

VOLUME 1
ISSUE 5

WWW.THEODDVILLEPRESS.COM *

THE ODDVILLE PRESS

A BREAK FROM THE NORMAL

FICTION

DR. HOWARD KARLITZ

AMBER FORBES

CHRIS ALLINOTTE

VICTORIA CLAYTON MUNN

MATTHEW QUINN MARTIN

ALEC BRYAN

JASMINE GIACOMO

MICHAEL FRISSORE

ADAM CALLAWAY

KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER

POETRY

YASSEN VASSILEY

ADAM MATCHO

ARTWORK

MIKE COOMBES

aka "STREET PHOTOGRAPHER"

FIERRA TESTER

Copyright and Conditions of Use

All the material in The Oddville Press is copyright and therefore owned by someone, usually the author. This means the owner of the rights and The Oddville Press have come to some sort of an agreement. For you, the user end, this will always mean you can download material and store it digitally for private use only, even print paper copies for private use only, but that is all. No other rights are granted. You cannot edit material in any way, print it out for sale or sell digital copies. Nor can you put it on a website or charge others to visit our site. A book doesn't need to spell out legal rules in full nor shall we, as it is quite simple and logical: using any of this material beyond the terms stated above is the same as theft, and that usually means the law, in some form, will be on your tail. Also remember that abuse of sites, like The Barcelona Review, will lead to repercussions which will only be to everybody's loss. Respect the artist. Respect the © sign.

Letter From the Editor

Dear Readers,

In the last month my computer died, taking almost everything with it. Add that to a major health scare/surgery, serious surgery for not one but two family members, the death of an uncle, an ill senior horse, and the fact that winter is right around the corner, and one might wonder how I handled it all. The answer: I wrote.

Writing is my way of controlling the uncontrollable. My escape. My chocolate. Writers write because it's in them to write, and of course it is. But the *reasons* behind why writers write, though as many and varied as snowflakes (escapism; loneliness; the love of the written word; the need to entertain; fame; financial gain; to shut that annoying muse up so we can have a decent night's sleep; to say "I was here"), all boils down to necessity.

Writers write because they have to write; because it's built in; because to not write goes against their nature... not that I'm saying writing is altogether natural. It's also a learned thing, a process if you will, and a life-long work in progress. A five-year-old can write. A thirty-year-old can write better and with more "pizzazz" (for lack of a better word) via life experiences, training, practice, practice, practice. Not that all thirty year olds can be writers, of course. Talent is a given and something one has to be born with... but I digress.

While reading the works of this issue's wonderful authors, I couldn't help wondering if they'd agree with "necessity" and, if

broken down, what would be their reason behind being a writer. (I also wondered what motivated each work, but I'll leave that for another time.) Talent isn't the question—it's apparent and abundant. So, is writing their chocolate, too? Do they use writing to escape, and if so, from what? In other words, how much alike are individual writers? That's kind of neat to think about, considering they're from all over the world. Maybe it's that creative spark, that "muse" as some call it, that makes us connect. Or perhaps it's something bigger. After all, writers have more in common than just the commonality of being writers.

Happy writing/reading,
Patricia D. Hurst
Managing Editor
The Oddville Press

Masthead

Managing Editor

PATRICIA HURST

Senior Fiction Editor

ROBERT CALLACI

Copy Editors

REBECCA TESTER

DON BURROUGHS

Poetry Editor

ILASIR MAROA

Copy Editor

ORLA O D

Layout Editor

DON BURROUGHS

Contents

Letter From the Editor • 3

The Secret Garden Party • 9
MIKE COOMBES

Light • 10
MATTHEW QUINN MARTIN

Confessions of a New York City Street Peddler • 14
DR. HOWARD KARLITZ

Guys Outside a Cafe • 32
MIKE COOMBES

Their Home • 33
VICTORIA CLAYTON MUNN

Game Night. • 35
CHRIS ALLINOTTE

Tongue • 52
FIERRA TESTER

A Tumble of Cereal • 53
FIERRA TESTER

Bearer of Hell • 54
ALEC BRYAN

Busker With Ukelele • 59
MIKE COOMBES

The Hypochondriac and the Middle School Nurse
A Love Story • 60
ADAM MATCHO

Dead Poet's Pendulum • 63
AMBER FORBES

Gatti 1 • 77
FIERRA TESTER

One Size Fits Most • 78
ADAM MATCHO

Angst Underlying • 81
JASMINE GIACOMO

Gatti 2 • 87
FIERRA TESTER

Dinner at Wither Port • 88
MICHAEL FRISSORE

This is Bob • 98
MIKE COOMBES

Romancing the Goat • 99
KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER

Smile • 112
FIERRA TESTER

(anti)Homer • 113
YASSEN VASILEV

The Kraken, Living. The World, Ending. • 114
ADAM CALLAWAY

Two Guys • 123
MIKE COOMBES

Contributor's Notes • 124

MIKE COOMBES

The Secret Garden Party



MATTHEW QUINN MARTIN

Light

You aren't sure why you did it. Why you smiled. A polite reflex is what you tell yourself. But if that's it, then which social or biological imperative keeps you standing in the hallway while the stranger with the oddly familiar hazel eyes looms larger with each successive footfall? Which one makes you answer "yes" when the stranger—Sasha he says his name is... Sasha, short for Alexander—makes you nod when he asks if you'd like a cup of hot cocoa? Nostalgia? Perhaps. You haven't had hot cocoa in years. More years than you'd feel comfortable counting or admitting to right now. At least not to this one, ten years your junior you judge, and judge generously—fifteen is more like it.

Maybe you just want to feel warm. More than a comfort, warmth lifts you. Lifts you high like a bird rising above thermal vents on feathers and hollow bones. For you are a light thing. Clinging to the light side of forty. A member of the placeholder generation, destined to hang like a dim star between massive and equally self-righteous centers of gravity. Just a seat filler, an intermezzo, and intermezzos are by design light.

It's all so off, you think, looking at this shaggy, scruffy twenty

something. One step perhaps toward dream logic. It's a fluke that you are even there. You've never so much as set foot in that ice rink before today. You just popped by to pick up your friend's son as a favor to Christa. Christa, who needed a little break. *Break*, being Christaspeak for a dose of afternoon delight with someone—anyone it seemed—other than her husband Brad, who was busy coaching three levels of junior league hockey at this very rink. Chasing faded glory.

Maybe you are too.

You wonder how Christa does it so casually. How she can go back to her husband's bed with the scent of another man still clinging to her more secret lands? Doesn't she fear he can smell it? No. All her husband—yours too—seems to smell is money. Even more so now that the market had stopped being bullish and the only thing wearing horns is Coach Bradley.

So what about you? you wonder. What dark path might this stranger lead you to? You wonder, for you are caught in the wondertow, and all you want is for it to pull you down, smother you, fill your lungs. Those eyes, those hazel eyes.

You shift your gaze to the Styrofoam cup he handed you. A few marshmallows are floating on the surface. Floating and beginning to melt in the sweet and steaming liquid enwrapping them, just as you are floating and beginning to melt in the sweet and steamy words that the stranger—Sasha he said his name was... Sasha, short for Alexander—enwraps you with.

Before long there might not be much left. Which is just fine by you. Lately you have begun to feel like a ghost in your own house. It happened slowly, a gradual slipping from solid to spectral, reaching your current wispieness when your daughter finally pushed you

away.

Her actions weren't out of malice or anger, or even frustration as so many children's are. It just seemed that Kelly had simply outgrown the need for a mother. At least a mother like you, light thing that you are. And she rid herself of you the way one would discard an old coat—not thrown away, but put in a closet to be forgotten. Gone for all practical purposes, but always hanging there as a comforting reminder. The final resting place of a thing still living. Hard to believe the child who once clung to your neck with a love complete would some day do that. Hard to believe, but harder still to ignore.

And that's how you see it, even if your husband refuses to. As he refuses to see a lot of things when it comes to Kelly. Kelly, the ever-present reminder that your heart will never fully belong to him—part will forever be with your daughter (or at least the hope of her), and part will be with her father. A man, so good, so kind, with a soul so generous, there was nothing for him to do but die at age thirty-three. A man who's name you still can't speak—even think about—without crying.

On your wedding day, *until death us do part*, was the only vow you knew you might one day break. Twelve years, seven months, eighteen days later that day arrived—gift wrapped, metastatic and inoperable. You broke your vow then—the 'parting' part, and part continues to do so. Death didn't part you. It never could. And as timelessly romantic as that might seem, the piece of you that followed your one true love beyond the veil of this world left you with a void—one as devastating as any sucking chest wound. It left you vulnerable and open to infection, an infection that would soon spread to your daughter.

But in the presence of this sweet young stranger—Sasha he said his name was... Sasha, short for Alexander—you find the terror of anticipation and the tyranny of remembrance to be uncannily absent. The taste of this simple freedom is as long forgotten as that of the hot cocoa in your hand.

This is not nostalgia. And for the first time in more years than you'd feel comfortable counting or admitting to right now, you can live in the moment. For the first time in a long time you feel young.

DR. HOWARD KARLITZ

Confessions of a New York City Street Peddler

It's February, 1980, and David Gordon is standing in front of a class of delinquent kids in a South Brooklyn juvenile detention center trying to teach reading. While patiently guiding them through a short story called "Young Pablo Picasso," his eye is caught by a reproduction of the artist's flamboyant signature that has been emblazoned across the top of the page. He puts the book down to stare at the lettering and then happens to notice a little blurb in a newspaper lying next to it on his desk announcing an upcoming show of Picasso's work, a major "Retrospective," scheduled to take place that year at the Museum of Modern Art. It was strange, the signature and show coming together like that. His mind wanders. An idea is taking form. Suddenly it comes to him. Just in time too, because the kids are going bananas and a piece of chalk whizzes past his ear, powder shattering against the green board behind him.

That evening, in the safety of his modest suburban home, he announced his plan to his wife. "Jill," he boasts, "this is it, the big one! I'm going to sell Picasso T-Shirts at the Museum of Modern Art this summer."

Quite naturally, she's leery. In fact, she thinks he's mad. And he really can't blame her. In the first place, she's wondering why in the world anyone would want to buy a T-shirt with Picasso's signature on it. And secondly, they had just been through a nervous breakdown-inducing business bankruptcy after he had invested their life's savings in three waterbed stores, all of which sunk after only 5 months, leaving them in a blizzard of attorneys' letters, injunctions, collections notices, court fees, judgments, tax liens, law suits (both of the civil and criminal variety), and every other form of lawyer-related horror one could dream of.

But he had to give this one a shot and Jill understood why. She understood that he was tired of trying to make it on a teacher's salary, tired of wheeling around suburbia in one clunker after another, tired of never even considering a vacation, tired of not being able to take his family to a decent restaurant, depressingly tired of watching the bills pile up on the kitchen table month after lousy month. They had held on to our 60's ideals as long as possible, but like the man desperately clinging to the ledge fifty stories up, it was getting hard because the villain, Mr. 80's, a/k/a "Greed and Excess," was stomping on their fingertips.

He hooked up with a real character named Benny who owned a T-shirt printing shop near his job. David showed him the Picasso signature from the school book. "Nice shot," Benny says. Everything in this business is a "shot." Said he can copy it, enlarge it, and press it onto a shirt. A "heat shot" he calls it.

"What do you think of my idea?" David asks. "Picasso, that is."

"Great" Benny lied. Thought he was nuts. "How many ya' wanna start with? A hundred dozen? Two?"

“No, 48.”

“Dozen?”

“No, shirts. Black ones, with white lettering.”

His first day out was in April. He rushed into the city after work figuring to go after the early ticket buyers. The shirts were stored in a knapsack on his back. As he walked down the block, however, his confidence melted away. Suddenly he was terrified. He had no license, if there was such a thing, no permit, nothing. Here he was, a schoolteacher, with a masters degree no less, slinking around the museum entrance on 53rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues like a criminal. He felt like a derelict, or worse yet, a pervert. He wanted to run, back to the burbs, but something grabbed hold of him at this moment of truth and he slipped out a shirt and held it up in front of him at arms length. And like magic, a very well dressed woman walked over and began to finger it. “Pretty,” she says. Pretty my ass, David’s thought, she’s a cop. She pulls out her wallet. Here comes the badge. “How much?” she asks, and when he tells her five dollars she hands him a ten and walks away with two. He’s rocked. Other people who have been watching now come over to buy shirts too. And this is the first critical lesson he learns about peddling, to draw a crowd and let people see money changing hands. It adds credibility to you and your action. It’s called *disalienation*.

Within half an hour, he’s sold out, but decides right then and there to quit because it’s just too damn scary, too risky, for a schoolteacher with a masters degree that is. But that night back home, he’s throwing the cash around the kitchen, and then he’s on the phone with Benny ordering more shirts which he picks up the next day on his lunch hour which he’s selling that afternoon at the

museum after work because already he's totally addicted to the money and the action!

The Picasso Exhibit opened to rave reviews and the crowds were enormous, with lines snaking all the way down the block and curling onto 5th Avenue. Business took off, so he hired his recently unemployed father-in-law, Syd, to help him out. Syd, one of the greatest, cast aside (not-even-a-gold-watch) garment center salesmen of all times, covered the 54th Street entrance while David worked on 53rd. When the end of June rolled around and the tourists poured into town, business exploded and suddenly they were moving a couple of hundred pieces a day. Then, summer vacation kicked in, thank God, and they were working nine to nine, seven days a week.

It was about this time that David's first competition showed up—two punk types from Hoboken. They copied his idea. What could he do? Sue? Call a cop? They hurt David's numbers because they were showing colors while he was only showing black. So David got colors too, a whole rainbow, and now he and Syd are moving even more shirts. Then they got Kiddie T's (for the grandma and grandpa set) and French cuts (for those long, tanned arms.) It was Jill's idea.

More competition hit the street: a couple of Israelis, a one-armed Cuban with a Ph.D. in physics, two accountants, at least one lawyer that he knew of, an insurance salesman from North Carolina, a keyboard player and drummer from a defunct rock band, and a host of college students on summer vacation. The place started to look like a flea market, but it was OK because there was enough for everybody.

Meanwhile the idea was feeding on itself. Soon everyone was

walking around with a Picasso Signature T-shirt, whether they've been to the show or not. It's big in the Hamptons. Fire Island, also. Store owners buy them by the dozen, and David's starting to see them in some very chic Madison Avenue shop windows marked up four to five hundred percent. He was doing serious numbers, so serious that Benny put all his other business on hold and printed only Picasso shirts. Very entrepreneurial. David was hot, and there was nothing he couldn't handle now... *except... the... truck!!*

One day a scruffy looking moose of a guy in worn jeans and sandals was looking down at David's T-shirts and asked for a pale pink extra large. Rather strange David thought. He bends down and rummages through his suitcases and comes up with the guy's order and suddenly he's eyeballing a police badge. "Don't cry," the plain clothes cop says, "just show me some I.D." But David's ready, and pulls out his wallet with a fifty dollar bill taped to the inside leather flap. "Don't even think about it," the cop says. "Put it away. I.D." So David hands him a valid driver's license. "You'll have to do something about this, **MR. DAVID GORDON.**" David has no idea what he's talking about. The cop writes out a summons, hands David the pink portion of it, gets on his walkie-talkie, and in seconds a paddy wagon comes roaring up. This is it, David figures, he's screwed. The cop opens the back door and David starts to climb in when the cop growls, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out!" and he grabs David's suitcases full of shirts and throws them into the truck. "Pick'em up at 2 o'clock. Got any back-up?" the cop asks. Again David doesn't know what's going on. "Shit to sell, until you come in." Our hero's drawing blanks. "You're not a virgin, David, are you?" he asks, somewhat surprised. David's too petrified to speak. "You'll learn. See you at two. Midtown North

Precinct,” and he was gone.

At the appointed hour, David finds himself in the bowels of a west side station house located in the heart of the city’s sleaze district, the denizens of which would probably associate the name Pablo Picasso with some new, well-hung porno sensation. He’s huddling against the wall of a dingy basement room crowded with an assortment of motley characters, many of whom he later learns are more plainclothes cops. An air conditioner belches and death-rattles ineffectively. Everyone’s milling about until one guy, a hippie type cop, sits down behind a typewriter and yells, “OK, who’s up first?” and all hell breaks loose with peddlers rushing him, waving their pink summonses in his face in order to pay a \$20 “ransom” for their confiscated merchandise and get back on the street where capitalism in its purest form awaits them.

David hangs around to the end, nervous, scared, like any law-abiding, middle class suburbanite would be when Gus Reuter, the officer who took his shirts, asks for the summons and \$20 (the “administrative fee” the city figures it costs to grab his stuff and haul it to the station house). He types up a voucher, asks David to sign it, and then hands back the summons and a receipt for the twenty. As for the summons, David’s informed that end of it is handled like a parking ticket, and has to be cleared through a different city agency, Consumer Affairs. And the fines Reuter warns, usually \$100 a pop, can add up quickly. David was then told he could take back his suitcases, which were stacked up unceremoniously against a far wall.

When he got home that night he burst through the door screaming “I quit! I quit!” waving the pink summons around like a madman. But the following day, he and Syd dug up some extra suit-

cases, “back-up,” which they would stash on the side in order to continue working between the time they got hit and the time they had to pick up their “shit.” (“Shit,” by the way, is the official term for the merchandise in your “joint.” Your joint consists of your “shit” and your “rig,” in his case, three or four suitcases lying open on the sidewalk. *Shit + Rig = Joint.*)

Their identity situation was deftly handled by the slick Pakistan proprietor of a Broadway arcade, who decked them out with social security cards and some neat looking plastic employment badges from a bogus Brooklyn construction company. David proudly became Roger Mantle! What the hell, he figured, if you’re gonna do it...

