

# **Blue Crow**

**M A G A Z I N E**

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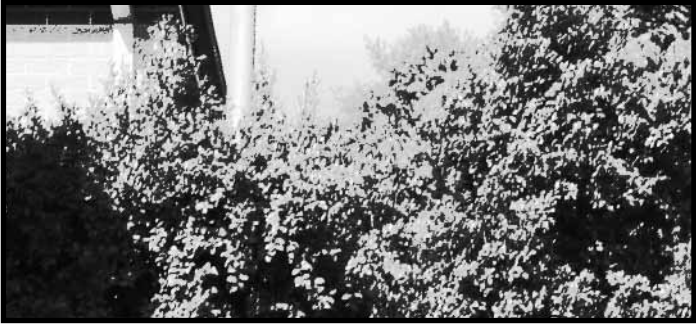
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# Foreword

by the editor, **ANDREW SCOBIE**



**AS I WRITE**, it is a beautiful sunny spring day in Sydney, Australia, and do we have some treats in store for you in issue two of *Blue Crow Magazine*. I hope you will discover within the sheer poetry (that exists without poetry).

We begin with a world story by Jason Markle, which I am sure you will agree needed to be told.

There is a beautiful poignant piece by JP Kemmick; a feast of comedy fiction, (some wonderfully subtle in their delivery, others simply hilarious in their entirety), by DJ Daniels, Robert McGowan, Ricky Ginsburg, Tyrone Arps and Jonathan Elsom, amongst many other fine craftsmen and craftswomen of humour, including delightful

crime/comedy from Danielle de Valera; also the drama-filled fiction of Carol Reid, Andria Olson, William Akin, J. Boyer, Daniel W. Davis and other insightful writers.

We feature two rib-tickling short stories from Matthew Glenn Ward's splendid new book, *John F. Kennedy Lives in the Future!* There is brilliant absurdity by Fiona Murray and Boris Glikman, plus myriad wonderful contributions from other, equally talented authors.

Good friend of *the Crow*, John Dodge, features his marvellous drawings, and Christopher Woods has included some

thought-provoking photographs. Superb art together with quality fiction; what more could one want in one edition.

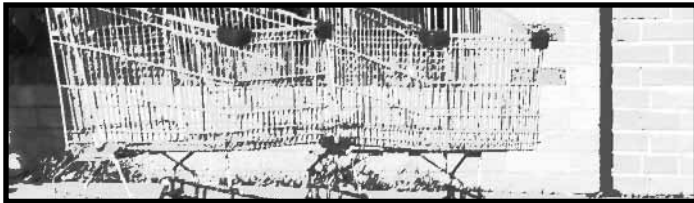
Thankyou, as always, to my comrade in the trenches: design guru, Matthew Ward for his invaluable assistance. The somewhat controversial Justin Bridges also returns with his unique brand of eccentricity, due, mainly, to contractual arrangements.

I hope you sit back, relax and enjoy as *the Blue Crow* spreads its wings to take flight.

**Andrew Scobie** ←

SYDNEY

OCTOBER 2010



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# Pazite Snajper! (Beware Sniper!)

by Jason Markle

**My interpreter**, Mateja, wishes for the war to end. He says it has gone on long enough. I am sitting beside him in a bar in Sarajevo, smoking my last cigarette and counting up the cash in my pocket, hoping I have enough money for more. Random gunfire from an unseen assailant and the steady driving rain has driven us to this sanctuary, and although it's nice to get off my feet, I am beginning to find Mateja's complaints to be rather annoying.

"It is time for the war to end. I am sick of it." He pounds his fist on the table, rattling our coffee cups and causing the other patrons to stare. "Are you listening, Conner?" he asks.

I look at him and nod. "Yeah, I heard you."

"So?"

"So what?"

Mateja shakes his head. "What do you think?"

I smile and shrug. "I think I need to get more smokes. And we need to get back to work." I look down at the money in my hand. Five Marks. "Do

you have any money on you? I don't think I have enough."

The Bosnian sneers and rubs his hand over his balding head.

"You Americans are all the same. You only care about yourselves, not the rest of the world. Here people are dying. Right here in the streets. But you do nothing. You look at your money and think about only what you want. It sickens me."

As I look around the room, the staring faces quickly turn away, but I can still hear them whispering.

"Look, Mateja." I press my cigarette into the ash tray, then sit up in my chair and look the man straight in the eyes. "What do you want me to say about this grand declaration of yours? Of course the war needs to end." I tap one of my coins on the table and stare out the window at the empty street. Then I turn back to him and whisper, "And you're wrong about me. I do care about what's going on. That's why I'm here."

He doesn't buy it. "Bullshit," he says. "You are only here for your story." I shake my head.

"Are you finished?" Slowly, I climb out of my chair and put on my jacket. "Listen, I'm going to walk up to the shop on the corner and pick up some smokes. Besides, we've got to get over to the airport. I'm supposed to have something for those bastards back in New York by the weekend and all I have is a few pages of notes scattered around my room. You coming?"

"Are you insane? People are dying out there. Just this morning a young woman was shot walking past that very same corner store. The snipers, Conner, they are ruthless. They will—"

"I know all about it, Mateja, and I know how to take care of myself. I've been around war before, and I've been here for a few months. So don't tell me—"

The Bosnian holds up his hands in defeat. "I know, I know. But, please, I beg of you, the streets, you see, they are empty. It is for a reason that the people do not go out. Don't needlessly risk your life over a pack of cigarettes."

I slide the chair under the table, lean towards him and smile.

"But if I don't get some more, I might die anyway."



My humor is lost on this man who has become my partner and guide. I start to head toward the exit, but he is quick. He moves from his chair and has me by the arm before I can touch the door.

“Don’t leave!” he says. “Stay. I know that someone in here will sell you cigarettes. Maybe even the vendor.” Then he shouts in Slavic, and I know that he is asking for more smokes, and the people look at me with sad pathetic stares. For a moment, I am embarrassed and I really want to leave, but then people are holding up cigarettes—some display whole packs. Mateja pulls me by the arm back towards my seat. “See,” he says. “They will sell you cigarettes. Cheap, too.”

• • •

“The woman who was killed today, they say she was trying to buy some bread for her two little children.” Mateja is nursing a glass of vodka. When he drinks he can only talk about the tragedies of this place. “Sarajevo is an unforgiving city, my friend.” He takes a sip from his glass.

I just nod and arrange my newly acquired smokes. I was able to buy a full pack of Primas, four Vatrás, and even two Camels for only three Marks. Carefully, I line them up on the table in front of me. I decide to smoke the Vatrás first. They are a cheap Ukrainian brand and they taste a little stale, but the filters are short, so they last a little longer. The Camels will be saved for later and I put the Primas, which are the easiest and cheapest to get, in my jacket pocket.

“I wish I had some Marlboro Reds,” I say, lamenting the prospect of being stuck with poorly made European brands for at least the next few weeks.

Mateja downs the rest of his drink and places the glass upside down in front of him. His breath smells sour as he leans across the table near my face.

“Will you stop worrying about your fucking cigarettes for one minute and listen to what I have to say? A woman died today. Does that mean nothing to you?”

For a moment I don't reply; I just light my cigarette and take a long, hard drag. The soft murmur of the other patrons and the occasional clink of silverware is the only thing that interrupts the silence between us. Outside a steady rain falls onto the empty city street and I stare through the window, searching for signs of life.

"Well?" says Mateja, interrupting my trance.

"Well what?" I say. "Women die here everyday, so why is this one any different?"

"What do you mean—different? They are all different. I am talking about people. A person. An innocent person was shot on the street, during the day, in the rain!" He pounds his fist on the table, rattling our glasses and scattering my cigarettes, sending two of them to the floor.

"Calm down," I say and I push my chair back and kneel on the floor to retrieve them. One has rolled toward a table close by, so I crawl over to it and pick it up. At the table are two men, probably in their mid-forties, staring down at me like I am some pathetic dog.

I flash a brief smile. "Sorry," I say. "Dropped my smokes."

The two men glance at each other, shrug, then continue on as if I were just a small nuisance in their daily routine.

At the table, Mateja has poured himself another glass of vodka.

"Will you take it easy?" I say. "You're embarrassing me."

"You are embarrassing yourself," he says in disgust. "All of you Americans are. You act as if you are kings of the world. Your talk is tough, but there is no action. Where is America now, eh? Where is your President Clinton, and all of his talk of peace and prosperity? Doing nothing, that's where he is. Sitting in front of his television set like every other American, that's where he is."

His eyes are lit with hatred and he empties his vodka in one quick swallow, then again places the glass upside down on the table. For a moment he stares, daring me to say something back, to defend the actions of my country, my people; my president. But I don't, I just stare back at him and take a long drag from my cigarette. And I wait for his next move.



Outside, there is movement on the street. A UN armored vehicle is making its way down the road. The loud rumble of its engines, the large wheels navigating over the worn paved road, shakes the tables. Glasses rattle as the walls vibrate with the quaking of the building. It comes to a halt just across the street from the bar. Behind the vehicle stand five figures: four males and a female. They are all wearing an assortment of military camouflage and civilian clothing, and they are all carrying guns. Three of the men enter a nearby building, its walls riddled with bullet holes and torn on the right side from where an antitank missile had penetrated it. It used to be an apartment building.

Mateja has finished another glass and is rising to his feet. He steadies himself with his chair, then, with obvious effort, maneuvers himself closer to the window.

“Sit down, you drunken fool,” says the vendor, who has posted himself near the door to observe the activity in the street.

Mateja waves him off, then puts his face up to the glass. “They are searching for the sniper.” He turns and looks back at me. “Maybe the road will be clear soon.”

I shrug my shoulders and play with my Zippo, clicking open the lighter cap with a flick of my fingers.

Irritated, he turns his attention back to the street. The female soldier has taken up a position behind the armored vehicle. She is kneeling, her weapon held to her cheek, eyes staring down the scope. Slowly she moves, searching from building to building. Then she says something to the armed man who has taken position behind a wall a few meters in front of her.

“I wish I knew what they were saying,” says Mateja.

“And I wish you would get away from the window,” says the vendor. “You are going to get yourself killed.”

Mateja holds his hands up in mocking surrender. “Okay, okay,” he says as he returns to his seat.

I pour my friend another glass of vodka and push it towards him.

He smiles, raises the glass in salute, then downs it quickly and once again places the glass upside down on the table.

“Thank you, Conner. I needed that.” He looks back towards the window. “Everything is so frustrating. It is always the same thing. A sniper kills, the city defenders hunt, and more people die. Even when they are able to get one, it seems as if there are hundreds more to take their place.” He turns back to me and rubs his balding head. “If only the army could break out and clear the hills. If only the United Nations or the United States would intervene with their jets. If only...”

I shake my head. “Look, it could be worse. At least the shelling has stopped. The UN made sure of that.”

“Yes, but that has not put an end to the war. The snipers, they still occupy the hills. Every day Serbian troops attack various places around the city. The killing is continuing.” He pours himself yet another drink, then asks, “And what is anyone doing about it?” I glance around at the other patrons, but their eyes are either fixed on the events outside the window or the drinks in front of them. “Nothing. That is what they are doing. The people in the city suffer and the world does nothing. If it were not for the tunnel, the city would not survive. That is the only way to get supplies, the only way for relief, the only way the people can arm and defend themselves. No one else will defend us.”

“Take a look outside, Mateja. What does that vehicle outside say? What are those black letters printed in bold on that white armor?”

“A few UN peacekeepers haven’t changed a thing, my friend,” he says dismissively, “and you know it. All they do is serve to remind us that the outside is aware of our situation and will do nothing to help us. Remember that young boy that we talked to near the market the other day, the one who was looking for relatives in the city? He said he was from Srebrenica.”

The boy had told us how the Serbs had come to his village and taken the men away and killed them. He said he was lucky to escape.

“And who was there protecting them?” Mateja points at the armored vehicle and sneers. “The UN has done us few favors, Conner.”

As Mateja drinks from his freshly re-filled glass, I turn my attention

outside and watch the steady rain fall. The woman is still kneeling, her body leaning on the wheel of the UN vehicle. I know that Mateja is right.

• • •

We have been here for hours and I'm running out of smokes again. I had pulled out my notepad and tried to detail the events outside, but the lack of action, and Mateja's seemingly uncontrollable desire to tell me what to write about, compelled me to put it away. I pull out one of my camels, light it, and toss my Zippo onto the table. Mateja is at the window again. He is waving his hands and arms about in intricate motions, trying to capture the attention of the woman soldier. If she sees him, though, she doesn't show it. Instead, she looks down her scope for a moment, then talks to the man a few meters to her front.

"I think they've spotted him." Mateja has his face pressed up against the window. "I think he is in that apartment building there on the corner. You see it?" He leans back, face still against the glass, and points. "That one there. You see?" As he turns back to me his eyes narrow, waiting for an answer.

"Yeah, I know the one you're talking about."

"You *know*," he says, "You're stuck in here, too. You could at least feign some sort of interest."

"Yeah, I could." I tap my cigarette and watch as the ashes fall into the tray. "You're right. I could get up, walk to the window, smash my face up against it, and present a perfect target for that Serb out there. Just because we're inside doesn't mean that he can't hit you."

Mateja turns and looks at the glass, then leans against it and peers outside.

"That sniper," I say, "he may be in that building, but he may not be. But I guarantee you one thing, if he sees you in that window, and don't think he can't, he will shoot you." I take another drag from my cigarette. "Right in your head!"

The Bosnian jumps away from the glass and backs towards our table.

Quiet laughter fills the bar.

The vendor who is still near the door says, “That is what I am trying to tell him, but he does not listen. You can get yourself killed, you fool. You could get us all killed.”

I pour two glasses of vodka and slide one over to my friend.

“To your health,” I say and swallow the dry alcohol and, imitating my companion, place the glass upside down on the table. Mateja looks at me for a moment. His hand is shaking as he picks up and holds the glass, then, slowly, he drinks it down and places his glass on the table in the same fashion.

“Why must you frighten me, Conner?” He pours himself another glass, spilling some of the contents onto the table.

Not for the first time, I shake my head, and look out the window. The woman has moved toward the front of the vehicle and appears to be preparing to fire. For a moment, the only sound is the soft beating of the rain, but the crackle of rifle fire causes us both to jump. There is a metallic clang as a round ricochets off the armor of the UN vehicle. The woman is yelling something and crawling on all fours towards her original position.

“I think they found the sniper,” I say.

Mateja is up on his feet, but will not get near the window. “Did the woman get hit?”

She has finally made it to the rear wheel and she is leaning her back against it. Her legs are stretched out in front of her and her rifle lies on her lap. Her chest rises and falls in a quick rhythm. I can hear her voice as she screams to her comrades.

“I don’t think so,” I say, but I really can’t tell.

Mateja runs to the door, but the vendor blocks his path, both arms raised.

“Get out of my way!” shouts Mateja. “She may need help.” The old man yells back at him in Slavic and I get to my feet thinking I may have to intervene. Mateja pushes him aside and leans up against the door.

“Be careful,” I say, “You’re too important to me to die.”

The Bosnian nudges open the door. He yells something to the woman

I do not understand. She yells back and waves at him to go back inside, but Mateja is persistent and continues to shout to her. Finally, when she raises her rifle and points it at him, he quickly closes the door.

“She is all right.”

“That was dangerous.” I return to my chair and pat my breast pocket, searching for my last cigarette.

Mateja sits down and leans across the table towards me. “What was that you said?”

“When?”

“Before I walked outside.”

I place the Camel between my lips and shrug my shoulders.

“I can’t die because I am too ‘important’ to you? Is that it?”

I try to answer but he cuts me off.

“What is it with you Americans? You only care about yourselves. What about Mateja? Don’t you care about me?” He motions to the people in the bar. “Don’t you care about them?” He points outside. “That woman, out there fighting, don’t you care what happens to her?”

“Wait,” I say, “I didn’t mean it—”

“Yes you did. That is exactly what you meant. My only importance is my use to you.”

“Hold on a sec—”

“No, I will not! You see, my friend,” he says that last phrase with obvious strain, “you are just like your countrymen. That is why they do not help us. That is why we are here suffering and dying. No one will help because we are of no use to them. That is why this war carries on.”

I place my cigarette on the table.

“Okay,” I say, firmly. “I’ve heard enough. As far as our relationship goes, we are friends. I only said that to get your goat.”

“Get my goat? What does that mean?”

“You know, pull your chain—fuck with you. A joke to annoy you. It doesn’t matter... What matters is, you are my friend, and of course I want you to be safe. I want everyone to be safe. You’re saying that I am indifferent but you know that’s not true. I just understand that shit like this happens

all the time and there is really nothing we can do but see it for what it is and tell the truth. You think this place is any different from Africa, the Middle-East? You didn't see the West jumping through hoops to help *them* out, did you? Of course not. That took time. And what's more important, it took something of importance to get countries like the US to react."

For a moment I pause and light my cigarette. The cafe is silent; all eyes seem to be on me.

"You are right though about one thing, Mateja. Those big countries, they are definitely ignoring this place. Sarajevo may be a part of Europe, but it really has nothing of value to offer. Sure, it is a wonderful city, or it was... but those big countries aren't going to get involved unless they get something in return, which in some cases is just good press and a positive image in the world. Just remember: most of the world sees this on the TV and all they see is a Bosnian problem, a problem that is up to Bosnians to solve."

Mateja is silent. His head is bowed as he stares into his empty glass. I take a drag and continue:

"All day we have sat here and I have listened, and the only thing that has come out of your mouth is blame. It's America's fault the war continues. It's America's fault that people die. That's bullshit. I'm not going to defend America, but the people of this country are the ones who are fighting: Serbs, Croats, Muslims—everyone is to blame for the killing and only they can stop it. People are caught up in this war and it is a tragedy that both you and I have seen first-hand, but all we can do is watch and report. Maybe one day that will convince people to act, but that is for them to decide. As for me, I'm sick of it! I'm tired of all of this, just as much as you are. But luckily for me, I can leave whenever I want."

Mateja looks up at me for a moment and stares deep into my eyes.

"What are you saying?" he asks, but I know he already knows the answer.

The rain has stopped. I press my cigarette into the ash tray and walk to the window. The silence is interrupted by three bursts of rifle fire that rattle the glass. A voice calls and the woman climbs to her feet.





“The woman—her name is Zlata, she says that they had been hunting that Serb sniper for almost two weeks.” Mateja runs his hands through his thinning hair and leans up against the UN vehicle. It is early evening and it is finally safe. Across the street, two buildings past the bar, five soldiers with blue helmets carry the body of the sniper out of the building and lay his corpse on the ground. “She says he is responsible for the deaths of at least twelve people.”

I jot the information quickly onto a notepad then ask, “Is the woman, Zlata, okay?”

There is a small dent from where the round struck the UN vehicle. The paint is chipped off. Below it, small traces of blood are splattered along the dull white surface.

“She is fine, but lucky. The bullet was close, but only grazed her.”

Zlata is sitting on the side of the road; a UN medic is patching up her forehead. For a moment, she looks at me. At first I want to ask her questions, get something from her that is worth submitting to my editors, but as I approach her and smile, she does not smile back. Her eyes are hollow; her face gray and withdrawn. She was probably beautiful once, but years of conflict have worn her down—now she seems like a ghost.

I place my notepad back in my jacket and turn to walk away, as her voice, raspy yet soft, gets my attention.

“You are an American, yes? A journalist?”

I nod.

Slowly, using her rifle for leverage, she struggles to her feet. The medic tries to help her but she pushes him away, muttering something in Slavic. Her hand moves to her forehead and she touches the wound, then checks her fingers for blood. There is none.

“May I ask you a question, American journalist?”

Again, I nod, but I can hear the anger in her voice; the disgust. And when her eyes again turn towards me I recoil a little.

“Tell me,” she says, “why has the world forgotten us?”

I turn to Mateja, but he shakes his head slightly and looks away. For a moment it seems as if the world around us has become silent and her question hangs poised between us like a bullet frozen in mid-flight.

I want to lie. I want to tell her it will all end soon. I want to give her hope—but I can't. Instead, I look at the ground and shake my head.

“I don't know.”

I can feel her staring at me, but she does not say a word. Finally, she slings her rifle over her shoulder and walks away.

“Come, my friend,” says Mateja, “we must get to the airport.”

He places his hand on my shoulder and tries to pull me along, but I stand fast. The rain has stopped, though the gray sky still lingers. Around me, people begin to take to the streets once more. The city blocks that were deserted only a few minutes before, seem to have come to life as if nothing had happened. This is Sarajevo, where street signs proclaim ‘Pazite Snajper!’, and the world fails to recognize any more than that.

“I'm sorry about what I said earlier, Mateja.”

He just smiles and motions for me to follow.

# Moving Along

by JP Kemmick

**We met** at a Halloween party. We'd both come dressed as the head of a horse, looking we agreed, for the perfect ass. She had a little plastic pumpkin filled with Easter candy. I liked her instantly. Eventually, I loved her incessantly.

She proposed to me in Montana, laying down on the hood of her car as we watched a herd of cattle sluggishly wander across the road, her lips sun chapped and her long blond hair fanned out over the hood like a setting sun.

“Would you marry me?” she said.

“Theoretically?”

“No, actually.”

“Right now?”

“No, but soonish”.

I paused to look at her and to give her what I thought was the proper penetrating, soul-baring look.

“Yes.”

There were mountains behind the cows and you had a feeling that somehow, behind those were more mountains and behind those, more, stretching forever. Waves of the things.

I got shot once at a liquor store during an armed robbery. The lone shot ricocheted off something and grazed my arm. The gunman saw the blood and looked terrified and left, forgetting the money. The store clerk thought

I was a hero. “So brave,” he kept repeating until the ambulance came.

She came to see me in the hospital, told me to quit getting shot. I told her I was working on it, had joined a support group.

She was in labor for five hours, gave us a slimy, red baby girl, fists clenched, wailing, then quiet, wailing, then quiet. I told her it could have been worse, some people are in labor for days, months, years. She said I should try it some time to prove my theory. She almost cracked a smile.

They took our baby away and then gave her back. We named her Marie, after Marie Antoinette, so that at her birthdays we could decree, ‘Let them eat cake’.

I got a job building houses, given to me by two Czech guys who called me Jimmy Boy and taught me everything they knew, which was a lot, if not everything. I liked the sun and the feeling I was doing something real, making something: a house, a family, a life. After ten months the market dried up and the Czechs moved south and I got a job at a bakery. At night she told me I smelled like cake donuts, wondered if I could try smelling more like maple bars, her favorite.

Our baby grew into a bigger baby and went to school, came home knowing things, kept on asking to look at a map, so we dug the atlas out of the glove compartment.

“Not that map,” she said and so we took her to a map store downtown and had her pick one out. We put it on her wall and she sat in her bed staring at it all week, running her finger along the rivers into the sea.

The bakery shut down.

“Donut biz just ain’t what it used to be,” my boss told me. We scrounged and cut back, relied on her job at the newspaper, answering the phones, directing the calls. I took a community college course on computers, quit halfway in and got a job as a roofer.

Our baby kept getting taller, longer. Her legs touched her chin. She came home with a new stack of books from the library every week, pored over them, fell asleep with them on her chest.

“It’s great,” she said when we were in bed at night. “I’m happy our kid loves to read.”

“She’s whip smart.”

“Yes, I just worry... I don’t know if she has any friends. I haven’t seen any, have you?”

“No.”

This was a thing we did not expect to encounter and we brainstormed solutions, eventually enrolled her in a basketball camp. She was tall we thought. She was horrible and hated it and came home bruised and looking down when she talked to us. Six months later she discovered chess club and wedged herself into a new circle of friends. We were relieved.

The newspaper was having a tough time and she was afraid of getting laid off, but she didn’t.

“The reporters might have to talk directly to the public,” she explained. “We can’t have that.”

We hired a new guy on the crew who was crass and unfunny and rubbed me the wrong way. I looked around for other work but couldn’t find any. I bit my tongue and tried not to look at the time.

Our baby girl got a job at a sandwich shop on the weekends and we would stop by, order two ham on ryes and tip her well. She blushed when we called her ma’am. We had a good kid, better than we’d expected. We lay in bed at night offering up different conjectures for our success, settling on some karmic balance instead of admitting maybe we were just good parents.

She found her first gray hair and a lump in her breast the same day. They took it away, the whole thing, gone. Our daughter was in her senior year of high school, almost done. One night a few weeks after the surgery she told us she was postponing college to stay home, no way was she leaving her mother right now. Her mother told her the hell she was. A little fire in her eyes. Held her daughter in the flame until she looked away and left the room. She got a wig and a prosthetic and was back at work in weeks.

