

Bartleby Snopes



A Literary Magazine of Fiction

Bartleby Snopes Issue 8

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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.*

A voice. A pull. A realm of darkness dropping away, revealing another world of darkness. His arm. She was tugging his arm. He closed his eyes again. "I'm not working today," he said.

But the tug continued. It pulled him back from the darkness again. Her fingers, digging into his skin. In his darkness, he imagined teeth tearing into his hairy forearm.

"Get up," she whispered, her breath hot in his right ear. "Get up. Now."

He pinched his eyes and tried to make out her face in the low light of the bedroom. There was some moonlight and there was the glow from the alarm clock. He could not see her eyes. "Get up," she whispered again, digging her fingers deeper into his arm. Five points of fear clawing into him. He tensed and pulled his arm away.

"I'm awake," he said. "What? What is it?"

She pushed herself up against the headboard and pulled the sheets up to her neck. He still could not make out her eyes. "Somebody's in the house."

"What do you—"

She grabbed his arm again and the sheet fell away from her left shoulder. "Shut up and listen. Someone is downstairs. Listen." She drew her hand back and pulled the sheet taut.

They were quiet. He heard nothing. He watched her shadow, frozen with expectancy.

"It's nothing," he said, whispering and wondering why he was whispering if truly it was nothing. He waited a moment longer. "It's nothing," he said again.

She shook her head, slowly, left to right. Then, again, left to right.

Then he heard it. Something.

"I'm calling the police," she said.

He reached for the sheet at her neck. "It's nothing. It's the cat."

She was still pressed against the headboard. "I'm calling the police."

"Don't," he said. "Don't call the goddamned police." He untangled his legs from the sheets and swung them off the bed. "I'll go downstairs. I'll go down and get the damn cat."

He rubbed his nose and started for the door.

"Take something," she said.

"What?" He turned to face her shadow.

"Take something with you."

"Like what?"

"A golf club. Something."

"The clubs are in the garage."

"I don't know," she said. Her voice, still a whisper, was higher now.

He was quiet as he slipped through the bedroom door. He was quiet for her. Nobody was downstairs, but he kept the hallway lights off anyway. He could see in the dark. He had better vision than she did. As he descended, he thought about the carpet runner she had demanded they install on the stairs. He wanted the pile to massage his feet but it was new and unforgiving.

Something was different. The spot on his arm where her fingers had been began to tingle. He touched his arm, thinking that she might have broken the skin. It was smooth, but there was an unmistakable tingling, a weak fire at the tips of his forearm hair. Something was wrong.

At the base of the stairs, he felt a breeze. The windows were closed. It had been cold that day. He squinted in the foyer and saw nothing. The den was empty. He moved through the living room. It was undisturbed. The dining room, too, was clear. There was no sign of the cat.

At the threshold of the kitchen, he reached for the light switch.

"Right there," a man's voice said. There was a thickness to the word "there."

Tiny spots appeared in his vision as his eyes adjusted to the light from the recessed bulbs in the ceiling and the fixture above the kitchen table. And then he saw him. Across the kitchen, a figure was facing him, standing with its back to the open sliding glass door that led to the deck. A man in a ski mask and a black coat and jeans. His hand was extended. It was holding a gun. The man was pointing a gun at him.

"I said stop," the man said, and he realized that he had not stopped walking, even when he saw the man. He had taken a step or two across the kitchen, toward a man in a mask with a gun. He stopped. He saw that the man was wearing a black turtleneck. He saw that the man had pale skin around his eyes.

The gun was pointed at him. The gun did not look like the guns he had seen in movies. It was not shiny. The man raised the gun level with the eye holes in the ski mask. "Not another step," the man said.

But he had not moved, or he did not think he had. He stared at the end of the gun. What was it called? he asked himself. The barrel? And he knew that he was going to die. He knew it because the cold wind coming through the open sliding glass door carried it to him. The wind was telling him that he was going to die. It was the song of the March night wind.

And he thought that he was supposed to see something about himself or his life. He thought that he would see images from his life, revelatory moments like the kiss at the altar on his wedding day or the night he crouched at the top of the stairs and heard his parents first say the word "divorce" or the first time he fell off his bicycle and felt the bloody kiss of the pavement. But these thoughts were incomplete, these images inchoate, and all he could fix upon was the cat in the corner of the kitchen. It was standing astride the long white vertical blinds that hung over the left half of the sliding

glass door. The cat was gray and black and it looked up at him with blank greenish-yellow eyes. He could not remember its name. It was her cat.

"Damn," said the man with the gun, cocking his head slightly. He began to lower the gun.

He blinked and stopped thinking about the cat. He looked down at his blue and white pajama bottoms and saw the material growing darker, the darkness radiating out, spreading down his left leg and across his left thigh. He tried to stem the flow but could not and he shivered and his hands shook as the wetness ran down the length of his leg pooling on the tile. He choked back the urge to whimper. He closed his eyes and thought of the only thing that came to mind—nothing. He thought only of the darkness, the void, the emptiness of that black world behind shut eyes.

When he opened his eyes, the puddle on the kitchen floor came into focus. Slowly, deliberately, he raised his head toward the other side of the kitchen. The man was gone. The chilly breeze was toying with the vertical blinds. The cat was gone, too.

He rubbed his fingers against the inside of his cold palms. He touched the back of his right hand to his upper lip, then the skin between the upper lip and his nose. He rubbed at his eyes once more and exhaled deeply. His chest rattled. Stepping over the puddle on the floor, he moved toward the open door. He placed his palms on the frame and slowly poked his head out into the night. Looking left, then right, he saw no trace of the man in the mask. The breeze raised the hair on his forearm. He still felt the tingling where her fingers had dug into him.

He stepped onto the deck. The wood was rough against the bottoms of his feet. He heard the fluttering of the leaves in the breeze, the sounds of tall, thin trees slowly shaking in the wind.

He looked up at the sky. Just over the tree line, the blinking light of an airplane crawled across the darkness. He raised his head further and looked directly overhead. It was a brilliantly clear evening and the stars, hundreds of them, looked down at him.

One of the stars above him was the North Star. He remembered reading about when he was a boy. Polaris was its name.

He thought about the light burning above him, the gaze of stars long dead that still traveled such a great distance to be seen. The cold breeze was filling his lungs and his chest began to heave and he shuddered when the wet pant leg clung to his skin. He slid down the wet pajama bottoms, followed by his wet underwear. He dropped them in a heap on the deck. Then he looked down at himself, at the lower half of his body naked beneath the pajama top, and the incongruity made him smile. He pulled the pajama top over his head and dropped it on top of the pile. He inhaled through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. He rubbed his bare chest and looked up at the stars.

Even when he heard her padding across the kitchen, he did not look down from the night sky. When she stopped at the edge of the door, she made an unintelligible sound. He looked at her. "Chris," she said, "why are you naked?"

He smiled when he saw the blinking light of another plane trail across the night.

"What happened? Was somebody in the house?"

He turned as she stepped out onto the dark deck. "Is that, um, piss on the floor? What was all the noise? What's going on? Was somebody here? Why are you naked?"

She was standing so close now that the clouds of their breath were mixing in the cold air. He pulled her against him and smelled her hair. He kissed the spot beneath her left ear. "I'm starving, sweetheart," he whispered. He let her go and looked over at the grill in the corner of the deck. "Are you hungry, too?"

She squinted at him. "Chris, it's freezing and you're not wearing any clothes. I'm going to call the police."

He smiled and touched her shoulder reassuringly. "No," he said. "You get some steaks out of the fridge and we'll grill them up." He kissed her on the cheek and gently nudged her toward the house.

"What the hell are you talking about, Chris?"

"Everything's fine," he said. "Let's eat something."

She nodded slowly, and he could see that she was having trouble understanding. But he inhaled deeply again, sucking the cool air into his chest. He looked past her puzzled expression, toward the open sliding glass door, where the cat had poked out its head. Its eyes were devoid of feeling.

Ted, he remembered. The name of the cat was Ted. Sometimes she called him Teddy because she said that he reminded her of a bear. Teddy the cat was staring at him and he was staring back and the longer he looked, the more he saw the face of a bear.

Editor's Note

Ted was our April Story of the Month.

The Competition by Margaret Mendel

I put a crime in motion when I heard I wouldn't make it as a runner-up in the piano competition. At first it was only a mental crime.

Losing sucks though and it kept eating at me until I decided to do something about it and a plan came full-blown into my head.

If they hadn't decided to have me turn the pages of sheet music for the remaining contestants I might have just gone off, licked my sorry ass wounds and let it go at that.

But when I got the call from a secretary with what she called the invitation, I knew that it could have only been the brainchild of one person, Philip. This guy has been nothing but a pain in my side since he was admitted into the music program last year.

I saw through him the minute he waltzed into the classroom, expecting everyone to treat him like he was a genius on a keyboard. I couldn't believe how anyone with an ounce of common sense could swallow his line of bullshit. Yet, it didn't take long before all my friends were following him around like they were puppies.

Philip was probably the richest kid in the program. Most of the students were well off with parents who were lawyers, doctors or who worked in the financial world. I was the odd man out. I was the lucky son-of-a-bitch with talent but no money. My status in the program was scholarship student. No one else worked but me and I scrapped together spending money working part time as the I-Phone and app go-to-guy in an electronic store. But Philip not only dressed and acted like an entitled brat, he smelled rich.

Then there was the matter of Philip's fragile health. Diabetes. And after only being in the music program for a couple of weeks, people who I thought had normal intelligence were looking after Philip like he was an invalid, fetching him lunch on rainy days so that he didn't have to go out into the bad weather and running errands for him during his practice sessions.

The biggest joke was that he wore an insulin pump that contained his medication hooked to his belt. It looked like an old time beeper and he got off on showing people the damned thing. He'd lift his shirt and the girls would all go, "Euuuwww," and then turn away. What made the thing repulsive was that one end of a thin plastic tube was attached to the pump while the other end of the tube was inserted into his belly and secured in place with adhesive tape.

I didn't take any interest in Philip's health issue until I learned that an I-Phone app regulated his insulin pump. Now, that I found fascinating. He said his diabetes, Type 1, was difficult to regulate, and because he needed to take five to seven and some times more shots of insulin a day, that this apparatus attached to his belt delivered the doses of medication that he needed to keep him from going into shock. He called it his artificial pancreas.

He was constantly fiddling with the I Phone app to adjust the insulin pump on his belt, fine-tuning his intake of glucose and insulin, especially when he was eating a candy bar. He'd put the cell phone on the table and let everyone watch the numbers and graphs scroll across the I Phone screen displaying the magical delivery of drugs to his system.

Often he'd leave the I Phone on a table and walk away, not because he trusted that the students wouldn't steal the thing, but he left it there thinking it would be entertaining. Then he'd come back grinning, pick up the I Phone and head off to class.

A miserable darkness hung over me after I'd been eliminated from the competition. I was angry and the only thing I could think about was striking back at someone and the more I thought about it, the more I focused my rage on Philip.

Until Philip came along I was pretty much seen as the wonder kid, rising up from the slums, with a missing dad and a natural musical ability. I knew everyone saw me as a novelty. That didn't bother me. I felt special. But with Philip it was different. Even at lunch the way he said, "Pass the salt," the tone in his voice, the impatient outstretched hand, made me feel like he was destined to always be top dog.

I googled diabetes and learned that Philip probably ate enough sugar and carbs just while he was in school to make him sick every day of the week. But he defended his candy bar and greasy burger diet by saying that he could eat pretty much anything that he wanted because the I Phone and the insulin pump on his belt regulated the sugar and carbohydrates.

For a guy who claimed to have everything under control, he sure played the drama queen with his daily dizzy spells. And then there were the angry outbursts that he blamed on a sugar imbalance. He'd bang on the table when he made a mistake in class and then storm out of the room, or he'd curse at the person sitting next to him. Everyone forgave him this bad behavior explaining it away as the imbalance of insulin and sugar in his blood.

The biggest joke was when he came to school looking ghostly pale, but I swear his pallor was due to make-up because his skin had an unmistakable pasty theatrical look. I thought that if this guy wasn't a mental case, he sure as hell was a master of manipulation.

I wondered how long Philip could keep up this game. Though after a year it didn't look like anyone was getting tired of playing nursemaid or making excuses for him. Even as the competition drew near, I thought surely everyone would begin spending more time practicing and less time catering to Philip. Fat chance, the closer we got to the competition the more Philip needed looking after and the less time my friends spent rehearsing.

I felt sorry for the students who swallowed Philip's lies and that's what they were; lies, all lies. As the saying goes, know your enemies and though Philip wasn't exactly an enemy he sure as hell wasn't a friend of mine. Philip knew I had his number, too. In the beginning he tried to buy my friendship with special concert tickets. He brought me

little gifts, delicacies to eat but when that didn't work he stopped trying. The next thing I knew he maneuvered me out of what used to be my circle of friends, friends who used to text me all the time, people I got deals for at the electronic store.

This competition, a school-sponsored affair, runs for several days and I didn't consider turning sheet music a consolation prize for being one of the first out of the running. The reality is that all the students but one will end up losers.

But, I knew who was going to win. He knew it, too. Had his teeth whitened for the big day and even got a manicure. Not only were Philip's fingers going to sparkle as



they romped across the keyboard, now he was going to have a glittering smile to die for.

Yeah, I'd put my money on Philip to make it into first place. He's been pulling all the right strings, kissing up to the instructors, and even in a subtle way he intimidated the stronger competitors. The other day I saw him consoling Gabi, a brilliant pianist but a pretty delicately balanced student who does a lot of crying. I heard him telling her not to worry, that she'd do just fine if she focused more on having fun and not worrying about the outcome. How very Zen of him, I thought.

Gabi and Philip thought they were alone. The chilling look in Philip's eyes unnerved me. He reached a hand out to her, whispered something in Gabi's ear. She put her head on his shoulder. He kissed her gently on the cheek, and when he saw that I was standing in the doorway, his eyes cut a mean triumphant glint in my direction.

The competition is for the graduating class and is part of our final exam. There are no bad musicians in the program but the judge's ears scanning for mistakes will eliminate a contestant for the slightest imperfection, if the rhythm is off, or if there is a

slip of a finger, a pinky striking a chord out of sequence. I know where I fouled up. I could have done better but in my excitement I rushed the middle section.

By the time we reached the last day with only six competitors remaining, I was still turning the sheet music. I was expected to stand perfectly still while the musicians took their bows, then follow behind as they headed back stage.

Philip was scheduled to perform next to last after the intermission. And just before he made his appearance I heard a commotion back stage, a loud bang and excited talking.

I stood stone-faced next to the baby grand piano, waiting for Philip to make his entrance. Finally he showed up. He looked as confident as ever though there was something about his body language, stiffness in his neck and I could see from the hard jaw line that he was clamping his teeth tightly together.

The piano bench was too high and he spent more than the normal amount of time adjusting it before he sat down. He slipped the sheet music onto the stand and rather than having the first page of music already for him to play, I had to flip past the introduction pages before he had the beginning of the sonata in front of him.

As usual Philip dressed casually. He wore dark trousers and a loose fitting silver silk shirt that shimmered in the glow of the overhead lights. He took a deep breath, lowered his head and then ever so slowly placed his hands on the keyboard, though he did not strike a chord. It was one of those breathless moments staged by concert pianists to prepare the listener. It's a trick to make the audience think that they are listening before they hear a single note.

Philip played quite beautifully, displaying the same dramatic showmanship that had become his trademark, arching his back periodically and raising his face skyward seeming to seek music from the heavens.

Then half way through the sonata, sweat began to form on his temples. He raised one hand, the fingers trembling slightly, but he executed the next string of chords with perfect timing. He still had more than half of the sonata to finish and the sweat dripped from his temples, running down the sides of his face. Several drops dangled momentarily on his chin before dribbling down his neck and onto the collar of his silk shirt. His fingers raced across the keys hitting every note flawlessly but now instead of sitting with arched back, he slumped over the piano, nearly brushing his nose against the ivory keys.

I kept up with him, turning the pages without him having to say a word or make any indication, and though his body began to tremble as if he were chilled, the music could not have been any more perfect.

And then he leaned forward, and turning his head in my direction, I could see his dark eyes were frighteningly glazed over and feverish. They looked so strangely lifeless that if I did not know better I would have thought he had gone blind.

I wondered if I should do something; perhaps even stop him from playing. He blinked, shook his head furiously, flinging droplets of sweat across the keyboard and onto my hands and shirt. But, he kept playing, playing. His face had gone deathly pale, while his hands flew across the keys with more majesty than I have ever heard.

Then when we reached the final page he looked at me and a frighteningly sardonic smile came onto his face. His newly polished teeth glistened, his face now nearly green with fatigue and ill health, yet he played the last line of notes as beautifully as if he'd been given a gift from the gods.

Mercifully the sonata was finished. For a brief moment he slumped forward and while the last note hung in the air, in one graceful gesture Philip slipped from the piano bench and fell to the floor.

The audience totally dumbfounded clearly did not know what to do. Some people applauded while others gasped. The stage manager, one of the judges and a couple of teachers rushed onto the stage. Lying half under the piano Philip was pulled and dragged out into the middle of the floor, lifeless, soaked in perspiration.

Several large men from the audience helped carry Philip back stage where the nervous energy ran wild. No one knew what to do, though someone had the sense to call 911. The remaining contestant, Ruth, a solidly build German, looked totally bewildered. One of the judges stepped back onto the stage, assured the audience that everything was under control and introduced the final musician.

Ruth walked to the piano, and though I've heard her play many times, I had no idea how she would do after all this excitement. Actually I didn't know how I would make it through this last performance. I could not concentrate, the image of Philip's last minutes at the piano kept flashing across my mind, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was laughing at me.

Thankfully the competition ended, and as I suspected, Philip took first place. Though he remained in a coma for several days, I think the school worried that they might have been awarding the first prize to a dead guy.

But Philip pulled through and it didn't take long before he was back in the practice room pounding away on the piano keys. He and I never talked about that last performance. We passed in the hall, brushed against each other in the auditorium but we never said as much as 'scuse me'.

I secured a teaching position and a seat in the Chicago Philharmonic and made plans to leave New York right after the spring commencement. I heard Philip was heading to the LA area. Several other students were considering going with him. That last week of school, though no one had said anything until then, there was some whispering about what had happened that last day of the competition.

It was just as well that I made plans to leave the area. My dislike for Philip had pushed me to a place I thought I could never go. Now everything reminded me of what I had done.

I don't know if I thought harming Philip would make me a better musician. But, I do remember thinking during the intermission on that last day of the competition, as I watched him eat several hand-rolled truffles from an anonymous admirer, that all my troubles would be fixed if only I could slip his I Phone into my pocket. Then it happened as though it was supposed to be. Philip trotted off to converse with one the judges, leaving the I Phone unattended.

I'm not a natural thief. Any way, I never thought I was until that last day of the competition when I found myself in the bathroom, Philip's I Phone in my hands. At first, I fiddled with the thing, I had to hurry, there wasn't much time, and then I found it, his pancreas app. My hands were sweating like crazy and it was difficult slipping my finger across the I Phone screen, making adjustments, ignoring the warning that kept blinking on the cell phone.

The stage manager called my name. The intermission was over and I had to go on the stage before the next musician. I quickly scrolled across the app and then shut it down. I came out of the bathroom, and bending over the table, pretending to grab a truffle, I let the I Phone casually slip onto the table and then I hurried out onto the stage and waited. Waited for Philip to make his appearance.

Editor's Note

The Competition was our March Story of the Month.

Photograph © Margaret Mendel

Postpartum by Brittany Michelson

What if she shoved the stroller straight into oncoming traffic? In the flick of her slender wrist, Julie sees her arm extend from her body and send the royal blue stroller into the chaos of speeding metal. The baby flies head first onto the asphalt, his tiny skull bursting open and his brains flying out like silly string.

She shudders as if a gust of cold wind were moving through her. At the corner of Willoughby and La Brea Avenues, in front of the Amazing 99 Cent store, cars hurl past at fifty miles an hour, stirring up dust and litter. Potholes mark the asphalt like craters. The store sign glares down at her, the word *Amazing* boasting in perfect, prideful pink.

She releases an open, broken laugh because laughter is the single thing she can do to distill the intense weight in her chest. She would never actually push Elliot into the street or do anything to harm him. But what if her arm turned into a beast and did something completely outside her desire? How can she have these thoughts in the first place if there's an absence of possibility? What kind of mother imagines pushing her child into traffic and laughs it off?

She grips the handle as if dangerous thoughts will wrest the stroller from her hands. It is early afternoon and the temperature is warmer than it ought to be for fall. A haze hangs in the air like most days in Los Angeles and the sun shines relentlessly. Trying to shake the image of the baby on asphalt, she thinks of the apartment door. Did she lock it? She feels the key in her pocket and turns around. The need to check is far more than a tic; it's a surge, stopping life until she checks.

Elliot starts up, perhaps to remind Julie that life is here, in the world of tiny movements. Sometimes his crying makes her think of the feral cat that used to live in the alley behind the apartment she had shared with her good friend Kristen—back when there were no diapers to change or aching breasts heavy with milk. The insistence of crying, like the whine of the cat, gets under her skin. She wants to stick tissue in her ears. He nearly depleted both breasts just before they set out for their walk so he can't be hungry. He's overdue for his nap. She picks up her pace, trotting over the cracked sidewalk.

The baby's cry has shifted from the steady whine of a cat to the sporadic bleating of a lamb. She stops walking, pulls the stroller to her, and lifts the blankets. His face is screwed up like a twisted towel. The pacifier has fallen out and is on his stomach. The mouth, open like a fish. She picks it up and plugs it in. He goes absolutely silent, as if the air went right out of him. She loosens her grip on the stroller and walks again, able to hear birds in the sycamore.

She pushes the stroller onto the rectangle of grass and charges up the sixteen stairs two at a time, leaving the baby behind. The apartment door is locked. A sliver of tightness releases from her chest. She bolts back down the stairs to discover that Elliot has given up the fight against sleep. The stroller sits completely still, as if there is no living being in it.

Julie stands at the edge of the grass, feeling the absence of the rubber handle. The pearl white Honda with the gold-rimmed license plate turns into the driveway. She walks towards the stroller while her downstairs neighbor parks the car in the space at the back of the building. Julie isn't in the mood to talk, but Joy sees her and heads over with a Ralph's paper grocery bag in each hand.

"Hello!" Joy exclaims. She sets the bags down on the sidewalk and Julie is afraid Joy might reach out and hug her. "Do you like my new haircut?" She runs a hand along the curve of her blond bob. The shorter style makes Joy's face appear rounder and her nose longer.

"Yeah, it looks great," Julie says with feigned enthusiasm. "Did you just get it done?"

"This morning. I have the most wonderful stylist over in Westwood if you're ever looking for someone."

Julie pushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her tangled, dark blonde hair hangs in a limp ponytail at the middle of her back. It's easier to throw her hair back lately, but she really should run a brush through it and trim the split ends.

"How is the little guy?" Joy inches closer to the covered stroller. Her fingernails are cherry red and she wears a whitewashed jean jacket dotted with jewels.

"Oh, he's just fine. Sleeping away."

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. Tired, but otherwise, everything's just fine," Julie says with confidence and stretches her mouth into a smile.

"Can I have a look at him? It's been a few weeks. I bet he's changed so much."

Julie wants to say no, that Joy can't look at him, because that will require exposing his face to the harsh sun, but instead she says, "Here he is," and draws the blanket away from the sunshade as if revealing a prize.

The thin skin of Elliot's closed eyelids catch the strength of the sun and flutter like an insect's wings.

"Ohh! Such a sweet little babe! And he's already grown so much. Hasn't it flown by?"

Julie tenses, afraid that Joy's boisterous voice will wake him. No, it hasn't flown by because every movement in every day must be paid attention to. She considers saying that the days feel like they're inching forward in a calendar of molasses.

"So far, the days feel really long," Julie says.

"Yes, but they grow up before you know it. I remember when Abby was little. She seemed to go from wearing diapers to graduating from college overnight. Cherish this time because it goes quick. And if you only have one like I did, it'll go real quick."

"Yeah, I imagine." Julie secures the blanket back over the stroller. Elliot's sleeping form slips into dark. She needs to start moving, or Joy might pin her there with a story. Like the day Julie moved into the building two years earlier, Joy rattled on about her divorce saga the moment after introducing herself on the sidewalk. How her husband could go to hell for keeping the house and the BMW after everything he did.

Julie pulls the stroller to her. She remembers now how she didn't seriously mind Joy's need to talk at the time because Julie was a different person then, secure inside her own skin and the freedom of living alone.

"Oh goodness," Joy says. "You probably need to keep moving. And I need to get this milk put away. Are you coming or going?"

"Going. To the park."

"Wonderful. Enjoy this weather. It's supposed to rain on Monday."

"We will. You too," Julie says, and forces every ounce of energy into a smile. Then she moves the stroller off the grass.

Down Beverly Boulevard, she passes cafes with people her age. They throw their heads back and laugh, seemingly unconcerned with anyone's future but their own. An elderly woman in a maroon dress passes by with a brown wig on a Styrofoam head. Julie looks at the wig held by the woman, how easily she can slip it over her gray hair and change her identity in an instant.

