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THE ODDVILLE PRESS

FICTION

CAROLINE TAYLOR

JEFF WOOD

TREY EDGINGTON

ADAM HOFBAUER

DIETRICH KALTEIS

ADAM GRAUPE

DYLAN GILBERT

STEPHEN HILL

FILIP SIMUNOVIC

ASHER ELLIS

JOEL FROHLICH

POETRY

HOLLY DAY

MOSBY BARLEY

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Letter From the Editor

Dear Readers,

Spring has sprung
The grass is riz
I wonder where the birdies is?
—Anon

That little bit of amusement, taught to me as a child, was the first thing that came to my mind last week while taking Bram (my Golden Retriever) for a walk. I mean, sure there might not be much in the way of grass just yet, but I did personally witness the return of the migratory birdies... or more specifically, one song bird and one Canada goose.

Yes, I know—two birds does not an on mass arrival make. But hey, it's a start.

Ah, Spring—the season of renewal and rejuvenation... for the muse, perhaps? You bet! Time to chip what had been our winter-frozen inspiration out of that snow bank and watch it bud again, much like the massive Heritage tree in my back yard. It's budding, too, by the way, and will soon explode with leaves, causing the neighbors to the right to again restart the Great Tree War, and the neighbors to the left to again drag out their lawn chairs and restart their bong. But first comes spring cleaning, and the annual trek to the local hardware store for shovels and rakes and hoes and three-pronged metal what-chamacallits that'll torture our yards (and in my case, my muse)

back to life and back to work. We will! We must!

Has all this Spring-talk got you chomping at the bit? Me too. So let's get ready to wash off that BBQ (plan), garden that yard (write), and trim those hedges (edit). Oh, and don't forget to stock up on bug spray (hush that pesky inner editor) because Spring has sprung!--sorta.

Happy writing/reading.

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CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



JEFF WOOD

Two Cents

The doctor said the fever was one hundred and four, but it was just numbers to the boy, who was convinced his bed was a sea and the blankets waves upon that sea. And heads would float by on the quilted water, little tiny heads, his Mom's head, and his sister's too, the head of the President, Danny from the Partridge Family, his English teacher Miss Summers, Aquaman, Mickey Dolenz, Mr. Potato Head, Santa. A part of his mind insisted they were only delusions from the fever, but he didn't much care. He had wonderful conversations with the tiny heads, spirited and warm, utterly forgotten the instant they ended.

That evening the sea drained away and the heads disappeared and he was all alone, shivering and scared and very, very cold. He realized in a moment of simple lucid clarity that he might die. The looks on his parents' faces, the hushed tones of the doctor, the way his Grandma just kept crying. Something was wrong.

He didn't want to die. He tried to tell them all but was trapped in his cocoon of sickness, too weak to speak, or even gesture. He focused on a chair across the room. He closed his eyes. He opened them and saw a girl sitting in the chair. Her skin was as pale as parchment, her hair like dried grass.

She had coins upon her eyes.

She smiled at the boy. Her hands moved to her face and she gently plucked the coins from her eyes and placed them on the bedtable. They were pennies. Revealed, her eyes glowed, flickering like candle flames. She placed her hand on the boy's hand. Her skin was cold. She smiled again, shook her head. No. She closed her eyes, and as the candle-flames disappeared so did she.

He was certain he was in love with her.

The fever broke the next morning. The boy spent the day in bed, resting, convinced the girl has saved him. He promised himself to keep the two pennies she had given him forever, move them from pocket to pocket with each change of jeans, never let them leave his possession. But life moves on, and they got mixed in with other coins in his pocket, with army men and string and small interesting rocks. Ultimately they were spent for candy, into the cash register and out again as change, entering the flow of the world of commerce, jingling happily in the pockets of the living.

DYLAN GILBERT

Pecs of Steel Fitness Center

I'm surprised by the dumpy receptionist, didn't see her when I joined yesterday, just the Adonis-like sales rep and the wiry physical trainer. She scans my card. "Have a good work out." Why would a chunky thing like that work in a gym? She must be a masochist.

I'm impressed by the cleanliness of the locker room: a carpet with a fresh lilac scent and new wooden lockers and benches. I change into my Under Armor shorts and t-shirt; I purchased them as part of the new me – the reinvention of myself as a gym rat.

I had been into yoga for a while, probably too long. But it just wasn't working – me and a bunch of gossipy middle-aged women trying to be spiritual through yoga. Give me a break! They were about as spiritual as their boob jobs. I wasn't interested in some fake quest for holiness. I was seeking something more primal. Simple. Pure. Matching my will against steel to build bulging, stone-like muscle. So I got a membership to the gym, bought a few outfits, and put *Pumping Iron* at the top of my Netflix cue. Now I'm ready.

I decide to start with a little cardio before I hit the weights. I put on my Ipod Nano and pick something to get me pumped. I choose the low hill work out and begin, my girl Beyonce cheering me on.

I'm steady peddling, in my groove, when I notice some guy, oafish and hairy, in a thick gray sweat suit, the old cotton-poly kind

from the 70's, a real *fashion plate*. He hops onto the bike right next to me. A whole row of bikes and he has to invade my space.

He begins peddling and I glance over at him a few times; he's already starting to drip with sweat and I can smell his unwashed hair. I can't believe this, my first day here and some sweaty goon wants to ride tandem with me. No. Hell no! I could see if there were no other bikes, but there's a whole row. Is he trying to fuck with me? Intimidate the new guy?

I'll just move. I'll show this guy you don't just put your sweaty ass next to people if you can help it. But if I move he'll be wondering why, and I'll be self conscious the whole time, worried about why he thinks I moved and it will taint my first gym experience. I'll just have to suffer through it.

I look again and sweat is pouring down his face. For God's sake, use a towel! They're free. I'm done – I just can't take it. I'll come back to the bike later. As I'm getting off, he wipes a meaty hand across his forehead, splattering my face with his sweat.

“Ung!”

He turns toward me, slowly. “Oh, my bad.”

I try to give a smile, act like hey, no big deal, just a couple of sweaty guys at the gym. I always get a bucket of sweat hurled in my face. But then I race to the bathroom and douse my whole head with hot soapy water, my face, my hair, my neck, the whole works.

“Hey, you know they got showers in the back,” I hear. I look up and a kid with a mop in hand is pointing toward the rear of the dressing room.

“No, no. I'm fine. Just a little sweat mishap. No need for a shower.”

He stands just looking at me. Does he want a tip or something?

I know there are showers for God's sake.

I make my way to the free weight room. Yes, now for what I came here for: iron. The place has a grungy smell to it, like rusty metal and old linoleum. Whereas, the upstairs was bright and shiny, this is more cave-like, primitive, lit by only a half dozen or so fluorescent lights. I like it, the vibe. It's the right environment for the dark part of me that needs to lift, grunt, struggle. Can't believe I've been trying to find myself through yoga the last 11 months, when this is obviously my true calling.

I'm at the dumbbell rack, deciding how much weight to begin with. I know I should start low. My wife Gabrielle even mentioned that to me as I walked out the front door with my gym bag. "Don't get too gung ho and hurt yourself." And I know she's right, but I want to blow this thing out, feel the rip in my muscles. A guy next to me is laying on a bench press in deep concentration, staring at the bar above his face. Wow, 200 pounds and he's not even that big. Maybe he needs help. This could be a way to start bonding, to find some brotherhood. "Hey, you want a spot?"

There's a delayed reaction, then he looks toward me. "Yeah, sure."

I stand behind the barbell, my legs bent for action, my fingers dancing in front of me, ready to assist when needed. "Okay, big guy, whenever you're ready." He squeezes the bar and hoists it above his chest. His muscles tighten and veins bulge. He lowers it to his chest, then powers it up, the weight clanking as he hits the top of his reach.

He knocks out seven easily, but by the eighth his arms start to tremble. By the tenth he can barely get it up. I lay a few fingers underneath the bar. "Come on, man! Push it!" He gets it up and tries to maneuver it to the rack. "One more. Come on, don't wimp out on

me!”

He shoots me a look, but lowers it back down. Coming back up is a battle, his arms trembling violently, his face bright pink, veins bulging out of his temples. “Push that shit! Push it! Come on, bitch, hoist it!” I give a finger of assistance. “Finish that cocksucker. Do it!”

“What’s wrong with you?” I hear from the other side of the weight room as the guy clanks the bar into the support. I see a little yellow-haired lady wearing a red “Pecs of Steel Fitness Center” t-shirt rushing toward me. “We’re running a kids party in the next room. You can’t talk like that!” she shrieks.

“Sorry, I was just giving him a spot,” I say looking toward the guy. He lifts his hands and gives the lady a look like “Don’t ask me.” I notice the dozen or so guys in the free weight room are staring at me.

“You can’t talk like that in a family gym!”

“I got a little carried away. Sorry.”

“Sorry? What’s your sorry going to do when little Joey asks mommy what a cocksucker is? Huh?”

“Look, I—”

“Just don’t let it happen again or I’m tossing you!”

“Now look—”

She does a 180 and marches back to the party room. I hear a mob of kids as she opens the door and then a slam.

A couple of big buffed guys are snickering and mocking me and the lady: “Push, cocksucker.” “I’m tossing you.”

I can’t believe my first attempt at free weights has gone so dreadfully wrong. I’m tempted to just leave – to hell with it. But then I think about how Gabrielle will respond when I get home. “You’re

going to sabotage your health because some guys laughed at you? Don't give them so much power." And she'd be right. I paid my membership. I deserve to be here as much as anyone. Besides, I notice my buddy needs a spot again.

I walk behind the barbell, but when he sees me he sits up. "It's okay, I got it."

"You sure? I can be more chill about it, you know?"

"I'm good."

Jeez, what's his problem. I help him deepen his weightlifting practice and now he's going Judas on me? Everyone around here is so tight-assed. I trudge back to the dumbbells as he starts benching. Screw it. I'll just do my thing and lift. I was pretty into it in high school, got pretty buffed. I'll just focus on that. I don't have to worry about these guys. Besides, once they see my physical prowess, I'm sure I'll be accepted.

I grab a few twenty-pound dumbbells to start, but they look so small, like the weight's not much bigger than the bar. I notice the big jokers curling with 40 and 50 pounders. I'm not going to look like a weakling. I grab a couple of 30's and go to work. Standing, I bend my right arm, heaving the metal to my chest. It's brutally heavy, but I manage. Then the left. I continue hoisting, my arms are straining like hell, but it's a good strain. Sweat drips from my temples and I feel my muscles heaving and wrenching. Halfway up my eighth curl I hear a pop and feel a jerk in my arm followed by a high pitched scream coming from my throat. It feels as if a buzz saw is ripping into my shoulder joint. I drop the weights and crumple to the rubber padding, thrashing and screaming: "Ahhh, shit, shit, shit! Motherfucker. Ahhhh!" I feel as if the pain will swallow me up, it's unbearable.

Suddenly the pale blond is standing over me. “What did I tell you about using that language?” she screeches.

“Ahhh, shit, shit, shit,” I cry.

“All right, that’s it. You’re out of here!” I notice the party room door open and a few little kids wondering into the free weight room.

“I’m injured for fuck’s sake! Can’t you see? Ahhh!”

“You have to leave!”

“Are you an idiot?”

She jerks, taking a step back, a hand to her mouth, eyes wide. “I’m just trying to make sure Joshua’s birthday party is wonderful,” she says, starting to tear up.

A little boy yells, “He made Jenny cry.”

“Get him!” hollers another squeaky voice. A little boy comes up and slaps me on the head.

“Come on now,” I say through clenched teeth. Emboldened by their buddy, a half dozen more little boys storm me, pelting me with kicks from their little sneakers, slaps and punches, one cracking me with a badminton racket.

The blond is telling them to stop but they won’t hear it. They smell blood.

I do a leg sweep, taking out three or four of them, sending them to the floor like wiggly dominoes.

Just then some parents arrive on the scene, entering from the party room. A huge face, eyes bulging underneath his thick glasses, pink frosting smudged on his mustache, is two inches from my nose. “Did you touch my child? Did you touch my child?”

“No, I’m injured. I was only trying—”

Veins bulging out of his neck: “Did you touch my child?”

“What’s going on down here?” booms a voice that is so deep and

powerful it freezes everyone. There stands a man, perhaps the offspring of an Arnold Schwarzenegger – Shaquille O’Neil one night stand. Pinned to his buffalo sized chest is a rectangular badge, tiny and dwarfed by his massive pecs, that says manager. The commotion starts up again.

“He was cursing in the gym!”

“He’s a mean man!”

“He attacked my child!”

“I’m injured! I’m injured!” I yell.

Throughout the whole ordeal, hoots and howls of laughter come from the two big guys, and an occasional kick to my side from an angry boy escaping his mother’s grasp.

The giant shakes his head, looks up as if God let him down yet again, then locks eyes on me. “You,” he says pointing, “come with me.”

I hobble up, gingerly holding my arm at my side, gritting my teeth so as not to howl in pain, and make my way toward him.

To the crowd: “Folks, sorry about the disruption. Go back to your party, I’ll take care of *him*.” The crowd breaks into applause, except the two buffed guys, one of whom is bent over, clutching his gut in hysterics. The other I think is wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

God, why do you hate me? I ask as I trudge up the stairs. Between the physical pain and the mental humiliation I think I’ll die. Not to mention my terror that the manager is going to twist my head off in a fit of ‘roid rage – “Oops, weight lifting accident.”

He marches me to the front desk. “I need your membership card,” he says.

It’s in my front pocket. I take it out and hand it to him. From

behind the desk he pulls out a pair of big orange scissors and snips the card in two, one piece falling to the desk, the other getting stuck in the metal teeth of the scissors.

I don't know why, but that snip is so harsh, so final, my bottom lip starts to quiver and I tighten my jaw to fight back sobs. "Look, you don't understand—"

"Hut!" he shouts, shoving his giant palm toward my face in a "Talk to the hand" gesture. How 90's. "Jose," he says to one of the kids behind the desk, "escort this *ex*-member to his locker. When he's done, bring him back here. Don't let him leave or go anywhere else in the gym."

"Yes, sir."

A crowd is starting to gather to watch the spectacle. I look down at me feet and pray I don't know anyone. I go to my locker, Jose right beside be, glowering.

There's a man, at least manlike, buck naked, blanketed in thick hair, using the locker above mine, blocking me. I don't realize till I catch his profile that it's the sweaty bike guy. I stand, waiting, my arm pulsing with sharp stabs.

"Let's go, sir," says Jose.

"Well, he's in my way," I whisper.

"Let's go!"

With one hand I maneuver around the biking sasquatch to my locker, dodging his hairy ass and belly, at one point narrowly avoiding a face to ass collision.

I can't possibly get dressed – can't even move this arm. I grab my bag with my good side and march back out, biker guy sitting his hairy bare ass on the bench, testicles spilling out onto the wood. "That's unsanitary," I whisper to Jose. He just rolls his eyes.

The giant's still at the desk when I come back. "Listen, Troy and Hector told me about what happened down there."

"Troy and Hector?"

"The jokesters down there, the ones yukking it up at your expense. They explained it wasn't all your fault, that the kids did, in fact, start it. So, sorry if I was a little hard on you."

