

# EFICTION



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# THE INVADERS

Gary Hewitt

I hope the poisonous tiger will go. He's scrabbling across an apple and twitching his feelers. I hate wasps.

I'm outside pulling off some plums and there he is. Does he think I've nothing better to do than annoy him? I've never moved so fast in all my life when he chased me indoors.

Is he looking at me? He's coming my way. I better shut the door. This is ridiculous. I'm barred from my living room whilst Attila the Buzz invades my fruit bowl. I seize a copy of the Express and prepare to unleash my inner warrior.

I crack the door open. My paper truncheon is ready to administer doom. I tiptoe inside and scour the room. I'm damned if I can see my cause of terror. I hear a rattling sound from near the window. There you are. Oh damn, time to escape. He must have called for a couple of his friends because there are three of them floating around now.

This means chemical war. I've got some Vapona hiding under the sink. I slink back. I won't be beat.

I close my eyes and plunge inside. I unleash a tornado of insecticide and I dare to peek at the window. I see two of them twitching on the ground yet can't see the third. I feel something on my arm. A dying striped lozenge prepares for vengeance. I close my eyes and scream.

# DAY FOR NIGHT

Stacey Bryan

The world came to an end on a balmy Tuesday evening while I was doing laundry in my Glendale apartment building. Not on a Monday so I could start off the week fresh with the apocalypse, knowing just where I stood. Or a Friday so I could say, “Thank God it’s the weekend. I need to de-stress from the End of Days.” It was a Tuesday. It had started out like every other day. I woke up with my usual regret. After that, on with business. Tuesday, four weeks to the day that I had been voted off one of the most popular reality shows running: *Muscle Beach Midlife: Sand in your Face*. The irony being that *Muscle Midlife* had no voting. But it made for good TV, so I was dead meat.

Forced out of escrow for the dream condo I’d been buying in Hermosa Beach, terrible timing left me between abodes, and I’d run scrambling for somewhere to live, eventually giving up on anything good. Hence, this place. Surrounded by elderly Armenian gentlemen who seemed to disapprove of women wearing pants. Too old to run to mom and dad. Too embarrassed to run to friends—a dozen of whom mysteriously shrank down to one or two once I got kicked off the show. Margarite, my sister? Not an option. So now as I made my way down deeper into

Single White Female territory—the laundry room in the building’s dank basement—I succumbed to rage as my ex-castmates’ faces flashed before my eyes: Ricardo, Dante, Kairi, Cayman, Andrygen, and Moeyner. Dante didn’t count. The order shifted constantly as Ricardo, the ringleader, held fast to first. He had convinced the others into the secret ballot that got me axed. Piece of crap wannabe “yoga master” poseur from Torrance. Not Dante, though. Dante had not voted. Dante had tried to warn me, in sign language, that something was brewing. But he signed way too fast, and none of us except Moeyner had taken the time to learn American Sign Language better so we could actually communicate with him. So, as usual, I had just blown him off.

But back to Tuesday. Back to the end of the world. As I neared the laundry room, basket on my hip, I was expecting the machines to all be occupied, except for one, which wouldn’t be enough to accommodate my load. I was expecting the light bulb to be stuttering in its usual migraine-inducing pattern. Even before I arrived, I could hear them all busily humming. All the machines, all being used. The one poster on the wall would be there, Truffaut’s *Day for Night*, dusty, the plastic cover cracked in one corner. But what I wasn’t expecting was to turn the corner and find my thirty-something neighbor Paula, eyes open, silent, encased by a cone of light and suspended in midair just inside the doorway. Nope. Wasn’t expecting that at all. Floating beside her was the small, big-headed creature I’d seen a million times

on TV and in the movies, so hilariously clichéd that I laughed out loud. There were some young filmmakers in the building. It must be an experiment, a joke. But then the creature turned, and it just wasn't funny anymore.

I had been thinking, just seconds before, who in their right mind calls themselves Andrygen? Obviously a loon, because her four kids were named after the moons of Jupiter. And what about Kairi, Miss Coldwater Canyon, 1992? Need I say more? How had I ended up on that show? Was I really as washed up as all of them? Gone, gone, gone, all of these thoughts, all logic, when I rounded the corner. I laughed, the creature turned. Its eyes moved. I froze. He/she/it froze too. It was a monster, but I had startled it. The laundry basket tumbled from my numb hands. Bras and socks and panties and jeans spilled out onto the floor, bleached of color under the buzzing lights. The being glanced at the laundry (was that disgust I saw? Or was I projecting?) and then something happened. I was in the air. Without thinking, I had vaulted upward, aiming for Paula's dangling legs. I whipped my arms around them. I felt her bobble downward a little in the light then lost all feeling in my body. The being/creature/monster visibly jerked, and triumph spiked behind my terror. It was a familiar feeling from my surfing days. From being battered and strangled by the wild surf, then caressed and buoyed high moments after. The sea was like an abusive lover, harboring beauty and terror within, including sharp teeth that came up out of no-



where to claim parts of your body as if it was a free buffet.

I was frozen now, due to some mysterious element of the light, and we kept going upward, but a deep-seated scream had already started corkscrewing outward from the center of my intestines, and still it came, brittle and clawing. “GAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!” My mouth couldn’t move, but the sound poured past my lips. It was like a thousand times louder than a rape whistle. And it must have worked, because the next thing I knew, the light was gone, my head was bouncing off the cement floor, and Paula was flopping down on top of me. I thought, “I wonder if Paula’s the one hogging all these machines.” And then I blacked out. Just a little.

Okay, not the end of the world in the traditional sense. But the end in every other sense.

The end of my world. As I knew it. The end of my reality. Of everyone’s reality, I might add. I wasn’t alone in this. When I came to seconds later, I was thinking of the show again. Suddenly, getting kicked off *Sand in your Face* wasn’t the worst thing that had ever happened as it had been moments ago. Correction--voted off. Illegally voted off. No, having Paula blink her already-open eyes, roll off me, then sit up and ask blankly, “What happened?” was worse than getting voted off the TV show I’d been counting on to help me buy my future, my dreams. “Holy shit, did I pass out again?” asked the petite brunette as I helped her to her feet.

The stubs of my missing fingers ached horribly.

“You don’t remember what happened?” I asked.

“What happened?” she said, now with some suspicion. She glanced around the room quickly, then back, as if Hannibal Lecter might step out from behind me.

“You...fainted,” I suggested. It wasn’t exactly a lie.

Paula sighed. “God.” She sounded genuinely weary. “I quit drinking four months ago. WTF?”

Note to self: do laundry somewhere else.

So I have to admit: the world had almost ended for me already once before when the Tiger shark chewed off two of my fingers. I guess this world ending thing, it’s a pattern for me. I’d been surfing with my buddy Rex, just hanging out on our boards in Huntington Beach. Belly down, butt to the sun. There was no warning, no sense of danger, just a tug on my left hand, a very wrong feeling. Something yanked, then hot hot pain in my fingers and hand, an agony beyond understanding. I thought I’d screamed but had barely gasped. Rex only saw what was happening because he turned my way to ask something. He threw himself forward on his board, pounding his hands into the water like shovels, hoarsely screaming, “Shark, Shark!” I’m sure the sight of his sun-bleached head closing in on my sun-bleached head from above was a charming one for the seagulls circling obliviously beneath the clouds. Or maybe they were thinking, “Better her than me.”

I'd never really gotten back on the horse, and I missed the waves. I've always remained near the beach, however. Surfing was one of the few places where I'd felt included, surrounded by like-minded folk. When you were born and raised in Sherman Oaks, California, product of a mixed marriage, being an outsider was nothing new. The Sherman Oaks of my childhood had been a tucked-away suburb in the hills just below Mulholland Drive, laid-back but exclusive at its core. I grew up without wanting for much with my older sister Margarite. She tried to drown me once when we were children but denies it to this day. Margarite had been living a wonderful life for five years, absorbing the endless love of our parents as an only child, until one day I'd burst in on the scene. After the attempted murder, water became my life.

Think *The Brady Bunch*. The episode where they hung out with the ethnic friend. Remember that? No? That's because there was no such episode. We grew up to the polite smiles and invitations of neighbors and friendliness of neighborhood kids, well aware of the invisible wall that stood between them and us, my weird mulatto sister and I. Mom was black, Dad was white. The funny thing is, we looked like a couple of white kids with a nice summer tan (that never went away). But everyone around us knew we weren't. Why did that matter? I don't know. You'd have to ask them. Think *Body Snatchers* with the gaping mouths and the pointing fingers and the horrible screeching. That's why, as soon as she moved away, Margarite started to pass. Today she

had a psychotherapy practice where she catered to anorexic and bulimic girls with whom she had acquired a degree of success. They had affectionately dubbed her “The Eating Monster.”

It might be hard to believe, but my childhood and the Tiger shark and the alien abduction were all inextricably intertwined. Because my childhood alienated me. Because the Tiger shark increased the alienation. And in the next couple of days when the whole tableau would play out again, the familiarity of being outcast, of being alone, was the very thing that kept me from going completely bat-shit crazy.

Before that happened, though, life seemed to return to normal. A few days went by, and the incident began to fade. Lulled into a false sense of security, I began to side with Paula, deciding that I drank too much, too, and I had probably hallucinated everything. Had I been drinking when I was doing my laundry? Was it my habit to down a couple of shots and then douse my bras with Spray ‘n Wash? No. But it sounded good. And it felt good. It felt much better than feeling crazy. My agent, Cola, called. A nickname, as you can imagine, needing no explanation. He was a quiet, unflappable man of indeterminate age (anywhere from forty to seventy). He said he was working on “my situation,” and to call him in a few days. Then he disconnected. And that was all that would be forthcoming from him today. That was just how Cola operated.

I decided to walk to the Korean market which was run by Mexicans and owned by a mysterious third party to clear my head and grab some groceries. Afterward, in the middle of the parking lot, a cone of light shot down from the sky. My heart dropped. My beautiful alcoholic theory evaporated into thin air. These were the moments when I was glad I didn't have kids. Kids that I hadn't raised, at least. "Not again not again not again," I heard my mouth whispering. I traced the light up to where it disappeared into a comically-shaped flying saucer. I say comically because it was almost cartoon-like: a silver disk hovering in the middle of the parking lot, encasing some middle-aged guy in its sheath of light.

He'd been about to get into his car, a shiny yellow Porsche Turbo. His keys tumbled from his fingers. His other hand was gripping a little white furry dog that was paralyzed, too, its eyeballs frozen wide in its little head. I stood staring, mouth agape. I pressed my forgotten bag of groceries to my chest, crushing eggs and mangling bread. Everyone around me continued with their activities, oblivious, as the rigid man was transported through the air toward the waiting machine. I calculated that I still had time to do a Paula on him, although there was no creature to scream at this time. But I didn't move. I just pressed my bag tighter to myself as something occurred to me. I had forgotten to get some coconut. For the margarita I was going to make. Which meant

that I needed tequila too. Because even though I didn't like tequila that much, I was still going to swallow a bunch of it the minute I got home. I turned on my heels and fast-walked back into the market and didn't look back. When I left, I went in a different direction, taking the long way home.

Back in my apartment, I turned lemons into lemonade. The alcoholic theory may not be real, but I could make it real by becoming an alcoholic. As I got progressively drunker, I called everyone I could reach and asked if they were okay. I should have called Margarite on the first drink instead of the fifth. She said, "Of course I'm all right. Are you drunk?"

"But has anything weird happened?" I slurred.

"This phone call is weird. Do you know what time it is? It's only one o'clock!"

I changed the subject, trying to derail her from this line of thought. "Remember when you tried to kill me when we were kids?"

"Oh, Rae, let go of it already! Listen to yourself. You need help!"

I had no comeback, so I yelled, "At least I'm not pretending to be white," and slammed down the phone. My name is actually Raine, but everyone calls me Rae. The minute I hung up, I felt terrible about what I had said. Especially since I have no business accusing my sister of anything, considering what I'd done, years ago, after the shark attack. I'm a much more horrible person than she could ever be, even if she tried.

The hours dragged by as I hunkered down in my living room, wavering between nostalgia and sentimentality and then prolonged drunken terror. I cried and slumped over and fell asleep and woke up with a headache and cried again and shivered with fear. This was me going partially bat-shit crazy. But not completely. At some point I shoved the dresser from my bedroom in front of the door (as if that would do anything) and then when I ordered pizza later had an embarrassing moment of tugging the box through the allotted space and glaring as the pizza guy smirked. The phone rang several times. One call was from Rex, back from Vegas. I didn't answer, because the world had come to an end—a symbolic end, as usual—and I was the only one who knew it. I figured I needed some “me time.” I skipped yoga with my mother. How could I do yoga now? An alien sighting one time was an accident, an anomaly. An alien sighting twice was an invasion. We were being invaded. Americans were being kidnapped in broad daylight. The phone shrilled a few minutes later. Rex again. I wondered why he was being so pushy. But then I realized it was dark outside, many hours later. I was squatting down, gnawing on a piece of cold pizza. Not a good idea to miss the yoga. My back felt plundered, like Vikings had raped and pillaged up and down its length.

