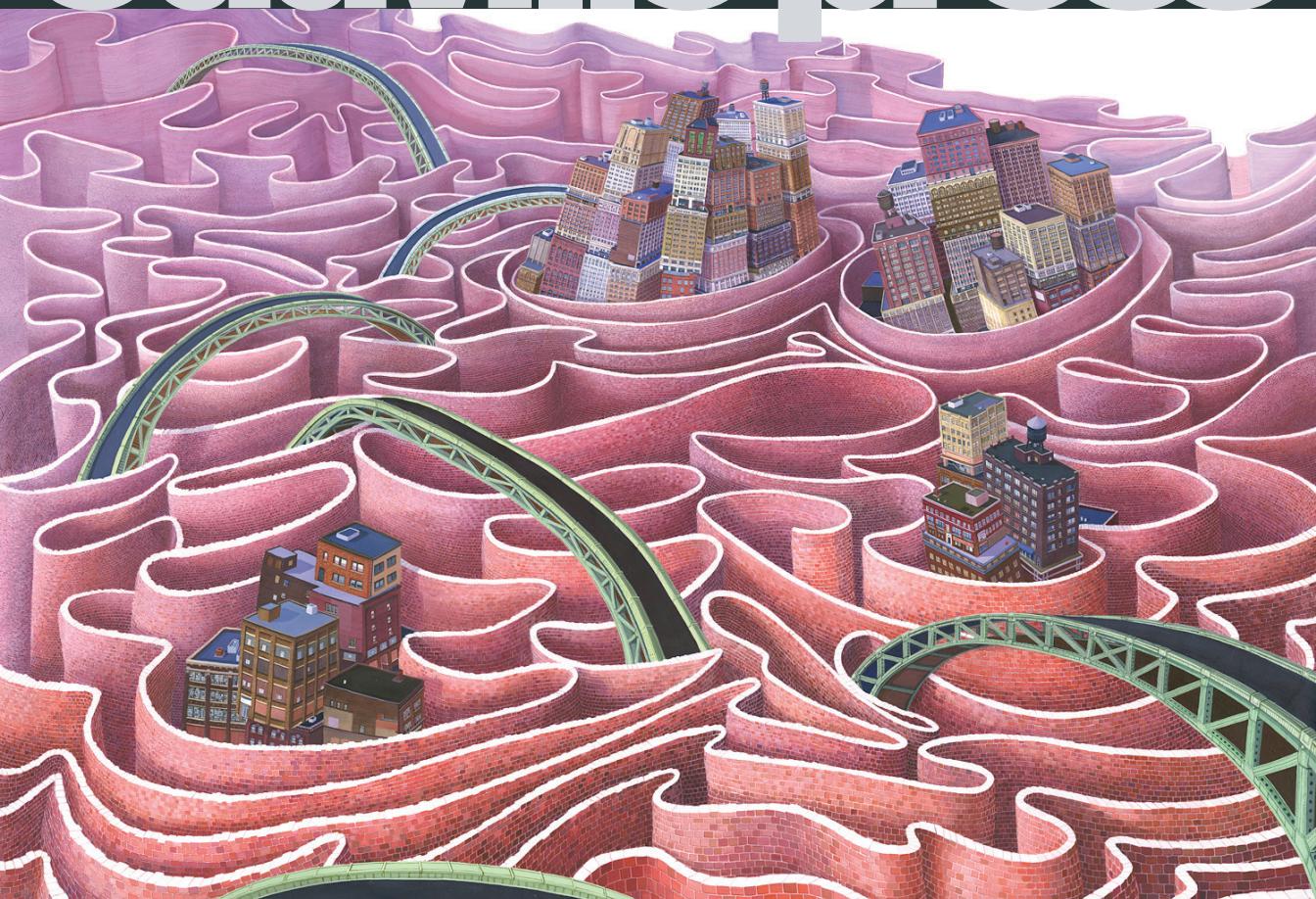


THE  
**oddville press**



S U M M E R   2 0 1 6

C O V E R   A R T

# Fortified

Amy Casey

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Amy Casey has exhibited her work regionally and nationally with solo shows in Cleveland, Chicago, New York City, San Francisco, Provincetown and Los Angeles. Ms. Casey has been awarded two Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Awards, the Cleveland Arts Prize as an emerging artist and a grant through CPAC's Creative Workforce Fellowship program. Ms Casey is one of the resident artists at Zygote Press in Cleveland and is represented by Zg Gallery in Chicago, and Michael Foley in New York City. Currently residing in a little crooked blue house in Cleveland, Ms Casey spends most of her time painting, printmaking and squeezing cats. Ms Casey's work can be seen at [amycaseypainting.com](http://amycaseypainting.com)

**the oddville press**

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

W W W . O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

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## DISCLAIMER

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,  
The Management

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# Dead Heart

Kurt Baumeister

---

Flown astride a church's spire  
A saffron rag clips the wind  
Once a dress but now a banner  
Once fell to earth but rose again  
Once showing her, now slicing  
Lower air, thick with birds  
Circling, cutting the sky, whirling  
Blades, a budding haze, memory  
Still bears her pain, held high  
Forces unseen, horses galloping,  
Free to roam steppes of air,  
The fires set, pitch made to flame,  
Drum beat in the martial night  
The rhythm like her dead heart  
And still the dress like a flag

---

*Kurt Baumeister has written for Salon, Electric Literature, The Weeklings, The Nervous Breakdown, The Rumpus, The Good Men Project, and others. An Emerson MFA and Contributing Editor with The Weeklings, his monthly Review Microbrew column is published by The Nervous Breakdown. Baumeister's debut novel, a satirical thriller entitled Pax Americana, will be published by Stalking Horse Press in early 2017. Find him on Facebook, Twitter, or at [www.kurtbaumeister.com](http://www.kurtbaumeister.com).*

# Shuffleboard

Joseph Powell

---

AT THE CURB a block before O'Brien's, Sarah checked her make-up in the mirror of her compact and applied Blushing Violet, a plum-colored lipstick with a pearly gloss. She rolled her lips and smoothed out the excess on her lower lip with her finger. She was going to meet Lisa, a friend from work, but, still, she had dressed with care. She wore an organza top by Jill Stuart and white linen Armani pants, that she had found at a yardsale in Laurelhurst for \$10 each.

Unlike her mother, Sarah believed she was frugal, practical, and sincere. Her mother had played a little too well the doctor's wife. She dressed the way privilege should, but Sarah felt her own style was self-created and matched the tenor of her personality. Her parents lived in a community too small to attract celebrities, so the moderately rich were called upon to fill this void. And her mother adopted this role with an embarrassing relish. She snapped the compact shut and put it back into her purse.

Sarah had walked by O'Brien's for over a year but had only recently gone in to make a phone call and discovered the shuffleboard table. She used to play with an uncle who lived near a Rec Center, and she thought it would be fun to teach Lisa how to play. O'Brien's was hardly the place to wear Armani, but after a

couple of beers and a few games of shuffleboard, she and Lisa would go downtown.

Inside, the light was dim and the air heavy with smoke and a dank smell of fermentation. She took a seat at one of the open barstools and ordered a Heinekens. The barkeeper was also the owner. He was a short balding man who wore a white shirt buttoned to the top, a small apron over brown slacks. His mustache was shaved to a thin flat line. His fingers and large front teeth were yellow from smoking. The hair on the sides of his head was slicked down, and it curled up in the back. His white shirt was rolled to his elbows, and Sarah liked how he watched the shuffleboard, how he slouched lower when he walked over and sprinkled a new layer of plastic sawdust from a can. His motion was so practiced, the dust swirled down and coated the table evenly and lightly as if it were a prize dessert.

Three other people sat at the bar. An old woman in a floor-length coat who chain-smoked, and two older men. One wore a green leisure suit and sipped his beer with deliberate precision. His eyes in the mirror looked drunk and watery. The other pored over a racing form, a pair of reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, mended with black electrician's tape. There was still no sign

of Lisa, but she was like that. If her boyfriend called at 4:45 with tickets to see the Mariners play, she was gone. Not that Sarah blamed her. If she had a boyfriend, she'd do the same.

She got tired of watching the old woman's ashtray fill up with cigarette butts whose rings of red lipstick got paler and paler, so she decided to move to a stool nearer the shuffleboard table. The handsome guy playing had a cute smile, and she liked how his blonde ponytail dropped over his shoulder when he shot for one of the corners. He wore an unzipped leather jacket, and a clean white tee-shirt which set off a gold chain. For a large man, he had a soft touch. The discs would spin through the sawdust and stop just inches from the end or hang on the edge. She watched him stoop, squint at the end of the board, arc a slow firm shot and follow through as if waving goodbye. He held his hand in the air until his opponent's disc thudded into the sawdust or his own spun into place. She appreciated grace in a man, not the slam-dunk airborne kind, but an unassuming delicacy. His hands were broad and strong, but he held the disc like an egg and sailed it down the lane in full confidence that it wouldn't fall and break. He had won two games and two beers, but even as he drank, the discs sailed steadily down the polished wood and scored.

She could see his sideburns were turning gray, but the wrinkles around his eyes disappeared when he grinned. He was probably fifteen years older than she was, but she felt she had seen enough of life that this was not a problem. Just last night Lisa had told her men were like a good Brie: they took time to sweat into something tasteful, someone who could sit and wait with a woman long enough for her to buy a pair of shoes, who might have an opinion about wallpaper, who didn't mind holding up one end of the yarn. Sarah had laughed,

but thought it was true. Waitressing at a coffee shop had taught her a lot about people. She had taken the job, she thought, until she found something better, but she enjoyed seeing the regulars so much and getting acquainted with new people that she stayed. She found herself looking forward to their arrival as if they had come to visit her. As she watched them wrap their hands around their cups, she wanted to sit down and listen to their stories, but she knew they probably didn't want to talk. When she passed a box of puppies or kittens in front of Safeway, she thought she knew just who each one ought to be given to. She thought animals could brighten anyone's life, all he had to do was open his heart to some creature to recover whatever joy had been missing. She had five cats herself, two were foundlings friends had brought her.

She wondered what was keeping Lisa when she felt a light touch on her arm. The bartender smiled and said, "Can I get you something else?" With his slicked hair and tiny ears, he looked like a seal. She felt his long yellow nails on her skin. They rested there gently, waiting while she decided. "Another Heinekens, please." He gave a little bow, blinked, and took away her empty bottle. Even after he had brought another beer and she began to drink it, she could feel the impression of his nails on her arm.

The guy with the ponytail sat on the stool beside her. He took a long drink from his beer and turned to watch others play.

"So, what do you call this game anyway?"

"Shuffleboard."

"Is it hard?"

"No, anyone can play. You should try it. Here, I'll put a quarter up for you." He straightened his right leg and reached into his pocket.

"No, I've seen you guys play. I wouldn't

stand a chance."

"You might surprise yourself, kiddo."

"My name's Sarah, by the way," she said, looking at the table.

"Mike," he said, "pleased to meet you."

They ordered two more beers and talked for over an hour. He looked like a biker, but he didn't talk like one. His voice had a quiet honesty that was considerate, thoughtful. She was impressed with the way he could talk about difficult things, emotional things, without getting embarrassed or impatient. A kindness in his eyes contradicted his size and manner.

The old woman in the coat smashed a last butt in the ashtray and waved her matted sleeve at the bartender. She collided softly with a stool on the way out, then slid around it like she was dancing. The other shuffleboard players had yelled "Goodnight" and left as well. The two older men had gone without her noticing. Mike finally looked at his watch and said he needed to get home.

"Where do you live?"

"The Regal apartments, up the street a couple of blocks, on 64th."

"Oh, that's only a block from my place. Are you walking?"

"Yes."

"Care if I walk along?"

"I'd like the company."

It was a steep uphill climb, but the night was cool and the porchlights and streetlamps cast a yellow pallor over shrubs, hydrangeas, and cars along the street. A cloud cover reflected the night glow of the city. A few maple trees held green globes of yellow light. The air smelled of grass and gas fumes. The distant rushing sound from the freeway came in pulsating waves like gusts of wind through trees.

"Look," Sarah said, "some little artist has drawn a picture in their driveway."

They stopped to regard the image out-

lined in colored chalk. A horse grazed in a green pasture, a blue stream ran through it, and a sun with bright yellow rays touched the top of a tree. A light over a garage door made the yellow chalk shine with a peculiar, eerie brilliance.

"Isn't that wonderful," she said, "somebody wants a horse and to live in the country."

"A girl, I'll bet."

"Why, because of the horse?"

"The horse is blue and looks like a unicorn."

"Maybe that's all the chalk she had. Don't boys ever dream of unicorns? What did you dream of when you were ten?"

"I don't remember. Motorcycles, probably."

"Well, I loved unicorns and drew them on my book covers, had posters of them in my room. My mother even made me a bedspread with a white one on it."

"I think I had a Marlon Brando poster from On The Waterfront and Johnny Bench holding about eight baseballs in one hand."

Mike invited Sarah in for coffee. His apartment was clean but spare. Sarah looked around while he made the coffee. An Ansel Adams print of El Capitan at dawn hung over a small bookcase. A brown sofa and oak rocking-chair faced a TV on a metal stand. A wooden bowl of letters and postcards sat in the exact middle of the round oak kitchen table. He made drip coffee into a chrome thermos. The kitchen was so small two people couldn't cook at the same time. His dishes were washed and stacked on the drainboard, and the stove and counters were clean. Things were orderly and the space well-managed, so she was not surprised when he brought the coffee cup in a saucer with a packet of sugar and creamer. His manner was engaging and she felt at ease talking to him. He offered to walk her back to her apartment but she said

she was fine.

Mike called her the next morning, and that weekend they went to dinner and a movie. She liked his thoughtful gestures, his quiet ways of doing things: the doors he held open, offers to hold her drink or purse while she hung up her coat or tied a shoe. The next week they went to the zoo, and she showed him all her favorite animals--the otter in the Northwest exhibit, the monal pheasant from Nepal, the baby gorilla, the weaver birds and their nests in the aviary. Once Lisa went with her to the zoo, but she seemed bored and impatient, not in the least interested in the beauty to be found there. She liked the kids in the strollers and the crows scavaging for french fries. Mike seemed interested and lingered at some cages, just watching.