"Oh, does that mean I can have my membership back?"

"Oh God no! It just means we don't have you arrested. But if I ever see your face here again..." He shakes his head and chuckles to himself.

"Look, I'm in serious pain here. Do you have someone who knows first aid or something, a person who could take a look at this?"

"Of course we do! What kind of business you think I'm running here?" he thunders. "One of the trainers is a certified nurse."

God, yes, I think. Maybe I can get something for the pain. "Can I see her?"

He pulls his bulbous head back on his neck, a shocked expression on his face. "That service is for members only."

My chin drops to my chest and I trudge to the door. This has to be the lowest moment of my life, even worse than when I cut a fart while demonstrating headstand to my yoga class. I get to the heavy glass door and pull with my good hand, but my bag gets tangled up and the door slams on my good arm. "Ahhh, shit, shit, shit!"

I lumber down the stairs, dragging my feet, shoulder throbbing, arm aching. I just wanted to be part of something and get some exercise. I struggle into my car and drive out of the parking lot, almost crashing twice due to one arm being bruised and the other just a piece of meat hanging at my side. I consider stopping to call Ga-

briel, but I can't possibly dig my phone out of my gym bag.

Heading up Route 9 to the emergency room, between agonizing throbs of pain, I try to figure out where it all went wrong. I guess I went a little overboard – part of my personality, I suppose, so sue me. And maybe weight lifting's not for me. I'm not really the type to just force my will against iron poundage, to socialize with simple minds. But what can I do to stay in shape? I have to do something, I'm not getting any younger. Maybe something aerobic this time, like running or biking. But they're so seasonal. What do I do from November to April? You wouldn't catch me out there freezing my nuts off. I could take aerobic classes, but God, that's so 80's. Besides, Pecs of Steel is the only studio close to me. Or I could try swimming. Yes, that's aerobic and builds muscles, and if I join the rec center, I can do it year round. This sounds promising. Once this shoulder heals, I'll take up swimming...

HOLLY DAY

Rabbit

slit up the skin along the forearms
peel the flesh back to reveal
so many colors: purple, blue, bright red. Throw
the body into the pot, let the water
heat to boiling. All along the long, skinny limbs

the colors fade, turn brown
translucent webs of sinew dissolve
into broth. The torn flesh curls
away from the bone, reveals even more:
dirty white, the yellow knobs of cartilage.

This is how it always ends.

ADAM HOFBAUER

The Epiphany Project

Dr. Monsoon had fallen asleep on his feet, lulled to rest by the constant hum of the particle accelerator.

“Maybe if we neutralize the particles first,” said Dr. Keizlowski.

Dr. Yomoko checked her clip-board. “Can we do that Dr. Monsoon?” she asked. Finding her colleague asleep, she raised her clip-board and slapped him across his back with the flat of it.

Dr. Monsoon’s head snapped up as Yomoko glared at him. “Stay alert Monsoon,” she said. “Do you want those hacks at the Info-Dome to beat us to the answer?”

Monsoon looked at the atomic clock set into the outside wall of the laboratory. Five minutes had gone by, and he didn’t remember being asleep. He had lost time.

As Monsoon had slept, the five person team had entered the second straight day of the Epiphany project. Forty-eight hours ago they had driven deep into California Data-County, past the sprawling Angle-Groves and the green-house farms of mysterious geometries, past the minimum security check-points and into the almost state of the art complex of the San Fierro Research-Vineyard.

Two days ago, they had descended into the Data Tunnel, down into the earth and to the waiting particle-accelerator, to the untested ions and the possibility of a scientific breakthrough. They had co-

erced the experiment with reams of mad genius, testing every variable in the recycled air and constant sixty-eight degree climate of the antiseptic chambers beneath the rich California soil, but now Dr. Monsoon's stomach was growling, and if he didn't eat something soon, he wasn't going to last much longer.

"I said what do you think Dr?" Yomoko asked him again. Dr. Spear appeared from a corner of the lab, carrying with him the fresh readout of data straight from the accelerator's core.

"Do what?" Monsoon asked as his stomach growled.

"We thought we might neutralize the particles before we fired them off." Dr. Keizlowski said.

"I suppose it would work," Monsoon answered. "We'd have to re-adjust all of our figures beforehand."

Dr. Sweeny rose up from behind the wad of computer monitors and said, "It will only take a minute," before he descended again into the green bank of lights and began to roll his fingers across his keyboard.

Monsoon's stomach growled again as Sweeny typed, and though he tried to think about the possible consequences of the neutralization of stable ions, he kept drifting into thoughts of food and phantom smells of home-cooking and outdoor barbeques. He wanted nothing more than to go home to his mother and a home-made dinner of lemon-pepper chicken, the kind she stirred all day in the Coca-Cola marinade, until it was tender as a young bruise and fell right off the bone. He hoped she'd serve it with hot fried-rice, mixed up with freshly grown peas and red peppers straight from her garden, and maybe open up a bottle of Marlow. Then for dessert, chocolate flake fudge cake, the kind his father wasn't allowed to eat because of the way it clogged his arteries with the flowing magma of dark

sugar syrup.

“Dr. Monsoon,” Yomoko said as she looked over her clip-board. “Give me a pen.” Monsoon fished through the pocket of his lab coat and, finding a handful of change, he was suddenly taken by an instant craving for barbequed potato-chips, the vacuum sealed snacks in the vending machine outside of the lab. He found a pen amidst the change. He handed it to Yomoko, and as the rest of the team approached Dr. Spear and the print-out, Monsoon wordlessly excused himself from the chamber.

Keizlowski shook his head in disagreement with the proposal, but just as he was about to argue over probability of success with Yomoko, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Come out here and help me with something,” Monsoon said. “My chips are stuck in the machine.”

“You idiot,” Keizlowski said. “You were eating in here?”

“Not the accelerator, the vending machine.”

Dr. Keizlowski followed his colleague out into the hallway. only to return a moment later and ask, “Do we have any wire hangers?”

Yomoko perked up. “What for?” she asked, hoping perhaps that the doctor had found some innovative use for such a mundane object.

“Dr. Monsoon’s chips are stuck in the vending machine. We tried knocking them out but they’re stuck by a little bit of the bag. Its pinned underneath that metal screw thing and...”

Yomoko dug into her pocket and pulled out a handful of change. “Here,” she said. “Buy another one.”

“But I’m not hungry,” Keizlowski said. “And I don’t think Monsoon wants two. They’re pretty big bags.”

Dr. Sweeny looked up from his seat at the computer. “I’m kind

of hungry now that you mention it,” he said. “I’ll eat the chips.” He came out from behind the monitors and followed Keizlowski out into the hallway.

Yomoko turned back the printout. Dr. Spear rubbed his eyes as he hunched over the monitors. “Maybe if we introduced the gold ions,” he said.

Yomoko shook her head. “They tried that at Brookhaven in Yew York,” she said. “And they almost created a black hole.”

“That was never confirmed,” Spear said. “And anyway, they were using a much bigger accelerator than we were, more like that two mile long job they have over at Stanford.”

“Or the brand new one they have over at the Info-Dome,” Yomoko growled.

“Anyway,” she said. “We’d be risking a state of excessive density.”

“Not if we controlled the speed of the ions.”

Yomoko stormed over to him and jabbed a finger in his face. “No. Our best bet is still to isolate a single particle and study the effects.” She looked around the room and, wondering what had happened to the rest of the team, Yomoko said, “Spear, we’re the only ones in the lab.”

Suddenly, the memories of that one passionate night began flooding back, when the two of them had adulterated their way across the laboratory floor, Yomoko bent over backwards, spread eagle across the ion generator. Spear’s pants around his ankles, pumping away.

“You’re right,” Spear said, beginning to unbutton his shirt. “You’re so bad.”

“No,” Yomoko insisted. “Not with the other Dr.’s right out there in the hallway.”

A loud crash came from the hallway outside the lab. They pulled away from each other and Yomoko rushed for the doors, sprinting out into the hallway to find the rest of the doctors gathered around the vending machine. Dr. Sweeny and Dr. Keizlowski were pushing against the glass with their shoulders and, with a great heave, they sent the machine back against the concrete wall of the Data-Tunnel, then let it drop, where it slammed against the floor. Standing to one side was Dr. Monsoon, his hand clutching an open bag of barbequed potato chips. “Try rocking it horizontally,” he said.

Through the glass, Yomoko could see a second bag of potato chips stuck in the metal coil at the top of the machine, held in the air by a tiny flap of foil.

Keizlowski stepped away from the machine and, seeing Yomoko, said “Dr., so glad to see you here. You have small arms. Perhaps you could reach in there and see if you can’t grab those nasty crisps and pluck them out for us.”

“Don’t any of you have any change?” Yomoko asked.

“We do,” Keizlowki said. “But the next thing behind the crisps is animal crackers and none of us want animal crackers.”

“And they’d probably get stuck too,” Dr. Monsoon added. “I suggested we try reprogramming the machine.”

“Impossible,” barked Keizlowski.

“No, its easy. I read about it on the internet. We just try a set of common codes until we find one that works.” Bits of barbeque crumbs flew out of his mouth. He wiped his greasy fingers on his lab coat. “The companies that make these machines re-use the same few dozen codes over and over again.”

The machine shook as it hit the ground again and Sweeny backed up against the opposite wall. “I’ve almost got it,” he said. “Maybe if

I just get a running start.”

Yomoko nodded. “I say we go with Dr. Monsoon’s coding hypothesis.”

“Keep in mind its only a theory,” her colleague said through potato-chip mouth.

“If we only had some wire hangers,” Kiezlowski said, slamming his fist into his open hand. “I bet you they get wire hangers at Info-Dome.”

“Move aside,” Yomoko said, pushing her way towards the machine. “Keizlowski, you go see if you can’t find any length of wire that we could get up in there. Monsoon, start giving me those codes.”

“I don’t know any of them,” Monsoon admitted as Keizlowski went off down the hallway. “Maybe if we went and asked Dr. Spear.”

“Yes,” Yomoko said, “Where is he?”

The gray silence of the hallway was suddenly flooded with the flash of red emergency light and the howl of sirens as the doors to the laboratory slid open, revealing Dr. Spear in the threshold. “We have a problem,” he screamed.

The rest of the doctors ran back inside the chamber, Dr. Monsoon wolfing down the last finger full of barbeque flavored flakes.

The particle accelerator was glowing at its metal seams. The printers were spewing out data faster than Sweeny could contain it. As Yomoko and Monsoon rushed towards the generator’s core control bank, Spear sank against the far wall, his head in his hands.

“You tried it didn’t you?” Yomoko yelled. “You introduced the gold ions.”

“I’m sorry,” he cried. “I didn’t think we could get them up to the right speed.”

“Run,” Sweeny yelled, “The core is going through an exponen-

tial increase in mass.”

“Can’t you stop it? Yomoko yelled as Monsoon headed for the door.

The door slid open, once again filling the hallway with the flashing emergency lights. Dr. Keizlowski jumped at the sudden noise, as did the Data-Tunnel supervisor, who had caught him shoving a length of wire into the guts of the vending machine and was standing with his hands on his hips, sternly admonishing the Dr. when the others burst out into the hallway.

Monsoon swept past them, screaming “Forget the chips, we’re approaching infinite mass.”

“Shit,” Keizlowski said.

“This would never happen at the Info-Dome,” Yomoko said as she followed, dragging with her the sobbing Dr. Spear.

Dr. Sweeny, too slow to switch off the power to the core, was the first one sucked into the gravity well. The rest of the doctors, though they made a valiant run for the upper surface, soon followed, but not before the vending machine was bent in half and pulled apart by its atoms, the bag of chips never letting loose of its grip on that spinning metal coil thing at the top of the machine.

CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



DIETRICH KALTEIS

Air Head

Dog flew out through the metal cubicle door, and he was rocking, body gyrating, spinning, arching his spine, boots hammering the floor. He whirled, shirttails flapping, the air guitar in his hands, a Gibson Flying V. His was yellow.

Dog shaking his hair, eyes catching his reflection, his show, playing for the mirrors mounted over the four sinks. Oh yeah, he had it. Go for gold. Bouncing down the line, his feet sliding along the lino floor. *Back in Black* blurted through his propellor lips, a patented lip thing he did. Fingers flying, blurring up the unseen fretboard. Mime on crack, Cirque de Soleil with a rock-and-roll bite.

Now the big finish. Sweat beaded, the hard work of rocking out. Anyone who thought it wasn't didn't know jack. The big leap, touch down and spin. He was in mid-knee drop when he saw them.

Eight grinning, aghast, stupid, preppy faces at the open door. Checker, the Newfie, Darl and some kids from science class. To them, they just witnessed an epileptic fit, an ictus of monstrous proportions, a body out of harmony with itself. Dougy Dog, bent on his knees in the middle of the second floor washroom, before the drain that smelled of wet farts from middle Earth. The kids turned to each other as if in congress, then laughter and twitters, hands clapping shoulders, knees, backs. Hugs, a riot, robbing them of equilibrium,

leaning on each other, on the door frame, rolling down the walls.

They don't get me. Dog rose, brushed at his jeans.

They applauded.

“You dickheads are destined to the fast food order microphones, maybe accountants at best.”

They quipped. “All hail, Dougy Dog.”

“Darl's your air groupie.” Checker roared and pushed the skinny girl forward, the Newfie simulating air fellatio. Darl reddened and quickly retreated away.

Back stage parties, a new town every night, and the girls, real girls. Oh yeah. Dog didn't need this shit; he rammed through them, tuning Checker out, thinking ahead to tonight's Aireoke. Did Hot Lixx put up with shit like this?

CAROLINE TAYLOR

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

My first impression of Philip, during his interview for the job, was that he was blessed with ignorance. Under similar circumstances, most of us, if we didn't happen to measure up in the knowledge department, would more likely feel cursed, or at least a tiny bit ashamed. But Philip was blessed, not with ignorance of facts or theories or how to raise funds for my foundation, or any of the ways of the world, but ignorance of the impact his physical appearance seemed to have on other people. On the George Clooney Scale of Drop Dead Gorgeous Men, Philip rated a 9.5. He had hair the color of a Kansas wheat field, gray-green eyes flecked with streaks of hazel, a voice like thick, dark molasses, a face like a Roman god, and a physique to match. Plus, his family was obscenely rich—which gave him excellent connections for the discreet arm-twist here and there.

“Why are you looking for work?” I couldn't help asking.

He rolled his eyes. “I'm broke.” And then he proceeded to explain how his father had rather old-fashioned notions about a young man supporting himself on the “sweat” of his brow. Oh, sure, Phil would one day inherit the family fortune, but his father was healthy, fit, and not likely to encounter the Grim Reaper anytime in this century.

Women seemed drawn to Phil like so many multicolored moths to an incandescent light. And even some men appeared to feel a bit uncomfortable in his presence—the way a guy would if he was just about to succeed in catching a babe’s eye when the real George Clooney walked into the room.

I myself was above such things. I was more mature, as they say in polite company, and therefore “out of the running.” And, although money can be a powerful attraction, I was immune. I had plenty, thanks to a generous, though hard-fought, divorce settlement.

