

THE RAG



ISSUE 6
SUMMER 2014

THE RAG
ISSUE 6

EDITORS

Seth Porter and Dan Reilly

DESIGNER

Krissy Porter

www.krissythedesigner.com

COVER & FEATURED ART

Justin Duerr

www.justinduerr.com

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SOMEONE IN THE ROOM WILL

by Falcon Miller

The temp agency calls while I'm watching *Oprah*. I put my feet down and get up to get to the phone.

The lady on the other end speaks like she's used to other people doing what she says just because she says so.

"Ms. Tanja? This is Elizabeth Sloane from Southward Contemporaries. We have a job available that looks like it's right up your alley based on your skills and resume. It's in an office and is primarily administrative. You'll be answering the phone, making copies, filing, and other general light office work. There's a possibility that it could turn into a permanent position, but you'd need to learn how to use the computer better before they'd consider hiring you. Of course, you're more than welcome to take some classes at our office after work if you're interested. Are you interested, Ms. Tanja?"

"Yes, I'm interested."

I take the details down on a blank pad from the bank and say I'll be there tomorrow. I don't remember if I say thank you or not.

Oprah has Mackenzie Phillips on her show. Mackenzie is still thin and talking about stuff that happened in the past and how she can't function properly now in the present because of it. I watch and forget about the phone. By the time I put it down, Mrs. Sloane's hung up a long time ago. I have no idea what to wear.

James tried to touch me last night, but I wasn't interested. Instead, I'd been thinking about the guest Oprah was supposed to have on her show—Samantha Fox—and how the *TV Guide* had been wrong. Samantha Fox was on the TV yesterday morning too—once on *The Early Show* and again on another show later in the morning. I don't usually watch the later morning show, but I did because James hadn't given me money yet, and I didn't know what to do about that. I'd been meaning to get my nails done since the last time, which was before the police took me in, but I

hadn't.

I push the brown comforter back and get out of bed. I still don't know what I'm going to wear, so I brush my teeth and wash my face, and hope that a nice outfit will come to me. It doesn't. I go in the kitchen and put some toast in the toaster oven, and make some coffee. It's seven in the morning. It should take me about an hour and a half to get to 57th and Lexington, so I should leave by 7:30.

I still have no idea what to wear. It's been so long since I've worked—not since before Frederick was born. At that time, everyone—all the women—wore skirts and blouses and stockings to work. Slacks came in later, so I bought a few pairs. I mean, slacks were around, but my husband, Van, never said anything about me wearing them, so I figured he didn't like them much. He liked when I wore this cream-colored satin blouse with pearls—he'd flirt with me in the morning like we were gonna have sex when he got home—but he never said much when I wore the slacks.

Jesus! The toast is almost burnt, and I have to make do with butter since there's no more olive cream cheese. I take the toast into the bedroom and put it on the bed so I can pick out my clothes. A cream blouse with pearls and a blue skirt and heels seems too formal.

Brown pants? Brown skirt? There are black pants that could go with a butter-yellow shirt. Blue dress with beige flats? Black skirt with the champagne-striped blouse and patent heels? Patent flats? There's the green sweater that could go with the black pants, but I don't have shoes that would really go with them good, though they would probably go with black ones.

And after I decide what to wear, there's the makeup. I gotta put that on too. I didn't have time to buy new foundation, so I'm gonna have to scoop out what I have with a Q-tip.

I may not go to this job after all. I didn't go to the assignments that the other two agencies sent me to either. This job is already messing up my routine, and I haven't even been there yet.

It's 9:40 when I arrive.

"You must be Miss Van Osten," the woman who greets me says like the agency called her and told her to expect someone who might not show, and like she knew that I'm normally home watching TV or reading magazines at this time. Before I can say anything, she takes me to the left, through a frosted glass door, to the office in back. The place is some sort of Asian cultural place that hosts events and lectures to promote Asian—Chinese, I think—culture in New York.

A woman in a matching red wool suit is the one I'll be working with. Her nails could do with some color. When she tells me what I'll be doing here, she stops and waits with big eyes until I say that I understand what I'll be doing. It's like the agency said—office work.

They put me at a desk that faces a window that's big and perfectly round, half-frosted. The desk and the walls are all the same wood color—not walnut, but more like oak or maybe maple—and the ceilings are low. You can tell no one ever fights loudly in this office, and if they do, no one hears it because the walls are probably thick; there's carpet everywhere but the kitchen and bathroom.

Nobody ever comes my way, except to get from one side of the room to the other. I try to make copies, but a light keeps flashing on the copier, so I can't make them. I bang on the side of the machine, but the light doesn't go away. I go to another floor and find another machine. While the copies are printing, I think about the windows in the big-name department stores in the area.

I told them 12:00, but I go to lunch at 12:30 instead. James gave me some money, but it wasn't a lot, so I have to save it in case I come back to the temp job tomorrow or the day after that. I go to a deli three blocks away on Third Avenue for a roll and some soup and a pack of M&M's. The deli guys act like they don't want me to go upstairs and eat, but nobody said anything to me, so I went anyway. The floor is wet, which is why they don't want anybody going up there, but it's lunchtime, so there's nothing they can do about it except have someone stand at the bottom and

block people from going up.

My head is hot, and I'm dizzy because I didn't get a chance to finish my breakfast this morning, and I've been thinking about this place I'm in. This Asia Society place. They can't be making a lot of money because the phone barely rings, and I can't find a piece of paper that really explains what they do.

I miss Frederick but not Van so much. He'd stopped caring about me as far as I could tell. He'd give me money when I asked him, though. He'd sit on the bed or on the chair in the dining room, with his head down and his hands in his lap, and listen like I was saying something really important. Then he'd nod. The money and then some would always be in a stack next to the phone the next morning.

When the police came, he was at work and Frederick was at school like he shoulda been. I'd just come back from getting my nails done and was going to call Aunt Edda to talk about Thanksgiving. My nails were looking real good. I've always kept them long, and this time I had the girl paint them a deep red. Frederick should know that his mother was not just good in bed but also a woman of sophistication, so I did them this way.

Anyway, the police came, and I let them in. I thought they wanted to talk about the masher in the neighborhood and if I knew who he was. They asked me if Frederick was home, and I said, "He's at school. Jesus Christ! Is the masher going after boys now too?"

They said no, but they had some questions about Frederick anyway, and did I mind. The two of them wouldn't sit down when I offered them the chairs in the dining room. They just stood, so we made a triangle. They had their heads to the side and were really serious. I didn't know what they had come for, but I turned the TV off.

"Mrs. Van Osten, what would you say your relationship with your husband is like?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Would you say you have a happy marriage?"

"No, but I'd say it's a good one. Van said he's taking me to

France soon, and we're gonna leave Frederick behind."

"And why are you leaving Frederick behind, Mrs. Van Osten?"

"Van's jealous of his own son. Can you believe that? He wants to get me back all to himself."

"And why would he be jealous of his own son, Mrs. Van Osten?" The taller policeman moved his head to the other side when he said this.

"I don't know. You'd have to ask him. I don't tell him about me and Frederick, but I think he knows and doesn't know what to do about it. Frederick's better in bed than he is."

The one policeman looked at the other. Then he said, "So that must be hard for your husband, Mrs. Van Osten. Have you two spoken about this—the fact that you think your son is better in bed than he is?"

"Naw. I don't think Van wants to talk about it, but we are supposed to be going to France."

"And, Mrs. Van Osten, you say your son's in school right now. Is that right?"

"Yeah, he's due home at about four."

"And how old is he?"

"He's fifteen, your honor."

The policeman smiled. "I'm not a judge, Mrs. Van Osten. I'm Detective Clark."

Then the other policeman moved in a little closer, like I'd said I was in pain and he was there to help, and said, "We'd like to hear more about your husband and son, Mrs. Van Osten. Would you mind coming down to the station and telling us more about them?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. But the cops had messed up my plans, and I wasn't sure, but I didn't feel like I had a choice but to go with them since they said they were cops. No one was gonna be there for Frederick, and I had promised myself that I was going to be in a silk underwear set today when he got home, except I hadn't figured out which one yet, so I needed to try them on. He said he didn't like lace, and I wear cotton every day, so this was gonna be special.

“What time can I leave your place?” I said.

“What time will Frederick be home?”

“Four p.m., like I said.”

“You’ll be home in time to warm up his dinner, Mrs. Van Osten.”

That was great, except I never made it home in time. I didn’t make it home until four months later. When I got back, Van had left the bankbook and his employee assistance program brochure from his job. A number was circled, and there was a note written over the list of services: “Call them but don’t use your real name.”

After lunch, I go look at the windows. Barneys on East 61st, then Louis Vuitton where the park ends, further down to Henri Bendel—Fifth Avenue, then Fendi. When I go into Barneys, everyone wants to spray me, so I let them. Now I smell like the Botanic Garden flower show, but I don’t care.

When I get back to the temp job, it’s 2:30. The girl at the front desk smiles like she’s heard something pleasant, and I go back to my empty desk. They give me some origami project to do, and I do it. By 4:27, fifty stars made from light green paper are piled up next to me.

It wasn’t that bad. Maybe I can do this every day. An office girl had appeared and showed me what to do. She was the first Asian person I’ve seen in the place all day. She had dyed brown hair and pink cheeks. Her hands looked rough, though, like she used them to work every day.

No one comes back to pick up the stars when I’m done, so I leave them on the sofa where I’d been making them, and move back to the desk. The sun is going down through the round window. My stomach is pushing on my skirt and making it crease in the front just below the waist.

At 4:47, Elizabeth Sloane from the agency can’t come to the phone. She’s on another call or something, so they put me on hold. I’m there for about five, ten minutes. I just listen to the Muzak, except their Muzak songs are real songs not instrumentals. The theme song from *Bosom Buddies* is on when she comes to the phone.

“Yes? Hi, Mrs. Van Osten. How can I help you?”

“I’d like to know when I get paid, please. My husband gives me money, I mean, but I’d like to know when I’ll get my own.”

“You’ll be paid by the end of this week, Mrs. Van Osten, as long as you turn in your timesheet to us by 5.00 p.m., Thursday.”

“Does someone come by and pick up the timesheets?”

“No, you’ll have to send it to us by fax or drop it off in person.”

“No one picks up the timesheets? Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry, Tanja. That’s just the way we do things. If you want to get paid, you’ll have to send us the proof yourself.”

The train is packed when I go home. The conductor comes through too loudly on the speaker when she’s announcing the stops. It’s like she’s deaf or something. Jesus Christ, if you’re loud, you’re loud, but don’t broadcast it over the speaker like that. If you wanna help people, just hold the train a little longer and have them come up to you with their questions before they get on.

It’s only Tuesday, and James asks me how my day was. “It was alright. I’ll make do. Did Frederick call?”

“Well, I don’t think he did, but you should check the machine.” James never says no.

“Can you get me those tapes I was talking about? The ones from Rosetta Stone?”

“Ooh, the ones you were planning on getting before your divorce. Of course, I can.” James was cutting the meat on his plate.

“Well, when can you get them?”

“Probably by Saturday, but lemme shop around first to get the best deal. I might be able to get a discount through work.”

“Well, I’d like to start practicing soon. How soon for the discount?”

“I’ll check.” He pats my hand, smiles, and eats.

James likes to have all the food from his plate on his fork each time it goes into his mouth. He can’t have a fork of just meat or just chard. His body has to know what’s for dinner each and

every time he masticates. Then he smiles and looks up while drinking his seltzer before he does the whole thing again. I can't understand it, but he seems fine with the whole thing. It's gonna get inside one way or another, so why not just do it the way that you want instead of the way they tell you to do it on TV?

James is reading a technology magazine later that night while I have my coffee. It used to keep me up at night, but it doesn't anymore. He's waiting for me to forget about Frederick so we can do it tonight, but I can't. My boy had a big one. James's is just alright, but he's bigger than Van.

My boy always giggled when I rolled up my stockings for our fun shows, even though I didn't hitch them with a garter belt like my father always wanted me to. Fun shows always ended with Frederick learning something new. I was like a magician—a surprise trick was always at the end. He loved my breasts, like all the boys did, and let me take my time when I rode him. James sits in the middle of the bed, Indian-style, when I do fun shows for him. He keeps his hands hidden in his lap. He smiles and claps at the end and then reaches for me like he didn't just see something great. I tell you for a fact, men don't want it like they used to.

In the morning, I put on my gray slacks and white sweater with my navy flats to go back to the temp job. I'm thinking about Frederick as a boy at Christmas time, how he would always come into my room Christmas morning to see if we were awake. He'd do this every five minutes or so until we woke up. He never opened the gifts until we said it was OK, no matter how long he had to wait. He's a good kid like that. I gotta put my head down as I'm walking, otherwise people might think I'm crazy, because thinking about him is making me smile.

"Good morning, Miss Van Osten." The greeter woman wants to say something but can't, like it's stuck in her throat and she might die if she says it. Finally she says, "We were hoping you'd come in a little earlier today."

"Oh. What time is it?"

"9:45 a.m., Miss Van Osten."

"Oh."

When I get to my desk, all my yellow stick-ups with the doodles on them are lined up on the right side, overlapping each other like important documents that had to be looked at in the morning. There wasn't enough room for them all, so they went across the bottom edge toward the left side of the desk as well.

I move the stick-ups from the bottom edge and open a drawer like I'm searching for paper and pen to take instruction. Mrs. Hayden-Cohn is standing there waiting to give me instruction, but whatever it is, it's probably not going to make any sense anyway, so I keep opening the drawers back and forth a lot because they're noisy. I try to look like I'm searching hard because I want Mrs. Hayden-Cohn to go away.

"Well, we're glad you made it on a day like this. Thank you for coming."

A day like this? What is she talking about? The weather is warm but it's cloudy, so it's hard to know what to wear. It looks like it might rain, but the rain doesn't know if it's coming or not yet. In the meantime, it was making us wait.

Mrs. Hayden-Cohn placed her right fingertips on the desk and leaned in a little bit.

"We're expecting several calls this morning regarding the APEC conference. Would you be so kind as to forward them when they come in?"

I smile. My heart beat fast and felt hot until Mrs. Hayden-Cohn left. I bet she knew that I couldn't find where I had written down my computer password and that I'd asked James for money this morning, even though I still had some, and that I had once been arrested because of my kid.

"Has the phone been ringing out here?" I'm looking out the large round window when Ross walks in. He's this young guy who walks on his toes.

James had given me some candy this morning to show he cares. Not a box of chocolate, but the loose stuff you have to scoop up with a metal scooper and put in a plastic bag so it can be weighed. James and I were homeless together. We met in a drop-in center that takes in homeless people a year and some time ago. He told me that he got to the center like he did because

people had gotten tired of him and that he had needed to accept that. His clothes were always pressed, and he went out till the evenings every day, so I figured he had access to some sort of money. And he was tall, built like Darryl Strawberry when he used to play ball. He'd hold my hand on the table when we talked and didn't make a fuss if we had to sometimes sit in the back of the place if there was no room in the front.

"Yeah it works," Ross says, and puts the phone back down. Then he waits a few minutes with his hand on the phone and looks at me. He looks like he's gonna say something, but instead he taps the phone, scrunches up his mouth, turns, and walks tippy-toed back to the back rooms.

On the fifth ring, I pick the phone up. "Yeah. Hi, this is Bjorn David. Can I get Scott Spokes again? We just got cut off?"

"Hold on." I transfer him to Iris La Vega.

In the afternoon, Ingrid Bornfeld comes over. She's tall and reminds me of an ostrich. She has on beige leather heels that don't match her blue skirt suit, which looks alright.

"Mrs. Van Osten, nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

I shake her hand and smile too, because she's smiling.

"So, as you know, our big conference is tomorrow, and we're expecting a lot of people here at The Asia Cultural Society. The conference will be drawing lots of scholars and interested parties from across the city, the country, and even from the rest of the world, and we expect it to be a smashing success." Ingrid Bornfeld claps her hands again, and keeps them clasped. "Of course, with all conferences, such as they are, we'll be handing out a lot of material to go with the lectures, talks, and roundtables. That said, we're behind on our copying. Do you think you'd be able to help us out?" Ingrid Bornfeld claps and clasps her hands again. Both feet are together like she's about to bow to her sensei.

"Sure."

"Fabulous! We'll have you start with the documents that are already on the table on the left wall of the conference room. We'll need 35, 36 copies of each of these four documents. Most of the

documents are three to five pages each, front and back. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine."

"Great!" Ingrid Bornfeld shakes her fists in the air to the god of conferences and strides down the hallway on my left side, past the copier where I'd be making all those copies. I make notes on a yellow stick-up: "Three to five copies, front and back. 36 to 40 each."

For lunch, I go to Bryant Park and have a sandwich on a roll and a candy bar. The coffee at the job isn't strong enough for me, so I get some more with lunch. I can't wait for them to make a new pot, so I take the decaf instead.

I told James that I'd go with him to his sister's house for Christmas, but he said it was OK; we could stay home and have our own Christmas right here in East New York. Holidays were a real freaking big deal in my family. We had a lot of them at our house, and there'd always be music playing—always Mathis and Crosby at Christmas time.

My father wouldn't speak until we'd bowed our heads and gone around like deer in a fight until one of us nearly fell over from pulling the Christmas cracker. Then he'd put his arm around me or my sisters and pull us close and whisper, "Merry X-mas, sweetheart." Ma'd walk into the room, and he'd let us go, so she wouldn't see us and maybe get jealous. Uncle Kip would always want to turn on the TV, and then father would do a few things for ma, like carve the turkey or call the condo office to see where our guests could park, since there was never enough room out front.

We did a slow circle dance to get the food. It would be all laid out, with silver candleholders shined up with white candlesticks. The layout always looked classy, though the paint of the room was always the wrong color, which was peach.

You couldn't get your food unless the person in front of you was done getting theirs; that was just the way we did it. We did it like that out of respect to those who died in the Holocaust, though someone somewhere had converted, and we'd become non-Jews anyway. We thought we were doing right by those who had suffered and thought they'd be happy to know we were

thinking of them, having gone without the way they did. I'd go to church with my family but this way with Jesus—warm, in a circle smelling like food, with people breaking up at the end into groups all over the house—always felt like more of how he did it with his disciples than anything else.

When I get home that night, James isn't home. It's early, so I don't know what I'm thinking, but I wanted him to be there. The voice mail doesn't even pick up when I try Frederick's phone.

When I get to the temp job the next morning, most of the elevators are not working, so I have to wait before going upstairs. The guy next to me has his hands on his hips and keeps his head looking at the needle. He knows how to wait. He's slender and has a light blue shirt with a light blue plaid suit. He's got curly blond hair. I can't see his eyes well, but I bet they're blue. He shoulda been in California, surfing, with all the girls watching him, like the king of the beach and the sea. I ask him the time. He shakes his head like he couldn't be bothered. He never gives it to me.

The origami stars I'd made are in the conference room next to black ceramic flasks and paper cups. Nobody's put the stars next to the nametags like they were supposed to. If I'm supposed to, nobody told me to.

Ingrid Bornfeld comes in. She has on a bright yellow shirt and those beige heels.

"Don't forget those copies, Tanja." She smiles like she's running for office and taps me on the arm. "And don't forget about those stars," she whispers.

I move half of the stars to the other table that had just nametags and pens and pads. If I put one next to each nametag, that would be a waste. Stars are supposed to be in the sky, not where they'd be thrown away or left behind. I move 5 of them to the side because I'm gonna take them home. When I walk past my desk to make those copies, I put the papers down for a second. The five stars I'd taken I put in my desk drawer, the deep bottom one.

Ingrid Bornfeld asks me to greet the conference guests as they come in, but I can't do that since I'm making those copies.

I go to the copy room near Development and Outreach. I make forty copies of the first page of the first document, which is like five pages front and back, then forty copies of the back of that first page. While the second forty are running, I go to the supply closet and take some file folders to put the copies in. Every time I make forty copies, I put the first few words of the top of the page on the outside of the folder so they'll know which page is inside.

"How are those copies coming, Tanja?" Ross is leaning into the copy room with both arms stretched from the doorway, like he's going to hurl himself to the other side.

"Do you think you could help me out a little?"

He leans forward some more, gives me a nasty look, and then leaves.

I have my notes about the copying, but I can't read what I've written. There's too much to do, and it doesn't seem right that they'd waited until the last minute to get it all done.

I go to the bathroom. Ingrid Bornfeld sees me on the way and gives me a big smile and a thumbs-up, like going to the bathroom was the right thing to do.

I tape a note to the back of the bathroom stall. I couldn't figure out which one, so I choose the one that's the darkest, so she won't be embarrassed when she reads it. I wash my hands before I do it and make sure there's tape on all four corners, so it won't fall off.

"Ingrid," I write. "The business is running all wrong, so I left the papers so they can staple them themselves. They can stand in a line and move over every time someone takes the next one over. Then they can check to make sure they have all the right pages and start the meeting. If they don't have the right pages, someone will help them. Someone in the room will."

I leave the temp job and go to send in my timesheet. The guy who does the faxes is perched way up high behind a tall counter, and the fax machine is in the back somewhere. It costs a dollar a page. The guy keeps nodding when I ask him if it went through. Then a light bulb goes off, and he puts the fax confirmation sheet in a paper bag and gives it to me.

I must have stood there for five minutes with that paper bag

in my hand, trying to think of a way to put it in my bag without wrinkling it. No one says anything to me about it either, though it looks like the kind of store that doesn't get a lot of people who will take the time to ask if something is wrong or if they could help you. It's a big place, but they don't have enough stuff to fill it, so the back mostly has white walls with holes but no shelves. I think about going to the arcade to see if Frederick is there, but then I remember those stars I'd taken. I get hot, and search like a crazy lady in my bag for a tissue or something so the other people can't see how nervous I've gotten. New York probably has some kind of law on the books about stealing from temp assignments and the temp people were probably looking it up right now so they could give it to the police straight when they called them.

I ask a short guy with fat fingers, "I took some stuff I made and hid it so I could take it home. Do you think they'd notice?"

He looks down at his cigarettes and while he was taking off the plastic says, "You kidding me? These people around here all have money coming outta their assholes. They wouldn't notice nothing."

I don't say anything because I already know what's gonna happen. That Asian Society is gonna call the temp place and say, "We want the name and address of that woman who worked here, the one who didn't copy right and told us to staple the pages ourselves."

"You mean your term ended or you lost the job?" is what James says when I call him.

"I lost my job, like I said. I gotta go see about this fax stuff, though, about my timesheet. It might take a day or so to straighten out, so I might not be home. Can you give me some money until payday?"

"Sure I can. Where would you like me to leave it?"

"In the house somewhere."

He doesn't even ask how I was gonna make do until I come home or why I wasn't gonna be there tonight. To hell with people and their own agendas. I'll call right before I'm on my way back and tell him I stopped at my sister's house to clear my head and that I got upset again from seeing her go through the crisis with

the baby. He'll feel bad and leave the money if he hasn't already.

I rest my feet on top of my heels. They have good coffee and pastries at the depot, and the chairs aren't too bad to wait in either.

The first bus available shoots like a bat out of hell into the light of traffic. I leave for New Jersey before the temp agency realizes I'd stolen those paper stars and calls the cops.

I push my chair back, turn my head to the window, and close my eyes. My jacket's on me like a blanket, keeping me warm until the heat kicks in. My hands are clasped in my lap. I think of Him.

AUTHOR BIO Falcon Miller is a freelance writer and poet. Originally from London, she grew up in The Bronx, and currently resides in Brooklyn, NY. She received a B.A. in English from Amherst College and has been a participant in workshops held by Cave Canem and Gotham Writers' Workshop. For the past 10 years, in addition to writing, Ms. Miller has worked extensively to house NYC's street homeless population. She is currently working on two additional short stories that concern loss, identity and sex that are to form a triptych to 'Someone'. She can be reached at falconmiller505@gmail.com.



WHERE THE BUTTERFLIES MEET

by Timothy Ghorkin

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that “the psychology of conscience is not ‘the voice of God in man’; it is the instinct of cruelty ... expressed, for the first time, as one of the oldest and most indispensable elements in the foundation of culture.”

So the way I see it, the only way to get to hell is by achieving total self-awareness. You can't be condemned until you first realize what a horrible being you are. Damnation requires a mirror of introspection—the realization of one's actions and their affect on other beings.

And this is why all New Yorkers go to heaven.

—

Today starts out just like every other day. 3 p.m. at the Starbucks, vaping on my e-cigarette, my iPad glowing in my face. Tonight I'm meeting a new Japanese girl at a Man Man concert in Brooklyn. I found this one just like I find them all—on the Internet. The Japanese love technology and stuff that is cool, and the Internet is both of those things, so the easiest way to find Japanese girls in New York City is on hipster dating websites.

Some people think that guys who exclusively fuck Asian girls are perverts for some reason. And for some reason, they're right, although I don't really know why that is. But I'm different. I'm only into Japanese women. Why? Because I'm a nouveau riche piece of white trash from Middle America. I've never had access to them until now.

There are no Japanese women where I come from, and there never will be. If you wanted to bang an Asian girl back home, you had to settle for the ghetto Filipina girl down the block. Which I did. *Monica* and I used to dry fuck the shit out of each other every other day after school. But she was far from Japanese. She was *dark-skinned* and talked a lot like a black girl—said words like

bathroom and had bare-chested Tupac posters plastered all over the walls of her bedroom. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

But the Japanese are different from other Asians in America. They come from their own rich and vibrant culture, which means there are no Japanese refugees, so you don't exactly find them in Flint, Michigan. You need something more than mullets and short mustaches, Nike and fast food, cropped shag carpeting and dark smoky living rooms lit by local access cable TV to coax them out of an already tasteful and culturally rich environment. You need something new, something authentic, something "inspiring"—like indie rock, or Johnny Depp or fucking goddamn Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

So this is what I do now. I started vaping because I don't smoke. I've never smoked actually. I bought the e-cig purely for recreational purposes. I like it. It's *contemporary*. That little green light—it looks like you're smoking an iPod or blowing an alien or something.

Actually, the real reason I vape is because I enjoy entertaining myself with an element of faux-douchery which doubles as a camouflage among those I despise. Hatred's become a remarkable source of inspiration for me lately. It enlivens my day. It gets me out of bed each and every afternoon, and gives me a reason to go on. I'll do almost anything to get the hate fluids pumping. And there's no place better than a Starbucks in New York City to start a day fueled by a pure and healthy hatred of humanity.

I believe e-cigs to be a ridiculous lifestyle accessory, and I absolutely loathe Starbucks coffee. But the reason I vape in the Starbucks, fucking around on my iPad like a total asshole, is to wait for that one complete fucking piece of shit in his 2-piece Men's Warehouse suit to reprimand me for smoking in a public place.

His is a ubiquitous kind—an entire sub-species of human Nazi tattling filth, who just lives to complain about everything in the context of his unfathomable standards and beliefs, most of which he himself does not live by. He is today's America. He is what our forefathers feared. He is the new New Yorker—the

most important kind of person living in the most important city the world has ever seen. And as I see it, it is my social and moral responsibility as a True American to fuck his shit up.

It starts with him seeing the vape out of the corner of his eye from nearly 15 feet away. The alarm bells go off in his stupid brain. *You can't do that in here. This is a Starbucks. This is fucking New York City. You can't smoke here.*

This asshole actually steps out of line and walks over to me in that subtle half-goosestep. I can see in his eyes the total confusion—the bafflement, the bewildering notion that someone might not be following the rules.

He walks up and stands right over me, his eyebrows furrowed, scrutinizing—hyper vigilant. “Hey buddy, you know you can't smoke in a public place.” I glance up at him, roll my eyes and look back down at my iPad.

“Hey *bro*, are you deaf? This is New York. You can't smoke in here; it's *illegal*.”

And then it happens.

I get up and scream at the top of my lungs, right in the middle of a busy Starbucks, full of horrible fellow Americans, “It's not fucking smoke, BRO! It's fucking VAPE!” I take a big exaggerated drag and blow the vape right in his face so he can smell that familiar fog-machine smell he's so used to from the Meatpacking clubs—propylene glycol, it's the same shit.

“See!” I yell again into his face.

I'm waiting for him to spaz out and hit me. But of course he won't. He'll just yell and act like a dick in front of everyone, because deep down he has no balls, just like everyone else here.

You can't get into a fight in New York City anymore. You go to jail. The recklessness and wild action of old New York has been gone for decades. It's just a big, gay-friendly shopping mall now, where you can't smoke.

He scowls at me and turns around to walk away. He has nothing left to say because he has no idea what's just happened.

But the important thing right now is not how he feels, but how the situation has affected everyone else inside this corporate institution—a place where they thought they were

safe, segregated from a world where other people are constantly exposed to weird shit like this. He doesn't know it, but this man is a pawn in my game of breaking the general morale of society. Call it terrorism if you'd like; I don't even care. I look around and I can see that this entire situation has transpired exactly the way I engineered it. I know this because it has silenced a crowd of 30.

I can see it in their faces. They feel horrible inside. Weak and morally defeated. Right here and now they come to realize, even if just subconsciously, they're too weak and full of whatever the opposite of conviction is to possibly feel ok about themselves after experiencing what's just happened. Like when someone screams nigger on the subway and nobody has the balls to say or do anything about it, or when you're sitting in the park and some legless man comes rolling up asking for a little help, and you realize what a total piece of shit you are for denying him your spare change because you're too worried about revealing the bigger bills in your pocket when digging for the coins at the bottom.