Everyone she passes looks well rested and energetic. Through the front window of a nail salon, women thumb through *Self* and *Glamour* with feet dipped in soapy tubs and nails drying under mini-fans. Julie used to do those things on a Saturday. She can't argue that her innocence was taken or that she hadn't had enough time for herself. She'd lived all of her twenties, with plenty of parties and irresponsibility. Not that she had truly been irresponsible. She'd completed a Graphic Design degree, worked various retail and restaurant jobs in college, and for the past three years has been employed at Birch Designs, a boutique design agency.

Julie heads across the crosswalk as the green man turns to the red hand. 10, 9, 8. What if someone plowed right through them? What if an impulsive jerk floored the gas pedal and wiped out her and the baby? A tingling like spider legs crosses her chest and shimmies down her spine. She grips the stroller handle tighter.

7, 6. She shakes her head at the red hand, as if it can halt thought. She considers staying and daring the cars to decide their fate. Or she could ditch the stroller, pump her arms and legs like the flashing green man, and run. She could get a pedicure, thumb through a magazine, and pretend she didn't know of anything discoloring the bright day.

5, 4, 3. She rushes across, panic rising, and stops on the other side of the street at the perimeter of the park. She shivers, her body rejecting the concoctions of her mind, and then clenches her teeth and pinches her left arm with her right thumb and forefinger. This is both an act of self-punishment and a test to see if she can feel beyond the numbness.

There hasn't been a single stirring. What if she'd tucked him in too tight and he suffocated? What if the pacifier choked him? Her skin feels confining and the early October air makes her sweat. She wants to check that he is still breathing, but there is the danger of waking him. If she lifts the blanket, the sun will lash its whip of light in his face. He'll start bawling. She wants to take him to a friend's house because she is afraid

to be alone with him in case one of the thoughts should turn to action. She is petrified that one poor choice or wrong movement could result in irreversible damage. She wants to call her best friend, but Duke is at work. Besides that, she can't imagine admitting these thoughts to anyone, not even Duke, whom she's known for sixteen years.

She crosses the parking lot to the corner of the playground. Under the moping branches of the cypress tree, she locks the stroller brake and lifts the edge of the blanket. The baby's nearly transparent eyelids are closed and his chest rises like a tiny puff. How sweet he is when sleeping. Sitting on the grass, she watches toddlers climb and swing. Parents seem like actors on a set. She imagines a director instructing them on how to move like parents and how to be at peace with their role. Some of them smile and nod like a puppeteer's strings are attached to their heads.

Julie leans against the tree and watches a man catch a toddler at the bottom of the slide. The little boy squeaks with delight and the man sets him on his feet and claps his hands in celebration, as if the child just won the spelling bee.

At the edge of the parking lot, a middle-aged man pushes an elderly woman in a wheelchair. Some day this could be her. One day when she's toothless and incontinent and agitated from old age, would Elliot take care of her? Guilt spreads through her veins like the blood that's needed to keep a system conscious.

Editor's Note

Postpartum was our May Story of the Month.

Quick and Painless by Shellie Richards

Well, hell. She'd hesitated. It had all happened in slow motion. Fran had popped the donut hole in her mouth and it'd become lodged perfectly, sealing off her air passageways. So when she became red and her eyes had watered over, Lois continued picking and nibbling at her hangnail. The same thing had happened last Christmas at dinner. A piece of butter lettuce had settled itself such that Fran couldn't breathe, the piece of bib lettuce rising and falling like an impervious membrane between her mouth and lungs. In an instant, Phil, in an altruistic act of gallantry, reached his hand down her throat and retrieved the piece of lettuce. He'd saved her life. Dinner was quiet afterwards and no one really talked to Phil much—only Fran who praised his efforts and thanked God over and over again for his very small hands. Simultaneously, everyone around the dinner table surveyed their hands and agreed. Phil was the only one who could've saved her. Phil was the only one who would've saved her.

Now here they all were, a year later, gathered around the casket—the cheapest one money could buy. And there lay Fran in the cheapest gown money could buy and the only audible sound was that of Phil's sniveling. No one thanked Lois per se. No, that would've been too brazen even for this crowd. But several had nodded, and their eyes had said it all. Thank you for your hesitation. Thank you for not acting quickly. Thank you for letting her die.

Lois can't say she was entirely and completely without guilt. Fran had been her mother. And Phil's mother. And Jane Margaret's mother. And Terry's mother. And Audrey's mother. And the reason they stood here today was at least in part, due to Lois's hesitation. Truth be told, Fran had been in the middle of one of her famous rants—screaming at the top of her lungs in the tiny Ford Fiesta about Lois's gutters that Fran had claimed needed to be cleaned immediately.

"Your gutters are going to rot right off the side of your house and when they do, by God, don't call me to..."

And that's when it happened. The screaming stopped. Lois luxuriated in the sudden and new found silence. Fran had popped a donut hole in her mouth. More technically, a munchkin from Dunkin' Donuts had rendered her screamless and it was glorious.

Lois had been chosen to speak at the service. This is all she said.

"Mother died eating a munchkin. Glazed, not cake. We do not hold Dunkin' Donuts responsible and will not be filing a suit."

Editor's Note

Quick and Painless was our January Story of the Month.

Mr. Softie by Annie Hartnett

Mom bought Mr. Softie three months after Dad left her for the school nurse. It was the same day I told her that the fourth grade had voted Nurse Applebee "Teacher of the Year."

"But she's not even a teacher," Mom said.

"It just has to go to a school employee. I asked."

"I'm teacher of the year," Mom shrieked. Mom's a corporate lawyer. She was never home for dinner before Dad moved out.

She asked me to put my little sister in her car seat. She drove us to Taylor Refrigeration, where Mr. Taylor helped her load the Mr. Softie machine into the trunk. It cost her seven hundred dollars.

"What do we need it for?" I asked Mom.

"You love ice cream," she said, and stepped on the gas.

When we got home, Mom plugged in Mr. Softie but she said it wouldn't work until the next morning because the mix needed to freeze.

We had vanilla softies for breakfast, mixed in with Fruit Loops. Mom said it wasn't nutritionally different from a bowl of cereal with milk. By recess time, Ms. Applebee was applying a cold compress to the back of my neck as I threw up into a little black trashcan.

"It could be salmonella," Ms. Applebee told my mother over the phone. My mother asked if Ms. Applebee would put me on the phone, and she told me to meet her in the school parking lot in ten minutes.

"She has to check you out with me," Ms. Applebee said. But she didn't stop me when I walked out of the nurse's office and took a hard left towards the lobby.

Mom peeled into the parking lot in a red convertible. She said the mini-van was in the shop. Some of the kids on the playground took pictures with their cell phones.

"Playing hooky, huh?" she said. She asked if I wanted to go jean shopping. I vomited on the door of the car.

"It's okay if you get sick a lot," Mom said. "Divorce is hardest on the children. Where's your sister?"

"Pre-school."

Mom told me then that she'd had whiskey with her ice cream after I'd left for the bus stop.

"Do you want me to drive?" I asked, because that's what Dad always said.

Mom put the seat back then, and said she could maybe just sleep it off. We were still in the school parking lot. The convertible didn't even have a top.

Mom didn't notice when Ms. Applebee came out to the car and led me by the hand back inside. Ms. Applebee called the cops from the nurse's phone. I listened to the sirens

drive the three blocks from the police station to the elementary school as I lay my cheek on the cool red vinyl of the couch. Ms. Applebee had already framed her Best Teacher certificate and hung it on the wall above her desk. It had shiny gold stars all around her name.

Editor's Note

Mr. Softie was our February Story of the Month.

The Gag by Daniel Ball

The reception hall had floral-print maroon wallpaper that reminded him of his grandmother's house. He slipped on the heel of his new shoe as he stepped through the vestibule and held the door for a bored-looking man who passed without a word as he withdrew a cigarette from its pack. The softened twang of an acoustic guitar from a popular song pushed through the wall of the adjacent room. At the door a pile of folded cards was arranged on a decorated end table. He hovered his extended pointer finger over them until he found his name: Gilbert Graham, written in calligraphy, the small checkbox for "and guest" conspicuously devoid of marking.

Gilbert picked up his card and fixed the narrow red tie cinched around his collar. He stepped into the main room, where the salads were already being served for the wedding party of Mr. and Mrs. James Dirk, his old college friends, they with degrees in business and art history, respectively; Gilbert with one in microbiology, for which his thesis on macroscopic organisms of local ponds was awarded high honors.

He held the card out at the ideal focal distance of his glasses and navigated the maze of closely packed, white cloth covered tables. From the center of each rose a cluster of balloons, royal blue with a mylar centerpiece that had "Jim and Kate" emblazoned across it. They swung in the drafts of the air-conditioned air. After circling the room twice he finally matched the 9 on his card with that of his table. He quickly jolted toward it, not seeing the waiter crossing his path. A collision ensued, the waiter sighed and continued, and Gilbert scrambled for a napkin from the table.

After wiping the sticky vinaigrette from the back of his neck, he looked around table 9. Its only other occupant was an old man in a wheelchair who appeared to be asleep. His head lolled sideways into the notch of his shoulder and a string of glistening drool made its way down the side of his half-open mouth. Gilbert wriggled out of his twill sport jacket. He stretched his head up high and peered around the room. The sounds of blended conversations and clinking dishes filled a room full of strangers. The bride and groom were nowhere to be found.

At last, though, he caught a glimpse of a table where four of their college friends sat in a tight semicircle, leaning inward and laughing. There was Elyse, another Bio major whom he'd had a crush on, Chris and Paul, who were brothers with very similar slick-gelled hair, and a red head whose name Gilbert could not recall. Still standing in the yellow glow of the miniature crystalline chandeliers overhead, Gilbert excused himself to the unresponsive old man, then hung his jacket over his twig-like arm and began to walk across the floor to them.

Not a head turned when he stepped up to the edge of table 4. They continued chattering. After twenty seconds Gilbert turned and twirled an unused chair from the next table and dragged it across the polished floor. It emitted a hellish squeal and a

harsh grinding that echoed off the walls and drowned out the music. He stood before them and they looked at him with bemused squints instead of smiles.

"Oh," Elyse said, "It's Gilbert."

"This seat taken?"

Eyes rolled.

He put his jacket on the back of his chair and sat down stiffly. When nobody spoke to him, he looked down at the salad set at his new place. He licked his lips as he admired how the light reflected off the dressing on the carrot shreds. He unrolled his silverware and began to tuck the cloth napkin into his collar when the waiter swept in a whisked away his plate, along with the empty ones scattered around the table.

Gilbert put on an exaggerated comic frown and looked up at the uninterested others. The elusively-named woman flipped her red hair with her fingertips and spoke into Chris's ear. He smiled and glanced at Gilbert momentarily.

Silence followed. Gilbert broke it. "So can you guys believe that Jim and Kate got married?"

"Yeah," Paul said, staring toward the door, "Crazy."

The others nodded amongst themselves.

But he continued, laughing, "And, I-I can just remember them in college, Jim would be all—" he snorted, "You know, the ladies' man—I'll never get hitched, he'd probably say and—"

As he leaned over the table the waiter returned and dropped a plate of mushroom risotto in front of him and the others. Gilbert fell silent and sat back. His cheeks felt hot. The four friends picked up their forks and wordlessly began to eat. Gilbert pressed a prong of his fork into one of the flakes of Portobello when a smile spread over his face. He couldn't help himself.

"So," he said with another snort, "A mushroom walks into a bar—"

"There she is!" Elyse interrupted, turning with a smile, "*Mrs. Katherine Dirk!*"

The bride scampered over through the narrow corridors between tables and hugged her. They hopped up and down like schoolgirls, and her long lacy earrings became tangled in Elyse's blonde hair.

"El-yse!" she screamed, "I'm so glad you could make it! It's been forever!" She released her and turned to face the rest of the four. "And you all look so great all dressed up."

Gilbert cleared his throat loudly, "Uh, h-hi Kate!"

"Oh, Gilbert...I didn't know you were at this table...thank you for coming." Then she pulled a chair out and turned it toward the four, completing the circle.

Gilbert, outside of it, poked at his food and tugged idly at the ribbon that descended waveringly from the balloons. He traced the path of the ribbon upward with his eyes and had to bite his lip to suppress a grin. Breathing quickly, he slowly pulled the ribbon to reel in the mylar behemoth. They did not watch. With his dinner knife he cut the

balloon free and pulled it to his lap under the table. Their conversation continued. He slit a tiny incision in the base of the balloon and pinched the hissing hole shut between his fingertips. His arms shook as he giggled in anticipation of the gag.

"Hey guys, look!" he said before he curled down and inhaled too big a gulp of helium from the sphere. He stood up to take stage, and could only utter the word "Listen!" in his hilariously high voice before his vision faded to gray, all swamp water and diatoms, and lightheadedness cut his act short. He stepped outward to steady himself but caught his ankle on the leg of his chair and crumbled clumsily to the ground. His head struck the hardwood with a dull flat thud.

And as he stared up at the dark ceiling and the blurred faces above him, the laughter began, wild and cruel and intoxicating.

Editor's Note

The Gag was our June Story of the Month.

Staff Choice Selections

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

Social Not-Working by Gargi Mehra

The day I found Megha on the internet, I pumped my fists in the air like I'd hit the million-dollar jackpot.

I called up the gang and told them all about it. On my ten-minute drive to office, I rang up Mohammed and warned him that his cherub couldn't hold a candle to Megha's little angel. I dialed Steven and enlightened him that Megha had risen to the position of Project Manager at an IT company. At least that's what it said on her profile.

Steven grunted. 'Did you drop her an email?'

'I sent her friend requests *and* wrote her an email,' I said.

'You know, if she's married, she wouldn't want to see you now.'

'That's ridiculous. Why shouldn't she get in touch with me? We had a special relationship in the past!'

Steven sighed. 'Just... be careful. I don't want you to get ...dumped, again.'

'You're wrong. That'll never happen. How do you know Megha won't call me? How do you know we won't trade stories of our lives after school over a candlelight dinner at the Taj? It will be just perfect. I'm telling you.'

He grunted again. 'Whatever,' he said, and hung up.

In office, the minute the boss left his seat, I checked my email. She hadn't yet replied.

The morning whizzed by in meetings. I wolfed down my salad sandwich in two bites at lunchtime. During the post-lunch cigarette break on the terrace, I checked my Berry again. Nothing. Yet.

At six when I rang the bell, Seema opened the front door, her lips pursed tighter than usual. Rohan scampered up and wrapped his arms around my leg.

'Daddy, look! Star!' he said, shoving his fist in front of my nose. The straps of the laptop bag slid off my shoulders. Seema scooped it up along with my helmet and padded off to the study.

I hauled Rohan up and whirled him around. We played a few rounds of pretend-boxing. Seema returned from her exercise of slotting things in their place and set down a cup of tea on the centre table. 'Your tea is getting cold,' she said, and I wondered how that could be —wisps of steam were still rising from the cup.

I patted Rohan on the bottom and sent him running into his room to do his colouring. Seema hovered by the sofa as I downed the tea in three gulps.

'So, when are you planning to take me?' she asked, her arms folded across her chest, one impatient foot tapping the floor.

'Take you where?' I asked.

'For shopping, where else? I've been reminding you for two weeks!'

'I have so much work right now. We have a big demo coming up. Can we go next week?'

'Oh of course we can go next week! The malls have discounts and sales going on all throughout the year, don't they?'

She stomped inside. I lugged my laptop from the study to the bedroom.

Megha hadn't replied even now. Then it struck me. I picked the wrong sites. Maybe Orkut's members always besieged her with 'franship' requests and MySpace wasn't her thing.

I logged into Facebook and dashed off a friend request there too.

Three days later, Steven called up.

'Seema says you're tethered to the laptop every evening? Is that true?'

'No, its not. Anyway it doesn't matter.'

'Did Megha reply?'

'No.'

'I want you to stop thinking about her. You're married. She's married and she's out of your reach now.'

'How can you know that?'

'Can't you see she doesn't want to be linked to you in any way?'

I slammed down the receiver. Steven's words had triggered the name of a corporate social-networking site.

There she was. Different photo here. A cool, professional picture of her in goggles and a pantsuit, her hair patted down perfectly.

I stared at the name of her company for a long time. The words danced in front of me. I clicked the link to the corporate website, and from there jumped to their 'Contact Us' page.

The phone numbers enticed me to pick up the phone and dial. That's what I did. A sexy automated voice demanded the extension of the person I wanted to speak with.

I pressed 0 for the operator.

'Good morning?'

The question in the receptionist's voice was unmistakable.

'Megha Sharma, please,' I said, my heart beating faster.

Elevator music filled my ears for five seconds, and then a ringing tone. On the fourth ring, she answered with a furtive 'Hello?'

'Hello Megha, Anil here.'

'Who?'

'Anil, from APJ School, Saket. Remember?'

'Oh.'

'I sent you an email. You must've seen—'

'Yes, I did. My only question is—I haven't responded, so why haven't you got the hint yet?'

'What's wrong with—'

'No seriously, why did you think it was okay to dig out my office number and call me?'

Didn't she need to catch her breath between rants? 'You can't just—'

'If you call me again or contact me in any manner, I will report you to the police. Do you understand that?'

I slammed down the receiver. Who the hell did she think she was?

Until evening I stayed away. When I did eventually click on the little blue login button, I found the vamp had blocked me out. From. Every. Damn. Site.

I hate her.

#

I wrote her an email:

Dearest Mrs. Sharma,

Sorry to bombard you with emails, but I wanted to clarify a few things.

In case you get the wrong idea, I must inform you that I had merely intended to get back in touch with you like I had with our other school friends. But your reaction shocked me to the core.

You will be happy to know that henceforth I will refrain from calling or emailing you unless you do so first.

And stop being so juvenile!

Best regards,

Anil

I nearly spilled my Coke all over Seema's *salwar kameez* when my Berry pinged Megha's reply.

Anil,

I'm really sorry but I couldn't talk freely with people around. I didn't mean to hurt you with my behaviour.

Please meet me tomorrow at the cafe near my office, 4 pm. We can talk this over in privacy.

Regards,

Megha

Throughout dinner, the music in my head drowned out Rohan's school stories and the blare from the TV. Seema cocked an eyebrow at me while passing the rice. I think she suspects something. But my lips are zipped.

#

The afternoon sun pounded down on the concrete. I parked my bike across the road, hopped over the divider and skipped past the makeshift pavement.

The interiors of the café cooled me down, but I still needed to mop my brow with my kerchief. When that didn't work I helped myself to the tumbler of cool water they thumped down in front of me, and splashed it on my face and eyes.

Advertisements of all hues ravaged the glass door that served as the entrance. Through the small patch of glass left bare, I saw two people crossing the road. One of them wore a khaki outfit.

Less than a minute later, they opened the door and strolled in. If a fashion photographer set eyes on Megha in that moment, he would have scooped her up, flung her over his shoulder and carried her off to his photo studio. Her jet-black hair lay in perfect waves on her shoulders, untouched by the warm breeze. Her black figure-hugging shirt and grey trousers had me reaching for the glass of water again. The shade of lipstick, a brighter crimson than I'd ever imagined her wearing, alarmed me a bit. But it only added to her looks, contrasting against her smooth milky complexion.

She sidled up to my table. Her cherry-red lips were moving.

'...see, I told you he'd be here.'

That's when I noticed the other person.

'Sir, did you make calls to madam here?'

For the first time since I caught sight of him from across the road, I noticed the policeman's uniform, the medals pinned across the shoulder, the glimmering eyes and the stiff, proud moustache.

The idea of fibbing my way through this ordeal had hardly occurred to me before I abandoned it.

'Yes of course, she is my old friend from school!'

'So? Does that give you the right to badger married women who have shown no interest in pursuing friendship with you?'

I rubbed the edge of the formica-topped table and examined the tips of my fingers. These guys didn't dust enough.

'If you contact madam again either by phone or even email, I will have you locked up. Do you understand?'

The quietness of his tone troubled me more than anything else. I raised my eyes to his level, and said, 'Yes.'

'I really expected better from you, Anil,' Megha said.

The duo sidled out. I considered ordering a frappe and slurping it alone over the next thirty minutes, but then I surrendered and moved out.

The bike ride to Megha's office turned out bumpier than expected. I parked across from the gate. She didn't sashay out, but why would she, now?

I turned the key in the ignition and revved up the accelerator.

Somehow, that tingling feeling of winning a million dollars had melted away.

Editor's Note

Social Not-Working originally appeared on the web in our April 2012 issue.

A Virus by Stephen Ornes

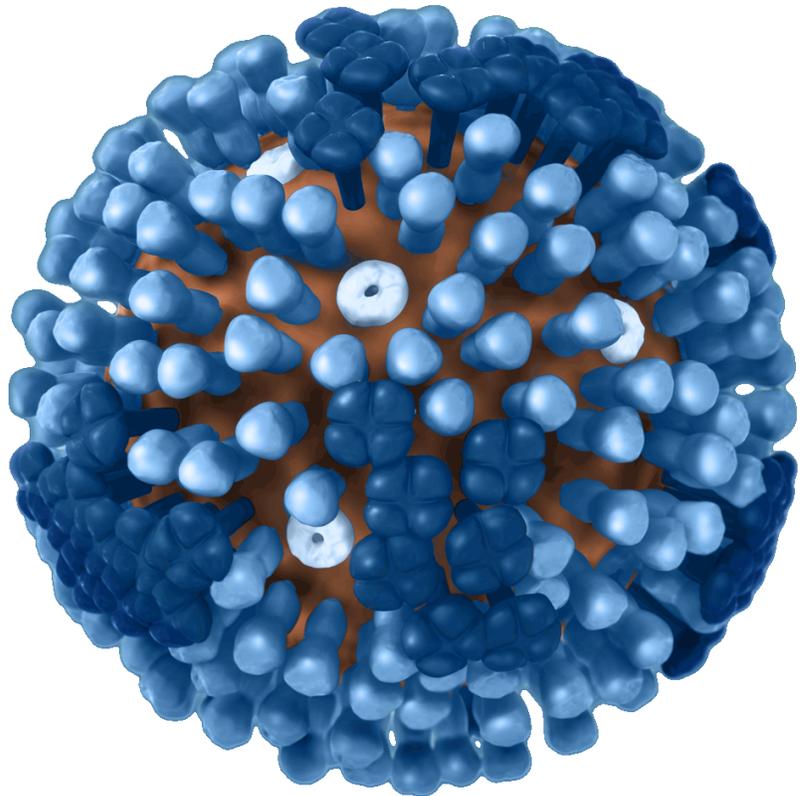
Five minutes before the show, Patrick shepherded his children into a small carpeted theater at the far end of the main hall in the downtown library. The show, "Now You See Me," was a loose adaptation of "The Emperor's New Clothes," with a purple dragon puppet named Snappy as the insatiable ruler. The conniving tailors were played by a mangy dog puppet called Hot Cha Roger and Nina Badina, a hyperactive lamb.

Alexis sat on Patrick's lap and Henry sat beside him. The lights went down and the dragon started dancing. Henry slipped away. Tucking Alexis under his arm like a football, Patrick chased Henry out the door. They returned a minute later. During the second song, called "More more more," Henry scrambled through the dimly lit room, snatching raisins and goldfish crackers from other children. Patrick crawled behind Henry, reaching for his ankle.

As Hot Cha Roger launched into the Goodbye Song, Henry clambered onto the stage, took a bow, and fell off on his head. The rest of his body followed, heels over head. The drop was six inches, not far enough to hurt the boy but far enough to invoke a collective gasp and a sudden, panicky surge from the audience. The puppets stopped singing. Patrick raced up, took the howling boy in his arms and left the room. They recovered in the library on child-sized couches and easy chairs.

"Time to go, Goose,"

Patrick said as he knelt by Henry. The boy rolled away and stood, preparing to run. Patrick held Henry's arm and pulled him closer. "You can't do that, little friend," he said to Henry, bouncing Alexis on his knee. He could hear the edge in his own voice. "Time to go."



Henry squirmed and giggled; Alexis slapped him across the face. She giggled, Henry howled, and Patrick picked up both kids—one on each hip—and walked to the elevator. He couldn't carry Henry's books as well. He left the stack. Patrick wondered if this decision—to make a quick exit—was like thinking that if you run in the rain, you won't get so wet.

"No one even notices. It doesn't bother anyone as much as it bothers you." Patrick looked up to see a mom, patting the head of her son—her quiet, curious son.

Patrick nodded. He wanted out, out, out. The elevator was taking too long, so Patrick carried his kids down the wide staircase.

"Where are my books?" Henry asked as they descended.

Patrick ignored him as they approached the desk to get his damn parking ticket validated. Henry kept asking. The librarian stamped the parking ticket.

"Where are my books?"

Patrick set down Henry and let him walk. They approached the center of the marble foyer with black-and-white checkerboard tiles.

Halfway across, Henry stopped, stomped his foot, and boomed, "Where! Are! My! Books!"

Patrick squatted down, looked Henry in the eye and whispered, "They're up in the library, I couldn't carry everything. It's too late, Goose. We have to get home. We'll get books next time."

"I want my books," Henry said. He dropped to his knees. Like a three-and-three-quarters-year-old Jesus, Patrick thought, headed to the cross.

Patrick reached for the boy, who twisted his body around and howled with a shriek that echoed aggressively through the foyer. Patrick leaned forward. Henry spun further away and slipped. Alexis slipped from his arm and landed on her feet. She laughed, her laugh bouncing and rising, and ran toward the main door to the busy city street outside.

