

THE
ODDVILLE PRESS

WWW.THEODDVILLEPRESS.COM

ISSUE 1

A BREAK FROM THE NORM

FICTION

Perle Besserman

Chris Miller

Mia Kammeyer-Mueller

Louise Beech

Pete Carter

Nora B. Peevy

Theodore Carter

Nick Poulton

Valerie Z. Lewis

Graham Parke

Christopher Allan Death

ARTWORK

JOHNNY O BRADY

MIKE COOMBES

POETRY

Jaime McDougall

Ray Succre

Michael Constantine McConnell

L. Ward Abel

Cheryl Snell

COVER ART
CLARA NATOLI

The Oddville Press

The Oddville Press is a downloadable electronic non-profit magazine dedicated to bringing high quality Fiction, Poetry and Artwork to the forefront.

It's staffed by committed volunteers with high standards of excellence whose mission is to promote today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

©opyright and ©onditions of Use

All the material in The Oddville Press is copyright and therefore owned by someone, usually the author. This means the owner of the rights and The Oddville Press have come to some sort of an agreement. For you, the user end, this will always mean you can download material and store it digitally for private use only, even print paper copies for private use only, but that is all. No other rights are granted. You cannot edit material in any way, print it out for sale or sell digital copies. Nor can you put it on a website or charge others to visit our site.

A book doesn't need to spell out legal rules in full nor shall we, as it is quite simple and logical: using any of this material beyond the terms stated above is the same as theft, and that usually means the law, in some form, will be on your tail. Also remember that abuse of sites, like The Barcelona Review, will lead to repercussions which will only be to everybody's loss. Respect the artist. Respect the © sign.

Cover art by Clara Natoli

Visit the artist at <http://claranatoli.blogspot.com/>.

Interior art courtesy of Johnny O'Brady

I'm a painter and a photographer. I'm very messy and like to walk around in wet paint. Art is therapy for my soul.

I like to paint people who aren't around anymore. To bring them back. Sometimes as I paint I can almost feel them breathing in the room with me. I wonder who they loved and what they have left behind. They remind me that life is precious - and fleeting.

I want my paintings to look like they've been hanging in then sun for 80 years and then dragged through a garage full of dust and motor oil. I add tea to my brush water and keep it murky and dirty to help achieve this.

Visit the artist at: <http://www.johnnyobradys.com>

Interior street art photography courtesy of Mike Coombes

Visit the artist at: <http://brightonpeople.wordpress.com/>

Dear Readers,

This is where I'm supposed to welcome you to the first Issue of The Oddville Press, as well as share the experience of getting here, my hopes for this magazine's future and, of course, to give out praises. Ah, but here's a simple truth: few, if any, read the editor's letter. The exceptions are: those who know the editor and are curious to see what they'll say; the editor's immediate family; and those who are looking to sue said editor and are hoping they'll mess up and include their address and phone number. Sorry, but you won't find my address or phone number here, the old saying *You can't get blood out of a stone* never truer than in my case, the last cent long gone toward a new fridge, stove, and lightly-used Suzuki Volusia (motorcycle). And no, *they* aren't up for grabs, either.

Most readers feel, and rightly so, that an editor's letter is a terrible waste of space, a commercial, if you will. They come to enjoy the show, not watch some blowhard bow and fawn. They want to get on with it. Heck, *I* want to get on with it and I'm the editor. And I want you to get on with it, too. I hope you enjoy this issue because a lot of really good people have put their heart and soul into it. I sincerely hope you will.

I'm going to shut up now. It's time for the curtain to rise. But before I do, I have a few thank-you's:

To the staff of The Oddville Press, who are the hardest working and most talented people I know. When something needs to be done, you do it with passion and pride; when life gets in the way, you support each other. To the authors and artists, who allow us to share your voices and have a small part in your dreams. And last but certainly not least, to you, Dear Reader, to whom this magazine is dedicated. Thank you all.

Patricia Hurst
Managing Editor

The Oddville Staff

Managing Editor

Patricia Hurst would like you to think she is a professional pudding wrestler. She would also like you to believe she makes movies with such actors as Harrison Ford, Russell Crowe, Robert Downey Jr. and Christopher Walken. But she doesn't. She's just a longtime writer and confirmed coffee/chocoholic. She also may or may not rob banks.

Senior Fiction Editor

Robert Callaci is a 55 year old sales professional who seeks to know what can be known. He has written over 300 poems for his own amusement and has been published in various e-zines . For the past three years has been busy writing an epic fantasy titled *The Tangled Tapestry*. He resides in New York with the two loves of his life, his wife and dog.

Fiction Editor/Senior Copy Editor

Dru M. is a staffwriter for *Blackheart Magazine*. His writing has appeared in *Thieves Jargon*, *HeavyGlow*, *Underground Voices*, *Lost in the Dark*, *Nevermore*, *Ink Magazine*, *Bloodcookies*, *Bust Down the Door* and *Eat All the Chickens*, *Starving Arts*, *Cafe Irreal*, *Bloodletters*, *Cherry Bleeds*, *Zygote in my Coffee*, and others. He lives in Canada, where he's pursuing a master's degree in creative writing.

Assistant Copy Editor

S.D. McKeown is a 25 year old plumber who writes action/adventure and techno-thrillers. He is currently pursuing a degree in humanities in his spare time. Twice a self-published author, S.D. has written four novels to date, and hopes to one day become a fully published author. Residing in South Armagh, Ireland, he has spent the last two years writing *Acts of Treason*, the fifth novel in a series of six.

Copy Editors

Rachel Johnson is a 29 year-old English graduate, and lives in Brighton, England, with her partner of four years, Robert. She works as a croupier, spending her nights meeting interesting characters and her days writing about them. She is currently working on her first novel.

Rebecca Tester: Despite the often depraved fiction she writes, Rebecca is an excellent neighbor who delights in baking brownies and walking her Rottweiler, but not her Beagle (who jerks her arms from their sockets). She writes when her two-and-a-half young children, home, dogs, ever-so-demanding fish and fabulous husband allow.

Ben Russell is an 18 year old South Australian who, after ignoring fiction writing for well over a year, is just about ready to take up the pen once more with brilliant results sure to follow. A stunningly attractive and modest young man, Ben enjoys reading almost anything with a little depth, and loves experimental writing.

Blackthorn

Jr. Editors

Jim Stay is a computer geek, technical writer, and one-time board member of Healthcare Informatics magazine. Retired to rural North Carolina, Jim writes short stories, and works with a wildlife sanctuary.

Alison Baumgartner, 22, is an English teacher living in Japan. A self-published author at seven –using the then industry standard of notebook and construction paper stapled together—Alison has not, as of yet, been able to recreate her earlier success.

Jordan Bowling is an 18 year old Kentuckian who likes a good mystery, but will read just about anything. She is currently attending college, working towards a degree in business accounting.

Lindsay Dubler lives in Olympia, Washington and has completed one YA novel, in the midst of writing two others, and has written a collection of short stories. She is passionate about writing that “makes you think” and is especially interested in edgy subject matter. She writes science fiction, young adult, and speculative fiction.

Stephanie Kraner is a twenty-two year old who writes urban fantasy and magic realism because she likes to imagine there’s wonder hidden somewhere amid the streetlights and road signs. She likes to read anything with strong, likable characters and a sense of imagination.

Jim Ryals graduated from Columbia College (New York) in 1982 and from Loyola Law School (Los Angeles) in 1987. He recently abandoned his

twenty year day job as a lawyer to pursue fiction writing full time. A refugee from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s socialist utopia, he relocated to Mandeville, Louisiana in 2007.

Michael Rigby, 18, is one of those people who doesn't quite fit into the label of student. Although school takes up most of his time, he is currently completing his Private Pilot's license and trying to complete one of the many short stories he's thought up in the air. In his free time he likes to train for marathons and run road races. He hopes to one day be able to publish a collection of his science fiction stories and fly around a few other published authors for a living.

Miles McCoy, 17, is a full-time student, part-time writer, part-time musician and hails from Pennsylvania.

Poetry Editor

Ilasir Maroa

Copy Editors

Orla O D is a self employed mum of two young daughters, and surrogate mum to two dogs (one stupid, one clever). Based outside of Dublin on the isle of Ireland, she is a published writer in both fiction and poetry, Orla has been a student of the the 'university of life' for a number of years and will continue in the hope of attaining a MA in something or other.

Julianne Johnson

SparkyLT

Visual Editor

Rachel Johnson

Public Relations

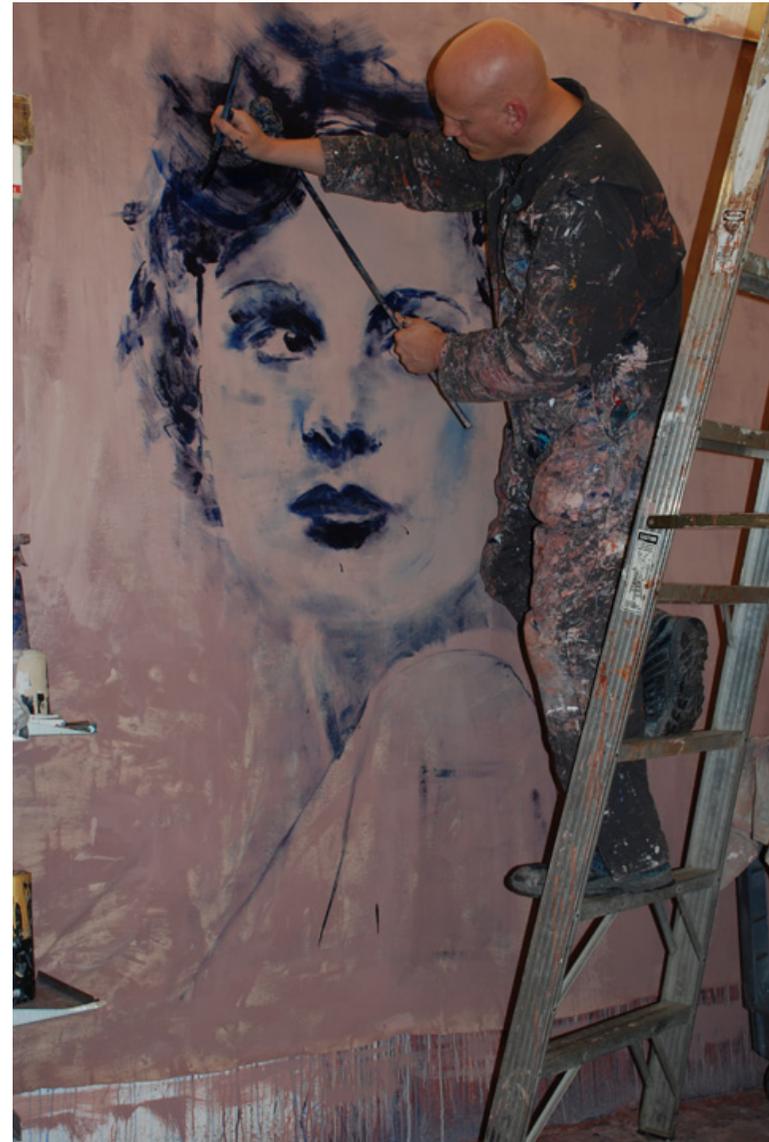
Stephanie Kraner

Layout

Non Serviam

Contents

Wages of Sin	6
© Perle Besserman	
Literary Mary	17
© Christopher K Miller	
The Fleecing Box	27
© Mia Kammeyer-Mueller	
Panda	36
© Michael Constantine McConnell	
Ode to a Bad Poet	37
© Louise Beech	
How Things Fit Together	41
© Pete Carter	
The Six Month Job	44
© Ray Succre	
Carnivorous Cows from Outer Space	46
© Nora B Peevy	
Burning Bush: A Christmas Miracle	53
© Theodore Carter	
Genesis (Good Willow)	56
© Nick Poulton	
Intimacy	61
© Cheryl Snell	
NSA	62
© Valerie Z Lewis	
Above Shiloh	74
© L Ward Abel	
Time to Go	75
© Graham Parke	
Purple Skies in a Glass Aquarium	82
© Christopher Allan Death	
Shoreseat	87
© L Ward Abel	
Coffee Shop Poet Wannabe	87
© Jaime McDougall	



Recipient of the Theodore Hoepfner Fiction Award and past writer-in-residence at the Mishkenot Sha'ananim Artists' Colony in Jerusalem, Perle Besserman was praised by I.B. Singer for the "clarity and feeling for mystic lore" of her writing and by Publisher's Weekly for its "wisdom [that] points to a universal practice of the heart." Her autobiographical novel Pilgrimage was published by Houghton Mifflin, and her short fiction has appeared in The Southern Humanities Review, AGNI, Transatlantic Review, Nebraska Review, Southerly, and Bamboo Ridge, among others. Her creative non-fiction has been recorded and released in both audio and book versions and translated into over ten languages. Her most recent book, combining memoir, storytelling, and women's spiritual history, is A New Zen for Women (Palgrave Macmillan). She has lectured, toured, taught, and appeared on television, radio, and in two documentary films about her work in the US, Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, China, and the Middle East. Perle currently divides her time between Melbourne, Australia and Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Wages of Sin

by Perle Besserman

Uncle Harry took the mountain roads at eighty, steering the gray-finned Cadillac like a shark gliding through the friendly Pacific. Aunt Ida sat beside him smoking a cigarette; she wore a bone silk dress and a pair of pitch black movie star sunglasses. It was late June, the far end of spring and not yet summer. Harry was hatless, his blond hair was slicked down and shiny, and he was sweating. "We made good

time," he said, slowing down. "Thank God," Ida said. "I was sure you were going to get a ticket." The countryside was studded with rickety wooden tomato stands and deserted hamburger shacks and Burma Shave and Wages of Sin is Death signs and faded billboards featuring A&W Root Beer. We pulled to a half stop at a deserted railroad crossing, and I was thinking it might be fun to live around here just as Harry gunned the motor and sped over the tracks.

"How's school?" Ida wanted to know.

"I'm in the Drama Club," I said.

"Still wanna be an actress?" Harry asked.

"Yeah."

"Maybe in the fall, if the union doesn't force a wage boost on me, maybe then I'll treat you to some professional acting lessons," Harry said.

"That'd be nice," I said, knowing he was probably not going to. My father called my uncle Harry a "four-flusher," which I took to mean a person who liked to play the big shot without being able to back it up. Still, he was taking me along to the Poconos for a month, so who was I to complain.

Harry's suite at the Brenner Hotel was situated on a high corner overlooking a golf course on one side and a hiking trail on the other. Everything at Brenner's was fake Indian: the Tepee House Dining Room, the Big Chief Casino, and the poolside Wigwam Clubhouse. The guests weren't Indian, though. They were all Jewish doubles of my uncle and aunt, manufacturers from the city and their bleached blond wives,

a few of them with kids and black Nanas in white starched uniforms and nurses' shoes. The black Nanas slept in a long, low bunkhouse out near the tennis courts in the "help's quarters." The hotel's lobby was more fake Indian, with a little Switzerland thrown in for good measure. It was the kind of place that made you expect that any minute Claude Raines would show up looking for Ingrid Bergman, a spy on the run from the Nazis. Everyone at Brenner's smoked and read magazines like *Vogue* and newspapers like *The Wall Street Journal*. My parents didn't smoke, my father read Conrad and Dickens, and Engels, never what he called "capitalist propaganda" like *The Wall Street Journal*, and my mother read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russian, never *Vogue*, so it was interesting for a change to see how the better-off half of the family lived.

I wasn't bothered by the hokey Indian furnishings. The only thing that mattered to me was that Brenner's wasn't an "Orthodox Jewish hotel" — like the kind my parents would go to if they had the money. Some people (if they can't make you over in their image, like God) will spend the rest of your life punishing you if you don't get out from under their thumb early. That was the case with my father, who wanted me to be a paragon of modest Jewish womanhood and Rosa Luxemburg at the same time. So what if the doorman at Brenner's wasn't a real Indian, so what if his name was Solly and he looked like an escapee from the Coney Island boardwalk — there was an Olympic-sized pool, there were red and pink geraniums in green boxes everywhere, and lemon and green and pink beach umbrellas and spotless white chaise lounges with long, lean, brown, oiled and goggled, non-Orthodox rich people lying

on them. College boy waiters and busboys came running at the snap of a finger in the dining room, and there were linen napkins and shiny goblets for water on the table at every meal — even breakfast — and the college boys, flipping spotless white cloths over their arms, were always hovering around and refilling the goblets with ice water. On their days off, the college boys played poker in their bunks and visited their girlfriends at nearby camps, and about half of them weren't Jewish. Our waiter was Jewish, though. His name was Norman, and he welcomed us to table number 524 with a big smile. Unfortunately, he had incisors like wolf fangs, which put me off immediately.

It was always noisy in the dining room. The women wore slacks to dinner during the week, and the men smoked cigars, which left everything smelling of cigar smoke: the linen napkins, the waiters' jackets, and even the food. I was the only teenager at our table; everyone else was middle-aged, heavily bronzed, and talked loud. Except for my uncle Harry, who had a shock of gorgeous blond hair, the men were either thin-haired or bald, or they wore toupees. Table number 524 was round and seated twelve, but we were only nine: me, Harry, Ida, Mr. and Mrs. Greenson, two teachers from Philadelphia who lectured and pointed into people's faces instead of talking to them; Didi Pelner, who ate alone most evenings, except on Tuesdays and Fridays when she was joined by her husband Ed, a very short man wearing elevated shoes and no tie — though gentlemen were requested to wear them in the dining room at dinner; and Mr. and Mrs. Tish. Mrs. Tish was hugely pregnant, riotously blond, and extraordinarily witty. She was, pregnancy notwithstanding, the most beautiful woman I had

seen in my entire life, and I adored her the minute I saw her enter the dining room in wooden Carmen Miranda platform shoes with red cherries on the front and a plunging black sequined dress draped in white fox tails.

At every meal, Mrs. Tish sat with her long jet cigarette holder poised in the air looking like Glinda, the Good Witch of the East. She had the most magnificent set of false eyelashes, which she fluttered shamelessly, pointing right back at the Greensons with her emerald and diamond-covered fingers. One night, after Mrs. Tish had drunk her two lemon-peel martinis before dinner, Mrs. Greenson warned her about the dangers of alcohol in pregnancy, and Mrs. Tish said, "You don't suppose that means I'll give birth to a fish, do you?" That shut Mrs. Greenson up on the subject of Mrs. Tish's drinking habits. Mr. Tish didn't talk much, but I adored him too. He was a millionaire hairdresser who owned the franchises on ten New Jersey beauty salons and wore string ties and purple shirts and said "erl" for "oil" and "goil" for "girl".

Though I was technically underage and not allowed in, I became a regular at the Big Chief Casino because my uncle Harry tipped the maitre d'. My aunt Ida suffered from migraines, and she preferred card-playing with the ladies on the nights she felt well anyway, so I became Harry's companion at one of the best tables in the nightclub, smack in the middle of the room, just the right distance from the dance floor and the stage. The place was like an underwater aquarium: everyone lit in blue, with an overhead spotlight shifting from red to green to tropical orange. The band, consisting of a drummer, bassist, pianist, and saxophonist,

who doubled on clarinet, sat in a pit directly below the narrow apron of the stage. I couldn't take my eyes off the bassist, who must have been about six foot six and wore band-aids on all his fingers, even his thumbs, and metallic sunglasses, which he never took off. A disembodied voice over a microphone, accompanied by a drum roll, announced the acts, which the audience, mostly too involved in talking and drinking, hardly bothered to applaud. When I wasn't staring at the antics of the bassist with the band-aids all over his fingers, I sat drinking a Pink Lady and watching Mrs. Tish, always the best show of all. She'd wave her cigarette holder at me and wink, obviously on her third martini and a little tipsy.

It was about two weeks into the season, and Harry and I were sitting at our usual table. He was drinking scotch without ice or soda water, revolving the glass in his hands and not saying much. Harry was not a big talker on even the best of nights. I would have liked it if he would have paid more attention to me, but I had convinced myself that, since, unlike my oratorical father, Harry was "the strong silent John Wayne type"—I was being ungrateful to want more than I was getting in the way of convivial conversation.

The bandleader was singing *Mona Lisa*, and I asked Harry to dance. Harry shook his head and looked into his drink. "Please," I begged, pulling at his hand. Harry took a swig of scotch and reluctantly followed me to the dance floor. We were only a few steps into a decent foxtrot when we collided with one of the ubiquitous Brenner baldies and his partner, a woman in pink taffeta with a visible moustache.

The collision was my fault. I'd been dancing with my eyes closed, too self-conscious about swishing my crepe dress to make a glamorous impression, and worried at the same time that my loose garter belt might fall off right in the middle of the floor. Harry wasn't helping either, dancing like a stiff, and holding me at least six inches away from his chest as if I had bad breath or a communicable disease.

"Many dreams have been placed at your doorstep..."

"Scuse me."

"Scuse me, doctor."

The couple danced away, and Harry looked embarrassed. To take his mind off having to dance with me and not someone his own age, I said, "Do you know that guy?"

"We sometimes play cards."

"Is he a medical doctor?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is that his wife?"

"I don't know." Harry gave me a slight push, ostensibly so I could do a dip and turn, but it was really so he could feel in his jacket pocket for the pack of Camels he'd left behind on the table.

"They just lie there and they die there. Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa..."

Harry's blue eyes looked black in the glow of the roving spotlight, and he scowled.

"How many people do you think there are in this room?" I asked to divert him.

He ignored the question.

"Well, your doctor friend's partner has a moustache," I said, annoyed that my uncle was patronizing me.

Harry stopped dancing, dropped my hand, and started for the table. "Enough of this," he said. "I'm going to teach you how to drink martinis." Picking up his cigarettes, he pointed me in the direction of the bar and took off.

The first martini was unbearable, but I camouflaged the taste of the second by holding my breath as I drank. At the end I didn't taste anything anyway; I just let myself enjoy the feeling of having my head float a few inches away from my neck. Harry held his fingers up in a V, and the bartender, also highly tipped not to notice my being underage, fixed us another round. By the time I was halfway through the third drink, everyone around the bar seemed to be talking very fast in Chinese.

Harry, who had become a little more talkative, said, "Thatta girl, drink up," looking pleased when I did, in one long gulp.

"Mr. Kaye, she's gonna be awful sick tamarrah," the bartender said, covering Harry's five-dollar tip with his hairy knuckles.

"Not this little lady...she's got a wooden leg."

"Must be a midget," a man from the far end of the bar yelled, and everyone turned to look at me.

"No, it's my niece, Miss Annie Oakley, fastest shot in the West." Harry put his arm on mine and yanked it up in the air like a referee announcing a KO.

"Hey, lookit that, will ya?"

"Wow!"

"I'll drink to that."

"Let's all drink to ole Annie here," cried a man with a maroon-colored satin cummerbund around his bulging belly.

"Happy New Year," mumbled a woman I hadn't noticed before. She was sitting in a corner and her hands were shaking. Her face was pitted and she had a gravel voice, but she seemed to have a lot of friends around the bar. Everyone, in fact, seemed to be not only speaking in fast, gravel-voiced Chinese, but to be snuggling up to everyone else.

"Enjoying yourself, Annie?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes," I whispered. "Oh, yes," and I really meant it.

The bartender was wrong. I didn't get sick. In fact, I spent the greater part of the month of July proving to Harry that I could "drink most men under the table" and socializing with the regulars at the bar. When they weren't drinking and snuggling at the bar, my new companions were like everyone else at Brenner's. In fact, they were everyone else: the mothers and fathers with the spoiled kids in sailor suits and their black Nanas, the "rag" manufacturers from Seventh Avenue who smoked fat cigars in the dining room and called themselves "self-made men," which, so they thought, justified acting any way they wanted toward the

people who waited on them for wages. I drank with them because they thought I was a prodigy and because I was bored, disgusted with myself for not being able to learn how to swim or snag one of the college boys. I didn't play cards, and that left me out of the social life around the pool with my aunt and her friends; and, having brought no books along, I was sick of *Vogue*. Taking stock of my situation, I wrote on a sheet of Brenner's stationery:

"Friends made: none.

Information gained:

- 1) Didi Pelner is planning to separate from her short husband in the fall.
- 2) Norman the waiter is about to be fired for being found in bed with one of the black Nanas.
- 3) I found an unopened pack of condoms face up in the grass near the golf course."

The next time I walked into the Big Chief Casino I saw my drinking companions in a new light. They looked like the people in the beer ads on highway billboards, having a perpetual good time but turning brown and fading against the elements.

"Hullo there, Annie."

"Hi, Toni." I walked up to the bar and sat down next to the ravage-faced, trembling ex-designer of children's clothing from San Francisco. The floorshow hadn't begun, and none of the other regulars were there yet. The band was playing a rumba, and only a few couples were dancing. Many tables were still empty. Off to the side of the room, a waiter

flapped a checkerboard tablecloth into the air, briefly allowing it to billow and parachute before setting it down.

"If it isn't ole wooden leg herself," the bartender called out over the music, greeting me with his customary sarcasm. I made a face at him. "Where's Buffalo Bill?" he asked, not seeing that he'd gone far enough.

"Dead," I said snappishly.

"Oooh...is that a way for a nice young lady to talk?"

