

# The Chamber Four Fiction Anthology

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Outstanding Stories from the Web 2009/2010





# **The Chamber Four Fiction Anthology**

Outstanding Stories from the Web 2009/2010

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# Introduction

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This anthology took shape over the course of many discussions about the short fiction being published online. With an ever-expanding world of fiction on the Internet, we wanted an easy way to find the best stories. If only someone would compile the many great short stories appearing for free online, and make them available in a number of ebook formats so that we could read them wherever and however we wanted, on any device. As we kept talking, it became obvious that this was a job for Chamber Four.

In this collection, you'll find traditional, Carver-esque stories alongside magical realist tales of teleportation. A chronicle of the social awakening of young mothers in a New York apartment building appears beside an existential horror story about a new bed. These stories take place in America, in Ukraine, in Africa, on a sheep ranch, in a nudist colony, and inside a poet's head as an extended daydream about Liz Phair. Some are traditional in form and some are dazzlingly experimental, some are long pieces that slowly pull you in and some are single-page punches to the solar plexus.

Some of these authors you've heard of, read about, and discussed with your friends; others you'll be discovering for the first time and can be sure to see again. We found these stories in magazines with long histories and on sites that belong to the post-millennium eruption. There is no factor that unifies the pieces collected here beyond their availability online and that hard-to-define but unmistakable hallmark of quality. The stories we selected are as diverse as the Internet,

as wide in scope as all literature, and each true to their shared subject: the attempt to reconcile our world to the struggles of the human soul.

The result is a collection of stories we have read and enjoyed since our website has been up and running, and we offer it freely to readers everywhere. This collection is not a definitive “Best of,” because, as much as we read, we couldn’t claim to have covered everything. Instead, think of The Chamber Four Fiction Anthology as a mixtape, a gift slipped into your hand in the hallway between classes by a friend who insists, “Trust me: You’re gonna love this.” But you can skip freely between stories, reading in any order you choose, so maybe a mixtape is an outdated metaphor. Call it a CD, then, burnt on our desktop with tracks from all over the world of music. But a CD? Who’s going to know what that is in ten years? It’s our playlist, then, our “cloud,” our what-ever-will-come-next. These are the stories we have read and enjoyed and now press upon you, insisting that you read them.

Trust us: You’re gonna love this.

—Michael Beeman, and the rest of Team C4

# Liz Phair and the Most Perfect Sentence

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by Andrea Uptmor  
from *Hot Metal Bridge*

It always starts with me getting hit by a car. I am walking along the edge of the road, scuffing my sneaker on the curb. I am in a funk. My shoulders are slumping in a sort of what's-the-purpose-of-anything posture. Maybe I got another rejection letter at the post office, or the grocery store declined my credit card. No, scratch that—I did get groceries. Yes, I am carrying them, and in fact, a pair of apples flies into the air upon the enormous impact, blocking out the sun in two distinct spots like a reverse domino. It is a very sunny day. When I hit the ground, I break something—an arm, an ankle—and I hear it crunch. The driver of the car gets out and runs to my crumpled body, pieces of blonde hair twisting behind her like prayer flags in the wind. She looks down at me.

It is Liz Phair.

Her face blocks the sun completely, and thus she is shrouded in a nimbus of holy yellow light like a William Blake revelation angel. Her beauty commands a profound silence over all of the elements. The wind stops, the traffic falls mute. Then Liz Phair says, “Oh fuck,” and the world begins to spin again. White bone is sticking out of my arm or ankle. A bus has run over the rest of my groceries, smearing peanut butter as if the pavement was toast. I am not in terrible pain. I watch her panic. I have never thought Liz Phair would be the kind of woman to wear a hoodie. It is faded green, softer than kittens.

She takes me to the hospital. She curses the whole way. She is Liz Phair. The radio is off when she helps me into the

car, and at first I am surprised that she was not listening to something hip and indie when we encountered one another on the road, something Michael Penn-esque, not the album stuff but maybe a bootlegged acoustic show in a small venue, but as she pulls out in front of a truck and rolls down her window to call the driver a cum dumpster, I realize Liz Phair is like me. She does not listen to music in the car. She uses long drives to talk aloud to herself about the nature of all things. That is why she is so wise. My arm is beginning to throb, and I grip the seat. She curses again and accelerates. We are moving together through the summer streets in this silent car, zipping toward the Emergency Room, Liz Phair and me.

The doctor tells me he must re-fracture my arm with a large hammer-like device. Liz Phair curses. She has a fear of blood, and of bones sticking out of skin, but she has stayed by my side this entire time, pausing her steady stream of foul language only once, to ask me what my favorite book is. When she asked that, back in the car, her eyes darted down my body for just a second before returning to the road. I told her it's Tolstoy's *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*. She squinted at the road for a long time, like she was confused, before she finally said, "Mine too."

At first I think she is being so attentive because she is worried about me pressing charges for getting run over, but as the doctor touches my arm and I cry out in pain, she grabs my unbroken hand and looks down at me, head eclipsing the examination light, face haloed by stainless steel and tiled ceiling, upper lip shaped like a rainbow, and I see the truth—Liz Phair has fallen in love with me today.

There are a lot of different first kisses. In one, I can imagine it happening right there, in the emergency room, at the same time my arm is re-fractured. Liz Phair touching her rainbow mouth to mine at the exact moment of the crunch,

so my mind explodes in a fountain of dopamine and adrenaline and serotonin. But I also like thinking that it's in a more quiet, private setting. Maybe she walks me to my door that first night, after bringing me home from the hospital. Maybe it's not for a couple of weeks, after several tension-filled nights sitting side-by-side on my couch, watching *Project Runway* episodes, until finally she gets up the nerve to put her hand on my knee and I just go for it. Either way, no matter the circumstances, it is totally ideal, and afterwards she says, "You are the best kisser ever," and it doesn't sound corny at all.

Pretty soon I move into her house. We buy a yellow couch. We adopt two cats. We throw dinner parties and watch *Top Chef* and carve things into the tree in our backyard. Our beautiful oak, in our beautiful backyard, big as the ones in my childhood. We make love under that giant oak, and afterwards we smoke cigarettes like teenagers. Liz Phair loves my writing. She leaves insightful comments on my blog and asks me to read my stories to her at night. I read them in funny voices, and popcorn shoots out of her mouth when she laughs, shoulders shaking, her butterscotch hair slick from the bathtub. My parents love Liz Phair. They are proud of me for not bringing home another unemployed guitar player. Her parents are dead at this point, so I don't have to worry about what they would think. But sometimes she tells me about them, how they were kind and good and even though I am fifteen years younger than Liz Phair, and a girl, and I only weigh 103 pounds, she swears they would have loved me because all they ever cared about was her happiness, and with me, she is content like a golden eagle who swooped around the skies for years before finding its one true mate. One time when she says that, she is holding our cat Johnny, and the moon sneaks in the window and wraps the both of them in a thick yellow fuzz of air. I write a poem about this fuzz of air,

and I wrap her sandwich in it the next day.

Liz Phair and I like to go on long walks, and we like to drink beer in pubs. Her son joined the Peace Corps and got sent away to Zimbabwe, so we don't have to deal with him much, and her ex-husband got remarried and then he surprised us all by also joining the Peace Corps. So it really is just the two of us, Liz Phair and me, taking long autumn walks along our neighborhood, hand-in-hand, my arm healed completely, bone tucked back inside. We crunch piles of ochre leaves with our sneakers and tell each other stories about our childhoods. Sometimes we pass some of my ex-girlfriends and they get this look of misery on their faces at seeing what they missed out on. Liz Phair tells me about car trips to the muggy Florida beaches while I describe strawberry cupcakes on my grandmother's front porch, white wicker furniture and ice-cold lemonade. That reminds her that lemonade was her favorite childhood drink too, and she stops right in the middle of the sidewalk to stand on her tiptoes and kiss my forehead. When she leans back, I look at her. Puffs of fall breath burst out of her mouth. I see that Liz Phair really is bathed in a glow that is separate from any lighting source I can find in the physical world. Pre-winter trees scissor the sky behind her head—a purple sky, with a big orange sun. It is not a glow that I have ever seen anyone in before. I cannot think of a word to describe it, my first time ever.

At first it is just a rough patch, a few weeks sitting in front of the blinking cursor, but by Thanksgiving I have full-on writer's block. I can only pace the hallway and peek in to Liz Phair's guitar room to see what she is up to. It is always something genius. Everything that comes out of Liz Phair's mouth is genius. She has a way with words, and a warbled voice that infuses her songs with a vulnerability that I can never seem to capture sitting at my desk in my room. All of my stories are gone. Sometimes I am able to hit a stride, just

briefly, and the words flow out of me. But they puff into the air and down the hall, where they collide with Liz Phair's new song like a 103-pound frame being taken down by a Mazda, and they fall, defeated, to the rug.

First it is Old Style tall boys, sitting with Liz Phair in a pub or at our kitchen table. I help myself to the complimentary champagne backstage at her concerts. I pour Bloody Marys into my coffee thermos. Sometimes when I get tipsy I can squeeze out a poem or two, which I scribble on sticky notes and stuff in my pocket. Most of the time I forget they are there, and when Liz Phair does my laundry, they come out illegible, little yellow clouds that fall apart in my hands. These are the good days. It is December now, and the city we live in is covered in a thin layer of ice. It buckles under my feet and the cracks race along the surface. I have not gotten published in months and honestly, if Liz Phair wasn't my life partner, I wouldn't have any money at all. At first it is easy to wash this thought away with a tall, foamy stein of Newcastle. Soon, though, the image of me as the red-carpet sideline, the K-Fed to her Britney, has penetrated my brain, filled the empty pockets and spread its plaque to even my most basic mental formations about the small things in life. I yell at the weatherman on television for being an incompetent forecaster of truth. When he doesn't respond I holler at the cat for doing cat-like things. I find myself rinsing this emotional plaque more often until the steins become 32 oz. plastic Slurpee cups, thermoses of vodka, and finally, my lips wrapped around the neck of a bottle of cough syrup.

On New Year's Eve, Liz Phair buys me a car. We are supposed to head out to go to this party, and I have been drinking wine while she got ready. I should feel happy about this car. It is a Prius, and I have always wanted a Prius. And I am full of wine. But I don't have the money to buy Liz Phair a car, and the book I should have written by

now is still a scattered Word document with lots of misspellings. Also, she is so much prettier than I am. I have realized this lately, when we brush our teeth side-by-side in the mornings. She has blue eyes, and firm calves, and her teeth are perfect rectangles. I want to thank her for the car, but something inside of me is triggered. Liz Phair with her perfect songs and her perfect skin and her Toyota Prius. I say she shouldn't spend her money so frivolously—no, I use the word sluttily—even though that's not an adverb, I make it so. I show her who is the writer here. She is hurt. I can see it in her eyes. Her blue eyes fill with tears. I take the keys and drive off, swerving down the highway with a bottle of Merlot in between my legs and nothing on the radio. When I call from jail, she answers the phone on the fourth ring. She picks me up and I ride in the front seat, silently, thinking about how the first time I got in this car, my bone was sticking out of my arm, but this time—stars smearing past the windows, her pronounced jaw clenched—this time, it hurts so much more.

That spring she is recording a new album. It is genius. When she is home, she sits in the sunroom with her guitar and whispers lyrics as she strums. She starts spending more and more time in the recording studio. I drink beer in bed and re-read Tolstoy's dream where he is lying on a pillar, looking up into the infinity above and shaking in fear of the abyss below. "Why do I live?" he writes. "What is the purpose of it?"

"I don't know," I tell the paperback in my hands. "I used to think the purpose was writing, and then I was positive it was Liz Phair, and now I think I don't know anything, nothing at all."

A month later her handsome producing partner picks her up at night and she rides away with him in his car to the studio. I catch a glimpse of her through the bedroom window.

She is laughing inside his car. They are listening to terrible music, Coldplay even, and as they drive away Chris Martin's cocky vocals hop through the yard and smack me in the face. I pass out and dream of yellow couches being shredded by Prius-sized cheese graters. When I wake up in the morning, sunlight pushes in the window and hits the crushed beer cans like broken glass. It's my worst nightmare: Liz Phair did not come home last night.

I look at her side of the bed. I sniff her pillow. It smells like Liz Phair when she has not showered in a day. The smell is my favorite. It tickles up my nose and pours back down out my eyes. I let it happen. I realize it's strange how I have not cried in all these months. I did not even cry when my bone was sticking out of my arm. Not when Johnny had to be put to sleep because he swallowed a bottle of Liz Phair's expensive cologne, not when Shirley MacLaine died in that movie. I always felt strong and brave. But why? I sit up, sniffing. I realize something. The words, like, hit me in the face. I grab the closest piece of paper—a 7-11 receipt—and I scribble them down. I use Liz Phair's Cover Girl Outlast eyeliner. The paper surrenders in my hands, wilts against the power of my masterpiece.

I have done it. I have written The Most Perfect Sentence.

Outside, at this moment, the clouds submit to sun and the yellow beams of it course through the windowpane, highlighting everything in the room—our bed, pillows, stacks of records—but mostly the sacred seven words I hold in my hands.

I read the sentence out loud, slowly at first. The particles in the sunbeams dance like glitter. I read it again. My tongue and lips unite in a way that is most perfect, almost as holy as a Liz Phair kiss. I have perfected language, and I am not even drunk. There is only one thing to do. I fold the receipt and

tiptoe out to the driveway. I leave it on Liz Phair's car, tucked under the wiper.

She does not come home for four days.

It does not rain. The sentence performs sit-ups under the pressure of the wind and the wipers but does not move. April 6, 7, 8, 9. Those are the days she is gone.

The ghost of Liz Phair is everywhere in the house. I hear her music in my head, I think I hear her footprints on the hallway floor. At night I wonder if I can hear her breathing. I dial her cell phone seven times a day. The first time she answers she tells me not to call back, that she needs time to think about all sorts of things, like the purpose of life and her new album. Other times she does not answer the phone. I take out all the beer cans and the wine bottles and I put them in the trash out back. I do Liz Phair's laundry, pressing her soft green hoodie to my nose. I paint the living room a cool lavender. I write poems about all of this, which I print and stack neatly in binders. I put them in manila envelopes and send them away to magazines. I think about praying. On the fifth day, I walk to the grocery store and put apples in my basket.

While I am at the store, Liz Phair finally comes home. Her handsome producing partner drops her off. I begin to walk back along the leaf-lined street. I think at this point it's helpful to imagine this scene from an aerial view, with the streets stretching out like an arcade game and me and Liz Phair are like Pac-Men, little dots moving along the lines. We do not see one another, but as we move closer, our bodies begin to pick up signals the other's give off; our auras are magnetic, they are pulling us together and we do not even know it. My stomach growls a bit, her palms feel tingly.

She notices the white slip of paper on her car. She picks it up and unfolds it. Her eyes move back and forth over the

words—once, twice, then four times. The sunlight catches the tear that begins to form in her eyes. She turns to the east and begins running. She can feel my energy vibrating from the store down the street. She follows that. The two Pac-Men move along the sidewalks, getting closer and closer. A sudden breeze quivers the trees. She grabs a skateboard from a neighbor's yard and skates down the middle of the road, knees bent, arms to the sides. Her hood slips over her eyes and for a brief moment, the neighbors marvel at Liz Phair, skateboarding down the middle of their street, looking just like the cover of her first album.

It ends with me getting hit by Liz Phair on a skateboard. I fall, and the two apples fly into the sky upon impact. She looks down at me and curses. I stand up. She is Liz Phair. She is four inches shorter than I am, but standing on the skateboard, we are almost even. She looks me in the eyes. A leaf falls from the tree and skitters the side of my cheek, drifts to the ground. I catch my reflection in a car window and notice for the first time that I too have a glow about me, all around my face.

# Eupcaccia\*

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by Angie Lee  
from *Witness*

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*\*From Kobo Abe's The Ark Sakura, trans. Juliet Winters Carpenter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 7-8. "[On this] Island (the insect's native habitat), eupcaccia is the word for "clock." Half an inch long, the insect is of the order Coleoptera, and has a stubby black body lined with vertical brown stripes. Its only other distinguishing feature is its lack of legs, those appendages having atrophied because the insect has no need to crawl about in search of food. It thrives on a peculiar diet—its own feces. The idea of ingesting one's own waste products for nourishment sounds about as ill-advised as trying to start a fire from ashes; the explanation lies, it seems, in the insect's extremely slow rate of consumption, which allows plenty of time for the replenishment of nutrients by bacterial action. Using its round abdomen as a fulcrum, the eupcaccia pushes itself around counterclockwise with its long, sturdy antennae, eating as it eliminates. As a result, the excrement always lies in a perfect half-circle. It begins ingesting at dawn and ceases at sunset, then sleeps till morning. Since its head always points in the direction of the sun, it also functions as a timepiece."*

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The row of mailboxes in front of Tewa Trailer Park in Tesuque, New Mexico, reads from left to right: W.C., Mr. & Mrs. Chicken, Joy Vanderloo, T. J. Apodaca, Santi Chun-Mogul, the Orcistas, Esquibels, Benscooters, Justice, and E. Eagle. An "E-normous" and wholly intact spiderweb extends from the plastic lip of W.C.'s receptacle and connects to the corner of a cinder block several feet away. Shoved inside the cinder block's cool arches are the spider's previous attempts to conquer the distance, balled-up practice sessions of dry, white discharge. At least a million fire ants roam the park, slinging gravel, dead ants, and food. The surrounding yellowed soil is stained with miles of their invisible language. Sagebrush, chamisa, and other brittle-stemmed shrubs bend upon contact and perfume the air, but otherwise the flora

shows no signs of change from season to season. Only E. Eagle's mailbox, swaybacked and half ajar, gives an indication of the passage of time. The mail carrier stacks E.'s weekly magazine, sheathed in black plastic, on top of his box, and since E. Eagle collects his mail but once a month the pile-up is a good indication how far into the month it is. On the Chickens' mailbox, the letters "+Mal" have been scribbled on the face in a harried stroke, as though something special would fail to be delivered if written any slower. The Chickens' box, as well as the Benscooters', is missing the red flag for outgoing mail.

Beyond the Chickens' trailer park is an empty lot that marks the beginning of what locals call "Auto Row," where what started several years ago as one store selling leather conditioner and piñon-scented car freshener gradually turned into an entire community of auto repair and auto parts/junk shops. By order of his mom, the neighborhood is off limits for Malchicken, even though she secretly lusts after all of it—the whole eight blocks from Roget's to Sven's—for she knows every man there is wearing a jumpsuit. Each shop along the Row has a different animal mascot, and a fierce competition takes place thirty feet above ground, in neon. Roget's badger wears a black beret, and he's smoking an unattached mouse's tail in one hand and strangle-holding Marson's little mouse head in the other. Every time the badger pumps his biceps, the mouse's bent whiskers light up in sequence. Malchicken's dad used to say the proximity to Auto Row was a good thing, and that the lights were there to make ordinary days seem like holidays. His mom used to argue that it was so bright she could see the screws coming down on the lid of her coffin.

The buzzing from Roget's neon sign stings the back of Mal's head, just underneath the wide cup of his skull. A similar tone comes out of the television speaker when Malchicken's

mother shuts off the DVD player but forgets to power down the TV. The screen turns gray, and the letters DVD appear in main-frame-green, matching hue to tone. Malchicken doesn't have to be in the room to know it's on. The two sounds together make his skin feel like it's being pulled off in sheets.

Recently, Marson's Lube and Oil has installed a new neon sign in which his French mouse, donning an apron and smoking a thin cigarette, is clubbing poor Roget's badger with a rolling pin. The fall of the badger in lights is beautiful to watch—a crumbling arc of green and brown dotted with droplets of blood—but the real treat is watching the three doughnut-shaped puffs of dirt rise as the body collapses on the ground. Malchicken has heard that Marson originally wanted the badger to fester into little shapes that curled into croissants, but the sign company said it was too difficult. Though Malchicken loves the new sign, he's harboring the hope Roget will fight back with something better, if not a little quieter.

Using the same kind of rolling pin as the mouse, Mal has created in the kitchen a miniature city made of puff-pastry cylinders. As heat penetrates the structures, the layers of dough will rise to towering heights with anally plumb walls, barring any shortcomings in craftsmanship. The Chickens' oven does not have a light and as the pastry swells, the glass steams over, preventing even the faintest glimpse of how the construction is going inside. On the bottom of the window is etched the word PERMA-VIEW, and the glass is cracked from top to bottom which produces a fragment the shape of New Hampshire. *Or Vermont*. Mal can't quite remember the ditty he learned from Lennie the Online E-tutor at school about how to tell the two states apart. Which one points up and which one points down. Sealed tight inside the turrets of puff pastry, Malchicken has installed a savory stew made of chicken and beans. It's wet-battered and egg-glazed so the

surface will finish on the rich side of amber, the girly side of brown. Though he's added a few cherries for color, he knows at the end of the line the stuff is going to come out brown. The bowel end of the line. The brown end. *Auto-chromatically*. Brown, brown, brown. And now he's got the mini camera to prove it. It's regal, *it's pizzazz*, the way it works, and real spirit-fueling.

At the sound of a hiss in the oven, Malchicken begins to fret. He knows the sound is telling him that liquid inside the pastry is drilling its way outward and falling to a carbonized hell. It's a sign of shoddy workmanship. Working with previously frozen chicken parts and dried beans, it's hard to control the moisture. The hissing may also be a wicked ploy taunting Mal to open up the oven door—*do it do it do it*—a reckless action that will release the heat trapped inside and end in disaster. It's a bread-knife-to-the-sternum type of experience, the hissing, the wanting to know, the splintery edge of sawed bone. His best bet is to leave the kitchen and let the baking run its course, to retreat to his room's darkness, disturbed only by a lukewarm moon. Setting the egg timer, which sounds out each painful second, on the sill, Mal pulls open the curtains, spraying beads of condensation diagonally across the glass. Mal takes a shy finger to the window, outlining shapes and cross-hatching them in with fat little squiggles. Freshly moistened dust tickles his nose. The bleating of the egg is steady.

Malchicken takes his head to the pillow, unbuckling his pants as he reclines. By the side of his bed there's a wire he can pull which causes a mobile hanging above his head to spin. His body is a doughy exaggeration of an obese child. Born without the well-sectioned Chicken neck, Mal's head-to-torso slope makes him a true pyramid-shaped American, according to FDA standards. Golden brown hair from his long pin head graces the tops of his shoulders where the tips

bounce with princely charm. His wads of fat are segmented and move independent of each other, colliding to form peaks and valleys. The color of his skin is that of un-fired porcelain with undertones of scarlet and lavender. Next to his skin the threadbare fabric of his underwear appears velvety, sophisticated, and magical in hue.

With a yawn, Mal rolls over and pulls out from under the bed a jimmy-rigged little VCR and B/W monitor. The two are connected to each other via a fat black cable that he fondles awkwardly. The video he's about to watch is a Malchicken masterpiece. It was shot using a mini self-leveling camera now tucked away inside a flannel pouch he keeps on his nightstand. The camera's original use—fastened to a metal skid and attached to 200 feet of cable through which was pushed twelve gallons of water per minute from the back of a Santa Fe County sewer truck—was to go headfirst into clogged sewer systems and record the journey into darkness. Mal considers sending the camera into the kitchen to peer into the oven and laughs. He would be single-handedly responsible for improving the camera's worldview. *It's perspective. From poop to pastries.* He cups his head between his hands and sets the video to *Play*. Seconds pass before an image comes into focus.

\* \* \* \*

The Chickens' septic system had always been a "ball breaker," and the way it "worked" had all three of them practicing the ancient art of inhalation and retention before crossing the threshold. Even without the contributions of Mr. Chicken over the last few years, the tank "kept its own way of thinking," and Mrs. Chicken tried everything (short of liquefying the load before sending it down, and Malchicken had to

threaten her with a kitchen knife before she conceded to let go of the blender) to keep the flow moving. She learned how to tighten up a loose-lipped plunger, and the importance of a flexible rod. Again and again she replaced the water-stained poster behind the seat showing two hands clasped in prayer and the words “Easy Does It” written underneath. Yet still the rebellious commode had difficulties swallowing, and a string of plumbers started coming up the aluminum steps of the Chicken trailer, until one by one they started to stay—later and later—until they showed up at breakfast taking their coffee black and their toast dry, their rolls having been slickly buttered all night.

For Malchicken, it was bad enough to hear the snide comments making the rounds—from plumber to car mechanic to casino dog—that the jobs at the Chicken trailer paid double time because there was more than one hole to plunge. It was crazy enough to notice how the shirt his mother wore in the mornings had an embroidered name on it that was not similar to the embroidered name affixed to the jumpsuit the stranger in the house was wearing, not similar as in *not* like Richard is to Dick or Jonathan to John. It was creepy enough to see the same stranger clang knife to fork as his mother offered to pack him a lunch, placing two fruit rolls, a soda, a de-crusted sandwich, and an oversized piece of dessert into a used paper bag that was so soft and worn it made no noise as she opened it up. She would pause, one hand holding the bag while the other yanked open drawers, to find a little something, a knife, a bottle opener, a wooden spoon, anything with some kind of durable value, in the hopes that the plumber would have the conscience to return it, along with himself, later that evening. It was depressing enough to watch his mother take the green keno pencil she’s saved all these years from the Chickens’ honeymoon in Vegas, its point a massive halberd in her hand, and cross off the listings for plumbers,

carving ruts through *poultry*, *printing*, *qigong* and whatever else followed the letters *P-L* in the big yellow book. *But no*. What really battered Malchicken's drummettes, what really dusted his marbles, was that his mother didn't think the self-leveling camera was worth paying for.

Sure she'd open up the coffers for the extra pressure, the repeat thrusts and sleek flow-through mechanisms, but when they asked if she wanted to capture the underground tunnel on videotape she told them she had seen enough crap. "What's to see anyway?" she'd ask. "Just get that can moving." Unlike Mal, she didn't care to see if what was coming in was going out.

One evening while his mother had gone to her room to freshen up, Mal asked a sour-mouthed plumber whether he had ever used one of the little sewer cameras. Without answering he demanded, with short tommy-gun exhalations, to know who told him to ask. When Mal didn't say anything the plumber grabbed Mal by the back of his neck and demanded to know where Pop Chicken was.

"I know about these things, and *whoa*, just tell me if I'm gonna have to get my fists ready."

"?"

"*Whoa*. Watch me."

"..." Mal shook his head.

"If your old man comes through that door tonight, watch me if I don't knock him flat."

"..."

"I'm not going to play no tool."

"He's not," Mal muttered, squirming.

"If he does tonight, I'll do him."

"Not coming."

“Dead flat. You hear?”

“...” Mal shrugged.

“*Whump.*”

“...”

“*Wham.*” The plumber placed a fist softly on Malchicken’s chin.

“...”

“*Too-nite.*” The plumber repeated, angling his head repeatedly toward the bedroom. He let go of Mal’s neck and moved his hands until they held him by the sides, and with his giant palms he pushed the tips of Mal’s shoulders inwards. There was a hint of a massage. So slight, Mal had to unclench his stomach in order to discern whether it was real. The plumber kept rubbing and said, “I know about those cameras. Oh...I know. Let me tell you what happened last time I had a run in with an angry husband. It wasn’t...heh, heh, surprise, surprise...” and now a wry chuckle passed through his lips, “due to any mis-plunging of my own.... No... It was only that I was doing my job too well.”

“...”

“See, I had gotten a house call, and I show up with my high-tech video *thee-ruster* ready to *visualate* the stubborn blockage. Here I was showing my customer the clarity and detail of the flexy-cam *thee-ruster* as we’re going down his pipe. It’s a beauty! But, a few feet into it, just as we get a rhythm going, *WHUMP*, the camera stops.”

“Clarity and detail,” Malchicken repeated.

“We look into the monitor, right, and it was awful clear what it was. Clear as day, and I swear to you the bastard looked yellow, and I know how the picture here’s only black and white but there it was...yellow.”

“Yellow.”

“Sure as heck that bastard was clogging the pipe, along with a shitload of hair, and not far from it was the little foil package it came in. Came in.... Ha ha. It was a...you know...” the plumber snarled, using a gesture with two fingers to encircle his groin. “One of them lubed pups. Rib-bed.”

The plumber finished the pantomime and his hands went back to Mal’s neck. Mal felt seasick and embarrassed and he started giggling, as if a skit intended as slapstick had knocked an old lady down and she was writhing in pain.

“You get my joke, do you?” The plumber laughed. “It was a clear I.D. And from the look on my customer’s face, *whoa*, I could tell right away the *’lil bastard* had not been a mutual purchase in this household, meaning husband and wife had not selected that piece of family planning together.”

“...” Malchicken swallowed hard.

“He stared at me and said ‘motherfucker.’ I tried nosing the blockage some more. The bastard wasn’t budging. He said to me ‘Motherfucker that fucking motherfucker.’ I said it sure looked like one. Yup. He said ‘Motherfucker it’s...I...I don’t...I don’t...no, not me. No, no, no, no, no. One does not make an ass out of me. Motherfucking cocksucker.’ I kept my nodding. So then the guy calls up his wife who was in a meeting so he leaves her this sweet little message about how there had been an emergency and could she come home at once. After that he hung up and started whacking himself with the phone. Like this. In the head. *Blap*. Then he got tired of that and hurled it into the bathtub. The batteries went flying everywhere and he went and pitched them one by one into the bedroom.”

“...”

“Motherfucker comes back to the bathroom and takes me by the neck. Here, like this,” the plumber said, swinging Mal around and locking one arm around his neck. “And he

screams, ‘Bitch! You’re dead bitch! Dead, you hear? Bitch, you’re dead!’”

Mal gagged and tried to pull away from the plumber’s chest.

“And he kept going on, like this, saying, ‘You’re so dead! Bitch!’ And so I...” The plumber released the pressure around Mal’s neck, and reversed the set-up by grabbing Mal’s arm so that it went around the plumber’s own neck. “Here, pretend you’re him and you’re strangling me. Come on, harder. Pull.” His fingers prodded at Mal’s arm to get him to tighten his grip. “Come on, harder...yeah, harder. So he’s trying to kill me, right? So then I had to do this....” In one move the plumber twisted around and spun out from the headlock into a position where he had maneuvered Mal’s arm behind Mal’s back and bent his own knee up Malchicken’s crotch. “To save my life,” the plumber said, breathlessly. He grumbled about how doing that move against the husband, who was much larger than him, tore his knee a little. He wiggled the hurt leg, shook his head, and then he farted.

The following morning, under a one-ply cover, Malchicken discovered the plumber’s discarded pond of man-flow in the bathroom trash. It was ripe, yellow and cautiously seeping.

When the Chickens’ toilet finally ceased all activity, not even a limp *bloop* or a minor *glug*, Mrs. Chicken grabbed her keno pencil and skipped to the end of the plumbers’ section. The minute Harold Zamcochyan’s boots struck across the living room floor, Mal started perspiring with excitement. This guy wasn’t going to fart around, literally. He didn’t blink at the sight of the water damage stains on the floor, and didn’t recoil when his steel-toed boot took a dip near the base of the toilet. Most importantly, he told the puffy-faced and flirtatious Mrs. Chicken that he was going to send in the camera

or else he wasn't taking the job. She chewed on her sleeve and considered her options. "Will it take long?" she finally asked. Malchicken stood behind her and peered at the plumber through the long "O" of his tightly curled hands. The plumber's jumpsuit was embroidered with the name "Hobie."

Before setting his knees down to work, Hobie moved aside the purple gingham toilet paper cozy and tugged at his pants several times, hooking his fingers deep into the belt loops. But, as head went to hole, the denim slipped and the curved tip of his vertical crack popped up and said *yes'm*. It was, to Mal, an impenetrable, onerous pit—and here he had to snigger—a pit probably a lot like the one the man was himself facing head on.

Without turning around, the man muttered something indiscernible; his breath rippled over the surface of the bowl like a scrunched up sheet of plastic food wrap. Mal watched the darkened wet patch on the knee of the man's pant leg spread upwards to his thighs and across towards his ankles at the same chilling rate. One of the plastic caps intended to cover the toilet's unsightly bolts had been knocked off and now floated toward him. Inside, there was something colorful resembling chewed peas and carrots, with dried clumps of hairy matter. It tried to dock on his shoe so Mal shuffled over to let it pass into the hallway. The water level was high enough to carry it over the threshold, and up and over it went. The sewer man again barked something, and moved aside invasive clumps of clotted toilet paper with the back of his hand while he prepared the cable. He had hairless, dimpled skin on his back, and—hunched over as he was—a scruff of neck-meat so large Mal thought that if at that very moment *the Tsunami* was to come into the Chicken trailer, without a doubt Mal would need both hands to grab hold of Hobie.

Three hours later—having sent in the camera, viewed footage of dense video grain, retracted the cable, and shook it near his ear several times—the plumber got off his knees and sent out a request for the two Chickens to come into the room. He spat into the bowl, sending a sheet of honey-like liquid over the edge. A dry spider scaled the edge of the crumpled toilet paper cozy and dodged in and out of sight. Mal (who had never left) poked his head into the hallway and called for his mother. She came, nearly tripping over the cheap gold molding missing a cheap gold screw, one hand lifting a sweaty lock of hair from her cheek and the other holding the prodigal plastic cap. Hobie glanced from one Chicken to the other, panning for a visual clue that would explain what was wrong with their pipe.

The Chickens looked at each other and then back at him. Malchicken leaned into the monitor and examined his reflection. Mrs. Chicken whispered “Problem?” and handed him the plastic cap. The sewer man turned his gaze into the hole and said very slowly and very loudly, as if addressing non-English speakers. “What...all did you throw down there?” In his voice was the hope that one of the Chickens would fess up to jettisoning a weird exotic baby animal or a portion of unfinished potato salad, but no go. Mrs. Chicken looked to her son for a response. Mal was busy wondering if shaking his head would be a bad answer or a good one. The plumber growled with impatience. Mrs. Chicken started to nod and then changed it to a no, and then nodded.

“Honest injun. No. Nope. Nothing. It’s just...just...well. That’s it. Just us. Down there.”

“Well,” the plumber said without conviction. “I am blasting water like the dickens through there and can’t move this thing a friggin’ inch.” He wagged the cable at them.

“Broken?” asked Mal, reaching for the camera.

“This here video camera attached here is supposed to light up and show what’s going on down there. These guys here are LED lights.”

“...”

“Look at it here, they’re on.”

“On.”

“I send it down, and they don’t work.”

“Here?” asked Mal, tracing a circle around the lights and watching the reaction on the monitor.

“It’s totally black once you get down in there.”

“Down in there,” Mal said convincingly.

“Without the lights I just can’t see what the devil is in your pipes.”

“See...*See*?” Mrs. Chicken muttered, throwing her arms up. “I just don’t know what there is to really look at.”

“And there’s nothing that’s moving it. I keep hitting it, **HARD.**”

“Hard.”

“Three hundred pounds of torque on this skid.”

“Hard,” Mal repeated, spinning the camera.

“Penetrating nozzle with thruster jets.”

“Thruster jets.”

“And two thousand pounds of water per square inch and I can’t move your matter?”

“Moof.”

“Christ, you’re an annoying kid.”

“Moof.”

“...”

“...”

“If you really need to see...”

“...”

“I’ve got a flashlight in the kitchen,” Mrs. Chicken said.

“Swell.”

“How about some coffee?” she asked, tucking the sweaty lock behind her ear.

The plumber grunted. “Great. That should really teach this toilet a lesson.”

“It’s decaf,” Mrs. Chicken whispered, placing a proud hand on her hip.

“Christ.”

“...”

“...”

“Is that a yes?”

“Lady, what did you throw down there?”

“I told you. Nothing. It’s just us. And besides, I don’t know what there is to *see*, really.”

“Shit.” The plumber replied, unscrewing and tossing the LED self-leveling camera into the corner.

\* \* \* \*

Mal’s video begins with a ridge of soft bumps that form the letter *M*. The camera then backs up until it’s obvious there are teeth on both sides and the hot presence of a tongue. Retreating further, it passes lips and emerges into broad daylight to move up the greasy length of a nose. The lens tickles the tips of eyelashes and stares down an unflinching eyeball. Then Malchicken’s whole face appears, alongside its reflection in a mirror; chin-to-chin, there’s a

tantalizing view up all four nostrils. His face goes through surprise, happiness, anger, confusion, frustration, and contemplation. Look—here's his mother, a slanted doorway, and a hand goes up to block her face. Out in the living room, there's a matchstick swizzled in candle wax and a partial fingerprint marring a photograph of a large crowd cheering a car race. The velvet backing the photograph is the darkest black there is. Suddenly there's a hot flash of fluorescence, followed by an examination of the faceplate of the light switch, its screw heads perfectly vertical. Droplets of moisture define a half-destroyed spider's web, shown with the light on and then off. On. Off. On. A painful minute focused on the spider's leg, jerky, electric, disco.

A close-up of something sways like a worm, and when the camera pulls back it's a loose thread from the elastic cuff of Mrs. Chicken's shirt. The tulip pattern on the fabric. Suddenly the camera is jerked as if hit by something hard; it's Mrs. Chicken's rings as her hand wraps over the camera's head. Mal's hand peels hers away. The camera tumbles to the ground.

The latch of the bathroom door going in and out looks like a darting fish. The cheap gold molding still looks cheap in black and white. Inside the bathroom, there are mineral deposits clinging to the showerhead, the bleached corner of the bathtub where the soap lives and slowly decays, dark patches of grout between linoleum squares from spilt iodine or hair dye. There's a tangled wad of hair near the corner of the tub where the caulking is riddled with spots of mold. Up near the lunar surface of the ceiling, there's a vertiginous moment where the self-leveling camera wheels around violently, followed by a millisecond flash of Malchicken's face, off balance.

A crack running along the bottom of a picture frame merges into the etched image of a perfume bottle and its

pebbled aromatzizer. Below is the scribble of the artist's signature, and then a high-contrast shot of the angle between the back of the frame and the nail holding it to the wall. From there, the camera moves to the toilet paper cozy and peers through the veil of its lace waistband to the bathroom window and the stippled Tesuque sky framed inside. An image of the sink draining (stopper missing) precedes a stunningly abstract view of the raw, threaded end of the faucet and the good twenty seconds or so it takes to form a drop of water and release it. Form and release. Form. Release. Form. Release.

There's a teasing of dust from the medicine cabinet's hinges as it opens. A survey of the cabinet shelves ends in the corners where the vinyl shelf-liners bunch up and no longer stick to anything. The mercury in a thermometer reads well below 98. A quick zoom shows a tube of toothpaste called NUMSALVE, its lower half curled like a snail and its cap dinged with tooth marks. The paste, on camera, sparkles. A length of beaded chain leads to a bathtub plug and here, the camera stares up into the rush of oncoming water. The lens collides with pieces of grout before showing the H handle turned on its side. A puffy scrubbing sponge with its rope leash. A string of bubbles floating off screen. Long, tedious shots of skin, hairy and hairless, a forearm. An inventory of freckles near the navel, ten little toes refracted under water. A piece of sock lint escaping. The camera traverses hilly terrain, glides down a soft inner thigh, and exposes the poetry of pubic hairs roiling with the tide. Underwater, the self-leveling head spins, pushes against flesh, and dives bravely. There's something overhead, like a blimp, casting a long shadow. Fingers, two of them, pointing up, pointing down. There's several seconds of turbulence, a fractal burst of light, and then total darkness.

# Watchers

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by Scott Cheshire  
from *AGNI*

I've seen the Racetrack Playa for eleven years in Januarys when the desert air and ground are still forgiving. My first year here was spent with the faces one finds in clouds, with the old men, running men, the dancing men one sees in the gnarled and raised roots of arrow weed, in the arms-in-the-air surrender of the Joshua tree, in the ever-changing weathered walls of towering rock and mud. In time, they all move and fall.

My second year here on the playa, I met two others—Raymond and Sport, a gay couple, Australian. They were wandering the Americas on foot and riding the occasional Greyhound. I happened by them in my Honda as they hitched their thumbs from the roadside. We drove some, and then sat facing the sun for two days. We didn't speak much, our eyes scanning the flat ground beneath us. Some, like Ray and Sport, leave the playa and never come back. Others return for two years, three years. And some just keep on coming.

For instance, I met Thom Storme some ten years ago while staying in a near-dead Pocono resort in Pennsylvania. The kind of place crawling with menthol-breathing Keno addicts by 10 a.m. Thom was the outdoor events coordinator, and we became friendly while snowshoeing across a frozen mountain lake. That long ago morning, Thom taught me how to walk on water. And I told him about the flat world of Death Valley's Racetrack Playa.

That next January, my third year on the playa, Thom sat beside me as we watched the desert sky beyond us touch the

far away ground. Soon enough, we were five on the playa, then ten. Some years, fifteen, never more than fifteen I think. In teepees and tents, herding by the fire, some of us with little more than sunglasses and a sleeping bag.

\* \* \* \*

I remember a photo of the Valley's Mesquite Flats in an issue of *National Geographic* that I found among my father's things: a boiling ocean of violet sand, like God's blanket snapped and shaken from some sky-sized window.

My father was here in 1968 with Sharp and Carey, the first geologists to pay strict attention to the traveling rocks of Racetrack Playa. They chose thirty stones, and named them: Hortense, Crystal, Brenda, and so on. I believe there are more than a hundred now scattered across the playa. Sharp and Carey marked their thirty with grease (some with a first letter initial, others with a full name), and kept a trained eye on the movers. One season, Hortense advanced 820 feet. There are some theories—ice sheets, wind, wet clay, more wind—but no consensus. Some of these stones have accrued a somewhat quasi-celebrity/mystical status over the years for us watchers. I've seen a Hortense myself, and my heart stopped.

According to my mother, my father spotted Sharp first, then Carey, and decided that two chance encounters in Death Valley were two too many to ignore so he walked up and said hello. When they told him about the playa stones I think it must have moved some wall inside him. Apparently, my father drove west through the valley back toward California (his birth state) three days after I first showed my face. I had barely burped in this world, and the man was gone. Not gone for good, mind you, not yet. No, he came back nine days later

and told my mother about the two men he'd met in the desert. He said he'd made some friends.

\* \* \* \*

There was one year we looked and looked, and just couldn't find the rock trails. Which, in part, made all that waiting all the better. There it is, the cleanest slate. But you can bet those sun-broiled and half-ton stones, heavier and without wheels than any grand piano, will stray across the desert floor, amble, as if pushed by muscled, invisible hands. And they will leave lines trailing behind like sperm tails, like tadpole tails, like comet tails, furrowed in the hard mud, stretching six hundred, seven hundred, eight hundred feet. No footprints, man or animal, about. No surface disturbance at all, save for the rock's very own path.

A sight like this—and one stone is more than enough to make you take a seat, to fill your stomach with a guttural rush of awe. But ten stones, twenty, one for each of us standing on the bedrock grandstand summit that overlooks the Racetrack Playa—it's enough to swipe your breath. And I mean this, the lot of us staring, breathless, waiting to catch one move.

Some of us wish we might see one stir like those that jones for a ghost moment, some encounter with the uncanny. Others claim a divine will, God's handiwork. Maybe the stones are push-buttons, levers, I don't know, on/off switches in some kind of "this world" camouflage that we are simply not meant to understand, I guess.

My take—despite what they'd like to think, there's no real room for miracle in the believer's world. If anything can happen, and I mean *anything*, by God, then tell me where does one find wonder?

\* \* \* \*

My father's later trips were sporadic, unplanned. When I was twelve he was gone for six weeks. My mother said, "Your father went for a drive." Sometimes years would pass by before he drove out west again.

When I turned fifteen, my father left for the desert and was gone for three months. And I held no resentment for the man. Instead, I developed a second image, a brain-secret version of my father that involved monk's robes, sandals—just him, the sun and, for some reason, a battery powered eight-track player. I imagined Gregorian chant as he cooled his feet in oasis water.

My mother said, "Your father is the kind of man who needs space."

\* \* \* \*

Last January, among others, there was Thom and myself on the playa. Also, of all things, a recently disassociated Unarian woman. She confessed to giving up her faith in the second coming of an inter-dimensional Martian father—the cosmic victor who would one day return for her, and how many thousands of others, in one of Yahweh's UFOs for a starry journey to who knows where fueled by love and tie-dye. And there were two Jehovah's Witnesses, young men, brothers maybe. It was their second year and their last, they told us. They remained largely silent, but could not help revealing a terribly tiring fight in their faces. It's remarkable what we tell each other even when we say so little.

And there was Lorraine. An atheist housewife from Austin who for four years has spent one week away from her

husband and teenage children driving the deserts of California, Nevada, and Utah, her last day usually spent with us in Death Valley.

An egg-yolk blonde, the prism's perfect opposite to deep and desert sky blue, she's not at all what you might imagine a pretty housewife from Austin to be. Often severe, head bowed, Lorraine seems to be mourning someone or something. But at the first sound of her name she turns with a portrait smile, ecstatic, stiff and arctic—I almost always buy it.

The first time I met Lorraine I found her sitting on a magazine, her legs crossed, cheeks bright with sweat. She rubbed her eyes like she'd been crying. She must have heard me coming, because she cleared a smooth circle in the gravel beside her. We slept that night beside each other in the piercing wind, wrapped in overlapping sleeping bags and blankets by the fire, and we never said one word. I heard her leave the next morning, pebbles crunching as she packed her bag.

\* \* \* \*

There is very little talk on the playa. We drive the melting yellow lines of Highways 395 and 95, some from as close as Carson City, others like myself and Thom Storme from as far as this country will take us, 2,500 miles back to the eastern sea and coast.

I'm sure there are others, at other times, attracted to the more deadly days of a desert June or July, to the screaming dunes of Mesquite Flats, the wide and whopping crooked skyline of the Panamint Ranges, or the milky bruise of the salted Badwater Basin. Or maybe even yet others who favor particular holidays, Christmas in the dunes, maybe some Thanksgiving lizard. There must be others. But the first week of January—the first weekend in January, this has been my

time and some have found this time equally amenable. Sometimes they point my way and exaggerate to the others—*15 years, 20 years, he's been doing this for 30 years, and his father before him.* I once heard a kid, his forehead draped with unfortunate dreadlocks, say, “I heard it’s his land, he owns all of this.”

I told him, “Don’t be stupid,” and took my place on the grandstand.

\* \* \* \*

My friend, Thom, is the uncanny kind. For him, the experience is an agnostic one, and he will be satisfied with nothing less than a live encounter out here. He is the kind of person that hopes for the vacant chair to move, for the untouched door to slam. He loves Halloween, I know because he told me. He’s also a man born for the outdoors. He is far better equipped for this life with his backpack, bicycle, and salmon jerky than I could ever be with my Honda hatchback, usually parked in Saline not an hour’s walk behind the playa, a change of clothes and a small black and white portable television in the back seat. Thom, no longer employed by the Bella Vista resort back east, lives in a yurt just outside of Burlington, Vermont. He makes a living, I’m not sure how, something to do with rental cabins. If you asked Thom how I make mine, he would cock his head like the pug of a man that he is and say, “Now that is a good question.” Like all of us, Thom wants to see a stone tear across the playa surface like a shot pinball. One of the smaller stones would do, but of course, we all want to watch one of the big ones fly, one of the impossibles.

Point of fact: it’s never happened. Not one witness, not ever, so we wait.

Lorraine waits, she says, because she “needs” to see this happen. Maybe this has something to do with an unchecked longing for immanence, a passing over into this world, something magical. Then again, I would think this might make things even more difficult for her. Lorraine wears the right kind of jeans, and she drives me crazy. We have shared a sleeping bag for these last three years (three nights, really), and I have felt a closeness with this woman I never expected. Not but one hundred hours of history between us, and she floats beside my heart like buoy. Her tired face, her blue eyes burning like two small moons, her perfect bottom. She never says my name. Last year, we spent the night in my back seat, and Lorraine pulled me inside her as if I might pass through.

\* \* \* \*

My mother died last February at seventy-one, pancreatic cancer. I watched her disappear, fall through the sieve of her bed, until she was gone like so much sand. My mother was a woman of very few words. She asked me if I was still waiting for my father to come home.

She said, “You are, aren’t you? You expect that man to pull up some day in that horrible Ford, and park the car like nothing happened. Love, the world moves with or without you. There is no standing still.”

I told her she was wrong, and told her to rest.

“I never cared about your father,” she said. “I’m glad he left.”

I shushed her—forgive me, I wanted to press the pillow on her face till her small feet stopped shaking.

“I’ve only ever had sympathy for two kinds of people, junior—the people I love and strangers. Unfortunately, I knew your father very well.”

My mother was a beautiful woman, even as her body turned mutinous, even as her skin turned to paper, her bones stabbing at her belly. I said, “You don’t mean that.”

She said, “I think this is the longest conversation we’ve ever had.”

When I was twenty, my father, sixty-four years old, went for a final drive out west. We never spoke much about his drives. What I do know I learned from my mother, bit by bit, gathered crumbs. I guess I always assumed he would take me with him when I got older. And as the years passed, my allegiance (a far less romantic version) dramatically shifted from him to my mother; and yet I have allowed an aura of wishful immortality to mingle with his memory.

So I lay my chips with hers, the good woman who took it. She never said a false word about him. Nevertheless, I have to ask, please: where does one pay allegiance next?

When I last saw him, my father had a green plastic cooler in the front seat of his Ford wagon. It was filled with Schaefer beer. He turned the engine and asked me if I knew his middle name.

I said, “No. I don’t.”

He said, “Figured as much,” beeped the car horn and took off down our street.

