

Volume II, Issue I

# The Oddville Press

A break from the norm



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## Disclaimer

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised.

The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature.

If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,  
The Management

PS: Mary Whitehouse: if you're reading this, fuck off.

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# Volume II, Issue I

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## Foreword: Waking the Giant

by LORRAINE SEARS

**F**EW THINGS in this world can withstand the test of time, although there are some: Stonehenge, the Easter Island idols, The Mona Lisa, The Rolling Stones—all iconic symbols of humanity's spirit, skill and determination; an underlying desire to make a difference. And throughout time, generation after generation have been inspired by their existence.

The Oddville Press, it seems, is another such entity. A creation standing strong to inspire creativity in all who dare to try. In its first incarnation this mammoth among ezines racked up an impressive 40,000 downloads in just six issues; a mighty achievement! But when something grows so big it can be hard to sustain. And sadly, the giant that was The Oddville Press was reluctantly put to bed. But like any sleeping giant the time has come when The Oddville Press must reawaken. With a strong team at the helm, dedicated to greatness, we're ready to take this infamous ezine to the next level.

Pumped and primed to climb to even greater heights; the dust sheets have been ripped back and the doors

thrown wide open. We've invited authors, poets and artists, both published and previously unpublished to send us their best and most outstanding works for inclusion within our hallowed pages.

Inside this historic re-launch edition you'll find laughter, tears, fear and warmth as The Oddville Press showcases a plethora of stunning works by talented contributors from around the globe. As Managing Editor, I want to thank everyone who submitted for this issue, whether you made it or not; your enthusiasm was infectious. And to those who did make it, thank you for the gift of first rights on your most excellent work. We couldn't have done this without you. To the Team behind The Oddville Press, who work round the clock to put this together, my thanks for their hard work and total commitment.

And to you, the reader, who's probably skipped this bit anyway—this is all for you, so go ahead; you can ignore me if you like. The treasures you seek are just a page turn away.

—Lorraine Sears, Managing Editor

# Whorling

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by Robert Mangeot

*Robert Mangeot lives in Nashville with his wife, cats and neurotic Pomeranian. His fiction appears in various journals and anthologies, including Lowestoft Chronicle, Pure Slush and Swamp Biscuits and Tea. In 2014 his work will appear in the Mystery Writers of America anthology Ice Cold: Tales of Intrigue from the Cold War. His writing has won contests sponsored by the Chattanooga Writers' Guild, On The Premises, and Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers.*

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## Whorling

WHETHER HE had fired that Glock or not, Marie understood this much: Colin Cathcart had the most stunning fingerprints.

The spark came while she prepped his hands, she in latex gloves and lab coat, he propped against the hotel conference table, Lyon out through the balcony sheers a carnival of animated light displays.

"Just relax," she said, not sure as the words dribbled out who between them needed calming more.

Next she made the optical scan of his impressions. She flushed as the confirmation appeared on her tablet: ten whorl patterns caught in light and dark relief.

Colin, the perfect fingerprint.

Marie hurried out paper and ink for rolled impressions. She laced her fingers in his, and together their hands slow-danced nail-to-nail over the sample card.

It was her stroke through what salt and pepper hair Colin had left, a stroke too lingering for DNA collection, when her boss Stasia shipped Marie off to the mobile lab parked outside.

"I'll finish up," Stasia said. "You start on those prints." Gladly.

Marie jostled past the agents who crowded the doorway, seasoned pros ready to have at the crime scene and suspect. She ignored the French police who bristled at their relegation to securing the hotel entrance, ignored the distant Festival music and projector lights painting whimsical scenes on the grayed stone buildings. Even the December wind failed to sweep away Colin's touch.

Alone in the trailer, Marie pressed close to his optical scan glowing on her monitor. Biometric averages dictated one print per hand survived chance to create a whorl. All ten of Colin's fingers whorled with ovular ridges as if raindrops rippling a pond.

"Bloody miracles you are."

Juxtaposed against his prints were scanned partials taken from the Glock discovered in the hotel dumpster. The computer mapped pattern breaks and deemed any match inconclusive. Marie sighted down each whorl with her pen cap, sample to partial, partial to sample. Not a match. Probably not a match.

A click of her mouse sent his whorls racing across the digital ether. Soon the database returned a list of possible matches. Third alphabetically was Dr. Colin Cathcart, diplomat turned historian, bio matching his statement to the letter.

Colin, an honest man.

How and when a historian started chasing armed and dangerous intelligence targets, well, Marie would share her story if he would spill his.

Marie blinked the dryness from her eyes. The plan tonight had been another try at the family soda bread recipe. Arán sóide, her grandmother called it, and Marie was expected to have it spot-on by Christmas. She had been examining the scorched first loaf, wondering what more there was to baking than chemistry, when her phone buzzed the alert: high-value fugitive killed at a grand hotel, potential rogue operative involved, Inspector Graf in a fury. The orders: sort the evidence out and clean it up. For yet another night, Marie had fed her angelfish, zipped her hatchback around the Périphérique and rushed aboard the helicopter. The ride south to the Fourvière hills grew hypnotic, the low clouds, the blurred countryside, the techs hushed and swaying along with the turbulence. Nearing the hotel, the chopper blazed a thousand feet over Lyon, its squares and façades transformed and churning with Festival lights. In such dreamland anyone could appear, and anything was possible.

Including ten perfect target whorls.

Marie leaned back, spinning in her chair to the white noise rhapsody of lab equipment.

Stasia glided into the trailer, DNA and residue samples bagged and tagged under her arm. Her pleasant grin cracked off by degrees.

Marie scooted back to her station. Busywork helped with focus, but by the time she injected Colin's blood into the spectrometer, dreamland had settled over her again. In her mind Colin hovered at her elbow as she explained the test protocols and the spectral peaks of his readout. Somehow his herb-spiced scent filled the air, no less powerful as memory.

His blood results: no narcotics, no prescription drugs, alcohol components hours metabolized.

"I could get behind a drinking man," Marie said. "Maybe I should ask him out for a pint."

Stasia glanced up from the electron microscope. "Do we need to talk about this?"

"The night he's had, poor man needs a pint."

"Marie."

Her Colin fantasy had shifted to pints at a pub, the two of them huddled in a private snug and Marie stealing their first kiss. "Didn't you see those whorls of his?"

"I did. In an open homicide file."

"Somebody breaks in and shoots a poor bastard holed up in a hotel room. Nobody's made Colin there, have they? He didn't leg it out of town. Didn't even call it in, I heard. The Inspector found him at a jazz club."

"Ah. Inspector Graf. What happens if she hears your plan to date our prime suspect?"

"Person of interest at best."

Stasia's deep inhale signaled a launch into boss mode. In the months since she recruited—no, rescued—Marie from the bottom rung at the Irish Garda lab, discussions about leveling out her excitability happened as regular as if set on a loop. Don't dig into agent profiles, Marie. Don't taunt the suspects, Marie. Especially not the Latvian finance minister. Don't tell your family a thing, Marie. Don't be Marie, Marie. Somewhere after Stasia emphasized professional disengagement, the voice Marie heard switched to Colin offering dazed thanks as she wiped ink off those epic whorls.

Marie chewed her lip. Colin, urbane and unguarded, quiet but capable, the soul of worldly experience. The sloop of his shoulders attested to past and scattered sins. For the greater good, not murder.

Colin, the gentleman spy.

"Earth to Marie," Stasia said.

"Right here," Marie said. "Hanging on your words."

Stasia gave the clipped frown that meant boss mode neared its crescendo. What had been given Marie with this job could be snatched away, dumping her back at the Garda for life as the postgrad redhead getting by on rare sun, Smithwick's and street curry.

"I'm not shading them," Marie said. "His tests."

"Never doubted it."

"I find something, I'll tell you straight."

"Best tech I've got. Let's keep you that way."

Praise had Marie sitting taller and the Garda that much further in the past. Five minutes of processing gas signatures ticked past before Marie rested her eyes. Burned on the back of her lids was Colin smooth despite the hours of grilling underway. The pub fantasy took hold again, now him reciting to her Yeats from memory. Off anyone else, poetry might earn the would-be bard two boxed ears, but in Colin's voice even tripe came out romantic.

Left there on his pub glass were whorl impressions dusted orange from cheese crisps.

Marie spun in her chair, feet out and tracing a circle. "Bet you that pint I've run a million prints. No lie. And tonight the ten most brilliant ever. It's a sign. 'Hey, fingerprint girl, take a gander at bleeding deady Colin here.'"

Stasia kept running test swabs, as if the silent treatment might work where boss mode had failed.

"Come on," Marie said. "Those prints, those laugh lines, those milk chocolate eyes. He's not even a wee bit sexy?"

"As murder suspects go?"

"Person of interest, I told you," Marie said. "I like his shiny head. I'd rub it every morning."

Stasia let out a sigh. "He's dashing, I'll grant you that. Ruined aristocrat meets learned scholar."

Briefly Marie nodded at the validation, but in marched possible hidden meanings and unspoken desires. Brainy wood nymph Stasia. Mistaken-for-a-model Stasia.

Hypothesis: Stasia harbored a Colin fantasy of her own. Hypothesis tested: Stasia went for athletes and cops and especially for athletic cops. In flats she stood eyeball to forehead with Colin. In heels she'd fight glare off his scalp.

Conclusion: Marie had those whorls to herself.

Stasia pushed away from her microscope. "Not a speck of identifiable residue on him."

A thrill seeped up Marie's body. "Told you."

"On his hands. Could have scrubbed clean. Still need to check his clothes."

Fair play, Marie thought. Out the trailer window the Festival lights projected geometric shapes and liquid pastels and Van Gogh stars across Lyon. Projectors transformed the hotel into a sequence of fairy tale palaces adorned with minarets.

"Was it Yeats who wrote about that Khan fellow?" Marie said. "The one with his posh dome."

"Coleridge. 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree: Where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.'"

Stasia seemed pleased at all that, like she felt she'd nailed the line, but the flat delivery had nothing on Colin the one-man show. Marie found herself studying her fingerprints, an everyday mishmash of spirals and deltas.

Good genes in her clan, but rotten prints. "You think, if we had a baby, our kid would get his whorls?"

"You might check his twenty-three-year old daughter."

Marie pretended to read through test logs, as not to betray a plan in motion. The daughter, a United States Foreign Service applicant, would have prints available for viewing at Stasia's next break.

"Assume Dr. Cathcart is cleared," Stasia said. "He's damn near twice your age. Where do you see this going?"

"Rome. Swank hotel like this. Get his prints all over me."

"Marie, breathe."

Marie forced a laugh to mask a groan. Already a crew scrubbed the hotel of evidence. Next to vanish might be Colin and his whorls. In dream time, any second could mark the end.

"Every week we're hopping around crime scene to crime scene. Suspects are my dating pool."

"Stop it."

"It's true," Marie said. "A pool stocked with lowlifes who think they can superglue their prints off or sand them down. Like they're not leaving a hundred other bits of evidence behind. Bleeding idiots. So, out of that dating cesspool, you're after me over fancying the ruined aristocrat? I like my judgment fine."

Stasia edged her chair closer. "Best thing for everyone is we finish the tests. We'll have our answers, you'll have a nap, and you'll see fate isn't fingerprints."

"Literal hands of fate, he's got."

"Every case you get so wrapped up," Stasia said. "When we get home, take a few days off. That's not a request. And since when do you pine over any guy?"

"I don't know," Marie said, falling against her seat. The lab seemed alive with magic, bright grains and spirals of it moving too quick to grasp. "It's a load of crap about needing a Mr. Right. But what about finding him anyway? I mean, I've got proof."

Stasia inhaled again, but no lecture followed. Instead she returned to her microscope. "Why don't you get us coffee? Come back with a clear head."

In other words, subject closed.

Hardly.

Marie took along a clipboard—the tech's ultimate disguise—back into the French night. She paused on the cobblestones to watch the shifting lights make over the hotel into a Moorish castle. An invitation to dreamland if ever there was one. She bypassed coffee from the lobby bar and bounded up the stairs.

Outside the conference room she and her clipboard mixed in with the detectives grousing over lost security footage and zero breaks in the shooting. The buzz was divided over Colin turned vigilante or Colin the man who vomited on the crime scene photos.

Not that any of the investigators bothered to ask the newbie tech, but Marie had captured the truth the moment he made those gorgeous impressions in ink. Whenever the investigation wheels stopped turning, everyone would understand what she already did.

Colin, the innocent man.

He had to be so, because he had to be fate. And fate, Marie knew, was the magic that came whorling out of a dream.

## Fractals of Sanity

by PSI

Psi says: *I go to school for psychology and have been writing since I can remember. During my free time I play airsoft and run the paranormal research society at my school!*

I like when the sky bleeds orange  
The clouds stuck together like melted chocolate  
Gingerbread men come out from the sunlight  
While pretty little gumdrops swing underneath  
Smiling their undying approval up at the cosmos

Delicately, I undress my wounds  
Purple with acidic tendrils of poison  
They smell like red and they look like  
Some kind of odor that comes from a rainbow  
A smell that can only be described as metallic gold treason

Today I sit beneath the banana tree  
Tasting the fruits of fallen Gods while  
I'm reminded of a song a fool once sang  
From a microphone wrapped in gummy bears  
Childish pranks then followed shortly after

Give me ten reasons not to fly  
The earth will accept me as much as outer space  
I ignore them both and hear all kinds of acidic colors of  
Passionate devils that lurk in the deep  
Of the ocean of lullabies - too frightened to be free

I see sounds of beauty and I taste the music  
Freedom flies down from the orange sky again  
Maybe I'll tempt the green furry teddy bear  
The one with the big pink dress that barely fits over  
Giant paws—nails painted red

Maybe I'll stay for eternity in the gape of the Universe  
Here there are fractals of sanity just waiting to sing to me  
I grin at them like the gumdrops do  
Smiling up at the cosmos  
My ever faltering approval

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# Silencio

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**by Michael Anthony Dorlac**

*Michael Anthony Dorlac was born in St.Louis, Missouri on the 29th of October 1969. He received his undergraduate degree in Literature and Language from Webster University, and earned his Master's in Library Sciences from the University of Missouri, Columbia. He is a visual artist, photographer, writer, and Michael's poetry has been published in various literary zines. He also has two self-published works that can be purchased through most on-line vendors. If anyone is interested in purchasing or viewing Michael's work, they can contact the artist directly by way of E-Mail. Rhinal57@yahoo.com*

*Michael Anthony Dorlac has printed 2 volumes of poetry, Brunette Bones and Black Licorice is his latest. Edgy, dark and sophisticated, these musings on complex subjects are sure to cause a strong reaction in the reader. These poems provoke and may shock readers unaccustomed to poems on the dark side. Photos and photo-collages created by the author add his visual poetry to the written word.*



# The Uncluded

by Jen McConnell

*Jen McConnell is a fiction writer. Her debut short story collection, Welcome Anybody, was published in 2012 by Press 53. A California native, she now homesteads in the Midwest under many layers of blankets. Her website is [www.jenmcconnell.com](http://www.jenmcconnell.com).*

## The Uncluded

THE ONLY reason Nora invited me—insisted, really—was that she needed an extra man. Her cousin cancelled at the last minute leaving the gender ratio unbalanced and, to Nora, unacceptable.

"It'll be fine this time," she pleaded on the phone. "I promise."

I tried a few excuses, knowing they wouldn't take. The idea of spending another holiday alone was more depressing than one spent with strangers.

As I walked up the icy steps of the metro stop near her home, I relaxed my face into something near a smile. Grimacing was my default. Nora wouldn't have invited me if she'd had any other backup. But I was it this time. She deserved better.

Nora Amarez—prom queen, Junior League president, high-profile attorney, mother of two Gap-cute kids—couldn't be more different than me, but was also the only one who really understood me. We'd been friends—just friends—since college. She was perfect for me. Not that there had ever been the slightest chance it could have been me.

I wished there existed a universe in which the impeccable brownstone before me was my house—that I didn't have to ring the doorbell. A universe where Nora was my wife and I was her normal, well-adjusted, non-grimacing husband.

Even in the possibility of infinite parallel universes, that particular universe didn't exist.

\*

It was a normal awkward dinner party. The crowd was a mix of Nora's family and orphaned friends like me. More than one person remarked how special it was to be in the nation's capital on Thanksgiving.

"That," I whispered to Nora as I helped her carry in platters of food, "is because they don't live here year-round."