So when Philip invited me out to dinner one evening, my first thought was that he just wanted to enjoy a quiet meal with a woman who might help keep swarms of adoring, often predatory, women at bay. It wasn’t a very logical thought, given my first impression of the man. Not only that, I was his boss, and I was fully aware that even guys who don’t have to earn a living by sucking up are still capable of doing so. We’d been working together for six months, long enough for him to notice that I was unattached. Besides, he was *irresistible*.

I formed my second impression of Philip after our dinner at Luigi’s where we were enjoying some pasta aioli along with a nice Chianti when a woman seated only two tables away from us burst into tears. Her boyfriend had just slipped a huge diamond ring onto her finger.

“What?” Philip raised an eyebrow. “She doesn’t like it?”

I laughed, my insides melting at the sound of his voice. “Of course, she does. Look how she’s turning it to catch the light. Isn’t that sweet?”

“She’s crying, for Chrissake.” He rolled his eyes. “I suppose that’s a girl thing, huh?”

“Woman.”

“Whatever. I hope *you* ’re not like that.”

I nearly spilled my wine. Why would Philip care? Had he completely forgotten I was the boss? I took a sip before replying. “Actually, I *am* like that. I cry over everything.”

Philip pursed his lips. I’d seen that look of mild disgust on the faces of a few of my friends, sometimes accompanied by a dismissive flap of the hand. Could it be that he was not blessed with ignorance but, rather, failed to notice the hordes of women buzzing around him because he simply didn’t like them? I chose not to pursue that chain of thought because it shouldn’t matter what he thought of women as long as he got them to write big checks for the foundation’s work. On the other hand, Philip had been treating me like a date, so wasn’t it human nature to hope he found me appealing? Even if I’d been rude enough to ask him what he thought of the so-called “fairer sex,” I figured he wouldn’t tell because, I kept reminding myself, it was None of My Business.

We should have ordered dessert or an after-dinner brandy because a coincidence of very poor timing had us walking out of the restaurant just as my ex jumped out of his Porsche, ran around to the passenger side, and offered his hand to a redheaded bimbo in a slinky silver dress that rode halfway up her long, model-thin thighs. She must have been more than half his age, her matching silver heels were twice as high as my comfortable leather pumps, and her shrieky, high-pitched giggles made my head throb in anguish.

The moment they disappeared into Le Chat Noir, where they would dance the night away while risking permanent hearing loss, I happened to spy my reflection in the Porsche’s window. It didn’t help that I was looking at something mildly distorted—something

that added pounds I was sure I didn't have, made my face look grayish and washed out, put raccoon-like shadows beneath my eyes, and flattened the hair on top of my head. Is that what Oliver had divorced? Yikes! I burst into tears.

Philip whipped out a snowy handkerchief and handed it to me. "Was it something I said?"

"No," I sniffled. "I told you. I'm just that way."

Philip took a step backward, probably to convey the notion to any curious passersby that he wasn't with me.

Three years and two divorce lawyers had passed, and it seemed I still wasn't over Oliver A. (for asshole) Wainwright. Talk about somebody blessed with ignorance. As long as Oliver hadn't known that I knew what he was up to, he'd figured everything between us was just fine. If I didn't ask, he felt no obligation to tell. He'd kept me tied up in anxious knots for three wasted years, wondering where he was, what he was doing, and who he was doing it with. He was a master of deceit—a person who could lie so convincingly, a polygraph wouldn't have revealed the truth. And why? Because Oliver Wainwright believed that whatever he was doing at the time, and whoever he was doing it with, were his business and no one else's. He felt no guilt. No remorse. Did not understand the meaning of the word "betrayal." And obviously did not regret, for one minute, the fact that we were divorced. The bastard.

I couldn't tell Philip why I was sobbing, not that he asked. I wiped my nose and shoved the sodden handkerchief at him.

He waved it away. "Keep it. Please."

I took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths and stuffed the hankie into my purse. If Philip cared one tiny bit, he would ask me what the trouble was. Or, even better, he'd put his arms around me

and give me a consolation hug—which, although highly inappropriate under the circumstances, might go a long way toward evening the score *if* Oliver happened to be anywhere nearby. Instead, Philip dropped me at my place, gave me a chaste pat on the shoulder, and said he'd see me at work.

Okay. I'd made a fool of myself in front of the second most beautiful man I'd ever met. In the process, I'd discovered that Philip might be intelligent, sophisticated, capable, cultured, amusing, wealthy, and a 9.5 on the Clooney scale, but he was also emotionally distant—and perhaps a tad bit misogynistic?

So, imagine my surprise when, two days later, Philip called to invite me to accompany him to an art exhibition at the Madame X Gallery. I decided it might be wise to upgrade my appearance in case I ran into Oliver again. I certainly did not want to make all those movie starlet-types who tended to gravitate toward Philip's sun get the impression that I might be his aunt or an elderly spinster sister.

I splurged on a calf-length silk dress with a slit up one side practically to my undies, a pair of open-toed stiletto heels, a facial, a manicure and pedicure, and a session with Randolphe designed to take inches off my split ends and years off my life.

In the mirror mounted on the closet door, I looked pretty spiffy, I don't mind saying. My efforts were rewarded by a complimentary once-over and an appreciative smile when Philip greeted me at the door.

Many of the paintings on display at Madame X's gallery were in the Edward Hopper mode—meaning a lot of them had a stark simplicity that positively radiated loneliness, longing, even anomie. As we wandered through the exhibition, moving from one depressing painting to another, our already attenuated conversation wilted and

then died. At one point, I could swear I heard Philip sigh. Which is more or less what I'd been trying not to do myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that his lips were crimped together, and his chin trembled ever so slightly. My own eyes began to tear up as I struggled to keep my emotions under control.

"Who did these?" I whispered, as one is often wont to do when viewing art.

"A friend of mine."

"Really? You actually know a real life artist?"

Philip's smile didn't make it all the way to his eyes. "Knew. That would be more accurate, I suppose, considering..." He jiggled the change in his pocket. "Seen enough?"

Not really, but I could tell Philip was anxious to leave.

Across the room, I noticed a tall, thin man with Asian eyes and straight black hair, surrounded by a coterie of attentive art lovers, one of whom gushed, "I just *love* your work!"

"Oh." I pointed. "Is that your friend?"

Philip and the Asian guy locked eyes, the way I'd seen in movies featuring gunslingers about to engage in a shootout. "Let's go," he said through clenched teeth.

Well.

On the way out the door, I snatched up a brochure about the exhibit and shoved it into my purse.

"Surely you're not going to buy one of those wretched paintings," said Philip.

"I don't know. Buying one might be just the way to spend some of the money I got from the div—" I put a hand up to my mouth and coughed. I hadn't told Philip about my personal life because he'd never asked. And, to be honest, a lot of men—even those who don't

care for women—think divorcées are, well, desperate.

Philip treated me to coffee at a little place called Java Joe's. While he placed the order, I gave the brochure a quick glance. The artist was named Ran Jao Hui, and the paintings I'd just seen were a bit pricey, even for me.

"I like your friend's stuff," I said to Philip as I dumped a packet of sweetener into my coffee. "But most of it is *so sad*."

"Mmmm." He took a tiny sip of his coffee. "He's had a sad life."

"Oh, dear. Is he a refugee or something?"

Philip's eyebrows shot up and I caught a glimpse of little fiery sparks simmering in the gray-green depths. He put his cup down rather hard, and some of the coffee sloshed out onto the table. "It's a long story."

I can be oblivious at times, but clearly that was a signal to drop the topic. I fiddled with my packet as the silence unspooled in ever widening circles around us. Even the people at the table next to us stopped their incessant babbling about the NBA draft.

The minute I got home, I Googled Ran Jao Hui and discovered that he was in his early thirties and that his art had been exhibited in New York, Chicago, and several European galleries. One curator, for lack of anything really illuminating to say, had commented that Ran's work "paid homage to Edward Hopper but from an Oriental perspective." Duh.

I thought about calling the Madame X Gallery to inquire further about Ran. But asking about the personal details of an artist's life would probably not get me very far. So, instead, I paid a second visit to the gallery. I went on a Sunday afternoon when I knew that Philip and everyone else in town with a Y chromosome would be watching the NFL playoffs.

I could hear voices emanating from a back room, but otherwise the place was deserted. I strolled through the gallery, looking for signs of “an Oriental perspective” in Ran’s paintings.

“... so puerile,” came a man’s voice from the back. “You can’t fool me.”

Another voice, one I recognized all too well, replied, “I wasn’t trying to.”

I crept closer.

“Then explain the arm candy.”

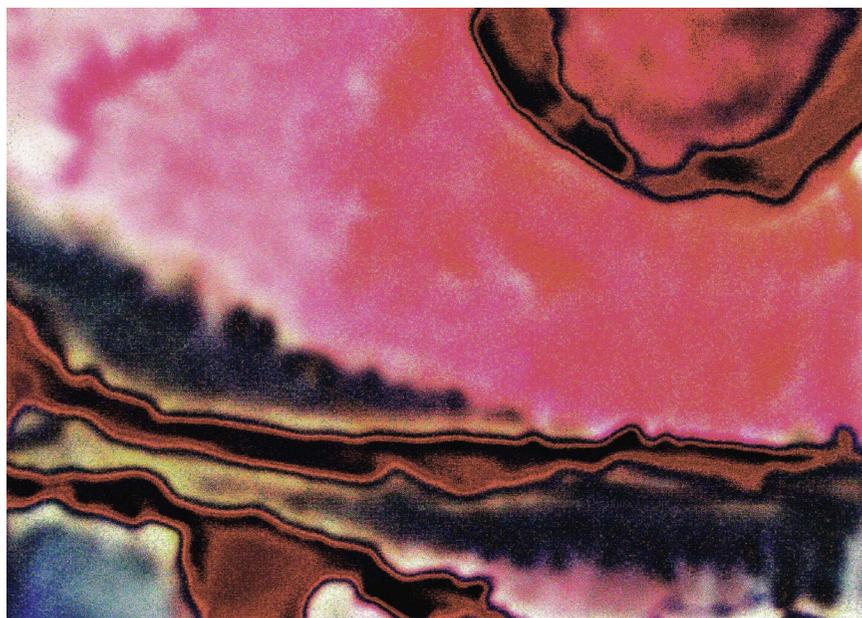
“That’s what you call a dried-up crone like *her*? Man, you need your eyes checked.”

This was followed by laughter—one voice high pitched and breathy and the other, a rich baritone. My blood pressure soared into the stratosphere as heat flooded my face. But no tears. I stood there, contemplating a bleak, boulder-strewn landscape titled “Aftermath.” Eventually, Philip emerged from the back room and jerked to a stop.

“It’s a good thing you know the artist,” I said, gesturing toward Ran’s painting, “because I doubt you’ll be able to afford one of these on unemployment.”

CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



ASHER ELLIS

Exit 7A

A flock of black birds took flight as Paul's station wagon approached the pile of road kill that lay in the opposite lane. The striped tail was the only remaining clue to the animal's species, which appeared to have been a raccoon. Upon seeing the highway carnage, Paul was immediately thankful he'd set off on his journey before the sun had set. It would make spotting any road-crossing critter that much easier, as well any lurking freeway patrolman.

Perhaps it was for this same reason that Paul had decided to stop for the hitchhiker just prior to the onramp. Under the midday sun, a stranger standing on the side of the road looks far less threatening than he would in the harsh beams of a car's headlights.

The hitchhiker was male and young— at least younger than Paul, who had just reached the thirty-year mark only a few months ago. The boy looked almost scholarly, wearing a corduroy jacket and a wire thin pair of glasses on his face. No doubt a student returning to campus after Thanksgiving break.

Although Paul was old enough to know that appearances can be deceiving, it was empathy that came out the winner of his decisional struggle. Paul too had not been able to afford a car while in school, and more than once he had found himself relying on the kindness of strangers. Besides, it was a busy day on a busy road that led to

a busy town. That fact alone would deter even a seasoned criminal from trying any funny stuff.

The boy picked up his messenger-style bag and quickly jogged to the vehicle's passenger door.

Paul hit the button to bring the window down. "I'm about to get on the interstate, southbound. Where you headed?"

The young man straightened his glasses. "Just down to exit 7A would be great. If you want, you could even drop me at the ramp so you don't have to get off."

Paul smiled. "Actually that's where I get off anyway. Hop in."

The kid grabbed his bag.

"So, you must be heading back to school, yes?" Paul had turned off the radio so he and the boy could have a conversation.

"No, I do not attend the university."

"You go somewhere else?"

"Yes. But it's out-of-state."

Paul waited for the boy to reveal which college he was referring to but the stranger said nothing more. Paul did not take insult though, for his companion was still very polite. It must've just been a matter of shyness.

"So then what brings you down this way?" Paul continued to talk to avoid the risk of awkward silence.

"Do you really want to know or are you just trying to be polite? Because I don't want you to feel as though you need to talk to me. I already find you very gracious for the ride."

The kid was sharp. He'd easily identified Paul's banter for what it was.

"No, really. I've been driving alone for a long time and would

love to talk to somebody other than myself. So yeah, I really want to know.”

“I’m going to kill someone who lives off of exit 7A.”

The moment of awkward silence that Paul had fought to prevent had now come. Paul would’ve never expected such a response and he found his only possible reaction was to chuckle to himself. You always hear to never pick up hitchhikers because you never know what wacko you might invite into your car. This was the first time Paul had ever ignored that advice, and look at where it had gotten him. But now Paul had to say something.

“Is that a fact?” Paul tried to play it cool. It wasn’t that difficult, as he still didn’t find the boy very intimidating.

“It is.”

“Do you always say things like that so casually?”

“I suppose I do when they’re so simple. It’s the reasons that are complicated.”

“Mind sharing?”

“I do. Unless you insist, but they are rather personal.”

Paul shook his head and rolled his eyes. If it wasn’t for the fact that this was all slightly entertaining, Paul would’ve probably kicked him out then and there. “That’s okay buddy. You can keep it to yourself.”

The young man stared at him. “You don’t believe me.”

Paul looked back at him. The boy showed no signs of anger. That was good. “Well, I have to think that if what you were saying was true, you wouldn’t tell me in the first place.”

“Why not?” The boy straightened his glasses again when he challenged Paul’s statement. A powerful sense of déjà vu hit Paul like an electrical spark. It was just like being back in a classroom.

“Because you’d be afraid I’d tell someone!”

“Who?”

“The police maybe?” Paul couldn’t believe he was still humoring this kid.

“But why would I be afraid of that? Even if you did go straight to the police, you don’t have a victim’s name, a motive, or even my name, now that I think of it.” There was a beat of silence. “It’s William, by the way.”

“Oh it is, huh? Well, Willy, my name is Paul. And I’d appreciate if you’d stop fucking with me and just sit there until we reach the exit.”

William turned back towards the road. “Of course. I’m sorry I upset you, Paul, but you’re the one who asked. My honesty is the only thing I have to give in return for this ride.”

Paul was aware of his temperature rising. “How about you and me go to the police station together? Then you can share some honesty with them. Ever think of that? I can spare the time if you can.”

“I believe I can. The man I’m after won’t be going anywhere. It would certainly delay my plans, but that’s all.”