Some years later, my mother said, “I think your father’s gone, dear.”

\* \* \* \*

I also remember Jasmine Yow who returned to the playa with her husband, Louis, in the years 1989, ’90, ’91. In 1992 Louis told us, those of us there that year, that his Jasmine (thirty-five!) had been shot dead by one of her junior high

students for who knows what. But before leaving us, she made him swear he would return to the desert. So he did.

Louis Yow, widower, Japanese born, wore a camera hanging from his neck on a strap as wide as a weightlifter's belt. A telescoping lens hid within its circles, an eye like a Harley's headlight. The man was a photographer, or so we guessed. We all know very little about each other, really (Thom being the exception). The late Jasmine Yow was the kind of woman that seems to blindly share her portion of beneficence. She improved my mood every time just by being here. We don't know much else. Only this: what life there is beyond, if any, has now been made lovelier.

Louis never showed his face again, probably drove home, wherever that is, with a wallpapered grin. And I bet it came unstuck, sure and slow, the closer he got to his garbage can lined curb, until it fell as he made a left into his driveway, parked, quietly clicked his car door shut and fell upon his lawn. I imagine a white stucco home jutting from the grass, where Louis lay, like some grave marker. And I see a dark-room in his basement, filled beyond capacity, developed glossies bleeding beyond the intended square-footage into bathrooms, kitchen and hall—all the echo-empty photos of the Death Valley Racetrack hanging by clothespins from clotheslines, filling the house and his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Yesterday, Lorraine and I took a walk along the playa. The flat world of the desert floor, dry and cracked, surrounded us, forming octagons and hexagons, the scaly pattern of an infinite armadillo's shell. We spotted what turned out to be a research team unloading trucks, wires and cabling just waiting to be un-spooled. An eager young man wearing a

baseball hat, whose glasses would not keep still—they kept sliding down the bridge of his nose—jogged up toward us. He tried keeping his head tilted back as he spoke, and he could not take his eyes from Lorraine. She has a beaten kind of beauty that engages you unwillingly.

He asked her, “Why are *you* here?”

I answered, but he began talking over me.

“Before long, we’ll know every move. One hundred stones. We’ll have *footage*.” He said the word “footage” as if he were referring to something pornographic. His eyes were wide, owl’s eyes, beneath the brim of his cap. His lips were pre-kiss.

“Now why would you want to do something like that?” I asked him.

He ran off to fetch one of the others, someone better informed. She was a youngish woman, toasty hair in wispy bands reached from beneath a safari hat tied under her chin. I thought of Katherine Hepburn in *The African Queen*. She waved while blocking her eyes from the sun, and shouted, “Hello there,” still fifty or sixty feet from where we stood.

“The Global Positioning System,” she explained. “This is why we’re here.”

The “system” has been fully operational for over a year now, and the damn thing sees every last move we make, as close to God’s eyes as we’ll ever get. Like the Big and Little Dipper, twinkling and mechanical stars hang above, forming a constellation of satellites that will actually, for once, tell our stories.

She was a cartographer, she said, and the young man a geologist. She said they’d heard of watchers, but hadn’t spoken with any yet, much less seen so many at once. More often, the valley is stippled with solitary creatures, shadowed

toy-men crouching small and high on a precipice. I felt a delirious need to tell her about my father, and Sharp and Carey, but this would involve telling Lorraine.

“So how many are you?” she asked.

“Maybe twelve,” I said. Lorraine was silent as usual, but she squeezed my hand as if she would collapse without it. Her left palm was over her mouth. Then she lurched forward, and regained her composure.

“Tomorrow morning,” the woman said. “First thing, we’re up and running. We have laptops—your prayers are answered. Is she okay?” she asked, nodding toward Lorraine.

I never quite saw the woman’s face completely—the sun, the droop of her hat, our hands blocking shards of sunlight and glare. All for the better, I’m sure. I have a shamefully easy access to memory, like reaching into my Honda’s glove-box where I keep Lorraine’s, forgive me, gorgeous melancholy, the rear view of Lorraine in her unflawed jeans, and every other thing that breaks my heart. If I had clearly seen the cartographer’s face, I would hate her forever.

Lorraine spoke directly to her: “Thank you.”

Her words hit me like an icy hose-thrust. I asked if she understood what was actually happening here.

Lorraine said, “Yes. What I came for.”

I motioned with my arms, as if taking the valley into my lap: “This is ours.”

Lorraine said, not so much to me but to the cartographer, that her husband had left her two months prior. Then she vomited on the sand.

Lorraine wiped her mouth, then cleaned her hands on the back of her jeans and walked toward one of the trucks. She turned and, facing me, began walking backward while waving. I wasn’t sure if she was gesturing me to come join

her, or simply waving goodbye. The trucks, I could see, were parked in a semi-circle. They were unsheathing antennas, and rigging transmission dishes in the sand.

Behind me and above the playa, the others stood stationary, watching from the grandstand. I couldn't make out their faces, they were too far off, but I could see one small arm waving in the air. It was good old Thom, I'm sure of it. The rocks stretched behind him skyward, stony fists. Points of rock like saw teeth, a bear trap's teeth, circled the horizon in the hot quivering air. I thought, is my father here? Does he waste somewhere close, sitting in his rusting Ford and watching the horizon? Is his belly sour with regret? Or maybe he's walking now, finally, in the Valley sun, his car long abandoned, making his slow way toward my mother.

On her last day, my mother said, "Junior, this is the kind of end we have to settle for, here, stinking and ugly. So better get going."

I watched Lorraine kneel and tie her boot, then disappear behind a truck. And I was overcome with love, a wash of love that almost knocked me over. It ran right through me, and I chose to move with it.

# How to Assemble a Portal to Another World

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by Alanna Peterson  
from *failbetter.com*

1. Measure the airwaves for high-intensity electric fields. Often high-traffic areas, such as tourist destinations, department stores and amusement parks, achieve the necessary frequencies, although they make the assemblage of the portal rather difficult. High-intensity veins snake beneath the earth's surface between the poles, forming a web, and if one is lucky a hole dug from the surface can tap into this network.

*He sold amethysts and other gems from a cart in the middle of the food court. I stopped at Auntie Anne's for a pretzel and he tapped me on the shoulder with his wand, smiling wide in the mandatory wizard costume. His thick fingers grazed my hipbone as he slipped a gem in my pocket. He was kind and I let him drive me home in his old taxicab. The peeled leather seats were charming and I told him so, lingering in the passenger seat while he idled outside of my apartment.*

2. Locate a high-intensity vein by measuring surface temperature. They are often found in heavily wooded areas because the excess heat creates a thriving environment for plant life. However, amateurs often mistake veins for hot springs or volcanic activity.

*He snuck me into a free show and I watched his face turn colors in the glow of the movie screen. He told me I looked like a goddess. We had sex in the woods behind the movie theatre until our bodies were imprinted in the flattened grass.*

3. Once you have located a vein, monitor the area for surveillance cameras or other electronic appliances that may disrupt the integrity of the electric field when you try to access the portal. Secure a shovel of medium weight, a number of steel beams depending on the size of the hole, and anything that can carry electric current.

*We lay there afterward and he told me what he had found. He cradled my head in the crook of his arm and I didn't tell him about the twig that was pressing into my lower back above the cusp of my jeans. He pushed a dripping curl off of his forehead.*

4. Survey topographic maps, land surveys and local geological data to familiarize yourself with the natural obstacles. Start digging.

*I started wearing his t-shirts to bed so he could see my nipples through the thin cotton but he fell asleep on the couch amid his maps and frenetic scribbles. He asked me for money, his voice desperate and deep, and I forgot about returning to community college in the fall. He would rub my neck and ask me to stand watch and I would lean against a tree, watching the fuzzy computer screens for bodies other than his.*

5. At regular intervals, test the strength of the vein with your car battery or other electronic device. The current should arc, disabling all cell phones, television sets, handheld radio devices, etc. The high-intensity veins flow beneath the earth's surface at varying depths, and so some holes may tap into the vein at a depth of six feet, while others may prove impossible without sufficient machinery.

*I scavenged flea markets and garage sales for old magnets and steel wool. I started knitting it together into a sort of chainmail with extra wire, industrial knitting needles and a screwdriver. He spoke of bodies embedded in walls, warped consciousness, the Philadelphia Experiment, a martyr's transcendent ecstasy.*

6. Reinforce the hole's walls with the steel beams. Some holes may become tunnels and so proper reinforcement is needed to support the integrity of the roof. For the portal to become active, it needs to be eased into wakefulness. Employ as many conduits of electricity as possible to divert the energy of the vein into your chosen portal space. Many travelers do this by embedding magnetic devices, discarded electronics, batteries and bits of scrap metal into the walls of a concentrated region of their hole or tunnel. Begin constructing the coverings to transform your mortal body into a part of the mosaic itself. Medieval armor and chain mail, constructed with overlaps and interlinking metal pieces to ensure full coverage of the war-

rior's skin, provide a very sound model for this construction, although past travelers have tested other methods, from weaving electrical wiring to welding car parts (the success of these methods remains unknown).

*He slipped his steel sweater over his clothes, dousing himself in water to find the leaks and openings where it seeped through to his skin. I rubbed Neosporin into the bloodied epaulets the steel wool etched into his shoulders as he stood in front of the mirror, locking his eyes on my moving hands.*

7. Do not be discouraged. Portal access is quite difficult, especially in areas with a high concentration of housing developments and power lines. Rainfall has an unexplained cleansing effect on power sources and often provides the best opportunity for transcendence. As studied travelers must know, a past period cannot be specified; the convergence of time and space differs at each vein. The essence of travel itself is embodied submission to the unknown and the inevitable.

*He was fidgety and distracted with the summer storms. I came home after work and folded my jacket carefully on the back of the couch; the iron coat hanger had vanished. I placed my keys on a clean kitchen table, the scattered papers gone and dirty coffee cups on the drying rack. Even my desk chair was gone. I wandered from room to room, drinking in his absence.*

# Seven Little Stories About Sex

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by Eric Freeze

from *Boston Review*

The boy's first French kiss was with a teddy bear. Her name was Melissa. She had blue fur, like shag carpet, two dimples for eyes, and a plastic one-piece nose and mouth. His brother told him, this is how it's done. You put your tongue in their mouth and move it around. You need to know how to do it right when you get a girl. So the boy held Melissa's head with both hands and licked the plastic slot that was Melissa's mouth. His tongue dipped down like a hummingbird darting into the throat of a flower, slurping up nectar.

\* \* \* \*

Every month, the boy had an interview with his father. His father wrote down their conversation and made a list of goals to accomplish. The father wrote, "Have homework done every day by five. Get above 90% on the next math test." And always, "Read the Bible."

Once, the boy's father talked about being in graduate school. He opened one of his mile-thick textbooks filled with diagrams and equations. His father had a pad of paper on his knees and he drew what looked like a sports play, with arrows and circles and squiggly lines. The boy moved his chair so he was looking at the shapes from the same angle. His father wrote "meiosis" in block letters, then "woman" next to a large round circle and "man" next to one of the squiggly lines. Then "sperm" and "egg." He wrote these down in no

apparent order and then he described the flagellating sperm swimming up a woman's fallopian tubes to penetrate the egg. The boy's father used many words that the boy didn't know: mitochondria, flagellum, TK inhibitors, implantation, zygote. The father drew more pictures: the egg halved, then quartered, then grew into a bunch like grapes or a cluster of frog eggs. The boy understood that this was how every human being started, the proliferation of two cells dividing. But the father forgot to explain the sex part, how the sperm and the egg got to be in the same place at the same time and so for years the boy thought the sperm flew out of the man and through the air to where it entered the woman and multiplied like cancer.

\* \* \* \*

Once the boy was on a playground. The playground had see-saws and monkey bars and a metal dome of welded triangles. The boy rode a donkey on a giant spring next to a plastic turtle. He was waiting for his mother to meet him halfway from school, like she usually did, sauntering up in overalls and sandals, her hair in a bun. Three teenage boys with black or grey t-shirts came up to him. They had chains on their pockets and their pants hung so low that their crotches were almost down to their knees. Their hair was long and un-parted.

"Do you want to see a lizard?" one of them asked.

The boy said yes. He liked lizards. He knew that their ancestors were dinosaurs and lizards reminded him of these great ancestors, their regal heads and their bones in the Tyrell museum that he had been to with his class. Yes, he wanted to see a lizard. They were rare in Alberta; in fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing one out in the wild—only in interpretive centers or zoos.

The middle teenager, the one with a silver loop splitting his bottom lip, pointed to a plastic turtle, said, "I saw a lizard go under that turtle."

The boy got off the donkey and climbed down to look. There was about a half-foot space between the gravel and the turtle, so the boy pushed some of the gravel out of the way with his hand.

The teenager said, "That's right, go all the way under and you'll see it."

The boy did as he was told and went in under the turtle. He could sit up now. The turtle's plastic shell diffused the light, making everything a pale green. "I don't see it," the boy said.

The teenagers were laughing. "Keep looking."

The boy said, "I can't see it anywhere!"

The teenagers threw rocks at the shell and the rocks made a sound like knuckles rapping a table. One said, "It's out here now. Come quick!"

The boy climbed out and the sun seemed brighter than before and he looked at the feet of the boys to see if there was a lizard winding its way through the gravel, camouflaged like a chameleon or a green anole, blending into the smoky rocks. But there was no lizard, only one of the boys with his pants even lower, and a penis hanging out of his boxers, limp and hairy.

"There's your lizard," the teenager shouted before pulling his pants back up, a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't trick, and they were off just as the boy saw his mother running toward them, angry-looking, her sandals thwacking her heels, and the boy thought, that was not a lizard, that was definitely *not* a lizard.

\* \* \* \*

Grade seven, the boy took the bus to middle school. The boy's family moved to the United States and the boy had started to learn to play the violin. The school put him in EEO: Extended Educational Opportunities. The boy still spoke Canadian; he said serviette for napkin, chesterfield for couch. Initially the boy was shy for saying these words, was embarrassed when kids would introduce him to other kids, like he was some Canadian ambassador. Two girls took it upon themselves to make him a badass. The boy had never been a badass before. One of the girls took the same bus to school. She sat one row in front of him and turned around in her seat and laid her head on her hands and asked him what it was like to live in Canada.

The boy said, "It's colder."

The girl said, "How cold?"

The boy said, "Colder than here." Then they stopped talking.

"We are going to make you into such a badass," the girl said.

The boy didn't know why, but talking to the girl was hard for him. And exciting. He had bought the jeans that the girl told him about, the ones that she said made his ass look great. He felt that this was important: a good ass to be a badass. He was glad for the jeans, too, because they were loose and when he sat down, the crotch bunched up in the front so that there was plenty of room if he got an erection. He got erections all the time now, whenever the two girls would grab him by the hands and take him to their lockers or when they hugged him between classes and he could feel their incipient breasts against his chest. And the morning. The morning on the bus was the worst. He was tired and

groggy and just the vibration of the bus would set it off. That's why, when he talked to the girl, he couldn't say much. He was wondering if she could see his erection in the folds of his loose pants, the pants that she told him to buy, the good-ass pants.

But now they were at the school and the kids were getting off the bus, shuffling past one another, wires trailing from ears into pockets, backpacks swinging, and the girl was waiting for the boy and the boy said, "I'll be there in a second," because he was at full mast now and the lack of vibration wasn't doing squat. So he picked up his violin case from where it lay at his feet. It was hard and black and plastic, shaped a little, he thought, like a penis. He held the case in front of him so that it angled up, a giant erection hiding his little one. The girl was ahead of him now and the case bumped against his good-ass jeans until he could feel the swelling starting to work its way out, and then they were moving through the glass double doors and the girl was waving to her friend and she took the boy by the hand and twirled and twirled him so that the other girl could see how good he looked in his new jeans.

\* \* \* \*

*Yanking your Yoda.* The new *Star Wars* had just come out and the boy made a fist and unclenched and held his limp penis in his hand. Poor Yoda, about to be strangled. To be a Jedi, strangle him you must.

The boy made up the phrase at a friend's house. They found a colloquial dictionary that the boys took turns reading. Masturbation wasn't something the boy felt comfortable discussing openly; for all he knew, he was the only one of his friends who yanked his Yoda day after day. But reading the

various euphemisms was somehow OK: bopping the bishop, choking the chicken, beating the meat, spanking the monkey, feeding the geese, yanking the chain, stroking the salami. The boys were prudish, came from prudish families, which made the words hilarious. Passing the book around was like what the boy imagined sharing a joint or a bottle of Tequila might be like, each new euphemism adding to their mutual intoxication.

But now the boy stood in front of his mirror and he felt a sickly guilt for the words: pounding the midget, spanking the plank, burping the worm, milking the lizard, doing the five-knuckle shuffle, cleaning the pipes, flogging the dolphin, punching the clown, siphoning the python, jerking the gherkin. The boy hoped the words would bring back that feeling of clutching his stomach, his breaths short and shallow, water in the corner of his eyes. Only Yoda made him smile now. There was something about the shape of his Jedi head, the peaked dome of it, the foreskin-like wrinkles on his face and his wispy curls like pubic hair that made the boy laugh so hard his abdomen was sore. The boy's priest had told him, warned him about his sin, the sin of Onan, self-abuse, masturbation. There were consequences. Think of every sperm as the potential for life, he said. Millions of lives wasted on the ground, spilled. Would he want those lives on his hands? Those unborn souls chasing him through eternity? It would drive him mad in the afterlife, would be like being boiled alive in his own sperm. *Boiled alive.*

The boy thought back to the first time he had jerked his gherkin. He was young, eleven or twelve maybe, his penis not fully grown. It was at night, on the waterbed that he shared with his kid brother. He had trouble sleeping, would diddle with himself out of comfort, to help the sleep come on. He remembered the feeling the first time, a great whoosh of energy from his groin permeating his body. Nothing came out

at first, no dead sperm, no souls chasing him through eternity. But gradually they came, every night, day after day, his seminal volume growing as he developed. Soon he was spurt-  
ing, had to bring a towel to bed to clean up as inconspicu-  
ously as possible, the millions of sperm rising to the top,  
following each other up and out, like lemmings diving off a  
cliff. Now he was in high school, was jerking off a couple of  
times a day, each couple spurts adding to the vat of sperm  
waiting for him in the afterlife. He tried to fix this image in  
his mind: a huge cauldron, like the ones used in Disney car-  
toons, a witch's brew where flames licked the sides and him  
roasting in there like a boiled cabbage. His penis wasn't limp  
anymore but slightly engorged. He thought of the heat, sear-  
ing heat, and his face melting like wax. His penis grew  
harder. The vat of semen was on fire, the flames engulfing,  
charring his face, and he smelled burning flesh. He was hard  
as a steel rod now and slowly, in spite of himself, his hand  
started to pump, yanking Yoda from his grave as the vat and  
all its contents went white hot and he felt himself, just for an  
instant, lifted away.

\* \* \* \*

At college, late at night, the boy and his girl made lazy  
figure-eights down landscaped medians on the way to the  
cathedral at the center of town. They were barely eighteen,  
under-aged drinkers nursing their buzz with rum and Cokes.  
The cathedral was near the top of a hill and the boy led her  
around behind. He had a Navajo blanket and she wore a  
spaghetti-strapped top and a pair of khaki shorts that barely  
covered her buttocks. Behind the cathedral was a park with  
grass and a spectacular view and it was three o'clock in the  
morning and they had been talking about how they could

spend all night together and all of the next day and the next and not tire of each other's company and wasn't that unique and great? So much more freedom than either of them had had growing up. The boy put the blanket down like he was laying a bedspread and he propped himself up on one elbow with the girl still standing and he was thinking how good she looked with the lights of the cathedral behind her and her soft cream legs and the spot on her back right above her buttocks which was the only place she had allowed him to touch freely since they had been dating these two months.

The girl lay down beside him, facing him, and she said, "What are you thinking?" Always the same question whenever they were close.

He wanted to say thinking of putting his hand between her legs because his friend Travis said that's how to get a girl hot but instead he said just how great it would be to be with you forever and the girl said that she'd been thinking the same thing. And then she looked down at the cathedral, its white lights shining up to its spires and arches, and he realized she was thinking the M-word and he was thinking sex and he wondered if talking about the M-word could get him sex if he was careful. He liked this girl, he really did, but he had a condom in his back pocket and Travis had been razzing him for a week that it had taken him so long to score.

"Here," the boy said. "You look cold."

He pulled the edge of the Navajo blanket over her and then he rolled her toward him so that she was lying comfortably in his arms and he pulled the other end of the blanket around him so they were like two larvae inside a cocoon. She put his arm around her and placed it on her stomach.

"I feel so safe with you," she said.

His hand felt like it was on fire. He had a vague idea of what was below her navel, that there was hair and a hole and

labia and moisture and so he rubbed her belly and put his index finger in her navel and wiggled it around some. Then, as if it were a power button turning her *on*, she rotated toward him and placed her hand on his cheek and opened her mouth to him. He moved his lips and let his tongue do some of the work and he tried to move his head around and brush his fingers lightly against her face like he'd seen actors do in movies. He put his hand on her shoulder blades and massaged where it met her side, just under her armpit and he slowly slid his hand over with each combination of kisses. But as soon as he felt the padded cup of her bra, she took his hand and put it on her thigh and then she rolled on top of him.

The boy was a little timid now—he didn't want to put his hands where they weren't wanted—but the girl was kissing him more earnestly and she had done a strange thing with her legs. They were parted over his upper thigh and as she kissed him, she pressed against him and she kissed him more quickly. He eased his thigh up against her crotch and her body became taut, like a tuned string. She moved faster now and his hand was on the back of her jeans and she pulled her face away from his so that she could breathe. He wanted her now, wanted every part of himself inside her and he saw on her face not desire but a look of confusion or surprise, her eyes open so that he could see the milky whites even with just the low light of the cathedral behind her. Her hair hung down and a few strands were wet and caught against the side of her face like the loop of a question mark.

Then he stopped. Abruptly he stopped. There was a firefly-sized light directly to the side of him that shook and flickered as it approached. The boy stopped and the girl smoothed his face with her hand and said, "What's wrong?" And he said, "Shhh." She rubbed his chest and bent down to kiss him and she squeezed his thigh with her legs.

“I think there’s a guy coming,” he said.

She untangled her legs and slid down alongside him and put her head on his chest just as the light licked the edges of the Navajo blanket and dazzled their eyes. “Sorry to bother you,” the man said. “I’m going to have to ask you to move.” He was gone almost as quickly as he came. He explained how it looked. The church didn’t like people making out on the lawn.

Back on the median, on the way to their dorm rooms, the boy and his girl wrapped the blanket around themselves like they were a couple of refugees. It was a while before either of them spoke. The boy was embarrassed and still incredibly horny but the girl shrugged him off every time.

Finally, she said, “we just had sex with our clothes on.” It was like the finger of God had come down and named it.

But the boy said, “I don’t think so.”

\* \* \* \*

The boy, married, seven years last April. He was lying in bed depressed. His wife lay on her side with her hand on his chest. They had failed their first round of in vitro fertilization last month and they had two embryos in storage for the next. So here they were, the failed parents, in the eye of the storm, two weeks after his wife’s period, waiting.

The boy remembered last month, the nights where he gave his wife progesterone shots. He would swab the bit of skin behind her hip bone with rubbing alcohol and push a needle through the fatty tissue and into the muscle. His wife sucked air through her teeth. Sometimes it hurt more than others. What did it feel like? There were little red pricks all over her hip after a full month of injections. Gave another

meaning to needling your wife. The boy needled her every night, “shooting up” they called it, all because the boy had problems, below-the-belt problems, whirligig sperm and too few of them.

Now, in bed, depressed, the boy thought of Dr. Zimmerman during their first meeting, before they signed the papers and froze the sperm and bought the progesterone-in-oil injections and shot up night after night.

First, the pitch: a story that Dr. Z had probably told to hundreds of aspiring parents but was new to the boy and his wife. “You don’t have a lot of good-quality sperm,” he said. Then he used a persuasive metaphor, a metaphor that the boy never forgot and then repeated word for word to his family, to his close friends, to some of his co-workers who tittered when they heard the word sperm: You are a like a one-man army trying to invade China. Sure, there is the theoretical possibility that you’ll be successful, but you would have a lot better chance if you had a whole army.

Then the stories.

The first was a couple in their forties and a man with a zero-sperm count. “Zero,” Dr. Z said. They did a sperm extraction directly from the testes and came up with five blobs of biomatter that may have been healthy sperm at some point. They injected these into the woman’s eggs and surprise! Produced two embryos. They transferred both and the woman got pregnant, gave birth to a baby boy. “The closest thing I’ve ever seen to immaculate conception,” Dr. Z. said.

The second was less optimistic. In this one, a woman was gifted with multiple eggs, a whole farm of them, extracted from her ovaries by the dozens, the Follistim hormones doing their job. Her partner had several good sperm injected one by one into the eggs, fifteen healthy grade-A embryos, three transferred for good measure, the others frozen, and

not a single take. They did it again and again, month after month and gave up after the money ran out. So, there's a spectrum of failure and success.

But for the boy and his wife, everything had been about average, middle of the bell curve. How many eggs? 10, about average. How many embryos? 5, about average. They had a forty percent chance, he knew, about average, for getting pregnant. This had made them hopeful. When his wife had her period the next month, he took a drive out into the country in the middle of a thunderstorm and cried, dripping tears and snot onto the steering wheel. Now they had another month to wait before trying again, another couple embryos on ice.

Lying there, the boy wondered if his wife was sleeping or deep in thought, dreaming perhaps like he often did about their unborn children. The idea of a child was still very abstract to the boy; he'd dreamed about his wife's growing abdomen, ultrasounds with bat-winged fetuses or premature deaths. She birthed a tow-headed winged angel, triplet boys, a body-snatcher seed pod, and once, a Popple covered in green goo.

So the boy was surprised when his wife turned and put her hand on his chest and played with the hair there. Her hands were warm, supple, like the hands of a child. She touched his stomach and the boy could feel the familiar pull in his groin, that tingling in his penis as it became engorged with blood. He wasn't sure he wanted this. There was something sad about it, desperate, like a one-night stand or a truth-and-dare game. She touched him now in earnest and he felt his hardness in her hand.

The boy was still reluctant. Sometimes when the boy was very turned on he thought of calamities like burning houses or muzzled terriers in animal shelters or dentists giving root

canals to try and push his mind from the sex, so it would delay his orgasm until his wife was coming so long and loud that it was all he could do to keep from giving in.

Tonight, he thought, dead baby, dead baby, dead baby. He started to go partly limp, like a wilted carrot. His wife pumped him for a while. Dead babies in burn barrels, dead babies in gutters, nannies pushing dead babies in prams. His wife shifted in bed, went down and kissed him from his shaft to his glans. Her entreaties were so sincere, so tender that he found himself following her lead, moving the way she wanted him to in spite of the images he had conjured in his mind. The boy heaped all the dead babies into a mound, one for every one of his whirling sperm, mouths agape, frozen in anguish, then pushed them away until they disappeared in a pinprick on the horizon of his mind. He let her pull him in on top of her and she came quickly and the boy moved, rocking and rhythmic, a man trying his best to give a woman a gift. She put her hands on his buttocks and he pushed in deeper and the woman groaned and said "oh, oh." There was a feeling of possibility and sadness to their sex. How many times had they both let themselves be duped? A couple of infertile adults, humping like rabbits to try and prevent their own extinction. The boy pushed harder, the woman groaned softly, gulping breaths of air. Infertile adults, just a couple of oversexed and baby-less yuppies in their empty home with their empty cars, walking clichés, really, humping in futility. The boy thought, Baby Gap, pastel blues and pinks, car seats, nursing bras, mobiles, Gerber, nipples sore from teething, all images in miniature like a diorama of the first two years of life. He kept these in his mind until he was groaning too and he felt his body go tight and warm for a few moments and then slack. He lay on top his wife, propped up slightly by his arms, not wanting to leave that place inside her. But she

was crying. The boy moved, shocked by his wife's depth of feeling, his wife who never cried, who only said I love you if he said it first. His wife touched his shoulder, almost pawing at it, while she wept.

And as he lay there, the boy confused yet happy, he thought how Dr. Z got it wrong. He imagined his sperm mixing with his wife's cervical mucus, struggling into her and swimming through the uterus. Over the next day millions of sperm would die, a literal genocide of his own genetic code. But one sperm would make it up to the ampullary portion of his wife's fallopian tubes where it would meet an egg, a full round egg in a nimbus of light. And that egg, in a process that nobody quite understands, would invite that one exhausted spermatozoon in, not like a warrior bent on invading China all by himself, but like a meeting between two wounded travelers, two souls who had been alone for so long, wanting to share some news, a chain letter telling the endless story of themselves, saying look, look how far we have come.

# Men Alone

---

by Steve Almond  
from *Drunken Boat*

You see them there almost by accident, through a window from a rolling car. They are at once recognizable as members of a tribe coming to believe in the absurdity of their bodies, drifting through rooms whose few flourishes, supplied by old girlfriends, now seem vindictive.

There's a TV, a phone, a few chairs. They do just enough to keep the place from ants. Afternoons, taken by a brief whimsy, they dance alone. At night they reach into cupboards for hidden sweets and make lists of things to be done the following day. They read magazines on the can, renewal cards molting the carpet. Sometimes their hands come loose and fall into their laps and dream a few minutes of women they will never see in church, a last stamp of decency worn away on the sofa nearest the window where they sleep on those certain evenings, the radiant concern of news anchors a lullaby onto them in socks. You could stare into these windows for years and not see anything essential or shocking, only the last rites of men who would pay any price to be you, and have.

# For the Sake of the Children

---

by Sarah Salway  
from *Night Train*

There's no notice on the door of the office. This is deliberate. As is its position upstairs in the shopping centre, where not many people go, tucked away between the staff entrances of Next and, like some bad joke, Mothercare.

Two security guards walk past, stop and stare at a couple leaving the office, the woman being held up by a man as she weeps openly, making no effort to mop up the tears. Blimey, says the new security guard. It's his first day, and he looks to the more experienced guard for help. "It's the baby shop," explains the other, shrugging his shoulders. Then they stroll on, a touch less jauntily, their heads bent together as they talk about how just one trip there means you could have thousands of little you's walking round. "Father of the Universe," says the first guard, beating at his chest. "That's fucking King Kong. That's me." He can't explain exactly why this excites him so much.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting behind the reception desk, Susan wishes she could change the music. It's on a loop pre-recorded by Dr. Jones himself. He's one for the old-fashioned atmosphere, she'll tell the clients when they comment on the songs. After a day at work, Susan will croon *Oh, what a beautiful morning* to herself on the bus home as she considers the statistics. Only four of the twenty-six couples she's seen today will conceive. Which will it be? She swings her hips to *it's not what*

*you do, it's the way that you do it* as she walks up her path. Then she stands still for a moment, patting her stomach.

On the other side of town, Dawn tells Peter that if he says again how it doesn't really matter if they have a child anyway, she'll leave him. What she hasn't told him is how she hears him crying in the bath, that she's found the pair of tiny blue and red striped baby socks tucked away in the bottom of his drawer. In the place where some men keep perfumed letters.

"There's no need to be so macho," Dawn says, squeezing his arm because in many ways she feels the same. It is him she loves, with or without. She opens another bottle of wine, red this time because they've run out of white, and they toast. "To us," she says. "To us," Peter replies, pushing his glass gently into Dawn's stomach.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Owen Jones always washes his hands four times when he gets back home after the clinic. It's his lucky charm. He likes to do it properly. Wash, then dry. Wash, then dry. Only then does he feel able to touch his own children. "You are so important to me," he whispers into his daughter's hair, letting her crawl into his lap, using his body as a gymnasium to pull and tweak as she tells him about a pair of shoes she's seen that change into roller blades at the click of a button. Could she have some, daddy? Could she?

Karen Jones stands at the doorway watching them. "Your dad's not made of money," she says and little Michele laughs, tugging at her father's ears. "Yes he is. These are five pounds each," she crows. "I'm going to spend daddy."

A spasm of fear chills through Owen. What if he only washed three times? He pushes his daughter away sharply

and then, seeing her face, reaches out to hold her too tight. “I only want for you to be happy,” he tells her as she struggles against him.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn and Peter sit on the sofa, not touching, in front of the television. “Are you watching this?” Dawn asks. “There’s never anything good on any more,” says Peter.

*Talk to me, Dawn cries silently. Let me tell you how it’s as bad for me as it is for you.*

*It hasn’t worked, it hasn’t worked.* The words drum their way backwards and forwards through Peter’s brain. “We should have got a video out,” he says and Dawn just nods.

\* \* \* \*

Susan turns her front door key as quietly as she can manage. She wants just five minutes peace on her own before Colin finds her. He’s too kind these days. It makes her edgy. She wants to be strong, hard working. She wants to give birth in the fields, squatting down in a corner and then back to work with the baby slung warm and damp against her chest. Work. She’ll lose her job. Could you have a pregnant receptionist in an infertility clinic?

“You’re home,” Colin shouts from upstairs before he bounds down to greet her. “Now, sit down. Don’t move a muscle. I’m here to look after you.”

\* \* \* \*

Peter slides down to sit between Dawn's legs, the better for her to massage his back. He edges a few inches to the right so she can reach the sore spot. The only bit of him that he can actually stop from aching these days. He feels her fingers prod between his muscle and skin and wills for his genes to pass through them like this. As easily as this.

"What if," he says and Dawn pauses for a fraction of a second too long. So alert is he to her these days that he can feel the tenseness in her fingertips. "What if we have an early night," he continues. "That'll be nice," Dawn says brightly although she doesn't want to. She hasn't enjoyed sex since all this business started. Peter knows this but hopes she hasn't realised that he doesn't want to either. That the thing that went the first time he picked up one of the magazines left out for him so discreetly hasn't come back yet.

\* \* \* \*

Michele Jones calls for her brother. "Daddy's full of cash," she shouts. "Lovely, lovely money." His wife laughs and squeezes down next to him on the sofa, thrusting a catalogue in his face. "I thought this in salmon pink," she says. "Nice," says Owen. He glances at the price, comparing it instinctively to the cheques from the clinic Susan has banked that day.

*I'll have one in salmon pink*, he imagines each couple asking. *Nice*, Susan will smile, her short buffed nails tapping on the enveloped cheque.

\* \* \* \*

Susan shouts at Colin to leave her alone. He goes off into the kitchen and she can hear him slamming cups down,

crashing plates against each other as he clears the dishwasher so she won't have to do it although it's the one job she enjoys. She likes taking her time, putting things back in their place, playing house. It'll take time to pacify him tonight, she thinks. She'll have to be extra docile, think of things she wants him to do for her. Later, she promises herself.

\* \* \* \*

Michele and Kevin Jones play at spending daddy all evening. It's the kind of non-participatory game Owen normally enjoys because he can doze on the sofa as his legs get chopped off for mountain bikes, skateboards and even, yes, why not, a sports car for mummy, while his fingers are buying a new computer game each. If only, Kevin thinks as he looks at his father and shakes his head. As the spending goes on it hurts Kevin more and more. His wants turn into needs. By the time he goes to bed, he is too angry to sleep. It's not fair. So much he can't have.

\* \* \* \*

Susan stares at herself in the mirror. She's aware her posture has changed even over the last week, her hips thrusting forward, her knees locked as if to bear the weight. Surely it would only be a matter of time before people notice. There must be a job she can do in the background for the next few months. If she sits tight enough into the reception desk would it show? She couldn't bear her life without her job. She sings *the way you look tonight* as she thinks of Owen Jones weaving miracles on his own. Without her. She'll tell him. He'll sort it out for her.

\* \* \* \*

Owen keeps thinking of things he's forgotten to tell Susan. "Or maybe lemon sherbet is a better colour," his wife says. "But then again it shows the dirt so dreadfully. What do you think, Owen?"

Michele prods him painfully. "Daddy's gone to sleep again," she tells her mother who tuts. Owen keeps his eyes shut as he thinks of Susan humming those tunes again and again. He'll make her a different tape soon. Wait and see how long before she can't get those songs out of her mind either. He tries not to smile.

\* \* \* \*

Peter dreams he is shooting at a target of the Virgin Mary. Over and over again, he picks up the rifle, lines up the sights and shoots. Suddenly Dawn appears over the horizon dressed in army combat kit. Stop, she shouts, putting her hand up like a military policeman. Together they look at the target. He's made no mark.

Just then, Dawn rubs herself against Peter and he turns to kiss her. "I love you," she says and he hides his face in her neck so she won't see his tears. "Do you think," she says, "do you think we could just cuddle up tonight?"

"Oh god, how much I love you," he says. "With or without."

\* \* \* \*

Back at the now deserted shopping centre, the security guard pulls his girlfriend by the hand up the escalator and she protests, giggling. “Where are we going?” she asks. “Why are you taking me here?”

He positions her against the unmarked door and with one hand, pulls her pants down. She groans into him, her whisper of careful as automatic as the route his fingers follow. When he opens her eyes briefly, it is only to look out for security cameras. Wouldn't do for him of all people to get caught. He yanks her towards him, thinking of how much they'd pay him on the other side of the door for his babies. He's the big daddy. He ignores the girl's quick gasp of pain as he moves in closer.

\* \* \* \*

Later, much later that night, the whispers of Dr. Owen Jones and Susan scream across the distance between them. “Is it mine?” he asks into the receiver, feeling its cold plastic against his lips. Susan is silent. “We have to be sensible,” he pleads. “It's not too late. There's still a chance we can get away with this. Better for everyone. Think of the children.”

# Semolinian Equinox

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by Svetlana Lavochkina  
from *Eclectica Magazine*

At Donetsk University, talking about money reveals bad manners—there has been no sight of salary for six months. Students and professors go to the marketplace after classes. They stand at the stalls side by side, their ankles equally soaked in April sleet. They sell groceries, poultry, hosiery—whatever the dealers supply them with.

“French socks latest cut, sexy stockings for your butt!” student Andrey recites into the drizzle, helping Professor Nikolai Vassilievich arrange listless bunches of carrots for display on the stone counter. Nikolai Vassilievich guards Andrey’s wallet while Andrey heads for an inconspicuous place at the market fringes to relieve himself. Drinking moonshine to get warm, they count their gain in inflated millions, munch the carrots, shoo mongrels from under the stalls, and never talk about the university.

At summer solstice, however, the learner and the learned meet in a short circuit at the State Examination. Andrey feigns due awe of Nikolai Vassilievich of course, but, mumbling unintelligibly as he does, Andrey still knows for sure that his mark will not quite exactly mirror the fact that he has neither opened any book on the course programme nor seen the professor doing his main job at the pulpit, his silver tongue pouring out undiluted Middle English to the drowsing audience, too recently weaned from Mother Goose to be able to partake of *swiche licour*.

Sighing, Nikolai Vassilievich scribbles ‘satisfactory’ into Andrey’s record book. After all, in the domain of cutting edge

Ukrainian market folklore Andrey is far more proficient than Nikolai Vassilievich will ever be. If Andrey, in his turn, were ever to examine Nikolai Vassilievich in retail practice, the professor's mark would inevitably be 'poor.' In Donetsk, the ability to tell Pushkin from Gogol, Shakespeare from Chaucer or sinus from logarithm is rather a handicap than a privilege. Such details put one at a tangent to the central focus of survival.

\* \* \* \*

At a tangent I may be, but I am truly privileged today. Andrey has given me a million to get a good chicken at the market. He wishes me to make a three-course dinner out of one bird corpse. He says I must make a broth, then peel off the chicken's skin, stuff it with schmaltz and onions and serve the filet separately, with mashed potatoes. We will feast in his locked room in the United Hostels, no hungry guests to diminish our delight.

Dizzy in the sweet, festering air of the poultry row, I am glad to see many chubby chickens displayed. I slap them on their thighs and breasts and finally choose the one that resonates most. My mouth is watering at the promise of a golden treat.

"What do you study, lass?" the vendress asks me, wrapping the chicken into a newspaper.

"English," I reply.

Her greasy fingers fumble under the counter to produce a blue hard-cover book. She points at the title, "The ABC of Dirty English." I run the pages between my fingers, incredulously: "*Abishag, Able Grable, Abyssinian medal...*" The brazen beads descend the page in neat strings, all provided

with matter-of-fact Russian translations. Dirty English is not in the curriculum. We learn it combed, buttoned-up and gelded.

“It’s yours for a million,” the woman says, knowing she has already won. Chubby chickens are much easier to sell than barmy books in alien tongues. So much for tonight’s dinner.

It takes the tram two hours to cross the city of Donetsk. It is warm in the tram, good for the first date. The workers, going home, already Brahms and Liszt with moonshine, wink at me, but then they see at once that I am already promised.

“Taboo words are inseparable from the language,” the dictionary preface says. “Their artificial banning leads to the language’s impoverishment. It is widely believed that Anglo-Saxon vulgarisms denoting male and female genitals are the true aristocracy of the language.”

I don’t notice that the tram has traversed the city of Donetsk twice and it has grown dark.

When I come back Andrey is not asleep yet. His hand is still able to reach his mouth with a cigarette, his elbow resting in a dirty plate.

“Where is my dinner?” he is drilling holes in me with his stare.

My only problem with Andrey is that he is allergic to English for its sheer impracticality. He doesn’t see any opportunity for himself ever to live in England or the States, so why bother at all. Andrey tells me off for a long time, hauling objects about the room to give his words more weight. He is very eloquent and I very ashamed. Yes, he is quite right in calling me a selfish bitch. Andrey is right in saying I don’t respect hard-earned money. He is right in saying I always do what my left foot desires. Right or left, around midnight I am being routinely forgiven—let the iron bed bear the brunt of my guilt.

\* \* \* \*

Loud singing wakes us up before dawn. We cannot recognize the male voice whose pitch ranges amply from peacock to goat but we know the female one by heart and to the marrow of our bones. The walls of the hostel rooms as thin as a calico curtain are being dissolved by the sulphuric acid of voices. Thank God we woke up to the allegro vivace part, which usually precedes the presto culmination with a final fortissimo out of the full breast of the diva and the breathless tenor losing its virility in falsetto heights.

The singers harvest their storm of applause from the listeners in adjacent rooms along with a loud account of their performance.

“Six times!” heralds the neighbour downstairs.

“No, seven!” argues the neighbour upstairs.

Andrey addresses me meaningfully, pointing in the direction the singing has been coming from, “Learn, Semolina, learn!”

The diva so praised is notoriously famous in the labyrinths of the United Hostels of Donetsk University. Nourished on raisin buns and peasant butter, now almost in possession of an intellectually unobliging diploma in English philology, Tanya spends her nights in cockroach-teeming cells not out of bitter necessity. Her parents are, for Donetsk standards, well-off. They live in a high-ceilinged flat in Artem Main Avenue where Tanya disposes of a whole room. If Tanya were asked to explain her behaviour she would say that she is just enjoying her student life before stepping into all too early adulthood, skimming cream from the thin milk of the toppled times. She would also imply that

she is escaping the pressure of her philistine family and gaining invaluable experience for life.

Our parents and teachers told us that God was invented to stupefy and poison people. It is only upon ourselves, the summits of creation, that we are to rely to thrive and multiply. But then Donetsk's embrace has become too sultry, too tight, so we have had to find some more ethereal air to breathe.

When the sky is as starry as it can ever get in Donetsk, I wriggle out from under sleeping Andrey's biceps and sneak upstairs to the twelfth floor, through a narrow door to the roof of the United Hostels. I cuddle up against the belly of Ursa Major because she is my only friend up there to listen to my complaints. I tell her that I am in love—impossible, unrequited, shameful, carnal love. I follow him, I covet him and yet cannot possess—he is made of the green sea, of the chalk curve, of flowing ink, of topaz breath, my Angle, my Saxon, my Jute. “You will soon have him,” Ursa says to me. “Fill your limbs with his tide, your head with his mind, your heart with his beat—and then your loins—fill them with his final spice. He will then take you in his arms and carry you far away from the United Hostels, up into the vernal equinox.” The only thing Ursa Major does not say is when.

Tanya is awake in small hours to lay an offering of flesh and voice on the altar of a Ukrainian goddess, moon-faced and arch-browed, full-bosomed and heavy-hipped. It is she who will protect her faithful Tanya, under the condition that she learns the art of lovemaking in all diligence and devotion, because in Donetsk it is through men that all women's dreams come true. The goddess will care for Tatyana's steeply rising career in Kiev, the capital on seven hills, marry her to a rich, dignified Englishman, or American, Tanya doesn't mind, and bring her several meridians west. The way is long but well-lit, and it is not only at night that Tanya toils. To facilitate Venus' tutelage, she studies English in a shrewd,

practical way, to be able to compete at the markets of business and love. How I wish I were her.

Tanya and I spend lecture breaks together smoking American cigarettes we buy for ten thousand apiece, for none of us can afford the luxury of a whole pack. We share her cigarette today because I am too broke for even one snout.

“Was I too loud this night?”

“Not louder than usual.”

Tanya informs me abundantly, as she always will, of Alyosha’s codpiece contents. Alyosha is her latest infatuation we had the boon of perceiving. The last inhalation of Pall Mall is hers. In a bluish, bridal veil of smoke, she confides me the latest Secret of Secrets.

“This night Alyosha said he wants a *baby* by me.”

In Donetsk, as everybody knows, children are rather aborted than born.

“Lucky you,” I say. “No one has ever wanted children by me. But you can give it a try.”

“God forbid,” Tanya says. “I’m waiting for the reply from the Kiev Travel Star. I wish they would take me!”

The bell to the next lecture rings and we go to listen to the Truth of the Truths of Theoretical Phonetics of the English Language delivered by Lubov Gavrilovna, a fierce spinster. Tanya is sitting next to me, looking directly into Lubov Gavrilovna’s mouth and zealously copying transcription signs from the blackboard, begging her goddess to forgive her premature thoughts of progeny: “/θ/ as in ‘thick’: voiceless, dental, fricative. /ð/ as in ‘then’: voiced, dental, fricative. /æ/ as in ‘bag’: front, open, short.”

The blue book under my desk is revealing different truths to me. I am copying them, pretending to be in a theoretically-phonetic trance.

“A Bag of snakes in Birthday clothes is in Bad shape.”

*“The Calf’s lesson in Curve is well-learnt.”*

\* \* \* \*

Andrey has just performed what he sardonically calls his marital duty. He is lying on his back, his head resting on my forearm, seeing the evening off with his last cigarette.

“Have you ever wanted children?” I ask.

Andrey turns his head to me.

“By whom? You? No thanks. You’re too inept to wipe your own ass.”

He raises his head, propping it on his own elbow.

“Don’t take it personally,” he says. “There are basically no women in Donetsk to have children by. They’re all either sluts or fools, and you’re the latter.”

I know that Andrey is right about me, but I want to redeem the female gender of Donetsk—I know an example.

“Alyosha does want a baby by Tanya,” I say.

“Really? What a hoot! He was thinking with his other head when he said that.”

I shouldn’t have aired Tanya’s secret but it is too late.

“A baby by a slut! That’s a good one!” Andrey grins, his teeth glaring in the fag light.

\* \* \* \*

Alyosha has left for his native village for the weekend. He needs a rest from incessant performances. He badly needs a substantial meal of mama’s purple borsch, with a hunk of

generously larded rye bread. Tanya is at home. Yawning, she puts on a flowered nightgown which has no idea of its mistress' night life in foreign quarters. She takes up a deadly boring textbook she has never progressed beyond page 14 when the phone in the hallway rings. She hastens barefoot to be the first to pick up the receiver and make her nosy mother retreat into the kitchen.

"Hellooo," Tatyana says in the deepest of her bosom tones.

"Oh, Andrey, it's you," she switches into standby mode, knowing why he usually calls.

"I would like you to help me, Tanya."

"I know you want my lecture notes again. Listen, can't you try and do your homework yourself, for a change?"

"Tanya, it's not your notes I want."

"Be quick, I'm falling asleep."

"Tanya... I would like you to give me a gift."

"Your birthday was two months ago, dear, and you got a whole pack of *Marlboro* from me!"

"Tatyana, it's a different gift I am asking you for. I would like you to give me *a baby*."

"Have you lost your wits? Have Semolina give you a baby."

Deeply, though, Tanya is flattered by the request. Even Andrey the market champion... She is half-wondering if she could secretly refit her duet score for his bass.

"Let me think," she says. "Call me tomorrow."

In the morning before classes Tanya runs into Dmitri the baritone at the cigarette kiosk. He leaves his entourage of two blondes and takes her by the hand to the side.

"May I ask you a question?"

“I didn’t sleep with anyone yesterday. This is why it was so quiet in the hostel at night,” Tatyana snaps.

“It would never occur to me to doubt your innocence, dear. It is a different question I have.”

Tanya understands that she has been betrayed. A deaf-mute janitor publicly inserts a note into Tanya’s curvaceous décolleté. A joint choir of male students chants on her entering the lecture hall, “We want a baby by Tanya!!”

Tonight the diva is not up to singing. Neither is she up to it the next day or the day after. At college she bears a stern face and moves like an ice-breaker. She refuses to visit Alyosha in the hostel. She is not on speaking terms with me. I miss her cigarettes, and even more, her detailed lecture notes.

\* \* \* \*

In Donetsk, the air temperature at summer solstice does not differ much from that of a furnace. The weather enhances the Great Account feeling for the examinees. Fifty heads in a single long row, sweat in rivulets streaming down their foreheads, recline, yielding to the fate and the heat against the hallway wall, waiting for their names to be called to enter the purgatory. Every quarter of an hour a victim is thrown out of the examination room, squeezed, bedraggled, sucked dry: the examination board is presided over by Lubov Gavrilovna, a spinster sans merci, an expert in torture. Lubov Gavrilovna is sometimes known to favour assiduous, simple, healthy-looking girls of peasant descent but pale decadent species with long noses stand no chance with Lubov Gavrilovna, this is well-known.