The *system* worked perfectly. They got hit, waited a bit, re-opened with back-up, continued peddling for a couple of hours, then went to the precinct to ransom their shit, and were back in front of the museum in no time. The tickets, like of those of every other peddler in the city, became toilet paper. Everyone’s figures were healthy. The peddler detail was vouching record numbers, while the T-shirt vendors’ bottom lines were blacker than ever.

But it would be impossible to close this chapter of the story without some pain. There were two periods during that summer when David thought they had him. The first was during the Democratic National Convention, which happened to take place in New York that year. Word came thundering down from the mayor’s office to sweep the midtown streets clean of vermin, especially around the museum where each conventioneer’s agenda would include a trip to the Picasso exhibit. He particularly didn’t want them in contact with vendors. Little did he realize, however, that out-of-towners love peddlers, and consider them to be just one more vi-

brant element in the city's personality. The peddler detail sought to temporarily suspend peddling operations and warned every street vendor in the strongest terms not to work midtown that week. The other T-shirt people stopped immediately, but David was getting greedy, and the next day opened up, business as usual. He was hit four, five, six times a day. Gus told him he was making "enemies on the force," the ultimate threat. Sergeant Laverty, head of the detail, cornered him in the peddler room one day and said if he kept it up, he'd never work the streets again. David was scared and considered stopping, but then went back out anyway. And since the competition had dried up, he made out huge, even with the extra hassle. Towards the end of the week the detail even let him slide one or two times. In the end they earned each others respect.

The second time David was almost put out of business happened when Picasso's greedy heirs decided that the shirt represented a copyright violation and that they "owned" his signature. An army of treasury agents, suit and tie guys in unmarked cars, hit the museum one day, confiscating shirts and handing out injunctions ordering peddlers to cease and desist until a federal judge would hand down a ruling in two weeks. The press had been tipped off the previous night and the street was teeming with reporters, photographers and cameramen.

As David sadly walked back to his car, he passed a bear of a guy, a grizzled street vendor pulling a monstrous rack of designer tops down the middle of 54th Street toward Fifth Avenue. He was leaning into a thick rope that was slung over his shoulder, the other end of which was tied to his joint. Traffic was backed up behind him all the way to Sixth Avenue, and each time an irate motorist was able to squeeze by, he was blasted with a car horn. His re-

sponse was a calm, detached, “I-don’t-give-a-shit” raised middle finger. David recognized him from the peddler room. His name was Spiro, a Greek, one of the few other vendors who had worked convention week.

“I saw what happened,” he said to David, dropping the rope in the middle of the street in order to stretch out his shoulder. Horns chorused.

“Yeah, they gave me this,” David answered, holding up the injunction.

“The hell with it, man. Go back to work.”

“And get arrested! You’re crazy. I’m quitting. For good.”

“Hey, they did you a favor. Cleaned up the competition. They ain’t coming back. It was just a big show. For the press. The Feds got better things to do than bust T-shirt peddlers. You’ll never have this chance again.” He picked up the rope and began lugging his rig toward Fifth. The line of cars started inching along behind him. “Now is the time,” he called back to David. **“NOW!”**

Within minutes David was on the phone with Benny screaming at him to print everything he had. And Spiro was right. For the next two weeks he was the only one out there selling the “banned” shirts. Everyone had seen them on TV and were desperate for them. Benny made two, three, sometimes four vanload deliveries a day. David and Syd dumped them on the sidewalk and watched their clientele pounce on them, grabbing ten, fifteen at a time. Spiro was right about the Feds, too. They never came back. In fact, the case was lost with the court holding that the signature was clearly in the public domain. It belonged to the people.

By the time the competition came back, it was too late. They had missed the best two weeks of the season. Summer was winding

down. Gus told David there would never be another two weeks like it again. And he was right.

The show was scheduled to end after Labor Day, but the museum was doing so much business that they decided to extend the show through October. Every day for the next eight weeks David rushed into the city after work, once again leading the double life of pedagogue/peddler; two seemingly incongruous pursuits, yet manageable, even to the point of benefiting his classroom technique. As a result of an injection of street wisdom which his streetwise kids instinctively picked up upon, control ceased to be a problem. They seemed to understand and respect each other more than ever before.

When the show finally did close, David decided to quit peddling for good and devote himself fully to teaching. But he was addicted to the street freedom and ended up quitting teaching for good and devoting himself to peddling. The next day he was in front of Saks Fifth Avenue pumping scarves and gloves in the crisp, exciting, autumn air.

This was the mainstream of New York City street vending, Fifth Avenue, the “Diamond Mile,” that stretch of intense commercial activity running from 59th to 47th Street. It was the time of giant rigs rolling up and down the block, each manned by four or five peddlers selling everything from lingerie to jackets, to sweaters, to pocketbooks, to dresses, hats, records, jewelry, make-up, wigs, belts, toys, pants, shoes, socks, radios, TV’s, telephones, over-the-counter medicines, tools, tires, car batteries, flashlights, condoms, birth control pills, even eyeglasses. It’s true. David once saw two entrepreneurial characters with a large box filled with prescription glasses. As one partner deftly placed a pair on a customer’s nose,

the other held up an eye chart exactly 20 feet away. “Can you see the “E” lady? No? OK, here, try another pair.” They went for six bucks a throw, two for ten dollars.

And as Christmas drew nearer, more peddlers appeared, store owners from the suburbs and the outer boroughs opening weekend Manhattan “annexes.” The streets were wall-to-wall until ten, eleven o’clock at night. Of course the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association screamed bloody murder, so more beat cops were assigned to the detail and they’d hit the avenue every hour on the hour, setting off a wild stampede of flying vendors and careening dollies which bowled over everything and everybody in their paths, because nobody wanted to get vouched and lose precious time in this most precious of seasons.

David always worked small, out of a suitcase or on a garbage pail, usually with scarves and gloves in the fall and winter, and anything from wallets to T-shirts to ties in the spring and summer. But he moved with the times and never allowed himself to get locked into any one particular item. One season he did incredibly well with dollar chain, “Bro’ Gold” as it was called in the ghettos, “Phonay Monet,” or “sluummmm...,” the definition of which can be found in the Unabridged Riker’s Island Dictionary of the English Language. We’re talking cheap costume jewelry, which he always sold as *cheap costume jewelry*, a buck a throw, six for five, as opposed to wise guys who’d stamp it 14 karat and sidle up to tourists looking for a quick hundred. David became known as the “Slum Lord” during a chain snatching epidemic by advising his well heeled clientele to “keep the real stuff in the vault and let the snatcher have this,” holding up a nifty, one dollar, 18 inch herringbone necklace. “Laugh as the mugger hi-ho silvers it down the

block.”

What a great mix of people out there too, all working together in relative peace and madness: Greeks, Turks, Israelis, Palestinians, English, Irish, Poles, Italians, Indians, Pakistanis, Swiss, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Costa Ricans, Russians, Prussians, Hessians, Saxons, Celts, Incans, Thais, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Taiwanese, Afghans, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Albanians, Davidqis, Davidnians, Transylvanians, Koreans... each representing a distinct immigrant wave that had come to New York, the greatest city in the world, to seek refuge and a degree of economic security on its golden streets, in the same way the founders of some of the city's greatest retail establishments had done generations before.

But even though Christmas was around the corner, the time for giving, not everyone was in the giving mode. Members of the Boards of Directors of the big time organizations like Saks, Bergdorf, Bonwits, Bloomies, to name but a few, cried the loudest. “Rid the streets of this peddler trash,” they chorused, “they’re killing us. How dare they sell an umbrella for three dollars when we can get fifteen!”

Were they forgetting their roots? Forgetting where the seed money came from? Forgetting how their great grandparents came to this country penniless and toughed it out with nothing but a dream and a pushcart on the cold cobblestones of Hester Street or Avenue C? And as for the greatest store of them all, the “Big M” on 34th, are they forgetting about R.H. Macy, the original “Yankee Peddler!” Evidently.

So, at the urging of these the yuppie captains of commerce, the rules of the game began to change. Under pressure from the

Association, the city raised the ransom on any joint that rolled to \$65. David didn't care. His garbage pail didn't have any wheels. The rollers didn't care either, particularly the Izod and Polo boys. A couple of sixty-fives a day would hardly put a dent in their pre-Christmas action.

So the next move on the city's part was to raise EVERYBODY'S confiscation fee to sixty-five. When that plan flopped, they decided to "impound" wheeled rigs under the guise that these "rolling platforms posed a hazard to pedestrian traffic." No big deal. The big operators switched to blankets. "Forty in the store. Ten on the floor!" Meanwhile David is still working his garbage pail with a piece of cardboard on it. He's selling leather gloves, showing only three or four pairs at a time. The rest are stashed in a bag behind him and are not subject to confiscation because they aren't on display. If Roger Mantle happens to get popped, he loses only ten or fifteen dollars worth of merchandise, and does not go directly to jail, but passes Go and avoids the ransom by letting the city keep the goods.

The politicians finally get to the big joints with Article B23-507.0 of the Administrative Code. They call it "forfeiture of seized property." David calls it highway robbery. No more ransoms, they're keeping it all now. The heavy hitting Izod and Polo peddlers scream bloody murder, threaten to form an organization in order to hire a lawyer in order to fight this latest outrage. They circulate petitions (which everyone signs with a phony name) and ask for contributions (cash—what else!), but soon the whole thing collapses because they're really a pack of unorganizable nomads and suddenly everyone's working small and garbage pails are at a premium.

So it's a whole new board game, the rules of which peddlers learning to live with when a fresh group of players suddenly sits down at the table. A wave of Africans came ashore one day, Senegalese for the most part, but with Liberians and Ethiopians sprinkled in for good measure. They hit the streets just like every previous immigrant wave had done since Peter, the 'bead vendor,' Minuet worked his joint on Manhattan's south forty 350 years ago. And like their predecessors, they were tired, poor, scared, humble, but determined. There was only one difference though. Quite evident too. It was right there in black and white.

There was a story going around that a big mucky-muck walked out of Bergdorf Goodman one day and was "shocked" by the bazaar that had seemingly sprung up overnight in front of the store, looking like "Istanbul on Sunday." His hallowed sidewalk was speckled with dashiki clad vendors hawking African flavored bracelets, necklaces, earrings and statuary, not to mention sunglasses and umbrellas (pronounced "sugahs" and "umbahs" by the new arrivals.) The Bergdorf guy cranked up the Merchants Association, which revved up City Hall, which shook up the Police Commissioner's Office, which gave birth to the "Alpha Squad", a new, heavily manned detail of plainclothes peddler-busters, so named because in the beginning they rode around in vans and light trucks rented from an outfit called Alpha Rent-A-Car. Between these new kids on the block and the regular detail, the pressure was enormous as they incessantly swept the midtown commercial districts, confiscating displayed merchandise as well as back-up if they could find it. A lot of old time peddlers packed it in. But the Africans stayed out there.

The next move was to crack down on identification. Pakistani

plastic became unacceptable. They wanted valid paper: driver's licenses, rent receipts, telephone bills, green cards. And if you couldn't produce, you were hauled into the precinct and hassled around for a couple of hours. For awhile David kept working, taking tickets under his real name and paying them, but finally quit for good when he started getting phone calls and threatening letters from some collection agency, probably the same corrupt one back then that was involved with the thieving Parking Violation Bureau. But the Africans hung in there. And why not? When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose.

The crusher came with the strict enforcement of penalties under Section B32-510, which states that unlicensed general vending is "a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of not more than \$1000, or by imprisonment for not more than three months or both." This all but eliminated the few non-African vendors from the city's midtown commercial areas. A lot of guys David knew became "moles," working the subways where the rules were different, or "book" peddlers (protected by the First Amendment). Some began working side streets, off the avenues, or all the way downtown in lower Manhattan where there was less of a chance of getting arrested. Some, however, still chanced Fifth Avenue, usually at odd hours looking for a quick morning or night rush. And every now and then you might even have caught one doing a lunch hour, particularly toward the end of the month when the rent came do.

As for the Africans, they still hung tough in midtown because "three hots and a cot" in the Tombs or on the "Rock" was not that far removed from ten in a room at dilapidated flophouse.

*Epilogue: A Play in Three Acts**Act I:*

It's a week after David quit for good. He's on the corner Fifth Avenue and 42nd street talking to a hot dog guy about then Mayor Koch backing down on his attempt to eliminate food vendors. "Too much Greek clout," the vendor says, "especially with Dukakis on the way up." Suddenly a police van pulls up and three cops jump out and arrest a peddler for selling her photographs of New York in front of the library. She's cuffed, MDavidnderized, and led into the back of the truck. Meanwhile, across the street, a three card monte game goes on undisturbed, with a large group of French tourists being bilked out of hundreds of dollars as pickpockets work the periphery of the crowd. Next to them some dope dealer is selling crack, another quaaludes, another loose joints. It's not the cops' fault. Evidently they're being told what to concentrate on. It's the city's doing, the result of the "crackdown of the month club." It's all part of what they consider to be the "effective utilization of law enforcement personnel."

Act II:

David didn't quit. You knew it all along. He's on Fifth Avenue selling wallets, feeling safe, surrounded by African Rolex guys, when suddenly someone breaks down and runs shouting "Alpha, Alpha!" He runs too, and from around the corner nervously watches a van cruise down the block on a "click-click" patrol. ("Click-

click,” by the way, means arrest in African lingo, the sound of handcuffs snapping shut.) He hangs out, and a little while later Gus comes up to him. “Be careful,” he says, “the Africans got a lawyer. ACLU. He claims they’re being discriminated against. That 99% of the collars are black.”

“He’s right,” David answers. “That’s because there’s no other peddlers left. Alpha chased them away. It’s like Catch-22.”

“So,” Gus continues, “they’ll be looking for the few old timers still out there. To kind of even things up.”

“Forget it, Gus,” David laughs. “They’ll never catch me. I’m too quick. Besides, I’m protected. An endangered species. The great white fucking hope!”

Act III:

David got click-clicked for the first time the next day on the corner of 40th Street and Fifth Avenue selling scarves off a garbage pail. They grabbed him and an African to his right. The cops came up on foot behind them. David and the African never had a chance.

An hour later, the two of them are sitting alone behind bars in a downtown holding tank and get to talking. Surprisingly the African speaks pretty good English. He’s from Ethiopia and the conversation soon turns to home and the stories David’s hearing regarding violently repressive conditions are unbelievable. David quickly realizes that to him, this is all child’s play.

Twelve hours later, a guard comes over to the cell and tells David that his I.D. checked out and, since he has no priors, he’s being released under his own recognizance. He does, however, have a

*court date next month. When the guard opens the door and David gets up to leave, the African instinctively rises too. “Where are **YOU** going?” the guard growls. “Sit your black ass back down.”*

“Sorry, boss,” the peddler responds step-n-fetchitly.

The metal door clangs shut behind David, leaving the Ethiopian alone in the cell. David starts walking away when suddenly he stops and turns back to the jailed peddler. “Why do you stay here, man?” He asks. “Really?”

“Because I’m free,” he answers.

MIKE COOMBES

Guys Outside a Cafe



VICTORIA CLAYTON MUNN

Their Home

Ella never could stand spiders. When she was five, one came through the window and bit her. Her arm turned purple and they had to cut it off. It was for the best, you see. And so, Ella couldn't take spiders no more.

When they arrived at the new dug house that Papa had been working on, Ella knew there'd be spiders. She could see them in the grass, in the still crumbling earth that hadn't been swept from the floor. Bitty ones, big ones with black shiny eyes like river rocks. She cried, sitting in the scrub far from their new shelter, and hoped Papa didn't notice.

Mama did, and she hauled her up by her one good arm. "Ella Lawrence, don't you be crying over nothing. Spiders won't hurt you none if you don't make 'em mad. Our old house in the city made them mad, see? There was no place for them to live—we'd made sure of that. Here, we can live with the spiders and they won't pay you no mind." She straightened Ella's pinned sleeve, then rolled up both of hers. "We've got to sweep the dug out, Papa's going to want to move in soon."

The wagon stood far from their new home, settled in the hill that Papa planned to put an orchard on. Apples, far as the eye could see. He'd planned it the minute he'd gotten his 100-acre paper

from the office. Apples, he reckoned, were wanted by everyone.

People thought that Papa was tetched, just a little. Mama too, because she'd grown up here. The Midwest was for crops, for corn and potatoes, wheat. Not Macintoshes and Gravensteins. But Papa was sure. And so they moved across from Boston, where the spiders were mad that people had put up homes where they lived.

Papa planned to do that here too—he just hadn't had the tools or know-how. So reading a book or two, he figured a house dug into the side of his orchard would work for a little while. He pondered his supply of apple seeds as his wife began to take things from the wagon and bring them home.

Ella crept towards their temporary home with the broom she'd taken from their wagon. The spiders looked at her, turning their little bodies towards the new attacker. She swept, pushing spiders into the air and onto their backs. Ella picked one up and looked at it, squirming.

Then, a flash of inspiration—and she pulled one of the spider's legs off. "Now we're even." Ella said, as she finished the dirt floor with one last swoop of the broom.

CHRIS ALLINOTTE

Game Night.

We only meet on Friday the 13th. Sometimes this is three times a year, sometimes it's only once, but we always make it back to the tool shed. No one ever skips, and no one is ever late. For six hours, every Friday the thirteenth we decide the fate of the world. Mostly. Partly. Kind of.