Paul squeezed the steering wheel till his knuckles turned white. He thought about what William had said and could picture the whole thing. The kid was right. The only concrete evidence of a crime was hitchhiking, and for that Paul was just as guilty a party.

Finally, Paul thought of a comeback. “Hey, for all you know, I could be a cop myself. Ever think of that?”

“I can’t say that I did. But nothing about you would suggest that you are. And after all, I wouldn’t think a policeman would ever pick up a hitchhiker, even if he was off duty.”

No they wouldn’t, Paul thought. Of course not.

“Even if I’m not a cop, I could still do something! I mean if I believed you. I could try to stop you myself.”

“Could you?”

Paul could feel the boy staring at him again.

“What?”

“I’m asking if you think you could stop me.”

Paul practically choked on his words. “Do I think I could stop a scrawny, bookworm like you? Yeah, I think I could. I mean how much do you weigh? One fifty? One fifty-five?”

The young man shook his head. “No, you misunderstand me. I can see that you’re bigger than me. And I’m positive you could succeed at giving me a severe beating. But that’d only bruise me a bit, make me bleed a little maybe, and eventually I’d be able to pick myself up and do what I plan to do.”

“Well if you want to test that theory, you let me know right now!” Paul was yelling and could do nothing about it. They were also now exceeding the speed limit by twenty miles per hour.

“I don’t want to do that. I just wanted to know if you think you could stop me.”

Paul inhaled to roar another threat but the boy spoke again.

“I don’t think you could.”

Paul began to tremble. He tried to take long, deep breaths through his nose but it wasn’t working and the kid would not shut up.

“I wish you wouldn’t get so upset. I’m not trying to insult you. I’m just trying to prove a point. You didn’t believe someone would reveal they’re about to commit a murder so I’m doing my best to convince you otherwise. You shouldn’t take it so personally.”

Paul wanted to yell his words but found he could barely whisper. “I could stop you.”

“Again, I have to disagree. To do so you’d have to become a killer yourself, but you wouldn’t want to do that. The only thing you, or anyone, could do is punish me afterwards for my actions. But face it, sir, you can’t punish someone for a thought.”

The breaks of Paul’s station wagon suddenly let loose an almost deafening, drawn-out screech as Paul slammed his foot on the pedal. The distinct aroma of burning rubber invaded the interior of the car like a mushroom cloud.

“Get out of my car!” Paul screamed.

The boy calmly reached for the door handle. “No problem. I appreciate you taking me this far. But we both know I can still get to where I’m going on foot. This will only delay my actions for a little longer.”

Paul reached into the backseat and grabbed the kid’s bag which he violently threw at its owner’s face. “You sick fuck! Fuck you!” Tears ran down both of Paul’s cheeks. He reached into the middle console between the two front seats and revealed a .45 magnum. He pointed the gun at the chest of the young man.

“You see? I could’ve stopped you! Just like I could’ve stopped the psycho who killed my wife and all those other innocent people who just wanted their lunch!” Paul thumbed the hammer. The boy stood frozen, too scared to move.

Paul uncocked the weapon and placed it in his lap. “I could’ve stopped you...” He wiped the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his other arm. “Had I believed you.”

Paul shifted the car into drive and sped away. He began to cry again, far from the last of his tears.

William reached down and felt his crotch to make sure he hadn’t

pissed his pants. Thankfully, he hadn't. It would've been rather embarrassing returning to campus with a dark, wet streak running down his leg.

Retrieving his bag from the ground, William squinted ahead to see if he could still see the man's car but it had already vanished into the horizon. As he dialed for a friend to come pick him up, William had a moment of regret. He wished this particular man hadn't been the subject of his Psychology 201 project. The poor guy turned out to have enough problems as it was. Maybe, William thought, he should've just gone with his original idea of wearing two different mismatching shoes for a week and record people's reactions. It would've been far less harmful.

But that notion left his mind as soon as he thought of the "A" he was now sure to receive. And that, after all, was all that really mattered.

CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



TREY EDGINGTON

Burying Hobie Cat

The day I buried Marilyn's cat, I came in really hung over. Not that being hung over makes the day stand out; I usually was. I had recently left my wife due to a lack of sex and other crap I don't want to talk about. Anyway, Marilyn's cat, Hobie, had died the day before, and she had been crying on and off ever since. I was a little more concerned with my own problems and didn't really give the slightest fuck about Hobie, though I knew it was a life-altering event for a fifty-year-old lady with no kids. I walked into my office about fifteen minutes late and found the post-it note stuck to the computer screen with a list of tasks written on it.

Take eBay packages to the post office

Oil change in the Escalade

Panties at Neiman's

Dig Hobie Cat grave

The whole list pissed me off, but I sure as hell was in no mood to dig a cat grave, especially since it was a hundred and ten degrees outside. I walked into her office to complain.

"Marilyn, are you serious about the panties?" I said, trying to be nice about the cat.

"Well, yes, Todd. I ordered them last week, and I'm running out," she said, grabbing a tissue to blow her pretty, fake nose.

“Okay, fine, but I got stuff to do after work, so I don’t know if I’m going to be able to get to all that.” I noticed that the new stuffed leopard she’d shot in Africa had come in, but decided against commenting. He was mounted next to an eighteenth century French armoire that was painted pink and gold.

“Hobie Cat’s in the freezer.” She started bawling. “So I guess he can wait.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I can probably get it all done today.” I felt bad for her, even though on most days I didn’t like her too much I guess I sort of felt bad about Hobie Cat too. He was one of the cutest little bastards I’ve ever seen, doing back flips in the living room, catching imaginary birds. I stepped to the side of her desk and awkwardly put my hand on her shoulder, trying unsuccessfully to comfort her. She handed me the keys to her Cadillac and her American Express card, and I went to load the eBay packages.

Like I said, Marilyn Huckleberry was fifty years old, divorced, and had no children. What she did have was a salary of close to two hundred thousand dollars a year and a huge set of fake boobs. She was a CPA by trade but spent most of her time at the office selling antiques on eBay. You name it: milk glass, early twentieth century porcelain mammies, Wedgewood plates, Murano glass, Lalique crystal, the original Fiestaware, and all sorts of other bullshit. She spent five hundred dollars a week on the lottery and thousands a year on various plastic surgeries. She bought fifty dollar panties, five hundred dollar shoes, and jeans that cost a grand. I was privy to all these things because I was her personal assistant and the one who actually purchased most of them.

I was sweating my nuts off standing in line at the post office and getting more pissed off with every dipshit in front of me. That’s

when I saw this girl standing in the outer lobby looking through her mail. She was a brunette with hair commercial hair and a cheerleader smile. Her tits were Class A stripper and so was her ass. Her thong straps were poking out of her low-rider jeans, as if to say, “Hi, Todd. Pull us down.” She had a tiny curve to her stomach. Her Playboy Bunny belly button ring twinkled as the light through the blinds caught it in flashes. Jesus H. Christ, I was horny. At first, seeing her made me excited in an animal sort of way, but then I realized that I probably wouldn’t ever be getting a girl that looked like that again. The realization pissed me off—also in an animal sort of way.

As the line moved slowly on, my thoughts went to Hobie Cat. He had been diagnosed with feline leukemia a few months before, and every week, Marilyn had taken him down to the Vet school at Texas A&M. I had no idea what they did there, but I knew it cost a shitload of money. Marilyn had cut her lottery spending to only two hundred a week. He was barely a year old, still mostly kitten, and I didn’t really think it was fair. Then again, nothing was.

“Sir, you’re next,” the guy behind me said.

“Oh, shit. Sorry about that.” By the time I got done at the counter, the girl I’d seen in the lobby was nowhere to be found, not that I would have done anything anyway.

I read an old issue of *Spa* magazine at the Sewell Cadillac dealership where I was getting the oil changed and drank some burnt coffee. Right in the middle of reading an article about gem therapy, my stomach started churning. Seconds later, I knew that it wasn’t a false alarm. I walked straight to the bathroom and almost knocked over an old man as he came out of the stall. From the smell of it, he wasn’t feeling well either. When I was finally done, I had to wash my face and my hands. The car was done, and I was on my way to

Neiman Marcus at Prestonwood.

I hated going to Neiman's for a few reasons. First, there was a bunch of shit there I couldn't afford. What makes that even more disturbing is that I didn't even want most of it. I just wished I could afford it. Secondly, there are a bunch of snooty-ass salespeople looking at you like you can't afford it. I guess that sort of goes with the first one, but the fact is that they probably couldn't afford it either without their discount. Finally, there was the panty section. I don't know what it is about the panty section, but it drives me totally insane. I look at the panties and bras and wonder what they are going to look like on the women who eventually buy them. In my head, they always look good. Better than good. They look wet-dream, porno good. I start picturing all sorts of scenes in which I'm having a crazy affair with rich, North Dallas women in the houses their husbands are still paying for. The really sick part is that sometimes I do this at the grocery store on the tampon aisle sometimes. I start wondering what kind of vaginas all those things are going to be going into. In my head they are always super-perfect vaginas—the kind you imagine but never see. I've got some serious issues. Anyway, I was really, really horny at that point and trying not to think about my ex-wife.

On the way up the escalator, I could smell the perfume and makeup from the counters below me and almost lost it. The generic woman smell was not what my over-active imagination needed. I got those thoughts out of my head and continued towards the panty section. Because I wasn't in the mood for any of the fantasies, I tried not to see the panties, keeping my eyes on the floor as I walked through the evil Neiman's panty section. Though I was unsuccessful for the most part, I got to the counter without flipping out, paid for

her crap, and left.

When I got into my car, I had to see what she had bought this time. Usually, it was some crazy see-thru thongs, the piece of cloth being barely bigger than a quarter. This was always shocking because of her age and all, but I always had to look—just to see. Almost like a kid at a birthday party, I opened the box and pulled back the tissue paper. My hands were shaking from both excitement and hangover. Finally, I saw the craziest shit to date. It was a set of thigh highs and a garter belt. There was a bra with the nipple section cut out. *Who in the hell is she going to wear that for?* A normal person would never know that Neiman's sold shit like that, and I wished I didn't. I put the stuff back in the box and went to get lunch.

Back at the office, I ate lunch at my desk. When I finished, I went into Marilyn's office to see if she wanted to talk. We had a weird relationship. She would make me copy a whole antiques price book so she wouldn't have to carry the original to estate sales. After I would get done, she would tell me what a great job I'd done, like I was some fucking retard who just learned how to run a copier instead of a grown man in college.

Other times we got along pretty good. She would buy me lunch at some really nice place, and we would talk about nothing in particular. She gave me odd jobs when I needed the money and paid for my groceries when I went shopping for her. Sometimes she gave me odd jobs at her house when I *didn't* need the money. I would file stuff, she would work on the computer, and we'd watch *Wheel of Fortune* on the little TV in her office. After the first commercial break, she'd make Rotel cheese dip, which meant we didn't have to pretend to work anymore. Usually, after *Wheel*, I would go home, unless some particularly interesting movie was coming on. I guess

she sort of paid me to hang out, but I was pretty lonely too and didn't mind. We were both divorced, so I guess I thought she understood, though we never talked about it. When I was going through tough times, she would send me on errands that lasted all day and amounted to almost nothing. One time she sent me to check every store in town for prices on this one Calphalon pot. I liked doing stuff like that most of the time because I could just drive around and not have to talk to anyone.

She was on the phone with the company's attorney when I went in there, so I headed over to her house to start digging. She told me to dig the grave between the two big crepe myrtles next to the fence. Though it was a good five feet from where I had dug Winnie's grave a few years before, I was still worried that my shovel would find her little doggie coffin.

She had two shovels and a pick by the garage door, and a pair of women's gardening gloves sitting on the counter. I thought about looking at Hobie in the freezer, but decided against it. I guess I kind of loved that little sucker too. He was a sweet little bastard, the kind of cat who rubs on your leg when you come home and doesn't need too much. He was tough, too. One time, when he was chasing a bug through her house, he slammed his little head into the wall when he couldn't stop fast enough on the hardwood floor. He looked over at us, shook his head, licked himself, and walked into the kitchen as if nothing had happened. Sadly, he hadn't been as playful in the last few months, but I'm sure he fought as hard as he could.

I thought I was sort of in the mood for digging when I got there. It would be nice to do something physical and get something real done. I pictured the shovel going in easy, like in the movies, with barely any pressure from my foot. Maybe an hour's worth of work.

That's what I was thinking when I took my shirt off and carried the stuff out back. Looking at the ground, I remembered that the soil was solid clay with some chunks of chalk mixed in.

I scraped off the top layer of St. Augustine and the soft soil an inch below that, making a neat rectangle that would fit the kitty casket. At that point the shovel became useless. I picked at the clay for about fifteen minutes, switching hands when one side of my back would start to hurt. It was hot as fuck, and I could smell beer in my sweat. Blisters were forming on my hands. I shoveled the chunks of clay and chalk out the best I could, making a pile next to Winnie's grave. I repeated this process for forty-five minutes or so.

I noticed myself in her window and wondered when my arms had become decent again. I had been working out, but I was drinking every day and eating almost nothing. Of course they were a little pumped from the digging, but they were even more cut than I thought. I was thinking I was looking pretty sexy, all tan and buff in my wife beater with dirt smudges on my arms and shirt. Then the part of my brain that still worked said, "Stop looking at yourself, you egomaniac. You ain't no goddamn Brad Pitt." (That part of my brain apparently wasn't paying attention in English class.)

Looking longingly at the pool, I adjusted my junk and told myself to work. I continued picking and digging for another hour until Marilyn came home. As I stood looking at the hole that was now two feet deep, she brought me a bottle of Evian.

"How's it going?"

"I'm about half way there," I said. "You wouldn't happen to have any more gloves?" I showed her the bloody spots on my palms, hoping she would decide to give me a raise.

"I sure don't," she said, taking my hands. "I'm sorry."

“How about tape?”

“Tape, I have,” she said as she rubbed a smudge of clay from my forehead.

I followed her inside, wondering why she was being so touchy with me. I noticed that her tits were looking particularly good and started wondering. Then, thankfully, the working part of my brain told me to stop it. She pulled out the first aid kit from under the kitchen sink and handed me the tape.

“Do you need any gauze?”

“No thanks.” I put the tape across the palms of both hands and rings of it around my thumbs.

As I started back outside, she said, “If you need anything, just let me know.” She was giving me this look that she’d only given me once before when I’d changed the battery on her old Vette. Like there was something she wanted to say, but had already decided not to. It was one of those looks you give a person to get them to ask you why you are looking at them like that. I wasn’t asking.

The sun felt good after being in the house. I picked up the pick and continued busting up the clay. I looked up at the window again and noticed that Marilyn was watching me through the glass. I looked back down and kept digging. She was arranging small, porcelain, antique Santas in a display case. After a while, I got the idea that she was getting all hot, looking at me through the window, but then the not-so-egomaniac part of my brain told me that she was probably just lonely or something. I still wondered though. *What if?*

I kept digging for another hour or so, trying not to look up at the window, except when I had to adjust myself. I waited until she wasn’t looking to do that. My arms and back weren’t hurting anymore, and it felt good. Finally, the hole was deep enough, and I

went inside to tell her. This was the part that I *really* wasn't looking forward to. I would rather dig a thousand cat graves than watch one lonely woman put her cat in one.