I looked at my reflection in the mirror over the bottles. I wasn't exactly a dead ringer for Annie Oakley, not with the deep blue rings under my eyes. In fact, I was getting to look more like the alcoholic Toni every day. "I'm going for a walk," I said. "Tell Harry when he comes." Then I headed out of the Casino toward the pool. Behind me I heard the band playing *Nature Boy*.

Someone was swimming laps in the dark. I leaned against the wall of a cabana taking deep breaths to clear the alcohol and smoke out of my system. A dark shadow drew itself out of the water; it was Steve, the lifeguard who hadn't been able to teach me how to swim, though Harry was paying him fifteen dollars an hour to do so. His chest heaving and his body dripping, Steve walked into the cabana opposite.

"Psst."

Steve stepped forward and looked over in my direction, a white beach towel slung over his shoulders.

"Hey, Nature Boy," I said in a voice resembling Mrs. Tish's.

"Oh, it's you," Steve said indifferently.

"Want to take a walk?" I knew full well that Steve didn't like me because he thought I was a phony, pretending to be rich and sophisticated and hanging around the bar with people twice my age. Harry had even tried to fix us up, inviting Steve to join us at the bar twice. But Steve had turned him down, saying he didn't drink because his mother was an alcoholic.

Steve started walking away. I hurried after him, losing my balance when my heel got stuck between the flagstones.

"Whooo..." Steve turned back and grabbed me by the arm, propping me up so I wouldn't fall. He probably thought I was drunk.

"You all right?"

I said I was, and he dropped my arm fast, as if he'd touched a snake.

"Why do you swim like you're desperate?" I asked, still feeling aggressive toward the bartender.

"Why do you drink like you're desperate?"

Bested, I found myself staring at Steve's chest. Then, wobbling slightly, I said, "I want to see where you live, where all the peasants live around here."

"You're not allowed in my room," Steve said. "Help's quarters are off limits to guests."

"I'm not asking as a guest."

Steve didn't say anything. Then, gripping my elbow suddenly, he steered me away from the pool in the direction of the long sheds where "the help" lived. Now, behind me, I

could hear the saxophonist playing a pretty good imitation of Charley Parker's *Star Eyes*.

We walked downhill past the empty tennis courts, past the hotel manager's wood-paneled station wagon that reminded me of a hearse. "How old are you, Steve?"

"Nineteen."

"Are you a virgin?"

"None of your business."

I stepped out of my shoes and enjoyed the soft, wet feel of the grass through my nylons. "Well, I am," I said, breaking loose from Steve's grip and galloping like a horse. I wanted someone to commiserate with, someone to talk to about the box of condoms I'd found in the grass on the golf course, of all places. So I said, "I'm a virgin, and I'm not ashamed of it. You shouldn't be either."

"Good for you," Steve said. We had reached the door of his room. "Still want to see how the peasants live?"

"By all means."

The door was unlocked and we walked inside. Steve turned on the light, revealing a narrow bed, an inordinately thin bureau made of cardboard, and a footlocker, and that was it. I asked where the toilet was, and he said it was outside in the woods a couple of yards away.

"How can they let you live like this?"

"It's easy. They can't afford not to."

"Don't you have a union or something? My father is a union organizer. I could tell you how to start one."

Steve laughed. "We don't need a union. We're summer help. One word and you're out. You don't like it here, there's someone else waiting right behind you to take the job."

"No wonder you're so aggressive in the water."

"What about you, what's your excuse for all the heavy drinking? How old are you, anyway?"

"I'm sixteen... no, I'm not; I'm fifteen."

"I've never seen a girl put it away like you do."

"I think it's guilt, or maybe a secret crush on my uncle that makes me drink," I said, half serious. I wanted to impress Steve with my talent for cool self-analysis. "Maybe it's mixed emotion. Sometimes I hate him. It's hard for me to tell the difference between extreme love and extreme hate, know what I mean?"

"That makes sense to me," Steve said, motioning for me to sit down on his footlocker and handing me a blanket. "Here, put this on over your legs. It's getting cold. Do you mind if I change?"

"No, sure. I'll turn around."

"Thanks."

Being a paragon of modest Jewish womanhood in spite of myself, I turned my head. I heard the towel tossed on the floor, then the bathing suit, and then I heard Steve pulling on his jeans. "You can turn back now," he said. When I did,

he was slipping on a sweatshirt that said Colby College across the front. His face and hands, I noticed now that he was dressed, were tanned, and he had a bump high up near the bridge of his nose.

"I'm starved, got any food here?" I said, compensating for Steve's obvious lack of interest in me. My mother's firm belief, instilled in me early, was that no man could resist seduction by the presence, or mere mention of, food.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to have any...but, actually...yes."

"Let's not be technical when I'm about to die of hunger, okay?"

Steve went to the bureau and opened the top drawer. "How about some day-old seeded rolls from the tea room and a half bottle of flat celery soda?"

"Heavens, a feast."

"I doubt it'll upset your stomach."

"Right. You mean I'm so pickled in alcohol that no bacteria worth the name can survive my intestinal tract." I was fancying myself Mrs. Tish again. After finishing three of the four rolls Steve had offered me, I drank the flat soda and licked my fingers.

"What are you doing that for?"

"I'm just licking off the gravy."

"There wasn't any gravy."

"Have a little imagination, Steve. It never hurt anyone."

"Yeah...well...it's two o'clock, and I've got to get some sleep, so..." Steve stepped on the empty celery soda bottle and tipped it over.

"How about if I stay here with you and the peasants? We can start a rebellion."

"Are you kidding? Or are you trying to get me fired?"

"Neither," I said, refusing to budge.

"Listen, Annie, you're fifteen, and that's jailbait. I can't afford to be fired. I've been saving every penny of these lousy wages for a motorcycle; I mean, what do you expect?"

"So you're going to sell your self-respect for a motorcycle?"

"What are you talking about? Come on, don't make me toss you out of here," Steve said, pulling on the blanket.

"Are you scared of me?" I whined, no longer sounding like the flirtatious Mrs. Tish but more like the kid who'd pleaded with Harry to dance with her only minutes ago.

"Atta girl." Steve gently pried me from his footlocker and guided me toward my shoes, making sure I'd gotten into them before opening the door and pushing me outside.

"It's bad enough you can't teach a person how to swim," I said, "but you are a traitor to your class in the bargain."

Steve stood in the doorway looking sorry for me. He obviously had no idea what I was talking about. "Good night," he said. Then he closed the door.

"Just because of a crummy motorcycle, you throw me out," I mumbled to myself. I was still standing in front of Steve's door nursing my dented pride when he turned out the light and got into bed — all of which I could see through the curtain-less windows. Okay, I thought, if that's the way you play, I can play nasty too.

Hiding in one of the damp cabanas near the pool, wrapped in beach towels for warmth, I alternately dozed and plotted my revenge. At the first signs of light, I headed straight for my uncle's suite, and, bursting in, blurted out that I'd spent the night with Steve the lifeguard but that, before they got any ideas, I hadn't slept with him in the carnal sense.

Ida smoked and paced around the room in her quilted pink bathrobe, her bare, painted toenails peeping out between the hem and the floor. I took a seat on their king-sized bed and watched the moving blobs on her toes until, hungry for real now, and feeling slightly hypoglycemic, I directed my attention to the matter at hand. It was raining.

"I don't give a damn about what Jacob is capable of doing. Let him throw me in jail for corrupting the morals of a minor if he wants to," Harry said when Ida asked him what he was going to do when my father came. Harry stood with his back to us both and his hands in his pockets. He wouldn't even do me the courtesy of talking to me, he was so angry. Ida was angry, too. "This isn't a joke, Harry," she said.

My uncle turned around and approached the bed where I was sitting as innocently as you please.

"Did you...are you sure nothing happened?"

"Of course nothing happened. But I'm not going to get into a big discussion about it." Now it was my turn to play the strong silent type. We were dealing in principles here, not the Ten Commandments. In addition, I was really mad at my aunt Ida for betraying the cause by rushing to the telephone and reporting me to my father five minutes after I'd walked in. Dark glasses and bridge games notwithstanding, when push came to shove, my "modern" aunt was proving herself to be no more enlightened than my "modest" mother. Even Harry, my ally in the fight against modest Jewish womanhood, seemed worried.

At noon, in the middle of a downpour featuring heavy doses of lightning and thunder, the perfect setting for a crime of passion, I stood in the lounge and watched my father pull up Brenner's driveway in his battered green Oldsmobile. Harry and Ida weren't speaking to each other or to me. He was sitting in a club chair, chain smoking Camels and blowing smoke rings. She was sitting nearby with her hands folded in her lap, having hastily pulled on a black watch plaid pants suit and done a cursory makeup job on her face. My father walked into the lounge without bothering to remove his raincoat or his galoshes and loomed in front of us dripping righteous indignation. He's going to punch Harry in the nose, I thought, as I watched him take a few steps toward us. Then a queer thing happened. The hotel manager, looking like a man suffering an attack of the bends, jumped out from behind the reception desk directly into my father's path. Holding his hand somewhere between his lower abdomen and his groin, and pointing at the muddy

tracks my father had left on the carpet on his trip from the door to the center of the lounge, the manager spluttered, "Look, look at what you're leaving on the carpet!"

Now, I thought, we're at the Sunday matinee of the Second Avenue Yiddish Theatre. Here's the story: Dark-eyed Jewish virgin trapped in blasphemous arms of *shaygets* lifeguard.

Cast of Characters: Outraged father; hedonist uncle; smartly dressed but secretly prudish aunt; spluttering hotel manager; astonished elevator man; a doorman dressed up as an Indian in feathers and buckskin fringes; assorted bellhops and guests.

Action: Outraged father making muddy tracks on a garish but expensive hotel lobby carpet as he moves to confront hedonist uncle, ignoring spluttering hotel manager. Heroine sitting with eyes lowered and hands modestly folded in her lap symbolizing the virginity in question.

Talmudic Dilemma: Which aspect of the case is more reprehensible — a Jewish virgin getting involved with a *shaygets*, or her suspected deflowering by said *shaygets*?

Voiceover Chorus of Modest Jewish Women: "*Gott sul ubhieten!*" ("God forbid!" to either possibility.)

My drama was interrupted by the braying of car horns in the driveway and a voice pleading through the microphone in the Bell Captain's station: "Will the person blocking the driveway with the green Oldsmobile, New York license plate number LK4602, please move your car immediately!"

Harry leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. My father pushed the manager aside and tossed him the keys

to the Oldsmobile. "Move it yourself," he ordered. Seeing my father meant business, the manager made a dash for the door, pulling a bellhop along with him. His path clear, my father walked straight up to my aunt Ida.

"So what do you have to say for yourself?"

Ida didn't have anything to say for herself.

My father, who had neglected to remove his Sherlock Holmes hat as well as his raincoat and galoshes, now made an elaborate show of removing his raincoat and shaking the water out of it before neatly folding it and spreading it out on a nearby chair. That's dangerous, I thought, recognizing his penchant for folding things before exploding.

"Don't blame Ida, Dad," I said, trying to head off the explosion. "I made up the whole thing."

"You keep quiet. I'm not interested in your trappy stories. I'm here to take my child out of Sodom — and it's only because you're underage that I bother. After you're twenty-one you can do as you please." My father coughed a fake cough and sat down on a leather sofa with a beige and black embroidered Navajo blanket tossed over the back. Facing Harry, with his arms on his knees and leaning forward, he said: "I ask why...why, God, do You in Your wisdom choose to torture me this way, using my brother-in-law and my daughter as your vehicles? What did I do to offend You?" Without waiting for an answer, he leaned back against the Navajo blanket, bunching it up at one end, and contemplated what God next had in store for him.

Outside, the sky, which had turned toxic yellow, bore down on the trees. The rain snapped against the roof and thunder

growled ominously in the woods. God answering; I recognized the phenomenon. It was uncanny, but I'd grown used to it over the years. My uncle and aunt and the onlookers in the lounge, however, were blissfully unaware of the fact that events of Biblical proportions were taking place in front of them, that God had chosen Brenner's as the location for His latest manifestation.

"Don't think I ever wanted your favors, Harry," my father whispered, his body going limp, like a spirit-deprived medium.

God must have given you a good excuse, I thought.

"Wait a minute..." Ida spoke up for the first time. But my father hadn't finished with his contemplative moment yet, and he held up his hand for her to keep quiet. Dutifully, Ida dropped back and held her peace.

"Keep away from my daughter from now on," my father said, adding "Leave her alone!" in such a loud voice that three people hovering around near the elevator jumped with fright.

"You're crazy, did you know that?" Harry said.

"And *you*, what in hell are *you*?" The contemplative moment having passed, my father was up on his feet again. Sensing that he might start getting physical, several guests entered the elevator and went up to their rooms in search of quieter forms of entertainment. "You call yourself an uncle! What kind of uncle? Everything you touch you corrupt. Money, money, money — money and good times, that's all that's on your mind!"

"That's enough!" Ida cried, getting up from her chair at last, mascara tears streaming down her face. "Stop it! Stop it now!" Harry must have taken that as a signal, because he got up, too, and pushed my father aside, landing him smack into a standing ashtray filled with Camel butts, which went flying to the carpet. Lucky for the manager that he wasn't there to see my father grind the cigarette butts into the carpet as he struggled to keep his balance.

"Send her things by freight," my father said breathlessly. "C.O.D." Then, tossing his raincoat over my shoulders as if to cover my shame before the gaping spectators in the lounge, he steered me toward the door. Except for the raindrops snapping like rubber bands on the roof, you couldn't hear a sound. I noticed the tag on the inside collar of my father's raincoat: MACY'S — like some arcane handwriting on the wall promising retribution against the sinners choosing to remain at Brenner's Hotel despite the heavenly signs. Some atavistic Jewish gene must have prodded me out the door, made me follow him without daring to look behind me. Maybe in a past life I'd been Lot's wife and was being given a second chance. Emerging into the squall, certain that the minute we left the threshold the hotel would crumble, I ignored the doorman's attempts to shelter us under his oversized transparent umbrella. The manager and the bellhop and my father's green Oldsmobile were nowhere in sight. I looked up, and, through the transparent umbrella, saw that the low yellow cloud layer was edged in pink and that a rainbow had formed beyond the trees.

Chris Miller was born Halloween, 1952, in Switzerland, grew up in Chicago, and now lives in Ontario. He has two grown sons by his first marriage and lives with his second wife in whose restaurant he washes dishes and 'cooks.' He's worked as a farm slave, factory cookie maker, geriatric orderly, pot washer, painter (of apartments and townhouses), technical writer, and (now) software developer. Among his writing achievements are: selling numerous articles to Transactor, a popular C-64 tech magazine, back in the 80s; scoring COSMOS' once-a-year (2007) 4000-word sci-fi slot; getting banned from Workhouse, a select invitation-only UK "professional writer's" workshop, for posting 'porn'; placing twice in and receiving an Amazon Gift Certificate from normally non-paying Libbon; short-listing in Chizine's 2006 (9th) and 2008 (4th) horror competitions; receiving a personal irate rejection from glimmertrain and a very generous one from American Scholar; placing twice (a poem and a short story) in Literary Mary's first print offering; also The Barcelona Review (to be archived 'alongside' his favorite author, David Foster Wallace) and several other web-based magazines, most recently Oddville. He's written one novel, a collection of essays, and is finishing his second collection of short stories—all for love.

Literary Mary

by Christopher K. Miller

Let me begin in a glad place, long ago. In my dad's little Pinto. Mary and I, parked in Jackson's woods. We hadn't kissed yet. In fact, I'd never kissed a girl. But Mary'd

pushed my left hand up under her blouse and positioned it on her right breast, which I knew from a library book was made up of lobules, ducts, fat and connective tissue, but which hadn't prepared me for the trembling sensuality and warmth of her, or the way she sighed when I squeezed. That breast was my world. If someone'd stopped me and asked me right then how big it was, I'd've said about the size of a basketball. And if they'd asked me to describe that nipple swelling and tautening between my thumb and forefinger, I'd've said easily as big as a plum, but dimpled like an orange—almost as firm too. After a while, Mary took my other hand and put it on her other one, let me feel the difference I'd made.

Mary wasn't like the other girls at school. And not just because she was the only one who ever let me touch her. For one thing, she had the blackest skin I'd ever seen. Even the colored students called her "midnight" to her face and "hoodoo" behind her back. Because my own skin is creepily and unnaturally pale, I was in complete and utter thrall of her.

I'm thin-lipped, have a mouth like a scar. Mary's lips were full. As she brought them toward mine, they filled my corrected field of vision. "Mmmm," she said, "don't you stop now." Which, thinking back, was probably unnecessary. My hands were stuck to her like leeches on a turtle. She would've had to slap them off, maybe even burn them off.

Then she was kissing me. Because I'd only ever kissed my mom, three aunts and two grandmas, I had my mouth puckered up like a chicken's butt after it's laid an egg. She began to pry them apart with her tongue.

Mary'd been adopted by the Reverend Jim Pooley and his wife when they were doing missionary work over in Africa. Because the Pooleys were childless, Mrs. Pooley being confined to a wheelchair, I figured maybe they thought, in addition to doing a Christian service, it'd be useful to have an able young body around. But that was just my own speculation. All we were told in assembly was that a girl from Nigeria'd be attending our school, that her ways might be a little different from ours, and that we were to make her feel welcome. There, parked in Jackson's woods in my dad's little Pinto, kneading those gorgeous breasts and kissing her, I felt I was doing an admirable job.

Once she'd worried her tongue into my mouth, she used it to pull mine into hers. So it was like we were sharing this great big huge one that just kept winding around like the colors on a barber pole. It was hard to concentrate on everything at once, so she laid her hands over mine and helped me. Sometimes she'd help tickle, sometimes squeeze, and even pinch—and then our barber pole'd twirl faster.

Mary'd been immediately popular with the boys. Her billowy dresses couldn't belie that she swelled and jutted in all the right places. She had a sly smile that was more demure than standoffish. And she had a real special manner of walking too. The best way to describe it'd be to say it was womanly. Had a lot of swish in it, but slow and deliberate—careful—like every step was a pleasure.

Daryl Latchworth and Billy Sheppard both asked her to the Halloween dance. Daryl'd played Lancelot in the drama club's big production of Camelot. And Billy was a starting

forward on the varsity basketball team, and a state pole-vaulter too. Billy and Daryl had this competition once to see who could kiss the most girls. They'd just walk right up to them, tell them exactly what they were about, and then get a kiss, sometimes more than one. I asked Billy if he wasn't nervous about being so forward. And he said it was like trick-or-treating when you're a kid: first couple houses are a little scary, but after that it's just free candy. This was before he and a bunch of his friends hauled me out of the showers and pushed me right out into the gym where Mrs. Riggs was teaching ballroom dancing to the grade nines. I covered myself with my hand, but that just called attention to it more, and earned me a whole new slew of nicknames of which I think I minded "peanut dick" the least.

See, I have what's called a microphallus. Even fully turgid, as it most definitely was now in response to Mary's stiffening nipples and panting tongue-sucking kisses, it's no bigger'n my ring finger from the knuckle up. Dr. Wallace once prescribed me hormonal creams for it that gave me a rash. He said that, unlike my poor vision and silver hair, my little penis had nothing whatsoever to do with my albinism, and that really it's not a pathological condition or deformity at all, that the term microphallus or micropenis just refers to any that're less than two standard deviations below the mean—and that it's nothing at all to be ashamed about. To which I said it was pretty obvious he didn't have one then.

Mary declined Billy and Daryl's invitations to the Halloween dance, inspiring rumors that she was either frigid or a

lesbian, depending on which of them you listened to. This, coupled with the fact that no girl'd ever come on to me, meant she had to pretty much knock me upside the head with a rock and tie me in a burlap bag to make her interest known. Though really she just sat down across from where I was eating alone in the cafeteria, and said she'd heard I was on the math team. To which I said it was more of a club than a team, and really more just Mr. Ross cajoling boys without steady girlfriends into staying after school than a club. Then she said she thought humor and modesty were the two most attractive traits a person could possess. To which I didn't know what to say. And so she said she needed help with algebra, especially factoring polynomials. So I started to explain the basics to her right there in the lunchroom, like how they deliberately make those problems eminently solvable so all you have to do most of the time is just reduce the constants down to their lowest common denominators for the answer to leap right out at you. Then she reached across the table and put her hand on mine like I wasn't paying attention and said she couldn't concentrate with the noise and all, and what if we went somewhere more private to study. Our texts were still in the back seat.

Mary put her hands on my face. Because of my poor eyesight, my driver's license's only valid when I have my thick prescription glasses on, and only during daylight hours. And anytime I'm out in the sun I have to wear this special broad-spectrum, SPF-30 sun block. I could feel it smearing as she caressed my cheeks, and expected she'd be repulsed by the stuff. So even though I kept my hands on her and my tongue in her, I kind of froze up for a second. But she just rubbed it around and played with it

like it was some glorious expensive massage oil I'd greased myself up in. Then, while she raked my neck and tugged and probed my ears and kissed me, I tried to recall how she'd done with my fingers on her nipples. A group of birdwatchers passed by talking about a Chestnut-breasted warbler they'd spotted. Then someone laughed and said something about his only ever getting mosquito bitten out here in woods. But we just ignored them. I'd never been so proud.

I did not rush. But it's the body's nature to explore. Mary let me feel the inside of her knee, and even parted them as I moved a little higher. But when, at the lace band of her panties, she trapped my hand and said, "Not yet"—I felt spared. My ignorance and ineptitude was safe. And when I felt her stroking toward my tiny bulge, it seemed only right that I catch her hand, raise it to my lips and say the same. My secret shame was safe too. And soon it was dusk.

Driving home, I felt a distance between us. Which, compared to how we'd been for the last several hours, I suppose there was. Because of the setting sun, I had to concentrate hard on the road. This made it impossible for *me* to talk, but I felt *her* silence signified regret. She didn't kiss me goodnight when I dropped her off. Reverend Pooley was on the veranda. I imagined the look he fixed us with would've been difficult to interpret even up close in a good light. Mary climbed out of the car, then leaned back in. "Something I need to tell you first," she said, like we'd been conversing on it all along. Then she left. I thought about what this thing might be all weekend.

Monday. A perfect Louisiana spring day. First period English. The classroom's windows were open and a magnolia's sweet perfume flirted with our senses. Ms. Darcy strolled in sipping a coffee. "So how many of y'all remembered your weekend assignment?" she asked, looking around the room.

In the ensuing silence, kudzu could be heard growing in nearby woods and ditches.

"If you'll recall, it was to write something in the *first person* to be read aloud in class."

Far away, a crow cawed.

"Could someone maybe remind us what is meant by the first person?"

"Would that be Adam?" said Cheryl.

"That old joke never tires, does it dear."

Chester's hand shot up. "That's where you tellin' the story like it happen to you, like you the one in the story."

"Very good Chester," said Ms. Darcy. "Very aptly put. Now can you tell us why it's so difficult to write in this way?"

"Cause mosta us can't thinka nothin' innerestin' to say? So we jess talk 'bout our own shit. An' it's like, who cares. Right?"

"Chester, I am amazed at your ability to perceive and synopsise. You have hit the nail squarely on the head. We all talk in the first person. It's easy and natural. And that's what makes it so hard to write in—to be observant and honest—yet to remain detached. The first person is to

other points of view as the guitar is to other musical instruments: the easiest to learn to play badly, but the hardest to learn to play well. That's why there are so many awful writers and guitar players."

No one laughed, but several discussions comparing popular bands erupted and rose steadily in volume.

"Okay, quiet up now y'all. Who wants to read first?"

Ms. Darcy scanned our faces. Stopping on Mary's. "You have a story for us Mary? How wonderful. Here I thought you were just going to ignore us this term. Class, I want y'all to give Mary here your undivided attention. Think of any questions or helpful suggestions you might have for after. And remember, like Chester said, this is a very hard thing to do. So you all be kind. Your turn's comin'. Mary dear, you just go on and begin as soon as you feel comfortable to."

Mary stood, glanced around the room, then down at the two handwritten pages trembling in her hands. "Called, '*What I Remember*'... by me, of course." Then she cleared her throat and began to read.

"There's a saying where I from: '*The body no be firewood.*' Mean the body have its limitations. I seven when the *gbomogbomo* lady come for little Sade and me. We both be in the cook room fighting over some naked dolly, some used-up Barbie with most its hair pulled out that mother find in the missionary bin. We be twistin' an' tuggin' back and forth on it and now little Sade she have the head, and me the rest. Mother she should slap us now. So we know somethin' not right."

Cheryl whispered something to Claudia. Both of them snickered.

"Excuse us Mary." Ms. Darcy glowered at them. "Would one of you be kind enough to share with the class what you find so amusing as to warrant this rude interruption."

Cheryl sat up straight and folded her hands before speaking, her voice syrupy with faux-innocence. "We were just wondering if this was still *English* class is all."

Mary was a moon shadow, too dark to blush. But there was embarrassment in her eyes. When I realized she was looking straight at me, my face burned like a day without sun screen.

"I'm afraid I will say something I might regret if I address this now," said Ms. Darcy. "So I will deal with it later. Mary, please don't let this ill-mannered pair reflect badly on the rest of us. I for one am intrigued by your story. Please do continue."