My daily life is much like yours. I wake up, I eat something, and I go to work. The only difference is I'm not showing off by breathing the whole time.

My favourite meal is breakfast. That's when you guys are at your tastiest. Oh, stop looking at me like that. I don't eat flesh and bone anymore ... it gives me gas. Ever seen a ghost fart? We whip through the room at the speed of light and you guys think something's gone off in the fridge.

Anyhow, I was about to tell you, before I was interrupted, that I eat memories. Your thoughts are part of your spirit, and since your spirit is bigger than your body, I just pick off one or two short-term memories and fill my belly. Mostly it's just little things, like where you put your car keys, the reminder to thaw out a chicken for dinner, Aunt Kathy's hip surgery... you get the idea. I never touch your long-term memories. They taste like dust, and also, I'm a ghost, not a bastard.

Where the hell was I? Oh yeah, I started to tell you about the Four. Every Friday the Thirteenth we meet in an old tool shed in Sudbury. It's the most private place we can think of, and the Big Nickel makes us all giddy. There's me, "Fingerstring". Black Cat and Broken Mirror are a couple, and fat, holy God. Their deal is bad luck, and between you and me, I think they do a little too much for their food. I saw Cat downtown last week, sawing through some lady's high heels while she sat eating her lunch. This kind of direct interference is strictly forbidden. Mostly though, it's such piddly stuff that we let it go.

That brings me to Miniature Sunflower. Now he *is* a bastard. He goes around opening car windows and sunroofs when it rains. He loves chaos and the despair it causes. Every now and then he kills someone, which is a bit above our station, but Sunflower is ambitious to say the least. By the way, don't *ever* call us ghosts. That is, unless you want to forget how to tie your shoes or have every single drive-through coffee you buy explode in your lap. (We're touchy on the subject.) One time Sunflower heard this video game programmer laughing and joking that there were ghosts all around. "The only ghosts are the ones I put on the screen." He wasn't laughing when a steel truck went by and dropped a five-ton coil on his car, with him in it. Sunflower gave the guy's spirit the finger the whole time he was crossing. Classy.

Okay, now you know everyone. Not that you'd want to. Collectively, we are "The Four Minor Gods of Misfortune and Chaos." It didn't fit on our business cards, so we just call ourselves "The Four ..."

Which brings us back to Friday the 13th. Every time we get together, we play games to find out how much fun we can have at

your expense, at least until the next Friday the 13th.

I told you about the four of us? There's a fifth, Circle Jim. When we play, it's all of us against him. If he wins, we take it easy, and get terribly hungry. During these times, we go to Vegas.

You wouldn't know this, but the nutritional value of a busted Blackjack hand is about equal to a Twinkie. Sunflower gets particularly crotchety. After our last trip to Nevada, the Casinos put in shatterproof windows from the second floor up. So you'll appreciate that when we win against CJ, we binge a little.

On those rare occasions where we win twice in a row, you guys tend to start noticing something's up. Remember the Depression? It was delicious.

The thing is, we don't win all the time, which, seeing as how it's always four against one, is odd in itself. It just seems to balance out.

The game itself isn't important. We switch it up every time. CJ loves chess, so we almost never play it. He pulls out four boards and turns into Bobby Fischer on us. (Literally. And it is as annoying as it sounds.) The worst part is he always plays us to stalemate. One of the "rules" is that ties go to CJ, because there are four of us, I guess.

You might wonder to yourself if we had something to do with the events in the last part of 2001. We didn't. I don't like saying their names, but there are spirits out there that are much bigger, much meaner than any of us combined, and they ride horses. As a matter of fact, we tried to help you out. There were four more planes, and four more planned targets, only one of the bad guys lost his ticket. Another fell down a flight of stairs and broke his collarbone on the way to the airport. The third got into a cab with

a driver that was absolutely clueless and missed his flight, and the last was killed when the tires blew out on his car and he went over a cliff. But there are only four of us. I'm sorry.

Whoa. Got a little heavy for a minute there. Let's get back to today. It's poker night. We all crushed out our cigarettes and made our way into the shed. We all smoke, as we dig the irony. Cat and Mirror had arrived early, and in a good mood. Last night's lottery draw was for over 200 million. The winner was the wife of a billionaire who played weekly as her "donation to charity".

Consequently, the tang of sour grapes was thick in the air today, and these two were loving it. They were wearing matching lime green tracksuits and Elvis sunglasses. Watching two morbidly obese spirits sweat profusely is quite a sight. Sunflower was next, and he flashed CJ a snaggle-toothed grin as he made his way to the table, toying with a large bolt. He sat down and then, seeing that CJ hadn't come in yet, tipped me a big dirty wink. I raised my eyebrows, and he went back to fiddling with the bolt and humming Carnival music. What a jerk.

CJ followed me in. He was dressed like Roy Rogers, with a tasseled shirt and a white ten-gallon hat. He was whistling, "I've got spurs." This was payback, I'm sure. Last time we all got together, and played Monopoly of all things, I was knocked out early and stole his MP3 player. I erased all of his symphonies and operettas, and replaced it with five hours of the same bubblegum pop song. So now, CJ's gone country. Spirits *hate* country. People who play country music in their house almost never misplace their keys. It's a fact.

First deal. I've got a ten and a seven. This isn't a promising start. I throw in the small blind and wave bye-bye to those chips.

Black Cat is giggling. She's got a terrible poker face. Her upside is she can be remarkably stupid. She'll be tittering over a three and a two, and everyone will throw their hand in thinking she's got it made. The downside is, she can be remarkably stupid - she's just as likely to fold a pair of aces. This happens more often than not, but for all the trouble she causes, she seems to have amazing luck at cards. Broken Mirror on the other hand, seems to pull just enough winning hands out of his massive behind to keep him in the game. He's a bit of a rube, and seems happy just to break even most times.

Jim throws in his big blind with a grin, and the game is on.

Each of us has one hundred chips to start with. Each chip is one day. (Don't bother with the math – there's overlapping.)

The big winner gets to spend the days however they want. We're all really in it for ourselves. It's just worked out that, over the years, CJ balances us off in the same way, so we started working together. When Sunflower's won it all in the past, we've had to remind him of the pact. Sometimes this means spoiling his fun.

He won big in ninety-three -- two hundred and eighty-six days. He decided he wanted to keep them all for himself. This pissed us off to no end. We got wind he was planning to run them all together in an attempt to impress the big guys.

As I've mentioned, his biggest trip was death by misfortune. So he rigged up a faulty pedestrian crosswalk. It would have been genius if it weren't so evil. It was set up so that it would just discharge massive amounts of electricity every so often. It wouldn't kill everyone who pushed the button; it would just happen at random. He even had it worked out so that some people got a little jolt that was just enough to mess up their heart, and they'd die about

twenty minutes later for no apparent reason. The rest of us were horrified. He was breaking a bunch of rules, and we all knew that it wouldn't be good attention he attracted from the Big Four.

I talked it over with Cat and Mirror, and we brought our plan to Circle Jim. He liked it and let us handle Sunflower in our own way.

We staked out the corner, and for the next thirty days that spot was a terribly unlucky place to visit. They were doing construction on the corner (which is how Sunflower got access to the wiring.) Incidents of falling paint cans went up 400%. The same crew forgot what they were doing and installed a new door on the convenience store that opened out onto the sidewalk. We laughed ourselves hoarse every time someone took one to the face. Lots of broken noses, zero electrocutions. Other people, about press the fatal button suddenly remembered terribly important matters directly back they way they'd come.

First prize, though, went to Cat. That broad was a genius. She solved the whole mess by letting a bee loose in a cab. The driver ploughed right into the faulty pole, ruining everything.

Sunflower was madder than we'd ever seen. One-to-one, he'd have beaten any of us senseless. Together though, we were more than a match for him. He backed down that time, and agreed to split up the rest of the days, but he wanted to keep his share of those. He made good use of them too, made up for a lot of lost time with some pretty memorable moments. Remember that guy who was installing an animated billboard and got flung three city blocks? And the lady who was checking her makeup and drove into the lake? The teenager that fell onto the third rail? Sunflower didn't waste time. I sometimes wonder if he actually was one of us, or something else entirely. The rest of us get up to some pretty

mean tricks, but we're never as out and out violent as he was, and we've never killed anyone... on purpose.

Second deal. I've got King / Jack suited in hearts. This might turn out to be something. The betting goes around and I raise. Then Sunflower springs his surprise.

"Hey Jim, what say we cut the bullshit, okay?"

"Whatcha talkin' about, pard'ner?" CJ's playing up the western thing; he doesn't recognize that glint in Sunflower's eyes that says he's deadly serious and something bad is about to happen to someone.

"All of this—this whole meeting, playing, winning, losing. All of it."

CJ drops the act, "That's the way we've always done it. That's the way it *has* to be done."

"That's just it, it's the way it's always been done." Sunflower is grinning again, his teeth are almost as evil as he is. "I'd say that the biggest part of that is that we *agree* that's how it's done. So if we agree to change things up, I think it'll change."

"What exactly did you have in mind?" CJ has eyes only for Sunflower now. Black Cat and Broken Mirror have stopped screwing around. They are scared.

Sunflower puts all his chips in. "I'm all in. I mean *all* in. I want to play for bigger stakes. I'm wagering my existence on this hand. If I lose, I'll just let myself go. I figured it out during one of our layovers in Vegas. Most of what keeps us going, keeps our spirits together, is the will to keep going on. For me, I'm at the end. I want it all, or I want to be nothing. So if you win, poof, off I go."

CJ can already see what the answer is going to be, but he asks anyway, "And if you win?"

“I expect the same from you. You lose, you disappear. You forfeit the right to ever play again.”

CJ gets officious. “There’s more than just your pride involved. There is balance to be considered. You can’t have things your way all the time. You just can’t. If you did, eventually the whole thing would collapse, and you’d go down with it.”

“I don’t care.”

“What do you three think about it?”

Nobody says anything. Cat kicks me under the table. “This is news to me. If he wins and you leave, I don’t think any of us are going to stand a chance. I think he’ll pick us off one by one, and run things into the ground.” I don’t know where these words are coming from, but as soon as I say them, I know they’re true. Sunflower doesn’t like us - he tolerates us.

“That’s not true, Finger. I’m putting my ass on the line for all of us. If I win, we get the whole thing to ourselves. We can do whatever we want, whenever we want, to whomever we want. Besides, think of all those times I won it for us. More than my share, am I right? You guys owe me. At the very least, you owe it to me to stay out of this until it’s settled.”

Mirror, Cat, and myself, we’re not brave. We pull our antics from the cover of invisibility, from the shadows. We’re happy to reap the rewards, but we don’t want to risk anything. So when challenged directly like this, we all turned meek. If spirits blushed, we’d all of us be crimson right now. But none of us said another word. We just threw in our cards and sat back from the table.

To his credit, CJ got his composure back remarkably fast.

“Do you understand what you’re asking?”

Sunflower smiles wider. “Yep.”

“Then I guess we’d better deal the cards. Throw in all your chips and turn your cards over. You want to play for everything, we’re going to play it straight up.”

Sunflower snaps his two cards down. He’s got the King of clubs and the King of Spades.

CJ lets out a low whistle, and lays his cards down one after the other. Queen of Hearts and the Three of Diamonds.

I look over at Cat and Mirror. They’ve got what I’m sure is the same expression I’m wearing—utter disbelief. How could CJ have agreed to this?

Snap. Three of Clubs.

What the hell are we going to do if Sunflower wins? We’ve always been able to keep him in check, because CJ would always be there to win his share.

Snap. King of Hearts. CJ is all but done. He’s just sitting there smiling, though.

Snap. Two of Spades.

“You know CJ, I’m looking at these cards, and I’m feeling pretty good about myself. I’m willing to change the bet slightly. If you win, I’ll still take off. If I win though, you get to stay around, but as part of the bad luck crew. What do you say?”

“Deal the cards, Sunflower. The deal stays as is.” CJ is deadly serious now. That look of serenity that he normally has is long gone. I have to wonder if he knows something we don’t.

Snap. Queen of Clubs. Sunflower has stopped grinning. “If you’re fixing this somehow, I win by default, you know that.”

“They’re your cards, and I haven’t dealt yet.”

There’s one card left.

The air around us when we’d arrived was thick with the smells

of cut grass, sun-bleached cedar, and heavy dust. Somehow it had gotten even closer in here. We breathed it in, having all forgotten ourselves for the moment.

A noise outside caught my attention. It sounded like a something thumping. I saw that Black Cat heard it too. Whatever it was, the sound had stopped, and we let it go. Sunflower was turning the last card.

“Wait.” CJ was keeping his eyes locked on Sunflower’s yellowed orbs. “You’re absolutely sure you want this?”

“What, are you chickening out? My offer still stands, CJ. Forfeit and stay a part of the group.”

“Turn the card, Sunflower.”

Snap. King of Diamonds. Victorious, the evil bastard stretched his grin to a grotesque width, literally from ear to ear, as if he was unzipping the front of his face. We all had it in us to stretch ourselves, but mostly we didn’t; we didn’t like doing it. It reminded us that we weren’t like you. That we weren’t human.

CJ did something odd then. He smiled back. He leaned back in his chair, and took off his cowboy hat. He gave me a wink and flung his hat at me. Then he just dissolved. His whole being fell apart like sand being blown in the wind. I must still have been breathing because I could suddenly smell a puff of leather and cinnamon.

The hat dropped with a soft thump in front of me. It was all that was left. Something made me pick it up. I was still fidgeting with it, twirling it around, when the winner started his gloating.

“Well, folks,”—he was still smiling—“guess that’s that. I’ll tell you guys, it’s going to be a little different around here. But don’t

worry; you'll still get your days. You just have to win them... from me."

He was snapping the cards now, shuffling. "Right now though, I've got mine, and I've got CJ's, which is enough to really have some fun. But I'm on a roll. I feel good things happening, like I can't lose. So I'll ask all of you – wanna play, or do you just want to shoot those chips over to me now and save some time?"

This touched a nerve with Broken Mirror. "I've got forty days here Sunflower. You know as well as we do that if we were to give you everything, we'd starve. The way you're acting, I don't see you giving us anything back to live on, so hell yes, I'm going to play you for it."

Cat straightened up in her seat. Hearing her partner show such backbone inspired her.

"I'm in, too."

"We've got ourselves a game here. Finger – you gonna play, or you gonna take the passive route like you always do? You can slide 'em over anytime."

Maybe it was the scent of CJ still in the air, or that the noise was back outside and it seemed important, but I threw the Stetson up in the air and dropped it right on my head. CJ's words came out of my mouth, "Deal the cards, Sunflower."

We played. Each of us played our hands conservatively, imaginatively, brilliantly.

The game went on and on. But three hours later, the results were exactly as Sunflower had predicted. He sat with every single chip in front of him, and this time when he gave us his sick, grotesque grin, he went one step further and threw back just the top of his head and gave a huge belly laugh. It was something to see.

Mercifully, he pulled himself together before he started talking again.

“Finally. You know, I’m glad you guys decided to play me, it’s that much sweeter to have all the days in my hands, knowing that I got them by beating the snot out of you losers, and this time I don’t have to turn around and give any of it back.”

I could hear Cat sobbing softly. Mirror was making comforting noises. Sunflower continued, speaking directly to me.

“I was thinking of leaving you guys each a couple of days to get by on, but in the last half hour or so, I’ve thought better of it. Maybe you’ll be a little more challenge next time if you’re *hungrier*. Right, tubby?” Cat cried harder.

“As for me. I’ve got some plans of my own, and I realized that if I gave you idiots even one day a piece, you might figure out some way to screw it up again.”

He stood up then, and motioned to the door.

“I want all of you to leave now. I’ve got work to do, and frankly, I can’t wait to get started. If you think I’ve been rough in the past, you’ve seen nothing.”

His eyes started to glow then, a sickly dark orange that ebbed and pulsed as he spoke.

“There are so many people in this city. So many opportunities. You’re going to see some really bad things happening to a lot of really innocent people. It’s going to be wonderful.”

There’d been something nagging at me since Sunflower made his first move with CJ, and I couldn’t put my finger on it. His rhapsodizing about the destruction to come, like a Bond-villain come to afterlife, had placed the final piece for me, and as brilliant a player as he was, as self-assured and aggressive as he could be, he was

absolutely blind to the biggest flaw in his plan. The noise outside, which was so loud now I was surprised that Sunflower wasn't hearing it, drove it all home for me.

I gave it one attempt. "Miniature Sunflower, I'm glad you won it all. I am. I just think the things you're talking about are a little much. We're meant to make things uncomfortable. We make people realize how good they've got it most of the time. We even hurt them a bit sometimes, but what you're talking about is... it's not us."

"You're absolutely right, Fingerstring. It's not you and it's definitely not the jellyroll twins over there. But you know what? It's me all over. I'm meant for bigger and better, and now I'm going to grab it. Ok, I'm tired of this. You've got to the count of five. Mirror, you get seven to haul that ass out of here, or we're going to play one last hand, for the same stakes I played with CJ. You know I'll win. So get out, or 'poof'."

He swung the door out on its hinges then, and I saw the horses.

The entire shed smelled like a fridge gone bad just then, as Mirror, Cat and I came as close to crapping our pants as we ghosts could get.

Mirror grabbed Cat's hand and squeezed. I couldn't move. All I could think just then was how much bigger they were than I'd ever imagined.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

"Us." The voice practically frosted the windows. One by one, they filed in. The first was stocky and wore a tight leather jacket. He was chomping on a short, expensive smelling cigar, and had scars all over his stubbly face. He stood shorter than any of us, but was the most imposing by far.