“I’ve always liked your left boob better anyway,” I told her. “Now I can give it all my attention.”

She started to cry, which was okay, I think.

We heard from the kid occasionally. There were boys now, which was new. We tried to keep up with the new names, the class schedule. We had

a series of charts and tables stuck to the fridge. It was a little more quiet in general, in the house and the world.

My knees hurt when I got home. I put the word out that I was thinking about going into home improvement stuff, doing remodels and whatnot. Some business came my way and I quit roofing. Hired a nephew just graduated from school and we remodeled kitchens, built decks. It was all right. I was my own boss. I came home one day and she was digging up a patch of the backyard, putting in a garden.

A boy came home with her for Christmas one year. He was wiry, funny, a good fit, an engineering student who liked to paint. Our kid was doing anthropology which neither of us completely understood as a profession. She took him into her bedroom, showed him the old map still pinned to her wall, put her hand on his and traced the old waterways. At night we heard them giggling in there and we made faces at each other and kissed each other and fell asleep.

After they went back to school she told me our daughter had asked to see her chest, her missing breast. She said she didn't feel like she understood what had happened, that she had left so soon after. She said it would help her understand something, even though she couldn't put it into words. She had shown her, had stood there while her daughter blankly stared at her chest, at the absent half. Then our daughter began to cry and then she began to cry. In the telling of it she began to cry again, her tears landing on her toast. I got up and put my hands on her shoulders, my chin on her head.

She married the boy. We were worried it was too soon after graduation, so much was still going to happen in their lives. But we said nothing, remembered basketball camp. The wedding was in Berkley and we flew down there, marveled at how much had changed since we'd last been on an airplane, made jokes about our age. At the wedding she made faces like she could not believe it, her daughter all grown up. She shrugged her shoulders, tucked her lips in and shook her head. I walked my baby down the aisle and left her at the altar, imagined I was leaving her at the edge of some new vast and undiscovered continent.

We talked about retirement in a dreamy way, like we'd read about it in some book once. We cut out refined sugar from our diets, started going on long walks around the block, through the park. We got a dog, a loveable mutt, who we taught to walk on his hind legs in anticipation of a treat and who we showed off to our daughter and son-in-law when they came for Thanksgiving. We joined a book club in an effort to be sophisticated in our old age. She started canning. I bought a grill and made steak every night until she begged me to stop.

The cancer came back and killed her. I told people I didn't understand, how if you stubbed your toe it didn't just fall off twenty years later. Nothing seemed to make any sense. I couldn't count things, remember things, eat things, drive things. I was terrified I had a long life ahead of me, ten, twenty years of utter confusion. Our daughter came home. She was pale, had her long fingers, always around her face, in her hair, covering her mouth. We made her into ashes and mixed them into her garden because she asked us to.

I tried going back to work but the numbers, the numbers didn't make sense like they used to. The nephew took over and I went home and sat with the dog on the couch, reading books. The kid called often, came home several times a year. One day she called and told me she was pregnant, at thirty-nine years old. I asked her how she felt about that and she said she was thrilled, absolutely thrilled.

I got out a pen and paper and wrote to her, told her about our pregnant daughter, about the dog, about how I wanted to cut our bed in half and send her half to wherever she was. How I was going to be a grandpa for the history books. About how there wasn't a thing wrong with me, which didn't seem fair. 'Too damn healthy', I said. I told her about the tree they cut down in the front yard because of disease, how the sawdust had settled on the front porch. I put it in an envelope and sat there looking at it for a long time before addressing it to our daughter. I walked to the mailbox, put it inside and flipped up the little red flag, letting the world know I wasn't surrendering yet.

# Obsession

by DJ Daniels

**Last night** it looked like we'd run out of garbage bags. We went to Def Con 3. Luckily, I found a spare packet tucked away at the back of the pantry. Not *hidden*. Not really. To tell you the truth, I thought something might be up. The odometer had just clicked over on to 77877 as I'd put the car away.

My husband had been driving for the big one, the big 77777, and I'm ashamed to say that I'd forgotten about it when we were out. *Forgotten*. Forgotten to work out just about when it would happen and notice what the universe had to say to me at that auspicious moment. I really should forgive myself, he was prattling on about hand washing or something. And it's not as if I could have said anything. 'Excuse me, dear, but could you tell me when the odometer says 77777, because it's a very important event and I need to know what's going on at the time'. No, the teasing would never have ended. Worse, he would think that I was just like him: An Obsessive, and therefore (according to the strange logic paths of his brain) it would mean that all of *his* obsessions were OKAY. He freely admits to his obsessions, one could say he revels in them, but I like to maintain the illusory higher ground. Life is much easier if I have the right to complain from time to time and I can only accomplish this by keeping *my* obsessions a secret. Although the word, 'obsession' does seem too harsh in my case. I'm not really that bad.



But it's fairly obvious that I couldn't tell him about the time I'd almost hit a tree waiting for 74747, or how I'd managed to get the car to the service station just on 76767 <sup>1</sup>. No. My husband is an out-of-the-closet obsessive and to maintain my superior stance, I have to stay an in-the-closet obsessive.

"You don't think I *like* being like this," he'd say.

(Yes, I do think so, I would think)

"I just can't help it."

(Well, probably not, but you could try harder. I know I do.)

It's a great shame that we don't obsess about the same things. Not that that would necessarily work out, we'd probably end up in a dysfunctional neurotic state. And of course, we are functional. We *do* function.

My concerns (which, as you'll see, are either harmless or legitimate) include:

The possibility of asbestos in the laundry

The hierarchy of pegs <sup>2</sup>

Putting things on the floor (other than shoes)

Sitting on the couch after putting petrol in the car. <sup>3</sup>

People putting their feet on the couch.

Kids sitting on the couch in dirty clothes.

The couch in general. <sup>4</sup>

You will notice that I have not listed the car odometer, which is fair because it's really more of a talisman than an obsession. Think of it as high-tech tarot.

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<sup>1</sup>. I drive on quite calmly if the odometer is at something like 71862, merely noting the beauty of the numbers but not expecting anything serendipitous.

<sup>2</sup>. It may be slightly non PC, but white pegs are preferable, and the only ones to be used for my clothes. The red pegs I use for my daughter's clothes, blue pegs are for my husband's clothes. And the dog's bed.

<sup>3</sup>. I hate putting petrol in the car but I can deal with it if the odometer is at a multiple of 10. It's 1.7km from our house to the nearest service station. And only 5.3km to somewhere they'll put petrol in for you. I still can't sit down on the couch, but I feel a lot better.

<sup>4</sup>. The optimum setting for the television sound is 15 (or 12 if he is going to bed. He adjusts it for you).

*His* obsessions include:

Not having any light at all in the bedroom at night.

Not seeing the bedroom clock at night.

Not hearing the bedroom clock at night.

Not hearing any noise at all at night.

Putting the rubbish out.

Doing the washing up.

Locking the doors.

Catching the 7.05am train and only the 7.05am train for work.

My teenage daughter's room.

My teenage daughter's life.

This is a difficult-to-live-with list, you must agree. But that is not all. He is also prone to outbursts, OCD Tourette's if you like, in the middle of conversation.

For example:

"How was work?"

'Well Mark was his usual annoying self—Light!—but we got most things covered—Turn down the TV <sup>5</sup>—I'm going to have to stay back late again tomorrow night—Henrietta, empty the bin.' (Henrietta is not our daughter's name, but I try and protect the innocent)

Sometimes it's purely non-verbal, a nod of the head, a look.

It's all very, very irritating. If I could only get him to go away on a holiday, take a break, relax, then it might be bearable. But he won't. Work is all. He cannot be spared. And if he can, he doesn't want anyone to know it.

I have devised a plan. It's a cunning plan, as they say, and it should be undetectable.

I want it to take place when the odometer is at 78654, which may seem odd, but it should mean I can get to the airport at 78987, if I am careful with my driving. Which I always am. That doesn't leave me much time. Although I have, for some time now, been turning up the heat, adjusting

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5. The optimum setting for the television sound is 15 (or 12 if he is going to bed. He adjusts it for you).

the volume, whatever metaphor you like. In other words, I've been leaving the washing up undone, listening to the television too loud, turning the clock around so I can see the time, adjusting the bedroom curtains so the light gets in, being just a little bit late in the morning, etc, etc. You get the idea. Henrietta is my silent partner without even knowing it. Some could say I started the plan 14 years ago with her birth. But that might be too cynical.

To be honest, I'd been thinking about possible plans for quite some time without really having something concrete in mind, when the universe sent a blessing my way. (The odometer was at 77676, which was reasonably good, but I wasn't expecting anything.) The blessing came in the form of a brochure, track work on the line, much needed, long overdue. It couldn't be helped, there would be no trains for the week of the 18th. Extra buses, blah, blah, blah. Straight away, I realised this was my great opportunity.

You have thought ahead and have imagined that you've spotted a flaw in my plan. You reason that he will notice something and realise there will be no trains. That's because you are married to someone reasonable and sane. He won't notice. As long as the 7.05 train comes more or less on time, he notices nothing. Just stands on the platform, reading his newspaper, oblivious. He moves forward automatically with the rush of people, still reading the paper. I know because sometimes I watch him from the car park. Sometimes I think that if a bird whooshed by him at about 7.05am he might just walk out onto the empty air and plunge onto the tracks, reading the paper, not noticing, until he was lying down at the bottom. Even then, he'd probably want to finish the article.

He notices nothing at home either. Nothing about me, nothing about the house. I once bought two couches (yes, those ones), had them delivered, and got the old ones taken away. He has never noticed a thing. To this day. Although once he remarked how well they had lasted, what a good buy they'd been. The odometer had been right back at 66665 that night. I knew I was in for something good, but I wasn't prepared for just how good, just how hilarious. Secretly hilarious of course, but hilarious nonetheless.

Back to the track work. Don't worry, he won't know.

I've already booked the holiday. Two tickets to New Caledonia and a room in a splendid resort by the ocean. I booked them at 77677. (Yes, the next day!) I've been practising my French.

The odometer was at 78651 on the morning of the plan. If I judged it right I could be stationed at the car park watching my plan unfold at 78654. I was. It worked out perfectly. I watched him stand on the platform and read. All alone. It took 15 minutes, but finally he looked up. He looked worriedly at the huge sign telling everyone about the closed station. A bemused station officer wandered over and tried to get his attention, gesticulating and pointing the way to the bus.

Time to rescue him.

I drove out of the car park and around to the bus shelter. I honked the horn, caught his attention and smiled as he stumbled over.

"Hop in, I saw a sign about track work and I thought you might be stranded."

He sat in silence.

"Can I drive you in to work? I've got nothing much on this morning."

"I don't think I can make it to work today," he groaned.

"You need a holiday," I said brightly. "You've just been working yourself too hard. I could organise it all, you wouldn't have to do anything. Maybe Henrietta could stay with my mum for a bit."

He said nothing, but I knew I'd won. Time to pack!

I have the feeling you're a little disappointed. You thought something worse was going to happen. What were you expecting? Horrific accident, maiming, death? Shame on you! I just wanted a break, some down time. He's quite different when he's not at work.

Anyway, I have to keep something up my sleeve for 99999.

# Nora

*by* Robert McGowan

**No one's** imagination would be very much stretched to believe that Victoria Peck, approaching her twentieth year as head of the Baywater Public Library's Literature Department, had been in actual fact typecast in the role of flinty schoolmarmish librarian, her being, in both appearance and manner, the virtual embodiment of the stereotype: wire-rimmed glasses resting low on her nose so that she looks at people sternly over the top of them, lips pursed; graying hair brought up prosaically atop her head in a prim variant of the antique Edwardian style of a century ago; her way of dressing as though disdainful of the indulgent current era, wearing always some version of the formless, homely day dress evoking the austerity of The Great Depression; her shoes invariably workaday practical, conspicuously plain, always brown regardless.

In addition to her Master of Library Science degree, Victoria holds as well an M.A. in English literature, the advanced English degree having in fact come first, the library degree following afterward only as a ticket to employment, career opportunities for scholars of English literature being all

but nonexistent in the real world—an egregious injustice serving as the familiar perennial source of consoling dark humor among this bookish sort.

Victoria—she has never permitted anyone the frivolously diminutive “Vicky”—had in her undergraduate years explored assiduously, as would of course be the proper business of an undergraduate with Victoria’s predilections, the full range of world literature, focusing finally, as so many in the western world naturally do, on English, reading voraciously into the whole history of the literature, from the earliest surviving texts, all the way through modernism, and then up into the postmodern era.

By the time she entered graduate school she’d developed an affinity for the nineteenth century, fixing especially on the development of the novel in the work of for example Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope (Victoria felt herself properly at home in Trollope’s upper-class settings), Dickens, though with lesser enthusiasm (she did not admire his fanciful grotesquery), and later, the bleak Thomas Hardy.

In her current position, Librarian Peck’s professional and personal interest in advancing human culture and sensibility impels her to lead the inexperienced among her library patrons away from the merely titillating into realms of literary merit, of substance, of importance, which duty she exercises in an exhilaration of high purpose, her avidity of course guardedly unrevealed, any display of emotion contrary to both her nature and principles. In addition to the British and European masters with whose work Victoria has long been deeply familiar, she is needless to say conversant also with literature worldwide, Asian, Arabic, African . . . And much of the world’s great literature, from whatever region of the planet, and however much revered for its expressive and cultural significance, is nonetheless engaging enough for adults as yet unaware of it and easy enough in some versions even for children. Victoria therefore strives to encourage in young and old alike an explorative appetite sufficient to induce in them a willingness to take such work home with them, often instead of what they’d initially chosen, in order that they might broaden their fields of aesthetic experience and refine their taste in matters literary.

Though ever careful not to overreach and thereby antagonize either the

public, her colleagues, or her library director, Victoria routinely, if but subtly, conveys to Literature Department patrons her disdain of vacuous popular fiction, this, again, for the sake of their edification, insinuating to them plainly enough that such rubbish—mystery, romance, adventure, fantasy—is worthless, and moreover that it is, in its worthlessness, offensive.

At home, Victoria's occasional guest marvels at her floor-to-ceiling shelves stuffed with works by the lions of literature, as well as by many other writers far more obscure but, for cognoscenti such as Victoria Peck, compelling—even, she is given to assert, indispensable. And amassed on more shelves nearby are books of literary history, arcane commentary and criticism, as well as the most critically respected, the most formidable contemporary fiction, both American and foreign. Victoria's sitting area is typically cluttered with such books lain about on sofa and chairs, on the floor beside them, on end tables, books it would appear she'd been lately reading into, that she'd left lying open, certain moving or thought-provoking passages boldly underlined, often with heavy red marker. She is forever apologizing to her visitors, demurely, ever so earnestly, for the disorder, explaining shame-facedly that her obsessive literary preoccupations, over which she alas seems powerless to exercise much control, are to blame. And her guests, inescapably aware of Victoria's reputation as an erudite, discriminating intellectual, are forever courteously assuring her she's forgiven.

But when late of an evening Victoria has had her steamy bath, has then slipped into her snuggly-warm jammies and nestled herself into the downy embrace of her bed, she will open the drawer of her nightstand and bring out from the very back of it her newest Nora Roberts.

Each one of which trashy volumes, on coming to the end of it, she wraps in a wad of old newspaper, dampens the bundle so to prevent its coming apart and revealing its contents, and then stuffs it deep into her kitchen garbage bin beneath coffee grounds and banana peels so to be taken to the Baywater landfill, deservedly to rot away there beneath mounds of other refuse, similarly noxious.



# **Busting To Go**

*by*

**Matthew  
Glenn  
Ward**



**A**

**L A N  
P E T E R  
S O N**

strolled into the blue fluorescent glow and background Bing Crosby warble of the men's restroom. As he stood, unzipped and did his business at the long, stainless steel trough, he had to guess where he was aiming as the dim light didn't allow him to detect any stream whatsoever. There was splash, of course, but for all he knew he could have been going all over his new Italian leather shoes.

In his pocket he started to feel the vibration of his mobile phone. He knew it would be his long-time girlfriend, Sally. He let it ring, though, not only because he was midstream, but also because he had argued with her just that afternoon. Sally was tipsy

with too much cheap, red wine and in front of their friends had laughingly accused him of being too predictable, too boring, not daring enough, not reckless enough. This had irked Alan. He had put up with it for a while with an el-fako ventriloquist dummy smirk; then he pretended his phone was vibrating—like it really was now—and he excused himself: he excused himself right out the door and right into a bar a few streets away. He had stayed, drinking beer for a couple of hours. This was Sally's first attempt to call in three hours. "Fat chance, babe," he mumbled.

Meanwhile, the gentle sound of Bing stopped playing and in the ten seconds between 'White Christmas' and Dean Martin's 'You're Nobody Till Somebody loves You', Alan heard a cough from the stall

behind him. The individual wasn't making much noise, and Alan knew what that was like: waiting for the place to be empty to let all those embarrassing gas noises out, and the number 1s and number 2s disarmed to harmless number... nones.

Alan finished and washed his hands at the sink. He dried them on his pants and checked his phone. It had been Sally alright. He put it back in his pocket.

Then, once more, a cough, but this time louder, and finally a sickening gurgled scream, even over the music.



*‘So Alan just kicked the door in at the latch.’*



“You right in there, mate?” Alan yelled, concerned.

(Nothing but Deano’s 1950s charm echoing off the blue-light tiles.)

Alan tried to look over into the cubicle, but it was too tall and he had no footholds. He belted his palm against the laminated door. “Hey! You alright?” he shouted. No answer.

He then looked under the door and he could see a pair of boots and jeans, but the jeans were pulled up—this guy was not using this public throne to back one out.

*Probably a junkie, Alan thought. Probably dead too. Shit...*

(You might already know that the Blue Light Initiative was

brought in by local councils to stop needle addicts shooting up in public restrooms. The light makes it hard for the junkie to see any veins, so they randomly stick in their needles, and they stick, and stick and stick, until in desperation they just go through their shoes into their feet, or even blindly into their neck, their eyes or anywhere in their arm. The addict usually gives up, though, and leaves, but every now and then an air bubble will make its slippery way into the bloodstream, or an overdose will happen, as determining how much heroin or speed mix the addict has on the spoon is often impossible. The music, too, is supposed to be a deterrent. Croon stuff from the 1950s, and even Barry Manilow is supposed to be effective in convincing the drug addicts to get the hell

out of there. It's not quite Nirvana, now, is it?)

The space under the door was too narrow. The space above the door was too tall. So Alan just kicked the door in at the latch.

Slouched on the can was a man who could have been anything from 20 to 40. In his left arm was a needle. Alan could see his eyes that, even in this light, were wide and horrified. He could also smell bile.

Alan's phone started to vibrate again. He took it and switched it off with a flourish. "Fuck-Off!" he said. Then he had an epiphany. Inspired, he took a handkerchief from his own pocket and with it pulled the needle from the addict's arm. He wiped the needle, draped his own jacket over his head, flicked a lighter and he could see the liquid inside the syringe was plumed with red

blood. "Waste not want not," he said as he plunged the needle into a vein in his left arm.

"And Sally said I was boring..." he said. "She said I was predictable. Well, this isn't boring, this isn't predictable. A heroin virgin I am no more, and a possible Hepatitis or AIDs death sentence, no doubt!"

The obviously now dead junkie seemed to Alan to be smiling, and Alan smiled back.

Alan sat himself on the toilet next to the dead man's cubicle and he locked the door.

"I'm not boring, now, am

I, Sally? I'm not boring, now, am I... Dead Heroin Guy!" Alan said and he laughed, maniacally.

'How High the Moon' drenched the room in echo.

Alan sang along, badly, and as the heroin/blood martini started to percolate inside his own internal highway, he had to stifle a giggle.

Just then, a man entered the restroom, unzipped and started to use the long, stainless steel trough. "Fucking blue light," he complained.



*This story appears in Matthew's new book, 'John F. Kennedy Lives in the Future!'. (World Audience) available through Amazon.com*

"BOMB BLAST RESEARCH" -- a short story by Matthew Glenn Ward

Hiroshima

→ Questions  
Revision 325

~~Nagasaki~~

**ROBERT SPITZ**, a slim man in his 50s, turned the sound of the wind effect CD on his stereo to half-way. He doused the 6 incense sticks one by one with his thumb and forefinger, and so increased the greasy smoke that had already filled the lounge room of his small flat. The smoke alarm up above began its shrill warning when Robert took a broom and thrust the handle up and through its white trilobite shell, breaking its spine with a satisfying snap.

He smiled as he dictated into a lecture tape recorder. "August the 9th. Artificial Hiroshima scenario #321. 3 hours after the blast. Smoke is thick, wind is blowing nuclear dust through the battered streets."

The phone rang. Robert hit 'pause' on his tape recorder. He picked up. "Hello," he said, talking louder on the phone than he did in real life, like a lot of men his age do when they're on the phone.

"Sheeko Mitsosuma here, Mister Spitz," a woman said.

"Ah, yes, Sheeko," he said. "Are you ready for the interview regarding your grandmother and the bomb?"

"Yes I am. Now this is for research into, what?"

"I am doing a doctorate on survivors of nuclear blasts."

"Ah yes, okay," she said, "but I have to tell you I am a bit nervous."

"Don't be," he said reassuringly, "just relax."

"Okay," she said, "I will try."

"So," Robert began, taking notes with pen on a lecture pad, "your grandmother survived the Hiroshima blast of 1945?"

"Yes, she did."

"How did the bomb blast affect your grandmother's life in particular? For instance, did she sustain any burns or radiation sickness in the aftermath of the explosion?"

"No, not really," Sheoko said. "The word she would use would translate to mean 'inconvenienced'."

"'Inconvenienced'?" said Robert, a bit perplexed.

"Yes," she said.

"And why was she inconvenienced by the Hiroshima bomb blast?"

"Well, that's all people read about in the papers. She wanted something else. I mean it was so boring: 'the bomb this' and 'the bomb that'.

'Survivors, victims'. Blah blah blah..."

"So, when your grandmother witnessed the bomb blast in Hiroshima she was inconvenienced because she wanted to read a better story in the paper?"

"Helsinki..."

"What?"

"Helsinki. Grandmother was living in Helsinki, not Hiroshima. She had never been to Hiroshima. In her whole life she never even went to Japan. You see..."

Robert sighed as he put the receiver on its cradle.

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Outside, Robert's flatmate Sam approached the building, reached the door and put his hands into his pockets, searching. He checked the pockets of his coat and also those of his trousers. He came up

with nothing.

Inside, Robert had turned up the sound of the wind CD and again dictated into his tape recorder. "Several hours after the blast, all is quiet except for the wind and the silent scream of the demise of human life -- wow that was good! -- and all one can do now is wait."

Sam rapped on the front door.

Robert heard the knock and continued to dictate into his tape recorder. "In the aftermath of the Nagasaki blast," he said, "the few survivors who could manage to stumble around the city approached random houses searching for food."

"Robert!" yelled Sam. "Robert, I've left my keys inside. Can you let me in?"

Robert: "They were desperate..."

Sam: "Robert!"

Robert: "They were angry..."

There was silence. Robert's eyes were squinting in the dim light of the loungeroom. "Radiation sickness usually killed these poor souls off."

Then the door caved in, Sam falling through it into the darkened room. He stumbled around, then managed to turn on the loungeroom light.

Robert: "Light was restored for those lucky enough to have generators."

The incense smoke made Sam cough and he pulled back the curtains and opened the windows letting in a cold afternoon breeze.

Robert: "Then the nuclear winter set in..."

Sam walked over to Robert, grabbed his tape recorder and tossed it through the front door.

Robert was annoyed. He waited a few minutes to



calm down, then walked back into the kitchen to see Sam gorging himself on a packet of corn chips washed down with a carton of custard.

"You know, Sam, if we are to continue to be flatmates you are going to have to start to respect my boundaries."

Sam chewed and stared into space.

Robert patted Sam on the back. "You always turn to food when life deals you a rough hand, don't you, old buddy?"

"This is as far from food as you can get," said Sam.

Robert nodded. "So, what's up? How did you go at whats hername's house?"

"Tracy, her name's Tracy."

"Tracy's house. Okay. How did you go at Tracy's house? Did you confront her?"

"No, not yet. I wasn't game enough. Probably tomorrow."

"Okay, well what are you so steamed up about? You didn't tell me anything except that you were going to confront her. I assume it's about something. Well?"

"She's taking people's money. She's a con-artist. She has no right being in the job she's in."

"And that is?"

"She motivates fat people to lose weight."