Patrick chased Alexis; Henry slouched to the ground. They returned; Henry lay on his back, kicking his legs, screaming. A small crowd gathered around them. Patrick looked up and saw senior citizens smirking or staring at him with suspicion; moms with their babies looking distraught; librarians who had stopped their own conversation and were regarding him as a curiosity. And then there was a thin man—maybe in his early twenties—with ragged hair, in baggy sweatpants and a hoodie pulled up over his head. The jacket was unzipped; he wore a filthy white t-shirt beneath. He filmed the episode with his cell phone.

Patrick tried to ignore them; he held Henry under the arms and picked him up, but the boy slid back to the floor and hit his head on the smooth marble. The crowd gasped and Henry howled. Meanwhile, Alexis tried to climb up on Patrick, but he held her away. She fell down and started to cry.

Patrick looked up. The man was still filming.

"Do you mind, jackass?" he said.

"Real nice in front of your kids," the man said with a nod.

Finally, Patrick wrestled both kids into his arms and walked quickly out of the library.

Both children slept soundly all afternoon. Patrick was glad it was over.

And it was over, for awhile. Then the video went viral. Three days after the library incident, someone called Patrick's wife, Lisa, who looked on the computer. The video had been cut and edited so that instead of saying "jackass" to the camera, Patrick yelled "jackass" at his son.

Someone save those kids! commented MommieLove75. *I'll take them!*

Then another version appeared, one that altered the sequence of events.. Some parts were sped up, others were slowed down, and other parts ran in reverse. That video (quickly christened AngryDad) showed a sad and screaming little boy who tried repeatedly to stand up—only to be shoved down by his father who said "jackass" with each shove.

"Jackass! Jackass!"

I think we all know who the jackass is here-but why isn't the government protecting our children? commented DizzyDi.

The video made it to television. Fox News showed it repeatedly, each time asking experts to weigh in. Patrick became a national villain. The video had been precision-tuned to depict abuse. Both Fox News and National Public Radio asked Patrick for interviews; he told them both to get the original footage, so they could see what really happened, and then he would talk. On television, Patrick saw a commentator—identified as the pioneer of "video therapy for children"—say that the video had clearly been tampered with, and wouldn't it be interesting to see the original? Then he backpedaled.

"But that's really an academic interest. With that kind of raw material, it's hard to imagine that the video is too far from the truth," the man said, patrician and authoritative, opening his hands and tilting his head slightly. "It's just so sad."

Patrick heard an NPR interview with the cinematographer, then regarded as something of a video vigilante, the leader of a new movement who admitted with a laugh that yes, he had profited from the video. Something to the tune of \$40,000 in ad revenue from the original, he said, plus talks with media companies to start a blog, write a book and sell the rights for an AngryDad video game.

"Isn't that something," said the reporter.

"But seriously," said the hero, taking a deep breath. He had a little lisp. "Maybe we should be looking out for each other. And more importantly, for our children."

Someone spray-painted JACKASSSS across the windshield of Patrick's car., Lisa's friends called at first to offer condolences, then to offer her safe haven, then to ask how

she could let this happen. One day, in a shimmering blue shirt and a black skirt, she put the kids in the car and drove to her mother's. Later on the phone, she told Patrick that she wouldn't come back.

"But you know it's not real," Patrick said. "You know the truth."

"I know," she said. "I have to look out for the kids. They're suffering, Pat. There's too much turbulence."

"I'm drowning here," he told her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It was a puppet show."

"I know," she said. "I love you, Pat."

"I'll fix it," he said. "Stay. Come back."

She hung up.

The video mutated and evolved. Other people added sound, deleted scenes, added clips from other movies. In one version, inspired both by the *Exorcist* and the vampire craze, Patrick tried to beat the devil out of his son. In another, Patrick was a customer at a fast food restaurant who was beating up an employee—Henry—for not giving him a straw. Patrick told himself to avoid the craze; after all, he knew it would die out on its own eventually. But it didn't. The virus grew, and amateur videographers one-upped each other with new versions: *Hamlet AngryDad*, *Muppets AngryDad*, *AngryDad the Kindergarten Teacher*, *AngryDad the Alien*, *AngryDad the mobster*.

He couldn't look away—he knew the disaster was happening *to* him, but the Internet provided a front-row seat to his own undoing. He watched his own ruination from inside and out simultaneously, and he could sense momentum building and the inertia of millions of invisible people crushing him quietly, anonymously, with misspelled missives and messages in caps.

His boss suggested he take some time off. People at the office were uncomfortable with Patrick being around. Maybe he could work from home? He stopped showering, gave up getting dressed. The house started to carry a putrid odor.

Patrick adopted the handle *AngryDad* and began visiting chat rooms, suggesting that someone somewhere find the original footage and see what "that guy" was talking about—you know, *the guy in the video who keeps saying the footage has been edited*. But his comments gave no rise to a thread, much less a discussion or action. The only response he ever received was from someone who accused him of being "lame and derivative."

Following a link from a blog post, Patrick saw, much to his horror, that he had become the poster Dad for a group called *Back to Basix*, which advocated for spanking and encouraged parents to use physical means to subdue their children. Patrick had never struck his children, but there was a picture of him, blurry and angry, on the *Back to Basix* web site; underneath, in italics, a message read:

Let's stand up for the Dad who was brave enough to do what this politically correct society says he shouldn't—raise his children to be obedient and respectful!

Below that, a "Donate now" button flashed. Patrick fired off an angry email. A representative responded that they didn't believe he was the real, original AngryDad because, they said, the real AngryDad had already blown off his own head with a shotgun.

Back to Basix wasn't the only group to usurp his image. Patrick found himself featured by ParentAbuse, a group who demanded government legislation to protect parents who felt harassed, by anyone. Patrick learned that these parents didn't want to be judged or become second-class citizens for their choices. He couldn't find any specific grievances. *What choices?* he wondered—but they were clearly mad. ParentAbuse claimed that Patrick had acted out of frustration, had been devalued in society for parenting in public. Underneath a blurry picture of Henry, crying, was a message in italics:

If we don't protect the parents, who will protect our children?

Patrick fired off another angry email. The response, again, told him that he couldn't be the real AngryDad because the *real* AngryDad had moved to Mexico, fed up with the government and restrictions and judgment and whatnot.

Patrick hired a lawyer, chased the pictures. He couldn't keep up. Over and over, still frames from the movie popped up in advertisements and on television. His lawyer's fees accumulated; he dropped the lawyer.

Patrick chased the videographer. He found his name and phone number easily enough on the Internet. On a Monday morning, he drove to the house. A For Sale sign had fallen down in the yard. He stood on the porch and rang the bell. It smelled like cat piss.

The door opened, and a cloud of cigarette smoke escaped, tinged with an even stronger smell of ammonia. A short, thin woman in a white tank top with short black hair squinted at Patrick.

"I'm looking for Ricky," he said.

"Uh huh," she said. "You look familiar."

"AngryDad."

She smiled, wickedly. "Oh yeah! No wonder you look familiar. Man, it's like you live here. You've been on every monitor on our house. Ricky's at work."

Patrick put his hand on his forehead and looked around.

"I'll wait," he said.

"No..." she said.

"He ruined my life," Patrick said calmly. "I've got nothing else to do. I'll wait"

The woman nodded. "Hold on," she said. She closed the door.

A minute later, the door opened, and Patrick looked in the man's bloodshot eyes.. He grinned and held out his hand. Patrick didn't shake hands, but he did start to quiver.

"Well," Ricky said. He was missing his two front teeth, and a few in the back. He was not well.

"I'm broke," Patrick said quietly. "I'm totally broke. I got laid off. My family left me. The damn video. I want two things from you, and if I don't get them I will fucking burn down your house and everyone in it. And then I will fucking kill you again."

"I *knew* it," the woman laughed from behind Ricky. "The camera doesn't lie. You *are* a bastard."

Patrick said, "I will gouge out your eyes, film the whole thing and put it on You-Fucking-Tube. I am not fucking around. I hate you. I want you to know that someone in this world hates you more than you would believe is possible. I may never see my children again. I hope that at some point you feel like shit."

Ricky's smile faded.

"I want five hundred dollars, and I want the original footage."

Ricky held up both his hands. "The money's gone, dude."

"Now," Patrick said. "I'm going to sit here until it happens. You have taken everything from me. You have profited from me. I have nothing. I'll be here."

It took a few hours, but Patrick left with five hundred dollars and a flash drive containing the original footage. He drove to a computer store and bought an expensive movie-editing software package. He was going to make it right, run the film in reverse. Lisa would return with Henry and Alexis, and they would move, and restart the machine of their lives, even change their names if they needed to.

He stayed up for three days learning how to navigate the difficult software. He became proficient at loading video, fixing it up. Adding sound. He posted a video on YouTube, but it was removed due to alleged copyright infringement.

He left messages with producers at Fox News and NPR. He was ready to talk, ready to give interviews. AngryDad would break his silence. AngryDad was not angry anymore, was not dead, not in Mexico. No one called back.

No bother, he thought. He watched the footage on the flash drive and sobbed at the small snippets of video of his children in the library.

Patrick was relieved to see that the pivotal scene wasn't damning. He had been worried and nearly convinced by the web sites, the chatter, the incessant noise, that he *was* abusive, and that when he *did* finally view the original scene he would see what everyone else thought they saw: A monster. But it looked like any tantrum, any child.

It was exceptional in one important way: Patrick In-The-Video still had everything. He was being run ragged by those children, but he *had* those children. He had a wife, a job. Patrick-watching-the-video had become a tainted shell moving through the great throbbing body of the world without any identity but his one ruined, public one. Patrick-watching-the-video cried until he couldn't anymore. All those electrons had come in, hollowed him out, and his insides poured out.

He finally talked to a producer at NPR by telephone. Patrick explained his situation, said he had the original footage ready to release and was willing to talk. The producer paused and told him quietly that they weren't interested in the story. People had moved on, forgotten about AngryDad. They didn't want to interview him, but the producer invited Patrick to submit an editorial. The Fox News producer was less courteous: "No way," he said. "Nobody remembers. Give us something new. AngryDad returns with a vengeance! AngryDad burns down a house, or AngryDad beats the shit out of someone Else—a stranger! Now *that's* new. AngryDad wants to tell you you're wrong? No thanks."

Patrick realized the virus had invaded, replicated, annihilated, and left. He hung up the phone. A few minutes later, his computer froze. A shot of Henry and Alexis, laughing, stuck on the screen. A blip, repeated quickly and infinitely, sounded from the speakers. It was a thin audio slice taken from the laughter of two children, removed from context, looped endlessly. Patrick moved the mouse but the cursor didn't budge. Those blurry faces wouldn't go away; the noisy blip became a perforated drone.

Patrick hit some keys. He clicked this and tapped that, then tapped harder, then banged his fists on the keyboard. He cried out, banged the keyboard, and shook the monitor. He restarted the computer, but the noise returned and the screen remained dark except for a blinking cursor in the top left corner.

"Reboot, dammit, reboot," he cried. There was nothing to do but pull the plug. Close everything. Lose his unsaved work.

Editor's Note

A Virus originally appeared on the web in our May 2012 issue.

Photograph © CDC

Speculation by Melodie Corrigan

"What happened today?" Carol chirped, dreading the response.

"More tests," her waif mother confessed, a bleak smile fluttering along her blistered lips, "I don't know what's left to test."

Carol knew they'd think of something; their imagination, if not their skill, was infinite.

"Side effects?" the younger woman asked reluctantly.

"Nausea."

Carol focused her eyes on her knitting to avoid the sight of her mother's thin bruised arms. Hovering above the institutional sheets, she sensed a ghostly presence—perhaps from the last one.

Perched forward on her chair, the young woman longed to voice how terrible her mother's illness was, how the pain wasn't worth it. She wanted to assure her that life would be better soon but her lips remained sealed.

From time to time Carol glared in disgust at the uneven stitches. It was her first attempt at knitting since childhood when she had offered aborted scarves to parents and aunts as love tokens. Once the novelty had worn off, the young girl had found knitting boring: always having to count.

"I thought you loved counting," her sister Bernice, skilled with her hands, had chided.

"Not this kind of counting," the child growled, passing on her wool, needles, and pattern books, to her accomplished sibling.

"You do other things well," her mother assured her, hurrying on with her cleaning to avoid a request for examples.

Back into knitting as an adult, Carol felt obliged to make something useful and sturdy. The attempt, a sweater, the back section ripped out and re-knit several times, was discouraging. To the sympathetic nurses, who avoided the only topic of concern, Carol replied she was knitting a sweater for her husband or nephew. Once she had suggested she was making a shawl for her mother but only once. Here it was imprudent to use the future tense.

Knitting was only a diversion. Sitting by the white shape, thin as a snake under the hospital clean sheets, Carol waited and comforted. But no, not comforted, that was her problem. She couldn't comfort. When it was her turn to speak, she remained silent.

To the scrape and click of needles she relived scenes from her childhood: chased home by a dog, her mother there; falling off her bike, blood staining her white sock, mother behind the door waiting. Ready to hide the ugly gape behind gauze, to call the school, making comforting jokes at the dentist and explaining the lost book to the librarian.

Carole's forte was numbers not words. Spurning family advice, she had become an accountant. Her round, gardening mother had worried between soups and stews what

accountants did "exactly." She wondered aloud whether it was natural for a young girl to enjoy "fiddling with numbers."

Her mother failed to appreciate the warm predictability of numbers. She was too strong and sure to need the crisp edges and sharp resilience of statistics. Carol did. She admired their stoicism. Numbers could be ignored or slighted, from them no word of complaint. From them no cries cutting the flesh of warm sleep.

"Did you see the doctor today?" Carol finally asked. Weren't doctors supposed to know something, some secret code to cure, to ease pain? Instead of offering assurance, they skulked along the halls, hiding behind procedures and whispering uncertainties.

"No, he didn't come."

"Maybe you were asleep."

"No, he wasn't by."

The younger woman glanced at her watch. "It's almost eight," she reported, stuffing her knitting into her canvas bag.

"You don't have to leave right at eight."

"The sign says, 'Five to eight.' "

"Her family stays later," the old woman hissed, indicating the silent cubicle opposite. Carol shrugged. Maybe they had nowhere else to go.

"They come to see her every day."

"Maybe they don't work," Carol snapped. "They're immigrants; maybe only the father works."

"So where is Tom on weekends?" her mother responded angrily. "You shouldn't have to do everything."

The old woman forgot how on his rare visits her son Tom hung furtively by the door glancing at his watch. Then after nodding impatiently at the details and stuffing hospital gift store magazines or candy towards his mother, he disappeared. The frail old woman didn't guess that late at night her son phoned Carol to insist she transfer their mother to a single room.

"Who's going to pay for that?" his sister grumbled, not admitting she'd already tried. Carol shrugged. A friend at work had said that hospitals scared men. It was something psychological.

Would her son Bobby come if she were sick, Carol wondered. It would be better if he didn't. She refused to have him—even as an adult—venturing out in the rain, sitting by the hour in a draughty hospital room while she lay dazed, dragging his chair along the ground to drown out frightened whispers, raising his voice in cheerful news to cover the silences.

"Eight is just a guideline," the older woman insisted, her delicate hands kneading the rough sheets.

"Next time," Carol lied, cajoling her voice to rise. "Tonight I have to run, Bobby's home alone. He won't do his homework if I'm not there."

"You're right, better go," the watery blue eyes followed her visitor's flight around the room. "Don't come by tomorrow. It's too far for you to drive every day."

"Don't be silly. This time of night it only takes half an hour to get home."

But could that be true? The nightly rejoinder sounded false. The hospital room was a world away from Carol's small safe house: the chipped kitchen table, the collapsing sofa that should be replaced but wouldn't be, the air comfortable and warm.

Carol flattened the bed sheets, and piled the magazines on the small cluttered bedside table.

"Is it still raining?" the left-behind voice asked, pulling the conversation thin as gauze.

"Looks like it."

She had always dreaded January, a dark month of rain and decay. Other years they had escaped to sunnier climates; this year they were trapped. Turning away, she hurried to make everything matter of fact as if she were just closing the account book at the end of the day.

She approached the bed and kissed her mother's cool, soft cheek. The fragile body trapped like a moth under the thick covers: nursed by a changing parade of women in uniform, cajoled by curious interns, tortured by tests that promised to benefit but never did.

Make it all business as usual. Pretend this is home—set the clock, check the back door, put out the cereal for breakfast.

"Bobby will be wondering. I must get going." Escape, quickly.

"Thank him for the picture."

"Anything I can bring you?"

Let me bring food, Carole thought. Let me bring platters of tempting delicacies to fatten you up. You who spent your life struggling to become thin and stiff, acceptable to the world of magazines, all to no avail until now.

If only to see her fat again. Moving firmly about the house, planning what bulbs to plant in the spring. But Carol had used every trick to entice her mother to eat—like she had when the children, young and defiant, refused food. Now, though, she cajoled with desperation, ignoring all rules of good food and bad food, defying questions of calories or nutrition. Food, any food. "Thanks, dear, I'll put it in the drawer for later." Candies, cream puffs, take out junk food, fruit, milk shakes, small portions, trays of food, and baskets of food. All discovered the next day, abandoned in the drawer or decaying in the wastebasket.

"I'm just not hungry, dear," her mother simpered. The daughter's head roared, "Never mind, eat." Her anger churned until she shook, and still her mother got thinner and thinner, the bones pressing to explode the translucent skin.

Carol's eyes betray her at every visit, her hands hide in busy tasks. It is all she can do to maintain a patter of interest. Pretend the visits are a pleasure.

No use coming when the soaps are on; her mother won't even glance at her. "I wonder if Betsy will get a divorce," the patient had asked anxiously the first afternoon. Carol, assuming Betsy was a nurse, discovered instead a world of characters whose lives were in the balance. Whose existence had a reality greater than the children, the grandchildren, and the world beyond the hospital walls.

Finally escaping the hospital, tucked in her car, the windshield wipers slapping ineffectually against the onslaught, Carol drove carelessly through the night. She was the reluctant courier between the two worlds. Ascending now, she struggled to wipe the aftertaste of the institution from her mind—to cram close the cover, to forget. Moving quickly home hopeful to find Bobby dragging about the house complaining about homework, Sandy late back from her school dance, the kitty litter box disgustingly smelly, the dirty laundry spilling over the sides of the hamper. Back home, where on holidays, her mother arrives laden with chocolate cookies and lemon cakes, always too many, always eaten. Where her mother argues that her granddaughter Sandy is too young to date and Sandy swears and there are tears and slamming doors. And then sometime later everyone apologies.

And why shouldn't her mother come home. The hospital isn't a prison. Her mother is no criminal. With help she could escape.

Yes, Carol snaps upright. I'll go back and get her now. Leave the car running, slip up the stairs into mother's room, bundle her bones in my own coat. We'll sneak down the stairwell, hiding in the corners if a nurse comes. It wouldn't be a problem; there were hardly any staff.

Bring her home, put her, where? There was no extra room, no room ready for an invalid. But surely the den would do, pull out the hide-a-bed. Take the TV out. Or better still leave it; leave it there for her to see the soaps. And then in the morning, bring in some toast.

She'd stop and pick up white bread; her mother refused to eat bread full of seeds. And homo milk for her mother's coffee. She hated skim.

Bobby would run around pleased. "I'll take up the tray," he'd cry. It would be fine. The day would be fine. But night followed day. What if her mother started to gag? If she choked, who could help?

Trapped in the car, heat vibrating off the engine, rain thrashing the metal carcass, tears burn her face. "Hold it, Carol," she mumbled, tightening her jaw. Things are just piling up. It's the season. As her mother always said, "Ride it out, January is the worst."

Pushing beyond the speed limit, she crouched forward to escape the black carpet rolling after her. She was impatient to escape the car and run across the lawn through the harsh, cold rain. Frantic to burst through the bleak January evening back to the strong sunny morning and shout, "Mother."

But now it was she who was mother. She who would describe January as the worst. She who knew that the other months, named and reliable in the past, were merely speculation.

Editor's Note

Speculation originally appeared on the web in our May 2012 issue.

Cheeseburger with Chips by Patrick Salmon

Aaron had to start working right away—during his deployment, Franky had only been able to contribute money in small bursts and they were still check to check.

"Don't stress about going back tomorrow," Franky said. "Think about the dinner I'm going to make you. Think about lentils and asparagus and think about the lemon soup."

He stared at the ceiling. "If you have to wake me up, just be easy about it. A guy kicked me awake once overseas, I knocked out one of his teeth." He hated talking about the war, hated even saying the word 'war,' so they had compromised and were calling it being 'overseas.'

She said she was so happy to have him home and then he turned the lights out. He imagined a cheeseburger he once ate in high school. It had a sourdough bun, two half-pound patties, a dozen pickles, avocado, blue cheese crumbles and bacon. It took him half an hour to finish it, the fries and the slaw. He remembered not feeling hungry the rest of the day. It was the first time he ever had blue cheese on a burger.

He lay still for an hour, drifted off to sleep and woke up five minutes later wide awake and hungry. He let his eyes adjust to the darkness in the room and tried to find the things that were different. Nothing of his had moved. His night stand had the same books on it and a deck of poker cards he had forgotten to take with him. Very little of hers had changed either, but he did see a thicker novel than he remembered on her nightstand. And on the wall was a black and white decorative bowl they had bought on their honeymoon in Puerto Vallarta. Hanging it had always been something that needed getting to.

He got up and wandered around their apartment, feeling awkward in the silence. He turned on the television but it made his eyes hurt so he shut it off. There wasn't anything on the radio he liked. Outside the window, even at this hour, traffic painted the blinds red. He didn't know what else to do so he did push-ups in the living room and then lay on his back. Blood rushed to his ears and walled off the silence. When his heart slowed he heard the hum of the refrigerator. Inside it were bottles of water and bags of vegetables stacked on bags of vegetables. Some lemons for tomorrow's soup. Out of a six-pack of light beer there were four left. He sighed and drank one with the door open. He smacked his lips and tried to scrape the taste of it off his tongue with his teeth. Then he opened a second one and sat down on the couch.

He opened up their wedding album and flipped through the pages. Franky looked happy in all the pictures. Toward the middle he found a picture of them after the ceremony smoking and eating cake. He smiled and then flipped through some more. In all the pictures she was about forty pounds heavier than she was now. She had been an overweight child and a chubby adult. He'd never cared about her weight.

When he deployed, she said she didn't like the way they ate, that she felt fat and she was going to start eating different. He said that sounded fine to him but as he got off the

plane, the sight of her had shocked him; she looked like she had been whittled down from a branch to a twig, emaciated almost. All that was left were bones and stretch marks on her sides and thighs.

He finished his beer and felt hungrier than when he had gotten up. His eyes drifted though, so he went back to bed without waking Franky and fell asleep.

Franky rubbed his arm until he woke up. She wore a pink windbreaker and her tennis shoes were already laced. She ran now, a few miles every day, and had planned for him to join her.

"I've been running down Meridian, past the grocery store. There's a hill you can see Mount Rainier from. It's great." Aaron rubbed at his eyes - the moon was still out.

On the road, she ran harder and faster than he did. By the time they made it up the hill, he was out of breath and had cotton-mouth, so they sat. "The air is so damp, it makes me want to puke."

"And you're used to running on sand, I imagine."

Aaron knew Franky's comment was less about giving him an excuse and more about probing into his time away, so he ignored her. He tried to enjoy the view, but the sun was barely up and it started to drizzle. He got restless.

For breakfast they each had a hard-boiled egg, an orange and a banana. While they ate, she told him again about dinner and how she was going to cook all the vegetables in a Crock-Pot. They were going to marinate all day and then they'd just melt in his mouth. He said he couldn't wait. She packed him green beans and a small tuna steak left over from last night.

His stomach still throbbed from hunger, but he wanted to support her diet. Wordless, he put on his boots and left.

Rock & Lumber was happy to have him back and he spent most of the morning catching up with co-workers. They asked him what it was like and he said it was nothing to write home about. Then he got them talking about what they'd been doing. When he'd talked to them long enough, he shook their hands and let them back at it. He sat through a safety video with his foreman but they mostly laughed at it and cracked jokes. Then the foreman's transceiver squawked that orders were backing up so they turned off the video and hit the floor.

Aaron found a forklift and took his time filling his first order. He eased out a small pack of 4x6x6s and loaded them onto a contractor's truck. When the buyer asked him to step on it he slowed down even more and smiled, ignoring him. Everything smelled like cedar and only now did he realize how much he'd missed it.

At lunch, his stomach growled and throbbed again, but he forgot to eat. He got busy with Mick from the rock side of the store about how they were looking for someone to take a run at the night shift. It payed time and a half but Aaron didn't know. He couldn't think really because his stomach ached.

In the afternoon he grabbed a ticket for 2x4x24s. The bundle, annoyingly, was up thirty feet on the top shelf. The pieces were long and hard to balance on the thin forks of the lift. The first time he grabbed at it, it was too far to the left and it tipped back onto the metal shelf it sat on. He took a breath and settled himself before he tried again. He felt like he hadn't eaten in a goddamn week. He picked it up again and this time he backed it out. But his forks were too far to the right and the wood tipped over.

He screamed for everyone to watch out and it all came down like an artillery shot on the concrete floor. The whole store heard and everyone inside came running to help. They found Aaron covering his head with both his hands and curled in a ball, unhurt. The lumber had split and bent and was scattered a hundred feet down the aisle.