Tanya has just been resurrected from the dead. Her hair is combed into a tight ponytail, her blouse buttoned to the

top, her dark skirt sweeping the floor. Sweat must be trickling all the way down her legs, but she emerges nonchalant. “Excellent,” Tatyana pronounces to those of us who are still in the anguish of waiting.

The secretary calls my name.

I am ushered into the place of execution. The table is covered with a once white tablecloth, now stained, creased by the racked martyrs’ fingers. Nikolai Vassilievich is placed next to Lubov Gavrilovna but seems to be blissfully away in vibrant April, seeping ale at the Tabard Inn. A withered bunch of carrots is peeking out of his string bag on the floor, for summer solstice makes no exception from his market chore which is to be performed after the examination is over. With a climactic rustle of fingernails, Lubov Gavrilovna opens my record book. Her toad eyes rise at me without expression.

“Semolina. Absent for seven lectures. Covert reading of extraneous sources in class. We look forward to hear what you have learnt about the phonemic system of English.”

I take a communal water glass from the table, half-empty, its rim scalloped with lipstick of various shades—scarlet, pink, orange—a token of mercy, a last gulp from the executioner. My hand remains suspended in the air as if in a toast to Lubov Gavrilovna and summer solstice.

“The phonemic system of English is very beautiful,” I start. “The sounds are of many colors and shapes. They purr, they moan, they bark, puke, squeak and sometimes spit. They live in people and animals and leave them only with their last ‘h.’”

Lubov Gavrilovna parts her lips to pronounce my verdict but then, upon a second thought, tightens them up again to hear what comes next.

“For example, /θ/ as in ‘thunder thighs,’” I continue. “It looks like the Wife of Bath’s leg in a red stocking. /ð/ as in

‘tether one’s nag’ is Chanticleer about to love his Pertelote. And here is the /æ/ as in ‘abishag’—it’s made of rough leather, broad and bawdy—like Absalom’s kiss. Then there is O, as in...”

Nikolai Vassilievich awakens from his slumber, at the mention of the creatures he knew so well. But Lubov Gavrilovna has had enough of my phonemic system.

“Out! Out with her!” she yells. “Expel her from the university!”

Nikolai Vassilievich’s string bag tilts on the side and the carrots all tumble down in a fan of “i’s, /i:/” as in “Shit Street.”

“Come on, let’s buy the little fool some chocolate,” Andrey says. He is not upset. So much the better. Didn’t he tell me a thousand times that honest studying is not worth the hassle? At last I can do something useful. Now that he has become a market dealer himself, I can take his place at the counter beside Nikolai Vassilievich. There is so much to sell, so many millions to earn. Andrey himself has not needed to come to the State Examination. He sent the rector a hundred pairs of socks, which are enough for a ‘satisfactory,’ and not even Lubov Gavrilovna could do anything about it.

\* \* \* \*

With no haste, already in possession of the intellectually unobliging diploma in English Philology with honours, Tanya picks up the receiver. She hears an unfamiliar male voice on the line. “Could I speak to Miss Tatyana Prokopenko, please? There is a matter of some importance that I would like to discuss with her.”

The humiliating events of the recent past surge into Tatyana’s head.

“You fucking bastard, go to hell, you hear me? You go to hell with your fucking offers and I don’t want anything. Fuck you!”

She hangs up with a bang, and, when the telephone rings again, lets her eager mother answer the call.

“Tanya, a nice gentleman has just told me that he was sorry you don’t want to work in Kiev, for the Travel Star. He said you must be snowed up with job offers to curse him as you did.”

Tanya picks up the telephone and throws it against the wall. The machine is smashed to smithereens. Tanya utters The Cry of Cries, louder than any of her final duet chords. The cry is drowned in the Whirlpool of Tears. She leaves the house in her night gown and slippers. She runs to the United Hostels. Alyosha can’t believe his fortune. He jumps to his feet, throws the half-finished cigarette out of the window, lifts her solid weight as if it were a feather and hauls her onto the iron bed.

“Not before we marry,” Tanya says, pushing him away with a firm hand.

If her goddess dumped her, she has now to take the remnants of her once promising fate by the horns.

\* \* \* \*

In Donetsk United Hospitals, men are neither allowed into delivery room nor can they visit the mother at the Obstetrics, so the babies are shown to fathers through ward windows. Alyosha, like every young father, appears daily for a 2-minute display of the son. It is, however, difficult to define Tanya as an ordinary mother, at least as seen from the point of view of the hospital staff. No less than twenty times

in five days Tanya spent in hospital the perplexed nurses have been accepting flowers and cards from sundry men. The contents of the cards stuck in the bouquets does not vary in a single word. Each of them says, “*Tanya—Thank you for the son!*”

I am at the United Hospitals, too, nothing serious, just family planning. Andrey says that they will serve me a chicken wing when I wake up. He has paid for that.

I am sprawled like a starfish and there is a needle in my arm bend. One doctor is behind my head and one is between my knees.

“Why is she still twitching? That dose should have put her under by now!”

“Ah, what the hell. Just get on with it.”

My limbs are washed by the green tide, my mind crumbles like stardust and flows down into my stomach. *Zazzy, zaftig, zing, zigzag*. The alphabet is over now. My loins are full of the final spice. “Well-done,” says Ursa Major. “You have deserved your prize.”

I hear his topaz breath, I feel the swing of his cloak. He wraps me into its folds and off we start, away from Donetsk, away from everything united, up into the vernal equinox. He is holding me tight, my Angle, my Saxon, my Jute.

# The Girl In The Glass

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by Valerie O’Riordan  
from *PANK*

They held the mermaid auditions in the aquarium bathroom, made the girls stick their faces underwater in the sinks and hold their breath. Shona lasted the longest. I heard her say when she surfaced that the room was sparkled with black dots. One of the other girls had gotten sick on the floor. I mopped it up as Shona shook the water from her hair.

Her routine was two minutes long. She wriggled and twisted, flicked her tail fin and somersaulted through the shoals of fish as the tourists nudged one another. The guides hustled them away afterwards so they wouldn’t see the mermaid lunge for the top of the tank and gasp for air. The girls couldn’t get out of the tank alone; their legs were fettered by the fins, and the porters had to haul them out. I used to push forward to get to Shona’s side—I’d grab her arm and heave and feel the thump of her heart jolting through my skin.

I’d stand outside the girls’ locker room and listen to her getting changed. The wet slurp of the tail peeling away from her legs, her curses as she pounded her feet against the floor to restore the blood flow. I’d sneak in later and jimmy open her locker, gather up the sequined fabric and push it into my face. The smell of her sweat, the tiny hairs gathered against the damp satin. I’d think of her as the bus carried me home, and I’d feel comfortable.

Just before Christmas she looked at me as I pulled her out of the tank. She smiled. I nearly lost my grip. I swayed and the light in the room dipped. I clung onto her and my fingers dug into her arm. She came up to me after she’d

changed and pulled up her sleeve. Five purple blotches where we'd touched. I reached out to feel and she pulled her arm away, shy.

The next day, the day of the Christmas party, I was waiting. I sat on the bench beside the lockers and hugged myself, rocked back and forth. I heard the shuffling hop as she made her way down the corridor, hobbled by the costume, and my heart drubbed. *Fucking fins*, I heard her mumble. Her tail slapped against the tiles as she turned and crashed into me. She gasped as I hugged her tight. Her skin was beaded with droplets of cold water and her bikini top pressed against my chest. She was speaking but it was muffled. I stroked her head with my free hand. They said this worked on dolphins. We dropped to the floor and I reached down and ran my hands along her scaly tail. It writhed and beat against the wall, and I shuddered. She pulled her face away and screamed, and I told her to shush, to hold her breath. *Two minutes*, I whispered. I ripped a gash in the satin and stuck my hand inside her thrashing tail.

They asked me to leave after that. I got a new job, in the park, skimming rubbish off the surface of the lake, stopping kids throwing rocks at the ducks. I stare into the water and think of Shona's slippery limbs. I watch for her amongst the paddle-boat tourists and the day-trippers. I know she'll turn up. I wait by the water and hold my breath. I count to sixty, and again, and I watch the black sparkles dance.

# Peacocks

---

by L.E. Miller  
from *Ascent*

We had values. We had Le Creuset pots. We had fold-out couches in our living rooms, where we slept with our husbands at night. Beside these couches, we had books stacked on the floor: Modern Library editions of Kafka and James Joyce and George Sand. Beneath these high-minded selections, we had *Lorna Doone* and *Anne of Green Gables*, touchstones from a time when reading in bed was our guiltiest pleasure.

We had blue jeans long before other women wore them. We had degrees in literature and anthropology and biology, hard-won in night classes at City College. We had aspirations but did not yet have careers. We had cookbooks with French recipes that confounded us. For a few years, we tried to muddle through until we gave up on the fancy dinners our children despised and turned back to the roasted meats of our childhoods.

And we all had children: two or three apiece, whose strollers we tucked beneath the stairways in our buildings.

\* \* \* \*

We were individuals, of course, but we seemed so much alike, I still speak of us today in the plural. Each of us had endured bookish, lonely childhoods in the outer boroughs; we had been the pride and bane of our immigrant parents' lives. When we found one another along the broad avenues

of what, growing up, we had reverentially called “The City,” we recognized one another as *landsmen*, all of us dark-haired women who carried the inflections of our parents’ Yiddish in our speech. Our cramped apartments were fine with us; we would never in a million years live in some bourgeois outpost in Long Island, and the only way we’d return to Brooklyn was in a coffin. We called ourselves The Quorum. We called ourselves the Collective Unconscious of the Upper West Side.

Our children played in a bleak little playground near the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. We invaded the place with our sand toys and tricycles, the bags we packed with apples and breadsticks. While we pushed our children on the swings, we talked about Carl Jung, whom we understood in a handful of telegraphed phrases, and Ingmar Bergman, whose films played downtown and which we desperately wanted to see. On the grounds of the Cathedral, several peacocks wandered freely. Sometimes, we took our children over to see them, although the great birds frightened us with their manic darting, their unholy screaming and reputation for viciousness. The hens were a dull gray, nothing much to look at, but the males were magnificent. I think we wished to see ourselves in them: rare and graced, transcendent in their vaguely shabby setting.

\* \* \* \*

It was during this time of strollers and failed cassoulets that Rebecca Redl moved into the building where I lived with my husband and our two boys. I first saw her sitting on the stairs, reading a book. Instinctively, she shifted her body while men in brown uniforms lifted chairs and bookcases up and over her head. At first glimpse, I took her for a girl of

twelve or thirteen, because at that age, I, too, would have read through the apocalypse. Her hair fell to her shoulders, black as obsidian. My first impulse was to touch it, the way it shined. Although the shirt she wore was so big and loose it nearly swallowed her whole, her loveliness had a sleek economy, as it is with certain lucky girls before their bodies assume an adult's heft and gravity.

A few steps below, a little girl with the same dark hair smoothed and re-smoothed her skirt over her knees.

On the second-floor landing, a man smoked a cigarette and gave curt direction to the men who carried the furniture up the stairs. This man was tall and lean and had cropped silvery hair. Later, I would learn that he was her husband, his name was Eric Redl, and he was a professor of philosophy at Barnard, some ten blocks north. I don't remember how I came to know these things. Rebecca and I never exchanged such information about our lives.

The little girl buried her face in her hands when I introduced myself, and Rebecca, with some reluctance, it seemed, told me her own and her daughter's name. I asked Rebecca what she was reading, and she held up a thick hardcover. *Buddenbrooks*. I hadn't read *Buddenbrooks*, but I told her I had loved the hundred and twenty pages of *The Magic Mountain* I had managed to complete while my sons napped.

"I wouldn't say I 'love' this book," she replied in a way that foreclosed further discussion. Nonetheless, I was willing to look the other way. I felt generous then. I had a husband whom I both loved and respected; I had two healthy, vigorous boys; I enjoyed the company of like-minded women. I told Rebecca about us, how we met at the little playground near the Cathedral every morning, and how her daughter would have instant friends.

“Instant friends,” Rebecca echoed, and I heard in the blankness of her voice the simple-mindedness of my presumption.

Later, I made soup for her, my mother’s vegetable bean. The day after I delivered it, she left the pot outside my door, scrubbed clean and without any sort of note inside.

\* \* \* \*

I was surprised, then, when Rebecca showed up with her daughter at the playground a few days later. The little girl, whose name was Vera, wandered over to the edge of the sandbox. Clutching her doll, she watched the other children dig.

In a manner of speaking, Rebecca became part of our group, but she held herself above it, like someone who refuses to join the party and demonstrates her refusal further by waiting outside the room on a wooden chair. The two of them would arrive late in the morning, Rebecca wearing a man’s shirt and Vera a perfect little dress. Rebecca would nudge her daughter to go play, but Vera stood to the side with her doll while her mother read on the bench. Sometimes, one of us prompted our children to give her a turn with a tricycle or shovel, but whenever she was offered, Vera just shook her head and gnawed on her doll’s arm.

It crossed my mind that Vera might be mentally retarded, and I told myself that would be a terrible thing, a tragic thing, for a clearly intellectual woman like Rebecca. But one day, Vera approached as I was unpacking my boys’ snack. Her eyes widened as she watched me hand out Fig Newtons and pour juice from the Thermos. She stared while Joel and Peter devoured their food in thirty seconds flat. Over on the bench, Rebecca turned a page in her book. I

handed Vera a cookie, and she wolfed it down. I thought nothing of it. We mothers fed and comforted one another's children all the time. I handed Vera a second cookie, which also disappeared in the wink of an eye.

"These cookies are my favorite kind," she piped in a voice as pretty as a bell. Then she skipped away, back toward her mother.

"I gave your daughter two Fig Newtons," I told Rebecca at the bench, when I saw her fold down a page to mark her place.

"Oh." She glanced up in my general direction.

"I hope that's all right. I know people feel differently about sugar and so on."

Rebecca laughed sharply. "I have no opinion about sugar."

Vera looked down and raked her fingers through her doll's hair.

"I wasn't sure what to do...she just seemed so hungry."

"She had breakfast at nine."

"I just know that some days, my boys get hungry every hour...."

When Rebecca blinked, I noticed, because her gaze had been perfectly steady until then. With that blink, I knew, she'd put her essential self out of reach.

But I pressed on, with a dogged insistence on good will, at which I both marvel and cringe today. "What are you reading?"

*"La Nausée."*

It took a moment for the information to compute. "I admire your powers of concentration. Most days, I wouldn't trust myself to get through a fashion magazine."

Rebecca stood up. “You’ve been very nice, but I think it’s best to be honest. I am not interested in friendship.” Her voice was neutral, not unkind.

“Fair enough,” I said, as lightly as I could manage. I walked back to the sandbox and called my sons out for lunch.

\* \* \* \*

“I want to be friends with you,” my husband said when I rehashed the exchange that night, after the boys had gone to bed.

“I know, I know, but it’s just so rude. I mean, what did I do? Gave her kid a couple of cookies. The crime of the century.”

“At least she was direct.”

“You’re no help.”

“Like I said, *I* like you.” Harry pulled me toward him.

\* \* \* \*

It was a temptation I couldn’t resist: letting drop a few sideways comments to the others while she read on the bench in the park. *La Nausée!* Why couldn’t she just say it in English? Dresses her daughter up in fancy clothes but can’t be bothered to bring a snack. Why do some people even have children? Even today I wonder: why was I so undone by this woman’s refusal to count me as one of her own?

One memory I’d almost forgotten but seems important now to recount: once, at the park, I heard Rebecca singing softly while Vera danced around her, swooping and twirling like a top. When I moved closer, I recognized it, the same wordless, minor-key melody my mother used to sing to me.

Rebecca met my gaze, soft and open for just a moment, until she turned away and closed her arm around her daughter.

\* \* \* \*

It was fall, then winter. The weather and a spate of colds kept me and my sons away from the park. The colds turned into croup, and I spent several nights with each of them outside the steaming shower and many days trying to keep them occupied in our small rooms. By this time, Rebecca and I exchanged only brief nods when we passed in the hallway. Often it was easier to feign absorption in the mail or my grocery bags and pretend I never saw her at all.

One day, Eric Redl appeared at my door, dressed for work and carrying a briefcase. It was a Tuesday morning, nine-thirty, and already my living room looked like a shipwreck. Vera stood beside him, clutching his arm. When I stepped toward them, she sidled closer to her father, as if she'd climb inside his body if she could.

"Would you mind?" Eric asked. "I have to teach a class at ten, but I'll be back after that."

"Of course." I reached for Vera's hand, but she pulled away. She wore a mismatched skirt and sweater. Her chin was streaked with jam.

Eric leaned toward me. "Rebecca's gone," he whispered.

"Gone? Where did she go?"

"Apparently Paris."

"Paris?"

"That's what it said in her note."

*She took off for Paris without so much as looking back...*  
Already, I'd begun composing the story I'd tell the others, but

then I saw Eric kneel down and rest his hands on Vera's shoulders. I caught the terror in his eyes. "I'll be back in one hour. The big hand will make one circle around the clock. Not too long, right?" He spoke quickly, as if he could build with his words a fort no grief could enter. But children always know. Vera clung to him and sobbed. Even Joel and Peter came over to stare with alarmed curiosity.

\* \* \* \*

Over coffee in one other's kitchens, we floated theories about Rebecca's disappearance. Most of these centered on a secret lover. Didn't we all dream of sitting in a Left Bank café with some dapper Jean-Pierre? About this we agreed: she was a terrible mother to have done such a thing.

\* \* \* \*

I probably would have left it alone, chalked it up to the unfathomable mysteries of the human heart and forgotten her entirely. But one afternoon, while the boys were napping, I went out to the common storage space beneath the stairs to look for the gifts I had previously hidden for Peter's birthday. Crouching there, I retrieved the items I had stashed in a shopping bag—a toy truck, a picture book, a rubber ball—but I couldn't find the clown doll I had also purchased. When I looked in a second bag, stuffed behind our neighbors' box of Passover dishes, I found not the doll but a stack of ten or more composition books. I believed at first the books were mine. I had filled dozens of such books for my college courses, transcribing my professors' every word about the Krebs cycle or the atrocities of Robespierre. By doing so, I

believed I was freeing myself, fact by fact, from the narrow expectations that had confined my parents' lives. But when I moved into the light and opened one of the notebooks I found not my own tidy print but a script so sprawling and wild it burst beyond the lines on the page.

*March 26, 1954. Weltschmerz. Literally, it means world-pain, but Professor Redl told me it is the distance between the world as you want it to be and the world as it really is. Why doesn't everyone feel this? How can one have a brain and not feel this gulf?*

Professor Redl? On the journal's inside cover, I found printed in somewhat neater block letters: *The Journals of Rebecca Zaperstein, November 1953-July 1954*. Then one of my boys called me back, and I had to leave everything under the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

When Eric stopped by to ask if I could watch Vera again while he taught class, I could have pulled him aside and told him about the journals. But I did not. I did not want to part with them yet. I was curious. I was nosy. I was what my mother used to call a *kokhlefele*, a meddler. That afternoon, while Joel and Peter napped, I went back under the stairs and pulled out one of the notebooks. I read hurriedly, hunched with the flashlight, poised for the sound of footsteps.

*September 14, 1953. Mama was wrong. Barnard is no different from anywhere else. I have nothing in common with the other girls. All they care about is finding a husband. By now I should know better. Very few people care about books and ideas, which are as essential to me as air and water.*

I had little sympathy for rich Barnard girls. I myself had worked six days a week as bundle girl at Abraham & Straus through my years at City College; I'd studied for exams during my lunch hour.

*October 17, 1953. I have never been one to cry but these days I am crying all the time. Today I was reading Wordsworth and I felt such a strong yearning for the kind of quiet he said is necessary for one truly to perceive the world. I wish I could be happy with what I have in front of me: the leisure to read and write and think. But it is my curse to want more, to yearn for something higher, something I can't even name.*

\* \* \* \*

One afternoon, Eric stopped me in the hallway with a brush of his hand. "Did she ever mention another man? A lover?"

"No. Never."

"But you and she were friends."

*Friends?* I recalled Rebecca's blank, incredulous voice.

\* \* \* \*

Three mornings a week, I watched Vera so Eric could teach his seminar. I bundled up the children so they could play outside after a snowstorm. I made play dough for them out of flour and salt. But like a drinker who wakes each morning with the best intentions to stop and loses his resolve by lunch, I left the apartment every afternoon with my flashlight to read more from Rebecca's journals.

\* \* \* \*

*November 5, 1953. Today is my birthday. I am eighteen. I feel nothing about this because all my life I have felt old.*

*January 15, 1954. Come out with us, my roommates keep telling me. You're so pretty, they say, as if that has anything to do with it.*

\* \* \* \*

A woman with her head on straight: that was how I was always known. And I would have described myself in much the same way. It seemed I'd been born knowing there was a gap between our ideal vision of the world and its untidy reality; the matter had never caused me great pain. But in the process of reading Rebecca's journals, I began to mistrust my own balance. Were my own bonds flimsier than I knew? Was my contentment about to shatter under more rigorous scrutiny?

\* \* \* \*

*January 28, 1954. I asked Professor Redl why he thinks modern thought begins with Descartes and not with Locke or Hobbes, and he explained that Descartes applied rigorous science, in essence, to "doubt-proof" his ideas and that he treated knowledge itself as a measurable property. I told him I find Descartes bloodless and he said Montaigne will be my reward.*

*February 13. When I asked Professor Redl why he gave me a B- on my paper, he told me I had under-explained the Mind-Body Problem. He told me I took too modern a view*

*in my discussion of it and did not adequately look at the question of faith. He said he always grades hard on the first paper and he was especially hard on me because he knows how much more I can do.*

*March 20. Professor Redl said to be careful of falling too much in the thrall of Schopenhauer. He warned me against confusing alienation with freedom. He said refusal is seductive but it takes much more rigor to arrive at a genuine, soundly reasoned yes.*

*March 31. Professor Redl speaks the most beautiful French. When he read aloud in class today, all meaning vanished in the music of the language.*

*April 4. Where does desire dwell? I'd imagine Descartes would say in the body, along with hunger, thirst and the need for sleep, but I cannot imagine it as just a physical impulse, at least not for me, since in my (limited) experience there is always the mental element, which, though unrelated to bodily sensation, I have felt as strongly as anything in my body.*

*April 16. Eric was right about Montaigne. I see what he means about his startlingly modern aesthetic.*

Had they already crossed the line that normally separates professor and student, or had Eric simply begun to occupy a more intimate place in Rebecca's mind? I, too, had fallen for several of my professors, not because they were especially handsome, but because they had introduced me to the suppleness of my own intellect. Although these crushes were not rooted in the physical, I noticed every physical aspect of those men: the slant of their handwriting, whether or not they wore wedding rings, the rhythm and sonority of their speech. It was men like Eric who affected me the most, the serious, unyielding ones, whose terse words of praise kept me nourished for weeks.

*June 16, 1954. Today Eric took me to see the sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. A revelation! I sat for an hour just looking at "Bird in Flight." Eric is like the sculptures of Brancusi: very spare, abstracted, but underneath writhing with a wild force. We walked back through the park talking about how art is a much more powerful medium than language for expressing the complications of human perception. Suddenly we realized that fifty years ago today Leopold Bloom walked through Dublin's streets. Eric bought me a rose to commemorate.*

*July 7. Making love is absurd and freeing and profound all at once. I pity all those girls their preoccupations with rings and respect and reputations and who owes whom what.*

*July 19. E. and I talked today about going to Paris. We could just go, he said. He said I shouldn't worry about finishing my degree. I will learn much more just reading and being sentient in the world. He said in Europe men and women live together all the time without the formality of marriage. To be free! To read! To walk! I said yes! We drank wine to celebrate.*

*August 27. Pregnant. I can't believe my body betrayed me this way.*

*August 31. I talked to Eric about getting an operation, but he cried when I even mentioned it. I love you. I want to marry you, he said. These are the words other girls wait their whole lives to hear. Even though it was 95 degrees out, I began to shiver. I couldn't stop, not even when Eric put his arms around me.*

*September 12. City Hall wedding. Grotesquely fat clerk, Professor Steinsaltz as witness. We went out for lunch afterwards, but as always I felt too sick to eat.*

*February 27, 1955. E. took me shopping for baby things. The layette. The lady kept piling things on the counter and*

*no matter what she showed him Eric just smiled and acquiesced. By the time we were done we had so many bags we had to take a taxi home. At home I let him unpack everything. Afterwards he just stood and stared at me as I lay on the bed. He asked, are you not happy at all about this?*

*April 13. Home with baby. Feed her, change her diapers, try to comfort her when she cries. These things should be simple but she stiffens and screams after her bottle and there's nothing I can do to soothe her.*

\* \* \* \*

Vera colored at the table while Joel and Peter built houses from blocks and then torpedoed them with toy airplanes. Unconsciously, she stuck her tongue out when she colored, as if reaching for some bit of knowledge that dangled just beyond her. When I went over to see what she was drawing, she covered the paper with her hands and twisted her body toward the wall.

One day, though, she came over to me and tugged gently on one of my curls. I crouched to let her twine my hair around her finger. That was all she wanted, to twist my hair and watch it spring back when she let go.

\* \* \* \*

*May 3. Tried to read "Ward 6" but kept losing the thread of the sentence by the time I got to the end. Comprehension swims within my grasp then V. starts to cry again. E. says to forget Chekhov for now and concentrate on Vera. He gets to continue with his work. Am I supposed to give up everything just because we have a baby?*

*May 6, early morning. Up all night with V. Every time I put her down, she cried. I was the one who got up each time because E. has to teach class today. He says I can sleep when she sleeps. But she only sleeps when I hold her and yesterday when I fell asleep in the chair I almost dropped her.*

*June 25. Why don't you take a walk, E. keeps saying. Fresh air will do you good. So today I put V. in the carriage and walked up to campus. At first it felt good to walk in the sunlight, but I'd forgotten the semester was over and the place would be deserted. Still I sat on the steps of Milbank Hall and hoped to see anyone who might remember me.*

*July 1. At dinner E. talks nonstop about his work. He drones on and on and on, so in love with the sound of his voice. I count the minutes until he's done and I can wash the dishes in peace.*

*July 16. E. is angry that I no longer want to sleep with him but he is too much of a coward to have it out. I cannot stand the feeling of his hands, his hunger, on my bloated body. He is weak in the same ways I am weak. I have no respect for him, no love, no affinity.*

\* \* \* \*

"Have any of you read *The Red and the Black*?"

"Ha. That's a good one. I don't think I have the brain cells anymore."

"I think Danny has some kind of inner alarm that goes off whenever I pick up a book. He can be in another room, but the moment I turn the page, it's 'Mommy, Mommy.'"

"It's moments like that when I think putting them in Skinner's box wouldn't be such a bad idea."

“Is it really possible to live on peanut butter sandwiches? If so, Jenny will be living proof.”

“I put dinner on the table and give everyone two choices: take it or leave it.”

“Rebecca what’s-her-name would be rolling her eyes at this conversation.”

“She’d only care if it were in a book written in French.”

I said that. Everyone laughed, but the satisfaction I got from laughing flickered and died.

\* \* \* \*

*August 8. The ring of flame around the burner, the knives in the drawer, the mouse pellets under the sink. Escape beckons in every corner of the house.*

\* \* \* \*

When Harry played with the boys, their shrieking laughter sounded muted to me, as if I stood apart, behind a wall of thick glass. When Joel and Peter bickered, I barely heard their rising voices; I sat at the table, adrift in Rebecca’s words, until Joel hit Peter on the head with the birthday truck. I shouted at him. I dragged him by the arm into the bedroom and it gave me a small but terrifying satisfaction to slap him. While Joel howled behind the door, Peter began crying, too. I didn’t go to him. I just sat at the table with a can of Harry’s beer. Had I once been a hungry, nervous student at Bronx Science with my sights on medical school? Peter crawled into my lap, wiped his face on my shirt, claimed his comfort. All I could do was rub his small, hot back.

And there was Eric. He had enrolled Vera in a nursery school, but every few days I saw him in the hallway, leading her by the hand. How are you, I'd ask. We're getting by, he'd answer, but his face was abject. Sorrow deepens some people's beauty, and this was true of him. His gleaming surfaces had been abraded, and I detected something passionate, almost devotional, about his grief.

How are you really? I asked him one day when he was alone, and he told me Vera had wakened several times in the night, calling out for her mother. It's very hard, I offered in reply.

Eric grabbed me and pinned me against the wall. I braced myself for a slap. I did not try to shield myself or shout at him to stop. Whatever happened next would be the logical result of my trespasses. He pressed himself against me and kissed me, with all of Harry's ardor and none of his tenderness. I felt Eric's erection, but I understood this as a purely physical response, nothing to do with me. His kiss was as good as a slap. I brushed my teeth five, six times that day, but all day I tasted his smoky breath.

\* \* \* \*

*January 14, 1956. V. began crawling today. She looks like a crab with her left leg stuck out straight. As she made her way across the floor she laughed her low bewitching chuckle. I know one thing: I love this girl.*

*September 28, 1956. Vera loves to hide her doll under a cushion or behind the window blinds. She shrieks with glee every time she finds it. I'm surprised at my own enjoyment of this game. V. is thrilled to find her doll every time!*

*February 12, 1957. I see now that the answer to my survival is to live a divided life. While I did not choose my cur-*

*rent circumstances, I can accept them. I can play the wife, iron E.'s shirts, proof-read his papers. Meanwhile I can hold myself apart: private, inviolable.*

*May 3, 1958. Our new apartment is sunny. V. loves to run up and down the long hallway. The extra bedroom will be my study. I think I'll hang white curtains in the window.*

*July 18. Today was a perfect, cloudless summer day. Decided to take V. to the carousel at Central Park. We walked all the way, and the air smelled of pressed linen. She chose a white horse, and I took the black one beside her. We rode the carousel three times. Simple pleasure, what other people feel all the time. Before we started back I bought us each an ice cream. When the man handed her the cone, V. pressed her lips against it. I love today, she said, and I told her I did too.*

*Oct. 26. V. and I played tea party and then we played school and then hospital. When I finally told her I wanted to read, she lay on the floor and cried. I locked myself in the bathroom but of course one cannot escape oneself.*

*December 3. I hope to God E. never reads this. V. horrible all day, whining about everything. Dragged her shopping and when I was done she planted herself in the middle of the aisle and refused to move. No matter what I said she refused. Finally, I walked away. She didn't move. I walked up to the door, but she kept standing there. I waited a few more minutes then left the store. I thought she'd come running after me but when I reached the end of the block she wasn't there. I watched the cars stream past thinking I should just do it; she'd be better off without me. How do people do it? How did Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary find the courage to do it? Someone honked and I realized where I was and what I'd done: I'd left my daughter alone in a store. I ran back and found her up front eating a lollipop. She'd*

*been crying so hard her eyes were red. The clerk just stared at me silently accusing. I hugged V. and told her I love her, I never meant to leave her. On the way home I bought her an ice cream, but it just made her shiver to eat it. A few blocks later she got sick all over everything. Back home I cleaned her up, but I was not as tender as I should have been. No one knows what it's like to fail every day at the thing that comes so easily to everyone else.*

The journal ended here. On December Fourth, Eric had come to me with the news that Rebecca had left. I pressed my palm against her careening script and remembered how, at the park, she had sung just for Vera, how they'd shared their private dance. I wished my touch could travel through those pages to offer her some measure of peace. At the same time, I wanted to be rid of her. I closed the notebook. I left everything as I'd found it under the stairs.

When I got back to the apartment, the front door was wide open. I rushed into the boys' bedroom, where I'd left them napping. I nearly fell to my knees to see them there, unharmed. Sleep revealed the residual plumpness in Peter's face, but in the past few weeks, Joel's body had assumed lankier, more grownup proportions. For almost an hour, I stood in the doorway and watched them sleep. I could not stop drinking in their beauty, but I knew I had to wake them or they'd be wild all night. Finally, I roused each one with a kiss on his sweaty hair.

That night, Harry and I sat together and listened to Brahms' Clarinet Quintet. When the yearning second movement came on, I took his hand. I always loved Harry's hands: their square, honest shape; the printer's ink that ringed his nails despite his daily washing with a pungent soap. I moved closer and inhaled his scent: the cleaning solvents, the metallic tinge from the type and slugs, the Schlitz beer he drank after work.

“Let’s move this operation to the bedroom,” he murmured. We unfolded our bed and began undressing as the Quintet ended. We made love for the first time in several weeks and afterwards, I felt both absolved and chastened. By reading and hording Rebecca’s journals, I had, in a manner of speaking, committed an infidelity. I had been unfaithful to the person I had, until recently, believed I was.

\* \* \* \*

The next evening, I told Harry I was going out for a walk. I put on my coat and boots and then retrieved the bag of notebooks from underneath the stairs.

Behind Eric’s door, swing music played. My heartbeat was louder and more insistent than my knock. The music went quiet, and a minute later, Eric appeared, in stocking feet. His face looked bloated with sleep. I could not place him in the same universe with his urgent lips and tongue two weeks earlier or the Glenn Miller he had just shut off. One of his toes poked out from a hole in his sock. I could smell the spirits on his breath.

He said, “What can I do for you after you’ve done so much for me?”

I recognized but did not traffic easily in irony. “Rebecca left some journals under the stairs. I just found them. I thought you’d want to know.” I held out the bag. My voice was as fast and nervous as a child’s.

Eric took the bag, and everything else fell away, all his cleverness and courage and rage, everything except the sorrow that was always present in him, like the bass line in a song.

“I looked all over the apartment for these. She wrote in them feverishly, you might say obsessively. After she left, I

looked everywhere for them and when I couldn't find them, I assumed she burned them. It seems like something she'd do, doesn't it?"

"I don't know."

"No, of course not. Why would you?"

I began worrying the skin around my fingernails. "Anyway, I thought you'd want them. I knew they were hers because she wrote her name in the front."

Eric didn't register this evasion. He was muzzy with inebriation. "She was only eighteen when we met. Yearning and intense. The kind of student professors wait for and dread a little. The material was difficult, but she thrived on the difficulty."

"I wish I'd had the chance to know her better."

His laugh was a strangled yelp. "You can reach her at the *poste restante*."

I smiled, baffled by the foreign words. I still wanted him to think highly of me; I wanted to be able to think highly of myself. "Come over for supper sometime. You and Vera."

He rubbed his eyes. "Marvelous idea. Thank you. We will."

\* \* \* \*

Not long afterwards, Eric and Vera moved out. The same uniformed movers arrived, but this time they made the trip in reverse. They whisked the furniture down the stairs to the van double-parked outside.

I told myself I had done the right thing, giving him the journals. While many of the passages had to have caused him pain, the pain would be resolved with time, whereas his

not-knowing would never be resolved, and he and Vera would be stuck in a perpetual state of waiting.

One thing was clear: Rebecca loved Vera as best she could. Didn't they have the right to know?

\* \* \* \*

That spring, a young woman began taking Vera to the park. We couldn't help staring: this new woman was tall and full-bodied. She glowed with sunny good health. She helped Vera climb to the top of the slide and cheered her on when she slid down. She looked like a Swedish film star, a completely different species from us.

Vera had a pail and shovel for digging in the sand. She now played as children do, ferociously and without any trace of self-consciousness, until the blonde, whom we'd secretly named the Big Swede, called her home.

One afternoon, Eric Redl appeared in the park. His hair was trim again. His eyes caught mine, but he maintained the smooth, impersonal look of a man whose desires were being satisfied. I stood with the other mothers when Vera ran over to hug him. We watched him swing her around and we watched him kiss The Big Swede on the lips.

He didn't let the grass grow, we said to one another.

\* \* \* \*

Over time, many of us, the old guard, the Collective Unconscious, have spoken of our children's earliest years. We have spoken of our fatigue and boredom and the aspect of performance, which is one of motherhood's dirty little secrets,

and of the loneliness we felt even in one another's company. We entered a more confessional age, and so we confessed: our rage and despair and lust and envy, our abortions and affairs. From time to time I thought of Rebecca and her courage to write the unspeakable, and I thought of Eric and the secrets we never should have shared. Although I always thought of her with regret and good wishes, I never spoke of finding my dark double in those pages until now.

Many of us live in the suburbs where we swore we'd never set foot and also have condos in Florida. Many of us are dead. Harry died last year, and although people say the pain does ease, I am still waiting for this to be true.

I continue to live in the old building. After a period of decline, the place is full again with children. The mothers, and a few stay-at-home fathers, use the same park as we once did, near the Cathedral. On warm days, I like to walk over there, although I'm nearly invisible now, a woman of eighty, sitting alone on the bench with my cup of deli coffee. I watch the children playing—the wild ones, the preternaturally kind ones, and the silent observers—and their parents watching over them: all of them beautiful, preening, fragile.

# The Naturalists

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by B.J. Hollars  
from *storySouth*

My mother left my father for the point guard from the San Antonio Spurs, and not knowing what else to do, Dad and I packed duffels, headed south to the nudist colony a hundred miles outside of Houston.

“The important thing,” Dad reminded me as we drove along the armadillo-lined highway, “is that your mother still loves you very, very much. She just...loves the Spurs a little bit more.”

For months, Dad had been looking for any excuse to partake in a midlife crisis, and since neither the Corvette nor the nipple ring had proved satisfactory, the nudist colony seemed a logical next step.

“So...we’ll be nudists then?” I asked.

“Naturalists,” he clarified, adjusting his glasses, “we’ll be naturalists, Frankie.”

I nodded as if the distinction was clear.

“You know,” he said, sensing my ignorance, “sort of like nudists, only...closer to nature.”

I didn’t know how much “closer to nature” I wanted to be, especially if the rattlesnake rumors were true.

I stared out the window at the sun-dripped desert.

And then, I buried my hands in my pockets, knowing soon, I’d no longer have the luxury.

\* \* \* \*

Without question, my mother's job as head trainer for the San Antonio Spurs put an unnecessary strain on my parents' already less-than-blissful marriage. Imagine a surplus of multimillion-dollar star-studded athletes continually hitting on the one woman allowed on the court. Thankfully, my father's job as the assistant manager for a post-it note company offered far less marital liability. His decisions rarely involved which blonde bombshell executive to sleep with, and instead, seemed to focus more on what flavored adhesive would appeal most to middle school teachers.

The answer was kiwi-strawberry.

On the surface, we all appeared content with our life's tidy arrangement of post-its and icepacks, adhesives and Ace bandages, though one night at dinner we just stopped being content.

"Well, what would you have done if Damien Markus asked for *your* hand in marriage?" Mom asked, salting her meatloaf.

Dad claimed he'd have said no, that he wasn't "into all that muscle."

"Frankie?" she asked, turning to me.

I dragged a French fry across my plate, told her I guess I'd have to think about it.

"What's to think about?" Mom laughed. "He's in the NBA! You thought we had great seats before, wait till you see where you're sitting next season."

Thanks to my father, the next season I'd most likely be sitting buck-naked on a metal foldout chair, watching the game on a rabbit-eared television, a few saggy-balled senior citizens commentating on either side.

But that first day, when Dad and I pulled into Nature's Bounty, "Southern Texas's #1 Naturalist Community" my

sights were not set on the future. Instead, I was fully immersed in the present, waiting—and dreading—the moment when I would be kindly informed it was time to take off my pants.

\* \* \* \*

The first rule of nudist colonies: Erections are frowned upon.

At least in Nature's Bounty.

"We find it makes the other citizens...squeamish," explained Mayor White. He leaned back, his feet propped up on the desk, proudly displaying his own flaccidness.

"Take me for example," he said, motioning to himself, "exhibit A. And you'd be hard-pressed to find somebody who can remember the last time I made anyone squeamish."

Mayor White winked, then placed his feet on the floor. He leaned forward, hands clasped, asked, "Any questions?"

Dad raised his hand.

"You there in the front row," the mayor chuckled. "I kid. Yes, Ted. What can I do for you?"

"Yes," Dad began, clearing his throat. "Well, I was curious...I mean, I *am* curious... if there are any policies related to...co-mingling...with fellow citizens."

"Are we talking fornication, Ted?" the mayor asked, leaning in close.

*Please don't be talking fornication, Dad.*

"Well, yes," my father chuckled, "I suppose that's the word for it."

"Well, it's a great question, really is," Mayor White agreed, tapping his desk twice before leaning back in his

swivel chair. “And I suppose the short answer is no, there are no rules. As long as you’re a consenting adult and abide by state law, you’re welcome to any partner you can land.”

Dad’s eyes widened and he nudged my ribs.

“Hear that, pal?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Any partner you can land.”

“But easy, cowboy, let’s not count our chickens before they’ve hatched,” White chuckled, standing, his balls plopping to the desk like twin paperweights. “First things first, let’s get you two out of those nasty old clothes, huh? We’ll see where that leads us.”

\* \* \* \*

It was a bit like tearing off a band-aid: The longer you ho-hummed around the more painful it became. Dad had the right idea, removing his pants in a single, fluid motion. He had the grace of a matador.

At 14, I’d had far fewer opportunities to publicly remove my pants and was slightly more hesitant. Not that anyone around us seemed particularly interested in what I had to offer. We’d stepped outside, which gave me full view of a beach volleyball game that had developed a hundred feet away, and closer still, a pair of middle-aged, hairy-reared men flying a kite. Neither group seemed the least bit concerned with me.

“Whenever you feel comfortable, son,” the mayor said, bending down to clear the sand from his flip-flop, exposing a dark cavern of butt hair.

Upon realizing that I probably wasn’t going to feel any more “comfortable” in the next half an hour or so, I reached slowly for my shoe and began the long process of undressing.

With each piece of strewn clothing, I flashbacked to one locker room horror or another—wedgies, purple nurple, testy tickles. I remembered there being something slightly barbaric about the whole situation: Being some kid's lab partner one period and having to share a bar of soap with him the next.

But Nature's Bounty felt different, safer, and while I considered asking Mayor White what percentage of residents suffered from purple nurple, I decided to withhold my question.

I removed my shirt, my pants, and, after taking a deep breath, pulled my plaid boxers down around my ankles, stepped out of them and balled them up in my hand.

"Well? Not so bad, is it?" Dad chuckled, running to introduce himself to the kite-flyers. "Oh, and, Frankie," he called, running backward, balls flopping like a couple of basset hound ears, "let's rendezvous at dinner, huh? I heard it's bratwurst night!"

\* \* \* \*

That night, I wrote Mom a letter:

*Dear Mom,*

*Hey! How are you? How are the Spurs?*

*Things are fine here.*

*Today Dad and I joined a nudist colony.*

*The people are nice, and the mayor wears a cowboy hat and leads everyone in calisthenics after dinner.*

*Tonight, we had bratwursts.*

*They were pretty good.*

*This place has it all—a barbershop, a dentist, even a*

*school. There's this store just down the street from the room Dad and I share where we can pick up Tylenol and rent VHS tapes, though most of them are John Candy movies from the 80s. Remember Summer Rental?*

*It's not as good as everyone says. It's sort of like The Great Outdoors, only with fewer raccoons.*

*Anyway, if you feel like picking me up, please note the return address. I will keep my duffel packed.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Frankie.*

I almost mailed it, I really did, though I doubted it was worth the stamp.

\* \* \* \*

Within the first twenty-four hours of the natural life, Dad managed to blatantly violate the “no erection” policy on at least four separate occasions.

“I can’t help it,” he whined his eyes gazing out at the others. “Honestly, I don’t know how you can help it. You must be some kind of Jedi Knight...”

“Dad, I really got to go,” I said, hoping to simultaneously drop the conversation.

“Where to?” he asked, his privates wagging in my direction. “You find a lucky lady?”

“Dad,” I hissed, “this isn’t some kind of...dating service.” He laughed.

“Who said anything about dating?”

“Well, it’s just that you’ve been sort of...sporting that erection for awhile now.”

“Aww, come on. It’s only natural, son. We’re naturalists.”  
Somebody’s large-breasted mother walked past.  
As if proving his point, his erection returned to full throttle.

\* \* \* \*

The following afternoon, I met a couple girls my age.

“Hey, you’re the new guy,” spouted one of the girls, a brunette (curtains and drapes). “I’m Aimee.”

She held out her naked hand.

“Frankie,” I mumbled, my eyes focused on the sandy ground.

“It’s great to meet you,” she smiled. “Oh, and this is my friend, Vicki.”

“Hi!” Vicki smiled, her braces glinting off the sun. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I nodded, feeling the sweat run down my back, onto my legs.

Under different circumstances, perhaps I might’ve felt some kind of sexual attraction, but at Nature’s Bounty, just saying hello to a girl was kind of like rounding third base.

“So it’s just you and your dad, right?” Aimee asked, placing her arms atop her head, pushing her breasts skyward.

I nodded.

“Which one’s he again?”

*What was I to say? The one with the perpetual erection?*

“Well, he’s sort of got this receding hairline,” I began.  
“It’s sort of grayish.”

“Okay,” Aimee agreed. “Yeah, he sounds familiar.”

I smiled, relieved that he wasn't yet known for any particular appendage.

"So," Aimee continued, brushing back her hair, "what brings you to Nature's Bounty?"

"My Dad...he's sort of having a midlife crisis, I think."

"Yeah, most of these people are," she agreed. Vicki nodded beside her, then scratched her stomach.

"Plus my Mom sort of left him for Damien Markus so..."

"Wait. The basketball player?" Vicki asked. I tried desperately to look her in the eyes, in the braces, anywhere but where I seemed to look.

"Yeah...he plays. For the Spurs."

"Ohmigosh! I love the Spurs!" Vicki cried, bouncing up and down. "Think you can get us tickets?"

"Sure, probably," I agreed.

And then, an afterthought:

"But we'd have to wear some clothes."

No one said anything, and, red-faced, I began wondering if I'd violated some unspoken rule:

*Thou shall not draw attention to thy nakedness.*

Finally, Aimee burst into laughter, pressing her hand to my arm.

"Oh, Frankie, you're a riot!" she laughed. "You think we'd really waltz around Freeman Coliseum like this?" she asked, running her hand down the length of her body. "Seriously?"

I shrugged, bashful, but figured we probably would.

Nature's Bounty was 300 strong, split nearly 50/50 by gender. Which meant I was gazing upon roughly 300 breasts a day. That's a lot, even for someone at my age. The downside, of course, was that the other 50% of the population was men, which meant that a sultry day at Nature's Bounty roasted more wieners than a hotdog stand.

The population was about two-thirds senior citizens, which didn't leave much eye candy for the rest of us. Still, my father assured me he was "shooting par for the course," forcing me to meet his rotation of flings every night at dinner.

"Now, Deborah," my father began, reaching for his creamed corn. "What exactly was your profession back in Austin?"

"Retail," a busty, middle-aged blonde answered. "But after twenty-years selling blouses and skirts, I realized I didn't much care for them."

"Case and point," my father chuckled, nodding to her chest.

She laughed too, and my dad slugged me on the arm while passing the corn.

"Case *and* point," he repeated, nodding first to her breasts and then at what remained hidden between her legs beneath the table. "Good one, huh, Frankie? Who could've guessed your old man was a comedian, huh?"

*Who could have guessed he was a naturalist?*

Yet despite my father's gallivanting and hobnobbing, it was pretty clear he wasn't yet over my mother. Some nights after calisthenics with Mayor White, we'd grab the fishing poles and head toward the lake, and while he never brought her up directly, she was always on his mind.

"Think the Spurs will make it to the playoffs next season?" he'd ask, casting out into the water.

And what was I to say except, "Yeah sure, I hope so."

\* \* \* \*

*Dear Mom,*

*Hi. How are you? Is Damien's knee any better?*

*Dad and I are fine. We moved to this nudist colony a few weeks back, but it's not so bad. We play a lot of Marco Polo in the lake, and they're organizing a beach volleyball tournament for next week, which should be fun.*

*I've made a couple of friends, but mostly we just walk around and try not to look at the old people. I've found myself staring off into the lake quite a bit lately, mainly because there aren't any balls out there, only buoys.*

*Down the street from the room Dad and I share there's a video rental store, but the selection's pretty bad. I've now watched "Summer Rental" 17 times and it's still just average.*

*It seems like The Great Outdoors has been checked out forever.*

*Also, if you ever make it down this way, feel free to drop by. I'd be happy to go with you.*

*For good.*

*I'll keep my duffel packed, just in case.*

I had a stamp, so I mailed it.

\* \* \* \*

The next day (like every day before), I woke to Mayor White's voice booming from the loud speaker.

"Rise and shine, folks! Another bea-u-ti-ful day here in lovely Nature's Bounty. We're looking at a scorching 88 degrees so please be sure to rub sunscreen in every nook and

cranny. And I mean *every* nook and cranny, people. Never can be too safe. If you don't believe me, go take a look at Carl Danby's backside. The man's a lobster, folks. Full-fledged crustacean."

Dad groaned, stumbling from his bed in full pajamas. He pulled off his shirt, his pants and started out the door.

"Come on, Frankie, rise and shine," he called. "It's time to get undressed..."

Most days Aimee, Vicki and I would shoot baskets beside the shuffleboard courts.

"So what? Is Damien Markus like your stepdad or something?" Aimee asked, taking a jumper. The ball thunked off the rim, shot to the left.

"I don't know. I guess," I shrugged, retrieving it. "I mean, I'm not sure if they're married yet."