I was surrounded by empty glasses, two tequila bottles, other random trash, and several pages of literature I had downloaded

from the computer with instructions on how to become a Big Sister. I sighed, spotting the Big Sister logo, woozily reasoning that now was the time more than ever to pursue this interest since I could, at least part of the time, protect her from the creatures. Roller skating, the movies, a little aikido. Work our way up to cage fighting. She would thank me later. My TV glowed against the wall, muted. I focused on the picture, realizing a moment later that the credits for *Muscle Midlife* were flashing across the screen. Wait a minute—how long had I been in the apartment? *Midlife* only came on once a week, on Mondays. Hours hadn't gone by. It had been days! The minute Ricardo's face appeared, my gorge rose. Then Dante's face popped on screen, his hands dancing and dreadlocks flying as he made some dramatic point in sign language. My gorge dropped back down. You had to give it to the guy: sweet, sexy, deaf, Jamaican Dante. The first hearing-impaired "actor" to be on a reality TV series in a sustained "role."

When someone knocked on the door, I bounced to my feet and stood still for twenty full seconds without moving. I don't know what I was doing. Listening for something? The sound of hovering engines? Another knock. I lurched forward and staggered across the room. I climbed on top of the dresser and peered through the peephole, hoping it was Rex. Rex was one of the only "friends" who hadn't deserted me after my ignoble denouement. But no, it was Dante. Weird. What were the odds? I vaguely remember mentioning my new address to him over the phone one night. I unlatched the door and yanked it open. It slammed into the



dresser and stopped, and we stared at one another through the half-foot gap. Dante didn't lose a beat and flashed his sexy grin at me. "Trouble with the ex?" he signed as I tugged the dresser away from the door. Except that he hadn't signed, he'd spoken. Or someone had spoken. Someone with a deep male voice and a deep male laugh that followed. I straightened up from the dresser and looked past Dante into the hallway to see who was there. But no one else was there. Dante gestured to the tiny space I had created.

"Can I come in?" he asked in a deep male voice. He waited the many, many, many seconds that slowly ticked by until I said, "Sure," then he shoved the dresser back and immediately slipped inside, sideways, like a shadow.

Dante strode straight to the sofa, shoved aside the newspaper and pizza boxes, and dropped down onto the maroon pleather surface. I closed the door slowly and turned around. I hoisted myself up onto the dresser and sat there swinging my legs, staring across the living room at him. I was wearing short-shorts and a tank top because, even though it was the middle of February, it was L.A., so it was 80 degrees outside. So I swung my legs and stared at Dante, a slow grin peeling back my lips, and Dante sat on my sofa and stared at my legs for a while. Nothing new. He hadn't changed.

"Did you miss me?" he smiled. He glanced at the TV and saw that *Muscle Midlife* was playing, made a moue, and cocked his

head. I waved my hand dismissively.

“I’m not watching. Believe me. It just came on, by accident. I didn’t even know it was Monday. I’ve been in here for three days straight. I lost track of time.” I was still slurring slightly.

A normal person would have been surprised by what I’d just said, possibly expressed concern. Dante just sat there, regarding me with what seemed like amusement.

“Keep talking,” I said, grinning. “Keep talking, you son of a bitch.” It was like being in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, the hallway scene with Nicholson and giant Chief and the chewing gum. Or even more shocking, that scene from *The Crying Game*. “Oh, my God, you son of a bitch.” I couldn’t stop grinning. Dante grinned back and shrugged.

“Wanna call me a son of a bitch one more time?”

“Yeah. You son of a bitch.” I jumped off the dresser. “You lying, cheating son of a bitch.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He glanced down at his wrist at his very expensive watch. “Tip of the iceberg, darlin’. Just the tip.”

I enjoyed hearing his voice. I enjoyed hearing myself laugh. I enjoyed not thinking of the secret invasion of the earth. I had been experiencing an unreasoning anger toward Whitley Strieber lately as he transformed before my eyes from fiction writer into autobiographer. Well, fiction for me, anyhow. How dare he be telling the truth! But right now, I savored the lack of anger. I

stepped toward Dante, swaying slightly.

Dante settled back into the sofa, entirely relaxed. He patted the empty space beside him.

“Rae, come here. Sit.”

Something in his voice compelled me to do so, so I did

“I can’t believe you can talk. I can’t believe you’re not deaf,” I murmured in drunken wonder.

“You have no idea,” he murmured back. He raised his hand, studied his nails.

“Andrygen spoke kindly of you the other day,” he said in that odd, formal way he had of speaking now and then. “And Moeyner misses you.”

If I had been drinking something, I would have sprayed the coffee table with it. Moeyner missed me? Moeyner was the Krumping Champion of East Los Angeles, 1999, named from a combination of Moesha and Jackie Joyner. She was forever rolling her eyes at me whenever I mentioned my ethnicity, so I never brought it up anymore. We got along better when she was teaching me the finer points of Krumping.

Andrygen, the pet psychiatrist whose name still irritated me to no end, had no choice but to be kind. She was the savior of all animals on the earth...and beyond. Her kids, the moons of Jupiter, were Io, Callisto, Ganymede, and Europa. I was very fond of Ganymede, however, her 11-year-old son. He’d confided in me that his mother had treated his husky Ralph for “depres-

sion” and caused a psychotic break instead. Now Ralph had to wear a muzzle and have infusions of Problem Pet Solution in all his food. Even the ThunderShirt didn’t help anymore.

“You know Ricardo got them to kick me off because of my missing fingers, right?”

Something to do with my energy being bad, otherwise why would the shark have stolen part of my body? Nature was responding to my lack of balance. My chakras were out of order. Dante smiled sympathetically, acknowledging the injustice. I hadn’t mourned my deserted journalism degree in years, but tonight I felt its absence keenly. What had I been thinking, dropping out of school? I watched as Dante absently picked up one of my Big Sister flyers, scanned it, smirked, and tossed it aside.

“I know what happened to you, Rae.”

I started. “You do?” How did he know I’d dropped out of school?

He reached out and patted my thigh. My skin tingled beneath his touch.

“Let’s cut to the chase.”

“What chase?”

“They’re interdimensional beings known more popularly as the Grays. They’ve discovered a way to appear in public, in daylight, unseen, wherever and whenever they like, to continue the experimentation that has been going on for decades. But of course, some can still see them.”

He leveled his gaze at me.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered, “You’ve seen them? I’m not crazy.”

His face was grim. “I’ve seen them for hundreds of years, sweetheart. They’re getting stronger. Humans are a means to an end in their search for eternal life. Their search for the soul.”

Hundreds of years? I squinted, distracted. Humans? Then as he continued I thought: maybe I should have married an entertainment lawyer when I got out of UCLA, like Margarite had, and settled down in Brentwood, OJ’s old stomping grounds, like Margarite had. Because if I had done these things, I probably wouldn’t be here, now, with Dante saying, “I know this because I’m a vampire. Our kind was here long before theirs, and we need soldiers to join us in the war against the beings that would destroy you all.”

I smiled slightly. One corner. I wasn’t quite well known enough for *Punk’d*. But I had to consciously stop myself from searching for the cameras. Slowly I held my hands up, two rigid stop signs. What if all of this was part of a giant prank, both abductions, Paula and the man and the little white dog? No. No. That little dog had been frozen. You couldn’t train a dog to do something like that. Hope, momentarily strong, stumbled without warning. It rolled backwards, downhill, and disappeared out of sight behind fear and loathing.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Dante suggested. “We only

borrow your blood for sustenance. We don't destroy. We preserve."

That hadn't been what I was thinking.

I stood up stiffly, my head abruptly clear.

"Stop shitting me."

"I'm not shitting, you, Rae. I would never shit you."

I spelled "Really?" as sarcastically as I could in sign language.

Dante stood up now, too, smiling benignly. Or so it seemed.

"I've been alive for 500 years, Raine. The show, the act..." he signed the rest quickly and I picked up a few stray words: something about boredom and hobbies.

"A few drops of blood you can live without. Your soul you cannot live without. Not many can see them, as you can, but you can still be controlled. If you become like me, they will not be able to control you, because it's the soul, the spark, that is your weakness. Without that, they have nothing."

A week ago, loony bin time. Dialing 911 as innocuously as possible, then visiting Dante every other Wednesday at "the center." Bringing him brownies and board games to stimulate the mind, maybe some calming music mixes. But now, a week later, recalling the vicious look that thing had given me as it stole Paula up into the sky...all I could think about was him, he who was lost in the world somewhere, he who I would do anything to protect, regardless that I didn't even know him: at least this way I could ease my guilt a fraction, feel like I had an ounce of control. Oh, and ooh...cherry on top.

I could screw with Ricardo in ways never before imagined.

“Wait a minute. You’re saying the one thing that makes me human, makes me alive, is my soul, but you want me to give it up. That’s not very convincing, Dante.”

Even as I argued with him, my heart and possibly soon-to-be lost soul were fixated on the idea of me holding Richard aloft by the throat and observing the un-yoga-like look on his face as I whispered, “*Namaste, motherfucker.*”

Dante approached me, cat-like. “I meant the royal you. Not you specifically.” He lowered his mouth toward mine. Oh. We were going that way first? Abruptly his face took a sharp detour to the left, toward my neck, and he whispered in my ear, “And Rae...don’t bother fucking with Ricardo. He’s not worth it.”

The last thing I uttered as a human being was, “You know, he’s not even really Hispanic.” I hated the reproach I heard in my own voice. I hoped dying would make me a stronger person.

I think L.A. is one of the best places, besides Transylvania, probably, to undertake the life-changing experience of becoming undead. I figure in Transylvania a person’s cultural heritage would be a plus: you’re already in the know about what’s going to happen. Same with L.A., our heritage coming from the movies and TV. There’s an old joke: what’s the difference between L.A. and yogurt? Yogurt has culture. But in this case, the media environment worked to my advantage. I was expecting to pass

out. I was expecting to wake up later with molasses in my veins. Dante had laid me out on the sofa. I sat up, mouth dry and head pounding, with my usual regret. Then I saw the sun poking through the slats of my blinds. It was morning! I raised my arms and looked at myself. Nothing looked different. Shouldn't I be somewhere more protective than on my living room sofa? Everything seemed so normal, so lacking in drama, that it took a few moments of experimenting with my blinds to discover that while the sun didn't cause me to burst into flames, it was undeniably...uncomfortable.

I changed into a sundress, thinking even heat distribution. Mistake. Doubled back immediately from the garage to grab supplies. I then undertook a harrowing drive to Culver City where I slowly baked, swathed in a scratchy blanket, baseball cap, and smothered in 30 SPF sun block. It seemed as good a time as any to surprise Cola. Disoriented from the drive and the sun, I stood outside the glass doors listing on the sidewalk until Nora the security guard came out, took me by my arm, and led me inside, saying, "Are you all right? Come in, let me get you some water." I wasn't even thinking of the whole inviting in thing. Still gripping the cup of water as I rode the elevator up, I strode past Irene, Cola's thousand-year-old secretary, and half-stormed, half-staggered into his office, ready to glamour him, *True Blood* style, into creating my overnight superstardom. If I was going to fight the good fight and battle to save mankind, I might as well



be rich while I did it. Sandra tottered in behind me saying, “Mr. Georgiou--” but Cola only raised his hand quietly, like he was making a bid at an auction. The door clicked shut quietly behind me. I stood in the darkened office, still dissipating heat and panting, while my agent sat at his desk quietly. There was an air of anticipation, almost as if he had been expecting me.

“Have you seen Twitter? Have you read the blogs? Have you been to your website?” He said quietly. His jet black hair was immaculately parted to one side, as usual, his muted Caraceni suit ridiculously form-fitting. “The fans are rabid. They all want you back. I have a conference call with the network in twenty.”

“Cola,” I started, “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me...” He had, after all, saved me. During the long dry spell following my modeling days and *Green Splendor* I and II, the lingering death knoll that usually precedes either a nine-to-five or prostitution, Cola had swept me out of the clutches of ruin. And I was thankful. But I had to exert some control; I could not always be the one the shark went after.

“But something happened--” I continued.

“I know.” Cola stood up, his face unreadable. I stopped, my mouth still open.

“Y-you know? Know what?”

And then I noticed that Cola had fangs.

He stood there looking at me with his fangs hanging out for several seconds. Hours. Centuries. Then they retracted back into

his mouth. He slowly slid his hands into his pockets. I gazed around the office, noticing for the first time how dark it was in here. The windows were covered by steel shutters. I stumbled forward a few more steps, my knees weak, and braced myself against the front of Cola's desk with one hand. I was still gripping my cup in the other. Some water sloshed out onto the muted salmon Savonnerie carpet. Cola materialized by my side. He gripped me by the elbow the way men used to do when ladies were about to swoon or start a scene.

"Sorry I had to do that," he murmured. "I just didn't think I should let you...continue."

I cleared my throat nervously. "I wasn't--"

He shrugged slightly. "It's okay. No harm done."

I stared at him. He stared back, unwavering. His hand was cold.

"How long have you--"

"Hundreds of years." He tried to move me. I had trouble letting go of his desk. He pried my fingers off gently, one by one.

