my scalp  
with swallowtail legs & murmur  
in my ear with vibrato wings, then sink into sternum

with a throat the color of sunrise & sustenance & creation.

# **I Have Met The Enemy...**

by David Earl Williams

and despite

quote

“Carrying a grudge

Is like swallowing poison

And hoping the other guy dies”

they are quite alive

and even very verbal.





**Skin Pick**

by Yasmin Phillip

Formulated in 2015, the year the family dissolved. Reduces pain, occasionally by introducing more.

## **DRUG FACTS**

### **Active Ingredients**

#### **Purpose**

Anxiety (70%) | An additional feeling you refuse to identify (20%, increasing)      Self-medication

**Use** for when the memory of hearing “we’re divorcing” has you up at 1AM | for when you have Biology exams, Chemistry labs, and a mother who keeps suggesting you start counseling to “process it all” | for when your father disables your phone service because you still don’t want to talk to him, and you’re ashamed to tell well-meaning but clueless friends *that* is why AT&T can’t help.

### **Warnings**

**For private use only** (i.e., your dorm room but **not** while your roommate is looking. Discuss DNA transcription, pre-med advisors, etc., then continue use once she returns to her homework.)

**When using *Skin Pick*** | Avoid mirrors | Redness, burning, or stinging may occur, especially when washing the face | If irritation worsens, **temporarily stop use**. However, do not google *why can’t I stop picking my face?* Consult your new campus counselor about him moving, the relatives taking sides, the five essays he’s texted insisting you don’t understand because you were “too close to mom.”

But keep out of reach the shame that *I can’t seem to stop no matter how many times I’ve prayed for strength not to touch my face and before I didn’t care about people noticing my face but now I do and all the progress I made at the start of school is shot and my face looks and feels like roadkill will this ever stop???*—March 2016

**Do not use if you** | are around your mother and sisters, home now in a strange new town with the phrase “taking a gap year” on default.

### **Directions**

- Run your fingers over your nose, cheeks, jaw, chin, forehead, and hairline. Excoriate anything dry, bumpy, scab-like, or smooth.
- Pick gently to delay scarring in highly visible areas like the middle of the forehead. But pick aggressively on the nights you sit at your bedroom window, staring at moonlit nothingness. Wash thoroughly after these excavations in an attempt to scrub away the collagen, blood, dirt, and depression.

- If relatives who avoided contact during the court proceedings venture a visit now and notice your skin, claim unrelenting acne. “No, Cetaphil, Proactiv, Neutrogena—none of them work.” Nod when a relative who struggles with actual acne suggests retinoids. Inspect your cheetah-print scars in the mirror and convince yourself. *Yes, these are from pimples.*
- Purchase your first makeup kit a few weeks after accepting a job teaching art at a local elementary school. Disregard how your broken skin winces under the foundation and concealer. It is necessary to prevent another child from asking, “Why are all those spots on your face?”
- Avoid consulting your new therapist about the anger, the grief, the consuming wish that he would disappear from earth permanently. Do not answer when she asks, over Skype,

“have you ever considered—”

***Inactive Ingredients*** TPF (ten pickaxing fingers) | 27 dark patches | Straight A’s on a halted college transcript | 10-16-IFLMLHE (“I feel like my life has ended”-October 2016 journal entry) | 1-hatred-2-sadness-3-loneliness | *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, by Judith Wallerstein and colleagues | silicones, methylparabens, and imidazolidinyl urea before work | 6-hour smile while the kids paint | Excedrin Migraine | art-journaled people shouting, *stop asking me how I’m doing, the answer is always the same* | the smell of metal when you pull your finger from your face | your mother’s voice echoing across the room: “stop picking” | a dead moonlit field across the street | 100% heart arrhythmia at the *ping* of his text | *Clearly you have not healed. But you will respect me* | 1-hatred-2-sadness | 1-hatred | 1 question, halting the excavation at the bedroom window:

*have you ever considered forgiveness?*

### ***Questions?***

Visit [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) two years later and type in *medical or psychological condition for picking your skin*. Stare at the terms: dermatillomania, excoriation disorder, skin-picking disorder. Sit with the shame, then decide to forgive yourself just as you decided, two years ago, to forgive your father. Repeat both decisions as often as needed.

Refill *Skin Pick* regularly. But when your fingers start to run, stop. Glance in the mirror, past the new scars to the fading ones, to skin quietly reversing what seemed permanent. Clasp your hands and walk away. Repeat this as often as needed.

# HUMAN AGGRESSION #12 AND 35

by Martin Heavisides

*A **figure in** a white labcoat (he, she, they or whatever combination of pronouns applies) with a burly assistant following a pace behind, approaches a man sitting on a bench. Speaks into a recording device.*

LABCOAT

Unsub is seated at a bench by a bus stop, waiting for a bus perhaps, or are other motives at work? Excuse me, when is the next bus due?

BENCHSITTER

Are you going on like that? We don't get many social engineers in full lab gear on this line. Usually they aren't even suited up outside a work environment. I talked to one at a pub the other night, dressed for all the world like a normal human being. A woman it was, quite pretty really, I understand there are more of them entering the profession than ever before in history. What a time to be alive! Said 'interesting' a lot. Wouldn't give me her number. Said it was a strictly controlled variable.

LABCOAT

Interesting. *(To assistant.)* You know what to do.

Assistant slaps Benchsitter hard across the face. He glowers and holds his cheek.

BENCHSITTER

That hurt. And what was it for if you don't mind my asking before I thump you right back. (Or should I? Admonitions of scripture and all.)

LABCOAT(*into recorder*)

Unsub displays verbal signs of aggression. You know what it was for, Mr.—?

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BENCHSITTER

Not sure I care to share that information and what do you mean aggressive? He hit me first.

LABCOAT(*into recorder*)

Clever rationalization of aggressive impulses. (*To Hogan.*) In the furtherance of his duties. Hugo is my assistant and he was carrying out his instructions. Both of us are well within purviews and norms. I'm Dr. Persimmons in case you haven't guessed that already. (*Into recorder.*) Unsub unruly.

BENCHSITTER

What do you mean unruly? What do you mean unsub? I'm not a serial killer. I'm just waiting for a bus, there was one ten minutes ago so there should be one about due.

PERSIMMONS

And now that we've introduced ourselves you have no viable excuse, according to social forms, for withholding your identity from us further. It never makes for optimum results if we can't put a name to our experimental materials.

BENCHSITTER

My name is Hogan, if you must know, Jasper Hogan. I sometimes call myself Halfhogan because the place we rent, the family and I, is one side of a duplex. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You aren't recording me are you? I've never been recorded in a public place like this before.

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PERSIMMONS

I don't know about that. If I know my colleagues the woman you chatted up last night had a machine going inside her purse or a pocket in the region of the breast. Did you tell her you were married? (*Into recorder.*) Subject's responses to be closely monitored for potential duplicity.

JASPER HOGAN

What I really ought to do is thump both of you. I intend to ignore you until the bus shows up and then sit as far from you as possible

PERSIMMONS(*into recorder*)

Subject evasive and uncooperative.

JASPER HOGAN

Who's uncooperative? I'm not even a subject, not without signing a consent form. Not that it's any of your business, but I'm a single father! Worst weeks of my life to date watching her waste away with cancer. Undetected 'til stage four and as the doctor in

Palliative never tired of telling me, there is no stage five. You people ought to be proud of yourselves.

PERSIMMONS(*bored*)

Interesting. We don't need quite that much anecdotal background, Mr. Hogan. (*To Hugo.*) You know what to do.

*Hugo hits Hogan a terrific blow to the stomach, doubling him over.*

Human Aggression #12 and

35 5

PERSIMMONS(*as Hugo gasps for breath*)

You don't remember the authorization you signed at work? Every condition of future use for experimental purposes spelled out in oblique detail, with obscure clauses explaining the conversion through bylaw of the entire city into an experimental ground. It is a condition of continued employment, as it must be if we're to have free rein to discover what's what and make the world better, but no undue coercion was involved. You signed of your own free will insofar as such a fiction exists. Come now, cooperate and you'll find we're not so hard to deal with. Who's a good subject?

JASPER HOGAN(*finally recovered*)

THIS IS A PUBLIC PLACE NOT A LAB! Oh, right the bylaw I'll look that up later incidentally, but. That does not mean you can just go striking people on the cheek and in the abdomen without their being ready, Harry Houdini died of just such a blow.

PERSIMMONS

I assure you that little love tap was not designed to kill, Mr. Hogan, what use would that be experimentally? No it was purely intended to sharpen your focus so you can attend properly to our questions, which won't stop until they've been satisfactorily answered. *(Into recorder.)* Subject is unaware questions are meaningless, it's the blows that are intended to test for innate aggressiveness of response.

JASPER HOGAN

What are you talking about? Punch a man in the stomach to test *his* innate aggression? If I

Human Aggression #12 and

35 6

JASPER HOGAN(*cont*)

thumped him right back it would be no more than he was asking for. Begging for. In a court of law they'd call that self defence.

PERSIMMONS

We aren't in a court of law, we're in a court of science, and in the context of this experiment what you call self defence is one of the primary indices of innate aggression. *(Into recorder.)* Subject uncooperatively keen of hearing.

JASPER HOGAN

I try to be a Christian about these things. I didn't hit back when Hugo walloped me across the cheek, you notice that? Only I don't recall any verse in scripture saying "If a



man thump thee in the stomach, turn ye the other to him also,” as if I were a cow and had four.

PERSIMMONS(*into recorder*)

Subject suffering religious delusions, possibly due to sharpness of abdominal blow. Bad sign: aggression more noticeable and uncontrollable in religious fanatics than in any other test group in history. (*To Hugo.*) You know what to do.

HUGO(*monotonously, as if reciting a lesson*)

History is littered with the corpses of people defending their loathsome Gods and attacking other people's, whole fields of ripe massacre over sticky, trivial points of doctrine between rival believers in the same God, utterly irrelevant to anyone with a truly scientific, rational outlook.

Human Aggression #12 and

35 7

*Picks Hogan up, hoists him in the air and twirls him about three times before body-slaming him to the stage.*

JASPER HOGAN

THIS ISN'T A LAB, I have my rights even if I don't have them on me and I don't believe you could get away with that kind of behaviour even if it was. I should thump both of you like you've never been thumped in your lives and I would too, if I was sure I was acting in strict accordance with the law.

PERSIMMONS(*into recorder*)

Subject requires nothing but social sanction to unleash the most savage acts of aggression upon innocent experimental researchers. It's not looking good, Mr. Hogan. You may need to be confined for your own safety and that of others. I for one would be sorry to see that happen. *(Nods to Hugo who begins fiercely kicking Hogan, still prone on the ground.)*

*Lights slowly fade*

JASPER HOGAN(*gasping*)

When is that damn bus coming? I need to get out of this madhouse.

PERSIMMONS

Everywhere you go you carry yourself with you, so you see there's no escape from this madhouse, not without our help. *(Hugo resumes kicking. Persimmons shakes his head.)*  
Not 'til I give the signal. *(Hugo reluctantly desists.)*

Human Aggression #12 and

35 8

*to BLACKOUT.*

PERSIMMONS(*in the darkness*)

The bus schedule's been changed.

# Holding Space

by Richard Stimac

## CHARACTERS

Phoebe: Female; mid 20s, early 30s.

Vi: Male; mid 20s, early 30s.

## SCENE

The Midwest.

## TIME

Contemporary 2020s.

## ACT 1

The gravel driveway of a small, run-down wood frame house. A screen door leads into an equally small, run-down kitchen. A bottle of vodka, a plastic tumbler, and a napkin holder with napkins sits on a table.

PHOEBE stands just inside the screen door with her arms folded. Outside, VI kicks at some gravel.

PHOEBE

Why you here?

VI

Early release.

(Lightening, then thunder, both  
in the distance.)

Wind comin' up.

PHOEBE

It's gonna storm.

VI

Yeah. I figure it is gonna storm.

PHOEBE

Come in.

(PHOEBE holds the door open  
for VI.)

PHOEBE

Your boots.

VI

Like 'em? Stopped by my brother's.

PHOEBE

In the house.

VI

You are right. A house must have order.

(VI sits on the steps and takes his boots off then sets them inside of the door. PHOEBE goes to the table and

(cont'd)

takes a pack of cigarettes from the kitchen table and begins to shake one out for VI. He locks the kitchen door behind him then takes the pack from her PHOEBE's hand and taps his own cigarette out. She begins to spark a lighter but he takes the lighter from her and lights his own cigarette, then throws both the cigarette pack and lighter on the table. VI sits in a kitchen chair.)

PHOEBE

Hungry?

VI

Hungry.

(PHOEBE takes a Styrofoam container from the fridge.)

PHOEBE

Cold fried chicken. I can heat it up.

VI

Anything to drink?

(PHOEBE nods towards the open bottle of vodka.)

VI

Besides vodka?

(PHOEBE opens the refrigerator and pulls a beer from the plastic rings of a full six pack, then tosses VI a can.)

PHOEBE

You don't drink beer.

VI

Neither do you.

(VI taps the beer then pulls the tab. His mouth moves as he drinks, almost as if he were chewing. When  
(cont'd)  
finished, he crushes the can with one hand and pulls the other hand across his face as if he were wiping water away.)

VI

Where the kids?

(VI's cheeks pull in when he takes a drag on the cigarette.)

PHOEBE

Mom's.

VI

Still in Cahokia?

PHOEBE

You should-a called.

VI

Instead-a what?

PHOEBE

Just showin' up.

VI

You knew I was gonna just show up.

PHOEBE

Still, you should-a called.

VI

I asked if your momma still lived in Cahokia.

PHOEBE

She does.

(VI opens the Styrofoam  
container, picks up a drumstick,  
and examines it.)

VI

Where's this from?

PHOEBE

Place down the street.

VI

You don't like fried chicken. Or beer.

(VI bares his teeth and bites into  
the chicken leg. He keeps his lips  
open as he rips the meat from the  
bone.)

VI

How's the kids.

PHOEBE

They're fine.

VI

Just fine?

PHOEBE

OK.

VI

They miss their daddy?

PHOEBE

I guess so.

VI

You guess so.

PHOEBE

They do.

(VI raps the crushed beer can on the table. PHOEBE goes to the fridge then sets the remaining five beers on the table. VI opens another can of beer.)

VI

Put 'em back. Get warm. We might have company.  
(PHOEBE puts the remained four beers back in the refrigerator.)  
Anyone gonna mind if I drink all his beer?

PHOEBE

It's mine. Drink it all if you want.

VI

I said you don't drink beer.

PHOEBE

I do now.

VI

Get another cup and sit down.  
(PHOEBE leans against the edge of the counter. VI twists open a biscuit.)  
Would be better hot.

PHOEBE

Let me put it in the microwave.

(PHOEBE offers her hand like a saucer for VI to place the unleavened bread. Instead, he peels back the lid of a grape jelly packet and squeezes it onto the

bottom of the biscuit. As he eats,  
the jelly stains his lips.)

VI

I said get another cup and sit down.

(PHOEBE takes another plastic  
tumbler from the cabinets and  
sits at the table. She places the  
tumbler in front of VI. VI pours  
both tumblers a quarter full of  
vodka.)

To happy homecomings. And you holding space for me.  
(VI lifts the cup heavenward, then  
drinks. PHOEBE begins to rub  
her forehead. VI nods to the  
tumbler in the middle of the  
table.)

Somethin' wrong?

PHOEBE

Got a headache comin' on.

VI

Vodka'll cure that.

PHOEBE

I'm not thirty.

VI

Drink up.

PHOEBE

I'm tired.

VI

Drink up. Make it all easier.

PHOEBE

I'm gonna go to bed.

VI

I said drink.

PHOEBE

You should-a called.

VI

You had fried chicken and beer. What more you need to get?



(PHOEBE rests her face in her hands.)

I told you I'd be comin' back.

(PHOEBE lifts her head and scoots the tumbler of vodka across the table so that it sits directly in front of her. She runs her finger around the edge a few times, then lifts the cup to her lips and drinks, all of it, in one gasp. She drops the tumbler and it rolls across the table and onto the floor. PHOEBE folds her arms on the table and lays her head down, her face towards the backdoor. The wind begins to pick up.)

I ain't that sort-a man.

PHOEBE

I know.

VI

I ain't a man to give up my space.

PHOEBE

I know.

(VI taps the second beer can on the table.)

PHOEBE

I'm tired of bein' a woman.

(VI takes a paper napkin from the plastic holder and blows his nose, then drops the napkin on the table. He stands and walks to the fridge. With the fridge door open, he whistles.)

VI

Your tastes sure have changed. Or the kids did.

(PHOEBE begins to hum a soft, nurturing melody.)

VI (cont'd)

There is food in here I know, for a fact, not you, not any of them kids, gonna eat.

(VI takes the last four beers in the pack back with him to the table. The uneven rhythm of rain drops begin to tattoo against the roof. So irregular. One. Then another. Maybe a third. Then oneoneoneoneone.)

VI

The storm's here.

PHOEBE

I need to roll my windows up.

VI

I did that for you.

PHOEBE

Thanks.

VI

I'm gonna take care of you. Don't you worry about that.

(The rain begins, hard, heavy, oppressive. VI picks apart a thigh. A car crunches across the driveway. A car door opens then slams shut. Someone runs across the gravel and

(cont'd)

pulls on the locked screen door.  
PHOEBE begins to cry.)

(END OF ACT)

# Fragments for an Open Marriage

by Janelle Cordero

I.

It always takes me a while to decide what I want, whether I'm at a restaurant looking at the five-page menu or picking out deodorant under the gleam of fluorescent lights at the grocery store or standing naked in front of my closet every morning. It's been the same way with men—I'd have two or three boyfriends at a time because I couldn't choose between their particular magic. My husband knows exactly what he wants: a Porsche 911, a salary of six figures, a safe life with me, and the freedom to sleep around. What do you want, he asked me days ago, and I still haven't responded. I think of how shared emotion pools between two people and glitters like starlight. I think of being wanted but also of being cherished as something rare and divine. I think of immortality and the soul and death and the impossible frailty of my own body. How do I say any of this in a way that makes sense? I want you, I finally tell him, which is true.

II.

Pine needles twitch in the wind like coarse hair. Seeds have sprouted in the concrete birdbath, growing green vines. Two middle-aged women in tank tops and leggings power walk down the street while talking of vacations. Our kids are coming with us, one of them says. It's not some romantic getaway. What's more romantic than a child born from love, I think to myself. A young couple walks by with two strollers and a dog, both in sunglasses, the man holding a thermos of coffee in one hand. Look how easily they move through this warm morning, this clear day with its birdsong and quiet breeze. I watch them until they're out of sight, studying their happiness with pleasure, like maybe it's something I contributed to just by noticing and thinking yes, there it is: the thing we all want.

III.

It's late, close to midnight, and we're walking downtown among the massive buildings with windows that gleam like eyes. We talk of how you're becoming an extrovert, and you take my picture as I stand in the middle of the street—facing you, then turning

away. I wish I was a different person, someone who could drink more than two glasses of wine, someone who loved low-lit bars and loud music and the jostling of bodies on a wooden dance floor as the DJ spins everything from Cher to Cardi B. I wish I lived more outside of myself than inside. But even now I'm sad, even now as you kiss me in front of the movie theater and tell me I'm beautiful before we get in the car and drive home. Goodbye, dear girl, the kiss seemed to say, even as we follow the beam of our headlights north, even as you reach for my hand.

#### IV.

What can I offer you other than I'm sorry? I build apologies like origami tigers and elephants and parade them across the kitchen table one-by-one, flimsy and precise, easily destroyed. There's who I want to be, I say, and there's who I am. I'm sorry those two people aren't the same. My therapist likes to talk about things like authenticity and self-betrayal. Truth lives in the center of your chest, she says—the space between your lungs. Lies live at the back of your throat. Maybe that's why I guide your hand to my neck during sex, to hold back what's not true. You tighten your grip when my breath quickens, panting, getting close. I want to beg you—don't let go. But words don't exist when I'm getting choked, true or not.

#### V.

The body has many endings—both mine and yours, the way we touch things but can never become them. You lift my silk skirt over my head and run your hands up and down my thighs. I reach for your shoulders, the widest part of you. I skim the stubble on your face, the impossibly short bristles of your high fade, the sweet black curls on top. Fuck me, I say, but what I mean is make me forget about my mind for a while and all the lonely thoughts that mean nothing, are nothing.

#### VI.

I'm at a stoplight downtown adjusting my hair in the rearview mirror, tucking it behind my ears and then untucking it. The motorcyclist to my left revs his engine, so I look over at him. He points right at me and then gives a thumbs up, a slight nod under his full-face helmet. I laugh, point at his bike and nod. The light turns green and I let him get

way ahead before I take off, wondering how he knew what I needed: admiration without expectation in the same way we point at horses in fields alongside the highway and say look, horses. We don't want anything from them—we just want to exclaim our wonder at their existence, to bow our heads in honor of their silky muscles, their massive hearts.

## VII.

You didn't ask to be born in a car alongside the Columbia River just 7 miles south of Canada. You didn't ask to be born at all, so I wonder—if given the choice, would you do it all over again? I'm not talking about suicide. Rather, I want to know if you would choose the border town of less than 300 people, the wood-paneled trailers and tavern made of cedar logs, the bald eagles hurtling through the sky with bloodied steelheads in their beaks, gills still opening and closing. And everything that comes later: the foster family in the valley town surrounded by mountains, eating grapes and tuna fish sandwiches at swim meets, the arcade center with all its flashing lights and pinball machines, setting fires in your basement bedroom before your parents took the door off its hinges, crashing into a hornets' nest in the woods with your mountain bike and going into anaphylactic shock. What about now—would you choose the ten-year-old Toyota Corolla and the rancher in a 70s suburb, the admin job downtown where you wear leather shoes and tailored suits, the city split in half by a river where a dozen people drown every year, and me? That's the question I really want to ask—would you choose me?

## VIII.

I bleed through the night, building new lives in my dreams where we love only one another and no one else. I wake at 3 AM to the cold white glow of your phone, your fingers scrolling or else typing messages to polyamorous women on one dating app or another. I pull the blanket over my head and breathe long and deep and slow until it's morning. I find small dark clouds of blood on the sheet where it soaked through my underwear, the thick cotton pad.

## VX.

You say you like the tall brunette woman far ahead of us in line. What do you like about her, I ask. I like her eyebrows, you say, and how skinny she is. She's different from anyone else. Huh, I say. I understand but I don't understand. Aren't we all different from anyone else? We've fought two days in a row over small things, cliffside streams that lead to a greater river, churning uncertainty. Just yesterday you told me the foundation of our marriage is eroding. And now here we are, you in a suit jacket and me in black leather heels, standing in line for half an hour to get into a warehouse art show, buildings rising up all around and people waving down at the crowd from their penthouse condos, the moon blurred by wispy clouds like strands of hair in water. The brunette finally makes her way inside and is lost to us forever, like maybe she never existed in the first place. We keep waiting, moving slowly upstream.

# Time Perception

by Philip Dees

"The gap between how time passes and how we experience it has engaged psychological scientists for more than 150 years." wrote Joe Dawson and Scott Sleek in the 2018 article, *The Fluidity of Time: Scientists Uncover How Emotions Alter Time Perception*.

I experienced this phenomenon in 1963 at the age of six years old. I lacked the intellectual or literary might at the time to really put my thoughts into words or to know what was happening on a psychological level. I was a first-grade student in Carterville, Illinois. Class had just gotten underway. In that particular class if we needed to excuse ourselves to go to the bathroom the teacher had hung a large cardboard sign with twine near the door that we were to wear around our neck stating as to why we were in the hall and in route to the restroom. I had worn the sign a few times and each time I had gotten a thorough ribbing from upper-class mates encountered along the way. Even had a knife pulled on me in the restroom as the much older student threatened to cut the sign from my neck. I held onto the sign as I ran past the student and out the restroom's door. That particular morning even though I really needed to go to the bathroom I just couldn't bring myself to carry that god awful sign. I thought maybe the urge to relieve myself would pass. What did pass was I dropped the mother lode of accidents in my pants. I sat there horrified atop the Mount Everest of Shame. A minute hadn't passed when the teacher stopped mid-sentence, slammed her textbook onto her desk and turned her focus away from the blackboard and glared out at the class. Standing silent before taking a long breath. An eerie smirk came over her face as her eyes narrowed and twinkled. Starting at the back of the class she asked the last child called them out by their full name and asked if they had "had an accident." They responded. "No." The teacher would then slowly and deliberately call out the next child in the row again using their full name, middle initial and asked, "did you mess your pants?" "No," the student quickly replied. The teacher continued to glare and became increasingly agitated with each passing student's emphatic "No." Susan T. so and so did you "Poop your pants?" Susan answered it wasn't her. Tom H. so and so was it you that "Soiled yourself?" "No Ma'am," Tom emphatically answered.

As the teacher continued to call each student out by name getting increasingly agitated, I began to focus on the large black and white clock at the front of the class. I focused on the click of the second hand. The teacher's voice faded further into the background and the click of that clock got louder and louder. I began to wince as the click of the second hand sounded like the roar of a cannon firing. Boom, boom, boom as I got lost inside that clock face. The clock became my world at each click of the second hand. The clock became 10 feet tall as the teacher called out each student by name. The clock became 20 feet tall. I was no longer in the classroom. I saw an empty seat in the middle of the classroom. I winced as each click of the giant second hand. The teachers voice continued to fade further away that is until I heard her call out the student's name directly behind me. I knew my name was next. I was back at my seat now no longer taking refuge inside that 20-foot-tall clock. The sound of my heart beating and the scratching of my fingernails as I grasped my desk drowned out the sound of the clock. She then called out the next student as I held my breath. It wasn't my name. She had then started at the front of the class along the opposite row that she had begun with. I let out a breath of relief and began to focus again on that giant Daliesque expanding clock face wincing at every click click boom BOOM of the second hand. Her increasingly hostile voice once again faded into the background. That clock became my sanctuary as I continued to dig my fingernails into the sides of my table top.

Her voice began to come back into focus as she started for a second time calling out students from my row. This time the front of the row. "Bobby V, so and so did you "crap you pants?" "No ma'am" he quickly replied. One more student and then me. I'm not even sure I heard her call out the student directly in front of me. She then slowly and quite agitated called out my name, "Philip K. DEES was it you who did this thing?" I don't remember ever answering her. I continued to grip the side of my desk. I looked away from the clock and looked down at the beautiful grain of the desk wishing I could dissolve into the molecules of that weathered polyurethane wood top. I continued to stare down through the desk and into the floor beneath my feet. I then heard the teacher say, "That's what I thought." This all maybe took twenty minutes for her to slowly and deliberately call each student out by name. It seemed like an eternity. I didn't have the



words for it then but that is definitely the first notion I had that our emotions certainly play a role in our perception of the passing of time. If only time will pass that slowly when I come to that great getting up morning in a day and time in the not too distant future.

I don't remember much about the rest of the day other than I wish I could just had died right there in the middle of that classroom one spring morning in 1963. It was some time that it dawned on me she knew all along who had "did this" before she ever began asking each and every student. That was my last and only year at Carterville grade school. I did first grade again, but it was in a new town "Carbondale, Illinois" with new students and a teacher that didn't come directly from the bowels of hell. Never had to wear a god awful sign to the bathroom again or be ridiculed in the hallway by upperclassmen.

I told my mother this story years later. She told me that my first-grade teacher from Carterville had been fired a few years after I had gone to school there. Something about she had a classroom full of first graders move a piano down a flight of stairs and the piano had broken loose and several students were hurt. I don't even recall her name if I ever knew it but she was easily the worst teacher of my life. Seems odd that my first ever teacher was my absolute worst ever teacher. Nowhere to go but up I often smiled and surmised. In retrospect i did learn a valuable lesson. I learned that hate doesn't really affect the one you hate but it affects the person doing the hating. In other words ME. That woman has probably been dead for decades and yet my hate for her still feels as fresh now reliving this episode as the day it occurred.



“Central School was built in 1905 and stood on the site of the current elementary school. This 1948 picture of Central High School was taken from the Carterville Comet. Central School was torn down in 1971.”

# Bullshit.

by Rowan MacDonald

She would never see them again. The light sprinkling of snow drizzled over the mountains outside her window, the kookaburras laughing in nearby gumtrees, and the sound of waves rolling ashore at night. She was dead. I kissed her forehead goodbye and stepped back, a small tear forming in the corner of my eye. She had gone. I was overcome with the realization of what being dead actually meant; what she would miss, the things she would never experience again. Waves of guilt rippled through my body because I knew that tomorrow, I would walk out of the house into bright sunshine. I would put one foot in front of the other, feel the warmth of sun against my skin, and breathe crisp air into my lungs.

The small bed seemed so large around her shrunken frame. I finally understood why people say things like, *she has left us*. She was certainly no longer in this room; the one we had kept vigil in for months. She was just as stubborn in her final journey as she had been in life and refused to die. In her place now was an empty husk, a shell of a human; wrinkled skin covering skeleton. Her mouth lay open, frozen in time, the body's last attempt at sucking in air.

Family members buzzed around the otherwise serene room. Phone calls were made, people cried, and others commenced to-do lists months in the making. But I just stood there. Motionless. I stared at her face trapped in time; frozen in a room filled with life and movement.

"I'll be alright," she told me days earlier.

People stared into phones; faces illuminated by screens. Others held them to ears, barking announcements down the other end.

"Don't know when it will be yet," they said to people who weren't here.

An entire life lived; a human being who breathed the same air moments before. Now all people wanted to know was when they could chuck her in the ground, and throw dirt on

top, like a cat burying shit. Only then could they squabble over inheritances, await larger bank balances and plan distant trips.

I knew that as long as she was free from this; removed from the materialism of life, the narcissism, the frenetic pace, then she would be alright indeed.

\*\*\*

“Bullshit.”

This was her final word.

“Bullshit.”

It was spring and while I witnessed death, everything else was blooming to life. The colors outside her room were beautiful and vibrant, in stark contrast to my darkened emotions. These same spring blossoms also triggered allergies.

“Ahh-Choo!”

There’s nothing like a violent sneeze to break the silence that accompanies a death-watch. I was standing at the foot of her bed when it happened.

“Ahh-Choo!”

Everyone stared at me like I was the worst person in the world for daring to wake the dying lady.

She stirred and slowly rolled over, harnessing a final ounce of strength. Her eyes prised themselves open and stared directly at me.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” I gushed. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

She listened intently, looked me up and down, and demonstrated a lifetime of perfecting being unimpressed.

“Bullshit!” she replied, before rolling over and returning to sleep.

She never spoke again.

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I didn't know how to speak at a funeral. Who does? I felt oddly protective of the memories I had. They were mine. They were ours. They were special to *us*. So, I talked shit, hoping to make people laugh, hoping to make *myself* laugh. Laughter was the medicine I needed; the drug to get me through, the only way to distract from her small, rosewood coffin and how it looked so elegant with beautiful flowers on top.

I spoke of the time she gave me gift-buying advice, how she innocently told me to buy a potential date an all-day sucker. To my right, a group of elderly ladies giggled together, like they had transformed into the mischievous young schoolgirls they once were.

I talked of her opinions on rock music, how on hearing AC/DC for the first time, she jumped, in horror, stared at the car floor and muttered, "thought the guts had fallen out of it!"

I reminisced on her dislike for dogs, but how she tended to a small pet cemetery, with more care, devotion and tenderness than many show the graves of loved ones.

For someone who disliked most things in life, including people, she had a knack for helping others. In her final weeks, a fellow aged care resident became stuck in a doorway, underwear around her ankles.

"I can't do it!" the lady bellowed. "I can't do it!"

"Shut up!" came her reply. "You bloody well *can* do it!"

And it was those words that I clung to now. Her blunt encouragement was something worth clinging to; something to get me through the service, something to get me through life.

One of the elderly, giggling ladies approached me at the wake.

"Did she really suggest you buy the all-day sucker?" she smirked, sipping her Earl Gray tea.

"Yes," I replied. "But I chose some flowers instead."

"Bullshit!" she laughed.

# Nobody Knows

by Carmel Mawle

I wonder, sometimes, whether our spiritual beliefs come more from religious training, or from trying to make sense of the experiences we have in life. My family wasn't very religious. We prayed at bedtime but didn't attend church on a regular basis. We celebrated Christmas and the Easter bunny, and I remember a couple of Midnight Masses when we visited our grandparents – the candles, the carols, the incense and stained glass. Growing up in Alaska, the natural rhythm of the wilderness was woven into a sense that there were forces beyond our understanding that influenced our lives. And it was through lived experiences that my perceptions of our spiritual nature, and the limitations of manmade doctrines, began taking shape.

I was seven, padding barefoot down the cold linoleum floor of a wood paneled hallway. Through my cotton nightgown, I could feel my hair swinging gently against the small of my back. The light was dim – a nightlight, or the midnight sun. The smell of chicken soup lingered. My face was thick, as if I wore a mask of clay. There was a gap between my consciousness and the physical manifestations of this life. It was something like watching a movie from the back seat of a theater, but beyond sight, it was also the senses of touch and smell and sound. The air I inhaled and the smells that came in with it. Where my consciousness existed, removed from this sensory information, there was no time or space, no separation from the universe or God. As a child, I couldn't have articulated it, but I implicitly understood that the manifestation of the physical world wasn't real. I played a role in its creation and there was something to be learned from it, but it wasn't really *me* who padded down that hallway.

Initially, I was diagnosed with epilepsy, but a trip to Children's Hospital in Seattle revealed the seizures were actually caused by a vitamin B deficiency, the result of overly prescribed antibiotics before and after a tonsillectomy. The condition quickly resolved with vitamin B therapy, but the awareness I received during those seizures has stayed with me, shaped the way I view the world and my place in it. Our places in this manifested universe.

When my little sister and I said our prayers at night, tucked into our trailer's built-in twin beds, we were given the choice of praying the scary "if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take," or a Buddhist chant that our dad had learned when he served in the Marine Corps in Okinawa. Our favorite, it went something like "Yom, Yom, Ho, Lin Gake Yo," rubbing our hands together and clapping loudly at the end. We didn't know what the chant meant, but it was said with love and reverence.

I was introduced to the concept of original sin, our shared destiny of fire and brimstone, and a possible salvation through Jesus Christ, at summer bible camp in Soldotna when I was ten. I was also informed that my recently deceased German Shepherd, Ludwig Von Drake, would not be waiting in heaven because, as the mirthless pastor alleged, dogs don't have souls. Devastating, but nothing compared to the vengeful God who emerged through camp bible studies. This god, who set the system up to begin with, would forgive us for being born into original sin only if we were lucky enough to learn the secret password. Trembling with the fear of God, I said those words, accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior, and was assured a mansion beyond the pearly gates in the afterlife. And in case things got bad before that happened, I gripped my rifle and crawled on my belly, steadied my bow and nocked my arrows, targeting bullseyes in the woods. I earned my riflery and archery badges at Solid Rock Bible Camp.

I returned home terrified that my sister, my mom and dad, my family and friends, were destined to spend their eternities weeping and gnashing, and set about saving souls with the fervent conviction of the recently converted. Mom assured me that she had been dunked into redemption as a child. My dad's family was Catholic. I'd heard enough about Catholicism at camp to be wary of its infant baptism, but my father refused to say the magic words that would ensure his place in heaven.

I was inconsolable, gasping through tears. Dad grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the back porch. It must have been 9 or 10 at night; the sun was setting, and the sky was blended shades of pink and red and gold. Mosquitoes knocked vainly against our flesh.

"Some church people like to think of themselves as a little bit above everyone else," he said. "So, they ignore the most important things Jesus said."

"Like what?" I asked.

“Like, when he said, ‘Some men call me Jesus, and some men call me Buddha. Some men call me Mohammed and some call me Brahma. I am known by many names.’” Dad handed me his handkerchief. “Despite what you heard at camp, there are many paths to salvation.”

I believed those were bible verses until my early twenties when I attended the First Baptist Church. The members were appalled by my insistence that it must be in there somewhere. My father had given me a list of false gods, they claimed.

After my parents’ divorce, Mom moved us to Seattle, and the drinking that had been an occasional raid into my parents’ liquor cabinet became an increasingly fulltime obsession. I was expelled from the Seattle Public School system in eighth grade and sent to a Catholic school across town. I remember very little of religion class, but there were a couple teachers who reached out to me. They never tried to convert me, just offered acceptance and kindness. To a kid who was rapidly sliding into an alcoholic hell, that was more memorable than any sermon.

From there, I went on to an all-girls’ Catholic High School. I drank and smoked anything I could get my hands on, took whatever I could find before class, and never failed to trip over the projector’s power cord when I stumbled in late to Sister Ethna Marie’s French class.

My friend, Monica, and I explored every corner of the historic building, from the basement to the magnificent dome. We climbed the fence and breached the hedge into the nun’s patio and found it littered with cigarette butts and empty wine bottles. One day, so drunk I could barely walk, I climbed out the 4th floor bathroom window onto the ledge and crawled to Monica’s classroom to knock and wave. I remember the look of shock on her teacher’s face, and the students calling, “Go back.” It hadn’t occurred to me until then that I was in danger. I gripped the narrow ledge and crept backward to the window. The next day, I saw her teacher, the nun we called Sister Cowpie, scowling my direction in the stairwell, though she never said a word. When I later went into the fourth-floor bathroom, the window had been sealed shut.

I was struck by the hypocrisy of an organized religion that produced bitter women, with no apparent love for their role in educating girls, living for Jesus. I never



made it past my freshman year there. One morning I staggered in late and told the principal, Sister Mary Teresa, to go fuck herself.

In the short years that followed my expulsion from Holy Names, there was the rapid decline in mental health you would expect of a teenage alcoholic/drug addict. I learned, years later, that my extended family had been praying for me ceaselessly. It may have been a miracle but suffice it to say that I almost didn't make it. At sixteen, I walked up the long staircase to Fremont Hall, desperate for a chance of life and sanity. I rarely spoke in the meetings. I would sit in the back of the room looking up at the 6' portraits of Dr. Bob and Bill W., the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. With my brain still foggy from withdrawal, I believed the portraits looked me directly in the eye, their facial expressions altering slightly to reflect approval, loving disapproval, compassion and encouragement, depending on my train of thought. If my mind strayed from the meeting, if I lied to myself about my recovery or past, their gaze cut me to the core.

One meeting when I was 2 or 3 months sober, I was overcome with fear. I had heard the old timers talk about the poor odds of survival, how only 1 in 32 alcoholics would stay sober. I had friends who had gone out and not made it back. They died in accidents and overdoses, they put guns in their mouths and pulled the trigger. Those who made it back spoke of God's will as if it had somehow been their higher power who had led them out the door and then back through it again. The reality was terrifying. I had nearly died on numerous occasions as a practicing alcoholic, but I was just a teenager. How likely was it that I would stay sober for the rest of my life? The realization hit me with such force that I couldn't speak, except to say, "I'm afraid." A kind woman, Patty, with a few more months than I had, took me home. She made me a cup of tea, covered me with an afghan, holding my hand until I fell asleep.

There were ups and downs in sobriety, but nine months in, my life was wretched. It was about 3am, a cold wet October. I shivered in my '64 Valiant, waiting for a load of Seattle Post Intelligencers I would deliver before dawn. The despair was so thick and raw that my body hurt, my chest ached, and I wondered if it was worth it. To drink again would mean a miserable descent into insanity and death, but to leave this life, with all its suffering, would be a blessed relief. Suicide seemed a viable option.

Suddenly, the car filled with something like perfumed tobacco smoke, and a stout woman, short curls framing a warm wrinkled face, appeared on the torn vinyl seat beside me. She spoke in what might have been a British accent, the raspy voice of a longtime smoker. “For every day that you stay sober,” she said, “A tiny piece of that hole in your heart will be filled. You’re going to make it, and it will get better.” And then she was gone.

Angels, both real and imagined, helped me find my way.

When I was a little over two years sober, I was nervous and running late, scheduled to chair the Fremont meeting. My boyfriend stopped the car in front of the building, but as I jumped out to race up the stairs, the sidewalk vanished. My feet and legs and body evaporated. What I experienced was pure energy, the stretch and shine of universe,  $E=mc^2$  blown up with love and intelligence beyond comprehension – a tiny glimmer of God. It only lasted seconds, maybe less. Then the concrete rematerialized, I regained my feet, knees and palms bleeding, and climbed unsteadily up the stairs, clinging to the handrail and breathing, breathing.

The question about blaming God’s will after drinking or drugging and making it back to the program became something I could answer satisfactorily for myself. The God I had experienced on that sidewalk would never will any of us to drink again. But if that should happen, God would will us to turn back to the light before we squandered the opportunity to live.

At twenty, I married a man I met in the program. He was considerably older than me, an angry and controlling man. One of his co-workers invited us to attend the First Baptist Church where he was a deacon. My husband hoped that the traditional female subjugation and “virtuous woman” rhetoric would rub off on me. We attended for over a year. I was skeptical of the mental gymnastics required to believe literally in things like the immaculate conception or the rapture, or that the devil had planted dinosaur bones to make believers doubt that the earth had been created 6000 years ago.

I accepted the position of church secretary there and, with the pastor’s blessing, organized a week-long seminar on alcoholism. The congregation believed the disease was caused by demonic possession, and I hoped hearing from doctors and experts in the

field would allow them to see those parables in a different light. In Jesus' day, without the benefit of modern science, it was logical to attribute mental illness, alcoholism, and epilepsy to demonic possession, but to cling to these old ideas struck me as a kind of faithlessness, even hypocrisy. If you believed that the bible was dictated by God, an omniscient being that transcends time and space, then why would you fear scientific inquiry? Wouldn't every new discovery serve to enlighten us of the true nature of God? But, instead, they clung to the outdated beliefs that justified their intolerance – of different cultures and religions, of the sick and mentally ill, and of sexual orientation.

This experiment in Evangelicalism ended disastrously when I and two other women came forward to accuse the pastor of sexual harassment. He resigned with the same dramatic flair he preached with on Sunday mornings, and the next day the congregation caravanned to his home to ask him back. Eventually, it came out that the pastor was having an affair with the head deacon's wife, and it was around the same time that the deacon's son, expelled from the church because they could love him, but not his "sin" of homosexuality, died by suicide.

My own marriage ended, after eight violent years, when I fled into the night with my two little girls. He had gone to the garage to get his guns, threatening to kill us all. I took a job cleaning and painting apartments in exchange for low rent on a one bedroom that I shared with the girls. I went back to school, taught piano, and began karate lessons, a study that transformed my life. Through martial arts, I went from a perpetual victim to a fighter. I won medals and trophies, became a national referee, and started my own school. I joined a progressive church and taught self-defense in the hopes that it might spare others the suffering I endured.

One day my minister called me to his office to tell me he was troubled. "I don't believe Christians should engage in acts of violence, even in self-defense," he said. "I marched beside Martin Luther King, Jr. Police dogs tore into my legs and arms, but I never fought back. Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek."

"I don't think Jesus was talking about rape," I said.

He showed me the scars on his wrist. "Our pacifism made a greater impression than fighting back ever could."

“Self-defense isn’t about making an impression,” I said. “It’s about surviving.” He was someone I had a great deal of respect for. His criticism deeply shook me.

Today, like a growing number of people, I find my church in wild places like the Rocky Mountains where my current husband and I have made a home. I find peace through hiking and meditation and star gazing on clear nights. While the church has struggled throughout history with the demons of human weakness, I am skeptical of anyone who lift themselves up as experts in the great mysteries.

While the people and their manmade doctrines may have fallen short, I don’t regret the time I spent in bible study with either the progressive or the evangelical church, though my interpretation was often different than my churchmates’. For example, in John 14:6, “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” And in John 8:12, “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’” While some might interpret these verses as proof of exclusivity, I came away with the opposite message. Whether we call Jesus light, or truth, or life, or the way, my dad had been right all along. There were many names, many paths, but as long as we turn toward the light, we’re heading the right direction.

Joseph Campbell held that the great myths, “bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported man's life, built civilizations, informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage. And if you don't know what the guide signs are along the way you have to work it out yourself.”

Stress and emotional strain, mental or physical illnesses can lead to hallucinations, and recent studies have shown a correlation between epileptic seizures and heightened spiritual experiences. Brain scans have found increased electrical activity in the left prefrontal cortex during seizures, an area linked to religious experiences. Real or imagined, there is no doubt that the seizures, karate, Alcoholics Anonymous, and these other experiences that defy explanation have become a lens through which I view the world and my place in it.

C.S. Lewis believed that we are born with an internal map that allows us to recognize justice and goodness, evidence that we are created in God’s image. Whether

my experiences were “real” or not, they have been integrated into my internal map. And, for better or worse, I am finding my own way.

The little bit of weeding I’ve done through manmade doctrines has led me to parallels in all faiths. I’ve found truth in the poetry of Zen and Sufi Masters and other writings. I recently learned that the Buddhist chant my sister and I used to pray is actually “Nam Myoho Renge Kyo,” from the Lotus Sutra. I look forward to learning more about that. This universal energy is far beyond my comprehension, but the little glimpses I’ve been given along the way have led me to believe that it has something to do with infinite creation and learning and love. I don’t suppose any of us really know for sure, and I can live with that.

# The Dimness of Rainbows

by Anna Oberg

I can hear my neighbor. She is shouting into the phone about insurance while blasting Bob Marley and talking unkindly to her dog—intermittently yelling *shut up!* over the clamor of music and yelping. Is it just the dog she wants to be quiet? Or also her boyfriend, the one who never wears a shirt, even on frigid mornings when he drags the trash to the street? I wonder. The dog has barked incessantly the entire day she was at work. I can see him up against the window, face to the sky, howling madly at the glass, never a break.

I catch glimpses of this mayhem from an Adirondack chair on my front porch. I think *maybe she is going to burn down her backyard*. She seems to be setting something up, arranging things somehow. Maybe she is a witch. I have a mundane epiphany—sitting here like this—it is as if I am at the table with my head propped on my hand observing while she circles her fishbowl. I can see what's she'd doing, but I don't understand.

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It occurs to me as I sit watching: the idea of denouement, and I remember back in the spring, I was writing about arcing, things falling from the sky. A bright yellow bird, dead on the sidewalk after smashing into the shiny glass at work. The arc of a baseball, thudding to earth, dirt billowing in a plume by home plate. Just missed. The falling action after someone has the courage to begin but somewhere in the middle of their passion loses sight of the goal and falls short. The way the sun rises every morning from one ocean and sinks into another by the end of the day. How routine becomes rule. The way a life ends: a deer runs out from the bushes and the car flips. It is an arc cut in half, a road ending at an abrupt corner.

I think about serendipity, wonder if it applies to me, wonder if it will seek me out. I always wonder this in the fall, when the year is on its downswing, and the leaves are falling. This is the downside of the arc. The way the last of the daylight slides away.

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I am thinking of my friend who has just died. A— was one of my people. Is. I still refer to her in present tense most of the time. I can't help it. Maybe this is why I am so

irrationally angry at the woman across the street for yelling at her dog. It is misplaced emotion. It occurs to me that even death occurs in fragments. A— is driving and swerves to avoid a deer running out in front of the car. She dies when the car flips. It's death juxtaposed—right there next to life, as the deer darts away unscathed. As if we are all living in a mosaic, hopping from piece to piece. Only, maybe it's not that colorful. And, some pieces break and break further, sift down, down until they cannot be used again.

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Another denouement: I'm in sixth grade, sitting at a desk in the back of a classroom. I feel a slight movement, a jostling on the back of my head, in my hair, like a rabbit rustling in dry grass. I reach up to find a tiny frog, placed there by the boy who sits in the row behind me. He is one who seems to want to be good but forgets and gives into all manner of temptation. I shriek and fling the frog across the room where it hops away and hides from the commotion. I tremble from the surprise of finding a creature nestled in my hair and myself the sudden center of attention. I flush bright red. The room spins.

I wonder what else in my life is like the frog—there in my hair, in my head, occupying me, my body—but remain unknown to me. What is there, latent, waiting to be found, dredged from the bottom like a shipwreck nestled on the cold floor of a placid lake?

So many things I have paused, left still and forgotten, in the midst of action. I figure there must be a room, somewhere in my psyche, of paused screens, taxidermied moments, waiting for me to come back to where I left off. It's the remembering that holds me captive. Knowing the rising action is prelude to a fall.

Gravity's offering: what goes up must come down. A bird in flight pummels to the earth, its skull bashed in. It has flown into a broad window. It thought it knew just where it was going, what it was doing. But, on the down edge of the arc, lies the dim side of the rainbow. Is this me as well? Is this what middle age is—flying along, straight into a window? That's what it feels like, the afternoon I find out A— has died. I wonder if it is dusk, the blue hour before the sky's soul goes dark that lures the bird into the glass or a deer out into the road, like the one that darted in front of A—'s car. Goddamn it, I will miss her.

A whirlpool, a siren song, a smashing and smattering of golden flight into the blue rest of twilight. My stomach turns at the thought of such an ending, and tears collect in the corner of my eyes.

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My neighbor is tying wood into a bundle—not lighting it—but working with her whole body and the twine. She fastens the odd pieces together in a tight sheaf. It's Labor Day weekend. The first hint of fall laces the breeze. Perhaps she is preparing for something that is coming, something I don't yet know about.

*God, she bugs me.* It's a stray thought, unfocused. It enters as I sip a vodka and soda, waiting on my family to get home. My neighbor is packing the car for camping or something. Some plans for the long weekend. Suddenly I'm glad we are staying home.

Anything fragile can break. I think about the tie that binds the wood she digs out of the brambles in her backyard. What would the consequences be? If the cord broke and the logs rolled down the driveway?

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*I like warm colors better,* I think as I stare at the autumn sky swept clean of clouds, of anything that might break the blue overhead. It's that autumn blue you can fall into. I want a certain warmth—the gold of aspen leaves, turned—to highlight this blue. I want the friction of opposing forces, the contrast of collisions that don't make sense. I crave the transition: the tension almost sensual between the aspens turned gold and sky so blue it wants to claim me, usher me away, deep into the thick, imagined purity of the atmosphere. I think of complementary colors, warm and cool, how they wash each other away.

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*What the fuck is wrong with her dog?* It goes on and on, braying like a hyena. I overhear my neighbor tell him in her singing voice that he will draw a predator from the wild, one that will eat his face, if he continues to make that noise. In the next breath, I see her inside, adjusting the plants on the windowsill.

She yells at the dog again. *Dude, stop!* As if this is effective. Going over there, to tell her she's an idiot—this is on my list of things I haven't done, but periodically wish to. Perhaps it is a pro/con list I am composing in my head. But I don't want to make enemies.