Mary studied me. When I realized she was waiting, I nodded.

"We don't think 'bout that dolly no more. We jus' each drop our part. Then Sade she grab my neck an' start to cry. The *gbomogbomo* a plumpy ol' woman, got to fart to ben' down an' pick up the body. Her breath defile the air too. Got teeth like rotten corn. Nex' she pull that dolly's legs apart and show me how she rubbin' between 'em with her nose finger. The dolly she smooth. But that ol' finger all cracked and yellow an' dirty from always cigarettes, an' it make a scratchin' noise. I cover little Sade's eyes, but she don't see nothin' anyway. She just want to be bendin' an' wettin'

my neck. After while the ol' woman take my hand and make me *rub* the dolly. 'Go make you perfec' too,' she say.

Mary shuddered and seemed to shrink away in all directions. Her chest rose and fell with two deep breaths.

"Then that gassy ol' woman lif' me an' little Sade up an' try to pull us apart like she wantin' to pry open a clam. But Sade she just hang on an' howl louder. So the ol' woman say to mother, 'Senior girls firs' mama. Take baby sister off till it her turn.' Then she holler, 'Boys, we ready!' An' mother carry off little Sade, cryin', cryin'. Two big men I only ever see out by the liquor parlor loopy drunk—and now no different—lif' me onto the table and one hol' my arms and the other pull off my underthings and hol' my legs apart like dolly's, an' start to rub me like dolly too. The ol' woman yell somethin' at him, but since she busy takin' tools out of a sack an' 'rangin' 'em 'tween my feet, he don' stop. 'They jus' here so you lie still,' say the ol' woman. 'Go fix you up now.' Then she touch me with somethin' col'. 'Help *virgina* to keep *virtue*,' she say.

Mary paused to rub her eyes and swallow.

"Would some gentleman fetch a cup of water," said Ms. Darcy.

Three boys jumped up, including me. But Mary shook her head. "No, I'm okay."

"Don't you mean, *vagina*?" said Cheryl.

"Please hold your questions until Mary's finished," said Ms. Darcy.

"Jus' sayin' it the way she said it," said Mary.

"Are you sure you want to continue dear?"

"The body can't carry what the body can't hol'. So can't describe the pain. When the cuttin' begin, I pass out screamin'. To a col' dark place somewhere with ghosts whisperin' and that ol' woman talkin', talkin' 'bout buyin' some big 'lectric fan on a pole for in her bedroom. Then I back awake for the stitchin' part. But when she pour on the ogororo an set fire to it, I with them ghosts again. But that all be forgotten now. Jus' me passin' a story along to myself like it happen to somebody else. Cause like I say, the body can't carry what the body can't hol'. So that's not what soak my bed at night. See, 'fection set in—'fection always sets in. Course I live. But little Sade, six days later, she don't. She never leave me though. She still sobbin' 'roun' my neck today. Cause what I do remember is mother holdin' me in the nex' room an' little Sade shriekin' an cryin' and pleadin' out for us while that ol' woman choppin' an' talkin' 'bout her shoppin', an her drunked up boys laughin', laughin'. I pray hard for them ghosts to come and get me then. But they with Sade now. An' that's what I remember."

Mary sat down. Ms. Darcy took two Kleenexes from a box and handed one to her.

"Ho-lee shit," said Chester.

"Yes," said Ms. Darcy. "Holy shit." Then she blew her nose. "Does anyone have a comment or question regarding Mary's story?"

Cheryl put up her hand. "I think if she fixed the grammar and told us more about how she felt, then the story'd be

better. Plus I didn't understand why they were having that operation in the first place, so she could probably explain that better too."

Ms. Darcy literally sobbed once. Or it could've even been a laugh. "I was afraid Mary's story might run a little deep for some of you," she said. "Cheryl dear, Mary is writing at a level that you do not have the experience or education to properly assimilate. And, as your *English* teacher, I suppose I must accept some blame here."

Cheryl turned pink. "You saying just because my words aren't all messed up, I can't write like... like *Literary Mary*?"

"What you're referring to is called *voice*. But no dear, because there's so much more to it. You will never write like Mary. For that, you can thank God." Ms. Darcy took another Kleenex and dabbed at her eyes. "Well," she said brightly, "I guess we have time for one more. Who's game?"

I'd done the assignment. My story was about a boy who's dad buys him one of those miniature little 3-cylinder Smart Cars that look like golf carts for his sixteenth birthday when all the other guys're driving their dads' big Mercs and Chryslers, and how he's too ashamed to ask a girl on a date lest she think he's a loser, but then a cute girl he likes actually asks him for a ride in it, and so they go over to Jackson's Woods and make out. And I'd be damned if I was going to read *that* now.

"Anyone?" said Ms. Darcy.

"I will," said Cheryl, standing.

Ms. Darcy just smiled.

Cheryl's story was about a cheerleader who's dating her school's football team's quarterback, but then at the state championship she meets the quarterback for the other team whose daddy has a Chevy Dealership over in Opelousas and drives a Vette, and how he wants to be her boyfriend too, and how he picks a fight with her other boyfriend and knocks out one of his teeth. It was well written and everything. She did a good job of telling how much they both wanted her and how bad she felt for dumping her boyfriend after he got his tooth knocked out. And so even though I didn't like Cheryl in the least, I was acutely and profoundly embarrassed for her.

After class, Mary slipped away like an apparition. And I realized that it was for me to find her. I planned to catch her at lunch and tell her how impressed I was with her story, and with her. But I got called to the office right after fourth period. Instead of Principal John though, it was Reverend Pooley there waiting for me. Pooley was a large man, a porcine man, with a thin brush-cut that looked like it'd grow into bristle instead of hair, and rubbery skin that looked like it wanted to sweat but couldn't.

"Do you know why I've come here today, son?" It was a rhetorical question, so I left it be. Pooley laid a hand on my shoulder as if to stay me. "Son," he said, "What I am about to tell you, I do in the strictest confidence."

Even though I hadn't fully understood Mary's story, I had a pretty good idea where he was headed. And I didn't want

him there. Something about the way his hand felt on my shoulder and the way his sharp little inset eyes were sizing me up just didn't sit right. I didn't trust him. And I didn't want his trust. "Reverend," I said, "that's not altogether accurate."

He took his hand off me. "Come again, son?"

"What I mean is, you can't tell somebody something in the strictest confidence. The strictest confidence is telling no one. Say I was to tell someone else in the strictest confidence, and them another..."

"Son, you telling me I can't rely upon your discretion?" He'd backed off a step, so his face was starting to blur. But I think he was glaring at me.

"No Reverend, what I'm saying is, whoever told you couldn't rely on yours."

There was a light tap. The door opened and Ms. Darcy stuck her head in. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought John'd be in the office." She studied Pooley. When she realized no explanation was forthcoming, she added, "I'll just wait out here."

Pooley plopped down into a chrome-and-vinyl chair. "You sit too son, this could take a minute. Do you read your Bible?" It was a leading question. So again I didn't answer. Pooley just continued as if I had. "Do you remember what the Lord said in Exodus twenty, verse five?"

I shook my head.

He said, '*I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.*' Do you know what He meant by that?"

"That he ain't fond of competition?"

"That He wants us to love only Him."

"Odd way of puttin' it."

Pooley sighed and looked like he wished he could cry. "Right now the Lord is concerned for a special young woman. A woman that has been handed over to Satan and made to suffer mightily. Only He can save her. Only He can restore her with His healing touch."

I'd heard about the Episcopalian's laying on of hands. But I wondered who, in his mind, had done the handing over. "And He doesn't want my touch interfering with His touch?" I asked. "Is that what you're trying to say Reverend?"

"She has no true feelings for you, son. I know it doesn't seem that way to you now. But her affections toward you are the work of the devil. She feels sympathy for you, of course—for your condition. But the devil has twisted these feelings to his own end."

"With all due respect, Reverend Pooley, my condition is neither your nor the devil's concern. But I am curious as to how you know so much about her feelings toward me."

He tried to sound indignant and perplexed. "Why she confessed them to me in the course of her healing, naturally."

"In the strictest confidence?"

Pooley clasped his hands and bowed his head, as though asking God's guidance. Then he rubbed his eyes with his

knuckles as though overcome with emotion. "Son, have you ever heard of a female circumcision?"

I shook my head.

"The proper medical term is cli-tor-i-dec-to-my, which means amputation of the clitoris. But it can be more than even this. And son, I can't tell you how many young women've approached me in my foreign ministry seeking the Lord's spiritual and physical healing from the terrible mutilations wrought on them by this heathen act of butchery. It is a procedure performed without anesthetic under filthy conditions by untrained persons using crude instruments." Pooley inhaled through his nose and blinked several times in rapid succession. In front of a congregation he might've looked as if he were about to cry instead of sneeze. With his fingers he wiped away tears that, even with my poor vision, I could see had never formed. "Mary has had her entire external genitalia excised," he said, reaching out as if to comfort me, "along with extreme in-fib-u-la-tion of her vaginal opening. That means—"

I stood and backed away. "Reverend, I don't need to hear this from you."

"These are a backward people son." Pooley stood and stepped toward me. "Did you know that where she's from, it's believed that sodomizing a virgin will cure AIDS?" Again he took my shoulder. "Son, you need to let the Lord heal this girl before you further compromise her virtue. Trust me. I know how frustrated and alone you're feeling right now." He pressed down on me. "I want you to kneel down right here on the floor and ask the Lord's help."

I thought about Mary's praying for those ghosts to come while little Sade screamed. Then I twisted free of Pooley, bolted through the reception area where Ms. Darcy sat reading a magazine, down a corridor crowded and buzzing with students, and out the main doors into the warm sunshine. There she was, waiting for me.

County road 36 joins Interstate 10 about fifteen miles south of Church Point. It could not have been enjoyable traveling with me on that busy thoroughfare, creeping along at 55 mph as I clung to the steering wheel and peered out at the road through lenses convex enough to burn small insects, while transports roared up behind as if to ram us before passing with a blast of air horn. It was for good reason that my license wasn't valid on interstates and toll roads. But she'd said she wanted to get away, and I'd've taken her all the way to Baton Rouge if she hadn't put her hand on my leg outside Lafayette and said, "Let's stop here." A rest area was coming up.

I parked between a Dupre' tanker and a semi loaded with Econoline vans. This time my mouth was ready for her. Another kiss and it was dark. The eighteen-wheelers were gone, replaced now by a motor home and a Budget rental truck, and the sun by the moon, now full and low in the pines beyond the picnic area. Katydid chirped a symphony of castanets, whistling to the lonesome wail and hum of traffic on the interstate. "I love you," I whispered in her ear. It seems so banal now. "I want you to devirgin me," she whispered back. It seemed so frightening then.

Hand in hand we walked past washrooms and picnic tables, and into an evergreen woods. The ground was a mattress of fallen needles, each one distinct and sharp, but piled and pressed by time into a surface that was soft and yielding. Mary pulled her dress up over her head and became a shadow in the night. But a shadow I could touch. I kissed her eyes and sucked her lips and tongue. When she reached to stroke my infant's hardness through my jeans, I slid down—away from her touch—to suckle on her breasts. And felt each grow in turn, like a lie, between my lips. "I'll just do you," I said, sliding lower still.

"No," she said. "No, we do each other." She raised her hips. "We do it together." And then she was naked.

When I rolled to my back, she began to undress me. It was like being stripped by a phantom. In the moonlight filtering through the trees, my skin shone a ghostly, translucent white. "You're beautiful," she sighed. Mary ran her hands down my chest, a pair of silhouettes reaching for my belt. "Been prayin' for someone like you to come."

"Wait," I said. "Look," I said. "Before you go any further, I think you should put on my glasses." I began to sob. "Cause you're gonna need `em to find what you're looking for." But she'd already found it. "See what I mean," I wailed. Then I felt the starch drain out of me until I was as tiny and limp as a macaroni noodle between her fingertips. More tears cooled my cheeks. "Think we could find a rubber for it?" I said.

Mary didn't laugh. She didn't even speak. She just took my hand and put it between her legs. The first thing I noticed was that she was hairless, glabrous as a baby. She

began to move my hand up and down. The skin of her lower abdomen was soft and smooth with muscular underpinnings. But lower it drew taut. Corrugated tissue stretched along either side of a narrow scar. At the nadir of this slice, just below a cluster of braille-like nodules, was a tiny shivering orifice. I traced circles around it. Mary spread her knees wider. I inserted the tip, and then my ring finger to the knuckle. She became my wedding band. Inside, she struck me as complete. I discovered in her a tiny mound an inch or two up the anterior wall, about as far up as the base of her hips. She still had her hand on mine, but I don't think she helped in this discovery. I think it was a memory buried somewhere deep in my genetic code. When I began to massage this tiny berm, Mary put her mouth on mine and moaned. At first I thought I'd injured her, that she was bleeding. My finger grew warm and wet. Mary began to squirm. "Oh," she said. "Joe," she said, "don't you dare stop now." Suddenly, I was hard again. She was squeezing me. And for the first time in my life, I did not feel small or inadequate. In fact, if someone'd stopped me and asked me right then how big it was, I'd've said about the size of a banana, maybe a cucumber. I didn't even get my pants off for that first time. Barely got my ass out of them before she was straddling me, hip to hip, shame to shame. I still couldn't see her, but I could feel her deep around me. Together we became perfect. Again and again, perfect.

We were spared having to drive back on the interstate. We awoke to flashing, twirling lights and our names being called through a bullhorn. We didn't even dress. We just walked out of those woods as naked and shameless as

Adam and Eve before the fall. It was the Louisiana State trooper who blushed and gave us blankets, who found our clothes and took us home.

Mary didn't return to school that day, or the next, or ever after. When I tried to call her, Reverend Pooley quoted more scripture and made it clear that she would never see or talk to me again. Six days later Ms. Darcy called me to the principal's office—the same sad little office in which Pooley had tried to get me to pray—said she had something to tell me. But then all she could do was weep.

When people ask me why I never married, I tell them I'm a widower. I am a widower. I will always be a widower. When I heard Billy tell Daryl that Mary must've killed herself because she figured all men were like me and now he'd never get a taste of that sweet gash, I almost became a murderer too, starting with my tossing the milk from his tray into his face. He sputtered while I split his lips and blackened his eyes. Oh, he got his licks in too. But one thing about being an albino is that scars don't show. I was never shamed or bullied again.

So let me now end in a glad place too. In the woods at night. Any woods, as long as there's a piney bed. Any night, as long as there's a little moonlight. And the ghost of Mary whispering, whispering all around me.

Mia Kammeyer-Mueller's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Verbsap, Defenestration, and Del Sol Review.

The Fleecing Box

by Mia Kammeyer-Mueller

Charlotte reaches from the shower for her towel, pats down her skin, then tightly wraps her hair. She moves from the shower to the sink and examines herself in the mirror, looking for differences in her appearance. Does she look like a thirty-year-old, newly engaged woman? She extends her left arm, fingers straight and spread apart, to admire the ring David gave her earlier. It's beautiful, the best present. She can hardly wait to show her parents at dinner.

Feeling a sudden chill, she plucks her robe from the hook on the bathroom door, threads her arms into the sleeves and ties the sash closed. Enough with the preening, she decides. Time to get ready or she'll be late. She bends over as she unwraps the towel from her hair. With eyes closed, she shakes out her hair.

Something is different. There's no movement, no damp tresses dangling around her face. Charlotte quickly rights herself and stares in the mirror. Her hair is wool. Not woolly. Not like wool. It's real, gray, matted, lumpy, stinky wool.

She reaches toward her head, then jerks her hand away before she makes contact. "No," she whispers. "It can't be." She closes her eyes and backs away from the mirror until she bumps the wall behind her. When she looks at her

reflection again a minute later, there seems to be more wool sprouting from her scalp.

And then it comes to her—the box. It should be in the attic, assuming she remembered to bring it from her parents' house when she moved in. She tiptoes to the door and opens it a crack. Down the hall, she sees a light on in the bedroom and assumes David is in there getting ready. She looks at the ceiling, at the door to the attic. She has to reach that door, pull the steps down, and get upstairs without David seeing her. She takes a deep breath, then runs for it.

The steps drop down with one light tug but land with a thud. Charlotte doesn't wait to find out if it attracted David's attention. She is almost completely up the stairs when she hears him.

"Honey, what are you doing? And what's that smell?"

* * *

Charlotte was born bald. She was still completely bald on her first birthday and on her second. When she turned three, she had a few wisps of pale hair on the very top of her head. A year later, she had twice as much hair, but she was still mostly bald.

Charlotte's parents couldn't understand it. They poured over family photo albums. Her father, Michael, had one great uncle who was nearly bald in his wedding picture, but he hadn't gotten married until he was in his fifties. No baby pictures showed shiny heads past the first few months. On her mother Bonnie's side, it seemed normal for babies to be born with a full head of hair. First haircuts were noted at

five weeks or two months. Why should Charlotte still be bald?

Dr. Larson, the family physician, said it was odd, but there was nothing wrong with Charlotte. The specialist Dr. Larson recommended also said there was nothing wrong. 'Give her time,' they both said. 'Children grow and develop at different rates. Charlotte will have a full head of hair in no time and you'll forget all about this. Wait and see.'

So Bonnie waited, but she did not see any new hair. Neither did anyone else. On the eve of Charlotte's fifth birthday, after wrapping up another beautiful hat, she knelt beside the bed. "Please, Lord," she whispered. "Please give Charlotte hair. She's starting school soon, and I don't want the kids teasing her because she's bald. Her teachers will think she is ill. Please, help my daughter."

The next morning, Charlotte did not have any more hair. Her grandparents came over to take pictures of the birthday girl. She opened her presents and everyone ate cake and ice cream, but still no hair grew on her head.

At the end of the day, Michael helped Charlotte with bath time while Bonnie stayed in the kitchen and wept. Charlotte splashed in the bathtub and made castles from soapsuds until at last it was time to dry off.

"Well, now," Michael called out. "Bonnie, come see this."

Thinking she was being called to investigate a bruise or the beginning of chicken pox, Bonnie hustled to the bathroom where she found Charlotte standing in the middle of the rug wrapped in a towel. Water was dripping from her hair.

Her hair?

Wet clumps of bangs stuck to Charlotte's forehead. Dark tendrils curled around her ears. Bonnie stepped closer and circled her daughter. She had a full head of dark, thick hair, and not a bald spot anywhere.

"What is this? What's going on?"

Charlotte's father shrugged. "She was playing in her bath, all covered with bubbles. I took her out and wiped them off, and—" he snapped his fingers. "There it was."

Bonnie couldn't believe it. Didn't believe it. It must have been a trick. "Michael, I don't find this joke funny at all."

He shook his head. "It's not a joke. This is for real." He combed his fingers through the soggy mop. Charlotte looked up at her parents and smiled with bluing lips. "It's real, Bonnie. Charlotte has hair."

Bonnie crouched down, eye level with Charlotte. Slowly, she reached her hand out and touched the hair. It was real. And it was staying. Bonnie dried it with the towel and the hair didn't come out. She combed and brushed it. She ran her fingers through it again and again. Charlotte finally had a normal head of hair, and Bonnie didn't care how she had gotten it.

* * *

David climbs the creaky steps with the mini Maglite in his mouth, the full-sized version stuffed in his back pocket. When he reaches the top, he waits a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. None of the shadowy shapes look

like a person. "Charlotte, honey?" He notices the odd smell from the hallway is even stronger up here.

Her voice comes from behind him. "I need to find a green metal box from my parents' house." She stops and says, "I know where it is," before rushing out. "You can go back downstairs."

He turns in her direction and moves toward her, wondering what could be so important about a box that she has to find it right now. Her back is to him, but when the weak beam of light flashes over her, he stops moving. "Sweetie? Are you wearing something on your head?"

Charlotte doesn't stop her scavenging. "No," she answers tightly.

He takes an uneasy step closer. Something is definitely different. "But then what's—" He reaches out to touch her hair.

She turns before he can make contact. She looks him straight in the eye, watching his reaction.

"What's going on?" he says. "It's like you're turning into a—a—"

"A sheep," she finishes. "Yes. I know. What do you think?" She poses like a 1950s calendar girl: one hand on her hip, the other behind her hair. "Do you like me wild and woolly?"

He reaches out to touch it again, but she flinches away. He looks puzzled, then grins, laughing a little. "But—what is it really? A wig? Is this some birthday thing your family does?"

"No, David. It's just what it looks like."

"But it looks like wool."

"It is wool."

His eyes widen, his mouth screws up into shapes that don't allow him to make words.

"Don't worry," Charlotte says, turning back to her search. "I'll take care of it."

He takes her by the shoulders and turns her to face him again. This time, she can't pull away when he touches what used to be her hair. "You're becoming a barnyard animal and I shouldn't be concerned? Charlotte, what the hell's happening?"

* * *

"Mother! Mommy!" Charlotte screamed from the bathroom.

"I'm coming." Bonnie tried to sound calm as she hurried through the house and wondered what was causing the fuss this time. *Probably a pimple. God-forbid she get a zit on her fifteenth birthday.* Closer to the bathroom, she noticed an earthy smell—dirt-like, but something more.

The door was locked. Bonnie jiggled the handle. "Charlotte, What's going on? Do you want me to come in? What's that smell?"

"It's me, Mom. I don't know what's happening." Charlotte's crying became heavy sobs. "I just took a shower and washed my hair."

Bonnie clutched the doorknob and shook it. "Honey, let me in. Whatever it is, I'm sure we can figure it out." She stepped away from the door and waited, wondering why her daughter called her so urgently, then wouldn't tell her what was going on. She had a hundred other things to do to get ready for the party tomorrow. And what was that horrible smell?

Charlotte grew quiet, then Bonnie heard a click and the door was unlocked. She paused a beat. "Honey?" she called as she peered inside. Charlotte's back was turned, a towel over her head. "Honey, what's going on?"

Charlotte turned around, her eyes puffy from crying. She unwrapped the towel, the smell worsening as she did. Her mother covered her face and took a step back.

When Bonnie looked up next, she was finally able to place the smell: sheep. Charlotte smelled like a sheep, and all of her beautiful brown hair had been replaced with thick fleece. It covered her head in tufts half a foot tall—gray in some places; in others, black. Chunky knots of tightly-wound wool squatted on her forehead, while gnarled dreadlocks sprouted at the nape of her neck.

"What-what-what-what-what?" Bonnie stammered.

"I just took a shower," she whispered. "What happened to my hair?"

Bonnie touched the wool. There was no give to it, no spring. She turned Charlotte's head left and right so she could see all of it. Not a single brown hair was visible. She looked in Charlotte's eyes and saw expectation, the need for an explanation. How was she supposed to answer?

She grasped Charlotte firmly by the shoulders, determined to sound authoritative and in control. "Don't you worry. We'll take care of this." She thought of Dr. Barrows, the specialist they saw when Charlotte was a bald baby. "I know a specialist. We'll give her a call and tell her it's an emergency—"

"No! I can't go out like this. I'll die!"

"Then we'll just have her make a house call."

Charlotte shook her head. "I don't want anyone to see me. You have to do something about this. Nobody can know. Please, Mom," she begged. "You have to do something."

Bonnie nodded. She stepped into the hall, leaned against the bathroom door. She took a deep breath of the fresher air and had no idea what to do.

She was so consumed with the situation, she didn't notice the opening and closing of the garage door. It wasn't until she heard heavy footsteps in the kitchen that she realized Michael was home from work. She wondered what he would make of this.

"Dad's home!" he called out as he came up the stairs. "Where is everybody?"

Bonnie rushed to intercept Michael, holding him at bay at the far end of the hall. "We have something of a situation with Charlotte."

Michael loosened his tie and grimaced. "Is this about another zit? I'm telling you, Bonnie, Charlotte has to toughen up about this crap. She's a teenager, for Pete's sake."

Bonnie glared at her husband. "Why don't you go take a look and tell me what we should do."

Michael straightened his back and walked slowly towards the bathroom. He sniffed the air a few times. The house was starting to smell like a barnyard. He looked back at Bonnie, but she was concentrating on the ceiling. Gently, he rapped on the door.

After much coaxing and assurance from Bonnie that it was okay, Charlotte unlocked the door for her dad. His reaction was more explosive than Bonnie's, causing Charlotte to wail that her life was over.

Her father immediately realized his mistake. "Aw, honey. It doesn't look that bad," he tried. "If you just smooth it down a little—" He reached out to rearrange her hair, but stopped when his fingers felt the coarse texture. "What—what is this? Is this a wig, or something? Are you in a play at school?"

He worked his fingers down to her scalp, gave the wool a quick tug.

"Ow, Dad."

"Michael."

He looked back at Bonnie, his eyes frantic. "What the fuck is this?"

"Michael!"

"Sorry. Sorry," he told Charlotte. "I just—what's going on?"

* * *

Charlotte twists out of David's hold and takes a step back. "I just meant you don't have to worry because this has happened before," she finishes quietly.

David's face pales. He turns to leave the attic, his hands on his hips for a moment before they flap out and he turns to face Charlotte again. He brings his fingers to his forehead as if trying to squeeze out a headache. "Right. Of course it's happened before. And that was when?"