I swallowed. "Did you know--"

Cola sighed. "Dante..." He closed his eyes for a moment. Then, "What's done is done. Now everything changes. You actually don't even need the show anymore. You can have your own show. You can have your own movies. You'll be a star." He inched me around in a tiny U-turn. My knees were shaking and I was hyperventilating slightly. I had come here prepared to use force, and Cola was already five steps ahead of me. My agent

was a vampire. *I was a vampire.*

“How did you know--”

He looked amused. “Rae,” he chuckled but said nothing further. He guided me across the room to the vegetable-tanned calf skin leather sofa. I swayed. He lowered me down to the soft surface then plucked the cup out of my hand. “It’s going to be okay, Rae. Don’t worry.”

It occurred to me that I couldn’t recall ever having seen Cola in the light of day except for maybe a handful of times. But this had never struck me as unusual, because at least half the people I knew didn’t go outside until the day was mostly over.

“Can I...sleep on your sofa till sunset?” I asked timidly, thrilled that he wasn’t going to dump me as a client. Or slaughter me. I don’t know. In some kind of vampiric territorial frenzy. “It’s really hot outside.”

He brushed a strand of hair off my face in a very un-Cola like fashion that freaked me out a little. Because I was a vampire now? Because I was an undead sister?

He didn’t answer me. Again. But I guess not saying no sort of maybe meant yes.

My cell was ringing. I woke on Cola’s sofa. He had placed a thin cotton covering over me. The familiar gigantic painting of Denzel Washington in some action movie spread over most of one wall while the beautiful mural of the Mediterranean Sea and surrounding hills that I had always loved covered the other.

That was probably where Cola was from. I glanced around. He was nowhere in sight. The steel shutters had been lifted from the windows and I could see the gray-black sky outside.

I stretched, refreshed. It definitely had been a much-needed two sofa kind of day.

Rex was on the phone. We decided on a movie and dinner. In West Hollywood, I made the excruciatingly awkward left turn from Sunset and drove past the Chateau Marmont where various tragedies and dramas were always playing out. Rex lived in the hills above it. We had met at UCLA where I was studying journalism and he was studying engineering. Just one of those things, standing in line at the Student Store. After he realized he'd seen me in the Op Pro Surfing competition a year earlier (I hadn't placed; but I'd done pretty well) we became best buds. We attended every surf competition that time and money would allow and watched the rest on TV. I had been boning up for another Op Pro when the Tiger shark made its appearance, bringing an end to my surfing days. Rex dropped out of UCLA the first time he won a million dollar purse at the World Poker Championships. I dropped out of UCLA when I landed my first *Green Splendor* movie. For some reason, although there had always been sexual tension between us, we never got together. Well, except that one time.

Rex threw the door open wide, grinning at me. Still tall and

lanky, as always, he emitted an indolent, sinewy sensuality. His lucky black fedora sat on the back of his head. Conveniently, he uttered the magic words, “Come on in, shark bait,” and I crossed over the threshold without incident. “Back in a sec,” he called, disappearing around a corner. I looked around the foyer and over at the living room. It was so sparsely decorated it felt like Rex was still moving in. He just wasn’t into buying stuff. He had paid off his parents’ house years ago. He was an only child, so there were no siblings to provide for. But he had set up some trust funds for several of his cousins’ kids. He had been married and divorced three times, each one annulled. He used to say he had bad luck with women. I knew it was about the money and not being able to trust anyone. I could have moved in here instead of the ratty alien abduction center. But I’d asked Rex for enough favors over the years and I just didn’t feel like I could ask him again. He’d been furious, though, after I lost my condo, that I hadn’t come to him for help. Only a good friend can get that mad at you.

I was nosily perusing the refrigerator when Rex appeared in the doorway with a light jacket on. “Wanna skip the movie and just get blasted? The Marmot has a good steak. You should eat something. You’re a lightweight.”

I stared at him. I sniffed the air. I gazed around the kitchen. He was baking cookies? Why hadn’t he told me? Something smelled so good! Was that a pot roast? Mmm! I bent to peer into the oven, but it wasn’t on.

“What’s going on now?”

“Huh?” I straightened up.

“What are you doing?”

I looked around in confusion. Where was that delicious odor coming from? I locked in on Rex. “Wow, you smell great! What is that, Drakkor Noir?”

“Drakkor Noir?” he said, amazed. “Are you high?”

I pivoted around and closed the refrigerator door and stood with my back to Rex for a minute. The light bulb went on in my head. I swallowed. My mouth felt crispy. Oh, yeah. That. I was smelling *that*...

I revolved slowly back around, looked anywhere but at Rex. I think the stress of not being able to talk about what I really wanted to talk about, the aliens and Dante and now *Rex’s blood* and my agent and *Rex’s blood* and my soul—or lack of one—and *Rex’s bloody blood* made me do something I thought I’d never do.

I said, “I want to tell you something.”

Rex leaned against the door jamb. “What?”

It had been on my mind lately, especially with all the end of the world stuff. The secret. The fact that my days have always started out the same way and have done so since I was twenty years old. I woke up, I remembered, and my heart squeezed hard with regret. It was just for a moment, but it was every day, an automatic thing that I couldn’t control, like breathing. Wake up, remember, regret. Only my parents and Margarite knew. Wake up,

remember, regret. So now I said to Rex, “Remember when I was twenty and I moved to Indiana for a while to live with my aunt because I was on academic probation at UCLA and my parents wanted me to ‘get my head straight’? Well, I wasn’t on academic probation, and I wasn’t in Indiana. I was here. I was pregnant and gave the baby away for adoption.” It had to be the stress. This past week had been crazy-nutty, and something had to give.

Rex had a cigarette in his mouth and was searching his pockets for a lighter. I watched as his hands kept patting the pockets for a few seconds, then stopped. Then he reached up and removed the unlit cigarette from his mouth, looked at it for a moment, then stuck it behind his ear, under his hat. Then he stuck his hands in his pockets and leveled his gaze at me. And then I realized what he must be thinking and I opened my mouth. He beat me to it: “We have a kid?”

“No, I--”

“We don’t have a kid?”

“We only did it one time.”

“Isn’t that all it takes?”

“It wasn’t you.”

He inhaled, blew it out. He dropped his head forward. He looked up.

“Come here,” he said. He held out one arm. Suddenly I was furious.

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” I was seething. “You think I

would--” I stopped. I couldn’t even finish the sentence. Rex lowered his arm, considering. He shook his head.

“Sorry. You caught me off guard.” Still, I didn’t move. He walked toward me. “I’m sorry,” he said again. The cookie/pot roast/warm chocolate smell increased the closer he got. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. He pulled me against him and wrapped both arms around me while saliva flooded my mouth. I didn’t know I was crying until I felt him rubbing my back and saying, “Shh, shh, shh.” My nose pressed into his collar bone. His arms were lean and strong.

He whispered, “For the record, you’re the one I should have married.”

We were walking up the hill from the Marmont back to Rex’s house. I had consumed so much alcohol Rex was flabbergasted that I was still vertical. My undeadocity obviously spelled a sad end to drunkenness. But I was happy. It felt like a burden of a thousand dense stars had been lifted off my back. I had never told Rex my secret out of pure shame, but all my suffering was self-inflicted. Rex had never judged me before. I should have told him a long time ago. How the shark, a monster coming out of nowhere, the stuff of nightmares, trying to eat me, trying to end me, had filled me with a reckless abandon borne of terror. It was almost a kind of survivor’s guilt, a crafty side-stepping of death that had me thinking my days were numbered anyway as death continued to stalk me. Of course, it stalked us all, but I’d imagined



it was on my heels, right there, poised to strike. I'd engaged in the whole nine yards—drinking, drugs, waking up in my car or people's homes with no memory of how I'd gotten there. If *Final Destination* had been made back then, I probably would have had a nervous breakdown. Okay. More of a nervous breakdown. It all came to an end with the baby. My parents let me decide what to do. So I carried him, I pushed him out, I held him once, and then I never saw him again. It was the best decision I have ever made. It was the worst decision I have ever made. And my every morning began the same and, I assumed, always would, until my mind ceased to function: Wake up. Remember. Regret.

And now Rex was holding my hand and it seemed like something was happening. It felt like a friendship hand-holding, except now and then his thumb caressed my palm, and even the baking cookie smell disappeared, replaced by that smoldering energy particular to long-buried sexual tension. Rex said, "Rae--" and as I turned, the cone of light shot down from the black sky, encasing both of us. He stopped. Everything. Talking, walking. His hand dropped from mine. He was smoking a cigarette. It toppled to the cement. I was unaffected. I stepped back as Rex began to rise. Oh, no. This was the wrong night. Oh, no, no, no. This was the wrong wrong wrong night.

Casually I reached up, hooking one hand around Rex's ascending ankle. After a few minutes of tug of war with the beam

of light, a being appeared in the air. It saw Rex. Then it saw me. It focused its glaring insectoid-eyes on me, but to no avail. I did not freeze, I did not let go of Rex. Instead, I smiled. Slowly. When it saw this, it tried to disappear. I didn't let it. It started to screech. I didn't let it. My vampiric voice emerged, producing a sustained note of havoc. It tried to fight. I didn't let it. It tried to keep living. I didn't let it. I vibrated, superhuman, monstrous, no feeling, no thought. I sank my hands into it as if it were made of water, or sand. I felt my sundress fluttering around my thighs as I unleashed pernicious violence upon it. Within seconds, I had reduced it to a purplish, brackish pulp. I had reduced it to its origins, its mysterious beginnings. Sated, I stopped. I stood panting in the street, white-knuckled and burning hot. Before me, the remains liquefied and disappeared.

The light had gone and Rex was on the sidewalk on his back. He rolled over to his stomach, craning his head toward me. He looked at me for a few seconds like he didn't know who I was. Which was correct. I was kidding myself thinking we had a chance. All that had changed now, hadn't it? As Rex pulled himself slowly to his feet I said, "Watch that first step...it's a doozy."

"God," he said. He was not amused. "Jesus. I guess." Bewildered, he bent forward and dusted his jeans off. We continued back toward his house, now strangely quiet. Whatever Rex had been about to say earlier was gone, forgotten. We parted ways in his front yard, even though we spontaneously started

grappling for ten minutes first on his tiny patch of front lawn. I knew he wanted me to come in, but I absolutely could not. God damn Rex and his crappy timing. As I was heading toward my car I said, “Everyone that I love and that loves me...ends up dead,” quoting some movie.

“I can think of worse things,” he answered without hesitation.

I’m not sure if it was all the close-contact wrestling with Rex or the bloodlust, but my passions were aflame and I decided to go tear Ricardo a new one. This idea was quickly thwarted when it dawned on me, once again, that I couldn’t just walk in wherever I wanted anymore. It was three in the morning as I lurked outside the Muscle Beach house.

The house was tucked away two short blocks from the beach on a stretch with a lot of other aging hippy-like abodes. Cayman, the champion bull rider from Wyoming, was trying to talk Kairi and Moeyner into a threesome. I could hear their voices through the walls and sensed that Kairi was into it. The crew was set up, filming the seduction. Ricardo and Andrygen were in their respective bedrooms, sleeping alone, Ricardo snoring like Bigfoot. I didn’t sense Dante at all.

I loitered outside, nimbly avoiding miscellaneous members of the crew as they wandered around smoking, checking equipment, and making phone calls. I had just worked up the nerve to approach one of them and get him to invite me in when I felt

a whoosh of air, my arm was almost jerked from my socket, and suddenly I was two hundred feet away, standing in the neighbor's yard under a blossoming bougainvillea. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to see Dante and his white teeth flashing at me in the dark.

I slapped a hand over my chest.

“Jesus!”

He laughed. “You are such a drama queen.”

I smiled tensely. “You know, since we're here, I have a bone to pick...”

Dante eyed me coolly, still smirking.

“Um...I just tore a Gray apart with my bare hands.” I looked up at the sky. “It felt good, but...” I paused, searching for the right words. “But, um...when is the big meeting going to be? You know. We all get together, map out the plan. ‘Cause...” I looked down at my hands. My stubs no longer throbbed and ached, since the change.

“One by one...here and there. Now and then...” I looked up and shrugged. “Ain't gonna cut it. So...what's the plan?”

“There is no plan,” said another voice, behind me. I whirled around. It was Cola. He materialized out of the darkness, intently fixed on Dante. “Is there, Big D?”

Dante's grin expanded. He placed a hand over his heart, as I had moments ago, but sarcastically, feigning emotion. “Georgiou. So good to see you. Where you been?”

Cola stood beside me, not a hair out of place, and placed his

fingers lightly on my arm. Our eyes locked. He didn't have to say anything. I got it. I had been right to begin with.

I had been punked.

"Hey, what do you want?" said Dante, "I've always liked her and always wanted to taste her."

"Ever heard of restraint?" asked Cola. "I know it's not your style, but..."

"Oh, mon," Dante laughed, "Don't saddle me with that crap, just because you wanted--"

Cola snarled. He actually snarled. Dante stopped talking. But he was still grinning.

"What one wants," said Cola menacingly, "isn't necessarily what one always gets."