Today, I've completed my social responsibility as an artist—I've effectively ruined the day of 30-40 successful American people.

In a decaying society, art, if truthful, must also reflect decay, and unless it wants to break faith with its societal function, art must show the world as changeable, and help to change it.

Ernst Fischer said that. Which I learned by watching the new Zeitgeist movie on Netflix.

In a Starbucks.

On my iPad.

Whilst vaping on my e-cigarette.

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I show up to the bar an hour early to get nice and drunk for her, so she can meet the real me. This bar has significant BO—or, *bohemian odor* if you'd like. Williamsburg is a magical place. It's where the greatest truth of humanity is revealed—*nobody cares*.

Everyone here has clearly convinced themselves that they are

artists. But the painfully obvious truth is *none of them are artists*. They are consumers. And this is what happens when you take the fundamental pain and struggle out of that which breeds art, and replace it with an entire lifetime of unearned money—it becomes hip instead.

She walks into the bar eyeing everyone with great scrutiny. I watch her scan the young people, searching for her older date while stopping to regard a couple of petite, pretty, young dark boys in loose tank tops. She scowls while passing behind them, though carefully, like they might be dangerous, wild animals.

I think I'm going to like this one. She looks like shit, though I can tell she's good-looking behind her grungy façade. She dresses like a really creative homeless person—many draping garments and scarves of clashing colors.

She finds me in the corner seat at the bar and walks over smiling. She tells me that she just came from getting a massage and that she's all oily and dirty and slimy feeling. I think this is her way of telling me that I have absolutely no shot at fucking her tonight, which I respect in a way.

I already like the way she carries herself, the way she owns it, feigning an air of importance to this crowd of self-important young people. We lean into the bar expertly, naturally—like adults. She orders some rye, a double, neat. I'm not exactly sure I've ever had rye, nor even actually know what it is, but I know it's something that most women don't drink.

Below her draping floral rags, she's got on green suede boots. She talks comfortably and confidently as I squirm and struggle nervously to keep up with her drinking and making fun of kids at the bar. Her hair's a goddamn mess, looks like it has about three days' worth of grease in it, forming thick black ribbons, and when she smiles there's a deep recessed incisor that I initially mistake for a missing tooth.

After about an hour or so, she complains about how shy I am and how she can't hear a damned thing I'm saying over the music. She wants to go somewhere else. "Fuck this band," she says.

"Fine," I say.

We find a generic rooftop bar with no music and little

patronage right around the corner. We take a seat far away from anyone else. Now that she can hear my voice, she has all kinds of horrible questions for me to answer—the kind I’m too unprepared and drunk to competently lie about. She asks me what I do for a living, where in New York I grew up, what my parents do for a living.

Little does she know that the premise of this line of questioning is wholly presumptuous for someone like me. But I tell her anyway. I tell her that my mom and dad died of heart disease and diabetes, respectively, and that I do nothing for a living, because I won a “\$1,000 a week for life” scratch-off lotto ticket, and if I hadn’t I’d probably be dead in a ditch somewhere or on the street begging for change, because I have a liberal arts degree from a no name community college and I have no social media or networking experience, which makes me unemployable by today’s standards.

She confesses that she has no idea what the fuck a “scratch-off lotto ticket” is, so I explain to her what kind of person plays the lottery in America.

I tell her that just like everybody else who lives in New York, I wasn’t born here.

That I grew up in a small white trash town just north of Pittsburgh, where people smoke cigarettes, play the lottery and work menial jobs. I tell her that this is what most of America is really like. I tell her that I moved here because I won a lot of money in the state lottery, and because there are no Japanese girls where I come from. This makes her laugh, though it’s actually not a joke at all, but I smile along anyway.

Then she wants to know what American life is like outside of New York City, because she’s never seen anything outside of Brooklyn.

I tell her that New York City is nothing like America—that New York is a “city-state,” a cosmopolis not unlike ancient Rome or Athens. Its identity and way of life are completely divergent from the standards and identities of the rest of its surrounding nation. It exists as a sovereign, independent state that functions solely to control the rest of the world’s economy. I tell her that

if the terrorists blew up all of the major cities in America but left New York, the world would function more or less the same, economically. But if you wiped New York off the map, the world was basically fucked, because New York is the chassis for the economic engines that run the world, and because of this it is the most important city the world has ever seen.

I tell her that Americans don't live like New Yorkers. In America, you can smoke at the bar. You can own a gun. You can get into a fistfight without going to prison. You can own your own home. In America, the lights aren't really there to *inspire*—but to simply light the way and allow one to see and navigate when it's dark out. In America, people throw the trash in dumpsters instead of leaving it in bags on the sidewalk. The bars close at 2 a.m., no one's heard of a bodega, and people manage to get by on a \$30k salary because they buy their food in grocery stores and wear the clothes they bought last year.

"Are there any similarities?" she asks.

"Starbucks," I tell her.

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After hearing all of this, she declares that I'm weird and disturbed, but funny in a "sorrowful kind of way," and after closing out the bar, she asks if I have any drinks at my place.

"My place" is a boarding house where I live month-to-month. It's designed for young working professionals and immigrants who've yet to acquire the income standards on paper to score a lease for their own apartment. It's like a halfway house for decent people of modest means and tastes, to matriculate into the hyper-bourgeoisie status quo of a proper New Yorker. In other words, I don't have my own apartment, because I'm too lazy most days to get out of bed and go look for one. Plus I like knowing that I can leave at any time and move on with relative ease.

After last call and some tasteless courting on my behalf, we're back at "my place." We drink bottom-shelf booze from the disgusting little "mini-bar" of half-consumed fifths of random shit whiskey and vodka I've collected on my rented dresser.

She presses her mouth into mine and all I can taste and smell is the hot vapor of booze. As I'm completely unprepared for this situation, I realize that I don't have any more condoms, so she demands that I run out to the bodega across the street and get some.

An Asian man at the register looks at me in a weird way as I purchase the condoms and nothing else. For some unexplained, paranoid reason I feel like he knows (and resents) the fact that I'm about to copulate with an Asian woman.

After screwing for a few hours, we lay there together listening to the gridlock traffic on 42nd St. through the only window in the room, which faces another brick building.

Out of nowhere, I ask her, "Do you ever masturbate?" I don't know why, but I've had a compulsion to ask this question of every woman I've ever been with for the first time. Maybe it's a subconscious desire to get them to leave.

She cracks a half-offended smile and says, "Sure, *all* the time."

"Really? What do you masturbate to?" I sit up in immediate attention, quick and pensive, hoping she'll reveal some twisted, disgusting fantasy that coincides with one of mine.

"Myself," she replies.

I pause to regard this for a moment, then reach under the bed to rummage through my new artisanal leather bag I bought in Williamsburg. I whip out my e-cig—pointing it profane and vulgar in the air between my thumb and forefinger. I roll over to her, gripping the heavy plastic vaporizer expertly between my teeth, and ask her, "Do you mind if I *vape* in bed?"

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For a while neither of us had a place we could have sex. I was beginning to upset the head mistress at the boarding house with all of the "loud banging" at night, and Her place in Brooklyn was sort of an open forum for roommates of every imaginable walk of life. Furthermore, I'd discovered that my lottery earnings weren't enough to satisfy the New York income standards for pinning down a lease on even a lousy \$1,700 studio. They wanted

references, a credit history, 6 months of canceled rent checks from a previous residence, and a letter of assurance from my accountant.

I didn't have an accountant.

"But I'm rich," I told the broker as I set my iced Starbucks coffee down on his \$10,000 desk, the condensation already bleeding through the napkin. "No you're not," he replied, sliding a coaster underneath it.

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Thank God she found her own place a few months later. I was beginning to realize that the lifestyle of a degenerate, electric-zoo-partying, Persian prince sex addict wasn't physically sustainable after the age of 30. I was indeed getting too old for this shit: drinking every night, slumming around in boarding houses, sex in semi-public places, living on the streets practically every day with nowhere to rest or properly take care of myself.

Something was beginning to feel wrong with my insides, and a vague feeling of shame and moral anxiety loomed over me daily. My hands and feet were chronically puffy, my mind worked like a rusted, smoking piece-of-shit American automobile from the 1980s, and my gut was a bloated, sagging mess.

Luckily, her Japanese ex-girlfriend—yeah, it was news to me too—was giving up a 9-year, rent-controlled lease in Brooklyn Heights and needed someone to sublet her apartment for a year. This alleged girlfriend was moving back to Japan after so many years in "The States," because the litigation market shit the bed and she had recently been laid off as a paralegal at the law office she worked for. So she offered my old lady her apartment while she went back to Japan for a year to get her shit together. I never got to see what this Japanese ex-girlfriend looked like before she went away (yes, I asked), but the place she left us was a massive one-bedroom for only \$1,400 a month, which seemed an almost perfect proposition, notwithstanding the fact that technically it was an illegal sublease unbeknownst to the property owner.

But we didn't really care about the future. We were smitten by

an immediate and unprecedented relief. Finally, we had a place we could relax. We moved in together a week later. I got my one big bag of shit from the boarding house and told the ball-busting head mistress to fuck right off. I didn't even stick around to collect my deposit.

But before I could even realize what was happening, life had gotten real easy, and in a very abrupt kind of way. There was something vaguely ominous about this.

Life was now local restaurants four nights a week. Drinks every evening. TV in bed. Late afternoon wakeups and brunch wherever we could find it served after 3 p.m. I was absolutely annihilating about 3,500 calories a day, 2/3 of which were being consumed right before bed after getting drunk.

It seemed just weeks before my life was unimaginably different. Before, I used to go outside. I used to go to the Starbucks and piss off god-fearing Americans. Before, I used to have a purpose. Now, I didn't even get out of bed. My laptop and Netflix and HBO Go had summoned the great, dark sloth from my being. If I got up before 4 p.m., which wasn't very often, I'd go to the little indie coffee shop at the end of our block, and not because I sought to hate its patrons, but because I actually liked it.

The way I used to *get my hate on* in a nice clean, corporate Starbucks had filled me with inspiring rage; now it just made me sad and frightened and worried about all those coffee cup lids floating on the rolling waves of millions of tons of trash in the great Pacific Garbage Ring—which I learned about from a documentary on Netflix, at home, in bed, vaping in the privacy of my own home, while my Japanese girlfriend was away at work.

When she gets home from her lunch shift, I've just woken up and she's drunk and frantic and babbling to herself in a language I'll never learn. I tell her to chill out, tell me what happened.

“The landlord. He came to the restaurant today.”

“So?”

“He talked to me. He *knows*.”

“He knows what?”

“He knows I’m not *Miki*.”

“Who the fuck is Miki?”

“The girl whose apartment it is!”

“Oh, right.”

—

Now let me tell you something hilarious about New York City. The housing situation in New York is nothing short of a social nightmare. The rent stabilization laws were designed to protect native New Yorkers from being squeezed out of their rightful habitat should the housing market ever inflate and put pressure on those less fortunate. So when all the upper-middle class assholes finally grew tired of their 3-hour daily commute and abandoned the suburbs for The City, consequently gentrifying every borough in their wake, the rent stabilization laws were put there to protect the less fortunate from being pushed out by the demands and standards of the hyper-bourgeoisie. In theory, the system works to keep New York a socio-economically diverse city while maintaining its world-class status—competitive, but socially aware.

The problem with this system though is that it gives property owners a financial incentive to get rid of rent-controlled tenants by whatever means necessary when the real estate market forecasts to make them filthy fucking rich.

So when some Japanese girl illegally sublets her 9-year, rent-controlled apartment to *your* Japanese girlfriend, and the landlord wants to know why there were two moving trucks outside of his property within just two days of each other, this is where the shit gets real between tenants and landlords in New York City.

I find out that this asshole landlord has actually been following her when she leaves the apartment, so he can find out where she works. Then he comes in for lunch, and while

he's eating his goddamn sushi, he grabs her by the wrist as she's serving him tea and tells her that she's violating "The Rent Stabilization Code" with an "illegal sublet agreement." He tells her that she's breaking the law, and she has two weeks to get the fuck out of there or he'll have "the marshal" throw her and all of her shit right out onto the streets. He says if she doesn't comply there are grounds for a lawsuit and court fees that she's liable to pay. He actually tells her all of this while she's serving him lunch. The fucking people in this town!

I think about this for a while, and after some careful consideration, I decide it's time to man up—to do my part in this relationship, which is to handle matters like these.

I tell her not to worry about it. "We're fucking New Yorkers, baby. We have squatter's rights. He just thinks he can push you around because you're a foreigner and you don't know any better. Which is true, I guess, but don't worry about it. This is white man's business. I'll straighten out this fucking ginzo."

So I get this idea where I tell her to set up a meeting with this piece of shit. But instead of meeting her, like he thinks, he's actually going to be meeting me. I find out that his name is Richard Giancola and that he owns property all over town. Our code name for him now is "Dick Salami"—because A) his name is Richard, B) he's a dick, and C) his last name sounds like some kind of obscure imported salami.

So she sets up the meeting with Mr. Dick Salami. I have her schedule the meeting in the late afternoon because I don't get out of bed for a damned thing before 3 p.m. these days. I also tell her to have him meet me at the park right by our apartment, for even a little more added convenience. Of course he doesn't know that instead of her, he's going to be dealing with me.

Since this guy is absolutely full of daunting legal information, I know better than to show up unprepared. I have an iPad with unlimited access to the Internet. I have an e-cig to keep me stimulated and steadfast in my research. After just a couple hours on Google, I now know that he first has to serve her a "notice to quit" the lease, which is an official legal document that needs to be served to the tenant by a 3rd party (lawyer) before an eviction

complaint can even be filed. Furthermore, it takes months and months to get evicted in New York, especially in Brooklyn because Brooklyn is full of deadbeat losers like me and her and this kind of shit happens all the time. Get in line, asshole.

Last night I took 10 mgs of melatonin and washed it down with about half a fifth of Templeton rye in an effort to paralyze and pound me into a deep, Freudian sleep. Lately I've been having horrible nightmares about tornados. Massive ones the size of small towns in the distance, dozens of tiny ones up close, skinny and black and winding down onto disintegrating man-made structures. Last night the tornados all caught on fire, touching off giant bundles of brush and weeds, wild shrieking winds stoking insatiable flames, causing mass conflagration on the land. The absolute horror of it all caused me to wake up with a panic attack.

After it subsided I fell into a drug-dirty haze. When I looked at my phone, it was already 2:45 p.m. Time to meet Dick Salami.

Needless to say, I'm a fucking mess right now. I feel vulnerable, weak, easily intimidated. I scamper into the park looking around for some greaseball asshole in a tracksuit. Sure enough I see Tony fucking Soprano there smoking a cigarette by one of the park benches. It's totally illegal to smoke a real cigarette in the park and he doesn't even care. I pull out my e-cig and take a couple vape rips to calm my nerves, but it just makes me feel pathetic.

He's an old-school looking motherfucker. Stout. Slicked back hair, tasteless black leather jacket from some Wilson Leather outlet in some shitty outdoor suburban mall.

When you watch *The Sopranos*, sometimes you think the characters are too larger than life to be believably real—that is until you actually move to the East Coast. The words of Meadow Soprano are now echoing in my head: “Some fat fuck in see-through socks.”

I take one more shameful rip and hide the e-cig in my pocket before walking toward him in my best “strong, silent-type”

manner.

“Hey, you looking for a Japanese girl?”

“Just one in particular,” he says, his big shit-eater wide across his face. “Why, you her pimp?” He’s wittier than I’d expected.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Who the fuck are you? Where is she? She was supposed to meet me here at 3.”

“She’s not coming,” I tell him. “You’re here to talk to me.”

He tilts his head way back and laughs into the sky. “Oh that’s rich!” He eyes me down like I’m as pathetic as they come. “Well, I’m guessing by the looks of you, you aren’t exactly her lawyer. So, who might you be?”

“John,” I lie.

He scoffs again, like my name can’t possibly be John, which it’s not, and I’m nervously wondering how he might know this. “Ok *John*. Tell your little lady she’s in a world of shit if she doesn’t get the fuck out of there by the end of the month.”

“End of the *month*?” I hear my voice crack a little. “That’s less than two weeks. Do you live on the fucking moon? How about we just stay for there for free and you can wait six months or more for the eviction to process.”

He raises his hands a little, showing his palms, mocking surrender. “Oh, my mistake! Look at Mr. fuckin’ big shot New York City housing lawyer over here.”

He’s clearly not at all intimidated by what I know, and suddenly I have a very bad feeling.

“You know, you might have been right if she was a U.S. citizen. But unfortunately for you, illegal immigrants don’t have the same rights as Americans or permanent residents.”

Great. Here it fucking comes.

“Yeah, I had my guy check into it. Your little lady here is an illegal alien, her student visa expired like three years ago, which means if either of you give me any more shit, not only will I throw her ass out of the apartment, I’ll call immigration and have her fucking deported, then the both of you can go live happily ever after in a nice tiny, cramped little shit-box over there in Tokyo.”

I stand there, looking at the ground, with nothing else to say. I've got nothing left.

"Gawd, look at yourself. How old is that shirt you're wearing, anyway? You know what's wrong with you, with your fucking generation? You have no respect for anything at all, including yourselves. You walk around in sweatpants and a dirty black t-shirt all day saying 'who cares' all the time, like it's a declarative fucking statement."

"Yeah, that's real nice provincial wisdom there, Dick. I'll see you in court," I lie.

"Yes you will!" he leers at me, before blowing real, honest-to-God cigarette smoke in my face before walking away.

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Why the fuck didn't she tell me she was illegal? Now we're completely fucked. Making the bastard evict us legally was my only play, and now I have nothing. I need a drink. It's not even 4 p.m., and I've only been awake for about an hour, but I might as well get started since I'm going to have to break the news to her as soon as she gets off work.

We're going to have to leave this place in less than two weeks, and with no back-up plan. I can swallow my pride and reinstate myself at the boarding house, I guess, but my options don't really help her much, because she actually works for a living.

As I sit there at this shit bar in Bushwick trying to think of a way out, I'm inconveniently reminded that we've been fucking for months without the use of a condom or any other *deterrent*, and to no one's surprise she hasn't had her period in over a month. She says she doesn't *feel* pregnant, so I guess that can't be a bad thing, but lately she's been either too busy, or too lazy, or too scared to piss on a pregnancy test, so I guess the tacit understanding between us if she *is* pregnant is that hopefully we can just "drink it off" over the next few weeks, along with the rest of our first-world problems. Right now this is on the forefront of my mind since we're about to be homeless.

I come back from the bar at closing time and she's in the

living room, sitting on the floor, at the bottom of our last fifth of rye. I don't have to tell her. She already knows, what with my coming home at 3 a.m. and five missed calls on my phone—my meeting with Dick Salami did not go well. I sit down on the floor beside her, hoping she'll share that last sip of rye, but she greedily slams the rest of it and lazily rolls the bottle across the floor.

We need to get drunker, but it's late and all the bars are closed. And so it's come to the "reserve bottle"—that godforsaken thing stashed under the sink where it belongs, with all the solvents and cleansers and noxious cleaning fluids. For non-alcoholics and the general self-respecting individuals who are unfamiliar with this sort of backup faculty, a *reserve bottle* is the worst glass bottle liquor money can buy. The nature of a heavy drinker deems that all *reserve liquor* must be relatively undesirable, otherwise you'll just drink it when you're too lazy to make a trip to the liquor store. Not unlike tonight, a *reserve night* is never a night met with eloquence or grace. It's an evening marked by undeniably irresponsible drinking.

"I think I'm *plegnant*," she says.

Fuck.

"Why? How?" I ask. "We don't even have an apartment anymore. Homeless people can't have babies, it doesn't work that way. And why the fuck didn't you tell me you didn't have your goddamn Green Card?"

"I don't know; don't yell at me. I'm *plegnant*."

"Well, you're just gonna have to get *un-plegnant* because we don't have any other choice."

"But you have money."

I quickly stand up from the floor and step a few paces away as though some dangerous animal or insect just appeared beside me.

"Yes, but that's *my* money! It's enough for only me, for one cheap lifetime of substandard living and freedom—not for three people and a fucking child's college education, and expensive sneakers and a minivan and a house and Obamacare and shit. We can't even find an apartment to live in, are you fucking kidding me? I would have to get a fucking job for fuck's sake!"

“So you can just *get a job* then, and we can have a family.” As quickly as she blurts this out, the tears begin to well up in her eyes and her lower lip starts quivering, because she knows how stupid and improbable it all sounds in the context of what she can actually expect from someone like me.

She breaks down and begins sobbing. Then the anger comes. She stands up to confront me. “I’m the only one in the world you have to be nice to! Why can’t you do that? Just be a man!” She throws a fist at me from over her head, but I catch it, and with my free hand I grab her by the face and squeeze her cheeks together, pulling her whole head close to mine so that I can glare into her eyes.

“Now you fucking listen to me! I will fucking *kill a man* before I go back to work again, do you understand? I refuse to bring a child into this disgusting shit world. I will not take responsibility for it. And if you decide to go ahead and have it anyway, I will fucking disappear from this earth, do you hear me? You won’t even be able to find me to match the DNA. No child support, no weekly anonymous check, no nothing. Do you hear what I’m fucking saying to you?”

I push her face away from me and she breaks down and screams, falling to her knees, hugging her own torso, like in some kind of fucked up Steinbeck scene where the mother finds out her child has been killed by some horrible, abrupt force of nature on the desolate Western frontier. She looks up at me with wet quivering eyes, that sort of ruthless Japanese rage that you only see in Kurosawa films and violent anime movies.

I’m too drunk and entranced by her reaction, so I don’t see her reaching for the empty bottle of rye beside her. Suddenly it comes whirling at my head. But it’s not like in the movies, where the guy ducks and it shatters on the wall behind him. No, instead this is the real world, and I’m too wasted to react quickly enough to dodge anything, so the bottle hits me right in the forehead. I scream this weird high-pitched scream, a noise that I didn’t even know I could make, and I put my hand to my head clutching where the pain is. It’s wet and warm. I take my hand away and look at it, and it’s almost completely covered in blood. I run over

to her and throw her against the wall. She's screaming and crying, and saying "Fuck you," and "I hope you die," and all the rest of it.

"Rape" isn't exactly the word I would use to describe what happens next, but to a lot of people these days it could totally look like that. There's a lot of screaming and struggling and "fuck you's!" and "no's!" and wrist grabbing, but eventually she gives in or changes her mind or *whatever*, and we stumble into the bedroom and she gets on top—and so now I know it can't be rape which is somewhat morally relieving—and we start doing it in this weird, rough, hateful way that I've never experienced before, and I'm not really sure that I like it at all.

It then occurs to me that since I'm the one pinned underneath her, and I'm a little scared right now, because I'm the one bleeding with injury and she's the one slamming herself down on me and growling at me in Japanese through closed gritted teeth, that maybe I'm the one that's actually being raped. Either way, I'm now on the verge of blacking out, either from too much reserve liquor or from the onset of concussion, or both, and it's getting darker, and the room is fading out through a pinhole like at the end of an episode of Looney Tunes. But she just keeps slamming herself down on me, harder and faster, still gnarring at me in an ancient language I'll never learn, and before I can even think about how to finish what's happening, there's suddenly nothing but darkness and void.

—

I wake up some time the next morning, and I can't remember the last time I've seen the morning sun. My head has that sledgehammered feel inside it. A head injury combined with a hangover is a new one for me. She's still there, but passed out on the edge of the bed, curled up in a ball, as far away from me as possible. I sit up and clutch my head, and it's all crusty feeling and it stings and aches like a motherfucker and everything is spinning for a moment. I sit there and blink heavily until the room finally blurs into focus.

I take a look around the room and there is blood everywhere.

Not just on the sheets, but spattered all over the walls and the pillows and smeared with handprints all over the place. It looks like someone was murdered here, and in a very bad way. I look down and there's blood all over my pelvis and stomach too. It suddenly occurs to me that at least half of this blood isn't mine—can't be mine. If it was I'd have been dead hours ago. I look down and see that her underwear is soaked in it as well.

It takes a few seconds for me to realize that she must have had her period in the middle of whatever the fuck was going on last night. I'm in the worst pain of my life, though suddenly I've never felt more relieved. This must be how every drunk feels when they've finally made the commitment of sobriety. It is absolutely awful and wonderful all at the same time—the feeling of pain and rescue all at once, profound and life-changing. I can feel new synapses forming in my brain as entirely new associations are being realized. I am once again free.

She's still passed out there on the edge of the bed, and there's no way in hell I'm going to wake her. She'll figure it all out eventually. Even if she loses the apartment, like she probably will, she can just find another roommate and go back to the way it was before we met—not living with a boyfriend and not pregnant.

As for me, I don't even bother to shower before leaving. I clean myself off as best I can in the sink, put a Band-Aid over the giant gash in my forehead, and don't even bother to change my 3-day-old t-shirt because like always, it's black, so no one can tell how filthy it really is. I gather my one big bag of shit that I never even finished unpacking in the first place and make my way down the street to the nearest subway bound for the old boarding house back in The City.

When I get there, I see the head mistress and I hang my injured head low with shame as I fill out the registration form once again and make yet another security deposit. She looks at me with pity and mercifully checks me in without any questions or bullshit. I look up at her and nod a subtle thank you, take my key to my room and I go to sleep for what seems like a month.

—

It's more than a year later and I'm at a Starbucks in Brooklyn again. I'm sitting out on their little patio, on the bright galvanized steel furniture, sipping something "tall" and artificially flavored like pumpkins. It's cold out, but the sun is a bright and menacing hell today.

I forgot my e-cig and my iPad at home, because my brain is sewage, and there was some asshole in line today talking loudly to some other asshole on his cellphone about the overall comfort and general quality of his new Clarks brand shoes, but I didn't have the balls to do anything about it.

These days I have to keep telling myself that I don't come here for the goods and services—that my presence is motivated by something dark and deep-seated. Maybe I'm planning something big. Maybe I'm through with all of these chicken-shit mini-raids on humanity's lewd, public displays of comfort, and I'm just waiting for the perfect time to bring out the big guns. Maybe I'm building it all up to ruin Christmas shopping this year.

But maybe not.

The reality is it's hard to resist life's little comforts when you're getting older and can easily afford them. Sometimes it's nice to just sit outside and enjoy a warm pumpkin latte without harassing people who just want the same simple things that you and everyone else wants in the end.

So I sit out there in the cold for a very long time, just thinking, and resting, and regarding the scenery. This particular Starbucks patio juts right out over the East River where there's a spectacular view of FiDi. From all the way across the river you can watch the city's brand new hyper-speed MAV surveillance drones ripping through what seems like hundreds of birds. It's late autumn so the birds can't help it—migratory restlessness. They just keep taking up into flight, despite their kin being cut to the ground right in front of them. With each invisible orbit the drones knock at least two birds dead to the ground as they loop around the massive buildings, gathering information on potential terrorists. It's fascinating to watch. With each direct hit, there's an explosion of feathers you can see from all the way over here in

Brooklyn. It's hilarious.

Suddenly, she appears behind me. I turn all the way around and see her there in her long coat, holding her coffee, smiling a sad little smile at me. I notice immediately she's a little thicker around the middle than before and rather bloated in the face—a result of long-term drinking I suspect. I can only assume that I look the same, but I have no idea; my new boarding house doesn't even have a mirror in the bathroom. I haven't seen my own reflection in weeks.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing she thinks to say.

"Sorry? For what?" I laugh.

"For pushing you away."

I pause to regard this sort of backwards thinking for a moment—Stockholm Syndrome.

I decide not to argue though. "Maybe," I say. "I'm sorry too. Sometimes you tell yourself that people say stupid things they don't mean when their back's against the wall and they're drunk and scared. But then again, maybe that's actually what they've been hiding all along. I mean, who knows, right?"

She nods her head and looks to the ground in sort of an ashamed but contemplative manner.

I offer a sick little smile to lighten the mood. "Anyway," I tell her. "We're clearly too destructive for one another. People like us need someone weaker and kinder to prey off of. Having an equal is just too dangerous for everyone."

She laughs a little, rolling her eyes and she nods again. After a painfully long period of silence, she mutters something token and cliché about catching her train and having dinner in the city, then quickly hugs me goodbye, saying maybe I'll see her soon.

Whatever.

I look out against the city skyline again, and I begin to think about what kind of person I am and where I came from and how I live now. And I remind myself that even if my lifestyle might seem a little irresponsible when compared with how the rest of the world struggles to survive, it's sure a hell of a lot better than living in some busted American ghost town, where there's violence and poor people and obesity and unemployment and

diabetes. And even though I don't have to work for a living like a lot of the people in this city, I can see that folks are still able to "make it" here—even if you have to be a maid in someone's condo or a Chinese delivery man. Here, at least the lights are still on and that gives hope to a lot of people, and in a way, it really is *inspiring*. Because at the end of the day, we live in the most important city in the world, and we're getting paid, and we're getting satisfaction, and we all love New York. And we're *confident*.

And that's what really matters.

AUTHOR BIO: Timothy Ghorkin lives in New York City with his Japanese girlfriend (no big deal). He's jobless and gets by doing a little this and a little that here and there, while attempting to finish his first novel. Complaints and comments about his writing can be addressed to tgcirca1982@gmail.com.