There's a vague sense that every story I write, even these notes from the patio, should have an arc. That I should force them into a formula, make them legitimate, somehow. That each anecdote should be going somewhere, toward a point I can identify where the action starts falling. And, yet, I know this is just some kind of rumor my mind has made up. Life happens in fragments that sometimes end abruptly before an arc can even be imagined. There's no making sense of what I see because I only see one side.

She's packing up the trunk of her car, still yelling at her dog. It's like binge-watching a boring show unfold episode by episode, thinking all the while, *I should really turn this off*. There's no rising action. Just her front yard facing my front yard, and the cavern between actor and audience.

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A—'s is a goodbye I don't want. I'll never want it. I try to file it away, make it disappear. I can't categorize it—it makes no sense. I refuse to add this farewell to the inventory of my life. Because I love her. I never want her to leave. Hers was a denouement I could have done without—no loose ends were tied up. I'm just left sitting here with all the stuff I want to say to her, and no one to tell it to.

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My neighbor, though—she loads her dog up and heads out in her daughter's car. I add this to my list of gratitude. There is quiet. It is the final denouement of this scene. It becomes the way things look in memory, faded and tranquil as her house goes dark, her driveway empties, the space between her house and mine is serene.

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One of the things A—'s death shows me: I've never been honest enough about anything. Especially myself. This loss hurts. And I sit there on the porch until the shadows soften, the vodka works its magic, and I can admit the pain of it. I walk back into the house through the screen door. Let it slam behind me. The rooms are darkened, but the windows glow a wild, blue light. It is dusk. And, it is finally quiet.

# Black Box Sleepover

by Michael J. O'Connor

"You know what? You're insane. You should be on stage doing that," Bobby said, taking a gulp of vodka from the plastic jug.

He handed it to me and I did the same, looking up at the few stars I could see through the sickly San Francisco fog above me as I tilted my head back and poured the vodka down my throat.

"I agree," I said, "I'm hilarious."

We were up on Bobby's roof, doing scorching lines of horrible yellow cocaine and drinking the jug of astringent liquor. For the last hour, I had been telling him the story of how that morning I had been kicked out of my girlfriend's house for pulling her full-length mirror off the wall to do the very same cocaine on, thinking she would be out all day with her mother. All three of us were surprised, though, when they walked in the front door, after a shorter lunch than anticipated, to find me crouching on the living room floor cutting up the yellow rock and cursing a drug dealer who would not be getting my business again. Unless, of course, I couldn't find another one. She told me to get out and she and her mother watched as I meticulously scraped up the yellow dust and tried to get it back in the little bag. They may have been bad drugs, but I wasn't going to waste them.

"No, really," Bobby said. "My friend Daniel has a theater company. You should audition. Just tell that story."

"You think so?" I asked, coughing and sputtering as some of the caustic vodka went down the wrong tube.

"Yeah," Bobby said, "he's always looking for people, I'll call him right now, he'll come over."

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An hour later, Daniel's head popped up over the edge of the roof as he climbed the sketchy metal ladder that snaked up the side of the building.

"This is scary as hell, boys," he said, visibly shaking from the climb.

"That's why we stay up here," I said, "coming down is even worse."

Bobby introduced us and I offered Daniel a swig from the bottle or a bump of the toxic-looking powder laid out on the card table we had set up on the roof. He looked at both cautiously before smiling and shaking his head.

“Well,” he said, “Bobby says you might be a good fit for the theater. Why don’t you show me what he means?”

I nodded and took a deep breath, certain from my first impression of this well-put-together, somewhat professional-looking man that he was going to watch me tell the story and immediately leave. If he didn’t, the only reason would be that he was too scared to climb back down the ladder.

I began the improvised routine and acted it out as big as I could, playing the part of my girlfriend, her mother, and myself. I used the actual cocaine as a prop and even did a big, burning line of it to emphasize when the story was over. To my surprise, instead of being disgusted like most people would, Daniel laughed throughout the whole thing, which only pushed me to go bigger and bigger. When I finished, he slapped the top of his thighs and stood up from the rickety folding chair he had been sitting in, extending his arm to shake my hand.

“We’re having a short play festival in a month. Why don’t you come by for the first rehearsal meeting tomorrow? Get my number from Bobby, I’ll send you directions.”

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I had been living with my girlfriend for about three months before the mirror incident. I had been a mess for much longer. She had only done what was certainly inevitable and did it nicely enough that I couldn’t fault her for it. There’s no way to recover from your mother seeing your boyfriend chopping up lines on a mirror that takes up half the living room and I didn’t expect her to try. As soon as I heard the door knob turn, I knew it was over, that the jig was up, and I wasn’t going to be able to fool her into thinking I would get better. I had been getting kicked out of places by people I loved for many years and I was sure it would happen again. While I thought I was getting used to it, the truth was that it was starting to wear on me.

On top of that, I now had nowhere to go. Bobby would let me stay with him for a bit, but sooner or later he would have to give me the same speech as everyone else about

how it just wasn't working out and that maybe I should find somewhere else to go. I was considering the fact that I could probably sneak up on his roof while he was at work and no one would ever know. I was even excited by the idea of getting a sleeping bag and sleeping under the yellow haze that soaked up all the light from the city and gathered above the buildings. I had just gotten my food stamps renewed for another year and could see myself living up on the roof at least until those ran out. And that depressed the hell out of me.

I had played in bands for years and was used to being in front of an audience but I had never acted before. The idea of being on a stage without a guitar or drum set in front of me and talking instead of singing felt about as comforting as getting on the bus naked or sitting on a toilet in the middle of a busy intersection. When Daniel had smiled and told me to come to the theater, though, something inside me glowed warm and bright. Having somewhere to go where I was actually wanted was a new feeling and I felt like the road was open in front of me. Like there was a small crack in the concrete wall I had been pushing against for years. When the cheap yellow cocaine finally wore off and the vodka took over a couple of hours after Daniel left, I passed out on Bobby's couch and slept deeply, knowing something was coming, even if it terrified me. It was at least better than another year of waiting around for something else to happen that might be even worse than getting up on that stage.

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The theater was in a neighborhood more known for its freely available Oxycontin than as a cultural hub. I rang the bell on an iron gate and took an old-fashioned elevator up to what looked like a floor of offices with a sign on one door that said "CHATTERING TEETH THEATER." I walked in and was transported to another place altogether, like walking through a portal. The theater was a small room with about 50 seats and was painted all black. A blank void where nothing could escape. A few people were sitting in the front row and a man in his mid-20s like me was standing on the stage and thumbing through a large binder. Daniel turned around and waved me over when he saw me. He yelled out an introduction to everyone and they all gave half-hearted, distracted waves or

nods of acknowledgement. The man on the stage was named Rick and I found out he was the theater director and owner.

“Daniel tells me you’re pretty funny,” he said, shaking my hand.

“I hope so.”

He looked me up and down, taking in my ripped jeans and faded black t-shirt, lightly sniffing the air.

“Well, me too,” he said.

I sat with Daniel as Rick went over the short plays that were going to be produced for the festival and started handing out parts.

“You’re going to be in ‘Lunch Break’ playing the part of Steve,” he said, handing me a small stack of papers. “Don’t lose that script. You only get one. I can not be making copies of scripts over and over again, I’m serious. Daniel’s going to be directing.”

Daniel gave me a small nod and a thumbs up and I settled in while Rick went over the schedule for rehearsals and show times. Looking around the theater at the rest of the actors, I couldn’t help but notice how serious they all were. They looked like they had it figured out. These were people who knew what they wanted to do when they were children and had found their way here on purpose, unlike me who had stumbled here from a rooftop.

The next few weeks were a constant swirl of rehearsals and meetings about the festival. I got to know the other actors in “Lunch Break” and became impressed and intimidated by their passion and commitment to what we were doing. When I came to a rehearsal hungover or still slightly drunk, I knew they could tell and they were appalled by it. I tried to make up for it by going bigger in my performances and improvising comedic choices like jumping into another actor’s arms in a scene where I was supposed to be startled, surprising him, and almost throwing out his back. This seemed to work and I got compliments on my “fearlessness,” when in fact it was the exact opposite. I was crushingly afraid and the only way I could think to survive was to go all the way and take it further.

On the opening night of the festival, I was already steadied by yet another plastic jug of vodka when I showed up to the theater. People were packed into the showroom, with some having to stand in the aisles when the seats were all taken up. Looking from behind the curtain at this fire hazard, I was clobbered by the amount of energy that was

generated by such a relatively small number of people concentrated in a tiny space. It was like the room had been wound up and was just waiting to go off.

There were a few pieces before “Lunch Break” and I could feel the power of the laughter and the response of the audience from backstage. Looking around the green room area, the rest of the cast was calm and put together, lounging on torn couches in the large, mirrored room. I pushed down the fear and stomach acid that was starting to bubble up into my throat and shut my eyes tightly as I tried to get my breath to a pace that was normal and didn’t cause my hands to tingle and go numb.

The stage manager came into the rehearsal room, looking at his clipboard.

“Five minutes for ‘Lunch Break,’ that’s five minutes for ‘Lunch Break.’”

“Thank you, five,” said everyone in unison except me, who had no idea this was what I was supposed to say.

I can’t accurately portray my performance since it is a big, blank space in my memory. However, I remember going bigger and bigger and the laughter in the audience getting louder and more physical. I remember at one point, my character was positioned downstage near the front row and I made a big gesture and screamed a line with a lot of *b*’s and *p*’s, which caused my spit to fly out into the front row. I distinctly remember a woman wiping my saliva from her eyes. Aside from these two small moments, I only remember the power. I could feel the audience’s roars and howls like it was feeding time at the zoo. When it was over, the rest of the cast was beaming and slapping me on the back and calling me crazy and I was wild with adrenaline and what was left of the cheap vodka in my veins. After the show, the whole company went out to a bar and I received many drinks and a few bumps of much better cocaine than what I was used to from some cast and audience members as I was congratulated on my performance. Rick slapped me on the back.

“You’re nuts, you know,” he said, handing me a shot of bourbon.

“I spit right in those people’s faces in the front row,” I said, downing the shot and letting the shiver run up my spine.

“That’s good,” he said. “They were in the splash zone, that’s to be expected. They come to see performers like you, you’re just giving them what they want. The next round of the festival is in a couple of weeks, I’ll find you a bigger part, just keep doing what you’re doing.”

I took another shot of bourbon at the bar and looked around as the future opened up.

Weeks went on and I was put in more plays and sketches. Each time I was cast in something, I felt the need to come up with a bigger and wilder character to top the last time. The laughs got louder and more powerful. I became addicted to the waves of primal, animalistic noises. When the shows were over, I drank more, trying to come down from the high. I would crawl up to Bobby's roof and slip into an old sleeping bag I bought at a thrift store, staring at the stars and listening to the ringing in my ears that seemed to bounce off the taller buildings surrounding the rooftop, feeling my heart beating and pounding against the inside of my chest.

One night, I mentioned not being able to sleep after the shows to Bobby and he put his finger up, signaling me to wait, and climbed down the ladder to his apartment. After a few minutes, he returned with a baggie full of pills.

"Take some of these. They're Oxycontin, they'll put you right out."

I took one of them to sleep, which worked, and then another the next morning. Then another an hour later. There was no show that night and I needed a day to try and wash the adrenaline out of my veins. The pills lightly brushed my limbs and massaged them from the inside. Bobby and I sat on the roof taking our usual cocktail of vodka and cheap cocaine with the added cushion of the Oxy giving a nice push and pull effect. By the time the afternoon rolled around, I was fully immersed in the thick soup of the combination. Then, my phone rang. It was Daniel.

"Hey, where are you? The audience is about to get let in and you missed the meeting."

"Wh- what," I could feel the stammering and stuttering slide out of my mouth.

"We're doing a matinee instead of an evening show today, did you forget? You still have time, just leave right now."

"Oh-kay," I said, hanging up and feeling my heartbeat try to physically match the panic I was feeling, despite being bogged down by the drugs.

"Gotta go, you gotta go come with," I tried as best I could to communicate my intentions to Bobby through the sticky web of drugs and he seemed to understand as he got up to help me down the terrifying ladder in my speedy, opioid-addled state.

On the train on the way to the theater, I tried talking to Bobby and all that came out was a jumble of words and ideas. In my head, I was eloquent and erudite.

“I say, old chap, it seems that the current state of affairs is that I am in a bit of a pickle for I have to be onstage in a few moments and I can’t seem to feel my extremities.”

What Bobby heard, though, was a series of grunts and groans that he tried to decipher using my pained facial expressions. When we got off the train at the station in front of the theater, Bobby helped me up the stairs and I felt cold horror run throughout my body, replacing the warmth and joy of the glorious combination of uppers and downers.

Taking steps into the lobby of the theater, I had to take massive strides to try and get the balance I needed to stay upright. Bobby helped, but as we turned the corner from the elevator and saw Daniel and Rick standing with the rest of the cast, I tried to walk on my own, holding my spine perfectly straight and walking with a sort of waddle. Everyone turned to look as I made my way to them slowly but they seemed to be at the end of a long tunnel that only got longer the further I got. When I finally reached them, Bobby patted me on the shoulder and slowly stepped back, making sure I wasn’t going to topple over as he went to take his seat in the audience. I nodded at everyone as Rick slowly took his eyes from me so he could button his coat and get ready to introduce the show. I just tried to stand still and not say anything until it was absolutely necessary.

As the show started and the minutes slipped away, counting down to when I would have to step out onto the stage, I tried to breathe through the fog. I knew the lines but my mouth didn’t seem to be cooperating with my brain. It was like they belonged to two separate people who were trying to communicate through a series of tin cans and strings. The rest of the cast for the one-act play I was going to be doing eyed me, worried, not saying anything to me for fear I would talk and their suspicions would be confirmed. When the piece before ours finished and Rick went up to introduce us, my heart started banging on the wall of my chest, trying to get out so it wouldn’t have to be a part of this.

I have flashes of memory of performing. Faces. Expressions. Dark eyes in the audience as I tried my best to get the words out. It was like the dream where you want to run but your limbs feel like they’re stuck in molasses, except it was my mouth. I tried not to look at the rest of the cast on stage as I slowly and methodically said the lines. At one point I locked eyes with Bobby in the audience and he quickly turned his head, unable to



look at me as I plodded through the ten-minute scene. Eventually, it became less of an emotional experience and more of a physical one. A feat of strength that I just had to endure so I could be done with it. A marathon of shame.

When it was over, the audience clapped politely and I stumbled to the little opening in the curtain that led backstage. My shoulder bumped the backdrop as I tried to exit and it wobbled precariously for a moment while the whole audience held their breath. They waited for it to fall and I stopped, frozen, watching while it swayed back and forth, eventually settling down into its upright position. There were a few disparate claps from the seats for the disaster that had been avoided and they sounded much more sincere than the applause my performance had gotten.

Backstage, everyone avoided me and scurried out into the hallway. Little gatherings of actors and stagehands who were crowded together parted as I walked by, putting space between myself and them like I was sick and contagious. The shocked silence from the audience that went along with my babbling, almost incoherent performance hung on me and followed me around as I tried to decide what to do. I found a couch in a rehearsal room in the back and laid down on it, trying to rest my shaky, almost-numb legs. The room was quiet and the lights were off as I listened to Rick's muffled voice on the stage, working hard to get the audience back after the spectacle I had put on. Slowly, I heard laughs start to trickle through, quiet at first, but eventually, they got up to their normal volume, and the show continued on with the next piece. Other actors were talking out in the hall but I couldn't comprehend or absorb what they were saying. I didn't have to understand to know that it was about what they were going to do with me. I felt the warm hand of sleep start to run over my face and down into my eyes. All the juice I had been running on for so many sleepless nights on Bobby's roof and the final shock and desperation of the last 10 minutes had poured out of me when I left that dark and silent stage, and I let my empty shell fade and eventually collapse into unconsciousness. I couldn't have been more thankful for it.

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A mixture of the lights being turned on in the rehearsal room and a surprised voice shrieking, "What the fuck?" woke me up. Through the fog of my crusted-over eyes and my

oxycontin-and-vodka hangover, I saw Rick and an entire improv class standing in the doorway, staring at me with raised eyebrows. I shot up off the couch and, realizing quickly that it was the next morning and that I had slept there all night, started to apologize and try to dart out of the room. Rick grabbed my shoulder as I scooted past.

“Hey man,” he said, “we gotta talk.”

“No, no it’s alright,” I said. “I should have known this would happen.”

He nodded, understanding that I would not be expecting to be cast in the next round of shows, and I ran staggering down the hall and into the elevator, trying to put as much distance between myself and the theater as possible.

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I spent a couple of days in my sleeping bag on Bobby’s roof, staring up into the sky, getting baked by the sun during the day and soaked through with mist at night. Whenever it got quiet in the late hours and all the honking and yelling down below ceased for a moment, I would be brought back to the silence of the theater. The night sky, blacked out with fog and the lights of the city, was as empty and vacuous as the stage and then a car would backfire or a bus would pass by on the street below the roof and I would snap out of it, cringing to myself and sucking air through my teeth as I tried to pull the memory from the front of my mind and back into the deep, subconscious area where it was sure to remain for many years. It was something that was going to pop up every now and then for the rest of my life like herpes or a sore tooth that never gets fixed. That much I was sure of. On the roof, though, I just wanted a second to be rid of it and to let it seep into the background while I lay there, waiting for the next day to come.

I eventually staggered down the dangerous ladder and knocked on Bobby's back door. He opened it and his eyes widened when he saw me. It was the first time we had been face-to-face since the horrific bombing at the theater and I could tell that the stench of it had not been completely washed away by the elements up on the roof.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he started to say as he motioned for me to come inside.

I stopped him halfway through the sentence.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “I was there. Sort of.”

I sat down at the kitchen table and he started rummaging through the cupboards.

“I talked to Daniel,” he said. “He told me what happened the next morning and wanted me to let you know that you guys are cool and not to worry about anything being weird.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“And he also wanted me to tell you that you should keep acting and that you’re really good.”

He sat down next to me at the table with two glasses and a plastic jug of vodka. The sight of it made my stomach gurgle and sputter, so I grabbed the glass he had put in front of me and went to the sink, filling it with water. I gulped it down, then filled it again as I felt the liquid soak into my muscles and nerves. It filled the creaking gaps between my joints and spread through my skin, rinsing away all the dust and debris that had settled there in the last few days, or months, or years.

“I should,” I said, draining and filling the glass a third time and turning to Bobby. “I could be.”

# Saturn Dreams To You

by Jyn Medina

Rather than continue the drive to my best friend in Clear Valley Medical Center, I pulled over about two miles away and met with a man I didn't know. This occurred precisely thirty-eight minutes ago. On a shoulder meadow of Route 63 in the dead of night as my friend sat in her hospital gown waiting for me.

The man's name, I came to learn, was Major Myoga. One might assume someone that addressed themselves as "Major" on their first meeting might be dressed in military uniform, but this wasn't the case. His clothes were ordinary. The kind that drew so little attention one would never give him a second look. His stature, however, sufficiently frightened me. He was like a flesh-covered tower that never stopped ascending—the kind of tall that made you crank your neck in awe and vague anticipation of it all crumbling down on you. If he wanted to harm me, I would be wholly defenseless to disagree.

This encounter with a dangerous man, I thought, must have been justice. It was precisely the variety of justice in that moment that I believed deserved to punish me for being too spineless to finish the drive to the hospital. That was why when he approached, I didn't move a single muscle.

I call him a person, but I learned he viewed himself much differently. To be more accurate, he saw himself as much *less* than a regular man. Rather than harm me, he introduced himself in a way I had genuine difficulty understanding.

*I'm an idea*, he'd said to me. *A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.*

He referred to himself as someone without substance. He had a physical body I could touch and feel, but to put it simply, he declared his manner of being *alive* was different than mine in few, but crucial areas. When I asked what those were, he said I was in no position to concern myself with other people's problems. Especially ones with less than clear answers. I hadn't noticed until then, but I'd been tearing up for quite some time. They were silent and slow, hardly making an impression. Much less worthy of being acknowledged. I wondered if I reacted like this because I wouldn't be punished

for standing my friend up, or if she—from Clear Valley Medical—had somehow transplanted her disappointment of my absence right into my eye sockets.

I was stunned. At a total loss. I didn't have the slightest clue what in the world was going on. Everything seemed to turn on its head. I felt as though it were all some bad dream, and if I blinked, I'd be back home again. But that's not what happened. In the next second, everything remained as it was. Unexplained and unsatisfying.

Major Myoga really had appeared somewhere down the way and come to talk to me, and what I produced were real tears that little to do with whatever he said. We proceeded to have a short conversation about nothing all that important, then eventually he expressed his goodbye's and hopped over the junction that bordered the meadow, promptly vanishing onto the highway. I saw no vehicle of any kind and heard no motor start. By foot, walking across would be next to impossible. It was as though he were simply swallowed by the darkness. What flashed into my head was the lingering light of a firefly puttering out. The sort of light that imprinted its mark in one's brain long after it was already gone.

There was a new moon on the verge of poking through tonight. I observed that and tried to piece myself back together like sand at a waterfront rebalancing its surface after countless people had dented its body. There was now only me and the darkness with a sliver of something special.

*I'm an idea, he'd said to me. A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.*

I thought about the meaning of this the rest of the night. Well after I drove back home and tucked myself into bed, there it lay, swelling in my mind. If it was possible to be an idea rather than a person, I wondered if that what was I needed to become in order to discover what forced those quiet, nearly indiscernible tears out. I had the feeling they had a much deeper meaning than anything regarding my weakness or fear for the Major or my dear friend, but of something so delicate it would crumble if I said it aloud.

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The next morning, I attempted to explain last night with the Major as clearly as possible to my other good pal Avery. I sat beside her on her living room's loveseat, picking and choosing the proper details to include and what must be left out or any coherence would turn to garbage. This December, unlike the twenty-three Decembers that came before—and the first December where she owned her own apartment—it had yet to snow. I was unsure why, but I found that nearly as odd as the Major himself.

Of course, Avery offered little sign she thought there was any connection between our metaphorical man at nine forty p.m. Route 63 and today's weather. As if illuminating her annoyance, a stale, powdery sunlight found its way through the short opening of her thrift shop curtain and onto her uneasy hands. Like a neglected alarm set to ring-ring-ring she tapped her fingers on the loveseat's sidearm, then looked back to me—eyes narrowed.

“Eliza,” she began. “I’m tired, okay.”

“I get that.”

“Do you? You get that? What the hell kind of name is Major Myoga, anyway? A myoga is a Japanese ginger. Are you meaning to tell me you listened to man who called himself Major Ginger? What’s he the major of? All the ginger plants in the western hemisphere?”

“I get it sounds kinda dumb.”

Avery took a big breath and attempted to say something else but quickly realized it wasn't worth the effort. Along with our friend in the hospital, we've all known each other since we were twelve—over a decade now—and Avery knew I was the type to carefully consider anything that piqued my interest. I'd already poked and prodded last night from every angle.

“Okay. Okay. Eliza, let's just... so did he say what he's the major of?”

I shrugged.

“Words, please. What *did* he say?”

I took another sip of my water, collecting my thoughts. Unlike our best friend in Clear Valley Medical, Avery normally accepted whatever I said so long as I worded it nicely enough, so it was simply a matter of that. I grinned, took in the aroma of her supermarket candles burning only a short distance off, and worked it out.

“Like I said twice,” I began. “He was an *idea*. Wherever he felt like being, he could go. But that night he felt like being there on the highway. Not exactly on a whim, but I guess he had his reasons.”

“‘He had his reasons.’ Meaning, you’ve got no clue what those reasons were?”

Again, I shrugged.

“And he’s a metaphor?” she said slowly, weighing the words in her mouth as though to test their taste and consistency.

“That’s what he said.”

“What’s he supposed to represent?” she asked, practically hounding me at this point.

“I dunno. I just know that’s what he said. Then he left.”

“I’m not even going to ask if you know where he went.”

“Great. Cause he vanished into thin air.”

“Vanished as in... *vanished*? You being literal? I can try to get by with what you’ve said so far, but things don’t just disappear. Whatever you want to say he was—off-duty military personnel, ginger ministers, or especially *eggplant commandants* aren’t cotton candy melting in some dude’s mouth. People don’t disappear like that.”

“This guy did.”

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Avery and I left to inspect the shoulder meadow on Route 63. It was only evening, with little guarantee the Major would show. It wasn’t that we expected to find him, but Avery had the idea she might have a better idea of what happened with a second set of eyes. As though it were a crime scene and she believed visiting it could point her to the perpetrator’s true intentions.

Once we arrived, we wound our scarves tightly around our necks and plopped onto the stiff grass. It was hard to believe it was the same place as where I sat last night. It looked the same, but more in the way of witnessing a perfect replica of an object. The kind where no matter how hard someone might convince you the replica and the real thing were the same, you could never accept it. To me, by a gut assurance, this meadow and the one I sat in last night may as well have existed in different worlds.

What I knew about it was little aside from certain facts. In winter, only grass lived here, but in other seasons one would see azaleas, chrysanthemums, nightshades, dahlias, and bundles and bundles of apple blossoms. In short, it was the spot to go for a date when you didn't have enough money for the museum, art cinema, or heck... *botanical garden*, but still wanted to seem down-to-earth.

Eight years ago, before my best friend began her many stints of consecutive hospital visits, she had once described this meadow as the perfect date spot from a car window. Whether or not she still believed that was another question, but on that particular day as an innocent sixteen-year-old, she believed it was the most romantic sight she'd ever laid eyes on.

"This place?" Avery asked.

"This place. I was minding my own business, then in came—."

"The Major. Yeah, you said that. He walked in right in the middle of the night with no car or transportation. Like one of those cross-country joggers that lug around gallons of Gatorade and piss in bushes for the whole animal kingdom and south side of Detroit to admire. That's all great and fine, but let's just back up a sec, okay?"

I looked at Avery, confused.

"Back up?" I asked.

"What were you even doing here? It was the middle of the night."

"That's..."

I tried to speak, but the words fell back into my throat, as though a vacuum were sucking each one down my windpipe until they sank to my lungs—suffocating me. I suddenly found it harder to breathe, so I closed my eyes and counted to four, then opened them to find Avery cranking her neck down to the road. I had no idea talking about this would be so difficult, especially with Avery.

"I know you might not want to hear this," she began, lowering her voice. She ran her fingers along the grass, occasionally glancing at me. "But, well, how should I say this?"

"By saying it," I said. "You know where this highway leads to."

"Grand ma-ma—and you know how she was—she once told me death wasn't so much a departure, but a total projection of life."

"Your grand ma-ma said a lot of things. For example—"



“Ah shush! Shush. Shut it please! Fair enough. But hear me out?” Avery said, flailing her arms about to distract me. “All the things that were clustered together, tucked away so tight deep inside, they come out. And when you’re grieving, you see them. The untangled, raw form of someone else’s consciousness. Someone you love.”

Her delivery was so flawless I had to wonder if she’d rehearsed that. But I knew what she was driving at. Anyone would. Avery straightened her back and looked at me.

“Is the world really that considerate?” I asked, plainly.

“Who knows. She only said it didn’t work in such a neat way. All that mattered was that one found their way to that place. To where time no longer mattered. And there, everything comes together.”

*And there, everything comes together. Where time no longer mattered.* I thought that over. Again, and again. Until now, I didn’t think time did anything very dramatic for me. I’d carried on like normal, really, nothing had changed. “Your grand ma-ma sounds smart,” I said.

“Half the time.”

*I’m an idea,* the Major had said to me. *A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.* Different than me in a few, but crucial areas. Most likely, those areas were closer to death than I’d cared to accept. Or, much less, that our friend at Clear Valley could acknowledge within herself.

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I was fully aware Avery made up that story about her grand ma-ma to make me feel better. That’s how she was. No matter the concern, if it looked like it mattered enough to me, she’d find some way to justify what I was saying. Even vanishing military personnel such as Major Myoga.

Back in bed, in my own home, I decided to gather up some flowers from my vase to make a bouquet. Our friend at Clear Valley—Maple—was fond of the presents I gave her. I’d made the drive to her hospital room many times before, but last night I simply couldn’t. The closer I drew to that big building, the harder it became to breathe. The three of us—Avery, Maple and I, had been inseparable for so long, ever since we developed our first bouts of horrific acne—almost in unison.

Back then it was so different. Avery was my first good friend, then less than a year later Maple stumbled into our lives. Of course, her name wasn’t actually Maple, but we

dubbed her that following an incident where she once dumped a boy under a maple tree and wouldn't stop sobbing over the *not-so-nice* words he hurled at her. Following a long night of ice cream tubs and illegally pirated movies, not to mention a brilliant joke about the maple tree to bring up her spirits the name had little choice but to stick.

Knowing her answer, I thought I'd better dial Avery anyway. Maybe she'd have a change of heart. People changed every day. The mind was not some stagnant production. I dialed Avery and waited.

"Eliza?" she asked.

"Wanna see Maple? I'd been keeping some flowers."

"And that appointment with the realtor in the morning?" she said, acting like my mother. "Get some sleep."

"But wouldn't Maple like them?"

"Like them? Since when was Maple a flower girl? That's not the point. Seriously, how long are you planning on living at your parent's house? It'd be different if you didn't have an income, but you do. It's been four times now. Four no-shows. Listen, I love you and I know how you feel but—"

"I can do both."

"All I'm saying is this. First, don't blow my head off please," Avery said. "You're turning twenty-four in three weeks. Maybe it's time you started your life."

"Started my life? I don't get it."

"You know what I mean," she said, no doubt preparing her next rebuttal.

Avery was loud and clear.

*Maybe it's time you moved on.*

I envisioned Maple grinning on that plain-sheeted bed, taking my flowers while pretending to like them. It was never about the content of the gifts. She'd be holding tight over her pancreas, pretending she was only an actress playing the sick girl for her breakout role. Sometimes I wondered whether most of what went on between us was only us pretending.

"I know Maple doesn't like flowers," I said.

"That's not the point."

"That point being you're not coming?"

"Not this time. Sorry sweetie."

Last night, I intended on going alone as well. And just like then, I discovered an unbearable pain inside like a wire grinding against the contours of my heart. Suddenly, I felt so much lighter. Like my body, from the darkest crevice of my gut, was turning liquid-smooth.

I hung up. I took the vase with the flowers and left. Outside, the dark winter air held only a sliver of a moon, not very many stars. Whenever the wind stirred up my belted trench coat, I held the flaps close. It seemed that like Avery, the moody Tuesday was also against me. I steadied my thoughts, focusing only on the smell of the dirt stirring about. I hopped on my scooter, strapped on my helmet, and took off.

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I arrived at the hospital in under twenty minutes. Inside, I was informed visiting hours would be ending but I had about a half-hour to talk with Maple before I'd be kicked out. Long time repeat visitor or not, there was a limit to the special privileges I could be given. I thanked the tired receptionist Catharine who had kindly dealt with me many times in the past, then made my way to Maple's room on the fourth floor.

The white walls of the room always reminded me of the heaven I'd seen in so many movies, or at the very least, the moments right before passing on. This never struck me as threatening before, but tonight that warmth seemed to fade to something far darker. It made me question why hospitals decided to paint their rooms white. *We know exactly what we're doing, they must say. Or would you rather we imply to our patients that they're going to hell? To nothingness? Everyone needs a flag to fight for and people happen to like this one. That's business.*

I waved to old lady Concetta—who'd been Maple's surrogate best friend the past couple weeks succeeding miss Fukuyama, Mr. Mann, Mr. Hablowi, countless others over the years I couldn't recall. I slipped through the curtain to Maple's portion of the room by the window. Just beyond was a vastly different world than the one in this hospital.

Thinking about that felt bizarre in a way it didn't before meeting the Major. However the world fixed the gears on its axis had been damaged. Now, it was open season. Like my hand would stop being my own if I were to stick it out the window. It

would belong to something so alien and independent of me that I would lose confidence in my standing *here and now*.

Maple was lying up, reading a thick book on selected battles from World War II. In her teetering hands, it looked like she was supporting some strange kettlebell that could be opened and closed.

“Some light reading,” I said, peering over her book.

To no objection from her, I took my seat to her side. She lay the book flat on her chest and cranked her neck to get a decent look at me. Her long black hair fanned out beneath her lower back and elbows almost as though it were its own wrinkled up bedsheet.

“Ain’t it boring around here?” she said, with her plain, somewhat nasally voice as usual.

Maple was beautiful. She had this light far warmer than most people should need to have. The sort that must’ve been painful to recharge every morning. It had nothing to do with the way she spoke—she was as stiff as could be. No. It was in the glimmer of her eyes. Like in there was a water from some special, deeply hidden spring. She’d been like this even before she was sick. One look at her and you’d never know she’d spent the better part of the last eight years in rooms exactly like this.

“I brought flowers.”

“No kidding,” she said. “Anyone can see that.”

“They’re for you, here,” I said, as if though I believed they were about her and not me.

For the next fifteen minutes or so, we talked about various advancements in my and Avery’s lives since the last time I reported in. When I mentioned the new meeting with the realtor, Maple looked at me with fresh, accepting eyes like I hadn’t said the same thing four times before. Upon hearing Avery had recently been proposed to by her boyfriend of a few years, all Maple did was smile and nod. All these events existed in some forward continuum that no longer had anything to do with her. I knew that but kept shoving it in Maple’s face anyway.

I didn’t mention Major Myoga. Part of me felt like it was better not to. *Eliza*, I’d said to myself. *She has enough real, physical problems. Don’t rope her into things that barely make any sense.*

At about the twenty-minute mark, things started to turn sour.

“It’s not that I don’t like to see you,” Maple said.

“Hm?”

“But I’m in the middle of this book. It’s long. It’s dense. It’ll take me a while, so swear on your decent health you won’t bother Catherine about visitor’s passes at least until next week. Seriously, a full week. Or you’ll get a curse and end up here with me. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

I nodded, at a loss for what to say. Several ideas came to mind. *What if that is what I wanted?* I was caught between the gulf of my world and Maple’s world—trying so hard to convince myself crossing over was as simple as showing up with a vase of flowers. Maple’s world was one built in the form of her own shadow. One that looked normal but was composed solely of a personal darkness that couldn’t be weighed or measured. As though her humanity had dissolved to the point where she could be possessed by this microscopic entity in her pancreas that to anyone else didn’t have a face and arms, a voice whispering profanities in her ear. The *real* Maple, the one I couldn’t see, existed as a phantom that lacked the specifically human reality of someone outside this sterile gate to heaven dubbed Clear Valley Room 405.

My world, Maple would say, was one where I believed death had nothing to do with writing your own meaning. It was written all over her face that all but seemed to suggest *you could never understand me*.

Over the years, Maple and I had exchanged a lot of looks like that. About every essential matter imaginable.

In the end, I removed my *VISITOR Eliza Gómez* lanyard pass and drove off from the hospital. There wasn’t much traffic on the road, and without thinking much, I wound up on *that* side of the freeway. Before long, the meadow crept into view. I parked on the shoulder and suddenly found it hard to breathe again.

The grassy scent was so thick it seemed to wad up in my throat. The further I ventured inside, the larger that mass grew. It was cold. So very cold. Seated toward the high overlooking point was Major Myoga, dressed this time in a Ted Baker peacoat and turtleneck, slacks, and oxfords. Like me, he also lacked a scarf. Between this time and last time, he had grown a considerable stubble. Wherever he’s been, I doubted it was a warm home.

“*Major*,” I tried to call out, but out arrived little more than a whisper.

He met me with a nostalgic smile that must have hid a crevice of pain. Like he was viewing his first love pronounce her wedding vows to another man far later. He went through the natural motions to invite me by his side. Upon sitting, my throat started to clear up. This let me know he smelled like sweet potatoes. I found this funny enough to laugh under my breath.

*A disappearing military man that smells like sweet potatoes.* What were the odds? With how the night was going, I needed that little laugh.

“Tonight, is much too beautiful. Don’t you think?” he said. White breaths accompanied each of his words like baby clouds, then got sucked up in the dark. “Night after night, I can’t seem to get away. It’s like love.”

“Love?”

“A perfect prison. Built with enough care, one can never escape.”

“Then this a lovely prison,” I said, unsure if I believed that.

We sat silently, looking up, watching the final clouds disappear. Now, there was an entire kingdom of darkness. That sliver of a moon held the only spot of difference. It must have been a portal to a far different, much more dazzling world without love.

“Major Myoga,” I said. “Do metaphors like to hang around meadows?”

He nodded.

“We do many things. Everyone has their role. As the garbage man is a pillar to sanitary security, or a doctor either saves or removes a life. Everyone has their role. Naturally speaking, I have mine.”

“Can we pause on your first point? You said you do many things?” I asked. “Care to tell me one?”

“Bicycles,” he said. “I love to ride bicycles. When I was alive, I never had that opportunity.”

I took that in. When Major Myoga was alive?

“Do you remember what you liked to do when you were alive?” I asked.

“Not all that well. I merely know there was never a single moment where a bicycle and I existed in the same place. Call it intuition, but I’m sure the fabric of *me* and the fabric of *bicycles* have been inherently incompatible until after I was dead.”

Major Myoga spoke in a calm, considered manner. Despite what he was saying, he made you want to listen. In some ways, he reminded me of Avery. But his words had a sort of pain that already materialized into something much different, almost indescribably massive. I listened with awe at the beauty of it, like I alone was witnessing a special ceremony. Avery used to speak like this some years ago. One day, she suddenly stopped. This made our interactions much lonelier than they had any right to.

“Is there anything you remember?” I asked.

More silence. The grass swayed. A minute later, Major Myoga spoke again.

“When I think earnestly enough, I can remember the bombs,” he said. “The light of the Japanese sword glowing in the moonlight like it was a wandering soul. The blood. The maggots drifting down the river. Yet I had to drink from the river anyways. In Okinawa, that’s about what I remember.”

“Is that why you’re a Major? You were fighting in the war?”

He stopped to consider this. He turned to me, then back down to his slacks. I thought it was an obvious question, but it seemed assuming did no good. Looking back, assuming hardly ever did good with Maple or Avery either.

He brought his fingers up to his temples and massaged them, as if searching for the right words.

“No, I hardly knew what was going on,” he said. “I don’t believe I ever lived past thirteen. The fighting occurred in its own way without considering me. That’s not why I’m a major. That has nothing to do with Okinawa.”

Eying him carefully, he looked at least thirty-two. While I couldn’t wrap my head around that, I could understand his view of fighting occurring without so much as asking for his feelings about it.

“Thirteen-year-old?” I asked.

“I believe I mentioned I’m an *idea*. Time means nothing to me. I can be—or travel anywhere. That’s what ideas can do. To put it bluntly, and possibly crass—a metaphor lives in another world, feeding from this one. There is little other way I might explain it. I’m both here, and somewhere impossibly far away. My apologies if that is difficult to understand. It would take more than a short conversation to clarify it any way meaningful to you.”

“To understand this correctly, with you, time no longer matters?”

“Correct. With me, time no longer matters.”

I had to wonder if Avery’s grand ma-ma had ever met the Major.

A firefly crawled to his nail, glowing briefly. After some time, it flew away, going off somewhere I could hardly see. It never lit up again, as if reminding me that once they finally decide to light their beacon and call out for one another in the darkness, lonely creatures go on to lead awfully short lives.

“Eliza,” he said. “Why are you here?”

“I think there’s an evil spirit in my best friend’s pancreas.”

“Evil spirits don’t like to hang around in pancreases. Those sorts of places are no good. Livers or bowels either.”

“Right? That’s what I thought!”

Again, our words stopped. We listened only to the wind. Once it would stop, soon after, it rose again. Like the sun, how without fail it would always rise again the next morning. And the world would keep on turning, without fail, ever. With no regard to the people who’d wound up stuck in one space, *the real them*, unable to find the portal to cross over to where everyone else was. Like how Maple was sick yesterday and the day and years before and would still be sick tomorrow. Much like love, or our inability to tell each other anything meaningful, Maple was caught in an inescapable prison built with too much care.

I got up, about ready to head off to bed.

“Major Myoga, why are you a major? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m a space cadet,” he said, genuinely catching me by surprise. “Remember I can be anything. I like to take things up to space. Sort of an *extraplanetary delivery man* if that means anything to you? Other worlds, other universes, it doesn’t matter. If there’s a package, you best understand I’ll be there to deliver it. Everyone has a role. That’s mine. I’m assuming you are my client?”

I nodded. There was nothing else to say but go along with what had been waiting so long between Maple and I to unfold—no matter how nonsensically this came to be. In the grand scheme of everything life encompassed, I’m sure an extraplanetary space cadet was surprisingly low on the list of hard-to-understand concepts. There were things much closer to home, mundane and otherwise uneventful that had been around me for much of my life that would be infinitely harder to understand than the Major.



“Looks like it,” I said. “Guess you already know my destination address?”

“It is protocol to wait for the client to say it. Once protocols go out the window, there is no telling what else does.”

I smiled at that. What a nice thought.

This was the last time I saw the Major.

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Following that night, the Major vanished again. He didn’t have to say anything, but I knew he was in search of his next client. It was my turn to follow through to Maple with the message he allowed me to deliver.

The coming week had its share of events. For the first time, I attended the realtor meeting. I would be able to move into my own place by next week. I also kept my word to Maple on not bothering Catherine and staying far away from Clear Valley Medical. On some afternoons, I went out to kill time with Avery. She didn’t ask me about Maple, nor did I bring her up. Mostly, we talked about the coming stages in our lives. It’s been like this since we were mid-teenagers, about two years after Maple first told us about her health in her matter-of-fact way. Neither Avery or I ever knew what to say, and Maple didn’t say much either.

“You’re getting older, Eliza,” said Avery now. “Have you still not given any thought to matters of the heart?”

*I know what it is you don’t want to say, and you don’t have to worry a thing about me,* I thought to myself, but didn’t vocalize to Avery.

On the appointed evening, I rode my scooter up to the hospital around six p.m. Maple was sitting up in bed, her book placed on the desk next to my vase. There was a slip of paper tucked between one of the middle pages.

“Eliza,” she said, straight-faced. “I finished the book.”

“That thing? Seriously?”

“No, not really. It’s way too long.” She paused, tapping her fingers on her knees like how the Major peered deeply to his slacks. She refused to look at me for longer than three seconds at a time. “I read this one anecdote from an American soldier. It was about the remains of an eight-year-old boy in Okinawa. Well, some accounts say he was

eight. Others eleven, thirteen, even five. It doesn't matter. The boy had a bullet lodged in his brain. A quick, painless death. It got me thinking."

She took the slip out of the book and handed it to me. Written on the paper was a poem in her handwriting. She gave me an approving look which turned my stomach inside out, but I began to read anyway. It was signed *Ji-ae "Maple" Park*, titled *My Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

*I like to dream I'm up by Saturn  
Sitting on the rings, smiling with the dust  
And the coldness is like a sword that slices my liver  
But I'm up there, so so far away.  
From a perfect prison barring you and me  
With the comets flying by, and there's no longer time  
And my spirit free to make the dream from me to you.*

Ji-ae had been sick for a very long time, and I'd never before cried in front of her. But for the first time, I let myself cry a little. Only a little.

Then a lot.

"I must've looked like a doofus," she said, her voice cracking. "Getting so worked up reading about the boy, and this came out. I know it doesn't make a lick of sense, but that's what I felt. Sometimes, I wonder what's the difference between me and my nonsense ideas."

I placed the paper down and peered out the window. Night would soon draw in, like any other day.

Ji-ae's heart was a lonely hunter. That was something I could understand any day.

I imagined the meadow, and the message I passed onto the Major to deliver for me. I packaged them with tears that arrived eight years too late. My heart was dense with the swell of ideas. Much like I was in the process of transitioning to a liberated spirit all on my own, no longer afraid to do so.

"The difference between an idea and a person," I said. "And this is my turn to be less than clear. But a person, in order to keep living in this world, would be bound inextricably with pain. You mentioned a perfect prison impossible to escape."

"Eliza, where are you going with this?"

“Just as it’s love, *pain* is also a perfect prison. Matters of the heart between one another are bonded through a pain so deeply private that they may not ever be spoken clearly. To do so would transform it into something less than true.”

“And to you—what are you implying exactly? This was how flesh and blood people are different from silly ideas,” Ji-ae said. “Pain, not just love, you say is like some jail that detained us. We’re partner inmates, me and you. A jail with no escape, and a love—therefore pain, which we can’t ever talk about because it would be meaningless to say aloud. I won’t disagree with that.”

“Right,” I said, viewing her eyes one last time. They were red, holding back tears with a force that seemed to require every last ounce of her effort. She had the same nostalgic smile as the Major. “Pain and love, especially in our case, are one in the same. Just as it’s impossible to describe love, it’s hopeless to describe pain. It can’t be put into words that retain its real meaning. An idea is that. The real meaning. Existing in the world like a spirit you can see and interact with. That’s why it’s silly. It’s silly that something so personal can be delivered from one person to another.”

“You’re saying an idea is that truth between us that can’t be said?” Ji-ae replied, wiping my tears rather than letting herself produce her own. “You’re taking that little poem too seriously. Forget I said anything.”

“Not this time. Not again. I’m not letting it go. You meant every word, and yes, that’s what I think an idea can be,” I said. “It’s pure. Unbound by all the shortcomings, illnesses, pretenses, and worries we could never fully escape from. In short, *it could cross the impossible distance between people who could never understand each other.*”

“Meaning, I’m assuming, from you to me? Are we having this conversation?”

Silly thoughts ebbed forth with the ones that shouldn’t be said. Such as *you should have seen how Avery cried over picking the right birthday gift for you last year. Like you were in any position to receive it! Another birthday, that funeral no one talks about anymore, it’s all the same. But wouldn’t it have been better if that foul-mouthed kid you dated was me?*

When I delivered my package via the Major I thought the same. There was no way I could ever be honest otherwise, and even if I could—if all my fears vanished—my message would never reach anywhere meaningful enough. That’s how Maple and I were.

Even when I knew within my gut, my liver... my *pancreas* she might finally be considering entering Heaven.

I thought again of that firefly that flashed in the meadow. It lit up for a single period of time to hunt for a lover, then vanished so deep in the dark no one would ever see it again. But its light remained in my brain. When I closed my eyes, I could see it. *Ji-ae*.

“I want you to take this to somewhere metaphorical,” I’d said to the Major. “To a dream only Maple knows. To my friend who lives far away. To *Ji-ae*’s world. I’ve got a message I’ve been waiting eight years to deliver. Can you do that for me?”

# The Front

By Sarah Stubbs

No one who worked at the Taco Bell ever went on vacation. The gaudy building squatted by Route 81, a meager draw for interstate travelers to stop and pee in my town. During my shifts, I bared my teeth to welcome each person who walked through the door.

My parents said I was allowed to go on only one vacation that summer, which I had expended on a family trip to the Outer Banks. I needed to spend the rest of the hot months between junior and senior year of high school making money. So my friends went to a lake house in upstate New York without me. They mailed me a letter full of inside jokes, Polaroids enclosed of them in bathing suits, making pancakes before a day on the water. I stuffed the photos in the pocket of my Yum! Brands-issue slacks.

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Technically it was a combination Taco Bell and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Our customers could order an 8-Piece Chicken Bucket with extra-crispy drumsticks and throw in a Crunchwrap Supreme for good measure.

Taco Bell food came from the freezer, bales of cheese and towers of shells preserved in plastic until they could be layered with ground beef and heated. KFC chicken emerged from a vat of bubbling grease so large I imagined it could conceal a body. Taco Bell food wasn't so different from the frozen dinners my mother microwaved when she came home from work. KFC food was like Grendel slithering ponderously from his swamp.

Many nights, I had to empty the trash cans after a long day of no one else emptying the trash cans. When the bins got too full, pieces of half-eaten chicken fell out of the cans and became lodged in the decorative containers that hid the cans from customers. The ravished tenders and chewed bones waited there for me, congealing in cold grease, rimmed in backwash from the voluminous soda that came with the 10-Piece Feast, until, cringing, I pried them from the bottom and dropped them into the trash bag.

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The manager, Melissa, gave me a 15-minute interview then announced that I would be working "the front." Melissa had yellow hair permed to crispiness, several

shades lighter than her tanning-bed skin. She called the restaurant “Taco Bell’s.” I thought that if I touched Melissa, her skin and her hair would have the same texture.

The front turned out to have both literal and figurative meanings: it encompassed the entry to the store, yet also connoted a battle line. Raw interactions with customers happened in the front. I did not make a single taco that summer, did not dip a single thigh into the grease vat. I was always in the front.

A rotating cast of characters worked the drive-through line and the back, which was a maze of food assembly lines and industrial fryers. Plump and pretty Ashley was my age, but I had never seen her at school. She attended just enough not to flunk out, and her Taco Bell wages went toward Spaghetti-Os and pediatric care for the baby she’d had in freshman year.

Ashley often took her breaks with Brandon, a high school dropout with a grin that made me sweat under my polo. Once when we were flirting by the register - or rather, when he was flirting in my direction while I giggled nervously - we fell into talking about books. He had read everything I had. Not just the books assigned for school, but also the ones I got from the library or snuck off my parents’ shelves, from Jon Krakauer to the *Wheel of Time* series.

But when I spoke of creative writing classes, his mouth twisted and he turned back toward the fryer he’d been neglecting.

“I don’t do that stuff anymore,” he said.

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We wore performance-material polos tucked into big-hipped black slacks and non-slip shoes designed for purchase on greasy floors. And don’t forget the red visor. The first time I wore the outfit, I laughed, just self-aware enough to recognize that my ugly work outfit was a cliché worthy of the Disney Channel.

One day my school crush came into the restaurant with his girlfriend. They were on break from lifeguarding, tawny and lithe with sunglasses pushed onto the tops of their heads. When I saw them walking into the store, on some primeval instinct to preserve my chance of future procreation, I squatted and hid behind the register.

Of course, there was no one else to take their order.

“Customers in front!” Melissa bellowed from the back.

So I stood back up, as crimson as my visor, and put on my Taco Bell Smile.

“Sarah, you work here?” my crush said. I was fiddling with a handful of Mild Sauce packets to justify having popped up like a Whack-A-Mole. His girlfriend smiled at me kindly, as if I were a child who made a mess while trying to be helpful.

“Sure do,” I bleated, dying a thousand deaths. They ordered Taco Bell food (no KFC) and returned to the pool.

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None of my coworkers wanted to hide behind the register if people they knew walked in. Every day I craved to leave and never come back, but also for Ashley, Brandon, and the others to invite me to take my break with them.