The next behind him was a striking woman with flowing silver blonde hair. She wore pale blue lipstick and a long green kimono that clung to her curves. She kept dabbing at a severe red sore at the side of her aquiline nose with an embroidered silk handkerchief. Somehow, her beauty was enhanced rather than diminished by this flaw.

Three paces behind her was the thinnest man I'd ever seen. His suit was absolutely the height of fashion, but I couldn't see it fitting anyone else on the planet. He walked through the door, and I could see that two more people could have come through at the exact same time with room to spare. He wore a navy pinstripe suit, with immaculate white gloves, and had a slim black moustache over a completely unamused expression.

Their final member came in, and I took a step back so I could grab Mirror's other hand. Ducking through the doorway, he was seven feet at least, and seemed to block out the world behind him as he entered. His skin was paper white, but everything about him spoke of power and vitality. He was a Viking in a tailored white suit, and he only had eyes for Sunflower.

"You've been a very busy little ghost." His voice was deep and friendly, but there was a clipped quality to it, as if he was just barely holding back violence.

His cohorts remained silent, but each seemed to be struggling against laughter. I could see the woman's handkerchief jiggling slightly as she hitched silently into it. The big man continued, "It looks like congratulations are in order."

To his credit, Sunflower wasn't going to take anything from anyone, even now. Whether this was bravery, or monumental idiocy, I'll never know.

“Yeah, I won. I took him down fair and square. I’ve got the days and I’m going to use them.”

The short guy mumbled around his cigar: “We heard.”

The lady stopped chuckling. “Big plans.”

The thin man was still smiling. “There’s just one thing you seem to have overlooked.”

I looked over at our tormentor of just a few minutes ago. His lunatic grin faltered a little, closing in around the corn kernel teeth as he started to understand. Cat whimpered a little just then, and looking around at her, at the weaklings he’d just dominated so completely, he shook his head, and drew himself up straight, stretching his torso so he was eye to eye with the blonde behemoth.

“Oh yeah? What would that be?”

There was a spark as the short guy relit his cigar on a flame from his thumb. “You’ve killed a lot of people, Mr. Sunflower.”

“Too many, really, for what you are,” the lady spoke around a large silver compact. Her sore had burst and she was busying herself with the cleanup.

“You see, Miniature, if I may be so bold,” the thin man chimed in. “There’s already someone that takes care of that particular function.” He tittered, and the sound was enough to make my whole being want to fly apart.

Sunflower’s voice cracked, and rose sharply in pitch. He was nearly hysterical, but he remained defiant to the last. “And? So what?”

It looked as if he’d wanted to say more, but just then the giant wrapped his hand around Sunflower’s entire torso and squeezed his whole body into his fist.

“So we’re... not... hiring.” Before Sunflower could even

scream, the blonde man had bitten his head clean off to the neck. I mentioned before we don't have bodies, so there was no blood. But we are made of matter, and when we play, we get dense enough to interact with things. During these times, we can feel. Right now, those of us remaining felt sick. Cat groaned and became transparent. Mirror dropped my hand and lowered her to the floor as she went limp.

The rest of Sunflower's body dissipated, leaving behind a scent of rotten leaves and axle grease. The big man dusted off his hands, and without another look at us, turned and was gone.

Famine and Pestilence spared us a last disparaging glance and followed their partner out the door.

War looked us all up and down. His battle-scarred face was impossible to read. He didn't say anything for the longest time, and then finally he walked over to me.

"Well, cowboy," (I'd forgotten I was wearing the stupid hat,) "guess there's more to go around now. Quit looking so worried. You guys'll do fine."

Cat groaned as she started to come to.

He was walking out the door now, but turned one last time. "Just don't screw it up, Jimmy. 'Cause we'll know." And then he was gone too.

Jimmy? He'd called me Jimmy.

The aroma of cut grass and cedar came back full on. They were warm, comforting smells, and I started to feel better about things. I felt a lot better actually, and could sense something new. There were possibilities out there I'd never seen. I knew I wasn't going to have to cherry pick memories anymore. I was beyond those limits now. I understood so much about CJ now. It wasn't about the win-

ning at all—it never was.

I looked over at Cat and Mirror who were so scared they were still wavering in and out of opacity.

“Relax guys. They’re gone. Sunflower’s gone. It’s just us.”

Mirror was first to recover, and I could see greed jumping up and down inside him, “Just us? We’re going to have a ball.” Cat was warming up to this, and I saw the same covetous look in her eyes.

I tipped my new cowboy hat and smiled at them. “Maybe yes, maybe no. Let’s play some cards.”

FIERRA TESTER

Tongue



FIERRA TESTER

A Tumble of Cereal



ALEC BRYAN

Bearer of Hell

At the side of a painted-white house resides a closed cellar door. The latch is unhooked and sways upon a rusted hinge that squeaks in the wind. The lock, with the key still in it, lies upon the ground. I forget why I am here. I vaguely remember someone has summoned me to retrieve something, but paramount now is the overwhelming thought that the summoning was wrought by something residing within the unknown confines of my own mind. I throw open the door and stare helplessly into the cloak of blackness.

The eyes adjust to the darkness, make out a stairway, and I descend into the maw, the very depths of the lightlessness. I cannot understand why, but with each step into the darkness, I find myself more and more imagining primordial and archetypal images of hell: Imagining the smell of brimstone—step, sulfuric stench—step, vaporous exhalations of intermittent fumes—step, imagining the loud crackling and hissing lurch of the odious melodies of damnation, along with the drum of wailing madness from the tortured souls inhabiting such dark places—step, imagining the indefatigable heat—step, the hissing motion of the gory fire gliding by—step, imagining him there—knees buckling, step, imagining the immensity filled with his bestial horns, blooded skin, burning eyes,

carnivorous teeth, ubiquitous abominable laugh and the three-pronged pitchfork of the master of all hopelessness—long pause, step. No end to the despair felt—step. No end because spiraling infinite, the bottom cannot be reached—step; always new depths—step, always racked with insufferable and unending pains—step, always immolation is impossible—step, the mountains will not fall on me—step, always the cardinal torture—the unflagging reminder of the failure—step, of the loss—step, of the innocent sufferer—step; reliving regret over and over again—step, step, step. Thinking these steps might never end—step. Then, in the moment of extreme necessity—step, the mind recalls the sagacious words of the old poet, and like a beacon they illuminate the final steps:

“When any of our faculties retain
A strong impression of delight or pain,
The soul will wholly concentrate on that,
Neglecting any other power it has...”

With that recollection, and the coinciding moment when I pull upon the metal chain, the light flips on. My descent into the dank cellar is supplanted by a sparkling room. Just like that, *abracadabra*, let there be light, and my Gethsemane is now dotted with brilliant white and yellow flowers speckled across a blithely pink wall. And my purgatory is filled with the fake fruit smell of waxen peaches emanating from a small candle flickering in the corner. And my damnation feels refreshing and crisp, as the summer breeze snakes through the ruffled blinds, caroms off the walls and ruffles the scattered papers, whispering soft upon my skin. And the pinnacle of my hell is defined by the most noble and courageous

young woman. A woman whose dark hair is splayed, unfurled upon the brown and pink striped bedspread where she lies.

There is no explanation for how I came to this moment. I know as little about this woman and this place as the common spectator would, but I do know, through the inundating empathy I feel towards her, that she means something to me, and I know I signify a vision of import to her as well. It is as if the animus and anima were playing out a drama in actual forms, as if the soul had surged up and created the image and now the physical bodies must become helpless observers, trapped deep within the form.

I am sitting on the edge of her bed. She is curled up like a fetus. Her hair is strewn around her like a moat. Tears stream from her eyes and run in rivulets onto her bed making one last mark before they will evaporate. Her back no longer undulates with the weight of whatever made her cry. She grows calm and quiet, serene. Then, without warning, she starts crying again.

I am now standing over her. I kneel by her side and look into her eyes. An emotion, like sadness but more complete, bursts upon me. I need to try and explain this emotion, but how? It is not a common emotion. It is an emotion verging upon blasphemy, an emotion not granted human beings without exacting an irremediable price. It is to say that when one watches the innocent suffer (and this woman is innocent), a part of them is reminded of, and compares the proximate predicament to the ultimate visage of all suffering—The Man upon the cross. And I know that to watch her needlessly suffer is not the same in proportion or magnitude, but it evokes the identical emotion from the onlooker, and the pain is too real to negate the emotion surging within.

A thought comes to my mind: “In the ordeal of love, there is

never just one sufferer; they always come in tandem. There is the suffering she experiences, and then there is the consequent pain loved ones experience when they watch her suffer.”

I now touch her with my hand in an effort to console her, but she does not feel me. I tell her it will be okay, but she does not hear me. I beg, plead, implore her to look at me and tell me what is wrong, but she does not see me. This moment, like a scratched record playing the same line, repeats itself. I am constantly going to her side, kneeling, trying to touch her with my hand, telling her it will be okay, begging, pleading, and imploring, but to no avail. Each time the moment repeats itself, it is a different woman who lies upon the bed, but each time, the emotive qualities evoked are the same. How long this has gone on? I do not know.

Most nights I never get past this moment. It replays without variation until I wake up. Some nights the scratched record stops skipping and the moment moves on when the first, the dark-haired woman, reappears on the bed. She is still crying when the door opens and her mother comes rushing in. I step aside and tell her mother I do not know what is the matter with her. Her mother sidles by me, and sits on the bed next to her daughter and runs her caressing hands along her daughter’s forehead, through her hair, and along her back, all the while whispering soothing words of comfort. I am forced to stand helpless and watch her daughter’s bereavement. I wish to take her pain upon myself. If it were mine, I could live with it, could expiate it, but to watch the most innocent and beautiful girl suffer, causes me an anxiety and pain more acute than damnation’s fire ever could ignite. It is this agony, I know, this unquenchable agony that I must overcome. But there is no way to overcome it. My anxiety for her, and then this overwhelming wish

to tell this young woman in my dream that it will be okay, but not knowing if it will, and knowing she cannot hear me anyways: this, this has become my hell—my utter helplessness.

Why, oh why did I ever take so many pills?

MIKE COOMBES

Busker With Ukelele



ADAM MATCHO

*The Hypochondriac and the Middle School Nurse
A Love Story*

We were brought together
the day I had a migraine.
The nosebleeds, scrapped knees
and playground injuries,
the language of our romance.

I picked scabs in class.
Bled all the way
to her small, sterile room
at the end of the hall.

She would place her milky hand
across my forehead,
her wedding ring in my eyebrow
saying, "You don't feel warm to me."

My mistress of medicine,
she had immaculate pink polish
on her chewed fingernails

and always kept pens
tucked in the front pocket
of her teddy bear scrubs.

Study hall stomach aches
got me into her bed
at least once a week.
I would lie there and listen
as she consulted webmd
told me all the things I could have:

appendicitis
kidney failure
dormant ulcers
inflamed pancreas

It all sounded so wonderful.
The way these maladies
left her lips and stuck me
like so many butterfly stitches.

Feeling only serious illness
could take our trysts
from her hallway waiting room
to the threshold of an ICU,
I hoped for scurvy, cancer,
leprosy, lung failure.

Anything to amble down

the hallway, faking
a limp and lie
in her corner room
missing mathematics
skipping social studies
dodging gym class.

She was always there
regularly misdiagnosing me.
She thought I suffered all the time
when really
it was only when she wanted me to.

AMBER FORBES

DEAD POET'S PENDULUM

He entered the pope's prayer study sweating and panting as though someone had chased him with a brand. He walked up to the pope's desk and stood behind him, waiting for the man to finish his daily prayer readings.

"Pope Alonso, I think I have something of significant importance here that demands your attention."

Pope Alonso looked up from his prayer book, casually placing a silk bookmark embroidered with a cross. "It best be of significant importance, since you just disrupted my prayer readings, Cardinal Bishop Bocelli," the pope said in an Italian accent.

Bocelli's gaze wandered the darkened room with its polished wall paneling, heavy curtains, mounds of bibles, religious statues, and dust-covered furniture, groping for the nerve to speak to the pope. "It is, Pope Alonso." Bocelli reached into his black cassock and produced a leather-bound book.

Pope Alonso reached for the book and, adjusting his glasses, fixed his aged eyes on the silver scrawling. "Rupert Eastlake's Poems, first edition. Bocelli, I do not have time to read silly poetry by an obscure man. I am very busy."

Bocelli clasped his hands in prayer and made a small bow. “If you would turn to the very first page, I think you might find something of interest written there.”

“What is the publication date? I don’t wish to waste my time with something written fifty years ago.”

“Eighteen-ninety-two, this year, sir.”

Pope Alonso sighed, opened the book. Bocelli kept his hands clasped in prayer, praying to the Almighty above that Pope Alonso would find exactly what he had found upon first reading Rupert Eastlake’s poetry. He observed the pope’s face, every wrinkle, every crease, and every facial movement. He watched as the pope pursed his lips and wrinkled his forehead. Next, the pope looked up, his eyes appearing amused (although Bocelli did not find this man’s writings amusing). Pope Alonso then grimaced, and he curved a silver eyebrow.

“He speaks against us,” he said, slamming the book shut. “He must be arrested at once. Send several of the cardinal deacons to find Rupert Eastlake.”

Cardinal Bishop Bocelli fell and kissed the ground around his feet. “*Grazie*. You will not be disappointed, Pope Alonso. I will execute the orders to the cardinal deacons that they must find him.”



The pendulum swung back and forth, back and forth, above the frightened poet tied to a rack, Rupert Eastlake. He lay on his back staring wide-eyed at the pendulum, hideous sounds issuing from his throat. The dark stone buildings behind the pendulum towered over Rupert, and the blooming crepe myrtles near the small church

swayed in almost-mourning fashion. An executioner stood high on a platform using a lever attached to intricate machinery to lower the pendulum about every five minutes. There would be no headlines for him, for Moorshir Village was much too small for England.

“Cole Alfred Lutherford. Sit down at once. Stop staring as though you have a mind disease.”

I turned to my sister, Sylvia, whose three friends stood behind her, noting how she was dressed for such a somber occasion. She should be decked in mourning weeds, but instead she was dressed in pink silk with white lace trimming, puffed sleeves tapering to fit her wrists, hair done in curls with ribbons, and too much rouge on her cheeks. And she must have pulled her corset extra tight this morning; either that, or the velvet sash around her waist was doing too much justice. Sighing, I joined my sister and her obnoxious friends. She was two years my senior at nineteen, but most of the time I believed I could be the older one.

“Mother told you to dress for the occasion,” I said, sitting down on a stone bench.

Sylvia batted her eyelashes, turned to her three friends, who made girlish giggles. Sylvia turned back to me with an air of haughtiness. She pursed her lips and said, “And why should I?”

“Because a man is going to die, Sylvia. And if his blood sprays, all that pretty pink silk will be spoiled.” *And you and your friends look absolutely repulsive compared to everyone else.*

“Oh, silly, silly, Cole. Pope Alonso says he’s receiving what he deserves because he spoke out against the Catholic Church.”

“Yes, dear Cole,” her friends mimicked.

The blood rose in my cheeks, every pulse throughout my body

drumming hard against me. “You’ve read his poems, Sylvia. Your governess spoke of his poems with you. You know they have nothing to do with speaking out against the Catholic Church.”

“That isn’t what Pope Alonso said.”

Well...blast Pope Alonso! He’s only coming out when the pendulum is five minutes from slicing the poet’s neck! He doesn’t consider naysayers human beings.

I turned away from Sylvia and her tawdry friends, my gaze caught by the sharp flash of sunlight beaming on the pendulum’s blade. Poor Rupert Eastlake. All he ever did was write innocent poetry. But the papal supremacy believed it to be an outcry against them. I knew that to be rubbish. I knew Rupert Eastlake but a little, but I knew enough to know that his heart was flighty with fantasies of pretty things, flowery settings, and elaborate women. None of his thoughts had ever drifted to religion.

If it wasn’t for Catholicism dominating almost every part of the world, no one would have to live in fear of their thoughts being misconstrued—the pope even had third world countries convert, with the threat of death if they didn’t. But it had been like this for centuries. The Papal Supremacy started out by executing King Henry VIII for his persistence with wanting to rid of Queen Katharine; and the power hold spread from there with the murder of other kings and those in power. And now to innocent people...

The first time I ever met Rupert Eastlake had been at a pub in London. I remembered the day was cold and wintry and gray. There were a few snowdrifts falling from the sky, and I had had my coat wrapped around me, my bowler tipped just so to block my face from the stinging wind. I remembered I stopped by a pub because I wanted some hot ale to warm my insides. So I entered, the

building filled with bawdy laughter, the scent of smoke, alcohol, and drunken men.

Rupert Eastlake had been sitting at the bar speaking with a bartender about some woman who caught his fancies. The bartender, I recalled, pretended to be interested. But Rupert had described her as being a cherry blossom, a porcelain doll, and a honey suckle. I think he had written those spoken thoughts down, for I saw his fountain pen scribbling away at a piece of stationery. Since there wasn't anywhere else to sit, and most of the men were drunk, I sat by Rupert Eastlake, and the entire time I listened as he spoke to the bartender about his poetry, about what his next piece would be.

"Women are such beautiful, delicate creatures," he had said. "Every time I see a woman, I imagine both of us lying back and thinking of England with flowers all around us."

The bartender nodded in his rush to mix drinks for customers.

No doubt I had been in disbelief, wondering how he could look at *every* woman and imagine taking her to a bed of flowers. After all, not all women were like cherry blossoms, porcelain dolls, and honey suckles. Some were like my sister. But I listened to him, listened to every phrase that had come out of his mouth.