MANY MANY PLUMBERS

by Daniel Fuginski

How many plumbers
wake up at the crack of dawn
have a coffee, some toast, read,
take a shit,
go out to brave the day
and on their way to work
see a red van that reads:
“NUMBER ONE PLUMBER IN THE CITY”
in big fuck-you white letters
with black outline
on the side of the road.

A plumber who is number two,
or number forty-nine in the city,
who, rather than seeps and moans
about it, hits the gas,
gets to the site,
fits the pipes,
and carries on.

How many plumbers
have never once fixed a toilet
or a tap
yet call themselves a plumber;
their rank unaccounted for
lack of data.

How many writers
write a metaphor
about plumbing

in order to write another poem
about writing—
the subject written about more than anything.

To plumb and get nothing done.
Don't be vulnerable about that,
anything but that, please.
Who in the hell wants to read about that—
someone else's pipes rusting away.
If you don't care to fix them then why should we
give a shit.

AUTHOR BIO: Daniel Fuginski received a B.A. in English from Simon Fraser University, which is the world's most beautiful concrete square on a mountain/stronghold against invaders. He currently resides in Surrey, British Columbia, which is alright I guess.

ELEVATION

by Andrea O'Rourke

The pines above the terraced churchyard
drip resin over stone roses and faceless cherubs
crested the flat-tiered slabs

that glow as if in the presence of God.
Nearby, thriving in cornflower and ironweed,
a boat junkyard, more pines, their sticky breath

of decay, the crickets' toothed pitch.
Here a local sot pees into the *U* in *Una*
painted on the side of a white skiff

and gazes down at sunbathers—
the goat path dipping into the flat sea,
penciled brows of gulls hovering in the sky.

He thinks of cities he's never seen,
those smooth, glass-encased buildings,
the fox-gray scrawls of highways

that wind unlike his shore, jaggy and broken
like chalk, and how, he heard, the streetlights
keep refusing tomorrow.

He feels a tug in his neck, yearns
for a handful of cash, a sweet tourist ass.
He's watched them all his life,

carried their luggage sealed
with good life, rented them umbrellas,
sold donuts with plum marmalade.

They come in couples. Sometimes with a child.
She's German. Or Czech. Her name is Ingrid. Or Eva.
Her thighs get dimpled from lying on the gravel.

She's shaved and you can almost see
her clit, rosy like the inside of a fig.
Her voice isn't. She hates plums.

He lights a cigarette, palms his chin, swears,
Gonna make this shit happen, and the smoke
swags down like falling hosiery,

clears in the warble of motorboats,
oars' muffled splashes, in the blue-braids
and the nickel swirls of herring

where he'll wash the paint shavings
out of his hands, ache out of his joints,
knock down her goddamn Kraut—*The man*,

his old woman used to say, *you could be*—
take his yacht keys, and the Benz keys, and *Good Lord*,
Good Lord, go down on that angel of damnation.

AUTHOR BIO: Andrea O'Rourke's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in The Missouri Review, Harpur Palate, Barrelhouse, Raleigh Review, Slipstream, Verse Wisconsin, and elsewhere. She is the 2013 Robinson Jeffers Tor Prize Winner. A native of Croatia, she lives in Atlanta, where she attends the MFA program and teaches composition at Georgia State University, translates, and paints—oils on cotton paper and acrylics on canvas.



AYESHA MILLER

by Royce Brooks

When she was nine years old, Ayesha Miller decided what she wanted to do when she grew up was marry rich. Contrary to the conventional feminist wisdom about the dangers of gender-normative childhood entertainment, Ayesha's decision was not the result of repeated viewings of Disney fairy-tale cartoons. Despite Hollywood's strongest efforts, Ayesha never gave a single thought to finding a husband—much less a rich husband—until the day Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had their electricity shut off for failure to pay. It was then that she abandoned her dream of becoming an Olympic track medalist like Flo Jo, and devoted herself to her new life goal of marrying into money.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson lived next door to Ayesha's family, and Mrs. Johnson was Ayesha's mother's closest friend. Mr. Johnson was tall and elegantly handsome, with a sardonic manner and a perpetual half-frown; Mrs. Johnson was small, brown, and prettily dimpled like Ayesha's favorite baby doll. They were by far the most glamorous couple in the neighborhood. Her brash, flirty laugh; his low, acerbic one and the chime of well-bourboned ice cubes hitting glass comprised the soundtrack of every neighborhood party Ayesha could remember. Unfortunately, fronting the virtual house band for so many Juneteenth barbecues and Super Bowl parties sapped Mr. Johnson's energy, leaving him ill-equipped to handle the added burden of maintaining steady employment. When Mr. Johnson was not between jobs, he was hoping to be.

The day she vowed to marry rich, Ayesha had arrived home from school to find her mother and Mrs. Johnson reclining heavily in two kitchen chairs. After a heated discussion with Mr. Johnson about why exactly his new job as a postal employee was too wretched to be borne, Mrs. Johnson was bemoaning her situation to Ayesha's mother and a quarter-full bottle of Maker's. Either the heated discussion or the whiskey had apparently

induced in Mrs. Johnson a limited form of amnesia: she was unable to remember why she had ever decided to become Mrs. Johnson in the first place, instead of remaining cute Debra Mullins with the bouncy figure. Ayesha walked into the kitchen just as Mrs. Johnson was bringing her lament to its soggy conclusion: “I should have married rich.”

I should have married rich. The five words slid into place in Ayesha’s head like the pins in a combination lock. Ayesha’s eyes widened as Mrs. Johnson’s boozy declaration sunk in. Ayesha realized that Mrs. Johnson was not lamenting mere bad luck; what Mrs. Johnson regretted was her own failure to act. Never before had Ayesha thought of marriage as an action that one could *do*; until that very moment, she had regarded marriage as a something that just sort of happened to people, like allergies. But now she saw the truth: it would not do merely to marry the first man who chose you. A girl could change her whole life—guarantee herself comfort and freedom—by doing the choosing herself.

Ayesha pictured herself rich and entitled, elaborately made-up like the ladies on *Dallas* or *Falcon Crest* or her mother’s favorite, *Dynasty*. There she was, in the Diahann Carroll role: skinny, pigtailed Ayesha Miller, now impossibly exquisite and exuding more bitchy hauteur than any five bleach-blonde costars. All that stood between that future and her was the wealthy husband she now intended to acquire.

Ayesha’s idea gained momentum a few months later, when her parents enrolled her in the prestigious Plainridge Day School. Riding high on Mr. Miller’s recent unexpected promotion and attendant raise, the Millers had initially considered several uses for the extra cash. For three weeks, a shiny blue convertible topped Mrs. Miller’s wish list, while Mr. Miller agitated incessantly for a new home entertainment system. Unable to choose, they decided to compromise by using the money to improve their daughter’s educational prospects. Ayesha’s teachers at the neighborhood school regarded her as a bright and intelligent girl, but her classroom performance consistently fell short of her parents’ expectations. The Millers hoped that a bit

more academic rigor and a predominantly plaid uniform would finally allow Ayesha to release the talented scholar within.

To Ayesha, the very words *private school* meant big German cars slaloming through piles of money, and she was excited to be moving that much closer to the rich boys. She carefully cultivated friendships with her new classmates, focusing on the girls with the best-looking older brothers. The students at Plainridge lived almost exclusively on the west side of the city, where low-slung ranch houses sprawled over thousands of square feet behind elaborate stone facades, and splashes from glowing backyard pools echoed through the sterile streets.

Ayesha found these little rich girls remarkably easy to win over, and soon she had calibrated her interactions with scientific exactitude. Her basic recipe combined one part superficial compliment—shininess of hair, slightness of weight, and awesomeness of earrings were all acceptable topics—with one part petty bribery, typical examples of which included the Fruit Roll-Up from Ayesha's lunch or an especially glittery Lisa Frank sticker. In no time, Ayesha was a regular at the west side slumber parties.

To Ayesha's old friends from her neighborhood, slumber parties on the west side were mythic events where the delivery pizza and the R-rated movies flowed like tap water. Ayesha herself relished the parties because they provided her access to the west side girls' big brothers. She knew that one of these tanned, lanky middle-schoolers could someday become her husband. In her imagination, she tried on different futures, different boys. One day she married herself to tall, popular Jason Beasley in a champagne-soaked ceremony fit for a princess. The next day she was Mrs. Scott Crowley, dining al fresco on the sweeping veranda of their wooded estate. With her mind full of possibilities, Ayesha blithely followed the boys around their air-conditioned domains, ingratiating herself wherever possible. The boys enjoyed the attention and treated her like a favorite pet. They pulled her hair, endlessly fascinated by its springy texture, and allowed her to cheer them on during their epic Super Mario battles.

Mrs. Miller was not entirely comfortable with her daughter's

apparent adoration of these privileged white teens but, afraid of hindering Ayesha's social development, she kept her misgivings to herself. But the day Mrs. Miller retrieved Ayesha from a pool party and caught her daughter hovering over three blond boys in lounge chairs with a tray of sandwiches in her brown hands marked the end of Ayesha's private school education. Seventh grade dawned with Ayesha enrolled in the local public middle school, attempting to pick up where she had left off with the kids from the neighborhood.

Ayesha was undaunted by her abrupt separation from the moneyed world of private school. She felt proud and mature on entering middle school, and her idea of what constituted future husband material expanded along with her estimation of her place in the world. Ayesha was sure that between the talented athletes on her middle school's sports teams and the aspiring rappers practicing their flows under the football bleachers, plenty of her current classmates would wind up being even richer than their counterparts across town.

To maximize her exposure to the athletes, Ayesha joined the girls' basketball team. The boys and girls teams shared the gym for practice, and often traveled to away games on the same bus. Ayesha spent the first part of the season attempting to flirt with the cutest of the boys on the team, but despite her dogged efforts, she failed to attract any romantic interest at all. She realized that she had miscalculated. The next September, Ayesha abandoned basketball and tried out for cheerleading. She was dating the boys' basketball captain by October.

Ayesha's high school years proceeded in a pleasant social rhythm. She was cute and popular, and she dated frequently. Thanks to her early interactions with the brothers of her old Plainridge girlfriends, she felt herself in possession of a sophisticated understanding of what rich men want. Of course, it had been years since Ayesha had seen any of those boys. Ayesha would sometimes remember them and smile. She avoided realizing that they never thought of her at all.

Ayesha's high school grades were merely fine, but an impressive interview and glowing letters of recommendation

from her favorite teachers helped her land a spot at the state university's main campus. Teachers had always loved Ayesha, despite her lackluster academic performance. A cheerful, attractive girl, she had never experienced the awkward adolescent phase that embarrasses its observers—for this, her teachers were especially grateful—and years of ingratiating herself with high-potential boys had perfected in her the art of appearing to pay enthusiastic attention to any boring thing she was being told.

Ayesha was proud to have been accepted to such a respected university. Determined not to waste the opportunity, she devoted almost all of her mealtimes to pursuing likely matrimonial prospects. She would usually lunch with a nice engineering major or pre-med student in one of the campus cafeterias. Often these boys were her tutors in one of the technical classes she had chosen for their favorable male-to-female ratios. They were awkward and clumsy and they laughed abruptly at their own childish jokes, but their bumbling exteriors belied the fundamental ruthlessness of their natures. These boys were too intimidated by Ayesha's cheerful prettiness to pursue her romantically. They coped with their embarrassment by belittling her intelligence to her face and involving her in imaginary sexual escapades behind her back. Ayesha was well aware of their hostility, but, not wanting to hurt their feelings, she continued with these lunch dates long after she had renounced the science types for good.

Ayesha reserved her evenings for dinner in the city with handsome business school students and future lawyers. Ayesha sized up these young masters of the universe disinterestedly, her appraising gaze faithfully mirroring their own. Her main concern was whether they seemed intelligent enough to achieve the ambitions they recited as litany. Their main concern was how many dinners they would have to buy before they would be allowed between Ayesha's long legs. The answer was four, although few of them stuck around long enough to find out. They hated her for daring to take their measure. These men hardly ever bothered to officially end things; they simply stopped calling. Ayesha consoled herself after these breakups with the knowledge

that lawyers seldom became *Dynasty*-level rich.

Ayesha gained thirteen pounds as a result of these frequent dates, but she failed to gain a husband, and having devoted the better part of her college energies to finding a rich match, she found herself nearing graduation without a chosen career path. Instead, she did what all her classmates did who still, in their early twenties, wondered what they would be when they grew up: she went to a career fair. Her pretty smile and outsized enthusiasm impressed the recruiters from a mid-sized management consulting firm, and she was eventually offered a position. Ayesha accepted with relief, thinking all the while of the wealthy corporate clients she would surely meet. The day she graduated from college, she gave herself two years to marry rich.

Ayesha began her corporate career enthusiastically. She woke early each morning and dressed with care; she delighted in her slim tailored suits and the supple leather pumps that clicked rhythmically along the immaculately tiled office corridors. The actual work—solving common-sense questions for companies looking to gain some miniscule advantage in the widget market—was easy, an afterthought. Even better was the abundance of high-earning, well-dressed men. Ayesha's enthusiasm and good humor made her an appealing co-worker, and she quickly became a sought-after team member. She was invited to endless client dinners, charity receptions, and business trips. On any work-related occasion, one could find Ayesha, surrounded by admiring men, laughing delightedly at a shocking remark devised for her benefit.

But despite her popularity, Ayesha was unable to secure a serious relationship. The eligible men she met were interchangeably attractive—handsome, intelligent, rich, or nearly so. But they were obsessively protective of their freedom, like little boys convinced that the night's best fun would begin as soon as they were sent off to bed. Ayesha knew that one day, most of these men would collapse with exhaustion into the arms of the nearest woman willing to tuck them in. Unfortunately, her timing was off; she never managed to be there for the collapse.

Sometimes Ayesha was approached by married men, but her sincere respect for the institution of marriage and her longstanding goal of one day being married herself made her an unlikely partner in adultery. Reluctantly, she began to consider revising her marriage timeline.

After a couple of years with the firm, Ayesha had lost some of her initial enthusiasm for corporate living. She no longer relished dressing for the day, and she found that the sleek high heels that had once clicked so coolly down the hallways now left her feet aching by mid-afternoon. She started wearing flats. Shortly thereafter, her lack of romantic success led her to abandon some previously-held taboos: specifically, she no longer avoided married men. Instead, after a rumored pregnancy scare involving a well-known partner of the firm, the married men of Ayesha's professional acquaintance began avoiding her.

Stripped of its sociable gloss, the job Ayesha had once enjoyed now seemed tedious. Ayesha cared about the widget market not at all; she began to wish for a nobler career. In her daydreams she became a nurse, a missionary; she healed lepers and coaxed emaciated orphans back to thriving health.

Though she was essentially blacklisted from the most profitable projects, her supervisors preferred to keep her with the firm rather than risk any legal unpleasantness. Similarly, though Ayesha was dissatisfied and relentlessly depressed, she preferred to remain with the firm rather than face a job market for which she felt wholly unprepared. At work, one or two younger women eventually took Ayesha's place within the social swing. All day long, Ayesha's office was filled with the unrelenting sound of high heels clicking in the hallway outside.

In children's picture books and playground games, riding the city bus is always a charming adventure; in real life, it is never so. Versus every other method of transport, the city bus is the most likely to leave you tardy, stranded, or breathing through your mouth.

Ayesha once saw a fellow passenger masturbating in a seat

across the aisle. She was less affronted by the act itself than by the total nonchalance of the man's stroking. His skin was as pale and translucent as skim milk and made Ayesha think of vampires. Ayesha did not believe in vampires, but neither did she believe in enduring prolonged proximity to masturbating strangers. She disembarked at the next available stop and walked the remaining two miles home.

The buses on the C-line tend to clot along their route. Instead of one bus arriving every five to eight minutes, as per the printed schedule, two or three or even four buses arrive one behind the other, then nothing for twenty minutes or more. Ayesha does not know whether this haphazard routing is the result of insufficient supervisory control, erratic passenger demand, or just the drivers' own laziness; she only knows that she had best not rely on the bus to get to her job interviews downtown. Not owning a car, she mostly uses taxis, an expense she can ill afford since her layoff. (She is optimistic about finding something soon. Her eight years of work experience make her an attractive candidate, she has been told, and the last interviewer was very impressed by her warm personality.) After an interview, when time is no longer of the essence, Ayesha always takes a C-bus back to her apartment. She has come to enjoy the inevitable delay the bus provides, since nothing awaits her at home but an afternoon of bill-paying and *Living Single* reruns.

A woman is waiting at the bus stop when Ayesha arrives. She moves her bag from the bench and smiles vaguely in Ayesha's direction. Ayesha sits in the vacated space. She is mesmerized by the woman's elaborate hairstyle, a bronze-tinted edifice of waves and crests that spirals upward from her head like a miniature monument to the sea. The woman inhales bored puffs from a slim cigarette. Ayesha closes her eyes and breathes deeply of the secondhand smoke. She pictures the life her child-self once hoped for: jazz-syncoated, sparkling, nocturnal. An infinite round of silk dresses and gold bangles, celebrated friends, candlelight. Something worthy of Diahann Carroll.

Ayesha banishes the fantasy, annoyed by her mind's stubborn attachment to childhood dreams. As she scans the street for the

bus she hopes is approaching, a man catches her eye. He is tall and conspicuously handsome, with a bold stride as he moves in her direction. Ayesha notes the impeccable fit of his dark suit, which looks increasingly expensive the closer he gets. Ayesha wishes she had decided to stand as she sometimes did to keep from wrinkling. Standing, she could now pretend not to be waiting for the bus. Standing, she could walk away, instead of being trapped on the damp bus bench, transfixed by his smooth, brown face.

Ayesha feels vulnerable without the armor of flattering clothes and makeup and youth that she used to rely on in her encounters with interesting men. She is grateful that she is at least wearing her interview suit, but deeply regrets the wilted state of her blouse. Struck by the absurdity of having her vanity wounded by a stranger on the sidewalk, she tries to force her mind onto some useful topic. Then, in an instant, he is beside her, studying the posted bus schedule. The sun glints sharply off of his watch and scatters a trail of diamonds across the sidewalk.

Ayesha's bus arrives at the curb and her bench-mate boards. Ayesha does not. Through the murky rear window of the retreating bus, Ayesha sees the petrified waves of her former seatmate's hair shrink as the bus adds distance. When Ayesha finally glances back toward the man, he is watching her. She meets his satisfied smile with a guarded one, well aware of his frankly appraising stare.

He is wondering how many hours he will have to spend with her before he will be allowed between her long legs. The answer is two. He asks her whether he is in the right place for the C-X bus. Ayesha nods, already harboring unbidden visions of the deeply wooded lots and stately colonial homes at the end of the C-X route, just shy of the city's north border.

"As a matter of fact," says Ayesha, brightly. "I'm going that way, too."

AUTHOR BIO: Royce has been an overpaid corporate lawyer, an overwhelmed government worker, a mathlete, a bridesmaid and a

vegetarian. Right now she lives in Texas and is glad.

AN AFFAIR

by J.A. Bernstein

Like most men who head abroad after college, at least in the early 21st Century, Jared Heine was far less interested in wealth than he was in getting laid. The two go hand in hand, though, as any well-heeled traveler must know.

He had studied Croatian at Duke, more on a whim than anything, although his mother's father was German and had evidently been stationed in the region during the Second World War (his exact role was not expounded upon in conversations). Through a friend of his adviser, Jared managed to procure a job in Zagreb with Nestlé, the Swiss conglomerate, which was looking to penetrate the Balkans. His job was to size up the potential for yogurt, of which the Croats ate a lot.

Too much, in fact, he now realized, sipping his gin at the Space Electronic Disco. The lacquered dance floor was spotted by hot fuchsia lights and featured an actual plastic spaceship, inside of which a helmeted DJ spun. A few meaty girls lingered by it, most with crude dye jobs, bright velvet tops, and jewelry that did not respond well to the steam.

Ten years ago, Croatia had been a western's man dream. The influx of McDonald's hadn't helped, but it was really the dairy, he realized, with the BGH-injected cows. The women were heartier than any Eastern European should be. Certainly post-Tito.

Yet, one caught his eye to the left. She was talking to a man in a suit, which was actually somewhat tasteful by Croatian standards—that is, it didn't have pin stripes or tails—and what struck him about her was her hair. It was cut short in a finger wave, such that one bang pressed to her cheek. She looked like a flapper, except she was wearing tight jeans and vaquero boots of red hide.

Jared eyed her through the rim of his glass. The man she was talking to was obviously mob. He was accompanied by two stubbly-cheeked, iron-necked men, neither of whom seemed

terribly interested in her.

She was phenomenally gorgeous, and he knew he had to approach her, though a man could get killed in this region for provocations far less severe. He waited twenty minutes for her to hit the restroom, then he followed her out.

Parting a sea of colognes, Jared swallowed a Valium and retucked his shirt. Outside in the hall, he found her waiting in line, angrily clutching her purse. To say his heart was beating at this point would probably exaggerate the ordeal, since he had already sniffed half a gram of cocaine outside in a cab, forty minutes prior, with a colleague from work, who had left.

“Hi,” he said to her, stupidly. He was aware that the eight other women in line, all of whom had been raised in good communist schools, spoke enough English to listen. “I just wanted to say—and I know this sounds corny, but it’s true—that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve seen.”

She watched him with hazel-gray eyes. A few other women stirred, expressing discomfort, but she didn’t move. And neither did he.

“I’m Jared.”

“I’m Jelka,” she said. “And I think you should go away.”

Our story does not end there, however, because well before his divorce, before the crippling affair that would cost him the bulk of his post-college savings, two BMWs, a house, and his soul, before his father died and pensively told him that he was not a disappointment, in spite of what everyone thought, before his two daughters would give him a parting kiss on the cheek, Jared found himself taking her hand. “You don’t have to call me,” he said, handing her his card, which had his name inscribed in a carton of yogurt. “It’s just enough for me to look at your face.”

She smiled, and she would obviously throw away the card, but not before noting his name.

Properly fearing for his life, Jared immediately returned to his apartment, which was in a nondescript Soviet tenement in an upscale section of town. He made himself a White Russian, which usually put him to sleep. When that didn’t work, he gulped

another Valium and strummed his guitar. Still feeling wide awake, he powered up his industrial-strength deep-fryer, which he had had shipped from Japan, and made himself fries.

The next morning, his maid, a grave-looking Bosniak shrew, found him passed out at his desk with his pants to his knees and his laptop open to some lurid cowgirl images. Most people would have been shocked by this encounter, but Amila had seen far worse.

Kicking his chair (the two were fairly close), she asked about his appointment in Split, where he was scheduled to be in two hours. Then she made him coffee as he hurriedly showered and shaved.

Jared nervously drove along the coast, eyeing the bright Adriatic, anticipating a meeting with his boss at some beachside resort where he lived. Jared thought he'd be fired, but it turned out he had been promoted. As the two sat under a grape-leaved arbor, sipping rakija, smoking imported cloves, the young German said that Jared had unusual skills and they needed him back in Geneva.

Of course, Jared thought. "Starting when?"

"Next week."

"Is it possible I could extend..."

The white smoke wafted up through the vines.

"No."

Seven weeks later, Jared resigned and groggily returned to the States. It turned out he was of little use to the Croatians, despite his strong marketing skills, because they were ceding the market to Kraft. He also thought he should go back for his dad, who had just been diagnosed with lymphoma.

On his final night in Croatia, he called up some friends—more like passing acquaintances, and all cokeheads, like him, from abroad—and swayed them to return to the Space Electronic.

Naturally, she wasn't there. He asked around the bar. Apparently, she had gone overseas. "By the way, if you're looking to kill yourself," said a server, "I can think of some easier ways."

The next morning, Amila drove him to the airport. He gave her a parting hug, along with a generous check, and he promised

to return in a couple of years, after he'd done his MBA.

Two summers later, Jared met his bride-to-be in a course on Operations Management. Cambridge didn't suit him, nor did Harvard's name, but he needed to pay back his bills.

He would marry up. His wife's father had not been a senator, but he was aspiring to it and seemed to run half of Whirlpool. Jared also appreciated her Midwestern charm: the way she said "please" to her professors, cheered for the Cubs, and constantly worked on her tan.

After graduation, he followed her home to St. Joseph, Michigan and took a job as an assistant VP overseeing divisional strategy. His hours were long, and he consoled himself by living on the lake—in a majestic, gabled Victorian that his father-in-law had bequeathed. Most evenings he'd run along the beach, and it was his only forty minutes of solace, given the screaming kids, not to mention the wife he was expected without effort to love. She wasn't a bad woman, he thought.

Like most small Midwestern towns, St. Joseph harbored some ambitions. A new country club had been built where Catholics and Jews were not allowed (at least until Whirlpool stepped in). There were also two upscale restaurants, both Northern Italian and deeply overpriced, yet cheap compared to Chicago's, where they'd drive to find decent fare. On more than a few weekends, Jared even indulged himself by calling up his old college friends—a few lived in the area—and smoking up at concerts, which his wife didn't mind, provided she was informed. He never cheated on her, either, though this was less by choice than fate. The women of the region were simply too trashy. They wore too much liner to the bars, donned tight-fitting spandex at gyms, and generally leered at him during symphony performances—like iguanas trapped in a cage. To another man, this might have held some appeal.

"Do you love me," his wife asked him one evening, pulling back the duvet.

"I do."

"You always look scared when we're in bed."

“Yeah, well, I haven’t been the same since Cambridge.” It wasn’t Cambridge, he knew, but he settled in for the chore.

Then one evening, when he was picking up his daughter from grade school, waiting for her dress rehearsal to get out, his smartphone showed a couple new emails. One was the predictable penile enlarger, but another was an invitation from a professional networking site. He almost deleted it, but then he noticed the sender’s name. *Jelka*.

Suddenly, a metal glove smacked his windshield. “Dad, why the hell didn’t you come around?” His daughter was dressed as Joan of Arc and hugging her chainmail suit. “I’m freezing my buns off in this.”

It was petrifyingly cold out, and his wife must have known something was wrong when he decided to go for a run. At 4 a.m. He was not a morning person. He had dragged himself out to a couple of marathons, which had painfully early starts, but he had never voluntarily run at this hour, much less with a phone. Sure, he could have waited until work, or even snuck off to the toilet. But he wanted to be by Lake Michigan. It had a certain charm. The Adriatic it was not: no shoals of fish glittered by him, the footing was sand, not rock, and the wind, when it came, resembled not an eastern sirocco, nor even a foamy gregale. No, this wind was cold, hard, and biting. Much like his life. And himself.

He sat along the dune and clicked OFF, sticking his phone in his sweatshirt, trying not to think. For 19 years, he had nurtured an obsession for a girl he didn’t even know, hadn’t even spoken to properly, and whose face he could barely recall. And yet here was the name on the phone. Maybe it was a different Jelka.

He clicked on the link to the website and found himself forced to sign up. It turned out no picture was included, though her name was listed as Jelka Babić, Notary Public, Zagreb, Croatia, and the note she had sent him said, “Hi.”

That’s all. After 17 years of making love to his wife with another woman in mind, that’s all he encountered: hi.

He watched the far, iced cliffs, which sludged their way through Lake Michigan. A yellow light broke on the shore.

Are u the same woman? he wrote.

Her reply came a couple days later, when he was driving on I-94. He almost swerved across traffic.

What do u think?

Can we meet?

The difficulty came not in scheduling the trip, but in finding an excuse for his wife.

Whirlpool Europe was headquartered outside Milan (which was only a short train-ride away). And it was important, he explained to his wife, to keep abreast of their affairs.

“Don’t they have people for that?” She was whisking the eggs for his omelet.

“Yeah, but I’m dying to get back to Croatia, as well.”

“Well, that’s fine. But I think we should hit up the Ritz.” They had honeymooned in Paris.

“Actually, I was thinking I would do this alone.”

“What?”

“It’s just a short stint, couple days.”

“I see.”

He tightened his bathrobe.

“What’s her name?” his wife said.

“Amila.”

“The woman who cleaned your house?” Her Teflon was steaming. “Really?”

“Why not?”

“You’re lying to me.”

“No, I’m not. And she’s really getting up there in years.” In fact, Amila had been dead for six years. He had stayed in touch with her son.

Eventually his wife acceded to the trip after he promised to meet her for a whirlwind tour of Provence.

For the next two weeks, Jared ran daily, trying to flatten his abs. His wife became impressed with his regimen. She said it would help their sex.

On the flight over, he practiced his Croatian, seated alone in first class. His knees began to swell, and he counted the hours till he’d land.

“I’m sorry, I think you have me confused with someone else,” she said, the first time he saw her standing beneath an awning, where they’d agreed to meet, on the corner of Ban Jelačić Square. A clattering tram was passing beside them, and she looked at him confusedly. Then, she said, “I’m just kidding.”

He watched her in silence. It was definitely the same girl. She was twenty years older, but the same. Everything he had feared about her came true in this one central visage: the soft yellow face, the hazel-gray eyes, the sparkling lips, the tressed hair. She was like a dream, only real.

“I’m Jelka,” she said, extending a hand. “I don’t believe we’ve formally met.” Her English was incredibly good. She was wearing a black silken dress, the exact opposite of what she had worn in the club. Her arms were a little fleshier, her hair a little long, but she was otherwise exactly the same.

“I’m Amila ... Jared.” Why the name had come out, he didn’t know.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Jared,” she said in Croatian.

