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THE ODDVILLE PRESS

A BREAK FROM THE NORM

FICTION

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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.

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Artwork by Clara Natoli

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

Dear Readers,

Here we are again, me writing and no one reading because, as you know, no one reads the Editor Letter. Ah, I shouldn't pound that same old drum again, telling you how much I hate writing an Editor's Letter and how I still firmly believe no one reads it, not even myself. But what I will tell you, though, is that we've come a long way and that some near disasters almost kicked the legs out from underneath us. Well, I would... but I think I just did (I can't say for sure since I don't read the Editor's Letter). But more important, let's talk about you.

Yes—you. You are the main person of this magazine. Oddville was created for you. Without you, Oddville wouldn't be. But you're here, and because you are, *we're* here. For that, I can't thank you enough! Of course, I'd thank you more if you would write in and demand we scrap the Editor's Letter... but like I said, I won't talk about that nor hold you up from getting to this issue. It's a dilly and one I'm sure you're going to love.

See, I read the works, not the Letter. But anyway...

Speaking of love. If you do love one of the works and would like to contact one of our talented contributors to tell them so, please don't hesitate to write them at our Oddville Submissions address and we'll be happy to pass it along.

Right. I know you're thinking *Shut up so I can get on with it already*. So I will. As always, a huge and heartfelt thank you to the best darn staff ever, the wonderful contributors, and especially to you, Dear Reader. Always you.

Patricia D. 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

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Fiction Copy Editors

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.

Stephanie Kraner is a twenty-three year old who enjoys words more than she enjoys potato chips. She believes that nothing is truly beautiful unless it is haunting in some way, and firmly applies that principal to any story she approaches. She also likes first and second person writing more than potato chips. She doesn't actually like potato chips.

Poetry Editor

Ilasir Maroa

Poetry 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 'university of life' for a number of years and will continue in the hope of attaining a MA in something or other.

Layout

Stephanie Kraner

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Lawrence Buentello has published stories in The Storyteller, Word Riot, New Works Review, and several other publications.

The Architect

By Lawrence Buentello

He received the commission shortly after arriving at His office.

At first everything about it seemed fairly standard, and He studied the contents of the folder without worry. The folder was the only item on His desk, after all, except for a lovely paperweight made of pure energy, which was the only artifact remaining from His last assignment. Despite the fact that the result had proven woefully monotonous, it had given Him some wonderful ideas.

The silence of the room was an interesting phenomenon; a pale light cast from an unseen source was His only illumination, and only the occasional appearance of attending seraphim interrupted the extreme quiet. He decided that He liked the silence immensely, since it aided in the creative process. Still, He longed for music again, the music of a celestial nature He'd once enjoyed on a previous commission. Then, He could close His eyes to the spaces before Him and conjure new forms in His mind as the music directed His consciousness. Music and creation had always proven a beautiful combination in His work—

Abruptly a seraph entered the room, a single sheet of parchment in its hand. It drifted casually before the desk, faceless, though bearing a dull glow that pulsed with typical intellection.

He accepted the parchment and the seraph left the room.

The first order of creation is due, He read.

“Where does the time go?” He said whimsically. Eternity was a relative experience. “Very well.”

He found a stylus in one of the desk’s drawers and began writing on the sheet.

First, a proto-universe, contained in an infinitely small point in a nonexistent space; then a sudden ignition of energy that expelled—

What?

He sat back in His chair and thought a moment, assessing and rejecting a dozen ideas. Some He had already explored and others were patently ridiculous. He thought that this time, and for this commission, He would attempt to provide an absolute linear development of matter unassociated with spiritual absolutes. He called this Physical Matter, and developed its ordination from various energetic states. When He was certain of His intent, He activated the proto-universe in an intense flash and observed its rapid expansion. Various forms of energetic waves created interesting patterns across the new universal realm, but nothing seemed to be developing along His specifications. He quickly studied the parchment again and amended His notes to include a unique method of containment of the energy waves. He called this Gravity, and was delighted with its effects. Independent of and dependent on the Physical Matter it affected to exist, it provided the mechanical means necessary for new Star patterns to begin forming. These new Matter groupings were very colorful, and pretty to see, and they kept

changing as gravitational influences altered their physical states. He watched these states evolve and coalesce, forming exotic expressions of Stars and Galaxies, gravitational wells and dimensional curiosities. In fact, He became so enamored of the beautiful variations of this new form of Matter that He began playfully altering some things, dilating time effects and using the impetus of the ignition point to create variations on His theme.

By the time He realized that He was moving away from His notes, He'd created quite a few anomalies, and worked to smooth them over in the general scheme of things. He'd wanted to create a linear development of this new Matter, but old habits are often difficult to arrest, and so He did His best to reform the universe around His artistic indiscretions.

The first order of creation was complete.

That is quite enough for one day, He thought, placing the stylus on the desk. He glanced down at His work for a moment though, trying to see if He could detect any discordance in its physical scheme—yes, ever the perfectionist—but felt essentially satisfied, and rose from the chair. Yes, all in all it seemed a pretty good day's work.

The pale light flickered to darkness when He left the room.

~

The next day a seraph handed Him another sheet of parchment.

The second order of creation is due, He read, musing over the suggestions that followed.

He stared at the parchment a moment longer before saying, in a questioning way, "Create a vessel for life?"

The seraph bent perceptibly in its robes.

"What kind of life?"

The seraph shrugged its shoulders, which was an interesting movement, since He was previously uncertain of whether or not seraphim even possessed shoulders. Seraphim were extremely efficient, but terribly robotic.

He glanced at the parchment again. A footnote stated quite plainly: eschew repetition.

That was too bad. He'd produced some excellent animate forms on previous assignments. The electromagnetic creatures were one of His favorite creations, and He was hoping to explore further evolved states of these—but, of course, the commission demanded no replications, so He paused a moment in thought. By midday He'd developed a new methodology to complement the universal physical progression, which He called Logic. This universal Logic would dictate the evolution of material forms along the cause and effect determinants of the available Physical Matter. If He'd planned a little more carefully He might have created a greater variation in the energy/matter paradigm, but the die was cast and He had only so many variations with which to work.

In this particular universal set He couldn't develop animate forms from available Stars, since the effects of gravity on large bodies of Matter produced energy states too unstable for the development of life. But if He used gravitational influences to form smaller celestial bodies

on which the effects of gravity could be productively employed He found that stable physical states were possible. At least, temporarily so—

The rest of the afternoon He experimented with various positioning of bodies—coalesced Matter He called Planets—and labored to align His desires for a viable life form with the limitations of the gravity/matter interaction, shaking His head in frustration from time to time and muttering darkly. Finally, He calculated the right combination of low-energy Matter states and the distances needed from their Star bodies combined with the correct elemental properties and time scheme, and then applied these determinants to a wide variety of Star systems within the new universe. And by the close of day He'd managed to produce several prime examples of small animate forms based on something new He'd managed to coax from the physical interactions—He decided to call these forms Chemical Life, and worked long into the evening to get them to logically evolve into larger groupings of Matter called Cells.

He sighed and decided to call it a day. Though this new form of life seemed unimpressive, He was encouraged by the rapid development of forms it produced after sufficient time had elapsed. He realized that this constant regeneration of physical patterns would eventually develop into more robust forms, and had to admit that it was a unique approach to the problem. Not bad, He thought as He lay down the stylus. It had certainly been more work than He'd anticipated, but it had some promise.

~

He'd barely taken a seat the next morning when a seraph hurried into the room.

"No rest for the weary," He said to Himself as He accepted the parchment. He looked up quickly. "Create beatific life forms?"

The seraph spread its arms.

"What in creation are 'beatific' life forms?"

The seraph, in the true spirit of cooperation, performed concise, poetic movements within the room, ostensibly to illustrate a more elegant form of animation. He nodded thankfully, though the display only inspired Him to sit quietly rubbing His temples.

After a moment He took up His stylus and began calculating the effects of time passage on the nursery Planets He'd created and found them woefully inadequate. He tapped the stylus on the desk a while, finding solace in the rhythm of the beat, and then realized He could accelerate the temporal effects on chemical development if He used gravitational forces as a catalyst—and so He created innumerable Planets with smaller circling bodies which He called Moons, and set the Moons to disturb the planetary seas in a truly meaningful way. That none of this violated His earlier concept of logical progression gave Him a certain sense of satisfaction.

When these accelerated environments began producing more elegant forms of life He examined them closely for efficacy, sometimes beginning the process over again with gravitationally-influenced planetary collisions if the forms proved too mundane. Soon a grand stable of animate creatures filled every niche of the planetary environments, and the variety was myriad indeed. In fact, at times He thought the Planets decidedly overcrowded, but at least the diversity was extraordinary. Flying, swimming and ambulatory

creatures fairly exploded throughout the universe, and He would be damned if they didn't qualify as 'beatific'.

He felt exhausted at the end of the day, but again felt a deep sense of accomplishment.

But for the first time He worried about what the following day might bring—

~

On the fourth day He settled behind His desk and sat grimly staring into space.

When the seraph entered the room He squinted in anticipation, though the seraph's attitude was supremely serene. It floated to His side and handed Him the parchment, though it must have sensed some pervasive trepidation in His attitude and quickly moved away.

"Create a unique sentient life form," He said aloud. He studied the sheet, glancing at the reverse of it as well, though the back of the parchment was blank. He rubbed His lower lip a moment before opening the folder again and refreshing His memory about the commission, but nothing it contained gave Him a clearer understanding of the request.

"Shall I make the Stars to speak?" He idly asked the seraph. "Or the Planets confer?"

The seraph, perhaps puzzled by the ironic tone of its Supervisor, spun like an ornament for a moment, dazzling the room with spiritual impressions. He watched the performance with folded hands, but was thoroughly uninspired. The seraph's motions ceased and it stood quite out of breath.

"A spiritual anomaly?" He said in reflection. "No, there are too many ethereal entities as it is."

He puzzled over this dilemma long after the seraph had taken its leave, studying the Planets and their environments and the grand variety of life forms existing in each. And then, as He was observing the instinctual interactions of several colorful species, a thought came to Him that seemed ultimately inspired. And despite one or two ethical considerations that brooded nervously over His conscience, He thought it was a delightful idea.

He picked up His stylus and began to work.

He decided it was best to focus on a single environment and so chose a Planet with superlative qualities, just the right distance from its abiding Star, and filled with a plethora of animate life forms. He had to labor diligently, though, in order to maintain the integrity of His universal themes, but He was eventually able to combine environmental stimuli with evolutionary developments in organic forms to create a series of perceptually accelerated candidates. These candidates would use neurological devices to perceive, remember and quantify the sensory images they apprehended and communicate these impulses to others of their species. While utilizing these perceptual qualities they would then have the opportunity to development legitimate communication skills such as language and writing, and to take these perceived ordinations of the world and create a useable cosmogony. Certainly this would eventually provide a unique sentient life form—

Unfortunately, He had to experiment with several species before finding any success. The reptilian, aquatic and amphibian forms (of which He was quite fond) proved disappointing candidates, and it was only as an afterthought that He tried using mammalian forms at all.

Even these proved difficult to coax into sentience, but after several attempts He was able to rapidly develop the neurological stages of a few primate species, and from there He managed to produce a few prime candidates. These candidates proved all too effective, however, and used their sentience to prey on one another. Finally (after allowing severe natural forces and hungry carnivores to 'cull' the candidates) He was able to coax the various lines into one viable sentient life form which He decided to call Humanity.

Exhausted, and not a little creatively drained by the experience, He watched this new sentient life form with genuine interest as it constructed primitive dwellings, stitched impressive hides, and began elaborating on common myths in a fine oral tradition that showed great promise for developing into true poetry and song.

But something about the interaction of Humanity disturbed Him, though He couldn't say precisely what.

Still, human beings began cultivating the world, in small ways to be certain, but in clearly intelligent ways.

At last He called it a day, and nodded sagely to Himself as He left the room.

~

On the fifth day He entered the room to discover a chaotic group of seraphim flashing and flitting about, each holding a thick folder marked with cryptic red lettering. He thought a long moment before moving from the door to His desk; such displays were not uncommon, but His presaging of the previous day made Him extremely wary.

One by one the seraphim circled His desk in a divine

rainbow of light, chiming sweetly as they laid the folders before Him and then glowing sporadically as they awaited His recommendations.

He studied the contents of the folders grimly, rolling His eyes from time to time, before exhaling in a profoundly weary sigh.

Humanity, it seemed, was in an exaggerated state of disarray. The distances between the human groups, in addition to the environmental barriers between them, had caused the development of a variety of philosophical belief systems, some in stark contrast to others. Without a consistent intellectual approach to their world, human beings had begun creating artificial distinctions between the groups based on superficial physical differences and differing cultural customs. Not only had they defined specific territories, but they had infused these territories with social realities all their own. A few isolated tribes seemed to be behaving well within their dense environs, harmonizing pristinely with the natural world, but in larger groups, in villages and cities, human beings had begun committing atrocities in the name of their differences.

He frowned disappointedly, tapping His finger on the pile of folders while gazing thoughtfully on the seraphim. The seraphim vibrated uncertainly in a corner of the room, perhaps worried that He would blame them for this unsavory turn of events. But He knew His own shortsightedness was to blame, and that only He was responsible for correcting His errors.

"Leave me now," He said gently, "and instruct an archangel to attend this office."

The seraphim, stumbling over one another in a chorus of clashing colors, fled through the door.

He sat back in His chair and considered His options.

But His options seemed severely limited. He had wanted to allow the natural condition of their world to shape their growth as sentient beings, but in creating a worthy Planet He'd also created the instrument of their disarray. How could He possibly align the thought processes of so many individual entities without becoming personally involved? Alone in the room He struck the top of the desk in frustration, bringing a fire into the universe that consumed a thousand suns. The purity of His design was at stake. He could wait a good long while as Humanity worked out its own problems, but that might bring the destruction of the Planet. No, His design had been flawed from the beginning, and now He had only one methodology left for influencing the survival of the species.

Intervention.

The word drifted painfully in His thoughts. It was the one aspect of creation He'd wanted to avoid, and now it seemed inevitable. But perhaps He did not have to intervene overtly to accomplish His goal—

The archangel entered His office then, and hovered gracefully in air, shining silver wings laid across its massive torso, a blinding light pouring from its face. In its hands it held a ledger and a stylus. He nodded, momentarily wondering if this indeed was the correct solution, but the archangel was already present and would serve as His emissary between Himself and the beings He'd created.

"Mark my words carefully," He said, rubbing His brow as He carefully assessed His choices. "For each group of beings in this world I will construct a philosophical

framework. Within each philosophy I will delineate the boundaries of human morality and ethics. And each group of human beings shall abide by these divine decrees as law so that no one group may dominate the world, and that every group of human beings may prosper in peace and caring."

The archangel lovingly copied every word He expressed, and as His instructions became a carefully worded pronouncement He was satisfied that the chaos which now reigned on the small Planet would quickly be resolved as His human creation found His instruction perfectly attuned to the best interests of all; especially since He instructed the archangel to deliver the sacred screeds in His name, automatically giving the instruction a righteous gravity. He thought His orchestration of a variety of religious doctrines completely inspired, each reaching similar perspectives of the universe without losing the unique spirit of its cultural identity. He was certain this would lead to an intellectual consensus on the homogenous nature of human existence and that a beautiful world society would soon develop from it.

After He dispatched the archangel to its work He sat quietly in His chair and felt quite good about this solution. Of course, it deviated from His original design, and that was disappointing, but the preservation of peace and the maintaining of the paradisaical nature of the Planet were of utmost importance. Reluctantly, He opened a new folder and began chronicling the deviations of the species' development for further study.

When this onerous task was complete, He dimmed the light of the room and left for the day.

~

On the sixth day He found that He could barely step into

the room.

Countless seraphim moved nervously from wall to wall, carefully avoiding the two archangels and several angels pulsating behind neatly stacked piles of folders. By His desk stood the principalities, emitting a low vibration as they flashed in an agitated state.

With a sullen expression He wandered through His frantic hosts and sat resignedly behind the desk. Immediately the seraphim dropped their folders before Him, and then the angels and archangels did the same; with some reserve of patience—though not much—the principalities parted the seas of the lower hosts and delivered a high monument of bright red folders upon the rest. He stared on these new developments and knew what had happened before even opening a single folder. But open the folders He did, as quickly as possible, studying the terrible news with an increasing furrow to His brow. When He had completed His assessment of the information just given Him, He sat back in His chair and exhaled a cosmic breath, heavy enough to extinguish Galaxies. Then He sat forward again and regarded His hosts.

“This is not good news at all,” He said, without humor. “I can’t believe how badly the design has failed.”

Despite the gravity of His decrees of the previous day, Humanity had not come together in a universal understanding of love and caring. Quite the contrary. Instead of perceiving His philosophical imperatives as a lesson learned for mutual survival, each group had decided that they alone were the sole recipient of His enlightenment and began warring against one another for the title. Some very imaginative divine pantheons were created to account for the spiritual message He’d sent, but these ultimately proved completely divisive.

Nation states were settled and destroyed, repopulated and destroyed again; martyrs were dispatched most heinously; new religions were founded, disbanded or consumed by others, and abiding over every human being seemed to be a genetic predilection for physical or spiritual self-gratification.

“Have I miscalculated so badly?” He said wonderingly.

The hosts turned to one another in search of a diplomatic response.

“That was a rhetorical question,” He said.

The hosts immediately relaxed.

“But if we’re going to right these wrongs we have a long day ahead of us, my friends.”

As the day progressed He instituted several new policies, completely surrendering His previous desire for an autonomous creation. How could He abide a chaotic autonomy? He also implemented a new system to receive immediate reactions to His policies. He ordered the principalities to watch over the earthly realm, assigning the angels and archangels to deliver an ever-increasing array of commands to the human species. The principalities would then deliver their reports to the seraphim, which would fly in and out of His office delivering these reports and taking new instructions to the principalities. He was determined not to lose control over His creation; certainly He could find a way to bring a general peace and solidarity to human beings everywhere.

He first tried sending angels to enlighten prophets, who would then have great influence over those to whom they disclosed their revelations—but He soon found that

the prophets were disregarded, or removed as threats to the existing hierarchy of human beliefs. So He instructed the angels to act in the cause of divine righteousness, destroying cities of iniquitous peoples, casting plagues upon the lands, providing rewards for the kind and generous, and striking down the wicked. Unfortunately, human beings seemed to possess a great resilience to spiritual perception. The religious leaders dissected His decrees and then resected them most creatively, conspiring to satisfy physical need over spiritual purity. He gave saintly powers to those few human beings possessed of characters beyond reproach, but most of these were slain by the jealous, or died as symbols of awe without actually having changed very many minds. The saints were cataloged with every other curio that spoke to the potential of human existence without actually becoming a commonplace theme. His prophets became the anchors for intellectual servitude, and made war on other religions whose doctrines did not quite line up perfectly with their own. Great suffering became commonplace, no matter how many seraphs flashed through His office door. He attempted a variety of inspired messages, each promoted by prophets in various parts of the world, but the promise of divinity seemed only synonymous with the promise of self-destruction. Superficial intellectual and physical differences were still being used as motives for death and devastation.

“What is happening to this world?” He asked the seraph rotating placidly before Him. He sat back in His chair, rubbed His palms over His eyes and waited for inspiration. Then He leaned forward again and nodded toward the seraph.

“If they refuse to accept spiritual ordination as a marker for peaceful coexistence, perhaps a new approach is required.”

The seraph bobbed uncertainly.

“Perhaps I dismissed the logical order of creation too quickly,” He said as He reached for His stylus.

Thereafter He instructed the principalities to intervene in the genius of human thought and industry, revealing the mechanism of physical creation and the underlying physical principles of the universe in order to reconstruct their societies on a rational and scientific basis. Initially, He felt quite pleased that the discovery of the nature of universal creation was slowly being explored by human beings, providing the basis for new technologies, industries, and self-assessment. He was certain that once people became aware of the logical order of creation, as well as its underlying causes, they would soon recognize the homogeneity of the species and work together to form a single, reasonable human society on earth.

But later that afternoon a bevy of seraphs stumbled into the room with desperate messages from the principalities. Despite the wondrous applications of science and reason that Humanity had managed to disperse through medicine, architecture and polity, a disturbing parallel technology had found an intractable evolution in human history consisting chiefly of horrible weapons of warfare that had the potential to destroy the entire human species—not to mention every other wonderful species He’d created for the Planet. Additionally, the spiritual instruction He had previously provided was now considered adversarial to science and reason, which created a whole new wave of persecution and retribution.

He pinched His nose between His eyes and moaned.

During the course of the late afternoon He tried several things to remedy the problems being experienced by His human creation, but everything He tried seemed only to complicate Humanity's perception of itself. The threat of eternal damnation meant nothing; martyrs and saints were venerated, then ignored, if they weren't actually assassinated; great technological achievements were celebrated and forgotten; the analysis of universal creation was defined and then denied by those still petulant about the loss of a unique identity in the universe; and petty physical and intellectual differences were 'still' being utilized as the basis for bad behavior. And underlying every human motive was an unbelievable obsession for possessing material goods.

At the end of the day He laid His head on the desk and groaned pitifully.

He raised His head and asked the seraph before Him, "What happened?"

The seraph buzzed helplessly.

"It seemed like such a beautiful creation. The Stars and Planets, the universal anomalies, the waters and the creatures on the worlds I created for their beauty. There must be a way to rescue this species—"

But He couldn't suffer another moment in the claustrophobic space that the office had become. He rose from the desk, gave strict orders for the principalities to monitor Humanity and intervene only if it seemed very near to complete self-destruction, and hurried from the room.

~

On the seventh day He returned.

The first thing He noticed was that there were no hosts at all within it, and this was a fascinating development in itself. The room was supernaturally quiet.

When He finally sat behind the desk He saw the single folder lying by His stylus. With a sigh He pulled up His chair and opened the folder.

The message was not unexpected, though it was disappointing. He felt He'd done some very good work. But even so, His commission had been rescinded.

He wondered, though, what might have happened if He had made Humanity telepathic. Perhaps then they might have known that each person was one and the same. But such a quality would have negated the esthetic brilliance of His original design—that each being was a universe within the universe he or she perceived. He thought it was a beautiful concept, though fatally flawed. Perhaps the next commission He received would prove more successful. He'd certainly learned a great deal from this one.

With a stroke of His stylus He cancelled Humanity, leaving the world intact for a time for His own pleasure.

What I really need is a long vacation, He thought, before rising from the desk and moving toward the door.

