

Bartleby Snopes Issue 12



A Literary Magazine

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Story of the Month Winners

Each month we publish 8 stories and host a Story of the Month contest. The Story of the Month winners are chosen by the readers of Bartleby Snopes.

Maybe Let's Don't by Mark Jaskowski

I had dreamt about murder, which was rare but not as rare as I'd perhaps have liked, and now the caller ID on my cell blazed Judith's name at me. My eyes burned. From the ringing or the light or the whiskey or the dream. Who knew.

I let it ring, let it ring, then ground my teeth and changed my mind.

"Hello," I meant to say. What came out was mucousy rasping from the back of my throat, the dry-damp sound of my lips smacking apart.

"Damien?"

I cleared my throat as quietly as I could but it caught, set me to coughing. I dragged in a wheezy breath and heaved onto my side. The phone flopped to the carpet.

"Damien." This as I blindly scraped it off the floor.

I took a tentative breath and my lungs only spasmed a little. "Sure. Yeah."

"Christ. Have a good night?"

"I killed a man."

"Uh huh."

"Don't worry. I don't think you know him."

"Right."

"He looks, or rather, looked, actually remarkably like William Shatner. Name's Bogart."

"I didn't," she said, serious as stand-up, "wake you, I hope."

"No, I'm sure I'll be fine. The body's in a bag."

"Damien."

"And the bag's in the swamp."

"Damien."

"And really, I mean, fellows like Bogart never really rate *dragging* the goddamned swamp, right?"

She set about trying to break the record for world's longest sigh, just blasting telephone static from her diaphragm. She'd've taken the title, too, except I once told her mother that I'd majored in art history.

"Anyway, don't worry." I groaned my way all the way up to half-sitting. "My secret's safe with me."

"Fucking...Damien."

"Judith."

"We need to talk."

"That," I said, thinking rather seriously about maybe sitting all the way up in the very near future, "that is not so good a plan as you think it is."

"Over coffee. Bloody Marys, maybe."

"If I can drink mine in complete silence, perhaps."

"Damien."

"Did I tell you I killed a man?"

"Look, I know that things have gotten...weird."

"Weird?" I was getting a little wherewithal, maybe just from the word *coffee*. "Nah, status quo. Been a regular pussy parade."

I briefly entertained the notion that I'd won, hurt her first.

"Pussy parade."

"Yeah. You know. In my apartment."

"Well. I forgive you."

I sat bolt upright. It wasn't so bad. I only felt like vomiting up my kidneys for a few seconds.

"You *what* me?"

The silence here, it was a cocktail of smug triumph oozing over the line.

"Judith."

"I'll be over in an hour. We can whatever."

Cold click of the line going dead, merry little jingle of my cell letting me know it.

I worked my way up to standing, then walking. My stomach was settling, my lungs relaxing. Eyes still burned if I opened them too wide. Maybe coffee wasn't such a bad idea.

I got the grounds and water into the machine and hit the button. Saturday morning had teeth but I was only about as nauseated as a post-nightshade Socrates and I figured my headache would go away if I slept until Wednesday. I started to run the numbers on how much sleep I'd gotten, total, and gave up fast. It was a sad enterprise. The smell of the coffee settled my stomach some, though. I leaned my forehead on the machine and breathed deep, started feeling altogether okay.

Then I looked behind me, at the kitchen and living room, at the take-out containers piled on the kitchen table and the clothing I'd somehow not really noticed strewn across the couch. More than a couple bottles on the coffee table, and my work apron dangling from the ceiling fan. I frowned and thought on that last one, figured I must have yanked and tossed it after a particularly dreary shift. It made for a rather less-than-festive curtain.

I plucked the apron down and got it folded and had gathered all the bottles in my arms before I decided to hell with it and replaced every item exactly where it was. If Judith wanted to catch me off my guard, this is what she was going to get.

* * *

I answered the door feeling more human than not but Judith's eyes still up-and-downed me. She opened her mouth and closed it. I leaned against the doorframe. She edged past me into the house.

"No, please, come in. Make yourself at home."

"You invited me."

"I certainly did not."

"You didn't have to answer your phone."

I smirked in a way that said I had something to say, a crippling rejoinder, but was keeping it to myself out of courtesy. I was lying with my teeth. And the idea that we could keep each other out of our apartments with turns of etiquette was an adorable kitten of a concept.

Her hair looked different. I wanted to comment on it to demonstrate my keen attention to detail, but damned if I could figure out *how* it was different. I flourished her chair out from the table for her instead.

I poured the coffee. Judith took hers black. I got milk and sugar and started doctoring.

She grinned with her eyes. "Philistine." A peace offering.

I couldn't not. "Phil, to my friends."

My spoon clinked on my mug like crickets chirping. I'd thought our sides would be pretty clearly demarcated, but I'd met her halfway, there, and I guess we were both thinking about it. Old jokes can be sad, too. This one, I didn't quite know what it was.

She licked her lips by flicking her tongue out straight. I got a pang of something not entirely irritation. I thought about calling her Python but that was maybe dredging a bit too far back. We may have had a fight about that at some point, who can remember, and my boisterous inner provocateur was suddenly more tired than I was.

We finished our coffee, talking about the weather and the mayor and the local basketball team, all the things we only knew from talk-radio commutes. A pause like the world holding its breath.

Judith looked down into her empty mug. "Hey. It's good to see you."

I nodded. That felt wrong, so I went to shake my head, but that would be worse. I got a half-turn in and did a vague circling thing that landed in a tilt.

"Yeah. I'm a pleasure to be around."

That felt like too much, so I reached over and flicked a take-out box off the pile and onto the floor, making it a different joke.

Judith watched my snowballing gesticulation with a fairly blank and possibly sympathetic look. I met her eyes and we sat there awhile.

* * *

Two weeks later and the thing we weren't discussing was how we were staying nights at each other's place. The sun set and she came over. I'd done a little cleaning, the kind where there's never enough trash bags and you wind up winded, so there was plenty of space in my living room for the overnight bag I politely ignored.

The game was to pretend that everything was incredibly normal, that nothing strange was going on here. She just happened to come over. I just happened to be in the neighborhood. Oh, my, isn't it late. Really it's best to just stay here. Oh, no, you don't need to crash on the couch. Bed's plenty big.

I thought of this in my daffier moments as couple's counseling. Trial un-separation.

I watched through the peephole before opening the door for her and her bag. She had her head tilted down, the way she held it when she had to walk down a street or stand in a crowd. Face tilted to defer eye contact, but not far enough to really limit her field of vision. I was psyching myself up to be nonchalant. Watching someone who doesn't know you're watching is its own private power, but her eyes jerked to the side every couple seconds without moving her head, like there was maybe a gaggle of social interactions waiting around the corner to ambush her and she didn't want to be caught off guard.

I felt dirty. The more she looked around the more I felt like apologizing not for spying on her but for something. If I'd cared to think about it, this would have been a moment that invited some soul-searching.

I didn't care to. Such was my hurry to get the door open that I clunked it against the deadbolt before remembering to unlatch it. I found Judith standing wide-eyed, startled by the sudden violent noise.

"Christ, Damien."

She smiled real composed-like, but got through that doorway pronto. We went to the living room. The bag took a seat next the sofa upon which Judith deposited herself, legs curled under her and something behind her eyes.

"So," she said. "I don't know. Maybe let's talk?"

I nodded fast so as not to betray trepidation. Judith's foot bobbed up and down. Her whole body jittered with the motion. It was hot. I walked to the window unit air conditioner and twisted the dial and got a sound like broken glass in a blender. Judith flinched. I yanked the power cord out of the wall too hard. The unit skidded against the base of the window but didn't fall.

Judith looked not quite in my direction from the couch. I went and sat a body's width from her. She keened over and laid down, head braced at a frightening angle against my elbow. I looked around. This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. Too intimate, too early. My jaw ached. I'd been clenching my teeth.

"Well." I said. "I think I'm going to go lie down."

I slid out from under her. Her head flopped into the cushion. I strolled as casually as could be down the hall to my bedroom and lay down with my hands behind my head. After a while the ceiling fan got boring so I turned on the television and cycled through the channels, down at first then up, changing directions like I was chasing something through the stations and trying to catch it unawares by switching back on it.

Judith came down the hall carrying her bag and lay down next to me at a safe distance. I looked over. She was watching the television cycle.

I clicked around for a bit and eventually settled on a quiet show about cheetahs. They cannot growl but will chirp and hiss.

Judith cleared her throat. "Do you have any paper?"

"Uh, probably. A legal pad somewhere. Why?"

"I left my journal at home."

She had always been adamant about that. It's a journal, damn you, not a diary. I didn't really get the linguistic distinction but damned if I'd ever sunk quite so low as to pick a fight over what she called her notebooks. Except maybe one time.

I leaned over to my nightstand and rifled around. It was wedged back between the stand and the wall. I yanked it out, tore off a couple sheets of paper, and handed them to her.

"I need the pad, too."

"Why?"

She flipped over onto her stomach and poked at the pillow. "Writing surface."

I passed her the pad. She pulled a pen from her bag and started scribbling. I learned that the cheetah hunts by sight, not smell, early in the morning or in the evening, to strike a balance between heat and light, and tried not to sense the glances from Judith every couple of sentences.

She capped her pen. I carefully did not look over to her, did not try to angle my eyes over her shoulder. She folded the paper twice and tucked it under her pillow and edged across the bed closer to me. We paused there a moment and then she put her hand on my arm and we leaned inward.

The cheetahs ran around and killed gazelles and hid in the tall grass. Judith took a deep breath. My whole body tensed but it was just a deep breath. No words formed from it. We did that dance the rest of the night, me trying to feel when she was starting to talk, bracing myself for it, and easing so very cautiously back into the silence.

* * *

I slept little and poorly and awoke to Judith snoring into my chest. I ground my head into the pillow to force sleep. No dice. With the air conditioning shot we could just about have grown orchids in the carpet. My breath started coming a little shallow and I got that twitching compulsion to move in my chest that only ever comes when you ought to stay in bed.

Judith stirred and I went still, hoping she'd slide off me. She didn't. I took her shoulder and tried to lift her away. Her weight just went to the other shoulder. I slid one hand under her forehead, peeling her face from my shirt where it had found itself glued, and used that space to peel myself the rest of the way loose.

I had a wet little silhouette of Judith on my chest. Her August shadow.

I stood at the foot of the bed and watched her. Later I would pretend to myself that I was thinking something profound, putting everything into its proper context, but really I was just wondering what she'd put on those legal pad pages, so I crept to her side and slid them out from underneath her pillow. I lifted them up to the scant light creeping in from the window at the end of the hallway. Both sides of two sheets were covered with skinny slanting scrawl. It was a little too dark to really read. I scanned through, looking for capital letters. A couple capital *D*s at the beginning gave me hope, then nothing for lines and lines until another cluster at the end.

I squinted at the script, turning it every which way, but in the best conditions she has handwriting that might make a fellow dizzy. I set the pages on the nightstand and stripped off my damp shirt and boxers. I held up the shirt, admiring the profile of Judith there.

My secondhand copier sat in the corner of the room. I put the pages on top and got my hands under it as gently as I could and lifted it out into the hallway, the living room. That I didn't trip over anything is a minor miracle. But light might wake Judith, so I crept behind the couch carrying the bulky machine.

I plugged it into a wall outlet and opened the cover. Sparkling blue light flooded the space between the back of the couch and the wall. I ran off two copies per side and folded them into separate packets, to hide in separate places.

The capital *Ds* for *Damien* seemed less plentiful now. And really, what did I stand to learn from the writing of one night, when there were boxes of notebooks under Judith's bed at her place, dating back to before we met. If I wanted the story, wanted to see myself reflected in her handwriting, I'd have to find a way to get a hold of them. Perhaps I'd happen to be in her neighborhood tomorrow night.

I was afraid all my movement and the blue light of the copier had woken Judith, but she was in the same position I left her in, breathing steadily, mostly not on top of the pillow. I crept around to replace the papers and stood there, holding Judith's makeshift journal and watching her sleep with a rush of transgressive thrill like opening your eyes while the family is saying grace, watching everybody looking down with their eyes closed, getting to know exactly what they looked like when they'd pray.

She snapped me today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure. A picture of her breasts. The caption read: "I love you. They love you. Can we come over tonight?" Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday. She snaps me every day.

Raymond asked to have a glimpse of them. "Is it possible?" he asked.

"No," I said. They are gone. They may as well never have existed. Raymond told me he didn't have any girl to be intimate with, and this was where I could help. He asked me if I'd mind screenshotting the next exciting photo she'd send. When I didn't say anything, he thanked me for being a good friend. It doesn't mean anything.

She snapped me a photo of her pouty face from above to look cuter, and in the caption asked me if I'd marry her :) I snapped back a shrugging selfie and wrote that I didn't mind, that if she was keen on it, we'd get married :|

Then she asked me again if I loved her. This time, she was naked, so I felt like saying yes. I cooled down quickly. She'd set the timer to 2 seconds to stop me from taking a screenshot. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing – but I supposed I didn't love her. To make it better, to relate to her, I also used a naked selfie in the background. I don't think it mattered anyway.

I had not kept my promise to Raymond. I snapped her again, telling her I wanted to see her for more than an instant. I think that made her feel something. She sent me another picture, this time with a full 10 seconds. It was so hot the heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on my phone. The lock button gave, and with that crisp whipcrack, it began. I sent the photo to Raymond. I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the private calm of this conversation in which I'd been happy. I sent it to four more friends (#notYourSnapsLosers). And each successive message was another loud, fateful rap on the door of our undoing.

I was questioned several times with all caps texts. Raymond texted her that I was innocent. It didn't matter. She asked me to meet. She told me that we needed to talk. I told her that surely, she would not break up with a decent hard-working young man because of one tragic moment of lost self-control. She told me that she needed some time to deliberate and that she would call me.

She called me. She came to see me again, and the silence of my room closed in round me, and with the silence came a queer sensation that we were going to make love. But she was not looking into my eyes. I had no time to make contact, as she had already started saying that in the name of broken trust and a broken heart, she would break up with me. I heard her ask me if I had anything to say. After thinking for a moment, I answered, "No." Then she walked out.

She had just refused, for the third time, to see me. She had nothing to say to me, didn't feel like talking—and would be seeing me quite soon enough when she'd come to pick up her things.

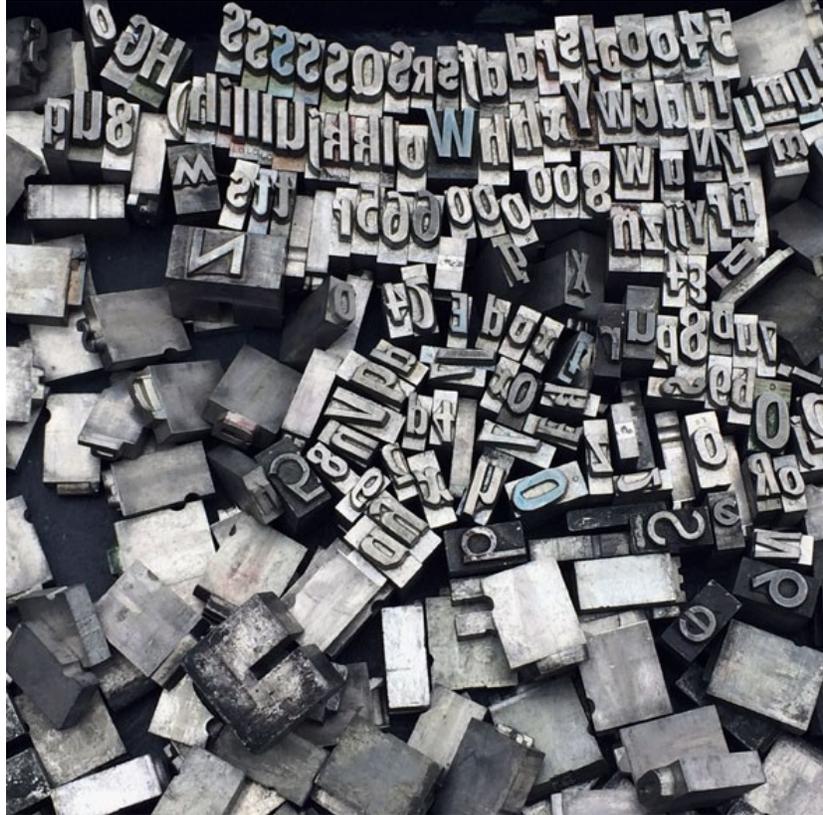
On the day she came, she asked me if we would still be friends. I said no. She said: "Have you no hope at all? Do you think that when love dies, everything dies outright, and nothing remains?"

I said: "Yes."

She dropped her eyes and sat down. She cried. I felt nothing. But then she said she felt truly sorry for me. It must make life unbearable to a man to think as I did.

Then, I don't know how it was, but something seemed to break inside of me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I ran around my room and grabbed every one of our photos and ran to the stove and burned them all. I told her not to ever waste time on me; it was better for it all to burn and disappear from each other's memories. I'd taken her by the wrists, and in an ecstasy of joy and rage I poured her all the thoughts that had been simmering in my brain.

I'd been shouting so much that I'd lost my breath. She was about to run out, but I held on just a little longer and took out my phone and opened Snapchat and stuck my wet cheek to her wet cheek and took one last selfie of



us. I set the timer to 10. Before sending it out to all our friends, I wrote "Love is forever."

Photograph: Letters © Jill Gewirtz

Sorting by Andrew Bockhold

Mrs. Kray lived alone. Her husband had passed away some time ago and she, like Tony, rarely went out. Her trash was always neatly arranged: folded down boxes, containers that had been washed out, and toiletries at the bottom making a soft cushion for the rest of the garbage. Always on top were house magazines with detailed notes in the margins. Tony imagined she used to be a realtor checking out prospects for her next sale.

Mr. O'Brien was a high school gym teacher with a massive appetite for pornography. His subscriptions ranged from soft-core to outright depravity, where the only pictures were page sized photos of reddened vaginas glistening on the lacquered pages. There were six in all and each month a new set would arrive and an old set would end up in the trash next to its seeming opposite; Mrs. O'Brien's obsession, which were stitching magazines with patterns and ads for threads. The stitching magazines usually had some sampler that Tony would find highlighted in green or yellow with notes and thread types crossed off. Mrs. O'Brien would send these bits and pieces out into the world and each person stitched a new line.

The third tenant in Tony's building was a health-nut that died at the ripe old age of thirty-three. Mr. Weiland lived alone too, and he was the only tenant that Tony actually talked to in the early evening hours. Tony sat and smoked from the time Mr. Weiland left for his dusk run until the time he returned sweaty and panting. It fit into Tony's unique routine; it helped him keep track of time and tenants.

It took a while for new people to move in. Apparently Mr. Weiland was only keeping healthy for himself and no family or friends came to collect his things. Tony considered breaking through the police tape barrier one night, but it was only a fleeting fantasy to walk through that door; Tony couldn't risk being caught.

The new tenants ended up being a beautiful young couple, and Tony never heard any loud noises or fights coming through the thin walls. His usual stake out on the walk proved a bit problematic though because Mr. Keenan, his name was on the mailbox, liked to chat. He was a little too forward for Tony who liked to ease into new tenants by carefully watching them take their trash to the dumpster and recording what bags they used. The Keenans used white bags with yellow handles. This would help immensely when finding their trash amidst the typical black shiny treasures.

"Hi, my name's Jim. My wife, Tracy, and I just moved in to the 3C." He extended a hand and Tony shook it with his sweaty, smoky palm. He immediately put his hand into his pocket to wipe away Jim.

"I'm Tony, I live here." Tony's scratchy throat made the sounds, but his ears didn't register the noise from within his own body. It had been so long since Tony had spoken to anyone outside his own mind that he had to clear his throat of smoke to sound like a normal human being.

"Excuse me." Jim jaunted to the dumpster with his white bag and threw it over the top.

"It was nice meeting you, Tony. I'm sure we'll be seeing you around." Tony nodded his head and made brief eye contact with Jim Keenan. It unnerved Tony to know this man's first name. Tony waited for the man to disappear up the stairs before taking a breath and stubbing out his cigarette.

It was the usual routine for new tenants to throw out all sorts of random things during a move in. They decide what needs to bring with it familiarity and what needs to be discarded with all its memories or lack of use. Tony never liked the sheer bulk of all these items. He sifted through them to find out much needed back-story on the Keenans, but they were newly married and more than likely threw the most important items away before they packed together. Perhaps Mrs. Keenan threw away old boyfriend photos before Jim could see them, and perhaps he had thrown away old dirty magazines or movies before she could see them.

Tony and Jim would briefly talk each night about the weather, or where something was in the neighborhood.

"So Tracy and I are looking for a good place to eat around here, do you know any places?" Tony had no idea. He never went out, and now this simple question made him start to sweat.

"No, but it's supposed to be nice tonight, no rain."

"Right, but I mean, there has to be something around here we haven't already tried. She doesn't cook much, and all I can do is grill burgers, you know what I mean?" Jim's palm made a wave away from his body and came back so hard Tony could feel the forced air that preceded the smack on his shoulder. Tony was still as Jim's palm slid away, and he was left there shaken inside. His hand was so still the line of blue smoke that rose from his cigarette was straight as it flowed upwards into the tree.

"Whelp, I guess we'll have to do some looking of our own then, thanks, Tony." Jim walked on into the building. Tony could still feel Jim's hand crashing down on his clavicle.

It took a month after The Keenans moved in before Tony could actually get a good sample past the name brands of foods and detergents. They too never threw away important documents, which was disappointing, but expected with these youngsters. Tony guessed they were in their late twenties, maybe early thirties; it wasn't something you asked about or could readily surmise. What those telemarketers wouldn't give for the information Tony had.

In the most recent bag Tony had found what could be of promise down the road. Old newspapers with jobs circled in blue pen could mean that one of them was out of work or unhappy with what they were doing. But Tony never heard them fighting about money, or making any noise for that matter. So tonight Tony figured the trash collection wouldn't be that stellar again.

But at the bottom of the white bag was a little yellow and black canister of film.

Tony was shocked to find such a vital piece of trash. For the first time he sat back against the inner wall of the dumpster and puzzled over the small canister. The loading tab was no longer protruding from the felt slip on the side of the can. Tony's grimy fingers turned the roll over and over. It was used, but undeveloped. At this Tony slowly backed out of the dumpster leaving the O'Brien's and Mrs. Kray's nightly findings behind. Doing his casual look around the corner Tony emerged from behind the dumpster with his find and went back up to his apartment.

Inside he sat at his table amidst the other catalogs of tenant trash and cleared a space for the roll of film. He crossed his arms and laid his chin on them while staring at the little cylindrical wonder before him.

The obvious struck him at once. He would never be able to see what was photographed on the negatives inside the little can. Just having it in his possession would violate his decaying parole. Sure, he thought, it has been five years since I moved into this place from my one room cell. My parole officer rarely calls to check on me, but the hazards of this are enormous. Tony would have to go during daylight hours to a place that develops film and wait at least an hour in eternity to find out what was on this roll when it could just be family pictures or wedding photos. He never even walked past the photo-booth at the local supermarket, he always skirted around it lest anyone see him looking. There had to be a better idea.

Tony dusted off his phone book and paged through the photography section hoping to find a place that would deliver the pictures by mail. No one would have to know or see that Tony had sent this roll out, and the pictures would not be seen by anyone that could recognize Tony. There was such a place and Tony highlighted the address.

It took him five days of staring at the little canister before he decided to go through with it. He found an old manila envelope from tenants past and taped his address only to the front left corner. He slipped the roll of film inside and taped over the previous address with that of the photo-shop. He had no idea what type of money to send so he took a crusted ten dollar bill and placed it inside, sealing it shut. It would be another five days before Tony even considered mailing it.

It was at this time that Tony realized he hadn't been keeping up with the trash collection. Days had come and gone and he had not so much as glanced at the dumpster. The truck had undoubtedly emptied it, taking many nights of digging away from Tony, but strangely enough he didn't care. All that was on the table now was the crinkled manila envelope with an undeveloped roll of film and a ten crunched inside.

Postage was going to be a problem. Tony never got much mail himself so he never bothered to see what postage cost these days, nor when the carrier actually made his or her rounds. He figured he could take a dollar bill and a small note instructing the postman to get the thing delivered. That would cause too many holes. Tony would have to purchase postage and mail it off just like other people. This was a problem too. Tony didn't own a car. He didn't even know where the nearest post office was. Once again he looked in his old telephone book for the addresses of nearby offices and found one close enough to walk. This would be the first time Tony had been farther than the market,

almost two miles out. This took days to decide but Tony finally ventured from the stoop out into the sunny streets into the world beyond his usual, and down the road where places still existed that he once took pictures of.

It was not such a bad walk and Tony's legs still carried him past the market to the post office. He lingered before the door for close to an hour before entering the building. He was out of breath from the walk and the pack of cigarettes he'd smoked just that morning. Once inside he waited in line and watched the people that came and went. There was a man in a business suit with large packages just ahead of him. Out in the vestibule there were some people checking their PO boxes, and right behind him was a mother and child waiting with brightly wrapped presents. Tony kept himself from looking back, but the child looked so happy and the impatient mother was bouncing foot to foot while she waited. She didn't notice Tony wave to the toddler who smiled back and flapped his hand back. The line moved and Tony stepped up to the nearest window.

"What can I do for you?" The lady seemed nice enough behind her counter as she weighed and charged Tony the eighty-three cents for postage. He slapped the sticker on the right hand corner of the envelope and prepared for the moment of truth with a deep wheezing breath as the lady pried the parcel from his grip and tossed it over her shoulder into a bin for outgoing mail. Now all Tony could do was wait.

He made the trip back to his apartment. Odd how commonplace the trip back from far away seems. The sights that were so alien now seemed normal. He stopped at the store for more chicken patties, box potatoes and cigarettes.

For weeks after this little trek Tony puzzled over the possibilities of the roll when he felt good, and the possibility of being caught in a parole violation when he felt bad. Every day he went to the mailbox after noting the times the carrier usually stopped to deliver. He'd never spent this much time awake during the daylight hours. Even before his own pictures sent him to prison he kept late hours working in his own darkroom on projects for local papers or magazines.

It took some time before the pictures arrived, which gave Tony time to focus on cleaning his own place up. Old tenants' trash now went back to the dumpster. His walls had slowly come back as he discarded all the old trash keeping only the current tenants on the table. He actually allowed himself to look down from his own window and watch the small children play football in the grass behind the complex. He never looked too long.

He was still bitter at all the trouble caused by his pictures. Children played by the pool in order to remember the womb, he thought. That's why he took a waterproof camera into the deep end to photograph the swimmers as they plunged into the water from the board. At night Tony himself swam into the deep end with goggles and twirled around pretending to be back within his mother in the dark suspension.