He couldn’t remember how to reply. Finally, he said, “Good evening,” which were the only words he recalled. He knew he should have studied better on the plane, but the Halcion pills put him out. He buttoned his suit—a white linen three-piece that made him look like Mark Twain. He wasn’t sure what else he should wear: a concert t-shirt, a dress suit, a scarf? The whole meeting was confusing.

“Would you like to sit down,” she said, noticing his discomfort.

He re-hitched his shoulder-bag. It wasn’t a fanny pack, as he had been tempted to wear (the gypsies were rampant in Croatia, at least twenty years back) but the bag was distracting, all the same. He’d even packed a condom inside—one of two he’d purchased at the airport. Why else was he alive? “Yeah, well, I was thinking we might get a drink.”

“I got a better idea,” she said, eying the far, passing tram.

“What’s that?”

“Would you like to go to Rome?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“What’s there to know?”

“Are you a prostitute or something?”

She laughed. It was the first time he’d heard her do it—it wouldn’t be the last—and the pitch was a little higher than he would have liked. It was awkward, even. And yet beautiful to him. Somehow it complemented her dress. “Would you like me to be a prostitute?”

“Is that what you are?”

“Are you a jerk?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend you ... Ja ne znam ništa,” he told her in Croatian, meaning, “I don’t know anything.”

She smiled. “Are you married?”

“Are you?”

“I am.”

“To the mafia?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Then I am, as well.”

“So let’s go.”

Her full name was Jelka Babić Đokić, and she had been married twenty years back—about seven months after he’d left—to a businessman in Sweden, who was originally Serb. They hadn’t yet filed for a divorce, but they hadn’t been in touch for over a decade, and he was recently sentenced to jail. Jared asked her little else about him as they rode on the train in first class.

“Do you have kids?”

“Yes, I do. And what about you?”

“Two daughters,” he said.

“Do they know where you are now?”

“I guess.”

Later, as she slept along his shoulder and he inhaled the scent of her hair—something like thyme and rosemary, he figured, along with the smell of people as they age—he recalled the mountains he had seen in his youth, the sharp alpine valleys, the conifers springing from cliffs. He watched the sun baking the water, far beyond the tracks, and the spread of the fields as he rose. He had

never been as happy as he was now. And he knew he never would be again.

AUTHOR BIO: J. A. Bernstein's stories have appeared in Kenyon Review Online, Tin House Online, and World Literature Today, among others. He is the fiction editor of Tikkun magazine and, beginning in the fall of 2014, an assistant professor of creative writing and literature at the University of Minnesota Duluth.



FLOATERS

by Benjamin Soileau

I parked my truck up on the hill so that I could get a good view of my wife's car down in the lot. I kept it idling and sat back, thinking that the men in my family never learn things the first time. My grandfather was bitten on his balls by a black widow spider while sitting in his outhouse. He had to get bit a second time before he burnt the thing to the ground. My father had a heart attack, and recovered only to change brands to a lighter variety. It took his second coronary before he finally switched to chew. And me, I remarried the same woman who had been unfaithful during our first go-around. We were divorced for less than a year, and got remarried shortly after the accident.

The Vietnamese lady who owns the Krispy Kreme where I was parked came out and told me that if I was going to use their lot then I had to buy something, so I went on inside and got myself a jelly-filled. As I approached my truck I got a bad dizzy spell and had to lean against the tailgate for a bit. I felt like Dorothy in the middle of a tornado and as soon as the spinning stopped and I came to, I saw that I'd strangled the doughnut in my right hand. Red jelly dripped down my fingers and onto the hot concrete. Back in the truck, I put the air conditioner on high and set the corpse of my doughnut in shotgun.

I could see Rita's white Honda Civic down in the lot between two yellowish splatters of bird crap on my windshield. Last Friday she came home wobbling drunk, her clothes crumpled around her body and her hair squashed down on one side. She was also barefoot, said she'd drunk too much and taken a nap in her car before coming home. I found a credit card receipt in the bathroom last weekend for a place in the mall that sells negligee. I'd gotten in bed every night this week waiting for her to come out in something fancy, but it's always the same extra large Eagles t-shirt that comes down to her knees.

I felt like a detective, sitting there spying on my wife, except

that I hoped I wouldn't find anything. The first time I didn't have to go looking, I just went to the bait shop outside of town one weekday to get some shiners, and as I drove past the Candlelight Inn out on Airline Highway, I happened to see her car parked in front of a room. Room 176, I remember. I pulled in and waited until I saw her come out with some silver fox, looked like he was sixty years old. We had it out in the parking lot while the old man jogged off to his black Cadillac and squealed off. I never did go fishing that day and those poor shiners all died in the hot sun in their plastic bag on the passenger seat of my truck. We'd only been married for three years when that happened. She loved me still, she'd said, but she wasn't ready to settle down. I told her she should have figured that out before we tied the knot.

For the first six months after our divorce, I did nothing but go to work at the machine shop, and then come home and drink myself blind. I liked it for the first few weeks—strutting around the little rented trailer that I leased from my boss, listening to all the ZZ Top and Rush records I wanted to on as high volume as I pleased. I drank as much as I wanted and ate any kind of garbage and watched as many fishing shows as I could stand. But it didn't take long for the emptiness to set in.

After I damn near drove myself loopy, I figured I would get it together, try to lose some of the beer weight I'd put on, and build my life anew. I realized that Rita was a lost cause and that a man's got to have some pride. I cleaned my trailer, planted some red azaleas outside and bought a 10-speed from my boss. I quit driving by our old apartment on Lorraine Street, the one Rita still lived in. I was feeling good again, and managed to slim down some after riding that bike every afternoon. I was getting used to not having Rita around. And of course, that's when the accident occurred.

I imagine getting hit by a car while riding a bike is a lot like being attacked by a shark. You're just cruising along (or swimming, or surfing), feeling the cool air whip around your face, when—WHAM—out of the blue, you're hit with the force of a two-ton great white, or a cherry red 1999 Mustang driven by a drunk teenage girl. Luckily, I don't remember much about it,

except waking up in the hospital and seeing Rita there, sleeping in a chair by my bed. I wasn't sure when I saw her if our divorce had all just been a dream.

It may as well have been because as soon as I got out of the hospital I moved back in with her on Lorraine Street so she could take care of me. She also helped me get the lawsuit in order. Rita told me that getting hit by that car was God's way of putting us back together. We got married again shortly afterward. I still had a white bandage around my head at the courthouse. We celebrated our one-year anniversary last month, but we like to combine the years to four to make ourselves feel better about it all.

I had the radio on the oldies station and when *Crystal Blue Persuasion* came on I turned it up. That was the song we danced to at our first wedding and it's hard to hear it and not feel good. A squirrel and a crow were barking at each other outside the passenger window and I watched them while I wiped raspberry jelly off the radio dial. It was a pretty morning, and I had nothing but time.

By noon I was getting bored. Her car still sat there in the lot and I started to think that maybe they were having a pizza day or something, being Friday and all. I considered driving around for a while, but as soon as I touched the stick shift, about a dozen crawfish pinchers dropped down over my face and started snapping. It wasn't a frightening thing, and I felt almost as if they were protecting my face from some unseen force. I had to idle there for a minute and let them do their thing. It seemed to last longer than usual, and as soon as they disappeared and my vision returned to normal, Rita's car was gone. I got out of the truck and ran to the end of the lot so that I could see down to the entranceway of the plaza. Rita was driving around the parking lot toward the main road. I drove down the hill and managed to get about a dozen cars behind her. I couldn't really tell if anyone was in there with her, but I followed her right on out of United Plaza onto Essen Lane.

I tailed her down the road a couple miles into town. Rita put

on her blinker and turned into Tabby's Steakhouse. I was making my way over when my head began tingling and my vision went haywire—little white dots everywhere with tracers, like I was on the Millennium Falcon, making the jump to light speed. I swerved into a Chevron station next to the restaurant and glided to a stop against the air hose in back. I waited for it to pass. I felt guilty as hell for operating a vehicle after what happened to me, but it's hard to swallow my pride and give up a basic freedom like driving. My fender was dented against the yellow concrete stopper, but it wasn't as bad as some of the others I'd put in it lately.

I got out and crept around the corner of the building along the restrooms. I was hugging that grimy wall pretty tightly, watching Rita's car idle in a handicapped zone in front of the doors to the steakhouse. I'd let her have my tag since I'm not technically supposed to be driving.

Just then I heard a toilet flush and this great big woman burst out of the door next to where I was leaning. "Hey!" she said, and stumbled back a few feet. Her legs were as wide as cypress stumps, and lumpy like cookie dough. They melted down out of a pair of yellow shorts into some pink flip-flops. There was a little black heart tattoo on her big toe. She was a good foot taller than me and her face was shaded beneath a large straw hat, not quite a sombrero, but almost. "You some kind of pervert, or something?" She held onto her bathroom key like she planned on stabbing my eyes out with it. The key was attached to a big silver spoon and she reared it over her head. I stumbled backwards along the wall and peered around her toward the restaurant. Rita was walking through the door and some big guy in a suit was holding the door open for her. "Get out of the way!" the big lady said, rattling the keychain at me.

"I'm not bothering anyone," I said, stepping backward. I stepped off the concrete and jogged down the little grassy knoll into the parking lot of Tabby's.

"I'm gonna tell the manager there's a pervert hanging out at the restrooms," she screamed at me and then marched off around the corner. Two men walking across the parking lot toward the

restaurant looked up at me, and then back at the gas station. I was a sitting duck. All Rita had to do was look out the window to see me. I ran back over to my truck and drove into the parking lot of Tabby's, on the other side of the lot from where Rita had parked. I kept my head down all the way into the restaurant.

There were two small benches in the waiting area and I sat down, staring at my Hush Puppies. "Is it just one today?" I looked up and the hostess was standing there with a big plastic menu in her hand. "Or are you waiting for someone?"

"I'm just catching my breath a minute," I said. I knew I wasn't being a very good detective.

"Well, just let me know if I can help you," she said, and walked back to her podium.

I leaned forward and looked back through the doors at the gas station. The lady was pointing at the bathroom door. She was still holding onto that silver spoon keychain, which was swinging along to her gestures. The manager stood there in his blue vest with his hands on his hips, nodding his head.

I called the hostess over and asked her if I could look around the restaurant for my friend. "Sure," she said. "If they aren't here, you can sit at the bar and wait."

I stood up and slowly peeled off my sunglasses, but had to sit back down almost immediately to let my eyesight adjust to the room. I still hadn't gotten used to having to wear shades all the time on account of light wreaking havoc on my pupils, even though that was the first of my many symptoms. After a minute I stood up and peeked around the hostess station. There was a dark bar on the right side and a crowded, brightly lit restaurant on the left. I couldn't see Rita anywhere. I kept my head down and walked toward the bar.

I was the only person at the bar. I sat down and looked past the bottles into the restaurant. The dining room was pretty busy for lunch. I'd only ever been to Tabby's once, for a retirement party for Rita's daddy. This was back during our first dance. Damn good steak, but pricey. Not that I couldn't afford it now, but I couldn't taste it either. Since the accident, my sense of smell is gone.

There were lots of suits sitting around these nice white tablecloths. The servers were mostly cute little blondes wearing black vests and bowties. They were bustling around like bees and I watched a particularly cute one buzz up to a table along the far wall and set down two glasses of white wine.

And there was Rita. I could see the side of her face as she leaned forward to grab the glass. Her back was to me, but I got a straight shot of the man she was sharing her table with. I thought for a second that I was lucky to have such a good seat for the show, and then I wondered about them drinking wine during lunch.

Rita's arm rested on the table, and I leaned forward so I could tell if her ring was on, but the bartender stepped in front of me. "What can I get you?" he said, sliding a big, laminated menu in front of me, but I just ordered what I always did if I was out.

I sipped my pineapple juice and watched them. I thought I didn't miss alcohol. I tried to drink several different times after the accident, but each time I would get very dizzy and fall asleep. I figured I needed all the sharpness I could manage these days.

This guy looked like a young Dick Burton, I thought. He was gesturing with his hands and wearing some kind of fancy watch, and also a big class ring. He seemed to be doing all the talking, and I knew that Rita didn't like it for a man to do too much of that. Her fingers kept spinning the wine glass around in circles, and every few orbits she'd pull it over to her, and set it back down, a little emptier than before. The bartender moved over and blocked my view. "Another one?" he said and knocked his hairy knuckles on the bar next to my glass.

"No thanks," I said. The cute blonde waitress was setting salads down at their table. Dick loosened his tie and stood up, and then strode very cool-like through the tables toward the bathroom. I stood up from my place at the bar and began to walk over to her. *Hey*, I thought I would say to her. *Fancy seeing you here. I just dropped in for a Tabby steak. I didn't expect to see you.*

But I stopped at the end of the bar and watched Dick enter the men's room in the hallway. Rita pecked at her salad. I had to be smart. I hadn't actually caught them doing anything. Not yet,

anyway. I wondered if I was being paranoid, having followed her here. But she was here with another man. I didn't have to accuse her of anything. I could probably tell what was happening just by the look on her face if I approached her. I pushed myself off the bar then, but found myself walking to the hallway instead, and into the restroom.

The lights were brighter than I expected them to be, and everything went white for a minute. I slipped my sunglasses on and felt my way along the sink. As I let cool water run over my hands, the room gradually faded back into view and I could see Dick in the mirror, his back to me, leaning over a urinal. We were the only two in there. He must have been holding it for quite some time. The great splashing of his pee against the plastic urinal mat made me wonder about the size of his cucumber and what designs he had for it. Mine was adequate in size, but ever since the accident it would shoot off as soon as I put it in, which is a shame since Rita likes to buck around a bit. I hated to think about it.

He was still making water when I spoke up. "Thank God it's Friday," I said. He craned his neck, trying to see who was speaking to him. He didn't say anything, just broke wind and turned back to his task. I waited for his water to start pitter-pattering, and then I spoke again. "Got anything big staked out this weekend?" I noticed that I was speaking in a deeper voice, and I looked at my reflection and shook my head at myself.

He turned around and we were looking at each other in the mirror. He was stuffing himself down into his pants, and he used his free elbow to knock the lever down, looking at me the whole time. The urinal made a horrible whooshing sound as it flushed and I saw his mouth moving as he faced me. I could only barely hear the echo of whatever it was he said. "Come again," I said. He leaned against the stall, his hands working to tuck his shirt in and get his belt back fastened. We watched each other in the mirror.

"I said what's it to you?," he said. My neck flushed hot as I watched his reflection give his tie a smoothing over, and then walk right out the door. His black shoes made a clicking sound and I could feel a very small rush of wind when he moved past

me. I clenched my teeth thinking that he didn't wash his hands and that he was about to go put them on my wife.

Back at the bar, I was glad that I'd trusted my hunch to follow her. The bar area was darker than the restaurant and it reminded me of one of those rooms that scientists hide behind to study something through a one-way glass. I ordered another pineapple juice and as soon as I did, I felt something wet dripping out of my ear. I probed it with my finger but could feel nothing. This is a new one, I thought. Young Dick Burton was interested in his salad now, but that didn't stop him from talking with his mouth full. I wished I could see Rita's face watching that. She'd stab me with a fork if I did such a thing. The wet dripping feeling in my ear continued until after they'd finished their salads. My doctor wanted me to record any new symptoms, so I took the little notebook out of my back pocket and scribbled *ear drip* in it, right under *can't find my words*.

Their entrees came out, along with another round of drinks, and I looked at my watch and realized that they'd been there an hour already. It didn't seem like they were in a hurry to get back to work anytime soon. He loosened his tie a bit and then Rita began to make little gestures on the table with her fingers, like she was trying to bang out a code. She does that when she's irritated at something. She taps out code with her hands on the coffee table at home when I forget what she's talking about, and she has to repeat it. But he didn't look like he was on the receiving end of her message. He was laughing and bouncing around in his seat like a monkey. I couldn't help but guess she was saying something about me, complaining maybe. Then he got this sort of serious look on his face and reached out, putting his unwashed hand over Rita's. He kept it there, making little circling movements over her hand with his dirty thumb. I thought I could cry if I gave myself over to it. It seemed like his hand was on hers for a long time, and I held my breath, but then he moved it away and she started up on the table again with her coding. He started laughing and bouncing around again, and then his water glass tipped over onto the table in front of him, and he scooted up and looked down into his lap. Rita stood up and went over to him, bending down

toward him and dabbing furiously at his crotch with her napkin. I hated to see that. When she started looking around the restaurant I ducked down behind the bar.

“Is everything ok?” the bartender was saying, peering over the bar at me.

I was crouched down at the base of the stool like I was tying my shoe. “I’m fine, thanks.” I gave it another minute, but I wished I would’ve stayed down there.

Rita was gathering her purse while the server picked up their plates. Dick Burton draped his jacket over his arm like some sort of flag. He made a point to draw attention to the stain on his khakis by sticking his groin out. Rita covered her mouth, giggling, and before the server led them off, they both picked up their drinks. Rita looked good walking through the restaurant. She seemed happy, the corners of her lips crooked up like when she’s winning at rummy. We used to play all the time, and I hadn’t seen that look in ages. It excited me and wounded me at the same time. She hugged her purse to her breast and held her glass of wine out like a lantern.

They all stopped at the hostess station. After checking a pad, the hostess pointed toward the bar. My tongue suddenly gained a hundred pounds and my heart fluttered up into my windpipe like a hummingbird trapped. I stumbled backwards and as soon as I saw the server come walking into the bar with their half-eaten entrees held out in front of her, I turned and fled into the men’s room.

The bright fluorescent lights in there immediately kidnapped my eyesight and set off an explosion of white-hot light. I lurched forward using my arms the way a cockroach uses its antennae. My fingers found a puddle of lukewarm water on the sink and I braced myself on it and leaned over the faucets until my vision returned. A Muzak version of *Eleanor Rigby* leaked through the sound system, and as the bathroom came into view I hoped that sixteen-year-old girl who plowed me over was in a bad way.

I didn’t know what to do besides stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The pink scar on my head was impossible not to see. It ran from just above my eyebrow over my head like some

line of demarcation. My hair won't grow over the scar and so I comb the longer parts over. My enlarged pupil looked grotesque in the light, like a clean black bullet hole. I was reminded of a beagle my friend had growing up. Its name was Bubba, and it had an eye like mine, a little discolored and bigger than the other. He would root around with his snout in the air and then smash blindly into you, stumbling off sideways, delighted in his stupidity.

The door to the bathroom opened and two men came in. I slipped my Ray Bans back on and pretended to be washing my hands. The men each took a urinal and were discussing what time they would tee off the next day. "Absofuckinglutely," one of them said. I watched their reflections in the mirror and tried to decipher which song was playing. *That's Why They Call It the Blues*, maybe. I wished I'd have gone fishing today instead of trying to be Columbo. I scooted out of the way when the men walked over to the sink.

After washing up, one of the men, as he was toweling off his hands said to me, "You got a peppermint for me?" The other fellow laughed at this, and I did too, as I watched them go. Seeing my reflection in the mirror made me want to break the glass. Why was I the one hiding? I decided I would walk out into the restaurant right past them and act surprised to see her.

Just then the door flung open and in walked Dick Burton. He stepped right up to the mirror and pulled out several paper towels and began dabbing at his pants. "Shit," he said to his reflection. He looked over at me, but I walked right past him and out the bathroom door.

When I got into the bar I slowly removed my sunglasses and blinked myself into the room. Rita was at a table against the window. She was looking into a little round mirror and smacking her lips at herself. The sunlight streamed in on her, and as I approached, she looked up at me and snapped the mirror shut. It fell from her hands and knocked her wine glass with a *ting*. She grabbed at it and then stabbed it down into her purse and stood up, smoothing down the front of her dress. Her cheeks were flushed cherry red and her eyelids fluttered like moths around a

hot bulb.

“Travis,” she said, eyes darting around the room. “What are you doing here?”

“What about you?” I said. I was seeing little particles swim around, like water bugs across the surface of my vision. I brought my sunglasses back out, but I dropped them on the ground.

“Did you drive here?” Rita said, squatting down to pick up my glasses.

“No, I swam. Who’s that you’re with?”

“What? I’m actually just leaving. I need to get back to work.”

I looked past her shoulder at the full glasses of wine at their table. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me,” I said.

“What are you talking about, baby?” She laced her arm into mine and began shuffling me toward the door, snatching up her purse as she guided me past her table. “Why did you drive here?”

I stopped walking and grabbed her elbow. Her jaw was clenched like a snapping turtle. “I’ve been watching y’all. I’ve been watching you and that asshole for *two* lunch breaks.”

“I’m just having lunch with a coworker. We have a project to discuss.” Rita jerked her elbow away from my grip and I felt the water start to drip out of my ears. “You shouldn’t be driving, Travis,” she said. “Driving and spying.”

All of a sudden I felt someone standing behind me. Then there was a hand on my shoulder. Rita’s mouth dropped open. I turned around and Dick Burton was standing there, still with his hand on my shoulder. “Is this jerk bothering you?” he said to Rita.

“I’m her husband, you asshole!” His face went slack like all his bones turned into jelly as he looked around the restaurant as if to assure anybody watching that he had everything under control. “Who in the fuck are you?” I demanded.

Rita pulled me to her and slipped her arm into mine once more. “Travis, this is Daniel. Daniel works in the insurance division with me.”

I looked back at Daniel and he was looking past me at Rita, his face squinched up like a possum.

“Daniel, I’ll see you back at the office. I’ve got to get Travis

home.” Rita tugged at me, but I broke away from her and reached out toward Daniel. I put my hands on his jacket and gathered his lapel into my hands, finding purchase to shake him to hell and back. The water was really dripping now, running out hot like lava down my cheeks. I felt Rita’s hands on my back.

I tried to tell this man that Rita was mine and that he’d best stay the fuck away from her, but the words weren’t coming. Instead, I said, “Dillops Gillelly,” and felt each and every hair on my head stand up at once, and then tingle away into nothing as a great flood of hot water came gushing from my ears.

A white light slowly evaporated to reveal Rita and the bartender squatting over me. Rita was stroking the side of my face and the bartender clutched a pitcher of water, as if ready to douse me with it. His mouth was cracked open and I could see his gold tooth glittering. Rita cradled the back of my head and tipped me up so that the bartender could fit the edge of a glass against my lips. The water was good and cold.

“You fainted again, baby,” Rita said.

“Your head all right, boy?” the bartender said. “Sounded like a goddamn coconut landing.”

They helped me up and I leaned into Rita as she led me over to a chair. The sunlight from the window warmed me and as I groped for my sunglasses, Rita brought them out and helped me get them on. Her purse was on the table in front of me and I looked back toward the bathroom hallway, at the stool that I’d been sitting at. “Where’s Dick Burton?” I wanted to know.

“Who?” said Rita. She turned to the bartender and shooed him away like a horsefly.

“You were with some jerk. Where is he?”

“That was Daniel, honey,” Rita said, grabbing up her purse. “We work together. He had to get back to the office.”

I stared up at her. Little white floaters began to appear, drifting down all around, as if it were snowing in the restaurant. Rita’s lips were plump and wet looking.

“Why did you drive over here?” she asked, crouching down in front of me with her hand on my knees.

“I just came in for lunch and I saw you with somebody.”

“Well, you wasted your time,” she said, standing back up. “I was just having lunch with a coworker. You know you can’t drive.”

“I drive all the time and you know it,” I said, trying to stand up, but failing. I was still dizzy, but the snow was letting up. “You always have three drinks on your lunch break?”

“Travis, honey,” she said, reaching for my hands to help me up. “I only had non-alcoholic drinks. You’re paranoid. You remember what Doctor Lee said about getting things mixed up?” Rita watched me like I was a slot machine she just pulled, biting her bottom lip and hoping for three cherries.

“Then what about your buddy?” I let her pull me up. “He always drinks like that on his lunch break?” I could still picture him with his grimy hands on hers. I didn’t know whether to cry or scream bloody murder.

“Honey, you’re imagining things.”

“I don’t know,” I said, and thought that maybe I didn’t.

Rita led me through the bar, the other customers following us with their eyes. When we got outside I had to lean on her car. My tag hung from the rearview. She asked me if I wanted her to call me a cab. “I’d drive you home, but I’ve got to get back to work,” she said. When I said that I didn’t want a cab she walked me to my truck. She shook her head looking at my front fender, but she didn’t say anything about it.

I cranked the ignition and then Rita leaned over me and adjusted the air conditioner so that it was blowing cold all over me. The dashboard clock read 2:58 in green.

Rita stood looking in at me, shaking her head like I was a child. “I guess I’ll just go back to work for a little while,” she said, hooking her thumb under the strap of her purse. “I won’t go out with the girls for too long today, ok?”

I knew it wasn’t a question.

“You need to go straight home. Promise me.”

I nodded my head at her.

“Then I’ll come home and make us some popcorn and we can watch a movie.” Rita ran her nails through my hair and then began pulling my seatbelt out for me. “Travis,” she said, clicking the seatbelt shut in its latch, and then smoothing the strap against

my chest. “I don’t want you to feel bad about things. I’m scared that you’re maybe getting paranoid. I’ll call Doctor Lee and get you something for that.” She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek and then shut the door for me. “See you tonight.”

Rita speed-walked back through the aisle of cars. The clacking of her high heels was all I could hear, even after she disappeared around the side of the restaurant. I’d let her go once and she’d come right back to me, which is what they say is the true test. I caught my reflection in the rearview and could see her lip print on my cheek. My symptom pad pressed up against my lower back as I tried to imagine getting along without her. Maybe I would end up on some dirty couch in the recreation room of some facility that smelled of piss and Lysol, sitting next to some guy who thought he was Napoleon, watching *Wheel of Fortune*. There was no telling what would happen next, but at least I knew Rita would be there for me. I was just about to shift my truck when the crawfish pinchers started dropping down again. They were bright red, and some of them were yellow and they snapped all around the front of my face. I rolled my eyes up, thinking that maybe I could get a good look at one this time, but as usual, they hid themselves. I sat back in the seat and waited for it to pass, feeling the cool air blow on my face. I hoped Rita wouldn’t be too long tonight. Popcorn and a movie sounded nice.

AUTHOR BIO: Benjamin Soileau is a bona fide Cajun who self-exiled from South Louisiana to the Pacific Northwest in search of the blank page pressed from Douglas fir pulp. His curious tales of the odd beneath the ordinary are written through the lens of a zillion jobs and a habit of questionable living situations. Now reasonably employed, he spends daylight hours behind the wheel of a beer delivery truck in Portland, Oregon, where he lives with his wife, Kennedy.

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

by Don Boles

There's a sex store just a mile outside of the main drag of Greenwood, beyond the Bi-Mart and Burgerville. It's the only place inside of three counties where anyone can get legitimate porn and not the random DVDs that are tucked in the back of the latest issue of *Hustler*, which are usually the latest installment of *Backdoor Bus Stop* and the like. I always find these places amusing. The buildings are huge gray blocks, almost the size of a dollar store, and have ADULT SHOP printed in black cartoony type against a bright yellow backdrop. I always expect a clown to be standing outside handing out balloons. I hang out there sometimes when I'm bored and horny.

There's a wooden fence that surrounds the entire premises except for the driveway. This is presumably to give privacy to the patrons inside, but seeing as I don't live in the town apart from the occasional summer helping out my mother, privacy is not a real concern. I've learned to just not give a fuck.

There was an overweight, balding man working the front counter. He sat on a stool that perched him high above the glass casing that housed the gadgets and toys that were more expensive than just your run-of-the-mill vibrators and French ticklers. His gut looked like a dented beer keg covered in a cotton tee. The wax paper shroud of a burrito sat next to him on the counter with a few shreds of lettuce and a tomato chunk left behind. He never looked at me. I don't think he ever looked at anyone in the store, just kept his face buried in whatever book he was reading. I think I overheard him answer his phone once as Jason, but I'm not sure. It's usually best not to be on a first name basis with your local sex shop operator anyway.

"Anything new in?" I asked as I approached the counter.

"Nothing good," he said, not looking up from a Penguin Classics version of *Frankenstein*.

"Anything weird?"

“There’s always something weird. I think we got a copy of *Granny Trannies* in. That’s supposed to be really out there. I think it’s Austrian or something.”

“Austrian?”

“Some Euro language. It’s dubbed, that’s all I know.”

“I’ll probably just look around a bit,” I said as I turned and wandered over to the video wall.

I was always amazed at how many videocassettes were still being produced in the industry. Most of the big companies had made the switch to DVD, but there were still a bunch of independents trading their wares on VHS. That’s probably where a majority of the girls getting off the Greyhound in San Bernardino wind up. They spend their savings on a bus ticket hoping to become the next Marilyn Chambers or Jenna Jameson and wind up working the indie circuit doing gonzo shows with animals.

As I made my way around the front room, I finally gave in to—what? lust? boredom?—and walked toward the rear corner of the store. There was a doorway that led down a dim, black-lit corridor where the arcade still ran strong. The rooms were little more than broom closets with 13-inch color TVs hooked up to a coin machine.

At the back of the corridor sat a man who looked like a skeleton. He sat on a barstool with his long legs splayed out in front of him and methodically ran a comb through his frazzled bush of red and gray hair.

“Are there any of these open?” I asked casually and realized that I was becoming way too comfortable in this setting. The first time you go to masturbate in a broom closet off Highway 99, there’s a nervous tension as you wonder whether or not you can actually go through with such callous self-flagellation. Most people can’t; those that can are usually so disturbed, they never speak of it again and try to forget they ever went in the first place.

