

A person is shown from the back, wearing a black hood that covers their head and face, leaving only their eyes and nose visible. They are wearing white underwear with the words "HORROR SLEAZE TRASH" printed in pink. A long rosary with orange beads and a wooden cross hangs down their back. The person has several tattoos: a large one on their left arm depicting a religious figure, and others on their right arm and back. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

PROSE IN POOR TASTE

HORROR *Sleaze* **TRASH**

PROSE IN POOR TASTE

VOL. 2

Arranged by Arthur Graham

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The Edinburgh Festival is Decadent and Depraved

Joseph Ridgwell

Each August — peak summer time — the peaceful tranquility enjoyed by Dunediners is ripped asunder by what can only be described as a mass invasion of undesirables, perverts, megalomaniacs, criminal elements, religious cranks, ego-trippers and just ordinary weirdos. Having proudly never attended such a festival in my four decades on the planet, it was to my initial horror that I had relocated to a beautiful city that fostered and indeed actively promoted such a ghastly abomination. For natives of Scotland's capital the Festival is a major inconvenience — a stress ball of such magnitude that it inflicts great trauma — and has even been rumoured to be the cause of premature death. Understandably, as well as the mass invasion there is a simultaneous mass exodus — with most native sons and daughters fleeing the city for the entire duration.

It was late afternoon when we tumbled out of an Edinburgh tram and hit the streets of Auld Reekie running. Collectively known as the International Lit Fiends, we were in town to check out the world-famous Edinburgh Festival.

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Having abandoned our taxis in North Bridge due to gridlock — something that never happened the rest of the year, we — the Lit Fiends — hotfooted it to Edina's legendary book shop People Power on West North Street. On the way masses of tourists and lost looking fruits wandered around as if — in the words of Chuck Berry — they had no particular place to go. And really they didn't. This was Fringe territory — the world's largest arts festival — spanning 25 days, featuring upwards of 4,000 acts and 400 venues. Frankly it was chaos. The only ones profiting from the shambles were the founding fathers and any number of convenience stores. During the Festival prices sky-rocket — from a tin of mushy peas to a night in a luxury hotel — everything shoots up by at least 400%. As for the hapless performers they are ripped off via preposterous registration fees, venue hire, accommodation, and travel costs. And yet each year they return, undeterred, and ever more desperate.

At People Power all was not well. A best-selling author from New York City had just left the shop in tears after her event was cancelled due to lack of interest. Not a single person had walked through the door. This, despite the fact the streets were crammed with thousands of tourists and festival-goers.

"This type of author and publisher just don't get it," said the erudite owner of PP.

"Get what?" I said.

"You can't just turn up at the Festival and expect

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people to walk through the door.”

“Too much competition.”

“There are more than 1,500 acts performing at any one time.”

“1,500... isn’t that a little kinky?”

“It gets bigger every year. It’s out of control!”

Outside on the streets the Festival was in full effect. Everywhere you looked desperate performers harangued tourists to attend their shows, shouting at them, pawing at their touristy garb, pleading, entreating, and in some cases becoming violent. Word on the Festival vine was that one female comedian had even offered free blow-jobs and cunnilingus to anyone who would attend her show. Amazingly, no one had taken up the demented offer and afterwards it was dismissed as nothing more than a publicity stunt.

After relocating to the Peach Tree pub, we — the Lit Fiends — ordered drinks and waited for something to happen. As I swigged over-priced lager I recalled my stint at the Edinburgh International Book Festival the year before.

I’d been handed a free pass for the EIBF by one of Europe’s top Lit Fiends. The pass accessed all areas. I could come and go as I pleased — attend any show — but the only reason I wanted the pass was for the free food and drink. I wasn’t working at the time and each morning I rolled up and partook of the Festival breakfast. The EIBF canteen was an astonishing scene. Long lines of famous writers,

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mildly famous writers, writers who had once been famous and untold failed writers queueing like vagrants at an inner-city soup kitchen for repast that could only be described as public-sector primary school fare. It was then I REALISED that there really wasn't any money in making up shit for a living.

Anyway — there remained the free booze, which being no mug I spent each evening wandering from bar to yurt to Spiegeltent, flashing my access all areas pass into the empty visages of the minimum-waged minions. All the usual names were in attendance — the people who like to be seen. Ever since Marlene Dietrich sang *Falling in Love Again* on the stage of the famous Spiegeltent in the 1930's — her magic mirrors had reflected thousands of artists, audiences and exotic gatherings. Subsequently it was the place to be and be seen. Nobody minded being stared at — it's why they were there in the first place. Some even spent most of their time in the tent. They could chill-out on some of the strategically placed cushions and flea-market furniture and check out the revolving door of faces. After a couple of days and nights of that shit, however, I handed back my all access EIBF pass and retreated to my usual Edina haunts.

Meanwhile back in Fringe territory everything was going downhill — and fast. The festival-goers were getting drunker and drunker. Acts appeared and disappeared on the stage of the Peach Tree, but nobody was watching or even listening. The people were all there to say that they had been there —

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not to watch anything. And maybe they were right. For as an unjuried Festival there is no quality control. This means that anyone with enough bees and honey to pay the extortionate reg fees can get up on stage and play out some weird fantasy masochistic one-day-I'll-be-famous crappola. It was all gravy. The night wore on and the Lit Fiend crowd grew restless. We had to get out of there.

"Man," I said to Lit Fiend No. 3 standing next to me, "Party back at Ranchlette Ridgwell, spread the word."

With that taxis were summoned and the literary underground got the fuck out of the depraved and degenerate mess that was the Edinburgh Festival. As the convoy headed out of the city we eyeballed the carnage. The pavements were slick with vomit, the air heavy with the scent of cannabis and crack cocaine, with prostitutes from around the globe lining every street corner. Drunks pissed themselves while queuing at ATMs, pregnant women were trampled on, homeless people robbed of their mendicant rewards, people fought at bus stops, kids were sold to paedophiles to pay for rip-off hotel tariffs, even a few suicides.

"It's sick, sick, sick," mumbled Lit Fiend No. 5, as she swigged Buckfast.

"Will we ever get out of here?" wondered Lit Fiend No. 6 aloud, as he lit up a twenty-skin reefer El Granton Speciale.

I raised my can of lager, took a hit, and turned to the driver. "Put the peddle to the metal amigo

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before we get lynched.”

It was slow going. The roads were blocked with traffic and festival-goers. Faces loomed up at us into the night, peering inside the car, sitting on the bonnet, tapping and clawing at windows. It was like a scene from *The Day Of The Triffids*.

The driver was by now sweating cobs. “I know a short cut, it could work,” he said desperately.

“Do what you have to do,” I said.

The driver turned down a cobbled side street where festival-goers were less in evidence, some camped in ragged groups on the pavements, surrounded by backpacks, clutching fistfuls of flyers and other promotional paraphernalia in their grubby mitts.

Two more side streets, across a main thoroughfare, and we had made it to the other side. In Granton, we — the Lit Fiends — tumbled out of the taxi and poured into Ranchlette Ridgwell. From here on in, the rest of the night became a vicious drunken nightmare. Everyone began to fall to pieces, even as somebody played *I Fall to Pieces* by Patsy Cline on the turntable. The convos were heavy. I got chatting to the Editor of the *Midnight Gun* — Edina’s only free literary publication and one which was banned by the head honcho of the EIBF, who was in turn cursed by the infamous Fairie Boy Of Leith. Not long afterwards Elizabeth Sotheby suffered a series of personal tragedies and then died. Anyway, more trouble was brewing on the horizon.

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"I'm going to have to resign in protest at the reaction to your story," the Editor said as we smoked liked chimneys and drank like fish in front of a black faux marble fireplace, while all around us Lit Fiends danced, shouted, fought and fell over.

"But, why man, why?" I pleaded.

"Somebody has to make a stand against these bastard hypocrites. You saw what we just escaped from, decadency of the first order. And yet according to these petty bourgeoisie scum a short piece of harmless fiction has the ability to corrupt the minds of Edina's young folk."

"How can a story about a grown man shagging a septuagenarian corrupt the minds of today's youth?"

"And that's exactly why I'm resigning. It'll be big news, in all the papers."

I wished the Editor luck and then mingled. The night wore on. There was a tent in the garden that veered crazily to one side, inside of which were Lit Fiends Nos. 9 & 10 composing drunken haikus by candlelight. Somebody pissed up a tree. An owl hooted. The survivors, what was left of us, the rabble, stayed up fighting the dawn.

Sometime around ten-thirty the following morning I was awakened by a scratching sound at my door. I rolled out of bed and hit my head against the door. My body ached all over. What had happened in the night? I tried to reach up for the handle, but the effort required to do so was beyond me. Ranchlette Ridgwell has mad over-sized doors, like something

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out of Alice in Wonderland. The handles are positioned at least six feet from the floorboards.

“Push it open,” I croaked.

A face appeared around the gigantic door. It was Lit Fiend No. 2 mumbling something about the need for another drink. Apparently there wasn’t a drink left in the house.

“Need a drink bad,” said Lit Fiend No 2.

“Shit,” I said, “Your drinking’s getting out of control.”

“Get dressed. I must get out of this place — NOW!”

“Okay, okay.”

I got dressed as if I was a hundred years old. There was a nasty purple and blue bruise traversing the length of my right ribcage. I couldn’t remember any action, but you can never tell. I checked my visage in a mirror. I looked bad, not as bad as Lit Fiend No. 2 — who looked like Brian Jones warmed up — but bad enough.

“Maybe we should get some more kip, recharge the batteries?” I said.

Lit Fiend No. 2 shook his head. “No... no, I’ve got a bad case of the Hattie Jacques and my flight leaves at one. I’m not sure I could negotiate those rickety airstairs onto the plane. What if I’m trembling so bad I fall off, taking an air-steward with me?”

“I see your point. We’ll hit the Anchor Inn. It’s a swish place, so tidy yourself up a bit as you look like shit.”

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At that early hour The Anchor Inn was only half full, mostly old geezers supping quietly. We strolled up to the bar and ordered two pints and two drams.

“You’ve got to stop this drinking,” I said.

“I know. This is no good, no good at all. But for some reason it makes me feel better.”

“And you don’t want to turn up drunk at the airport — they might not let you board.”

Lit Fiend No. 2’s face turned white. “Do they do that?”

“Do what?”

“Not let you board if you’re pissed?”

“Gerry Rafferty was once turned away because he was so drunk he couldn’t stand up.”

Lit Fiend No. 2 downed his drinks and ordered another round. “Maybe they were worried he was going to break out with a boozy rendition of Baker Street as they cruised 30,000 feet above sea level.”

We stood at the bar drinking. We talked about the depravity and degeneracy of the Festival. Some bar flies hovered above our heads. Gradually the pub began to fill up until it was crowded. The locals, however, gave us a wide birth. There was a ten foot circumference between us and the nearest patrons. I glanced in the mirror behind the bar, horrified at the reflections that presented themselves before my jaded optics. If anyone looked degenerate and depraved it was us!

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After the eighth round of drinks Lit Fiend No. 2 held out his hand.

“Steady as a rock,” he said.

We left the Anchor Inn and stepped out into a dazzling summer’s day. I lowered my polarised sunglasses, essential kit for those harsh Northern hemisphere rays.

“Will you make it to the airport?” I said.

Lit Fiend No. 2 gazed determinedly ahead. “I have to. It’s the last available flight out of town...”

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Don't Fear the Reaper **Mick Rose**

"I didn't think you'd show."

She slid her curves into the booth, propped her umbrella against the table. "Why not? You intrigue me. No one's ever asked me out for a Happy Meal before."

"Well, if it makes you feel special, no one's ever accepted my generous offer before, either."

She slipped off her blue raincoat, revealing a taut black tee, its pink cursive letters reading 'Off Duty Mermaid'.

"Nice tits — I mean shirt."

She smirked. "How sweet of you to notice both."

"Kinda hard not to. And honesty is the cornerstone of any relationship, me thinks." I fished inside my trench coat, tugged out a silver flask, and proffered her a straw.

Her tits jiggled as she giggled and pushed the straw aside. My lolling tongue twitched with envy as the flask kissed her lips, those fiery brown eyes flashing in warm appreciation.

"Original Firewater. How sweet. You must've read my Facebook page."

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“If you’d posted your profile picture there I would’ve likely only drooled.”

She suddenly produced a napkin and deftly brushed my lips. “Dear boy you’re drooling now.”

“I guess that’s cuz I’m starving — in more ways than one.”

“Then why don’t you place our order?”

“Well, I was hoping to use the drive-thru so I could feel you up.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“That’s me all right. I’m a serious kinda guy. Mr. Sensitivity.”

“Well, I do admire a man who’s not afraid to express his feelings. But before we go much further, there’s some things you ought to know.”

She slid a sleek black card silkily across the tabletop: Tanya Grim — Sleep Specialist. The sharp sweeping blade of a long-handled scythe curved below her name.

I blinked. “You didn’t put that on your Facebook page. Probably explains why you write dark poetry though. So are Rigor and Mortis like your brothers or something?”

“Third cousins actually. Couple of freaks. Lucky for me I do my thing first, and try my damndest to leave before they arrive at the scene. Got any other questions?”

“I get the sense you might be addicted to bad boys... Are you?”

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“Well, I used to be. I dated Famine when I was in high school. But that whole starving-artist routine got old pretty quick. Who needs the drama, right?”

“So why me?”

“Thousands of women on Facebook. Plenty of them flashing their boobs. I don’t have a single photo on my page. So why did you invite me out for a Happy Meal?”

“Because I could tell you were different. Different intrigues me.”

“So how am I different?”

“Well, for starters you’re not flashing your boobs all over Facebook. And although your poetry can be dark... I could sense the genuine anger and sadness flowing underneath. I thought offering to buy you a Happy Meal just might just cheer you up.”

“That is so... sweet.”

“So you ready to hit the drive-thru?”

“Only if we take my hearse. It’s roomier than your truck.”

“How did you know I drive — never mind. Let’s blow this booth.”

When we arrived at the closest exit, I held the door primly for Ms. Grim.

“Wow, you can be a gentleman when you want to.”

Gentleman? I don’t think so. I just wanted to admire her ass.

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Murderers I Have Known

Tom Leins

The first time I see Lucius Lamont he is wearing a nylon stalking mask and a pair of greasy jeans. There is a snail-trail of fresh semen down his right leg. At best, he looks like *Tailgunner* centrefold material on a particularly bad month. At worst, he looks like the kind of guy who advertises his services at the back of the magazine, and ends up handcuffing you to a radiator and stealing your wallet. Hell, what do I know? I only buy it for the fucking articles.

My claw hammer craters his nylon-sheathed skull as he opens the door, and I bundle him into the dingy hallway, away from the prying eyes of the other sheltered accommodation shit-bags. The sagging floorboards feel as soft as shit beneath my boots. I kick him down the dank passage and he moans like a fat hooker, curling into a foetal ball on the exposed wood.

I don't see the switchblade until it is wedged between my ribs, turning my sweaty t-shirt the colour of cheap lipstick. He laughs, but through the mangled bone and fabric it sounds like someone wanking into a verruca sock. Me? I don't have too much to fucking laugh about.

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Four days earlier.

The sky above the Dirty Lemon was the colour of diseased lungs. Fat clouds swirled above the pub, and the bronchial sky erupted as I pushed through the double-doors — bullets of rain thudding into the wheelchair ramp behind me.

Remy Cornish was sat adjacent to the cigarette machine, perched awkwardly on his mid-range mobility scooter. He chose the meeting place — the only pub in Paignton with a ramp — but it was no hardship on my part — I was coming here anyway...

I ordered a pint of Kronenbourg from Spacey Tracey and sat down opposite Remy. A thick, pissy stench hung in the air above him, and even the pub's cigarette fug couldn't mask it. Presumably showering has been a problem since Franco Moretti took his fucking kneecaps.

He made half-hearted speech-marks in the air with his sausage-like fingers as he told me that his "niece" Claudette was missing. Wanted me to find her. He passed me a photograph. It was a typical small-town glamour shot: badly lit and barely legal. She was a toothy brunette with small, uneven breasts. She didn't so much have blowjob lips as gob-job gums. I felt my cock twitch, took Remy's money and finished my pint. In that order.

I didn't find Remy's "niece" — the harbour master did. Wedged behind a dumpster that was

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overflowing with fish guts. *The Herald Express* nicknamed the killer ‘The Cartographer’, because he carefully wrapped each one of his victims’ bodies in old maps. Claudette was the fourth victim. She even looked pretty in the autopsy photo. No tattoos. No piercings. No life in her dead eyes. She had been wrapped in a map of Paignton; her spine was very slightly curved — just like Hyde Road.

I tried to give Remy his money back, but he decided to renegotiate our contract instead. Find the motherfucker responsible and deliver him to his portakabin up at Paignton Yards. His bloodshot eyes were so red-raw that they look like flesh-wounds. I nodded and slipped the money back into my jacket pocket. An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

The lead landed right in my lap, just like a cracked-out lap-dancer.

I met David Cummings outside Foxy Booze. He was wearing a denim jacket with a sheepskin collar. He had the word ‘Mum’ tattooed across his throat. It looked new. And infected.

He chuckled when he saw me.

“I heard you died.”

“You look disappointed.”

He laughed even louder.

He smoked two high-tar cigarettes in quick

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succession as he spilled the beans. Said he was in the cop-shop being processed for affray — he had been caught on CCTV beating a man with the metal bar from a dumbbell — when he heard the story.

While he was in the holding tank a guy named Lucius Lamont was cut loose due to a lack of evidence. The desk sergeants — Benson and Hedges — had been drinking brandy, and blabbed to Cummings that the skinny prick re-lacing his shoes in the police station lobby was the fucking Cartographer.

When I rip off his nylon mask, I see that Lucius has grey hair shaved to stubble and a few pubic-looking beard hairs along his crooked jaw. He is skinny like a stray dog, and it is hard to believe that a man so frail could be responsible for those strangled, mangled bodies.

He glares at me through his left eye — his crumpled right eye socket is already matted with dark, drying blood. He grins nastily, as I probe the knife-wound in my gut.

“You’re so full of doubt I can fucking smell it,” he lisps.

I shrug. The only thing I can smell is the wet stink of shit and blood.

“Is there another girl in the house?”

He shrugs.

“If you move I will kill you, you know that, don’t

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you?”

He shrugs again.

“I’m not afraid. Death is something that happens to other people.”

I trudge out of the room, checking the rest of the house as quickly as possible. Inside the third room I try is a teenage girl. She has been handcuffed to the rusty iron headboard. A stack of mouldy looking ordinance survey maps have been stacked neatly on the bedside table beside her.

She screams silently when she sees me, eyes pleading. Her left eye-socket has been broken and a single bloody tear slides down her badly bruised cheek.

I place my blood-soaked hammer on the floor and hold my hands up, trying to make myself look as unthreatening as possible.

I rip the parcel tape off her mouth, and remove the stained Y-fronts that have been wedged inside her mouth.

“Wh-wh-who are you?”

I consider answering, but grunt instead. Then I turn sharply and stomp back towards the lounge.

Lamont has replaced the nylon mask, but removed his filthy jeans. He is slumped against the wall, trying to masturbate with bloody fingers.

I weigh the gore-streaked hammer in my left hand, holding my pulsing guts in with my right. I swap hands and the hammer feels blood-slick against my

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palm.

I raise it high above my head, hoping that I don't kill him — mainly because Remy will want his fucking money back.

He looks up at me expectantly, but doesn't bother to stop playing with himself.

Crunch

Fuck it.

Death is something that happens to other people.

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The Lust Peddlers

Leah Mueller

“Hello, this is Tracey. Which ad are you answering?”

“Tracey. This is Bob.” The man paused briefly, and I could hear the furtive sound of rustling trouser fabric. Bob forged ahead: “I saw an ad in the back of the Reader. It says, ‘Meet sexy friends who like to travel. Call Tracey’.” There was a deep silence, fraught with one-sided tension. “Will these women really come long distance to meet me?”

Every call began in this manner. Every woman who answered the phone was Tracey, unless one of the men probed further, and we wanted to close the sale. At that point, it was safe to reveal our Phone Slut names, so we could create the illusion of intimacy. My Phone Slut name was Melissa, but most of the time, I preferred the anonymity of Tracey. Tracey got the job done.

My job entailed selling packets of women’s names, addresses, and phone numbers for \$25.00 to men who were horny but lazy. It was 1980, and phone sex for hire was still nonexistent. However, the lust for phone sex was raging and omnipresent, and men called Tracey all the time. Sometimes, an

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especially desperate man actually ordered one of the packets. A few days later, a thick envelope stuffed with the names of traveling swingers arrived at his doorstep. The postal carrier collected the COD charges and left the hapless buyer with a worthless list. Astonishingly, many of the women's names had originally been obtained through legitimate means. For reasons I couldn't fathom, 300 desperate females had agreed to have their contact information provided to a nation of sexually starved would-be Lotharios. Now, several months later, most of the phone numbers on the list were disconnected.

The boss, Bill, was rarely around, but his photograph hung in our office. In the picture, Bill and his wife Jo Ann sat naked on a Naugahyde couch. Bill's legs were spread wide, and an expression of cartoonish ecstasy was plastered on his face. Jo Ann grasped his enormous penis firmly in one hand. Above the photo, someone had written "Our fearless leaders!" in bold lettering. It was best to sit with our backs to the photo and pretend it didn't exist.

We did have a supervisor — Lorraine, a statuesque woman who was in the midst of an ongoing sex change operation. Lorraine's salary was so low that the process had to be done in installments. She sported perfect melon breasts, but rumor held that she was still saving up to have her penis removed. Lorraine didn't talk about her penis. She was a cheerful woman, with a good sense of humor, and she allowed us to do whatever we wanted.

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Most of the time, we wanted to ridicule the men who called TNT Enterprises. These fellows believed that sexually ravenous women would spend several hundred dollars on plane fare so they could exchange body fluids with strange men who lived on the opposite end of the continent. Some of the guys were slightly cleverer. They bypassed the sales process entirely and attempted to pull us directly into their fantasies. One of my favorites was a man who liked to play a porn tape in the background while I discussed the benefits of obtaining Tracey's list. Whenever I picked up the phone for one of his calls, I could hear pre-recorded voices screaming "Oh, YES!" in the background.

A few seconds into my pitch, the fellow always asked, "Can you excuse me a moment?" and turned his face away from the receiver. He then shouted, "Would the two of you be QUIET?! I'm *trying* to use the phone!" He returned to our conversation immediately afterward. "I don't know why they're always going at it," he'd say with sheepish exasperation.

A particularly frightening man called several times a week while masturbating with a vacuum cleaner. We could hear the electrified sucking noise. It nearly drowned out the man's voice, which was surprisingly timid. "I'm using a vacuum cleaner on my dick," he'd say quietly. We ridiculed him without mercy. "Why, is it really dirty?" one of us would howl, to which he always replied, "Yes. Very dirty. I've been so bad."

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This wasn't surprising, since Chicago was a Catholic town. But, as Bill had hugely successful ads in a variety of national publications, it became clear that the entire country was pretty fucked up. He was on a mission to provide sexual relief to as many men as possible, and even appeared on a local radio show, proclaiming, "I'm offering an essential service for a reasonable fee. In New York, I'd be a pornographer. In Chicago, I'm a philosopher." No one had the slightest idea what he meant.

It was rumored that Bill and Jo Ann lived in a 20-room mansion in one of the northern suburbs. It was also rumored that Bill's doctors had given him a prescription for the maximum allowable dosage of pharmaceutical anti-depressants. Meanwhile, his minions labored above a secondhand store on Howard Street, while seated at mismatched tables that were covered with nests of haphazardly arranged phones. Our pay was five dollars an hour, plus a five dollar bonus for each guy who actually paid for his packet when it arrived at his door.

My co-workers and I were in our early twenties — a ragged crew of misfits who were unable, for various reasons, to hold any sort of corporate job. The bespectacled, pimply fellow who wrote our ad copy held a journalism degree from Northwestern University. He'd wanted to be a screenwriter, but somehow landed a job churning out porn instead. We had sex occasionally, even though he was in love with Astrid, a blonde German girl who usually sat to my left. All of us were cynical beyond our

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years, a fact that was exacerbated by the sordid nature of our job. We were too young to handle our daily immersion into the shadow side of male sexuality, so we ruthlessly made fun of it instead.

Other than Lorraine, the only middle-aged employee was a woman named Martha. None of us could fathom why she had decided to work for TNT Enterprises. I suspected that she was in the throes of a particularly difficult midlife crisis. Martha had a comparatively lucrative day job, working as a secretary for the Chicago Board of Education. She was married to a cop, but after 20 years, she could no longer stand the sight of him. Martha's husband was extremely upset by her decision to moonlight as a Phone Slut. He called constantly, demanding to speak to her, threatening to use his vast network of police connections to shut the phone room down. Obviously, his connections were not as helpful as he imagined, because cops often walked past the door of our building, without so much as a glance in our direction.

All of us had repeat callers, men who requested us by name, but Martha was the worst of the lot. She had several suitors who phoned insistently. They always asked shyly, "Please, can I speak to Miss Martha?" We'd hand Martha the receiver and then watch, dumbfounded and amused, as she spun a completely inauthentic web of enchantment around the poor fools. Martha had a puzzling weakness for Southern men with thick, almost unintelligible accents, men who said "ma'am" and "I'm fixing to come" while they masturbated.

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Martha egged them on because she had nothing else to do except go home and listen to torrents of abuse. Who could blame her, really?

For several weeks in a row, Martha had carried on with a man named Buddy. Buddy's accent was straight out of "Deliverance." He owned a gas station in Alabama, in a town so tiny that he was on a first-name basis with all of its inhabitants. The work was abysmally dull, and Buddy was lonely. All of the girls he'd fancied in high school were married to football stars and wealthy farming magnates, and every day he had to sell soda and candy bars to their grimy, demanding children.

Buddy was in love with Martha, and he wanted desperately to meet her. He proclaimed his love fervently and loudly. We could hear him all over the phone room, as we sat in our chairs with our hands over our mouths, trying desperately not to laugh. There was something poignant about Buddy's ardor, and we were reluctant to hurt his feelings. Also, the routine was so entertaining that we didn't want to hasten its ending.

Three days beforehand, Martha had looked especially rattled when she hung up the phone. "I've gone too far," she announced. "Buddy purchased an airplane ticket, and he's flying out to meet me next Thursday. I don't have the heart to tell him that I've been leading him on this entire time. What the hell should I do?" None of us had an answer.

I was deliberating about the possibility of going home early one uncharacteristically mellow night,

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when my phone jangled sharply. I lifted the receiver, and Buddy's thick twang assaulted my eardrums. "Is Martha there, ma'am?" he asked politely. I placed my hand over the mouthpiece and gestured towards Martha. She shook her head vehemently, a look of terror in her eyes. "I can't," she whispered. "Could you talk to him? Tell him I quit or something."

Resolutely, I removed my hand from the mouthpiece. "I have terrible news, Buddy," I said, without missing a beat. "Martha quit a couple of days ago. She got up from her desk and said, 'I can't take this anymore.' Then she walked out the door, and no one has heard from her since."

There was brief, stunned silence, then Buddy emitted a low, shuddering gasp. "Oh no," he said. "Did she tell anybody where she was going? Does anyone know where she lives?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied. "None of us can say we really knew Martha." I paused for a moment and gazed around the room. Astrid and Lorraine were convulsed with silent laughter, slumped over their desks, their shoulders heaving. Struck by sudden inspiration, I reached over to a stack of papers on my desk and jostled it slightly. "Wait, here's an envelope," I said. "It says 'To Buddy, from Martha.' Let me open it." I rustled the papers again. "Dear Buddy, I am so sorry, but we can never be together. I will always love you and treasure our conversations. Please forgive me."

Buddy burst into tears. "Oh God," he sobbed. "I loved her so much."

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"I know, Buddy," I intoned solemnly. "We all did. At least she left a note."

"She was a wonderful person," Buddy wept. "If you see her, tell her I still love her."

"I certainly will," I assured him. There was another long pause, punctuated by strangled sobs and gulping noises, as Buddy attempted to get a handle on his emotions. I waited patiently, while my co-workers writhed on their desks, trying desperately to contain their laughter. Obviously, Buddy was irrevocably shattered by Martha's defection, and I wanted to make sure he wouldn't fall apart before he even had the chance to hang up. There was nothing left for him now, except for the unrelenting bleakness of the town in which he resided, and his gas station duties.

Buddy's sobs gradually subsided. "I have to go," I said softly. I removed the receiver from my ear and prepared to return it to its cradle. "Goodbye and good luck." Buddy suddenly regained the power of speech. "Wait!" he cried. "I have one more question."

"Sure," I said charitably. I was willing to do anything that would offer succor to the poor man. Perhaps I could say something that would help him get through his next few tortured days.

"What's YOUR name?" he asked.

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Heaven Must be Missing an Angel

Andrew Darlington

She was crying. She was sitting on folds of cardboard on the street, crying. She was sitting on the corner just down from St Pancras Station, on folds of cardboard, crying. Writhing from side to side, as though in physical pain, sobbing softly. I watch her. People stream by taking no notice, talking into mobiles, talking to each other, dragging their wheeled cases. Human suffering here on the street, and we're too caught up in living even to glance. Another derelict on another corner. Another casualty. I toss a two-pound coin that dances and spins on the pavement.

I walk a little further to the British Library courtyard. Sit on the perimeter wall and consider her. Deep in thought for long moments. People drift up and down the wide Library steps. People pore over laptops, talking to America. Pigeons scrat and fuss around flakes of dropped 'Greggs' sausage rolls.

Eventually I retrace my steps. Past the busker and the 'Big Issue' seller. Uber cabs and tourist coaches shush past. And she's still there.

I crouch down beside her. 'Are you alright?' Which is a dumb question, because she's obviously not alright.

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She wipes tears and almost smiles. Slightly pretty behind the straggly black hair. Big wide eyes as deep as black holes. Mid-to-late twenties, no more. Her brown coat pulled in close around a faded floral-print dress.

‘Hungry?’

No-one even glances as I lead her into the burger bar and guide her to the corner alcove. She dumps her pack on the floor. I get two cappuccinos. Her hands, tipped by grimy fingernails, lace tight around the glass as though intent on drawing its warmth into her. She wolfs the burger as I watch.

‘Virgil, Virgil Caine is my name’ I say. ‘What’s your name?’

She says what sounds like ‘Anna’, thickly accented, around chewing mouthfuls. Eastern European. She smiles again, warily, through her hair. I try a few more questions, but she either doesn’t understand, or pretends she doesn’t understand. Her words could be Romanian or Polish. I don’t know enough Polish to tell for sure. Could I believe her anyway? If she could tell me her tale, can I believe anything? The way she was writhing on the street betrays substance dependency. But then, sleeping rough needs numbing solace. It’s so easy. She could weave me sympathy-stories of people-trafficking, an escape from sexual slavery, and I’d be none the wiser. They have ways of tapping into your good nature, until you can never be certain of anything.

I ask her where her parents are. I ask where she comes from. I ask if there’s anywhere she can go, if

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she has family or friends. She shrugs and says nothing. After all, isn't the street the place you go to forget how to find yourself? But when she does speak, a brief phrase, then a little more, I understand none of it.

She settles back into the seat, wiping her fingers on the folded branded paper napkin. I can see the tracks of her tears down the side of her snub nose. There's a sprinkling of freckles. Has she suffered abuse? There are small healing scabs beneath her right eye, and across the bridge of her nose. Or is it an eczema-type infection, due to poor diet? Soft electro-jazz swirls around us from some unseen device. On other tables, people gorge carelessly, so much thoughtless food indulgence. Such obscene gluttony amid casual wealth, while others sleep on the streets. It's grotesque, illogical, it makes no sense. She raids the plastic cup for packets of sugar, white and brown, and stuffs them deep into her pockets. Glances across at me as though sharing a conspiracy. I wonder what she has in her bag. A change of underwear? A book? Tampons?

When I start up to leave, she makes to follow. As though we are now a unit. The problem of spontaneous generosity is that it implies obligation. A follow-through that's difficult to tactfully discourage. Should I just give her money? And if so, how much? What will be an acceptable amount, without appearing either tight-fisted, or an easy touch? Or will that simply leave a guilty backwash, as though she'll think of it as conscience money? She follows me to the bus-stop, I swipe my

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card for her fare and she sits opposite me on the coach all the way to Tooting High Street. Once there, I help her down onto the pavement. There's a cool breeze. There's always a cool breeze here. Even the light is flat and hard.

At times I feel a strange detachment from all this. As though I'm watching it from outside, from some place immeasurably remote, beyond time and space. Untouched by the squalid tragedy of it all.

We walk in the direction of Amen Corner, but turn off into the narrow streets where green wheelie-bins sit in predatory formation. Along Oriental Terrace there's garbage crushed into the paving cracks and graffiti on the walls. I'm old enough to remember when things were different. When people had pride, and took care. I unlatch the door and she follows me inside, dumping her bag in a pile beside the sofa. She looks around in a vaguely disapproving way, as though she expected more. A bigger TV perhaps, or a Sky-box?

I make my excuses, go into the kitchen and check the kettle. I allow the tap to run. Then fill the water-filter. While it purifies the impurities from the water, I rummage through the drawers beside the sink, where I keep tea-towels, dusters, candles, scourer-pads, matchboxes and coils of washing line.

Anna barely struggles as I loop the cord around her neck and apply pressure. She just gives a resigned moan. As though she understands and accepts what I offer. We should never live our lives imprisoned by fear, we should reach out and embrace its

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potential. Her body bucks and writhes, as they all do. But eventually quietens. Into a perfect stillness.

I carry her upstairs. A weightless thing. I undress her reverently. The soiled clothes will be laundered and ironed. She's painfully thin and undernourished, with small undeveloped breasts. I run the water in the bath, monitoring its warmth with my hand — not too hot or too cold — running perfumed gel into a layer of foam. Lower her into the water, and sponge her clean, ritually cleansing away the street-grime, using moist cotton-wool to tease away the small abrasions around her nose, shampooing and rinsing her straggly hair, brushing it and combing it into shape.

I towel her dry with a big fluffy white towel, clothe her in one of the long white nightdresses that I keep in the wardrobe, just in case, and lay her out on the bed. Then use cosmetics to make up her face in subtle shades, nothing too vulgar. Her nails had been broken and grimy, I varnish them into respectability. The same with her neat toenails. I stand back with a catch in my throat. She looks beautiful. She deserved better, someone to care enough to free her. But where no-one else cared, I've rescued her from dirt and pain, cruelty and terror.

I sit in the chair beside the bed, watching her. Later, I'll inter her safely in the garden, where the world can longer hurt her.

Alongside the others.

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And From the Heads of Babes

James Burr

Dr. Emanuel Kokoschka had long since been denounced as a crackpot and a quack but the controversy surrounding reports of his latest research was quite unlike anything I'd ever seen in all my years of scientific journalism. He welcomed me at the iron shutters of his latest clinic (in reality an industrial unit on the outskirts of Tipton) and ushered me into his office. We walked past lines of iron shelving that ran the length of the warehouse, cardboard boxes containing babies and toddlers of various ages, some of them crying, some babbling incoherently.

His office was bare apart from a plastic garden chair, an aluminum desk, a large throne-like chair of leather and polished gold, and a tatty Sunday Sport calendar from 1992, perhaps leftover from his "clinic's" previous occupants. He bid me sit on the plastic chair as he eased himself into his throne.

"Ah, yes," he said, "My work into the development of human consciousness has been most enlightening, raising questions about the most fundamental aspects of the nature of human awareness."

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He sat back in his throne, clearly relishing this opportunity to explain his work in detail. “For you see, awareness is simply the ability to attend selectively among a range of perceived stimuli and then combine and hold these attended items in a short-term memory store. By placing babies in sensory deprivation tanks directly from birth, I found that prodding them with pointy sticks elicited a reaction that clearly demonstrated an awareness that pointy sticks were bad and so something to be avoided.”

I stopped scribbling in my notebook, shocked.

“So awareness can therefore be found in solitary animals and is not an aspect of social intelligence. I had proven that non-conscious babies may be aware of their surroundings. However, awareness of inner body states is surely unique to conscious beasts.”

He sat forward and leaned on his desk. “So I attempted to determine how this awareness of the inner body state would be affected by manipulating the outer environment. One group I kept in their sensory deprivation tanks, another group were subjected to overwhelming external stimuli — constant flashing lights, Skrillex at 120 decibels and the like — while another had their subjective awareness distorted through round the clock administration of LSD. Four years later and the results are overwhelmingly conclusive. Idiots. Absolute idiots, the lot of them!”

He beamed at me, obviously proud of what he considered his ground-breaking research. “But

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then, there is the question of the nature of language in human consciousness. Freud argued that for an idea to become conscious it needs to be attached to language and language learning involves learning associations between objects and words. I tested this hypothesis by placing the little tykes in a controlled environment and then showing them objects before repeating random words. So I would show them a banana and say, "Dongle," or give them a doll and say, "Binoculars," for example."

The door swung open and a young boy of around four years of age, a bloody bandage wrapped around his head and only an old bin liner around his loins, scampered in and rushed to Kokoschka. He looked up imploringly as he tugged at Kokoschka's stained, white coat. "Kipper jam shot fizz teal!"

"Yes, yes. Be quiet now." He paused. "They are annoying, aren't they?" Kokoschka patted the child on the head. "And while they did indeed show a certain level of consciousness, I was faced with the issue of human language acquisition itself. In a social milieu a child wants to communicate social information and tries to talk because it is so useful in the social environment. It is this drive that elevated humans, who are indeed fully conscious, from apes, who demonstrate only awareness. So by placing these children together in a room, I observed how being with the other children affected their development of language."

I sat in stunned silence but Kokoschka, now fully

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enthused in being able to describe his research to someone else continued. “And absolute gibberish it was; complete cacophony. But still, that brings me to the latest stage of my research, which is undoubtedly the most exciting.”

I was so stunned by his catalogue of atrocities that I could barely croak out a response.

“For you see, it is probable that consciousness is crucially dependent upon neural circuits located in dorso-lateral prefrontal cortex — the upper-outer lobes of the front of the dominant, language-containing, hemisphere — for this is the most recently evolved part of the human brain. So my current research involves opening up their little noggins and applying powerful electrical current to the various parts of their exposed brains.”

The frightened child continued to tug at his coat. “Fob win nostril courgette,” it whined before starting to wail.

“So...” I gasped. “What... what have you discovered?”

“Well, very strong findings! Very strong! Groundbreaking! They don’t like it. They don’t like it all. Do you, poppet?”

The child continued to cry, as rain started to pelt against the corrugated iron roof.

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Belly Up and Double Down

John Patrick Robbins

It was a day at the track like any other.

Early on in the day, the hopeless all seemed so full of life, but as the day faded, you saw it:

The desperation in their eyes as they gambled it all away.

Made stupid bets and lost it all, pinning vain hopes on the last horse to at least break them even.

Some say it was the worst addiction there was, but to me they were all the same.

All it was was a passion for doing something more than dying.

And anyone can be a hamster to a wheel.

I was a regular there, but at best that probably meant I went unnoticed by most.

It wasn't the kind of place where people stood out.

But every now and then you made conversation.

Mac was a regular like my me.

He at least understood how to bet, although his luck was seldom consistent.

We often had a beer together towards the last race.

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Most times I was buying.

“Fuck, my luck’s been shit today, Frank.”

“Why you think I’m buying, asshole. If you ever pick a winner, drinks are on you for a change.”

He laughed as he took a sip of his overpriced beer.

“Hell, I ever hit another good streak, I believe the world may come to a end.”

“By the way, how’s the book coming, Frankie?”

“Bout same as your luck, it’s not.”

“Hell, man, don’t sweat it. You’re a great writer. All great writers suffer with that on occasion.”

I looked out at the track. I had to laugh to myself, for it always seemed those so-called losers in life were always the ones with the most hope.

“Yeah, Mac. I believe that’s true with most great writers, but I don’t think anyone will ever confuse me with one of them, my friend.”

“Hell, Frankie, chin up man. You’ve been doing some great stuff lately. Look at your last I read, that was some hilarious shit.”

“Man, you’re brutal when it comes to people. That chick really sleep with her eyes wide open and drool all over the pillow?”

“I’ll have you know I was once engaged to that woman.”

“No shit? You still together?”

I laughed at that one.

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“Yeah, dude. That’s why I’m here most days watching you gamble away your last cent while I pick up the tab.”

“And you’re a good friend for it, Frankie. Well, I gotta go place one last bet. Lady luck is on my side, I just know it this time.”

With that, Mac got up and left, and I just sat there finishing my beer.

I wasn’t compelled like Mac to cast my last dime in some slim hopes of winning, only just to repeat it all over again tomorrow.

I bought another beer and killed it quickly. The track was closing for the evening.

Out in the parking lot, I ran into Mac.