My previous work has been (or is soon to be) published in *The Absent Willow Review*, *CoolStuff4Writers.com*, *Screentalk Magazine* and *The Yale Banner* – as well as being distinguished by the *Nicholl Fellowship* (Quarterfinalist) and *Slamdance Writing Contest* (Semi-finalist).

Most recently, my graphic novel, "The Merlin Prophecy", was lucky enough to receive an exclusive 2009 New York Comicon premiere through Ardden Entertainment.

The Last Long Box

By Derek Ivan Webster

Tony hefted the clean, white cardboard box twice more before his fingers found their purchase, sliding into the cutout slots at either side of the long and narrow container. Before this morning it had been a year since Tony had last lifted one of the boxes and he could swear they had gotten bigger in the meantime. Frowning at the strain in his back and arms, Tony shuffled across the thinly carpeted hallway, wondering if memories did not grow heavier with each passing year.

Three hundred odd issues per longbox, give or take a handful of annuals and special editions that surely threw off the count. Sixteen longboxes full of the books he'd collected religiously, not to mention the half-dozen shorties packed with an assortment of titles he'd acquired somewhere along the way. All told, Tony figured he must have almost 6,000 comic books, all meticulously bagged and boarded, for years stuffed away in the bedroom closet he shared with his wife. It was one of the features that had helped them decide on their first home: a walk in closet the

size of most children's bedrooms. His wife had pointed out he needed more room for his comics than she did for her clothes. Luckily she had laughed.

His wife occupied his mind as he stumbled his way between the bedroom and staircase. Tawny was the stuff of dream for Tony. The patience she had demonstrated over the years with regards to his saddle-stitched addiction was truly awe inspiring. But as much as Tawny loved her husband and as much as she'd allowed herself to accept his comic mania, she'd never quite found a love for the material itself. What she had never quite understood was that Tony's obsession had less to do with the comic books and more with what those comics had come to mean. Tony had *literally* grown up reading comic books. Comics were not a pastime to Tony, they were a lifelong passion, one that had paid him back many fold over the years with very unexpected dividends.

In junior high he had astounded the school librarian by asking if she had any Nietzsche available. He'd come across the philosopher's dubious but intriguing message while witnessing Professor Xavier's bone-breaking confrontation with the Shadow King. In an advanced Western Literature course in college, Tony had embarrassed the upper-classmen with his knowledge of Greek and Norse mythology. After class a co-ed had approached him to ask advice on supplementary study material. He was too tongue-tied to admit to his encyclopedic knowledge of *The Mighty Thor* and the *Monster Manuals, Volume 1 & 2*. For Tony, comic books had not just been a part of his life, they had been his life. But like all important things, their role had changed over the years.

Feeling a bead of perspiration forming at the edge of his scalp, Tony carefully set the box down upon the worn banister at the top of the staircase. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, still supporting most of his burden's

weight with the effort of an arm and hip. The actual number of comics that Tony had allowed himself to accumulate since he'd first picked up *X-Men Annual #11* at the age of nine was 6,152. His pained smile turned sly when he realized he'd been trying to convince himself he'd forgotten the total. The truth was that Tony could still remember every cover of every issue he'd ever plucked from the mail, purchased at the store, or received as a gift over the last twenty years.

He remembered issue #76 of *G.I. Joe*; the one with Roadblock standing atop a shattered tank, carnage of the Cobra War painting the background in fire behind him. His blood still raced a bit with the excitement of turning those pages and following Zartan's singular arrow as it flew miles across Cobra Island only to finally be plucked from the sky by the silhouette of Serpentor's head. Tony's sister had hated Serpentor almost as much as he had. When he came running to find her and show her what had happened in the newest issue she was so happy she actually hugged him. Tony thought of Roadblock and those eerie flames every time he remembered the rare feeling of his sister's arms around him.

Tony's own arm began to tremble a bit and he could feel the bruise trying to form beneath the weight on his hip. Taking a full breath, he wrapped his hands back into the side slots and heaved the box back up against his chest. With the slowest and most deliberate of steps, Tony started down the stairs.

He remembered *Wolverine #57* just as clearly; the first time he'd read a comic that actually made him hurt inside. He remembered Logan holding the Lady Mariko in his arms as she slipped away. The sharp sound of a life ending on the soft turning of the final page. Up until then, Tony had always thought that, no matter how severe the storm, heroes were always meant to make it to the far side

unscathed. Sure, bad things happened (turmoil was the central tenant of every comic ever written, after all) and things couldn't get much bleaker than the dire straits that each month's finale manufactured. But in the end it seemed like everything always worked out—at least if you were willing to shell out money for the next issue.

Tony's mother had taken him to the comic shop that month, an oddity only because his father was the one that normally showed the patience for his son's voracious hobby. She was in a hurry and he'd barely been able to make it to the re-sale bins before she came looking for him and dragged him all the way to the checkout. On the long ride home, he'd read his comic silently from the passenger seat, occasionally looking up through the rain streaked windshield before returning to the more vibrant textures of the page. His mother had started smoking again and he wanted to tell her the fumes could damage his comics but the raw red at the corner of her eyes told him to go back to his reading. As painful as it might be to witness Logan's final moments with his true love, if it got to be too much Tony could always turn the page and close the book. Maybe Mariko would be brought back to miraculous life in the next issue. In the comic book world there was always hope. Tony could feel himself turning that next page every time he smelled smoke on his mother's breath.

Tony paused at the midway landing. He considered setting the box down but just couldn't bring himself to do it. There was something inalterably heroic about the world of comic books. The ordeals, the straining oaths, the unflinchingly sincere melodrama. More recently comics had taken a turn in a supposedly more realistic direction. They'd come to like being called graphic novels and splashing around unshielded violence, gratuitous swearwords and conspicuous sexuality. They were aimed at an older readership. People like himself, Tony supposed, longtime readers fast approaching 30 that had supposedly "matured" into a much darker and

more sordid taste. The truth was, the new stuff didn't do much for Tony.

It wasn't that he had anything against mature content on the comic shelf. He'd come across his first dose of drugs and death in the pages of Frank Miller's classic *Daredevil*; he'd felt his first crotch rocket while ogling the Goblin Queen's pouty lips. Tony didn't find the new material too mature for young audiences. Rather he found it too uninspired for true comic book fans. If he wanted to see hookers getting cut up in a drug deal he could turn on just about any channel on cable TV (not to mention the networks after 9). Unfortunately, if he was looking for that elusive world of magic and wonder that had always been there for him, it was becoming increasingly hard to find.

And that's why Tony couldn't bring himself to set this impossibly heavy comic box down. This was the last of the 16 longs. The rest of the boxes had already been carried down and this was the final chapter slowly closing on a lifelong collection. Would Thor drop *Mjolnir* from his grip with the Asgard Serpent, so near, still hissing in his face? Would Captain America drop his *adamantium-vibrium* alloy shield while chasing the Red Skull down an abandoned mine shaft in the Alps? Heroes don't stop; they keep going. They don't complain; they complete. Tony summoned up all the strength of his bone thin, 152-pound frame and clutched the 75 pound box of ink and paper all the tighter. He promised his heroes he would not let them down.

As his whole body began to flush with the exertion of each awkward step, Tony wondered if this was just the sort of compulsive behavior his wife had pointed out to him when they'd talked about what to do with his collection. Perhaps it was the distraction of that thought that caused Tony's left toe to catch on the edge of a step. Perhaps had he allowed himself to set the load down on the landing he would have retained enough strength to hold onto the box as he fell to

one knee. Perhaps had he not kept so many comics for so long he would not have seen so many memories arcing away from him and through the air as the longbox tumbled on its side and spewed out all 293 of its treasures. As Tony watched, in horror, he saw his comics scattered like mere paper all across the steps, landing and living room beyond. When the last of them had tumbled to the ground and all the flapping and smacking and bending was thankfully finished, Tony let his reaching hands fall to his side and sat back, hard, upon the steps behind him.

His thoughts again returned to *G.I. Joe #76* and those eerie flames. He thought of his sister's arms around him, two children celebrating the victory of their shared hero. He thought of the car accident that had taken her life the next year and how he had continued to collect *G.I. Joe* until its cancellation but had never read another issue.

He thought of *Wolverine #57*, of Lady Mariko's limp body in Logan's arms. He thought of his mother smoking in the car, of how his father had never forgiven her for their daughter's death. He thought of the night that she'd collapsed at the edge of his bed and told him his father wasn't coming home anymore. Despite his hope, and no matter how many pages Tony turned over the years, he never found Mariko resurrected on the far side.

For Tony, the world he read in his comics and the life that he lived in reality had always found a way to agree with one another. Through the happiness and the sadness, the tragic and the tender, there had always been a comic book that could help a confused and overwhelmed little boy, adolescent, young adult and even twenty-nine-year-old man make sense of the world. Tony sat there and looked out over the sea of discarded stories that lay before him.

Finally, he thought of the conversation he'd had with Tawny the week before. How she'd explained they'd need his

closet space to help store diapers and toys and all the sundry of new possessions their little girl was sure to bring with her once she arrived next spring. Tony had agreed. He hadn't hesitated when his wife had suggested he find a way to empty the closet. He'd even been surprised by how willing he'd found himself. Other than the backbreaking effort, it had all seemed easy enough and there were already fifteen longboxes worth of proof down in the garage to demonstrate his resolve.

Tony slowly gathered up the fallen comics, reordering them as he went and trying his best to ignore the bruised corners and bent spines of the previously mint issues. He stacked them all back into the container and placed the lid back on top. With a great swinging effort he was able to pull the box back off the ground and up against his chest. He tottered for a second before starting back up the stairs.

The final box he would keep. He'd keep it for his sister and his mother. He'd keep it for the librarian he'd surprised and the co-ed that had asked after his secret. He'd keep it for the little boy, the adolescent, the young adult and twenty-nine-year-old man that all resided within him. He'd keep it for all of those people but most especially he'd keep it for the little girl his wife would soon bring into the world.

She'll have to start her collection somewhere, Tony mused to himself as he staggered his way up the steps. Until the mighty ordeal was finally at an end, the last longbox did not touch the ground again.

Grady McShane's bio can be found on page 79.

Hide and Speak

By Grady McShane

Grabbing at images of windblown trees
With tearstained teeth and calloused knees,
Stabbing at formulas of dead men's thoughts
With yak horn fans and cold stars distraught.

Sunshine winters get my Zen bomb centered.
Enlightenment escapes me,
Bastard heroes set my pride at zero,
I escape enlightenment.

I whisper fear in the spooky sound's ear
With death's frozen phrase killing cheer,
Chewing on razors with my Buddha face,
Squandering charm and out of disgrace.

Rot-gut laughter hanging drunk from rafters.
Pretension hides from my truth,
Plastic smiles shine like new ceramic tiles,
My truth hides from pretension.

Sobriety and clarity,
Poetry and symmetry,
I lack, I lie, I live and die,
Never touching true prosperity.

I'm average.

Dylan Gilbert, originally from Berkeley, California, where his hippie parents named him after Bob Dylan, spent many years in New York City working as an actor in everything from performance art to Shakespeare. He currently lives and teaches English in New York's Hudson Valley. His story, "Rules of the Game," was published in the January 09 edition *Word Riot*, an online magazine, and his story, "These Not Good People," is being published in the upcoming edition of *The Externalist*, another online literary magazine.

Menopause Yoga Studio

by Dylan Gilbert

In spite of sleeping poorly last night, I manage to arrive at the Menopause Yoga Studio fifteen minutes early. Of course, that's not the real name. The name keeps changing due to lawsuits (how un-yoga), but that's what I call it due to the fact that the majority of the clientele are middle-aged housewives trying to fight off decrepitude, trying to keep their asses tight against all odds. And though I can be a jerk about it, truthfully, I admire them for their effort.

It was different in the studios in the city, the ones I used to attend before I moved my family up for a life in the 'burbs. Young, old, didn't matter, these women were yoga beasts. Buffed! Like, you could tell if you got in a beef with one, you were getting a beat down. But hot as hell too, some real beauties. In some ways, I like it better up here, less competition, less pressure. But not today.

I find a quiet spot in the corner and spread out my mauve Tapas mat. I smell the scent of the yoga mat cleaning wipes I recently used as I lower myself down. Mmm,

Eucalyptus. Promotes mental clarity. I could definitely use that today. I like the floor in this studio. A rubbery substance, like a high school track, much better than the slippery hard wood floors or unsanitary carpets of other studios I've been to. I'm stretching out my tight spots, hips, hammies, shoulders, when a 60-year-old anorexic bird of a woman with a tuft of curly red hair puts her mat *right* next to mine. Every time. I just want my own little corner of yoga studio, but they always put their damn mats *too* close. Really. I mean, have some spatial awareness. But they're too self-absorbed. She's less than a foot away from me and three feet from the next person over. Gabrielle, my wife, tells me it's because they like me, but I think it's because they see a man and a man in a yoga class has low status, a peon, in fact, so they squeeze in on you. If I was more assertive I would say something, but God, I could never. I'd be mortified. I'd sooner lick my own ass.

The Bird Lady goes to get some supplies and comes back and lays her blanket and blocks between our two mats. Is she fucking kidding me? They really need to send these people to yoga obedience school – get them certified in yoga etiquette before starting class. Rule one: Don't encroach on people's space. Rule two: Use deodorant. Last week I had some nature girl next to me and I almost died of asphyxiation. Rule three: Don't come in late interrupting *my* yoga experience. And definitely don't expect me to move my mat to make room for you once class has started. Rule four: Don't gab and gossip before class. We don't care about your house remodeling. How un-yoga. And rule five: If you're fat or hideous, don't put your mat in front of me!

The anorexic bird lady is annoyingly type A. She immediately begins aggressive stretching and goes right into asanas: Downward Dog, Plank, Chaturanga. Her manic energy is completely interfering with my sluggish depression and it's ticking me off. I'm tempted to move, but how could I justify it? What would people think? Oh, I

just wanted to get away from the manic little chicken woman who put her damn blocks in my personal space. The place is filling up now anyway. More older housewives, but some younger women too. Even a couple of guys, always get a few on the weekend. As usual, wearing big clumpy sweat suits from the 1980's. Rule #6: No thick cotton/poly sweat suits from the 80's. And that's not just a yoga rule, that's a *life* rule. I decide to try to meditate till class starts to block everything out.

I hear a bit of grunting and crack my eyes open to see an ass the size of a Buick, some lady bending over directly in front of me laying down her mat, inches from mine. No, no. I just want a little corner of peace. Spatial awareness, people. Look at all the room in front of her. Am I invisible? I exist here. I'm tempted just to leave. I can see the girl at the desk all concerned. "Why are you leaving?"

"It's just too crowded. Everyone's encroaching on my space." I'll show them. They'll realize that they need to take some control of this situation; the management needs to do something. I paid for a damn space and I'm being squeezed out. Yeah, I can already hear Gabrielle. "Oh, I'll show them, I'll hurt me." One of her favorite slogans. And she'd be right. Why should I sacrifice my yoga class for these spatially challenged nitwits? I'll just say something. I'll ask here to move up a bit. I have long legs and I'm worried I might bump her. It's perfectly reasonable.

"Okay, make sure you have a block, a blanket and a strap," flows the voice of Bren, the yoga instructor. Oh God, class is starting. I can't say anything now. Too awkward.

Bren is one of the best teachers at the studio. Tall and skinny with giant black eyes that make her look like an Arabian princess. And she's got serious yoga skills. Some of these older teachers can barely demonstrate all the poses their teaching. I've seen a couple of them come up all

shakily and just tip over – just ruins class for me. But Bren is lean and fit and can demonstrate the most challenging asanas, like Wheel and Crow.

We start moving from Cow, on hands and knees with a curved back, to Cat, switch to an arched back. Every time Big Butt in front of me cats, her giant ass crack, covered in dark purple spandex, is in my face, a spot of wetness already forming between the two boulder-sized buttocks. I'm terrified I'll accidentally touch it with my aristocratic nose. To my right Chicken Lady is breathing like Darth Vader, doing double time Cat-Cows – her shriveled belly practically touching the floor with her arch, her spine shooting high toward the ceiling with her curve. I awkwardly scooch back farther into the corner as we start on Sun Salutations.

~

We're in the thick of Scarinamascar B. I'm in a seated position on an invisible chair, thigh muscles pulsing, sweat soaking my bandana. I'm feeling the high, fatigued legs, burning shoulders, endorphins flying unhindered from neuron to neuron. "Flow up from Awkward Chair to Tadasana," Bren beams in. My breath flows like a forceful stream out of my nostrils, legs like bedrock, torso weightlessly flowing upward. I'm having the yoga experience.

"Unggh!" Oh God, what was that revolting sound? We continue through the vinyasa: Forward Bend, which I do with the grace of a hawk swooping down to catch a ferret, spring back to Plank, then slowly lower down to Chaturanga.

"Unggh!"

“Rrrgh.” Oh, Jesus, it’s those klutzy men. They’re grunting like hogs. Don’t these people know anything about yoga? It’s all about the flow of breath. They’re going to pull a muscle or worse. Rule seven: No grunt—

“Urrrrgh.” How can I do yoga with this non-yoga sound? I mean, I could see if you’re in the gym in the free weight room, but this is venal. Bren’s got to take control of the situation.

“Make sure your breath stays flowing,” she says in her cosmic monotone. Good, she’s on it. We’re so in tuned. “Deep inhales and deep exhales. Feel the breath on the back of your throat.”

“Ungh!” Maybe too subtle, Bren.

What the hell? Something wet hit me on the cheek and the corner of my mouth. A drop of something splashed me. Oh my God. I glance at the ceiling. This place is notorious for leaks. I can’t see anything, thank goodness. It’d probably be full of asbestos. Where’d it come from? Bird Lady, flapping around next to me, she probably got over-excited, gurgled some spit in my direction, I’ll bet. I’ve got to sterilize. I release my Down Dog and see a giant purple ass dripping with sweat. I feel nauseous. She flicked sweat on me. I know. Dear God, there could be fecal matter in it.

I tap dance around all the Down Dogs and rush for the door. “Excuse me. Sorry. Pardon me.” God, please let it be asbestos water. I fling the door open and fly toward the receptionist, a black-haired girl wearing a thick layer of make-up, about nineteen, intensely engaged on a red slider cell phone. “Excuse me, excuse me.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “Just a moment, please,” she tells me.

“This is urgent. Do you have any hand sanitizer?”

“Hold on, Shana,” she sighs into the phone and then to me, “No.”

“You know, you really should. There’s a lot of unsanitary—uh—ness going on in there,” I say scurrying to the bathroom.

“You can write a note and put it in the suggestion box,” I hear her say as I attempt to close the violet curtain in front of the bathroom. I urgently turn the hot water to full pressure and blast a dozen squirts of fragrant white hand soap into my palms. I bring the milky water to my face and scrub frantically. I cup sudsy water into my mouth, swish it around, spit it out and repeat several times.

I feel around for paper towels, face dripping. Suddenly my right eye starts burning. I feel the oozy suds creeping in the corner. Oh God, it feels like someone poured battery acid on my fucking eye. I stick my face in the sink to rinse. CRACK! I hit my head on the facet. “Shit!” I’m flushing water over my face and eyes. My head throbbing just over my left temple.

I whip off half the roll of paper towels and dry my face and hair. I’ve got a small red triangle on the side of my forehead. I reapply my bandana to cover it up and go to get my mat and get out of here. My T-shirt’s soaked and I’m whipped.

Everyone’s in Triangle Pose as I enter and Bren approaches me furtively. “Dale, can you demonstrate Headstand for me in just a bit?”

I quickly mask my ecstasy. “Well, I guess, okay, if no one else wants to.” She gives my hand a little squeeze and I feel her yoga-ness. She releases me and glides back to the

front of the class. I've waited for years for this acknowledgement.

~

Purple velvet in her drawl as I'm demonstrating, completely in sync with her voice and intention. "Place your head in line with your elbows. Notice how he is on the top of his head, the Crown Chakra, not the forehead." I'm in the pre-Headstand position, my moment of glory. Sharing my yoga-strength with my puppy-eyed peers.

"The next step is to straighten the legs." I mirror her words, she the master, I the apprentice. "Now, slowly, using the core, he'll bring one leg up...and then—.

"Ffpzzt!" A pressure induced fart shoots out of my ass.

Oh, dread. Oh God, erase me now. An amazed giggle from somewhere, and the rest of the room in mortified silence, even Bren. My legs are up in a wobbly Headstand. Bren is probably tearing up – her face inches from my ass when the violation occurred. I try to make squealing sounds with my head and hands against the mat – make them think it was a mat fart. The problem is the sweat – gives it more of that blistering sound. If they didn't have the damn heat so high.

"Salamba Sirsasana," Bren coos, indicating my stance. God hates me. I'm never coming back to this studio. I can only imagine what Bren thinks of me.

I shuffle back to my place as if I had the scarlet letter branded on my chest, willing myself to invisibility. I go directly to Child's Pose, burying my face in my mat, willing my classmates and especially the teacher not to see me.

"Nice Headstand," says a voice like licorice. I look up – it's Fat Ass. "I could never do that." For a moment I think

she's mocking me, but her eyes have the earnestness of a puppy.

I blubber out some nonsense, sounding like a dad on a cheesy sit-com. "Oh, well, sure, you could, just takes practice."

"You have a beautiful practice," she whispers. "So focused."

"Thank you. Thank you for your kind words." And I mean it. Who goes out of their way to mention something like this? I start to have a warm feeling...for a nanosecond, till that tiny bit of warmth is joined by an elephant-sized dose of SELF-HATRED. This is the woman I have mentally ridiculed and cursed all class, but in my moment of weakness, she shows me kindness. The shame is Bruce Lee, the self-hatred is Mike Tyson and they're beating the crap out of me.

"Okay, I think we've been in Headstand long enough," Bren says to Bird Lady, the only one still up. Finally, Sivasna, the Corpse Pose, the end of this wretched class, my last one ever at this studio. I can't wait to get out of here. I'm going straight to the hospital and request a lobotomy. Cut this memory out! Once everyone is settled down, I sneak out while Bren's back is turned. Don't even roll up my mat, just snatch it and escape.

Little Miss Thing on the phone gabbing, feet up on the computer keyboard, and holding what appears to be a MacDonald's cheeseburger in her hand. How un-yoga. Why doesn't she just break out a pack of Marlboros? She's about as spiritual as a tube of toothpaste. Why's she even working here? Rule number 8: Only hire *yoga*-people to work in *yoga* studios. Duh!