Everyone asked Aaron if he was okay. He howled that he was and then turned his back on them. He muttered under his breath he couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. The air was thick with wood particles and when he smelled the cedar he felt like it was sticking in his lungs. Half-way through cleaning up his spill he took a chunk of wood and cracked it over a corner of the dumpster. The sound made his ears ring and then his head started ringing, too.

When he got home, Franky stood cooking over two burners. She had sweated through her shirt and her forehead was dripping and smearing her make-up. There was a pot of soup simmering and the lentils were frying in a pan. The Crock-Pot was open and the stench of asparagus was everywhere. The table was set but the silverware was laid out crooked.

"Beer on the table for you."

She'd set out that damn swill for him?

"Almost ready, so have a seat."

She tried to kiss his cheek but he took off his boots and threw them into the closet. He let his chair scrape the floor as he pulled it out and then he sat down. "Why did you have to get this stuff anyway? It's more like water than beer."

Franky stopped stirring and looked at him. He never could hide his anger and he knew she saw it on him.

"I got it cause I can't have regular beer and I really wanted to have a beer with you."

He ignored her and took a sip. "Light beer."

She turned back to the stove and started stirring again.

"Hey - don't turn your back on me."

"I have to keep stirring the soup."

He made fists but stopped short of slamming them down on the table. He kicked the chair out from underneath him, went to the bedroom and slammed the door three times before it closed.

He lay down on the bed and tried to breathe. She could have bought him some regular beer, too. That would have been easy. Then they both could have had a beer they

liked. Why did she have to be so obstinate about the food? It was so healthy it was irrational. The body needed fat, he knew that from training. His stomach ached, his head ached. Why did she intentionally suffer like this? Do this for no good reason other than she wanted to?

Franky came into the bedroom an hour later. He had the lights off and was massaging his palms into his eye sockets and breathing very slowly.

"Are you all right?"

"I have a headache, a massive headache. I haven't eaten."

"I'm so sorry, let me make you something. Anything you want."

"I just want a cheeseburger. That's it. A giant burger. Can we go out and get a burger?"

She rubbed his back. "Anything you want."

It was late out and nothing was open in town so they drove south to Graham and then had to keep going past Kapowsin. Twenty miles out in Eatonville they found a small drive-through called Henry's.

"Two cheeseburgers, no lettuce, no pickles, no onions, with mayo, ketchup, and do you have potato chips? Can you do me a big favor and just put them in the burger? Right in the burger on top of the cheese? Thanks."

Franky looked at him. "Since when did you start doing that? Is that any good?"

"It's great. You'll love it. I knew a guy overseas who used to do it."

"Ate it like that?"

"Just like that."

She shook her head. "Sounds like a character. Can't wait to meet him."

He stared out the windshield and saw a stray cat scrambling up the side of a dumpster. Its claws caught on a metal bar and it managed to pull itself up and over. Finally on the rim, it started sniffing around for scraps.

Instead of letting her comment pass into silence, he said, "Knew a guy overseas. Don't know him. Knew him."

Franky realized what he meant.

They paid for their order, drove to an empty spot in the parking lot and unwrapped their burgers. He watched her. She took a dainty bite and swallowed it. Then she took a gigantic one and started chewing it. A smile drew across her face and she started to giggle. Her eyes watered a little and she said, "It's so good."

Editor's Note

Cheeseburger with Chips originally appeared on the web in our February 2012 issue.

Pensacola by Jonathan Kosik

Before the oil turned the Gulf of Mexico sour and brown, we practiced reserved smiles and polite conversation as we crossed state lines, driving south from Nashville to vacation at your father's place in Pensacola, gauging how close we were getting by the number of crushed love bugs freckling the headlights and windshield. The house on the beach: the long, waxed surfboards, the blue hurricane shutters. The ocean fifty yards away, waving us in with rolling curls of crashing surf. We brought bathing suits and flip-flops, T-shirts and cut-off khakis. We loaded the refrigerator with two liters of blue agave tequila and three liters of margarita mix. We spent the morning and afternoons scuttling from umbrella covered chairs on the hot, white sand to the kitchen at your father's house—smiling like co-workers as we passed each other at the blender, freshening a drink and then back to the beach; a handful of peanuts and some celery for lunch and liberal amounts of sunscreen to keep our golden skin from reddening.

We shared a bed, too. As usual, your father offered us his bedroom and took the sofa bed in the living room. You, of course, protested, told your father he was too old for the fold-out, told him we'd be fine sleeping in the living room, there were two couches after all. He would have none of it, told us bedrooms were for married folk, winked and left us to unpack in the narrow pink bedroom. For eight summers we'd stayed in the pink bedroom, where the sun left its color at the end of the day through the western facing window. Our feet occasionally touched during sleep because the bed was a double. There we slept on our sides, our backs all but pressed together, our knees pulled up close to our chests. The little roars of the water came in through the screened windows with the sweet ocean air. You'd told me the first night that this kind of situation, the two of us in one bed again, was the business of vacationing.

That was the summer before the oil. Before the schools of mackerel and sea bass fought through the thick, sticky water in search of a new home or washed up on the shore, flopping about, sucking in air for a minute or two before their motion ebbed and their eyes turned dull. That was before the sugar white beaches turned brown and gray, and the signs appeared every fifty feet: *Shoes must be worn on the beach at all times. No Swimming Allowed*, eventually replaced with *No Entry Allowed, Hazardous Conditions*. Signs with the red ovals and white letters of danger and the black skull and cross bones of poison were posted at every beach entrance. The lifeguard stations stood empty. The black flags that bickered in the wind were kept high atop the flagpoles on the beach. Discarded napkins from closed ice-cream stands stuck in the cattails on the dunes and waved like weeping lovers to the ocean. The beach had been left silent. Helicopters no longer spotted for sharks. The sharks had moved on, long before the humans figured it out.

When the oil took Pensacola away, your father sold the beach house for far less than he had paid for it, but found it necessary to do so because he couldn't look at the filthy,

slick ocean any longer. He moved back to New Jersey and its overcast winters and the never-ending cooing of pigeons. We were invited to come for Christmas.

When the oil had pulled the last of the seagulls beneath the surface sheen, I had become completely consumed. The television in the living room and kitchen stayed on 24 hours a day. It seemed that nothing could be done. No expert teams of engineers could undo what had happened. Some called it the end. Others held out hope that the damage could be fixed, that in time we would wake up one morning and everything would be back to normal. There would be clean up, of course. Plenty of damage control, but the worst would be behind us.

By the time the pitch clouds under the rolling gulf waves had rounded the eastern tip of Miami's South Beach and the Mercedes Benz convertibles and bright colored thongs had been replaced by hazmat suits and bulldozers that pushed black sand up and down the beachfront, the winter had settled in. With Christmas a week away, you left for New Jersey. The driver wrestled three large suitcases into the trunk of the pink-roofed taxi you took to the airport.

I went to a tree lot and bought a two hundred dollar Christmas tree that stood twelve feet tall and seven feet wide at its base. For hours, I untangled hundreds of feet of Christmas tree lights, I pulled the black, garbage bags from the attic with the plastic reindeer kept inside and the five shoe boxes full of colored glass ornaments. The television continued to deliver minute-by-minute accounts of the disaster. The oil couldn't be stopped. Not with siphons or barges, robots, chemicals, or a thirty-ton cement dump to close off the well. There was no remedy. Even the heavy, yellow cap installed on top of the blown well only lasted a month before the ground around it ruptured and left a thirty-yard tear in the ocean floor. I called you, to tell you about it—what I had seen on the television, the panic, the public denial, the feeling of loss. You didn't answer. For thirty-three days the oil flowed, uncontested from ocean floor to surface. For thirty-three days I left messages on your cell phone and on the answering machine at your father's house.

I wept.

And then the well ran dry, and the gulf was thick like syrup. The television in the living room confirmed the news: the well was pronounced dead at 9:55 a.m. I called to let you know. The spring was coming. People were full of optimism.

The papers from Thomas, Wyatt and Jones arrived in the first week of March. Your attorney cited irreconcilable differences. A note, typed out on impressive stationery was attached. It cited the two hundred and twenty-three phone calls that had been logged between my phone and your cell phone, or to the phone number listed for your father's house. The note advised that a simple signature would be in my best interest, as a long, drawn out period of litigation, mixed with harassment charges would only delay the clean up of what had turned into an ugly situation.

The day after the signed papers were faxed back to Thomas, Wyatt and Jones, the men showed up with the moving truck. They worked without words. Their shirts stuck to their shoulders and chests, heavy with sweat, as they carried the things from the house and packed them into a long, sugar-white moving truck—a cavernous thing. I put the blender to work and whipped up a half dozen margaritas. The men thanked me, but refused to join me in a drink. I held up a chilled glass and toasted to their quick and quiet removal of our life together. They left the Christmas tree, which had dropped most of its needles, and the television. I stood out on the brick patio and drank until the sunlight died beyond the Nashville skyline, and the last lingering breaths of winter cold pushed me inside.

There was too much oil. Volunteers with shirts that read "It Can Be Saved" were turned away from Pensacola and ordered to go back to the homes they'd left so many months before. The T-shirt vendors wore ventilated masks to clean the air coming into their lungs as they packed up their boxes and headed east. The thick, black tide would ebb and flow itself clean. The scientists assured the world of that; they estimated between ten and fifty years before the Gulf restored itself.

The love bugs don't fill the air in early summer anymore. The smell isn't what you would think it would be. It takes some getting used to. The surf reddens exposed skin, so I wear a full wet suit and wade out past the rolling black waves where the gentle rise and fall holds me around the chest. And when the sun sits on the curve of the world, and the beach falls dark behind me, there's still a glimpse of what it used to be. I listen to the tide as the stars begin to show, the waves crashing in and pulling out. It almost sounds like water.

Editor's Note

Pensacola originally appeared on the web in our June 2012 issue.

Burying the Hook by Bryan Jones

The vacant lot at the back of the neighborhood left a gap between the houses that resembled the missing tooth of a broken smile. Eric walked across the lot and entered the property that the city owned. The property sprawled down to the river. When they were boys, Eric and Steve had trespassed back there to get to the good fishing spots. That was almost thirty years ago.

Eric still had on his dark suit and dress shoes. Only a few hours had passed since the funeral service. He found the old trail and thought about fishing in the deep pools with Steve's lucky fishing lure. He had the lure in his hand. He stopped for a moment to look at it. He scratched his thumbnail against the single rusted hook. When Steve had loaned it to him, it had looked brand new. For years, he had meant to return it. He knew now that he'd never be able to give it back to his old friend.

When he made it to the wide bend in the trail, Eric stopped to stare at the old post that he and Steve had sunk into the ground next to a large oak tree. They had wanted to build a wooden fort on the property. But they had never done it. Only the single post remained of their grand plan. Still, Eric was proud that it was there. It defied an expanse of time that he found difficult to measure. He remembered how two scrawny boys had carried that heavy piece of lumber on their bare shoulders.

Eric went up to the post. He touched it and disturbed a swarm of memories.

Then Eric heard something behind him. He turned around. Two shirtless boys in blue jeans and sneakers came down the trail carrying a wooden post on their bony shoulders. Their voices were excited and exhausted at the same time.

Their names were Eric and Steve.

"It weighs more because it's treated," Steve said.

"Treated with what?" Eric asked.

"Copper preservatives that help keep the rot out."

The boys stopped on the trail. Steve looked down and kicked a dirt clod like he was conducting some sort of test. With a free hand, Steve pointed to a spot near an oak tree. But then Steve drew his hand back. He stroked his fingers against the sides of his chin like he had seen his father do. No, this wasn't the right spot.

"There are better places up ahead," he said. "Let's keep going."

Both boys shifted the post on their shoulders. Steve led the way down the trail. They vanished into the woods.

No one remained in the clearing.

It was quiet on the trail until the breeze stirred. From an oak tree branch, a bird twittered. Only a dark hole in the ground marked the spot where once a wooden post had stood. At the bottom of the hole lay a lure with a single rusted hook.

Editor's Note

Burying the Hook originally appeared on the web in our April 2012 issue.



Photograph © Angela Xu

Where's the Art in That by Richard Jay Shelton

When I woke up, my roommate, Nathan, was getting dressed. He was wearing his best blacks. He was excited, even happy. Today was Robert Weston's opening. Nathan thought he would finally get a chance to talk with Sherry and set things right. He had bought her a gift that he showed to me. It was a gold heart shaped pendant with a tiny diamond set in its center. On its backside, "With All My Love Nathan" was engraved. He had also written her a love letter explaining how he felt, "just as a precaution," he said, "in case I'm unable to express my feelings to her in person."

I knew he was courting disaster and the letter and pendant were just a few tiny flares sent up to light the battlefield, too few, too late, the battle having been won by Robert Weston. I felt, as a private might standing behind his defeated captain, that he shouldn't venture out onto the battlefield alone. I told him I was going to the opening as well and that perhaps we could drive out there together. "No way," he said. "I am taking my own car so Sherry and I can leave together." He actually expected to bring her back with him that evening! A classic example of the valiant warrior looking at defeat and seeing future conquest instead of devastation.

The opening was from 4 to 7 p.m. He left at 1 p.m. He wanted to get there early just in case she showed up so they'd have time to talk. I left at 3:30. When I arrived at the gallery, Nathan was standing alone at the front door. He had a glass of wine in one hand and the gift and letter in the other. He asked me if I had seen Sherry. I told him I hadn't, that I had just arrived.

The gallery was a large open space. It was overflowing with stuff, so much stuff, that the hundred or so people who showed up to see the show could barely move without bumping into or stepping over something. All these items were the things one would find in a suburban garage except for the fact that instead of appearing tidy and unused, this room was a riot of tangled and stacked junk. Was his father really such a slob? I wondered. Is this a literal recreation of his father's garage, or a mangled mess the junior Weston orchestrated having the foreknowledge that in contemporary art disorder is always perceived as creative, whereas, order is a harder sell, being generally perceived as unremarkable conventionality.

There were shelves full of hardware, stacks of lumber, tools of all sizes, boxes labeled Christmas Lights, Baby Clothes, Taxes, cans of old paint, used paint brushes, old dirty clothes, garden tools, a broken down baby crib, stacked folding chairs, worktables, crushed beer cans, and sawdust and plaster dumped on the floor. A mommie's worst nightmare. On the back wall of the gallery was an altar of sorts; a worktable with "Post-it" notes stuck to it with descriptions of things needing to be done like, *build shelves in pantry, fix faucet in bathroom sink*. A calendar hung on the wall with photographs of young girls posing in tiny bathing suits. There were four pictures of kids on the wall next

to the calendar with nails hammered through them. On the worktable, a moldy cup of coffee sat next to a blotter pad full of doodles. Lettered on the wall to the right was the following aphorism: "If a machine stops it doesn't mean it's broken." On the wall to the left of the worktable, built out of old weathered wood, were the words, "Under(mine)ed Dad(a)." Hanging next to it was a framed drop cloth that had layers of dripped and splattered paint on its surface. "Dad's Pollock Painting" was cut out of its center.

In sum, the installation was the virtual essence of chaos and everybody seemed to love it. It was the type of space we moderns love to frequent: a cluttered and busy space that appears significant, because nobody can make sense of it. The ideal spot for a meaningless chat with a friend over wine while being bombarded with images and objects so common in their origin one can feel an instant connection with them. What a perfect evening. You have a pleasant social encounter and, as an added bonus, leave feeling you have been exposed to a meaningful cultural experience.

I was standing outside, a few feet from Nathan, talking to a friend about the intended meaning of the nails hammered into the photographs of children when Sherry arrived about 5 p.m. hanging on the arm of Robert Weston. This fashionably late arrival by the artist was calculated to create a favorable impression upon all those individuals at the exhibition that mattered, first and foremost, any and all in attendance with money to spend and, secondly, those few higher ups in the art world who define and maintain the status quo for the aforementioned art financiers. By arriving late, Robert Weston displayed his disregard for the entire production. It was an accepted form of one-upmanship, a symbolic flaunting of artistic superiority. He was proclaiming from his elevated position: "What do I care what you think of my work? I know my work is important and I don't need your approval or support." Of course, this was far from the truth. Once he entered the gallery he would spend the remaining two hours groveling at the feet of not only those that mattered, but also at the feet of a few who didn't—though he wasn't privy to the fact.

As they approached, Nathan became anxious and nervous not to mention self-conscious (to an extent I would never have guessed possible). He finished his drink, set it down, and turned to the large plate glass window at his right to inspect his reflection, not as Narcissus might have, lovingly, but as though he felt sure something was amiss. He turned around at the precise moment Sherry reached the door. He stepped in front of her. This blocking of her entrance startled her and threw a twist into Robert Weston's posture, forcing him to spin at the hip. He gave Sherry a tug that lifted her into the air. She bumped Weston's shoulder, which sent him banging into an unsuspecting young man. Weston looked angry. I'm sure this was not the choreographed entrance he had rehearsed in his mind.

"Sherry," Nathan blurted. "We have to talk."

She recoiled from his touch as if it scorched her flesh. Weston straightened up, lifted his head high, lit up his face with a smile, and plunged forward dragging Sherry behind

him. Nathan followed, and stated again, "Sherry! We have to talk!" He somehow had the presence of mind to sense this approach wasn't working, so he ended this demand with an imploring, "Please."

Sherry turned to him and replied, "Not now, Nathan! This is not the time or the place."

By now Weston had turned on the charm and was chatting it up with a distinguished elderly gentleman. Sherry turned her back to Nathan and assumed the supporting role demanded of her. "So nice to meet you," she said to the gentleman Weston introduced to her.

Nathan stood immobile, apparently unsure of his next move. He glanced at the threesome chatting and then at the gift and letter in his hand. He looked as though he was about to turn and leave but then reconsidered. I doubt that he was actually thinking about anything, but rather waiting for the inertia that had enveloped him to pass. It did as soon as they moved further into the room. Nathan maneuvered his body around a set of saw horses supporting a sheet of plywood, past a half dozen spectators, and into a position in front of Sherry.

"Look," he said lifting the gift up in front of her with his two hands, "I bought it for you. It's..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Sherry leaned toward him and said, "Fuck off, Nathan."

Talk about a pivotal line. I think even Shakespeare would have been in awe at the chain of events these three words set in motion. I walked over to Nathan, grabbed his arm, and said, "Come on. Let's go outside and get some air." But that arm instead of coming with me, plunged into my chest sending me flying back into a group of conversing onlookers.

As he thrust me back, he yelled, "No! I have to talk to her!" He grabbed Sherry's arm and spun her around. Somehow he managed to maneuver the gift and card out of his hands and into hers. With a forceful tug she freed herself from his grip, then took the gift and card and tossed them into a trash can filled with wood chips. As she did this, Robert Weston stepped in front of Nathan and said, "I think you better leave." Nathan shouted, "I'm not going anywhere until I talk to Sherry."

By now a crowd had gathered around the three of them. Everyone seemed amused. They apparently perceived this drama as a performance piece intended to accompany the exhibition. As the voices escalated, the crowd gave approving nods and passed approving smiles around as though to say, "Clever, don't you think?"

"If you don't leave I'm going to have you thrown out!" Weston screamed.

This threat didn't have much effect upon Nathan. Weston was a thin artistic type and Nathan knew ten little Westons couldn't budge one heavyset Nathan. He simply said, "Get out of my way," and brushed Weston aside with a sweep of his thick arm. Right

about then two larger art types stepped forward and restrained Nathan, one on each arm.

"Throw that asshole out of here!" Weston demanded. The crowd cheered.

"Get your hands off me!" Nathan screamed as he struggled to free himself. He was attempting to get to the trash can to retrieve the gift and letter.

Weston, meanwhile, had become conscious of the crowd's interest and decided, *Why not play up to it?* He shouted at the top of his lungs, "You're just like my dad! When things don't go your way you become violent!"

"God damn it! Take your hands off me!" Nathan screamed.

Right about then the owner of the gallery called the police knowing this was not a scripted performance. A third individual joined the two restraining Nathan, and together they dragged him outside. All he could do was toss off a few "God damn its!"

As soon as they released him from their grip, he shoved them aside and rushed back into the circle of spectators that surrounded Sherry and Weston. Nathan went blasting through the crowd like a tank rolling over foot soldiers. He went straight to the trash can and overturned it, dumping its contents onto the ground, and retrieved the gift and card. He spun around and again presented them, raised high in his hands, to Sherry, like a crown presented to a queen. He didn't say anything. He just stood there like a sweaty eunuch. This gesture was sufficiently dramatic to send Sherry into action.

"You fucking asshole! Don't you get it! I don't want your fucking gift! I don't want to talk to you! I don't want to see you again! I don't even like you!"

He lowered the gift, "But what about all..."

He never had a chance to finish his sentence. "You just don't get it do you?" Sherry yelled. "I never liked you. Where do you think I was when I said I was staying at my girlfriend's? I was fucking Robert, that's where I was, you dumb shit!"

This so enraged Nathan that he threw the gift at her and then tore up the letter and tossed that at her as well. About then, his three escorts reappeared and a struggle ensued. Nathan began kicking and turning over objects in the exhibition. Moments later several policemen arrived. Their entrance was greeted by a great clapping roar of approval by the crowd, which still hadn't realized the gravity of the situation. One of the officers grabbed Nathan. When he saw the uniform his reason returned and before the officer even uttered a word he said, "Okay, Okay. I'm leaving." They escorted him out.

I followed them out. I knew my role as arbitrator would be crucial to a quick resolution to this ugly business, a resolution that would leave Nathan free to wallow in his misery (as opposed to wallowing in his misery confined in an iron cell). I approached the officers and offered an explanation of the events that had just taken place. I explained to them how Sherry had dumped Nathan without a word. I told them about the gift and love letter she had so cavalierly tossed into the trash can (which actually wasn't a trash can but a sculpture, though I chose to refrain from explaining to the officers the aesthetic considerations that allow for the possibility of an ordinary trashcan

being perceived as sculpture). I tried to play upon their sympathy. They were attentive, but not sympathetic. They had Nathan handcuffed and locked in the back seat of their car. To them this was just another case of domestic violence. They had learned from experience that sympathy in such situations might alter their judgment which they felt to confine within the strict rule of law. Nathan had become violent regardless of who or what provoked his violent behavior. They were reluctant to let him go for fear he might hurt somebody. I understood their concerns but still pressed my case. This guy, I told them, was the most passive I knew. I assured them the passion of the moment had passed. He had reverted back to good old Nathan, the guy who couldn't hurt a flea much less a rodent the size of Sherry. "Yeah, we've heard all this before" was their reply.

It was the owner of the gallery who came to his rescue. He came out and joined in the conversation. He was very sympathetic. There was no real damage done. (Actually, I thought Nathan had contributed to the look of the installation by scattering the junk around in a much more random, haphazard manner, making the environment look less contrived. And the pendant and torn letter added a touch of sentiment that was lacking from this dry, academic presentation). He told the police he didn't intend to press charges. He just wanted Nathan to leave. I told the police that I would see that Nathan got home safely. They released him in my custody and escorted us to my car.

On the way home I tried to console Nathan with dumb trite comments like, "She's not worth it" and "More fish in the sea," but I doubt he heard a word I said. He sat quietly staring out the window as though frozen to the seat, an icy numbness emanating from his immobile body. When we arrived back at the loft he went straight into his room without uttering a word.

Editor's Note

Where's the Art in That originally appeared on the web in our March 2012 issue.

Robin's Installation by Rick Neumayer

Robin Parker-Sims had a ladybug tattoo on her chest and a barbwire arm band tattoo above her left elbow. If she'd put half as much energy into her art work as her



appearance, she'd have been a lot further along by now than merely being our co-op art gallery's only non-dues paying member. I felt she wasn't serious about art and would've weeded her out long ago, if it had been up to me. But our other members wanted more young people involved in the gallery, and someone had to hang the shows and keep the gallery clean. Ironically, after her pretentious little installation had been damaged during the opening reception, Robin came up to me.

"Thanks for helping, Audrey. This might've been a total loss otherwise."

As if it could have been anything else!

Robin was about twenty-two, short, neither fat nor thin, and always the Goth look—black clothing, boots with tall soles and heels, dark hair in a bob with bangs, blinding red lipstick, gobs of eye makeup. She worked only part-time at her coffee shop job,

and never had enough money. She always seemed prickly and uncommunicative, my helpful comments falling upon deaf ears.

I had no love for my fellow co-op member, Gladys Larsen, either, not only because she'd supported the installation, but also because I'd overheard her referring to my still life paintings as "competent but clichéd." Clearly, the woman lacked appreciation for the long classic tradition. How could anyone prefer Robin's bizarre exhibition to my water colors of lilies? I didn't like being spiteful and vindictive, yet such a cutting remark was

not easily forgiven. A ceramics artist originally from London (and so proud of it), Gladys always dressed elegantly, but she was sixty-five and looked it. It was her tweedy balding Scandinavian husband Glenn, a librarian, whom I'd accused of ruining Robin's tampon installation.

Tampons! I'm not unsophisticated, but really!

Despite our personnel problems, this was a wonderful gallery. To me, it always seemed to glow and gleam because of its white walls, light wood floors, and high ceilings. There was a door at the far end, usually left open, where beautiful glass objects caught the light. During openings, small groups tended to congregate in that area. I assumed this was why Robin had chosen it for her installation, though she never confided in me.

The installation was a six by six sculpture consisting of five hundred spray-painted tampons attached by six-pound test monofilament fishing line to the ceiling. It was not meant to be interactive, as any fool could see from the "do not touch" sign on the wall, but it was still tempting to move the tampons around and that's exactly what Glenn Larsen had done. I knew; I'd seen him. Perhaps he'd really rather have pawed Robin, considering how his wife was so up in age.