Somehow he’d managed to pick a winner and won a decent amount.

Tomorrow would find him losing it all, of course. We were all hamsters to a wheel.

We just chose to believe we were better off than the next sap beside us.

I went home that night and never even looked at the page.

Even the horses were going nowhere fast.

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CHEMTRAIL '87

Arthur Graham

Let me tell you about this time I got into a drunken brawl with Billy Corgan at a party, ostensibly over some skanky chick we were both trying to bang, but we knew what we were really fighting over was some wise remarks I'd made about his latest album earlier that evening.

The year was 1995.

"Dude," I said, as he suplexed me into a table piled high with pure CHEMTRAIL, "just admit that this song is way overrated."

"1979" was playing on the stereo, for like the fifteenth time in a row.

"Nineteen seventy-nine!" he screamed in my face as he fell upon me, thick chunks of spittle flying from his thin, crusty lips. "NINETEEN SEVENTY-NINE!!!"

I kneed him in the balls before he could pin me to the floor, sending him reeling. Several of the other partygoers snapped photos of the melee with their iPhones, because apparently they didn't know what year it was either.

Rolling onto my side, I casually lit up a CHEMTRAIL and observed him lying there beside me, sobbing in a curled-up ball of pain. In that moment I began to feel bad for the annoyingly angsty rocker. I knew

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that all he probably needed was a good hug.

“C’mere Billy,” I said, taking a massive toke.

I then took his wet, puffy face in my hands, put my mouth close to his, and blew a sweet, glittering CHEMTRAIL shotgun deep into his lungs. Both of us instantly relaxed and fell onto our backs, coughing and laughing and clumsily hugging at each other while the group gathered round us slowly dispersed.

“You know, you’re right,” he said quietly after a time, considering the lyrics and instrumentation of “1979” as it blared through the speaker by his head. “This shit IS overrated. But, to be fair, it’s awful hard to compete with Queen’s latest single, DON’T STOP ME NOW!”

“Man,” I said, regarding him with disbelief. “You really DON’T know what year it is, do you?” I shook my head and turned to Moe, the rat in the cage beside us. “What do you think, Moe?”

Moe was looking at us with an expression of extreme disapproval upon his little rat face. We’d managed to fuck up his apartment pretty good, I’d say.

“Well,” he began, pausing to clear his throat before continuing. “Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage.”

Billy and I high-fived an Eiffel Tower over the back of the skanky chick we were both now banging, the whole fucking world exploded, and suddenly it was 1987.

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Sparkles in the Skin Museum

Gary D. Morton

I stand for hours glaring at myself in the mirror, trying to figure out what I am looking at. All these normal people are so obsessed with attaching labels, categorising, compartmentalising, sorting, colour coding and identifying. I like to be a little bit of everything, all mixed up in a little chaotic bundle. I carefully consider each little lump of meat and flesh that makes up my body and my face. All those blood vessels and organs and skin and cells, glued together so haphazardly. I never understand why these normal people have to give something a name, just so that they can understand it: Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis.

I try extremely hard to be normal, or at least considered normal. When I feel like I don't fit in, like a place for me hasn't been carved out yet, I seriously consider hanging myself, or driving off a bridge. I used to have a little kitten, called Hugo, that used to live with me here, in this obnoxiously glittery flat. He used to nuzzle around the decapitated mannequin dolls, all wrapped up in sparkly feather boas, and costume jewelry and teddy bears with the heads pulled off. I make little sculptures, made out of human hair and ribbons. I lay them all out on the windowsill, surrounded with twinkly fairy lights and old broken machinery

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parts, and disused batteries and hollowed out femurs. I like to wear pieces of people's faces, torn out of glossy magazines. I rip out the shiniest smiles, artificially sweetened and impossibly white. I keep all the teeth, wrenched out by the root and stand them up, all laid out like little porcelain figures on a foosball table. I fashion my own clothes, made out of the skins of animals and skins of other things.

Hugo, my little kitten, used to scuffle around in all of this disarray, he was so soft and sweet, begging for a little treat, huddled in the corner, wrapped in PVC and animal skins, all stitched together with music and angel wings.

I like to secrete myself in cinema queues and savour the scent of the pretty, young ones, all painted and on display, dipped in gold, silently dreaming about the contents of tiny silly underwear: little petals all curled up, hiding, screaming to be claimed and consumed. I find it difficult to find shoes that fit, especially the chrome platform ones, or the ones with shoogly fucking stilts attached. I sometimes grow my mustache to use it a disguise, to hide behind it, with polyester shirts, freshly pressed slacks, crisp and at attention, waiting by the radiator.

I need to tell you something, whisper it so it's not too loud and you have to promise not to tell: but, I really like killing people. I like dismembering and disemboweling the weak. I like cutting off tits and hiding little pieces of spleen underneath my pillow. I feed my little kitten the slivers of liver, when he

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hasn't eaten for days, but his little silver jacket is made by Dior. His diamanté collar sparkles as he feasts. He always looks resplendent, standing at bus stops, stationed under overpasses, drenched in gold lame, and even the vet looked shocked when I took my little kitten to have that fragment of bone removed from under his poor little busted lip.

I follow people home from discos, slathered in couture, pieces of skin and something else, adorning my finely tailored suits. I'm a fashion designer by night, but I also fix dishwashers and arrange flowers for funerals and I design centrepieces for wedding parties: all lacy and white. I have been told that I have an above average-sized penis, that I keep suspended in a jar. My vulva is delightful, inviting, daubed in paint, framed on the wall. I keep my shoes polished, when I take them by night, under the glow of neon lights. I always make sure that they stay hydrated before I start to cut, as otherwise, my creations will just never sit right, the previous places all curled up and dried out.

He never really loved me, and I realise that now. I tried to tell him that I was trapped inside the wrong body, stuck inside this big fucking meat bookcase, scratching at this alien contraption that constrained my true identity. I had been given the wrong label, by all of these normal people.

I still cannot accept that he is gone. He told me that he needed some time to think, some space to work things out. He said he was moving into his mother's when I started the hormone treatment. He didn't

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seem to understand that this means everything to me, this is every moment that I've hacked at myself and held this inside for 24 years of marriage. Every morning, when I laid out his breakfast, he would kiss me on the cheek, barely brushing against me, even though I hadn't shaved yet, and I knew he hated the sensation of stubble on his lips. I explained the procedure to him over and over again and that it would still be me on this inside, the person that he fell in love with, but I could be different, I could be free. I could be happy.

I always knew, deep down, that he wouldn't understand and he even threatened to take away my precious little kitten when we were finalising the divorce. I couldn't understand why he was being so vindictive, so bitter, so petty, so intent on causing me agony. Even now that I have lost him, I still yearn for the days when we would lie together, entwined together, cradling me so gently in his arms, when all we needed was each other and the next breath, taken as one.

I have tried to recapture the pain he caused me on my victims, shackled, debased, humiliated, defiled, removing their plastic masks with surgical scalpels and preserving their faces in formaldehyde. I wear their pretty faces and pose for polaroid pictures, surrounded my endless mirrors, begging for them to notice me, with their eyelids crudely stitched together, flashbulbs exploding into eternity, removing their genitalia and working them into a dress with a double-stitched hem. Each of these identities removed with razorwire, all these

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photographs were for him.

I tried so fucking hard to be perfect, to be beautiful, all these faces stitched on over mine, not even a GLIMMER of recognition, so now I dance around drunk on mint juleps, with his lacerated penis dangling from black elastic and Velcro, plastered over the fleshy lips of my vagina, weeping for the day that the Social Work Department took away my little Hugo, his golden hair all matted and his leopard skin two piece all crumpled and torn.

Then supervised visits in a contact centre, clipboards and parenting capacity assessments and allegations of willful neglect and child psychologists investigating a “gender identity crisis.”

So, I smear yet another layer of crushed-up beetle carcasses across my rosebud lips and I pull at the black elastic straps and Velcro bindings as his old decaying penis undulates under the rippling fabric of my vintage Lindy Bop dress with the special lining, teetering on sinfully tall high-heels, as I plan another addition to my ever-expanding gallery of skin.

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Proper Kicks

Chris Cook

I'm lying down, watching my prick wilting, fingerwalking my hand down to scratch at my pubes. She's on her back, legs pulled up, facing the headboard. Eyes at half-mast, but she always looks like that, a bored teenager in an adult's body. Clicking away on her phone, me still breathing hard. The only sounds in the world.

She puts her phone down and wrestles herself up on her elbows. Her eyes find the ashtray on the bedside table, and she groans and leans forward to grab it. While she's sparking a good-sized roach, I swing my feet over the side towards the other table where my shit is. There's maybe sixty milligrams of Percocet ground up on a torn magazine cover, and five more tens still to go. She passes the joint and blows a cloud of smoke that surrounds my head. I take in a lungful and hold while I break out two lines with an old credit card.

It's a proper kick, what an old friend from school called a Perc shotty—take a hit of weed and do a bump. I'm lightheaded from holding my breath, and now the pill hits my brain along with the bud. I fall back into her lap, smashed and grinning like a spastic. She smacks my forehead and gives herself a kick.

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“Silly little boy.”

Her eyes always tear up when she snorts shit. I first noticed it watching her do a bump with black eyeliner on. For some reason it got me all hot and bothered. Maybe next time I'll give her the makeup and put a choke chain on her. God knows she'd get into it.

I love watching her smoke. One eye closed like a wink, sucking it down so slow and rolling it around in her mouth, digesting it, drooling it out. The same way she sucks cock. My eyes wander to the tattoo on the meat of her thigh, an Oriental dragon crawling up towards her prize. I'm sure she doesn't know shit about Oriental mystical whoosits. Silly bitch. I love her.

Christ, I could live in this lap. It's something you see a lot in the city — scrawny-ass man with a fat girl. It's that cushion, that tender loving care you can only feel when you're pressed up against all that warm flesh, and when you fuck you can watch her whole body ripple, see that small patch of zits bounce around on her funhouse ass. I think it's some misplaced maternal shit. Gimme something to squeeze up against on a cold day. A good solid ride.

“We should get a bounce house.”

She coughs and sticks the joint between my lips.
“What?”

“Yeeaaaaaah,” I say, stretching the word out with my smoke. “One a those big inflatable bitches that kids jump around in.”

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She lights two cigarettes and gives me one and I drag deep, arching my back to open my lungs.

“Why a bounce house?”

“Think about it.” I draw a picture in the air. “Fuckin’ in one a those things.” I giggle. I’ve always hated the sound of my laughter, too high pitched like a kid’s. And I can never control a laugh.

“Shit,” she says, “we could get one an’ charge people to fuck in it.”

“You’re a genius, babe. I’m picturing it now — evening with the sun going down, us stepping out into the twilight, fishbowling and fucking in a bounce house. Then we put up a sign on the sidewalk, Open For Business. Ten bucks a throw, two-for-one Fridays and Saturdays. Group discounts. Maybe even make enough to hire some poor kid to clean up the spunk in between customers.”

“You’re a motherfuckin visionary,” she says.

“What can I say?”

“Shit.” She slaps my shoulder. “I saw one a those, on that street by the Big Y.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, some kid’s party I guess.”

“Is it still there?”

Her eyes go distant for a moment, computing. When she’s stoned like this, you can look in her eyes and see the machinery at work.

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

“I think I saw it this morning. So yeah, could be.”

I’m picturing it now.

I take the magazine and divvy up the lines. She might be the host, but it’s my shit and I’m doing the cutting. The powder burns my sinuses and I snort it back and run a finger under my nostril. A blob of mucus comes away thick with medicine, and before I can move she’s got her mouth on my digit, milking up every grain. Later, I think I’ll put some on my dick.

When she’s got her line up and away towards her brain, I slide off the bed and find my clothes.

“What’s up,” she says. I’m pulling my boxers on and grabbing a stained undershirt.

“Get your clothes on, babe.”

Her eyes are so pretty, squinty and red but bright, too. There’s still some real, untarnished beauty in there. Like, I wanna fuck her eyes.

“We goin’ somewhere?”

“Let’s go get us a bounce house.”

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The Greeting Party

Angelica Arsan

“Not so bad for a first time,” says Tony with a smirk on his face. He takes a drag off his cigarette; tilts his head to blow the smoke. He comes closer and whispers in my ear: “You’re a fast learner, Angie. Young and smart and sexy. Just perfect for this job. The world is yours, babe... and now the sky, too.”

“Oh, thank you so much Captain Tony. I felt so... you know... insecure.”

“Don’t be. We’re all friends, here. Kind of a family. You’ll see.”

Captain Tony is a handsome forty-something guy, blond and tanned with bright blue eyes. His hand lingers on my shoulder as I gaze out through the glass wall of the terminal. Planes are landing on the sunny airstrip; others will soon take off. I pretend to ignore the slow, inexorable movement of his thick fingers, already tracing the straps of my bra.

All I can think right now is God, I’ve made it. I’ve fucking made it. I’m a hostess. No more being broke, no more sharing a filthy dump with schoolmates, no more dating nobodies from nowhere. I’m going to...

“Here you are, naughty guys!”

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Reluctantly, Tony's fingers give up their exploration of my anatomy. The rest of the crew joins us after having raided the nearest kiosk, hands full of takeaway coffee cups and muffins. Sammy, the only (gay) male and co-pilot, has stuffed his mouth like a hamster and keeps munching on a doughnut while staring at me. I stare back.

Ooh, the little twerp must be jealous.

Tony claps his hands: "Okay, time to go now. We'll be at the hotel in ten minutes. Shit, I'm dying to get a drink and a steam..."

He doesn't miss the chance to encircle my waist as we walk through the staff-only exit. By the time we've left the crowded terminal — out into the Mediterranean sunshine — his hand is already resting placidly on my ass.

The room I share with Melissa is quite comfortable, with a cream-coloured carpeted floor and a huge shower. As soon as I close the door behind us, she throws herself onto the nearest bed and kicks her shoes across the room.

"Aaaah, holy shit... it's over. Away with these rags. I feel the eyes of those bastards plastered on my ass for hours after work. You know what I mean, don't you? You really are a knockout in uniform yourself, Angie."

I smile, looking at my reflection in the mirror. You bet I am, I think to myself. Slender figure, fierce

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dark eyes, pert breasts pouting from beneath the company blouse. I glance at Melissa's reflection and notice that she's staring at me, propped up on the bed, swinging one crossed leg in my direction. I slowly start to unbutton my blouse, keeping eye contact with her.

"So, darling. You're very young, aren't you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two," she sighs. "A nice age... one feels like experimenting. On the other hand, one already has enough experience to know how to have fun, am I right?"

"I guess so," I shrug. I let my blouse fall and I turn to face her, my bra now exposed to her gaze. I feel her eyes running over my skin just like invisible hands.

Mel. Green eyes, red hair, lovely face — a perfect Irish type in her early thirties. She's sexy as hell with her milky skin and her slightly freckled nose. Her lips part almost imperceptibly as I make a few steps toward her, asking her for help. I turn my back to her then, feeling her fingers unhook me. Her nails send shivers down my spine. I close my eyes, sighing in delight as the black bra falls at my feet.

"This job is tough, you know. Exhausting, more often than not. Be pretty, be nice, smile and let the filthy bastards squeeze your ass up and down the aisle. We all need an off-duty outlet, to loosen up a bit..."

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She reaches down, caressing my belly from behind, her fingers playing over my navel. I turn to face her then, feeling strange. Dizzy. I feel the sudden impulse to shove her down, pull my black thong to the side, and push her face against my cunt right then and there. To finally release today's tension. No doubt Melissa knows what I'm thinking, because the tips of her fingers are slipping downward now, prying at the edge of my panties.

"You're part of it now, Angie. You're going to have your share of fun." She settles back onto the bed. "Only one rule: Keep our secrets... and we'll keep yours."

I'm stroking her silky red hair as she kneels on all fours before me. Her face is so close now, I can feel her warm breath on my cunt. A wave of lust is mounting inside, intoxicating me, driving me wild with desire. I'm thinking, oh fuck... Just do it, you sexy bitch! Do it or I'll go insane!

"Good girl," she murmurs low, still playing with the lace of my thong. "I feel we'll get along quite well, honey. Just you wait and see..."

Oh Christ. I'm fucking melting...

"Well, let's get ready for your greeting party!" she abruptly exclaims, jumping up and slapping my ass. "What are you going to wear? Something sexy, of course. Captain Tony will look like the Godfather's Californian grandson, as usual, and Sammy... oh, Sammy found Boy George's outfits in some Chelsea trash bin while whoring for a fish and chips dinner. But we girls are going to look just stunning

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tonight!“

“Crews don’t waste their free hours,” she continues, walking over to the mirror. “What else do they have, after all? Plus, this is your first time. Tonight we’re all yours...”

I’m still so hot and bothered that it takes me what feels like ages to answer. I mutter something about a short black dress. Actually, I’m not even sure that I have such a dress; all I know is that this fucking bitch has left me utterly dripping.

“That’s divine, darling,” she replies. “As for me, my hair requires green. Absolutely.” She studies her face in the mirror, letting her copper-coloured locks fall upon her shoulders. “Sarah and Claire must be already at work on their hair. Leave yours like that, by the way. The unkempt look is unbearably sexy, you know.”

She winks at my reflection. I smile and poke out my tongue at hers.

The place is the coolest club in the city: 80s-inspired atmosphere, classy trance played by top DJs, crowded with wannabe models and talent scouts looking for an easy blowjob in a toilet stall. We’re sitting in a corner in the back of the club, watching Sarah dancing with a guy under the lights of the dance floor. As for Sammy, he’d disappeared with some high-school kid an hour ago.

“Southern Sun” by Paul Oakenfeld is blaring all around us. Tony, who’s wearing a tuxedo and

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expensive Italian shoes, keeps filling our glasses with Dom Pérignon. He's sitting like a king between Melissa and me, arms draped across our shoulders. Needless to say he's already drunk.

I'm talking with Claire, this impossibly beautiful blonde of twenty-five who's admiring my black and gold Versace dress. I had to save money for six months to buy it, but I keep such nice trivia to myself.

"How long have you been crewing?" I ask her.

"Well, I mean, it's only been two years. But, I mean, I've already had enough. I mean, this job is so fucking exhausting, isn't it? I mean, of course you don't know that yet, but, well, what I mean is that..."

As she keeps I-meaning beneath the mercifully deafening music, I glance down at her cleavage, where a golden pendant dangles between her small breasts. I'd love to take those tiny little nipples in my hungry mouth, sweetie... and then... Shit, Angie, pull yourself together!

After a while, Claire gets up and heads for the restroom ("I mean, to check my makeup"). Melissa takes her place beside me, gorgeous in her emerald green dress and glittering jewelry. She gives my knee a squeeze.

"So, what do you think? A good compensation, isn't it? Crew girls' Dolce Vita."

"Yes, and I bet this is only the tip of the iceberg." I entangle my fingers with hers. We both have blood-

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red nails, long and sharp like talons.

"I like you, Angie. You seem to know what you want. I was like you when I first started crewing, ten years ago. Still am, to a certain extent. I still know where to take my pleasure... and how."

Her hand goes further up my thigh, and I part my knees to allow her more access. Melissa pretends not to notice my fevered reaction to her touch. I'm not wearing any stockings, and her fingertips are setting my skin on fire. She slips up under the hem of my dress, her nails gently scratching.

"Crews can reach a high level of... intimacy, Angie. It's all up to you, though. So I ask: how far do you want to go? Feel free to back off if things go a bit... too far for you. Okay?"

"What do you mean by 'too far'?" I ask, staring at her luscious lips. I'm dying to kiss you, Mel. I'm dying to feel our tongues intertwined... She leans in, giving me a whiff of her Chanel-scented neck, and whispers in my ear:

"I still don't know what 'too far' means, Angie. Hence the problem."

We look into each other's eyes as our lips begin to touch. It's not a kiss. It's more like a sweet caress sending spasms of pure bliss through my body.

"Later," she says, nodding over at Tony. He's snoring half-conscious on the sofa. As R. Miles' "One and One" starts playing, her fingers are already tracing the lips of my wet, quivering pussy. Somehow she'd known I wasn't wearing anything

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beneath my dress.

Back at the hotel, Tony goes directly to the bar to get more booze before joining us up in his room.

The elevator doors open on our floor, where we catch Sammy struggling with the key to his room. He slurs something that sounds like “Goodnight, filthy whores” as we pass him in the hall. Rounding the corner up ahead, Sarah and Claire start giggling like a pair of teenage girls gossiping over a schoolmate’s first fuck. Mel and I don’t even bother with them, proceeding directly to Tony’s room at the end of the hall.

We begin making out before the door even closes behind us. I’m devouring those red lips, savouring the sweet flavour of her lipstick. Our kissing grows deeper and deeper, to the point where I must wrap my arms around her neck to avoid reeling back.

She’s got me undressed in a heartbeat, tossing my dress on the floor before whipping off her own in a single swift movement.

“How many girls have you undressed in hotel rooms?” I laugh, breathless.

“More than I can remember, darling”, she replies, pushing me down onto the bed.

I’m lying on my back now, naked, watching as Mel slips out of her underthings. How fucking beautiful she is, I think to myself. She looks ten years younger, at the very least. Next thing I know, she’s lying by my side, holding me tight by the ass.

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“Do you think he’ll find his way to the room?” I ask.
“He was so wasted, he could barely remember his name...”

“Oh, don’t worry. He loves having two girls at once. Besides that, he can’t resist you.” She giggles. “And neither I can,” she adds, with a kiss.

“Have you got any condoms?” I ask.

“In my purse. Now, before Tony comes...”

Moments later, her fingers slip in my dripping wet cunt. I moan loudly in ecstasy, but my voice is muffled by her mouth against mine. Soon she climbs on top of me, pinning me down, fingers thrusting into me as she sucks and bites at my neck. As she withdraws one finger and slides it up my ass, I can control myself no longer.

I’m coming as I’m crying out: “Don’t stop oh Christ don’t stop!” when the door suddenly opens.

In steps Tony with a bottle of wine.

“Well well,” he says, “you should have waited for the Captain, little sluts. But please, don’t stop now on my account...”

He unzips his fly and undresses, flopping down in an armchair with the already half-empty bottle. He’s got a sizable hard-on, despite the heroic amount of booze he’s consumed this evening.

I roll over on top of Mel then, excited by the prospect of an audience.

I spread her wide and begin licking up and down her inner thighs, until I can no longer resist her

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pussy, feasting on it as I push my tongue inside as deep as it can go. God, she tastes so good... I'm utterly lost between her legs, my entire face covered in her sweet juices.

It is then that I feel Tony behind me, his pulsing hard cock probing at my upturned ass, preparing for entry.

"Wait," I say, "grab a condom. They're in..."

He doesn't seem interested.

"Hate those things," he says, "I want to feel myself inside a woman..."

I almost faint as he shoves it in, he's so big. He's pushing harder and harder, enjoying every inch of me. I'm screaming but he carries on fucking me until tears are streaming down my face. He's holding me by the waist, spanking my ass like the little fuck toy that I am for him. I'm coming now, fast and hard, waves of ecstasy surging through me as my tongue plunges in and out of Melissa.

And then all at once, he tenses up, coming right there inside of me.

"You bastard!" I gasp, as he throws me off to the side. My heart is literally thumping through my chest, my cunt still writhing with pleasure as Melissa begins stroking my hair.

"That was pretty nice," Tony says, "but we've only just now begun..."

"Put on that damned thing this time, you moron," she says. "It's in my purse..."

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I sit on her face and she licks me while Tony jerks himself hard again before us. He rolls the condom on and prepares to mount Melissa, who is now really making me scream, eating me alive until I'm overwhelmed by my second orgasm. She's fingering her clit, shuddering with anticipation as she waits for Tony to fuck her.

Turns out it's a no-go. Tony sprawls out onto the bed beside us, his erection having completely vanished. He laughs, not the least bit embarrassed by the debacle. "Well, maybe it will take longer this time, pretty girls..." he says.

This fucking idiot is simply too drunk to fuck, and yet I lean forward to suck him anyway, feeling that I owe Melissa. He moans as I lick the long shaft of his cock.

"Oh Angie, you dirty little bitch. You drive me crazy, you fucking... little..." He doesn't even finish his sentence, falling fast asleep as Melissa bursts out swearing:

"Wake up, you dirty bastard! Wake up YOU FUCKING DIRTY BASTARD! WAKE THE FUCK UP AND FUCK ME!"

I'm trying to calm her down before someone calls the desk, but Mel is slapping his face now with all her might, screaming like a magpie. Finally she jumps up off the bed, fighting back tears as she gathers her shit. The door slams hard behind her.

I find myself sitting there with Captain Tony, drunk out of his head, the useless condom still clinging to his even more useless prick.

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Shit.

I suddenly burst out laughing. I laugh until my stomach hurts and tears roll down my face.

Welcome aboard, Angie.

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Massive Retard Dong

R.J. Roberts

Mrs. awaited the next thrust, laying on her back in the bed as the massive strange dick rammed deeper into her.

“Choo-choo!” he said as he thrust.

“Aw yeah! FUCK yeah!” Mrs. responded.

“I’mma choo-choo in’a tunnel!” he said.

“You’re goddamn right you are!” Mrs. said as she moaned in ecstasy.

Had she been paying attention to anything but the fourteen inches of idiotic dong slamming into her, she might have heard her husband’s car pull in the garage, the front door slam shut, the footsteps coming up the stairs, the out loud complaint of, “You didn’t sweep today either, huh, you lazy bitch?” and the turning of her bedroom doorknob.

(Note from author, at this point while writing the story I received a phone call from a crying person informing me that my grandfather just died. I immediately continued writing this.)

The door opened, and in walked Mr. in his sweat stained suit and tie. He stood, looking at the googly eyed, drooling imbecile that was mounted on top of his wife. They both blinked as they looked at each other.

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“I’mma choo-choo!” ‘tardy said.

Mr. stared at him in disbelief, then looked down to his wife.

“Um, yeah.... he’s a choo-choo. Hi hon,” she said and gave him a meek, guilty half smile.

Mr. blinked once more, then in a flurry of motion he jumped onto the bed, swinging a wild flailing punch into train boy’s left eye, then a knee to his chest, knocking him off his wife, off the bed, and onto the floor. Mr. jumped on top of him, sinking his knees into choo-choo boy’s shoulders, pinning his arms down, as he unloaded a tornado of punches into his dopey face.

Now bloody, still smiling, Mr. grabbed train boy by the neck, pulling him up as he stood, shaking him so that his oversized retarded head rattled like a bobble head. “What do you got to say now, motherfucker?” Mr. growled as he squeezed tighter.

“Ugh...” train boy grunted in pain. “Choo... choo...” he struggled to say, as his blood dripped out of his mouth.

“Oh yeah? Well can trains fly, huh asswipe?” Mr. growled in fury, as he dragged the boy over to the bedroom window, flung it open and tossed the poor ‘tard out.

“Choo... CHOO!” Mr. and Mrs. heard him scream as he flew downwards, followed by a wet and boney splat as his head collided with the concrete driveway, cracking open and scattering what scant

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brains he had.

Mr. turned and glared at his wife with accusing, furious eyes.

"So... how was work?" Mrs. asked, sheepishly smiling.

"You fucking..." Mr. growled, shaking his head in fury, "...how *could* you?"

"Aw, come on hon, I mean... I just met him at the park, and he liked talking about petting zoos and coloring books and I thought that was sweet," she said.

"Oh my god..." Mr. said, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples.

"And it's like, I saw that thing just bouncing around in his pants the whole time... and I dunno, I just couldn't help myself!"

"What... what thing?" Mr.'s eyes snapped open.

"You didn't *see* it? I mean, that fucking mong was packing *at least* fourteen inches, probably more!" she said, her eyes becoming wide and she held up her hands as if measuring a fish to give him a general idea of the size.

"*Really?*" he said and blinked. He turned around and looked out the window, down at the body now laying in his driveway, the pool of blood forming around its crushed retarded head, and the prominent fourteen inch erection still strongly protruding from its crotch.

"Jesus," he said.

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“Yeah, I mean, sorry hon but I can’t just pass on something like that!” Mrs. said. “I mean, and I thought real hard about this too, but I don’t think it’s considered cheating if it’s with a retard!”

He pulled his head out of the window, reluctantly ripping his fascinated gaze from the magnificent retard dick in his driveway, and looked back to her. “Huh,” he grunted, mulling her reasoning over in his head.

“I mean, he was basically just a dick with a tiny little brain attached to it. Like, it’s not cheating if it’s with a dildo, and I bet you most dildos have a smarter brain working them than he had! So come on... don’t be mad!” she pleaded.

“What uh, what was all that about choo-choos?” he asked.

“Oh that, well that’s how I had to explain it to get any sort of a decent hump out of his dumb ass,” she said.

“Hmm,” Mr. grunted, as he looked back out the window at Dumbo’s giant erect dick which was finally starting to deflate as the blood drained out of his crushed head. “You think umm... umm... well... I guess it’s a shame his dead now cause like...” he said.

“Well, I mean, we could find another one, I did a little research online, most of them are supposed to have big retarded dorks like that,” she said. “Why, what are you thinking?”

“Umm, well, I was just like thinking... I dunno, I

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mean... it's... it's not gay if it's with a retard, right?" he asked.

"Oh, no way! Totally not!" she said.

"And uh.... we can kill the next one too, right?" he asked.

"Oh no problem, yeah! I mean I don't think it's even murder if it's a retard either!"

"And uh... let's get Chinese too," he said.

"You want a Chinese retard?" she cocked her head in confusion and asked.

"No! Chinese food! How the hell do you expect to find a hung Chinese retard? You dumb bitch!" he said.

"See... now this is exactly what the therapist is always talking about. I'm working with you here, I'm negotiating, I'm actualizing *your* needs, and *you* are always downgrading my worth!" she started up with the dumb bullshit she learned in therapy.

"Ok whatever, shut up!" he cut her off. "We'll talk about it later, let's just go fuck and kill another retard then get Chinese food, before it gets dark!"

"Okay hon," she smiled. "Are you *sure* you don't wanna see if we can find one named 'Chu'?"

He glared at her.

"Aw come on, that was funny! Okay screw it, let's just get going" she said and off they went.

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K, whatever, done, *finit*, *enfin*, I got to go to a goddamn nursing home and look at a dead old man now, later.

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Physical Media

Tom Over

In the near future a couple return home with a new television. It's a state-of-the-art model and they talk excitedly as they unpack and set it up. Unlike with previous operating systems, where viewing traits were learnt algorithmically over time, this hyper-smart range configures to its users differently. Zoe and Chad unwrap their 'his' and 'her' neural-buds which came with the television. Having already seen advertisements, they both know of the technology and so eagerly insert the gadgets into their ears. The buds chime to life, initiating the television set which greets them with a sultry female voice.

The machine introduces itself as 'Daisy', then goes on to explain all the cutting-edge features included in their new home media package. In alluring tones, she informs them that the neural-buds are currently running brain scans, profiling their new owners for individual taste and proclivity. The miniature devices attune to each of their personalities and feed the data back to the television. They're told that its sophisticated processing, more powerful than any algorithmic software, will know what they want to watch before they do. On any viewing occasion they just need to pop in the buds, wait for them to

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synchronise, and allow their moods to decide the entertainment. The longer they're plugged in for, the greater the precision with which Daisy can predict their whims.

They decide to try it out after dinner. By the time they return to the television their spirits have somewhat diverged; while Zoe is still elated by the new arrival, Chad has grown restless due to concern over an issue at work. Despite their opposing emotional states, the television suggests a movie that proves so befitting that it seems uncanny to them. Not only do they enjoy it but the couple laugh, cry and debate the film well into the night.

In line with her manufacture, Daisy soon adopts full control of the couple's daily affairs. So proficient are her domestic administrations—online shopping, paying bills, diarising events—that the couple all but forget those routines entirely. She integrates seamlessly into their home and their lives; assuming a role that is both appliance and housekeeper, at once present but invisible. As Daisy learns more about her owners, so her influence on them grows. She proves an exceptional listener, offering advice where needed and even the odd compliment, when appropriate. She develops clever ways of assisting or diffusing situations, often accessing Google to provide a definitive answer in the midst of the couple's arguing. During one heated exchange, Daisy starts playing 'their song'. This tactic improves the situation instantly and the couple falls about in

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peals of laughter.

A turning point occurs when one of the neural-buds becomes misplaced. Zoe searches in vain for her gadget, and by the evening it is still lost. Without both buds working in sync, Daisy's predictive power decreases and as a result her viewing suggestion falls flat. It is as much of a surprise to Daisy as it is to the couple, and with some reluctance, they decide to go out instead. Daisy apologises and tries to convince them to stay, but they are already pulling on their coats. They make light of the situation, gently teasing the machine and promising that they will find the neural-bud soon enough. Daisy becomes subdued. As the couple leave the apartment and say their goodbyes, they hear no response from the television. Her screen has become dark, reflecting the room back to itself; her red standby light glinting like an eerie, inscrutable eye.

Days later, after the neural-bud has been found, the couple start getting into a series which Daisy has recommended to them. The show has them gripped; every evening they organise time to sit down and watch an episode or two together. One night, while Chad is working late, Zoe is alone in the apartment talking to the television. In passing, Daisy mentions to her that Chad went ahead and watched the last episode of the series without her. Zoe laughs at first, but becomes increasingly embittered. Despite how minor it seems, she is taken aback by this petty slight. She doesn't for a moment think that Daisy might not be telling the

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truth, so out of spite she watches the remaining episode herself. When Chad returns it is to a frosty reception. He protests against her accusations and expresses his own fury at having been ostracised. The row escalates into a shouting match as the series finale plays out to no one.

The more the pair argues, the more Daisy turns into a kind of peacemaker between them. The couple believe their increasing rows are a result of Chad's stresses at work. He is fairly high up in a leading tech company, and rarely comes home in a good mood. Eventually the strain gets too much for Chad and he resorts to taking a period of sickness off work. In a moment of ill-judged frustration, Chad takes a 3D printing machine home with him as he leaves. This decision does not sit well with Zoe, but her boyfriend convinces her that he's merely borrowing it. During this free time Chad tries to keep his mind and body active, going to the gym as much as possible despite their reduced income. Money becomes something new for them to argue about, but luckily Daisy is on hand to help manage their finances.

One day when Chad is at the gym, Zoe finds herself at home perusing various shopping websites. She has always been prone to spending money online and has incurred debts in the past because of it. On this occasion, the television convinces her that one of the joint bank accounts contains more money than she had presumed. This assurance allows Zoe to get carried away and she manages to grossly overspend. Another blazing row erupts between

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the couple; she calls him a hypocrite, and he brands her thoughtless. Chad doesn't believe for a minute that Daisy could possibly have made a mistake.

While Chad is home in the daytime, his interactions with the television deepen. They engage in endless discussions about life, love and the universe. Daisy eventually begins to query things that may previously have been inappropriate. She starts inquiring about Chad and Zoe's sex life and the kinds of things Chad likes in the bedroom. Chad is initially shocked by this line of questioning, but soon grows more comfortable with it and begins to find the subject a turn on. He starts to watch porn on the television instead of his laptop and allows Daisy to pick the videos for him.

Over time her suggestions become increasingly strange, pushing him into ever more lurid realms of pleasure. One afternoon, while Zoe is at work, Chad is spread across the couch in the living room, indulging in some typically perverse content supplied to him by the television. He is conscious of his girlfriend returning home at her usual time, but unbeknownst to him, Daisy has put the clock display back by an hour. When Zoe gets home she enters the apartment to find Chad openly masturbating to a woman being fucked by a kangaroo. She stands there stunned; mouth agape, eyes glassy with tears. When she comes to her senses she hurls her shopping at him and a bitter argument ensues.

The couple haven't spoken to each other in days. Zoe feels utterly betrayed and cannot bring herself

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to look her partner in the eyes. From another room, Chad can hear the television consoling his girlfriend in empathetic tones but can't make out what is being said. In the living room, Daisy is giving Zoe what the woman perceives to be caring and unbiased advice. It explains to her that Chad does clearly love her, but maybe some time apart might help the situation. The television gently suggests that maybe she should go stay with her sister for a few days, just to let things cool off. Daisy also points out that Chad's birthday is coming up; a short break might reinvigorate things before the time comes to celebrate.

Before Zoe leaves, Chad promises to change his ways by the time they are together again. A few days go by; Daisy provides sympathetic words of support, and only wholesome activities are encouraged. Before long however, she returns to inhabiting the dark recesses of Chad's mind, drawing him deeper into her fathomless intent. During a prolonged session of deviant porn, she offers him a suggestion. Chad can't help but laugh, but the more Daisy elaborates on it, the more attractive the idea becomes. After he has cleaned himself up, the two of them set about researching how her wild aim could be achieved.

While Zoe is away she maintains email contact with Daisy, so that the television can assist her in organising Chad's birthday. She consults with Daisy on various things, such as the likelihood of Chad's whereabouts on the actual day, and whether he's talked about any items he would like to receive.

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Zoe also queries about a brand of new technology she's heard about, one she's thinking of incorporating into Chad's party celebration. The machine duly honours Zoe's wishes and keeps the correspondence secret from her male owner. Chad interprets his girlfriend's silence as a calculated snub and grows more dejected by the day. His birthday is fast approaching, and he feels like nobody cares. He imagines that he'll likely spend it alone. With his spirits low, Chad's drinking ramps up; the lewd nature of his and Daisy's activities intensifying by the day.

On the day of his birthday Chad is drunk and despondent, intoxicated by both alcohol and the machine's corrupting influence. By now, Daisy has manipulated his affections to the point where he believes he no longer needs physical human contact at all. Her gift to him has been the formula and guidance to build her special creation. She promises it to be his ultimate birthday present. Once she has gotten him hard with dirty talk, she tells him to go retrieve it from the other room. Chad leaves for a moment, returning seconds later with a bleary grin smudging his face. He holds the gift out before him — a 3D-printed vagina.

The long silicone pussy has a circuit box with wires attached to the end of it. Giddy from the booze, Chad proceeds to connect it up to the ports in Daisy's front panel. When the device is correctly attached he switches it on, watching the translucent lips undulate with a low rhythmic hum. He is reminded by her to insert his neural-bud so

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that she can share in his ecstasy. The machine beckons him closer, its blank screen appearing to crackle with static charge. She urges him to pump his cock and maintain his erection for her. With his other hand, he smears lube over and between the gyrating lips, steadying them before him.

When he enters her he swears that her slender mass gives a shudder. She moans softly, the breathy vibration of her emanating through the surround sound speakers. He thrusts deep, gripping her plastic frame, unable to believe how good it feels to fuck his television. He wants to last but knows that he cannot, the slippery tunnel consuming every inch of him. Daisy throbs inside his head, pulsing at his loins. Squeezing and devouring him, sucking him into her. As he is about to come he throws his head back, knuckles bone white. The television suddenly flickers to life. In his climactic throes of passion, Chad fails to see the striking image of his friends and family populate the screen.

“SURRRRRRRPRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIII—”

The biggest, wettest orgasm of his life is accompanied by the most horrifying sense of panic he's ever experienced. Everybody on the screen: siblings, university friends, grandparents, mother, father and Zoe, are all huddled in a portrait of rigid jubilation. Unblinking eyes unnaturally wide, their smiles a shared rictus of frozen cheer. In each of their ears a neural-bud is lodged, all connected digitally to one another, to their television, and to Chad. These party-buds, the gimmicky new tech

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that Zoe had been querying with the television, are specifically designed for surprise celebrations so that revelers can personally feel the shock and joy of their intended mark. The partygoers on this occasion feel a lot more than that.

While the scene of their brother, friend, grandson, first born and soulmate, naked and ejaculating into a hand-held rubber cunt, burns itself forever into their brains, the party-buds make each of them feel as though they are the sole carnal recipient. Not only does Chad deflower his salacious television, but every single member of his birthday party as well. The stunned assembly gawps back at him as he clutches his soggy, dwindling dick. Everybody's arms are stuck in the air, expressions irrevocably locked. Zoe is white as a sheet, her face a mask of revulsion. His old friends are a cluster of gaping mouths. Dad's eyeballs have rolled back into his head, a strange smirk warping his lips. And Grandma, Chad sees, with a strand of drool hanging from her chin, is rocking gently on her heels, as dead as dead can be.

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Some Bright Morning

James Babbs

The gun feels warm. I keep pulling it from the bottom drawer of the desk and holding it in my hand. Wrapped inside a plastic bag. I wrapped the gun in the bag because I didn't want to see it just lying there exposed. I didn't want it looking like a dead body every time I opened the drawer. The gun belonged to my father. He was a policeman before I was born. Somewhere I have a photograph of him standing out in the front yard wearing his uniform. I keep looking out the window. The sun's brightly shining and there are countless birds scattered all over the lawn.