One evening after dinner in her apartment, she asked him again about his past and the "strikes" he once alluded to, but he only grinned and shook his head.

"Why don't you want to talk about it?"

"There isn't much to talk about."

"Do you think I can't handle it or are you afraid to tell me?"

"Do you want a drink?"

"A beer, please."

When he came back into the room, he brought two water glasses of beer and a plate of crackers and slices of cheddar cheese.

"Thanks," she said. "Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Yes," he said after a wiping beer-foam from his lip.

"When I was twenty-three, I traveled for a time with a motorcycle group. We went down to San Francisco, saw Haight, smoked some pot, played the bad-ass more than actually being one. Then Dart, that was his name, Tom Dart, got into some heavier stuff, meth and coke mainly, and started doing some stupid shit. Putting Molotov cocktails in mail-

boxes, bottle-rockets in cars with their windows down, that kind of thing. He was finally arrested and did a couple of months in the slammer. We came back to Washington after that and rented a house in Parker, near Yakima.

"I started logging, and we were working by St. Helens before it blew, so I was gone a lot. He was dealing a little pot, trying to get his CDL, looking for jobs. He didn't want to log. I had some dynamite in the basement for blowing stumps because on weekends I occasionally helped a friend who had a contract to build a campground near Mt. Adams. I had a license, it was all legal. I told Dart where the stuff was. But one day he got a wild hair and decided to clean the basement. Well, he threw the cardboard box in the burn-barrel and didn't make it ten steps before it blew."

"Did he die?"

"Die? Hell yes, he died." He took another drink of beer.

"There was an investigation, and I was eventually cleared, but because of my reputation. Everyone I knew blamed me, Tom's girlfriend, even my folks. My dad told me to clear out until I came back respectable. He and my mom live in Yakima. I haven't seen them since." He set the glass on the floor and stretched out his legs.

"That's enough for now."

Sarah picked up a cracker and nibbled at the edges. She sat up straight and gripped the left arm of her chair. "I'm sure your parents would like to see you. Have you tried getting in touch with them?"

"Don't want to leave any more dirt on the rug, you know?"

"That's just stubborn if you ask me."

"Maybe, but I don't see them knocking at my door."

"Do they know where you are?"

"I haven't disguised my trail any."

"Well, okay, a couple of strikes." She took a drink of her beer and looked out the window. She watched a boy wheel his bike up to the birch tree in his front yard and lock it up. He looked too young to be riding a bike.

Mike leaned back in his chair. The knock was a soft three raps and its successive beat had in it a perky confidence. Mike rose and opened the door wide, his hand coming to rest on the outside knob. A woman held out a letter, her leashed Pekinese stood beside her, patient and quizzical.

"This was in my box yesterday, doesn't look important, though. Oh, hello, I didn't know you had a visitor." She put the letter deliberately into his left hand.

"This is Sarah, Sarah this is Joanie. She's my neighbor."

"Pleased to meet you," Sarah said, remaining seated.

"I was just going to walk Charlie so I'll see you later. Nice to have met you." She waved politely, and turned to leave.

Mike put the letter on the table and returned to his chair. The late afternoon light coming through the window ignited the back of Sarah's head and highlighted the red in her hair, giving it a church-window glow.

"Cute dog," Sarah said, "has she lived here long?"

"The dog?"

"No, Joanie."

"She was here when I moved in, so that's at least five years."

"She seemed. . .familiar. . .I mean she seemed like she knew you pretty well."

"It's not what you think."

"What do I think?"

"You know."

"What is it, then?"

"For three years we talked now and again. I like her, but one night a couple of months

before I met you, she came over and I could tell she'd been crying. Her hair was messed up, and her eyes were red, mascara down one cheek. She asked me if she could use the phone, but she calls and calls and nobody's home. We start to talk, and I can tell by her hands that something's bothering her. I ask if she'd like a drink. Yeah, I'd like one, she says. So I brought her one, a little whiskey and water. She tries to call again, but nothing. Then, before I know it she's crying, snuffing big sobs, crying her damn eyes out. What's the matter, Joanie, what's the matter, I said. Can I get you something else? No, no, she says, I'm okay. Then she stands up like she wants to leave, so I walked over to take her glass, and all of a sudden she puts her arms around me, holding on like she's drowning. We stood like that for a long time. I was patting her on the back, saying now, now it's gonna be okay."

He paused, took a drink from this beer. He looked at the glass, the thinning crescent of foam. The square of window-light just touched his shoes, igniting dust motes that swirled lazily in the air.

"That's all? I mean you didn't do anything else?"

Her face seemed changed, more childish and private. She was looking towards him but not at him. He felt a pressure in the room, his room. He could hear the minute hand of his clock lurch forward, the quiet almost inaudible splat of the bathroom faucet.

"Do you know what was going through my head? I thought that if I moved my hands, if I started rubbing her back and working my hands over her body, slowly, and in the right sequence, we'd be on the floor, and I kept thinking about it, my hands I mean, all I had to do was move them and things would change. But I didn't, I didn't."

"Well, it turns out her father just got killed

in an accident and she was supposed to call her brother because she was the only one who knew where he was for sure. When she finally let loose, she kissed me on the cheek and ran her hand through her hair. As she left, she stood with the door open, smiled, and said, Thanks. Thanks for the drink. She left and I just stood there holding her glass."

"Why didn't she use her own phone?"

"I don't know. I never asked."

"How did he die?"

"Car wreck. Her brother had some gambling debts and was a little hard to find."

The red light on the coffee-maker glowed in the corner, and the west windows had a rosy sheen. The refrigerator purred like a cat. Sarah watched the edges of the curtain turn pink and then darken. The bicycle made circles on each side of the tree like giant binoculars on a giant nose.

"You know, Mike, what I saw on the way over here? I saw a monkey in the backseat of a car, and it had a cute round face that stared at the people in passing cars as if he wanted a new home or somebody to play with. And I thought, God, wouldn't it be great to have a monkey. The driver had a blue bandana around his head and a grey beard. His car had Viet Nam bumperstickers, so I think he was a vet. How could he take care of a monkey, I asked myself. I thought, then, of all the places I would take one, what I would feed it, how I would dress it." She was looking down into her lap as if the little monkey had just been there.

She stared out the window at the evening light. The birch, the little plastic horse on wheels and its white string, the spindly privet hedge, seemed to pull in the light greedily, to

wrap themselves in it. It occurred to her that her own thinking and its feeling had just this sort of blushing substance, a surge of sensation before its inevitable subsiding. Perhaps it was only this trick of light, but a warmth came over her, spreading out from her face down into her chest and arms. She could feel her arms hanging there as if they belonged to somebody else.

Out across the city in a thousand houses were doors closing. The people behind them were like actors waiting to come on-stage in the morning, into the happy public streets, the markets, offices, and restaurants.

Sarah's mind drifted to the libraries of privacies people carry around every day, the significances in them that radiate outwards and color what they do. She saw Joanie's mascara, the fluffy Pekinese, the empty glass in Mike's hand, and thought of the randomness of consequence, of any three people in a room. It was hateful, and scary, too.

What matted sleeve, what dress would she fashion for herself? It was this unknowable underside that seemed bottomless, yet present somehow, almost ever-possible. And the wonder of it was a knock on the door, a smile, a letter. She could feel tears welling up, and turned harshly away.

"Damn," Mike said, "a monkey."

He got up and put his large arms around her, and she leaned into him. She felt his hands move lightly across her shoulders, then in slow circles up and down her back. When he hugged her, she leaned into him, into his hands, the soft circular motion, and felt like a small hard disc spinning and gliding down a dark and narrow street.

---

*Joseph Powell has published five books of poetry and a short story collection called Fish Grooming & Other Stories. He lives on a small farm in Ellensburg, Washington with his son, Evan.*



# Bedazzlement

Colin Berry

---

*Colin Berry earned his BFA at the University of New Hampshire before completing his MFA with high honors at Boston University. He continued his development as an artist with a year in Italy on a Fulbright Grant, and later, with a Nelson Shanks Master Class at the Art Students League in New York. Berry cites Florentine Renaissance influences as crucial to the development of his mature style, which marries a contemporary attitude to classical technique. In his new series of water paintings, Berry brings viewers to the edge of hovering between the beguiling detail and arrangement of surface patterns, and an underlying sense of depth, volume, and tranquility. Berry has been a visiting faculty member at Wesleyan University and a lecturer at the University of New Hampshire. His work has been included in many exhibitions nationally, and has been featured in articles in American Art Collector, The Artist's Magazine, and American Artist magazine. His works are held in many private and corporate collections including Dana Farber, Delta Airlines, and Fidelity Investments.*

# Talk to the Animals

Jill Hand

---

POLICE DISPATCHER Amber Flammia was working on a crossword puzzle when the call came in at 2:17 a.m. She was stumped trying to think of a four-letter word for the sternward extension of a boat's keel. It ended with a G, because eight down was the name of the dragon from *The Lord of the Rings*. That had to be Smaug, but what could the boat thing be? Frowning, Amber put down her pencil and answered the phone.

Calls at this hour usually meant something serious: a car crash or a heart attack or a domestic dispute that had gone beyond the soup and salad of accusations to the meat and potatoes of punches and sometimes worse. Amber hoped it wasn't a domestic. Those tended to turn even uglier when the police showed up and the combatants temporarily put aside their differences and joined forces in attacking the uniformed interlopers.

"Lenape Point 9-1-1. What is your emergency?" she said.

A prim little voice spoke up. "I wish to report a crime."

Amber sat up straighter in her rolling desk chair. There was something about the voice that was wrong somehow. People who called to report that they'd been robbed or their car had been stolen sounded upset. This voice

sounded pleased.

"What is the nature of the emergency, ma'am?" Amber was reasonably certain the voice was that of a woman or a little girl, but a little girl wouldn't be awake at this hour, calling the police and sounding absolutely delighted to be reporting a crime, would she? There were no sounds of whispers or stifled giggles in the background, so it couldn't be some kid at a slumber party making prank calls. Amber's oldest daughter, Emma, had tried that once when she was sleeping over at a friend's house. She'd called 911 when Amber was on duty and in a deep voice had said, "Help! A UFO just landed in my back yard!"

"My hand is going to land on your butt if you don't hang up right now, young lady. This line is for emergencies," Amber told her grimly. That was the last time Emma had tried that stunt.

Every so often a kid would be fooling around and call 911 as a joke, or someone would dial it by mistake, but not at 2:17 a.m. Amber repeated, "Ma'am? What is the nature of your emergency?"

"A horrible crime," the finicky little voice said with relish. "Simply dreadful. Theft. The illegal diversion of funds by a respected member of the community who is not really a nice person at all. I demand that you lock them up

at once."

Amber looked at the caller ID. She recognized the number as belonging to City Councilwoman Peggy Moran and felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Oh, crap, she thought.

She asked, "Princess, is that you?"

There was a flustered silence. Then the voice replied. "This isn't Princess. This is a concerned citizen who wishes to remain anonymous."

"It is too Princess," Amber told it. "How did you manage to dial the phone?"

"Speed dial. I knocked it off the charger and pressed the button," the voice said, sounding pleased at its cleverness. "So, what are you going to do to Peggy? Are you going to send somebody to arrest her? She's asleep, lying flat on her back and snoring like a buzz saw. She's going to be surprised when the police show up and haul her off to jail!"

"We're not going to arrest Ms. Moran because her cat called and told us to. That would be ridiculous," Amber firmly told Princess, who was indeed a cat: a grey Persian with startling round orange eyes, like an owl's.

"Don't you care that a crime was committed? She stole four hundred dollars from the fund to benefit that little boy who has cancer and used it to buy shoes," Princess whined. "They're ugly shoes, too," she added spitefully. "She didn't buy me anything, not even a catnip mouse. I asked her for one and she said I already had a perfectly good catnip mouse, so I thought, all right, stingy old Peggy, wait and see what happens to you."

"I'm hanging up now," Amber said, and disconnected the call.

Animals had been talking in and around the town of Lenape Point, New Jersey, (population 2,142) for about a month now, but this was the first time that one of them had used a tele-

phone, at least as far as Amber knew. It would be Princess, she thought morosely. Princess was not a nice cat. She'd bitten Amber quite hard when Peggy first got her and brought her into the municipal building to show her off. The phone call proved that Princess was sneaky and vindictive, and also smart. If she decided to go to the newspaper with her story about stolen funds there'd be hell to pay.

Sighing, Amber made a note to speak to the police chief, Frank Rizzi, when he came in. He'd probably want to have a talk with Peggy about keeping her phone away from Princess. It would be up to him to decide what to do about the accusation of theft from the Help Ryan Heal fund. Ryan was the little boy with leukemia for whose treatment Peggy had volunteered to collect donations, some of which she'd allegedly appropriated for her own use, or so Princess claimed. Amber wouldn't put it past her. She was always buying things for herself and billing them to the town. A case in point was the expensive color laser printer that had somehow made its way from the council chambers to Peggy's house. Peggy claimed to have borrowed it to print leaflets for the Girl Scouts' toy drive. That had been almost a year ago and it still hadn't been returned.

"People!" Amber muttered, turning back to her crossword. She managed to pack a great deal of bitterness into that one word.

Prior to the previous month, there had been only one talking animal in Lenape Point. That was Calico Jack, a bright-eyed African grey parrot belonging to Pete Ferrier, who ran the Gas Up and Go service station. Calico Jack had an extensive vocabulary, some of which was swearing so inventive that it would have done credit to the original Calico Jack, an eighteenth-century pirate who plied his trade in the Caribbean. He could mimic the sound of a telephone ringing, the microwave oven

beeping and Pete's dog barking. He could also mimic Pete yelling at the dog: "Shut up, Fletch. Shut up! Shut up! Shutthehellupgoddammit!"

Then Al Wooley and Nash McDonald had been out in the woods hunting deer early one Saturday when they came upon three whitetail does nibbling on some sumac foliage. Al raised his rifle just as one of them looked up and shouted, "Run, girls!"