“They’re all open,” the man said without looking up from the mirror that existed only in his mind’s eye. “It’s a slow night.”

I opened the door on my left and stepped inside. There was a metal swiveling chair bolted to the ground eighteen inches from

the TV screen. The screen was black except for the instruction to insert one dollar, which was flashing in neon green. I peeled two dollars out of my wallet and inserted both into the bill slot underneath the coin taker. The screen immediately switched to some random genitalia being smashed together. I turned the dial on the right side of the set and was met with a pair of buttocks thrusting away at whatever was in between the legs straddled around it. In the upper right hand corner was a timer counting down how many minutes were left before the screen would change back to black.

As I continued to peruse through my options of straight, gay, and lesbian, I felt no arousal at any of it. It was erotica in the same stratum as a *National Geographic* documentary on human mating habits. Even the loud orgasms could not magically transport me into fantasyland from the closet where I sat.

There was a knock on the door and before I could stand up, the knob turned and the door opened. There was a small frail shape in the doorway. It only existed as a shadow, since the only light coming in was from the burning neon in the hall. I could see wisps of hair feathering out from a thin cranium, but I could not see a face, just a darkness where the face should have been. I heard a voice.

“Do you mind if I join you?” the voice said. It was a trembling voice, one of fear, or excitement, I didn’t know.

“I’m done,” I said, quickly slipping past the shape. “It’s all yours.”

“Thank you,” the voice said greedily as it slithered past me and into the tiny room.

I looked back to see the skeleton man, whose job it was to make sure what just happened wouldn’t, still combing away at his hair.

I opened the door to the double-wide in which my mother resided and ran the trailer park. The brown shag carpeting was barely visible from the glow of the television in the living room. My mother lay back in a recliner that served as the only remains of her marriage to my father. Her eyes were closed and her mouth

slightly agape as the steady baritone of her snore greeted me.

She had fallen asleep again watching TV, most likely as a cover for her growing paranoia about where I go in the waning hours of the night. On the TV screen, Pa Cartwright was doling out his sagebrush wisdom to one of his headstrong sons.

I gently lifted her head and removed the thin quilt that hung over the back of the chair and draped it over her. On the nightstand beside the recliner was a box of Kleenex. I pulled a tissue out and dabbed the wet corner of her mouth. The lines on either side of her mouth ran deep into her skin. The worry lines on her brow were becoming more bunched. I tried to close her mouth without waking her, but was unsuccessful.

“When did you get in?” she asked.

“Just now,” I said, “Did you hear me come in?”

“No,” she said, “I was just watching television relaxing my feet and *Bonanza* came on and ... I never could stay awake through that show.” She ran her hands along the arms of the chair. “Have you seen my remote?”

“You should go to bed, Mom. It’s late.”

She frowned briefly. “I will here shortly,” she said. “I think *Big Valley* is on after this and I always had a thing for Lee Majors.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Just don’t fall asleep out here.”

“I won’t. Besides I’m your mother. I’ll fall asleep where I want.”

It was the summer of the Craigslist Killer. I primed the mower, waiting for the rubber bubble to fully replenish itself before pushing it in a third time. I yanked the cord and the mower came to life on the edge of Mrs. Bowman’s yard. The dry Oregon heat had yet to fully come into season, and by my second pass over the bright green grass, I settled into a groove and could’ve mowed half the state if I’d been asked to.

I had graduated from Kansas State that spring and at the age of 23 still had no clear idea of what the hell I was going to do with my life. My mother had told me that her maintenance man had thrown out his back in April while replacing a light bulb in the men’s bathroom, and she needed someone to fill in for

the summer. She said that she could pay ten bucks an hour and that was all I needed to convince myself to leave the wet heat of Manhattan, Kansas for the dry heat of Greenwood, Oregon.

Mrs. Bowman stood on her front porch, leaning on the iron railing with one hand, a mahogany cane in the other with her fingers wrapped around the handle, looking not dissimilar to a vulture holding onto a bone nearly stripped of all its meat. The vertical bars underneath the railing twisted upward into crossbars that reminded me of charred licorice sticks, the kind that took an abnormal amount of force to chew through.

I didn't like how she stood there, watching me go back and forth across her lawn, making sure I took care not to cut apart her rosebush in the corner. I kept my gaze down at the bulky black engine jutting out of the green iron chassis. I could still feel her eyes peering at me from behind the tinted glasses that covered half her wrinkled face. I was sure she was a sweet old lady, but I've never been comfortable around babies or people requiring canes.

I always saved Mrs. Bowman's yard for the end of my mowing duties, because without fail she would disappear right as I was nearing the porch, only to reappear seconds later with a pile of cookies wrapped in waxy plastic. A woman that big and on a cane shouldn't be able to move that fast, I always thought. If she moves that quickly how come she can't mow her own damn lawn?

"Clark, sweetie," she said as I released the throttle.

I turned and she held out a shaky, flabby arm covered in liver spots of varying shades of brown. In her clutches were the aforementioned cookies. I accepted them with my most forced smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Bowman," I said quickly and turned back to the mower.

"No, thank you," she said, holding me in her gaze, not letting me leave.

I politely nodded but she continued to stare at me as if I had absolutely nothing better to do than stand there listening to her television set blaring the latest developments in the world of Jessica Thatcher. The fact that I really had nothing better to do

was beside the point.

“It’s no problem,” I finally said, hoping to end it there.

“I just can’t move the way I used to,” she said. “Just the other day I fell down in the store. I was looking for some Crisco.”

Again I nodded. “Well, I had better wheel the mower back up to the shop.”

“Don’t let me keep you, sweetie,” she said, her jowls bouncing up and down.

I shrugged and muttered a thank you as I turned and began pushing the mower off her lawn and onto the road that circled the trailer park.

As I rolled the mower into the shed, I bumped it on the concrete lip leading into the storage area and dropped Mrs. Bowman’s cookies, bringing a hushed “Shit!” from my lips. I picked up the bundle and brushed the flecks of dirt off the plastic wrap. As much as the woman gave me the creeps with her cane and half-vacant gaze that suggests that she’s not sure if I’m real, she did make a damn fine batch of chocolate chip cookies.

I wrestled the mower the rest of the way into the tool shed and shut the door and clamped the lock.

The shed was dead center in the six-acre trailer park. The double-wide that served as my mother’s home office sat nestled in the northwestern corner of the park. This gave me a healthy dose of upslope walking as I made my way around the asphalt circuit, passing mostly single-wide trailers that were brought to the park twenty years ago and never replaced. Bright yellow aluminum siding had faded to a rusty brown on some, blue turned to moldy green on others. Along the sides of the asphalt were clumps of grass clippings, still wet from the steady drizzle over the weekend. I chose to ignore the clippings as I was too lazy to go back and pry the cheap push broom out of the shed.

I climbed the heavy wooden steps that led to the deck of my mother’s porch and entered the first door on the right, marked with slightly askew black letters: *Office*. My mother was sitting at the desk playing solitaire on a computer that had been out of date when she bought it three years ago. Her eyes were wide and her

mouth veered to the side of her face as if her lips were trying to escape.

“Did you weed eat?” she asked.

“No, I’ll do that Tuesday.”

“You can’t let the weeds get too high. They’ll eat all the good grass,” she said.

I nodded my head, placating my mother before heading through the door behind her desk, which led to the rest of the trailer, to take a shower.

When I would stay with my mother I would sleep in the spare room where she keeps the frayed memorabilia of our lives, like t-ball trophies and a fifty-year-old sewing machine. It was also where her personal computer was kept. Some nights I would get online, but with only a dial-up connection, it made for slow web browsing.

Sometimes I would log on to the IM service and chat with friends who were still down in Kansas. On that particular night no one was up, so I went into an Oregon chat room. After wading through the initial onslaught of fake women asking me to visit their cam sites, I noticed there were only about five real people in the room. There was the usual plea for real women from horny men who were too cheap to go to the bar. One woman asked if anyone was into BBW. One guy, who went by the username *monro69*, asked if anyone wanted to come over and fuck his wife.

“What does she look like?” I asked.

monro69: She’s cute. Average body.

“Does she know you’re pimping her out in a local chat room?”

monro69: I’m not asking any money. She’s a submissive and I’m her master. She has to do what I say.

“So what’s your plan?” I kept telling myself it was curiosity that had me talking.

monro69: You come over. Fuck her. Then go. Pretty simple.

“She’ll let you do that?”

monro69: She’s into the sensory depravation shit. She’s got an I-Pod blaring in her ears. She’ll be tied up too.

“Are you in Monroe?” I could hear the crash bars securing me into the coaster car.

monro69: No. I'm in Greenwood. Where are you at?

I didn't know where I was at. I was sitting at my mother's computer negotiating with a complete stranger the terms in which I would have relations with his wife.

“I'm in Greenwood,” I responded. “What are you gonna be doing while I'm fucking your wife?”

monro69: I'm gonna watch. Don't worry I won't try any gay shit with you.

I tried to argue against it. My mother's Bible-based upbringing was screaming: *Are you out of your fucking mind!* But my life experience and liberal education made a more convincing argument: *Don't knock it 'til you tried it. Could be fun.*

“Where do you live?”

monro69: I live up in the hills off one of the old logging trails. I can meet you at the Dairy Dell on the north side of town and take you up there.

From the dim light of the computer screen I could make out the mouse pad that my mom used for the computer. It had a picture of a bald eagle with wings spread in full flight and a quote from Isaiah. Before typing my response, I actually read the quote: *“For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness.” Isaiah 25:1.* It was a nice thought.

“I'll be there in five.”

I sat fidgeting with the radio in my mother's '87 Honda Civic. The paint job was a burnt forest green color so it blended in with the back side of the Dairy Dell. There wasn't anything worth listening to on the radio at that time of night so I just flipped it off and stared up at the orange and white sign that towered above the two-lane blacktop. The lights were off in the sign. I guess nobody wants a tasty ice cream treat this late at night. Vanilla swirls and chocolate dips are not on the palates of those who come crawling out of the bush at one in the morning.

To my right I could see a needle-prick of light coming down the road. The lights grew and separated forming a small vehicle,

maybe a Ford Taurus, I couldn't tell in the dark.

The vehicle slowed and pulled into the parking lot, coming to rest next to me. I could not make out what was inside. I only saw a hint of glare off a pair of glasses.

The window rolled down next to me and I followed suit. I saw the driver much clearer now. He had a military-style flattop above a round, blank face. The glasses I suspected before were on his face. The style looked to be a good fifteen to twenty years out of date; metal frames with two bars running between and above the lenses. He wasn't wearing a shirt. He looked to be in fairly decent shape with only the slightest bit of chub around his arms and shoulders.

We stared at each other for what could have been no less than ten seconds. I finally broke the calm. "You, uh, Monroe?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah. I live up over the hill over there, 'bout five minutes away," he said gesturing to the densely forested hill behind me.

Monro quickly slid back behind the wheel of his vehicle and began his ascent. With my own vehicle I followed him into the darkness.

As we drove along the narrow logging road up the hill, I tried to keep the license plate of my guide in focus. The plate had a group of random numbers that may have meant something to its driver. Even with the bright light of my headlights on it, the plate still had a misty red frame from the taillights.

The road twisted and turned through the woods, leaving me several times alone in the dark. I thought I caught the glint of a wolf's eyes watching me from the dense tree line. Maybe nature was trying to tell me something that God could not. I pushed the thought from my mind and followed the red eyes in front of me as they led me further up and in.

It was when Monro turned off the asphalt and onto a private drive that the tendons started to stretch in my arms and legs. There was no concrete, just the sound of loose gravel and dirt spraying underneath the tires. As the drive continued off the main logging road I felt I had seen enough of the rabbit hole, but

didn't know how to climb out.

Monro's vehicle finally came to a stop and his headlights shined brightly on a large aluminum-sided shed. It was large enough to be an auto-body shop. His headlights turned off and I heard his door open and close. Without thinking, I did the same.

I stepped out of my mother's car only to realize that there were no lights. In the dark I heard the sound of shoes running across gravel. I squeezed the handle of the car door, but I could not open it. The sound grew fainter and I saw Monro's half-naked silhouette against a dim porch light up the driveway. I carefully walked up the surprisingly steep incline toward the light, looking about to see if there was anything out of the ordinary. My feet crunching the loose gravel was the only sound. No bugs. No creeks or streams in the distance. No breeze through the trees.

Upon reaching the porch, I checked for any bloody garden tools lying around. There were none, only a lawn chair and a black grill next to the sliding glass door that was open eight inches or so. There were no lights on as far as I could tell inside the house, just the faint blue and white glow of a possible television set. *You are going to die tonight*, the last gasp of rational reasoning said, echoing inside my head. I believed it. I stood on the porch and steadily accepted my fate.

"You comin'?" Monro said, peering through the opening in the glass door.

"Yeah," I said, "I just wanted to make sure you didn't have any chainsaws around."

He smiled briefly before he turned back into the house. "No. No chainsaws," he said.

I followed him inside and we went through a dark kitchen area and hall that led into the living room. "Just a naked woman on the floor," Monro said as he gestured to the woman on the floor.

Indeed she was naked. She was blindfolded with a blue and white handkerchief, lying on her belly in a prone position. Her arms were bound at the elbow behind her back to a wood two-by-four, roughly twenty-four inches long. Her knees were held in much the same fashion. A web of ropes connected her hands and

feet with a lone rope going down her spine and in between her buttocks.

As Monro lowered himself on top of her, I sat down on the couch opposite the two. He shoved the fingers of his right hand in between her thighs. She silently lifted her head as he penetrated her. "I think she's ready to go, man," he said. He stood up and made his way to a recliner that looked much better than my mother's. "Have at it," he said as he plopped himself down and lit a cigarette. There was a lamp next to him and in his smile there were several teeth that were askew and overlapping.

I stood and began to unbutton my pants. I tried looking at her but her blindfolded face was too calm. There was no expression in her mouth, just a calm acceptance. "She's okay with this?" I asked, blocking out the fact that I stood there naked in front of another man who was not my doctor.

"That's the beauty of it, man. She's a submissive," Monro leaned forward through the cloud of smoke and ash with an excited dance in his green eyes, "She doesn't get to know. She has to do what I tell her."

I looked from her face, which was resting sideways on a throw pillow, to her body; thin in a deflated sort of way. Her skin sagged from her freckled shoulders and there was a deep magenta birthmark underneath her left buttock. I tried to get myself hard.

"It's a bit weird huh?" Monro said behind me. He had a glass of water in his hand.

"Yeah," I replied. This was all more than a bit weird, but I didn't want to offend my host.

Behind the recliner was an ornate marble fireplace. On the mantle was a picture of Monro and a woman. They were both smiling and wearing glasses, hers thicker and an older style. It reminded me of the pictures that were in my mother's church directory. He was wearing a blue shirt and she was wearing a red silk blouse. I wondered if it was the same woman on the floor in front of me. Her hair was the same dirty blonde as the one in the picture, just more matted and wet. Next to the picture was a certificate for distinguished service in Afghanistan signed by the United States Army.

The woman on the floor sneezed, causing her body to spasm briefly but violently, made more so by the ropes and wood. Monro stood up from his chair and got a Kleenex from the coffee table by the couch.

He knelt down beside the woman and wiped her nose. "Thank you," she whispered.

I watched as he went into the kitchen to dispose of the tissue. I began to look for my jockey shorts on the shag carpet.

"Not your bag, eh?" Monro said as he returned from the kitchen. The beginnings of love handles hung over his khaki cargo shorts.

"I'm sorry," I said. I looked back at the woman. She yawned briefly before scratching her nose on the carpet next to the pillow.

"That's okay. It's not for everybody," Monro said as he casually slipped out of his shorts. He climbed on top of her and began violently fucking her. There was no change in her expression. He leaned over and pulled out one of the earplugs and whispered something in her ear.

"Thank you for abusing me," she said plainly as he continued.

I crawled over to the couch and finished getting dressed. Monro and wife continued as if I weren't there. Maybe I wasn't. My skin began to shiver and I quickly pulled on my shirt. In the darkened corner I saw a blue plastic tub with a child's toy robot reaching out a clawed arm.

I tied my shoes and stood up. "I think I'm going to go I guess." I wasn't sure what exactly the proper etiquette was for excusing yourself from such situations. "Do you have a bathroom?"

"First door on your right," Monro said without breaking stride or rhythm. He even pointed out which door with his left hand.

I went into the bathroom and washed my hands. There was only a grainy bar of soap so it took me a while. When I left I heard the sound of flesh smacking itself raw.

I drove back down the logging road and I turned on the radio,

desperate for something, I wasn't sure what. I wanted something clean. Church hymns, James Taylor, something that, no matter how bland, didn't reek of decaying humanity.

The orange glow from the lights scattered along the highway grew brighter, signaling the return of civilization. I stopped at the four-way stop next to the Dairy Dell. The intersection was empty. To my left was the dark highway. On my right the streetlamps that led back home were beginning to turn off as the Oregon morning twilight crept over the hills.

AUTHOR BIO: Don Boles earned his degree in Creative Writing from Oklahoma State University in 2010 and writes his own weekly blog, Dispatches From The Wasteland, on blogger.com. He lives in Beaverton, Oregon with his wife and their two rats, Pesto and Potato.

CROTON FALLS STILL

by Kara Delavoie

After the reservoirs came, we learned to live
in the spaces between them, to think of ourselves
as occupying higher ground. The milk, the mill and
the iron ore were gone, but we knew the train tracks
led somewhere, stretched our eyes uphill after them. For years

we stoked fires, our homes encampments of
fireflies ringing water. And when some lights
blinked out, we just said our children were too old
for fairies. We say it still, but louder to drown out the light

wave of trucks, a wall of sound we can't see
over. Yet we have our pride, our good sense
of touch. We hold hands underwater to test
the temperature, the turbidity, the oxygen saturation

till our skins turn wrinkled and blue. We print
reports and send them upriver in a milk bottle,
best if refrigerated. We fix our eyes on the dry,

cracked sky and wait for an answer, yes or no,
or even a falling blackbird would be grace
enough. But we hear only the distant

drone of engines above us and don't know
if they exist or if it's the earth singing
itself to sleep in sympathy. So we

quake, shaken from dreams by tremors
of pumps and pistons, the groaning

of dams, as the reservoirs heave and

coil around us, wringing out

every last drop.

AUTHOR BIO: Kara Delavoie lives sometimes in the wilds of New York but mostly in her imagination and is a freelance writer/editor. Her work appeared long ago in The Southeast Review, Lullwater Review, West Wind Review, Art Times, and a handful of magazines that are no longer in print. This year marks her return to writing poetry.

KUSKANAX CREEK

by Jordan Mounteer

Consider the wasp,
venom-flasked, mud-dauber.
Abdomen spun like clay between
two fingers, thinness of a whisper
verging its two halves
part-air, part-earth:

wings like interlocking cutlery
remember something:

the muck of proteins and nucleic acids
swished around in the cheeks
of oceans, the fertile backwash varying
the wing-joint from the opposable thumb.

We are nearer to our geneses.

*

Nascent mist treks down
the far spruce-horned slope.
Old sweat and diesel rusting the air.

Strapped to the valley's shear
by our own discerning senses.
Buckled down.

*

Consider the wasp,
hollowing its hive
into the earth,

a many-chambered lung
flush with the corpses of spiders.

In calculating breath
one must account for mass,
for gradients of thistled-bush,
weave of ancient logs awoken
from the millipede rotations of decay.

Consider the wasp,
its yellow pulse spindling
an *axis mundi*, endless work.

AUTHOR BIO: Jordan Munteer is a bit of a nomad-poet, and has been seen frolicking in South American jungles, hitching down the New Zealand coast, and teaching English in Japan. His poems have appeared in The Malahat Review, Event, Grain, and The Antigonish Review. He recently won the 2014 PRISM International Poetry Contest and the 2014 Kootenay Literary Awards. He likes very, very strong coffee.

PNEUMATOLOGY

by Tyler Petty

Murder was the wrong word. It failed to connote scientific rigor. Further, Thomas's inquisition was not about vengeance—he had nothing against the Amish—or any innate upwelling depravity. And despite the claims of his childhood cartoons, animals were unsuitable test subjects.

The farm was a schizophrenic congregation of tradition and circumvention; the house dark after the last lantern was extinguished, the grazing fields floodlit to ward off furtive predators. From his observation point behind the yard's tallest tree, Thomas consulted his logbook and waited. The family patriarch would soon emerge from the windowed mausoleum and approach the barn, his steps a model of Old Order efficiency. He would not hear Thomas creeping behind him, would suspect nothing until the first flash sounded.

Thomas unshouldered his backpack and removed the Polaroid camera, re-checking its calibrations as he neared the barn. The initial photograph fulfilled two purposes: first, it provided a control image against which he could compare the later exposures; second, its aftereffects induced the Amish to face the camera, a crucial consideration for the experiment's successive steps. Without the silent announcement, Thomas could be compelled to speak. Verbal contact compromised the purity of the subject/scientist relationship.

As he did every evening, the Amish father ensured his sons had laid out sufficient feed for the barn's denizens, a smattering of skittish chickens and two nonplussed heifers. The sons were yet to neglect their chores on any of the nights Thomas had observed; he suspected bovine lowing and forked scratching feet soothed the Amish father after the day's exertions.

Thomas had trained himself to regiment his thrumming heartbeat as he transitioned from observation to data collection. The excitement of the chase did not hinder his experimental

acumen, but it reeked of unprofessionalism. He was there for research, not a climaxing thrill.

The Polaroid's flash froze multitudes of motes in the air, specks that had been invisible a second earlier and would soon resume their anonymous drift. Expelled from the camera's chemical press, the exposure developed against the night air. The Amish father froze, shoulders stiffened, his body alert to the introduction of danger before synapses transmitted it to his conscious mind. He turned, facing Thomas. If his people tapped into the torrential information flowing through nearby fiber optic cables, he might have known what was coming next.

Straw crinkled beneath his feet as he shifted his weight, but the Amish father did not move, either to confront Thomas or flee toward safety. That was not their way—another reason the Amish were ideal subjects. The limits of his lips curled downward as Thomas framed the soul-stealing picture.

If the second picture revealed anything—a dissipated halo, a ghosting beckoned into the lens—the experiment would stop there, Thomas's hypothesis proven, the final stage unnecessary. But as it had on every other night, in every barn, field, or farmhouse, the second picture emanated nothing. The procedure was clear. Thomas felt through the backpack, fingers flitting over Ginny's pink plastic photo album, and pulled out the knife.

After the struggle, which Thomas attributed to base survival instincts—no transcendental impulse necessary, just the animal's frenzy for life—he snapped the final picture. He stepped away from the rivulets of blood while it developed, wiping his brow with one hand, flapping the photograph to clarity with the other. A final comparison of the three pictures revealed no pneumatological phenomena. The Amish father's conversion from living to dead appeared to be mere biology.

The three pictures fluttered to the ground and settled there, too heavy to be borne away by the hematic trudge. Thomas replaced the smirched knife, careful to keep it from staining Ginny's album, and shouldered his backpack. As he crossed the yard, he must have tripped a motion sensor; that explained the new light behind him.

The experiment concluded, again without the result he needed, Thomas unstopped his emotions. As he hiked back to his car, he wiped his nose on his sleeve and prayed over his tears.

AUTHOR BIO: Tyler J. Petty is a writer and teacher from northern Indiana. He graduated with an M.A. in Creative Writing from Ball State University in May 2012, and his work has previously appeared in The Broken Plate and Oblong Magazine.



ODDLY PRECIOUS MELANCHOLY

by Janna Layton

Kimber wore her favorite dress: white, airy, best described as a frock, with capped sleeves and an alternating pastel yellow and pink duckling print. Around her neck she wore an antique skeleton key on a long chain. The night before she had taken a bath with her favorite bath bomb: purple with glitter, twinkling lavender water disappearing down the drain. It had been Friday night, but she didn't want to go out; she wanted to be in the bath with water as warm as Hawaii's and scented like French flowers. She knew others were out drinking, smoking, dancing, screaming at the ocean, whispering in tight circles, but she had wanted to take a bath in silence.

Now in the SUV she listened to her iPod: gentle songs with banjos and xylophones and synths. Music that already knew and smiled with sad wryness and continued, unfazed by anything.

"Clothing," said one mother. "He still dresses like a teenager. I told him no one would think to offer someone dressed like him a job, but he says he dresses up for interviews. But what if he's walking down the street and meets a potential employer? What then?"

Becky was in the room for the parents. It was a large meeting room with rows of tables. Coffee and tea were in the back along with muffins and cookies and croissants in piles. They were in the middle of one of the day's many sessions. This one was about the greatest characteristics of their generation. There was a list on the whiteboard: they had been homeowners by their mid-twenties, they had had good jobs, they had paid off their debts.

"Not that these kids actually meet anyone on the street," another parent said. "They always have their headphones in and don't look at anybody. They look down at their phones."

"Exactly," said someone else. "No wonder they can't find jobs. They don't interact with humans. They don't have people skills."

A company representative wrote “people skills” in dry-erase marker.

“And it’s not like we didn’t try. All those years of driving them to soccer practice, all those group projects in school.”

“Oh, I know. When weren’t we driving six kids in a minivan somewhere?”

“And for what?”

“But what can you do?”

“What *can* you do?”

“Not that it’s any better when they do have jobs,” said Becky, glad to have a way into the discussion. “My daughter Kimber has a job, and you’d think it was a death sentence. All she does is complain about it, as if there weren’t millions of people out there who’d kill for work.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and Becky felt a small beam of pride light up inside her as the company representative wrote “appreciate jobs” in big letters.

Kimber certainly did not appreciate her job. Or anything else. Becky could picture Kimber’s angry eyes beneath her bangs.

“Wow, this is great, you guys,” said the company representative. “This is a lot to work with. We’re going to take a break now, so get some refreshments, use the bathroom, socialize, and then we’ll take these notes and talk about how we can bring these values back to society.”

Chairs screeched on the floor as the group of middle-aged adults slowly got up. Becky went to the pastry table. She’d forgotten her paper plate and took a new one, getting a muffin, another croissant. She glanced around the room for the other singles she had met during introductions and ice breakers. There were so many couples who had each other for this, even those who were divorced. It would be easier to have someone.

The next girl who got in the SUV was wearing black slacks and a white button-down shirt. She smelled of pasta sauce and immediately started taking off her clothes.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she asked. “I’m not going in this shit.” She looked towards the driver. “Sorry, I can’t stand wearing

these after work.”

“Just buckle up when you’re done,” he said.

Buckle up. How like a helicopter parent. Helicopter parent. Kimber hated the term, what it implied. Years ago her mother had used it, and it had been during a pleasant moment—a dinner or lunch, something with just the two of them—but then when her mother had used that phrase to describe herself, Kimber had wanted to smash her water glass on the floor. But it was like a helicopter, Kimber realized. One felt powerful piloting a helicopter, and one could fly away. Humming over birthdays or talent shows, then heading back to base for a sandwich when it was something they’d rather not see. Flying away if the threat was something they’d brought in, then returning to remind you how many hours they logged with your school’s PTA. I always made sure you had the highest-rated booster seats, and later I bought you an iPhone.

She could tell some of her peers knew this already. Some had sensed it, as she had, since childhood. For others, the disposability came as a surprise. I wouldn’t give you up for anything in the world; except, except.

The girl opened up a gym bag with one hand while holding the back of a seat with the other for balance as the SUV continued forward. Kimber took out one of her ear buds.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Kimber.”

The undressed girl glanced at her. “Cool. I’m Lisa. You going to the debt seminar?”

“Yeah. I hope it’s not too boring.”

“I know. I can’t believe my mom is making me go.”

Lisa pulled on tight dark wash jeans and a tank top with black and neon blue horizontal stripes. She settled down next to Kimber and took out her phone. “What are you listening to?”

Kimber glanced at the time. “A band from New Zealand.”

“I like some of the stuff that’s coming out of Sweden,” replied Lisa before she started texting.

Lisa’s bills had something to do with her kidneys. Their group was all medical debt and student loans. The first official group.

None of the pastries tasted good, Becky realized after she had eaten a few. She went back to the table to see if anything better had appeared. It hadn't. A couple whispered nearby, and she thought about Mike again. They would have—surely, at some point—gotten back together if he hadn't passed away. Mike was tall—a big, blustery guy. How much better she would feel now if he were here, one of his thick arms around her shoulders. She missed having someone with her at outings like this, someone with her at home. But perhaps it was better this way. He would probably rant about how Kimber had this coming, how all these spoiled kids had this coming. Becky didn't disagree, but didn't know if she wanted to hear that tonight. She didn't know how she would feel in a few hours. She tried not to think about it.

“The next roundtable session will be starting in just a moment,” the lead company representative called out.

There were half a dozen of these reps in the room. Most of them wore khaki pants and red polo shirts, but the lead rep wore a black skirt suit. Her hair was up in a tight, shiny bun, and her heels clacked with authority. Becky felt embarrassed about her high-waisted jeans and theme park tee-shirt.

If only Kimber could get a job like that, Becky thought as she went back to her seat.

More young adults got into the SUV, some of whom Kimber recognized from photographs and some from the meetings they had been quietly holding for the past few months in small apartments and the storage rooms of coffee houses.