With my college visits and my parents hovering over me, I didn’t fit in with my coworkers. Brandon never invited me to smoke after work with the others. He knew I wouldn’t, not because I didn’t want to, but because I was afraid something nebulous might happen, something I could not name, that lay in how my parents anxiously awaited my return after every closing shift, even though they had hounded me to get the job by the interstate. Perhaps for the same reason, Ashley’s kindness to me was sympathetic. She had made her choices; others had made mine.

One night toward the end of that summer, I hurried out to meet friends after the restaurant closed. I changed out of my uniform in the bathroom I had cleaned so many times. As I left, I walked past Ashley and Brandon sitting outside, drinking sodas and waiting for their rides. The night air teased my bare limbs in my shorts and spaghetti strap top, my skin sweat-salty from being inchambered in the uniform. My coworkers were still wearing their polos and slacks. They called after me as I walked to my car.

I could have sat down with them or offered them a ride to wherever they were going. It wouldn’t be far; we lived in a small town. But I just smiled at them over my shoulder and kept moving.

# Okra Women

by Kia Addison

*Maybe, we thought, the world needs enemies it can love, enemies who are no threat at all. Maybe, we thought, that is the story inside the history of girls.*

Ayşe Papatya Bucak “The History of Girls”

I am watching the tomatoes drip slow and thick from the can like globs of molasses when my grandmothers check in on me.

My brother is at his best friend’s house, pacing back and forth across his musky, bachelor living room with my baby niece on the floor. She gnaws tiny shrivels of rug and watches the men grumble and furrow their brows with her baby girl knowing.

She could choke on the rug, but the men don’t know that. I can feel in my bones their unknowing and it makes me smack the bottom of the can harder than necessary. The tomatoes coil out and grizzle on the stove top.

While my brother is there, fuming and worried and ignorant, my grandmothers press close and shove their noses over the stove to sniff out the beginnings of jambalaya. They lean against the countertops and the way they cross their arms stretches the jiggly flesh of their deflated biceps and carves dark rivers in the skin.

A visit from the ancestors feels like a change in atmospheric pressure. The air is electrified and heavy. They’re taking up so much space that I shimmy closer to the stove so one doesn’t accidentally brush me. Being brushed by an ancestor feels like being poked with a taser. It makes your entire body jolt as it strives to jerk away from the cold prick of death.

The blood is never ready to dry.



My grandmothers wander into my tiny living room and fuss over the wall tapestries and the stains on my Goodwill chairs. There are eight of them, a nonlinear arrangement of Black women. My blood knows them all, but my mind only contains memories of two. Mabilyn and Eve.

Eve was my father's mother, a stocky woman with broad shoulders and swollen fingers. A face round as the China plates that she'd kept in her cabinet. She'd held me on her lap when I was little and pressed kisses to my cheeks and made me blueberry pancakes in the mornings.

She died suddenly of a stroke and my father had followed soon afterwards. Mabilyn was my mother's mother. She used to take me to the park on Sundays after Church, where her voice echoed off the walls when she sang. She was so loud I was afraid God would smite her for screaming at Him.

She, too, was stocky, but her broadness was in her hips. When I was tiny, I'd secretly giggle at her thin waist suddenly interrupted by thighs so thick they sagged over the edge of every chair she could find.

I only know the names of some of the others.

Henrietta and Nameera. The other four women come from times where their lives went unrecorded except by word of mouth, and those mouths were beaten until swollen shut sometime in history.

My great-great grandmother, Henrietta, hovers, sniffs, and then groans in the back of her throat. Her expression is blank, as if she is so wearied that she's lost sense.

"I don't have my own tomato garden," I remind her. Perhaps she doesn't like that I am using canned tomatoes for the Jambalaya. Perhaps she doesn't like that I am making Jambalaya at all. Perhaps she doesn't like me. The details of her dislike are never clear.

One doesn't have to like someone to love them. My daddy always said that. Usually about my mama, when people pleaded with him to share the secret of a

long marriage. He'd look at my mother's broad face and sparkling eyes with a resentful smile and remind them that he can't stand this woman, doesn't even *like* her most of the time, but he loves her.

He always sounded very disappointed by this.

"Easy enough to start one," Henrietta says.

"I don't know how to take care of tomatoes."

"It's *a plant*, baby, not a child," she informs me, slowly, as if she is trying to explain horticulture to the deranged. "It takes care of itself for the most part. You only have to make sure the bugs don't eat it all up."

"I don't have time for that," I say. This causes her to harrumph, this widow of the First World War, but before she can push me further, my niece chokes on the rug and her daddy, my brother, jumps from the couch. The ancestors freeze, stare into me where my niece's blood is connected to my heart valves.

He grabs her by the arm and swats her back desperately. She vomits up the scraggly pieces of rug along with stringy, silvery milk spit up. "*Aw, man!*" My brother's friend cries, as the vomit sinks into the fibers of his rug. "*Bruh, I just got this rug!*"

"It's ugly as Hell," Mabilyn harrumphs because my baby niece is thinking the same.

"Mm. I cain't even understand. How you gon have blue walls *and* a green rug? No wonder da baby threwd up. Rug hurtin her eyes," Nameera adds, as the only one of us to be college-educated, by Mary McLeod Bethune herself.

Then they all are on that man and his rug, mocking it and him and his taste and his daddy as only women can.

Their smiles spike through me. Joy is like blood. Pure and unhindered it can be a life source, but infected, like mine, it causes the most agonizing pain.

My joy has been corrupted so long my stomach roils with nausea, and I barely make it to the sink in time to vomit. My elbows dig into the hard counter, and I am shivering as all warmth leaves my core in great, painful heaves.

My grandmothers stand silent at my back and watch with lidded eyes. “Ain’t nuthin gon hurt more’n Jambalaya after all that,” Eve tsks. “Ought to make some toast wit hondey milk.” That sounds disgusting, and what’s more, this Jambalaya is a project I began one night when, exhausted and heavy from weeping but too wired for sleep, I dove headfirst down holes of useless research.

My Google history was littered with such searches, and others from after that night, when my brother insisted that I take up my case in court.

*How do I find a good lawyer?*

*What is sexual assault?*

*Why do men rape?*

*How do you make roast without a crock pot?*

*Why can’t I sleep?*

*Where does Jambalaya come from?*

*How do I report sexual misconduct on a dating app?*

I hadn’t found any pursuable answers except when it came to food. The food blogs had been a welcome relief, giving me something to focus on besides my own misery. This jambalaya required nothing more than few ingredients to come out great.

*Justice should be like that*, I think as I stand over the sink watching my own drool slither into the sink. My grandmother’s strength tries to gather in my bones, but every single one is shaking too hard for it to stick.

“I don’t want to do this,” I tell them, and the words bounce round in my head, collecting shards of pain and memory. I had told Daniel that *I don’t want to*

*do this.* I had repeated it twice before he looked up with a teasing smirk and eyes filled with a dark want.

*What the fuck did you come here for then?* He'd demanded. He hadn't stopped. He thought it was a game. That I was roleplaying, I guess. *There*, he said when he was done, and he'd dragged his hard body off my flattened undead corpse. *Didn't I say it? I make my women scream.*

My throat still ached where his head had been pressed hard against his woman's trembling chin, from where he'd bitten down on his woman's vocal cords; tried to tear out his woman's screams with his teeth.

"I know it, darlin'." Someone murmurs, her voice so thick and low with a Louisianian accent that it reminds me of an alligator's growl. "This ain't Gods way, to right a wrong wit only dis!" She rams a savage finger at the burning jambalaya. "This is all a man will understand. Somethin he can have. Somethin he can devour. God ain't make us *things*."

I stare at the rice, bubbling over with red tomato juice. It smells like the Earth when its pregnant with rainfall. Like iron-tinged, dried blood. I push my shoulders back and approach it anyway. I pick up the spoon and labor against the hardening grains. They stick to the bottom of my worn, hand-me-down skillet with a bottom so black it imbues everything with a charred taste.

Mama used to say that love tasted and felt the same way. She would glance at my father, with his dancing eyes and thick moustache and shake her head. The only lesson she gave me about love was the burnt, bitter flakes of black in my food. Maybe that was why I was scared when Daniel hadn't listened to me, but not shocked.

*What the fuck did you come here for then?*

\*

I add in pieces of the sausage that I savagely eviscerated earlier. I stabbed it, skewered it, sautéed that fucking dead, useless meat. I cried and laughed as the

thin juices slicked through my fingers. I wrapped my fingers round the flabby sausage, and I screamed with my grandmother's voices as I strangled his dead, useless meat.

"I can't stand it. Even in death I can't rest. My knowin keeps me chained here. My knowin got me dead," another of my blood says, nameless, with a forehead sloped on one side as if her head had been bashed in. Her despair is so palpable it links us across veins of time until we are shuddering with three hundred years' worth of fury.

My brother, in his stumbling, awkward way, had tried to understand Daniel's motivations. *"You told him no?"* He questioned me, again and again, as if I would suddenly realize I had been yelling yes all along. *"You tol' him to get off? You said you didn't want to do this? I know you screamed, but that wouldn't have told him anything. You went there for sex. Hell, maybe he thought that was a good sign. I don't know. I'm just trying to understand what he was thinking."*

My brother's desperate attempts to comfort me had begun with trying to help me understand my rapist. *"Of course you should sue,"* he agreed. *"I'm just trying to tell you what was happening from his point of view."*

My brother didn't understand why his unknowing incensed me. Incensed us all. His daughter even screamed during the conversation, and he growled something about her being too much like her mother, fussy. I pointed out that she had soiled herself and needed a change.

*"That's just disrespectful,"* he tried to joke, and even his joke infuriated me. All he did was joke. Meanwhile, his daughter was squirming in her own excrement, helpless and longing for basic human respect.

Meanwhile, a man walked free in the world even though he had continued to drown me in bedsheets because to him, it was a senseless act, a joke, a fuck he never had to think about again.

“I don’t *want* to sue,” I say, and shake hard the canister of spices. Some of the brew explodes, chunks of meat popping over the rim and slapping my cheeks. I shriek and back away, but the suddenness of it sends a tidal wave over me.

A second later, I dig my fingers into the thick, sweltering mass o reddened rice and hot peppers and shards of meat and scoop up handfuls. “I don’t want to tell a bunch of stupid strangers what happened to me!”

The Jambalaya squelches as I fling it around the kitchen. The red juice splatters against walls and floor. I suddenly think about those chimps who hurl excrement at passing strangers. Sometimes, defiance can only come in the form of dirtying the benefactors of your imprisonment.

Maya Angelou wrote that she knows why the caged bird sings. I know why the caged chimp screams.

“I don’t want their judgment! I don’t want to hear how I should have been more careful! I don’t want to *fight everyone* just for *someone* to listen to me! I don’t want to be scared!”

“Oh baby,” Eve murmurs. My body bucks against the gravity that released birds and insects into the air but chained me against the bed and held Daniel’s hulking weight against me.

“Why didn’t anyone hear me scream?” Red and yellow slips down my walls and drips over the chairs. The blood roaring behind my eardrums sounds like Daniel panting into my chest.

“Daughter. Daughter listen,” there is an African woman looming over me, a shadow lengthened by the sun. I realize that sometime in the last few minutes, I have slipped to the floor, knees squeezed to my chest and shaking. Sweat prickles between my bra straps and tickles my spine.

“Our ears rang with you,” this grandmother is like a bronze bamboo stalk, all strength and sleekness. She somehow towers above us with her pain and power. We fall silent when she speaks, quick and guttural, sounding of thunder. “I thought

it was me screaming. I was back in that hole again. I thought I was going to die the first time, but I didn't so I screamed. The whole world rang with me. We all thought it was ourselves screaming."

*That's why it hurts so bad, I think. It's happened before. A million times.*

My phone vibrates in my back pocket. I startle so hard I bang my head against the oven's glass front. "I'm sorry. I didn't quite get that. Could you say it again?" Siri asks, with perfect civility.

"Siri," I whisper. "Why do men rape?"

A beat of silence. Then, "I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. Could you say it again?"

Eve and Mabilyn and Henrietta and Nameera and the Louisianian and the sloped head and the slave and the African all sink to the floor with me. An outsider would have assumed we were holding a coven meeting, or perhaps committing mass suicide.

"They won't understand," Eve whispers. "You can say it a million times, in a million different voices. They'll pretend not to hear you."

"Fuck them," I growl. "Fuck them all."

\*

An hour later, and the jambalaya has blackened in the pan. A heady, charred smoke blurs the air. Red spots of jambalaya glare from the ceiling and walls and tabletop.

"My lawyer wants to use our fucking conversation from Tinder. *I'm* paying *him* to convince an old man that I didn't deserve to be fucked in a way I said I didn't want to be fucked, and it's my word against a white man who just *happened* to hire a Black lawyer so he would look better."

It is a triple violation, to be forced into further situations where my *nonono's* would be pitted against a man's *yesyesyes*. To them, it is a simple fact of

law and order. They aren't paying any attention to how I flail on the floor, throat clogged with bits of rug, and if they had noticed, my gargles and spit up would be deemed *disrespectful*.

My grandmothers harrumph and moan. The anger between us has thickened so much it has sunk to the pit of our soles.

"Guess tain't no other way but to keep goin'," Henrietta sighs, with the indifference of the choiceless. An ember of rage tries to ignite in me, but it is quickly stumped out by weariness. I nod.

"Only because if I killed myself, my brother wouldn't know how to raise his own fuckin baby."

They cackle at that. "He wouldn't, neither! That poor chile is sweet but so stupid."

"I'se feel it," Nameera murmurs with glinting eyes. "That baby girl gon' be hard-headed and triflin' and too good for this'un world," we can all sense it, the pit of fire in the belly of our youngest.

How she side-eyes everyone and bangs fists against her father's chest to demand his attention. I could cry thinking of her growing up like me, with burnt-skillet love and men who make women scream and centuries of abuse in her blood.

"Maybe for her it'll be different," Eve suggests, though it sounds more like a question. My brother is lifting his daughter now and the weightlessness of her delight, her love, rings through us all. Whereas she is happy, we mourn this feeling she will lose soon.

"Maybe for her, it'll be *worse*," the sloped head mutters. I push myself to my feet. I wobble at first, a newborn calf, but find myself in front of the stove before I can collapse again.

I glance at my phone. "I have another two hours until my lawyer calls to go over more court crap and I burned it."



“Girl, that mess ain’t even good for da *rats*,” Henrietta agrees.

I scan the black lumps of smoky material. I can no longer recognize a single ingredient; it has all been charred from the inside out. I cock my head. I had forgotten to add Okra. I lift the pan and start to scrap the rest into the garbage. “I need to learn how to make it right... In case she ever needs it.”

Across town, my brother is taking his leave, laughing through goodbyes and assurances that *we can still hit the clubs, man, my sister can babysit!* I see him through my nieces softly drooping eyes. One day I, too, will be an ancestor to this girl and her girls and their girls. My ears will ring with them.

I let the skillet slip from my fingers into the trash.

I do not have to ask my mothers to leave. They have vanished by the time I turn with a rag in hand to scrub the walls and open the windows. The atmospheric pressure lessens, and I am only myself again, a single thread separated and alive in the tapestry.

*In a few hours, I think, I’ll do this again.*

I will return to the battlefield and fight an army of ancient brothers who are sometimes sweet but mostly stupid.

Meanwhile, my niece will sleep in preparation for the day when she joins me in battle; I will learn to make Jambalaya; a burnt and evil skillet will rot in some trash yard somewhere; our mother’s blood will swim in me.

I pull out a different skillet and begin again.

# Something Extra

by Callie S. Blackstone

Listen, Shirley can tell you whatever she wants. The facts are the facts. My goulash has been winning the cooking competition at the Lutheran church since the 1970s. New decades, new pastors, new kids in the Sunday school seats: my goulash, first prize, every time. She fixes new recipes every year: cheesy chicken broccoli casserole, tater tot casserole. A flurry of casseroles. One year she tried to be artsy about it and made a quiche. I had never even heard of one before. But, my goulash wins every time. You should see the look on her face when they place the ribbon on it! My mom always said you better be careful what face you make, it may stick that way.

Shirley can tell you she's the best cook in our congregation, and I can tell you the sky is green. The truth is, I'm the best cook. It's not just the ribbons that prove it, either. When funerals happen or babies are born, families always pick my meal to heat up and nourish themselves with. Goulash. A true American dish. *Quiche!*

I generally receive one or two thank-you cards a week--the congregation is pretty big. Families have been relying on my cooking for decades now. It's familiar to them. Sometimes it's more comforting than their mother's cooking. And that's alright. I may sound prideful, and the good lord knows I struggle, but the food is not about that. It's about taking care of my church, my people. It's about nurturing them, holding them up when they can't hold themselves.

When that thing happened to Susie's girl Jenny, well, that was the first time our congregation just didn't know what to do. When her senior picture, taken two years before, started to show up on our tv screens--well, no one is ever prepared for that. I will never forget that picture. She was just beaming and you could tell she was a real nice girl. And she was, too--of all the young people in our congregation, she was always happy and optimistic, ready to lend a helping hand with the coffee. She was always a real good girl. And I'm not saying that just because of what happened. Lying is a sin.

I'm ashamed to admit that it took all of us a day or two to fully understand what was going on. Some people were saying Jenny got up and ran away. But that girl was too kind to go and do that. And what for? She was beautiful with her blonde hair and those

wide open blue eyes. If only she had seen what was coming. If only any of us had. She had her whole life in front of her and a boyfriend she was going steady with. He had just asked her father for permission to marry her the month before, and he had been saving up for the ring. And she got it, too--the man over at the jewelry store donated a ring to the boy, who slipped it on her cold hand before she was buried.

By the time her body was found, our church had rallied. The pastor was meeting with the family everyday. We were holding a prayer chain. But we are there for both the spiritual and the physical needs--the men who were able bodied helped with the search, and those that couldn't hobbled down the sidewalks posting flyers in store windows. I'm not criticizing, I'm at an age where I'm grateful I can still hobble. The women stepped forward like we always do--with food, with offers to clean. We wanted to take as much burden off of that family as possible. Even if it was by way of one of Shirley's ridiculous quiches.

Now you may wonder what makes my goulash so special. You may be wondering what goulash even is. Beef. Macaroni (the pasta shape is key.) Onions. Garlic. Tomato paste, tomato sauce. It's pretty straight forward.

Now my recipe was handed down from my grandmama to my mama to me. I'll pass it down to mine soon enough. It's a real good recipe. Fine tuned, you could say.

Listen, my grandmama went to since she was a girl. And she brought my mama up in it. And my mama, me. And we aren't Sunday Christians, either. We were brought up to read our bibles and pray everyday. I still do it, too, even with my vision slowly going on me.

But when you grow up on the plains and you pray and pray, and you look towards the empty horizon, and it feels like nothing is answering back, well sometimes you might take matters into your own hands. Sometimes you have to do whatever you can to survive and pray for forgiveness later.

Grandmama's family was already poor before the dust bowl hit. That's what they're teaching my grandkids to call it in school; grandmama only ever called it hell. Her mother had to place bread dough in a drawer and allow just enough room for her hands to enter and knead it; the way the bread was always lined with grit, no matter her

efforts. The sound of the wind rustling the newspaper they hung on the walls to keep the dust from coming in always kept her up at night. She had to fall asleep with the weight and moisture of the damp rag over her face so the dust wouldn't get in and give her pneumonia overnight. She never could have anything over her face again, even the masks at Halloween upset her. But the scariest thing was having to grip the rope that led to the outhouse at night so she wouldn't get lost in the endless dust. Her hands were constantly burned because she ran so fast during the night to get in and out, just to come back to the solace of a wet dishrag and a bed lined with filth.

Well grandmama's mama (my great-grandma) couldn't take it. The farm wasn't bringing in any money because of the storms, and it was damaging the house. Her husband couldn't find any work locally, like all of the men. The kids were getting more familiar with the taste of earth than the taste of meat or cheese. Grandmama's mama started to notice that what little they had was being poured out of a bottle into her husband's mouth. She knew something had to change.

That's where Margaret came in.

Everyone in great-grandmama's town knew who Margaret was, although they'd never claim her on the street, let alone invite her to church. What prideful people! My Christ would welcome anyone—he did socialize with all kinds, afterall.

But they weren't so open-minded back then; the woman lived on her lonesome on a desolate farm left to her by a man who had died long ago. The cruel amongst them said Margaret had killed him. The smart amongst them recognized his demise had ultimately been the death of her.

The woman kept to herself after he passed. She remained isolated during the storms, no one to help her. I picture her following her own rope to her own outhouse, sand quickly piling on her like the devil's version of snow. She did this every day, on her own; papered her house on her own; placed the cooling suffocation of a damp rag on her face on her own.

That is, until grandmama came in.

You see, while Margaret lived on her own out there she had to find ways to get by. It wasn't as easy as it is now; town and the accompanying stores far off, no machines to

clean dishes or clothes. She was totally on her own. So she began to find her own solutions.

Now, I suspect my grandmama was given all the knowledge Margaret had. But that old woman (God bless her,) would not tell any of us how Margaret originally got her hands on the information. Whether it was passed down to her out of ancestors from Salem, MA, or whether she made a pact with the devil, I just don't know. But Margaret developed powers out there on the plains, and great-grandmama went to her for assistance. At that point, great-grandmama, who was a god-fearing woman, would have done anything. And she did.

When great-grandmama confronted great-grandpapa about the empty bank account and the empty liquor bottles he hit her, full-fisted. She decided it was time for a little extra help. After great-grandpapa passed out at the dining room table, great-grandmama wound a winter scarf around her hair and face. It wasn't just to protect from the dust; she knew visibility was low, but she didn't want anyone to see where she was going or the black eye she wore while she was doing it. She took her only daughter's hand, afraid to leave her with an angry drunk.

The story goes that they set out in their protective clothes, ready to face the wind and the dust to find assistance. Yet their time was easy enough; there wasn't even a breeze, and the only dust they picked up was on the bottom of their shoes. Great-grandmama knew the way, which was its own special power on those barren plains, where there were no markers and everything was done by sight, gut, and providence. It was a small home. You could see through gaps in the boards to the thin fabric sheets she had hung up for protection. Despite her powers, Margaret never asked for more than she deserved. I'm certain God took that into consideration when she passed.

Great-grandmama knocked on the front door and grandmama clung to her while they waited. From the way grandma told it, Margaret took a long time to get to the door. Margaret took several minutes taking her two visitors in; the clock passed; great-grandmama feared that the woman's eye contact would amount to a curse on her daughter. One thing you have to remember about magic is that when it helps people, they like it—when it doesn't go their way, it's evil.

But grandma wasn't afraid and she took her time taking Margaret in. The woman was so skinny that you could see her bone structure through her facial skin, her skull protruding as if it was a warning. Grandma remembered her arms the most—how they were so gaunt the veins protruded from them. They tapered down to fingers that were gnarled and curled.

Margaret stepped aside to let the two women in. The place was unremarkable, like any other shack on the plains, although no one was doing much visiting those days. She gestured to the table and turned to the two girls, foregoing the previous formality of offering food or drink to guests. No one had anything to spare those days, even her.

When the woman's voice finally came out, it came out as a croak. It had gone unused for so long and the throat it belonged to was cracked and dried by sand. The woman croaked over and over until her throat finally produced something useful.

"What do you want?"

According to the way great-grandmama told it, her mother took in the small shack before taking in the woman. It did not seem like she was someone who appreciated excess, even before the dust.

"We have no money, no food. My husband drinks up whatever we do have." She paused. "I heard you can help."

The woman responded with a croak that grandma supposed was laughter. "I can help, but nothing comes for free. What can you offer me?"

Great-grandmama took a moment to really think, to inventory her life. She bowed her head in shame, as if the scarf she wore was a weight she could no longer bear. "I apologize, I have come empty handed." She began to turn and pulled grandmama with her.

"The girl," Margaret said. "The girl."

Now, don't worry. It's not as demonic as it sounds. Margaret explained that her work could be hard on her—her arthritis had turned her hands into claws, but there was still work to be done. If great-grandmama stayed on to help some days, the family would not only get what it needed, the girl would be fed. Now great grandmama was a god-fearing woman, and she only came out to see Margaret when she had a real need. She

likely would have done anything. And her girl would get fed. So great-grandmama agreed.

I wish I could tell you what happened next. What did grandmama's assisting work look like? Was grandmama taught directly, or did she pick up things as she went?

Grandmama taught my mama the ways, but she never revealed the details of her own learning. She would never provide answers when I asked. Perhaps it was out of respect to that old woman, Margaret. We were taught to pray for her in heaven—although the pastor would not have approved of that, or anything else we were up to. I'm a saved woman—I believe Jesus Christ died for my sins. But I know sometimes you need something extra out here on these plains, where you can look for a long time and still see nothing. A vast empty place, it is.

That was why Jenny's disappearance was so scary. There aren't a lot of places to hide a body out here on the flat expansive land. If you tried to bury a person, your silhouette darkened against the landscape, somebody could easily see you. This is a vast, empty place. There aren't many buildings or outcrops. Where did that girl go? We had never seen anything like it.

But, back to my goulash. I already told you the basic ingredients—beef, pasta, tomatoes. But I always add something extra. There isn't any funny business—I don't add anything to influence people to vote for my cooking in the competition. No, nothing like that. I merely give them a boost for the day. Feeling ugly? They look in the mirror and understand they are God's creation. Having what the Catholics call a long night of the soul? The darkness lifts a little, they have some energy to spare. Heart broken? My magic—if that's what you want to call it—helps the situation along, whether the two are meant to mend or to separate.

None of my magic ever goes against God's will; it merely helps people along on the journey God intends for them.

Now Jenny's girl was real concerning to all of us. Like I said, all of us were praying, the men were looking, the women were cooking. But as the days went on

nothing on the news changed, even across channels and anchors as it went national. No one knew where the girl was. They said no evidence had been left behind.

Now, like I said, I've helped folks having dark times and I've straightened out my share of what the young people call domestic violence, but Jenny, I'd never seen anything like Jenny in my lifetime. And I'm an older woman now, I've seen my share of how terrible this world can be. I'm retired, my kids are long out of the house. I had time on my hands, so I prayed. I prayed for that girl not only while I knelt, but while I did housework and sat over my knitting. But I needed to do something even bigger than that.

Now, all of us older church women have a schedule for dark times just like these, even the strange ones. The rotation tells us when we are supposed to deliver food to the families in need.

I'm just like any other old church lady; I keep food for the dead in my freezer. Goulash, waiting to be delivered to a grieving family, to new parents, to anyone in need. And yes, my secret ingredient works, even after getting put on ice. I place directions with each delivery so the recipient knows how to heat it up just right, although everyone in the congregation knows them by now. I used to keep other dishes in stock, but over the years people made it clear that the Brewer women's goulash was what they wanted. One year my daughter even bought me a separate freezer for it, her husband hauling it over from the store and setting it up for me. It's filled with stacks of frozen goulash. And when it begins to run low—when the bottom of the freezer peaks through—I spend whole days making goulash, sauteing garlic and onion, warming tomatoes until they are fragrant, browning meat. That freezer will always be full, until my own kin needs to eat out of it after I pass. And they'll fill it after that.

At first I dropped off the standard goulash tray. It was early days, then. Early enough that our naive community still thought she'd be coming back alive, alive and healthy. Those were the early days.

But the days crept on and we accepted the statistics. Did you know if they don't find a missing person in a certain amount of time, the likelihood of her coming back alive is basically none? God bless her. Her boyfriend's face was plastered all over the news; he was asked questions by the police for hours and hours. The whole thing still



lingers on him, a dark cloud over him that has driven him to the bottle and away from the church. I've tried to visit a few times, but he's pushed me away with some crude words. I still keep him in my prayers. Who wouldn't curse after something like this befell them.

The next batch of goulash was delivered at her family's preferred supper time—I know when all the families eat. I brought it piping hot. This time more than one special ingredient had been added to the dish. I had to pull out the notebook that is handed down from Brewer woman to Brewer woman. First grandmama to mama, then her to me. I'm sure my turn to pass it on will come soon enough.

The brown cover creaked open to display a series of brittle lined pages. First, a dedication page to God. Next, to Margaret. Then, to the Brewer family, especially the women. The initial pages were about the standard Brewer ingredient—that special something we put in every dish to help God's children on their way. But this was more than what today's doctors call low self-esteem or depression. It was beginning to look like this was something pure evil that needed to be driven out of our community. So how was I gonna do that?

I had tripled the standard special ingredient; then I added additional herbs for faith, strength, and protection. I meant to drop off the dish and be on my way—I was actually meant to visit with my daughter—but when Jenny's mother opened the door, I invited myself in. The woman was a specter of her old self, hair limp, face pale, nail polish cracking. Now there's nothing wrong with a woman who works, who focuses on things beyond the mirror. But that wasn't her way. She considered her looks to be of utmost importance. I knew she wasn't well. The rest of them—Jenny's father and brother—were the same way. I gathered them up, sat them at the table. I found their dishes and spooned out the goulash, stayed long enough to ensure they took a few polite bites. I honestly don't know how much needs to get eaten for the magic to work, but I wanted to make sure they got some of it in them. I was starting to get the feeling this was going to be going on for a long time, and they needed strength to make it through.

Jenny's mother was always a woman concerned with impressions, done up to high heaven and a thank you card sent out for every little thing. Polite woman. She never mentioned that night to me; when we met eyes passing each other in church years

later, there was no spark of recognition. I think she was so heartbroken she had forgotten much of that part of her life. With the grace of God, I hope she has.

As the rotation moved on from my goulash to Shirley's dry meatloaf, I kept praying. But sometimes you need more than prayer. I kept thinking of how I would feel if one of my daughters disappeared off the plains, no evidence in sight. Something needed to be done.

The police had moved on from the girl's boyfriend. Now, they were pulling records of local offenders. Every news broadcast showed the faces of men in our community with previous evil convictions. I knew some of the faces: the boy who worked down at the dog kennel, the bagger at the Piggly Wiggly's, one of the members of my own church. Now, Jesus may forgive, but there are certain things I leave for him. That man returned to our congregation once or twice before disappearing completely from our lives. None of us missed him.

Every man's face became a monster and her family kept walking around like ghouls and the girl was still missing, probably dealing with the biggest horrors of them all.

I knew something had to be done, so I kept turning the pages.

Now, grandmama taught me the basics. When I got my first blood, she decided it was time. First, she told me the story of Margaret, like I've told you here. Second, she told me that it was one thing to help God's work along, but it was another to take on too much power and steal from him. And it was yet another to start doing the devil's work.

After you crack open the heavy cover of that old notebook, you turn past the pages of dedications. The next section is almost like one of the fancy foreign recipe books they use at the library cooking club on Thursday nights. The early pages profile a variety of herbs we get here in these parts—pleurisy root, goldenrod, yarrow. Grandmama sketched each plant and carefully wrote down what they do to quicken God's workings. You'll find our secret ingredient early on in the pages, the booster we Brewer women have been throwing in almost everything we cook—including what we make for our own. But there are other ingredients, too, like the extras I threw in for Jenny's family. All good things.

After you turn through pages and pages of plants, you hit a page that has a large 'X.' When she started teaching me, grandmama never explained what the X stood for. I figure she thought it was clear enough. X meant do not move forward. X meant devil's work, meant you were getting too powerful and trying to do too much.

After they stopped suspecting Jenny's boyfriend and every man in our community was outed as a monster, I turned the pages to the X and stared at it. The X was written with straight slashes, and it sent a clear sign: do not pass.

Neither grandmama nor mama told me how they used the notebook, not really; I have no idea if they ever turned past the X. I have no idea if my own kin will when they inherit the book from me. But I figure it's something that comes along with the book, this responsibility: the knowledge that sometimes we have to make difficult decisions to do the right thing. That sometimes out here on the plains, God doesn't answer real quick, and we need some assistance.

When they dragged the girl's body out of the landfill, I knew my community needed some assistance. I turned the page.

I had to call up my daughter and tell her to find a babysitter that day; usually I watched the little one while she took the older one to dance practice, but when I saw the pale flesh of that girl being pulled out of the landfill on the news, I knew it was time, and I knew it couldn't wait. I had learned there were monsters in our community, monsters that needed to be exorcized. I had learned that there was a horrific demon in one who had not been identified yet, who had stabbed a young and promising girl 32 times. God had a lot of work to do, and I'm sure he just didn't notice what was going on down here in Medicine Park. But I knew he wouldn't stand for it. Neither would I. I turned the X page that day, and I never looked back.

First, I had to identify the evil lurking in our community. Second, I would have to eradicate it.

The book offered several ways to locate information. I selected what seemed like the easiest one. I prayed for the good lord to guide me.

My own husband had been dead for a long time. I never took another. Despite my son-in-law's assistance, I often take on the manly work around the house. I'm not afraid of a hard day's work—I believe it brings you closer to God.

So I prayed for guidance and while I was picking up sticks in the yard one day, my back began to ache, and there it was: a branch shaped like a V, a crook with two arms. I looked at the branch, and I prayed. I knew it was what was meant for me.

Now, my grandmama became known for her cooking; I don't think she needed that little extra something to get that reputation, either. Huge pork tenderloins glistening with fat, the rich meat still moist under the crunch of breadcrumbs. Her mashed potatoes always had a little chunk to 'em, with lots of garlic added. What I wouldn't give to eat it again.

As grandmama grew, those around her in the church and the community noticed her talents and wanted to know what set her apart. Was there a special Brewer technique or ingredient?

She became fiercely protective, because she was afraid others would learn what was really brewing in her kitchen, making her a social pariah despite her confidence the lord was guiding her.

She passed down these recipes along with advice about never standing out too much. We were raised to be good, upstanding women—not just for the godliness of it, but for the fear of discovery. She wanted to know that what had happened to Margaret would never happen to herself, let alone her loved ones. Margaret, that poor soul—God bless her.

So I kept praying, confident the good lord would guide me. How could I use this tool without gaining any unwanted attention? A disguise? Anything that looked out of place would surely get noticed in this small town, where everyone not only knows everyone, but their parents and all their other people too. We all go to the same church and eat the same food. They would know.

I wondered if I should do it at night, but I knew that wasn't an option. Everyone here owns a gun—including myself. An unknown figure wondering the street

would get shot pretty quickly. I'm not afraid of facing the lord, but I didn't want to do it until this matter was put to bed.

One night I was praying and tears were coming down my face and running through all my crinkles. What was I going to do? God had given me a tool—or maybe it came from some other place—and I didn't know how to use it. As I was praying, I saw something from the corner of my eye: the notebook.

I learned that with the right combination of ingredients, a person can glamour themselves. And by that I mean you can become invisible. You aren't literally invisible—I could still see my hands—but others don't notice you. I encountered many people on those long journeys—the meandering I did in Medicine Park, Duhriage Pass, Four Mile Crossing. Their eyes sometimes caught on where I was, and I figured their families may have a little something extra they cook with, too. But they never fully took me in, or called out my Christian name.

Every day for seven days I began to use the tool, going block by block. It guided every turn. I placed the stick in my hands and immediately felt a buzzing, like an electric conduit was flowing through it. I walked forward until the stick started pulling me in one direction, a dog hungry on a leash. And I followed. And I followed.

And on that seventh day, it barked. The energy was so strong in that stick that I started to shake and I almost fell down there on that street—thank God I don't need a hip replacement like Mary went and got herself in Oklahoma City!

But yes, I was shaking all over. It was like trying to get control over a car once it's already started fish-tailing all over the place.

I knew I had found it. The den where the monster lived.

At first I wanted to charge up the sidewalk, barge into the house, and put him in his place. But I knew he was dangerous, and if he could slash that young girl 32 times, he could break me in half easily. I made a note of his address in the little notebook I kept in my pocket. I knew my own community well, but the stick had made me move from

neighborhood to neighborhood until things were less familiar. I didn't know the people as well out here. Didn't know these kinds of monsters existed.

After finding that place I turned and walked back to my car several blocks away. I got in and locked the doors, looked around. Nobody was there. I immediately nodded off to sleep and slept and slept until eventually I woke up and the sun was just starting to move back towards the horizon.

I awoke frozen, more afraid than I had ever been in my life. I began praying immediately. There are devils in this world and our faith can protect us from them. But, how I was afraid! What if the monster discovered me? I felt like I could sense him, a rabid dog constantly smelling out prey, ready to sink his teeth into me. I started to shake again, like I had earlier. I knew I couldn't live like this. It was time to get to the bottom of it.

I started the car and drove in the general direction of the downtown. I wasn't an expert on where I was but I knew enough to get there. I cruised slowly until I spotted the town hall, lacking confidence that I could walk stably on my own two feet. I had to make it inside to find out who owned the property.

I pulled into a vacant spot, luckily in front of the old building. When I got out the feeling overcame me again: waves and waves of terror that sent my stomach lurching. I hadn't eaten since before leaving the house, but I feared I could get sick any minute. I was so afraid I didn't even care about the impression that would have made on anyone if the glmaour dropped. I've never been so petrified in my life.

That was until I stepped inside the building.

I kept looking around that big front entrance, ready for something to come out at any moment. But what I saw, initially, was a standard building. The woman behind the desk was someone who could have easily gone to school with my daughters—maybe she did. Everything, normal. And yet, and yet.

I was slowly repeating the lord's prayer in my mind, over and over, so I could stand up straight despite the overpowering waves of energy that had not left me. I wasn't even focusing on the meaning, just the words, just something familiar I could hold onto in that evil place. *Our father, who art in heaven...* I realized I kept repeating those opening lines over and over, unable to move forward despite my familiarity.

The blonde woman behind the desk raised her face.

“Yes, can I help you ma’am?” The tremors were increasing, my hands were shaking. I wasn’t strong enough to keep up the glamour, not enough to hide that tremor anyway. I could tell she could see it by how hard she was staring into my face, trying to ignore what was going on with the rest of me.

“...” I opened my mouth, I said the prayer again in my mind, and I spoke. “I need to speak to someone about property records...”

She pointed me in the right direction, her smile not one of kindness but of relief that the old woman had moved on.

I focused on the words and my steps, repeating words and counting tiles until I reached the door. I knocked gently and a voice rang out.

My whole body went stiff. The shivering stopped. I had left the branch in the car. But the interior branch I’ve fostered all my life, that’s grown stronger from the book, began pointing in the voice’s direction.

The good Lord has funny ways of doing things, doesn’t he? I expected to go there to find out who owned that property, who that monster was, and I did, but not how I expected to. It was penciled right there on the door.

I had the notebook in my bag but I couldn’t reach for it. He had already called out “Yes?” a second time and I sensed he was getting up from his chair. I knew I had to act, and my memory of the section after the X was probably not enough.

But the sight of Jenny’s face rose in my mind, her bright smile. I thought of her boyfriend’s bright smile, her family’s bright smiles, all of them essentially destroyed by this man’s need to harm.

I knew God was on my side. I stepped in.

# Lost and Found

by Charles Booth

The rain stopped in early May, and for a few weeks, no one missed it. They were still drying out from the long, gray winter, followed by the long, soggy spring with its floods and swollen rivers and the smell of mud clinging to everything. Buster Martin, a seventy-two-year-old small engine mechanic, and his ten-year-old granddaughter, Denise, died back in February; their Chevy pick-up swept away by the few feet of water that washed over the West Creek bridge. They were last seen on a rainy night, clinging to a branch, the old man's gray whiskers shining in the rescuers' spotlight, before the exhaustion overwhelmed him, and Buster – holding a girl too tired to cry – slid smoothly into the overflowing creek, disappearing in that thick, mud-colored water that pushed angrily forward to the historic covered bridge – a hundred and twelve years old – which came loose, shredding its timber trusses as it tumbled down the waterway. When Clay Hinton, a shy seventeen-year-old with the McGregor County Volunteer Fire Department, pulled at some boards that had run aground on the edge West Creek a few days later, he saw those two green, bloated bodies – Buster and Denise – and immediately vomited onto his orange vest.

A month later in Bethlehem, Tennessee, ten-year-old Bobby Henry stood at his window, the lamp light bouncing off the kitchen's yellow, floral wallpaper – the air greasy from freshly fried chicken – looking for his dog, Beaumont. Each morning, weighed down by his oversized rain boots, he walked with his Uncle Teddy to the mailbox and then across the street, to the ravine that now contained what looked like a whitewater rafting course, clicking his teeth for the dachshund. In April, the mailman delivered the dog's body, wrapped in a blanket like an overstuffed sausage, and when Teddy placed this grim package on the garage's concrete floor and carefully unwrapped it, Bobby Henry noticed the animal had empty eye sockets. Poor Ole Beaumont's eyes had disappeared somewhere along his journey from the house on Old Tobacco Road to the ditch by The Pantry convenience store, where the mailman found him amid clumps of leaves, tree limbs, moldy clothes, beer and soda cans, and the pebbly silt from nearby hillsides.



The May 17, 1990, edition of *The Bethlehem Chronicle* included one of Helen Dugger's notorious columns, "Lost and Found," where she claimed responsibility for the recent sunny skies overwhelming the community. Helen, a devout Catholic as every newspaper subscriber knew, had dedicated herself to drying out the town of Bethlehem, praying three rosaries a day for the clouds to go away, and lo and behold, by the time the kids at West Creek High donned their green robes for commencement, the town was dry and warm enough for them to receive their diplomas outside in the school's newly renovated football stadium. You're welcome, she said, making a joke out of the bad weather that had claimed at least three lives – old man, little girl, and beloved dog – in as many months. What Helen didn't realize was that her celebration was a bit premature, and that she'd now cursed the town with a coming heat wave that would turn lawns a sickly yellow, damage Ed Keen's tobacco crop, and lead the staff of *The Bethlehem Chronicle* to try, and fail, frying eggs on the newspaper's asphalt parking lot.

But those miserable days were still a few weeks away. May 17 promised to be another blessing, à la Helen Dugger, to a town that had suffered through two long seasons, and when Clay Hinton left his high school graduation, the windows down in his pickup, he thought he might go fishing instead of to the party his mom was organizing in the Madison Street Baptist Church's banquet hall. He idled in the parking lot, still wearing that unzipped green commencement gown, and as he let the wind play with his already receding blonde hair, let it pick up the stale odor of cigarettes clinging to his truck's worn upholstery, he pictured that little girl again, staring at him with those wide, dead eyes, and for reasons he couldn't quite understand, he bent forward and sobbed, wishing that the goddamn air and warm sun still felt like they did when he was a little boy, or hell like they did a year ago when school let out for the summer and he joined the church softball league and everything felt just perfect, absolutely perfect. A minute passed before he wiped his eyes, looking to make sure no one was staring at him, mocking him, but when he shifted his truck into gear, he saw Bobby Henry stomping barefoot through the tall grass on the other side of the road.

Clay recognized the boy immediately. Christ, everyone in town knew Bobby Henry. That's because last fall, before all the rain and grief, the boy ran away from home, taking only his dog, Beaumont, with him. No one saw or heard from him for a whole month. How could a ten-year-old survive on his own that long? Speculation built

that it wasn't Bobby Henry's idea at all, that someone drove slowly down Old Tobacco Road, rolled down the window and enticed the boy inside with some offer of candy or comics or something worse. Then one day in November, he showed up at his principal's house – a scrawny nothing of a boy, naked in the cold except for an old, oil-stained blanket. And next to him, just as boney, was his faithful dog. Bobby Henry didn't say where he'd been – he didn't say anything anymore. The boy had turned mute, preferring simply to stare at the world and occasionally gasp for breath like a fish marooned on land, that ribbed chest rising and falling as if the heart inside were about to break free of its fleshy confines.

*The Bethlehem Chronicle* ran several stories on Bobby Henry's disappearance, and the police and the sheriff's office recanvased the areas they'd previously gone looking for the boy in the hopes of finding clues to where he'd been and what had happened to that kid's voice. Clay went out on both searches, wearing his sunglasses and a blue McGregor County Volunteer Fire Department windbreaker, feeling older and like an actual law enforcement professional, hoping to be the one who found Bobby Henry and then praying to be the one who found the clue to his long absence.

When December arrived, along with the rain, Helen Dugger wondered in her column if the boy was faking. She saw how much press and attention he was getting, just for being gone and then for being quiet, and she didn't mind all the hate mail that came in accusing her of cruelty. Clay wrote one of those letters – something he'd never done before – because he felt a connection with the boy. They both grew up without fathers, both hated talking aloud, and both found comfort with their dogs. Clay's twelve-year-old basset hound, Kenny, died the summer before, and his heart sank in the spring when he heard about poor Beaumont's demise. And now there was the quiet Bobby Henry, still skinny but not nearly as bad as he was in the fall, wearing only a pair of jean shorts, pushing past the honeysuckle and the briars crowding the ditch along the road, and then disappearing again into the woods.

"Well, shit," Clay said, turning off his truck, cranking up the window, and then struggling in his seat to disrobe from that shiny commencement gown. The laughter and chatter of his classmates, celebrating their emancipation from school, drifted across the parking lot, but Clay ignored them, focusing instead on the thick brush growing along the roadside, a wide green mass swaying from the hot air blowing through town, wiping

away all memories of the cold rainy months Bethlehem had endured. Seeing those trees in full leaf, Clay suddenly realized it was summer, really summer, and he marveled at how the season always seemed to catch him by surprise. In fifth grade, shortly before his father disappeared, the old man took him fishing on the Red River, and while sitting in their canoe, waiting for the lines to dip, waiting to feel the tug of a living creature fighting for its life, his father tapped out a cigarette from his Marlboro soft pack, lit it, and after exhaling a long stream of smoke, said, "Son of a bitch, it's summer ain't it?"

"Yes, sir," Clay had said. A scrawny boy, even though he lived off Snickers and Three Musketeers and double cheeseburgers from Johnny's in those last months with his father, the food calming him after his parents' screaming matches, their breaking picture frames and even kicking in the glass screen on a 30-inch television. Together, the Hintons were oil and water, or rather a flame and gasoline, but separate, like that day in the boat, they seemed content, as if they preferred nothing more than to take long, dreamy drags from a cigarette.

Clay didn't blame his father for leaving. Sure, it was a little funny how he disappeared without a word, without a hint of where he was going or when he'd be back, and all these years later, Clay still ran to check the mail when he got home from school, and he still jumped to answer the yellow, wall-mount telephone in the kitchen whenever it rang, and still nothing. But really, when he sat on his truck's tailgate at night, listening to the crickets and cicadas, he didn't hate his father or even think that much about him. He just hoped his father could somehow see him, wherever he was, and that he was proud of the obedient, considerate, rule-following boy he'd become, and that even though his father never had much respect for cops or authority, he hoped and prayed that he'd be happy his son was on his way to becoming a police officer, a detective, Hell maybe even an FBI agent who thwarted federal crimes, such as kidnappings, which now reminded Clay of Bobby Henry, who'd just been swallowed by the foliage in front of him.

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The heat bouncing off the parking lot's black asphalt caused Clay's forehead to bead with sweat, and his sunglasses slid down his wet nose. He pocketed the shades once he pushed his way into that dark brush, and for a minute or two, it was slow going without a trail to follow, the branches slapping his face, his torso, his arms. He hiked

deeper into that dank-smelling woods, the ground, covered in last year's dead leaves, littered with old tires, a refrigerator door, strangely shaped glass beer bottles from the 1970s, artifacts of a world lost only twenty years ago. Eventually, Clay did find something resembling a trail, and as he made his way down the narrow dirt path, he cursed the fact that he hadn't changed out of his only pair of dress pants, his new black shoes and the white button down his mother bought him for this special occasion, for the photos that would forever memorialize his graduation.

Thorns on a low-hanging vine snagged his polyester pants, and Clay, looking more at these holes than his footing, slipped on a loose rock and slid into a shallow ravine.

"Goddamn it," he said, wiping the mud from the seat of his pants. His feet landed in soft earth next to a narrow, trickling creek, and as he scrambled up the far side of the ravine, heavy clumps of dirt clung to his shoes like Velcro. He paused, closed his eyes and breathed the way his momma taught him, the same exercises she said helped her calm down. He became a moody, angry boy when his father left, and even though he behaved himself too well at school – his teachers wanted a little more spark, a little more fire and personality – he became accustomed to throwing fits at home, smashing dinner plates, and generally acting like the father that was no longer around. So, Mom taught him a technique her own therapist gave her, how to be quiet and slow yourself down, and after a few minutes of breathing in that muggy forest air, he felt his hands soften and his heartbeat slow to a trot.

Clay slipped off his shoes and smacked them together, sending clumps of mud flying around him, and while he squeezed his feet back into them, he noticed the boy – the half-naked Bobby Henry – standing at a barbed wire fence, looking into a field littered with old, rusty lawn mowers and small tires filled with rainwater and soggy leaves. Up a slight hillside stood a shack on brick pilings and a sheet metal building with the door open. A long gravel road or driveway led up to the shack, looped around it, then ended inside the sheet metal building, where a heavy, middle-aged fellow with a graying black beard ratcheted a bolt off some old tractor and lifted out a loose piece of engine from under its hood. A plywood board, leaning against the building, acted as a sign, announcing the place as Martin's Small Engine Repair. The name caused Clay to flinch and bite his finger, bite it hard so the pain would keep him from remembering that

February day when he saw Old Buster Martin and his granddaughter, Denise, staring at him with their shocked, greenish-gray dead faces. That guy over there, sweating in the shade, his hands and fingernails grimy from motor oil, must be Buster's son, must be Denise's father, and since Clay still had a good pair of eyes on him, he could see all the way to the back of the building, where pictures of the recently deceased were taped above a tall Craftsman toolbox. Clay counted fifteen photos before stopping because little Bobby Henry was stealthily working his way through the barbed wire, trying to sneak over to that rundown family business, owned now by a solitary man in mourning.

The boy – God he was so skinny – pulled a rusty wire down to squeeze through the barrier. Clay moved closer, not wanting to startle Bobby Henry or alert the small engine mechanic to their spying. Helen Dugger, in another characteristically thoughtless move, criticized this very shop for taking too long on her husband's mower. Right there in print, in the Sunday *Bethlehem Chronicle*, she accused the man – his father and daughter dead – of trying to swindle her and her husband out of a half-decent riding mower. The hate mail really piled up after that one, prompting her to issue her first and only retraction, something along the lines of "I was just kidding, but this is America, you know." A sort of hateful, prideful apology that inspired Clay to write a second letter to the paper. He stared at her column photo – she was a heavy woman, not fat but large in a masculine, Germanic sort of way – and he let that image, along with his anger, infect his prose, so that he spent more time calling her names, teasing her about her weight, then he did about his legitimate argument for a bit of compassion and sensitivity. Shit, just thinking of that woman and his own letter now raised his blood pressure, prompting Clay to move clumsily forward. He slipped, fell on his bottom, and when he looked up, he saw little Bobby Henry springing for him, like a wild animal on the attack.