"Well, what's the problem with that? Sounds quite worthy to me, quite noble."

"It was, until she got it into her head that she doesn't need to even leave her house to do it."

"They come to her?"

"No, she rings them up."

"What?"

"She calls them early in the morning to get out of bed and go for a run down to the park, then to exercise. They take their mobile phone with them, they have a headset plugged into it and she urges them as they run, as they exercise."

Robert laughed. "Well how does she make sure they don't cheat? I mean they could just be slothing in bed, faking that they're out there on the road. Huffing and puffing to make it sound like they are exhausted."

"Of course they could and they do, that's the point. But she doesn't care. She just wants their money. They do this for a few months, they of course don't lose any weight and she pockets all this moolah for herself—tax-free by the way."

Robert nodded. "And you love her, too, right?"

Sam spat out his chips and custard. "No!" he said, angrily. "I do not love her. I just know her through someone else. And what she's doing is unethical."

"Sounds to me, Ophelia, like you are protesting too much."

Sam stared at Robert. "Ummm... I don't know what that means, mate, one of your uni references no doubt, another quote that is useless in the real world. Where's it from anyway?"

"Dickens, I think."

*This story appears in Matthew's new book, 'John F. Kennedy Lives in the Future!', (World Audience) available through Amazon.com*

# Nelson Street

by Carol Reid

**The newspaper** on the doorstep had a rumpled look. When Rose stooped to gather it up the letter tucked inside fell into her hand. There was no envelope, just a single sheet of blue notepaper. She unfolded it and held it to the light.

“*Dear Rosalea,*” the letter said. Everyone called her Rose, and had done so all her married life. Harry lumbered in from his Saturday morning golf, bringing with him a scent of damp wool and open air. She pushed the letter into her cardigan pocket and offered him the weekend *Sun*. He took it into the sitting room, and eased himself into the armchair. Rose heard the hum of the television screen come to life and set the pan of sausages on the stove. As they sizzled, she took the letter out again.

“*Dear Rosalea,*

*I've thought long and hard before sending you this. (Here there was a section crossed out.) I live in the old family house on Nelson Street. Though I wonder if you would recognize it anymore. So if you are in the vicinity would you please come by, perhaps at mid-day Wednesday? I would be pleased to give*

*you lunch if you have not eaten by the time you get here.*

*Yours truly, Charles Magnus Harrison.*”

*Charlie, she thought, after all these years.*

And here it was Tuesday. She stuffed the letter back into her pocket. If she meant to go up into Old Town tomorrow morning, she must clear her brain, calm her heart and think what she would say to Harry before she left. For a brief moment she considered simply telling him the truth. Then she called the rectory to make an appointment with Reverend Styles for ten forty-five the following morning.

“This is Mrs Arden calling,” she said when Mrs Styles said it would be an inconvenient time.

“Yes, Mrs Arden, I know.”

Rose felt her face redden. It wasn't like she took up hours of the reverend's time. Sometimes she just needed the quiet of the rectory office as she awaited his arrival. It calmed her to study the hazy portraits of the church fathers with their plain dark robes and homely faces.

“I'll just come in then, at ten forty-five?” she said.

Then to Harry, “Would you run me up to the manse in the morning? I have to see the reverend about the spring planting.”

He speared a sausage and grunted. She supposed that meant he would.

As she slowly swung her legs out of the car at ten-forty Sunday morning she only said, “Don't wait for me, Harry, Mrs Styles can run me home.”

He reached over and pulled the passenger door shut behind her.

She watched him drive to the corner, turn right and disappear. The wind blew strands of hair across her eyes. She pulled off her scarf, and the broad barrette at the nape of her neck came with it. She refastened it, then went into the reverend's office to cancel her appointment.

Mrs Styles gave her a look when she insisted she didn't need to re-book and suddenly she felt a sickening awareness of eyes upon her. What if someone called Harry and told him to come back for her now? She stepped into the alcove and used their phone, then waited out in the damp rising wind for her cab to arrive.

“Nelson Street, Old Town?” the driver said. “Alrighty.”

He had turned down the music when she got in the cab. She could hear the occasional strains of melody between the thump of the wiper blades. The cabbie smiled and muttered into his speaker.

When he raised the volume of the music uncomfortably high she rapped lightly on the Plexiglas partition between them but he seemed not to hear and she refolded her hands in her lap.

She sat back on the stiff upholstery and watched the sea as the cab glided along Marine Drive and up into the Old Town. Here, yards were larger, houses smaller—some newly painted, some fallen into scabrous disrepair. A tiny milk and bread store with a dim “Open” sign sat at the foot of the hill. Three bedraggled boys straddled their bikes in front of the shop and drank Fanta out of bottles, tipping their faces back into the full force of the rain. The cabbie waved at them as he passed, then turned to her.

“Nelson Street,” he said.

The street had always been long and crooked as a cow path, backed by low, logged out mountains that kept the lake side of the street in shadow on summer evenings. Her parents’ house had been torn down years ago and a sprawling rancher now sat in its place. But there was the old Harrison house, set back at an angle from the road. The cabbie hopped out and held the car door while she fumbled in her bag for the fare.

“Here,” she said and paid him with a twenty dollar bill, waving away the change. He slipped it into the flat black wallet that swung from a chain on his belt and ducked back into the cab. She stood on the gravel shoulder, watching the patter of raindrops in the puddles at her feet. She wanted to tell him, ‘I haven’t set foot on this street for forty years but here I am, now’. The cab was already on its way. She watched it pass through the intersection and vanish over the crest of Nelson hill. Then she walked to the back of the old house and knocked on the basement door.

An old man answered. When she was ten and he fourteen, he had seemed to tower over her, already a man—broad shouldered, well muscled, hair bleached by the salt of the nearby sea. Now they were eye to eye, breadth to breadth, and time had chilled the sunlight in his hair. He’d had some brothers, much like him in looks, but they had been casually cruel,

calling her names like “Charlie’s little bit,” that made her feel vaguely sick.

He winked and pulled her inside. She laughed, and squeezed his shoulder with her free hand. It was warm in the basement and smelled of oil from the old furnace that clattered away in a corner. Two clotheslines were strung up from steel eyes embedded in the painted cement walls. Shirts and underclothes were pinned neatly to the lines and gave forth a clean, soapy scent. The cedar box, stuffed with dress-up rags, sat next to a patched velvet chair, and two braided rugs clashed together on the floor. She took it all in hungrily, clutching Charlie’s hand.

“How long have you been back here?” she said, finally releasing him.

“Since beginning of March, only a couple of weeks,” he said in a voice she never would have recognized. As a boy, he shouted more than spoke. Now he was left with a strained whisper, as if his throat closed on every word.

“That was a funny letter you wrote me.”

He frowned. “It took me a long time to write that letter.”

The furnace wheezed into silence and it was very still in the dim basement.

“Can we go up and have some lunch then?” she said brightly, her appetite gone. How could she have forgotten his awkwardness at school, how she, at ten, had read to him from his textbooks on spring evenings? Her eyes filled with tears. She could barely see her way and clung to the banister.

“I shouldn’t have sent it,” he said, trudging up the staircase behind her.

In the kitchen, he flicked on a ceiling lamp that tinged the grey afternoon light a pale yellow. A splattering of rain struck the windows. She searched the counter for a kettle.

“I could use a cup of tea, Charlie.”

He turned and saw that she was weeping. She shrugged and shook her head. He kept looking at her.

“What?” she said, drying her cheeks with her coat sleeve.

“Tea, you bet. There’s some cans of chicken and bread, in the cupboard next to the kettle.”

She brought the food to the kitchen table. With practiced hands she put together the sandwiches and he soon set down a mug of tea beside her. Thoughts of Harry flickered through her mind. He had probably eaten onion rings and a sundae at the Dairy Queen, then gone home to sit in front of a blaring television. When would he notice how long she had been gone?

Charlie seemed to enjoy his sandwich, and again she saw the boy in him as he tossed his long grey hair back with one hand.

“Where are your brothers?” she asked. She sipped the tea. Already cold.

“Scattered to the winds. Two over on the Island, one, I think, back east, the other one...”

He crossed himself and crossed his arms. She tore the crust of her sandwich into crumbs. They gave the dead a moment of silence.

“I remember wishing I had brothers when I was little. Then I met yours and I didn’t wish that anymore.”

“You were happy just with Mama and Papa.”

Her smile faded. “Yes. Sometimes I think it was always summer when I was a little girl.” Another gust of rain-soaked wind struck the glass.

“In the daytime you helped Mama hang the wet clothes and in the evening when Papa came home..’

“We worked together in the garden. And when I was a little bit older I thought, here we are just we three in the house, perfectly happy, and in your house, so many people and you all by yourself.” She swallowed the last of the tea. She needed to go to the restroom and realized she didn’t know where it was. This kitchen, curtained only with worn lace panels, had been visible from her parents’ house, but beyond that the layout of the upstairs house was unknown to her.

“Excuse me for a minute, Charlie,” she said.

He pointed down the short dark hallway. “Second left,” he said, “I cleaned this morning.”

She was ashamed at the surprise she felt as she entered the washroom. It was, as promised, clean, although the porcelain was porous with age and the tile had dulled to a shade that had no name. He had cleaned with bleach,

as everyone had in the old days; no lemons or floral or vanilla. Just the merest hint of Javex assured her that it was safe to sit down.

She heard him talking as she re-entered the hallway. She'd seen no telephone and heard no ring. She had begun to say, "beg pardon?" as she realized that the conversation was entirely self-contained.

"Do you think she likes me?" he said. His hands cupped his ears, as if he struggled to hear a response. "No, I didn't think that was funny."

He hushed and turned to face her. She had wanted so much to come to this place, to remember the happiness of her early life, but there was so much that she had forgotten. Mama had forbidden her to go into the Harrison house. Papa had once stood between Charlie and his oldest brother after the bigger boy had struck the younger one full in the head with an axe handle. The image made her flinch; Charlie, hunched over, with a running cut on the crown of his head, and Papa, no taller than the older boy but twice as broad, wresting the weapon from his hand. Later that night she had heard her parents talking in the kitchen.

"Is Rosalea's friend that boy," Papa had said, "the other ones can go to hell, but the younger one, *Charlie*, he does no harm."

"No more boys," Mama had said, her voice an angry hiss Rose had never heard before. Not the great Charlie, not anyone.

The storm outside had fallen quiet. Only a light breeze ruffled the greening leaves.

"Let's get some air while it's not raining," she said and picked up her coat from the back of the chair. A plaid jacket hung from a hook at the back door and she helped him slip his arms into the sleeves.

The hills in the distance were black in the mid-afternoon light. The backyard sloped gently toward the stand of alders that hid the old lake from view. Her parents had swum in that lake before she was born, before the reeds and water lilies had choked the lake into a sludgy puddle. When she was old enough to swim, Papa had taken her to the ocean in the evening and carried her over the barnacles to the water's edge on his warm back. Rose could smell the lake now on the breeze, the dark, sweetish scent of decomposed leaves and standing water. As they approached the bush she



noticed clouds of tiny flies hovering over damp depressions, like footprints, in the grass. Here, the ground was a firm green carpet beneath their feet.

“Wasn’t this the corn patch, Charlie? It feels like the soil’s still good.”

The Harrisons had made no objection when her father’s garden had trespassed over the property line. She had often lugged baskets of zucchini and corn to the Harrisons’ back steps to make up for the encroachment. Sometimes the produce was taken in. Sometimes it lay untouched until Papa, needing the basket, tipped it out onto the compost heap with a somber look on his dark face.

“There was nothing better than that corn,” Charlie said. “You could pull off the husk and the silk and eat it raw right off the cob.”

Rosalea made a shocked face and shook her finger. “You’ll get stomach ache!”

“Oh, she was always right about that,” Charlie said, “Your Mama was always right.”

*Not always*, Rose thought. Mama should have felt Papa’s heart weakening, should have seen that his arms trembled with every spadeful of earth. She’d been just a girl and she had seen the black fear in his eyes as he drooped against the handle, sweating in the cool of the evening. And just two years later Mama should have tended to herself instead of shrinking into a brittle rack of bones, leaving Rosalea too young to know her way into the world.

The clouds were gathering again, ready to release the next hatful of rain. The first fat droplets splattered in Rose’s hair and she made for cover under a substantial fir. Charlie picked his way carefully over the uneven ground... and as she leaned back against the rough bark and watched him approach she saw the reason for his careful pace. The earth in a ten foot radius of the tree had been tilled into soft mounds. Not a bramble or root remained there and, like the spokes of a giant wheel, empty seed rows waited.

“Charlie, did you do this?” Her hands were very cold and she could see his ragged breath in the air.

“I’m not alone here,” he said with a small, shamefaced smile. Then he cupped his ears and whispered, but she couldn’t make out the words.

She felt the touch of her father's hands in hers, and the comforting circle of her mother's arm around her shoulders, urging her back out into the downpour. The seed rows were filling with rain, and the earth was warm, then cold on her feet as her shoes filled with mud. She wanted to stay there, to sink into the dirt, to be swallowed and born again into eternal summer. But they would not let her stay; Papa held onto her muscles and bones and Mama moved her away from the turned earth and the ruined lake and into the open space of the yard. She began to run toward the street, surprising her legs with the sudden exertion, her soles slipping across the wet grass.

Charlie was shouting at her in that tight, whispery voice. She turned to see him trudging behind her, his long grey hair in damp strings across his shoulders.

“Rosalea, don't run away.”

She wanted to take Charlie with her, wanted to reach out and fasten his hand to her own, but she was dizzy with cold and she needed to get to the bread and milk store, to call the cab to take her home. The warm push stayed at her back, moving her forward, forward, forward. She kept her eyes on her feet, on her dirt—and grass-stained shoes.

When the taxi pulled into the parking lot the driver squinted at her but seemed to remember the tip she'd given him and let her into the cab. The heat blasted from the car heater and she dozed a little on the ride home. The driver tried to help her to the house but she shook him away and planted another twenty into his hand.

She leaned against the gate and looked at the house. Clean white siding, new roof, clipped boxwood hedge glimmering with rain. The house that Harry built and she kept, pretty as a picture.

Harry was in his chair, just finishing up the last section of the paper. “About time,” he muttered, then folded back the paper and jabbed at it.

“What was the name of the family next to your old place on Nelson? Harrison, weren't it?”

She had only enough energy to nod.

“I see one of the boys passed on, Charles Harrison, aged 63. Passed away March first of this year. No service. Was that the one you knew?”

# Toward Shalott

by **Andria Olson**

**Her father** was on national television every Sunday. People watched him with wide stares, eating him with their eyes and waiting for his words to leap to life in their bellies.

And the cameras would pan every once in a while to Maria's face, her pale, perfect face, as she sat in the center of the front pew, directly under the sanctuary's big glass skylight where the mid-morning California sunshine would fall in gentle haloes against her glossy brown hair.

Maria was perfect, according to her parents, who watched everything she did with sharp eyes. They watched everything and could guarantee—*guarantee*—her perfection. They had to, they said, because the people in the congregation, her father's people, watched her too. They knew everything she did, and it was important that she sat in the Sunday morning sunlight where the lustrous rays bathed her shoulders and kissed her shiny hair.

Her father was a shepherd. The people depended on Reverend Walker to tell them how to speak, how to dress, how to pray. They needed him to be perfect. Her mother was a shepherd, too, and people flocked to her from

all over the country because she was the best at what she did. She never made mistakes, and she never herded them the wrong way. Perfect, like her patients after she had finished with them. But still they returned to her—they always wanted more. More bounce, more youth, more perfection. To make them feel good, full, satisfied. Together, Maria's parents made the world a more beautiful place, inside and out. They were one of *those* families, one of those perfect, beautiful families everyone was afraid to join because, in the presence of the Walker family, no one was worthy.

Maria didn't feel worthy. Every night her parents sat by her bed while she said her prayers, and after she said *Amen*, they kissed her on the forehead and told her she was perfect. Maria asked them once how they knew she was perfect. Her mother said God's love showed in the way her teeth were so straight and her skin was so smooth and her hair was so shiny. It showed in the way she always got A's in school. "Plus," her father added, "you aren't allowed to date, so we know you won't be compromised by a boy." Both parents smiled, but they weren't joking. She told them she wasn't perfect, and again they just smiled, a cue that her response was perfect.

Maria was shy. It was hard to be shy and in high school. The girls were always friendly, always eager to allow her to eat with them at lunch or to sit beside them in class, but they spoke to her carefully, as if they might let something slip. They complimented her on her designer clothing and flawless manicured nails and asked politely how she had done on the last exam, even though they knew she had gotten an A, because she always got A's. They didn't even talk about her behind her back, the way they whispered and snickered about the other girls when they weren't listening. The boys spoke to her as if they were afraid her father would find out, as if they might be sent straight to Hell for catching glimpses of her smooth thighs or subtle cleavage. Sometimes fellow students would tell her to come to a Friday night bonfire at the beach, and they would smile encouragingly, as if to say they really wouldn't mind her company, but they would look away from her, toward the next distraction, before she'd had the chance to answer because they always already knew her answer. "No, thank you, I would love to, but I can't make it."

Her parents sat with her while she said her prayers, kissed her on the forehead, and told her she was perfect. She got up the courage to ask them if she could go to the beach for a bonfire. They looked at one another and were quiet for a long time. Maria said an extra prayer during their silence, telling God she was thankful for her perfect life but please, please, wouldn't He let her go to the bonfire? She listened hard for an answer, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

"You know we want you to have friends," her parents said.

Maria didn't open her eyes.

"You can go," her parents said finally, "but only if one of us goes along. We have to keep an eye on you."

Maria opened her eyes and said, "But God has an eye on me. Isn't He enough?"

Her father sighed. "You know God gave humans the gift of free will."

Maria wanted to ask her parents why they didn't want her to exercise the gift God had given her. But she already knew the answer—they wanted her to wait until she knew how to use that gift properly; they wanted her to understand the great responsibility that comes with free will. Maria was sure fifteen was old enough to understand, but 'thou must honor thy father and mother'.

Maria wondered sometimes if there was such a thing as Hell, a place where everything was wrong and everyone was wretched. She imagined a dark, empty place where the people moaned and cried and everyone was ugly. Their skin was gray and sagging, and each face hung lifelessly as if it would slide off its skull into a puddle at its feet. No matter how terrible or ugly Maria made this imaginary place, she was sure she would rather be there than upset her family. Of course, they never appeared to be displeased with her, but she knew they were—she sensed their frustration and felt it in the pit of her stomach, rocking from side to side. She felt something slither beneath her skin—snakes. She wanted the snakes to stop; she wanted to please her parents. She was desperate to please them and didn't know why.

In eighth grade, Maria befriended Anna. When her mother came to pick her up at school one day, smiling and dressed in a fresh white sundress, she

asked Maria how her day was. Maria answered that she'd found a new friend, Anna Wilson. Her mother found out a few days later that Anna Wilson wasn't someone Maria could be friends with. It wasn't all right to eat lunch with Anna or sit with Anna in class or talk to Anna on the phone. It was because of Anna's mother—Lesbian.

Maria was no stranger to the controversy surrounding homosexuality. After all, her father preached about it: *a sin. Dirty, wrong.* After all, her father's vehement sermons were the reason for the guards posted at the bottom of her family's driveway. And when Maria told her parents, "she didn't care, she wanted to be friends with Anna anyway," they shook their heads and frowned. Maria told them she would continue to speak to Anna at school whenever she wanted to. It was the most defiant she had ever dared to be; she thought it might feel good, that she'd be relieved she was finally exercising her free will. But there were tiny snakes creeping inside her, under her skin, making her feel unclean. That night her parents watched while she said her prayers, and they kissed her forehead and said, "Sleep well," but they didn't tell her she was perfect.

Maria didn't speak to Anna at school the next day. After that, Anna avoided Maria altogether, as if to say, *I'll make it easier on you.* It wasn't easier. Maria wished Anna would cry or yell or force her to be her friend. She wished someone would make her do what she wanted to do.

She apologized to her parents and to God; her parents told her they had forgiven her, and the trembles beneath her skin had nearly stopped, so she figured God had almost forgiven her too. She showered, scrubbed her skin until it bled, shaking and scrubbing until she felt the snakes recede completely.

Because Tom was new to the high school, he didn't know Maria's father was Reverend Walker, the man who owned the world—'God's partner in crime', Maria once heard a woman whisper.

Tom said hello to her, and she jumped.

"I'm sorry," he said. He didn't take his eyes off hers, and she shifted uncomfortably; she was used to being scrutinized, but not like this. She was used to the idea of millions of people staring at her face on television, but

not this. He was beautiful, the kind of untouchable, painful beauty Maria thought only existed in movies or magazines. *Hot*, she heard the other girls whisper as they passed him in the halls or watched him from across the lunchroom. His beauty made it even more difficult for her to speak.

“What’s your name?” he asked her, leaning even closer. Maria, speechless, took a step backward only to find that she was trapped between him and a wall. She was careful not to make a sound as she breathed in his scent. She was a candle, and as she felt him draw closer, she began to melt.

At breakfast, Maria’s father poured himself a cup of coffee and told Maria and her mother of a dream he’d had the night before.

“It was so strange,” he said. “I was sitting here, in the kitchen, drinking coffee just as I am right now, when an angel came to me.”

Her father said the angel spoke to him.

*Do not be afraid*, the angel said, *for you have found favor with God*. The angel told him the Holy Spirit would come upon him, the power of the Most High.

Maria didn’t speak. Her father often had strange dreams, and she wondered sometimes if he made these up, but she always ended up remembering that ‘thou must not bear false witness’.

Tom was the only boy who had ever pursued Maria even after finding out who she was. He sat beside her in class and offered to drive her home after school and asked her if she would go to the spring formal with him. She said “No” each time, but every time he asked her she became more aware that her wax was weakening, softening, and she felt her wick—her spine—rise closer to the top, faster and faster, like a bubble released at the bottom of the ocean. She waited for the bubble to burst. She prayed it wouldn’t burst.

She didn’t dare tell anyone how much she liked him, and she certainly didn’t dare ask her parents for permission to attend the spring formal. Instead, she studied him, even from afar—the way he walked with his thumbs hooked under the straps on his backpack, the way he scratched his head when he spoke to people, the way he sometimes smiled with only one side of his mouth. She learned his class schedule and planned ways to cross

paths with him during the day.

They met sometimes in the girls' bathroom during Study Hall; Tom sat with his back against the door, and Maria would sit before him, and she would tremble when he put his hands on her knees while they talked.

"Can't you sneak out of your house?" Tom asked. He didn't know that her house was rigged with alarms at every door and window and that her parents slept in the next room and came in at the slightest sound or sign of disturbance.

She looked forward to each meeting, to the sound of his voice and the touch of his hands on her body. She fantasized about it, about sex, even in church on Sunday mornings when the sunlight streamed upon her, stroking her hair and washing her in haloes. She imagined herself with someone clean, someone who wouldn't awaken the snakes under her skin. She imagined herself with Jesus; she imagined Jesus looked like Tom, tall and lean and square-jawed. The thought made her shake with pleasure.

While everyone else was at the spring formal, Maria sat in her bedroom putting on makeup, pretending she was going to the spring formal too. She pretended she was in a hurry, that any minute the doorbell would ring and Tom would be waiting downstairs for her. Foundation, powder, blush, lipstick, eye shadow, eye liner, mascara: it took thirty-seven minutes to finish everything. She looked at herself in the mirror, her smooth skin, blue eyes, dark hair; examined a tiny freckle on her nose and wondered why her makeup hadn't covered it. She removed all the makeup and started over. In the mirror Maria caught sight of her bedroom window, beyond which she could see the bay, shiny and vast in the orange rays of sunset. She pictured girls in bikinis flirting with boys hugging footballs, harried women chasing children with salty hair and sunburned noses. There were boats in the harbor, one of them belonging to Maria's father, but she couldn't tell which; she saw the window only in the mirror, and all she could see were shadows of the world.

In the girls' bathroom at school, Tom caught her off-guard. Maria suddenly felt someone grab her from behind, and she dropped her textbooks in surprise. She gasped breathlessly as Tom pushed her up against



the wall, resting his hands on the wall on either side of her.

“Someone could see,” Maria whispered.

He leaned toward her, lowering his head to kiss her, and Maria dodged his lips weakly, whispering, *we can't*.

“I know,” he murmured, pressing his body up against hers and leaning down to rest his lips by her ear. He said, “But I can't stop it.”

She couldn't help resting one hand on his waist as she dissolved under his touch. She let her hand slide up under his untucked shirt, feeling his muscles beneath her fingers. Tom pressed one hand against the small of her back and ran the other hand up the back of her thigh. Maria turned her face up weakly, her eyes falling shut, feeling the heat of his chest against her. She imagined he was Jesus and almost believed it.