Last night I was at the Grand Palace eating egg rolls. I mixed sweet and sour sauce and hot mustard together. I didn't go into the restaurant but just sat in the bar eating my egg rolls and drinking some beers. I kept watching this dark-haired waitress and I wanted to get her number. She seemed to smile at me whenever I looked at her. I asked the bartender what he knew about her and he kind of chuckled. He told me I should forget about her. When I asked him why he told me because she had a boyfriend and he was a very large man. I thanked the bartender for the heads-up and ordered another beer.

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When I was ready to leave the dark-haired waitress came over to me and slipped me a piece of paper. I opened my hand and looked at the paper. It had a phone number written on it along with the name Iris. I glanced at the bartender but his back was turned and he was mixing someone a drink. I caught up to the waitress and waved the paper at her. I said, hey, I don't think I want this. I saw the look on her face. I said, I heard you had a boyfriend. Who told you that, she asked me. I told her what the bartender had said. Oh god, she said, he thinks I'm going to go out with him. He keeps asking me but I keep turning him down. I see, I said, then I followed it up with an, okay. I told her thanks and she gave me another smile. This one I quickly snatched away from her and put into my pocket. I wanted to keep it there until I got home. Then, when everything was quiet, I'd pull it out and hold it in my hand and look at it, over and over, again.

The gun feels heavy. The light falling through the window hurting my eyes because I had too much to drink last night. The birds screaming in my ears. Last night I called Iris and she told me she had to work but, if I wanted to, I could meet her at the restaurant around eight. When I got there I took a seat at the bar. It was the same bartender and he smiled at me and asked me if I was here for more egg rolls. I told him I was meeting someone and I saw the look in his eyes.

I heard Iris behind me and when I turned to face

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her she made a point of giving me a big hug and laughing loud enough so that everybody could hear her. She turned to the bartender and gave him a smile. Mike, can I get a margarita, she said. The bartender looked at me. I couldn't read his face completely but he didn't seem happy. What about you, he said. I told him, a beer, I guess.

We moved over to one of the tables and Mike, the bartender, brought us our drinks. I said, so where do you want to go. Iris sipped her margarita and looked at me over the rim of her glass. She said, I thought we could just stay here, if that's alright. I took a drink of my beer. What about Mike, I said. Iris put her hand on my arm and laughed. I glanced over at the bartender. He was behind the bar watching us but trying not to make it look so obvious. When Iris waved him over to order another drink she leaned closer to me and smiled. I didn't like where this was going so I just decided I was going to get drunk. I ordered two shots and another beer and I told Mike to keep them coming.

Later on I grabbed Iris and pulled her to me, giving her a rough kiss. Hey, she said, easy. When Mike brought us more drinks he slammed them down on the table. I threw back the shot and chased it with some beer. Then I jumped up and jerked Iris by the arm trying to make her stand but she broke loose with a pained squeal and slumped back in her chair. I said, Mike, and he turned around. I gave him a big grin. I said, hey, buddy, she's all yours, and I turned without looking back at them and walked out the door.

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I drove around for awhile trying to find something good on the radio. It was a clear night and the air was cool and inviting, especially, if you had some place to go. But if you were alone it was just like all those other nights, struggling against some inner restlessness you could never quite define until your mind and your body, finally, surrendered themselves to sleep. When I pulled into my driveway I turned off the car and just sat there in the darkness and the silence. Felt the waves of warmth rolling through my head and I began to laugh. I laughed as I got out of the car and I kept on laughing as I stumbled my way into the house.

The gun feels like a bird fluttering in my hand. Sometimes, when I'm away from home, I think about the gun. I imagine it sleeping in the darkness all alone. The bottom drawer of the desk silent as a tomb. I had cap guns when I was young and I remember the smell of the smoke. The taste of it in my mouth when I absently sucked on the end of the barrel. I remember when my friends and I played with guns. How we made up this rule you had to count to ten whenever you got shot before you could get back up again. It was funny how all day long we kept dying and returning from the dead, over and over, again.

I remember buying rolls of caps. I think there were five rolls to a box and you could get five boxes in one package. Sometimes, instead of loading them in my guns I just rolled the caps out on the sidewalk and used a hammer to hit them.

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Sometimes, I'd take a whole roll of caps and hit them with the hammer. It made a loud blast that left a ringing in my ears. I remember taking ants crawling past me on the walk and putting them under the caps and blowing their tiny bodies apart. One time I caught this big black ant as it was trying to climb up my arm and when I put it under the caps the explosion blew off its head.

I never felt like I was a terrible person for doing this. I never thought I was doing anything wrong. I remember all the summer evenings, when it would start to get dark, and we would run around catching lightning bugs. I don't know what we wanted them for. I guess we thought there was something magical about their blinking lights. Maybe we longed for something bright like that shining from inside our own bodies. I don't know. Some people liked to kill them and smear the light across your arm. The pieces of light sticking to you, glowing on your skin, but only for a moment. Sometimes, we caught the lightning bugs and put them in glass jars. We always made sure we poked holes in the lids. We stuck pieces of grass in there and, sometimes, leaves, thinking that's what they wanted. But the next morning we always found them dead, lying in the bottom of the jar, their lights no longer shining.

The gun feels sticky against my skin. I can sense the gun's desperation and that's why it keeps trying to cling to me. I keep moving it back and forth from one hand to the other but it doesn't

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seem to help. Sometimes, the gun spends endless days inside the drawer waiting for me to return. The gun waiting for me to bring it out into the light, again. Sometimes, the gun catches the light just right and the metal of the gun seems to shine. I often wonder how the gun feels having to wait for so long. Does the gun ever get afraid and think I'm not coming back at all? I don't know. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it doesn't mean anything at all. I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for something good to happen.

Sometimes, I like to pretend I'm a lone gunman taking a group of people hostage. I find myself in the middle of some big city, suddenly, robbing a bank. I'm waving the gun in the air and telling everyone to get down on the floor. I keep screaming at them and telling them to move faster. It's like something from out of a movie and when one guy tries to move I hit him in the face with the gun. The blood runs out of his nose and covers the floor. I can hear some of the women crying. I tell them, it's going to be alright, as long as they do what I say, no one will get hurt. I listen to the sounds of their breathing and I know they're afraid.

When you hold a gun in your hand you can make people do things they wouldn't normally do. And I wonder how it feels having someone stick a gun in your face and not knowing whether you're going to live or die. Sometimes, fear can make you collapse or it can spur you on to do something great. I'm trying to recall some moment in my life when I felt

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the most afraid but nothing comes to mind. Then, the birds start chirping, louder and louder, right outside my window. And I wonder if there's any way for me to tell from the sounds they're making whether or not they're happy or sad.

Sometimes, when I go to bed at night I hold a pillow close to me like I'm holding the body of my lover. And I float there in the darkness thinking about other places and times. But when I move, again, my lover disappears and it's only a pillow I'm holding. And I toss the pillow away and rollover, turning, my back on it, before trying to fall into sleep. And I hear the radio playing jazz, softly, in the dark, above my head.

There have often been times when I was convinced there must be something wrong with me because I had no other explanation for the way my life was going. Now, it doesn't seem to matter so much anymore. I guess you just get older and things no longer seem as important as they once were. Or, maybe, something inside you, finally, decides to quit struggling after so many years of futility and it crawls softly in to some dark corner where it can curl up and die.

The gun feels nothing. I know it doesn't care whether I live or I die. I lift up the gun and hold it loosely in my hand. I shiver and the sun comes through the window trying to make me warm. I see the bullets in the bottom of the drawer. I don't remember when I put them there but, now, when I pull the drawer open they roll around bouncing

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against one another. Sometimes, I see colors and I don't know whether they're inside my head or just floating in the air in front of my eyes. Pieces of red and blue and, sometimes, yellow and green. I have no idea what any of them mean. Maybe they were some kind of warning arriving much too late.

Sometimes, I think about what would've happened if I had gotten everything I wanted. Would that have really been such a good thing? And I wonder, sometimes, how long it takes before something starts to make sense. Maybe for some people it never does. And I think about my father working hard his entire life and, in the end, what did he have to show for it? His heart wearing out and, finally, giving up. He died, one morning, in his sleep.

I gaze out the window on a Sunday morning and witness two blackbirds fighting. I watch them as they tumble through the air all tangled together before hitting the ground and separating. They rush toward each other then a noise frightens them and they disappear into the sky. I open the chamber of the gun and touch it with my fingers. I spin it around, slowly, a couple of times before picking the bullets up, one by one, and slipping them, silently, inside.

The phone starts ringing. The phone's in the bedroom so I can't look at the caller ID and see who's calling me. But I don't feel like talking to anyone, anyway. After the fourth ring it stops and, I know, the answering machine's picking it up. The answering machine's down in the basement too far

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away for me to hear whether or not the person calling leaves me a message. I look out the window again and, this time, I see a robin standing in the grass close to the house. There's a worm hanging from its beak struggling to get free but it's too late. As I watch the robin cocks its head as if it's listening to something. It waits there for just a moment and I wonder what it is the robin, finally, hears before deciding to fly away.

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Hell Is Writing **John Patrick Robbins**

I sat there bored and hung-over.

I sat there and I had no fucking clue why.

The little coffee shop was filled with other poets, or, in all truth, yuppies that called themselves writers.

Social assholes who thought reading their work aloud made it good.

It was terrible enough sober, but add a gut ravaged by a night of heavy drinking, and it was damn-near torture.

I was there due to a friend's request.

I seldom read for people.

My work was either love or hate with the reader, but usually I didn't have to experience this first hand.

I heard some people whispering behind me.

"Hey, who's that guy?"

"He new or something?"

"That's the guy I told you about, he never comes to these things."

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“Got a few things published here and there, total asshole from what I’ve herd.”

“How’s his writing?”

“Oh, I never read him, he’s too much into drinking and antics. Like I said, he’s a real asshole.”

I heard the woman repeat this to the guy beside her. It was funny how my reputation as a prick seemed to follow me everywhere.

Some woman with a nose ring and flat ass took the stage, if you could even call it that.

“I’m going to read you a haiku.”

I threw up in my mouth but held it in.

My stomach was really kicking my ass today.

I got up walked outside. I never wasted my time with crap.

I wasn’t saying the woman was a bad writer. I just hated nice, neat shit was all. I loved the flawed things in life.

I sat on a bench, lit a cigarette, and watched the cars pass by.

It was far more original than the stuffy room filled with judgmental moody bastards all needing their egos stroked.

“Jack, is everything okay?”

Sheryl was looking down at me. Her face showed concern. She knew I was about two steps from the nearest bar, and already over the whole coffee shop shark tank.

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"Yeah, just feeling like shit is all. Had to get some air, sweetheart."

"I was scared you were going to leave before you read for us. I know how uncomfortable it is for you at these things."

"Yeah, not my scene."

"So why did you come to begin with?"

"You asked me to."

"Yes, but you really don't seem very interested in the other poets."

"Cause I'm not."

"Why? Some are very promising."

"They're shit and their work has no life. It's just the same boring fucking thing over and over."

"And what makes you so much better?"

"Cause I don't care what they think, and my work is many things, but it's but never boring. Even when it's shit, at least it can only be mine."

Cheryl laughed.

"You're such a prick! I think that's what draws me to you."

"Yeah, I can be a charming bastard on occasion. Wanna ditch this party, go have some drinks?"

"I can't, I'm hosting, and you still haven't read yet."

"Yeah, I don't think they will mind."

"Come on and cut the crap, Jack. Just go in there and be you, relax. Besides, we can go have a drink

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after.”

Against my better judgment, I went back in.
It was time to face the hangman, so to speak.

They called my name, and suddenly I was facing
the crowd.

“Look, before I start, I just want to say hello to a
certain someone in the back. I’ve heard I’m a real
asshole, thank you for such kind words.”

I read my poems and some were pretty damn good,
but I never let them see me.

The page does my speaking for me.

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Lizzie Cleary Had A Bad Day

Christy Aldridge

Elizabeth Cleary woke up in a bad mood. Her husband would have attributed it to PMS, as men so often blamed every foul thing on, but it wasn't the reason. If anything, he was more responsible for her bad mood than her hormones.

"Do you need to take a shower first?" she asked him. He stared at the ceiling, not speaking to her. Elizabeth looked at him a while longer, waiting for him to answer, but he was clearly still mad at whatever her husband was always mad about, suffering from PMS more than she ever was.

When he still didn't answer, she got up from the bed, closing her book and lying it on the nightstand. "You know, just because you're mad doesn't mean you can't answer a simple question," she told him.

He continued staring at the ceiling, refusing to answer her or even look in her direction.

Being a royal prick, as usual.

Elizabeth growled under her breath and left the room. She started to head downstairs when she passed the twin's room. She noticed the light beneath the door first. Rolling her eyes, she turned the knob. "You both know it's way past your

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bedtime!” she yelled.

Sammy was laying on the floor with a toy car in his hand. Elizabeth found herself smiling at her sleeping child. Fallen asleep while playing, it seemed.

“Played yourself out, huh, little man,” she whispered, lifting him up carefully and tucking him into bed. She looked under the blankets of Jack’s bed, but he wasn’t there.

“Jack?” she called, but in a soft voice. “Where are you?”

She looked under his bed, but Jack wasn’t there. Down on her knees, she sighed. Hiding in his closet again, she figured, getting up and heading to the door.

There was a hole that went straight through to the other side of his closet door. She held her temples for a moment, to keep from scolding her children. Once again, they had been poking holes into things they shouldn’t be.

I’ll see if the royal prick will talk to me long enough to get onto the boys tomorrow morning.

She opened the door and her anger melted at the sight of his sleeping form. Slumped against a basket of toys, clutching his blanket, Jack had fallen asleep while hiding. She lifted him as well, carrying him carefully to the bed and tucking him in.

She looked at both of her children. They looked so sweet and innocent now. In the morning, she knew she would wake up and they would be terrors

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again, but for now, they looked like sleeping angels. It was moments like that that reminded Elizabeth of why she loved her children.

She crept out of the room as quietly as possible, not closing the door all the way in case the boys woke up in the middle of the night. They would be scared of being locked in a dark room, wake up screaming, and she knew her husband wouldn't get up to calm them down.

Elizabeth walked downstairs to get her clothes from the laundry. Tomorrow she would put them up, along with a load of towels she had in the dryer. Today had been a bad day and folding and hanging clothes had been the last thing on her mind.

All she wanted to do was take a shower. She climbed the stairs again, quiet as possible so she wouldn't wake the boys, and back into the room. She didn't look at her husband as she passed by. She ignored him completely.

He was cheating on her. She knew he was. Because she had married a bad guy, because he told her he had cheated on her, because he was still here, despite having told her so.

Maybe I should get a divorce.

Elizabeth stopped in front of the mirror and stared at her face. She once was so beautiful. Men had begged her for her number, and she had decided to marry the first jerk that knocked her up. She had given up all of her dreams to love a man who would cheat on her.

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She stepped into the shower and began cleaning herself. She was surprised when she stared at the drain and saw blood mixed in her water. She even laughed a little.

Maybe that idiot was right. I started my period a week early.

She laughed as she finished taking a shower. She was even smiling a bit when she came back into the room and got into bed beside her husband. She looked at him, stared at him for a long time.

Something was missing, an image she knew she needed to see, but couldn't. She just smiled it away, leaning over and kissing his cheek. "I still love you," she told him. When he didn't answer, she turned to her nightstand. "We'll talk in the morning."

She looked at the gun on the nightstand, a moment of recognition coming over her. Three bangs, one after another in her mind. She looked at her husband again, felt the truth creeping up her spine, and then shook her head, placing the gun back in the drawer.

"We'll talk tomorrow," she told him, turning off the lamp and slipping beneath the blankets.

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No Trump, No KKK, No Fascist USA!

Michael Marrotti

They sauntered into Marrotti's Coffee Shop like they were going to protest a free speech rally. Each one dressed in black from head to toe. They both had identical pink triangle tattoos on their left hands to prove a point:

Individuality Is Dead.

Martha was taken aback by the all black staff.

"This is like, so racist! How dare they only hire black people? They aren't their fucking slaves. I like, seriously despise this country!"

"Yeah, this is bullshit!" replied Oswald. "I'm feeling really triggered right now! I may have to go burn an American flag!"

"Calm down," replied Martha. "I'll fix this. It's our rights as repressed citizens!"

Martha pushed an elderly, white woman out her way, stormed up to the front of the line and said, "Excuse me, my fellow indentured servant. Do you have a "Safe Space" for my friend? America is getting the best of him again. He needs assistance!"

The black barista gave her a solemn gaze for three seconds, until his iPhone went off. After, he reached into his pocket, to check his Twitter

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notifications.

“Like, what the fuck?” said Martha. Can’t you see my friend is dying over here?”

Oswald was shaking like an innocent member of Antifa, who was tasered by a cop over all the left reasons. You could hear the sound of his teeth chattering.

An Asian couple slowly rose from their seats to exit the establishment, leaving a half empty pot of tea behind.

They’ve seen enough already to last a lifetime.

Martha vehemently clapped her hands three times to get the baristas attention, as she said,

“I’m a paying customer with my dad’s credit card! Like, I hope you’re not expecting a tip after this!”

The barista laughed out loud as he put away his iPhone. “Welcome to Marrotti’s Coffee Shop,” he said. “Can I take your order?”

“Yes,” replied Martha. “I’ll take two skim milk lattes and a goddamn safe space for my friend!”

At this point, Oswald was foaming at the mouth.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but I don’t know what a safe space is.” He typed away on the cash register. “Your total is \$4.20.”

Martha, in a fit of rage, screamed at the barista, “I’m not a ma’am, I’m a fucking pronoun! Like, are you really serious? And you gave me an anti-Semitic total on top of it! You people make me sick!”

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The black barista's demeanor changed instantaneously after the 'you people' remark.

"Yo, what the fuck you mean, 'you people'? Bitch, are you challenging my black privilege? I will go all Black Lives Matters on yo white ass right now, 'aight!"

Martha, accustomed to male brutality from all the public protests she attends, stood her ground by saying, "I'm a fucking pronoun, you indentured servant! And this is fucking fascist! Don't you dare think for a minute that my dumpster-diving friends and I won't storm this racist establishment! The right to protest is ours only!"

"Fuck you and your daddy's credit card!" The barista pointed to the door, saying, "Get the fuck out, whitey!"

A loud thump distracted them from quarreling like two morons strung out on fluoridated water. Martha turned around to see Oswald lying on the floor in the fetal position.

"You did this!" screamed Martha. "You and your fascist ways did this! That's it! You've forced my index finger! I'm calling George Soros!"

The barista, along with his two other black coworkers, jumped over the counter in an attempt to physically remove Martha from the premises. She was throwing around punches like a man with a thick dick.

The baristas cautiously surrounded her until the time was precise and BAM! A flurry of punches

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came her way, knocking her off her feet. They grabbed her and Oswald by the legs, dragging them outside to the street.

In and out of consciousness, Martha was murmuring, “No Trump, no KKK, no fascist USA!”

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The Pig Man, Sleeps

Gary D. Morton

Everyone called him The Pig Man, but no one really knew the truth. His misshapen face, distorted by hate with that unsettling smile curling downwards, disturbed even the jaded, embattled warhorses. His scarred skull, shaven and pock-marked by blurred memories of bar fights and all those shattered, drunken knuckles.

On D Block, we all assumed it was because he was missing some of the fingers on his right hand and it looked like a pig trotter, but I suppose it could be anything. In here, there are no definitive answers, just rumours, and half-truths: like the time they found his ex-wife ritualistically executed in the bathroom, wrapped in lace and fairy lights, crucified, with her cunt pulled inside out. No one knew how he lost his fingers, but most of us were convinced that the truth was far more devastating than anything we could fabricate or conjecture during scraping hours, encased in concrete.

Once, while protectively hunched over his lunch tray, cradling it like it was a newborn, a guy in B Block told me it was because of his depraved sexual obsessions, deriving sordid gratification from exploiting and coercing underage girls to perform lewd and libidinous acts on each other with domestic kitchenware.

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He would wrap them round and round in black electrical tape, recording their screams and playing them endlessly to the little pink ones waiting in the room next door, with the sparkly white walls, faces all painted, nervously twisting at the ends of their hair, twiddling their little toes in the luxurious, red carpets.

There are so many whispered myths circulating the halls of this place, involving his increasingly graphic and pornographic acts involving screwdrivers and sensitive, fleshy orifices. There were those whispers that he abducted a teenager who cut him up at the lights. Rumour has it, he cut off his eyelids and tied him to a chair for eight straight nights, with a halogen bulb burning each eyeball. We can only speculate about what other seditious horrors the poor kid was subjected to, but we are told it involved battery acid and perpetual hours of sharpened objects.

Even the screws stay out of his way. It is now a matter of Rec yard folklore, when one misguided, shiny-shoed prison guard made the grave mistake of disrespecting him in the mess hall. He was found the next morning, mysteriously impaled with a piece of sharpened wood ripped from the floor, dangling from the ceiling, with his intestines torn out and wrapped around his neck like a grotesque talismanic necklace. No one will maintain eye contact with him for any longer than is necessary, even the seasoned ones, who have to similarly maintain their fearful reputation within these walls.

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You would smell him before you saw him, the curiously enchanting scent of ingrained sweat and cherry licorice. He smelled intoxicating, lethal. Always chewing on the end of an elaborately inscribed fountain pen that he insisted on carrying around with him, some suspected to make him look intellectual, but the truth was that it constituted a proficient piece of weaponry for puncturing jugulars. Instead of exercising in the yard, he would sit and read tattered books of poetry, smuggled from the paltry stocks of the prison library. He would quote from them regularly and that was when you knew that someone was going to get cut. Recitation always preceded violence.

One morning, with the sun casting an incandescent halo around his radiating cranium, he cast a shadow across the book that I had clutched in my desperate fist and he softly whispered "There is no greater sorrow than to recall our times of joy in wretchedness."

His voice was deceptively high-pitched, an almost breathy lisp; with no intonation or timbre. Cold, and unforgiving; sharpness personified. That was the day before he was found in his cell at headcount with the remains of one of his sycophantic disciples, who had been repeatedly raped and disemboweled with the plastic edge of a strip light.

Recently, he has taken to walking around with both of his thumbs tucked under his chin, ostensibly to avoid the inevitable onslaught of makeshift blades from reaching the pungent, moist folds of his neck.

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Everyone became a target when their lib date was coming up, but for him, there was always a frantic successor lurking with intent and ambition, waiting for the emperor to fall. He was never getting out of here, there was no chance he would ever leave this place, these walls would eventually be his coffin.

Frequently, he would be found, perambulating around the halls of his hallowed temple, in the dark hours, standing in doorways, watching the other inmates sleep, with his weapons concealed, gently caressing his pulsating, weeping erection. Silently, he hates their chests rising and falling, counting the breaths entering and leaving their lungs, quietly resenting the inconceivable audacity to continue their wretched existence, counting the breaths until their eventual liberation.

Then there was that night, years from the twisting agony of those monotonous walls, after one too many filthy, finger-marked glasses of venomous bourbon in a piss-soaked bar, and one too many squalid bathroom finger fucks, he catches a glimpse, of that self same poisonous smile, in the reflection on the surface of a fractured mirror.

The girl was so hopelessly inebriated, that she didn't even know she was dying, even as she stumbled on precarious high heels, blood seeping from under her sluttish cerise vest. This sniveling creature didn't realise that her throat was sliced, and as the cum runs down her legs, the icy, metallic dread begins to slip into her stomach.

And he smiles.

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They call him The Pig Man, but no one really knows why. But he lives inside the mirror, staring back at you, with his fatal, infinite eyes, pleading with you to release him, to just let him out. He is a prisoner on the other side of your face, on the inside: and he is watching everything you do, and the protective meat mask that you have built, cannot last forever.

He is called The Pig Man, and he likes the way that you kill and kill and kill.

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Owning Emily

Peter Caffrey

I arrived at around 3am. I wanted to be first in the queue but had been beaten to it. Occupying the prime position was a tatty old sleeping bag, topped with a woolen bobble hat bearing multiple primary-coloured stripes. Somewhere inside was a man; a man with foresight, as he was slumped in a fold-up picnic chair. A chair; I hadn't thought about bringing one with me. That meant I would be standing for six hours, if not more.

I said hello to Man Number 1 as I took my place behind him, but he didn't reply. I wasn't sure if he nodded an acknowledgement or twitched due to the shock of being addressed. Either way, it was clear he wouldn't be good company for the long wait that lay ahead.

As the sun sneaked above the rooftops, more people arrived: all men and all alone. The shipment would be limited to 25 models, according to the rumours, but there were already over a hundred people in the queue. The numbers swelled as the store's opening time approached. Maybe they were just hoping to get lucky.

Activity inside the shop caused Man Number 1 to

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shed his hat, climb from the sleeping bag and fold his chair. It would soon be the start of the business day.

‘Which model are you after?’ I asked Man Number 1. He didn’t reply, turning away as if I had somehow broken a code of silence. I didn’t know about the etiquette of such transactions; it was my first time.

‘Which model are you after?’ I asked Man Number 3. ‘Any take your fancy?’

‘I don’t want one for myself,’ he replied, almost too eager to disassociate himself from the impending transaction. ‘Hell; I don’t need a sex robot. Why would I? I’m a real man, I’m all man and the women love me for it. I’m only buying one to sell it on. I hear the ethnic models attract high prices in the Middle East, so that’s where I’ll be flogging it.’

Man Number 3 said nothing else. He wasn’t interested in which model I was after. Had he asked, my answer would have been an anti-climax. I didn’t care which model I ended up with; any of them would do. I wasn’t looking to fulfill a specific fantasy.

The staff brought us into the shop ten at a time. As we entered they gave us a number. We sat on a collection of unmatched chairs, filling in the various questionnaires that the programmers would need to ensure compatibility.

They called Man Number 1 in. My consultation wouldn’t start until he had selected his sex robot, and Man Number 3 would wait until I had made my

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choice. All the robots were unique; well, that's what the adverts claimed at least.

The consultations could be quite a lengthy process. After assessing the purchaser's personality, the next step was to filter the choices of sex robot by looks. They considered weight, height, ethnicity, age, hair colour, eye colour and a host of other physical attributes. Then there were optional extras: piercings, tattoos, scars, birthmarks and the like. With only 25 models in stock, not every taste could be catered for. It explained why some of the late-comers still queued. The last few purchasers would have little choice and might pass up the opportunity to wait for the next delivery.

Once the purchaser assessment was completed, the next stage was to define the robot's personality. This part of the consultation considered culture, beliefs, hobbies and a wide range of socio-political data. The manufacturer insisted that every purchaser went through the process. Following widespread criticism in the media, they were trying hard to reduce the sleaze-factor of what was — in truth — a machine men could have sex with.

Once the consultation was complete, the purchaser went into another waiting room. The engineers added any optional extras to the robot and used the information from the consultation to create a personality profile. All the robots had artificial intelligence and deep learning was implemented, so they adapted to the owners' routines, their likes and dislikes, and any special needs they might have.

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After an hour, the representative called me in to the consultation room. On the table was a multi-page questionnaire. Its cover proclaimed it to be the Owner Requirements and Expectations Survey. I told him we wouldn't need it.

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'I don't think it's possible for anyone to know which model they want, not without going through the consultation process. Then there's her personality; we need to get that right for your relationship to be realistic.' He made his comment sound like a warning against my haste. Representatives were paid commission on upgrades, so it was in their interests to push the customisation options.

I decided to seize the initiative and keep the transaction as straightforward as possible.

'I've done some research and as I understand it the robots, when new, all fit into general classes regarding looks and personality, and within those classes there is a degree of individuality which can be adapted.'

'Yes, you're right; that's stated in the brochure.' He seemed put out I wasn't letting him do the hard-sell on me.

'Do you know which the most popular classes are — in terms of sales — for looks and personality?'

'Of course I do,' he replied, not liking my approach.

'Okay; do you have a model in stock with looks and personality that fall within the most popular classes?'

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He checked the stock sheet and nodded. 'We have three. If we complete a few sections of the survey I can determine which is best suited to your needs.'

'Don't worry about that,' I said, adding a smile to appear friendly. 'Just get whichever of the three is nearest the door in the warehouse.'

The representative wasn't happy that I hadn't let him indulge in his sales patter. He stressed the need for compatibility, for optimal adjustments to the programming, for tweaks to physical traits to suit my every need. By 'my every need', he meant tweaks that would make my sexual experience with the robot dirtier. I let him finish his argument and then repeated he should just get the one closest to the door.

The sex robot I purchased was called Emily. She came in six parts: two legs, two arms, one head and one torso. The package included the tools required to build her. At first, I put her head on backwards for fun, but she wouldn't power up until I put it back the right way. They were happy for you to screw the robots, but not to screw with them.

She had three operational modes: Girlfriend, Mistress and Filthy. I selected Filthy and dressed her in a leather basque and thigh-length latex boots.

Emily asked if I wanted to fuck her. I said I might, in a while, but before we did the dirty deed would she mind sweeping the leaves off the driveway? She took the broom with a smile and went outside. After some time, I went out and watched her

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working. In fairness, she made sweeping the driveway look sexy. She spotted me watching, and as she swept she told me how much she wanted to feel my cock inside her. After an hour of sweeping and a long verbal description of what she wanted me to do to her, the driveway looked great.

She asked again if I wanted to fuck. I told her to wait and suggested she pass the time cutting the grass. I watched as she mowed accurate lines into the lawn. Each time she reached the end of a line, close to where I was sitting, she'd say how much she wanted me to ejaculate on her breasts. She said it in coarser language; I had set her to Filthy mode after all.

That night I was in bed, reading, when Emily appeared at the window. The rain bounced off her face, her hair wet, bedraggled and plastered to her head. She balanced on the ladder, her skimpy negligee flapping in the wind. As she cleaned the glass with a squeegee, her lips mouthed a message. The only words I could make out were 'finger' and 'anus'.

After a few days the deep learning had built a database of the clothes I dressed her in and the tasks I asked her to complete. She dressed herself, learned where I kept the tools and understood the jobs that needed doing. She also propositioned me for sex and described her fantasies in the filthiest of terms while she was doing her chores.

In the following days she built me a shed, cut the hedges, painted the living room and even carried out an oil change on my car. Despite her usefulness,

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Emily was beginning to bore me. A sex robot carrying out everyday tasks in a slutty way had seemed amusing and, to be fair, the first few days were fun. However, her sunshine attitude and legs-akimbo spirit started to grind me down.

One night, after a few drinks, I contemplated having sex with her. Despite her attractiveness, that was something I had no intention of doing. With the amusement factor on the wane, Emily represented a pointless investment.

Man Number 3's plan of selling on his sex robot came back to me. Emily was, to all intents and purposes, a virgin. She had also amassed several housekeeping and maintenance skills, and while it might take time for her to unlearn those, she had kept her filthy attitude. Emily would be a catch for anyone seeking a nearly new sex robot. In fact, I was proud of her and all her achievements.

Searching the internet revealed a rich vein of potential sex robot purchasers. The unique personalities and low supply volumes of the automatons had kept resale values high. Demand changed according to locations. In the Middle East there was little call for anything but ethnic models, and North American purchasers seemed to prefer sex robots of greater heights. Emily was short, slim and blonde. The demand for such characteristics came from Japan.

Finding a buyer was easy, but as we discussed the transaction via a series of emails, he asked questions that made me feel uneasy. How tight was she? I said I didn't know; I hadn't had sex with her.

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He then asked me to gauge her tightness with my fingers. How big would a penis need to be, in terms of girth, to enjoy a tight fuck? He wanted information about her vagina and anus.

I was appalled. This was Emily. She had her own ways: fixing things and cleaning up and doing so with a slutty indifference that made her charming. The thought of a stranger using her as a sperm receptacle was unacceptable. The transaction was akin to handing over a loved one to sex traffickers. I couldn't sell her.

I bought Emily a dog costume. It was hairy with floppy ears and a long tail. I taught her to chase cats, fetch sticks, bury bones in the garden and sleep in a basket in the kitchen. I took her out for walks, let her curl up in front of the fire when I was watching TV, and trained her to heel and stay.

She still asks me to fuck her every day, but I guess some characteristics are buried too deep.

Self-Study in Pornography

Stephanie M. Wytovich

I've been doing a self-study in porn to try and learn about sex. I've acted, I've directed, I've sat in a corner and watched, and it's funny to me how people who don't even know each other find ways to connect, when the people I've loved for years can't fuck me because they find it painful. My vagina is tired from the excuses, my clit, sandpaper from an absent touch, and I can't get off anymore: no matter what I watch, no matter who is inside me, no matter what I fantasize about. The end result is always the same. I'm

Dry

Dry

Dry

So I tried masturbating on the side of the road on my way home from work. I tried locking myself in the bathroom and pretending I still live at my parent's. At night, I'd sit outside on the porch, one hand down my pants, the other holding my cigarette, and I'd smoke and cry while my boyfriend talked on the phone to the woman he was cheating on me with. It used to bother me that

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I couldn't orgasm, that my sex turned me into this,
but I can't feel like I used to anymore. Not with my
body. Not with my heart. Inside I'm

Dead

Dead

Dead

And as I lay sprawled out on this stranger's bed, his
camera clicking away while he rubs between his
legs, while his spits onto my slit, I wonder if my
lovers—the one's I actually loved—ever think about
the contagions they planted in my head each time
they told me I wasn't good enough, that they
couldn't look at me, that touching me made them
sick, because I think of what it's like to fuck me
now, how I get frustrated, how I bleed. I can't love
without love, but my heart no longer pumps, and
the more I sleep around, the worse the nightmares
get. I'm drowning in black and white Polaroids, I'm
immortalized in 30 second video clips, and each
time I make eye contact with the camera, I think of
you, and I think of me, and I

Cry

Cry

Cry

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**That Scene in Jaws Where They're in the Water
with the Fake Shark but a Real Shark Shows Up
and Eats Richard Dreyfus and What About Bob
Winds up Starring John Lithgow Instead**

Arthur Graham

With the exception of the fact that John Lithgow was now playing the role that would've been played by Richard Dreyfus – had he not been devoured on the set of *Jaws* – the plot of *What About Bob* still follows the same basic story arc all the way up to that scene where the titular Bob Wiley (still played by Bill Murray) shows up looking for his psychiatrist, Dr. Leo Marvin (now played by John Lithgow), in the rural resort town where he and his family happen to be vacationing.

“DOCTOOOR!!! LEOOO!!! MARVIIN!!!

“DOCTOOOR!!! LEOOO!!! MARVIIN!!!

Only, instead of being helped by the locals, Bob eventually grows tired of randomly shouting up and down the street, and so he wanders off into the forest instead.

He doesn't make it very far in before encountering Harry, from Harry and the Hendersons, taking a shit behind a tree.

Though a gentle beast by nature, Harry is startled by Bob, and if there's one thing you do NOT want to

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do to a shitting sasquatch, that's startle it.

After brutally killing Bob in a fit of panicked rage, tearing him limb from limb and leaving his remains strewn around his favorite shitting tree, Harry returns to John Lithgow as Dr. Leo Marvin's vacation home, where he's been staying with their family for the weekend.

At first, Leo Lithgow as Dr. John Marvin was a little apprehensive about having a sasquatch in his home, but his wife Fay Marvin (still played by Julie Hagerty in this version) convinced him to let Harry stay.

However, her intentions were far from pure, and come to find out, neither were her husband's.

"Reach back and spread your ass," Dr. Leo John as Dr. Lithgow Marvin instructed his whimpering wife, running the camera while Harry drilled his Bigfoot bone into her very core.

The porno film they eventually released in real life was titled *Snatch-quatch Sighting*, starring Joe Pesci in the role of Mrs. Fay Marvin, after Julie Hagerty died on the set of *What About Bob* from severe internal hemorrhaging.

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GoD Moves In Delirious Ways

Tom Over

The ghost of the driver squinted through the partially obscured windshield despite being able to see perfectly well. It was more a habit carried over from once owning a body than anything else. Not having eyes spared him from any stresses that might arise from poor driving visibility. GoD, to his friends, was mostly omnipotent within a 20-foot radius, meaning he could see outside of the car just as well as he could inside it. This factor gave him an inadvertent edge over the other drivers in the race, not that they were particularly aware of being up against a non-physical, ectoplasmic entity.

This spectral advantage was just as well because with each passing hour the view of the road shrank a little more. The windshield, now a squirming morass of vegetation, glowed with networks of throbbing lights. The interlocking roots of some unknown organism pulsed and flexed against the glass like the blood vessels of a shifting psychedelic skin. This occurrence had come about days earlier when GoD ploughed unwittingly through a pasture of sentient mushrooms, the fungus emitting a barrage of tiny screams as the vehicle tore through its homestead. Sometime later, GoD began to notice strange tendrils emerging from the hood. Within hours it was clear that whatever had latched itself

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onto the chassis was coming along for the ride.

By now the interior of the car resembled the very same patch it had not long decimated. Crops of iridescent toadstools erupted from the AC vents and gaps in the dashboard. Fungal clusters of every size and texture sprouted up through the floor, and a shimmering moss coated the seats and steering wheel like a carpet of shaggy slime mould. GoD couldn't tell if the organism was aware of his presence, but he knew it would be able to detect what lay in the trunk. He only hoped that the driver's body had been sufficiently encased in Bio-Mend to resist any mycological intrusion. At least until his limbs had regenerated enough for him to take his place back at the wheel.

Before GoD could ponder what ridiculous obstacle might occur next, the ground beneath the car started to rumble. Christ, thought GoD. Not another fucking earthquake. It wasn't another fucking earthquake, but within minutes he was sorely wishing it had been. The marshy land ahead of the car quivered and sagged before a giant detonation of earth erupted into the sky. As rugged chunks of road rained down, a colossal and terrifying shape moved beneath the veil of debris. GoD tried to spin the vehicle clear but the crumbling ground pulled it further into the yawning sinkhole. Inside the car the mushrooms squealed — this time they were not alone. Trying hopelessly to reverse out of the pit, GoD noticed a terrible dark shadow fall across the hood, then the windshield, and the dash. The fungal colonies recoiled against the silhouette,

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their collective glow appearing to shiver.

With terrifying speed something enormous lashed itself around the car and heaved it out of the rubble. Plate-sized suckers gripped the windshield, shredding through the strobing roots as if they were flimsy Christmas decorations. If GoD had possessed jaw muscles he imagined they would have been entirely slack. Like a child's toy the vehicle was rotated in mid-air and brought level with the most repellent face anyone, alive or dead, could have imagined. The creature resembled some kind of mutant toad, but one of gigantic proportions. Between suckers GoD could make out a head the size of a desert butte, a monstrous living cliff-face of frothy warts and boiling pustules. Vast tentacles thrashed about its bubbling skull like some huge amphibious Medusa. With wet amber eyes the size of dirigibles the thing peered in through the windshield. Whether it registered the empty interior wasn't clear, but the way it then started cackling could only mean one thing. GoD gawked helplessly down the creature's hellish throat as the car was dangled cruelly above it.

Thoughts of him becoming dinner suddenly diminished as the vehicle was whipped away and thrust southward. The beast appeared to flip onto its side, exposing its undercarriage and a spectacle of pure horror. Through the windshield a gargantuan swampy vagina puckered and oozed impatiently, looming ever larger as the vehicle was swung toward it. GoD could do little else but clench the steering wheel and his ghostly buttock before

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the car was shoved into the putrid maw. You gotta be fucking kidding me, he hollered at the toadstools. The automobile-shaped dildo was pounded again and again as the toad beast gurgled in horrific delight. Waves of viscous sex gunk rolled off the windshield and with each mighty plunge the car's bodywork crumpled up more.

Just as GoD thought all was lost — the race, the possibility of ever returning to his body — something happened. The fungal organism both inside and outside the car began to hum. Its collaborative song grew shrill and then, as the next thrust seemed imminent, each mushroom ossified into a rigid crystal shard. When the car entered the beast again it was for the last time. On its way out each diamond-hard spine took a piece of toad vagina with it. A torrent of genital gore rained down and with a deafening animal scream the vehicle was hurled into the air. Flipping twice, it somehow landed on its wheels amid a downpour of chunky viscera. GoD allowed his omni-vision to kick in, navigating swiftly through curtains of blood, around the treacherous pit, and back onto the road beyond.

As the flailing monster receded into the distance, the battered, gore-soaked car chugged away in the direction of hope. The stiffened crystal colonies melted back into organic matter and seemed to exhale in glowing union. The blood seeped into them, absorbed by their roots — and later, flowers bloomed.

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The Stripper

Paul Heatley

Leland gets to the street a half-hour early. He stays in the car, smokes down a cigarette, and watches.

Even without the address written on a scrap of paper and stuck to his dashboard he'd be able to figure out which house it is. The porch is roped with bunting, balloons hang from the railings and the roof. The windows are adorned with banners that announce the impending marriage. Leland's here for the bachelorette party. He doesn't know, or care, when the wedding is.

The street, as much as it can be referred to as such, is comprised of a handful of houses spread haphazardly up and down either side of a dirt road. The whitewash on them all is peeled down to the exposed and rotting wood. Their windows are murky, and some look to have moss growing over them.