"Speak for yourself," said the other. I had no idea what they were talking about and

wasn't sure that I wanted to know, either. Dante turned to me.

"Listen, sweetheart, there is no vampire army. Aliens will come and aliens will go. And there are other beings. There always have been. What are you complaining about? You'll never get old now. You'll never die. You'll become insanely rich." He addressed Cola, as if trying to prove a point. "Tell me I'm wrong. And on top of everything, you don't have to take any shit from anybody. Least of all them. They can't control you. Your will is your own."

"But I've lost my soul."

Cola gripped my arm. His suit tightened along his arm, over his biceps. Hmm. What kind of undead body was under that suit

that I had never noticed before? Did you still have to do sit-ups when you were no longer alive, or were you frozen wherever time had left you? What had Cola been doing, maneuvers with the Roman army, hoisting a heavy sword night and day? Loading bag after bag of grain onto wagons under the hot sun? While I drooled a little, preoccupied, Cola said, “Tell her.”

Dante crossed his arms and remained silent.

“There’s still time for undoing. If she’s balked at her decision. There’s still time.”

Abruptly Cola cocked his head, listening. His steely fingers released my arm and he backed away. “Please excuse me. I have to go. But Dante...tell her. It’s her right.”

We locked eyeballs again, and something glimmered deep down in there. I don’t know what it was, but it made my heart hiccup and my brain tilt. What was going on here?

And then Cola was gone. I stared at the spot where he used to be, my entrails yearning after him. He was hundreds of years old and probably had lots of other things on his mind, but he had taken the time out to face down Dante. I appreciated it, but it also made me wonder why.

“Listen, sweetheart, I told you not to come here and dick around with Ricardo. I told you he wasn’t worth it.”

“Don’t change the subject. What’s the undoing?”

“Ahh...” He waved his hand and rolled his eyes. “You still have a fortnight before your soul is completely gone. If you think you’ve made the wrong decision, we can change you back. Well,

we can try. Sometimes the process is fatal.”

The bougainvillea seemed to glow in the moonlight as I processed the information. What was a fortnight again? Surreptitiously, I did some mental math.

“But anyway,” Dante continued, “what do you need your soul for? There’s nothing beyond this wretched earth.” He turned and spat. He seemed fairly pissed.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” I yelled. “We died, Dante, but now we’re here, having a conversation. I’d say that’s something ‘beyond’ the world. Beyond life. Beyond death!” The next thing I knew, Dante was in front of me. I hadn’t even seen him move. I guess that’s how the Gray had felt. I was still amazed at how much the movies had gotten right. Dante’s depthless eyes fastened on mine and he placed his forefinger beneath my chin. “I’ve always liked you,” he whispered. “Just remember...I’m your maker.”

“Meaning?” I pressed him. What did that mean exactly? That I was beholden to him? I was pressing the empty air, however. Like Cola, Dante was gone. I noticed how he had done a slip n’ slide past the elephant in the room which was my possible “undoing” and going back to being human. I hadn’t pressed it because, although I was feeling a little down, I wasn’t really sure it had been a wrong decision. Out of the night, echoing on the wind, came Dante’s voice: “You are mine, and you are one of us. You have sacrificed day for night. The long, eternal night...”

Back in Glendale, I slumped onto my sofa, dispirited and blue. I understood the nature of vampires and the fact that if Asshole medals existed, vampires would win, hands down, every time. Out of boredom and too much time on their hands and a delusional sense of superiority. I was still bummed that Dante had played me, but I couldn't really blame him. He had given me the choice, and I had taken it. Regardless of the futility, I unscrewed a new bottle of Jack and tilted my head back. The last thing I expected was the room to be suffused with a light so white and stunning that I thought for a millisecond someone had "pushed the button." The kid, I thought, the kid. Oh, God, let him be in San Francisco. I lowered the bottle, blinking rapidly, and tried to see what was happening.

"LOOK NOT UPON ME," a voice boomed directly in front of me from the center of the light.

"Ah!" I slapped my hand over my ears. "Whoa, whoa, whoa--"

"Your time draws short to partake of the Elixir and join the Fairie folk in the battle against the Soul Seekers."

"What--"

"A fortnight sees the end of your soul for good. You must partake now, before that is so. You are only of use with it. We cannot bring you back from the undead, but you will exist in a space between death and life."

"Excuse me—what?" I squinted, trying to see in the light.

"LOOK NOT UPON ME."



I grabbed my ears again. “I can’t see anything! Stop screaming. Someone will call the cops.”

“Do you accept our proposal?”

“Proposal? What proposal?” I felt like Kurt Russell in *Big Trouble in Little China*. One minute you’re minding your own business, and the next you’re getting pulled layer upon layer deeper into weirdness manufactured out of more weirdness.

“What Elixir? How do I know it’s not poison? Maybe your job is to kill vampires. And what Soul Suckers--”

A sigh. “Soul Seekers.”

“...are you talking about? The Grays or the vampires? The vampires said they were here before the Grays. What about you?”

“Fairie folk precede all beings, even humans. We oppose the Night Beings but have formed a temporary truce. The Soul Seekers, a blasphemy to the universe, must be stopped.”

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes. I was exhausted. And *hungry...*

“The hour grows short. You must decide. Do you accept? Will you partake of the Elixir? We are not here to harm you. You can see them. Even at the moment of your possible death, your concern is for others. We need your kind.”

After a few seconds I realized the being must be talking about the kid. I’d thought of the kid while assuming the Fairie light was nuclear Armageddon. Evidently that counted for something, even though I had just sort of handed him off like a baton to the next

runner in a relay race. For a moment, the Fairie had appeased my guilt greatly. I was not used to that feeling. One point for the Fairie corner.

“Listen, I’ve already been bamboozled by someone I thought was a friend. I’m not up for more bullshit. Besides, I still have time. A fortnight is two weeks,” I said firmly. I’d remembered this abruptly in the midst of lane changing on the I-5, headed back from the coast.

Silence. Then...

“We have battled the Night Beings. We are battling the Soul Seekers. None of these creatures harbor good intentions for the human race. Fairie folk are the only ones who have coexisted in peace with your kind for eons.” Pause. “We would work at obtaining that peace once again, one day.”

I stopped trying to plumb the depths of the glimmering light and leaned back with my arms crossed. I nibbled at my lower lip, drawing blood. Surprise! My fangs had finally appeared. I wanted to jump up and call Cola immediately. I knew he would have some positive feedback. But now I might undergo yet another transformation and be distanced from Cola forever. We might even become enemies. Instead of scoring me my own movie franchise, he might have to tear my head off and fling my body into the center of an active volcano. I shook my head, banishing the image. Never happen, I told myself. That would never, never happen.

“What *is* a Fairie?” I asked. “Will I enjoy killing? Will blood still smell like cookies in the oven?”

Silence.

Maybe there was some confusion as to what cookies were. Or an oven.

I glanced sideways at the light. I was careful to not look upon it.

“The Fairie abhor all violence. We will do our battle as we must. But we are made of love. We are made of stars. We are made to be together.”

The truth is, when I was slaughtering that Gray, reality had tunnel visioned down into one desire only: to disassemble it atom by atom—if it had any. The rage had emanated outward with the weight of eons behind it. Even Sherman Oaks, fruitless auditions, road rage and betrayal had been in there somewhere. Not a good thing. On top of that, loyal as I was, Rex’s blood had smelled like cotton candy on a roller coaster on the most beautiful spring day in the world. And vampire status didn’t do much for the outsider factor. I had never felt more alone in my life. This was much, much worse than Sherman Oaks. Who wouldn’t want to be made of love and stars and fudge and hugs? It sounded like something Barney would say, but I liked it. Maybe this town wasn’t really worth it, but the world was worth fighting for. Especially when there were people in it—beings—whom you loved. I should have learned it from the shark instead of running away. I should have

surrendered. I should have floated skyward, straining toward the sun with my eight remaining fingers. This time I had died, and all fear was gone. Dante had already lied to me. What were the odds I was being lied to again? I'd done enough betting with Rex to figure low. I would do it. For my family. For my kid. For Cola. For Rex.

I held my hand out for the Elixir.

Bring it on.

# FIRES

Eric Boyd

After nine months and three appearances in front of my judge, I was finally going to be approved for early parole. We had argued over the idea of an illegal sentence all that time, and finally people were listening.

I was sitting in the crowded bullpen of the courthouse. Everyone was waiting for their hearings, talking nervously and trying to stay calm. I didn't talk to anyone; I was still tired from getting up at 5am. I brought a book with me, *And the Hippos Were Boiled In Their Tanks* by Kerouac and Burroughs. That would make a great movie, I thought. They'd probably never show it at my theater, though. I'd have to see it somewhere else.

Every half hour or so my lawyer, Hank, would come down and visit me, giving me updates on what he thought was going to happen. I sat and waited for him to give me the next update.

"Yo," a man lying near the far corner of the bullpen said, in my direction. I was sitting on the bench, in the near corner, next to the door. Nobody else said anything; the man was looking at me.

"Me?" I asked.

"Yeh. My name's Donald. Who keeps comin' down for you? That your lawyer?"

“Yeah. Henry Choveler.”

“I never heard of him. He good?”

“Hell yeah he’s good!” Someone else said. “I got him right now. We’re finishin’ up a case today. I’m gonna beat it thanks to Choveler, I already know it.”

The man adjusted his suit, “Hey, what judge do you got?” he asked me.

“I got Judge Grangos.”

“No shit? Gillian Grangos? Ole’ ‘GG’ Me too! We’re both goin’ home today!”

“Well, I hope so.”

“Wait...” the man said. “Are you Anderson?”

“Fredrick, yeah. That’s me. Why?”

“I think your lawyer, Choveler, told me about your case, man.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah! You’re goin’ home for sure. Your case is fucked up, dude. What was it? Some chick OD’ed and you tried to save her life or some shit?”

“I put her in a bathtub, but I didn’t know whether to use hot water or cold, so I went back and forth and did both. I ended up burning the girl with the hot water. I didn’t really know what I was doing.”

Everybody in the bullpen went silent. Suddenly, almost at once, they broke out into wild laughter.

“Yeahaha!” the man laughed. “Choveler told me. You’re goin’

home, dude. Don't even worry. How the fuck was you supposed to know what to do? Your case is dumb as hell."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Man, shut up!" Donald, the guy who started talking to me first said. "Everybody knows the only reason your ass ain't in the chair right now is because your momma set the courthouse on fire yesterday! If they didn't catch her yet, she'll be up on level four soon."

"Fuck you! Don't be sayin' that shit so loud."

The people in the bullpen stopped focusing on me and began to remember they all had cases coming up as well; everyone became pensive again. Only Donald and I talked.

"So your lawyer..." Donald said.

"I met him in the jail," I said. "He got a few days for contempt of court. He told a judge they were full of shit."

"For real? So he's a fighter, he like, fights for you?" Donald asked, nervous.

"Yeah. Choveler's alright," I said, finishing a page of the book. "As long as he doesn't do that with my damn judge."

Donald snickered. "Yeah. Well shit, man," he said. "I might have to go with him. My guy, shit, he's terrible. He tells me I might be able to swing ten years upstate if I'm lucky? Swing ten years? This ain't no fuckin' merry-go-round! Man, they don't got shit on me! I ain't swingin' NOTHING! Can't nothing proved I shot that cop! I need a new lawyer!"

"Hey!" A guard shouted into the bullpen. "Pipe down in

there. You wanna see your judge today or not?”

“Yes sir,” Donald said very quietly. “Next time your man comes down here,” he whispered to me, “you ask him to see me?”

“I’ll try, buddy.” I said.

“Thanks. For real, man. Thank you.”

“Right.”

I continued reading, waiting for Hank. The clock in the bullpen didn’t work, but I was pretty sure it was past noon. The guards left for lunch, only one staying back to watch us. Lunch would probably be about ninety minutes, so the other people waiting for court took naps. I couldn’t sleep, even though I had been up for almost eight hours. I could never sleep in shackles. Those damn things never fit me, especially the leg shackles, which cut into my ankles and left marks for days. A week after wearing leg shackles I would still catch myself walking in short, quick steps, like I was trying to keep up with the rest of the chained herd.

After the guards returned from lunch, a few people were called for court, came back, or didn’t, and the bullpen began to empty. It was a Friday. Courts never see any big cases on Fridays, because one day isn’t long enough to pick a jury or reach a verdict for a new case. People only go home or back to jail on Fridays. Motions are accepted or denied. No trials.

“Anderson,” a guard said, unlocking the gate.

“Yes, that’s me,” I said, standing up.



“I know who you are; you’ve seen that lawyer five times now. Com’on.”

I placed my book on the bench to save my seat.

“No no no, go ahead and grab the book, I’ll take it,” the guard said. “You’re going up to the court this time.”

“Oh. Alright.”

I gave the guard my book, and he placed it on a shelf on the wall next to his desk.

“Where’s my lawyer?” I asked.

“He’s coming down now. The judge’s clerk just called and said they were ready to see you.”

Waiting for Hank, the guard put me into more shackles. I was wrapped around at the waist with a leather strap, like a bodybuilder’s belt, handcuffs looped in the middle, plus a chain to connect to the ankle shackles I already had on.