"But if they are...then he's your stepdad. I mean, that's what it would mean," Vicki clarified.

I nodded, going in for the lay-up.

The rim rejected me.

"Man," Aimee joked. "Seeing as Damien Markus is your stepfather and all, I figured you'd be a better baller."

"Yeah, well, you have to remember *that* guy is my biological father," I explained, nodding to Dad off in the distance, wagging his erection at people like a divining rod.

"Maybe it's some kind of abnormality," Vicki suggested, eyeing it from afar. "Maybe he has too much...Viagra in his diet."

"Nah," Aimee shrugged. "They're always like that at first, overly friendly. For the first month or so, my Dad was just constantly...it was just constant."

I nodded.

“But I see you’re doing a pretty good job,” Vicki commented, nodding to my privates. “I mean, you seem to be keeping things under control for the most part. That’s really awesome.”

There were only so many ways to respond.

“Thanks,” I told her, placing the ball over my crotch, “for noticing.”

\* \* \* \*

One evening directly following calisthenics, a Land Rover screeched into the parking lot, sending the dust sprawling.

“Unexpected visitors,” Mayor White smiled, adjusting his cowboy hat.

They were more than a little unexpected.

Dad was sipping his iced tea and talking to Deborah outside the dining room when I spotted my mother and all six feet nine inches of Damien Markus emerging from the vehicle.

“So anyway, it’s all in the swing, really,” Dad informed Deborah, demonstrating the perfect golf drive. “You see, the trick is to really get your center of gravity low, really hunker down. And then...”

“Dad,” I whispered, tapping his shoulder.

“...but honestly, it’s all in the follow through anyway. Here, allow me to demonstrate,” he said, putting down his iced tea.

“Dad...”

“Yeah, Frankie?” he asked, turning.

“Mom’s here.”

“Pardon?” he asked, cupping his ear.

“Mom’s here. And Damien.”

He shielded his eyes from the blearing sun.

“Huh,” he shrugged, spotting them. “How do you like that?”

Then, he returned his attention to Deborah. “Now anyway, hon, about that follow through...”

\* \* \* \*

Apparently there was a surplus of Spurs fans at Nature’s Bounty, though you’d never know it—there are only so many ways to support the team when your apparel is limited to skin.

“Damien,” whispered the star struck Vicki, walking up to him, nipples hardening. “Think I could get an autograph?”

Damien glanced behind him for paparazzi, then put his hands in the air and took a few steps back, just in case.

“How ‘bout I mail you one?” he offered.

“Frankie!” Mom called, running toward me. Her face dropped upon viewing me from a full frontal perspective.

“Oh, boy,” she said, focusing on the ground. “Think you could throw some pants on, sweetie?”

My face reddened—the color was beginning to grow on me—and I reached for Dad’s iced-tea and held it over my privates, a temporary solution.

“I just got your letter,” she whispered, coming hesitantly closer. “I’m so sorry, Frankie, I would have come sooner but...”

“You know, hon,” Dad cut in, strutting toward her. “It’s great you’re here and all, but...no gawkers allowed. Sort of a

rule. We find it 'builds barriers,' he explained, flashing quotation marks in the air. "You got to strip down to stick around. That's what we always say."

Dad glanced Damien for the first time.

"Oh, look! What a pleasant surprise!" Dad exclaimed. "Ted Jacobson," he introduced himself, offering a hand. "I'm Maggie's husband."

"Ex-husband," Mom corrected.

"Already?" Dad asked, surprised. "Has the paperwork gone through?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"So listen, can I get either of you an iced tea or something?" Dad asked. "Got one right here," he said, reaching for the one covering my crotch. I leapt beyond his reach, splashing everywhere.

"We're here for Frankie," Mom cut in. "That's all. We received his letter about how you've been holding him hostage so..."

Dad shot me a look.

"I never actually used the word hostage," I explained. "I was just telling her about *Summer Rental* and then the next thing I knew..."

"Let's not make this any harder than it has to be," Mom interrupted. "I don't want to have to bring in the police."

"Police?" Dad laughed. "What for?"

She waved her hand around.

"Well...clearly, this is some form of neglect..."

"Neglect?" Dad asked, his penis pointing accusatorily at her. "But *you're* the one who left *us*."

She quieted, then whispered, "Frankie, grab your things. We'll meet you in the Land Rover."

She turned to stalk off, though she didn't get far.

A few hundred naturalists had gathered to observe the commotion. Some of the older men were eating ice-cream cones, dripping all over their hairy stomachs while leaning on shuffleboard poles.

"Oh, no," Dad said, noticing his audience. "You are not taking my son away that easily. I'll...fight for him."

He puffed his chest out at Damien.

Damien gave my mother a, "Do I really have to kill your ex-husband?" look, but she refused to meet his stare.

"One-on-one," Dad continued, jabbing a finger to Damien's chest. "First to 21. Ones and twos."

Damien shot my mother another look, and shrugging, removed his warm-up jacket.

"Mayor White," Dad called, motioning him over. "You mind leading me in a few calisthenics?"

The mayor beamed, so proud, in fact, that his ball pouch nearly leapt into his stomach.

"It would be an honor," he whispered, placing his hands on Dad's shoulders. "Let's start'er out with a couple of wind-mills."

\* \* \* \*

My father lost 21-2, sinking a lucky two-pointer from the edge of the court in the final seconds.

His eyes were closed.

I think he even landed in some shrubbery.

Nevertheless, the crowd went wild, genitalia jiggling, breasts wavering like synchronized swimmers.

Dad didn't have much in the way of offense, but his defense proved virtually unstoppable. His penis functioned like some kind of full court press, and when fully extended, cut off quite a few drives to the basket. Damien had a real problem being tightly guarded by a 220-pound naked man, so he didn't get a lot of great shots off, regardless. The game dragged on far longer than it should have; Dad calling fouls for things like "anal interference" and "testicle tugs" and bending over to tie his shoe every chance he got. Still, Damien managed to string together the necessary points to win me back my freedom.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Nature's Bounty could hardly believe their good fortune. A performance by Damien Watson in *their* colony! Just wait until the other colonies heard!

That evening, Dad became the town hero—not for winning valiantly against great odds, but for luring Damien Markus to Nature's Bounty in the first place.

"How do you know him again?" all the old men asked, pulling the wax from their ears. "Second cousins, ya say? Once removed?"

Dad didn't bother getting into the hairy details.

Mayor White insisted we take an "all colony photo" to commemorate the event, and before they could stop it, Mom and Damien found themselves surrounded by 300 breasts, 150 wieners.

"Everybody smi-iiiiile!" White cried, centering us in the viewfinder.

We did. Everybody did.

Everybody but Mom and Dad.

\* \* \* \*

As dusk approached, the three of us took a walk around the lake while Mayor White tossed an arm around Damien, insisting on giving him “the grand tour.”

“It’ll be fun,” he chuckled, adjusting his cowboy hat. “We’ll show you every last nook and cranny.”

The colony swarmed just a few feet behind them, making escape virtually impossible, even for a professional athlete.

“Frankie,” Mom began, staring off into the water, “you’re certain you want to stay here?”

It’s hard to say what won me over; the courtside seats just no longer seemed all that important.

“I mean, just for the summer,” I explained.

I’d slipped on a pair of boxer briefs, which slightly lessened the awkwardness.

“I’m in that beach volleyball tournament and all. Vicki and Aimee are counting on me...”

“Who are Vicki and Aimee?” she asked.

“His girlfrieeeeends...” Dad sang.

I shook my head no, which seemed to calm her.

“You know, we’d love to have you around, too,” Dad hinted. “I could use a girlfriend myself. Just take off your clothes, stay awhile, all the shuffleboard you can shake a stick at.”

“No. Thanks,” Mom rolled her eyes. “I’ll leave you to your nudists.”

“Naturalists,” he corrected, draping an arm around her. “We’re naturalists, hon. But close.”

“You call this natural?” she asked, freeing herself from him, pointing to the naked crowd hovering around her superstar fiancé in the distance.

“Well, at least it’s honest,” he countered. “No one’s hiding anything here.”

Mom shook her head and Dad gripped her still-clothed shoulders.

“Hey, Mags, listen to me. That two-pointer I sunk, it was for you. For our family.”

“Oh, the one you made with your eyes closed?”

Dad shrugged.

“Call it fate.”

Mom refused to call it anything.

“Ted, you lost 21-2,” Mom reminded, biting back her grin.

“Well, it’s not my fault Damien got called for penis perusal on six different occasions,” he said, raising his arms in the air. “I mean, come on! It was flagrant! You saw that!”

I laughed.

My father the comedian.

My father the naturalist.

“See? Even Frankie thinks it’s funny!” Dad laughed, clapping his hands. “Even Frankie knows a flagrant penis perusal when he sees one.”

Ignoring him, Mom peered down, sweeping the sand back and forth over her feet.

“So, what do you say?” Dad asked quietly. “Take off your clothes, stay awhile...”

She didn’t answer.

He attempted a smile, though it came out all wrong.

Still, I knew he meant it.

I could tell by the humble look on his face, his erection at full salute.

# The Affliction

---

by C. Dale Young  
from *Guernica*

No one would have believed Ricardo Blanco if he had tried to explain that Javier Castillo could disappear. What was the point in trying to explain it to someone, explain how he had seen it himself, how he had watched as Javier Castillo stared deeply as if he were concentrating, and then, slowly, disappeared? Ricardo always began the explanation in the same way, by stating that it wasn't a sudden thing, that no, no, it was a gradual thing that took sometimes almost as long as three minutes.

Ricardo was an odd man. He wanted to believe Javier Castillo was a god of some kind. But Ricardo did not believe in gods. He did not even believe in Christmas, angels, or miracles. He even found it difficult to believe in kindness. And yet, he had left his wife and family to follow this man, this Javier Castillo, a man he knew little about. What he did know about Javier Castillo was that he possessed an "affliction." This is the word Javier Castillo used to describe his ability to disappear. An affliction. Ricardo wanted to believe that, but he could not find it in himself to believe. What he felt for Javier Castillo was a kind of envy. And maybe, somewhere inside his messed-up head, Ricardo believed that the longer he was around Javier Castillo the more likely he, too, would gain the ability to disappear.

But Javier Castillo... Yes, the really surprising thing about Javier Castillo was not the disappearing act. Anyone can disappear. What was remarkable about the disappearances was the fact that Javier Castillo had control over where

he reappeared. I cannot be certain when he first demonstrated to Ricardo his “affliction,” but I can piece together that it must have been early, some time within a few days of their first meeting. Did he demonstrate it? Or did Ricardo simply catch him in the act? I’ll never really know. What I know is that Javier Castillo had explained to Ricardo that as a child he had moved from Mexico City to Los Angeles, how one night, as he lay in bed, he wanted to be back in Mexico City so badly he closed his eyes and tried to imagine being there. He thought, for a minute, that he could actually see the City, the Old Square. And when he opened his eyes, he was lying on a ledge. He was lying on the lip of the fountain in the center of the Old Square, the fountain cascading over the flowering tree of sculpted concrete down into the shallow pool next to him. He thought the warm night was a dream. He thought he was having a spectacular dream. But he was not dreaming. He was there in the Old Square, the old men strolling around smoking and talking slowly, others leaning against walls beside doorframes like awkward flamingos, one leg firmly planted on the ground, the other leg bent at the knee so that the bottom of the shoe was affixed to the wall behind them. And when he sat up, when Javier Castillo sat up, nothing changed. It wasn’t a dream at all. It was anything but a dream.

Ricardo recounted how when he first heard this story he had closed his own eyes trying to imagine another town. But all Ricardo saw when he closed his eyes was the bluish white glow of the light bulb he had been staring at before he closed his eyes. There was the ring or impression of the bulb on the inside of his eyelids, but nothing more. He could see no other place. The round bluish-white mark on the inside of his eyelids was not even perfectly round. It was hazy and indistinct. It seemed to be disappearing. The light bulb was disappearing, but nothing else was. Ricardo had never been outside of

the Los Angeles area. He had never gone anywhere except to work at the body shop and to work at LAX and, eventually, to the town in the Valley where Javier Castillo had been living. He could not picture any other place at all.

The recollection of the first time Javier Castillo disappeared stayed with Ricardo. How could it not? He returned to that story over and over. He couldn't help it. He could hear Javier Castillo describing what had happened to him; hear his voice in his head. He replayed the situation over and over of opening one's eyes and seeing not one's bedroom but a square in Mexico City. But it was not because of the oddity of what had happened—the disappearance, the reappearance—but because Javier Castillo had not been afraid. Ricardo knew that if such a thing had happened to him as a young boy, he would have been terrified. He knew that he would have sat in the Old Square crying and wondering how he would ever find his way back to his family in Los Angeles. He knew he was not the kind of man that Javier Castillo was, that he was afraid of being alone. And being in another city surrounded by people you didn't know was essentially being alone. Ricardo needed people, and he needed to know things. And, apparently, this was not something Javier Castillo cared about, not even remotely. Even then, thirty years after his first disappearance, Javier Castillo had no understanding of his affliction. He could not explain how it happened. He simply knew he could do it. And this knowledge was enough for him. It was, after all, his affliction, and he knew he had no other choice than to live with it.

Ricardo had married the girl next door, or so he liked to tell people. His parents had him marry the daughter of their best friends. She was beautiful, but she was not gorgeous. There was no better way of describing her. To describe her black hair or the color of her skin would be pointless. To describe the softness of her voice and compare it to water was

pointless. What was important was that she was a beautiful woman, and he had walked out on her. On some days, Ricardo wondered what she was doing, wondered if his two sons were being good for their mother. He felt certain they were not being good. They were boys, and he knew boys at their age were trouble or about to be trouble. They couldn't help it. It was not as if they chose to cause trouble; they just did. And his wife—she wanted those boys to be good, which in her eyes meant good in school, good at sports, good at something. But they would never be good in school. They would never understand why school was important. They would never be good at most things. They wanted to be old enough to drive a truck, to be able to drive to the edge of town and get high. Ricardo understood this. He had been a boy like them. He knew what it was like to get stoned and curse the sky because it was getting dark too quickly. He knew what it was like to smoke until the dryness in the desert became the dryness in your throat. He was no Javier Castillo, and neither were his sons.

Ricardo had watched Javier Castillo disappear many times. In many ways, he had studied this affliction, timed it. He visited the library once to look through books on physics. Sitting in the stacks on the newly installed carpets, the fumes from them like a tranquilizing gas, he had tried to read them. None of them had any information on this means of travel, or none that he could make out from the photos and diagrams. That Javier Castillo could fade away, find himself somewhere else, Ricardo was fairly certain. Javier Castillo had told him how during his teens he had gone to Singapore, French Polynesia, Egypt. It was then Ricardo really discovered the extent of Javier Castillo's affliction. He would go to other places for a few hours or a few days. He had spent an entire week in Toronto wandering through Chinatown. Ricardo knew this but could not believe it. Ricardo felt the

overwhelming need to test Javier Castillo. He needed something more than observation of the disappearing act and the stories then recounted to him later. He needed proof. And so, one afternoon, Ricardo wrote four numbers on a piece of paper and left it on the chest of drawers in the bedroom. He was convinced the numbers, which he had seen on television, were clues to picking the right horse. He convinced Javier Castillo to go to the horse races that afternoon. Shortly after finding their seats, Ricardo told Javier Castillo about the numbers, that he had written them down but had forgotten to bring the paper with him, that he needed them and couldn't remember them. Javier Castillo excused himself. He went into the men's room, entered a stall, locked the swinging door, and disappeared. When he reappeared in the stall a moment later, he went to find Ricardo. While at the house, Javier Castillo had written the numbers down on the back of his hand with the black sharpie marker left next to the scrap of paper Ricardo had forgotten, the marker left there intentionally by Ricardo. And when he showed Ricardo all four numbers on the back of his hand, Ricardo said nothing. Ricardo didn't even say thank you. Ricardo wondered why Javier Castillo had written the numbers on the back of his hand instead of simply bringing the piece of paper back with him. Surely this meant something about the affliction. Surely a clue was to be found in this action, the paper still on the chest of drawers but the numbers retrieved and inscribed upon his hand.

Ricardo never knew what to say to Javier Castillo. Can you blame him? I wouldn't know what to say to a man who could disappear. But in Ricardo's case, it wasn't that he couldn't find the words. It was just that Ricardo never felt the words would be taken seriously. Why ask a question? Why try to discuss things? Javier Castillo always seemed to know the answers. I would have had many questions for Mr.

Castillo, I think. I would have spent far too much time wondering about how it all worked. But Ricardo? Ricardo wondered if the affliction gave Javier Castillo special knowledge beyond that of travel, if somehow, when in that space between disappearing and appearing, there were answers. But this thought was too complicated and Ricardo, despite trying to formulate the right questions, simply remained silent. What he said to Javier Castillo, instead, was something about dinner. In the dimly lit Italian restaurant, the backs of his arms sticking to the fake leather booth, Ricardo stared at Javier Castillo, smiled, but said nothing. Ricardo thought about ordering pasta, the one that looked like little ears, but he didn't know what they were called. Javier Castillo ordered that pasta for Ricardo without a single word passing between them. Yes, somewhere in that space between disappearing and appearing, there must have been answers, but Ricardo had no idea how one reached such a place without the affliction. Ricardo worried that one day Javier Castillo would go in search of answers and never return.

Ricardo first met Javier Castillo while working his evening shift at LAX. Ricardo worked a second job each evening as a skycap. In the gray space of the baggage claim, in the gray space of the check-in area, Ricardo had watched face after gray face arriving and departing. Javier Castillo was there to see his aunt off. Ricardo watched him the way he watched all people who were at LAX but neither arriving nor departing by plane. Accessories to travel, Ricardo had thought, accessories. They were not really people but means of transportation to or from the airport for these other people who were traveling by plane. Even years later, Ricardo could not explain why he continued to stare at Javier Castillo that night. It was not that Javier Castillo was a handsome man. He was, in many ways, rather ordinary in appearance. Javier Castillo had looked at him and said "Buenas noches."

They began to talk. Ricardo noticed the way in which Javier Castillo's eyes were dark, a dark brown flecked with gray. That Javier Castillo had spoken to him in Spanish didn't bother Ricardo. Many people spoke to him in Spanish, could tell from his face and dark skin that he was of Mexican descent. They exchanged small talk, nothing remotely exciting. And despite this, Ricardo had felt his heart panic in his chest. Ricardo left the airport with him. He never went back. He never went home. He never called his wife and family. He couldn't think of what to say or how to explain Javier Castillo to them. He left the airport with him and drove for hours. In a corner of his mind, he believed he was being abducted, but he had not been abducted. He had asked Javier Castillo if he could come with him. And in the sun visor mirror, Ricardo noticed his own eyes were a different color green. His eyes were more of a dark forest green, darker than the usual pale green he had seen in the mirror all of his life.

Once, after almost three years of living with Javier Castillo, Ricardo felt the sudden urge to press his hand through him just before he completely faded away. He wanted to see if he would also start disappearing. The affliction. What must it have felt like? Could Javier Castillo actually feel himself dissolving? The hands, finger by finger? But Ricardo knew that when Javier Castillo disappeared, he did so evenly. It was not as if the chest dissolved leaving the heart exposed and beating. He just slowly faded into a shimmer, and then a shadow, and then air. It was gradual. There would be a man, and then a man seen through but still there, and then the dingy, yellowed wallpaper clinging to the wall behind where Javier Castillo had been standing. Dingy and dirty: the wall would suddenly be more sharply in focus, its browning yellow like the nicotine-and-tar-stained filter after smoking a cigarette. And though Ricardo had no explanation, he knew the disappearing happened faster at times,

slower at others. He wanted to pass his hand through the shadowy Javier Castillo, the one about to become air. But he could never get himself to do it. Javier Castillo was always watching him carefully, and Ricardo feared that Javier Castillo knew what he was thinking.

What must such a life be like? Think about it. To live with a man half shadow, half something, something that you could not explain to someone else, much less yourself? Even after three years of living with Javier Castillo, after lying in the one bed next to him night after night, after sitting out on the balcony and smoking cigarettes watching the smoke coil into shapes that only disappeared, Ricardo did not understand Javier Castillo. Ricardo never asked any questions. He just didn't know how to do so. He simply lived there, simply existed. He did not work. He did not worry about money or his wife and sons. The time simply passed, and the man known as Javier Castillo moved in and out of air. And finally that day arrived, the day that Ricardo could not recall with any great detail—Javier Castillo faded away and did not return.

Ricardo thought nothing of it at first. A week passed, and then a month. Ricardo had no money to pay the light bill or the utilities. He had no money to pay for anything. He had never questioned the fact that Javier Castillo always had money, was always able to pay for anything they needed. Two whole months passed before Ricardo realized Javier Castillo was not coming back. Without electricity, Ricardo walked around the dark house occasionally flipping switches to see if something would happen. The air was still most nights, the heat of the desert coming in through the windows carried along by the echoing howls of the coyotes hunting the nearby canyon. Ricardo was alone and without a dime. Within a day or two, he began to wander the streets. He did not remember how to go home, and he wasn't sure how he

would get back to Los Angeles. He wandered into the parking lot of the Travel Lodge just as I was stepping out of my rental car. I don't usually talk to homeless people. It isn't that I am afraid of them, but that I have no idea what to say to them. But Ricardo's eyes were green, that dark forest green, and he looked haunted. I don't really remember what I said to him, but he followed me, asked me if he could come up to my hotel room to take a shower, promised me he would not rob me. I have no idea why I agreed. He showered and then came into the room and sat staring off into space. I offered him some whiskey, and we sat and drank it. I told him stories I had heard in my years of traveling as a salesman, told him stories of the small island in the Caribbean where I had grown up, the people there, the way we swore the cats were spies. We sat in our jockey shorts and t-shirts drinking whiskey. We lapsed into and out of Spanish. It seemed as if we had known each other for a very long time.

Over the past three years, I have heard much about Javier Castillo, too much, really: the disappearing, the timing of it, the various places he had visited. I have never actually seen Javier Castillo, but there are times when I feel quite certain I know what he looks like. And Ricardo, though he never says so, sits sometimes staring at the chair in my bedroom as if waiting for Javier Castillo to appear. Do I believe in gods? In angels, in miracles? No. No, I never have. I am more like Ricardo than I want to believe. Before he goes to sleep most nights, Ricardo says the very same thing to me. He says: "Carlos, sleep now. Sleep." Night after night, he says this, says it faithfully. And it makes me wonder if he had instructed Javier Castillo to go to sleep in much the same way. Lately, at night, lying in bed, Ricardo breathing deeply the way he does when he is lying down, I cannot sleep. I find myself staring at the empty chair. I half-expect Javier Castillo to appear. I would love to be able to say I just want to make

sure the chair is empty or, at most, the place where I left one of my old pairs of jeans. “Carlos, sleep now. Sleep,” Ricardo says. But falling asleep is the least of my concerns. I know I will sleep eventually, much the way I know that one day soon I might... I am concentrating so hard. I am concentrating on another place, another town. “Carlos, sleep now. Sleep.” Yes, maybe I could disappear. Vanish, gone, in thin air, nothing left but the room, the bed, the chair. But I am no Javier Castillo, right? I am definitely not like Javier Castillo.

# Bad Cheetah

---

by Andy Henion  
from *Word Riot*

My mother, in bra and pantyhose, is kicking another man out of her life, only this one we like. His name is Roland Reynolds but everyone calls him Cheetah: a tall, easygoing long-hauler with big cats on his forearms. He sits with a sleepy smile on his face and his feet up on the recliner as my mother rages, her finger inches from his handsome face.

Cheetah, it seems, has offended.

“That shit may fly with the truckstop crowd,” my mother crows, “but not with me, asshole.”

My best friend Gordon and I watch the carnage thigh-to-thigh from the couch. Gordon is enjoying this immensely, I know, based on the fact that my mother is panty-free under the flesh-colored hose. When Sarah gets going like this, she’s oblivious to anything but the focus of her wrath.

“Pack your crap and be gone when I get home,” she says. At this point the banished beau typically begs for forgiveness, but Cheetah simply winks in compliance, and Sarah sighs and turns to the sofa.

“Joey, there’s lasagna in the fridge and pop in the garage. Call me if you need me. And Gordon? Quit staring at my crotch, son.”

\* \* \* \*

We’re sharing a joint in my basement bedroom. Cheetah and I sit on the bed while Gordon stands ready with the

crossbow. Lined up against the wall is a series of mannequins from the department store my mother manages. The first six have photos of former boyfriends taped to their plastic skulls and are in various stages of degradation. One has steel wool for pubic hair and a crude vagina carved into its crotch; others are covered in happy faces and swastikas. All are pierced with arrows from the crossbow.

We've attached a digital image of Cheetah's face to Mannequin No. 7. On its arms, in brown and yellow marker, I've replicated the cheetah tattoos. Cheetah squint-eyes my handiwork and christens me a damn fine artist. Gordon pats him on the back and tells him it will be a damn fine honor to perforate his sternum.

Once we finish the jay, Gordon goes into his routine. He raises the weapon, closes an eye and spends long moments regulating his breathing. "I love Sarah Jane Arnold," he whispers finally, and fires an arrow midpoint into the mannequin's torso. Gordon is a crack shot with the crossbow, even stoned.

Cheetah grabs his abdomen and makes a choking sound, falling back on the mattress with a laugh. I survey the damage. The steel tip of the arrow has pierced the cement wall deep enough, I know, to draw moisture. About a year ago I put a padlock on my bedroom door, and so far, at least, Sarah is respecting my privacy. But if she ever gets a wild hair and busts in here and sees the watery, moldy mess we've created, she'll kick my ass, a scenario that causes frequent and extreme consternation. When I'm not baked, that is.

\* \* \* \*

We kill the lasagna and watch reality television well into the afternoon. Then Cheetah takes a private call and proceeds

to invite us along for a ride. He loads his few personal belongings into a box and we pile into his rig, a shiny black Peterbilt with a large compartment for sleeping or, as Gordon surmises, canoodling with truckstop whores. Cheetah laughs and shakes his head. But Gordon has turned serious, the way he does when he's coming down.

"So. Roland. You're pretty blasé for a man been kicked to the curb."

Cheetah's sleepy smile doesn't change. It never seems to change.

"Take life as it comes, Gordo."

This kind of reasoning doesn't hold up for Gordon, I know. He comes from one of those make-your-own-destiny families, with an ultraconservative father who put himself through community college and made a mint in commercial construction. The truth is his old man is wound pretty tight (who gets their kid a freakin' crossbow for his birthday?) and sometimes I think the berry hasn't fallen far from the bush. Gordon gets these singular obsessions and just will not let go. In middle school it was Bruce Lee and all things ninja; for two years solid it's been my mother.

Gordon turns in his seat to face Cheetah. I sit between them, not wanting to be here. I'm not one for confrontation.

"You upset a wonderful woman today," Gordon says. "You screwed the pooch, Long Hair. Perhaps you'd like to bare your soul before it's too late."

Too late for what? I wonder, and apparently Cheetah is thinking the same thing. His brow arches as he smokes a cigarette and works the gearshift.

"Thing you've got to learn," Cheetah says, "is that women like their men dangerous until they show a hint of danger."

"Danger?" says Gordon, and now he's nearly yelling. "And what so-called danger do you—"

“Hey,” I interrupt, “where we going, anyway?”

Cheetah pauses before answering, finishing his cigarette and flicking the butt out the window. Gordon continues glaring but is smart enough, at least for the time being, to keep his mouth shut.

“Gonna see a guy,” Cheetah says, “about a thing.”

\* \* \* \*

Turns out, Cheetah’s guy manages the adult superstore out on Interstate 69. He’s a short, fat specimen with beady eyes behind rose-colored shades and black sideburns that run to his lips. He’s leaning on the counter of the otherwise empty store as we file in.

“Ain’t got much time, friend,” he says. Cheetah spreads his arms and makes a *what-can-I-do* face, and the two of them look down at us.

“Gentlemen,” says the fat man, “we need to talk in private. Help yourself you my personal viewing room.” He sweeps his hand toward a door in the far corner of the store. I shrug and head that way, psyched at the prospects, while Gordon begins his protest.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. If you think I’m—”

I keep moving. Gordon will come eventually. He makes this show of being disgusted by porn, but in the end he’ll sit and watch just about anything you put in front of him, complaining the whole time about the exploitation of women, the end of civilized society, so on, so forth. He used to fuss about weed the same way.

I open the door to a bank of flat screens. One of them has the still image of a bare-chested brunette pointing at someone off-screen. I sit down and hit Play. The brunette is actually

summoning a man and his hardened member while straddling another man on a bed. My cell rings. It's my mother.

"Hey Ma, how was work?"

The brunette puts the man's member in her mouth.

"It's after seven, where the hell are you?"

"With Cheetah." There's no sense lying; Sarah would sniff it out in a heartbeat.

"Oh my fucking god. Where?"

"We're fine Mom, no big—"

"Where, goddammit?"

"At the Tiger Den on 69."

The man grabs the brunette's hair with both hands and pulls her head forward. The brunette gags.

My mother says, "Stay there, I'm sending the cops," and clicks off.

"Jesus Hubert Christ," says Gordon, entering the room. "Look at that filth."

And we do, for several more minutes anyway, until the men reposition the brunette to their liking. Gordon makes a disgusted sound and begins thumbing through a stack of DVDs. I tell him Sarah is sending the cops. "Excellent idea," he says, without looking up. "This place needs to be shut down." I watch more of the movie. The men are doing something to the brunette I didn't know was possible. She howls, though it doesn't sound convincing.

Gordon holds up one of the movies from the stack, eyes bulging.

*"Holy. Mother. Mary."*

I snatch it away. On the cover a naked man resembling Cheetah is embracing another man, also naked, under the title *Backdoor Butlers 4*.

“Could be him,” I say.

“*Could* be? Look at the blessed tattoos.”

Yes, indeed.

“That son of a bitch,” Gordon snarls. “He probably gave Sarah Jane the AIDS.” He pounds a fist on the counter, knocking movies to the floor. “That hippie son of a bitch.”

\* \* \* \*

Cheetah explains the scam as we leave the porn shop. It involves a rich old widow, a bogus contract for a new roof, a huge payment. For an easy hundred, all Gordon and I have to do is wear hardhats and circle the mansion, pointing up and looking dour. Her eyesight is so bad, Cheetah says, the old bag will think we’re seasoned roofers.

Now, I don’t consider myself particularly naïve. In the two months he lived with us Cheetah made only one cross-country run with his rig, yet he was always flush with cash. I knew he was up to something, but swindling old ladies? Man-on-man porn? I almost wish he was dealing.

This is the point where Gordon should be raising holy hell, lecturing Cheetah about responsibility and all that, but the kid’s in a zone: jaw set, fists clenched, eyes locked on the dirt lot. I haven’t seen him this livid since Billy Berbin called his father a Nazi and Gordon got after him with his nunchucks.

He bends to tie a shoe, letting Cheetah get ahead. “We’ll take the work van,” Cheetah says, heading toward a nondescript white vehicle. Gordon rises, takes several long strides and trips Cheetah from behind. He goes hard to the ground and turns with a scowl. I’ve never seen the scowl—it’s menacing, a grownup scowl, a scowl that promises pain—and I wish

suddenly for a customer pulling up, a freak hailstorm, anything.

“You little motherfucker,” Cheetah growls. He stands and advances, and I wonder what Gordon will do now—he’s a foot shorter and stick-thin, but smart, smart enough to have a handful of sand. He does the sand-in-the-eye trick and Cheetah yells and brings his hands to his face, staggering back. Gordon pounces, using the bigger man’s momentum to take him down.

It’s a dreadful sight: Gordon perched on Cheetah’s back flailing his scrawny arms. “*Bad Cheetah*,” he yells with each punch. “*Bad Cheetah*.” Cheetah, meanwhile, is wiping the final bits of sand from his eyes; he’ll be in control momentarily and God knows what he’ll do. A series of thoughts roll through my head. *Did Sarah get through to the cops? Where the hell are they? The old sand-in-the-eye trick really works, no shit. Cheetah has a buck knife on his belt—I hope he doesn’t pull it; we’re only fifteen, for Christ sake. Does he really like it in the ass?*

So here’s my best friend defending my mother’s honor and what am I doing but standing around thinking my idle thoughts, avoiding what should be *my* confrontation, and Cheetah begins to rise with Gordon attached to his neck like a ninety-pound leech. With one arm he reaches back and flips my boy to the ground. Gordon lands hard on his back and immediately clutches at his chest, gasping for air.

Cheetah leans over and spits on him.

I haven’t moved. The entire time, I haven’t moved a goddamn muscle. Cheetah sees the look on my face and sneers.

“Piss your pants, did you?” He moves my way, motioning down at Gordon. “At least *he* got in the game.”

“Yeah? At least I don’t suck cock, porn-man.” I don’t know where this comes from. I feel sick in the chest after I

say it. I prepare to run.

But Cheetah stops, lips parted, eyes wide.

“You don’t know, do you? He laughs. “How precious is this? *He. Doesn’t. Fucking. Know.*”

At this point the fat man sticks his head out the door and says something about a buddy cop of his calling. Cheetah ignores him. His eyes hold mine.

“Your old lady,” he says. “Where do you think I first met her?”

“Fuck you,” I say.

“Cheetah,” says the fat man. “They’re *on their way*. Get those little shits out of here.”

“On the set,” Cheetah says. “I met her on the set.”

“Bullshit,” I say, but I know he’s right. My mother hasn’t always managed a department store, yet we’ve always had the house and food and nice things. I remember her telling me, six or seven years ago, that she entertained people for a living. In my little-kid mind that meant a singer, or even a magician. She never filled in the gap.

The sick feeling has turned to anger. I’m trembling all over.

“That’s right. It was me and three other guys, in fact. You ever hear of a train, son?”

Cheetah makes a crude humping motion. Gordon has made it to his hands and knees and is crawling forward. As he comes to his feet I see blood from a nostril but the same rabid expression. My best friend will never quit.

“*Cheetah—*” says the fat man, but I don’t hear the rest. I take the front, while Gordon takes him from behind.

# Nothings

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by Aaron Block

from *Alice Blue Review*

The Olufsens' annual Accomplishments Exhibition started at 8:30 a.m. when the first movement of a twelve-tone symphony composed by fourteen-year-old Nolan Olufsen sounded from the PA system set-up at the bottom of the driveway and blanketed the neighborhood. The music woke me but not Lyndon, my son, who I found downstairs on the couch, eating a bowl of cereal in front of the TV and holding the invitation to the festivities he'd received a week ago. He was already dressed, in socks and shoes even, his mother's yellow rain jacket folded next to him, which he'd brought from the closet because last night the weatherman said showers were likely in the afternoon.

I put a fried egg between two stale pieces of bread and fielded Lyndon's questions about last year's Exhibition, whether I remembered the potato-mashing machine Dr. Erik Olufsen built from wire and his hand-made, precisely measured gears, or the way Maddy Olufsen sang her husband's songs while standing on the roof, wearing a costume she'd sewn herself from clothes worn by her grandparents when they emigrated to America. I lied and told him sure, I remembered all that and the year before, too. It was Rosanna, his mother, who took him every year, who was better at pretending interest in the neighbors' projects. The invitation was delivered the day after she left. Lyndon made me read it to him three times at dinner, once more before he went to sleep; I knew I'd have to take him.

He was ready to go as soon as I'd finished my sandwich, but I made him wait by the door while I brushed my teeth

and shaved, making sure to get the bristles under my bottom lip that I always miss. While I was at it, I cleaned my ears.

By the time we'd finally crossed the lawn to the exhibition, Nolan's symphony was in its fourth movement: loud, percussive and quick, like a sadistic march. Nolan sat at a table with the score spread out before him, gesturing as he explained to Mrs. Morrison from two streets over how he selected the prime series and what the variations meant. He was blond and tall, like the rest of his family, and spoke clearly without condescension. I pretended to browse through the article about Schoenberg he'd written for context and watched Lyndon walk immediately to Maddy, who smiled and straightened the front of his rain jacket as she put one of the pale, creamy candies she'd made into his hand. He thanked her and turned to look for Dr. Olufsen's table, his favorite because of all the hinges and gears that spun and clicked, and Dr. Olufsen's willingness to let anyone turn the crank, or press the button, to put it all in motion.

I stopped to flirt with the oldest daughter, Ingrid, home from college this weekend just for the Exhibition, despite a fractured tibia that kept her from performing the dance she'd choreographed. She showed me pictures of last semester's recital and tried to explain how her piece was different.

I found Lyndon again by the side of the house where Dr. Olufsen's machines were spinning, accomplishing their simple, worthless tasks, part of a crowd gathered for the demonstration. Everyone laughed as Lyndon pushed a big red button over and over again, which somehow caused a small aluminum basin to fill with water until it tipped and the water turned the wire gear. Dr. Olufsen explained what was happening for everyone, but I couldn't follow. In the end it just made a quarter spin on its side for as long as the button was pressed. The crowd applauded, and Dr. Olufsen thanked my son, called him "our little guest of honor," and shook his hand.

Lyndon had a little league game at noon, so after 30 minutes at the Exhibition we had to go. Maddy and Ingrid both hugged him. Maddy insisted we take more candy, and said to let her know if we wanted a batch all to ourselves.

While Lyndon changed into his uniform I walked from the kitchen to the garage, where the storage boxes I'd bought two weeks ago for Rosanna's clothes were still leaning against the water-heater; bicycles, a ladder, and a few rakes lined one wall, boxes of Christmas decorations another, resting on top of cans half-full of paint that hadn't been touched for five years. I thought I might drop Lyndon at his game and come back to spend the next hour or two taking everything from the living room, kitchen, bathrooms, both of the bedrooms, and dragging it all out here to the garage, so that I could then look at it all and be proud, and show Lyndon, when he came home, exactly what we had. And if it was nothing, we'd be happy to have nothing, and be nothings, the little holes in the road your tires roll right over without a sound.

# Dragon

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by Steve Frederick  
from *Night Train*

Watching his breath steam the frozen air, Wyatt considers tugging loose the tumbleweeds one by one and burning them in a barrel. Weeks of hard frost and winter wind have stuffed the wire fence along his property line with the long nest of tangled debris. After struggling with a few of the prickly spheres he decides instead to burn them where they sit. In his work shed, he finds a can of gasoline and some newspapers. While inside, he lifts a pint of vodka from a drawer and pauses for a few long swallows.

At the fence corner abutting the county road, he wets a corner of the paper with gas and strikes a match, ignites a few of the weeds and steps back. The oily twigs sputter and flare, the fire creeping along the fence like a lit fuse. He drops the smoldering paper, stamps it out, and hustles to the side of the house to get a hose running.

When he turns the faucet handle, the water won't come; it's frozen inside the coils. Pulling the hose straight he's startled by a pop from the gas can, followed by a *whoomp* from the fuel that sends a fireball rolling across the lawn, the heat hitting him in the face and pushing him stumbling backward. Amazed, he watches as the spreading fence fire reaches the dead cedar near the house and climbs the outer branches. In moments, the entire tree erupts with a towering roar.

His wife, Dawnell, runs from the house screaming. Wyatt turns desperate, yanking on the hose in panic. She yells, "Stop it, Wyatt! You idiot!" The hose breaks off the spigot and water streams onto the lawn. "Shut up!" he yells.

Dawnell stands agape, watching the cedar throw off coils of flame, and runs screaming into the house. Wyatt jerks on the broken hose till it saps his energy, then stands helpless, holding the useless end. Derailed by indecision, he considers running for a bucket or an unbroken hose; but instead he lights a cigarette and watches as the fire on the lawn begins to subside.

The blackened fence wire smokes with smoldering strands. The cedar wood crackles and flares, expelling plumes of white smoke. Wyatt feels the abrupt bite of the cold. The stink of the calamity steams from his jacket. He stamps into the house, where Dawnell is breaking down and weeping over the kitchen table. “You stupid, stupid fool!” she wails.

“You take care of it then,” he says. He slams the door, revs his pickup, and throws gravel down the length of the driveway.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours earlier, as the sun cleared the horizon, Wyatt was already pouring bourbon into his morning coffee. The weekend had begun dry and cold. The yard was a mess—Dawnell had been on him about it for days. He had the dead cedar to cut down. He intended to clean everything up. He just needed time to brace himself.

By the time Dawnell got out of bed, he was watching the Discovery Channel, spinning his kid’s globe, taking note of nations that no longer exist. Dawnell stalked into the living room and frowned. “Stop doing that!” she said. “You’ll wear it out. You make me dizzy just watching you.”

“How about a vacation?” he said. “Let’s all go someplace we’ve never been.”

Dawnell rested her fists on her hips. “With what money, Wyatt?” she said, bobbing her head. “You’re always on vacation these days.”

His daughter, Amy, still in her flannel nightie, peered from behind her mother and smiled. Her brown eyes sparkling, she stepped between them and hugged him, squeezing hard. He patted between her shoulders, felt his heart revive, remembering when those eyes filled the tiny universe of her face, when he’d lift her up and her baby legs would curl underneath.

“America’s peacekeeper,” he said, smoothing her hair. “Someday you’ll run the United Nations, little girl.”

The child waited for him to smile. “Let’s have waffles!” she said. She pulled the remote from his lap and changed the channel.

Dawnell’s gaze fell on the bottle. She folded her arms and glared.

Wyatt set his teeth. “What, dammit?”

“You’re off to the races already? I can’t believe this.”

He rose and opened his arms to gather her in, but she edged past him without a word, pulling along Amy, who rolled her eyes and shook her head. Dawnell turned back at him. “You lied to me,” she said, her voice steady and cold.

He hoisted his mug. “About this?”

“About the yard. About everything.”

He bit back his answer, tightening his lips. Amy ducked into her room.

“You want me to just ignore it?” Dawnell asked. “Is that it?”

He raised the glass with a dry smile, as if proposing a toast. “There you go.”

“Not this time, buddy. Not on your life,” she said. “I told you. I fucking warned you. This is it, mister. This is the end.”

He put a palm to his temple and closed his eyes. “Warn, warn, warn. You’re always warning me,” he said, his tongue going thick. “I haven’t done anything,”

“Of course not! That’s the problem, Wyatt. You never do anything,” she said. “You really don’t get it at all, do you?”

She shook her head and turned away toward the kitchen. He followed, pulling his jacket from its hook. “No problem, Dawnell. I’m on it. OK? I’m on it right now.”

Then he went outside, puttered in the shed awhile, and, despite his best intentions, set half the yard ablaze.

\* \* \* \*

Barely slowing for a stop sign, Wyatt turns off the county road and onto the highway. Before the heater has time to kick in, his cell phone rings. He sees his home number on the display, flips the phone open without speaking, and shuts it off. He drives eastward for two hours on the rural highway to Ogallala, smoking cigarettes and talking to himself, and rolls onto Interstate 80 with no destination in mind. The hypnotic four-lane, carrying freight trucks and impatient cross-country travelers, stretches before him, steady and monotonous across the Platte River bottomland. He stops at a convenience store for a quart of beer to pass the time and drives for two more aimless hours, letting a Garth Brooks tape cycle twice before ejecting it and tossing it out the window.

“Bitch,” he says out loud. How could he still be with her after half a decade?

She wasn’t the girl that he’d fallen for, that was certain, not the demure predator that his high-school buddy, Simms,

had dropped into his lap on a double-date road trip to Thermopolis. Dawnell had played all her cards at once—tinted contacts and tight jeans, a gauzy red bra under her thin white T-shirt. She laughed at his jokes, ran crimson nails across his thigh. Along the way, a cold drizzle gave way to heavy snow. Simms's date, using her mother's credit card, booked them all into a room with a fireplace and two beds. Simms took a look outside, yanked off his clothes, and led them, whooping and naked, across the deck to a steaming outdoor tub.

Dawnell floated toward Wyatt in the dark, letting her nipples brush his thighs. "I won't tell if you won't," she whispered. Wyatt tipped back a jug of lukewarm chablis and then held it to Dawnell's lips.

"The snow's piling up on your head," he said.

"That's good," she replied, her hands busy under the water. "Otherwise, I'd be naked."

Two months later they married, embryonic Amy tagging along on the honeymoon.

\* \* \* \*

Wyatt turns on his cell phone and pecks out a number. "Simms, you wild man!" he says. "I'm on my way. Get your ass to Swede's tonight and buy me a beer."

Wyatt slaps himself to sharpen his wits. A night on the town might lift his spirits. But the sun's still high overhead and already he's wearing down. He pulls off the interstate at a truck stop, heaps two cold donuts onto a napkin and fills a quart-sized soft-drink cup full of coffee. He leaves the busy freeway, crosses the shallow Platte, and turns east onto the Lincoln Highway. The old two-lane runs parallel to the interstate, threading tiny heartland towns, alongside barns

pitched askew by prairie wind, fenced country headstones sticking up like bad teeth. Wyatt passes a corral of tiny burros huddled beneath the sunburst vanes of a gray wooden windmill, among them a forlorn zebra, chilled and mystified, half a globe gone from the Serengeti.

\* \* \* \*

Wyatt had found himself baffled by how marriage had transformed his life. He'd quit pounding nails, hired a crew and advertised himself as a contractor. Simms became "that goddamn buddy of yours." Dawnell took a job in town, worked late keeping Wyatt's books.

When the time had come for Dawnell to deliver Amy, she cramped and cursed for 16 hours. Wyatt held the baby first, marveling at her downy lightness, the way her gray skin filled with pink before his eyes. "That's it for me," Dawnell groaned. "You're doing the next one."

At Dawnell's insistence, he had a vasectomy. A year later, in the throes of intimacy, he agreed to have it reversed. On the evening after the second operation, alone in the bathroom, he dabbed at his twice-bruised scrotum with a chilling washcloth and taped gauze alongside each testicle. He hobbled to the bedside, rolled in gingerly, and rested his head in his hand, tracing the curve of Dawnell's hip with his fingertips. Even in sleep, she recoiled from his touch.

In time, Wyatt learned to cook and clean with inept fervor, changed messy diapers, memorized toddler doggerel featuring brown bears and velveteen rabbits. But after Simms left town to find work, Wyatt's drinking hit high gear. He held boozy poker games in the work shed with Dawnell's brother Coyd and anyone else who'd show up. An all-night game brought an end to that. Sneaking into the house, he

crunched a wooden flute under his heel. Dawnell, who'd given it to Amy as a present, spat curses. Amy howled until Wyatt promised her he'd buy her anything, anything she wanted. The bawling stopped. She pulled tiny fists from her eyes and smiled.

"I want waffles," she said. They'd laughed then and eaten waffles together at the kitchen table, winter closing in, steam fogging the windows.

With the card games banished, Wyatt began drinking alone in the work shed. Coyd, who had joined the sheriff's department, nearly lost his job for driving him home unticketed after a minor crash. After Dawnell insisted that he dry out, Wyatt sat her down to tell her what he'd learned. She poured herself a cup of tea and settled in to listen.

"If it wasn't beer, it'd be something else," he said, going over a theory he'd been developing. "Everybody's addicted to something—drugs, medicines, food, even religion. That might be the worst one of all. Even some old-timer who spends all day carving wooden ducks doesn't give a shit about carving or ducks. Sometimes it's because he watched an army buddy blown to bits in front of his eyes."

Dawnell stirred her tea. "Fair enough," she said. "Let's talk about your reasons."

In an instant the notion came unstrung. Try as he might, he couldn't think of a single one.

\* \* \* \*

Along Wyatt's route, the broken towns linger in their dreary infirmity, each with its unkempt wooden churches, erector-set water towers and long-abandoned five-and-dimes. When he reaches Crane Prairie he turns at its single

traffic light and idles into the crumbling downtown. All but a few of the quaint brick buildings are boarded up, the commerce moving south long ago with the coming of the Interstate. Pickups fill the spaces around Swede's Steakhouse. Inside, a menagerie of mounted beasts, all horns and fangs, peers down from the walls. A mountain goat sports Ray-Bans, a cigarette tucked in its hardened lips. The bartender draws Wyatt a foamy beer.

Hours later, Simms enters with a flourish, tossing back the hood of a fur-trimmed parka, stamping snow from his boots. "Damn! The stuff you see when ya ain't got a gun," he yells. Farmhands and implement peddlers and big-haired women look toward Wyatt, who feels a sudden chill, imagines himself in their cross-hairs. Simms throws an arm around Wyatt, introduces Darla, tall and square-shouldered, her Nordic presence magnified by a red down duster and riding boots. Wyatt needs a long glance to take her all in.

Simms grins. "Where's the little woman?" he asks.

"Home with the kid. Just passing through. Wondering what you were up to these days."

The three take a booth, where a robust barmaid deposits a pitcher and frosted mugs. Simms pours a round, his eyes swimming as if he's already had a few, and starts telling stories. Darla hangs her coat and scarf on the rack of an elk, drapes a thick blond braid alongside dramatic cleavage.

"I got pissed off this morning and decided to get the hell out," Wyatt says. "I don't know what's going to hit me when I get home."

Simms laughs and slaps the table. Darla eyes him sideways, runs a finger around the rim of her glass. "This fool could have had all the chicks," Simms tells her. "Look at him. Had to fall for the first one I fixed him up with."

They finish one pitcher, then another. Cold creeps in the doorway as the place fills up. Darla feeds the jukebox and pulls Simms to his feet to shuffle with her around the hardwood floor, lifting his hand from her ass when he starts clowning. Wyatt backs against the wall, stretches a leg across the seat, his appetite gone. He notices a woman, thin and wiry, wearing a leather jacket and sweatpants. She stands with her back to the glowing woodstove, wine glass in hand. Her raven hair is thick and bunched, her dark, narrow face obscured by owlish glasses. Darla steps out of Simms's grasp and leans toward her to whisper. When the song ends, they bring her to the table. "Wyatt," says Simms with a wink, "this here's Mel."