When children dive into the water, clothing has a way of slipping off or pulling free; reminding us of its unnaturalness within the watery stomach of the pool. When Tony was asked about them he said they were merely candid shots that he in no way planned to use for his or anyone else's pleasure. The trouble started with a young girl whose top

came off when she dove into the pool. Tony snapped pictures without thinking and the girl became distraught at the idea of her newly found body being photographed so openly. Tony never once thought of anything besides the innocence of the whole ordeal. Parents got involved and Tony was barred from the pool, but that was not enough. An inquiry was launched and all his pictures were seized.

They made a strong case and Tony didn't have a good lawyer.

He was a model prisoner however and he was paroled after three years. It was inside that he learned to keep to himself and always know who's living around you. He was never allowed to take or develop pictures again.

The envelope of pictures arrived on a Tuesday. Tony felt relieved that the process worked and he was now in the clear of any wrongdoing. After clearing the table Tony placed the small envelope in the middle of the table and fixed himself something to eat. All while eating he stared at the parcel. There it was. After weeks of agonizing and waiting it was finally here. Tony had never given much thought to what was actually pictured. He looked around the room and saw the freshly cleaned walls and the space he now had left. It had now been over a month since anything new had been taken from the dumpster.

Tony waited another five sleepless nights before opening the parcel. He smelled the paper and felt the glossy finish before opening his eyes to see what was on the pictures. His heart was exploding inside and he could feel the blood pumping through his veins into his taut temples.

Tony opened his eyes.

The sickness rose from his stomach in one awesome spasm. In one moment the stink from years of waste descended down upon him in wave after wave of nausea. In each frame his own movements in and out of the dumpster were recorded like an animation flip book. He enters and exits the brown box with things in his hands and looks left and then right. The images held the sight of some sunken monster turned gray and skeletal creeping from behind the dumpster out into the light of the parking lot. The last shot is of Tony standing back beneath the tree blowing smoke into the branches as perfect shafts of light cascade down upon him.

Land of Lost Fathers by Ryan J. Ouimet

Pull," he tells me and I cock back and hurl the bottle. He fires a shot from the little pellet shooter and misses. This is what drinking looks like once you've pissed everyone off at the only two bars in town. It is two men drinking tall mean beers and throwing bottles and growing uglier. He has never once hit the bottle cleanly enough to break it. Every now and again you hear the chime of it ricocheting, glancing the glass as it flies by and into the green sprawl of woods before us.

This here is a land of lost fathers and wandering sons. Between black and white there are infinite shades. You learn to name them living up in the northern vast paradise: soft whites, talcs, steel, creams, ash, char, soot. All can point to the rest of the day, and coming night. Each imbued with meaning. You can see the snow from days and miles away. It's the way the sky gets to be like a surgeon's metal table and its children, the clouds, cling to it, unable to rise above. Everything hovers, grows fat and pregnant. Then the world goes the white of death. You can see the blues too, precious blues coming in for warmer days.

"Pull," he tells me. I launch it high, high enough where he can get off three shots before it stabs itself into the hard snow. No hits. No glances. We open two more beers. Our sixth each.

It is a slow drinking game. He gets two shots, his beer and mine. I never get to shoot. I always throw. Then we go back to drinking the beers until they drain and he gets two more shots.

Bull is a lost father, but underneath those types there is always a wandering son, not a man even if his mustache is all gray and hanging at the corners of his crooked mouth.

I am only thirty-six. I am a boy next to Bull. I am a wandering son still as far as I know. No children. Nothing to go mad wondering over. Bull is old. His face droops like a cartoon dog, heavy wrinkles, left half the victim of stroke. It's like talking to two men. One looks young enough, vibrant in that there's still energy flowing from the eyes. The other is like a sad old man, the sort you have to skirt around on a street because his shuffle's so slow it's depressing to walk behind him, and you'll be late to where you're headed.

There's no good reason we drink together, only that I worked one summer on his property setting traps and reinforcing his trailer against the coming cold. He gave me a bit of money and a lot of beer. He reminded me of my old dad who died working when I was a kid. He fell from a ladder, my dad, and broke his back on a pile of bricks. I remember the clouds being whitish blue like fat jellyfish, and the sky being black-blue like the ocean. He'd slipped. Simple as that.

He goes by Bull. Which is a real asshole name, but because he looks so harmless and crippled it doesn't come off that way. I think he sees I'm lost. Even though really I am

old too. Thirty-six is too old to be hiding from the world in an old man's yard, drinking and playing games.

We finish the beers.

"Pull," he says and I toss it lightly, try to get it to hang so he can level it off and hit. It's a miss. His right hand is pretty steady but he shoots with his left. That's the side dripping off of him and broken. I think that's the point of the game. If he can hit something with that ruined side maybe it'll mean something.

I am readying the bottle, and waiting for the word. Instead he clears his throat.

"Tell me about that girl," he says. He means the girl I was with two weeks past. She may have broke my heart but I am not sure as of yet.

"Why?" I ask him. I don't feel like talking about her.

If you have never lived in a town as small as this then you can't comprehend the closeness. There are not many people unknown to you. Everyone is a mirror. Everyone is like the shiny steel sky before it snows. Everyone is related. Everything you've ever done or will is reflected back at you. It's why I left. I can't reason why I came back except that there are only so many places you can go that look the same. Every town was grey, and all the people too. They all looked like home.

"Because I am a dirty old asshole. I need a story. Payment for the beer." Guilt trip. Even Bull doesn't understand because he is a lost father. He came up this way to be faceless. He says he had a girl once. Where is she now? He doesn't know. So he runs away. The closeness kills you eventually. It strangles you.

There aren't too many girls that come up willingly into such wasteland cold. The ones here are for the most part born here. They are the daughters begot of couplings whose underlying love was one of warmth and not one another. There isn't much else to do unless you hunt or fish but to make warmth, fires or otherwise that simple flesh to flesh.

"The girl was a ten. Big tits. Brown skin", I tell him. What I am supposed to say is the girl was a beauty. "Outsider. From Arizona," I explain again. Which means she smelled like the desert and its sun. She was like cinnamon. But you can't say that out loud. "It's a long way from home I told her. And she said it was, and that she had always wanted to be in Alaska. It's cold, she said. So what do you tell every outside girl when they come up Bull? You say: I'll warm you up."

Bull laughs.

I laugh.

But she didn't say it was cold. What she said was that she figured Alaska must be the exact opposite of Arizona. What I told her was it isn't. I had a good line too and I wasn't going to spoil it by telling it to Bull. I told Arizona that the desert is just like the tundra. They are vast and lonely and the only thing worth doing is finding someone to keep you company because nights are the same in any manner of vast and lonely place. I was like a poet. You can't be like a poet in front of people like Bull.

"Then what?" Bull says.

"You know then what," I tell him.

"I'm sure you rode it like they don't down in Arizona," he speculates. I ignore him.

"All her life she was in the sun," I say without wanting to.

"What?"

"Nothing, Bull." I say.

"She broke your heart," he says almost like he enjoys it. It could be he wants someone broken by his side, someone to sit on his good side, the side not drooping and limp to make him feel whole.

"Some girl? Broke my balls. That's all," I tell him. All her life she was in the sun. All my life I've been sapped by cold. Of course she broke my heart. It was like a dream. Of course.

"She broke your heart," Bull says again, and he laughs. He leans back, and grows quiet.

She did, but what's the relevance of that? Any girl from Arizona could've. Anyone of them. All of a sudden I don't want to be this Bulls surrogate anymore. This is how it starts. The wandering. With a persistent broken heart. Your heart breaking over and over again because time is illusionary. It heals nothing. Once it breaks that's it, you can't escape it. That's a reason to wander. Landscapes as grey as these.

I look at Bull and I want to kill him all of a sudden. For making me say what hurts aloud. I start imagining doing it and the real sick truth of it is probably no one would know I'd done it. Who would find him? No one was looking for him. He'd be just another lost father, self-sacrificing himself to the cold in repentance for all the shitty things he'd done. For abandoning his girl, and never making it right.

He is staring off, long into that dark green nightmare of a forest.

"Pull," he says, and when I throw the bottle he makes it explode into white shattering flashes of light. Then we cackle like demons at this momentous victory, and our horrible howls echo back.

A Night in the Diner by Michael Morshed

All night I sat in the kitchen, eyeing the chemicals under the sink. Marty always asks me how I could have so many cleaning supplies and such a dirty apartment. I like to ask him why he cheats on me and why he's such a dick.

I'm walking into The Diner now, where he says he met her, where he said she works.

They seat me in a booth across from a couple, next to the bathroom. There are photos on the wall, they're nothing, fluff that's supposed to make you not look at them.

"How are we, ma'am? What can I get you tonight?"

"Get me the waitress who just helped the table across the aisle."

That's how close she was to me.

Just a few seconds ago. She was taking the dessert order of the couple. She was excited about them wanting a slice of apple pie with two vanilla scoops. She approved. She wrote the order down. She offered to refill their coffees. Her ass is not as good as mine, but that could be The Diner outfit.

The waitress looks behind her. She too sees my girl heading for the kitchen.

"Sheila?"

"Yeah. Sheila."

"Would you like anything else?"

My phone is on the table and it's ringing. It's Marty again. His last message started with how sorry he was and ended with him pleading, saying he had been stupid and drunk. He is stupid and a drunk. I once found better, but better saw he could do better than me.

The photo I found in his wallet is under my hand on the table. I raise my thumb and pointer, glance at the photo then at the girl's face.

Sheila says, "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

It is her.

I slap my hand down on top of the photo. I smile. "I thought so but no. Eggs and bacon."

She writes that down.

I don't know how Marty could have gotten her. The girl before me though, she was pretty too. Whenever I say to him a girl is pretty, he says pretty girls are no good because they make things tough. He likes telling me that, and just leaving it there.

Her picture doesn't tell her beauty right though. She could have been stolen out of a Barbie factory. She's elegant, even in a drab, yellow and grey dress. Her ass is probably awesome. It was definitely just the uniform.

"How would you like the eggs?"

"Do you know Marty Graham?"

"The country singer?"

Somebody is lying. She could be good at that. She's probably good at a lot of things.

"The cashier at CVS."

Sheila smiles. She purses her lips like she's gonna kiss the air. "No."

I hold up the photo. "He has this picture of you."

She takes the photo and does look confused by it. "This is my headshot. I'm getting into modeling."

That sounds right.

"I got it developed at CVS."

I ask a new waitress for my check. My plate has as much food on it as it did when the first waitress brought it to me. The only change is I burst the bubble in my sunny-side up egg. The yolk is cold and hardening in the grooves of the bacon.

The manager is staring at me while he organizes the menus. He has a stupid red tie on, a white office shirt tucked into black pants that circle his inflated stomach.

I wonder if he would sleep with me, if he looks at me and thinks, *yep that's one I can get. One that looks like that.*

The couple that ordered the pie are down to the crust and there's a half scoop left.

She tells him to finish it, and I think that's a good idea because guys watch a lot of porn and they don't want girls who are fat. They'll date fat girls. Make them their girlfriends, their wives. But they don't *want* fat girls.

The new waitress brings the check.

I guess they're expecting me to leave a tip. I'm not sure to who. It takes three women to bring me my food, one beautiful girl and one bad man to put me on a course to snap.

If that makes me weak, then fine, I'm weak. I don't know why anybody has any trouble admitting that.

Under the sink, I taped a recipe on the shelf above the cleaning supplies. A few shakes of Ajax, one scoop of dishwasher detergent, two-parts water, one-part ammonia. A spritz of lemon, for the taste. That's what they say. Must be another fat girl who wrote that, if there's any concern for the taste. I don't have a bucket to mix it all in, so I tell Marty that's how close he is to being alone. \$3.95 for a bucket.

Inventory by Amanda Hart Miller

Marla's daughter Bethany slipped back inside the apartment after saying goodnight to the boy she'd been seeing for two months. When Marla crossed her arms, Bethany sighed.

"He seems very nice, honey. I've told you that," Marla said quickly. "I like him."

Bethany looked down like she was studying the dingy carpeting, and Marla could see delicate crease lines in her pearly blue eye shadow. "Good. Me, too," Bethany said.

The table where Marla sat took up most of the cramped dining room, so Bethany had to pass inches away from Marla to get to the kitchen. Only the two of them lived there, and Bethany had picked up Marla's habit of smiling and squeezing the other person's shoulder as she passed. But tonight she didn't, and Marla distinctly felt the absence of touch on her shoulder. In that absence she saw a vision of what her life would be after Bethany left her—a shadowy life of work and TV, occasionally seeing a movie with a friend, trying out a few social groups only to realize being alone was better than being with people you barely knew. Even though being alone was no good either. In the kitchen, Bethany popped open a soda can.

Bethany's father—Bethany had told Marla, *you can just call him my father... ex-husband sounds so ugly*—had offered to help Marla and Bethany move into the tiny apartment two years ago after he moved his own stuff into a nicer apartment with a grocery store cashier he'd been seeing for six months. *No, we can manage by ourselves*, Marla told him. And she and Bethany had managed just fine. Marla adjusted her hours at the doctor's office where she worked the front desk so she could be home whenever Bethany was there. They were doing just fine.

Later, when Bethany would become a single mother shuttling Zoe and Emma to doctor appointments and playgrounds, hurrying them through spelling and math homework so she could heat up leftovers, holding them after nightmares while she kept her own nightmares about bills and loneliness to herself, Bethany would tell Marla the same thing—*We're doing just fine*—and Marla would know that it was both very true and very false.

Marla thought about getting up and standing at the kitchen's only door, but this was an aggressive move, she knew, because it would trap Bethany, who would get defensive. Marla waited at the table, listening to the refrigerator door open and close, open and close. Bethany never snacked after dinner. She'd told Marla that this was how people got fat, which was a dig not only at Marla but at all women past twenty, women whose hips and bellies widened, women who surrendered themselves to gravity and spread. But Bethany often took inventory of what was in the fridge—she wanted to know that the option was there for her, on the off chance she might want it.

"G'night," said Bethany as she passed Marla.

When Marla looked at Bethany's hair, finally grown so it hung halfway down her back after she cut it all off with the kitchen shears after her father left, Marla couldn't help be annoyed at how that boy Andrew kept his arm around Bethany whenever he was with her—every moment, it seemed—his skinny forearm nestled in her hair. Like he was claiming her. "It's just that you two seem very close all of a sudden," Marla said as Bethany reached the hallway that led to their bedrooms. "Very serious."

"I told you. I like him." Bethany stared at the soda can in her hand. "I love him." This last was in a quiet voice, like the times when Bethany would beg to stay with Marla instead of going to her father's: But I like it here better, Mom.

"Sixteen is so young."

"Can we please not have this same conversation over and over?"

Marla searched for something unique and meaningful to say, but she didn't want Bethany to walk away while she was still searching for that perfect phrase. It wasn't hard to say the right thing; in retrospect, she had thought of many right things to say to both Bethany and Bethany's father. But it seemed impossible to say the right thing at the right time.

"The weird thing about sixteen is that it feels much older than it is," Marla said.

"So I keep hearing."

"I know I can't stop you. From, you know, being with him. I know that. Don't think I don't."

"Good." Bethany turned to go as if she'd been unclipped from a tether. "So I guess there's nothing more to say."

"There's a lot more," Marla said to herself.

* * *

Bethany plopped on her bed and turned on her laptop. It took forever to boot, and sometimes it went through a series of error screens that made her want to throw it against the wall. Her mom had gotten it for her for Christmas, but she'd dropped it this spring and its edge was scuffed and probably something inside was slightly not right. Sometimes her belongings didn't seem like she owned them until they were slightly not right, as if before that, they belonged to someone else who wasn't clumsy and didn't come from a broken home. But then the Microsoft colors began to glow on the screen, and it was all okay.

Andrew had messaged her twice since he left the apartment, telling her he loved her. There was something both beautiful and desperate in that phrase, the way it felt at first like it was just a statement, but it was really begging for a reply. You couldn't just ignore it. "I love you" was like that. Andrew was like that, too. Andrew's mother had dementia and his dad had gone away long ago—really gone away, not gone like Bethany's father, whose apartment she went to every Wednesday night and every other weekend, where she messaged Andrew and watched videos on her laptop while her father played *Grand Theft Auto* with his grocery store girlfriend. Really gone, like Andrew didn't know where

he was. And Andrew's mother was cracked. Totally crazy. Bethany only met her once but she whipped up the sweatshirt she was wearing and showed Bethany and Andrew her tits and then laughed—brayed, really, like a donkey—like it was the funniest thing ever. That was what Andrew had to live with, but he got up and got dressed and went on with his life every day. That in itself was amazing.

It was all amazing. Andrew and Bethany, together.

The sex was less amazing than the idea of the sex. But still, love was amazing. It was the most amazing thing she could think of. She messaged him that she loved him, too.

Ur mom doesn't like me does she?

Of course not, she wanted to tell him. Her mom didn't like anyone Bethany liked—not Rick Thomas, whom her mom said was stuck-up, not Jackson Cade, whom her mom said cussed too much, not Andrew, whom her mom said was too possessive. In her mother's eyes, Bethany was practically a princess, and no one was good enough for her. *Bethany's probably bored because she's off the charts smart*, her mom said to Mrs. Brashears when Mrs. Brashears told her Bethany had been more interested in writing notes to Nikki than learning geometry. *If Nikki wants to be two-faced, let her do that to someone else*, her mom told Bethany three months later when Nikki and Bethany were no longer speaking. *She's probably just jealous of your looks. And you're so funny, too. You're not just pretty but you're fun to be with, too. How could she treat you that way?*

Sometimes her mother talked and talked until Bethany felt like she was talking about someone else, a second Bethany whom Bethany instantly disliked for being so perfect. And besides, her mother's dislike of Andrew—it all went back to THE DIVORCE. How could it not? To be loved and then not be loved anymore. Now that she was in love, Bethany couldn't imagine the pain in that. To have someone totally understand you—to give someone all the pieces of you they need in order to understand you!—and love you, and then suddenly they don't love you anymore. While THE DIVORCE was happening, all Bethany could think of was herself, but now, in the intense memory of her mother stuffing their clothes into garbage bags to move them out of that little house where they were once a family, she knew the same thing could happen to her.

She would keep this love she had. She would never let it go.

She likes you. Don't worry, Bethany typed to Andrew.

* * *

Marla watched Bethany pick at her French toast, cutting tiny squares and then tinier squares until the sugary dough was mostly smeared onto the plate. "I'm going to take you to Dr. Walters for a check-up," Marla said. She felt nauseated as she geared up for the next line, but she had made the decision sometime around 4:00 a.m. after lying in bed awake and helpless the whole night, knowing that this force in her daughter, this need for love, was larger than both of them, and that Bethany would turn to sex—and its duplicitous connection to love—just as Marla had those many years ago. Life had taught

Marla to scrap together what pieces you could salvage. So she said, "And if you want to talk to Dr. Walters about birth control, that's fine. That's your business."

"Really?" Bethany's fork was poised halfway to her mouth.

"It's time for you to go in for a check-up anyway, and what you do in there is up to you. Like I said, I know I can't stop you from doing what you want to do. But I don't think you'd like to have a baby at 16. You'll make a stupendous mother someday, of course."

"Okay," Bethany said.

What did that even mean? *Okay*. How could Bethany just say okay and nothing more? She'd made a huge compromise, and all she got was *okay*.

Marla asked, "Should we stop at CVS? We could get some discount Cadbury eggs and cream soda?" It was something they always did, every year the week after Easter, the two of them.

"Okay," Bethany said as she chewed. "I'd be up for that. If that's what you want to do."

"Then that's what we'll do," Marla said, trying to remember exactly when Bethany started splitting *I* and *you* so completely that there was never any *we*. Except the *we* that meant Bethany and Andrew.

* * *

In the CVS, Bethany didn't feel like going through the paperbacks with her mom, laughing at the pictures of these perfect women with creamy white shoulders. That was something they used to do, maybe a few months ago, maybe even a year ago. It was one of those things that used to be fun but seemed childish now. She waited until her mom seemed interested in one and then said, "I'm going to look around," and walked fast enough to discourage her from following.

She couldn't figure out why she hadn't told her mom she had already started on birth control pills, that she'd gone to a clinic a few weeks ago. Why was this worse than admitting that she and Andrew were having sex? Not that she had exactly admitted that fact by saying "okay." At least, she didn't think she had. Not exactly. Perhaps her mom thought the "okay" just meant, "in case it happens in the future."

In case it happens because we are so passionately in love, Bethany thought. Going to the clinic by herself on that rainy Tuesday before anything had even happened seemed so premeditated, so unromantic. And now that action suddenly seemed like such a lump between her and her mom. Such a stupid detail to withhold—that trip to the clinic, which had felt so exciting but empty at the same time. Such a small detail compared to sex itself, which she had always considered the biggest mystery.

Bethany browsed through the makeup aisle and then turned the corner to see if her mom was still at the paperbacks. She was, but beside her stood a man in his early forties with a neatly trimmed beard. His skin was flushed and damp, like he'd just come from outside where he'd been biking or jogging or something.

"Sometimes I do," Marla told the man. "Sometimes I wish they were true. But then the whole idea of being suddenly swept away seems so silly."

"So you're not a romantic, then? Or you are?"

"I guess I was, once. Now I'm a realist. You?"

"If a realist means you've been hurt a few times but not enough times to be a pessimist, then yeah, that's what I am, too." The man held a book with a dragon on it, but it looked like an unnecessary prop for the lack of attention he was giving it. Really? This was his pick-up line?

Marla laughed, and the man, apparently encouraged, continued. "I belong to a book club. It's fun. We don't really read romances, more like Game of Thrones type stuff. You know, things like that. But the people are really nice and funny. You should come. If you ever read fantasy. Or if you wanted to."

"Oh, maybe. When do you meet?"

"The first Tuesday of each month. Do you Facebook? Can I look you up? I could send you the club information."

Under the harsh fluorescent lights, her mom looked too fragile—but even more scary, she looked transient, as if the ties that had held them together for the last sixteen years weren't as thick and binding as she'd thought. Maybe things were coming undone, frayed by the passage of time and now this silly, stupid man was pulling at the last threads.

Yes, Bethany had tried to get away, had used Andrew to pull her away. But now her mom was moving on without her.

"We're going to be late," Bethany said as she hurried toward the two of them.

"This is my daughter. Bethany."

The man said hi to Bethany, at first looking surprised, as if Bethany didn't fit into his calculations, but then Bethany could see his mind working, turning this problem over and over. If he could win over Bethany, it was one step closer to winning over her mom. If he could claim Bethany's approval, he could claim her mom's. He gave Bethany a big smile and held out his hand, which she didn't take. He returned it to his side, awkwardly.

"We won't be late," Marla said. She turned back to the man. "You can look me up. My name—"

"We will be late," Bethany said. "If we want to stop by the park and drop pennies into the wishing pond. Like we always do." They hadn't done it since last summer, Bethany realized as she said it, but last year hadn't been that long ago. Sure, her mom could give this man her name and they would still be on time for the appointment. She could give her name and they could drop pennies in the pond and still even be on time. There was time for all of it. But Bethany could feel the greedy little animal inside her screaming no. The greedy animal waited as her mom looked back and forth between Bethany and the man.

"No, that's okay. Thanks, though," her mom said to the man, who smiled in an annoyingly pitiful way.

"Are we ready?" her mom asked her, as if Bethany had not acted rudely and selfishly, as if she had not crushed this part of her mom just to see whether she could. As if her mom had known, the minute Bethany had been born, that this would be the result.

At the pond, Bethany would hold the dirty penny in her palm and sense her wishes swirl through the budding tree branches to brush across her face. Her and Andrew and happiness and forever and children and love. But these were words that belonged to carefree people.

She needed to know she commanded love, that she was loved far beyond all else.

She needed this part of her to shut up, the heavy, clingy part that needed so much.

She needed to know that when she turned away from her mom, her mom's whole world would drain empty. Always. Anything else was unthinkable.

The pennies would fall from their hands and sink into the silt at the bottom of the pond.



Photograph: Leitery Umbrella © Jill Gewirtz

Staff Selections

The following stories were selected by the editors. These stories represent our favorite and most memorable pieces from the past six months.

Border Crossing by Heather Clitheroe

It was a joke they played on each other. When the shipments came from No. 12 Robotics Manufacturing, Ltd. of Guangzhou, they'd call in whoever was newest, whoever hadn't seen one before. The crates were seamless plastic and every surface was marked 'perishable.' The manifest was simple, the paperwork always complete. A simple package to clear. Just run 'er through the scanner and send it on through. But it was a lot more fun to pull the crate off the line, take it to secondary. Call the new guy, hand him a box cutter, and tell him to get cracking.

The bots arrived swathed in thin layers of a soapy foam film, treated with something that kept them quiet until they started peeling it back. It clung to everything with a peculiar static charge, and the more they would unwrap it, the wilder it would get. Film everywhere, sticking to their arms, hanging off their elbows, trailing after them like toilet paper stuck to the bottoms of their shoes. It was almost too much of a hassle, but then, that was what No. 12 Robotics Manufacturing probably wanted.

"It's so we don't bother," Summit said. Jeff was only halfway through the crate, down on his knees on the floor, still unwrapping. Summit leaned against the stainless steel table, arms folded, a shadow of a smile on his face. "C'mon, rookie. You gotta go faster than that." Jeff kept pulling back layer after layer of the film, his face growing red with embarrassment as the others started to gather around and snigger. He thought they were laughing at him because he was taking so long—the newbie, only two weeks into the job, his uniform still so new it was sharply creased. His shoes squeaked on the concrete floor as he shifted his weight. He worked faster.

But they *really* started laughing when he pulled the last layer of foam away and fell back with a cry of horror. As the eyes opened and the thing started to come to life, Jeff swore and brandished his box cutter at it, forgetting that he had a gun on his belt. They all howled. It looked at him and then the thing slowly licked its lips and reached out its arms. "I'm so hot for you," it said. "I'm so horny for you."

Jeff got to his feet, swearing at them all. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to act good-natured about the joke, but the tips of his ears were beet red. He was mortified, filled with hot shame. "What the fuck?" he said, hoping he sounded like just one of the guys.

"What, you never seen a hobot?" Christina was laughing so hard she was crying, tears streaming down her face.

"A what?"

"Hobot," she said, and she leaned in to look at the thing in the crate. It was the perfect image of a teenaged girl, eyes comically wide and blue. The small mouth was puckered into a slight pout. Freckles dusted its face and neck. "People buy 'em to fuck." She touched its forehead, the bot's eyes shifting to watch her.

"I'm so hot for you," it said.

"I know that, honey," said Christina.

"You turn me on. You're such a powerful man."

"Easy there." Christina batted at the hand that had encircled her wrist. The others were wandering away, still guffawing. This was a story they'd tell again at lunch, and at the end of the day when the night shift came on. "They're pre-programmed," Christina said to Jeff.

"Dunno, Christina. Maybe it's a sign you should wear lipstick," Summit said, with a laughing wheeze.

Christina flipped Summit the bird, grinning, and gave Jeff a wink as she sauntered back to her station. "Okay, tiger," she said. "Go get her."

Jeff rubbed the back of his neck. Looked at Summit. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You inspect it."

The bot was lying in the crate, watching them. "It's not...going to get up, is it? Like...walk around?"