"I remember meeting a beautiful woman in Herefordshire. Her name was Celia, and she had the most beautiful locks of brunette hair. I wrote a poem about her, talked about her hair being shiny ribbons of brown that could make the mousy hair of a little girl appear incredible."

I heard him talk for what must have been three hours before injecting my own opinion about his delusional thoughts of women. "You wouldn't think these things about women if you met my sister."

Rupert Eastlake turned to me, scrutinized me with those black eyes of his, those eyes set deep in wrinkles and folds. “Your sister? Might I ask, do you have a picture of her?”

I nodded and thought of the sepia picture I carried in a cigar box in the folds of my jacket.

“Well, take it out boy.”

I pulled out the cigar box and took out Sylvia’s picture.

“Her name’s Sylvia.” I handed it to him, and he took it, every fold in his face emphasized by curiosity. He made inquisitive sounds and made strange facial twitches. He had caressed the picture like a lost memory and smiled.

“Your sister is a beauty, my boy, uh—”

“Cole Lutherford.”

“Cole Lutherford.” Rupert flipped the picture around so I could see it in portrait style. “Note her slender neck, high cheekbones, the curvature at which her ear meets her head. She is an artwork, and if you cannot see that, I regret there is no help for you.”

My eyes had grown wide. Most men would agree with me that my sister was a hideous beast, what with dark rouge splattering her cheeks, thickly painted eyelashes, big hair, and a nasty habit of showing too much décolletage.

“This is but a picture, sir,” I had said. “If you should see her face, then—”

“Whether or not she cakes herself in paints and rouges should not matter.”

Awestruck as I had been, I couldn’t help but to wonder if this eccentric man were sane or not. Doubtless to say, he wouldn’t let me speak at all with the remaining time I had at the pub. He had spoken of women the entire time, of their slender figures, soft

features, soft skin, and delicate smiles. He spoke of writing endless poetry about beautiful women and love and beauty. I had to order myself some cognac to stay sensible. By the end of the conversation, he managed to take a breath and slow down.

“It was wonderful having someone listen to me. I know I have no important views of the world as most writers do, but it’s wonderful to speak about my passion, especially since I’m a local poet from Moorshir.”

“Moorshir? That is my village.”

“Really?” Rupert raised his eyebrows. “Then why don’t I treat you to an anthology published by the local printing press? I hope to have copies all over Europe eventually, and maybe some in America.”

I smiled. “I would like very much to have a copy.”

Rupert rummaged around in something hidden from view—probably a bag. He produced a leather-bound book, simply titled, “Rupert Eastlake’s Poems, first edition.” I took this book, opened it to the first page, and had been astounded by what I read.

Though he had talked in wild tongues about his poetry, his writing proved to soar beyond the surface details of which he spoke. Indeed, with an in-depth analysis of his poetry, one could deduce that it wasn’t just love and women he spoke of, but rather a satire of the bitter people who were blind to the world beyond their sepulchers. His poetry was not morbid, but sweet and funny. True, he had poems dedicated to beautiful women, but it was a humorous account of finding beauty in every woman.

After I had read his poetry, I decided to gift my sister with the anthology, to see if it would change her perspective on things for once.

“I bid you farewell, Rupert Eastlake. I shall give this to my sister.” I tipped my bowler hat, wrapped my coat around me, and left the pub a little fuzzy from the cognac.

“I bid you farewell, Cole Lutherford.”

I had gone back to Moorshir Village that day, taking a hansom cab to the train station, which led me to Herefordshire, in which I had to walk all the way to Moorshir on foot. While I walked back to Moorshir, I decided to take a look at his poetry again, to see what else I could find. The cognac, of course, made my mind a little hazy, so I hadn't been able to read.

When I had found myself back in Moorshir, I handed the text to my sister, who worked out the text with her governess. Both of them found the poems to be very humorous, and both could see what I had seen.

Looking back on it now, I suppose I could see how the pope misconstrued the poor poet's words. The pope, though very literate, delved only into religious texts. When reading fictitious works with no religious values, he tended to dismiss them as mere poppycock, something religious fanatics do. Rupert's poetry could be deemed offensive, especially the poem on the first page...

That poem had spoken of a man with a cross, a man so cemented in his beliefs, he refused to see beyond what was in front of him. Whenever an unattractive woman was put before him, he would use that cross to ward her off, and remained firm with the belief that she was unattractive. Eventually, so many of these women were put before him that he threw the cross away and said women couldn't undo what they had been born with.

Of course, the pope hadn't delved into it as he should have, so in his mind the woman must have been a symbol of the Catholic

Church and the man's throwing the cross was a spit on the church.

But now it didn't matter anymore what people had seen in his poems, as Rupert Eastlake was beneath the pendulum ten minutes from his neck. In Moorshir Square, more people gathered around the pendulum, filling up stone benches. Those in the back took out opera glasses, while those in the front leaned forward. I looked around at every pompous person and realized that I was the only one in mourning weeds.

Every one of those people had enjoyed Rupert Eastlake's poetry. They all saw what I had seen. The pope's words, however, were law I supposed. I shan't join them though.

"Turn your stupid head," Sylvia said. "You should have just stayed home, Cole. You didn't have to come."

I kept my look stoic.

She cocked her head and stuck out her bottom lip. "Little brother, you are a chicken with your head cut off."

"Just because women can now vote does not mean they are superior to men. So quit acting superior to me," I said.

Sylvia's hazel eyes grew wide, and with a *humph!* she turned to her friends, arranged her skirts, and chattered about my impudence. While she did that, I turned my eyes back on the poor poet. Rupert's face was a white calla lily. Inaudible sounds escaped his throat, and I wished I could go up there and speak with him and read some poetry with him and speak of beautiful things with him. He would enjoy all that. My reminiscing thoughts are disrupted, however, by the unmistakable chiming of the bell atop the small church.

Every head in the crowd turned towards the church, where the large oak doors opened in a flurry, with Pope Alonso, his cardinal

bishop, and several cardinal deacons making their way out. The pope held a cross in both hands, while the cardinals held lit candles (rather odd, considering the day was bright). The papal supremacy made its way to the front of Rupert Eastlake. They separated, created a half-moon shape in front of the pendulum, and Pope Alonso stood in the middle.

Flurries of excited whispers erupted in the audience, each whisper echoing the same thought: to hear the pope speak, and to see the poet dead. If I even had the strength, I would pick up this stone bench beneath me and hurl it at the pope and his cardinals. That would be the end of the papal supremacy, and it might be the end of me, but at least I would save future generations from suffering.

“You best not make a scene, Cole,” Sylvia said. “Mother will send you to live with our father in India.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing right now, dear Sylvia? Why, your head is more on the chopping block than mine when it comes to who is going to India.”

Sylvia cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve already had my season. I’m open to potential suitors. Mother can’t send me to India.”

No longer was I thinking my venomous thoughts, I was spitting them out with a surge of fierce energy, of such euphoria that I cannot believe I spoke at all. “You can find just as many suitors in India. Beggars, blind men, snake charmers... they would delight in having a woman on the same level cross their paths. You are considered beautiful in India, Sylvia.”

Sylvia’s puppet friends mocked me with their twisted faces, but I was resilient. My sister readied herself for another comment, but the pope held the gold cross in the air, commanding everyone to silence.

“*Buon giorno*, Moorshir Village residents!” Pope Alonso waved the cross over the entire audience. “I have come all the way from Vatican City to seek solace in my comfortable England Estate. But Rupert Eastlake has cut my comforts short with his monstrous beliefs about the Catholic Church. It is an outrage!”

Chatter ensued, then was silenced by the pope’s voice. “There is a reason why the pendulum swings. All of you would do well to remember that. We are powerful, and we will not be daunted by obscure men. *Grazie*.”

Then why bother with an obscure man? This thought made me smile, but Sylvia’s haughty façade ripped the smile off my face.

The semi-circle of cardinals parted, and Pope Alonso walked up to Rupert Eastlake. When he reached the tip of the man’s head, he put his hand on the poet’s forehead. “Would you like to say anything before the pendulum swings through you? God wants a final word, even from sinners.”

My breath caught in my throat as I strained to hear what the poet would say. I squeezed my eyes shut, praying that his last words would slice into everyone’s hearts, make everyone feel the guilt that was so human. Opening my eyes, I saw his mouth open, then close, open, then close. “Speak, dear poet,” I whispered.

He grunted, then coughed. “Pope Alonso.” His voice was raspy. “Blind as you are to what is beyond you, God will be the ultimate judge. God sees into the hearts of men. God will find that I have lived my life with little sin. God will find that I have lived my life while shedding smiles unto others. I will find myself in heaven, and you, dear sir, will find yourself below.”

There were horrified gasps from everyone. Several ladies fainted into the nearest man’s arms; they should have brought their

fainting couches. There were a few outcries.

“You, dear sir,” Sylvia said so that only her general vicinity could hear, “will find yourself below. Pope Alonso has been appointed by God, and he is only doing God’s will.”

Pope Alonso smiled at Rupert and patted his head. “You are much like a child, Rupert Eastlake. Maybe God will give you that much.”

Rupert said nothing. He just stared at the pendulum so close to his neck.

“If anyone has anything to say,” the pope said, “do not keep your opinions silenced, for we are all unified Catholics under the eyes of God.”

My sister and her friends stood. “My friends and I would like to wish Rupert Eastlake a happy trip to the underworld. No one speaks out against the Catholic Church, which is just and honest.”

Rupert strained to see my sister. When he saw her, a smile formed. “I’ve seen your picture before, Sylvia, is it? You are more beautiful up close than you are in sepia.”

Sylvia did her trademark *humph!* and sat down, nudging her friend for a fan. A few other people stood to speak, but their words were more of a metaphorical spit than anything else. Once everyone finished releasing their feelings, the pope pulled his hand off the poet’s head and made his way to the center of the semi-circle. He held his arms in the air, tilted his head upward and stood that way, even when he spoke.

“Bow your heads in prayer for one minute, ladies and gentleman,” he said.

All heads bowed, including mine. My prayer was but a small thought, much like a brief glance at a person who left something

memorable within you. That was exactly what Rupert Eastlake did; except it had not been a glance at him, but a glance at his soul through words. “Rupert Eastlake, your heart is my heart, is my sister’s heart, and the heart of the human race.” And that was all I said.

Every head looked back up. No one said a word, no one probably thought anything. There was nothing but the bitter silence.

“Are all prayers made?” Pope Alonso asked.

Again, no one said a word. The pope nodded, and he gestured for the executioner to lower the pendulum. The pendulum would slice through Rupert’s windpipe, delivering a fatal, painful before it even sliced through his neck. As the executioner reached for the lever, he tripped on something, a stone perhaps, and fell on the lever, breaking it clean through. There were a few gasps, mostly for the executioner’s safety, and the pendulum went down, down, down, slicing through Rupert’s head.

My stomach twisted when his head flew through the air, a straight shot towards the audience. Whose lap shall it land in? It was a game, and most people scrambled to get away from it—not me, though. The head seemed to fly slowly in this brief moment of time, as people knocked over stone benches, women ushered children with firm hands, and men carried ladies away from the scene.

“Cole, get up!” Sylvia, with her friends gripping her bustle, hit me in the back of the head with the fan. “It’s done. It’s taken care of!”

Who was the lucky winner? Me, of course. The poet’s head landed near my bench, and I reached over and picked it right up. The people who hadn’t left Moorshir Square stopped to gawk at the prize I held. I wouldn’t doubt that those hungry for money were

thinking how much this head could be worth. Appraising his value, though, didn't make much sense. He was worthless before he was killed, why was he worth something now?"

"Cole! I demand you come with me. Take that ghastly thing off your lap." Tears streamed down Sylvia's face, not for me, but her brutal embarrassment. "You shame the Lutherford name."

Every severed nerve in me dissolved. Tucking the bloody head in the crook of my arm, I stood on the bench. I slapped my sister, hard. "Have some compassion for a fellow human being. Rupert Eastlake called you beautiful, and no man has ever called you beautiful in your life."

Sylvia touched her cheek adorned with my handprint. She did not move, she did not turn away. She stared at me, wide-eyed, mouth agape. Her friends returned that same expression. Sylvia folded her arms across her bosom, leaving just enough space for a baby. I dropped the head in her arms. I faced the pope.

"You call yourself a disciple of God, Pope Alonso? Why, you are a mere gopher of God, if you could even consider yourself worthy of that title." I took a courageous stab at these last three words, knowing it was all over for me. "I, too, speak out against the Catholic Church."

All eyes were solemn on me.

FIERRA TESTER

Gatti 1



ADAM MATCHO

One Size Fits Most

The old man
was all cheeks
limped a little
whistled through his teeth
when he said
“What size is this?”
of the felt green tophat.

I showed him the tag:
one size fits most.
“What does that mean?
I have a big head
look at it.”
He bowed
and it was a large
bald
head.

I stretched the elastic
inside the tophat.

It would fit.

“You better not lie to me”

he said, wallet in hand.

A cracked leather wallet

filled with crinkled bills.

I said it wasn't my nature
to lie about such small things.

He said I should learn

to lie

about everything.

It made the earth

rotate easier

when people tell people

small, untruthful things.

The total was 10.69.

He dealt me a 10.

“Let me check the other bank”

he said, a hand in his pocket.

He unloaded almost \$5

in change

onto the counter.

“Take what you need”

he said of his pile of

silver and Sacagaweha dollars

his pennies and pocketlint

and crumpled notes

that old men write to themselves.

I counted the 69 cents
then took an extra 50
for a soda later that day.

JASMINE GIACOMO

ANGST UNDYING

Malashandra von Rorbidov stalked through the door to her family's home, flinging a long tress of black hair over her left shoulder. Moonlight managed one final touch on the ragged black lace that fluttered behind her, and then she was across the threshold. Her angry blue eyes stood in stark contrast to her pale, flawless skin. She formed a silent growl with her full red lips, baring the points of her fangs.

“Malashandra, darling, what troubles you this fine evening?” Malashandra's mother, Melliflua von Rorbidov, was a very thin woman, all angles and disapproval. Her blood-red dress of finest silk made a fine cover for curves that Melliflua did not actually possess. She paused on the stairs and leaned a delicate hand, its nails perfectly manicured and painted, on the polished ebony banister. The other held a glass of white wine.

“For God's sake, mom. Can't you please just call me Andie, like all my real friends?” Andie huffed, rolling her eyes and turning to check her reflection in the mirror.

“Language, Malashandra, really. And why do you bother? You know you'll never see anything in there.” Melliflua's cultured voice held a note of exasperation and several of frustration.

“Mom, you wouldn't understand,” Andie said, pretending to

see a smudge next to her thick black eyeliner, and wiping at it with the very edge of a finger. She adjusted the angle of a spike of sharp red hair and pretended to check whether she liked its new position. A flick of her anime-inspired bangs, a few adjustments to her fashionably emo clothes, and she was satisfied.

“Apparently not,” Melliflua said, her voice as dry as the wine in her glass. “You know you have the second half of your Sanguinary Removal Course tomorrow night. Please endeavor to be on time. Lord Passbury was pleased with neither your late arrival last week, nor your less-than-courteous remark when he commented on the virtue of punctuality.”

Andie sighed and rolled her eyes. *Puncture, punctual. It's too easy.* “Whatever.” She headed toward the stairs to go up to her room.

“Malashandra, I mean it. You need to go to the class. It's required!”

Andie stopped on the lowest step. “Mom, please. I get it, okay? The older vamps at school told me all about it.”

Melliflua's eyes widened in outrage and alarm. “First of all, young lady, ‘vamps’ is not a proper way to refer to our kind. We are ‘vampires’, or occasionally ‘The Brotherhood of Blood.’ Second, whatever you hear at school, there is no way it can possibly substitute for the centuries of experience that Lord Passbury has, and is willing to impart to you!”

“Okay, Mom, seriously. I'm not a young lady. I just turned a hundred and eighteen two days ago. And I'm no one's brother. I'm a lonely only, and you keep telling me I'm the reason why. And just because Lord Ass-buried—”

“Malashandra!”

“—has centuries of experience at sucking, doesn’t mean I want to suck too.” Andie’s insulting tone let her mother know that there was yet again some form of degrading slang in that sentence somewhere. Andie learned so many slang terms at school, and Melliflua couldn’t keep track of them all. She was seriously regretting the decision they’d made to let their daughter attend the local public high school.

“You are going to that class, and that’s final.” Melliflua’s pale nostrils flared with indignation.

“Oh my *God*, Mom!” Andie yelled angrily, stomping a Doc Marten on the stair. Before she could warm up into a full rant, however, her father strolled in from the kitchen.

“That’s enough, Andie,” Tertolius said in a mild tone.

“Oh... hi Dad. I didn’t know you were home,” Andie said, regaining her composure at his use of her nickname.

“And,” edged in Melliflua, knowing her husband was about to dominate the rest of the conversation, “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t use that epithet under this roof. We’re undead in this household and have been so for centuries.”

Andie merely smirked.

“Andie, you think you know enough to skip out on the class tomorrow night?” asked her father.

“Duh.” Andie crossed her arms and tipped her head, giving her father a direct, insolent look.

“Come to the kitchen then, please,” her father requested, turning on his heel and heading that way.

Andie let a small frown of confusion mark her alabaster brow; she’d expected more of a confrontation. But now she was curious; she stepped off the last step and followed her father.

Her mother followed as well. She had an idea what her husband was up to, but she wasn't sure how it would turn out.