I walked in the door leading to the kitchen, but before I could say anything, she called my name from the other room. I told her to hold on while I took my boots off. I walked into her sunken living room and she wasn't there.

"Marilyn, where are you?"

"I'm in here." The sound was coming from her bedroom.

I walked in and saw her in the bathroom. She had changed out of her blue, silk tank top and dress slacks and was now wearing a t-shirt tied in the back and blue jean shorts. There were tiny blue veins near her ankles, but everything else looked okay. She smelled like baby powder. Things were about to happen, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

"Can you get that plant down?" she said, pointing to an ivy above her bathtub. "I can't reach it." I stepped into the tub and up onto the edge near the wall. As I reached up for the pot, I felt her hand on my back. "I don't want you to fall," she said. Then her other hand was on my stomach where my shirt had come up. I grabbed the small pot, and her hand went down the front of my pants. My stomach went with her hand like it does every time a new girl sticks her hand down there. I stepped down and put my head against the tile, letting her keep going as long as she wanted to. I looked into her closet and focused on pair of pink, high-heeled shoes. She was kissing my back and still rubbing. The air conditioner was blowing on me, evaporating the sweat and giving me goose bumps. I was a little freaked out, but didn't know how to stop it, and it felt nice to be touched again.

"Lay down," she said. I think I said okay and lay down in the

tub. She pulled my tank top off and then my pants. She put a condom on me and took the tape off my hands. She gently kissed my blisters, and put me inside her. That sounds dumb, but I don't want to say we started fucking or banging or she started to ride this dick. She simply put it in there and lay down on me. I rubbed her back as softly as I could. She was crying quietly, and the tears tickled as they rolled down the side of my chest. I don't know why she was crying, but I don't really think it was all about Hobie.

The whole thing made me start thinking about my wife and all the mean shit she'd said. I knew it was bullshit, but for some reason, I held on to it. I guess I thought the pain made it real or worthwhile or something. I really just wanted to run—to go home and drink beer, watching MASH and not thinking about any of it. I knew I couldn't. I couldn't let her finish burying him alone.

Finally, she got up and walked to the little toilet room next to her closet without saying anything. I didn't know what the hell to do at this point, so I put my clothes back on and the semi-used rubber into my pocket. I walked into the kitchen and got a beer out of the refrigerator. I'd never had a beer at her house.

I put my boots back on, sitting on the kitchen floor and wondered what the fuck would happen next. I decided to start the funeral by myself and walked out into the garage to grab Hobie out of the freezer. His fur felt crispy through the bag, like cold Christmas decorations. I carried him out to the gravesite and laid him down in the coffin. He was still in the bag. His little head was poking out now, and the frost on his whiskers was melting fast. I smoked a cigarette, finished the beer, and waited for Marilyn.

Finally, she came out, looking like nothing had happened.

“You got him ready?” she asked, putting her hair in a scrunchy.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t want to look at him anymore.”

“Okay,” I said, putting the lid on the casket and the Velcro straps around it.

“Todd, can you say something?”

“Say something?” I asked.

“You know, like a prayer or something about heaven.”

I couldn’t remember a damn thing to say to Jesus about Hobie going to heaven. Not even the ashes to ashes stuff. Finally, I remembered my grandmother saying, “Just talk to him.”

“Uh, Jesus,” I said, grabbing Marilyn’s hand. “We hope that you will see to it that little Hobie here has a good time in kitty heaven.” I paused. “He was a good kitty, and he never crapped on the floor. He was more than just a kitty though. He was our friend. And, Jesus, can you please help us through this tough time? I know that you and your old man do stuff that we can’t understand, like taking little Hobie, but please help us to work through whatever pain we have. We may not know why it hurts, but it sure as hell does. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

I didn’t believe in anything at that point, but the prayer felt sort of real.

I started to cover Hobie’s casket with dirt, and Marilyn went in to make Rotel dip. I got as much dirt on top of him as I could, put her tools away, and walked inside to say bye.

“Marilyn, I’m gonna head home. You need anything else?”

“No. Thank you. I’ll be fine,” she said, dipping a plain Dorito into the cheese dip.

I was halfway out the door when she stopped me.

“Todd?”

“Yeah?”

“None of this ever happened.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean none of it. None of it ever happened.”

“No, nothing ever happens.” I said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I think she meant something about the nature of reality, like nothing ever really happens, but I’m not sure. Maybe that’s what gets her through. I kind of wondered what got me through or if I was getting through at all.

Pulling out of her driveway, I decided not to start some bullshit, philosophical discussion with myself. It was better just to get drunk and figure it out later. I stopped at the corner store near her house and got an 18-pack. I drank three before I got home.

MIKE COOMBES

Cuba!



CLARA NATOLI

Untitled



STEPHEN HILL

The Sleepover

David stared at Ryan's back, following his friend cautiously as the two 11-year-old boys tiptoed across the living room. Whatever he was about to see, he thought to himself, it had to be good.

Moonlight filtered through the drapes over the living room window, warping their shadows across the walls and ceiling. Ryan's Dad hadn't made a peep in over an hour, but Ryan was still moving as if the slightest noise might set off a bomb. Even the swish of his pajama clad legs coming together had prompted him to walk with his skinny legs swinging in a wide awkward gait that almost made David laugh out loud.

Of course, this wasn't going to be acceptable.

Over the several minutes it had taken the two boys to walk down from Ryan's room, Ryan had looked back at David several times, one skinny finger jammed down over his mouth and his eyes narrowed in a silent demand. David had shrugged each time, accepting the request with mounting frustration. After all, he never quite knew what he had to shut up about. Ryan's house may have not been that large—it was a lot smaller than where he lived—but David figured it would still take a lot more than the creak of a floorboard or two to wake up anybody at one in the morning.

Besides, there was only Ryan's dad to worry about—his mom

had left Ryan's father almost a month ago. A short pretty lady with strawberry blonde hair and freckles, she had the same strange yellow eyes Ryan had, and always smelled of vanilla. Although she spoke so quickly she would often stumble on her own words, her soft voice meant David had to strain to hear her. Once, when David and Ryan had been trudging home from school, David had mentioned he couldn't picture Ryan's mom yelling. "You should come over late at night sometime," Ryan had replied quietly, his eyes sweeping the grit on the sidewalk.

A month later, Mrs. Mergel had moved out of the house, and she now lived several blocks away with Ryan's aunt.

At the far end of the living room, the boys stood at the base of a massive piece of furniture composed of numerous drawers and cabinet doors. A bureau, entertainment unit and filing cabinet all in one, it was a plethora of hard oak angles fastidiously sanded and polished.

Ryan turned to David, leaning in so that even in the dim light, David could see his eyes bulging with nervous excitement. Unfortunately, David could also smell the Nacho Cheese Doritos Ryan had ravenously wolfed down less than an hour earlier. As Mr. Mergel would be as likely to buy junk food as gouge his own eyes out, David had snuck the chips in at the bottom of his bag as a sleepover snack.

"Keep an eye on the stairs," Ryan whispered.

"Nobody's coming," David protested. "Your dad's been asleep for—"

"Just keep an eye on them!" Ryan fired back.

David blushed and wheeled around, fixing his eyes on the stairs. Ryan was almost half a foot shorter than David, yet right now, with

his fiery stare and commanding stance, there was no question about who was in charge.

Then again, there usually wasn't, David silently admitted to himself.

In school, David Baggett was always one of the first picked for any sport in gym or on the playground, and his good looks already had girls stealing second glances for reasons they couldn't quite pinpoint. Ryan Mergel however, was a frail, nervously twitching body carried by spindly legs and topped by a mop of black, bristly hair corkscrewing everywhere at once. David always stuck up for his friend at every turn however, because after school, Ryan was the man.

Most kids didn't know it, but Ryan had courage nobody else his age had, and when he had something to show you, it was always worth your time. Whether it was how to scramble up onto Ms. Tobias's roof in less than ten seconds, the num-chucks he had cobbled together using the ends of broom handles and a bicycle chain, or the shortcut through Ted Morris's backyard giving you a picture perfect view of Stacey Miller's bedroom window. And since Ryan's mom had left, he'd gotten even more daring. It was all—as Ryan so frequently muttered—“too wicked.”

So when Ryan pulled David aside on Thursday afternoon at recess, promising something “unbelievable” if he slept over Friday night, David knew it had to be cool. It was just as much what he said as how he said it, his yellow eyes intense, and one hand jittering nervously as he combed back his mop of unruly hair.

As David continued to stare at the staircase on the other side of the room, he heard a drawer slide smoothly out on its rollers behind him, and a sheaf of papers rustled. A moment later, a thin finger

tapped him on the shoulder, and David turned to see Ryan gingerly opening a small box that looked barely big enough to hold a pencil.

Ryan flipped it open, and his wide eyes lit up.

“Too wicked,” he said softly.

“So what’s it for?”

Ryan ignored the question, craning his neck to stare up at twin cabinet doors on the top tier of the bureau.

“Up there?” whispered David. “We’re going to need a chair or something if...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Ryan was shoving a plush ottoman over from the foot of the living room lazy boy. “You’re the tall one,” he whispered, wedging it against the wooden base.

“So I’m getting something out of the top cabinet?”

Ryan nodded, placing something in David’s palm. “The left one.”

David stared down at a tiny key gleaming under a shaft of moonlight, then followed Ryan’s gaze back up to the cabinets, spotting the keyhole at the bottom of the left cabinet door.

“Inside, you’ll see a shoebox about this big,” Ryan continued, and held his hands apart about a foot. “There won’t be anything else in there.”

David climbed up, slipped the key into the lock, turned it, and smiled at the give of the latch just before the door swung open. Reaching inside, he pulled a metallic looking box out of the cabinet eagerly. The box immediately wobbled, teetering off of David’s palm.

“Careful,” Ryan hissed.

David slapped his second hand over it, halting its descent. “No sweat,” he smirked, and stepped onto the carpet while balancing the

container in both hands.

“Just put it on the floor,” Ryan whispered, stealing a glance over his shoulder.

David did as he was told, getting down on his knees and putting the box down cautiously in front of them. Leaving several smudged prints on its steel surface, his eyes settled on a small lock sealing the split between its lid and body.

“Aw, crap!” David exclaimed. The more obstacles they came across, the sweeter the mysterious treasure seemed. “Do you have another key?”

Ryan squinted at the lock. “Don’t need one,” he whispered. He swiftly opened another bureau drawer and pulled out a paper clip. Plunking down beside the box, he jammed it in the tiny keyhole, jiggled it back and forth, and the lock popped open.

They were in.

Ryan’s hands caressed the box’s surface, as if savoring the moment—or anticipating an awful backfire. He licked his lips, peering at David with a smile that boosted David’s nervous excitement to the point of pain.

“All right,” muttered David. “Open it up already!”

Ryan nodded, lifting the cover back. Sliding back smoothly, it seemed to glide on its hinges.

Veiled in darkness, for a second all that was visible was a swath of red velvet cushioning nothing but a shadow. Then Ryan slid the box further forward, bathing it in the glow from the window...and David saw.

“Holy shit,” he muttered under his breath.

Polished curves of sleek, smooth metal gleamed out at the children—heralding the appearance of a .357 Magnum revolver.

“Your dad’s?” David asked.

“For now,” said Ryan. He reached into the box, scooping out the gun from its soft red nest. “We’ve had it for two weeks, but I only found out where my dad was keeping it on Wednesday.”

He hefted the gun awkwardly by the handle. “Heavier than it looks,” he whispered under his breath.

David’s eyes fixed on the slick metal nozzle, curved trigger, and the handle’s grooved rubber grips. This was not soft plastic or something chipped from wood, this was the real deal. He could almost smell the coppery odor of metal.

As David reached out automatically, Ryan’s eyes narrowed. His palms white-knuckled the handle and yanked it away.

“Come on, I just wanted to look at it,” David whined. He didn’t like how his voice sounded, but he couldn’t help it.

Ryan hesitated, a tiny smile pulling up one corner of his mouth, and the gun swung back...until the barrel was aimed directly at David’s face.

David’s breath caught in his throat. “What are you doing?”

Ryan didn’t say a word, but the tiny smile blossomed into a grin, and a trembling thumb arched over the hammer, cocking it back with a CLICK.

Ryan’s eyes narrowed into slits, and his lips curled down in a sneer. “Get your ass on the ground,” he purred. “Or it’ll never see daylight again.”

“Quit goofing around!” David blurted.

Ryan snickered. “Relax, it isn’t loaded or anything.”

“Well in that case...”

David tore the gun from Ryan’s hand, almost dropping it at once. “Geez, this is heavy!”

“I told you!”

David hoisted it upright with both hands, stretching it out at arm’s length, the nozzle barely an inch from Ryan’s forehead. He carefully hooked one finger over the trigger, and it was all he could do to not to yell at the top of his lungs.

“Freeze!” he blurted.

“Shhhh...” Ryan whispered. “I’m dead if my Dad finds us with this!”

With a real live gun clasped in his hands, David had to agree that Ryan was probably right. Mr. Mergel always seemed pretty strict—not surprising considering he was sort of a teacher. A *University Drama Professor* is how Ryan’s Dad had corrected David, often telling the boys things like “it is through the art of acting that we can see ourselves.”

David never could quite figure out what he was talking about, but he never dared say that to Mr. Mergel’s face. Not only was he a teacher, and not only was he dead serious, but he was big. Way taller than David’s dad, and more muscular too, with shoulders that pumped out shirts David imagined his class could camp in.

“What made your Dad buy a gun anyway?”

“It was Granddad’s,” Ryan replied. My dad’s been hanging onto it since the funeral, and on Monday it’s going to my uncle. “If my mom ever found out it was here, she’d be pissed.”

David couldn’t help but think how weird the word ‘pissed’ sounded alongside a mention of Mrs. Mergel. He thought of her offering up vegetable slices or strange grainy cookies, talking all the time in the quiet voice of hers. But then David remembered the tone in Ryan’s voice when he’d asked about her yelling, and how he didn’t say anything else the whole way home. Even so, it was

bizarre to think of her angry, let alone bawling Ryan out. Thinking of Mr. Mergel doing the same thing though? That was easy.

Pushing the thought to the back of his mind, David raised the gun back up. He squeezed one eye shut while squinting the other, peering down the barrel as he swung his aim across the expanse of the living room. Past Ryan. Past the couch. Past the chairs and the mammoth bureau. Past the pictures on the walls. Past almost everything...

Until he was staring straight at Mr. Mergel, huge and furious at the bottom of the stairs.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mr. Mergel screamed. In the dark room, his face was a grey sphere, his mouth a black hole.

The lights snapped on, and Ryan snatched the gun from David. Holding it behind his back, he kicked the open box across the carpet as Mr. Mergel came for them, eyes squeezed into slits.

“Dad,” Ryan managed. In spite of the light, his eyes bulged out of his skull, but his voice held steady.

Mr. Mergel loomed over both of them. So like his son’s, his thick black hair stood out in great bed-pressed spirals, uncoiling like broken springs off his skull. The red lips of a crimson bathrobe hung open over a mottled slab of pale flesh.