The snakes didn't sleep anymore, and Maria felt them crawling everywhere, torturing her, taking her over. She avoided Tom at school, and he didn't address her either. In Calculus class, she rubbed her eyes to stay focused. She stared hard at the teacher, trying hard not to see that his skin was gray, that his face was slack and sliding from his skull into a puddle at his feet.

Maria's father had another dream, and this one he shared with his congregation at church, in front of television cameras and bright lights and hungry sheep.

“I dreamed I was visited by an angel of God. The angel told me not to be afraid, for I had found favor with God. The angel told me new things were coming, things we wouldn't understand, but the Holy Spirit, the power of Most High, would be upon us.”

*Faith*, the angel said, *is what will bring grace to believers*.

Inside Maria's body, serpents teased at her nerves, inching up her arms and poking at the undersides of her skin. She felt them in her face, behind her smile, behind her flawless complexion, throbbing in her forehead and pushing steadily at the backs of her eyeballs. The cameras panned to her face, and she bared her teeth in a perfect, shining smile.

Maria's body hurt everywhere. She couldn't get out of bed and lay shivering beneath a red down comforter while early sunlight peeked

through the blinds, shining tentative patterns across the mirror. Her mother came in to ask why she hadn't come down for breakfast, and Maria answered she didn't feel right. Her mother took her temperature and said, "You have a fever—stay home today and rest."

"How do you know that's all it is?" Maria asked.

"I'm a doctor," her mother answered.

Maria was sick. She didn't want to be treated by her mother, a doctor who only treated people who *thought* they were sick. But she didn't say this out loud; instead she nodded and said she would rest, told her mother to have a nice day at work.

When Maria still wasn't better the next morning, her father took her to see the doctor. The doctor looked her over and did tests on her, and Maria waited quietly with her father in the sterilized examination room. She liked the way it smelled—sanitized, clean. Finally, when the doctor returned, he asked Maria's father to sit down, and then the doctor sat down too. He removed his glasses and rubbed his face with both hands. Maria stared at the doctor, watching in horror as his face turned sideways and gray slid eerily downward.

"I have something to tell you," the doctor said. Maria blinked hard, and his face went back to normal. She looked over at her father, who was clutching the arms of his chair with bloodless fingers.

"Maria," the doctor said. "Maria—you are pregnant."

No one moved or breathed. Finally, Maria's father cleared his throat and coughed loudly.

"But how can this be?" he asked. "My daughter is a virgin."

The doctor shook his head, and Maria clutched at her belly, pressing her nails into her flesh.

"Aren't you?" Maria's father asked.

Maria took a deep breath and said, in a voice without tremors, "Yes, of course I am."

Maria's father nodded and turned to the doctor. "She has never even kissed a boy," he said. "We have never let her from our sight. She has never been compromised. I can *guarantee* her purity."

At church, Reverend Walker announced the good news. His dreams had held more meaning than he'd thought. The angel had come to him, had foretold the news of Maria's 'immaculate conception'.

"I didn't believe it," Maria's father said. "But then I remembered what the angel had said to me: *Faith will bring grace to believers. Salvation is here. Again.*"

The small California town went wild. Not because they didn't believe Reverend Walker. Because they did. They had Faith! Faith, like a giant beach towel waiting for them when they ran, shivering, from the ocean; hands outstretched as goose bumps rose on their arms.

Maria didn't know why people believed it. Why hadn't the sheep revolted, gone to find a new shepherd? She wondered again if he'd truly had those dreams, and she imagined for a moment that she really was carrying the son of God in her body. *Immaculate*. She liked the word.

At school Tom approached her for the first time since it happened.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Are you pregnant?"

"Yes," she answered, slowly, determinedly. She lifted her chin a bit and caught his eye with hers. "You can't say anything," she said.

Tom gave a slow smile, that lazy, beautiful smile. "I could make millions," he said. "I could write a book about it—*I Banged the Minister's Daughter*." He laughed. "If you're carrying the son of God," he said, "does that mean *I'm* God?"

Maria's breath shortened. The tingles behind her face increased, pressing against her eyeballs and making sparkles swim across her vision. He wasn't clean. Tom was dirty, wrong; sinful.

At home there were lilies on her bedroom windowsill, waving wickedly in the quiet breeze that came off the bay and drifted through the screens on her window. She slammed the window down and locked it.

"I am sick of shadows," she said. She turned spitefully from the window and sat in front of her mirror, watching herself as she planned how to save herself from the truth, from God. She sat there weaving, night and day, a magic web of deception.

Maria hated school. People didn't know what to say to the girl who

carried a piece of God. She used to think everyone carried a piece of God, but it seemed everyone had forgotten their own pieces—Maria's piece was better, and they were jealous. They wanted to touch her, feel her; devour her.

But they didn't reach out, they didn't touch. They watched, open-mouthed, and didn't say anything.

She snuck quietly away one day, creeping past teachers and students who were too unworthy to see her. She went, invisible, to the bay and sat at the edge of a dock, dipping her toes carefully in the water. Tiny waves rippled away from her feet, and the opaque mirror of water caught the sun's rays in spots, throwing light like glitter into Maria's eyes.

She closed her eyes and leaned backward until she was lying with her spine uncurled against the warm wooden planks, her feet still swaying weightlessly in the water. She stretched her arms out to the sides and imagined she was hanging on a wooden cross. There were nails in her palms but not in her feet, and she began to slide down the cross, her bloody palms too thin to hold the weight of her body. Splinters impaled themselves under the skin of her back as she slid lower, lower, and a thorn punctured her eye, releasing the pounding pressure behind her eyeballs. She called out, *Stop, you're hurting me*, and clawed with her feet to stop the downward descent. Still she continued to fall, lower, lower. Maria sat up and opened her eyes, sweating. Her heart gave a jolt when she saw a dead fish lying at the edge of the dock.

She leaned closer and saw that it wasn't a fish, only a rock. She picked it up. It was pinkish-gray and a little longer than her hand, heavy and warm. She slid the tip of her finger up and down cracks in the rock, feeling the sun's heat rise from the tiny fissures.

She became aware of footsteps behind her and turned her head. It was Tom. His skin was dark bronze from hours in the beachside sunlight, and his hair was shiny and gold. He reminded Maria of the golden calf in *Exodus*, the one that momentarily had the power to take God's place.

He sat down beside her and didn't say anything for a long time. He was too beautiful, too hot, and he had melted all the wax on her candle, leaving

only her wick—her spine—but *Icarus* had discovered too late that a skeleton was not enough to keep him in the sky.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said finally.

Maria didn’t answer. She got to her feet and stood listlessly beside the golden god. She thought of her plan, her web. She was a spider.

Slowly, calculatedly, she reached one hand out and rested it in Tom’s soft, gleaming hair. She rubbed his head, letting the silkiness touch each crevice in her fingertips. Her other hand still held the fish rock gently. He closed his eyes in appreciation of her soothing touch.

Leaning down, Maria whispered in his ear. She kept one hand on his head, guiding him to the surface of the quiet water. When he was on his hands and knees at the edge of the dock, Maria bent down too. She dipped her hand into the cool water and splashed a handful of sparkling droplets against his forehead.

An intake of breath, and he was about to speak—

Maria raised the heavy rock, still clutched in one hand, and suddenly, swiftly, brought it down with all her might. A surge of electricity buzzed through her before she heard the crack, lightning before the thunder.

He stayed on his hands and knees for a long moment before giving a quiet shudder and falling onto his side, his head hanging off the dock and sweeping the water’s surface. Maria’s breaths came in trembling gasps as she looked around, forgetting for an instant that she was invisible. With a soft half-grunt, she pushed the golden idol into the water and watched as it created dark waves and gentle lapping splashes. The waves closed gaping mouths over the golden hands and feet and shoulders, licking hungrily at first and then growing gradually smaller, smaller.

Faces, microphones, cameras, hands, hands, were everywhere, everywhere, and Maria couldn’t escape them. She looked around, twitching, squinting, for a familiar face. None were friendly—they were wolves, invading the herd, hungry.

*This is my own driveway, my own house*, Maria wanted to scream, but she didn’t, because she knew she belonged to them now.

“How does it feel?” came one voice, loudly, as a light flashed in her face.

“Why did He choose you?” another voice called, disembodied, coming from somewhere in the sea of cameras and faces and claws.

And from another voice she heard, “*Fraud!*”

Maria looked for the source of the voice, and the corner of a microphone hit her sharply in the face, just below her eye.

“*They won’t be sheep forever,*” came the voice again, this time louder. And then, just before the gunshot, Maria felt a pair of big, strong arms wrap themselves around her and carry her up the driveway, not stopping until she was inside the house. There was another gunshot, followed by a crescendo of voices, angry, frightened. In the midst of the screams and panic, Maria withdrew into the big pair of arms around her, thinking they were probably the arms of God. Or maybe it was the arms of her new bodyguard—a man who had been hired by the church to protect her.

Reverend Walker was furious. In his sermon that Sunday, he called the shooter ‘Judas’, ‘a traitor’. “*Amen,*” murmured the congregation.

Maria watched their faces go slack and begin to slide toward the floor. And then she felt a tugging sensation at her chin. She reached up to touch her face and realized it was her own skin that was stretching and falling, falling, to a grayish puddle at her feet.

Maria leaned toward her mother, who was sitting in the pew beside her. She cupped her hands around her mother’s ear, the way children do when they share thoughts of utmost secrecy, and whispered, “I have to pee.”

Her mother frowned delicately. She hated the word ‘*pee*’.

She patted Maria’s thigh and nodded permission without turning her head. Maria slipped quietly from the pew and made her way out of the sanctuary, followed discreetly by the bodyguard.

In the restroom, she spent a long time looking in the mirror at her face, which had gone back to normal: Perfect skin, perfect hair. The mirror caught rays of muted light from the frosted window on the other side of the bathroom and refracted them softly into Maria’s eyes.

There was an awkward knock on the door. “Miss Walker, are you all right? Should I get your mother?”

“No,” Maria answered firmly. “I’m almost finished.”

She slipped out of her white high heels and tiptoed to the window. Yes, it was just as she'd remembered—open. She scrambled over the sill and out into the clear, unfrosted sunlight. Maria ran, fast, barefoot, and didn't stop until she reached the bay where her father's boat was docked. She started to climb onboard but stopped when she saw a small motorboat on the other side of the dock. The motorboat was red, and in the front, in faded white letters, it said:

*Our Lady of—*

And the space just below that had once borne the rest of the boat's name, but time and water had washed the paint away. Maria climbed aboard and started the motor, and the world was all before her as she laid herself down on the floor of the boat, hugging her belly with her arms. They had almost certainly noticed her absence by then, and Maria imagined them searching for her, never finding her, wondering where God's child had gone. She imagined that later, much later, someone on the other side would spot her and look down at her perfect, immaculate body and declare, '*She has a lovely face*', and there wouldn't be anything left to say.

# I Fell From the 43rd Floor... and lived!

*by* William Akin

**I was alive.** That was my first thought, once I realized it was true. I was alive, calm and blissful despite my broken and distorted form. Perhaps it was shock, the shock of falling from the iron skeletal thumbprint sketch of the forty-third floor. Perhaps it was the shock of my injuries, from striking the grid work of girders that will someday be the forty-second, forty-first, and thirty-ninth floors. Maybe it was the shock of being halted by a beam on the thirty-seventh, the awe of experiencing a perfect combination of odds, physics, luck, and mercy.

It was peaceful up there, despite the wind's mournful insistence. I was too high for the people on the streets below to see and I doubt they paused very often to look overhead. Nor could I see them, though I could make out the patterns of their movements, the ebbs and flows of their traffic signal tides. They seemed busy and purposeful, many worlds away from my own repose and stillness. I wondered if I would ever be as they were again, if this tranquility would be lasting or passing.

I thought of my lunchbox and thermos resting on the framework six



stories above. I had been ravenous just moments ago, to the point of being careless and clumsy with ham sandwiches and hot coffee occupying too much of my mind. Now, the thought of food or drink seemed trivial, necessities to be endured rather than lavished with such grand attention and deep desire. I was alive, right then, and couldn't imagine why we needed any more than the air to breathe for our sustenance.

I could hear faint voices, shouts, curses, and prayers drifting up towards me, my crew promising aid and salvation. I thought that this was how a god must feel, at ease with everything all around just the way it was, unmoved by the noise and commotion below. I wanted to shout to them, to tell them to take their time. I was alive and they were alive and there was no need to rush about so, to grow so desperate and hungry. Every thing was as it was, I wanted to tell them, but the gods must be mutes or humans must be deaf.

I saw into my own apartment even though it was blocks, miles across town from my perch. The windows were open, curtains parted against the city's summer swelter. My wife was wearing her polka dot apron and peeling potatoes in our kitchen, the sun glinting golden off her skin as her lips moved to a song on the radio. I wanted to invite her up there with me, to lift the burden from her shoulders, to feel, for just one moment, this stable contentment our lot in lives had never allowed for us. Like most people, those far below and even the rescuers rushing up, we are too busy surviving to be living fully. Her singing paused and her lips pursed as if she were about to be kissed. She looked up from the peeler and white enameled sink and for a moment, for the briefest half of a second, it seemed she saw me before returning her attention to our dinner. That moment was all I needed. I was ready to come down. There is much pain in being human and very little suffering to be found in being a god, save for the pain of my distance from her, which was much too much to bear.

The other steelworkers were just below me now; I could make out their hard hats and leather gloves, their oily denim shirts and dirty faces climbing upward, so many saints at last ascending Jacob's ladder. They felt alive now, too, turning aside the vague shadow of death that follows everyman to aid another deep in its darkness and thrall. The sight of them pleased me and

I wanted to shout or shine a light, to beckon them onwards in their bravery and compassion. Their faces were drawn into stern determination as they drew together in pursuit of a common purpose, like twine weaving into rope. The Earth below was tugging at me, and despite the view and tranquility, I was ready to come back down.

In the last few minutes before their arrival, I allowed myself to fall completely into that sense of peace, to memorize it as if it were a poem or photograph. I held it inside me like a deep breath, as deep as I could so that when I return home at last, to that tiny apartment, to the smell of meatloaf and potatoes and the sound of sirens drifting up from the street, to the light which is my wife's eyes and the warmth of her embrace, I will place my lips upon hers and breathe into her soul this bit of peace I have saved.

# The Cyclist

by **Fiona Murray**

**The cyclist** is starting to freak me out. I see her every day on my route to work. She has the same bike, same red pannier, same red helmet and even the same reflective vest. We see each other as we turn onto the main street from the leafy back roads of my suburb. Every time I see her it gives me an eerie feeling.

I had started riding to resist the increased train fare, and calculated that I would save exactly \$145 a month by cycling to work. My colleagues already thought I was stingy and obsessed with efficiency, so I told them I was training for a marathon to keep them off my back.

Before the cyclist appeared on my route, my 10 km ride to work was methodical and peaceful; its tediousness, gradual inclines and turns somehow comforting, emulating the work that began at 9:00 am. This changed when the situation with the cyclist gradually stirred kind of a spirit of competition. Even when I purposely rise earlier to catch her she is still up ahead, as though she pre-empts when I am going to leave the house. So I spend the ride trying to catch up with her, wishing to overtake her with a snide glance. Instead, it seems like everyday my path is full of red lights and the growing anxiety of seeing her cruising comfortably in the distance.

Chasing her means each morning I turn up at work early. While this has some benefits, such as providing time to tidy my desk and straighten out the paper I print letters on, the downside is being alone with Greg.

Greg is the IT guy, a scruffy short man who has been at the office as long

as me. He is also into some miscellaneous type of new-age spirituality, and he proselytises to me over his blue china cup of green tea while I sip my take away latte. He talks at me, and I smile—not because I am being polite, but because I tune out and think of how I ride 500 meters out of my way to get a coffee that is 20% cheaper than the items on the main street.

This morning Greg tells me that the cyclist doesn't exist. He reckons that she is just a projection of myself and that each morning I am simply chasing my 'true self', which I can never hope to reach. He thinks the universe is trying to teach me a lesson through this neat analogy. I tell Greg that the girl looks different from me when I see her up close because she looks grumpy and never smiles.

Greg calmly replies that I have a constant scowl. I tell him that he is an idiot and probably depressed.

I walk back to my office realising I have been working in administration for the same real estate agency for years, waiting to move into senior management. I feel itchy with stagnation. This morning I go through the list of names on my database of people who have not paid rent for several weeks, then I type neat letters instructing them to vacate. I smile when I check my figures—I am already up ten evictions since last month, something my managers are definitely noticing about my work.

I go to the kitchen for a coffee break, toss three spoons of instant coffee into a cup and reach for the milk. I smell it and realise it has turned into a thick sour sludge over the weekend and nobody has bought a fresh bottle.

Greg laughs at me from the doorway.

"It's karma!" he says smugly.

"For what?"

"For your work."

"Hey—it's not me, it's this business. It's just the way the system works, if we've got unsatisfactory tenants we need to get rid of them."

He shakes his head in disgust.

"Unsatisfactory? You mean they let the grass grow a few centimetres? You should stop evicting people to make yourself look productive."

"Give it a rest, Greg. I'm just doing my job."

“Look, all I’m saying is, little things keep going wrong for you because the universe is trying to send you a message.”

He smiles, passes me a plump carrot and says it’s from his garden. Even though Greg is annoying, he grows some amazing produce, and I find it hard to refuse.

I spend the afternoon sifting through the database, munching on the fresh carrot, trying to find any breaches in households that I can use to justify an eviction. I find a householder who hasn’t cleaned the pool in months, and another who is two days late on their rent payment.

It is there, in the confusing depths of addresses and numbers that I find Greg’s name. There is a message next to it claiming he is on his third breach for not mowing the lawn at his property. I make a note of it and continue filing photocopies until my watch alarm goes off to tell me it is ten to five. Then, as I do each day, I take my small spray bottle of disinfectant, and wipe down my desk, wash up my cup and lock my door.

• • •

I ride out of the office car park on my bike. As usual I can see the cyclist is in front of me down the road, and I ride up next to her as she stops at a red light. I try to think of something to say, like: ‘Hey! You don’t know me but we have the same bike setup, and take the same route! What are the chances?!’ Instead no words come out, and I look down at my bike and fiddle with the brake lever.

She looks at me firmly and I turn away. The light goes green and we both take off. It doesn’t take long for her to creep far ahead of me. I make a turn into a side street to avoid seeing her. All I want is a peaceful detached ride home without her constantly in the distance, as though she’s taunting me.

As I lose sight of her I think about work. It wasn’t always meant to be as reductive as it has become, as much about numbers and turnover and statistics to show my boss. When I was at Uni I just wanted to become an organic farmer on a small property and spend my days working with the

natural world. Something changed when I got a temporary job with the real estate company. A summer job turned into years after I got a taste of a steady wage.

I think about how a promotion would give me enough money to buy a piece of land just outside the city and how I could go there on weekends. I've been thinking I could start growing some organic vegetables, like I always planned. I could get up with the sun and work with the soil. I think about how evicting Greg will get my numbers up to an even more impressive rate. I realise a higher salary could also be spent on a new investment property in the city, and I begin to smile. The cyclist is in my view once more and I wonder what backstreets she's taken to out-manoeuvre me again. I get to my suburb and see her pull away into a different street. Sometimes I wish she'd look back and wave.

At home I heat up a can of grey, deceased-looking mushroom soup and put a piece of frozen bread in the toaster. It doesn't taste good but it works out cheaper. As I munch the soggy bread I think about whether to evict Greg. This, I realise, is one of those ethical dilemma-things people always talk about. I'm still thinking about Greg as I finish my dinner, and keep thinking about his annoyingly unshaven face as I wash up. As I wipe down the bench with disinfectant I recall all the times he has barged into my office and started ranting about some kind of spiritual crap, and how he seems to leave a trail of dirt everywhere. I lie down in my bed and think of what his facial expression will be like when I tell him he is being evicted, and promptly sleep deeply all through the night.

• • •

This next morning after the ride to work I see Greg hanging around outside my window. He is doing tai chi, and keeps looking through the blinds to see if I'm in the office yet.

"You should read this," he later says, plonking a moth-eaten book on my desk.

"What is it? I don't want any more Dalai Llama, I put the last book you

gave me in the shredder.”

“This is Tolstoy’s, *The Death of Ivan Illych*—it will teach you how to confront your impending death by living more authentically.”

“Go away, I have to get this report done and send out some letters.”

“You mean eviction notices? I can’t believe you are still doing this job. Don’t you remember when you were at Uni, and all you talked about was moving to the country and being self-sufficient on your vegetable farm? What happened to that?”

“What I am doing is more important. Besides, I don’t have an impending death. Last time I went to the doctor he said I was in very good shape.”

“Your body is in very good shape, maybe,” says Greg, with a smug look that makes me want to throw my scissors at him.

Greg shakes his head and walks off and I start drafting eviction letters. He is again outside looking through my window, muttering something, not doing any work, as usual. My irritation reaches full capacity, and I start a new letter, ordering him to vacate his property within 30 days. As I stand up to fetch the letter from the printer I see him waving at me through the window. He has a packet of seeds in his hand and he’s trying to get me to come outside and help him plant them in the patch of earth that borders our car park. I give him the finger.

I smile when I see the paper come out of the printer, precisely adjusted for the letterhead. I send the letter off to the secretary straight away so that she can get it in the post this afternoon. Feeling happy with myself I go to the bathroom, take off my neatly ironed clothes and change into Lycra.

“See you tomorrow!” I call out to my senior manager as I walk past his office.

He looks up from his desk and holds up a hand to stop me.

“Let’s meet tomorrow. I have some good news for you,” he says. “Your productivity is fantastic this month, and we’re very happy with your performance.”

“Thank you,” I say, trying to suppress a smile. “Can I talk to you about something? It’s about the IT guy—Greg. I’m just worried that he’s slacking

off, he's meant to be working but he just harasses me all day.

"Greg?"

"Yeah, that short scruffy guy, always has a dirty shirt, spends his lunch break planting seeds in the garden outside? Bit of a weirdo."

"I'm not sure who you're talking about. We haven't had an IT guy for months, we just call in our contractor when we have problems."

"But you must have seen him—he's always talking about spirituality, and brings in vegetables he grows?"

"I haven't seen anyone like that. Anyway, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

The senior manager stands up and straightens his tie, shakes my hand and goes to close his door. I walk out of the office feeling confused. Habitually, I put on my helmet and cycling vest, thinking of Greg.

As I ride out of the office car park, I see the cyclist. This doesn't surprise me anymore. Up ahead she emerges on the same back road. It gives me an involuntary shiver. At the first opportunity I turn back onto the main street. I am in the bike lane, and as far left as possible, but it doesn't stop a bus from nudging my shoulder. I swear, swerve onto the footpath and curse to myself. Regaining my composure, I turn back onto the road and regain a steady pace.

There is no way that Greg is a figment of my imagination. I'm sure I've seen him fiddling with computers, tapping away on broken machines. Anyway, you can't just hang around in an office if you don't work there.

I see the cyclist pull out a few meters ahead, put her brakes on suddenly and stare at me.

"You know it freaks me out that you're always following me!" she shouts, then starts peddling swiftly to ride past me.

I see her legs cycle furiously, gaining ground until she is 50 metres ahead. Slowly, as if in a film, I see the bus continue its trajectory towards her; see her riding furiously away from me, unaware of the bus's monstrous presence.

I turn away as I hear the scratch of metal, bike on bus, and see the cyclist disappear from view.



*Drawings by John Dodge – part I.*



*' Builder '*

*Drawings by John Dodge – part I.*



I mean there's no reason I need to tell her right away. I've got a couple of credit cards and I'm sure to get another job soon. I've heard everyone's hiring and I'm certainly well qualified. Maybe Frank will give me a job. Gosh, I hope the kids don't find out. Bobby's birthday's coming up. Well, like I said, there are the credit cards. Maybe I should try to get into another field, something more secure. Maybe I went to school for the wrong thing. Oh, jeeze, how am I going to keep this from her? I'll just still have to leave every morning as usual. I should call Frank.