Inside the large, spacious kitchen, Mina, their cook, was busily cleaning up after creating her latest batch of blood sausage. The marble countertops were gleaming, the polished white floor tiles spotless. Only the last of the dishes remained, and Mina was cleaning those with practiced motions, her portly frame a testament to her love of the ritual of repeatedly sampling the dish to see if it was done.

The von Rorbidovs filed in silently; Mina didn't hear them over the rush of the hot water flowing from the tap.

Andie looked at her father, taking the cue for her silence from him.

Tertolius tipped his head in Mina's direction and mimed a bite.

Andie's eyes flew wide, and she looked over at Mina. But very soon, her lids lowered halfway in calculation. After a few seconds, she crouched a bit, springing over the island in the middle of the kitchen floor. She landed on Mina's back and pushed her head into the sink. Mina screeched in surprise and banged her head on a pot. Then gravity took over from momentum, and Andie and Mina tumbled to the white tiles. Mina rolled tubbily to her back, flailing and yelping, and Andie had to scramble to get her right leg free from under the cook.

Mina took one look at Andie's bared fangs and shrieked, grabbing at a crucifix that was strung onto a necklace of individual garlic cloves. Andie batted away the cook's plump hand, ripping the necklace away and scattering garlic cloves across the floor. With a low, direct lunge, she bit into Mina's neck, hitting the carotid artery, and began drinking deeply of the warm, sweet liquid.

Mina was their baker as well, and Andie thought she could taste lemon and poppy seed in the thick red blood. *No wonder there were only two dozen cookies yesterday instead of three,* Andie thought, smiling and letting several drops of red warmth past her lower lip, where they stained the collar of Mina's white uniform coat. As Andie drank, ethereal metal music jammed through her brain, playing her a killer theme song.

When Andie felt the flow of blood slow to an ooze, it was time to see if what the vamps at school had said was true. Exhaling, she made a tight seal with her lips, then sucked as hard as she could. Like trying to inhale the last bits of a slushie, they'd told her. Sure enough, up came some more blood, along with the sound of slurping in Mina's veins, like air in a straw. *That's how you know you're at the bottom of the cup.*

Finally finished, and very full, Andie sat up next to Mina's corpse, and burped loudly. She grabbed a dish towel from the counter and wiped her mouth clean, then stood up, facing her parents. She dropped the towel onto Mina's body and arranged her face into an expression of boredom.

"Fine by you?" she asked, and then burped again, smacking her lips in rude fashion.

Her parents could only stare at her for a moment.

"Er, Andie..." her father began, and then had to start again. "Er. Andie, that was... very well done. As your father, I have to ask... er. You know the rules; the only blood you're allowed until you're a hundred and eighteen is pre-drained. Andie, darling... have you been engaging in underage drinking?"

Andie rolled her eyes; her shoulders slumped. It had been a thrill, a monstrous rush, killing Mina; it had felt so easy, so right,

and now she was being treated like a criminal?

“Just get me a new cook by tomorrow. You know I have to have my pancakes with the clots fried in just right.”

“Andie—” her mother began, a shrill tone of parental accusation rising in her voice.

“No, you know what?” Andie stormed past her parents, showing open the swinging kitchen door and hurling the worst insult her kind could use: “Bite me!”

FIERRA TESTER

Gatti 2



MICHAEL FRISSORE

Dinner at Wither Port

The Wither Port Mental Clinic stands at the top of a hill somewhere in the mighty Berkshires of Massachusetts. Founded in 1920 by bootlegging immigrant Carmine Rossi, the original clinic was built entirely out of snow. It closed weeks later after the whole structure melted. Rossi rebuilt his clinic in 1929 with partner Giuseppe Panfilo Mastriani, a marijuana-crazed criminal who claimed to be an accomplice in the terrorist plots of Sacco and Vanzetti, and who would also be the first patient at Wither Port.

Business boomed for Rossi during the Depression and he never looked back. He died a very wealthy man in 1979, and left the whole operation to his sons, Drs. Carmine Rossi Jr. and Renaldo Florentine, who changed his name upon marrying Princess Wilamina Florentine of Hampden County in a touching ceremony in which fourteen people were killed.

Today the Wither Port Mental Clinic is a bughouse of slaphappy delirium, just as it says on the sign in the front lawn. The brothers gave up actually helping patients years ago, and have turned many of the wards into discotheques and cockfighting venues. Because of this, the State Medical Board sends a representative to the clinic every year to make sure that the place is still standing. On the day of these visits the Rossi brothers hold a special dinner

and awards ceremony honoring the rep in attendance.

Another tradition, and one that the Board considers rather questionable, is the doctors letting patients attend the dinner. Each year, two or three patients who have shown slight improvement are invited and even get to sit with the brothers and the Board rep.

This year, Dr. Snidely Milano was the special guest and winner of the Jack Warden Achievement Award. Recent winners of this award included Dr. Boog Boogingham, who flew to his death from the roof of the clinic three years before; Ozzie the catfish, a clinic pet who won when no one from the Board would come the following year; and Dr. Leeches McGee, an imaginary friend Dr. Florentine had for a few months.



On this year's special evening, Dr. Florentine waited impatiently for Dr. Milano to arrive. He had been pouring himself drinks for half an hour and, by the time Milano's car had come, Dr. Florentine was completely drunk. Milano entered and noticed Florentine, dressed sweetly in a green cardigan and khakis, lying on the floor.

"Dr. Florentine, are you all right? Here, let me help you," Milano said as he lifted Florentine off the floor, but the doctor didn't answer. As they walked, Florentine twice fell into Milano's arms, until Milano finally lifted and carried Florentine to the dining room.

"Dr. Florentine," Milano said, "are you drunk?"

"No, I don't think so," Florentine replied. "But thanks for asking."

"Dr. Florentine, I..." Milano couldn't finish his sentence, as,

once they entered the dining room, the doctor tore himself from Milano's embrace liked a freaked-out cat and bolted for the punch bowl. Dr. Rossi, seeing his guest standing alone, went to greet him. Rossi was dressed to the hilt in a black tuxedo complete with cape, top hat and cane, and was holding a giant martini glass.

"Dr. Milano?" Rossi said. "Of the 'Pepperidge Farm' Milanos? How are ya, you old bastard?"

"I'm well, Dr. Rossi," Milano said. "You really need to do something about your brother's drinking problem. It's an embarrassment."

"Who are you, our mommy?"

"Well, I just..."

"The bottle happens to be the only friend my brother has. But what do you care, you in your ivory tower, eating caviar with a silver spoon while having unprotected sex with the pool boy?"

Dr. Milano could only stare at Dr. Rossi in stunned silence until, after six or seven uncomfortable seconds, Rossi spoke again.

"Say," he said. "Would you like to meet our finest patients?"

Dr. Milano noticed three men bouncing around the room and hooting like Daffy Duck, until Dr. Rossi hit one in the head with a frying pan and shot the other two with a tranquilizer gun. Milano was assured that the men—Jacques, Lance, and Eggbert—would be fine and, sure enough, they each stood up and went to their table. Rossi then introduced them. Jacques, sporting a Pompadour, wore one of those Lacoste shirts with the alligator logo, red short shorts and roller skates. Dr. Rossi introduced him, like he always does—as a "former soap opera heartthrob and sixteenth-century explorer." Lance, everyone's favorite dwarf in the clinic, wore plaid pajama bottoms, a Hulkamania T-shirt, and a pith helmet.

Lance had been arrested and charged with first-degree murder. He was found guilty by reason of insanity, a ruling no one contested due to the fact that his lawyer was not so much a lawyer as he was the genie who Lance believed lived in a whiskey bottle on his kitchen counter. As for Eggbert, he never spoke himself, but did so only through his ventriloquist dummy Mahatma. He was simply wearing a codpiece. Eggbert, not Mahatma. Mahatma was nude.

As there was every year, this night's dinner had a theme. The brothers went with a Chinese motif for the evening, or at least Asian. The waiters, who were all dressed as ninjas and frequently throwing stars and fighting to the death, handed out Chinese menus and place mats. When the waiters spoke, they did so in what everyone assumed to be Chinese. It was quite offensive, really. When Milano informed Dr. Florentine that ninjas were indeed Japanese, he received a karate kick to the testicles. The doctor then stood up and tried to commit hari-kari with a stick of butter, and when he failed, wept uncontrollably.

"Baby! Baby!" Mahatma shouted, mocking the doctor openly.

"Hey," Florentine responded. "I'll karate chop you."

"Stick your head in gravy!" the puppet added.

"You shut up!"

"You don't know karate, you drunken loser," Mahatma said.

"I'll kick your ass."

"Either you karate do 'yes' or karate do 'no.' You karate do 'guess so,' Mahatma said.

"All right. That's it." Dr. Florentine then got into a fistfight with a puppet. The amazement of what everyone was seeing was only outdone by his losing, as others cheered Mahatma on and the song "You're the Best," from the film *The Karate Kid*, began play-

ing in the background.

“Sweep the leg!” Dr. Rossi shouted.

“Yeah! Get him a body bag!” Lance exclaimed.

Mahatma finished Florentine off with a drop kick (a move the rest of the boys assumed would never work in an actual fight) followed by a leg lock until Florentine tapped out, signaling his giving up. Mahatma did a victory dance and returned to Eggbert’s lap.

Dr. Milano, still reeling from Dr. Rossi’s comment, and Dr. Florentine’s kick to his crotch, observed this entire scene with mouth agape. He considered making a run for it until everything calmed down and a waiter arrived.

“Good evening,” the waiter said. “I have a surprise. My mother was abducted by aliens last night.”

“Can you just bring us some water? I’m suddenly not feeling very well.” Milano said.

“You know, I could have you killed,” the waiter said angrily as he snapped his fingers and vanished into thin air.

“Dr. Rossi, did you just see that?” Milano said.

“What, do you want *all* my attention tonight?” Rossi replied.

Dr. Milano tried to distract himself by taking a minute to notice the framed photographs displayed on the walls around him. To further the Asian theme, there was a photo of Connie Chung from the Calgon laundry detergent “Ancient Chinese secret” ads of the 70s, a big photo of Mr. Magoo’s sidekick Charlie, and a collage of Long Duk Dong from the film *Sixteen Candles*. Dr. Milano decided the brothers required sensitivity training immediately.

After a few minutes, a different and very effeminate waiter came over.

“Okay, everyone listen. Shut up, please. We have a Chinese

thing going on tonight. We have the Moo Goo Gai Pan, the Sub-gum Wonton, and the Moo Shu Cat.”

“The what?” Milano asked.

“Cat. It’s a cat,” the waiter said. “You know, mee-oww. Moo Shu Cat. Like Heathcliff and Garfield.”

“That’s disgusting,” Milano said. “I certainly won’t eat that.”

“Yes, well, that’s exactly the kind of mawkish ignorant piffle I’ve come to expect around here,” the waiter said. “You eat pig and chicken! God forbid you come off your high horse and eat cat! Cat’s not good enough for you, is it? No, but lead the way to the barn where the cows and chickens roam! Snob! Fascist! Pervert!”

Dr. Rossi and some others now intervened and carried the waiter away. During this commotion, Jacques became rather scared and demanded that Milano hold his hand as he sucked his thumb, while Florentine and Eggbert began tossing Lance around the room. When he landed on a nurse, knocking her to the ground, she was quickly placed onto a gurney by two men and carried away.

“Anyone else feel like the walls are closing in?” Rossi said, as yet another waiter approached.

“Food. What want?” the waiter asked.

“Time for Chinese food, Doctor,” Rossi said.

“No Chinese,” the waiter said. “We have pasta, seal, and left-overs.”

“But...” Milano started. “Did you say seal?”

“Yes, baby seal,” the waiter said, feeling Milano’s cold stare.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I say seal? I meant veal.”

“Well,” Milano said. “I don’t eat veal. I don’t like what they do to the calves.”

“You’re a saint. Praise Jesus. What’ll it be, then?”

“Wait, what happened to the Chinese food?” Milano said.

“Cancelled. But do enjoy the Chinese zodiac place mats. They’re filled with oodles of valuable information.”

“In that case,” Milano said, “I’ve have the pasta, please,”

“Pasta all around!” Rossi shouted. “Anyone else starting to feel dizzy?” Rossi then tried to lighten the mood by taking interest in the place mats and trying to bring Eggbert out.

“Eggbert, my friend,” he said. “What year were you born?”

“’74,” Mahatma said. “What of it?”

“Well,” Rossi said, laughing fakely. “According to this, 1974 was the year of the tiger. You are a tiger... Grrrr... It says you enjoy scuba diving, cross stitching, and shooting excessive amounts of heroin. You would make a good circus performer, cult leader, or serial rapist. Hmm.”

“Ooh, a cult leader,” Dr. Florentine said as he stumbled by the table. “My nephew’s a cult leader.”

“Many tigers,” Rossi continued, “are transsexuals and/or pedophiles. Fascinating. You tend to feed on human flesh and are a frequent bed wetter. Famous tigers include Attila the Hun, John Wilkes Booth, and Chico from Sha Na Na. That’s our little Tony the Tiger.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Eggbert stood up, actually speaking, to the shock of the entire room. “It’s true. I wet my bed. The doctor says I have a nocturnal enuresis! I have a condition!” Eggbert ran out of the room crying. Mahatma then stood up.

“I hope you’re all proud of yourselves,” he said as he went after Eggbert. Lance, seeing this, began laughing hysterically until he burst into flames right at the table. A waiter came by with a fire extinguisher to put the flame out.

“Great,” Rossi said. “Renaldo, you soupy waste of flesh! One of the freaks exploded!”

“Dr. Rossi...” Milano said.

“What?” Rossi replied. “No one exploded, sweetie. Everything’s fine.”

After this, things started to get hectic. Jacques performed an amazing yet incredibly destructive table-to-table skating routine; Dr. Florentine found Mahatma and engaged in another fistfight with him; Eggbert returned with a water hose, spraying everyone in the room while shouting: “Now you’re all wet!”

Amid all of this, Milano felt something grab his leg. It was Dr. Florentine, who had just thrown up all over Jacques, causing him to leap up and knock the table over and spill beer all over Milano. At that moment, one of the waiters, completely naked and carrying a tray of food, returned.

“What is the meaning of this?” Milano demanded.

“Your dinner, Sir.”

“What is this? I ordered pasta. This is a bowl of Spaghetti O’s. And put some clothes on, you freak.”

Just then, one of the chefs came out covered in chocolate cake frosting and shouting, “Let them eat cake!” He bumped into the waiter, causing Spaghetti O’s to spill all over Milano.

You know how on cartoons, when a character gets really mad, his face turns red and the top of his head comes off because the character is boiling? That’s what happened to Dr. Milano. He grabbed a dinner tray and proceeded to slap everyone with it until Dr. Rossi calmed him down with an injection.



When Dr. Milano woke up the next day, he was shirtless, shoeless, and still covered with remnants of beer, Spaghetti O's and cake frosting. He was lying on a bed, and standing above him were Dr. Florentine holding his head in pain, Jacques eating dog food from a can, and Dr. Rossi scribbling something in a notebook. Milano figured he was making observations until the doctor handed him the notebook. He had started a game of tic-tac-toe and had put an "X" in the upper-left corner. They passed the book back and forth and, after four draws, Rossi finally won.

"Yes!" he shouted, receiving high fives from his comrades. "Now stand up. We have a presentation to do."

Milano got out of the bed and stood facing the three gentlemen.

"Let's get on with it, shall we?" Rossi said. "We have a few questions before the presentation. Monsieur Jacques, the questionnaire, please."

Jacques pulled a piece of paper from inside his pants and handed it to Dr. Rossi.

"Thank you. First question. Lick me."

Milano looked at Rossi as a dog does when it is confused.

"Mm-hmm. Okay, Roman numeral two," he said, then punched Milano in the face.

Milano collapsed on the floor as all three men stared at him.

"Correct!" Rossi screamed, causing the other two to applaud loudly. "Now, because it is nearly time for our soap opera, we'll skip to question seventy-nine...hmm...what do you know. There is no question seventy-nine."

"All right, Doctor," Milano said, staggering while trying to stand up. "What is going on? What time is it? Where am I?"

“I’m sorry. Time’s up. The answer is Teddy Roosevelt. But you did get two out of three, and you win this new blender. Now, the badge, please.”

Jacques handed Milano a blender, which was beat up and certainly not new, then reached into his pants again and produced a yellow badge cut out of construction paper and a tube of glue and glued the badge to Milano’s bare chest. Dr. Rossi then announced: “The good Dr. Whatever-The-Hell-Your-Name-Is, you are now sheriff of Wither Port Mental Clinic. Here’s your gun. Now, off to the doctors’ lounge.”

And they frolicked off to the doctors’ lounge hand-in-hand.

MIKE COOMBES

This is Bob



KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER

Romancing the Goat

I shouldn't have done what I did, but it wasn't because she was albino—I felt bad for her albino-ness or whatever you call it; I had a crossed eye growing up, and until it was fixed, people picked on me because I looked like a freak. So that wasn't why I did it, I swear.

I did it because Angelina was meaner than a tipped cow from the day Mom and Dad rescued her from a foster home.

That first night, she was camped out with her five dilapidated boxes in the freshly-painted butter yellow room across from mine. I was nervous. *Be extra sensitive*, Mom had said, *both of her parents are dead*. So I hesitated in front of her door. That's when I heard it.

She was talking to someone. Or something: "Of course not. This time it will be much easier," she was saying.

"Angelina." I knocked.

The murmuring stopped. Silence.

"Come on," I said. "I just... I just wanna say hi."