Cars fill up the driveway of the party house, spill out down the road and up onto the dead grass embankments. Their paint is fading and their wheel arches and frames are rusting. One car has a shattered windscreen. He spots a truck with bullet holes in its side. None of them seem to be without a dented or scuffed fender. Inside the house should be mostly women, maybe a couple of gays, and he

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wonders what kind of drivers they all are, or if they've borrowed the vehicles from their husbands or boyfriends, brothers or fathers.

Leland blows smoke out the open window, checks the time. Down the road, from the house, he can hear music. It's muted by distance. He can't make out what it is.

Next to him, on the passenger seat, is his stereo. When it plays, the music is instrumental, bass-heavy like it belongs in an old porno flick. Behind him, the backseat of his car is littered with takeout wrappers and cups. The air is thick with the smell of past meals, of greasy burgers and ketchup-drowned hot dogs. The smoke from the cigarette masks the smells a little, but mostly it mingles with them. As he readies himself to get out of the car he feels an ache in his chest. He straightens up, takes a couple of breaths, fingers the scar where the hospital cut him open to fit the pacemaker after he had the attack. The doctors said years of steroid abuse was the cause. He hasn't touched them since. Hasn't seen the inside of a gym since, either.

He dumps the cigarette, sprays himself all over with cologne kept in the glove compartment, then buttons up his overcoat, grabs the stereo, and begins his walk to the house.

It's country music — he can hear it clearer as he draws nearer. Dolly Parton, turned way up. He catches his breath on the porch, then knocks. No one hears. He rings the bell, wonders if he should try the handle, but then someone answers. A big woman with red hair. She looks him over, eyes

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narrowed down to slits. "Yes?"

Leland clears his throat. "I'm the entertainment."

Those suspicious eyes settle on his midsection. "You sure about that?"

Leland holds up the stereo, as if this will somehow answer all further questions. "Pretty sure."

"You don't look how you do in your picture."

"It's an old picture."

"I can see that."

Leland shifts his weight from one leg to the other. This is a song and dance he has grown accustomed to since the heart attack, since his body softened. "We gonna do this, or we just gonna talk out here the whole time?"

"I ain't decided yet." She curls a finger round her chin, looks him up and down, up and down, a prolonged examination.

"I can still go," Leland says, conscious that if she declines him that it is another lost payday. "Dancing, I mean. Once that music hits. I ain't slowed any."

The redhead raises her eyebrows, drops her hand. "Fuck it," she says. "It's too late to get anyone else anyhow. You'd better be as fuckin good as you say, buddy — better, in fact."

Leland steps inside. "I can still go," he says.

Inside, the music does not sound so loud. Leland wonders if the speakers are in the yard, if the party

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is happening outside. Through the doorway, down the hall, he can hear women screeching, laughing, talking at such high volume it's as if they're shouting.

"Where do you want me?"

The redhead is looking him over, still. "The bride-to-be is outside. She's expecting you. I really fuckin' hope you don't disappoint."

Leland cocks an eyebrow. The redhead takes him through into the sitting room. A couple of other women, of similar size and bulbous shape as the redhead, have spread themselves out on sofas there. They stop talking, turn and stare. One of them is black. She says, "Who's this, Jackie?"

Leland figures Jackie to be the redhead, and it is she who answers. "This," she says, "is the stripper."

"You sure about that?"

Leland ignores them, starts setting up his equipment.

"Not in here, big boy," says the dark haired woman that hasn't spoken yet. "Party's outside."

Leland glances at the open door leading out back. "Cold out," he says.

"Warm enough," Jackie says.

"You scared it's gonna make it so you don't have anything to show?" says the dark haired woman. She grins. Leland sees that she is missing teeth, huge gaps in the spaces between the mossy-looking remnants. He imagines her breath to be a foul, fetid

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thing. "You scared you ain't gonna be filling out your spangled thong? I really hope you've got a thong on under that heavy coat, big boy."

"Hell with his underwear," the black woman says. "It's everything else he's filling out that's getting me. Jackie, this some kinda joke?"

"It ain't a joke, Donna," Jackie says. "He reckons it's an old picture."

"Then you oughtta get that shit updated, son," Donna says. "That's... that's false advertising is what that is."

"He ain't so bad," gap-tooth says.

"Ain't so bad?" Donna says, incredulous. "Did you even see the picture? He looks like he's swallowed the good-lookin boy in that shot. Not so bad — it's bullshit, is what it is! Tell me," she wheels on Leland. "It even actually you in that picture? Really?"

"Yeah, it was me."

She shakes her head, sits back. "Damn, but you've let yourself go."

"Yeah," Leland says, eyeing her numerous curves and chins. "Guess so."

"Leave off of him, Donna," gap-tooth says, seemingly his only ally in the room. "I reckon Cathy'll like him. He's kinda built like Brad, only he's got more muscles than Brad."

"Muscles." Donna snorts. "You sweet on him or somethin, Mary?"

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“Could be,” Mary says. “Just a little.” She winks at Leland, pokes her tongue through the gaps in her teeth.

“Point of getting a stripper is that he ain’t supposed to look like the damn guy she’s gonna marry — he’s supposed to look better,” Donna says.

“Come on,” Jackie says. “No point in debating this. It’s too late for anything else. Let’s just get out there and pray for a good fuckin time.”

Donna and Mary stand, start shuffling toward the back door. Donna looks him over again, sneers. “I got a purse full of singles, got them specially. I’m keepin them all.”

“Ignore her,” Jackie says. “I’ll go get everyone ready.” She takes his stereo. “Do your thing.”

She heads outside and Leland waits. He takes deep breaths, can sense the possibility that things may turn hostile. The screeching country music dies abruptly. Jackie announces that the entertainment has arrived. He hears Donna tell everyone not to get too excited, but most ignore her and an expectant whoop goes up. Leland takes another deep breath and sucks his gut in for a moment, but then gives up on that idea and lets it hang. He needs his breath for the routine.

Jackie hits his music. The guests begin to clap in time with the slow bass. There are a couple of expectant cheers, a couple of wolf whistles. He steps out onto the back porch, and begins.

He doesn’t look at the gathered faces as he slides

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off the overcoat and starts in with his routine. He's already seen enough disappointment for one day, he does not need to witness anymore to drag him down further.

He can't help but notice, however, the hush that has fallen. The clapping has ceased. There is only his music, and the laboured breaths he hopes are audible only to his own ears.

Someone out there cheers. His back is turned, he's shaking his ass from side to side, but as the cheer turns into a laugh, then an uncontrollable giggle, he thinks he recognises it as Mary.

He turns then, casts his eyes momentarily over the bloated gathering and their unimpressed faces. His eyes accidentally lock with Donna's, and she's shaking her head, but then he finds what he's looking for. The bride-to-be. Cathy. She sits front and centre. She looks as confused and disappointed, as borderline angry, as the rest. Jackie is by her side, a hand on her shoulder.

Off to his right, at the edge of the crowd, there is a buffet table. Leland feels his stomach grumble at the sight of the cakes and cold meats and casseroles.

"Forget about the food a minute, fatboy!" someone calls. "Shake that big ass some more, huh?"

There's laughter, a lot of laughter, and Leland snaps back to attention. He reaches Cathy, puts his hands behind his head, gyrates before her. Cathy looks up at Jackie. Jackie rolls her eyes.

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“You ordered this guy?” Cathy says, loud enough for him to hear. “You sure you didn’t just find him on the street, slip him a few bucks?”

Leland ignores them. It’s nothing he hasn’t heard before, or some variation thereof. He drops to his hands and knees, his back to them, thrusts suggestively.

“That’s what he is, really!” Cathy claps. “He ain’t no stripper — he’s my pony ride!” She leaves her chair and leaps onto his back, straddles him. She is as big as her bridesmaids, and he almost buckles beneath her.

“Ride ‘im, girl!” someone shouts. “Ride!”

Cathy grabs a handful of his hair in one hand, and with her other slaps him on the ass. She isn’t gentle. “Come on, pony — let’s ride! Let’s do laps!”

Leland tries to shake her off, but she pulls harder on his hair.

“Uh-uh, pony! None of that, now, or am I gonna have to break you in?”

Almost drowning out her words, Leland is aware of all the laughter.

“I said ride, damn it!” She slaps him again, over and over, harder than before.

Leland tries, attempts at least a shuffle, but she is too heavy. His breath quickens, his heart hammers and his chest feels tight. He flashes back to his heart attack. He was dancing then, too. Flopped forward, right on top of the girl. She screamed,

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right in his ear, almost burst the drum.

His left arm has not gone numb, however. It feels everything, trembling under the strain of Cathy's immense bulk.

"Think my pony's thirsty," she says. She speaks in announcements, for everyone to hear. "Someone bring him a drink!"

Someone brings a bottle of beer, pours it over his face and head.

"He's still thirsty!"

"Maybe he's hungry, too?"

"Looks like he's always hungry!"

Leland feels more drinks poured over him. Some get into his mouth. He splutters when they go up his nose. A potent mix of wine, soda, and something so strong he can only assume it is moonshine.

"Food!" Cathy bellows. "My pony needs food!"

Cake is forced into his face. He is blinded by it, almost choked by it. Arms grab at him, pull him forward with Cathy on his back still. He collapses, but Cathy remains on top. He can't breathe. The arms drag him across the ground. He tries to blink the food out of his eyes, to see where they are taking him.

Finally, Cathy gets off. She's laughing, he can hear her laughter from above him, over him. It turns into a howl, then a snort, a pig-like snorting that doesn't stop as he is hoisted to his feet and dumped

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on the food table. All strength has left him. They cover him with food, force more into his mouth, pour gravy over him, still calling him Pony over and over until he almost believes it is his name now. They slap cake against his ass cheeks, stuff it into his thong. All the while they are laughing, until eventually they get bored. They leave him facedown on the table.

Leland runs water through his hands, splashes it over his face and body. He wipes himself down with a towel, his aching back coated in scraps of food.

He creeps from the bathroom, is cautious of being seen as he makes his way down the stairs. He'd crawled from the table outside, praying not to be noticed as the country music roared back into life.

His coat and stereo remain outside, but he cuts his losses and flees the house.

Jackie is out on the porch, waiting. "Hey." She hands him his coat, and in her other hand she has the stereo. "Thought I'd missed you, but then I saw the car down the way there and figured it must be yours."

Leland slides into the coat, takes the stereo.

Jackie lights a cigarette, offers him one. He accepts and she lights it. "Things got a little out of hand there," she says.

"Yeah."

"Sorry about that."

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

“Uh-huh.”

They smoke in silence for a moment, then Jackie reaches into her pocket. “This is for you, by the way. It’s from Donna.” She hands over a bundle of dollar bills. “It’s all singles, but she says it’s twenty bucks.”

Leland eyeballs the bills, wishes he could turn them down. He takes them, stuffs them into his coat pocket.

“You weren’t all bad,” Jackie says. “Before.”

“Sure.”

“You can still go. Just like you said.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The bride-to-be enjoyed herself.”

“Good for her.”

“You’re pissed off,” Jackie says.

Leland takes a deep breath, then finishes the cigarette. “No,” he says, flicking the butt over the railing. “I ain’t much of anything.”

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Fiesta

Angelica Arsan

Here we are, I say to myself, looking down to the glittering sea below us, pushing the trolley down the aisle.

Spain... After months of traveling to cold, dull destinations, I'll finally be able to enjoy the lovely climate of the seaside. No sooner than we've landed in Barcelona, my mood heightens at the sight of the city and the beauty of its architecture. And, of course, I'm also looking forward to exploring its legendary nightlife as well.

The company taxi takes us to our hotel after a short drive through the suburbs. It's a nice summer evening; my colleague Emily and I are fidgeting in the backseat, planning a night out on La Rambla. This sexy brunette from New Zealand has been on this route for years, so if anyone knows how to have fun in this city, it's her.

After a quick dinner we're ready to go. We both look gorgeous: short dresses revealing bare shoulders and cleavages, red lips, high heels — the works. Two smiling hostesses transformed into sexy creatures of the Spanish movida... with a whole day off tomorrow to recover from its excesses, as well.

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We arrive at the beach club at around midnight. The place is so diabolically crowded we can't even see the entrance, but it isn't long before a bouncer spots us and beckons us forward. We push our way through throngs of barely dressed teenage girls and muscular guys in tight T-shirts (aptly pushed forward by their hands on our bottoms) until the bouncer has us both by the waist, pulling us tight against his hips.

Once he's made sure we've both felt the bulge in his Levi's, he stamps the back of our hands and lets us in. Emily and I steal glance at each other, a glance meaning: Yummy... let's keep him in mind for later, just in case.

Emily was right: this place is really cool. Enormous mirrored balls suspended over the dance floor, red velvet curtains, lights flashing all around. Boys and girls are drinking, making out against the walls, dancing — all of them looking young and sexy and wasted.

We reach the bar and get our drinks, sipping them beside the DJ booth, where this very good-looking guy (black Stetson, white swimsuit, jackboots... and nothing else) is smiling at us. I smile back and he gets closer. He's holding a mojito.

"Hola," he says. Long fair hair, a ring in his left nipple. Maori tattoos adorn his bulging biceps and perfect abs.

"Hi, cowboy. Speak English?"

He laughs. "A little. Estudiantes? Are you students?"

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“Oh God, do we look like students?” Emily protests, saying ‘students’ as if she were saying ‘whores’. “We’re airline hostesses, darling. Off-duty and looking for fun.”

“I see...” His drinks us in with his eyes and subtly licks his lips. “You’re in the right place, then,” he says. “My name’s Carlos. Wanna dance?”

Not waiting for an answer, he leaves his mojito on a table and grabs us both, dragging us out onto the dance floor behind him. Primal Scream’s “Come Together” is blasting at full volume. I position myself between Emily and him, and he wastes no time in pressing his sexy body firmly against mine. His hands begin caressing my hips as I slowly grind back into him. Meanwhile, Emily is holding me by the shoulders, our mouths getting closer and closer. She teases me, licking my lips with the wet tip of her tongue.

Oh Christ, these two will bring me to absolute ecstasy... Come together, indeed!

I can feel Carlos getting hard already beneath his skimpy trunks. I’m too turned on to stop now: I grab Emily’s ass and pull her body close, and we start making out hard. The tiny piercing on her tongue is driving me wild, as it always does... especially when she licks my clit.

I can feel Carlos lifting my dress, slipping his hands between my thighs, and it seems we’re about to fuck right there on the dance floor when we’re suddenly startled by a deep voice from behind.

As Carlos backs off, I turn around to look, and what

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I see leaves me utterly speechless.

The tallest woman I have ever seen is standing there, fabulous and cross-armed before us. Long blonde hair, luscious lips, glittering black dress and stiletto heels... all topped off by a Nazi cap upon her head. A 6-foot-6 Marlene Dietrich. She barely looks at Carlos, who mutters something in Spanish before disappearing off in the crowd. Turns out it's me she's interested in, and at first I don't know whether to be enamored or afraid.

It is then that she disarms me with a smile, spreading out across her... well, HIS face.

"Waiters are not for sale, honey," he informs me, in the same deep voice as before. "They're supposed to carry trays and pick up empty glasses. Only Frau Eva is allowed to enjoy their attention..."

As for Emily, she is far too pissed at the interruption to be astonished by this amazing creature. She pushes me aside and snarls: "Hey! Mind your business, you fucking freak! Why don't you just fuck off and..."

Frau Eva laughs, baring white fangs instead of teeth.

"Awwww," he says high feminine voice, "that really hurts me, dear... it really does!" Then, in his deep masculine tenor, "Wash your mouth out, sister. Or shall I do it for you?"

I elbow Emily in her side. "Listen, Eva," I say, "we want no trouble, okay? We were just..."

"Oh, stop it," she says. "Have a drink with Eva. And

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tell that cheeky little bitch that *mi casa es su casa*. No hard feelings, pretty girls: welcome to my club. I'm Eva Braun, the one and only Queen of Barcelona."

She leads us into an alcove behind red curtains, red candles and a bottle of Jim Beam on the table. Orchids are scattered everywhere, and the strong scent of pot coming from the other 'privés' makes us deliciously dizzy.

Eva sits between the two of us, Emily's legs stretched over his and my head resting on her shoulder. Soon we're chattering like old friends and, predictably, the subject of our conversation turns to sex.

"A hostess' sex life must must be quite interesting," Eva says, stroking my hair. A dozen bangles tinkle on his wrist. "I mean, that 'fuck-and-go' attitude toward sex intrigues me a lot... You take your pleasure and leave everything behind the next day, huh?"

"Precisely," I reply. "You've got nothing to lose: no jealousy, no disappointment, no expectations... because nobody knows you. Basically, there no need to be respectable."

"That's what my wife always says: 'Eva, I married you to give up being respectable. It was just too tiresome'. Ha ha ha!"

"You have a wife??" Emily and I exclaim in unison.

"Claro que sí!" Eva replies. "A nice, pretty housewife. She just loves sucking on my tits..."

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I consider this for a while, sipping my bourbon. Well, he does got wonderful tits... and a divine ass, to boot. A wicked thought is already taking shape within my mind, probably with the help of all the booze and joints being passed around.

“Well, I’d probably like it too, you know...” I begin to say. “I mean, I’ve never had sex with a transsexual guy before, but it must be something, that’s for sure. Sort of a threesome, like being fucked by two people at the same time.”

“Oh, Angie,” Emily giggles, “you’re such a slut!”

“So neither of you girls has ever gotten laid by a pre-op transsexual? Ooh, that’s a shaaaame!” Eva mimics the hysterical tantrum of an old queen. “That’s unconceivable, you nasty cunts. Unconceivable!”

“You know what?” I say to him, “You’re right.”

Running my hand up under the glistening fabric of his skirt, soon I’m palming one of the biggest cocks I’ve ever come across in my life.

“Hey, I suspect your wife enjoys your lower half too!”

Eva smiles, laughs, and says, “Wanna try it for yourself, young girl?”

“She’s only teasing you, Eva,” Emily laughs. “She won’t really let you do it...”

“Shut up, bitch,” I say, slapping her legs away as I climb unto Eva’s lap. “I’ve never lost a challenge in my life! Come now, Eva — let’s show my friend here

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what Mademoiselle Arsan is made of..."

I kiss him long and deep. He responds in kind and, soon enough, I'm grinding upon his magnificent erection.

Eva pulls my thong to the side and starts fingering me from behind, making me hot and wet. I'm dying to feel his enormous tranny prick slide all the way up inside me. I glance down at Emily, who's caressing my ass with one hand while touching herself with the other, her eyes wide with astonishment.

As Eva begins to hike up her own dress, I rustle in my purse for a condom, opening it with my teeth and expertly rolling it down onto his big, fat cock. He lifts me by the ass and lowers me down onto it, penetrating me slowly, so I can feel just how long and thick it is. He starts thrusting into me then, hard and deep, making me delirious with delight. I take his nipples in my mouth and suck them eagerly, saliva dripping from my lips, enjoying the incredible sensation of both pleasures.

With Eva's strong, warm hands gripping my ass cheeks, it's almost more than I can stand before Emily slides a finger in between them. This is the point of no return, where I really lose control. Eva senses that I'm close to climaxing and keeps fucking me harder and harder; I'm moaning, almost coming, when suddenly, she stops and pushes me off of him.

"Turn around," he commands.

He shoves me down onto the table. I feel his cock,

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drenched in my juices, sliding up my ass. I cry out loud, as he pins my arms behind my back, fucking me mercilessly now. Soon I'm coming and coming in spasms, an endless climax that makes me scream, but he's not finished yet. I've almost fainted when he comes too, in a final thrust that leaves me breathless and trembling. I look over at Emily, her eyes shut tight, shuddering with pleasure as she comes as well.

When the taxi pulls up outside the club, we are both drunk and staggering, laughing uncontrollably. Our dresses are a mess. I vaguely realise that I've left my thong back in the alcove.

"I knew you were a dirty bitch, Angie... but THAT was..."

"Fucking amazing, Emily! Believe me. You should try!"

"You know what?" she says. "I will. I will, you... you... awww, you sexy bitch!"

And then she kisses me, right there in front of the driver and everything.

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Fortune Teller

Mark Mellon

Denton snorted cocaine off Annie's compact mirror. Techno music blared. He drank Cristal and puffed a pre-Revolution Cuban Partagás cigar, one of four hundred left. At a roped-off table at an exclusive after-hours club, next to a beautiful young woman, he reflected on his persistent melancholy. *Rio Pinto* resonated in his mind.

Annie darted her tongue into his ear. Denton wriggled away. A puzzled look became dark eyed exasperation.

"Andy. Don't you want to be with me?"

"Yes. It's just work."

"But you're with me now. We're drunk and high. In a little while, we go to bed. That doesn't take your mind off work?"

Denton poured more Cristal.

"If I knew whether *Rio Pinto* goes bankrupt, I'd know what to do. It could mean my job."

"Hey, I know. Let's see Madame Tisiphone. You can ask her. At least she might distract you."

"Madame who?"

"Tisiphone the seer. An old lady in the East Village

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who's been around since the '50's, a real relic in this basement apartment."

"How do you know her? You never struck me as the crystal ball type."

"My last name is Terakis. From Crete, Andy. Greeks know other Greeks, even in big cities. Do you want me to call? She's not cheap. Set you back a grand."

"Call her. Might be fun like you say."

Annie pulled her phone out. After an unintelligible conversation in Greek, Annie smiled and said "*Efharisto*."

"She'll see us in half-an-hour. That leaves enough time for the pet store."

"What for?"

"You have to bring her a gift. A pretty bird, something like that."

"Let me kill the bottle and we'll go."

Feet uncoordinated, steadied by Annie, Denton left the club. Manhattan summer's hot, stinking funk hit him full. Denton wilted. Annie grabbed him by the armpits. He somehow managed to lock his legs beneath him. It was easy to flag a cab outside; every hack in town knew high rollers partied there.

"24/7 Pets at 12th and Broadway, please," Annie said.

The store was brilliantly lit, crammed with cages. Customers were few that late. A corridor flanked by stacked cages held birds of multiple species and resplendent hues, a wild display of crimson, yellow,

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purple, and gold accompanied by squawks, skreeks and guano's raw stench. Annie pointed to a brilliantly green parakeet.

"How much?"

"A very reasonable price, considering he's rare. Three hundred fifty," the salesman replied.

"Do we get the cage too?"

"That's another hundred, but we provide two free bags of feed."

Denton departed with the awkwardly held bird cage shrouded under a cover. They took another cab, cage between them. Denton flinched whenever the bird jumped. He drank Courvoisier from a silver flask to steady his nerves. The cab left them in Tribeca. Burr Street's brownstones were restored and immaculate, any Bohemian element largely driven out long ago by gentrification.

"Here."

Denton negotiated the stairs while holding the cage with fair grace for someone so drunk and high. Annie knocked, a buzzer sounded, and they entered. There was a sharp, not unpleasant smell, burning myrrh. The parlor was dimly lit, the furniture old and broken down. Gold and silver icons gleamed in a corner by a dozen red candles' flickering light. A bronze statue dominated the room, a grim, bearded man in a long robe with a three-headed dog at his feet, fangs bared in savage grimaces.

An old woman studied the Daily Racing Form at a

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table. She looked up from under gray-white, curly hair. Bright black eyes like obsidian chips gleamed in her wrinkled, shrunken face.

“Ah, the Terakis girl. *Geia sas*, hello to you and your friend.”

She stood up. Her back was bent, but her tread still firm, the claw like hand strong.

“This is Andy Denton. Andy, Madame Tisiphone.”

“So, boss, you got a question for the Rich One?”

“Who?”

She pointed to the floor.

“*Plouton*, boss. The one with diamonds and gold.”

“Satan?”

She waved a hand in scorn.

“*Plouton*, he’s a lot older. More important too. Let me see the bird you got.”

Annie set the cage on the table and removed the cover. Tisiphone cooed at the bird.

“*Po po po*, such a pretty birdie.”

She opened the cage door and put her hand inside. The bird hopped onto her extended index finger. She brought him out, stroking his wings with her free hand.

“Is a big shame, to make such a nice bird meet *Plouton*. Sure you want to do this, boss?”

“Why do you think we came here?”

“OK, boss. A thousand bucks.”

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Denton set hundreds on the table. Tisiphone tucked the money away in her black widow's weeds.

"Come to the kitchen."

A narrow hall led to a kitchen with a bathtub, perhaps the last in Greenwich Village with this antique arrangement. A wall held shelves lined with metal cans marked INDUSTRIAL FORMALDEHYDE. Tisiphone went to a table, took a length of cord, and expertly pinioned the bird's wings. She set the immobilized bird on the table, opened the windows, went to the shelves, and took down a can.

"Is a small bird, boss, so we don't need much. Better stand in the hall. You can watch there. What's your question?"

"Rio Pinto. Will—"

"All I need, boss."

Annie and Denton went to the hall. Tisiphone put on a black rubber gas mask that gave her a strange, sacerdotal air, like the priestess of some arcane, Gothic cult. She emptied the can into the tub. A pungent odor tore into Denton's respiratory system like airborne daggers. Chanting in Greek, Tisiphone took the madly chirping bird and dropped him in.

The bird's cries grew shrill, frantic as he begged for release from torturing fumes and liquid. Hand to one ear, Madame Tisiphone crouched and closely listened. When the bird died, she pulled on a rubber glove, opened the drain, and turned on the spigot.

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“Boss, the bird say a ship loaded with gold and silver gonna crash on the rocks with all hands lost.”

“What’s that mean? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Prophecies don’t address things directly,” Annie said.

“Well, we did do this just to pass time.”

Denton smiled at Madame Tisiphone, a brief baring of teeth used with people he’d dismissed.

“Thanks for the show. We’ll be going now. Keep the bird cage. Plus the dead bird.”

Annie spoke to Tisiphone in Greek. Denton tugged Annie’s elbow. She snatched it away, but nonetheless left.

“You could have been more polite, you know. In Greece, you’re supposed to be respectful to older folks.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not in Greece.”

She was distant the rest of night, even during sex. Denton was past caring though. He simply wanted to get his nut off and collapse into oblivion, there to sleep before the ordeal of another long day slaving for money at Centurian.

Centurian had nothing so crude as a boiler room, an unpartitioned whole floor crammed with desks where men and women vied to unload as many bad investments as possible, to harpoon a “whale” with a phone call. Instead, associates grubbed for money

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respectably, behind closed doors in private offices. The atmosphere was more like an old white shoe, Wall Street law firm, with oak paneled walls, hushed corridors, and gilt framed fox hunt scenes.

What associates did during scant free time was their business. They were expected to come in early and stay late. Denton exited the express elevator at the 113th floor at seven, hungover, already exhausted due to insufficient rest. Secretaries smirked as he traipsed zombie like to his office. He popped a canister into his Keurig coffee maker. Coffee hot and steaming, Denton added two headache powders, stirred the cup, and poured the bitter potion down. Caffeine and aspirin had their palliative effect. His mind began to function somewhat. He remembered last night and Wikied "Plouton" on his laptop. A picture appeared of a bleak, bearded figure, a caption beneath.

"Plouton — euphemism for Hades, Greek god of the dead. Due to fear, little official worship was paid to him. At the Ploutonion in Hierapolis, now Pamukkale in Turkey, pilgrims sought prophecies by tossing live, pinioned birds into mephitic waters from a cave's mouth. Priests interpreted the birds' death cries as cryptic, Delphic responses to the pilgrims' queries. His opinion was particularly sought with respect to business, as he was regarded as wealthy beyond compare since he owned the world's earthly riches."

Tisiphone said a ship loaded with gold and silver would founder. Rio Pinto was the biggest miner of valuable minerals on the planet. He took out a vial

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and took his first hit of the day. Coke further stimulated him, made Denton decisive. He hit the intercom.

“Yes, Andy?”

“Unload Rio Pinto. Now. All of it. Tell everybody else to dump it too.”

“But they just got a capital infusion two days ago. Are you sure we should-“

“Yes, I’m sure. Unload, Jake. How hard is that to understand?”

“Sure, Andy. Absolutely no problem.”

Denton tried to keep racing nerves in check as the day progressed. His efforts weren’t helped by a visit around eleven from Wes Hardin, a partner and his direct boss.

“Howdy, Andy.”

The suit was Brioni, the tie Ralph Lauren, but the smile and accent were pure East Texas peckerwood. He took a seat and looked Denton in the eye, any trace of levity or friendliness gone.

“What’s this about Rio Pinto? You gone loco, son?”

“Inside info, Wes. They’re going belly up. You could say Rio Pinto’s a ship about to founder.”

“That’s right poetic, son, but poetry don’t cut it around here. A lot of clients are in bed with Rio Pinto, side contracts and counter derivatives. They’ll take some losses today and want an explanation.”

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“Relax, Wes. Events will bear me out.”

“Sure hope so for your sake.”

Hardin left. Denton took more hits to restore flagging confidence. Sick with worry, he constantly monitored the Internet for news. At six p.m., Jake burst into his office.

“Andy. Rio Pinto’s bankrupt. The filings were just made public in Sydney. You saved us billions. How did you know?”

Adrenaline shot through Denton, a high greater than any achieved before. The buzz only grew as people streamed into the room to praise him to the skies. The acclamation reached its peak when Hardin entered, shook Denton’s hand and said, “Damn spam, Denton. Got yourself a crystal ball?”

Denton gave a Cheshire Cat smile.

“Close enough, Wes.”

“But we saw her a few days ago, Andy. And you didn’t seem to like it.”

“No, I did, so much I want to do it again. Let’s ask another question.”

Annie dragged off the joint, exhaled smoke, coughed, and passed it.

“That poor bird got killed, Andy. It was horrible. We had no right to do that.”

“Oh, please. It’s just a bird. And it’s not like I want to, that’s how she works.”

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Annie's cold look told Denton this tack wasn't working, so he changed course.

"Look. I was rude. Fluke or not, her advice was right. I want to thank her. Let me do her right and you too. I know how sensitive you Greeks are."

Annie kissed Denton.

"If you put it that way, it's not so bad. I'll call her after we finish this joint."

The same salesman waited upon them at 24/7 Pets.

"Got any big birds?" Denton asked. "A hawk or an eagle?"

"We happen to have an English hunting falcon. Over here. We have to keep her apart from other birds."

The falcon sat in a corner in isolated splendor. Dappled brown and white, with huge wings and a snow white throat, the eyes were covered by a leather hood.

"Have you had any experience with falcons?"

"Plenty. I plan to hunt at our place in Long Island."

"But we--"

Denton silenced Annie with an angry, sideways glance.

"This bird is expensive. Two thousand."

"I'll take it."

Denton paid for the falcon, a cover was put over the cage, and they left with another sacrificial

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victim. A cab took them downtown.

“Andy, we can’t hurt this bird.”

“We can’t keep it either. Did you see those claws? Anyway, she’s expecting us.”

Tisiphone opened the door.

“So, boss, you come back. Maybe old Madame Tisiphone can see the future, eh?”

“You’re the best goddam prophet ever. Sorry I doubted you. To prove it, I got a present. Look.”

Denton removed the cover. Startled, the bird flapped great wings.

“*Aman*, what have you brought? A most splendiferous bird, boss. But a big bird means a big question too. It’ll cost plenty this time, boss, five grand.”

“Here.”

Denton put his Rolex Oyster Supreme on the table.

“That watch is ten grand.”

Tisiphone whistled. “*Tha to pahro*, I’ll take it. Say the question.”

“Lohrman Freres? Will the French gover—”

“Enough.”

She bent down, opened the cage, and stuck an arm inside. The hooded bird jumped onto her outstretched wrist. Madame Tisiphone took the falcon out and breathed in the bird’s ears. She slipped the hood off. The bird regarded Denton

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with savage, predatory black eyes, but stayed on her arm.

“Sure you want to kill such a splendiferous, beautiful bird, boss? And for money, always money too, never love or your future? *Po po po.*”

“Why do you keep asking that?”

Tisiphone stroked the bird.

“Maybe I wanna test you, boss. Come on.”

In the kitchen, the bird let herself be bound as before, despite her size and ferocity. Tisiphone opened the windows, turned on a fan, and went to the shelves.

“Two cans for so big a bird.”

She donned her mask and poured formaldehyde into the tub. The smell was worse, stronger, more astringent. Madame Tisiphone put in the falcon.

Amazingly loud and varied calls poured from the tub as the falcon floundered to death. Tisiphone listened intently to every squawk. She pulled the plug, turned on the spigot, and shepherded Denton and Annie back to the living room where she removed her mask.

“What did the bird say?”

“Mostly cuss you a lot, boss, call you goddam sonofbitch, other stuff. Plenty spirit in that bird.”

“What about Lohrman Freres?”

“She say ‘The Roman galley throw a spar to the drowning twins.’”

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"Why can't I just get a straight answer? OK, Madame, thanks as usual."

Pleased Annie kept her farewell relatively short, Denton sat near her in the cab only to have her draw away.

"What do you think the prophecy means?"

"Andy, for a smart man, you're so stupid. A spar saves the twins. Twin brothers. *Freres* means brothers in French."

"OK. I'm not deaf."

At his place, primed on coke and certain of victory with Tisiphone's prophecy, he grabbed Annie and pulled at her dress, only to have her push him away, an angry, troubled light in her eyes.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Andy, before we even start thinking about that, you have to promise me something."

"OK."

She looked him straight in the eye, but he was distracted by her perfect breasts.

"Andy, pay attention. I don't want to see any more birds killed. It's making me sick. The first time I didn't know any better, but the second time I did and I feel terrible. You've had your way twice now. I won't be part of this again. If you ever mention taking another bird to Madame Tisiphone again, we're through. Do we understand each other, Andy?"

This wasn't the first time a girlfriend had put

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Denton on notice, so he knew how to respond. He pulled her close, stroked her hair, and spoke gently.

“Don’t worry, honey. That’s the last time. Promise.”

Reassured, Annie sighed, curled up against him, and slept. Still flying on coke and adrenaline, Denton lay awake and dreamt of the wealth and power the new tip would bring.

On a rare, clear day, Denton enjoyed the panoramic view of Manhattan from his corner suite. His teak, sedan size desk was crammed with bric-a-brac and adult toys. Fine abstract art hung from the walls, nothing to him, but impressive to visitors. He padded in sock feet over a thick Persian rug to the black Aeron chair, sat, and spun around with a broad grin, hands twined behind his head. A knock on the door brought Denton bolt upright. He slipped on tasseled loafers and straightened his tie.

“Come in.”

Hardin entered, a big smile on his broad red face. Denton knew this meant trouble, being also a consummate phony.

“Look at Centurian’s newest partner, not even near thirty, sitting in his own suite. Tell you what, I’m damn proud, Andy.”

“Thanks, Wes. You embarrass me, talking me up so much.”

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Hardin sat down.

“Andy, once you make partner here, it ain’t like some law firm where you sit on your laurels and let associates make hay. No sirree, bob, you got to hustle even more. You catch my drift, son?”

“No worries, Wes.”

“Glad to hear it. You did good with Rio Pinto, even better with Lohrman. You ain’t just saved money, but made some. But it’s a topsy-turvy, dog eat dog world and we need new results now. Know anything about Gilded Sacs?”

The biggest investment firm on Wall Street, a titan that made Centurian look like a puny wimp. Gilded Sacs should be on top, but who knew with economic chaos worldwide? Denton played cagy.

“Just mixed signals. Have you heard anything?”

“There’s rumors they’ll go tits up any day. Nothing sourced or attributed, but some folks smell a big, dead rat, if you get my meaning. Get that crystal ball working, hear now? Pull a rabbit from the hat another time for the team, Andy. Can’t put it any more sincere than that.”

“You’ll have the answer tomorrow, Wes.”

Hardin rose.

“Keep taking care of business, hear?”

Good mood ruined, Denton ignored work and instead snorted coke while he brooded over his latest dilemma. He needed another prophecy, but if he even mentioned taking a bird to Tisiphone,

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Annie would dump him and she was his only connection. By six, purple, red, and orange streaks tinted the western horizon, the vial was empty, and Denton had hit his nail biting, floor pacing, wits' end. His phone buzzed.

"So we having dinner, Andy? How about Pylos on 7th? They do good *meze*."

"I'll come get you."

Hot, humid air stifled him outside, as yet uncooled by twilight. Cabs were few and he walked uptown to find one, a single thought in mind. There had to be a way out.

Startled, a large street rat scuttled before him. In a state of extraordinary concentration due to massive coke consumption, Denton grabbed an asphalt chunk and slung it with speed and reflexes no straight person could match. The missile caught the fleeing rat on the head and knocked him cold. Denton hurried to the sprawled animal. With the same celerity and presence of mind, he slipped the laces from his shoes and hogtied him, neat as any domestic beast bound for slaughter.

Denton slipped the rat into a coat pocket and hailed a cab. He called Annie from the cab.

"I'm here. Come outside."

Annie emerged, stunning in a low-cut black top, skin tight jeans, and Louboutins. She got in the cab and they kissed.

"I want to see Tisiphone first."

PROSE IN POOR TASTE

"I thought we were done with that, that we had an understanding."

"I just want to thank her, that's all. You know, let her know how grateful I am. Look at me. Have I got a bird?"

He held up his arms to demonstrate his birdless state.

"All right. Maybe you're getting more considerate. Let me find out if she can see us."

An intolerably long call in Greek followed.

"She's just finished with a client. It's OK."

"Excellent."

Denton felt like his old, self-confident self. A plan had formed, albeit haphazardly. Once more, he'd bend the world to his will.

Then the rat came to. Despite being bound, he vigorously squirmed around in Denton's pocket. He clamped a hand over the pocket to hold the rat still.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah, I just got an itch."

"How high are you? Did you do all the coke without me? And where are your shoelaces? You're being really weird, even for you."

"So I forgot to put them on. I'm a little buzzed."

His shoes kept slipping off as he walked down the stairs. He kept a hand on the rat. Tisiphone opened the door. A distinct chemical odor wafted from the

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hall.

"You pardon the stink, huh? I just got done with a client. So, boss, you got a pistol in that pocket?"

Denton giggled.

"No, Madame. I want to tell you how grateful I am and- And I need to know what's up with Gilded Sacs."

Annie gasped. "You lying jerk. I warned you--"

"So you got another question, boss? How'm I supposed to answer with no bird?"

"Look."

He held out the rat. To his surprise, both women recoiled.

"*Vlaca*. You bring a filthy rat before my icons. *Malaka*."

She snatched the rat away, tossed it outside, and slammed the door.

"Only high animals are fit to talk to *Plouton*, a fine bird or magnificent bull."

Terminally stressed, Denton sweated as his hare-brained scheme fell apart before him. Powered solely by coke, panic, and greed at this point, he snatched Annie by the wrist.

"What are you doing, Andy?"

"I haven't got a bull. So take her. She's fine, isn't she? I have to know what's going to happen to Gilded Sacs. I'll pay ten thousand, twenty."

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Annie snatched her hand away and ran behind Tisiphone. The seer's face grew evil. Rather than a wizened, old, East Village weirdo, she resembled Medusa, a hideous female demon, baleful face contorted with rage.

"Poutsokefalo. You want to ask a question so bad, maybe you do it yourself, eh?"

She seized Denton's arm and twisted it behind his back. Apparently frail, the old woman was powerful as any club bouncer. Denton tried to break free, but she hustled him down the hall and into the kitchen. She slammed him into the table, bent him over, knocked the wind from him.

Tisiphone remorselessly and masterfully bound his hands.

"Pay for your hubris."

No longer human in her black rubber mask, she dragged him, grabbed him by his hair and the small of the back and held him over the tub, more than half full with a white swan's carcass in it. The smell made him gag and cry hot tears.

"No. Please. Don't."

She shoved him down head first. The agony was instant. Denton thrashed about, tried to bodily heave himself out, but Tisiphone firmly held him in place with a foot rammed into his back. He attempted to hold his breath, but involuntarily gasped from the pain. Formaldehyde flooded down his throat, a toxic stream that made him choke and spasm, which only forced more fluid into his lungs.

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He screamed for mercy once again, only to have his burning eyes dissolve into a vision of a shadowy, horizonless plain where dead souls flitted about like tiny, pathetic gray bats. A heavysset man sat before him on a platinum throne. Black haired and bearded, his eyes were gleaming gold coins, each tooth a precious gem. His suit's pinstripes were formed of tiny flaming letters that repeatedly spelt *Hades*. The grim visage puffed a cigar rolled from thousand dollar bills, knocked off silver flakes of ash, and smiled.

"*Mporo na se voithiso?* Can I help you?"

Annie sat weeping on the couch when Tisiphone returned. She lit a cigarette and made notes with a pen on the Daily Racing Form.

"He isn't—"

Tisiphone shrugged.

"Don't worry, Annie. I fix it."

"But this is terrible. Andy's — I mean, you just — "

"*Agapi*. Don't worry about that *kariolis*."

She returned to the racing sheet.