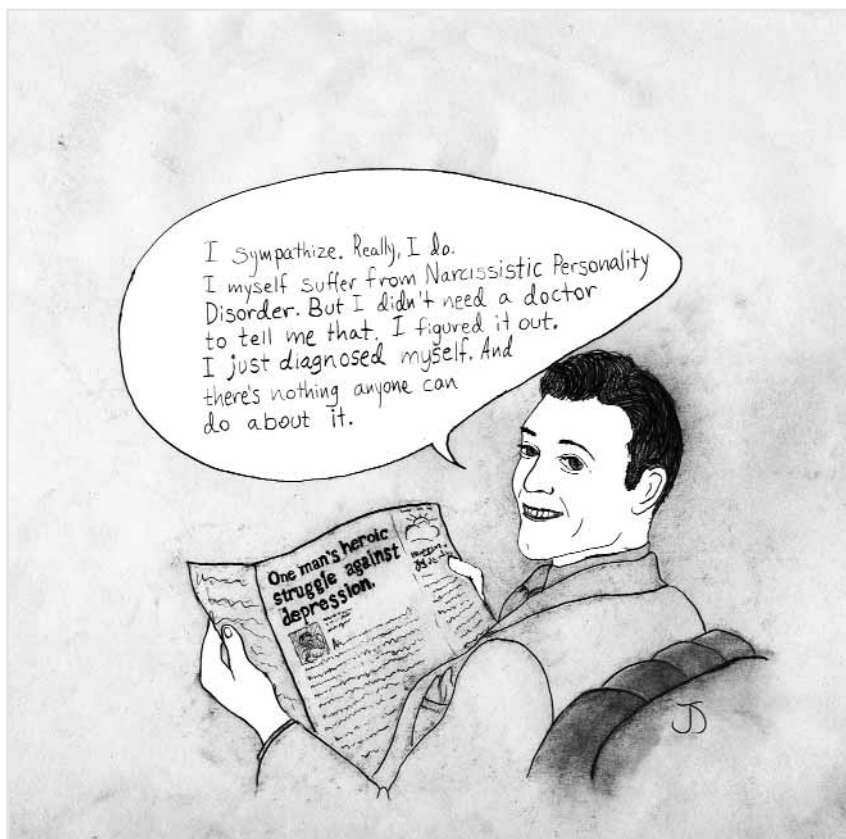
*'Frank'*

*Drawings by John Dodge – part I.*



*'Tonight'*

*Drawings by John Dodge – part I.*



*'Narcissist'*

*Drawings by John Dodge – part I.*

What ROMEO really meant;

But soft,  
What light on yonder  
window breaks?  
Tis the west and  
I am the sun!



*'Romeo'*

# Tillie and Alfredo

by Ricky Ginsburg

**My Aunt Tillie** had been mugged three times, survived open-heart surgery (yet still smoked a pack or two each week), and outlived both her husbands and all five of their cats. She blinked for the last time when Hurricane Phillip roared in from the Atlantic Ocean and tore up her ass on the last weekend of September 2003.

Now, I'm not saying it literally re-creviced her rectum, although the midair collision with the palm tree did split her britches. Thankfully, the ER doctor swore to me she'd died from the lightning bolt and hadn't felt a thing after it blasted her from the fourth floor balcony. Of course, that would be my aunt—going out with a flash and a bang, the same way she'd charged through her ninety-one years on the globe.

I wish I could tell you she was stone-cold sober, stepping out to check her orchids while the eye of the storm hovered over Miami Beach, but I found an open fifth of Bacardi on her tray table and an empty one in the trash can under her sink. For my dime, this was just another hurricane party for the old tooter, nothing she hadn't celebrated at least forty times in

a decade of living on the beach. Tough break for Aunt Tillie that Zeus farted in her direction and she didn't have time to duck.

"Nine lives is eight too many," she would often complain to me when reminiscing about Victor and Wesley, husbands one and two in that order, and their cats. Both came with a collection of felines that Tillie tolerated for reasons she never revealed to me, other than a sly wink and a poke in the ribs, but the "four-legged poop producers," as she called them, seemed to die off early in the marriage.

Victor's twin tabbies—Glitch and Grindle—were victims of soured milk and what the veterinarian could only describe as "an odd white powder with an acidic taste." Wesley brought a massive calico on their honeymoon, thirty-five pounds of fur that Tillie shoved out of their house in Winter Haven whenever one of the neighbor's dogs was on the loose. The calico had a misadventure with a pit bull and managed to run up four-thousand dollars in medical bills before Wesley gave in and let the poor animal pass on.

His next two pets came from a local shelter, refugees from a misguided Christmas gift that came with a no-return policy. Tillie gave them each a year and a half before threatening to burn the shelter to the ground unless they took them back. Wesley vapor-locked a week after the kittens departed. My aunt sold the house three days later and moved to Miami Beach.

Our last phone conversation had come when her lights went out and stayed off that Saturday morning. To hear a woman of Aunt Tillie's age drop into the vernacular was funnier than the Comedy Channel, so I let her rant in that Minnie Mouse voice for almost five minutes before calling a time out. I had made my usual attempt to quash the looming crisis Thursday morning prior, with an offer to come stay at my apartment west of the Turnpike—a much safer distance from the tidal surge and only one flight up in the event *my* power failed. At that point, the first of the feeder bands was already rushing over the city, slinging raindrops in short sheets with the occasional hat-flinging gust. All the local television stations had gone over to 'round the clock weather alerts; each warning a step more dire than the

one fifteen minutes earlier, until the “hurricane specialists” had removed their blazers and were all whipping digital arrows across the screen in a frenzied display of psychedelic trails.

We’d fought the telephone debate enough times that I knew it was futile—she just wouldn’t leave—but it was a requirement for my own peace of mind to know I’d at least played my part. Hell, if a team of surgeons and a bunch of thugs couldn’t shut her down, I figured Mother Nature would probably call it a draw as well. In the five years I lived in Ft. Lauderdale, there was only one storm, Griselda in 2001—a Category 5 with mandatory evacuation, where Aunt Tillie relented and slept two nights in my apartment. It took a Metro cop with a bullhorn to convince her, but eventually she came downstairs and let me drive her away.

Without electricity, Aunt Tillie had once again been deprived of two of her life’s necessities—power to make ice cubes for her rum and Coke, and air conditioning to create a pleasant atmosphere in which to drink them. Since the governor had declared a state of emergency for both Dade and Broward County hours earlier, access to the beach was now restricted to emergency vehicles and teenage surfers, who never missed an opportunity for some “real” waves. As a lifeguard on the payroll of the city, I could still come and get her, but with the winds peaking at fifty miles an hour, it would have to be soon.

Giving up on the power company tirade, she ran through her usual repertoire of excuses not to leave, starting with the orchids, her most prized possession. They were tied to driftwood limbs and fingers that I’d bolted onto her patio walls: a magnificent rainbow of flowers, stalks, and thick green leaves that had twice been featured in the local papers. Aunt Tillie, who had grown up in Brooklyn, discovered orchids at a farmer’s market a week or two after she’d moved to the beach. Enamored with their vibrant colors and intriguing shapes, she started collecting immediately and now had several hundred specimens on her balcony patio. Not being one to appreciate a plant that only bloomed once or twice a year, I was just glad she had a hobby, other than men, to keep her occupied.

Once again, with a storm now pounding its way on shore, she was



convinced that she had to stay there to make sure the sheets I'd securely tied over her collection held on in the wind even though my riggings had never failed.

Second on her list and only slightly less important, there was no way she'd leave Mr Kartoogian, her seventy-six year old neighbor and most likely candidate for husband number three, alone in the storm. "Someone," she argued, "has to take care of the old bat." The image of the two of them, huddled together on her couch was quite touching until she mentioned he'd renewed his prescription for Viagra just in time for the weekend.

And then there was Alfredo, the old man's pernicious cat.

The hanging jungle of dendrobiums, phalaenopsis, and cattelyas were, for the playfully destructive feline, a source of endless amusement and a dangling display of swatable toys that were constantly replenishing themselves. There had been dozens of phone calls from my aunt, usually predawn and always on my day off, about how Alfredo had knocked the buds off a double Marie Lavage or a rare White Asian Moonbeam. She claimed that several plants had even been torn from their moorings and nudged over the edge of the fourth floor balcony by the furry cretin. At six-fifteen in the morning, I would have drowned the cat myself just to stop the phone calls.

There was a white metal railing dividing the balcony between Aunt Tillie and her neighbor; too high for either of them to step over, but wide open for a twenty-pound tabby to squeeze through with ease. Alfredo, unaware of property lines and condo association rules, wandered freely between the two sections of the suspended patio, usually at night. My aunt was convinced the animal had vampire in its lineage, as she never saw him on her patio in daylight.

She told me that if not for his marriage potential and sexual prowess, Mr Kartoogian would have lost his pet to her anger years ago. According to the police reports from those early days, there had been two instances where rum-infused sardines were left where Alfredo could easily find them, leaving the poor kitty so intoxicated that it passed out in the hallway. Another report, only a week later, spoke of the cat being stranded outside

Kartoogian's door in a cardboard box with its mouth duct taped shut. And yet another where the cat had been stuffed into a burlap bag and hung from the condominium's flagpole. All of which Aunt Tillie vehemently denied with her hand across her heart.

Angered though she was by the cat's insistence on demolishing her floral panoply, my aunt refused to let the beast come between her and a viable lover. At her behest, I raised the lowest plants to higher perches, tied a section of chicken wire to the common barrier, and moved the two patio chairs and the bamboo coffee table to the center of the ten-foot by six-foot space. Mr Kartoogian stopped filing police reports and for a while, it seemed as though Alfredo was stymied.

However, in a battle between galvanized chicken wire and salt spray, the wire is going to lose eventually. It took less than a year and a half before the exposed corner of my pet fencing dropped off the balcony and into the ficus hedge four floors below. Alfredo returned to Aunt Tillie's garden and reminded both of us that cats know how to climb.

Of course, by now, old man Kartoogian was a regular fixture in my aunt's life. They dined together at all the early bird specials and could recite the breakfast menus in every hotel between 163rd Street and Lincoln Road. They spent Friday afternoons at the movie theatre two blocks north on Collins and Tuesday nights at the bingo hall in Surfside.

But it was deeper than just a casual relationship between a pair of senior citizens, and a lot more detail than I needed know. I caught them half-dressed more times than necessary when stopping by unannounced to see if she needed anything or wanted to have dinner with her only nephew. Often times on the telephone, I could hear strange noises in the background and Aunt Tillie's voice would suddenly crack and she'd hang up.

Having lost my parents to a flat-footed llama and a rocky passage in the Andes when I was still in grade school, Aunt Tillie had become my substitute mother. The thought of her doing anything more with a man at ninety-one than holding hands was enough for me to consider therapy.

She was happy, though, even mentioned going for a marriage license

before the end of the year. I didn't ask if she'd told him about her two previous spouses... both of which died on the downstroke; at seventy-six, the odds were against him anyhow.

From what the old man was able to recall, once his hearing kicked back in the day after Aunt Tillie's unfortunate demise—he having been just six feet away from her when the bolt hit—they had just finished eating dinner: Frosted Flakes and the last of his skim milk. Alfredo was sprawled out on my aunt's recliner, a thin stream of drool dripping from one side of his face. Mr Kartoogian was certain she'd fed the cat a chunk of a sleeping tablet, crushed into the leftover hamburger Aunt Tillie had scrounged from the lowest shelf of her darkened refrigerator. (I found half a pill and a butter knife in her bathroom but never told him about it, thinking that was what she usually took before bed.)

The old man said the hurricane crashed through in waves of thunder; windows rattled and shook with each hammering gust of wind until the sound was a continuous explosion punctuated by a hideous whistle as it found cracks to seep in through and sing its song of havoc. He swears they were too scared to do anything besides squeeze together on the couch; each with a throw pillow in their lap for protection should a pane of glass shatter and threaten them. Knowing my aunt, they were on the couch alright, but I doubt they were just huddling against the storm.

According to Mr Kartoogian, it started getting dark as the winds calmed, announcing the arrival of the eye. He got up to try to rouse his pet, but Alfredo had regained his senses and left the recliner. With flashlights, they searched the apartment, under the couch, behind the chair, every closet in the kitchen without success. Aunt Tillie slid open the door to the patio to let the ocean breeze, a temporary respite, blow into the dank apartment. When she turned to relight the candles on top of the television, Alfredo crept from behind the curtains and skittered out the door.

It took a moment until they could swing their lights around to follow him, but finally they spotted the cat on the patio, relieving himself in the far corner by the fence. Aunt Tillie, a throw pillow raised over her head and screeching louder than a hawk diving for its prey, ran out to the patio

swatting the air above Alfredo's head. Storm or no storm, the cat was not going to take a crap on her balcony.

She reached for the railing to steady herself and brought the pillow down fast and hard at the cat who was in mid-dump. Alfredo hissed back at her and scattered between my aunt's legs. She never had the satisfaction of knowing whether her aim was true or not, as it was her assault on the cat that scared it back into the apartment moments before the fatal lightening bolt that tripped Aunt Tillie's main breaker.

Mr Kartoogian checked out less than a month later. My friend at the city morgue said it was an overdose of "blue boner pills." I went looking for Alfredo after the old man's funeral and found him in the arms of a silver-haired lady named Bryntha, who was now living in my late aunt's apartment. She told me she was going to have the maintenance man take down the driftwood and the orchids, but the cat liked playing with them so much that she decided to leave them there for his enjoyment.

I told her the cat enjoyed an occasional Bacardi and a tin of sardines.

# The Felling of the Elm

*by* Tyrone Arps

**Charles Reece** sat at his kitchen table, working on the daily crossword. Twenty-six across was bothering him. He drank from his coffee cup and watched Giles stride down the hillside towards the row of trees along the stream that bordered their properties. Giles carried his chainsaw. The morning was crisp and clear now that the sun had burnt off an early fog. Charles had taken his dog, Baldwin for a stroll into town before sunrise to get the paper and when he returned, he'd noticed lights on at the newly-built house opposite. It was over a kilometre from Charles' kitchen but there was nothing to obstruct the line of sight. The row of trees were just far enough down in latitude so that their tops obscured part of the neighbouring paddock but not the house. Giles had briefly disappeared behind them before reappearing at the base of a red gum on the left. Charles' grandfather had left it and the other four red gums standing and planted an elm in addition. The elm was planted on the day Charles was born, the red gums were left alone because they looked nice. They stood on Giles' land now, the Reece property ended at the stream. Charles opened

the window a little to see if he could hear the buzz of the chainsaw. Not yet. Giles was in the shade of the trees and so Charles was having trouble figuring out what he was doing, apart from the obvious, which was destroying a perfectly good tree. But what could Charles do? The answer was nothing; Charles, one time owner of said trees could do nothing. He put his empty cup down and looked at the crossword. He picked up his pencil in case the nine letter word needed to fill in the blank boxes of twenty-six across came to him. It was the final clue required to complete the puzzle. Normally these things were a push over; most of the clues were repeated from time to time by lazy writers.

Charles had often thought about writing to the editor to tell him that he should fire his clue-writer. That was the name for a crossword writer. 4, 6 letters. Charles could become one and use that in his first edition. He thought about going into the newspaper in the city and asking to see the editor. The faint hum of the chainsaw drifted through the window. Charles looked out at Giles wrestling with the thing. He was on his knees in a plume of blue smoke. *A man who is stupid and recognises the fact isn't as stupid as he believes. Stupid people who believe they're clever are just plain dangerous.* Red flannelette shirt sleeves rocked and swivelled and the chainsaw went quiet. The smoke dissipated and the morning was peaceful again for the moment. Giles stood over the machine and yanked at the cord. The saw came to life and was put back to work. Charles went to the kitchen bench and poured himself another cup of coffee. He stood at the table, looking down the hill. The red gum was being difficult. Charles guessed there to be one month's firewood in that single tree. He wondered if his neighbour would let it dry long enough for it to burn properly or just smoke the town out with it. He sat down at his crossword again. Nine letters, *unsuitable for*. The fifth letter was *e*, if the answer to seventeen down was correct. Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw the tree falling. He turned in time to see it hit the ground, its upper branches bounced, sending loose leaves into the air. Baldwin whined from the front porch. Charles reassured him, with, "easy boy."

Giles had stepped back to watch the tree fall and was now wiping his

forehead with his sleeve. Charles regarded the remaining trees. The one that now stood on the end of the row looked strange. Giles stared at his handy work for a while and then walked back up the hill to his house with his chainsaw. Charles filled in the blank boxes of the crossword: T i m b e r r !

The next morning Charles took Baldwin for a walk to buy the paper. The town was dark and the only other soul around was Doreen, the owner of the general store. At seventy one, she was ten years younger than Charles. He set the door chime off as he entered.

“Mornin’,” he called.

“Mornin’, love,” she called from the room in the back of the shop. She lived in the house attached and usually was busy at this hour making fresh rolls for the morning parade of workers heading for a nearby copper mine. Charles put the correct change on the counter and picked up a paper. He folded it once and tucked it under his arm.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Doreen.”

“See ya, love.”

Baldwin stood as his master came out of the shop and had his lead untied from a bike rack bolted to the path. He wagged his tail and strolled along side Charles as they made their way home. It was then that the memory of the tree’s destruction came to him. Charles paused as the terms of the new day were adjusted in his mind. They continued along until the path ended and crossed the road. The verge was wider on this side and Baldwin liked to sniff around in the hedges in front of the houses. The first headlights emerged at the end of the town’s main street and Charles shielded his eyes from the glare. It wasn’t a miner going to work. It was Giles. He slowed to get a look at Charles. Giles waved but didn’t stop. He would probably want to have a chat on his way back from picking up a couple of those energy drinks he liked from the shop. Charles picked up his pace, tugging at Baldwin’s lead to let him know they needed to get to the corner a little faster this morning. More cars went by and the air was beginning to smell of fumes. They took a right at the corner and headed for

home. Giles lived on the road parallel to this one. They would be saved from false niceties for once. Baldwin led his master up the driveway and into the front porch of their house. Charles unclipped the lead from the dog's collar and left him there to watch the yard. The kitchen was still warm from last night's fire and Charles put the newspaper under the lamp on the table and put the kettle on to make some coffee. The windows above the bench and by the table were black and only showed a reflection of the room. He tried to remember the clue to yesterday's puzzle and couldn't. He would need to review it before opening this morning's paper. While the kettle came to the boil, he chopped some dog roll up and took it out to the porch. Baldwin licked his chops at the smell and ate his breakfast in the dark. Charles made his coffee and sat with it at the table. He read the clue from the previous day; '*unsuitable for?*' he asked. He stared at the empty chair at the other end of the table. Giving him some more time to spark an idea in his head. Nothing. Charles put the old puzzle aside and opened today's paper. Page forty eight was comics, page forty nine was puzzles. He went straight to yesterday's solutions and skimmed down to twenty-six across. His mood darkened. *Misbecome*. The writer had cheated with a nonsense word. Charles looked back at the puzzle, to the boxes where he'd written timberrr! He preferred that answer. He took a sip of coffee and began today's crossword. As the sun came up and the fog lifted, Charles opened his window slightly to let the sound of the birds and some air in. He was filling in thirty-one down when Giles came marching down the hill with his chainsaw. He wore a blue flannelette shirt this morning. Now a bona fide lumberjack, he sized up his crop of firewood. Charles watched his neighbour walk the length of the felled red gum. Though Charles couldn't see from here, he knew Giles was licking his lips like Baldwin did just before chowing down. Giles stooped over his chainsaw and heaved it into life, but instead of sawing into the tree on the ground, he pressed the spinning chain to the trunk of the next red gum in the row.

Charles' mouth dropped open.

"Oh no," he muttered.

Lumberjack switched positions and revved the saw before cutting into



the other side of the trunk. Charles slumped in his chair. This fool was going to cut them all down. But what could you do? He stared out at his old friends and felt sorry for them. The second red gum was close to falling and Lumberjack put his machine aside and stood back, looking up at the giant he'd slain. Its top slanted ever so slowly and Charles heard a crack as the last sliver of trunk gave way and the tree went crashing to the ground beside the first. As its upper branches bounced, the trunk kicked upwards sending the whole mass sideways. Giles saw it closing in on him but wasn't quick enough to get out of the way. He let out a 'yelp' when the trunk trapped his mid section against the first tree. It must have knocked the wind out of him because Charles never heard another sound from him. Baldwin barked once from the front porch.

"Easy, boy." Charles drank some coffee as Giles' arms trashed about. Charles thought about thirty-one down. He would do what he could for Giles. Nothing.

# Busting God

by Danielle de Valera

**Reg Mulcahey** was leaning against the sink, looking worried. He pulled a packet of Camels from his pocket, lit two and passed one to me.

“Why didn’t you tell those cops you were a narc? *Christ*, Michael!”

I was sitting on a kitchen chair holding a packet of frozen peas against my rapidly closing eyelid; you need a sense of humour in this business.

“What’d you expect me to do, Reg—blow a cover I’ve been working on for months?”

“Well, y’ cover’s blown now,” Reg drawled; he was in surveillance. “I had to show them my ID to get them off you; they can send someone else into that nightclub. By the way, The Eagle wants to see you, that’s why I came.”

• • •

The CEO was in a hurry. She was due at a high-powered press conference on narcotics at two. She could barely make the time to tell me I was taking a paid trip to the Northern Rivers to bust a heroin dealer everyone up there

called God. She threw my new ID papers at me and told me to catch the next train out of Sydney.

“Where would you like me to go, ma’am?”

“If you’re meaning a town, O’Neill, try Murwillumbah.”

My clothes were torn and bloodied. I was still holding the packet of frozen peas to my eye. She didn’t seem to notice.

“I’d like to take Anna with me,” I ventured.

“You’re taking Johnson with you. Not on the same train, of course.”

*Baby Johnson?* Oh no, everything he touched turned to trouble. But it was no use arguing.

The peas had melted. I pitched them into the wastepaper basket and turned to go.

“O’Neill?” She got me just as I reached the doorway, a trick of hers. “When you come back—you do intend to come back, don’t you?—I expect you to take that desk job. Why don’t you marry that girl and settle down?” she hurled after me. “You’re too old for field work anyway.”

And there it was, the crux of the problem: I was growing older. I watched what I ate; I pumped iron and ran miles every day so that I could stay in the field. Still I grew older.

We had a bad scene at Central when Anna discovered we were going north for some time. (I’d told her we were going to visit her mother in Newcastle.)

“What about my elephant collection?” she demanded.

I bundled her on to the train. “I’ll get you another.” Wot-the-hell, there were bound to be plenty of elephants in northern New South Wales.

Elephants you can always get.

• • •

Murwillumbah didn’t seem to be the place to find God. The trail led south to Ballina. We rented a small fibro cottage on the dunes in a hamlet called New Brighton, a safe sixty ks from Ballina. Then I linked up with Baby, who’d scored a banana-packing shed in the mountains outside

Mullumbimby, and together we worked at slotting into the low life in what the sign on the highway declared was: THE BIGGEST LITTLE TOWN IN AUSTRALIA.

I went home every night to New Brighton when I could and sat with Anna on the veranda overlooking the empty windswept beach.

At dusk the Cape Byron lighthouse began to flash steadily every thirteen seconds. Sometimes the prawn fleet would be heading out to sea. One by one, the trawlers would emerge from the Brunswick River three ks to the south of us, a space of about four hundred metres between them. At night Anna and I could see their deck lights, strung out like Chinese lanterns along the horizon.

There was one down side to New Brighton. Spiders.

Every night they spun their webs across the narrow Banksia-lined path to the beach. Every morning there they'd be, swinging face-high, in the centres of their three-metre webs. I smashed and banged at them each a.m. while Anna cowered behind me in tears. She had a phobia about spiders.

If I forgot to do this before I left, Anna would stand in the back yard and wail for Star.

“Star, *Starr!* Please help me!” And Star would come over from her house and gently remove all the spiders with a broom.

Star was a bona fide hippie—compost heap, vegetable garden, bicycle, pension, the lot. She lived with her two pre-school children in the next house on the dunes. The first day she met me, she showed me the dope plant she was growing to buy a potbellied stove for the kids for winter.

“It gets *cold* here when the winds blow, Michael,” she said, long dark hair hanging down over her Indian print dress, tanned, tow-haired toddler on one hip. “There are cracks in the floor boards and Ptolemy’s asthmatic.”

That wood stove was her Holy Grail, God was mine, and we both thought like Jesuits. Countless times in the night I saved The Plant from being ripped off by threatening total strangers with violence. Towards the end I started to complain.

“Anna, tell Star to harvest that bloody plant; there’s a wood stove’s worth there by now.”

Anna would've been very lonely that autumn without Star and the two little boys; I was away a lot.

God was proving difficult to find.

• • •

I was looking for someone called David, who was said by one informant to have "connections". It wasn't that he sold foils out of his socks in the upwardly-mobile Top Pub but simply that he'd been here since the Nimbin Festival. He knew everybody.