"Don't be stupid. She'll just lie there."

"You're a sexy man," it said to Summit.

"I got a wife and a mortgage, kid," Summit told it.

"Can I be your girlfriend? I need somebody to spank me. I've been very bad." The bot struggled to sit up, but it was firmly tied down with bungee cords. Jeff thought suddenly of the dolls his sisters got when they were little, held in place by twist ties to keep them from shifting inside cardboard boxes.

"Yeah, yeah." Summit shook his head. "Listen, you gotta check these things over. How old do you think it is?"

"A few weeks?" Jeff worked it out in his head. "Maybe...a few weeks to be assembled, and then I take the manifest and add the days in transit..."

"You shitting me? No, man. How *old* do you think it's supposed to be?" Jeff didn't understand. Summit sucked his teeth, exasperated. "Is it supposed to be a kid?"

"I..."

"If it looks like it's a kid, it's illegal. C'mon. You know that. Child porn. You box it up, you call the police, they charge the sick fuck." Summit twitched the foam back. "See that? Practically no tits." It wriggled in the box. The packing peanuts that filled the voids whispered as it moved. Its long, blonde hair was caught under its shoulders, and the bot twisted its head impatiently, one thin hand snaking up to pull the hair free. Summit removed more of the foam, leaning over the crate, and the bot reached for him, stroking his thigh. "Quit that," he said.

"I like it when you tell me what to do," it crooned. The voice was high and clear. So real. So lifelike.

"I don't know why they never tie down the arms," Summit said. "Fuck. Every time this happens."

Jeff helpfully brushed it away from Summit's crotch, but the bot grabbed on to him and pulled his fingers to its mouth. "I'm really lonely," it said, and kissed the palm of his hand.

"Jesus." Its lips were dry and warm. "It's so...real."

"She's made to be like that."

"It."

"Whatever." Summit grabbed at another wad of foam. "Now, look. See? No pubes. No pubes, barely any tits. You see any wrinkles around the eyes?"

The bot blinked several times as Jeff leaned in to look. "No."

"The teeth. Small, right?"

"Do I have to..."

"She's not going to bite you." Summit pushed the bot's lips back gently. "Well, she'll probably try. But not hard. These things never bite that hard." They looked at the bot's mouth together. One front tooth was missing, the socket a darker red than the gums. The bot tried to smile and said something, the words mushy as it spoke around Summit's hand.

"I want to please you."

"See that? She's missing a tooth. So what does that tell you?"

Jeff and Summit stepped back as the arms reached out again. "It's supposed to be a kid?"

"Bingo."

It was still twisting, trying to sit up, but the bungee cords kept it on its back in the crate. The arms stopped reaching for them, fell limply to its sides. "I just want to make you happy," it said, and a tear trickled slowly from the corner of one eye down towards its ear. "Why can't I make you happy?"

"So what do we do?"

"Seize it."

"But after that?"

It listened to them quietly, fingers twitching in the foam.

"Put it in the burn pile. It's contraband."

Jeff looked down at the crate. "Oh."

"Take some pictures and box her up," Summit said. "Cover her with that foam. She'll go quiet." He kicked the crate gently with his foot. "They just keep getting better and better. You know, the first ones didn't even have nipples? Just little plastic nubs." He shook his head. "Can't imagine who thought it'd be okay to make a hobot without nipples."

Jeff went to get the camera. When he returned, Summit was gone, and the bot was blinking and turning its head from side to side. "Hi," it said.

"Hi." He wasn't sure if he should talk to it. "I'm going to take some pictures."

"Okay." The bot smiled at him, staying very still. It posed. He took a picture. It raised a finger to its mouth and paused. Posed again.

"Uh, thanks."

"I like to take pictures."

He put the camera down on the table. The bot gave a small cough and fidgeted. There was a rustling noise. Overhead, the lights buzzed. A couple of tables away,

Christina called to somebody. Packages thumped; the narcotics dog barked. He picked up a piece of foam, then another. The bot sighed a little. He tucked the first layer of foam around it. As he bent down, the bot's hand suddenly shot out and grabbed him. The grip was surprisingly firm. "Hey. Let go."

The bot pulled, caught him off balance and he lurched forward. When it spoke, the voice was rushed and no longer lilting. "I'm real," it whispered urgently. "Let me go. Box me up and send me on. I'm not a robot. I'm real. Please just let me go." He stared at the small form tied down to the crate, cocooned in packing peanuts. "My parents are here. I'm coming to meet them. Please, please," it moaned. "Please let me go. I'm so thirsty. I haven't eaten in four days. Please just let me go through. I want my mom and dad."

Jeff's heart contracted with horror; he gasped and he looked wildly around for the boxcutter. "Oh my god," he said. "Shit..." He had to cut her free, this poor girl. How on earth had she lasted this long? No food, no water? "Oh my god." He couldn't stop repeating it. This was how people were crossing the border? Like *this*? Fuck. A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. His hands shook. He took a breath to call, to shout. They had to come and help him get her free.

A hand on his shoulder startled him and the bot turned her head sharply.

"Relax," said Christina, not without a little sympathy. "They all do that. Freaked me the fuck out the first time it happened to me." The bot gave a long, sobbing groan but went silent as soon as her face was covered, features slack. The arms dropped with a dull thud. Christina gave a small grunt of satisfaction. "Not this time, sweetie," she said. "Night-night."



Photograph: Josie's Udders © Chris Fradkin

A Haunting Refrain by John Timm

The apartment was small, but for the time being suited my needs. A place to park my briefcase and laptop, watch an hour or so of TV, rest my head for the night. If a new romantic interest came into my life...but that seemed to be nowhere on the horizon, so for the moment I contented myself with having four walls and a roof. My books, my CDs, stereo system, artwork and most of the rest of my world remained over a thousand miles away, held hostage in a bitter separation that was grinding slowly, inexorably towards divorce.

The place was old and built to the standards of, I don't know, the 1920s or 30s. Maybe even earlier. The paper thin walls clearly lacked the kind of insulation we've become used to in an era of energy consciousness. On hot days it became unbearable, and I took to running the air conditioner on low speed when I was out. Now that it was fall, edging into winter, it would be cold when I came in at the end of the day. The first order was to turn up the thermostat and wait for the radiator to begin hissing and ping-pong, delivering much needed warmth to the room.

I'd say the building was about half-occupied. You could tell just by looking at the mailboxes in the entrance foyer. I never bothered to count exactly, but a goodly number of them lacked a name. Mine in particular stood out because at the time it appeared to be the only one on the third floor with a current resident, number 305.

None of this is to suggest the building was in poor repair. Far from it, it was as if I were among the first to enjoy its fine tiled bathrooms and ornate light fixtures, the hand carved woodwork that began at the front entry, continued down each hallway, up the highly varnished stairways, and followed its occupants right into each lodging.

Another tenant moved onto the third floor, number 301, a week or so after me, but I never saw them before tonight, and in fact, might never have seen them at all were it not for the music.

* * *

Like so many other nights of late, I find myself staring at the ceiling, listening to a marvelous performance on violin. It's been going on almost since the day I moved in. It's Mozart. One by one, the sonatas, the divertimenti, duos, trios, quartets.

At times, the music is so loud it seems to be right there in the room with me. I can hear the physical movement of horsehair against string. I swear it. Other times, I must strain to hear the delicate melodies. Regardless, it keeps me immobile as I gaze at the pressed tin ceiling and follow the intricacies of the crown moldings circling the room.

The source of this auditory delight is as of yet unknown. At least not exactly. Either it's coming through the walls from my anonymous third floor neighbor in number 301, or up through the floor from somewhere below. Until now, I've preferred simply to savor it, a welcome relief from another tedious day, another evening of ongoing desolation.

Nothing else could provide the same solace, relaxation, comfort as the strains that seem to fill every inch of my abode.

Tonight, for whatever reason, curiosity has finally gotten the better of me. As much as I hate to interrupt the rapture of Mozart's Violin Sonata No. 27 in G Major, I simply must find its source. Still dressed in my uniform of the day, slacks, white shirt, sans only the requisite necktie, I put on a pair of bedroom slippers that await me obediently at the foot of the bed, grab my keys and head out into the hallway.

Not wishing to be detected—what excuse would I give for roaming the hallways?—the slippers allow me to move about with the desired stealth. First, I pause at the door of the tenant down the hall in number 301, right at the stairwell. Some kind of television sitcom.

Indistinguishable talk, followed by laughter—no doubt canned—followed by more indistinguishable talk. Definitely not the origin of my nightly serenades.

A quick trip down to the second floor draws me no closer to an answer. All is quiet, save for more muffled talk, more TV, the barking of a small dog somehow alert to my unseen presence. I return to the third floor.

Despite the obvious futility, I press my ear to each door up and down the length of the hallway. Predictably, logically, there is no music emanating from any of the apartments.

Except mine. Mozart, his Violin Sonata no. 22 in A Major, perfectly executed, pours forth from number 305. My residence. My beloved Amadeus. I lean against the door in disbelief, unable to move, unsure I really want to know the answer to my quest. Finally, I get up courage, steeled by the conviction that after all this is my apartment and there are no other occupants, and this is some kind of trick my mind has been playing on me what with the stress of the separation and all, and that the music will stop the moment I enter.

Except it doesn't. The music is there, in full force, as if a chamber ensemble has gathered there for my exclusive delight. The second and final movement is ending and I am taken up by its rich fullness, the artistry of the unknown, unseen performers possessing a genius to match that of its composer. I fall onto my bed as if I had no other choice.

Moments later, the music ends, and a voice calls in from the hallway. In my confusion, I've failed to close the door completely. It's a muscular young man in a t-shirt, the type without sleeves, arms lavishly tattooed, a shaved head.

"Can you try to keep it down a little? We just had a baby and it's trying to sleep. That music of yours keeps her awake."

"I'm sorry. I'll do what I can."

"Make it quieter, okay?"

How am I going to explain that I didn't know where the music is coming from, except from my own room, and that I certainly have no control over the volume? But I'm in no position to placate my angry neighbor just now, so I try to buy some time, time to think,

time to clear my head, time to figure out a way to deal with my nightly concerts, uninvited as they are, yet so welcome.

"It won't happen again. Sorry."

He turns away, not before giving me a look that provokes more anxiety on my part than any words he could have summoned up.

I lay there, worried there will be an encore performance, followed by another cameo from my brutish neighbor. But thankfully, the concert has ended for now, the curtain drawn, so to speak, and I finally drift off, still wearing my slippers and my uniform of the day.

* * *

It's been six weeks now. Another night, more Mozart, another visit from my neighbor in number 301, who came pounding at my door more or less on schedule.

The threats have been less and less veiled in recent days. Tonight's confrontation was loud, louder still because he was within inches of my face, his face reddened, muscles bulging, fists flexing. It is time to move on.

* * *

I was able to fit everything into the back seat and trunk of my car. Except for my bedding, I haven't unpacked anything else yet. It can wait for another day. I'm tired from moving and exhausted from an ongoing mental ordeal that defies explanation.

The new apartment is modern, with none of the character of the old place—no fancy tiles, no ornate woodwork, just stark white sheetrock from floor to ceiling, and no other embellishment, save for the light switch and a smoke detector high on the wall with a small red light that blinks at regular intervals.

It matters not. As I lie here on my bed, Mozart's Sonata no. 17 in C, source yet unknown, begins to envelop me, consume me, and I entertain myself by tracing imaginary figures on the bare ceiling. Soon, it's the finale, and as if on cue, someone is at my door, pounding.

When Yitzy gets home from work on Friday afternoons, the floors are swept, the challah is baked, and the children are bathed. Their hair smells like shampoo, and it's combed back from their faces neatly, wetly. They clamor at the baby-gate at the top of the stairs when he comes through the front door. They squeal with delight *Abba Abba Abba* as he pauses to touch the mezuzah and bring his fingertips to his lips.

There's a roasted chicken in the oven, eight pieces with crisp skin, arranged on a bed of sliced mushrooms and bay leaves swimming in olive oil. He wheels his bicycle down to the basement, and as he passes through the kitchen, he gives her a quick kiss, his lips pleasantly dry and warm, or tugs on her apron strings playfully. His beard smells of sawdust.

For this Shabbos, there are fresh green beans simmering on the stovetop. Last Shabbos it was carrots, cut into thick orange coins. The week before, broccoli. The week before that, it was Brussels sprouts thinly sliced, sautéed in a pan. Before that, green beans.

Our sages say that Shabbos exists outside of time, that each day of rest and prayer and peace is but a taste of the World to Come. The Olam haBa is an infinite progression of Shabboses strung together, days perfectly stitched, whole and holy, into one splendid garment. From darkness to darkness like womb to tomb, but stretching much further in both directions, until they wrap around.

If you look far enough, with a telescope strong enough, you'll realize you are viewing the back of your own head.

When everything else is ready, she climbs the stairs slowly, with deliberation, and takes her bath. She likes the water very hot. She dresses, in a black dress, or a blue one. She waits until the very last minute to do the very last thing. It's there, brown waves tumbling around the featureless Styrofoam face, waiting for her. She tucks all her hair into the wig cap and takes it in her hands. Her sheitel.

She's begun to wear it less and less. Now she puts it on only for Shabbos. During the week, she reaches for a tichel instead. She tells Yitzy she's decided to keep it special for Shabbos, and it will last longer that way. *We don't have the money to replace it.* She tells her girlfriends it's just easier to tie a headscarf and be done with it. *And have you seen these gorgeous new tichels Miriam is selling?*

What she doesn't tell is that when she wears the sheitel, she hears things.

* * *

She's come to pick up her older daughter from Hebrew lessons when Rabbi Mendlowitz calls to her from his study. His door is open, his books line the walls, deep

brown leather with gold embossed alef-beis gleaming on every spine. He beckons with two fingers held aloft, gestures for her to sit.

She's keenly aware that the blouse she's wearing today doesn't quite cover her collar bones. She sits with her arms crossed awkwardly, because she sees, glancing down, that the tattoo on her forearm is peeking from her up-rolled sleeve. It's the letter shin, pinkly inked to nearly match her skin tone, so that it appears to be almost a birthmark. She's never sure whether to be less or more embarrassed by the fact that it's a Jewish tattoo. Either way, it's an indelible remnant of her former life, and a constant cause for suspicion. She is a ba'al teshuvah, after all, not born into the observant life, and she could backslide, God forbid, at any moment.

Rabbi Mendlowitz's black eyes sparkle, and his cheeks are always flushed.

So he says my son tells me your Esther has said something strange to him.

She swallows, and nods. He goes on.

She tells him that God speaks to her. She says that you told her that she can listen and that Hashem will talk to her.

She clears her throat. *Well, in a way, yes. Don't you think?*

He smiles broadly. *No. He shakes his head vigorously, and his payos tremble, the little spiral curls flopping against his reddened earlobes. No, Hashem spoke to prophets, and there are no more prophets. Are you thinking that Hashem has something personal to say to you? This is not so much a Jewish idea.*

She tugs at her sleeve. *No, no of course not, it's just that I meant for her to know that we should all be listening to that "still small voice"... you know, inside, to figure out what God wants of us...*

Rabbi Mendlowitz smiles again, wide enough so that his face is split, honey pouring golden from the rock. *Torah! Torah tells us exactly what Hashem wants of us! Voices are for the prophets! Torah! We have Torah to tell us how to live!*

Yes she says yes, of course, Rabbi.

He ushers her out of his study with a hand that hovers six inches from her shoulder. She gathers Esther from her classroom and they walk the three blocks home. She thinks the whole way about what she didn't tell him.

Our sages say that when Ya'akov saw the angels, the messengers, ascending and descending the ladder on the banks of the Yabbok, they were ascending first because they are always here, always among us. The man he wrestled with, the man who wrenched his hipbone from its socket, the man he wrestled with when he was alone, was already there.

* * *

Rachel Rosenberg is her best friend, and they are in the supermarket, inspecting packages of plastic-wrapped kosher turkey legs when she finally broaches the subject. She tells her just that she keeps getting a song stuck in her head, a song she used to know, that it might be stress. She doesn't implicate the sheitel.

Rachel raises one diligently groomed eyebrow and her lips swerve with a wicked crook.

Is it... sexy?

No, no she says it's just a Bob Dylan song. He's a poet, practically. He's Jewish, you know.

Well, I don't know from Bob Dylan says Rachel but what's it called?

She replaces a one-pound tube of hamburger meat on the refrigerated shelf and sighs *All Along the Watchtower*.

Rachel Rosenberg's skirt swishes, the hem dragging on the battered linoleum as they walk down the aisle lined with glass jars in which colorless blobs of gefilte fish brood silently.

Look says Rachel I'm sure it is just stress. You have such a meshugganah life. Why do you want to stay home with the baby, anyway? It's way past time for you to get another job. You need to feel useful. You need to do something with yourself. Why don't you teach again? You're great with the kinderlach.

She laughs through her nose. She doesn't explain. Rachel Rosenberg doesn't know from ironic.

* * *

The tops of Dr. Bloch's breasts are visible today, draped in yellow silk patterned with tiny blue birds. When she smiles, both of her glossy lips curl perfectly into the shape of a little red boat. She keeps getting distracted by the little red boat.

I can't write you a prescription for the Xanax again until you are finished nursing Dr. Bloch says but if you feel like you are experiencing depression, there are options. There are definitely anti-depressants that are considered safe to take while breastfeeding.

She shifts uncomfortably on the exam table, and the paper crinkles loudly beneath her. *No, no, it's not depression. It's just anxiety again, I think. I mean, I'm not having panic attacks, not like before I had my gall bladder out. I'm just, well, I have headaches, not really pain, but just pressure, just sometimes. And I feel like I, I don't know, I worry.*



She doesn't want to try to fit her sheitel into Dr. Bloch's little red boat. She wonders how many angels could squeeze in there, anyway. It would capsize.

What you could try Dr. Bloch says is taking Benadryl. It's an antihistamine, and that will relieve the stress response just as it relieves an allergic reaction. It's just fine for breastfeeding, and it will help you sleep, too.

But won't an antihistamine reduce my milk supply? she asks. She thinks she's read that somewhere. It dries up fluids.

It may affect it slightly, or it may not. But you have to weigh the risks and the benefits.

Dr. Bloch's little red boat bucks as if on high seas. She uncrosses and recrosses her legs. The skirt is short, the legs are sleek and sheathed in flesh-toned nylon. She wears a thin gold chain as an ankle-bracelet. It shows through the nylon.

The most important thing is that you are well, that you are a happy and healthy mommy. Isn't that right?

Yes, yes, of course, Doctor.

She drives home in the station wagon, and for the first time in a long, long while, she turns on the radio. It's all static, and she jabs at buttons blindly, hoping for a rock and roll station. As she hits the brakes for a stop sign, the song blares out of the back speakers, heavily skewed to treble. "All Along the Watchtower." She leans her head against the steering wheel and cries, laughing.

* * *

She gets ready for the mikvah just as carefully as always, even though she hasn't bled in three cycles. Yitzy doesn't know. She switches back and forth between her bed and his right on schedule.

She washes her hair and trims her nails. She scrubs the soles of her feet and shaves her underarms. She soaks in her very hot bath, with no oils or salts. She uses plain soap. She doesn't put on deodorant after, or lotion. She brushes her teeth thoroughly, flosses between. She's as naked as the day she was born, but for the tattoo, the letter shin.

She walks the three blocks to the mikvah in the dark, her hands burrowed deep in her coat pockets. Orion is above her, that's the only constellation she can identify. She's taken two little hot pink Benadryl, and she feels slightly loose in the legs. She walks just a quarter inch above the pavement, her shoes make no sound.

The rebbetzin is waiting for her, a long gray snood bagging her ponytail. These nights, once a month, are the only times she's seen the rabbi's wife without her lovely blond sheitel.

She rinses her body in the shower stall, submits it to the rebbetzin's inspection. The rebbetzin pronounces her ready, free of any dirt or debris or random stray hair that might lodge between God and herself. But the rebbetzin's blue eyes dangle for a moment too long above her belly, swinging like divining pendulums, and they narrow.

Nu? So is it a boy or a girl?

Oh, oh no, I've just put on a little weight she stammers. She didn't think it was obvious yet, the swell, the apple-sized secret underneath the silvery striations of her old stretch marks.

The rebbetzin clucks. *Uhm-hmmm. Estie and Tzipi will be very happy to have a sister or a brother.*

She nods weakly, her subterfuge so easily defeated.

You haven't told Yitzy yet?

She shakes her head. *No.*

The rebbetzin nods. *And why not?*

It's just... well, it's my sheitel...

The rebbetzin stands, looking at her expectantly, but she can't finish the sentence.

She walks gingerly down the tiled steps into the mikvah, the warm water swallowing her ankles, her knees, her thighs. Her feet reach the bottom of the pool, she's shoulder deep. Her unbound hair floats on the surface, spreading out in a nimbus of deep brown eels. She recites the bracha and immerses once, twice, three times.

Kosher...kosher...kosher... the rebbetzin pronounces the word after each dunk, judging each satisfactory. And then she's left alone in the little room, left alone to reflect, to say her personal prayers.

She bends her knees, dropping down just so, so that the surface is just below her nose, the water covering her mouth. And she looks. She looks for any tiniest grain of sand, any fragment of dead skin, any lost hair that some other woman may have missed. Any other piece of any other woman's life that might be suspended in the warm womb of the pool. She listens for any secret the tiles might have absorbed. She listens for stowaway wishes.

* * *

When Yitzy gets home from work on Friday afternoons, the floors are swept, the challah is baked, and the children are bathed.

Our sages say that two angels accompany a Jew on his way back home from shul on Friday nights. Two messengers, one good. And one of the yetzer hara, the dark side, the evil inclination, the animal soul. Two angels follow him home, and if the house has been properly prepared for making Shabbos, *the lamp lit, the table set, the couch spread*, then the good angel speaks a blessing that next Shabbos will be just the same, and the bad angel is compelled to answer *Amen*. If the house is not prepared, it is the evil angel that utters the wish, that next Shabbos should be the same, and the good angel then must agree, seal the curse with its own *Amen*.

There's a roasted chicken in the oven, eight pieces with crisp skin, arranged on a bed of sliced mushrooms and bay leaves swimming in olive oil. He wheels his bicycle down to the basement, and as he passes through the kitchen, he gives her a quick kiss, his lips pleasantly dry and warm, or tugs on her apron strings playfully. His beard smells of sawdust.

For this Shabbos, there are fresh green beans simmering on the stovetop.
When Yitzy gets home from shul, everything is ready. The candles are lit. She's wearing her blue dress, and her sheitel, carefully brushed.

They sing together, as always:

Shalom Aleichem, malachei ha-shareis malachei el yon

Mi-melech malachei ha-melachim Ha-Kadosh Baruch hu...

Peace be upon you, ministering angels, messengers of the most High

The King who reigns over kings, The Holy One, Blessed be He...

And she hears two songs. The lyrics mingle. They grapple. It's hard to tell what is what, who is who. She feels the baby move, low and deep in the crucible of her belly. Her hip hurts.

Artwork: The Wrestler © Anna Lea Jancewicz

The heat becomes a monster. It's bad in the daytime but you can turn on the garden hose and spray yourself, or go to the woods where it's cooler. At night it seems worse, so muggy hot that even a thin sheet feels like too much covers for your sticky skin. The fans set in the windows turned up high to blow in enough night air to cool the hot, stuffy rooms sometimes just blow humid air from one place to another. Still, a breeze feels better than no breeze. This was one of those nights when I couldn't sleep and the fan whirred almost uselessly. I heard Mother coming down the hall towards my room. Sometimes you just know what's about to happen and in that way I knew she was coming to turn the fan off so it wouldn't run all night, wasting electricity. She peeked her head in the doorway.

"It's too hot," I said to let her know I'm awake and to not turn off the fan yet.

"You're a night owl, Willa Mae. You ought to be in dreamland by now."

Sounded like she was in a soft mood, so I sat up a little.

"Will you tell me a story?"

"Oh Lord, girl. It's late. I'm wore out. Did you say your prayers?"

"Yes ma'am. Just a short little story?"

She came over and sat on the edge of the bed. She brushed my damp bangs off my forehead and sighed. "I don't have any stories this evening. I'm ready for bed myself."

"What's a joot joint?"

"A what? Where did you hear that?"

"Birdy said her brother that died went to a joot joint. I think he might have been in a car accident."

"Birdy tole you that?"

"She told me he went to a joot joint and I figured out the car accident part myself."

"You did, did you?" Her voice was teasing but not mean.

"She don't like to talk about it but she told me he rode out to a joot joint and then he died, so I figured he must have been in a crash. Was he?"

"Juke joint."

"Huh?"

"It's not 'joot' joint, it's 'juke' joint."

"Oh. What is that anyway?"

"A dancehall sort of place."

I thought about that for a minute. Mother and Daddy don't dance; no one in our church does. It's not exactly a sin, at least not one that gets preached about, but if you're saved you just don't. Billy loved to dance. It's what they always say about him. I felt a flicker of worry in case he wasn't saved. He was still a kid when he died, or at least not yet grown up.

"How old was he, Birdy's brother, when he died? Did Daddy know him?"

"He died long before your daddy was born, Willie." Her voice wasn't smiling any more. "I don't know his exact age but he hadn't graduated yet, though to hear Birdy speak of it he all but had a Harvard diploma in his hand."

"A what?"

"Nothing. You go to sleep now." She stood up and bent to kiss me where she'd brushed my bangs back.

"I thought you was going to tell me about the car accident?"

Mother snorted. "Well, I don't know nothing about a car accident your great uncle Billy might or might not have been in. He's been dead long enough to have been turned to gold. Whatever he was really like and what happened that night out there on Old Country Road folks may never know, or at least not remember."

So. Her mother knew something. It was clear by the way she said it that she and Birdy didn't see eye to eye on the dead boy. There was more than one big gap between the way Mother and Birdy saw things.

"Birdy said everybody loved Billy."

"I suppose everyone Birdy knew did love Billy. But Billy probably knew a few more people than the Willoughby family and their silver spoon set. He weren't at no country club the night he ended up dead, that's for sure."

"What was the name of that place?"

"I have no idea, Willa Mae. I have never in my life set foot in one of them places and don't plan to. You ask a lot of silly questions for a girl that ought to be asleep."

"If someone would just tell me, I wouldn't keep asking."

For some reason, Mother sat back down then. She just sat there staring in the dark until I thought there might be something wrong.

Then she said, "Willie, you can't keep poking around in people's business like you do. But you're right about not knowing and how that makes you overly curious. I'll tell you what, Billy would have been your daddy's uncle, and even your own daddy don't know what all happened to him. So it's not like we've been keeping some big secret from you. Whatever it was, it wasn't like he was a war hero or something, so just take all that 'Billy was God's gift to the world' talk with a grain of salt. He had been out to a place where people drink, smoke, cuss, gamble, dance and lord only knows what else. Lot of no count folks end up in those places and sometimes bad things happen, fights and such. Different kind of folks go there, and I reckon it's some high society folks' idea of fun to rub shoulders with migrant field hands and other riff raff. I don't know how many times Billy would a been out there, but one night he didn't come back alive. Maybe it was cause his car landed in the ditch, but it seems doubtful that's what killed him. More likely he got in a fight with somebody who pulled a knife. Now that ought to be enough to give you nightmares. I must be addled myself to be telling you all this when you ought to be asleep already." But she stayed sitting on the bed.