Wyatt, revived, hears himself introduced as Simms's lifelong buddy, a big-shot contractor. He banters with Mel and buys tequilas all around, and when Simms and Darla rise to dance again he nudges her from the booth. The floor crowds quickly, and he slides his hand to the small of her back. She gives a jerk and mashes against him. "Whoa!" she says, "Sorry. I've been getting a tattoo and it's still a little tender back there."

She grabs his wrist, drops his hand lower. "That side's OK," she says, catching his eye, pressing against him during the dance, her perfume lingering under his chin after the music stops.

Wyatt orders another round and pulls Mel into the booth beside him. He lights a cigarette and shakes the match until it smokes. When turns to Mel, she's holding a cigarette and waiting. His matchbook's empty.

Darla holds a lighter across the table, "Here you go, Melania," she says.

"Melania?" Wyatt says, looking her over. "That's one I never heard before."

“It’s Spanish,” Mel says, her dark eyes steady and expressionless.

“I get it now,” he says, nodding. “Kinda like Melanie then. It’s a pretty name.”

“Not Melanie,” she says, pulling the empty matchbook from his hand and writing her name in capital letters, handing it to him to read. “MELANIA,” she repeats. As he’s reading, she plucks the matchbook away, lowers her eyelids and scribbles some more—a phone number under the name—and hands it back. Wyatt smiles and tucks it into his pocket. Later, on the dance floor, he lets his cheek rest against hers. His breath stops; he’s never cheated on Dawnell. Mel brushes her lips across his. “Let’s go get some air,” she whispers.

They jog through a biting wind to her Suburban. She drives a few blocks and parks in the shadows of a railroad overpass, leaving the motor on to run the heater. From a kit in the glove box she sorts out some gadgets and stuffs a brass pipe with a pinch of marijuana. Soon he’s giddy and daring, tasting tequila and smoke on the tip of her tongue.

“Can I see it?” he whispers. She draws back and looks up at him. “The tattoo,” he says. “What is it?”

She turns her back toward him and slides up her blouse, revealing the coils of an ornate dragon. Feeling daring, he presses her shirt even higher, unhooks her bra, encounters a swirl of vivid hues and scaly ferocity. Her welted skin rises under a green leg and a row of demonic fingers tipped with curved black claws. He’s never touched a tattoo, never seen one this close. “My god!” he says. “How far does it go?”

She takes off her glasses, turns on the overhead light, gets her knees under her and slips down the sweatpants, revealing a curling reptilian tail adorning her right buttock. “That’s amazing,” he says, tracing the outline with his finger.

“Hurry,” she whispers, wagging her hips, pressing against him. “It’s cold.”

“Here?” he says.

She looks back at him, her face inverted, framed in her armpit. The dashboard lights glitter in her eyes. “We can’t go to my house,” she says. “I got kids.”

Wyatt slips out of his jacket, pulls at his belt, loosens the buckle. The dragon appears to writhe on the dusky canvas of her skin. Wyatt’s throat tightens. Bursts of light fill his eyes, and he slumps backward against the door.

Mel turns her face toward him. “You feeling OK, sweetie? You don’t look so good.”

“It’s just the weed...the combination,” he says, blinking. “I need a minute.” He leans across her, resting his head for a moment between her shoulder blades. After taking a few breaths, he puts his palms on her shoulders and lets them slide down the curves of her waist. “I’m not a big fan of tattoos,” he says, “but I could get used to this.”

She lowers her face until her cheek rests against the seat, lifts her rump again. “What do you got against tattoos?” she says.

He ponders an explanation, his thoughts growing vivid and disordered. “Nothing, really. I guess I’m just kinda old-fashioned,” he says. “They’re OK, but I’d never want my daughter to get one, you know? There’s nothing skankier than some old grandma with a tattoo that’s gone all faded and blue and shit.”

Mel stiffens. She turns to face him, glaring. “Skanky?” she says. “Really?”

Wyatt looks at her dumbly. Her hand flicks and he flinches, turning his face aside. He expects a slap, but she catches him high on the cheekbone with a hard fist, lands a

second one on his nose before he can cover up. His nostril lets go a gush of blood. She brings her feet around, the sweat pants still at her knees, and begins kicking at him. “Fuck you, you bastard,” she says. “Who do you think you are?”

Wyatt, startled by the onslaught, grabs for the door handle and tumbles onto the street. She throws his coat after him. The Suburban drops into gear with the engine winding, tires screeching as she drives away.

Wyatt’s head swims. A gust of cold prairie wind cuts through his thin clothing. He picks up a dented can from the gravel and throws it after her. “What the hell kinda name is that?” he yells, his ragged voice echoing from the abutments.

Wyatt feels his left eye swelling shut. He holds a finger alongside his nose and walks out to the main road, following the street lights back toward the tavern’s rainbow of neon. It’s near midnight and the streets are empty. Simms and Darla are still in their booth; she’s nuzzling him as he holds a cigarette over the table.

Simms looks up. “Jesus, Big Boy,” he says. “What the hell happened to you?”

Darla stares at Wyatt. “Where’s Melania?” she says.

“The bitch went crazy,” he says. “I swear, I never touched her.”

Darla gets up and trots across the dance floor, punching numbers into her cell phone.

Simms howls and bangs the table. A few sullen drunks look over from the bar. “This is too goddamn good, Ames,” Simms says. “You better take that shiner home to Mama. Looks to me like you done screwed the pooch around here.”

Battered and despondent, Wyatt drives toward the freeway and buys a bottle of bourbon at a truck stop counter just before 1 o'clock. He checks into a room that smells of bird dogs and cigarettes, the paper bag tucked under his arm. He listens awhile to the low whine of freeway traffic before turning on the TV. A long swallow of whiskey lingers warm in his throat. He tips back the bottle again, and his chest fills with a hollow ache.

After sleeping awhile, he awakens on top of the bed, shivering. A train horn blares; rail cars clatter in the night air. The television glows. "You'll have flatter abs in seven days," says a perky, spandexed woman. CALL NOW! blinks in neon orange across her breasts.

He sees himself in the mirror next to the closet, the image startling. His eye is puffy and blued; a crust of dried blood clings to his upper lip. He wets a washcloth and cleans himself up. Finding the bottle standing open, he caps it and drops it into the trash. He checks out, fills a pair of coffee cups, turns up the country radio, and drives hard through the darkness with nearly 300 miles between him and home.

When the morning sun begins rising behind him, he's fit to burst, and pulls off at an interchange for a break. Nearby sits a small wrecked building near a grove of trees. Planks cover the windows; daylight sifts through holes in the roof. Inside, tires lean against the walls. Empty beer bottles, some of them in shards, litter the floor, along with heavy gear wheels, rusty farm tools and the hard iron teeth of machinery built for ripping up the ground. In one corner a fire has burned through the floor, climbed the wall, and charred a broad smudge across the ceiling. Wyatt walks over and uses the hole as a urinal.

When he's finished he steps back and begins looking around. At the back of the building the floor rises two steps

higher across the width of the room. Ornate arches top the boarded-up window frames. A shaft of sunlight illuminates the back wall, where four bolts emerge in the shape of a cross. Wyatt wonders how long it's been since he's been inside a church. He stands in the center aisle and looks up at the ceiling, feeling weary and ill but overtaken by this sudden concealed majesty. His carpenter's eye admires how the rows of heavy, tight-grained beams intersect precisely across the peak of the roof. He faces the space where the altar once stood and lets his mind settle, closing his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he can see Dawnell in her wedding gown, Simms in his dark jacket and tie. Within moments, he's among people he hasn't seen in years, their voices joined in a soothing murmur—old church folks who knew his parents, his Sunday school teacher, friends from his childhood baseball team. He's a kid again, airy and disembodied, and the voices, consoling, fill him with a sense of yearning. "Mister?" one them says.

Wyatt opens his eyes and turns around. An old man stands between him and the door, bundled in grimy insulated coveralls and a hat with dangling ear flaps. He's short and thick, his face puffy and etched with age. "Mister?"

Wyatt stares at him until his head clears, murmurs, "It's a *church*."

The man looks at him steadily, his hands thrust into his pockets. "I know what it is, pal," he says. "This here's my property."

Wyatt gathers himself, brushes his clothes and squares his shoulders. "Then I guess I owe you an apology. I just came in to look around."

The man's look softens. "I get a lot of that—photographers and such. But the kids come in and monkey around too. I'd padlock it but for the cemetery. You got family up there?"

“No. I didn’t see it. Is there a cemetery too?”

The old man grins and folds his arms. “Out by the wind-break,” he says. “You can’t haul off a cemetery, can you?” He tells Wyatt how a half-century earlier the congregation had moved the church, built a new one in town, taken away the steeple and the pews and the stained glass. A few of the old-timers, he says, still tend the graves in the tiny fenced burial ground.

“You come in off the freeway?” he asks.

“I’m heading home to Scottsbluff,” Wyatt says, assuming his businessman’s voice. He finds it a comfort to speak with someone sober, someone he can understand. He talks about places he’s seen during his travels: abandoned houses, ghost farms 20 miles from the nearest towns, sprawling dirt-scratch ranches in the treeless Sandhills grassland, where cattlemen pull winter calves in the hard crystal air, a hundred miles from good medicine. “It fills me with wonder,” he says. “And a place like this, it’s hard to imagine what it must have been like.”

The man takes his hands from his pockets and puts a match to a wooden pipe. He sits on the edge of a tire and gestures for Wyatt to join him. He tells a story about farming before the Depression, when some of the rural counties held twice as many families, about squatters on homestead claims struggling through barren winters before hard times drove them off. He pauses and waits for Wyatt to look up. “Looks to me you got your own hard-luck story to tell.”

Wyatt remembers his mangled face in the motel mirror and touches his swollen eye. “Yeah, I guess I partied a bit last night.”

The cold settles in through the roof as the wind picks up, swinging the door on a rusty hinge. “Thing you gotta remember,” the old man says, “it wasn’t like today. A lot of them pi-

oneers left the cities or the old countries to come out here—on foot, some of 'em—and lived in dugouts in the ground, or in shacks made of stacked prairie sod.” He catches Wyatt in a level gaze and taps the cinders out of his pipe. “Imagine that, son. Live your entire life without leaving your mark, not even a headstone to remember you by.”

Wyatt shivers. He entertains a stray thought about offering to fix up the building, but lets it go. He stands and shakes the old man’s hand. “I won’t keep you any longer,” he says. “It was real good talking with you. I hope you keep this old place going.”

The man chuckles. “Tell you the truth, I ought to burn the damn thing down. To me it’s just storage, and more trouble than it’s worth,” he says. “It ain’t been a real church in years.”

\* \* \* \*

Back in the truck, Wyatt waits for the heat to build and rubs his hands over the dash. He yearns to be home, to get himself organized again and get back to work. Back on the freeway, he begins an inventory of plans. He’ll make things right. He’ll plant a tree for Dawnell—that’ll come first. After that he’ll start painting, maybe paint the whole place a new color, or a palette of new colors. He imagines doors that he’ll shave, windows that he’ll seal, cabinets he can fit with new handles and hinges.

He shifts his hands atop the wheel, rolls his shoulders to loosen up. He passes farm trucks on the rural highway, drivers lifting a gloved hand off the wheel in greeting. The sun breaks through the dull clouds, casting an amber glow on the snow-dusted grasslands. The quiet order of the furrowed fields fills his chest like raw oxygen. He veers south to the

freeway to make better time, darts around semis, passes the twin stacks of the coal-fired generators at Sutherland. The hours pass in a quiet frenzy until he rolls past Chimney Rock, past Scottsbluff's smoking sugar factory. He speed-dials home, gets no answer.

By the time he gets to the house he's hungry. The driveway's empty. He begins making waffles, stacking them hot on a plate in the oven. After Dawnell drives in, she sits for a moment, making a call on her cell phone. Wyatt watches her study his truck and look toward the house. After a few moments she gets out. She's wearing white gloves and a hat with a veil. Amy's in a blue dress trimmed with lace. He smiles—he'll go to church with them from now on. He begins thinking about all that he has to say. Minutes later, Coyd pulls into the driveway in his patrol car.

Wyatt steps outside. "Dawnell," he says, "what's going on?" Coyd steps between them.

"I want him out of here," Dawnell says.

"Look, there's no need," Wyatt says. "I'm OK now. We just need to talk."

Coyd holds up his hand. "Put the spatula down, Wyatt," he says. "She's got a protection order. Judge Davis signed it last night. You got to be out of here."

Wyatt's heart jumps. He feels his fists tighten. "What the hell, Coyd? You think I'm fixing to flip her to death?" he says. "This is my goddamn house. Dawnell? Honey? What's this about?"

"Figure it out," she says.

Coyd turns to Dawnell. "We talked about this, Dawnell. Now get in the car."

Dawnell turns away, pushing Amy ahead of her, climbs inside and slams the door. Wyatt's swollen eyeball throbs. A

starling lands in the cedar, setting loose a drizzle of blackened needles.

Coyd puts a hand on Wyatt's shoulder. "The whole damn volunteer fire department was out here taking care of that tree, Wyatt. You think you can just burn the whole place down? Look at you, man. You stink! You're all busted up. You gotta get yourself squared away. Now let me get you out of here."

Wyatt stiffens, tapping a cigarette pack against his knuckle. "What are you saying, Coyd? Am I under arrest?" He watches the car as Dawnell glares back through the windshield. Amy looks over the dash, fury burning in her eyes.

"Not as far as I'm concerned," Coyd says. "But you're not staying here. I can't let you. Dawnell packed you some bags and set 'em out in the shed."

Wyatt pulls a cigarette from the pack and reaches to his pocket for a light. He pauses, stares at the empty matchbook, and the fight in him drains away. He stands with the unlit cigarette in his lips, squeezes his eyes shut, lifts his face to the empty sky.

Coyd takes his arm. "I can cuff you right now, Wyatt," he says, hardening his tone. "What happens next is up to you, buddy. Now what's it going to be?"

# On Castles

---

by Trevor J. Houser  
from *StoryQuarterly*

Before Wesley Mantooth is lifted into the desert sky all he could think about was castles.

One day, before going to law school, he decided to go to Scotland to look at them.

“Come with me,” he said.

Wesley paid a local innkeeper to take us around to see if anything caught his eye.

“But I thought you wanted to build your own?” I asked, not yet comfortable with the idea of my best friend living in a castle all the way over in Islay.

Wesley snorted a bump off his fingernail, “I’ll need somewhere to stay while they’re building it, won’t I?”

We spent the morning looking at castles. They were mostly gargantuan and slathered with peat. I touched them just to make sure, but they were real. For lunch we stopped at a tavern in Port Ellen. We had scotches and roast hen. I could smell gull shit and stale beer.

“Which one was your favorite?” asked Wesley, gnawing on a thighbone.

“I liked the one with the moat.”

“Yes,” said Wesley, “but I didn’t much care for their turrets.”

“Islay is the fifth largest Scottish island and the sixth largest island surrounding Britain,” said the innkeeper.

After lunch, we went back to castle hunting. There was one very handsome model that was built in the sixteenth

century. I went to the top of it alone and looked out on the countryside. There were cows and limestone churches warming themselves in the sun.

"This is nice," I said.

"Yes, it is," said Wesley.

The three of us made our way from castle to castle until sunset. The sunset was a soft orange glow obscured by massive gray columns of storm clouds.

"God is behind there," said the innkeeper.

\* \* \* \*

Wesley on my intercom, trying to coax me outside.

"What the hell?" Wesley says. "Enough of this Howard Hughes shit and come down here like a human being. Wait are you alone? What have they done to you? *What have you done with my friend and colleague, you animals?*"

"You're coked to the brains," I say. "Leave me alone."

"If you don't come down here in three minutes I'll be forced to brutally rape the first person I see," says Wesley.

"I'm staying."

"That's very un-American of you," says Wesley. "I wanted to buy you nine or ten drinks of your preference. You leave me no choice but to call your mother and inform her I will be dropping by later for apple pie and senior citizen cunnilingus."

I sigh into the intercom.

"Alright, I warned you," says Wesley. I hear a sharp snort followed by Wesley's deranged attempts at girlish screams.

\* \* \* \*

Once upon a time in the future when Wesley is already blown up in the desert, I will write the President of the United States.

“My best friend was recently blown up in Iraq,” I will write in the future to the future President. “Please explain.”

The President will not reply. On television I will see him playing golf with the British prime minister. They will seem refreshed, unworried. I will briefly consider going around the corner and buying a cleaver to assassinate said President, but then I will decide the President is too far away, so I watch television instead.

The death of my best friend will put me in a deep funk. For three weeks I will suckle at bottles of Alsatian Gewurztraminer. I will think of purchasing a Swiss cow online. I will write letters to each of the Cabinet members except for the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development because I figure they have enough on their plate. In between letters I will often consider lighting myself on fire, or releasing a live mako on the Capitol steps. In the afternoons, I will watch a program about wild horses in Montana. They are led by a big white one, possibly a Mecklenberger, or an Orlov Trotter. The horse’s name is Flower. It will be on every night at nine.

\* \* \* \*

One afternoon I write a drunken email to Wesley telling him to quit and move with me to Mexico so that we can marry Catholic girls and go on adventures together.

Wesley writes back:

*What was I thinking? They tricked me with all that money and those goddamned club ties! You know how I feel about traditional neckwear. At least the*

*medical profession has sense enough to kiss off an afternoon for golf, or defile a nurse in the records room. The only sane thing I can say about these people is that they actually condone heavy drug use.*

*Approximately,*

*Mantooth*

\* \* \* \*

My phone rings at three o'clock in the morning. It's Wesley.

"I'm dying," he says.

"Dying how?"

"Iraq. They're shipping me off tomorrow."

"For work?"

"Yesss."

"You sound strange."

"Strange? Strange how?"

"You don't sound like yourself."

"Oh. Valium."

"Valium?"

"And double Greyhounds."

"Did they say why they're sending you?"

"Moderately complex matters."

"Are you going?"

"My division at the firm is government and infrastructure. In a nutshell."

"Quit."

"My father."

“What about your father?”

“He would cut me off.”

“That’s not more important than dying.”

“Your opinion.”

“What are you going to do then?”

“You could kidnap me.”

“From Iraq?”

“We could hide out at my father’s place in Zermatt. Go skiing until the war is over. They would think it was terrorists. Probably get a raise.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Six months.”

“Jesus.”

“Je-sus!”

“Well, what now?”

“Grey-hooouuunnnnd.”

“If you want I can take you to the airport.”

“They have a car. It is coming for me.”

“Wes?”

“Hm.”

“Be careful.”

“Mmm.”

“Make sure to wear one of those things.”

“Wear what exactly?”

“That Kevlar, or whatever they call it.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know, but I’d wear it if I were you.”

“You concerned for my safety, old buddy?”

“No, I’m concerned about the Middle Eastern coke supply.”

“Funny. I should sleep now. Fuzzy sheep. Look out belloowwww.”

“Wes?”

“Yesss.”

“Take care of yourself.”

\* \* \* \*

Wesley and I once had simultaneous panic attacks. We were on an airport shuttle outside Vail, Colorado. The night before we’d had too much cocaine and Wild Turkey at a friend’s wedding. Everyone else on the shuttle looked normal. I remember Wes sweating and pleading with the normal looking passengers to let him out because he was having acute kidney failure.

“Don’t you know I am the duke of Archibald?” he screamed at the driver.

\* \* \* \*

I worry about Wesley. People blowing up every day. I watch terrorists on TV because it is the new national pastime. I am watching them now. They are mourning the loss of another terrorist. They are in some drab little neighborhood I will never see in my lifetime. How long would they mourn for, I wonder? I watch by myself on the couch. I have a Tom Collins. I know the President isn’t watching. He is golfing in Palm Springs, which has the least amount of terrorists per capita in the universe. I watch intently. One terrorist has on

mirrored sunglasses. He is smoking a long-stemmed ivory pipe. He is in what looks like a circus tent surrounded by a buffet of dried fruits and various teas. I think he looks forlorn. Forlorn terrorists are the most dangerous, I think. The other terrorists smile sheepishly at the TV cameras and sometimes eat what look to be dates.

“These are terrorists of honor,” I say as I settle down with another Collins.

\* \* \* \*

I point out Iraq on my desk globe. I touch it. It is beige colored. Some day, I think, I will get married near a lagoon, or somewhere equally romantic, and Wesley and his wife will live nearby and all four of us will play cards and drink Vermentino. But not now. Now is not the time for Vermentino. Now is the time of terrorism, which is like the Stone Age, or something similar, but also different.

\* \* \* \*

I am thinking about castles.

I walk to the fake castle in Central Park near Eightieth where they sometimes hold summer concerts. I imagine living inside as a fake lord or duke. A castle is a place for hunkering down for a long winter of ham-hocks and hay shortages. It looks cozy for a castle. I like cozy places. When I was younger I wanted to live under a tree like Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*. A crackling fire and cured sausages hanging with dry sherry in little green bottles and roots curving out like rafters.

You can't live under a tree nowadays.

People would vote against it, or stick flame-throwers down the chimney.

\* \* \* \*

I decide to go to Iraq and rescue Wesley.

Accomplishing such a feat will give me direction while simultaneously saving Wesley from all but certain dismemberment. I decide this is something I should have decided a long time ago. This decision makes me feel bold and unselfish for once in my life.

Why not, I think? Why don't people just go over to a war unannounced and take away their loved ones en-masse? What is stopping them? I can see it now. Cameras following my every move through the war-torn countryside. The President wishing me luck from a verdant fairway in Palm Springs. I would find Wesley and we would steal away into the night. This would be followed by a week of hiking through the wilderness during which we would eat trout and drink chartreuse for sustenance. We would dream of Switzerland and talk about Cicero. Hot buttered rum and coked up countesses awaiting us on the winter slopes of Zermatt.

The other thing that could happen is that we could die.

\* \* \* \*

The first leg of my trip is to Morocco via Paris. I do not like Paris, but I admire the airport bar. I drink down three French ales while pretending to watch soccer. The game is confusing, but the beer is good. Once in Morocco I find a hotel thrown together with white mud and whopping teak ceiling fans that chop at the north African heat in vain. I

spend three days smoking hash and dreaming up daring escape scenarios. One night at a nearby café, I meet two substitute schoolteachers from Florida. They are frightened of the locals and joke that they need an escort.

“We want to get drunk,” they tell me.

We go to slavery museums together and eat long spicy lunches in the old district. The old district is different from the new district in that it has fewer hotels and more murders per capita. One of the teachers is blond. The other is a redhead. The blonde is named Sally. I can’t remember the redhead’s name, but she is afraid of snakes. During one of the snake charmer shows I pinch the redhead hard on the back of her overly freckled neck as if she were being bitten. She screams and runs off crying. Sally laughingly consoles her as I watch another cobra rise from the wicker. I think, what if we dropped a million laser-guided cobra baskets on Baghdad? Would they survive the impact? What exactly is the going rate for cobra labor these days?

At night, we eat couscous and all manner of things that have been jerked, or steamed.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Sally asks.

“I’m breaking my friend out of the war,” I say.

“I don’t think they let you do that,” the redhead snaps, still a bit raw about the business with the snake.

“Why not?” I ask.

“It’s like taking your kids out of class before school’s out,” the redhead says. “It’s just not done.”

“Yeah,” Sally chimes. “You need a note from the principal to do that. So you would need a note from the President, I suppose, or at least some sort of general.”

“I’m going note-less,” I say.

“How are you going to do it?” Sally asks.

"I'm going to walk into Iraq and take him."

"Take him where?" the redhead asks.

"Switzerland."

"That doesn't sound very smart does it Sally?"

"Sure doesn't."

We get drunk and smoke hash back in my room. I don't have sex with either of them as both are afflicted with unfortunate semi-mullets and an over-reliance on blue mascara. Early the next morning I slip out of the hotel before they wake up.

I take a taxi to the desert.

I start walking.

"Now I am really rescuing my friend," I say to the desert.

I walk for a long time through the desert before I realize I have made a mistake. I turn around. I take a bus back to Morocco and buy a map. According to the map, I am nearly a thousand miles from Baghdad. It is Wednesday. I ponder hopping a flight to Kuwait, or possibly Jordan. Then I get another hotel room in a different part of town. I call room service. I order a BLT and a French beer. All the beer here is French, or Belgian. I decide coming here was a stupid idea.

The telephone rings. It is Sally.

"Hey mister, we just saw you tearing through the lobby. What do you know, we're staying at the same hotel!"

I hang up. I call down to the front desk. I ask for another room under the name Algernon Swinburne. I take a bath. Don't think of Wesley dodging explosions. I drink French and Belgian beer in bed until I fall asleep. The next morning I get a flight back to New York.

A month later, I learn of his death by phone.

“They blew him up,” weeps his father. “Can you believe they blew my boy up?”

His father says a stray mortar found him one afternoon minding his own business inside the Green Zone. One minute he was having a harmless turkey sandwich the next minute his arm came off at the shoulder followed by irreversible blood loss.

I hang up.

I look out the window.

The world is changing, but how?

I stay home.

I polish off my wine rack until the funeral, which is later that week.

It's a small church on the Upper East Side. Wesley's closed casket is there. It smells like shoe polish and candle wax. I take a seat near the back by myself. I try to listen to the priest, but my mind wanders. I am in Islay. I am on the slopes of Zermatt contemplating late-night hot tubbing with coked up countesses. My friend is not in that box with only one arm, I reason. My friend had two arms and liked to do lines while watching the Yankees game.

“All I want is to be left alone,” I tell people.

The first thing I do is to purchase a can of lighter fluid.

For two days I regard the lighter fluid gravely from a safe distance. Once I pull out a box of matches from under the sink, but that's as far as it goes.

I go back to regarding it gravely from a safe distance.

The following nine days I refuse to leave my couch, or watch TV, or eat excessively, or drink alcohol, or sleep, or deconstruct porno, or do anything Wesley is now unable to

enjoy, being that he is no longer of this world.

I see this as level one on the grieving scale.

On day ten, I reach level two. Level two includes one drink and one TV news program per day.

On day fifteen, I reach level three. Level three includes two drinks, one TV news program, and one PG rated movie per day.

On day nineteen, I reach level four. Level four includes three drinks, three hours of TV, and light masturbation.

On day twenty-one, I discover a routine. Every morning I have a grilled cheese with Gewurztraminer. I broaden my horizons. I watch TV. People with mustaches appraise the Yankees' underachieving bullpen. People with mustaches try to sell me a powerful rug cleaner. People with mustaches talk about extinction level meteors pulverizing the rings of Saturn. The rise in mustaches says something important about the inevitability of the universe's collapse, I think.

"This is proof," I say, smacking the top of the TV. "Proof that life is meaningless!"

At my kitchen table, I decide to leave civilization. But everything is harder now. People used to live in saloons in the Yukon and eat hard tack and marry sensible women named Clara. Now you lie in bed on Monday afternoon. You think about what heart disease will feel like while criticizing teen nurse porn.

\* \* \* \*

I have two dreams.

One is about a beaver that makes a cozy fire inside his dam. In the dream, the beaver sips expensive brandy by the

fire and is happy about life in general. The other dream I have is about Wesley. He is outside my cabin door and asking me why I left him to die. I wake up feeling unsure about my decisions in life. I want to feel like the beaver. I want to tell the President how I feel, but the President is probably out on one of his midnight rounds of golf. I try to go back to sleep, but I can't. I think about Wesley. One minute, eating lunch, the next, blood gushing from his bomb-eaten arm. I've eaten a thousand turkey sandwiches and I never got my arm blown off and died in the desert. If you think about your arm possibly getting blown off every time you eat a turkey sandwich you would get summarily fired, or divorced because no one would understand you and you would live under your bed fearfully eating turkey sandwiches, or under an old tree with some talking moles drinking sherry, or move to Islay or somewhere where turkey sandwiches haven't been invented yet.

\* \* \* \*

One night when I was younger, the full moon was out and it made me feel sad and happy at the same time. It was big and white, but also sort of blue like a corpse. The moon is probably more powerful than we know, I thought. I probably thought this because I felt empty inside and was smoking cocaine. I wanted to make love under the volcanoes to German au pairs who would say things like, "Anflug das gemuts unt legen dein schneidel!"

\* \* \* \*

Every Christmas, I used to go to Wesley's Christmas party at his parents apartment on Central Park West, and

surrounded by the jet set and original Picassos and Dalis and waiters carrying silver trays piled high with mini-lamb chops and hot buttered rum in pewter mugs I would think it was possible, it was possible in my own future to live like this, to be easy going and to know what chartreuse means, and to say things like Cicero in the normal course of conversation. But then I would go to the bathroom. I would see an original Dali hanging over the toilet and I would feel sick because my toilet back home had some kind of stain running down the sides and an ironic beer calendar and maybe some kind of deodorizer that didn't even work.

\* \* \* \*

Often, I walk to the fake castle in Central Park. Boulders and trees frost-covered. For dinner I mostly eat frozen pizza, but once a week, I copy a fancy recipe from the Sunday paper. I use cheaper, but similar ingredients to recreate it at home such as barley (instead of risotto) and melted mozzarella (instead of stravecchio) wrapped in steamed chard. With that I drink Jura, or pinot gris, or Polish vodka.

\* \* \* \*

December. I receive an invitation to Wesley's parents' annual Christmas party. "Come celebrate the holidays New Orleans style," it says. At first, I don't want to go. Then I decide I will go after all. To show solidarity in that I understand the level of pain Wesley's parents are going through. Also I have a secret plan.

\* \* \* \*

Wesley's parents have one of those elevators that open right into their apartment. I shake hands with Wesley's parents and give them a bottle of Jura.

"There you are," Wesley's dad says, squeezing my hand tightly.

"How are you doing, dear?" Wesley's mom asks.

"I'm ok, how are you?" I ask.

She sighs. "Oh, as good as can be expected."

"I hope you like the wine," I say.

"Thank you, Hector," Wesley's dad says, looking at the wine, but also not really looking at it. "I'm sure we will."

I go across the foyer to a silver tray. On the silver tray are mint juleps in pewter tumblers. I take one of the mint juleps and walk over to the living room. There is a four-piece New Orleans band playing New Orleans-style music. I can see the jet set gathering by the big windows facing the park. They are talking in low voices, but I don't pay attention to them. I go to the fireplace. On the mantle is a vase. The vase is filled with Wesley's ashes. My plan is to steal the vase and take it to the castles of Islay where they belong.

"There's something wrong with these mint juleps," one of the jet set says.

"Yeah, too much mint," another one says.

The New Orleans band plays another New Orleans-sounding song.

I look out the window. The buildings around the park are lit up. They make me feel like I'm in an old movie, or on some kind of movie set.

A waiter comes by. I take another mint julep.

Some investment bankers come over to where I am standing. One of them grins. He asks me if I want any blowcaine. I

laugh inadvertently and say no as if I just had maybe too much blowcaine already.

“Good band,” one investment banker says.

“Cheesy outfits, though,” another one says.

There are four investment bankers now. One of them says something about Tuscany and laughs. I drink more of my new mint julep. I pretend to be looking at an original Dali over the fireplace. Another investment banker says he wants some blowcaine, but he can’t because their babysitter has to go home early.

“Is she hot?” one of the investment bankers asks.

“Who, the babysitter?”

“Yeah.”

“No, she’s a dog,” says the investment banker, laughing. “My wife hired her.”

Someone on the other side of the room signals that he wants to speak by clinking his glass. He is an investment banker, who owns a Gulfstream 4. He points at Wesley’s parents and thanks them for the party and saying how we all understand how hard it’s been the last few months. After that he talks about the boarding school they all went to and tells an anecdote about the black janitor they used to make fun of. He says the janitor’s name was Ralph. One of the investment bankers’ wives laughs inadvertently. An investment banker passes a baggie of blowcaine behind his back to another investment banker. No one talks about Tuscany for a few minutes.

“America is fucked,” says one of the investment bankers, who is suddenly standing next to me.

“It’s the new frontier for investment banking,” he says, not looking at me, but at the painting. “If I had to live in America my whole life I’d probably kill myself.” He gulps

down his mint julep and grabs another from a passing waiter.

“Our time is over,” he continues. “It’s the Southeast Asians’ time now just like it used to be the Japs and the British and the Dutch. I don’t know who before that. Maybe the Vikings, or the Visigoths. It doesn’t matter now because you can’t get away with anything because America is fucked. The pioneering spirit is dead. Look around. People are bored like they’re going through the motions except maybe in times of national tragedies they are alive. We need more national tragedies. Tragedy is relative to the time you live in. Gettysburg makes 9/11 look like people comparing the cleanliness of tap water to getting repeatedly stabbed in the face by your dead grandmother. Tragedy is what forces people to act human. You can see it on their faces. Overall people’s expectations have lowered. Why have people’s expectations lowered? The deterioration of the service industry for one, but that’s always the first to go. Ask anyone. Every morning our parents had milk delivered to their doorsteps. People pumped their gas while wearing uniforms and singing in unison. Does that mean we’re dying out as a culture? Probably. We cured polio. We can’t cure shit now. What I’m saying is this is a dying culture, but it’s probably not as bad as the French. The French are probably a lot worse. They’re irrelevant and secondly they smell. Who cares about wine and smoking at cafes? Nobody cares. Maybe a few people do, but they’re doing it ironically, or just pretending that they live in those times when those things meant something. My wife likes going to France for the holidays, but I don’t care. It’s a good country to play tennis in, but it’s a dead culture, like Italy or maybe Norway. I went fly-fishing in Norway once, but everyone looked depressed like they knew their time had passed. The whores I fucked were depressed and reluctant to think about the future. Do you know what I’m saying? We

need to stop institutions from becoming fake ideas about life that are somehow widely accepted as true. People are dying as we speak. There's only one time a century to be in the right place where things are going on and people are alive and that place right now is Southeast Asia. I don't know. People that live here are idiots. I have a mansion picked out in Singapore with servants and a pool and satellite TV. I guess most people aren't as adventurous as they think they are. Most investment bankers are pretty adventurous, though. Plus, we work our tits off. That's why I like it." He pauses to drink more mint julep. "By the way, you try any of that blowcaine?"

Another investment banker comes up to us. He puts his arm around the other investment banker.

"We're going to that bar underneath the highway," says the newly arrived investment banker.

As everyone goes to the foyer to say goodbye I take the vase off the mantle. I put it inside my coat and walk to the foyer. I try not to look at Wesley's parents, but out of the corner of my eye, I can see Wesley's dad looking at my jacket because it's bulging.

"Goodbye," says Wesley's mom.

"What's that in your jacket?" says Wesley's dad, not sure whether to smile or be concerned.

"Nothing," I say.

Wesley's dad reaches his hand towards my jacket. "But there's ... well, there's something right here."

I see the elevator closing so I jump into the elevator with two investment bankers about to do blowcaine. I can hear raised voices on the other side of the elevator.

"Why are they yelling?" one of the investment bankers asks.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“It sounds like they said stop,” the other investment banker says.

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“Weird,” the first investment banker says.

“Are you coming to the bar?” the other investment banker asks.

“Probably,” I say.

“Cool.”

The investment bankers do some blowcaine off their pinky nails while I think about the emerald pastures of Islay. We wait for the elevator to go “*bing*.”

# Black Night Ranch

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by Roy Giles

from *Eclectica Magazine*

“Sheep are born to die,” James Carl said, pointing his syringe at Billy. “They think that’s their purpose. We want their wool. They want to die. The trick is to make the stupid son-of-a-bitches think you want them dead.” He vaccinated with authority, tossing sheep aside like wool blankets when he finished with each one.

“They’ll spite you that way and live. Don’t baby them. Make them think you’re stabbing them to death.”

James Carl and Billy had hanging around their necks clear bags of sheep dope with long rubber hoses attached to needles big as framing nails. The sheep were packed tight into the twenty-foot pen, squirming and crawling over one another like maggots. Every time James Carl tossed one, the whole bunch erupted into isolated geysers of sheep. Billy kept losing his balance in the melee, exasperating the beasts. It was the uncertainty of it. Falling. They couldn’t stand it. An old ewe leapt at Billy’s head, dragging the needle in his hand with her. The chisel end of the needle carved a deep line in Billy’s cheek. The ewe’s front hooves clawed his back as she made her way over.

“Fucking sheep!”

“Don’t baby them,” James Carl said, tossing two animals at once. He was in a hurry. A group of Mexican shearers were due at his ranch by noon, and he wanted to be ready for them.

Billy had been looking forward to the shearing ever since waking up. All through breakfast James Carl had talked

about it. He said they could shear a sheep in less than two minutes, and if they brought the young one called Miguel with them, then Billy would really get to see fast.

“And quit that cussing. Your parents didn’t let you, and I ain’t either,” James Carl said.

Billy climbed out of the pen.

“Where you going? I see three unmarked backs.”

Though it was more of a bad scratch than a cut, Billy touched a finger to his cheek and tongued it from the inside. He didn’t know much about sheep. Before Bird Creek Bridge gave way three months earlier, taking Billy’s parents forever with it, his family had run a few cows, but never sheep. He’d gotten the job and moved in with his father’s old friend, James Carl, mostly because the rancher was lonely, but the official reason was that Billy knew Spanish. Or rather, he was supposed to know Spanish. James Carl owned the only sheep ranch in Hughes County, Oklahoma, and every spring he hired Mexicans out of South Texas to shear his flock. Lonely as he’d been the ten years since his wife left, he frustrated himself into great depressions when he couldn’t communicate with the only company he ever had. He’d said that very thing to Billy the day of the funeral. Billy’s dad, who’d been proud of how well Billy did in school, had bragged about his son being so smart in one language that he took up another one. That had impressed James Carl. But while Billy recognized words when he saw them on paper, and he did well in class, in truth he understood little spoken Spanish. Nonetheless, he was fresh out of high school and fresh out of parents, and James Carl took him in.

“Don’t worry about the cut. Them’s antibiotics,” James Carl said. He caught up with the last three sheep and had them stuck and marked before Billy could get back across the fence. “Just get the gate.”

James Carl was a big man. Notoriously big. He was so big that when people saw him for the first time, they'd say out loud, "Goddamn, that is a big man." When he walked his steps were so far apart his gait looked like slow motion to Billy. His fists were as wide as Billy's head, and he could lift four sheep at once when their wool was thick. And since Dog, the only sheep dog on the Black Night Ranch, couldn't herd, protect, or do anything else that a sheep dog was supposed to do, that's how they often had to move them. By hand, five at a time. Billy's one to James Carl's four. It took a long time to move the animals like that, but usually, even if Dog was around, he spent more time scattering the sheep than anything else. Billy wasn't crazy about Dog. Sometimes when James Carl left the front door of the house open, Dog nosed his way into bed with Billy. Billy slept heavy and never noticed until he either woke up with the mutt or else itching from the dirty black hairs, cockleburs, or ticks the animal left behind. Even thinking of Dog made Billy itchy.

Billy opened the gate at the end of the pen furthest from James Carl. To the sheep the opening must have looked like an entrance to hell because the front lines facing the gate were impenetrable. They weren't going. James Carl kicked and pushed from his end, but the gray mass absorbed him like a pond takes a pebble. Finally, letting out a series of spooky high-pitched yelps, the big man grabbed a lamb and threw him over the top of the horde. It was a half-eared lamb they called Sonny, who had only been on the ground a little over a month.

James Carl, who called every dog he ever owned Dog, named all his sheep. Few had simple names like Sonny did. Most were called things like That Bitch Ewe Who Almost Killed Me, The Lamb Who Got Tangled in the Fence That Time, or Billy's favorite, The Ram with One Nut. Sonny was named after James Carl's father, Sonny, who, a few years

before he died, had gotten half an ear kicked off by an emu. Sonny landed beyond the open gate and ran. The rest of the sheep, looking at one another for reassurance and apparently not finding it, dug in after him, emptying the pen into the pasture where the rest waited to be sheared.

After rounding up all but a few dozen stragglers hiding somewhere on the rancher's three-thousand acres, they were ready for the Mexicans. James Carl told Billy to start plowing the upper three-hundred and twenty acres, the 320 for short, and that he would call him when their company arrived.

Billy had barely climbed in the Big R Versatile tractor when he spotted six or seven wild dogs working the tree line to the north. They were a long way away, but he knew they were dogs. They don't hunch up all timid-like and prance the way coyotes do. Dogs are worse than coyotes. Braver. Smarter, too, which made them bad news for sheep. These looked especially menacing to Billy the way they slithered in and out of the timber like a snake. About a thousand yards east and upwind of the dogs were a group of thirteen sheep, five ewes and their lambs.

Billy picked up the CB handset and radioed back to James Carl, who was supposed to be preparing a barbecue pit by the shearing barn.

"Found the stragglers. We got dogs on them," Billy said, but he realized that from where the shearing barn was he was right in the line of fire. In a hurry he added, "The dogs are behind me." He made a hard right turn so the dogs would progress past him.

Five minutes after radioing and hearing no response from James Carl, Billy saw a ewe go down. She kicked her back legs high in the air before falling. Over the noise of the tractor, he hadn't heard the rifle report, but he'd often seen deer kick the same way. It meant the ewe was likely heart-shot. It also

meant James Carl mistook his sheep for dogs. While Billy fumbled for the CB, he saw another ewe collapse, and he dropped the handset. A lamb then spun to the ground. The dogs were about two-hundred yards from the sheep when the lead dog broke and ran for them, the rest of the pack following. The sheep stood looking in the wrong direction until Billy honked his horn. As the sheep turned toward the tractor, they caught sight of the dogs and fled into the timber out of Billy's sight. When the dogs were nearly at the spot where the sheep disappeared, the sheep re-emerged and ran straight at the dogs. All but one.

A lamb separated from the group and ran flat out across the newly plowed field toward the tractor. When it got close enough, Billy saw one of its ears was half gone, which was strange because Sonny was supposed to be with the others they'd rounded up that morning. At first it looked like he was headed back to the pasture he'd escaped from and was going to cross in front of the tractor, but instead the lamb cut hard just short of the Versatile and took cover under it. Versatiles like the Big R were enormous, and though they swiveled in the middle, such tractors couldn't be maneuvered like the tiny Fords and Farmalls Billy was used to operating. The tires alone were taller than he was, and there were eight of those. As fast as Sonny was running, the tractor must have looked parked. Billy heard and felt nothing, but he knew he got the lamb because it never came out the other side. He shut the tractor off and climbed out, mindful of James Carl's position at the barn. With Sonny coming at him like he had, Billy had lost track of the other sheep.

Shots echoed off the timberline from the north. Billy couldn't see anything that James Carl might be shooting at by that time. He also couldn't find Sonny.

"Break down?" James Carl asked over the CB. Billy climbed back into the cab to answer him.

“Ran over Sonny.”

“Anything salvageable?”

“Can’t find him.”

“Quit plowing and go gather up what woolies you can find.”

“How come you shot those sheep?” Billy asked.

“What sheep?”

“Those sheep up there I radioed about.” Billy waited long for a response.

“My goddamn eyes. Who’d I kill?”

“Not sure, but three.”

“Shit. All right. Just get the dead.”

Billy drove the Versatile a quarter-mile across the field and parked on the timberline where he last saw the dogs. He loaded the three sheep that James Carl had killed, pulling them on top of the plow. He found some old, rusty barbed wire rolled up and looped over a fence post and used it to tie them to the frame. He had expected to find one or two more dead, or at least some evidence that a couple had been killed by the dogs, but instead, he found seven strung out along a short path on Wewoka Creek, which was the east border of the property. He couldn’t believe the waste. Two went unaccounted for. He assumed they had been killed and carried off, but the fact the dogs had killed seven and let them lay was odd. And then there was Sonny, plowed under somewhere on the lower half of the 320. Billy drove the tractor and sheep to the shearing barn. James Carl looked over the dead.

“Ten? Damn. Just three were mine? I shot eight times.”

“Just the three.”

“The Ewe I Hate and One Eye ran with this group.”

“I didn’t find them,” Billy said.

“Did a headcount. They ain’t with the rest. Why’d Sonny split off from the others?” Billy didn’t know. He also didn’t know why James Carl would ask him. He knew Billy didn’t know anything about sheep. “Sheep don’t split up. Don’t make sense. Why’d those dogs kill so many?” Billy didn’t know that either. From the recent lack of ticks in his bed, and the fact that he hadn’t seen Dog around, Billy thought he’d been missing a couple of days, but he wasn’t willing to mention it without something concrete to say about it.

“Instinct never failed an animal so much as a damn sheep. Untie my three. I’ll skin them and hang them in the smokehouse. Take the rest to the bone yard in the pecan orchard. How’s your eyes? You see good?”

Billy told him his eyes were fine, but that he was only a fair shot with open sights.

“Can’t be any worse than me. I reckon you better start carrying the rifle, at least until I get a scope for it.”

Billy had only been working with James Carl the three months since his parents died, and already he was used to seeing sheep do things that made no sense. He was used to seeing them get killed. They ran into barbed wire fences, off cliffs, into slow moving dirt road traffic, and other such nonsense on a regular basis. Apparently he and his boss could add running under tractors and straight at dogs to the list of stupid things sheep do.

“Maybe Sonny was retarded,” James Carl said with serious wonder. “Get back to plowing. I’m going go find the hole he slipped through. I’ll yell at you when the Mexicans get here.” It was his last word on the subject of Sonny.

Billy didn’t say anything, but he didn’t think Sonny was retarded. For one thing, the lamb had been the only one to find the hole in the fence, which Billy thought was smart.

And had he not run under the Versatile, splitting off from the rest of the sheep would have proven a wise move. He considered it a huge oversight on the part of James Carl for him to think a lamb running from dogs pointed to low intelligence.

Sweating, Billy climbed back into the Versatile. It had been a dry year. A drought if you listened to farmers. Farmers couldn't be trusted when it came to weather, though. They'll tell you it's either too wet to get the wheat up or too dry for it to grow. Billy had never met a farmer yet who had a good year where weather was concerned. But it was dry that morning, that's for sure. The wind had blown all during the night before and dried the ground to a powder by daylight.

Dust puffed in through the cracks of the cab. Billy tied a bandana around his nose. Soon it was too soaked with snot to be of use. He took the bandana off and leaned over the gear shifts. Eyes squinting and nose dripping like hydraulic fluid, he thought about James Carl. He had never known a tougher man. For years he'd heard his father talk about *the* James Carl Henry who could lift Hemi blocks without a cherry picker and who stepped over gates instead of opening them.

When Billy was six, he and his father were fishing a roadside pond when he first saw James Carl. At that time the man wore a thick black beard. He was looking for Billy's father in order to trade him a beefalo for a .223 Remington rifle. Billy saw him step out of his Chevy one-ton and walk toward them.

Billy said, "Daddy, there's a really big man coming."

"What do you think that man wants?" Billy's father asked, casting his line.

"I don't know. He looks mad."

"Think we ought to run or fight it out?"

“I think we ought to run.”

After that Billy found it fascinating to hear all the stories about the big man. James Carl once took on a band of Hell's Angels sixty miles away in Lehigh, Oklahoma, back when being a Hell's Angel had nothing to do with parades or charities. Back when all outlaw motorcycle gangs called themselves Hell's Angels. Outside the only bar in Lehigh, for fun he kicked one of their bikes to the ground. After a short chase down unfamiliar dirt roads, he wound up taking twenty-three stabs in a wheat field. Billy had heard his father tell the story many times.

Shortly after being hired on, and in a rare moment of courage, Billy had asked his boss about the stabbing. The courage to raise the question resulted from James Carl having burned the palms of both his hands when Billy had mistakenly tried to open the hood on the feed truck he was driving. What Billy had thought was steam rolling from under the hood, James Carl had realized was actually smoke. He had knocked the boy out of the way and burned himself instead. He had talked Billy through how to bandage his hands for him, and in the moment, though Billy had felt responsible for getting his boss burned, he'd also felt a kind of safety and trust in doctoring the man's burns. In feeling that sense of safety, Billy asked about Lehigh. James Carl said it was the prettiest stand of wheat he ever saw. He claimed it's what saved him. Said the wheat sang to him and kept him from bleeding out. Billy didn't much buy it, but he wouldn't have been the one to disagree. Two of those stabs were to James Carl's neck, and not pocket knife stabs either. All his scars were at least an inch wide. Those bikers had used big knives.

Starting to doze into his daydream, the CB cracked. “Wake up, goddamn it.”

Billy hit the brakes and looked up. He had been veering off into a cut in the timber toward the creek. James Carl must have seen him and figured he had gone to sleep.

“I’m awake.”

“The Mexicans are here. Park the tractor and come on.”

\* \* \* \*

James Carl did the introductions. “Billy, these are the Mexicans. Mexicans, this is Billy. Tell them how many head we got and ask them how long’s it going to take. Not that I care. I just like to know. I’ll go get some ice for the water cooler.” James Carl carried the water can to the house.

Billy wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve. Words passed back and forth through his head, but he was afraid to say them. He knew that once spoken, he’d be expected to make sense of the words that would come back at him. He pretended to spot something important on the ground, bent to pick up a rock, and stuffed it in his pocket. He wiped his nose again. A square-faced man stepped forward and handed Billy a red bandana. Billy took it but didn’t know what to do with it. The man motioned to his face like wiping his nose and Billy got it. Even though Billy already had a bandana, he nodded a “thank you” to the man and blew his nose into it. It smelled of lemons. The Mexican pulled a blue bandana from his pocket to show him he had another and motioned for Billy to keep the one he’d handed him. Billy nodded again but said nothing.