I hoped that if we hung with David long enough he'd lead us to God, or at least to one of God's connections. In the end I came to the point directly.

"Do you know how to find God?" I asked him one night when Baby and I were hanging out in his shack eight ks from the Mullumbimby post office.

He'd been sitting on the bed, smoking. He leapt to his feet, scattering ashtrays and empty stubbies, and got me in a headlock from behind. He was strong and fast for a bloke on the disability pension.

*"What are you?"* he shouted.

I thought: Christ, are we sprung?

"Are you some kind of born-again Christian? If you are, get the fuck out of here!"

Dave hated Christians. He cherished a theory that a local Christian cult called the The True Vine had destroyed his marriage by converting his wife, Doreen, who had been a first-class junkie and who was now one of the top cats in the charismatic industry. Doreen claimed she still loved Dave. She kept sending people around to convert him.

I squawked that I wasn't a Christian, that I just wanted to buy some stuff.

He released me. "You don't use, do you?"

"I just want to deal a bit, make some money; Anna and I want to get married."

This seemed to satisfy him. “Can you get into town Wednesdays? Say round one at the Bottom Pub.” He threw two single mattresses on to the kitchen floor and Baby and I lay down in the clothes we stood up in.

“The table near the fountain.” Dave blew out the kerosene light.

Baby fell asleep right away. I lay there wondering what Wednesday would bring, while possums clattered over the old tin roof and the bull koalas called weirdly, like cattle.

• • •

When I woke up in the morning both Baby and David were gone. David’s friend, The Captain was standing in the doorway, leaning against the door frame, smoking a rollie. He was wearing a white dress with lace trimming. I shouldn’t have been that hungover, though we did get into the rum at the end, so I looked away. But when I looked back he was still standing there.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I’m wearing this dress,” he said conversationally.

“Not especially,” I said and went out to have a piss. Then I came back inside and made myself a cup of coffee.

“I lost my clothes,” The Captain went on.

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I didn’t lose them really, I just mislaid them.”

“Uh huh.” I stirred the sugar into my coffee and studied him.

He was around thirty, about ninety kilos, a hundred and eighty-three centimetres—and fit. Very fit for a freak. I decided to raid his dilly bag as soon as I got the chance and have his ID checked out by the bureau.

“When I wanted to leave I couldn’t find m’clothes anywhere, so I went through the chick’s wardrobe. Well I couldn’t go home starkers, now, could I?”

“You’ve got great taste, Captain,” I said. “It looks good on you.”

He flashed me a grin from under his mop of naturally blonde hair, which had been streaked pink and green and purple with food colouring.

“Good,” he said. “As soon as the shops open I’m going to walk into town

and have breakfast at The Country Kitchen.”

“You do that, Captain,” I said.

• • •

The Bottom Pub specialised in rednecks and footballers. Even at one o’clock on a Wednesday, the bar was crowded. I ordered lunch, took my drink into the beer garden, sat down at the table near the fountain and waited for the connection to show.

He joined me almost immediately, wearing the standard, middle-class regalia of the town: long socks, long shorts, and a shirt with barber’s pole stripes. The gut hung over the belt. For an instant I wondered if he was an off-duty cop, but he didn’t have any of the mannerisms.

He introduced himself as Wayne. “David tells me you’re interested in God.”

I never cared for go-betweens. Never liked their style; they had no class.

“Let’s just say,” I said tersely, “I hope my prayers will be answered. Does God really deliver?”

Two lunches landed heavily on the table in front of us: T-bones with chips, some ornamental lettuce and tomato and a sprig of triple-curl parsley.

The waitress took one look at me and went to fetch the manager.

“You wanted four weights, is that right?” Wayne said. “You got the bread?”

Bread. Wayne’s best shot at street cred. Like I said, no style. I rattled around in my dilly bag and produced ten thousand dollars.

Wayne didn’t seem to mind the grubby state of the bills and smiled as he counted them. “Yes, I think we should be able to do business.”

I picked up a chip. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the manager bearing down on our table at Mach 3.

“O’Brien?” The publican’s voice boomed out across the beer garden. “Is that you, O’Brien?” He was short-sighted.

Wayne waved a well-manicured hand. “It’s okay, Tom, he’s with me—

honey,” he said to the waitress, “get us two more beers, will you?” He pushed a ten-dollar bill into her cleavage. “Thanks a lot, love, keep the change.”

The publican disappeared; the greenery swallowed him up. The fountain tinkled. The waitress returned like magic and smashed the beers down in front of us.

“Where were we?” Wayne was watching her retreating form. “Oh yes, I guess you’ll be wanting to see the goods.”

He took out what looked like a packet of Drum and placed it on the table between us. I poked at it with a breadstick. Inside was a Glad sandwich bag containing approximately four ounces of what appeared to be heroin.

I stared at the packet sitting there between the sugar bowl and the salt and pepper shakers. There were other people in the beer garden: a couple of families with small children, and four girls I recognised from the Commonwealth Bank.

“You want to test it?” Using the end of his fork, Wayne shovelled enough for one hit on to the torn-off corner of his paper serviette. “Here, make yourself comfortable.”

I took the stuff and locked myself in the toilet. It tasted like the real thing. I waited long enough to have shot it and returned to the table.

Wayne smiled at me. “Good gear eh?”

I tried to appear mellow. “Ah look,” I said; it was now or never. “I’m in a position to make a much bigger deal than this.” I let him hang for a while. “*Much* bigger. I work for someone. And the person I work for, well, he’s got unlimited finance.”

“Unlimited finance?” The magic words. “How much are we talking?”

I paused. “Two hundred thousand—maybe more. Can you supply that much?”

Wayne nodded. “Can you get all that bread together in one place?”

“No worries,” I lied. “The man I work for is big in Sydney. But . . .” I pretended to drift a bit, “an amount of money like that . . . I’d have to hand it to The Man myself.”

Wayne shook his head. “God never gives interviews.”



I took a stab. “Not even for a quarter of a million?”

Wayne considered for a while, then he went away and made a phone call. I’d expected a blank ‘No’ to this proposal. It sounded too much like a set-up to me.

Wayne returned as I was finishing my steak. “He says he’ll consider it. Give me your ID.”

I gave him my fake pension card. He took down the relevant details. No doubt favours would be exchanged and I’d be punched through somebody’s computer.

Wayne pushed the ID and the Drum packet at me. “You’d better get going now, you’re ruining the tone of Tom’s establishment. We’ll be in touch by the end of the week.”

“How will you know where to find me?”

Wayne smiled. “God’ll find you. God is everywhere. He’s omniscient.”

“I think you mean omnipresent,” I slung the price of the second beer down on to the table, picked up the gear and walked out.

“By the way, your friend’s in gaol,” Wayne called after me. “Drunk and disorderly.”

• • •

It was the last day of autumn. We lay on the lawn on the headland opposite the Beach Hotel in Byron Bay. Anna and I were half-under a hibiscus bush with double pink flowers. The Captain, who had been sticking to us like glue, lay beside us with his latest girlfriend, Julie. She was a wisp of a thing with scrappy black hair and a see-through Indian arrangement.

She was also a dedicated junkie. I wondered if The Captain knew that.

I was waiting for word from God. It was Saturday now and I was still waiting. I was drifting away on the sound of the sea when The Captain jabbed me in the ribs.

A person in long, flowing white robes and with equally flowing grey hair was approaching across the grass. S/he stopped in front of The Captain and Julie.

“I am the current manifestation of the Archangel Gabriel!”

“Yeah yeah.”

“The only redemption is Jesus.”

“*Piss off!*”

“Hear me, young man, for I am the one sent to show thee the way to God.”

I sprang to my feet and dragged the angel behind the Hibiscus bush.

“Ballina,” the voice said, dropping an octave in three seconds. S/he pressed a piece of paper into my hand. A car had driven up. It stood at the kerb with its engine running. The angel raced to it in a flurry of robes and jumped in, flashing purple socks. As the car drove off I unfolded the note. It read:

*Paradise Motel. 2 p.m. Sunday. Divine Worship.*

“What a funny place for a church service,” The Captain said, reading over my shoulder.

I went round to the Byron Bay police station and bailed Baby out. I had a feeling I was going to need him.

• • •

Baby and I had barely got into our room at the Paradise Motel on Sunday when the phone rang, and a heavy voice I didn't recognise told me to “Get rid of that gorilla”.

“I think they mean you, Baby Chops.”

“Well I ain't goin'.” Baby was sprawled on one of the twin beds, guzzling designer beer from the bar fridge and checking over the gun he'd been carrying under his outsize flannelette shirt.

I walked down the hall and knocked on the door of the room next to ours. Inside, Reg and the surveillance team had everything organised: holes had been drilled through the wall adjoining ours, and cameras and microphones set up.

“I hope you know what you're doing, O'Neill,” Reg said darkly when he saw me. “You don't think this guy's going to front up without heavies, and they're sure to be carrying.”

I started back to my room before Reg could ruin my adrenalin rush.

"I know you're crazy, O'Neill," he hissed after me. "Whatever you do, don't leave the motel. *Don't leave Mother!*"

Half an hour later the phone rang again. This time it was Wayne.

"I thought that bloke was in gaol. Why hasn't he left?"

I began to feel uneasy. Maybe God was omniscient after all. Did God also know about the agents who were all over the building? Maybe he intended to roll me for the money and string my body up from the clock tower of THE BIGGEST LITTLE TOWN IN AUSTRALIA as a warning to any other narcotics agent who might think of disturbing his lucrative empire.

On the bed lay the briefcase containing twenty thousand dollars, all I had been given by the department to show. The rest of the money was bulked up out of paper—which made me nervous.

At precisely two p.m. there was a knock on our door. It wasn't God, however, who came in; it was Wayne.

"Did you get all the bread?"

I indicated the briefcase lying open on the bed beside Baby. Wayne advanced on it as if to count the money. I blocked his path.

"Where's the gear—and where's God?"

Wayne gave me one of those smiles. "God's changed his mind, he wants me to do the deal for him." He produced two weights and threw them on to the bed. "That's the sample."

"Where's the rest?" I demanded as Baby counted him out six thousand dollars in marked one-hundred dollar bills.

Wayne pocketed the money. "The rest's at a safe house across town. You come with me, we can do the rest of the deal over there."

I got myself a beer from the bar fridge. I didn't offer him one; in this way I expressed my disapproval. Wayne then suggested we split the gear and the money into five separate lots. He'd bring each lot to the motel and we'd do the whole thing here. It was no way to find God.

"Listen," I said to Wayne, "I'll level with you: my boss is Italian, I'm his right-hand man; *that there's* his cousin. Look," I shoved the phone at him, "I've *got* to hand the money directly to God, they're my orders. And *he's* got

to come too. You can't insult the boss's cousin."

Wayne hesitated. He flung a glance at Baby who lay on the bed trying to look smouldering and Italian. Then he took the phone out of my hand and started pressing numbers.

I went over to the window. I hoped he'd stay on the phone long enough for the call to be traced. Down below, a blonde with magnificent hair teetered out of the vestibule carrying a large shoulder bag. She wore a tight leather skirt, a leopard-print top and spike heels.

"Okay," Wayne said; he hadn't been on the phone long enough for a trace. "He says he understands, it's a lot of money. He'll be there."

I locked the briefcase and pocketed the keys. "Let's go."

• • •

We were flying 'on a wing and a prayer', like the old WWII song says. With a briefcase full of paper money and three guns between us, we were driving away from all the security we'd had.

Still, there'd been enough time for Reg to organise a tail for us. And Wayne was going to lead us to God. All we had to do when we got there was stall for five minutes, and the place would be surrounded by bureau agents.

Out on the highway Wayne started glancing in the rear-vision mirror a lot. "Did you put a tail on us, O'Brien? Those bitches are following us."

Three cars behind, two young women, their hair whipping in the wind, were zooming along in a white sports car.

"Maybe they like our looks," I offered. "Drive slower."

"I want the redhead," Baby rumbled from the back seat.

Wayne put his foot down on the car's accelerator. He executed a hard left turn and some very fancy rights and we found ourselves at a river. The vehicular ferry was on our side. There were no bridges.

Wayne drove the Merc on to the old ferry. He slipped the ferryman fifty dollars. The ferryman slipped the tail chain in place and started up the engine. The young women were left jumping up and down on the river bank.

I lit a cigarette and thought as the ferry pulled out into the broad river. Unlike Cliff Richard, we weren't wired for sound. Now we were completely on our own.

"Baby," I said, as we bumped off the ferry on the other side of the river, "have you rung your *mother* lately?"

"My mother's been dead for six years," Baby said grumpily.

I twisted around and looked him hard in the eye. "I think you should ring her real soon," I said. "I'm sure she'd like to know where you are."

Wayne had pulled off the highway and was speeding east along a sandy track. He drove into an old garage opposite a small cottage near the beach. It was a very isolated spot. The last phone box I'd seen was at the highway turn-off three miles back.

"You go in first," I told Wayne. "I'm not going in with all this money until I know for certain God's there with the gear."

Wayne strode in. A person fitting the surveillance photos of God appeared at the front window a few minutes later. Wayne stood in the doorway of the cottage holding up a plastic bag full of something white. As we watched he opened it up, dipped his finger into it, put down the bag where we could still see it and walked back to the car.

"Taste it," he said venomously, holding out his finger to me.

It was real all right.

"Okay, Wayne," I said, "blame it on my toilet training, but I'm not a trusting man; I'm going to leave Baby here. If anything happens to me, well, let's just say he knows who you are and where your family lives."

Baby produced a revolver and waved it at Wayne from the back seat. It was then I noticed that the seat was littered with miniature bottles of alcohol—mostly empty—that he must've got from the bar fridge.

"Gimme the car keys," he slurred.

Wayne stepped back out of arm's reach. "You'll have to shoot me first. You're not driving off to get reinforcements and rip us off."

He had us. I would've loved to shoot him, but it wouldn't have gone down well in court. I got out of the car and walked into the house with Wayne. I hoped Baby was a good runner.

Seated in the living room, holding a tumbler of Scotch and ice, sat an elegant man in his late fifties. He wore cream slacks, a cream-coloured Italian-knit sweater and a cream cravat. I imagined a yacht somewhere.

“O’Brien,” Wayne said deferentially, though the deference was not for me, “may I introduce Mr Westmoreland?”

The plastic bag full of heroin sat on the coffee table.

“Mind if I look around?”

God stirred. “If it’ll make you feel more comfortable, Mr O’Brien, go ahead, go ahead.”

I prowled through the house. When I reached the kitchen I saw why he was so cool: two heavies with shoulder holsters were playing Black Jack at the kitchen table. They cut me hard glances as I went by.

“Happy?” Westmoreland asked me when I returned to the living room.

“How about a drink?” I hedged. “Scotch is fine. No water.”

Wayne pressed another of the Swedish tumblers into my hand.

God held up his. “To private enterprise!”

We drank. I wondered if Baby had change for the pay phone.

“And now,” God said, “the briefcase, Mr O’Brien. If you please.”

It was no use trying to stall any longer. I placed the briefcase on the coffee table and tossed Wayne the keys. As he came forward I stepped back three paces and pulled out my unmarked Smith & Wesson.

Wayne opened the case and riffled past the top layer of money. The pieces of paper fluttered to the floor.

“Shit,” he said and slumped into a chair.

“My name is O’Neill,” I said as quietly as I could. “I’m a member of the Narcotics Bureau. This place is surrounded. Be very quiet please and lie on the floor, face down.”

Wayne complied but God remained where he was. “Do you mind if I sit, Mr O’Neill? This is something of a shock.” He gestured. “My heart, you know.”

Long minutes went by. Where was Baby—was he still finishing the bottles? From where I stood I could see into the hallway which led to the kitchen. Wayne had buried his face in his hands. God was fiddling

nervously with one arm of the chair.

I didn't hear the shots that came through the front window. The first bullet took me in the wrist, knocking the gun from my hand. The second hit me in the shoulder, spinning me around. I knew then that the goons in the kitchen had somehow been alerted and that help, *if* it came, would not come soon enough for me.

The heavies came in. They kicked me a couple of times, just in passing. Suddenly I could see my own funeral: The Eagle looked resigned, Reg was boring someone, Anna was looking beautiful in black. And Baby was still searching for a phone . . .

I was passing out when in through the doorway leapt a leggy blonde in a tight skirt and leopard-print top. She was barefooted and carried a SWAT team semi-automatic which she waved about in a most unfriendly fashion.

"Freeze!" she shouted. "Drop the guns—all of you!"

It was the young woman I had seen coming out of the motel in Ballina.

"Honey," I said, "I don't know who you are but you're in the right movie."

"Cut the crap, O'Neill." It was The Captain's voice. "Just pick up the guns."

• • •

After the bureau boys had come and gone and the doctor had patched me up, I asked The Captain where he'd come from.

He smiled at me. He was still wearing the wig and the gear; I thought how he could make a fortune in Kings Cross.

"The boot of the car." He was already into God's liquor cabinet. "I just climbed in and held it together with a bit of fencing wire. Want some of this? It's class stuff."

"Did Reg know about you?"

The Captain shook his head. "Nah, I work alone. Like you used to, O'Neill. The Eagle sent me. *Saay*," The Captain went on, "are you going to take that desk job, O'Neill, make a little room for *me*? Ah'se just a po-ah

country boay, ah *needs* a break.”

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a bastard, Cap?”

He doubled over. The long blonde wig bobbed fetchingly up and down as he laughed. “You *can’t* stop, can you, O’Neill? You’re just another fuckin’ junkie—you’re hooked!”

• • •

It was after midnight when Baby arrived at the New Brighton house. We’d be gone by dawn, no sense in taking risks, but Anna and Star didn’t know that. I decided I’d leave a note for Star; she could have anything we left in the house, and we’d be travelling light. I planned to carry Anna to the car at the last moment. If I was lucky we’d be half-way to Sydney before she woke up and cracked on to what was happening.

The four of us lay back on large satin cushions, smoking God’s dope, drinking God’s Scotch, and watching Ridley Scott’s cut of *Blade Runner*.

By five in the morning, everyone was asleep but me. In the light from the guttering candles, Anna’s new collection of brass and crystal elephants accused me. I made a mental note to chuck as many of them as I could into my kitbag when we were leaving.

I went outside. It was almost dawn. Already the spiders had finished spinning their webs from tree to tree across the path. I ripped out The Plant and pushed it in through one of Star’s open windows, then I went and stood on the dunes.

There was a light wind blowing, and the scent of the Caterpillar wattle mingled with the smell of the sea. What did I want with a desk job?

And yet . . .

There are times when I get tired of this existence and think that I’ll get out while I still can. That’s when I think I’d like a vegetable garden like Star’s—even a compost heap, maybe. I’d like to plant some trees and stick around long enough to see them grow. But then tomorrow comes and things seem different.

Yet I ask myself in the night when I can’t sleep and the day has been



particularly dangerous: how much longer do I think I can go on doing this?

Not much longer.

So will I take that desk job?

I don't know. I'm caught in a web of my own making, though *caught* isn't really the right word.

Like the spiders, I can stop any time I want to.



*Illustration by Jonathan Elsom.*

# The Mourning After

by Jonathan Elsom

**Trevor Cottiswood** loved funerals. Or perhaps one should say he loved the side benefits that often followed them.

It was, you see, not the need to celebrate the passing of the deceased (whoever they might be) that made Cottiswood such a frequenter of funerals and memorial services, but quite simply the desire to eat—and eat for free. Whether it be in church vestry, adjoining parish rooms, or even Sunday-school rooms Trevor always looked forward to the lavish spreads which often followed the funeral services. Indeed he had become quite a connoisseur of these little repasts. This is not to suggest that he was frequently losing friends and relatives, or that he preferred the funeral wakes to the ceremonies themselves—far from it. He would hover sympathetically in the background as friends of the deceased filed dutifully past the grieving widow or widower, and if it became necessary to actually speak, Cottiswood was always able to proffer a few suitable words of gentle condolence. It's just that he never actually knew the people whose funerals he was attending.

Quite by accident Trevor Cottiswood had discovered that tasty meals might be enjoyed on a regular basis by attending other peoples' funerals. And all for the modest outlay of a good dark suit and a sympathetic smile.

He had happened to wander into his local St. John's Church Darlington one afternoon, and discovering a funeral service was taking place had slipped into a rear pew. He'd fully intended to slip out again at the conclusion of the service, but the warmth of the sun filtering through the stained glass windows had left him drowsy. He came-to with the organ ponderously thundering out 'Lead Kindly Light' and was aware that the small congregation was now filing past him. So there was nothing for it but to join the throng of departing mourners.

He shook hands and mumbled consoling noises to the elderly woman who he took to be the grieving wife of the deceased and found himself being ushered into the adjoining vestry along with other members of the congregation. Within moments he was juggling a cup of tea and a plate of triple-decker sandwiches. Everyone was tucking in with alacrity. Even the grieving widow appeared to have a healthy appetite and didn't seem unduly saddened by the demise of her husband.

The sandwiches were delicious. The scones which followed even more so, and although Cottiswood had already enjoyed a large pub lunch he demolished the proffered food enthusiastically. He soon sensed that the dear departed had not, in fact, been particularly *dear*, and even his widow was happier to talk about other things, particularly the quality of the scones and pikelets.

Among the mourners he became aware of a small rotund woman dressed entirely in black. She sported noisy jet bracelets and was conspicuous for a large velvet fedora worn at a rakish angle, and an equally conspicuous delight in the food on offer. With plate piled high she'd stationed herself near the tea table and seemed oblivious to her fellow mourners. He could have sworn she, like himself, was also a stranger to all those present. She caught Cottiswood's eye and favoured him with a slow wink before popping another pikelet in her mouth.

At sixty-five Cottiswood had been greatly enjoying his recent retirement. Having worked steadfastly for 45 years as an excellent bespoke tailor for Tweedles ("Tailoring to Suit Every Occasion") he now lived comfortably with an elderly Persian cat called Buzz Fuzz in Elysian Mansions, a tastefully decorated Darlington apartment block. His

lifestyle was comfortable and his superannuation plentiful, but as a man who loved his food the discovery that he could eat almost daily for free delighted his abstemious nature—not to mention his tastebuds. And so began his introduction to the pleasures of professional mourning.

He soon realised that it was safer to attend funerals of men about his own age, as there was less chance of being caught out in conversation over the tea urn afterwards. He would scan the Deaths Columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and carefully cut out any likely memorial services and funerals. Obituaries with useful information on the deceased were a bonus, and he would store the facts away to use in subsequent conversations with fellow mourners.

He was amazed at how easy it was to join the bereaved at a funeral service and be accepted, without question, as a ‘friend of the family’ or distant relative.

“Oh, we were at school together—I used to look up to him greatly...” often covered things nicely. Or—“Well, he was actually at Uni with my brother... I didn’t know him very well myself, but I felt I just had to come along and pay my respects...” These, and other little rejoinders were usually vague enough to pass muster and he could then excuse himself and dive off to snaffle another scone or sausage roll. Cottiswood actually began to enjoy these little subterfuges. His role-playing appealed to the actor in him, and gave him an appetite for all the delicacies on offer. He told himself that he was merely ‘singing for his supper’.

There were occasional awkward moments of course—usually when he got carried away with his own performance. Such as when he’d mentioned at one funeral reception that his {imaginary} sister had once enjoyed an (equally imaginary) flirtatious attachment to the deceased—

“Well, I’m actually here to represent my sister,” he heard himself improvising, a plate of club sandwiches in one hand. “She couldn’t make it today, but she was so fond of him... very fond...and I understand he felt very much the same way about her. I believe we might well have heard the sound of wedding bells if our family hadn’t moved to Melbourne...”

A marked silence followed, accompanied by looks of frozen disbelief from the male company around him. They then informed Cottiswood, in

no uncertain terms, that their elderly bachelor friend had been gay all his life and decidedly misogynistic. As Cottiswood blushed heavily and stammered an apology he heard a giggle at his elbow and noticed the same little black-suited woman he'd originally encountered among the mourners at his first funeral reception. She hurriedly buried the snuffle of laughter in a sausage roll, but not before treating him to another slow wink.

Thereafter Cottiswood made a point of restricting himself to discreetly anodyne remarks and concentrated on his prime reason for being there—the free food.

And then a few days after the unfortunate 'wedding bells' incident he found himself face to face with the same little woman at another funeral reception. She was clutching a loaded plate and a cup of tea. The stout body was again clothed in funereal black and the bright periwinkle eyes held Trevor Cottiswood in a steady gaze from beneath the battered velvet hat.