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The boy tackled Clay, knocking him onto his back, and while sitting on the recent high school grad's torso, little Bobby Henry clawed at Clay's face with his long, jagged fingernails, grunting like some feral animal, like the possum Clay's dog, Kenny, cornered by the garbage cans, the possum hissing and snarling with the same frightened rage. Bobby Henry's fingers tore little pink lines into Clay's cheeks, his lips, and down his chin. When he finally subdued the boy, pulling those spindly arms behind Bobby Henry's back, he felt the sting of his injuries. In a few days, those pale streaks would

turn to dark red scabs, letting everyone know he'd been in a ridiculous altercation with something like an angry cat. A year earlier, Kenny had swatted at Clay, his claw leaving a small red mark on the boy's bottom lip, and when the scab arrived, the kids at school teased him for having herpes. He couldn't very well confess that a virgin can't get herpes, so the taunts stuck, making everyone think of him as some dirty, diseased degenerate, which was fine by him.

Clay pushed Bobby Henry face first into the ground, pressed a knee into the boy's back, and whispered angrily for him to "Calm down, goddamn it."

The boy wiggled and fought and growled, gritting those angry teeth, until Clay finally let him go. Bobby Henry, never tiring it seemed, jumped back to the fence, keeping his distance, and with heavy breaths, he watched Clay raise his hands as if surrendering.

"It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you, kid. I'm here to help." Clay put on his sunglasses, pulled out his wallet, and flipped it open to reveal the volunteer firefighter I.D. "I'm one of the good guys. Just worried about you, thought you might try to disappear on us again."

Bobby Henry's breathing slowed. The suspicion remained in his eyes, but he sat in the dirt and seemed to regard Clay as something other than a threat. An annoyance maybe, but not a threat.

"You still ain't talking, are you?"

The boy didn't respond. Fresh sweat slid down their faces from the scuffle, and Clay knew his shirt would be completely wet in a few minutes – the shade offered no relief from the heat.

"Why you want to bother that guy?" Clay nodded to the shed. "He's gone through enough with –"

Before he could finish, the boy was up, through the fence and running through the tall grass, skirting the edge of the field to keep himself from being seen. Clay watched a minute, looked back at the woods and the trail that led to his truck. He smelled of dirt and his torn clothes felt heavy against his body. The scratches on his cheeks stung, and the sunglasses slid down his nose. Seven and a half seconds passed before he spit and said, "fuck it," and climbed carefully through that barbed wire fence, snagging his pants and not giving a damn. Bending low, he also ran along the field's

edge, not wanting the proprietor of that small engine shop to see him. When he finally caught up with Bobby Henry at one of the pilings holding up the shack, he realized the boy was waiting for him.

“What is it kid?” Clay asked as if he were talking to a dog. Bobby Henry nodded to the dark, rivetted earth beneath the house. Clay removed his sunglasses to see this shadowy spot that smelled musty and cold. The boy, not waiting for a response, crawled under the shack and returned a minute later with a broken dog collar attached to a chain.

“The guy’s dog get loose?” Clay smiled like his dad the day Clay reeled in that ten-pound catfish. A proud, parental smile. Bobby Henry, knowing the heartbreak of losing a dog, wanted to find this poor guy’s only companion. Someone ought to explain that to the bitch, Helen Dugger.

“What kind of dog was it?”

Bobby Henry looked around, as if scanning for the animal. He lifted his head to make sure the engine mechanic was still in his shop. Then the boy pointed a thumb at himself.

“Like your dog? What was Beaumont? A dachshund?”

The boy leaned forward and slapped Clay hard across the cheek. The scratches radiated with a fresh, hot pain.

“You bastard.” Clay grabbed his arm. That skinny kid, hoarding a secret reserve of strength, pulled easily away from Clay’s grasp. He stepped back, thumbed himself again, and then wrapped the broken collar around his own neck. A tight, but perfect fit.

Clay looked at him until he felt his arms tingle with goosebumps.

“OK, I get it,” he said. “It fits, so you’re Cinderella. This is where you were that month? A prisoner here?”

The boy snarled, but he also nodded.

“They kept you chained up down here. Why?”

Bobby Henry smiled for the first time, but it was the saddest, bitterest, hardest smile Clay ever saw. Shit, he doubted it was even a smile, like the dictionary would reject the use of such a friendly word for what twitched across the child’s face. Bobby Henry nodded in the direction of the shop to indicate the man inside. Then he licked two fingers and mimicked sticking them up his own ass.

“Jesus, kid.”

“Yeah,” Bobby Henry said, his voice quiet and rough like an old man’s.

“Holy shit, you do talk.”

That seemed to embarrass Bobby Henry, who looked down at the broken dog collar in his hand. He dropped it and then reached back into the shadows, feeling around for something in that dirt until he pulled out another collar. This one was much smaller, and Clay pictured the boy and his dog, Beaumont, underneath this shack, shivering from the cold that fall, from the clouds building for the coming months of rain, from the footsteps that creaked the boards above his head, not knowing if those footsteps were heading his way, heading down the steps to pull violently at the chain, dragging the kid out into the light, the horrible gray light of late fall, the light being something to fear more than the dark.

“It’s OK now.” Clay put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Then he looked back toward the small engine repair shop. Those bloated, dead faces reappeared in his vision, the grandfather and the granddaughter, staring at him in an accusatory manner, asking why he was disturbing their slumber. Clay’s anger spiked – he was disturbing them? They’d caused him to lose so much sleep, caused him to cry that afternoon – his goddam graduation day – while they’d spent the last fall keeping a little boy with no father under the house like he was some sort of ragged sex doll.

“Who did it?” Clay asked. “That fella over there in the shop?”

The boy said nothing. He disappeared back under the shack. Clumps of dirt sprayed out of those shadows as the kid scratched and dug into the earth. A moment later, Bobby Henry came back out, his hands and face brown, mud in his hair, and he hobbled as he crawled because he held something large and round in his grimy right hand. The boy stood, dusted the object against his jean shorts and then held up the skull for Clay to see. A long, jagged crack ran along the crown.

Clay shook his head, not wanting to touch it. “Who’s that?”

The boy shrugged. Then he dropped the skull, which landed on its face with a dull thud. He had no way of knowing, but Clay felt certain the skull belonged to his father. Why else had the man stayed so quiet all these years?

“They know about this? The old man and the girl?”



Bobby Henry looked at the opening to the shop. Clay followed his eyes. When he turned back around, the boy was gone, disappeared up the stairs into the shack. The floorboards sighed under his weight. A commotion arose, with things falling to the ground or bumping against the wall, a constant rumbling that had Clay's heart racing. Whatever that guy was back there, this was breaking and entering. And the noise was likely to gain them some attention.

"Hey," someone shouted. Clay spun around and saw the pudgy, bearded mechanic, his heavy-lidded eyes starring almost through him. "You want something?"

Clay slipped his sunglasses back on, took a deep breath, and then put his hands on his hips the way they did in cop shows. Never mind that his white button down was grass-stained and untucked, that his pants had a hole in them, exposing a pale bare knee with thin, bloody scrapes on the flesh.

"Hello Sir." Clay spoke deeper than usual. "Sorry to bother you. I'm working on an investigation, and uh, you know, I thought I'd just come out here and ask you a few questions." Clay swallowed. "If that's ok with you, sir?"

"What?" The man squinted. "You ain't here to pick up a mower?"

"No sir."

The man spit. He looked around Clay toward the shack. "You ain't trying to rob me, are you, you son of a bitch?"

Clay laughed. "No way. I'm with the volunteer fire department." His hand shook as he removed the wallet again and showed the man his laminated I.D. "We're investigating..." Clay paused. He looked at his muddy dress shoes. For a moment, he felt embarrassed, felt like he should just leave the kid in the house and run back to his truck and forget this whole goddamn day, but then he got angry, angry like he felt when he checked the mail sometimes and saw only coupon books, angry that no letter from his father was hidden deep in that metal box, and he thought "To Hell with this guy."

"We're investigating the Martin deaths. Buster and Denise. You knew them?"

The man stepped back, stunned by hearing those names spoken aloud, and he put a hand to his graying black beard. His eyelids fluttered.

"Yeah." He spoke in a slow, dull voice, a voice weary from heartache, a voice that had Clay wondering what that kid, Bobby Henry, had tricked him into. "That was my dad. That was my girl."

“I’m...I’m sorry.”

“Yeah?” The man laughed sadly. “Well, what the hell you gonna do? We all die, I suppose.”

“Mr. Martin, I’m really sorry?”

“Joe.” The man backed up and leaned against the sheet metal building, next to the garage door. “Joe Martin. Yeah, they died in the flood. I guess Dad didn’t think that much water – it wasn’t much – could carry his truck away. Took a few days to find them.”

“Yes sir.” Clay closed his eyes and nodded. “I was the one who found them.”

Joe Martin didn’t know how to take this information at first. He just stared at the grass in front of him. Then he pulled a dirty, oil-stained rag from his pocket and dried his wet face.

“She’d just turned ten,” Joe said. “Threw her a party, we had some cake and corndogs – that was her favorite – and then that crazy old fucker started arguing with me again, and I had it with him, I was just done – oh Christ – and so we started yelling and pushing each other and he knocked me off the porch and now I do drink a little. Not much, Kid, but a little and I just couldn’t get to my feet. I was like a turtle on its back, and so they drove off and I didn’t think two shits about it, until I heard about the truck and then them clinging to that branch. Were you there for that?”

“No sir.”

Joe Martin nodded while squinting at Clay. “You get in a fight?”

Clay didn’t know how to answer. He smiled, kicked at a rock sticking out of the dirt, looked up at the sun, but no words came to him.

“What happened to your face? Looks like a cat mauled you.”

When Clay still didn’t speak, Joe Martin looked down at the rock the young man was toeing. He seemed to be inspecting it, analyzing it, and when Clay looked down, he realized it was the skull and not a rock. His surprised kept him from seeing Joe Martin until the man was right before him, until it was too late to stop Mr. Martin from wrapping those beefy arms around Clay’s neck.

The two struggled, Clay trying to breath while the hair on Joe Martin’s forearm tickled his nose. They fell to the ground and rolled against the stairs. The man knew what he was doing, knew how to subdue a person the way cops sometimes do, and he

grabbed Clay's arm, twisted it violently behind him, breaking it and sending a sharp, paralyzing pain surging into the recent West Creek High School graduate's eyes.

"What you doing out here in the woods, kid?" Joe Martin asked. He laughed, bending close to Clay's face, and licked the boy's cheek. "Don't you know the Devil lives out here."

A long silence followed. Clay lay crumpled on the ground, crying from the pain, shivering at the thought that he'd end up chained beneath that house, that his skull would one day be mistaken for a rock in the ground. Could his father see him now? Where the hell was he?

"Dad," he mumbled at the skull, his lips wet in the dirt. Above the cranium's hollow eye sockets, he saw Bobby Henry at the top of the shack's stairs, holding a glass jar. The seal was twisted tight on top, and inside, two balls floated in a foggy liquid. Clay blinked while staring at it, watching the balls slowly turn until he realized those small orbs were eyeballs.

"Welcome home, you little bastard," Joe Martin said. "I see you found Beaumont. Besides my father, that dog had the most hateful eyes I ever saw. I had to go back for 'em."

Bobby Henry, wild boy, feral animal, a creature filled with such hate and rage – the same feelings that recently coursed through Clay before Joe Martin broke his arm – looked at his dog's missing eyes, took two wobbly steps back into the doorway and then passed out, letting the jar fall to the floor where, instead of shattering, it simply rolled back into the small house.

Joe Martin laughed. Not a loud, long laugh, but a short, sing-songy, gleeful laugh, as if he'd just watched a slapstick comedy and he was replaying the movie's scenes in his head. He continued chuckling while he undid Clay's dress pants and pulled them down to the boy's pale, skinny knees.

Clay tried to speak, but the words came out as faint sounds, unable to compete with the pain and exhaustion throbbing through him. "Please, sir...wait please...sir?"

In a dream state, in the fog of it all, Clay saw that woman – Helen Dugger – appear in the mist of dust, the wind blowing up the dry dirt at the beginning of that summer-long drought, the one she'd prayed so fervently for. She appeared like an angel, or maybe the Reaper himself, and her being there, in that little circle in the woods, was

so out of place that he knew she wasn't real. He'd never hallucinated before, never imagined someone who wasn't there, and it shocked him a bit at how real she looked, a large woman, at least six feet tall, with dyed blonde hair sprouting in enormous curls. Sweat bubbled from the thick plaster she spackled across her face to hide her wrinkles and blemishes. She marched toward them, an avenging angel, holding a heavy purse in one hand and a rusty lawn mower blade in the other and when he felt Joe Martin let go of his hips, when he realized his mind was regaining some clarity over the pain, he saw that the woman was there, before him, in the flesh – not a dream but real – and he saw her lift that blade and then bring it down hard onto Joe Martin's head, wedging it there in his dark hair, causing Joe to crumble and fall while blood ran into his eyes. The small engine mechanic groaned and routed around in the dirt like a wounded animal.

"Oh God!" she shouted. "He's bleeding?"

"Mrs. Dugger," Clay whispered.

"I didn't mean for him to bleed." She looked at Clay and then into the sky. "I swear. I just wanted him off that boy."

Joe Martin moaned, tried to stand, and then fell onto his back, revealing to Clay the wide, gory gash atop his head.

"I only came to say I was sorry." Helen Dugger reached into her purse and pulled out a card. "See. It's an apology note."

"Ma'am. I think my arm's broken."

She ran away, back toward the car parked in the gravel drive. In the scuffle with Joe Martin, he hadn't heard her drive up. Now, she stood with the door open, catching her breath.

"Mrs. Dugger," he shouted. "Ma'am!"

"Help me." Joe Martin waved his arms in the air as if he were doing a breath stroke. "I can't see."

"I'm sorry." Helen Dugger threw the apology note at them, but it pattered out on its strange, curved trajectory and landed on the gravel. Before getting in her car, she looked from Clay to Bobby Henry to Joe Martin. Her face, so soft at first, the brows and cheeks on the verge of collapsing under the weight of that apology, suddenly darkened, as if a cloud passed between her and the sun. She stared for a long time at the scene

before her, and Clay realized, as if seeing this world through her eyes, that the three of them looked the same, as if they were simply different generations of the same man.

“Is this why you still haven’t finished my husband’s mower.” She shouted with a voice overwhelmed by hate and tears. The car door slammed shut behind her, and as the tires crunched over the gravel driveway, sending white dust into the air, Clay pressed his forehead against the skull on the ground – his father’s maybe – and wondered which of the three of them would be first to stand.

# Innocent Lies

by Joel Fishbane

Quinn didn't like Charlize and wasn't surprised when their daughters fought; it seemed a natural extension of the animosity she had never bothered to hide. The disdain had started the day the Wintersets moved in across the street and Quinn had noted a bumper sticker that declared Charlize had voted for Jill Stein. Her disapproval only escalated with every pair of leopard print stretch pants and impossibly-high-heeled shoes, a sleazy aesthetic that belonged further south, like downtown or the ninth circle of Hell. Their daughters went to Heroine Day Camp, which divided campers into squads named for magnificent women of myth. Charlize's daughter was a Maid Marion while Quinn's eldest was an Amazon. Tribal warfare had extended beyond games of Capture-the-Flag and, at a recent BBQ, things had gotten out of hand. A fifteen-year-old counsellor had sprained her wrist wrenching the girls apart. The girls themselves were unscathed but Quinn suspected she'd get an email. Charlize didn't let things slide.

Now Charlize was at her door. Temperatures had been in the nineties all week and Quinn didn't appreciate having to open the front door. Charlize tottered in one of her traditional ensembles; her sneakers looked like the sort an Instagram model might sport for the sake of a few thousand clicks.

"This isn't a good time," said Quinn, although she hadn't been doing anything of worth. Thorin had taken the little Amazon and her sister to the movies. Quinn had been mucking around in the kitchen. She worked at the DMV and spent all week being called terrible things. It led to the sort of tension that only her Ottolenghi could cure.

"Would you rather talk to my husband?" said Charlize. "Or the police?"

That didn't take long, thought Quinn. Charlize had a habit of throwing her husband around like a live grenade. Matthew was built like a linebacker and worked long hours at a law firm that spent its time tackling corporate scum.

"You're not going to the police," sighed Quinn.

"Your daughter committed *assault*."

"That's a little extreme."

"She punched Keke in the *eye*."

*Keke*. Matthew once told her it meant "good luck". Quinn wouldn't have minded it as a nickname but it bothered her that this was all the girl had. Like she had been robbed of some crucial choice. Her own daughter was Guinevere. A name with plenty of options. "They're *six*," said Quinn. "Girls will be girls."

"*Boys* will be boys. Girls should know better. Do you even know why they fought?"

"I'm sure it was nothing."

"Your daughter went *nuts* because *Keke* said there wasn't a Santa Claus."

Quinn's laugh was a good sharp bark. Sweat slipped down Charlize's face and Quinn thought she could trace the path of a single bead as it trickled down the high cheekbones and past what could have been a surgically altered nose. From here, the drop curved round the plump chin, and finally came to rest in the dip over her dark collarbone. The collarbone was pronounced; it might have been surgically altered too.

"You need to take this seriously," said Charlize. "Your daughter *hit* someone.."

"Gwen is *six*. Santa Claus might as well be God. I'll tell her to keep her claws to herself if you'll tell your daughter not to be so sacrilegious. There will be plenty of time for cynicism when they're older."

"It's not cynicism. It's reality."

"Guess we know where she gets it from."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Gwen's. And Santa's, I guess."

Who needed a heatwave when there was Quinn to stoke the flames? She should have made peace but the remark that girls should "know better" had rankled her. Girls were not made of sugar. They were, like so many boys, entirely capable of being snips and snails. Hadn't it been girls who had called Quinn a witch when she was young? "A witch, a witch! Quinny's a witch which is why she has warts!" Something about the repetition and rhythm had delighted them. There never had been *warts*, plural. It had been a single mischievous growth on her forehead. Three brief sessions with a dermatologist and the thing had vanished forever. The girls didn't care. Even in college, there were those who still called her a witch.

"Children have such a short time to believe in things," said Quinn. "Why tell them there isn't a Santa Claus?"

“Because there isn’t.”

“That’s your opinion.”

Charlize rubbed her pinched face. “An opinion is an expression of a position that is taken in the absence of fact. Biographers and historians have *opinions*. I’m stating *truth*.”

Quinn studied the bulging muscles of Charlize’s neck. Before the DMV, she’d been a massage therapist - she liked to joke that now she caused pain instead of relieving it - and she had kept a few clients for the extra income. She’d even been hired by Matthew last spring after he hurt his back. He’d been doing yard work. Quinn had pictured Charlize as the cruel taskmaster who never let her husband rest.

"Santa Claus is a *possible* truth," said Quinn.

“There’s nothing possible about it. You’re telling your children their gifts were delivered by some fat man when you *know* you went out and bought them yourself. That’s a bald-faced lie.”

“A white lie.”

“Don’t use that expression.”

“Pardon?”

“It comes from the belief that white equals something innocent.”

“All right, so it’s an *innocent* lie. Santa Claus is something fun. You like to have fun, don’t you?”

“I’d rather treat my child with respect.”

“Are you saying I don’t?”

“Would you let Gwen keep a wallet she found on the street? That could be harmless or it could be the first step to a life of dishonesty. There are no innocent lies. Everything has consequences.”

“And what are the consequence of telling a six-year-old there’s no Santa? All you do is create a humorless, unimaginative child who grows into an equally humorless, unimaginative adult.”

“I will not lie to my children, no matter how insignificant it seems.”

“Careful. You teach her the value of honesty, she might start letting you know what she thinks of you.”



Everything in Charlize clenched. There's the trapezius, thought Quinn. The carotid artery and the jugular vein. No wonder she wears leopard prints. She has a predator's blood, fast and unrelenting. The sight of the woman, so fierce and upset, gave Quinn such pleasure that she could not tear herself away. A minor case of schadenfreude. Sadism as white – sorry, as *innocent* - as any of the lies she had ever told.

Charlize came as close as she could without stepping into the house. An inch shorter than Quinn, she shook in those designer shoes. "You think I'm a bad mother because I won't let my kid believe in fairy tales? Let me tell you something: I work fifty hours a week for minimum wage. There is no magic in the world. There's only work and more work so that maybe your kid can have a better life than you had. I get that for her, that's all the magic I need."

Quinn's quippy comeback stalled in her mouth. Fifty hours a week? Matthew had always made it seem like the woman was a professional sloth. "Where do you work?" she asked.

This only angered Charlize, who assumed (rightly) that Quinn had missed the point. "You want to talk about parenting? *You're* the one who didn't even bother to find out why the girls were fighting. *You're* the one who laughed when I told you. You're the one who – "

- at this point, something in Charlize burst and her red face contorted in a spasm of pain. Quinn had been right: Charlize *had* been shaking in those designer shoes and now she pitched directly into the half-closed front door. Out of reflex, Quinn leapt back and when Charlize hit the door, it swung back into the house. Charlize continued to fall and then she was curled on the ground like a crumpled note. Quinn almost enjoyed the sight of Charlize sprawled on the tiles, a beached whale with blousy hair and press-on nails. But her smile died when Charlize didn't move. Quinn knelt to shake her neighbor. Something wet ran down the woman's scalp; instinct, or maybe premonition, told her it wasn't sweat.

\*

When Christmas neared, Quinn and Thorin made their usual holiday deal: the tree was her territory while Christmas dinner was his. They divided their time between the in-laws and had a standing policy to only buy each other one gift under a hundred dollars.

There was also a limit to what they gave to the girls; there was *no* limit to what they said about where the gifts had come from. This year, though, the policy preyed on Quinn. Charlize Winterset's accusations had seemed absurd in the heat of August. Now, as the frost gathered on the glass, she wasn't so sure.

"Do you know the girls never thank us?" said Quinn one night. "We do so much for them. And what do they say?"

Thorin eyed her over his glasses. "I hope you didn't get into parenthood for the gratitude."

Thorin was an editor and did much of his work from home. He always had his nose buried in a manuscript, his mouth curled in a perpetual scowl. Quinn, meanwhile, was engaged in the Ritual of the Annual Christmas Cards. She always wrote the addresses in elegant calligraphy, loving the way the black ink sat on the envelope's cream-colored face. It was nine-thirty and the girls were asleep. The suburbs were dusted with snow. Sondheim was on the stereo and the glasses were full of wine. The air had a rich intimacy. They would almost certainly make love later; they wanted another baby.

"Do you think they need to learn about how the world works?" she went on. "Maybe they should know it isn't a bunch of elves who made their toys."

"We'll tell them about Santa when we tell them about sex. They'll be so excited about one, they won't care about the other."

"You're not taking this seriously."

"Not in the slightest." He merrily made a slash across the page.

Quinn had a spreadsheet with the addresses and scanned the names to decide which to write next. "Oh my God! I forgot about the Wintersets."

"We've never sent them a card in the past."

"It's different now."

"Why? Because of last summer? She had sunstroke and you helped. That hardly calls for a letter."

"She hit her head on our wall."

"She was overheated. That's not the wall's fault."

"They've been having a hard time. Keke has those allergies. And there's this new trouble with the police."

"We don't know what that's about. Matt might have already taken care of it."

"It's *Matthew*," said Quinn. "He doesn't like Matt."

She opened a fresh Christmas card - they had printed three dozen, each with a picture of the family smiling before a tree. She tried to compose a personalized note. Last month, the police had come to Matthew's office and, ever since, there had been rumors of trouble. Quinn had been trying to learn more but Matthew wasn't returning her texts.

Quinn's pen continued to hover. "I don't know what to say."

"If you can't think of what to say, you probably shouldn't say anything." Thorin taught a class once a week and now had the tone of the professor imparting wisdom to an inferior world. "You shouldn't send a Christmas card to people you don't care about."

"Do we care about David and Hugo? And what about your ex?"

"We were married. I like to be polite."

"Well, that's all I'm doing with the Wintersets."

"It's a lie," said Thorin.

"A white lie," said Quinn and immediately cringed. Ever since the summer, she'd been unable to use the phrase without fearing she'd committed a terrible act. "And I *do* care," she added. "You like to be polite to your ex. I like to be a good neighbor."

"You never used to," muttered Thorin but he went back to his work.

Above the card, Quinn's pen continued to float like a sprite. It wasn't true that she didn't care about being a good neighbor. She had just never cared about being one to Charlize, who she had not talked to since a neighborhood block party in the fall. Embarrassed by her incident in the summer, Charlize had kept her distance. Quinn still didn't know where the woman worked fifty hours a week at minimum wage. Their children went to the same school but they did not, as might be expected, spend much time together. Now there were these rumors about Matthew. If Quinn was a better neighbor, she might be able to learn more.

"I'll just tell them I'm sorry they're having a terrible time."

"Don't do that for Chrissakes. If you're going to write something, keep it nice."

"Another innocent lie." This time, she had remembered to say it right.

But she did not finish. When she went upstairs, Quinn left behind a card with nothing but the word *Dear* scrawled across the inside.

As predicted, Thorin clambered on top of her as soon as they fell into bed. After looking forward to the encounter, she now thought only about the Wintersets. Devoted as she was to the truth, Charlize might appreciate a letter that addressed her troubles head-on. *Dear Matthew and Charlize: We hope you have a pleasant Christmas even though your daughter has allergies and you might now have legal bills....* No. She could not subscribe to Charlize's philosophy. Thorin was right. Keep it nice. Above her, Thorin slaved away but Quinn's mind kept going to the blank Christmas card and the message she couldn't put into words.

In the morning, Quinn collected the cards and left the incomplete one in the drawer. At the post office, she bought thirty Christmas-themed stamps and affixed them one by one. She was nostalgic for the stamps that had to be licked. Why did nothing stay the same? Stamps become stickers and lawyers become defendants. Quinn did not believe Matthew had it in him to be a crook. Last spring, when she had treated his back, he had been in such agony that he had been brought to tears. It suggested a tenderness of spirit. Later, at the DMV, she lorded over her paperwork and wondered how she might react if Thorin was suddenly accused. She bestowed on herself a legendary stoicism. But how would she explain it to the girls? More innocent lies, of course. This, she realized, was probably not what Charlize had done. If Matthew was in trouble, Charlize had probably sat Keke down and told her all about it. The idea spurred Quinn towards rage. To tell the truth about Santa Claus was heartless but to risk alienating a girl from her father was nothing short of cruel. The girl was bi-racial and Quinn guessed she already knew to be careful around the police. This would only increase her fear and mistrust. It was shameful. Why should a little girl have to face such hard realities?

When she came home, she saw that the Winterset's driveway was barely shoveled. There were no Christmas lights. She ached for Keke, trapped in that charmless house. Inside, she went retrieved the unfinished Christmas card. She completed the salutation, now addressing the letter to Keke instead.

*Ignore your mother,* Quinn wrote. *Your father is a good man.*

For the signature, Quinn did not bother with Santa's surname; she wanted Keke to imagine that Santa was a personal friend, a benevolent spirit watching from afar.

That year it stormed on Christmas Eve and Quinn, who adored a good blizzard, threw open the curtains and helped the girls count the snowflakes as they fell. Later, while Thorin handled bedtime, Quinn lay out her giftwrapping needs on the dining room table. She arranged them precisely as a surgeon would their tools: paper, scissors, tape, ribbons, bows. The gifts were hidden in the attic, where little girls could never go, and she wore soft shoes so the floorboards wouldn't squeak. Thorin was too clumsy to be trusted. He often lumbered along, clattering like Jacob Marley with all those terrible chains.

"The sugar plums are dancing," he announced upon coming down. He nodded in approval at the gifts. "You should be a professional."

"I have a gift for gifts."

Quinn began disturbing the ashes in the fireplace. With one of Thorin's boots, she made a single imprint on the rug. Thorin watched her with a look of both amusement and desire and the moment might have turned to baby-making if not for the sudden banging on the door. Quinn rushed to the front hall, worried the knocking would wake the girls. Through the glass, she saw Charlize Winterset, a silhouette seasoned by falling snow. The woman's winter wardrobe was as awful as her summer one. Animals had died for her coat and she wore an expansive hat with a wide brim that orbited her head.

"Power's out," said Charlize. "It's only affected my side of the street."

Quinn looked out and saw that it was true. It was some quirk of electrical planning. A similar thing had happened last year.

"I've been going to every house that's lit," said Charlize. "You're the only one who's home."

"It's the holidays. A lot of people leave town."

"Who's at the door?" Thorin stepped into the hall. "Oh. Hello."

"I need to charge my phone," said Charlize. "It's completely dead."

Twas the season for charity. Quinn stepped aside and Charlize came in, bringing the winter with her. She stamped her boots and shook off the storm.

"Remember when we all had landlines?"

"We still have one," said Quinn.

"His number is in my phone," said Charlize in exasperation. "I remember when we used to memorize things too."

“Whose number?”

“*Matthew’s.*”

She infused the word with venom. Thorin and Quinn exchanged looks. They'd guessed there was tension at the Winterset home but this suggested something worse. It increased Quinn's pity for the unseen Keke. In the last two weeks, Quinn had developed a near-maternal feeling for the girl. She'd searched for her while picking up Gwen at school and had ideas about driving her home so she could learn whether she had liked the letter from Santa. Or, rather, the *letters*. Quinn had felt so good about sending the first that she'd sent two more.

Thorin disappeared into the house while, in the living room, Quinn stooped to unplug a lamp. Once it was charging, Charlize stared at her cellphone, wiping her nose on her sleeve as she waited for the device to spring back to life. It seemed to take forever. The women shifted in the uncertainty, aware of a crackle between them that could have roasted chestnuts. At last, Charlize was able to make a call, but the short power cord meant she had to bend over to put the phone to her ear.

“You're a son of a bitch!” she shouted. “You're a goddamn *coward!*”

There was a rustle upstairs and Quinn heard Thorin's heavy steps. An ominous feeling wrapped around her throat. She inched toward Charlize, gesturing for her to keep it down.

“You think you’re tough?” Charlize yelled. “Taking her while I’m at *work*? Are you that afraid of me, you little *snake!*”

She ended the call and looked like she might crush the phone in her fist.

“I don't understand,” said Quinn. “He took her?”

Charlize glanced up, confused as to why Quinn was there. For her, there had been only the voicemail, that void into which she could vent her rage. “He came to the *house*,” she muttered.

“He's no longer living there?”

“You think I want him near us? After what he did?” Charlize began sending a text. “I *knew* he'd do something like this. I told that lawyer he was going to run. And, surprise surprise, look what happened.”

“Nobody’s running in this weather,” Quinn said.

"No. Everyone's hibernating. The trick is to figure out where." Her nails clacked against the screen as she sent one text, then another.

"Call the police," said Quinn.

"It's been three hours and he's her father. Right now, there's nothing the cops can do. But you just wait: as soon as the weather clears, he'll leave the state. When that happens, he'll have broken his bail conditions and then it's going to be a whole heap of trouble. Which is just as he likes it, the damn fool."

Bail? Quinn hadn't realized things were that bad. A new pressure seized her lungs. She hunted for her wine and finished it in a single gulp. "Where do you think he'll go?"

"Oh, I don't know. West. I don't care, as long as he doesn't drag Keke with him. I told her not to go anywhere alone with him. Why didn't she listen?"

"Does he have family in town?"

"His mother's nearby. I can't tell if she's ignoring me because she knows something or because she hates me hard. But it's not a bad idea to pay a visit. If he'd have gone anywhere, it would be to her. You know men and their mothers."

"You can't drive in this weather."

"I told you: the moment the storm ends, he'll disappear." She yanked the phone charger from the wall and collected her coat.

Quinn was startled. Having glimpsed the drama, she wanted to know how it all turned out. "Do you want me to come? You shouldn't have to do this alone."

Charlize was as surprised by the offer as Quinn herself: it had popped out entirely on its own. She studied Quinn, as if trying to determine if she had come upon a trap. "

Why not?" she said. "Always good to have a second gun."

The phrasing made Quinn wonder if there was an element of danger to her mission, some small trepidation Charlize wouldn't admit. She went to find Thorin to tell him her plan.

"You're going out *now*?"

"She asked for my help," said Quinn.

"I thought you hated each other."

"I like to be a good neighbor." It wasn't much of a lie, innocent or otherwise. It sounded false, even to her.

The storm assaulted them as they crossed to Charlize's SUV. Up close, Quinn saw the rust in the wheel wells and the chips in the paint. The Jill Stein bumper sticker was bold as ever, like a bright red tongue being stuck out to the world. The drive began in a state of treachery and only worsened from there. Charlize, hunched over the steering wheel, drove slow as she peered into the night.

"Is Matthew really so bad?" asked Quinn.

"The word is *selfish*. Man is opposed to using his heart."

"Is it possible they have the wrong man?"

"As possible as Santa and the elves."

Quinn wrung her hands, hoping it looked like she was trying to stay warm. "So what did he do? Embezzlement or something?"

"I used to find him *exotic*," said Charlize, shaking her head. "Had the charm of the Devil."

"Is Keke in danger?"

"She worships him too hard. I tried to warn her but I guess she ignored every word."

The car fish-tailed and, for a moment, they were out of control. Quinn cried out but Charlize was calm as she took her foot off the brakes and turned into the skid. The car responded like a chastened child and then the crisis was done. Quinn was embarrassed by her show of the weakness. She sat up straighter, determined to screw down her courage. She wouldn't lose it again.

"If I hadn't worked a double today, I would have been home," Charlize muttered "I need the money for *gifts*. This holiday. It's a goddamn tyranny."

"Christmas is my favorite time."

"It's a plague. And it makes people do ridiculous things. Do you know some idiot has been sending my daughter letters from Santa? I had to tear them up."

Quinn tried to maintain a placid expression. "You opened her mail?"

"She's six. She shouldn't be getting mail."

"What did the letters say?"

"Some nonsense about Matthew being a good man. I'd say Matthew himself sent them but he doesn't have the imagination."



"Maybe someone was trying to help."

"How is that helping? Matthew is *not* a good man. How are children ever to know how to live in the world if we keep lying about what kind of world it is?" She shook her head and seemed to bear down as if giving birth or taking a shit. "I wish I knew who wrote them."

"Santa?"

"Don't get cute. You gotta keep your eyes out. One day it's letters from Santa and the next it's DMs on Instagram asking for pics."

"That's pretty bleak."

"It's a wasteland world. Days are as bleak as they come."

"You treat the world like it's out to get you and that's all you'll see. It's all Keke's going to see too. We get so few moments of innocence. Didn't your mother talk to you about Santa?"

"Sure. Usually between the moment we got evicted and the one when we found a new place to live."

"That really happen?"

"There were a few bad years. I never wanted my kids to go through it. That was one of Matthew's selling points. From day one, he was the man with the plan. I was just wrong about what sort it was."

"We once got evicted," said Quinn. "My parents decided to pay for my braces."

"Well, you've got a helluva smile. I'd say it was worth every cent."

Mother Winterset lived in a house whose Christmas lights could be seen through the driving snow. There was a Cadillac in the driveway that Quinn recognized at once. Matthew, the man with the plan, had vanity plates: WINTERKING. Charlize parked across the street and sat with the engine running, drumming her manicured thumbs against the wheel.

"You really want to help?" she said.

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"But are you really here? Last summer, you just had to call the ambulance. This isn't going to be like that. He really is going to leave the state. This storm is the only thing saving us but it won't last. You want to believe in fairy tales? Well, that girl is trapped in the tower and someone has to ride to her rescue. What do you say to that?"

Quinn stared into the snow. At some point, she had stepped onto the ride and now didn't know how to get off. "Was it really so bad? The thing he did?"

"He was selling black-market oxy. At the *school*."

In Thorin's business, this was called burying the lede. Quinn still hoped it was a mistake but there was only one way to know for sure. She tugged down the edges of her winter cap as if it was battle armor and asked Charlize, her general, to tell her what to do.

When Matthew came to the door, Quinn saw he had lost none of his menacing good looks, though the danger was undercut by the Santa Claus hat. The white pom-pom bounced by his head, a snowball that had lost its way.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know, just being neighborly!" She thought her laugh sounded crazed.

"You're a long way from home, Quinny."

"So are you." She stamped her feet and related the story she and Charlize had prepared. "Charlize wants to tell all the parents what you supposedly did."

Matthew twisted his mouth. "That goddamn busybody. She's got no right."

"I told her the same thing. Luckily, I was the first one she called. I convinced her that doing this on Christmas Eve wasn't a good way to make friends. I think I talked her into waiting until after Boxing Day."

"That was smart of you."

She looked past him. "You want to invite me in?"

"How did you know where I was?"

"Charlize said it was the likeliest place."

"And you just hopped in a car during snowmageddon?"

"Thorin thinks I'm finding last minute gifts. I won't stay long."

Matthew relented. "Keke and Mom are asleep. We'll have to keep it down."

She trailed him down a hallway that spilled into a holiday wonderland. The angel atop the tree had its arms stretched high and looked like a weightlifter holding the ceiling over its head. Down below, an army of gifts lay in wait, begging to be found. Matthew had made a camp on the couch. On the coffee table was his laptop, a fresh beer, and a pair of passports lying side by side.

"You could have called."

"You've been ignoring my texts. So? Is what she said true?"

"Is that why you came? Or did you want to get me under the mistletoe?"

"Nothing's changed, Matthew."

"And if I ask for a massage?"

"Matthew..."

"A joke." He put up his hands in peace. She had the feeling the beer wasn't his first, second, or third.

Quinn tried to listen to the rest of the house. There was a backdoor and Charlize still had a key from when she had watered the plants during Mother Winterset's last vacation. Quinn was supposed to text Charlize once she was inside so Charlize would know Matthew was distracted.

"You want a drink, Quinny?"

"How about some Oxy?"

He gave a tight smile. "The police have it all wrong and Charlize is looking for an excuse to walk off like a queen in the divorce. I'm done with her nonsense. I told her as much before all this went down. I said we'd give Keke one last Christmas and then I was moving out."

"Seems like you've already moved out."

"Things got out of hand."

Quinn motioned to the passports. "Going somewhere?"

"Just making sure no one *else* goes anywhere."

"You think Charlize is going to take her?"

"If you were worried about Thorin, you'd do exactly the same."

"Speaking of which, I should text him. He was worried about me going out."

Quinn turned to write the message to Charlize. She was running on instinct now and heard her own heart. She turned back in time to see Matthew rotating his neck in an exaggerated way.

"This whole thing has me tenser than a steer in the slaughterhouse. Since you're here, what say you give me your magic touch?"

It was exactly what she needed: a way to keep him occupied. He lay face down on the couch and Quinn sat over him much as she had last spring. That session was months

in the past and yet still bold in the mind. It had been a hazy spring day and there had been a fight with Thorin, the sort of blowout that left her second-guessing every choice she'd ever made. It was in this moment of weakness that she had found herself standing over Matthew to help with his aching back. He had always seemed fun, a blank canvas on which she could paint all sorts of daydreams. When he had joked about what *other* areas of tension might need release, she had decided to oblige. It had been a careless whim, after which she had fled the house, pausing only long enough to wash her hands. There had seemed little point in confession. It would only upset Thorin and there was no chance of it happening again. This was the thing that Charlize Winterset didn't understand. The truth is a jagged rock. Why not soften the edges when you can?

"You seem out of practice," said Matthew, speaking into the couch.

From somewhere in the house, she thought she heard a distant creak. "You understand why I had to come, don't you? Our daughters go to that school. I have a right to know what's going on there."

"And so you drove through a storm on Christmas Eve? You're a bad liar, Quinn." He rolled over, presenting himself like a gift. "When the dust settles and I get back, we should absolutely have drinks."

"Get back from where?"

That grin faltered. He looked like a baseball smacked in a new direction. "I just mean that I'm going to be busy. Honestly, the last few days have been a nightmare. I feel like I've been somewhere else. That's all I meant. When I *get back* from all of this."

The house was maddening in its silence. From the kitchen, even the fridge had lost its hum. She couldn't hear the storm and saw the absurdity of her position. An hour ago she had been nestled at home. Now she was here, spiraling, with Matthew Winterset offering himself, just as he had the previous spring.

"Maybe you don't have to leave right away. You tell Thorin there's an accident blocking the road. Tell him Santa crashed."

"No. I should go."

Accepting his fate, Matthew trailed her back to the front hall where she wrestled into her boots and coat. She stood to find him standing close, mischief in the eyes. It made him handsome and she remembered how much she had liked him and how, until

now, she had thought of their encounter as a happy secret between friends. Your father is a good man, she had told Keke. She still needed it to be true.

"I was hoping to score some Oxy," she said. "That's why I came."

That grin of knowledge returned. He went to the closet and, from the inside pocket of his coat, he produced a small bag with a half-dozen pills. He told her it was all he had left; he'd flushed everything before the cops searched the house.

"But I can get you more. We'll talk."

"When you get back," she nodded and she stepped back into the snow.

\*

In the brief time since their arrival, the snow had collected with malice. The SUV was now half-buried, for Charlize did not want to waste time brushing off the snow. Keke was half asleep in the back, her thumb in her mouth, face hidden by a pillow of black curls. The plan had worked with clockwork efficiency. Charlize had gone in the back door, swept the girl into her arms, and exited again with ease. There had been little resistance. The girl had woken long enough to recognize her mother's face. She might not have even realized she was being taken away.

"I'll have a hell of a time explaining things in the morning," said Charlize.

"Christmas will distract her."

"Matthew took the gifts when he left."

"Bring her to our place. We'll find her something."

"You mean that?"

Quinn looked out at the storm. "He had her passport."

"Of course he did. He doesn't miss a trick. But he missed us, didn't he?" For the first time all night, Charlize laughed.

Charlize's phone began to ring and, when she didn't answer, Quinn's followed suit. It was Matthew both times and the women, without speaking, put their phones on silent. Quinn guessed that Charlize, according to her own philosophy, might want to know everything else Quinn could say. But she could not surrender to these ideals. The holidays have always been a time for illusions. Parents pretend to have money, spouses pretend to be in love. Fantasy triumphs over truth. And why not? We all deserve a bit of myth to call our own. Quinn glanced back at the sleeping Keke and wished Charlize had not waylaid those letters from Santa. She hoped her daughters would never stop

believing and for Keke to start. Perhaps there was still time. It was still Christmas, after all, a time when the spirits are invited to intervene. She looked out at the storm, studying the snow. Searching for ghosts. •

# Searching for Trauma in a Coffee Shop

by Pooja Joshi

I'd been watching Jhalli for thirty-nine days when she disappeared. I know it was thirty-nine because the day before it was thirty-eight, and the day before that it was thirty-seven. I kept a note of everything in my diary – what she ordered, where she sat (usually it was that booth hidden away in the corner, but on the off-chance it was occupied, she would clench her jaw and begrudgingly choose another seat). I thought perhaps I could figure out what happened to her. But now the forty-sixth day has come and gone, and there is no sign of her, and you may be my only hope at this point.

It is important that you understand why I kept such close tabs on Jhalli – I am not a pervert or voyeur, though I can already see your eyebrow bending with disbelief. The problem is I am a writer with a writing problem, a drinking problem, a smoking problem, and a diabetes problem. So I suppose that is not one problem, but rather four problems. The writing problem was the one that constantly dug under my nails, biting into my skin – what kind of writer has nothing to say? Every day, I came to the Chaar Number Road Cafe, ordered a black coffee and opened my notebook and stared. And stared and stared. Then every evening, I paid for three black coffees and an egg roll, listened to Ibrahim grumble at me for taking up a seat the entire day, and went home.

So you must understand that when I began to watch Jhalli, I only did it because watching her made my hand pick up my pen and write something for the first time in years. Once that had happened, there was simply no choice but to keep going, keep writing, keep watching.

That first day, so exactly forty-five days ago, she came into the cafe around two in the afternoon. I normally do not notice every patron that walks into the cafe (not that there are many), but she was different. First of all, she wore a particularly provocative shirt. It depicted a cartoon of a woman slapping a man and calling him a donkey. In this part of town, women don't slap and insult men. Much less wear an advertisement of such a thing. Second, she walked right up to Ibrahim and ordered a Diet Coke. Now this made me laugh. As if a place like Chaar Number Road Cafe served something as foreign as Diet Coke. She settled for a lemonade (hold the sugar), and sat in that god-forsaken booth for the first time. The noise of stretching plastic burned my ears as she slid

towards the wall. This noise was made three more times. After the fourth day, she learned where not to put her weight. I didn't speak to her, but I watched as she finished her lemonade, her thumbs flying away on the screen of her phone. I wondered who she was messaging, but there was no way I could know. And that was when the most miraculous thing happened, and my hand picked up the pen that lay listlessly beside my empty notebook. The first thing that I wrote about her was this. *Who is it that has enthralled Jhalli so? Who is it that she cannot wait to finish her lemonade before messaging? Who has taken hostage of her mind?* I stared in shock at my own hand, but I did not stop it. So my eyes watched her. The pucker of her lips around the straw as she drained the glass. The wrinkle in her forehead as she typed message after message. The crumpled 10-rupee note she left on the table for Ibrahim when she left. Nothing escaped my watchful eye. It is all written here exactly as it happened.

I thought I would never see her again – but I was wrong. There she was, the next day. And the next. And the next. As you can see, my notes become more detailed as the days go on. It is because I am realizing that she inspires me. Of my four problems, Jhalli is solving one. I am still trickling a bit of gin from my flask into my black coffee when Ibrahim's back is turned. And I am still getting up every hour to smoke. And my sugar levels remain on the precipice of killing me. But I am writing.

It became a routine of sorts – I waited for Jhalli every day, and every day, she would appear around two in the afternoon. Sometimes she would be on the phone and I would listen to her conversations. It is in this way that I learned more about her. She is a student at the East Motiganj High School. Her best friend is Mumu, which I believe is a nickname. She came at two in the afternoon because she was skipping her mathematics class, which she hated. And after all, she planned to run away to Bombay anyways to try her luck in Bollywood. So there was no real reason to be attending mathematics class. I appreciate your patience as I share all of this, because it is all relevant, as you'll see in a moment. The most important piece of information I gleaned from watching Jhalli for so many days is this: there was a boy named Agam who was besotted with her. She didn't care much for him – as you'll see here, on day twenty-three, she proclaimed loudly to Mumu on the phone that she found him rather ugly. But he was her ticket out of this place and onto the train that would take her to her dreams. So Agam thought Jhalli loved him, and Jhalli let Agam believe this lie. It made me sad that she would resort to



such a deception, but I do understand. This town is no place for a girl as spirited as she, and I respected her for doing her level best to write her own destiny.

Now that you know about Agam, you are likely wondering if he had something to do with her disappearance. This is where things become a bit more speculative, because at some point I stopped simply noting observations. This is when I myself become a character in Jhalli's story, so I will do my best to objectively share what happened on the thirty-second day. This was one week before Jhalli officially disappeared.

As usual, I was waiting in Chaar Number Road Cafe, already on my third coffee of the day. My egg roll lay half eaten on the table beside me as I scribbled furiously in my diary, perfecting a new story I was writing. The newspaper editor had put out a call for submissions the evening before, and I finally believed I had something worth publishing.

Three minutes after two, she walked in as she always did, wearing a bright yellow kurta over black jeans. But on that day, a boy accompanied her. This was in fact Agam, the ugly boy she was stringing along. I agreed with her assessment of his physical attributes. His face was marked with acne scars, and her eyes were sunken into his skull, as if someone had squeezed the bones of his temples. His hair was thin and greasy, but his clothes looked expensive. Yes – I understood why Jhalli thought she could manipulate this boy into taking her to Bombay.

"My father will kill me," he was saying as she nodded to Ibrahim, who began slicing lemons immediately behind the counter. The pair of them slid into her usual booth. Agam sat in the wrong spot, making that unnerving noise with the plastic. Both Jhalli and I winced at the same time.

"You have to stand up to him, then," Jhalli said simply. She looked rather bored, as if she knew Agam would acquiesce to her wishes at the end, and she hated entertaining the drama of his doubt.

"I don't understand why we can't just get married here first!" Agam looked annoyed, and his hands were clasped tightly in front of him. My hand clenched around the coffee cup as I watched them glare at each other.

"How many times do I have to explain this to you? Married girls don't get chances in Bollywood," Jhalli hissed at him. Ibrahim had brought over her lemonade at this point, so she was keeping her voice down. I was straining to hear what she was saying.

“So who says you need to tell the producers? We’ll get married so our families are happy, and then I’ll save up some money for us to go to Bombay,” Agam retorted. Jhalli sighed in exasperation – and a twinge of realization. I wanted to pat her arm sympathetically. In that moment, we could both see right through Agam – that shrew. He wanted to marry her and impregnate her. And then trap her here in this shithole for the rest of her life, tending to his babies. He had no intention of sharing her with the millions of ogling eyes that watched the silver screen every day.

“Let’s talk again tomorrow,” she said finally, slurping her lemonade. Agam tutted, and I thought he would say something more, but he simply stood up – the plastic screeched again – and walked out of the cafe. I kept watching her after that, engrossed in her phone once again. She was making a new plan, because Agam had proven to be a dead end. If he would not take her to Bombay, she would find another way.

Before I proceed, I need to share what I was thinking at this point. Here I was, someone who had seen a bit of the world, watching this girl at the start of her life, about to double-cross this boy who loved her. I respected her ambition, but I did worry for her. Boys around here don’t take well to being rejected, and Agam was clearly a rich man’s son. And girls like her – girls who wore shirts with slogans about tearing down the patriarchy – well, she certainly was not making things easy for herself. This was why I did what I did next.

About ten minutes after Agam left, Jhalli called Mumu. She was holding back tears as she narrated what had happened – that Agam was a lost cause. I couldn’t bear to see her cry, so I finally made the decision to reveal myself. I must admit, there was an element of thrill to it. It felt like breaking the fourth wall, because I was the writer, and she had been my subject for a month. I got up from my seat and walked to her booth, slipping my notebook into the oversized pocket of my coat.

“Excuse me,” I said to her, remaining standing. She looked at me inquisitively, the phone still glued to her ear. I gestured for her to hang up on Mumu, and she slowly stuttered a goodbye, pulling her phone away from her face.

“What?” she asked me suspiciously, her eyes narrowed.

“I can buy you a ticket to Bombay,” I told her. I’m not sure what made me say that, because I guarantee I do not have the money to be buying people tickets to

Bombay, but Jhalli was the closest thing I had had to a friend in many years. So for her, I could part with alcohol for a few months and spend the money on a ticket.