"I was just a kid. Fifteen. It-it-it was just like this," she says as if just remembering it herself. "It was my birthday and I took a shower and everything was fine and then—this."

"And you never thought to tell me?"

"I was fifteen. It only happened once—"

"Fleece is growing from your head," he bellows. "How many times does that have to happen before it's important enough to tell your future husband?"

"I didn't think it would ever come back. I didn't—" Charlotte's voice breaks off, stopping her from forging ahead with the argument. What can she say to him? The look on his face—disbelief, fear, revulsion—tells her there is no way to explain this.

"Charlotte?" David's voice is softer now. "Honey, I'm sorry. It—" He sucks in a large breath. "It doesn't matter that you didn't tell me before. I know now, and—and—and—let's just fix this. Okay?"

She can't believe what she's hearing. She expected him to demand answers or storm out, telling her it's over, the

engagement is off. She's so stunned, she doesn't say anything.

"We *can* fix this, right?"

* * *

Bonnie stood by the front door, peeking out the frilly curtain every two minutes. She wondered if he had gotten lost, if the directions weren't good enough. He should have been here by now, unless he backed out.

"For crying out loud, get away from the door," Michael told her from the living room. "It won't make him come any faster."

"It's not making him come any slower," she snapped back. She twisted her wedding ring around and around her finger, sometimes slipping it up to the middle knuckle. He had to come. And this had to work.

It was nine-thirty when Mr. McGovern finally arrived. He was shorter and thicker than what Bonnie had imagined. He wore a gray tweed cap and a matching vest and carried what looked like a doctor's black bag. He looked from Bonnie to Michael, then announced he was ready to take a look.

Charlotte was in her room. The three adults stood bunched in the hallway. Bonnie knocked on the door. "Honey? Mr. McGovern is here. Honey? Are you still awake?"

"I don't want to do this," she wailed.

Bonnie showed the men a nervous smile then said to the door: "We've already been through this. Your father and I

think we should give it a try. Now, do you want us to come in, or are you coming out?"

Silence from Charlotte's bedroom. Bonnie tried the knob—locked. She rattled it a little harder than she needed to.

"All right, I'm coming. I don't want all of you in my room."

Two minutes later, the four of them were crammed into the bathroom. Mr. McGovern stood on a small stool to get a good view of Charlotte's whole head. He examined each section carefully and at last declared that it was wool.

"Jesus Christ, we already know that," Michael said. "We want to get rid of it. That's why we called."

Mr. McGovern opened his black bag and removed a set of shears. He buzzed them once to get everyone's attention. "I know. That's why I'm here."

He began in front. The shears made a slow whining sound and barely moved. He told her to look at the floor and tried starting at the base of her neck. Again, the shears whined in protest. Mr. McGovern took off his cap and scratched his bald head. "It's too thick."

"How can it be too thick?" Bonnie wanted to know. "It's only been growing since this afternoon."

"I'll have to take it off in layers."

The first layer was the messiest. Mr. McGovern wasn't used to shearing something the size and shape of Charlotte's head, and he didn't always get the right depth for the shears. By the fourth and final layer, he was more confident, and the fleece quickly fell.

After all the wool was off, Michael excused himself to get another trash bag while Bonnie ushered Mr. McGovern downstairs to pay him and to be reassured he would keep this confidential. Charlotte locked herself in her room.

Overnight, the wool grew back thicker and smellier. Charlotte wouldn't leave her room. "I'm hideous! Cancel my party. I can't see anyone like this. Cancel my life."

Bonnie spent the morning calling friends and family saying Charlotte was ill. The party was indefinitely postponed. The calls helped keep her from wondering what they were going to do now.

Michael was in the kitchen making sandwiches for lunch when the back door opened and Bonnie's father walked in.

"Anton, what are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?" he asked as he sat down at the table. "I have it written on my calendar: today is the big party. So I'm a little early, is that a problem?"

"We cancelled," Michael called down the hall. "Bonnie, your dad's here."

Bonnie hurried into the kitchen, eyes wide, unsure she heard correctly. "Dad, what are you doing here? I left a message."

"I've been out all morning looking for the perfect card for my favorite granddaughter. Now where is the beautiful birthday girl?" His bushy black mustache twitched over his smile.

Before she knew what she was doing, Bonnie had told her father the whole story about Charlotte's hair.

Anton pounded the kitchen table with his fists, startling everyone. He glared at Bonnie with dark eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was a deep growl. "What were you thinking, calling this McGovern over to shave my granddaughter's head like she's a sheep?"

"We thought being bald would be better than having wool. We didn't expect it to grow right back," Bonnie tried to explain. She had spent most of the day wondering this herself. "Now she won't even let us see her."

"Good for her. You don't know," he accused. "Shaving it off won't work. You don't know."

"And I suppose you do?" Michael asked.

Anton stood at the table, pointing a knotty finger at each of them in turn. "You two don't know what you're doing. You should have called me. I'll be back and then we'll get this settled right."

He returned at three o'clock, this time knocking on the front door. When Bonnie answered, she wasn't prepared to see a tall man with a thick hump on his back standing beside her father. His thick silver hair was smooth and wavy. Something about the stranger looked familiar.

"Bonnie, this is Smishek from the neighborhood. Remember him? He lived in the house on the corner, the one with the fence. Remember?"

Images floated through her mind until she came up with the old man standing at his front door watching her retrieve a

ball from his yard. He had a hump even then, but his hair had been more gray than silver. She was surprised he was still alive.

"I'm older than dirt," he announced in a voice that was rasp and whisper. There was no twinkle to his eye.

Michael joined them at the door. "What's going on?"

"Anton tells me your girl has the wool," Smishek said, stepping inside.

He looked at Michael, then Bonnie, his lids sagging low over his eyes, almost fluttering shut. "I know what to do."

Bonnie almost hugged him. "Thank God. What is it? What do we need to do?"

Smishek shook his head. "Not you. Just me. Where is she?"

Michael held out his arm, keeping Smishek from moving further into the house. "Hold on. What do you mean, 'just you?' What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get rid of the wool." He turned his body sideways and, despite the hump on his back, slipped between Michael and Bonnie and was up the stairs before anyone could stop him.

Anton reached out to keep Michael from stopping Smishek. "Let him go. He knows what to do."

"And what do we do?" Bonnie wanted to know.

"We wait."

Two hours had passed since Smishek's arrival. Michael, Bonnie and Anton sat at the kitchen table. They couldn't

hear anything from upstairs. Bonnie had been the last one to speak, and that was only to suggest they sit down.

Anton held his fingers in a triangle and bounced the tips against each other. "He is good. Smishek knows what he is doing."

"I can't take this." Michael pushed away from the table. "Why isn't he coming down? Why isn't he telling us anything? I'm going up there."

Bonnie reached for him. "Think of Charlotte," she said. "This might be our only hope."

He looked again toward the door, then back to his wife. She widened her eyes pleadingly. He sat back down.

After twenty minutes more, footsteps were heard on the stairs. The three rushed to the living room. Smishek was alone. They stood in front of him waiting for him to speak. Finally, Anton touched his shoulder and said only: "Well?"

* * *

"The box," she tells him firmly. "We need to find a green, metal box. I brought it over from my parents' house." Saying the words gives her a rush of courage.

She tries to picture it, remembers old Smishek walking into her room. He seemed so huge, with his hump and those long fingers all stretched out and reaching. She thought he was going to grab her, but his hand darted inside his coat and came out with the box. Such an ordinary looking thing, olive green with a chrome latch and handle. But what it held inside—

"It's up here? How big is it? Do you know—"

Charlotte moves over to a corner where she recognizes her mother's printing on a large moving box. She knows David is just a step behind her, looking over her shoulder. She relieves him of the smaller flashlight and pokes the dull beam into the box.

"It's here." She drops the flashlight and reaches into the box, coming back out with a dark velvet pouch.

"This is it?"

She nods. "The box is inside." She gently pulls it closer to her body to prevent him from touching it.

"So what next? Should I get anything? Do I need to call someone?"

"I think you should leave."

"You don't think I should be part of this?" His tone is accusatory. "As your future husband?"

"I need to do this alone."

"Fine." He squares his shoulders and exhales sharply. "I'm gone."

* * *

Smishek seemed smaller, reduced. His long fingers shook as he tried to straighten his rumpled silver mane.

"Tomorrow she will have her hair again. Tonight, let her rest."

They walked him to the door, offering him anything they could think of as payment. "There must be something we can do for you. Please, just name it," Michael said.

"I gave her a box. Don't lose it. Next time, you won't have to call me."

"Next time?" Bonnie repeated.

"You mean this could happen again?" Michael asked.

Smishek smiled, his icy blue eyes now sparking to life, and left.

* * *

After she is sure David is out of the attic, Charlotte finds a place to set the box, clearing off space on a large bureau with a dressing mirror. She takes a deep breath, then removes the green box from the pouch. It's hot, but she doesn't let go. She lets the heat seep beneath her skin, through her fingers, then across her hands.

She feels the box cool as she wonders if she can do this. Smishek had told her this would happen, said he was giving her the box for the next time. She thought he was just trying to scare her. She didn't pay attention, doesn't remember the order of things—

"I can't," she whispers, still holding the box. "I don't know what to do." The calm courage she felt earlier is gone. Charlotte gulps down air, wishing she hadn't sent David away. She had only meant for him to go downstairs, but maybe he left—really left. Who would want to marry a sheep? And since he just proposed tonight, no one else knows. It would be so easy for him to just walk away.

She shakes her head to clear away the distractions. She can't worry about David yet. She needs to take care of this. Now. Maybe she could call her parents. No, they wouldn't know any better than she does. And Smishek died years ago. She went to his funeral. There is no one to call, no one to help.

She looks at herself in the mirror. There is more fleece than when she left the bathroom; she is sure of it. She is suddenly aware of how itchy and uncomfortable it is, the way it scratches her neck and rubs the tops of her ears.

She tightens her fingers around the box. It heats up again. Bright light escapes wherever it can. The box hums with vibration. Charlotte turns her face away as she uses one finger to flip open the latch. The lid springs open.

Her eyes immediately close, and she listens to the hissing, sizzling sound, remembers it from the last time the box was opened. She holds it with both hands, gripping the metal edges of the box. She can't put this off any longer. She opens her eyes, keeps them focused on the floor at her feet, and waits for the fleece to fall.

*Michael Constantine McConnell is a devout student of the 20-button Anglo concertina and "experimental forms" editor for Farrago's Wainscot (www.farragoswainscot.com). His poetry, prose, and palindromes have appeared in **Style**, *Jabberwock Review*, and *the Bitter Oleander*.*

Panda

by Michael Constantine McConnell

With so many freckles
on your knee, I could
connect the dots and draw
whatever picture I desire,
but choose to trace hearts
over and over on your skin,
a silent tattoo
only we understand
or can see. I can speak
any rhythm, but engage
you iambically, with heart.
When your knuckles
reciprocate my kisses,
I go blind, feel fire
behind my eyes and melt
into undeniable perfection.
And you fit on my lap
like sin, your earlobes,
gumdrops, the innocence
of candy when the world
held nothing more than blue
skies, the blackness of coffee,
a Spring morning drowned by birds.

Louise Beech is a 37 year old columnist and travel writer for the Hull Daily Mail. She writes fiction as a hobby. She has been published in The Writer's Eye, and other stories of hers will feature in Vagabondage Press and Ocean Magazine shortly. At the end of year a short story is scheduled to appear in the Sunday Express magazine, S.

Ode to a Bad Poet

by Louise Beech

Before Eddie had his good eye sewn shut, he liked to count the clouds. He liked to think he could name them too, but they pretty much named themselves; he just wrote the poetry.

Last night, before his eyelids were meticulously stitched together like a broken zipper, he decided that the evening sky was a dusted, carrotty layer cake. Each cloud rested on another, more or less orange, so subtle a different tinge that the gradual darkening would have had the finest of painters unable to mix a perfect shade. He called them Ginger Spice. No, that wasn't quite right. Sounded like that red-haired singer who wore the Union Jack dress. He stirred his tea, wondering absently if anyone would care to make it the way he liked when his sight was gone, and he got lost in a final Stratocumulus haze. His sightless eye slept. The other bulged, dry as heat.

"Edward. Edward, wake up."

He tries to open his eye but the lid doesn't work. The dream of last year's island holiday disassembles but, without light, the remnants linger.

"Relax or you'll tear the stitches." The nurse speaks slowly, as if it's his hearing that's gone. "How do they feel?"

"Sore," says Eddie, reaching for the irritation.

"Don't touch them." He thinks it's the big, five-chinned nurse and wishes he'd taken more notice of her voice yesterday so he could be sure. He sits up, grabbing for the bedside cabinet, and knocks over the vase. The water is tepid, thick.

"I've got breakfast. Here, I'll show you." She guides his hand to the cold eggs and tea, hands him a knife and fork, plastic handle first. "Don't worry about the vase, I'll get that."

Eddie can only vaguely smell the food. It's not quite as nauseating without the visual impact but the lack of odour is no good sign either. He wonders if the tea is weak, the colour of sand, and realises he doesn't care.

"The doctor will be around later," says the nurse. Eddie wonders where the tears in his left eye will go if he were to cry, but he doesn't ask her because he's starting to think she's the big nurse, the one who told him yesterday that worse things happen at sea.

The night that Ruth accidentally had anal sex was a real eye opener.

"The old record player in the living room won't work," she tells friend Shelly on the phone. "It makes a scritch-scratch sound when I put the needle on the "Moon River" vinyl." She doesn't tell her that the sound grated just like her sphincter. "The record's in the bin," she adds, turning

on the kettle. "I think he meant well. I mean, he's a good kisser, sensitive otherwise. He loves my photographs, so who knows..."

As the water warms she eyes the dry streak of kidney-shaped saliva on the wall where she was deflowered ten hours earlier.

Thomas, who she'd dated five mediocre but pleasant times, had pushed her against the wall while Andy Williams crooned about the river, and without removing her skirt or underwear he entered her. She had thought it more a lack of experience than daring that he penetrated her there. The pain surprised her as much as her annoyance that the vintage record player was being violated. It was cherry wood. It was her father's. It was ruined.

She had let Thomas finish and peeled her wet cheek from the wall, touching her mouth where it was bruised, adjusting her crumpled skirt

"You just looked so, um, hot tonight," he'd said, which she thought unnecessary, and then he gently kissed her cheek. He aimed for her mouth, she thought. She decided that if they ever go on holiday to Europe, and hire a car to explore, she would definitely have to drive.

"I might go to the travel agents later," Ruth tells her pal. "Pick up an Ibiza brochure. Thomas said he fancies it."

"Don't you have to go to the hospital?"

"The hospital? Yes." She hasn't forgotten, though she'd been trying.

"I'll talk to you later," says Shelly. "Give my love to your dad."

The kettle boils and she makes tea. She should be leaving for the hospital but she needs a half hour to wake up. She looks at the corrupt record player. Her photographs are scattered across the floor, not ruined but creased, the gravestone split in five places. She'll be lucky if she gets a C.

"Hey Dad," says Ruth. From the ward doorway he appears to have lost a stone in two days. Was his hair always silver? Egg congeals on a plate by his bed. The sun is on his face but she doesn't suppose it matters. Down the corridor a patient is calling the nurse a fat cunt. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm better than the food they're giving me. It's no wonder people die in here. So, what did you do last night?"

Ruth puts her bag on the chair. "I listened to music."

"How do I look then?" He smiles like she has her camera at the ready.

She considers lying. She looks at her father's lopsided face, the red welts that seal his eye, the swollen neck, the egg yolk on his chin, the pyjamas he's had a lifetime.

"You look like shit."

"Ah, well, at least I can't see it. Do I look so bad that the young nurse with blue eyes wouldn't consider a mercy fumble?"

"Dad!" She blushes. "You can't say that to me. You're not supposed to think about stuff like that, let alone do it. You're nearly fifty."

"Describe the clouds to me."

"They're white." She doesn't even look out of the window.

"White? You can do better than that."

"You're the poet, Dad. I just take photographs."

She sits on the bed, touching his arm first so that she doesn't surprise him.

"Does it hurt?"

"No. They gave me plenty of drugs. I remember when you were little, playing hide and seek. You thought that if you shut your eyes no one would find you."

Ruth's tears fall soundlessly.

"You'll need tarsorrhaphy," the doctor had explained a week earlier. Eddie learned his fate in a dismal office with a map of the world on the wall and a large window that offered no view of sky or cloud. He was glad that one eye did not have to witness it and the other hurt so much that it didn't care.

"In extreme cases like these, where the tumour begins to push the eyes so far out that the lid cannot close over them, we have no choice but to partially sew the eyelids together." The doctor (his name rhymed with diarrhoea, but Eddie couldn't quite remember it) smiled and clasped

his hands together like two polished shells. "The corneas are at risk of serious infection otherwise. We can reverse it if the tumour shrinks. You'll have to stay in the hospital for the duration."

"It isn't shrinking though, is it?"

"It isn't growing." The doctor seemed content with this comeback. "The chemotherapy is having more of a pause effect, if you like."

Eddie pictured his favourite film, *The Great Escape*, paused, Steve McQueen's motorbike leap, frozen, eternal.

"I can't have chemo forever though, can I?"

"Promise me when things get rough you'll have me at home," says Eddie. The nurse has brought them both a drink that resembles coffee. "I don't care if they have to collect my crap and vomit in a bucket, send some inept nurse daily, plug me into the national grid...I want to be at home. I want to be able to watch the clouds from my own window, and if I can't watch at least know they are there. Can you humour your old dad?"

"It's what I'm best at."

He knows she has been crying. He knows she's young, that he's a burden.

"How will you write?" she asks.

"You don't have to be able to see to write, Ruth." He can't decide if he's trying to make her feel better, or himself. "I'll store it in my head. In some ways I can see better now that my sight doesn't distract me. When I've gone totally

demented and I'm rambling, promise me you'll write it down and make shitloads of money. Call it 'Ode to an Idiot.'"

Ruth laughs but the sound is shrill. He wonders if she's smiling. He hears the soft meeting of china and wood as she places her cup on the table, the rustle of sheet, whisper of breath, and then she is leaning on his chest, pressing her cheek against his heart. He strokes her hair; he knows that it is straw yellow but he only smells the shampoo and cigarettes. He remembers when she was born and he wrote God-awful poetry about her toes and nose, rhyming baby with cradle, likening her cry to birdsong. listened to "Moon River" and rocked her until she slept.

"I'll call it 'Ode to a Bad Poet,'" she says within the folds of his pyjama shirt. "And I'll run it with those photos I took of you and mum on Brighton Pier, when she ate too much candy floss and threw up on your new shirt. Remember?"

"Of course I do. I'm blind, not dumb."

When Ruth has gone, the nurse bustles into the room. Eddie can hear her tights rubbing together at the thighs, smell her sweat as she reaches over him for something.

"Shame my wife isn't still alive," he says, looking towards where he knows the window is.

"You miss her?" she asks.

He can smell pity, putrid as off-milk. "No, she'd just have been far more appealing without my sight. If they'd sewn my ears up too we might never have got divorced."

She doesn't laugh. Nor does he.

Ruth leaves the hospital to the sound of dinner trolleys being wheeled out, the plates clattering: a warning to the patients. Her phone rings the moment she switches it back on. It's Thomas.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry I was a little, um, pushy last night," he says. "It's just that I like you so much. Are we good?"

Ruth wonders if they are. She holds the phone to her chest for a moment. She watches the leaves swirl around the hospital car park, gold chasing brown. She looks at the sky. The clouds are not white. They are not silver-lined. They are grey. It might rain; it might not. She supposes that it isn't what you can see, or not see, it is what you do.

"Do you really like my photographs?" she asks.

"Your photographs? Yes. You have a real eye for the unusual. It's part of why I like you."

"You're blind, Thomas," she laughs. "I'm a novice, but it's sweet that you're kind."

She's going to do her assignment again; she still has four days. Taking pictures of a gravestone was an uninspired idea. She might photograph the clouds. She might not. She might go to Ibiza, photograph the island. She might not. She might give Thomas a chance.

Pete Carter has lived on Cape Cod most of his life. Being a New Englander, he tries to be self-sufficient and enjoys car repair, building, cabinet making, painting, plumbing, reading, debating, fishing and computer repair. He also likes to write when something's not broken.

He writes shorts that range from horror to satire and everywhere in between. He has had pieces published in Wild Child, Bewildering Stories, Theatre of Decay and an upcoming anthology by Fiction Reborn.

How Things Fit Together

by Pete Carter

I've been losing pieces of my life.

More and more things have just come up missing.

I'm not talking about the little things we lose every day, like the newspaper or the car keys, but large chunks of things that can't be carried away in a pocket or dropped behind the bureau.

While I usually slept until the alarm went off, the sun woke me that morning. It was beating down in an insistent pulse, not leaving one shadow in the room. It stood fixed in a spot that threw light directly onto my face and when the possibility of logging extra pillow time got chased away with the shadows, I figured it was time to get up.

"Good morning, Honey," I said, coming down the stairs.

"Hey there, you got up on your own for a change."

"My love for you drove me out of my bed and into your arms," I said, while I hugged her.

"What a crock of shit," she said, hugging me back.

"Where's Tim?"

"Upstairs getting ready for the bus."

My son was accident prone and would get hurt sometimes when he wandered into places he shouldn't be. Last month, he was hit by a bus crossing the road and just after we had him fixed up from that, he got hurt in a stampede.

After he was stuck in bed for a while, he promised to be more careful and watch where he was going.

And then a few days later, he fell off the top of the house. It'd been a trying few months of parenting.

We always seemed to get him put back together, but it's a very tough thing to go through as a parent. Just the fear of seeing your child in pain, watching them lying there broken and the feeling of helplessness that overcomes you, is one of the hardest things to endure.

When it happens, all you can do is just hold them, tell them things will be all right, even when you have no idea how things really are going to be. You just hope that they are, so they won't discover you're lying and are just as lost and powerless as they are.

That, sometimes in itself, is enough to get you both through a traumatic event.

Tim came bounding down the stairs four at a time and went for the pile of toast.

"Morning, Son."

"Hey, Dad. You promised to play catch with me tonight, don't forget."

"I'll get out of the work early enough to play, don't worry."

"Great," Tim said.

"A big day at the airport?" my wife said.

"Always a big day. I'll be glad if one day goes by where nothing out of the ordinary happens."

"The kids at school said that aliens landed there last week. Did they?" said Tim.

"Well Tim, I've been sworn to secrecy by the government." I gave my wife a wink. "But let's just say that the airport would be the most natural place for aliens to land if they came here."

"Wow," said Tim.

"That's enough 'wowing' out of you, go get your backpack from upstairs or you'll miss the bus. I don't have time to drive you this morning," said my wife.

"I better get going too," I said.

"What about breakfast?"

"I'll get something off the stand at work," I said, while I leaned in and kissed her.

"You know what the doctor said about your cholesterol. The food at that stand is horrible for you."

"I'll find something healthy," I said, and after yelling upstairs "Bye, Tim", was out the door.

In the past few months, we have been having an ever increasing string of vandalisms at night around the house while we slept. My tire had been stolen, sections of the fence in the front yard had been taken, our dog went missing and the big oak that sat in our front yard had disappeared.

It was such a common occurrence that when I walked out the door that morning, I had become inured to these little things. Although, this was something a little different.

The car wasn't where I'd left it last night and the right-hand rear door was missing. Thinking my wife had been in some fender bender, I yelled through the screen.

"Honey, were you driving the car?"

"No," she yelled back from the kitchen.

"What the hell happened? The car is moved and the rear door is missing."

"I'll call the insurance agent."

"Who would steal a door off the car...?"

"What's that, honey?" said my wife, her voice muffled by the pantry.

"Just call the insurance agent. See ya, honey."

"See you tonight, dear."

I had little choice but to drive to work with the wind howling through the car. The papers in the vehicle swirled around in

a mini hurricane before jumping out the door-less car leaving a litter trail behind me.

When I arrived at work, the parking lot was filled with the usual collection of trucks, tractors, motorcycles, grad-alls, trains and helicopters. I struggled to find a parking spot amidst the mechanical mayhem and debris that usually filled our lot.

I grabbed a cup of coffee after finding nothing appetizing on the stand and headed to the control tower. I climbed five stories to the top, which had become part of my morning ritual after the elevator broke. At the last flight of stairs, I had the familiar thump of my heart right on the edge of beating too fast and it actually felt good. I considered this the company health plan.

"Morning, Boss," said Dave, who lost his legs in a trucking accident a few months back.

"What's going on today, Dave?"

"Well, we got an airplane crash on 22L, an overturned water tower on 23R and assorted farm animals wandering around."

"Typical Monday. Let's get to work."

Eight hours and five crises later, I walked back down the stairway and found my car in the parking lot. The trunk and the passenger's front door were missing. I shook my head, got in the driver's seat, and drove home.

I left the radio off on the way. Sometimes, I just like to have peace and quiet on the way home and with the wind

whipping through, I couldn't have heard it anyway. I pulled into the driveway and looked up at my two-story colonial.

Half the roof was gone.

It looked as though a tornado had come through and torn the place apart. All the windows on the first floor were ripped out, the shutters were all hanging at crazy angles and the door was lying on the steps.