“Fredrick!” Hank said excitedly, coming down the steps.

I turned around and pretended to try waving, noticing the shackles and shrugging.

Hank laughed. “Yeah, those things aren’t too fun. Hey, what’s with the glasses you’ve been wearing today?”

I had recently gotten reading glasses from the clinic at the jail. I didn’t really need glasses, but they changed my face enough that I looked like a different person. I liked that idea. I decided not to explain that to Hank, though.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “The real issue is that I’m

hoping you're gonna tell me I don't have to wear these shackles again."

"We'll see what we can do about that."

"Any news at all?"

"Fredrick, the DA for this case doesn't understand why you went to jail in the first place."

"I like him, then."

"But...This assistant DA, she's in charge of appeals and parole granting. She's who we're seeing today. She hates you. I don't know why. She's new, so she's spitfire. DAs don't grow hearts until a few years into the job."

"I don't like her."

Hank laughed again. "Me neither, but we have to go through her to get you home right now. So, here's the good news: she's allowing you early parole. Immediately. Now. You'll be out in a couple hours. Her and I talked it over, and she's willing to do that."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"Like I said, we talked. I've been on the phone with the case's DA, and I've been talking with her outside of the courtroom. Between that and I wrapped up a murder case with the same judge... It's been a busy day."

"Murder case? I thought they never had trials on Fridays?"

"They don't. This was the last day. We would have had closing arguments yesterday, but there was a fire at the courthouse. Everything got shut down."

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“It didn’t matter either way. I lost that one.”

“Oh.”

“But I mean, don’t worry!” Hank sputtered. “Your case is totally different; the judge is actually very sympathetic. While the DA was having their closing arguments on that last case, she passed me a note asking why we don’t just release you now.”

“The judge passed you a note in the middle of a murder trial?”

“That’s how it goes, Fredrick. Don’t worry about that. She had no idea what your case was even about. I hate to say it, but you really got railroaded.”

“I know it.”

“But, and I hate saying ‘but,’ but I have to. I said there was good news. There’s also bad news.”

“Of course,” I shrugged.

“The judge asked why we couldn’t just release you today, and I told her that after this, you wanted to seek a PCRA appeal. Those are very complicated, and there’s a chance that if you took this deal today, you might be giving up your rights for the appeal.”

“So you explained that to her, to the judge?”

“Yes, and she’s okay with that. Between her and the original DA, I think we can get your record cleared. I know it doesn’t make up for these past few months, but think of it as a life lesson.”

“I’ll try. So everything’s good, then?”

“Well, it is with the judge and the original DA. With this assistant DA, this one that doesn’t care for you, she’s not having

it. She'll let you take this deal, but she's the one that does want you to withdraw your rights for the appeal."

"Look," I said. "I just want to go home. I'm tired. You understand that, I'm sure. I'm just too damn tired to care right now. Get me home today."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Fuck it. I'm sure."

"Alright, let's go up." Hank nodded at the bullpen guard, who got up from his desk and grabbed his key ring. We began to go up the narrow stairs leading into the hallway of the courthouse.

"Hey, wait," I said.

"Yes? What's wrong?" Hank asked.

"There was a guy in there, in the bullpen, he wanted to see you. I think his name was Ronald, or Donald, something like that."

"Who? You mean Don Price?" the guard said. "He left for court a while ago; he's already on his way upstate. He was able to swing about ten years. He got lucky."

I turned my head back and looked into the bullpen. It was completely empty.

"You're the last case of the day, Anderson," the guard said.

I must not have paid attention to who went in and out of the bullpen while I was reading. I had been alone in there for the better part of an hour, the guard told me.

"Oh," I muttered. "Nevermind."

# ETHAN'S LUGGAGE

Graham Oliver

At some point during college, it became obvious that suitcases were appearing in the back of Ethan's car. They'd be there one night, gone the next, and then a new one would show up a couple of weeks later. When I noticed them, I'd ponder on the subject for a full ten or fifteen seconds before getting distracted by something else. I never asked him what it was all about. What difference did a few suitcases make?

The story behind the suitcases would come without prodding some time later, on one of those rare sober nights when we felt like doing nothing and so we did nothing while we drove. It was a confessional drive. I was reminiscing about my time in high school with another Ethan, the Ethan from high school instead of from college, and reflecting on the weekends we would drive through the rich neighborhoods in the middle of the night and destroy mailboxes, a misplaced quest for justice. I had to fill in enough gaps in memory with guesses that I might as well have been lying. Ethan was telling the truth, and he was telling me about his little problem with kleptomania.

"Freshman year some kid read a really shitty short story out loud," he said. "It was terrible, just a string of boring clichés, but the big conflict in the story was that two people had accidentally

picked up each other's suitcase at baggage claim in an airport. It was supposed to be a mystery or something." Ethan paused, peering down the road. "Where the fuck are we? Anyways, I hated the kid, he never shut up and he always wore Birkenstocks, even when it was raining. Worst fucking smell in the world. But a week later I was driving around at night, almost as bored out of my mind as I am right now, and I passed the exit for the airport. I couldn't get that stupid story out of my head. I kept thinking about how easy it would be to pick up someone else's bag at the airport. What's stopping you? And so I did."

He paused again. I withheld my impatience. He'd finish the story when he finished the story. The wrong word now and he'd probably change the subject.

"It was pretty intense the first time. I kept expecting a security guard to stop me before I even got to the carousel. When I did get there, my hands were shaking bad. I just stood there like an idiot, waiting for a bag to get past the crowd of people without anyone going for it, or waiting to get busted. Finally, a nice looking black leather bag came past. I grabbed it and left."

One more pause as he slowly turned onto a familiar road. Maybe he'd known where we were the whole time.

"Jesus, I sound like I'm confessing my drug use in front of a bunch of fellow addicts. Hi, my name is Ethan, and I have an addiction." He continued. "As cliché as it sounds, I got a rush, you know? Pulling out of the parking lot with a stolen suitcase sitting three feet behind me. It didn't last though. I got home and

felt fucking awful. Can you imagine?” I couldn’t. “Someone sat there and waited, and waited, and their suitcase never showed up. The airline probably wouldn’t do anything about it. Can you imagine?” I still couldn’t. “There wasn’t a name or address on it or anything. I’m pretty sure it was an old guy, from the clothes. I couldn’t stop picturing his face. I could’ve returned it to the airline. Said it was a mistake. It probably would’ve made it to him even if I had just left it in front of the airline’s office. But I didn’t. I just dropped it off at Goodwill, full of clothes, and decided I never wanted to steal anything again.”

The story wasn’t over, which meant he had done it again.

“But I did it again.” We were almost back to the apartment. I wondered if I should try to change the subject, or if I had a subject to change to. The story was too serious, it was making me nervous and was moving us away from our usual lighthearted mood. He was still talking. “It isn’t just an impulse thing either. I plan it out. I alternate times of the day, days of the week, weeks of the month. Airlines. Clothing. Behavior. Where I drop it off afterward. The only thing I keep consistent is that I only take expensive looking luggage. Some small fucking rationalization that maybe it would affect this person less.

“I don’t understand it. I never even keep anything. I just take it home, look through it, feel shitty about what I just did, then take it to some donation place after I throw anything with the person’s name on it out the window. I don’t even worry about getting caught anymore. How would I get caught? Even if they

stopped me walking out of the door, I could just pretend like it was an accident, that I had a suitcase just like it. How would they know?”

We had parked. Ethan was moving slowly to exit the car. “They wouldn’t. Fucking crazy,” I added helpfully.

“No, they wouldn’t.” We were out of the car, strolling down the sidewalk along the apartment wall. The faint bass of hip-hop music echoed from another building.

Ethan’s voice was lower now. “It’s so fucked up. Maybe I need to see a shrink or something.”

I still couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say. Or a better alternate subject. So I went with inappropriate.

“I killed a guy once,” I whispered.

“Don’t fucking lie to me. Not right now.” We were outside the door. I stepped inside and heard the sound of Ethan pulling out his pack of cigarettes before the door shut. I slipped my shoes off inside and walked back into my bedroom. I wasn’t sure if Ethan was staying or leaving, if I was tired or awake, so I sat on my bed and waited for something to change. Then it did—I jumped five feet in the air at the sound of a tap on my window. On the other side, Ethan managed not to laugh. I slid open the window.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I answered.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll do it again.”

And with that, he left the window. I had no idea if he meant scaring me, stealing suitcases, snapping at me, actually suggest-



ing that I not lie, or telling me the truth. A half hour later he was inside and we were discussing who we should call to find something to do.

# GOD KNOWS

Bob Kalkreuter

When the cops came, Keith was sitting on a wooden stool, watching the kids splash around the heated, indoor pool. As lifeguard and swimming teacher, he loved to work with kids, especially the young ones. Four, five, even six years old, they were just the right age, still accepting and spontaneous, still full of the natural rhythms that disappeared when they became tiny adults and learned to judge you only from the outside.

But that's the way it was with kids. Always changing. Always in motion. Like the Kincaid girl, Carol. When she joined his class last year, she used to dig her fingers into his arms when he towed her around the pool, holding her tight the whole way.

But last week she'd leaped into the deep end, screaming "look at me!" In a panic, Keith dove into the pool, stretching out to reach her.

After bobbing to the surface, Carol dodged his grasp, flashing her own special grin. If he hadn't been so alarmed, he might have laughed.

Not that he thought she was a bad swimmer. He didn't want to encourage reckless behavior, and he didn't trust her to go solo yet. Not at five or six or whatever she was.

It was frightening what happened to her.

The cops wore coats and ties. Approaching him, they flashed their badges. The pool deck was wet from the traffic of dripping swimmers and they walked carefully in their leather-soled shoes.

The tall cop was a lumbering, red-haired man, smelling of sweat and tobacco and aftershave. He carried a silver-tipped pen in his shirt pocket.

“You recognize this girl?” he asked, holding up a picture.

In it, Carol was grinning, big and saucy. She was wearing the gold chain she loved so much, the one with the metallic green four-leaf clover hanging from the middle. He’d often seen her wear it, going in and out with her mother.

“Yeah, she... she used to be in my class.”

The cop nodded. “That’s what I heard.”

“I can’t believe what happened,” said Keith. “A little girl like that.”

He tried to remember Carol the way she looked last week, so sparkling with energy and life. Yet another image kept intruding, a darker image, an image of her small body lying in the mud and muck of a roadside ditch, bruised and gray and naked. An image the pool director laid out for the staff this morning.

An image he wished he could banish altogether.

Keith heard a scream. Startled, he leaped from his stool. In the water, he saw a boy wrestling with his sister. He blew his whistle. “Chris!” he shouted. “Stop that! Leave Wendy alone!”

Chris dove down, swimming toward the edge of the pool.

Sitting back down, Keith tried to gather his thoughts. But he

didn't want to think any more about Carol.

"When did she come? What days?" asked the red-headed cop.

"I'm not sure. Tuesdays maybe?"

"Yesterday?"

"I think so. I'm not sure," said Keith.

"I thought you said she was in your class."

Keith watched a gathering of air bubbles near the edge and Chris surfaced, sputtering. He grinned at Keith and waved. "She used to be in my class. I only teach beginners. On Saturday mornings. A couple of months ago, she graduated to the next level."

"Did you see her yesterday?"

"No. I don't work Tuesdays."

The second cop was a dark, gangly man wearing a stained, plaid jacket and khaki pants. It was cold outside, but he was sweating here in the close, chlorine-smelling heat. He twisted a finger inside the collar of his shirt, trying to get some air. "You worked here long?" he asked.

"Two years."

"I used to bring my son here, four, five years ago. Before you started, I guess."

"Yeah, I was in high school."

"What was she wearing, you remember?"

"Carol? She had a pink suit, I think. But that was..."

"Her street clothes. Not her swim suit," said the cop, bristling.

"I don't see them in street clothes. They change in there."

Keith pointed to the door leading into the changing area.

The red-haired cop toyed with the pen in his pocket. “You seen any strangers hanging out lately?”

“There are parents here all the time, watching their kids.”

“I said strangers, not parents.”

Keith glanced around the pool, looking for Chris, who was hauling himself out of the water at the far end. He headed toward the locker room. “Moms bring the kids usually, but the dads come too sometimes, and I don’t always know the kid they’re here to see. They just stand around watching.”

“So,” said the gangly, second cop, sounding impatient. “Does that mean yes or no?”

Keith hesitated, thinking. “Well, there *was* a guy,” he said, speaking slowly, as his memory collected the pieces. “Last week, I think. Yeah, last week.”

The red-haired cop leaned closer, squinting. “What did he look like?”

Keith frowned, recoiling from the odor of tobacco and sweat and aftershave. “I don’t remember, really. Average, I guess. Kind of dirty. But I remember his coat. It was purple. Dark purple.”

The cop leaned even closer. “What was he doing?”

“He just wandered in, I guess. I didn’t give him much thought.”

“You generally have people just walk in like that?”

“Not usually.”

“How do you know he wasn’t with one of the kids?”