Organization had taken time, but fortunately information had gotten to them early. They'd known before their parents, even. Their parents who were now in the building, thinking they were in a simple, thoughtful all-day workshop and support group. Their parents who didn't know that they too would disappear if they were deemed likely to be vocal even after hours of marketing. Their parents who had continued to look them in the eye and smile even though they knew and thought their children did not know.

But some of their children did know.

“What if we, like, announce it? Put together information and post it online?” one guy had suggested during that first meeting.

They had met afterhours in a café where one of the girls was a barista. There had been tears. There had been jokes about chemo and the USDA.

“Or we could say nothing and just take off to Canada,” someone else said.

“That’s coming from such a place of privilege, though,” a girl interjected. “So then they’ll just move on to a group that doesn’t have the resources to run to Canada.”

“I don’t care about privilege,” a boy said. “I just want to live. How fucking privileged are we going to be if we’re fucking dead?”

After some arguing, Kimber spoke. “We leave and they move on to the next group. We stay and they do us and then move on to the next group. We make an angry blog post and it’s just another crazed angry blog post. No, we need to do something else.”

And now they were in the SUV, being taken. She felt like she had before surgery. All the appointments, referrals, biopsy, a distant dread. And then suddenly you were in a gurney, and a nurse was putting an IV in your arm, and any moment you would be unconscious and then they would wheel you away.

But there would be no anesthesia today. She kept watch out the window. A young man on a bicycle paused when they were at a light. Kimber nodded to him, and he shifted his messenger bag to his left side.

“I think it would be fun to be a bike messenger,” she said.

“I get that,” Lisa replied while texting. “I’d rock a powder blue bicycle.”

Lisa, Kimber knew, was texting someone far away who would then turn slightly and tell the person sitting next to them at a café to upload a funny picture to a social media platform. The picture for this particular communication, a calico cat in a black sweater with the caption “I can be chat noir too,” would be seen by many, including Sam. Sam would be sitting in a room with Cassie, both surrounded by monitors, both watching and waiting, both taking action or holding off on taking action according to the picture selected. The images Lisa remotely summoned—the cat, a

pufferfish, a bulldog puppy, a foal—might be the last interaction Lisa and Sam had.

“The night before, we’re going to the clubs,” Lisa had said at their last planning meeting. “We’re going to dance all night.”

The parents were at their tables again. Several higher-ups from the company had given speeches. Now a video presentation by the CEO was playing. The CEO told the parents how he had gotten into business, how he had paid his dues and worked his way up.

“You’re the ones with the hard-earned money,” the CEO said. “You’re the ones who have fought hard to keep it. And now, instead of that money being drained away, both directly by having to support adult offspring and via taxes because you’ve been stuck with the bill for everyone else’s kids’ debts too, your life savings will stay with you, funding your golden years. It’s hard to overstate how much of an impact this measure will have not only on you individually, but on the economy. Instead of staying home, you can vacation. Instead of eating at home, you can eat out. And what does that do? Think of all those hotel and restaurant jobs. Those are jobs that real go-getters can start out in and work their way up. You’re creating jobs here.”

Kimber had been at the office assistant job as a contractor for three years. Although she had been told that the contract position could lead to fulltime employment, it hadn’t happened yet.

“You just smile big and be super helpful and work as hard as you can. If you work hard, they’ll reward you,” Becky had told her.

They were on the highway now, leaving the city. The time on Kimber’s iPod was just as expected. She knew from Lisa that Ryan’s SUV was about ten minutes ahead of them, Kevin’s about fifteen. She had traced out this route on maps so many times, with so many variations, that actually traveling it now was both quotidian and surreal, like watching a movie she had already read the screenplay for.

Maps, satellite images, blueprints. At what point, after what

hour of study, did it count as already being there? Holed up in her room as a child, she had imagined being anywhere else. She studied maps of San Francisco, Vancouver, Paris, Barcelona, Istanbul. She imagined filling a backpack with some clothes and her favorite animal figurine—the little black lamb her mother had given her on tenth birthday—and traveling the world, alone.

But she had also looked realistically at escape routes around the house. What were the most discreet side-streets that would get her the farthest away if needed? When her father's yelling was particularly loud, when Kimber could hear things being thrown, she would look at the window and think, "now?"

But she had never fled. No point now in wishing she had. This time, remembered maps would be of use.

She casually glanced around the vehicle's interior. Some of the others—the ones who knew—looked nervous, and she smiled at them.

"Has anyone seen *Perseus and the Ouroboros* yet?" she asked. This was their check-in question, to remind everyone to calm down and focus. "The reviews say it sucked, but my roommate and her boyfriend really liked it."

She felt the group relax.

"It was okay," said one guy. "The special effects were good."

"Yeah, the phoenix looked cool," said another. "Spoiler alert."

Soon the group was chatting again. Two started talking about their parents. Kimber listened in but didn't worry, as neither was involved in the plan and therefore could reveal nothing.

"My mom doesn't believe that I really haven't been called in for any interviews," one boy was saying. "Fast food, retail, nothing. She thinks I don't send in applications."

"I know," said a girl. "I finally got a call center interview but didn't get the job. My parents are convinced I botched the interview on purpose. They want me to go to grad school, but I'm already in so much debt."

Debt. That was why they were in the SUV. Kimber was familiar with both the debt and the denial.

Her father could have doused her in gasoline and lit her on fire and her mother would have stood by, that confused but

complacent expression on her face.

“The thing is, these kids have never had a real problem in their lives,” the man said.

It was another break, and Becky had joined a small group by the refreshments table.

“Not in their whole lives,” the man continued. “I mean, look at our parents. My father had already served in the war at my son’s age. And then he was supporting a family. And meanwhile, my kid is what? Making coffee? That’s what his goddamn linguistics degree was for?”

“Oh, I hear you,” said Becky. “My grandfather died when my mother was very young, and they were dirt poor. Then Kimber has this middle-class, two-parent household, and you’d think she was Cinderella. When she got cancer, I thought it would make her more grateful as a person, but she acted like it was just some other annoying thing.”

“And yet we still do everything for these kids,” a woman said.

“It’s the selflessness of parenthood,” said someone.

“Unconditional love. And look what we got to show for it.”

The group nodded and sighed, and then was silent.

There had been no crying or hysterics from Kimber when she was diagnosed, just those same hard eyes. Becky had cried, though. It had been the bad type of skin cancer.

“You’re worried about this? Now?” Kimber had asked.

“Of course. You’re my baby. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Becky didn’t drink tea usually, but she decided to make some. She needed something to do, and the tea would give her something to hold; the steeping would give her something to focus on. As she studied the different tea bags, another woman stood nearby, stirring her coffee with a swizzle stick even though the milk had long since blended. Becky recognized her as one of the many divorced parents whose ex was also here.

Mike would have been here, he would have, even though he and Kimber had butted heads almost as soon as Kimber was born. Mike would come home angry, and Kimber would mouth

off, and then he would lose it and punch a wall or break her lamp or animal figurines. Becky had been dismayed to see two people she loved so much fight. She had hoped and hoped it would work out. But then Mike left. If he hadn't died, maybe it would have been Kimber's cancer that brought them all back together.

Becky approached the woman with the coffee to make small talk. She didn't get the chance.

"Why does it have to be our kids?" the woman asked.

Becky glanced around to see if anyone else had heard her. A few people nearby were staring.

"Why not some rich people's kids?"

"We've been over this, Helen," a man said, the man Becky knew after introductions and ice breaker games to be the woman's ex-husband, the father. "They're not the ones in debt."

"It would be counterproductive," someone said.

A representative with a big smile swooped in and put her arm around Helen's shoulders, leading her out of the room while talking gently.

The SUV arrived at the large complex Kimber and others had studied in blueprints and photos. It looked like any suburban office park. Kimber silently counted the number of SUVs in the parking lot they pulled into. One more to go, then they'd all be here.

They got out and a man in a suit welcomed them. As they were led through the lobby, Kimber looked at the receptionist, a young woman about her age. She was wearing the faux-vintage owl cameo above her left breast. Everything was on schedule.

They were taken down a hallway to a large meeting room. A few older adults in suits waited on the sidelines, and lots of other kids in their twenties and early thirties milled around. She saw Kevin. He was wearing the tee-shirt with a monocle-wearing narwhal on it, the one his father hated the most.

"Hey, you," she said, hugging him.

"Hey," he replied, grinning. "Looking forward to the debt reduction seminar?"

"I know, right?"

“The vans are just a block away,” he whispered.

“Good.”

She hugged Kevin once more before releasing. Poor Kevin, with his master’s in library science, his student loan debt, and months and months of fruitless job searching.

“In high school they told us we had to go to college or else we’d be flipping burgers,” he said at one of the planning meetings. “Then after the economy tanked, they told us we were entitled for going to college instead of flipping burgers. Now we can’t even get jobs flipping burgers.”

“And now we’re going to be the burgers getting flipped,” Lisa had joked.

Kimber looked around the room and took note of Ryan. They had shown each other their scars. Ryan’s was from his chemo port. Kimber’s, from when the melanoma had been removed, ran diagonally from her right shoulder to her spine. “Battle scars. We’re ready for this,” Ryan had said.

Ryan was now lingering near the back doors of the meeting room, occasionally pretending to look through the “debt reduction seminar” brochure. When the countdown was over, one team with supplies would come in that door, the rest through the front.

Finally, the last of their group was herded in.

“Hey! Excited for today?” said Lisa loudly, keeping her voice jubilant and mocking.

It was almost time.

“The seminar will be starting shortly,” said a voice over the PA system. “If you haven’t picked up a packet yet, please do so.”

Becky glanced at her watch. They had only been given a vague timeline for when everything would happen, but she felt it was getting close. She kept looking at the company reps for clues. She was worried that one of them would suddenly announce it was all over already. That the—very humane, they promised—process had been completed.

She paused. She had been about to take a bite of another pastry, but now she couldn’t imagine eating anything. Her throat

began to clench at the thought of it. She hurried to the trash can and let the paper plate and pastry fall. For a moment she felt like she was going to fall into the black hole of the trash can too.

Kimber. Kimber's body. The tiny body she had held. The eleven-year-old gripping a baseball bat, staring down her father who was holding up the family cat by the neck. The young woman's body, scar trailing from pale shoulder to under a tank top. Those hard eyes. Her daughter's body. Any moment now it would be—repurposed—that was the word used. What if it had happened already?

"It's very ingenious," a spokesman had told them. "Very cost effective, wide profit margins. The highest quality is sold both overseas and domestically. And the rest is bought by institutions like private prisons, stockyards..."

Becky gripped the edge of the trash can for balance. Was she the only one? She looked to the other parents. None of them really wanted this, did they? They hadn't had a choice, had they?

"What about organ donation?" one man had asked after meekly raising his hand during one question-and-answer session. "Couldn't they just sell a kidney?"

"That is an excellent question," the rep had said. "And yes, usable organs will be utilized appropriately and reflect the post-debt-repayment compensation. But cost-wise, a kidney would just not be enough. And with so many health problems in this group..."

Becky didn't remember to agreeing to anything—not that they could. Their children were adults. They were only here as a courtesy. A few other parents, like her, looked ill. Some were blank-faced. Two were complaining about adult children who had moved back home, as if they would return to them after this.

This could have been different, Becky thought. Why couldn't Kimber have been nice to Mike? Why did she have to major in geography and not something like business or computers? What one father had said earlier was true: if all the kids in this generation had become software engineers or CEOs, they wouldn't be in this mess. Then Kimber would have had a job that paid a lot of money, a job that didn't disappear with the

economy. She wouldn't have gotten laid off from that museum that lost funding, wouldn't be working as an office temp with no insurance. Wouldn't be taken to this building.

"Adderson, Kimberly," a man called out. The first group was about to be led down.

Kimber walked forward slowly, letting her hips sway in insolence and her eyes roll in annoyance. She stood near the door and waited as the rest of her group, which included Lisa, was called, all the way through Yang, Kevin. They were in groups of ten. Otherwise there was the risk they would overwhelm the handlers. The company did not think there was a risk in small batches.

"All right," a company rep in a polo shirt said perkily, "You guys are going to the C-Level Career Track talk first."

One company rep started leading them down a hall single-file, another at the end of their line. What idiots, Kimber thought. Did they not think this would look suspicious? She supposed they didn't think it would matter at this point. Still, they walked compliantly like schoolchildren, information packets on a seminar that would never happen pressed to their chests or dangling from a slack arm.

The rep at the head of the line stopped them in front of a bank of lockers and opened one.

"Okay, part of today will be about keeping focus and not being distracted by those mobile phones you all love so much. I know, I know, a few hours of withdrawal, it will be hard. But they'll be safe here."

They put their phones in the locker and continued.

At the end of the hall was a large freight elevator. The same handler at the head of the line said something about the regular elevators being under repair. They would go down three levels, although the buttons only showed one. As the large box descended, Kimber saw that several of her peers had tensed, their lips slightly parted in alarm. She glanced at Kevin and gave a quick nod.

"Anyone want to see *Perseus and the Ouroboros* after this?" he

asked. "I heard it's actually pretty good."

Mouths closed with resolve, just in time for the elevator to clatter to a stop.

The doors opened to a vast, dark space, and the kids in the front hesitated.

"Out," snapped a rep.

"What is this?" one boy asked.

"Out," the other rep said, shoving. "Now."

"Is this part of the training?" someone else asked.

"Just get out of the elevator."

Four armed guards waited, two on either side, as the group slowly stepped forward. Their eyes adjusted to the lighting. Now they could see the conveyors, the vats, the grates in the concrete floor, the chains. There seemed to be no end to the room. Lisa and Kevin, their designated screamers, started crying and trying to get back into the elevator along with two boys who knew nothing of what was to happen.

"Get into a single file line," shouted one of the guards, motioning with his gun. "Single file!"

Lisa, Kevin, and the two boys continued to scream and struggle against the handlers. A few others looked around in shock at the room they were in, at the gleaming new machines. One girl timidly stepped to where the guard indicated, in between two long chains lined with shackles and collars on the floor. Kimber examined the guard giving orders. He was an angry, graying man. The way his chin jutted out was supposed to signify confidence and authority, but she could see the lack of control in his red face and shifting eyes.

"You get over there, bitch," he said.

She stared at him for a moment longer, then moved to stand at the front of the line, just in case anything went wrong and they ended up pressed for time. The others slowly followed. Kevin looked at her imploringly, but she shook her head. She would stay in front.

The shackles would go around their ankles. The thin collars would go around their necks and keep their heads in place. Then they would all be pulled up in unison and swung upside down,

their throats bared for the mechanized blade. After their throats were cut and they bled out, their clothes would be removed and then they'd be put in the scalding tanks to remove their hair before butchering.

The workers who would do the actual butchering were being held in a different room and would only be brought out once all the corpses were hanging in rows. They were to spend all night breaking down human bodies into something more profitable, and then be brought by bus back to their guarded company housing.

The handlers came forward to snap on the shackles. For a moment Kimber thought she'd have to give the signal to go off-script, but then the music started.

It pumped over the building's PA system, electric guitar strumming. Kimber smiled. The guards looked up in confusion at the sound. At fifteen seconds into the song, just as the vocals kicked in, the lights went off in the basement and the young adults pounced.

For a moment Becky thought she was falling, that she was fainting. Her daughter was dead and she was fainting. But then she heard the other parents screaming and felt the ground shake. An explosion. An explosion and music.

"Are they trying to escape?" someone asked. "Is that them? Who's doing that?"

Someone else yelled that they were locked in, and several parents slammed their bodies against the doors, futilely.

"Did they know what was happening?" a woman asked. "Oh, God. Was it all of them? Did they all escape? Are they all alive?"

Alive. Kimber might be alive. She would never let this happen again, Becky swore. She'd grab her daughter and run with her from this building, protecting her just as she had all these years with seatbelts, helmets, vitamins. She'd take Kimber back home and tuck her into her childhood bed. She wouldn't let anyone hurt her.

Kimber waited with crossed arms, listening to the upstairs teams'

progress via walkie-talkie and watching the assembly line of guards and handlers go by. Blood poured to the concrete floor and splashed on her dress, over the yellow and pink ducklings. Sometimes someone would put an arm up, and a few fingers would fall to the concrete.

In one hand Kimber held a wrench from a duffel bag the receptionist had brought down with the walkie-talkie; when the machine's blade was no longer in use, she would take it, and perhaps get to use it before they were stopped.

The heavy doors of the conference room flung open. The crowd of parents rushed forward, then slunk back. One man called out a name, then paused with arms held out. His mouth moved, but he made no sound. A woman sunk to her knees. Becky pushed through regardless, breathless. She was short and couldn't see over the other parents. But her daughter had to be there. Her daughter had to have survived.

And there she was. There was Kimber. There was Kimber blood-splattered in that silly but cute dress, flanked by more blood-splattered kids in tight jeans and cartoon t-shirts and black tights under short dresses. There was Kimber gesturing with a bloody blade towards the remaining company representatives, then turning to look at her. Her daughter was alive.

AUTHOR BIO: Janna Layton is a writer and office worker getting by in San Francisco. Her poetry and fiction have been published in various literary journals, including Broad!, 100 Word Story, Bartleby Snopes, REAL, and The Pinch. She rambles on about comic books and stuff at readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com.



DOG DAYS AND WET DREAMS

by J.R. Hamilton

At any given time I can predict with relative certainty what my days and nights will be like. Rarely, sweetly, there is something surprising. Most of the time I know it'll just be another sad, gray day, rain or shine. A friend once told me, more than a decade ago, that this feeling stems from a self-fulfilling prophecy. There might be some truth to that. But at times I've tried to throw some random act into my day, or take a different route, or flash an empty smile, but it's contrived, and nothing really changes. I'm like an insect specimen pinned to the wall.

So I would drink, numb out. If I felt stuck, I would drink to fight that feeling. When I was young it was a celebration, a feeling where tomorrow may never come, so drink up today. After hospital stays and lost friends and my sad, shy attempts at love it became more desperate. Periodically, I would try to stop. While stopped, I would wait for the disappointment, any disappointment, to arrive so I could lift the bottle back up to my lips, always feeling strangely guilty, but free, again, somehow.

I drank in Davis Square, in Somerville, Massachusetts. A circle of friends in addiction formed. We were the bums, the nuisances, the latchkey kids, the addicts, the losers. We were all looking for a drink, or some pills, or some money, or some sex, or just something, anything, to do. My focus was to keep my cup full on a daily basis. No day was very typical in regards to how I would go about getting my booze, but the fact remained that I would be drunk from around 11 in the morning to roughly that time each night. I would panhandle or make liquor store trips for the homeless population, many of whom were banned from the store. Occasionally I ransacked my father's change jar, or came up with some excuse to get money from my sisters and parents. There was a crowd of kids, between 16 and 20 years old, who needed someone to buy them booze. I would make the trip and we would all drink together. There were days where

I found myself at the store 7 or 8 times throughout the day. I developed a rapport with the skinny, pierced and tattooed girl who worked there. She was hot, though I didn't care much for all the alterations. Her name was Wendy.

The summer sun was strong and I sipped a bottle of pink lemonade spiked with vodka. I was almost out. I had panhandled and enough fell in my cup for two pints of vodka, with about \$2 to spare. I hated vodka, but it was cheap and plentiful. I especially hated this vodka, which was called Ruble, although some called it Rumble or Somerville's Finest, as it is produced in Somerville and gets you violently, cheaply drunk. It was \$4 a pint up the street. I had a late start that day, having slept till two in the afternoon. Now I was almost out.

Saint Peter walked by, his smiling face grizzled, his voice like broken rocks and smoke. "Hey, Rigsbee! What's up for today?"

"Almost out of booze. Broke. Half-drunk but I've got a ways to go."

"Well, we'll see if we can find Larry the Fairy. Remember him? He usually surfaces around now to get his gin and ginger ale. He'll share with us."

Larry the Fairy materialized but was reluctant to share his booze. Larry was an old guy with long gray hair and a beard. He carried an over-the-shoulder plastic shopping bag that you'd find at a supermarket for a dollar and it bulged with newspapers and his stash of gin and soda. From what I understand he was just an eccentric who lived mostly as a shut-in in a subsidized apartment, but he had been a schoolteacher.

Saint Peter got him talking about books, and mentioned that I'm into books. "What authors do you like?" he asked. His voice was high and rough and nasal.

"Oh, I don't know. Thomas Wolfe, Hermann Hesse, Henry Miller. I've been reading some stuff by Bukowski."

"Wow, a young man who reads Bukowski."

I wouldn't find this very impressive, but I suspect he was out of touch.

Peter patted me on the back and said to Larry, "So's how about you share some of that gin with this scholar and I?"

The three of us sat in a park on a bench and passed the bottle around for about 15 minutes. Larry stood up, abruptly, and said, "Ok, that's enough. Got to get home. It was nice to meet you Rigs, take care, Peter." He stuffed the ginger ale bottle into his bag, and newspapers crunched. He shuffled out of the park.

"I thought Larry would take a shine to you. You're literary. I'm just a scumbag."

"I'm a scumbag too," I said. "Now what do we do?"

"I got an idea. I'll be right back."

He walked out of the park. Students and office workers flitted past. In my foggy brain I tried to imagine being normal. To this day I can't fathom living a normal, decent life. A day job, \$40,000 a year, a wife, kids, and just working and coming home for dinner, everyone talking about their day. I imagined an ordinary wife asking me about my day: "Well, sweetie, I sat on the pavement and panhandled and drank booze all day with bums and petty criminals."

Saint Peter returned, on a bike. He rode up to me with a big grin on his face.

"Where'd you get the bike, Pete?"

"Probably belongs to some yuppie that didn't put a decent lock on it. I went over to the bike racks by the station. So many to choose from. I'll be right back kid." He began to ride towards the station and the bike path beyond, quickly though a little wobbly. As he drove off I heard his cracked laugh.

I meandered. I walked back over by the slab, which is a slab of concrete by Store 24. People sat on it, having ice cream, or drinking from paper bags, or whatever. There were benches arrayed around but many gravitate toward the slab. There was graffiti marking it up. The graffiti was always changing. It was washed off, then people would write on it again. I bought a cheap \$1 coffee at Store 24 and sipped it on the slab. My drunk was fading fast, and the coffee sat uneasily on the vodka and gin. But I was tired and empty and needed a jolt and to consume something.

A girl named Caitlin sat on the slab, looking bored. She was a presence in the square, but I'd never been close to her. She was 18

or 19 and friends with some of the latchkey kids I've mentioned. But we were never introduced, though in a roundabout way she would come up in conversation and I would express that I thought she was pretty. She wore a red dress and she was slender and pale. She had red hair and thick black glasses. Her lip was pierced. Altogether she was like this aspiring down-and-out hipster. She glanced at me shyly and I sipped my coffee and took her in. I lit a cigarette. She walked over, smiling, and asked for one.

"Sure," I said.

"Thanks!" She took the cigarette and she walked away toward a couple of skaters who were standing around. They conspired together and wandered off.

Peter came back, on foot. He was smiling. He carried a twelve-pack. He reached into his pocket and handed me a \$10 bill. "I owe you from the other day."

"Cool. I'm assuming you sold the bike?"

"Yup."

"You've only been gone for a half hour! Who the hell did you sell the bike to?"

"I have my resources. Let's go down the path and drink these."

"Give me one second." I crossed the street to the alley by the train station. There was a small parking lot with this fence with a door that leads to a dark alley. I used to pee through the chain link door into the alley. I had other spots as well. Sometimes I went in the t-station, sometimes I would piss behind Store 24, sometimes I would go into the pool hall, and the spot we were headed to had an enclosed dumpster and the door was always unlocked. However, you couldn't pull it off during the day. There were people walking by, and there was a day care that was close enough where I would worry that if I was caught peeing by the dumpster I'd wind up a registered sex offender.

I was a low-life. I had this thought as I pissed a violent stream through the fence, moving my feet back from the piss that pooled in the dark alley. I zipped and headed back across the street.

"Jesus!" Peter sad. "That took a long time. The beer's getting

warm.”

We walked past the square, and I glanced around to see the people idling there, reading newspapers, drinking coffee, or just looking lost or contemplative. I thought of Caitlin.

“Caitlin bummed a cigarette off me. Chicks never stick around when they bum a cigarette,” I said.

“Oh, Caitlin! I gotta story for you. Remember that night when I had that crack?”

I remembered. It was late, the buses wouldn't be running before long, and I was hammered. Drug-wise Peter wasn't a crackhead but more a jack-of-all-drugs. He rarely was able to afford anything more than booze, but when he could find it he'd shoot coke, snort coke, smoke crack, shoot heroin, smoke pot, pop OxyContin, pop dilaudid, drop acid, whatever. Personally, my thing was booze. I've done drugs, but mostly gave everything up when “crazy” became official. Periodically I would smoke some pot, but found every time that it turned its back on me and it just didn't work out. One suggestion: if pot makes you paranoid don't smoke a bunch of it and listen to dissonant classical music about the bombing of Hiroshima. Just throw it out. Or sell it.

Anyway, it was late and Saint Peter had showed up having just bought a little crack. He wanted to go to a nearby stadium and smoke it on the bleachers. I wanted to. The liquor store was closed and I wanted to get high. When I was younger I tried coke and never thought it was anything to write home about, but it was fun. I thought I should just smoke some crack. I couldn't sink much lower. I had one foot in the street. But when I was younger I had a golden rule: no crack, no heroin. I hesitated, looked at my watch, and went home. Chickened out or took the moral high road or however you want to look at it. When I got home I was all bummed out, couldn't sleep and regretted that I didn't smoke crack with Saint Peter.

“Yeah,” I said. “I remember.”

“Well Caitlin turned up. I let it drop that I had crack on me and she put out for it. Sucked my dick and everything.”

“Fuck you,” I said, in disbelief.

“Yeah, Rigs, we were in the bleachers and she was showing off

her little bald pussy. She shaves it. She called me ‘daddy.’ She said ‘give me that little Irish cock daddy!’”

“You are fucked up and tell a lot of tall tales.”

“No bullshit. What, did you like her? Just get some crack and you can have her.”

We kept the beer down, and took big swigs on the sly. People passed, oblivious, and if they weren’t oblivious, we didn’t give a fuck. He went on about Caitlin, but I told him I didn’t want to hear any more about it. I was 27, but he was probably in his 50s. It wasn’t entirely his age that presented a problem. It just seemed so fucking shady. Sure, a schoolgirl fantasy, whatever. If that weren’t a common thing you wouldn’t know what I’m talking about. Wives dress up as cheerleaders so they and their husbands can go back to, or pretend they had, glory days. When I’m 50 or 60, an 18 or 19-year-old girl will still look good to me. They did when I was 10, too. But my vision of Caitlin ... I didn’t know her, but had I given her drugs or money for sex it wouldn’t have been worth it for me. I’d rather take her out to dinner. I would’ve panhandled and schemed and got some money together and took her out for a burger. I wanted to talk to her. I guess I felt she was too beautiful to need to fuck for crack.

I began to feel down. When I drank I would usually feel pretty good, but that feeling wore off fast, and it became just robotically trying to stay drunk. The first hour or so would be great, but then I would stop talking. So I drank, and Peter drank, until the twelve-pack was gone.

“I gotta go see a guy about some pills,” Peter said.

“See you later,” I said. “Thanks.”

He stumbled off. I walked back over toward the square, and two of the kids were there, Becca and Bonnie. They smiled and waved me over.

“Rigs, what are you doing tonight?” said Becca.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “I’ll probably go home and eat.”

“Will you go to the store for us? Are you coming back? We’ll drink you up!”

“I gotta hit the store myself, so sure. Not sure if I’ll come back. Feeling kind of down.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” said Bonnie.

“No, just tell me what you need.”

Becca said, “Get a liter of raspberry vodka. The cheap stuff. The same stuff you bought us last night.”

I did feel some remorse for supplying liquor to nascent drunks. They were all baby-faced and at loose ends, drinking in the street. Mostly, I just wasn’t entirely aware of my age. I knew my age, but wasn’t thinking of it. I needed booze, and they needed booze too. The substance was like an equalizer, though I didn’t really work it out in detail. It was a ridiculous theory anyway.

I walked over to the store and walked in. I must’ve been a sight when I haunted that place. They’d see me go in, again and again, drunker and drunker. But I never caused a problem. Wendy told me stories of people drinking and falling asleep in their cooler. Bums. I’ve probably made trips for some of those same bums. I picked up their liter of raspberry vodka, which seemed really unappealing, like a concoction of drugs and candy. I took my \$10 and bought a pint of Ruble, two King Cobra 40’s, and two nips of Old Thompson. Wendy rang me up.

“Sometimes I think you just come in here so much because you miss me,” she said.

“I do miss that smile sometimes.”

Her cheeks flushed and she looked down. I said it because I liked her. She had a big smile and was always nice to me. But if I were telling the truth I would’ve said, “I come in here because I am completely fucked up and have a world-big hole inside me that I fill up with liquor and then continue to pour the liquor into the hole so I don’t have to feel so broken, though I remain broken and my life is a hollow, sham life and I have been reduced from a kid with a good heart to a low-life and drunk that pees in alleys and buys alcohol for future drunks and bums, often with stolen money from petty criminals or the parents that always wished I would amount to something.” But I didn’t say that.

I walked out and brought the liquor over to the kids. I gave them their change. “Have a good night,” I said. They waved and smiled, saying, “Bye bye.”

The bottles clinked in my backpack. I stood at the bus stop with a cigarette, and when it rolled in, I got on. It was strange to be on a rush hour bus with a bunch of regular people after drinking all day.