It was the same with Memorial Day and Fourth of July. The tourists in their faded t-shirts and sandals with socks. Then they returned to the Midwest or New England, and DC—the company town—humped along again, doing the nation's business.

"Anyone watch that show on A&E about hoarders?" someone at the end of table said during the lull between dinner and pie. "The last episode was a doozy."

My back stiffened and Nora glanced down the table at me. I kept my gaze on the flames of the centerpiece candles.

"A&E? I thought it was TLC," someone else said.

"Disgusting," Nora's husband, Gerry, said. "How can you watch that?"

"It's sad and fascinating," Nora's cousin, a blonde woman sitting across from me, said. "How can you not watch?"

"As a psychologist," another woman said, to a chorus of groans, "I find it interesting that it's always one of two things—raised in poverty by a Depression-era parent or compensation for lack of love during childhood."

I excused myself to fetch another beer. As I left the room, I heard Nora calling for a happier topic. Closing the refrigerator door, I was startled by a woman standing by the counter.

"You sure are quiet," I blurted out.

She smiled. "Is that for me?"

I handed her the beer and grabbed another one. The woman was short and overwhelmed by her dark mass of hair falling around her shoulders. Her green eyes were huge under a heavy fringe of bangs, like headlights emerging from a tunnel.

"You're Nora's friend from college, right?" she asked. "I'm Lily."

I nodded. "You look familiar."

"New Year's Eve. You were leaving just as I arrived. You left right before midnight, which was odd, so I asked Nora about you."

"I had no one to kiss," I said without thinking.  
 She smiled and asked if I wanted to go outside.  
 "It's freezing out there."  
 She shrugged and opened the back door.

We went out to the tiny deck overlooking the even tinier backyard. Lily shivered but shook her head when I offered to get her jacket.

"I'm just waiting for the idiot talk to pass," she said.  
 "Not a Hoarders fan?"  
 "Nope." She looked at me. "You aren't either?"

"To be honest—" I said, then stopped. Her face was so open, actually waiting to listen to me. But how could I be sure she wasn't like everyone else?

\*

In my small crowd of friends, it's a joke. You want to describe a madman or lunatic, you just say "tin foil hat" and everyone laughs. Even Nora.

I laugh, too, careful to match their mirth.

But I lived in that house. The one kids avoided on Halloween. The one with the Oldsmobile on woodblocks, knee-high weeds for a front lawn, and aluminum foil taped to the inside of every window. My dad was the one in the aluminum hat. Actually, he had three.

I didn't do much living there really. Slept in my room. Showered and ate some meals. In California, it was easy to spend nearly all day and night outside.

Early on, school became my salvation. Sports, clubs, extra study hall— anything that would extend my time away from home. There was also the arcade, the mall and, once in a while, Tommy's house. He was the only one who didn't tease me about my home and, in turn, I keep his family's secret.

Unlike mine, his house looked normal from the outside. It was inside that was overwhelming.

Those TV shows—Hoarders, Buried Alive—could be amusing, until you see it in person. Or live it. I don't know how Tommy survived. Maybe he didn't. We lost touch after high school.

His parents had a pathological problem that made them unable to deal with the everyday flotsam of ordinary life. There were towering piles of junk everywhere in the house, except Tommy's room, which he kept locked when he was at school. On the floor and every available surface, there were stacks of newspapers, computer parts, gift wrap, you name it, with aisles carved out so you could walk from room to room.

If his parents weren't watching as I left the house, Tommy would shove trash into my backpack—empty tuna fish cans, broken Christmas ornaments—to throw out on my way home. Tommy and I thought his parents were just weird and messy. My dad, Tommy agreed, was textbook crazy.

\*

When I was a kid, my dad took me a few times to the Musee Mechanique at the edge of Ocean Beach. This was when he still went out into public, before the fear—or whatever it was—set in completely.

The museum was tucked into a dark labyrinth underneath the Cliff House, next to the ruins of the Sutro baths. The cave-like space, dusty and ancient, was full of carnival games and mechanical slot machines from forty years earlier. My father loved it.

Entering the museum, we were greeted by Laughing Sally, a behemoth of a woman, made of wood painted so long ago that by the time I saw her she was just a grimy brown body with faded orange lips and hair. For a kid with a weird dad, not much creeped me out—but I was nervous in that place, afraid to venture in too deep.

Everyone in the museum was like my dad, moving silently from dusty game to broken machine, touching them despite the admonishing signs. The most fascinating and repulsive game was the Opium Den, where tiny, vaguely Asian wooden figures reclined next to miniature pipes. I watched as my dad put in quarter after quarter, making the diorama come alive. He turned the knobs, making tiny puffs of smoke rise from the lips of the figures. They would sit up, stretching their hands forward in the empty space, grasping at nothing, before jerking back down on their tiny cots, waiting for the next quarter, the next hit to come. My dad would have stayed there for hours if I didn't drag him away.

As a kid, I didn't understand the look on my dad's face, his desperation as he slid in a quarter. Longing for something—an era, a life—he could never have had.

When I was about twelve, my mom told me that my dad's family had once owned a dunking-booth business, renting them out to festivals, church bazaars and summer fairs.

"So dad was a carny?" I asked. Now that was something I could tell my friends at school. That could explain my house, my family. "I'm part carny?"

"I guess so." She tried to smile but her lips just pressed tighter until they turned white.

I wanted that to explain everything. Grandma had been a bearded lady. Grandpa swallowed swords. I tried so hard to believe there was a reason for it all.

Mom left Dad when I went away to college. She didn't divorce him. She loved him, she said, she just couldn't live with him anymore. She kept an eye on him over the years, paying his bills, bringing him groceries, paying a service to cut the grass a few times a year.

\*

I told this all to Lily, out there in the cold. I just kept talking, her wide green eyes curious but not pitying. When I paused, she took a sip of beer and waited. She was actually listening, I realized, and not just waiting for her turn to speak. I wanted to hear her story—and why she was so interested in mine—but I couldn't stop talking.

When I went into the kitchen for more beer, Nora and a few others were huddled over glasses of wine at the counter. Nora slipped off her sweater and handed it to me.

"So why don't you like Hoarders," I asked Lily outside as she pulled on the sweater.

"Joanne? The blonde across from you?"

I nodded.

"Her parents were alcoholics. She is fucked up six ways to Sunday because of it. I wonder how amusing she'd find a reality show about growing up with an alcoholic. Finding your Dad face down in his own vomit. Taking care of your younger brother because mom's too bombed to cook."

"Sounds like a hoot," I said. "Real Winos of Georgetown?"

"The Secret Lives of Co-dependents?"

Our laughs turned into sighs.

"My parents were hoarders," Lily said after some silence. "Not criminally so. They'd never get on TV. Once a year we'd have a crazy clean-out-the-house week and a huge garage sale. No one ever wanted our junk so my dad and brother would spend another week hauling it all to the dump. We'd enjoy eating a meal or two together in the dining room—we had a really nice table when it was cleared off—and then it would start all over."

"I never had friends over," she continued. "Never had a sleepover. Refused to let boyfriends come over. I drove myself to my prom." She groaned. "I try to be grateful. I wasn't abused. There was food to eat. They aren't bad people. I tell myself they did the best they could but still."

"I know," I said. "Turns out parents are just people, too. But by the time we figure that out, we're fucked in the head."

"Amen to that."

"To messy homes." I clinked my bottle against hers.

"To aluminum hats," she laughed. "Maybe they'll do a show about that, next."

"One can dream," I said.

\*

A year later, Lily and I visited San Francisco. We had decided to meet each other's parents and I thought visiting the Musee Mechanique would be a good first step. We ate lunch at the Cliff House before I took her down to the beach. A sign on the locked door indicated the museum had relocated years earlier to a storefront on Fisherman's Wharf.

Lily took off her shoes and dug her toes in the sand. I stood at the edge of the water, tossing stones into the small, foamy waves. I thought of my father, who still

lived in our house, still trapped by his own madness. I tried to picture him through Lily's eyes, wondering if he would seem as crazy to her as he did in my memory. Part of me worried that he wouldn't seem crazy enough. That I had imagined it all. Maybe I was the crazy one.

Lily took my hand and smiled, her green eyes bright in the sunlight.

"Let's go," she said. "It's going to be okay."

With the sun streaming in through the windows and all the machines dusted, the new Musee Mechanique wasn't creepy at all. Like all of Fisherman's Wharf, it was now safe and sanitized for tourists. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Lily and I laughed over the Opium Den, Naughty Marietta, and the Fortune Teller. But when she wanted to get a closer look at Laughing Sal, with her re-painted hair and lips, I held back.

\*

We walk up the driveway holding hands. The house is smaller than I remember. Every window is still lined with aluminum foil; the weeds in the front yard are thigh-high. The front door is open just a crack. Mom told him I was coming. He doesn't have a computer or phone. The small opening of the doorway is the only way I know he is in there. I squeeze Lily's hand as we step onto the porch.

## Beirut

by JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

*John Sibley Williams is the author of "Controlled Hallucinations" (FutureCycle Press, 2013) and six poetry chapbooks. He is the winner of the HEART Poetry Award, and finalist for the Pushcart, Rumi, and The Pinch Poetry Prizes. John serves as editor of "The Inflectionist Review", co-director of the Walt Whitman 150 project, and Marketing Director of Inkwater Press. A few previous publishing credits include: "Third Coast, Nimrod International Journal, Inkwell, Cider Press Review, Bryant Literary Review, Cream City Review, The Chaffin Journal, The Evansville Review, RHINO", and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.*

And in another city I'll never know  
someone is razing the house  
where I was born  
with his left hand  
while the right  
builds from my absence  
the house where I'll die.

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# Pins

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by Michael Anthony Dorlac

# 40 Acres and a Mouse

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by Joe Cappello

*Joe Cappello has worked in a manufacturing/office environment most of his career and has written short stories, plays and poetry about his experiences. He has recently published an eBook collection of his short stories entitled, "Bridge to an End: Short Stories about Today's Changing Workplace." He invites you to read excerpts from his book at [www.wordsearchers.org](http://www.wordsearchers.org).*

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## 40 Acres and a Mouse

HE THOUGHT about not going in today, but then thought better of it. It was important to show up, physically. Then you could find ways to hide, sort of, in the spaces of the day where The Boss couldn't see you and The Employers couldn't get word of your behavior. Henry Todd was an old hand at it, though he was tired of playing. Thirty years at the same job, reporting to the same spot, showing enthusiasm, animating himself like he was a cartoon figure. How much longer could he keep it up?

But then he remembered it was Winston Mehmet's birthday and there would definitely be bagels and donuts and other treats. Different story. You don't pass up bagels and donuts. He was definitely going in today.

The building sat on a large floating barge. You parked next to it and boarded it like a ferry across a river. The company flag hung from one corner of the structure and flapped noisily as it bobbed up and down in response to a low but steady wake. A slight breeze blew from the water making this early April day a chilly reminder of a not too distant winter. Henry liked to board the barge at the last minute with a quick, long stride. But Lionel Masters, The Boss, barked at him to hurry up. He was shouting at employees to get moving like he was herding cattle into a corral. His gray eyes and short, red beard made him look like a cowboy as he held a clipboard in his hand and raised it over his head like he was about to paddle the bottom of some unsuspecting tardy worker. He couldn't keep the smirk off his face as we hurried past him.

The Boss was in charge of launching the structure promptly at 9 a.m. He did this even if there were employees running from the parking lot screaming at him to wait. But he never did. He scratched his beard, and then his crotch as he shouted in a voice dripping with ecstasy: "Wait for the late boat. Why? Because you are LATE! L-

A-T-E! Should be here in 20 minutes. And whatever you do, don't forget to mark yourselves late. That's L-A-T-E!"

No one could understand why you would launch a building perfectly capable of functioning on dry land into a body of water and have it wander around like it had some place to go (which it didn't) only to steer back to the same place every night at the same time. But that was the choice of The Employers, and who were the employees to ask questions? Besides, it was nice being out there when the weather was good. You could walk around the building at lunch time one way, and then reverse the direction for the afternoon break. Or only go halfway around, and then reverse direction again. Limitless possibilities.

Henry walked through the lobby door and greeted Matilda Zaney, the switchboard operator. She was busy watering two plants that flanked the door, both of which had died quite a while ago.

"Morning, Matilda," Henry said. "I see you're tending to the plants." Matilda nodded, her green eyes wide open and almost lifeless.

"They look a little droopy. Should I be worried?"

"No," Henry said patting her shoulder. "Keep doin' what you-re doin'. They'll be okay."

Henry walked into the first-floor offices, which featured gray carpets and matching cubicle walls. His was the one in the back corner that afforded him extra space from the two walls his desk straddled. It took a few seconds for him to notice the clutter on his desk. It was familiar, he thought, in a way he couldn't quite understand. But after seeing the cup of day-old coffee and the half-opened offer for a free subscription to Management World Magazine, it finally struck him. His desk was an extension of his mind. Papers lie on top of papers in haphazard positions, like the thoughts that piled up in his brain; scraps were strewn everywhere with scribble on them, staccato-like and unintelligible. He often thought

this way following one thought as it collided with another or collapsed in on itself into the twisted wreck of confusion manifesting itself in the handwriting he now scrutinized. The small bins placed in no particular order on the top shelf filled with papers, staples, tape, paper clips a deck of playing cards, a measuring tape, unused planners and post-it notes. There were even pictures of his dead father dressed in his Navy uniform from World War II, his arm around his cousin who was dressed in his army uniform. Disarray, he thought, as he considered how lucky he was to actually get a look inside his mind. Who was smart enough to make that happen?

But he was going to clean it up using a technique he had attended a seminar on last month, the Japanese 5 S (sort, set in order, shine, standardize, sustain) technique. He was considering how to begin the process when he heard Lionel Masters' hollow knock on his cubicle door.

"Morning, Henry," Lionel said. He was now in the role of Benevolent Boss, a role he assumed as soon as the building was launched.

"Morning, Henry," said Perry Tacaday. He was the Boss's assistant and seemed to repeat everything The Boss said. As such, he always stood behind The Boss, his face just over his left shoulder. He looked like a parrot and word had it that this was by design. Lionel masters hired him because it would take too long to train a bird.

"We were thinking of having a meeting," The Boss said, "but we thought better of it. Meetings are a waste of time."

"Waste of time," Parrot Perry said.

"Boring as hell," The Boss said.

"Yuhhhh, boring," repeated Parrot Perry.

"So if anyone sends you a meeting notice, by God, you ignore it, understood?"

"Got it," Henry said.

"Gotta' ignore it," Parrot Perry said. Lionel Masters looked at an opened package of saltines on Henry's desk.

"Say, can I have one of those?"

"Help yourself," said Henry. Lionel took two. He placed one in his mouth and without looking held the other one over his right shoulder. Parrot Perry snatched it from Lionel's fingers then quickly gobbled it.

Henry was in the kitchen pouring himself a cup of coffee. Bobby "Bubba" Bingley, the Purchasing Agent, was visibly shaken, his round face beaded in sweat, and his bald head covered in red splotches. He was breathing heavily and his shoes and trousers were soaked up to the knees.

"Lionel's after me," he said.

"How do you know?" Henry took a long sip of coffee.

"We argued."

"About what?" Bubba looked around nervously.

"The basement," he said. "I told Lionel that there was a leak in the basement. That's where I keep my purchasing forms. I went down for a box and—" He looked down at his trouser legs. "—that's how I got these."

"So, if there's a leak in the basement, I'm sure Lionel will get it fixed," said Henry.

"You don't understand. He said it's not possible for there to be a leak in the basement. He said I was crazy."

"So, ignore him and go back to work," Henry said.

"I can't." Bubba brought his face close to Henry's and hissed at him. "He took my wireless keyboard."

"What—"

"You heard me," Bubba said. "He took my keyboard." He sounded like a child who had lost his favorite toy. "He told me I was mistaken about the leak and that I shouldn't tell anyone. Then he took my wireless keyboard." Bubba stood looking at Henry, his face wrinkled in a pained expression. "I can't work without my keyboard."

"I'm sure he'll give it back."

Bubba looked around in case Lionel and Parrot Perry were lurking in the shadows.

"No. He won't. Meantime, we're leaking." Bubba walked to the door of the kitchen then turned back to Henry. "Are we going to sink?"

The Employers liked to run a tight ship and since the entire company floated on water every day, that was a pretty good thing. To help this process they employed a very active Technical Manual Department. They wrote policy for the company on everything from casual dress to making sure there were six bagels left over on bagel Friday (for The Employers, of course).