Al and Nash stood frozen in shock as the deer scampered away. Just before they vanished into the trees, one of them turned to yell over her shoulder, "How dare you! We're mothers!"

All thoughts of hunting abandoned, the pair beat a hasty retreat back to town, where they went to the police station and excitedly told Chief Rizzi what had happened. The chief was initially dubious and asked if they'd been drinking.

No, they told him, their eyes wide with sincerity. Not a drop. Only coffee, plain coffee, with no whiskey or anything in it.

Their story of encountering talking deer was bizarre, but not as bizarre as one might think, considering the fact that the incident happened deep in the Pine Barrens, a remote, heavily forested area where weird things tended to occur from time to time. Big Foot had been spotted there, or at least something tall and shaggy that strode through the trees on two legs, swinging its long, hairy arms. Bears sometimes walked on their hind legs, but this was no bear, or at least that's what those who saw it insisted.

A winged monster called the Jersey Devil made an occasional appearance, and sometimes strange lights were seen in the sky, hovering over the pines and then zipping away faster than any known aircraft could travel, but talking animals were something new.

It soon became obvious that it wasn't just

deer that had acquired the power of speech. Cats and dogs started grousing that they didn't like their food. They wanted steak and chicken instead of that soggy canned stuff or those hard, brown pellets that came in a bag. They started demanding to go outside more often, and made unflattering personal remarks about their owners.

"I love you," six-year-old Ashley Perlmutter crooned to her dachshund, Piper, hugging him blissfully.

"Well I don't love you," Piper retorted. "You squeeze me too tight, and you spit when you talk. No wonder you don't have any friends."

Ashley went weeping to her mother. "Piper's mean," she complained.

"I'm only being truthful," Piper retorted, looking up at Mrs. Perlmutter with soulful brown eyes.

"Stop it, you two," Mrs. Perlmutter said. "If you can't play together nicely then leave each other alone."

It's like having another child, she thought wearily, watching Piper walk away, his head held high, toenails clicking on the hardwood floor. She'd been enchanted by the idea of talking animals when she read about them in books, but the reality wasn't nearly as delightful as what she'd imagined it would be.

The problem was that these talking animals weren't wise or whimsical like the ones in books. Instead, they tended to be uncomfortably carnal and self-absorbed. Mrs. Perlmutter had loved Charlotte's Web when she was a girl. Now she couldn't think of Charlotte and Wilbur without imagining them behaving rudely.

At Frank Rizzi's house, his black-and-white Great Dane, Van Halen, was making the chief's life miserable with his demands for sex.

"You gotta help me, bro," Van Halen

moaned one afternoon when he and the chief were at home. "Take me to see Babette."

Babette was a female Great Dane whom Van Halen had impregnated. She'd been successfully delivered of a litter of eight puppies several months before this conversation took place.

"Her owner doesn't want her to have any more puppies right now," Rizzi told the dog, who was sidling up to a puffy upholstered footstool, a lascivious gleam in his eyes. "Don't you dare!" Rizzi told him. "That's disgusting."

"But I need some action! Frank, you're a male, you understand," Van Halen wailed. "If I can't get it on with Babette, at least let me out so I can go next door and hook up with Milly."

Milly was a Chihuahua who weighed about six pounds to Van Halen's one hundred and seventy.

"Absolutely not!" Rizzi told him, scandalized. "Try and think about something else. Think about sports. That's what I do."

Van Halen let out a despairing groan and sank to the floor, his huge head on his paws. "I don't like sports," he complained. "How about we go for a ride in the truck? That might distract me. We can stop by the drive-in and get cheeseburgers."

Sighing, Rizzi got up and got the keys to the truck.

There didn't seem to be any logical pattern to which animals talked and which couldn't (or possibly they just chose not to.) Deer talked but horses and goats didn't. Squirrels and rabbits and groundhogs talked, but not smaller rodents like mice, or pet hamsters and gerbils and guinea pigs. Insects didn't talk. Neither did fish or reptiles. Chickens and wild birds talked, starting early in the mornings with happy cries of, "Hey! It's time to wake up! Get moving! The early bird that catches the worm, you know!" It made quite a racket when the

birds were all yelling at once. The local stores quickly sold out of earplugs.

The clergy were unable to shed any light on what had caused it. Father McGuire, the priest at St. Margaret's, said he had no idea when Brigid Neary asked him if he thought it was a miracle, like the image of the Virgin Mary that sometimes appeared on various foodstuff, like pieces of toast.

"Those probably aren't miracles," he told her. "It's just people seeing a shape that reminds them of Her." Brigid looked unconvinced, so he added, "It's good to be reminded of the Blessed Mother when we sit down to have a nice piece of toast. There's nothing wrong with that. We just shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"But the animals talking, Father. Surely that's a miracle," Brigid insisted. "It must mean that the Lord wants us to know they have souls. Don't you think you should contact the bishop?"

Just then a squirrel spoke up outside the window of the pleasantly shabby room where Father McGuire and Brigid sat in the rectory next door to St. Margaret's. The room was stuffy and the window was open a few inches to let in fresh air. They could clearly hear what the squirrel had to say.

"Oh, no you don't. That's my acorn. Give it here, you..." The word that the squirrel called the other squirrel that was about to make off with an acorn he'd buried made the good Father and the elderly spinster shoot bolt upright in their seats, as if they'd been goosed. "Gracious!" Brigid gasped.

"Um, yes," said Father McGuire, going over and closing the window. "Maybe it's best if we don't inform the bishop just yet. Let's wait until after the town meeting on Friday, and then we'll have a better idea of how we should proceed."

Over at the First Methodist Church, Pastor Bob Haney had his hands full trying to convince his flock that the talking animals weren't the work of Satan. "The language that some of them use, Pastor Bob! It's enough to make your hair stand on end," said an energetic lady named Janet Hoagland, who was active with the youth choir, and in organizing the Christmas Bazaar and running the food pantry and dozens of other good works. Janet liked to think that Jesus was watching as she arranged canned goods on the shelves of the food pantry, or sorted through used clothing to be donated to the needy. "Atta girl, Janet," she imagined Jesus saying as he looking on approvingly. "Way to go! You'll be richly rewarded when you get to Heaven."

Janet already had a list of questions prepared that she planned to ask Jesus when she got to Heaven, the foremost of which was how come she didn't have a boyfriend, when even Denise Jeter had one and she was fat? The reason was that Janet was a pain in the ass. Maybe Jesus would eventually see fit to impart that information to her, but for now she was unaware of the effect she had on people.

Pastor Bob patiently explained that just because the animals sometimes swore, it didn't mean they were in thrall to the Prince of Darkness. "People swear sometimes, good people, too. It just means they lost their tempers or got excited about something."

Janet said she never swore, which was true. "Oh, fudge!" was the strongest expletive to pass her lips, even when she hit her thumb with a hammer, or stubbed her toe on something hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. Then she was stuck by a thought. "What if it's the Catholics? What if they're behind it somehow?" Despite the fact that they were alone in the church's narthex, she lowered her voice, in case a Catholic might be hiding

nearby, listening in and taking notes in order to report back to the Pope. "They have this ritual called the Blessing of the Animals. Maybe that's what caused it."

Janet's paranoia sprang from her ancestors on her mother's side having been Huguenots who'd had a bad time of it in sixteenth-century France under Catherine de Medici. A suspicion of Catholics had been handed down through the generations.

Pastor Bob suppressed the desire to laugh. He didn't want to hurt Janet's feelings. He was a nice young man who was not long out of seminary school. "The Blessing of the Animals is harmless; the Episcopalians do it too, you know." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I really don't think the Catholics have anything to do with it. Father McGuire is as puzzled as the rest of us."

"That's what he says," Janet replied darkly.

So far, only the residents of Lenape Point knew about the remarkable thing that had occurred in their midst. They'd agreed to keep it a secret, at least until they could have a town meeting and decide what to do. They had a horror of what might happen if word got out.

Some of the older people remembered what it had been like when Doris Mae Carter was convicted of poisoning three of her husbands back in the nineteen-forties. The black widow Doris Mae was Lenape Point's most notorious resident. The sleepy little town, which was even sleepier back then, became overrun with sight-seers during Doris Mae's trial, subsequent conviction and eventual execution in the electric chair up in Trenton. They tied up traffic, tramped through people's yards, boldly walked into homes and snooped around, stealing whatever they could get their hands on as souvenirs. After that harrowing experience, the people of Lenape Point didn't ever want the avid glare of public attention

focused on them again.

Pastor Bob thought a rabbi might be able to help. He wished there was a shul in town, but there wasn't. He had an almost superstitious awe of rabbis, due to one who came to lecture to his class at seminary school one time. The rabbi was an elegant silver-haired gentleman who bore a striking resemblance to the late Leonard Bernstein. He told them various fascinating tales of Jewish lore, including the story of the Golem of Prague. Pastor Bob thought that if a rabbi could make a giant man out of clay and bring him to life with a piece of parchment that had mysterious Hebrew words written on it, then one might be able to do just about anything, including discovering what had caused the animals to start talking.

The municipal building was packed to overflowing on the night of the town meeting. In the absence of the mayor, who'd gone to visit his mother in Florida, Peggy Moran was in charge as the senior City Council member.

Amber Flammia, who'd taken the 911 call from Peggy's cat, Princess, asked her how Princess was doing.

"She passed away," Peggy told her, sorrowfully.

Amber said she was sorry to hear it.

"Thanks. I'm absolutely heartbroken. The poor little thing must have eaten a mouse that got into some poison. I've got a terrible mouse problem in the basement so I put some poison out and, well, I guess Princess must have gotten down there somehow and ate poison because I found her stiff as a board one morning."

Amber looked shrewdly at Peggy. Had she poisoned Princess so she couldn't blab about her stealing the money from the Help Ryan Heal fund? She thought it was a distinct possibility.

"That's too bad," she said. Then she

couldn't resist asking, "How's the Help Ryan Heal fund coming along?"

"Oh, that. I'm not involved with that anymore. Chief Rizzi suggested that somebody else should do it. He said I already have too many responsibilities."

"I see," said Amber, thinking, good for you, Frank.

Extra folding chairs had been set up in the meeting room, but even then some people had to stand up in the back. The overflow crowd was out in the hallway, standing on tiptoe to peer over the shoulders of the people in front of them, straining to hear what was going on. The swinging doors that led to the meeting room had been propped open so they could follow what was being said.

Chief Rizzi was there with his Great Dane, Van Halen. He hadn't wanted to leave him home alone because the big dog tended to get into any food he could reach. Van Halen could open the kitchen cabinets and he'd consumed entire boxes of crackers and cereal and bags of nacho chips. He hadn't yet figured out how to open the refrigerator, but Frank thought it would only be a matter of time until he did.

Peggy opened the meeting by sweetly stating that nobody should think that the mayor had run out on the town in its hour of need. Peggy was laying the groundwork for a try for the office of mayor at the next election. The mayor's absence had made her very happy.

"He hasn't abandoned us to go on vacation in Florida," she told the gathering. (That's exactly what she implied he was doing.) She let that sink in before continuing. "That's what some people are saying, and I want to make it clear that it's not true." Nobody was saying it, although she hoped they would be now.

"His mother is having an operation. She's having a pacemaker put in, and although it's not really major surgery and she'll probably be

just fine, we shouldn't pass judgement on him for being in Boca Raton and not here with us tonight." She gave a light little laugh. "Goodness knows, I wish I were there now. I envy the mayor getting to go to the beach when we're all wearing coats and boots and freezing our you-know-whats off! Well, enough about that. Now I'll turn the meeting over to..."

They never got to hear who she was going to turn the meeting over to, because Janet Hoagland stood up. "Shouldn't we have a prayer first?" she asked. There was grumbling from some members of the audience, but others murmured assent. She pushed on in her usual bossy, take-charge way. "Before we get started, I think Pastor Bob should lead us in prayer."

Pastor Bob hadn't planned on speaking. He had no idea what he should say, but people were nodding at him encouragingly, so he stood up and decided to wing it.

"Let us pray..." he began, before Peggy cut him off.

"Come up to the podium, please, and speak into the microphone so we can all hear you."

Pastor Bob made his way through the crowded room to the podium, desperately racking his brain for the proper words to use in this particular situation. The Lord's Prayer didn't seem quite right, although he generally considered it to be a good all-purpose prayer. Neither did the Twenty-third Psalm. Although that one spoke of God as being a shepherd it didn't specifically mention sheep, or any other animals. "Let us pray," he said into the microphone. "Lord, we thank thee for the gift of community, and for bringing us together here tonight so that we may share our thoughts about this most, uh, unusual thing which has happened in our midst. With your guidance, Lord..."

Van Halen nudged his owner in the ribs with a front paw. "Hey, Frank!" he said.

"Shush," Rizzi hissed.

Van Halen would not be shushed. He prodded him more urgently. "Frank, hey! Hey! How come I'm the only dog here?"

Janet Hoagland was sitting directly in front of Rizzi and Van Halen. She turned in her folding chair and glared at the dog. "Be quiet. Pastor Bob is praying."

Pastor Bob was saying something about how God made all creatures great and small but Van Halen wasn't paying attention.

"There're no bitches here, either," he said, loudly, standing up and looking around. "I was hoping there'd be bitches."

"That's enough!" snapped Janet. "Chief Rizzi, there are children present. Please control your dog."

"What are bitches?" Ashley Perlmutter asked her mother.

"Lady dogs," Mrs. Perlmutter told her. "But it's not a nice word."

"Bitches, bitches, bitches," Ashley sang happily. "Bitches, bitches..."

"Ashley," Mrs. Perlmutter said warningly. "Do you want to go in time out?"

Ashley fell silent, although her lips moved, silently repeating the forbidden word.

Meanwhile, Pastor Bob had been struck by an idea. Maybe it was divine inspiration, but whatever had provoked it, he thought it was an excellent idea, one that had apparently failed to occur to anyone else until now. Why not ask Van Halen why he could talk?

"Excuse me, but I was wondering why you can talk," he said to the dog.