A boy about fifteen, Billy guessed, stepped out from behind the others. The boy looked toward the sheep gathered out in the pasture.

“Looks like two thousand. He thinks you speak Spanish, huh?” the boy said.

“I can read it.”

“Tell him we will do it in one day and one half.”

“Okay,” Billy said.

The boy leaned in close and whispered, “Drink whiskey?”

The sound of James Carl closing the house door straightened the boys. The rancher returned with a five-gallon orange water can filled and ready. He took Billy aside. “What’d Miguel say?”

“That was Miguel?”

“I’ve been gone ten minutes, and ya’ll didn’t so much as introduce yourself?”

“No.”

James Carl got loud. “Did you talk sheep at all or what? Pimples and jacking off?”

“He said it would take the rest of today and half of tomorrow.”

“Twenty-three hundred head? Seven Mexicans? You misheard.”

“No.”

James Carl thought about it. “I guess that boy’s got faster.”

The Mexicans rigged up, tested their shears, and donned their chaps, but mostly they waited for sheep. James Carl and Billy ended their conversation and herded in the animals from the pasture through hog panel corrals they’d rigged up for that purpose. After getting ahead of the shearers by five-hundred head, James Carl sat in lawn chair in the shade of an elm growing beside the shearing barn. He opened an ice chest full of beer and watched.

The shed was set up with ten shearing stalls, which were just plywood cubicles with eight-foot tall burlap bags hanging

in wooden racks in the corner of each one. Each stall was six feet wide and had a back and two sides. The front was open to the outside. Billy helped Miguel's little brother stuff the bags with shorn wool, and when each bag was full, James Carl left his beer and hoisted the little boy into the sacks so he could tamp the wool down. Billy noted the little boy was wide between the eyes, and though he wasn't clumsy, it appeared he never really looked at anything. Like he looked past everything. He was a pleasant boy, though, and stayed steady.

Billy's hands, already soft from handling the wool every day, turned yellowish-brown and grew foul from the stink of it. He wiped his hands on his pants but couldn't rid himself of its stickiness.

"Lanolin," James Carl said from the shade. "Wool's got lanolin in it. Give up, you ain't getting it off. Look at your boots." Billy's boots glistened in the rich grease. "They won't be leaking for a while."

"It's like ear wax," Billy said.

"Quit stuffing a minute. Watch that boy shear."

Billy had been working so hard to keep up that he hadn't been able to watch the shearing like he'd meant to. Miguel kicked a sheep loose two-to-one faster than the next fastest. James Carl timed him.

"Goddamn." He showed the stopwatch to Billy.

"It looked fast. Was it fast?"

"The record is about twenty seconds slower than his average. That one was twenty-seven seconds." James Carl timed again. "Twenty-nine seconds. Look how he hardly nicks them."

Miguel was beautiful. The sheep, quiet, docile in his hands, trusted the boy. Where the other men occasionally had to struggle to get the sheep positioned just right, Miguel

molded them between his legs exactly the way he wanted the first time. He never repositioned until he was ready to turn them to his shears, and he never grabbed an animal that went rank in his hands, not even the moody rams.

At the day's end, two-thousand one-hundred and nine sheep were sheared. Nine-hundred and seventy-two were Miguel's alone. With less than two-hundred sheep to go, the Mexicans were antsy to finish, but James Carl refused to string lights in the shed. Instead, he built a great fire in the pit he'd dug earlier. A white man fire, he called it. He spit a gimp yearling and feasted them on mutton and beer. When everyone had their bellies full and their heads buzzing, he ordered Billy to get two cots from out of the shed behind the house.

"Me and you are going to sleep outside with them tonight," he said.

Billy fetched the two cots and started setting them up beside the fire. The Mexicans looked uneasy about it. It was clear they didn't know if the cots were for them or for James Carl and Billy.

"Explain it to them, Billy. They look scared."

"Explain what?"

"I don't want them thinking we don't trust them. Just tell them we feel like sleeping under the stars tonight. The fat one plays guitar. I might get my fiddle. Tell him I'm better than last year." Billy waited for his boss to walk away liked he had before, but the big man waited to see what was said.

"Well?" James Carl asked.

Billy looked for Miguel but didn't see him. "They're shy, and only Miguel will talk to me."

"They've been chattering all day. They ain't looked shy to me."

“But Miguel—”

“Billy,” James Carl said, raising his voice, “if the next word out of your mouth ain’t some Mexican gibberish I can’t understand, then I don’t want to hear another word.”

“*Dormir?*” Billy said.

“Good, but look at them when you’re talking. They’re the Spanish speakers, now ain’t they?”

Billy turned to the group of Mexicans, who had grown silent as James Carl’s voice had risen. Miguel walked up. Billy searched the boy’s face, then said, “*Dormir. Quere dormir.*”

Miguel nodded to him. “We will, too, then.”

“I’m a dirty bastard,” James Carl said, looking at Billy. “I had me a feeling about this.” He walked off toward the house. “Put the cots up.”

Watching his boss walk away, Billy thought he should say something. Anything. Explain himself somehow. He wanted to tell him how he would try to learn how to speak it and how he knows how to read it, but what came out was, “But my parents—”

James Carl turned back. “What? What about your parents?”

Billy couldn’t finish his thought because he didn’t have any idea what he had planned to say. It just came out. Embarrassed, he lowered his eyes and stared at the ground.

“I won’t put up with a boy who’ll run his parents down, particularly when they ain’t here to defend themselves. Is that what you intended to do? Tell me it’s their fault you lied to me?”

Billy said nothing.

“What then?”

"I don't know," Billy said.

"Well, I don't, either. But I know what trust is. Do you?"

When Billy couldn't answer, James Carl walked away.

"You better sleep out here tonight," Miguel said.

"Yeah," Billy said, but he didn't move until his boss was fully out of sight. "Why did you speak English? You got me caught."

"Already caught. I just made it hurry," Miguel said. He spoke to his family in Spanish, which Billy couldn't understand, but when the square-faced one went to the back of their truck and retrieved a blanket for him, he figured out what had been said.

Billy wrapped the blanket around him and pulled a lawn chair close to the warm pit of embers. He sat wondering if he'd be fired, but more than anything, he was just sorry he'd disappointed the man. He'd disappointed people before. So far as he could tell, it was as much his purpose to disappoint as it was the sheep's apparent desire to die. The way James Carl looked at him when he realized he'd been lied to, Billy had seen before. He'd seen it when he let the bottom burn completely out of his mother's favorite bean pot that had been handed down three generations. He'd seen it in his father when he stumbled in one night drunk and bloody. And he'd seen it especially severe in his grandmother when he'd doubted God. But he'd never seen it like it was in James Carl. It felt as different to him as the difference between killing a mouse and a horse. The bigger they are, the more it hurts. There is something in the weight of it. The size. The space a thing takes up in the world. He fell asleep in the chair feeling he had scarred a big piece of the world. A really big piece.

Billy woke, scratching the back of his neck. Miguel's little brother, springing from behind him, giggled and tossed a tuft of wool in Billy's lap. From his cot Miguel shushed him, then

pulled a bottle of whiskey from his sleeping bag and offered it to Billy. Billy shook his head “no,” but looking at the people sleeping around him and back at the house to see if lights were on, he eased out of his creaking chair and signaled Miguel to follow him.

Billy led Miguel and Miguel’s wide-eyed little brother a half mile to the Versatile at the lower edge of the 320. They crawled under the tractor, built a tiny pit fire, and sat in a circle around it.

“How do you shear so fast?” Billy asked.

“Faster I shear, faster I finish,” Miguel said passing the whiskey. Miguel’s brother reached for the bottle but was passed over. “No.”

“He’s quiet. What’s his name?” Billy asked.

“He has no name.”

“I got a name. It is Carlos,” the boy said.

“It is not Carlos,” Miguel said.

“It is Claudio.”

“Stop lying. It is not Claudio either.”

“It is Pedro.”

“Why did you have to ask his name?”

“I know my name,” the boy said, getting agitated. “My name is Jesus. It is Justo. It is Ramiro. It is—”

“Si. I am sorry. It is Justo,” Miguel said.

“Ramiro.”

“I know. Ramiro.”

“It is Ramiro.”

“I heard you,” Miguel said.

“It is.”

Billy interrupted, “I’m Billy.”

“Yes!”

“Yes, what?” Billy asked.

“We both have names.”

“Oh.” Billy opened his mouth to ask how old the little boy was, but thought better of it. He guessed him to be about nine or ten. That was close enough.

The little boy stretched out on the ground and fell asleep. Miguel slumped against a tire, drunk. Billy drained the bottle, stood up too fast, and banged his head on the tractor.

“Fuck!”

The little boy stirred but didn’t wake. Miguel looked long at his brother. “The same voices,” he said. “Day and night. Same voices all the time. I am tired listening to sheep. To shears. My hands shake all the time. It is like I am shearing when I am not shearing. I am tired listening to him talking nonsense all the time. It would be worth dying if I never had to hear sheep or shears or him or Mexicans and Americans trying to understand the other.”

“Yeah,” Billy said.

“You will not be fired, I think,” Miguel said.

“Maybe.”

“You can learn my language by next year when we come. I did not speak English last year. My brother did not. Tell him that.”

“Why would he even need me to speak Spanish if you speak English? He doesn’t need me.”

“He will. I will not be back,” Miguel said. “I am hungry.”

“I am hungry, too,” Miguel’s brother said, waking to the suggestion.

“Too bad one of those stupid sheep hasn’t walked by and dropped dead. I bet I could cook mutton better than James Carl,” Billy said.

Miguel perked up. “Want to go kill one?” He pulled a cheap looking survival knife from his boot. “It is sharp. Feel,” Miguel said handing Billy the knife. It was sharp. He handed it back. Miguel crawled out from under the tractor. His brother sat looking hopeful. “There are too many here. He would never miss one. I say we get one of the woolly ones still in the wood corrals. Easier.” He crawled up on the Versatile to get a better look. “I think it is too far for him to hear.” Miguel jumped down from the tractor and slid under it to put out the fire.

Billy didn’t want to kill any sheep. He’d seen enough dead for one day, but he felt like doing something brave. He felt like taking up a greater space in the world, like James Carl. Billy helped fill in the pit, leaving no visible evidence there had been a fire. He remembered to bury the bottle.

Miguel led the way but hesitated at the timberline. “I get lost in trees,” he said. Billy took over and led the boys straight through to the other side where it opened up into another field not yet plowed. Across the field lay the wooden corrals. Miguel out front, they sneaked the last quarter-mile. At the corrals, Miguel’s brother put his hand through and let a lamb lick his fingers. He giggled.

“Stay on this side,” Miguel said to his brother. Grinning at Billy, Miguel took the knife from his boot and bit down on it.

Climbing over the corral fence, Billy missed a step and fell into the sheep, frightening them. Bleating, the sheep scattered and ran in futile circles around the boys. Miguel took the knife out of his mouth to laugh at Billy lying in the dirt, put it back, and began the chase. Miguel lunged at one, missed, chased another, and missed again. Billy faired about the same, each boy running in drunken circles, laughing and falling, until Billy gave out and crossed the fence. He sat

panting in the grass with Miguel's brother, who rocked patiently. Billy heard the gate jangle. Miguel approached carrying a tiny lamb. It looked dead, drooping in his arms. Miguel spit the knife onto the ground. The lamb raised its head, curled comfortably into his arms, and fell asleep.

"I can not do it," Miguel said. "He jumped in my arms like I was to save him. They all ran. He jumped."

Billy, feeling big, picked up the knife. "You can't baby sheep." He tested the knife's edge, wiped it off on his pant leg, and raised the lamb's sleepy head, exposing its neck. He gripped the knife hard, felt for the best spot to cut, and looked up at Miguel. Miguel took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and turned away. Billy lowered the lamb's head. He could see there was more to it than Miguel not wanting to be the one holding the knife. He could see the boy didn't want it killed at all.

"Let's put him back," Billy said, tossing the knife in the grass.

Miguel relaxed his shoulders and stared up at the sky, his hands slipping to loosely hold the lamb. Seeing the look on Miguel's face, Billy, too, felt a sense of relief. In his periphery, Billy saw Miguel's little brother pick up the knife, but he was too slow to prevent the boy from slitting the lamb's throat. Miguel dropped to the ground with the lamb and tried to stop the flow, but it was a good cut. The lamb was mostly dead.

"Why did you do that?" Miguel pleaded.

"Huh?"

"I said why did you do that? We were going to put it back. I have it all over me. What are we going to do with it? Shit. Shit." Miguel turned to Billy. "Do something."

The little boy put his hand on Miguel's shoulder. "We eat? I am hungry. We eat now?"

Miguel cried, leaning over the lamb.

“We could throw it in the creek,” Billy said. Wewoka Creek was only a couple hundred yards away.

“Throw it in a creek? There is blood all over.” Miguel stood and walked away from them into the dark. Billy, hearing Miguel’s crying intensify, ducked his head and stared at the ground like he always did when he was nervous. He noticed blood had splashed his boot. It beaded up in red half-moons that with a shake rolled to the ground.

Miguel reappeared, calm. He pointed a finger at his brother. “His name is Cordaro.” The boy started to correct, but Miguel leapt onto him, pinned him to the ground, and knocked the knife from his hand. “*Cállate el hocico!* I want to hear nothing from you. Hear? *Nada!*” Miguel’s brother looked vacant, as if focusing on some curious point far beyond his brother. Miguel crawled off of him and went to Billy. He started to cry again but stifled it. He picked the lamb up from the ground and held it like a dead baby. “Which way?”

Billy led him to the creek. It was full of spring rain. Miguel waded chest deep and released the lamb. Watching it float downstream, he washed away the blood, then washed his brother. Billy, sitting on the bank sobering up, caught movement downstream. In the moonlight, he saw Dog slip through the cattails on the opposite side of the creek. He was after the lamb. Billy stood.

“Get,” Billy yelled. Dog looked up and saw him but appeared unconcerned.

“*Que?*” Miguel asked, pulling his brother close.

Dog stretched his neck out into the water, nipped at and missed the lamb. He hunkered his haunches. Billy knew he was going to leap. He ran down the bank toward Dog, throwing anything he could grab as he closed the gap between

them. Dog was brave, but he wasn't stupid. He abandoned the creek and disappeared into the cattails. Billy slowed when he saw him leave. He waded in and pulled the lamb from the water. Dripping at the river's edge, he saw Miguel staring at him.

"A dog was going to get him," Billy said.

"It is dead."

"Yeah."

Billy heard the familiar diesel cams of the Versatile hammer to a start. Though it was a half mile away, it was clearly the big tractor. When lights washed the tops of the creek willows, he knew James Carl was coming. He saw that Miguel knew it, too.

"Put it back in the water," Miguel said.

Billy laid the lamb in soft grass and walked the incline up and out of the creek to get a better look. The tractor was almost to the corrals. They hadn't bothered to kick dirt over the blood. Miguel and his brother joined Billy.

"He will know," Miguel said. Billy nodded. "Tell him that dog did it. Tell him we chased but too late." In the headlights, Billy saw James Carl standing at the corrals. "Tell him it was the dog," Miguel said again. Billy descended the slope to where he'd laid the lamb. He gathered it in his arms and climbed the rise, stopping beside Miguel. "You will tell him it was the dog?" Miguel asked.

Billy stood looking into the lights now heading his direction. "Stay in the creek bottom. Walk up it until you get to a fence. It goes right across the creek. Follow the fence back to the barn."

"You will say it was the dog?" Miguel asked.

Billy shook his head.

"It will be bad," Miguel said.

Billy nodded that it would, and carried the lamb into the lights of the Versatile.

# The Eskimo Keeps Her Promise

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by Emily Ruskovich  
from *Inkwell*

Jeremy says that one day I will wake up and there will be something different about my room. He says I will feel sick and not know why. My mother will be putting dishes away and the truck will be gone and the cat will be sleeping on the TV as usual, her flicking tail making a soft, static sound against the screen. But I will get out of bed and I will look and look, shaking out my clothes, holding my books upside down by their spines to see if something falls. I'll tear the covers off my bed. I'll dump the sand out of the little perfume bottles on my shelf and sift through it and find nothing. Then I will pick up the Eskimo doll on my desk, and I will feel something hard in her tiny pocket and it will be a silver tooth—*his* silver tooth—and when I find it there, I will know that he has killed himself.

He makes me a map of where to find his body. It is four pieces of paper taped together. He draws the two dogs in the yard and a football, the fence around the house with the moldy scarf on the weather vane, the trail past the horse's grave, and then blue arrows pointing down a gulch. He folds up the corner of the map and writes "Lift here" and I do. A wolf stands in the water eating a boy. The wolf is looking up at me with a piece of blue cloth in his mouth like I've startled him with how fast I opened the flap. The boy's eyes are red Xs but his mouth is smiling; the blood is a fountain and there are frogs. Jeremy paints a corn-haired girl crying in her hands. He draws cattails and crows.

But he is eleven and lies.

The first thing I do every morning is press my finger on the pocket. I turn over on my bed and reach out, sometimes with my eyes still closed. The pocket is big enough to fit a penny. The clasp is the tip of a sea urchin's quill and it pricks me. I know that there is nothing to find but still I feel a terrifying thrill in checking. It is my first thought, and my last thought. Sometimes I believe I can make things happen by forgetting to wish for them *not* to happen. So I always make my intentions clear: *I don't want Jeremy to kill himself.* I bargain. This time, with the doll. *If there's no tooth in your pocket tomorrow, I promise to build you a sled. I promise to make you a dog out of cotton and rocks.*

She stands on my desk with two sharp wires coming together at her temples to hold up her wooden head, and her seal-skin boots hang an inch in mid-air. She is mouthless. Inside her muff, she is handleless, just stubs of stuffed material. Inside her boots, the same stubs. She holds something over me that transcends the usual power struggle of girls and dolls. It gives me a purpose that no one else could know, a fear of death and chaos, the thrill of grave responsibility. I know it's all false and in the day it's a game to talk with Jeremy about his suicide. But at night...

The Eskimo gets lots of things she never uses—a fishing pole and a baby—but I do it because it's the only thing keeping Jeremy alive. I am nine but understand the word is “sacrifice.” I whisper it in my dark room. The word falls from my mouth like a red silk scarf.

Jeremy finally twists his tooth out. He's at his own house when it happens; I see only the gap it leaves behind.

He gives the silver tooth to his aunt to send in an envelope to his mother. He does not come into my house some night and open the urchin clasp. He does not look over at me sleeping in my bed. He does not kill himself and I am not the

one to find him, to chase off the wolf and hold him in my lap, crying in his coarse, sweet hair, *I love you*.

He goes on living and eats scorched brownies from a pan on my porch. The rest of his life is out of my control. The world is reckless and angry. He teases the dog with an old sock; he finishes school, buries his father, goes away to college and marries a girl he finds there.

And I stop playing with dolls. I wash the river from my hair and move into the city where I am restless at bus-stops, searching men's mouths. I reach out in the night to feel the sting of an urchin quill but the Eskimo is packed away. I have children. Girls. I marry too. Telephones ring and I answer.

Because that is what I wished.

There is no one to blame, nothing to blame on anyone. Still, I hold it against him. And I think of what is gone, of those moments when our lives hung in the same balance and the whole of his world depended on me. The secret bargains in the dark room. Insects thumped on my window. I saw his death in the stream, then undid it, as if the river and its secrets was an open zipper simply to be closed. The doll's wooden head glared in the moon. The dog barked at the stars.

All of this is lost on him. A red scarf fallen in a black room.

# Helping Hands

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by David Peak  
from *PANK*

Malmoud, the village leader, grabbed Betsy by the hand, the loose skin on his thin arm purple beneath the white glare of the sun. His head was covered in thick shocks of white hair, his obsidian eyes sunk deep within their sockets.

He'd been hovering around her ever since she'd climbed down from Brian's mud-caked Jeep, tilting his head back and forth as he eyed her blonde ponytail, her neatly-pressed safari pants.

He jerked Betsy's arm as he pulled her through the small, nameless village outside Wau in West Bahr al Ghazal.

These villages were popping up everywhere in South Sudan, everywhere in Sub-Saharan Africa for that matter, as quickly and haphazardly as dust settling after a storm.

The landscape of South Sudan is bleak—the land of biblical cataclysm, of annual droughts giving way to annual floods. The sky is always full of birds of prey—buzzards, eagles, kites.

Malmoud kept turning around, kept saying something in his language—Thuongjang, the Dinka language, the language of the Nile—but it was incomprehensible to Betsy's ears, too rich in vowels, too formless, too breathy. *Brian would know what he's saying*, she thought. *Brian speaks six languages.*

It's nearly impossible for an American to visit South Sudan without a chaperone. Betsy found Brian online. At 27 he was already working on his doctorate in anthropology. He had a ruddy face and bright eyes. He worked for

the International Rescue Committee. She e-mailed him and he responded. She only paid him \$450.

Malmoud's face looked like an eggplant, his teeth flashing yellow in his wide mouth, his tongue a vibrant pink, his gray eyes radiating anger. He wore nothing except a pair of faded camouflage cut-offs.

They passed by small huts made of grass, "thuckles" they called them. They passed by houses of rusted green and yellow sheet metal. They passed by huts made of dried mud, sagging tin roofs stretched overhead, huts made of rotting, brown wood, chicken-wire fences strung up alongside the dirt path that wound through the center of the village.

There was no electricity, no running water, no telephones. Brian told Betsy that some of these people had satellite phones but so far she hadn't seen any.

The sky was a blue dome over their heads, cloudless, stretching endlessly, as large as the world itself.

She was struck by the silence of this place, the emptiness. A bi-plane buzzed in the sky, somewhere in the distance. Betsy stopped, made a visor with her hand, looked into the sun.

Malmoud pulled at her once more, muttered something in his strange language, nodded his head toward the canvas IRC tent. He let go of her hand and Betsy felt his perspiration cooling in her palm. He side-stepped behind her, put a hand on the small of her back, and using the tips of his needle-thin fingers, gave her a light push.

Betsy looked down. The dirt in front of the tent had been kicked up, trampled, as if a hundred people had passed through the tent's entrance that morning.

"You, go," he said, his tongue struggling over the sharp angles of English consonants. "Look inside."

The entrance of the tent was a dark slit that ran up between two hanging flaps of canvas, red crosses painted on either side. Betsy looked around for Brian, for any of the International Rescue Committee workers, and saw nothing but purple faces, peeking out from behind huts, from within the thuckles.

The bi-plane's high-pitched buzzing was louder now. It was approaching the village.

"Go," Malmoud said. "Now."

Betsy felt the old man's eyes boring into her, hotter than the sun. She'd only been here—in this nameless village—for five minutes. She'd only left Kenya that morning.

She swallowed her spit, took a step forward, and grabbed hold of one of the canvas flaps. She pulled it back and looked inside.

\* \* \* \*

"There was a pile of arms," Betsy said. "Maybe twelve of them, stacked up like chicken bones on a plate, pools of black blood all over the place.

"In the back of the tent, all huddled together, there were six dead children—no older than eight or nine. They'd bled to death. Their lips had turned gray, puckered up against their face. All of their eyes were still open. All of their skin was gray. The stench—*my God*—the stench was unbelievable. They were the only kids in the entire village. After that...that was it. There were no children left."

She was home now, back in Michigan. She'd arrived early that morning, taken a cab home, climbed the stairs, fallen into a long nap. Paul, her fiancée, had woken her after sundown, roused her gently by stroking the side of her face

with the backs of his fingers. He was nearly done cooking her dinner, he'd said. He was sorry for waking her, he'd said.

He hadn't said anything about her early return, hadn't asked her any questions. *He knows I'll tell him when I'm ready*, Betsy thought, sliding out of bed.

She was setting the table for dinner. It was covered in an elegant, white cloth. The lights had been dimmed. The windows were open. The humid summer air smelled like trees. Grasshoppers chirped in the yard.

The sight of wood floors, polished and clean, of floral-print wallpaper, track lighting—these things comforted Betsy in a way she would have never thought possible. Never before.

Paul was in the kitchen, the next room over, washing the dishes. They'd been engaged for nearly a year. Betsy's trip to Africa was something they had both agreed she needed to do, something she needed to get out of the way before they settled down, started their family.

As Betsy told her story, he occasionally responded, his voice muffled beneath the sound of running water. He sounded uncomfortable, like he didn't know quite what to say.

"They'd been hacked off at the shoulder," she said, shutting the cabinet door, holding a plate beneath each arm, a glass in each hand—her hard-earned waitressing skills at work. "With a machete. It was still there, next to the pile of arms. Its blade was nicked, covered in dried blood."

Three days had passed since Malmoud led her to the IRC tent. She'd taken the first available flight home—a full month earlier than she'd planned. She lost the will to help, had never been able to go birding in Botswana like she'd wanted. All the way home and all she'd been able think about were the birds in Botswana. They were supposed to be the most beautiful in the world.

All she remembered were the buzzards and the kites in Sudan.

“These people actually cut off the arms of their children. All because they didn’t know what an *inoculation* was—what *vaccines* were. We found out later, we learned that they thought we’d been injecting them with poison—that’s what Malmoud said. You should have seen the look on his face. Those villagers, they nearly killed those IRC people. And...and I don’t know why, for some reason they thought I was there to help, they thought...they thought I could bring their children back to life.

“The five months I was there, I never saw anything like that—not in Rwanda, not in Kenya.”

Betsy set the glasses on the table, then the plates. She picked up a box of matches and lit the candles. A gust of summer wind blew in through the open windows. The flames jumped.

“I know I was told, ‘Don’t expect to make things better.’ That’s what Brian said when I first got there—to Sudan. ‘Don’t think that just because you come from privilege that you can change things.’ But I never thought it was going to be like that. Christ, I don’t know how we’re supposed to wipe out polio if...if...” Betsy’s voice faltered in her throat.

She saw Paul standing in the doorway, drying his hands on a dishrag. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows. He filled the doorway, stood in a wide stance. He was a handsome man with a large jaw and dark eyes. Something about the way he was standing there reminded Betsy of how much she loved him.

“Jesus,” he said, coming toward her. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He grabbed hold of the back of her neck with one hand, wrapped his other arm around her lower back. He pulled her close. “I had no idea,” he said. “I had no idea you were living with this.”

Betsy angled her chin upward, smelled the wine on Paul's breath as he came in close and spoke softly in her ear. His skin smelled of soap. He said everything she expected. *It's okay. There's nothing to worry about. You did all you could. You're a good person. Those people need the guiding light.*

They never got around to eating that night. Instead they sat on the couch in the living room, finished two bottles of red wine. They talked until two in the morning. By the time they went to sleep, Betsy's eyes were puffy, swollen and red. As they climbed the stairs, she felt nauseous. *Only the wine*, she thought. Paul held her around the waist, supporting her. Her legs were rubbery and she had to hold onto the handrail. *In the morning I'll feel better.*

\* \* \* \*

That night, insects filled her dreams. Every kind of insect. Gnats. Mosquitoes. Dragonflies. Praying Mantises. They were the size of cars. They swooped down on her, emerged from black skies, flapped their leathery wings.

They had eyes like silver domes. She saw herself reflected in their vision. She saw hundreds of versions of herself, small, distorted. Her face bent into new angles.

She covered her face with her arms, screamed "No no no no no" as she ran. She was running in the desert, she knew it was the Sahara. Her feet were bare, the sand lunar-gray, cold, the sky an endless black void. The insects droned above her, beyond her vision. She felt their menace in her blood.

In the distance she saw the IRC tent bathed in moonlight, recognized the red crosses on the entrance flaps. And then she was there, pulling back the flaps. There was silence now. The insects were gone. She took a step inside the tent.

She felt herself sinking in blood. It closed around her knees. It sucked her down. It was at her waist, smelling like copper. She held her arms in the air and tried to scream. She couldn't make a noise. It licked at her armpits. She struggled, and for a second she thought she might break free. She slid down even farther and the blood filled her mouth with its warmth, its metallic stink. She tried to scream again and felt it pouring down her throat, into her lungs.

\* \* \* \*

Time passed. Two, three days. Betsy got the flu. Every morning she was waking up, darting to the bathroom, throwing up stomach acid yellow as bile. The bathroom would spin. Her forehead would sweat.

She would think of all the shots the government made her get before she could go to Africa: Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Meningitis, Rabies, Typhoid, Tetanus-Diphtheria, Measles, Polio.

She stayed in bed all day. Her eyes twitched with dreams.

When he came home from work, Paul served her plain foods on a tray. He served her chicken broth and unbuttered toast. He served her JellO cut up into little cubes. She wouldn't touch any of it. Finally he started giving her bowls of ice chips, told her—begged her—to suck on them. He gave her water, glass after glass after glass of water.

She had nothing but time, nothing to do but think. She thought of what had happened in Wau. She thought of what had happened after she'd seen the arms.

The bi-plane's buzzing turned into a roar as it approached the village, swooping over the huts in a wide arc before touching down in the dry, surrounding fields.

Betsy emerged from the darkness of the tent and fell to her knees, then to her hands. The dirt was dry and hot against her palms. Her stomach pulled inward and she dry-heaved, hard enough to break the blood vessels around her eyes. A thin cry escaped her mouth. Malmoud stood over her, yelling. He stomped back and forth, bringing his knees up high, slamming his feet into the dirt.

She heard Brian's voice, down the footpath, a hundred yards away. He was arguing with somebody.

She fainted.

By the time she woke up in the back of Brian's Jeep, they were about to cross the border back into Kenya.

The sun was relentless. The land around them flat, brown.

They approached the border, nothing more than a small shack, a barricade built of yellow 2×4s. A dozen men—young boys, really—in baggy camouflage uniforms stopped them. They appeared unsure of what to do. They rifled aimlessly through their bags. They argued with Brian.

There was a small metal sign on a post with a message written in Kishwahili, English and Arabic. The sign warned of taking photographs, a criminal offense.

The guards had AK-47s. They held them at their hips, posed with them. They had a meanness in their eyes. She had never seen anything like it. They reminded her of abused dogs.

"*American*," Brian said. And then he reverted back to words that Betsy could not understand.

The boys let them go soon after that. It wasn't until the Jeep bounced along the dusty road into Lokichokio that Brian began talking. He spoke quickly, loudly.

"Don't worry," he said. He kept checking the rear view mirrors. "The IRC workers got out of there as soon as they

realized what was happening, as soon as they figured out that the kids had been rounded up.

“Malmoud—that old man—he was the one. He was the one who did it. Did you go in the tent? Did you see what was in there? Christ, I never should have let you go with him. Somebody—I don’t know who, must’ve been one of the IRC workers—somebody put out a dispatch, I don’t even know who to. That plane that landed, it was two human rights defenders, Americans. None of us knew what to do. We were yelling, we were all scared, panicked. That’s when I got to the tent and saw you on the ground. I picked you up, ran you back to the Jeep. Christ, I never even knew I was that strong.”

It wasn’t until she was on a plane, flying out of Nairobi, that Betsy cried.

Then one morning Betsy woke up, stepped down from bed, and her legs gave out beneath her. Her bones pulled her straight to the hardwood floor. First her elbow smacked, then her hip thudded. A wavering cry escaped her throat and for a second she couldn’t figure out what it was. When she realized it had been her cry, a cold rush of fear coursed through her entire body. Her fingertips tingled.

She soldier-crawled her way to the bathroom, sat against the tub, looked at her feet. Her vision was blurry. It took a few seconds before things came into focus.

Sunlight poured in through the small window next to the toilet, formed slanted columns, illuminated bits of dust that twirled and danced in the air.

The skin of her toes had turned black. It looked like her skin had shrunk over the bones in her foot. Her toenails were a wan pink. The cuticles had turned orange, like they’d been stained with iodine. The bridge of her foot was beet-red, covered in open sores that glistened white in the sunlight.

Betsy's heart pounded as she inspected her feet. She thought of words like *gangrene, necrotic, fetid*.

She looked at her hands. Her palms were covered in sores. The skin on her fingers was so black it was shiny, almost blue. *How had I not noticed that? How could I have not noticed that my hands turned black?*

She was too tired to do anything. She was too tired to crawl back into the bedroom, to lift herself up to the phone, too tired to dial the numbers, to explain who she was, where she was, what was wrong.

Betsy felt fuzzy warmth swirl behind her eyes. She was tired. She shut her eyes and fell asleep. *Paul will find me*, she thought. *Paul will find me and Paul will help*.

\* \* \* \*

She was in a white bed. The bed's frame was metal and painted white. The white sheets were tucked tightly over her body, but her body was not there. Her arms were tucked beneath the sheets but her arms were not there. Her legs and feet did not push against the sheet. She was flat.

She was back in the Sahara, surrounded by the lunar sands. The sky was black. There were no stars. There was moonlight on everything but there was no moon.

At the foot of the bed was a giant mosquito. It was perched on the ornate footboard, all six of its massive, pipe-cleaner legs holding the footboard like a buzzard holds the branch of a tree. Its legs bent out at its sides at severe angles. Its body expanded and contracted as it took in and released air.

The mosquito tilted its head as it looked at Betsy. Its sucker hung straight down like a vacuum cleaner attachment.

Its antennae sprouted from its small head, curled inward on themselves into the shape of a heart.

It had eyes the size of dinner plates, silver dome eyes. She saw herself reflected in the mosquito's eyes.

"If you had one wish," the mosquito said, its voice like crawling insects, "what would it be?"

"I would like to help everyone."

"And how would you do that?"

Betsy thought for a moment, then said, "I would like more hands. I have always seen my two hands as helping hands. If I had more hands I would be able to help everyone in the world. Two hands are not enough to help everyone. I could reach out to everyone in the world. I wish that I had more hands."

As she spoke, she thought of the pile of arms she'd seen in the IRC tent. She thought of how small they had been. She wished she had picked them up, brought them somewhere. She wished she had done something, anything other than leave them there. She thought of Malmoud, his obsidian eyes, the way they radiated anger, the way he touched her ponytail.

"I wish I had been able to bring those children back to life—the way those villagers thought I could. I wish I had picked up those arms and put them back where they belonged, reattached them to their sockets. I wish that I had been able to breathe life into those children's lungs, to give them back the life that was robbed from them."

The mosquito laughed a buzzing laugh. Its whole body convulsed with laughter. Its heart glowed red inside its body.

The mosquito's face turned into Paul's face. He looked upset. Betsy recognized his voice.

"I'm here with you," he said.

\* \* \* \*

“I’m here with you at the hospital. You’re going to wake up soon and I’m going to be here for you.”

Paul sat on a plastic chair next to Betsy’s bed. She had a private room. The sky outside the window opposite was overcast. He watched Betsy’s eyes twitch and he thought she must be dreaming.

He did not know how long comas were supposed to last and he did not know whether or not it would be best for her if she stayed wherever she was.

Paul leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, cupped his hands in front of his mouth, and began to cry.

She’ll need a quadruple amputation, they’d said. Symmetric peripheral gangrene. Caused by a malarial infection.

Paul did not know the answers to the doctor’s questions about where Betsy had been or what she had done or what she had taken. He only knew what she told him. She had been to Kenya, to Rwanda, to Sudan. She volunteered with the International Rescue Committee. She had been administering Polio vaccinations. It was her dream to help stop Polio.

Paul leaned back in his chair and stared out the window. He did not want to think of Betsy spending the rest of her life confined, without arms, without legs.

Paul thought that the gray sky was the same sky over Africa. He wondered if these clouds were made of waters that had once been in Africa. It occurred to him that if so, the journey these waters had made was a long and thankless one.

# The Next Thing on Benefit

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by Castle Freeman, Jr.  
from *The New England Review*

When the police in Miami—if police is what they were—asked Sharon how long she had been on Benefit Island, she found she didn’t know for sure.

“Three days?” she said. “Four days? A week? Not more than a week.”

When they showed her a log of some kind from the base at San Juan that had her party cleared through there in early February, she said, “Oh.”

They had her. They had her, but they didn’t seem to want her. They didn’t seem to care much about the little she had to tell them. When they asked her how she knew the man she had been on the island with, she told them, through her work. When they asked her what that work was, and she answered physical therapist, they looked at her. They looked at her, but they didn’t seem to care much about that, either.

They didn’t keep her long. Patrick had said they wouldn’t, and they didn’t. She was with them for half an hour. Then they drove her to the airport and put her on a flight to Newark. She had no ticket, no reservation, no bags, no money. Nothing was asked for. Patrick hadn’t said anything about that. Can the police do that? The police of what?

\* \* \* \*

Duncan Munro did not at first look to Sharon like the next thing. “Duncan’s a trip,” her friend Wanda told her

when she asked Sharon to take her appointment with him. Wanda had the flu.

“Duncan’s a trip,” said Wanda. “You don’t want to miss out on Duncan. Do you know the St. John?”

“Is it near the Carlyle?” Sharon asked her. She was used to working at the Carlyle. She had an arrangement with an orthopedist at Mount Sinai who had arrangements with several of the big hotels.

“Not really,” said Wanda. “It’s private.”

The Hotel St. John was in the eighties off Park. Sharon had walked down that block a hundred times; she’d had a client there, an older lady. She had never known there was a hotel on the street. That was part of the thing of being the St. John, she learned. The St. John had no awning, no doorman, no sign. You climbed the marble steps to the door, toward the warm yellow light coming from the front rooms, and somebody swung the door open for you. You got into an elevator the size of a phone booth, and up you went. The elevator opened directly into a suite of rooms. There was no hallway, there were no doors.

From what Wanda had said, Sharon expected Duncan Munro to be what Sharon and Wanda and their friends called a giant squid: ancient and hideous, raised from lightless depths, having an array of long, slippery arms that twisted and wriggled to turn up in unwelcome places. The giant squids had to be handled. Wanda, a black Amazon, six feet two, with the shoulders of a prizefighter and the stride of a panther, handled them easily. Sharon, smaller, softer, not so easily. In this case, however, it didn’t matter. Duncan Munro, Sharon found, wasn’t a giant squid. He was a gentleman. He was a little heavy, but not soft; not really fit, but in decent shape. His age? Well, his hair was mostly there and mostly dark, though his eyebrows had begun to look as if two

families of small birds, swallows or swifts, were nesting on the ridge there. He might have been ten years older than he looked, and he looked, say, fifty-five. No, he didn't look like the next thing, not at first. But he was.

Sharon's appointment was for five o'clock.

The management of the Hotel St. John had set up a massage table in Duncan Munro's suite. Munro had a bad knee. He lay on his stomach with a towel over his middle. Sharon went over his back, his shoulders. She handled his knee.

"What happened?" Sharon asked him. "It feels okay to me. It wasn't broken. How did you hurt it?"

"In a football game."

Sharon was bending Munro's left knee gently back as he lay prone. The work went best when you kept the talk going.

"College or high school?" she asked.

"College."

"Where did you go?"

"Princeton."

"So, they play a lot of football there?"

"They did."

"Not anymore?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Why not? Did they kick you out? Were you bad?"

"Don't be silly."

Gently, Sharon let Munro's left leg back down onto the table. She picked up his right leg, she began testing that knee.

"So, what did you play?" she asked Munro. "In football? Were you the quarterback?"

"I didn't say I was playing."

Okay. Okay, then. Fine. No talk. No questions. He wanted her to shut up. Sharon could do that. After all, she said, he was Wanda's client, he wasn't hers.

The next week Sharon had a call from someone with a British accent, someone named Patrick. "Patrick at the St. John," he said. He wanted Sharon to take on Duncan Munro's therapy as a continuing engagement.

"I can't do that," Sharon told him. "He's Wanda's client. I can't just cut Wanda out. We don't do that."

"Call her," said the man named Patrick. "We'll look for you Wednesday, then, shall we? About five?"

Sharon called Wanda. "Go for it," said Wanda. "Go right for it. It works for me. I heard from Patrick, too, you know."

"You did?"

"I sure did," said Wanda. "I heard from him big time. I am a happy camper today. A very happy camper."

"Why?" Sharon asked her.

"I guess you could say Duncan bought my contract," said Wanda. "Duncan's a trip. You'll have fun. Don't worry about me. I'm going shopping."

So Sharon began calling on Duncan Munro. The squid never appeared. Munro stayed on the table as Sharon worked on him. His towel stayed on. He didn't turn over, he didn't pat or grab or squeeze. He didn't even flirt. He also didn't complain.

"Am I hurting you?" Sharon asked him.

"No."

"Tell me if I hurt you, okay?"

"Okay."

At the end of their third or fourth session, when she leaned into his ankle and worked it back, back, Munro said, "Enough."

“Enough, that hurts?”

“No,” said Munro. “Enough, let’s have dinner.”

Sharon was uncertain.

“You mean sometime?” she asked.

“I mean now.”

“I couldn’t,” Sharon said. “I’m not dressed or anything. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you. I have been for a couple of weeks. You look fine. You’re dressed beautifully.”

“No, I’m not,” said Sharon. “Or, where did you think of going?”

“No place,” said Munro. “Are you busy? Do you have to be anywhere?”

Briefly, Sharon thought of Neil. Did she in that moment discern the ineluctable advent of the next thing? Probably she did. She thought of Neil.

“No,” she said.

Duncan Munro ordered dinner brought up—no ordinary dinner, the kind of dinner Sharon didn’t get every night, didn’t get every year. A dinner on heavy linen, perfectly white, a dinner under silver covers, with a couple of bottles of champagne, a dinner rolled in by two waiters, one to serve and one to light the candles and pop the corks. With them was a tall man wearing a blue suit, an Englishman.

“This is Patrick,” Duncan Munro told Sharon.

“Hi, Patrick,” said Sharon.

“Good evening, miss,” said the Englishman.

“You and I talked on the phone, didn’t we?” Sharon asked.

“Indeed we did, miss,” said Patrick. “Will that be all for now, sir?” he asked Munro. Munro nodded and Patrick

shooed the waiters off and followed them to the elevator and out.

“Who’s Patrick?” Sharon asked Duncan Munro.

“Patrick’s an Etonian,” said Munro.

“What’s an Etonian?”

“A good thing to be, where Patrick comes from,” said Munro.

“Are you one?” Sharon asked him.

“I might have been,” said Munro. “But Patrick’s the real thing. Patrick is a man of many talents.”

“He’s like the concierge?”

“The concierge?”

“Yeah. He works for the hotel, doesn’t he?” asked Sharon.

“No,” said Munro. “Not for the hotel.”

They began on their dinner. Munro wore a robe, and Sharon sat opposite him in sweatpants and her FDNY T-shirt. She expected Munro to drink a lot, but he barely tasted the wine. Sharon drank most of it herself. Probably that was part of the thing, long after dinner, of her finding herself with Duncan Munro in the suite’s shower. They stood in each other’s arms under the warm water.

“I think I’ve had too much champagne,” said Sharon.

“Don’t be silly,” said Munro. “You can’t have too much champagne. It’s good for you.”

“It is?”

“Well, at any rate,” said Munro, “it’s good for me.”

“But you haven’t had any.”

“But you have.”

Sharon realized she was a little taller than Munro. She had never before been together with a man shorter than she. She looked him over. He wasn't a big man.

"I guess you're not quite built like a football player, at that," she said.

"You are. Those broad shoulders. Those strong legs. You'd have made a beautiful football player."

"So, do you think I could have joined the team?" Sharon asked him.

Munro laughed.

"I don't know," he said. "The fellows would have been all for it, I know that. But this was years ago, remember. Before you were born. Coach had a rule against four-legged showers."

"Four-legged showers?" Sharon said. "So, is this a four-legged shower we're having?"

"You bet."

Sharon giggled. "A four-legged shower," she said. "I like that. That's pretty funny."

"Coach thought so," said Munro.

\* \* \* \*

After Christmas the real winter, the leaden New York winter, took enduring hold, grimly, like a sentence you had to serve, like long, hard time you had to do, day after day after day. The cloud and fog and dirt and noise hung low over the avenues, and along them the lights of the shop windows poured a wet, dripping sheen over the streets and over the traffic in the streets so that Sharon, making her way to work every day from Kew Gardens, felt as though she were going down a mine.

She got to the St. John around five.

“You’re wet,” said Duncan Munro.

“Yeah, I’m wet,” said Sharon. “It’s pouring. You didn’t notice? It’s been raining for two days.”

“I haven’t been out.”

“You haven’t been out? You work in here?”

“Where did you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Sharon. “In an office? An office, I guess. People work in offices.”

“You don’t work in an office.”

“No,” said Sharon. “My work, you’re sometimes better off without an office.”

“Mine, too,” said Munro.

Sharon took off her damp coat and hung it in the closet. When she turned to Munro, he nodded toward their massage table. “That’s for you,” he said.

On the table, a paper parcel waited. Sharon picked it up. Inside were a pair of plastic sandals from the drugstore and a narrow box about a foot long, covered in black velvet.

“What’s this?” Sharon asked.

“Open it.”

Sharon opened the box and found herself looking down at a string of pearls, not big pearls, not small. She hooked them around her finger and lifted them carefully from their box.

“Are these real?” she asked Munro.

“They’d better be,” said Munro.

“I can’t take these.”

“Sure, you can,” said Munro.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say, thank you, Duncan.”

Sharon picked up the sandals.

“Flip-flops,” she said.

“They’re real, too,” said Munro.

“I don’t get it,” said Sharon.

“You’ll need them,” said Munro. “Where we’re going.”

“Where’s that?”

“South.”

“South of where?”

“South of here,” said Munro. “A long way south. Out of town. Out of the winter. Into the sun, the heat, the light. You know? A few days of sun? A few days of folly?”

“Folly?” Sharon asked.

“Folly. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t like that.”

“I’d like it,” said Sharon. “Sure, I’d like it. Where would we go? Florida?”

“Not Florida,” said Munro. “South.”

“The islands? Barbados? I’ve been to Barbados.”

“Not Barbados. Keep going south. Another island. Smaller. A small island I know down there.”

“So, like a resort?” said Sharon.

“Something like that.”

“When you say ‘folly’? We’re talking about your basic beach-bar-bed vacation, is that right?”

“There’s no bar,” said Munro.

Later they lay together in the suite’s enormous bed. Munro lay on his back with his eyes closed. Sharon rose on her elbow beside him. She put her hand on his chest. Munro opened his eyes.

“What if I can’t make it?” Sharon asked him.

“Why wouldn’t you be able to make it?” Munro asked.

“I might be busy.”

“Busy?”

“Yeah. Busy. I might have a boyfriend. I might have a husband.”

“You might,” said Munro. He took her hand. He examined it, turned it over, kissed the palm. “Beautiful hands,” he said. Sharon waited.

“You might have a husband,” said Munro at last. “You might. I don’t know. I haven’t asked. I might have a wife. You don’t know. You haven’t asked. You don’t ask. What do I do? Why am I here? You haven’t asked. You’ve wondered, but you haven’t asked.”

“Why would I ask?” said Sharon.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because,” Sharon said, “look: if I asked you whether you have a wife and you said yes, I’d feel bad about that.”

“And if I said no?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

“I see what you mean.”

“Do you?”

“Do I see what you mean?”

“Do you have a wife?”

“No.”

\* \* \* \*

They flew from a little airport on Long Island to Miami, then to San Juan, then on down. The plane looked to Sharon

like a model plane, like a kind of miniature, until she climbed aboard. Inside was a long cabin with leather chairs on steel pedestals instead of airline seats, a bank seat like a sofa, and a bar. Patrick was with them. He rode forward with the pilots. There was another man, too, a boy, really, with brown skin and a white jacket, who waited at the bar and served them meals.

At San Juan they landed beside a harbor full of the biggest ships Sharon had ever seen, all gray, unmoving: floating gray mountains. Sharon watched from her window as Patrick and another man, perhaps one of the pilots, left the plane and were met by two men in uniform. All four climbed into a Jeep and drove a short distance to a metal building.

“Where’s Patrick going?” Sharon asked Munro.

“He won’t be long,” said Munro. “It’s the Navy, down here. They make you dance around a little. It won’t take long.”

Patrick and the pilot returned, and they took off again. Now the sun was strong in the cabin. The pale walls, the pale carpet, the metal fixtures, the windows, all blazed together. They had been served some kind of rum cocktails after leaving San Juan, and the cocktails and the sun made Sharon sleepy. She lay on the bank seat with her sandals off and her head in Munro’s lap. He stroked her hair. She slept.

“Here we are,” Munro was saying. “Well, almost.”

Sharon sat up. They were on the ground. Out the window was the runway and beyond it a low scrubby flat with a dull green tree line and low buildings, pink, yellow, white. Taller buildings in the distance.

“Where are we?” Sharon asked.

“Port of Spain,” said Munro.

“Where’s Port of Spain?”

Munro smiled. “You know,” he said, “I’m not really sure. We’ll ask Patrick.”

Two men came on board, and they and Patrick collected the luggage and carried it down from the plane, with Sharon and Munro behind them. The air was hot and heavy, and full of the smell of diesel. The sky was a milky blue overcast, but there was no coolness in it. Sharon could feel the heat of the tarmac through her sandals. She followed Munro.

“Is this the island?” she asked him.

“Next stop,” said Munro. He pointed ahead.

A helicopter with a fishbowl front compartment, like a traffic helicopter, sat on the runway before them. Patrick and the other men had put their bags into the machine and now climbed into the front. Munro and Sharon went in behind them.

“Ever been in one of these before?” Munro asked her.

Sharon shook her head.

“You’ll love it,” said Munro.

She did love it. Just at first, when they lifted abruptly up and off, Sharon shrieked and laughed, because the sudden rise made her feel she was falling. But when they banked and turned and took up their course, she loved being able to see. You could see everything. They left the overcast, and the sun flashed on the bright water that passed beneath them, seemingly only feet below. Overhead the sky, light blue, then darker blue, then purple at its top, and at the horizon, low clouds like a cotton lining that surrounded a great sapphire in a jewel box: the world on all sides and above and below clear and bright to the farthest limit.