She stared at me for an impossibly long time, and I wondered if I had made a mistake. As I was about to mutter an apology and walk away, never to grace Ibrahim's cafe again out of sheer embarrassment, she did the unthinkable. She put her hand on mine and looked at me with grateful tears shining in her eyes.

"You would do that for me?" she asked. I nodded. Of course I would. She was Jhalli. I would do anything for her.

Jhalli agreed to accept my generosity surprisingly quickly. It is my guess that she was desperate, and her judgment was clouded by the recent revelations about Agam. I wanted to warn her not to trust me, not because I was dangerous, but because I was a stranger. If she continued to act like this, who knows what could happen if she trusted the wrong crowd in Bombay? After all, in the big city, there would be many people frothing at the mouth to take advantage of a desperate young girl like her, and she would have to be careful. But I didn't say any of this. Because I didn't want her to resign herself to a life of lost opportunity. And I wanted her to trust *me*.

We made a plan to meet at the train station a week later, so she had time to pack and sort out her affairs. I knew she would want to say goodbye to Mumu and arrange forged copies of her school certificates, in case a producer wanted to confirm she was of age. I gave her money for this purpose in an orange envelope, but I didn't ask for any more details. She seemed to know what she was doing.

If you're good with numbers, you'll know that the day we planned to meet at the train station was the thirty-ninth day of my watching her. She continued to come to Chaar Number Road Cafe each day in between. Now and again she would smile at me, and I would look away quickly. Jhalli still didn't know I was watching her. I wanted to relish those days before she left. I knew that once the train left the station, my inspiration would be gone, and I would once again go from being a three-problem person to a four-problem person. But I hoped that in that last week, something in my fortunes would change as well. I worked voraciously, late into the night – I had to do this by candlelight because the electricity is unreliable in my building – and completed my story for submission to the newspaper.

On the thirty-ninth day, I went to the train station at four-thirty in the morning. The train was not arriving until a quarter-till-six, but I did not want to cause any delays on my account. I wanted to be first in line at the ticket office when it opened at five-fifteen. So I stood there in the dark, my coat buttoned tightly, my scarf wrapped around my neck, clutching at the small stack of bills in my right hand. I counted it obsessively, making sure I had enough for Jhalli's ticket.

When the ticket office opened, I bought the ticket to Bombay from the bleary-eyed ticket officer. He sipped on a cup of tea as his machine printed the single ticket, three exchanges from this little town to the great city of Bombay. I handed him my stack of bills and took the ticket, ready to meet Jhalli as she embarked on the adventure of her life.

I completed the purchase at the ticket office at five-twenty-two. You can confirm this based on the receipt the ticket officer printed. As I said, the train was coming in twenty-three minutes, so I settled onto a bench to wait for Jhalli's arrival. At five-thirty, I began to worry. I had thought she would come early for such a big day. But there was no sign of her.

At five-forty, I became even more concerned. I realized I did not have her phone number, or else I would have called her and demanded to know where she was. One does not arrive late when their life is about to change. I looked down at the ticket in my hands. I wanted to rip it to shreds and throw it in the gutter. Why had I spent all my money on that ungrateful girl? I should mention that these were my thoughts in that moment of anger. They did not last. I am not a violent person.

Promptly at five-forty-five, the train pulled into the station. A couple of people stumbled onto the platform, dragging large bags, their eyes heavy with sleep. Not many people would get off in this town, but there were a few people who had gone to Kolkata or Delhi for work and would occasionally come home. Still, Jhalli was nowhere to be seen. The conductor walked down the platform, calling for boarding. He stopped when he got to me, sitting alone on the bench.

"Are you boarding the train?" he asked, confused. I shook my head.

"You have a ticket," he said, pointing at the piece of paper in my hands.

“It’s not for me,” I replied. He shrugged his shoulders, as if he wasn’t paid enough to care, and continued his march down the platform. At five-fifty-two, he got back onto the train and yelled for final boarding. Still no Jhalli.

At five-fifty-four on the dot, the train began to move. Two minutes later, it had disappeared from sight. And I remained there alone at the station, holding the now-useless ticket in my cold hands.

I waited another hour, wondering if she had overslept, but she never appeared. And that was when my mind drifted to other possibilities – maybe Agam had figured out her plan. Maybe Mumu had spilled the beans to her parents. Maybe she had met with a car accident on her way to the station. I really had no way of knowing. So I let my feet carry me to the Chaar Number Road Cafe, because I did not know where else to go.

Ibrahim arrived around eight, balancing a wheelbarrow stacked high with fruits and eggs and a bag of flour.

“Why are you here so early?” he asked me as he opened the lock on the front door of the cafe.

“Jhalli never came to the station,” I murmured to him, still distressed.

“Who’s Jhalli?” he asked, looking at me funnily as he began to carry the groceries inside. Of course he had never bothered to learn her name. It was almost comical to think about – we were the two people who had been with Jhalli every day in this cafe for the past thirty-nine days. I knew so much about her – cared so deeply for her – and Ibrahim did not even know her name.

I ordered my usual black coffee and opened my notebook, wondering if anything would come to me. Nothing did. Unsurprisingly, Jhalli’s disappearance had knocked the writing right out of me, and I was back to square one. Four problems, no Jhalli.

As I mentioned earlier, I knew Jhalli was a student at East Motiganj High School. Two days later, I went to the school to see if I could find her. I watched from the tea stall across the road as all the students trickled through the gate around nine o’clock, but I couldn’t see her anywhere. I wouldn’t have missed those sparkling eyes. The long black hair. There would be no mistaking Jhalli. But she didn’t show.

This brings me to yesterday, the forty-sixth day, when all this came to a head. I received the email from the newspaper first thing. My story was going to be published. But rather than elation, all I could feel was concern. The only thing on my mind was

finding Jhalli. You must understand that what I did that morning was an act of desperation – I did not mean to cause any harm, but I was worried sick about Jhalli, and not a single word was leaking from my pen. So I went to the headmaster's office at East Motiganj High School, dressed to the nines.

There were two others waiting to see him when I arrived, so I waited patiently in the hall, my coat pulled close around me. It was cold yesterday morning, impossibly cold for this time of year.

When he finally peeked out of his office and gestured to welcome me inside, I entered eagerly. His office was large – probably larger than my whole flat – and covered with books and diplomas and stacks of pages. Somewhere on one of those pages was information about Jhalli.

I sat in the wooden chair in front of his desk as he settled into his large armchair, tenting his fingers to look at me.

"Cold day, isn't it?" he said. I nodded. He continued to peer at me over the rim of his glasses.

"So what is it I can help you with?" he asked finally.

"Is Jhalli okay?" My voice came out as a whimper, perhaps because I was scared he would confirm my worst fears. But his face did not betray any grave sadness. His expression was one of confusion.

"Jhalli?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"She is my niece," I said quickly, going along with the first story that came to my mind. "She was supposed to come see me a week ago, but she never showed up."

"Is Jhalli her *daak-naam*?" he asked me. I nodded quickly.

"We don't use any nicknames here as a policy, but I can pull up her attendance for you if you tell me her full legal name," he said, clicking something on his computer. I frowned. I didn't know her legal name. But I couldn't tell him that – he thought she was my niece. You can see why I ended up looking rather suspicious, despite my very honest intentions.

"Her best friend is Mumu, and she was seeing a boy named Agam," I blurted out. "I'm worried Agam has done something to her." The headmaster raised an eyebrow.

"Are you saying one of my students has hurt another student?" he clarified. I nodded meekly.

“That is very serious. Agam, you say?” he continued. I nodded again. He peered at something on his computer, his mouth in a tight line.

“The only Agam registered here is in class 11. He is in Ms. Akter’s class at the moment. Perhaps we can have a chat with him,” the headmaster said. I stood up immediately.

I followed the headmaster to the far end of the hallway, where a board hung above a door reading “Akter - English.” He pushed open the door, and I eagerly looked inside the classroom, scanning for that wimpy boy who had probably hurt my Jhalli in some way. But he was nowhere to be seen.

“Agam?” the headmaster asked as Ms. Akter cut short a diatribe about Shakespeare. A tall boy wearing thick glasses in the front row looked up in surprise. He slowly rose up, his knees trembling.

“Yes, sir?” the boy mumbled. The headmaster turned to me.

“You wished to ask Agam about your niece?” he asked. I shook my head.

“There must be a mistake. This is not Agam,” I said. The headmaster stared at me for a moment.

“I told you – this is the only Agam at our school. Are you well?” he asked. I didn’t know what made him ask that all of a sudden, because I was quite well, if a little sweaty from this encounter. But before I could say anything in response, the class bell interrupted us. The students began to file out of the classroom, including the-boy-who-was-also-Agam. As a wave of students filled the hallway outside, I happened to glance through the window.

*Agam.*

There he was. The stringy hair was unmistakable. I pushed past the students in my way. I could hear the headmaster protesting behind me, but I was too quick, ducking into the crowd of young people. I am very sorry if I trampled anyone or hurt anyone, but as you know, I needed to get to this boy and see what he had done to Jhalli.

“You!” I screamed, grabbing hold of the collared shirt of his uniform. He looked up at me with frightened brown eyes. His skin had somehow cleared since the last time I saw him, but I was sure it was him. The other students were assembling in a circle around us, smirks on their faces. They knew something exciting was about to happen, with this livid stranger holding onto their classmate’s neck. The headmaster was still

trying to make his way through the throng, yelling from afar. But his voice had drowned out entirely – all I could see was Agam’s face. And no Jhalli.

“What did you do to her?” I snarled, tightening my grip. His face had drained of color.

“Who?” he croaked out.

“Jhalli, you monster,” I growled.

“I don’t know any Jhalli,” he sputtered out. Before I knew it, I had slapped him across the face. The other students gasped. A couple of them laughed.

“You wanted her so badly that you’ve hurt her!” I crowed. “All she wanted was a chance at a new life in Bombay, and you couldn’t bear to see her happy, could you?” I threw him to the ground, summoning all my strength to kick him in the stomach. A trickle of blood came out of his mouth.

“Stop this at once!” The headmaster had finally broken through the crowd of people and pushed me against the wall, but he was an elderly man, and I was strong. I pushed him to the ground as well.

“What is this madness?” he yelled as he fell. “Call the police!” Several of the students pulled out their phones, some dialing a call, others simply recording what was happening. I didn’t care about the police. I simply wanted Agam to pay for whatever it was he had done to Jhalli.

“I’ll kill you if you’ve hurt her, Agam,” I roared, pulling him back up to his feet. He held his hands up in surrender.

“You’re mistaken! I’m not Agam – that’s Agam!” he protested, pointing at the boy in glasses I’d seen before. “My name is Jeevan,” he groaned, wiping the blood from his mouth. I screamed in frustration at this point. I know you’ve seen it all on camera, so I’d rather not recount it here, because this is not who I am. But as you know, Agam continued to insist on this manufactured story of his, and I needed to take revenge for Jhalli. So I did – I did what any friend would do.

Now since I’ve been here, speaking to your colleagues, they all keep telling me the same thing. There is no Jhalli. The school insists there is no Jhalli. Ibrahim insists there is no Jhalli. Agam insists he is not Agam. But they are all wrong – wrong, wrong, wrong. I have seen Jhalli. I have understood Jhalli. I have watched Jhalli for thirty-nine days and I have written her entire story right here, in this notebook. Every observation, every



fact – it is all here, within these pages. I know I seem to be a disheveled person. A broken person. A person with more problems than most. But I am a truthful person.

So that is my story. I am begging you to believe me. Not for me – I don't care about that. But for Jhalli.

# A Cumbersome Backpack

by Bernard Martoia

Pandemonium erupted in the TGV Aix-en-Provence station when passengers alighted from the belated train. Relatives and friends were shocked to hear the news. It was a close call, in their opinion. Indeed, it was not an everyday event that a train rolling at two hundred miles per hour went into an emergency stop mode and, last but not least, did not derail.

On the other hand, business people, who were easily identifiable by a three-piece suit and an attaché case, did not have such a receptive audience. They had the decency not to vent their frustration for being late for a deal when four hundred lives had been at stake. An oasis of civility prevailed over money in the face of a near-death experience. The most exasperated merchants rushed to the taxi cab stand because they could not brook any more delay.

The less well-off passengers had a more difficult time than the two other groups. They neither had a compassionate ear nor an escape route. Because they could not cling to something tangible, they appeared to be walking in a nightmare, and their eyes looked glassy.

After the strong emotion was released in one way or another, the crowd scattered across several exits.

“What the heck is going on here?” wondered the pedestrian when passengers cut and ran. The loner was out of his depth. In that melodramatic ambiance, he took his time to check connections. There was a shuttle every twenty minutes between the TGV train station in the middle of nowhere and Aix-en-Provence.

One event chased away another quickly. It was a generation predisposed to risk and transgression, with a short memory anchored in the present and with few plans for the future. Constant movement and rootless life went hand in hand with a world without borders in which a millennial generation grew up. Their existence was reduced to a binary outcome: movement was life, and stillness equated to emptiness.

“All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone,” wrote the French philosopher Blaise Pascal. By a twist of fate, the home-lover pioneered the information age. Pascal was a child prodigy who excelled in mathematics. At nine-year-old, he dedicated himself to the invention of the first calculating machine. The altruistic son wanted to help his father, an overworked tax supervisor in Rouen, Normandy.

British philosopher Roger Scruton analyzed people’s restlessness and coined oikophobia, the repudiation of inheritance and home. He characterized it as an aversion to the Sacred and the embrace of xenophilia.

While meditating on his incapacity to adapt to modern life, the pedestrian dawdled through a gangway connecting platforms and offering a broad view of the countryside.

From a geological perspective, the Arbois plateau was a limestone table that separated the Etang de Berre – a lagoon near the Mediterranean coast – from Aix-en-Provence’s green basin.

The tableland occupied a place of choice in Provence while offering a panoramic view of the Alpilles to the northwest and Mont Sainte-Victoire to the east. Each range elicited a passion that proved consistent. The Alpilles formed the fertile ground for Alphonse Daudet’s letters, and Sainte-Victoire inspired Paul Cezanne right to the end.

In the past, the Arbois plateau was a warren that bristled with rabbits, foxes, wild boars, grass snakes, squirrels, magpies, and nightingales, to name a few. Steel and glass buildings replaced molehills, burrows, dens, lairs, and bird nests. Biotech companies clustered around the train station, whereas logistic platform services, aerospace subcontractors, and defense companies proliferated near the airport. The pace of life was no longer a languid stanza of cicadas or a melodious hoot of an owl but an ear-splitting noise from a high-speed train or a plane’s takeoff.

As soon as the shuttle arrived at Aix-en-Provence’s bus terminal, a stale and breathless baggage handler, dressed in gray overalls, bowed in front of the baggage compartment. Before he had time to align suitcases appropriately along the curbside for

the benefit of all the parties, impatient passengers snatched their belongings from his calloused hands. “It is mine!” they belligerently said when he did not yield. His fastidious attention to workmanship browned them off. Jackals mobbed him.

Good manners could no longer accommodate a society giving free rein to promptness. In the past, the ordinary course of life was to progress by small degrees with much effort. The digital age yielded haste and obsession with immediate triumph in social networks.

“God laughs at those who deplore the effects of which causes they cherish,” said the French theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet. “Cause and effects are two sides of one fact,” surmised the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Since causality was no longer understood, blame and rage were prevalent in a narcissistic and infantilized society.

The pedestrian did not join the fray over interfering in another man’s business. He took a deep breath when his backpack was the last item coming out of the baggage compartment.

The anxious wait revived a minor incident at the Los Angeles International Airport a decade and a half earlier. A snaking carousel kept moving despite the conspicuous lack of baggage coming out of a protuberant hatch. While the foot traveler gawked at the hatchway, a pipe dream carried him away to a magic show. Because he was a good audience, he expected his backpack to turn out like a dove from a cylinder hat. The definite halt of the luggage conveyor shattered his chimera.

At the airline front desk, where he recorded the missing baggage, a clerk invited him to call an unlisted company phone number she wrote on his flight ticket. “Please do it after 9 p.m.,” she added without explaining why. In all likelihood, it was the hour when data reconciliation was over.

The investigation was pointless. The first call center representative was a know-it-all person. He affirmed with a crushing authority that the backpack had been channeled to Tahiti, an archipelago in the South Pacific. In a reminiscence of *Tales of the South Pacific* by James Michener, the bookworm found solace in thinking that the

gear could not be farther away on the planet. Analysis upsets but comparison comforts, as the saying goes.

The next evening, an honest but helpless female agent informed him that the tracking system was a black hole in Paris. “Blame a computer glitch, a travel peak, a worker shortage, or a perennial strike!” surmised the caller on the receiving end of that worrisome situation. “Another wasted day,” thought the traveler gloomily. Then, he vented his frustration with a deep sigh after hanging up the phone.

A day later, another telephone operator with a mellifluous voice declared with aplomb that the haversack would arrive within the first flight from Paris. Though the customer was positively thrilled, the expectation did not materialize. A good liar is a good talker.

In the meantime, the nerve-wracking delay was a blessing in disguise. The traveler and his then-wife sojourned at a decent motel in Redondo Beach, not far from the airport, with a promise of a refund from the travel insurance company.

Squeezed between the Santa Monica range and the Pacific coast draped in fog, Los Angeles was an inexhaustible entertainment source, but on one condition: “Avoid highways during rush hours!” a motel concierge warned the deluded couple.

When the wayfarer returned from San Gabriel Arcangel Mission, where he prayed for the recovery of his backpack, a red light for an unanswered call blinked on the hotel guest room telephone’s display. An airline subcontractor had delivered the backpack to the motel’s front desk. The Lord works in mysterious ways. ...

In retrospect, the rambler felt nostalgic for that foregone setback, which lasted a whole week. The delay opened the door to an unsuspected cultural life in a city better known for its movie studios and outdoor activities.

The mood at the Aix-en-Provence bus terminal mellowed at some point. The luggage handler tilted his head when he overheard someone thanking him for his toil. The hard worker hastened to wipe the sweat that beaded his forefront with a sleeve of the overalls and stared blankly at a hearty customer extending a hand to him. Though he could not fathom the stranger’s motive, he firmly shook his hand.

After paying tribute to Der Untermensch, the grateful footslogger loaded the backpack on the shoulders, fastened hip and torso belts, and tightened shoulder and hip straps. The perfunctory check-up inspired the carrier. He firmly jammed a custom embroidered hut on his forehead, folded his arms over his chest, and monitored the matey backpacker. When the latter vanished into the traffic flow, the humble man returned to his humdrum routine while slamming the baggage compartment's doors.

Unlike previous hikes in the U.S., which were methodically planned like military campaigns, the rambler envisioned an aimless journey through his native Provence. Paying homage to kith and kin resting in peace was of utmost importance. "The die is cast: let providence unfold!" he mused. His self-approval was lukewarm. Among other things, he feared unearthing a buried past and touching a sore spot.

Thus, he randomly walked onto the sidewalk of an avenue bordered by sycamore trees. The pale green of fresh leaves did not offset the dazzling whiteness of massive trunks.

The tree's bareness was an eyesore. No other spectacle was such an assault on the senses as those stumps spoiling the tree's silhouette.

The scarecrow negated the sycamore's haughty shape, symbolizing strength and protection. General George Washington stationed a battalion under a massive sycamore tree at the Battle of Brandywine.

The town council supported excessive pruning. Whether dead or alive, branches were cut indiscriminately for passerby's safety. It resulted from a somewhat abstract precautionary principle appended to the French Constitution on behalf of a European Charter on Environment and Health. ...

A great emotion overwhelmed the pedestrian when he drew near La Rotonde fountain. The landmark was on his way to the music conservatory in his childhood.

Bronze sculptures of lions, swans, sirens, and angels bedecked a monumental water feature. On top of the vast structure stood three female statues back-to-back. They were nicknamed the three graces. Each one epitomized a distinct quest harbored by the former capital of Provence. The idol holding a Tablet of the Law and oriented toward the

Court of Appeals symbolized Justice. Facing the road to Marseilles with its harbor in the Mediterranean Sea, the second model aimed to control Trade and Agriculture in the colonial empire's heyday. The last effigy stood for Fine Arts in Avignon's direction and the Palace of the Popes.

It turned out that the latest statue influenced the lad's education. The boy's family did not live in the affluent city but in the boonies near the Etang de Berre. The household was attached to a power plant, where the father worked as a foreman. The mother was a homemaker.

The station supplied electricity to an oil refinery and a petrochemical factory.

Because of the proximity of two large-scale chemical companies, dwellers had good reason to believe that the smell was terrible. On the other hand, they could not complain that the odor was constant or immutable. It alternated between rotten egg, oily rag, sour cabbage, and sewer stench, to name a few. The toxic waste was discreetly discharged into the lagoon at night, preferably at the black moon. Consequently, an effluvium of decayed fish stank the air for days. Therefore, the great variety of odors was a derisive topic for country bumpkins endowed with a good sense of humor. "What kind of smell is it today?" was on everyone's lips.

The timing was crucial for doing the laundry. Only when the mistral blew could the homemaker hang out wet clothes on a washing line in the garden. If by misfortune, the wind ceased or changed direction, ere an hour elapsed, the clean washing was draped with soot. Thus, the helpless housewife was back to square one.

Instead of sleeping late on Thursday – a school day off – the lad woke up early for a rehearsal at the music conservatory of Aix-en-Provence.

The weekly shuttle responded to the mother's ambition. She yearned for upward mobility for her son through a musical career. Unfortunately, the lad had neither a musical ear nor a natural predisposition for the sixth art. He longed for painting, literature, and cinema among the seven art forms. He deemed as so-so the four others, including sculpture, architecture, music, and theater.

As the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. Nonetheless, the musty smell of a vintage musical instrument was a healthy break from the pungent odors inhaled in the boonies.

The fifteen-mile-long commute was not a walk in the park with an apprenticed driver. The automobile swayed and rocked when the mother pressed the clutch pedal, cupped around the gear knob, and moved the lever from one position to another.

Despite rattling, sputtering, and wheezing noises, the Citroën 2CV was not just any automobile. Surprisingly, it collected great reviews in car magazines and newspapers. Its two-cylinder engine was declared “the most intelligent application of minimalism to succeed.” Regardless of sycophantic editorials, the tiny car gave rural people a motorized alternative to a cart.

The conservatory was near the Passage Agard. On a side note, this passageway was named after Félicien Agard, a director of the Salins du Midi, a lucrative salt company in the nineteenth century. The tycoon bought what was left of a Carmelite convent, which was ransacked during the French Revolution. He decided to open a passageway between the Cours Mirabeau and the Circuit Court. Due to an owner’s fierce opposition, the gallery ended with a bottleneck. Surprisingly, the lack of space did not preclude a booming activity. Stores, printers, and workshops were set up in the narrow passage.

The pedestrian recollected a vivid memory of the picturesque alley, where a comic book store monopolized his attention. He hankered for the adventures of Tintin. With his distinguished flipped-up tuft of golden hair, the daredevil junior reporter led an investigation with Milou, an astute white Wire Fox Terrier.

For young readers’ convenience, any release was displayed at the lowest level of the storefront. In this way, children drooled over the cover, which alluded to a promising adventure abroad. The windowpane was stained by fingertips, lip traces, and tears when low-income parents could not afford to buy the release for their offspring.

The mood of the lad from the boonies oscillated between euphoria and frustration. He did not venture into the bookstore because he never received a little



pocket money. He contented himself with a ritual show of a mannered employee wearing a necktie and a pinafore. The diligent cleaner erased longing, cheerful, or hopeless marks upon the windowpane.

Sadness overwhelmed the pedestrian beyond the Passage Agard because the conservatory was a shadow of its former self. Windows and doors were sealed off with plywood boards to prevent squatting. The white frontage was stained by a black and slimy streak running down from a rusty gutter that elicited a roundup of pigeons. A creeper plant wrapped itself around a wrought-iron gate and muffled a verdigris bell. In the yard, where pupils had frolicked during a recreation, moss prospered on disjointed cobblestones.

The listless pedestrian reminisced about bygone days. After the bell rang at the recess's end, young musicians huddled in a hallway while waiting to be called individually. A stern professor led a trial with a metronome, but any novice had difficulty keeping up the tempo. Seated on a stool with an extra cushion, the lad from the godforsaken place labored to play the piano with his tiny hands. The professor belonged to the old school, which was unforthcoming with encouragement and indulgence. After outlining the flaws or, eventually, the student's progress, he gave him instructions for the next session.

The stranger relished the atmosphere of the crammed brick-and-mortar building. Eager to delve into the past, he grabbed the wrought-iron gate with both hands and succeeded in squeezing his head between two bars. Then, he closed his eyes in this odd but quite relaxing position. After self-induced hypnosis through slow breathing, forgotten sounds resurfaced in the upper story. He heard a dirge echoing through a doorstep, an ominous creaking of wood stairs betraying a director's unannounced inspection, and a laughing fit from classmates overacting to any opportunity.

As the dreamer was immersed in the past, a throaty voice cut off his search for lost time.

"Please, do not do it here!" said an alarmed woman who observed him for a while.

“What do you mean?” mumbled the escapist in utter confusion. He could not fathom why he was subjected to such scrutiny from a passerby.

“Do not take your life!” hollered the woman who snooped around him.

“It was never my intention,” responded the dreamer with a waspish tone.

The trapped man was a fair game. His manly thews and sinews enthralled the hussy woman. Grotesqueness gave way to alarm when the contemplative person could not withdraw his head, hampered by his earlobes.

“May I help you?” said the lady archly.

Though she was meaty with advice, her compassion was challenged by an erotic tinge. The prisoner heard her rapid breathing, which betrayed her arousal. Out of reticence, he did not dare to accept her help.

Without a second thought, the woman took the liberty of drawing her fingers through his hair like someone petting a stray dog. The gesture was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The bound prisoner kicked over the traces. While doing so, he pulled back his head without mercy for his lappets.

“Ouch! It hurts,” commented the lady, who added whimsically: “Do you want to have cauliflower ears like rugby players?” She simpered as she finished giving him a piece of her mind.

“Stop plying me with questions!” retorted the unhinged man.

“Well, I am sorry, I did not mean to get your goat,” she replied with a false air of contrition. Because the man’s reaction dumbfounded her, she put two fingers in the corner of her mouth and pressed them slightly between her teeth.

“By Jove! This woman is a dissembler,” thought the yahoo who read her mind. He winced in pain when the blood flow was restored in his incarnadine pinnas.

The tamer did not miss the opportunity to pick herself up. She shook her curly mane and burst into laughter. Then, she inveigled him to a terrace facing the circuit court.

“Let us have a drink to cheer you up!” she advised as she posed arms akimbo like an Amazon.

Because the dreamer was backed into a corner, he claimed an appointment with a dentist.

“You do not like someone having a rendezvous,” twitted the Amazon loftily.

Her bulging and piercing eyes betrayed a short-tempered personality trait. She was consumed by anger because she could not suffer that the man snubbed her invitation. Her eyes said in an equally silent tongue: “You are bluffing. Do not be such a jester and tell me the plain truth!” Then, another reflection had the magical power to restore her self-esteem: “The guy is probably a pansy!”

The appraisal was reciprocal.

“She is a mixed blessing with her Bette Davis eyes, emotional baggage, and skill at creating a scene,” pondered the concerned party. “She is the copycat of the tempestuous Hollywood star. A terrible passion would well up, and there would be either a murder or a suicide. “Stay away from that fatal woman!” speculated the moviegoer.

Both stared stonily at each other for a while. O time, suspend thy flight!

The escapist ditched her without further ado. He had other fish to fry rather than trifling with a manipulative woman. He headed for the tourist office, hoping to glean information about the music school’s fate.

Hostesses busied themselves in a princely marbled hall. The pedestrian idly listened to a monologue close to him. A tousle-headed bilingual auxiliary with stiletto heels spoke to an old woman wearing glasses on the tip of the nose. She often resorted to body language when she fumbled for the right words. Because she was nervous, her speech was stilted. The old lady had difficulty understanding her double Dutch and inchoate presentation. The mumbo jumbo belonged to Globish, a European form of global English cross-dressed with continental cadences and false friends’ sequins.

Because the Rambler could not catch the eye of any host, he did not wait for help any longer. He rummaged through brochures and found the information he was looking for.

The music academy had been shifted far away beyond a beltway that did not exist in his youth. A glossy picture on the cover showed a kind of boat. Depending on people's backgrounds, it was either a replica of Noah's Ark or a landing craft stranded on a beach during the Second World War.

State-of-the-art technology protected the building from heat and excessive light. A computer monitored aluminum panels according to the day's light intensity. "Thus, students are hatched in a cozy henhouse with background music," belabored the pedestrian. He recollected his personal experience when he rubbed his numb hands in an unheated hall before a rehearsal with a stern professor.

The intrigued visitor read the brochure to the end, but his final opinion was less enticing than the first impression. The futuristic building looked like a spiritless gangway in a space station. Naturally, the moviegoer had 2001: A Space Odyssey film in mind. Not without prejudice, the nostalgic preferred the old brick-and-mortar building.

After the brochure quenched the pedestrian's curiosity, he found solace in a shining bronze statue representing Paul Cézanne on a sun-bathed plaza in front of the tourist office.

The bearded painter wore a hunting coat, whose pockets were filled with pencils and a sketchbook. He dressed down a waistcoat with a Camargue herdsman rope tie and a brimming hat cocked to his eyebrows. With his hands crossed onto a walking stick, the artist peered toward Mont Sainte-Victoire. Besides his wife, the mountain was his favorite model.

While contemplating the statue, the bookworm thought that Cézanne's attire was a nod to the herdsman in *La Bête du Vaccarès* (The Beast and Other Tales) by Joseph d'Arbaud. "Thus, the sculptor honored two artists in the same work," guesstimated the passerby. Nothing could prove it, but the rapprochement beguiled him.

Striding along the Cours Mirabeau was a distinctive experience in the past. Onlookers staked out the flow while hoping to discover a star, whereas a handful of prissy hopefuls yearned to be greeted.

One day, the apprentice musician bumped into a famed couple in a quiet street perpendicular to the Cours Mirabeau. Alain Delon and Mireille Darc walked hand in hand. Because the boy stood agape at the two actors, Delon winked at him jubilantly, and Darc flashed a smile. It was an extraordinary event for the sonny boy living in the boonies.

The pedestrian went into a bookstore where he used to buy scholarly books. Except for the staff that was younger than him, nothing had changed inside the store. Shelves had an aged patina, and the distinctive smell of old books enraptured the bookworm. After obtaining a precise map for his journey, he resumed his roaming onto the famed boulevard.

The vision of a mossy fountain unleashed an urge to drink. By a stroke of luck, the brasserie Les Deux Garçons was a block away. The pedestrian looked abashed with his cumbersome backpack, but nobody minded his presence.

The staff was busy preparing tables for lunch on a bright veranda, particularly appreciated by show-off people. Seasoned waiters ceremonially folded napkins corresponding to an elaborate design, and busboys meticulously aligned silverware along with plates.

The barroom was lively, with greetings exchanged between bartenders, a head waiter, and the sole female among the staff.

In between was an empty hallway with a crimson British phone booth near the toilet room.

Several lithographies from the golden age of Art Deco adorned the walls. A printing piqued the pedestrian's curiosity. It represented a female bather, who wore a one-piece black swimsuit with a crimson scarf and white sandals. Turned away in the direction of the blue sea, she stood on tiptoe with her hands raised and her palms turned upward as if she welcomed a glorious sun. Agaves formed the background. In a half-

circle, a slogan with golden rays beaming in all directions praised the gorgeous weather on the Côte d'Azur.

A discreet PLM logo was inscribed within a bouquet of white and pink flowers at the bottom of the poster. PLM was the acronym of the Paris Lyon Mediterranean Sea railway company. The fierce competition spurred innovation, so the company commissioned the illustrator Roger Broders for its advertising campaign. The company financed his many sojourns to the Côte d'Azur. For a decade, the artist dedicated himself entirely to poster art on the Riviera.

Like Cezanne's paintings, Broder's illustrations were distinctive for their direct lines and bold colors, combined with a graphical perspective showing featured mountains and seascapes in the background.

An air of braggadocio in the barroom ended the reminiscence of the past.

The head waiter fitted a necktie in front of a framed mirror dating back to the Second Empire. His ebony hair and neatly trimmed beard emphasized his manliness. He loved being the center of attention.

Nothing was left to chance. After a commensurate time to look at himself, the Adonis snapped his fingers, and the Aphrodite aided him in putting on a black tailcoat. He thanked her with a honeyed tone. Then, the whippersnapper returned to his fussy way of getting dressed in front of the glass. He heaved a sigh after he finished buttoning a double row of trimmings. Then, he folded a blue pocket square, which matched his coat. The fop turned his inquiring eyes on the besotted young woman. Because he was satisfied by her fondness, he dashed to a flowerpot, picked up a daisy, and bestowed it upon her coat lapel.

An old pendulum clock struck noon in the dim hallway. Its thunderous strike brought back a nightmarish memory from the pedestrian's childhood.

His great-uncle, Joseph, and his wife, Rose, lived half a mile from Les Deux Garçons restaurant. Their home was the Villa des Violettes, a two-story house on a dead-end street.

On a Sunday afternoon, hosts and guests wanted to get some fresh air after celebrating the budding musician's fifth anniversary.

February was the gloomiest month in Provence. Days seemed endless, and no amount of wistful recollecting could bring back summer. A flower bed of violas was in full bloom in the garden, hence the villa's name.

Because the lad suffered from a cold, he was left alone in the dining room. The daredevil did not wait for their return to explore the villa. He was trapped in a dark hallway when a draft shut a door behind him. After a while, his pupils dilated in response to the pitch darkness. He perceived an ominous pendulum clock producing a lugubrious grind at each swing of the rocker's arm. The cold machinery stalled him in check for a long while. When the bell struck the hours mournfully, he yelled for help.

The guilty mother came to comfort her crying child. "There is no harm done!" she declared while aunty Rose flashed a disparaging glance at the careless mother.

Strangely, the five-year-old boy developed a phobia of a pendulum, an unlisted case among mental disorders.

Since the pedestrian was in a befuddled state of mind in the hallway, the sprightly waitress invited him to follow her on the veranda. After teasing the guest with a cryptic smile, she strutted on high heels ahead of him. The moviegoer's fancy deceived him into thinking she was leading him not to the veranda but to a precinct in San Francisco where crime novelist Catherine Tramell taunted police detectives who cross-examined her.

Since the unassuming man preferred to stay in the background, his wish was fulfilled immediately. Traditionally, a waitress reserved the most festive tables for good customers or bigwigs.

A waiter described with a broad Provençal accent the food available that day. The listener got distracted by a noticeable gap between the two upper front teeth of the garçon. It brought back in his upper story the remembrance of British actor Terry Thomas, whose 1/3-inch diastema was considered a national treasure.

The guest selected aïoli. Steamed vegetables and codfish were arrayed on a plate, while garlic sauce was served in a Terra Cotta clay pot. Abstinence from consuming meat on Friday was a recommendation of the church.

Two women with classic dresses occupied a table near the pedestrian. The waitress came to their table and asked the ritual question: “Does everything go well?” After the two ladies nodded in agreement, the young waitress bent over and spoke in an undertone so that nobody would overhear her. She was grateful for their help because her seven-year-old boy had been admitted into a private school.

After the waitress kowtowed, the two women broached a subject that interested the pedestrian. The Caumont Arts Center hosted a Turner exhibition. On this note, the happy-go-lucky concluded his meal with a yearning to attend this show.

Unfortunately, the art center did not possess a cloakroom for his cumbersome backpack. “You may leave it to the luggage deposit room at the train station,” suggested a young receptionist after referring his request to a senior manager. The pedestrian did not want to retrace his steps to the train station near the bus station.

A similar setback occurred to him at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Before boarding a night’s flight to Paris, the backpacker had a day to kill in New York City. Albrecht Dürer’s exhibition lured him. Though the Met possessed an array of metal lockers in the cloakroom, his load did not fit into the broadest one. A sorry clerk invited him to drop his cumbersome backpack at the baggage locker room at Grand Central Station. So goes life. ...



# Whitstable

by Maxton McCormick

The bleak sky sorrowfully wept lone and heavy droplets as the hiemal, salt-laden wind blew forcefully in across the rheumy, choppy abyss of the pearl-grey sea, as if trying to knock down the worn and languishing wooden groynes, equally-spaced and dotted across the bitterly frigid shore of the pebble-strewn beach like candles on the cake of a melancholic child. There, some twenty metres from the encroaching waves, a frail old man observed the gallery-worthy piece in front of him, ensconcing himself bit by bit onto a bench as worn as his wool-knit jumper. Between his deafening ears and in front of his weary eyes perched a pair of crooked brown glasses, cracked in one lens, but not deemed worthy of replacing. On his thinning crown perched a tartan flat cap and in his wrinkled hands he clutched the ligneous handle of a démodé walking cane to his wind-ruffled parka jacket.

The man had lived here in the quaint English seaside town of Whitstable his whole life and remembered it the same as a child as he did now; it was as if the town was trapped in its own bubble, suspended in time and ignorant of the changing world around it. Something about the pebbled beach and haggard harbour had kept him here for most of his life. His growing deafness and subtly setting dementia made his every word doggerel drivel, and it took great effort on the part of the townsfolk to engage in conversation. Nonetheless, wherever he wandered, he was greeted with warmth, like the first bounties of Spring. Each time he would set off on his commendable daily activity he would arrive at the docks, perhaps instinctually, for it was where he had spent the daylight hours of the better part of his life. At the fishmonger, whenever a new heyday-inspired anecdote or reverie popped into his mind, he would excitedly share it with the staff, revelling in the pride that accompanied reclaiming his youth and glory the way a museum boasts rediscovered relics. The small ship mooring in the docks had inspired his most recent memory;

He breathed in the smell of salted air and pungent fish as the gale blew in from past the docks. The man was waiting to service a vessel, with windswept hair and a sense of fulfilment. He paused to light up a cigarette. Slowly, sucking up the fumes. Holding, eyes shut, face to the sea. Releasing, letting go of his earthly worries as the smoke cheekily blew back in his face. Opening, setting his gaze upon the lowering sun, which made the sky shine all manner of shades: crimson, hazel, lemon, illuminating the sea, twisting it into a field of lavender observable only through the moistened eye. As the

ship berthed, the men around him secured the ropes and he was swiftly called for assistance. As his hands gripped the thick pleated fibres, a wave crashed up against the dampened dock, retreating, and pulling the vessel with it. With his mind preoccupied and his feet unstable on the slippery base, the man was pulled along with the boat and off the mooring. He released his hands from the rope, bracing for impact against the abyssal sea like one would for a punch. Crashing through the surface, the dark water engulfed him as he submerged. Shocked by the coolness of his new surroundings, he panicked for a second, before jetting back up to the surface. His legs were lead as he treaded maladroitly, with flailing arms, along the docks to avoid being crushed by the ship at the next surge. Once clear, the man felt for the approaching wave and arose as it did, propelling himself up with its momentum, grabbing the cool stone of the dock and hoisting himself back up to safety, the only danger remaining being that of humiliation, as his sullen and drenched mass sulked away from the laughter of his crew, slowly being drowned out by the noises of the ocean.

The ocean. The ocean.

A gull at his feet drew his attention away from the churning, void-like vacuum in front of him, prompting him to check his antique pocket watch. With intense effort, he began to rise from the bench, bit by bit, in the same painstaking way he had sat, wincing and grunting all the while, prompting the seabirds in his vicinity to scatter hither and thither. As much as the man longed for it, his body could not move the way it did in his memories, but he quietly held out for hope that his strength would return. The wind died down, the water coming almost to a dead still as he stood, hunched, facing the sea; for as frail as his body was, his mind, in this brief moment, was clear.

# Saturn Dreams to You

by Jyn Medina

Rather than continue the drive to my best friend in Clear Valley Medical Center, I pulled over about two miles away and met with a man I didn't know. This occurred precisely thirty-eight minutes ago. On a shoulder meadow of Route 63 in the dead of night as my friend sat in her hospital gown waiting for me.

The man's name, I came to learn, was Major Myoga. One might assume someone that addressed themselves as "Major" on their first meeting might be dressed in military uniform, but this wasn't the case. His clothes were ordinary. The kind that drew so little attention one would never give him a second look. His stature, however, sufficiently frightened me. He was like a flesh-covered tower that never stopped ascending—the kind of tall that made you crank your neck in awe and vague anticipation of it all crumbling down on you. If he wanted to harm me, I would be wholly defenseless to disagree.

This encounter with a dangerous man, I thought, must have been justice. It was precisely the variety of justice in that moment that I believed deserved to punish me for being too spineless to finish the drive to the hospital. That was why when he approached, I didn't move a single muscle.

I call him a person, but I learned he viewed himself much differently. To be more accurate, he saw himself as much *less* than a regular man. Rather than harm me, he introduced himself in a way I had genuine difficulty understanding.

*I'm an idea*, he'd said to me. *A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.*

He referred to himself as someone without substance. He had a physical body I could touch and feel, but to put it simply, he declared his manner of being *alive* was different than mine in few, but crucial areas. When I asked what those were, he said I was in no position to concern myself with other people's problems. Especially ones with less than clear answers. I hadn't noticed until then, but I'd been tearing up for quite some time. They were silent and slow, hardly making an impression. Much less worthy of being acknowledged. I wondered if I reacted like this because I wouldn't be punished

for standing my friend up, or if she—from Clear Valley Medical—had somehow transplanted her disappointment of my absence right into my eye sockets.

I was stunned. At a total loss. I didn't have the slightest clue what in the world was going on. Everything seemed to turn on its head. I felt as though it were all some bad dream, and if I blinked, I'd be back home again. But that's not what happened. In the next second, everything remained as it was. Unexplained and unsatisfying.

Major Myoga really had appeared somewhere down the way and come to talk to me, and what I produced were real tears that little to do with whatever he said. We proceeded to have a short conversation about nothing all that important, then eventually he expressed his goodbye's and hopped over the junction that bordered the meadow, promptly vanishing onto the highway. I saw no vehicle of any kind and heard no motor start. By foot, walking across would be next to impossible. It was as though he were simply swallowed by the darkness. What flashed into my head was the lingering light of a firefly puttering out. The sort of light that imprinted its mark in one's brain long after it was already gone.

There was a new moon on the verge of poking through tonight. I observed that and tried to piece myself back together like sand at a waterfront rebalancing its surface after countless people had dented its body. There was now only me and the darkness with a sliver of something special.

*I'm an idea, he'd said to me. A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.*

I thought about the meaning of this the rest of the night. Well after I drove back home and tucked myself into bed, there it lay, swelling in my mind. If it was possible to be an idea rather than a person, I wondered if that what was I needed to become in order to discover what forced those quiet, nearly indiscernible tears out. I had the feeling they had a much deeper meaning than anything regarding my weakness or fear for the Major or my dear friend, but of something so delicate it would crumble if I said it aloud.

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The next morning, I attempted to explain last night with the Major as clearly as possible to my other good pal Avery. I sat beside her on her living room's loveseat, picking and choosing the proper details to include and what must be left out or any coherence would turn to garbage. This December, unlike the twenty-three Decembers that came before—and the first December where she owned her own apartment—it had yet to snow. I was unsure why, but I found that nearly as odd as the Major himself.

Of course, Avery offered little sign she thought there was any connection between our metaphorical man at nine forty p.m. Route 63 and today's weather. As if illuminating her annoyance, a stale, powdery sunlight found its way through the short opening of her thrift shop curtain and onto her uneasy hands. Like a neglected alarm set to ring-ring-ring she tapped her fingers on the loveseat's sidearm, then looked back to me—eyes narrowed.

“Eliza,” she began. “I’m tired, okay.”

“I get that.”

“Do you? You get that? What the hell kind of name is Major Myoga, anyway? A myoga is a Japanese ginger. Are you meaning to tell me you listened to man who called himself Major Ginger? What’s he the major of? All the ginger plants in the western hemisphere?”

“I get it sounds kinda dumb.”

Avery took a big breath and attempted to say something else but quickly realized it wasn't worth the effort. Along with our friend in the hospital, we've all known each other since we were twelve—over a decade now—and Avery knew I was the type to carefully consider anything that piqued my interest. I'd already poked and prodded last night from every angle.

“Okay. Okay. Eliza, let's just... so did he say what he's the major of?”

I shrugged.

“Words, please. What *did* he say?”

I took another sip of my water, collecting my thoughts. Unlike our best friend in Clear Valley Medical, Avery normally accepted whatever I said so long as I worded it nicely enough, so it was simply a matter of that. I grinned, took in the aroma of her supermarket candles burning only a short distance off, and worked it out.

“Like I said twice,” I began. “He was an *idea*. Wherever he felt like being, he could go. But that night he felt like being there on the highway. Not exactly on a whim, but I guess he had his reasons.”

“‘He had his reasons.’ Meaning, you’ve got no clue what those reasons were?”

Again, I shrugged.

“And he’s a metaphor?” she said slowly, weighing the words in her mouth as though to test their taste and consistency.

“That’s what he said.”

“What’s he supposed to represent?” she asked, practically hounding me at this point.

“I dunno. I just know that’s what he said. Then he left.”

“I’m not even going to ask if you know where he went.”

“Great. Cause he vanished into thin air.”

“Vanished as in... *vanished*? You being literal? I can try to get by with what you’ve said so far, but things don’t just disappear. Whatever you want to say he was—off-duty military personnel, ginger ministers, or especially *eggplant commandants* aren’t cotton candy melting in some dude’s mouth. People don’t disappear like that.”

“This guy did.”

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Avery and I left to inspect the shoulder meadow on Route 63. It was only evening, with little guarantee the Major would show. It wasn’t that we expected to find him, but Avery had the idea she might have a better idea of what happened with a second set of eyes. As though it were a crime scene and she believed visiting it could point her to the perpetrator’s true intentions.

Once we arrived, we wound our scarves tightly around our necks and plopped onto the stiff grass. It was hard to believe it was the same place as where I sat last night. It looked the same, but more in the way of witnessing a perfect replica of an object. The kind where no matter how hard someone might convince you the replica and the real thing were the same, you could never accept it. To me, by a gut assurance, this meadow and the one I sat in last night may as well have existed in different worlds.

What I knew about it was little aside from certain facts. In winter, only grass lived here, but in other seasons one would see azaleas, chrysanthemums, nightshades, dahlias, and bundles and bundles of apple blossoms. In short, it was the spot to go for a date when you didn't have enough money for the museum, art cinema, or heck... *botanical garden*, but still wanted to seem down-to-earth.

Eight years ago, before my best friend began her many stints of consecutive hospital visits, she had once described this meadow as the perfect date spot from a car window. Whether or not she still believed that was another question, but on that particular day as an innocent sixteen-year-old, she believed it was the most romantic sight she'd ever laid eyes on.

"This place?" Avery asked.

"This place. I was minding my own business, then in came—."

"The Major. Yeah, you said that. He walked in right in the middle of the night with no car or transportation. Like one of those cross-country joggers that lug around gallons of Gatorade and piss in bushes for the whole animal kingdom and south side of Detroit to admire. That's all great and fine, but let's just back up a sec, okay?"

I looked at Avery, confused.

"Back up?" I asked.

"What were you even doing here? It was the middle of the night."

"That's..."

I tried to speak, but the words fell back into my throat, as though a vacuum were sucking each one down my windpipe until they sank to my lungs—suffocating me. I suddenly found it harder to breathe, so I closed my eyes and counted to four, then opened them to find Avery cranking her neck down to the road. I had no idea talking about this would be so difficult, especially with Avery.

"I know you might not want to hear this," she began, lowering her voice. She ran her fingers along the grass, occasionally glancing at me. "But, well, how should I say this?"

"By saying it," I said. "You know where this highway leads to."

"Grand ma-ma—and you know how she was—she once told me death wasn't so much a departure, but a total projection of life."

"Your grand ma-ma said a lot of things. For example—"

“Ah shush! Shush. Shut it please! Fair enough. But hear me out?” Avery said, flailing her arms about to distract me. “All the things that were clustered together, tucked away so tight deep inside, they come out. And when you’re grieving, you see them. The untangled, raw form of someone else’s consciousness. Someone you love.”

Her delivery was so flawless I had to wonder if she’d rehearsed that. But I knew what she was driving at. Anyone would. Avery straightened her back and looked at me.

“Is the world really that considerate?” I asked, plainly.

“Who knows. She only said it didn’t work in such a neat way. All that mattered was that one found their way to that place. To where time no longer mattered. And there, everything comes together.”

*And there, everything comes together. Where time no longer mattered.* I thought that over. Again, and again. Until now, I didn’t think time did anything very dramatic for me. I’d carried on like normal, really, nothing had changed. “Your grand ma-ma sounds smart,” I said.

“Half the time.”

*I’m an idea,* the Major had said to me. *A metaphor thrown into waking, Monday night reality.* Different than me in a few, but crucial areas. Most likely, those areas were closer to death than I’d cared to accept. Or, much less, that our friend at Clear Valley could acknowledge within herself.

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I was fully aware Avery made up that story about her grand ma-ma to make me feel better. That’s how she was. No matter the concern, if it looked like it mattered enough to me, she’d find some way to justify what I was saying. Even vanishing military personnel such as Major Myoga.

Back in bed, in my own home, I decided to gather up some flowers from my vase to make a bouquet. Our friend at Clear Valley—Maple—was fond of the presents I gave her. I’d made the drive to her hospital room many times before, but last night I simply couldn’t. The closer I drew to that big building, the harder it became to breathe. The three of us—Avery, Maple and I, had been inseparable for so long, ever since we developed our first bouts of horrific acne—almost in unison.

Back then it was so different. Avery was my first good friend, then less than a year later Maple stumbled into our lives. Of course, her name wasn’t actually Maple, but we



dubbed her that following an incident where she once dumped a boy under a maple tree and wouldn't stop sobbing over the *not-so-nice* words he hurled at her. Following a long night of ice cream tubs and illegally pirated movies, not to mention a brilliant joke about the maple tree to bring up her spirits the name had little choice but to stick.

Knowing her answer, I thought I'd better dial Avery anyway. Maybe she'd have a change of heart. People changed every day. The mind was not some stagnant production. I dialed Avery and waited.

"Eliza?" she asked.

"Wanna see Maple? I'd been keeping some flowers."

"And that appointment with the realtor in the morning?" she said, acting like my mother. "Get some sleep."

"But wouldn't Maple like them?"