Van Halen looked around, confused. "You talking to me?"

There were chuckles, as people were reminded of Robert De Niro's famous speech from *Taxi Driver*. Van Halen had watched the

DVD with Chief Rizzi. He understood right away why people were laughing and decided to ham it up.

"Are you, talkin' to me?" he growled.

"Van Halen, stop it," Rizzi ordered.

"Answer the pastor's question."

Van Halen would have liked to perform the entire speech, but he obeyed. "Okay, sure. I could always talk. You just couldn't understand me before, but now you can."

Well! That was a surprise! It wasn't something that had happened to the animals that had made them start to talk; it was something that had happened to the people that had made them understand what the animals were saying!

Pete Ferrier, owner of the Gas Up and Go, shouted that the government was responsible. "It's some kind of black ops! They picked us because we're a little town way the hell away from any major centers of population. They're conducting a secret experiment on us by putting something in the water!"

"LSD? Is that what it is? Like Project MK-Ultra?" That was Al Wooley, one of the hunters who'd encountered the trio of talking does. "Oh, gosh, are we all out of our minds on LSD?"

His words were met with cries of shock and outrage. A woman screamed and several people began to weep uncontrollably.

Chief Rizzi thought he'd better take control of the situation before everyone panicked and ran, screaming, into the night.

"Calm down. We're not on LSD," he said loudly.

Janet Hoagland asked him how he knew. She wouldn't know what it felt like to be on LSD. She'd never drank alcohol, or smoked a cigarette, she announced, smugly. "I wouldn't have any idea what it feels like to be on drugs. Maybe the government has drugged us and

we're all hallucinating."

"The government hasn't drugged us," Rizzi told her.

"What if it's the End Times?" a man shouted. "In the End Times, all kinds of weird things are gonna start happening. It says so in the Bible."

There were excited cries at that. Janet looked up at the ceiling, as if she expected to see the acoustic tiles part like a curtain, revealing Jesus looking down at them. "Is it the End Times, Pastor Bob? Is it? Oh, thank you, Jesus! We praise your holy name," she babbled.

Pastor Bob shook his head helplessly. The End Times weren't something Methodists discussed much. That was more in the line of the Evangelicals, who liked to speculate on whether some celebrity or politician might be the antichrist. He tried to recall what the Bible said about the end of the world. Something about war? And pestilence? That seemed to apply to every period of history he could think of.

Van Halen raised his muzzle and howled plaintively. Rizzi patted him on the head. "It's okay, fella."

Van Halen looked up at him, his brow furrowed. "Aroo? Aroo! Woof!"

Rizzi told him to stop fooling around, but Van Halen wasn't pretending. He'd lost the power of speech as suddenly as he'd gained it. So had all the other animals. The people of Lenape Point had no idea what to make of that. Some suspected the government really had conducted a secret experiment on them, possibly using an invisible ray of some sort, or a hitherto-unknown mind-control technique. But if so, what was the point? Some thought it might have been a miracle. It remained a mystery.

People viewed their pets differently after that. They were still fond of them, but they

became slightly wary of them, too, wondering what they might be thinking. Al Wooley and Nash McDonald gave up deer hunting, remembering the outraged cries of the three does at the beginning of the strange episode.

Calico Jack the parrot was once again the only talking animal in town. He clung to his perch with powerful reptilian talons, cocking his head as he watched Pete Ferrier conduct business at the Gas Up and Go.

"Hello!" he'd say brightly. "Hello! Hello! How's the boy? Good bird! Beep-beep-beep!" (imitating the sound of the microwave oven.) "Oh! Look what you did! You spilled oil all over

the floor, you idiot!" (Those were the words that Pete had shouted at his helper one day several years previously. Calico Jack had stored them away in his clever little brain.)

He sidled along the wooden dowel where he perched, a mirthful expression in his silver eyes. "Ooooh! Look! Look what you did! Hahahaha! You spilled oil all over the floor!"

He plucked a pistachio out of his dish and daintily ate it, spitting out the shell. Then he craned his neck and watched with interest as it fell, joining a litter of shells on the scuffed linoleum floor. "All over the floor!" he remarked happily.

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*Jill Hand is a former newspaper reporter and editor. She lives in New Jersey, just like Snooki from Jersey Shore, and writes speculative fiction, mostly horror and humor, or a mix of the two. Her work has appeared in Aphelion, Bewildering Stories, and Weird New Jersey. Her novel, Rosina and the Travel Agency, about teenagers who escape the clutches of a powerful twenty-fourth-century time travel organization and get up to hijinks in 1947 San Francisco is available as an e-Book from Amazon and Barnes & Noble.*



# The Window

Mariya Petrova

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Mariya Petrova is inspired by the spirit of Spain, and guided by the philosophy of existentialism. The photograph is a means to a freedom achieved through hard work. Her passion for photography was sparked by the knowledge of art acquired throughout life, instilled by parents and teachers of arts, and the influence of her brother Kaloyan Bogdanov-Kalo, a young artist, known for his pictorial wisdom, symbolism and the freedom of his artistic creations. Artistic photography requires patience, deliberation and a clear idea of the image the artist intends to convey.

# Red Velvet

Arlyn LaBelle

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The morning air is gentle  
ceding her space  
as her heels sink  
into the wet grass.  
She slips small holes  
into its skin, still waking.  
She smiles at the feeling,  
as it gives.

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*Arlyn LaBelle's work has appeared in the Badgerdog summer anthologies as well as Words Work, Persona, The Missing Slate, The Blue Hour, LAROLA, JONAH Magazine and Ink In Thirds. She was awarded a scholarship for the Badgerdog summer writing program, and won 3rd place in the New Jersey Writer's Project.*



# Tower

Amy Casey

# The Coat

Richard Krause

---

THE TRAP WAS SET at the bottom of their run in shallow water. You could tell where their bellies went all slippery in the grass and mud, and you could imagine they'd be traveling so fast that they'd hit the pan with both hind legs, or even their two forepaws, and the steel jaws of the number two trap would close on them in an instant. This happened time and again so you had to make sure that the stake was pounded in firmly enough, or they'd pull it out and drag your trap into someone else's line.

On dry land you'd sift fine soil over the trap then scatter leaves hiding it, preferably by the bank of a creek so the running water would divert the animal. Maybe too you'd put some bait around. Sometimes they'd get only one paw caught, and if it was the forepaw it'd be gnawed off if you didn't check your traps early enough.

It took twenty-four animals to produce Gretchen's muskrat coat. Half the animals were probably caught in the runs, the other half on relatively dry land. About half of those on dry land gnawed their paws off, or the coat would have been sewn together sooner. Though maybe she wouldn't have bought that particular coat, for it was a matter of the woman and the trapped animals and the anticipation of an exceptionally cold winter that

brought its manufacture together and conspired in the purchase.

Gretchen, despite her inordinate compassion, most probably never heard the animals squealing, the broods left behind in their dens, or even in their own bodies. She only felt the fur, its deep luxuriant pile, its rich golden brown that ill-suited her own wig of artificial orange fibers. The coat gave the impression that there was something feral in her nature, something in the Pennsylvania wilds that was transposed to her. It gave the impression of runs slid down, animals browsing in the moonlight following the scent of their desires.

When she wore the coat it seemed like countless families of shimmering animals were on the move, or huddled in the dark silhouette of some underbrush, or in the tangle of blackberry bushes or tall grasses. Their tails had for sure disappeared along with their paws, and the black noses and beady eyes on their little faces, but the animals still seemed to be huddled in fear before being skinned, when in truth they were probably only tossed on careless mounds to be put on stretchers to dry.

The fur looked so exhausted like the remains of mutilated bodies—desire stopped in its tracks by the shrewdness of strategically placed steel jaws. Matted fur mixed with mes-

entry and visceral fluids, stained with flecks of blood and yellow clots of fat. But after it was treated and brushed it transformed into a deep, rich lustrous pile, as if it were still on the animal's back.

All of Gretchen's friends wanted to dig their fingers into the fur. Though Gretchen didn't really have many friends, only one or two associates at work who'd visit the house once every two or three years to have dinner with her mother.

Gretchen took care of her mother who was in her seventies saying her rosary beads all day while lying on the living room sofa till she returned. And for the little boy that they raised she'd bring home sweets: halva, Baby Ruth bars, Almond Joy, or sometimes for herself big snowballs of sponge cake topped with pink or white icing and shredded coconut. The artificial ingredients didn't go well with the muskrat fur, the red dyes, or the list of additives longer than some of the letters she typed at the Red Cross.

Gretchen herself didn't apparently need help, for there was no urgency, no one lying bleeding on a battlefield, or needing to contact family members to arrange for a hardship leave. There was in fact the calm assurance that things were going as they should, that the economy was prospering so that in the Fifties a fur coat could be purchased just like the alligator handbags and shoes a few years before when the reptile was all the rage. But now they were all at the bottom of closets, in the dry swamp of dusty discarded fashions. At the time muskrat coats appeared Gretchen took an immediate fancy to them; in fact, she surprised everyone by the boldness of her purchase.

That Gretchen's humdrum life went on as before probably need not be mentioned. She was a hit at work, but everyone soon grew

accustomed to the coat. It was for warmth, even if it did stir up brief excitement at the office. Gretchen didn't once push up the collar with both hands around her cheeks, tilt her head to one side, bat her eyelashes and kick up her heels like Betty Grable. Had she done that she'd quickly have sat down flushed and embarrassed. No, the coat just draped her body. It seemed in fact too big for her, so that twenty-four is probably a conservative number of animals considering that the paws and heads were missing.

The coat, however, grew to be part of her. The chestnut browns that were crisp and clear turned yellowish and lost their gloss, from cleaning, storage, from the underpile of shorter hairs showing through, that the coat soon started to match Gretchen's orange hair. The animals were permanently buried in the coat to provide warmth, to bring excitement to Gretchen's life. Their desires of course were in the missing paws and heads, the nose, the eyes that were no more, the ears that would never again hear the call of a mate. Not even the tiny beads of glass that replaced the organs of sight in fox stoles were evident in the rather nondescript fur. All the sensory organs were gone entirely, and only the fur that had warmed was left. Gretchen herself had poor eyesight, but her sense of touch grew exceptional, typing from a Dictaphone implanted in her ears for eight hours a day. So she never missed the absent organs of the animals.

The one man in Gretchen's life had stopped courting one summer. Philly would come over on Thursday nights and sit with Gretchen and her mother and watch TV, but finally nothing ever came of it when Philly died unexpectedly. Gretchen was obviously grieved and seemed to take it pretty hard. It was shortly after that that she purchased the fur coat for herself, to the surprise even of her

mother who usually had a say in everything Gretchen bought. Soon all interest in Gretchen and the coat subsided.

In fact the animal rights people made Gretchen finally put the coat away, stop wearing it prematurely, so she had it dry-cleaned one spring and permanently stored. After that Gretchen somehow seemed exposed without the heavy fur on her body. Where

before the coat revealed at least an intent to identify with the two dozen or so muskrats that roamed the woods of Pennsylvania finding mates, reproducing at will, till they were stretched and stitched together for a coat, now there was no such suggestion as the following fall Gretchen went out and bought a wool coat.

It seemed that the curly hairs fit her wig of artificial fibers. When a parakeet one day got loose at work, Gretchen panicked fearing that the bird would get tangled in her hair and she would be exposed. For that reason too she seemed to pull the material more tightly around her body. In any event the wool coat suited Gretchen after the muskrat coat. And anyway Philly was long dead and the new coat gave evidence that she was entering another phase of her life.

Though the dead animals she wore it could be argued fit her, the fact that she and Philly just sat on those Thursdays still as cream cheese watching tv with Gretchen's mother, and then had cake and coffee, suggested that no animals had slid through those Thursdays either, splashed into no creeks even though Philly, Gretchen, and her mother swallowed tall glasses of ice water. The fact that anyone was trapped was not even visible, for when Philly came over the coat was not yet hanging in the closet.

The wool coat looked sleek, even though Gretchen's body now in her late thirties was

filling out, plump and pink like the snowball cakes she devoured weekly. In fact the coat and the impression it made with its beautiful black lamb's wool was the opposite of Gretchen, unless of course you had the imagination to see the sheered sheep or consider what it was that made Gretchen take to wearing a wig. A weak gene in the family? For her mother too wore a wig.

In fact the coat was serviceable, and Gretchen wore it well and at the beginning even got a few compliments. Privately many co-workers were glad that Gretchen had gotten rid of the ratty muskrat. For some attributed their allergies to the dander they said was on the coat. At times the wool coat looked almost elegant, though it did draw attention to the lusterless orange hair that was always done exactly the same.

I had tried to fathom Gretchen's private life and thought that the muskrat and sheep could provide access. I even thought the polyester fibers in the coat she bought in her mid-fifties could do it. But no, I found out that the coats only threw one off the track. There was a meadow that the bounding sheep would lead you too, a simple clover field that told of a life of simplicity, standing there clipped, all pink, vulnerable, exposed. She had not been manipulated, not even instinctively out of filial duty. That's not what forced her to live at home all her life.

The dead muskrats were not a conscious comment on her desires that had been caught and throttled. The men never came calling outside of Philly, not because there was some family secret or religion that associated every desire with impure acts. The reproducing muskrat population you could argue belied that. For thousands and thousands of such coats were thoughtlessly made and they only made women more attractive, so they

too would be caught. No, it was something that didn't end with polyester, those artificial fibers that are bound to work their way into anyone's life eventually even if they are not wearing a wig.

And it wasn't entirely the loyalty to the Red Cross, other people's problems, though that could easily devour a lifetime of desire, so you give to others leaving yourself a hollow garment synthetically spun from the oil in the ground.