The bus stopped at the end of my street. I lived with my parents and two sisters. My eldest sister had the downstairs, where my Gram used to live. The middle sister lived on one side of the upstairs, my parents on the other. I lived in the middle room.

My pattern was to wake up and head to Davis. Often I woke up pretty early, hung-over and with shaky hands, but always after my family left for work. I would often be at the liquor store when it opened. Sometimes I would find someone with booze left over from the previous night. Around 4, before anyone got home, I would head home and eat, then head back to Davis for the night. I tried to avoid my family. They were distraught over me.

This day was unusual because they were home. I crept up the back stairs and my parents were in the living room watching bad TV. I walked into my room and put my bag down, then went into the kitchen to cook a microwave meal. I ate a little nuked Salisbury steak with a side of mac and cheese off the plastic tray. I heard my cheap pay-as-you-go phone ringing in the bedroom. I went in and picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Hi Rigs.”

“Um, who is this?”

“It is Daphne. How are you?”

That voice. My stomach turned into quivering pudding.
“Daphne? I thought ...”

“You thought what?”

“I guess I thought I wouldn’t ever hear from you.”

“I wanted to see how you are.”

“I’m drunk. Fell off. Going to get drunker.”

“Do you still live at the same place?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I’m coming over.”

She hung up.

I hadn't cut my fingernails in a while. I hadn't showered. I had been wearing the same clothes for a few days. I finished my food, showered, and did a little grooming while I was in the shower. I stepped out, shaved, put on deodorant and a splash of cheap cologne, and walked into my bedroom. I put on clean boxers, a clean pair of blue jeans, a clean pair of socks, a clean t-shirt, and searched through my clothes for a clean, decent looking button-down shirt. I found a blue one that didn't stink. Good enough. I picked up my bag and went down the back stairs, and walked out front and sat on the steps. I shot back a nip of whiskey and opened one of the 40's. Lit a cigarette.

I had booze, so I could make her want me. Maybe if she was a little drunk she could like boys. It was so awkward before but now there were bottles full of elixir and everything would be smooth sailing.

I drank and smoked. The stars were like mother of pearl thumbtacks stuck up there. It was cool. I was drunk and petrified but I wanted her. I wanted to see her but it was all so unexpected. Eventually a black SUV pulled up and she stepped out. She had her blonde hair pulled back and wore jeans and a black t-shirt. She smiled and gave me a hug. I pressed her into me. I liked to have that body in my arms. She smelled good.

"So ... where is it?" she said.

"Where is what?"

She walked over and picked up my 40, unscrewed the cap, and poured it onto the front lawn. She raised an eyebrow. "Do you have more?" She looked into my backpack and took out the other 40 and the pint of vodka. I was stunned. She unscrewed the caps and dumped them out. She didn't find the other nip, but a nip is just a drop in the pan.

"Jesus," I said.

She laughed.

"You ... I can't believe you did that. I can't believe I just let you do that."

"C'mon," she said. "Let's go for a ride."

Her house had a lighted peace sign. It was a white house. The

lights were dim inside. I walked in behind her, taking in her straight back, her hips, and her full ass. But I moved stumblingly and I was disoriented. I wanted more booze, I wanted to be mad at her, but I just followed her, through the hallway and into the kitchen. In the hallway there was a radio on a table with SMOOTH JAZZ scrolling in green digital letters across the display. A mournful saxophone played over a scattered piano, the volume low. We paused in the kitchen.

“How about some coffee?”

“Sure,” I said.

The pot had already been brewed. She had thought of everything. She poured me a cup, asking, “How do you take it?”

“Milk and too much sugar.”

She put milk, a jar of sugar and a spoon on the counter. I fixed my coffee.

“Let’s go hang out in the basement,” she said.

The basement smelled damp and there was no furniture but a few couch cushions. She walked to the far side and sat cross-legged at an easel. I sat against the wall and sipped my coffee.

“I don’t understand why I’m here,” I said.

“You are here because I came and picked you up. And since you don’t have your booze you need something to do.”

“I’ve really missed you. I was really upset. You are so fucking beautiful. You are the most beautiful girl I have ever kissed.”

She sat at her easel and dipped her brush. When I spoke her smile wavered. She moved the brush in a sweeping gesture: a swipe of blue. She turned to me and said, “I come down here when I’m sad and just paint.”

The painting she was making was largely blue and red. I stared at it, and thought I saw a horizon or a shore or the aftermath of a disaster.

“I want you.”

“I just don’t feel that way about men.”

“I don’t believe you.”

And I didn’t. It couldn’t ever make sense that a girl this beautiful could want me. And our brief time together was awkward. She just realized that. She realized I was a mess and

used a confused bisexual ruse to trick me. I thought it, and felt ashamed to think it.

“I like girls,” she said. “But I do care about you. And I don’t like your drinking. You need to make more out of yourself. You have a good heart.”

I know how this story ends. Looking back I think certain things, I wonder about certain things, but for the most part I’m tracing a definite outline. My path is more or less fixed. In this case, the outline is of a blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful girl with wonderful curves, a good heart, and a mind that is razor sharp. In that moment there were possibilities, and I was content with uncertainty. I sat on my cushion with my coffee, a request on the tip of my tongue. I sat and watched her, a little drunk, a little tired, wondering what would come next.

AUTHOR BIO: J.R. Hamilton rides the MBTA in and around Boston, Massachusetts, mostly to and from places he’d rather not bother to go to, such as the lousy godforsaken mall he works at. When he is not entirely black and blue with doubt concerning his ability to craft a compelling sentence, he attempts to write in his spare time. He is currently editing a collection of short stories about mental illness and addiction and a short slice-of-life novel about being a loner bombarded by advertising slogans. Well, sort of. If you would like to cheer him up, you can write him at jrhamilton002@gmail.com



BEST WORK

by Stacey Bryan

When the image came, so did the woman. Sometimes the woman was already there. The image bound him to it like a novice to God. It stepped leisurely out of the vast space and hunkered down, lit from within, smelling of stars. It existed, intoxicating, surrounded by the silent sound.

Nothing happened at first. He was fine. Jake ordered the marble from his usual place in Oakland. It was 98 cents a pound. He could afford it now, no problem. It had been years since he'd needed an advance from his agent. It was delivered to his home in Venice Beach, as always, about four weeks later. He thought of alabaster but passed this time, not in the mood for the bruising. He chose Utah green marble, light, which deepened to a darker hue streaked with cream.

In his studio, he began the work. The block was large but not quite large enough to necessitate the overhead crane. He positioned it on the wooden table, braced by sandbags. Using a diamond blade, he roughed out the stone. Slabs of marble separated from the block and toppled over. Rock dust filled the air and he breathed like Darth Vader behind a respirator. He sprayed the marble with water before he drilled and kept the bottle handy. If the stone wasn't wet, he might damage it, along with his tools.

The neighbors were used to Jake's work: the piercing drill, the shattering chisel. He'd lived in Venice for 17 years, here long before many of them. His house was away from the canals, which he disliked. The water could smell brackish and the birds were noisy and dirty.

He worked for several days and still he was fine. Then on day three, as marble chunks thudded to the table, something happened. He felt a kind of quickening inside his boots, a strange sensation of something gone awry. Several of his toes had lost all feeling. He did not want to look at them now. He felt exhausted

and decided to stop for the day. He turned off the drill and headed for the bar.

It was a balmy August evening, the usual for Los Angeles. Upon entering the bar Jake sensed something different immediately but couldn't place it. Until he saw her. The girl was sitting on his stool in the corner, doodling on a napkin and nursing a beer. She didn't look old enough to be in here. He shot Victor a glance as he came in and Victor shrugged as if to say, *What do you want me to do? You don't own the fucking stool.* Jake felt his belly tense as he did a sly double-take, taking a seat five stools away from her. He'd seen the girl skulking around the neighborhood the past couple of weeks. She had appeared, strangely, just before the image had arrived. Perfect timing. But she seemed too young. She couldn't be the one.

He hunched over the bar and brooded, noting in his peripheral vision that the girl was staring at him. He downed three beers and two shots of tequila over the course of the next hour, ignoring her even as the vibes furled his way in an undulating wave. A skeeze wandered over to the girl and attempted a rap, which she quickly nixed. When she got up to leave twenty minutes later, the skeeze followed her to the door. Jake thought his name was Rick. It seemed like everything was going to be okay until she turned away and Rick blocked her exit. Jake closed his eyes and dropped his head forward. Pivoting on his stool he stood up unsteadily, a condition not due to alcohol but due to the state of his toes.

"Hey," he said, and they both turned. The bar was dark, the jukebox blasting. Nobody paid them any attention. "Dude, that's my little sister." She could pass for his sister. She was dark too. "Back off."

"I seen you before, man. You don't got no sister."

"What the fuck do you want with her? She's like 16 years old, dude."

Rick bared his teeth through his ragged beard. "None of your fuckin' business, man."

This was one of the last bars in Venice that hadn't been zombified by yuppies. Unfortunately, the appeal of its un-

renovated nature drew all types, necessitating a fight at least once every few months. *Hijo de puta*. He was tired. Not up for this. He stood, swaying slightly, trying to compensate for the numbness in his toes. He reached out for the girl and Rick blocked him.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” said Jake.

“Or what, fuck-face?”

Jake half-turned and grabbed someone’s half-full pint glass off the counter. He swung it with velocity into Rick’s head. The girl gasped and backed away. Glass and beer spiraled through the air. Blood spurted in an arc from Rick’s nose. His eyes opened wide then rolled back into his skull. Jake didn’t have time for this. There was no time for anything except the block. Drilling the block, chopping the block. Rick didn’t understand. He staggered sideways and dropped to his knees. Voices rose and a commotion ensued.

“Outside!” Victor screamed from behind the bar. “Goddamn it, Jake! Fuck! Outside!”

Victor didn’t understand.

Jake tossed three twenties on the counter before he turned and left. He always tipped Victor well but tipped bigger whenever he broke something in the bar. Outside, the balmy evening continued, loyal, eternal. Crickets were singing. The door opened behind him and someone came quietly outside. It was either the girl or he was about to get shivved in the kidneys. He paused for a moment, staring up at the sky, as he lit a cigarette. God, he hated Los Angeles.

The girl stepped forward and looked up at him briefly. She held the napkin she’d been doodling on between her thumb and forefinger and waved it in the air a little bit, back and forth, back and forth. Jake glanced at her, exhaling a cloud of smoke. He studied her. She was disheveled. He had the feeling she was homeless. She was mocha colored, thin, but possessed square, strong shoulders and a round butt. Her brown hair was cut short like a boy’s but was growing out, like an unruly hedge. It looked oily, like it needed to be washed. He saw the girl studying him back. He was dark and his hair was black, unruly, hanging to his shoulders, peppered with gray. He was Mexican, his family

hailing from San Jose del Cabo before transplanting to North America in the 50s. He was tall, unusually so for his clan, so they'd affectionately nicknamed him "El Gigante." His full name was Jocasto, after his grandfather.

"You shouldn't smoke."

He didn't look at her. He pulled on the cigarette.

"You're welcome," he said.

"You didn't have to do that. I'm not a child."

Now he looked at her. "Really? How old are you?" He felt strange. He could practically see the pheromones spinning and popping in the air between them. There was an insistent pull, an attraction, which he felt inclined to fight.

"Old enough," came the response.

Porqueria. He laughed and blew smoke up into the air. "Okay." He was 49. He remembered when he had been "old enough." He flicked ashes and started walking. "See ya around." He propelled himself forward into the night. Away from her, disengaging himself from the undertow. Ahead, always ahead, always waiting, was the stone. He made his way toward it, toward the image, always missing both, never free of either. He wouldn't be able to work until morning. His one concession to the neighbors was to keep the noise limited to daylight. It was more difficult to get around now, due to his toes. It was taking longer than usual to walk here and back, so he arrived home late and dog-tired. When he removed his boots he discovered two toes on one foot and three on the other, rotten through and through, had simply fallen off. He picked them up carefully, wrapped them in plastic, and placed them in the long freezer.

He was almost finished with the rough cut when his right ear fell off. There was no warning, no numbness first. It plopped down onto the table beside the slabs of discarded marble, and he stared for a moment, unable to identify what it was. An animal, a dead bird, some organic thing dropped from the ceiling? But no, it was his ear. There was no blood, no gore. Just a lump of flesh, feculent, detached. He had turned off the drill and had pushed the respirator up onto his head, freeing the ear to fall. He

removed his gloves, wrapped the ear, and placed it in the long freezer near the toes.

He turned back around and surveyed the stone, panting slightly, nauseated. He could see the image inside it like something trapped in ice. The image was emerging, the rest falling away. It clawed like some creature, a monster, to get out of the rock. It was doing much the same to get out of his head. He closed his eyes, blindsided by a raging headache. He left the studio, crossed the small back yard, and entered his house. Four ibuprofen trembled in his hand as he downed them with whiskey. The sun was setting, blood red. He would take a short nap, go to the bar later.

Someone was in the studio. He had fallen asleep on the sofa and left the back door slightly ajar and furtive sounds came to him, rustling, rattling. Instantly awake, he gained his feet and stumbled stiffly through the kitchen. It was dark outside. Across the yard the door to the studio was open, though there was no light. He grabbed the baseball bat from behind the refrigerator and crossed the cement driveway. Just inside the door he flicked on the light. The short-haired girl was bent over his cabinet in the corner, rifling through the shelves. She whirled around, her eyes wide. Jake put the bat on the ground and leaned on it with one hand.

“Jesus Christ,” he said. He looked toward the block. It appeared untouched.

“The gate was open. I was going to ask—”

“You followed me,” he said. He looked at her and felt the tugging undertow. She was probably homeless, and now she was a thief. Also way too young. None of those things fit into the usual scenario. It couldn’t be her.

“No. My friend showed me your house—”

“Come over here,” he said.

She stopped talking and backed up a step.

He stopped leaning on the bat and straightened up.

“Come here,” he said again.

“No.”

“Look, I’ll just come over there and get you.”

“Okay.” She stood waiting. He leaned the bat against the doorframe and strode toward her. He felt some of the toes on his other foot give way, like stepping into mud and that squishing sensation that followed. This threw him for a moment, and he stopped. She took advantage of the hesitation, tried to dart around him. His arm shot out and caught her by the wrist. She squealed.

“You’re trespassing,” he said, towering over her. He turned and walked out, hauling her after him. He didn’t want to be pulling her into the house, calling the cops. He wanted to be falling onto the sofa with her, rolling around on the floor with her. The girl resisted but soon stopped, no match for his height and strength. He stepped awkwardly, feeling the toes inside his boot moving around where they shouldn’t have been, like loose pebbles underfoot. He would deal with that later. Inside the house he held onto her wrist as he retrieved his cell phone off the coffee table. He held the phone up so she could see. “Calling the cops,” he said. “What were you doing in there?”

After a moment of glowering: “I was looking for some paper. I ran out.”

He paused. “Paper for what?”

She glared at him, her wrist still in his viselike grip.

“Okay.” He started dialing with his thumb.

“Drawing. I draw. Draw. Draw. I sketch. I paint. I draw. I ran out of paper.” She yanked against his hand and he let go. He contemplated her, slid the phone into his pocket. His headache had diminished but was still there, dug in like a tick. He would go to the bar anyway. He had to, to clear his head. To clear his head after the headache. After the headache and before the work. Was she the one? Maybe she was lying, though. Maybe she had no sketches. Or if she did, they sucked. Lots of people said, “I like to draw.” Didn’t mean anything.

Suddenly she said, “I saw your retrospective at the LACMA last year.” She was absently rubbing her wrist. His sculptures had been featured there last year. His father, aged now, living in Santa Fe, had made the journey back out here to see it. Jake had paid for his plane ticket, along with two of his cousins. His mother had

passed away ten years ago. His other siblings lived out of state.

“I couldn’t,” she paused, her jaw working, searching for the words, “believe it.” She trailed off. “I couldn’t believe it.” She nodded once, satisfied. “It was amazing.”

Jake knew nobody under thirty who was interested in the LACMA. But who knew? She could be lying about that too. She could be lying about everything. He had also won the Arthur Ross Award in artisanship for the limestone relief he had created around the front door of an historic library in downtown L.A. Had she mentioned that? No. How much was real and how much had she read somewhere in passing? There was a tender pixie quality to her face and eyes that made him want to smooth the hair back from her face and he was instantly annoyed at himself. No. No time for that.

“Okay. Come on.”

They left the house. He locked up and led the way back across the yard to the studio. In another corner he opened a battered desk drawer and removed a pad from within. He turned and handed it to her. She took it and grinned. “I was going to look there next,” she said.

“That’s where it was.”

“The whole pad?”

“Yeah. Come on. I’m leaving.”

She followed him out.

“Back to the bar?”

He didn’t answer. He lit a cigarette and held his arm out a little impatiently: *you first*. She passed the gate and he turned and locked it after them. His feet squished and then he remembered his toes. Oh, shit. Shit.

“I gotta go back. I forgot something,” he said. “I’ll see you around.”

“Okay.” She lingered in the darkness, clinging to the pad of paper. “I have a yellow Bug. That’s where you can find me.”

He stopped and turned. “Why would I need to find you?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.” She finally turned around and walked away. Jake continued toward the studio and the long

freezer.

He was staggering home two nights later at 2:30 in the morning. Victor had kicked him out and told him to get some sleep. His head hurt and he was having trouble walking. When he turned a corner to take a shortcut home, he saw a yellow Bug parked up ahead at the curb. Slowly he approached it. In the distance a dog howled.

Jake peered through the window and saw a girl inside, a hoody pulled down low over her face, huddled beneath a blanket. At least he *thought* it was a girl. She *looked* like her. She appeared asleep. Homeless. He fucking knew it. Suddenly there was movement. A cat reared up on its hind legs, paws against the window, and yawned lazily at him. When it had closed its shark-like mouth, it remained stretching there, regarding him curiously. Jake straightened up and looked around at the deserted streets and dark corners. He looked back down at the cat, smoking, gazed into the interior of the car, searching. He saw stacks of papers, what may or may not be drawings. Some frames poking out covered up by a sheet. The moon shone down, silver and gray.

He knocked on the window. Probably a bad idea. He did it anyway. The cat pushed off the glass with its paws and settled down into the driver's seat, watching him. He had to keep knocking and knocking before the girl even stirred. The cat stared while she shifted, its ears twitching. Jake saw her peering out from beneath her hoody. She spotted him and froze. He imagined what he must have looked like, a gigantic dark shadow lurking outside her car. He bent down more so his face was in the window and spoke loudly: "Hey. Does this thing drive?"

She took a moment to gather herself. She sat up. The cat stepped onto her lap. She nodded.

"You can park at my place. You wanna drive or you want me to drive?"

Jake was just being polite. He wasn't sure he could even fit inside. The back seat was packed with so much junk, he wouldn't be able to get the front seat back. In response, she leaned over and unlocked the driver's side. He opened the door. She pulled the keys from somewhere in her clothes and tossed them toward

him. Jake took a few more drags then flicked his cigarette and ducked down. Somehow he wedged himself in. It was exceedingly painful. The car started up with ease. She was keeping it in good working order. Smart, if she was actually living in it. At the house they both got out and she stretched in the driveway. She had thanked him on the way over and he'd grunted a response, half-ignoring her. He started to go inside.

"See you tomorrow," she said, and started to crawl back inside the Bug.

Jake stopped and sighed.

"Not in the car. You're sleeping inside. The house." He paused. "Unless you don't want to. Your choice."

She hesitated, one leg in, bent over, and slowly backed up. Impatiently, he waved his hand. "Come on. On the sofa. I'll get the stuff." He entered the kitchen and called over his shoulder. "The cat too. What's your name?"

There was a pause before she answered. "Erin."

The next day his other ear fell off while he was using the angle grinder. There was a fine mist in the air composed of water and dust. When he pulled his respirator off, the ear came with it, stuck to the inside.

While he was detaching it from the mask, he felt his pinky dislocate in his left glove. He shook it loose onto the table and stared at both of his body parts silently for a moment before wrapping them in plastic and depositing them in the long freezer. Beside him, around him, above him, below him, the marble sang. It hummed an unceasing note that cleaved his brain. He pressed one hand to his temple, eyes squeezed shut, then opened them a moment later to see Erin standing in the doorway. She had been gone all day on the Promenade where she worked as a barista.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. My head."

"Want me to get you something?"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes again. "Ibuprofen. The bathroom. Thanks."

After she had delivered the pills with some water (he declined

to ask her to return to the house for whiskey), she loitered inside the studio with him, studying the piece. He watched her, nerves jittering, half-sitting on the long freezer. Nobody saw his stuff while he was working. Except for the woman. He thought she might be the woman. All the signs were there. She turned to him, her eyes shining. *Don't say anything*, he thought, *Jesus, God, don't say anything*.

She didn't say anything. Instead she walked toward him, her hands behind her back, like an innocent schoolgirl. There was anything but innocence in her face, though. The pheromones were back, shooting from their bodies like bullets, ricocheting off each other. He knew what was coming. He saw the blazing awe and he toed the precipice. Her chocolate skin called him. The squareness of her shoulders tormented him. But he couldn't do anything but remain there, unmoving, uninviting. Until he knew for sure. As she approached, he pushed away from the freezer and brushed past.

"You can't be in here when I'm working," he said, moving back to the table. "The dust will get in your lungs."

It had the desired effect. He heard her leave a few moments later.

The days passed. He wired the usual money to his father in Santa Fe. He worked the stone. He appeased his agent over the phone, promised he wasn't drinking that much. Erin worked most of the day, every day, leaving the cat with him. She'd had a fight with her roommate three weeks ago, stormed out. She'd admitted it had gotten progressively more difficult to stay clean for the job. Washing up at the beach bathrooms, trying to rinse off in the freezing showers outside had been especially difficult. She slept on the sofa, threw his trash out, washed the sheets, although he hadn't asked her to do any of that. On weekends, she joined the artists and cons alike on the boardwalk, peddling her wares.

At the bar a few nights later, he was ambushed outside by Rick the skeeze. He was leaving and he stumbled, feeling the heel of his left foot disintegrate in his boot. He was down on the ground getting kicked in the ribs before he knew what was

happening. “Motherfucker,” Rick seethed. “*Motherfucker!*” His voice scattered into the street, glittery glass. Jake glimpsed a bandaged nose, two black eyes, right before he felt a rib splinter and shatter inside him. He did not need any help breaking his body. The next kick that came, Jake lashed out, grabbed Rick’s boot, tore him off his feet. He went down, head bouncing off the sidewalk. As he writhed, stunned, Jake belly-crawled over him quickly like a giant spider and slammed his head down onto Rick’s forehead. There was a groan, then silence. Rick’s crotch grew dark with urine. Jake sluggishly gained his feet. Los Angeles spread out around them, massive in its loneliness, its exhausting lack of originality. Jake’s heart pumped within, exactly the same, a mewling piece of meat. Only one thing kept it beating, and here it hunkered down beside him, grinning like a demon in the dark.

At home Jake stumbled through the door dragging his left foot, sides heaving. He collapsed onto the sofa. Erin was nowhere to be seen. He heard the toilet flush behind him then her footsteps approached. She was wearing yellow short shorts the same color as her car and a tiny t-shirt that barely contained her strong, broad shoulders, inflaming his senses. She smiled at him, holding something behind her back.

“What are you doing up?” he said, gritting his teeth. He was glad his hair covered the holes left by his missing ears. He squeezed his hand shut as he had in the bar, hiding his missing pinky.

“Oh, my God.” She stared at him. “Did you get into another fight?”

Jake held out his good hand, trying not to look at her girlish, shapely legs. “What is it? Give it here.”

She paused, then pulled a piece of paper from behind her back. He took it from her. It was a sketch done in heavy black pencil. He inhaled sharply, his shattered ribs tearing a hole. There was a ringing in his ears. The room disappeared. The sketch was all. It hunkered down, side by side with the image, both illuminated from within. The silence stretched out, suffocating the room.

“How old are you?” Jake asked without looking up. He

probably should have asked her before. *Well, fuck, he was asking her now.*

She chuckled softly. “28.”

28. He didn't know what to be more amazed at, her sketch or the fact that she was much older than he had first presumed. She looked 17. He'd figured she was 19, 20. 28. He gripped the paper and gazed at it, unable to look away. Nimble, Erin plucked it from his fingers. He stood up immediately, his head throbbing. They locked eyes.

“I wasn't done looking at that.”

“Come and get it,” she challenged.

He lunged, she dodged. He caught her by the back of her shirt. It tore loudly. He yanked her backwards and spun her around. She stumbled into him, jarring his broken ribs. He winced, hissing between his teeth, but pulled her closer.

“You're too old to be saying old enough.” This quietly, against her mouth.

“I know,” she whispered back and closed her eyes.

The timing was perfect but also couldn't have been worse. At that moment, his right leg fell off at the knee, sliding out from inside his jeans. Erin screamed and tried to hold him up. Jake closed his eyes and plunged into oblivion.

It was more difficult to work the piece as the days went by, even as close as he was to the end. Usually his fingers were the last to go, but this time he'd lost both pinkies and an index finger, and this greatly hindered him. It was also nearly impossible to maneuver with the crutch under his arm, trying to balance with half his leg missing and the rotting heel of the other foot. But somehow he managed. He moved to the smaller precision tools to refine the shape. He used rasps to remove the high spots left from the grinders. He used files to remove gouges and punctures left from the rasps. He used silicon carbide paper to sand it down, gripping it with awkward intensity with his remaining fingers.

Since he wasn't using the drills at the end anymore, Erin was allowed in with him, sometimes aiding in keeping the stone wet. He gave her instructions for what to do when he was done, when

he was no longer able to collect his parts and place them into the long freezer. When he could no longer do this, he would be free.

On the day he finished, as he covered the piece with a sheet, both his arms fell off and his remaining leg buckled and snapped beneath him. He plummeted earthward like a tree, slamming into the world with no restraint. His head popped off and rolled across the room like a bowling ball. It took her a while to find it later, resting as it was in the shadows beneath the desk. She struggled with his torso. Even diminished as it was with half the limbs and no head, he was heavy, huge. The cat watched as she hefted him to her waist, rearing back to pry open the door, the torso balanced against the edge of the freezer. His ribs felt loose and squishy beneath his shirt. Finally she managed to lower him gently down. She collected and wrapped every part of him carefully in plastic, placed every part into the freezer. She wanted to remove the sheet to view the piece. But he had asked her not to, so she left it alone.

Three days later Erin was sunning herself in the yard when Jake appeared behind her. He was leaning against the house, wholly returned, wholly renewed, his boots crossed casually at the ankles. He had slept for days, surrounded by a soothing zibeline darkness that had stroked his skull and coated his skin. The cat approached him leisurely and he watched as it rubbed its face along the tip of his boot, eyes squeezed shut in pleasure. He straightened and Erin stood up out of the lawn chair. They came together. He pushed his hand into her hair and pulled her head against his chest.

A while later after he whipped the sheet off and revealed the piece she stood, riveted, as dust motes tumbled lazily in the afternoon light. It had sauntered down, as always, as if it had all the time in the world, though he did not have all the time in the world. He had carved it out, soaring and wild. His bones had snapped, his blood had boiled. It had merely watched as he had disassembled. It did not care about his pounding heart, his grinding breath, his fleeting life. It did not care about anything but existing.

AUTHOR BIO: Born in San Francisco, Stacey's pieces have appeared in literary magazines in New York and Los Angeles. A UCLA graduate, she has coached gymnastics, worked at a Wyoming dude ranch, the L.A. Reader, and closed captioning. Her present project is an L.A.-based paranormal comedy series in which nothing can be taken seriously.

LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS EMERGES FROM THE WOODS
AT MOORESVILLE, IN

by D.A. Lockhart

Come to us like rust-scraped guitar
strings and thick summer water
that howls from birch-lined fields
of corn and soy, move like you are
buried in the quick-silver river bottom
that cuts through county lines.

Come to us through that impossible
medium of shadow-boxed, glow-tube
waves that end in AM radio. All of it
in copper voices that ember us to life.
Because it is summer here our sky hangs
in banners of slow-churned light. At night
we stand uncertain beneath moon-dog
stars, curious of melodies appearing
through canopies of trees and walls
of fire weed, button bush, and saplings.

You must come and come strong,
baring teeth like pop bottle necks
across three-year old guitar strings
and you hammering transcendental
souls into fretboards like trains burning up
mile after mile after mile of gravel chipped rails.

The three generation sound crickets
follows and along another well-lit
main street of just another Hoosier town,
we still want to know is that there is another
voice just beyond the nearest treeline.

AUTHOR BIO: D.A. Lockhart holds a MFA from Indiana University and currently resides in Windsor, ON Canada. His work has appeared in Windsor Review, Sugar House Review, Construction, COE Review, and Hawk and Whippoorwill. His work is also forthcoming in Straylight Magazine and Reed Magazine. He is editor-in-chief at Urban Farmhouse Press and is a librarian at Rochester College in Rochester Hills, MI.

TODD'S MOM

by David Joshua Jennings

She smelled like Dr.Pepper
and she wore a hat
with a bill that flapped everywhere
and her name was Susan
and she was hot.

Sue was Todd's mom,
a divorcee from Italy,
and she like to stroll around
in a bathrobe
that often came loose,
shocking Todd's friends with her breasts,
making us lustful,
giving us dreams
of sultry nights at Todd's house
alone with Todd's mom.