“Give me the gun now,” he snapped, his voice graveled by sleep.

The gun remained where it was—behind Ryan’s back.

“Dad, we were just looking at—“

“I said give me the gun!”

The tone was cold and furious, but beneath it was something else, and when Ryan’s father held his hand out...David saw his palm was shaking.

But why? David thought. Why would Ryan’s father be so scared

if the gun wasn't even loa-?

Oh no. A frigid fist wrapped itself around David's heart and squeezed, pumping ice through his body.

Not waiting a second more, Mr. Mergel clamped down on Ryan's wrists. Blue veins heaved like serpents along the back of his hands, and still Ryan hung on.

"Just a second," Ryan muttered, his voice so mild he could have been arguing for more TV time. "I just need it for a second."

The gun's barrel jumped back and forth. One moment it was leveled at David's chest; the next it was tracking the ceiling. Clusters of fingers squirmed across the handle like maggots on rotting meat.

It could go off any second, David thought. It could go off *any second* and then...

"Let go," he gasped, his voice no louder than the hiss of a snake. Now the gun's barrel was shoved into Mr. Mergel's chest, the nozzle smothered by his housecoat.

"Stop it," David managed, his voice a cracked whine.

Cold steel jammed against Ryan's ribcage, hard enough to bruise it.

"STOP IT!" David screamed, finally finding his voice. "The gun's loa—"

BLAM!

The blast tore through the living room. David's hands slapped his ears, and his shocked legs scissored backwards, tripping him over and dropping him to the carpet.

So loud! David's mind screamed in a panic, over and over. *So loud so loud so loud so loud so loud so loud...*

He stared up at Ryan, no longer seeing the gun, just the two of them, father and son staring at one another—stock-still. Their

shapes and shadows were lit as if in the frame of a snapshot: pale Ryan with his odd yellow eyes and thin lips, Mr. Mergel with eyes wide and haunted, and erratic splotches of stubble coating his face like buckshot. A thin haze of smoke lay over them, and a familiar smell clogged David's nostrils. *Fireworks? It smells like fireworks?*

Mr. Mergel's chin sagged forward, as if in sympathy or prayer, and he stared down at the chest of his son's too-large t-shirt. Ryan's gaze followed his father's, then down to the gun they both clutched with stiff fingers.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Mergel, and slumped to the floor.

Sprawled on his back, Mr. Mergel's bathrobe yawned over his fish-white torso, made even paler by a ragged red hole punched into his gut and drooling blood.

David stared up at Ryan. His friend's face fell under the shadow of his hair, and the gun was still clutched in his hand. One of his bare feet began to tremor, and his heel tapped a disjointed rhythm on the carpet.

"Ryan," David said, the sound of his voice louder than the gun blast in his ears. "Ryan, are you okay?"

Ryan's narrow shoulders pulled back and his skinny chest drew out, ironing out the folds and wrinkles of his t-shirt, and driving his posture ramrod straight.

"I'm good," Ryan said. He turned towards David, his yellow eyes clear, his face relaxed. Thin wisps of grey rose from the barrel, anointing his face with smoke. "Too wicked."

"Too wicked?"

"Yep." A huge grin split Ryan's face, and he pointed the gun at the front door. "Now let's go find my mom."

MIKE COOMBES

Bubbleman



ADAM GRAUPE

The Weasel

I worked the front counter of the Department of Motor Vehicles and looked over at a weasel sitting behind his desk. He wore a plaid suit about three sizes too small, had long whiskers, and nibbled at a chicken. Something about the weasel depressed me, but I could never put my finger on why he made me feel this way. He was easy enough to get along with but it was as if he wasn't there as a person. Well, of course, he wasn't a person. He was a seventeen-inch tall weasel but that didn't stop the DMV from hiring him. Anyway, the weasel's phone rang and he answered. He spoke in hushed tones and after he hung up, he shimmied over to me while I administered an eye test to a 70 year old.

The weasel told me his daughter was ill at school and he had to leave to pick her up. It was three hours to close on a Friday with no one else in the office, but I felt bad and said, "Go ahead and leave for the day." The line was ten people deep, and I noticed through the front window that the weasel had his fishing boat attached to his Silverado as he sped out of the lot. A customer cursed me out for the long line and yelled, "It's the fishing opener, and I want to get the hell out of here! Why are you guys always short staffed at this branch?"

Monday arrived and the weasel sauntered in twenty minutes

late, and he had a rabbit's head sticking out of his lunch bag.

I asked the weasel, "How is your daughter doing?"

He looked confused and said, "What are you talking about?"

"You left work early to pick up your daughter, remember?"

"Oh, you mean my girlfriend's daughter, but I think of her as my daughter."

"I thought you were married." I said, starting to wonder about the weasel.

"No, we split last year. Wait a minute, are you insinuating that I left work early to fish?" I didn't say anything. He pushed himself back from his desk and said, raising his voice at me, "You are unprofessional!"

"I was just asking about your daughter." Damn, I hated coworkers sometimes. "Look, I wasn't insinuating anything. Just forget it." Two hours later, my phone rang and a woman from the State Audit Board had some questions for me. She sounded like she had cotton balls in her mouth while she explained that they flagged me for not meeting my quota for applications processed in April. Each employee used his or her own stamper to stamp his or her employee number on each application processed to get credit for each piece of work. She said I would receive a write-up from my supervisor and be placed on probationary status.

I returned to my window at the front counter and waded through the slush: boat titles, moped titles, car tabs, and so forth for hours. Five o'clock arrived and I took my pile of forms to the blue zipper bag the courier picked up nightly for delivery to state headquarters. Suddenly, I noticed that the top form in my pile had the weasel's employee number on it. I searched through the rest of the applications and all but two had the weasel's employee number. It dawned

on me: sometime during the day, he had switched stampers with me, and I was using his stamper on all of the forms I processed. He got credit for all of my work while he sat at his computer most of the day web surfing or drooling over www.weaselupskirts.com.

I walked to the weasel and said, "Let me see your forms."

He elbowed his coffee cup and coffee spilled over and soaked the two forms he had on his desk. The ink from the stamp smeared making my employee number on his forms illegible.

I said, "How long have you been switching stampers with me to get credit for my work?"

"What are you talking about? Do you feel okay?" He smiled.

I walked to the security camera recorder, removed the VHS tape, and put it into the VCR player in the meeting room. I rewound the tape saw that at ten a.m., he switched stamps with me and at five p.m., he switched them back. Long story short, I turned the weasel in to the state board for using my employee number, and they immediately fired him.

I thought life would be okay from then on for me at the DMV, and it was, until two weeks later when I met the weasel's replacement: a high yellow. She was a giraffe with doe eyes that wore a short skirt and had black-stocking covered legs that went on forever. She was trouble all right, but at least she was a different kind of trouble.

JOEL FROHLICH

The Knight and the Angel

I'm not sure why I'm writing this. I'm not sure who'll ever read it. Maybe Martians or Uranusites will find it one day—if so, thank God they can't read English, because what I'm writing speaks worse of the hum an race than anything ever written. If those illiterate Uranusites do find this one day, I guess I should just be glad *something* is left to prove that human beings existed other than Twinkies and condoms.

This all happened one day while I was at school. I am—I was—a tenth grader at Florence Nightingale High School. For the longest time, I swear to God I thought a Florence Nightingale was a species of bird. The girl who told me Florence Nightingale was a famous nurse in Victorian England, June Crowley, is an angel in disguise, sent on a secret mission by Yahweh to save humanity from its misery. Shhh! It's a secret. Her parents probably don't even know.

Right now, that angel is dying on the floor of a mucky warehouse that smells like a fish morgue as her hair falls out from radiation sickness. She's in good company: about two thousand other people, young and old, rich and poor, are dying right alongside her, on the same mucky floor.

I lied: I don't really believe in angels. Not anymore.

Do you want to know what I was thinking about the minute be-

fore the flash went off? Well, I might as well be honest. After all, my candor will just be twenty-six varieties of lines and squiggles to the illiterate Uranusites who find this. The minute before the flash went off, as I slumped in my chair like a sick doll and took autopilot chemistry notes, my hand serving as my eyes' unconscious secretary, I was thinking about June, about the AP World History project on Florence Nightingale we'd worked on together, about the nippy day in March I'd gone to her house to work on that very project and gotten snowed in for seven hours there, and about the conversations we'd had while it snowed about teachers and school and history, and about her intoxicatingly childish laugh that went so well with her maturity, and how her eyes looked like those velvety pools of chocolate they show in Godiva ads. I really wanted it to snow again. I'd been classically conditioned to get high off the sight of snow as if it were cocaine, though I had a fat chance of seeing any now that it was June. You know, the month of June. Not the girl June.

I've been raised in the Jewish faith, but I know the Christian faith believes that God sent His son to Earth. Well, right as the flash went off, I thought maybe Heaven had opened up. I thought maybe Jacob's Ladder was being deployed into Florence Nightingale High School for June to climb back up into Heaven, where she came from. But then, a very different thought entered my mind: I thought God was sending our sun, S-U-N, to Earth. As in, a G2 class star, a ball of hot gas 870,000 miles in diameter, landing right in our twenty-person classroom. I know. I'm dumber than a retarded fish.

The first thing I can remember after the flash is our chemistry teacher leaping under her desk and shielding her neck with her arms. She's ancient—a fossil almost—so she probably grew up with those *Duck and Cover* videos, back when people actually expected this

sort of shit to happen any day.

Thing is, the students' desks are just little shoddy flaps of wood attached to a plastic chair. They probably wouldn't protect us from an angry cat. So after our fossil of a teacher leaped under her ginormous, steel enforced monster of a desk, I dived in after her. Not only that, but I toppled the desk over on its side, placing a barrier between the windows on the other side of the room, from whence the flash came, and us. Then all Sheol broke loose. A hurricane ripped through the room. Something hit the teacher's monster of a desk really hard, probably one of our little shoddy desks.

When it finally got quiet again, I asked my teacher if she was all right. She wept into her frail hands but said she was all right. I then got up from behind her monster of a desk and asked if everyone else was all right. They weren't. They were dead.

I'd like to tell you, illiterate Uranusite who can't understand me, that in that moment, my knees buckled, my heart shattered, and I began weeping salty tears of sorrow. Instead, the truth is I felt as though the hurricane from hell that'd ripped through our room had been an invisible hand knighting me with a sword of wind. In the midst of utter destruction, I'd come out safe, able-bodied, a savior for a helpless world thrown into the jaws of Hades. And maybe an invisible hand *had* knighted me.

In the '80s, mothers who hated hard rock claimed that the name of the band Kiss was an acronym for "Knights In Satan's Service." I'd know. I've watched the movie *Detroit Rock City*. Well, after the bomb went off, if those mothers were right, little did I know I'd just fulfilled every hard rock fan's fantasy. I'd become a member of Kiss. But without an instrument. Or a singing voice. Or the face paint.

As if becoming an able-bodied knight and a face-paint-less

member of Kiss weren't enough, when I looked outside the shattered classroom windows, little white flakes were falling from the sky. It was snowing. Just what I'd wished for.

My reaction to the bomb and to the snow as an able-bodied knight, as a face-paint-less member of Kiss was to find June Crowley and make sure she was all right. And I knew just where to find her. The worst thing technology has begotten since the hydrogen bomb is called Facebook. You can learn just about anything about anyone using Facebook. Even if the bomb hadn't been dropped, Prime Minister Putin in Russia and President Palin in America would've used Facebook to transform their countries into police states. Privacy is so medieval.

Thanks to Facebook, I knew June had theatre class first period. And since the Florence Nightingale High School theatre is a windowless fortress in the centermost and safest part of the building, I knew June had had a very good chance at survival.

When I looked for June in the theatre, I couldn't recognize anyone in the Stygian darkness. There are no windows in the theatre, and the power had gone out. The only light came from the open door I'd used to enter, which I now had my back turned towards.

"June!" I whispered. My eyes still hadn't adjusted to the darkness. To them, everything was a Picasso painted in black.

"What?" asked an anonymous female voice. "Who's that?"

"Where's June?" I asked.

"June's been injured," the anonymous female voice told me. "A stage light fell on her arm and she's been taken to the hospital down the road."

Incidentally, nothing was left of the hospital down the road but a pile of rubble. No one knew this yet. What I *did* know was that

taking anyone outside might be a terrible mistake. I'm not much of a science student, but I knew that, despite its romantic appearance, taking a walk in the snow was about as safe as sticking your head in an X-ray machine, falling asleep for ten hours, and then waking up before turning the machine off.

People actually did stuff like that in shoe stores, back when my chemistry teacher was growing up. They'd stick their feet under X-rays to see how their shoes fit and giggled at the sight of their skeleton. I swear, even if I'm dumber than a retarded fish, most people are dumber than a retarded worm. Worms, it so happens, don't have brains.

I was about to tell the anonymous female voice how June was probably one of the few non-retarded human beings alive and how angry I was that she'd been injured when an anonymous male voice told everyone to shut up the hell up. The anonymous male voice had been playing with a radio and had finally picked up something, the first thing to hit the invisible airwaves since the bomb went off. Everyone listened. It was President Palin, telling America that equal and utter destruction had been suffered by the entire civilized world and that everything was going to be all right. Everything was *not* going to be all right. The way things were looking, we'd be in school until July.

Everyone listened to the radio like it was a football game. I knew this was my chance to slip outside and, being the able-bodied knight that I was, find June. Wrapping myself in a lead blanket I found in the science department and wearing some UV-protection shades from my locker, I set out. The lead blanket was so I wouldn't be sticking my head in an X-ray machine, so to speak.

The snow didn't crunch under my feet, which kind of made

me sad. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, it wasn't real snow. The clouds were the darkest I'd ever seen clouds, as if someone'd spilled ink in them, and the sunglasses just made everything look even gloomier. Dead animals—squirrels, birds, fox, deer, rabbits—were scattered haphazardly everywhere. They looked like long disposed of stuffed animals. I tried to stay away from passersby, many of whom were wearing coats, even though it was June. June the month, not the girl. Lots of them were eating dead animals, raw meat. Radioactive meat. Twice, on two different occasions, I heard gunshots. I guess two of them were eating dead humans.

When I reached the rubble-filled lot—rubble that'd taken on the form of a hospital just that morning—I found a piece of cardboard made into a sign, written on with purple crayon, erected among the corpses and shattered concrete. The plum purple Crayola writing read, “SICK PATIENTS TO WAREHOUSE QUARTER MILES EAST ON MAIN STREET EMERGENCIES ONLY.”

The warehouse, being the size of a football stadium, wasn't hard to find. It was June who was hard to find. Two thousand bodies, young and old, rich and poor, some burnt beyond recognition, some moaning and groaning like animals in a trash compactor, lined the floor to the point where stepping on hands and feet became inevitable. The doctor in charge of the warehouse-turned-hospital noticed me and asked me who I was looking for. I told him I was looking for June.

“June? Is it still June? Feels more like January to me. Snow doesn't fall in June.”

“I'm looking for June Crowley,” I said. “The girl, not the month. Short for Juniper,” I added, hoping that would help. He told me he'd only been kidding and asked me to wait while he went to find June,

leaving me standing smack dab between one dying woman's boil-splotched head and the feet of a horribly disfigured human whose sex was no longer anymore identifiable than a cockroach's.