No, circumstance didn't entirely do it, though dutifulness to her mother and the early death of Philly contributed. But just what staved off all the men, just what was it that buried the desires in leather handbags, high heel shoes, coats that were fashionable? Regularly Gretchen and her mother would make the trip down to 149th Street for a new hat. Does fashion drain just what it is meant to elevate into the commercial? It can't be only religion either, though that contributes, along with the tug of the mother. Everyone said she had been too strict, and maybe that accounted for Gretchen's poor eyesight, and not only the fact that she was so small at birth that she fit into a shoebox, and had to be placed in an incubator. It must have been, too, in the body beneath all that clothing. What was it that made me ascribe a larger than life character to Gretchen? The curious elevation that always comes of denial? True, she followed fashion, but finally only to the extent that one had to be clad. The dress finally didn't do what it was supposed to, attract men.

The time my fiancée came over should have told me, but I didn't see it then. I could see the radiant glow in Gretchen's cheeks as she circled the living room with the exquisitely beautiful Ildiko and the stiffness in her limbs, and how she trembled as their fingers intertwined. For years later she referred to her dancing that day as heavenly. Since Ildiko taught dance at Arthur Murray's, I had just credited her comments to Ildiko's lightfooted- ness and grace.

Finally after Gretchen retired and her mother had long since died, I discovered what placed her in the social limbo of a muskrat coat between desires and the garments we wear to assure their fulfillment. I had known she wrote poetry when she was younger, and one afternoon she showed the poems to me. The verse was to a young woman, a love poem. I read more, and immediately the poems told of a passion that all her life and considering her strict Catholic upbringing was buried in alligator shoes, closed up in fancy leather handbags, hidden under hats, wigs, inside a muskrat, then wool, and finally a polyester coat. Garments abetted by every shade of pocketbook to hide the unorthodoxy of a desire whose time would not come for another thirty or forty years, and only then in big cities. I wondered how many other lives were tucked away in the mad scramble for fashion.

Gretchen today lives in a nursing home, where the aids I have heard have to struggle nightly to get her into her nightgown.

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*Richard Krause's work has appeared in The Alembic, The Long Story, Hotel Amerika, Scapegoat Review, J Journal, and the Red Savina Review. A collection of his stories titled Studies in Insignificance was published by Livingston Press, and Optical Biases, a collection of his epigrams, was published by Eyecorner Press in Denmark. Krause currently teaches English at Somerset Community College in Kentucky.*

# Catching Bubbles

Laura Aitken

---

She watches them drift—  
the soap rings on the wind  
born from lips  
of others, at play,  
shimmering, iridescent—  
she stretches  
a finger  
to stroke  
the rainbow sides  
of that perfect curve—  
the bubbles dance  
closer, a dozen wisps  
of colour. One kisses  
the back of her hand  
trembles—

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*Arlyn LaBelle's work has appeared in the Badgerdog summer anthologies as well as Words Work, Persona, The Missing Slate, The Blue Hour, LAROLA, JONAH Magazine and Ink In Thirds. She was awarded a scholarship for the Badgerdog summer writing program, and won 3rd place in the New Jersey Writer's Project.*



NA Radke

# Bench Symmetry

Nina Athena Radke

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*Nina Athena Radke is an editor, publisher, writer and photographer from New York. She owns DreamMiners Publishing and Creative Arts Services, and currently has three books of poetry and prose available on Amazon and Createspace.*

# Duane Quill's Passion

Donald Hubbard

---

DUANE QUILL CHOSE THIS DAY to kill as many of his fellow citizens of Hale, Connecticut, as the Good Lord would allow him.

He had been good all winter, had plowed his neighbors' driveways clear of snow, and didn't get into any fistfights at the Dented Kettle even when they turfed him out of the premises or cut him off. He prayed mightily, at least a couple times a week, but once spring came the Lord still left him ugly. Plus, he didn't catch anything on the opening day of fishing season.

Faithfully, he had oiled his guns over the winter, blew part of one of his ears off once in the endeavor, so he was prepared for a biblical vengeance on all those he felt thought they were superior to him. Which included pretty much every other citizen of Hale, Connecticut. Except for Bobb Kleski who believed he was a goat and Thin Spaghetti Bossetti, who weighed over 800 pounds. He could spare those two. They had enough on their plates and would not benefit by a shotgun blast through their bellies.

Eating. It occurred to Duane that though Hale did not have a police force, just a few poorly trained constables and a resident state trooper, he might get shot and killed himself today. He hadn't really thought of that before. Some of his fellow citizens owned guns too and

might take umbrage at Duane donating free shots at them. They might retaliate, take it the wrong way. Or worse, the Staties might swoop in with the National Guard.

So the village idiot slung his favorite rifle onto his shoulder, started up his Pinto, and traveled over to Gzeb's store in the Polish part of town, for the ingredients of a potentially last meal. He got out of his car with the gun still strapped over his shoulder.

"Morning Gzeb."

"Good morning Duane, how can I help you?"

"Just looking for a few things for breakfast."

"If you don't mind Duane, I'd like it if you could go outside and put your rifle back in the car, it not being hunting season and all. Don't need anyone shooting off his other ear or someone else's. Its damn bad for business."

Absent-minded him, Duane finally recognized that he had not let go of his rifle since he left his house. Simultaneously, he appreciated that he had a rifle and Gzeb did not have one. "You know Gzeb, I don't feel like paying for my food today. Can you grab me a package of bacon, a half dozen eggs, and a soft pack of Chesterfields?" Duane unslung his rifle and pointed it at the center of Gzeb's forehead.

"What got into you today Duane: you

hungover or something? Still got those horizontal lines in each eye that won't go away? I'd figure that that would be advantageous, easier to do fractions and all."

"That ain't it Gzeb. This is the day the Lord appointed me to kill everyone in Hale, 'cept Kleski and Thin Spaghetti Bossetti."

"Well you know Duane, I don't live in Hale so the Lord wants you to spareth me. But let me get you your food and your cigarettes and you can go about your business. Sound good?"

"Sounds fair to me Gzeb; I always liked you."

So Gzeb fetched Duane his groceries, put them in a small bag, and handed them to Duane.

"Promise me one thing Duane? No killing until you've had a good breakfast, promise?"

"No problem; why'd you think I got these groceries for? A man's entitled to a last meal."

"Say 'hi' to God for me."

"Will do Gzeb. Sorry I had to steal from you and all. It just didn't seem logical to pay you. 'Least I didn't shoot you."

Duane left and Gzeb ran right to his phone, thumbing through his emergency phone numbers until he reached the state trooper.

"Ron, this is Gary Gzeb. Dumbass Duane Quill just left my store. He was armed with a rifle and he robbed me. He was mumbling something about killing everyone in Hale today... Yeah, that's what he said... Yeah, something about God ordered him to do it... He went home with the stuff he stole to make himself a last meal... Yeah, I think he's serious, he's always been crazy; now he's just crazier. And walking around with a gun."

Gzeb finished talking, placed the "Closed" sign back in his front window and left work for the day.

"Damned mental case."

Almost home, it occurred to Duane Quill that he had sinned, had committed his first crime, and probably needed to confess. Plus, if he was shot to death today by law enforcement, he would die with the cloud of his other sins and transgressions. He pulled a sharp left toward the center of town to the rectory at St. Reinhold's Church to meet with Father Stan.

Fr. Stan had woken up fifteen minutes earlier and had just poured himself a cup of freshly brewed coffee when he saw the beat-up Pinto of Duane Quill pull up onto the rectory driveway, expelling its driver, who walked to the front door and rang the bell.

"Dear God," whispered Fr. Stan. "Not him."

April is supposedly the cruellest month. Certainly In Hale it was proving true for idiots.

Fr. Stan let Duane Quill in. "Have a seat Duane. What brings you to the rectory this morning? Fr. O'Brien is about to start the morning Mass. It lasts about a half hour; then afterward you can speak with him."

"Father Stan, do you believe that God speaks to us?"

"How do you mean Duane? Please sit down in the living room. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Yes Father, two sugars, no cream."

Patiently Fr. Stan prepared the coffee then sat in the living room across from Duane. "You wanted to know if God speaks to us; is that why you came here Duane?"

"It is Father; God told me to kill everyone in Hale. Except of course for Bobb Kleski and Thin Spaghetti Bossetti."

"Of course."

"But I just robbed Gzeb's store since I might die today, and I don't care much about anything. But I thought I might... that I probably should confess, if I get killed by the cops today trying to do God's will and all."

"I see. When you say that God spoke to you, was it in a dream or in a conversation like we are having now?"

Duane squinted. "Neither Father; it was just like I saw a stop sign and stopped. One moment I was just told to do that and then never was told not to after."

"Excuse me for asking, but were you drinking at this time?"

"I had been, but I had stopped twenty minutes before. But it was not the drink Father; I've been drunk thousands of times, hundreds of times since God talked to me, but this was the only time I've been called to do something this important."

"Are you intoxicated now?"

"No Father, I've never thought clearer. You can give me a bunch of police sobriety tests right now. I'd pass every one."

Father Stan removed his horn-rimmed glasses and cleaned the lenses on his sleeve. They were not dirty; he simply felt some type of philosophical gesture might influence Duane in a positive manner. "Let me ask you Duane, have you ever thought about why God wants to you murder everyone in Hale?"

"Everyone but Bobb Kleski and Thin Spaghetti Bossetti."

"Yes Duane, we covered that."

"Did you question God when He called you to be a priest? Its like this Father, the Lord works in mysterious ways. But yes, I have given some thought to why I'd be asked to do something this...what's the word I am looking for...'extensive,' and I think it's because God does not want His hands on it. Listen Father, there are some really bad people around here; you hear their confessions every week; they leave the confessional with a couple Our Fathers and a few Hail Marys and they feel like they can just do the same old crap again. Excuse me, Father, that's a poor choice

of words, but I see it a half hour after they leave church. You and Father O'Brien tried, I get that, but these people don't listen. It's like Sodom and Gomorrah out there except with drugs and really awful looking clothes. I think God just wants it to stop."

"But about the children..."

"They're the meanest of the bunch Father. Every time I go outside and there is a kid around, they make fun of my ear."

"Okay Duane; I am going to level with you. I am happy to take your confession, but first, let me counsel you a bit. I have known you to be a good and gentle man in the ten years I have been at St. Reinhold's, always helping people, never asking for anything in return. I have also seen you drink more and more and let me say that I do not believe that God is speaking to you. I think that it's the booze. I have been praying to God and have spoken to God thousands of times, long before I was ordained a priest, and in all of the times I have never heard God speak back."

"But Father..."

"But listen, I can line up some very good professional help for you right now, before you or anyone else gets hurt. Once you come out of treatment, if you still think that God wants you to butcher an entire town, we can talk again."

"Why don't we do the confession thing Father and see how it all works from there."

"Certainly, but are you sure you do not want to wait until five o'clock tonight, give you some more time to think?"

"No Father, it's got to be now."

"Okay, let us start with the sign of the cross."

"Bless me Father for I have sinned, I went to church last Easter and as far as the last time I went to confession, let's just say it's been awhile. Do I have to guess when?"

"No son, just tell me your sins."

"Well you already know about me robbing the store today, I don't know if that counts, the owner was kind of in on it, he didn't try real hard to talk me out of it. I touch myself a lot in places I'm not supposed to..."

"That does not surprise me, what else my son?"

"Sometimes I pay for sex. I'll drive as far as Boston or New York for a pretty woman, Meriden or Bridgeport if I am low on money. I do a lot of under the table work that I don't report on my taxes. Sometimes I lie. That's about it Father."

"Go forth and sin no more. You are forgiven my son. For your penance, I want you to say ten-thousand Our Fathers and ten-thousand Hail Mary's, and not shoot anyone."

"That's kind of stiff Father. Can't we negotiate on some of those prayers? What do you usually hand out for masturbation and paying for sex?"

"Don't you worry about anyone else my son. Now go to Gzeb's store and return what you stole this morning. Then go home and sleep for a bit then start up on your prayers."

"Whatever you say Father." Stan got up and stuck out his hand for Father Stan to shake.

"Thanks for listening, I'll show myself out."

"Remember Duane, no shooting today, or any other day! You have a place in this town. People like you and you like them."

"I'll try to remember that Father. Have a good one."

Father Stan got up and watched Duane get in his car and drive off, then trotted to his telephone and called the emergency police number. The dispatcher was aware of the issue as a number of state troopers had already been mustered and dispatched to Hale. Father Stan thanked the dispatcher, hung up, then started to pray an awful lot. Rattled, it never

occurred to him that Duane had never uttered the Act of Contrition during his confession.

Poor Duane started considering Father Stan's advice as soon as he had driven off. The part about not shooting anyone sounded like the priest was making a joke, and all those prayers, well that seemed negotiable too, but returning the items he stole from Gzeb, that sounded doable and right, so he drove down back to the Polish area of town to do that. The killing could wait.

Gzeb had not returned to work, so Duane studied the "Closed" sign and the locked door and formulated a contingency plan. He pulled down the "Closed" sign, took a pencil out of his pocket and wrote down "The eggs and bacon and cigarettes belong to Gzeb. Do not touch. Sorry Gzeb, hope we are still friends." He placed the groceries down on the store's front windowsill along with the sign, proudly displayed, then drove off to Middletown to get a McMuffin for breakfast.

His penance having begun, Duane drove over the town line, scarcely missing a posse of Staties who descended on Gzeb's store to begin to lay out their plans for apprehending Duane while another group of cruisers bee-lined for Duane's house, and Reinhold's rectory.

Emergency alerts went over the television, but most of the kids watching Admiral Jack or Flippy the Clown failed to pass on the warning.

As the dragnet widened, Duane Quill pulled up to the Washington Street, Middletown McDonalds and, deciding to dine inside, ordered an Egg McMuffin and a coffee and sat down. This was before the installation of drive-thrus at fast food joints, so some customers got their orders and ran out to their cars, but many sat down. Around Duane, a large family of two parents and eight children picked on each

other. A man his age read *The Hartford Courant* and a bored teenage girl thumbed through her high school assignment, Jack London's *To Build a Fire*.

Duane just gazed at the menu of items over the front counter and read them repeatedly to himself.

Conceivably, Duane might have used this time to plot his next steps for the remainder of the day. He had returned the stolen items to Gzebs, had decided already to defer the prayers assigned to him as penance and was in the midst of achieving his goal of eating breakfast. That left the mass murder thing.