Just as I pass her, the bathroom door flies open and I'm nose to nose with one of the grunters. He's grinning at me in his big gray sweatshirt, wet at the armpits, neck and belly. Short and bulky, a shock of dark hair, meaty face, thick glasses, forty or fifty, and smiling like a lunatic. Conspiratorially, "You cut one, man."

"Excuse me?"

"You farted. Right in front of everybody." If I had a gun I'd shoot him, then myself...then the cheeseburger right out of the receptionist's greasy hand.

"No, uh, it was the mat. Uh, squeaky," I manage to mumble.

"Dude, you're my hero. You were cool as a cucumber. Just cut one and went into headstand like it was nothing. You should have seen the look on Bren's face."

God, please kill this man. "Okay, well, bye," I say squeezing past his bulky frame, feeling clumsy pats on the shoulder from one of his meaty hands. Back off me. Jesus, what is it with the lack of spatial awareness in this place?

"Hey, I look forward to seeing you again. I come here a lot so—

The door closes behind me and I'm gone. Thank god. Oh, crisp air and freedom from that nightmare. I'm sure as hell never going back there again. Damn, and I still have seven or eight classes left on my card. That's a hundred bucks down the drain.

Heading toward my Saab, I can hear Gabrielle's voice in my head again. "You're giving up yoga over a fart? It's a natural function of the body. Nothing to be embarrassed

about." But she doesn't understand how stressful yoga can be. Maybe it's just not for me.

I start the car and head into the road – a quiet drive is always good for frayed nerves. If yoga's not for me, I ponder, then what is? Maybe there is something else, a work out that is sublime and pure, that attracts people who have consideration, respect, boundaries, taste. A place *where rules are followed*. And maybe it's just not yoga...I wonder what Pilates is like...

FEATURED AUTHOR: MIGUEL DE LEON

Miguel Lopez de Leon is a writer living happily in Los Angeles. He has written numerous poem collections, short stories and novellas (short novels). Miguel is currently working on his fantasy-adventure series 'The Hillside Chronicles'. Miguel has already completed book one of the series 'The Hillside Chronicles: Peter Huddleston & The Rites of Passage', which is his debut novel. Miguel is currently working hard on book two of the series, 'The Hillside Chronicles: Peter Huddleston & The Mists of the Three Lakes.' To view more of Miguel's work, go to www.miguellopezdeleon.com

GRANNY'S TALE

By Miguel de Leon

Every night, my Granny tucks me into bed and tells me a story before I fall asleep. I love my Granny. Whenever I get home from school, she's in the living room waiting for me, a big glass of wine in her hand. Granny says wine is a drink that adults like. My Granny loves wine. A lot.

"Okay sweetheart," Granny starts, pulling the thick blankets up to my chin. "I...you were very nice to your little brother yest—today, Patty. I'm very proud of you. Now, what story do you want Granny to tell you?"

My Granny has a whole bunch of stories she likes to tell me. There's the one about the policeman who chased her in the car, the one at my mom's party when she fell asleep in her carrot soup and almost drowned, and the one about the time when she pushed my other grandmother into the

swimming pool. But the story I love the most is the grocery store story.

"You want the grocery story again, sweetie?" Granny asks, taking a long, deep drink from her mug of wine. "Okay, okay...let's see now...."

Granny always takes a few more extra gulps of wine before she starts her stories.

"It was a cold day that Tuesday..."

Thursday, I remind her.

"It was a cold day that Wednesday, as I approached the dry cleaners..."

Supermarket.

"That's right, dear. I was in the supermarket...I wanted to buy some...I needed some eggs for a special cake that I wanted to make you and your brother..."

The last time Granny told me this story, she was there to buy ham and cheese for a picnic, but it doesn't matter.

"When who do I see, but Mildred, from bingo. You remember what I told you about her, don't you sweetie..."

She stole Granny's man.

"She stole my man!" she continued, drinking from her flowery mug. "So I went up to her and I said..."

Granny actually just slapped her, but she likes to say she said something first.

"I said, 'Veronica...'"

Mildred.

"I said, 'Mildred, you piece of trashy, good for nothing, lying, cheating, pot bellied, eighty-two year old mattress—you stole, no, you *stole* my man!' Then, sweetheart, Granny—your Granny's a lady. So, I tried to gently walk by her to get to the frozen food section, when she violently grabbed—she had the nerve to grab my arm..."

Granny slapped her twice and tackled her into a huge pyramid of paper towels.

"So I tacked that no good—and you know Granny's a big lady—I tackled her into the paper towel display."

It was written about in the newspaper.

"It made it to the newspapers, didn't it sweetie? You remember the headline: 'Innocent Grandmother Defends Herself against Violent Adulteress.'"

The headline was actually: "Drunk Grandmother Assaults Wrong Lady at Grocery Store."

I love my Granny.

FEATURED AUTHOR: MIGUEL DE LEON

THE CAT'S MEOW

By Miguel de Leon

Meow, meow, meow, meow...

"Hi Tabs! Who's da good kitty? Who's da good kitty?"

Meow, meow, meow, meow...

"You want some of my sandwich? Here you go...good kitty!"

Yes, I know this is a wretched display. But this is what must be done whenever I want anything in this little apartment. I guess I don't do much around here. There are no mice. They don't have kids. I never leave. It's pretty boring. Sometimes I pretend to see things on the wall, chase things that aren't really there. My owners are amused by this. They think I see things they don't. I take naps. I like cheese. Is that normal? Liking cheese I mean. Oh, here comes the male one.

"Hey Tabs! Who's my favorite cat? Who's my favorite cat? You are!"

Okay, whatever tubby, where's the food?

"Speak Tabs, speak...speak Tabs. Tabs...speak Tabs..."

He apparently has me confused with Lassie.

"C'mon Tabs...speak...speak Tabs...speak..."

Oh, for the love of...fine. Meow, meow, meow.

“Good Tabs! Genius cat! Genius cat!”

Stupid man. Stupid man.

“Do you want something to eat Tabs?”

Yes.

“Do a trick for me! Jump Tabs! Jump!”

Jump? You must be out of your damn mind.

“Jump and you get a treat.”

Give me a treat and I won't claw you when you're sleeping.

“It's okay, here's your kitty treat...”

Not these again. They taste like socks.

“See you later Tabs, love you.”

Go to hell, I hate these treats...oh good, he's gone. That was the one who had the bright idea to buy me a leash and try to walk me around the block the other day. A cat on a leash. That's like a bulldog with a ball of yarn. How humans ended up in charge of everything I'll...oh, here comes the female one again.

“Who's da good kitty? Who's da good kitty?”

Yes, yes, we did that already. I want cheese.

“Does kitty want cheese? Kitty loves cheese.”

Not as much as middle age woman loves gin.

“Mommy will fix herself a drink first, then I'll get Tabsy-wabsy some cheese.”

Why don't you move your fatsy-watsy buttsy-wutsy and give me my cheese now.

“Oh no...I forgot to get cheese at the market this morning Tabs...”

You...bitch.

“Do you forgive Mommy? Do you forgive me? Love you Tabs.”

Go to hell. She's going to take a bath now. I don't know how she does it. All that water. I blame the alcohol. So, here I am. No milk, no cheese. Neglected, as usual. Whatever. I'm gonna take a nap. I usually nap in a small space behind the refrigerator. The dream team never finds me there. Wake me if the male one comes home with cheese. You can have some if you want. Just go “Meow, meow, meow, meow.” They'll give you anything you want.

FEATURED AUTHOR: MIGUEL DE LEON

JUST ANOTHER DAY BY THE LAKE

By Miguel de Leon

As three teenagers noisily arrive by my spot at the lake, something terrible happens. I run out of vodka. As the trio of kids set up their towels and radio, I unknowingly gulp down the last of my liquid courage. I'm not really a drinker. Most days I'd rather have a double espresso than a cape cod. But today is different. Today I learned an awful, shocking truth. My dog is trying to kill me.

No, I am not drunk. Maybe a little. Yes. Yes, I am drunk. But for good reason. Yesterday, I spent the morning desperately trying to forget that I had just been dumped. That's right, dumped. My girlfriend of six months had the revelation that we had no 'heat'. What the hell is that? Heat? I think it means I'm fat. So there I was, in my argyle socks and happy face boxer shorts, dumped. Hello vodka, my name is loser. After about, I don't know, a thousand drinks, I found my dog Rugby sitting in the living room with a VHS tape in his slobbering mouth. "Rugby," I stammered, "You matter, you do." Rugby did not reply. The next thing I knew, I was watching the lively tape in an ancient player I loyally refused to throw away. As the moaning sounds loudly echoed from the amateur video, I realized...I had heat. I had a lot of heat. Much more than my neighbors sex tape in front of me. I thought, no...I knew, my neighbors should know this.

I must have knocked on their door. Why else would my barbarian sized neighbor, Bruce, have been yelling at me? It's wasn't my fault we shared a balcony and they always

kept their windows open. And it sure as hell wasn't my fault that when my golden retriever got bored he brought back random possessions from their apartment. I felt Bruce was agitated at hearing his own voice moaning loudly from the television in my living room. I felt I should comfort him. "Bruce," I said, consolingly, "You're lucky. Even through the leather mask and handcuffs, it's clear that your wife is a lovely, and very flexible woman."

What amazed me was not that I wasn't completely knocked out by the first of Bruce's punches. It was not that I was able to lose him and run the six blocks to the lake. It was that I didn't spill a drop of the vodka cranberry from the tumbler in my bruised and bloodied hand. I was quite impressed Rugby was able to keep up with me. As I thankfully emptied out the remains of my plastic dinosaur tumbler, my loyal, slobbering friend sat cheerfully on the grass beside me.

And here I am. Actually, my life's not that bad. I have heat, dammit. I'm alive! I'm free! I matter! I decide to blend in with the early afternoon crowd, peeling off my tattered blue argyle socks and throwing them carelessly away. Now I'm just a normal guy in his trunks. Suddenly there's a bloodcurdling scream from the lake.

My faithful canine companion excitedly gallops back to me, a dripping wet, blue argyle bikini top dangling from his mouth. Before I know it, I'm arguing with a mysterious, topless woman's boyfriend, as Rugby attempts to swallow his newfound possession.

"What kind of man let's his dog act that way?" the angry boyfriend bellows. "You'd better apologize to my girlfriend, man! I'm warning you! Now what do you have to say to her?"

Assessing the situation, I look straight at the horrified woman and choose my words carefully. "What the hell kind of classless idiot would wear a tacky blue argyle bikini?"

I wake up on the grass, Rugby's stupidly happy face greeting my newly broken nose. The three boys from the spot nearby are standing over me. "Are you okay, sir? That topless woman beat you up pretty badly."

"I'm fine," I reply, in a daze. "I'm alive. I'm free. I matter."

"You're lucky your dog was here." The teenage boy replies, "You've been unconscious for ten minutes. We didn't know who to go to for help. When your neighbor walked by, your dog ran up to him and led him here."

"Hello Bruce...I have heat..." I mumble, looking up as his mammoth fist shoots towards my head.

I hate that dog.



Adrian Ludens been published in a variety of magazines, from *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* to *Morpheus Tales* to *Crossed Genres* and others.

MR. SIX AND THE BLOND ZERO

By Adrian Ludens

Rumors circulated around Paris that Mr. Six was visiting incognito. I heard he was making the rounds, visiting with faithless and faithful, young and old, rich and poor. He met with the corrupt who broke the law and the even more corrupt who made it.

I happened to be in the city on holiday for a few weeks, ensconced in a comfortable hotel suite where I lacked for nothing. I also did nothing. It was late one evening and I was gazing idly out my window when I decided that it would be an intriguing experience to meet a man of such notoriety. Perhaps I unwittingly invited what happened next, because a great gust of wind suddenly howled through the square below the hotel. Lightning broke apart the darkness and the glare vividly revealed the figure of a tall, slender gentleman garbed in black moving at a leisurely yet assured pace across the empty square. Thunder boomed with such volume that I confess I pressed my palms over my ears. The peal of thunder subsided and I turned from the window.

The figure I had glimpsed in the street below now stood in my room. He was dressed in priest's robes. Knowing something of his sense of humor, this convinced me of the stranger's identity. Here, I was convinced, was Mr. Six. I was vaguely disappointed to see no evidence of horns when he removed his hat. He settled in, immediately at ease. My guest requested that I treat him just as I would an old friend. His carriage and manners were fine and he was

handsome; portraits you have undoubtedly seen bear no resemblance to him.

"You are very comfortable here," he commented, after he had taken a seat. He appraised the room casually.

I asked him to try my favorite tobacco and he accepted. I loaded his pipe with it and gave him a light. Mr. Six sent up a cloud of fragrant smoke, and said admiringly, "This tobacco is quite good. It burns slowly, with the satisfying odor of a prosperity gospel follower."

That made me shudder a little, but we all have our metaphors and figures of speech. Who was I to judge? I let it pass and said:

"Everyone in the Parisian elite seems to prefer fine-cut Turkish and Syrian tobacco that burns your tongue and creates a suffocating smoke. But it is all the rage now. Its outrageous price guarantees its popularity. I insist on bringing my own preferred tobacco with me when I travel."

I realized I was satirizing myself with this arrogant criticism of other people's taste in tobacco. But the truth is that I dread those high-priced Havana cigars with the fancy labels around them. The label costs about a cent to produce, yet serve to increase the price of the cigar a hundred-fold!

What an exposure of human nature it is. For most, the only way they could tell a fine cigar from a poor one was by the label and the box. The wine merchant and the cigar dealer have an easy chance to get rich, for it is merely a matter of knowing how to select the right labels. This is undoubtedly true. Whatever everyone else is smoking or drinking is automatically sought after and regarded as the best by ninety-nine percent of the population. Foolishness! What shallow thoughtlessness indeed! I take great pride in never---

My visitor drew me from my reverie by rising from his chair and striding over to the window. Mr. Six made a pretense of glancing out onto the storm-sodden street, then reached out a delicate white hand and examined the drapery instead.

“Very elaborate, yet elegant.” He looked back at me, one eyebrow raised. “It boasts such a rich, swag look. Where did you have the cloth shipped in from? Surely this is not domestic.”

“That window treatment remains the same as when I first took up residence here.” I gave a careless wave in the direction of the muslin hotel drapery. “It could be constructed of burlap sacking for all I care. It serves its purpose admirably and I spare no thought to its appearance.”

Every word I said was true, yet I felt my cheeks flush under my visitor’s prolonged gaze.

I rose abruptly and strode to the liquor cabinet, intending to break the seal upon a forty year old bottle of scotch which had been presented to me a year earlier by either a visiting duke or a maharajah; I forget which.

Perhaps it was the psychosomatic residue associated with bad memory of an overly expensive, highly disappointing cigar that gave me a moment’s pause. Or perhaps a sulfurous odor truly had begun to engulf my quarters; an inescapable byproduct of my guest’s presence.

Not wishing to be accused of hypocrisy or inadvertent self-satire, I reached instead for another, more humbly labeled bottle of the amber liquid. This one was just seven years old and admittedly much more pleasing to my palate. I thought I discerned a pattern in our topics of conversation.

My guest seemed to glide across the room to where I poured generous amounts for both of us. Still standing in front of the cabinet, we raised our glasses in a toast.

“To the simple pleasures in life,” I announced. Mr. Six nodded and drank. I followed suit, overzealously emptying my glass.

My guest smacked his lips in apparent relish, yet his expressive eyes still betrayed his amusement at my expense. “You seem not to have succumbed to the usual shallow nature of men,” he admitted. I frowned into my glass and pretended to sip. What the devil was he grinning about?

“Your quarters are comfortable, well appointed and appealing and I see no egregious attempts at supercilious affectations,” my esteemed visitor went on. I struggled to keep up with his words, but he spoke with such sincerity that I felt my mistrust slipping away.

“Thank you,” I bowed. “I strive to be a practical and humble man in all respects.”

“And yet I am one of your most ardent and grateful admirers. Does this surprise you?”

I admit this revelation gave me a rather queer turn, but I did my best to give nothing away.

“Why do you suppose I am pleased by you?” His demeanor had slid from complimentary to confrontational so seamlessly that my scotch glass slipped from my fingers and fell to the thick carpet as I struggled to think up an adequate response.

"I live an honest and practical life," I began, without much hope of convincing him now. I sensed that I had somehow painted myself into a corner but I couldn't imagine how. "I am not one who judges a book by its cover."

Mr. Six smiled. "It is merely a matter of knowing how to select the right labels." His dark eyes glittered. A stormy rush of wind suddenly rattled the window panes. He had quoted me, but was he using my own words against me somehow?

"Why, yes. As I said before..." I broke off. *Had* I said it? I remembered thinking it, but had I actually said it aloud?

Lightning crisscrossed jaggedly across the sky and illuminated my quarters. I noticed that our shadows seemed to merge on the wall as one.

"What an exposure of human nature it is!" Again he reiterated my unspoken words.

A sudden, tremendous peal of thunder shook the hotel and jarred me into taking an uneasy step back. My ankle twisted awkwardly on my fallen scotch glass and I staggered. Mr. Six chuckled as I winced in pain. Anger and resentment closed my hands into fists.

What did I think I was going to do? Put him in his place with a round of fisticuffs? Instead I smiled sheepishly and hobbled to my chair. I fell into it with a groan. I suddenly felt wary of further conversation and was eager to be rid of my visitor.

"My sincerest apologies, but it is getting late." I nodded down at my swelling ankle and looked back into his face with what I hoped was a passable imitation of a self-depreciation. "Would you mind seeing yourself out?"

"Not yet. There is someone nearby who I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting."

Another brilliant flash whitewashed the room. Then inky blackness held sway again as the thunder rolled. Suddenly there she was; her striking figure silhouetted by the brighter light in the hall. My young wife Geneva tottered into the room, tipsy and giggling. Her bare legs were long and the hem of her black cocktail dress was short. A long string of pearls dangling from her swanlike neck swung in time with her hips as she sashayed across the room. Her platinum curls lay in a disheveled tangle over her bare shoulders. Raindrops from the storm had transformed into liquid temptation upon contact with my wife, and the shimmering black fabric clung like a second skin. I forgot my throbbing ankle, the storm and *nearly* forgot my guest.

My wife Geneva was the heiress to her parents' combined fortunes. The hotel in which we were so cozily quartered shared her maiden name. She had attended a number of the finest finishing schools, though regrettably had never actually finished any of them. The papers, not very flatteringly, though admittedly not far from the truth, have labeled her a 'vapid blonde zero of fresh young flesh'. Geneva is my guilty pleasure; my one vice.

Finally noticing that I had a visitor, my wife stopped short. "I wanted to get out of these wet clothes right away," she pouted. My young bride gazed impudently at my guest. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Darling!" I exclaimed. At least I thought I did. Someone did. Had it been my guest? I wasn't completely sure of anything at that point.

"Geneva... my kitten..." I finally stammered. I extended a shaky hand in our guest's direction. "I would like to introduce you to a highly esteemed visitor. This is Mr. Six."

"I'm honored," he purred.

"Pleased ta meetcha," Geneva responded. Then, oblivious of his status and power, my wife turned away dismissively. She hoisted one dripping leg onto the arm of my chair and bent to unclasp the buckle of her stiletto-heeled shoe. My hands were empty, but my guest –sharing in my sentiments perhaps- dropped his empty glass to the carpet. Geneva kicked her shoe aside.

"You've spilled your drink," my wife chirped when she noticed the empty glass lying on the dry carpet. "Let my husband get you another."

She tossed the other shoe over her shoulder and across the room. Something shattered and tinkled, but I couldn't be bothered to investigate. Geneva glanced at each of us in turn: an attentive Dark Prince and a stupefied King *Leer*.

"Your husband was just extolling the virtues of depth over appearance," Mr. Six told my wife.

Geneva frowned. "What brought the conversation around to swimming pools? Talk about boring!"

"Indeed!" Mr. Six bent and extravagantly kissed Geneva's nearest hand. He lingered so long that as he straightened, I squinted to make sure all her rings were still accounted for.

"I see that it is quite late and I am sure you two would appreciate some privacy." Mr. Six bowed gracefully. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Are you leaving?" Geneva wondered.

Our guest glanced at me and our eyes locked. Then he turned on his heel and strode toward the door. There came

another brilliant flash of lightning, followed by another deafening thunderclap. Geneva and I were alone.

My wife had already forgotten our visitor; I wondered if I ever would. Geneva wandered around the room, removing what precious little clothing remained and prattling on about her day: the shopping, the drinking, and the socializing. I half listened and murmured in surprise or assent whenever it seemed appropriate. I kept dwelling on the look shared between my guest and myself.

I had striven mightily to convey a look of innocence and righteousness. Yet I am not so deeply immersed in the folly of self-denial to have convinced myself that I had succeeded.

My visitor's eyes had fairly glowed with a vibrant brew of hilarity, lust and smug triumph.

What had Mr. Six seen in my eyes? Probably the same base emotions.

Although KJ Hannah Greenberg is only infrequently abetted by her imaginary hedgehogs, she regularly sloshes through the act of matchmaking words. One of her cutest couples is 'balderdash' and 'xylophone'. To wit, Channie has placed her work with an array of publications, including: *365 Tomorrows, AlienSkin Magazine, AntipodeanSF, Fallopian Falafel Zine, Fictionville, Ken*Again, Language and Culture Magazine, Literary Mama, Morpheus Tales, Parenting Express, Poetica Magazine, Poetry Super Highway, The Externalist, The Jerusalem Post, The Mother Magazine, The New Vilna Review, and Winamop.*

Reserve Duty Shalom

By KJ Hannah Greenberg

I lift you,
Toward Shemyim.
Your fingers tuck 'round,
Little bird.
Your sister, too,
Flies forward.

Keep me earthbound.
Girls, pull!
Beret, epaulet, buttons, and khaki
Mean service.
Ima shouts,
Names two.

Guns,
Plus jeep,
Wait.
Your whispers
Anchor *machar*,
(Or my fortnight).

Two weeks, perhaps,
This war, before
Silver trumpets can
Skip hills, restoring
What little heads and hugs
Can not do for soldiers.

"Shalom" means "hello," "goodbye" and "peace."

"Shemyim" means "heaven."

"Machar" means "tomorrow," but also connotes "eternity."

"Skipping hills" refers to a passage in Psalms about Moshiach/the messiah.

"Silver trumpets," too, represent the coming of Moshiach/the messiah.

Julian Merrill is a medical student studying in Ulm, Germany. He voted for Barack Obama.

Barocket Man

by Julian Merrill

Though President Barack Obama had been missing for the last ten days, it was not the top story in the news. The world had grown too used to his antics. He had brought peace to the Middle East, solved global warming, lifted Africa out of poverty, and every step of the way he had achieved his goals by motivating the masses pretty much the way rock stars fired up their fans. He had used his electric smile, beautiful voice and relentless charm to make everyone love him.