The Technical Department was at the end of a long hallway on the second floor. Henry was walking down this very same hallway to the department to ask a question of Roy Buehler and Karen Mandarin, the two employees charged with this awesome task. He came to the door and noticed it was closed. There was a rhythmic banging against the door which caused Henry to pause. He was amazed at how it seemed to speed up, slow down, speed up. Like Sonny Corleone at the famous Godfather wedding scene, he thought. Henry knocked on the door. The sound stopped mid-bang.

"What—?" It was a raspy voice, strained from exertion and it could have been either Roy or Karen.

"Uh, this is Henry Todd. I have a question, can I come in?"

There was dead silence. Then a rush of sound indicating a great deal of activity taking place behind the door.

"Sure." It was Roy's voice. "Just give us a second." In a minute or so the door flung open. Roy and Karen stood breathing heavily, a forced casualness on their faces. Roy wore glasses and was balding. Karen wore a white blouse and blue jacket with matching slacks. She wasn't aware that her blouse was misbuttoned and one end hung carelessly out of her slacks.

"How can we help?" she said in her mousey voice as she smoothed back her clearly messed up long brown hair.

"Well, uh, I was wondering, what's the policy for contacting The Employers?" Roy's and Karen's eyes widened.

"What do you mean? Henry, you know no one talks to The Employers," Karen said.

"Yeah," Roy added looking at Karen. "If you need anything, you can contact The Boss."

"I know," Henry said, "but what if I want to contact The Employers about The Boss?"

Roy and Karen seemed dumfounded. They craned their heads like a pair of caged birds who lost the ability to tweet. Roy spoke after scratching the top of his bald head.

"You have to give us some time to work that one out, Henry," he said. "No one ever asked that question before." He closed the door to a crack and peered at Henry, Karen's head above his. "We'll get back to you," Roy said as he slammed the door shut.

Henry returned to his desk and the work that was piling up. He went through his e-mails, deleting way more than he kept. Of those he opened, he deleted even more and responded to only a handful that were actually business related. He delighted in emptying the trash bin at the end of the exercise sending the annoying and misdirected digital missives to an unmarked cyber graveyard. If life could only be as easy, he thought. Keep what was important, shit-can the rest.

He looked out his window and noticed the waves. It was a sunny day, with a slight breeze blowing from the west. But the waves seemed to be higher than usual. A couple actually broke over the one side of the building sending a shallow but noticeable wall of water cascading against the foundation. What if Bubba was right? Then the building was in danger and someone should do something about it. He couldn't wait for Roy and Karen to find out what policy he should follow. He needed to get action now. If he couldn't reach The Employers, then he would have to settle for the next best thing to God himself: IT.

The IT department was in a restricted area of the second floor. You made a right turn before the Technical Manual Department and followed the hallway to the other side of the building. There were cameras posted every few feet. They were like white metallic eyes that followed you as you walked. If you stopped, they stopped. If you took slow deliberate steps, they would follow you in a similar manner. This sometimes made Henry feel uncomfortable and he wanted to poke one of the camera's mechanical eyes out, but did not want to incur the wrath of the IT department. Their retribution was swift and clandestine. Suddenly your computer would freeze up, or your e-mail would stop working. IT could make your day a living hell, since no one could fix your computer (or disable it) but IT.

The door to the IT department was stainless steel and didn't have a door knob. There was a single eye painted in the middle with a small camera serving as the retina. It was always red, like it was mad at you for daring to interrupt the goings-on of the all-important IT department. In order to enter you had to give your sign instead of a password. The IT people thought this would be much

more secure than giving out words which could be easily found out. So each person was given a body part to hold in front of the eye. These parts had been synced with the eye in advance, so it would always know who was seeking entrance.

Henry's body part was the middle finger of his right hand. He was told to hold it sideways in front of the eye so it wouldn't seem so offensive. But he delighted in snapping it into the typical vertical position reserved for someone you wanted to stick it to. Henry now did this as the bloodshot eye turned green and the door opened.

Cody Scritowski, the IT Manager, was sitting in front of his computer screen, his brown eyes reflecting the code he was writing in front of him. Henry stopped in front of his desk and slightly to the right. He could tell from the crazed look in Cody's eyes that he was writing code. Never interrupt an IT person writing code. That was the unspoken law of the business world and Henry was damned careful to observe it. He stood there waiting to be acknowledged, his right hand in his pocket, his middle finger still extended.

"Henry," Cody said without taking his eyes off his screen. Henry could still hear his fingers tapping rapidly on the keys as he strung letters, numbers and symbols together into code no other human being but an IT soul could possibly understand. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to The Employers. I was wondering if you could get a message to them for me."

Cody, his fingers still pecking at his keyboard like so many pigeon beaks gathering bread crumbs, slowly shook his head from right to left. "They don't have time," he said. "Take it up with The Boss."

"But it's about The Boss. Look, I know you speak to them."

Cody shot him a look. "Who told you that? I never told anyone that. How did you know that?"

"Everyone knows that," Henry said.

"Damn it. A breach in security. Don't worry, I'll plug it." Cody went back to his coding.

"Cody, I heard there's a water leak downstairs and I wanted to confirm it. Lionel thinks it's BS—"

"He's right," Cody said narrowing his eyes as he looked at his screen. "There's no leak."

"But, are you sure? I mean... your servers are down there." Cody stopped mid-code. His eyes widened as though he just remembered something.

"Henry—uh—gotta' go." Cody stood up and ran for the door. He looked back as he was half way through it. "I'll catch you later."

Henry was walking down the hall back toward the Technical Manual Department. When he reached the entrance he noticed the door was ajar. He pushed it open slowly and he could see Karen and Roy. Karen was standing against the left wall, with Roy facing her. Her left leg was hooked on Roy's right shoulder. They were fully dressed and Henry wondered if he should turn around and leave.

"Oh, Henry. Hello," Karen said noticing him. She waved and smiled as though one foot on the ground and the other draped over a man's shoulder was about as natural a pose as one could assume.

"How can we help you?" Roy also smiled and placed his right hand on Karen's left ankle as though it were his jacket lapel.

"Well," Henry said, "I was wondering if you had any word on the policy for contacting The Employers."

"Oh, right," Roy said. "We're in the process of penetrating that issue now." Roy looked at Karen as they both shrugged and gave each other a wrinkled smile. "We'll get back to you as soon as we hear something."

"Oh. Then, okay." Henry turned to go. As he was closing the door, he saw Roy grab Karen's buttocks as she hooked her right leg over his other shoulder.

Henry returned to his desk in time to see The Boss sitting in his visitor's chair. Parrot Perry crouched behind the chair so that his head was over Lionel's left shoulder. Henry sat in his chair and swiveled it around to face them.

"Hello, Lionel, Perry. Can I help you?"

"Naw," Lionel said. "Naw," Parrot Perry repeated until Lionel gave him a "that's enough" look. "Thought I'd stop in to see how you're doing, strictly social, you see," Lionel said.

"Strictly social," Parrot Perry said.

"Actually, I'm doing fine, I—"

"What did that bastard Bubba say to you?" Lionel leapt to his feet as specks of spittle flew from his moist lips. "Don't believe anything he says. He's screwed up, chunky and fat."

"Chunky and fat," Parrot Perry said also standing, but still behind Lionel's left shoulder.

"Now, what did he say to you?"

Henry instinctively pushed his chair back in reaction to Lionel's sudden outburst. "Look, he's concerned that's all. Said something about a leak in—"

"Leak? Leak?" Lionel turned to look at Perry. Perry looked at him and they both said together, "Leak? Leak?" Lionel shot a look at Henry.

"Is that something to say to people who are on a floating building in the middle of a body of water?"

"Only if it's true," Henry said.

"Huh, did you hear that?" Lionel turned to look at Parrot Perry. "Huh, heard that," Parrot Perry said. Lionel looked at him then at his left shoulder. Perry quickly took his position as indicated. Lionel turned back to Henry.

"I suggest you do not spread rumors. Especially ones started by former employees who are no longer with us."

Henry stood up. "You mean, Bubba—"

"Yup, Bubba," Parrot Perry said. Lionel verified the answer to Henry's question with a quick nod. He then smiled and turned to go.

"Let's have no more talks of leaks. And, hey, glad we had a chance to take things off line." He left quickly with Parrot Perry close behind.

The confusion once again started to build in Henry Todd's brain. Should he believe Bubba's story about a leak? Should he care since Bubba was now toast? He sat paralyzed at his desk wondering if he should get back to his e-mail or prepare the agenda for a meeting he was supposed to run that afternoon. Voices of other employees trailed past him in the hallways. The smells of coffee wafted through the air from the kitchen. All seemed normal. He was in no particular rush to disturb the natural order of things, lest his confusion become even more debilitating.

Maybe Lionel was right and there was no cause for concern. Besides, he might get in trouble with The Boss and The Employers. Then Henry saw his reflection in the computer screen, thinning gray hair, wrinkled gray skin, a sagging jowl, eyes that looked dull and pointless. Suddenly there was a hint of a smile and a glimmer he hadn't seen before.

Fuck The Boss and The Employers. He was going to the basement to check it out personally.

Henry jumped up and walked quickly to the lobby. He passed Matilda as she was pruning the dead branches of the lobby plants.

"Hey, Matilda," he said as he walked directly to the metal door with a red 'Keep out' sign on the front.

"Henry, you can't go down there," Matilda said. But it was too late; Henry was already through the door.

It was dark and Henry relied on the light from his cell phone to mark the way. The entrance led to a narrow hallway that ran right across the front of the building. If you turned left, you reached the storage closet and a small room housing the servers. But he turned right, curious to see where that would lead. When he got to the end, there was another hallway that ran along the entire length of the building. Two hallways? Is that all that's down here, Henry wondered. He looked at the end of the long corridor and noticed a faint light coming from a slit at the bottom of the interior wall. He made his way there slowly, holding his cell phone in front of him.

When he reached the spot, he could see the light shining through the bottom of a small doorway. He was surprised to find it unlocked and when he entered he was taken aback at what he saw. There were rows upon rows of fluorescent lights on the ceiling. Under these and clear as day were rows of plants. Hundreds of them growing tall, nourished by the lights. There was water flowing between the rows representing a kind of irrigation system. The place had an odd smell, musty but with a whiff of spring in the air.

Henry noticed a man a few feet from him. He was tying a plant to a stake he had driven in the ground. The man was black and wore blue overalls over a white shirt and a bright red tie. His hands were rough with long fingernails that trapped a line of gray dirt under each. His face was round and smooth like dark leather. He was wearing wire rimmed glasses. When he saw Henry, he peered over them, the whites of his bulging eyes like



flash- lights against his dark skin.

"What the hell you doin' here?" The man dropped his twine and moved quickly toward Henry. "You ain't supposed to be here. The Employers know you're here?"

He stopped a few inches from Henry's face. He was shorter than Henry, but barrel chested with thick arms that bulged with power as he raised them to point at Henry.

"No, I came alone."

"You know no one is allowed down here. Just those two rooms upfront."

"I know, but my friend—a co-worker—he said there was a leak down here. I wanted to check it out, you know, a leak. That's serious."

The man's eyes softened as he raised his head and gave Henry a closer look. He backed up a couple of steps.

"Musta' been this morning. I was lettin' the water in for the plants and got called away. It came in too fast and flooded things down here, but I took care of it."

"That was probably when he was down here," Henry said. "Anyway, I didn't know there was a whole field down here." Henry stuck out his hand. "Henry Todd."

"Gray Brown. And don't give me any of that 'Farmer Gray' shit. Anyway, nice to meet you. But we're both screwed if the The Boss or The Employers know you're down here."

"I'm not gonna' tell them. So—. How'd you get to do all this?"

Brown explained that when the building was built, he was the janitor. Then The Employers decided to use an outside janitorial service to save money, so he was laid off. But The Employers had to meet a minority quota, proving they purchased X dollars from a minority owned business.

"So, I said, hey, yous might not want to admit it, but you need me. I came up with this idea—it was like that, you know, what'd they call it? 40 Acres and a mule. Remember? That's what they was supposed to give all my black ancestors after the civil war. Instead of land and an animal, they got jack shit."

Henry tried to remember his history but figured he missed that chapter.

"So they gave me their version of 40 acres down here. But instead of a mule, I asked for a mouse." Gray Brown led Henry to a small room in a corner of the basement field. It was an apartment—a cot, kitchenette, arm chair, TV and a bathroom. A small desk stood at the opposite end with a computer on it. Gray Brown shook the mouse and the computer powered on.

"As you can see, I attached the mouse to a computer, not a plow. I did some research, found all of the retail and farmer's market outlets in the area, what kinds of

produce they buy and how much they pay. Planted to meet demand and before I knew it, I was in business."

"Wow," Henry said. "So you live here all the time?"

"Pretty much. Except on weekends. I use my truck to pick up stuff for my plants, drive my produce to market, visit friends and family. Yes sir, can't beat what 40 acres and a mouse have done for me."

Henry shook hands with Gray Brown and promised him he would not mention a word of his visit to anyone. Once back at his desk, he sat down at his computer and reached for his mouse. But he stopped suddenly before he touched it. He stared at it for a moment, then noticed once again his face reflected in his computer screen. He was surprised to discover he was smiling.

He quickly grabbed the mouse and shook it several times until the computer screen came to life with possibilities he had never seen before.

## Lardaceous

by GERARD SARNAT

*Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, 2010's HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man and 2012's Disputes. He has been published in over 70 journals and anthologies. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry's a physician who's set up and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, a CEO of health care organizations, and a Stanford professor. For The Huffington Post review of his work and more; visit GerardSarnat.com. Some of these pieces will appear in his third collection, 17s, in which each poem, stanza, or line has seventeen syllables.*

Long-jowled roomy-jeaned fortresses, receptacles of no one's desire,

peters unseen since childhood, Medicare gave us motorized wheel chairs.

Happiest place on earth everything's grand lived large here at Disneyland?

I slip my Matterhorn from its drapery that fits like Tweedledum's.

Resolved

to

slim

down,

how can we fit through the fast-food court's double doors?

Sauna, tanning box, mani-pedi? let's stare at poi in the lobby,

excavate Ben and Jerry's tubs. End of living, survival begun?

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# Angel

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by Michael Anthony Dorlac

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# Tough Love

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by Joe Boettcher

*Joe Boettcher is an undergraduate student at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. This is his first officially published story. For those interested in his unofficially published stories, they can be found on his blog: [joeboettcher.blog.com](http://joeboettcher.blog.com).*

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## Tough Love

DON AND Eleanor were both whistling while they worked in their back yard late Friday afternoon, but neither whistled the same tune. As he trimmed the hedges along the fence, Don whistled the theme from the Andy Griffith Show. Eleanor, on the other hand, preferred performing "Oh Susanna" as she tended her garden. Because the hedges and the garden sat only feet away from each other, their tunes constantly clashed with one another, making their music sound, instead, like confused birdcalls to their neighbors and passersby. Don often wondered if his wife noticed how their tunes clashed. He figured she probably didn't, considering her hearing wasn't what it once was, but he was sure that the neighbors did.

He glanced over at the house next door. A twenty-something-year-old kid whose name Don couldn't remember was sitting on the back porch smoking a cigarette. They made eye contact, and the kid bent his brow and flared his nostrils at him. Don smiled warmly at the kid, and as he turned back to his work, he began to whistle even louder. "Kid looks like he could use some good music in his life," he muttered to himself between verses.

Seeing the neighbor kid made Don think of his own son, Tim, who was not a kid but a man. Tim would never laze around on his back porch smoking cigarettes because he was a respectable businessman who worked in a fancy office in New York City. Don's smile widened and his whistling hastened as he thought of seeing his boy again next Thursday. He hadn't seen Tim since he came home for Easter last April, and the phone calls had become less and less frequent ever since his son received that promotion in early July. Next Thursday, though, the three of them would be together once more. Don imagined them making paper turkeys and putting up the Christmas tree just like they did every year when Tim was a boy. Who knows, thought Don, maybe Tim will even surprise us

and bring home a girlfriend this year. Don chuckled and said, "That'll be the day," as he snapped off a stubborn branch.

After he finished off his last hedge, Don took a step back to examine his work. He admired how straight he had made the bushes across the top. It was as if he had given the hedge a marine cut. "High and tight," he said to himself, and he chuckled as he turned to look at his wife. She was still bent over her garden, still snipping away at stems, still digging away at weeds. Don figured she'd probably be at it for the next three hours if he didn't distract her with something first. His sweetheart had one hell of a work ethic, and he loved that about her. But sometimes he wished she'd settle for the marine cut.