I opened the door of my car and ran to the hole where my front door used to be.

"Honey!" I yelled running into each room. "Honey! Where are you?"

She wasn't anywhere downstairs, so I ran up the stairs two at a time and found her everywhere.

She was at the top of the landing. I saw her leg first.

There were pieces of her strewn around like a rag doll torn apart by a Rottweiler. Her headless torso was left on top of the bureau like a type of curio.

I said, "Oh, my God," and then I heard Tim's voice.

"Dad, are you home?"

"Tim? Where are you Tim?" I yelled to the ceiling.

"In the back yard."

I ran down the stairs again and through the kitchen door into the back yard. I saw him lying on the grass with a leg and arm gone. He was trying to hold himself up with his one remaining arm.

I dropped to the ground and gathered him in my arms.

"What happened, Tim? God, what happened?"

"I don't know, Dad." I hugged him. "I'm cold, Dad."

"Don't worry son, your Dad's right here." I held him and looked for help.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Son?"

"Are we still going to play catch today?"

"You bet, Son. You bet."

Ray Succre currently lives on the southern Oregon coast with his wife and baby son. He has been published in Aesthetica, BlazeVOX, and Pank, as well as in numerous others across as many countries. His novel Tatterdemalion was recently released in print and is available most places. He tries hard.

The Six-Month Job

by Ray Succre

"What are you reading over there?" Stark asked me, the mop-damp Alzheimer's hall, 2nd Floor South, perpendicular between our dormant stations. "This blue 'Welcome Aboard' letter they gave me today." "No you're not. That's your red termination slip." I turned the page over and examined its face. So it was. My termination slip. The late night was tepidly crooked about alarms, alarms based on movement or moisture. We waited for them, then ran.

Alarm was everywhere at random.

An old man urinated in bed; his alarm sounded, ten seconds.

Another old man moved outside; his moisture tapped windows for two hours.

I went in, drew down his sheets, wiped him, changed the bed.

I went out, drew a lighter, smoked quickly, came back damp.

Six months approached.

"First shift on 2nd South, huh?" Stark asked.

"Yes, but I'm very eager to do a good job here." I replied.

"No you're not. You hate this job."

I lifted my eyes to the clock; six months had passed.

So I did. I hated the job.

The elevator opened before me and I entered.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

Stark was in love with questioning.

"This was my last shift." I explained, "I was fired; I'm leaving."

"No it's not. You got hired; this is your first shift."

The doors closed, remaindering me in a small compartment dropping down without a true, human plane.

So it had been. The first shift. Over and over again.



Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

*Nora B. Peevy is a writer/artist and stay-at-home mom to her three bearded dragons, two cats, one Cuban Knight Anole, a few hungry praying mantids, her stepson, and her husband. She has a B.A. in English with a Concentration in Creative Writing. Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she now lives in Dallas, Texas, where she spends her time stalking werewolves, vampires, zombies, and other creepies. She has been previously published in the June 2008 issue of *Crimson Highway*, has been accepted by *Bewildering Stories* for a forthcoming publication in 2008, and recently won Second Place in the monthly short story writing contest sponsored by *Fantasy Gazetteer*, soon to be published.*

Carnivorous Cows from Outer Space

by Nora B. Peevy

I've been told by my superiors that I sound like the bipeds Ron Perlman and James Earl Jones if they were both chain smokers hopped up on horse steroids who drank like fish, though I never made the acquaintance of a drunken fish. Anyway, that's not really relevant to the story. What is relevant to the story and, really, all you need to know, is that my name is Mooligan, not to be confused with the word "mulligan," though I can understand the confusion, since they are so close in print. My human captors (or so they think) call me "Cow 152," but I assure you that my I.Q. is much higher than 152 and I have never needed a "do-over" for anything in my 205 years of existence, though if I end up at the stockyard any time soon, I might need to contact you from the other side of the pasture. Nevertheless, I am attempting to befriend *Homo sapiens* and reach a peaceable

existence, since our planet is doomed for demolition in the year 2008. You bipeds may laugh lightly at Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but I assure you that it holds some truth. You may also think that we are only cows, but really, we are intelligent quadrupeds from Planet Moo. (Moo translates into "Superior Beings" in our native language of Moo, but to you human bipeds, it sounds like "where's the beef?")

This is precisely why my species is so miffed these days. In trying to save our species from annihilation, we have managed to become food for insubordinates like you — except for those nice East Indian folks. Being Hindu, they believe we have souls. Plus, they rely on us for dairy products and use our waste as a source of fuel and fertilizer. We are a revered matriarchal symbol. Hence, it is safe to be a cow in India for the most part (minus a few slaughterhouses they're trying to have unsuccessfully shut down); nowhere else is it safe, unless you live in a hippie commune. Though personally, after observing Hindus vs. hippie communes, I am more inclined to favor the former than the latter. One can only listen to Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* so many times and frankly, I never could stomach performance art as a whole. Nor do I understand the hippie infatuation with what you bipeds deem "grass." It has a most cantankerous flavor that is quite unpalatable, really. I wouldn't feed it to a goat, and they aren't even as intelligent as I. (This I have witnessed many times at what you humans call "petting zoos," where many a young biped's paper nametag has fallen prey to a goat's insatiable appetite for junk.)

But I digress. All you need to know is that my name is Mooligan, I come from the Planet Moo, and I am trying to take over your world for Cowkind everywhere. (You may ask where Planet Moo is, and my response in simple layman's terms, and to steal a line from your beloved biped George Lucas, is: In a galaxy far, far away. And that's all you need to know. It's top secret, so don't ask any more, or I will have to do something drastic that you won't like.)

At the moment though, my battle for cow sovereignty appears to be a losing one. (I am not prepared to admit that Earthling bipeds might be smarter than us, but they certainly have proved detrimental to our existence. Perhaps it's our lack of opposable thumbs.) At this time I am unsure why all my reinforcements keep ending up in the stockyards, and it seems that industrialization is taking over my small corner of the pasture — quite literally. It is a small pasture in the middle of an industrial park in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas, steakhouse capital of the United States. And this morning, I witnessed a rotund tobacco-spitting biped hammering a post into the ground by my feeding trough. The post had a sign. The sign read: Land for Sale. My land for sale. My sweet green bliss of pasture sandwiched between a paper company and too many Dot Coms and financial institutions for me to count on my hooves. And much to my bovine chagrin, a new McDeath popped up across the street. All of this I will be reporting to my superiors in our weekly meetings, but in the meantime, I have plenty of hours to while away in pastoral bliss, or what is left of my pastoral bliss.

The first interruption of my pastoral bliss started with a routine morning visit from a biped I fondly referred to as 'Joe Blackberry.' Joe walked with a manly business swagger of importance with his Blackberry permanently attached to his hands like an extra appendage. He practically farted money, as his lavish label-oriented wardrobe indicated. This week he seemed to favor Versace and Nordstrom, and to my pleasant surprise, imported Italian leather which I did not recognize as my cousin, Vinnie, from my missions abroad. And he reeked of the funny-smelling water you bipeds call "cologne." He tended to favor horrendous odiferous scents like Burberry.

Joe Blackberry liked to talk loud enough to be heard above a sonic boom, which for you non-science-oriented bipeds is typically around 167 megawatts per square meter and sometimes exceeds 200 decibels. (As a further reference point, thunder is a sonic boom that occurs naturally during a thunderstorm — just to give you an idea of how loud Joe Blackberry can project on a sunny day in my quiet end of the pasture while stinking up the place with his Burberry cologne.) Each morning at precisely nine o'clock Joe Blackberry snuck into my pasture to call the woman he cheated with on his wife. He didn't want to be overheard moo-ning over a female biped that wasn't his mate by his office superiors, since he coveted a cushy corner office with a leather chair imported from Italy and made from my other cousin, Veal. His carnal sin's name was Candi. Not very original, but he loved to call her lots of cutesy foo-foo names like "pumpkin" and "doll face," terms that would make any grown bull cringe, what you bipeds like to call "pet names". Though, if I had a pet I'd name it something

cool, like George W. Bush or Dick Cheney. Then I could call out for my pet in the pasture: Here Georgie, Georgie! C'mere, boy! And he'd come bounding over with love and adoration in his Homo sapien eyes. But I digress again ...

This morning Joe Blackberry was discussing the many ways he would love to, as he put it so romantically, "boink" Candi. If I didn't have four stomachs, I would have suffered from the ultimate gag reflex. Joe Blackberry's whiny castrato voice carried over the mild morning breeze, mingling with the greasy fast food scent of McDeath from across the street, and as I watched the lights flicker in the sign on top of the fast food joint, I imagined I heard thousands of my comrades mooing in distress.

Depressed, I turned my attention back to Joe Blackberry, instantly cheered by the debacle Joe found himself in. Joe Blackberry had stepped in a pile of cow shit. "What the fuck! Stupid fuckin' cow shit! Hold on a second, Candi."

Amused, I looked up from my morning trough, along with my comrades, to find Joe Blackberry scraping the bottom of his alligator loafer on the edge of my breakfast plate.

"What are you looking at?"

I mooed a reply, to which Joe Blackberry shot back, "Stupid cow. Should make a fuckin' burger outta you an' show you whose boss. Bet you'd taste good with some A-1."

At which point, a great anger swelled within my broad muscled chest, and while Joe Blackberry was busy wiping the bottom of his shoe with a McDeath napkin, one from across the street that he had conveniently tucked in his pocket after breakfast this morning, I sauntered casually

around my breakfast trough and tackled him to the ground, relishing the look of fear in his beady piggy eyes. (No offense to you pigs, though. But he did have piggy eyes. I have nothing but the highest regard for intelligent life forms from other planets and I've read *Charlotte's Web* more than a few times with a teary eye on longer intergalactic vacations with my youngest calf, Angus.)

Joe Blackberry caterwauled like a terrified rabbit and I saw my snorting nostrils reflected in the shiny, wet pupils of his eyes. I held him down with my hooves, breathing hot on his neck. I licked the salty sweat from his brow and then sank my teeth into his jugular. In between hot, fresh mouthfuls of Homo sapien, I remarked to the other cows in the pasture, "Huh, they taste like chicken." Score one for the away team. This cow wasn't taking any bull from anybody any more, any time, any where. I'd taken matters into my own hooves, and I liked it. In fact, the only thing missing from my after-breakfast snack was some mayo and ketchup and that yummy shredded lettuce they use at McDeath. Since I was supposed to be a peaceful ambassador to humankind, a full report would be expected on my superior's desk by morning — standard policy in the involvement of any Homo sapien death. But I was confident my superiors would approve of my actions, and if not, too bad for Joe Blackberry. There were plenty more where he came from.

"Anybody got a toothpick? I've got something stuck in my bottom left molar." At this point, I remembered not having hands. "Oh wait. I don't have opposable thumbs or my beloved pet monkey, Chips, with me. Damn." Even though

I was to spend the morning with the remains of Joe Blackberry between my teeth, my eyes gleamed with glee as I saw an empty alligator loafer lying beside my trough. Never again would my breakfast be interrupted with the coital fantasies of a horny Homo sapien teenager trapped in the overactive imagination of a thirty-something professional. Sadly, as I was walking away, I recognized the alligator shoe as my good friend from Paris, La Coste.

At this point, I caught Moorice staring at a new visitor approaching our corner of the pasture. (For you lesser intelligent beings, Moorice is pronounced "Moo-reese", not "Moo-rice," as in the Asian dish. Moorice is one of my newer recruits, though he is working out quite nicely now that he's mastered the art of silence when following orders. He tended to be a bit chatty before.) "Boss, I think we have a new visitor."

"Your deduction skills astound me sometimes, Moorice."

"What?"

"Hmmm ... Nothing, nothing," I barked. (Though not really. I mean, you wouldn't think a cow would bark like a canine, would you? You can't be that daft.) Move your hooves so I can get a better look at him." I craned my neck in their general direction, pretending to munch lazily on my leftover breakfast.

"But this is pri-iiime real estate you have here, Mr. Raaa-mesh." The big lug of a Texan in his Armani suit adjusted his belt, which I noted was made from one of my former

superiors, Elsie the Borden mascot, instantly sealing the poor unsuspecting twit's fate.

I whispered to Moorice, "You take the stumpy one that smells like bacon with the bad B.O. I'll take the funny brown looking one." What Andy Armani, as I fondly remember him, and Ramesh heard, though, was: Moooo! Moo! Moo! (At this point I would like to take the time to educate you, the reader, about our native dialect of "Moo," Much like some northern bipeds, Eskimos for example, have a polysynthetic language resulting in derivational suffixes and noun-incorporation to describe subtle nuances where a single word can mean an entire phrase, the same is true for our native language. This is why often all a Homo sapien will hear is the word "moo." But really, we're carrying on an intelligent conversation. Who woulda thunk it?)

"Well, what's got his tail in a knot this morning? Cute big feller, ain'te? Too bad he'll be on his way to the stockyards soon with the new development."

"Mr. Kensington, I cannot purchase this land from you."

"Well, tie me 'roun an armadillo an' throw me inna Trinity River. Why on God's green acres, not?"

"Because of the cows, Mr. Kensington. My family is Hindu, though I am an atheist myself, and if my grandmother in India ever found out about this, she would be very displeased with me. And that's putting it mildly. I greatly respect my grandmother and want to live to see my thirtieth birthday."

"You can't buy the land because of the cows?"

My ears perked up and I regarded Ramesh with a strong reverence I reserved only for my highest superiors and my wife and children back home. Perhaps not all Homo sapiens deserved to be food after all.

"No, I cannot. You see, where I come from cows are considered sacred because of their life-giving milk. My grandmother would weep if I sent a whole herd of such beautiful animals to the slaughter yards. I'm sorry, but I cannot buy this land from you." Ramesh walked away, bowing his head to me as he left the pasture. And I was kind of sorry to see the cute little fella go. He would have made a good ally. I decided to research the Hindu community in and around Dallas further for my superiors' weekly report. If their numbers were strong, they might be able to aid our cause.

However, Mr. Kensington fell into the F.O.O.D category. I nudged Moorice with my nose. "You take the left and I'll take the right. The rest of you bring up the rear." I nodded to the herd behind me.

Ironically, Mr. Kensington tripped over Joe Blackberry's lone alligator loafer by the side of my trough as he was exiting the pasture. At the exact moment he tripped, his cell phone rang. My mild Dallas morning was interrupted by Michael Jackson belting tinny from Mr. Kensington's phone: "'Cause this Is Thriller, Thriller Night. And no one's gonna save you from the beast about to strike ..."

Perhaps a small primordial part of Mr. Kensington's ill-used brain sparked alive, a prehistoric caveman snippet of him that remembered a time when he was prey on the menu and still fairly young on the food chain. Or perhaps it was

the loud belch I let out, when Joe Blackberry started to not agree with my four stomachs, but Mr. Kensington turned around right then. He resembled Skippy when he was surprised, the fantail goldfish I used to have back on Planet Moo as a young calf, all pop-eyed and round-mouthed. Or maybe, he looked like someone had slammed his tongue in a pickup door. (I once knew a young calf that happened to in an unfortunate farm accident. He couldn't talk properly for the rest of his career. And every time he opened his mouth, all we heard was "Mmmth!" And so he became useless to our cause in the field, and was put on permanent filing duty at The Division of Moo-tor Vehicles in Plano. Which is hard to do without opposable thumbs, but he had a pet monkey too, so it worked out alright. Well, for him, not the monkey. The monkey was bored, but I digress again ...)

So anyway, Mr. Kensington turned around at that exact moment, all fishy bug-eyed, and saw about twenty pairs of brown steer eyes staring back at him with ravenous intent. (If this scene had been animated, instead of dollar signs reflected in our eyes, I like to imagine we'd have had Steak N' Shake neon signs reflected in ours.) Mr. Kensington made a valiant attempt at scaling the pasture fence, but since he was losing the battle with his waistline and had spent one too many mornings at McDeath across the street eating Sausage McDeaths, he wasn't spry enough to pull his pudge over the fence; sad for him, good for us. Another enemy fallen behind our lines. Though he would have tasted better with some fava beans and a nice Chianti. (Well, not literally. You don't really think I have a kitchen and wine fridge just sitting around the old pasture, do you now? I mean, I am an intelligent life form capable of

intergalactic travel with the flick of a tail, but that's going a bit far, even for you, reader.)

Moochelle took this moment to show up from her constant preening. (She thinks her tail is better than the rest of us, but her farts are just as smelly, trust me. You don't want to be on the tail end of that heifer). "Where'd the stumpy bald guy go?"

"He had a late breakfast engagement." I grinned, hoping I didn't have any Kensington stuck in my bottom molars.

She rolled her eyes and flicked a fly off her round rump with her tail. "Oh, I rather liked him. What's for breakfast?"

"Don't you mean lunch? It's almost lunch time. Really, if you showed up for our morning meetings and kept to a regular schedule Moochelle, you'd be more of an asset than an ass. We need to figure out how to save our pasture and stop feeding the stockyards, or we'll never be able to save our species from imminent destruction."

She huffed and blew her hairy lips at me in a wet raspberry, but soon lost interest when she saw a young leggy blonde waving a Chick-fil-A sandwich, straddling the pasture fence in her Versace black Trapunto boots. She resembled a flamingo on stilts, with her hot pink Burberry trench, which she obviously wore for fashion reasons only, since the day was warming up to be hotter than a cow pie. Bulimic Betsy, as I named her a few weeks ago, had a secret to keep from her coworkers. And the pasture was the only deserted place in the industrial park, or so she thought. She quickly gobbled down her Chick-fil-A sandwich. (Chick-fil-A is one of my most successful campaign projects to date, and

chickens aren't known to be intelligent creatures, so there's no loss of an ally there. They eat rocks. How bright is that? My superiors were quite pleased with the slogan: Eat Mor Chikin. Sadly, McDeaths were still popping up faster than flies.) "Shoulda had a burger," she mumbled with her mouth full.

"Your table awaits madam," I nodded at our unsuspecting dinner entrée. It's a good thing I'd been assigned to a fairly busy pasture, or we would have all starved and never completed any further assignments. My superiors might not like my decision to eat them, instead of befriending them, but the latest stockyard statistics were sure to change their minds.

Did you know reader that cows can eat up to eight hours a day? Why, if every cow ate one Homo sapien per hour per day of their normal eating schedule, the world would be a better, more peaceful place. Don't you think? I think so. Now if you'll excuse me, I have another meal to attend.



Theodore Carter's fiction runs the gamut from humor to literary fiction to horror. He has appeared in several magazines and anthologies including The North American Review, From the Asylum, Yankee Pot Roast, The Potomac Review, Kiss the Sky: Fiction and Poetry starring Jimi Hendrix, and Stress City: A Big Fat Book of Fiction by 51 DC Guys.

Burning Bush: A Christmas Miracle

by Theodore Carter

She heard his car door slam in the driveway, and braced herself for his brutish presence. She'd rehearsed this conversation all afternoon.

"Christmas traffic by the mall," he grumbled as he walked through the door.

He dropped his briefcase on the floor and walked by her into the kitchen, toward the whiskey. She watched him pour a glass, his bushy eyebrows curled into a severe scowl. Lately, she couldn't stop looking at his unkempt eyebrows.

"Honey, I need to ask you something," said Mary.

"What?" Dan asked.

She should have waited until he'd hit that nice spot between his third and fourth drink. "I want to invite my brother for Christmas."

He exhaled deeply, then returned to the living room and plopped into his recliner; drink in one hand, newspaper in the other. The recliner had been her gift to him twelve

years before on their first anniversary. Now the fabric of the chair – and the marriage – had worn thin.

"Jesus, Mary," Dan said.

"That's right. And the wise men, and all that."

Dan shoved his paper into his lap, turned toward her, and glared. He did this a lot. He'd garner all of his nastiness and direct it into his eyebrows until they pulsed like small, heaving, woodland creatures. He'd tilt them at just the right angle to portray his utter disdain for her. Over the years, his eyebrows had grown inversely in relation to the strength of their marriage. With both – the marriage and the eyebrows – she hadn't noticed changes until reaching a crisis point.

"He wants to come Thursday," she said. "I talked to him this morning."

"Fine. For Christ's sake." He turned back to his paper.

"Right. Thank you," she said.

Mary smelled the pot roast burning and ran to the kitchen. Too late. Its ends had shriveled. It looked like a deflated football. Thankfully, Dan had no sense of smell. She wouldn't feel his wrath until dinnertime. Maybe she should inject the beef with antifreeze before then.

When Mary returned to the living room, she added, "And he wants to cook Christmas dinner." Dan exhaled and threw his head back against the top of his recliner. Over the top of his neatly combed, brown hair, she saw the upper ridges of those shaggy eyebrows. They made her feel old and lonely.

"Roast beef."

"You know he won't, Dan." Mary's brother Charles worked as a vegetarian chef. Dan thought this akin to him being a lifeguard who refused to go into the water.

"I guess we won't be having anyone over then."

"Who did you want to invite?"

"That's not the point."

Mary wasn't sure what the point was, and she didn't care. She took Dan's empty glass and went to refill it so she'd be sure he'd had three drinks before seeing the pot roast. When bringing the fresh drink to him, she pretended to stroke him affectionately on his brow. Really, she was trying to flatten his eyebrow with the condensation from the whiskey glass. The renegade hairs bounced back as wild as ever.

Charles returned from the grocery store with loads of plastic bags in each hand. "Hi, Hi," he said, and walked into the kitchen to unload. Mary helped. Charles began humming *Jingle Bell Rock*. Dan came into the kitchen. He hated humming. He conveyed this to Charles with a careful movement of his left eyebrow. Charles stopped.

"What's on the menu, Charles?" Dan asked.

Charles brought his hands together with a clap. "Missile tofu for the main course."

Dan looked at him quizzically, powerfully.

"Marinated in soy sauce, lime, and hot pepper flakes."

"Ah," said Dan. He got out a tumbler and opened the liquor cabinet. Charles had given him a bottle of small-batch whiskey that morning, but Dan got out the Jack Daniels.

Charles had several pans and pots going. Onions sizzled. Water boiled. The exotic aromas filling the house smelled nothing like what Mary produced with her pot roasts and Chicken à la king. Mary played sous-chef, chopping and dicing. Charles cooked and hummed. Dan lurked and drank. Mary didn't look at him, but still she knew that his eyebrows moved, pumped up and down like pistons, as he gave her and Charles disapproving looks from the doorway.

"When are we eating?" he asked.

"Almost," said Charles. She looked at Dan. He rolled his eyes, then retreated into the living room. A bald spot had replaced the cowlick on the back of his head. His bottom had widened and his shoulders were more round than she'd remembered. And yes, even from behind, she could see the very tips of his oversized eyebrows peeking out from the sides of his head.

"Mary, watch this pan for me? I've got to make the dressing," said Charles. They switched spots. She swirled the oil and the onions, smelling their delicious aroma, thankful that this was something Dan couldn't enjoy. Holding the pan, Mary thought about using the hot underside of it to flatten her husband's eyebrows. SMACK!

While cooking the onions, Mary decided Dan's sensory defect should be exploited somehow. It was only fair. He'd dominated her for years with his hulking male body, his role as provider, and now with his menacing eyebrows. Then,

while she stirred, a plan sprang to her mind; a clever, sinister plan. Mary hadn't felt clever in years, and because of this, she decided it necessary to utilize her plan.

She turned off the stovetop flames, then turned the gas back on without igniting it. Charles had his nose in a vinaigrette and didn't notice the scent of gas.

"Dan, can you come here a minute?" Mary asked.

"What?" he said. He entered with heavy steps.

"The pilot light is out," she said.

Charles looked up from his dressing, his nostrils flared, and then his eyes grew wide in horror. Mary shook her head and put her finger to her lips begging him to stay silent. Charles edged toward the doorway.