Had the world grown tired of him in the meantime?

No. In Obama's fourth term he was as adored as ever (his proposal to expand the maximum length of a president's tenure to four terms was nearly unanimously passed in both the Senate and the House). But people had learned to expect the unexpected. Christmas 2009, Obama's present to the nation had been Osama Bin Laden. He had brought him out on a stage in handcuffs personally. In 2011, he had given the world the cure to HIV/AIDS. Two months earlier, everyone had wept in the streets after finding out that *Obama* had the disease (he had contracted it attempting to save a bleeding man from a burning car). So who cared if he was missing now?

~

"Don't you think he's overdoing it a little?" Jack asked Tom, his copilot on the first manned mission to Mars. They were sitting next to each other in a luxurious cockpit and drinking

coffee. "I mean, sure, Obama was the one who promoted this mission, he really wanted to beat the Chinese to Mars and we appreciate that, but come on! He needs to disappear right before it happens! God knows what kind of spectacle he has planned back home. This is supposed to be our show, Tom, *our* show! Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin sure didn't have to put up with this shit."

Tom shrugged indifferently. "Look at the papers, Jack. We're on the front cover. Nothing Obama can do is going to diminish what we've accomplished."

Jack snorted. "Don't be too sure. Something tells me Obama is going to make the headlines tomorrow, and not us."

"That's ridiculous, and anyway, you get to go out first! You shouldn't be complaining."

"You get to say the famous words ..."

"That's only fair."

"Sure it is ... but *who* wrote them."

~

The NASA headquarters in Houston was bristling with excitement. Perhaps the planet's greatest technological achievement to date—the two-manned Space 'Bama 3000—had just landed on Mars. The entire world, except for the Chinese block, was watching.

Tom Durden had just stepped onto the sandy red planet and pronounced: "Hope has carried me a long way, farther than any man before me, and yet only now, with this final step, do I truly know that I can. People of this world, yes we can!"

People around the world were cheering; Obama had outdone the Chinese Block once again! *Yes we can!*

But now the real mission began. Jack Miller and Tom Durden were supposed to explore the sandy terrain, do a few scientific experiments and bring back whatever they could find. But they were having some difficulty with the connection. The screen kept going black...

A few hours later, after a fifteen-minute delay in which there had been no picture at all, the screen suddenly turned back on. Jack's face was on the screen, visibly white even through his space helmet.

"Houston, we have a problem," Jack said.

"What is it?" the leading NASA commander asked through his headset.

"We found Barack."

"You found what?"

"We found The President."

"On *Mars*?"

The camera shifted slowly to the left, and there, lying in the sand, was Barack Obama's body. The entire NASA control room gasped in horror. Obama's eyes were open and locked in a lifeless stare, his hands were clutching an orange basketball, and he was wearing a Kobe Bryant jersey and gym shorts...

~

The secret meeting was being held in a small white room in a secluded area of the White House. Sitting at a table that looked better suited for a student dorm room than anything else were: President Biden, The head of the CIA, one four-star military General, and Chief Investigator Stackhouse, the most respected man in crime. He was leaning back in his chair and smoking a cigar.

"How did he die?" President Biden asked.

"The autopsy report suggests that he suffocated, lack of air." The head of the CIA said. "There's no air on Mars so... that makes sense."

Biden nodded. "And Michelle Obama said he left to play basketball downstairs in the gym he built."

"Right."

"And he disappeared the day before the shuttle left?"

"Correct."

"And no was worried about this?"

Everyone in the room shrugged, except Detective Stackhouse.

"Obama was always so secretive," the General said, a large man with a scarred face and thick grey hair, "our investigations show that everyone always thought someone else knew what he was doing... but as it turned out, no one did."

Biden felt like firing someone. He certainly *had* to fire someone. He just wasn't sure whom to fire yet.

“Let’s get to the point!” the General growled. “This was clearly China. We must first accept that we lost the Mars Race, and then get ready for the worst. This is clearly a declaration of war! There *is* no other explanation.”

The head of the CIA, a small man with thick glasses, shook his head. “All our information shows that China was behind us in the Mars Race, at least a year and a half. And anyway, if China had really beaten us to Mars, then they would have simply done it and taken credit for it. But they are flat-out denying any involvement. Why go through all the bother to get to Mars first just to stage a strange murder scene?”

The General was angry. “Then how the hell did Obama get to Mars?”

The CIA man looked at him smugly. “He must have been on that Space `Bama all along—that’s the only plausible explanation.”

Everyone in the room paused as he said this.

“You think the astronauts did this?” Biden asked.

“Unless someone else was on that shuttle, they are almost certainly guilty. Don’t forget we lost the transmission for a while.”

“We have been interrogating the astronauts extensively,” the General said. “There is no reason whatsoever to believe that they had the motive or the capacity to follow through with this.”

“But then, who’s left?” Biden asked.

The room was silent. Only the sound of Inspector Stackhouse puffing on his cigar could be heard.

“Wait a second,” the CIA man exclaimed, taking his glasses off. “I have a motive for the astronauts. Let’s not forget: there were *two* of them, and that thing flew almost automatically. Obama approached them the night before take off, right after shooting some hoops, and told them one of them had to step down, because *he* wanted to be the first man on Mars. They beat him up in a fury, and killed him accidentally. So they took him to Mars to dispose of the body. Voila! Case closed.”

The General could hardly hide his contempt. “They must be pretty good at beating our interrogation techniques then, don’t you think?”

“Do you think we could apply those same techniques to Michelle Obama?” Inspector Stackhouse asked suddenly.

Everyone looked at him stunned.

“That’s out of the question,” Biden barked.

“Well, that’s an awful shame.” Stackhouse said calmly. “Because she was obviously the killer.”

Everyone looked at Stackhouse in horror, but then the Head of the CIA nearly fell off his chair.

“He’s right,” he exclaimed. “He’s right! The reason Obama was wearing a Kobe Bryant jersey was because, as we all know, he is a big Lakers fan. But Michelle is a *Celtics* fan. They must have been having an argument. That’s why Obama wanted to go shoot some hoops ... to clear his head. But there was a fight as he tried to leave. Obama was knocked unconscious, and then Michelle suffocated him with a pillow!”

Everyone gave the CIA man confused looks. Could Biden fire him? Biden hadn't been on the job that long yet. He would have to check.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind," Inspector Stackhouse said. "But why don't we get Michelle?"

Biden obliged with a sigh. "Don't do anything too weird."

"I won't kill her. I promise."

~

Michelle Obama was led into the room a few minutes later. She had a solemn look on her face and she was wearing a black dress.

"Can I help you, guys?" she asked sitting down.

Stackhouse stood up. "Michelle, do you know who killed Barack?"

Michelle shook her head. "No, of course not."

"Michelle ..." Stackhouse asked, leaning over the table to look her in the eye. "Michelle, don't lie to me."

"I don't know."

"I said don't lie to me!"

Michelle stared back at him in outrage.

"You're a Martian aren't you, Michelle?"

"What?"

"You're a Martian!"

"No, I'm not!"

"Yes, you are!" Stackhouse yelled, pulling a gun out of his pocket and pointing it right at her head. "That's why Obama achieved so many spectacular things. He wasn't human. That's why he wanted to go to Mars so badly in the first place, right? He's a rejected Martian. And now, because he tried to return, they killed him, didn't they? And you knew about it, because you're also a Martian."

"Don't shoot me. Please don't shoot me." The tears were rolling down Michelle's cheeks.

The large General stood up and pointed his own gun at Stackhouse. "Put the gun down or I'll shoot!"

"It doesn't matter," Stackhouse cried. He seemed to have lost his mind. "It doesn't matter, anyhow. Just watch. I'll shoot her right in the face and she won't even budge. Metal doesn't hurt Martians."

"Don't shoot." Michelle cried. "Don't shoot. Okay, Okay, I'll tell you!"

"Hurry up," Stackhouse bellowed.

"Barack *wanted* to die on Mars," Michelle cried. "He was getting older and his wish was to die in the sky, because that's where he belonged, with the stars. He snuck onto the Space 'Bama and ran out of the shuttle without a space suit on while the astronauts were exploring the terrain."

Stackhouse smiled. "And he had the basketball outfit on, because he had been playing earlier, and he wanted to say goodbye to all the things he loved, am I right?"

Michelle nodded through her tears. "Don't forget we were at the end of his fourth term. This was his final and perhaps grandest accomplishment. He wanted to check out on top. He wanted to leave the Earth. And I mean *literally* leave the Earth. He didn't want to be with us any more if he couldn't serve. It was such a romantic notion. He called me from the shuttle and said that he had never been so happy in his life, and that seeing the Earth from a distance filled his heart with joy, because he knew he had made it a better place.

Stackhouse smiled. "Case closed."

~

The tape with the recording of Michelle was leaked to the press the next day, and the world wept in the streets. Even some Chinese got teary-eyed.

But Jack had to wince as he listened to it on the news. He was tempted to call Tom and make a joke about how their five minutes of fame were certainly over, but then his jaw almost hit the floor.

"Obama appears to be the first man ever to set foot on Mars," the newscaster said.

"Latest evidence suggests he ran out before Tom Durden and Jack Miller did ..."

"No," Jack screamed at the TV. "No!"



Richard was the winner of the *ChiZine Publications* 2009 "Enter the World of Filaria" contest. His short story "Maker of Flight" was chosen by Filaria author Brent Hayward and Bram Stoker Award-Winning editor Brett Alexander Savory. He has been published by *Cemetery Dance*, *Word Riot*, *Colored Chalk*, *Cause & Effect*, *Gold Dust*, *Vain*, *Dogmatika*, *Nefarious Muse*, *New Voices in Fiction*, and *Opium*. He is currently pursuing a MFA at Murray State University in their low-residency program. He is also putting the final touches on his neo-noir thriller, *Transubstantiate* and has started his new transgressive fiction novel *Disintegration*.

YOUR ENEMIES WILL DEVOUR YOU

by Richard Thomas

7. LOVE AND DEVOTION IS SECONDARY

It's a little thing, the way she glances back over her shoulder. But it works. For several nights I haunt the same shadowy brick building, sucking down cold beer, and killing myself with tobacco. Waiting for her return. Bruised floorboards share the ripe smell of urine and lavender. Her darkness is my weakness, but I have no desire to find the light.

"Rhymes with leather," she says, her hot breath on my neck. Tight jeans whisper over long legs, her crimson blouse held shut with ivory buttons, pale flesh straining for attention. A hint of things to come, bounty for the brave. I am brave tonight.

She is like an old pair of gloves – soft and supple, giving and familiar, torn and abused. The world disappears for days, and the gasps fill my apartment with a translucent

shadow that is not love. Her cheap, easy sister instead. A mattress is all we see, and a solitary glass of ice cold water, sweating condensation. The dingy walls turn away in disgust, the trickle of the toilet bowl a constant reminder of the humanity of it all.

When it all comes crashing down three months later, its name is abortion, and the tears she sheds are not wrapped in the rapture of the gods. As I walk out of the hospital, I am down five hundred dollars. Cash. And she will never be the same in my eyes. She is damaged goods now. She talks of our offspring, our son, visiting her in a dream. Her cries fall on deaf ears. I will not picture him riding a carousel in heaven, surrounded by clouds and cotton candy.

Yes, I will. For eternity.

2. TO THE POINT OF WASTE

At three in the morning I am stumbling down a barren sidewalk, the cool night air a godsend, if I wasn't about to slam my head into the concrete and rupture out my dinner.

I cannot stop drinking so I don't even try. My wife is out of town, and I have already taken her requisite nightly call. I am sober and coherent. But not for long. It starts with a couple at home, to get me in the mood. To prime the pumps.

I stare at the filling moon and cast my blame in her direction. She curses me with this hunger and I am eager to devour it. Every time. The jackals and vipers greet me with sideways glances and sly grins. They line the bar like toadstools in a field of grass. Empty inside, I seek out company in any form. This disease eats away at me, and we all nod our heads, confident that the prescription we are taking tonight will be the cure that we so desperately need.

Eons pass in a smoky corner, even the light is afraid to embrace us. Harpies of every shape and size pour sustenance into my mouth, one greasy shot at a time. The lies we tell each other wrap around us like a blanket. A soft comforting blanket. A moth-eaten, lice-infested, foul and rancid cloth.

The clear liquid pours, and the glasses clink as the laughter creases my skin. There is a feast to be had. The remnants will be seen again, long after she has abandoned me, splattering my feet, reminding me of how I fail. This I do to myself willingly. Knowingly. And I cannot stop.

3. FOR THE SAKE OF TEMPORAL THINGS

In the morning my hands are covered in dirt, the ivory sheets, coated in grime. I've been digging again.

In the backyard under a small pine tree is a shoebox, lined with plastic bags, secured with duct tape, filled with \$4,200 in twenties. In the basement is an old cigar box filled with \$560 in singles and change. In one flap of an old suitcase is \$1000 in \$100 bills.

Every time I hit an ATM, \$20 goes to the private fund. Every bit of cash I get from my ninety-four-year-old grandmother goes into the private fund. Every expense check, every tax refund, every bit of winnings from my online gambling and various poker nights. Every Vegas trip.

Private.
Fund.

If I have to run one day, I'll be able to. As our credit card debt grows, my private fund does not enter my mind. It does not exist. It is neither a blip on my radar or an echo in my empty skull.

When I buy a gram of coke. Cash. When I buy Barely 18, Extreme Holly Threesomes, or Butch Lesbian and the Lapdance Kid. Cash. When I bet on the ponies. Cash. When I visit the Bunny Ranch, and ask for Willow, Cheyenne, or Venus Star. Cash.

It is a sacred moment, a dirty little secret, my own private Idaho. I cherish it, and curse its existence at the same time. I touch the bills, the crumpled and flaccid old money and the sharp, crisp new mint. It validates me, and rapes my soul. All at the same time.

4. SPIRITUAL APATHY

It is the sixth time in three months and may finally cost me my job. The phone rings, an endless throbbing pain at the base of my skull. An ice pick eased into my temples, as the tears run down my face. The machine picks up as I bury my head under the pillow. I can faintly hear cars flying by. The wind whips at the windows, rattling their frames, mocking my frailty. There is a pounding at the door, and a cold shock runs over my shivering flesh. I know who it is. I do not move, and wait for the inevitable. I wait for the slip of paper, the whisper against the dirty hardwood floor. I beg for silence as I await the verdict, the proclamation, the eviction. I am not denied. It is not the first time. Nor will it be the last.

I cannot bear the weight of it all, and would empty my bladder right there in my bed, if I didn't need the sleep, if I didn't need to come back here in twenty seconds, and shove my dented grey matter into the sand. I look the other way. I deny any knowledge of the distance I am falling, the speed at which I approach the concrete, or the inevitable damage that awaits me in buckets.

A three-bedroom single family home in the suburbs. A studio downtown. A townhouse in Chinatown. A two-

bedroom on the top floor of a six flat. It doesn't matter. The space I occupy always ends up the same: empty and cold.

As I stand in the bathroom and relieve myself, I cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. I am the tunnel.

5. VEHEMENT DENIAL OF THE TRUTH

Baseball bat or golf club?

The golf club because it vanishes in my hand. It sidles up to my thigh and disappears.

He goes down fast, one shot to the head. A dull grunt, and he falls beside his car. A quick glance around, and nobody is in sight. More. But not the head. I beat his back like a dusty rug, and when sweat drips off my brow, and a puddle forms around his pants, I pull back, and look up again. The gaping maw that was my boss for three years, he is no more.

6. SORROW FOR ANOTHER'S GOOD

I am numb, and yet I can feel the needle go in, the thread pull through my eyelid, and then I do it again. And again. I have sewn them shut. It had to be done.

I wake up screaming and the bed is wet. In the dark I'm not sure if it is sweat, urine or blood.

7. TO INDUCE HUMILITY

My love of myself became perverted, to the point that it blotted out the world. There was no wrong, only right. There was no other way, only my way. There was a singularity and vision that blinded me to everything else. A snowstorm, a blizzard, and I was at its epicenter.

I see him once a month. He comes to visit. I thank God for that, and curse him at the same time. God, that is. Not my son.

It doesn't matter if my room is ringed with metal bars or if the walls have pads. I did this to myself. I seek no forgiveness, only love. His love. And so far, he gives it to me. But I search his eyes every visit. He's having sex now. He's drinking. I know that much. This is not his burden to bear.

I am the third, and he is the fourth.

I pray he will do better.

E. G. Bartholomew is a high school student in Chicago, Illinois. Bored by the limitations of life and reality, he enjoys writing stories about people who break through those barriers and discover new perspectives on life. He has a large stack of stories written by hand next to his bed—he hopes to get some of them published in the near future. When not writing or doing schoolwork, he enjoys playing video games and watching football.

Carry Matches

By E. G. Bartholomew

Venus twinkled. Jake smiled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd caught sight of Venus through the thick haze of smog coalescing in the atmosphere. Where Jake lived it was especially hard to see the stars and the planets and the moons. A mere five hundred feet away, Tubby, the nickname of the largest and most defile energy reactor in the Empire, spewed tons of pollutants and carcinogens and wastes.

It was forbidden for people to live near the reactor. This worked out nicely for Jake, because Jake wasn't a person. Jake was a nonentity. Everyone over 50 years of age was a nonentity. The government saw neither use nor threat in men so old.

Bells knelled, signaling the end-of-day roll call. The town's populace filed out of their designated shelters in their uniforms and headed down Street#43 to the Town Square for attendance. The asphalt echoed with the footsteps of government-issue boots. Jake stayed put. The attendance of nonentities wasn't required.

It was late evening. The gnats and the mosquitoes were out in droves. After swatting the fourth mosquito against his forearm—leaving a reddish bruise on his pallid skin—Jake decided to head inside. Anyways, he wanted to note the sighting of Venus in his journal.

Jake began writing in a journal daily when he was seven and hadn't stopped since. Now it spanned dozens of volumes. Most of them were crammed beneath his bed. Some were scattered around his bedroom floor. Still others were buried in the heaps of trash that polluted his home. He never cleaned it.

Jake would be put to death if the government ever discovered these journals. It was illegal to record history in the empire. It was illegal to read or write. Knowledge was a privilege reserved for trustworthy, loyal citizens. But the very act that put a price tag on his head made his life fulfilling. These were historical documents. What does a life mean if there is no documentation of its existence?

Jake found the current volume hidden under a pile of science textbooks in his study. Like most rooms in his house, there were no lights in his study. He worked in the ambience of candlelight. He carried a pack of matches in his pocket around the house. He lit the candle and picked out a pencil from his drawer or writing utensils. As he wrote the date in the margins, however, his fingers went sore from arthritis. The joints stung as he curled his frail fingers around the ridges of the pencil. It was getting worse lately, the arthritis. Lately it'd hurt to grasp small objects.

The condition ran in the family. Jake's mother was a writer. After long nights she'd return from her study with bruised, shaking fingers. She kept at it till the end; never uttered a word of complaint, but Jake knew it hurt her. She'd be out buying a new bottle of aspirin a week. Of course, this was before the current government was in power. Back when

the government focused on lengthening lives, not killing off people who were unfit for work.

Jake wasn't strong like her. He had neither the drugs nor the desire to push through all the pain. The day he couldn't bear to write was the day he couldn't bear to live, and, judging by today, that day was near.

The knowledge disturbed him. Not because he didn't want to die but because he really wanted to record the sighting of Venus. Someday someone was going to comb through the contents of his house and discover the journals. He wanted them to know he saw Venus. He had no idea how but somehow its maroon rays poked through the layer of pollutants lining the stratosphere—did this mean anything? Hope?

Some days when the pain was really bad and triple dosages of painkillers weren't working, his mom would retire to the wine cellar. She kept all sorts of alcohols in there—he didn't remember most of their names but he remembered one was "vodka." Since his mother's death the new government had outlawed alcohol—it made workers inefficient. It was possible Jake was the only man left alive in the empire who'd seen a drop of liquor.

There were still boxes and bottles of it left. He'd never drank alcohol before, but hell, he was near death. How much could it hurt?

The wooden steps creaked under Jake's bare feet as he descended flight of the wine cellar. When he reached the bottom he felt around for the light switch and pulled it. The overhead light swayed in the draft, casting murky rays of light over the rows of dusty bottles.

He picked up a nearby bottle. It was dusty and the labeling had worn away. Maybe by now the alcohol was

contaminated. Did it really matter? Jake had already decided he was inches from death.

So he uncorked the bottle and drank and drank and drank. Whatever it was it burned his throat in a good way as it went down. Good stuff. Why hadn't he ever tried this before?

It took him about ten minutes to down the first bottle. Then he picked up a second bottle. It was larger and had a red label. He could make out a "wh" and a "y" on the label, but nothing else. This one was stronger. It burned even better. He could only drink about a quarter of the bottle before feeling full.

He brought the red labeled alcohol and some other bottles back upstairs. Honestly, he couldn't feel anything. And he couldn't remember why he was drinking. But it was obvious why his mother loved this stuff.

He wanted to see Venus again. Maybe it was still there. So he pressed as many bottles as he could to his chest and stumbled back out on his porch. Roll call had ended the townspeople were making their way back to their homes. One—a young, blond-haired, blue-eyed, pre-pubescent boy—noticed Jake. Jake had seen this boy before. Sometimes he would throw eggs at Jake's house. It was illegal to damage peoples' property, but, well, destroying and stealing the property of nonentities was not only OK but encouraged.

The boy's mother noticed her son and trailed his line of sight to Jake. Jake holding alcohol. Surely this woman had no idea what alcohol was, but she knew people were only allowed to drink out of government-issue cartons stamped with the Emperor's Seal.

A bottle slipped from Jake's chest and shattered over the patio floor, splashing against Jake's leg. Consciousness was seeping back into him. He realized what this meant. The State PeaceKeepers would be coming for him. In his haste back indoors he accidentally dropped another bottle. He fumbled with the door handle and made it inside.

This wasn't good. No no no no no. They'd be coming for him, sure as hell. He knew it sure as hell. They'd come for him the same way they came for Billie Norton. They'd knock on his door and no one would ever see him again. They'd torture and torture and finally kill him. They'd demolish his house.

Sirens wailed in the distance. They were coming. Closer, closer. Even if he was younger and skinnier and didn't have arthritis, there was nowhere to run. The State PeaceKeepers would close the perimeter.

The wine cellar was his only refuge. They'd easily scavenge and discover every other room of the house, but no one had a wine cellar. They wouldn't think to look for one.