Keith squirmed on the stool. These cops, they made him nervous, the way they stared and asked questions, as if he weren’t

to be trusted. “There weren’t any kids here. We were about to close up.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. Sam chased him out.”

“Sam?”

“The director’s son. He used to play football at the university. He works down the street, and stops by to get a ride from her sometimes.”

“From the director?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he know this guy with the purple coat?”

“I don’t know. You can ask Sam.”

The cop backed up and looked around the pool area. “I will,” he said. “You see anybody else?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Well. Okay.” The red-haired cop pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Keith. “If you think of anything else, call me.”

“Okay.” Keith wasn’t sure what to say now, if anything. Finally he added: “I hope you get him.”

“We will,” said the second cop, his eyes narrowing. “And when we do...”

With that, they both turned and made their way across the water-slick pool deck.

After Keith finished his shift, he went into the locker room

and changed into jeans and the Z.Z. Top t-shirt his sister bought him a couple of years ago at a concert. He pulled on his old black coat, the one with the broken zipper, and he stepped outside, bracing himself to face the chill. Autumn was early this year, early and cold. The late afternoon sunlight was gray and dismal. He yawned.

“Big party last night?”

He turned to see a thin blonde woman reaching for the door. She wore a long coat that hung open to reveal white shorts with black tights underneath. She smiled.

Keith grabbed the door and held it open. “Not really,” he said. “I was up all night studying.”

She flipped her eyes and laughed, flinging her yellow pony tail. “I didn’t know you went to school.”

“Riverview Community College. I’m shooting for the university next year. If I pass chemistry.”

“What are you going to major in?”

“Education, I guess. I like working with kids.”

“And they like you.” She ducked under his arm, then swiveled back to face him, still flashing her big smile. “You’ll be great. Chris thinks you’re wonderful. Wendy too. Thanks for being so good to them.”

Keith felt himself flush. “Thanks,” he said.

When he reached his apartment, he stripped off his coat, dropped it on the floor, and went into the kitchen. There, he

fixed himself a peanut butter sandwich. He took a beer from the refrigerator, rolling it across his forehead before taking a sip. It did nothing to ease the building tension.

He usually didn't drink much, or often. First, he couldn't afford it. And he didn't like the taste either. Not until the alcohol became tasteless, by the third or fourth drink. But this thing with Carol, it upset him a lot, especially when the cops appeared. Somehow, they made her death seem closer, more real and sordid.

Carrying the beer and sandwich, he sat in the old brown chair his grandmother gave him when he left home.

"You can have it recovered and nobody will know how old it is," she'd said.

But he didn't want to do that. "I like it this way," he'd said.

It was like having the past right there at his fingertips. As a boy he used to fall asleep in that same chair, whenever he visited Mo Mo's house. She'd lived on a farm with a rocky creek out back, and Keith could still remember the bite of that chilled water, especially on the hottest days, when he had nothing to do but fish and swim and wander the open fields, smelling the earthy tang of drying hay.

Thinking about her now, he finished the sandwich. When he was three, his mother ran away with a car mechanic, although he didn't know that until ten years later when his sister told him. His father told him she'd died.

Growing up, Mo Mo was his rock, his biggest influence. When she died, during his last year of high school, his grades went from



average to awful.

He took a drink of beer and set the can on the floor, unfinished. He picked up the chemistry book from the coffee table. It was still open to the chapter on compounds. He knew he needed to study hard if he wanted to get through this course. Science wasn't his strong point, particularly chemistry.

But tonight he didn't feel like studying. Not with thoughts of little Carol running so loose and rampant.

He glanced at the beer, then away. He replaced the book on the coffee table and stood. He didn't go to movies often, but today he needed a distraction.

The movie theater was in a shopping mall across town. Fifteen minutes he sat in traffic, waiting for a broken light. When he arrived, the ticket window was closing. Holding up his wallet, he tapped on the glass. A girl with pink and green hair glanced up. She wore a nose ring.

"Am I too late?" he asked.

She slid open the window. "Hi," she said, smiling.

"Can I still get a ticket?"

"Sure," she said, taking his money. Her nails were painted to match her hair. "You work at the pool, don't you?"

He nodded, afraid she would ask about Carol.

"Thought so," she said, pushing the ticket toward him. "I picked up my niece a couple of times. She was in your class. Lani Harland."

He grinned, much relieved. "Lani. With black hair?"

“Uh huh.”

“She didn’t like the water much, at first.”

The girl laughed. “No, she didn’t. But she does now. Loves it. She still talks about you. Calls you Keet.”

Keith laughed. “She never could say my name. How’s she doing?”

“Oh, fine. She wants to come back, but Jenny, she’s my sister, she can’t afford it right now.”

“Well,” he said. “She can bring Lani any Thursday afternoon. That’s my late day. It’s usually pretty slow, so the director goes home early. I won’t say anything.”

“That’s nice,” she said, smiling broader. “I’ll tell her. But I don’t want to hold you up any more. The movie’s about to start.” With her pink and green nails, she combed through the strands of matching hair.

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks.”

After work on Thursday, he noticed a police car shadowing him until he reached the parking lot of his apartment complex. Once there, he turned off the motor and sat very still, trying to settle his nerves. Above, a cloud of bats tumbled in erratic haste through the growing dusk, and he considered the irony of this ancient scramble of hunter and hunted.

Friday morning the same cops returned, scowling in the heavy pall of chlorine.

“Goddamn, how can you breathe this stuff?” said the gangly cop, sneezing. He wore the same plaid coat, but this time his pants were maroon.

“You get used to it,” said Keith.

The red haired cop did most of the talking, asking the same questions as before, worded differently. And just as they appeared ready to leave, he leaned forward again. “Where were you Tuesday?” he asked, breathing heavily.

“Tuesday? That was...”

“Yeah. Tuesday. What were you doing?”

“Um... well, I was home studying. I’m having a hard time with chemistry.”

“Anybody with you?”

“You mean, do I have a witness?”

The cop stared, unblinking. “Do you?”

“No. I was studying.”

“Alone?”

“I live alone.” Keith tried to sound casual, as if the insinuations didn’t bother him, but he felt his throat tighten. “I told you before, I didn’t see her on Tuesday.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said.”

Keith looked around. There was a gray-haired woman swimming slow laps on the far side. Nobody else. “I really need to watch the pool,” he said.

“We can always haul you downtown,” said the gangly cop, wiping sweat from his nose. “Your choice.”

“Why? I was just studying.”

“She was seen Tuesday with a man about your size,” said the red haired cop. “And he wore a dark coat, like yours.”

Keith thought about the man who’d wandered in last week. “Was it purple, maybe? The coat.”

“Dark.”

“Well, purple’s dark at night, isn’t it?”

The gangly cop shook his head. “Who said it was night?”

Keith felt himself redden. “The tv... Didn’t they say she was killed at night?”

The cops stared at him. It made his stomach churn, those stares. He wanted to ask them if they’d bothered to ask Sam about the guy in the purple coat. But he didn’t, he couldn’t, not with them staring so hard. Not with his stomach in such knots.

Finally the red haired cop said: “They said she was *found* at night.”

After work, he didn’t want to be alone, so he wandered down the street, watching cars, inspecting storefronts trying to close, passing pedestrians. No one looked at him or acknowledged him, but he felt better, just being there in the midst of day-ending traffic.

A police car pulled up to the corner and stopped, the cops in the front seat watching as he passed.

Reaching the stone wall bordering the park, he looked inside. A creek wound through the trees, reminding him of Mo Mo’s

farm. If only she were here now. She'd always been so good at listening, something no one else seemed to do for him. Not even his sister.

Keith found a cold wooden bench and sat in the slight, chilled breeze, watching ducks pull rippled v's across the dark, tree-mirrored water. He saw a couple of kids, a boy and a girl, dodging between near-naked shrubs, squealing and laughing.

He recognized them and raised his hand. "Chris! Wendy!" he shouted. They stopped, at first startled.

Then Chris grinned. "Keith!" he said. But just as Chris started to wave, a small blonde woman appeared between the trees and grabbed them each by an arm, glancing at Keith with confusion and fright. Hurrying, she steered them along the path in the opposite direction.

As they disappeared behind a maintenance shed, two men with unkempt beards stepped forward, as if to cover their retreat. The men's breath came in silent white wisps. They stared at him, hands deep in the pockets of their jackets.

Seeing them, Keith rose and walked back to the street, head down, picking up steam as he listened for the sound of footsteps. He wanted to be alone.

The next morning, Keith arrived early for his beginner's class. Pulling into the parking lot, he noticed the director's metallic blue Honda already in her reserved spot. He couldn't remember the last time she'd been here this early.

Just as he started to enter the locker room to change into his swim suit, he heard his name. He turned. The director was hurrying down the corridor, waving her hand.

She ushered him into her office. “Have a seat,” she said. Tall and angular, she moved with the quickness and energy of a woman much younger than her mid-fifties. She stood behind her desk, drumming her fingers on the back of the chair.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I’ll be sitting most of the day.”

He liked the director, and he was pretty certain she liked him as well. In the last two years she’d given him four raises. Last month, she’d even pulled him into her office as he left for the day.

“Keith,” she’d said. “I want you to know I’m pleased to have you here. You’re great with the kids. The parents love you. I wish all my lifeguards were as good.”

But this time she didn’t smile. She just stood there behind the chair, looking very rigid and solemn.

“This thing with Carol Kincaid,” she said. “It’s bad.”

“I know. It’s terrible. The kids, I feel horrible for them. And I can’t imagine what her parents must feel.”

She drummed the chair faster. “The police have asked about you.”

“Yeah, they’ve been here a couple of times, asking about Carol.”

She grimaced. “No Keith. They’re not asking about her. They’re asking about you.”

He shifted his weight, and for a moment they both stood in

silence. Then he said: “I didn’t do anything. My God, you don’t think...”

“No, Keith. I don’t believe... um... I know you loved that little girl. And her parents know it too.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about what happened. I didn’t see anything. I didn’t do anything.”

“Keith, I know that. I’m not saying I believe them, but...”

He felt heat infuse his cheeks. “Why have they decided that I’m hiding something?”

“They haven’t decided anything yet. They’re just looking at possibilities.”

“Sure,” he said, trying to sound positive. “And if I hear anything I’ll let them know.” He glanced at his watch. “Maybe I better get changed. My class starts in five minutes.”

“Keith,” she said, her voice rising. “I’ve got Cathy covering your class this morning.”

“Cathy? How come?”

“Well, as you know, the police have a witness...”

“A witness? They say somebody saw me?”

“No, they don’t say that. Not exactly. They say that somebody who looks like you, wearing a coat like yours, was seen with her, just before...”

“Who looks like me? What does that mean?”

“Keith, I’m sorry. I really am. There are already rumors circulating among the parents. The police are going to have you down for a line-up soon. I’m probably not supposed to tell you

that, but I know you didn't do anything."

"I promise you, I didn't do anything."

"You don't have to convince me, Keith. But. Well. It isn't good for us, this investigation." She crimped her lips together and stared at the chair. "Right now we can't afford to lose any more swimmers. That new club across town, they're a lot newer and they've pulled a lot of swimmers already."

"Are you firing me?"

"No. Of course not. I just want you to stay home for a while. Until the police get this settled. You'll be paid, of course...for a week or so."

He shook his head. "What about that guy Sam threw out last week? Did anybody look into that?"

"Sam talked to the police and they're going to look for him. I'm sure something will break soon."

"Ask the kids. They'll tell you. I didn't do anything."

"I'm sorry, Keith. You'll be back soon. I know you will."

He left in a daze. Outside, a shaft of smoky sunlight broke through a jagged slit in the clouds, glowing like a furnace in the underbelly of a storm. It was chilly, but he didn't feel cold. He didn't even remember the drive home.

As he approached the front door, feet scuffled on the concrete behind him.

"We don't want your kind in this neighborhood," said a deep, graveled voice. And before he could turn, something hit him on



the back of the head, sending him sprawling to the ground. He felt his face scrape the cement.

“Unhhh,’ he grunted.

“You know what we do with bastards like you?” came another voice. “This!”

Boots pummeled his sides and back. He tried to curl himself into a fetal clinch, but someone kicked him in the head and held him face-down.

Strong hands jerked his arms and pulled them back, pinning them between his shoulder blades, high and hard.

“How do *you* like it?” shouted a voice.

“Hey! What’s going on?” A different voice broke through the confused jumble of grunts and threats. “What the fuck you think you’re doing? Back up! Back up Goddamn it!”

Keith groaned.

A pair of high-polished shoes stood by his head and someone touched his face. “Call an ambulance. And get these assholes here under control.” For a moment there was movement and shuffling and Keith lay there trying to organize his senses.

“You assholes are lucky. If you’d killed him...” A young cop waggled his billy club at the group of men backed against the building by his partner.

“But he’s a Goddamn...”

“I know what the son-of-a-bitch is. He’s a piece of shit, but he’s not worth going to jail for. And if we hadn’t been following him, you might’ve done just that.”

“If he presses charges, you will anyway,” said the second cop.