"I don't get nightmares. I don't mean to be nosy but I ought to know about my own family, right? It's not being a busy body when it's your own kin, is it?"

"No. I reckon not. But now you know as much as I do about it and that's enough. This isn't something you need to be talking about with anyone else, not even Birdy. Especially not Birdy. And no one outside the family neither."

"I know. I'm not dumb."

"No, Willie, you ain't dumb. But you know what they say 'Curiosity killed the cat.'"

"But satisfaction brought him back."

Mother laughed. I felt starry with pleasure. She had come in tired, mainly to turn off the fan and I'd gotten her talking and even made her laugh.

"You got a quick tongue. I hope it don't get you in as much trouble as it's likely to. Now get to sleep."

She left the fan on, pausing in the doorway. For a soaring moment, I thought she might say something else, maybe add to the Billy story, but she didn't. Her heavy-heeled footsteps went around the house as she turned out lights, then disappeared into the dark of her and Daddy's room.

I lay there mulling over the new details. I started erasing the car smash up that I'd been picturing and felt almost giddy with the even worse thing...it could have been a knife fight. Mother had pretty much said that Billy wasn't as perfect as Birdy made him out to be. She had said it in the same sort of voice she used talking to the church ladies. I couldn't for the life of me remember a time when she'd just flat out told me something about the grown up world. I felt bigger than my own body and hoped she'd keep talking to me like that instead of always trying to shoo me away from the grownups. But for now, I really just needed to think about this new piece a little more. I needed to see how that golden boy, who wore a ridiculous velvet suit with a lace collar in his baby picture, grew up to be someone who could get in a knife fight, and be killed. It was almost too good to be true.

Quietly, Unmoving by Greg Letellier

It was a kitchen filled to the windows with ghosts. Vanessa and Peter sat at the table. Cups of coffee by their tapping fingers had since grown tepid, and with one overhead bulb out, unfixed for months, Peter and Vanessa sat in dim lighting. Whatever modicum of light was shed from the singular bulb directly above made the ghosts illuminate, and as they floated amidst the still air of the room, the bulb appeared starkly ivory as a full-moon, but one veiled by passing clouds.

Before the kitchen, Peter and Vanessa met at the University of Maine in Orono. They kissed sweetly in a wine-soaked embrace, and they were young artists: poets, or painters or whatever they felt like on the particular day. But the responsibilities of adulthood put their paintbrushes into shoe boxes to collect dust beneath beds. It led Peter to a job at the grocery store, where the closest outlet for his creative tendencies became arranging fruit into pyramids in the produce department. Vanessa worked on a farm on the outskirts of Dayton. By night, after the ghosts fled town to sleep, she wrote verse: poetry injected with cosmopolitan dreams, a universe which could fit comfortably in the palm of her hand.

But the lease to their apartment was up, and they knew the world was before them. And that's where their desires diverged: Vanessa wanted to head out West, but Peter had some emotional connection to Maine. He couldn't quite explain it when she questioned him, but he saw something worth it in staying, in living among the ghosts.

Peter sat at the table, pointed at the dead bulb overhead.

We gotta fix that thing, he said.

Or we could ditch this place, Vanessa said. There's always that option.

Peter sat silent as the ghosts, staring into the night. Ghosts only dwelled in Maine, and all of America knew of the phenomenon. Lighthouse keepers since the eighteenth century kept documents of the ghosts, and the supernatural phenomenon was a point of interest for Maine poets and writers. But nighttime was the most peculiar time to watch the ghosts. They would flee the homes, mills, cafés, and streets and drift calmly into the ocean. They would sleep in the silky black water: rising with the swells of sea, falling when the waves crested. At dawn, as the day rose over the horizon, the ghosts floated back townward to hover quietly, unmoving. Tourists from all over came to see the rocky coast, the mountains at the end of the Appalachian trail, L.L. Bean, and of course, the late-night "ghost walk" to the sea. Maine's out-of-state appeal awarded the state the nickname *Vacationland*, because, although many came in the summers for the ghosts, they couldn't imagine living with them in their houses.

As days tumbled on, a mid-August heat swaddled the town in humidity. The conversation of moving ensued. Peter and Vanessa decided to seek refuge from the heat in diners and coffee shops of Main St., just for the air conditioning. They sat in a coffee shop across from the Biddeford public library, and in two chairs by two large windows. They continued the discussion of heading out West.

Is it the ghosts? Peter asked, catching the gaze of one of them, one who once was a young woman before becoming a mere translucent portrait of her body, steeped in a deep catatonic stare. He asked again: Is it them, the ghosts?

No, not really, Vanessa said. But don't you ever just want to leave this place behind?

I guess from time to time I do, Peter said, scratching his hair.

Vanessa talked of heading out to the Pacific coast for a while, but never once did she mention specific cities or states. She felt she just needed to walk out of her home, looking back only to remember the door she closed.

All her life she walked the tough land of Maine, strolled throughout the grey streets of its small towns, and she feared the ghosts. The ghosts, however, weren't unfriendly; timid adults feared them irrationally, while children greeted them cordially. Children have a virtuous way of welcoming the strange, while adults tend to either tilt their heads in confusion, or turn them in ignorance. But Vanessa, now thirty, had grown embittered to the sight of the ghosts, breezing through their holographic frames to pursue the menial tasks of adulthood. On that particular day, she avoided chores for the luxury of a story. She opened Joyce's *Dubliners*, her little paperback piece of tourism.

The next morning, Peter and Vanessa decided to sleep in. Vanessa cocooned herself in the sheets, not for their for their warmth, but the sheer comfort of feeling them around her body. Peter finished a breakfast beer and tossed the empty bottle in their trash can. He slid next to Vanessa, wrapped his arms around her waist, and kissed the nape of her neck. He slid a hand under her shirt, feeling the softness of her abdomen.

Should I get something? he asked.

I don't know. I don't think we should tonight.

Why?

She turned and flicked the light. She put her glasses on.

I just feel like resting, she said, grabbing her book off the night stand. Peter watched her eyes, fixed on the yellowed pages. A ghost floated into the room, through the door. It waited quietly, an older man ghost, just staring off in the way they all do.

Vanessa heaved her book at him. It flew through his temple.

I'm sick of them, she said. They're always lingering, watching you. This whole place is fucking dead. Those goddamn mills, the ghosts.

That day was the hottest of the summer. Peter and Vanessa held sopping cool cloths onto their foreheads, beads of cold water dripping off the cotton edges onto the upholstered furniture. The ghosts had mostly kept out of the living room that day, lingering by the kitchen table. Sitting in front of the T.V., Peter and Vanessa began to feel restless, kicking their feet and checking the cupboards: pulling the same crackers out, putting them back.

Peter. I'm moving out, Vanessa said.

He pulled the towel off his head.

I'm going to live with my parents, she continued. I need to get out of this apartment until I can find a job out of this state.

Peter stood and walked over to a storage closet. He began rummaging through a basket of various household items. He found a lightbulb, and walked into the kitchen, through the lingering ghosts. Vanessa sat on the couch, pressing the cloth against her forehead.

Peter? Are you fucking listening?

Yes, he said, standing on a chair. He was twisting in the bulb.

I want you to come with me, if you want.

He kept twisting.

Please be upfront with me. Don't you want to leave this place? Find somewhere to be young and creative again?

He screwed in the bulb entirely and it glowed a starry white. The ghosts appeared even brighter as they lingered still in the quiet room. Such beauty in the dead things sparked a sudden knowing in Peter. His face lit up to a wide-eyed, owlish glance to Vanessa, and he spoke.

Let's go for a drive.

Huh?

Can we suspend this conversation for a while? There's somewhere I want to go.

She watched him grab his keys.

Where are we going? she asked, rubbing her eyes. Where are—?

Peter had already walked through the door.

Southbound, the roads toward the coast snaked through small towns dispersed sparsely among the night. Some roads ran over hills. As the car dipped along the roads, they temporarily felt weightlessness. Peter always wondered, though he could never ask the ghosts, if death felt like a permanent weightlessness, a constant dip in some long road. It was thirty minutes later that they pulled along a dead end.

Vanessa grabbed Peter's hand. They walked silently down the road, away from the car, toward the sweet smell of ocean swimming through the evening air. The day had waned into a cool New England night.

Where are we? Vanessa asked, kicking pebbles along the road.

Peter didn't say anything. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tightly.

Prout's Neck is a peninsula just south of Portland. The American painter Winslow Homer lived and painted at Prout's Neck during the final years of his life. He spent his earlier career as a national symbol, painting mostly Civil War Soldiers. In the final twenty years or so of his life, he moved to the Maine coast to paint the sea. Peter recalled his old college lectures, which had since migrated to the distant parts of his memory. Homer was interested in finding emotion in the sea. He stared at the same portion of Maine coastline for the final fifteen years of his life, and over and over again, he saw something.

He saw *infinite* things, Peter said, eyes fixed on the seascape. He just kept painting and painting, and the sea was never just the sea.

Infinite, Vanessa said. You know, there really is something about the sea. Lord Byron called it the perfect image of eternity. I bet it was the sea, not Maine specifically, not the ghosts, that inspired him.

Perhaps, Peter said. But it's true though, what you just said about the sea. You look at it and feel like you might be looking at infinity. But isn't it infinite? Can you see anything finite in waves that always move, day in and day out? Can you see anything dying in a geological body which carried people around before nations like this one even existed?

She stared into the sky.

Peter looked into her eyes. It was at this moment that he felt the desire to paint again, and he felt it intensely. It caught him off guard in the way that light catches you off guard in the early autumn mornings, as you lift the shade for the first time and you see the yellow leaves littering the grey streets. He began to speak, but halted when Vanessa sprinted into the waves, leaving his final words to dissolve as a smoke wisp, quietly as lives do at death: carried off into whatever comes next.



Photograph: Dead Sea Dusk © Chris Fradkin

Celia perched on the examination table, naked but for a flimsy cotton gown, the table's paper covering sticking to her sweaty buttocks. She stared at her knobby feet and yellowed toenails while Dr. Macalester dismissed the aches in her ankles and knees and the pains in her back and her headaches and hot flashes and sleeplessness as merely due to the accumulation of too many birthdays. Dr. Macalester, whose skin had yet to wrinkle, prescribed what she termed "healthy aging:" exercise, diet, and volunteer activities.

Hadn't Celia already given decades to teaching? Hadn't she sacrificed years to the tending of her husband and the raising of her daughters to adulthood? Wasn't she allowed to devote the pitifully short remainder of her life to herself?

She had wondered how to tell about the crazy thing she'd done that morning to the chicken. But watching Dr. Macalester tapping on her laptop, she realized there was no point. She was not entitled to selfishness, nor would she be entitled to rage. Rage was only allowed to the very sick. No one acknowledged that slowly but surely she was dying.

With clammy hands, she accepted from Dr. Macalester a lab form for a blood test "Strictly routine," Dr. Macalester said. "We'll check thyroid levels, cholesterol, Vitamin D. You know the drill. Did you eat today?"

Celia shook her head. "Just black coffee."

"Okay. You can get the tests done in our lab this afternoon." Then with a cheerful, "See you next year," Dr. Macalester left the room.

Celia grabbed a wad of paper towels and rubbed them over her face and through her cropped gray hair. As she dressed, she eyed a shiny pair of scissors that Dr. Macalester had used to slice open the Pap test kit. Celia slipped the scissors into her jacket pocket. Let Macalester search for them and worry about her own faulty memory.

In the waiting area outside the lab door, there was an empty chair next to an elderly man. He flipped the pages of a magazine with a hand so disfigured by brown spots it reminded Celia of a soiled rag. There was another open seat at the end of the room, next to a heavy man breathing noisily and with great difficulty. His skin was dark brown but had a chalky tinge like the bloom on old chocolate. His eyes were shut, his mouth open, his thick hands lay limply on the arms of his chair.

Celia leaned against the wall. She would stand until her name was called.

A slim middle-aged blonde in a camel-colored coat entered the room. Like Celia, she scanned the room for a seat but unlike Celia, made straight for the one next to the noisy breather. Once seated, her gaze met Celia's.

There was something inviting in the woman's straight posture, in her pleasant face, in the crispness of her white blouse, in the smoothness of her golden hair. Celia's old friendships had become a burden. Who could stand to listen to the same grumblings year after year after year? Bad enough she had to endure Mitchell. But the high-watt

smile the blonde beamed at Celia seemed such a charming appeal for friendship that Celia smiled back. She was sorry the seat next to the woman was taken. They might have had a pleasant chat.

But then the woman lifted her sick neighbor's thick hand and licked the back of it from the base of his thumb to his pinkie.

Disgusted, Celia grimaced and looked away.

"I saw that!" A heavy woman next to the heavy man leaned forward. Under her short shiny black hair, large gold triangles in her ears jangled. "You leave my brother alone!"

"No harm done." The blonde's voice was deeper than her slight build suggested. Returning the man's hand to the arm of the chair, she said, "Just a little experiment."

"Experiment? What are you talking about?" The heavy woman got to her feet and loomed over the other.

A man in a white coat appeared in the doorway to the lab, a clipboard in his hand.

The heavy woman grabbed his arm. "We didn't agree to any experiment." When he frowned at her, she pushed past him, yelling, "Dr. Mac! Tell this lady not to experiment on Carlos!"

While the man with the clipboard pursued the heavy woman, the blonde rose and walked toward Celia.

"My work rarely produces such animosity," she said. She had excellent diction and smelled wonderfully of a floral perfume.

"I hope she doesn't make trouble for you." The licking had revolted Celia, but there must be a reason for it. The woman's voice, her smile, her hair had won Celia over.

"Mrs. Woodman!" Dr. Macalester strode into the room, her white coat flapping. "This way, Mrs. Woodman!" She pointed across the waiting area to the double glass doors and the EXIT sign.

"There's no need to shout," Mrs. Woodman coolly responded. "We can discuss this in your office."

"No more discussions. You will leave now!"

Dr. Macalester herded Mrs. Woodman toward the exit, gesturing emphatically as they argued. Celia heard only a few words. From Dr. Macalester: "assault." From Mrs. Woodman: "scientific research" and "corroboration." Macalester followed with "danger" and "will not allow" and "police." She flung open the glass door with such force Celia thought it might shatter.

Mrs. Woodman glanced back at the waiting room. She nodded at Celia, and then left.

Without Mrs. Woodman, the room was drearier, as if her departure had drained some of the light. Celia could feel the remaining minutes of her life being sucked away. She was certain the others around her must feel this too. How could they stay quiet? If someone were siphoning money from their bank accounts they'd be screaming.

Beneath the chair Mrs. Woodman had occupied was her cream-colored scarf. Celia gathered the soft fabric and inhaled the scent of her floral perfume.

Why should she wait for the lab technician? What good would any blood test do her? She hurried out the door.

The crisp air was refreshing. The sun had sunk out of sight behind blocks of buildings and rolling hills but left enough light to hold blue in the sky. A steady breeze sent dried leaves skittering along the asphalt parking lot. At the end of a row of cars, Mrs. Woodman stood looking across the street to clumps of tall silvery grasses that flanked a green shield-shaped sign welcoming visitors to Kit Heron Park.

She thanked Celia as she draped the scarf around her neck. "Call me Libby," she said and waved her hand in the direction of the park. "I've often meant to walk the trail around the pond. Care to join me?"

Of course she would. A walk was just what the doctor ordered.

"Zip up," Libby said. "It will be cold when the sun goes down."

Celia pulled up the zipper on her fleece jacket.

"Your collar's caught." With the intimate gesture of a long-time friend, Libby released the material, then touched a spot above Celia's right ear. "There's some kind of bug in your hair."

Both of them stared at the yellowish-pink speck on Libby's finger.

"That's not a bug," Libby said, more perplexed than disturbed.

"No, it's not," Celia said. Itchy heat crept up the back of her neck. Lying would require more creativity than she could muster. "It's raw chicken. I was making soup. I had problems chopping it. I guess some got into my hair."

"Was it a complicated recipe?"

"Not exactly." She wiped her forehead with the back of her sleeve and unzipped her jacket.

"Let's walk and you can tell me about it."

They crossed the street. On either side of the bark-mulched path, grass plumes swayed in the air. They walked side by side, Libby in low-heeled ankle boots, Celia in her sneakers. The path ascended a hill topped with spiky evergreens and thick-trunked trees on whose pewter-colored branches yellow leaves clung. At first, Celia faltered with her litany, but Libby eased her way, enthusiastically uttering "certainly" and "of course" and "I know exactly what you mean!"

By the time they reached the mass of trees on the crest of the hill, Celia had imparted nearly all: her and Mitchell's retirement; the sale of their house; the move to the condo; the noisy neighbors; her daughters' self-centered phone calls; the complacency with which her husband approached their failing bodies and dwindling lives; the way the walls seemed to be closing in on her. She'd spent the early morning hours reviewing the opportunities she'd wasted and the wrongs she'd suffered. The frozen pieces of chicken that refused to separate were yet another enemy. "So I attacked with a cleaver. There was chicken flesh everywhere."

How immensely satisfying the crunch of bone; how disturbing the feverish need to strike again and again and again, until she felt the shock of cold flesh under her feet.

Libby tucked wayward gold strands behind her ear. The tip of her nose was pink. A droplet hung from her nostril. "Poor Celia. How did the soup turn out?"

She took a tissue from her pocket and handed it to Libby. "I don't know. I dumped the bits into the crock-pot, threw in some carrots and dill and left it for my husband."

Libby laughed. "Good for you." She slipped her arm through Celia's.

They walked down the hill toward the pond. The trees around them seemed rubbed with soot; the pond below lead-filled. The yellow leaves and Libby's golden hair were the brightest spots in a darkening world.

While they walked, Libby admitted that she too had gone through a rough patch when her husband's lupus worsened a year ago making him wheelchair-dependent. She'd had terrible headaches and unrelenting hot flashes, couldn't sleep, could barely function.

"But then I discovered that with my body's changes, I'd developed a wonderful talent. The more involved I've become with my work, the better I've felt."

"What is it you do?"

"Diagnostics."

Along the path, glass globes at the top of tall wooden posts flicked on. In the acid-yellow light, the shapes of leaves and branches, even the forms of mulch at their feet, were newly distinct, though oddly colored.

"Does your work have anything to do with what happened in the waiting room?"

"As a matter of fact, it does." Libby explained how three months ago, her taste buds had become incredibly sensitive. She could discern flavors she had never noticed before. This applied not only to food but to other things as well, like sweat. She began to perform what she called "little experiments" and discovered that she could detect the taste of specific illnesses.

"Lupus, for example, tastes like sour cherry and Kalamata olive. Prostate cancer tastes like dried figs." She tugged Celia's arm. "Now is the chance for you to express your skepticism."

If Libby had claimed divine intervention, Celia would have been dubious, but Libby sounded completely rational, like a scientist investigating a rare but naturally occurring phenomenon. "I've read about dogs who can smell changes in their owner's body chemistry. It's not much of a stretch to imagine a person doing so by taste." And it wasn't really, when that person was Libby.

"Thank you," Libby said. "You have no idea what your support means to me."

Their paces were well-matched. Libby, though a few inches taller, had an easy, comfortable stride.

"Did you figure out what's wrong with that man? The one with the breathing problem?"

"Adrenal malfunction."

"You could tell that from licking his skin?"

"Fortunately he had a small cut. Blood is the best medium. There is something so wonderful, so rich, so vital about blood."

Blood? Celia's thoughts caught and swirled around a slab of raw meat oozing crimson liquid. She stopped walking and let Libby's arm fall away. She shivered and zipped her jacket.

"Have I upset you?" Libby asked anxiously.

A car horn honked nearby. There must be a street beyond the thicket of trees and shrubs. She did not want to insult Libby. "Isn't using blood risky?"

"Not to my patients. I'm perfectly healthy. As for risks to myself, they seem of little consequence when there are so many I could help. I hoped Dr. Macalester would understand and assist me. I thought if I tested one of her patients and then compared my diagnosis to hers, she would be convinced. The minute I saw that man near the lab, I knew I'd found the perfect candidate. But she refused." Libby dabbed her eyes. "She thinks there's something wrong with *me*." She tapped her chest. "That *I* need help. Imagine."

What Libby described might be dangerous, might even be preposterous, but so were mountain climbing and deep-sea diving. If she thought she was helping others instead of waiting uselessly for senility and decay, let her. Hadn't Macalester urged selflessness on her? How much more selfless could a woman be than Libby? And if there were a slight chance she put others at risk, well, disease was everywhere. You took a risk when you put your hands on the handles of your grocery cart. Life was brief and full of things that made it briefer.

"Don't listen to Macalester. She's insensitive. Besides she's probably jealous. A talent like yours could put her out of business."

"Perhaps," Libby said. In the path light, her hair looked brassy, her face older and far more vulnerable. "I must say her outburst today caused me to doubt myself."

Celia jammed her hands into her pockets and felt cold metal—Macalester's scissors. How perfect! She'd use the scissors to undo some of the harm Macalester had done. Holding them out to Libby, she said, "Dr. Macalester wanted me to get some routine blood tests. Why don't you do the testing for me?"

"Oh no," Libby said. "I couldn't hurt you."

"Don't be silly. I need your help." Celia opened the scissors, took a deep breath, and jabbed one of the sharp points into her thumb, wincing as a scarlet bead formed on her skin. "Here you go."

"Oh, Celia." Libby's smile was lovely. Her grasp was gentle but firm. "You are amazing."

She bent her golden head over Celia's hand. Her tongue was soft and warm...the touch of it shockingly pleasurable.

When Libby looked again at Celia, her expression was full of benevolence. "Honey and lavender," she said. "Perfectly healthy."

Libby was so pleased for her, Celia did not want to seem ungrateful. She hugged Libby and pressed her face against Libby's coat. Her stomach rumbled. She stepped back. "Guess I should celebrate by getting something to eat. I haven't eaten all day."

"We'll fix that," Libby said.

Noise erupted overhead—cacophonous honking and barking and cackling. The wild sounds startled Celia.

"Must be geese," Libby said, tilting her head to look upwards. "And look at that moon!"



Over the trees hung a full yellow moon. A towering wave of sadness engulfed Celia. She did not want to part with any of this: the woods, the geese, the moon, Libby. Sobs shook her so hard she fell on her knees. Libby stroked her hair. She reached for Libby's hand and held it to her cheek. When was the last time anyone had touched her with such generosity? Her sobs quieted. "We lose so much," she said.

Libby clasped her hand and held it tightly. "Yes, we do. But look what we've found."

Celia wiped her face, blew her nose, and then brushed debris from her jacket and pants. Libby tied a tissue around Celia's wounded finger. Once again she linked her arm with Celia's.

"Ready to move on?" Libby asked.

Beyond them the path curved. She could not see where it led, but moonlight brightened the way.

The Fate of Fuzz by Christopher Cassavella

Doctor: Why'd she throw the clock at you Mr. H____?

Wife: Oh, I've already gone over that. When I got home yesterday, there was a ton of—

Doctor: No, I'd like to hear him tell me. Why did your wife throw the clock at you, in your opinion? Go ahead . . . tell us.

Husband: Leave that bit alone for now, doc. Don't give her a hard time. If you want to pin it on somebody, you can blame me. But I really don't care to talk about that clock right now anyway so—

D: Mr. H____ I'm not trying to pin this clock incident on either of you. But throwing a clock, and like you said—a pretty big fucking clock at someone you're married to is akin to making a loud statement. I'd thought we'd try to understand why it happened. I know if a pretty big fucking clock was thrown at me I'd like to figure out why.

Husband: No, I really don't care to understand something like that today. It was my fault because I left all the pine needles from the tree on the floor after I took it out to the sidewalk, so let's leave it at that. I don't think she's really ever done anything wrong if I think about it. I've been the rotten one here, doc.

D: Is that right? Your wife has never done anything wrong then?

H: No, I know she's been wrong about things before, but I mean in our relationship. If we were two high school kids working on a class project together, she'd be the brains and I'd be the slacker. I'm the reason we're here talking to you twice a month and have had as many bad days as we have.

D: How do you feel about that assessment Mrs. H____?

Wife: Well, I don't know. Sad, which makes me a terrible person. And a little worried too. He's been agreeable like this since last night. It's strange, isn't it? He's even tried to hold my hand during dinner and then kissed me on the chin before we went to sleep.

D: You think it's strange that he's been affectionate towards you?

W: Of course I do. It's not very much like him . . . to be so considerate and peppy. Last night at dinner, I've never seen him in such a good mood. Talking about salt and pepper shakers like they were the most interesting things ever invented. And not just that, it's everything. He's excitable by anything he sees. Frozen lakes and green painted light

posts. I don't get it. Actually, I didn't think to tell you about any of that . . . the day we had yesterday.

D: And what kind of day did you have?

W: Surprising. I didn't tell you what we found inside the clock after I threw it at him. There was a baby bird inside the clock.

D: There was a baby bird in the clock? Like a real, living bird?

H: One-hundred percent real, doc. What a cute baby bird it was, too. Had this patch of fur on his head that looked like a mohawk and this wild yellow beak. Though the beak might've been broken cuz I didn't hear him use it once.

W: It was very cute, I agree.

D: So, okay, you threw the clock at Mr. H____ but how'd you come to find there was a bird inside it?

W: Well, he happened to notice it among all the pieces of broken clock when he went to broom it up.

H: It was just sitting there in the middle of all that glass and wood. I was afraid it was broken into pieces itself. But no, he was a tough little bird. I picked him up in my hand and he looked up at me with eyes like two little black magnifying glasses questioning everything for the first time.

D: How'd it manage to get in the clock?

H: We don't know. You've never heard of such a thing like a bird stuck in a clock before, have you? Cuz, we haven't. Unless, there's a bird hidden in every clock and nobody thinks to check.

W: He's serious about that last bit. He's not fooling with you. After dinner, we get back to the house and this nut goes checking around in the few clocks we have to see if there were anymore baby birds in them.

D: And did you find any birds in your clocks?

W: Of course he didn't.

H: No, doc, I didn't. But I had to make sure. I guess it was just luck that she threw the clock at me when she did or we'd never have found that poor bird.

D: Okay. So you were lucky to find the baby bird. Why would you say you were you lucky?

H: Because we were given a chance to save him.

D: I see.

W: I didn't think he'd care about the bird. I thought he'd just want to throw it in the garbage and move on and we'd argue about the next thing. It wouldn't have been a shock if he told me to get rid of it or put it out in the yard and leave it on its own.

D: So what did you end up doing with the bird if you didn't toss it away?

W: Well, after the clock smashed and made a mess everywhere, it was awhile before he went to go clean it up. I wouldn't have cleaned it up till night, I was still very upset. So it was maybe a half-hour before he went to clean it up. Then, from the bathroom I heard the strangest thing. It was him talking, but in that cutesy, terrifying voice people use on babies and dogs. I thought my ears were drunk. I walked over to him and there was that little bird there in his palm. It was all very odd. I still can't believe I heard him talking like that to the bird.