He had intimated to two people that he meant to commit heinous crimes today, Fr. Stan, who presumably was bound by the privilege of the confessional to keep quiet and Gzeb, who skedaddled out of town and shut down his business for the day. Duane reasoned that no one else knew about his mission as he sipped his coffee. When he figured that no one was looking at him, he pulled a flask of whiskey out of his back pocket and splashed a couple ounces in to act as a stabilizer.

Stabilized, Duane gulped the remainder of his coffee, finished McMuffining and wrapped up his rubbish to throw into the trash. As he exited, he ran into a woman holding a large purple purse. He held the door open for her and as she looked up at him to thank him, she gasped and dropped her purse.

Insulted at what he thought was her reaction to his partially shot off ear, Duane glared and asked her what her problem was.

"No problem, sir," I just remembered that I left my oven on at home."

"It's the ear isn't it?"

"The what?"

"My ear that I nearly shot off, it's that, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, no it isn't. Can you let me go, I

have to go back home to turn off my stove? I am sorry if I offended you."

Duane Quill let her run away and looked at some of the workers behind the counter, who rolled their eyes at him. He rolled his eyes back at them and circled his right forefinger around his temple, indicating that the thought that the lady was crazy.

Unbeknownst to poor Duane Quill, the alert in Connecticut was now general, radio and television. The public was warned to look out for a man with a shot off right ear driving a red pinto, as Governor Ella Grasso raced down to Hale to set up a command post at Gzeb's to monitor the situation. Helicopters whirred overhead as news crews set up around the Hale town hall.

In Hale, his neighbors tried to fathom what had happened to poor Duane to set him off like this. Some folks had known him since kindergarten, always a friendly and harmless kid growing up, a bit of an abject drunk as an adult, particularly after his parents both died in the same month, but no threat. As news filtered in that he meant to shoot up the town as some "Abraham-like" order from God, people tried to figure out what tipped him over from weird to deranged. Those that had offended him at some point in his life, hid in their cellars, glued to their transistor radios for news of his anticipated and prayerfully desired apprehension.

Back in his car, Duane motored back to the Hale line, finally dedicating himself to a plan to lay low his home town. He had packed three rifles and fifty shells in his back seat this morning, then finally realized that besides himself and Bobb Kleski and Thin Spaghetti Bossetti there were 3247 other citizens of Hale and he could not kill them all with only fifty shells.

"Shit!"

So he jockeyed his car to the side of the

road and parked it and took a piss, all the time thinking how to biblically convert fifty shells into 3247 murders.

Zipping up, he exclaimed, "That's it!" He realized that his car, operating at the right speed, served as a perfectly acceptable deadly weapon. He could run over Hale, striking down its people like wheat. God would like that touch.

"Damn, that's it!" He was back in business.

But was he? Soon after getting his car back on the road, he had to brake, traffic had stopped because the all the streets into Hale had been road-blocked by state troopers. That was odd thought Duane, nothing really happened in Hale. It was not like Hartford with its stabbings and muggings. He had no time for this, so he jackknifed his Pinto off the road and into the St. Alphone di Liguori cemetery, one of the borders between Middletown and Hale. Like a futuristic moguls runner, he negotiated his car between grave stones and monuments until he found a good straight cemetery path, leading him out of the cemetery and bypassing the roadblock. He was back home.

But by this time, the streets of home were deserted with the exception of police cruisers. Word had gone out by neighbors telephoning each other, and running next door to warn each other. Even the town bell had sent out a warning; the first time since it was used in this manner since the Civil War. The grammar school had been opened up to receive the anticipated wounded residents. Windows were curtained and shuttered.

This was not his home town. Sirens wailed and soon Duane saw crisers filling out his rear view mirror and he had an epiphany that they were chasing him.

How had it gone so wrong? Like most people who do things that God tells them to do, Duane had not so much planned to

fail but failed to plan. He never should have blabbed to Gzeb, he should have just laughed off carrying a rifle into the store and paid for his breakfast and cigarettes. Then he would never have driven to Fr. Stan, who quite possibly had violated the sanctity of the confessional and called the cops on him.

"That was it," thought Duane. "I'm quitting the Catholic Church!"

A helicopter now rode his ass and cruisers tried to pull up next to him, indicating that he should roll down his windows. Duane gave the cops the finger, the last act of civil disobedience that he committed before his car veered off the road into a lawn jockey who punctured his gas tank with its lantern, blowing up the Pinto.

The impact knocked him out, a blessing of sorts since the flames soon surrounded him. Waking up panicked and terrorized, Duane left his car and fanned the flames as he sprinted down Skunk Misery Road toward the sand traps.

Duane wondered why God had forsaken him, until a charitable state trooper blew Duane's brains out with a couple shots from his service revolver.

That was it for Duane. Fr. Stan did say a Mass for him, but it took place one early morning at two a.m., because otherwise the townsfolk would have stormed the very old wooden church and might have burned it to the ground.

A distant relative of Duane's, a third cousin once removed, was located in the Ozarks; he authorized Duane to be buried in Potters Field, then hired a Hartford lawyer and sued everybody. The case against the trooper and the State of Connecticut was dismissed immediately, but the lawsuit against Ford for the defective gas tank on the Pinto made millions for Duane's cousin who donated the money to himself.

Duane's house felt apart brick by brick, until the town seized it in tax title and razed it.

Gzeb patented some spooky Duane Quill Halloween masks and sold them for a few years, but the fad never really caught on, probably because it was hard to depict a shot off ear and because the masks were cheaply made and proved flammable; sort of ironic

considering how Duane met his maker.

Few Hale residents are left who remember Duane and frankly most had forgotten about him not long after he died. A lot of people who are on a bender and drunk-driving sadly die; even those called upon to do God's will.

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*Donald Hubbard has written six books, one of which was profiled on Regis and Kelly and another that was a Boston Globe bestseller and Amazon (category) top ten. Another book has gone into a second edition and Hubbard was inducted into the New England Basketball Hall of Fame as an author in 2015. Hubbard is currently compiling a series of short stories about a fictional small town in Connecticut.*

# Human Ladder

A.J. Huffman

---

Hands tear at my shoulders  
as ten tiny toes dig  
into folds of back, bruise unprepared  
skin. She is diminutive  
adventurer. I am great  
Mount Aunt. She will conquer me,  
or I will die, marked  
by the efforts of her tryings.

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A.J. Huffman has published twelve full-length poetry collections, thirteen solo poetry chapbooks and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink), *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press), and *Familiar Illusions* (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a twotime Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2500 poems in various national and international journals, including Lablette, The James Dickey Review, The Bookends Review, Bone Orchard, Corvus Review, EgoPHobia, and Kritya. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press. [www.kindofahurricanepress.com](http://www.kindofahurricanepress.com).

# Verbatim

Tony Clavelli

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"MR. SAFFRON, HEY!" the young man says, trudging through prairie grass, trampling it really, on the edge of Milo's yard. Milo takes a few hurried steps back up his driveway to keep the gap between his neighbor and himself. "Hold on a sec! Can I ask you something?"

Kevin Vaughn's done this, every day, for the past week. Same question, verbatim. Before this week? Not even a wave. Milo has tried a few different things to avoid this neighborly visit but no variation prevents it. It might be less upsetting if Kevin would just get the name right. Sheffron. Not too challenging.

Milo's knees ache as he moves towards his front door. When Kevin continues, now on Milo's Spanish grass, now on the edge of the asphalt, Milo holds up a hand and Kevin comes to a stop, panting, sweating, trying to smile but mostly looking deranged.

"Mr. Saffron, hey, it's me, Kevin. I live next door," Kevin says, same as always.

"Uh huh." And then the thing about the brother, Milo thinks. The creepiness of this conversation again and again makes his skin crawl. Kevin picks at a red spot on his cheek.

"Have you seen Chris? He's my brother? Looks like me but without all this." He grabs his hair and tugs at it. "Can't find him. Maybe you saw his car, or...?"

The conversation can actually diverge here, sort of, depending on Milo's answer. On Wednesday, right around when Milo became suspicious about what was happening with Kevin—the same sweat-stained Oxford, the scrapes on the backs of his hands, always fresh—he tried a different response. He told Kevin that he had indeed seen Chris, which wasn't true, running off towards The Little Store on Rt. 25 to get some snacks. This gave Kevin a moment to say, "Snacks? Really?" and then he took off back to the house the two brothers shared, just as he would have if Milo had told the truth.

So Milo thinks Kevin has caught himself in a time loop. Unfortunately, Milo has no idea what this really means or what to do about it. With no news of Chris, the other Vaughn brother, to report, Milo watches Kevin sprint back through the tall grasses bordering the yards and into the open garage. Again. For the fifth time this week—never once acknowledging that the conversation has happened before.

Milo brings the mail inside, grabs a can of Diet Coke, and makes a point to pop into the garage for a moment to adjust the white board. There was a time not too long ago when Milo would try to work things out on this, make plans, sketch a garden plot, or later,

diagram how to sort through Lisa's belongings. It's a remnant from when he was a teacher, and it helps him think. But yesterday, when he had the inkling that something odd was afoot, he started a timeline.

He uncaps a black marker and adds to his tabular clock of known events. On the left side of the broad board he has an overhead map, like an architect's floor-plan, marked with each of their homes, his prairie grass, the path Chris's car takes, the daily mail encounter, and Kevin's late afternoon march to the rear of the property.

Right when Milo starts to feel uncomfortable about what he's doing, he goes inside. Then he climbs upstairs to the spare bedroom with the only window in the house facing the ranch home next door.

He pulls over the wicker stool and thinks about how his sister warned him of things like this. Not people stuck in time-loops, of course, but how retirement would dig at him. Soon Chris arrives home. There's the fistfight and the dogs barking and the silence. It's a scene he'd caught the tail end of in the preceding days. Watching it in full, he can tell they're lousy fighters—each clearly not wanting to hurt the other and not wanting to back down. Chris is a little shorter than Kevin, and when he tumbles to the ground right in front of his Volvo's headlights, his t-shirt flipped up exposing his rumpled belly spilling over his jean shorts, Milo again feels a surge of genuine worry. On Saturday morning, it rains. The chalky grey skies drop a steady shower and puddles form in their usual dips in the asphalt. As he considers retrieving the already-soggy paper, he notices the golden bubble around the Vaughn brothers' house.

He presses his face into his screen door for a better view. After a moment of trying to comprehend the strange light and colors, he

comes to the simple conclusion that it is raining everywhere except for a roughly thirty-foot bubble extending out of the front half of the ranch home next door. There is the long morning shadow cast from the red maple, stark against the burnt grass of the Vaughn's lawn, the twinkling reflection of sunshine bouncing off of the silver Volvo's door handle and into Milo's eyes, the gradient of color as the rain sort of dissolves away before the edges of the golden dome. And elsewhere? Just rain.

Carol would want to know. She wouldn't put him in a home or anything. Maybe he could call her over for some other reason. Since his wife had died two years earlier, Carol didn't need a big fuss to come by—maybe she and Frank would rent a movie and bring it over.

He climbs the stairs, wondering if the oak banister had always been this wobbly—maybe Frank could help with that too? He goes into Lisa's office, which Milo calls the spare room, even though it is still Lisa's office even if Lisa is gone. His head is so full of things this morning. There is a bubble of sunlight ahead of him (where is the rain above it going exactly?) and his thoughts whirr to the point where he feels a sort of singeing on his skin above his right ear, and then the phone rings.

"Milo?" Carol says.

"There's this bubble," Milo begins, but Carol cuts him off.

"Frank and I are heading down to Caputo's to get some sausage for grilling tomorrow—that sound good?"

Tomorrow seems far too long to wait. By tomorrow, he could be caught in the loop too and there wouldn't even be a tomorrow. It'd be today all over again.

"That doesn't even make sense." A barbecue doesn't make sense? What's wrong?"

"Ah, sorry," Milo says, fumbling with the phone. "Carol, can you maybe come today?

The banister is all out of whack. I thought maybe Frank could give it a look."

"Milo, it's raining, Dear," Carol says. "You know Frank hates driving in the rain. And we're coming tomorrow. So you don't want anything special from the store?"

Milo sighs. He sees the Vaughn brother with the shorter dark hair coming out of the garage pushing an empty shopping cart. Milo's seen this before, though not with the rain filtered over it like bad TV reception. The Vaughn kid opens the trunk of the hatchback Volvo, completely oblivious to the fact that it is raining everywhere except for a small radius around him. Chris Vaughn stands behind the car, and the bubble distends, stretches outward further down the driveway. It moves.

"Either this connection is terrible or you've fallen asleep on me again," Carol says.

"Hello?" Milo says. "Oh! There, good—I guess the rain was making it cut out for a minute." Which doesn't make sense, but was enough for Carol to say "Hm" and end the conversation.

He could just drive away. No more bubble to see. He doesn't drive much, but the Thunderbird has gas. While he's standing there in the kitchen with one arm in the sleeve of a green raincoat, he knows he isn't going to leave. Too many questions remain. And what if he's needed, somehow, to reopen the loop and mend the universe and get the little microcosm of time unstuck? This thrills him for the short moment he allows it to.

He walks to the front window, letting the coat slip to the floor. He watches as Chris's Volvo backs out of the driveway, a little golden tube of impossibility stretching with it, flexing as it goes, until it splits in a mitosis of sunshine. The bubble recoils, wobbling as it adjusts itself to its new dual state.

He scrambles together something like a

lunch out of white bread and a soft, disappointing apple.

He watches the neighbor's house for what feels like hours until another car approaches. This one, unbubbled, pulls into Milo's driveway, and he recognizes it as his brother-in-law's. Frank steps out and lightly jogs up the sidewalk. Frank is about two years older than Milo and moves around like he's twenty years younger.

"Carol sent me," Frank says, stepping in past Milo. He's holding a six-pack of Old Style by the plastic rings.

Milo looks at him impatiently—how could he not mention the golden-domed home next door? He steps out onto the path and into the rain. The ranch house next door doesn't glow. It just gets rained on, as houses do when it rains.

"What the hell is going on?" Milo asks.