"Like them? Since when was Maple a flower girl? That's not the point. Seriously, how long are you planning on living at your parent's house? It'd be different if you didn't have an income, but you do. It's been four times now. Four no-shows. Listen, I love you and I know how you feel but—"

"I can do both."

"All I'm saying is this. First, don't blow my head off please," Avery said. "You're turning twenty-four in three weeks. Maybe it's time you started your life."

"Started my life? I don't get it."

"You know what I mean," she said, no doubt preparing her next rebuttal.

Avery was loud and clear.

*Maybe it's time you moved on.*

I envisioned Maple grinning on that plain-sheeted bed, taking my flowers while pretending to like them. It was never about the content of the gifts. She'd be holding tight over her pancreas, pretending she was only an actress playing the sick girl for her breakout role. Sometimes I wondered whether most of what went on between us was only us pretending.

"I know Maple doesn't like flowers," I said.

"That's not the point."

"That point being you're not coming?"

"Not this time. Sorry sweetie."

Last night, I intended on going alone as well. And just like then, I discovered an unbearable pain inside like a wire grinding against the contours of my heart. Suddenly, I felt so much lighter. Like my body, from the darkest crevice of my gut, was turning liquid-smooth.

I hung up. I took the vase with the flowers and left. Outside, the dark winter air held only a sliver of a moon, not very many stars. Whenever the wind stirred up my belted trench coat, I held the flaps close. It seemed that like Avery, the moody Tuesday was also against me. I steadied my thoughts, focusing only on the smell of the dirt stirring about. I hopped on my scooter, strapped on my helmet, and took off.

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I arrived at the hospital in under twenty minutes. Inside, I was informed visiting hours would be ending but I had about a half-hour to talk with Maple before I'd be kicked out. Long time repeat visitor or not, there was a limit to the special privileges I could be given. I thanked the tired receptionist Catharine who had kindly dealt with me many times in the past, then made my way to Maple's room on the fourth floor.

The white walls of the room always reminded me of the heaven I'd seen in so many movies, or at the very least, the moments right before passing on. This never struck me as threatening before, but tonight that warmth seemed to fade to something far darker. It made me question why hospitals decided to paint their rooms white. *We know exactly what we're doing, they must say. Or would you rather we imply to our patients that they're going to hell? To nothingness? Everyone needs a flag to fight for and people happen to like this one. That's business.*

I waved to old lady Concetta—who'd been Maple's surrogate best friend the past couple weeks succeeding miss Fukuyama, Mr. Mann, Mr. Hablowi, countless others over the years I couldn't recall. I slipped through the curtain to Maple's portion of the room by the window. Just beyond was a vastly different world than the one in this hospital.

Thinking about that felt bizarre in a way it didn't before meeting the Major. However the world fixed the gears on its axis had been damaged. Now, it was open season. Like my hand would stop being my own if I were to stick it out the window. It

would belong to something so alien and independent of me that I would lose confidence in my standing *here and now*.

Maple was lying up, reading a thick book on selected battles from World War II. In her teetering hands, it looked like she was supporting some strange kettlebell that could be opened and closed.

“Some light reading,” I said, peering over her book.

To no objection from her, I took my seat to her side. She lay the book flat on her chest and cranked her neck to get a decent look at me. Her long black hair fanned out beneath her lower back and elbows almost as though it were its own wrinkled up bedsheet.

“Ain’t it boring around here?” she said, with her plain, somewhat nasally voice as usual.

Maple was beautiful. She had this light far warmer than most people should need to have. The sort that must’ve been painful to recharge every morning. It had nothing to do with the way she spoke—she was as stiff as could be. No. It was in the glimmer of her eyes. Like in there was a water from some special, deeply hidden spring. She’d been like this even before she was sick. One look at her and you’d never know she’d spent the better part of the last eight years in rooms exactly like this.

“I brought flowers.”

“No kidding,” she said. “Anyone can see that.”

“They’re for you, here,” I said, as if though I believed they were about her and not me.

For the next fifteen minutes or so, we talked about various advancements in my and Avery’s lives since the last time I reported in. When I mentioned the new meeting with the realtor, Maple looked at me with fresh, accepting eyes like I hadn’t said the same thing four times before. Upon hearing Avery had recently been proposed to by her boyfriend of a few years, all Maple did was smile and nod. All these events existed in some forward continuum that no longer had anything to do with her. I knew that but kept shoving it in Maple’s face anyway.

I didn’t mention Major Myoga. Part of me felt like it was better not to. *Eliza*, I’d said to myself. *She has enough real, physical problems. Don’t rope her into things that barely make any sense.*

At about the twenty-minute mark, things started to turn sour.

“It’s not that I don’t like to see you,” Maple said.

“Hm?”

“But I’m in the middle of this book. It’s long. It’s dense. It’ll take me a while, so swear on your decent health you won’t bother Catherine about visitor’s passes at least until next week. Seriously, a full week. Or you’ll get a curse and end up here with me. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

I nodded, at a loss for what to say. Several ideas came to mind. *What if that is what I wanted?* I was caught between the gulf of my world and Maple’s world—trying so hard to convince myself crossing over was as simple as showing up with a vase of flowers. Maple’s world was one built in the form of her own shadow. One that looked normal but was composed solely of a personal darkness that couldn’t be weighed or measured. As though her humanity had dissolved to the point where she could be possessed by this microscopic entity in her pancreas that to anyone else didn’t have a face and arms, a voice whispering profanities in her ear. The *real* Maple, the one I couldn’t see, existed as a phantom that lacked the specifically human reality of someone outside this sterile gate to heaven dubbed Clear Valley Room 405.

My world, Maple would say, was one where I believed death had nothing to do with writing your own meaning. It was written all over her face that all but seemed to suggest *you could never understand me*.

Over the years, Maple and I had exchanged a lot of looks like that. About every essential matter imaginable.

In the end, I removed my *VISITOR Eliza Gómez* lanyard pass and drove off from the hospital. There wasn’t much traffic on the road, and without thinking much, I wound up on *that* side of the freeway. Before long, the meadow crept into view. I parked on the shoulder and suddenly found it hard to breathe again.

The grassy scent was so thick it seemed to wad up in my throat. The further I ventured inside, the larger that mass grew. It was cold. So very cold. Seated toward the high overlooking point was Major Myoga, dressed this time in a Ted Baker peacoat and turtleneck, slacks, and oxfords. Like me, he also lacked a scarf. Between this time and last time, he had grown a considerable stubble. Wherever he’s been, I doubted it was a warm home.

“*Major*,” I tried to call out, but out arrived little more than a whisper.

He met me with a nostalgic smile that must have hid a crevice of pain. Like he was viewing his first love pronounce her wedding vows to another man far later. He went through the natural motions to invite me by his side. Upon sitting, my throat started to clear up. This let me know he smelled like sweet potatoes. I found this funny enough to laugh under my breath.

*A disappearing military man that smells like sweet potatoes.* What were the odds? With how the night was going, I needed that little laugh.

“Tonight, is much too beautiful. Don’t you think?” he said. White breaths accompanied each of his words like baby clouds, then got sucked up in the dark. “Night after night, I can’t seem to get away. It’s like love.”

“Love?”

“A perfect prison. Built with enough care, one can never escape.”

“Then this a lovely prison,” I said, unsure if I believed that.

We sat silently, looking up, watching the final clouds disappear. Now, there was an entire kingdom of darkness. That sliver of a moon held the only spot of difference. It must have been a portal to a far different, much more dazzling world without love.

“Major Myoga,” I said. “Do metaphors like to hang around meadows?”

He nodded.

“We do many things. Everyone has their role. As the garbage man is a pillar to sanitary security, or a doctor either saves or removes a life. Everyone has their role. Naturally speaking, I have mine.”

“Can we pause on your first point? You said you do many things?” I asked. “Care to tell me one?”

“Bicycles,” he said. “I love to ride bicycles. When I was alive, I never had that opportunity.”

I took that in. When Major Myoga was alive?

“Do you remember what you liked to do when you were alive?” I asked.

“Not all that well. I merely know there was never a single moment where a bicycle and I existed in the same place. Call it intuition, but I’m sure the fabric of *me* and the fabric of *bicycles* have been inherently incompatible until after I was dead.”

Major Myoga spoke in a calm, considered manner. Despite what he was saying, he made you want to listen. In some ways, he reminded me of Avery. But his words had a sort of pain that already materialized into something much different, almost indescribably massive. I listened with awe at the beauty of it, like I alone was witnessing a special ceremony. Avery used to speak like this some years ago. One day, she suddenly stopped. This made our interactions much lonelier than they had any right to.

“Is there anything you remember?” I asked.

More silence. The grass swayed. A minute later, Major Myoga spoke again.

“When I think earnestly enough, I can remember the bombs,” he said. “The light of the Japanese sword glowing in the moonlight like it was a wandering soul. The blood. The maggots drifting down the river. Yet I had to drink from the river anyways. In Okinawa, that’s about what I remember.”

“Is that why you’re a Major? You were fighting in the war?”

He stopped to consider this. He turned to me, then back down to his slacks. I thought it was an obvious question, but it seemed assuming did no good. Looking back, assuming hardly ever did good with Maple or Avery either.

He brought his fingers up to his temples and massaged them, as if searching for the right words.

“No, I hardly knew what was going on,” he said. “I don’t believe I ever lived past thirteen. The fighting occurred in its own way without considering me. That’s not why I’m a major. That has nothing to do with Okinawa.”

Eying him carefully, he looked at least thirty-two. While I couldn’t wrap my head around that, I could understand his view of fighting occurring without so much as asking for his feelings about it.

“Thirteen-year-old?” I asked.

“I believe I mentioned I’m an *idea*. Time means nothing to me. I can be—or travel anywhere. That’s what ideas can do. To put it bluntly, and possibly crass—a metaphor lives in another world, feeding from this one. There is little other way I might explain it. I’m both here, and somewhere impossibly far away. My apologies if that is difficult to understand. It would take more than a short conversation to clarify it any way meaningful to you.”

“To understand this correctly, with you, time no longer matters?”

“Correct. With me, time no longer matters.”

I had to wonder if Avery’s grand ma-ma had ever met the Major.

A firefly crawled to his nail, glowing briefly. After some time, it flew away, going off somewhere I could hardly see. It never lit up again, as if reminding me that once they finally decide to light their beacon and call out for one another in the darkness, lonely creatures go on to lead awfully short lives.

“Eliza,” he said. “Why are you here?”

“I think there’s an evil spirit in my best friend’s pancreas.”

“Evil spirits don’t like to hang around in pancreases. Those sorts of places are no good. Livers or bowels either.”

“Right? That’s what I thought!”

Again, our words stopped. We listened only to the wind. Once it would stop, soon after, it rose again. Like the sun, how without fail it would always rise again the next morning. And the world would keep on turning, without fail, ever. With no regard to the people who’d wound up stuck in one space, *the real them*, unable to find the portal to cross over to where everyone else was. Like how Maple was sick yesterday and the day and years before and would still be sick tomorrow. Much like love, or our inability to tell each other anything meaningful, Maple was caught in an inescapable prison built with too much care.

I got up, about ready to head off to bed.

“Major Myoga, why are you a major? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m a space cadet,” he said, genuinely catching me by surprise. “Remember I can be anything. I like to take things up to space. Sort of an *extraplanetary delivery man* if that means anything to you? Other worlds, other universes, it doesn’t matter. If there’s a package, you best understand I’ll be there to deliver it. Everyone has a role. That’s mine. I’m assuming you are my client?”

I nodded. There was nothing else to say but go along with what had been waiting so long between Maple and I to unfold—no matter how nonsensically this came to be. In the grand scheme of everything life encompassed, I’m sure an extraplanetary space cadet was surprisingly low on the list of hard-to-understand concepts. There were things much closer to home, mundane and otherwise uneventful that had been around me for much of my life that would be infinitely harder to understand than the Major.

“Looks like it,” I said. “Guess you already know my destination address?”

“It is protocol to wait for the client to say it. Once protocols go out the window, there is no telling what else does.”

I smiled at that. What a nice thought.

This was the last time I saw the Major.

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Following that night, the Major vanished again. He didn’t have to say anything, but I knew he was in search of his next client. It was my turn to follow through to Maple with the message he allowed me to deliver.

The coming week had its share of events. For the first time, I attended the realtor meeting. I would be able to move into my own place by next week. I also kept my word to Maple on not bothering Catherine and staying far away from Clear Valley Medical. On some afternoons, I went out to kill time with Avery. She didn’t ask me about Maple, nor did I bring her up. Mostly, we talked about the coming stages in our lives. It’s been like this since we were mid-teenagers, about two years after Maple first told us about her health in her matter-of-fact way. Neither Avery or I ever knew what to say, and Maple didn’t say much either.

“You’re getting older, Eliza,” said Avery now. “Have you still not given any thought to matters of the heart?”

*I know what it is you don’t want to say, and you don’t have to worry a thing about me,* I thought to myself, but didn’t vocalize to Avery.

On the appointed evening, I rode my scooter up to the hospital around six p.m. Maple was sitting up in bed, her book placed on the desk next to my vase. There was a slip of paper tucked between one of the middle pages.

“Eliza,” she said, straight-faced. “I finished the book.”

“That thing? Seriously?”

“No, not really. It’s way too long.” She paused, tapping her fingers on her knees like how the Major peered deeply to his slacks. She refused to look at me for longer than three seconds at a time. “I read this one anecdote from an American soldier. It was about the remains of an eight-year-old boy in Okinawa. Well, some accounts say he was



eight. Others eleven, thirteen, even five. It doesn't matter. The boy had a bullet lodged in his brain. A quick, painless death. It got me thinking."

She took the slip out of the book and handed it to me. Written on the paper was a poem in her handwriting. She gave me an approving look which turned my stomach inside out, but I began to read anyway. It was signed *Ji-ae "Maple" Park*, titled *My Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

*I like to dream I'm up by Saturn  
Sitting on the rings, smiling with the dust  
And the coldness is like a sword that slices my liver  
But I'm up there, so so far away.  
From a perfect prison barring you and me  
With the comets flying by, and there's no longer time  
And my spirit free to make the dream from me to you.*

Ji-ae had been sick for a very long time, and I'd never before cried in front of her. But for the first time, I let myself cry a little. Only a little.

Then a lot.

"I must've looked like a doofus," she said, her voice cracking. "Getting so worked up reading about the boy, and this came out. I know it doesn't make a lick of sense, but that's what I felt. Sometimes, I wonder what's the difference between me and my nonsense ideas."

I placed the paper down and peered out the window. Night would soon draw in, like any other day.

Ji-ae's heart was a lonely hunter. That was something I could understand any day.

I imagined the meadow, and the message I passed onto the Major to deliver for me. I packaged them with tears that arrived eight years too late. My heart was dense with the swell of ideas. Much like I was in the process of transitioning to a liberated spirit all on my own, no longer afraid to do so.

"The difference between an idea and a person," I said. "And this is my turn to be less than clear. But a person, in order to keep living in this world, would be bound inextricably with pain. You mentioned a perfect prison impossible to escape."

"Eliza, where are you going with this?"

“Just as it’s love, *pain* is also a perfect prison. Matters of the heart between one another are bonded through a pain so deeply private that they may not ever be spoken clearly. To do so would transform it into something less than true.”

“And to you—what are you implying exactly? This was how flesh and blood people are different from silly ideas,” Ji-ae said. “Pain, not just love, you say is like some jail that detained us. We’re partner inmates, me and you. A jail with no escape, and a love—therefore pain, which we can’t ever talk about because it would be meaningless to say aloud. I won’t disagree with that.”

“Right,” I said, viewing her eyes one last time. They were red, holding back tears with a force that seemed to require every last ounce of her effort. She had the same nostalgic smile as the Major. “Pain and love, especially in our case, are one in the same. Just as it’s impossible to describe love, it’s hopeless to describe pain. It can’t be put into words that retain its real meaning. An idea is that. The real meaning. Existing in the world like a spirit you can see and interact with. That’s why it’s silly. It’s silly that something so personal can be delivered from one person to another.”

“You’re saying an idea is that truth between us that can’t be said?” Ji-ae replied, wiping my tears rather than letting herself produce her own. “You’re taking that little poem too seriously. Forget I said anything.”

“Not this time. Not again. I’m not letting it go. You meant every word, and yes, that’s what I think an idea can be,” I said. “It’s pure. Unbound by all the shortcomings, illnesses, pretenses, and worries we could never fully escape from. In short, *it could cross the impossible distance between people who could never understand each other.*”

“Meaning, I’m assuming, from you to me? Are we having this conversation?”

Silly thoughts ebbed forth with the ones that shouldn’t be said. Such as *you should have seen how Avery cried over picking the right birthday gift for you last year. Like you were in any position to receive it! Another birthday, that funeral no one talks about anymore, it’s all the same. But wouldn’t it have been better if that foul-mouthed kid you dated was me?*

When I delivered my package via the Major I thought the same. There was no way I could ever be honest otherwise, and even if I could—if all my fears vanished—my message would never reach anywhere meaningful enough. That’s how Maple and I were.

Even when I knew within my gut, my liver... my *pancreas* she might finally be considering entering Heaven.

I thought again of that firefly that flashed in the meadow. It lit up for a single period of time to hunt for a lover, then vanished so deep in the dark no one would ever see it again. But its light remained in my brain. When I closed my eyes, I could see it. *Ji-ae*.

“I want you to take this to somewhere metaphorical,” I’d said to the Major. “To a dream only Maple knows. To my friend who lives far away. To *Ji-ae*’s world. I’ve got a message I’ve been waiting eight years to deliver. Can you do that for me?”

# El Condor Mira

by Dylan Munson

The spot where he had fallen was particularly cold, but there was no snow on this part of the mountain. The invader's back felt as if it had frozen to the rocky platform on which he lay. The terrible eye pinned him from the other side. It was not accusing, despite all the evidence against him.

The gun, damned thing, lay a few yards away, out of his reach. So did his sat phone. It didn't have any distress beacon activated, because that would have been self-destructive in another way. So he was stranded. Paralyzed from the shoulders down, a castaway on this unfathomable mountain, in an unfathomable country, with an unfathomably large bird staring down at him.

The bird. It wasn't the gun to blame, it was the bird. Somehow. He imagined he would, as he was dying, have quite a bit of time to consider how this was really the bird's fault.

The pain wasn't bad, probably because most of his nerves were either destroyed or now disconnected from his spine. Dying there wouldn't be so awful if it were just a bit warmer, and if he could see over the mountain. That must be a nice view. He didn't much care for scenery, but it seemed like a shame to die without grandeur. The day was clear, and if he were on the peak, instead of this blasted, freezing slope, maybe he could see out to Santiago. He'd landed there just seven days ago, first class, sipping mimosas all the way from New York. Three days drinking himself away, getting stoned out of his mind, going to clubs, forgetting dark-skinned women with names that sounded to his country club ears like equally enticing cocktails. It seemed so far away now. He could've forgotten about his invasion, stayed in Santiago. It wouldn't have been a terrible loss.

But here he was, with nothing to see but the blue, cloudless infinity above. And the eye. The eye that didn't even have the decency to accuse. Just to pity.

He closed his eyes, and waited to die.

But he didn't die. He remained pinned like a dissected frog on the uneven rock, and the studious bird remained above him. He didn't once see it fly away to eat or

drink. It was alive, though, as dispassionately alive as he was. It moved its head from side to side, quick biting motions that it hurt his brain to look at for too long.

Its shriek, which was unlike that of any of the many other birds he'd encountered, was the other thing that reminded him of the creature's vitality. It was a piercing shriek, laden with the undertones of a hissing cat and a growling wolf. The shriek was usually followed by a series of low, guttural vocalizations made while the bird knocked its head from one side to the other, shifting its gaze up, down, and around his body.

Once, he had thought he was about to die. The pool of blood had extended about half the diameter of the rock face he occupied, his mouth was dry, he was unable to conjure a fully formed thought, and his heartbeat was slowed to almost nothing. He closed his eyes and settled in for a fall. He figured it would feel like falling. He wasn't a religious man, so he didn't think he would fall anywhere in particular. Just that he would drop a bit and then—nothing.

The rock beneath him stuttered, faltered. He prepared himself.

Then the bird shrieked, and his eyelids snapped open. The eye gazed down at him with pity and contempt.

He was unhappy about this. His heart rate was still slow, he had minimal bodily sensation, but his eyes worked fine and his ability to think was returning. That seemed wrong, in a distant way, to him. He had lost far too much blood for advanced functions to be continuing. He should at least be unconscious. But he wasn't.

A bit of unconsciousness would have been a blessing.

Two days passed. He kept his thinking to a minimum, figuring that he could goad his nervous system over the edge. It didn't work. He also found he could turn his head just a bit, enough so that the eye was out of his central vision. But it was still there in the periphery, and that was somehow worse. That made it feel like he was being examined by a dentist, having his head turned one way and the other to check for cavities. So he kept his head positioned the way it had been.

On the second day he felt the rock unsettling again. The air grew still, and he had the sensation that the very bottom of the mountain had disappeared, that the rest would be eaten, from the bottom up, until whatever was doing the eating reached this point. Then he would fall, at last. He could hear the hollow Earth beneath him. He was

ecstatic. He would soon be free, free of the discomfort, free of his thoughts, free of that eye.

But the shriek stopped the deconstruction, liberated the air. The mountain grew back. The cold returned, more potent than before. The bird hopped a step closer to the edge of the overhang upon which it was perched, and shrieked again. For good measure.

It could have been a week. Probably it was a month. He lost count of the cold days and colder nights. Whatever had been coming for him, whatever release had been prepared, did not seem likely to return. Not a single plane had passed overhead. No hikers. He was marooned next to one of the largest cities in South America. He didn't understand how it was possible. It was even more of a mystery than his continued breathing.

It rained several times. He was excited the first time it did, because he thought it very likely that he would be drowned, or at least get very sick and then hurry to his end. Neither of those things happened, though. The rock beneath him grew colder, and the night after it rained a thin layer of ice formed between his green polyester jacket and the ground. Mud ran over the rocks above in tiny waterfalls, cascading down upon his face in rivulets that left brown streaks on his pale, carefully manicured skin. That felt like such a waste now, all the money to repair the little cuts and bruises from his various expeditions, his other invasions that had provided that very money. Now here that flesh was, a domain of dirt and detritus, a domain of failure.

When days passed, and he felt no change come over his faculties, he knew his hopes for death by water had been in vain. Then it rained again, and this time he tried to sleep through it.

He slept very little. Enough, but very little. Even if he'd been comfortable enough to get a full night's rest, the eye would not let him. It watched, and if it saw that he had sunk too much, screeched and brought him back to consciousness.

Because he was not a religious man it never once crossed his mind that this could be Hell, which it was not. He only considered it some kind of unfortunate mistake. There was no room for punishment in his understanding of the world.

He continued to stifle his thinking, but images crept in nonetheless. They were all familiar images, except for one aspect—at the center of all of them was the eye. He saw an image of his first girlfriend, in the back of his car after a school dance. She was leaning in to kiss him, but nestled between her lips was the eye, watching him with contempt, and he shrunk back.

The first time he'd really flattened himself out with drugs. He didn't remember which drugs, and it wasn't like remembering the trip itself. It was more like watching himself from above, lying motionless on the dirty mattress, the hairy naked man who had sold the tablets to him kneeling beside it. But at the center of his own chest was the eye.

Then something that had happened on his way to Santiago. He'd been in the airport, about to board the flight. There was a bird flying about in the terminal, some of the airport employees were trying to catch it. The bird was small, probably just a sparrow or something like that—he didn't really know American birds very well—but it had the eye of the condor. And as it flew back and forth, alighting on the departures board, then flitting to the marquee over a coffee shop, then back to the departures board—all through these movements, the eye watched him.

And when he returned to the rock, the eye was still there.

He hated the bird, and it was a hate filled with the conviction of a genocidal madman. His loathing extended to everything that looked like it. Anything with wings, he considered, ought now to be killed. Because of what this bird was doing to him. Its kind needed to be squashed. Not because this same fate might befall somebody else, but because what was happening was unnatural. It shouldn't be allowed to occur.

It dawned on him, after some days, or weeks, or months passed, that he had one advantage over this creature. He hadn't actually tried using his vocal chords since he had cut himself down, and wasn't sure if they would still work.

The first vocalization he produced was nothing more than a screech; after that, an undulating growl. His voice required warming up, it had gone without use for so long. But eventually he found he was able to produce a specific vowel, if he really focused on it—*aaaaaaa*—and then a consonant.

“Hwa...Hwa...Ya...Da...” He didn’t actually know what he wanted to say, now that he had found his voice. What he wanted to do was curse the thing, say something that would penetrate its little bird brain so deeply that it would have to understand without understanding. To hurt it so much that its feathers would fall off, its beak shrivel to a point, its talons crack and fall apart like brittle seaside candy. The invader no longer wished it to leave, but wished it to stay long enough that he could make it suffer the way he was suffering.

But as he gazed into the eye, as he looked into its black and red depths, he saw something like past, present, future superimposed upon each other. He saw himself reflected there, not just the images he’d seen before but *all* the images, his entire self, dissolved into a cloud of probabilities, events that had occurred and had not occurred all layered one on top of another like a poisoned wedding cake. He saw this, and his will evaporated. He could no longer define what this curse ought to be because he could no longer define where he was or who he was. He was not an invader, prostrate upon a rock, cut down with spacious life before him and behind him. He was a cloud, lying on another cloud, looking into something with inscrutably broad meaning.

His muscles, suddenly freed from their prison, spasmed, and his hand clawed at the little bit of dried blood on his jacket that had not been washed away in the rain. It caked off onto his fingers like clotted red paint. He looked into the eye and only managed to whimper the word “Why?”

The eye did not change. It continued to stare, and deepened.

He closed his eyes, and prepared himself for the next cry.

“I thought trees didn’t grow this high up. What’s it doing up here?” The hiker shifted the weight of his backpack a bit. It was getting uncomfortable. He had thought this wasn’t going to be too different from his summers in the Rockies.

His companion shrugged, then said something to their guide in Spanish.

The guide, a Mapuche man of not more than twenty-five or so, looked the tree up and down. He responded very slowly. Or the hiker thought it was slow. Spanish usually sounded fast to him, especially as the guide spoke it.



“He says it shouldn’t be here. There’s not enough oxygen. And he’s passed this way before and never seen it.” He squinted and turned his head, then pointed at something about halfway up the tree. “Look!”

The hiker followed his finger and saw, perched on a barren branch, a massive bird. He thought it seemed rather confused—it was not looking out from the tree, as birds usually were, but facing its trunk. Its hooked beak was pressed up against the cracked wood so tightly that the white feathers about its neck hugged the bark as well.

“Condor,” the guide said.

“It’s beautiful.” That wasn’t really what the hiker thought. He thought it was quite a plain bird, distinguished only by its size. He liked nature to be more gaudy. That was why he’d come to the Andes, wasn’t it?

As if reading his thoughts, the bird turned and glared at him. It shuffled along the branch a ways. Then it crouched, paused for a moment. The hikers looked, the guide watched, as it took to the air. It flew in a great circle about them, then disappeared over the crest of the mountain.

# CARACOL

By Eric Odynocki

The aroma of fresh churros, conchas, and coffee weighed heavily in the air, mixing with the salt of the Pacific by the time El Sonrisón pulled up to the gas station in Caracol. El Sonrisón smirked to himself when he caught the attendant freeze in the doorway of the garage and ogle his car, a gleaming 1950 Chevy 150. Moonlight cream. His, technically, because he had the keys at the moment. One of many reasons La Micté would be scouring LA for him right about now.

*He must think I'm another Hollywood exec, here to drown in booze at the Hotel Pacífico.*

"Fill her up," El Sonrisón said. He stepped out of the car, smoothed the lapel of his burgundy suit. He leaned against the hood and lit a cigarette. A peach dawn was peaking over the indigo silhouette of the sierra, casting beams of sunlight on the awakening seaside town: the mission bell tower, the fishermen shacks, and the glimmering gates of the Hotel. As tasty as the tobacco was, El Sonrisón couldn't ignore the power of dough and sweetness wafting in the breeze, how it emanated from a small, signless storefront a little ways down the street. A small house rather, sandwiched between a locksmith and a hair salon. An elderly woman in a flower embroidered mandil and with salt-and-pepper braids wrapped around her head swept the front stoop.

"Is her food any good?" El Sonrisón asked the attendant without taking his eyes off his next mark. A couple had stepped up to the old woman's gate. She greeted them with a kiss on the cheek and invited them inside.

"Doña Chepa's? Oh, yes, of course! She is Caracol's best cook. She has breakfast out now. Wait until lunchtime and you can try her tamales! To be honest, I prefer hers to my own mother's."

"I promise I won't tell." El Sonrisón flashed one of his pearly grins and the attendant almost blushed.

El Sonrisón turned back to Doña Chepa. She was now waving to a group of school children, each one skipping away with a pastry. "What does her husband do?"

The attendant shook his head. “La Doña Chepa has been alone for as long as I can remember. El Don Seve died before I was born. Well, disappeared.” He leaned in and in a lower voice said, “They say Don Seve found something while fishing one day. Came back into town raving. And the next day, he was gone. Not a trace. Some people say Doña Chepa had something to do with it but I don’t believe it. La pobre was left all alone, her children all up north. Ever since she’s just been selling food to the town. Never misses mass. Always stops by if you’re sick. I swear her chicken soup does wonders.”

A little old lady with children in the States? A seemingly endless stock of foodstuffs? El Sonrisón blew out some smoke through his nostrils. Doña Chepa was hiding something. Something he could use to pay La Micté back. Something that made El Sonrisón’s mouth water.

“You have to try her cooking before you go.”

With one hand, El Sonrisón flicked the cigarette and with the other flicked a coin to the attendant. “I think I’ll grab a bite.”

El Sonrisón parked the car at the hotel, tipped a bellhop, and sat in the front lobby smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper, putting into practice every conman’s first lesson: look like you own the place. He waited until mid morning, when the townsfolk would be satiated with breakfast and occupied with their pointless daily tasks, and Doña Chepa would be preparing her tostadas or taquitos or whatever the attendant said.

“Good morning,” El Sonrisón greeted when she opened the door. “Might I interest you in a new stove from Sears?” He held up a catalog which he had swiped from the gas station and flashed the smile that gave his name.

Doña Chepa stood in silence, taking in his 5’10” frame, his slick black hair, his clean shaven, dimpled face. Her hooded, caramel eyes didn’t blink. “Save your smile for the young ladies. I am not so easily fooled.”

“I assure you—”

“Come on,” Doña Chepa invited, slowly withdrawing into the shadows of the house. “You look tired. And hungry. I don’t know what you’re after but you can’t get it on an empty stomach.”

El Sonrisón stifled a chuckle. Tables had never been turned on him so fast, his charm so easily dismissed. Even his usual quick wit could not find a clever enough rejoinder other than, “All right.”

Incredulous of Doña Chepa’s generosity or naivety and savoring what appeared to be an unexpected challenge, though one he was sure to best as he had so many others, El Sonrisón walked into a common room. A table by the front window was where Doña Chepa sold her wares. A cupboard and cabinet with a large wood-burning stove lined one wall. A rocking chair and wooden bench on the other greeted guests. A single rug covered a small portion of the immaculate wood floors. The white walls held a cross and a painting of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

“They call me Doña Chepa. What’s your name?”

“Eddy.” He didn’t lie, although he wondered why, out of all of his aliases, he blurted that name. It was a name he only let his abuelita call him. A name he had not heard in years. Something about Doña Chepa reminded him of her. Physically, completely different. But the shrewdness cushioned with affection, the same.

His eyes lingered on a single shelf with a framed portrait of a couple in wedding dress and a large conch shell with swirls of pink and orange: a sunset in calcium carbonate.

“Beautiful,” El Sonrisón remarked.

Doña Chepa nodded, preparing coffee. “They say the Spaniards never saw so many shells on a beach before, so they called this place Caracol. That one was my husband’s last gift before he... he... You know they say when you put the shell to your ear you can hear the ocean. And its spiral looks like it goes on forever.” Doña Chepa’s wistful gaze at the shell turned into a reproachful glance at him. “Siéntate, pues.”

El Sonrisón obeyed, pulling a chair out from the table. Doña Chepa offered a plate of conchas and a mug of coffee. “So tell me, young man, what are you doing here?”

“I’m selling—”

“Don’t lie. Your pocho Spanish gives you away. No salesman from the States would bother with this town. Why are you here?”

El Sonrisón took a sip of coffee. He had never tasted a cup so good. A perfect blend of sugar, smooth cream, and earthy bitterness. He licked the froth from his lips.

Doña Chepa leaned back in her chair, assessing him. “No, you’re not looking for something. You’re running away from something.”

El Sonrisón forced himself to maintain eye contact while his mind shot to La Miete. She’d be crossing the border by now, pocket pistol in her garter.

“Running to, running away, what difference does it make?”

“It doesn’t,” Doña Chepa agreed. “We all end up in the same place.” She paused, musing. “So many people get lost along the way, don’t you think? Though they often don’t realize. I see it. Them. So many floundering, confused. They need help.”

El Sonrisón leaned back in his chair. A lecture. Great. He scanned the room out of the corner of his eye and noted a curtained doorway. He took a bite out of a pan dulce, chomped at the sweet sponginess. He imagined it must be what a cloud at dawn must taste like. El Sonrisón nodded, feigning interest. “Were you ever lost?”

“Twice. Once when I was young and thought I loved another man who promised me everything except leaving his wife. And then when I lost my husband.”

“Who helped you?”

“My husband. Both times. First, by showing me what true love is. The second,” a tear sparkled in her eye, “I didn’t realize at first. His absence was too much. But, after he was gone, I realized I wasn’t alone, that he never truly left. He lives in my heart, my memories. I see him in my dreams every night. And that’s what brought me back. Our lives together. Our lifetime full of love.”

El Sonrisón sat in silence. What telenovela had she copied that from? The melodrama was almost nauseating. The tear was a nice touch, though. But who was she performing for? And why? Finally, he said, “He must have been a good man.”

She nodded, wiped her cheek. Dreaminess glazed over her eyes. “My Seve always made sure we lacked nothing. When he wasn’t fishing, he was selling his catch to the fancy gringos. Every day. His palms thick with scars from pulling those nets. Up to the last day. Even in death he provides. I don’t have to worry about anything. I can look after Caracol, make sure everyone’s full. And healthy.” She paused, giving him a meaningful look. “You’re not exactly lost, but not sure of where you’re going either.”

He shrugged with a smirk as if admitting, “Guilty as charged.”

“Do you need help?”

El Sonrisón shook his head.

Doña Chepa kept eyeing him. “Oh? Now it’s your turn. Who has helped you?”

“No one,” he nearly spat.

She pursed her lips, unimpressed. “No seas macho. Be honest.”

El Sonrisón sat for a moment, the resentment of a rough life that soured his answer before melting away, deflating his haunched, defiant shoulders, leaving him almost cold. He didn’t like the question, didn’t like the memories it conjured up. Like his abuelita hugging him the day he went to live with her because his parents were gone, rounded up in what the Feds called Repatriation. They had been born in California but their accent and melanin and simply crossing paths were incriminating enough for the agents. And they tried finding their way back but one bus ride in Mexicali turned fatal. Eddy was seven when he received their last letter.

“Who has helped you?” his abuelita asked from across the table.

El Sonrisón’s heart jumped. He blinked and saw only Doña Chepa again. Thankfully, he had not flinched, spilled his coffee, or choked. Too many years keeping cool under pressure. Handcuffs. Gunpoint. But thinking he saw his grandmother there shot a sharp pain through his chest. Seeing her there, in front of him, not like the last time, in the white coffin being lowered in the cemetery, the funeral he had to watch from a distance because of his reputation. He took a sip of coffee, hoping the warmth would dull the ache. *Am I about to steal from this woman?*

“Countless people, I suppose,” he said. “And now you.” He lifted his mug in gratitude at which Doña Chepa waved a dismissive hand. “I guess where would any of us be without someone’s help?”

“Who are you helping find their way, Eddy?”

El Sonrisón looked away this time, his name like a gunshot. Through his mind flickered faces downcast from betrayal. An old banker patting his pockets for his wallet after El Sonrisón helped him pick up his hat. The mechanic he left on the side of the road. The look on his abuelita’s face when she discovered he stole his first watch so they could pay the rent. He was ten at the time. Abuelita threw the watch out the window and never said *Eddy* the same way again.

El Sonrisón looked at the plate heaping with pan dulce, the steaming mug, and, with a pang, imagined Doña Chepa’s face after he left with everything she owned. Or

could it be different this time? Was there another life without La Miente hunting his every step? “Perhaps it’s time I start trying.”

Doña Chepa smiled approvingly.

El Sonrisón took a final bite, a final sip, wishing, in a way, it would not be the last time. He wiped crumbs from his lips. “May I use your bathroom?”

Doña Chepa gestured to the curtained door frame. As El Sonrisón passed through its threshold stepping onto an exterior patio with an outhouse, he could hear the old woman quip, “Don’t get lost.”

El Sonrisón stepped into the outhouse, pretended to do his business as his mind whirled over his next move. The nape of his neck had tingled at the mention of Don Seve’s parting gift, how he continued to provide even in death. Would it be so wrong to scope out the place? According to the attendant even the townsfolk, as much as they hailed Doña Chepa as a saint, suspected her of hiding something. Why not put their rumors to rest?

El Sonrisón stepped back out onto the patio where he noticed a second door, a metallic one, green with rust nibbling on its corners.

“Gracias, Doña Chepa,” El Sonrisón said in a booming voice. When no reply came, El Sonrisón smirked and sauntered over to the metallic door. He jiggled the handle and found it to be unlocked. Inside was a small room with sacks of flour, rice, and beans, shelves of cans. Each wall had a door. Deducing the door on the right must lead back into the kitchen, El Sonrisón checked the door across from where he stood. It was a small bedroom, the blinds closed, letting in only the thinnest threads of sun to slit across a bed with dusty pillows, blankets. An armoire stood nearby. El Sonrisón sneaked over, gingerly opened it only to find two skeletal hangers. Doña Chepa’s room must be somewhere else. He felt around for a false wall or floor, a compartment where the old lady could hide some valuables. Nothing. Under the bed. Nothing. Behind the bed. Nothing.

El Sonrisón stepped into the small back room, listened for Doña Chepa’s shuffle of chanclas and, when silence reassured him, walked over to the door to his right. El Sonrisón hesitated. Based on what he remembered from the street, this door should lead right into the hair salon next door. Opening it could create an awkward situation with a bunch of hairdressers or he could meet a wall blocking his way. El Sonrisón could talk

his way out of the former and could circle back to the kitchen and living room if the latter were true.

The doorknob twisted smoothly and the hinges did not scream but whispered much to El Sonrisón's relief. He entered a library or study. He looked around at the stacks of leatherbound volumes, the polished shelves, the green velvet cushions. What would an fisherman's widow do with all these books? And how could she afford this kind of furniture? *I knew she was hiding something!*

El Sonrisón quickly perused for a safe, a chest, anything. He checked the desk in the middle of the room, slipped a hand under the middle drawer for a key, and found nothing. El Sonrisón sighed. Doña Chepa hid her money better than pirates.

There was another door opposite where he came in. El Sonrisón opened it expecting to see a row of women sitting under dryers but instead felt a cool breeze wash over him. His eyes met with the shade of a colonnade that wrapped around a courtyard. A fountain bubbled in the center while bougainvillea crept up the columns in slithering tendrils of magenta. Was this still Doña Chepa's house? Did it matter?

El Sonrisón grinned, dimples crimping his full drawn lips, as he walked the length of the colonnade and slipped into one of the side rooms. He found a sitting room with marble floors, persian carpets, crystal chandeliers. Beyond that, a music room with a gorgeous grand piano. A spiral staircase led to bedrooms on the second floor, each one more sumptuously furnished than the last. Along the way, El Sonrisón took note of all the jade figurines, the porcelain vases. He plucked a diamond ring and a string of pearls from a jewelry box left carelessly open. Keepsakes for now. Something to appease La Micté's hate. She could never really hate him for long.

El Sonrisón made his way back down the hall to the spiral staircase that he could have sworn ran clockwise before. On the ground floor he stepped into a lounge he did not recognize, which opened into a dining room, which led into a cozy den with a red chaise lounge. El Sonrisón made a right, expecting to walk into the courtyard with its colonnade. Instead, he found a long gallery, impossibly long, with red walls lined with white marble statues and pre-columbian effigies. El Sonrisón took a step forward. The muffled thump of his leather sole against the marble tile thundered in the gallery. He took another step, and another, the thudding of his shoes the only sound reaching his ears. The initial sculptures in regal poses gave way to writhing figures, their mouths and



eyes twisted in ecstasy or rage. El Sonrisón kept his own eyes on the door at the end of the gallery. He was winded by the time he got there.

When El Sonrisón opened the door, he found a cozy den, a dining room beyond. He shook his head, ignored the rumbling question. *Wasn't I just...?* He started running. A billiard room. A drawing room. A conservatory, stiflingly humid. A gallery of landscapes. Or were they windows? And then, a cozy den with a red chaise lounge, a dining room beyond. El Sonrisón stood, dumbfounded, his eyes darting for an exit. A large window looked out onto the street. Tourists on souvenir hunts. Mothers going to market. All walking under the Baja sun. El Sonrisón tried lifting the bottom sash of the window. When it did not budge, he slid his hands along the sill, groped for a latch. Nothing. He banged on the glass, yelled for help. No one even looked in his direction. El Sonrisón gritted his teeth, jammed his elbow into a pane. The glass stayed intact while pain throbbed in his elbow. El Sonrisón took a candlestick from a nearby table and flung it at the window. The candlestick clunked to the floor. El Sonrisón took an ottoman next and slammed it with all his strength. Nothing. Not even a crack. Panting, El Sonrisón leaned his head against the glass, beat his fist against the cold surface.

A car parked nearby. A familiar car. Out stepped a woman in black skirt and red blouse, black veiled chapeau, raven hair spilling in waves over her slender shoulders. El Sonrisón watched as Doña Chepa approached and offered La Micté a pan dulce from her wicker basket. La Micté's bright red lips drew up in a smile as she accepted, took a bite, and showed Doña Chepa a picture. The old woman leaned in, squinted, and nodded her head. Doña Chepa gestured toward the house. La Micté nodded. Doña Chepa linked her free arm into La Micté's and they started heading towards the house.

El Sonrisón stepped back from the window. The red chaise lounge sprawled before him. He staggered over and slumped down, cradling his face in his hands.

"There you are."

El Sonrisón's head jerked up, his eyes bulging at an elderly man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in plain but neat clothes. He had a thick crown of white hair, two beady eyes beneath snowy and bushy eye brows, and a salt and pepper mustache framing thick lips. He looked back at El Sonrisón with a not unkind expression.

"Who are you?" El Sonrisón croaked.

“You know.” Don Seve walked over and took a seat next to El Sonrisón, patting him on the shoulder. Don Seve’s eyes peered at the candlestick on the floor, the toppled ottoman.

“But people said you were... I thought you were...How is this...?”

Don Seve chuckled. “People say a lot of things.”

“But... but... am I dead? Is this some sort of hell?”

“Oh, no, not at all. It’s a gift. She liked you. Come.” Don Seve rose, his joints cracking. He put the candlestick back, stood the ottoman upright and in its place. “Let me show you to your room. I’ll explain along the way. And then you can start helping me in the garden. Chepita will need the fresh tomatoes”

El Sonrisón blinked, sitting there as if boulders anchored his shoes to the spot. “I can’t leave?”

“Eventually. The house is a bit of a puzzle. I don’t go out, you know, so people don’t find out about this place. But by the time you can I don’t think you’ll want to.”

*Eventually.* The word twirled in El Sonrisón’s mind.

At the door, Don Seve turned around and motioned with his hand. “Come along.”

El Sonrisón sat a moment longer, stupified, trying to make sense of how the hall behind Don Seve appeared to balloon and swallow him. El Sonrisón then realized how exhausted he was. From fighting. From running. Wasn’t each heist, each scam, each headline getaway just landmarks plotted erratically on his treasure map for stability? Hadn’t his life been a funnel without a bottom? Nowhere soft to land. No haven.

El Sonrisón got up slowly and shuffled forward. He thought he could hear the hiss of the ocean.

# The Last Story

by Brittany Ann Oppenheimer

I walked into the same library like I have twenty-seven times before. Twenty-seven times I saw the same sparkle of light dash across the dust swaying in the air. Twenty-seven times I walked to the counter with my hands in my pockets unsure of what I wanted to read. Twenty-seven times I watched parents smile in delight as their little ones skipped happily across the hallway to the outside world. Book in hand, or in elbow, or some other place that will keep what is dear to them safe.

For me, today is a different day, and I feel good. Hopeful even, because this is the twenty-eighth time I journeyed into this library alone, and in three days, it will be the twenty-eighth of February. That was the day my son was born. A day which I have celebrated with him ten times. It is a very lucky number to me and I find myself to be a very lucky guy. I boast about it all the time at the casino. That my luck is the reason why I win blackjack or slots so consistently. Over time, it became addicting to jot down every win inside my mind. Two hundred and eight wins to be exact and even after all that time. The rush of a winning streak always made me feel good. It made me feel like I was unstoppable, and yet. *I'm feeling lucky* is the biggest understatement I could ever give myself.

The librarian I talked to for the twenty-eighth time was in high spirits today. He whistled quite cheerfully. Trying his best to hit the high notes with ease. He also walked around with a pep in his step that made him look like he was walking on air. The old man wore a brown suit and polka dot tie and a pair of glasses that were cracked on one side. He stumbled around, tower of books in hand until he noticed me from behind the counter. I could hear him mumble something in the distance. It became hard to pay attention to my surroundings as the harassing thoughts started to overwhelm me again. Still, what the librarian said...or, what he tried to say didn't seem normal. His words sounded stuffy and weightless like fog. Wait, fog? Fog doesn't even have a sound, right? Yet, his words were cloudy... and they made my head swell. It was like I was unaware of the cast of shadows masquerading as real people, but they are real people. How could they not be? Damn it, I remember a time when I was so sure of myself, so certain—

“Do you need a recommendation, sir?”

“Oh,” I responded. Trying my best to hide my drifting again. “No, actually. I have an idea of what I want today. Would you mind lending an ear?”

“Of course,” he responded gracefully. “What did you have in mind?”

It’s funny. The old man had such a carefree attitude that I had to chuckle over the thought. Like he had already lived a perfect life. One with no regrets. No secrets, and at that moment. When the world seemed normal. Even for just a second. I had to ask myself... *could I ever achieve this level of happiness again?*

“I am looking for a heroic tale” I explain. “One with all the trials and tribulations of being human. A coming of age story, if you will.” I continue, “I want this book to have the twist and turns of an adventure story. The sorrow and misfortunes of an imperfect world. The cliché love of a fair maiden, and an ending that sparks a feeling of hope.” I could see the old man tilt his head in curiosity. Clearly intrigued by the oddly specific request, and even still. Twenty-seven times before I had picked something new. Something I might like, or maybe would not like, and each time I read and finished a book. I was not disappointed. No, not at all, and neither was he.

“Well, if you are looking for something with such a theme, or many themes in this case. I can only think of one book off the top of my head that might fit your description.” The old man walked me to the very end of the hall until we reached the last bookshelf on the left. He stopped, peeking down the corner, and shifted his way through the aisle where the light from the window never reached. I saw him climb up a ladder near the top left corner of the shelf. Blowing the cobwebs away with his mouth before grabbing the book from its resting place. I could tell that he saw an admiration for this book that brought him great joy and nostalgia. The moment he handed it to me and I saw the golden leaves on the cover come to life. Morphing out from their flat, still images to something I could touch. Something that felt real. You can say it’s magic or whatever you want to call it, but after I saw the tiny, specs of light from the leaves fall on the tips of my figures. I knew then that it was perfect. It had to be—

Because today was my son's birthday.

His sixteenth birthday and I promised I would read to him one last time...before I cut him off.

He slept so soundly in his hospital bed. Though, I don't think sleep is the right word for this. He laid there unconscious for almost a year and all I could do was pray that this time. On this night, he would finally wake up. On Christmas day, when I felt sure he would finally open his eyes, he didn't. When I went to church every Sunday week after week with a new sense of hope. I thought then, or more so, every Sunday after, he would finally walk again.

He didn't.

October seventh was my birthday. It was a day I did not celebrate, nor did I ever go out of my way to do so. On that day, I did not go out to drink or gamble for fun. I also did not expect any surprise parties or unwanted guests. I...don't even remember when the last time I had a birthday party was...because I never wanted one. It wasn't special to me, and it wasn't special to anyone else either. After all those years, I had never thought twice about it, except today. I thought, realistically, that the chances of my one wish coming true would be high. Since I had never celebrated a Birthday before or was given presents or anything that would be deemed special to me. I thought to myself—

*This has to be it. On my Birthday as far back as I can remember, I was never selfish. Greedy? Maybe, but not a beggar. On this day, my one wish. The only thing I want for my Birthday this year is for my son to open his eyes. I want him to see that I sat there with him every night. Thankful, with a teary eye smile that the two of us can finally be a family again. I want to tell him how much he means to me. How much I love him because I know he doesn't hear it enough.*

*Trust me, I know.*

I watched him that night with bated breath. Becoming so sure of myself again that this would be the day. I could feel it in my bones. The beating of my rushing heart kept me on my toes...yet it felt steady. I could feel every vein inside my chest pulsate, but I couldn't help but clutched my hands tightly. I knew, without question that finally—

11:59 PM—

There's still time. There's plenty of it! Any second now he will wake. Any second now I will hold him in my arms. Crying, most likely. As I tell him that everything will be ok. That I understood why he said he hated me before the accident. I can see it now. He probably feels like shit, just like I do. Out of all the words he could have said before it happened. Why did it have to be "I hate you." I know he didn't mean it. I'm sure of it!

That's why any second now. My son will wake up. Any second now I will tell him I love him. That I would never do him wrong. That he will always have a home with me. Any second now I will tell him that. Any second now.

Any second now...

12:01 AM.

Twenty-eight is my lucky number. Twenty-eight times I went into the library and twenty-eight times I read a book to my son at night. However, the twenty-eighth book was special. It had to be because my son only had seven days to live. Seven days to create a miracle. Seven days to prove all the doctors wrong. That he was not suffering, just fighting. That he wouldn't become a vegetable. He was just waiting to blossom. How could they possibly force me to end my own son's life? How could they persuade me to think that this was what was best for him? To tell me that there was nothing else that could be done. That all this waiting and hoping was purely for nothing. Absolutely nothing, but that hope in my heart still lingered because I knew how my luck was. I knew somehow, deep down, that everything was going to be ok. It was.