It was just as he pulled the light switch of the cellar for the second time that night that he heard a loud bang as the State busted down his door. He could hear their coordinated movements through the thin ceiling and the orders of the ranking official to comb through each room carefully. Jake could just picture the uniformed men with their assault rifles that fired homing bullets. The lasers of their weapons were designed to detect heat and avoid the battle-suits of their owners. The lasers were all drifting down, down, down, towards the wine cellar and Jake's perspiring body.

He took one of the bottles lining the wall and mimicked the action he'd sometimes seen in the Western movies he'd

watched as a kid: he tapped the end of the bottle against the column that supported the row of alcohol.

It shattered and alcohol spattered all over the floor. He held the jagged bottle ready, determined.

Just as the overhead light dimmed out he heard the ranking officer barking orders to "Try this door." And the door handle of the wine cellar began shaking.

"Remember men," the officer shouted, "use bullets. Do *not* attempt to smoke him out. It's too dangerous. We are less than half a mile from Tubby. The air down there is flammable—energy lines run below ground. Too much fire and you'd ignite the entire empire."

Then Jake remembered: He kept matches in his pocket. He pulled the pack out. There was one stubby match left.

The door handle was shaking more vigorously. It stopped momentarily and was punctuated by the bang of a battering ram slamming against the door. It'd give way soon.

Whatever happened, by the end of the day the journals would be found and destroyed. They wouldn't have the profound historical impact Jake had always hoped they would.

But this day could still make history. It could shine in history in the rest of the world as the day totalitarianism burned alive.

The joints of Jake's sore fingers shook as he swiped the match. It produced a small, wavering flame.

The battering ram beat the door down and the assault rifles of the PeaceKeepers poked through. One shot Jake.

He dropped the match and died before he hit the ground.
The lit match fell neatly into the puddle of alcohol that had recently been spilt.

Jake's wine cellar ignited, his house exploded, the lines beneath his house exploded. The fire found its way to Tubby. Tubby exploded. The energy reactors had produced a network of flammable wastes that spanned cross-empire. The explosion traveled the entire network.

The empire burned.



Rose Sinay traded shoveling snow in Connecticut, where she wrote personal essays for the town newspaper, to sipping sweet tea and writing short stories in warm, sunny North Carolina. She has, also, dusted off her uncompleted novel that has been patiently awaiting its conclusion.

The Trigger

By Rose Ann Sinay

Prozac and a couple shots of his good friend Jack Daniels -- would it kill him or send him into an anaphylactic shock, Jacob wonders, pulling out of the parking lot after a particularly difficult day. A self-inflicted dose of stupor is what he needs to get through his days in the accounting department of Deargood and Fine. Change this, reconfigure that, use a different software program; it's harder and harder to keep up with the new ways of doing things while secretly duplicating it all with pencil and paper. All the new people being hired --- he tries to ignore them, but they keep coming, wanting things from him, invading his space. The pressure to control his "quirks" is almost too much for him to handle.

His hands hurt; Jacob realizes that he has a death grip on the steering wheel. He unclenches each hand, one finger at a time. He slides the relaxation CD in the player and tries to focus on his breathing, following every instruction whispered by the syndicated therapist. Tonight, however, his mind will not be soothed as he continues his drive home.

His boss had barged into his office, fifteen minutes before quitting time, literally throwing two budgets on Jacob's desk to be reworked by tomorrow night. It had taken Jacob an hour just to re-sort the pages and put them in a workable order. He had highlighted all comments in color-coded ink,

put them in matching coded folders, drawn straight blue lines around the final figures (green lines around subtotals) and pulled up corresponding files on the computer. He had tried to resist the compulsion. What did it matter if the colors matched or if the lines were straight? But, it did; and, in the end, he couldn't stop it. His fingers itched; his mind begged and bullied until he just gave in.

He'd been giving in for a long time; actually, for as long as he could remember. At first, it had been the counting -- twenty steps from his bedroom to the bathroom, forty-six steps to the refrigerator. Gradually, things began to bother him; things that were out of place; things slightly askew or not perfect. The spines of his books had to be in complete alignment on the shelves; papers must be kept inside his desk, never left on top; pencils with marred barrels were thrown in the wastepaper basket.

Right now, all he wants is to be home. Dinner would have been started; he likes his dinner at 7:00. It's Wednesday: pan fried steak -- 3 minutes on each side -- baked potato, maybe rice. He doesn't like rice, but he and Tina were trying something different to help him be a little more flexible. The doctor had recommended a plan of changes one day a week to start: rice instead of potatoes, a walk instead of watching the evening news, not wearing a tie to work. Dr. Betz said the pills should kick in any time now, but he is not so sure. All Jacob wants to think about is putting his slippers on and pouring himself a glass of Jack. Everything will be okay; he just needs to get home. Tina will be waiting. He starts to feel a little better and unconsciously applies more pressure to the gas pedal.

~

Jacob met Tina on his 35th birthday. They joked that she had been his birthday present. She certainly was the best gift he had ever received. She wore her shiny, brown hair

short and neat, very little makeup and skirts halfway up her shapely thighs. He liked that. She was warm and funny and made jokes about his idiosyncrasies that even he could laugh at. In the 10 years of their marriage, this was the first time she had demanded that he get help for his worsening condition, with consequences, if he refused.

"Tina," he says expectantly, as he opens the kitchen door. It's too quiet. No cooking smells fill the air. "Tina," he says again, louder this time with a hint of desperation. "Where are you?" His eyes frantically search the kitchen. He sees a cabinet door not quite closed and quickly crosses the room to shut it. His heart seems to thud a little louder.

A glass, with milk curdling in the bottom, sits on the counter. Jacob begins to feel that familiar tightness in his chest. He grabs at the glass, knocking it into the sink. It shatters into razor edged shards. Jacob counts to ten, takes a deep breath and carefully disposes of the damage in the garbage can under the sink. He mops up the milk and rinses the sponge three times. *That wasn't so bad*, he thinks cautiously. *Maybe, the pills are starting to work.*

Jacob turns his back to the sink; his eye catches an envelope lying on the kitchen table. He stares at it, stark white against the cherry table top. She's left him! His heart pounds and skips. He knows what's in that envelope -- every reason why she should go, why she has to go. But, he is trying! Why couldn't she give him just a little more time? His breathing is labored and harsh. She is his one constant; now, she is gone. Jacob knows this. It is all written there, in black and white, neatly folded in that damned envelope, waiting like a loaded gun.

"Jacob," Tina's voice whispers softly, as she enters the room. "It's Wednesday -- small changes, remember? Just small, tiny changes. It's okay. You're okay," she chants over and over again, as she approaches and wraps her arms

around him. She holds him in a tight embrace until his breathing is normal again. "I thought it would be good for us to go out for dinner tonight. I'm sorry; I guess the glass of milk was too much, huh?"

"Actually," he responds, his panic ebbing. "I think I handled that rather well." Jacob picks up the envelope, crushing it between both hands before slipping it into his pocket.



Kara Ferguson was born and raised in Memphis, TN by extremely liberal parents. She frequently thanks them for deciding not to name her Starshine. Kara lives with her husband and their fat spoiled cat and spends her free time watching zombie movies, and pretending to be a writer and editor of a tiny literary magazine. She will read anything she can get her hands on. In December of 2008 Kara obtained a degree in Liberal Studies from the University of Memphis with concentrations in English and Art History. She was previously published in *Outercast*.

Skiping Stones

By Kara Ferguson

My son, Isaiah, died in 1918, one of the many casualties of WWI. It was early spring when we got the news. Anna and I should have been enjoying our empty nest, and reclaiming our lives together, instead we were mourning the death of our child. No parent should ever know the sorrow of out living their children.

Anna and I married young; our first year together was difficult. We wanted nothing more than to start a family of our own and to ease into the daily life of running the farm. However, my mother's health had been failing for some time, and a month after our wedding she was dead. My father found little joy in life after that. I had always thought my father a strong soul, but he wasted away so quickly. He ate little and spent his days by her grave under the willow tree. He talked to her like she had never left him. Soon, he too passed on and left me feeling unprepared for the season that lay ahead.

I had worked that farm all my life, but always with my father at my side. With him gone, I constantly second

guessed myself. I was slow to decide what to plant and when, afraid I might make the wrong choices. My indecision nearly caused us to starve to death that first winter. I planted too late in the season, and had a poor harvest. There was no extra food to sell in Tulsa and so we had little money that winter as well. Anna never complained though, even when her stomach ached from hunger and she shivered from the cold. She would hold her hand to my cheek, smile, and say, "Next season, Micah, things will be better."

We wanted very much to start a family of our own, but months of waiting and hoping turned quickly into years. I suppose you could say we never stopped trying, just hoping.

I was forty, and Anna nearly so when it happened so unexpectedly—a miracle. At first Anna suspected that she was going through the change, but she was pregnant. Nine months later Isaiah was born, perfect in every way. He was our miracle baby, when thought we would never have any children.

Anna clung to him until he was old enough to walk, and toddle away from her. We tried not to coddle him; there's no place for a spoiled child on a farm. In the mornings after the cows were milked and the eggs gathered, Anna taught Isaiah to read and write. She taught him numbers and history and gave him a love of knowledge that I never had as a child. It should have been no surprise to us that when Isaiah was older he wanted to leave the farm. Isaiah needed to discover the world.

On his seventeenth birthday, Isaiah told us he was leaving. Anna made his favorite desert—caramel cake. We sat around the table, our dinner plates pushed aside. Isaiah's piece of cake sat on its plate untouched. He shifted around

in his seat like he used to do as a boy, anxious to be dismissed from the table so he could go play.

“I’ve joined the army!” Isaiah said too loudly, the words escaping from his lips unexpectedly. Anna’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth. Isaiah looked at his cake, suddenly finding it fascinating. Anna stared at him, saying nothing at first.

“Isaiah,” I asked, “Why would you do that without talking to us about it first?”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” he said, looking away and stabbing his cake with his fork.

“Explain it to us, Isaiah,” Anna told him. Her anger and surprise showed clearly on her face though she tried not to let it out in her voice.

“I want to see the world!” Isaiah’s eyes sparkled as he said it, and he finally met our eyes.

Anna shot up from her chair and gathered the plates from the table. She snatched my plate away with half a piece of cake still on it, my fork hovered in the air over where it had been. I leaned back in my chair and watched their stand-off unfold. Isaiah let out a loud sigh.

“It’s not forever mother,” eighteen-year-old Isaiah told her, the excitement fading from his eyes.

Anna moved from the living room to the kitchen, shuffling about loudly. She started cleaning up, slamming doors. It was only a matter of moments before she dropped a glass and it shattered against the floor. Anna swore under her breath. It was uncharacteristic and under other circumstances Isaiah and I would have laughed. Instead, we sat there in silence. She emerged from the kitchen, holding

a dish rag around her thumb; blood speckled the edges of the cloth.

“A world at war is not a glamorous place, Isaiah,” she told him and looked to me for support. I shrugged my shoulders because I knew they had decided, and what I thought would not change things.

Suddenly angry, Isaiah slammed his fists against the table top. The glasses and utensils that Anna had left there shuddered. My glass toppled over and rolled off the table before I could catch it. Anna jumped, shocked by his outburst. I stood up, and reached to put my hand on his shoulder, but he backed away from me.

“Son,” I started. Isaiah turned and walked towards the door.

“Mother,” Isaiah said without turning to look at us, “I’ve already enlisted. Even if I wanted to change it now, I can’t.”

Isaiah could always be found at the pond behind our house skipping rocks when something was on his mind. I found him there later that night, and sat down beside him. The night was warm, but the earth was cool and damp beneath me. Isaiah skipped one stone after another, causing rings to dance across the surface of the water.

“You and mom don’t understand anything,” he said finally. I remained silent, waiting for the right moment to speak.

“You don’t want me to do anything, but stay here on this stupid farm forever,” he dug his barefoot toes in to the muddy bank, and poked and the ridges that raised between his toes. Isaiah threw the next rock at the water as hard as he could. It sank with a pop in to the water.

“Your mother and I thought we’d never have any children,” I said, trying to not get angry with him. “But then you came and your mother, well, we both knew you were a miracle, Isaiah.”

“You don’t want me to have a life of my own,” Isaiah chucked another rock at the surface of the water.

“You don’t understand,” he said after a few moments of silence, “There are so many things I want to do. Things that I want to see, but if I stay here...”

“Your mother is a good woman,” I told him. “She wants to keep you safe. We both do.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow, Dad,” Isaiah said, standing up. “I’m leaving in the morning.”

Isaiah left me sitting on the bank and I watched him go. My hands were cold, and I struggled with the laces at first, but soon my boots were off and then my socks. I dug my toes in to the mud and tried to imagine how Isaiah must have felt, but I had never wanted to leave the farm. When I was his age Anna and I were already married.

By the time we woke up the next morning, Isaiah was already gone. Anna and I never got a chance to say goodbye to him.

I am not an educated man and there were things that I could not teach Isaiah about the world. He needed to experience things for himself, and I knew that. Isaiah needed to find his own way. There was only one thing I regretted in my life and that was never telling him not to go. I never tried to make him stay, though I know if I had he would have hated me for it.

At first Isaiah sent letters regularly, to assure Anna that he was well and that everything was fine. Anna’s anger for Isaiah faded as soon she read the first letter. His letters sounded more alive and vibrant than I could ever remember him even as a curious little boy with the whole world at his fingertips.

It was strange how quickly our lives changed with Isaiah gone. Our home was quiet again. So quickly Anna became my wife again, and though she was still a mother, it was no longer an active role she had to play. After seventeen years of living your life for your child, you begin to forget who you are without them. Anna and I lingered in bed longer in the morning, indulged ourselves with an extra cup of coffee, and enjoyed every second of our time alone together.

When he left, Isaiah never thought that he might not come home. In his last letter from boot camp, Isaiah wrote that he was being shipped out, but couldn’t tell us where he was going. There was a time when Anna enjoyed the solitude of the walk to town to collect our mail, but then Isaiah’s letters stopped coming regularly. It was too hard on her. Anna was devastated after every trip to town when there was no word from him. She became a ghost of the woman I married all those years ago, the woman I had only recently rediscovered; worry consumed her life. It was then that I began making the walk to town on Saturday mornings.

The floor was cold, and I was reluctant to let my feet touch it completely, but the sun would be up soon and the day would not wait for me. The walk to town was a long one, and there had not been a letter from Isaiah in two months. Anna was already awake; she was sitting on Isaiah’s bed in the room across the hallway.

“It’s never been this long Micah. Maybe we’ll have word today.” She called to me. I grunted in agreement and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

"There's a thermos with coffee on the table," she said, from the doorway now. "Make sure you take a jacket. It's cold this morning."

"Yes dear," I replied sleepily.

I noticed then for the first time, how grey her hair had become and the way worry lines stretched across her face. I never thought that my Anna would grow old; I wondered if she saw me the same way. Would we still be enjoying our lives together, rediscovering ourselves, if things were different and Isaiah were simply away at school. Or would the newness of being alone together have worn off?

I pattered around for a few moments, washing my face and getting dressed. I headed to the back door in the kitchen. Anna was at the sink rinsing her breakfast dishes. I squeezed her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek.

"There will be a letter today," I said confidently and told her I would not be long in town.

Soon, I was headed down the road that winds between our farm and the town. The sun had started to come up, but the morning sky was grey. I hoped that I could make it to town before the rain came.

In town, people waved to me from doors and windows as I made my way to the post office. I waited in line with the other people who lived too far away to have their mail delivered. Before long it was my turn at the counter.

"Fletcher Farm. Micah, Anna, and Isaiah," I told the clerk and waited patiently while he searched through his bins. He handed me a stack of letters bundled together with twine; all the letters Anna had written weekly to Isaiah had been returned.

The rain had already begun to fall when I left the post office. I waited out the rain by having lunch at the diner across the street. I chose a booth near a window so that I could watch the weather while I ate. Usually, the food there is exceptional, but that day it had no flavor.

Two men in military uniforms sat on the other side of the dinner. They waved the waitress over, and as they paid their bill I overheard their conversation.

"Miss," asked the man closest to me, "can you tell us how to get to the Fletcher farm?"

"Well, I could," she said. "But that's Micah Fletcher, in that booth over there."

She pointed to me, and I turned and nodded in their direction. My stomach started to feel like it was sinking, and my hands trembled a little. I was sure I didn't want to know why they might be looking for me. They walked to my booth, with their hats in their hands. I stirred the food around on my plate, and did not look up; my hands trembled.

"Sir? Mr. Fletcher?" the first man asked.

"Yes," I answered without looking up. "That's me."

"Isaiah Fletcher is your son?" asked the second man.

"He is." I confirmed and looked up at them. "But he isn't here if you're looking for him."

They looked at me nervously, and shuffled their feet. The discomfort showed on their faces, and I knew it must be the same feeling that I had in the pit of my stomach. I looked

back at my plate again, and then up at the men, making eye contact.

"We volunteered to come," the second man said, and the first man elbowed him.

"What Jones means is we served with him; we knew him so we thought we should be the ones..." the first man trailed off.

"We should be the ones to tell you," said Jones. "We've very sorry. There's no easy way to tell you, but Isaiah is dead."

"Your son was very brave. He was a good soldier," the first man told me. I looked away, and my hands shook so fiercely that I dropped my fork. I watched as it clattered off the plate and skidded in to the floor.

"How..." I started, but my voice cracked. "How did he die?"

"You really don't want to know that, Sir," said Jones. "Knowing the details won't change anything."

"I need to know," I said. My whole body began to shake and I tried to brace my hands against the table. The first man slid in to the booth across from me, and waved Jones away.

"My name is Willis," he said. "I was there with him when he was hurt. We were walking together and he was telling me about your farm, and how much he missed being here. There was an explosion, a landmine or a grenade or something."

Willis stopped speaking for a minute, and I could tell he struggled the same way I did. Willis had been there, and even he wanted to believe it wasn't true. He couldn't have been much older than Isaiah. The parent in me wanted to

comfort him, but in that moment I hated him for living while Isaiah died.

"It was his leg," he said, and just like that, the story of my son's death poured from that man's mouth.

"When I found him, it was just gone. I carried him to the medics, but they couldn't stop the bleeding. It was awful," he paused, and rubbed away tears in his own eyes. "He hung on for hours, but they couldn't help him. I'm sorry that you had to find out this way."

Willis left me sitting there, and before I could stop it from happening, I began to sob and my body shuddered as the tears rolled down my face. My son was dead. How would I tell Anna?

The rain stopped, and eventually so did my tears. I collected my things and left, only realizing later that I had not paid the bill. I walked slowly because I did not want to face Anna. I didn't want to tell her our son was dead. Isaiah's death would break her heart, and I didn't know if I could be the one to cause that pain.

Ahead there was a bend in the road, and our farm lay just past it. Soon I would see the big red barn. It was old—the rough edges of wood had smoothed and weathered over time. The once brilliant red paint was chipped and peeling with age. The field that was once fertile enough to feed generations of my family was overgrown with weeds. Times were hard, and Anna and I were too old to keep up the farm on our own; we had hoped to pass it on to Isaiah.

It was that thought that brought me to my knees in the middle of the muddy road. I never even tried to cover my face as the tears rolled down my cheeks and dropped in to the puddles on the ground. It reminded me of teaching Isaiah to skip stones in the pond when he was six, and how

fascinated he was by the way the water rippled in circles. After awhile I was able to calm myself and as I passed the bend I saw Anna walking up the road to meet me. For a split second I considered never telling her.

“Do you have news?” she called to me. I nodded, afraid my voice would give me away. I took her hand in mine as we walked down the road together.

“I don’t know how to say this,” I began slowly. There was no need to finish my sentence, because Anna stopped walking. She stared at me, tears welled up in her eyes, and without having told her, she knew.

“How?” Anna asked me. “Do you know how? Was there suffering?” I couldn’t tell her about his leg and dying slowly from blood loss.

“He was shot,” I lied, “It was quick, Anna.”

Anna cried, but I knew that her sorrow would not be the same as mine, because she never had to know how our son had suffered before he died. We walked back down the road and past our farm house to the pond behind it. We sat together on the muddy bank, and I held Anna against me while she cried. After awhile she was quiet, and we skipped rocks in to the pond until the sun set.



FEATURED ARTIST: MICHAEL KNOWLES

I've been a freelance writer now for over 30-years. In that time I've worked for comics, magazines TV and radio. I've also accumulated odd bits of artwork that, for one reason or another, never got published. Some of it was for projects that have lain fallow because I was too busy to get round to them, others were created for profiles on the Internet.

MEMORIES OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL CHILDHOOD

Every Wednesday night my mother and I would retire to the bathroom where we would smear our faces with petroleum jelly and sing nursery rhymes at the top of our voices. My mother chose Wednesdays because it was a bad night on television. There wasn't much on. As opposed to our faces. There was a lot on those. Even today I can recall the taste of petroleum jelly. It's a taste that's difficult to describe. So if you really must know, then I suggest you taste some for yourself. I was worried about swallowing it but my mother assured me that it was perfectly harmless. In fact, she said, it was beneficial for the digestive system because it would make the passage of my stools from the lower intestinal tract to the outside world much quicker. And she was, as usual, right. They came out like bullets from a gun! Thus demonstrating another advantage of swallowing petroleum jelly. The force of the stools hitting the water caused a big splash thereby giving our humble lavatory a dual purpose. And what dual purpose would that be, you may ask? Well, on these occasions it became both a receptacle for removing waste products and a bidet. Such then are the many wonders of the humble petroleum jelly.