Her flower garden was already immaculate—a perfect square full of fertile dirt and evenly spread red mulch. Every plant rested exactly one foot from each of its neighbors and every row contained a different type of plant. For a daisy to be only eleven inches away from a chrysanthemum was unacceptable, and for those two plants to be in the same row entailed blasphemy of the highest order. The grid, as Don affectionately called the garden, could not stand without these proper protocols. Eleanor could not bear it being otherwise.

Don gazed at the back of his wife's neck as she hunched over her plants. It was tensed up on the alert as she scoured her garden for imperfections of any sort, ready to pull them out by their roots. She reminded Don of a panther that he had seen on a nature program once. Its neck was just as taut, its attention just as focused on finding its prey and devouring it whole. And, like the panther, his sweetheart certainly didn't miss much. Don remembered how she used to have to correct Tim over and over again when he'd help her garden. Tim would plant a flower in the wrong spot and Eleanor would scold him saying, "Come on, you know better than that. Do it like I taught you, Timmy." But Tim would inevitably do it again, and Eleanor would always wind up sending him

over to Don. He could still recall how his son would come skulking over and sit down on the ground in front of him Indian-style, with his arms folded across his chest and his bottom lip sticking out. Don would always have to repress a chuckle at this demonstration. Then he'd ask Tim to come help him trim the hedges. Tim would be so excited to get to use the hedge clippers that he would come out of his funk in an instant.

"You shouldn't be so hard on the boy," Don would say to his wife later in the evening. "He's just a kid trying to help his mom."

"I'm just giving him some tough love," Eleanor would reply, and the conversation would end before Don could disagree. Eventually, Tim stopped offering to help with the garden, and these conversations ceased completely.

Don continued to watch his wife as he put his hedge trimmers down. It was getting late and his stomach was beginning to growl. Tonight was leftover night and he knew that he had half a pastrami sandwich waiting for him in the fridge. He wondered what Eleanor would eat, if anything. It wasn't uncommon for her to work straight through dinner when she was working on her garden.

Suddenly Eleanor sat up and grabbed her yardstick, which sat on top of her trashcan full of yard tools. She set it down next to two of the plants and put on her reading glasses to read the measurement.

"Time to measure again, honey?" Don asked.

"Mm-hmm," Eleanor replied before once again breaking into "Oh Susanna."

"You think they moved since last time?" said Don with a smile.

"You never can be too careful," said Eleanor between whistles.

"You never cease to amaze me, honey," Don chuckled as he walked over to his wife and kissed her on the top of her head.

Eleanor looked up at Don for a moment and smiled. "You're too kind," she said, and then she returned to her measuring.

"Not kind enough," Don replied as he kissed her head once again. He stood for a moment next to his wife and glanced around their backyard and reflected on how little it had changed since they moved into the house thirty years ago. The grass was still hard to keep green and the deck was still hard to keep brown. The swing set he had bought when they first moved in still sat in the corner of the yard for some reason. (He and Eleanor certainly weren't using it.) Don had never gotten around to throwing it out. He sighed and clapped his hands together a couple of times. "So I suppose there's nothing I could say to convince you to call it a day, honey?"

Eleanor continued to measure with her fingers as she looked up at Don. "Sorry, dear, but I want my garden looking its best when we have people over for Thanksgiving."

"I think it already looks great!" Don exclaimed with the utmost sincerity.

Eleanor looked up at him with a skeptical look on her face.

"No really, honey, I think you've already got it looking perfect. Besides, Thanksgiving's not 'til next week. You've got plenty of time to put your finishing touches on it."

"Next week I have to clean the house."

Don was about to concede when he thought he heard a car door slam in front of their house. "That's odd," he said.

"What is it, dear?" said Eleanor.

"Were you expecting any company today?"

"Don't think so."

Don turned with a jerk as he heard the gate to the backyard creak open. There in the gateway stood none other than his son, Tim. He was a tall boy, much taller than either of his parents, with a thin body and dark brown curly hair, the exact same color brown that Don's hair used to be. He had on a nice suit, but no tie. And he looked tired. Don was sure he was tired. He knew from experience how long and exhausting plane rides from New York to Orlando tended to be. After visiting Tim in New York once, Don made sure to clearly communicate to him that he would be coming to visit them from now on and not vice versa. And now there he stood, making good on their agreement, though a week earlier than Don had expected him. Nevertheless, Don was overjoyed to see his boy. He and Eleanor embraced him and told him how happy they were to see him, and he embraced them right back. Then they all went inside and Eleanor set to work fixing up her Timmy's favorite snack while Tim and Don sat at the kitchen table.

"No really, Mom, I'm fine," said Tim as he watched Eleanor hustle around the kitchen, taking the ice cream out of the freezer, the cookies out of the cupboard, and a can of Sprite out of the fridge.

"Nonsense, Timmy, I'm sure you're hungry. You look like you haven't been eating at all."

"Well I guess I could eat something. But, Mom, I'm thirty-two years old; Sprite, ice cream, and cookies was my favorite snack when I was like, fourteen!"

"Oh." Eleanor paused opening up the ice cream carton and looked at Tim. "So, do you want me to make you an adult snack like carrot sticks?"

Tim looked over at Don who shook his head and mouthed "No" emphatically. Tim laughed and gave in. "I guess it has been a while since I last had a Sprite."

"Really?" said Don. "Why's that?"

Eleanor interrupted before Tim could reply. "It's because they don't drink Sprites in the big business world, dear; they're too respectable." Eleanor beamed with pride as she said this.

"But Sprite's okay at home. Isn't that right, Timmy?"

"Actually, a lot of the people I work with drink soft drinks; I've just been trying to cut back on my sugar intake lately," Tim replied.

"Oh," said Eleanor. She finished putting the ice cream in a bowl and went to put the carton back in the freezer.

Meanwhile, Don smiled at Tim as he tried to think of what he should ask him first. Eleanor finally broke the silence saying, "Well, I don't think one Sprite will kill you."

"You're right, Mom," said Tim as she placed the can of Sprite and the ice cream in front of him and then put five cookies on top of the ice cream. "Thanks."

"You're very welcome, Timmy. Now tell us about New York!" said Eleanor. Don watched as she sat down in the chair across from Tim and hunched over the table eagerly.

"Well, um, New York's amazing," said Tim. He took a sip of his Sprite and Don noticed him wince slightly. That's when Don remembered that those Sprites had been sitting in the fridge since Easter. He caught Tim's eye and gave him an apologetic look, but Eleanor didn't seem to notice.

"Now you're going to have to do better than that Timmy," said Eleanor with a smile. "Your father and I have been bored to death here in Orlando. We want to know what's so amazing about New York."

Tim cleared his throat and continued, "Well I went to see the Statue of Liberty recently."

"Really?" said Don. "I've always wanted to do that! Remember dear, that was the one thing we didn't get to do when we were there because the line was too long."

Eleanor nodded and said, "Mm-hmm."

"How was the line when you went there?" Don asked.

"Actually, there was hardly any line at all, Pop," replied Tim.

"What day did you go on?"

"A Tuesday."

"I knew it! I knew we should have gone on a weekday, honey. Oh well." Don sighed and chuckled to himself.

"Don't worry, Pop. I took a lot of pictures, and I've got them in my bag," said Tim

"Great! I'd love to see them," said Don.

"How's your job, Timmy?" asked Eleanor.

Tim had just taken a bite of his ice cream and Don noticed another suppressed wince. That's when Don realized that the only ice cream they had was rum raisin flavored. This was Don's favorite flavor but, unfortunately, one of Tim's least favorites. Don mouthed "Sorry" to Tim as he forced himself to swallow the bite, and Tim nodded slightly to his father to indicate that it was no big deal. Then he cleared his throat and said, "What did you say, Mom?"

"How's your job going?" Eleanor asked as she leaned forward further in her chair. (Don couldn't help but notice that she was nearly on the edge of her seat.)

"Oh, um, there's actually something I have to tell you guys about my job. It actually has to do with why I'm here so early."

Don glanced at Eleanor who continued to stare at Tim. He noticed her eyes widen slightly for a moment as she absentmindedly played with the lace on the tablecloth. Don wondered what this could be about. A few thoughts flashed through his mind, some good, some bad, and some downright scary, but all he said was, "Yeah, I

was wondering why you were here so early, Tim. Did they give you some extra vacation time or something?"

"Or are you on a business trip to Orlando?" Eleanor chimed in.

Tim took another sip of his Sprite and choked it down before saying, "No, guys, I'm here early because I quit my job."

It took Don a moment to register what he had just heard, but when it finally did register, he still couldn't believe it. Tim had never been a quitter. He had been a straight-A student all the way from kindergarten through college. He'd played five different sports in high school and never quit any of them, even baseball, and he was particularly bad at baseball. And, in recent years, he had been climbing the corporate ladder like a mad man. So Don knew that for Tim to quit his job there must have been a very good reason. He glanced once again at Eleanor, and seeing a blank expression on her face, he simply asked, "Why?"

"Because I want to be a teacher, Pop," said Tim.

"A teacher?" said Eleanor.

"Yeah, Mom, a teacher."

"What, like at a high school?" said Eleanor.

"Yeah, that's why I'm here so early. I've got a job interview lined up at Hoover High on Monday, and I thought I would come in a bit early for some extra family time."

"Wow!" said Don. He felt goose bumps begin to form on his arms. "That's really exciting Tim!" He had completely forgotten about the whole quitting thing. "I hope you get the job. We'd love to have you closer to home so that we could see you more often."

"Thanks Dad," said Tim. Don noticed that he too was fidgeting with the lace on the tablecloth.

"But what was wrong with your New York job?" asked Eleanor.

"It was becoming too monotonous, Mom," Tim replied. "All of the meetings and presentations and financial charts were starting to blend together. After a while it began to feel like I was running on autopilot, like I had lost my passion."

"And you think you'll be more passionate about teaching high school?"

"Yeah, Mom, I do. I feel like it'll be a new challenge that I can really sink my teeth into."

"But you've never expressed interest in teaching before." Eleanor had the tablecloth lace wrapped around her hand, as if she were about to pull the tablecloth off the table.

"It's something I've always thought about, but never seriously considered," Tim replied.

"What about New York, Timmy? It's so much more exciting than boring old Orlando."

Don shot a look at Eleanor, but she didn't notice.

"But you guys are in Orlando!" said Tim. "I really miss you guys when I'm out in the big city."

"Well, that's sweet, and we miss you too, Timmy, but

we don't want you making a huge mistake on our account."

"And why is it a mistake?" said Tim, both of his hands tightly gripping the lace.

"Teachers don't make nearly as much money as investment bankers, dear," said Eleanor. "You won't be able to afford a nice apartment like you have in New York on a teacher's salary."

"Don't you think I've thought about that, Mom? I am perfectly aware that teaching doesn't make as much, but I don't care about the money."

"Really?" said Eleanor incredulously. "Well, what happened to Mr. Three-Piggy-Banks, then?"

"I was eight years old, Mom, and I wanted a remote control car!"

"I seem to remember you being fourteen," said Eleanor.

"Same difference!" said Tim with an exasperated laugh.

As Don watched this argument unfold, he found himself sinking lower and lower in his chair, wishing it would end soon so that he could eat his pastrami sandwich.

"High school teachers have to deal with all sorts of delinquent kids all day. Do you really want that to be your job?" Eleanor continued.

"I actually miss dealing with children! After dealing with a bunch of rich, amoral, know-it-all adults for the past ten years, I actually welcome delinquent kids! At least I can write delinquent kids up for being bad and not have to worry about them gunning for my job!" Tim ran his fingers through his hair before once again grabbing and twisting the lace.

"I don't know, Timmy. I just can't see you enjoying being a teacher; you're too smart," said Eleanor.

"Why do you always do this, Mom?" said Tim.

"Why do I always do what?"

"This!" Tim waved his arm above his head and slammed it down on the table.

"This?" Eleanor stared at Tim blankly.

Don just kept looking back and forth between them, not sure of what to say or what to do.

Tim exhaled and said, "You know, before I decided to quit my job, I did a lot of thinking—and I mean a lot of thinking. Eventually I came to a place where I was nearly ready to go ahead and change career paths. You know what the only thought that kept me from feeling one hundred percent confident in my decision was? The thought that Mom's never going to support me in this. But then I thought, 'No! I'm older, I've earned the right in her eyes to make my own decisions by now, right?' Yet, here I am, the same old Timmy, eating ice cream, drinking Sprite, and being shot down by his mother! That's what I mean by 'This'."

Eleanor rubbed the lace with her thumb and forefinger. She opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it again.

Don sat up in his chair and looked once more from his wife to his son. Tim's face was dark pink and his eyes were narrow. Eleanor's face was pale white and her eyes were wide. Don's stomach growled. "Are you gonna eat your ice cream, Tim?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, Pop," Tim said as he rubbed his forehead.

As Don got up to grab the bowl, Eleanor also stood up and said, "Excuse me" as she hurried out the backdoor. Don paused for a moment as he watched her plant herself in front of her garden once again and then proceeded to grab the bowl. He grabbed a spoon from the counter and dug in. He glanced back out the window as he ate and noticed her neck. It was drooped over her flowers motionless. She held the yardstick in her right hand by her side.

Tim took another sip of his Sprite and cleared his throat. "Was I too mean to her, Pop?" he asked.

"Don't worry, son," Don replied. "Your mom's a tough woman. She can take it. I'm sure she just needs some time to think, just like you did."

Tim nodded in agreement.

\*

Later that night, while Tim was out catching up with some old friends at a restaurant, Don and Eleanor sat in their twin recliners and watched TV. Don had let Eleanor pick the program, so they wound up watching one of those mystery crime documentaries. When they watched these types of shows, Eleanor usually talked right along with the show's narrator—giving her theories on who did it, commenting on how awful that must have been for the victim, and remarking at how disorganized all police offices seem to be—but tonight she remained silent.

Don kept glancing over at his wife during the episode. He missed her constant banter because now that he could actually hear the show's narrator, he realized that his wife's commentary was a lot more amusing. He also realized for the first time that the show had a mediocre soundtrack that was annoying more than anything else. Eleanor seemed soothed by it, though, so he didn't say anything.

Suddenly the picture began to fizzle and waver. "Uh oh," said Don under his breath. He had had the sneaking suspicion for a while now that their clunky old 1980s television set wasn't going to hold out much longer. It was a thick black RCA model that had been largely held together by twist ties and duct tape for the last three years. Don watched as the old girl gave her last attempts at life before her picture faded to black for good. He chuckled and said, "Well I guess it was bound to die sometime, eh honey?"

"Mm-hmm," Eleanor replied. Her eyes remained on the black screen, her hand on the remote.

"So, uh, who do you think did it, honey?" asked Don.

"The neighbor," said Eleanor.

"Yeah, it was probably the neighbor," said Don, even though he didn't even remember there being a neighbor.

Eleanor's gaze finally broke away from the TV, and Don watched as she sifted through her basket full of magazines that she kept next to her recliner. She picked out a Reader's Digest with Kirk Cameron on the cover and began reading. Don patted his knees a couple of times as he looked around the room. The grandfather clock in the corner ticked slowly and minutes passed before he finally got up and examined the TV.

As he looked over the monitor, his eyes came to rest on a piece of duct tape stuck to its right side. Don peeled it away to discover the crack that Tim had made when he was eight. Don remembered how it was such a rainy summer that year and how Tim was so frustrated with the fact that he could not go out and play baseball with his friends. So, on one particular rainy day, Tim decided that it would be harmless to play catch with a friend in the family room without asking permission. Don recalled the look on Tim's face when he and Eleanor sat him down for a stern talk. His red eyes and his sniffing nose were enough to tell Don that Tim was sorry, but Eleanor was not satisfied. She gave Tim a long lecture on why there is a place for everything and everything needs its place and how playing baseball in the house could lead to other self-destructive tendencies like stealing and drug abuse. All Don could do was watch his wife go on and on until she finished. Then he took a piece of duct tape, put it over the crack, and said, "There, all better."

Later that night he mentioned in passing, "You think the lecture was a little much, honey?"

"I just don't want him to wind up a degenerate," she replied.

"In other words, tough love," said Don.

"Absolutely, dear," said Eleanor.

Don chuckled at the memory and looked up at Eleanor whose thousand-yard stare was burning a hole in her Reader's Digest. "You know, honey," he said and paused for a moment to see if Eleanor would respond. She did by taking off her reading glasses and looking up at him. "Um, you know, honey," Don began again, "our Tim's a smart fellow."