"You're out in the rain like a crazy old man. We got beer and a Cubs game."

Milo stares at the house. Frank tears a tallboy from the plastic ring and extends it out to Milo who takes it and cracks it open. Milo then remembers earlier in the week, while he was picking up bruised pears off the grass of his backyard and listening to the sharp hum of wasps all around him, that he saw Kevin Vaughn walking towards the tree line of their backyard. He had been holding a cardboard box in one arm and a small gasoline container in the other. The bubble must be out back.

"Milo, game time!"

He waits until the Cardinals are batting during the second beer before testing his theories.

"Do you believe in time travel?" he asks Frank. Frank has a bowl of pistachio nuts emptied onto the love seat beside him, and a Cubs helmet/ice-cream-dish where he's depositing the shells. There's a fine salt smear on his jeans where he wipes his fingers.

"No sci-fi for me," Frank says, eyes on the game. "You know you can download that stuff now, with the TV. Stores right in your cable box." He picks up the remote and shakes it at Milo for emphasis. "I can get you a deal."

"The neighbors next door," Milo says. "The Vaughns."

"Those boys need to get laid."

"Frank," Milo says, growing impatient.

Frank presses pause on the TV. He lets out an exaggerated sigh, and Milo starts picturing the conversation Frank will have with his sister about how screwed up Milo's becoming and how they can only hold off so long before they have to get some help. He chooses his words carefully. "I think they've gotten themselves, in a way, stuck."

"Okay," Frank intones. "So...?"

"I think we need to get them some help or something. Get some scientists maybe."

Frank crunches a pistachio shell between his fingers. He looks sad and Milo knows that isn't good.

"Okay," Milo says. "Okay. The mail's going to come." Milo explains how Kevin's conversation plays out precisely the same way every time. "It'll happen today—you'll see. Then we can talk about it more?"

"And if it doesn't?"

Milo considers this. "Then we have a beer and I try my best to convince you not to tell Carol."

Frank gets up and steps over to Milo, clanks his beer into Milo's even though Milo is not really a part of the gesture. "We'll see."

When the game's over, Milo rinses the cans. Frank shouts from across the hallway about how the banister screws are stripped. The tone of his voice suggests this is at least partially Milo's fault. Frank goes into the garage where the tools are and comes back in a hurry.

"You wanna explain some of this to me?"

Frank says.

Milo knows his whiteboard probably makes him look pretty bad, as in no way I'm not telling his sister bad.

"I was just organizing that thing I was telling you," Milo says. Milo sees the Dremel tool on the ground, the one Frank bought him for Christmas but which was only used by Frank when he came to fix things. He bends down to get it and feels his back seizing up.

"This is neat," Frank says. He taps at the board, and looks back at Milo. "They really do this same shit all week?"

Milo gives a wobbly nod as he painfully creaks his back upright.

"Huh," Frank says. So Milo and Frank are up in Lisa's empty office, and though the rain has mostly stopped, there is still a distinct difference between the shadows cast in the area around the Vaughn house and the area outside of it.

"There should at least be puddles on the driveway," Frank says. He texts Carol that the banister's a tricky one, which it isn't, and watches the bubble unblinkingly.

When the mail truck comes and delivers mail, they go back downstairs. Frank has the newest smartphone, of course, and takes it out in the foyer by the open screen door.

Milo takes a deep breath and walks out to get the mail. Kevin comes racing towards him, tromping through the prairie grass, same as always. But today Kevin glows, the light around him different than the light everywhere else.

"Mr. Saffron, hey!" he calls. Milo worries about the proximity of this. He employs the down-boy-down gesture, and Kevin stops a safe distance away.

"Mr. Saffron, hey, it's me, Kevin. I live next door."

"That's right," Milo says. He glances back at the door to see Frank holding a big

thumbs-up.

"Have you seen Chris? He's my brother?" But then Kevin stops the up-speaking and has followed Milo's eyes back to the screen door. "Say, Mr. Saffron. Who the hell is that?" Kevin points towards Frank. The dim light indoors casts a silhouette of that bystander cell-phone stance.

"I saw a car pull away," Milo says, trying to draw Kevin's attention away. "Volvo, right?"

"Yeah, that's our car," Kevin says. But he's walking now, towards the front door. In doing so, the bubble is getting dangerously close to Milo. Milo doesn't move nearly as fast as he wishes he could, but he starts backing towards his home as fast as he safely can.

Frank then steps outside, holding the phone with one hand at eye level.

"I can't believe it," Frank says, stepping closer. "This is wild."

Kevin, who looks wound-up and skittish pretty much always, now looks even more jittery, flicking his curls left and right as he looks between the two older men.

"Why are you filming me? What do you know?"

"I'm shooting my brother-in-law on account of his sister," Frank says. "She's got a nursing home application all filled in she's itching to send it the moment this geezer can't walk anymore. He called me over to film him getting the mail 'cause he doesn't have a smartphone."

Milo feels a surge of warmth for his brother-in-law, whom Milo usually considered not terribly bright but is obviously more on his toes than Milo is right now. Kevin steps back. His lips purse a strange frown that makes a furrow in his scruffy beard.

"Do either of you happen to have a vacuum pump and chamber?"

Kevin's so off-script that Milo doesn't really

know how to react to this.

"Nope," Frank says. Kevin lurches back into gear, turning and bolting home the way he always does at the end of this conversation.

When Kevin is back inside, Frank says, "Come on," and starts walking towards the Vaughn home. "I gotta see what's going on there."

"We can't do this," Milo objects. He is following Frank anyway. Both men are crouching slightly, even though, Milo knows, this shouldn't make any difference. When Frank gets close enough to be at the event horizon of the light bubble, Milo sputters and coughs and wants to scream for Frank to stop.

Then Frank, unflinching, crosses into the bubble.

And nothing happens. Milo sees Frank's short-sleeved oxford shift from definitely-black to maybe-actually-navy and otherwise all is fine. Milo feels a shudder over his whole body as he enters the different light.

"This is trespassing," Milo whispers.

Frank puts his finger to his lip, and with a faux-military flourish, waves them into the open garage door. The cement door to the interior of the home is ajar.

They're in a laundry room that smells like mildew and Downy and they step through to the kitchen. Milo doesn't know what they're supposed to be doing here, but he feels incredible.

A sudden sharp and crackling sound comes from a doorway adjacent to the kitchen. Milo stumbles from the surprise but catches the countertop and manages to stay upright. Frank beams at Milo, and Milo realizes this surge rushing through him is fun. Frank points to the open door and a light flashes with each sparkling sound, and mouths the word "welding," which maybe before today would have annoyed Milo—of course it's welding; he'd

have figured that out eventually—but now he smiles back.

The welding crackle pauses long enough for Milo to hear a car door close outside. Milo points to his left, towards the living room that faces his own house and Frank nods. Frank sidles up next to Milo and dips down so Milo can lean some of his weight on Frank. Together they limp out of there. The gesture from Frank is so natural that it's not until they're squatting next to the musty green couch and hearing Chris step inside that Milo considers how effortlessly Frank does things like this all the time. Carol too.

"You said you'd stop," Chris shouts down to his brother.

"I think I got it," Kevin says. "I was just working with the shell, but we can climb in after it's done charging."

"Climb in?" Chris says. "You're insane. I'm calling Dr. Shim, and we're shutting it down 'til she comes and checks the work."

"No!" Kevin says, climbing upstairs, and Milo hears the door to the garage open, and then some swearing, and then the door slams shut.

Milo coughs, realizing he hadn't been breathing much. Frank has his forehead pressed to the glass of the window behind him, trying to get a better view of the fight outside. Milo looks to his own house. From the golden light of the Vaughn bubble, his home looks rather dismal. He sees his gutters full of dead leaves and the siding that hasn't been repainted in decades. The shrubbery bulges out of the confines of the stone-edged garden. Lisa and Milo built it together after Lisa retired. Milo kept it up really nicely until slowly it hurt

to do so. The whole place doesn't really look like much to be clinging so tightly to.

Frank extends a hand to Milo. "The way they're scrapping I bet we've got five minutes to get a look."

Milo gets up, his knees feel like they're grinding themselves down to nothing, but it's actually not so bad. Frank moves aside so that Milo can pass and be first. Now that he's in the doorway above the straight stairs of unfinished pine, he hears something purring down below, revving up, and it smells a little like burning metals and disinfectant. It's a good smell, this thing downstairs that will change everything, maybe. Something really big is down these stairs and Milo is at the top and he's ready.

He grabs onto the thin handrail and on the second step, his knee buckles. His grip is only good enough to swing him sideways as he tumbles—his face smacking against the unpainted drywall—but not good enough to stop the fall. It's bright downstairs, he sees, in flashes and blurs as he rolls over himself and comes to a sliding stop with, oh good, his feet below his head.

There is something absolutely incredible rumbling softly just beside Milo. When he manages to roll his head to look, he sees the Vaughn's machine, and the funny way it warps the light of the basement. Its shining black mass seems to rush toward him. He can't take his eye off the little silver door handle welded to the outer shell. Milo feels an overwhelming urge to touch it.

Frank is thundering down to help, and probably the brothers will be inside soon. But Milo can close the loop. He knows. He reaches for the handle.

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*Tony Clavelli is a graduate of the West Virginia University MFA program in fiction. His stories have recently appeared in Metaphorosis, Jersey Devil Press, and The Awl.*

# You Are Your Diagnosis

William Hilary

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Things will be slower than they need to now  
since I was born a name and became a diagnosis;  
I have tried to remain calm in the face of it  
harrowed out on plastic mattresses in spermwhite wards.  
Never mind.  
I have stood on the red edge of a cliff, perched over  
Carolina bay; have watched the white hump of a  
whale lifting seaskim and shell; Boats on the horizon  
gathering in moondust clusters, moving as slowly as they need to.  
We listen through seashells for reason.  
All I know.  
If you fail you'll be released in seventy two hours.  
And the list of side effects include a slow, steady swelling of the brain.

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*William Hilary is a Los Angeles based poet, closely affiliated with Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center. His work primarily deals with mental illness and psychiatric hospitalization.*

# Lynn

Z.Z. Boone

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"I JUST THINK there are some crimes so horrendous," Celeste said, "that a person forfeits the right to live in a civilized society."

It was Saturday night—our regular "sex night"—and we were sitting in Pik-A-Pizza having our regular Saturday night pre-sex pizza.

"Why would you think that?" I asked.

"Well, it's kind of like what my friend Lynn says..." she began before I could cut her off.

"I'm not interested in what your friend Lynn says," I told her. And then I went on to list all the reasons the death penalty is barbaric. Celeste listened patiently, shrugged from time to time, nibbled on her gluten-free crust. But she didn't give in, didn't roll over, didn't say—as she usually did—*Yeah, I guess you're right.*

We met eighteen months ago on a cold Saturday night in January. This comatose little dive I used to hit after work. Bar, TV, couple of scratched wood tables, unisex toilet, fly-specked kitchen in back. Nothing much ever happened there—people would come in and just kind of collapse—even though the sign outside over the window said Pandemonium.

I was at the rail drinking dinner when I saw Celeste with some angry, full-bearded guy. They were coming out of the cloakroom

maybe four feet from me, and he was wrestling with his L.L. Bean ski jacket as if it was a predator. I heard him say, "These people can't even get a simple order right. Fucking anteaters could do a better job." Celeste was close-mouthed but embarrassed. You could tell. And she was cute. Small, round-faced, shoulder-length blond hair that looked like she didn't fuss with it, faux-fur coat. They left right after that, but before I could ask Lew the bartender if he knew who she was, she came walking back inside, went straight for the cloakroom, rummaged around in there a minute, then came out.

"Did anybody see a pair of brown leather gloves?" she asked.

Everybody in the place, about a dozen of us, mumbled no and tried not to look like thieves. Celeste said something I couldn't hear, turned to leave.

"Light brown or dark?" I asked just before she pushed open the door.

She stopped, turned, studied me a second. "Dark," she said.

"Coffee? Chocolate?"

She nodded.

"Which one?" I asked.

Everybody else was back to eating their burgers, and drinking their beers, and either

flirting with the waitress or watching the Bruins lose to Edmonton.

"Aren't they the same?"

"Not really," I said. "Coffee can have cream in it and becomes almost tan. There's dark chocolate and milk chocolate and even white chocolate."

She smiled and took a couple of steps closer. She smelled a bit like medicated foot powder. "Dirt," she half-smiled. "They're the color of dirt."

"I'm still confused," I said. "Let me buy you a drink and try to get this straight."

"Sorry," she said. "I've got somebody waiting."

"Send him ahead."

"I don't think I can do that."

"Okay," I said. "Understood. But what you should do," and here I motioned to Lew to bring me something to write with, "is leave your number in case those gloves show up."

She smiled fully at this, stepped even closer, took the pen from my hand and wrote a number on my beer napkin.

"I really love those gloves," she said. "My dad gave them to me."

"I'll pick up the place and shake it until they fall out."

I called her an hour later when I got home.

"I found them," I said.

"Really?"

"No," I said. "Not really. But I have an extra pair you can use."

She asked me what color they were, and I told her black.

"Dark black or light black?" she said.

We got together the next night—I found out the guy she was with in Pandemonium was a blind date—and we went to this rock 'n' roll revival show. At the end of the night, I gave her this cheap pair of black work gloves I bought as

a joke and we wound up hanging out for the next eighteen months.

I live in a manufactured home, sometimes called a "trailer" by the uninitiated, and work for a company called Flying Carpet Cleaning and Restoration. Yes, I am a huge disappointment to my parents, two well-meaning but misdirected people who raised me in Fredrick, Maryland where they still happily reside in retirement. My dad was a high school gym teacher, and mom worked in real estate. The old story. They wanted to see their only kid climb that ladder of success, not go belly-first down failure's water slide. They were cloth coat Republicans who believed in hard work, competition, and accomplishment achieved without favors. And they pushed their beliefs on me so hard, that by the time I was sixteen, they had pushed me straight through to the other side.