All of us in the gallery started getting emails about the situation.

Delicious.

Earlier, when Robin was getting ready to hang the show, she'd asked everyone if they knew where a tall ladder might be found because of the gallery's high ceiling. After attaching the strings of the tampons—all shades of gray—to long thin threads, she had to climb up and pin them to the ceiling. When she finished, they all swayed as you walked by.

When the installation was damaged, Robin contended (or so I came to discover, the negotiations being conducted behind closed doors) that part of her loss was due to the extensive labor expended just to hang the installation:

"The arrangement couldn't look messy. The tampons couldn't touch each other, but they still had to move slightly without getting tangled up. The threads all had to be cut almost the same length, but not exactly, in order to get the sensuous swing effect I wanted."

I'm sure that after putting her arms up for such a long time, Robin got really tired, poor thing. Probably, some of the pins wouldn't hold and the tampons fell. I could imagine her having to climb down and pick them up, then climb back up and do it all over again.

Robin's artist statement referred to the repetition of shape and the beauty of monotony. How seeing the same thing over and over again has a ritualistic attraction. But they were tampons, for God sake! You could put two-thousand of them up there and they'd still be tampons.

Robin contended that when Glenn Larsen had touched the hanging tampons, he'd tangled them up so badly the mess could never be undone. She demanded that he pay for the damage:

"My work was destroyed. I need to be compensated. I worked hard on the installation, and what does that say about the gallery if it can't even protect its own members?"

This was all very public, as the emails started zinging back and forth. That's how I knew what was going on. I was surprised when our executive director Dan Romano, another professorial man, said he'd like to discuss the matter with me.

"Of course," I said. "I've heard the criticism going around that you were being too heavy-handed, but I was shocked because I think you've done a wonderful job. With over twenty gallery members, being in charge must be a terrible responsibility."

He agreed that, indeed, it was. After alluding to my well-known tact and discretion, he told me negotiations over compensating Robin had run into a snag.

"Glenn claims that he didn't cause all the damage," Dan said.

"But I thought he'd admitted as much."

"While he admits touching the installation and perhaps unintentionally tangling up a couple of threads, he contends that the twisted mess Robin found afterward was someone else's fault."

"Whose?" I said.

"I was hoping you might be able to help with me with that."

"Me? Why?"

"Only that, as you were the one who saw him do it, I wondered if you'd noticed anyone else batting it around?"

"Certainly not! otherwise, I'd have said so. I resent the implication, Dan."

"No implication intended."

"The only person I saw was Gladys Larsen's husband. He was batting it around like a cat who can't keep his paws to himself."

"Well, you know how it is in a situation like this," Dan said. "There's a substantial amount of money being demanded. I'm an artist, not a detective, but I have to ask everyone who might've seen something. I know you're observant. That's why I asked. Thank you for your help."

Not long after this, at a meeting where I expected further discussion, Dan announced that the matter had been settled privately. Gladys was at that meeting and remained silent, which I found both appropriate and gratifying.

"Let's not talk about it anymore," Dan said.

And so it was all taken care of, and never spoken of since—openly, although the gossip was that the Larsens had paid a substantial sum in damages to Robin. I told Gladys how sorry I was, and do you know she gave me such an odd look, as if to question my sincerity. But she wouldn't dare accuse me.

The installation turned out to be Robin's last show. She left the gallery soon after, taking her tangled tampons with her, surely not because of this incident, but rather to live in Toronto, where she claimed there was an amazing independent art scene—and presumably everyone was tattooed.

Editor's Note

Robin's Installation originally appeared on the web in our March 2012 issue.

Artwork – "Tangled" © Carrie Neumayer

Rescuing the Dead Girl by Jonathan Slusher

After the video went viral it only took them two days to find her. *Woman Jumps from Tour Boat to Rescue Funeral Urn* (386,011 views). At first it was merely nameless faceless chatter on her voicemail. Later there were knocks on the door, a scattering of reporters, as well as three cordial invitations to be a non featured guest on obscure talk shows.

It could have gone either way at first, but before developing a solid reason not to she decided that she didn't want to take any part in it. She wasn't going to talk. She wasn't going to talk at all. Not to any of them. Not ever.

All *they* wanted to talk about was the video. An amateurish twenty minutes of shouts, splashes, and a blanketed soaking wet version of herself that was hardly recognizable. Did she think she was going to die? They wanted to know. Was she scared? Surely Hope was a crazy kook and no one was really interested in anything beyond *why* she'd jumped.

What kind of person was she? If given the chance would she do it all over again? These were the questions Hope would have answered. These were the things she was still turning over in her own mind. And they were the secrets that no video could ever capture.

The jump itself lasted only a second or two then she hit the water feet first—sandals, pink toe nails, and all—then tumbled sideways. Once Hope came back up and began kicking through the frigid water towards a life that was already lost; that was the moment when she realized how meaningless her previous concerns had been. How she'd wasted away so much of her life worrying about unimportant things. But there'd been similar moments of clarity before and in much less dire predicaments. While holding the urn in her arms and waiting for the boat to come back around, she couldn't believe how much time she'd wasted worrying about what everyone else thought of her. It was a sickness really. She wanted everyone to like her. Even the jerks, the kings of jerks, she desperately worried about their approval too.

Cold, wet, scared, crazy and treading water she searched for placement among the multitude of ridiculously dumb things she'd ever done in her life.

"Stupid jerks," she mumbled, water spraying from her salty wet lips.

Before the jump, back up on the deck of the ship, with two feet firmly planted on solid ground her paralyzing fear had been that she looked just as bad as everyone else. They were members of a small hoard of grayish green faced passengers shuffling and stumbling across the rolling decks of a large catamaran tour boat. With top shelf drinks in hand she was just one of many significant others on their return trip from a recently opened open bar.

The scenic sunset sail on the bay, in rougher-than-usual conditions was all paid for and made possible by the corporation, of course. The trip was just a little thank you to

the families—the *real* support networks—of the company's most successful employees. Without support from home these over achievers wouldn't have been able to put in the extra time and effort to make the company what it had become. Their growth had been meteoric; it had certainly been an epic seven years, and her husband Rich—traveling wherever and whenever they needed him, working fourteen hour days—he'd been right there in the beginning when it had all started. This whole weekend was a tribute to the company's Global Champion Pool, the very best of the best.

From the left a phalanx of noticeably bigger waves rocked the boat sideways. She was braced for it, but nonetheless a few sips worth of Cabernet Franc leapt free of the plastic cup and splattered across the length of her flowered skirt. She watched two beads of red liquid roll quickly down her bare ankle, spill into a sandal, and collect under the arch of her foot. Suddenly she was a mess. And why did her legs look so deathly pale? She wasn't one of those gym moms. She was the type of girl who still got most of her exercise outdoors. At least she'd managed to preserve the two import ales intact. They were property of Rich and his work manager, Doug, the latter a very tall and overly self satisfied workaholic who expected no less from his own employees.

The boat swayed and her stomach turned, but she wasn't concerned about nausea, the feeling would probably fade as usual once she got used to it. Two beers in one hand, she leaned back into the railing and took a few quick drinks of the wine. They'd passed Alcatraz a few minutes ago and now—lit by a late afternoon sun through a thin and hazy fog—the pyramid silhouette of Angel Island was coming into focus dead ahead.

The islands, headlands, mountains, and of course the bridge were amazing—the bay was beautiful. What an amazing place this was to live. She took another slow contemplative sip and passed it back and forth through tightly clenched teeth. There was no rush to get back to a conversation that she wouldn't be included. That was one of her biggest concerns. She'd been living in San Francisco for almost six months and still hadn't yet made a single true friend. Sure there were a few nice women at the kids' school, but her friends and family back East were different. The move had been a particularly hard one. What other adults did she really have to talk to? Rich? He was sometimes physically there, but—as long as there was one bar of cell phone reception—he was rarely ever really *all there*. Thank god for the kids. However, they were getting older and she had to be careful about needing them much more than they needed her.

As if on cue she was bumped from behind by a big and tall black suit—looking down at his phone—he didn't even apologize. She glared at the overpriced designer material moving away from her. *Hello. You even see me? I'm the woman you just smashed into.* How ridiculous large men looked while typing madly away on such tiny keyboards.

"You know, if Karma were a currency that guy would be flat broke."

A witness to the small indignation hovered at her side. Wild smiling eyes, he wore a salt and pepper beard, a red Fog City Adventure Tours windbreaker, and a sailboat shaped name tag that read: FLASK, New London, CT

"If Karma *was* a currency," she replied. "I'd withdrawal my entire account right now in one giant lump sum."

He paused a thoughtful moment, "Why not keep it in the bank and save it for retirement?"

"No. I want it right now. All or nothing, it's long overdue."

Had she hinted too much at martyrdom? She didn't want to sound like that. She took a stab at Flask's age and came up with anywhere from forty five to sixty.

The boat eased into calmer water sheltered by Angel Island.

"Now is a good time to move about," he told her. "Let me help you with those drinks."

"It that a part of your regular duties?"

"It is today. Deck duty and vomit patrol."

"Thanks so much," she used a sincere tone. "But I think I can manage."

The exchange had lasted only a few moments, but she stretched it, savored it and allowed it to fill her up in a space inside that had gone empty. Hope was never good at reading eyes, but this time she was quite certain that he was interested. Yet, it was more than that too. He wasn't *just* interested, he was engaging, he had taken the time to be witty, and he didn't look around himself or poke away at his phone as he spoke. Hope had been given his full attention and in return she'd given hers back. There really was no point of conversing any other way, she thought. Meeting new people, learning new things, and just using her senses, the unfamiliar world excited her. Yet it seemed to be a part of the world that was shrinking quickly, getting lonelier, and no one had enough time to care.

She found her husband and Doug in the same spot near the bow comparing business class accommodations of international airlines and seemingly without any care of what had become of her.

She handed over the beers and assured them both that it had been no trouble at all. While they continued their conversation she set about silently contemplating her new surroundings.

The Golden Gate Bridge was audible now, with an increasing amount of distinct humming and clanking noises as they approached it. She estimated that the Sun was about six or seven Suns above the horizon. Close to shore she stared for a long time at a large round white topped rock that was swarming with gulls. At the opposite rail a tall silver haired woman in a purple dress silently wiped away tears. A man had his arm around her. What was that all about?

Hope flinched as Doug stretched a pointed finger and stabbed it at the underside of the bridge, "You know that's one of the most popular suicide destinations in the world." He drained the last quarter of his beer all at once and shook his head. "Hell of a way to go."

"Broken back or neck, probably even worse if you survive." Rich added.

Nodding inertly Hope watched the woman in purple pull a vase from a backpack. No. It wasn't a vase. Of course it wasn't a vase. It was an urn! They were going to spread someone's ashes under the Golden Gate Bridge. That *was* it. That was the reason why the woman was crying.

"Holy shit," Doug held his eyes on the urn. "That's the guy with the ashes," he said. "There they are."

"Who's they?" Rich whispered.

Doug shrugged, "Some heavy roller protocol guy from HR who asked if it was okay if he and his wife could spread his daughter's ashes from the boat. Just a quick handful apparently, they have a list of places all over the world still to go to. Crazy shit, huh?"

Starting very low then increasing in volume Doug's phone played a familiar heavy metal tune. *Machine Against the Rage* or something like that. He held the phone's display up so Rich could see who the caller was.

"Probably needs help logging into his own teleconference again," Rich smiled. "Help! My Key Opinion Leaders don't think I know what I'm doing!"

Doug drawled, "Know what? You put me on one of those planes next to some idiot trying to blow up his underpants and I'd punch him in the face while singing God Bless America."

She knew they were poking fun at the caller. She also had no idea who he was.

Rich whispered something into Doug's ear then slapped his shoulder and they both laughed uproariously, but Rich's laugh was much louder, too loud.

The woman in purple and her husband both looked up, so did just about everyone else.

"I've got to go use the ladies room," Hope lied.

In the bathroom or the head, or whatever they called it, she cleaned the seat with a disinfecting wipe then sat down carelessly, her bottom landing askew. It was so frustrating. There was so much inside of her that she was unable to show to anyone. A person couldn't truly be whole without giving themselves wholly to someone else. Hadn't she underlined something like that in a Steinbeck novel once? Rich used to read classics out loud to her in bed. Now he occasionally tore through brainless paperback thrillers, but spent most of his free time playing Sodoku or Mafia Wars on his stupid phone.

She readjusted her position on the toilet seat then commenced involuntarily rocking herself back and forth with both hands between her knees. She suddenly felt as if she was slowly disappearing, fading away into something that anything could pass straight through. Worthless and alone, she was a loser who hadn't even earned a paycheck in nine years. *Nine years*, she shut her eyes at the thought of it. Trying not to cry, feeling out of place with her mind seized in an uncontrollable bramble of thoughts, she acknowledged it was becoming a reoccurring sensation.

From the toilet seat, she felt the ship begin to shift direction. Someone knocked loudly on the bathroom door, maybe for the second time. She stood up immediately then avoided the mirror while quickly scrubbing her hands. Her mind was still a mess and it was her own eyes that she didn't want to see reflected back at her. Shuffling slowly with her head held low, her feet instinctively led her towards Rich. But before she even caught sight of her husband she was brought back to life by the woman in purple. It was implausible, mired in her own problems, she'd forgotten all about her.

Hope arrived at the precise moment.

How could anyone truly grasp the escalating look of grief stricken shock on the mother's face when the wooden urn slipped from her hands, hit the deck, rolled in a half arc, and tumbled into the bay? Those few excruciating seconds, Hope witnessed them from beginning to end. The woman in purple and her husband, that was all, no one else had been paying them any attention.

Their eyes met. Loss and soul crushing hopelessness; she recognized the feeling and acted on impulse. Without hesitation, without thinking, and all in one motion Hope placed a foot and both hands on top of the low wire railing. She leaned forward then jumped.

Strangely, she remembered being happy that she'd done it even before her feet left the deck. Hope learned what it felt like to cradle the glossy sugar plum funeral urn of a complete stranger while fighting the chopping waves of San Francisco Bay. Who else in the whole world could say that? She also recalled that under the water her long skirt flowed gracefully. It was extraordinarily beautiful. Her clothes didn't even feel wet. And it was at this moment that the video that was to be seen by hundreds of thousands of strangers began rolling.

At the rail, passengers lined up three deep and selected the camera settings on their phones.

The boat circled once.

Flask threw her a line. Then he threw her another.

The woman in purple hugged Hope's soaking body and kissed her purple lips.

Facebook and Twitter got a live feed.

Doug's mouth formed a capitol O but no words came out of it.

Hope updated her profile picture and changed her relationship status to: *it's complicated*

Rich took a week off.

The home phone rang and rang.

The kids had a good laugh.

The whole ship had turned around for her.

It had been a long time coming.

Editor's Note

Rescuing the Dead Girl originally appeared on the web in our January 2012 issue.

Flight of the Red Baron by Kevin Deutsch

Gordon sat in the Buffalo Niagara International Airport terminal and considered his glory as he awaited boarding for his flight home. A warrior returning from battle.

What a summer! Gordon had totally ruled camp. Well, he was very popular at least. In fact, a whole butt-load of people knew him by name. That had been a big thing this summer, saying "butt-load" of something. Gordon was even semi-involved in its origin. Sometimes Gordon would simply sit and try to figure out how many people in camp he was friends with, and that alone tells you the number is a lot. He played some important roles this summer, too. For example, although he hadn't been officially appointed captain of his color war team, the Red Barons, it was understood that he was pretty much the "power behind the throne." His contributions to the official song and final skit had surely been major factors in the Barons' surprise victory.

Fifteen minutes ago, he was touching base with his mom, calling collect from a payphone while keeping an eye on his carry-on, and that's when he first saw her: Blonde. Two or three years older. Grey hooded sweatshirt, hood up. Headphones. Blue cropped sweatpants. Pink-and-black striped knit gloves with the fingers cut out. Black fingernail polish. And was that an eyebrow ring? Yes, it was. She was at Gate B9, his gate, bundled onto a chair, legs and everything. Her sandals were on the floor beneath her and her feet were bare. She looked cold.

Now he was back at his seat, keeping an eye on her. Casually. He could be very nonchalant.

Then she just got up and walked right over to him, blunt and attractive in that way a girl in her pajamas can be. Frumpy hot. (This concept had been discussed in Gordon's bunk one night. He had listened from bed with acute interest.) Gordon pretended not to notice. Played it cool. *I am busy reading the tag on my luggage*, he expressed. *It is a very interesting tag.*

"Excuse me," the voice said. He looked up and she was right there and that was definitely it, frumpy hot. "Sorry to bother you."

"Yes?"

"So," a coy smile, "you look like someone who might have some warm socks."

"Warm socks?"

"Yeah, like thick sneaker socks. My feet are fucking freezing, and I get cold on planes, too. So, ya know, I had a hunch about you..."

Gordon liked that she swore in front of him, like she trusted him not to go tell. And that she had a hunch about him. Also exciting. And he did have an extra pair of sneaker socks in his carry-on. He liked to take off his shoes during flights, and then sometimes—on his way to the lavatory, usually—he would step in something wet and it would drive him nuts for a long, long time, so he began taking the precaution of packing an extra pair of clean socks just in case he'd have to change. The other reason was just in case an

intriguing and sexy girl might appear one day in need of some socks and he could play the hero. This very scenario that had played itself out in his head so many times before was actually coming true.

Gordon continued to act like this was no big deal.

"Socks... like these?" Gordon asked, pulling out his pair, as if from a magic hat.

"Yeah. Wow, that's great. Thanks so much. You're a sweetie."

She took the white socks and mussed Gordon's hair a bit and sauntered back to her seat, where she put them on—they were big on her and reached halfway up her calves—and then got back to her magazine, something called "BitchVerse" with a pierced and angry female face on the cover.

Gordon once saw a movie in which a man and a woman who are strangers strike up a humorous conversation in an airport terminal and then become very close. Later in the film there was a sex scene in a hotel room, with soft music and candles and sweaty bodies. Gordon decided that he would not miss this opportunity to talk with the girl.

As he got up to walk over to her, it was as though all the blood had disappeared from his veins. He was weak and shaky. But if that was what must be overcome to talk to an attractive stranger, so be it. In camp, he'd been taught to keep his eye on the prize.

Perseverance and Endurance had been written on two of the columns in the dining hall.

He wondered if she'd felt like this when approaching him. Almost definitely not. He told himself to Be a Man, and then it became a chant, over and over, in his head.

His plan was to start with something light, something related to socks—that was his 'in'—and then zoom out a bit and get to know her better in a general way.

The magazine she was reading had the word SEX in big letters on the cover. Still, he stayed focused. He knew a socks-related pun and got it ready. Then he was right above her. As she looked up, he pointed at the socks on her feet and said, "Eso si que es."

She took off her hood and removed her headphones. He could hear music playing. "Huh?"

"Nothing, I just said... It's S.O.C.K.S., in Spanish, it wasn't, um..."



"Socks? You mean "calcetines"?"

"What?"

"Socks in Spanish, is that what you said?"

"Well, no, it was, forget it, it's nothing. What's the word you said?"

"Calcetines, that's socks, I think. I lived in Mexico for six months. But that was a while ago."

"Oh, cool. That's really interesting... So, anyway, how are they?"

"What, the Mexicans?"

"No, the socks."

"Oh. Yeah. They're comfy. I like them. Thanks."

"Great. I'm Gordon, by the way."

"I'm Tricia, but my friends all call me Trish. Nice to meet you." She held out her hand, in its fingerless glove. He shook it, part clothly and warm, part smooth and cold. A busy sensation, but good.

"Is it okay if I sit over here for a bit?" He pointed to a seat beside her.

"Guess so. I'm just reading. Gordon, right?"

"Yeah. You know anyone on this flight?"

"Nope, I'm just coming back from visiting my mom. In Buffalo."

"Oh, neat. I just finished camp. It was like an hour away from Buffalo. Jamestown, New York? Maybe an hour and a half, even."

"You were a counselor?"

"Um, no, it's sleepaway camp, so the campers can be pretty old... Yeah, I was oldest bunk."

"Oh okay."

"And color war co-captain, too. So, in that way, it was like being a counselor."

"That's something. So was it fun?"

"Yeah. We won."

"Congratulations."

"It was pretty close."

"What color were you?"

"We were the Red Barons."

"Huh. I'm not a big red fan. What's a red baron? Is that a bird?"

"Well... I don't know, I don't think it's a bird. I think someone said it was the nickname of this German fighter pilot or something. I'm not sure if 'baron' means anything on its own though."

"So your team was named after a German soldier?"

"No, not really, I think it's its own thing, and that was just some guy's nickname. Like the Swamp Fox."

"What's a swamp fox?"

"Well, it's not anything. That's my point. Like, there aren't any foxes that live in swamps, but that's one of those soldier nicknames. 'Cause he was sneaky, I think."

"There was a soldier called the Swamp Fox?"

"Right."

"Was he German?"

"I think he was British."

"Oh, okay. So it's like when you say gorilla warfare?"

"I... guess so. Right."

"So are you like a history buff or something?"

"No, I just remember some stuff from class."

"You're probably a really good student. You look very studious."

"I'm okay, I guess."

"Can you see without your glasses?"

"Not really." He took them off and squinted.

She took them from him and put them on her face.

"Holy shit! You must be blind!"

"Who said that?" He played blind.

"Ha ha! You're funny!" She studied him. "And you're kinda cute without your glasses."

"Yeah?" His heart raced, but he powered through. "I was thinking about getting contacts." He continued squinting.

She pushed back the hair hanging over his forehead. She turned his head to the side. "Yeah. You look a bit like a really young Matthew McConaughey when your hair is like this." For a moment, both of her hands were touching his face. Then she let go. She handed back his glasses. When he put them on, she was smiling at him. He smiled back.

The spell was broken by a loudspeaker announcing that Flight 004 to New York City—JFK Airport would begin boarding in just a few moments.

"Well that's us," Gordon said. "Where's your seat?"

"I think they said New York."

"Right."

"Oh, you're on a New York flight? I'm going to Chicago."

"What?"

"Yeah, I'm leaving out of Gate B10. See?" She pointed at the B10 information screen. "I didn't realize you were waiting in the B9 area."

"I thought you were in B9."

"The waiting areas kind of overlap, I guess."

"I guess so." It was like a small building inside him had collapsed.

By now, a line was forming for the New York flight. The voice announced that it was Now Boarding.

"My flight is boarding in like five minutes anyway," she said. "And I really wanted to go pee before I got on. Airplane bathrooms are so gross."

"Yeah."

"So... I guess this is it."

"I guess so."

"Oh! Do you want your socks back?"

"Well—Y'know what. Nah."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They can be something for you to remember me by."

"Oh. That's so sweet. Hey, it was really nice meeting you, Gordon."

"Nice meeting you, too." They shook hands.

"Well, bye."

She headed out to the general walkway, turned around and waved. He waved back. Then she hurried off toward the restroom. He watched her until she disappeared, along with his socks, in the sea of people. There was no kiss, no hotel room. Nothing.

On the plane ride home, Gordon stepped in something wet.

Editor's Note

Flight of the Red Baron originally appeared on the web in our January 2012 issue.

Artwork © Shlomo Rydzinski

The Last Supper by Darci Schummer

Melanie had been eating just what she liked: mashed potatoes, ice cream, pudding, but her coworkers at Abbott Northwestern, who had taken a sudden interest in her, were always saying, "You need to eat more. You need more iron," they would say. "You need more protein. You need more fiber." But now she felt they could say nothing because her stomach was gone, rotted away, and she no longer needed to eat. There was no need to put anything in her mouth, no meat or apples or carrots, because there was no place for it to go. She imagined the food floating around her body, fraying chunks of it knocking against her heart, her liver, her kidneys. The thought of it made her sick, and when they told her, "Remember, you're eating for two," she felt light and dizzy like a Mylar balloon. "Congratulations," the balloon said. "It's a girl."

November had been strange, the weather unusually warm for Minneapolis. Most days she left the house wearing not a jacket but a sweatshirt, which now stretched tight over her growing belly. As she walked to catch the 5A, she waded through rivers and pools of crimson and gold, feeling buoyant, light enough to drift like a leaf. She told her husband this when he came home from his job as a carpet cleaner. He looked at her crossly and told her she was silly. This was the word he now used to describe her: silly.

Right before dinner, he launched into a story about how that very morning he had clipped a red-tailed hawk with his work truck. "I didn't even see it," he said. "Just came right up out of the ditch. Really, *it* hit me. No time to stop. They hunt on the side of the 35, you know, perch right up on the light posts and then swoop down on the sides of the road. It had probably just eaten dinner."

"What happened to it?" Melanie asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I had to keep driving. Couldn't just slam on the breaks to stop with cars behind me. I never—" She stood up to spoon some potatoes on his plate, and he paused, looking up at her. "I'm going to say something before we eat."

"Something," she said.

He shot her a look. "You know," he said, bowing his head. "To God in heaven, we pray. Thank you for this food on the table. Thank you for our health. Thank you for the health of our child who is getting bigger and bigger every day, and with God's will," he paused, his brow wrinkled, "will. In the son's name we pray, amen."

He pulled his head up and looked at Melanie. She tried to conceal her smile, the corners of her mouth pinched; her eyes had been open the whole time. "Eat something," he said.