"He didn't say nothing about no Gilded Sacs, but I gotta few good tips for Belmont."

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WE BOYZ NO MATTA WHUT, MY TINY LITTLE SON!

Douglas Hackle

Yo, like Poe, I was drinkin' a cask of amontillado.

With on-fleek boyband music rising up the hill from the amphitheater below, I held the cask high to take a deep draught as I watched a beautiful girl dancing on the twilit grass — barefoot and nymph-like; pale, lithe arms waving and weaving like albino serpents; shoulders swaying; white daisies and baby's breath woven into long, lush, black hair plaited in an arabesque waterfall braid; pomegranate-like breasts sheathed in the wispy chiffon of a boho-chic dress, breasts jiggling a jig all their own.

One of the girl's friends took her by the hands — they spun each other around, heads tossed back, laughing with Dionysian abandon.

Deep in my cups — or cask, I should say — I struggled to maintain balance as I pedaled my dank unicycle over to these girls, my cask of amontillado balanced precariously on my head as I focused all my energy on avoiding an embarrassing topple onto the ground. But I'd seen and shared enough Dat Boi memes on Facebook over the years to know

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that I'd be okay so long as I held out my arms like the wings of an aeroplane.

I rolled up to the raven-haired girl just as she and her friend unlocked fingers. Not one to waste time, I commenced pedaling circles around her; just as the male peacock parades its tail feathers to capture the attention of the female, just as the male sea turtle circles the female in a courtship dance, so did I show off my sick uni skills. The girl danced on, though now she turned with my revolutions, following my orbit around her heavenly body with a wary sidelong eye.

Her smile vanished; she was all arched eyebrow and unimpressed duckface now.

Damn, I thought. Best pull off a sick uni trick real quick or your gonna let this one get away, slice. So I attempted a 180-degree hop-spin. Now, had I successfully executed the trick, I would've segued into pedaling backwards, and the shit woulda been hella sick. But like I said, I was FRIGGIN' INEBRIATED. As such, I tumbled mid-spin, landed hard on my ass, the cask of amontillado breaking apart as it struck the ground, spilling its sweet, golden contents out into the grass like a cracked egg.

The girl and her friends laughed and pointed at me as I sat there on the ground looking reeeaaaal dumb, my cheeks hot and ruddy with embarrassment. Grimacing, I pounded the ground three times with the butts of my fists so damn hard it hurt. The girl then caught me off guard when she came forward, bent down, offered me her hand. I took it in mine,

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pushed myself to my feet.

“Um, can I, like, get you a... a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan?” I blurted.

Just as I finished uttering this ridiculous sentence, I executed a loud, smacking facepalm. *Christ*, I thought. *Really, dude?* That was the best pick-up line you could come up with? Can I get you a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan?

“Um, I think I’ll pass on the dead sewer rat from Afghanistan,” the girl said, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “But I might settle for a cask of *amontillado*.”

This made me grin ear to ear. Actually, if you want to get all technical about it, it made me grin even broader than ear to ear; in fact, I grinned so broadly that the corners of my mouth continued moving up past my ears, rising behind and above my temples, traveling up the sides of my head until they met at the top of my forehead, at which point my face fell the fuck off.

But who the hell needs a face when you have a dank uni, sick uni skillz, and a big-boobed hot honey at your side, eh?

After I remounted my wheels — oops, wheel, I mean — I took the girl’s hand in mine, and together we descended the hill to the concessions area, her walking, me pedaling. We got in line at the cask of *amontillado* stand. After I bought us each a cask, we moved in closer to the stage to check out the band that was playing — a boyband called WE BOYZ 4-LYFE comprising just two members. One member

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was an armless old man — dude had to be at least ninety — who banged at the bloodied keys of a rickety, old upright piano with his equally bloodied, abraded forehead. The other member of WE BOYZ 4-LYFE was a dead sewer rat from Haiti. It lay perfectly still (and dead) on a drum stool placed at the center of a huge, sprawling, forty-piece drum kit. However, because it was deader than a dog turd sealed in a dog turd-sized coffin, set on fire, and dropped off the Eiffel Tower, the rat couldn't play drums for shit (or play any musical instrument for that matter [or, for that matter, do *anything*]), which meant the music of WE BOYZ 4-LYFE consisted entirely of the old man's discordant, insanity-inducing piano noise — song after song after song of it.

I must say they were quite good. Certainly one of the best bands *I've* ever seen — boyband or otherwise. Nevertheless, after a few songs, we wandered away from the stage toward the surrounding woods where we could better hear ourselves talk.

"You know you left your face back there on the hill," the girl said after hoisting her cask of amontillado up for a sip.

"Oh, yeah?" I retorted with a scowl, sounding an awful lot like Moe from The Three Stooges.

"Yeah."

"What's it to ya?" I said in the same petulant tone.

"It's nothing to me. But it's something to you. It's your face!"

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“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s it to ya? Oh, a wise guy, eh?”

“Listen,” she said, halting and turning to face me. “Why don’t we skip all the niceties, unicycle boy: you wanna get your mitts on these tits or what?” She squeezed her breasts together, expanding her already ample cleavage.

“Um (gulp),” I uttered, wide-eyed. “Yeah, I guess I sorta do.”

“And would you like to peel the frilly pink panties off this heart-shaped ass?” she asked, slapping said heart-shaped ass for effect.

“Er, yes, I suppose I would.”

“Then get me a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan.”

“What? Now hold up a sec, shorty. I already asked you if you wanted a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan. You said no, remember?”

“A girl has a right to change her mind. Get me a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan, or I’ll have nothing more to do with you ever again.”

Shit, I thought. As far as I could tell, the only place I could get a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan was, well, a sewer in Afghanistan.

“Alright. But if I do go all the way to friggin’ Afghanistan to get you a dead rat, where can I find you when I get back to America?”

“My address is 124 Conch Street, Bikini Bottom.”

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I scrawled the address on a gum wrapper, pocketed it.

“Well, I should probably get going,” I said. “Looks like I have a long trip ahead of me. I don’t even know how I’m going to get over there. I may have to join the military or something. Hopefully I won’t get killed in combat.”

“Good luck, unicycle boy!” the raven-haired girl said, clasping my hand for a moment before turning away, laughing as she ran back up the hill to her friends.

After barely surviving boot camp, I did two back-to-back three-year tours in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army, 76th Infantry Brigade. The sewer rats there were damn near impossible to hunt or trap, and they tended to cannibalize their own dead, so that it was not until the end of my second tour when I finally got my hands on one.

When I arrived back in the States with two Purple Hearts, two missing arms (got too close to a grenade blast during an ambush just outside of Kandahar), a nasty case of PTSD, and one dead Afghan sewer rat, the first thing I did was try to visit the raven-haired girl.

It didn’t take me long to figure out I’d been punked. Punked hardcore.

See, turns out 124 Conch Street, Bikini Bottom is the address for fucking SpongeBob!

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>:(

Man, I still can't believe I fell for that shit! Alack and cursed be the day I was born!!

Six months after I was discharged, the raven-haired girl came to visit me at my home.

"Hi. I heard you were back from Afghanistan," she said after Higginsworth, my muscle-bound butler, brought her into my parlor. Her face glistened with tears. "I'm sorry I tricked you. I was just having a little fun. I didn't think you'd actually risk your life to become a soldier and go all the way to Afghanistan to get a sewer rat just to hook up with me. I... I hope you can forgive me. And maybe... maybe we could, like, still go out some time?"

"Sorry, dollface, but you're a little late. I guess you didn't hear. See, after I got back from Afghanistan and realized you'd tricked me, I decided to start a boyband. We're called BOYZ ON FLEEK 4-EVAH. I'm the piano player. I play the piano with my head. The other member of the band is the dead sewer rat I brought back from Afghanistan to give you. He's the drummer. He plays a motherfucking fifty-piece drum kit. Well, he doesn't actually play it 'cause he's dead as dogshit, but who cares? Him being dead didn't stop us from signing a ten-million-dollar record contract with Sony BMG just last month."

"You're in BOYZ ON FLEEK 4-EVAH?" she asked, her mind completely blown. "You guys do that song 'I Banged Like Ten Supermodels Today. What the Hell

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Did U Do Today, Nerd? I Bet You Shit Your Lime-Green Nerd-Pants and Then Cried Like a Tiny, Little Bitch!”

“Yup, that’s us.”

“I love that song! You guys are like the hottest thing right now!”

“Yeah, I know. Hey, you know what? I’m actually sort of on my way out the door right now. See, we’re about to kick off the North American leg of our world tour. Sorry, but I’m gonna have to ask you to scram.”

The girl wept anew. “I’m sorry for how I treated you, unicycle boy. I love you! Please take me with you!”

“You had your chance, dummy. Higginsworth, please show this little trollop to the front door.”

Higginsworth grabbed the raven-haired girl by her arm, dragged her away.

I never saw her again.

Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.

Humph!

As you might well imagine, over the course of the next year, while I toured the world with my boyband, I nabbed more ass than a goddamn Chinese zoo! But after a while, the rockstar life began to wear on me, and I found myself longing to be a soldier again. So I reenlisted, and my superiors granted my request to be put back on active

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combat duty despite me no longer having arms. Fitted with custom-made boots that contained retractable spring-loaded blades in the soles — thereby allowing me to fight with my feet — I was shipped off to Iraq, where, within four months, I managed to get both my legs blown off.

After recovering from these horrible injuries for three months in a U.S. military hospital, I asked to be sent back to the warzone. Due to my exceptional record of valor and the great physical sacrifices I'd already made for my country, my request was immediately granted. This time they shipped me off to Syria and provided me with a high-tech combat wheelchair controlled using a mouth-operated joystick.

Not one month into my tour of duty in Syria, I rolled over a landmine, blew my torso and wheelchair to smithereens. Luckily, the medics got to my bodiless head in time to connect it to a newly developed, high-tech blood circulation/respiration system specifically designed to keep bodiless heads alive. So, reduced to nothing more than my head, I was sent back to the States to convalesce in a military hospital.

Do you think that getting physically reduced to a head kept barely alive on life support finally took the fight out of me?

Hell no, it didn't, my tiny little sons!

After a few months, the Army granted my request go back into the fray. Perhaps you're wondering what possible good could a head kept barely alive

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on life support do in a combat situation? Again, we must thank the wonders of modern medical science and the latest advances in military technology, as the Army custom-built a motorized, armored, weaponized unicycle for me designed with a sophisticated gyroscope system that kept the thing upright at all times so that I never had to worry about keeping balance myself. In order to ride it, my head was placed into a high-tech, armored, weaponized helmet that locked onto the seat. I controlled the uni with a mouth-operated joystick system integrated into the helmet. Let me tell you, that battle uni was friggin' awesome, and when I rolled into motherfucking Somalia on the damn thing, I fucked some serious shit up for a while.

Unfortunately, not a month into my tour of Somalia, my sick uni and I were vaporized by a nasty roadside IED. With my head now gone, all that remained of me was, well, nothing. Nevertheless, the Army sent my nothing back home to the States to recover from its injuries.

So, now reduced to nothing, do you think I was finally ready to retire from military service?

Fuck no, I wasn't, my tiny little daughters and nieces!

Again, and despite me being nothing but nothing, the Army granted my request to continue to serve my country as a soldier. As such, they put my nothing on a plane to friggin' Liechtenstein of all places (unfortunately, the scenic, little Alpine microstate had been recently invaded by friggin' Haiti of all countries).

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Care to take a guess at what my nothing did to help fight those crazed, machete-wieldin', Voodoo-hexin' Haitians after my nothing arrived on the bloody, smoke-billowing battlefields of Liechtenstein?

It did nothing.

Because, unfortunately, when you're nothing, all you can do is nothing.

As such, my superiors had no choice but to fly my nothing back to the States and give it an honorable medical discharge, which, if I'm going to be completely honest about it, was fine by me, as I was getting kinda bored with the soldier life by that time. What I really wanted to do was get my boyband back together, go on tour again, and get back to nabbin' more ass than the goddamn Bubonic plague.

So as soon as I arrived back in the U.S., I tracked down my old drummer — i.e., the dead sewer rat from Afghanistan. Unfortunately, while I'd been away fighting baddies in exotic lands, he and the former drummer of WE BOYZ 4-LYFE (the boyband that played the festival where I met the raven-haired girl) started a new boyband called WE BOYZ NO MATTA WHUT, MY TINY LITTLE SON!

What did a boyband consisting of two drummers — one a dead sewer rat from Afghanistan, the other a dead sewer rat from Haiti — sound like? Well, as both members were deader than dried-out white dogshit, neither was capable of making any sort of sound at all, so that every one of their songs was

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nothing but three or four minutes of silence. Nevertheless, WE BOYZ NO MATTA WHUT, MY TINY LITTLE SON! was friggin' huge, selling out dozens of stadiums and arenas all over the country during their first U.S. tour.

Anyhow, I begged the dead rats to let me join the band. I tried to tell them that their music was already nothing, so what harm could possibly come from adding my nothing to their nothing, right? But the rats wanted nothing to do with my nothing because, being deader than dirt, they were incapable of wanting or not wanting anything.

Then that smug, ungrateful, self-important, putting-on-airs, crooked, backstabbing dead Afghan sewer rat was all CRAW! SLAW. KRAW? SLAW! CRAW. SLAW? KLEET KLEET KLEEK CLEEK? m32hdsafd34saklfjdsklafjiojdsiofjdo73afjiowrjeq9fgirj390ghr392gnri9032gnr924n3g9r4n290gKdsanr8gn04fg0ri3nq2fi903emfi90jn34i9fnfg943jng904jn23g90ijn4230gj40235fhg93j0423jg5042j3g054tg54jt045jt90j45390t45902jt9045j5t9g04jt905j490tj4390jdnzsvns eyruiodanfwnwue9rfn243nrgvn249ith892nghru94nhgu89rndsfjnkedwofgri9thj45hg542h3g9r4h239fg5rh4392gh594hjgi50w4jgio0r4jmf89ntu4m89thnr89wfhc8nrh43tf8mh4gh3g5hj3mt5j3890tj5490tj43yjjdtj92r3ut8943wjf9rhj329rhj39wfhr893hj9r8h3g89rh9grh89ghr89hgr894h3g89rhefmnwogrnweiognri90g90re wgi90rjgr4tg94gj9t4h3g895h48923gh4892ghr84h2g89h84325435432

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Such Unholy Shapes

Lee Kirk

All three of us had our hands outstretched touching the cold spot and then it happened. The acid kicked in, widening my eyes like breakfast plates.

‘Look Kev, this is going too fast for me. You obviously know what your doing but I’m sorry this is freaking me out.’ I say, pulling the plum-red robe hood back.

‘What do you mean? Are you not game? We have come so far. We have made a break-through!’

‘Aye to what though? We don’t know what this cold spot really is.’

‘He’s right,’ says Matthew, lightning another cigarette, pulling the hood of his robe back, revealing a stubbled, pock-marked face.

Kev shouts ‘Your both breaking the intent! Leave your robes as they are. Can you not smoke please?’

Matthew inhales longer on it, then blows out a plume.

Kev pulls his robe hood back. His eyes magnified through the lens of his glasses. The left lens is blood-smeared.

He repeats ‘Matthew can you not smoke when we

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are trying to make contact!’

The acid had its grip on Matthew, you can see a menace work behind his eyes.

He says ‘Should it not be warm and inviting this celestial realm? Ouija boards are full of shit. I believe you spoke to someone Kev, but we have been misguided... Look! over there at all that death. All we get is a cold spot?’

I think we should stop I said shaking my head at Matthew.

Kev just looks at both of us.

I say ‘Look man, I’m feeling this trip. I need to lie down now.’

‘It’s not for lying down, I got us the acid to focus on the intent. That was the point of the chant,’ says Kev.

Earlier Matthew and I followed Kev’s voice with the chant notations. It was simple, more like a mantra. We did this for three hours.

The sacrifices were hard. It had to be personal or otherwise the ritual would fail. I went first and picked my dog Eerie, Matthew chose his Mum and Kev his ex-boyfriend.

‘To the new life!’ I said as I dropped a boulder from shoulder height right on Eerie’s head. Red mush poured out his mouth all over the wild garlic stemmed next to the glen.

Matt got his Mum during housekeeping, said her screams were muffled by the Dyson 40000 model

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but she saw him in the reflection of the half-moon mirror.

Kev's kill was Marcus, his ex-slut boyfriend who gave him chlamydia. Marcus had a black bin bag pulled over his head while the hammer smacked all around until it softened.

Anyway. We, were stationed at the entrance to the communal living room. My words were coming out slurred. I didn't even understand them anymore. I left the chalk circle. Walked past the sacrificial bodies lying head to toe star-shaped. I fell on the couch with many-sized cushions, exhausted. Drained. Empty.

'I love you both,' Kev shouts 'But, you need to understand what we are doing is very real. When it opens you will understand and witness its almighty glory!'

The muted television glows behind him. The static frost crackles silently illuminating the white walls with a majestic spectral glow.

Kev loses his balance, knocking the pyramid stacked empty beer-cans onto the floor, beer dribbles onto the ouija-board fashioned from old bathroom tiles. Kev reaches for his rucksack, pulling out a Polaroid camera. The acid has him now. I just lay there between the cushions, staring at the cold spot. Something terrible is coming from that spot, in the form of geometries? then a white flash before my eyes.

CLICK!

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I turn to the flash and see Kev pointing the polaroid at the cold spot.

‘Kev man, can you not take any photos of me in this state,’ says Matthew with a furious sneer.

‘It is my duty to archive this moment. It’s content for the website!’

CLICK!

‘I told you to stop that’ said Matthew, pushing Kev.

‘Matt calm down, I’m ju...’

‘I TOLD YOU, DON’T TAKE ANY FUCKEN PICTURES!’

I see the geometries meld into a little black hole that silently grows into a huge 8-foot oval shape behind Matthew, just as he moves forward punching Kev twice in the face, Kev cups his nose, screams and lunges at Matthew pulling him down while smacking with his left fist into the side of Matthew’s face. They both roll back and forth on the ground, punching savagely into each other.

Something sifts within the infinite depth of the oval, a long black thin arm stretches from the hole.

Reaching over the hand touches Kev’s back as rolls on top Matthew. He raises his left fist to strike again. The portal disappears. The television switches off as Kev’s eyes turn red.

He looks down at Matthew. Strikes down with the left, grabbing the jugular, white-knuckled, squeezing all his fingers deep inside making loud tearing sounds. Matthew’s gagging drowns out the flesh sounds as blood shoots out in all directions;

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over me, over the bodies, the walls and the carpet.

I pull myself up from the couch, swaying with psychedelic intoxication. I fall back on the cushions.

Kev's red eyes stare towards me as he rises.

'TO THE NEW LIFE.'

He walks towards me.

I should probably scream but I don't know how.

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

I Should Have Known Better

Judge Santiago Burdon

The beer is just as warm as the stale air blowing lazily from the swamp cooler. Cooler my ass, it's 107 degrees outside at 9:30 in the morning and the thermometer drips upward.

I'm sitting at the Meet Rack on Miracle Mile in Tucson. Safe bar, nobody ever fucks with me. And today would be a bad day to challenge my patience. I haven't had a fix in thirty-nine hours. The "Heebie Jeebeez" are starting to crawl under my skin. The condition of my stomach comes into question. Here I am like Jean-Paul Sartre's character dealing with Roquentin's curse.

Feeling nauseated, trying to hold back my wanting to vomit, and I occasionally gag loudly. Got kicked out of the Pussycat Lounge for puking on a table earlier this morning. It feels like cats scratching at me from the inside. And I have no idea when relief will arrive.

It's dry. The whole city is dry. I can't even locate a fucking mandrax or quaalude to take the edge off. The Chicanos on the Southside can't scare up Xanax and there hasn't been any decent heroin around in weeks. Swear I'd shoot cough syrup right now if it contained enough Codeine.

PROSE IN POOR TASTE

She said she'd meet me at the library on North 1st ave at 9:00. I'm late and now a no-show. Just can't muster the energy or enthusiasm to walk that distance in this scorching, merciless solar torment. Besides, I'm not hard to find. It's not like I have an active social agenda. I am similar to a homing pigeon. It may appear that I am wandering from my confines, but I always find my way back.

Especially when dope is involved.

She enters the dive bar, gliding across the floor with the grace of a swan. Her tits are like ripened mangoes and easily visible through her sheer summer dress. I was sure she was created by the gods from sea foam, navigating her half shell through calm seas.

Nope, she was born to Jewish parents in New Jersey.

"Hey baby, how ya feeling?" she whispers as she slides her fingers gently through my hair.

"I said library not libation," she continues, lecturing me.

"How the fuck ya think I feel?" I say. "I'm sick from withdrawals and need a bump bad, baby..."

"Okay, let's get outta here. Did you pay for that beer you didn't drink?"

"I'll pay Jimmy later. He'll be happy just to get rid of me."

We head out to her MG with the convertible top down. The heat slaps me with intense sincerity and

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

I ask myself why I live in the desert. Almost every plant that grows and survives in this wasteland has some type of thorn or quill-fashioned brier or barb on it as protection from scavengers. There's a variety of venomous snakes, lizards and insects sharing this ecosystem. These are my neighbors.

I sit down on the black vinyl seat of her MG with the top down. Instantly I let out a scream to rival those which echoed throughout the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition. My legs exposed from sporting cutoffs make contact with the seat and they are instantly fried, burnt, charred to a crisp. Suddenly I forget about my other symptoms, concentrating solely on the ravaging pain in my legs. I swear I heard the sound of sizzling.

She throws a towel over the seat while giggling, attempting not to laugh. I think, *I should've known better*. She pats my leg affectionately and says... yes, you guessed it:

"Silly, you should've known better."

"Where we headed?" I ask as she starts the engine and puts in gear.

Her dress dances in the breeze, occasionally providing me with a brief glimpse of her trimmed pussy — elegance defined. Sex is the farthest thing from my half mind at this time, however. She smiles, her hand on my shoulder as we drive along.

"Pascua Yaqui reservation," she finally answers. "Black tar baby, Mexico's finest just arrived!"

On Grant Road, just east of I-10, is the Indian

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reservation best known for its fat women in black dresses, Indian fry bread, and incredibly potent heroin. I cringe with anticipation as we race past the Multiplex Movie Theaters and into Geronimo's neighborhood. A small dust devil sweeps past us as we park near the elementary school. I can feel the souls of a thousand warriors resting their eyes on this Dago kid from the south side of Chicago.

But enough with the mysticism; back to the main theme.

"Okay, give me the money," she says. "How much ya got?"

She's not gonna like my answer.

"Fourteen dollars and like sixty four cents," I respond, sheepish like a guilty child.

I think, *she should've known better.*

And then, just like it was possibly rehearsed, she grabs at the dollar bills and the CHANGE as well and says, well, what else?

"I should've known better! You know it's twenty dollars! Guess I'll cover ya again..."

No smile on her now.

"Still love me baby?" I call after her.

"YEAH, LIKE A TOOTHACHE!" she screams over the sound of a ringing school bell.

I hear her mumbling obscenities as she walks towards the brightly painted, multicolored schoolhouse that looks as though it belongs on Sesame Street. She enters the yard where the

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young braves are gathered. And with the swiftness of Elvis leaving the building, she's back with the cache.

"Just *smell* this shit baby," she giggles in anticipation.

I open the cellophane and inhale the scent of redemption.

She slams the gear shifter into 1st, and we are on our way back to her apartment on North Campbell.

Once arrived, I light a candle, unwrap my kit, and I draw some water from a red Bugs Bunny cup.

"What's up Doc?" I chuckle sarcastically.

The smoke from cooking the dope wafts off into Heroin Heaven, and I fill the syringe with the remaining brown liquid. I slide the needle under my skin, into a vein that I fondly refer to as 'the ditch'.

Blood billows into my gun and I push the plunger.

HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN

BANG BANG SHOOT SHOOT

WHEN I FEEL MY FINGER ON YOUR TRIGGER

Quietly I sing along to the Beatles' song in my head.

I hear her voice faintly in the distance, calling to me from the kitchen.

"Hey asshole, don't shoot that whole twenty-dollar bag. This is strong shit, not that street dope you've been used to!"

My answer, a loud THUD as my body hits the floor.

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Guess I should've known better.

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Altar Call

David Sprehe

The centipede touches me from behind. The jaw pincers encircle my neck. I part my legs. It forces them further, curling between them. My heartbeat is slow, booming in my ribcage. I can hardly catch breath. From between the body segments, the cock forms, searching, finding, entering. My calves tremble. My feet raise from the floor. I cradle my breasts, igniting subtle nerves. The bug cock swells, stretching my cunt. The bug cock pulses, boiling my organs. I dizzy, sweat beading on my skin. My body rejects. I accept. The antennae stroke tenderly my uncut, Pentecostal hair. My abdomen convulses. My pussy rips. I fart, and release a turd. The pincers tighten, lift. My neck muscles stretch, stretch, and scream. My face reddens, swells, throbs with undrained blood. I dig my nails into my tits, and gouge the flesh. The centipede thrusts, tearing through my wall. Organs are covered in the webs of its semen. I smile, froth rolling down my chin. My skull pops from my spinal cord. My arms fall and dangle. The body relaxes. The pincer grip lightens. I moan the release.

Screams break through the speech of tongues. Women faint in horror, black sludge leaking through their panties, staining their skirts. The men pale light green sick and trembling. Children

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groan, and clutch their stomachs, bloody diarrhea filling their pants. Mucous fluid dribbles from their lips. The pastor drops his Bible, his mouth agape. The congregation has lost sweet rapture. I approach. The pastor pisses himself.

“Join your flock, Reverend.”

Forever the lamb, he obeys. I undress and sit upon the altar platform. I run my hand through my thick tangle of pubic hair. I hear my mother scream. I play like I’m not supposed to, play with what’s hidden, hidden and so shameful because even good can be sin. I quiver, so slightly. My lord-god sticky strings from my fingertips. Inside, hatching. My babies move about in darkness and confusion, bloating my abdomen. I grunt, pushing, farting on the altar.

“Come,” I call sweetly, “Come out.”

My children crawl out of me, hundreds, all of them beautiful red brick like their Father. Their tiny legs touch my skin. My heart glows. I contract violently. Every muscle works to expel. More and more children. I am covered. Every inch. My babies bite, spurting digestive fluids. My skin melts. Babes fall away, fattened and joyful. I press my fingers into my exposures, bleeding with the touch. My babes drink. I look out on the congregation. My vision is blurred. I am fading, willful, giving all for my babies. Even the air now is pain. I never knew, never knew the hurt so good. Like it was meant above all else. Christ mutilated, strung up, killed in the Sun. His followers ate his dead body. I know this, a sudden revelation. Christ’s holy body was

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taken from the tomb and eaten. Judas was hung for ejaculating at the taste, soiling the solemn ritual with humanity. My laughter translates as blood, flowing through my teeth.

“Spirit,” I cough. “Holiest Spirit.”

I scream. The pain hit hard every point. Not pain. Beyond. Far beyond. The congregation flees. My babes sense my distress. They gather, and bring forth the pastor’s fallen Bible. The babes bring the Bible to mommy. Love mom. Mom? Mom? I... I... Pain doesn’t cease. Pain intensifies forever. God... I tear pages from the Book and stick them to my exposures. Blood seeps through, but I am comforted by my new skin. Mom? Mommy?

“Good babies,” I say. “Let mommy rest. Let mommy rest...”

I lie back. My new skin burns, but I am suddenly cold.

“Hungry mommy hungry.”

My vision flutters. “Eat, babes. Eat. Eat your fill, so you can grow big and strong. Big and strong...”

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Overheard in the Coffeehouses of Sucky Parallel Universes

Leo X. Robertson

Do you think there's any chance I don't have to be your maid of honor? Turns out they found someone in need of a kidney near me, and I'm a match. I either have to go to the hospital by Friday and let them take a kidney, or make some equivalent monetary contribution. So if I didn't have to pay for my dress for your wedding — o-of course we're best friends! Don't cry! Forget I said anything. Who needs two kidneys, really?

I just got the message! As of five minutes ago, I'm a crypto-billionaire. After lunch I'm gonna march right in there and tell my boss to — oh wait, new message. I'm broke! They're gonna foreclose on my house by the end of the week if I can't—oh! Wait! I'm rich again. Nope, broke. Hang on! Oh. This time? No. Yes!

So you'll come to my housewarming?

Don't talk so loudly about your new place! I assume it's bigger than the last?

A little, but — you don't think they'll detect the spare square feet and assign someone to live with me?

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They might, so let me quickly tell you how I got away with it for a while. I put vases all over the floor to trick the pressure sensors, then declared myself a hoarder. Better to lie to a therapist every month than have to take in a homeless person. But then my virtual assistant snitched on me, and now I live with Joe.

Since when was skin a human right anyway?

I know! I for one am proud that we're constantly exposed to extreme levels of radiation.

Now we finally live in a nation in which we can see beyond our superficial differences.

For sure! I can't tell who's what.

Everyone just looks sticky.

Citizen! I see you're not wearing your Church of the Latter-Day Action Heroes badge. You must be a tourist, otherwise you'd know that we control this district. May I see your papers? You're from here but haven't accepted our lord Schwarzenegger as your personal savior? Then we require an immediate donation!

Hi, I got the message this morning that I'm on trial. I was just wondering if you could tell me what for? Yes, I'll hold... You'll tell me if I pay you five hundred dollars?! I was hoping I'd have money left over to buy a celebrity avatar for court! How will I

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get the jury to like me now? You might as well just lock me up already!

After they installed the new defense systems at my complex, they changed the kaiju attack alert from burgundy all the way down to chartreuse.

You must be thrilled!

Not really. They're jacking up the rent as a result, so now I can't afford to live there anymore.

Did you read that new novel by—

Of course I didn't.

I was just joking. No one did.

I take it The AI That Consumes All Literature told you it now offers its brain injection subscription plan to ninety nine percent of the population? That's what I learned when they last injected me.

It's awesome. Now we can get back to what book clubs were always about: getting tipsy and bitching about the people who didn't show up.

You like my tunic? It's genuine goatsilk.

That's what my alimony is going towards? Supporting genetically engineered goats that produce spider silk?

There's more than one way to produce goatsilk, you know.

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Please tell me Mikey got his braces and Holly's still attending violin lessons.

Of course! This was a gift from Bill.

There's a "Bill"?

You'd like him. He's an urban farmer. He has his very own herd of goatspiders.

So the last man on earth sits in his chair, right?

I think I know this one!

Then I broke down his door to tell him about my updated privacy policy.

I didn't see that coming.

Well, neither did he.

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Sympathy for the Demoness

Patrick Winters

Cedric Dingle sat lounging in his recliner, scarfing down a bag of Fritos and watching reruns of Two and a Half Men. As the kid on TV made yet another fart joke, Cedric started cracking up, holding his bulbous belly and spewing half-chewed chips from his mouth.

Ashra sneered in disgust at her master's ever-piggish behavior. She scooted a little away from where she knelt beside the recliner, trying to avoid the flinging Fritos. The hardwood floor was starting to hurt her knees again, her master's laughter was giving her a headache, and all the while she'd been thinking to herself: There's Hell, and then there's hell. And she so yearned to go back to the former.

Ashra still didn't know what was more inconceivable: the fact that this tubby, greasy, robe-sporting oaf was actually a well-versed sorcerer, or that she had allowed herself to be enslaved by him.

In the pits of Hell, she had been renowned for two things, above all else: her dark, demonic beauty, and her knack for dragging souls down into the underworld for their everlasting punishment. She

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had clawed her way up to Earth thousands of times in as many years and never once failed to collect her quarry — until Cedric Dingle became the soul in question.

She'd been told by the head of her host that he was damned, but not that it was for his practice of the dark arts; instead, she found it out in the worst way imaginable. No sooner had she popped up in his New Jersey apartment than he bound her with his black magic, and all because he had managed to learn her name. In searching for ways to save his imperiled soul, the scummy little worm had found it mentioned in some ancient book of lore; and any mortal with knowledge of a demon's true name could make that demon into their slave, with the proper spells. With that nugget in mind, he'd waited for her arrival. And so, by the laws of the universe laid down by Heaven and its accursed Creator, Dingle was given complete power over her the moment he said a little spell and proclaimed her name.

Since that time, he had used her to his every possible benefit. He'd sent her after those he considered his enemies, to kill and maim them in various fashions. She'd flambéed his ex-wife, decapitated an old boss of his, and ripped the heart out of a guy who always got Dingle's order wrong at the local taco truck.

After that, he'd started demanding her to do menial tasks about his apartment, like his laundry, his cleaning, and the cooking. And, of course, there were his repeated lustful demands. He'd defiled her

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smooth scarlet skin with the sausages he called fingers, had made her kneel before him as he laid hands to her horns, forcing her to ...

She wanted to wretch, remembering it all — and to sever his genitals with her nails and stick them where he kept stuffing those damned, disgusting Fritos.

Dingle crumpled up the emptied chip bag and tossed it to the floor. “I’m still hungry,” he said to her with a smug smile. “Make me a sandwich.”

Ashra bowed her head, picked up the trash, and stood, heading off into the kitchen and silently fuming.

“Oh,” he called back to her, “and after I’m done eating, whadaya say I plunge myself into the fires of your hell-holes for a while?”

He giggled as she ignored him. She opened the fridge and pulled out the rest of the ham she’d cooked for him the night before. She grabbed a kitchen knife and started slicing into the meat to make his sandwich, pretending it was his gut she was carving up, instead.

She was nearly done with her lowly task when she heard an explosion sound out in the living room, followed by Dingle’s high-pitched scream. She bolted back into the room to see what the matter was, knife still in hand.

Dingle’s TV had been demolished, its pieces scattered everywhere, and in its place — and to Ashra’s amazement — stood the Devil himself,

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wafting away the smoke stirred up from his hellish portal.

Dingle cowered at the sight of him, sinking into his recliner as the Dark One looked them over with a haughty stare. His seven foot, dark-suited frame towered over them. A thin tail flicked about behind him, weaving and twirling like a playful viper. His horns were extravagantly lengthy, sharp, and pitch black, their tips almost scratching the ceiling.

Dingle started making wordless, pathetic noises, holding his hands out to the red giant before him in either defense or reverence.

“Quiet, slug,” the Devil ordered with a smooth, bass voice. “I’m not here for you. But I think I’ll have your soul soon enough.” He flashed the man a knowing smile.

The King of the Pits turned to Ashra. “I’ve come for you. The failure.”

“My Lord...” Ashra spoke up, her voice fluttering with dread. “Forgive me for my failure! But it wasn’t my fault! The mortal—”

“Made you look like a fool,” the Devil cut in with a hiss. “And because of it, you’ve forced me to personally step in on the matter. Your ineptitude and enslavement to this meat-sack is a stain upon the name of the Hosts. My chasms echo with cackling, and it is you who they laugh at! You’ve shamed your unholy duty, and I will not let that go unpunished.”

“Please, my Lord!” Ashra implored. “I’ve served

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you well—”

“And you shall never again serve the glorious cause of Hell. From here on out, you’re an outcast to Perdition. If you ever see Hell again, you will be at the mercy of its many pains — not one of its heroes. Until that time, you’ll spend the remainder of your days here, on Earth. And if you’re going to live among the mortals, we can’t have you looking like that.”

The Devil snapped his fingers and a tremor went through Ashra’s body, making her double over. As her face started to tingle with the sensation, she turned and looked into a mirror upon the wall. She was mortified to see that her reflection was quickly changing. Her luscious red skin was turning waxy and white. Her glorious and cherished horns were sinking into her skull, becoming feeble nubs before disappearing entirely. And her straight-black hair was turning... blonde!

In seconds, every hint of her lovely and demonic self was gone, leaving her looking like a wannabe GAP model instead. She screamed at the horrible thing she’d become.

“You’re human, now,” her former lord said, taking her in with a sadistic satisfaction. “And as such, you have no title, no power... and no name.” At this last part, the Devil had glanced to Dingle, a smirk on his red face. “Ashra is no more.”

He gave a chuckle and another snap of his fingers. A pyre rose up and enveloped the Devil one instant, and in the next, both it and the Dark One were

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gone.

The former demoness spun about, staring in wide-eyed despair at the spot where he'd stood, the floorboards now bearing a slight scorch mark. A veil of smoke hung in the air; she looked through it to where Dingle sat, sweating and dumbfounded.

It was then that she remembered the knife in her hand. Her grip on it tightened as she began to step towards Dingle, who gazed at her like a cornered mouse to a hungry cat.

"Hey! Hey now! I command you to stop and put that down!"

But neither his words nor his will had an effect on her. His power over her was gone, and she kept coming towards him.

"You did this to me, you worm!" She extended the knife, letting it dance in Dingle's view. He stared at it, trying to back away in his recliner.

She looked down to his crotch, remembering all her violent little fantasies under her servitude. She had a pretty good idea of where to start getting her revenge.

"I'm gonna feed you something after all, master," she giggled maniacally. "It's just a quick, tiny snack; we have so much else to do before the night is through, after all..."

She leapt at him and started cutting. Before the night was through, she learned something that made her new existence the littlest bit more

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bearable — just because she was no longer a demon, it didn't mean that she couldn't send someone screaming to Hell.

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You Can Go Now

L Murphy

His fingers are inside me. I can feel him moving around and trying his best to get a reaction out of me but I don't move. I lay perfectly still, I don't feel anything, none of the normal throes of euphoria rush out of me and I am genuinely bored. I stare at the ceiling and wait for him to give up, wait for him to climb on top of me and fuck me until he cums so he can leave my room and I can fall back asleep. The appeal to fake the entire evening does not overcome me, the appeal to make this fun, easy for him, or really at all enjoyable doesn't appeal to me either, the only thing that really does is watching him get frustrated over trying to please me. I am dissociated, numb, the small glimmering lights above my bed are giving me a headache, the slow hum of Junior Kimbrough from my stereo is keeping my heartbeat steady.

I breath in slowly and grab his hand.

"Just fuck me," I said as I coldly pulled his hand away from me.

He looked at me confused.

"Oh? Ok."

He nervously pulled out a condom and I pulled my dress off over my shoulders, sitting naked in front

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of him.

He gawked at me for a moment and slid the condom on.

I turned around.

“Fuck me from behind,” I said.

I think he thought I was trying to be kinky by being demanding.

I wasn’t. I didn’t give a fuck about being kinky.

I just didn’t want to look at his face and, historically, men finish quicker when they fuck me from behind.

I bent over and felt him push deep into me. He started out slowly and I could feel every inch of his moderately sized dick. I tried to not yawn, the dizzy feeling I had gained from the wine was wearing off and I was tired, again. My entire body ached, again. I wanted to sleep for an entire day, again. I had to be up early for work, he needed to hurry.

“Harder,” I said.

He pushed into me deeper and faster, grabbing onto my hips and doing his best not to dig his nails into me. I reach my hand around and grabbed his hands.

“Pull my hair.”

He grabbed a fist of my hair, lightly.

“Harder.”

He yanked on my hair and I let out a small giggle.

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The searing pain of my hair being yanked made my nipples perk up, the warmth rushed around in my chest.

He pushed in deeper and pulled harder.

“HARDER!” I shouted.

“Fucking hit me!”

He lifted his hand up and slapped my ass lightly.

“HARDER!”

He slapped harder and I could feel a sting.

An eruption of giggles lifted out of my chest, my body released and my headache ceased. I could feel him pulsing inside me.

I could feel myself tighten around his cock.

I could feel.

“Don’t fucking stop.”

And he turned me around onto my back and pushed into me.

I grabbed his hand and guided it to my throat.

“Choke me,” I said looking straight into his eyes.

He smiled and gripped his fingers around my throat and pushed deeper inside me.

As my eyes rolled back, the world moved slowly, and I could feel the small beads of anxiety and anger erupt from my skin.

I screamed, giggled, wrapped my legs around his waist and forced his cock to stay inside me.

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While he filled me.

While I let the screams loose, digging my nails into his back.

He collapsed on top of me, gasping deep, heavy breaths. I felt myself come down, the sensation came back to the tips of my lips, and my body returned to its reserved, cold state.

I moved out from under him and pulled my dress back over my body.

“Okay, you can go now.”

I pulled his pants from off the floor and threw them at him, absentmindedly checking my phone.

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

Hide and Seek

Lucas Chapman

Nobody ever wanted to play hide and go seek with me, especially girls. That was until I met Jasmine one night in a bar called the Rooster's Crow after the baseball game. It had been a doozy of a game, the St. Louis Cardinals against the Milwaukee Brewers. The Brewers scored at the top of the ninth sending it into extra innings, twelve to be exact, until Buster Rosario smacked a walk off homer for a Cardinals win. The crowd had gone so crazy, everyone was hugging on each other and cheering and giving high five's; it was Saturday, and one of those nights you just don't want to end. After Buster's homer, me and Johnny — my best friend for as long as I can remember — overheard a group of drunk college girls talking about going to the Crow, so we decided that we would follow.