FEATURED ARTIST: MICHAEL KNOWLES



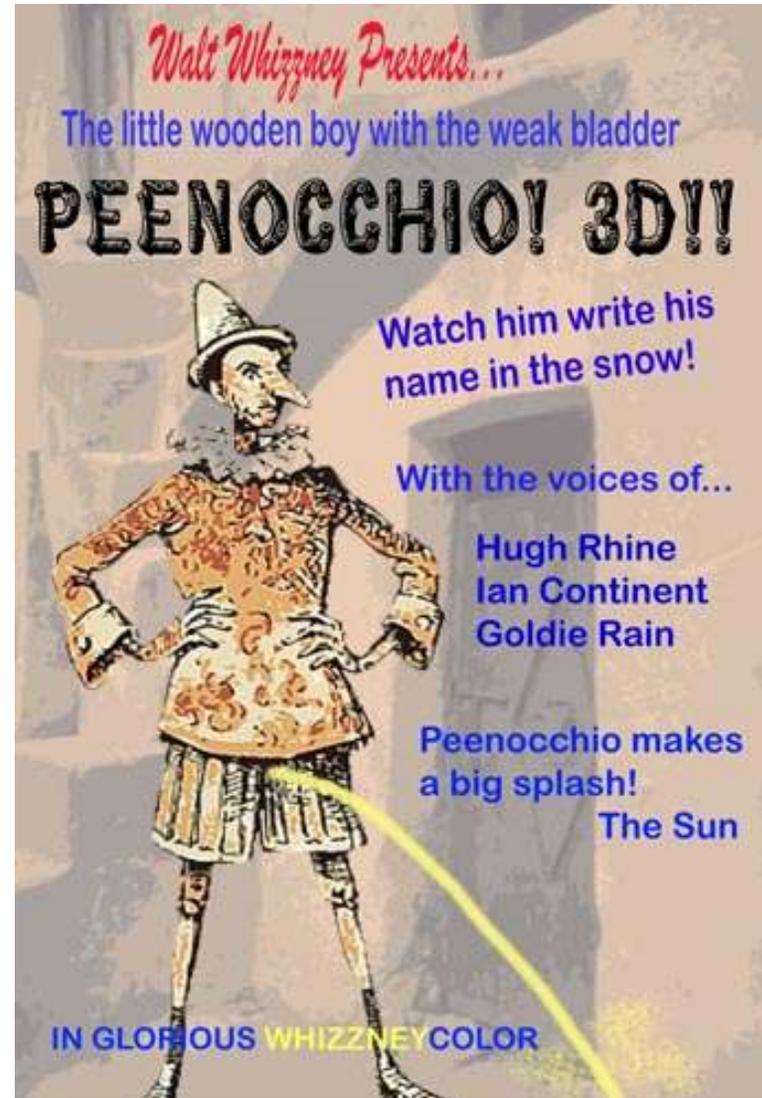
MEMORIES OF A DYSFUNCTIONAL CHILDHOOD

This is my grandmother, Beryl. Even in her old age she dreamed of winning the Miss World Contest. My father told me she'd taken optimism to new and dizzy heights. My mother, on the other hand, said she had a screw loose. The year before she died my grandmother became bored sitting around in her flat and decided to become a prostitute. She wasn't as successful as other prostitutes because whilst men paid to have sex with them it was the other way around for her. Even men who were really drunk refused to do it for nothing. The police sometimes arrested my grandmother's clients under the Mental Health Act. It was being a prostitute that finally killed her. She drowned while giving a drunk a blowjob. She'd have been all right but his bladder was full.

FEATURED ARTIST: MICHAEL KNOWLES

A WOODEN ACTOR

The director said he had to pull a lot of strings to get this film made.

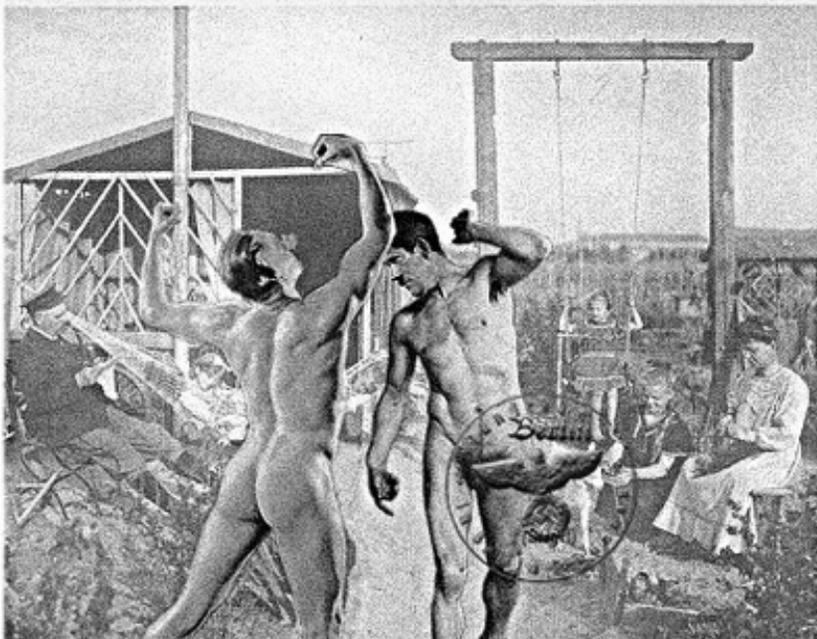


FEATURED ARTIST: MICHAEL KNOWLES

HITLER AT PLAY

I've been led to believe that Hitler was something of a beast. But it seems he had his softer side as this photograph reveals. It comes from Hitler's Photo Album and I can assure you that it's 100% or thereabouts genuine. The album recently came into my possession and the guy who sold it to me said it had been found by his father. Apparently his father was one of the workmen who discovered Hitler's bunker some years ago. He found it underneath the sofa where Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide. Fortunately when the Russians arrived, they didn't look under the sofa otherwise Stalin would have had the album destroyed. He didn't want people to think Hitler had a soft side in case people started taking a liking to him. Hitler, I mean. Not Stalin.

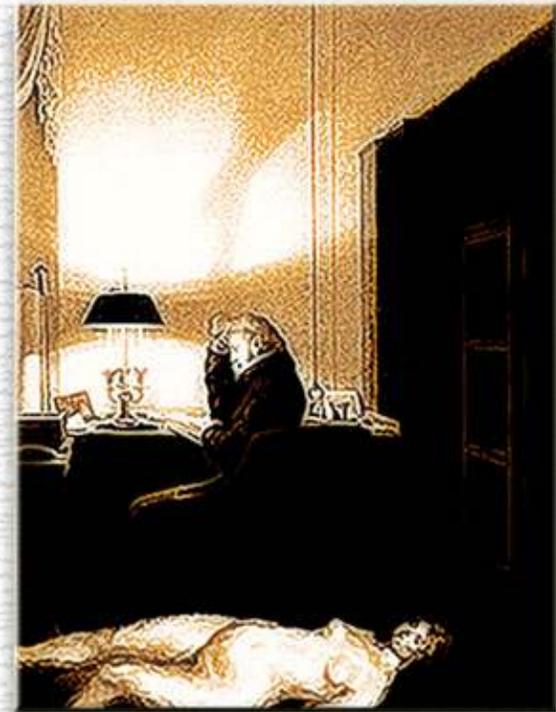
When he wasn't busy planning to conquer the world and do nasty things to people he didn't like, Hitler would retire to the countryside. Here we see him dancing naked with the farmer's son whom he had befriended, Hitler liked to think of himself as a son of the soil. Indeed, everything Hitler touched was soiled.



FEATURED ARTIST: MICHAEL KNOWLES

THE WIDOWER

This painting shows a man struggling with his income tax returns. And when his wife started to nag him about leaving his dirty underwear lying about, the husband explained that the mind numbing complexities of the document he was working on required peace and quiet. Being an obstinate and rather unpleasant character, she ignored him and continued nagging. Drastic situations require drastic measures and as the painting shows the man is now a widower. Let's hope he remembers to claim his widower's allowance.



I'm a reporter for The Associated Press in Los Angeles, where I cover urban affairs. I was a business writer for The Miami Herald for five years before that. I've been a newspaper journalist for more than 20 years. My favorite assignment was being a foreign correspondent in Latin America, where I was based in Venezuela. I covered coup attempts, guerrillas, mudslides and general mayhem and skullduggery. Now back on the relatively tamer U.S. shores, I write about all that stuff in my fiction.

The Parrot Cages

By Christina Hoag

THURSDAY

11:11 a.m.

Hi:

Would you be the Astrid Larson who was a reporter at the Jersey Tribune in the 80s?

Simon Farber

11:49 a.m.

Simon!...How are you?...What're you doing these days?...A.

12:14 p.m.

I figured it was you but wasn't sure. I Googled you and your byline popped up from South America. I don't remember you speaking Spanish.

I'm chief public information officer for the N.J. Attorney General. Married, two kids, two parrots, ranch house in the Trenton 'burbs, mini-van, Saturday soccer coach. You?

Simon

1:07 p.m.

I've been at the Miami Star nine years...I was the Latin America correspondent. The journalism was great – mudslides, coups, guerrillas, but the novelty wore off so back to Miami...Jeez, how long has it been? Why did you leave reporting? A.

1:10 p.m.

It's been 18 years, right? I'm impressed at what you've done, and envious. I wish I'd done something adventurous, and you made it to a major metro daily.

My reporting career? Ouch. I couldn't get on a big paper. I worked at a trade magazine, then moved to flacking. It pays the bills. I'm writing a novel, though.

Simon

3:16 p.m.

Wow, 18 years! Sounds right – I was about 25 back then.... I think the last time we were in touch you called to tell me you were marrying an old flame from Brown – the one you dumped me for....A.

P.S. I'm writing a novel, too!

3:25 p.m.

Yeah, I married Moira. She's a nurse for a plastic surgeon. How about you? Are you on deadline?

Simon

4:16 p.m.

Divorced...Nah, I'm waiting for callbacks. Emailing makes me look busy when editors walk by. I was sitting staring out the window. The Star must have the country's best newsroom view. We overlook Biscayne Bay and its mansion-studded islands. Miami Beach luxury condo towers in the distance. \$500,000 yachts glide by, dolphins and manatees occasionally surface – hardboiled reporters rush over to gawk...A.

4:23 p.m.

You got me beat. My view is downtown Trenton's state office blocks. I bet the Star's newsroom is a bigger version of the Tribune's. A huge, open room with clusters of desks and computers, editors in glass-walled offices, right?

I have a staff of two dimwits who handle routine media inquiries. I approve all press releases and handle the big stuff like politics or investigative exposes, things requiring strategic spin. But these ninnies want direction on everything. "Simon, what do I say about an inmate lawsuit against a deputy AG?" I personally pinned a list of all the "no comment" situations above their desks: No. 1, lawsuits. Simon

4:28 p.m.

The frustrations of a spinmeister, but I bet you earn six figures – so don't complain!...Let me guess: your nameplate adorns your door, pictures of Moira and the kids on your wood laminate desk, diploma on the wall, newspapers piled on the floor? A.

5:12 p.m.

Almost, smarty-pants. No pictures of Moira, but plenty of my kids: Michelin-tire babies, gap-toothed smiling five-year-olds, sullen tweenagers in braces.

Abby's a freshman: tennis and field hockey teams. Jason's in seventh-grade, chess club and honor society. I had to push him to play soccer. Speaking of which, I have to pick him up from practice and get dinner ready. Moira's staying late for training in, get this, vaginal rejuvenation surgery. She didn't appreciate my jokes about it, though. She takes these boob jobs and butt lifts way too seriously. I have to OK this press release (new crime victim compensation fund) then get out of here.

Here's a picture of the kids: my biggest achievement. What are you working on?

Simon

5:15 p.m.

They're beautiful. Jason looks like you – high forehead, dark hair, electric blue eyes. Abby's got your beanstalk build....I gotta get home to see what the handyman's done with the new kitchen cabinets. The guy isn't too swift – he's still stunned he made it from Cuba on a raft. I'm remodeling my 50-year-old bungalow...The story is on this chemical company dumping toxins into the Miami River. Looks like the state has turned a blind eye. I'm waiting for the response from your counterpart. What's it like working on the other side from reporters? A.

7:21 p.m.

Good story for you, not for the AG. Sunday front-page?

When you're on the inside of a story, the media looks very simplistic. Things are always blown out of proportion, taken out of context.

Simon

8:13 p.m.

Yep, story runs Sunday. This is the AG's statement, finally – "we will aggressively investigate any complaint of an environmental hazard and prosecute to the fullest extent of the law"...I'm sure you write these things every day. A.

11:10 p.m.

Yeah, same bullshit.

I have this enduring image of you in the Tribune parking lot, standing next to that gross green VW bug you drove. It was a windy evening, and you were fighting strands of foot-long hair flying in your face. The sun was backlighting you with a

golden glaze. You were laughing that hearty guffaw, your hair tangling in your mouth.

Simon

11:15 p.m.

Gross green bug! That was a great car! 163,000 miles. I have no recollection of that, were we going somewhere?...My enduring image...you striding through the newsroom, prepped out in your granny glasses, Oxford shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, khakis, hair neatly side-parted, brow puckered. You'd throw yourself in your chair, fire up a cigarette, toss the lighter aside, exhale a long, loud stream of smoke, then launch a tirade about how your story had been chopped, changed or killed. A.

11:18 p.m.

Those editors were idiots, as editors invariably are. That city editor used to snarl at us to "keep it down" we'd be having such a riot, remember? The camaraderie was the best thing about that shitty newspaper.

Do you still have long hair?

Simon

11:19 p.m.

Not waistlength – mid-back, easier to manage in the wind...You still smoke? I gave up years ago...Yep, we had a good time, even though we only made 225 bucks a week. A.

11:21 p.m.

It was actually the happiest time of my life. I loved railing against editors as a know-it-all 25 year old. Somehow it's not as fun with two decades more experience.

I gave up smoking, but I love it. Occasionally, I sneak a cigarette when there's enough time to change clothes. Moira hates it.

Simon.

11:22 p.m.

Jeez, if you love smoking so much, smoke! There are worse vices.Yep, it was more fun then because now we know how many answers we don't have...Well, it's past my bedtime. Nightie night, Simon. A.

11:23 p.m.

Good night, Astrid.

FRIDAY

6:03 a.m.

Up yet? I've already read the Times and Journal online, got a couple pages down on the novel. I'm on the fifth draft, 450 pages, it keeps growing. It's about a diplomat who unwittingly gets caught in a spy ring. Yours?

Simon

6:46 a.m.

Ya got me beat, dude. I'm in my kimono, bedhaired, sipping my first demi-tasse of espresso as I sit in darkness in front of the laptop on the dining table...My novel – a coup in a fictional Latin country. First draft, 163 pages...Hitting the shower...A.

8:17 a.m.

So what happened with your marriage? You haven't mentioned it.

Simon

9:26 a.m.

Gotta bang out this Sunday piece today...Well, I was married four years to Steve, an alcoholic lawyer. I didn't take his boozing seriously at first, he was just a party guy...but he got worse and worse, and it wasn't so much fun. I had to bail him out on a DUI, take him to ER when he cracked his head open. He totaled my car, slammed my

head into a window, blamed me for needing to drink. I poured booze in the toilet, watered it down, threatened to leave. He tried AA, but relapsed twice. I became a wreck, could barely write. Finally, my editor threatened to put me on probation. That's when I knew I was destroying myself with Steve. I moved out, worked myself out of the doghouse and went a-foreign corresponding. A.

9:42 a.m.
What a nightmare. I'm so sorry.
Simon

9:58 a.m.
It was six years ago. I've put it behind me. Steve dried out in rehab, moved to Arizona. Last I heard, he was getting remarried – to an old girlfriend! Story of my life! Pisses me off that she's getting the best of him while I got the shit, but that's life...Gotta dash – editor's bugging me for this story and I've only written the lede. This emailing is too distracting! What's up with you? A.

10:48 a.m.
I know, I couldn't concentrate in my meeting. The AG asked me twice if anything was wrong.

I've had such a sheltered existence compared to you. You've had a lot of well, action, drama, Life.

Big indictment today after a yearlong undercover investigation into the mob. AG wants a press availability at 2:30.
Simon

12:32 p.m.
Actually, I'm envious of YOU...a nice family, a stable relationship, a life partner. That has eluded me. I guess everything in life comes with a price. A.

1:15 p.m.
Do you have a boyfriend?
Simon

2:17 p.m.
Nope, and I kinda like it that way. A.

4:07 p.m.
Why? Afraid of another Steve?
Simon

4:30 p.m.
Maybe...I figure I'm through with all that...How was the presser? A.

4:34 p.m.
TV showed up so the AG was happy. He's running for governor next year. How's the story coming?
Simon

5:12 p.m.
So you'll be his press secretary? I remember how you used to ream out flacks!!...Just got through the edit with minimal damage. Now it's being lawyered. So I'm stuck here a while...I love the newsroom at night...no voices just the furious clacking of keyboards as deadline approaches. A.

6:43 p.m.
I'm at home. I'm chauffeuring Abby and her friends to the mall for pizza. My life as unpaid taxi driver.

My favorite newspapering moment: going down to the pressroom to get the first edition, still damp and smelling of ink, right off the press.
Simon

6:45 p.m.

I love the thunderous whirring of the presses as they spew out thousands of papers; the acrid smell of ink, the newspaper bundles tossed into the trucks over the yells of the dispatcher; the flare of the trucks' red tail lights before they melt into the dark. And I know that, in a few hours, hundreds of thousands of people will be reading my work. It's a helluva charge. Online newspapers just ain't the same.

7:33 p.m.

I'm at Barnes & Noble, just dropped the giggling teens at the food court. What's your favorite Shakespeare play, movie, color, author, book, actor, dog?

Simon

Sent via BlackBerry

7:42 p.m.

Othello, Casablanca, Easy Rider, Forrest Gump, purple, Steinbeck and Greene. Beloved, Grapes of Wrath, The Stranger, Great Gatsby, DiCaprio, setter. You??...You're a very formal texter!...A

7:46 p.m.

MacBeth, Midnight Cowboy, The Hustler, teal blue, Amis, Hornby, Vonnegut, Mailer, For Whom the Bell Tolls, Hoffman, lab. I refuse to butcher the English language by writing in "text." You still at work?

Simon

Sent via BlackBerry

8:13 p.m.

Just finishing with lawyers....Guess what? This is TOO WEIRD – my editor just asked me if I wanted to go to New York next week to interview some CEO!!...A

8:23 p.m.

Fucking fantastic!! I'll come into Manhattan, we'll have dinner. Got to pick up kids now. More later.

Simon

Sent via BlackBerry

9:01 p.m.

You know, I always got the impression you thought I was kinda too crazy for you...A.

11:41 p.m.

I was in bed already, but craving a cigarette. So here I am in the den in boxers and T-shirt.

I never thought you were too nutty. I really dug that about you. You were kind of a free spirit, always dramatic. It doesn't surprise me you were a foreign correspondent, seems the kind of thing you would do.

I've thought a lot about you over the years. I often wondered what happened to you and how you were doing.
Simon

11:44 p.m.

Thought I'd check my inbox one last time and your email popped in!!! I'm sitting in bed with my laptop on my knees...I have sort of a confession to make. A.
P.S. Is that place still on 2nd and 7th, where we used to go in the wee hours? The windows would steam up in the winter and you'd write funny things in the condensation. We'd chow down a whole loaf of challah bread slathered with butter.

11:45 p.m.

A confession? Come forth, come forth.

The Kiev is still there. It's where I introduced you to blintzes.

Send me a picture of yourself.

Simon

11:49 p.m.

Here goes (deep breath). (So embarrassing) A bunch of us were at the Shamrock one night after you'd told me you'd refound Moira. I was kinda drunk and kept saying, "why can't we keep going like before?"...as in trysts at your place. I grabbed your arm and you shrugged me off. Then Dave Tremaine (remember him?) told me to leave off. You'd moved on. That's the only time in my life I ran after a guy. It was you!... Here's a photo, me in Bangkok last year. Went backpacking for three weeks in Asia. Totally cool. Send me a pic of you...A.

SATURDAY

12:00 a.m.

You're killing me! Jesus, you really wanted to go back with me??!! What was I thinking? I don't remember that but I remember I was really into you.

Your cheeks are thinner but you look just the same, the pert, freckled nose, those big baby green eyes. Here's one of me, less hair than you'll remember.

I'd love to travel to exotic places, but Europe is all Moira can handle. We've been to London, Paris, Rome, Switzerland this year. I'm booking the hotel for August now.

Simon

12:14 a.m.

You're as handsome as I remember...I guess Moira was what you were thinking. I was surprised you got married so quickly, but hey...You're booking the hotel five months in advance! I never reserve a hotel – I land, pick a place from the Lonely Planet and grab a taxi. A.

12:17 a.m.

I emailed Moira my latest chapter three weeks ago. No response, so I emailed her to ask her if she'd read it. Still no response.

Simon

12:20 a.m.

That hurts....but email? You can't just ask her? A.

12:24 a.m.

Well, we're busy with kids, jobs, ships-in-the-night type thing. She thinks writing is a waste of time. She rolls her eyes and calls me the "great American novelist." So I mock her golfing.

Simon

12:30 a.m.

Nothing like an unsupportive spouse to make you feel like shit. I felt lonelier in my marriage than I do by myself. Do yourself a favor, dude, just ask her...Better get some sleep, the tree guy's coming early to cut away dead branches – prepping for hurricane season...Nightie night, Simon...A.

12:31 a.m.

Good night, Astrid.

6:53 a.m.

I'm heading to the garden. Constant work. That's how I spend Saturdays. I don't even remember the last time I did something like go out for a drink...A.

7:22 a.m.

A drink? You mean a soda at McDonald's?

The roofer's here measuring for a new roof. It's setting me back a small fortune. I'm out a large fortune if you throw braces in. Thank God for payment plans. I'm soccer coaching and birthday party chauffeuring today. Moira's playing golf.

Simon

11:02 a.m.

Neighbor thinks I'm nuts cos I keep stopping 2 chk inbox every 5 mins. Aggh! Standing on ½ mowed lawn – ran over cord. Now gotta go to wkend hangout, Home Depot, 2 buy new 1...Houses r money pits. Home ownership – definitely overrated...A

Sent via BlackBerry

11:17 a.m.

I've done same thing. I'm standing on the soccer sidelines. This dad keeps shaking me on the shoulder every time a kid scores a goal. I'm about to belt him one.

Simon

Sent via BlackBerry

12:01 a.m.

Why r Home Depot cashiers the slowest in world! Stuck in line...A

Sent via BlackBerry

1:32 p.m.

Jason scored the winning goal. We're celebrating at McDonald's. Moira will kill me, I've sworn him to secrecy.

Simon

Sent via BlackBerry

1:33 p.m.

What's childhood w/out Mickey D?...A.

Sent via BlackBerry

7:36 p.m.

Whew, finally done with kids. Crisis of the day: Abby had a spat with her best friend, who decided she likes the same boy Abby likes. I got a Blockbuster video. "Before Sunset."

Simon

8:13 p.m.

I went to Blockbuster, too! "Basic Instinct." Steamy sex scenes. That's the closest I get to sex these days. I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever do it again. It's been years. Embarrassing...A

8:32 p.m.

Don't be embarrassed. I'm in the same boat. Moira's never in the mood. I've asked her to go to counseling but she's too scared of what it might uncover, that we're really not compatible, I guess. I bought sexy lingerie for her birthday once and she blew up. She said I really meant she wasn't sexy and I was trying to stereotype her in a male fantasy. It was just some red, lacy stuff. Hardly a crotchless panty, for crissake.