I heard footfalls and then the door opened, only enough for her narrow face to block my view of the room beyond. Her hair was white as flour, and her eyes were pink. "What." The word came out like a bee sting.

“I just... I’m... your new sister. Immy.”

She blinked. “Hello,” she said, with church picnic politeness.

“I’m... sorry about your Mom and Dad—”

She snorted. “They did something stupid.” She started to close her door.

“Wait.” I stopped her. I elevated myself on my toes to try and peer over her head, but all I could see was the open window, the flood-lit orange tree in the front yard. “Who were you talking to? You could always talk to me if—”

“None of your business.”

She closed the door.



The next day at breakfast, Angelina dumped half the bottle of syrup on her empty plate, guzzled down a glass of orange juice, refilled it, and then guzzled that. She dipped her hand in the syrup and licked the runny stuff from her fingers.

“Angelina, honey, you don’t have to eat *just* the syrup.” Mom buttoned up her suit jacket; she was showing a house that day. “We may be an all-organic household, but we have plenty. You can have all you want here.” She kissed her on the top of her head.

Skins of syrup ran down Angelina’s left arm.

“Guess what,” I said. “Aurora says I’m good enough to be head cheerleader next year.”

No one responded. Mom was smiling at Angelina in a way that I’d only seen on Christmas card Virgin Marys. Dad was humming “You are my Sunshine” as he flipped the pancakes.

I was as insignificant as a fly stuck between windowpanes.

“Um, Mom? Dad?” I cleared my throat. “I need to eat first because Aurora’s coming to pick me up because we have cheerlead-

ing practice before school.”

“Oh, Immy, you don’t have to raise your voice,” Mom said. “And anyway, it’s Angelina’s first breakfast here, so she gets first batch. In fact, we even got her something extra special to celebrate.” Mom slipped her hand in her pocket and extracted a small gold box with a blue ribbon.

Angelina blinked—in surprise, but there was something feigned about it—at Mom. Then, with her sticky, drippy hands, she opened the box, rummaged through the tissue paper, and pulled out a silver charm bracelet.

Exactly the one they’d bought me for my sixteenth birthday.

I saw red. “That’s mine!”

“No, it’s not, dear.” Mom twittered and took the bracelet from Angelina to open the clasp and put it on her wrist. “It’s just the same one as yours, since you liked yours so much. You know what they say, it’s just like real estate. If it’s successful once, don’t mess with the formula.”

Angelina’s weird pink eyes met mine.

“But she doesn’t have any awards.” I looked at Dad, but I was getting no support there. “She hasn’t even been to school yet and she’s only gonna be a freshman.”

Dad set three pancakes on Angelina’s plate, and she gobbled so recklessly it made me think of the pigs in the races I’d seen at the fair. When I thought that, I guffawed so loud I shocked even myself. “And she’ll get it all dirty. Look at her! She doesn’t even use a fork!”

Angelina burst into tears, ran to her room, and slammed the door.

“Imogene Marie! Really!” Mom went after her.

I scrambled to think if I should defend myself. The only sound in the kitchen was butter sizzling.

Dad stood there, his brow furrowed. “Immy,” he said. “This is important to your mother, so do what she says and please let’s keep the peace, okay?”

He peered quickly down the hall in the direction Mom had gone, then he came over and slid two pancakes onto my plate. By the time I put butter on them, they were cold.



Over the next few weeks, I learned to tolerate her at the table and tried to be civil, but she had no interest in talking to me. And there was seriously something *wrong* with this girl. Every time I cruised by her room, I heard weird stuff. Low murmurs. Something like the *ohm* on Mom’s ridiculous *Yoga for Youga!* dvd. Snorts and grunts. And words I couldn’t make out.

I frequently pressed my ear to her door.

“We’re going to have everything we wanted. Not like before,” she said once to whoever she was talking to.

And then she started *doing* things to get me in trouble. I came home after cheerleading practice and my dirty panties confettied the hall. Chocolate was forbidden in our house, but somehow Angelina found ways to bring it in and melt it into the furniture. Then she’d stick the wrapper near my stuff, or in my *room*, so Mom would find it. She tore the covers off Dad’s *True West* magazines, melted the rubber top to Mom’s juicer, and took a permanent marker and wrote “smelly” on her own bedroom door.

“What is going on with you, Immy? Are you acting out?” Mom sat at the small desk in her office, her suit jacket draped over the back of the chair, her hands folded on her lap. “The psychologists

all say that the non-adopted sibling has problems adjusting, and that certain... issues may arise, but this is a little extreme. I thought you always said you didn't want to be an only child."

"Actually..." I didn't know where she'd gotten that from. I had never said that. "Mom, she..." I heard footsteps coming down the hall, but they stopped by the door, as though someone was listening. I dropped my voice to a whisper. "She's *weird*. She talks to herself—or *something*—every night in her room. It's creepy."

"Stop that, now. We need to give her space. She's adjusting."

"She dumped out my laundry and melted your juicer," I said.

"Immy. Be reasonable."

"Why don't you believe me? Have I ever lied to you?"

Mom sighed, that same sigh she did when she saw Dad drink a diet soda. "No, Immy, you haven't. But your actions that first day at the breakfast table set the tone, so what am I supposed to think? I'm sure she wouldn't destroy property. Her foster family just said she was a little... erratic, but consider what she's been through. Stop trying so hard to get attention. *I know you're here.*" Her cell phone rang, but she didn't reach for it right away. Instead, she said, "I understand, honey. I really do. But I expect more from you. Until she gets more settled, you're going to have to get used to being second fiddle for a little bit." She flipped open her phone. "Consuela Barnes... why, yes, that house is still available..."

I turned to leave.

"...hold on one minute... Immy? Would you mind running to Bountiful's and getting me some more of those organic carrots? You know the ones?"



"This just sucks," I said to Aurora as I shimmied out of my

jeans. We were skipping seventh period Botany in favor of a dip in the lake. “I’m getting blamed for this juvenile shit.”

Aurora was untying her halter top. “I can’t believe your ’rents don’t notice this chick is a complete freako.” She gathered her long red hair and put it up with a scrunchy.

“Mom says it’s because her parents are dead. That’s her rationale.”

“Oh my God, my hair’s full of knots. Did you bring a hair-brush?”

“Yeah.” I reached into my book bag, which didn’t hold anything *except* the brush, a change of clothes, and a Twinkie I was going to have to eat before I got home so Mom wouldn’t catch me.

“Well, I could see that, I guess,” Aurora bent over and ran my brush through her hair. “With how they died, and all.”

I realized I didn’t know how they’d died. “How?”

“Your parents don’t know? Jeez, you don’t know? I thought everybody did. It was all over the school like a couple of weeks ago.” She tossed me back my brush and ran straight into the water, diving head-first.

I followed and stroked out to just beyond where my feet could touch.

Aurora treaded water next to me. “Jimmy? His sister Jewels’ best friend Sybil is in Mr. Botts’ freshman Home-Ec with Angelina. Some dumb bitch burned a hole in a double-boiler ’cuz she didn’t know to put water in it, and Angelina started freakin’ out when she saw all the smoke on the gas stove and told Mr. Botts her parents died in a big barn explosion, so now Angelina doesn’t have to take Home-Ec anymore because being around the flame is too traumatizing.” Aurora floated on her back.

I thought of some of the things I'd heard through her closed door: *We'll always have what we want, now. We'll do whatever we have to do.* "Oh, please," I said. "Angelina's a lying sack of shit."

"I don't think so. Jimmy's brother's babysitter's Dad works for the fire department. There *was* a big barn fire a couple months back. It's probably true, and you heard it here first! Come on. Race ya to the dock." And then she stretched out her arms and headed for a bunch of logs we'd had some guys on the football team lash together and anchor to a sunken Pinto far below.

But I didn't follow her right away, because what she'd said was niggling at me. What if it were true? What if it were true and Angelina *saw it*? Saw the whole thing? Or worse, saw the whole thing and then their charred-up bodies? That was a terrible way for her parents to go. For the first time since Angelina's initial night in our house, I found myself feeling bad for the girl.

Until Aurora climbed onto the raft and her bracelet gleamed in the sun, and it reminded me of the one I got for my sixteenth birthday, the same one Mom and Dad bought for Angelina.



That night, Mom and Dad were out at their Grateful Grain-lovers meeting and I was feeling bold enough to ask Angelina to her face how her parents had died. But just before I was about to reach for the knob, I heard her laugh. "Wait until you see!"

And something, something in that room... *something talked back*. A long, low groan.

It spooked me enough to wish Mom and Dad were home. I was alone in the house with Angelina and... and *something else*.

And then the door flew open and I jumped several feet. She glared at me. "What."

Like on the first night, I tried to peer inside her room, but to no avail. “I just...” I had been planning to blurt, “I just wanted to ask you how your parents died,” but she’d startled the crap out of me, and all I could stammer was, “... who... who are you... talking to?”

She sneered. “I am reading aloud. I like to read aloud. And you quit listening at my door, or else.”

She went to slam the door on me, but that’s when I saw it: she had not just the charm bracelet on that Mom and Dad had given her, *but mine too*. I stuck my ankle into the door so she couldn’t close it and grabbed her wrist. “That’s my bracelet!”

For one second I thought I saw a glimmer of surprise, but then she said with an indignant little toss of her head, “I want it.”

“You can’t have it. You got your own. Give it back.”

“No.”

From the room behind her I heard a low rumble.

“Give. It. Back!” I shoved the door with so much force it opened all the way and banged against the wall.

Holy hell.

Her room was crammed with goats. Stuffed goats—white, black, brown, wearing tutus. Porcelain goats of all sizes. Her bedspread was a goat pattern and her throw pillow was a goat. In the corner, her cardboard boxes served as pedestals for burning candles in the shapes of goats. And it looked like she had taken crayons and drawn goats on the fresh paint-job. “What the—”

Just then, Mom and Dad walked through the front door, and Angelina started hyperventilating and whipped up a whole barrel-full of fake tears.

“What is going *on* in here?” Mom rushed in.

“She took my bracelet!”

“Imogene Marie, she has her own. *Why* would she do that?”

“But look—” I raised my hand to point at the sobbing Angelina as proof, but when I did, I saw that *both bracelets were somehow on my wrist*.

Mom looked like a wounded calf. “Please,” she said quietly. “Just go to your room.”



It was shortly after that Mom and Dad decided the best way to improve things was to take us to Disneyland. We only lived a couple of hours away, and I’d been several times. Angelina had never been. So they thought that by forcing me to take her on her first attractions, I’d somehow develop more sisterly behavior patterns.

“I don’t like anything fast, and I don’t like anything that’s in the dark, and I don’t like loud noises,” Angelina said.

I was about to develop more sisterly behavior patterns, alright. I smiled, reached out and took Angelina’s hand. Mom beamed.

“I know this great ride that has goats on it,” I said.

Angelina blinked, and for the first time since I’d known her, she smiled—genuinely. “Really?”

“Really. They’re fake, but they look just like the real ones. They even move and make noise like real ones. You’ll love it.”

“Okay.”

“Which ride are you going on, dear?” Mom asked. She was holding my father’s hand.

“The train,” I answered. She and Dad had never been on any of the attractions—they were the types that got sick on hayrides.

“That sounds lovely.” Mom patted Angelina on the head. “You have fun and we’ll meet you at the exit.” She took my father’s

hand, and the two of them strolled off in the opposite direction.

I turned. Looming in the distance were the desert-colored fake buttes that had always reminded me of leaning piles of dung, and screams that were a hundred teapots whistling. It was my favorite roller coaster in the whole world: Big Thunder Mountain.

It was fast, it was dark, and it was loud.

We started up the path.

“I told you, I don’t like fast things.”

“It’s not a fast thing, I swear.” I tugged her along. She resisted, but weighed less than tumbleweeds. I bolted past the sign that welcomed me to “Big Thunder... Population 38” and towering boulders sprouting grass and daisies. A couple of rusted wagon wheels tilted against a fence. There were barrels with old milk cans, gnarled trees, a working water wheel, and a Western town. She finally slipped out of my grip near the weather-beaten saloon and a storm-stained assay office.

“I am *not* getting on that!” She stomped her foot and yelled—and then she realized that people in line were staring at her. She stopped and put her head down, meek as a... not exactly a lamb. More like a whipped horse. Either way, a guy in a red kerchief and suspenders herded us between two wooden fences. A large gold “2” was painted on the platform beneath my feet. I looked at Angelina and suddenly thought of the bucking bronco pens at the rodeo.

It smelled like wet metal and chlorine. A recording of an old man warned about hats and wild rides. Then there was the *hish* of steam as the blood-colored steam engine *U.B. Bold*, trailed by open cars the color of desert suns, halted and unloaded its cargo of flushed, breathless tourists. I stepped down into the seat and slid over, patting the cushion. “Come on!”

Angelina looked left and right. I'm certain she was wishing someone would say she was too short to ride and pull her out of line. But no one did. She startled when the lap-bar came down across her waist. Nervously, she extended her spindly arms and clenched the Jesus bar on the back of the seat in front of us.

We took off with a jerk and whipped into a tunnel. I reveled in the *thrum thrum thrum* in my muscles and the *clickety-clack* as we ascended through a hale of agitated bats, fang-like stalactites and seething pools of phosphorous. Angelina shrieked like she was being burned.

I thought of ground-up chocolate and melted juicer tops. I thought of her nasty glares. I thought of my stolen bracelet. And I laughed. "Open your eyes! You're missing this!"

She refused. She shrieked and caterwauled so that it drowned out some of the ride's sound effects—the howl of a coyote, the puffing of geysers, the *churn-glutch* of mining equipment.

And then she dug her nails into my hand, and it hurt. It dawned on me that Mom was right. This *was* acting out. In fact, this was *mean*.

And I was loving it.

And then I remembered the thing I'd used as bait. And there it was, surrounded by empty crates of TNT and poised on a rocky outcropping: the shaggy gray and white mountain goat. He bleated in greeting even as he chomped on the large stick of dynamite he had clenched between his teeth.

"Look at the goat, Angie!" I sneered. "Look at the goat!"

I didn't think she'd do it. But Angelina opened one eye, and then another. Her lips parted in surprise and then spread into an expression something like delight. She loosened her grip on the

bar and reached out, as though she could touch it. As we came out from under the shadow of a slapped-together trestle, I saw tears on her cheek. In the sun, they gleamed like fool's gold.

With bullwhip suddenness we dropped and coiled around to the right. Angelina kept her eyes on the animal until we raced through another tunnel. She yelled something, but she may as well have been singing into a dust storm.

We slowed down and rolled past the other end of the town we had seen in the beginning. The Golden Nugget Dance Hall proudly displayed its flag, and an empty noose swung in the breeze. A decrepit baby carriage sat on the front porch of the fake El Dorado Hotel.

I looked at Angelina. Her mouth was set in an angry pucker.

"I want that goat," she said through clenched teeth.

I was so shocked I laughed. "You can't have the Disney goat. Are you kidding?"

"NewMom and NewDad said I could have anything I wanted, and I want that goat!"

"But it's a *computer*, it's attached to the rock. It doesn't *come* off, you stupid bitch," I said.

"You wait." She wiped tears from her cheek. "You wait, because I am going to get that goat, and when I do, he's gonna blow you up!"

Cold fingers worked their way from my neck to my waist.

The ride ground to a stop, and Mom and Dad weren't too far from where we disembarked. They did *not* look happy.

Mom rushed to Angelina's aid. "Oh, baby, it's okay."

"You," Dad gripped my arm, "are in a lot of trouble."

"How *could* you?" Mom pushed her sunglasses up on her head

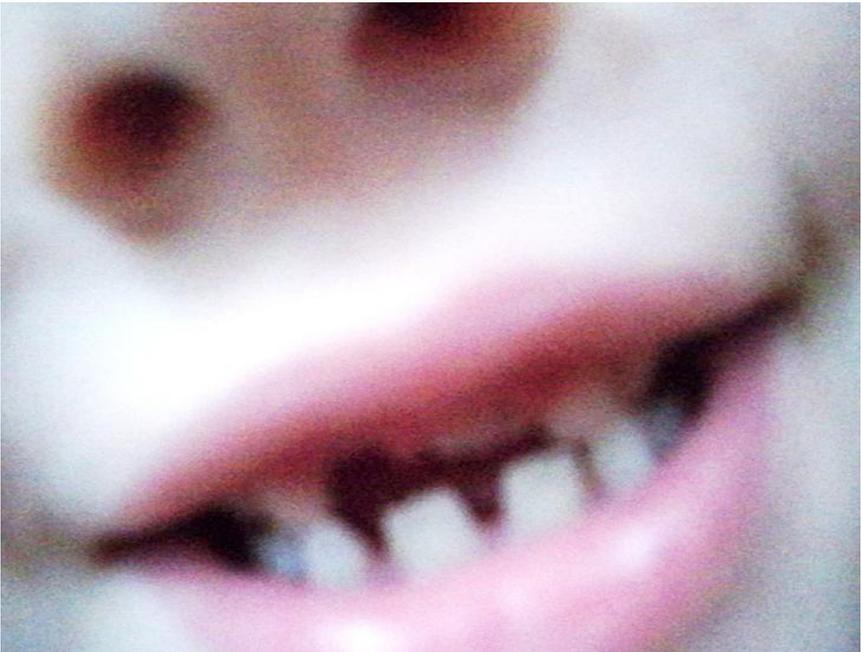
so I could see her eyes, burning like small coals. She rummaged in her quilted hobo and pulled out a paper bag. “Here, Angie. Why don’t you have a piece of celery. It’ll calm you down.”