H: He was good at tickling my hand, doc. And not even all his feathers were in yet.

D: Did you take it to a vet? A bird that small needs its mother and to be fed properly. There's a lot that could go wrong for a bird that young.

H: We tried to, doc. The assholes over there didn't want anything to do with the short guy. Believe that? We went to two more vets after that and they didn't want him neither.

W: I had to hold him back when the bird kept getting refusing. He was telling the first vet to go fuck himself, it was embarrassing. At the third vet he was threatening to choke the doctors and the secretaries. He said he'd be coming back with a buddy of his who didn't have any feathers. It was all a lie, but still, it was some scene he made. There was a poor dog with a broken back leg who wouldn't stop barking at him.

D: That is unfortunate, but vets must be so busy already. Taking a baby bird off your hands is probably a very low priority for them.

H: So they'd just let it die then? And offer us no advice? That's not right.

W: True, they didn't even give us any ideas as to where we could take it or what to do with it. They flat out said they couldn't do nothing with that bird and left us on our own.

H: By then I nicknamed the short guy, Fuzz. He was as docile as a frozen tire, doc. Sure, his eyes were taking in everything but he was cool about it all, like nothing could get to him. And that kind of mellowed me out. It made me feel like okay, we'll figure something else out then. So we were walking around for awhile and arguing about what to do next. We weren't even sure what birds that small eat. Worms? But then I figured you'd have to chew it up into tiny pieces and I just couldn't do that even as much as I liked him. But then an idea came to me when we were walking around after that third vet. I thought why not look for a bird's nest.

W: It actually made sense to me, too.

D: A bird's nest?

H: Yeah, doc. I thought if we could find a bird's nest and get Fuzz in there, another bird might come to find him and adopt him as his own. I would've kept the short guy myself but she didn't think it was a good—

W: We have no idea how to care for a bird. And a bird that small needs someone to really care for him. We couldn't give him any of that.

D: I tend to agree with you. I'm not sure it'd have survived with just you two. I would think it needs a mother. Did you eventually find the nest?

H: Doc, it took us a long time. Four hours of going around to different parks and looking up at all the trees we came across. We didn't see one nest. But Fuzz was okay with it. Just looking around at everything like he does. At one point, I thought about leaving him with a bunch of pigeons we saw eating together by the lake but I couldn't take the chance. They might just fly off without him and I thought Fuzz didn't seem to care for them. No, a bird's nest must be the best place for him. So we kept looking. We finally found one after the sun went down.

W: You had to see how tall this tree was. Forty feet at least and the nest was almost at the very top of it. He wanted to take the bird and climb the tree like he was King Kong climbing up the Empire State Building. I told him there was no way he was getting all the way up there. Especially since Fuzz was going to be with him. But he didn't want to listen.

H: It was tall doc, but I've climbed trees before, used to do it all the time when I was a kid. So I thought I could do it, no problem. The only thing was that it was freezing out. I was nervous my hands might slip off the bark or that my foot might slide off some ice and me and Fuzz would go traveling a long way down.

W: I told him we could wait until tomorrow to find another nest that wasn't so high.

H: I didn't want to wait. I wanted Fuzz to find a new family already. So I secured him in my jacket pocket and started to climb the tree. I took the first few steps slowly to make sure it wasn't too frozen. It was okay, so I started to climb up—

W: I couldn't watch them. I put my hood over my eyes and hoped I didn't hear anything fall.

H: I was fine for most of the way up. It was only about halfway that my hands got cold. But I felt so close to the nest that I had to keep going. I had the small guy in my pocket, so close to a new family, I couldn't let him down. So I kept on going, hands frozen and hurting. I got up near the nest and used my last bit of strength to hold onto the tree with one hand and used my other hand to fetch Fuzz from my pocket. I got him out and gave him one last look and he was looking right back at me, like nothing could bother him, not even some lunatic who was climbing a tree and holding him in his frozen hand as he barely holds onto some tree bark forty feet up off the earth. Then I just said a little something to him and—

W: You talked to him up there? What'd you say?

H: I just said that he was okay. That he was stuck in clocks before and had been thrown into walls, been turned away from three different vets and now life was going to be okay, that he should just keep looking around the world like he does. Kept it short just like him. Then I placed him in the nest and started my way back down.

D: Were there any birds in the nest?

H: No. It was empty, but it looked full and cozy. I was sure another bird would be back real soon. Doc, do you think Fuzz was adopted? I'm not sure how birds work.

D: I honestly can't say.

H: I hope birds have hearts. I can't see myself ever going back there to see what happened. I hope they took him.

W: I'm sure he's doing fine.

H: Doc, I been thinking maybe this whole marriage happened just for Fuzz. So we could take care of him and send him off on his way and get him to keep going on. You can't tell me he was stuck in that clock for no reason.

D: You sound like a parent Mr. H____. And I like your theory, but it's interesting you didn't look at it the other way around. That maybe the bird existed solely for your marriage.

H: I don't even know what kind of bird he was, doc.

W: It was a sparrow.

H: You think so?

W: I do.

D: We should do our next session at the park you took him to, I'd bet you'd like that Mr. H____.

H: Imagine that. I was thinking in bed last night, that every bird I ever see again, I'm gonna wonder if it's Fuzz. It's a nice feeling, doc.

W: Does this mean anything for us? He's so much . . . happier now. Do you think he'll stay like this?

D: I don't know. He might. Is it making you anxious to think he'll stay like this?

W: It is. I'm afraid we won't be the same. I really think I like to argue with him. Sounds awful, I know, but it's what we do. We've always been very good at that.

H: Listen, after we leave here, we're going to buy a new clock to replace the old one. We could argue about what kind of clock we should get. Okay?

W: Sounds like a start, I guess.

H: Good. I love you.

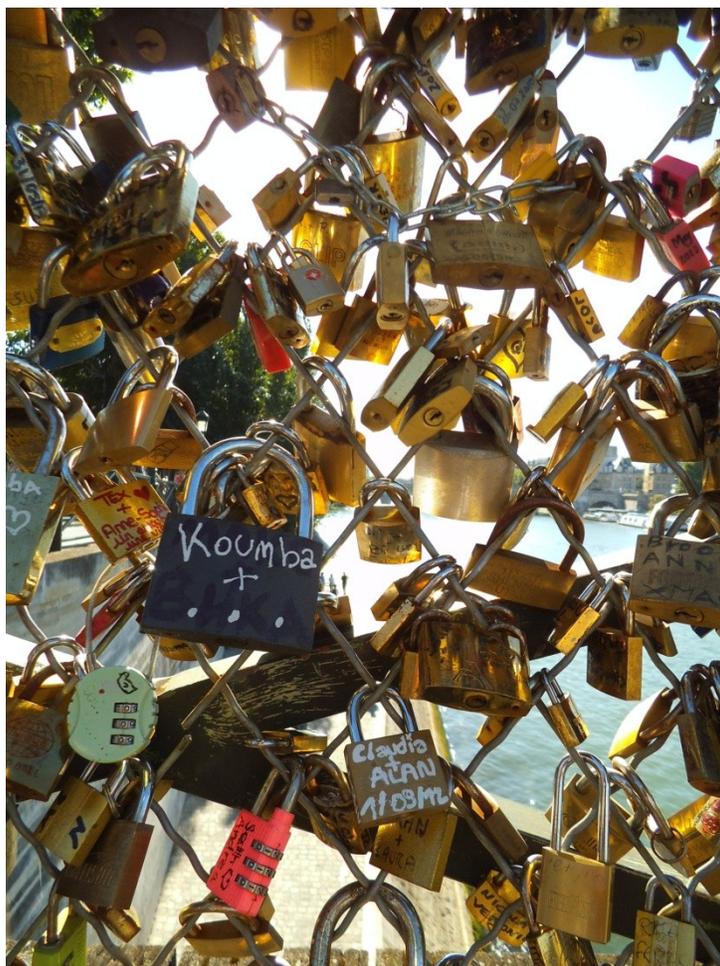
W: Don't say that, it doesn't sound right.

H: I love you, I love you, and wait . . . I love you.

W: Can we be done for today, doctor?

D: Sure. Time is almost up anyway. Let me know Mr. H___, are you gonna check that new clock you buy for any birds?

H: Of course. I don't think I'll ever be able to stop that, doc.



Photograph: Locked © Chris Fradkin

The Oath of Weirding by Rob Essley

Just after completing her training and passing her deadhandler's exams, Cassie was awarded her certificate. "You've passed," he said.

At hearing this she looked up at her mentor and smiled timidly at him. He returned a grim smile, showing several blackened teeth. She shivered, as she often did when he looked at her directly.

The windowless room had been the site of many hours of practice draining and impromptu cleanup exercises, necessitated by the various states of the dead and, unfortunately, the time of year. In winter she could maintain a clean, presentable room, all the way down to the copper floor drain, but when the heat of Kansas summer wafted in, the floor would become alternately sticky and slippery with various liquids. She prided herself in a clean workspace. As to the smell of the place, it didn't bother her. She rather enjoyed it, in fact.

On her way home from the Salina Mortuary, Cassie never passed by the graveyard without slowing down to read as many headstones as she could. It was an old habit, looking for names she knew, people she'd worked on. Lost loves.

She'd chosen her path, and she wondered if her work with the dead meant she'd get some kind of reward in the afterlife, like a prophet or something. Not likely, she decided, but when she finally went to join them, she was determined not to be accused of Weirding. That could keep a soul betweened for millennia, or so it went.

Weirding, she thought, trying to remember when first she'd heard it. Probably just before the Depression, at the beginning of her training. The demand in her business never stopped, never varied much. Folks died, and that's just what they did. Mostly old, but some young. She loved working on the young because they stayed together. A family wanted their boy propped up in the casket, she could build him up on a wooden frame, and he'd stay put. An old lady, she slid down, collapsed like a burlap sack of corn meal. No matter the body, she loved the challenge and alone time with the dead. But not Weirding, never that.

The old man, Feathers, presented the certificate to her with the practiced dignification of a familiar ceremony.

"Master," she said, looking down at the piece of thick paper, "why isn't my certificate signed?"

"Because, my dear," he said, "you haven't completed the Oath of Weirding. If you like, we can do it right now."

She pursed her lips and busied herself scrubbing the blood from a metal forceps, not ready for this unexpected bit of testing.

Weirding.

Feathers sighed, pulled his overcoat off his back, and hung it on a hook near the door. He fished around in one of the pockets, then turned back to face her. The candle

jumped and flashed, projecting dark, dancing shadows on the far wall. A glint from the old man's glasses reminded her to light another candle, which she did and placed it on the table next to the cool body of a dead young man. He set a small block of wood down on the table, and held a knife in his other hand, which he wiped with a damp cloth.

"Okay, let's take this oath," she said. "But what's the wood block for?" Wind outside rattled the old windows. She felt a draft coming through the baseboards, which stirred up the stagnant air.

Feathers frowned at her, split the wood block open to remove a small glass vial, and held up the knife. "Give me your hand." He breathed out through his mouth, and she turned her head to the side.

The living smell so much worse than the dead, she thought. She reached out her hand. He squeezed her wrist and pulled her arm hard. She lost balance and nearly fell into him, but he wrapped his powerful arm around her and shouted at her, "Stay still!"

He slit her finger, caught some of her blood in the glass vial, then dripped it onto the corner of the certificate.

"We shall hereby decree, respect for the dead must come above all carnal impulse, bribery, and convenience. To this, can you agree?" he said, setting the blood-vial down on the table. She felt a strange sense of confusion at his words, and wanted him to leave, But she needed that signed certificate.

The work was steady, especially given the outbreak, and Cassie found herself at ease around the deceased. Now, with abundant competition in town and a windfall of corpses, she began to consider her opportunities. Three mortuaries had popped up over the past few months, and rumors of her skills as an undertaker bounced around like tumbleweeds. Winter stripped the town of its charm, and the winds blew hope away and out into the prairie. Townsfolk moped about or stayed indoors, warming their hands to cookstoves.

She licked the cut on her finger, not looking into his eyes. "I agree."

"Very good. Further, in keeping of this Oath of Weirding, you hereby assert that no parts of the deceased shall be removed unless absolutely necessary or requested by kin." He put the knife down, wiped his hands absently on a linen cloth.

"Yes, I agree." She felt the fire of guilt, and tried to put out of her mind the things she'd done.

"In the Oath of Weirding, you must hereby agree that you shall never deface the bodies of the deceased, nor shall you look upon the lifeless faces in adoration." Feathers shifted his weight, waited for her response. After a time, he repeated himself, "You must hereby agree."

"Yes." She clenched her jaw, just wanted him to sign and leave her to her work. Sweat gathered on her forehead, and she felt something shift in the way the old man looked at her, finally making eye contact. His eyebrows lowered and he didn't blink.

"To this Oath, you must agree. Please say 'I agree.'"

"I agree," she lied.

"Congratulations my dear." He reached for the pen and formed his elaborate signature, overlapping the blood he'd dripped onto the paper. She sighed, but not too forcefully. A weight came off her as he walked out, and she latched the door behind him.

Cassie went back to the young man on the table, and put her hands on his cheeks. Lifeless blue eyes stared out at the ceiling. She tilted her head to one side and stroked his forehead with the backs of her fingers, humming a baroque.

In that room only one of them breathed, but when she parted his cold, clammy lips with her tongue, she joined him, if only for a moment.



Photograph: Before the Gargoyles Flew © Chris Fradkin

Recovery by Damon Barta

It sat in the center of my hand like some lackluster pearl. I could tell the old man knew it was missing. His face twitched when his fingers felt its absence. He had to wonder now: would it work? Would his prayers have any effect at all if he came up one short?

I am not a cruel person, just a curious one. When it had rolled up to my toe, three possibilities had occurred to me. Keep it. Return it. Feed it to the pigeon that was on its way to claim it. The last of these would have been satisfying in only a fleeting way, and I'd dismissed the second thought immediately. Not because I am cruel, but because I am curious.

It was made out of cheap material, which is probably why the whole thing had come apart so easily. He'd stumbled coming out of the church, and his beads had hit the ground. He held hungry and indiscriminate pigeons at bay with his cane as he plucked the beads off the cobblestone plaza.

He had to hurry. He didn't count as he retrieved the beads and reattached them to the plastic "chain." He thought he'd gotten them all. When he surveyed the plaza for outliers I covered the lone remainder with the toe of my boot and drew casually from my cigarette, nodding noncommittally at his searching gaze. When he looked away I picked it up.

We'd both been coming there for a long time. That's how I knew what he'd do next. He sat down on the bench opposite mine, clutching his mostly reconstituted rosary, and bowed his head. The violent shaking in his hands became a barely perceptible tremor as his fingers moved across the beads, his muttering faintly audible through the breeze that blew between us. He didn't actually know how many beads were supposed to be on the chain, but he relied on routines, and when the rhythm of a routine was disrupted things came apart. His hands began again to shake violently. His mutter became a stutter.

If I were cruel, I would enjoy this. If I were truly curious, I would be satisfied. I would pretend to have just now found the last bead and give it back. I am neither cruel nor curious.

Inside the building beside us, they tell us that we must recognize a Higher Power to get well. Some of us pretend it is the God of Gothic architecture and Papal decree when it is really just a certain number of plastic beads. Others insist in all earnestness that it is a hot-fudge sundae. My Higher Power is having someone else's Higher Power in the palm of my hand.

I reach towards a passing pigeon and open my hand. It comes slowly at first, wobbling warily, then breaks into a manic tap dance. I close my hand and it stops, cocks its head, and wobbles on down the plaza.

I am neither cruel nor curious. I am recovering.

Steve

Me and the boys, we were heading home, walking our boards across the tracks and riding, just riding, past the hospital, over the freeway bridge where we always toss our smokes off the edge, it's what we do, doesn't even matter if you just lit up, and we were out in front of Joey's place when we saw this big ass dog bolting up and down the street, not even going anywhere, just bolting like it owned the place. Big old German shepherd with a collar and everything, like there was no doubt it had just escaped and its owners were probably out looking for it, but we couldn't see them anywhere. We stopped and watched it as it ran around, wagging its tongue, stopping to piss here and there, and Joey was like, Maybe we should go catch it, but nobody was feeling it so we went inside. Joey pulled out his mom's gin and I put on some tunes.

Veronica

Professor Juarez says it's fallacious. That it's just heteronormative values imposed on young women. Or old women too, I guess. The whole idea of it. Men expecting sex. Like if they wine and dine you, you owe it to them. Like you're repaying a debt. And as a woman, I'm usually on the same page. I'm a feminist, sex shouldn't be a commodity. But that night if I'd gone home with Richard things would've been different. I wouldn't have this cast, for one thing. I'd still be in school. It doesn't get you anywhere. Thinking like that. But you can't help it. I'm a good driver. Fuck the crime report, anyone would've flipped out. What are you supposed to do. I was going the speed limit and everything. Cruising at sixty and bang, there's a bottle in your windshield. What do you do. I'll tell you, you flip out. Of course I feel bad. I tried to attend the service. They wouldn't let me go. I think her mom told them not to. They should have let me go.

Charlie

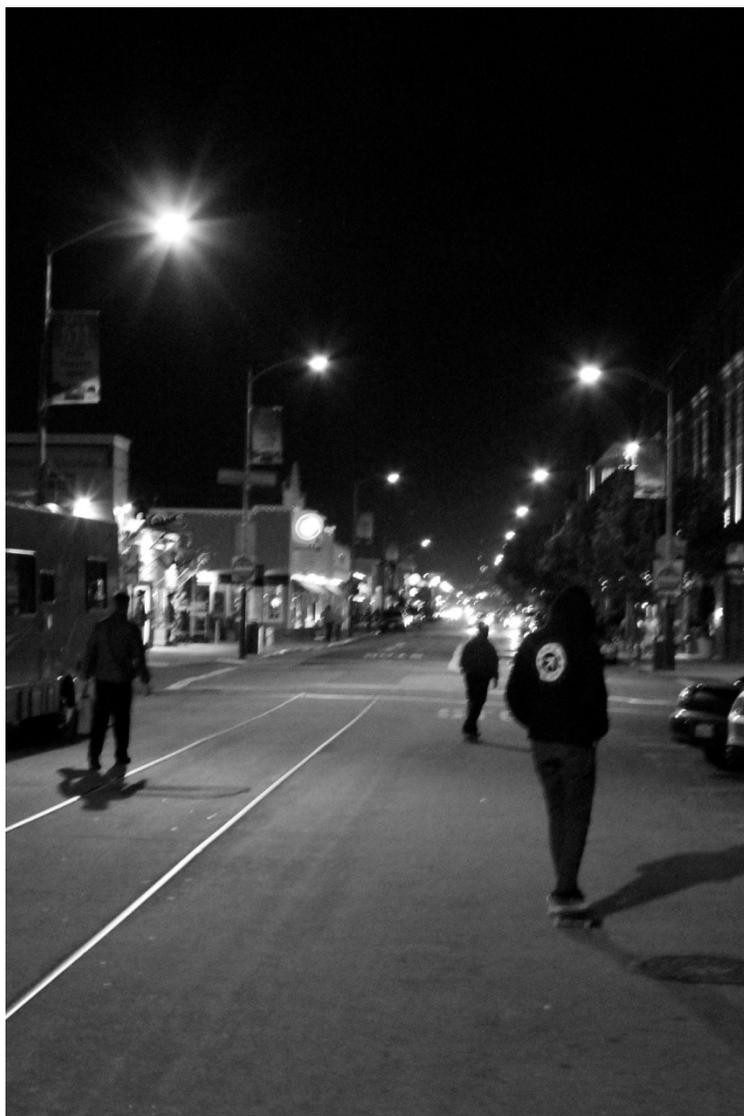
Well, I don't know, Booboo never got out before, Pops kept the gate closed, and she was happy. I think she got too excited when she saw the gate was open. She just like ran out. I think it was me, I think I left the gate open. I don't know. Pops wouldn't have left it open because he's always so strict so I think I left it open. It must have been me, I was the last one to open it. Everyone kept asking me, but not like they really wanted to know, more like they already knew that I'd left it open but they like wanted to hear me say it. Must have been when I got home from soccer because I remember I went in the back door because the garage was locked and I had lost my house key. I don't know, but I think it was me. I think it was my fault.

Steve

You know how it goes, me and the boys went at it, Joey found his mom's bong and we went ham, you know, chilling, bumping something or other on my speakers, talking shit, like, Hey Dennis, how's your sister, and, Hey Dennis, can I have her number? Dennis was the bitch, that's the way things worked, Joey hooked us up with weed and drank and I brought the speakers and everybody made fun of Dennis and his hot sister, but that's just how it was. Things should've been chill but that day we all knew something was up, beats me why we were so bummed about it, but we couldn't stop thinking about that dumb dog running around out there, all happy and pissing on bushes and shit, because you know, you see a lot of strays out on the streets, like at the skate park that's just something you see, but this one clearly belonged to someone, and we could've caught it, wouldn't have been a big deal, Joey skates real fast, so finally I was like, I think we should go find that dog, and everybody agreed. We were all a little fucked up at that point, especially Dennis, who had his knife out and was poking holes in the couch in the shape of a frowny face or a hot dog or some shit, who knows, he was feeling kind of down, but we got up and grabbed our boards I took the bottle and we went out the front.

Veronica

I wasn't drunk. I mean Richard was pushing shots but I knew I was driving. Wasn't looking for that DUI. And I had a midterm the next day anyway. Not that that mattered. It really wasn't my fault. That fucking bottle. I mean, who does that?



Charlie

I was home alone, since Pops was still at work and my mom was getting groceries, I think, I don't know, so I let Booboo out and dished myself some ice cream. By the time I'd finished, Booboo wasn't scratching at the door like she usually does. But I just thought maybe she was pooping so I got more ice cream. I ate it all and Booboo was still not at the door. That's when I got a bad feeling, so I went out and called for her, but she wouldn't come. I put on my mom's slippers and went out and called for her again, but she still wouldn't come. And then I saw the gate was open. I swear I thought I closed it but I guess not. I don't know. I felt like I might cry because Booboo wasn't in the backyard I just knew she had got out, so I ran out through the gate calling her name.

Steve

Shit, I don't like talking about it, but it was bad. Real bad. A whole lot of blood, a whole fucking lot of it, and Joey kept saying, Oh my God, oh my God, because it was still alive, even though it was completely fucked up, some of its ribs were sticking out, and Dennis was real quiet, and it was just lying there in the middle of the street, twitching and shit, kind of whining, its legs moving every once in a while like it wanted to run, but it wasn't going anywhere, the thing was fucked. I still had the bottle of gin, I tried to take a swig, but I just spilled it all over my shirt. I was like, What are we gonna do, and Joey just kept saying, Oh my God, and Dennis had his knife out and was stroking it, sort of looking around, so I said it again, What are we gonna do? Nobody said shit, but I didn't want to just leave it there, so I bent over and started patting its head. I don't know what that was supposed to do, but the thing was so out of it that it didn't even notice, so I looked at Dennis and then back at the dog and I grabbed its hind legs and started dragging it. Didn't even have a destination, I just knew I had to move it out of the street, but as soon as I pulled it an inch it flipped a shit and started screaming and howling. I've never heard anything like it, and somehow I didn't notice before but it was sitting in a pool of blood, so I jumped back and saw I had blood all over my hands, blood on my pants, and I just lost it, I started bawling like a little bitch, but Dennis and Joey weren't about to say anything, they were freaked out too, and I didn't know what to do, call the cops? Who has the number for animal control? I just booked it, I dropped my board and didn't even look back, I just started running, spilling gin all over the place, and the last thing I heard was that poor fucking dog, screaming and howling.

Veronica

Ok, I'll admit. I'd had something to drink. But only a couple. They knew right away after the crash with the breathalyzer and everything, but still, I don't like admitting it. It

makes it sound like I was drunk. I drive well when I'm drunk. Actually, sometimes I drive better. But I wasn't drunk. That's not what I'm saying. I was going sixty when their minivan pulled up in the lane to my right. She was in the backseat. She was looking at me and smiling. So I smiled back. I still had both hands on the wheel. But every time I looked over at her she had that same smile. Her mom was going at exactly my speed. So we were side-by-side for a while. She was adorable. Six or seven, I don't remember. But her hair was tied up in a little bun. Had these big gold earrings. I wouldn't pierce my daughter's ears. Not until middle school at least. Eventually I sped up a bit, or they slowed down. I can't remember. So I was a little ahead of them when it happened. Like half a car length. The radio was on. I was sober as a rock.

Charlie

I'd seen them around before. One was Dennis, I didn't know the other's name, and they were just like sitting on the curb looking sad. They're big, they're high schoolers, I don't like talking to high schoolers. Especially not guys like Dennis, because everybody knows he's mean, but I'd looked everywhere, in like a hundred backyards and driveways, so I ran up and asked if they'd seen Booboo. Dennis didn't even look at me, he had this pocketknife and was cutting the grass with it, but the other one said, Who's Booboo. So I said, My dog, and he said, Your dog, and I said, Yeah, and he said, Your dog, and I said, Yeah, I think I left the gate open. I was tired from all the running around, and pretty sweaty too. By now Dennis wasn't cutting the grass anymore, he was stabbing the lawn with his knife, which was pretty scary, by the way. It was a pretty scary knife. The guy who was talking to me was quiet, and then Dennis got up really fast and pushed me to the ground. It hurt because I landed weird on my arm, and I didn't know why he did that, so I stood up and said, Why'd you push me? But Dennis didn't say anything, he just pushed me down again, harder. And then I noticed he was crying. It was quiet but he was definitely crying. I started crawling away on my hands and knees, but Dennis followed me and kicked me in the stomach, and I started crying too, saying, Why are you doing this, why are you hurting me? But Dennis didn't say anything, and his friend just looked away.

Steve

It fucking sucked, I couldn't get the blood off my hands, when I finally stopped running I tried wiping them on the grass and washing them off with the gin, but nothing worked, so I stopped to catch my breath and have a smoke, but my hands wouldn't stop shaking, so I threw the cigarette away, and the lighter too. By then I could hear the freeway, and I've always thought, damn, it would suck to live this close to the freeway, you'd hear it all the time, it'd fuck with your dreams and shit, and the whole time I was thinking, maybe I should've killed it, maybe I should have found a brick and bashed its head in, or used

Dennis' knife, or called my mom or something, but I just froze up, you know how it is, it's like fight or flight, and when the shit hits the fan you don't know what to do, but there I was, with fucking dog blood and gin all over my clothes, walking somewhere, I don't even know where, and after a while I saw the bridge.

Veronica

Her name was Abigail. Abigail Rose. I sent her family letters. They didn't respond.