"Mm-hmm." Eleanor nodded in agreement during another awkward pause.

Don was about to say something but changed his mind at the last second and said, "So, um, don't you think he probably knows a lot about TVs?" asked Don.

"Seems like all the young people do," said Eleanor.

"Well, then I think we should let Tim decide which new TV we should buy," said Don, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "What say you to that, honey?"

"Well—" Eleanor set down her Reader's Digest and rubbed her chin. "Just as long as it doesn't clash with the room. It has to look right, you know."

Don glanced at the old RCA with its patches of duct tape and its bulky frame. "Okay," he said.

"And I read a news report recently about a certain brand of TV that causes cancer, so it definitely shouldn't be that brand."

Don smiled. "I'm sure Tim wouldn't pick a TV for us that causes cancer," he said.

"What if he hasn't read the article and doesn't know it causes cancer?" said Eleanor.

"Well then the Federal Government won't let us buy a TV that causes cancer! There's regulations on that type of thing, dear!" said Don. He paused and then continued, "I love you, honey, but sometimes you can be downright paranoid. Sometimes you've got to trust that you're not the only one who's in control. Other people are just as capable at making right decisions as you!"

Don and Eleanor stared at each other for a moment. Eleanor's mouth was ajar and her eyebrows slightly raised. He had never before spoken to her that way, which is why the adrenaline was coursing through his blood so fiercely at the moment. The grandfather clock continued to tick.

Finally Eleanor said, "Do you really think that, Don?"

"I do," Don replied. "But I don't mean to be harsh."

"I know," Eleanor replied. "That's why they call it tough love, I guess."

Don laughed and said, "Yeah, I guess."

Eleanor smiled a smile that made Don's hands tremble.

"You never cease to amaze me, honey," said Don.

"You're too kind," Eleanor replied.

"Not kind enough," said Don. He stood up, and, as he did, he ripped the piece of duct tape off of the crack and tossed it into the wastebasket. He walked over to his wife and extended his right arm. "Time for bed, M'lady?" he asked in a deep voice.

"M'lord," she replied as she reached out and grabbed his arm. He helped her up and they embraced for a moment, her warmth making him shiver. Then they slowly went up the stairs to bed.

\*

When Eleanor came down to the kitchen the next morning, Don and Tim were already up and looking through a TV catalog. Don noticed her come in and motioned her over, and he noticed her hesitate a bit before she did.

"What's going on, boys?" she asked.

"Well I told Tim about our TV problem, honey, and we were just looking through the options for a replacement TV," said Don. He looked at Tim and noticed that his son wasn't looking up from the catalog. "Tim thinks we should get a Toshiba, don't you Tim?"

Tim looked at Don and replied, "Yeah, Pop, but now that you mention it, Sony's looking kind of good as well. Even though it's a bit more expensive than the Toshiba, the Sony also has more pixels and a bigger screen, which means it has a better picture." Don noticed that his son's eyes remained fixed on him as he said this. He would not even look at Eleanor.

"Well, I'd say that sounds pretty good," said Don turning to his wife. "What do you think honey?" Don's heart

began to pound. He searched in her eyes for some semblance of what he saw in them yesterday night, and there it was. Although she stood with her arms crossed, biting her lower lip, Don saw softness in her eyes that made his hands tremble.

Eleanor moved to behind her son and eyed the catalog over his shoulder. Don saw Tim tense up as his mother came behind him, but when she put her arm on his shoulder, he relaxed.

"I think that sounds like a great idea, Tim," said Eleanor.

Tim turned in his seat and looked at her. "You think so, Mom?"

"Well, I guess so," said Eleanor with a chuckle. "I mean, I don't know as much as you about TVs, so I trust your decision."

"My thoughts exactly," said Don.

"Well, it's settled then," said Tim as he clapped his hands. "We go with the Sony!" Tim had a look on his face that reminded Don of when he'd let the boy use the hedge clippers all those years ago.

"Great," said Eleanor. She looked at Don and shrugged her shoulders. Don chuckled and nodded back to her. He knew it was progress.

## Jar

by KELBY LOSACK

*Kelby Losack is a retired chainsaw ninja/werewolf cyborg/Martian circus ring leader. He is now a writer living in Texas, where he raises three beautiful children with his best friend. His debut novel TOXIC GARBAGE is now available. More at [www.kelbylosack.wordpress.com](http://www.kelbylosack.wordpress.com).*

HER NAILS tap on the window. Her shadow on my bedroom floor. I flip the lock, slide the window open.

She crawls inside, glass jar clutched in one hand, reflecting the yellow street lamp outside.

She wraps her arms around my neck, uncovered, cold to the touch. Presses her cracked lips, blue from December air, against my cheek.

Icicles in her eyelashes.

She says, "I brought you a going-away gift."

I tell her I'm not going anywhere.

She sets the jar between her legs, where my hand is guided by her hand on my wrist. I touch the lid.

"Imagine," she says, "if you could hold onto anything, keep it sealed in a jar. Black brain tumors and airline tickets. A mother's broken arm. A husband's guilt. Trapped inside your jar—to watch or feed or destroy. To keep."

Her eyes travel from our fingers laced over the lid, over the chill bumps on my arms, into my eyes, and they

close as our tongues collide.

She says, "Come with me."

I ask her to stay.

Our eyes open. Clouds of our breath float between our mouths. The snow melts off her chapped feet and soaks my sheets.

Cracked blue lips touch my nose, twitch into a smile, shiver and close tight.

Without any words, she says goodbye. She sets the jar in my lap and crawls out of my bed, out of my window, barefoot over the icy road, past the stop sign and she's gone.

Icicles in my eyelashes.

I lie on my back, holding the jar in the yellow lamp light, and imagine what I'd keep inside.

Her nails tap on the glass.

## Birdhouse

by J. S. MACLEAN

*J.S. MacLean hails from Calgary Canada and has had poetry published in a variety of journals in Canada, USA, UK, India, and Australia. These publications include Ice Flow (University of Alaska), Clover, Literary Review of Canada, The Chimaera, Shit Creek Review, and Bohemia. He has a collection, Molasses Smothered Lemon Slices available on amazon.com. His interests range widely from Science to Art, his pastimes from adventure to laziness. In his spare time he works.*

First, you need a bird—  
keen, and vivid plumed  
(yellow, teal, or sheen,  
but any shade will do)  
to author it around.

Frame its rhythmic heart  
in blueprint figures  
based on forms of flight,  
crooks of boughs gabled on  
a roof of polished burl.

Scribe holes to observe  
flash of beak or claw,  
and hang a mirror  
inside for pretty things  
to love or fear themselves.

Construct it with craft,  
quill-scribble call songs,  
like Colombian  
bushes burst in chorus  
by dimming afternoons.



# Homophone

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## Shaun J. McLaughlin

*Shaun J. McLaughlin has authored books on history and historical fiction, using both a traditional publisher and self-publishing. He maintains a publishing blog and a history blog on the Patriot War of 1838. A researcher, journalist and technical writer for over thirty years, with a master's degree in journalism, Shaun lives on a hobby farm in Eastern Ontario. Now a semiretired freelance writer, he focuses on further fiction and nonfiction writing projects.*

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## Homophone

"HEY, NINJA NERD. Where's my homework?" Cathy ignores the interruption and continues reading her book. She savours every second of time on the single tree-shaded bench in the barren schoolyard, a rare oasis in their industrial neighborhood. And, she has no need to visually identify the speaker. Everyone at school can recognize big Kathy's snarl.

"Yeah, Ninja Nerd. Where's our homework?"

Cathy shudders at the ensemble growl of the Swarm, the cabal of tough girls that shadow Kathy. She has no fear of Kathy one-on-one, despite her reputation for pummelling other students of either sex. Cathy's black belt gives her the edge she needs—and the first part of her hated nickname. However, she can't take on the Swarm too. She rises as the gang encircles her bench.

"What do you want?"

"The homework about homo's phones," Britney says, setting the Swarm all atwitter with her politically incorrect pun.

"I believe you mean homophones, Britney." Britney hates her full name—she prefers Brit—so Cathy stresses it.

"If there are homophones," Britney continues, "are there also heterophones?" She eyes the Swarm, making sure they caught her clever wordplay.

"They are called heteronyms," Cathy snaps. She finds Britney an affront to women, with her bottle-blond hair, navel-baring top and smart-ass remarks.

Kathy chuckles at Britney's distress. Good, Cathy thinks, the gang leader is not taking sides.

At six feet tall and one hundred and forty pounds, Kathy's presence at school is as undeniable and pervasive as gravity. By twelve, she passed for sixteen. Now at sixteen, she resembles the women on the strip joint marquee posters downtown. Even with no makeup, loose clothing,

and her red hair in an unflattering style, she turns men's heads.

Cathy stands four inches shorter with a ballerina's physique—or, as she often says when looking in her mirror: skinny and titless. She dresses plainly, wears her tawny locks pulled back, and turns no men's heads, which she appreciates most of the time.

"What are homophones," asks Latisha. "I missed that class." Almost as tall as Kathy but slender, she keeps her black curls short and usually wears men's blue jeans and T-shirts.

"Homophones are words that sound the same but have a different spelling and meaning."

"You'd better have our words." Kathy glares at Cathy.

"Mr. Barkley asked for one example each. Is that so hard?"

"You're missing the point, Ninja Nerd. I made it your job."

"I spent two minutes on Google last night and found over two hundred."

"Give us the list, loser," says Britney.

"The list is in my head, Britney."

"You memorized them all?"

"Mostly." Cathy loves to read and research—hence the second half of her nickname. "I will give you each a pair. Can you remember until class?"

Every girl, except Kathy, pulls a cell phone from a pocket or bag. "Who remembers anymore? We'll text it," Latisha says. "You should get a cell."

"Who'd want to talk to her?"

"Not me," the Swarm choruses.

Kathy punches Cathy lightly in the shoulder. "Brit got you that time."

Cathy shrugs. "Come on. Who is first?"

"Give me mine, Ninja Nerd."

"I have a perfect one for you, Britney. H-o-a-r as in a type of frost, and w-h-o-r-e as in what you see in the mirror."

The Swarm loves it. Fingers fly over cell phone keypads. Kathy gives Cathy another light whack. "Good one."

Cathy relaxes knowing she can skewer each girl separately and avoid the wrath of the collective, as long as Kathy approves.

"I'm not going to say whore in front of Mr. Barkley."

"I'll take it," Latisha jumps in. "I wanna see Barkley squirm when I stick out my boobs and say whore in my sweetest little voice."

"Go for it, girl," the Swarm chants.

"Who's next? Let's go," Kathy orders. The Swarm's major domo is enjoying the verbal assaults. Hands fly up.

"For Judy," Cathy recites. "L-y-r-e as in an old musical instrument, and l-i-a-r as in when you told us you slept with Randy."

"Ha-ha-ha," the Swarm cackles.

"For Ashley, d-i-s-c-r-e-t-e as in distinct, and d-i-s-c-r-e-e-t as in having good judgement, something you lacked when you dated Demetri."

"Yuk," the Swarm chirps.

"For Ivana, d-a-y-s as in parts of a week, and d-a-z-e as in your state of mind after three beers at Guy's party last week."

"Ew-w-w-w," the Swarm drones.

"For Semona, b-u-t as in on the contrary and b-u-t-t as in what is bulging out of your undersized jeans."

"Yes-s-s," the Swarm hisses.

"I still need one," Britney whines.

"Here is a triplet for you, since you are so special: v-a-n-e as in weather vane, v-e-i-n as in something that carries blood, and v-a-i-n as in thinking you are so precious."

"Oh-h-h yes," the Swarm titters.

"My turn," Kathy asks, giving Cathy a warning glance.

"For you, I saved the only quad set of homophones I found. It is sure to impress Mr. Barkley."

"Tell me."

"Do you really want everyone here to copy what I give you?"

"Get lost." Kathy waves the Swarm away. They stroll towards the school, anticipating the bell.

"For you, I have r-i-t-e as in a ceremony, r-i-g-h-t as in correct, w-r-i-t-e as in putting words down, and w-r-i-g-h-t as in a special artisan."

"No insults?"

"If you want insults, I have lots."

"You're okay." Kathy's face relaxes into a rare smile. She sits on the bench and pats the space beside her.

Cathy takes a seat at the far end, just out of Kathy's reach. She does not trust her that much, yet. "Can you remember the four words? You did not use a cell like the others," she says.

"Nah! My parents won't get me one 'cause it's too expensive."

"Mine too," Cathy says. "They say I have to pay for it myself but no one wants to hire a kid my age."

"Really! I'd think a smarty like you'd have no problem getting a job."

"Thanks. But, I am not that smart. People think I am because I read a lot and study and get good grades."

"No one'd give a dummy like me a job," Kathy mutters.

"You are not so dumb. I think you find school boring. I remember several times you answered a question when pushed by a teacher."

"Thanks, Ninja Nerd," Kathy says, smiling.

"I wish people would stop calling me that."

"Whatever got you into that ninja thing, anyway?" Kathy asks.

"It is Taekwon-do. I am not a ninja."

"I hear you workout four or five days a week. What's with that?"

"It is personal," Cathy replies.

"You can tell me."

"Oh, I guess I can confide in you," Cathy whispers. "If you promise to keep it to yourself."

"I promise," Kathy says, placing a hand over her heart.

"Five years ago, something bad happened, and I decided to learn how to defend myself."

"Did someone hurt you?"

"Not me." She pauses to gather strength for the next words. "A man sexually assaulted my big sister—"

Kathy's smile vanishes. Her expression darkens. She composes herself and stands.

Cathy has often seen that visage of pain on her sister.

"I saw that," Cathy says, rising.

"Saw what?"

"That scared look when I said sexual assault."

Kathy throws a roundhouse punch at Cathy's head. Nimble and quick from years of sparring, Cathy dodges the hit. Kathy lunges to grapple the smaller teen. Cathy dances sideways. She chooses not to hit back—Kathy moves too slowly to be a danger. Kathy chases Cathy four times around the tree and bench, and then gives up, angry and gasping.

"I guessed correctly, eh? Someone did rape you," Cathy persists.

Kathy bites her quivering lip.

"I bet he did it more than once, right?"

"Piss off!"

"Is it a man you know? Your stepfather, maybe?"

"SHUT UP OR I'LL KILL YOU."

"Have you told your mom, at least?"

Kathy drops to the bench, hiding tears with her hands. "Bitch," she coughs out.

Cathy gasps. She did not intend to be mean. She sits next to her sobbing classmate and slips her slim arms around the big girl's shoulders.

Kathy's silent sobs abate as they rock gently together.

"You know Ninja Nerd," she whispers, "we're not so different after all."

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# Slaughterhouse

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## Mario Duarte

*Mario Duarte lives in Iowa City, Iowa, and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He has published in a wide variety of literary magazines and is at work on a poetry collection and a short story collection.*

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## Slaughterhouse

IN THE backseat, the boy gazed out the side window at the limitless Illinois darkness. There were no stars or moon, and the Earth and sky and all they contained, including their red Plymouth, held hands as one. Occasionally, car or truck headlights spotlighted a small strip of elm trees. Their slim, trunks and fingering branches quickly rose and dropped out of sight again.

There were few streetlights on this two-lane country road this late night. Even the eye-like windows of the houses on the hillside were dark. His older sister slept in the backseat beside him, her straight, dark bangs looking sharp enough to cut paper. Her blue miniskirt and tall, white go-go boots peeked out from under a plaid, wool blanket.

Waves of heat blowing from the vents stroked his face—a quiet rush. Once, he heard an owl. He imagined enormous, soaring wings and arched talons. Between the dark strands of hair on the back of his father's head, the boy was struck by the lines of moon-white scalp. Leaning forward in his seat, he saw his father's hairy knuckles glistened with sweat.

The boy imagined the car was a spaceship headed for the moon and he was an astronaut floating in the weightlessness of space, dangling by a white, umbilical-like cord, spacewalking. Then, the car jerked and swerved. The brakes squeaked and a yearling with spindly, wobbly legs sprung across the road and disappeared into field of cornstalk stubble.

The commotion woke his sister. Her almond-shaped brown eyes blinked open, then closed. A moment later the pods of her eyelids twitched with dreams again. The boy felt incredibly drowsy and yawned. He scratched his head and shut his weighty eyelids.

The boy dreamed of his father as a circus ring master walking on his hands, with his crooked grin. His sister tiptoed across a high wire until she fell to the netless ground. His mother in ruby-red sequined dress com-

manded a white stallion to march across the circus ring, and he was one of many clowns squirming out of a tiny honking car.