"I told you I don't have to."

"Well I'm telling you that you do. For both of you."

"It doesn't matter anymore, Ted. I told you."

"How can you say that? You're five months along. I don't know what the angle is."

"There isn't any damn angle. I told you I don't have a stomach and I'm not going to eat anymore. It doesn't matter."

Ted let his fork fall hard on his plate. "I can't take any more of this...this *silliness*. How am I supposed to talk to you?"

"You don't need to talk to me."

"Why the hell would you say that?"

"You don't talk to shadows, do you Ted?"

He cracked a beer and got up from the table. "You're something else. You know that, you're really something else."

Melanie listened to his footsteps fade into the living room and then listened to the television flipping on. It would be religion that came blaring out. He had taken to listening to this preacher and that preacher shortly after she got pregnant; or rather, shortly after she told him she wanted an abortion. Her periods stopped coming while she was on the birth control pill, and they had agreed when she went on the pill that they didn't want a child.

"We can't afford it," she had said after telling him she was pregnant.

"We can find money," Ted said.

Melanie laughed. "Are you going to ask your mother? Because my parents aren't helping. They can't and you know it."

"She would help us. I know she would..." He looked down, rolling a carrot back and forth between his fingertips.

"You told her."

Ted said nothing.

"You fucking told her, didn't you? Son of a bitch. You had to open your big mouth and tell someone."

"Please, Melanie..." He came to her and held her, confessing at her knees. "I'll do goddamn anything. Just don't get rid of that baby. I won't be able to forgive myself and God won't forgive either one of us." It was a side of him she had never seen before; she froze, rubbed her stomach, imagining familial tableaux.

"Since when does God matter so much to you?"

"It's in the Bible, Melanie."

"Your mom tell you that, too?"

"She's right. She's right about it. You'll never forgive yourself."

"I won't, huh? Is it that or that you and your mother will never forgive me?"

"Please, Melanie, please, babygirl," he said, clinging to her. She had looked up into the the overhead light in their kitchen then, the one they still did not have the money to replace, and felt as though she weren't standing there at all but was simply floating above her own life, above them, above the marriage, and now she could do nothing but sit back and watch the scene. She started laughing, the laugh beginning as a small quiver and building until her whole body shook. And then Ted was laughing, too, and

they were both shaking until finally they broke apart, tears running down Melanie's face.

"You're happy now, aren't you babygirl, aren't you? We decided and now you don't have to worry, right babygirl?" Ted said.

Melanie just laughed again, amazed at how easily they had stopped moving lockstep. She turned away, wrapping her arms around a body that was now a stranger, a mess of marrow and sinew that she did not recognize and that—most importantly—she was no longer master of.

"Only in Jesus can man find peace!" The televangelist's voice screamed from the living room. Melanie peered around the corner, watching Ted as he leaned toward the television, elbows perched on his knees, hand gripping a warm beer. "Some people say God isn't here. They say things like 'god is what he is,' meaning that God comes and goes as he pleases. I say that God doesn't leave." The preacher's voice climbed to a fevered canter. "God doesn't take time off from his work," the preacher paused. "God is always right there." The preacher beat his chest, patting his forehead with an initialed handkerchief. "Always right here for you to call him when you need it." The crowd yelled out, "Amen!" And Melanie thought she saw Ted mouth the words along with them. She turned away and began picking at a paper towel, insistent as prayer, until a mound of papery flakes lay before her. *Amen*, she thought.

When the program ended, Ted turned off the television. She listened carefully to his movements, translating the slightest sounds to actions. In a moment, she knew he would use the toilet and then—then, "Are you coming?" he said.

"I'm coming," she said, slowly pushing herself up from the table.

"You eighty or something?"

"My legs now. It's my legs."

"They sore?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Then let's go to bed." He took her arm and began leading her to their bedroom. He ran his hand down the nape of her neck. "Come on, babygirl," he said. "We turn back the clock tonight, you know. Extra hour."

They drew near the bedroom, which was dark, only scant patches of light came in from the street. And though deep within herself she knew it did not matter, the darkness frightened her, the door an open mouth, the bits of jagged light, teeth. "I'd feel bad if that hawk is off somewhere dying," she said. "I'd feel really bad for that bird laying there like that. It might have been miserable and nobody would know it," she said, her voice getting higher as they crossed the threshold. "It might have had to lay there trapped. Couldn't get away if it wanted to."

Ted pulled off his clothes until she could just barely see the white of his underwear in the dim light coming in from the street. He flopped into bed. "You need that extra hour," he said.

He exhaled and turned over away from her so that he faced the door; she was on the inside of the room and she turned away from him, staring at what she could still see of the wood paneling. "Spring ahead, fall behind," she said.

"What, babygirl?"

"I said, 'spring ahead, fall behind.'"

"That's how the saying goes."

"Why do they say 'fall behind'? Doesn't it sound bad?"

"You're thinking too much. Get some rest so the baby can get some rest, too."

"I don't need rest, Ted. I don't need anything. I told you. Shadows don't sleep or eat or anything. They just float along. Most of the time you can't see them at all. Now it's going to be completely light when you get up in the mornings. You won't even be able to see me at all."

"You aren't a goddamn shadow, Melanie. You're here in our bed in our house and our baby is inside of you. I don't know why you keep talking this way. If you don't stop it, I'll make you go to the doctor. You won't talk me out of it this time. You'll do exactly what I say."

Melanie kept quiet; it did not matter, but she did not want to push Ted anymore. She did not want to see the doctor; the doctor would tell her that she no longer had a stomach, that there wasn't really a baby inside her, facts she already knew, and then the waiting would just seem longer.

Soon Ted began his measured breath, light and raspy. In the space of being alone while not being alone, her mind drifted. She could see a red-tailed hawk and then suddenly she was in the air, her vision honed to the slightest movement of gray or brown below. The forest by the side of the highway was sparse, carpeted in vibrantly green grass. It was spring, not fall, and the leaves on the trees were the same resonant green. And then as the wind blew and the grass swayed, she saw movement, a small rabbit darted through the strands. Her heartbeat quickened and she swooped down toward it, her talons extended. But before she reached the ground, she was merely watching from above again. Ted's truck appeared in the distance; he was driving, checking the time: "Spring ahead, fall behind," he said. Then she could see the bird, she could see the highway...

Melanie jerked awake, her fingers unconsciously crossing her chest, her heart palpitating wildly. Yes, it would be her heart that would fail next, and she was happy for that. She glanced over Ted's sleeping form to check the time, hoping that when the clock struck 2 and time turned against itself, her body would gain nothing back that it had already lost.

Editor's Note

The Last Supper originally appeared on the web in our February 2012 issue.

The Tent by Janna Layton

The police are asking about the tent. They're standing in the backyard with Caitlin's swing set, Jeremiah's toys, Jenny's tent. The tent is forest green, but inside it's full of pink and purple blankets, a cheap sheer blue scarf pinned to the ceiling like a canopy bed or sky, photos of teens in a school courtyard and at an amusement park glued to dangling ribbons.

And it seems so silly that the police are here. The blankets, the pretty teen girl blankets, are still soft and fluffy and no doubt smelling of bodywash and teen girl sweat and makeup. A few strands of Jenny's long light brown hair are probably still buried there. These can't be abandoned blankets. Jenny will be back, pouty and dark-eyed, curled up in a corner of this tent and texting two friends at once.

"She an outdoorsy type?" one of the detectives asks.

Barbara laughs awkwardly. "No, no. That's the thing," she begins. "Jenny's not an outdoorsy type. This is more her...her...I guess she'd call it a sanctuary. Teens and their privacy. A spare room."

Eventually the police leave, reassuring her that since Jenny's a good student, she'll probably return before the weekend's over. Eight-year-old Caitlin and four-year-old Jeremiah are watching *Pokemon*, expressionless. Barbara hugs them both. They say nothing.

"Everything's going to be okay," Barbara tells them.

"Do we have to go to school tomorrow?" asks Caitlin.

Barbara goes into the kitchen. Mike is there, leaning against the counter, eating a bag of chips.

"She'll be back soon," he says. "What a load of drama, though."

Mike is not Jenny's father. Barbara tries not to think about what her friend Susan had said, her voice caught between panic and excitement, as she told Barbara that poor Mike, the cops would probably be suspicious of him, him being the stepfather and all, always the stepfather.

Susan had even paused, looking at Barbara, as if trying to gauge if it were a possibility. But Barbara knew it wasn't. Jenny had been in her tent Friday evening. Barbara and Mike had gone to their bed. Then Saturday morning the tent was empty. Jenny's bedroom was empty. She had probably gone off with friends without telling, Barbara thought. A teenage display of power. But Sunday morning the tent was still empty, and now it is almost night again. Maybe she will be in the tent tomorrow in time for school with some teenage excuse for her absence. Once Jenny returns, the tent will have to be taken down, put back in the garage.

Monday morning Barbara can barely make herself look out the window at the tent. She is disappointed when she doesn't see a silhouette, but then remembers that she only

sees a silhouette at night, and only if Jenny has the electric lantern on. Jenny is probably still sleeping—it's only 6:00am. Of course she is sleeping. Lazy, lazybones.

The cement patio is cool and damp on her bare feet. She barely breathes as she crosses over to the grass, reaches the tent. She wants to say "Jenny," but can't. The pull of the zipper is cold. The tent is empty, even under the blankets.

By the time the kids wake up she has already been on the phone with the police. Mike has already come down, rubbed her shoulder, made some coffee.

"Did Jenny come back?" asks Caitlin.

"Not yet, sweetie. Soon." Forces herself to smile.

"She's being a spoiled brat," announces Jeremiah gleefully. He holds his blue train blankie over his head and starts spinning around, singing a cartoon theme song.

Barbara stares. Jeremiah keeps spinning. She should say something. She should say something. But the moment's passed. He's only four. She looks at Mike, but Mike turns away.

Work is supportive when she says she can't come in.

"We'll let you know if she calls here," her manager says.

Mike takes the kids to daycare and school and goes to work. Barbara keeps the TV tuned to local news, but it's just weather and traffic. She sits at the kitchen table and studies the newspaper. Each turn of the page feels like asthma, like vertigo. Surely the police would have called if there were any news. There won't be a headline "Body of Teenage Girl Found." There isn't.

Then there's the comics section. Never before has she realized how many comics there are about parents and teenagers. Lanky teens lying in messy beds, moms trying to pull them out for school. Teens hunched over their phones, ignoring their exasperated parents. Even the slacker kid from "Doonesbury" who became a CIA agent in the never-ending Afghan/Iraq War storyline is currently safe in his parents' kitchen, annoying them with his social networking ways.

Barbara leaves the kitchen table.

There are no emails from Jenny. There are emails of support from her own friends which she doesn't read in full. There is an email from Jenny's biology teacher, Ms. Worth.

"Jenny is such a sweetheart. We will all keep a look out for her."

Such a sweetheart. Such a sweetheart.

If Barbara leaves the house, Jenny might come home and find the door locked—she didn't bring her keys. But Jenny could be nearby. At the good mall where she went with friends. At the bad mall that she only went to when grudgingly accompanying Barbara on an errand. At the park with the ducks where they used to go when she was little.

Duck Park. She can't remember the real name of it. It was by the apartment they lived in back then. Their one-bedroom apartment didn't give Jenny much room to play, and the complex had no grass—just spider-webbed juniper bushes and concrete with cigarette butts. Fortunately Duck Park was just a few minutes' walk. There was a shallow, murky pond that Jenny called a lake, and a little hill of grass she called a field.

Jenny in her little overalls, rolling again and again down the hill, shrieking with joy, grass stains. Jenny filling her mother in on the history and family tree of each duck, naming them all. Jenny using a stick to draw pictures in the muddy gravel along the walkway. Jenny making a little boat out of leaves and twigs to float in the pond.

Jenny must be in the park. Jenny is in the park. Barbara debates for milliseconds whether or not to just drive over in her bathrobe, but then she pulls on gray sweatpants and a sweatshirt from Caitlin's school's PTA. She hurries to the car, no purse.

The drive across town is twenty minutes, but feels longer. Where is the park? It was on this street. Is it gone, did she pass it, was it another street entirely? But there it is. The name is unfamiliar, but she can't tell if this is because it is a new name or because it was always Duck Park to them. She stops the car at the curb, jumps out, hurries up the little hill.

Jenny is not there. Barbara wasn't expecting the truth to be so brutally quick. She thought she would have to look around, that hope would stretch out as she looked behind trees. But the park is much smaller than she remembers. Just the greasy puddle of a pond. Just the bump of a hill. A man sleeps on the lone bench. There are beer bottles and empty chips bags. There is only one duck, a female mallard, in the pond. How long has it been since she came here? Jenny is sixteen, and she never brought Caitlin or Jeremiah here.

Barbara goes back to the car.

At home she checks the tent again. Still no Jenny. She touches the blankets, imagining they are warm, that Jenny stopped by and took a nap. The tent wasn't supposed to still be here. It was supposed to be a one-time thing. Lately Jenny had been complaining about her room. She wanted to paint the walls pink. She wanted purple carpet. She wanted a four-poster bed. She had looked up prices, looked up paints, looked up carpets. Made a spreadsheet. Refused to hear "no." Threw a fit. Slammed doors. A pretty, pouting princess. A brat.

It's still morning. Barbara puts on jeans and a nicer tee-shirt, even though she knows she's not leaving the house unless she hears some news. She goes on Facebook and makes friend requests to Jenny's friends. Maybe one will accept and some news will slip through. She leaves the browser open, just in case. No breakfast this morning, she realizes. She eats cold cereal on the couch. She changes the channel on the TV. There is a travel show. The host is showing off Switzerland.

In the apartment she and Jenny lived in, they had a free map of the world that had come in the junk mail. Barbara taped it to the wall and Jenny would point to different places and Barbara would tell her what they were.

"What's Madagascar?" Jenny would ask.

"Let's find out."

And Barbara would pull out the old, cumbersome atlas she'd gotten at a garage sale and read aloud facts about the chosen place.

"I want to go to Madagascar," Jenny would say.

Or Portugal, or Nigeria, or France, or Norway, or Illinois. She wanted to go everywhere. She wanted to see lemurs and ancient temples and waterfalls and the Space Needle.

"Maybe someday," Barbara would say.

Maybe Jenny is in Seattle, or New York, or Madagascar.

Barbara goes out to the tent again. Still no Jenny. During the argument about the bedroom remodeling, Barbara had dragged the dusty tent from some camping trip and dumped it on the kitchen floor, telling Jenny that since she didn't appreciate her room or this house, she could set up the tent in the backyard and sleep there that night.

"Jenny has to sleep outsi-ide! Jenny has to sleep outsi-ide!" Caitlin had chanted.

Jenny, her angry eyes made more insolent with navy eyeliner and smoky eye shadow, glared at her mother for several moments, then picked up the tent and went outside. She managed to set it up herself. She spent the whole night there. The next day she hung up the photos of her and her friends inside. The sheer scarf and extra pink and purple blankets appeared after a shopping trip with a friend who had a car.

Barbara thought it would last a week at most. But every day after school Jenny went straight to the tent, coming in only for food and the bathroom. They were playing chicken, neither mentioning the tent. At night Barbara, from a window of the two-story house, would look out at the green glow and the silhouette of her daughter.

Editor's Note

The Tent originally appeared on the web in our March 2012 issue.

The Social Life of Wolverines by Elise Atchison

As soon as the car dropped off the raised gravel road onto the rutted two track, Dale yelled, "You idiot! This isn't Moose Creek!"

"I can see that," Jenny said.

"Well, turn around!"

"I can't do it here. It's too tight. I'm sure there'll be a place to turn around up ahead."

They plowed through the tall grass that grew in the middle of the dirt road. The grass *swooshed* as it disappeared under the car grill.

"I don't even think this is a road, Jenny."

"It's a road. There was a forest service sign pointing this way. It's just not a very well-used road." Jenny laughed.

"This isn't funny. We're going to be late to the wedding."

"Don't worry, Dale. I'm sure there'll be a place to turn around soon."

The brush thickened as they drove up the road. Lodgepole saplings bent forward under the front bumper, *thwacking* against the bottom of the car. Dale looked back and saw the small trees flattened to the ground, the bark scraped off their spindly trunks, the needles stripped from their young limbs.

"This car doesn't have much clearance. You better just back up."

"I can't back up. It's so overgrown, I can't see where the road is. We'll go off."

"Jeez, Jenny. You better find a place to turn around. The road's pretty much disappearing on us."

They bounced over the rough terrain. The farther they went, the more the overgrown forest intruded into the roadway. Low hanging spruce boughs slapped the top of the car with a steady *schwump, schwump, schwump*. Hawthorn branches clawed the length of the car with a high-pitched *screee-aaawk*.

"You're ruining the car, Jenny."

Jenny didn't answer, she just stared straight ahead, looking for the slightest hint of a place to turn the car around. They were only going about five miles an hour when they heard a loud *clu-unk*, and the car stopped moving.

"Oh great. That's just great," Dale said. He leaned forward and peered at the barely visible road ahead. "Try to ease it forward." Jenny pressed gently on the gas, but the car didn't move. "What about backwards?" She put the car in reverse and tapped the gas again, but the car still didn't budge. "Floor it!"

"That might rip the axle off, Dale."

Jenny turned the car off. They sat in silence for a moment, and then both of their heads jerked up.

"What's that?" Dale said, a slight panic rising in his voice.

"It sounds like music. Heavy metal music, I think."

Dale's eyes widened. "It's getting louder!"

A black truck came barreling around the corner and skidded to a stop in front of them. The truck was rusty and dented, the front bumper hung half off, and a large spider crack zigzagged across the front windshield. It looked like it had been driven off a steep cliff and then dragged back up from the bottom of a rocky canyon. Two men stared at them from behind the dirty glass.

The driver had dark hair, shaggy and matted like a musk-ox. His eyes darted around with a glittery, artificial shine. The passenger looked like he was bald under his baseball cap. His half-lidded eyes slithered over them with a slimy, reptilian gaze.

"Oh great, we drove right into a meth lab."

"Be quiet, Dale. They might be able to hear you."

The music clicked off, and the driver emerged from the truck. He was tall and thin, and he had a weird, intricately-patterned tattoo covering his right arm from shoulder to fingertips. Dale thought it looked like some sort of cult or gang thing—probably a souvenir from prison. The passenger stayed in the car, his round face grinning at them as if he were fondling a pistol in his lap.

"Oh my god. The driver looks like the Misfit. And what do you want to bet that other guy plays the banjo?"

"Stop it, Dale." Jenny reached for the door handle.

"Are you crazy! Don't get out!"

Jenny opened the door and stepped into the grass. Dale slumped down in his seat and locked the doors and cracked the window a couple of inches.

"Looks like you guys have a problem here," the driver said.

"Yeah. We're stuck," Jenny answered.

The driver squatted down and looked under the front of the car. His hand rested on the hood, each fingernail packed with dark soil as if he had been digging in the earth with his bare hands. "You got a jack?"

"No!" Dale yelled from the car.

"Yeah, in back." Jenny said.

The driver went around to the back of the car. Dale waved wildly at Jenny until she went over to his window. "He's going to hit us over the head with the jack and steal the car," Dale hissed in a low whisper.

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Just pop the trunk, Dale."

The driver came back around to the front of the car and placed the jack under the front axle. Jenny stood beside him in a pale lavender dress and sandals.

"You don't look dressed for the outdoors, ma'am."

"We were headed to a wedding at Moose Creek. I guess we took a wrong turn."

The driver chuckled. "Yeah, I guess you did. It looks like you high-grounded on a rock, but I think we can get you moving again." He jacked the car up and called out, "Robby!"

The passenger got out of the truck and ambled over to them. He gave a silent nod as he walked by Jenny. The two men pressed their shoulders against the front of the car and shoved it backwards off the rock. Dale bounced in his seat as the car settled back onto the road.

"You need real good clearance to drive up this road. And four-wheel drive, of course. It's not very well maintained."

"I can see that," Jenny said with a laugh. "I appreciate you guys getting us unstuck."

"No problem. But I'd be a little more careful where you take that car. This truck is a university vehicle, and it's meant to be banged up. But I wouldn't drive my car up here."

"You work for the university?"

"We're grad students. Studying the social life of wolverines. We've been out here four weeks this time. Kind of ready for a shower and a beer, and not necessarily in that order." The three of them laughed, while Dale narrowed his eyes at them from the safety of the car.

"You should be able to make it out from here. We'll follow you and make sure you don't get stuck again."

Jenny looked back down the road and frowned. "I don't think I can back out of here. It's so overgrown, I can't see where the road is."

"I'll lead you out," the round-faced guy said in a barely-audible voice.

He shuffled around the car and started walking down the middle of the road. Jenny pulled on the door handle and gave Dale an exasperated look as he fumbled with the lock. She put the car in reverse and inched back down the road, following the plodding form of her guide.

When they got back to the county road, Jenny stopped the car.

"Just keep driving, Jenny. They probably wanted us to get the car out, and now they'll shoot us and steal it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Dale. They're grad students."

"You believed that story? God you're gullible. I don't know how you ever made it this far in life."

Jenny looked at Dale for a long moment, then she rolled down her window and yelled, "Thanks!"

"Moose Creek's two miles up that way," the driver shouted, his tattooed finger pointing north.

The two men gave a thumbs up and pulled south. Jenny waved and turned north on the county road. She knew exactly where she was going from here.

Editor's Note

The Social Life of Wolverines originally appeared on the web in our January 2012 issue.

The Lifeguard by Joshua Willey

Around the time of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, I got a job as a lifeguard at the pool on Arguello Street. It was one of the oldest pools in the city and there were some unsettling discolorations on the floors. Next to the pool was a park. It was a quiet part of town and after work I'd linger on the benches, watching bums scour the trashcans, drinking maté and listening to the city hum. One night, I was reading under a streetlight and a girl walked up and sat down.

"You're the lifeguard," she said.

"That's right. Are you drowning?"

"Maybe so," she said, smiling and lighting a cigarette. She was pale and had very clear, light eyes, almost colorless, but slightly blue, like ice.

"I'm the one in the polka dot suit."

"I don't let myself look at the pretty girls. I feel like once I start..."

"You can look at me."

"OK."

"I look at you."

"I will then. I am now." She had an alluring way of blowing smoke to the side, and the asymmetrical cut of her hair, the steel stud in her lip, and her worn clothes lent something rugged to her appearance.

"What are you drinking?"

"Maté." I held it out and she took a drink; then made a sour face.

"Let's go get a real drink," she said.

"What's a real drink?" I asked. I would not have guessed that moments later we'd be sitting in McDonald's, sipping Dr. Pepper.

"I come here all the time," she said.

"I've never been before."

"Why not? They don't have them where you're from?"

"They do. I guess it always seemed too well lit."

"Sometimes you need the light to appreciate the dark."

"I see that."

"Where do you live?"

I pointed toward the ocean.

"You?"

She pointed in the same direction.

"What do you do besides lifeguard and sit in the park?"

"Now that I get free swim passes, I swim. I borrow stuff from the library. I explore the city. You?"

"I work at the Wayfarer."

"I've seen that place."

"Come by. I'll give you a cup on the house."

That night I couldn't fall asleep. I watched a movie with my housemates, a couple from Villahermosa; both bus drivers. The only bus driver couple I ever heard of. It wasn't as though they thought of driving busses as a day job; it was more than a career even; it was a passion. They went to bed after the movie and I listened to music in my room. At two I went out to an all night joint where I knew the staff. The chef came out and sat with me. She had just gotten a job as a cook for Raytheon and would soon be shipped off to Iraq or Afghanistan. I told her about the girl with the clear eyes and she said it sounded just like true love.

I woke at noon the next day and went for a swim; then I took the bus out to the Wayfarer. She was at the counter in a black and white checkered apron and a Sharks hat cocked to one side. She winked at me when I stepped in and poured me a cup. When she brought it over she kissed me on both cheeks.

"You smell like chlorine."

"Always."

It was busy, so she couldn't talk. I finished my book and waved to her before stepping out.

I had to work the following evening. There were a couple hours of team practice first, and the air was filled with splashing and whistles. Lap swim started after that, and Roxy, who was working the desk, turned on the radio and we hoofed it a little when nobody was looking. A Russian came in and bobbed up and down the slow lane, looking so happy he could fall asleep. A couple kids with buzz cuts dove in and immediately entered the impenetrable zone of their rhythm, swimming fast, with the lightness of habit. I was reciting the periodic table to myself and then there she was, stepping out of the locker room in a two-piece polka dot suit, a stud in her belly button matching the one in her lip, a swim cap on her head. She did the YMCA and smiled in my direction, then dove in and swam the length entire without coming up for air. When she emerged beneath my chair I seized the opportunity.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Taking you home," she replied, and pushed off the wall into a lap of freestyle. She stayed with this stroke for some time, doing kick turns beneath me. I wondered how a smoker could have such wind. After a while she switched to breaststroke. At one point she got out and walked around the pool, water beading up and running down her skin, her pores opened by her heightened heart rate, her cheeks flushed. She took a kickboard from the bin and walked back to her lane, reaching out and running her fingers down my calf as she passed by. She concluded her swim with butterfly.

When we closed, Roxy handed me a note: directions to her place.

"Who is that girl?"

"I have no idea," I said. I rode until I reached her address. I locked my bike and knocked. A big guy in a plaid shirt answered the door. He looked confused for a second but then stepped aside and invited me in.