"We do seem to keep meeting at these little gatherings, don't we?" she said, popping a cocktail sausage into her mouth. "Perhaps we have a similar group of acquaintances? How sad for us both that they seem to be passing over so regularly..." She twinkled at him slyly. "I'm Sybil Ashforth, by the way."

"Er...hallo," said Cottiswood warily. "I'm Trevor Cottiswood. I didn't actually know the deceased, myself. I'm really here on behalf of my elder brother. He couldn't make it today, but they were together in Vietnam I understand..."

The bird-like gaze was rather unnerving.

"What a coincidence. I didn't know him either... but I'm here representing my sister. She couldn't make it today, but she was so very fond of him—and I understand he felt very much the same way about her. There was even the thought that we might have heard the sound of wedding bells at one point..."

Cottiswood stole a swift glance at Sybil Ashforth beneath her enormous hat, and was met with an innocent smile. Was it just a coincidence that she had fed him the identical lines he remembered using during the unfortunate 'wedding bells' incident?

"Still, even if neither of us actually knew the man, at least we do have

something in common. I love these lavish spreads, don't you?" She waved another cocktail sausage at Cottiswood with a clatter of bracelets and bit it neatly in half with her small teeth. "Mind you, I used to attend funerals purely because I always felt at home amongst those who have passed over. I have always had a remarkable life-line to the spirit world, you see." She leaned towards him conspiratorially. "So often, you know, the dear departed find it difficult to let go of their earthly ties, especially when they are wandering in that nether region soon after death. It was sometimes a comfort to them to be able to channel messages to their loved ones through me. But being at their beck and call always gave me such an appetite, of course..."

Sybil gave Cottiswood another slow wink and smiled sweetly at an elderly parishioner who was passing with a plate of sausage rolls. She selected a couple of the larger ones.

"However, I discovered I so enjoyed these little teas and receptions I now really come for the food. Mind you, I wouldn't dream of saying as much and upsetting the gravy train, as it were," she said quietly, polishing off the last sausage roll. "And I do hope you will feel the same? After all, it's so important to give the dear departed a good send off, don't you think?"

As the weeks passed Trevor Cottiswood realised that his almost daily intake of delicious funeral 'baked meats' was rapidly expanding his waistline. A return visit to Tweedles enabled him to have certain adjustments made, but eventually the black suit could no longer cope with his growing portliness and a new charcoal pinstripe had to be ordered. Buzz Fuzz, who now had to dine alone most days, was beginning to pine for his master's company and as Cottiswood's waistline increased so did the dejected Persian decrease in girth.

It was a glorious late spring morning and Sydney was at its balmy best. Lilac trees were in spectacular bloom, cascades of purple florets carpeting the streets around Darlinghurst. The insistent machinegun chirruping of the currawongs filled the air as they strutted to and fro. Trevor Cottiswood, however, felt somewhat less than chirpy as he puffed up the hill towards St Cuthbert's Anglican church. He suspected that one of the oyster patties at yesterday's funeral reception must have been 'off'. He possibly shouldn't

have eaten quite so many, but the tea had been particularly delicious and difficult to resist. Perhaps he was suffering from delayed heartburn? His heart was certainly pumping wildly beneath the pinstriped waistcoat, and although he had already let the garment out to its fullest extent it was becoming obvious that he would have to cut down on the third helpings of pikelets and cream scones.

He felt that Sybil Ashforth was also becoming rather a bore with her earnest conversations about her supposed links to the spirit world. He greatly regretted taking her into his confidence in the first place and decided he much preferred his own company anyway. It also worried him that suspicions would begin to be aroused in the minds of local vicars if he and Sybil continued to attend so many of the same funerals. He had even begun venturing to parishes further and further afield in search of ‘fresh meals and repasts new’, but she had an uncanny knack of popping up in church pews as far away as Blacktown and Parramatta.

Today Cottiswood had not felt up to a lengthy train journey, and even the short stroll from Elysian Mansions had left him exhausted. The St Cuthbert’s was surprisingly full for a midweek funeral and so he squeezed himself breathlessly into a pew at the rear of the church. His heart was racing as he subsided into his seat with relief.

*I really must get some more exercise, he thought, and today I’ll resist those sausage rolls.*

He closed his eyes and his heartbeat had barely begun to subside when a familiar voice whispered in his ear.

“Well, fancy seeing you here, Mr Cottiswood.”

A plump elbow nudged him in the pinstriped waistcoat. “Actually I guessed you would read the little piece in this morning’s *Herald* about the deceased being such a notable chef. Otto’s in fact. Gracious! The catering should be quite delicious!”

There was a discreet smacking of lips and Cottiswood opened an eye. Sybil Ashforth had excelled herself. She was of course dressed in her customary black, but today a stuffed blackbird had been added to the velvet fedora. A sleek wing swept down rakishly over one eye, and its own beady



black ones glittered at Cottiswood. Sybil peered at the slumped figure in some concern.

“You don’t look yourself, dear, if I may say so,” she said quietly. Her corseted figure squeaked as she leaned in towards him and a wing brushed his ear. “Are you sure you shouldn’t be resting at home for a change? All these funerals do take their toll you know. Those who have gone before can be so demanding, as I well know, and you are looking rather pale.”

Cottiswood grunted but said nothing. She sighed and opened her Order of Service as the vicar mounted the pulpit and the organist segued skilfully into ‘Oh God our help in ages past’.

The service passed in a vague blur of litany and music, and although Cottiswood managed to lever himself to his feet for the hymns, and subside silently into his pew at other times, he was scarcely aware of what was occurring around him. The dull ache in his chest seemed to have spread to his upper arms and he longed to loosen his collar and free himself from the confines of his increasingly tight waistcoat.

At last the service was over and with a clicking of her jet bracelets the rotund figure beside him gathered up her handbag.

“What a lovely service,” she said, patting at the blackbird on her hat. “And what deliciousness awaits us in the vestry, I’m sure. Now you just sit there for a little longer, dear, and I’m sure there’ll still be plenty still to eat when you feel up to joining us.” The blackbird bobbed in agreement.

Sybil bustled off with other members of the congregation. Cottiswood closed his eyes and tried not to think of the amount of food Sybil would have devoured by the time he reached the vestry. Eventually he began to feel a little better, and so he gingerly extracted himself from the pew and made his way back up the aisle. In the adjoining parish rooms he discovered a sumptuous spread had been provided and the reception was in full swing. The dearly departed chef had evidently left instructions that his friends and relatives were to eat as plentifully at his wake as they had done in his restaurant. Cottiswood was still feeling a little giddy, but the ache beneath his waistcoat had lessened. He headed carefully towards the tea urn and then retreated to a chair in the corner, balancing a plate of the most

appetising smoked salmon sandwiches and canapés.

Cottiswood watched the progress of the stuffed blackbird swooping and bobbing among the mourners as Sybil Ashforth (loaded plate and teacup held aloft) trotted around the room. She appeared to be edging closer. Hoping to avoid any further conversation Cottiswood lumbered to his feet, intending to replenish both his teacup and his plate. The room swam giddily around him as a searing pain shot across his chest. He gasped and attempted to clutch at the curtain beside him as the cup and plate tumbled from his nerveless grasp. With a grunt of surprise he toppled forward and followed the splintering china to the floor with a massive thump.

He was dimly aware of a babble of voices and people crowding around him. Hands turned him onto his back and someone loosened his collar and unbuttoned his waistcoat. The pain across his chest was excruciating. Through fluttering eyelids he was aware of the beady eyes of a familiar blackbird bobbing above him as its wearer clutched his hand.

“Dear, Mr Cottiswood,” breathed an equally recognisable voice in his ear. “You mustn’t worry. Just lie there and relax. Everything is being taken care of.”

Sybil Ashforth patted his cheek, but he found himself unable to utter a word.

“You know, dear, when you’ve finally left us, as I fear you are soon to do, it will probably take a little time to adjust. You mustn’t be surprised if you find your ethereal-self attempting to return to its earthly confines over the next few days. There’ll be such temptations to return,” she murmured as she delicately wiped traces of a crushed canapé from his tie. “And such opportunities to influence the funeral arrangements too... But don’t worry. I’ll be here when you want to make your wishes known, dear, and I do so hope you’ll keep the catering firmly in mind.”

She leant in conspiratorially with a creak of corsets and Cottiswood felt the gentle brush of the blackbird’s wing.

“If I might suggest—chicken vol au vents always go down well—and don’t forget those delicious little angel kisses ...and of course we seldom see chocolate éclairs at these gatherings nowadays...”

Her voice had become very distant, but before Trevor Cottiswood drifted into unconsciousness he was visited by an irritating thought. Although the next funeral he attended would undoubtedly be his own, he would no longer be able to take part in the reception personally. He would now be forced to watch Sybil Ashforth tucking into the lion's share of the vol au vents and angel kisses, and he would be quite unable to do anything about it.

# The Year that it Rained

by J. Boyer

**Dinner came** and Fanny Knatchbull ate what was put before her much as she had learned to live her life since her recent return from France. A delicate handler of all things foreign now (but certain of herself in every other way that mattered), she managed the snails without a great deal of bloodshed; only when the fish arrived served with the head *on*, and so bony was its meat and so piercing its stare that she felt prone to perform a careful, delicate tracheotomy rather than divide it into manageable bits, did Fanny nearly falter. Fortunately she picked up without hesitation and went on. She spoke with some authority when the subject of wines was raised, not once but twice as the first of these wines was poured, once in schoolgirl french, once in broken english. There were wines with each course, about which she was inevitably asked her opinion later on, this always in a way that stopped other conversations at the table, ensuring she had every other guest's attention. Here, too she did well, answering each time with confidence and youthful grace, as if very old and valued accounts were now in very young and very capable hands. The white she proclaimed to be

“civil” while both the Burgundy and the Bordeaux she judged “tannic,” but pleasantly so, of course, after which she discussed the rain fall in Tuscany and compared it favorably with that of Bordeaux, at the same time condemning the alkaline in the soil there, linking its increase to the European Union not to mention global warming.

Her dearest friend Tom Tithall had all he could do to keep from breaking into laughter. Tom was behind all this, its instigator, and so encouraged by his gall was Fanny Knatchbull that she went on to speak of tectonic plates and saline in the water table and the impact of both on a grape’s rate of growth, comparing the richness of the Burgundy’s color to moral excellence in the human condition, not once, believe it or not, but twice, before someone finally thought to say, “Really? That’s fascinating. But—In what sense?”

“In the sense that both a Burgundy’s glow and a person’s moral character are subject to all the uncertainties of nature’s intervention.”

“So—What you’re saying then...”

“Yes, please go on—My english, it’s not so good.” And he did of course, for men always do of course, they never really listen to a woman, particularly when they are wearing formal clothes. So satisfied with how he’d handled his own objection was he, that by the end of what the skeptic had to say it was clear he thought Fanny was charming and graced in addition to being worldly and perceptive. In fact, so satisfied was Mr Hired Suit here that he moved completely into Fanny’s camp once the goose was on the way, yielding to necessity at the point when spears of asparagus arrived along with poached pears still in their skin, which seemed to have been arranged by Cezanne, he said, as if longing for her assurance that Cezanne was the artist who was famous for his pears, and as if Fanny, the only Parisian at the table, were singularly qualified to say.

She could not remember at all how she managed after that, but manage she did, going ahead with this ridiculous charade course by course, moving from breads to fowl to puddings in very short order, grateful to the Ritz staff at each serving for their time sense and their skills for distraction, while beaming at the other end of the table sat Tom, well into his cups by this

point and just as reckless as ever, having the time of his life, even lifting his fork to her periodically to signal a toast, the sort of thing one does with those we've known and adored for as long as we can recall.

Tom had always been reckless. Even as children, Tom had been bold while Fanny had been shy, ever-eager to take a leap while she'd been fearful of a fall, and in that way they'd been well-suited since they'd first begun to play. They were the only children in the neighborhood, and they'd come together by default, really. As to why they became so dear to one another, it was because of their differences, not despite them. But it was more than that as well. Neither the Tithall house nor the Knatchbull house next door was loveless exactly, or even cold; there were sunny times and warm days and occasionally pleasant if grumbling affection in both. It was just that Fanny and Tom were raised by working parents who preferred to live well beyond their means, each working several jobs to stay ahead of their creditors, and so great was the struggle to feed and educate their children in an expensive area like Coventry there wasn't energy enough for anything else.

After university, Tom changed careers with more or less the same frequency as he dry cleaned his business suits, becoming an immediate success each time, for he pushed himself relentlessly and made himself so indispensable to anyone he worked for that he became the de facto person in charge, while Fanny grew up to be a lively, light-hearted creature with hazel eyes and peach-colored skin who longed to travel. She could brighten a room with her smile. If only she'd been born with a head like Tom's, for his had been perfectly suited for school, she might have set out to be a teacher somewhere, or even better a writer, for she felt incomplete and thought there were essential lessons in the world she not only needed to learn, she needed to articulate as well; but she simply was not a book person, it simply wasn't in the cards. It was people she read with high talent, not print, some much more readily than others, Tom for instance, who she often regarded as a handsome volume with large, clear type, wide margins, and a glorious array of polished illustrations.

The first great event of life on her own was a trip through France by

train that used up all of her savings. Not that she let that deter her. She went deeply in debt for a second trip to France all the same, this the following year, during which she fell in love with an unhappily married Moroccan lithographer, who later turned out to be married to a woman with whom he was half-in-love at least, for he went back to his wife whom he'd sworn he'd divorce—judging from his hurried explanation and the snapshot Fanny still had, an indolent woman with mysterious eyes and ankles as thick as tree stumps and, reportedly, a passion for music.

Fanny was twenty-five by the time she moved to London, twice-traveled and now every bit the beauty Tom had predicted since they'd been fifth-formers together at Chatwell Hall; but she was cleft of heart and disillusioned with men, thinking France—like romance—was better at a distance than were it known by rail. Within the year, Tom moved to London as well, settling first in Notting Hill, where Fanny saw him regularly, and where, inevitably, Tom did most of the talking. Once a week or so Tom recounted his seeings and doings, his dining outs and business deals, while Fanny sat across from him in a dingy flat with a floor so uneven that getting to the kitchen made one appear to limp, or, alternately, forced one into a shuffle.

Later Tom moved to a better flat in the slightly less fashionable Kensington, where she couldn't report on the flooring, since she had hardly seen him at all, and then one day, out of the blue, as if they'd spoken every day for a month, Tom rang her up and said, "Fanny, welcome me back, by the way, say, can you still do that French business of yours? I want to play a joke on a friend. A dinner with an older crowd. Some fund raiser thing for my old friend Maurice. Stuffy bunch. I want you to help me teach them a lesson. Go to Paddington. I'll be there with a driver. He'll have a sign. Mademoiselle something or other. You're supposed to be my fiancée, by the way. Thing's at the Ritz, I think. Mostly foodies. I told them I was engaged to a famous Parisian gourmet. What do you say, do you have other plans? By the way, I'm leaving for Johannesburg once the evening's over, taking a taxi directly to Heathrow, so you'll have to get home on your own, I'm afraid, and if you see me picking at my food, not to worry, I never get on a

flight without trying to eat light just before.”

Fanny paused before agreeing, thinking to herself that Tom was totally occupied, unique in his power to interest her, wondering to herself why she'd never been able to command Tom's attention to the same proportion he clearly did hers, thinking to herself that never had he wished for her company during their childhood with the same intensity she had been wishing for his, as if pressing her hand to his heart. Tom was too old to remain so unsettled. He was inexcusable, incomprehensible, always running—like a March day—from hot fits of fever to cold, and she knew she'd be much better off if Tom found some other woman to pick up his dirty things this evening—though, truth be told, what would be the point of sending him packing when she would only go after him later on. She felt helpless to resist him. As the call neared its end, she agreed to drop what she was doing and be off to Paddington Station, for Fanny was still willing to attach her fate to his blindly, wholly, handsomely, no matter what Tom asked she realized, no matter what its risks, a devotion which left her feeling as she dressed for the evening, not only that women were fallible but that men were paragons of bad faith who received far better than they deserved, but also left her feeling lightheaded from the excitement that evening held in store.

Now *that* evening was all but over. While Tom said his goodbyes, Tom's friend Maurice, who'd been too far removed to speak to her at the table, seized the opportunity to discuss the Montrachet as he helped her with her cloak. “May I just say I love what you're wearing,” he began. “So self-assured and confident. Pity the poor thing who wants the world to know all she owns so she puts it on her back. You know what I mean: All celadon and silk and strappy heels. It's always such a give-away, isn't it, when a woman's overdressed. You can tell she thinks she's a fraud.”

“I should thank you all for inviting me to your lovely, elegant dinner—so quickly? Is that how it's said? My english—I'm sorry—”

“Think nothing of it. The least we could do. And after you've come so far to be with us.”

“Have I?”



“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t like your Montrachet?”

His face soured. “Off year.”

“Well,” answered Fanny, “that was the year that it rained. No? Goodnight.”

Fanny had taken a flat on Half Moon Street, across from Hyde Park, a convenient walk from the Ritz, nonetheless, Tom insisted on a taxi, explaining that a young man in a fine tux with a beautiful woman could not leave a place so grand as the Ritz *shanks mare*, as he put it. It was completely against all rules of propriety, not to mention, no doubt, the law. A taxi was not to be, however. A searchlight the size of Wales scoured the sky of the London night outside the hotel and a vintage fire engine decorated in campaign banners was parked beneath the porte-cochere at the hotel’s entrance. Angled in a way so it extended into the street, it succeeded in stopping traffic for several blocks. The scene was pure chaos. Horns blew and drivers shouted oaths at one another while the men who’d attended the dinner party slipped rubber gear over their evening clothes and climbed aboard, all several sheets to the wind, and this was made clear to any in doubt by those who had been issued bullhorns.

“What’s all this?” Fanny asked.

“The launch of his campaign. Promised to put out fires when he put his name up. A fire truck. Get it?”

“We’ll never get through,” Fanny said.

Tom took her hand. “This way. We’ll manage.”

Annoyingly, Fanny found herself as women in heels often find when they are walking with their escort, for she was struggling to keep up with Tom as if she were the younger sister and Tom her older brother, for she tried to keep pace with his stride while he did nothing to adjust his to hers. They walked this way in silence until Fanny sighed to herself, then she blurted out the story of her Moroccan lithographer, in copious—even painstaking—detail, sparing Tom nothing and making up a few things whole cloth to ensure that her story would be as shocking to Tom as it had come to seem to her. “Do you see, Tom?”

“Yes. That is, I think so.”

Meaning to lighten Fanny’s mood, but having no idea whatsoever as to how he should respond to what she just told him (but pathetically eager to please nonetheless, for men often are in such circumstances, since they naturally assume a woman is fishing for a compliment when all she really wants after being jilted is to find a man, virtually any man, who will accept her definition of who she is and why), Tom remarked, “You were wonderful tonight, Fan. The envy of every woman, the desire of every man.”

“Really? I wasn’t a bore? You’re certain?”

“Oh no. The farthest thing from it.”

“What was all that anyway?”

“Bunch of Euro swine, think they know something about grub. Seems the previous candidate they backed spoke superficially of soup and they dropped him like a rock.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Trying to raise money for some sort of political campaign or other, don’t ask me why, can’t hope to win, poor Maurice, can he. I mean, a fire engine. Seriously.”

“Ah, Maurice. Yes. Maurice.”

“My friend, you met him, you were seated catter-cornered. A funds raising thing. A million pounds a plate or something—I told him I could produce this famous French—Really? I didn’t tell you any of this in advance?”

Putting his arm around her shoulder and drawing her near, Tom added, “You don’t know how I’ve missed you, Fanny Knatchbull. Are you seeing someone new? After this lithographer, I mean.”

“Someone unprincipled.”

Tom responded that he couldn’t be happier for her then, since Jane Austin’s warnings aside, a woman would be foolish not to align herself with an unprincipled man when it’s clear to any girl—and certainly any young woman—that it’s unprincipled men with whom life is truly a pleasure, and, conversely, a principled life with someone attentive and wholesome and civil is precisely what drives women to drink and despair.

“I meant you, silly. This evening. We’re engaged, Tom, remember?”

“In that case,” said Tom, “I demand a kiss.” Tom swept her up in his arms and bent her backwards in some ridiculous version of a Hollywood swoon circa 1940, where eyes meet and lights dim to the swell of fine violins.

“You’re awful,” Fanny giggled.

“Yes, I am, guilty as charged.”

“Well? Are you going to stand me up?”

“Not until I’ve done this.” Tom kissed her. Playfully at first, she thought. Then not. And then, as if she were discovering in herself a tiny engine increasing to a throb, she was kissing, too, surrendering herself to the moment as if being lowered toward the fiery pits of Hell, reasoning this could not be an earthly pleasure, it was far too grand from the get-go.

“There,” said Tom stiffly, putting Fanny back on her feet.

“You’ve had your kiss, Tom.”

“Brilliant, right, I have, haven’t I?”

If only one of them, for even a moment, might have found in the kiss the least hint of ambiguity! If theirs had only been, say, a physical sensation alone, Tom might have known what to do. But no. Feeling the flutter of her heart, the beat of Fanny’s heart in hand, then the beat of his own, Tom saw the moment in the naked light of truth and was startled by it, meat, bone, and marrow.

Fanny said, “It’s getting cold, Tom. Let’s cross to the other side of the park.”

“Why don’t we.”

“What’s taking you to South Africa?”

“Banking.”

“Oh anything but that.”

“I’m afraid so. Dreary, isn’t it. Who knows what could have been going through my mind.”

“Goodness. *Pauvre petite.*”

They walked on, creating a silence now so loud it approached the point of deafening them both. Fanny knew what he was thinking, for she was

thinking it too, but she could see in his eyes that Tom was desperate for her to sidestep the subject, so Fanny remarked on a young woman she knew Tom had been seeing, a girl she knew to be a fortune hunter, and so promptly did Tom rise to this young woman's defense that Fanny assumed from his tone she'd confused this young woman with another, until she understood he was teasing again. He was explaining the girl's behavior by proposing that since the girl in question had been raised as a Quaker she had been taught that all men were equal under the eyes of God, no matter their race or culture or predilections, and hence all should be treated as one, with the many no more or less discriminated than the few, so if she was pursuing Tom because he had been doing very well for himself economically, it was because she saw no reason—at least in matters of the heart—to hold his good fortune against him. If anything, she embraced his present economic state and wished him all the best in this regard for the future, and if at some point ahead he became very rich, indeed, then she would feel it was God's will that she look past his luscious millions and love him only for himself.

"Which is just as the Creator intended, I haven't a doubt," said Fanny.

"Nor I."

"You mount a powerful defense, Tom."

"I do, don't I, I rise to the occasion."

"Almost every time."

"What was it your father used to say?"

"Despots bring about the servant class, but then servility brings about despots?"

"No. I was thinking of something else: 'A polite kiss is Pity's sister.'"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Fan, but I might have had too much wine with my dinner."

"From the look of your shirt, I'd say you got most of it *on you* and not *in you*."

"Oh God. So I did. I can't wear this on a plane. And I've packed all the others. Maybe we should go somewhere and try to see to it. Club soda or something."

"There's always my place."

“Well, if it’s on the way. Then later I’ll get a taxi.”

“Yes,” said Fanny, linking their arms. “Let’s.”

Surprisingly, now that one of them had been brave enough to address the kiss in conversation, she felt none of Tom’s need to revise the moment. She’d been as surprised as he was, but once the kiss began she knew what any woman knows who has been kissed for the first time by the man she was meant to be with, namely, that she has but one real prospect for happiness and the man she’s just kissed *is* that prospect, and surprisingly, perhaps amazingly, for the first time in her life Fanny felt both tutored and complete.

Tom asked, “Which flat is yours, Fan?”

“Over there. We’ll have to cross to the light.”

“Show me again.”

“There. See the Athenaeum Hotel? Follow it to the end. You see that lane? No, look up the street, toward Starbucks.”

“Let me see where you’re pointing.”

“On the corner, the light in the window?”

For a moment she thought Tom meant to kiss her again. Tom paused. She paused. He put his cheek alongside her own as if to follow where she was pointing, then just as quickly removed it. A look of great distress flashed across his face. He was waiting for her to reassure him, she could see, to tell him that what they were about to do was perfectly fine, would work out perfectly well. Fanny had no idea why that mattered, not in the greater scheme of things. To her, they had already crossed the line, a line the size of a gulf, not a fissure, a gulf that had already separated them from what they had meant to one another for these many years, while to Tom, well, there’s nothing half so frightening to a young man as sleeping with a woman he actually loves. Tom was looking at her like a little boy. He was looking at her as if just a moment before everything in his life had been perfectly fine, and she had ruined it out of malice.