When the boy awoke, the car leaned into a curve, then accelerated in a flash. From his vantage point—he was curled up in the back seat—he saw streetlights. Their giant, yellowish bulbs were like insect- or alien eyes glaring down on him. He sat up. A large, dark building slowly came into focus in the shrinking distance.

Happiness swelled inside him from his toes to his scalp when he saw his mother standing alone near a doorway. Her head wrapped in a red scarf, clutching a purse in one hand, waving with the other. The boy abruptly shook his sister awake. She cried for him to stop, which he did after shaking a couple of times more. His mother opened the back door and hugged and kissed them.

When his mother kissed him, she smelled of the blood of butchered cattle. He knew that the toy factory his mother had worked in for many years had moved away, and now his mother cleaned up the blood from the killing floor with water hoses and brooms. She had told him the pay was good and the small crew of cleaners got along, but she missed her old job.

The boy missed the toys his mother used to bring home. Red fire trucks with white ladders, cartoon bears large enough to sit on and small plastic artillery guns that shot plastic rounds . . . It almost seemed like any day—especially pay days—could be like Christmas. Some new toy would appear from behind her back and land into his small, sweaty palms.

Driving home, his mother took her seat beside his father and the car sped off. While his sister fell back to sleep, the boy overheard his parents talking. He was very still and quiet—pretending to be asleep—and listened to his mother speaking softly about how a cow broke loose and had run wild throughout the slaughterhouse, and how even she had been needed to catch it.

The boy imagined a cow with long horns running

down a nearly empty building, his hooves echoing down the hallways. It made him smile to think of his mother running—he imagined her hair bobbing as she raced past the white men, then thinking otherwise and stopping. His father laughed at the story.

Then, the boy opened his eyes and leaned forward and tapped his mother on the back and asked why she stopped chasing the cow. She turned in her seat and told him she had suddenly felt sorry for the poor thing. After all, it just wanted to live, and everything has the right to live. The boy felt a truth in his mother's words and nodded.

She patted his hand and told him to go back to sleep, and that before he knew it they would be home. The boy curled up in his section of the backseat and closed his eyes. He imagined he was a cow running on the loose while white men with guns and sledgehammers chased after him.

When they arrived home, his father carried his sleeping sister inside. When it was his turn, the boy asked for a horsey ride. His father even whinnied and stomped his feet when the boy sleepily said "ride 'em, cowboy." In bed, he heard the smallest of footfalls on the rooftop and imagined tiny cattle stampeding away from white men wearing bloody aprons.

## The Dark Night

by JAMES VACHOWSKI

*James Vachowski leads an itinerant life as a quality assurance technician for an independent traveling circus, where he strives to ensure that your next ride on the Cyclone is in full compliance with most, if not all, applicable safety regulations. During the carnival's off-season, James lives in Massachusetts and writes mediocre fiction. For the latest news about James' life on the road, be sure to check out <http://www.jamesvachowski.com>.*

THE SCREAM came first. A cry of danger in the dark night—a sound I knew too well. It was a call for help, sent out from a damsel in distress.

It was my call to action.

I was on the move almost before I saw which way to run. The thief was ahead of me, but not for long. A two-bit gangster dressed in a pinstripe suit and a crooked fedora. The crook had the princess's pink handbag tucked under his arm as he sprinted for all he was worth.

He wasn't worth much. I closed the gap quick.

Al Capone's little brother risked a backward glance. He saw me hot on his heels and cut a sharp left. Across a yard. Over a fence. Through a sprinkler.

I made the same moves, but faster, and took his legs out with a chop block tackle. The chase was over in seconds.

The victor, I stood over my prey as I took in deep, gulping breaths of the humid night air. Beneath me, the hood lay prone on the grass. His head was sunk low, either from humiliation or exhaustion. Frankly, I didn't care which.

A bustling crowd formed around us. Their accolades carried across the subdivided neighborhood, and I acknowledged their gratitude with a single nod of my head. Several of my colleagues were on hand, lighting up the crime scene with flashlights. Her Majesty's bag had torn open during the struggle, its contents strewn about on the grass.

M&Ms. Snickers. Skittles. Reese's cups. Even a Milky Way.

Jesus, what a mess.

A husky, maternal voice of outrage brought a hush to the crowd.

"What on Earth is the meaning of this!"

No one answered.

The housewife came closer, surveying the punk at my feet. Looking down, she stared directly into my mask.

"Young man, I think it's best that I call your parents. Who, exactly, are you?"

A gust of wind picked up. I rolled my shoulders back and felt my cape unfurl.

"I'm Batman."

# 40 at 425

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## Doug Weaver

*Doug Weaver has earned degrees in piano performance and journalism, and has a graduate degree in creative writing from California State University. Earlier in his career, he also graduated from the Los Angeles Correctional system having conducted extensive research in the use and commoditization of cocaine, methamphetamine and heroin. His work can be seen in Blunderbuss Magazine and The Roundup Writers Zine. He teaches at a small liberal arts college in Los Angeles, and currently lives in Long Beach with a Cairn Terrier.*

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## 40 at 425

THE SUN is shining outdoors. The limping ceiling fan, slightly out of balance, blows syncopated calypso-beat bursts of stale air over my face while worn bearings in the motor click a kind of jazzy counterpoint. And all I can think of is the skinny black man, freshly showered and scented, hanging newly ironed shirts—light yellow or blue—on a rack in the next room. He is attractive. I restrain myself, though, because it's not clear whether he's a cross-dresser or not. Those pastel shirts, cheap pants and fruit salad cologne may be part of his day job, so to speak, constituting the male drag that supports his decidedly unmanly hobby. Now don't get all judgmental and holier than thou here, Mr. Reader. What makes you think I should be grateful for every morsel of man meat that crosses my path anyway? Even I have my standards, for god's sake. After all, a man like myself prefers real men—and as I'm writing this, I wonder if it's better to say a man like myself or a man like me? Which one's right? I know that every time I've used the emphatic über reflexive myself instead of just the plain, simple, unadorned me, it's sounded impossibly self-absorbed, self-important and, frankly, kind of embarrassing, while using the me form retains a slight scent—a tiny bouquet of humility. And I realize, during all my flailing about in my own puddle of self-reflexive sludge, that even though I'm still prone from the night before, my shoulders have begun to shimmy and dip, my hips are bumping and grinding and I'm chanting under my breath, following the syncopated Jamaican beat of the ceiling fan: A man like me—a man like me—a man like me. No one's in the room to see me, but I suddenly feel self-conscious and try to pull myself together just in case I might have to explain myself: I'm not weird, really, I was just—but I pump the brakes on this thought quick because it really is weird.

Truth be told, I actually respect cross-dressers—I admire them, mainly because you can't be a pussy when you're not a pussy and you insist on dressing like a pussy. It's just not my cup of tea. That's all. And please: this is NOT an invitation for you to strain my sexual appetites through some sieve of critical thinking. My revulsion to fornicating with a cross-dresser can easily be traced to any number of my own glaring shortcomings. Only one request: If you insist on judging me, please—save it for another day. Thank you.

But what to do? How do I learn the identity of this man without risking considerable embarrassment? "Excuse me—but could you refresh my recollection? Just who are you and what is your name? Silly me—I seem to have forgotten." What if we're neighbors or even lovers? What if he's not a cross-dresser, but is just some hot guy I met recently who's decided to iron my shirts (or his shirts), and he becomes offended that I've already forgotten his name? Or he gets all beatific, and some sad, caring expression forms on his face—the pitying eyes with all that infinite understanding as he tries to keep to himself the word he's thinking: Dementia—poor dear. I tell myself that it doesn't really matter what he's thinking about me or who he really is, and roll over and pull the blankets up around my head. He's obviously not dangerous, I tell myself and try to will myself back to sleep. But I've been denatured. Just a pickle who can't, by any force of will or god, revert to being just a plain old cucumber again. Wide awake and I can't cast out this cursed awareness and simply order my eyelids to relax, even for a minute.

Climb out of what could generously be called my bed—because, frankly, it's more like a landfill than a place of repose—grab my rifle and, like a sleep-deprived zombie, drag myself out to the front yard to shoot targets on the hill in the distance. Just targets—not people or animals

or anything. Still wearing the boxer shorts and stained t-shirt I wore to bed last night, but it doesn't matter. The neighbors have seen much weirder than this. They'll get over it. Pull the trigger once, twice, and try to gauge the black man's reaction as the bullets stir whiffs of dust on the side of the hill. If he's a real man, he'll probably take the shooting in stride. If he's a cross-dresser, he'll become hysterical, I tell myself. The blood drains from my cheeks when I notice that Mrs. Olsen, the lady who lives nearby, has carried a watering can over to her geraniums. Whether she is oblivious to the nearby shooting or is just being polite, I can't tell, but I feel like a fool for not making sure there was no one in my line of fire. Could have shot her easy, and then where'd I be? It would have ruined my whole day—probably a whole series of days, with police investigations, prosecutors—the whole nine yards. How to explain her death to the authorities? "I was only shooting the rifle because I wanted to spend a little quality time swinging on what I hope is this guy's monster cock for a few minutes, which I wouldn't do, officer, if he was really a cross-dresser."

Then the thought strikes me: What if he's here to save me? That would be really cool. Life has been so hard recently—and it doesn't seem to be getting any easier. I start thinking about the different ways he might try to save me, and like a tiny snake slithering into my consciousness and whispering in my ear, I begin to suspect that this guy might be from AA. What if I called them and I just don't remember? I hope not though, for a couple of reasons: first, I already let him into the house. They're like vampires. Once you invite them in, they suck the kink right out of your capillaries. And second: they really don't appreciate a good debate. Trying to explain the symmetry of how our beliefs are diametrically opposed is lost on them: "Some people go to work, have families and play golf—and I shoot heroin and speed." Simple, and no big deal. But with somebody from AA, it becomes an exhausting verbal wrestling match during which the AA practitioner will right away call out his big guns to support his position: god himself. And who can argue with god the Infallible, All-Powerful, All-Seeing, All-Knowing, All-Judging, All-Forgiving, All-Bronze-Age Brawn and Victorian-Age Virtue, All-Capital-B Boring?

For the briefest moment I consider what it might mean if this black man is an imposter—only pretending to be in AA or whatever, but the implications of such a thought make me dizzy, so I turn toward the front door and almost trip over Fluffy, my big white dog, who died a couple of weeks ago. Don't even shake your heads, all judgmental and everything, like this is just what you'd expect from somebody like me, because really, I'd have moved her but I've just been so busy that I haven't had time. After Fluffy'd been lying in the front yard for a few days, I guess I figured that she'd just blend in to all the discarded shoes, broken bicycle frames, dried-up caulk guns and random junk there, but her long thick fur, which used to be all bright white exuberance, began to brown a little

in death, and she became a little conspicuous. So I took a white sheet and covered her up, thinking that when I got a few minutes of free time, I'd give her a proper burial in the back yard. But guess I just got used to seeing the white sheet in the front yard because it's been there for a while now. Fluffy's paw peeks from the corner of the sheet where it's come loose, so I get a brick and secure it back the way it was. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the black man, wearing his slacks and light yellow shirt and a pair of sunglasses, jump into a Toyota in the driveway and start the engine. As he backs out, he waves to me, but I can't see his eyes because of the sunglasses. I want to say something, but all that happens is my mouth opens a little. No sound comes out. He drives away and I wave back. There's such intense loss and desolation once he's gone. Still can't remember who he is. James? Paul? Who knows? I think about putting the barrel of the rifle inside my mouth and pulling the trigger. And I'm not surprised that I'm thinking these thoughts, just a little concerned that my decision not to blow my brains out has been borne, not out of shocked revulsion, but from plain old featureless, flat, dry boredom. Apparently the thought of killing myself is about as novel as watching a couple of episodes of CSI: Miami. Finally I hear my own voice while standing in the crisp morning air, the sunlight brilliant in my eyes, a .22 caliber rifle cradled in my arms: What the hell is going on with me?

I go back in the house and lock the door tight behind me. It's dark inside. Quietly peek out through the blinds covering the front window. Front lawn is dead from neglect: completely desolate—not even weeds grow there. Just all the random junk and, of course, Fluffy's white shroud is rustling in the breeze. Go in to where the black man was ironing and look at the tags on the hanging slacks: Sansabelt. And the shirts: Faded Glory. Okay—probably not a cross-dresser. But anything is possible, this being the San Fernando Valley and all, which, unlike Venice or Santa Monica where the debris meets the sea, the Valley is where the debris is manufactured and perfected, where completely respectable folks—mixed in with liver-spotted TV stars, inbred police with pre-pubescent penises and toothless, crab-infested outlaws—when all stirred and simmered together at normal Valley temperatures, which are as hot as the Space Shuttle re-entering the atmosphere, are magically transformed into gold-plated, pay-at-the-window, come-as-you-are, opposable-thumbed nightmares.

I begin to think. Think about who the black guy might be, but more important, ponder my own identity. And it's not easy. No foothold or signpost or anything surrounding me has any resonance at all. I'm completely numb. Life/death, hot/cold, wicked/holy—it's all the same. Lost in this house that grows more unfamiliar as each second passes. Think about hell and Catholics and how right they were about damnation. Eternal Perdition—forget about those nine graduated rings of hell, there's nothing worse than being lost. Frantically, desperately—like the last ball

bearing in a pinball machine—I roll from room to room, literally bouncing off the walls until I need to take a leak, and somehow, miraculously, I know where to find the bathroom. Lurch through the door at the same time I unzip my pants. Pull my dick out and aim it into the toilet, and as the wonderful, cathartic, robust stream of piss hits the water, I look up, and there, written in a scrawl of cocksucker-red lipstick on the mirror of the medicine cabinet are the words: "YOU are a seafood soufflé." And I feel hopeful for the first time I can remember, not because I know how to make a seafood soufflé, but because I know there's a cookbook in the kitchen.

There's a whole section titled *Soufflés* with various headings. There's a turkey soufflé, a chicken soufflé and ones made of cheese or spinach or even sweetbreads. There's not one soufflé, though, made of just seafood, which is fine with me because I have a bit of a sweet tooth. There are soufflés made of almonds, and caramelized almonds, with Cointreau or curaçao. There's a rum and macaroon soufflé, too. I settle on a chocolate soufflé because, frankly, my dears, chocolate—in both men and desserts—makes my knees buckle. I'm in love with the chocolate.

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The recipe begins with a caveat: "Chocolate needs special treatment for soufflés because it is heavy." And it's fitting, I think, that I will need, merely by virtue of my special nature, special treatment. Eagerly I rise to meet the challenge. I gather the ingredients and tools and start to work. I will be made of seven ounces of semi-sweet or sweet baking chocolate, one-third cup of strong coffee, quite a bit of butter, some milk, some flour and various pans and soufflé dishes. Because of my experience with eating chocolate soufflés, I take the liberty of adding to the recipe a generous jigger or two of rum—doesn't rum go with just about everything? And, of course, I add a dusting on top of myself a bit of powdered sugar once I'm done. My mouth is watering at the thought of it. I question, but just for a split second, the obvious difference in volume between what currently constitutes me and the seemingly niggardly volume to be rendered by this recipe. I consider trying to increase, by use of mathematics, the quantity of my ingredients, but restrain myself because, Number One: I am terrible at math; and Number Two: Who am I to question the wisdom of Julia Child, the drunken PBS kitchen maven, whose cookbook of French recipes has served generations of homos as both Bible and toilet reading, and is the creator of this very recipe? But this is no time to dawdle. I preheat the oven to 425 and then smear some butter inside the soufflé dish. There's a certain charm in the fact that, during my creation, I'll need to place a collar made of aluminum foil around the top edge of the soufflé dish in order to inhibit, I think, any unwanted accretion of heat that might manifest itself in burned places around my chocolate upper periphery. Whether it's significant or not, collars and me

go back a long way—most recently, of course, with those on the Faded Glory shirts hanging in the next room, but more especially those of the Elizabethan kind.