Charlie

After a while Dennis' friend pulled him off me. My nose was broken and Dennis wouldn't stop crying. I don't know why he was crying, I was the one who had a reason to cry. Dennis' friend told me where Booboo was, but he said not to go there. He just said to go home. That was it, he said, Go home, and he picked up their skateboards and took Dennis' knife and the two of them walked away. I didn't listen. They didn't say it but I knew, I just knew Booboo was still alive. I knew she must be scared, she didn't want to be alone, sometimes when we left her home alone for too long she'd get scared and chew up the pillows, so I went and found her. My leg hurt bad but I ran anyway. I ran up the block and around the corner to the one place I hadn't looked. Didn't see any cars. No people walking, either. Didn't see anyone but myself in the reflections of cars parked on the curb, but I couldn't even see that too good because I was crying. I got there too late. Booboo was just lying there in the middle of the road. Lots of blood. I've never seen so much blood. I sat down and started petting her, scratching behind under her collar. That was her favorite when I did that, I think it got itchy back there. That's where they found me. Pops picked me up and covered my eyes.

Steve

I did it without thinking, just on instinct, you know? Like a cigarette butt, because that's what you do, when you cross the bridge you throw your smoke over the edge, right into traffic, even if you just lit up, but a bottle's a lot different from a smoke, and right when I threw it I knew I'd done something bad, something real fucking bad, and I heard it hit something hard, but it didn't shatter, it was more of a crunch, so right away I knew it hadn't hit the street, it must've hit something else, and then when I heard the screeching tires and the fucking crash I knew it was bad. I stopped and turned and looked off the edge, and it was two cars, a sedan and a minivan. The minivan had spun out, I guess, and it was smoking like crazy, and as I watched the driver side door flew open, and this big old lady fell out onto the concrete, it was a sad sound, almost as bad as the dog howling, just plop, right onto the street, and she got up, all shaky and stumbling, and the

first thing she did was open the back door of her minivan, and then she just lost it, she started shrieking and running around in circles, pulling at her hair, and then this other chick came over, the driver of the other car, holding her arm, and she was like, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, are you okay? and the big old lady starting hitting her, saying, You killed her, you killed her, you bitch, it was you. It wasn't her. It was me. I threw the bottle. It was all my fault. I stood there like a fucking stone. I didn't say a thing. I just stood there. I couldn't look away.

Photograph: Downtown © Justin Nguyen

My Condolence by Jon Fried

I was cranking out the pitch to GorpCorp, the trail snack giant, when Dody Sullivan pinged me on the company IM. GTG. When Dody calls... I was also IMing my friend Berner on my phone. I never text or IM at work but it had been such an awful week. Berner takes nothing seriously and I needed that. I typed three words to Dody: on my way. Berner wrote back: K, Mr. BS.

Hurrying up the spiral stairs to the Executive Rotunda, I checked my shirt, straightened my tie and brushed the dandruff off the shoulders of my dark blue shirt, grumbling at myself for not wearing white every day like Chairman Jim. Not that he could possibly have dandruff to worry about. And if he did, Dody would take care of it. I'd joined the Communications team just six weeks before, but I knew how it was.

"Your tie is crooked," she said, a phone pinned between ear and shoulder, tapping on her computer keyboard with both hands. "Jim, it's me. The 10 o'clock moved to 10:30 but you HAVE to talk to Carla RIGHT NOW, she's been waiting an hour... The plane will wait... The Board will wait. They'll have to... NO, Rudy said the frames still aren't ready, but not to worry, the pictures are safe. Here's Carla, I'm putting her through. Jim, NOW." She nodded, glared and started to laugh. As she put down the phone, the laugh turned into a growl, and as she turned toward me doing my best to look sympathetic—and I was, as I'd seen some big egos in dark suits cowering before Chairman Jim and had some idea of what Dody dealt with every day—she shuddered and grimaced. "You have no idea. How are you? Don't answer, tell me later. I need your help."

"Anything," I said. I meant it. I'd been looking for a job for almost two years. And I liked her. When she gave me 60 seconds of chat on my first day, we discovered that she'd grown up in the town next to mine, another sleepy, nothing suburb in New Jersey. I still had a plenty of sleepy nothing in my system. It was all gone from her.

"I need you to write a condolence letter. Somebody's brother died and Jim wants the letter out today. Michael is out. I'm going crazy and this HAS to get done. Do you have time?"

That was a rhetorical question. But that's not why I couldn't speak. Good thing Dody didn't wait for a reply. "I really appreciate it. You know how it works. You have to send it to me and Jim can't know that you're writing it. It's not you. Listen, he doesn't even know that Michael is my usual backup. Jim would kill me. I don't know what he expects. OK? Can you call HR and get the details?"

I nodded, gave a thumbs up, and hurried away. I still couldn't speak. She probably wasn't surprised. A lot of people were as scared of Dody as they were of Chairman Jim. Some more so. I wasn't so scared. I know how to play the beta dog to anybody's alpha, whether that might be the chairman of a Fortune 500 company, the chairman's Chief Assistant, or the cool dude in the message center. The reason I couldn't speak was that the somebody whose brother died was me.

Julian, two years younger and 20 light years more brilliant and talented than I'll ever be, inherited the dysfunctional heart valves and flair for genius on our dad's side. I got the strong pump and the tendency toward the bland on our mom's side. He survived a couple of operations and was inching up the transplant list when an infection burned through him in two days and that was it. We'd been preparing for years and of course were totally unprepared.

Vacation and bereavement days don't kick in for three months, so I took one sick day for the funeral and didn't tell anyone. People get fired for being downers. Not right away, but eventually. "Always up," that was my mantra during the hideous job hunt grind. I know some people—Berner is one—who clawed at it for years and then just gave up. That's when Berner started calling me Mr. Bullshit.

I wrote a condolence note in the crisp, WASPy, quasi-folksy diction that Chairman Jim seemed to use. I gave Dody my snail-mail address and a fake name. She'd never check up on it. She didn't have the time.

Great, Dody emailed back. Now make sure the guy writes back. Even if you have to call him and coax him. Jim wants to know there is real two-way communication.

So I wrote back from my fake self. When I told Berner, he shook his head and said, "I warned you."

A couple of days later, Dody called me into her office.

"Jim was really touched by the guy's reply. He'd like to meet him in person. Do you have time to arrange it? I'm just SO crazy. He LOVED your letter, by the way." She was looking at me and she hung her head as the phone rang, and then snarled when a second line lit up a moment later.

"It should be pretty easy to arrange," I said.

"I like your attitude," she said and then turned to her blinking, beeping phone.

I staggered back to my cubicle, stared at the screen for five minutes, and then walked back into Dody's office. I waited til she was free and told her everything.

"Shit. He can't know. We'll both get fired. I've seen this. He wants you to keep a secret from everyone else, but if you keep a secret from him, he thinks he can't trust you. I am SO sorry. I lost a brother. In Afghanistan. It sucks. But don't worry. No one knows but you and me and you won't be with him more than ten minutes. To tell you the truth, it's more of a photo op."

"I met him when I started just a few weeks ago. Will he remember me?"

"He will, trust me, he never forgets a face, but he's not good with names and he'll never put two and two together."

Not without your help, I wanted to say.

A couple of days before the photo op, Dody pinged me. "Can you come over? NOW?"

We had another problem: The staff photographer and the backup were both out, and Chairman Jim happened to walk by when Dody was learning all of this and said, "Why don't you get that new guy, the new writer. I specifically remember him saying he could take photos, do videos, anything we want. Get him in here." Dody said she thought I might be busy. "Well he just got a little busier," said Chairman Jim.

"Now what," I said. I could write my own condolence letter, but I couldn't take my own photograph. This was not a selfie opportunity.

"He will FREAK if he finds out everything. Because then he'll start asking questions and I won't want to answer them. Look, you're going to have to find a stand-in. Can you do that?"



I called Berner. He was the only one I could call. He laughed in my face and said that nothing would make him happier than rolling out some BS for Mr. BS. "Always wanted to be an actor," he said. In college he'd done performance art—mimicking traffic cops in downtown traffic, brushing his teeth every day for a month on the main quad in his underwear—though never under the auspices of the drama department.

I went over to Berner's place the night before but he wouldn't let me get in a word. "Don't worry, I know what to do. Dress the part, act the part: I work in IT and my brother died. How does a guy in IT dress? Wait, don't tell me. Anybody dresses up for the chairman. You're wondering if I even own a tie. Come on, don't worry. Let's have another beer."

Berner was late. I couldn't believe it, and I knew that Chairman Jim was usually late for everything so I was hoping it wouldn't matter, but Dody called me—not IM, this merited a phone call—and asked me where my guy was. "He's here, or any second." I

texted, IM'd, called; nothing. I prayed; that worked. Reception called, your guest is here. I ran. Berner was flirting with the young receptionist, and I had to pull his arm with both hands, and I was so infuriated I didn't notice right away what he was wearing. A plaid sport coat, a Hawaiian shirt and a Justin Bieber tie. Over blue jeans.

"What, you don't like it? I'm an IT guy, what the fuck."

Those last three were Dody's very words when we appeared at her desk. Glaring, she ushered us in to the Sailing Room, the little conference room off of the board room with all of Chairman Jim's sailing trophies. She shook her head at me, a look of pity on her face, and said, as if Berner wasn't even there, "Too late now. Jim's coming in two minutes."

She closed the door behind us. "Well, she's cute," he said. "No seriously, have you hit on her?"

"She's got two kids."

"So?"

"She's married."

"So?" Berner was the kind of guy who always talked about cheating on his girlfriend but never did. It probably helped that he lived with her and she was paying all the bills.

I walked around the room snapping pictures, trying to figure out how the camera worked.

Forty minutes later, the door popped open and first came Dody and then came Chairman Jim. He was taller than I'd remembered, at least six two, and had a better tan. "Chris?" he held out his hand to Berner.

"Conveniently enough, yes," Berner said.

Only then did Chairman Jim notice what Berner was wearing. He opened his mouth and I'm not sure what he was going to say, but I'm guessing he recalled the occasion for the meeting, because he just said, "I'm sorry about your brother. Have a seat and tell me what happened."

"He croaked. I don't mean to be crude, but I'm still upset." Berner didn't sound upset. Chairman Jim stared at him. Berner went on. "Chris—I mean, Tim—Tom—Tim—had a bad heart. Rather he had a good heart, a huge heart, the biggest heart, but a crappy valve."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Chairman Jim tossed me a glance as I snapped away, circling the two of them on either side of the round table. "Tell me what you do at the company here," he said to Berner.

"I'm in IT. I do what I'm told." I tried to catch his eye and shake my head at him.

"You don't sound so happy about it."

"When my brother died I realized that it was time to stop the bullshit and just lay it on the line."

Jim stared again and after a moment said, "There sure is a lot of bullshit everywhere."

"Tell me what you do at the company here." No, Berner, no.

Jim gave a half wince, half smile. "I try to do what needs to be done."

"And how do you decide what that is?"

"I decide what makes sense to me. Do you dress like that every day?"

"No. It's not every day I get to meet the chairman."

"Were you close to your brother?"

"Chronologically? Or emotionally?"

"Emotionally."

"Both actually. But come to think of it, it's not really any of your business. Or rather I can't imagine you really care."

"Look, I don't know you, it's true. But I care about every single person who works for me."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"I do. Because it's true. My job is dependent on you no less than your job is dependent on me."

"Is that so," Berner said, crossing one leg over the other and tilting his head as if he were a talk show host.

Chairman Jim stood up, glaring, and glanced at me. Speaking more to himself than either of us, he said, "I'm done with this." And with that he walked out of the room.

"I think he liked me," Berner said.

"Stay here," I growled at Berner. I chased after the Chairman, for what reason I don't know, and stopped in the hall when I heard his voice coming from Dody's office.

"And I want to sign the dismissal form myself. I don't want to see that guy's face in here on Monday morning, understand?"

"Yes, Jim."

Berner was still in his chair drumming on the table when I returned to the Sailing Room. "You don't understand. I just made his day. Guys like that LOVE to fire people."

"Berner, I appreciate the help. Will you get the hell out of here? I have to go back to my desk."

Berner sprang to his feet, burst out the door and sprinted down the hall, shouting, "Not a moment to lose, not a moment to lose! Drinks at my place at 6!"

Ten new emails in the inbox. I read them and marked them unread and then Dody appeared at my cubicle. Dody never appeared at anyone's cubicle. She never spoke in a whisper. She spoke in a whisper now. "I told him everything. I had to. Let him fire me. Let him fire both of us." Her pocket buzzed. "That's him. I'm sorry." She hurried away.

I began packing up my things. I didn't have much. A photo of Julian and me in the treehouse. A plastic 8-ball with a glass window that would show your fortune when you shook it. My thesaurus, the last print book on the planet. I sat staring at the screen.

Ping from Dody. Come now. When Dody calls, one last time.

She was on the phone. She put up her index finger. She made a face into the phone and hung up. "One second," she said, rushing out of her office, leaving me to wonder what I'd say to the security guard sent to escort me out of the building. Maybe they wouldn't bother. Maybe they'd trust me to disappear on my own.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" Dody hurried back to her desk about 10 minutes later. "I can't believe this. I CANNOT talk right now and I didn't want to tell you this way, but Jim wants you to be his number one staff writer effective immediately. He wants you in the Sailing Room at 11:20 to talk over his testimony to Congress next month. There'll be a promotion, and maybe a raise, hopefully a good one. But I'm sorry, I CANNOT talk now." The phone rang. She stared at the number. "Here we go again. Be here by 11:10, OK?"

I nodded and trudged back to my desk.
Berner loved it.

Photograph: Endless Cubicles © Jon Fried

The Duck by Michael Janairo

In English For Life's main lesson room, the students stood to one side and the instructors the other as Director Tanaka entered. He was an unusually tall, barrel-chested Japanese man whose easy smile and wavy salt-and-pepper hair quieted the room. He strode past the beer, wine, whisky, sushi and sandwiches arranged on tables that had been pushed together in a tight line. With one hand he gestured toward the students; with the other, the instructors. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said with a smile, "welcome to English For Life's Monthly Happy Hour. Your lessons are over ... for today. So please put away your books and speak English informally. Enjoy!" He brought his hands together and lowered his back in a slight bow.

Peter didn't move with the crowd. The newest instructor scanned the student's faces—young professional men and women, housewives and retirees—looking for Reiko, whom he had taught earlier that week. Someone wearing cologne got close to him and whispered: "Let 'Fuck Your Student Night' begin." The voice was quiet, the accent heavy and Australian, and it made Peter blush.

He turned to see a veteran instructor walking away. He was called "Stu," because his real name, Raleigh, was too hard for students to pronounce. Stu charged toward the alcohol saying, "Make a hole! Make a hole!" Students stared at him as he grabbed a giant bottle of beer, filled tiny plastic cups and handed them to anyone around him. Beyond Stu, on the far side of the room, stood Reiko. She was lean and tall, or at least taller than the women around her as she leaned close to them like a quarterback in a team huddle. He imagined they, too, were impressed by her, a college grad (major: French), who spoke fluent French but now needed English for her job (financial analyst for a French bank). Peter felt the redness of his face fade as he walked toward her, but Director Tanaka blocked his way.

"Mister Peter!" Tanaka said, smiling. He gestured to a quiet group of men and women. They gazed upon Peter with thin-lipped smiles, full cups of beer in hand. "Ladies and gentlemen, please meet Mister Peter. He is the newest addition to the English for Life team." Tanaka continued to speak about Peter, repeating a story he wanted Peter to use as his official history: He was from Boston (in truth, he had grown up outside Washington, D.C., but Tanaka had said, "No one knows Alexandria"); had graduated from Harvard (it was really Boston College; "Our students? They know Harvard!"); and had spent a few years in Tokyo teaching at various language schools, but switched to English For Life because it was more prestigious ("A sensei has experience; he's not a recent grad"). Then Tanaka bowed to the students, and left Peter to live these lies. The students accepted it all and then took turns asking questions like "What's your favorite movie?" "What's your favorite book?" "Why did you come to Japan?" He answered—"Star Wars," "Moby Dick," "For the adventure"—and asked them the same questions, and he listened politely and complimented their English, even

when he wasn't sure what they were saying, because their voices were quiet and halting and bereft of articles and prepositions. And of course they all smiled and laughed when he asked them why they had come to Japan, because that was just silly, and for a short while it seemed as if they had shared something real.

Stu landed a meaty hand on Peter's shoulder, turned to the students and said, "Good evening, language learners! Are we happy with happy hour? Kampai!" He raised his empty plastic cup and tapped it against one student's cup after another, saying, "Clink, clink, clink." He said, "Now, I'm so sorry, but I must borrow Peter-sensei." He pulled Peter away from the students as they asked one another, "Borrow?"

Stu whispered again: "Clock's ticking, mate. Stop the bloody act; invite young Reiko and her friends to Ozaki's." He pointed with his sharp chin across the room where Reiko was smiling at them. He gave Peter a push: "Go on, man."

Peter wished he hadn't told Stu he thought Reiko was attractive. He had said so because it was true, but that truth when mixed with his understanding of teacher-student relationships and English for Life's policies, and his strict Catholic upbringing, made acting on it seem wrong. But maybe something else was at work here with the free food and drinks that allowed for—or even encouraged—transgressions.

Peter lowered his head. He had already crossed an ocean; now all he had to do was cross a room. He walked up to Reiko and said, "Good evening," to her and her friends. He introduced himself and shook their hands.

Reiko, with a slight French accent, said, "I was seeing you talk with so many of the others, I was having the thought maybe you were avoiding me, yes?"

The eyes of the others slid from her to him.

He didn't know what to say. His heart skipped a beat when he realized she was flirting with him, and he didn't know how to act with these witnesses.

She said, "Of course, teachers must have so many duties?"

She was giving him an out, which emboldened him. "Actually," he said, "I was saving the best for last. I want to invite you to the after party at Ozaki's?"

Reiko turned to her friends. They spoke in rapid Japanese and nodded to one another with swift birdlike movements. Reiko looked up to Peter and said, "Sounds fun."

About half of the teachers and students from English for Life packed Ozaki's, where stereo speakers blared rock music and various TV screens showed baseball, soccer and sumo. Stu bought the first round for Reiko and her friends; Peter, the second. They drank and laughed and smiled, though Peter couldn't really hear a thing. When he saw seats open up in a quiet corner, he signaled for the group to follow. Only Reiko came along, and he felt his heart beat faster as they sat close together, and the world around them seemed to change, to shrink and grow quieter, as if they were truly alone.

Reiko said, "Look."

He followed her eyes to a TV screen and he realized that the music and conversation had stopped and that all the TVs were now showing the same thing: news footage of a wild duck flying low over a pond with a steel-tipped arrow through its body. The screen froze on a grainy close-up of the duck with wings outstretched, the shaft a blur through

its body. The next image showed a crowd near a fence around the pond, necks craning to glimpse the stricken bird. Then a pretty news presenter's face filled the screen, a grainy close-up of the duck floating in the air beside her head. Near the bar, a burst of laughter arose and was quickly shushed. The presenter spoke some more, and then the TV went to a commercial. Music from the stereo returned. The TVs showed different programs again. Voices grew louder. Peter found himself sitting very close to his student in an intimate corner of a bar late at night in Tokyo, and he looked confused.

She smiled at him and said, "Did you understand? The police want to capture the person who shot the duck, and they want to give the duck medical treatment, but they are afraid to capture it may hurt it more. It is so, so terrible. Everyone's been talking about it all day."

"Terrible," he said, feeling like a foreigner because he wasn't "everyone"; no one at the school had mentioned it. He asked, "Where is that pond?"

She gasped and lifted her hand to her mouth. When she lowered her hand, she revealed a knowing smile. She said, "Maybe you didn't hear? Shinobazu Pond. It is near Ueno Park."

He nodded and drank and tried to stop himself from blushing. He had never heard of the park or the pond, and wasn't sure he could repeat either name, they had sounded so strange. But he was sure somebody who had lived in Tokyo a few years would've known both. She had caught him in a lie, and he wanted the night to end.

She said, "*Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et veule!*" She said, "You know?" He shook his head.

She said, "I am remembering Baudelaire's poem 'The Albatross.' The line has the literal meaning 'Here is the winged traveler, who is left so weak.'"

"The poor duck," he said.

"Yes," she nodded. "You, too, are a traveler, yes? I am, too."

He nodded, unsure what to say or where she was going.

She smiled again. "Too serious? Maybe, sometimes, I'm too serious. Do you know, Peter, what a duck says in Japanese?"

She smiled and said, "The duck says, 'Gaa, gaa.'"

"Gaa, gaa?" he said.

She said, "Very good! I'm teaching you duck Japanese. What is it that a duck says in English?"

"Quack," he said.

"Kwa ... what?"

He said, "Quack."

"So strange," she said, as she watched his lips and repeated after him, "Quack." Then she said, "Even our animals speak different languages."

He nodded and they laughed.

She said, "You know, nature is very important to the Japanese people." She leaned close. He could smell the welcome sweetness of her perfume. She put a hand on his knee. Blood pounded through his chest. She spoke, but he didn't catch her words. He

felt too dizzy. He watched her lips and nodded. She leaned in even closer. He felt her soft breath on his ear. She said, "I want to be natural with you."

He awoke to the aroma of coffee and burrowed himself deeper into her futon—and her scent, which did nothing to slow his dawning sense of guilt.

"Good morning, Peter," she said, her voice close.

He peered over the covers to see her sitting on the edge of the bed, mug cupped in her hands, wearing a baggy white T-shirt. Was it his? Their clothes were puddles on the tatami-mat floor at her feet. On her bookshelf sat Japanese and French volumes, and her English For Life texts. Something pounded in his head, more than just the pain of a hangover, but an alarm telling him to leave.

She smiled, her eyes clear and bright. "I have an idea. Let us drink coffee, and then let us go see duck."

His mouth felt gummy and raw as he tried to speak. She got up and said, "Coffee, yes?"

"But," he said, his ragged voice was tinged with secondhand smoke.

She brought him a mug. He sat up, took it and sipped. He said, "Today is Sunday, and Sunday is a day of rest."

"You mean, like, you are so very tired?"

"I mean," he began, but he wasn't sure what he meant. Yes, he was tired, but it was more than that. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want to be seen with her. He still didn't believe he was there, and what they had done the night before, and she seemed so cool about it. He said, "I just like the way it sounds: 'Sunday is a day of rest.'"

"Why?"

He said, "It sounds biblical."

Her brow tightened. "Are you a Christian?"

"I was raised Catholic," he said, "but 'day of rest' is like an old-fashioned phrase, full of mystery and power."

"Ah," she said. "Maybe like Imperial Japanese."

He shrugged.

"I was worried: Is he Christian? Christian weak man's religion."

He said, "Maybe something biblical doesn't sound powerful to you."

She pressed her palms together and bowed and chanted: "That is correct."

And in a flash, he saw himself as an altar boy listening to old Monsignor Flanagan's low, mumbled chants during the weekday Mass before school. The scents of incense and candlewax filled the air as his younger self absorbed every incantation and prayer, his spirits rising to that moment of self-loss that he once thought of as communion with God.

"You very deep, I think," she said. "Not a party boy, but like monk in a story, you know? He is top student, but he learns so much he can no longer follow teacher's way. He must follow own way. So, instead of monk, he becomes a businessman and very rich."

He has many women, many children. Much travel. And when he old man he go away. On his own. That life is good life, I think; finding own way."

"And you?" he asked, liking the story and that she had told it. "Are you a party girl?" As soon as that question was out there, though, he regretted it. Of course she'd say no, but what would he do if she said yes?

Instead, she turned her head from side to side, offering him her left and then her right profiles, as if to let him decide. Then she shrugged and said, "Let us go to see the duck."

At the Ueno Park train station, she took his hand and led him past men in suits talking and bowing into payphones and around islands of audiences circling jugglers, break dancers and jazz trios, while all the while, from far in the distance, an amplified voice shouted: "Foreigners go home! Go home!"

She walked quickly, her head aimed straight, her feet pointed out, her body rocking. They paused at the top of a long staircase, where they could look down and take in the wide expanse of the ancient pond, filled with duckweed, lily pads and lotus plants. Signs in English and Japanese said it had been built in the 1600s as a sanctuary for pilgrims visiting nearby shrines and temples. Now, it was a wildlife sanctuary.

They walked down the stairs and along a wide path that circled the pond. They stopped when they reached a crowd before a fence. Children with sticky fingers and popcorn bags, gray-hair seniors in light jackets and squinting middle-aged adults waited in silence, some with cameras at the ready. A cloud blocked the sun. The pond turned gray. Empty aluminum cans, popcorn bags and corn-dog sticks floated in the water. Reiko turned to Peter and smiled.

He suddenly felt as drab as the crowd, old and spent, decades older than her, even though he knew she had two years on him. A line of ducks swam out from behind a disarray of weeds. The crowd went silent. The ducks darted behind stalks and leaves. The crowd sighed, and he felt a surge of shame course through him with the words "*This is what you're doing with your life?*" echoing in his mind. He felt stupid; everything seemed stupid; all of them drawn here just because it was on TV.

Then the group of ducks returned, swimming into a clearing. Among them swam the arrow-stricken duck. From a distance, the arrow looked like nothing more than a comic prop held beneath a wing. The ducks turned toward the crowd. Some gasped. Cameras clicked. The shaft clearly thrust out the duck's back. The duck bent its head into the water to eat. The arrow skimmed the surface. The duck lifted its head. The arrow flicked water up in a perfect arc.

She squeezed his hand. The duck swam on, as if the arrow were routine. He was reminded of one of Monsignor's phrases: "Like Christ, we must all carry our own crosses." It was easy to remember; he said it in all his homilies.

The ducks disappeared behind a mass of vegetation. She whispered: "Amazing. This wounded animal has power. Look, all these people together. The animal makes us more human."