I watched as she peeled the leaves off the top of the stalk and offer it to Angelina. But instead of taking it with her hand, Angelina bent over and snatched it away with her mouth.

She swatted at a bug on her flour-white cheek as she chomped on the stick of celery. When Mom and Dad turned their backs to start the walk down the exit queue, she glared at me with her strange pink eyes and murmured, “Boom.”

FIERRA TESTER

Smile



YASSEN VASILEV

(anti)Homer

I don't want to live forever
in this impossible city
where directions are perverted
the years furiously turn
and everything is incurable
where stairs are inverted
pyramids built upside down
steps lead nowhere
and streets turn in a circle
where yards have no entrances
corridors end in walls
and there are balconies
on which no one ever stood
where doors are made of stone
and windows closed forever
with their nothingness
opening inwards
I don't want to listen to the voices of the walled
I don't want to be walled
in this impossible maze

ADAM CALLAWAY

The Kraken, Living. The World, Ending.

The Kraken wakes up at six am everyday. He swims to the bathroom, where three massive vats sit on a secret beach. One is filled with disinfectant, one is filled with rinse water, and one is filled with Crest Mandiblepaste (straight from the manufacturer). He builds up a head of steam, drawing water into its mantle and then squeezing it through a special nozzle on his underside, and vaults into the vat of disinfectant. He twists and agitates, making sure to get every single sucker clean. He then uses his massive tentacles to pull himself into the next vat of rinse water (which is then processed and poured back into the ocean, new, desalinated water replacing it). The vat of Crest Mandiblepaste has a special piece that fits over the Kraken's mandibles and then two massive brushing heads buff away stains and bits of sailor and marlin, but the Kraken usually has breakfast before doing this.

He puts on a modest gray suit (Italian, and extensively customized), a sixty-foot nautical-themed tie (double-Windsor knot in under four seconds), a dozen pairs of highly-shined black Forzieri Italian Hand-Crafted Leather Cap Toe Dress Shoes, and a gold ribbon pin on his lapel. He has a small breakfast of two dozen yellow-finned tuna and possibly a tiger shark (if he had had a particularly rowdy night with *Aspidochelone* and *Jörmungandr* over at Charyb-

dis' place).

The Kraken lives in a large, hidden cave off of the eastern seaboard. It is a meager one-hundred-thousand square feet (the Kraken was turning his life around, having blown his money on junk bonds and prescription pills, and the real estate agent said this was the only thing in his price range). The cave is extensively decorated. The Kraken was going for a cross between a new age, space age, urban bachelor pad and Carlsbad Caverns. He thinks he did a pretty good job. Purples, blacks, chrome, and glass are used gratuitously to great effect. The exception is the Kraken's bedroom. Much of this space is taken up by the four hundred (two levels of two hundred) King-sized Vera Wang by Serta Specialty foam mattresses (he used to have innerspring, but they were just too hard on his back after a particularly large takedown of a Spanish Galleon back in the day). The indent left by the Kraken after he swims off to his bathroom in the morning is sometimes cited as the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Its subsequent relaxation back into its normal shape is so spectacular to behold, that a permanent hotel has been built outside of the Kraken's cave to cater to the event (the Kraken receiving a thirty-percent cut). The rest of the Kraken's bedroom is devoted to mime memorabilia. A little known fact about the Kraken: his dream in life was to become a master of "the Art of Silence." The walls are decorated with tentacle-drawn diagrams of "the Rope" and "the Box," the more complex "Carnival Ride" and (his own invention) "the Superhero, After Vaulting from a Skyscraper, Gets Distracted by a Flight of Pigeons, Misses the Falling Girl, and Smashes Into the Pavement." A circus-tent sized striped shirt, white paint, and greases sticks like California Redwoods hang on the walls. His most prized possession, a signed

photograph of himself meeting Marcel Marceau, is hidden in a dark alcove two hundred feet above the Sertas. It's the reason the Kraken gets up in the morning.

After the Kraken goes back to his bathroom to brush his mandibles, he's off to work. After getting his Graduate Marketing Certificate from the University of Phoenix-Online, he got a job at a successful ad agency in downtown Manhattan. Unfortunately, he had to spend a substantial sum of money constructing what is essentially a massive fishbowl in the vacant lot next to the agency's main building. He works from eight am to four pm, five days a week. He suggests many marketing ideas for many products. Not a single concept the Kraken has every suggested has been considered for use. It might be that they all have to do, in some way, with fish, sixteenth century schooners, and/or mimes. The more likely explanation is that the "Big Wigs" aren't fluent in Hydronian, the lingua franca of the sea monster world. He thinks they are naive (The company is only keeping him employed until their new headquarters is finished in Boise).

The Kraken swims home after a hard day of being rejected and changes into a palatial silk robe. Sometimes he orders Kung Pow Shrimp from Kenny Wong's. Sometimes he puts on First Class. Sometimes he goes and visits a few of his friends.

The world's oceans are enormous, offering plenty of room for dozens of sea monsters. The sea monsters are a tight nit group. They all belong to the same social club, the Order of Splintering Planks. They all belong to the same union, Global 001. Of course, as with every species, there are those who get along together better than others. The Hydra and the Scylla had a falling out a few centuries back after a friendly "Who is the Best Multi-Headed Mon-

ster” competition turned south after Hydra purposely hit Scylla in the gut when Scylla was going for what would have been a record number of ships sunk simultaneously (then sixteen, currently twenty-two, held by the Leviathan). There has been numerous attempts to reconcile them, but that many mouths yelling at once is intimidating.

The Kraken swam the few thousand miles to Charybdis, where Aspidochelone and Scylla were arguing about Socrates’ decision not to escape from injustice in Crito. Aspidochelone agrees with Crito, and thinks that Socrates was being selfish in not escaping. That he could’ve done more good, but the allure of martyrism and the chance to be forever remembered overtook him. Scylla disagrees with Aspidochelone, saying that Socrates had to die, otherwise all his teachings were meaningless. She threw out the “eye for an eye makes the whole world blind” spiel. The Kraken finds these philosophical discussions boring. He turned his attention to Charybdis and Jörmungandr. They weren’t very conversational. Charybdis was always drinking (the Kraken feared she may have a problem) and Jörmungandr had to speak without letting go of his tail, lest the world end. It was actually comical watching him try to talk out of the corners of his mouth with that hissy snake voice. Hardly anyone could understand him.

Aspidochelone and Scylla finally finished with their debate and noticed that the Kraken had arrived. They offered him some fresh tourists that Aspidochelone had lured this morning, but the Kraken was on a strict diet, and Americans tended to be fattening. Quite good dipped in Hidden Valley, but no, the Kraken was trying to slim down. Scylla inquired why. A girl, he says shyly. Charybdis raised an eyebrow.

The girl's name was Maggie. She worked at his office and was really cute. She was quite into fusion, so he had gotten Medeski, Martin, and Wood tickets and was working up the courage to ask her to go with him. He showed Aspidochelone a picture of her from the company picnic and the turtle made a rather lewd comment. Scylla worried about the difference in age, her being twenty-nine and the Kraken being a little over a millennia. Charybdis took a split second to tell him to go for it. He said he'd probably do it the next day and tell them about it this weekend.

The Kraken said his goodbyes and got back to his cave around midnight. He put on his pajamas, a three piece ensemble of anchor print, cotton pants, button-up shirt, and night cap. He went to his bathroom and cleaned his mandibles once again. He kissed Marcel Marceau goodnight, settled down onto his mattresses, and tossed and turned until two in the morning, thinking about Maggie.

The Kraken awoke and went through his routine full tilt and arrived in his fish bowl cubicle an hour early. If he would've had the glands for it, he would be sweating bullets (the protection for this was doubly redundant, because no one would have noticed anyway, the Kraken being completely submerged and all). He was distracted all morning, but nobody took notice, a Kraken in distress looking the exact same as a Kraken calm.

At lunch he made his move. Knowing Maggie didn't understand Hydronian, he handed her a tentacle-written note and the two tickets. His English wasn't terribly good, but he knew his way around a Merriam-Webster. She looked at him warily through those eyes that reminded him so much of the frothing sea, and said yes.

He went home that evening and got spent the next two hours

getting ready. What does one wear to a fusion concert? He settled on a horizontally-striped button-up shirt and a pair of loose-fitting slacks. He told Maggie that he'd meet her at the concert at seven. Luckily, it was very near the water's edge.

The Kraken grabbed a suckerful of sea anemones and jetted toward the boardwalk. He did the breathing exercises that his psychiatrist told him to do when he got nervous. A gang of Perks (half great white, half punker) decided they wanted to fight him on the way. They bit and tore at his carapace, but the Kraken made short work of the measly gang. Unfortunately, Perks usually gave him indigestion.

The Kraken made it to the shore at precisely seven and saw Maggie dressed in a conservative turtleneck and khakis. The relationship was doomed before it even began. No communication. That, and what happened next.

The crowd was focused on Medeski's screaming organ solo, and didn't notice the hundred-foot sea monster in the harbor behind them. One woman, however, heard a gurgling (the Kraken was trying to seduce Maggie with a traditional Krakonian love ballad) and turned to see what it was. Well, long story short, one scream turned into a thousand, and before you knew it, the crowd was frenzily stampeding, killing Wood in the process. The Kraken got so embarrassed, and, combined with the sloshing Perks, he launched a massive ink bomb into the crowd. It was a blackout. He never saw Maggie again.

That night, the Kraken went to Aspidochelone hangout. The giant turtle knew exactly how to cure the rejection blues, and the monsters proceeded to get monumentally inebriated on Aspidochelone's stash of toxic waste. He even had a barrel or two of nuclear

run-off. The Kraken couldn't remember much after that, but he woke up in the morning with a supertanker fowling up his den and his tentacles around the Yacumama and Cirein-cròin. After apologizing profusely to the ladies, he made a solemn oath never to let that "soup-in-the-making" talk him into anything again.

The Kraken called in to take a sick day, but no one answered the phone. He gave up after the fifth time and went back to sleep.

The next day was Saturday and he went to the biannual Order of Splintered Planks meeting. He got dressed in the ceremonial poncho woven out of kelp and soaked in the blood of all the fallen monsters (damn Hercules). They were meeting a thousand miles off of Hawaii. Everyone but *Aspidochelone* (still recovering from Kraken's "No Worries" night) and the Loch Ness Monster (who was still on probation) was there. "Long Live Ye Who Lives in the Deep Blue Sea," the ceremonial anthem, was sung by the Sirens. The males had previously all donned their ceremonial, doubloon encrusted ear-muffs/plugs/auditory-sense stoppers. It was beautiful, nonetheless. The main order of business was attempting to reconcile with Japan over the supertanker that the Kraken had destroyed. There were a few angry stares and a few nervous whispers. The Kraken sunk down in the crowd, his mantle going maroon with embarrassment. He offered to pay for it, no one heard him.

The rest of the meeting was business as usual (image cultivation, investment news, etc.) The Kraken went home even more dejected than usual. He took a cubic meter of valium and slept straight through Sunday.

On Monday, he woke up at six, got ready, and went to work. It took him until noon to see the "for lease" sign on the front of the office or the pink slip taped to the bottom of his bowl. He slunked

back home. On the way, he pinched his tentacle in a mass of coral. This was the straw that broke the Kraken's back. He raged and smashed the entire reef to bits (making a young entrepreneur rich in the process, him having collected the more interesting "living sculptures"). The Kraken jetted home at such a speed as to create a vacuum in his wake. He went straight to his room, grabbed his mime garb and his autographed picture and hit the currents. He donned the uniform on the way and signed a contract with a small circus out of Nova Scotia.

The rest of the Kraken's life is fuzzy. Those who actually saw him perform said that his dexterity and creativity were unsurpassed. Everyone else fled quickly, his wildly quick and intricate art having a similar appearance to a sea monster attack.

He was apparently fired from the circus after an ill-advised tryst with the Bearded Lady and Barnacle Man. The Kraken sunk into a deep depression after that. He became spiteful towards his friends and the justice-less world in general. At one point, he had a cannon to his head, but couldn't light the wick. The depression and jadedness compounded. He wanted to get back in touch with his roots as a monster of legend. He took down tanker after ore-ship after cruise liner, but it wasn't enough. He accosted coastal towns and entire islands, but it wasn't enough. He eventually turned on his fellow monsters. They shook their heads at him and took him into custody. His trial was short. They found him guilty of crimes against monstrosity and sentenced him to be devoured by Charybdis. On the altar, he was given a chance to say his last words. He repented nothing. Instead, he swelled his mantle to an incredible size and gave a massive, inky jet toward Jörmungandr. He knocked the snake out cold. The monsters did all they could to keep the

Midgard Serpent's tail in his mouth, but it was all for not. The world ended in a small flash of blue light.

MIKE COOMBES

Two Guys



Contributor's Notes

Chris Allinotte is a Toronto based writer, recent winner of the 2008 Toronto Star Short Story contest for my piece *The Dirt on Ronnie Wilkins*. He has been published online at SixSentences.com; and Micro Horror.com.

Alec Bryan graduated from Weber State University with Bachelor degrees in Geography (emphasis: Latin American Studies), English and an MA in English literature. He has worked as a freelance writer/editor, and loves to live where the desert meets the mountains (Helper, UT). He fly-fishes and writes for vocation and avocation. He is currently teaching as an adjunct professor at Weber State University. He has two short stories published.

Many anagrams can be made with the letters in '**Adam Callaway**,' none of which approximate 'Kraken.' He is also a firm believer in the psycho-kinetic power of conspiracy theories, of which, he is the perpetrator of dozens. He can be found physically near the south-western shore of Lake Superior and via the interwebs at <http://adamcallaway.blogspot.com>.

Amber Forbes has been writing for about eleven years. She has a little over twenty articles published in the Xtreme section of The Augusta Chronicle, all aimed at teens.

Michael Frissore's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Monkeybicycle*, *Sein Und Werden*, *Is This Reality?*, *Literary Chaos*, *decomp*, *rumble*, *Hecale*, and elsewhere. He has also written for *The Tucson Citizen*, *Flak*, *Slurve*, and

other publications. His first book, *Poetry is Dead*, will be published by Coatism Press in 2010. Mike grew up in Massachusetts and now lives in Oro Valley, Arizona with his wife and son.

Jasmine Giacomo lives and writes in Washington State with her husband and two small children, and dreams of owning enough cats someday to be called “that daft cat lady” by the neighbors.

Dr Howard Karlitz is former teacher, headmaster and college professor, having earned two masters degrees and a doctorate from Columbia University. Currently I am involved with instruction and research as it pertains to autistic children. I’ve been writing for years (in a myriad of genres) and am extensively published, having contributed to numerous professional and literary journals, magazines and newspapers including, but not limited to the *The LA Times*, *Newsday*, *The New York Daily News*, *Working Woman Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Baltimore Sun*. In addition I’ve written several novels and screenplays. If you so desire, I could forward and bore you with an extensive bibliography of my work.

Adam Matcho is a writer living just outside of Pittsburgh. While he would love to write the next great story, poem or sentence, he is currently an obituary writer and therefore writes about dead people most of the time.

Matthew Martin is currently an MFA candidate in Popular Fiction at the Stonecoast Program, University of Southern Maine, as well as a produced feature film writer and playwright. His screenwriting/play writing credits include:

- Slingshot: Bought and produced by Bold Films. Distributed by the Weinstein Company.
- Poison: Produced as part of NYCollective’s 10x2 Play Festival.

- A Very Good Year: Staged reading presented as part of FilmFest New Haven's Special Events series.

- Brothers: Screenplay co-written under contract with Sully Erna, lead singer/songwriter for band Godsmack. In development.

- A Walk in the Park: Premiered at NYC's Upright Citizen's Brigade Theater. Best of Festival Selection at NYC Downtown Film Festival and Best Short Film Nominee at Hoboken Film Festival.

- Orpheus: Play with music produced with the New Haven Theatre Co. as part of 2001 International Festival of Arts and Ideas.

Victoria Clayton Munn wrote her first book at age six, and shows no signs of stopping. She is a writer and poet who has been published in various online and print 'zines, including *Poor Mojo's Almanac(k)*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Legendary* and more - as well as a chapbook "Two Lips". She lives near Albany NY with her husband and daughter. Visit her at <http://www.writinggirl.com>.

Kristi Petersen Schoonover's fiction has been featured in *Wrong World's* anthology, *I'm Going to Tell You One More Time*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Barbaric Yawp*, *The Illuminata*, *Microhorror*, *Crimson Highway*, *Citizen Culture*, *New Witch Magazine*, *MudRock: Stories & Tales*, and a host of others, including Susurrus Press' *I Am This Meat* anthology and Tyrannosaurus Press' *Beacons of Tomorrow: Second Collection*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College and hosts the paranormal fiction segment on *The Ghostman & Demon Hunter Show* broadcast.

yaSSen vaSSilev (born 05. 06. 1988) is a young Bulgarian poet. He is currently studying Dramaturgy at the National Academy of Theater and Film Art "Krastio Sarafov", Sofia, Bulgaria. In May 2009 he published his first collection of poems

called “Blind Infinity Hangs”, which had won the National Prize for Literature of Hermes Books – one of the biggest Publishing houses in Bulgaria. He had published poems, prose and articles in most of the prestigious Bulgarian literature magazines and newspapers, both printed and online. He had also won several National awards for poetry and prose. Together with Mina Stoyanova – he is co-author of three performances based on their poetry – “Delusions” (2007), “When the Clocks are Melting” (2008) and “Dirtify/WarX” (2009). Personal website: www.yassenasilev.wordpress.com