“This is pretty great,” Sharon told Munro. But he couldn’t hear her for the noise of the engine and the rotors. He was looking off to the left.

“This is really great!” Sharon said again, more loudly. But Munro still didn’t hear. She touched his knee and he turned to her, smiling and shaking his head. Sharon smiled back at him, but she didn’t try to speak to him again.

Now the water went turquoise and a line of surf appeared where the sea broke on a bar or reef. Then land sped beneath them, an island that looked like the round eye of a bird: dark inside a ring of white beach. There wasn’t much to the island. From the air, it looked to be the size of a tennis court; even as they descended, Sharon saw it must be very small. The helicopter landed on the beach: dark ragged palms inland, their tops bent gently by the wind. Under the palms, set back, a low square building, and a group of three people coming from the building toward the beach, two pushing hand carts. The rotors stopped turning, and the pilot and Patrick opened their doors.

“Here we are, miss,” Patrick said to Sharon.

Sharon stepped from the cabin and down onto the soft sand of the beach. She bent to remove her sandals so she could feel the sand barefoot. Munro climbed down from the machine and stood beside her. The wind in her face was strong. It blew her dress against her legs. It blew her hair across her eyes.

“What’s the name of this place?” Sharon asked Munro.

“I don’t know if it has a name,” said Munro. “We’ll ask Patrick.”

The three with the carts had loaded their bags and were taking them back up the beach toward the building in the palms. Sharon and Munro started walking behind them when Patrick said, “Best put your shoes back on, miss. There are sharp bits off the beach.”

“Oh,” said Sharon. She was carrying her sandals. She stopped, leaned on Munro’s arm, and put them back on her

feet. Then she and Munro, following Patrick, walked toward the trees. Behind them, the pilot had climbed back aboard the helicopter and started the engine, and before they had left the beach, he had lifted off.

Duncan Munro had stopped when the helicopter took off. He had turned to watch it rise, pause, and make off the way they had come. He had watched it out of sight. Then he turned and caught up with Sharon. He took her around the waist.

“Now, then,” said Duncan Munro.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime the next day it occurred to Sharon that Duncan Munro was not a visitor to the island where they were staying, but its owner. She had slept fitfully. The house they were in was barely a house at all. It was low, made of some soft stone, with deep verandas, screened windows, and louvered doors. The wind blew through the house all night, stirring the curtains, hurrying through the rooms. Sharon started awake, then slept, then started again. Beside her Munro slept deeply. She put her arm around him and lay close along his back. Then she slept for a time, but soon the many sounds the wind made woke her again, and she turned from him and tried to settle herself another way. In the morning when she woke, the wind was gone and so was Munro. She was alone in the bed.

Sharon got out of bed, put on a robe, and left the house by French doors in the bedroom that let out onto a courtyard in the rear of the building: quarters like theirs on three sides with a gallery all around, enclosing a kind of rock garden that had a fountain in the center, a dry fountain. On the open side of the courtyard, a sandy path went out of sight into the trees and low growth.

It was near nine, and the sun was high, but the courtyard was empty, and nobody seemed to be around in the rooms or in the gallery. Sharon looked for the other guests, she looked for housekeepers and serving staff going about their work. She saw none. She went up and down the gallery, peering into the windows of the other rooms. Some were furnished like theirs with beds, chairs, dressers, but showed no sign of being occupied. Some were quite empty. One was boarded up: wooden panels had been screwed down over the windows and over the slats in the door.

Sharon started back the way she had come, but then she heard voices coming from the shut-up room. She returned to the door, looked up and down the gallery, and leaned toward the plywood panel that covered the louvers. It wasn't voices she heard, but a single voice, Patrick's. He must have been talking on the telephone.

"Yes," said Patrick. "Last night."...

"No."...

"She's the same one, yes."...

"Nothing."...

"Nothing at all."...

"Of course not."...

"He does. He must, mustn't he?"...

"All you've got."...

"As soon as may be."...

"No."...

"That's too long."...

"That's far too long."...

"Well, he isn't going anywhere, is he?"

"All right."...

“I will.”...

“All right, then.”

Sharon turned and walked quickly back around the gallery to their room. She went through the room and out onto the veranda in front. Munro was waiting for her, sitting in a chair. He got to his feet when Sharon came onto the veranda. He took her in his arms.

“Where have you been?” Munro asked her.

“Looking around.”

“What do you think?”

“It’s really quiet.”

“It’s meant to be quiet.”

“So, where are the other guests?”

“Guests?”

“This is your island, isn’t it?” Sharon asked. “It belongs to you.”

“You might say that,” said Munro.

“I might say that? What would you say? If it isn’t yours, whose is it, would you say?”

“I’d say it was ours.”

“Ours?”

“Yours and mine,” said Munro. “For the time being. For the present. For what it’s worth.”

\* \* \* \*

Sharon sat beside Munro on the beach. They sat on low canvas chairs. At noon the wind had come back. It was an onshore wind; it blew into their faces, stiffening. Sharon wore a wide straw sun hat, and she had to keep putting her

hand up to hold onto it. She turned to Munro. "Do you want to go indoors?" she asked.

Munro didn't answer. He looked out over the water to the surf breaking on the bar a hundred yards offshore. He hadn't heard her. He hadn't heard her on the helicopter, and now here. Sharon wondered if Munro might not be a little hard of hearing. She hadn't noticed it before, but it was possible. He wasn't a kid. She reached across and touched his arm where it lay on the arm of his chair. Munro turned to her.

"Do you want to go in now? The wind?"

"I like it," said Munro. He turned his arm over and she took his hand.

"Let's stay a minute more, all right?" Munro asked.

"Sure," said Sharon.

They held hands. Sharon hung onto her hat with her other hand. They were silent together. She thought of Neil. The year before, Neil had taken her to Barbados for a long weekend. Somebody he knew from the bank had a place there. The heat, the beach, the air, the sea had worked on Neil, all right. Normally he wasn't what you'd call a lot of fun, but down there he came over Sharon like a buck rabbit on his honeymoon. They barely left the cabana, they barely ate.

Munro was the opposite. He'd been more of a lover in New York, in his peculiar hotel. Since their coming to the island, he'd hardly touched her. That suited Sharon. She didn't have to be screwing all the time. And Munro was by no means cold, he was by no means inattentive. He wanted her with him. He was easy with her, but in a new way, a way new to her. He was as though they'd known each other for years; he was familiar, he was bantering, he was more like an older brother than a lover. And Sharon began to feel the same way, which was odd, because, of himself, of his affairs, his life, of

the long-accreted soil in which ease and familiarity must grow—of these Munro continued to give her nothing at all.

Again, the difference from Neil. Neil never talked about anything but himself, and he never shut up. His boss, his accounts, his assistant, his landlord, his sisters, his accountant, his dry cleaner, what he'd said to them, what they'd said to him, and on and on. Wanda couldn't stand him.

"Neil?" said Wanda. "Don't give me no Neil. I don't know what you see in him."

"He's nice," said Sharon.

"Get out of here," said Wanda. "He's like a fourteen-year-old boy."

"He is not," said Sharon.

"He's like a fourteen-year-old boy with good credit," said Wanda.

Sharon laughed.

"What a meatball," said Wanda.

Maybe Munro's silence was part of the thing of his being older, and part of the thing of his having money and position. He didn't have to talk about what he didn't want to, and if he didn't want to talk about himself, well, maybe he's bored with his own stuff, after all this time, Sharon said. After most of a lifetime. Maybe you got that way. Maybe Sharon herself was getting that way, prematurely. Maybe that was related to the next thing.

Munro was by years the oldest man Sharon had been with. She didn't make a practice of flying down to the islands with men of any age, certainly not with clients. She'd done it twice, counting now, and going to Barbados with Neil wasn't the same, as they had practically been engaged. But she hadn't seen or talked to Neil in—what—four months? Six? So when the next thing came along in the form of Duncan

Munro, Sharon had been ready, she guessed, and that was all there was to it.

The next thing. You may not do the smart thing, Wanda said. You may not do the best thing. You may not do the right thing. But you will do the next thing.

Sharon turned her head. Two men were on the beach with them, one down the sand to their right, one to their left. Each of them stood perhaps a hundred feet from Sharon and Munro. The men weren't swimmers. They wore khaki trousers, and they wore leather shoes. Their shirts were untucked and hung loosely. They walked around on the beach from time to time, to the water and back, but they didn't leave, and they didn't come closer to Sharon and Munro.

"Who are they?" Sharon asked.

"Who?"

"Them," Sharon said. "Those two. Can't you see them?"

Munro leaned forward in his chair. He narrowed his eyes and looked where Sharon pointed.

"Oh, yes," he said.

"Couldn't you see them?"

"Not at first. I forgot my glasses."

"You don't wear glasses."

"Maybe I'd better start."

"Maybe you'd better. Who are they, though?"

"We'll ask Patrick," said Munro.

A few minutes later they left their chairs and made their way over the sand toward the trees and the house. Munro went slowly, painfully. His knee had begun to hurt him again, he said. He leaned on Sharon, and she took him around the waist, at first helping him, then practically holding him up. As they came up the path, Patrick left the house

and came to meet them. He supported Munro's other side, and he and Sharon together got him onto the veranda and into a comfortable chair. Patrick went to make them drinks.

"That's better," said Munro. "That's much better. You see why I like younger women, now, don't you, Patrick? If you can't walk, they can pick you up and carry you. Women our age can't do that anymore."

"Surely some can, sir," said Patrick.

"Some," said Munro. "But then, they're apt to fall short in other ways."

"I suppose so, sir," said Patrick.

Sharon sat in Munro's lap. He kissed her hair. "Poor kid," said Munro. "Comes down here for a dirty weekend with a rich guy—not young, but still frisky. Turns out she's signed on with Rip Van Winkle. Or, no. Not Rip Van Winkle. She's signed on with . . . with . . . Who's that other fellow, Patrick?"

"Dorian Gray, sir?"

"Turns out she's signed on with Dorian Gray," said Munro.

"Who's Dorian Gray?" asked Sharon.

"Fellow in a book," said Munro. "Kipling? Conan Doyle?"

"Oscar Wilde, sir," said Patrick.

"Have a drink with us, Patrick," said Munro.

"Thank you, sir," said Patrick. He poured himself a glass of sparkling water and sat in a chair to Munro's left, facing Sharon.

"We were going to ask you, Patrick," Munro began. "We were going to ask . . . What were we going to ask Patrick?"

"The name of the island," said Sharon.

"That was it. What is the island called, Patrick?"

“It’s called Benefit Island, I believe, sir,” said Patrick. “Or Benefit Cay. Or simply Benefit.”

“Why’s it called that, I wonder,” said Munro.

“I couldn’t say, sir.”

“And the men on the beach,” said Sharon. “Who are they?”

“Men on the beach, miss?”

“Two men on the beach just now,” said Sharon.

Patrick looked at Munro. “What about them, eh, Patrick?” asked Munro.

“They stayed apart, but they were there the whole time we were,” said Sharon.

“Keeping an eye out, I expect, miss,” said Patrick.

“Keeping an eye out?”

“Keeping an eye out, miss. Keeping a watch.”

“So they’re like security?” asked Sharon.

“Like that, miss,” said Patrick.

“Security from what?”

Patrick looked at Munro again.

“Patrick?” Munro asked.

“Well, miss,” said Patrick. “It’s a small island, you see. There’s no proper population. There are no police. It’s all by itself out here, Benefit is, isn’t it? There can be dodgy people popping in.”

“Dodgy?”

“Unsavory people, miss. To do with drugs, for example, other things. It’s as well to keep an eye out.”

“So those two were guards?” asked Sharon.

“Yes, miss.”

“They were carrying.”

“Miss?”

“They had guns.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if they had, miss,” said Patrick.

That same night, Sharon made Munro lie on their bed while she worked on his knee.

“Busman’s holiday for you, I’m afraid,” said Munro.

“No, it isn’t,” said Sharon.

“Sure, it is. You can’t be having much fun.”

“Yes, I am,” said Sharon. “Sure, I am. How could I not be? I’ve had my first ride in a private plane, my first ride in a helicopter. This is my first private island. Those were my first private armed guards.”

“Brave new world,” said Munro. “How do you like it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ll get to like it,” said Munro. “Planes, helicopters, islands, guards. All that. You’ll get to like it, and it won’t take long. It never does. You’d be surprised.”

“Then there’s you,” said Sharon.

“Me?”

“Yeah,” said Sharon. “You gave me my first real pearls. You’re my first boyfriend on Social Security.”

“Is that right?” asked Munro.

“That’s right.”

“Got your cherry, there, did I?”

“You got it,” said Sharon. “I’d been saving myself.”

“Good for you,” said Munro.

“But not anymore,” said Sharon.

“Good for me,” said Munro.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Munro stayed in their quarters to nurse his knee. Sharon went alone to the beach. But there she found the sun blazed and beat down on the sand like a torch, like a hammer. She left the beach on a path that went into the trees, a path that led away from their house and toward the center of the tiny island.

Benefit Island: it wasn't easy for Sharon to see how the place could ever have been of much benefit to anyone. She had expected on Benefit to be surrounded by the green and flowery growth of Barbados (as much as she'd been able to glimpse of it from beneath the panting and tireless Neil); but Benefit seemed to be grown up in a dry, gray vegetation leaved in cowhide and armed with spines and hooks, which clung doggedly to the hot sandy earth. The path went under drab and rattling palms and dark, shaggy evergreens. Benefit? Maybe the island had been named by shipwrecked sailors who had floated for weeks, starving, in an open boat, to fetch up here at last, men so desperate that for them Munro's arid, unbountiful refuge would be a benefit, in fact, the saving of their very lives.

Sharon stopped. Ahead of her a group of people came around a bend in the path and approached her. Five people. Sharon looked quickly behind her, and would have turned and gone back the way she'd come, but when she looked again, the group was almost upon her.

"Good morning to you," called one of them. Sharon nodded. She waited for the five to come up.

A man and a woman in their fifties, and three children: two girls and a boy. The children looked about ten. The boy must have had cerebral palsy or some like condition. He lay

slackly in a wheelchair pushed with difficulty by the woman over the sandy path. The girls might have been twins. Both had badly crossed eyes, as did the man. The girls, and the woman, wore long dresses of plain gray cotton that covered their arms and hung to the ground. The man and the boy wore long-sleeved shirts and black trousers.

The woman did the talking; the others were silent. She was tall and thin and had a long face and big teeth. She was very friendly and eager to converse, as though she didn't get much chance to. She told Sharon that they were a religious community: Pentecostals from Little Rock. They lived at a derelict sugar refinery at the other end of the island. The plant had been abandoned decades since, and the community lived in a trailer on the grounds. They hoped to build a church on the site, but they awaited the arrival of more members of their congregation. At present their community was themselves. Were they a family, Sharon wondered? The man and the woman looked old to have such young children.

"Are these your kids?" Sharon asked.

"These are our gifts," the tall woman said.

Later, when Sharon told Munro and Patrick about her meeting on the sand path, "What did you say they said they were?" asked Munro.

"Pentecostals," said Sharon. "From Little Rock, Arkansas. What's a Pentecostal?"

"It's some kind of Christian," said Munro. "Christians. This place is going to hell. How many of them did you say there were?"

"Five."

"Five Christians," said Munro. "Five of them. Can you beat it? God, how I hate a fucking Christian."

"Oh, really, sir," said Patrick.

“Well, Patrick?” said Munro. “Well? Don’t tell us you’re one, too.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Patrick. “C of E. Pater was the vicar.”

“No,” said Munro.

“Great Uncle Ronnie was the Bishop of Leicester,” said Patrick.

\* \* \* \*

Munro was going down. He stayed in their rooms or on the veranda, where he sat by the hour collapsed in his chair, looking as though he’d been dropped into it from a high window. At night, now, it was Sharon who slept soundly, waking to find Munro lying beside her, not sleeping, sitting up, or standing by their window in the moonlight that came in from the courtyard. He was silent, he grew vague. His senses seemed to be more and more affected: his hearing was worse, and his vision. One morning when Sharon came out onto the veranda, to find Munro in his chair, “Who’s there?” he cried.

“It’s me, baby,” said Sharon. “Can’t you see me?”

“Oh, yes, I can see you,” said Munro. “I can see you now. You were in the shadow.”

Sharon hadn’t been in the shadow.

“What’s wrong with Duncan?” she asked Patrick.

“Wrong, miss?” asked Patrick.

“Come on, Patrick. Look at him. He can’t hear, he can’t see. He can hardly walk. He’s confused.”

“Mr. Munro isn’t a young man, miss.”

“Come on, Patrick,” said Sharon.

“And then there’s his dodgy knee,” said Patrick.

“There’s nothing wrong with his knee,” said Sharon.

“There never has been.”

“I beg to differ there, miss,” said Patrick. “As you observe, the poor gentleman can hardly walk.”

“Maybe he can’t, but there’s nothing wrong with his knee,” said Sharon. “I’ve been working on him, you know. That’s what I do. He didn’t hurt his knee playing football at Princeton. He didn’t hurt it not playing football at Princeton. He didn’t hurt it any other way, either.”

“Princeton, miss?”

“Yeah,” said Sharon. “When we first knew each other, he told me he’d hurt his knee years ago when he was going to Princeton.”

“Ah,” said Patrick. “Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?”

“He would? You mean he didn’t go to Princeton?”

“I couldn’t say, miss.”

“Yes, you could,” said Sharon. “Yes, you could, Patrick.”

“Miss?”

“It’s you, isn’t it?” said Sharon. “You’re the boss. It’s not Duncan. It’s you. You’re the boss down here.”

“Not I, miss,” said Patrick.

Sharon glared at him. She shook her head. She went to the veranda and looked over the beach. She looked up and down.

“Where is he, anyway?” Sharon asked. “I thought he was in the shower, but he’s not.”

“I couldn’t say, miss.”

“He’s not in our room. He’s not in back. I wish I knew where he’s gotten to.”

“That’s what many people wish,” said Patrick.

“What does that mean?” Sharon asked him.

“Things are not what they seem, miss,” said Patrick.

“No shit, Patrick,” said Sharon.

No shit. Sharon didn’t need Patrick, she didn’t need an Etonian, she didn’t need the great-nephew of the Bishop of Leicester, to tell her things were not what they seem. So what if they weren’t? Sharon didn’t care. Sharon said she was doing the next thing. She didn’t need to know how things really were. Not knowing was, even, part of the thing of doing the next thing. She didn’t care about knowing how things really were. But she wouldn’t have minded knowing how things were not. She knew Munro and the rest weren’t what they seemed to be. But what did they seem to be? What was she, however falsely, supposed to believe? She didn’t even know that. And nobody seemed to care. Was she, then, not even important enough to fool?

“Where were you?” she asked Munro when he came along the gallery to their room. He walked between two men who were helping him, the same men—or men who looked like the men—Sharon had seen on the beach. They didn’t speak. They helped Munro to his chair on the veranda and left. Munro sat heavily in the chair. Sharon knelt before him and looked up at him where he sat.

“Where were you?” she asked.

“Had some calls to make,” said Munro.

“Calls? You mean telephone?”

“Like a telephone,” said Munro. “There’s no real telephone here.”

“Where did you go?”

“Down there,” Munro waved his arm toward the gallery.  
“Patrick’s set up for it.”

“Who were those guys?”

“They’re Patrick’s guys.”

“The security?”

“Well,” said Munro, “one of them’s a doctor.”

“A doctor?”

“That’s right,” said Munro. He reached to her and touched the side of her face. “In fact,” he said, “I might have to cut it short down here.”

“Cut it short? You mean go home?”

“That’s it.”

“You mean, to a hospital?”

“That’s it.”

“Well, sure,” said Sharon. “Fine. When do we go?”

“Well,” said Munro, “the best thing might be if you went on ahead.”

“You mean by myself?”

“That’s it,” said Munro.

“Leave you here?”

“That’s it.”

“No,” said Sharon.

“No? Why not?”

“I don’t know,” said Sharon. “I’m here. I came here. I came with you.”

“So you did. Why?”

“Because you asked me to.”

“So I did. Now I’m asking you to go.”

“No,” said Sharon. “I’m with you. I’ll leave when you leave.”

Munro smiled at her. He put his hand on her knee and patted her. He leaned forward, bent his head, and kissed her bare knee.

“You’re a good kid,” said Munro.

“When are we leaving?”

“We’ll ask Patrick.”

\* \* \* \*

“Miss?”

Sharon woke in the dark. She was alone in their bed. Patrick stood beside the bed, speaking softly, not much more than whispering, trying to wake her. He didn’t touch her. Sharon sat up and covered herself with the sheet. Where was Munro?

“Quickly, miss,” said Patrick. “Quickly, now, if you please.”

She got out of bed and dressed. She heard voices on the veranda. Whose voices? Not Munro’s. She didn’t hear what they said.

“What time is it?” she asked Patrick.

“Past time, miss,” said Patrick. “Quickly, now.”

He hurried her out of the room, across the courtyard, and down the path that led among the trees. The night was black dark. Once Sharon tripped and fell to her knees, but Patrick picked her up and practically carried her to a vehicle she hadn’t seen before, hadn’t realized was on the island: a kind of Jeep or Land Rover, with open seats and no top. Patrick got her into it and started the engine, and they bucketed along the road away from their quarters, then

turned off onto a sandy track. When Patrick stopped and shut off the engine, Sharon could see the surf in the distance, and a beach, and she could see, closer, a tower rising dark against the sky ahead.

Patrick got her out of the car and led her through a clearing, past the tower, which she now saw must be some kind of smokestack, past a couple of vacant iron buildings, toward the shore. The tall woman from the other day, the Christian woman, was waiting for them there. She had a rubber raft pulled up on the beach. She held it by a rope, but when she saw Sharon and Patrick coming, she pushed the raft into the surf, splashing into the water after it. Her long dress was soaked to the waist.

“Go, go, go!” the woman said.

Then Sharon and Patrick were in the raft on the water. She sat at one end, looking back at the island behind them. Patrick rowed. They were heading out into a little bay. Benefit Island lay like a long shadow on the water behind them. There were no lights on it that Sharon could see. Not one.

Patrick quit rowing. They were nowhere. They were between the bay and the open sea. The island might have been half a mile off. Sharon sat in the raft. She was barely awake. She had promised to stay with Munro, and here she was in a rowboat in the middle of the sea, without him. Patrick had plucked her from her bed and pushed her right off the island, and she hadn't fought him to stay. She hadn't pushed back. They had given her nothing to push back against.

Now she saw ahead a little float or buoy, the size and shape of a champagne bottle, bobbing on the low swell, with a blinking green light on its end.

“Where's Duncan?” she asked Patrick.

“Mr. Munro's not ticketed for this trip, miss,” said Patrick.

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“It’s already happened.”

“What has?”

“We haven’t much time, miss,” Patrick said. “You’ll be all right. They’ll want to have a word with you at the other end, but there won’t be anything to it. You’ll soon be on your way.”

“What about you?” Sharon asked Patrick. “Are you going back? Are you going back for Duncan?”

“Go home, miss,” said Patrick. “Go right on back home and pick up where you left off. Carry on. Forget what happened down here, or if you can’t forget it, at least don’t talk about it. Not ever, miss, not to anyone. Do you think you can do that? Ah.”

“Ah,” Patrick said. They heard, overhead, the heavy thumping of a helicopter approaching quickly. It came from the sea, flying very low, circled the blinker buoy once, then again, then settled on the water at a little distance from them. It showed no lights. Patrick rowed them to it. A door in the helicopter opened, and Patrick helped Sharon step from the raft onto one of the helicopter’s pontoons. An arm reached for her there, took her hand, and pulled her into the cabin. The door closed. Sharon turned to look out a little window. She saw Patrick begin to row away, toward the island. When he passed the marker buoy, he reached for it, cut its line, raised it from the water, and laid it down in the raft.

The helicopter’s rotors began to turn. When it rose into the dark sky and began to make off, Sharon could see, on the far side of the island, a row of lights, running lights, in fact two rows, three, advancing toward the beach. Many running lights, coming in to the beach.

Sharon wishes that the police in Miami—if police is what they were—could have simply put the question. She wishes that some one of them could have taken a minute, only a minute, could have laid down his pencil and brought her a cup of coffee, or a drink, and sat down beside her and simply asked, What in the world was going on down there? She couldn't have told him, but she would have liked to have been asked.

Nobody asked.

She's back home now, back in the city, back at work. But things aren't quite as they were. When she'd been back a couple of days, Sharon walked down the block past the St. John. The place looked dead, it was dark, and when Sharon went up the steps nobody swung the door open for her. The door was locked.

She called Wanda; Wanda had at least known Duncan Munro. But Wanda's number was no longer in service. Sharon even called Neil. Why? Neil hadn't known Munro.

But he'd known Sharon. She called him one evening. A woman answered, and Sharon told her she'd called the wrong number and hung up.

Then one day in the spring Sharon was waiting for the light on 76th Street on her way to a client when she saw Patrick getting out of a taxi on Madison Avenue in front of the Carlyle. It was Patrick, all right. His hair was a little longer, he wore a blue suit and carried a briefcase, but it was Patrick. Did Sharon call out to him, did she catch up with him and say hello? Did they have a cup of coffee together and talk things over? What do you think? She stayed where she was. She watched him, though. She watched Patrick as he shut the taxi's door, paid the driver, turned, and went into the old hotel.

# The Night Dentist

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by Ron MacLean  
from *Drunken Boat*

The night dentist has one cold hand held near his heart. He wakes to taillights on the Longfellow Bridge. He rides above the water on the day's first Red Line run. Subway brakes scream. Mirror fingers flex frigid—bone white. His eyes burn. He blames his patients. He seethes silently: feared, resented, ill-conceived. He dreams of bicycles. Professionals in flight. In transition. His face mirrored in the window is not the face he remembers.

He is not prone to accumulation. He is accustomed to a captive audience, a mouth frozen open, admitting his hands (one warm, one cold), his increasingly sterile tools. The burden of conversation, the opportunity, is his. He has questions he wants to ask: why it is always dark; why he is sentenced to nostrils stained from antiseptic mouthwash. Thoughts and half-truths: no man achieves all he wants; we all make some accommodation with the night. A thin band of orange light burns at the horizon. Faces not his reflected in the pre-dawn window.

The night dentist protests innocence. Untucked misfit in a middle school library no different at 51. *Why do you hunger for what does not satisfy?* He dreams of fish scales. Electric fence games. To caress a cheek. A tender gum line.

*If you were to commit crimes, what crimes would you commit, and why.*

He tires of latex and cynicism. He longs for fresh fruit, non-nutritional salt snacks, fried fish. All night, every night, he fingers sterile tools. Flexes for circulation. Coveted

warmth that always, somehow, eludes him. He surrounds himself with half-lies, rusted metal, sheared plastic. Quasi-recyclable. Translucent technology he can trade in at a moment's notice. He prefers slippery sentences that leave room for escape. He sits sifting among the spoils. Eats recycled chicken from a paper tub.

The night dentist's tools include, but are not limited to: reamer, burnisher, merlam pliers (serrated), forceps (standard), carver, excavator, universal tofflemire.

A man across the aisle talks into a cell phone. Unshaven. Insistent: *i want them in one bag, and they have to not be moving. you have to figure out a way to pack them so they're not moving.* Silverfish crawl into cavities. Frigid fingers flex, bone-white in harsh fluorescence. The smell of wet cement. Tired cynicism. A woman in the next row faces forward, says to some hidden camera: *flight is the country i came from.* The train presses forward, darkness to darkness. Through the window, the night dentist sees fruit trees. Well-greased bicycles welded weightlessly in flight. In formation.

Alone in a fruit field, he dreams of soft tissue, silverfish, sound sleep. The night dentist says, "these are the things I keep in my heart." The night dentist says, "open wide." The night dentist says, "this won't hurt a bit."

# Pool

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by Corey Campbell  
from *Anderbo.com*

Inside the dark living room, Darla waited for the bathroom. She counted more than 64 photos of a child on the walls, shelves, and piano. Many shots the same but in different sizes—the Sears pose with marbled gray background, the unknowingly sweet smile. The child belonged to Trevor and Mandy, who were hosting a pool party. The couple had set up house in the Valley, in a neighborhood of small square houses, many guarded by iron fences, the homes of car thieves and newlyweds in their twenties still renting. Their living room carpet crawled with Winnie-the-Pooh toys and bright plastic objects shaped into keys and school buses. Darla herself, just older than the couple, had been pulled to the party by her boyfriend Jon, Trevor's pal since eleventh grade.

The pool radiated in the heat, its sides cracked by the '93 earthquake, a lone inflatable zebra lapping against the far wall. Jon lingered outside by the pool, beer in hand, just close enough to get his legs wet when someone cannon-balled in. The heat of the day had just come, so a thick yellow mugginess had settled onto the patio, making limbs heavy as if filled with sand. White empty plates and plastic forks stood on the small metal table, used and smeared with ketchup.

Darla and Jon had been together just under a year. Already his mom bought her sales clothes from Macy's and invited her to family dinners on Friday nights. What she liked best about him, Darla had realized earlier in the car, was that it wasn't going to last, so she didn't have to care that much

really. She walked back out to the patio, pulling a small puff of air-conditioned air behind her. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust again to the brightness.

Jon touched her arm. "You OK?" he said. She could almost see behind his mirrored sunglasses. His purple boardshorts just grazed his knee.

She nodded. Their condom had split the night before, so they'd spent the morning going to two different Rite Aids to get the morning-after pill. The pharmacist didn't say anything but had the same gray hair as Darla's dad and looked just as disapproving. For lunch Jon had taken Darla to a Belgian restaurant on Ventura much too expensive for him, and she let him eat his mussels while she swallowed the first pill at the bathroom sink. When she came back, they both pretended everything was normal, and turned up the radio loud once they hit the freeway.

On the patio, Trevor was wound up in conversation. He was short, built for the military, compact frame, trimmed hair, muscley back. He was a cop, patrolled mostly shopping centers and the community college campus. "The guys with the best job," he told Jon, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Those helicopter cops. They fly over the big houses in the hills where chicks sunbathe topless."

Darla looked over to Trevor's wife. Mandy was an ex-hostess of chain restaurants and now wore Keds and was still round with baby fat. She was out of earshot, fitting the baby into a swimsuit with a mermaid on it.

Trevor nudged Jon. "Can you imagine? The MILFs."

Jon turned to Darla. "I've explained to you what a MILF is, right, honey?"

The first time Darla had met Trevor, he had just tackled a guy at the mall who had stolen a plastic toy camera. The first words he had ever said to her when Jon introduced

them, there in the food court just outside the Mongolian barbecue: “I love catching these guys. Gives me a boner.”

On the patio, Darla said, “Great, Trevor.” She’d already gotten into a fight with Jon earlier that summer about Trevor going to a Hooters in the desert.

Trevor shrugged, his shoulders already burnt deep red. “Those helicopters,” he said, his accent vaguely reminding Darla of Frank Sinatra. “Some jobs have great perks.”

“There!” Mandy said, standing her baby up on the concrete and toddling her towards Trevor. “Who’s my baby?”

Trevor scooped up the little girl and swung her over his head, walking her into the shallow end of the pool.

Mandy leaned her hips out and picked up a wet dinosaur sponge from the pavement. She said, “Be careful.” Her wide white thighs caught the sun, her skin almost glowing.

Trevor waved an arm, “Don’t worry. The diaper alone could keep her afloat.”

Mandy smiled at Darla a smile that said *One day you’ll know what I’m going through*. “Did you get enough to eat?” she said. “There’s wings in the kitchen.”

Darla touched her middle, which felt like a void, which felt like static or white noise. “Good,” she said. “But thanks.”

“OK,” Mandy said, heading back into the cool of the house. “I trust you,” she called out to Trevor, then shut the sliding glass door behind her.

Jon ran a finger down Darla’s arm. “Does it hurt?” he said.

“No.”

“Want a sip of my beer, Darla? Might relax you.”

“It said no alcohol.”

“One sip isn’t going to do anything.”

She put her hand on his wrist. The package said the success rate was 99%. It was a sure thing. And besides, she didn't know if that one time had really been enough anyway. "Just stop," she said. Her throat dried up.

The cooler hung open under the shadow of the house, green and brown bottle necks pushing through the ice. Only root beer left in cans or cream soda that made Darla sick.

"I'll be back," she told Jon, who had taken off his sandals and dangled hairy legs in the blinding white-blue water. Trevor floated the baby on a raft tour of the outer edges of the pool. He pointed out the pump to her and the water filter and the black widow spider web under the diving board.

"Putting on your swimsuit?" Jon said.

Trevor looked over at her. "The water feels great," he said. "Come in and join us."

Darla reached a hand into the pool, which was warmer than she'd expected. "A little later," she said, knowing that she wouldn't, that she hated others seeing her in her swimsuit.

\* \* \* \*

The kitchen had that familiar avocado-green tinge, the orange linoleum curling at the edges, the reminder that this was all new in the '70s. Darla already knew where everything was. She and Jon were house-sitters there a couple of months before, taking the cocker spaniels out to pee, sleeping in the master bedroom which was the only bedroom, swimming naked in the pool and then having sex on a couch covered in dog hair. Darla knew the kitchen had enough snack food to supply a small convenience store. She thought of the bright packages as bags of chemicals, preserving each other, as though they were something worth preserving.

Mandy sat at the kitchen table, her back to the doorway, looking through a Bed, Bath and Beyond catalog.

“Sorry,” Darla said. Mandy turned around, raising her eyebrows. Her brown hair hung down her back in frizzy swirls. “For disturbing you,” Darla said, pointing to the catalog and the *Glamour* magazine on the table next to it.

Mandy said, “No problem.” She was drinking iced tea, the ice cubes already melted in her tall blue glass. “Just need a break sometimes. With the baby and all.”

“Sure,” Darla said, looking at a flowering bush just out the window, the lace curtains hanging like bangs across a forehead, the potted violet in soil so dry it was struggling. “Of course,” Darla said. “I’d be horrible at it. I’d probably start drinking. I know I would.” Mandy’s back stiffened. She looked over at Darla. Darla shook her head. “Just kidding,” she said. “Raising a child must be so hard.”

Mandy said, “Can I get you something?”

“Diet Coke?” Darla said, edging to the refrigerator, where graduation photos and school pics of cousins hung under heavy fruit-shaped magnets. All eyes direct at the camera. Grade schoolers in green grass and corduroy overalls. Tiger and devil faces in Halloween grease-paint, purposeful and wanting to be there. “I can get it,” Darla said.

Mandy flipped through the catalog. Still looking down, she said, “We need to get a new comforter. She threw up all over the last one.”

“That’s OK,” Darla said.

“I buy her new clothes all the time, she’s growing so fast.”

“I’ll bet,” Darla said.

“My own shirts are stained at the shoulders,” Mandy said. Darla looked at her shoulders and the T-shirt front of

hatching eggs and the words Mother Hen in red, ropey letters. "Not this one," Mandy said. "I never wear this one." She looked back down at the catalog. "Things don't stay nice, you know. You think they will but they don't."

Darla moved to the doorway with her Diet Coke perspiring coldness into her hand. "Don't worry. Your house is really nice. This is what people want."

Mandy said, "Jon's a really good guy."

Darla nodded and walked back to the patio.

\* \* \* \*

Outside, the sky was losing its harsh whiteness. Darla could hear a lawn mower a few houses over, the sounds of cars on Balboa. Shadows of the grill and lawn chairs fell over half the patio. Jon was on his next beer, which was either number three or four. Darla never counted but just knew that later on she'd be the one driving.

"No swimsuit?" Jon swung his arm around Darla's waist and pulled her down next to him by the pool. "At least get your feet wet." He splashed water on her.

Darla held up her arm and pretended to push Jon into the water. "I'll do it," she said, putting her other hand over the Diet Coke.

Jon called out, "Officer. The missus is beating on me again."

Trevor swam over with the baby, leaned in towards Darla. "Is this true?"

"Please." Darla looked down at her legs. "I'm not a missus."

Trevor said to Jon, "I'll have to take her away in the squad car if you two can't make up."

Darla got up and said, "OK, OK."

Jon had once told Darla he didn't think Trevor's marriage would last more than five years. Now they were in year four. Mandy's mother had died of cervical cancer not long before they met, and ever since Mandy had clung to him. At the wedding, Trevor had teared up, said he was so grateful he found her, so happy he'd stopped by that chain ribs-restaurant that night and caught her attention, so glad he'd come back the next afternoon and nervously asked her out, ecstatic when she'd said, "Sure, I guess." At the reception afterwards, Jon told Darla much later, Trevor had tried steering him to a tall redhead because she was so hot.

"Did you even bring your swimsuit?" Jon said.

"No," Darla said. "It's OK."

Trevor said, "You could borrow one of Mandy's. She wouldn't mind."

"It's OK. I can sit it out," Darla said, sitting on a gray wooden bench that splintered near the bolts. She leaned back and looked at the chain link gate on the fence, the patches of dirt where the dogs had tried to tunnel out. The neighbors had a hummingbird feeder hanging from a tree and a panel of cardboard on the side window where the glass was out.

Mandy came outside with a king-size bag of potato chips. She didn't lift her flip flops all the way when she walked. She took the baby from Trevor. "How's my girl?" she said, putting her face right up to the baby's, touching noses, probably breathing out potato chip breath. "Anyone have a towel?"

Trevor threw her one with sailboats on it. He said, "Darla wants to swim but didn't bring a suit."

Darla waved her hand. "Oh no, I'm fine." She felt the hot pavement with her feet, the comfort of it.

Mandy kept her face at the baby's. "We have extras. Don't be shy."

Jon said, “Yeah, Darla, don’t be shy.”

Mandy said to Trevor, “Hey, can you show her? I have my hands full here.”

Trevor stretched his arms above his head. “Yo,” he said and pointed to the door.

Darla gave Jon a look and he shrugged. She thought of quicksand—if she were being dragged under, Jon would probably just stay there and give the same shrug. Whenever she got very sad, which happened sometimes, Jon acted as if leaving her alone was the best thing. He said sadness made him feel helpless.

\* \* \* \*

The bedroom was smaller than Darla remembered from house-sitting. There were more stuffed animals, more VHS tapes of wrestling. The bed was covered in pillows.

Trevor looked around in the adjoining bathroom, which had a fake marble countertop and a whole series of toothbrushes in a line beneath the mirror. “Jon told me about the morning-after thing,” he said.

“He told you?”

“You know, we’ve been friends for a long time.” He came back into the room empty-handed and pulled a heaping clothes basket from the corner of the room. “Don’t worry, they’re clean.” He threw white shirts and towels onto the bed. “I think you made the right choice.”

Darla sat down on the bed, pulled a pillow into her lap and fingered the lace at the edges. “I’m sure of it,” she said.

“Though I think you wouldn’t have gotten pregnant anyway,” he said, looking over at her. “It broke one time? Come on.”

Darla looked at the photos on the wall, generic shots of little boys giving tulips to little girls. “Maybe,” she said.

He leaned into the clothes basket, digging through the bottom layer. “It all changes with a kid.”

“I know that,” she said, but she didn’t really. She’d heard about it from friends—her Mormon friend in Nebraska already trying for a second, and she and Darla were exactly the same age, same birthday. Darla knew the basic pattern of sleepless nights, of loving something more than anything else. It always sounded impossible to her.

“Do you like being married?” she said.

Trevor pulled a black swimsuit from the basket. “Here’s the fucker,” he said. It was a one-piece with gold rings on the shoulder straps. “This was Darla’s from a few years ago. Might be too big for you.” He threw it into her lap.

She stood up and draped it against her body, looking into the mirror. “Here,” he said, stepping forward. His fingers pinned the suit lightly to her waist. “Let’s see.”

She could smell the beer on his breath and the sweat and chlorine. “Do you?” she said.

He looked down at her, leaned closer to her face, really looked at it, it seemed to her, though it was probably just the beer. “Not always,” he said. His hand was on her waist, his other hand slid tentatively down her side. For a moment it felt good to be touched by someone else. She wanted to close her eyes and follow it.

“I think it would be too hard,” she said, opening her eyes. She put her hands up and gently took his arms off her, placed them at his sides. “I don’t know how you do it,” she said. “Especially so young. I don’t know how anyone does it.” He stood watching her. She thumbed towards the backyard and said, “They’re probably wondering about us.”

He said, "Right. I'll let you get changed," and headed for the door.

But she pulled him back by his arm and steered him to sit on the bed. She took off her shirt and unhooked her bra, letting it hang in her hands for a moment, knowing his gaze was on her. She slipped off her skirt and panties and stood there before him naked and let him look at her. Then slowly she took the suit from the bed and stepped into it one leg after the other and pulled it up around her breasts and then to her shoulders, where the little gold rings met her collarbone. It didn't fit her, but she didn't care anymore. She looked into his face and said, "Let's go."

# Everything is Breakable with a Big Enough Stone

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by Taryn Bowe  
from *Boston Review*

When Lyla was ten, she had 32 teeth. She washed her hair with a special coconut oil and slept in a closet. Each night, waiting for sleep, she touched one wall with the crown of her head and the opposite wall with the flats of her heels and pretended she was holding the two walls apart. Her sisters giggled in their room. They dangled pants and panties from their windows, hooting in high wheezy voices when boys stopped on the street below. Lyla's mother ran outside, shooing callers off with hairbrushes, plungers, bread knives. Her sisters dropped their panties onto the tops of trees. Girl fights followed; her mother, shrieking; her sisters, violent with their fists. In her closet, Lyla pressed her fingertips against her eyelids until she saw blue, then tapped every tooth with the tip of her tongue.

Before he went to work each night, her father knelt by her door and pressed play on a tape he'd made of his laughter. He laughed at a joke she'd told him about convertibles, and then at another she'd told him about fruit. If she could be any fruit, she'd be a lychee because she was so sweet, and if she could be a car, she'd be a bright red convertible because this was the kind that everybody wanted. Her father laughed like a man you could trust with your life. His breath grabbed in his throat and hissed, but when air found his lungs, low rolling hollers bellowed out of his mouth and out of the tape deck's circular speakers.

When the tape was over, Lyla opened the closet door and pressed rewind. If she could go back to any age, she would go back to being ten.

\* \* \* \*

Lyla grew three inches. Everything changed. She moved out of the closet, into the hall. Her sisters tripped over her legs when they stumbled out of the bathroom. When Lyla sucked on the corner of her pillow, she prayed no one would see her and scold her for gross habits she should have outgrown. Her tape deck was stolen. Her father sleepwalked into walls. Lyla danced on air and, in the morning, found herself on the kitchen floor or coiled into a pretzel in her mother's garden. Some mornings, she woke up with a prize in her hand. A sweaty piece of candy. Or a seed, which she recognized from home-school as the kind that grew guava plants with sun and soil and water. One morning she woke up on Coconut Coast, without knowing how she'd gotten to the other side of Kauai.

\* \* \* \*

On her eleventh birthday, her father bought her a convertible. The car had platinum rims and silver spokes. Red-colored paint appeared to melt off its fenders. Diamonds studded the black leather steering wheel, catching the glimmer of the sun's rays on the clear blue ocean. Some days, though, Lyla refused to touch them, wore white gloves, took long naps, walked to Fat Man's Cave and hid in the damp cool craters instead of climbing the hill to the marijuana fields, where her father parked the car beneath a tree split in thirds by lightning. Most days, Lyla pretended she didn't hear her father calling, and he sent a driver to pick her up. The driver, Kirby, was as skinny and shy as she was. "Yes, Ma'am," and "Certainly, Miss," he said, blowing smoke out of

the corners of his mouth. His smoke caught in the wind, and Lyla snapped a neck muscle turning her head to watch it disappear. Kirby let her play her music on his tape deck, Prince's *Purple Rain*, and he drove by volcanoes without joking about fire or asphyxiation or burns. He didn't look up her skirt when the wind pinned its hem against her chest. Maybe he only loved boys, or no one at all. She fell asleep in the warm back seat.

\* \* \* \*

In Kauai if you were pretty and special and tall enough to reach the gas and brake, you could get your license early if your father bought you a car. You could drive only dirt roads, and only at night, and you couldn't tell your sisters who, according to law, had to wait until fifteen for a license, fourteen for a practice permit. Off roads and in fields, she'd mastered swerving, speeding, maneuvering in reverse. On the day her father told her she got her license, she touched her nose to the salt-stained passenger door and licked the aluminum handle to forget the sickening taste of red. Red of a fist clutching the shift, the red flush of his cheeks. Red had a hot taste that hurt. It made bile rise in the back of her throat, and she squeezed her eyelids shut and then opened them so she could stare into her father's pores. Why her?

She chewed marijuana leaves as she waited for him to come back from where he stood spitting over the edge of the cliffs, watching his saliva vanish into the surf. When he returned, Lyla spat leaves into the grass, and the sun bled into the sky, purple-orange-pink, and they lay on the hood, again. The car had subwoofers and bass that thudded right through the core of you, swallowing all sounds.

\* \* \* \*

When she was twelve, her father took her to Honolulu on the car ferry. They stayed in a hotel made of crystal chandeliers. Everything was breakable with a big enough stone: walls, mirrors, glass elevator. Lyla won a dancing crown making ribbons come to life like snakes. She kept hula hoops in motion. She threw balls in the air and caught them in the arches of her feet, above the swell of her belly, between her chin and chest. She ate healthy food and drank lots of bottled water. She did not smoke pot or PCP. She pinched her nose when her father lowered the convertible roof and, with closed eyes, called out movie star names, Malana, Sophia, Ivy.

“Break a leg,” he whispered backstage, sweet charcoal breath in her ear before she danced and disappeared behind the rising smoke and music.

She danced to save swimmers from sharks. She leapt into the air to be discovered and saved. She didn’t think about her mothers or sisters and imagined everything that ever mattered depended on the perfect execution of a single split or pivot. One night, she pounded her bare feet into the sand until parts of her she didn’t know could sweat were leaking small waterfalls from her body.

“Slow down,” her father said. “Everything comes early to you. What do you have left to wait for and accomplish?”

Except that month, her period was late. She missed it ferociously, even though it was such a pain and mess. She missed the way it had protected her for seven days and nights. It had come early, when she was ten, and her sisters had braided her hair in cornrows, and her mother had given her napkins to pack in the dirt when she was done.

\* \* \* \*

Lyla floated above her life where no one could touch her. She became the ozone, which was thin, invisible, and full of holes too. She watched herself grow bigger. She threw up. Her father snuck out for bread and nuts and never came back, and she spent her first night alone, then a second. A man, starved like a skeleton, tried to steal her purse and keys. She pulled out a knife; her strength and hunger, electrifying. After chasing him, she was ravenous and stole coconuts from trees. She cracked them open. She drank their milk. One day, she crawled to a wind farm and pushed out a baby, as still and blue and breath-stealing as anything she'd ever seen.

\* \* \* \*

Now, she tells strangers stories, babbling like an infant who has just discovered speech.

She had seventeen children and two of them died.

Or she didn't bother with babies because the man who loved her couldn't share her.

Once, she tells a surfer, she won a hula title in Honolulu. Another time, she tells a sunbather, she drove a convertible to the edge of a cliff. Because is a lie really a lie if it *ought to* have been true?

One day her father broke laws and speed limits to race her to the hospital and save her baby and get her help. But he never abandoned her beneath the great white turbines, where the wind was ground to pieces, where birds fell from the sky.

# The Abjection

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by Michael Mejia  
from *AGNI*

We are not sleeping well. Our eyes are open. Perhaps the bed is too hard, says the one. The bed is not too hard, says the other. Night is over. The bed is unmoved. It is not the first time. The bed is new. It must be paid off within the year. We must avoid unnecessary charges. We must make regular payments. A small portion of our modest salaries. A reasonable sum for comfort. For sleep. Because our credit is not good. We are afraid to ask. We just pay. What else can we do? We pay and we pay. We pay. It cannot be the bed. But we are not sleeping well. We sleep without touching. The bed is wide. We have room to turn. We would not even know. We do not turn. We lie awake. We hear ourselves. We do not ask, "Are you awake?" Not anymore. We are awake. Perhaps the bed is too hard, says the one. The bed is not too hard, says the other. We dismantle the frame. We reassemble the frame. We tighten the frame. We use tools. Splendidly they fit our hands. Our hands are the perfect size. Still we are not sleeping well. Perhaps it is not the frame, says the one. We turn the mattress over. We make the foot the head. We turn the mattress over. Perhaps it is not the mattress, says the other. We move the bed to the window. We move it away from the window. We point it toward the door. But we have heard that this is unlucky. We angle the bed in the corner. The three other corners. We cannot open the door. We cannot reach the closet. Our clothes hang in the dark. We imagine them. They have no shape. They are shapeless. They were not made for us. No memory of us. Nothing of our bodies. We are naked. We move the bed. There is another bedroom. There is a bathroom. There is another

bedroom. There is a kitchen. We are naked. There is a laundry room. There is a breakfast nook. There is a dining room. There is a living room. There is a bathroom. There is a den. There is a hall. The bed does not fit. Not in all of these rooms. It does not fit the breakfast nook. It passes down the hall. The bed enters where it can. We do not force it. The one will not sleep in the kitchen. The other proposes a deck. A sleeping porch. First we must pay off the bed. Our sleep has not improved. We lie on our sides. Our joints are sore. We lie on our backs. Our backs are sore. We lie on our stomachs. Our spines prick our organs. We lie close together. We lie horizontally. We lie obliquely. We do not sleep. We lie in opposite directions. We transverse the bed. Feet in our faces. A blister on the one. A callous on the other. A soft instep. A twitch and a curl of toes. Our friends do not call. Because we are irritable. We are rude. We curse. We are gratuitous. "Fuck...fuck...fuck," we say. "Fuck...fuck...fuck." We do not invite them for dinner. We are tired. We are too tired to make dinner. Our stomachs are empty. We are consumed by the bed. We do not meet our friends. They have drinks after work. After dinner. Before dinner. They are always drinking, says the one. They are drunks, says the other. We are not invited. Not anymore. We would not go anyway. We will not get in the car. We watch it from the window. We will refuse. We will show them. They should call AA. We are defiant. They will end up in jail. They will kill someone. They will end up mutilated and dead. We will watch it from the window. We have no friends, says the one. Not anymore, says the other. We are grumbling. We say it again. We are grumbling. The telephone does not ring. The house is quiet. The television is off. The radio is off. The lights are off. The bed has returned to the bedroom. We watch it from the doorway. We watch it through the window. As if we were burglars. Desperate criminals. Hungry. Malignant. Misanthropic. Without money. Without friends. Coveting our possessions.