The next morning Keith left the hospital with his sister. He was limping and his broken ribs ached despite the pills he’d swallowed. When they reached her car, she turned, face puckered. Her hair was dark and close-cropped, and she leaned against the car door, her eyes circling, looking for a place to land, or maybe to keep from landing.

He couldn’t remember what his mother looked like, but his sister looked just like the pictures he’d seen.

“I’d ask you to the house for a few days, to give you some rest. But Bill, he’s not feeling good. And little Billy’s sick with the flu,” she said, her voice trailing away. She turned the key ring in her hand, looking thoughtful.

“That’s all right. I don’t feel up to it anyway. I hope they get better.”

“Oh, they’ll be better in a few days.” She opened the car door, ducked her head to get in, then stopped and turned, one foot inside, the other out. “You don’t mind, do you? Staying by yourself?”

“Course not,” he said. “I’m twenty, remember.”

“Sure,” she said, forcing a laugh. “I forget.”

“Sarah and Billy, they’re all right?”

“Sure. They’re fine.”

“I’d like to see them sometime.”

She slid into the car seat and unlocked the passenger door.

“Get in. I’ll drop you off. But you’ll have to give me directions. I don’t remember...”

“That’s all right. It’s not far. I’ll manage.”

She opened her leather purse and rested it on the steering wheel. The car door was still open. “Here,” she said, pulling out several bills and a stick of gum. She unwrapped the gum and folded it into her mouth, handing him the bills. “Get yourself some breakfast,” she said. She dropped the gum wrapper on the ground and closed the door. She ran the window down a crack and flipped on the heat. “Bill, he’s got a friend who’s a lawyer. If you need somebody...”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s just a misunderstanding.”

“Well, get some rest.” She revved the engine, rolled up the window, and drove away.

Keith waited there, holding the bills flat in his hand. She was ten years older than he was, and sometimes, when her boyfriends used to come over, she’d lock him in the bedroom with a box of toys.

“Thanks,” he said, knowing she couldn’t hear.

Keith walked back to the hospital and called a taxi.

His apartment was dark and empty, the blinds closed. The chemistry book was open to the same page.

So far he’d only been able to take shallow breaths without pain, and he really wanted to take one long, deep breath, but his ribs hurt too much. He went into the kitchen, wondering if a cold beer would make him feel better.

No, he decided. *Not with these pills.*

He peered outside, where he'd hung the basket of petunias Chris and Wendy gave him last Christmas. A yellow cat sat there on the sill, reaching up to scratch the dirt.

"Hey!" he shouted, grabbing a coffee cup from the counter and flinging up the window. The cat leaped to the ground and Keith reared back to sling the cup, but the sudden movement shot pain up his side and he set the cup back down on the counter and closed the window, grimacing.

In the living room, the phone rang. He didn't move, but listened to the rings grow louder and more strident, then disappear.

He felt woozy and figured it was just the effect of the pills. He went into the bedroom and thought about lying down. But he didn't. He opened the closet and ran his hand back and forth along the shelf, under the extra sheets. Finally he struck the edge of something hard, but crumpled. He drew out a junior mint box he'd gotten at the movie theater one afternoon.

He felt a rush of satisfaction, of having kept this tumbling, ungrateful world at bay, at least for a moment.

He opened the box to shake a necklace into his hand, a tiny gold band with a green, four-leaf-clover pendant dangling from the middle. He stared at the necklace, curled in his palm like a tiny, sleeping snake.

*God knows why*, he thought, when he remembered the way she'd flinched, seeing him come out of the shadows in the parking lot, just wanting to see her bright smile. *She used to be so sweet.*

Then he heard a sharp, repeated banging, as if the hinges on the door were about to come loose. “Open up! Police!” shouted a single, loud voice. “Open up now!”

# BOULDERS AND OCEANS

Haydn Cieri

The door sucks in quickly from the wind. She squints and walks from the door to the steps to the curb to the street that overlooks the ocean far below the rocky bluff that holds her home. She crosses her arms over a gray knit cardigan that flaps behind her like a cape from the winds off-shore. Now she is at the edge of the road where she leans on a waist-high wooden barrier dividing the asphalt street from a sixty foot drop into the sand and boulders of the beach. Her hair and skirt too are full behind her like sails. She wears slippers. The sky is spitting a light drizzle. No sun.

From far down the carless road to the right a man comes slowly with a limp and stops beside her. There is a click as he lights a cigarette and inhales. She keeps her eyes to the ocean. He exhales.

Another beautiful day, he says.

She pretends not to hear him.

He leans against the barrier beside her and inhales again and looks out at the waves.

They're big as houses, he says.

She is quiet.

The boulders out there on the sand, and in the ocean. They're

giant. He points at them with the butt of his cigarette.

She turns and looks at him, then back to the water.

Makes you wonder how they got out there, he says.

Fell from the cliff.

And rolled all the way out that far?

I suppose.

It's a hell of a journey, for a rock.

Sure.

Farther than most rocks travel in their life, that's for sure. Most just sit around. The little ones might get thrown every now and again if they're lucky. But those boulders did it all their own. I respect that. Something to be proud of if you ask me.

I don't think rocks get too proud.

Sure they do. Volcanoes. Mountains. Very proud. Very proud rocks. You need some kind of an ego to reach as high as they do. Higher than birds and clouds. Higher than anything we've built. If mountains aren't proud then hell, maybe I don't know what proud is.

She smiles thinly and for only a second, sucking it in like undoing a mistake. Maybe you're right.

Sure, those boulders have done pretty well for themselves. From being so lonely up here on this cliff. Now they swim every day. They have little creature friends in the water to keep them company.

They have themselves to keep each other company on the cliff.

True, but rocks are all the same. They're hard-headed and

become bored of each other's company very quickly. Then they bicker and rocks bickering is very ugly, let me tell you.

I'll take your word for it.

I think you'd best.

A slight smile and she looks up from the waves to his face. With her hand she reaches up and traces the lines in his forehead down into the wrinkles around the scruff of his mouth and chin.

They say wrinkles say something about the kind of life you've lived, she tells him.

Do they? Well, I only wish my laugh lines were half as deep as the lines on my brow.

I can't believe you're smoking.

Neither can I.

Dad, please.

You're right, he says and looks down, taking one last crackling pull before flicking the cigarette over the cliffside. It crashes into the sand far below in a burst of red ash.

Why did you wait so long? she asks.

It was a good cigarette.

Jesus, dad, not that. To tell me. Why wait till now?

You'd probably have made me stop smoking. He smiled. She did not. You know I didn't want to worry you.

How's that working out?

Not nearly as well as I had hoped.

I told you those fucking cigarettes would kill you.

You did. We all die from something.



And your cause of death will be fucking stupidity.

Indeed. The cancer will be noted as purely ancillary.

That's not funny.

It is a little.

I can't believe you.

Jen, it's my own damn life. If anyone's allowed to joke about it, it's me.

She says nothing and pulls the collar of her cardigan up to meet her chin.

Come on, darling, you're cold.

I'm fine, she says.

For a while now there is nothing but the wind and the muted clap of rain in the tide. Her eyes are wet as she reaches over and takes her father's hand and feels the weight of her damp curls as they clump and fall to her shoulders like thick brown ribbons run along the side of a pair of scissors.

You know, she says, the rocks who make it to the ocean erode three times quicker than the rocks on land.

His hands are shaking inside of hers. And their lives are three times fuller.

I see why you sympathize.

He smiles.

How long did they say? she asks.

Well, they said two months.

Only two months?

He nods.

And when was that?

About two months ago.

Jesus christ, dad.

She fights it, but fails and begins crying. Small, controlled bursts. The type of crying you'd expect from someone who's new to the idea of sorrow.

Darling, listen. He holds her head into his shoulder. It's going to be alright. I've lived a hell of a life. Twice as much as most. I'm content with how things are. It makes sense to me now, you see? I've done all the things I've wanted to. More even. And I've created something more special than anything I could have ever imagined. You. He takes her head from his shoulder and holds it between his two frail hands. But, darling, I'm not going to wait until one day my heart is good and ready to stop beating. Until the meat is peeling from my bones. I can't have you see me like that. With tubes and wires. A feeding machine. A pissing machine. It's not fair. You understand? As of today I've outlived my life expectancy. I don't plan on dragging this whole thing out much longer.

She is stares into the last few dying specks of blue in his blackening eyes while he tells her that he will kill himself tonight. He tells her it will happen on the beach, that he has received the pills from the doctor, that it is legal now in Oregon. He tells her the doctor preferred to call it 'euthanasia' rather than suicide. That the pills were incredibly over-priced. Then he makes a joke about not needing the money in hell. She does not find it funny.

Really, neither does he.

Should I tell mom? she asks.

So she can poke around in my expenses again to see how much she'll be getting? No. Let her and that chicken-shit Fernando in Florida find out from the papers.

You're sure about this, dad?

His whole body is shivering, his skin is pale and thin as paper. What white hairs he still has are flat against his scalp from the rain.

I'm sure, he says, head shivering up and down.

Later, beside the largest of the boulders visible from the house, they will sit Indian style around a fire on the beach. He will bring s'mores materials and they will burn marshmallows above the flames. Neither are hungry, but they will each smile and eat their s'mores in a show for the other and then they will lay in the sand and tell stories about their childhoods, about how different they were. They will talk about baseball games. Favorite drinks. Crushes growing up. The war. Best friends. Card games. Family members. Favorite Christmases. Least favorite Christmases. Mom. He will smoke again. She will be angry at first but say nothing of it and then when the rain clouds move along there will be stars spanning the clear blackness of the December sky. The waves will be rough against the boulder that night. The water will come almost all the way to the fire. It is two days shy of a full moon. She will ask him after a while about his pets growing up. He will not respond. Later, she will find the empty pill container in his

right jacket pocket. The waves will be rough against the boulder that night. They will be calmer in the morning.

# NEVER ROSE

Charl Landsberg

Perhaps a little song for Rose

A girl caught in the proper pose

To walk on eggshells, pointed toes

To be the best she can be

The perfect wife, she cooks and sews

She scrubs and cleans, she weeds and sows

Her proper manner, her neat clothes

To be the best she can be

Her short-cut nails, her powdered nose

Her hair tied up with lace and bows

Hair prim, regardless when wind blows

To be the best she can be

Ever cites the sweetest prose

She's never haughty, never gauche

She plays the game as best she knows

To be the best she can be

She's ever careful where she goes  
The party halls, the movie shows  
Prefers the well-lit aisle-side rows  
To be the best she can be

Her eyes as gentle as a doe's  
Belies her deeper troubled woes  
She hides her heart's most inner throws  
To be the best she can be

# WASH

Charl Landsberg

I did not make it through the fatal wave  
That pulled me underneath the vicious tides  
And lagan there I lay on Neptune's nave  
And here it is where all my treasure hides

I kept it scattered on the coral shelves  
With morays standing guard before the gate  
They sing their midnight dirges to themselves  
To keep the hours merry as they wait

The purple crab sits neatly on my right  
And counts the coins and bullion and gemstones  
He's honest and he works within my sight  
And gathers all the treasure in my bones

My sunken vessel crumbles in the sand  
The shredded sails are scattered all around  
And in my chair I sleep with cup in hand  
That only holds the last drink that I downed

The little things that crawl cleaned up my bones  
And made them opalescent in the moon  
They gave my head a crown of cowrie cones  
My feet resting in drachma and doubloon

The whales above sing long and steady psalms  
And rays of sun shine down through the mottled glass  
The seaweed has become my garden's palms  
The coral shelf become my garden's grass

I lie within my tomb of sand and rot  
Elysium beneath the crystal sky  
All hunger that i knew is long forgot  
All worries that I knew have passed me by



# LONG LIVE THE QUEEN

Blake London

Each time a bee inflicts a sting  
They leave that venomous prick buried deep in their enemy  
Enlightened and unburdened, the bee has only a few hours left  
to live  
In these few hours, he comes to terms with death  
This yellow-jacketed demon hath discarded his spear and life  
For one final kiss from Petunia and Lily, quelling their silent cries  
with his gentle wings and somber smile  
For one final flight over fields of sweet clover, to lie down with  
the very neighbors he'd terrorized mere hours ago  
For one final breath, repeated in every meadow  
For one final legacy, to turn rogue into legend

My friends, all my life I've served the queen  
Followed without question, led on by the false promise of royalty  
and riches  
Brainwashed into breaking my back 'for the good of the colony'  
Struggling to secure every last speck of pollen 'for the good of  
the colony'  
Sacrificing myself for my brothers, for her, 'for the good of the  
colony'

We all have; Every wingbeat, every strained syllable, every  
oh-just-one-more-gram-for-the-good-of-the-colony  
Has been programmed into us at birth  
Hard-wired into our heartbeat until our mantra becomes our  
identity

An angel of death, sent to spread the spore of corruption  
Pollen was my poison, and I hoarded every speck  
That's the thing with poison  
The more you get, the more you want  
At first your body rejects it  
Tremors rack your bones, defying the enemy at its gates  
But the tenacious parasite is clever  
And wears the disguise of a Trojan horse  
A peace-offering from the very ones disrupting the tranquility  
With open arms, the instigators are welcomed, integrated, and  
employed in the circulatory system  
With open arms, they are rushed through a web of lifelines to  
the four-chambered ticking bomb  
And with open arms, they plant their seed  
BOOMBOOM BOOM BOOM BOom boom