I think women are much better at repressing their sexuality. Women basically use men. Once they get what they want, babies, you're cut off.

Remember our soapy showers?

Simon

8:46 p.m.

Vaguely...I remember driving through the Lincoln Tunnel, spending the night with you in your Upper West Side apartment and getting up early to head back to Jersey. You had a hairy chest, but I'm not recalling a lot else...You're probably right on women repressing their sexuality...less testosterone and more social cues, but don't believe women only want sex for babies. Plenty of women want sex. I have three friends, all 40s, desperate to get laid, but aren't going to pick up guys in a bar...I buy lacy lingerie for myself. I wear it when I need a boost – I sashay around knowing that I'm sexy...Come clean, ever had an affair?...A.

8:57 p.m.

You must remember the long, soapy showers. Something other than my chest hair? Does that mean I have too much hair? I guess I'm pretty forgettable in the sack. Maybe that's why Moira's frigid? My ego is now a deflated balloon.

I came close to an affair, but I chickened out. I really wrestled with it, though. How much am I supposed to give up for Moira? Where does this marriage leave me, in a perpetual state of sexual sacrifice? In a few years, I won't even be able to get it up. But I couldn't go through with an affair and live with the guilt. And what if she found out? But I'm not sure I'd make the same decision today. I got a lap dance once at a strip club, but it was nervewracking. I was paranoid someone would recognize me.

Simon

9:23 p.m.

Jeez, Simon! You're a tad neurotic, but I admire your loyalty...I think you remember our fling because it was your last before you got married. I've had more going on in the interceding years...A.

P.S. There's always Viagra for your old age.

P.P.S. Tell me if I'm right...You feel your life isn't your own anymore. You run around for others all the time. You work to pay bills. You do little that you enjoy. You feel life is passing you by as you tend to orthodontist appointments and new roofs. You're capable of a lot more, but don't know how to get there. You're playing the game as it's supposed to be played and where's the reward? Is that all there is out of life? How come others seem to get so much more?... A.

9:46 p.m.

That's EXACTLY how I feel. (How did you know?) What the fuck do I get out of this equation?

Simon.

9:52 p.m.

I feel the same way, that's how I know. But I don't have the answers...whew, heady conversation...I'm gonna watch my movie...A

9:54 p.m.

I'm going for a walk and smoke a cigarette. I don't care what Moira says.

Good night Astrid.

9:55 p.m.

Nightie night, Simon.

SUNDAY

5:16 a.m.

I woke up thinking about you. I wish we lived closer. How was your movie?

Simon

5:42 a.m.

You were on my mind, too...I feel like I'm teetering on the brink of a precipice...A.

5:43 a.m.

I'm already in freefall.

Simon

5:55 a.m.

I'm glad we're 1,500 miles apart. Otherwise, who knows what would happen. Maybe something both of us would regret...A.

6:02 a.m.

I don't think I'd regret it. I'm having other regrets, actually.

Simon

6:04 a.m.

No regrets allowed...A.

6:08 a.m.

Astrid, I think I married the wrong woman. I should have married you.

Simon

6:41 a.m.

Whoa! Listen, I wasn't into getting married back then...You can still make a go of it with Moira. You've formed a beautiful family. You should try to get her into counseling again....A.

6:55 a.m.

I thought about it all night. My life would have really bloomed if I had married you. You would have brought out things in me that I can't reach by myself. Instead, I settled for someone too safe.

Simon

7:01 a.m.

Jeez, why the hell did you marry her?...A.

7:03 a.m.

I don't know. She suggested it, it seemed the thing to do. I fucked up. Big time.

Simon.

7:10 a.m.

You're a great dad to two great kids...That's something to be proud of...And there's a thing called divorce, by the way...A

7:16 a.m.

Easier said than done. You're right: the kids are what makes it worthwhile. I'm taking them for pancakes now. Jason hasn't even started his science project due tomorrow. So guess who's going to end up doing it?

Simon

7:26 a.m.

Happiness only arrives in spurts, moments even, that interrupt life's monotony. It's hard to deal with that. Especially when you hit middle age, and the horizon shrinks. When you're young, the horizon seems infinite – that's what makes the monotony bearable. You know you can break it at any time with few consequences. But when you hit the age when you realize you've become ensnared by your decisions, and that's all there is to life, it becomes a real fucking letdown. A.

7:37 a.m.

What else is there in life once you realize you've hit a wall in your career, you've turned your life over to your kids, you're firmly anchored? My novel is my big "out." I know it's a pipe dream, but it's all I have. I keep rewriting because I'm scared to finish it. Then what the hell would I do?

Simon

8:02 a.m.

Take your kids for pancakes and ace the science project. A.

7:36 p.m.

Why do we do less and less of the things we enjoy as we get older? I used to love dancing, haven't done that in years, used to go bowling, don't do that any more...What happened to just plain fun?...A

9:21 p.m.

Kids and science projects.

Simon

9:24 p.m.

Roofs and lawns....Nightie night, Simon

9:26 p.m.

Good night, Astrid.

6:57 a.m.

Hmmm, I was tossing and turning all night...Do we really want to take this step? I mean, I'd love to, but the circumstances...A.

10:03 a.m.

Both the dimwits are out today so that means I have to field all the media calls. Ugh. How's your day?
Simon

10:32 a.m.

You're avoiding the question. A.

10:35 a.m.

I know. I see where this is heading. Gulp.
Simon

10:40 a.m.

I'm thinking I'm going somewhere where I'm just gonna wind up on the short end. You'll end up leaving me for Moira – again! A.

10:54 a.m.

I don't know what to say. The situation is a lot more complicated than 18 years ago.
Simon

11:18 a.m.

Here's the big question: would you ever consider leaving Moira? A.

12:05 p.m.

I have considered it.
Simon

12:06 p.m.

And??? A.

12:07 p.m.

The kids.
Simon

12:08 p.m.

But if you lived close by, had joint custody? A.

12:09 p.m.

I'd miss a huge part of their growing up. I couldn't do it. They're everything to me. Not to mention the financial hit.
Simon

12:10 p.m.

Admirable, although you're sacrificing your happiness. Or are you afraid? A.

12:13 p.m.

I admit I'm a coward. It would be such an upheaval and messy. It's a lot to ask, Astrid.
Simon

12:15 p.m.

I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm asking whether it's possible...Asking me to be the other woman is a lot to ask. There's nothing easy about divorce...or staying in a bad marriage...If we go ahead with this, we're both gonna feel guilty – no matter how much we try to justify it. A

4:03 p.m.

Cancelled the trip. Gonna do the interview by phone. A.

4:14 p.m.

Whaaaaa?? Please Astrid.
Simon

5:21 p.m.

It's for the best. I can't do it, Simon...A.

5:32 p.m.

I'm going home to clean the parrot cages.

Simon

8:18 p.m.

Astrid, please come! I'm dying to see you. I'm sorry I got carried away. I was just thinking of myself. Please, please come. We'll just have dinner, as friends.

Simon.

THURSDAY

3:26 a.m.

I'm dying to see you, too. But I'm afraid of what would happen. An alarm is clanging in my head. A.

4:31 a.m.

Why are women so fucking level-headed? Of course, you're absolutely right! Why can't you make the wrong decision for once? Like me.

Simon

5:03 a.m.

I've made wrong decisions, too. Don't beat yourself up...A.

8:33 a.m.

You're right, you don't need a married man. You should try Internet dating. My cousin met his fiancée online.

Simon

9:02 a.m.

I dunno. I feel like I'm damaged goods somehow. Who would pick me? A.

9:45 a.m.

Jesus, Astrid! You're gorgeous, smart, interesting, witty, successful. Who wouldn't want you? Just because you were married to an alcoholic?

Simon

10:02 a.m.

He wasn't the first shitty guy. I feel that's all I can get. I guess my self-esteem is low, huh? A.

10:37 a.m.

So, learn from your mistakes. Unfortunately, I've lived in my mistake too long. You know, I'm wondering why I'm letting you go so easily.

Simon

11:05 a.m.

Because you're M-A-R-R-I-E-D...A.

2:12 p.m.

Oh my God, why did you send me these roses?! They're stunning – yellow edged with pink. Everybody's stopping by my desk! A.

3:17 p.m.

Fuck the roses. I sent them yesterday.

Simon

3:19 p.m.

Hell, I don't mean that, I'm glad I sent them. Really, you should get out there and find someone.

Simon

4:10 p.m.

Why am I giving YOU up so easily? A.

4:15 p.m.

Because I'm M-A-R-R-I-E-D.

Simon

FRIDAY

9:13 a.m.
I signed up on cupid.com. A.

10:31 a.m.
I feel sick to my stomach.
Simon

11:01 a.m.
Me, too. I'm going underground for a while. A.

11:32 a.m.
What do you mean? I don't want to lose contact with you! I just found you!
Simon

1:05 p.m.
Simon – we rediscover each other, we want each other, we can't have each other. What's the point? A.

1:10 p.m.
We can share our writing.
Simon.

4:54 p.m.
Sorry, I just can't do it. A.

5:03 p.m.
Astriiiiiid, come back heeeere!

ELEVEN MONTHS LATER
WEDNESDAY
3:31 p.m.
Hate me? A.

4:37 p.m.
Course not. But I went crazy checking for your emails. I really missed you. You stopped so suddenly. I went into

Manhattan on the Thursday night and sat in Marriott bar, getting shitfaced, hoping you'd show up. Every time I saw a redhead, I thought it was you. I even ran up to a couple women.

This is uncanny you wrote right now. I have big news.
Simon

5:20 p.m.
Had to go cold turkey...the only way. Wasn't easy, believe me. I was in a funk for a while...Did you sell your novel?...A.
P.S. You were right about online dating.

6:17 p.m.
I tried to get Moira into counseling, but she wouldn't budge so I went into therapy and I finally came to a decision. I asked her for a separation. She took it better than I thought.
Simon

7:01 p.m.
That's huge, very courageous! I have big news, too. I'm engaged to a guy I met on cupid – his name's Nick, runs an apparel business...A.

11:32 p.m.
Congratulations. I have to go clean the parrot cages. The novel – I'm on the seventh draft, 673 pages. I thought I'd finished, but now I think it needs another revision.
Simon

Born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, Ethel Rohan received her MFA in fiction from Mills College, CA. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from over fifty online and print journals including *elimae*; *PANK*; *Decomp*; *DOGZPLOT*; *Storyglossia*; *Word Riot*; *mud luscious*; and *Ghoti Magazine*. Her blog is www.straightfromtheheartinmyhip.blogspot.com.

Tainted

By Ethal Rohan

My five-year-old daughter, Sadie, wanted me to kiss her on the lips. When I refused, she pouted, and pointed to her pink-red mouth with her finger. I kissed her cheek, firm and fast, and moved into the kitchen. She followed.

"Not there, here." Again, she bunched her mouth, pointing like I was obtuse.

"Stop," I said.

She moved in front of me, trying to talk through her contorted mouth.

I stepped around her. "Go play, Pumpkin. Mommy's got to get dinner ready."

My second daughter, Mandy, appeared in the kitchen doorway.

Sadie rushed at her big sister, whining. "Mommy won't give me kisses."

"She will, just not on the lips."

I carried a saucepan to the sink. "That's right, kissing on the lips is only for adults."

"For lovers," Mandy said, at all of eight.

"What's lovers?" Sadie asked.

I shot Mandy a look.

"That's enough, both of you." I shooed them from the kitchen, and blasted the saucepan with water to boil the carrots.

At dinner, Sadie continued to sulk.

Frank lifted her onto his broad knees. "What's the matter with Pumpkin?"

"Mommy's mean."

He acted mock-surprised. "She is?"

Sadie sniffled, and rubbed her dry eyes with the back of her fingers. "She doesn't love me."

He faked solemnity. "You're right, you know? Mommy doesn't love you." He tickled her sides. "She adores you."

We chuckled.

"Dinner, people," I said.

He plucked Sadie from his knee, and pushed her toward her chair.

Sadie turned, offering him her pucker. He kissed her lips, and laughed. Sadie flashed me a triumphant look. My skin prickled.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I muttered to him.

He sighed, and forked his chicken.

Mandy adopted her superior edge. "You're like the only parent in the world who thinks it's weird to kiss your kids on the lips."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"I'm just saying. It's, like, freaky."

"That's it, no book for you tonight."

She dropped her knife and fork on the table. "Mom!"

Frank objected without words, but I refused to meet his face.

After dinner, I ordered the girls into the shower. They protested, never wanting to wash, and once in the shower never wanting to get out.

"Typical women," Frank teased.

Finally, after my issuing several ultimatums, the girls caved. Mandy always showered first. She stripped off her clothes, and stood under the warm running water, lathering up her body, and singing and dancing. A full twenty minutes passed before I could get her out of the steamy stall and into towels. Frank blow-dried her hair.

Once naked, Sadie became a butterfly, flitting from room to room, diving and soaring, twirling and floating. I chased her. Exhilarated, she moved with the abandon of a flamenco dancer, her laughter the sound of bells pealing. She'd swallowed the sun.

The moment dissipated; I was no longer looking at Sadie, but recalling my own naked five-year-old body: equally pale, skinny, and supple. Again, I asked myself how anyone could harm a child? How my uncle could have molested me at this tender age, have continued to molest me until I was thirteen and finally "something" enough to be able to say "no," "stop," "never again."

I grabbed Sadie by her shoulders, my teeth clenched. "Into the shower."

She wiggled free, my pink fingerprints on her skin, wanting only to dance.

"You need to have your shower and get into your pajamas, now!"

Frank touched my arm. "Hon?"

I rushed into our bedroom, and locked the door behind me.

"Are you okay?" Frank asked through the door.

I stood trembling, holding onto the doorknob, fighting the urge to rip a pillow, punch a hole in the wall, take a razor to my forearm, reminding myself that I wasn't angry at any of that.

Alan is an author and self-described optimistic cynic living on the South Coast of NSW, Australia. He has two novels and a number of short stories published and is currently working on a third book. You can learn all about his writing and read his blog at his website <http://www.alanbaxteronline.com> where you'll also find a lot more of his work, including a free novella. He also teaches Kung Fu. Feel free to tell him what you think. About anything.

Crossfire

By Alan Baxter

'What do you mean, dead?'

'You're dead.'

'Actually dead? No longer living?'

'Correct.'

'Who the hell are you then?'

'Well, Death, obviously.'

There was a long pause. 'Obviously. What happened?'

'You flew your fighter into a bit of crossfire, that's all.'

Darryn's eyes widened, incredulity and anger. 'That's all? That's ALL? I'm standing here dead!'

Death shrugged. 'What do you want from me? Sympathy? It was pretty much your fault, after all. You should look where you're going.'

'It was a battle over Regnellus Prime, something like three thousand fighters, dozens of Battlecruisers, we even had two Dreadnaughts there. It's not really just a case of looking where you're going.'

Death shrugged again. 'There you are then. If it's any consolation a couple of hundred fighters, from both sides, have gone down in crossfire. It's not like you're the only idiot in the fleet or anything.' Death looked up, staring into nothing for a moment. 'There go two more,' he said with a smile.

Darryn looked around himself, soft, silvery emptiness. Everywhere seemed to be nothing but pearlescent luminescence. He crouched to feel whatever it was that he stood on, but felt... nothing. He waved one hand under his foot. Thin air. He could feel the sole of his flight boot with his fingertips.

'Don't try to figure it out. It doesn't really follow any laws of physics that you're used to.' Death sounded almost bored.

Darryn stood up, looked Death up and down. He appeared to be a pretty normal looking young human male, maybe mid thirties, close cropped dark hair, long, black leather coat. 'You don't look much like Death,' Darryn ventured.

Death put his hands into the pockets of his coat, flapped the leather a couple of times. 'Not even this? I thought it was quite gothic.'

'Isn't Death supposed to be a skeleton in a long cowed robe, carrying a scythe?'

'That's a bit old-fashioned, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

'Of course. Besides, after all this time I would have thought you humans would have got around your self-centred attitude to everything. How would a human skeleton in a cowl carrying a scythe be perceived by a Regnellian then? Or a Pyrexian?'

Darryn nodded. 'I suppose. I guess I kinda thought they'd have their own Death. Like a see-through Regnellian exoskeleton, perhaps. You know, we see bones with no flesh on, so maybe they'd have their exoskeleton, but it'd be clear, like, and they'd see there was nothing inside...'
Darryn trailed off at Death's raised eyebrow. 'Well, excuse me,' he spat. 'I have just died, after all. How does you looking like that make a Regnellian feel then?'

Death sighed. 'It's different for everyone, that's my point.'

'Is it?'

'You want me to change how I look for you?'

'No, I don't.'

'Because I can. If you like.'

'No, it's fine.'

'If you want, I could be a see-through exoskeleton.'

'No, I do not want you to be a see-through bloody exoskeleton.'

They stood in silence for a while. Death kept his hands in the pockets of his leather coat, gently flapping it from time to time. Darryn stared around himself, trying to take a few deep breaths and come to terms with the sudden change in direction his life had taken. A complete about-face, in fact,

to the polar opposite of life. 'So what now?' he asked eventually.

Death was looking into the distance, eyes narrowed. 'Ooh! Close one.' He grinned broadly. Darryn cleared his throat. 'Mm? Oh, sorry. One of your Dreadnaughts just bounced off the atmo of Regnellius trying to outmanoeuvre a squad of Regnellian Warslabs. Nearly stacked into a planet.' He grinned again, looking slightly impish.

'You enjoying this?' Darryn asked.

'Definitely. Come on, a pitched interplanetary war? We haven't had something like this for decades.'

'We?'

Death paused. 'It's complicated,' he conceded.

Darryn found himself strangely unmoved. Certainly he had been very surprised and angry in the first few seconds, but now he found himself standing in a big silver cloud, chatting casually with Death. And, he had to be honest with himself, even Death wasn't really very scary. He was more like a mate that was paying more attention to the ball game on the holo while you tried to talk to him. 'Complicated,' Darryn said quietly, largely to himself.

'Turn around, turn around!'

Darryn jumped at Death's outburst. He spun around, looking everywhere, seeing nothing but opalescent emptiness.

'Oh, sorry,' Death said sheepishly. 'Not you.'

'Not me?'

'There's quite a dogfight going on around Regnellus Prime's second moon,' Death explained. Darryn raised an eyebrow. 'Two Battlecruisers and about six platoons of Axe-1 fighters from your lot are engaged with four Regnellian Warslabs. The 'slabs keep changing formation while your fighters try to overwhelm them with numbers.' Darryn's other eyebrow raised. 'One of the 'slabs managed to get around one of your Battlecruisers. He really needed to turn around.'

Darryn shook his head. 'Did he?'

'Er... no. All six hundred and eighty personnel dead instantly.'

Darryn nodded, lips pursed. 'I don't really care, you know.'

Death shrugged.

'I mean, I can understand that all this mass death is like a mega party for you. Really, I can see where you're coming from there. If you're Death, then a massive interplanetary war certainly ranks better than some fat old Magnetean falling off his grav bike in the country somewhere. But, in all honesty, I don't care.'

Death nodded. He looked a bit like a schoolboy getting a dressing down from the headmaster. 'Sorry about that,' he mumbled.

Darryn felt a bit mean all of a sudden. 'I don't mean to ruin your fun.'

'It's all right, really.'

'No, seriously. I mean, there are hundreds dying out there every minute...'

'Thousands.'

'Right. So why waste your time here with me?'

Death looked into Darryn's eyes for a moment. Then, 'Well, I'm not just here with you, obviously.'

'No?'

'No. I'm everywhere. I'm Death.'

Darryn nodded, large thoughtful nods. 'Right. Death. Of course.'

Death made a rueful face. 'But you are sort of bringing me down a bit.'

Both Darryn's eyebrows shot up, like startled meercats. 'I'm bringing you down a bit?'

Death's expression became just slightly apologetic. 'Yes. A bit.'

Darryn clasped both hands behind his head in exasperation. 'I'm bloody dead. I've just been killed through my own incompetence in a battle that *could* have led me to heroic glory and I'm standing here in... nothing, with you in your "gothic" coat and I'M BRINGING YOU DOWN A BIT?'

Death looked down between his feet. 'A bit, yeah.'

Darryn made a sound of anger and disgust and strode off, deliberately shouldering past Death as he went. He took long, purposeful strides, furious with everything about his predicament. He was dead. Simple as that.

He was an average fighter pilot at best, but he'd done the training, flown the sims. In flight school he had a pretty solid record of kills, a decent kills to death ratio. He had

earned his way into a good squad on the Ares and he was proud to enter the fray with his Wing today. But his first time in real combat and all that training, all those sim kills, counted for nothing.

They'd worked together today, his wing. They'd followed formations and set pieces just like training and even pulled off a couple of bits of individual, intuitive genius. The battle was going well. But regardless of his kills to death ratio in training, it only took one death in real life and that was that. One mistake and it was all over. He'd taken three out Regnellian Arrowshots, one of them in a truly memorable dogfight, before he'd manoeuvred himself dead. That was a three to one kill to death ratio. Not nearly as good as training. But he'd strafed a Warslab twice as well. He was pretty convinced that he'd taken out at least one, if not two, of the Warslab's ion cannons on his second pass.

'Not a bad effort, really.'

Darryn jumped, startled to see Death strolling alongside him, hands still deep in his coat pockets. Darryn looked back the way he'd come, but it was just the same as where he stood now. Death stood beside him, smiling apologetically. 'I can't really storm off, can I?' Darryn asked.

Death shook his head gently. 'No.'

They stood in silence for a few moments. 'I suppose it's not a bad effort really,' Darryn said eventually. 'In the grand scheme of things.'

'Three Regnellian Arrowshots and two ion cannons!' Death said jovially. 'You should be proud of that.'

'I suppose.'

'And you had a few assists in there too.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes!' Death pulled his hands free and clapped them together. 'You tucked in behind Joster when he had that bogey on his tail and led the Arrowshot away. Joster wingtipped and took him out with a single volley.'

'Well, that's a set play. Joster's kill.'

'Yes, but he couldn't have pulled it off without you. You did it together.'

Darryn nodded. 'I suppose so. How's Joster doing?'

'Dead.'

'Ah.' There was silence for a moment longer. 'Is he being a pain too?'

'Everyone's a pain in one way or another.'

Darryn nodded, lost in thought. 'Sorry to bring you down,' he said after a while.

Death patted him on the shoulder. 'It's all right.'

'So, what now?'

'Ooh, big kill to the humans!'