"She's upstairs," he said. A steak was sizzling on the stove. I walked upstairs and there she was in an oversized tank top and short shorts. She ushered me into her room and closed the door.

"You seem like you only have one foot in the world," she said.

"I guess you're right."

"So where's the other foot?"

"If I knew that..."

She kissed me, and I kissed her back, and we fell on the bed.

I woke in the middle of the night to see her sitting naked on the windowsill, smoking. We looked at each other for a moment. Half her face was illuminated by the streetlight. Her radio was on low, reactions to Obama's first Oval Office address. An Escalade rolled by bumping Big L.

"What are you thinking about," I asked.

"Your foot."

"What about it?"

"Where it is."

"Where are your feet?"

She didn't answer.

"It's like sometimes all consciousness seems like false consciousness, so if you want to be true, you have to forego consciousness altogether."

"I think I know what you mean. You study philosophy?"

"Not really. My brother."

"You are happy?"

"No. It's not about happiness."

"What's it about then?"

"If I knew that..."

The next few days I was sad. She'd thrown me out of equilibrium somehow. It's not that I wanted to be with her all the time, but she had entered a space I thought was mine alone, and now that space was changed. The silence and emptiness in which I soaked, the current I floated upon, it was all given a new tone. I decided to go for a swim. I rode over to the pool and talked up Roxy for a while. Then I stood under the shower with my eyes closed before walking out and diving in. I just drifted to the bottom and when I started up for air, the girl in the polka dot suit and swim cap passed me, going the other direction. The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion. Our eyes met through two layers of goggle plastic. She said something, but I couldn't make it out, only see the bubbles rising from her mouth to pop on the surface of the pool.

Editor's Note

The Lifeguard originally appeared on the web in our June 2012 issue.

The Leprechaun Violence Conjecture by Andrew Davie

What is the Leprechaun Violence Conjecture?

Good question. It's a formula I've been working on which attempts to predict the amount of violence one would need to inflict on another person to be able to claim authorship of Leprechaun 5.

Could you explain what that means?

It'll become more clear when I tell you about Bob.

OK. When were you working on this formula?

For most of 2009

Why does something like that need to be calculated?

It is essentially an examination of the classical Faustian contract in which one weighs how much a soul is worth. Also, when you're a day trader and dealing with the fallout of the Subprime Mortgage Crisis, you're doing a lot of drinking and mindless postulating.

Are you drinking right now?

Absolutely.

What are you drinking?

A Black Tooth Grin.

What's in a Black Tooth Grin?

It's a drink invented by the members of the heavy metal group Pantera, based off of the lyric "Someday you too will know my pain, and smile its black tooth grin" from the song "Sweating Bullets" by Megadeth. Their version of this concoction consists of multiple parts Crown Royal with a splash of Coca Cola. My version is equal parts Jack Daniel's and Coca Cola with a splash of Seagrams Seven.

Are you listening to Pantera or Megadeth right now?

No, I am listening to "Digital" by Joy Division.

Does any of this factor into the conjecture?

Yes, musical taste and libation choice are just a few of the variables which factor into the calibration of the equation.

So, how does the formula work?

Well, there are levels which can be depicted in a bar graph, each correlating to a specified amount of violence one would visit on a person so that he/she could have written Leprechaun 5.

For example, let's take Bob: an average American male, maybe slightly more idealistic than most.

Level One: Bob's idealism is still such that his desire to have written Leprechaun 5 is so beneath him, he pays it no mind whatsoever. Instead, he's busy reading Zen and Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, drinking cheap beer, and watching Fellini films. He's about 22 years old and a senior in college.

Movie character he's most like: William Wallace in "Braveheart," full of pure idealistic fervor, unwilling to compromise or bend to a life of oppression.

Bodily harm done so he could have written Leprechaun Five: zero; everyone around him is safe.

How many levels are there altogether?

Seven, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

What kind of cheap beer does someone drink on Level One?

Schlitz, Pabst Blue Ribbon, St. Ides, King Cobra, typically anything that comes in a 40 ounce container.

Were you at all influenced by Dante's Divine Comedy?

Somewhat. There are also influences/comparisons that can be made to: the calculation of Blood Alcohol Percentage, Hempel's Paradox, and some of the early works of Tycho Brahe.

Didn't Brahe keep a pet moose?

At one point he owned an Elk, which sadly died after ingesting too much beer and falling down a flight of stairs. He also maintained the services of a Dwarf who acted in the capacity of Brahe's personal jester.

Are you making this up?

No.

Was this something you discovered during your down time in 2009?

I would spend a decent amount of time pouring over covered call options and the remainder would be dispersed equally between perusing Wikipedia and various boxing websites.

Would you listen to music during this time?

Yes.

Any bands in particular?

Slayer, Minor Threat, Minutemen, Fugazi, Black Sabbath, Bad Brains, Megadeth, etc. It depended on the day, whether it was nice outside or gloomy, whether I was in the grip of an anxiety attack or on a euphoric high.

Shall we discuss Level Two?

Level two: Bob is between the ages of 21-24. On his lunch break, from his entry level job, he spends a few minutes at Barnes and Noble across the street from his office. He glances at the direct to DVD movies in a bin somewhere near the back of the store. Since it's close to St. Patrick's Day, he's reminded of The Leprechaun Series, but shrugs it off, checks the time, and heads back to the office with the coffee his boss ordered. Mostly, Bob spends his days at this entry level position, between the hours of nine and five, but it could be eight to six, doing menial office tasks: handing out faxes, answering the phone, running errands. His general disposition and life outlook is a good one. He doesn't mind running these seemingly banal errands because "He's paying his dues." Someday, with hard work, he'll write something innovative and fresh.

So for this formula to work, the person wants to be a writer?

It can be any artist, but for this particular example Bob is a writer.

Movie Character he's most like: Josh Baskin in Big; he attacks data entry with zeal, and \$187.30 is a lot of money. He hasn't lost that childlike innocence in thinking that someday they'll mention his name along with the greats.

Bodily harm done so that he could have written Leprechaun Five: .5 out of a possible 10. It's the equivalent of being at a bar and getting backed into a few times, by a guy who's had a couple, so that Bob stiffens and when the guy tries leaning back again, he meets with enough resistance to spill a little of his drink.

Who is this guy typically, the one with the spilled drink?

Most likely he's a finance guy, Morgan Stanley or Goldman Sachs, you can tell because he's got a gym bag with the company's name embroidered on the side. Since it's happy hour, he's tossed back a few Vodka Cranberries and his equilibrium is compromised. He's on his way to being a full fledged date rapist, not a compromised gropist.

Is gropist a word?

Not in the lexicon per se.

What does the gropist listen too?

Sirius XM, probably Howard Stern on his way to work, I'm guessing classic rock; he definitely gives high fives and knows the words to "More Than a Feeling."

What's Level three?

Level 3: This is where things begin to turn. Most likely the first couple of Bob's friends have gotten married, but at the same time, Bob's glad it's not him. He still enjoys the entry level job for the freedom it allows him to write, but the novelty of the paycheck amount begins to weigh on him. On his way home from work one night, he sees that Willow is on sale for \$9.99 and he stares at Warwick Davis for a long period of time while the theme from The Omen reverberates around in his skull. Regardless, at the end of the day, Bob meets his friends for a couple of domestic beers and talks about an idea he has for a riff on Repo Man. His Idealism hits a slight bump, but maintains its course. Odds are he's about 25 years old.

Movie Character he's most like: Lloyd Dobler; Bob still doesn't want to sell out (i.e. buy anything sold or processed, sell anything bought or processed, or process anything bought or sold). Dobler's idealism took a hit when Diane Court dumped him. He ended up drinking cheap beer, getting life lessons outside of the Gas n' Sip. He still possesses the idealism though, demonstrated by blasting Peter Gabriel from a boom box outside of Diane Court's window, even after she gave him a pen... a pen.

Bodily harm done so that he could have written Leprechaun Five: 3; Bob would get into a shoving match with someone, but they'd have to push him first. Then he'd feint and throw wild haymakers until someone broke it up.

You seem to know a lot about movies.

You have no idea, I can recite all the best picture Oscar winners, and their directors, from the last fifty years.

What won in 1971?

The French Connection directed by William Friedkin. My mom calls me on the weekends for help with the New York Times crossword puzzle.

OK. What's the next level?

Level 4: Bob reads in Variety one morning two new movies are being produced involving the repossession business. Occasionally, he plays Black Sabbath over the all office page, and when his boss meets with him at his four year review, he actually says the words "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not have any more responsibility." Then he tells his boss "This meeting is over," as if Bob was a cop accused of corruption during the Knapp hearings. Bob spends the rest of his days at his desk endlessly typing pages toward what he feels is his magnum opus. Really, he only has a title: No One Runs Faster Than a Rifle Bullet, but the title alone gives him some solace. His "idealism candle" is flickering in the wind. Bob has now switched from drinking beer to drinking whiskey.

Movie Character he's most like: Barton Fink; so much promise coming out of theater, then toiling almost aimlessly, until he questions whether or not he's actually in Hell, carrying around what might be a Fishmonger. Fishmongers Fishmongers Fishmongers Fishmongers.

Bodily harm done so that he could have written Leprechaun Five: It would take something, but not much to set him off at this point. For example, if someone were to make the mistake of asking Bob to get them coffee, he'd knee them in the face repeatedly like Paco in Bloodsport.

What won best picture in 1978?

The Deer Hunter. Michael Cimino

What are you listening to now?

"Three point one four," by the Bloodhound Gang. They originally wanted to call it "Vagina."

Pi. That's clever. You seem to have an eclectic taste in music.

One who is not open to new things will find himself shut off to the world.

What movie is that from?

It's not, I just made that up.

What's Level 5?

Level 5: Over half of Bob's friends are married and have bought houses. Some of them have kids. He begins to listen to Ozzy Osbourne's version of "Working Class Hero" over and over again, mouthing the words "But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see." He's moved on to drinking copious amounts of Scotch, and drinking wine by the bottle. While holed up in his studio apartment one Sunday morning, The Return of the Jedi comes on television; Bob watches the scenes with Carrie Fisher and Wickett like

Travis Bickle watches American Bandstand in Taxi Driver. The multitude of scripts that Bob's written collects dust on his shelves. If the name Eli Roth is mentioned in Bob's presence, he might just snap.

Bodily harm done so that he could have written Leprechaun Five: The last level at which Bob is mostly reactionary, but beginning to become antagonistic. If pushed, Bob would take off his watch, smash a beer bottle, then tear someone apart like Atilla in Lionheart.

Do you think if you had the same aptitude in the field of math or science, as you do for film, what you might have accomplished?

The Field's Medal for starters, perhaps be on a Nobel Prize team which discovered the cure for something, or the natural orbit of something else. As it is though, I know that Dolph Lundgren was the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship to MIT.

Are you serious?

I wouldn't joke about something like that.

What's the next level?

Level 6: Things take a bit of a breather at this point. Bob could no longer stomach his job; he was suffering from night terrors and a severity of apathy he'd never felt before. He's taken a new job (still entry level), which mixes things up a little, and gives his idealism some resuscitation. At the same time, he's still mostly jaded, and at dinner, while talking with friends, he openly laments the fact that if he'd been offered the chance to write Leprechaun 5, he would seriously consider it. A small part of him still holds out hope he'll make it as a writer. He doesn't mention this to the group at the table, instead he pushes a half eaten dumpling around on his plate wondering if it's a metaphor for something else. After dinner's over, and the check comes, Bob's friends pay with platinum business credit cards. He leaves three wadded up ten dollar bills.

Movie Character he's most like: Uli Kunkel from The Big Lebowski; he's content to float in a pool with an empty bottle of Jack bobbing next to him. Of course, if he feels like someone is making with the funny stuff, he'll unleash a marmot, brandish a samurai sword, and cut off someone's "chonson."

Bodily harm done so he could have written Leprechaun Five: Since he's gotten the new job, and gotten a bit more settled, Bob's not as antagonistic as he used to be. He's more like my friend's 180 pound bull mastiff Gordon: content to go with the flow, but if someone takes Gordon's bone, they might lose a hand, or arm, or face. Regardless, they're going to be less handsome... Gordon's not allowed to play with other dogs.

All this to have written the fifth installment of the Leprechaun series?

Yes.

How do you feel about the writers of the movie, Doug Hall, John Huffman, Alan Reynolds, Rob Spera and William Wells?

Again, the conjecture doesn't really have to do so much with the actual film itself, or the writers per se. It has to do with belief and ideals, and how they change over time.

What's the last level?

Level 7: The final level. Bob spends most of his time wondering whether or not he just wasted the last decade of his life on naive and unrealistic pipe dreams. Warwick Davis now haunts him everywhere he goes, and one night, while lying on the cold wooden floor of his living room, surrounded by empty bottles of Pinot Noir, and a pizza box with coagulated cheese stuck to the roof of the cardboard box, finally admits to himself that yes, he would have killed someone to write Leprechaun 5. All except a handful of his friends are married, have kids, and are productive members of society. Bob's free time is spent in his studio apartment, drinking and crafting short stories, which he sends out into cyberspace like some kind of new age Henry Chinaski. Bob has no drink of choice; as long as it's got any proof, it's fine by him. He's around 30 years old at this point.

Movie Character he's most like: Fender from Cyborg. "I LIKE THE PAIN; I LIKE THE MISERY... I LIKE THIS WOOOOOOOOORLD!!!!!!!"

Bodily harm done so he could have written Leprechaun Five: a 10; Bob is John Rambo with a .50 caliber machine gun cutting people to ribbons, disemboweling, and hacking off heads with his bare hands.

I guess the only question left is where does Bob go from here?

Yes, that is the ultimate question, what does Bob do now? He could continue planting his feet in unsure footholds, hoping the Gods of fiction throw him a bone. Although, the uncertainty of it all leaves him feeling paralyzed. Or, he could commit himself to a life of options trading, waking up at five forty-five everyday to reverse commute, leaving before the sun rises and coming home after the sun sets, day in, day out, day in, day out, day in, day out, day in, day out...

Isn't that lyrics from "Digital?"

Yeah, I've put Joy Division on repeat. The point is, one day Bob might possibly leave his apartment for work, get outside into the early morning, feel the chilled air, the kind which burns the lungs, and exhale a profound sense of hurt reserved for those with broken souls. The bus will be late three minutes, causing Bob to miss his train. He'll have to wait on the platform an extra forty minutes. Bob will hop back and forth on his feet in a futile attempt to get his circulation going. That's when he'll see it; a poster for a film about the repossession business, entitled A Rifle Bullet Goes Faster, directed by Eli Roth. He won't cry, he won't laugh. His movements will become robotic, as if Bob is an automaton, operating on pure motor function alone. "He seemed so peaceful," will be the consensus during the trial, uttered by witnesses and people who'd known Bob for most of their lives. He won't talk to anyone; not to his lawyer, not to reporters, not to the victim's families. Finally, before sentencing, he'll stand up in the courtroom clad in an orange jumpsuit and say cryptically "A friend with weed is a friend indeed." It won't be

long before a young camera assistant, there to film the proceedings, divulges the quotation is from Leprechaun 5. The message boards light up; Bob's story makes a few waves, but soon dies down. It isn't until months later, while in protective custody, Bob gets the news. His life story is going to be made into a film: "The Leprechaun Killer." Sequel rights are already pending. Perhaps, Bob thinks, there might be a kid out there somewhere wondering what he have to do so that he could have written The Leprechaun Killer.

Jesus. So what do you want to talk about now?

I have a formula called the Jane Biehn theory; it's a correlation between mustache thickness and good acting. Would you'd like to hear that?

Editor's Note

The Leprechaun Violence Conjecture originally appeared on the web in our May 2012 issue.

King Henry by Elliot Sanders

I liked to run through the center of town with the empty grain silos and the old train station. I'd watch birds in the silos and listen to freight trains coming down the tracks, shaking coal off the runners. Near the station was a narrow tunnel where you could stand with barely enough room for the train to pass. You had to put your back flat against the wall. The train would roar by, just like that, a foot from your face. It made me nervous and excited at the same time.

I came home late one day, after dark, my chest heaving and thick sweat rolling off the ends of my fingers. I had that good feeling you get after exercising for a long time—the one that takes you into your body and makes the things around you not matter as much. The screen door shut behind me with a clack and the first thing I heard was:

"Fuck you, Richard," from Mom in a high voice.

When my parents saw me they hushed their voices and moved into the kitchen. I poured a glass of water and walked past them onto the back porch. The cold water tasted good and the night bugs were in full hum. Their voices grew loud again and I could hear them easily through the window.

"He's staying with us," Dad said. "He's my son and I have an obligation."

"Yeah, and what about your other obligations, Richard? How about those? Huh? I mean, did you stop for one second to think how I might feel? How Eric's gonna feel?"

"It's what's right," Dad said.

"Funny you're so concerned about that now."

Dad opened a beer. Mom came out onto the porch and sat down next to me. She asked me stupid stuff, like how things were going at school and if Collin had moved up a grade yet. I said he had, but I didn't know if this was true. Mom explained that Henry might be living with us for a while. Henry was my half-brother. He lived with his mom in a big house near the city, and she'd gotten herself real sick, and now Henry was supposed to stay with us for the summer. I didn't know Henry very well. Dad took me over to his house once. It was real nice and had a TV room in the basement with a play station and an air hockey table. When mom found out, there was a fight. She called Henry's mom a 'home-wrecking cunt.' She said Dad loved Henry more than he loved me. Dad said this wasn't true but he didn't take me on his visits anymore.

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Henry showed up two days later. He stood in the lawn and stared up at our house like he'd never seen one before. He came inside and did the same thing: he stared at our living room with the faded green carpet and then went into the kitchen and stared some more. Henry wore a plaid shirt with a collar that stuck out and made his head look like a flower bud. He had round glasses that reminded me of that doofus Harry Potter.

Mom took me aside.

"Take Henry up to your room, Eric," she said. "Be kind to him."

"I thought you didn't like Henry," I said.

"I never said that," she said.

Henry sat on the floor in my room. He wanted to use my telescope but I told him not to touch that. I showed him the dirty comics I kept under my bed but he didn't seem impressed. I asked him what he did all summer, and he said he went to camp mostly. He asked me where I went to camp and was surprised that I didn't. He said I should go, and that I should learn to swim. It really was a pity I couldn't swim, he said. Henry told me his mom was in Baltimore at the big cancer center and his dad was staying with her. I told him I didn't want to hear about his parents, even if his mom really was sick like he said.



Henry didn't drink kool-aid or soda and wanted to know where our water purifier was. And where was the bottled water, he asked, because there wasn't any in the fridge. He said I shouldn't let the dogs lay on the sofa. He wondered why dad kept the boat in the garage since it was filled with holes didn't look at all like it could float. He asked why we only had one car for two parents.

The neighborhood kids started calling him King Henry. King Henry, they'd say, Your Royal Majesty, Your Highness, Your Lordship. It was all really funny but Henry didn't think so.

Henry followed me everywhere. He followed me out into the woods near my house where we had this old farm building. It had eight sides so it was called the octagon. Luke, Aaron, Caleb, and Jake, they all played down there. Jake said it was an old hut where they used to do meditation. It hadn't been used in a long time and there wasn't a farm there anymore. The octagon had a door without a lock, so we put branches up around the sides of the place so not just anyone could find it. And it was in the woods, anyway, so it would have been hard to spot.

We played this game called the runner. The runner's job was to sit in the middle of the octagon with the door shut. He had to take off his shoes because it's harder to run in the woods barefoot. Everybody else hid nearby. In the woods. In the tall grass. Under brambles. Up a tree sometimes. The runner would count to a hundred. Then he'd come out of the hut and chase down anybody he could find, except he'd be the only one not wearing shoes.

I explained the game to Henry one night and asked if he wanted to try. He said sure. The next day he wore this stupid jogging outfit. Short shorts. He said his mom bought them. It was the first time I saw him blush. When he tried to pull the shorts down his thighs, the top of his underwear showed. Everybody laughed.

We put Henry in the middle of the octagon. It was getting late. The rest of us, we all scattered. Night was coming which made it easier to hide. I had a really good spot under some thorn bushes. Henry came out and sprinted all over the woods in those ridiculous shorts. But with the shadows, he didn't see us. He stepped on a thorn and went back into the hut and shut the door. We waited for what seemed an hour but Henry didn't come out. Henry, Henry the Merciful, we yelled, come and get us! But he didn't. It was getting real dark. Jake and Aaron took some stones and banged them off the sides of the hut. Finally I walked up and opened the door. Henry, that dork, he was sitting in the middle of the room with his face in his hands, crying.

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Henry cried a lot after that. He cried at dinner when mom told him to eat his green beans.

"Eat your green beans," Mom said. "Eat your green beans like Eric or you're going to bed."

"Yeah, eat your green beans, Henry," I said, sniggering.

"Shut up," Henry said.

"Both of you stop it," Dad said.

Henry wiped his eyes and picked at his plate. Dad told Henry he didn't have to eat his green beans, and then Mom and Dad started to fight. Mom said Dad was showing

favoritism. Dad said she was being cruel. Dad left the table and went to eat in the living room. Mom washed dishes. Henry still hadn't touched his green beans.

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After that, Dad took Henry out a lot on their own. He brought Henry to work with him, and he'd never done that with me. Mom said Dad just felt bad for Henry because of his mother and all, but I saw the look in her eye. I knew she thought the same thing I did.

I sat on the front porch and watched Dad and Henry rolling down the street in Dad's truck with the windows down. Dad was smiling. Henry looked happy too.

That night I asked Henry where they went. He said they drove up by the creek. The water was high, and they caught two fish, he told me, smiling. I said the fish were probably diseased and nobody fished up there anymore. Henry just sat there on his bed with this dumb look, still smiling. Mom and Dad were outside on the porch. I jumped over to Henry's bed and sat on his stomach, squeezing his ribs between my knees. Get off, he said, get off, in this pathetic voice. I squeezed harder and lay my fists into his thighs and gave him some real deep bruises that turned blue right away. He wasn't smiling after that.

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The next day was Sunday. The other kids were mostly at church so it was just Henry and me. Henry was still real agitated about last night and the bruises on his thighs, which were turning purple. He asked if I wanted to play the runner again. But with shoes this time, he said. He had this funny expression. He looked excited. I said sure because I knew I was faster. Also, I knew all the old places.

He gave me a ten second lead, so I was already at the end of the street when he stood up. He was wearing those dorky shorts again, which made me laugh and hold my stomach and nearly stop running. I ran down Main Street. It was empty. Henry was a block away. I ran toward the station.

The sun was low over the fields, turning the silos red. When I got to the station, I kicked down onto the tracks, stirring up dust with my sneakers. My feet felt light and easy and I could smell the tar. I couldn't believe Henry was still behind me. I looped around the station, breathing hard. Down the tracks, I saw the train gate closing. Then came that tingle along the runners so I knew a train was coming. I made a line for the tunnel. I heard the train now, a low whistle in the distance. The train and the tunnel were getting closer, but so was King Henry. I could practically hear his short shorts squeaking away, giving himself a bigger wedgie with each step.

The pebbles between the tracks bounced. I pushed into the tunnel just as the train rushed by, pressing my back flat to the wall, the wind going crazy.

The tunnel was dark and dusty after the train left and I didn't see Henry anymore. I ran back down the tunnel and found him lying in the tracks. It made me pretty sick actually, to see him that way, even though it was just Henry. Henry the slow.

A man from town had seen us, and he came running over. He asked what happened. I told him there wasn't much room in the tunnel, and Henry didn't press his back flat against the wall like he should have. The man called the police.

There were a lot of questions after that, from the police and from Mom and Dad. Dad was really upset, which was understandable. But I couldn't see why Mom was so sad—with the crying and everything—because Henry was a loser and everyone knew it.

Editor's Note

King Henry originally appeared on the web in our April 2012 issue.

Photograph © Elliot Sanders

The Wind Turbines by Jane Flett

I've been tricking myself that the hill will fix me. Getting up early and clambering up over the dusty stones, trying to find a vantage point from which I can observe every side of the island. It feels good to get a bit of distance, some perspective. I don't really know what I'm doing in Greece, to tell the truth. I sometimes think that maybe I'd have been better off sticking things out at home, but I had to get away, sort things out in my head. Turns out, I'm not as strong a girl as I thought.

I haven't taken a single photo here. By the time I've climbed to the top of the hill, my fingers are sweaty and everything looks bleached out, overexposed. I haven't unzipped the case. I've lost the direction to point, forgotten how sure I used to feel behind the glass. My instinct has slipped. I've been analysing things too long, building them up until the fear of action is insurmountable. There was a time when I felt all the power of the universe with the SLR in my hands, when I could capture a moment of life and



freeze it forever. Pick for myself the reality in focus, in frame. But lately, I feel as if I've been hypnotised.

It's the turbines. Those unnerving and comforting turbines: they've drawn me in. I like to sit underneath and breathe in and out with the whoosh whoosh

whoosh, feel the murmur of the air synchronise with my heartbeat. The monotony is reassuring; sullen white giants pounding away at the horizon like prisoners cuffed at the ankle. But there is also that lick of danger, the crack in the plaster, the thwack as the white blade guillotines the unwavering blue of the sky. It's addictive. My lips are savoury with sweat and I stare ever-upwards, thinking about precisely nothing.