Murderous. As if we don't give a fuck. We hide from the neighbors. We are not in the mood. We don't belong in the garden. Something rustles the hydrangea. The grass is too high. The birdbath is dry. Something is biting us. Something smells. We retreat inside. As if we have failed. The bed has not moved. The bed in the moonlight. Our work suffers. We are thinking about the bed. We talk of nothing else. The one is in the breakroom. The other is in the toilet stall. We are in the elevator. No one says anything. Silently the numbers rise. We are thinking about the bed. They don't want to hear it. Not anymore. They are hearing flute music. Flute music is all they want to hear. They want to hear no one talking. They are not watching us thinking. Thinking about the bed. We are in someone's cubicle. We say we are not sleeping well. We say the bed is not quite hard. But it is not quite soft. We want to say that the bed is in-between. But that does not mean enough. *In-between what?* someone may ask. We say nothing. We do not say *In-between nothing*. We say nothing. No one has asked. We cannot answer. What did we expect? We stare at someone. Someone is pretending to check email. We examine someone's desk. There are spreadsheets. There are proposals. There are estimates. There are receipts. There are vouchers. There are invoices. There are reimbursements. Something has happened. There is evidence. Something is changing. Something has changed. We were not involved. We were not informed. Were we? The conversation is over. It is time to work. We have been warned. We slump in our ergonomic chairs. We try to seem productive. What have we missed? We were thinking about the bed. We grumble. Someone is watching. Someone is a snitch. Someone must be watched. Carefully. We try napping in the car. We have been skipping lunch. Our space is reserved. RESERVED FOR EMPLOYEE. Our name is missing. The parking structure shudders. Tires squeal. There will be a collapse. A terrifying

catastrophe. A disaster. A conflagration. A holocaust. Something arduous. Something wearisome. We begin to count bodies. A Cadillac. A Honda. A Mercedes. A Nissan. A VW. A Saturn. The bed is cool and hard and aerodynamic. Thirty miles to the gallon. Some kind of hybrid. Something more than a bed. It rotates in our showroom. We have lost the keys. At noon it is bright. This is not helping. This changes nothing. We have been skipping lunch. This makes us dizzy. This makes us grumble. Our work suffers. We have been warned. The one in person. The other in writing. We examine the bed like a body. We could have returned it. We had thirty days. It has no lumps. It does not sag. It has no cysts. No tumors. No blemishes. No valleys. It has no canyons. No moraines. No ridges. No rifts. The bed has no topography. The bed has no landscape. The surface is clean. As if we have never been there. Not yet. Like a tomb. If we could open it. Slip ourselves in. We have heard stories. We know they are lies. A sarcophagus. Behind glass. Protected by alarms. The bed like an artifact. Protected by a curse. We watch it from the doorway. The bed like an altar. An unearthed foundation. A plinth supporting history. The bed supports us. The bed is firm. Firm enough. It is firm enough for that. The bed is solid. The bed is strong. It undermines us. Makes us ashamed. We cannot stand up straight. We are weak. We are enervated. We have grown pale. We should hang in the closet. Creased and faded. Stained. Pilled. Snagged. Shapeless. We should slip from the hanger. Pooled. It is like no other bed. None that we have known. We sensed its singularity. We had our shoes off. We thought it said *Sleep*. We know we were wrong. We can admit this. We know we misheard. We know. We know it. There was flute music. We had our shoes off. Children bouncing beside us. On another bed. We tried that one. It was too soft. Our socks had stripes. We did not know they had holes. The children did somersaults. Barrel Rolls and Seat Drops.

Corkscrews. Cat Twists. Our eyes were closed. We thought the bed whispered. We thought we heard *Sleep*. It did not whisper *Sleep*. The bed whispers nothing. The bed is mute. The bed does not creak. The bed absorbs. The bed muffles. The bed stifles. The bed chokes. The bed silences. The bed emanates silence. The bed is zero. It inspires contemplation. White. Still. Silent. Flat. Patient. Moon. Star. Void. These are not the qualities we were seeking. Not quite. The bed feels distant. We are still making payments. Now they are late. Night is over. Our eyes are open. We are not sleeping well. We will attempt an analogy. The bed feels like stone, says the one. Like wood, says the other. We will not say steel. The bed seems natural. We agree on this. We argue. We argue the qualities of wood and of stone. Durable, says the one. Flexible, says the other. Grain. Seam. Fibrous. Foliated. We apply these to the surface of the bed. This comes to nothing. The bed is resistant. It unsettles wood. It muddles stone. The bed ramifies. We argue. It is not the first time. We know nothing. We don't know. We are furious. We lie still. Time passes. The world grows more uncertain. Something happens. The one reconsiders wood. The other reappraises stone. We sense these changes. They warm us like fever. The bed embraces the changes. The changes in us. The bed does not change. The bed does not embrace us. It is not a bed that embraces. No caress or consolation. The bed has no tenderness. Its embrace is conceptual. But the bed is not a concept. The bed is real. It is hard on our backs. On our joints. It crushes our genitals. The bed seems less and less like wood or stone. A bit more like steel. An object forged to do violence to our bodies. The bed is not natural. We can admit this. The bed is a scourge. The bed is wrathful. We feel compelled. As by a spring. As by a catapult. We are propelled into the air. Our feet are driven to the floor. The floor is cold and hard. Our feet are bare and tender. It is a cruel bed. We can admit this. We are behind on our

payments. Our work suffers. We have been warned. One of us is fired. The other begins to smoke. Smoke marijuana. Smoke opium. It is not the first time. The other drinks beaujolais. Syrah and malbec. Has an affair. Why try and hide it? There is significant evidence. We have an argument. It is not the first. There was some intercourse. Intercourse at a motel. One of us slept. The one at the motel. The other was awake. The one is well-rested. The one slept for hours. There was also some intercourse. But that's not the point. The one is well-rested. The one feels good. The other resents the sleeping. More than the intercourse. The other wants to punish the one. Wants the one to feel worse. Worse than the other. Wants the one to sleep poorly. Wants the one to lie on the bed. Lie awake. Wants the one to lie with anyone but the other. To lie on the bed. Wants to punish anyone. Wants to witness the one suffering. Wants to fall asleep to cries for mercy. The punishment is conceptual. The other will lie on a couch. The one on another. No one lies on the bed. We lie in separate rooms. Still we are not sleeping well. We lie awake. We contemplate separation. We would move out of the house. Neither would take the bed. Not the one. Not the other. One or the other would take the late payments. The bed would remain in its room. Alone. Independent. Enduring. The bed invincible. The bed victorious. The bed will not separate. Never. The bed will remain whole. The bed will remain. Immovable. Immutable. Ineluctable. The bed is unity. We see this from the doorway. It counsels reunification. We kneel before the bed. We stand before the bed. We reconcile on the bed. But we do not sleep. We are not sleeping well. The bed is unmoved. The bed is redoubtable. The bed is impenetrable. The bed is impregnable. The bed is a fortress. The bed is a bastion. The bed is virginal. As if we have never laid upon it. As if the bed is a concept that we conceived together. As if our imagination had begotten a bed. A bed that is greater than us.

Celibate. More severe. More unforgiving. More rigorous than us. That chastises us for our flaws. Our sins and our foibles. We are exposed by the bed. We are humiliated. We are refused. We are rejected by the bed. We are driven out. We beg to return. We watch it from the doorway. We long to be restored. We abase ourselves. We lie on the floor. We lie like animals. Like vertebrates. We lie like invertebrates. We lie like crash victims. Victims of an attack. Sufferers of disease. We lie like the living and like the dead. These attitudes are conceptual. Our suffering exceeds us. We are seeking a form. One that does not yet exist. Our representations are avant garde. The bed is bounded by traditions. It refuses to recognize. Its ways are esoteric. The bed is inscrutable. Its intentions are ambiguous. We lie in its shadow. The bed is not reassuring. We doubt it will protect us. The shadow is conceptual. We feel it in the dark. As if the bed would collapse on us. Like a failed civilization. We feel it teeming with plots and assassinations. We submit ourselves. What else can we do? We crawl underneath it. Our hair is there. Things lost and forgotten. Signs of a past we cannot recognize. A body ornament. A utensil. A shard of pottery. A garment made of wool. A page of text and numerals. A calendar. A figurine. A weapon. It is close. The bed. It rests on us. It compresses us. It is dark underneath. And inappropriate. And unsanitary. And there is something else. Something vaguely familiar. Something that is not me. Something moist that is panting. That is weeping.

# American Subsidiary

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by William Pierce  
from *Granta*

One spring morning—it was early May, and sunlight had just reached the ivy at his shoulder—Joseph Stone leaped up at his boss’s call, then slowly, so as not to remind himself of Pavlov’s dog, tucked his chair back under the shelf that held his keyboard.

He did not have far to go: three steps, four at most, took him from his cubicle to Peter Halsä’s pale, wood door.

“*Entschuldigung?*” he asked, pronouncing the German word slackly, as any American would. “Excuse me?”

Herr Halsä was drying the inside of his ear with a white hand towel. This was nothing strange. It had seemed unusual at first, months ago, but then Joseph had asked himself why certain behaviors should be off-limits at work, especially to the boss. He tugged at his nose, waiting for Herr Halsä’s answer.

He felt only mildly ridiculous thinking of his boss as Herr Halsä. Everyone else was required to use formal German address, and it seemed right, though he’d explicitly been asked to call him Peter, that Joseph not call too much attention to what was already unpleasantly obvious: the gratifying fact that his boss relied on him utterly.

Herr Halsä lifted his head, looked up—he was now drying the nape of his neck, having apparently rushed from home with his head still wet—and grunted in a German way that pleased Joseph, because it meant again that Joseph worked at a German company, among Germans, who might at any time release deep, Bavarian grunts.

“Nothing, no, you can return to your work. I was just saying good morning. Good morning.” Herr Halsä nodded, still rubbing his hair with his head aslant, and closed the office door. He preferred to give orders in his own good time, when he’d chanced across things that needed doing, and in the meantime he expected his employees to stay busy on their own.

Joseph returned to what he’d been doing. He was typing up another proposal for robots that would replace human workers in an engine factory.

No one else in the building, only Joseph Stone, could say that his cubicle opened on to the boss’s door. The other cubicles, their short walls paneled in grey carpeting, were strung together to form two separate mazes, each of which closed in on itself and had a single entrance at the printers and copy machine, not far from the kitchen door. Herr Halsä’s office took up the corner diagonally opposite.

To the gear-hobbing maze belonged seasoned American salesmen who were unable to sell machines, though not for want of escorting potential buyers to golf courses and strip clubs. For whatever reason, probably some sort of native laxness, the Americans were unsuccessful—and with them one German who was so good at selling gantries that he’d been transferred to raise the *Amerikaner* out of their slump, and had instead fallen into one himself. To the gantry maze belonged newcomers who had not sold anything before their arrival from Germany. They were young and hungry and German and knew how to browbeat their former colleagues at the *Automationsfabrik* to give them extremely large discounts. Why shouldn’t the parent division sell its robots at a loss if it meant gaining a toehold in the prestigious American car market? These good *Kerle* had rubbed elbows in company showers with the very men they now called on for favors. The Americans in gear hobbing had visited Germany

too, but only to try the Wiener Schnitzel and spend a few days in seminar rooms.

Joe Stone was the exception. He was American and the company hadn't even sent him to Europe yet, but his was the cubicle that opened like a secret on to the boss's door. Despite various drawbacks, the arrangement suited him well. He preferred to be visible to no one, and at midday Herr Halsa would close his door and tighten the slats on the narrow shade covering the long, tall window beside it and (Joseph was fairly sure) nap. Herr Halsa idolized the chief of the Volkswagen company, and the chief of Volkswagen held as his guiding principle that nothing must remain on his desk overnight. So, to ensure that nothing violated this adopted dictum, Herr Halsa forbade everyone from putting papers or objects on his desk during the day also. Which left him with extraordinarily little to do.

Herr Halsa opened his door with the fresh snap of someone about to take the air and disappeared into the matrix of grey-walled cubicles. Joseph pasted another block of boiler-plate just where it belonged, then plucked the lemon out of his iced tea to resqueeze it. The rind of a lemon, with its regular dimples and high yellow complexion, cheered him so extraordinarily that he plucked and resqueezed several times as he drank each glass. The sun warmed his back, the sky had receded higher than ever, it was an uncontainably beautiful day.

The silence broke.

"I don't care if the file is on your hard drive!" Herr Halsa cried. He was straining to yell as loudly as possible, no doubt to make an example for everyone in the building. "I expect to see it in the next ten minutes, or your job will appear in tomorrow's classifieds!"

Whatever else one could say—such as "Joseph Stone was badly paid" or "Joe Stone the PhD was out of place here"—he did not forget to enjoy the small pleasures of his job.

Joseph held up his cutting and pasting and listened. He heard, of course, the soft scrapings made by the German receptionist, Roswitha, as she wiped each office plant's leaves with a handkerchief. But the dust-up seemed to be over.

It was no fault of the boss's that he knew nothing about computers. He'd never been shown how to use one, and his book learning, which pre-dated the era of workplace computers, was more in the nature of a technical apprenticeship.

Joseph considered the factory layout the company was proposing this time, but the German sales engineers, as they were called, knew plenty that he could not assess. It was a small marvel that the gantries could carry engine blocks not only high over the aisles but also through the women's room. Joseph's friend the mechanical draughtsman, an American, took great pleasure in formalizing the Germans' mistakes. "I do *exactly* what I'm asked to," he said. He liked to be challenged so he could repeat it.

"You might get a bigger raise if you—"

"I do exactly what I'm asked to."

A few minutes later, the American salesman Alan Freedman—his name was spelled wrong according to Herr Halsä, who thought it should be *Friedmann*—ambled into the boss's office with his naked, silver hard drive and the large, side-burned service manager, Helmut Schall, who waved a screwdriver as he explained in German that he'd removed the hard drive at Freedman's insistence. Naturally anyone in Herr Halsä's position who had once been a service mechanic would hesitate before spending too much work time in the presence of a man who might, just by his rough familiarity, remind people where the boss had started out, so, pulling his suit jacket from the back of his chair, Herr Halsä excused Alan Freedman—"All right, all right, go back to your phone calls!"—and closed the door on his friend Helmut Schall.

Joseph could easily sympathize with the boss on this occasion, for Herr Halsä's duke, his overlord, the very stylish Herr Doktor Hühne, who might as well have come from Berlin between the wars rather than any part of coarse *gemütlich* Bavaria, was scheduled to enter in the middle of this scene and, after half an hour, exit with nearly every German speaker to a gala welcoming lunch. Following this, Herr Doktor Hühne, without Joseph's boss, was to call on customers in the afternoon. Herr Halsä had spent days revising a very smart, thoroughgoing agenda for the kick-off meeting.

When Hans Hühne arrived, he shook the beefy hand of his prime underling in the United States, Herr Halsä—who had in the meantime calmed himself and reopened his office for the grand arrival—accepted Roswitha's requisite offer of *Kaffee*, and promptly left the office to shake Joseph's hand and enter into private negotiations.

Joseph felt courted. Here was perhaps the most stylish suit-wearing man he had ever met—Herr Doktor Hans Friedrich Hühne crossed his legs even while standing, and turned his head gently to the side, not with any hint of arrogance but nevertheless with the suggestion of a long cigarette holder and a thin black tie—and, very consciously no doubt, he chose to address Joseph before anyone else. At this formal moment, the occasion of receiving a well-regarded superior who has just disembarked from a transatlantic flight, Peter Halsä could not very well emerge from his office. Herr Doktor Hühne had chosen to leave it and would return in his own time. But Herr Halsä clattered about—chairs, his empty outbox—to express impatience to Joseph in a language that Herr Doktor Hühne would not recognize.

"You translated the gantry catalogue, isn't it?" Hühne said. He spoke English with a smooth accent.

"*Das habe ich, ja*," Joseph answered, wondering if he'd made any kind of mistake in his German.

“We have a new project in need of the highest-quality translation, and I’d like us to work on it together, you and me,” he went on, speaking German now.

Herr Halsä went so far as to clear his throat, but Joseph heard the softness in it, a touching womanliness that would mean to Herr Doktor Hühne, if he happened to hear, that Halsä intended nothing peremptory. On the contrary, it brimmed with comic lightness, the kind of mild rebuke that one might direct towards an old woman, perhaps a receptionist who had chosen this inopportune moment to dust the plants.

Joseph nodded with grave interest—he enjoyed being important; who doesn’t?—and stood up to match Herr Doktor Hühne’s height, making certain in his American way to advance this relationship by allowing his arm to bump a few times against Herr Doktor Hühne’s while they reviewed the as-yet-unreleased German prospectus for a new overhead-railcar system.

Herr Halsä appeared briefly at his door, then pulled back. Joseph saw his image there, the faintest double exposure, wearing the fine Italian jacket that usually hung behind the door.

Once Herr Doktor Hühne returned to Halsä’s office, where the German salesmen were now gathered around the conference table, Herr Halsä grew expansive and host-like. At these times his bearing made Joseph proudest to have this unexpected opportunity, which had come up almost by accident six months before, to be the translator here instead of a mere secretarial temp. Joseph sat off to the side, his favorite fountain pen poised for note-taking. The Americans on staff were excluded from these meetings for the simple reason that the conversations were conducted in German, and for the complex reason that the Americans were American.

Not much happened during the meeting in terms of company business. But several important psychological or interpersonal things took place, and Joseph marveled at how curious they were, and how lucky he was to be here to witness these intimate workings of an executive office—without having to suffer from any very significant attachment to the questions being discussed. First, the railcar system went unmentioned. Joseph felt fairly deep loyalty on this point and scratched out a reminder to tell Herr Halsä about the project as soon as the überboss left. Second, he noticed the obvious: the disappointment that caused Herr Halsä's eyes to shift nervously just ten minutes into the meeting, after the anecdotes and jokes and hellos. Charismatic Herr Doktor Hühne began to ask questions and guide the conversation—no guest-playing for him—and it became only too obvious that the written agenda would go unfollowed. Herr Doktor Hühne would have no chance to see, though tomorrow was another day, how tightly his next-in-command ran this important subsidiary.

Joseph, meantime, was smiling and nodding. He couldn't understand half of what was being said, the quick Bavarian retorts, the irony-drenched allusions to who knows what. But no matter. Joseph was the company translator and, with that credential, a fully vested German speaker. Even his mother said he wasn't a very good listener—how could anyone expect one hundred per cent comprehension here, where the salesmen were discussing technical matters foreign to Joseph even in English? Why should he squint or shrug or ask the others to repeat themselves when silence and a few well-timed laughs would carry him through?

Herr Doktor Hühne had worked himself into a bluster over the notion of *Handwerk*. Joseph took a few disjointed notes, hoping to record this fascinating paradox without scrambling it. *No matter how many "machines" assemble*

*our robots*, Herr Doktor Hühne seemed to be saying, *everything that the factory produces is "handmade."* Hühne was the kind of urbane man you might find in a pale linen suit smoking thin, stinking cigars, so his bluster did not throw him forward on to the points of his elbows, anxious and combative, but took him deeper into the chair, his fingers tepeed and restless and occasionally pressed against his lips. "Customized production, gentlemen," he said in English.

"Ah, customized production," Herr Halsä joked. He didn't switch to English unless he had to. "*Kundenspezifische Fertigung*. I thought you wanted Reinhold to use handsaws and toilet plungers."

Herr Halsä leaned back, trying to work himself as low in his chair as Herr Doktor Hühne, but of course it was impossible. Herr Halsä spent too many of his evenings in steak-houses.

"Let's leave American work to the Americans," the highest-grossing salesman said.

Herr Hühne laughed. "Yes, *Handwerk* in the manner of watchmakers, not plumbers."

Joseph pulled at his upper lip and immediately read his own gesture. It was hardly-to-be-restrained pride. These men could tell their jokes about "American work," their rather offensive jokes in which "American" replaced what must have been "Turk" back home, and altogether forget that Joseph was, in some ways—well, in every way—an American.

He liked to maneuver towards near-paradoxes, to insinuate himself into scenes that most could never hope to be part of.

At lunchtime, when the meeting broke up—Herr Doktor Hühne abruptly rose, declaring his hunger—the line of salesmen, and among them Herr Halsä, strolled towards the building's front door in twos and threes behind the visiting executive, who was a personal friend of the family that owned the company. Herr Doktor Hühne had walked ahead with the highest-grossing salesman, a curly-topped redhead far thinner than the rest and willing to make any kind of joke, transgress in any way, even to the point of yanking Hühne's tie, beeping like the Roadrunner, and calling the regent *Dingsbums*.

Joseph, too, proceeded to the front door. But this was where his deficiency cut him off. He could ride all of the other rides, but here at last he came upon a minimum height for the Tilt-a-Whirl, the requirement of actual Germanness, which he missed by a finger or two. It was his secret goal to grow into it, to convince Halsä next year or the year after, by silent competence—it would take just once to change the expectation permanently—and then he could board one of the cars departing for an inner-sanctum lunch.

Along behind the *Automationsabteilung*, as the only American invited to the restaurant, the sales rep Jack Wilson paddled out. He'd been talking all this while to Ted and Alan and the other non-German speakers in the hobbing area. Maybe he'd even done the rounds of the service department, the warehouse that occupied the back two-thirds of the building and marked the hunting grounds of the only birds lower than Americans in this peculiar aviary: the *Bauern*, Helmut Schall and his staff of Bavarian farmers who'd never had their moles removed. Joseph liked them, in fact they were some of the best men in the company, but the defensive jokes about their moles and so on—Herr Halsä's repertoire—any employee would have found funny, and Joseph felt justified in leaning back from his note-taking and giving

a full-on laugh. Just the same, as he directed a quick salute to the sales rep Wilson, a slightly pleasant superciliousness washed over him, a feeling of gratitude to the fate that had given him cafes and saved him from the America of sports bars and chewing tobacco. Why shouldn't he enjoy some of the privileges conferred on him here and consider himself every bit as superior as the true Germans felt?

Joseph watched through the kitchen window and, like a basketball player who could dribble without looking, engineered a second iced tea blind. It did make sense, despite a tensing in his shoulders, that this man, Jack Wilson, would go to the restaurant. He was the one scheduled to escort Herr Doktor Hühne to the customer's plant that afternoon. Wilson and Hühne would tour the No. 3 Engine Plant in Cleveland, which had accepted the very first proposal that Joseph had written—an eleven-million-dollar project, the German factory's largest yet. And Herr Halsä was right to consider Hühne's impression of things. The previous executive vice-president had been recalled for capitulating too quickly to the American way of doing business—particularly by replacing German components with much cheaper substitutes.

In inviting Wilson to lunch there was no awkwardness, because Wilson did not work for the company. He was a kind of mercenary who agreed to play golf on the company's behalf exclusively and get drunk on the company's behalf exclusively and frequently with people who might or might not have purchasing clout at whatever plant Wilson had led the Germans to target. He was a go-between. A middleman. The aesthetics of the thing were less germane than the logic: it made sense for Wilson to liaise over popcorn shrimp. Nevertheless, when Alan Freedman walked into the lunch room, his hair full and proud, unlike all the monk-topped Germans, Joseph couldn't resist saying something conspiratorial.

“Look at Wilson out there laughing. Do you think he’s drunk?”

Wilson soft-shoed into his son’s minivan, the star of his own silent movie.

Freedman was forever in good spirits—he was a man of the highest, proudest, most natural spirits Joseph had ever known—and he pulled a Sam’s Choice lemon-lime soda from the refrigerator along with his brown sack of lunch, and laughed with a gentle calm that put Wilson’s bluster to shame. “He deserves to be happy, no? A million and a half for the Cleveland plant, I’d be handing out tulips and Swiss chocolates.”

The pulp of Joseph’s lemon went on spinning in his glass even after he’d stopped stirring, the swirls of dissolved sugar warping and turning like heat waves coming up from a car. He often felt blessed by small things and now, with the young sun glinting off windshields and beckoning him outside with his lunch, he felt deeply fortunate to have this packet of sugar in his hand, to be already rolling the torn-off piece of it between his fingers, to be here in this job, a translator instead of a temp, twenty dollars an hour instead of eight-fifty.

A million and a half.

“And—do you get commissions when you sell?” he asked, expecting the worst. Every one of them must have been making too much money to care about anything. He was halfway back to his cubicle—a little-used door next to Herr Halsä’s office led to the lawn behind the building—and Freedman was about to disappear into the gear-hobbing maze.

“Nope. I guess commissions are an American thing,” Freedman said wistfully. He was still smiling. He was almost laughing, and his hands were plunged so far into his pockets that his elbows were straight. Joseph thought he’d like to

have him as an older brother or confidant who could advise on all the stages to come. "It makes me think I should go out on my own. But damn, a drought's a drought when you're repping, and it doesn't matter how many daughters you have in school."

What, Joseph asked himself as he sat on the cool May grass and looked out over the pond, is a million and a half dollars but an abstraction on a beautiful day like this, with a fresh iced tea, an egg salad sandwich with big pebbly capers, a slightly crunchy pear? The pond was a fire reservoir, man-made according to some code that required a certain-sized body of water for every so-and-so many feet of manufacturing space: the neighboring company made baseballs, softballs, soccer balls, basketballs, volleyballs, all of inexpensive design and quality, for the use of small children. But even if their pond was square and covered across half its surface with algae, the jets that aerated the other half caught the light magnificently, scattering it like chips of glass, and the tiny green circles that undulated on the near side resembled stitches in a beautiful knitted shawl that the pond wore garishly in the sunlight. Joseph thought of his wife of less than a year, back in their apartment, studying by the window; his parents gardening five hundred miles away; his grandparents outside too, no doubt, mowing their tiny lawns just to walk under this magnificent sun.

When Joseph was back inside, Herr Doktor Hühne returned to pick up his briefcase, which he'd left in the middle of Herr Halsä's empty desk.

"Why didn't you join us for lunch?" he asked in German. "That was unexpected. We arrived at the restaurant and I looked around myself, wanting to ask you a question, and what's this? He doesn't eat?"

Hühne left again with Wilson and the top-grossing salesman, and an hour passed by in welcome silence. Joseph

worked steadily, with his usual dedication, no one but Roswitha interrupting. She sprayed Herr Halsä's window, his silk plants, his brass lamp, wiped and rubbed, a water spritzer in one hand, an ammonia bottle in the other, wiping, rubbing and spraying, holding the plant handkerchief between her cheek and shoulder and a roll of paper towel under her wing.

"I'm saying nothing, I'm saying nothing," she said. "Keep on with your work." She spoke in heavily accented English and switched to German only when someone spoke in German to her. She was eighty or so, extremely short, with grey skirts that wrapped not far below her breasts. "He keeps you busy too, I know that. With his whims," she whispered, and shushed herself.

Joseph liked having a mercurial boss. *Mercurial* was a good word for him. He was pleased to have thought of it.

When Herr Halsä returned, it was clear where he'd gone after lunch—to the gym, as he often did. The advantages of a workout, not just for Herr Halsä's health but for the whole organization's well-being, so far outweighed any cause for criticism that Joseph wondered at his own momentary derision, the thought skittering into his head that these workouts seemed to follow on occasions of secret, carefully hidden stress. Who else was privy to Herr Halsä's fears and thoughts? Aside maybe from Frau Halsä and a few personal friends, no one but Joseph could have guessed at what was happening in the boss's mind.

\* \* \* \*

On occasional weekend nights, with little notice, everyone at the company was invited to a German hall for drinks and music and laughing repetitions of the chicken dance.

Herr Halsa would wrap his arm around every shoulder he came to and lift his beer *Krug* in a toast. *What? You have no beer?* He'd hesitate just long enough to show he regretted spending the company's money, then raise his finger to signal for another. By Monday, no one dared to remind or even to thank him.

Without exception, he returned from the gym with his face the deepest red, as if he were holding his breath through a heart attack. But in exchange, he was calm. His hair, as usual, remained wet, and he rubbed at it with the same towel that had started the day, bending his neck left and right, arching his back, and moving in other cat-like ways that would have seemed impossible an hour before. Joseph envied him his midday showers.

Then that was it for a while. Halsa retreated behind the closed door of his office and drew the shades of his tall, narrow windows—presumably so that others, instead of watching him eat an apple, might mistake this for his most productive hour. He would emerge afterwards, either confirmed in his good opinion of the day or reminded of some fresh inconvenience that needed a scapegoat.

Today, by the magic of endorphins, he was confirmed—his arms behind his back showed it immediately—and he took his flat expression from desk to desk and watched his employees' computer screens over their shoulders, occasionally nodding at what was for him the mystery of how things appeared and disappeared, moved, grew, changed and scrolled on the various monitors. Witnessing the growth of a letter on screen might have occupied him for hours if he hadn't realized, perhaps more acutely than anyone, that this rapt staring resembled ignorance.

"Come in here. Come in, come in," Herr Halsa called from his office. Joseph had no idea who he was talking to.

With the door open Joseph had a view into the room, but Herr Halsa was looking down at the things on his desk, re-ordering them according to some new, afternoon priority—name plate, lamp, telephone, pen stand. And Joseph could not see as far as Herr Halsa could along the hallway formed by the cubicle walls. Maybe someone was standing there: a petitioner. What's more, the boss was speaking not in German but in English. "This is something you need to finish for the end of the day, so we must sit together. Quickly I think. Joe!"

Joseph hurried into the office with a notebook, two pens and some papers he'd finished the day before but not yet presented to Herr Halsa. "Excuse me, I—"

"We're ready to send out a letter just now and offer this very good job. Inventory manager for the new production area," Herr Halsa added, as if he'd forgotten that Joseph had sat in on every one of the interviews. The new "production area" was an assembly room where this new employee would take robotic cranes out of their boxes, count the screws, assemble everything, test the completed system, then transfer it to a flatbed truck for shipment to the customer's plant. Joseph's attempt at a job description had muddled everything, though—no one asked if he'd ever written one before—so that several applicants showed up expecting to run an automated inventory system and a couple of others wanted a division reporting to them. But no matter. His influence held. After each interview, Herr Halsa would ask Joseph what the man (he couldn't help it that no women had been included) had meant by this and that, and very often what Herr Halsa wanted to know had nothing to do with the delta between languages at all.

The American salesman liked to say that Peter Halsa was aptly named. He had risen beyond his competence and didn't know what to do with his time: the Peter Principle.

Had anyone dared to repeat this to Herr Halsä, he would have said that he didn't need to understand his job—it was Joseph's responsibility to explain it to him.

Joseph sat while Herr Halsä paced, and here came a tremendous mistake that changed the course of the day. Even after five p.m., Joseph would resist thinking he'd made a mistake. But it was a mistake, and he knew it was a mistake, because a competent employee reads his boss's signs and does not transgress against the boss's most deeply held expectations.

Joseph believed he knew exactly what they'd be doing. They'd be writing to the candidate far more experienced than the others. And because it was a beautiful day and the sun was making use of each passing car's windshield to launch itself at the office walls, where long, overlapping triangles played across motivational posters framed in gold and black, Joseph nodded, looked Herr Halsä in the eye—calm Herr Halsä, for whom Herr Doktor Hühne's visit had been sweated out in the gym—and said, "I'm happy to help."

At first, nothing happened. And nothing seemed likely to happen. Why would it? Perhaps no one—least of all Joseph—would have expected anything to come of such innocuous or even friendly words on such a life-affirming day, where beyond the recirculating air of this boxy metal building the trillionth generation of bumblebees was unfurling from its hidden combs.

Herr Halsä smoothed a résumé like an angry mother pressing a shirt. "This is the one we're hiring. Fred Wagner," he said, still speaking in English.

Herr Halsä respected his translator, Joseph knew that. He felt the boss's admiration every day. There was the unusual latitude that Herr Halsä afforded him, and one day, when Joseph was off sick, Halsä had moved him into that

cubicle by the door—the other Americans he pushed to the periphery and spied on. Of all the employees in the American subsidiary, German and English, Joseph Stone was the only person allowed to keep a real plant. All other plants were required to be silk or plastic. So when Herr Halsa tickled a file into his hand and sat down with a tired sigh, Joseph at some level did not hear the words he had just spoken. Frederick Lebeaux Wagner? Herr Halsa pronounced the name “Vagna,” the German way—though the underqualified good ol’ boy with bobbing eyebrows and a love of dirty jokes was as American as Joseph himself.

Halsa placed his hand on Joseph’s shoulder, then patted it. He leaned forward with whatever he had to say. “Do you know why Hühne is a doctor?” he asked. Joseph couldn’t get over how unusual this was: Herr Halsa speaking English to him in private. “Hühne’s a doctor because the owner’s son, the old man’s son, who went to Gymnasium with Hans, has a younger brother who became—chancellor, is it?—at the University Köpfingen. But a chancellor at the University Köpfingen doesn’t give away free doctorates so easily, without work, so they arranged it in this way, that Hans Hühne, who couldn’t rise so high on the technical side without a doctor’s degree, would take his doctorate in insects, in bugs, and the university would confirm, yes, he’s a doctor, with no diploma printed. He’s a specialist in the dung beetle with his shit degree. I have only a certificate, but Doktor Schwanz Hühne has not even that much.” His face, which had cooled off since the gym, veered back towards plum as he spoke.

Joseph laughed because he thought Herr Halsa expected and even demanded a laugh from him—a good, strong, close-lipped laugh that said, *Wow, is that true? I won’t ever tell anyone*. But on the table in front of him, Halsa’s folder named the wrong man for inventory manager, very clearly and prejudicially wrong.

“What about Gary Jackson? For this job,” he said, tapping on the file. “The applicant who did the same job before.” Also the applicant Joseph had recommended. Herr Halsä had nodded, and the other person in the room had nodded, and Joseph had in fact written the offer letter already, and it was in his hand here, behind the other papers for which he’d already, while Herr Halsä was talking about the shit doctorate, gotten his trusting signature, and he’d been planning to go up front after this meeting and drop it in the mail.

“Gary Jackson?” Herr Halsä said. “The black one? I didn’t know you wore white make-up to work.”

“You said on the phone with the lawyer that you need more minorities.”

“Do not refer to private conversations between me and my lawyer,” Halsä said, abruptly switching to German.

“You’re in the room to explain his meaning when I’m lost in garbagey lawyer words. You’re not supposed to remember any of it.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

Herr Halsä leaned in and pushed his chest hard against the table. He was speaking English again. “I don’t ask for your help,” he said, looking into Joseph’s eyes but pressing his thumb against the table’s high shine. “I don’t need your help ever, do you understand? I pay you!”

A truck flashed a stutter of sunlight across the posters again.

Joseph tried to think how to react like a German. Most of his German friends would have quit. The good, decent, strong-willed Germans would have argued, then quit. But what about the businessy Germans? The *Nieten in Nadelstreifen*, idiots in pinstripes? Or come to think of it, this bitter subversive feeling most closely matched his friend who drafted all the factory drawings here, that’s who he felt most

like. It was maybe pure American bitterness that welled up and spat a calculating line back at Herr Halsä in Joseph's most cordial tone of voice: something that would stab the boss without giving him grounds for firing.

"Herr Doktor Hühne just wants me to translate a new catalogue."

This maneuver, once he'd completed it, did seem German to him—after all, his American friend, the draughtsman, had lived in Darmstadt for fifteen years. And Peter Halsä proved more adept at it.

"You're not the company translator waiting for everyone's work," he said. "You take your jobs from me. If anyone needs your time, tell them to ask first, they can knock on my door. But I won't give up my secretary's time for everybody's pet project."

Without quite knowing how, Joseph retired from Herr Halsä's office to his own cubicle, where he could at least drink the melted ice at the bottom of his long-finished iced tea. He didn't buck forward or run. He walked upright, and he remembered squaring the signed papers on the boss's table in a very casual way before excusing himself. Halsä had already said, too, that there wasn't enough time to write to Fred Wagner before five and they should do it first thing in the morning. Joseph slipped his signed letter to Gary Johnson into a company envelope, affixed one of the personal stamps he kept in his top drawer and licked the envelope shut, exultant to have the last word. Sooner than face a lawsuit, they'd keep Johnson on—the most qualified man, a balm or salt to their racism, salutary either way.

The afternoon had lengthened the building's shadow more than halfway to the ball factory, nearly there, where the five o'clock shift had just arrived, bringing with it a fleet of cars vetted and certified to meet the arcane union rules for what it meant to be "Made in the USA."

Herr Halsä was hiring an inventory manager for one reason. He had fired two lawyers and with Joseph's help retained a third who'd given him the legal opinion that putting in the last few bolts in the production area would allow the company to pitch its robots as "Assembled in the USA." The lawyer before this latest had sent a long description in quotation marks, with his signature below: "Final assembly done partially in the United States from some parts manufactured from metals mined and smelted partially in the USA." And now, as Joseph squeezed another lemon into a fresh iced tea and breathed in the spray of lemon oil, he felt with decreasing urgency the embarrassment of having helped Herr Halsä turn away from the truth. Herr Halsä didn't want the truth of anything. He wanted whatever would seem to raise him up, well past his competence.

Meandering past Helmut Schall's test gantries, which flung an engine block back and forth ten, fifteen, twenty thousand times to prove their stamina, Joseph kept himself safe with an extra-wide margin, in case the many-worlds theory proved to be true and a few random quanta of difference in some conceivable world, leading to a stumble or a careless turn, put him fatally close. Whenever he approached a precipitous edge, or a car passed near enough to unsettle him, he wondered if in some other universe his mother would have cause to grieve now, and the thought of hurting her in that way, somewhere, saddened him.

He didn't pace for long. The company was paying. But he could feel how little that mattered now. He needed to finish the proposal by tomorrow and despite everything he couldn't help wanting it to be perfect, down to the indentations and centerings. Thirty pages' worth. But none of that was the main reason he sat at his desk again, resqueezing his lemon, dusting a few leaves of his ivy plant—a final act of defiance, since Herr Halsä's "permission" was unspoken

and grudging—and pasted in more blocks of pre-written text. These cubicles of words: he'd worried over them, like a boss getting a new job description right, and then, without testing it overmuch, he'd called the cut-and-paste system finished, suitable for all occasions, never to be questioned again. The main reason he dropped his disgust, gave up pacing and returned to his privileged corner was that he was bored.

At five o'clock Herr Halsä came out of his office and Joseph's pulse quickened. Towards or away? He glanced over: towards, and it was clear that Herr Halsä had forgotten everything, put it all behind him. He was wearing his smart suit jacket, finely tailored—Joseph took particular note of it. And he looked confident now. You couldn't think about the Peter Principle when Herr Halsä wore that suit jacket. Maybe Joseph should spend some of his paycheck on a hand-tailored suit. He didn't know what occasion he'd have to wear such a thing, but it seemed the perfect antidote to molded rubber balls, a factory pond, the gray rugs climbing up the walls of his cubicle.

Herr Halsä laughed. He had a deep, hearty laugh when the day was done. And he told Joseph to go play a little.

Joseph chuckled and nodded. "Good advice," he said.

"*Das ist kein Ratschlag, das ist ein Befehl,*" Herr Halsä said. "It's not advice. It's an order."

Almost drunk now, Joseph gave a casual evening salute. "*Jawohl. Tschüß!*" he said familiarly. Swatting the envelope against his wrist, back and forth, he watched Herr Halsä swagger away, and noticed with a certain amount of unbecoming pleasure that even as the boss passed a trio of underperforming American salesmen he said nothing to them, lost in his pre-dinner whistling.

That was it. Without considering what was inside, or rather, thinking of it sidelong, as evidence of his importance here, Joseph raised the sealed envelope in a toast and shredded it, along with a few sensitive documents that Herr Halsä didn't want the others to see. He stood up and, with the last moments of the day—because Herr Halsä had left twenty-five seconds early—he wetted a square of paper towel in his melted ice and wiped the leaves of the ivy until they glowed.

# About the authors

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**Steve Almond** (“Men Alone”) is the author of six books, most recently, *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life*. He is also, crazily, self-publishing books. *This Won’t Take But a Minute, Honey*, is composed of 30 very brief stories, and 30 very brief essays on the psychology and practice of writing. *Letters from People Who Hate Me* is just plum crazy. Both are available at readings. In 2011, Lookout Press will publish his story collection, *God Bless America*.

**Aaron Block** (“Nothings”) received his MFA from Emerson College, where he teaches college writing. When not teaching or writing he is usually buying records, eating a sandwich, or doing online jigsaw puzzles. His heroes include Orson Welles, Gary Giddins, and whoever came up with online jigsaw puzzles. He lives in Boston with his girlfriend, Fritha, and their cat, Ella.

**Taryn Bowe** (“Everything is Breakable with a Big Enough Stone”) has published fiction in literary journals, including *Boston Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The Beloit Fiction Journal*, and *Redivider*. She lives in Portland, Maine with her husband and baby daughter.

**Corey Campbell** (“Pool”), a student in Warren Wilson’s MFA program for fiction, published “Pool” at *Anderbo.com* and “The Plants” in *New Southerner Magazine*. Her story “Everyday Things” was showcased in the New Short Fiction Series at the Beverly Hills Library. A runner-up for Open City’s RRofihe Trophy two years in a row, Ms. Campbell has

taken workshops at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and is the recipient of a National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences scholarship for her writing.

**Scott Cheshire** ("Watchers") earned his MFA in fiction at Hunter College, City University of New York. He is currently working on his first novel.

**Steve Frederick** ("Dragon"), a lifelong journalist, is inspired by the high lonesome prairie. His fiction writing can be found in *Night Train*; *Snow Monkey*; *You Have Time for This: Contemporary American Short-Short Stories*; *Best American Flash Fiction of the 21st Century* (a book used as a text in China); *Emerging Voices*; and in a variety of online sites, including *Vestal Review*, *The God Particle* and *The Story Garden*.

**Castle Freeman, Jr.** ("The Next Thing on Benefit") is a novelist and short story writer living in southern Vermont. His stories have appeared in a number of literary magazines, and his most recent novel, *All That I Have*, was published last year by Steerforth Press, Hanover, New Hampshire, and by Duckworth Publishers, London.

**Eric Freeze** ("Seven Little Stories About Sex") is an Assistant Professor of creative writing at Wabash College. He has published stories and translations in a variety of periodicals including most recently *The Southern Review*, *Boston Review*, and *Tampa Review*.

**Roy Giles** ("Black Night Ranch") is an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Central Oklahoma. He is a founding member of *Arcadia Literary Journal* where he serves as the drama and assistant poetry editor. "Black Night Ranch" is his first published story and originally appeared with *Eclectica Magazine* where he was chosen as the "Spotlight Author" of that issue.

**Andy Henion** (“Bad Cheetah”) likes sharp-tongued movie sidekicks, burnt-orange automobiles and hominy from a can. His fiction has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Pindeldyboz*, and other places. He lives in Michigan with some people and an animal.

**B.J. Hollars** (“The Naturalists”) is an instructor at the University of Alabama where he also received his MFA in 2010. He’s served as nonfiction editor and assistant fiction editor for *Black Warrior Review* and currently edits for *Versal*. He is the author of the forthcoming *Thirteen Loops: Race, Violence and the Last Lynching in America* (University of Alabama Press) and the editor of *You Must Be This Tall To Ride: Contemporary Writers Take You Inside The Story* (Writer’s Digest Books, 2009). His website is [bjhollars.com](http://bjhollars.com).

**Trevor J. Houser** (“On Castles”) was born in Oregon, but since then has lived in other places, like Mexico, where he drove a sort of gas truck. His writing has appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, *ZYZZYVA*, and *Pindeldyboz* among others. Two of his stories were nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He is currently working on a novel about werewolves in colonial times and how that affects the modern human condition. He lives in San Francisco with his wife and daughter.

**Svetlana Lavochkina** (“Semolinian Equinox”) was born, raised and educated in Eastern Ukraine, where the cities steamed with important factories, where dandelions poked through the concrete in some places. A decade ago, she moved to Eastern Germany, where Leipzig teems with parks and stucco nymphs call from the pink façades. Svetlana’s short stories were published in *Eclectica* (shortlisted for Million Writers’ Award 2010), *The Literary Review*, *In Our Words Anthology*, *Chapman*, *Textualities* and are forthcoming in *Mad Hatters’ Review*. Svetlana has been in unreciprocated love with English since she was seven. She tries to breathe with it, but this air is as thin as high on the mountain. The words tease, bully and won’t obey.

**Angie Lee** (“Eupcaccia”) is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. Raised on the top of a water tower in Los Alamos, New Mexico, Angie holds an MFA from Cal Arts and has exhibited in both the US and Europe. She often thinks of traveling to the moon and roasting her own coffee beans at the same time. Her work has been published in *Giant Robot* and *Witness*, and she blogs at [www.moonquake.org](http://www.moonquake.org).

**Ron MacLean** (“The Night Dentist”) is author of the story collection *Why the Long Face?* (2008) and the novel *Blue Winnetka Skies* (2004). His fiction has appeared in *GQ*, *New Ohio Review*, *Fiction International*, *Night Train*, *Other Voices* and many more publications. He is a recipient of the Frederick Exley Award for Short Fiction and a multiple Pushcart Prize nominee. He holds a Doctor of Arts from the University at Albany, SUNY, and is a former executive director at Grub Street, Boston’s independent creative writing center, where he still teaches.

**Michael Mejia** (“The Abjection”) is the recipient of a Literature Fellowship from the NEA and a grant from the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation. His novel *Forgetfulness* was published by FC 2, and his fiction, nonfiction, and book reviews have appeared in *AGNI*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Paul Revere’s Horse*, *Pleiades*, and *American Book Review*, among others. He lives in Georgia. His website is [michaelfmejia.com](http://michaelfmejia.com).

**L.E. Miller** (“Peacocks”) has published short stories in *The Missouri Review*, *Scribner’s Best of Fiction Workshops* 1999, and *CALYX*. One of her stories was also selected as a PEN/O. Henry Prize Story for 2009. L. E. Miller holds an M.A. in fiction writing from the University of New Hampshire. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and son and is completing a collection of short stories.

**Valerie O’Riordan** (“The Girl In The Glass”) is just about to complete her MA in creative writing at the University of

Manchester, England. Her short fiction has been published in print and online; she won the 2010 Bristol Short Story Prize and in 2009 she was a finalist in Flatmancrooked's inaugural Fiction Prize. She's working on her first novel and she blogs at [www.not-exactly-true.blogspot.com](http://www.not-exactly-true.blogspot.com).

**David Peak** ("Helping Hands") is the author of a novel, *The Rocket's Red Glare* (Leucrota Press), a book of poems, *Surface Tension* (BlazeVOX Books), and two chapbooks. Other writing has appeared in *elimae*, *Annalemma*, and *Monkeybicycle*. He lives in New York City.

**Alanna Peterson** ("How to Assemble a Portal to Another World") lives in Seattle and attends the University of Washington law school. She wrote this story during an NYU summer writing program in Paris, although she completed her undergraduate education at USC, and it was first published on *failbetter.com*.

**William Pierce** ("American Subsidiary"). William Pierce's fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Granta*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, and elsewhere. He is senior editor of *AGNI*, where he contributes a series of essays called "Crucibles."

**Emily Ruskovich** ("The Eskimo Keeps Her Promise") grew up on a little farm in the mountains of the Idaho Panhandle. She graduated from the University of Montana and then from the University of New Brunswick, Canada, where she earned her MA in English. She is currently a Teaching-Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers Workshop. "The Eskimo Keeps Her Promise" was her first published story. She is twenty-four years old.

**Sarah Salway** ("For the Sake of the Children") is the author of three novels and two books of short stories. Her latest novel, *Getting the Picture* (Ballantine, 2010) is about love in

a care home. She divides her time between Kent, England and London, where she is currently the RLF Fellow at the London School of Economics. Sarah's website is at [www.sarahsalway.net](http://www.sarahsalway.net).

**Andrea Uptmor** ("Liz Phair and the Most Perfect Sentence") is a fiction writer from Illinois. She is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Minnesota. You can read her blog at [andreauptmor.blogspot.com](http://andreauptmor.blogspot.com).

**C. Dale Young** ("The Affliction") is the author of three books of poetry, *The Day Underneath the Day* (Northwestern 2001), *The Second Person* (Four Way Books 2007), and *TORN* (Four Way Books 2011). He practices medicine full-time and teaches in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. A former recipient of the Grolier Prize and fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Yaddo, and the National Endowment for the Arts, "The Affliction" was his first published short story. He lives in San Francisco.

# About the publisher

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