There could be no better time than this moment for a bit of honest self-disclosure: A few years back I advertised for sex partners who were willing to participate in what came to be called "library sex" wherein I'd meet other men in a library, and if we decided there was sufficient chemistry between us, we'd check out the appropriate books, then either go to a motel or sometimes just the bathroom inside the library, strip naked, become aroused and then place tiny Elizabethan collars around our penises, who would then recite sonnets to each other. Of course, our penises didn't actually recite to each other, we just pretended they were talking to each other while we manipulated the little slit on the top of the glans as if they were tiny mouths opening and closing during speech. Let me explain. First off I want to make one thing clear: I'm not weird. Library sex, rather than being just some random manifestation from the imagination of a prissy and twisted queen, was actually my attempt at subverting the manifesto (if there is one) of the leather community, who seem to believe that it's the gear that makes the man, with all those color-coded handkerchiefs that, I've come to realize, rather than signifying varying degrees of dominance or passivity, actually signal to others the level of physical integrity one's anus has retained after years of abuse. But my main criticism of "leather men" was the patent dishonesty of it all. I'm the last person to condemn a little theater now and then, but the kind of make-believe these guys practiced was downright embarrassing. I can't tell you the number of times I've found myself sucking some leather guy's cock only to have him affect a masculine, deep timbre, then look down and spit out words in a manner designed to get me to believe that he's a Marine drill sergeant, and not a ribbon clerk at Macy's, "Suck that cock—yeah, suck that cock." And I'd look up at Mr. Whoever and respond, while trying to mask my annoyance at the patent stupidity of his request: "I am!" which, even though it's only two words and two syllables, is still difficult to say with a mouthful of penis. It remains a mystery to me why some guys get so chatty during sex. I was so disenchanted with the whole leather scene that I invented "library sex" as a kind of rejoinder to it—an exercise in the ridiculous. It wasn't planned this way, but library sex actually became a whole new genre.

As in most sexual practice weighted heavily on dressing up and pretending, which library sex certainly is, it's not about the orgasm or climax, but, as they say, it's the journey. Just as some stories derive their meaning from an endless deferral of meaning, this kind of sex only becomes meaningful with the avoidance of any sex at all. After all that dressing up, who has time to fuck?

There is a narrative portion of the recipe that describes the evolution of this particular chocolate soufflé, and I learn that I'm modeling myself on a new and im-

proved version from the old recipe, that, had it been used to remake myself, I'd have suffered the considerable risk of collapsing in on myself. Apparently the earlier version of the recipe created a soufflé that was too "fragile." Basically, the changes to my new sturdier self will be affected by simply "folding the chocolate mixture into a meringue." Rather than adding the sugar to the chocolate sauce base at a later stage in the recipe, I will simply "whip it into the egg whites," early on, thereby firming myself up. There is, however, a tradeoff: In exchange for exiting the oven as a kind of sturdy, self-reliant version of my previous soufflé self, I will be sacrificing what's characterized in the recipe as "dramatic puff." Sacrificing!? Dramatic puff!?! The words cut deep and induce in me waves of shame as I think back over my life, and I wonder, if the tables were turned, and I was a chocolate soufflé reading a recipe on how to make a drug-addled homosexual in the early 21st century, it might look like this:

### **Self-Hating Homo (Southern California)**

Serves anybody

- 5-12 years of parental injunctions against any sexual thoughts
- 3-7 years of coveting your sister's Barbie dolls instead of the toy guns you received at Christmas
- 2-3 years of realizing that when your dad is drunk, you can play with his junk and he'll never know
- 4 high school years of pretending you wanted to throw a football when you really wanted to dance around on the sidelines with your girlfriends and toss around the blue- and-white pom-poms: Two, Four, Six, Eight—who do we appreciate? GO Scorpions!!
- 10 plus adult years of unlimited drug use (can include any combination of anything as long as it has the ability to cause figurative blindness and literal paralysis)
- 10 plus years of running as fast as you can from any kind of signifier that's anything less than motor oil, meth and men, blindly, numbly piloting your engorged cock past anything considered feminine.
- Equal parts of fatalism and laziness: Responsibility puts such a hole in my day. All I really want to do is watch TV and suck cock.

I've spent my entire time on earth trying to outrun this sewn-in fag label, but deep down I know it's true. I'm as dramatic and puffy as any of them. Some homos are, seemingly without effort, or somehow employing a high level of advanced rationality or intelligence, able to reconcile themselves with the inherent dramatic puffiness of being a gay man. Cross-dressers embrace it, for Christ's sake. But I'm not one of them.

It began, I think, when I started reading the Black Beauty books when I was a little boy. I didn't know any better. My sister and her friends seemed to be attached to them. They sighed and giggled and whinnied and galloped about, bucking their heads as if they were actually horses. So I began reading the books as well. And I reveled in the stories told from the beautiful black horse's point of view, who grew from being a sinewy and mistreated colt into a champion runner, and who was such a keen judge of human character. The house I lived in was a couple miles from Casa de Oro Elementary School—and was actually equidistant from the school and the bus stop. During good weather I sometimes walked to school up a dirt path in the middle of a hillside meadow that turned golden in summer. And during these early morning walks I often pretended, after scanning the hillside for anyone who might be watching, that I too was a beautiful black colt. I flicked my tail and bucked and whinnied, much like my sister and her friends did, and I felt free and completely, horse-ily magnificent. Then one day—the day my report on Alaska was due in Ms. Tendler's fifth grade class—I was casually trotting up the hill. The air was crisp and brilliant and I was practically dancing, rhythmically tossing my mane and whipping my imaginary reins back and forth, playfully cuffing the hard earth with my spirited hooves. Completely alive and lost in the shimmering sunlight; the yellow weeds, the dirt path and the frosty air. And during my labored ascent I repeated over and over in my unashamed soprano voice, as if it were a breathy chant rhythmically affirming my place in the world: "A boy like me—a boy like me—a boy like me." Then, like a thudding, lumbering monster blocking my way, I heard Billy Crane, the sheriff's son, in his sneering, leering 15-year-old voice: "Playing horsy this morning?" He was grinning. I tried to scream but no sound came out, and I imagined myself running up the hill as if I weighed nothing at all like critters do all the time in cartoons. I would have given my life if I could have jumped up and landed inside Ms. Tendler's classroom in one motion. And I realized at that moment that I was not only a slave to gravity, but to the forces that terrify me and freeze my vocal cords and my ability to explain and my will to defend myself or even escape. Years later, I sat front row and center for a completely naked off-off Broadway production of *Equus* and realized what I'd been missing: a hoof pick.

But as in most things, there's another side to all this drama, to this litany of despair. The cookbook describes the new and improved version of my soufflé self as one that "stays up and retains its primal soufflé character." "Primal soufflé character!" I continue reading those words over and over again and goose bumps form on the back of my neck and on my arms as the thoughts wash over me: I'm not doomed to be all just puffy and fluffy drama forever—I'm going to be primal! Julia! My savior!

With renewed vigor, I continue reading through the directions in the recipe and I realize that the moment of



truth is near at hand when I will enter the glorious oven to begin my transformation. My baking time seems quite brief—a mere 35 to 40 minutes, during which time I will do my soufflé thing, meaning I will rise up and become firm enough to resist the forces of gravity and air pressure. When a wooden skewer is poked into one of the several cracks that will form on my surface during baking and is pushed down into my innards, I can pronounce myself done if, when it is removed, it's only lightly coated with chocolaty residue. This will be a welcome change, because, as I exist now, I'm no more than a cold, flaccid puddle of dark brown sludge—although I am rather sweet, if I do say so myself. Maybe I'm inconsistent, but I could be quite satisfying as a dessert to be spooned into the mouth like soup. Here, I remember a saying my high school French teacher used to repeat to her students: "La persévérance est la mère de toutes les vertus." So I soldier on. Break with my own tradition and I resist settling for the status quo. I set the timer and enter the pre-heated oven.

After baking it's evident beyond a shadow of a doubt that I've been transformed. I feel substantial and robust, but at the same time sensitive and—I guess there's no need to be modest or hide from my nature anymore so I'll just get on with it: I feel sensitive and delicate. There. I said it. But it's okay, because I know I'm completely and consistently delicious. I feel somehow more worldly too, like I've traversed the dark night of the soul, I've survived and I've discovered I have my own voice. I have an urge to put a bumper sticker on the rear of my car that proclaims: I'm Sensitive, I'm Delicate, I'm Proud—I'm a Chocolate Soufflé!! I set myself aside to cool a little, and I sprinkle a bit of that wonderful powdered sugar over my surface. And the particles are so light, they don't fall in a straight line. They are more like snowflakes, drifting with the whims of unseen currents of air, whose masters are temperature and pressure and friction, born from the infinite brooding vistas of frigid dark clouds who never utter a vowel, but are only capable of whispering in nonsense consonants, multitudes of them, each one a unique frozen crystal that will, when the storm is over, gather to blanket my feet—and my arms—and my eyes—and the bright chilly morning—and my hillside path of weeds.

## Loose Ends

by JENNIFER A. POWERS

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I HATED THEM. I hated them for making me eat vegetables and brush my teeth. But I didn't hate them that day. After it was over, I curled into my grandma's lap in the kitchen, moping and immovable, staring at the squares of late afternoon sunshine on the linoleum floor. I was haunted by how my grandmother had shielded her face from the casket descending into the cold, dark earth, and how hard she'd cried. She never cried.

My grandparents lived 322 miles away. We saw them on Christmas. Grandpa would tug his goat beard and braid it to make us laugh. He'd dip his toast into over easy eggs at the breakfast table. He'd always ask the same question every year: You get everything you wanted?

I'd say, almost, because there was always something missing.

Grandma looked like a shadow in her black dress. She leaned over the table to suck vodka through a skinny straw, trying to dig into my silence, saying, "You loved your grandpa, didn't you?"

I wasn't sure since I didn't know him that well. I nodded, Yes, I loved grandpa, like my head was a robot's head and I was just agreeing with Grandma whose bent neck reminded me of a broken branch. The reality of that day intruded upon my usual liveliness. It was bigger than Christmas and not getting what I'd wanted. But I still couldn't say it: I've missed you, Grandpa. Why are you so far away?

I thought about my dad's future funeral. But I didn't know how to say all of that, being eight years old. Grandma braided my knotted hair. Her thick nails poked at my scalp to get the braid tight and she brushed loose ends off my shoulders. It was strange being there during the summer but not for Christmas.

"I know you loved him," I know, she said. Her breath stunk. As I sat on her lap I felt the boniness of her legs beneath me. I thought about skeletons and how the priest said, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

"I know you loved him," she said again. I couldn't feel her words like I was made of stone, unfeeling, like all those headstones. I imagined my own name carved in granite. Goose bumps popped up all over my pale skin as they'd done at the funeral when I heard my parents soothing my grandmother. There was terror in her stringy cries. I was silent through all of it. I was silent to the pain of my grandma's claws digging into my head so I knew for sure that I was alive. She could get the braid just right, so something in life could be just right. Long black hairs dropped onto the squares of sunshine, parts of me I was leaving behind in this world. I listened to the dripping faucet and ticking clocks and fragile cries and all I wanted to was to sit on my grandma's lap and watch the squares of sunshine melt away into night forever. All I wanted was to hear the fat black bugs tap the porch lights. All I wanted was to eat breakfast with him one more time so I could say it loud: I've missed you. All I wanted was one more chance before the priest had said, for eternity, all of eternity. All I wanted was another chance.

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# Devil's Playground

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## Rhonda Talbot

*Rhonda Talbot; Los Angeles based writer and film executive. Her first novel, A Halfway Decent Girl was published in 2003. Currently finishing her 2nd book, her author page is <http://amzn.to/1dqSDas>*

*A number of her stories, articles and essays have been seen in More, Positive360, Salon, Rusty Nail, Awl, Cultural Weekly, Ploughshares, The LA Times, Divine Caroline, Examiner, Huffington Post, among others.*

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## Devil's Playground

WITH SHELLEY out of the way, I thought it might be possible for me to pick up a few friends of my own. She was always the more popular sister yet I'd gained some celebrity at our new High School through osmosis due to her being the main drug supplier. Freshman year held promise. But when word got out that she'd been shot up full of Thorazine and shuffled off to eat mashed potatoes in a juvenile center, a quiet scream rang in the school's halls, and outdoor quads. My fleeting fantasy was just that. No one gave a shit about me except to ask when Shelley might return.

Just when I thought life was over and I would never have any friends, Mo, her hoodlum, junkie boyfriend was waiting for me in the parking lot.

"Hey! Come here."

I had a secret crush on Mo. He was short in stature, with blinky, sad eyes and a crop of chocolate brown hair that swept across his long eyelashes. He even smelled like a chocolate bar. Mo called himself an urban outlaw and mother had given me strict instructions to never be near him. Yet, when he walked toward me in his oversized coat that dragged along the ground, my impulse was to hug him and feed him.

Chances were he was out on bail. He did all sorts of felonious activities; armed robberies, assault and battery. He also kept a shiv tucked in each of his chunky boots and sported a "mom" tattoo on his shoulder though he lived with his deaf grandmother.

"Hey." He spoke like he had a teaspoon of sugar stuck

in his throat, graveled and just above a whisper.

I climbed into his Chevy, and sat on the smooth leather seat. It was an older car, but the leather was kept clean, even glossy between the cracked parts. Mo cranked up the radio when Stairway to Heaven came on. Given a poster of Robert Plant was tacked up on my bedroom wall, this was an indication that Mo and I were meant to be together. He had chosen the wrong sister is all.

"You want to make some money?"

"No one will buy drugs from me, Mo. They already think I'm a narc."

"That's why you're going make me rich."

Then he patted my thigh, sending an electrical jolt through my virginal body. I imagined my life with Mo, living in his grannie's dusty basement, making cheese plates while listening to the Smiths and serving cokes to the junkies while they nodded on the shag carpet.

Mo was considered a lifer, in that he was in prison more than out. I could handle his personal affairs after school, and hire dumb girls to sell his drugs until Shelley returned. It's possible she no longer cared about Mo anyway.

"Your sister used to sell five hundred bucks worth of smack a day. She had a real gift. In one week she sold 1000 fake Quaaludes at Cobo Hall."

With this remark, I felt like I might cry. I wasn't Shelley. I would never be Shelley. I wasn't tough or brave or savvy. I wasn't a sales person. I wasn't sassy or fun. I wasn't anything.

Mo peeled out of the parking lot and I figured he was taking me somewhere to give me a crash course in drug dealing. Then he pulled up to a Bank of America. We were about a mile from the townhouse I lived in with my mother in Keego Bay. In fact, she cashed her checks there, mysterious checks made out to her from various men. I never probed. The rent got paid.

Mo handed me what looked like signed payroll checks from a company called Concrete and Mortar Construction.

"If they ask you anything, just say you work there as a receptionist. You have a fake I.D.?"

"Of course."

Everyone had fake I.D. That is just something you did in Detroit when you turned 14. In fact, it was Mo that provided the I.D.'s. to my friends and me. We used them mostly to sit in skuzzy bars and watch old people dance to bad covers of Layla.

I cashed the check without a hitch and left with four one hundred dollar bills.

My teller was a pretty lady with long brown hair; probably called Chestnut Spring. A grown up girl with a regular job that paid attention to hairstyles, she probably had good parents, and a respectable boyfriend. I was so full of envy I had forgotten what I was doing there.

"Can you endorse the backs, please?"

"Oh. Right."

I signed my name like I did this all the time. She was eyeballing my fake I.D. I experienced a brand new kind of fear; a fear that sits in the pit of your stomach like a rotting animal crawling to get out. Though I knew these checks were illegal, I didn't consider myself a criminal.

My heart was pounding. Sweat trickled down my back. Chestnut considered me and smiled. She was hiding something, maybe hitting one of those secret buttons under the counter. I was certain she knew. My getting caught would be the thing that would unravel my mother completely, spiral her into full-blown alcoholism. Her faith in me, so I believed, is what kept her in check. With Shelley gone, the two of us still had a chance at a life somewhere. Maybe not in Detroit, but somewhere.

I handed the checks to Chestnut who was still smiling, like acting cheerful was part of her job requirements.

"You like your job?"

"What job?"

"You're funny." Thank god Chestnut wasn't very perceptive. She misread my stupidity for humor.

"It's the worst. Yunno?" My entire body sighed. It was going to be okay.

"Mostly just answering phones. Talking about cement and stuff. It's temporary until I get into a community college so I can study medicine or ceramics."

"Wow. Good for you."

She lowered her voice.

"This place is soooooo boring. But I just got an apartment and have to pay the bills. I really want to go back

to school, though. But I'm pregnant." She pulled back so I could see her bulge.

"Wow."

She counted the four crisp bills. I had never seen a one hundred dollar bill before. Never mind four. I tried to act nonchalant but when I collected the bounty my hands were shaky. All I could think about were the groceries I could buy for the house. I would surprise my mother with a T-bone steak or lamb chops.