At first, I thought I was alone in coming here, but for the past couple of days there's been a pick-up truck at the fourth turbine on the crest, the one that's stopped keeping

time. I've been keeping my distance, far from the mood for conversation. I wouldn't understand anyway, can't wrap my head around the liquid vowels burbling over the rocks of river beds. I stick to the lower ones on the west-facing bank; I keep quiet; I think about taking photographs then I fold my hands and walk home. Though I've been watching, and wondering. For a while, I felt like the keeper of this place, but this one has keys to the turbines. He parks beneath that one, the still one, and he unlocks the white belly and steps inside. I'd like to know what he's tinkering with. I'd like to see him take out the defibrillator and bring it back to life.

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Physically, I can feel my strength building. It's the walks up the hill each day, tightening my calves, it's the oranges I pick from the grove and hook my thumbnails through the pith. That, and the vitamins from the sunbeams which channel into the valley, soaking through my skin to rejuvenate the buried organs after the slog of winter. Mentally, I'm distracted; home seems so far away. But life keeps on pounding, tick-tock-rotate, and the world moves on.

#

I spoke to him. It wasn't planned, he had left already: I watched him. He'd spent the afternoon in the heights of the tower and the blades were starting again, cantankerous and slow, but definitely moving. I was awed. The tricks he must possess to pull the puppet strings on this giant, bring him back from the brink. I was going to take advantage of his absence to take a closer look but he must have forgotten something because I'd barely been there five minutes before his truck pulled up beside me. And I wasn't going to talk to him but he stepped out and walked over to us. My nerves began to rattle, wanting to make mumbles about the weather.

He'd want to know what I was doing there, so I told him. I explained that this turbine is my favourite too, I call him Paul. And that this new unbalanced lollop of his arms is charming. I said, *I can't believe he's moving again* and looked across the hilltops at the stoic white army. Pleasure panted at the nape of my neck. *Thank you.* I'm not sure he understood. I thought about his hands, wondered what miracles his dense knuckles could untangle. We looked at each other and he put his toolbox down on the ground, and it was red and heavy, and I wasn't sure what to do.

He looked at me and I turned and started to scuttle down towards the valley, my heartbeat in my ears, in the air. Puffs of dust kicked up on the path. I didn't turn. I ran until I reached the house and then I went inside and closed the door behind me. The stone wall was cold against my cheek. I breathed until I sounded normal then I stopped thinking about it, and went into the kitchen to put the dinner on.

#

I haven't written home. The first morning I bought a stack of glossy postcards, all stucco buildings and azure seascapes, walnut-faced women preening over their olives. I couldn't begin to comprehend how to describe things. I threw them in the bin.

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This afternoon, I was waiting for him. I put on a white sundress and sat by Paul's base with the reddest vine tomato I could find. I'd showered thoroughly, but by the time I got to the top my feet were grey with the dust that clung to every enclave of sweat on my body. I didn't mind. The angle of the road meant he didn't see me until he reached the door and stooped to unlock it. I stood, handed him the tomato, and said *delicious* in an intonation I'd practiced repeatedly under my breath. He looked at the tomato and looked at me and suddenly I didn't know how I was going to explain things. I wanted to follow him inside Paul, climb the ladder to the heart, shut myself away in this Rapunzel's tower amongst the crackle and hiss of electricity for the village. I wanted to feel the cold metal against my sticky skin. I didn't need to say a word.

He was quite rough, clutching a fist around my tricep, digging a thumb into the soft flesh beneath, and then it was dark inside, disorientating after the glare of the sun. He grappled at my dress and when I made no attempt to help him with the buttons, he nicked the hem with a Stanley knife and ripped it open. I gasped and I think he liked that, because he took the knife and slit the sides of my underpants so they fell to the ground. And then he swung me away from him and pushed my body to the wall and entered me with a sudden whoosh from behind. He fell into the rhythm instantaneously—pounding with my heartbeat, with the blades—as my nipples grazed. He finished before I did, and before I could cobble my senses together, he was gone.

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After that, I stayed away for a few days, hatching small tasks around the house, wondering what to make of myself, trying to decide if I felt different at all. I clipped my toenails short and took everything out of the fridge, defrosted the ice compartment, and filled it again with the shelves wiped clean. No change. I thought about going home and leaving this behind, too, I figured there were other islands with baked hills and noisy tavernas with people who might ignore me. I thought about Antarctica and how far was far enough to run. Then I tired of my own melodrama and went back to where Paul was waiting.

He'd been working. The mechanism no longer grunted and the arms crested like lazy dolphins making bets with the sky. I tried the door and it moved, so I pushed inside to find if he was waiting for me. He wasn't. The toolbox was on the floor but the chamber was small and round and quiet. I crouched and stared up the ladder and before I could think about it the wire cutters were in my hand and I was pulling myself up the rungs, curling my toes around the metal. The cable made a satisfying snip; his arms creaked, unbalanced. The cutters felt weighty in my palm. For good measure, I unclipped the barrette from my hair and prodded it into the gap where the cogs intersected. There was a crunch. Hastily down the ladder, and outside, and Paul wasn't moving. I walked back down the hill with a spring in my step. I was sure he'd be back, soon.

#

We stood eye-to-eye in the chamber, locked into a staring contest. He held the wire cutters and cursed in his guttural tongue, but I didn't shirk. The slope of my shoulders was insolent. I felt cocky, assured, even when he took me by the shoulders and cracked me against the wall. Watching him stomp off, a metallic taste on my teeth, I felt I might just be winning. He wasn't the only one with power. Not now.

He was back the next day to rewire the cable. I stood in the doorway with a cigarette, watching him work. We did not talk. When he was done, he climbed down the ladder and shoved me aside with his thrilling, meaty hands. A gob of spit landed by my feet. His contempt glistened in the sun.

#

I am terrified that this cannot last forever. I've had my respite and soon Paul will be fixed again, the snib will slide closed, no room for me inside. No more games. He'll tuck his pigtails away and I'll have nothing left to tug on in this playground.

I have an idea for a more permanent solution. He's brought this on himself. I don't know what else I can do.

Here is how it will go: tomorrow he will be back, to finish things off. I will follow him from a distance, I will wait until he climbs up inside. By the time he is at the top of the ladder it will be easy to slip my hand into the top metal shelf of the box and remove the keys. The door will click and there will be no more of this uncertain to-ing and fro-ing. It will be easier; the decision will have been made. He will be waiting, forever, for me.

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I arrive at the wind turbine. The air is dry in my throat.

Editor's Note

The Wind Turbines originally appeared on the web in our February 2012 issue.

Photograph – "Helipad" © Chris Fradkin

All the Little Deaths by Penelope Cray

When we arrived, the first row of little deaths was already lined up shoulder to shoulder along the firing range. It was easier to pick them off that way. The rest extended in single file like rows of blighted corn. The little deaths in the first row shivered but held firm. Douglas had trained them well. We were to use BB guns—it was the only way Douglas could guarantee their cooperation. Nothing too violent, they'd requested. Resilience wasn't in their nature, the littlest deaths being easily bruised, and skittish. We had to warn them when we were going to fire by raising our hand in a sort of salute. That was the arrangement, elaborated in the weekly emails Douglas had dispatched in the months before the big event.

None of us had unreasonable expectations. No one expected any big deaths to show up; no one expected to take out their own big death. This was simply about making life easier on a day-to-day level. Some of us sought to extend the shelf life of certain foods. If the little deaths that caused them to sour or stale could be stalled—via BB, for instance—the food would last longer, which would save us money, freeing us to spend it on more pleasurable pursuits. Others were more ambitious. They didn't want to avoid death per se, but rather sought to win a protective advantage for certain body parts. One woman had a nasty canker sore that blistered, wept, and crusted over. She wanted the little death to leave her upper lip alone, long enough at least for someone to fall in love with the rest of her.

I stood in line and watched as, one by one, my brethren took the BB gun in hand and picked off their row. We'd all been practicing our shot. The little deaths were flying backward, a purplish mist trailing after them as they landed, stunned, in the grass or staggered about, clutching their arm or stomach. I felt almost sorry for them, except I knew how much they had taken from me.

Just then a hush fell over us. Trish had set aim, skipping the salute. Douglas leaned in, then seemed to think better of it and took a step back. Trish held herself still, staring down the gun at her little deaths, who fidgeted and avoided eye contact, but held their ground. What was she up to? Then, with a practiced swiftness, she lowered the gun, wrapped her lips around two fingers, and whistled. *Tweet!* All of Trish's little deaths and all the trim rows behind them poured in one mass toward us. I heard Douglas scream "No!" as Trish wheeled around and began firing. I was hit first in the arm and then again in either thigh. Into each small, nonfatal wound leapt a little death. I fell to my knees. I thought I heard the singing they say you hear when your big death comes to collect you. But it was Trish.

Trish was singing to us, "My friends! I love you! I am setting you free! Your big deaths will never get you now!"

Then she turned the gun on herself, and in a hail of BB fire, the little deaths roared into her.

Editor's Note

All the Little Deaths originally appeared on the web in our April 2012 issue.

Racing Cancer by Cortney Phillips

Back then, they thought that power lines gave you cancer. There was a whole field of them on the other side of the road next to our neighborhood, sticking out of the ground like trees, threaded together. The field was off limits after Karen O'Hara and Gordon Knowles were diagnosed with leukemia the same summer, two months apart. Lydia, my sister, told me that Karen was wearing a candy necklace that snapped and caused bruises to sprout like mold under her skin. That was how they knew. Gordon was later that summer, after suspicion about the wires started and a blood test confirmed the rumors. Cancer wires. My mother held my wrist so tight it made me squeal and say *okayokay*, promising to ride my bike only in the cul-de-sac and down by the spillway.

The wires were the Truth or Dare trump card, the last-ditch effort used to break the kid who would drink any combination of kitchen condiments, ding-dong-ditch any of the creepy neighbors' houses, moon any car that drove by. The summer that Karen and Gordon were in and out of the hospital, no one would go under the wires, no matter how daring they might have proved themselves to be. I was nine, and completely fascinated by all things cancer. What happened to your body when you went under the wires? Would it be instant, like a bolt of lightning? Or a slow process, where clumps of your hair blew away in the wind until you had that bald, patchy, and sunken look everyone who went and saw Karen said she had. I thought the hair loss was symptomatic and panicked every time I lost strands in the shower. I stood in front of the mirror and lifted folds of hair to view my scalp, checking for spots of shiny skin that might have popped up when I wasn't looking. There was a two week period where I refused a hairbrush, sure that with each hair caught in the comb's teeth, I was becoming cancerous.

Lydia was eleven that summer, the same age as Karen and one year younger than Gordon, so she claimed their diagnosis like it was her own burden to bear. Using her sadness over their condition, she was able to get out of dish duty and excuse her inability to eat her vegetables, dramatically restating that she "just never thought it would happen to them." I reminded her earlier that year, she complained about having to stand next to Gordon at the chorus concert because he smelled like hard-boiled eggs. Lydia told me I wouldn't understand.

And then the summer ended and Gordon came home from the hospital and was still able to play on his soccer team that fall. Lydia and her classmates made Karen a get well video that showcased her new school locker, waiting for her when she was ready. I told my friends at the lower school that I knew people who knew people who had cancer, that my neighborhood was practically overrun with it, that I might even get it soon. I repeated the words the adults around me used to talk about Karen, saying *chemotherapy* and *bone marrow* to sound like I knew more than I did. I asked too many questions and my parents told me it wasn't polite, made me promise I wouldn't

ask things like that in front of Karen's parents when we brought casseroles to their house.

"Will her hair ever grow back?

"Does cancer smell like something? Do you think Karen smells like cancer?"

And then Karen wasn't in the hospital anymore and she wasn't home and she wasn't anywhere and I didn't ask any more questions. Lydia was in the school chorus that sang at the memorial service and I watched her like the whole performance depended on me mouthing the words along. The Neighborhood Committee bought stacks of white paper bags and tiny little candles and lined the street that led up to the O'Hara house and Lydia solemnly said that she thought it looked like the same road that had taken Karen to heaven. Months later, my mother cried in the grocery store when she saw Mrs. O'Hara and hugged her on the cereal aisle, squishing a box of granola against her chest.

It was the summer after Karen died, the summer I was ten, that I became brave. When no one was paying much attention—Lydia strutting around the pool in her first bikini, my mother running errands—I asked to ride my bike to a friend's house but rode it out to the field instead. I lined my bike tires up with the grass, just in front of where the power lines hung, and wondered if I was still safe up this close. I thought of all the kids who haven't played here since the last summer. I felt new and on the verge of something.

I held my breath. I kick-started off the ground with one foot and pushed down hard with my other leg. My feet spun around on the pedals and the bike bumped forward over rocks and grooves in the dirt. I was a blur—the tires split through tall grasses as I made my path across the field, the wires hanging over my head. I finally let my breath out when my bike hit the other side of the field and the tall poles were at my back. With frantic hands, I searched myself for tumors, pressing my finger tips under my arms and behind my knees, in all the folds and bends of my body where cancer could hide.

I crossed the field two more times and still no tumors. On my last ride, the ride that would take me back to the side of the road our neighborhood was on, my front tire hit something and I pitched forward over the handlebars. Stretched out on the ground, breathing heavy, looking up at the wires. It was too late. I could feel the tumors growing.

The next day, a bruise darkened my knee and rose with a lump. I poked at my body to see how quickly I could make blood collect under the surface of my skin, like Karen's candy necklace, but left only red marks. Weeks passed before I realized I didn't have cancer. I should have felt relief—I knew I didn't actually want to have cancer, but felt disappointed and didn't know why. I wasn't chosen.

When I eventually told Lydia about riding my bike under the wires and racing cancer, she called me a liar.

"I did so," I said. "I probably should be bald by now."

"See," she said and I knew I wouldn't be able to argue with her logic. "Maybe if you were bald, I'd believe you."

Karen wasn't so special, I wanted to tell her, but it would only be a few more months before people stopped talking about Karen altogether. It probably wasn't the wires, authorities finally said, to end the paranoia. I was never sure what to think.

Editor's Note

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The Ruiner of Things by Daniel Wessler Riordan

My wife said that my existence strained credulity and then after she'd said that, some hours later, while I was out, she left and she took the dog and left me a note on the stairs that said she'd left and taken the dog, as if I wouldn't have noticed without the note. *My existence strained credulity*. An odd thing, I thought, for one person to say to another, but the words were slow and measured and I could only assume that she'd crafted them carefully, perhaps a good bit of time before she had finally decided to say them.

Several months later I sat in my car thinking about all of this. It had become the thing I did, thinking about her leaving and the way it happened. Sometimes, when thinking about it, I'd pretend that I would get her back and that I would one day hatch a plan, one that involved me bettering myself and taking control of myself and telling her that I had done all of these bettering things not for her benefit, but for mine, because I really, honestly cared about making myself better for myself, but it just so happens that I'd be better for her, too, a nice fringe benefit, and honestly, I hadn't done it just to win her back. Honestly. I would do these things. I would say these things to her. I would make it happen. So far, I had not.

And so I was in my car and the engine was running but I wasn't going anywhere because the car was in the garage and the garage door was closed. Fumes thickened. And then my cell phone rang. I was hoping it was her. I hadn't heard from her in so long. It had to be her. It had to. But it wasn't, and why would it be?

Instead, it was a buddy of mine asking me if I wanted to grab a pint at the neighborhood bar, and that sounded fine, sure, I guess, so I pressed the button on the garage door opener, just, instinctually, and then, just for a fleeting moment, just enough to absorb a glancing blow, I wondered where my wife was, just then, and how far along she was now, seven months? had it been that long? and why had I allowed it all, all of it, her, my life, to up and leave, and so on, and then, as the door went up and rolled back, the fumes in the garage, they left me, too. It seemed if I would commit to nothing, then surely nothing would commit to me.

And then at the bar, a bar that my wife and I used to go to together, I thought to myself, maybe she'll be here, but of course she wasn't, why would she be? because she's pregnant and pregnant women don't frequent places like these.

People crowded in one on top of the other, all arms and legs and hair and perfume and clatter, begging to be tendered ten-dollar beers and watered-down drinks in small glasses. There were girls, women, beautiful women, everywhere, and my friend pointed and said I should go talk to this one or that one or this one, no that one, no this one, over there. I was reluctant. I was terrified. I became perfectly quiet, found a corner, smoked a cigarette outside in the alley.

Things thinned out. It grew late. Defensively, I'd become terribly drunk. My friend was drunk, too, and anyone left in the place was no doubt in a similar state and that's when this girl, this young attractive girl, blond hair, nice boobs, white teeth, blah, blah, she came up to me and said I was sexy. This confused me. I pinched my eyes and inspected her closely. She wasn't so young. Her hair wasn't so blond. Her teeth, not so white. Her boobs, the constant.

Really, she said, I think you're sexy.

Please, stop, I thought. Please never say that again. Or just keep saying it. Or just keep saying it. Say it louder. No. No, stop. Stop saying it.

I'm not sexy, I said. She said that wasn't true. I knew I was being lied to. I'm not sexy; just ask my wife, who had left me. And so this lady, gal, woman, with her boobs and off-white teeth, and the roots of her hair like they'd been yanked through the ground from the dirt, she came up to me and she said I was sexy. This is what she said to me.

I really didn't have a clue what to do so I offered to buy her a drink and she said yes and my buddy followed me to the bar while I fetched it and I asked him what to do and he said without hesitation, Fuck. Her. And I said, Yes. Right. I was desperate for a woman to be in my bed again or maybe just to be in my bedroom, or really just in the house, anywhere in the house, just to know she was there.

But then I got to thinking, what if I took this girl home and she didn't need what I needed and she wanted something completely different, what if she wanted something else entirely? What if she stuck her hands down my pants and tried to stick her fingers in my asshole or something? This had happened to me once, as a teenager. I was making out with this girl and she unbuttoned my pants, which was wonderful, complete bliss, until, instead of grabbing for my penis, as some girls in that situation are wont to do, she tried to stick her fingers up inside of me. Whoa. I think I said. I barely know you. What's the matter with you? So, what if this young gal wanted to try something like that? And what if I had to refuse? Or what if she wanted to do lord knows what else, role-playing, something with leather, something that required me to wear a mask, one of those ones with the zipper. I can't wear a mask, I'd get claustrophobic. So I'd turn her down, and then we'd both just end up embarrassed and I'd have to drive her home and the whole time there would be this terrible silence where all either of us are thinking about is her fingers and leather and how strange life can be.

Or worse, oh, galactically worse, what if we have the time of our lives, what if when we have sex, what if when I come, she comes too, at the same exact time, and what if we're coming and we embrace and we feel like our bodies have become one, that light and heat and time, they all mean nothing, and everything all at once, we are perfect joy, right there, in that moment, and what if I tell her I love her, or what if I do love her, *what if I do love her*, but what if I can't tell the difference?

I did know this: in the moments after I would come, I would most likely only feel shame. I would probably excuse myself to the bathroom and roll the condom off and watch it splash into the toilet and beg for it to go down on the first flush and I would invade her medicine cabinet and find her toothpaste and squeeze out a gob of it, directly into my mouth, and I would roll it around with my tongue and hope against hope that I would stop tasting her soon, please, soon. I would want to use her toothbrush, but that would be too personal. And then I would leave because I can't actually share sleep with this person. I don't even know her. She doesn't know me. I have sleeping needs. I have a dog at home that needs cuddling. Or I did. Before my wife took it, my wife who had left me.

You want to get out of here? She asked this after we'd taken a shot each of something quite strong.

Yeah. Of course. That'd be great.

I turned to my friend and shrugged my shoulders and he had this huge smile on his face and he gave me two big thumbs up.

I followed her to her car, but it turns out she didn't have a car, and I'd just been blindly following her around the block. I found this out as we turned the corner and she asked, So where are you parked?

I was following you.

I don't know where you're parked. Why were you following me? How could I possibly know where you're parked?

Well, you were walking in the lead, so I thought I'd just follow you to your car.

I don't have a car.

I'm sorry.

You're sorry that I don't have a car? You know, not everyone has a car. Some people like to take public transportation. For the environment or they can't afford cars. Are you an elitist or something?

No. No. I. No. I was... I was apologizing for the miscommunication, I wasn't apologizing because you don't have a car. I would never presume to judge the fact that you don't have a car. I mean, you should see *my* car. It's a real piece of shit. I can't really afford to get a new car, either.

Really? Your car is a piece of shit? What is it you said you do for a living?

I was getting cold at this point. Cold all over.

I'm, uh. I paused, and then, quietly, I mumbled what it is I do for a living: I'm sort of an artist.

Oh.

And that's exactly how she said it. "Oh." As if it were the word that would end all use of further words.

I had said, "Oh," like that once. My wife had just peed on a stick. We were both in the bathroom.

Two blue lines, she had said.

"Oh," I had said. I know now that this wasn't the preferred response to her statement.

I thought we both wanted this.

We did. We do.

I'm not doing this alone.

Well, you know, in the end, we're *all* alone.

What?

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I just mean, when it comes down to it, you're the one having the baby and not me and I'll support you, of course, but you have to make the ultimate decision about what it is you want to do with your body.

I thought this was a very feminist thing for me to say.

You're such an asshole. (She was still quite calm at this point. She talked almost in a whisper.) What are you saying? Are you saying we shouldn't have this baby? Is that what you're saying?

I'm not saying that.

I think that's what you're saying. I think that's exactly what you're saying, but you're too much of a chicken shit to just come out and say it.

That's not what I'm saying.

You have no courage. You really are such a coward.

I'd go with you to the clinic.

I guess chivalry isn't dead. (She was getting louder.) We've been planning this. We've been actively *trying* to do this. Am I in the Twilight Zone? You're the one that started the fucking discussion in the first place. You're the one that pushed this.

Ok. Valid points, all. But I changed my mind. I don't think we should anymore. There. I said it. I'll man up. I don't want this anymore. I'm really sorry.

It's a little fucking late to be sorry. (She was loud, then. Very loud.)

Look, you can go to the clinic today. You can go down there and get the ball rolling and when you have to have the procedure, I'll be there for you. I promise, I'll be there for you. And before you know it, it'll be like this never happened. And sometime, when we're actually ready, we can try again. Maybe this will even bring us closer. Everything happens for a reason.

There was a magazine sitting atop the toilet. Elle, Vanity Fair, something thick with Cate Blanchett on the cover - Cate Blanchett who eyeballed me rather disappointedly every time I took a piss. My wife rolled the fashion tome up tight, making for a shockingly impressive weapon. She and Cate Blanchett's face came swinging after me, knocking me off balance; I stumbled into the bedroom. My lip was cut. A swipe across the head and I went down, out of pure shock, onto the carpet, dabbing my hand to my mouth and looking at my fingers as the blood came off onto the tips.

I showed her the blood, sure the sight of it would roust her from her state of madness. She would see she'd gone too far.

I'm bleeding.

Good. You fucker.

Whack. On the top of the head then. On the back of my neck. My hands up, wrapped around my face. On my side, fetal position. She kept swinging.

I was wondering where the dog was. Why hadn't the dog sprinted to my aid?

I started laughing. This was all so absurd—laughter, I thought, was a reasonable response. She, apparently, did not. She whacked me in the ear, a region that I had failed to adequately guard. She hit me a few more times then stood up and seemed to run out of steam, though her body remained positively tremulous. I noticed a certainty of purpose in her eyes and then she said:

What is wrong with you?

I couldn't have answered even if I'd wanted to. So I said, What do you want from me? I'm an asshole. You knew this when you married me. I breathed heavy, in and out.

And then she paused, to measure her words very carefully. And then she gave the most honest and articulate account of my person that anyone ever had: Your existence strains credulity.

I had no answer for this. Instead I might have asked about the whereabouts of the dog.

My wife dropped the magazine in my lap and got up and walked away. As she left she said that I really knew how to ruin things. I was in fact, a Ruiner. Ruin personified.

That's how I should have answered when the girl asked what I did for a living: I'm a Ruiner. A Ruiner of Things.

So what kind of art do you do? Do you, like, paint or sculpt or something?

I'd been given a second opportunity and I decided to be more candid this time, for once in my life, I'd be completely honest with another human being and with myself, about just who it was that I was, before any possible attachments could be made; before I ruined myself or her or anyone orbiting her or any more than we all already were.

I'm a Ruiner.

A what?

A Ruiner. A Ruiner of Things.

Is that, like, performance art?

Yes, I guess. It kind of is. You see, I ruin things, professionally. You give me a situation, and I ruin it. You give me your confidence and I ruin it. You give me trust and I ruin it. You give me love and I ruin it.

Oh, she said again. And then she, too, paused for a moment of reflection.

You're kind of a weirdo aren't you?

My existence strains credulity.

She laughed. I had meant all of this as a notice of sincere and honest caution and she had found it a signifier of charm instead.

Look, she said. I just wanted to sleep with someone tonight. And you looked like a sure bet.

I just wanted you to know what you were in for with me, that's all.

What I'm in for is hopefully a half decent lay and maybe a cup of Starbucks on my nightstand in the morning.

I just thought...

What? That I'm going to get tangled all up in you? Look at you. You're a fucking mess. You don't think I can see that? You think I'd actually let someone like you anywhere near me in any real way? I'm a grown woman, you idiot. I don't need your warnings. Christ, who the fuck do you think you are?

I had no answer to this question.

Why don't I just keep my mouth shut? I said. If only I had said that to my wife more often. My wife who had left me.

I really wish you would, she said. And she lit a cigarette. So where's your car?

Editor's Note

The Ruiner of Things originally appeared on the web in our June 2012 issue.

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