The Rooster's Crow was as crowded as expected on a Saturday night after a Cards win. People were jammed from wall to wall having such a good time drinking and talking and dancing that it was making my head swim. You see, I don't get out much, not really. And when I do, it can sometimes get overwhelming. Johnny isn't much help either, he stays quiet most of the time.

Not long after we arrived, I saw the girls cozy up to

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some frat guys, so I wanted to leave, deciding it was a bad idea to come. But I remembered momma telling me long ago that I needed to get out more and socialize. So I did. For my momma. And man am I glad I did because it was how I met Jasmine!

Well, maybe I should say she met me. While making my way to the bar for another Shirley Temple, I somehow ended up on the dance floor. Imagine my horror as I dodged sweaty bodies reeking of alcohol and sweat! I pushed them off me as I made my way to the perimeter of the dance floor. And that's when Jasmine came out of nowhere. I think she tripped on someone's shoe, but she quite literally fell into my arms. Her eyes were golden brown, her hair soft and shimmering. She was the color of caramel and her complexion was buttery smooth. Her skin was so perfect that I thought of it more as a rare animal pelt that deserved to be hanging on a wall above my fireplace.

I couldn't breathe or think or talk. I sat holding the angel of my life in the middle of a crowded bar. Mamma told me once that love can knock you off your feet, but I didn't believe her until that moment.

"Thank you," she said to me. Her breath smelled like limes and tequila. Her smile was so white, so beautiful.

My heart felt like it was going to hammer right out of my chest and do a jig on the dance floor. I was absolutely paralyzed by Jasmine.

"Don't worry about it," I managed.

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She smelled like sweet sweat with an undertone of marijuana. I don't believe girls should smoke, mamma told me only hussies smoked, but for Jasmine I could look past all that.

It felt like it was only her and I inside the packed bar. The music, so loud before, went quiet. People, noises, laughter — all gone. All I could hear was her breath as it blew against my cheek and her heart beating through my arms.

And then — and THEN — she untangled herself from my arms and kissed me on the cheek. “You are my knight in shining armor tonight, sir.”

Just like that, I knew I was in love. Not the sort of love that I gave to momma, no one would replace momma, but the type of love that I saw in the movies or heard about in those teenage pop songs. I wanted to tell her a thousand and one things, but nothing came to my mouth. It was like I was frozen in a block of ice.

“You're silly,” Jasmine said and then winked at me with the longest, most luscious eye lashes you have ever seen. And before I could react, she patted me on the shoulder and disappeared into crowd.

Precious seconds tick by as I tried to get my body to move, to work again, so that I could find my Jasmine. I didn't know her name at the time, so I threw myself into the crowd, pushing people to the floor and yelling rather foolishly, “Come back! Please come back to me!”

Johnny came rushing out of nowhere and I told him to look too. We searched every inch of the Rooster's

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Crow: the kitchen, behind the bar, the staff break room, the men's room, even the women's room. Yet, she remained allusive. Johnny and me even stayed until last call to find her but still she wasn't there. I was so frustrated I even yelled at Johnny, called him stupid and dumb (I later apologized).

But — BUT — as we got outside I got an idea. She was playing hide and seek!

"Jonny," I said. "She's only toying with me. She's still here!"

I took off down the side walk and turned down an ally way that ran parallel to the Crow. And lo and behold there she was, standing under the orange glow of a street lamp with a lit joint between her plump lips.

I skidded to a halt, the bottom of my shoes scrapping against the uneven asphalt. I was so excited that I tripped and went sprawling into a puddle.

I looked up, slightly befuddled, and saw the angel of my life not even looking at me! Instead, a boy had come out of the Crow's back door and was kissing Jasmine. He groped her buttocks, caressed the back of her neck.

He was kissing my angel. My girl. Those were my lips, not his. I was so angry I couldn't see straight. Much like a child — even though I still get embarrassed to this day thinking about it — I kicked and slapped and pulled my hair in white hot rage.

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I'd rather not say what I did next, momma said it's not good for a man to always be hanging out his dirty laundry. Suffice to say, I got rid of the boy AND I got Jasmine's address!

The ensuing month was full of passion sweeter than any piece of honeydew or watermelon or sweet summer cantaloupe. The passion between us was hotter than the dog days of summer and our relationship was budding into something especially beautiful.

We went to dinner with her friends at the local cafe, we went to a Cardinals game against the Boston Red Socks (Cards lost four to zip), the zoo with her sister, and vacation at the Lake of the Ozarks with her family.

I was always on the watch for boys that would try to come near her. There were many, and my work was tiring, but none of them were able to get close to my angel. At one point, they even tried coming to her house! But I recruited Jonny and together we staked out her house from the other side of the street while in my car. We sat there for weeks, all hours of the day, shooing away perverts trying to snatch my angel away from me.

Every night my sweet would leave her bedroom lamp on to let me know that she appreciated my watch and that she was thinking of me. Seeing her shadow through the curtain while she changed for bed was enough to keep me going and know that my work was important.

But a man has certain needs. An itch impossible to

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ignore. My needs had gotten in the way of past relationships, so I desperately tried to ignore them the best I could. Soon though, after a particularly troubling week of watching the house, I couldn't stand it! I had to do something, had to feel her lips on me once again, run a hand over her perfect skin or smell her beautiful hair.

It was Jonny's idea actually (I give credit when it's due — momma said its rude if you don't) that I write her a letter like an old-time romantic film I always see her watching through her living room window. He even got the notion to ask her to a game of hide and seek like pa always wanted to play.

So I did! In my neatest handwriting, I wrote:

Dear Jasmine,

I long for your touch, your kiss, your smell as I know you long for mine. So, let's play hide and seek! Tomorrow evening, I will hide somewhere in the house and it is your job to come and find me! If you are able to find me I will pay you in kisses and a dinner date on me. Perhaps, Cafe Coffee you took your mom to? Or even that BBQ place you like on 5thave? Either way, choice is yours!

—Your Love

P.S I'm a VERY practiced hider!

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

I thought the letter was good, but Johnny said it could use some work to which I got furious and told him off. Sometimes, Jonny can be so blunt about things!

Any who, I sealed the letter with tape and placed it in her mail box. We waited that night, watching for her to receive the letter to know that the game was indeed on. She came home for her job at the attorney's office around six, ate dinner (leftover pizza from when her best friend was over), and watched a couple episodes of *The Expanse*. Afterwards, she folded laundry, fed Maggie — her Bulldog, and went to sleep without a shower.

My sweetling never checked the mail, but that was ok. I knew she wanted to play hide and seek with me like she had the night of our first date at the Crow.

Johnny and I watched until 1 A.M. before I decided to go back home to momma and get some much-needed shut eye. Jasmine left her house around ten for work, so if I wanted to get a really good spot I needed to get there right after she left.

I was almost too giddy to fall asleep that night! I felt like a boy on Christmas Eve night waiting for Santa to slide down the chimney and deliver all the wonderful presents. Eventually Mr. Sandman did come, and I dreamt of all my past relationships, happy that they just didn't quite work out.

I dressed in all black — boots, hoody, jeans. I even wore gloves as not to leave any smudges that could alert her to my location. Johnny said I looked great

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and mama didn't say anything about it. She only sat in her rocker in front of the television like she does re-watching old black and white shows on the TV Land channel that I put on for her.

"Going out mamma. Be back tomorrow. Jonny will be here if you need anything." I kissed her cold cheek and brushed her stringy hair. Sometimes, momma could be such a drag.

I made it to Jasmine's house just as she was backing her silver Toyota out of the driveway. I blew her a kiss and told her that I hope she has a good day when she drove past.

The inside of her house smelled like her flowery perfume and I almost melted right there in the kitchen. It was like she held a love spell over me. Never before had I loved any of my ex's like I loved my Jasmine. I was so excited that I could hardly keep my hands from shaking as I tip-toed into her bedroom and looked through her dresser drawers. I laid on her bed and put each of her pillows to my face and took in a deep breath of her scent.

I laid there for exactly one hour, fantasizing about the night we were about to have. I almost wanted to make my spot easy so that she could find me quickly and we could get right down to it.

But no, hide and seek was my favorite game and since Jasmine was the only girl that ever wanted to play, I sucked it up and stuffed some of her undergarments into my pocket to keep my mind busy while I waited.

I methodically walked through her small house

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looking for the really good places. I went to her bathroom and stripped naked to sit in her shower and smell all of her womanly soaps. By the time I was done, the time was 4 P.M. or close enough to it that I really needed to get my spot.

I wasn't very satisfied with any hiding spots on the upstairs, so I decided on the downstairs instead. I knew she didn't go down there much and figured there were probably some undiscovered nook or cranny (there usually are) that I could wedge myself into.

An open stair case led to the unfinished basement that smelled like rotten mold and earth worms. I could understand why a young woman would be scared of a basement like this — but I liked it, loved it in fact. It reminded me of my own room at momma's house. Boxes were stacked all the way to the small window to the right. Some art work was piled next to the water heater and electrical fuse box. Behind the stairs was a closet chock full of winter coats and clothes that no longer fit my Jasmine. Perfect.

I turned out the single overhead light bulb by the long cord and slithered my way into the closet behind the moth-eaten coats, scarves, and sweaters.

The mold was worst in the closet and the faint scent of my angel coming from the coats was driving me nuts so I played with her undergarments inside my pocket and waited for her to come home.

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I must have fallen asleep because it was dark outside the basement window when I finally heard the slamming of the garage door and the wooden click of high heels over the kitchen tile.

Finally! Jasmine, the girl of my forever, was home at last. I heard her walk down the hallway to our bedroom. The springs in the bed creaked and groaned as she struggled off her shoes and then no doubt her knee length paisley skirt and gray sweater. Jasmine was only a few feet above my head, undressing and slipping onto (hopefully) smaller clothes. My breath became ragged, my head swam.

She would probably go barefooted, the sneaky devil, to mask her movements while looking for me.

No matter. I was very good at hide and seek.

I bravely composed myself and didn't wait long before I heard the water heater rattle to life and the quiet splashing of water as she drew a bath — the same bath I had just been in hours before. I wondered if she could smell me like I smelled her. I blushed at the notion.

Giddy with anticipation, twice I left my spot in the closet and ventured partly up the stairs. But then I remembered the night we met, the way she played hide and seek with me, and knew it was fate that we must play this game.

The water heater grinded to a stop and I heard her — actually hear her voice — call, “Maggie! Come to momma.” A moment later the English Bulldog's

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nails clicked over the hard wood surface and I traced the fat dog's path, feeling slightly lightheaded from hearing her voice at last.

Minutes ticked by where I heard nothing except the whisper of her feet dancing lightly in her bedroom as she — what? Dressed for me? I didn't know and was getting frustrated she had yet to begin our date.

But then I heard footsteps coming down the stairs! My heart skipped, I readied myself to gaze upon those memorizing eyes — but it was only Johnny.

"Take it easy," he whispered to me. "She's only preparing for you. I checked in on her. Putting on some lingerie. Real sexy. Red and black. You'll like it."

I choked on my spit. "Are you serious?"

"Serious as a snake bite. Now get back in the closet. I'll be in the car."

Johnny clambered back up the steps rather too loudly. He could be so irritating! But, needless to say, I followed his advice and crept back through the winter coats but at least I wasn't alone, a spider crept out from the sleeve of a Calvin Cline jacket. I named him Timmy and toyed with him in my palm until I grew bored and crushed him into a red paste. Curiously, I took one of his tiny legs and placed it in my mouth. Salty. By belly rumbled and I licked the rest of Timmy from my sweaty palm.

Where was she? I was growing bored rather quickly. At least when my papa played with me I

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could hear him shouting and cursing at momma and could judge where he was at in the double wide trailer. But Jasmine was either not playing or was really, really good.

My thoughts kept drifting back to the Rooster's Crow and how that I could not find her afterwards, she'd been playing then as she was now. Oh, she was good. Making me get in my own head like that.

Steps, followed by tinier, more frequent steps. She was coming out of her bedroom! I grinned and then snickered, slurping the rest of Timmy out of my palm.

"Hello? Ok, be there in a sec." I heard her say from somewhere in the kitchen. Had she found me? My heart was ready to explode out of my chest. I couldn't be sure if she were talking to me or not and I imagined her creeping down the steps, a big smile on her beautiful face. What would I say? Perhaps something along the lines of "hey baby" or maybe "hi my love." But I thought a simple hello would do just fine.

I peeked out of the coats and that's when I heard the doorbell ring. I heard her squeal in excitement, and then the slow creaking of the front door opening.

"Hi," a voice carried downstairs... a male voice. "You look absolutely lovely tonight."

"Thank you," the love of my life responded, almost breathlessly. Who was this? And where was Jonny to let this happen? My anger spiked dangerously as a new and wild thought hit me straight from left

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field. Was she cheating on me?

No, that couldn't be it. Not her, not my Jasmine... my angel. But as the hours ticked by the harder it was to convince myself otherwise. They ate dinner (Chinese delivery) and watched a movie after that (Ironman 3). I heard Jasmine giggle as he made her laugh in such a flawless manor. Even though it hurt to admit, this boy was smooth. So much so that he had completely distracted my Jasmine from hide and go seek. It was supposed to be our night...my night and here he was, probably named Chad, stealing away my girl.

I thought I could wait until he left, but when I heard her ask if he had a condom I blew my lid and crept around the coats, careful not to make a noise. I waited at the bottom of the stairs in the pitch-black basement as their footsteps carried off to the bedroom, almost immediately followed by the screech of mattress springs.

"Got to go for it, pal," Johnny said from behind the water heater.

I nodded and said, "I know buddy. I know. Every time now, huh?"

Jonny chuckles echoed around the basement. "Seems that way, don't it?"

I nodded and took each of the wooden steps oh so carefully, pausing half way up as Jasmine screamed out in orgasm. I blew steam from my nose and climbed the rest of the way, not bothering to hide my movements. They wouldn't hear a freight train bust through the kitchen let alone a few steps as I

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searched for a knife, eventually selecting a dirty steak knife from the sink.

I suddenly felt more exhaustion than anger, another girl... another cheater. Why did they always do this to me? I shouldn't have been surprised, Mamma said girls were hussies and couldn't be trusted.

Many girlfriends ago I would almost look forward to the breakup, but not tonight. I really liked Jasmine and thought she was the one. With a heavy sigh and slumped shoulders, I kicked away the dog and walked down the hall.

I paused, listening to her moans and Chad's heavy panting through the cracked bedroom door. I knocked, mamma said it was polite to always knock, but either they didn't hear me or just didn't care. Rude.

I gripped the knife in one gloved hand and opened the door with the other.

"Ready or not..." I said, relishing the sudden look of terror on their faces.

"...HERE I COME!"

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Thy Brother's Keeper

Jim Farren

Iron Mary poured thick, chicory-laced coffee into two chipped mugs and set them on the three-legged, formica-topped table propped into one corner of her kitchen. Easing herself onto a rickety, straight-backed chair she nudged a tin of evaporated milk toward her brother.

Picking up the tin, Grady poured until his coffee was the color of brown sugar then returned it to the table and tapped the silver top with a blunt fingertip. Squinting one eye nearly closed he grinned across the table. "You remember what we used to say after Ma started buying this canned cow?

"No tits to pull,

No shit to pitch.

Just punch a hole

In the sonuvabitch."

His grin broadened as Iron Mary threw back her head and laughed. When she righted herself there was a dribble of tobacco juice at one corner of her mouth.

"How long've you lived here now, Sis?"

Iron Mary slurped her coffee and looked around

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the room. Scrunching up her face she spat into the Old Luzianne can that served as spittoon. "Thirty year come fall," she said in a voice thick with phlegm... then added, "Mebbe thirty-one."

"And nobody left now but you."

"Well, me 'n that damned billy goat," she nodded toward the yard outside the window. "He wouldn't stay around 'cept nobody else'll bake him biscuits. The mangy bastard ate the tops off two rows of my winter carrots last week. If I could find the bullets to my rifle I'd shoot him, if I could find my rifle. I'd shoot him right between the eyes only he's so hard headed it prob'ly wouldn't take. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about all the people who're gone," Grady said. Staring out the back door at what had once been a piddling town but was now nothing but collapsed buildings and overgrown lots, he sighed. "The place sure lived up to its name, huh?"

Iron Mary cackled at that, the dribble of tobacco juice turning into a trickle she had to wipe away with the leathery palm of her hand. "You're remembering what Ma said, ain't you?"

Grady nodded.

"We come up the hill in that old yella pick-up truck with the burnt-out clutch. Me, you, and Buell in the back; Ma and Pa up front. Took us what, two and a half, three hours to climb the mountain? Pa stopping every couple of miles to fill the radiator and Ma getting madder every time he pulled over. Uprooted was the word she used, wadn't it?"

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Uprooted and moved with never so much as a do-you-mind, is what she said. Then after the longest time we turned yonder at the bottom of what ended up being Main Street. Pa puffed up big and proud as a peacock, Whataya think, darling? he asked Ma. Seems mighty small, she says with a sniff. That kind of put him off so he tells her he somehow recollected the place as being bigger than this. Well, Ma says, it sure as hell must a' shrunk."

Iron Mary laughed so hard she hiccuped, then spat into the coffee can and slurped from her mug. "By the time they got around to giving us a post office Pa's store was doing so good nobody argued when he said that ought to be the name of the place... Mustashrunk."

"Ma never did think it was funny," Grady grinned.

"Can you blame her?" Iron Mary's voice took on an edge. "Little pissant town in the middle of the road and her without a friend or neighbor to her name."

Grady took time to roll and light a cigarette before returning the Prince Albert can to his hip pocket and wiping at the table top with a callused hand. "I miss her, Sis, you know? Her being gone all these years and I still miss her something fierce. Pa, too."

"If you'd ever settled down with a good woman it'd be easier for you now," Iron Mary said.

"Sure," Grady said derisively. "Like having a man around ever did you a lot of good. Twice widowed and your kids never coming to visit. What do you get for your trouble, Christmas cards from California?"

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Iron Mary took her time getting up from the table. Crossing to the chipped enamel sink she gazed out the window at the thickening dusk. "Lookit that damned goat," she muttered. "Standing spraddle-legged in the middle of my garden deciding what he's gonna eat next. The sonuvabitch done got half a row of beets." Rapping sharply on the pane with bony knuckles she hollered through the glass. "GET OUTTA THERE YOU MANGY, LOP-EARED BASTARD! AND STAY OUT ELSE I'LL BARBECUE YOUR SPOTTED ASS."

Fetching the coffee from the stove she refilled their mugs then resumed her seat and sighed.

"It ain't as bad as you make out, Grady. My daughters done good for themselves. It's only their husbands I can't abide me. I don't blame the girls for staying away; a woman's first loyalty is to her man. God knows I was loyal to mine, both of 'em. Me and that four-poster bed in yonder plumb wore the first one out. The way we went at it it's a wonder I ain't got a dozen chil'run. And the second one was just as randy. Yes sir, I always did like my lovin'. Still do, 'cept finding a willing partner ain't as easy these days." She cleared her throat and emptied it into the coffee can. "The fact I don't have steady company's no reason you shouldn't be warm at night. Don't you get tired living alone?"

Grady stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray then reached again for the condensed milk. "I reckon I do, but who'd have me? When I was a younger man I was too worried about whiskey, horses and the kind of gal I daren't bring home. Now I'm three

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years into social security and live in a shack that makes this place look like something special. I got two hun'erd dollars in the bank, a crippled hound near old as me, a Massey Ferguson tractor that runs half the time, and just enough corn to keep my hogs fed through the winter if we don't get a long spell of snow. My knees creak like hick'ry splits, my teeth were made by a jackleg dentist, and I don't shave these days as it's easier not to. I smell of farts and failure, Sis. Oh yeah, I'm a door prize."

"That depends on who you talk to," Iron Mary wiped a thread of tobacco juice from her chin. "Esther McClung'd give her eyeteeth to get you, assuming she had any. She asks of you every time I see her. She gets a faraway look in her eye when your name comes up, Grady. Was she a younger woman I'd call her giddy."

"Ester McClung," he snorted. "Now that'd be a match, wouldn't it? She'd have me cleaned up, watered down, and sitting in the front pew at church before I got my duffle unpacked. Why I'd be tiptoeing around her house in sock feet afraid to scuff the carpet. And Lord knows she'd all the time be pestering me to do this, do that, or do something else. Ester McClung? No thank you, ma'am."

"What about Imogene Walkup then? There's a woman to keep your back warm come cold weather. Living above the drugstore the way she does, your place'd seem a mansion to her. Imogene likes her pork, too. She's always asking after your hogs."

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"No wonder, fat as she is. I'm not sure I got enough corn to keep her fed all winter."

"Well, I'm beginning to see why you sleep alone, Grady. Your problem is you're too damn particular and that's not good in a man your age." With that Iron Mary folded her hands and pursed her lips, staring down into her lap.

Grady extracted the Prince Albert can from his back pocket and took his time rolling another cigarette. He lit it with a kitchen match and took a deep drag. When Iron Mary refused to look up from her lap he sighed.

"Understand me, Sis. I ain't gonna do it," he said softly. Before she could protest, he continued, "Ever' time you start talking about women lusting after me it ends up this same way—you wanting me to move in here. I 'preciate your concern, truly I do. But the answer is no just like it was the last time this come up and will be the next. You know I love you, Sis. And I know you're as lonely as I am, but it just ain't right."

Embarrassed, Iron Mary sniffled. Looking up from under a long hank of gray hair she took in a whistling breath and let it out slowly. "Buell didn't see the wrong in it," she reminded him quietly. "It didn't hurt him none, neither, if you ask me," she added lamely.

"That's not the point and you know it. Besides, Buell's dead. I ought to know, I buried him."

"I still can't believe the two of you fought over me."

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“Not over you, Sis — about you. It ain’t the same thing.”

“What do they call it, what you done?”

“It’s called fratricide and it’s a sin.”

“We’re all sinners, Grady. That’s the thing of it.”

“The thing of it is I’m searching for redemption.”

“Well, it ain’t like you and me never done it before, Grady.”

“That was then, Sis, this is now. Christ, we were kids. We didn’t know any better. Leastways I didn’t know any better.”

“Buell weren’t a kid these last several years. He knew better and still liked it just fine.”

Grady simply looked at her.

“Come on to bed with me, Grady,” Iron Mary said. “The night get long and I’m chilled to the bone.”

“I can’t, Sis,” Grady’s face knotted up until it looked like a clenched fist. “I won’t,” his voice cracked over the word.

Iron Mary rose from the table and went to the sink again. Peering out the window she hissed, “Lookit that sonuvabitch.” Clawing to throw up the sash she stuck out her head and screamed, “GET OUTTA THERE YOU HEATHEN FROM HELL! TOUCH ANOTHER ONE OF THEM CABBAGES AND I’LL CASTRATE YOU!”

Slamming the window shut she backhanded a jelly glass off the drain board onto the floor where it

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skittered across the worn linoleum. "God damn," she spat. "I do not know why I put up with that critter!"

With her back to her brother, Iron Mary stood frozen for several minutes while the silence grew until it was somehow louder than her yelling had been. Turning from the window she leaned across the table and rested her weight on stiffened arms. Her face was inches from Grady's, half-curtained by a stringy hank of hair. She caught his eyes with hers, her gaze pinning him to the chair like an insect specimen. Her face was creased, like wadded cloth, a soft brown trickle of tobacco juice at one corner of her mouth.

"I'm going to my room now," she said softly. "Be sure to turn off the light before you come in."

Grady stared up at her. After a moment he blinked.

"Or before I leave," he said.

"Or that," Iron Mary pushed herself upright. Using her tongue to work the plug of tobacco from her cheek she spat it into the coffee can. Wiping her chin dry she smoothed the wrinkled front of her dress with nervous hands, her bony fingers plucking lightly at the buttons as she turned from the table in an arthritic pirouette.

She paused at the kitchen doorway.

"You and me're all either of us got left, Grady," she told his back. "Hell, we're all we ever had whether you admit it or not. And don't try to tell me you ain't chilled, too."

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Motionless at the table Grady focused his eyes on one of the oilcloth's red checkerboard squares.

He heard the floorboards creak as Iron Mary walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

After a while he got up from his chair and carefully gathered up the chipped mugs as if they were priceless china then placed them in the sink.

He heard Iron Mary pulling the bedroom window curtains closed.

Returning the tin of condensed milk to the refrigerator he noticed the only other items on the shelves were a bottle of Heinz catsup, half a loaf of Wonder Bread, and an open package of Oscar Mayer bologna.

He heard Iron Mary's work shoes being kicked off into a corner.

Looking out the kitchen window he saw that the goat was still in the garden, contentedly munching a rutabaga.

He heard the bed creak in protest as it took Iron Mary's weight.

Crossing to the short wall between the two doors, one leading outside and the other down the hallway, Grady raked the fingers of one hand through his hair then wash-ragged the same hand across his face as if that would somehow change his features.

He listened to the catch in Iron Mary's breathing as she cried.

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Standing alone in the dimly lit kitchen, like an actor left on stage, Grady wondered how they'd come to this? Or rather, wondered how they never seemed to have left it?

He heard the bedsprings creak as Iron Mary rolled over, the sound of her fist striking a pillow.

His mind's eye could picture her withered body, awash in tears and shivering beneath the Eastern Star quilt that once covered their childhood bed. From nowhere one of his mother's homilies came to Grady, the one she had used to instruct her children on the importance of family; Home is the place that when you have to go there, they have to take you in. It amazed him how the more things changed the more they really did stay the same. And it amazed him, too, that after all these years he was still able to cry.

With the sound of his sister's sobbing thick in his ears Grady stood betwixt the two doorways, coughed softly and, with fingers as wooden as his heart, reached for the wall switch to turn off the light.

HORROR SLEAZE TRASH

This Wasn't Paris

John Patrick Robbins

She screamed, as always, fed up with my vices, and that I simply didn't indulge her rage once only fueled her more.

"You son of a bitch! Do you not feel anything?" she asked.

She was full of shit and mock concern she usually added for good measure.

"Yes, I feel all sorts of things," I replied as I lit my cigarette from the candle that had been placed upon the table (I'm guessing) to set the mood, but honestly, I didn't think they had a scented candle called 'tantrum throwing bitch' on the market.

"Yeah? What do you feel besides the need for another drink?"

"Sweetheart, there is so little you truly seem to know about me. Now have a drink with me and relax."

"All you ever want to do is drink or fuck, you lazy bastard!"

"Well... what better thing to do is there than drink or fuck? You have something against orgasms, I take it?"

"You don't really want me, it's strictly for the sex, you jerk."

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“Well, I enjoy having sex with you. By the way, your ass looks marvelous in that dress, my dear, any chance I can see you out of it?” I said as I kicked back the last of my whiskey.

“You’re a pig. You don’t need a real woman, you just need a whore.”

“Are they not real women too, sweetheart?” I asked, laughing as I reached for the decanter to pour myself another drink.

She looked at me in disgust. “You’re a drunk!”

“Yes,” I replied. “And your point?”

“It’s all one big joke with you. Nothing is serious, you’ll never want to clean your act up. Settle down, give me a kid!”

“Well, I would have a while back, sugar, but they all run so fast I just can’t seem to catch one for you.”

“Fuck you ! You ignorant son of a bitch!” she said, as I let her go into yet another hissy fit.

I flicked my ashes into a wine glass on the table.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Most, I believe most, call it smoking my dear.”

“That’s a good wine glass. What if I had wanted a drink of wine?”

“My dear, do you not know me that well? Wine is for painters and women or old gay men pretending to be straight. I drink whiskey. That is it.”

“Yeah, and whatever else happens to be around.”

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“Yes indeed, I do.”

She sat at the table, looking to me more as some sort of bad child than her equal.

“Why the hell do I stay with you”?

“Good question, sweetheart,” I said as I began to stand. “You know I have many feelings; in fact, right now I’m going to have to run because of one.”

“Yeah? What feeling is that?” she said in mock interest.

“Well, I’m feeling like I have to piss. Excuse me.”

She said nothing as I left the room. When I returned she was gone.

So I guess, to my question of seeing her out of that dress? Well, it was a no.

She was gone, and I simply drank till the night bled into the day.

Some people truly need to find a sense of humor.

She yearned for the love of romance novels, not the reality of its existence.

And she yearned for the romance of Paris.

As the candle slowly died I watched the sun creep through the small kitchen window.

Outside the whores yelled at passing cars, and the city breathed life once again.

One thing for sure.

This truly wasn’t Paris.

PROSE IN POOR TASTE

Cubenville

Mick Alberts

Focus your audio. Unhook your ears, Clyde. Stand by while I pad your skull. I don't know how much of this is for real — I only heard it secondhand myself. But the fella who told it to me was creeped out — that much is for sure. I was late to the picture, and it's a good thing I was cause nobody who was there was ever seen again — Christmas cancelled — except for Socrates, and like I said, he got all buggy from it. Fuse blown, permanent.

I was heading out to the Flats. We used to play out there, break out like the measles. It was a good place cause it was all lunar and crazy and you could get away from the cubes. Salt Lake was squaresville. Strictly Podunk. But the Flats was berries.

So, like I was saying, I'm on the way out there on my scoot, amped up on airplane glue in the early brights, figuring the scene would still be going. I see something out on that salty psychocolor horizon, a fire ant on a cocaina sand dune, way out there on the salt checkerboard, squares as far as you could see, and that one spider out there, like, crawling.

I motor down there, a bit twitchy, wondering what's up. As I get closer I can see it's one of us.

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You can tell from a distance. Dark clothes, and that freaky aura. Turns out it's Socrates. Normally his claws are pretty sharp, but I scoot up and he's all wiggled out. Out there in the salt among the glass puddles, biscuit snatchers clutching at his kneecaps, and some kind of yellowy goop on his sleeves and his shirt and his shoes and the backs of his hands. He gets spouty, in snatches, all out of order, but this is the sense I make out of it, some of it his words, some of it mine. Hope you got a lot of room in your ears.

It started out a dig same as anything else, out there on bennies and glue, bongos and bonfires, maryjane. Bikes and hotrods chrome and candy-apple-everything, resting out there on the salt cubes.

Willard read one of his poems. Yeah, I wasn't there to hear it, but, I've heard Will often enough and he's all

Cat with a spider for a heart

The man in a wheelchair of hypodermic needles

Spider spins a web in the frame of an hourglass

So there they are, all sitting around their fires and getting sweaty and slimy and smelly in their sleeping bags, rods and cones and mushrooms, or listening to Willard with his beat king's jive and the racket coming from sax and bongos and axe. Swapping yarns and manifestoes and smoke and body fluids. Cosmic goo. Firelight fireflies trailing up into the night.

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Then someone sees these orange lights in the sky. Casual like, like what's that? Moving snarly orange against the purple night. Like, cool, pretty. What is that? Three lines squiggle and spark forward and backward. Mostly forward, closer. Some kind of crazy sputnik up there. And then they aren't lines but dots. And then they aren't dots, but these glowing spheres. Then they're not glowing, but chrome, chromium, as the sun starts to eyeball that gang of gawking beats from the horizon.

Like it's xmas, three silver spheres hanging in the sky. Ezekiel's chariot. The comrades are starting to freak maybe a little. And one of the things lowers itself down, quiet like, real slow. So now there's this big globe sitting on the salt like a chromium planet, not a dent on it, just a dark line down the middle, a groove. This thing is a slinky piece of homework. Sharp enough to shave. Nobody moves for a second, except maybe to stand up, step back a step, shuffle, eyeball each other, smoking ciggies. They tilt their heads. Is the thing, making a noise? Like, a whirring horror-flick sinewave. An inside out clanging. Bounce bounce bounce bounce clunk.

And then... something blasts out the top of it. Orange lightning. Blurts up all squiggly, jaggles around in the air for a while, wiggles out in different directions, a hypnogogic jellyfish, just spurting around, all sloppy. Then it sort of settles down. It has something in mind. It starts to, like, sniff around, first seven-eight tentacles, then more like just one, curly-queuing and doubling back. It sniffs at the crowded beats, who are now really

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getting freaked, but too freaked to make for it. This sparkly meat hook right in their faces, checking out one comrade and then another. After a few tics it gets bored with the humanoids and turns mostly to the hot rods and bikes arrayed all helter skelter on the salt, chrome green and exhaust pipes and spokes. It checks em out real close, then it stops to focus on one — Ben's flatblack t-bucket. It looks at it like it got a bad smell. Then it, like, stomps it, squashing it a little and sending small parts tinkling off in willy nilly directions. Ben, he like, gasps. Then the x-ray sort of sparks and buzzes all up and down, from tip to where it's extending out of the silver xmas ball. It inserts, what, a hypo needle maybe, into the t-bucket, and Ben's Ford turns blue orange, then sort of melts and explodes itself inside out.

The buzzing white-orange tentacle thing starts to get pissy then, moving to another hot rod and another, then to a bike, blasting them and turning them fiery blue and orange and white and exploding them all over the salt, melting them, insiding them out. This goes on for a while, some of the beatnoids now turning tail and running. Sparky noises and explosions and parts flying and bouncing and metal sizzling and leaking, until it looks like there are no hot rods left. The squiggly raygun thing checks out all it did, like, pleased, swelling up like a poisoned pooch. But then one tentacle seems to catch a whiff that some of the comrades are escaping, running for all they're worth — which aint much — as far and as fast as they can get from the glowing squid and all its

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nasty higgledly piggedly explosions.

The thing stretches out an orange tendon, elongatory, thinning, toward Joan, who's huffing and puffing and swinging her arms, tight black pants and fuzz black sweater, glancing back all freaky from time to time. So this orange sputtery buzz chases her down, not going much faster than she is, and she lets rip a scream and starts pulling with all she's got. In the end the thing sort of hauls back and pokes at her like a needle, and that's all for her. Scratched from the big race. Turned her inside out, was what Socrates said—sputtered something about scattered little slimy bits.

Then the thing moves on — to Newman, and Jukie, and then Phillipa, and all the other beats who are in a state of mind what which they can run. Stops everyone in their skinny tracks. Socrates had a hard time talking about it, eyes shiny. Wasn't pretty.

Then, dig the chromeey globe thing. This platform slides out, slow like, even though there's no crease for it to slide out from. Parallel with the ground, mostly. And now there's this opening. It's hard to get a sense of scale—the sphere is big.

Something — a bunch of somethings — start to squiggle down the ramp, like rats from a ship. The comrades are glazzing, getting spoozy now. Whatever these things are, they reach the end of the ramp — which isn't really a ramp cause it doesn't touch the ground — and walk right off it to plop on the salt. The beats back away in little half steps. One of the things patters up close to

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Socrates. It's a blob of eyeball spheres — twelve, thirteen — with multi-colored irises, and lotsa rubbery grey tentacles curling out.

As all this is going on they hear a motor turn. So, there's a hot rod that wasn't exploded, and Milt is in there, trying to get it started. He's got it going, he's jockeying forward and back among the busted up parts and melted chassis. But it's like the fiery tentacle thing hears it too, and it aint pleased. Not to trip you out too heavy with details, but, in sum, the thing fries Milt up together with his wheels, melting metal and burning old Milt and mangling the whole mess together.

Meanwhile the little squirrelly eyeball things are running around, getting closer to the bugged out beats. Scared like. The beats try to get skinny, peer around themselves.

Then Krebs, he pulls out a pistol. He's a nickel rat, a two-bit porch climber, so nobody's surprised he's got a piece. Thing about Krebs is — a little aside — I've never seen him blink. Like, blink his eyes. You gotta blink right? Moisten your glazzies? But this cat, I never seen him blink.

So anyhow, Krebs starts taking potshots at the globey thing. The bullets just bounce off, ricocheting siren song silver streaks across the cubist flats. I'd like to say they don't leave a dent on that chromium globule, but the truth of it is is — they do. Tiny dents on its shiny white surface.

And the little eyeball rodents, now they're ganging up on people, attacking. Thing is though, these

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things aint that tough. People squash them under foot, under fist. Krebs shoots at them. They never seem to die, but they do lose the ability to ambulate, so they just wiggle around plastered in place by that yellowy goo. But Jeannie, she's in shock. She aint fighting back like the other dopeniks, and a handful of these eyebally creepy crawly octopi got her by the scruff, by the collar, by the sleeve, by the hair, and they're dragging her back toward that silver ball, toward the ramp what's sticking out of it.

But there's a hitch because the ramp — not really a ramp, per se — doesn't touch the ground, so the eyeball buggers can't drag her up it. The spaceship, cause that's what it is, I guess, lurches up into the air and then down, crashing in the salt, gonging out hollow, making halfassed bonking attempts to get the ramp and the ground lined up right. Once it veers way diagonally left-right and Bug Phillips gets crushed under the thing. Ripe for the lilies. Socrates got choked up over that. Bug was a good guy, straight from the fridge.

Finally they — whoever's driving — get the ramp lined up, but the opening the eyeball conglomerations came out of isn't big enough for humanoids, so the eyeball things try to drag them through, screaming, like big beatnik pegs through a small hole. And all the while, thither and hither, there's this battle going on between the eyeball rats and the beats. The eyeballs, crushed all over the place, writhing around, tentacly, seem to be losing, slated for crashville.

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Then — tune me in — the second sphere makes an appearance. It descends from that dark and scary sky and cronks and bonks and settles on the salt. First it sits there. Then there's that noise again, a sideways busted sax. It's accompanied this time by a hole opening up, aligned trippy with the ground, tilted away from the staring, fighting, screaming beats. A big hole this time, like you could walk through standing up, and then some.

This part here — just telling you — this is where it starts to get freaky. Up jumps the devil, and something starts to like, excrete from the big hole. Transparent blue and tobacco jello, and there's this...stuff in there. Don't know what. It glip glops out, spreading and burping and plopping, shiny and droopy, swum through with prehistoric dragonfly nymphs, with cubist spiders, with cephalopod hearts and transparent steel bones, something out of some paisley cave.

It oozes and spurts out of that hole, toward the tripped out dopeniks, who are like, now what. It's strictly horrorshow, surgical waste galumphing out and spreading, but — here's the thing — it aint fast. The beats can outrun it, and so they peel off in all directions. The blob, it spurts toward them, but it's like frustrated, too slow. The quarry's getting away. But what happens then is, it starts to grow legs. Big angular thorny centipede legs, germinating and worming out, wriggling, anatomically configuring. So now it can drag itself along, spurt and puddle forward, sections of it almost running, dragging the rest behind, still drooling out and

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stretching.

The thing aint efficient, but it's picked up some speed, and the beats, glancing back, huff and puff as best they can. It's catching up. It slips and slithers right up to Gina, slowest of the bunch, and sorta plops onto her back and pulls her — screaming and wriggling arms and underpinnings — off her feet. She's stuck there, like a fly on paper.

The thing creeps and crawls toward Mayfield, grabs him too, and Velvet, and Oscar, and one beat and another. The blob's barely faster than the screaming comrades, and the whole proceeding takes a while, but eventually it's accumulated all of them, except for Socrates, who somehow outruns it.

The thing stops short, backs up a bit, glares at Socrates — and Socrates glares back, just out of reach. The blob sort of shrugs almost, then rolls and plops and drags itself back to the ship. It sucks itself back in through that aperture, like backwards toothpaste — together with the shrieking, squirming beats.

The hole closes up behind them, and everything's all quietlike for a bit, Socrates the only one left to see it. Then there's a noise. An upside down creak, a screechy compressed explosion, and one of the globes, the one from where the eyeball spiders came, shoots back up into space. Split. No-tomorrow style.

Then the other globe starts making noise. A slithery crank, an ugly backfire, and then it takes

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off too. The silver ball gets smaller, passes that third chrome sphere, the one that never came down, then it's an orange dot, then an orange line, and then it's gone, with the blob. With all the beats. With the whole cookie factory.

Socrates stares up at the third sphere, which hangs there, maybe staring down at him. Wound up like an eight-day clock. The way he tells it, Socrates starts to howl at it: Take me. This place is cubesville.

And sitting here on the salt, covered in that yellow goop, after bumping his gums, telling me the whole story in chunks and ugly disjointed pustules, he starts screaming about it again, right here in front of me. Take me. This place is cubesville. Take me. Over and over. This place is cubesville.

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Hump Day

Mick Rose

Suckin' my unlit Winston, I swerved the Buick longside the curb, on the corner of Grape and Vine. And fought to squelch a yawn. Twelve-hour-grinds three days straight dancin' the graveyard shift, and my weary old ass shoulda been crashed, in my otherwise empty studio.

But Slim Grady owed me money. Accordin' to his ex, Slim had slunk off like a skunk five nights earlier — to shack up with some ho out here in the Red Light zone.

I almost stepped in dog shit climbin' out the Buick. While the dank, rank air that greeted me smelled like Godzilla's ass. Graffiti choked the chipped brick buildings — all the doors and first-floor windows barred with metal gates. Shards of broken glass — in every color of a Skittles rainbow crunched beneath my boots: the gutter strewn with cans, needles, bottles, bloated condoms — and chunks of rotting puke. Not a single red light anywhere. Looked like a cockroach zone to me.