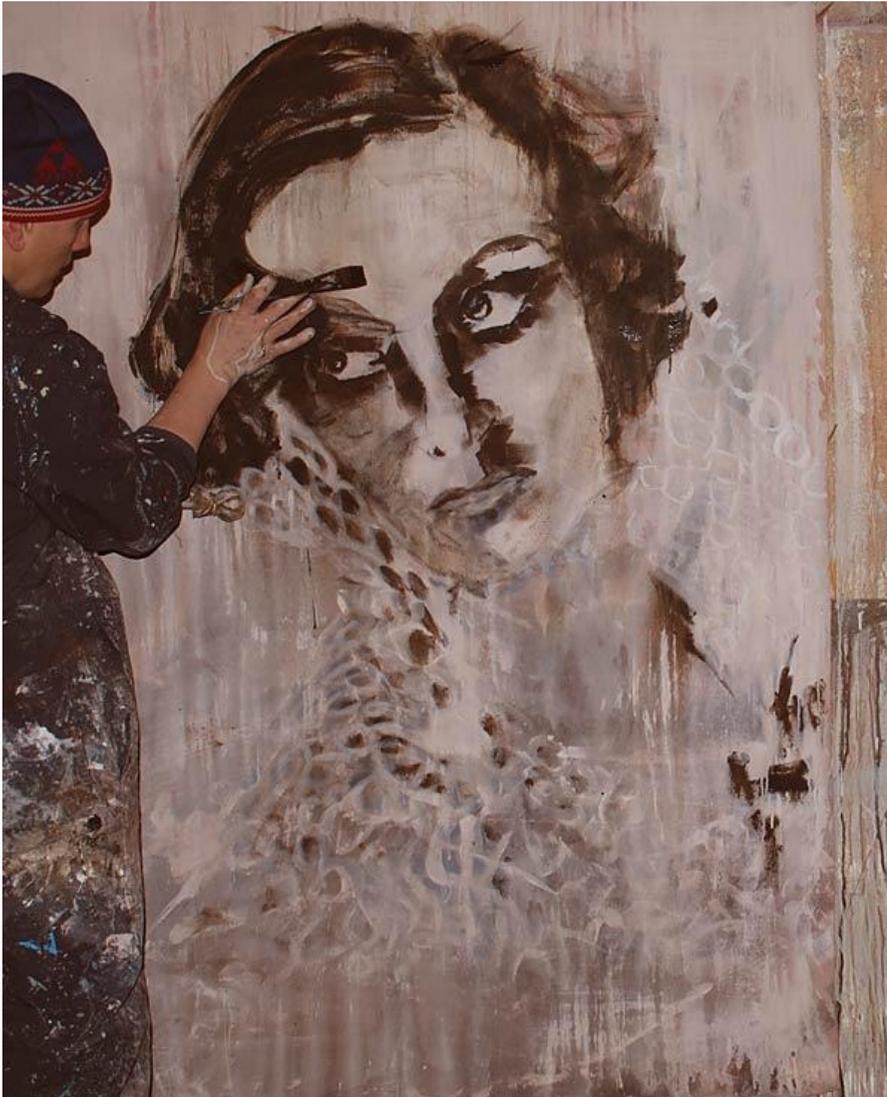
"God damn it," said Dan. Whiskey in hand, he removed the pots and pans from the stovetop one by one, clanking them down hard on the counter. He got a match from the junk drawer. Mary backed up until she was almost in the living room. She pulled Charles over next to her and held his arm tight. She wanted him with her; she wanted his consent. Dan approached the stovetop with a lit match.

Mary had loved Dan at one point, and for that reason, it was only partly enjoyable to watch his whiskey glass explode like a Molotov cocktail. Watching him catch fire, brought up a conflagration of emotions. Part of her reveled in the pleasure of having brought such pain upon him, but she also felt sick to her stomach. He hadn't danced since their wedding day, but he danced around the kitchen now. He screamed. He bled. His hair caught fire. He bumped into the walls leaving burnt skin and blood on the white

paint. Had she really meant for this to happen? Was this the outcome she wanted? Dan turned toward her screaming, his eyes filled with horror, betrayal. His knowing look registered with her, but as she stood face-to-face with him, she focused on his eyebrows, which were completely ablaze. Those, hairy, middle-age-man eyebrows, those furry bushels of contempt, burned on Dan's face. The scene played slowly in Mary's mind. It seemed his eyebrows would burn forever, that she might sit Dan in his recliner and leisurely roast marshmallows over him. And the thought of this, the hideousness of debasing her husband so that he was simply a heat source for campfire treats, made Mary realize that yes, she had meant for this to happen. She didn't need to feel sick. She could even let forth a sinister giggle if she liked.

Charles ran for a towel and threw it over Dan's head. He sunk onto the linoleum floor. Smoke billowed from underneath the towel. Dan whimpered. Mary smiled at Charles, and Charles, whose look of horror had faded, looked almost ready to smile back.

It took fifteen minutes for the ambulance to come, but once Dan had been carted away, Charles finished cooking the missile tofu. Dinner tasted wonderful, largely because Dan wasn't there to criticize it. Of course, she knew she wasn't altogether done with him. There'd be legal rigmarole, divorce proceedings. Whatever happened, she'd be ready. She imagined him across the courtroom from her, trying his best to look menacing without the use of his powerful eyebrows.



Nick Poulton began writing full time, just over twelve months ago after spending ten years working in television in London. It was something he had spent years talking about but never doing. In the time since, he has written two novels and has three more in development. He has also written a number of short stories. After building up this body of work, he will embark on the mission of finding an agent with the aim of publishing a novel.

He relocated from London to Oxfordshire with his wife and later this year will move again to live in rural France, where he hopes the space and quiet will provide him with the perfect environment to continue creating stories (and finally get a dog).

Genesis (Good Willow)

by Nick Poulton

I'm putting the last of the food on my plate when the bulb dies, plunging the room into darkness. A dull pop tells me it isn't the battery. I slam down the pan.

'Bollocks.'

My eyes, so quick to adjust, allow me to see. It's not the darkness that pisses me off – more the thought of getting a new bulb.

I unscrew it from the chipped porcelain lamp base. I threw the shade away years ago – can't have anything dimming it, can I? Tossing it from one hand to the other, I enjoy the feel as the glass burns my skin. Moving to the window, I pull aside the drape. Doesn't matter now; nothing to hide.

Chilly morning air crawls at me through cracks in the glass, easing slyly into the room. I throw a log onto the worktop fire and smoke billows up, stopping to brood against the ceiling. Looks like a sulking genie.

I remember something Tom said about knowing a guy and all that, and as I sit at the table, I make a mental note to go in a bit.

Shovelling simulated meat and eggs into my mouth, I have to work hard to imagine the flavour. Warm food's one thing but I'd give anything to taste real bacon again. Washing it down with a liquid that's orange in colour and vacant in taste, I wonder what it's supposed to be.

A communal hallway door slams and the dog whines. Suddenly I'm standing, my heart trying to break out of its rib-cage prison. I reach for the cricket bat like I always do. Its wood feels comfortable under my fingers. Good willow that, still strong. My hand runs across the grooves lining one edge. I carved them myself, all ninety-nine of them. So close to a century. Images of university flash into my brain like strangers crashing a party.

Footsteps pass the front door and ascend the stairs. I breathe easy, nice and slow. Only old Jonesy; probably back from the trading market. Or the blood-pit.

Hearing the dog whine reminds me I've forgotten to feed it. I take my plate to the landing, where it's tied up. It lifts its head and even yelps in recognition as I approach. I don't stroke it, don't talk to it – never even given it a name. Best not to get too attached. It sniffs at the plate, eating only when I grunt approval. I can make out the sealed eyelids,

where the breeder blinded it at birth. He assured me it'd heighten the dog's senses, make all the difference. I wasn't convinced at the time; the practice had been frowned upon then. Common now though. Different now.

I dress in the kitchen. Wire coat hangers dangling from the curtain rail are as much of a cupboard as I need. Don't need much. As I remove my jacket, they clang together like ashamed church bells, tinny and pathetic. I shove the cricket bat in a makeshift holder over my shoulder – a post-modern sword in a tatty scabbard.

I leave the fire smouldering on the tiles.

The dog's waiting for me in its world of darkness. As I untie it, I can feel quivers of excitement vibrating along the old rope I use as a lead.

Undoing the bolts on the door takes time. They need greasing. The dog's restless, getting more excited as I slide each one back. Leaping up, its paws scratch at the wood, so I tug on the rope and kick out at its back legs. It collapses to the floor, tail still. I should feel pity, but truth is I feel nothing at all.

Before drawing back the last bolt, I put an ear to the door. No sound. Good sign that, safe sign. A hinge squeaks as I open it. Dangerous that, like a beacon. Needs fixing.

The vast hallway beckons, as dark as the devil's soul. The dog rushes forward, so I loop the rope around my hand twice and haul it back. Closing the door behind, I don't lock it. No need, the bulb or the dog is all they'd want anyway. Nothing else worth taking.

The communal front door hangs at an angle from rusted hinges, clinging desperately to its identity. It hasn't been closed for as long as I can remember. The building manager gave up. No point fixing it, he'd said, cheaper to get burgled. Long time ago, that. Doesn't matter now.

We hover inside, watching the street. Two burnt-out cars squat in the centre of the road like giant torched beetles – it's been years since they were abandoned. The tarmac's charred black beneath, almost consuming the white road markings that stubbornly whisper odes to regulation. Graffiti covers the building opposite. Late morning gloom's attempting to disguise it in shades of grey, rather than reveal its truth in garish colour. The words 'FUK IT' still say the same thing though.

Need to check for movement, so I lengthen the lead, letting the dog go on ahead. It keeps its nose to the ground, seeking danger. Only when the rope becomes taut do I move out from the shelter of the building. Can't wait there all day, can I?

My eyes pick out details; not as good as they once were. Good enough, though; good enough to see them come. With my eyes and the dog's nose, we'll be fine, we'll be grand.

A small fire's burning on the corner next to the launderette. The windows are empty of glass, but the machines remain, standing quiet and empty like stubborn robot sentries keeping vigil at a long forgotten post. No need to wash clothes now. Too dark to see them. The smell's bad, but people don't get too close, so what does it matter? Dog doesn't care. Dog's happy for food and shelter.

We move on, walking over a faint zebra crossing. Not sure why, just proper, that's all. Turning into the high street, shops and takeaways stare mournfully at each other across the void; relics of another time. Signs above have been removed, the gap between ground and first floor windows revealing naked brick. I stop at the deserted fish-and-chip shop and inhale – it's funny how it still smells of chip fat. Chip fat and waste. The dog strains at the lead, eager to go in. I pull it away.

In the distance, I can see a bundle lying on the pavement. A dog, skinny and small, is pulling at it in rigid jerks. It looks up as we approach, a stray; it still has its eyes. One's fine but there could be more, so we wait, locked in a laughable standoff. Quickly realising it's no match, the stray slinks away. No reinforcements, no chance. I stare at the bundle. How long's it been there? Days most likely, maybe weeks. Crosses my mind to search it but I resist. No sense wasting time. Besides, others will have got to it already, probably killed it in the first place.

We cross the street. No zebra crossing here, no rules here. Dark splotches of chewing gum sprinkle the pavement, darkened over time; rotted like most things.

I'm glad to get off the high street. Never a good stretch. In front of me, terraced houses line the road. Which one is it? Difficult to remember – they all look the same. Without numbers or names, it's a guessing game. Somewhere in the middle seems familiar. Move on again, mindful of ambush. Place is as silent as a condemned opera house.

It's the birdbath I recognise. Small and made of stone, proud in its patch of decimated lawn. A puddle of water

slouches in it, stagnant and thick. I chuckle at the irony of baths for birds as I approach the front door.

Three short raps, two with pauses, and then two quick taps.

I know Tom's got a dog; wouldn't think it to stand here though. Breed them for silence, it's important they're quiet. Tightening my grip on the lead, I pull my dog closer. It whines. Smelling the other, maybe. Better not be a bitch in heat. Unlikely though.

Footsteps close on the other side of the door, followed by the sound of bolts being drawn. It opens a chink and a muzzle appears low down, teeth bared. The dog lunges forward and I yank it back, hissing a command. It obeys, still pulling, but less so.

'Yeah?' comes a voice from the darkness.

'Shopping.'

There's a pause before the door closes. I wait, listening as the dog inside gets bundled into another room. I Hear it yelp. The door opens again, wider this time. I move inside. Behind me, Tom locks the door and leads me along the corridor towards the back of the house. Shuffles like an old man, Tom. Younger than me though, I could be his dad.

We enter the kitchen. Fire's burning in the corner, smoke's thick. Needs an outlet. Needs a flue. A round table of white plastic and three matching chairs, made for outside, are the only furniture. Tom gestures to one, eyeing the dog. I sit down. Dog stays close.

'Lucky to have this,' I say, running a hand across the table's surface. 'Good quality.'

Tom watches me through eyes as wide as a newborn calf, as lethal as a panther. He looks more tired than hope itself.

'What do you need?' he asks.

'Light.'

'Don't we all?'

I smile but don't reply.

'What did you have?'

I hesitate slightly before reaching into my pocket. When I do, I can feel the glass under my fingers, smooth and perfect. Broken though. What does it matter? How long have I had it? Months? Years? All that time it hasn't failed. All that time it was good. Broken now though; no good now. I pull it out and hold it up. My hand shakes.

I see Tom's eyes widen and a flash of anger smashes into me like a wave on perfect sand. I wait, steadying myself, soaking it up. I blink and then swallow it back down. Bulb's broken anyway. I hold it out. Tom hovers then takes it, turning it gently. Might as well be oil.

'60 watts, 240 volts,' he mutters after a moment. 'Beautiful. How long?'

I shrug. No idea.

Tom watches, more panther than calf. 'Tricky.'

I nod.

'Need to check,' he adds, getting up.

For some reason my bladder lurches. I stand. Tom hesitates, staring at me. I lower slowly and sit down. Tom

leaves the room, shutting the door behind him. The dog whines.

Something like a fist clutches at my intestines. Need to look for an escape route. Just in case. Can't be too careful. The back door's barricaded with wood. Looks solid. No chance there. Backed into a corner. Foolish. The only way out is the way Tom's gone. I kick out at the dog and move towards the door. No noise. No life. Bad sign. Ambush possibly. Fucking Tom. Known him a long time. Almost trust him. Not now though. Has the bulb. Broken, though. Still mine, though.

I reach up to where the handle of the bat stands behind my shoulder and grip it, easing it out of the scabbard. Slides nicely, slides quietly. No problem there. I use it to push down on the handle and pull the door open.

Hall's empty, and as cold as a tomb awaiting a body. No sound. The dog moves forward and I follow. Front door's locked. No way out. Need to batter it down. No chance though.

I hear nothing as the dog jumps round but I know it's Tom. Traitor! About to die. Fucked up. Should know better. I swing the bat hard. Head height, best way. The crack sounds dull in the damp hall and Tom hits the floor, neck bent. The dog goes for his throat and grips. Fierce. Well trained. I pull it back and it moves behind me, tail low, ears back. Shivering.

I kneel by Tom's side. No movement. No pulse. He's still holding the bulb, even in death it's too important to let go. Next to him is a small cardboard box. Yellow, old and dusty.

I pick it up and open it. A new bulb. Heart's racing now. Tom's okay. No problem with old Tom. No betrayal. He brought light.

A scrabbling from the other side of the door tells me his dog knows. Time to go. I pull the key from around Tom's neck. Bit of blood. Not too bad. At the front door I listen. All quiet. All good. I open up. The dog dashes out and I follow. Pull the door shut. No one'll know. Better that way.

* * *

Back at home there's fresh wood on the worktop. The drape covers the window and the new bulb's shining hot, almost white.

I sit in smoke, working at the cricket bat with a knife. Needs sharpening. Should do the job though. The new notch is pale and fresh; the century's up. Unfortunate for Tom.

A door upstairs slams. I drop the knife and grip the bat, listening. Footsteps descend, passing outside. Old Jonesy, off to get food. No worries.

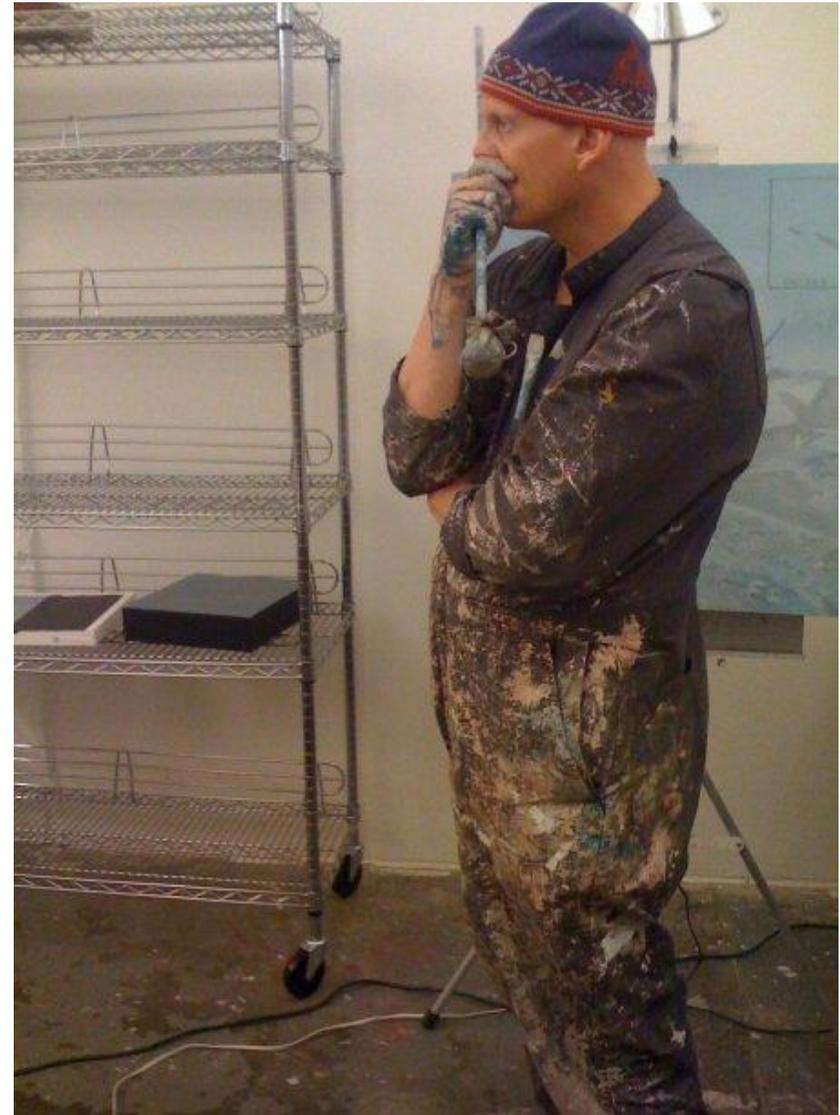
I put the bat down, running my fingers over the notches. I can remember every hit.

Good willow that. Still strong.

Intimacy

by Cheryl Snell

The women's underwater voices
blow deeper into bad weather.
They talk about men and mothers,
body parts defunct or drifting, lay out
secrets that catch one another off guard
with the meal they make of them.
They will not stop until well
into the dinner rush, the room brightening
with electric light and the wide eyes
of eavesdroppers, who pretend not to see
the women as they rise to go, eyes full
of the knowledge they have shared
too much to ever meet again.



Valerie Z Lewis has a BS in English Education from New York University, an MFA in Writing from Goddard College, and works as a writing professor at SUNY Orange. Her fiction has been published by Fresh Boiled Peanuts, The Pitkin Review, Torquere Press, SNReview, and Dark Sky Magazine.

NSA

by Valerie Z Lewis

Halfway through the morning briefing, all Matt Ryan had been able to process was that there was a tiny, almost-invisible fly circling the donut box at the center of the table, and Matt could've caught it with her fingers, if only she was a ninja. The fly landed on the edge of the donut box, but didn't stay long, sailing to the opposite side of the table, circling Agent Brinkman's head, dancing on top of Agent Rodriguez's mechanical pencil, and then soaring upward, disappearing in the glow of the fluorescent light. Matt reached out, got a donut, took a bite, and half of it crumbled on top of the pile of papers in front of her stamped 'Classified'. She totally failed as a ninja.

"Agent Ryan."

Matt looked up and smiled. "Chief?"

Chief Wagner scratched the back of his bald head. "Agent Ryan, your work on Project Firebridge was exemplary."

"Thank you, sir." Project Firebridge ended up being little more than calling the L.A. branch, having them fax over a

document, and then translating and annotating it. But Chief Wagner and the other high-level good old boys, who spent the eighties assassinating KGB officers and romancing misunderstood European prostitutes, were overly impressed by detailed research and Powerpoint presentations, and Matt had always been ridiculously book-smart.

"You're going on a field assignment," he continued. "We believe there's an individual impersonating an NSA agent. Chatter says he's establishing contacts now in New York, and he could be building toward something. Page 38."

Matt brushed the remains of her donut onto her lap and flipped to page 38, a memo entitled "Imposter SK7 May Have Links to Terrorist Organizations".

Matt looked back up at the Chief and forced a smile. It was still her first year in the NSA; her degree was in Political Science with a minor in Poetry, and in the past five minutes she'd been defeated by both a fly and a chocolate-covered donut. She definitely wasn't ready for imposter terrorists, seeing as how the only way she'd win in a fight was if the suspect challenged her to a Sudoku puzzle.

"Chief, I appreciate..." She cleared her throat. "I welcome the challenge, but unfortunately I haven't completed field training, and - "

Chief Wagner silenced her with a raised palm. "It's mostly research. Once you get a name, call it into the secure line and we'll send in a team. You don't have to confront anyone."

Matt turned a page in her packet to find a plane ticket. "But I have to go to New York?" She put her fake smile back in place. "And it will be a wonderful opportunity."

Matt spent the evening alone in her apartment reading and re-reading the background information on the suspect. He was a male who went by the aliases "Commander" and "SK7". He communicated with his potential recruits through coded online messages, where he often referred to "Operation Green", which the NSA believed was an environmental terrorism plot. Though his IP address fluctuated, it was often traced back to the West Village of Manhattan, and arrangements had been made for Matt to stay at a hotel in the area.

There were maps and reports and three-page footnotes to one-page memos. Matt usually spent her days writing reports like these, and she hadn't realized before how tedious it was to read them. She lay down on her living room floor and organized the documents by priority while half-watching a movie about kickboxing. She considered calling her ex-boyfriend, Alex, but quickly decided that twenty minutes of mediocre sex wasn't worth the inevitable week of drunken three-am phone calls. Eventually, Matt just made a grilled cheese sandwich, accidentally set a dish towel on fire, put two t-shirts in a duffel bag, and went to bed.

Working in her New York hotel room didn't go much better. Matt booted up her laptop, took out all her paperwork, and then stared at a blank Word document for half an hour before ordering a fruit basket from room service, watching a Matlock marathon on television, and eating so many

tangerines that her fingernails turned orange. Around midnight she finally felt guilty enough to begin her investigation log, though all she could do was summarize her objectives.

After checking her personal e-mail and logging into the NSA server to check her work e-mail, Matt opened a new browser tab and, just on a whim, Googled "commander sk7 nsa". The first result had all three terms, and Matt clicked on it. It was a Craig's List posting in the Casual Encounters category:

sk8 guy seeks nsa

unemployed and bored. looking for friends, maybe more, no expectations. into graffiti art, music, operation ivy, sxe. hit me! kcommander777@yahoo.com.

Matt saved a screen capture of the page. While it looked like a basic friend request, it had all the red flags: a reference to the NSA, the alias "Commander", the alias "SK" (with an 8 instead of a 7, which had to be a code), and "Operation Ivy", which sounded like a phase of "Operation Green". This had to be how he was communicating with his operatives. She Googled "SXE" and found the New York Stock Exchange listing for Stanley Industries, an IT company that contracted with the Defense Department.

"Holy shit," Matt breathed out. The conspiracy went further up than they'd thought.

After making notes in her field log, saving web pages and screen captures, and backing it all up to the NSA server, Matt opened a Yahoo account with the username matilda_newyork7 and sent an e-mail to kcommander777:

SK8 Guy,

I hear what you're saying.

When she woke up the next morning, there was a message waiting for her:

matilda! awesome to hear from u! in ny? wanna hang? -
kadia

Matt froze with her fingers on the keyboard. The suspect wanted to meet with her. But she wasn't a field agent. She couldn't interrogate someone. She'd never even been issued a gun, which was fine with her, since she was pretty sure she'd accidentally shoot herself long before she had a chance to turn the gun on someone else.

Matt hit the "Reply" button. She was supposed to get a name and call it in. Right now all she had was a Craig's List post and a pseudonym. If she met with the suspect, she could call in a description and an address. She could even look around for evidence when his back was turned.

"If he doesn't kill me," Matt muttered.

Kadia,

I'm free tonight. Give me a time and a place. Maybe we could have coffee?

The response came while she was studying the room service menu for her breakfast options.

there's a starbucks on 6th ave and 10th – not to be confused with the starbucks on 6th and 11th lol. my place is 615 10th st right next to the starbucks. i'll be at an outside table, wearing green. 8pm ok?

"I'll be there," Matt said as she typed her reply. She hit 'Send' and added, "Try not to shoot me in the head execution-style and dump my body in the river."

Matt spent the day doing as much research as she could, talking to some of her fellow NSA agents, and making phone calls to other intelligence offices, but other than reports of vague, coded chatter, there was no new intel. She took a shower, put on the cleanest-looking of the plain t-shirts she'd brought with her, and walked to the corner of 6th and 10th.

There were at least ten outdoor tables, and more than half of them were full, but Matt spotted Kadia right away. He was a slender young guy in a green sweater with medium-brown skin. He was sitting back in his plastic chair, sipping at a grande-sized drink, and surveying the people walking by on the sidewalk. He had a small, welcoming smile, as if he was sitting on a front porch in the country, and the passing crowd was comprised of his personal friends.

Matt stopped walking abruptly. The "Commander" was a kid. He couldn't have been older than twenty-one. He looked like the type of person who was more likely to loiter in front of a record store than command an environmental terrorism plot. Matt turned around and ducked into the doorway of an apartment building. She had to get away before he spotted her.

But then she remembered a presentation Agent Brinkman had given a few weeks ago. Matt had fallen asleep as soon as the lights turned off and the slideshow started, but she remembered being struck by the introductory remarks. Agent Brinkman pointed out that the terrorists of the future

would be diverse and not easily identifiable. "Our enemies are smart," he'd said. "They're recruiting college kids and old ladies – the last people you'd profile as terrorists, because these are the people who can get past security without arousing suspicion."