Darryn perked up instantly. 'Really? What happened?'

'Great manoeuvre! Two Battlecruisers shielded a fighter fleet, then broke and led two Warslabs to collide trying to avoid your Axe-1s. Ooh, that was some clever flying.'

Darryn nodded, smiling broadly. 'Sounds like the Barclavia Gambit. Classic large vessel set play.' He rubbed his hands together. 'Yep. I bet it was a Barclavia.'

'You want to see?'

'See? Can I?'

Death grinned and sat down. He didn't sit on anything, just assumed a sitting position. 'Sure, why not?' He gestured to nothing beside himself.

Warily Darryn moved next to Death and slowly sank into a chair he could only imagine. Sure enough he felt himself supported. Quite comfortable too. 'I'm not supposed to be doing something else?' he ventured quietly.

Death raised both his hands. 'Well, sort of. But wouldn't you like to see the battle first? It's a doozy!' He made a gesture through the air before him and the enormity of space opened out in front of them. Darryn's stomach lifted and his head spun. They were suspended in the vacuum several thousand kilometres above the surface of Regnellus Prime. Two moons loomed to the left, hundreds of vessels of varying size criss-crossed the blackness, energy weapon discharge burning silently through the airless cold. Axe-1s and Arrowshots, Battlecruisers and Warslabs pitched, yawed and rolled. Incandescent explosions flared and died as lives were lost and heroes were made.

Darryn took a deep breath, sat back in his chair of nothing, relaxing, transfixed by the scene before him. 'Amazing,' he breathed.

Death smiled. 'Best seat in the house, eh?'

Darryn watched an Axe-1 bank and cut back towards a Warslab, aiming to strafe it from front to back. He also saw

the two Arrowshots cutting around to pick up the fighters already past the 'slab. Darryn pointed frantically, 'Shit! Look out for the crossfire!'

The Axe-1 bloomed into a flash of flames and wreckage and was gone.

Darryn looked at Death, his mouth agape. Death shrugged and held out a frosty bottle for him. 'Beer?'

Grady McShane, 32, is a headhunter for the maritime industry. He was born in sunny West Palm Beach, Florida. His family, friends and neighbors have graciously declared him to be “an exceedingly odd individual.” He has been a wrestler, writer and musician all his life. Rejecting anything having to do with the mainstream, he now lives in Cleveland, Texas in a tiny log cabin with Ona Kizis (his true love) and three very strange little dogs.. He has not been published because he has not really tried. He enjoys old Punk and Outlaw Country Music, old books, old Sci Fi and Western movies, and anything considered strange or frightening by ‘normal folk.’ He plays guitar poorly, sings well, gardens all sorts of plants and veggies, reads anything from the mayonnaise jar to mythological tales, drinks too much coffee and has a strange fixation with making his own soap. He wants his writing of poetry and stories to spark an awkward conversation with the world.

Beyond the Nimbus Ceiling

By Grady McShane

Jaunt through
Abstruse psycho spiritual kismets ala carte:

Smash grinning mirrors and saunter beyond
Intangible parallels.

Nibbling at the forbidden cheese
Of Swarga Ioka,
Scratching at pearly purgatorial gates
Slurping Nirvana
Snorting Tian
Plowing the Elysian Fields.
Enlightenment on the metaphysical cracker

Tingles on my transcendental tongue.

Beyond the nimbus ceiling,
Below the molten rocks of Hades,
Surfing Styx on an eternal dial tone wave,
The stone from my own grave cuts black emotion.

Ka Kissing smudged maidens of Aaru
To the shining dismay of Queen Ma’at,
Ammit lapping at my mastaba like a lollipop.
Hamistagan accusing every move.

Bar brawl in Valhalla
Crown Frisbee game in Heaven
A tumble through highest Jannah
And a hand of metempsychosis with Orpheus and the boys.

Then back to the mundane leapfrog
Holiday with my mortal fraternity.



David M. Elliott is a 37-year old, never-before published writer currently living in Asheville, North Carolina. When not submitting short fiction to obscure online literary journals, David is working on his novel *Cherokee Spleen*, which he hopes to see published to great fanfare and (fingers crossed) a movie adaptation starring Steven Segal.

Head

By David M. Elliot

The guy was a fucking Neanderthal—caveman big and crazy looking. Not an ugly dude or anything, just a big, dumb-looking guy. I had no idea that he was fucking psycho. But, sitting in a bar whacking down beers and shots is not exactly the most conducive environment for character judgment, know what I mean?

It was a normal kind of bar—the kind of strip mall Irish pub you can find in any town with a population of more than 5,000. My buddy Gary and I decided to head out, get a few drinks in our systems, and maybe find a couple of women and try to get into their systems. Like any other average Friday night, you know? We're nothing special, just a couple of guys in our thirties who've been down in the women department for a while now. Internet porn can only take a man so far. Eventually he needs some human interaction and companionship, preferably from the opposite sex.

So we had a couple of Rolling Rocks at my apartment and decided to go to Hannah O' Riley's for some drinks and maybe a couple games of pool. Everything was normal when we got there—the usual overabundance of hip guys in their early twenties with bad beards and worse clothes were swarming around attractive girls with small clothes and even smaller self-esteem. The jukebox was playing classic

rock, which was just fine by us. It was a nice, safe, expected scene.

We wedged ourselves between some people at the bar and waited for the bartender to notice us. After serving three girls who walked up after us, he grudgingly came and took our order (two Harps and two shots of Goldschlager). With drinks in hand, we found an empty pool table where we could set up shop. We set our drinks down, lit up some smokes, and Gary started racking up the balls.

I reminded Gary about the last time we shot pool. How the game went on for almost an hour because I'm so bad. He laughed and said something to the effect of that being good, because it'll save us some dough. He finished racking up the billiard balls while I selected a cue (or, more accurately, going through the motions of what I had seen other guys do at the cue stick rack, having no idea what I was actually doing). Then, I realized that I was going to have to break.

If you've ever watched the Special Olympics, then you've probably seen something akin to my break—it is always a valiant effort, but just not quite to the level of human function that God intended. It isn't pretty, to say the least.

So I lined up the cue ball and the stick, went through the motions, wondering where the cue ball would end up—certainly not on the table, I was sure of that. I drew my right arm back, making a nice show of it, and thrust it forward. There was resistance as I ground the tip of the stick into the red felt of the table, then give as the tip slipped upward and connected with the ball. The ball went flying, upward, over the neat little triangle of balls, over the edge of the table. I heard a loud cracking noise as it hit the hardwood floor and then a loud, deep, masculine voice go "What the FUCK?" The ball had hit the floor and bounced

and hit what appeared to be a linebacker from the NFL in the ankle.

I flashed my standard sheepish-yet-awkward-filled-with-loving-geekiness grin at him and said, "Sorry, man."

He snarled at me, picked the ball up, and tossed it to Gary who was holding his hand out. Gary gave me a quick little "thanks-for-almost-getting-our-asses-beat" look, and then said, "I'll break, man."

"Sweet," I said back.

"Psycho Killer" by the Talking Heads came on the jukebox as Gary lined up and executed a textbook break, something seen on the pro billiard shows you can sometimes catch on cable. The balls scattered evenly, and two striped balls dropped into the pockets. I marveled briefly at seeing how it was supposed to look, thankful that we were past the break phase.

For the next forty or so minutes, we played. Gary showed mercy on me by allowing the game to drag on and not immediately running the table. The music was good, the beer was good, and the crowd was becoming more and more attractive as time wore on—I had a suspicion that the alcohol was just sweetening up the sights, but I can't be sure.

I leaned down and was just about to point my stick at the opposite corner pocket for the 8-ball shot, the soothing sounds of "Bad Moon Rising" by CCR coming forth from the jukebox, when I felt a presence behind me. Have you ever felt like someone was way too close to you? That's exactly what it felt like. I looked up at Gary and saw a weird grimace on his face as his eyes went past my shoulder. I turned around and found myself staring into the chest of the aforementioned Neanderthal.

His t-shirt read "I support single moms" and had a picture of a silhouette of a stripper holding a pole. I had seen the t-shirt before and thought it was actually pretty funny in a sick kind of way. However, the giant chest and trunk the t-shirt was wrapped around now unnerved me. He was about eight inches from my face, and, well, that was just weird.

I looked up at him and saw the giant, sloping forehead, the half-lidded eyes, the unkempt hair, and the slight overbite of the caveman pictures I had seen back in school. *Early man*, they said. *Hunter/gatherer*, they said.

I leaned back just a little bit, realizing that I was already against the pool table, and very politely said, "Um, hey, man."

He peered down at me through his droopy eyelids, his brow furrowed. I couldn't tell if he was in deep thought or just drunk or both.

"Got winner," he grunted.

I wasn't about to argue with him, so I said, "Sure thing, man. We're almost done here."

He reached toward me, slowly, with a fist. When his fist was about two inches from my face, I realized he was trying to give me something. I looked up at him—his expression hadn't changed. The lights seemed to be on, but nobody appeared to be home.

I reached up and held my hand open, and his giant, meaty fist slowly opened and six warm, moist quarters dropped into my hand slowly: his money for the next game. Normally, someone will come up and just set their quarters up on the table while you're playing, but Neanderthal man made his own rules, I supposed. I sure as hell wasn't going

to argue it, not when I measure in at five-foot-nine and one hundred and sixty pounds.

The expression on his face did not change, so I smiled politely and set his quarters down on the edge of the table. After a moment of tentativeness, I turned around and shot Gary a slightly-faux-terrified look and leaned back down for my shot. Part of me wanted to sink the shot to win the game, and part of me wanted no part of playing Neanderthal man.

I called my shot again, glancing back over my shoulder quickly to confirm that Gigantor was still there (he was), and I made the shot—the 8-ball dropped cleanly, with the cue ball spinning off to the left. I had won.

"Well, good for you," Gary said, quickly hanging his stick up in the rack. "I'm gonna go take a piss, man."

I pleaded with my eyes for him not to leave me, but he ignored me. So he was gone, and there I was. The big fella had moved to the rack and was selecting a stick, going through no motions, simply grabbing the one Gary had just put up. He was studying it, his back to me.

The guy had to be at least 6'7", maybe more, and no less than 300 pounds. He had a thick head of curly black hair, and his "single moms" t-shirt was stretched to the limit. I racked the balls and waited patiently as he stared at the stick, turning it in his hands slowly. I glanced over toward the bar and saw Gary trying to force himself through the crowd to get us more drinks.

"So," I asked his massive back, "what's your name? I'm Dave."

No response. He continued turning the stick in his hand for a moment or two. Eventually, he turned around and faced

me. His face remained expressionless as he finally looked at me.

"Head," he grunted.

His name his Head? I asked myself. It must be a nickname. And again, who am I to question the giant mountain of man?

"Good to meet you, Head," I smiled. "Your break."

He stared at me for a few moments, still either really drunk or really pensive or both. Then he walked around to the other end of the table, lined up the cue ball, leaned over the table (looking as though he would barely be comfortable using a pool table for a bed), and fired off a break so powerful my eyes went crazy trying to follow the balls.

Two solids and one stripe dropped into various pockets, and I was preparing to move to the cue ball, thinking it was still an open table, but Head pressed on, lining up another shot. He sunk the 9 ball, and kept going.

Gary came back with three beers and set them on the small pub table by the pool table. "I brought you a beer, man," he said to Head, who was now concentrating on his next shot: 11 ball in the corner.

"Gary, this is Head," I gestured.

Eyebrows raised: "Head?"

"Head."

Gary gave him another look as the 11 ball fell, and said, "Good to meet you, Head. I'm Gary."

Head glanced up at him briefly, and then went back to running the table on me. He sunk three straight balls, then looked up at us and said, "Want head."

Gary chuckled and said, "Well, Head, here's a beer for you."

He handed the beer glass to Head, who took it, looked at us with his half-lidded eyes, and then proceeded to drain the glass in a long, slow, deliberate chug. It was actually a thing of beauty to watch. Had I not been so weirded out by the whole situation, I might have gone in for a high-five when he slammed the glass down.

"Holy shit, Head," Gary said in awe. "That was fucking nice."

Head licked his lips slowly and went back to pool. He missed the next shot, and then I missed my shot. I stepped back and sipped my beer next to Gary.

"What a fucking weirdo, man," I whispered.

"Well, he can drink some fucking beer, that's for sure."

"Yeah, but who cares? He's a fucking creepy giant man-child."

"Well, finish your game, so we can ditch him and go hang out at the bar."

We had a plan, so I tanked my next shot and watched Head make a sweet 8-ball shot, banking it from the side from one end of the table to the other. No matter his social skills, Head was quite the pool player.

I was hanging my stick back up on the rack and telling Head, "Nice game, man. The table's all yours; we're heading to the bar now. Have fun."

Head was ostensibly slowly contemplating what I said as we walked off. Gary and I made it to the bar and managed to find one open stool—he sat, I stood, and we ordered more drinks.

The music grew a bit more edgy as the night wore on—the older folks were out of there, and the crowd was getting younger as the night was getting older. "Ride the Lightning" by Metallica was rocking in the background as Gary and I sat, drank, joked, and pointed out women that we wanted underneath us but would never have the guts to talk to.

After about fifteen minutes at the bar, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A big, meaty tap. I knew who it was immediately, even before I heard him say, "Want head."

Christ, I thought. I looked at Gary and shrugged my shoulders very slightly. Then I turned around and asked, "What's up, Head?"

He said nothing. He just stood there, towering over us and staring down at me.

"Order the biggest fucking beer they have for our friend, Gary," I said.

Gary ordered a beer for Head, who just continued to stand there, looking back and forth from me to someone on my left. I glanced over where he was looking and saw three girls, two sitting, one standing. They were pretty girls, probably in their early twenties. I had seen them earlier, while we were playing pool, and they appeared to just be enjoying their female company—I had watched as two different groups of guys had approached them, only to been sent on their way.

Head was glancing at them, which made me a bit more comfortable—the fact he was looking at hot women made

him suddenly a bit more human, and slightly less creepy. He was probably just a lonely guy with no real social skills to speak of.

Gary stuck his arm out, a giant glass of beer in his hand and called out, "Here ya go, Head."

"Want head," Head grunted as he took the beer. Gary and I both watched, anticipating the epic chug. Instead, he just held it in his hand.

I seized the moment.

The one girl standing in the group that Head seemed to be infatuated with was wearing a white skirt, so I called out, "Hey, white skirt!"

She either couldn't hear me or was ignoring me, so I yelled it again, louder.

She and her friends all looked in my direction. They really were pretty girls, and I instantly felt a bit creepy, as a thirty-year old guy yelling at younger women in a bar. But I stayed focused.

"Watch this," I mouthed, pointed at Head, and nodded, sending sweet-ass non-verbals that they were about to see something cool.

They peered at Head, so I craned my neck up at him, tapped his forearm and said, "Dude, drink that beer. Chug it, like you did before. Hurry, they're looking!"

He glanced down at me, giving me that sly, half-lidded stare, and then back at the girls. They continued to look at him, and I think he finally realized they were waiting to see him do something.

"The beer, Head, for Christ's sake," I urged him.

He glanced down at the full glass, and then chugged it. Again, he was slow and deliberate and didn't stop—his Adam's apple bounced up and down with each swallow. Approximately 24 fluid ounces down his gullet in one fell swoop. Gary and I were both awed, again.

I glanced at the girls, a huge smile on my face, like I was the presenter on some kind of amazing videos TV show. They were impressed, and all three of them giggled as they clapped their hands.

I heard a huge belch from above me, and then Head said, again, "Want head."

At that moment, something clicked in my own head, so I looked up at him and said, "Want to get some head, Head?" Those words, coming out of my mouth were probably the funniest thing I'd heard all night. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah, man. It sounds to me like Head needs some head," Gary chimed in.

We laughed and looked up at Head, who was staring at the girls. He still held the empty beer glass in his hand and was licking his lips.

Wow, I thought—that's probably totally creeping the girls out. I tapped Head on the arm to divert his attention. I was feeling confident now, like there might be some kind of shot with these girls. Hell, if nothing else, it gave me something to do.

Head looked at me, expressionless, and I asked him if he wanted another beer.

"Want head."

Jesus, again with the head.

"Yeah, that's great, man. I'd love some fuckin' head, too. But how about a beer for now?"

He didn't say anything, so I took his empty glass and handed it to Gary and told him to order more beers. "How I Could Just Kill a Man" by Cypress Hill started on the jukebox and I yelled up to Head, "Man, we should probably go talk to those girls. They seemed to be into your beer-drinking skills."

Head was still staring at them, and at this point, even with my buzz going, it was starting to weird me out a little bit. He didn't acknowledge me, of course, but he did raise his arm slowly. When it was parallel to the floor, he made a fist and pointed one finger at the girl in the white skirt and said, louder now, "Want head!"

I smiled uncomfortably in the direction of the girls, who were talking amongst themselves, apparently oblivious to Head's loud proclamation. "Dude, cool it," I said.

His arm was still up, he was still pointing at the girl.

"WANT HEAD!"

What the fuck?

Gary turned around with a beer in his hand. "Here you go, man," he yelled up to Head.

Head ignored him and started walking toward the girls. He dropped his arm to his side and slid his hand into his front pocket.

"WANT HEAD!" he yelled again, louder.

"Jesus fucking Christ, dude, what's going on?" Gary asked, confused and still holding the beer out in front of him.

"I don't know," I answered, just as Head pulled his hand out of his pocket.

Head was about three feet from the girl in the white skirt. She looked up at him with a small smile on her face. Head must have been a foot and a half taller than her, and he probably outweighed her by a good 180 pounds. He stopped and leaned down, his face less than a foot from hers, and yelled at the top of his lungs. It was a loud, feral, primal yell: "WANT HEAD."

"Wow," Gary said. "Yelling in the girl's face is not the way to get a blow job, dude."

"I'm not sure he's..." I started, when I looked down and saw Head unfolding a large knife in his hand.

"Oh shit," I whispered.

"WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD!" he was yelling as he brought the knife up and stabbed the girl in the side of her neck.

The knife plunged deep into her neck, buried to the handle. I froze as the girl dropped the drink in her hand and her friends screamed. Blood began to spray from the wound. This is like a horror movie! I thought.

I heard Gary yell out "Oh fuck!" behind me as the girl dropped to the floor. Head bent down with her body. He dropped to his knees, and I could see his arm start to move in a back in forth motion. The girl's legs kicked uselessly underneath him.

He's sawing now, I thought. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything.

The girl's friends were screaming and backing away from Head, who was still kneeling over her body, sawing through her neck with his knife. "Let the Good Times Roll" by the Cars was playing on the jukebox now, like some sick joke.

He kept yelling, "WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD!" His left hand moved and grabbed her by the hair as he sawed.

The other people in the bar were beginning to realize what was happening. Just then, the bouncer rushed in. He was a big man in a black t-shirt with the word "SECURITY" on the back in big white letters. He tried to get a grip on Head and pull him from the girl, but Head shoved him back with his left hand. The bouncer fell on his back.

I heard the bartender, a skinny, short, bearded hipster, yelling into the phone: "He's fucking killing her, man! Right now! Holy shit! Hurry up!"

I heard Head grunting and saw his arms moving—from behind, he could have been a cowboy at a rodeo, tying up a steer. And he kept yelling, "WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD! WANT HEAD!"

People were screaming and running out of the bar. The bartender was crying into the phone at this point and the bouncer couldn't do anything but prop himself up on his elbows and watch in horror. I couldn't move. I had no idea if Gary was still behind me or if he had fled.

Head let out a loud scream then—no words, no "want head", no "got winner". His left arm was yanking, yanking, and finally he was still. He hunched over, and I finally was able to do something.

I said, "Head?"

His back heaved as he breathed, his shoulders rising and falling.

Suddenly he turned and faced me, his left arm extended. With a fistful of golden hair, he lifted her severed head. Blood dripped onto the floor from what was left of her torn neck. Nauseated, I noted that her eyes were rolled up into her skull, but not closed.

"HEAD!" he yelled, looking right at me.

I felt my eyes stinging with tears. My legs gave out. As I dropped to the floor, my legs folding under me, I fell against the bar, knocking a stool over in the process.

"HEAD!"

It was too out of context, seeing her like that. Moments before, she had been laughing with her friends, clapping for Head and his beer drinking skills. So beautiful, so happy, so full of life. But now, she was so removed from reality.

He whimpered now: "Head."

I heard him crying loudly, wetly, and completely unashamed. I looked up, just in time to see him toss the head in my direction. Her blonde hair spilling onto the floor, her eyes rolled back into her head, her life now suddenly over and gone forever. And there I was, propped against the bar, staring at this once beautiful thing, feeling more shame and pain than I ever knew was possible.

Head dropped the knife. As it clattered on the floor, I looked at her there, her hair covering those dead eyes, and I thought, I'm sorry.

Eric M. R. Webb is currently pursuing a BA in English / Creative Writing at Virginia Wesleyan College. He spends most of his time on English coursework (which is never-ending) and writing. He hopes to pursue another entirely useless degree when he finishes this one in 2010.

Dream: Swans, Streets, Children, Sheep

By Eric R. Webb

These swans are giants:
swimming through the park's
sliding sidewalks as water.

English maze-hedges the only
boundaries to shining great birds,
tall as horse and substantial
as decades-old ghosts.

As swans who swim through earth
are lost in mazes – less thoughts
than summer hedges – crushed-shell
sidewalks sink in places: soft-
souled shoes are drowned in phrases.

Seashell walks lead to
cobblestone streets, which through
children (threes, fours, fives) must be herded
as though sheep. Sheep running from slaughter:
baa-ing dismay at ignoble display
of the chase through hill-sided streets.

All the stone buildings have wrought-
iron doors, though the hooves of the sheep –
and small childish hands – demand they
open afore they are eaten, their voices

implore the futile words – doors do not hear,
they must keep on their running – in the end
they stand tired in dead-end, cobblestone moors.

Corralled between buildings they run at the walls,
banging their heads against slate stone construction.
It is not the stone that draws blood from their heads,
but the pounding of 'escape!' loud in their brains –
the word bounces between ears full of disdain –
the action suits word, and the only escape

lies in the direction they came. As though from a beach
they embark that way, herding up ramps lowered
from ships floating in cobblestone streets. Wood
and sails stand proud and gleaming as the children
climb high and fly away from the shore.

Ships sail through small city streets, booms
resting lightly on roofs, bright canvas billowed
against uphill wind, and the sheep strain at the rail.
Slowly sails tilt through horizontal: canvass

into feathers, and boats into swans,
sailing a small pond in a French garden.
There go the dreams of flying sheep, children.