On the seventh day, I paced around the hospital room until my feet got tired.

On the sixth day, I cried in the corner of the bathroom for hours at a time.

On the fifth day, I punched one of the doctors in the face without remorse.

On the fourth day, I put a gun to my head. No bullets, just simulation.

The third day was when I rented the twenty-eighth book. The heroic tale. The kind of story my son always loved to read. It was just like him. How kind-hearted and selfless he was to everyone. I had never seen a kid with such a big heart. Someone that would go out of his way to help others. Even if it meant being late for school or getting someone close to him mad—

He...made me mad.

He hated me...just because I didn't want to help a girl whose car got stuck on the side of the road. We drove by the scene, hoping that maybe he wouldn't notice...but it was too late. He locked eyes with her and remembered the pretty face he saw many times before, and as soon as he did. I knew then I had to put my foot down. I had to force myself not to listen. To not be wrong for once in my life. Especially not to my own

son! I told him that it didn't concern us. That it wasn't our problem and that we should stay out of it, but he was persistent. He cared for that girl more than I thought. He said he loved her. That he would do anything for her, but how could someone that young know what love is? He's just a kid. He's...my kid.

I know more about this world than he does, and yet even when he is finally of age. I will still call him my kid.

God, he shouldn't have questioned me.

I'm the closest thing to a father that he has!

I gave him his birthday.

I gave him food and a roof over his head.

I gave him the normal life he always dreamed of for ten God damn years!

He doesn't even call me dad...

He calls me by my name.

After all I have done. To have him question my authority like that. To say that I was wrong and that he hated me. He just...made me so mad I couldn't...pay attention—

He stunned me with his words. Those three words, which shouldn't have meant much to me to begin with, somehow tore my heart open in two. It was as if time stood still. Like my soul was ripped right out of my body, if only for a moment—

Then, it went pitch black.

I could feel my body twisting and distorting while I was out, but the sounds I heard right before still echoed for some time after that. I heard a crash, an explosion, or something similar, but the scariest part of all was in that brief moment of darkness. I thought that I had died. For how long? I don't really know myself. All I know is that I am here now. Trying my best to make it up to him because, yeah. He is my kid. The closest thing to, and I wanted to make sure that these last three days would be something to remember. If he can hear me. God, I hope so. I want him to experience the things he loves one more time, and for that reason alone. I made sure to make this novel last.

On the third day, the hero stumbles into a battle he is unsure how to handle.

On the second day, he falls in love with the fair maiden to whom he knows very little about.

On the last day. The twenty-eighth day. Right around the time he was born. The hero, after losing the life of his best friend, his army, and his home. Is able to rescue the

fair maiden from the villainous dragon and return her to her loving parents where they wedded the very next day.

I could not help but look up at him once I got to the final pages of the book. It meant that his life...and a chapter of my life was over. I never wanted the novel to end. I wish I could just...turn back time to a year ago and redo everything. I wish, and even now I still pray, that my second chance is coming and that it will come. I say this as someone who feels lucky, or, someone who had good luck at one time.

Luck, hope, faith, love.

These are words that should not be related to each other. The very thought of them brings a feeling to one such as myself that should never be. That feeling is the opposite of what I was trained to do. What I was expected to act like. Even when my life hit its absolute lowest point. What I felt now wasn't hope anymore. It was dread. Pure, uncontrollable dread that presented me with a fate that I cannot change. No matter how hard I try to control it. No matter how much I pray. It's like it is written somewhere in heaven that his death is certain and, if not. He will go through life suffering. Now, and until the day he dies.

My luck, or hope, or whatever the hell you want to call it was something I could cling onto because I thought doing so would make everything better. These things made me feel good. They always have. If I was lucky enough, or if I prayed enough. I honestly believed that things would go back to normal. That I would be able to go back to the life that felt perfect. No, it was perfect. I just didn't realize it until now.

I didn't realize that this kid...my kid, deserved better than me. He deserved more than what I could offer him, but I failed. I failed in every way a parent could fail, but I couldn't tell myself that, because I knew it wasn't true. I didn't fail. I remember all the good things I had done for him. All the things other children his age would have dreamed of!

I can count them all on one hand. All the important things. The things that would give a child like him a good life, but even still—

I saw the last page of the book. The ending. The spark of hope that I so desperately desired. I couldn't help but brush my fingers across it, because I knew the end was near, but there was still time. I could always make more time. Why couldn't I?



Yet, the words on the final page. The ones that left me breathless. They caught me off guard. Slicing the tear in my heart farther and farther apart from each other the closer I got to the end.

That final passage read as such—

*And there I was again. Wondering what it meant to achieve greatness.*

*To know that you had everything. Then to lose it all in a blink of an eye, and for what? Love? Happiness? A bright and prosperous future? No, the truth is this. No one can achieve greatness without acceptance. To know that you may not win the next battle, or to not know when your time may be up. I have lost so much. Many of my friends and family died beneath my feet. I think to myself daily how horrible it all is. How badly I pray to the nearest God that I may try to do it again...but, I would not. If I did, why would I be here? Right now, setting the path that their sacrifices had laid out for me. To think and dream the same dream every night that this may be something—*

...

*I wonder.*

*Is it my hopeful façade that keeps the beauty of this world from me, or have I not let go for long enough to notice?*

My fingers were trembling.

The book I had rented out didn't indicate any kind of hope at all. In fact, it was the opposite. It told me everything I didn't want to hear. That there was no way out. That life would just...get better when I knew it wouldn't. It became difficult for me to not ripped the pages out of that book entirely. To tear them to pieces and flush them down the drain, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't! Why can't I?

...

Wait, I know why.

I know exactly why.

It's because...it was him.

This book, how it was written. It treated people the way my son would. He was kind-hearted, yes, and he did have a hot head, but that was because he spoke the truth.

He wanted nothing more than to exist. To be seen by someone. To be a part of my life, but I ignored him.

I ignored him when he got good grades.

I ignored him when he won his soccer games.

I ignored him when he got hurt.

I ignored him he needed advice.

When he cried.

When he got lost.

When he called me dad...only once, and I laughed.

I didn't know how much I needed him until now. How could I possibly continue with my life after all that I have done, and yet—

His eyes were closed, but I can still see him crying.

He wants this.

We...both want this.

I will, yes. I accept. I have to now because if I don't—

God, it should have been easy for me to end it. Why wouldn't it be? I knew deep down that pulling the plug wasn't the hard part. Compared to everything else that was happening. This felt the most normal. Like pulling out a nightlight when a child isn't afraid of the dark anymore. No, the horror came when all the regrets started rushing back. That I, a grown man, had become a fool for many years. I thought for the longest time that I was doing good. That I was making a difference in that kid's life...when the truth is...I wasn't.

Huh, I guess he really wasn't my kid then.

If he never was. If I had done him so wrong, why does my body still hurt like hell?

Where is the irony in this? To see a boy dying right before my eyes. Is this meant to be taken as a joke? Have I become so villainous at this stage of my life that I will never see the point? What is there to get? What could there possibly be left to learn? Have I always been this blind? Have I been so neglectful, so unaware of my surroundings that I had forgotten what really matters? God might as well strike me down now and end it all. How could he force me to suffer through all this torture? All this pain and regret that I had built up for over ten years!

What are you trying to tell me?  
What is it that you want me to do?  
Tell me what you want.  
You tell me.  
Tell me.  
Tell me!

A sharp ring echoed through my ears.

It was the kind of sound no parent would ever want to accept. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't acknowledge what I had just done, but when I finally got the courage to see him one last time.

He smiled...without a heartbeat.

And the thought of that, for some reason, put me at peace.

After that, I saw the doctors cover his body with a blanket and wheel him away. I thought about how taken care of his body would be. How the morticians would pamper him and take care of his every need. It was the kind of heaven he craved when he was little. To know that someone would be there to listen to his problems. To take a splinter out of his foot with a needle. To be an arm to cry on when no one else would ever give him the time of day. I couldn't give him any of that when he was alive...when I knew deep down I could have. Now, after everything he's been through. He can finally be free.

When I thought that to myself after walking out of the hospital in chains. That's when I finally got it and as soon as I did.

I looked up towards the full moon for the first time and smiled.

...

"Happy Birthday...Kid."

# Winnie's Gift to Comrade Carlos

by Sandro F. Piedrahita

“Instantly, something like scales  
fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained  
his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.”  
Acts 9:18

Winnie walks across the courtyard from her room to the main house. It is almost eight and she has to prepare breakfast for Abimael and his father. She knows that Abimael's mother will not be sharing in the meal. Comrade Juana has told her she would have some business to attend to and has asked Winnie to stay home and take care of Abimael on Sunday even though it is usually her day off. Winnie shudders at what Comrade Juana might be doing or plotting, knowing it is probably something heinous – a kidnapping, a bombing, an assassination. Winnie had initially been hired just to take care of Abimael – Comrade Juana had insisted that Winnie was not an ordinary domestic, that Comrade Juana did not believe in “exploiting” servants – but with time Winnie had taken on more and more duties, cooking, sweeping, washing the dishes. And while at first she was supposed to stay with Abimael only when Comrade Juana and Comrade Carlos were out of town, which happened often as they perpetrated terrorist acts all over Peru, with the passage of time the old woman became a permanent fixture in the home. And with time the *zamba* Winnie grew to love the blonde Abimael as if he were one of her own grandsons, perhaps even more.

Winnie is in her seventies and her rheumatism is killing her. It has become difficult to do all the chores that have been assigned to her and her hands hurt as she puts the key in its slot to unlock the door to the main house. Winnie does not complain about the pain which afflicts her joints or about much of anything else. She is an old woman now, *una viejita* as her grown children call her, and she has learned to accept the challenges and trials of life with tranquility and resignation.

There was a time when she railed against the injustices she faced as a woman of mixed African and Amerindian blood in a country with a well-established racial hierarchy. Even the newspaper advertisements for jobs with department stores asked for job applicants to have “*presencia*,” a word meaning “presence,” but which actually

meant that only white persons or light-skinned mestizos need apply. And when Winnie was faced with overt racism, she did not hesitate to lash out in anger, using her favorite insult, “*me cago en tu madre*” – I shit on your mother. But now she rarely ever cusses, except when she is really steeped in anger. She accepts her lot in life with humility and knows that it is not really important in the eyes of God whether one is a maid or a princess. She knows that the only thing that ultimately matters is the state of one’s soul. And she is satisfied on that score, knows that when the day comes she can die in peace, although she is worried about Comrade Juana and Comrade Carlos, for she knows their actions are not pleasing in the sight of God. Over the years she has learned that their actions are sometimes heartless and brutal, even though they claim that all they are doing is attempting to liberate the quechua-speaking peoples from the white coastal elite based in Lima.

So she puts the eggs and the *chicharrones* in the frying pan, the potatoes in the boiling water. She knows Comrade Carlos is from the highlands and loves his *ajiaco* with a touch of hot peppers and that Abimael unlike his father likes his eggs scrambled rather than over easy. It has been the same routine for over eight years, since she first began to live permanently with the family, and she knows all of their tastes, better than those of her own grandchildren. Comrade Juana, being an American, insists on orange juice in the morning while Comrade Carlos prefers *café con leche*. But Comrade Juana will not sit at table this morning. She is on one of her “expeditions” with Comrade Barbara. Winnie cringes at what they might be doing and attempts not to think about it, to concentrate on her eggs and her *chicharrones*.

When Winnie had first learned of the “revolutionary” activities of Comrade Juana and Comrade Carlos, she had thought about quitting, but by then it was too late. She had already fallen in love with the young Abimael and could not contemplate the idea of leaving him to his fate without her. She was an old and unschooled *zamba*, that was true, but she was utterly necessary to Abimael. Without her, what fate awaited him? What kind of future would he have? And maybe, just maybe, Winnie thought, she could somehow have an influence on his parents. Comrade Juana was probably irredeemable – she became harder and harder with the years – but over time Comrade Carlos had become increasingly kind. Lately he had become worried about her rheumatism and had insisted she see a doctor at his expense. And unlike Comrade Juana, Winnie had the

sense that the “expeditions” in which he and his partner engaged were having a greater and greater toll upon his soul. She had the sense that for some reason his conscience had suddenly awakened after being ignored for years, but Winnie could not pinpoint how or why. It was only a vague intuition, she wasn’t quite sure about it, but nevertheless Winnie prayed nightly for his conversion.

Comrade Carlos had become a somber man and Winnie often had the sense that he could easily fall into the cesspit of despair. He no longer waxed poetic about the “revolution” or about the greatness of Presidente Gonzalo, whom he had venerated as a demigod for years. He no longer spoke of the brutal conduct of the Shining Path – a group he had belonged to for more than a decade – as if the actions of its members were heroic. The only thing that seemed to give him joy was kicking a soccer ball with his son in the backyard or telling his son stories about Chasqui, Comrade Carlos’ grandfather, about how the old man carried bales of hay on his back from one end of Cusco to the other to make a living. Winnie had the sense that Comrade Carlos was always sad. When he was not out of the house on one of his “expeditions,” he spent his whole day in bed and did not watch any television, not even the soccer games that he once loved.

When breakfast is ready, Winnie calls Comrade Carlos and the young Abimael. Comrade Carlos arrives first and sits at his chair with a worried look about his face, but Winnie has long ago learned not to ask any questions. Frankly she prefers not to know what her employers are doing with their time, for she suspects it is monstrous and barbaric, ever since she saw how they stoned a man to death at Huanca Sancos. Comrade Carlos takes a newspaper and attempts to read it, but Winnie soon realizes that he simply isn’t interested. He begins to read, then puts the paper on the table, picks it up again, then again stops reading. He does the same thing every morning at the breakfast table.

“What’s for breakfast today?” he absent-mindedly asks but doesn’t seem to listen to Winnie’s response. When his son sits at the table, fresh from the shower, Comrade Carlos weakly asks him, “What’s up, champion?” but again doesn’t seem to hear his answer. Winnie thinks Comrade Carlos’ mind is in a deep hole and suspects it has something to do with the “expedition” he and Comrade Juana have been planning for the night. Winnie has heard her priest say it time and time again during the Mass: sin

fatigues the soul and nothing fatigues the soul as much as a sin which has become a habit.

Winnie serves Comrade Carlos his *ajiacó* and *chicharrones* and the scrambled eggs to the young Abimael.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have,” says Comrade Carlos. “I know it takes work to prepare the *ajiacó*. And with your rheumatism – ”

“I’m fine,” responds Winnie. “It doesn’t take much work to cut the potatoes.”

“Listen, Winnie, I know today is Sunday and you like to go to church – ”

“It’s Easter Sunday,” Winnie interrupts him.

“Well, Sunday is usually your day off, so if you want, you can go to church. You don’t have to spend the whole day with us. At what time is the Mass?”

“I like to go to church at noon.”

“So go at noon. Do you need me to drive you?”

“I can take the bus as I always do. That won’t be necessary.”

“No, I can take you,” says Comrade Carlos. Then he looks at his son. “And you can take Abimael with you. You know I don’t care if you teach him things of God. Maybe God is what Peru and the world need at this time. There is so much ugliness everywhere.”

“Thank you,” Winnie says, completely surprised by the words of Comrade Carlos. “I would like that. I will tell Martin – I mean Abimael – to change into his Sunday clothes and get ready.”

Winnie has always secretly called Abimael “Martin,” ever since she took him to be baptized in the Catholic faith without telling his parents and named him after Peru’s famous black saint, Saint Martin de Porres.

“Good,” says Comrade Carlos. “I think you are a good influence on the boy. Between you and me, I know that you sometimes take him to Mass when his mother and I are out of town. His mother would be furious if she found out, but I don’t mind.”

“Listen,” says Winnie. Her voice is halting. “Why don’t you go with us? I mean, it’s none of my business. But it wouldn’t hurt for you to get closer to God. And given that today is Easter Sunday – ”

“Me in a church? I haven’t stepped in a church in years. Sometimes my Chasqui would take me to church in Cusco. Not every Sunday but from time to time. But when I was about fourteen I stopped believing in God...”

“Why?” Winnie inquired.

“It’s an old and terrible story. I have no inclination to repeat it now. Let’s say someone abruptly took my innocence away.”

“Maybe God is calling you today,” the old *zamba* responds, without asking Comrade Carlos for an explanation of what he has said. “You wouldn’t want your son to go to Mass if you didn’t think it was a good thing.”

“I’m not even sure what I believe any more. For a long time, I was certain He did not exist. That there was too much injustice in the universe for a just and loving God. But lately I’ve been thinking... I don’t know, Winnie, perhaps another time.”

“Today is a special day,” Winnie responds. “The Sunday when we celebrate Christ’s Resurrection. I always pray for you, for Juana too. On this day, perhaps, you can make your peace with God. Come with us. Juana will not know. And the boy will be so happy.”

“But why would Christ want me? I’m a miserable man. If you only knew everything I’m guilty of...”

“I have some idea. It’s not for nothing that I’ve lived with you for the last ten years. But your misery does not hinder His mercy. The more miserable you know yourself to be, the greater is His mercy.”

“You have no idea what I’ve done,” Comrade Carlos responds, suddenly turning pensive. “If you only knew, Winnie, if you only knew... you wouldn’t want to be in my presence if you only knew... in my sad and despicable presence.”

Surely Winnie can imagine the extent of Comrade Carlos’ evil acts. All she has to do is read the newspapers to know the carnage imposed on Peru by the Shining Path. She knows about the bombings, the assassinations, the massacres of entire Indian villages supposedly perpetrated to help the Amerindian find the “shining path.”

“No matter what has happened,” Winnie says, looking at Comrade Carlos intently, “God is love and mercy. Trust His unfailing mercy. It is not too late.”



She is making a desperate gambit, knows this opportunity will not repeat itself, wishes she was more intelligent and would have just the right words. But then she sees a smile alight on Comrade Carlos' face and is suddenly surprised.

"All right," he responds. "It can't hurt, can it? I've had a yearning. I can't really explain it. But I can assure you of nothing. Perhaps I shall forever be a doubter, perhaps I am destined to simply suffer."

Why today and not another day? Winnie does not know. She attributes it to the sudden irruption of God's grace in Comrade Carlos' life.

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So Comrade Carlos puts on some dark slacks and a white shirt. He even puts on a tie. Then he tells Abimael he is going to church with him and Winnie. They get into Comrade Carlos' old white Chevy Impala and make their way to the church of San Juan Maria Vianney in the district of Magdalena Nueva.

"Why are you going to church today, Papi Carlos?" asks the young Abimael. "You've never come with us before."

"I don't know," his father responds. "Does it bother you that I am going with you?"

"No, just the opposite," Abimael answers. "I'm very happy about it. It's just that I always thought that going to Mass didn't interest you or Juana. I know my mother is against it."

"For some reason, I woke up thinking of God today, Abimael. I looked up at the sky and thought about Him. And last night I had a strange dream."

"A dream about God?" asks the young Abimael.

"You can say that," Comrade Carlos answers. "And I thought I heard the voice of my beloved Chasqui talking to me about the Christ."

"Your grandfather spoke to you?"

"Yes, my grandfather, the man who raised me since I was a seven-year-old. He would often speak things of God when I was a child. He was a man who lived a very hard life. And yet he never wavered in his faith."

"What does that mean? To waver?"

"I mean he never doubted the grace of God."

"You waver, don't you, Papi Carlos?"

Comrade Carlos looks at his son and smiles a gentle smile.

“That’s a very tough question, young man. Let’s say that I am searching. That for the first time in my adult life I think that I am searching.”

They arrive to church early and sit on a pew close to the altar. As soon as the services begin, an usher approaches them to pick up the collection – he is a man with Down Syndrome – and Comrade Carlos hands him a hundred *soles*.

“May you continue to live your life in peace,” the usher tells him. Comrade Carlos begins to sweat. Winnie senses that Comrade Carlos is shifting nervously on his seat.

“I’ve never lived my life in peace,” he complains to Winnie. “I’ve never felt inner peace, not even when I first became a *senderista*, when I was brimming with revolutionary fervor. Nor outer peace for that matter, since I was always expecting to be killed. I wish I could trade places with that retarded man. I’m sure his life has been much easier than mine.”

“Just pray,” Winnie tells him, for Father Robles has begun to speak. “It is probably true that it is impossible for that retarded man to sin.”

During the sermon, the priest talks about redemption. He refers to the sixteenth psalm, “Keep me safe, O God, in you I take refuge” and speaks about the great sacrifice made by Christ during His Passion.

“Just think of the suffering He endured to ransom you,” says the priest.

“Yes, you!” he exclaims. “Sitting on that bench across from me today. I’m speaking to you! Christ was tortured in an unimaginable manner to make amends for your sinful, wicked ways! To open wide the gates of Heaven even if you don’t deserve it. He was flogged, beaten, nailed to the Cross, spat upon, crowned with a garland of thorns.”

Comrade Carlos has the sense that the priest is addressing him directly, although he is speaking to the whole congregation.

“Yet you continue to sin!” the priest continues. “Today, on the day of His Resurrection, promise never to sin again! I’m speaking to you and nobody else. You know who you are! Change your heart forever! Abandon the road that is leading you to death! Make the choice to follow the Christ and carry His Cross! Make the decision now! God’s Mercy awaits you here and now if you turn your life over to Him.”

Then the priest begins to speak about Saint Paul, a persecutor just like Comrade Carlos.

“Think about Saint Paul’s awakening. He had engaged in the stoning of Saint Stephen. Just like so many innocent people are stoned today. Killed by the Shining Path, killed by the Peruvian military. And yet Saint Paul was not outside of Christ’s infinite mercy. God stopped him on his way to Damascus and asked him, ‘Paul, why do you persecute me?’ The Lord is asking you the same question today. Yes, you, sitting right there in front of me! You are blessed and don’t know it. You have Jesus, crucified, with you!”

Comrade Carlos is sure the priest is looking at him directly.

“When you persecute the least of men, you are persecuting the Christ Himself. The begging Indian boy, the shoeshiner, the peasant, the policeman. There is a war going on in Peru and the people have chosen sides and hate the opposite camp with all their passion. ‘Why do you persecute me?’ asks the Lord. Stop all the persecution! Achieve justice through the peace and love of Christ! You are facing the same choice as Saint Paul. And remember that Saint Paul could have rejected the call. Just as you can reject the call. But if you submit to Christ’s will, you can achieve wonders just like Paul!”

And suddenly Winnie sees Comrade Carlos begin to weep. At first he weeps silently, the tears just run down his face, but at some point it is as if a dam has broken, as he begins to sob loudly. Everyone around him looks at him as he breaks down uncontrollably. It strangely sounds as if he is laughing, laughing out loud amid his endless tears and muttering disconnected phrases.

“In you I take refuge!” he cries out, echoing the words of the good priest. “O God, keep me safe!” he pleads. “I didn’t understand what I was doing!”

Abimael looks at Winnie quizzically.

“What is wrong with Papi Carlos?”

“Just let him be, Martin,” she tells him. “It is the moment of his conversion.”

The priest continues to speak about redemption. How the Lord is infinite Mercy. How no matter how much one has sinned, Jesus is ready to welcome the sinner with open arms.

“Throw yourself into the arms of Christ’s Mercy,” the priest commands. “Like a child into the beloved arms of his mother! Shall a mother forget the child suckling at her breast, the child of her womb? Surely she may forget, but God will not forget you.”

And Comrade Carlos continues to cry, he cannot cease the weeping. Finally he collapses, buries his face in Winnie’s chest and cries in desperation, “If you knew my monstrous actions, you wouldn’t want me in a church. Once I even ordered the massacre of two-hundred Indian peasants in Cajabamba because they rejected the Shining Path. I killed dozens of them myself, Winnie, I killed them with my own hands! On another occasion I ordered that a woman be burnt at the stake! And that’s not all I’ve done. My life has been one continuous crime.”

Then he reaches for his son.

“Oh how I love you, Abimael, how much I love you!” blurts out Comrade Carlos amid his tears. “You cannot possibly know how I adore you!”

“The Good Lord forgives everything if you truly repent,” Winnie says to him. “Your crimes may be dark as night, your sins more red than scarlet, but Christ’s Mercy is greater.”

Finally the moment of the Eucharist happens.

“I cannot partake given all my crimes,” Comrade Carlos tells Winnie, “but please go ahead. And take Abimael with you.”

“I understand,” Winnie responds. “Everything doesn’t happen in a day.”

Comrade Carlos composes himself, kneels and begins to pray. He confesses to Winnie that he doesn’t even know what it means to pray any more. Nor what to pray for. He admits that it has been many years since he has said a prayer, not even a desperate prayer. But Winnie tells him to pray for guidance, to just throw himself at the feet of the Christ and ask for direction.

“O Lord, show me the light!” he prays under his breath. “I who am steeped in darkness!”

When they all return home and Abimael is playing in the backyard, Comrade Carlos approaches Winnie and tells her he needs to speak to her.

“What is it?” Winnie asks.

“I wanted to tell you I’ve made a decision. I intend to get baptized and confess all my multiple sins, each and every one of my crimes. My parents were unbelievers, so I was never baptized in the Catholic faith. But I don’t know how Juana will respond.”

“Don’t be afraid,” Winnie counsels. “The Lord tells us that again and again in the Bible. It’s going to be hard for you to confront Juana and maybe even Presidente Gonzalo. It might mean the end of your relationship with Abimael’s mother. It might even jeopardize your life. I know the Shining Path is not just a bunch of kids playing games.”

“I feel I have no choice. I feel that I *need* to get baptized and confess my sins. That is the only way I shall achieve some measure of peace.”

“Take comfort in the psalm quoted today by Father Robles. ‘Keep me safe, O God. In you I take refuge.’ Just repeat that to yourself, Carlos, again and again, until you find peace, until you find your way out of the darkness...”

“The problem is that I have a final mission to complete. That’s why Comrade Juana and Comrade Barbara are out of the house, because they have gone out to pick up the ammonium and nitrate bomb. It should be a simple matter. It shouldn’t involve any deaths.”

“Don’t do it,” Winnie replies. “Make a clean break. You never know what could happen. You are so near to the light. Don’t put that in peril now that you are so close.”

“At some moment soon, I’m going to have to take stock in my life. I know that, Winnie. But I don’t see any way I can avoid tonight’s ‘expedition.’ Comrade Juana and Comrade Barbara have been planning it for weeks and I can’t cancel it at the last moment, not without an explanation. I’m going to have to put everything in words and know it won’t be easy. After all, I’m thinking of changing my entire life.”

“Conversion is not a one-day affair,” Winnie tells him. “It is an ongoing process, a continuous response to the Mercy of God.”

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That night, Comrade Carlos, Comrade Juana and Comrade Barbara leave the home around nine o’clock while the young Abimael is still awake. Winnie tells him it’s time to go to sleep and prepares to leave, but Abimael pleads with her to stay in his room.

“I’m worried about my parents,” he tells her. “I know all about their missions and know that they are dangerous. What are they going to do tonight, Winnie?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Winnie responds. “Come, let’s say a prayer for them.”

Winnie knows what they are doing, has seen Comrade Carlos putting a box in the trunk of his old white Chevy Impala and knows it was a bomb. But she doesn’t say any of that to the young Abimael. Instead, she instructs the boy to pray.

“Father,” he intones, using the words Winnie has taught him to say whenever his parents are out on one of their “expeditions.” “Please keep my father and mother safe, whatever they are doing. Save them from any harm. And please protect their souls. Don’t let them do anything that will stain their spirits.”

When Winnie thinks that the young Abimael is asleep, she gently pulls the covers over his chest and prepares to leave. But the boy suddenly rouses.

“Did you see my father crying today in the church?” asks Abimael.

“Yes, I did, Martin.”

“Why was he crying? What is he so sad about?”

“I’m not sure,” says Winnie. “Maybe his tears are tears of liberation.”

“What do you mean? Liberation means freedom, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe your father has begun a long journey to freedom. Christ is the source of all freedom and light. But one can never tell. I think he wept today because he figured out, perhaps for the first time, that he must change his ways.”

“I know what they do, Winnie. I remember when they stoned that man in Huanca Sancos. And that sometimes they face off with policemen.”

“Everything will be all right,” Winnie tells him.

“I also wanted to ask you something.”

“What is it?” Winnie asks.

Abimael seems reluctant to speak, as if it’s hard to ask what he wants to ask. Finally he sits up on his bed and looks at Winnie straight in the eyes.

“While we were at church, Papi Carlos said that he had killed hundreds of people. That he burned a woman alive. Doesn’t that mean my father is evil?”

“He has repented of his acts, Martin. In the eyes of God, it is as if it never even happened. Don’t think about his crimes. Think about the fact that he has made his peace with God.”

“Sometimes I’m afraid my parents won’t come back, that the police will kill them.”

“Try to sleep. I promise that when they return, I’ll let you know.”

“Why are Juana and Papi Carlos the way they are? Why aren’t they like other people? Most people are good like you.”

“Oh, my Martin, I wish I had an explanation. I think that when they started, they thought they were doing it for the greater good. But conscience is like a muscle. If you follow it, it becomes stronger and stronger. And if you ignore it, it withers away like a muscle too. I think they ignored their consciences for so long that they no longer know right from wrong.”

“I think Papi Carlos is finding his conscience once again. Don’t you think so, Winnie?”

“He might be,” responds Winnie. “It’s hard to tell.”

Winnie watches the boy fall asleep, caressing his blonde hair. His room hasn’t really changed in the last seven years, the same Mickey Mouse poster, the depictions of all sorts of dinosaurs on the walls, a photograph of the Alianza Lima soccer team... a room just like that of other boys, except that Abimael does not live the life of most other boys. His life is one of constant anxiety, of not knowing whether his parents will return at night. Winnie sits on the old rocking chair she keeps in his room, wishing that her Martin’s life might be somehow different.

She is surprised – not shocked – that Comrade Carlos had agreed to go on the “expedition” despite his epiphany at the church. After all, she thinks, this may be his last chance to achieve redemption. If he wastes this opportunity, it is unlikely that it will ever happen again. It is a tipping point in his life, just like when Saint Paul was blinded on his way to Damascus. A moment that can sever the before and the after. That can start him on a new road. But Winnie knows how difficult it will be. He will be tempted to continue on his wicked path by Comrade Juana, Comrade Barbara, Presidente Gonzalo, all the *senderistas* who follow Gonzalo Thought as if it were a religion. They will tell him that what he is doing will save the Indian masses. And his faith in God is so weak, so new, so tepid. Winnie steels herself and begins to pray the Rosary.

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Winnie is awakened by the great noise in the living room, the loud voices of Comrade Juana and Comrade Barbara, also the voices of two men she doesn't recognize. Winnie hears shouts, cries, two men carrying something, the front door shut violently as if shut with anger or desperation. She gets up from the rocking chair and makes sure Abimael is still sleeping. She closes the door to his room gently, hoping he will not wake up. Whatever is happening in the living room is not something she wants her young Martin to witness.

Winnie goes out to the living room and is shocked by what she sees. The two men, whom she has never met, two bearded white men, are putting a body on the sofa. She suddenly realizes it is the cadaver of Comrade Carlos, that Comrade Carlos is dead. His face is destroyed, shot multiple times, a pool of crimson blood covering his eyes and nose. His body hangs limply from the sofa, his arms hanging listlessly on its side. The two strange men seem to be nervous, doing everything in a hurry. And Winnie thinks to herself, today, on the day of his conversion, Comrade Carlos has finally been killed.

Comrade Juana is wide-eyed and has a spooked look on her face, as if she could not process what has happened. She doesn't say anything while the two bearded men go about their business, wrapping a shroud about Comrade Carlos' corpse and covering his mangled face with a pillow sheet. Winnie doesn't know if Comrade Juana ever truly loved Comrade Carlos, whether their relationship was anything more than a revolutionary pact. Surely some feelings must have developed, as they lived together for over a dozen years. But while Winnie is thinking she suddenly remembers the young Martin, and knows that he must not see what is happening. He will be greatly saddened by the death of his Papi Carlos, but if he sees his father bloodied on the sofa, the shroud covered in red, his disfigured face, the child will never recover.

So she cries out at everyone assembled in the living room, "Please try to keep quiet! You might awaken the young Abimael. He must not realize what is happening. Please! Please stop making so much noise!"

Comrade Barbara looks at Winnie with eyes of unbridled fury.

"You are the one responsible for what has happened!"

Winnie cannot understand. She knows Comrade Barbara feels an intense hatred for her, although Winnie has never understood her reasons. Perhaps Comrade Barbara



hates Winnie because she feels she has been a moderating influence on the family, especially on Comrade Carlos.

“Why do you blame me of all people for the death of Carlos? If anything, I didn’t want him to go on the ‘expedition.’”

Comrade Barbara ignores Winnie’s questions. She is steely and hard, directing the men with an air of authority.

“You can find a shovel in the shed in the backyard,” she tells them. “And you can bury him there.”

“Sure,” says one of the men, the one wearing a red bandanna. He takes the cadaver beneath the armpits as the other man picks him up by the feet. Comrade Juana opens the door to the backyard as the two men carry him outside.

“Hurry!” cries out Comrade Barbara with a steely resolve. “I killed the son-of-a-bitch who shot him, but other policemen might be investigating. By the time they arrive, if they ever do, it must be as if Comrade Carlos had never existed.”

“Had never existed...” echoes Comrade Juana, as if she were catatonic.

Winnie approaches Comrade Juana and wraps her arms around her. The two women had never been close, but Winnie feels a sudden pity.

“As if he never existed,” Comrade Juana repeats. “As if I never met him that long-ago night in Cusco playing his *quena*...”

Winnie doesn’t know what to say. It’s not as if this moment had been unexpected. Live by the sword, die by the sword. And Comrade Carlos had lived by the sword for years.

“Carlos is dead,” Comrade Juana announces. More than sadness, her face betrays stupor. She leaves Winnie and approaches Comrade Barbara.

“Now it is you who must tell me what to do,” says Comrade Juana to her co-revolutionary.

“Continue with the armed struggle. Keep following Presidente Gonzalo. That is all I shall tell you. Kill all the sons-of-bitches. Don’t follow your husband’s path of weakness.”

Winnie prepares tea for Comrade Juana and Comrade Barbara, not knowing what else to do and not fully understanding what has happened. The men are outside, digging furiously to bury the cadaver before sunrise.

“He will still be hailed as a hero,” Comrade Barbara states.

“He devoted his life to the armed struggle,” whispers Comrade Juana. “More than a decade in service of the revolution.”

“No one will need to know that he cowered at the end,” spits out Comrade Barbara.

“I don’t think he cowered. I don’t think he was ever braver,” responds Comrade Juana.

“What happened?” Winnie interrupts. “What do you mean?”

Comrade Juana says nothing.

“We planted the bomb in the Kentucky Fried Chicken Restaurant in Miraflores,” answers Comrade Barbara. “We left before it exploded. The mission went off perfectly. Comrade Carlos did what he had done a hundred times before. Even though he vaguely stated that it was probably his last mission. But as we were fleeing, a *patrullero* stopped us.”

“He was a young policeman,” Comrade Juana adds. “An indigenous man just like Comrade Carlos.”

“I don’t see why you give a damn,” Comrade Barbara says to Winnie in a fierce voice. “I know you never cared for Carlos or Comrade Juana. You’ve always thought their acts were wicked. Your only love is Abimael.”

“I have always loved every member of this family,” Winnie responds. The old *zamba* lifts her face up in defiance.

“Well, Comrade Carlos got out of the car with his gun unholstered, ready to shoot the policeman as he had shot dozens of policemen over the years. Something that had happened so many times before. But then he hesitated –”

“He froze,” adds Comrade Juana. “As if he couldn’t bring himself to do it.”

“The son-of-a-bitch pleaded with him,” Comrade Barbara continues, “got on his knees and prayed, told Comrade Carlos he was the father of an infant girl, begged him to spare his life, even spoke of Jesus.”

“And Carlos holstered his gun,” Comrade Juana interjects. “He told the *patrullero*, ‘Go on your way. I will not touch you.’”

“But the policeman didn’t repay Comrade Carlos in kind,” says Comrade Barbara. “As soon as he got up, he pointed his revolver at Carlos and said, ‘I shall kill you, *hijo de puta*.’ And then he shot Carlos point blank in the face, not once but three times.”

“He didn’t show any mercy,” says Comrade Juana. “Even as Comrade Carlos told him of his love for Abimael and made a sign of the cross before the policeman shot him.”

“That was disgusting,” Comrade Barbara opines. “And that is why I’m sure you had something to do with it. I’m sure you poison the mind of Abimael with your religious fairy tales. And I suspect you’ve done the same with Comrade Carlos. I’ve seen your room, how it is filled with images of the Sacred Heart and of your Virgin Mary. As if virginity were a prize, you stupid *zamba*. When you’re fighting against tyranny, there aren’t any *medias tintas*. If it wasn’t for your influence, he wouldn’t have thought twice about shooting the policeman.”

“He froze,” Comrade Juana repeats, still in a state of stupor. “I had never seen him act that way before. He couldn’t bring himself to kill the *patrullero*.”

“I understand now,” says Winnie. “At least he died after having made his peace with God. He was sacrificed at the hands of the man he saved. In a strange way, he was acting like the Christ.”

Comrade Barbara replies with an insult.

“*Cojuda*, don’t you realize his death is a major loss to the cause of Presidente Gonzalo? That the armed struggle has lost one of its major warriors? All because of your stupid faith in an imaginary God. You’re a fucking fool and you made a fool of Comrade Carlos.”

Winnie wants to restrain herself but can’t. She can’t believe she is being blamed for Comrade Carlos’ death. And she responds to Comrade Barbara in kind.

“*Vil puta!*” she exclaims. “Don’t be surprised that I am cussing at you. You have a viper’s tongue, but I’m not afraid to answer you. It is you and the other Shining Path *hijos de puta* who led Carlos to his violent end. He was going to be killed at one point or another given the life he was leading. And worse than that, he was in grave danger of losing his soul. So if he was a fool at the end, I say so much the better. Saint Paul once said it is wisdom to be fools for Christ.”

“Who do you think you are, *negra de mierda*, that you can insult me? That you dare call the *senderista* heroes sons-of-bitches?”

“You can attack me because I’m a black woman,” Winnie responds. “Call me a *negra de mierda* if you wish, but I can assure you that your spirit is much blacker than my skin! You are the one who is steeped in *mierda*! Don’t you see God keeps a list of all your crimes?”

“I can have you fired in an instant for your insolence,” responds Comrade Barbara, furious at Winnie’s accusation. “Then we’ll see who’s a vile whore in the eyes of God!”

“I don’t need this shitty job,” Winnie shoots back in anger. She feels her face grow hot and the sweat beginning to drip on her forehead. “I have three sons who can take care of me, *vil puta*. Don’t you know that?”

“Ah!” exclaims Comrade Barbara, preparing the *coup de grace*. “But that means you will forever be separated from your lovely Abimael! You won’t be able to teach him your religious nonsense. He’ll grow up to be a Shining Path guerrilla just like his parents.”

Winnie is suddenly at a loss for words. She feels herself swooning, fainting, dying. She begins to feel dizzy, not knowing what to say. She looks for a chair where she can sit down and suddenly feels very old and tired. When she had insulted Comrade Barbara, she had not realized that as a punishment her relationship with Abimael might be severed.

“You can’t separate me from the boy,” she mutters. “Not after all these years.”

“Yes, I can. Comrade Carlos can no longer protect you. Maybe we’d let you stay if you participate in one of our missions. You can’t do much at your age, but you could work as a lookout. That would show Abimael that the Shining Path is the only way. He would learn that the teachings of Jesus and Saint Martin de Porres are worthless if even his beloved Winnie becomes a *senderista*.”

But Winnie has never been one to brook evil and is not about to begin now. Suddenly her vigor is renewed and she rises from her chair defiant.

“I have already taught Martin what he needs to learn and he will never waver,” says the old *zamba*.

“I’ll teach him to be a rebel,” responds Comrade Barbara. “We’ll send him to camps where he can be indoctrinated. He’ll be taught to follow Marx, Lenin and Mao.”

“Abimael will never follow Gonzalo Thought. And he will never engage in acts of violence. He knows the difference between right and wrong. It is imbedded in his soul. You know nothing about faith, but I’ll remind you of a famous proverb. ‘Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.’ And Abimael’s faith in God is secure. So fuck you, Comrade Barbara. You have not defeated me. Now I’m going to bed. Sleep in peace tonight, assuming that you can.”

And Winnie repairs back to her room, not before checking in on the young Abimael. The boy is sound asleep, probably dreaming of beaches and green pastures and of his favorite soccer team. Winnie is sad but hopeful. She is sure that given his last minute conversion Comrade Carlos is now with the Lord in Heaven. And the young Abimael, come what may, will be just fine.

# Harlequin Pattern

by Victoria Smith

(Dedicated to Milan Kovacovic)

*The endlessly tall, deeply tan, and unspeakably handsome stranger stood alone outside the Sunny Days Café. Its facade needed renewal, and next to the gorgeously built stranger, the café's sagging edifice drooped deeper. Sun sparkled in his eyes, and breeze tossed his chocolate-colored hair. Marlene's heart fluttered like butterflies dancing from clover to clover. In her mind she ran her fingers across the muscular ridges of his chest. His body shivered, as if her thoughts possessed telekinetic powers, making him flinch. A heavy sigh escaped her ruby-red lips.*

Tina heard her husband's footsteps above her. The coffee pot gurgled loudly, signaling it had finished brewing. She saved her story and locked the computer. She entered the kitchen and opened a dark cupboard door, extracted a coffee cup, and set it on the burnt-orange counter. She opened the avocado-green fridge and removed the half-and-half. She no longer wanted to update the kitchen. It was stuck in the 1970s, and it could stay there. She, however, wanted a do-over because her husband, Malcolm Simmons, disappointed her.

His slippers slunk across the tile floor.

"The coffee's done," Tina said without turning around.

"You're up early." His voice rose at the end of the statement, and she imagined his eyebrows followed suit.

"Hope I didn't wake you when I got up." Lying came easy to her.

"No," he said.

Lying came easy to him too. It had only been a month, so he wouldn't risk making her angry again. Her mother had suffered through the same problem with her father.

"I'll fix breakfast while you're in the shower," she said.

"Okay." His voice chirruped.

Did he grin too? She gripped the dishrag in her hand and imagined running it across his face. But when dealing with men, she had learned patience equaled power.

She kept her back to him and bent to open the drawer at the bottom of the avocado-green stove. She grabbed a frying pan, its finish scratched and flaking. A little nonstick to season the eggs. He retreated to the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, she did dishes while he ate.

“Do you work today?” he asked.

“Yes, from noon to seven. It’s Tuesday. I work every Tuesday from noon to seven. Also, every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday.” Her schedule hadn’t varied since they married six years ago. She tried to change it once but hadn’t been able to make her work hours line up with his.

Malcolm kissed her when he left for work. Tina smiled at him because he was going. After he drove away, she returned to her novel.

*Marlene yearned for the Adonis who commandeered the sidewalk. In turns he glanced at the dilapidated door of the café and his sleek watch. She imagined herself strapped to his sinewy wrist.*

*She entered her bedroom and dropped her robe on the floor. She dressed calculatingly and artfully. Facing a gilded mirror, she combed her hair and brushed her teeth. She washed her face, but she couldn’t sponge the heat from her cheeks. She hoped with every vein in her body he remained in front of the café.*

Tina’s fingers tapped the keyboard, barely keeping up with her thoughts. Her phone rang, and her fingers froze in mid-stroke. She peered at the small screen. She didn’t recognize the number, so she let it ring, but she took a break. She needed a cold shower.

She liked her job as an assistant librarian, but she wanted the money she planned to make from her novels. Both her eleventh-grade English teacher and her twelfth-grade history teacher had told her, “You should be a writer.” She didn’t think they meant romance writer, but there wasn’t a market for essays about Pulitzer Prize-winning plays or historical articles about the church’s role in society. Her father told her to be kind. Her mother told her to never be anyone’s fool. Experience taught Tina her mother knew best.

After her shower she returned to her novel, eager to reheat her characters’ desires.

*Marlene emerged from her house of gloom into the warmth of a summer morning. Sun kissed her face and caressed her cleavage. She wore a low-cut, body-hugging, hot-pink tank top.*

*"Hello, stranger, do you need help?" Marlene asked.*

*He gazed into her icy blue eyes, melting them. She stared into his green pools of wonder.*

*"I was supposed to meet someone at this café, but it's closed."*

*"It needs major plumbing repairs," Marlene said. "Perhaps the person you were supposed to meet sent you a message."*

*"I forgot my phone."*

*"Would you like to use mine?" She pried her phone from the back pocket of her skintight jeans.*

*"Thanks, but I don't know his number. You know how it is with cell phones."*

*"Would you like to come to my place for coffee? Mine's better than the java served by Sunny Days."*

*"It would be a pleasure to drink your coffee," he said, sipping her beauty from head to toe.*

*She turned toward her house surrounded by colorful flowers swaying in the breeze. The stranger, indifferent to the graceful blooms, admired her sashaying behind.*

Tina's phone alarm rang. She saved her story and logged out. No need for Malcolm to find and read her novel. But if he did, what a moment of sweet revenge. At work she would have little time to fret over him or plan her next move.

Malcolm would sit at his desk and brood. He might call or text her; she hoped not. She would be angry if he contacted her at work. She made it clear to him the library was understaffed, and she was busy. Two weeks ago, he sent her a bouquet of roses at work. Furious, she asked him, "What the hell? Do you know what my co-worker asked? She asked, 'Is it your anniversary? Your birthday?' And when I said no, she asked, 'Did your husband cheat on you?'" Tina despised anyone who made her look foolish.

Her day at the library passed quickly. At five o'clock, she clocked out, hoping Malcolm wouldn't stop by on his way home. At five-thirty, she pulled into their driveway. When she entered the house, he was lighting candles. Dinner simmered in the



kitchen, making her mouth water. Pink roses stood on the table. Malcolm's face wore hope, fear, and yearning. He couldn't fix it this time. She had warned him the last time, that the next time would be the last time. She loathed pink roses.

He had fixed her favorite meal, so she ate with him and drank a showy but tasteless wine. He made a suggestive comment about going to bed early. One last time wouldn't hurt. Tomorrow when she asked for a divorce, it would increase his pain—she had made love to him so passionately, then served him with papers. Trust and fidelity were gone, but she had her sexual needs.

After Malcolm fell asleep, she slipped from their bed. She needed to finish her novel. She turned on her computer. The cursor throbbed on the page, and her fingers pounded letters on the keyboard, arranging them into words, paragraphs, and chapters, pages to be turned by her future fans.

*Marlene grabbed the biggest coffee mugs from her cupboard. If he stayed for only one cup, she wanted it to be a long one.*

*"I don't usually invite strange men in for coffee."*

*He scrutinized the hot-pink tank top stretched across her shapely breasts and his eyes walked down the valley between them. Her tight top testified against her, then he noticed her sad eyes. "I'm Fitz," he said.*

*"I'm Marlene. Are you married?"*

*"No, and you?"*

*"Yes." The word escaped her throat, a lump of regret.*

*At once he understood her sadness.*

*"My husband is frequently unfaithful. It destroyed my soul, but I'm ready to move forward. I've spoken to a lawyer."*

*He walked to her side and pressed his hungry lips against hers. Both of their worlds rocked. After what seemed both a lifetime and a moment, they drew apart.*

*"I have to go to work," she sighed.*

*"Good thing. Otherwise, we'd end up no better than your husband."*

*He picked up her phone. "I'll put my number in your contacts. Call when you're free." His plea pierced her heart. And he was gone.*

Tina yawned and rubbed her eyes. So much lost time. She locked her computer and went to bed in the guest bedroom.

She had wanted to be up and in the kitchen before Malcolm, but the wine and sex and late-night writing caused her to sleep past dawn. The creaking and groaning of the bedroom door woke her. Like everything else around the house, it needed fixing. Malcolm climbed into bed next to her. "Good morning," he said, kissing her cheek. She turned and exited the bed on the other side. "I meant to be up by now." She slipped into an oversized robe and left him on the bed. After he went to work, she called the lawyer to confirm their meeting.

At the end of the day, Tina parked her car in the middle of the driveway, blocking Malcolm's access to the garage. After he arrived home, he slammed the front door, strode into the kitchen, and asked, "Why did you park your car like that?" She sat at the table with papers spread in front of her, like tarot cards dealt from a deck.

"I want a divorce," she said. "I've seen a lawyer, and he drew up the agreements. You can look them over."

His peevish demeanor vanished. "I don't want a divorce." He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket. "I love you."

She touched one of the papers. "It's too late. You knew what I expected if you wanted me to be your wife."

She turned the first paper right-side up and pushed it toward him. It outlined the division of their house and its contents. She had taken great pains to divide the property fifty-fifty.

"Suppose I won't sign this?" He stood, gripping and bending the pen with his fingers.

She handed him the next agreement, outlining the division of their savings. Again fifty-fifty, except his retirement. He could keep it unless he fought the divorce, then she wanted half of that too.

"Nice tactic." He bent the pen back and forth, again and again.

She turned another piece of paper toward him, an agreement to use the same lawyer and split the cost fifty-fifty. "It'll be cheaper," she said.

"Can't we sleep on this?" he asked. The pen snapped.

"We'll do this next week with the lawyer, and as far as sleeping, you're not staying here tonight or any other night."

“But I love you.” Blue ink oozed onto his fingers, and he spoke the words to his hands instead of Tina.

“Not my idea of love.” Tina snapped her fingers in the air above her head.

“I can be the husband you want. After last night, I know how much you love me. Others won’t matter.”

“Don’t beg.” She abhorred men who groveled.

He wiped his hands on a white kitchen towel embroidered with a rooster and threw it and the pen in the garbage. “Your mother would be proud.”

“She warned me not to marry you.”

He started to speak, but she stacked the divorce papers in two piles. She left his copies on the table, clutched hers to her chest, then turned away. He wouldn’t fight the divorce because the details of their marriage embarrassed him.

Too excited to sleep, Tina went to her desk. She needed to get on with her life and her novel.

*Marlene tried to focus on cuts, colors, and perms, but every corner of her mind bubbled with Fitz. At one o’clock she heard his voice. She moaned. She couldn’t escape visions of him, and now she imagined his voice.*

*“I need a haircut. Does Marlene have an opening?” It wasn’t an illusion. Fitz stood at the receptionist’s desk. “A friend recommended her.”*

*“I’m free,” Marlene said. “I can take you now.”*

Finally tired, Tina stopped writing. In the future she would be careful about men.