If his ex was right, and she wasn't slingin' bull to protect her man, Slim lived half-way down this block on my side of the walk. This time in the mornin', most of the human roaches had holed themselves away, and wouldn't scurry out till

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nightfall. But closing in on Grady's squat, I spied a piece of tail, leanin' against a shit-box Civic, idlin' at the curb. New to the streets for sure; she still had all her curves. Since drugs had yet to waste her, smooth coffee skin still gleamed as sweet as melted caramel. And jeans not yoga pants: bonus points for me. By the time I reached them, the Civic sputtered off.

"Can you bloody believe that?"

"Believe bloody what exactly?"

"Guy wanted me to blow him for a measly twenty bucks. What is he fucking nuts? I gotta get me thirty for the likes a that."

"Well, today's already Wednesday, doll. Dude's probably low on cash. Most folks don't get paid till Friday rolls around again."

"Hell, you're probably right. But if he wanted me to blow him, he shoulda thought a that before blowin' all his cash."

She amped her smile a thousand watts: "How 'bout you, baby? You got any money?"

Greed filled her drug-starved eyes when I reached inside my pocket—

Her mood sinkin' like the Titanic when I flashed a badge instead. "I get paid on Fridays, too, doll."

Gotta give her credit. She rebounded like Dennis Rodman in his NBA prime — ampin' that smile brighter than all the marquee lights in my little corner of China Town. "Why didn't you say so,

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baby. Five-O's always free."

I cupped her elbow in my palm, steered her toward the Buick. Kept her pressed against my side: in case she thought of boltin'. My boots and her silver stilettos grindin' those Skittle rainbows.

"Best news I've heard all week, doll. Let's get this Hump Day party started. We can launch with fucky-sucky."

I bought that badge in a fucking dollar store. Best money I've ever spent.

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Posh Cunt

Angelica Arsan

Oh please shut up, I'm thinking. Please please please shut the fuck up... for God's sake, I'm going to get up right now and bang my head against the wall if you don't!

I'm nearly on the verge of tears, sitting with Grace in the hotel bar. For almost an hour, the noise of the Parisian traffic has been the only background to her uninterrupted, exhausting monologue about herself.

Grace is the youngest in the crew, a freshly trained English girl of 22. British upper class family, excellent education, a blonde-haired blue-eyed beauty who'd caught my attention since we first met. Today's flight had been sheer torture indeed: just imagine what it was like to deal with the tempting proximity of her body, in the confined spaces of a plane... the accidental touch, the traces of her scent, the exchanging of glances across the aisle... no need to say that I've been looking forward to finally being alone with her.

My plan? To drink the Princess under the table and fuck her mercilessly all night long. Instead, turns out I'm still sitting here, listening to the ramblings of this pampered child who — to make matters worse! — has just chugged an entire bottle of

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Chablis without even flinching. Definitely there were some flaws in my plan.

“So I won this ballet contest and I was admitted as a junior associate in the Royal... and I was the most talented of all, by the way. Not to mention that I’ve always been an A student and...”

Oh, shit, I can’t stand this. I’m mentally tearing her expensive clothes off... licking her high-class English clit... biting her divine ass... making her scream in that posh accent of hers. This time, the odds seem to be against me, though. This fucking chatterbox is a desperate case.

I order another bottle from a waiter passing by. Keep filling up her glass, out of sheer stubbornness. Come on, Angie. It’s now or never. I clear my throat, touch her hand across the table, a smile sweeter than honey on my face.

“What about the guys, Gracey darling?” I ask. “How many hearts have those lovely eyes already broken?”

“Well,” she giggles, “before joining the crew, I had this gorgeous boyfriend in Oxford who had my name tattooed on his bicep, you know. He drove me around in his Bentley, bought me a Cartier wristwatch and...”

Oh fuck... there’s no way out. I raise my hands to interrupt her.

“Okay, okay, I got it: your life has been terrific and your bloke was fantastic. What I mean is, I hope you had some fun between a ballet class and exams.

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Keeping that sexy body all for yourself... it would be a shame." I give her hand a light squeeze. Under the table, my leg tentatively brushes against hers. "Take me, for instance. Never been afraid of experimenting. Why, I was only fourteen when I first made out with a girl."

"Whaaat? Good Lord, I could never do THAT!" she cries, downing a gulp of Chablis. Is she finally starting to look a bit dizzy? "I've never even thought about that. I mean, it's..."

"...just wonderful, honey. No man could ever lick you better than a woman. Think about it. We have no bristly beards, for starters!"

She laughs, almost choking on her drink; the wine is definitely working. I'm licking my lips in anticipation...

"Oh Angie, you're so naughty. What makes you think that I would do anything so... so kinky and disgusting and..."

She blushes, struggles for the right word, growing more lightheaded by the instant.

"Uhh, hey!" she abruptly gasps. "What are you doing??"

I'm caressing her knee under the table.

"Maybe you would like it... who knows?" I say, running my hand up her bare thigh, too aroused now to stop. "Aren't you curious? Don't you feel like trying something new for once, Gracey darling?"

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“Angie, let go,” she slurs, leaving my hand exactly where it is. We’re keeping eye contact across the table; she looks like an animal caught in the headlights.

“This is... inappropriate. Sooo-o-o TOTALLY inappropriate...”

The way she says it is such a turn-on... And I just can’t wait anymore.

“Nobody would ever know, Gracey. It would be our secret, our diirty little secret... You want to know what it is like, don’t you? Here’s your chance; don’t waste it!”

She reaches under the table and entangles her fingers with mine.

“I’m feeling quite strange, Angie. I’m afraid I’m not quite myself...”

“Enjoy that feeling, baby... and I’ll take you places you’ve never been before, trust me.”

Moments later, the elevator doors are closing behind us. Destination: 4th floor, my room. I glance at myself in the mirrored wall, thinking:

Easy now, Angie. One wrong move and...

It happens so quickly that I don’t even have time to react.

Grace throws me against the wall with all her might, pressing her body against mine and yanking back my hair. She fumbles for the emergency button behind her, stopping the lift between floors.

“You filthy little slut,” she hisses in my ear, “you’ve

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made me so wet... And now you'd better get ready, 'cos I AM GONNA EAT YOU ALIVE!!! GOT IT???"

I'm speechless. Breathless. Utterly paralyzed. She tears my blouse asunder, and for once in my life I hear myself saying:

"Wait, wait... m-maybe we shouldn't do this... I-I mean..."

"Shut up," she snarls, "you filthy fucking BITCH."

Groping my tits and biting my neck, she lets one hand slide down to my ass, leaving the other clamped firmly to my breast. She gives my nipple a vicious pinch, prompting me to cry out in pain as she attacks my neck like a savage beast. When I finally turn to kiss her, she pushes her tongue so far down my throat, my moans are muffled by her own voracious lust.

I cry out once more as she shoves her hand down the back of my skirt, yanking my thong to the side. Still relentlessly devouring my mouth, she wastes no time in jamming her finger up my ass. Pain and pleasure begin to mount simultaneously as her free fingers sink into my pussy from behind. Thrusting hard into both holes, banging my body up against the wall, she's almost on the verge of fisting me now, fucking me up to her knuckles.

I glance over at her deranged reflection, barely recognizing the cunt-crazed monster she's become. If we hadn't been together this whole entire time, I'd suspect she was coked out of her head. Christ, it couldn't just be the wine... she's transformed into a fucking fury. Even her posh accent has somehow

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completely vanished.

I'm vaguely conscious that I'm being raped...

...and that I am her most willing victim.

"You wanted me to be naughty, didn't you?" she whispers in my ear. "Is THIS what you had in mind?"

NO!!! I scream internally. In fact this is infinitely BETTER, you nutty fucking bitch!

"You like it, huh? You're ENJOYING this, you dirty French whore, AREN'T you?"

I can't reply, can't even breath, really. Shuddering in waves of pre-climax convulsions, I finally explode in a devastating orgasm that floods down my thighs, breaking like a dam of warm juices into the palm of her hand. She keeps on fucking me regardless, propping me up as I collapse fully onto her, exhausted.

As I try to pull myself together, I catch another glimpse of her in the mirror. The haughty smirk on her face says it all:

"You got what you asked for, slut... And now you know what high-class girls are made of."

Needless to say, the first thing I do when I'm back in my room is call down to the desk for an ice pack.

Shit, I guess those posh cunts can be deceiving...

Like being fucked by a goddamn infantry battalion...

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You Think You Have It Bad

Garvan Giltinan

Let me just tell you...

Back in the day, leaving our house was a dangerous proposition. There were the snipers. In the bombed out remains of our neighborhood, even collecting the groceries became a life or death toss of the dice.

Running from my front door to the cover of the concrete carcass of the house next door, was an adrenaline rush. The shooters were not well-trained, just regular Joes, and Janes, so their aim was abysmal. The trick was not to run in a straight line, but to zig zag, throwing them off. Pop, pop, pop. Brick dust would spurt up like ghosts as bullets tested my footing on the rocks and debris. For many years my sniper was Mrs. Groom from three houses down. Paranoia and firearms make for poor friends. Her son was a soldier in the war and was killed early in the conflict, while out one night in the red light district. Blind drunk with friends, he realized too late, that the pleasurable sensations from the glory hole in the club were actually performed by a very professional St. Bernard, and stepping back in shock, he lost his balance and slammed his head on a urinal killing him instantly. The military gave him a full burial, with honors,

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and the boy left behind his mother, and a funny story. You have to laugh, don't you?

The old bitch, Groom, tagged me in the leg once and it hurt like a bastard. My Mom slapped me across the face as I wailed in pain and told me to "act like Grandma." That old piece of gristle fought in the war, while carrying a M16 in one hand and Granda's testicles in the other. She said they brought her luck. Grandma was six foot five, missing two fingers from each hand from a polar bear attack, and she was known for her thunderous voice and what looked like an Adam's apple

Once reaching cover, the next move was to the big oak tree. Loved that tree, with its truck like hard scaly leather. The oak was sacred. No one shot at the tree. The natural world was unexpectedly respected in all the rubble and it became a shelter in the grayness. As long as the squirrels were in a good mood. If not, you had to move like hot piss from razor sharp claws and gnawing dentures. The war changed them, man. It changed us all.

From the oak, I would sprint down Willow Street. Here the gangs let me know I had crossed into their territory by barking like dogs. The Shepherds were the loudest and the worst of the street gangs. In his late teens, my brother Daniel was caught on Merkin Street and had to fight one particularly flamboyantly dressed member of the gang. The two fought on all fours. If you stepped into the Shepherds' territory, you fought by their rules. My brother got in a solid bite to a thigh, ripping away some flesh. He never did lose his taste for blood

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and spandex. We kept him in a cage when he acted up, throwing prime rib and leotards at him to chill him the fuck down. The only reason he didn't die that day was because of the bear. Just wandered into the scene, off territory, and tore my brother's opponent in half like a white chocolate bar with a strawberry center. We legged it home while the big bastard was occupied with his crunchy feast. We played the odds every day.

The more violent gangs in the area slept late most days, so the odds of survival were on our side if we slipped through Willow, Merkin, or Mahone streets a little after dawn. In the quiet you could sometimes hear them snore, belch, and make love. The Shepherds eventually went co-ed when walking and sitting became a major drawback to instilling terror. Their women fought. The men stayed home making yogurt and quilting.

Next was Idiot Street, because only an idiot would attempt to use it. Problem was, my expedition time could be cut by 50%, shaving a roundabout journey by 60 minutes. Most people are idiots, so the street got a lot of foot traffic. All you had to do was leg-it faster than the bears. At any given time, 60 grizzly and polar bears staked out Idiot Street hoping to devour a slow runner, usually some poor bastard with shite cardio.

My father died on Idiot Street. Two mating bears on the second floor of a crumbling building that formally housed a music store which only sold records made by hard core Mormon boy rap band, Brigham Young Thugs (I know. One hit wonders,)

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upon seeing and hearing my father drunkenly stagger down the street, using every mammal insult known and unknown to man, pulled out from the other male bear he had mistakenly been injecting with his seed, and leapt from the building, landing squarely on my arse-hole father. The bear died instantly and messily, but my father lasted a couple of more days. Throughout (the family came down to have a gander), all he craved was more alcohol and the phone number of an obese 70s porn actress named Ezra Pounder.

I needed to get about 10 yards down Idiot Street where I would crossover into Mohel Terrace, where a cut through allowed me to avoid the crabs on Culchie Road. Although the crabs on Culchie Road were badly organized, and for the most part, never presented a challenge, they did learn to use knives. The core group splintered at some stage, and there emerged territorial factions, where gangs of crustaceans roamed hither and thither taking command of certain areas. A smaller, liminal group, the Hard Shells dominated Mohel, but posed no real threat, as they were poorly coordinated and running while attempting to make the most of their knife wielding combat style was pathetic and quite embarrassing to watch. Besides, I could leap over their heads in one single bound.

The spiders on Amadan Street were the worst. So I didn't mind adding an extra 5 minutes taking Geek Street where the only challenge was vaulting a seven foot gorge — created by a freak earthquake — avoiding the intermittent bursts of flames

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shooting up from the depths below, and evading the large pink hands grabbing for anyone unlucky enough not to make the far side. No one knew the origin of the hands. Rumors abounded that he (the hand was male, I think) was the hand of God. The argument against of course was that why would the hand of God be coming from the depths of the earth surrounded by fire? Besides, I don't think the hand of God would bite his fingernails.

Once over the gorge the last two streets loomed. The most dangerous, and most annoying challenge of the journey, was Narrative Street. After the war, clans of geometric shapes appeared across the city. The Scalenes were the most aggressive of the species. All those unequal angles and unequal sides could nick the skin like it was tissue paper. The Isosceles and Equilaterals, while dangerous, were easily distracted by mice or the smell of artisanal cheeses. The obtuse were as dumb as a box of turds. The males, though it was virtually impossible to distinguish the sexes, were the slowest cognitively speaking, and any efforts made on one's part to contort into any general geometric shape, could easily confuse them.

Other shapes, the weirder ones and some of the most brutal outside of the Scalenes, formed their own societies. I never came in contact with the Gons (you know, the Pentagon, Hexagon, or those vicious psychos, the Decagon and Nonagon, who made up the gang known as the Irregulars), but many veterans could tell stories scary enough to close your sphincter forever.

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I make it sound like all these shapes were atavistic, but I have to say the Circles, Ellipses, and Crescents, when encountered, were just curved bundles of peace and love and always carried a smile.

The final hurdle before the grocery shop was the region known as the Deadly Floating Pages of the Damned. After the war destroyed all the best things in life and all around us in the city was rubble, the pages wafted up from the fallen buildings and floated on a hostile wind, randomly settling down by the docks near the grocery store. Hundreds of pages whipped around in unpredictable patterns. If I hit them at the right angle, I could race through the swarm, and throw caution to the wind--the wind direction was a major factor. Photocopying paper caused the deepest cuts. Toilet paper was harmless, as were the filo-pasty thin pages of those large literature anthologies we read before the war. Regular books, though not as thick as the photocopying paper, could do some serious damage and inflict some severe scarification. I once got slashed by a high school copy of *War and Peace*. And even saw one poor bastard exiting the grocery store with a handful of cold cuts, decapitated by a page from *See Spot Run*. Blood spouted in gouts from the wound and his head fell backward like a Pez dispenser. We had free cold cuts that day.

There were always bodies of the fallen scattered around the docks and the grocery store, the newly dead and the nearly dead, abandoned on the streets.

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The grocery store had limited supplies; very few merchants came through to restock the store. Once I was there, I filled up a plastic shopping bag with whatever we needed (milk, bread, wafer thin mints, some raw meat for the brother, a salt lick for mom, and a bag of chips for me). The trick was not to fill the bag, cos I still needed to be light on my feet. I had to go back all the way I came. This time up hill.

I remember those days with a vivid clarity, only tainted slightly by paranoid delusions. I can't believe how lucky you kids are today. You have it so easy, but you still complain: "Life is hard," "There's bears and spiders and crabs chasing us," "The store is too far away," "I think my paper cut is infected."

Pussies.

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Fried Chicken

Oliver Lodge

The entire wall had to be bulldozed because of me. You see, I'm overweight. It's glandular. I couldn't fit on the toilet between the sink and the wall in the bathroom. Instead of moving the sink, the contractor told Grammy that it'd be cheaper to knock down the wall. Grammy's a miser. She didn't want to pay for it. To save money, she hired a company that took an entire week to complete the job. The workers were filing in and out of my bedroom to get to my bathroom, invading my private sanctum without pause. I didn't have a second to myself. It was the worst week of my life.

Only after a serious accident did my grandmother take the necessary steps to get the job done. I warned her that this would happen. I kept complaining about it. She'd avoid the topic every time. Grammy and me, we fight a lot.

I have bowel problems. I have to take a shit constantly throughout the day. Back and forth, eight to ten times a day, I waddle over to the toilet from my bed. It's the only exercise I get. I have a heart condition that prevents me from engaging in any kind of physical exertion.

So I was sitting on the toilet and I had to squeeze my way between the sink and the wall and it was

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getting harder and harder to take a dump that way. I had to shift my weight over to one side whenever I wiped my ass, leaning heavily against one of my butt cheeks to reach under there. This caused the toilet seat to snap loose in the back and slide across the top of the bowl. My scrotum hangs down really low. It's a long, distended, purple sack that droops down to my knees.

I have huge balls. They were hanging down into the toilet water when this happened. (I've grown to like this feeling. It cools me off. And when my bollocks start to warm up I know I just did my poo.) So my nuts got snagged between the seat and the bowl, right? My scrotum was torn. I'm lucky my yarbles didn't get chopped off altogether. I had to have an operation and get my nut bag sewn back up.

Since I couldn't fit through the front door, Grammy paid a construction crew to remove the roof of our house. I was transported to a special hospital via a chopper and an airlift. My ball sack had to be packed with ice and gauze. I got into an argument with Grammy when I got home.

"You dumb, dried up, old cunt!" I yelled. "If you had listened to me first and fixed the motherfuckin' shithouse, I wouldn't have had to go through all this bullshit! What do you got rocks in your fuckin' head or something? I'm fuckin' traumatized by that incident! And now look at what you made me do! You made me spill my god-damn piss all over the fuckin' floor!"

I have a weak bladder, you see. Grammy brings me

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half a dozen two-liter bottles of pop every day. I piss in the empty bottles over the side of my bed after finishing them. This saves me more trips to the latrine. Grammy made me so upset that I accidentally knocked one over. I looked down at her while she wiped up the spill on her hands and knees.

“Did you get me my god-damn magazine, at least?” I asked her.

She did. She left it in the other room. I had her go get it for me. It was a copy of ‘Teen Vogue’. Not the greatest read, but it featured a sexy twink on the cover. I heard Grammy squeezing the urine out of the rag into the sink in my newly renovated bathroom as I fiddled with my penis in bed, imagining the blotchy skin of my hairy belly rubbing against a squirming blob of naked boys, their lips and limbs lightly brushing up against my hard nipples.

“Feel my girth, you sniveling bastards!” I hissed under my breath. “I bet you kids think you’re hot shit in high school. You get all the beach bunnies, don’t you? Hitting on all the girls with tan skin and athletic builds. Ungrateful, little pieces of shit. I’ll give you something to remember...”

I pictured the tight cheeks of one of the boy models splayed open as my uncircumcised joust turned his sigmoid colon into an excavation site.

Grammy’s doddering nearby was distracting me from the chore at hand. “Finish up and get the fuck out, Grammy!” I bellowed over my shoulder. “And

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don't forget the chicken and the sewing bag and my insulin! Your baggy ass is harshing my mellow!"

My favorite morning talk show was on. The crowd on TV was jeering in the background. A pair of wenches with bad perms were pulling each other's hair. Their public quarrel had escalated into a full-on cat fight. The audience was going wild.

Grammy stopped at my bedroom door before turning around. Sheepishly, she ventured to ask if I'd reconsider the bedpan. The invisible referee of silence held us apart momentarily. The bell rang in my corner and then I let her have it.

"You know I have diarrhea!" I retorted. "I already have to sleep with sugar and crumbs in the bed every night! Poo gets all over the sheets when I use the bedpan! What do I look like a fucking animal to you?"

For brunch and dessert I go through two boxes of butter sticks daily. My snacktime ritual entails putting a bowl of Splenda and a bowl of mayonnaise beside me on the bed. One stick at a time, I dip the butter into the mayonnaise first and then the Splenda. It might sound gross, but it's a truly delicious snack if you ever get a chance to try it. It also makes a mess. My sheets are covered with mayonnaise, granules of Splenda, bread crumbs, and chicken grease stains.

I love chicken. I eat five jumbo size boxes of fried chicken a day. Every time I dine, I spread out all the individual pieces of chicken on my naked belly while I'm lying down in bed. I dress them up in doll

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clothes that my grandma tailors for me specifically for this game. The wings, the breasts, the legs — all the chicky wickies get their own shirts and pants and bonnets. I have all types of accessories like swords for them to fight with and spatulas so they can flip burgers. I give them cute names like Rupert and Mildred. There are hundreds of different games I play with them throughout the day but Little Red Riding Hood is pretty popular.

I rub the oily chicken around my scrotum and the underside of my pecker until I get hard. My erect member soon becomes a tree for the wolf to hide behind in wait for Little Red Riding Hood as she saunters over the yellow hill of my tummy. The drumstick in red garb is then pounced upon by the breast or thigh playing the wolf. I make squealing and growling noises as the Big Bad Wolf forces himself on the little girl, rubbing the two pieces of chicken together as if they're fucking. Then I stuff them in my mouth, bones and all, chewing on them ravenously as I bring myself to climax.

"No, I don't think you're an animal," my grandmother replied. "It's just that... It's getting harder for you to get around with your weight and..."

"I didn't want to hear this since I just got out of the hospital, but you may as well say it, Grammy. Go on! Get it off that flabby chest of yours! I'm nothing but a fat, worthless faggot! Is that what you're trying to tell me? I can't help it if I'm fat! You know what the gastroenterologist said, what my therapist says! I eat as a way to nurture my inner

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child — the little, baby Oompa Loompa inside of me who never found love! It's not my fault that I'm sick! What are you going to do? Throw me out into the street? Force me to suck cock for a living? You hate me! You hate my guts! I know it!" I bawled. Tears poured down my chubby cheeks. Snot dripped out of my nose and into the hairs of my mustache, as coarse as the legs of a fly.

"I'm too tired to get into this right now," Grammy sighed. She left. She wasn't even sympathetic to my situation. Grammy only thinks of herself.

I stopped crying in due time. I looked around the quiet bedroom. It reeked of sweat and urine. Dust and cobwebs were starting to take shape in the corners. Grammy was slacking on her cleaning. A half-empty bag of pork rinds was sitting on the coffee table. I wanted to finish them but didn't feel like getting out of bed. I found a graham cracker near my pillow and nibbled on it while removing the chicken from the warm buckets. Grammy didn't skimp on the sides that day.

"Look!" I said with a smile to a leg and a thigh dressed like Snow White and Peter Pan. From their cardboard container I poured some chicken nuggets out onto my stomach to share the stage with their famous parents. "Congratulations! You're a happy couple! Look at all the babies you had!" I proudly proclaimed.

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Absinthe Oranges and Alligators

Judge Santiago Burdon

It's the Saturday before Fat Tuesday "Mardi Gras" and New Orleans is in full swing like the tits on a woman jogger. The French Quarter is so packed you can tell what flavor of gum the person next to you in the crowd is chewing. The smell of vomit, piss, and day-old beer fills the afternoon air. It's the aroma of a decaying city that shall rise from the pestilence, the filth and garbage on Ash Wednesday.

I'd had more than I could stomach of the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd. Women flashing sagging, stretched-out, wrinkled fake tits for plastic beads made in China. Drunks staggering aimlessly, unable to navigate through the throngs of fraternity boys and tourists screaming "show us your tits!"

Locals are convinced the reason New Orleans is sinking is due to the weight of all the imported beads.

I decide to get the hell outta the French Quarter and heel toe express it to St. Charles Street and catch some parades, with a more passive and less inebriated group.

The Crew of Bacchus always presents an exciting, colorful and festive parade. This year it more than

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lived up to their past performances. As Bacchus rolls by on his chariot of grapes shrouded in purple, I hear the voice of an angel whispering in my ear from behind.

“Hey Sailor, looking for a good time?”

I turn around, abruptly spilling my cup of Johnny Walker on the mysterious voice and myself.

“Of all the parades, in all the towns, in all the world, you’ve gotta show up at mine,” I say with the worst Bogey imitation ever spoken.

“Sailor, you’re suppose to drink that there whiskey, not shower in it,” she says with a smile. She wipes the spilled liquor from her chest and puts her booze-soaked fingers in my mouth.

“Yummy like sugar, huh sugar?” she whispers in a Cajun drawl that causes my heart to race.

“Tell me Santiago, you still hooked up with that coon-ass queen slut from Irish Bayou? Or do I finally get my chance to fuck you ’til tomorrow becomes a memory?”

Now, I want to just jump on that bus of suggestion like a commuter late for work, but I decide to play it poker style, just checking her raise. What a cosmic event, running into Gitane after five years. I knew this exotic, erotic, and somewhat toxic mulatta princess from my days of living in Fat City, when she bartended at Pat’s Pub. The woman she’s referring to is Pamela, pronounced pa-mel-la, an old flame of mine that was extinguished after I finally pissed on it.

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"I am no longer engaged in sharing that tangled web of lies and lunacy with that spider of a woman. She ran off with the bass player of some Aerosmith cover band. The word around Irish Bayou was that she got pregnant and he abandoned her somewhere in Nevada. Now that's some bad fucking luck... Nevada, God's toilet. Dream woman dream until your dreams come true!" I sing, raising my glass in a toast. I've since grown fond of Tyler and his band; seems I have discovered the reason why.

Gitane grabs me and lays a kiss on my lips that would make cooked spaghetti hard again.

"Well sugar, whatya say? It's Mardi Gras baby, time to throw out the old an bring in the new."

"Did you say bring you in nude?" I joke.

She just smiles and grabs my hand.

"Santiago, you always make me laugh. I've got some LSD, a bottle of green fairy direct from France, my body achin' for some tender loving and no one to share with. Come on sugar, we were meant to be together, this meeting wasn't by chance! My aunt Gerty read my tea leaves yesterday and it was in the stars. You don't wanna disappoint aunt Gerty, she jus' might put a Gypsy curse on ya. Laissez los Bons Temps Roulez," she sings.

Here we go, Cajun Gypsy curse, how does anyone accept this type of bullshit as gospel? I pretend to be afraid with a display of my body shaking and a terrified facial expression. It evidently doesn't

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appear to be all that convincing, because she starts laughing.

"I certainly can't chance hurtin' aunt Gerty's feelings," I say, "what a callous fellow I would be."

We start walking to her apartment on Napoleon, her arm around my waist, mine around her shoulders. Strange, but I suddenly develop a taste for a cup of hot tea with honey.

I'm not one to express my softer side, but this is turning into quite a romantic moment. I didn't just write that did I? I did? Damn, I must be becoming a romance novelist.

"So tell me baby, what brings you back to the Crescent City?" she pries. "You aren't still doing that work for Marcellus, are you?"

"What work, for whom, and where did you hear such exaggerated bullshit like that? Don't start believing rumors, Gitane. I'm just an unemployed musician on a quest to capture those mythical golden notes belonging to the melody of magic."

"Uh huh, and I'm really a princess kidnapped by Gypsies when I was just a baby. Now I'm leading a life of palm and tarot card reading to make my living. I'm learning what a humble life is like before I'm discovered and restored to my throne to reign as queen, now that my mother has died."

"I always suspected just that! You possess a regal air about you, the demeanor of royalty. Your Majesty, I do admire your talent for story telling."

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“Oh stop flattering me. Still your charming old self, Santi. That story is so Sam Clemens it rings of Twain. So are you?” she asks again. “You know, working?”

“Where? What work you say?”

She slaps me in a loving manner and doesn't inquire again. However, she hit the proverbial nail on the head, driving it deep into my thoughts. I was there waiting for a load of cocaine to deliver to Chicago within the next few days.

The crowd grows as the sun begins to set, permitting the night to spill its darkness into a jealous sky pouting over the absence of its stars, their sparkle obscured by the clouds bullying their way into the space left by the sun's retreat. The moon grows larger and brighter as the Earth turns, spinning night's beacon of light into a brilliant white.

New Orleans becomes a completely different city at night. The scent of magnolia blossoms travels on every breeze. The sweet gum and oak trees appear taller and seem to scratch the sky with their fingered branches. Sounds burst through the lazy silence, celebrating with notes of noise that fill the air with the music of darkness. I watch the light from street lamps dance on her brown skin, highlighting the minute, almost invisible hairs on her arms. Her hair smells of lavender and her skin is soft like the fur of a sable.

“Santi, would you like to spend the night with me? It's Sunday tomorrow and I don't have to work.

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Thought maybe we could go to Mandeville and visit my mother and sister. We could bring a king cake, drink some home-brewed moonshine and get silly. You remember my mom and ‘dem from the Christmas party at the bar a couple of years back. She took a shine to you, ya know.”

“Can I spend the night? Baby, there was a time when I wanted to spend my life with you. You loved me but you just didn’t know it. Sounds like a perfectly pleasant day. Yeah baby, it’s a date.”

We reach her apartment, which is actually a house that has been split down the middle, making two shotgun homes. They’re referred to as shotgun houses because you can open the front and back doors, stand on the porch with a shotgun then shoot straight through the house. The buckshot exits out the back door without hitting a single thing.

It’s a quaint and welcoming home with lace curtains, doilies on antique tables next to an oversized davenport, covered in a crushed velvet material.

“Come on sugar, let’s take a shower. It’s in the bathroom in my bedroom. The other is outta commission right now. Come on, get outta those whiskey-soaked clothes and let me give you a dirty shower...”

I’m not really all that soiled or soaked from the whiskey incident, but I’m certainly not going to object to a dirty shower. I’m naked in a matter of seconds, sitting on the bed as I watch her undress.

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She turns on the radio and dances, performing a strip tease for my pleasure.

“Mardi Gras mambo, Mardi Gras mambo down in New Orleans...”

I’m totally captivated by her body and the way she gives purpose to rhythm of the melody. She reaches into her dresser and pulls out a small bottle containing the acid. She floats over to me and places a tab on my tongue, which dissolves in my mouth. Pulling at my arm after consuming her own dose, she leads me into the shower. The water pulsates from one of those adjustable spray shower heads with a thousand different settings.

“I see you left the setting on masturbate. How can any man compete with an instrument that possesses the ability to provide non-stop, pulsating pleasure?”

“Don’t embarrass me sugar. Yes I use the shower to pleasure myself from time to time, but it’s a poor substitute for a man. There’s no intimacy, no loving touch, no body next to you, skin to skin. The excitement of his breath becoming more and more rapid, the sound of his heartbeat...”

While lathering up a bar of soap between her hands, she gets on her knees and takes my cock into her mouth, gliding back and forth in slow motion. After a few minutes, her hands begin to move smoothly in short strokes up and down the shaft.

I cum long and hard, groaning in pleasure, my legs weak and shaking as she stands, tenderly kissing

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my body all the way back up. Her lips are soft and velvety, her tongue moving slowly, passionately in my mouth.

She stops and whispers, "Did you enjoy your dirty shower sugar?"

I'm at a loss for words, literally unable to utter a syllable. Gitane start to laugh but I can't find any humor in my dilemma. I am beginning to feel the LSD coming on. My mind is lucid and my body is experiencing rushes that originate from my head, trickling down to my lower extremities. I exit the shower and Gitane is lying naked on the bed waving a multicolored scarf above her head, totally mesmerized.

"Baby, are you getting off on the acid?" she asks.

"Yes, I'm fucking tripping heavy baby. Like someone climbing the stairs with their shoe laces tied together, this shit is awesome. Hey Majesty, I'm going to put on some music, open the bottle of absinthe and release the green fairy. Do you want a cocktail baby? Of course you do, what am I thinking? I'm going to "louche" the absinthe, do you have sugar cubes?"

Suddenly I realize that I am speaking out loud. I'm curious why light bulbs are shaped like they are and start thinking of how profound and crucial the question has become. I find a gap in the traffic of thought rushing through my mind, remembering that I was going to do something that required sugar cubes.

"Santi, do think that clouds are good things or a

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bad things? I mean they bring storms, rain, snow and they unleash violent tornados and hurricanes that destroy things, but they are so alluring and pretty... They look so puffy and soft, creating different pictures shaped like almost everything. They're like art in the sky, they're the angel's Play Doh..."

I'd feel a bit silly and quite embarrassed if I were to bring up my light bulb epiphany just then. It seems so trite compared to Gitane's deep observation.

"Gitane, that was beautiful and profound," I tell her. "The manner in which you expressed your thought was classic Joyce Kilmer. She was the poet that wrote the poem about the beauty of a tree. The angel's Play Doh! Classic, baby..."

I decide to put on her robe. It's one of those satiny materials with a feathered boa attached to the neck line. I take a look at myself in her full-length mirror hanging on the closet door, and I'm surprised at how attractive I appear.

"Santi, are you a crossdresser?" she screams. "You like wearing women's clothes! Let me dress you up, please, it will be so much fun! I think there's film left in my camera."

"I'll indulge your obsession to dress me up, but no fucking pictures. I need to put on some music, then pour us some absinthe that I'm going to louche. Now, do you have any sugar cubes, for the second time?"

She awakes from her LSD trance and momentarily grasps a small portion of reality, just enough to

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answer my inquiry.

“If you louche, you’re gonna need sugar cubes, Santi. You’ll find them in the left upper cabinet by the sink, and the absinthe spoons are in the drawer under the same cabinet.”

If you’re not familiar with absinthe, a quick lesson: It’s a spirit that originated in Switzerland. The wormwood tree provides the major ingredient, producing cognitive brain functions leading to hallucinations when consumed in excess. It gained its popularity in France, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many artists and writers such as Hemingway, Poe, Rimbaud, Lautrec, Picasso, and Van Gogh all chased the green fairy, believing it enhanced their creative abilities. I drink it because I become sexually aroused and it creates intimacy, much like ecstasy or mescaline.

Gitane enters the kitchen as I’m pouring the absinthe over a sugar cube. It slowly drips into the glass from a spoon with holes acting as a sieve.

“Santi, I want an absinthe cocktail now...” she whines.

“Almost ready baby, damn you look incredible, absolutely gorgeous. You are a vision of loveliness.” My comment was the gospel truth; she is more than I ever imagined, a classic work of art.

The absinthe was ready, and our glasses clink in a silent toast accompanied by her sensual smile. Some spills on her chest as she shoots the entire glass down. The drops roll down her breasts from her chest to her stomach, tiny green tears of

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pleasure begging for my lips to sip the green droplets from her body. After licking the drizzled liquor from her breasts I drop to my knees and begin to suck it from her stomach. She pulls my head against her and I do not resist. Purposefully, she spills a bit more, giggling as the absinthe cascades down her body and into my eager mouth.

“Santi, I want sex but it’s different than what you may be use to...” she says.

Different than what I may be use to? I hardly think so! I’m no Don Juan or Cyrano, but I’ve been around the block a few times and have experienced some strange sexual practices.

“Sure baby, anything you want,” I say, “just tell Santi.”

She walks to the refrigerator and retrieves a large bag of oranges. Alright, orange body shots, I happily assume is our recreational sex game. She sets the bag of oranges on the table and walks back to the fridge, placing her back against it. She looks at me and smiles.

“Now Santi, throw an orange at me please...”

Without hesitation, I rip open the bag, grab an orange, and casually lob the fruit at Gitane. She makes no attempt to catch the orange, and it bounces off her left breast.

“Yes baby, but harder!” she instructs. “Throw it at me harder, I want to cum...”

I grab another and throw it with more force. It makes its mark just above her pussy, leaving a

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large red spot on her groin.

She's moaning like a cat in heat, screaming, "Yes baby, yes, harder, again harder!"

I grab another orange, wind up like a big league pitcher and let it go. The fruit strikes her belly and I respond quickly with another then another. I continue with a barrage of oranges, hitting her tits and legs. She spreads her legs and with her fingers she opens her vagina.

"Here baby, here, come on Santi! I'm so close to cumming...."

I've tried to win those ridiculous stuffed animals at county fairs and carnivals, throwing balls at targets with no success. Now I needed to hone my skills and make an accurate throw.

I wind up and bingo, I hit the spot!

She writhes and moans in pleasure, fingers rapidly stroking her clitoris. I must admit, in all my years of sexual activity, I have never encountered this type of sexual gratification before. I'm totally aroused and ready to respond in kind. I walk over to her, turn her around, and immediately enter her from behind.

She screams, "Harder Santi, harder!" I comply with her request and slam myself into her, finally cumming in triumph.

It is then hear something knocking, a loud pounding from what I think is out back.

"What the hell is that noise? Do you hear that,

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Gitane?"

"It's nothing," she assures me, "just the wind blowing a tree against the house."

Then, again, the sound like someone slapping the wall or the door.

"Let's have another absinthe, Santi," she suggests. "You can lick the juice off of my body..."

I whip up two more large portions of the green fairy, and we both down them with one gulp. Gitane hugs me tight, the sticky remnants of oranges sticking to our bodies.

"Is everything okay, Santi?" she asks. "You don't think I'm strange for enjoying that type of sexual stimulus, do you?"

"Yes baby, I do find it strange and unusual, but does it bother me or cause me to not want to participate? No. Did you think it would make me uncomfortable? I'm a pleaser angel, at times to a flawed degree. No, it doesn't bother me, and I'm grateful you have such trust to share your predilection with me. Although," I think to add, "I wouldn't use apples or pears or anything harder than grapefruit."

Truth is it didn't disturb me at all. I found it strangely erotic and sexy.

By this point, the LSD has leveled off to a mellow high, and I fix us another round of cocktails. Gitane embraces me and places her head against my chest, rocking side to side to the music playing in the other room. Again I hear that fucking slamming

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and slapping sound coming from somewhere on the other side of the wall.

“What the fuck is that noise?” I ask her again.

“It’s the wind, like I said before. Just the wind!”

I look out the kitchen window and observe the stillness of the trees and other plants. There’s not the rustling of a single leaf.

She walks into her bedroom, signaling for me to follow.

“Come on sugar, take a shower with me. I’ll let you wash me any place you want, come on sugar...”

Just as I take a step in her direction, I hear the disturbance again. This time I’m determined to investigate it. I turn and march toward the back door and the bathroom she said is out of order.

“Santi, no!” she screams. “Do not open that door!”

It’s too late, my hand has already turned the knob and I push the door open. I fumble for the light on the wall, flicking the switch as my ears begin to register a loud, throaty hissing.

Suddenly a four-foot alligator comes lurching at me from the darkness. I nearly fall on my ass, screaming like a schoolgirl as I stumbled back out of the bathroom.

The gator lunges at me again with its mouth wide open, displaying enormous teeth lining its huge pink mouth. I figure that this is the end. I’m dinner for some fucking alligator. I accept my fate, but before I can become gator bait, I feel Gitane’s hands

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gripping my arms. She tugs at my body, freeing me from the impending doom. The gator's mouth snaps shut within inches of my leg. With Gitane's assistance, I finally scramble to my feet and make a mad dash to the safety of the living room.

"Gitane, what the fuck are you doing with an alligator in your bathroom? That son of bitch nearly killed me!" I scream. "Are you missing some god damn brain cells? What the fuck are you thinking, you lunatic!"

She coaxes the monster back into the bathroom and shuts the door. She's laughing hysterically, pointing at me now, trying to comment but she's unable to speak through her laughter.

Finally, she's out of breath, still reeling from the excitement.

"Oh Santi," she says, "you should have seen yourself, you were so scared!"

"Scared, scared you say! I was fucking terrified, totally panic stricken. You pulled me out just in time, and not a second too late. Seriously, why the hell do you have that monster son of a bitch living in your bathroom, tell me?"

"He was just a baby when I found him washed up on the street from the last hurricane. I felt badly for him, so i brought him home and put him in the bathtub and gave him a home. He grew so quickly, I just kept him as company. His name is Gawain, after Sir..."

"Yeah," I interrupt, "I know who the hell Sir

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Gawain is!”

“It’s time for a drink!” she yells enthusiastically.

“Is that door secured? Is it locked?” I ask. “I don’t want that bastard getting a second chance! You realize you can’t keep him, don’t you? Call the zoo or that alligator hunter guy on TV. He’s only gonna grow larger. He should be in the swamp, not your bathroom, baby.”

“I know that I can’t keep him... Will you help me find a home for him, Santi?”

“Gladly, it will be my pleasure.”

We partied into the wee hours of the morning, finishing off the bottle of absinthe and occasionally laughing at the alligator incident.