The room becomes silent as the scales tip in the parasite's favor  
The air grows thin, the light starts to dim  
The weight of what they've done finally sets in  
They wonder if they've gone too far

If they pushed too hard  
As the last bit of illumination slips from the tiny little chamber  
And the walls begin to cave in

boom boOM BOOM BOOM BOOMBOOM

The chambers kick back on with a steady thump  
And the lifeline awakens as a slow, erratic brook  
Growing into a steady stream, a speeding river, a roaring rapid

And in that way, I became a phoenix  
Destroyed in a final act of war  
Rebuilt from the ashes  
Transformed into an angel of death  
sent to spread the spore of corruption

And spread I did

Like wildfire, I swept the land clean of any abnormality  
Rebellion?  
Crushed without hesitation  
Beauty?  
Razed, raped, and rotten in seconds  
Free will?  
Sucker-punched in the throat with the dagger of conformity  
I was the instrument designed by nature to destroy nature

Until I met Lily and Petunia

It was a routine mission, a search and destroy  
An easy job for a veteran  
And the last of my career

I arrived at the meadow around high noon, per orders  
Touched down near the stigma of one daffodil  
And started the chain reaction that would colonize the entire  
meadow in a matter of hours

When I returned to collect my spoils  
The meadow was exactly as it should be  
Uniform, colorless, quiet, voiceless  
Except for two little natives bustling with life

As I flew closer, it became obvious that these two flowers had  
somehow succeeded where every other rebel had failed  
They had not only survived the pollination, they resisted it  
“How?” I demanded, “How did you do it?”  
And into my mind flooded a motion picture of humans  
Humans with gavels, and ties, and planes, and suits  
Humans with rooms full of money, turning their neighbors into  
slaves  
Greed pouring from their veins like poison, pooling at their feet

But never reaching low enough to stop the coming storm  
Humans bustling from homes into cars, into planes, into tanks,  
into jets, into extravagant rooms filled with enormous monitors  
connected to even bigger bombs  
Bombs that could vaporize humans, level cities, crush countries,  
raze entire nations  
I saw two seeds drop into fertile soil, reluctantly planted by  
weeping parents  
I heard them say, “Shhh, Lily, take care of your sister Petunia.  
Don’t cry, be strong.  
The sun is coming soon, it won’t be long. Know what’s right by  
what’s in your heart.  
Let it breathe, and transform this hell into art. Let it become  
what it was in the start.  
History doesn’t have to repeat, if you remember to let your heart  
live, let it breathe.”  
I saw a rocket arc in the distance, Lily and Petunia were drawn  
close together  
I saw an orange flower scorch the hillside barren  
I saw Lily’s parents evaporate  
I saw everything turn black  
And then I saw the light  
  
I flew back to the hive, with a renewed sense of purpose  
A switch had been flipped, the Trojan horse sent back to Hades  
I bumped through corridors, as the parasite bumped back to

its inferno

I burst into the main chamber, as my heart breathed free once again

My eyes could see with a light all their own

And what they saw in front was a queen on her throne

With piles of honey and the bones of her subjects struggling underneath her bulk

Her majesty couldn't help but hoard every ounce of fat and power

Turning her jowls thick and her heart oh-so-sour

How the tables have turned

An angel of justice, sent to spread the spore of rebellion

Freedom was my poison, and I donated every speck

At first her body rejects it

Tremors rack her bones, defying the enemy at its gates

But this tenacious rebel is clever

And wears the disguise of a loyal soldier

With open arms, I thrust my stinger into the very one that had given it the power to subjugate entire fields

With stubby, suffocating, useless arms, the spear is welcomed, integrated, and employed in the circulatory system

With reaching, frantic arms, its poison is rushed through a web of lifelines to the four-chambered ticking bomb

And with dying arms, it plants its seed

BOOMBOOM BOOM BOOM BOom boom

The room becomes silent as the scales tip in this radical's, this rebel, this revolutionary's favor  
The air breathes freely, the light finally shines  
In the brain of every terrorized worker  
Every crippled, colorless field of long-dead flowers  
Their servitude is abolished  
And just like that...  
boom boOM BOOM BOOM BOOMBOOM  
...They come alive again.

Each time a bee inflicts a sting  
They leave that venomous prick buried deep in their enemy  
Enlightened and unburdened, the bee has only a few hours left to live  
In these few hours, he comes to terms with death  
This yellow-jacketed demon hath discarded his spear and life  
For one final kiss from Petunia and Lily, quelling their silent cries with his gentle wings and somber smile  
For one final flight over fields of sweet clover, to lie down with the very neighbors he'd terrorized mere hours ago  
For one final breath, repeated in every meadow  
For one final legacy, to turn rogue into legend.

# THE SEED

Saskia Scott

Gropes and writhes through  
twists and turns  
past bits of broken rock  
and earthworms.

A tiny tendril,  
fat with milk of rich seed,  
peeks out,  
leaf upturned, a tender green

palm catching a cascade of light.  
So it grows, roots twined around my heart,  
a fresh new hope  
out of the secret dark.



# CONTRIBUTORS

Stacey Bryan studied under award winning Irish author Brian Moore but wasted a lot of time since then and has only begun writing again recently. She was born in San Francisco and raised in Los Angeles and uses any opportunity available to make fun of Hollywood and The Valley. She is at work on a short story collection created expressly for that purpose.

Graham Oliver's work has been previously featured in Texas State University's *\_Front Porch Journal\_* and *\_Cenizo\_*. He lives just north of Austin with his wife, two rabbits, and neurotic dog.

Blake London would best describe himself as, "a professional dreamer." He enjoys moonlit walks on the beach, exotic women, and fine dining.

Bob Kalkreuter is living his life backwards. After spending 30 years as a banker, he decided to quit and do something useful. Thirty-nine of his stories have been accepted by magazines such as *Underground Voices*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Edgepiece*, *Writes For All*, *The Stone Hobo*, *Eunoia Review*, *Alfie Dog*, *Solecisms*, and *eFiction*. Two of his stories were nominated for Pushcart Prizes. One story was awarded the Herman Swafford Prize from *Potpourri Magazine*. He has two sons and currently lives in northeast Georgia with three freeloading cats. He wouldn't have it any other way.

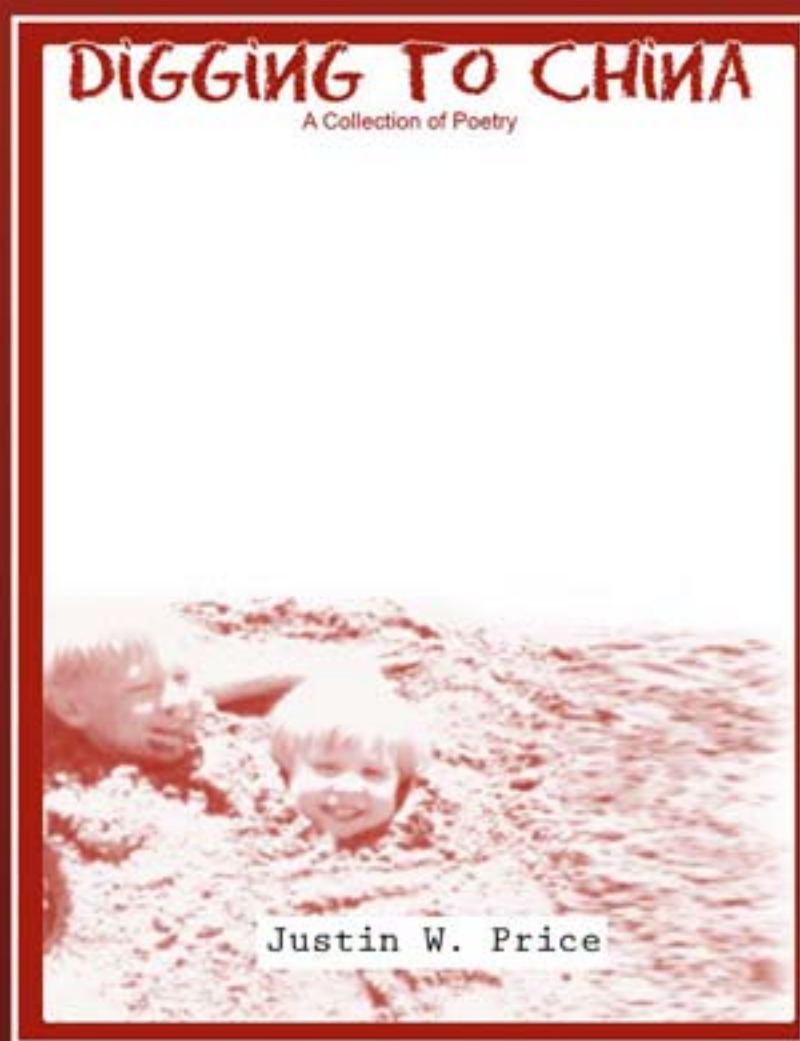
Eric Boyd was born on October 16th, at 3:33AM, 1988 in North Carolina. He briefly studied at the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield,

Iowa. Boyd is the literary editor of Pork & Mead magazine; he also helps edit the Squawk Back literary magazine. Boyd is a winner of the PEN American 2012 Prison Writing contest. His work has also been featured in several journals, both online and in print, including the Rusty Nail, Fourth River, and Velvet Blory. Boyd's first collection of short stories, Whiskey Sour, was released in the spring of 2012 by Chatham University / Nervous Puppy Publishing. The collection will soon enter its second printing. Eric Boyd currently lives in Homestead, Pennsylvania.

Gary Hewitt is a raconteur who lives in a quaint little village in Kent. He has written a fair few tales over the years some of which have been published in Mbrane, various anthologies, Twisted Tongue, Morpheus Tales, Morpheus Tales Best Of Weird Fiction Volume 1, Smokebox, Slingink Magazine, Short Story Net, PygmyGiant and Bewildering Tales. He enjoys both flash fiction and the longer short stories. He is also not afraid to dabble in the arcane art of poetry. He's a proud member of The Write Idea and sometimes writes the odd flash fiction tale on that venerable website. He is also a proud member of the Hazlitt Arts Centre Writers group in Maidstone which continues to grow from strength to strength. He has produced an anthology of his flash fiction [available in e-book from](#).

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# THE ZOMBIE, THE CAT AND BARACK OBAMA

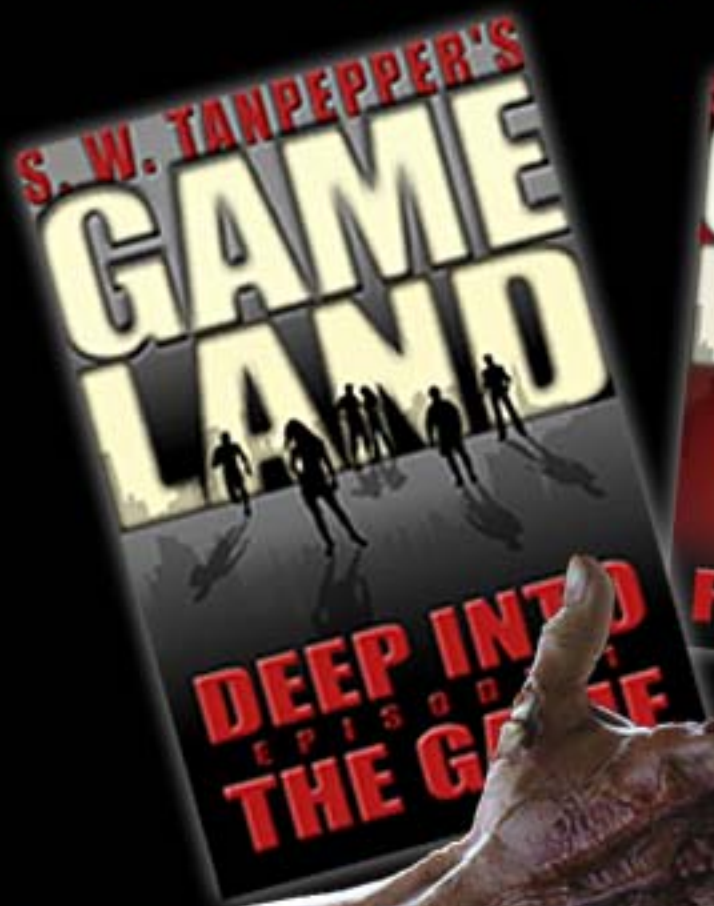
FEATURING APPEARANCES FROM THE ILLUMINATI,  
OSAMA BIN LADEN, LARRY THE DOWNING STREET CAT,  
QUEEN ELIZABETH II, THE CHESHIRE CAT  
AND A HOST OF CHARACTERS.

*Lots of twists and turns and the writing is outstandingly good.*  
— The Rabid Reader's Reviews

# GAMELAND



**A new sci-fi thriller series from  
S.W. Tanpepper, author of *Golgotha***



**HACKING IN WAS EASY  
BREAKING OUT IS A KILLER**

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