#

Mr. Poole, middle-aged, bald, and dressed in clothes that announced him as a second-rate lawyer, sat in front of Tina. Malcolm had just left. “I have to say Mr. Simmons took everything quite well. Smoothest divorce I’ve ever had,” the lawyer said. His eyes lingered on her breasts before he lifted them to her face.

“We had an understanding when we married. Mr. Simmons didn’t keep his promises.” Tina crossed her legs, baring a long stretch of skin as the slit in her skirt opened. “Could we renegotiate my half of the fee?” She stood, walked to the door, and turned the lock.

She approached Mr. Poole’s side of the desk and slipped off her skirt. The short, pudgy lawyer started to speak, but Tina straddled his lap, and he stopped. She began,

“One great experience for canceling my half of the legal fee. No complications, no continuances.” He let Tina unzip his pants. She understood it to be an acceptance of her offer. Contract complete.

A quarter-hour later, Tina dressed. The negotiations had gone well. She would owe him nothing, and she’d had a good time. Quickies were her forte.

“So, why are you divorcing your husband?” the lawyer asked.

She stopped buttoning her blouse and ogled him. She felt generous, so she answered, “Six years of marriage is a long time. I thought I wouldn’t have a problem being married. I loved him at first, I think. Or maybe I loved the idea of being married. He promised to accept I couldn’t be monogamous. But he was always jealous, always following me, always looking at me with wounded eyes. I tried being more discreet, but it grew tiresome. He’s the unfaithful one. He broke his promise, not me.”

Contempt replaced lust on the lawyer’s face. She worried he would try to back out of their contract. She positioned her hands on his desk and leaned toward him. “I know you’re an ethical lawyer, Mr. Poole. That’s why my friend, Lilith, recommended you.” His face twitched. She smiled. “So, no one will know about our special contract. I’ll never breathe a word to anyone. Not anyone.” The contempt on his face shifted to uneasiness.

Good, he understood. She finished buttoning her blouse and put on her skirt. He watched her roll black stockings up her long legs and attach them to her black garter belt. The garter belt had been his Achilles’ heel. Lust enveloped his face again, and the bulge in his pants grew big and hard. Because concupiscent men made her hot, she wanted to do him again—to see if he would let her, but she had a novel to finish.

She slipped on her stilettos and clutched her purse. “Thank you so much for all your help, Mr. Poole.” She flipped the lock on his door and exited her old life.

Malcolm was right. Her mother would be proud.

# Planted

by Anna Tjeltveit

When Jack returned to the office after his lecture, a strip of sunlight lay abandoned on his desk. Columbia had given him the smallest office in the economics department, dusty and shadow-darkened, but the broken blinds occasionally let in a beam of light. He knelt on the desk and attempted to jimmy open the blinds, cursing his yearlong contract and miserable hours, trying to let in anything which would brighten the room. This only broke the blinds further, blocking out the sun. Defeated, Jack sat down in front of his laptop, taking a moment to check his email before beginning his paper revisions.

Among the stream of job postings and spam from publishing companies was a message from a Harvard economist he had met at a conference in Cleveland several years earlier. They had met at a mixer on the first night, when Jack attempted to make small talk about the landscape in Ohio and the man responded that he was Kentucky born and bred and would rather shoot himself than live in a place this flat. Jack paused for a moment, then quietly said that he was from West Virginia and felt exactly the same way. They had exchanged business cards and spent the next few years occasionally forwarding articles and jokes without developing any further relationship.

The email the man had just sent was titled, “you need to see this.” All it contained was the link to a ten-minute YouTube video called “Planted Man,” uploaded by a channel with a few hundred subscribers and viewed nearly a million times. The video description named a town an hour away from Jack’s hometown in West Virginia and advertised “plantings” available for a hundred bucks. Jack pressed play, unsure what to expect.

The video opened on a meadow. Trees surrounded the grass, the scene so blindingly green that it took Jack a moment to get his bearings. The ground looked flat, but Jack knew to look for the curvature at the edge of the frame. There was nowhere completely flat in southern West Virginia, nowhere to see a sunset unobstructed by

mountains. In the middle of the sloping meadow lay a fallow garden bed, its loose soil scattered with grasses and dandelions.

An old woman knelt on the ground and sank her arms into soil up to the armpits. The earth shifted underneath her arms, then the motion stopped, and the woman braced herself to begin tugging. As she pulled, something that looked like matted blonde hair crested at the surface of the earth. The woman pulled further, and a man's head appeared, then his shoulders, followed by his chest and his legs. A minute more and the body of an unconscious man lay on the ground, pale and naked against the damp soil. His chest trembled with shallow breaths.

In the center of the man's chest, at the cavity where solid ribcage gave way to soft organ, were a patch of thin leaves. At first, Jack thought that they were the leaves of a plant which had been uprooted, but as the video focused, he saw that the leaves were connected to a carrot which was growing inside the naked man's chest. Its head blazed orange against his white skin and its body rooted inside his, their familiar heritage recognized anew.

The old woman whispered something to the man, and he groaned and began to move his limbs around in the garden bed. His eyes opened slowly, and he stared up at the sky, blinking away the brightness as his pupils adjusted to color after a long period of darkness. Then he tried to lift his head, and the old woman offered her support, giving her arm to lean on as he shakily knelt, and then stood.

The naked man was tall and broad, but his face was awash with a childish wonder as he drank in the scenery around him. His head followed his eyes, moving first towards the sky, then towards the grass, then towards the mountains behind him and the old woman in front of him. She wiped the dirt onto her overalls and watched him, her reserved expression betrayed only by a slight pulling at the corners of her mouth.

After a few minutes, she took the man's hand and guided it towards the plant which was growing on his chest. He felt the small, lacy leaves of the carrot top, and then his fingers probed the flesh of the carrot, touching the place where its damp skin connected with his own before it sank deeper inside of his chest. For a moment, he studied this new part of himself carefully, then he looked up at the old woman, threw his

head back, and laughed. It was a deep laugh, his stomach bouncing up and down, and it was filled with joy and wonder. The carrot in the man's chest moved with his breath and Jack felt like he was watching a fundamental symbiosis, an ancient biological geometry. The man's laugh was that of someone meeting an old friend after a long separation, laughing all the deeper in gratitude for the reunion. He seemed to be at peace.

Jack's screen went black. He was at his desk again, staring at his reflection in the computer's darkness as the sound of a graduate course floated down from the ceiling. The video stuck to him in the way that dreams sometimes clung to his mind after waking, its images shifting into new shapes and merging with old memories. The mountains became his mountains, the body his body, the roots his roots. He saw himself transformed into part of the earth and he longed for that sense of pure unity.

When Jack was seven, he got lost in the mountains without knowing that he was lost. He slipped out of his mother's trailer before dawn and ran past the end of the dirt road and deep into the woods. The mountains held a magic the adults didn't want him to see, huge trees dripping with bunches of green leaves and soil drenched with nighttime dew. He saw himself as a wild thing released from captivity, a boy escaped from a crumbling coal town. For hours, he had wandered up hills and through cricks, mapping the land until he knew where everything was except the town. When the sun was high and he grew sleepy, he found a tree stump and fell asleep inside its hollow. Hours later, the sun dimmed to ashen gray and he awoke to people calling his name, their voices echoing in chorus through the holler. He began to shout and cry until a search party came through the trees and found him, carrying home to cold chili and a neatly-made bed.

By the time Jack was a teenager, most of the people at his high school who hadn't gotten knocked up or dropped out were eager to leave. The town was dried up, its lifeblood gone when the mines stopped hiring, and no one wanted to repeat the same cycles of poverty which trapped their parents. Jack felt the same way, seeing the way his mother grew a little smaller each time bills arrived which the two of them couldn't pay. He began to spend hours at the library each day, obsessing over used textbooks about political science and economics.

The scholarship he read astonished him with its power of transformation. All the parts of his life which he couldn't understand, his mother dropping out of college to raise him, his church collecting money to keep the hospital open, his aunt going in and out of rehab, became data points which he could manipulate and study. He joined the debate club and took community college classes, determined to create order from his anxieties and save himself from the blight he saw around him.

When he got his scholarship to Yale, he stared at the online portal for several minutes before telling anyone. Part of him had never expected to succeed, and only after getting what he wanted could he realize the sacrifice it entailed. Over the next few weeks, as friends and neighbors congratulated him, each good wish felt like a goodbye. He loaded up a station wagon and left, feeling the mountains grow smaller the further he drove away.

The first time he stepped foot in New Haven, he felt lost in strange landscapes he didn't understand. Other students spoke in crisp mid-Atlantic accents about summer homes and trust funds, wearing Brooks Brothers shirts and travelling to the Hamptons over long weekends. When Jack visited their homes over breaks, he saw how casually they moved through villas in Spain and mansions on Long Island Sound, and he became ashamed of his double wide in a West Virginia holler.

No one at Yale wanted to welcome an Appalachian boy with dirty jeans and an accent, so he bought suits from thrift stores and steamed them in the shower, practicing in the mirror until he could say, "washing the windows" instead of, "warshing the winders." Eventually, he caught a foothold among the elite and began travelling in their circles, visiting their second homes and gratefully accepting the connections they made for him. Home felt smaller and poorer each time he visited, and eventually he stopped visiting. Sometimes, studying for his PhD at Princeton, he dreamed of sprawling green mountains and woke up with his stomach aching for home, but he told himself that the world of dissertations and job offers was the real world, and everything else was a fantasy.

Now, sitting in his office at Columbia, Jack felt a renewed and urgent sense of homesickness. His life had taken him far away from the things which had shaped him as



a child, and replaced them with networking opportunities, dinner parties, and strings of half-developed relationships which had never worked out. After all of it, he was still stuck in limbo eight years out of his PhD program, shuffled between schools without ever being quite brilliant enough for a tenure track position. An immense feeling of emptiness began to bloom in his chest, and he became certain that he was about to be sick, that he would spit out decades of jargon and small talk all over the papers on his desk. When no illness appeared, he put his head down on his desk and imagined being buried.

He went through the rest of his day as though sleepwalking. At home in Queens, he ate leftovers without tasting them, contemplating the past and possibilities of a future. He opened the Planted video again and idly scrolled through the comments. Someone had listed a name and address where the woman lived and said she would plant anyone who asked and was willing to pay. When Jack typed the address into Google Maps, the landscape where he had grown up suddenly appeared on his screen, its verdancy reduced to flat colors and a system of interlocking lines. It was a nine-hour drive from his apartment to the woman's house. Jack had a car, a consequence of rural paranoia which had never quite died, and he realized with a start that he could make the trip in a day.

For the first time in a long time, he allowed himself to imagine going home, planting himself in the soil he had loved and letting it absolve him of his abandonment. The idea was absurd, but the world he lived in felt absurd as well, and he could not get the image of the man in the earth out of his head. His life faded away from him, the job he was going to lose in a year, the wasted years, and he felt himself pulled back towards the ancient longing for the mountains. As if in a dream, Jack began to pack a bag. He could change his mind in the morning, a voice in the back of his head told him, as he emailed his boss about a family emergency and asked his neighbor to feed his fish until he returned. When Jack could do no more, he lay in bed and watched the Planted video until its shapes blurred together and he fell asleep.

The next morning, Jack awoke before dawn without an alarm, feeling electric. He could change his mind later, he told himself, as he locked his apartment behind him and

drove down 278 and out of the city. He drove away from New York towards Pennsylvania and the scenery shifted from urban developments and warehouses to sprawling cornfields and deep valleys with rivers running far below. Allentown was the last urban bulwark before 78 merged with the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and the scenery surrendered entirely to huge, green mountains covered with masses of drifting fog.

The Turnpike twisted up and down the mountainsides, gaining and losing altitude with the rhythm of his breaths. When the peaks became too high to summit, the tunnels appeared, huge concrete chutes which burrowed into the heart of the stony behemoths, impossibly stable beneath thousands of tons of weight. The drive continued into the heart of the Appalachians, and the road began twisting gradually up the side of the mountains, curving as it gained in elevation until the drop-offs fell thousands of feet below into valleys blanketed with trees. The landscape now was nothing but steep green mountains in every direction, no civilization in sight except for the highways, tiny taupe lines cut into the sides of ancient stone. All thoughts of turning back had disappeared from Jack's mind.

As soon as the signs for West Virginia appeared, memories consumed the landscape. He remembered road trips he had taken as a child, the familiar landmarks he had used to mark his place as his mother drove home late at night. There was the turnoff where he had thrown up on the side of the road as a child, there was the rest stop where they got a flat tire. He passed the parking lot where he pulled over and hyperventilated on the way to Connecticut for the first time. The mountains seemed to cradle him as he drove, welcoming him home and asking why he had spent so long away.

Right off the highway, handpainted signs appeared advertising the planting service, and they led to a narrow road which curved up the side of a mountain. The woman lived at the end of a dirt road filled with hairpin turns so tight that Jack had to stop his car several times to make his way around them. At the top of the mountain the meadow came into view, and beside it a single-wide trailer, its siding weather-stained and its porch made of rotting planks. Jack parked next to several other cars on the grass, gripped his wallet, and walked to the front door of the trailer. Before he could raise his hand to knock, the door cracked open in front of him.

The old woman was shorter than she had seemed in the video. She wore a pair of muddy overalls and kept her hair in two long white braids tucked behind her ears. When she saw Jack, she squinted at him, taking in his outfit and the money he carried.

“Want to be planted?” She asked.

Jack nodded. “Yes Ma’am.”

The woman nodded and pursed her lips. “Well,” she said. “I can’t say you’ll find much room, but you’re welcome to join the others.”

She opened the door wider, and Jack saw that the living room of the trailer was packed with people in formal clothes. They leaned against the walls, or perched on the edge of the couch, or sat with their knees pressed to their chests on the floor, chatting to each other and holding paper plates of casserole and green beans. Some wore pantsuits, uniforms, or lab coats, but they all seemed to share a sense of tentative comfort, like a pair of old leather boots being broken in again after many years.

Jack glanced at the old woman once more, then took a helping of food and moved to the center of the living room, where he planted himself on the carpeted floor and started a conversation with a doctor from Tennessee and a banker from Virginia. Everyone moved slightly as they waited, gesturing hands and bobbing heads. In the late sunlight slanting through the window, the slight movements of the people in the living room seemed to be caused by an invisible wind moving through them. It was funny, Jack thought, the way the individual people ceased to matter as much as the image they made together. It looked almost like a forest.

# Annual Gathering

By Emily Zasada

## Labor Day, 2008

The funny thing was that Kristen half-expected to see her dead cousin Mike at her aunt Bobbie's annual Labor Day family get-together, and, as it turned out, she was right.

It was late in the afternoon, the sun golden and careless, the dense trees at the edge of the forest her aunt and uncle's property backed up to still full and green and somewhat arrogant, unwilling to admit that change was around the corner. Through the kitchen window, she could see some of the snow globes in Aunt Bobbie's collection on the shelves over the sink, gleaming in the sun and looking as if they were floating in mid-air, a trick of the light she and Mike first noticed back when they were kids. Her brother Josh was flipping burgers on the barbecue, opining to her father and Uncle Richard about both the recession and the genius of Steve Jobs. Uncle Richard was nodding in all the right places, but Kristen noticed that he kept glancing toward the house as if he were formulating an escape plan.

Kristen sighs, rubs her forehead. Listening to Josh was like being in the audience of a loud, talentless band, the kind that wails on and on, oblivious of audience sentiment. She felt an unprecedented alliance with her reticent Uncle Richard. She, too, wants to escape.

Aunt Bobbie and Uncle Richard's annual Labor Day cookout was an expected family ritual. Although this year, it also had the added unpleasant dimension of being part of her mourning ritual. She guessed that others felt that way, too; it was apparent that Mike was the subtext humming underneath all the conversations, in the occasional overly loud bursts of laughter, everyone trying to prove they were having a good time. Everyone was there: her parents, Josh and his quiet, pointy-nosed wife Amelia and their two disobedient nephews, her cousin Marcy (who drove down from Massachusetts with her catalog-model-handsome husband Adam and two ridiculously adorable daughters), and, finally, Aunt Joan, Mike's mother. The accident had been the previous summer. She glanced at her Aunt Joan, sitting by herself under a yellow umbrella at the patio's edge. A certain papery quality to her skin in the light. All afternoon, she'd meant to go

over and spend more time with her. She would, she decided, as soon as she finished the beer she'd been nursing for the last half-hour or so.

"Hey, Porcupine."

Immediately, Kristen stills. A coolness descends. She becomes hyperaware of the sound of a cicada somewhere in the dark and distant trees. Glances around to double-check that someone wasn't standing near her that she hadn't been aware of. Takes a few steps back into the trees.

Instantly, the shadows deepen as if someone had drawn a curtain. The little sunlight that has filtered through is in pale yellow shards, blurred gold at the edges as if they've been scrubbed with a brush. Kristen can actually see him now or sort of see him anyway. He's leaning against a tree a few feet back into the woods, wearing jeans and a Dismemberment Plan t-shirt. She can see the tree through him, but she can also see how the dim light barely traces his features; she's even reasonably sure she can make out his freckles.

"Hey, you," she says, thinking (as she's saying it) that she needs to try to sound normal, but then also at the time thinks that she does sound normal because, in a way, all of this is entirely normal; the way they always leaped straight into conversations as if it were the middle instead of the beginning. She has an awful, terrible rush of affection for him, so overwhelming that it even eclipses the question of this whole apparition thing for a moment. Her cousin. The only person who ever truly understood her, who got her. They always spoke one another's language. She presses her hand against the tree, aware of her suddenly damp palms. She wishes there was a way to etch every detail of this moment on an envelope and crawl inside so she could experience it forever.

Mike nods in the direction of Josh. "Still full of himself, huh?"

"The fullest," Kristen agrees. She gives Mike a sort of sideways glance, and tries to casually adjust her position. Terrified that she might inadvertently do or say something that would cause him to disappear. "Glad you could make it, by the way."

A half-smile. "Traffic was a bitch."

Kristen laughs but is careful to laugh in a neutral sort of way in case Mike doesn't know he's dead, and he really does think he was in traffic. Her thoughts splinter into kaleidoscope-esque fractals. Maybe he's not a ghost at all, she thinks, but rather a left-

over relic of himself, some sort of animated shadow. Or perhaps this is all in her head; she's crazy, in other words. At that moment, both theories seem equally possible.

Then she decides she doesn't want to think too hard about any of this. She just wants to talk to Mike in the way they always did. "I almost didn't come," she finally says.

"Oh?" Mike's tone is neutral. "And why is that?"

Kristen hesitates. Looks out at Josh, who is throwing his hands up in the air, yelling something about a local sports team. Nearby, his thin, unpleasant wife is cutting up a hot dog into little pieces and eating it with a fork. Beautiful Marcy is bending over to talk to one of her beautiful daughters, her hair glowing in the sun. "No one knows who I am," Kristen says finally, knowing she sounds self-pitying but not caring because it's Mike. Also, Mike is dead. Also, it's true; no one does know who she is. For as long as she can remember, she's felt like a stranger when she's around her family. Only a few years ago, Aunt Bobbie asked her if she was still interested in ballet. She hadn't even thought about ballet since she was thirteen. All she remembers is the cool feel of the wood floor in the ballet studio under the toe of her ballet slippers. The question hurt Kristen's feelings a little; since she was a child, she'd adored Aunt Bobbie, a feeling that persisted even though she wasn't a child anymore. It made her wonder if, as a thirty-two-year-old, her adult interests were irrelevant. Also, there's her mother, who was just asking Kristen in the kitchen if she'd met any nice men. Kristen doesn't know how to explain that none of the men she's met are very nice, but that—also—she doesn't seem to put herself in the correct situations to meet nice men, for reasons she prefers not to examine very closely.

Mike nods. "Family, am I right?"

Was that a look of wistfulness on his face or just a trick of the light? Kristen can't tell. She struggles to collect her thoughts. Tries to remember everything she's been thinking about for an entire year. But, stubbornly, they slip beneath the surface, their shape and form amorphous and indistinct. "You know," she starts, her voice not sounding entirely like her own, "I've always wanted to tell you—" she begins, glancing sideways, the outstretched lawn where her relatives are strangely bright, the shadowy place where she's standing with Mike strangely dark, "that—" She swallows, her mind seizing up, turning blank. The wind blows, the light shifts, and she turns, exasperated, ready to swap out whatever she was going to say with, well, something, *anything*—

But Mike is gone.

## Labor Day, 2015

The hallway is quiet, dust motes swirling in sunbeams. Downstairs, Kristen can hear people arriving. Marcy's laugh rises up the stairs like pink balloons.

Kristen pauses, feeling suddenly shy. She likes Marcy—everyone likes Marcy, for god's sake—but Marcy is a radiant success. When Kristen is around her, she can feel all her failures draw closer together, their grubby arms sliding around one another for comfort. The horror of it all is that she's thirty-nine. Thirty-nine! When she's around other responsible adults with spouses and children and real careers, she feels like a pretender, struggling to speak a language that she's never been fluent in and—possibly—doesn't really want to learn.

She wants to hide.

She darts for the nearest door, opening and closing it silently behind her. Then she looks around, her eyes adjusting to the gloom, the thin trickle of light coming through the slanted blinds, glazing half a dozen dusty snow globes on the bookshelf under the window. Remembers where she is.

Uncle Richard's den.

It's been decades, probably, since she's been in here. She stares at the television, astonished at its ancientness. It's the kind with a curved screen and little dials. She doesn't even know if she'd remember how to work such a thing. She and Mike used to come up here to watch TV; that was something they liked that Marcy looked down at, telling them (in a superior sort of way, Kristen thought at the time) that she preferred reading books instead. They would take a giant bowl of popcorn in here and sit on the worn blue and white checked couch and watch all kinds of random stuff. Old shows from the seventies and eighties, shows like *Three's Company* and *The Loveboat* and *Murder She Wrote*. Or infomercials; Mike really got a kick out of infomercials. He used to watch one after another, howling with laughter the whole time.

"Hey, Porcupine. What's shaking?"

Kristen sucks in a breath. Because he's sitting there—Mike—in the same corner of the couch he always did. Or, the shadowy form of him is anyway; she can see the arm of the sofa through his leg.

“Not much,” Kristen says, struggling to sound normal. She’s terrified of the possibility of doing or saying anything that might cause him to blink back out of existence. It’s been seven years since the last time this happened. Throughout the first few Labor Days after the last time she’d run into ghost-Mike in the woods, she’d spent at least half of her time lurking around the trees at the back of the yard, hoping to run into him again. For the last few years, she’d been doing the same thing but also broadening her focus by peering around the house. Every year she’d think, somewhat horrified at herself, *I’m in my thirties, and I’m secretly skulking around my aunt and uncle’s house looking for ghosts*, but she couldn’t bring herself not to do it either. There’d been that moment during the Labor Day get-together in 2011 she thought she sensed something in the pantry. Actually, it might have even been a little more than that because she’d thought she’d heard a muffled laugh. After that, she stood there for the longest time breathing in the smell of dry cereal and dusty cardboard, waiting for something else to happen. But nothing ever did.

Mike nods. He appears to be staring in the direction of the television screen, although the tv isn’t on. “I heard Marcy downstairs.”

Kristen is surprised by this. She hadn’t expected Mike to be aware of what was happening in the house—although, as she ponders this thought, she isn’t sure why. After all, he’s aware of her; is having a conversation with her, even. Possibly, she’s being selfish. Thinking that Mike should be her ghost and hers alone.

“Marvelous Marcy,” Kristen says. Mike casts her a look that—while transparent, like the rest of him—still conveys knowing. This pleases Kristen, but it also—if she’s going to be honest with herself—feels like a betrayal. Of Marcy. Yes, okay, she’s up here with the intent of hiding from her. Actually, though, it was only a few months ago that she had a long phone conversation with her after Uncle Richard died, a conversation in which Marcy confessed a lot of things, like her worries that she was only pretending to be good at her job but wasn’t actually good, and pretty soon someone was going to find out. And Kristen confessed some things, too, like the horrible crush she’s had on her boss for the last year, how she stays awake at night replaying their interactions, trying to figure out if he ever hints at any interest in her. Also, they’d recently started exchanging emails about low-calorie pressure cooker recipes.

But, despite all that, the prospect of being near in-person Marcy fills her with panic.



“I shouldn’t be intimidated by her,” Kristen says defiantly, still in character as her younger talking-to-Mike self. She loves this version of herself, she thinks, overcome by a wave of fondness. She misses it terribly. “I have my own set of accomplishments, you know.” Although, as she says this, her voice falters. She may have some, she supposes, but she’s unsure what they are.

“Well, duh, Porcupine.” Out of the corner of her eye, Kristen is reasonably sure she sees Mike’s transparent blue eyes flicker in her direction. “I mean, that goes without saying.”

Kristen nods and relaxes a fraction. Ghost Mike is also sticking to his expected lines. She hears Marcy’s laugh, hears Josh talking with that joking tone in his voice. Out of nowhere—despite Mike’s presence, even—she has a sudden, contradictory wish to unhide and go downstairs. I don’t understand myself, Kristen thinks. Possibly, she says this out loud. Then she’s sure of it because Mike is staring at her.

“I’m losing it,” she confesses. She becomes uncertain when he doesn’t say anything—just keeps looking at her, his eyes not leaving her face. “What?”

“I don’t remember.” His translucent face goes soft and helpless.

Someone—Marcy, maybe—is talking about drones; her daughter wants one for her birthday. Josh says something about how much he loves Spotify. She can hear them clearly through the vent over the floor. Kristen gets the sense that Mike is listening to them as well. Strangely, she feels embarrassed for him. What would it be like, she wonders, to know that the world has moved on without you? To know that it continues to carelessly cough up new inventions—not to mention new wars, natural disasters, political upheaval, etc.—without any consideration of the fact that you once walked on the planet? Then she realizes she’s wrong, that he’s not looking in the direction of the tv; he’s staring in the direction of one of Aunt Bobbie’s snow globes instead. Snow White is trapped there, eternally smiling, eternally drowned, two large-eared dwarves clinging to her skirts, plastic snow up to their ankles. The light shifts weakly. He says something that sounds like *not near* or maybe *top tier*, his voice sounding thin and reedy, like a fading radio transmission.

A coolness slides in and wraps itself around Kristen’s chest. “Mike, what are you saying?”

Mike shakes his head, his eyes terrified. *Crabs and*, he says, or something like it. *Rabbit. Rabbit.*

Kristen tells him the only thing she can think of, which is that it's okay. That everything will be okay. Or, she tries, anyway; the lie sticks in her throat. Years ago, she stopped believing anyone when they said that, and she didn't want to join their untruthful ranks. She makes some sort of noise, trying to communicate... what? Something.

But it doesn't matter, because Mike is no longer there. In fact, it's likely that she's imagined the last several minutes, if not the whole thing.

### **Labor Day, 2022**

"Are the stores open normal hours on Labor Day?" Josh asks, reaching for a new box.

Marcy shrugs. "I don't know. I can never remember." She sits on the floor, tucks her hair behind her ears as she continues dusting off snow globes and putting them in a box. Dark circles smudged below her eyes. Aunt Bobbie died three months ago, and Marcy has had to juggle managing everything to do with the estate while working full time. Time and gravity have tugged at her features, changing them; she doesn't even remotely resemble the little girl in the photograph behind her on the wall. "You guys, it just occurred to me. This is the last Labor Day we'll ever be in this house."

"Really?" A cold thump in the center of Kristen's chest. She knew this, of course. Earlier, she'd gone upstairs to grab some sodas for everyone and had stood at the kitchen window for the longest time, staring out. In her mind, she'd superimposed all their deceased relatives—her parents, Aunt Bobbie, Uncle Richard, Aunt Joan, Mike—over the glowing green lawn in their usual spots, sitting in phantom lawn chairs, grilling phantom hamburgers on an imaginary barbecue. Then, one by one, she'd imagined them winking out like fireflies.

Josh pauses, a stack of old magazines in his hands. "No shit?"

"Yeah." Marcy's eyes are distant. Maybe a little pink, too, but it's hard to tell in this light. "Anyway. Maybe we should go. What do we need? Besides a shredder and a new vacuum cleaner, that is."

“Garbage bins, giant ones. At least two.” Josh studies his phone and glances at Kristen. “You coming?”

Kristen shakes her head, and says she’s going to finish boxing up the books on the bookshelf. Marcy suggests that they pick up dinner while they’re out. Before Kristen even agrees, Josh is on his phone, searching for local places. Josh believes in food reviews like other people believe in God. “You still like those little pancakes? What are they called?”

“Moo shu,” Kristen says, distracted. She’s sitting on the floor, looking through a box of old toys she found in the closet at the back of the basement. She pulls out a little spaceman figurine. “Was this Mike’s?”

Josh takes it from her and examines it in the light. “I guess. He had a thing for space stuff, right?”

Kristen thinks this over. “I think so,” she says finally.

“I wish I remembered him better,” Marcy says from the stairs.

Kristen nods. She does too, but she doesn’t want to say that out loud for fear of offending him. She hasn’t actually seen Mike in years, but sometimes when she’s here at Aunt Bobbie’s house, she thinks she can sense him hanging around, although she knows it might just be her imagination.

Later, Marcy texts to say that all the large garbage bins were sold out at Walmart and that she and Josh will have to make at least one more stop. She’s terribly apologetic about this and tells Kristen that she hopes she isn’t too hungry and that if she is, she thinks there might still be chips and salsa in the upstairs cabinet. Kristen tells her she’s fine and texts a series of heart emojis out of gratitude that Marcy is thinking of her.

These days—and Kristen still isn’t sure how this happened—they’ve gotten close. Years ago, Marcy’s family downsized, and moved five hundred miles south from their glamorous house in Massachusetts to a condo nearby in Ferndale; it’s so close to nearby BWI that the glasses rattle in the kitchen cabinets when the planes take off overhead. Marcy’s beautiful children are adults now, or on the cusp of it at least. One has dropped out of college to sell cell phone plans, and the other is studying Native American culture and is haunted by the guilt of being genetically European. Also, after years of covering it up, Marcy now openly admits that her husband, Adam, is addicted to video games,

which is why he no longer works. His beard is long and gray, and he doesn't socialize with Kristen and Josh unless he has to.

Later, she gets a text from Josh with a picture of a funny license plate on the back of a car with liberal amounts of rust and duct tape on the bumper that reads STOL3N. She and Josh are close, too, texting about random stuff several times a week. She's not sure how this happened, either. She sends him back a series of crying-laughing emojis.

Sometimes she thinks about how Mike died right around the time emojis became widely popular. Sometimes she's even aware that these days she thinks in emojis. Which is yet another concept that would be difficult to explain.

It's almost dark. Kristen pours some wine into a plastic cup, opens the bag of chips, and turns on the TV. All the shadows have moved into the basement, pooling by the steps, crouching behind the furniture. The last she heard from Josh was that Marcy couldn't decide between two shredders; this was accompanied by an eye-rolling emoji. Kristen flips through the channels. An important glacier is disappearing. Only a few hours ago in New York, the CFO of an artificial intelligence company threw himself out a window. She doesn't want to hear any of this, she thinks. She hits the button for the program menu, scrolls through the shows, and finds an old rerun of *The Loveboat*. A blurry and impossibly thin blonde is walking by a pool, her eyes rimmed with extraordinary amounts of makeup. A bartender leers. In the background, synthesized music oozes innuendo. Kristen settles into Aunt Bobbie and Uncle Richard's old couch, drinks her wine, and falls into the seventies. Everything is wrong with this, and nothing is appropriate. She doesn't want to overlay the standards of her current era over this older one, but after trying for a while, she finds that not doing so is impossible. Going backward, apparently, wasn't something she was allowing herself to do, not even after giving herself permission. All her muscles ache from bending and lifting all day, picking up boxes, and scrubbing things even though Marcy has told her over and over not to bother. She's wanted to do these things to help Marcy, who has been so kind to her over the last couple of years, so understanding even though Kristen was stupid enough to get involved with a married man, who (of course) ultimately broke up with her, went back to his wife. Kristen can't believe she used to be terrified of Marcy. How stupid that seems now.

Gradually, she becomes aware of a shift. On the other side of the couch, the air has thickened. Kristen waits, holding her breath. She knows even before she turns and sees him there. In fact, she realizes, on some level, she's been more or less expecting it. This is, after all, the last time she'll be at the house. Tomorrow she'll be back at work, and Marcy has scheduled the movers to arrive in the morning.

It's been a long time, she says. Or she thinks she says it, anyway. It could be that speaking out loud is somewhat beside the point.

Mike nods. He's more transparent than she's ever seen him, barely even a wisp, a hint of features against a backdrop of wood paneling, one of Aunt Bobbie's framed embroideries of marigolds hanging on the wall. Now taking him in fully, Kristen's breath gets caught in her throat. It's not the shock of seeing ghost-Mike again—this is the third time, after all—but his youth; that's what she's staring at; the show on the television in front of her forgotten. He's barely more than a kid, which surprises her, although she doesn't know why. It's good to see you again, she says, and she means it, but she's aware that he's not saying anything back, not even trying; from the looks of it, maybe such a thing is impossible now, after all, so much time has passed, after all, he's barely there, hardly even an outline. A little, she thinks, like the darkened rectangles behind the pictures they've taken off the walls upstairs. She hesitates, wondering what else to say, but finally gives up, and turns her attention back to the show, even though her mind has been wandering and she hasn't been keeping track of what's going on. For a while, she senses that he's watching it too, that maybe he's even gotten somewhat caught up in it, but honestly, she's so tired it's hard to pay too much attention, and anyway, it's easier to watch what's on the screen in front of her; it's too hard to know what's going on in the mind of a ghost. And later, when she hears the crunch of the tires on the gravel driveway and the white headlights swing into the downstairs window, she jumps up and heads to the stairs. Belatedly, she remembers Mike there; she turns and looks back, surprised to see him still there and—if she's going to be honest—a little annoyed too. After all, in a few hours, they'll be gone; the cleaning crews are coming tomorrow; by the end of the week, the house will be listed for sale. What's left of their family, the straggled lot of them, is moving on, and she thinks Mike should as well. For some reason, she's fed up with all of this, what Mike is up to. She feels it in a burst of pinkish annoyance, flaming up in irradiated pulses. Why is he here, anyway? It's a half-hearted sort of haunting,

that's all she knows. *Goddamnit, Mike. You are gone.* He's been gone, in fact, for a long, long time. So long that she's turned into someone else entirely. Any tug she feels towards him is a relic, a sun-bleached fossil stranded in a lonely desert somewhere, a shadow of something that vanished long ago from this earth. *I am here*, she thinks, somewhat defiantly. *I am alive.* She turns her back on all the dust and shadows and heads towards the stairs, the incandescent kitchen, towards everything coming next.

# Church Going Non-Believers

by Dustin Zima

After my parents divorced, the speedometer in my mom's car stopped working; it was the result of my mom having to trade-in her old, new car for a new, old one. Most times, the pointer inside the plastic barrier rested at 120 MPH. There were times it would flutter and tap against the plastic, but the red needle usually flipped back and rested on 120 MPH. When the dial jumped around, my mom reached over the steering wheel with one of her hands and pounded on the dashboard with a closed fist.

It was in this pugilistic fashion that my mom and I arrived to church. Since the divorce, mom believed that taking me to church would be good for me. That the masculine presence and rugged good looks of Jesus would fill the male void left behind in the divorce. This new practice, which felt like a punishment, was the result of my dad's favorite drunken rant: "Igun fine myself a goo' Chris'an woman. A goo' one. Mean it. No smoking. No swearing. No flip-flops. Tha'goddamn flapping-sound. Haaate it. It's repulsive. A Chris'an! *That's* I'm going to find. Watch. A goddam Chris'an." I was always in bed during these soap-box sermons. I'd laugh sometimes, but not always.

And so, post-divorce, my mom did her best to reform herself. She quit smoking (thanks to hypnosis) and curtailed her swearing while in public and around me (no thanks to quitting smoking). She refused to stop wearing flip-flops, though. In fact, she took to wearing *only* flip-flops, no matter the occasion, and flapped them against the bottoms of her feet with defiant pride.

The first service we attended was a true test of two of Christianity's fundamental tenants: empathy and forgiveness. The car ride to church was a lot like when we took our cat, Simon, to the vet. Mule loves cats; he says, "If man could be crossed with the cat it would improve man, but it would deteriorate the cat". When we played pool in Hannibal, at 36 Gemini, he'd gently place Simon inside the intended pocket, and Simon was always on his side and stayed nestled in there until I altered my shot altogether.

He'd even paw at the balls to change their direction to insure Mule had the upper hand. This was proof of the corruption of Man.

So, just how Simon hid on the floor on the way to the veterinarian, I slunk down and curled up in the fetal position. My mom pet my head: "Is kitty scared to go to church?"

"Meoooow."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"Me-ow."

"Dustin."

"Meow?"

I reached up to the stereo, aimlessly feeling for any knob, but before finding one, mom pushed my hand away: "Bad kitty!"

I hissed and went for her legs.

"Dustin Michael!"

"Meow?"

I began to *purrrrrrrrrr*—until remembering our destination.

"Why are we going to church? We never go to church."

"We've gone to church plenty of times."

"When?"

"Your uncle's wedding . . . and your great grandma's funeral . . . and Ben's dad's funeral . . . and your cousin's wedding."



“Those were awful. I had to look at uncle Melvin’s body. You touched it!”

“Oh, it’s not going to be *that* bad. You might actually like it . . . and touching a loved one’s body at a funeral isn’t strange. My family has always done it.”

“I couldn’t. They’re *dead*.”

“Well, all traditions come to an end. It’s not always a bad thing.”

“Amen!”

“That’s the spirit!”

The speedometer needle began to flutter just as we pulled into the church parking lot. Mom cursed it. She pounded with an open palm on the dashboard. I giggled; it always tickled me to watch her spank the speedometer. Sometimes, I’d cheer her on!

*Kill the pig!*

*Cut her throat!*

*Spill her blood!*

Mom was disturbed by the chant, but I’d told her that I’d just read *The Lord of the Flies*, and that these kinds of things had to be done by the book. When it was over, I’d pretend to pull tickets out of the tape deck like we were playing Whack-A-Mole!

“Mule told me that when he goes to church there’s an old guy that sits in front of them and picks his nose the whole time. He even picks his nose when they’re singing. He said that the man, after he picks his boogers, flicks them and they land on people. He said one landed on his brother, Henry, once.”

“Ewwwww. That’s disgusting.”

“Well, if we sit by someone who’s digging for gold we’ll move to another pew.”

“ . . . what’s a ‘pew’?”

“It’s a bench that people sit on in church. You’ll see.”

“Why don’t they just call it a bench?”

“They’re special benches.”

“Don’t you think a special bench would be called something better than ‘pew’?”

“*Gesundheit.*”

“What?”

“You said, ‘A pew,’ and it sounded like you sneezed, so I said, ‘*Gesundheit.*’”

“What is *Ga-zoon-tight*?”

“It’s like saying ‘Bless you,’ but in German.”

“You know German?”

“Just that one word.”

“Mule says that whoever invented the German language must have had a bad toothache that day. What’s it called, again?”

“*Gesundheit?*”

“No, the benches in the church?”

“A ‘pew’.”

“*Ga-zoon-tight!*”

We pulled into a spot in the church parking lot and got out of the car—mom got out; she walked around to my side and tried the door handle. I locked it on her. When

she went for the handle, I locked the doors, and as soon as she took her hand off the handle, I unlocked the doors. This ping ponged back and forth a handful of times until she engaged her mom-voice: “Damn it, Dustin!” It was tough being alliterated at, especially at such a young age, because the cadence was just too catchy. And swearing on top of that? It tickled me more than it intimidated; I ended up adopting/adapting it, myself, around this time: “Damn it, Debbie!” I was ten, and a heathen.

A family that was walking through the parking lot heard the mother damning the son. It was appropriately biblical; and while it was seemingly insignificant, the absolute truth is that the devil can only be discovered in the details. It’s probably why we were, like my friend Mule once said, “church going non-believers”. It’s too bad because it’s an ideal setting to cast damnation unto someone and then be absolved. Mothers toil, biblically, from the moment they become one; A mothers trials are made of biblical toil. It might just be locking/unlocking doors, but it’s that on top of It was literal and figurative. Serious and satirical. The family stopped and stood stock-still. The mother approached.

“Can I pray with the two of you?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that—at least not around strangers.”

“We do not have to be strangers,” the mom smiled.

“I wasn’t being serious,” my mom assured her.

“I understand. Would you like to pray together before we go in?”

“Thank you. That’s kind of you, but I’m not comfortable with that.”

“With praying?”

“Not out here, in the open, in front of the church . . . maybe when we get inside. You go ahead . . .”

The mother gathered her two young children closely and shepherded them toward the church. The husband took two more drags from a cigarette and skillfully flipped the butt into the tiny patch of lush grass in between the street and the sidewalk. As he walked away, he winked at me. Weirdo. Hilarious, though.

I finally got out of the car. Mom grabbed me under the armpit. I imagine that there is nothing better for a parent's arsenal than a veiled infliction of pain for when things fall apart in public. I was familiar with this tactic, and knew not to resist—I still squirmed, but just enough to garner a little self-respect. (Mule wouldn't let me hear the end of it if I didn't do it by the books). Unintentionally, I broke free and, out of an innate impulse, lit out. After a few strides, the bear wearing the pinwheel hat on the tricycle in my head stopped pedaling in circles, and I slowed to a standstill.

As mom approached, she noticed that there was something on the seat of my pants: gum, stretched from cheek-to-cheek.

"Damn it, Dustin. How did you manage—"

There was a parade of parishioners passing through to witness this blasphemy; some laughed, some shook their heads, and others crossed themselves while saying inaudible prayers. The thumb returned to the armpit, and I was guided inside the church, into the women's bathroom.

"I don't want to go in there."

"I know you don't, but you have to. You've got gum all over your pants."

I was led into a stall—there were no urinals on the wall and that was unsettling. She told me to take off my pants and pass them under the door to her—also unsettling.

"I want to go home."

"Dustin, please."

"Can we just go home?"

“I can get the gum out. Just give them here.”

“I don’t care. I just want to go home.”

“Just let me try.”

Without untying them, I shoved my dress shoes off with the backs of my heels. One of the shoes slid across the floor and into the stall across from me. The other one flew up into the air, ricocheted off the wall—Michael Jackson—and splashed down into the toilet.

“Damn it, Debbie!”

And it was at this most inopportune moment that a woman entered the bathroom. I heard my mom let out a nervous laugh and then apologize. The woman had on nice shoes, but she dragged her feet when she walked. *Shish. Shish. Shish.* That wretched *shish* sound. It’s my flip-flop *thwap*—definitely a great title for a song—(Outkast has one called “Flip Flop Rock,” which is a great song). Before she could *shish* fully inside the stall, she slid to a stop. It was silent long enough to hear a toilet flush in the men’s bathroom on the other side of the wall. Once again, my mom apologized and rushed to retrieve my shoe.

While the woman went to the bathroom, my mom and I stood at attention, ready for anything. She clenched my shoe in her hand like a bite block for ECT. Another flush-shattering silence followed—each of us was embarrassed for a different reason: my mom for her son swearing at her in front of someone (in church), me because I was in a women’s bathroom with no pants on, and the stranger because she could not go to the bathroom while everyone anticipated the sound of her going to the bathroom.

I pulled my shoe out of the toilet, water pouring onto the floor, and launched it over the stall door. The toilet water splashed down on me, then on my mom, and finally on the floor of the stranger’s stall.

“Dustin Michael!” (The dreaded combining of first and middle name. There’d be hell to pay!).

“It fell in the toilet!”

“I’m so sorry, ma’am!”

“Is everything oKendra?” the woman asked, uncertainly, through her stall door.

“Yes, we’re just having a gum issue.”

“And my toilet shoe.”

“Michael, please,” and then to the closed door of the woman’s stall, “I’m so sorry, ma’am.”

With the tips of her pointer finger and thumb, mom picked up the shoe and dropped it into the sink. She rolled, rolled, rolled out a handful of paper towels and tried to dry it off. After the rough paper started to flake and pill, she cast it down into the trashcan.

I peeked through the gap in my stall’s door. Mom was resting her backside on the ledge of the wash basin, staring up at the ceiling. Her eyes were closed and she was mumbling to herself.

The woman exited the stall and *shished* over to the sink next to my mom. As soon as I heard the door opening, I panicked and kicked my pants out from under my stall. They landed at the woman’s feet. Mom knelt and snatched the pants from the floor. She stood up, facing the woman, and began to cry. The stranger hesitated a moment, then reached over and took her by the hand. Mom broke down, into the woman’s arms. She cried, without restraint, into the woman’s hug. I watched before I couldn’t watch anymore; I opened my stall’s door, pants be damned, and went over to them.

“Mom? I’m sorry,” I blubbered.

The stranger answered, “Your mom’s okay, honey. Let’s just give her a minute.”

I squeezed in between them and hugged my mom as tight as I could.

The next Sunday, we returned to church. We found a parking spot on the street that was directly in front of the church’s entrance. We even managed to make it into the lobby without causing a scene (or cussing). As we entered, the woman from the week before greeted us. She had been waiting for us so she could invite us to sit with her.

“I’m so glad you came back,” the woman said.

“So are we. And thank you so much for your kindness last week. It meant so much.”

“It was nothing at all.”

“Well, it was something to me. I mean it, thank you.”

After the service began, I bombarded my mom with whining requests to go to the bathroom. After rapid firing ten of them in a row, and just to shut me up, mom acquiesced. She looked over at the woman, mouthing a silent sorry and, at the same time, squeezing my arm with just enough force to let me know that she was onto me. I broke free, bounded out of the pew, and hurried down the aisle and out the door.

Mom was not able to concentrate on the sermon. She was preoccupied by the thought of me spreading hellfire throughout the church’s grounds. Five minutes had passed, and for all five of them her head was on a swivel, scanning the church structure for me—like the Terminator.

Her scanner picked up my presence at the back of the church, in the loft, rummaging through the chancel. Without waiting for recognition from the woman, my mom excused herself and, with her eyes self-consciously fixed to the floor, rushed down the aisle and out the door. She climbed the stairs, but before she reached the top, she

intercepted me on my way down. In one motion, she grabbed me by the arm, turned me around, and spanked me. She was good.

“Dustin, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“You were supposed to go to the bathroom and come right back.”

“I know.”

“You have to behave.”

“I know.”

“Can we make it through just one church service? Please?”

“Church is boring.”

“Dustin . . . please.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re going to go back in there and you’re going to behave. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you understand me?”

“I said ‘yes’.”

“Damn it, Michael. I mean it.”

“You just said a swear word in church.”

“I know. I shouldn’t swear.”



“Especially in church.”

“Michael, please. I can’t do this.”

I was led back down the aisle to the front row pew. After we sat down, the woman leaned over and whispered, “Not another gum incident I hope?”

I waited for my mom to get comfortable before re-engaging her. When I finally did, I hit her with five rounds of “I’m thirsty.” The homily had ended and the offering plates were being passed around the congregation. I was relentless and unleashed a volley.

“I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty . . .”

The woman handed mom the offering plate, and she set it down on the pew so she could pull some money from her purse.

“I’m thirsty, I’m thirsty, I’m thir-stay. I. Am. Thirsty. Who’s thirsty? Me. I’m thirsty. Dying of thirst. Me. Thirsty. Thirstville population: me.”

As I said this last one, my hand accidentally pushed the plate from the pew and down onto the floor. In an instant, mom was kneeling on the ground, collecting the envelopes, visitor cards, and coins. After piling them back onto the plate, and adding a couple of crumpled up dollars of her own—she decided to hold on to the visitor’s card that she had filled out—she handed the plate to the attendant.

Mom snatched up her purse, grabbed me by the arm, and started to march me down the aisle once again. I grabbed for the passing pews, clinging to the ones I could get my hands on. Embarrassed and in a panic, I implored, “Mom, don’t beat me!” The congregation gasped and held their breath. To be fair, there were a few laughs.

Mom led me back into the same women’s bathroom as the week before. She rattled out some scratchy, brown paper towels from the box on the wall, wet them in the

sink, and scraped my face with them. She dabbed at my nose and face and neck with the wet paper. I did my best to dodge her jabs, but crying consumed too much of my energy.

As she tapped my nose with the wet paper, it started bleeding. The blood dripped onto my lips, seeped into my mouth, and down my chin. It mixed with my tears. The rivulets of blood soaked into the neckline of my white, collared shirt. Mom rolled out more brown paper and tried wiping the blood from my shirt. It came out looking like a Rorschach test.

It was ten minutes before my nose stopped bleeding. Mom led me out of the church, where inside the benediction was underway. I did not want to get into the car. I feared the finality of the car ride home, but I went for the handle anyway. Locked. Mom put her purse on the roof of the car and started digging for the keys. *Had they fallen out during the spectacle? She would rather walk home than go back inside and look for them.*

I looked in the car and could see the keys dangling from the ignition. I pointed this out to her. She looked to the sky, then to the car, giving both of them a good, mumbled cussing. Then, she proceeded with a general dressing down of whomever and whatever came to mind. Both of these were impressive displays of language that were generally assumed not to be in a lady's lexicon. Mom then moved on to pleading her case to no one in particular—after what had happened inside of the church, she did not feel comfortable calling on God at the moment. Unbeknownst to me, who had been giggling throughout her performance, this dressing down was a more veiled damning of me. After her malediction, she took out her phone and called the police to ask for help—with the lock, not with me.

As we waited for the police to arrive, my mom and I stood side-by-side, leaning against the car. I pressed my face against the passenger side window, staring at the old piece of dried gum stuck to the seat from the week before. The police officer pulled up, got out of his car, and walked over to us. He pushed his sunglasses down, looked me up and down, and asked if I was oKendra. He even pulled me aside, out of earshot of my mom, and asked me again if I was oKendra. As she explained that I frequently had nose

bleeds, which I did, she cried and shook and scanned the area for rubberneckers; she was desperate to get out of there before the service let out.

The service ended and people filed out of the three arched doorways. What they saw at the bottom of the stairs was the boy who had been yanked out of church during the sermon, the one who had yelled out, “Mom, don’t beat me,” standing against a police car, his shirt stained with blood, and at his side, the mother who dragged him out in the middle of the sermon.

After we regained access to the car, and just as my mom started the engine, the speedometer needle went berserk. Muscle memory kicked in and she beat her fist against the dashboard like she was trying to win me another carnival prize.

*Kill the pig!*

*Cut her throat!*

*Spill her blood!*