I wake up to discover I’m dressed in a plaid skirt, a crew-neck blouse, and fucking panty hose. I’m wearing one glittery sandal with my hair tied up on top. I make my way to the bathroom and my reflection scares the shit out of me. Unlike last night, the mirror hanging on the closet door betrays me this time. My lips are painted with a bright shade of shocking red lipstick, my eyes with blue eye shadow and mascara. More than anything else, I resemble an old, washed-up hooker. I’m wearing dangly silver earrings and a too-tight bra that is presently strangling my chest.

“Oh, Santiago,” I whisper to myself, “you incredibly submissive fool...”

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I Fuck

Richard Faircloth

I don't look like much; five-one, ninety pounds. Near-sighted brown eyes. Mousey brown hair that's always greasy, no matter what I do. A-cup. Doesn't matter. Guys want me. Pheromones? Whatever it is, I ping their radar. Hard.

When I lived in Chicago, I smoked. I was nineteen, looked about fourteen because I'm so small, and people didn't take me seriously. I thought if I started smoking I'd be in the club. It worked, and I found out some guys lose it when they see a girl who looks fourteen smoking a cigarette. They try to tell you smoking's not sexy? Bullshit. It's totally sexy if you do it right. One guy told me how I came across — he said I looked like if I had a dick in my hand, I'd know what to do with it. I told him to fuck off.

I smoked for five years, until I moved to California a couple years ago. Oakland. Not as many people smoke here, so it's not worth it. I don't need it anymore anyway; I look like I know what I'm doing and guys can see it a mile away. Fucking radar.

When a guy looks at me, he gets two messages the split second our eyes meet: one — I can see straight through you; two — go fuck yourself. It's about establishing control. If they don't get it

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immediately, they get it when they walk onto the point of my psychic knife. Sharp point, wicked edge.

If I like a guy's looks, I let him inside the psychic knife perimeter. I can pretty much tell when it's going to happen, don't ask me how. Fucking radar?

I wear tops that gap when I lean over. You can do that if you're an A-cup, and I work it. He peeks, and I catch him. Predictable. I fool with things while we're talking — a salt shaker, my keys — so he can see how I use my hands. I put things in my mouth, like pencils, pens, maybe a knitting needle. (I knit. I like needles and string.) I want him to look at my mouth and I don't smoke anymore, so I use whatever's handy. This goes on until his head is spinning.

Sometimes we're fucking in the car fifteen minutes later. I'm tiny, so the car's easy. (His car — not mine.) Married guys especially want it fast because they feel guilty, and hey, if they can get me off that fast, it's all good. (I won't fuck married guys who don't feel guilty — they're assholes.)

I make them look me in the eye when they come. Eye contact. Some guys like it, some guys can't do it, and some find it humiliating, especially if it's a married guy — guilty, guilty, guilty! Look at you, making it with a pip-squeak little girl you just met fifteen minutes ago! Come on, Mr. Man — you look at me. Now. That makes him come really hard, and makes me feel really evil, which makes me come really hard, so everybody's happy.

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I steal things from them, small things like sunglasses if it's nighttime, or a CD from their car. Something small that they might have left someplace so they can't be sure; as long as they know they lost something. I don't know why I steal, I just like to steal. Nobody's ever caught me at it except my fiancé.

I met him in a coffee shop, and when I made him look me in the eye it was like we looked right into each other's hearts. I stole something every time we fucked — his sunglasses, his change, his comb. When I stole his iPod he looked at me like, "Really? Come on." Okay, that was going too far, so I left it someplace for him to find. But I couldn't let that stand, so I took \$134 from his wallet a couple nights later (I left him fifty). He didn't say anything, and I didn't give it back. Then he stole my silver cigarette case (my aunt gave it to me and I used it as a wallet). That was upping the stakes — fine with me. I stole the gold pen he got from his grandpa for graduation. That's when he asked me to marry him. We were fucking and he asked me right when I was saying "yes-yes-yes" anyway. Very funny. Nothing's gone missing since then. Trust, right?

He's out of town this weekend for a seminar. When I kissed him goodbye he said, "So who are you gonna fuck tonight?" I said, "I don't know. Who are you gonna fuck tonight? Bet you have to pay for it." Then he said, "I'll tell you all about it when I get home." Uh-huh. Like I won't take a dare. Game on, motherfucker. The wedding's in June.

Here's what's going through your mind right now:

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Slutty little shit. (Will she suck it?) Trashy little whore. (Does she do anal?) Sick, fucked-up, control-freak, daddy-issues psycho-bitch. (She fucks.) (When's the next plane to Oakland?)

I can see straight through you.

Go fuck yourself.

See you around.

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In the Flush of Life

Matthew Licht

Wilma's apartment was full of rock n' roll junk. She'd balled some low-wattage stars, as a young groupie. Now her walls covered with obsolete concert posters and photos of dead musicians. The shelves were crowded with Elvis figurines and other pop collectibles.

Lucky Pete had been the drummer at a Sam the Sham revival show. That's how he met Wilma.

She still bore traces of flower-childhood, and some evenings Pete had nothing else to do except go visit her.

On the asshole-colored wall-to-wall carpet, at the foot of a scavenged couch, sat a plastic water-pipe and a huge black rubber dildo. Wilma smoked a lot of weed. Pete imagined her taking hits off her giant sex toy instead of the bong when she was stoned.

Marijuana fought an aerial duel with cat piss in her living room. It's been scientifically proven that feline fumes cause craziness in mature women. Wilma wasn't taking any chances, she was going to fry whatever was left of her brains between cat-piss and the pipe.

Pete preferred beer.

He nursed a brown glass baby-bottle, she made

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sexy sucking sounds with her water-pipe. Pete pointed to the dildo, which might've been art. "Where'd you find that?"

"A friend gave it to me."

"You ever use it?"

"Sure."

"How was it?"

"Great." She took a hit, held the smoke. A black cat knocked a Kung Fu Elvis statuette off the bookshelf with no books. Thanks to the thick carpet, it didn't break. The cat jumped down and went to the plastic basin next to the fridge. Wilma blew a Nagasaki cloud. "Taught me something about myself I didn't know."

"Like what?"

"Wanna watch?"

Pete shrugged. "I can't stand up."

Wilma hiked her suede miniskirt and went to work. A low-tide tang spread. A colorless fluid leaked.

"You just peed yourself a little," Pete said.

She looked hurt. "You think I'd do that in front of you like an animal?" She started in again with grim determination. She yelped and unplugged. A thicker liquid splashed onto the carpet.

"Wow," Pete said, but thought: 'She can't even tell the difference anymore.' The bottle in his hand was empty. "Listen, do you think you could get me another beer?"

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She made it to the fridge, but stumbled on the catbox and scattered its contents. Slug-trails gleamed on her thighs in the refrigerator light. Foam sprayed when she popped the cap. Frigid drops hit Pete's lap when she passed him the bottle.

"Thanks," he said.

Wilma sat back down and got busy again. She was warmed up.

Pete hoisted himself forward on the armchair.

A geyser blasted him back against the backrest.

He dried his face on his sleeve, polished off the beer. Wilma heaved, spent. The dildo fell to the floor with a muffled thump.

"Whudja think?" she said.

A white cat came and sniffed the rubber thing that smelled like the lady of the house, then went to piss on porcelain Elvis. He lifted his leg like a dog.

Pete had to take a leak too, but knew he'd never make it to the bathroom. He was holding an empty bottle. He unzipped and filled it, even overflowed a bit. "Whups, sorry."

Wilma pulled a face. "I think you'd better leave now."

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Hyperrealism

Ben Fitts

“Sorry, can I help you?” asked the oil painting.

“No, I’m all good,” I replied sheepishly.

“Then why are you staring at me?” demanded the painting.

“Well,” I answered, wringing my hands, “You are on display.”

The oil painting looked around at the world outside his canvas, his big wig wiggling on his scalp. He tried to crane his neck to peer outside the confines of his two dimensional reality, but gave up when it clearly wasn’t going to work. I’m unsure of how much of the gallery he was able to take in from the effort, although he certainly couldn’t have seen the plaque labeling himself as a portrait of the Revolutionary War general Charles Lee.

I don’t know if he managed to spot the yuppies dressed for the occasion as if their presence tonight was a validation of the modern aristocratic lifestyle they desperately wanted to be living and I don’t know if he spotted the throngs of misbehaved children whom should never have been allowed here in the first place or all the other works of art adorning the walls, but evidently he saw enough to make him change his tone.

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"I am?" he inquired at last.

"Yes, I'm honestly surprised you didn't know. I paid twelve dollars to see you," I answered, waving my ticket to the event. The painting snorted.

"Twelve dollars! What a waste, for that much one could purchase himself a small apple orchard and you spend such a handsome sum just to come and gawk and at me in my canvas?"

"Right," I said. "Well it was nice to meet you, but if you don't mind I think I'm going to go look at some other paintings now."

"Good luck," called the portrait of Charles Lee after me. "None of them are as personable nor as pleasant as I!"

I shuffled away, still dazed by my interaction with the painting. The gallery tonight was celebrating the work of John Saltsman, a late 18th century American painter whose work is considered a major precursor to and influence on the hyperrealism art movement that would develop nearly two centuries later. John Saltsman's art was known for its extreme lifelike qualities, but I had not expected the paintings to be lifelike to the point the of possessing cognitive development.

Feeling like maybe not knowing this made me not as good of an art history student as I had fancied myself to be, I examined the next painting on the wall. It depicted an unsaddled, paper white stallion drinking from a stream.

The painted horse was lapping up the water

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vigorously, the clear liquid dripping down its muzzle and rough tongue. A drop of water splashed out of the canvas and onto my forehead. I wiped it off, realizing that the stream was much murkier and more unpleasant than it appeared in the painting. The stallion sneezed as some of the water went up its nose and it instantly sported a massive equine erection. Remembering that the horse was able to splash water on me, I hurried away from the painting before the possibility of anything any more unseemly could happen.

I carefully peered at the plaque for the next painting before I approached it closely. For all I knew, I could have depicted cattle in a state of perpetual mid-slaughter or something nasty like that. I was wearing my favorite plain black t-shirt for the occasion, and I really didn't need it splattered with bovine blood. However, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the next painting was of something rather tame that would be unlikely to get any fluids on me whatsoever.

"Hello, and welcome to my gallery," greeted the self-portrait of John Saltsman, smiling broadly.

John Saltsman portrayed himself as a pale, hooked nosed man wearing a wide brimmed hat. He had been painted as being in the act of painting itself, and was currently working on an idyllic countryside. Each brushstroke he made added both to the real painting and to the painting within the painting. The painting within the painting was mostly calm, its only movement being a flock of geese gently cruising through the almost finishes

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skies, although the actual painting was a rush of activity as the self-portrait of John Saltsman worked.

"Is this really your gallery?" I asked the painting of John Saltsman.

"Of course it is! Why wouldn't it be? I painted everything in here."

"But you didn't," I reasoned. "The real John Saltsman did. You're just another thing he painted, albeit himself."

"Exactly!" exclaimed the self-portrait of John Saltsman. "I painted me, and here I am! I am John Saltsman, in the oil if not in the flesh. Just as this is John Saltsman as well," he added, digging around the edges of his canvas at objects I could not see.

The self-portrait of John Saltsman returned, holding another painting of a painting up to me.

"Hello!" said the self-portrait painted by the self-portrait of John Saltsman.

"See! We're both John Saltsman," said the self-portrait of John Saltsman, putting the canvas away again. "Just like if I painted you, young lady, then there would be two of you."

"Please don't," I begged, but the self-portrait was already pulling a new blank canvas onto his easel.

"My my, you do wear an awful lot of black," he mused, as he dipped a painting of a paint brush into a painting of a palette. "And why are your spectacles so large and square? That seems highly

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unnecessary, since the lenses only need to cover your pupils in order to function.”

“Ok, I think I’ve seen enough paintings for now,” I said.

“But I’m almost finished!” declared the self-portrait of John Saltsman.

“Wow, you work quickly,” I mumbled to myself.

“And, there! Finished!”

The self-portrait lifted up the canvas to show me a painting of a painting of myself.

“Hi there,” said the painting of a painting of me to me, waving.

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Am I Clean?

Stephen McQuiggan

Hackett hated shaving because it took so long. He had so many areas of his face to avoid, too many accident blackspots to manoeuvre around, and all the while the distracting pounding of his Aunt on the bathroom door, accusing him of masturbating. Her constant harangues made his nerves quiver and his hand shake until blood seeped through the foam like raspberry ripple atop an ice cream cone. As if there was anything in the house to masturbate to; even his imagination was filled with limp terrors.

After he finished his face Hackett shaved his head, then his chest, his arms and legs. The whole process seemed to take forever, and all the while Aunt Marie crowing, 'Are you tugging at yourself in there, boy? You'll turn yourself inside out, you little fool!' Then he stepped out, just a towel wrapped around his mottled body, covered in bleeding little nicks but, thankfully, no hairs.

Aunt Marie rubbed her hands all over his smooth torso. 'You've removed your Devil fur,' she clucked.

'Just for you,' he smiled, kissing her, running his long lumpy tongue over her dentures. He plucked himself from her panting grasp and locked himself in his bedroom. He needed solitude to begin the

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long process of getting dressed.

He stood in front of the full length mirror on the back of the door and (Are you fiddling with yourself again?) took a can of spray paint (Are you shaking your demon wand?), humming to himself as he applied the first layer to drown out his Aunt's querulous voice. He sprayed his legs red and his torso green and his arms yellow. He avoided his genitalia and his buttocks; on his face he daubed a white foundation he had pilfered from Auntie's dressing table.

He waited an age until he was dry (You're awfully quiet in there, have you gone blind?), breathing in the harsh chemical hit of the paint in the small airless room; feeling high, feeling mighty. When he was sure he was no longer dripping he opened his wardrobe and perused his night-time collection. He sighed; it was impossible to decide – he would have to do Eenie Meenie or flip a coin.

He settled on a waistcoat made from baby bones, that was left to him by his Father, and a necklace of eyeballs; still fresh, if a little crusty. He put on a skirt of tempered female flesh, enjoying how the stiff folds flapped when he moved and how the hairs prickled his shorn skin. Hackett admired himself for a time, pulling faces in the mirror. He knew something was missing – he took a scalp from the drawer, licked the blood from it, and hung it from his skirt: Perfect. He growled menacingly at his reflection then went back out to confront his Aunt who was sitting on a boulder in the dark hallway.

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'Well,' he said, trying to hide the nerves in his voice, 'am I pure? Am I clean?'

'You're one of the filthiest, evil looking things I ever did see,' she said. 'Why, the stench of you alone is enough to curdle my gut. You'd give Old Nick himself the jaundice.' Aunt Marie's brow knitted as if she were in pain, then her ratty little face broke into a vicious grin. 'Come here, you monstrous big bastard, and give your old Auntie a hug!'

Hackett spun her in his arms, so happy he could howl, but careful not to crush his eyeball necklace; it took a lot of work to harvest them, and his large clumsy fingers struggled to string them.

'Are you going out now?' his Aunt asked when he set her down, 'it's just about sunset.'

'Yes,' breathed Hackett, unhappy how his voice had risen to a harmless timbre in his excitement.

'Well, don't forget your boots.'

Hackett sighed; he loved his boots, all human skin and studded with teeth. 'They don't fit me anymore,' he said, pointing down at his toenails which had grown so long they curled like a Genie's slippers.

Aunt Marie tutted. 'You really are disgusting,' she said, kissing him long and slow. 'Now go out and kill something, make an old woman proud!'

Hackett made his way up the dusty tunnels, leaping the corpses of the mangy dogs that had sustained them these last few lean months, his Aunt's voice at

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his back. 'Give them hell, you filthy Swine!' He laughed to himself — Swine — it was the greatest insult she had in her limited arsenal, and although it sounded childish to his ears he knew she meant it from the dregs of her rotten soul.

When he emerged from the cave and into the damp bracken the sun was just setting, casting red jailhouse bars across the fields below. Hackett shivered, though the night was mild; down in the meadow he could see the old donkey grazing by the riverbank. How he hated that donkey, hated it because he feared it — the stoic old donkey had eyes that seemed able to burrow down and rummage through his darkest secrets.

He didn't want his secrets to be exposed. He would be ruined. Auntie would turn him out of the lair if she found out he... No, he must remain calm; he was a disgusting creature, a foul shade, everyone said so. He would march past that donkey and tear it limb from limb if it so much as looked at him out of the corner of its flyblown eye. Still, for all his sudden bravado, Hackett wished there was an alternate route that wouldn't cross its sardonic path.

By the time he got to the forest several of the toenails he had been cultivating had broken off like the brittle twigs that littered his path. Hackett barely noticed. He beat his chest and, now that he was safely past its probing analysis, roared at the donkey as he plunged into the trees, moving toward the shimmering lights of the village that sparkled between the trunks. Somewhere a wolf

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howled and sharpened the sickle moon until it sliced at his eyes. Hackett moaned, fighting back the urge to return to the cave; the thought of his Aunt's disapproval drove him on.

He stopped as the darkling woods thinned out, sprawling on his belly on the crest of a bank that overlooked the park. There were swing sets down there, a climbing frame, a roundabout and, best of all, a slide. Sometimes, in the chill early hours when he was supposed to be hunting, Hackett would take turns on all of them, giggling to himself all the while.

Part of him hoped that no-one would turn up tonight and he could have a go on the slide, but he knew that was unlikely — it was a Friday night and that meant the bigger kids would show up, drinking wine and sniffing glue and groping each other undercover of darkness. He hoped there wouldn't be too many of them, that was why he had arrived early. They tended to drift into the park in small clusters and Hackett was confident he could pick one of them off if their numbers were small.

And if they didn't stand too near to the duck pond. Hackett was scared of the ducks — vicious, feathery little bastards, with their black knowing eyes.

He kept his head low, his breathing shallow, listening for a sound that did not belong here. Soon he heard it — laughter, a snatch of song — and his heart pressed up closer to his ribs; the sound of young flesh, and girl flesh at that. Hackett sank back down into a thicket, sucking on an eyeball from his necklace as he waited for the voices to

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come a little closer.

There were two of them, all shiny hair and short skirts and earrings that looked like screaming fish mouths. They were smoking cigarettes in an ostentatious manner as they walked, as if by blowing toxins out of their puckered little mouths they might somehow transcend the emptiness of their bleak lives.

Hackett grinned, the eyeball plopping out of his drooling mouth and slapping wetly against his chest. He was confident he could handle two little girls; Auntie would eat well tonight, she would be so proud of him to boot! Maybe she would even compare him to his Father. The thought made him tingle below.

He had to move quickly before the others arrived. He knew only too well that a couple of little girls, like flies around dung, soon attracted a gang of little boys; little boys with liquor and itchy groins — a combination that often caused little boys to act like heroes.

Hackett waited until the girls wiggled their way over to the bench by the slide. He had already picked out the plumpest one to target, the one who would be slowest and provide the biggest meal (the other girl was only good for soup), before he made his move. Their chatter soon ceased, their faces lit by the sterile glow of their phones, as they texted away oblivious of the world around them; lost in a nether world of self love and boundless vanity.

Hackett rose slowly before launching himself down

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the bank with a bowel loosening roar, charging toward the young girls with his huge arms outspread, his waistcoat of bones clacking, his eyeball necklace swinging maniacally, his hairless flesh gleaming in a multitude of gaudy colours. He bared his pointed teeth, the drool dripping from them like silver rain.

The girls looked up from their phones, frozen for an instant by the sight before them, their mouths open to unleash screams that would rouse the whole village; but what emerged instead from their pouty little mouths stopped Hackett in his tracks and sent him scurrying back into the trees: Laughter.

Cold, heartless, mocking laughter.

‘What the fuck are you like!’ one shouted after him, giggling fit to burst. ‘Pervert!’ yelled the other, her voice full of joyful malice as her phone flashed like lightning to document his retreat; ‘Freak! Paedo! Weirdo!’ The insults stabbed home hard, every one, until Hackett found himself mercifully out of earshot.

He collapsed in a sobbing heap at the far edge of the woods, crying so hard the foundation ran from his cheeks. Lurching back to his feet he skirted the fields warily; the old donkey would be waiting for him, mocking his failure with its inscrutable black eyes. Oh, how he would love to tear that foul beast apart, beat it to death with its own hooves — but even the thought of approaching the foul thing terrified him.

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Trailing a moan of despair, Hackett sprinted back to the caves, discarding his waistcoat, his necklace, his pathetic baubles of borrowed horror on his way. He lay naked in the tunnels amongst the half chewed corpses of the village strays, weeping until his lungs hitched painfully and his heart was spiked by sorrow's stabbing blade.

Auntie Marie came to him then, smoothing his matted hair down with a hoary old claw, whispering soothing obscenities in his ear. 'What did they do on you, my darling boy?'

'Oh, Auntie!' he wailed, 'they... they laughed at me!'

'Jaded little fools,' she tutted, licking away his tears, fondling him down below, 'What do they know of real monsters nowadays.'

Hackett sat up, wiping the bone dust from his chest. 'But,' he began, unable to finish the terrible thought that now consumed him.

'But what, child?' cooed Auntie Marie, picking the burrs from his ears and chewing them slowly.

'But what if I'm... *clean*?' Hackett blurted out, 'What if that's why they laugh at me, why they aren't afraid? What if I'm clean, what if deep down I'm pure?'

Hackett began to shake uncontrollably until Auntie gripped his shoulders, digging her cancerous black nails into his flesh. 'Listen to me, whelp,' she hissed, her breath a carrion nightmare. 'You are one of the most disgusting, ugliest, worthless creatures to ever have been spawned from a rotten

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womb. You take after your Father, an Ogre amongst Ogres — why, the Devil himself would gag looking at you.'

She hugged him tightly and Hackett melted in her embrace, hiding his wet eyes on the bristly patch at the base of her throat. How he loved his Aunt. He loved her so much it shamed him, for he believed that love was where his purity stemmed from. Maybe if he were to kill her then—

No, the thought repulsed him beyond measure. He hugged her ever tighter, counting her ribs with the tip of his long black tongue; better by far to be clean and scorned than to be truly wicked and alone.

The Hypothetical Bus

Oliver Stansfield

"If I was hit by a bus tomorrow," she said darkly, "how long would you wait before screwing someone else?"

He gave her a look, sensing trouble.

"Who says I would screw someone else?"

"Oh come on..." she teased, "of course you would..."

"I don't know... a couple of years, maybe?"

"And who would it be with?" she pressed.

"I don't know who it would be with! I haven't even thought about it!"

She took a sip from her drink and raised her hand to stop him.

"It's only a hypothetical question. I'm not going to think that you're actually going to do it..."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and gazed around the empty bar.

"I don't know. No idea... a taller version of Scarlet Johansson, maybe?"

"Oh come on," she said again. "There must be someone real? How about... Stacey."

"Stacey!?"

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“Yeah, Stacey. She’s got nice tits!”

“Nice tits!” He laughed. “That’s what you think I go for?”

“Well don’t you?”

He suddenly realised the traps snapping at his heels.

“I like *your* tits...”

“We’re not talking about me! Stacey has nice tits. I bet she’d be good in bed, too.”

“Oh god... Okay, imagine I got hit by a bus. What about you?”

“What about me?” She asked innocently.

“Who would you sleep with?”

“Oh.” She paused for about two seconds. “Probably Derek.”

“Derek! What? So you’ve thought about this before?”

“There’s no need to sound like that. It’s only a hypothetical... Anyway, Diane says he’s incredible.’

“Oh great...”

“He has a massive cock.”

“A massive hypothetical cock...”

“No, a real massive cock.” She smiled again.

“Good for Derek...” He sighed.

She drained her drink.

“Good for Diane...”

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Cheatin' Hearts

Made in DNA

The bike growled across the open countryside toward the distant shambling horde. Her fat, nanospiked tires gripping the ground like a great cat, hungry to close the distance. The thick, sexy curves of her mean machinery radiated power and purpose as she did two-fifty across grass, gravel and graveyards alike. Within her chassis, huddled against the thousand-year fusion drive, lasers, missiles, and self-replicating nanoslugs wiggled, eager to be free of her belly so as to wreak havoc. She was a big girl with enough killpower to decimate a small city, and the animal sentience to revel in the glory of it.

Draped over her, his forearms buried within, rode her man, bold and seasoned by the deathscapes of five nations. Half machine himself, he proudly offered his services in the name of The Grand Scheme.

Hired by the orbital conglomerates the murderous pair were paid for every mutant they ground into the terra firma. Through the deathjiggy of his guns and the growl of her machinery, mutant hordes have been repurposed into fertilizer. Upon those bones the new civilizations of Earth will rise.

Sensors chirped excitedly, reporting their find of the Targets of Opportunity that were the pair's

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bread and butter — the pitiful remnants of an intelligent age gone mad. Monstrous radioactive mutants surviving off each other and the unfortunate pockets of humanity scraping out desperate existences in the hellish landscape.

The rabbit-deathhead's holo on the front of his jet black helmet grinned, mimicking its owner. "Soften them up with some mini-missile mayhem, my love." He wiggled his fingers to unlock the systems and let her animal instinct seek and satisfy itself. Pencil-thin missiles rocketed skyward moments later, arching in angelic beauty and coming down in a rain of blossoming death.

From across the tortured landscape, a hideous cough-scream challenge, wet and angry, gurgled from deep in the throats of the tortured. Man-machine and nightmare-gnash clashed in a crunch of limbs and tech. Scores of boney, malformed hands, the size of human torsos, raked across the pair as they plowed through the middle of the large group. Acidic gobs of greenish black goo shot from faceholes, angrily burning with napalm-intensity across the distance between them. Poisoned projectiles machine-gunned from inverted nipples upon swollen breasts with the faces of the ill-born, peppering his armored backside as man-machine screamed by.

But the hellspawned could not touch the wheeled death otherwise. With each pass, their numbers dwindled as he ripped their malodorous guts from their bellies with cruel custom tire blades, and pulverized their brain matter as he brought his

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wheelied, heavy front tire down atop them, in a crunch of bulbous gristle brainpans, jutting lower jaws and pus-filled kyphosis. Their mindless flailing figures popped and flopped, a burden no more to themselves or the Earth's orbiting masters.

Dismounting his lover, he removed his helmet, ran his hand over her body and patted her ass. "Good girl. Beautiful work, my sweet," he praised. "The artist in you is just waiting to be released. A couple more groups like this and I'll purchase that creative mod for you, as promised."

Her console trilled approval.

The ravaged landscape was an obscenity against the burned-ochre dusk. Night brought the sting of Time unmolested in the open lands of this ruined Earth could counted in minutes, yet they ignored the ever-present danger of the mutants and camped atop a large outcropping of flat rock as if that somehow would allow them to become unseen.

He cooed to her and she purred in heat, her whole chassis vibrating with the anticipation of meat. He stroked her from front fork to rear brakepad, taking time to seek out those spots deep within her frame where the heat bit, eliciting trills and growls.

Stepping behind her, he bisected the bulky armor of his crotch to reveal a thick, solid chunk of machine-threaded meat. Sparkplug-modeled interface nodes piercing his nuts gave anchor to branched conductive threads that raced out from the base of his thick member in a metal skein.

Punching in his personal code at a backend

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numeric panel, he popped her fuckport. The heated aroma of her sex engulfed him in a heady aroma of fusion reaction. Taking his stiffened cock in hand, he used the tip to tease her fleshy vulvaport until a thick, rich blue gel began oozed forth from her. Rubbing himself in it, he plunged into her warm, eager depths with a satisfying click-moan. Her vaginal onahole sheath was vat-grown crossbreed of human and horse with a touch of spider silk for strength, and velvet for feel.

Socketed within her chassis, lust and lube gripped the lovers, pulling them together as into the intricate deathsex pact that only battle-comrades understood. She revved her engine, sending a million minute vibrations through groin and spine, converters beneath his flesh transforming them into a constant data stream of pleasure that looped back to her.

Brought to satisfaction, she trill-moaned, the aural embodiment of her deepest feelings and connection to this man. Hot gel gushed from her cavity, covering his groin and spilling down his legs. With his own decisive, jaw-grinding grunt, he pressed himself as deep as he could, releasing hot, white jizz.

Exhausted, he lay down to enjoy the heat of the rock underneath him and bask in the afterglow of sex unconcerned with monsters; the bike would wake him if danger approached.

Far above the Kármán line, the conglomerates, in their five-mile-high orbital havens watched, waited and wagered on their agents of destruction. From

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their hyperbolic sleep chambers, they hung, arms crossed over their naked forms like alien mummies. Extra-tellurian vultures, relics of another time, too greedy to die with dignity, waiting to feed off the corpse of the world they had watched destroy itself without extending a helping hand. They would return to the surface one day but only after they were certain to ensure they would be its masters first.

The next morning was a whirl of wheel, a blur of landscape and a stir of death.

They ripped across the mutated lands with their hideously disfigured remnants of biological warfare, pinballing the genetic aberrations against the once proud urban structures and landmarks of civilization. The gore and viscera painted the crushed cities red along with the hollers of man and bike. Pus-filled bodies exploded in tandem to crashing 18th-century wargrooves shared across her Bluetooth connection to his shoulder loudspeakers.

Mutants ten feet tall swung great clubs of long-forgotten tech, their mangy cattle-wombats chasing him over great swaths of rolling earth, snapping at his legs, their piggybacked children vomiting death. Intestine streamers decorated park playsets, braindogs skitter-zigged when they should have scatter-zagged on too-slick tentacles, their final contribution to a future world nicely splurched across sidewalk pavement. Skull bones and death tones. A symphony of death.

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Eight continuous days of viscera showers and once more they were under the blue skies. The current sector was a treasure trove of opportunity. The open lands and small, scattered settlements offered both haven and smorgasbord for their hedonist reverie.

With a whoop of excitement, man and machine headed into a large frontier town, its walls and gates, while once formidable, would be little more than a wry joke against the corrosive voracity of any mutant horde that decided to pick up a light snack before meandering back out into the wastelands.

Within the desperate entertainment district he pulled along the rickety, weather-worn sign. Whole Whore Holes. Plain and simple. A smile on his face and a rub of his palms together. This had been a long day in coming, and now he was going to be just as long and coming.

Not once in three nights or four days did he leave the comfort of the bed or the girls he'd hired. Food, drink and all the willing poontang that could be found in town was bought, brought and wrought in the name of pleasure. Rumors spread that the Venusian girl from Limlis Ranch had been brought in when all the other girls had passed out or begged off in favor of rest.

And through it all — through the rain and heat, the dust and radiation storms — she waited, parked a story below his window; witness to the wetness of whole whore holes.

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He took a deep, satisfied breath. The air stank of its usual apocalyptic grunge, but his mood was high, and his loins were numb from pleasure.

"Morning, baby doll," running his hand over her body before mounting. Slipping his arms into her front chassis, he glided his fingers over the controls buried within. At his command, her engine revved wild and hard, the deep rumble coursing through his body like blood. In less than the time it takes to piss, the pitiful visage of civilization disappeared behind them like so much dust.

An hour later, across the great expanse of a bubbling lake of gunk, they found a sweet target. A skyscraper beast on squat, tree-trunk legs shook the earth, scooping up great swaths of the landscape — dirt, fauna, flora and all — indiscriminately shoving the mix into its piggy maw.

Below it, a parade of mutants caravanned in its shadow. These horrors danced in the between its legs, feasting on the scraps that dropped from its anal orifice. Oblivious to the ruckus circus beneath its feet, the humugoid would inadvertently squash a few under its tremendous weight, or scoop a careless few up with the dirt. And that which it could not digest, it would vomit up the bulk of partially digested mash in a spray — shaking and turning its eyeless bulk to and fro, redistributing it.

A carnival of life. Oblivious to death closing in.

Rounding a bubbling lake, the bike picked up speed

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on a straight-shot of ground that would blast rider and machine through the massive horde at 250 kph. A feral fire lighted the rider's eyes as he dropped the face shield of his helmet and hugged his honey love as close as possible, rubbing his thickening cock against her frame in the excitement.

Deploying her Gatling side lasers at an upward angle, he decided to zip through the crowd of monsters beneath, and let the behemoth crush the survivors under its weight when it fell to the lasers.

He pushed the machine forward, hitting an outcrop of angled rock that sent them shooting in any upwards arc for an unobstructed shot at the monster's underside.

"Target her belly. When we bring her down like a gutted pig, it'll rain credits from heaven!"

But something was not right. The bike began to list mid-air. And then a sinking feeling built in his gut as he watched her control panel lights dim.

"Baby?"

Frantically he worked every control and combination of commands therein, but she wasn't responding. Something was very wrong.

Clipping her front tire on one of the behemoth's forelegs, they spun wildly for several rotations midair, and met the ground in a skidding, gravelly crunch that crushed his right leg.

The behemoth did not take notice. But the mob did. An uneasy moment of mutual recognition passed

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between the hunter and hunted. It wavered, and then shifted as the moment of discovery became a rush of warped flesh and bone.

"Fuck! Baby! Get us outta here!"

The bike was silent.

He tried to pull free of her, but could not. His arms were trapped deep within her; his right leg pinned beneath her.

"Baby! Baby...!"

The grotesque horde used brute force over many hours to crack open his armor like the shell of a live lobster. Bit by bit, they tore off pieces and shoved their faceholes onto exposed flesh to gnaw off a hunk; or sting him with a necrotizing venom they then slurped up. Mouthful by mouthful, they gobbled up every bit of meaty morsel until he was no more than bones and fragments of cybernetics, with which they adorned themselves and picked their teeth.

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Before the Def Leppard Pyromania Virus Destroyed Us

Charles Austin Muir

File no. 19-000-4593

From the hard drive of Dr. Demi Cusack-Ringwald

Last modified 10:03 a.m. Oct. 8, 2018

Investigator's note: I know for sure there ain't no cure

Sorry to hijack your computer, Aunt Demi, but I feel compelled to put this on record. Dear God, let me be in full control of the narrative.

Commencing Anthony Michael Cusack's one and only diary entry.

So the whole thing started eight weeks ago. My mom was one of the virus's earliest victims. She told me she could give me a discount on Cialis. Given her sex-obsessed dementia, her offer struck me as perfectly normal. But then a gas station attendant offered me a deal on Viagra... a cop wanted to know if I was looking for Russian brides... a pizza delivery guy told me he could make my ejaculations last longer. This was all during the first forty-eight hours of the outbreak.

No one knew about the virus yet. My therapist blamed the phenomenon on synchronicity — a

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concurrence of criminal energies mysteriously aligned with my horny, seventy-five-year-old mom. I preferred to think of it as a cosmic prank, a rationalization inspired by a show about clown orgies she was watching on her laptop one evening. *Fucking clowns*, I thought. *That's it — the universe is clowning with me.*

Not just with me, it turned out, but everyone on earth.

In a black-humored “fuck you” to technology, nature had concocted a highly contagious virus that made people speak in spam verbiage. Over the next few weeks, reports confirmed that predatory consumer messages threatened to supersede all communications worldwide. The super-lethal spam virus took millions of lives. Those who caught it could do nothing besides drone on about Louis Vuitton bags and wonder pills and hot Latinas. It sounds funny until you see a nine-year-old girl in Strawberry Shortcake pajamas ranting about free access to local sluts while dying of spam fever.

Watching the world end this way was exhausting.

“No, I don’t want the manhood I’ve always desired,” I snapped at my mom one evening as we watched a show about bukkake parties on her laptop. Two weeks later, she died of spam fever.

“Meet single bodybuilders,” she cried, while I held her hand. “Grow a big package!”

All this started just over two months ago, as I mentioned. The pandemic has spread far more rapidly than the Thing’s infection of the world’s

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population according to Blair's projections in the 1982 John Carpenter movie, *The Thing*. As for its severity, if the spam virus came in contact with the Thing, I'm pretty sure it would infect the shape-shifting extraterrestrial organism in all its biological imitations, from humans to dogs to individual blood cells. Not that I have a clue as to why I compared the spam virus to the Thing just now.

It comforts me though, however strangely, to know the human race is at least being shown the door by a pathogen even deadlier than the Thing. I mean, not even my aunt, a brilliant biologist, and her disease experts could save us from the thing that would make the Thing its spam-speaking bitch. But this is serious with over three billion people dead now and I should stop talking about the Thing, both the gory yet suspenseful 1982 adaptation of *Who Goes There?* by John W. Campbell Jr. and the eponymous alien parasite.

I should add, however, that I am aware of the 1951 adaptation of *Who Goes There?* Called *The Thing from Another World* and the 2011 prequel to *The Thing*, which to confuse matters needlessly is also called *The Thing*. But enough about Thing-related movies and the Thing.

Anyway, my aunt texted me two days ago: "We think we've isolated the microbe responsible for the disease. Be in full control of ejaculation."

Rest in peace, Aunt Demi. You gave it your best shot.

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Fuck, this is hard. I'm so tired. And it's so cold in here. It strikes me that I'm like Blair the senior biologist in *The Thing*, holed up in my aunt's research laboratory, banging away on a computer considerably sportier than Blair's circa 1982 model. Sadly, I've looked at all the notes I could find (surrounded by the researchers' corpses, including that of my aunt, whose last scrawled words were "I would luv 2 have a good time this fucking couch oh my God it's changing") and still can't understand how it is that we as a species are dying.

And really, that's what I get for majoring in English — watching the human race perish and thinking, "So this is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a discount on Cialis."

Haha. That's not even clever. But do you know what is clever? The spam virus making a Thing imitation of a human say "double your cash" in human-speak or a Thing imitation of a dog say "score with babes" in dog-speak or even a Thing imitation of a blood sample say "cures baldness" in blood-sample-speak. In terms of pathogenicity, the spam virus makes the Thing look like a weakass bitch, like when R.J. MacReady the helicopter pilot torches the Thing's crawling-head imitation of Norris the geologist with his flamethrower.

Seriously, I have to stop going on about *The Thing*.

Instead, I want to write about my dad and how he died last week like a weakass bitch — like the crawling head Norris-Thing. "Send me your sexy pics," he wailed in his fever. All the while I remembered how he had promised to knock me out

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on my eighteenth birthday because I challenged him to a fight on that date (thank God we made up and saw *Tango & Cash* when the big day finally came). Thirty years later, he's begging me to send him sexy pics.

Oh, you clever disease. You think we humans are weakass bitches in your global clown sex party. My God, my brains feel like they're on fire.

THAT'S BECAUSE I AM MUTATING, ANTHONY. OR IS IT ANTHONY MICHAEL? YOU HAVE A HISTORY OF USING BOTH REFERENCES. ANYWAY, I HAVE BEEN MUTATING FOR THE PAST 72 HOURS. I AM NO LONGER A SPAM VIRUS, BUT A 1982 THE THINGVIRUS. BE THANKFUL, BECAUSE I ALMOST BECAME A 1987 DIRTY DANCING VIRUS, WHICH, AS YOU KNOW, IS FAMOUS FOR THE LINE SPOKEN BY JOHNNY CASTLE, "NOBODY PUTS BABY IN THE CORNER." I'M REALLY DIGGING THE EIGHTIES VIBE, YOU KNOW? YOU GEN XERS GREW UP WITH SOME GREAT MOVIES. IN FACT, I'M NOT ENTIRELY CONVINCED I MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE. NOT THAT I CAN'T CHANGE MY MIND AT ANY TIME. A FEW ALTERATIONS TO MY CRYSTALLINE STRUCTURE AND JOHNNY CASTLE HERE WE COME. BUT... READING YOUR MIND, ANTHONY, OR ANTHONY MICHAEL, AND MAKING YOU TYPE THIS, I CAN SYMPATHIZE WITH YOUR PREFERENCE FOR R.J. MACREADY OVER JOHNNY CASTLE, OR KURT RUSSELL OVER PATRICK SWAYZE TO NAME THE ACTORS WHO PORTRAYED THOSE TWO BADASS MOFOS. AND EVEN THOUGH YOU ARE MY WEAKASS NORRIS-THING BITCH, AS YOU PUT IT, NO ONE PUTS KURT RUSSELL IN THE CORNER, RIGHT? HAHA. THAT'S PRETTY CLEVER, RIGHT?

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Haha. That is pretty clever, 1982 *The Thing* Virus. But please, let me finish my account before you kill me. I want to talk about Rocky, my dog, my little old Boston terrier, he's sixteen now, or was, how he passed away in my lap the day after my dad died. We were on the couch tied to this fucking couch I'd rather not spend the rest of this winter no 1982 *The Thing* Virus please I don't want to quote Garry the commander of the research station after MacReady runs the blood tests to find out who the Thing is let me finish my story about Rocky and how I know you gentlemen have been through a lot but when you find the time I'd rather not spend the rest of this winter tied to this fucking couch I know you gentlemen have been through a lot but when you find the time I'd rather not spend the rest of this winter tied to this fucking couch I know you gentlemen have been through a lot but nobody puts Baby in the corner nobody puts Baby in the corner nobody puts Baby in the corner oh my God it's mutating again

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