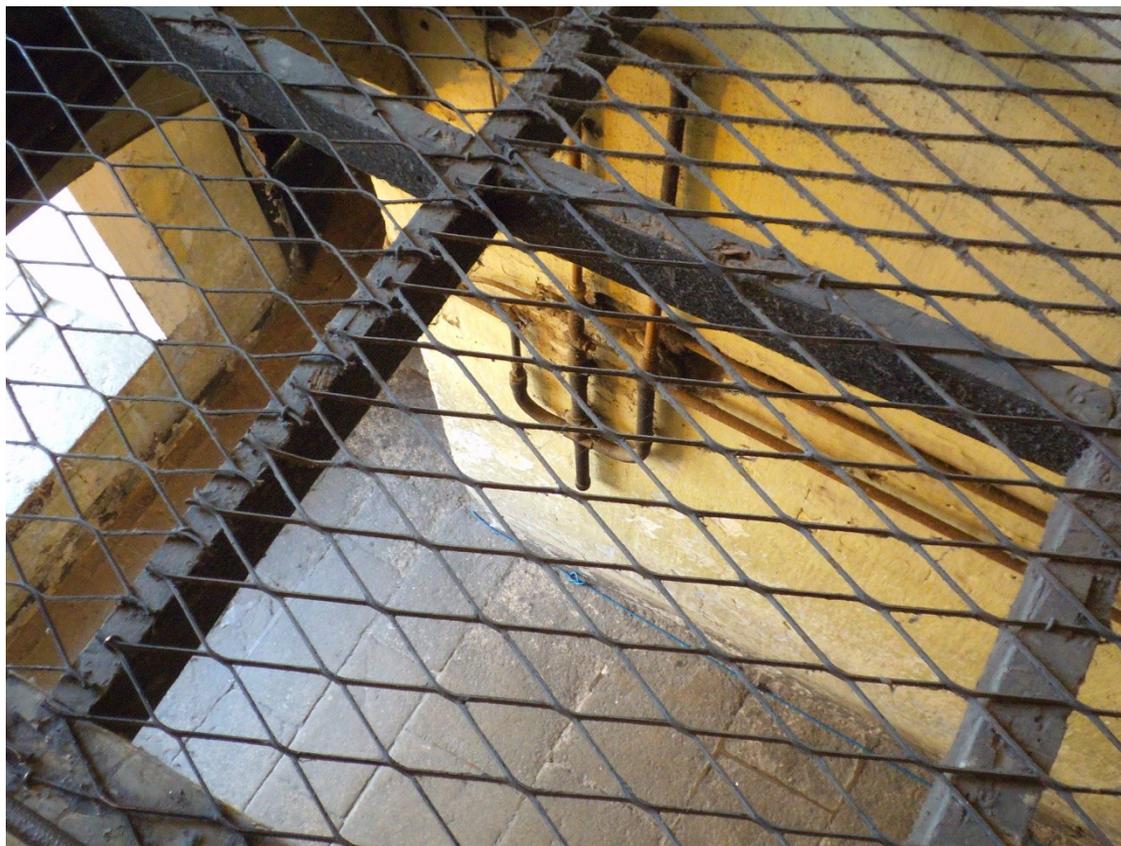
He squeezed her hand, looked into her eyes and said, "I was thinking the same thing."

She smiled. Her eyes filled with warmth. He knew why he was with her now.

He said, "Being with you has been amazing."

She smiled and his heart soared beyond the crowd and the pond, through time and space to see the two of them—Reiko and Peter—growing old together through a fulfilling, cosmopolitan life that included Japan, America and France, a future in which he was free of Catholic guilt and her insightful words were a source of endless amazement, and they kept having the best sex because each day offered opportunities of togetherness and of discovering new things about each other as they held—deep within their hearts—the unerasable image of the other at this moment when they first fell in love on the banks of Shinobazu Pond.

Her eyes locked on his. She opened her mouth to speak. He was certain she would say something to cement their connection, and thus prove their night together was eloquent, beautiful and true. She said, "Kwa-ku?"



Photograph: Uncle Ernie's Fallway © Chris Fradkin

Sunrise on Fifth by Dusty Cooper

Penny loafers aren't the best shoes to wear when trying to get lost in the woods. Lost under a thick surface of leaves, I stumble over hidden roots and stones, splashing through the warm end of the color spectrum. Heading towards the north end, the traffic noise becomes wind-rustled branches, and treetops outstretch the tallest Upper Westside apartments. It's here I find the local's Central Park. A used condom and squeezed-dry lube lay at the base of a tree. The tip of my shoe gets less than an inch from the discarded latex before I snap my foot back.

"Gross," I say, wiping my hands on my jeans.

It's just after sunrise. The city is waking, vibrating with a low hum. Even this far into the park it's hard to escape the city. The noise, the people, the traffic, and the hard, gritty cement. I love it here, but I miss the barefoot simplicity of home. It was easier to be hypothetically gay. Keeping everything private. Never journeying into things like sex in public places. Somehow the city forces that on you. Everything up here is different. Even leaves experience a life of variation. Changing their colors from green to red to orange to yellow, they never know the boring existence of brown until they crumble and disappear.

In Louisiana, brown polka dots appear in the leaves just before they litter the ground, curled-up like poisoned cockroaches. Green to brown, life to death, nothing in-between. Toeing the dirt around the used condom, I thought of Amaury.

I met him through Melina, and Melina through Craigslist.

She had a listing for a room in her Harlem apartment. I sent my information: Male, 26, Gay, Photographer, from Louisiana. Out of dozens of ads I responded to, Melina was the only one to call. When I answered the phone with clear, clipped articulation, she said, "Aw, I thought you'd sound like a cowboy."

I laughed, sure she was joking, but there was silence from the other end.

"Why would I sound like a cowboy?" I asked. "I'm from Louisiana."

"Southern gentlemen are hot."

"Can't I be a southern gentleman without the drawl?"

"I guess," she said, "but it's not as fun."

Melina was a lounge singer who paid her bills working in the office for maid services at The Carlyle on East 76th. If I didn't give her my full attention when she tried to regale me with gossip about Liza Minnelli, a permanent resident of the hotel, she called me a "boring homo."

She had also suggested I work on building a new wardrobe. "Whatever you wore back home has been out for three years," she had said the day I unpacked. "Accents can be attractive, but these Old Navy jeans..."

The row of shirts that had seemed so colorful in the spacious closet at my old place looked dull in my new foot-and-half wide closet.

"You don't quite fit the part. You're cute, but we've got to change your look."

Back home I was just gay, to her I wasn't gay enough.

I became addicted to taking solitary walks exploring the city, my iPod pumping music into my ears. I would pass more people in an hour than I would have walking all day in my hometown. But you never have to speak to a single person in the city. When you know just about everyone from your town, it's hard to escape recognition and at least some small amount of polite conversation. In New York it almost seems like eye contact on the street or in the subway is a form of attack. I like to pretend I'm walking through a deserted New York. I come up from the subway onto vacant sidewalks with indie-pop blue grass rhythms as my only company.

Midway through my first month with her, Melina met me so we could ride the subway together. I had my earphones in, but I could see her waving from the end of the block. Her hair pulled into a bun meant she didn't have a lounge performance that night, which meant she needed an audience. Me.

"Take those pacifiers out of your ears," Melina said, grabbing me by the arm.

On the platform, she told me about her day and the latest news about an ongoing drama between two tenants at the hotel, something she called "The Stolen Dog Saga." I let her words wash over me like the stagnant air pushed by the approaching subway train. We scrunched into the rush hour traffic of bodies; everyone's eyes downcast, pushing their way through for a crevice in which to stand. Melina and I were pressed against one of the middle poles, each of our butts in the faces of the people lucky enough to get a seat. Halfway down the train there was a sharp chinned guy wearing a pinstripe suit and a red tie. White cords snaked out of his ears, and he was nodding his head to a rhythm only he could hear. We made eye contact. Before glancing away I registered a smile.

Melina nudged me. "I think he likes you."

"Who?" Our eyes met again and he smiled. "So, what does it matter?" I said.

"You need a man," Melina said. "You're in New York, not Podunk, Louisiana."

"And?"

"And you can have sex," she said.

"With a stranger from the subway?" I said.

"He won't be a stranger for long," she said and laughed.

As the train bobbed the pole rubbed against my hip. I thought about grabbing the guy's red tie and leading him above ground. The train was slowing. I looked again but he was turned towards the door.

"You should get off the train with him," Melina said.

"He'd probably run away," I said, holding the pole as the train lunged to a stop.

"Yes, with that attitude he would," she said, and poked my chest.

The guy exited. As the train jerked forward, the lights flickered and it seemed for just a second that I was alone in the car.

The following Thursday moved with the crawling pace of a three-toed sloth. By two o'clock I had explored as much of the city as my feet could take. I sank onto my mattress on the hardwood floor, and used my laptop to watch sitcoms. By four the sun had set behind the building across the street and my *cozy* bedroom was cast in the gloaming light of a Harlem afternoon. There was a knock at my door. I tensed as though waiting for someone to stick me in the arm with a needle. I thought about pretending to be asleep. Melina didn't wait for an answer.

"What are you doing?" she asked, oblivious to the obvious.

"I thought I locked that," I said.

Her dark hair loose, big and falling in waves down her shoulders. Her dark eyebrows were in contrast to her ruby red lips, the same color as the stilettos she was wearing. She gave me a stage smile. I thought maybe she wanted me to go to her show, again. "Get dressed, you." She threw her hands into the air. "We're going out with Amaury tonight."

I forced the image out of my head of her singing and dancing with a feather boa.

Hands on hips, she said, "You're twenty-six, and you've been living here for almost a month. You need to have some fun. Besides, Amaury's leaving tomorrow."

I tried to constrict the sheets tighter around my body. "So?"

"So?" she repeated, as her heels clacked across the short distance from the door to my bed. She plopped down next to me. "So he wants to have a good time his last night in New York."

"And you think he'll want to spend his last night with me?"

"May-be," she said, pinching my nose.

Riding the subway, Melina and I leaning against the sliding doors, the car was full with an energetic crowd. Even though the air above ground was in the low thirties, I was the only one wearing a coat. I felt as though my southern-boy fashion sense was on display. On the L train to the East Village there was a group, I figured Columbia students, comparing *The Odyssey* to the new Radiohead album. The guy leading the conversation had dark blue eyes fringed with black eyelashes. He looked towards me, and I jerked my head to Melina at my right. She smiled and raised her eyebrows. I began to regret folding to her pleas to be her escort.

"Do you really want me to ride the subway home and walk five blocks to the apartment by myself?" She set the hook by saying, "At three in the morning?"

When I conceded, she said, "Chivalry isn't dead, they just call it being gay, now."

From our apartment it took three transfers and eight blocks of walking to make it to Beauty Bar on 14th. Dome-shaped hairdryers lined the wall opposite the bar and posters of beauties donning different 50s style hair-dos were scattered throughout the long, narrow space. Somewhere near the back a hand raised and waved. Melina grabbed my arm and dragged me through the crowd. We dodged girls taller than me wearing smocks and holding martini glasses, the liquid inside close to spilling over. Conversation was subdued, the calm before the storm of vodka-loosed tongues.

"Hey," Melina said in a sing-song way and hugged the owner of the hand. As he reached to return the hug his arm swooped down and brushed the side of my cheek.

"Oops," he said with a smile over Melina's shoulder. A spotlight caught his green eyes and I felt a fizzle pass under my belt.

Melina turned and introduced me with an outstretched jazz hand. "This is Zach, an amazing photographer." Pulling the red scarf around Amaury's neck, she said, "And this is..."

"Amaury," he said, extending his right hand.

Our palms met and I felt a reluctant energy pass between us. I registered an appraising sweep of his eyes, and realized mine had done the same.

He was shorter than me, in better shape, cute, and French.

"Hey man," I said and smiled.

"Pleasure," he said, a sly grin revealing perfect teeth.

I like to believe we both knew in that moment we would hook-up. Maybe we did.

Most of what happened after that comes to me in vague shapes, shadows. Between the haze of drinks and shots we all danced and talked.

Conversation between Amaury and me came in the form of body language and lingered glances. He and Melina would be dancing, gyrating in gratuitous motions, and Amaury's lips would purse to the corner of his mouth as though he were trying to sneak a kiss from someone. All the while his eyes seeking me in the darkness.

Melina, Amaury and I had merged with another group, migrating to other drinking holes. The full moon pulled us around Tompkins Square. Our pack moved from bar to bar finding different settings to repeat the same behaviors. Talking, drinking, dancing, flirting.

At two, bartenders began barking about closing time. Continuing to drink, we ignored the last calls and other retreating patrons. As we were ushered out into the cold, I was still the only one wearing a coat. Amaury threw his scarf over my head and pulled me close to him.

"It's cold," he said, tilting his chin. "You should keep me warm."

I felt my cheeks color with confidence. "I agree," I said, wrapping my coat around him.

As we began to leave I spotted Melina. Despite my libido and the libations, reason found its way through. "What about her?" I asked, more to myself than to Amaury.

She noticed me looking and smiled. "What?"

"I can't let her go home by herself."

"Get a cab," Amaury said to Melina.

"I don't have any money," she said, her hands raised in a questioning gesture.

I reached into my pocket and gave her a twenty. "Here," I said, and hailed a taxi.

We all three cinched into the backseat. At 45th Amaury got out. I made sure Melina had enough money for the rest of the trip and the driver knew where he was going. I, on the other hand, had no idea where *we* were going.

The moon was low in the west. We walked to the promenade overlooking the UN building. Behind the illuminated white wall, the East River moved with Queens' lights zig-zagging on the surface. My arm around Amaury, we leaned against the railing. His smile churned my insides with a need that chased away all other thought.

We kissed, the cold intruding between our warm lips. He pulled away and led me by the hand. At the next block we turned. The street ended in a dark park overlooking the river. I realized then we weren't just on some romantic late night stroll.

"We can't," I said, as he pulled me towards a park bench.

"Come on," he said, tugging on my coat.

"It's freezing. Plus, there's a cop car right there. What's wrong with your place?"

"My family is staying with me."

We continued to walk north. Either the drinks had begun to metabolize or reality was setting in, but the burn that had appeared when we first met began to extinguish. He turned in front of me and stopped. Rising on his toes, we kissed. My color returned.

"I know where we can go," he said.

His fingers intertwined mine as we climbed the stairs of his building. After eight flights we came to a landing with a rusted door. Amaury touched the door and pushed. The squeal from the hinges echoed down the stairwell and he turned to me, teeth gritted.

He crossed the raised jamb and made soft steps onto the metal roof. Reaching out he beckoned me to follow. It was like crossing onto a movie set. The night was lit by the Queensboro bridge. Its lights were speckled against the cloudless sky, replacing the stars erased by the city's light pollution. I felt the wind shuffle my hair and catch the tails of my coat, and noticed Amaury was shivering. We sat near the ledge and I wrapped my coat around him. I attacked, my kiss a predatory bite. He attacked back.

Our faces were like two soft stones rubbing together. I feared our lips would freeze. Sinking our teeth into each other's necks left ice cubes resting on our skin. I clawed at his stomach and chest, but winter had robbed the sensation from my fingers. He pushed me back and unzipped my jeans. The cold rushed and further tamed my enthusiasm. With Amaury's head in my lap I watched the bridge. Headlights and taillights crisscrossed in tidal rhythms. It was like the UN building; beautiful, stationary, the whole world moving around it. Amaury's wet kiss broke the scene. I pushed him back and moved on top of him. Unbuckling his belt, I slid my hand into his briefs.

He flinched. "That's cold."

Our friction did nothing for the chill. The wind whipped over my back and the tin roof could have been a patch of permafrost in a field.

I tried to unzip his pants, my stiff-knuckled fingers fumbling. Gripping my hand, he said, "I don't think this is going to work."

I looked into his eyes. His red lips had gone grey. My head slumped onto his shoulder. Without arguing I sat up. For the first time I felt exposed on the roof. I wondered if people on the bridge could see us. Did they pass by, warm in their cars, envious of the two lovers sharing a rooftop rendezvous? Or were they aware of the folly

of our actions in the frigid night? I looked at Amaury, his lips blue and quivering. His stare, the way his eyelids slanted, said what I was feeling. Disappointment.

I wrapped my arm around him and ushered him into the building. Head on my shoulder, his feet hesitated on each step down. At his apartment door I wanted to push him against the wall, take the chance of being caught. But I just stood there. He kissed me one last time, his hand resting on my chest, and nudged me out of his life.

On the street I realized his apartment was on the other side of the island from any subway I could take home, and I was out of money for a cab. I walked west on 55th. The sky was deep blue as the sun began to rise. Unaware of the world around me, images and sensations from the night circled my mind. The collective memory was floating like a lost red balloon, pretty but empty and out of reach. Every step I took was the passage of a day, and, by the time I walked a block, my time with Amaury seemed like something that had happened a week before.

I rounded the corner onto Fifth Avenue and the city was deserted in every direction. The streets were clean, almost sterile. Windows on the west side reflected the sun with the glamour of a Tiffany lamp. At the end of the block the buildings framed the edge of Central Park, the trees tinged with the final stages of fall. Those phases of auburn, pumpkin, and squash all blended together. The headless mannequins of Hugo Boss stood still, watching. Their invisible eyes scrutinizing.

My loafers padded soft on the pavement. Everything was quiet except a hum looming in the distance. Hands in my pockets, I held my coat open wide, walked down the centerline, and spun in a slow circle.

Nudity and Nocturnals by Danielle Kessinger

From a distance it looked almost staged—the people lining the water's edge, the blankets and bits of clothing fanned out around them, the five naked, struggling forms revealed in the rise and fall of waves—nudists being pulled out to sea. She should have known when she saw the armadillos out in daylight, the sun upon their shells creating shuffling points of light, that the hurricane wasn't turning.

At first, she just watched the animals from the window of her house, a salt-worn two-story that stood on the thin strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and Florida's Intercoastal Waterway. It was the last house still occupied within the bounds of the National Seashore. When the government annexed the land, it let the few elderly retirees remain. She hadn't wanted to stay, but Richard had loved the house surrounded by ocean and mangroves, the place he'd spent his life working towards.

Going down the driveway and out onto the road, she watched the animals warily, her cane keeping a slow, careful rhythm. The armadillos were staying in the grass on the side of the old road, not going past the frayed edges of pavement. She'd never seen them during the day unless they were flat and frying on the blacktop. Richard had always admired their form, the complexity of their shell, but she thought them ugly, something prehistoric-looking that should have disappeared with the ice age.

She measured the distance in parking lots. Each one designated a different segment of beach, all of them unofficial: the fishing beach, the tanning beach, the surfing beach, and the nudist beach. That morning, the parking lot for the nudist beach was full of shiny Harleys, BMWs, and a banner strung between two trees with bright red letters declaring "National Nudist Week." Richard had always joked that he'd take her to that beach someday.

When she arrived at the ranger station, two of the rangers, Jeanine and Nathaniel, were leaning against the counter. They waved in Mrs. Frumess' direction before continuing with their argument.

"Hurricane Fred?" Nathaniel said. "They're calling it Hurricane Fred. If we have to get those nudists off the beach, it's going to be difficult to convince them with a Fred."

"Don't worry. They always hit up in the Carolinas or down south. They're already predicting it'll make landfall near Charleston." Jeanine turned towards her, pushing back hair sun and salt bleached from hours of surfing. "Mrs. Frumess, have you ever seen anything more serious than rain and some great waves?"

"You might be too young to remember when Andrew hit, but the winds up here were enough to take the shingles off roofs." She gestured with her cane. "Of course, there were fewer homes then, and people built sturdy. Fewer of these fancy places with the floor to ceiling windows asking for a palm tree to go flying through."

"Mrs. Frumess, was that a jab at the bourgeoisie?" Nathaniel asked.

"Stop being a troublemaker," said Mrs. Frumess.

He tipped his hat at her.

She remembered Nathaniel as a little boy running barefoot on the sand. His father, Gabriel, owned the bait and tackle shop, the only business at their end of the beach. After a year of early morning pleasantries, Gabriel invited Richard fishing with his friends, and it became a weekly ritual.

She'd gone with him once, on one of his first outings. Richard had greeted each man with smiles and back slaps, while she stood separate from their easy camaraderie. When evening fell, an armada of little boats had moved to the center of the channel. As the motors stilled, the men took out small nets and, gripping one side with their teeth, cast them out in an arc. Nathaniel, barely ten at the time, had patiently reminded Richard where to hold the net, demonstrating the turn of the shoulders, the snap of the wrist. A shouted encouragement from his boy-teacher, and Richard gathered the nylon with deft fingers before throwing it to spread gossamer threads like a spider web on the water. It had been years since she'd noticed his grace, the calm precision of his movements. Instead, there had been dinners cold on the table and his hands on her tensed shoulders promising time someday, always the whispered someday, until she wanted to press his palms firm against her ears.

She looked at Nathaniel, suddenly, inexplicably a grown man, the curves of his face given over to hard planes, and felt the weight of years.

"Mrs. Frumess, do you need me to come by and pull in the porch furniture, just in case it passes near here?" Nathaniel asked.

"When the leaves start coming off the trees, I'll worry." She picked up her cane. "I should head home."

"Let me drive you," he said, moving to take her arm.

"I'm fine," she said, waving his concern away.

The next morning she rose early to sit outside and watch the storm swells carve their way up the shore. When people said, "You must love it out here. It's so quiet," she wondered that they didn't notice the constant rustle and roil of the ocean. Usually it was a steady hum in the background, but there were times when she felt the waves would deafen her.

As the wind strengthened, she went into the house, ignoring the ringing phone. She wondered if the storm would damage the dunes, remembering their first months on the barrier island and watching a sea turtle laying eggs among the hillocks. That night, she had told him she wanted to move back inland, hating the mosquitoes, the armadillos, and long days with only him for company. He had agreed to discuss it only if she would take a walk with him. It was late, the water turned to ink and silver. She'd been the first to spot the turtle struggling to pull its weight up the shore. They'd crept nearer as it made a hollow in the sand with rhythmic, powerful sweeps. Richard had taken her hand as they stood counting each globe as it caught a bit of moonlight before dropping into darkness.

She moved slowly around the living room, dusting twenty years worth of mementos of the beach, pictures of Richard nestled among them. The phone rang again, and she closed her eyes and imagined the hurricane taking the dunes, the house, and her.

There was a loud bang at the door and a shouted, "Mrs. Frumess."

"Mrs. Frumess," Nathaniel banded again. "I don't have time for this. We've got to evacuate now. It's turned right towards us." There was no give in his voice.

She opened the door, feeling proud. "You look so tough."

He glared.

"It's not as if the world would miss one old woman."

Nathaniel put a hand on her shoulder. "You don't really believe that."

She shrugged. They only knew her because they'd all loved Richard. She was merely what was left in his wake.

Jeanine's voice came through the static on the radio. "Five nudists caught in a rip tide. I need you down here."

"Shit, I'm on my way." He got her into the car and sped down the road, swerving to avoid armadillos nosing their way onto the black top. When they pulled into the parking lot Nathaniel told her to stay in the car.

She looked at the ramp leading to the beach and wished she'd sat naked on the sand with Richard, sharing what they could with the air. There were so many somedays still stored and unspent when they'd called her from the marina to tell her about his heart, and the ambulance, and the nothing they could do. Forty years of work and he'd only gotten six by the sea, leaving her alone with decades of waves.

She got out of the car and made her way slowly up the ramp. As she reached the top, Nathaniel dove into the water. There were clumps of people in various states of undress scattered across the sand. She hobbled over to a group of pale, middle aged men watching their companions swirled in the surf and thought she hadn't missed much skipping the beach for all those years.

Mrs. Frumess shook her head, picking up discarded beach towels. "Wrap yourselves up, you idiots," she said handing them towels. "You're getting all shriveled."

The men stared at her until she forcibly wrapped a towel around the waist of a large man with a snake tattoo. She had convinced half of them to put something on when a thin, gray haired man stopped her.

"What are you doing?" He stood in front of her, hands on his naked hips.

Mrs. Frumess handed the towels to a short woman standing next to her. "What does it look like I'm doing?" She said, mirroring his pose. "I'm covering people up."

"There is nothing shameful about the human body." For all his gray hair, he had the physique of a man who spent a great deal of time ensuring there was nothing shameful to see.

She held out a towel. "This wind's reaching gale force and it can't be healthy for you to be flapping about."

He glanced down and, with great dignity, took the towel and carefully wrapped it around his waist. Together, they turned towards the tide to see Jeanine and Nathaniel pull the last of the swimmers from the water.

Thirty minutes later, she was in a large white van sitting between a woman not that much younger than her and the man with the snake tattoo, now covered. The rangers were outside trying to move armadillos off the road by shaking towels like capes in a bullfight.

"Why don't we just drive over them," said the woman sitting next to Mrs. Frumess.

"That would be faster, but so would have been letting you people wash out to sea." She looked around and saw the tops of canoe paddles sticking out from behind a seat. "Grab those for me," she told the man sitting beside her.

They passed them up to hand to the rangers, and she climbed out after them.

"Mrs. Frumess, get back in the car," Nathaniel told her.

She held out her hand. "Let me just do one." When Nathaniel shook his head she said, "Please, I'm old and today's the day."

"Okay, just be careful," he said, handing her the paddle.

She took it from him, grip firm, and found her target, a small armadillo directly in front of the van. She gently swung the paddle in its path, until its little legs took it, grunting, into the brush. She smiled, thinking she was eighty-two years old, and in a single day she'd seen more naked men than she'd seen in a life time, and herded a dinosaur, however small its size.

Droning by J.D. Hager

Vince developed severe insomnia almost immediately after his wife left him.

Something about the way she declared him the biggest loser she had ever met, and rode off into the sunset on the back of her Pilates instructor's Vespa. It felt like he went weeks without even closing his eyes, hopeful and expectant that his wife would come skidding into the driveway any moment, denouncing the errors of her ways and reiterating her undying love for Vince. He still loved her despite how she felt.

Vince soon lost his job, and began experiencing hallucinations triggered by sleep deprivation and delusions of reconciliation. He consulted a doctor, who prescribed a particular sleep enhancing medication with the unfortunate side effect of sleepwalking. So while Vince awoke well rested, he was never sure what adventures his sleeping body had taken on. He'd managed to lock himself out of the house numerous times, and even woke up in the back of a police car once. It was brutally awkward, but compared to the curse of the unclosing eyelid, the sleepwalking seemed not so bad.

One day Vince awoke sprawled across his living room floor in his underwear. No blankets or pillows, just his nearly naked body stretched out across the carpet like a homicide victim. He'll never get used to waking up in some strange place that is not his bed, no matter how many days in a row it happens. Vince's body was wracked by hypothermic tension, his various extremities on the verge of surrendering all feeling and control. Ever since the heater malfunctioned the house was an icebox, regularly achieving temperatures far below whatever the wind and cold outside could muster. Vince could see his exhaled breath, floating like smoke signals, as he shivered on the brink of frostbite in his own living room.

It didn't take Vince long to realize some evil, degenerate force was ringing the doorbell over and over. He had no idea what time it is, but it felt far too early for anyone to be so vehement about their use of the doorbell. He imagined his wife standing there apologetic and teary-eyed, but doubted whether she would bother ringing the bell. More likely it was his wife's lawyer, with divorce papers tucked neatly into his briefcase and a restraining order rippling through his fingers. Vince stood, struggling against his clumsy, frozen limbs. He grabbed a blanket from the couch and wrapped it around himself, taking a few shaky steps toward the front door. When he reached up to rub the blur out of his eyes he realized there was a penny pressed into the flesh of his cheek. He peeled it off and held the coin in his hand as he stepped to the door and opened it, wrapped up like a burrito.

Vince discovered the neighbor kid Jango dressed as a bumblebee, poking his doorbell with a stick. Jango, the eight year old of dubious intelligence, with the blank stare and the overbite as severe as any cartoon character. Every time Vince saw the kid he at first felt sorry for him, and then asked himself, *who the hell names their kid Jango?*

"Jango, what's up? Stop ringing the damned doorbell!"

Jango dropped his stick and took a step away from the doorway, his yellow bee antennae hovering above his head like UFOs. "Trick or treat," he said, smiling and holding a hollow plastic pumpkin out in front of his bulging bee belly.

"You've got to be kidding me. Do you know what time it is, Jango?"