I wanted to run, but that would seem suspicious. I kept my eyes focused on the front door and imagined myself on the other side I couldn't quite feel my legs so I had no idea how fast I was going.

Once in Mo's car, I slumped into the seat and handed him the money.

"Good job." He gave me a hundred dollar bill.

"Want to do this again tomorrow?"

"Okay."

I had him drop me off at Kroger's Grocery market. My mother and I lived on freeze-dried coffee and graham crackers. We never bought food. I was always hungry. I'd been hungry for five years, ever since she left my father.

Walking into Kroger's with money in my pocket was a recurring daydream I had during History class. You don't realize the importance of food until it's no longer there I suppose, so I often created elaborate imaginary buffets in my head.

I yanked free a cart and slowly walked down each aisle; studying brands I could now afford, smelling cheeses, enjoying the Muzak. I bought whole milk, a family packet of thick steaks, French bread, fresh-baked cookies, lunchmeats, real coffee, cereal, Oreos, toilet paper, and toothbrushes.

Even some fancy items like canned sardines and Carr's biscuits, which were really just saltines without the salt. But my mom loved them. I lugged five fully loaded shopping bags outside and onto the curb, having forgotten how I might get them home. I stuck out my thumb.

A non-descript, white van pulled over; possibly a cable T.V. truck or one a serial killer might own. A young guy jumped out to help me with the bags. He was talking fast and loading up the back of the van when I noticed he didn't have any hands.

A bit of nausea rose up from my stomach killing my sunny mood but I kept smiling. I wanted to bolt but my bags were already in the van and he was behind the wheel, still talking.

I didn't catch what he was saying but something about his family or his sister in Minnesota, how his Husky ate some poison and that his name was Frank. He was a real chipper guy wearing jeans, a black T-shirt and a black top hat of some kind. I looked straight ahead, pretending I hadn't seen his horrible disability. But he kept doing hand type stuff. I felt scared, guilty, and ashamed. Were there handless serial killers? In a way this made sense. No fingerprints. He wanted my attention, so I moved my head slightly in his direction.

First, the van was a stick shift. Also he was smoking a cigarette, which was pressed in a crease he had constructed in the center of the steering wheel. Frank would bow his head, take a puff, then straighten back up again, and shift the gear with his stumps, all the while asking me questions and telling me about his life. He was attending a local college studying engineering. He grew pot in his bedroom and loved to build rocket ships out of old toasters in his backyard.

I kept looking out the front window, a frozen mannequin, like it was natural to not look at someone when they were asking you questions. Snowy bits bounced off the windshield. Now he was working the wipers as well.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Falling snow had a way of pulling me into a trance, natural hypnosis. But I fought it and gave short answers to all his questions; all lies.

"Birmingham High. Physics. Basketball. Five brothers. School Teacher. Dad's a dentist."

We were a half-mile from my townhouse.

I knew he had asked me another question but had no idea what and I didn't want to look at him. I lurched forward for no particular reason then shouted.

"Here's my stop. Anyway, thanks so much."

"Just here at the light? Let me guess. You live in the back of the closed Dairy Queen."

I detected hurt in his voice but didn't care. I didn't want this guy knowing where I lived. I somehow equated his lack of hands with danger. I felt in complete and utter peril. Maybe it was the cat got your tongue comment that somehow terrified me most.

I shoved open my door and clambered out. He helped me unload the van then waved a stump and took off. I would have to carry the bags home in three trips.

I whipped up meat pasta with a side of water crackers and sardines. This was the first time we would eat dinner together in years. Mom had been working on a wall mural of angelic cherubs; her blue jean shirt was covered in bright streaks of acrylic paint. The walls of our homes, no matter how temporary, were always her canvases.

My mother was young and beautiful with flinty green eyes and high cheekbones. She kept her long blonde hair piled on top of her head with butterfly stickpins. Wispy strands seemed to fall strategically down her neck.

"Dear god! Where did you get all this food?"

"I won a prize at school for the best essay on active volcanoes. Kroger's coupons."

"What a great incentive program. So where are there active volcanoes?"

"Well, there's the one in Hawaii and one in Maine."

"Maine? Huh."

I wanted to freeze this time I had with my mom, just us, none of the other kids that were already living with my father, no crazy sister tripping over furniture high on drugs, none of mother's male visitors. Like we were two friends having dinner, normal, laughing over how we

never painted over her murals post evictions. Life was normal.

"Oh, next time, honey, be sure to get wine. White wine. A jug."

"Okay."

"You've always been such a good student. You will love the schools in California. One of these days we'll get there. I can't wait to show you Ghirardelli Square. And the Wharf! Just to die."

My mom squeezed my arm.

"I promise we are going. You and me."

Then she took her plate, dumped it in the sink and got ready to go out.

"Bye mom."

Mo and I would rob four more banks in that many days, all in the same way, all in my neighborhood. I even opened my own savings account.

And that may have been my mistake. I was back at Bank of America and Chestnut helped me with my new account. By now I felt we could be close friends. I might visit her after the arrival of her baby, perhaps babysit.

I deposited fifty dollars into a savings account, intending to go to Kroger's, to surprise my mother once again, but this time I walked outside into what looked like a movie scene. Swirling lights, a dozen cop cars, all surrounding Mo's Chevy. He was flattened against the car, being patted down by a cop; others had their guns drawn on him.

Not sure what to do, I started to walk away from the bank but was immediately approached by two rather large female police officers. They knew my name; took my purse, patted me down and put me in the back seat of a police car. I glanced back at Mo, who showed no emotion in his face.

From this distance, that mischievous quality that made him sexy, the puppy eyes that made my heart buzzy now seemed all wrong. He was a different boy. Dismissive. A stranger. He acted like he didn't know me. I wanted to cry. I loved him.

I was taken to a small police station in West Bloomfield, near where I lived. There were two police men inside, one young guy with slicked back hair, the other my father's age but with caring eyes.

I sat in a cement cell, imagining the next few years I would spend in juvenile hall, alongside my sister. I wondered how she would greet me. Would she greet me? She never really liked me much.

My mother of course would be crushed, possibly drink herself to death. Her one good daughter, as it turns out, just another disappointment. A petty thief. A loser. All those Carr crackers and sardines held no meaning now. Our nightly conversations, the closeness, and the hopefulness I had felt, gone. We would never get to California and she only had me to blame.

As the night wore on, the older cop with the kind face let me out of the cell and we sat in his office. He gave me my purse and let me smoke cigarettes.

"I hate punks like Harry. Getting kids like you caught up in this stuff. What are you? 14? He won't be getting out this time for a long stretch. His dad's serving six life sentences for murder."

"His name is Harry?"

"Harry Smith the Third. Maybe Mo was short for moron. Anyway, I checked you out. I know you're a decent kid. Harry denied he knew you. Said he picked you up hitchhiking. But I found a letter you wrote to him in your purse. I guess you never sent it."

I had forgotten about that letter. When Mo would go to prison, Shelley and I always wrote him letters, like charity. Shelley called mine stupid. "Dear Mo, hope it's nice there. I miss you."

The cop held up a pink envelope I'd decorated with sparkly flowers. It was actually my mother's expensive stationery. I cringed.

"Do you want this?"

"No."

He tucked it inside a file with my name on it. I had a file. A record. Now I understood why at age of 20, certain friends had records, "a mile long."

"My sister is locked up at the moment. Is that where I'll go?"

"Yeah, I know all about your sister. You're not going there. I'm going to let you go home. Stay in school. Don't get mixed up in this stuff. I'm about to end my shift. I can drop you at the bus station."

"Really? You won't tell my mom?"

"Do you think you can look me in the eyes and tell me you'll stay out of trouble?"

"I think so." I looked into his tired eyes, and wondered if he was this forgiving to all troubled girls. "I'll be good. I swear." My words felt phony and I wanted to cry so I looked away. I was not familiar with such kindness, such interest in my welfare. My own father had written me off years ago when I chose to stay with my mother after the divorce. He had called me a traitor. I was nine. I knew I was bad. Inside. But the policeman cared and for the first time in my life, I knew what that felt like.

We drove in silence heading toward the bus station. I held my purse close to my chest. I wanted to ask if he had any children but was too afraid. I made a mental promise to never rob another bank, to do well in school. I wanted to make this officer proud.

"I would take you all the way, but I'm exhausted. Just get yourself home. Okay?"

I nodded. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"I see kids all the time. You're not a delinquent. You might not feel that way, but I have a larger perspective. Actually I would say you have more to offer than most kids. Don't let people tell you otherwise."

I watched his car disappear down the winding road, this good man on his way to see his own family. They would have a warm dinner. His children would talk about their day at school then they would all watch a movie. The kind of dad I dreamed of having.

I didn't take the bus. I made my way to Woodward Avenue, the artery that cut through the suburbs of Detroit and the one road that always lead me to Keego Bay.

"Hey stranger! Where are your grocery bags?"

And there was the white van. Was it possible he had been following me? My heart raced, but I was freezing and getting wet from the snow, so I climbed inside. Once again saying hello without looking at him.

"Could you hand me a cigarette?"

Was he doing this on purpose? There was simply no way to avoid looking his way. I pulled a Lucky Strike from the pack.

"Do you want me to light it for you?"

"Thanks. That would be awesome. You can call me Frank."

"Okay."

The cigarette was ready, but still, the problem of where to put it. I held the Lucky toward him as he gripped the wheel with his forearms.

"Could you please also place it between my lips?"

I did; but it was kind of tricky, especially since I concentrated my stare outside. I quickly slid back to my seat. He flicked on the wipers, shifted, puffed, fiddled with the radio, then leaned over and set the cigarette in the strange crease on the steel wheel.

I felt compelled to run again, but by now was so tired, and relieved I hadn't gone to juvy, I sank into my seat thinking about what I would cook for my mom. Fried chicken? Pan-fried steak?

"I'm so sick of winter," he said. With a jerk of an elbow he got the wipers to go faster. "I used to tell people I got my hands cut off for stealing. Ha-ha."

I finally looked at him. He had a sweet face with bright eyes and a crooked grin. A teenager. No top hat today. His hair had been cut professionally; he cared how he looked and this made me feel really bad. Maybe he wore the hat when he thought his hair was dirty. This was a polite person. A thoughtful person.

The policeman told me I was good, but I felt rotten to my core. Chestnut had been kind even though I was robbing her. Frank was full of friendly impulses despite my reluctance to even look at him. Would I ever care about other people? Understand life through their eyes? Or would I be stuck in my own miserable head, thinking the worst of people. Never willing to trust them. I did bad things often and was only kind to my mother, the only one I did trust.

Yet in one day, I'd encountered three good people whose only intentions were to treat me well, and make sure I was okay. But here I was being cruel; deciding someone with no hands was a horrible person, possibly a psychopathic killer.

"I was born this way. I'm disabled."

"What?"

"My arms. I sometimes forget because I tell so many people so much all during my life, I sometimes forget it might be weird for them."

"Oh."

"You don't have to sit on yours. It's not contagious."

My own hands were tucked safely under my thighs.

"Oh. Yeah. I hadn't noticed." Pulling them onto my lap they felt odd and aimless. Leaning against the window I tried to relax and act natural which was difficult because I had such an urge to fidget.

"Well, anyway, my parents tried to put these weird hooks on me when I was young. They tried all kinds of stuff, but, the thing is, I've never had hands, so I'm not really sure even what I would do with them. I'd probably

start stealing things, using 'em for all the wrong reasons. Idle hands are the devils playground. Right?"

"Yeah. That's a good quote."

"Hey, we seem to live in the same area. I can give you rides when you want. Also want to be friends? Just friends. I'm not hitting on you. Even though you're cute."

I smiled.

"I'd like that."

The falling snow pulled me into my calming trance. Frank was okay. We could be friends. I needed a friend. Things would be okay.

## Seeing Eye Cat

### Robert P. Kaye

*Robert P. Kaye's stories have appeared in The Los Angeles Review, Monkeybicycle, Per Contra, Metazen, Green Mountains Review, Jersey Devil and elsewhere, with nominations for Pushcart, Best of the Web and Story South prizes. Links appear at [www.RobertPKaye.com](http://www.RobertPKaye.com). He writes, juggles and throws knives in the far upper left corner of the USA.*

### Store Damage Report

**Damaged items:** Front counter, three chairs, customer laptop, store manager leg, towel.

**Reported by:** Josh

**Cause of damage (please be specific):** It happened during the morning rush, with the line almost out the door. Jaleena pulled shots while I took orders, prepped food and worked the register. The good news is the new breakfast sandwiches were flying out of the case. I didn't see the customer I'll call Mr. Catman as he entered, but became aware of a disruption when people peeled out of the line ahead of something that sounded like hellcat horror movie sound effects.

"What's the problem?" Mr. Catman said. He wore those space visor sunglasses favored by seniors and weighed maybe four hundred pounds with a white beard done in pirate braids and a pigtail down his back from under an embroidered fez. He also carried a white cane.

"Can I take your order sir?" I said.

Claws raked the display case and I looked down.

"Sunshine, cut that out," Mr. Catman yelled.

"Holy shit," I said. "Is that a leopard?" I apologize for using profanity in front of customers, but that's what I said.

"Of course not," Mr. Catman said. "It's Sunshine, my seeing eye ocelot."

Did I mention Sunshine was all muscle with a green service animal vest and a leash, not a handle? For a second, I thought this might be OK, but then the animal lifted its leg and squirted something stenchy onto the case.

"Jesus, Sunshine, knock it off." Mr. Catman tugged on the leash.

"Don't worry, he's just marking his territory."

Tina—Mrs. Abramson—stood by the counter waiting for her skinny no-foam latte, which on this particular day I had already comped as a gesture of good will to her as a super-regular customer and neighborhood booster. She screamed and rocketed little Joshua's stroller between two tables, right through Sid the insurance guy's power cord, crashing his laptop onto the floor. This backed Sunshine against the case in full snarl mode with claws out and fangs barred.

"Sir," I said. "I can't let you bring that animal into the store."

"Are you denying me access?" Mr. Catman said. "I want a triple shot extra-large latte and one of those morning buns, heated up, pronto, or you're looking at a law

suit."

I remembered the training where we talked about The Customer Service Moment of Truth, balancing consumer satisfaction, store image and brand integrity. I tried to remember where lawsuits fit in. Sunshine hunkered down, doing that creep forward thing cats do when stalking a bird, only he'd focused on little Joshua in the stroller. Tina–Mrs. Abramson–hailed a chair up over her head and yelled "Get back!"

"Sir!" I said. "Your cat is about to attack a baby." I admit that flirting with Tina is the high point of my day and I may have become overly protective.

"Well thanks for the information, sonny," Mr. Catman said. "Did I mention I'm blind?"

He yanked on the leash and Sunshine snarled, watching Mrs. Abramson hustle out the door. I'm not sure she's ever coming back. She was more than our best customer. A lot more.

"I'll wait at a table," Mr. Catman said. "If one is available."

The place had emptied. "Triple latte, stat," I said to Jaleena, who crouched behind the counter. I threw a morning bun into the warming oven, but I'm sorry to say I failed to use the tongs.

"Better make that non-fat milk," Mr. Catman said. "Can I get a little help navigating here?"

I guided Mr. Catman by the arm to a table, which is when Sunshine snagged my leg—there may be some residual spatter on the clearance merchandise. I wrapped a

towel around my wound to stop the bleeding— the first aid kit needs more tape, by the way—then finished the latte while Jaleena hid in the bathroom. She's a good kid, but not management material.

Mr. Catman ate his morning bun and drank his beverage while Sunshine proceeded to gnaw the legs on three different chairs. Both seemed to enjoy their dining experiences. Mr. Catman finished and stood up. "See you tomorrow, Josh," he said. I never told him my name was Josh, but we wear our nametags, per company policy.

I totally forgot to ring him up. You can take it out of my last check. I will file a separate Safety Incident Report for the sixteen stitches in my calf, but will not be returning tomorrow, having failed my Customer Service Moment of Truth. This is never going to be more than a crap job no matter what I tell myself and Tina is never going to leave her husband because he's some big deal software engineer. And, yes, I think little Joshua might be named after me, but I will never, ever be able to prove it. I can see that now.

To put it another way, the fucking customer is not always fucking right, so fuck you right in your goddamned morning buns. Sorry for the profanity, but I'm still a little freaked out.

Also, did I mention that Tina–Mrs. Abramson—says you'll be hearing from her lawyer?

Thanks for the opportunity and goodbye.

— Josh

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