It was weird
when we encountered her in the outside world,
outside here meaning outside the wistful lust zone
of *la casa de madre de Todd*,
in her role as citizen,
lawyer and single mother of a 14-year-old, divorcee,
target of other men's desires.

She was a constant theme in our lives, subject
of many a nasty joke in Todd's presence,
who listened and steamed and cursed us inwardly
but outwardly pretended he didn't care, jokes
that went on every day at least once a day
for four years, until we were 18,
grown men in the law's eyes,

able to buy smokes and ride motorcycles
with chicks on the back,
you know, *dudes*.
I was a dude, Todd was a dude,
Todd's mom was a MILF—
we were cool, basically,
at least in our own eyes.
In any outside environment,
outside here meaning outside our hood,
hood here meaning suburb
(we used it with an irony we weren't aware of),
in any outside environment
we would have been pretty dull:
white trash, Okies, *Southerners*
they sometimes call us up north,
at least those who gather everything below the Mason-Dixon in a
noose
and strangle it into a single idea.

Anyhow we were 18 and Todd's mom
was still single and had grown increasingly flirtatious
these last few years.
The décolletage on her summer blouses
had plummeted at least by an inch,
a mile in our eyes,
and she sometimes left her tennis skirt on all day
(Sue had a court in her backyard)
and often invited handsome men
to hit with her
back and forth as we watched from Todd's window
pretending to masturbate to gross Todd out.

By our 18th birthday this was the bet:
whoever sleeps with Todd's mom wins.
Wins what? Everything, basically:
clout, the gaze of girls, the admiration
of the entire high school,

down whose hallways they'd strut,
onlookers parting like the Red Sea,
stars in their eyes.

You'd even be more popular than Cody,
half Puerto Rican varsity quarterback Cody,
who donned his football jersey through the hallways on Game

Day,
or, sleeves rolled up, sunglasses on his forehead,
hung out in the parking lot after school,
arms crossed, leaning on the bed of his pickup,
which always had a bucket of hog feed in the back,
winking at cheerleaders.

You'd even be more popular than Cody
if you slept with Todd's mom.

Needless to say none of us had a chance,
except for Seth, who was only our friend
because he bullied us less severely
but more consistently than everyone else
if we pretended we were his pals—
though sometimes we'd get drunk and rage at him
and he'd realize we despised him and he'd be sad.

'Seth the Snake' we called him
because secretly he was a rapist.
He'd raped three girls and got away with it
because in small town Oklahoma rapists get off.
It's too shameful for the victims' family
to pursue the case—their daughter's name
would be soiled if it got out, perhaps for life
if she remained in town like Melanie Mantrain did,
so named for the gang rape she suffered
when she passed out drunk at a party.

Seth was the only one who could plausibly land Sue
because he wasn't actually Todd's friend.

Plus he was the only one bold enough to try,
bold here referring to a small town boldness,
which to him meant the boldest man in the universe.

And then it happened.

Todd excommunicated Seth from out friend circle,
so we never got told directly,

but the legend went something like this:

It was a mid-summer evening.

The fronds that hung over Todd's mom's house
swooned in the breeze.

It was in the middle of a heat wave,
a desiccating Oklahoma heat wave,
the kind that trepans into your kidneys.

But inside Todd's mom's house it was mild,
subtropical almost, and with its plush white carpets and pink
furniture

it had the ambience of a doll's house.

The story goes Seth knocked on the door,
Sue answered in her night gown,
a sliver of red panty showing,
and Seth asked for Todd.

"Todd's not home," Todd's mom said.

Then she invited him in and they fucked.

Fucked hard, according to Seth,
fucked until the sun came up
and then he came in her.

Word spreads fast in our town,
and churchgoing parents
who loathe unmarried women
will believe anything.

Three months later

Todd and his mom moved away.

AUTHOR BIO: *David Joshua Jennings is from Oklahoma, USA. He has spent much of the last seven years traveling to more than fifty countries and writing about his experiences. He currently lives in India.*



ON BREAD ALONE

by Josh Goller

Roger Miles is more than one person.

He discovered this one night when he nodded off in Appleton, Wisconsin, next to his wife, Evelyn, who worked from home and was such a turbulent sleeper that for the past half-decade Roger had only a sliver of mattress on which to cling. He teetered there along the padded edge and stared into the dark pit of his closet as his eyelids grew heavy, even amidst Evy's thrashing and aggressive snores. He slept. When he awoke, he lay in a twin bed in a tiny studio apartment in the Ravenswood neighborhood on Chicago's North Side. Not a tremendous leap, only four hours by car, but his range would improve.

What amazed him most that first time, when he awoke with both hands in his boxers in that dumpy apartment, alone but for the mice he soon discovered living behind the baseboard under his kitchen sink, was the sensation that everything was in its right place. Ravenous from a night of what, at the time, he could only describe as teleporting, Roger knew that the cupboard contained a half-eaten box of Frosted Mini-Wheats. He knew the milk was only borderline sour, but also that his only cereal bowl was currently teeming with cigarette butts atop the toilet tank.

In the mirror, his face looked somewhat changed: a receding hairline, hollowed out cheeks, a scar across the bridge of his nose. But he knew that face too. After a shave, smoke and shower he went for a coffee and knew he was a regular there, knew the cute dreadlocked barista was really called Tiffany though her nametag said *Rain*. As he watched the steam lift off his cup and twirl into the icy winter air, Roger remembered he once had a job in the Loop, a file clerk on the 7th floor of 175 W. Jackson, near the Sears, but he'd been laid off due to the economy and his rent was two weeks past due. He knew that his landlord was a Syrian with a unibrow who forbade pets but never appeared at the property without his own impeccably brushed Shih Tzu in tow. He knew

the quickest route to the Red Line. He knew how to mend torn clothes.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he had all sorts of knowledge that simply hadn't been there the night before when he'd fallen asleep next to his restless wife.

Years later, once we really got to talking about it, he admitted he'd visited, inhabited really, dozens of his parallel selves. Hundreds. Whenever he closed his eyes, he'd tremor and quake, terrified of losing his place. Some selves were better than others, he'd said, and I hoped so, since the self I knew, the Roger who had drifted to Portland and, more specifically, to the dumpster in back of the sushi shack my late husband left me, couldn't get much lower.

Roger was born in 1976 in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. That part was no different no matter what self he lived in. That part was universal fact. As a child, he had a goofy half-smirk that made grownups suspicious of him, a problem that only grew worse during his awkward adolescence. He was long and lean and brighter than he looked, growing to resemble the corn stalks he detasseled one summer for \$4 an hour and a bushel of free sweet corn. This same history pertained to more than a handful of Rogers, but not all. One Roger got kidnapped waiting for the school bus. One drowned when he dove off a bridge. Another won a regional spelling bee. The Roger I knew dropped out of high school in the 11th grade. He drifted to Madison and things got hazy. One morning Roger awoke outside on a soiled couch somewhere near Camp Randall, the frat boy tenants poking him with sticks. He asked them if he could have a glass of water and maybe, if it wasn't too much trouble, some spare change to buy a sandwich. They made faces at each other and sputtered out laughter and told him fuck no.

The Roger I knew decided to move on.

He hitchhiked as far as Boulder and camped there for a while, living off soup kitchens and, in a pinch, fresh roadkill and dandelion greens he sometimes brewed into tea, along with the Twinkies and beef jerky and malt liquor he bought with

the meager income he managed from panhandling with clever cardboard signs. He lived a few weeks with a straggly-haired half-Korean girl who was small and loud and had two babies and trouble holding her wine, and before leaving town he served a few weeks in the county jail for busting the padlock off a Kwik N Go storage shed and running off with six cases of PBR in a wheelbarrow.

He made it to Portland with a single change of clothes, a brown bag full of quarters, and a mutt named Franklin. Roger fit in well at the homeless shelter on Burnside. Everybody loved his dog. He made friends. Back then, he still cleaned up nice. The social worker whose bed he frequented, a frumpy redhead with a smatter of facial moles whose shoulders hunched under the weight of the world, even set him up with a Building and Grounds job through a city parks program. He drew three-and-a-half weeks of minimum wage pay and then got shit-canned after the incident with the schizophrenic and the spoon.

They pumped him full of meds and he saw a thick-legged counselor named Chevonne with a milky British accent and light black skin for a few months, and he more or less got well. Someone told him Franklin got hit by a car, but all he said was “Franklin lived long before automobiles.” Beth, his fire-haired social worker, set him up with an apartment of his own. She paid his security deposit out of pocket. She had a heart the size of Mt. Hood and low self-esteem.

Not that Roger needed help wooing Beth. This is when he still had all his teeth, and before he lost the eye. He kept seeing his counselor, and dreamed of taking her home and showing her the view from the floor of his new apartment. Though by rule Chevonne never talked about her personal life, she looked the type who knew her way around a kitchen like a mother. No one had put any care into a sandwich for Roger in years. Punk teenagers at fast food places assembled theirs as crudely as they dissected frogs. And his own sandwiches tasted completely wretched, like grass clippings and old socks. Roger would have given up the meth, would have stopped drinking, if only he could

get the pear-shaped Chevonne to make him a sandwich.

With his floor mattress squeaking and his red-headed and kind-hearted Beth under him, Roger pretended she was Chevonne; he'd always had a good imagination, especially when he was taking drugs. One day Beth forgot to take her pill and Roger knocked her up. When she told him, he got confused and wouldn't shut up about how interesting it would be to have a child who was half black, and British besides. By the time of the abortion, Roger had lost the apartment and was forbidden from coming within 500 feet of Beth. He agreed with the decision. He thought it made good sense.

A few months later, he'd read in a soggy newspaper stuck to a curb that Beth was struck by a drag-racing teenager while she rode her ten-speed along a bike path and she died three days later in a hospital. Roger never found out what became of Chevonne. Perhaps she went back across the pond. Or maybe she died too. Everybody does.

Roger was the first to admit that those weeks and months around Beth's death were a fog. His head wasn't right. He'd sworn off the medication and stopped sleeping in the shelter, but he didn't know how it was that he ended up in that dumpster behind my sushi shack, only that he'd been there before. He once told me that if you time it right, food in dumpsters isn't as vile as most people think. Timing is everything.

From the first time I saw him, rooting through a black garbage bag stuffed with spoiled yellowtail, his other hand cradling balled-up bread from the Italian joint next door, I thought he looked like Jesus. It's easy to say that about any long-haired, bearded man, especially one holding fish and bread, and I know the historical Jesus was likely dark-skinned, nothing like the Anglo renderings of today, but Roger really did have a Christ-like air about him. Even covered in garbage he was Messianic. I asked him if he'd like to come inside, have some miso soup, some green tea. I could make him a proper yellowtail roll. Even better than dumpster sushi, I joked. With the wild-eyed look he gave me, I half-expected to be asked to follow him and become a fisher

of men. Instead, he asked if I knew how to make a sandwich

I met him in the back alley most nights. It became our ritual. I'd offer him a proper meal, maybe a reheated cup of coffee, and he'd refuse, and instead rifle through my trash and bless my scraps. Sometimes he asked for a cigarette. I don't know why I kept at him like that. He wasn't the first vagrant digging through my garbage. But something about the flicker in his eyes made me want to wash his feet with my hair. I know that sounds crazy.

Someone I knew worked for a radio station. One of those Christian radio stations with the strained upbeat music, old-fashioned phrasings and the raspy preachers who sound about one pulpit-pounding away from a stroke. Brimstone in a tin can. When I brought Roger up to my friend, they did a feature on him, and on how I was a Good Samaritan to this poor, homeless man. Lit up their switchboard. Roger and I listened to it together in the sushi shack, smoking cigarettes and drinking leftover coffee while he took his sweet time with the sandwich I'd made. Roger said his voice over the radio waves sounded like one of his other selves. That's how it got started. That's how I first found out.

About a week later, Roger asked me if I could get him back on the air. He asked me this after letting me make him a proper yellowtail roll for the first time. I told him I couldn't make any promises but I'd do what I could, and he gulped down the dollop of wasabi like it was a grape. His eyes didn't even water. I didn't think there would be much I could do for him, but my friend at the station said they had little else on the docket.

They brought Roger in, smelling of the street in his soiled jumpsuit, and gave him a half-hour slot, just a one-off type thing, but he wowed them. He got to talking about his other self, about how he could transform into another life, about how, at a moment's notice, he could become someone new. They thought he was talking about being born again. They lapped it up like manna.

Within two weeks, crowds started coming to hear him speak. He'd lost his spot on Christian radio for talking about dinosaurs, but local shock jock Rod Thrust brought him in to talk about his other selves for comic relief. Rod Thrust would joke that they were paying Roger for these appearances with his choice between a fifth of vodka or 15 minutes alone with a shower and toilet, but really they weren't paying him at all. Rod Thrust's favorite joke was to ask Roger what it was like to be inside another man. His sidekick, Skeezy Sal, would laugh so hard at this that he'd slap the desk and snort.

After the joke got old and they announced Roger's final radio appearance, there were a dozen or so people gathered outside the station to meet him. A grandmotherly woman with cloudy eyes asked to touch the dangling strap of his overalls, and he let her. She sobbed and hugged him and raised her hands in the air. He yanked a man out of a wheelchair and the man hobbled around shouting.

That night there were close to 20 people congregating in the back alley behind my sushi shack when I took out the trash. No one came inside to eat.

When he spoke, Roger didn't preach. Even though he was the only one talking it sounded like a conversation. He told his flock about the Roger he'd just returned from, who had a wife and three kids, a primo shipping and receiving job in San Diego, a Rotary Club membership and a Maserati, but who'd hanged himself in a hotel closet in Des Moines with his dick in his hand the night before his 10th wedding anniversary. He talked about last week's visit to the Alaskan Roger, about the self who lived off workers' comp from an oil drilling snafu and who fell asleep happy each night next to a rosy Inuit woman who'd actually taught him (honest to god) to love the taste of walrus blubber. He went into great detail about the self who was currently giving a nearly identical speech to a similar number of folks behind a Thai restaurant in Eugene.

Twice as many people gathered the second night. By the third, Roger had to stand on top of the dumpster lid to speak. He told them about how every decision we make splits us off into an

impossible number of directions, and despite all his voyages into other selves, he'd only scraped the surface. The alleyway full of people snuffled and dabbed their eyes, seeming to move as one body as he explained that there was no point in fretting about anything, because even the pigeons in the gutter found enough to eat, even the dandelions in the sidewalk cracks managed to flower and spread their seed.

It was a beautiful scene until Rivera next door called the police

For the next few weeks, Roger wandered the streets. I read in the *Mercury* that he'd led a march down Alberta, but when I took him in from out of the rain a few nights later he admitted over coffee that he'd only been wandering and talking to himself so he wouldn't drift off; the crowd had simply followed. His hand shook as he brought the steaming mug to his cracked lips. I think I heard him say, "I miss my wife."

I didn't see Roger again for almost two months. I lingered in the back alley each night when I closed up and took out the trash. My pulse thumped in my neck the one time a silhouette rounded the corner, but it was just a tagger with a spray can in hand. Each time I whipped up a yellowtail roll I'd think of him, like he was living right there in my heart. That sounds cheesy, but it's true.

Late one night, Roger appeared to me in a television. I awoke to a soft blue glow, and between the two blanketed mounds of my feet was his peaceful face. He wore an eye patch from where the beanbag round had drilled him. The tent city of his followers had popped up around the early-blossoming tree he'd been sleeping under along the Willamette riverfront, and they'd all spent over a week there before the police chief called in the tear gas and other non-lethal force.

The white light from the camera crew lit up the steam rising off Roger's wet hair. The interview outside the county jail must have been almost over because the pretty Indian reporter asked him if he had anything else he would like to add. Basked in that

glow, Roger looked straight into the camera and I could feel his words inside my head before he even spoke them.

“Give away all your stuff and follow me.”

Roger had already taken up in the abandoned Rainbow Splash waterpark out in Troutdale by the time the sale on my sushi shack went through. He was making the headlines almost nightly by that point, though few media crews risked trying to interview him now that his horde of followers had holed him up in the canopied perch atop the waterslides. Helicopter footage showed that his more militant followers patrolled the chain link perimeter of the park at all hours. They wore humorless expressions and led large dogs.

I had a difficult time getting in. The park’s gatekeepers frowned upon women as gray as me, but when I flashed the bag of sandwiches I’d stowed in my purse they eased up. One glimpse of my wad of cash and they let me through.

Nothing about the compound reminded me of Roger. The ticket booth brimmed with pamphlets titled “Multiplism and Me.” The pamphlets showed crude line art cartoons chastising anyone who called themselves an *individual*. As they led me past the stagnant wave pool someone was crying out and getting dunked under in ecstatic baptism. The cracked asphalt of the go-kart track was lined with makeshift tents.

The pale sky misted as they led me up the four flights of stairs to the top of the waterslides. The half-shell chutes, bone dry and cracked, were splotched with moss. Through the slats in the grated stairs, I watched a pocket of outward-turned followers lock arms and press shoulder blades so they could face in all directions at once to symbolize multiplicity. This was their praying to Mecca, their genuflecting, their Wailing Wall.

One of his followers cupped his hand behind my head like a cop to duck me into Roger’s tent. My eyes took a while to adjust. Inside the tent smelled like wet burlap and pungent smoke. Roger lay sprawled atop garish pillows, clad only in silken boxers. A swirling and tangled symbol I didn’t recognize was finger-painted across his chest. A long-haired woman next to him parted his

flaking lips with her fingers and dropped something under his tongue.

One of the guards who'd led me up the stairs jerked his head, and the naked women gathered up various cloths and shuffled out the tent flap. They knocked over a hookah but didn't bother to right it. I squashed the smoking ember under my sandal toe.

Roger's palms were chafed raw and bleeding. The tops of his feet were deeply scabbed. His head was ringed with dried ragweed and goldenrod and random field grasses. He looked more dead than alive.

"Roger. It's Maggie," I said, not quite settling into a soiled beanbag chair. "You remember me?"

The pupil in his good eye had grown big and black. His lips slackened and his mouth drooped. He'd lost a few important teeth.

For all the compromising situations I'd found him in, I'd never seen Roger without a shirt. His chest hair was sparser than I'd thought, but what he had was matted and dark. His ribs jutted out and cast thin, ugly shadows against his yellowing skin. He smelled mushroomy and ripe.

I reached into my pack and pulled out the three bread bags full of sandwiches. Ham, egg salad, bologna. I dangled them proudly like they were fish on a line. Roger's pale tongue slipped across his lips but then fell back into the pit of his mouth.

His feet were a mess. Heavily calloused, scabbed, bluish, long nails caked with dirt. I'd never seen the man wear a proper pair of shoes. Reaching out, I ran a finger down his right foot, ball to arch to heel. His toes flexed like a baby's. I dug around in my bag for the only beauty product I'd thought to bring along after dropping the last of my extra clothes, knick-knacks and furniture off at the Salvation Army. I pulled out the expensive perfume Tim had the nurse buy for our last real anniversary, perfume I'd only worn once.

I swished the chunky glass bottle in front of Roger's face, but his eyes only stared as before. I tried to spritz some of it onto my hands but it wasn't nearly enough. On the third slam, the bottle broke into a few large pieces against the steel floor. The fragrance

filled the tent so strongly that my eyes watered, and I ran my hands through the puddle, nicking fingers against shards, until they dripped with perfume and thin trickles of blood.

As I wrapped my hands around them, I could feel Roger's feet make the slightest flinch. I kneaded the perfume into the rough-skinned balls of his feet, the tender arches, the blackened and cracked heels. His throat made a sound that wasn't a word. One of his hands slid into his silk boxers, and then the other, and they remained there, motionless, as if clasped in prayer. I stirred my hands through the glassy puddle on the floor again, gritting my teeth as the shards bit at me and Tim's expensive perfume soaked in and stung. But as I rubbed the fragrance into Roger's weathered feet, I felt no pain.

It was the closest in my life I've ever come to worship.

I set up my tent near the back of the park, where the chain-link met a wooded area, and where a loose patch of fence could easily be pried open if need be, but could also be folded down to discourage raccoons. Back there, no one seemed to pay me much heed. Many in the tent city were youngsters, transient kids who looked like they came from rich families in California. But there were some obvious former business types, people like me who'd left a lot behind. Our resident attorney, the one responsible for keeping the local authorities and probably even the ATF off our backs by invoking some antiquated Multnomah County squatting law, spent most days shirtless (but with a tie still wrapped around his neck) under a makeshift umbrella atop a lifeguard stand.

The tamale lady who had dragged a cooler full of her hand-rolled grub around Northeast Portland each day, and who hoofed it far enough south to occasionally pop her head into my sushi shack to pester my patrons about whether they wanted tamales instead, had somehow made her way out to Rainbow Splash. Constantly rebuffed in the city, out here she was cleaning up. She even began standing up during the nightly gatherings and giving testimony through translation by her teenage son about how she wasn't only a tamale cook, but also the wife of a drug lord in Juarez, a beauty queen in Venezuela, and even a famous children's

author who'd founded various charities in Peru.

Roger was appearing less and less often by the time I'd settled in. He had no memory of our moment together in his waterslide perch, and the few times I crossed his path he seemed to barely remember me at all. But each night before the gathering he'd roll the ceremonial fruit down each of the five waterslides: the apples, oranges, tomatoes, peaches and plums another symbol of the multiples of each self.

When he did speak, it was always a showstopper. He'd stand on the visitor center roof, waves of heat rising all around him, making him all the more otherworldly. With everyone in the camp hooking arms in multiples of seven and slowly spinning so each pair of eyes could get a peek at Roger and at everything else, he spoke through a glitchy megaphone about the selves he'd been visiting, about the new ground he'd been breaking. He'd recently started visiting selves that existed in the past and future, selves that were paupers and kings. Selves that lived on other planets. That moved like water or oil. Like air.

By month's end, I'd settled into my tent. I'd joined the camp hoping to become a kind of den mother, but it didn't happen. Still, I did my best to be at peace. What was at first a distraction, the loud lovemaking from the young couple camped out above the nearby utility shed, became like crickets to me, like crashing waves against a shore. It made me remember Tim, made me worry about Roger. He hadn't preached all week. I'd been doling out my wad of bills to Chet, the shirtless attorney, in a steady stream. Apparently the local authorities, even the Feds, were closing in. Court costs were atrocious, and ceremonial fruit and printed materials wouldn't pay for themselves. It made me realize how little Tim had really left me, how insignificant a sushi shack really was in the grand scheme of things.

It soon became obvious I was one of the few who hadn't visited another self. I spent whole days meditating within the swelter of my tent. Nothing. Not even during the heat wave, the time I passed out until after sundown and awoke with a headache straight from hell. Most often my thoughts would drift

to Roger. Rumors had started up that he was dreadfully ill, but Chet laughed it off each night at Union. The tamale lady, through her interpreter son, claimed to have spent a blessed hour in his presence earlier in the week. Still, with the cops patrolling the barren parking lot almost on the hour, I started to worry.

As I grew desperate to visit another self, the dark thoughts crept in. Thoughts I'd learned to hold under after Tim died. I thought about death, about how Roger had said it's not the end but only shifts us into another vessel. I hoped my other selves were doing something better. That some had bummed around Europe after college or followed through on nursing school or had a child. I hoped at least a few of them still lived with Tim. That at least one was happy.

I wish I could tell you that when Roger met his end it was in a blaze of glory, that a fiery chariot swooped down from the heavens and scooped him up. Or that the Feds raided the compound under the cover of night and Roger rose up and fought them tooth and nail, or gave himself up while laying down some pacifist nugget of wisdom that would've dropped Gandhi's jaw.

It wasn't quite that lurid.

The Roger I knew simply stopped breathing. The women he'd surrounded himself with slept undisturbed through the night, their heads resting comfortably on his corpse. When I heard the shrieks from his tower the next morning I knew instantly what had happened, like I'd been up there myself, the first one to check his pulse.

In the initial commotion, Chet the attorney huffed it up the stairs so fast I thought he might keel over himself. I'd already been up for hours, meditating with my tent flap half-open so I could catch a breeze, and I didn't budge from the lotus position as I took it all in. A small group of the more vocal followers, those who testified at Union and bragged the loudest about the exploits of their other selves, gathered at the bottom of the steel steps. Word spread quickly but no one seemed to know what to do.

The day was less chaotic than you might expect. I'd assumed

Chet would take Roger's passing as his chance at a power grab, but that didn't happen either. He was pretty broken up about it all, and that made me rethink my opinion on lawyers. Mostly people talked about what to do with the body. It lay until early evening in the sweltering tent and was already beginning to smell. The faint tinge of his mortality on the wind was inescapable as we ate our tamales.

The group decision on what to do with Roger basically broke into two camps: ditch the body (Chet knew some people) and cover up the fact that he'd died, or make a display of his death that would leave an indelible image for the media, who still patrolled at least twice daily in vans or their helicopters. A decision was made, and around dusk his corpse was adorned in dried flowers and splashed with various fragrances by his harem and a group of the strongest men heaved the stiffened Roger over the railing of his waterslide perch and secured him there with bungee cords for all the world to see.

The moon was mostly full that night and I sat in my tent with the flap open. Roger's body hung with limbs splayed like Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, his tattered clothes, his hair, his beard all whipping around in the stiff breeze.

He looked like he was flying.

I sat and I stared at him, his pale skin glowing in the soft blue light. I stared and I meditated and I cried. I consoled myself knowing he had his other selves. I hoped, somewhere, he was with his wife.

Early the next morning I awoke to something pelting my tent. I threw open the flap and marble-sized hail plinked against the concrete. The sky was angry and dark.

I tried lying back down in my bedroll but something felt off. When I sat up again the back of my neck tingled and the hairs on my arms stood on end. I smelled something like sulfur.

The otherworldly flash and piercing crack happened all at once. I froze and then began to shake uncontrollably. Commotion rose up in the camp louder than at any Union. Acrid smoke lingered in the air.

When I stepped out of my tent the hail had begun to let up. Rain streaked down. People ran over to the base of the waterslides, where all that ceremonial fruit Roger had rolled down lay rotting in a heap. They were so frantic I couldn't take my eyes off them until I too had reached the base. When I looked up, I finally saw the tent atop the perch was charred and smoldering. The bungee cords were coiled like black snakes.

Roger was gone.

Despite Chet blowing through most of my cash, I managed to find an apartment easily enough but had to live off tuna and Wonder Bread for longer than I care to admit. Despite my credentials, it took me almost two months to land a waitressing job at an upscale sushi joint in the Pearl. But by Christmas I'd settled in, started dating a portly but pleasant social worker I'd met through a Craigslist ad, and I'd even adopted a mutt I named Franklin.

Overall, there was no consensus on what happened to Roger. Plenty of folks simply went home, and the rest in the commune fractured off into various sects, some teaching that Roger had defeated death, others that his body's disappearance was literal proof of the illusion of the individual self. It wasn't long before nothing resembled what Roger had actually said.

Most news outlets and armchair investigators assumed he'd caught wind of the warrant that was being issued and he'd simply moved on, that the aftermath of the lightning strike was little more than smoke and mirrors. Rumors of his death didn't gain much traction with those who hadn't seen it for themselves. I had to turn away a handful of reporters and even a biographer who'd shown up at my apartment door, but otherwise I'd pretty effectively shut Roger out of my mind. To keep it that way, I'd built a small but meaningful shrine to Tim. I lit its incense every night.

On St. Patrick's Day of the next year, I waited on a table with an exotic woman and a slick-haired creep in a Miami Vice getup. I ran through the specials like my voice was recorded on tape. The woman smirked at her Don Johnson and ran fingers through

her black hair. She ordered a hot sake and a yellowtail roll. I asked if either of them wanted some miso soup, some green tea.

When the man turned to me, I dropped my pen. His eyes flickered. He smiled a perfect, gleaming smile and then thumbed the scar across the bridge of his nose.

He asked, if it wasn't too much trouble, for a sandwich.

AUTHOR BIO: Josh Goller sprouted in Wisconsin soil but transplanted to the gloom and damp of the Pacific Northwest where fewer people wear fake cheese on their heads. He's a pacifist with a black belt and a sushi-gobbling flexitarian. Having endured the academic rigmarole of earning his MFA from Pacific University, he shows and doesn't tell and writes what he knows. He's a senior editor at Spectrum Culture and he also edits the offbeat flash fiction zine The Molotov Cocktail. He hangs his hat in Portland where he enjoys driving through fog and hipster watching.

ARTIST BIO

Justin Duerr grew up in rural Pennsylvania. As a child he studied ancient Egyptian mythology and art, oddities of pop-culture, religion, and anything odd he could find hiding in the woods or in the local library. In 1995, an intense vision revealed, all at once, a vast sweeping storyline upon which a lifetime of artistic labor could be hung. This loosely defined story would also serve as a way of illuminating and amplifying an invisible inner-voice that seemed to be able to modify the world for the betterment of all beings. In addition to the work of piecing together these visions, Justin has labored on fishing boats in the Bering Sea, founded an independent religion—the Church of Divine Energy—and starred in the documentary Resurrect Dead: The Mystery of the Toynbee Tiles. He continues to investigate several “art mysteries” and pursue visual art at a fevered pitch. He plays in at least six Philly-based music ensembles: Northern Liberties, Erode & Disappear, Hex Nine, Geb The Great Cackler, Ghost & Garden Structure, and Auric Doves Of Avalon.