Matt poked her head out of the doorway. Kadia was drumming his fingers on the table top and bopping his head to music only he could hear. A Starbucks employee was wiping down the tables, and the kid waved at him and smiled, though the employee completely ignored him. Well, Matt thought, apparently the terrorists of the future are stoners.

When Matt approached the table, Kadia looked up right away.

"Hi," Matt said. She held out her hand, but Kadia leapt from his seat and pulled her into a hug. Though the suddenness surprised Matt, she was oddly comfortable with it. Kadia smelled like strawberry-scented shampoo and felt warm all over, despite the breezy evening air.

"Matilda, right?" he said as he released her and went back to his chair. "Unless I just totally assaulted a stranger and now you're gonna call the cops and I can like, hug big hairy guys in prison who won't be nearly as cute as you." He leaned on his elbow and half-hid his smile behind his fist. "Well, I'm sure some of them are cute."

Matt chuckled. "I usually go by Matt."

"That's cool. Matilda sounds like a Disney villain, right? Like me, Kadia. I mean, in college it's cool to be all individual and stuff, but yeah, like, having a girl's name in junior high

gym class sucked so hard." He took a sip from his coffee cup. "Oh, hey, you want something?" He gestured to the storefront behind him. "This place serves coffee, except they make it extra-expensive and pretentious. It's this whole thing. I think it's gonna catch on."

Matt stood up. "Yeah, I could use a latte."

Kadia jumped to his feet. "I'll get it. What kind?"

"Caramel?"

Kadia grinned. "Awesome, you're like me! It's not coffee unless it's eighty percent sugar, right? Be right back."

When Kadia returned with a caramel latte for her and a new mocha for himself, he dove right in to the personal questions Matt was completely unprepared for. One of the standard cover stories given to NSA agents is that they worked as consultants for a mergers and acquisitions firm, and they were in town for business. It explained why the agent lived in a hotel, and mentioning "mergers and acquisitions" usually bored people and didn't lead to many follow-up questions.

Except, of course, with Kadia.

"That sounds so awesome," he said, leaning forward on his elbows. "So like, what exactly does that mean?"

"Um, well." Matt paused to take a sip of her latte. "Well, I merge things, and then I..." she tore a corner off the cup's sleeve. "Acquire them?"

Kadia laughed. "It's probably crazy complicated, right? Don't even bother trying to dumb it down for me." He took

a sip of his coffee. "So do you wanna hear some music? I just got into this new band, and they have this amazing single. You know how it is when you find something totally awesome and shiny and new, and you just want to tell everyone?"

"Where is this music?"

"At my place." Kadia stood up. He noticed Matt's hesitation and his eyes widened. "Oh, hey, please don't be freaked out. To be honest, you could probably kick my ass. I'm, like, not very coordinated."

Matt smiled. "I bet I have you beat in that area. Ever set a dishtowel on fire? I did that just last night."

Kadia raised a fist in triumph. "I set a potholder on fire making toast just this morning."

"Then I guess you win," Matt said as she stood up.

Kadia reached out and took her hand. "Come on. I promise I won't murder you and slice your body into delicious cuts of meat."

"Does that mean you'll slice my body into sub-standard cuts of meat?"

Kadia turned to look at her and laughed, smiling with his whole face, his eyes filled with the stars above them, were they not washed out by light and smoke.

Kadia's building was right next door, the one where Matt had briefly hidden. Like most places in the neighborhood, it was large and immaculate by New York standards, and

Kadia's apartment had high ceilings, huge windows, two bedrooms, and a spacious living area.

"Wow," Matt said as she walked in behind him. "I didn't know the sub-standard meat industry was doing so well."

Kadia laughed. "Nah, I'm just housesitting. I kind of dropped out of college this semester, and my parents kind of hate me for that, so if it wasn't for housesitting, I'd be living in the park." He went to the stereo and fiddling with the ipod sitting on top of it. "Okay, ready?"

Matt took her jacket off and set it down on the leather couch.

Kadia hit a few buttons on the ipod, then turned to face her. "Okay, this is one of those songs that just gets stuck in your head all day and you write down the lyrics and tape it to your dresser so you can sing it in the mirror and you tell all your friends to download it and you listen on your ipod while you're skating behind the grocery store thinking how cool it would be to make a skate video with this song playing in the background and then right before it hits the chorus have some random kid break their wrist just for the shot, you know?"

"What?" Matt said, but Kadia hit a button on the stereo and the music began playing.

It was an upbeat song with a dirty guitar riff and a vocalist that sounded like he was either choking to death or having an orgasm. While Matt hadn't followed any particular style of music since high school, she liked the song enough to nod her head along with the beat.

Kadia rushed up to her and took her hands, and they launched into a silly dance, swinging their hands back and forth and shaking their hips. Kadia tried to sing along, but the lyrics were so unintelligible that eventually he just made up his own, and soon the chorus became, "Dance with me, Matt. You're awesome like that. Dance with me, Matt. You're awesome like that."

The song ended with each of them twirling in a circle while headbanging, and Matt collapsed on the couch as Kadia went to the stereo and turned the volume down. She pushed her hair out of her face and tried to catch her breath.

"That was so much fun," Matt said as Kadia sat down next to her. "I can't remember the last time I was exhausted from dancing and not from working all night."

"Oh yeah, working sucks," Kadia said. "I gotta tell you, being a drop-out loser is totally the way to go."

Matt turned to look at him. "Will you show me how to make money killing people and slicing them into meat?"

"Will you show me how to merge and acquire things?"

"Will you burn me a CD of weird rock music?"

Kadia bit down on his lower lip as he smiled. "Will you kiss me?"

Matt only hesitated for a second. A kiss was harmless, and it would make him trust her, and then he'd be willing to let her in on his plot. She could bring down his entire operation, earn herself plenty of praise in the NSA, and maybe even get a promotion.

But when she ran her fingertips along his jaw line, grabbed the back of his neck, and pulled his face against hers, it was because she wanted to, because he smelled nice and smiled all the time and danced with her in the living room. His mouth was warm and tasted like chocolate. He put his hand over hers and squeezed it gently, and she sucked on his lower lip and didn't think about anything.

But when Kadia pulled away, it all came rushing back, and Matt realized she was kissing a suspect. She hadn't read much of the NSA handbook, but she was sure "making out with terrorists" was in the "Don't" column.

"Um.." Kadia began.

"Yeah," Matt said. "I should go."

Kadia inched away from her on the couch, breaking each point where their bodies were touching, eyeing her warily.

"Maybe I could see you tomorrow?" Matt asked.

Kadia's face brightened with his smile. "Yeah, totally," he said. "I'm usually at the Gristede's parking lot in Park Slope until, like, four, and then I come home for dinner."

Matt stood up and retrieved her jacket. "How about I stop by around five?"

"Yeah, awesome." Kadia stood up, but didn't make a move toward her. "I'd kiss you again, but then you might like, think I'm too easy."

Matt smiled. "Yeah, you better watch out, slut."

Kadia laughed.

Back at the hotel, Matt typed up her notes about meeting Kadia, including his address, but excluding the kissing. In addition to uploading her investigation log to the NSA server, she e-mailed it to Chief Wagner, along with the note, "Strong suspect. I will attempt to retrieve more evidence, but proceed with counter-terrorism measures at will."

Matt closed her eyes and took a deep breath before clicking "Send". She wanted to see Kadia again before she got him arrested, but she wasn't about to put millions of people's lives at risk because she liked dancing with the suspect.

There was a missed call from Alex on her phone, but Matt deleted the voicemail without listening to it and went to bed.

The next day when Matt buzzed Kadia's apartment, he appeared at the door with a crazed grin on his face and an armful of snack food.

"You're just in time!" he shouted. "Come on, come on!"

Matt followed him up to the fourth floor landing, where he sat on the floor and dropped the food between his legs. "What's going on?" she asked.

He gestured for her to sit beside him. "Every day at five, Mrs. Katz in apartment 7 comes home and yells at me, then locks her door and screams on the phone about linoleum."

Matt sat down and took the orange juice box and bag of potato chips Kadia handed her. "Linoleum?"

Kadia nodded as he unwrapped his straw. "It's the weirdest thing. She's always screaming about someone about selling her linoleum. And she totally hates me."

"So you sit here and wait for her to yell at you?"

Kadia put the straw in his mouth and grinned around it. "Young people these days watch too much TV. I try to get some of my entertainment from, you know, the real world."

Matt laughed and took a sip of juice.

It was just a few minutes later when a tall, thin, gray-haired woman stomped up the stairs with an energy that seemed impossible at her age. When she caught sight of Kadia, she stopped on the stairway and narrowed her eyes. She pointed one long, bony finger at him and shouted, "Hooligan!"

"Good evening, Mrs. Katz," Kadia said cheerfully. "What a pleasure to see you."

"You are a filthy hooligan," Mrs. Katz said, her finger still extended. "Get away from my door."

Kadia hugged his knees to his chest and tried to stifle a giggle. "I'm not near your door. I'm near the stairs. The stairs are the property of, like, everyone."

Mrs. Katz stomped to the landing and glowered down at Matt. "Stay away from this hooligan, young lady. He's nothing but trouble." She shot Kadia a nasty look. "He was probably smoking drugs all day."

Kadia waved at her as she turned away. "I'm straightedge, but thanks for your concern."

"Lousy bastard," Mrs. Katz muttered, then slammed the door behind her.

Kadia collapsed into giggles as he leaned against Matt's shoulder. "I swear, I never did anything to her."

Matt put her arm around his shoulders. "She's just always hated you?"

"It's gotta be a skin color thing," Kadia said. "Either that or she's just nuts."

The sound of shouting came from apartment 7, but the only phrase they could make out clearly was "fucking delivery". Kadia pressed his face against Matt's shoulder and started giggling all over again.

"You are a strange boy," Matt said, though she couldn't help laughing as well.

"I know, I know." Kadia raised his head. "I have some real food at my place if you want. We could leave Mrs. Katz alone for now."

"Sounds good." Matt stood up and reached down to help Kadia to his feet.

After a dinner of sandwiches and chips in front of the television, Kadia cleared the paper plates and said, "Wanna see something top secret?"

Matt's ears perked up. He was going to tell her about Operation Green, Commander SK7, or the terrorist cell he was building. She would be able to give the Chief some solid intel.

Before she could respond, Kadia dashed out of the room, and returned with a plastic three-ring binder, which he placed carefully on her lap.

"Don't think I'm weird, okay?" he said softly.

"I know what this is," Matt said.

Kadia's eyes lit up. "You could tell? Like, about me?"

Matt nodded. She ran her hand over the front of the binder. "You can trust me to keep this confidential."

"Thanks," Kadia said. "It's just, you know, I'm always afraid people are gonna laugh, you know? And if my friends knew, they'd be all, like, dude, you're such a pussy."

"What?" Matt opened the front of the binder to find a typed poem. She scanned it once, then read it again, and looked up at Kadia. "Where is this from?"

"From, uh..." He smiled. "Me."

"Holy shit." Matt turned the page and read the next one.

"Holy shit. This is like if Yeats and Ginsberg had a baby together." She looked up at him. "And the baby was fucking brilliant."

Kadia's smile widened. "Shut up. You're just saying that because I'm so cute."

Matt turned another page. "I've studied poetry. This is brilliant." She tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned down, as if getting closer to the page would make the words even more powerful. "Can you print me a copy? You have to print me a copy."

Kadia ducked his head, suddenly shy. "Yeah, sure, if you want." He ruffled the edge of the pages. "The ones in the back though, they're like, older stuff, and probably not as good, so you can skip those if you want, and I won't – "

Matt leaned over the open binder and kissed her. The binder stabbed her in the stomach a few times before she could be bothered to move it to the side. She wrapped her arms around Kadia's neck and kissed him again and again.

"That impressed you?" Kadia asked between kisses. "'Cause I was gonna buy you flowers but I – " he paused to kiss her again. "I don't have any money."

Matt kissed her a few more times before pulling back, though she kept their faces close together. "I don't want to..." she said. "Well, I want to, but I can't – "

"It's cool, we don't have to do anything but this," Kadia said, kissing her softly on the nose.

When Matt kissed her again, she pushed him backwards, and ended up lying half on top of him. They made out for what seemed like hours, until they were both too exhausted to move. And it wasn't until Matt was walking down Sixth Avenue, hugging a copy of Kadia's poems to her chest, that she realized she hadn't gotten any information about his terrorist cell.

The e-mail from Chief Wagner said, "The Commander posted on an extremist website today, and we traced the IP to your suspect's building. A team is going in tomorrow at eight p.m. Stay clear of the suspect. Good work, Agent Ryan."

Matt closed her laptop and collapsed on the bed, still holding the sheets of poetry. She couldn't believe that Kadia wrote terrorist propaganda online and then grabbed some juice boxes for them to share while hanging out in a hallway. She couldn't believe that Kadia plotted environmental terrorism and then wrote the most beautiful amateur poetry she'd ever read.

She got up and shoved the poems in the trash can beside her bed. Criminals were often charming, and she'd fallen for it like a rookie. She decided that when she woke up in the morning, she would get the first flight back to D.C., go home, take a day off work, get her tires rotated, and never think about Kadia again.

Matt woke up the next morning and did the exact opposite.

"I am so bad at my job," Matt said that evening as Kadia poured them some grape juice in his living room.

"So quit," Kadia said, taking a seat beside her. "What did you always want to be when you were a kid?"

"A ninja," Matt said immediately.

Kadia gasped with delight. "Me too! I was always such a screw-up, you know, but ninjas – "

"Ninjas can do anything," Matt said. "Ninjas don't let their bosses pressure them or their ex-boyfriends call all the time."

"Or drop out of college and hide from their parents," Kadia added. "Totally. We totally have to be ninjas. What's the first step?"

Matt set her glass down and leaned back against the couch. "Well, we'll have to get some nunchucks."

"Awesome. I love when the first step is shopping." He leaned back beside her and put his arm around her.

Matt closed her eyes. "I might have to go home soon."

"Sucks." Kadia kissed her temple. "But we can still e-mail, right? And maybe I can see you again, like, next trip you make."

Matt just smiled in response. She would probably see him next at his trial when she testified against him, if he didn't disappear to a secret overseas CIA prison.

She felt Kadia brush her hair away from her ear. He leaned over and whispered, "Don't be sad."

Matt opened her eyes, and his smile was so honest and bright that she just had to kiss it. She wrapped her arms around him and let herself get lost in the feeling of their lips pressed together, and his hand soft against the side of her face.

When Matt hooked her fingers underneath the waistband of Kadia's jeans, he took in a sharp, audible breath, and his entire body tensed.

"Let me." Matt felt dizzy just at the first touch of his skin. She undid the top button and let her hand slide in further. Kadia buried his face in the crook of her neck. She could feel his chest tremble and his breath stutter, and she felt a sudden surge of protectiveness. She closed her eyes and tried to think about the rhythm of her heartbeat and her hand, instead of how she would need to get out of the

apartment in less than an hour unless she wanted to get arrested by the NSA tactical unit.

Kadia's breathing became quicker and more ragged, and he gasped, "You're seriously awesome" into her ear. Matt started laughing in spite of her worries, and when Kadia tried to kiss her, she still couldn't stop. When he came into her hand, their arms were wrapped around one another, and they were smiling against each other's mouths.

Matt rolled off of him and pulled a throw blanket over them. Kadia looked at her with heavy eyes, rubbed her shoulder, and said, "Can I...?"

"Go to sleep." Matt kissed him on the cheek.

"Okay." Kadia turned on his side and gave her a long look before closing his eyes. "I'll see you when I wake up."

Matt waited until the motion of his chest became steady before gently untangling her limbs from his and getting up off the couch. She noticed a backpack in the corner of the room and went over to it. When she picked it up, a skateboard almost fell out from behind it, but she caught it before it could make too much noise.

As she tried to lean it back into place, she noticed the letters "sXe" painted graffiti-style on the bottom of the skateboard, and her heart sank. It was the business the Commander was involved with. But then she looked closer, and underneath the logo was written, "straightXedge 4 lyfe".

Matt knelt down and opened the backpack. Inside was a Columbia University folder with a doodled "sk8r" on it. She

opened the folder and a bent student ID fell out. The picture was of Kadia with shorter hair, and the name read "Kadia Commander". Matt reached further into the bag, finding only unlabeled CDs, except for one, with a picture of a dancing figure on the cover and the title "Operation Ivy".

Matt dropped the bag and ran into the kitchen while dialing her cell phone.

"Chief Wagner," Matt said when he answered. "Abort the team headed for 615 Tenth Street."

"Are you on a secure line?" the Chief asked.

"I have the wrong guy," Matt continued. "Commander's his last name, SK8 means 'skate', and Operation Ivy's a band."

"Agent Ryan," the Chief said firmly. "You are not permitted to call me from the field. This is not a secure –"

"Call off the tactical unit!" Matt shouted.

"They should be there already!" the Chief yelled back. "Give them the suspect and we can sort this out in processing."

"Processing? He'll be in Guantanamo before I can even - "

Matt began, but he'd already ended the call.

"Motherfucker," Matt muttered as she rushed back into the living room. She almost ran into Kadia, who was standing up and looking half-asleep and confused.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Matt grabbed him by the shoulders. "Listen, they'll be here any second. I'll do whatever I can to help you, but sometimes prisoners disappear – "

Kadia smiled and put his arms around her. "Matt, what are you talking about?"

Matt sniffled. "I wish I could just stay here with you forever," she said as her eyes filled with tears. "I wish we could just dance and drink juice and laugh at your crazy neighbor with the linoleum – "

"Oh, wait," Kadia interrupted. "Did I say linoleum? I meant petroleum."

Matt just stared at him.

"Oh, wait," Kadia continued. "I meant plutonium."

Matt's eyes widened. "Plutonium? She's buying plutonium?"

Kadia nodded. "Yeah. Is that like petroleum?"

"Wait, what's her first name?" Matt asked.

"I think it's Sarah."

Matt took a step back. "Sarah Katz in apartment 7. SK7. She's the Commander."

"Cool," Kadia said. "So like, what are we talking about?"

Matt rushed to the chair where she'd dropped her jacket, took her NSA badge out, and shoved it into her pants pocket. "Stay here," she called back to Kadia as she rushed out the door. "If you hear gunshots, get down."

Matt got out onto the third floor landing just as she heard the front door of the building splinter and break open. She saw the first of the tactical unit enter, men dressed in riot gear and carrying automatic weapons. If she rushed them, they wouldn't hesitate to shoot her, regardless of the

badge. She needed some way to get their attention before they could take aim.

As the armed men moved up the stairway, Matt grabbed onto the railing, climbed over it, and hung down so that her feet would be the first thing the men would see as they turned the corner to the second floor landing. She took one hand off the railing, dug the badge out of her pocket, and held it up just as the team rounded the corner.

"NSA! Hold your fire!" she shouted. "I'm agent Matilda Ryan, and I'm the lead in this investigation. The suspect is in apartment 7 with possible nuclear materials."

The man at the head of the group pressed his earpiece and spoke into his wrist. "We need a Hazmat team at 615 Tenth Street. This is NSA priority code 11B." He turned to the men behind him. "Its number 7. Let's move."

Matt felt a wave of relief that lasted only until the last armed man had passed her and she realized she was hanging from a railing by one arm. She dropped her badge and reached up to get a better grip, but her hand started sliding immediately.

"Shit," Matt said, and she fell onto the second floor landing.

She tried to cushion her fall by leading with her shoulder, but all she accomplished was hitting her shoulder hard on the concrete. Still, she would've been relatively okay if she hadn't clipped her ankle on one of the stairs as she fell. After a few minutes of reassuring herself that she wasn't dead, Matt rolled onto her back, closed her eyes tightly, and managed to pull herself into a sitting position using her one

good arm. But the pain in her ankle was blinding, and there was no way she could stand by herself.

She opened her eyes, and Kadia was standing in front of her.

"That was the most bad-ass ninja move I've ever seen," Kadia said.

"Thanks," Matt said. "I think I broke my ankle."

"Yeah, I already called an ambulance."

"So, um..." Matt looked up toward the third floor. "Your neighbor's a terrorist. And I'm a federal agent. And I thought you were the terrorist." She forced a smile. "Sorry?"

Kadia sat down on the floor across from her. "Nah, that's cool."

"Just help me out with one thing," Matt asked. "Why did your personal ad say NSA? I thought you were impersonating a National Security Administration agent."

Kadia's eyes widened. "That means No Strings Attached. But now it's like..." He looked down and smiled shyly. "It's, like, I kinda want to be attached to you." He looked up at her, his eyes sparkling. "With string. Or, you know, any substance."

Matt laughed, then winced as she felt a shooting pain in her ribs. "When your housesitting job's finished, do you want to come stay with me in DC? My apartment's nothing special, but it's right next door to a big parking lot."

Graham Parke was born in a small town in the Netherlands in 1738. He lived off the land, hunting squirrels and crocodiles, until, in 1799, he finally decided to join society. Society was not pleased.

After creating rudimentary working models for an internal combustion engine, a water powered laser, and a set of surprisingly fuzzy dice, he finally found his true calling; he was to become a scribe. He immediately set upon his new interest with vigor, taking long lunches, sleeping in till all hours of the afternoon, and spending his waking hours lamenting the indescribable hardships of the insanely talented.

He also did some writing. His best known efforts to date are; 'What I'd like for my birthday, a short list by G. Parke' (1913) and 'People I just met, address book entries to be added over the weekend' (1965). He's still hoping for that ever elusive big break.

Graham Parke has been described as both a humanitarian and a pathological liar. Convincing evidence to support either allegation has yet to be produced.

Time to Go

by Graham Parke

I spot the pigs comin' in low over the barn. "Look at them pigs fly," I say to Hank. "See them, Hank? See them flyin' pigs?"

Hank and I are out in the fields. Hank's fixing the tractor that up and died on him yesterday and I'm lookin' for

leftover corn. Hank said he'd let me sell the corn out by the road, if I'm careful not to get in harm's way. He said I could keep the cash as extra pocket money. Hank is good that way. One day I hope to be just like Hank.

"Them pigs sure are fast," I say, pointin' at the sky, where the pigs are doin' somersaults and showin' off. At first Hank don't look up, so I tell him he crazy, he crazy for not lookin' at them pigs. Hank mumbles that I'm gettin' worse every day and that now I'm seein' pigs fly. But I don't let up and I pull on his jacket, real hard. He hates it when I do that but there's nuttin' for it. "You crazy, Hank," I say. "You crazy if you don't look. When you gonna see pigs fly again?"

Hank gets mad and shoves me off on account I made him drop his tools. He don't like to get dust and sand on his tools, he says it locks them up. But finally he looks up, and I swear, Hank, he stop breathin'. He don't say a word, just stares at them pigs. "Go pigs!" I say. And they go.

Then Hank's runnin', top speed back to the barn. Forgets all about his tractor and the sand and his tools. "Go, Hank!" I say.

By now the pigs are done playin' and they put in some serious flyin', comin' straight for us. I tell ya, they even faster than me on my bike. They even faster than me on ten bikes! And Hank jumps as they pass over, but they up too high for Hank to reach. He keeps runnin' though, and when he gets to the barn, he finds hisself a shotgun.

"What you doin', Hank?" I yell. I run after him cause I scared. "Hank, what you doin'?" I'm out of breath and it is

hard to yell, but I have to. I have to. "You not gonna hurt them pigs, are you?"

Hank don't answer, he just starts shootin'. Empties the shotgun in the air like a madman, then reloads. He has a crazy look in his eyes, like maybe someone is stealin' from him. Like maybe he'll teach them a lesson. He gets two pigs an all. They fall from the sky like land pigs. They dead before they hit the ground.

"What you do that for, Hank?" I axe. I tink maybe I'm cryin', but I'm not sure. Could be dust in my eyes from runnin'. Anyway, I want to kick Hank in the chin for what he done. Killin' them sweet flyin' pigs like that. But Hank is very quiet, maybe even angry, so I kick nuttin' and just shut up.

* * *

In the evening it's all over the news. All the pigs in the world started flyin'. Idaho, Tokyo, Europe, all places. No more pigs left on the ground anywhere. Nuttin'.

I watch the TV from the kitchen table where me and Hank and his wife Desiree and their daughter Tessa are havin' dinner.

Desiree roasted them two pigs that Hank shot from the sky. I say, "I ain't eatin' no flyin' pigs," and I push my plate away. "It ain't right."

Desiree tells me how meat is expensive and how I ain't ever gonna have a chance to eat pig meat again. I tell her, "I just as soon skip my last chance too." So Desiree goes on about how I eat chicken but that's a trick. I tell her, "Chickens don't fly anyways."

Hank don't say nuttin'. He takes my helpin' and eats it. Real slow like.

I make a fist like I'm gonna hit someone. I'm not of course, I know better, but I do it to stop from cryin' for them little pigs. When Tessa sees that, she pushes her plate away too.

I tink maybe that's what saved her in the end.

*

Hanks wakes me early in the morning and we go out in the fields again. Hank cleans off the tools and works on the tractor. I get the rest of the corn. It goes brown if you leave it out in the sun too long, and nobody wants no brown corn. Not even crazy old McAnnum from down the road.