Jango looked at his calculator watch. Vince didn't even know they made those things any more. "Seven forty-four," Jango announced. He smiled and raised his pumpkin in Vince's direction. "I'm a bee."

Jango and Vince were well acquainted. Jango was home-schooled, and usually lurking around the neighborhood when most kids were locked away in conventional public facilities. Since Vince had experienced recent problems finding and keeping a job, Jango and Vince tended to share similar schedules. Vince and Jango's parents cohabited a duplex with a single, enormous yard. Bored, depressed and drinking green tea, Vince watched Jango's daily adventures from his kitchen window as the boy traipsed through their backyard. He dug for dinosaur bones. He catalogued the insect species endemic to their backyard. He spent hours entertaining himself poking a stick in the dirt, and Vince couldn't help but feel envious of Jango's carefreedom. Jango's tireless explorations of the moment at hand provided Vince fleeting instances of respite from himself.

"I'm sorry, Jango. I don't have any candy."

"That's pretty fucked up, Mister K."

Vince was regularly both surprised and disturbed when engaging Jango in conversation. He said things out of the blue, things like *you know, many mammal species eat their offspring*, or, *your skin has the pallid complexion of the dispossessed*. Things an eight year old shouldn't say. He often appeared to enter some kind of trance when he spoke, the tone of his voice so level and assured that it twisted Jango's blank stare into more of a mystical, all knowing gaze. Every time it happened, Vince couldn't help but feel like it was all just some freaky, recurring accident.

Jango stared at Vince like Vince was the sun, like Jango couldn't quite see him and was blind from trying. Jango's jutting overbite did nothing to improve his dimly lit demeanor. He looked dumbstruck, and Vince felt moved again by a wave of pity for this poor kid, what with his goofy appearance and goofier name.

"How about a penny?" Vince held the penny peeled from his cheek out toward Jango.

"How about a dollar?" Jango said, pulling his plastic pumpkin away from the offering in Vince's hand.

"I'll give you a dollar if you can tell me why you dressed as a bee."

Without so much as a pause, Jango reported "Because they have one of the most spectacular mating rituals of any arthropod." The way Jango's eyes lit up when he said *mating rituals* gave Vince a queasy shiver. "When the Queen is ready to mate with the drones, they swarm and mate hundreds of feet in the air. Then when it's over, the drones' endophallus gets ripped off and the queen flies away with part of the drone still inside her. The drone falls paralyzed to the ground and dies within hours. Pretty spectacular, huh?"

Spectacular wasn't the word that came to mind. Jango's scholarly manner frightened Vince, as if he were an eight-year old entomologist giving a lecture. He wanted to ask Jango where he procured this information but felt unable to speak. A picture of his wife entered his mind, flying off and leaving him to die behind, paralyzed, his endophallus wrapped in newspaper and stuffed into her purse like a souvenir.

"Jango, that's, that's..." Vince trailed off searching for the right word. "Horrible."

"That's life, Mister K."



Jango the bee and Vince the burrito stood facing each other in silence for a moment with stares now equally blank. Vince felt as if he had gleaned some horrible fact of life, a grim peek at the inner workings of the universe that he hadn't been prepared for. It felt like a punch in the throat.

"Happy Halloween, Mr K." Jango turned back toward the sidewalk, and started waddling his bee butt away from Vince's front door, his little foam stinger waving back and forth like a reminder of something lost. Then Jango stopped and turned back to face Vince one last time. "You owe me a dollar."

Vince suddenly noticed the awful taste in his mouth, like he'd spent the entire night sucking on that dirty penny. He closed the door and wrapped the blanket a little tighter around himself. A wave of fatigue hit him and he could barely keep his eyes open, as if the months of restless nights and zombie walks had accumulated into a smothering, suffocating mass. He shuffled back to the couch, flopped down onto it as gracefully as he could while wrapped up like a taquito, and slept like a man freed.

Photograph: Jeffrey's Card © Chris Fradkin

Woof Woof by Leslee Renee Wright

Lucy is dead and it doesn't matter. What does matter is that her father is still alive. He is alive and his daughter is dead and it still isn't enough to make things right.

I went to kindergarten with Lucy. Our finger-painting easels were pushed together chummily, and she didn't laugh when, thanks to a miscommunication with the teacher, I wet my pants and urine slurped toward her shoes. This made us friends, and what made us best friends was the day my parents decided to build our new house across the street from hers. Together we tilted over the deep, dirt socket where the basement would go, and my beloved Bonne Bell lip shimmer slipped from my shirt pocket and tumbled into the hole. I couldn't do a single thing right. Maybe I still can't.

* * *

I don't remember much of what Lucy looked like. She was somewhat freckled and sometimes blond and occasionally tall. Her father, however, was a large man—completely and always—made in the shape of an upside-down bowling pin. He had a long, draggy moustache and the look of a schnauzer that spent all day snout-down in a slimy bowl. Schnauzers are my least favorite dog, but I like them more than I like Lucy's father. I didn't like him back then, and I like him less now.

Because she is dead, I try to remember the good things about Lucy. She collected reptiles, and had no fear of snakes or the squirming worms they ate. When Lucy went to summer camp in 5th grade, her snake escaped its terrarium, and Lucy's mother, a squeamish aerobics instructor, paid me five dollars to hunt it down. I spelunked the closets and crawled under beds, but my ears kept casting about for the heavy footfalls of Lucy's father. I was afraid of what he would do if he found me, wrist-deep in a pile of neckties. No one knew how much he hated me except for me.

* * *

That Lucy's father hated me left me with a certain paranoia of being hated. I went out of my way to wedge myself into everyone's good graces, agreeing and smiling back any foul mushrooms of dissent. When the most popular girl in class scowled at me for wearing red leather boots just like hers, I vowed to never wear them in her presence again, for the sake of our respective positions on the hierarchy. When Lucy somehow ended up as the popular girl's best friend, I ceased my telephone calls and retreated to the school rejects: a girl with webbed toes; another who sported her brother's hand-me-downs and a pair of black lips, the latter induced by her passion for licorice ropes.

Lonely, and never a lover of licorice, I read books to search out stories of other girls who might be hated. But they were never hated, not by adults. They might be stuffed in a

burlap sack and kidnapped, or roasted in an oven and eaten, but those options seemed more tolerable than being hated. To be snatched, to be gobbled—both were almost a type of love.

Perhaps that's why boys made for a welcome change. In 8th grade Arts and Crafts an inky-haired Megadeth fan made fine work of my upper thighs, massaging them beneath the table, his fingers shoving higher, past the hem of my shorts. I kept still, watching how his forehead creased with hormones or genius. It felt good to be someone's muse. But whenever I spotted him in the lunchroom he was an utter philistine, busy spraying chips between bursts of laughter, and if my shy eyes caught his they were met with deliberate blankness, as if he had clapped them on vapor. From a distance I noted the way his bangs bunched over his brows, making him look a little like a Schnauzer. I was developing, no doubt, and what I developed was a strong dislike of Schnauzers.

* * *

Later, Lucy's father started building antique cars in his garage. Every day, from sunrise until sunset, high-powered tools screamed and gnashed at our windows, and the neighborhood stank of gasoline. Soon, everything came to taste of gasoline. Even my favorite flavor of pizza pocket, piping hot from the microwave, had the tinge of burnt rubber. I fed it to the garbage disposal, and the metal blades churned up something inside me. I could hate Lucy's father. I could hate him more than he ever hated me. The realization came with a hearty satisfaction all its own.

* * *

By the time I was old enough to drive, I was speeding by Lucy's house with my middle finger held high and a chorus of angry, tattooed girls wailing from my car. Lucy's father barely looked up from his blowtorch, his expression hidden behind protective face gear. He had hated me first, but I hated him most, and if not bound by the law and a need for parental approval, I would have done more to make him know it. I soothed myself by staring at him from my bedroom window, mouthing a mantra of *woof woof, motherfucker* while sucking down lemon drops.

Even as an adult, all moved out and with a life of my own, I still thought of Lucy's father. I would spot some teenaged boy in a Megadeth shirt, smell gasoline, or come across a schnauzer tearing up someone's garden, and rage would grip me. It gripped me in a way that felt cozy; it was like being gobbled up whole and I felt delicious.

* * *

I thought about letting it go, once. Lucy had just put a gun to her head and the timing seemed right. I had a rare fit of benevolence that prompted me to drag most of my belongings out onto the corner and watch from the porch while passers-by hauled off my

sweaters and dining room chairs. I felt lighter and lifted. I wrote a poem in the funeral home's online guest-book, went on a diet, and engaged in vigorous sex with my next-door neighbor. None of those things lasted—not even the poem, which, when I checked back a few weeks later, had been deleted. Gone, like vapor.

* * *

I could explain what happened with Lucy's father—what happened to make me so certain that he hated me, and thus made me hate him in return. I could explain but I won't, and here's why.

There are very few things I can call my own—the sourness of lemon drops, the distaste for Schnauzers—but the most important of them all is what I know about Lucy's father. It's a secret, and once I show it to someone, they will try to rationalize it, they will try to suggest that I am over-reacting. They will rob me of my tragedy, which is all mine for the keeping. I know how to make it last.

* * *

The last time I saw Lucy's father was a year ago, mere months after Lucy died. He was in the grocery store, clinging to a cart as if it were a walker. His salt-and-pepper hair and whiskers had both gone chalk white. He was fatter than I remembered, shorter somehow, but I knew him at once. Me, he didn't know at all. I was fatter, too, and I liked to stamp the full weight of my feet to let others know that I knew what they were thinking. I stamped and stomped after him through the aisles until he turned around, but he only puzzled at me, asking if I could show him to the salsa.

I pretended to lead him to the salsa, but it was really the dog food aisle. He looked over the colorful bags that were cavorting with puppies, and he seemed to shake—a bowling pin about to tip over.

Woof, woof, I thought, and even though the voice in my head was triumphant and shouting, I couldn't bring myself to bark out loud. The noise was trapped inside me.

Maybe he heard me struggling, because he looked at me then, his ears pricked up.

Woof, woof! Woof, woof!

But my lips stayed shut. They always do.

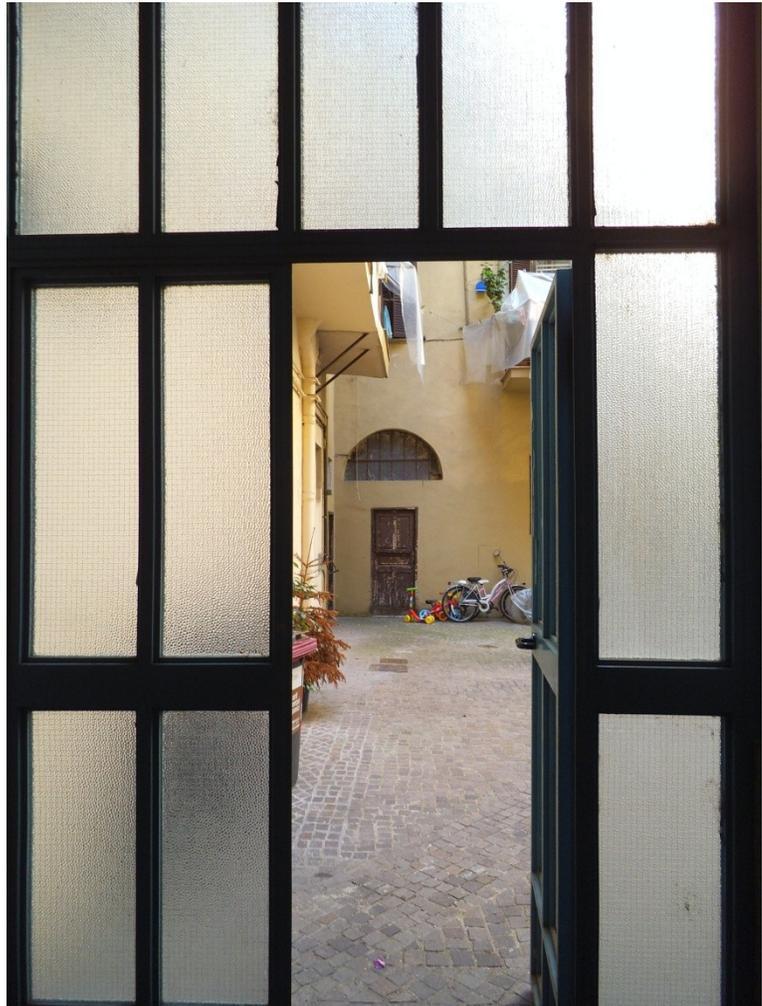
Photographic Memory #10 by Hun Ohm

She keeps that night in the white garage cabinets filled with jars of ginseng roots. Patiently, it leans behind the brethren rectangles of Prestone and Kikkoman, presses against the cardboard coffin for gardening tools used two seasons and then forgotten. Barbecue skewer sentries, coat of dust. Somehow, she brought it with her intact. The only one. See the fading dress, the Brylcreemed hair. Read the gilt writing in the bannered banquet room, inscrutable characters too grand for the eye to misunderstand.

What can begin to explain the heart? Who can know its palimpsest, the soft palpitations it cannot cease? There is only her shallow breath that accompanies the handling of this picture, then her lips' faint crescent. And in the air, suddenly, rises the sound of strings. A series of speeches, careful laughter. Ballads and oaths. A toast.

This night of her engagement, she was still young, there is no question. She was scarcely the age of her father's first wife when that one was sent away. She would not smile but only stared solemnly at the expanse before her. She held the fiancé's certain hand, white-gloved, unyielding. But notice the reluctance of her shoulder, a hollowness between their bodies that only the camera captured. And over there, another hand afloat, its thin owner dwelling beyond the frame.

All around them there were strings of faces like blushed pearls, smiling, red with rice wine. The fiancé led her to the elevated table filled with dishes: rice cake and pear, an ox's ribs ringed by four fish stews. All his favorite foods, she knew, she had learned the lessons well from his household. But throughout the reception she sat silently, without expression. She did not touch her food.



There were whispers from each corner of the vast banquet room. Rumors passed from plate to plate, each mouth hungry to show its tongue. *Strange*, they would say. *Perhaps she is already with child. See how full her belly is.* Even her father could not help it; she caught him staring at her silk-wrapped midriff.

And those words, they bit into her as if tipped with blade. She was young, but there is no question she had keen ears. Slowly, she rose from her seat and gazed at the disaster of tables before her. Heads turned, a disturbed murmur swept through the room. Silence. When she spoke, her voice was a distant bell at night, fallen upon slumbering ears.

"Not this man," it rang, and she stared at the astonished eyes. "Not this man," she said again and sat back down. No one spoke. She placed her hands into her food and squeezed.

Photograph: Framed © Chris Fradkin

by Ian Woollen

Gray stared at his dinner. He did not like eating alone in restaurants. Not that Gray struggled with being alone. He enjoyed it—in private. To be alone in public was a different matter.

He glanced repeatedly at the other solo diner at the Dragon Express. Five tables away. The other guy sat comfortably, legs crossed, leaning back against the colorful waterfall murals. Yeah, that's the way Gray wanted to look too. They both wore jeans and a plaid flannel shirt and sandals.

Gray refocused on his Blackberry, blinking and bleeping beside his plate. The phone was his dinner partner. Text messages floated in from his distant wife, away at a yoga retreat for the week.

R U at Dragon again? R U having sesame noodles?

Gray typed, "chow w/ doppelganger."

The other guy unrolled a newspaper and spread it out across his table. The pink pages were a give-away. The Financial Times. Gray had read it at breakfast and could easily guess which front-page article the other guy was digesting. The one about retirement portfolios. The one that made Gray think, "I'm never going to get out of this rat race." From his perplexed frown, Gray surmised the other guy was a not a banker or professional money man. Probably a mid-career academic, like Gray, trying to learn how to protect a diminished 401K.

Gray scooted his chair. Crossed and uncrossed his legs. He stood and walked over to the drinks counter to refill his tea. He passed close to the other guy's table and noticed that the doppelganger was eating sesame noodles. On the way back, the guy glanced up and Gray gestured at the newspaper and said, "It's enough to make you decide to stuff the mattress."

The other guy smiled and said, "The problem is I already have."

Gray said, "How do like the sesame noodles?"

"My favorite," the guy said.

"You eat here a lot?"

"Usually take-out," the other guy answered, "my wife likes ordering take-out, but she's away at a conference this week, so tonight I just came on over."

Gray struggled to contain a rippling sensation of space/time warp. He slowly, matter-of-factly said, "Yeah, same here."

"You're welcome to join me," the other guy said.

Gray wavered. He wanted to accept the invitation, but in the world of professorial male bonding, it was too much too soon. Also, he noticed a pack of cigarettes in the other guy's shirt pocket. Gray had finally quit smoking only six months before. He knew that if the other guy offered him a smoke... no, he couldn't risk it.

"I'll take a raincheck," Gray said, "I'm just finishing up. And I don't want to keep you from your paper. Important time. We're the last of the newspaper readers."

"Right on," the other guy said.

* * *

Gray busied his dishes, except for his Styrofoam tea cup. He exited the restaurant. The evening sky had gone dark. He started toward home, sipping his tea. Why had he and the other guy not at least exchanged names? Would that have broken the spell, to voice their different names?

Like many people, Gray occasionally Googled himself. He had found several individuals with his same first and last name scattered around the country. He once dreamed of inviting them all to assemble at a spring break resort in Florida.

Gray turned and crossed the street and headed back toward Dragon Express. He paused behind the tall bushes in the parking lot. He saw the other guy inside, framed by the large, front window, reading his newspaper beside the waterfall mural. Gray stared and suddenly remembered something mysterious about waterfalls. The secret place behind the deluge.

He was a young child. An outing to a state park. Ledges. A tributary creek. The waterfall now would seem small. Back then, it was thunderously gigantic. A dare from someone, an older kid, his brother. A dare to walk into the spray, to walk directly through the noisy curtain of water and discover the secret place on the other side. His brother did it first. He disappeared. Gray froze and yelled for help.

* * *

The other guy folded his newspaper and swallowed the last of his drink. He stood and stretched and strode out of the restaurant. He lit a cigarette. The smoke wafted across the parking lot to the bushes. It smelled delicious to Gray. The other guy began walking down the cross street.

Gray followed him at a distance. Matching his pace and gait. Three blocks later, the other guy arrived at a brick bungalow perched on a rise. He turned and climbed the steep, frost-heaved limestone steps to the porch. He paused to snuff out his cigarette in a clam shell ashtray on the porch railing.

Gray watched from the corner.

Inside the house, ceiling lights flicked on and off and on, as the man's shadow migrated from the living room to the kitchen, upstairs to a bedroom. Gray approached, gathered his courage, and gingerly took the stone front steps, one at a time, up to the porch. He rescued the cigarette butt from the ashtray and inhaled a reviving puff. It was like crossing through the veil of the waterfall. Trespassing into alien space. Now he was the other guy.

Issue 12 Contributors

Authors

Damon Barta once lived in a place where he could see for miles in every direction. He now lives safely among trees. His work has appeared in several print and online journals. Selected fiction can be found at <http://damonbarta.site88.net/>.

Andrew Bockhold is an associate registrar and adjunct faculty member at a small college in Cincinnati, Ohio. His work has appeared at *Xenith*, *Work Literary Magazine* and *Streetlight Literary Magazine*. His first novel is currently under consideration, and he is nearly finished with a second. He lives with his wife Kristen and their cat Mia.

Jackson Burgess studies at the University of Southern California, where he is a Greenberg Fellow for Poetry and Editor in Chief of *Fractal Literary Magazine*. Jackson has placed work in *Tin House Flash Fridays*, *The Adroit Journal*, *The Monarch Review*, and elsewhere, and leads a poetry workshop on Skid Row. (jacksonburgess.com)

Christopher Cassavella is a recent graduate from Kingsborough Community College where he received his degree in Liberal Arts and currently attends Brooklyn College. Some of his short stories have appeared in *Buffalo Almanack*, *Tincture Journal*, and *Front Porch Review*. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Heather Clitheroe's work has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Kaleidotrope*, and in *Lightspeed's* upcoming Women Destroy Science Fiction special issue. She is a past participant of the Banff Centre for the Arts' writing residency program and the Leighton Artists' Colony. She wishes to thank good friend, former grad-school co-conspirator, and all around good egg, Sarah Mann, for her fortuitous link to an article and demand for a story on Facebook. Finally. Facebook is good for something after all.

Dusty Cooper is writing a collection of stories based on his experiences on Koh Phangan in the Gulf of Thailand. His work has appeared in *Fogged Clarity*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Paper Nautilus*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Litro*, *Bartleby Snopes*, and *Weave Magazine*. Dusty received his Master's of Creative Writing from Southeastern Louisiana University where he currently teaches.

Rob Essley is an aspiring fiction writer originally from Wyoming, now living in a forest near Atlanta. He loves to keep it weird. His writing has been published at www.fiction365.com, and you can read much more at www.robessley.com.

Jon Fried has published short fiction in *Third Bed*, *Eclectica*, *Beehive*, *Pierogi Press*, *Pindeledyboz*, *Lamination Colony*, *New Works Review* and other literary journals and e-zines, as well as feature stories on New Jersey culture and nightlife for The New York Times and songs he has written for a rock band he co-founded called the Cucumbers, which has released several recordings. He is working on a series of novels based on some colorful characters in his family tree.

J.D. Hager lives in Northern California with his wife and dogs. He spends his days working undercover as a middle school science teacher. His fiction has appeared in the *Porter Gulch Review*, *Cease Cows*, *East of the Web*, and is forthcoming in many other places. He shares leftovers, rants, and other sequences of words at jdhager.wordpress.com.

Laurie Jacobs lives in a small town on the coast north of Boston. She has a JD from George Washington University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. She has published several books and stories for children. Her creative non-fiction has appeared on The Drum. This is her first published piece of fiction for adults.

Michael Janairo's journalism and creative writing has been published in various newspapers and literary magazines. His story "Out of Japan" won the Tsujinaka Fiction prize and was published in both English and Japanese in the *Abiko Quarterly*. Other recent work includes the poem "Aswang" in the online speculative journal *Eye to the Telescope*, the short story "The Advanced Ward" in the anthology "Veterans of the Future Wars" and the short story "Angela and the Scar" in the anthology "Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction From the Margins of History." He lives in upstate New York with his wife, son and dog. (His family name is pronounced "ha NIGH row.") He blogs at michaeljanairo.com.

Anna Lea Jancewicz lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where she homeschools her children and haunts the public libraries. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming at *The Citron Review*, *Jersey Devil Press Magazine*, *theNewerYork*, *Rivet Journal*, and elsewhere. Yes, you CAN say Jancewicz: Yahnt-SEV-ich. More at: <http://annajancewicz.wordpress.com/>

Mark Jaskowski grew up in the swamp and now lives in the mountains. He teaches and studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He's got a few stories around, including in *Warmed and Bound: A Velvet Anthology* and the forthcoming *Exigencies* anthology from *Dark House Press*.

Danielle Kessinger has lived and written in the mountains of Colorado, Japan, North Carolina, and Costa Rica. Now, she resides in the flatlands of Florida and composes poetry on a paddleboard in gator-infested waters. She recently completed her first novel.

Edward Lando is originally from Paris and is currently a senior at the Wharton School. He is writing his first novel.

Greg Letellier is a writer from Biddeford, Maine. His poems and stories are published or forthcoming in *DUM DUM Zine*, *Extract(s)*, *Ray's Road Review*, *Poydras Review*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, and elsewhere. His book of stories, *Paper Heart*, will be released in August.

Amanda Hart Miller is presently pursuing a Master of Arts in Writing at Johns Hopkins University, and she teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at a community college in Maryland. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in nearly twenty literary magazines, including *PANK*, *Literary Mama*, *Apeiron Review*, and *Scissors & Spackle*. Her short story "Pansy" was nominated for a 2013 Pushcart Prize. She has also published several children's books.

Michael Morshed earned an MFA from UCR Palm Desert, and his stories have also appeared in *The Whistling Fire*. He lives in San Diego.

Hun Ohm is a writer and intellectual property attorney. He lives in western Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared in *Literary Orphans*, *Gone Lawn*, *Every Day Fiction*, and other publications.

Ryan J. Ouimet is currently working very long days in the woods while attempting to finish his first novella. Ryan holds a BFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maine. His work has been published in the *Sandy River Review* and *Fifty Word Stories*. He splits his time living and writing between NJ and NY.

June Sylvester Saraceno is the author of two full length poetry collections of *Dirt and Tar* and *Altars of Ordinary Light* as well as a chapbook of prose poems, “Mean Girl Trips.” Her work has appeared in various journals including Poetry Quarterly, Southwestern American Literature, and Tar River Poetry. She is English program chair at Sierra Nevada College, Lake Tahoe, as well as MFA faculty and founding editor of the Sierra Nevada Review. For more information visit www.junesaraceno.com

John Timm is now semi-retired and freed from the shackles of writing non-fiction in order to put food on the table. He gives his imagination free reign by writing flash fiction and short stories. A second novel manuscript is also in the works. And a third. And a fourth.

Ian Woollen lives in Bloomington, Indiana, walking distance to Bryan Park. His day job is psychotherapy. Short fiction has surfaced in a variety of places, including *Juked*, *Unlikely Stories*, *decomp*, and *The Blue Lake Review*. A new novel, *UNCLE ANTON'S ATOMIC BOMB*, is due out this fall from *Coffetown Press*.

Leslee Renee Wright lives in Denver, Colorado, where she writes poems and stories, and avoids misanthropy whenever possible. Her work is forthcoming from, or has appeared in, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *A Capella Zoo*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and others. She has a sparse website at lesleereneewright.com

Illustrators

Chris Fradkin is a former beet farmer now living in Brazil. His prose and poetry have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Thrush Poetry Journal*. His songs have been performed by *Fergie*, *The Plimsouls*, and *The Flamin' Groovies*. And his Emmy-award-winning sound editorial has graced *The X-Files*

Jill Gewirtz is a New York native and has been surrounded by photography since the 1970s. Her father owned color laboratories from the 1970's through the 1990s and he produced prints for photography Master's such as Meyerowitz, Scavullo, Avedon, Hiro, and other pioneers in the photography field. She was developing black and white film at age 14. Ms. Gewirtz is drawn to surreal art and by using alternative photography techniques, collage, and reflections in her digital work, she is able to recreate that blurred line between reality and fantasy. As an artist, she takes new art forms and pushes herself, as an effort to continue evolving. She is especially interested in multiples of objects, which creates a sense of infinity and permanence. She had an image included in the Hurricane Sandy exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, which was accepted in the Museum's permanent collection. Recently, she's also had photographs in group shows at Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, Monmouth Museum, and the Marietta Cobb Museum, outside Atlanta. A number of her photographs were recently included in the Getty Commons and Library of Congress collection. Jill Gewirtz believes that at no matter what your age, one can continue making artwork throughout their lifetime. Her work can be seen at JillGewirtz.com and <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jillgewirtz/>.

Justin Nguyen is an independent filmmaker and a recent University of Southern California graduate. He spends his time skateboarding, making music, and performing spoken word when he should be sleeping, and aims to inspire others to keep following their passions.