When the doc came back and led me to June, she had her arm in a sling, but otherwise looked like a healthy sixteen-year-old angel.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

The doc then informed me that, being an able-bodied knight, I needed to do some work. I wasn't sure what this meant, but I was feeling grateful, so I told him sure. I would really regret saying that.

The work the doc had me do wasn't any knight in shining armor work. The work the doc had me do was burying corpses, work fit for a prisoner. When I came back to the warehouse-hospital after sundown, it was too dark to find June. I slept somewhere on the floor and was awoken the next morning by the doc. He wanted me to work again.

"Again?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"I'm still goddamn sore from yesterday," I told him. "I hardly slept last night on this concrete fl—"

The doc pulled me up from the floor and slapped me hard across the face in one fluid motion. I writhed like a trout on a hook. Like I say, I'm dumber than a retarded fish.

"You have a *big* nose and a *big* mouth!" the doc told me. "People are dying and bleeding all over and you want to *sleep*?"

"Doc—" I started

"Listen, Jewstein, you can call me Pharaoh from now on! 'Kay? Because you're working for me for a whole month until these patients get better! And you're *not* seeing your girly friend until you're

finished!”

I thought Pharaoh was joking when he said he'd make me work for a whole month. I thought it'd just be a day or two. I'm dumber than a retarded fish. What ended up happening was I spent three weeks fetching his surgical tools and burying more dead people.

It turns out Pharaoh hadn't been anti-Semitic until the bomb went off. He explained this to me: he said Israel and the Zionists were responsible for the nuclear holocaust because they'd probably pissed off Palestine, who was friends with Iran, who was friends with Russia. The United States was friends with Israel, so Russia decided to nuke us to hell to help their buddy's buddy.

I figured the radiation must have altered Pharaoh's brain chemistry. Radiation makes some people anti-Semitic—who knew?

I asked him why Russia would be dumb enough to make herself a nuclear target just to help her buddy's buddy.

“Shut up, Jewstein!”

Finally, three weeks later, I was allowed to see June again. When I saw June again, her appearance was not wholly unlike that of an anthropomorphic naked mole rat separated from its colony. Her head was a cantaloupe dotted with those freckles old people get. Her face had erupted with puss-filled boils. For the first time in her life, June Crowley needed me. Desperately needed me. And because she needed me, I still loved her—in spite of her ugliness—more than ever before.

Her only recognizable physical trait was her big, brown eyes, the ones that reminded me of velvety pools of chocolate. Tears were dripping from them. I figured they might taste like Toblerone. You know, that Swiss chocolate. Don't worry. I didn't really taste them.

Here, nescient Uranusite, is what'd tragically happened: appar-

ently, some bastard brought outside apples from a tree contaminated by radiation into the hospital and fed them to June and many of the other patients. They might as well have fed her polonium, a radioactive element once put in a Russian dissident's food by Putin's hit men as poison. June taught me all about polonium that day I was snowed in at her house.

"Your eyes are still beautiful," I told her as she wept. "They look like chocolate."

I waited for a response. She still wept.

"Shhh," I told her. "Tell me a story. Something to get it off your mind. Where were you born, June? I really wanna know."

Still the tears came. I put my arm on her shoulder and told her something that would comfort her. Something I actually believed since I'm dumber than a retarded fish.

"I think you're an angel."

"You know who you are?" June rasped. "The only guy thankful for this shit! That bomb just made your goddamn day, didn't it? Because now I'm lonely and sick and vulnerable and have no one to talk to but you!"

I tried to whisper no, but my vocal cords had turned off.

"Here you are, living out your ultimate fantasy while everyone else is in hell," she croaked.

I begged with my eyes. But then I, too, wept because she was right. Only then, unknowing Uranusite, did I realize what type of knight I was. A member of Kiss: Knights In Selfishness's Service.

After realizing what I was, I left the warehouse with no lead blanket on and went in search of some radioactive apples. It didn't take me long to find the apple orchard down the street, from whence the contaminated apples that'd infected the patients had come. I

picked an apple and ate it. I stuck my head in the X-ray machine.

When I die—which shouldn't be long from now—it's very possible that there'll be no members of Kiss left. No more rock n' roll. That's okay. Humans are about a day or two away from extinction. When they're gone, rock n' roll will just be a bunch of noise. This narrative will just be a bunch of lines and scribbles.

Good-bye, June.

Good-bye, human race.

Good-bye, rock n' roll.

Good-bye, Uranusite.

MIKE COOMBES

Mr. Wippy



MIKE COOMBES

Mr. Wippy and the Cornettes



FILIP ŠIMUNOVIĆ

I Sit and Watch the Children Play

I was walking home from work when this bizarre thing happened.

I sat down at a park bench - which I rarely do - not more than two blocks of four-story buildings with peeling yellowish facades from my apartment. It was hot as hell and I had to sit down. No, it *was* hell. High summer in Split is nothing but hell. The heat made me feel as if my soul was about to part from my body, much like my career and reputation were going to part from my person later that day.

Time was between six and seven in the afternoon - too early for of old people to crawl out of their apartments to take posts on the benches and too late for young people to be returning half-naked from the beach, slapping their flip-flops, towels hanging around their tanned necks. Time was just right for children. Children have school until two or so in the afternoon, they eat lunch and rest, afterwards they go out to play. At least this is what I believe they do. I don't have children and I don't think I was ever anything like these kids today.

I lit a cigarette, gathering strength for the remainder of my home-ward walk, and children started running around.

Babyhood and childhood are pathological conditions. I never thought about this before, but it makes perfect sense. On TV the

other day I learned that babies exhibit a bunch of reflexes, or signs, that would be indicative of serious neurological disease in adulthood, and children... well, children - just look at them! They are utterly insane. Every single one of these little people produces more energy than a nuclear reactor. Unleashed from confinements of repose they ran around like maniacs.

There was this one guy who ran as fast as he could away from the bunch (there were maybe five or six boys altogether), turned around and sat on the floor. He then stood up, no, he jumped up, jumped some more on the spot, and ran back to his playmates to hit one of them on the back of the head and run off again. What would possibly motivate a sane person to do behave like that? Another one wasn't so much into running - he stood there scratching and pulling on something inside his shorts, presumably his penis. It wasn't quite an autoerotic act, but it wasn't what you'd call French etiquette either. Soon they started a game of soccer, the only resemblance to the game being that they were kicking a ball around with their feet. I should not be unfair – they also delegated one guy to stand in front of one of the benches. He was the goalkeeper and bench was the goal. They didn't even demonstrate sufficient mental capacity to divide themselves in two teams.

So I sat there, studying their behavior, thinking. I explained to myself that the only motive for their behavior is the urge to relieve accumulated energy, like dogs when taken to walks. If I had but a fragment of that energy, I thought to myself, I would get through a month's worth of cases in a day. I am a lawyer, a judge, at the municipal court of Split.

And I work in a non-airconditioned office.

I reasoned further: it is unfair that civilized people who are able

to serve the society are tired on most of the days, tired of work, tired of their families, relatives, obligations, tired of life, whereas these useless little things have all the energy in the universe. It was another one in the long line of flaws that make up life. Wouldn't it be better if they had peace of mind to study and educate themselves in time and then, once they are learned and their lives gain meaning, that they have this surge of raw strength that can be used to achieve something useful? For one, they would not become the idiots they were bound to become, idiots that spend their best years sitting on those very same benches drinking beer and whose intellectual pinnacles are reached by discussing the recent soccer game. I thought along those lines and I thought so deeply that the cigarette I lit (and barely drew a toke from) burned my fingers.

I lit another one.

Still, you can't help liking them, not for all their misguided fuss and empty commotion, all the idiocy they are destined for. Children are children - they are likable. Besides, there is always the theoretical possibility that one of them will accomplish something, anything, in his life.

I was now smoking more avidly on my second Davidoff and watching them run around. I thought of the old Rolling Stones' tune *As Tears Go By*, because it had a line in it that went something like:

'It is the evening of the da-a-a-y... I sit and watch the children pla-a-ay. Smiling faces...'

Or something like that.

I went on to make my case by saying that, if children are *per se* likable, it must take an utterly disgusting boy, impertinent and repelling in every one of the underdeveloped characteristics of his small person, to make a grownup genuinely loathe him. It is almost impos-

sible to loathe a child, or even to be negative towards a child in any way. For a woman it is probably entirely, biologically, impossible, and for a man it is difficult. I believe this has a firm footing in our biology and that those creeps who molest children either don't understand what they are doing or have deeply messed up brain wiring. I've seen some of these subjects, and there was always profound psychopathology behind such cases. An average person, even an average male with some capacity of reflection that is transcendent over biological impulses, is almost incapable of negative feelings towards a child.

However, on the day in question I proved more than capable of such feelings. The levels of disgust, as I said above, needed to be much higher than with an average adult to cause the physical reaction that has become so well known to me over the years – a sort of nausea, lightheadedness, a certain dizziness caused by a glimpse into the infinity of human stupidity. Most likely that was the first time in life that I felt that way towards a child. In a way it was exciting to have a *first* again, since it was a long while ago that I had reached the part of life where *firsts* become scarce.

He was a plump little bugger, a bit shorter perhaps than other kids around him. Others were skinny, made of skin hanging from bones, and this guy looked like a sumo wrestler as he stood next to the bulk of them. I have no idea how old they were. Six, seven, eight? How does one tell this? Women can always tell how old some random child is. His hair was cropped almost to the skin and his face was the face of a bloated frog. You could barely see the small dark eyes in their tiny cracks, and his lips were not the full, plump lips of a healthy child (which he undeniably was, at least physically), they were the miserly lips of a fifty-year old spinster. His face told you

that he was a kid who would soak you in gasoline for a candy bar, set fire to you with a golden Zippo for another one, and then stuff both candy bars in his meaty cheeks and chew on them while watching you burn. He was dressed in a sleeveless shirt, as most of them were. When he ran the sides of him shook like jelly.

Other kids were kids, they looked like kids and acted like kids, empty-headed and empty of any experience, knowledge or motive, but this boy had the whole honesty of an appearance of a Herzegovinian tobacco smuggler. If he, no - *when* he – comes to sit in front of me in court I am going to send him away for a fiver, just for good measure. And I will base my decision solely and with full responsibility on his physique.

The Day of Judgment could come soon, it seemed! The crook was, of course, cursing and beating a smaller child. He slapped him around a few times with the elegance of King Kong, let him turn around and try to run, before administering a kick in the butt. The little kid ran away, dripping with sweat and red-faced with fury and pain like a traffic sign, and observed him from the distance. He caught some air and ran with full power towards his tormentor, hitting him with such force on the back of the head that I could hear the slap from where I was sitting. These kids were not playing, they were beating each other with all they had. When the flabby kid turned around I could see he was crying with pain. ‘Good,’ I remember thinking.

“I’ll tell my mother!” He screamed like hell through the tears. Of course you would, I thought, you little rat. The other kid, so successful at the hit-and-run tactic and so stupid to abandon something that successful, approached him. He must have been afraid he had hurt him. As soon as he was within reach the crooked child stopped

crying, grabbed him and pulled him towards himself, twisting the weaker boy's hand behind his back like a twig. It was now the captured boy's turn to scream like he was being slain with a dull Persian scimitar. As if this wasn't enough, the tobacco smuggler was hitting him with the other hand – in the flank, on the stomach, on the chest. He was out to maim him. After the beating he caught him by the neck and started choking him.

I was already on my feet when others, who enjoyed the show so far, jumped to separate them.

“Leave him alone, Ivan, he didn't do anything to you!” So I learned the name of the boy I will convict some ten years down the road. Or maybe some ten days down the road.

“You'll kill him you ass-sucking asshole!” Complained another cute child.

“Fuck you motherfuckers I'll fuckin kill all of you! Leave me alone cocksucker! Go fuck yourself! Get off!” The fat kid screamed because two other boys climbed his back, hung from his neck and were trying to separate him from the victim. The victim had stopped screaming and his face turned some peculiar bluish color.

The boys were successful in releasing the boy who still breathed, it seemed. For the time being, Satan was constrained.

“Don't give us the same bullshit every time man, you're the goalie and that's it. Fuck off and go home or go to your post!” Another kid screamed at him, and so I learned the nature of their mortal struggle. The fatty plunged to grab his throat (where does all this energy come from?) but the kid took a swift sideways jump and evaded the voluminous mass of fat that was after him.

“Go suck your grandmother's dick!” The mass of fat suggested.

The language these kids used was... well, this is how it was. I

write it here word for word and you can call it whatever you like. I have no words for it. These little savages and their filthy tongues are the best mirror of our society. If their parents talked theater and literature at home they would have been sitting in that very same park competing who can memorize more lines by Chekhov, instead of kicking each other in the butt like monkeys. Or they would be at home like civilized people, taking French lessons, or piano lessons, or practicing to put up a theatre piece. I was performing theater in school when I was their age. I could memorize full-length parts and I have read *The Brothers Karamazov* by the time I was ten. These children cannot even speak.

The strangled kid with the twisted arm started wiggling. Resistant little buggers these, I thought.

But even if the fat kid were able to recite the entire Hamlet backwards and forwards, I would still hate him. What was he doing now? He was out of sight. Maybe refused to be the goalkeeper (bench-keeper) and left.

I fired up another cigarette.

He would become the person that keeps this society stuck in the rut. Incapable, mentally and physically retarded, loud, self confident, aggressive, undereducated, uncivilized. People like that are everywhere. People I work with? Same thing. In spite of countless professional flaws and flaws of character (or perhaps because of them), these people have more self-confidence in their attitude than a decade of newly appointed Harvard professors. These Dalmatians are perfectly capable of talking and saying nothing, saying *plenty* about *nothing*, talking for days, no, weeks about events that a normal person would not even notice. Common people all over the world have such conversations, but Mediterraneans have the talent

to give them such tone, magnitude and importance as if they are the most important people in the world and their conversations directly linked with the destiny of that world. Nowhere else does the maxim ‘the lesser the people and their lives - the louder the conversations,’ come into display. That day, that disgraceful day I’m trying to describe here, I spent over than two hours of breaks at work drinking coffee, smoking like a steamer and witnessing intellectual murder by talking about some Stjepan from police administration who was cheating on his second wife with an intern, that intern having had quite some fault in the matter because she came to work wearing buttock-high skirts; by hearing endless tasteless jokes from my colleagues about each other, lawyers about paralegals, paralegals about secretaries, secretaries about lawyers, lawyers about judges, judges about indictees and convictees, and so on and on and on and on; abandoning that for the briefest of moments to come to topics that had morsels of usefulness like the prices at the supermarkets, critique on new stores and shops, critique on old stores and shops, hair-dressers, car mechanics, kindergartens, schools, brothels, restaurants, travel arrangements offered by some relative of some secretary who had just opened a travel agency in town and was looking for customers; constructors who were also someone’s relatives and who would cheaply haul cement and bricks for someone’s house in some village...