After four undistinguished years in high school, I decided to head north to Castleton State College in Vermont. My decision was based on two things: a picture in their brochure in which students of every conceivable race were happily building a snowman together, and the fact that me moving to the most über-liberal state in the nation would drive my parents wild.

I lasted one semester. Not even long enough to declare a major.

But I chose to stick around town—town being Rutland—where life is frigid but simple, where folks eat much-too-much yogurt, where getting dressed up means wearing a turtleneck under your sweater.

"Andrew is still rebelling," my mother will tell you if you ask.

She still calls me at least once a week. We only talk a few minutes, but it seems like an epoch. She goes on about fatherless families

and welfare, the black helicopters spying on us all, the persecution of the people she calls “the job creators.” I lean against the kitchen counter, open a beer, and by the time I finish it I’ve come up with some phony excuse to hang the receiver back on the wall: there’s someone at my door, or I have another call I have to take, or there’s smoke billowing out of my microwave.

I know. She’s a wonderful woman, and she gave me life. But give it a rest for Christ sake.

Celeste’s parents were a different breed. Strict Catholics whom she both adored and obeyed. She told me pretty early on that living together was out of the question, and that was fine by me. Except that she started dropping hints about what a blast it must be to be married. Raising a family, waking up together, never having to say see you next week. The girl was like some sunny, overly optimistic Beach Boy’s song and sometimes I found it necessary to pour her a heaping shot of reality. During the week, we seldom saw one another. I was shampooing people’s rugs all day while she was on the swing shift bathing old men at Senior Living Alternatives down in Pawlet. We weren’t exactly the Kardashians. We’d hang out on the weekends, go to a movie, hike around Otter Creek, maybe drive up to Burlington to watch the Lake Monsters play ball.

And we’d have sex. Always on Saturday night, always at my place, always between eight and nine p.m. so I could have her home without her mom or dad popping a blood vessel.

Have no doubt. The sex at first was great. If not great, very, very good. But sex, like a car battery, loses its power after a while and needs a jump. Don’t misunderstand; I looked forward to it all week. But what was once a gourmet dinner soon became a sliced chicken sandwich,

what was originally a glass of chilled champagne became a can of warm Diet Coke.

What really kept me coming back was this: Celeste adored me and would pretty much do whatever I asked, act any way I wanted her to, adopt whatever philosophy I threw out there. If I liked a certain movie, so did Celeste. If I believed in reincarnation without really being sure what it was, so did she. If I had expressed an enthusiasm for polka music, I imagine Celeste would have run out and bought an accordion. The same held true for politics. Global warming: check. Empowerment abused by the rich: check. A racist, sexist nation without a level playing field: check and double check.

My plan was to take her down to Fredrick at the end of the summer and introduce her to my parents. Let them panic over the possibility of a liberal daughter-in-law, liberal grandkids. It gave me a feeling of accomplishment, knowing I could enlist another right-minded person into the fray, but like the sex, it too was starting to turn as mundane as scratching dandruff.

Enter Lynn.

Celeste had an almost one-hour drive down to Pawlet, so she started car-pooling with one of the other home health aides. I never met Lynn, but I had a clear picture: some overweight chick with hairy arms, a closet full of handguns, and a Tea Party sticker on the back of her Chevy Avalanche. Rush Limbaugh fan. Anti-immigrant, pro right-to-life, Bible thumper. I could hear her hoarse, tobacco-choked voice asking, What’s so wrong with waterboarding people?

And after a month, Lynn was already starting to have an influence on my girlfriend.

I noticed it the first time a month ago when Celeste and I were stuck in traffic on Route 4 and some homeless guy approached the car. It was May, and it was raining, and he

was carrying a hand-lettered cardboard sign:

DOWN ON MY LUCK  
WIFE AND 2 KIDS  
YOUR KINDNESS APRECIATED

I rolled down my window and handed him five bucks.

"What if it's a scam," Celeste said after the guy had moved on.

I raised my window and looked over at her.

"Lynn says most of these people are fake. As capable of working as anybody else. They make hundreds of thousands of dollars and retire to Europe while the rest of us turn sixty-five and have to take jobs as greeters in Home Depot."

"That's ridiculous," I told her. "Poor man is one more victim of the downwardly spiraling middle-class."

"Like us?" she said.

I told her that wasn't the point, and she turned her head and looked out her side window.

"He didn't even spell 'appreciated' right," she said.

Forgive me. I've strayed from my original point.

After Celeste expressed her somewhat uninformed opinion of capital punishment at Pik-A-Pizza, just as we were preparing to leave and head over to my place, this woman walked in. Gorgeous. We were at the register paying, she was at the counter next to us for take-out.

"Hey, girl," Celeste said.

This apparition, this Playmate right off the magazine cover, turned and smiled and said, "Celeste! What are you doing here?"

Her teeth were whiter than my enamel

stovetop. Long braided hair the color of black Twizzlers. Green eyes like Heineken bottle caps. She was wearing a yellow scoop-neck t-shirt, tight cut-off jeans, black flip-flops.

Celeste made the introductions. "This is one of my co-workers," she said to me. And to the co-worker, "Jazz, this is Andrew."

"Jazz?"

"Short for Jasmine."

The two women made small talk while I shelled out for the bill, and Jasmine's pizza was sliced and boxed. But the capper, the part that I would not have believed if Abe Lincoln himself were to tell me, was just as Celeste was saying goodbye, Jasmine leaned in and kissed her. On the lips. It wasn't lingering or anything—in fact, it was probably pretty innocent—but it was (I repeat) on the lips.

In the car, I couldn't even turn the ignition key. "Wow," I said.

Celeste glanced over, tilted her head like a dog trying to hear better.

"Wow what?" she said.

"Wow, she seems very nice."

"Jazz? She's great."

"She kissed you right on the lips."

"Yeah, well that's Jazz."

I started the car.

"If you and I weren't a couple," I said, "do you think she'd go out with me?"

"No way," Celeste says. "Poor girl was married at eighteen, divorced at nineteen. Hasn't trusted men since."

I laugh and Celeste asks me what's so funny.

"When you first introduced her as your co-worker, I thought maybe it was Lynn."

"That's so dumb," Celeste laughs back. "Lynn is a dude."

Generally, our Saturday nights followed a pattern. We'd get to my place, make some

popcorn or tear into a giant bag of chips, open a couple of beers, then hit the old Posturepedic. Except that on that night I was in no mood for preliminaries. I started kissing Celeste hard, grabbing for her the second we were parked in my numbered slot.

"Whoa, boy," she said. "We're in public."

Once indoors, I took her by the wrist and tried to steer her directly into the boudoir. The bedroom itself was prepped, as it was every Saturday night: clean sheets, no visible pornography, and a Hawaiian Breeze-scented Glade Plugin. Tonight, though, Celeste was hesitant. No. More than hesitant. Resistant.

"What's wrong, babe?" I asked.

"I think we need to talk about something."

Uh-oh, I thought.

We sat on the sofa in my living room, and she held both my hands. Maybe a display of affection, maybe in order to keep me from turning on the TV. I'm not sure.

"Sometimes you make me feel like a prostitute," she said.

"I thought most girls like that."

"Most girls like that," she said, "in movies written by men."

Already this was a new Celeste. Confrontational. I found myself growing increasingly aroused.

"Can we talk about this later?" I asked as I tried to get to my feet and pull her up with me.

"Lynn thinks I should put sex on the back burner until we get our relationship straight," she said.

"Lynn the dude."

She nodded and without asking, started to talk about him. He was thirty years old—six years her senior—married without kids. He had a degree in American History and a fantastic sense of humor. Once, while they were driving to work and playing that game where you try and point out objects as you go

through the alphabet, Lynn was stuck on the letter "k." Fortunately, Celeste reported, he spotted some poor cat that had been run over and yelled "Kitty!"

A regular Jerry Seinfeld, this guy.

Celeste moved me over to the kitchen table and put on tea. For the next hour, I listened to her opinions while drinking Earl Grey and gnawing on petrified Lorna Doones. I made a couple of plays for her, including one out-and-out lunge across the table, but she was determined. I heard about how welfare makes people dependent upon the government, how college professors poison the minds of otherwise rational young adults, how voter fraud has led to the invalid elections of every Democratic president since Grover Cleveland. All of these absurd beliefs were prefaced by "according to Lynn," or "Lynn thinks," or "in Lynn's assessment."

At 8:30 she said it was time for me to take her home and that maybe tomorrow we could go see Lynn speak at this Young Republicans' meetup in Montpelier. When I told her I had other plans, she shrugged like it was no big deal, and at that moment she reminded me of my mother, except that Mom towers over me a good eight inches and has never really gotten me that hot.

My relationship with Celeste veered in another direction, and all of a sudden sex was off the table. Weeks went by, and she started to become—even with the increasingly fucked-up political views—the most desirable woman on planet Earth. I tried everything: respect, disrespect, charm, desperation. We still hung out on the weekends—she continued to ride-share with Lynn despite my advice—but our days together started to resemble those times when your female cousin comes up from Arizona and bugs you to fix her up with one of

your friends.

Then, one Saturday night in mid-August, I asked her to marry me. We'd had our pizza, and she was looking exceptionally fine. I don't remember what she was wearing, but at that point she'd have gotten my attention in a hazmat suit. We'd wound up back at my place playing Monopoly and I'd just been sent directly to jail, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.

"What brings this on?" Celeste asked.

I stood up from the kitchen table in order to make a stronger appeal. "Look at us," I said. "In the prime of our lives and we're sitting here playing Monopoly. It's like we're already married."

Celeste smiled and I tried not to leer at her like some perv at the mall. "Actually, that's kind of sweet," she said.

I walked behind her chair and started to rub her shoulders the way she used to like.

"And since we're kinda like married," I suggested, "why don't we do what kinda like married people do."

Celeste's smile faded and she removed my hands, stood up, walked toward the side door.

I pursued.

"What's wrong, babe," I said, trying not to sound too patronizing. "Tell me. Let me make it better."

"It's just that I'm really confused right now," she said, then went on to explain the source of her confusion.

Apparently, Lynn and his wife were having problems. They'd been trying to keep their marriage together for the sake of appearance, but had come to some kind of fork in the road. Lynn recognized his intelligent bride as the beautiful woman she was, but unfortunately—like in that Robert Frost poem—he had decided to walk a different path.

"He wants to get laid," I told her.

"That's a terrible accusation to make!" she

said.

"He's a guy, Celeste. This is what guys do."

"He's not like that," she told me. And then she added, "Even if he was, I'd still love him."

I felt my stomach flutter and drop like some trapdoor in a magic show. "You love him?" I asked.

She nodded her head, walked back toward the kitchen table, sat. She picked up the tiny thimble from the Monopoly game and nervously rotated it between her thumb and index finger.

"If you love him," I said like a spoiled eight-year old, "that means you don't love me anymore."

She half-smiled and looked directly up at me. "Come on, Andrew," she said. "We'll always love each other. It's just—"

"Just what?"

"Lynn seems to really like me."

I started to object but I couldn't think of anything to say. Probably because she was right. I did love her. I just really didn't *like* her all that much.

"So what now?" I asked. "Do you want to split up?"

"I don't know what I want," she said.

We didn't see one another for the next couple of weeks, and by that time sexual tension had me as irritable and jittery as a pedestrian stuck on the median of an eight-lane highway during rush hour. I started to worry that I might lose it at work. Be shampooing a rug for some poor housewife and turn to her like Benny Hill and say, You have another little rug I wouldn't mind shampooing.

So I decided to call Celeste. Tell her that our time apart had completely changed my view of things. That I liked her a lot. That I now appreciated her for who she is. That if she took a chance on this new, improved

Andrew, she wouldn't regret it.

I went to the wall phone in the kitchen and dialed her extension at Senior Living Alternatives, and after a few rings somebody who wasn't Celeste picked up. I was told that Celeste was away from her desk, but should be back any second. I left a message for her to call me, then gave my name.

"Oh hi, Andrew," the voice on the other ends said. "It's Jazz."

Something surged through me, not unlike lightning hitting Frankenstein's monster. "Jazz," I said. "How's it going?"

"It's going," she said.

I momentarily forgot about Celeste and focused on Jazz. Lonely, luscious, available Jazz. Hitched and ditched within a year. Her faith in men destroyed.

I'm not jealous, Celeste. But you want to play this game, let's play this game.

"You're in luck," Jazz said. "She just walked in."

"Jazz, hang on," I said. "The fact that you answered her phone is fate."

"Is it," she said, not in the form of a question.

"I think you and I should go out together."

"And I think you should talk to Celeste. She's right here."

"No! Wait!"

Silence.

"I don't need to talk to Celeste. It's over between her and me. That's the whole reason I'm calling."

Silence. Then I heard Jazz say, "Andrew, you know you're on speaker phone, right?"

I didn't know that.

The next thing I heard was Celeste's voice. "It's over?" she said.

"I suppose," I said. "If you want it to be."

I was ready for tears. I was ready for her to say we've been through a lot together, let's not throw it all away. And I was ready to agree. To take her back right then. Reunited via AT&T.

"I guess then that's it," she said, and she sounded rather emotionless, actually.

"Be careful," I heard Jazz warn from somewhere in the background. "Don't say anything you might regret."

And then I heard a man's voice. I pictured him not far off from the two women, separated perhaps by a partition, ready to be released from his cubicle like Pandora from her box.

"The woman knows what she's doing," he said.

I simply stood there. I heard footsteps and what sounded like a copy machine and somebody coughing. Just before I hung up, I heard Celeste's voice one last time.

"Andrew?" she said. "I have to go now. I have things to do."

A minute later I was standing with the refrigerator door open, staring inside. Food is lucky, I thought to myself. Food avoids this kind of shit. I grabbed a beer just as the phone rang.

"Sweetie, it's Mom."

"I'm glad you called," I said.

"Really?"

I pulled a kitchen chair up next to the phone, opened my beer, sat.

"Yeah," I said. "Really."

I listened as she talked about the evils of Affirmative Action, the need for conservative redistricting, the benefits of a strong military. I listened and listened. I finished my beer and got another one and sat back down and listened some more.

Except for goodbye, I hardly said a word.

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