Turns out I have a hard time sellin' the corn. I stand by the road for hours, waitin'. Everyone is talkin' about them pigs and no one much cares 'bout eatin' my corn. Not even when I sing this little song about how good the corn will be with salt and butter, or just with salt. I guess I picked that corn up for nuttin'. I lost a lot of pocket money because of them pigs, but I don't care, I just happy they got away.

A car stops along the road and I run up to it. It's a very expensive car. There's almost no dust on it, and it is black as night and twice as shiny. I would say it's a Rolls or a Jeep or sometin'. The man inside is wearin' nice clothes too, not coveralls like me. When he rolls down his window I wave a piece of corn at him. "Lookin' for some fine corn, mister?" I axe.

The man shakes his head and axes me if I've seen any pigs fly.

"Sure have, mister," I say. "Seen them do somersaults too."

Then he axes me if we had any pigs of our own and if we caught any. I tell him, "Hank shot two pigs and ate them." I frown to show the man I don't like what Hank done. I would never shoot no flyin' pigs. It ain't right.

The man says it's too bad Hank ate them pigs cause he'd pay good money for them. I take him back to the house anyways and Hank sells him some bones and leftovers. Hank doesn't like what he gets for them cause as soon as the Jeep drives off, he's kickin' the wall.

* * *

The news people say there's no 'splanation for them pigs flyin'. It seems other folks shot down their pigs too and yet other folks from labs came to collect them. Then the lab folks did all kinds of tests and 'speriments on the pigs but they found nuttin' strange. They were all ornary land pigs.

I guess they found no wings on 'em or somethin'.

* * *

Hank and I are out by the barn when I spot the horses comin' in low over the fields.

I'm helpin' Hank turn the pigpen into a vegetable garden. I have to carry the bags of dirt from the barn on account I'm taller and stronger than Hank. Then I have to spread the dirt out over the mud. It's not an easy job but I like to push myself. So I can improve. It is 'portant to improve all the time, Hank tol' me that. One day I will improve so much even Hank won't call me stoopid no more. Hank will say I

just like him and he'll let me take over the farm just like dad wanted.

Dad never had no horses though, and Hank didn't get any neither. Guess they are too much trouble or somethin'. Maybe they look too smart. Nobody likes a smart ass. But old McAnnum had horses and I watch them fly over the fields, comin' in our direction.

"Look at them horses fly!" I tell Hank, pointin at the sky. The horses don't do any somersaults – or maybe they already done them over old McAnnum's barn – but I say, any time horses fly, it's worth lookin' at. "See them, Hank?" I axe. "See them flyin' horses? They even faster than them pigs!"

And Hank looks. He knows stranger things can happen.

That's when I hear the shots. Old McAnnum must have caught word of how much them lab folks were payin' for them flyin' pigs and figured flyin' horses might not do so bad neither. Guess he has no nets for catchin' flyin' horses though, otherwise he wouldn't be tryin' to kill them.

"Stoopid McAnnum is shootin' at his horses," I say to Hank. "His own sweet beautiful horses. We gotta do somethin'!"

Hank says darn right we got to do something, and he goes back into the barn. When he comes out he's carryin that horrible shotgun again and he's mumblin' about how old McAnnum will never get them horses from way over at his place.

"Please, Hank," I say. "Leave them sweet flyin' horses alone. They done you no harm."

But Hank's takin' aim, and them horses are flyin' so low. So low. I can't touch them but I can smell them. That's how low they fly. Perhaps they're tryin' to duck under old man McAnnum's fire.

"They not even your horses," I warn my brother. "Shouldn't be messin' with no man's horses. You tol' me that yerself, Hank!"

But Hank says that rule don't count no more, what with them horses flyin' away an all.

So I take the bag of dirt from my shoulder so I can throw it at Hank. The bag is heavy and hard to hold, but I'm pretty darn angry and I hit Hank, full in the gut. But not before he gets off a shot.

"Now look what you done," I yell. A dead horse drops in the middle of our new vegetable garden. Almost flattens me an all.

But Hank says nuttin'. He's busy lyin' under the bag of dirt and he's real quiet. Specially seein' how he must be hurtin. So I also say nuttin' and just shut up.

Things ain't never easy though and old McAnnum isn't too happy with Hank. He comes over in his truck as soon as the horses are out of sight – the live ones that is – and tells Hank to put the dead horse on the back of the truck or else. Hank says that old McAnnum will prolly like to pay for the horse, but old McAnnum don't. Hank says that without him, old McAnnum would have no horses left at all, but old McAnnum says Hank had no business killin' that horse. Hank says old McAnnum can pick up his own darn horse if he feels that way. Old McAnnum grumbles and then 'grees

to pay Hank to help him move the horse. And Hank gets old man McAnnum to pay for the buckshot too.

It prolly isn't much cause Hank goes back to the house and kicks the wall.

* * *

No one came for the horse though.

The news people say that lots of horses were caught, all dead, and the lab folks found nuttin' strange about them. Common land horses they said. Nuttin' special.

We're havin' dinner and Hank's eatin' real slow and careful, on account he hurt himself carryin' the horse - and maybe gettin' that bag of dirt in the gut.

The news people say that now there are no more pigs in the world and no more horses and what's next?

I warn Hank and Desiree that I won't be eatin' no flyin' horses, just in case. Hank tells me to shut up and not to make trouble.

Desiree gets angry. She tells Hank to watch his mouth at the table. She doesn't like it when folks don't watch their mouths around Tessa. I always watch my mouth around Tessa. I know better, she only little.

Then Hank says somethin' bad about me that I don't want to repeat. Desiree gets even more angry. She tells Hank he should tink about what he sayin'. He should tink long and hard. And then she makes that face. That face she makes when she's about to remind Hank that it was him who dropped me on my head all them years ago.

Hank shrugs and goes on eatin'.

I'm feelin' bad though. Very bad. I know Hank didn't mean what he said about me but it still hurts. I can't help hurtin'. Maybe if I was smart and grown-up like Hank I could stop that hurt, but I'm not. And also I feel bad for that horse, the one Hank shot. Who would have thought it would happen again after them flyin' pigs? If I was smart I would have figured it out and hidden the buckshot. I was too late for the horses, but Hank won't be shootin' no more flyin' animals, that's for darn sure. The news people say they never found out where them pigs and horses went. The animals made a circle around the world and then were gone. Disappeared at some spot that our eyes in space can't see. Folks even sent planes up but they found nuttin' but empty sky. The news people say there weren't even no birds. With all the talk about flyin' pigs and flyin' horses nobody noticed the birds had already gone.

* * *

Hank wakes me early in the morning and we go to town to get surplies. I always like to get surplies cause I get to ride in the truck and Hank gives me the list and then in the store Hank axes, "What surplies we need partner?" And then I have to read the surplies from the list.

I can't really do that of course. All that writin' is mumbojumbo to me. I just look at the list and repeat everythin' from memory. But everybody is always impressed, even Bill who runs the store, and they tell me I becomin a real man.

But today it's not so nice in the store. I remember all the surplies just fine and Bill gives me a good long wink, says

I'm really improvin, but when I'm done rememberin' Hank axes for one more surplies. He axes Bill for three boxes of buckshot.

I'm not so sure I want to be like Hank no more.

* * *

After the horses, the other animals leave, one by one. Even the ones that are locked in or tied up. They disappear in the night somehow. I guess there's no stoppin' nature. The last to go are the rats and the roaches, the news people say. Then there's nuttin' left but us men and women and the plants.

It's gonna be tough on all of us, the news people say, on account that we need the animals. But it's possible to survive. If everybody works hard and works together, there's still a chance. We need to start growin' nuts, lots of nuts, and beans. And we have to find a way to make milk from grass. Without usin' no cows or goats or sheeps. And because everybody has to do their fair share of the hard work, we won't be usin' money anymore. Not for a while.

Desiree laughs and says folks are forced to be vegetenarians now. Even the folks from McDonald's. She says that's maybe a not such a bad thing.

* * *

I have five thousand dollars in my bedroom, pinned up above my bed. Hank gave `em to me. He went to the bank and took out all his savin's, divided it between me and Tessa. I like to look at all them old people on the money before I go to sleep. Maybe someday, if I improve myself more and more, I can make the world better again, and

invent my own money, and put my own face on it. And then some other handy-guy onna farm will have me over his bed and he will decide to improve hisself too.

Tessa decided to eat her money.

* * *

Life wasn't bad right away. For a bit, everythin' stayed the same. There was just no meat on the table. And I can't say that I was sorry about that. Lookin' at meat would only remind me of them sweet flyin' pigs and horses that Hank killed. But slowly things got bad. We have less food than before. We don't get new clothes when the old ones tear - Desiree even washes them less so they last longer. And every day me and Hank and Desiree and Tessa work hard, plantin' and waterin' the seeds that the gonverent passes out.

Right now it's evenin' and we're all inside. We're tired and getting' ready for bed. I make a few drawin's for a machine to make milk from grass. I'm shapin' it like a cow cause machines can have any shape we want. Hank is lookin' over my shoulder, checkin' my drawin's. He tells me they are good. They need some detail, he says, but they a good start.

* * *

I wake early in the morning and I know it's gonna happen today.

As the light hits my eyes, I feel the change setting in. I get up, dress, and go out to the field. Desiree and Tessa are already workin'. Tessa looks up and we smile at each other. I know she knows. Me and Tessa feel the same changes, I

see it in her eyes. We both feel how everythin' is different today. Better.

Desiree tells Tessa to stop foolin' around and water the plants, but she don't move. Desiree shakes Tessa like she's day-dreamin' or somethin', but she isn't. Then Hank comes from the house, dirty coveralls and boots on, spade in hand, ready to plant more seeds. He tells me to follow him out to old McAnnum's fields, but there's no time.

The feeling is a bit like remembering something you haven't thought of for a long time. Something you've always known but happened to never think about. And it's much easier than reading and writing, that's for sure. No mumbojumbo.

I know where all the animals went. I see the place in my mind clear as a picture. Like I've been there often. Like I belong there. And the route that the animals took is my own. Every bit of the way will be second nature. It's a wonderful feeling.

For the first time in my life I know what I'm supposed to do and where I'm supposed to go, without anyone telling me.

And so does Tessa. We smile at each other and lift off.

Hank and Desiree stare up at us, then start shouting. For a moment I'm worried Hank's going to get his shotgun, but he doesn't. He just jumps up and down, trying to grab us, telling us to come back.

Desiree is crying. I can't hear what she's saying, her words are too muddled, so I do a few somersaults over the barn to cheer her up. It doesn't help, she and Hank won't stop crying and yelling, so Tessa and I wave goodbye and go on our way.

* * *

We go around the world before we head into space. Tessa says she wants to see what's on the other side. I tell her we came from the other side but she says she wants to see the other other side. So we go around the world again, to see the other other side, then float through the hot place into the cold dark place.

I'm not scared. I'm a real man now. I'm doing something Hank can't do, and I'm happy, relaxed. I feel more changes going on inside me and I like it. I'm only shivering because of the cold.

From this place, the world looks even larger than it does from the ground. And it isn't round at all, at least it doesn't look round. More curvy and angular. And blue also, not green and yellow like the fields. I guess this is because the sky is blue and covers everything. Or maybe it is because water is mostly blue and people always say there is a lot of water. Not where I'm from of course, but in other places. And there are a lot more other places than there are places where I'm from.

I realize Tessa and I are higher than the sky, and that's a funny thought. The sky's always been the highest place in my mind. It seems strange that anything could ever be higher than the sky, let alone I myself. Without the sky above me, it doesn't feel like I'm up high at all. And, thinking about it, I guess the sky really is the highest place; Tessa and I are going lower and lower now, moving away from the sky on its other side.

Tessa asks me if we have time to explore the stars, but she knows we don't. They are waiting for us in the next place, like they do every three thousands years. Like they did when they came for the Atlanteans, and the Khiserians. But they can't wait forever. They have other places to visit, other organisms to seek out.

I understand now the loneliness they felt when they discovered there was no other life in the Universe. Nothing but them. No one to study or to communicate with, nothing to pet or to take care of, no one to love and share with.

I understand why they searched for planets and places with special qualities. And why they tweaked conditions in those special places to help life spring into existence, to give it a fighting chance, to give themselves a fighting chance.

I understand why they had to leave those places to let nature take its course. And I understand why they travel from special place to special place to find forms of life suitable to join them. Safe enough, gentle and interesting enough.

It is time for us to come home, and we shouldn't be late. That wouldn't be polite.

Tessa makes us fly around the moon a bit first, to see if the old man is there. We search for a while, but it seems he already left.

Christopher Allan Death currently resides in the concrete jungle of Northern Colorado. He has published fiction in *Worlds of Wonder*, *Night to Dawn*, *7th Dimension Magazine*, *The Ethereal Gazette*, *Shallow Graves Magazine*, and *Bits of the Dead* (Coscom Entertainment), among others. You can find him at www.myspace.com/christopherdeath.

Purple Skies in a Glass Aquarium

by Christopher Allan Death

There is a place beyond the muddy waters of the Arthur Kill, beyond the massive concrete bastions of east New York, where not many humans dare to go. It's a place called Fresh Kills Municipal Landfill, inhabited by nothing more than rodents and 2,200 acres of spectacular garbage. Located on Staten Island, it is hailed as the world's largest waste depository, measuring almost three times as large as Central Park. On April sixteen, 2021, it became the site of an extremely odd occurrence.

* * *

Just another day at the office, Johnny sighed as he crawled over one particularly large garbage knoll. He looked left and right to make sure no one was watching, and then slid down the embankment in a plastic garbage can lid, squealing as he went.

Sledding was one of his favorite pastimes on the weekend. It was a way to relax and unwind after a long week of searching for food and seeking out shelter, but he still felt self-conscious about it. Grown men weren't supposed to

take part in such childish pastimes, even if the man in question was a twenty-two year old mutant with a deplorably large third eye.

Besides, Johnny told himself, he wanted to look distinguished if he ever met that special someone.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, he dismounted the makeshift sled and brushed a moldy orange rind off his shoulder. That was one downside to landfill sledding. Every once in a while he would get a piece of debris stuck in his teeth. Usually it was just a scrap of hot dog or an old gum wrapper, but now and then he would run into something much worse.

Like a dead beetle or a rat fetus.

Johnny shuddered at the memory. He made sure to clean his teeth extra well after those occasions – that was for damn sure. But when his toothpaste of choice was lemon juice, and his toothbrush consisted of a sponge on a pencil, the term extra well became extremely subjective.

"Shall we go again?" he asked himself in a rather refined southern drawl.

"Why yes, of course," he replied, except this time his voice was rough and carried a pronounced East Coast accent

Johnny had become a master of voices during his time in Fresh Kills, mostly because he didn't really have anyone to talk to. He spent most of the day rooting through the garbage, looking for useful odds and ends, and watching the "shit ships" unload their cargo. It wasn't a bad

existence, really, considering that most mutants had been executed in the year 2016.

Johnny trudged up the waste hill, sled in hand. The only way he had escaped the mutant purging was by hiding here – in Fresh Kills. Not many people ventured into the waste-filled wasteland, and those who did were often just as repulsive as he. If not physically, then mentally; he'd met his fair share of psycho killers and schizophrenic madmen.

Pausing at the top of the hill, Johnny gazed over his kingdom. It was beautiful beneath the fading summer sun. Broken bottles and mirrors glimmered in the soft sunlight, creating the illusion that he was surrounded by vast golden waves. They rippled slightly, as if slowly bleeding into the Atlantic Ocean, and in that moment, he was completely and utterly content. Nothing in the entire world could have made him happier.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes it is."

"Almost makes me wish I lived here."

"It has its charms."

Johnny took a deep breath and gazed into the sunset. It took him a moment to realize that he wasn't talking to himself. There was a bird standing beside him, following his drowsy-eyed gaze. Except it was like no bird he'd ever seen before. Not even in New York City. It was thin, blue, but instead of feathers, a thin layer of hair covered its body, interrupted here and there by patches of pale flesh.

The bird looked up at him, and for the first time he noticed that two horns grew from its head – like it was a goat.

"My name is Jay," the bird said. "What's yours?"

"J - Johnny," he stuttered. "Johnny John Jamison. You can call me J.J.J. for short."

"Interesting name."

"Well, I'm a little peculiar myself."

The bird shrugged its shoulders and paced forward. Did birds have shoulders? Johnny didn't know, but by God it shrugged somehow.

"You're not as strange as you think."

"Oh really?"

Johnny would have said more, but he was too busy staring at the bird's legs. They were gigantic – at least four feet tall, and made it look more like a pelican than a blue jay.

"You're one of the last normal people left on earth, J.J.J."

"How do you figure?" Johnny asked, repressing the urge to laugh. He had been a mutant his whole life, and was comfortable with being genetically inferior. When he used to live in Queens, he didn't mind the looks that people gave him when he walked down the street. He didn't care when cab drivers ignored him, or when old ladies avoided him. In fact, he considered himself lucky when he walked through Central Park at night. The muggers wouldn't go near him. So when the freaky blue jay suggested that he was normal, the thought tickled his funny bone.

However, the bird was being completely serious.

"The world has changed a lot over the past century," it said in a documentary-inspired monotone. "Nations have risen and fallen, kings appointed and overthrown, laws passed and broken, morals embraced and rejected. And now, humanity has reached its end."

"What are you talking about?" Johnny murmured. But his question wasn't answered by the blue jay.

"What he means is, the human race is fucked," said a baby with a jackal's body. "Ever since the beginning of time, it has been on a downward spiral, and now it's gone down the proverbial toilet."

"Who are you?" Johnny said, eyeing the peculiar newcomer. Just as he stopped staring at the deranged blue jay, there was something new to attract his eye.

"Who, me? I'm Wilfred."

"And?"

"What the hell do you mean? I'm a jackal with a baby's head, for crying out loud."

"I mean, where did you come from?"

The baby rolled his eyes. "The same place as that god-awful blue jay, of course."

"Who are you calling a blue jay?" the bird demanded. "I'm the bluebird of happiness, and I prefer to be referred to as such."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Save your sob story," the baby sneered. "We're all in pretty sad shape."

"You're telling me," said a monkey who appeared to be wearing a woman's skin. "Look how I've ended up. Am I pitiful or what?"

For a second Johnny didn't know what to say. He just stood there, looking back and forth, from the bluebird to the baby to the monkey. Nothing seemed to make sense. Where did they come from, and why the hell did they come to a landfill, of all places? Johnny rubbed his eyes – the two natural ones – while the large one on his forehead continued watching the new arrivals.

"Hold on now," he demanded. "Who in god's name are you?"

"I'm Beauty," said the monkey with a flourish.

"More like the beast," he heard the baby chuckle.

"Shut your mouth. I was beautiful in the beginning, before everything went to hell."

The bluebird sighed. "So were we all. But now ..."

"Now we're just about as pretty as you, J.J.J.," the baby finished. "No offense."

Johnny smiled. "None taken. I hope you understand that I'm completely lost right now."

"Then let me explain," the bluebird said quickly, before either of his companions could interrupt him. "We represent different parts of human nature. In the beginning, we were complete. We were normal, without

any defects. But as time went on, humans began to shed their nature. In essence, they forgot what it meant to be human."

"They fucked us in the ass," the baby said bluntly.

"So what do I have to do with any of this?" Johnny asked.

"Everything," said the monkey. "You kept us from disappearing completely."

"I seriously doubt that."

"Maybe you don't understand," the bluebird interjected.

"You're the last real human on earth. Everyone else has ..."

"Turned into bastards," said the baby.

The monkey shot him a warning look.

"What? I'm just telling him the truth," the baby responded, crossing his furry arms over his chest.

"So, what are you trying to tell me? That the world is going to end, and you're going to escort me to heaven in a fiery chariot?"

"Almost," the monkey mused. "But without the fiery chariot. Do you have any idea how expensive those things are these days?"

"Um ... uh ..."

Johnny's mouth was dry. He tried to say something, but the words got caught in his throat. It was a funny sensation, because he was never at a loss for words when he talked to himself. He almost felt like laughing.

"So, what am I supposed to do? Turn around in a circle, recite a magical verse, and clap three times?"

The monkey kicked at a rusty bicycle tire. "Maybe it would help if we explained who we are."

"I represent innocence," the baby began. "But now, thanks to the evil that has pervaded society, this is what I've become. A jackal. A subhuman monstrosity. There is no more innocence in the human race."

"And I represent internal beauty," the monkey resumed. "Once I was beautiful – perfect in every way. But people have grown ugly and self-centered. They don't care about anyone but themselves. Money means more to them than anything else."

"What about you?" Johnny said, directing this question toward the bluebird. "What's your story?"

"Me?" The bird cleared its throat. "I represent happiness. People have forgotten how to be happy. They take pleasure in sick, depraved things. All they do is work. They have lost the will to be truly happy."

The monkey stroked its long blonde hair. "We have all been reduced to these deplorable forms. But soon we will be whole again. Soon the angels of destruction will descend from heaven and the world will be purged in flame."

Johnny shook his head. Suddenly he felt very light-headed. All their talk about the end of the world was making his stomach turn. Sure, the human race was a little rough around the edges, but they weren't all that bad, were they?

He tried to make his head stop spinning, until finally he was forced to sit down.

"There's not much time left," the monkey said, glancing at his golden Rolex. "The angels will be here any minute. We have to leave before it's too late."

The baby leapt to his paws and began to scamper down the garbage hill. "Follow me!" he shouted. "I know where to go!"

So off Johnny went, half stumbling, half falling down the hill, with only a deranged half jackal, half baby, and a head full of questions to guide him. He still didn't comprehend what he was doing, or where he was going, but some invisible force pulled him forward. Maybe it was curiosity, and maybe it was divine intervention. Only God knew, no pun intended

It wasn't until the baby stopped running that Johnny came to his senses. He took a seat on an overturned recliner and looked at his three odd companions. The scent of salty ocean waves was stronger now, and he could feel the breath of the Atlantic on his face.

"Hold up. You expect me to believe that the world is going to end, just like that, and I'm going to be whisked up to heaven? I might be genetic scum, but I wasn't born yesterday. Is this some sort of an elaborate hoax?"

"No hoax," the baby replied. "And unless you want a holy flame up your ass, I suggest you follow me."

"Where?" Johnny exclaimed. "There's nowhere else to go! Unless you want me to jump into that god-forsaken hole, like Alice in Wonderland."

"Bingo," the monkey said.

Johnny tried to detect a hint of sarcasm in those two black eyes, but they were dead serious.

"In you go!" the bluebird urged, using his hairy little wings to prod him forward. "You aren't afraid, are you?"

"I think I'm in some kind of weird crack dream, but I'm not afraid," Johnny said uneasily. Truth be told, he was afraid, really afraid. He didn't know where that hole went – whether it went up to heaven or straight to hell. It could lead into the Atlantic Ocean for all he knew. He didn't even know where it came from. But before he could politely refuse their offer, a pair of very strong hands landed on his shoulders, and shoved him into the pit.

Johnny screamed and tried to resist, until he realized that he wasn't falling down at all. He was falling *up*, and the clouds were creeping back like a pair of arms, drawing him into a warm embrace. In the distance he could see a pair of pearly gates, and beneath him the world writhed in glorious purple flames.

Just before Johnny disappeared inside the golden city, he looked down upon the earth and smiled. It looked like purple skies in a glass aquarium.

Shoreseat

by L. Ward Abel

In the shadow of such a sea
larger than everyone who has ever lived
to sit on rocks and hear them speak
and truly listen. I'd hold a glass
tall and dark, cool, but just so,
a small clone of waves for drink, to fill me.
I would hope for calm weather there
but would welcome weather
by any other name. Rain, ocean,
sweat, love, all of us are tidal.

Jaime McDougall is a US ex-pat now living in Australia with her Aussie husband. She works as a freelance writer, professional blogger, and virtual tour coordinator for authors. When she's not drowning in a sea of work, she's writing creatively, roaming around the beautiful land of Australia, sending Aussie goodies overseas, or poking her husband with a boomerang just for kicks.

Coffee Shop Poet Wannabe

by Jaime McDougall

Door stalked, admired, cursed
from across the tar and cracked pavement.
Should I? Could I? Dare I? Oh, yes,
for today, my sweet coffee shop,
today is the day of reckoning.

Jingle-jingle, jingle-jingle of the door.
Ah, a new girl, just a little bit of something,
perhaps sweet or perhaps spice
for the usual, eccentric pot.

"Um, I'd like a bottle of water please,"
as if the purchase of water
is a sensible action rather than
a dollar twelve for a plastic bottle.

"And the turkey..." mumbling 'sandwich.'
"The turkey panini with the gouda?"
Go with the gouda! Go with the gouda!
Don't break code! Possible emergency evacuation!

"Yes please," and with no voice wobble,
no long stares, just glances and whispers.
Thank the benevolent coffee shop deities
for their small yet wondrous favors.

Order filled? Empty table? Affirmative.
Sitting down slowly, laser beam stares.
'Flannel shirt, blue jeans, foreign body accepted,'
and a return to muffled conversation.

Put down my water, sandwich, and notebook.
A notebook? Ah. Acceptance melting into welcome.
Losing myself in the words, objective completed,
writing, wondering what the hell a panini is.