My conversations at work have been like that for three decades, and I cannot come to think of billions of hours that have gone to waste without feeling sick. Over the last thirty years of work I had three (3!) discussions about, *exempli gratia*, law, philosophy of law, society, or meaningful politics. I remember every one of those three discussions and I could describe them in detail, if not for the danger

of boring the reader. I won't take the chance - I still have to get to the shameful event I set out to describe.

If one were to record these people, these *Croatian Mediterraneans*, with a camera, and replay the muted recording, one would have the impression that they are the grand Masonic lodge of Zürich about to decide on world's economy of the next century. The way they sit, gesticulate, drink, smoke, talk, the way they add emphasis to their words with body language, the way they pause after saying a sentence and allow the words to resonate... They are incredible. I'm positive that Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler looked less theatrical when they decided to break the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact.

These people mistake talk for action and aggression for energy. For them, silence is a disease and failure to respond to a witty remark is weakness. Thinking, reading and talking, *actually* conversing, are flaws of character reserved for those unable to participate in 'normal life.' And life, that 'normal life', is comprised of interminable barking and yelping and is radically amputated of critical reasoning.

Fat kid, the promising tobacco smuggler, was coming back. He seemed calm and I thought he wanted to rejoin the game that went on without him. Even the killed kid was back on his feet and playing.

I could never participate in this. I tried, I still try, I still sit with them and listen to them, but how can I participate in this? Every now and then I say a thing or two, but they feel that something is offbeat with me. Why do you think I'm stuck in the municipal court dealing with bus passengers caught without bus tickets or poor kids stupid enough or stoned enough to get caught with a roach of grass? Because I could not participate in their lunches, dinners and everyday bullshiting. Being the ablest, most educated lawyer that had written

most articles and a textbook in criminal law, being the best-rated professor at Split Law School for decades, couldn't get me anywhere. Knowing all the car mechanics in Split and recommending the right one at the right moment when the gearbox in the minister's BMW got stuck would've gotten me everything.

And I told the minister of justice to look at the yellow pages.

The fat bastard did want to play, but on his own criminal terms. He started throwing rocks at others, stopping their game and yelling:

“Cocksuckers, I'm back. Leave Jerko at the post and let's play.”

There was a little undirected commotion and perhaps a meek attempt of quiet protest, but he took the ball and started playing as if nothing had happened. Aggressive little prick! Others joined in. He fought all of them, almost killed one kid, threw rocks to interrupt their game, and now he was back, playing with them! Naturally, barely a minute of civilized play had elapsed before he began to fight again. He stole the ball from other kids, fouled them, sent them flying in the dirt left and right with his gigantic arms. When he was shooting he didn't care for the goal, he just cared to release the savagery inside him so that most footballs ended in the goalie's groin or chest.

There were pebbles flying towards them and the savagery ceased. I saw them looking at me. Did I throw rocks at these children?

I looked at my right hand: I could see the reddish spot on the index finger where I burned it with the cigarette, the last cigarette was long finished, and the hand itself had traces of dirt.

“Hey mister! What's up?” It *was* me who threw the rocks. Good! But I couldn't believe what the little savage just said to me. ‘What's up?’ I stood up and started walking towards him. I was getting agitated and, in my suit and coat, I thought I was going to die from heat.

I don't really know anymore, but I must have been shaking with rage. Trembling.

"Did you just ask me *what's up?*" I was furious. "Is that the way to speak to grownups? Apologize!"

"Fuck apologize. Go fuck yourself!"

"I will arrest you and put you in prison! Do you know who I am? I am a policeman, you can't talk to me like that!"

"Fuck you are. Fuck you. Go arrest your mother!" Others scattered and I was alone with him. The complete lack of respect, or even fear, insubordination and the foulest language I ever heard... Coming from a child at least. When I was his age it was a dare to look directly into the eyes of an adult, let alone speak if you weren't spoken to! But this was no ordinary child I had before me. All of my energy was directed at constraining myself from hitting him.

I didn't have enough energy. Next thing I knew I was holding him by the back of the neck, slapping him. I slapped fairly hard, it seemed, since he was kicking in the dirt like a pig and shrieking.

Before I could stop I was pulled from behind and fell flat on my back, rising a dusk of dirt. I couldn't see anything since dirt stuck to sweat and grease on my glasses. I was kicked in the stomach once, not very hard, and then I felt the rising sensation of being picked up by two strong hands. I was soaked in sweat and I can only imagine how my clothes and my face looked like.

"What the fuck are you doing you crazy fuck? You're lucky if I don't dismember you on the spot." Everything was the same – same syntax (can one call this syntax?), vocabulary (same question is in order), intonation, even the same voice – only deeper. Blindly, I had to ascertain that I had the privilege of dealing with the young gentleman's father. I wanted to explain to that man what had happened,

calmly and in logical sequence of events. However, I said:

“Your son is an animal. He almost killed one boy and wounded others. He is an animal that needs to be in a cage. And I’m telling you, he will be! I’ll personally...” now I was on the floor, with a bleeding nose. “That’s fine!” I continued, choking on blood, tears and sweat. “This is great. You just hit a judge! He will have company. I’ll arrest the lot of you beasts.”

The man had his back turned on me and was looking at the creature he proudly produced. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. I got on my feet. The man turned to face me and wanted to say something but the little animal, the devious crook, said:

“Dad... he asked if I want to see his penis. I said no and he went crazy...”

“What?” I was consternated. So was the father. We stood in silence, looking blankly at each other. As always in this region of the world, silence is never long-lived. This time (as well as most times) it was broken by a woman’s porcine shriek:

“What is going on here? Are you all right Ivan?” Behind me a woman, the brat’s mother, was approaching, accompanied by two other women and a younger man. That man was unshaven and the mother looked as the hostess of an astrological show on local television.

“Everything is all right.” Said the father. “We need to calm down now. Mister, you are not going anywhere, you’re staying right here.” The savage told me.

“How do you mean that? You can’t tell me...”

“Stay there and don’t move an inch. I’m calling the police.”

“I *am* the police, you fools! Do you know who I am? I am the judge at city court. I can get you all arrested for spitting on the street

if I wanted to.”

“Honey, what is going on?” Asked the woman who cuddled the future tobacco smuggler and turned to look at us, displaying a face with more make up than a whole harbor of forty-year old hookers in Hamburg. She was as cheaper than that - she was as cheap as a case of anchovies at the fish market. At the end of the business day.

“It’s all right darling. I think this old man here tried to touch Ivan. Nothing happened.”

“Touch? What do you mean touch?” She was getting up, still holding the kid’s head in her arms. “What-do-you-mean-touch!” She looked at the head in her arms. The head looked up at her with tears in its eyes. The head opened its filthy mouth and said:

“He was trying to show me his penis. I said I didn’t want to see it.”

I braced myself for the possibility of an attack, but she managed to surprise me. The prostitute spit in my face, kicked me in the groin, and threw herself at me with the self-conserving instinct of someone experienced at defending her anus from greasy Brazilian sailors, cutting my face with unavoidable long red fingernails and ripping my clothes. I managed to catapult her in the air like a cat, only to be clinched by the father who obviously knew how to clinch people. The kid approached me and spat in my face.

Little animal’s saliva was still dripping from my chin when two policemen arrived on the scene. They recognized me, of course, yelling:

“Judge Davidenko!” for everyone to hear. And by that time there were a lot of people around to hear.

They ordered the boxer/sailor to let me go and he did, possibly impressed in a way by the fact that I *was* a judge. And that was the

end of the incident for the day, more or less. Out of correctness, I accepted to go to the main station, which was in the same building as the courthouse and that I had left several hours earlier. I refused to communicate with the wild bunch and I learned through acquaintances that they made a statement pressing charges for sexual and physical assault.

I concluded the day by getting drunk.

‘A respected Municipal court judge molests and beats a child in the park.’ I don’t know what was more wrong in that headline – the accusations or the fact that I was ever respected by anyone. No one respects anyone in this town. A high-distribution journal of the lowest level said: ‘Psycho-judge jumps child in broad daylight.’ That was a better one. It was closer to what happened. Also I learned that in our wonderful society there circulates an even lower level publication, called *Fame and Glamour*. *Fame and Glamour* said, on two full pages of kindergarten-level writing, that I was a psychopath and a convicted rapist of nuns who returned on foot from a rehab clinic in Spain, falsified his law-degree, got a job at court but could not resist pillaging and raping. Under the influence of heroin from Portugal.

In addition, the hooker really turned out to be a local talk-show host (not an astrology show, though) and the incident gained wind. Instead of quieting down, media went on for months. Talkshows (and not only cheap local ones) were produced to discuss pedophilia. Priests swarmed, drawn to television and newspapers like flies are drawn to those ultraviolet light traps that electrocute them. They were delighted that, as an exception, someone else was indicted for cuddling children. However, unlike flies, the priests were not electrocuted. The hooker appeared in her show dressed in black, as if I

had killed the kid. I was sorry I hadn't, of course. She gave a series of primitive, ill-informed and illiterate reports on Croatian judicial system, corruption, pedophilia, psychiatry and so on, intending to cover all aspects of the event, but in reality all she covered was the lone aspect of gigantism of her décolleté.

It was a proper disaster. I could describe more details of our media struggle (which was more of a massacre than a struggle), and legal proceedings that went on for almost two years, but what good would that be? No one is really interested in other person's misery unless it is directly linked to one's own.

At first I remained at work, before getting suspended 'for the duration of the trial.' I complained and filed a lawsuit to get my job back, then they complained and dragged it out, then I complained at them dragging it out, and so on and so forth.

Legally I won everything I could. It was impossible for their charges to hold in court and I had to get my job back - one way or the other.

When I started working, less and less people talked to me at work, which was the best thing that could have happened to me. I was getting less work delegated, which was a problem or, better to say, would've been a problem if I hadn't found a way to fill my time.

I systematically dedicated myself to making this little family's life as difficult as possible. I had their names included in lists of police suspects, making them susceptible to cavity inspection every time they presented their IDs to an officer of law. I soared over the new cases like a hawk, on the lookout for their names, or names of their relatives. I turned the pettiest parking tickets of their remote relatives into nightmares.

And I wait. I wait for the tobacco smuggler to grow (he won't

need more than a few years), and buy his first pack of cigarettes. His first beer. First reefer. Anything he does, if he offers me the littlest offense possible, I'll get him. I won't allow him to develop into what he is bound to become. I'll write up a thick file on him and I'll have him filed next to car thefts and rapist. And if by some act of divine mercy he does something bigger, if he actually hurts someone or steals a car, he will be consuming the rest of his youth between trials and prisons. My only hope is that I live long enough and that I still have some reputation and power to act - when the time comes.

Prosecuting this individual will be the greatest deed I can offer to our society.

Split, June 2009

MOSBY BARLEY

Etymology

Hit ne wæs not one of ure wordes in
þe begynning, for ðe Normen yave us
þis word, French ðæt snuc upon easterne schore,
fram þe Latin tungue, swa great beforan.
ðe Romanan nam fram þe Greca woruld.

It ys but language historie,
Foule or faire, the mysterie;
And every word that ys yspoken
hath a tale that ys not broken,
luv or bore be ye ysmitten,
It was speche, yet only written.

Verily, it be likened unto a man that seeketh
lost treasure, buried deep
beneath,
and when he find it, he rejoiceth greatly
in spite of others' careless indifference.
For it came to pass, that men sought knowledge
and became as little children when they found it,
giddy.

For all Experience hath shewn, that
in the Course of word History, men
are more disposed to speak without
thought of what Language they use.
But transient Language long
instituted is not dictated by prudence,
but by convenience. Such has been
the patient Sufferance of the linguist.

Just as the archaeologist digs through
various layers of earth, sometimes for
weeks, only to discover some old rusty
scrap of metal, or a broken clay jar –
useless?

Not to the serious historian
amid piles of dusty books. He excitedly
cleans it, preserves it, studies it, and
dates it. It goes to a museum
stuffy and old,
full of antiquity,
it gets added to
the collection
for all the world to enjoy and benefit from.

MIKE COOMBES

Steampunk Gentleman



Contributor's Notes

Mosby Barley is a junior English major at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia. He loves writing fiction, though he was encouraged to submit a couple of his poems. He heard about the *Oddville Press* through a friend.

Holly Day lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota (USA) with her husband and two children. Her most recently published books are *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, and *Walking Twin Cities*.

Trey Edington has an MA in English from the University of North Texas and various fiction and non-fiction publications. He is currently unemployed and living with his mother and his cat in Dallas, TX. Trey is also a recovering alcoholic and writing a book about that experience called "Sick Normal Blackout."

Asher Ellis fiction has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Verbicide Magazine*, *The Monsters Next Door*, *MicroHorror*, *Rope and Wire*, *Yellow Mama*, and *Flashshot*. His stage play script, "Stupid Cupids," was accepted by the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in 2005. He is a 2006 graduate of Colby-Sawyer College, where he earned a degree in English Literature, and is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the Stonecoast Program at The University of Southern Maine.

Joel Frohlich is an undergraduate student at the College of William and Mary majoring in psychology and neuroscience. His short fiction has appeared in the April 2009 issue of *Down in the Dirt* and the September 2008 issue of *Teen Ink*.

His poetry has appeared in the September 2008 issue of *Poet's Ink Review*.

Dylan Gilbert lives with his wife and teenage son in New York's Hudson Valley. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Word Riot*, *Writers Bloc*, *Slow Trains* and other literary journals. You can find the prequel to "Pecs of Steel Fitness Center" in issue Four of *The Oddville Press*.

From writing about a 180-pound bipolar wood tick to about a bear having an affair with a whore called the American Dream, **Adam Graupe's** fiction has run the gamut from the strange to the bizarre. He has been published in America, Finland, and England. [Http://adamgraupe.webs.com](http://adamgraupe.webs.com).

Stephen Hill is a writer living and working out of Toronto who has recently begun submitting his fiction for publication. His short story "Tipping the Scales" has been published by *Broken Pencil* magazine.

Adam Hofbauer is an author and student living in San Francisco. He attends the graduate writing program for fiction at San Francisco State.

Dietrich Kalteis is a writer living in West Vancouver, Canada. Twenty-two of his short stories have been published over the past year. His screenplay 'Milkin' Dillard' has been optioned to Bella Fe Films, and his short story collection 'Big Fat Love' (Cantarabooks) is due out Spring, 2010.

Filip Šimunović is a final-year medical student in Heidelberg, Germany. He has lived, studied and worked in Croatia, United States (Boston), Germany and Switzerland. Previously, he has published several scientific and medical articles in English, as well as several short stories and plays in Croatian. Last month his first fiction story in English was accepted in a Chicago magazine *Hektoen International*.

Caroline Taylor's short stories have appeared in *Futures Mysterious Anthology*

Magazine, The First Line, The Chick Lit Review, Orchard Press Mysteries, The Dan River Anthology 2009, and The Greensilk Journal. Her first novel, *What Are Friends For?*, is forthcoming in March 2011 from Five Star Mysteries.

Jeff Wood lives in Pueblo, Colorado with his wife and daughters. He's had stories published in print magazines and online publications such as *Boston Phoenix, New York Press, Camas, Tomlit, Six Sentences, The Greyrock Review, Bellowing Ark,* and *Java Journal.* More of his writing can be read at his blog, The Oort Cloud (<http://the-oort-cloud.blogspot.com/>).