“Right, Good. Well. You’ve taken a room in Ferndean Manor then,” Tom continued. “Who lives above you, not a madwoman in an attic, I trust.”

“It’s really not that bad.”

“Don’t let her near matches is all.”

“Stop it. Now you’re just being a snob. It’s not very large, but it’s reasonably comfortable. Wait till you see it inside before you pass judgment.”

“Perhaps we ought to hurry.”

Fanny replied, “Sorry, Tom, I’m in heels.”

“Was that a drop of rain I just felt?” asked Tom.

“What *is* that? Up there?”

They both turned their heads toward Green Corner at the sounds of a terrible ruckus. A siren was bleating into the London damp as if gasping for its last breaths of air while a rotating blue lamp pulsed, then stuttered. Fanny recognized the truck before Tom did. She remembered the E R F on its grill and how the letters had sparkled beneath the port-cochere. The truck was an ancient Water Tender marked as having belonged to the Tynemouth Fire Brigade years earlier, and the drunken revelers had managed to start the pumps and get one of the fire hoses working. They were sitting in a row on its top like a crew deadset on winning a longstanding tug of war, each of them holding onto a section of the hose as it jerked and swayed. A steep arc of water shot miles into the air then traced a path forward as the truck moved on, soaking all in its path, while the drunks did their best to keep from falling off the truck and breaking their fool necks. One of them spotted Tom from afar and began calling out his name, encouraging him to join them. As the driver slowed the truck to a crawl, another shouted, “You look like a mad dog just bit you in the foot, Tithall. Get up here where you belong.”

“Well don’t just stand there like a damned fool. Come on,” shouted another.

“Fanny?” asked Tom. “I don’t think I have much choice.”

“Come on, Tithall,” shouted the driver, “we don’t have all night.”

Tom turned to Fanny and said, “Are you sure you’ll be all right from here?”

The truck began to pull off without Tom, primarily because the driver was seeing double and couldn’t feel the brake pedal beneath his foot, Fanny

imagined, but it wasn't long before a hundred hands reached out in Tom's direction. He had to run to climb aboard, but climb aboard he did, taking his place alongside those clinging to the trunion bars. A bell clanged in his honor. A light, portable auxiliary pump came unmoored when its stainless steel clamp rings loosened, so someone kicked it free and it went rolling off on its own. Then the truck jumped a curb and as it gained speed nearly ran down two Hyde Park pedestrians before setting off across the wide, wet lawns toward the trees, its engine sputtering. Everyone was so drunk they didn't notice. Shouts were coming through the bullhorns as the truck moved toward the trees, its engine dead now, overturning benches and sideswiping trash bins. Fanny tried to make out Tom from the others, most of them distant and greedy, slickered, brutal, and brilliant in the moonlight, for such is how men seem to someone Fanny's age, and at last she did, just as the truck passed over a knoll toward the tree line. Tom had made his way toward the ladder hand over fist and was hanging now from its end as if swaying from a trapeze.

Then the light changed and Fanny hurried across the intersection as women do when wearing ridiculously uncomfortable shoes, as if feet rather than shoes were surely the nuisance.

# Amerika in the Sky (In Memoriam)

*by* **Boris Glikman**

**I remember** that day starting off ordinarily enough; there I was playing in the open field not that far from home, the sky azure with hardly a cloud blighting its face.

I was alone as usual, for my mother didn't let me play with the other kids. I never really wanted to play with them anyway. I always knew I was different, I could see things that they could not and understood matters that they had no inkling of.

This disparity between my physical and mental development did cause me problems; there was always the inner conflict between the body's desire to be a child, carefree and frivolous, and the mind's desire to think deep thoughts, explore complexities and subtleties of the world, create abstruse theories.

That day the body scored a victory for there I was playing in the open field...

The lay of the land is so perfectly flat I can see unencumbered all the way to the horizon.



As the day proceeds, the heavens rotate slowly on their axis. Towards mid-morning something very odd catches my eye on the eastern horizon. It is something that I have never seen in the sky before but there it is before me, arising slowly from beneath the edge of the Earth.

By some strange process, the continent of North America has become attached to the celestial sphere at the place where land and heavens meet and is slowly becoming unravelled from the crust of the Earth.

America is now being carried along by the turning of the heavens. I can clearly see its unmistakable shape and the features of the land: the whiteness of Alaska, the mighty rivers, the mountain chains, the major cities, the wheat fields, the pine forests, the Mojave Desert.

At first, while the continent is still at a shallow angle in the sky, the North American people seem to be enjoying their unique experience, smiling, laughing, some even waving to me down below. They appear to be very proud and self-satisfied, taking delight in their position in flight above the rest of us.

As the heavens continue their inexorable turning and the continent slowly approaches the celestial zenith, the fun and the mirth turns to panic and despair.

At midday the continent reaches the highest point in the sky, hanging precisely upside down and the Sun is eclipsed. Some rays are still able to sneak around the frayed edges of the landmass, but the diffracted beams are of a different hue to natural sunlight and create an eerily muted illumination.

The view from down below looks like a disturbed anthill on a gigantic scale, with millions of Americ-ants scurrying frantically in random directions, trying to save their colony from some uncouth hooligan poking at it with a stick. If not for the desperate gravity of the situation, it would be almost comical to observe the way that they are trying to cope with the catastrophe that has befallen them.

But how does one deal with their world becoming upside down? All the survival instincts developed over the eons of evolution are now hopelessly irrelevant.

The people are now in their most precarious position, desperately trying to grab anything that is firmly rooted in the ground, to blades of grass, to soil itself. Even when they completely lose all grip on land, still they attempt to find some protuberance in the fabric of the sky that they can hold onto, to give themselves just one more instant of life.

Some of the people hold hands as they fall, others are kissing and hugging, while others still are engaged in more intimate activities. I look away, not wishing to intrude upon the privacy of their last significant moments together.

Even at this critical time, the teenagers can not suppress their competitive streaks and are racing to determine who can fall the fastest and hit the ground first and the hardest.

As if to make up for their lives being cut short, the falling people seem to age decades in the few instants of their descent.

I can see weddings taking place and then being consummated. I hear babies crying, I watch them grow; they'll learn secrets of the sky that I'll never know. Parents are teaching their children the facts of life, teaching them how to behave, how to tie their shoelaces. Boys are turning into adolescents, having their first shave and diffidently asking girls out for a first date.

I see friends shaking hands, saying, "how do you do", they're really saying, "goodbye to you" and I think to myself what a horrible world. I watch mothers whispering last words of love to their children, men writing their final wills and testament, people coming to terms with their fate.

As the continent remains in the apex of the sky, buildings' foundations start to loosen, roots of plants are no longer able to cling to the soil; the once mighty rivers empty their banks in cataclysmic downpour of unprecedented proportions.

After all the signs of civilisation and life—buildings, forests, houses—disappear, the ground itself begins to give way and disintegrate. The Earth slowly loses its compactness and adhesiveness, dripping down in small spurts at first and then in great lumps. Here and there, the liquid magma substratum is peeking through the locations where the entire continental crust has fallen off.

As the whole continent continues to break up, a colossal downpour of bodies, concrete, trees, mud, water, cars, houses, rock, soil all mixed up together into a terrible blend, threatens to engulf the world below and destroy our lives too.

Thankfully, some clouds appear and block these scenes of suffering and chaos but then they quickly disperse and again I'm unable to look away.

But what right do I have to look, God-like, upon the numberless agonies? Who am I, a small boy, to watch scenes of suffering so terrifying that even Death, itself turns its bony face away in fright?

After an interminable span of time, the continent begins to move away from the zenith. The Sun re-appears in the sky, whole and wholesome, able to shine again. For a moment it seems to me that the sky is empty and blue, with its innocence intact, just the way it appeared early this morning. But morning happened a million irreparable lives ago, in that innocent era when things like this could not be envisaged.

A fortunate few have managed to somehow survive the nearly total destruction of the landscape of North America and they are approaching the horizon and security of the ground again. Thank goodness they now will be able to land safely and be lauded as heroes.

Alas, my hopes are proven to be woefully inaccurate. For when this ill-fated continent reaches the horizon again, it collides sharply with the unyielding ground that is already there. Two continents attempt to occupy the same location at the same time and one of them has to lose out.

Northern Canada and Alaska are the first to go. Bit by bit they are torn apart as the stationary Earth refuses to shift and stands firm its ground, and those remaining alive, that I thought would be the lucky survivors, are crushed to dust. A horrible grinding noise is created that resounds across the span of the land, like a million fingernails scraping together across an inconceivably large blackboard.

I cannot help but rush to their aid, to try to save at least some lives. Suddenly I halt as I remember that the horizon is an illusory point in the distance that keeps receding further and further as you walk towards it and so I would never be able to reach the doomed ones.

By now, more than half the continent has been ground into fine powder

as the merciless process continues. The major metropolises of the United States, the founts of so much knowledge, art, music, creative energy, are being pulverised into nothingness.

Icy pieces of Alaska intermingle with the glassy shards of New York City and with bits of tinsel of Los Angeles. Would it ever be possible to reconstruct America from these clouds of dust? Civilisations, cities, entire countries have been rebuilt from ruins before, but this is annihilation on a thoroughly unmitigated scale, from which there's surely no coming back.

"Well, there goes the New World," I think wistfully. "No longer will we have America in our lives, no more remains of that cultural centre of the world from which we get all of our TV programs. It is all gone in the cruelest fashion, right before my very eyes. And yet, its ashes and dust will settle all over the world, infusing every cell of the remaining planet. Forever more, it will provide fertilisation for the world to go on growing and progressing the way America once did and we will be able to say proudly that we now all have a little bit of America in our very souls."

Many years have now passed since the day we lost America. For years, the sky was stained red with the blood of the hapless victims, its mysterious beauty forever blighted by the destruction it had wrought upon the innocent millions.

The world gasped, the world cried, the world mourned, and then it went on living. For a long time afterwards, all our activities down on Earth seemed insignificant and frivolous by comparison with what transpired up above.

"Where was God while America was being destroyed? How could such a day ever come to pass?" we wanted to know. "Did God look the other way and ignore what went on that day? Shouldn't Time, itself have stopped in the face of such tragedy?"

We realised that like the stars, the Sun, the Moon and the seas, so the continents, too are compelled to rise and fall; it is part of the natural order of the Cosmos. We had to accept that one day our land, too would be thrust into that same bottomless pit in the sky.

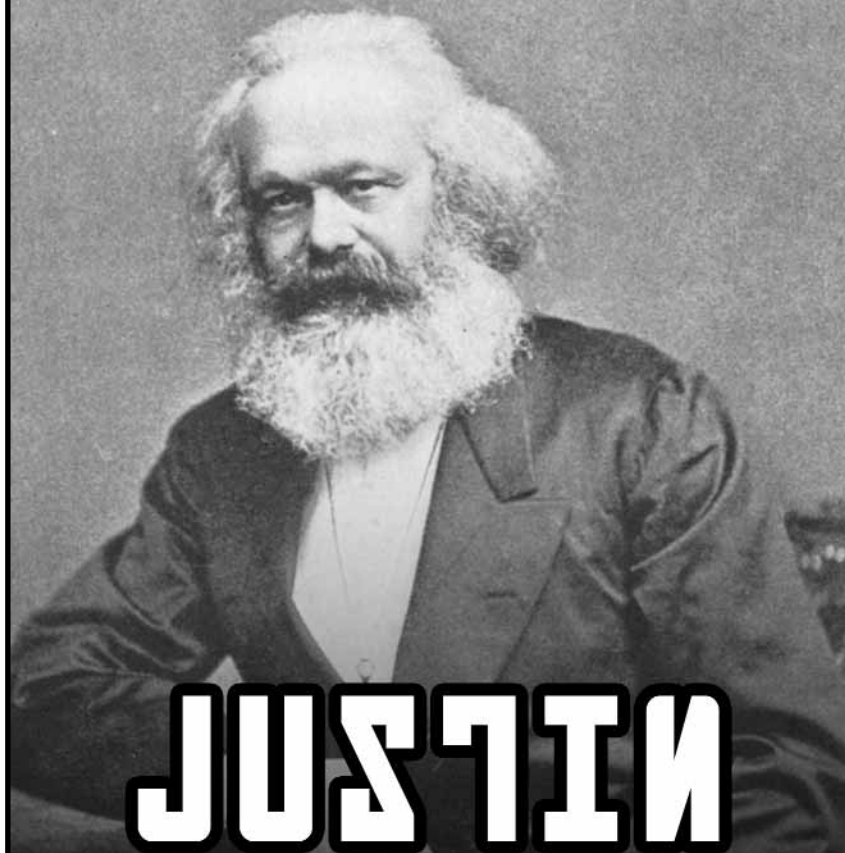
Ships were forbidden from approaching the ugly scar that lay across

what was once the New World. However, that didn't stop the morbid sightseers from making their way there to gawk at what became known as Ground Absolute Zero, or taking chartered flights over what was once a mighty country, bustling with life.

Every time that I look up, I see it all again: the chaos, the panic, the destruction, America writhing in its final death throes, a thousand lives being cut short with each passing minute.

In the end, however, what I have written is only a crude and clumsy depiction. Words that I have used to convey what I saw and felt that day are now impotent, bloodless beings that have lost their vital life-force together with America. And so I will speak no more, except in that most authentic and most profound language of all—absolute silence.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



JUSTIN

THE FAILED INTERVIEWS

BRIDGES

**IT** IS JUNE 2008, and I have scheduled an interview with Alexander The Great's half-brother, Alexander The Mediocre as 'The Great one', according to my housekeeper and cleaning lady, Mavis Pomona, was unavailable. (Typical... I can't even get an audience with *real* dead celebrities.)

For the uninitiated, Mavis is a psychic who channels the spirits of the dead from the other side so I can interview them. (You may see it as a 'second class gig', but it sure beats working for a living.)

Mavis induced herself into a trance by consuming a packet of chocolate biscuits, then nodded to indicate the presence of a spirit was within her.

• • •

*Am I in the presence of Alexander The Mediocre?*

Yes.

*Oh, good! Your brother, Alexander The Great conquered most of the known world in his short life and was one of the greatest generals in history, if not the greatest.*

*What amazing things did you do?*

Umm, I covered the flanks.

*So, you were in the battles then?*

No... not really. My job was to stay home and look after the house.

*Did you do anything of note during Alexander's campaigns?*

Of course!

*What did you do?*

I gave him all of his ideas. Without me, he would have been nothing. Well... I only met him once actually. I mainly did the washing up and made sure the garbage was taken out once a week. That was pretty important because it was a bit on the nose by Thursday.

*You didn't really do anything of note, did you?*

No. I suppose not...

*Then there's not really much point in continuing this interview, would you agree?*

Yes. There is probably no point to it at all.

*Mavis! Can't you find me someone interesting to interview?*

• • •

After a short break, where Mavis and I had some sponge cake with cups of Earl Grey tea, Mavis said she could feel another spirit rising within her. "Who is it?" I asked excitedly. Her eyes rolled back into her head.

"I am Socrates!"



*What? Socrates? The great Classical Greek philosopher?  
Fantastic!*

Ah... no. The name's, Nick Socrates. I ran the local  
fish and chip shop in the late 1950s.

*Pass! Mavis, change channels. Get me someone  
interesting, for goodness sake.*

• • •

We decided to have some lamingtons Mavis had prepared. I  
must admit the one I tasted was extremely palatable, though  
Mavis scoffed down all the rest before I could sample another.  
She then announced another spirit was within her.

*Who is there?*

Bob Dylan.

*Well that's an improvement, of sorts... Hang on! Bob  
Dylan is still alive!*

No, I'm not *that* Bob Dylan. I'm the one who worked  
in the tax department in Hobart in 1929.

*Tax department? Did you write any songs?*

No. But I had a second cousin who played the  
accordion.

*Oh God... spare me...*

• • •

Again it was time for a break. Mavis was really beginning to annoy me. In the middle of munching on a half a large tea cake filled with fatty slices of ham, she began to sway her head in a most disturbing manner. At first I thought she had become diabetic, but then quickly realised the obvious.

*I take it there is another totally uninteresting spirit now within you? Who is it this time, pray tell?*

Mein Name ist Karl Heinrich Marx. Ich schrieb das Kommunistische Manifest.

Meine Theorie war, dass der Fall des Bürgertums und des Siegs des Proletariats ebenso unvermeidlich ist.

‘Die Geschichte von allen bisher vorhandene

Gesellschaft ist die Geschichte von Klasskämpfen’. (\*)

*Mavis! Get rid of this one as well! He can't even speak bloody english!*

• • •

So that was it as far, as I was concerned. I must have been mad, or at least extremely naïve to think that my housekeeper would come up with anyone remotely interesting. Instead, I retired to my bed for the night to listen to Judy Garland records over a glass or two of fine sherry.

(Idea): I think I'll buy myself a cat.

(\*) Taken from, *The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter 1.

# Nemesis

*by* **Marc Ellis**

## **BEAUTY**

Marianne was the world's most famous model. All adored her long hair which was the colour of roasted almonds, her flawless, pale skin and her thin wrists and waist. For decades the magazines had featured her and people of both sexes wondered, what was the secret of her youthfulness?

But only Marianne knew.

One day, as Marianne was waiting for her limousine in the foyer of a great hotel, a laundry girl pushed a huge basket full of soiled towels past her towards the service lift. She was bent with toil and sweat glistened on her forehead. Marianne's heart beat like a jackhammer, her face turned raspberry red and her neck muscles went into spasm. The laundry girl was not only her spitting image; she was fifteen years younger and much, much more beautiful. Marianne knew that her moment had come. She followed the girl through the service doors.

"Marianne," she said softly, investing the girl with her own name. The girl stopped pushing the basket and, turning, stared up into the older woman's face with an expression which betrayed the ambition with which she had waited for this very moment.

Marianne felt sorry for her.

Each knew instinctively what to do.

“Swap clothes,” Marianne whispered, reminding her. Wordlessly, the laundry girl complied, then, indistinguishable from her mentor, she walked through the swinging doors into the hotel lobby.

There, she seamlessly continued the legend of the ever-beautiful model, Marianne, while her mentor bent her back to the heavy laundry basket and resumed the life she had known before she became the most beautiful woman in the world.

• • •

## INNOCENCE

Owen was born and bred in the country; he had never been to the city.

He had always been a romantic. His first words were of admiration for a buttercup and, until it died when Owen was six, his terrier had been his best friend. When he was seven he proposed to his mother and when he was twelve his heart was broken when his father entered his favourite sheep in the Hook and Hoof competition at the Royal Easter Show in distant Sydney.

This tragedy made Owen think hard about himself at an unusually early age; he decided to turn his attention away from his remaining pets, and from his parents. He made friends with some of the local lads. He was pleased that they enjoyed his company and after a few tentative sessions in the oast house he certainly enjoyed theirs. They introduced him to some of the local girls, dark broad-beamed women who drank the local brew and were always willing to accommodate Owen, for whom they quickly developed a soft spot.

Nevertheless Owen knew he was missing adventure, city life and romance, real romance with an experienced woman who knew what she was doing and who would show him the way of the world.

On his fifteenth birthday Owen sold his last pet, an enormous, fat and intelligent pig of which he was once fond, for three hundred and fifty dollars and bought a one-way ticket to Sydney. He rented a room in

Darlinghurst. He bought a ghetto blaster for one hundred and fifty dollars, a flannel bathrobe for sixty five dollars, a pair of jeans for forty five dollars, a hair cut in a Double Bay salon and a couple of joints. He hung out in the coffee shops in Darlinghurst Road where he chatted to the proprietors as he had seen done in repeated episodes of *Miami Vice* and *Get Smart*. He smiled at the hookers and the cops and after a few days he felt that he had come home, that he belonged.

The locals were amused by him. The coffee shop bosses indulged in his delusions of sophistication, and the prostitutes, touched by his good manners and naïveté, flirted with him outrageously. He reminded them of their own grown sons and they steadfastly left him alone.

“Wow!” said the youngish, fat woman who ran the laundry downstairs as Owen came out of his room wearing his new clothes. “Wanna be me boyfriend?”

Owen declined. He had outgrown good time girls such as she. One Saturday night he put on his new jeans, turned up his ghetto blaster and smoked one of the joints. The laundry woman put her head in the door unannounced.

“You better turn that music down, young feller,” she said, “else you’ll have to dance with me.”

“Oh,” said Owen. He stared at her, annoyed at her intrusion, and did nothing.

The woman waited for a full minute, staring at Owen with her mahogany eyes. As the drug took hold, Owen became fascinated. Her black curls, shrieking with flame-coloured streaks, had been pulled wildly onto the top of her head, which resembled an erupting volcano. Her lips were full and her ear lobes were pierced by minute diamond studs from which escaped an occasional brilliant beam. He had passed this woman each day on his way in and out of the laundry but had never given her a second glance. Now, before him, stood the woman of his dreams.

“So, dance then,” he said, though he hardly dared to speak. He was bound up in the fulfilment of his romantic destiny, of his dreams.

The woman swayed slowly, turning on imperceptibly—flexible ankles,

reaching her hands above her head, behind her back, around her sides, swaying and rippling, as fluid as a swan moving down a lightly-flowing stream.

Owen put down his cigarette, took the hands which she had offered him and began to move with her. Her body was firm, surprisingly firm. Close up, he saw, her eyes were deeper and more knowing than he could ever have realized. Her body opened up to him and he moved in, swallowing the experience as greedily as her body was swallowing him. Beneath the smooth fabric of her dress, something hard and angular brushed his thigh.

“Hey cutie,” she whispered, sinking her jaw down to rest against his ear, her strong arms pulling him to her as though he were a bottle from which she wanted to drink. Her voice was hoarse, close in his ear. “You be careful. You’re dancing with a real woman now.”

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## **FOOD**

Martine loved eating and grew fatter and fatter every day. She enjoyed food at all times of the day and in any location. Hunger would strike without warning in the oddest places and she was never without food of some description. Chocolate bars, pastries, wine gums and even cans of lurid, sugary soft drink were inevitably secreted in the voluminous folds of her clothes and in the depths of her ubiquitous handbag. When her holidays arrived she travelled to one provincial city or another where she would take a hotel room and lie in bed eating pizza with the TV on. This is what she loved to do.

One day she fell in love and decided to become thin in order to attract the attention of her beloved. She dieted, she exercised and she took pills which suppressed her appetite. After two months she was as thin as a string bean. She went to the gym and after another month her body was toned and petite. Then she went to her beloved and made him carry her away on a Pacific cruise.

Before more than a few days the weather turned foul. The ship pitched

and tossed and eventually sank. Martine's lover was drowned and she found herself in a lifeboat with four enormous German tourists.

The days turned into weeks and Martine was dehydrated and starving. The huge tourists were relatively comfortable. Their bulk kept them warm and, unlike Martine, they had their supplies of chocolate, dried fruit, biscuits, éclairs, and cans of soft drink hidden, as always, in their clothes. They ate and drank and sang folk songs to keep their spirits up as they waited for their ordeal to end.

As her companions enjoyed their adventure and thrived in adversity, Martine laid her body in the prow of the cramped lifeboat, dying of thirst and starvation and cursing her decision to become thin and beautiful.

• • •

## **FAMILY**

Nigel lived in poverty with his parents. Their neighbourhood was dangerous and the people next door were smelly and disagreeable. Yet Nigel's parents were clean, honest and kind and they provided Nigel with every happiness they could afford. But Nigel was ungrateful and he complained frequently.

When he was twelve, Nigel's mother felt honour-bound to tell him that he had been adopted. Nigel was thrilled.

"Oh goody," he said. "Now I can go and find my real parents and have a good life at last."

He filled out a form in the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and waited. And waited, and waited, while his parents tried to conceal their grief at the impending loss of their only child beneath a veneer of loving support and understanding.

Eventually the envelope arrived from the Registry. Nigel tore it open. Imagine his astonishment to learn that his real parents were the smelly, disagreeable couple who lived next door.

"I don't think I'll go," said Nigel. "I think I'd rather stay here with you."

“Oh no, you don’t,” said his mother and father. “You wanted to find your real parents and now you have. Now, be gone.”

And so Nigel had to move to the hovel next door to live in starvation and squalor with the smelly, disagreeable neighbours, while his former parents, once they had overcome their grief, lived in peace and contentment next door.

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## **MARRIAGE**

Roberta and Michael were very much in love. When, at their wedding service, they said, “with thy body I thee worship and with my worldly goods I thee endow,” they meant it. Hundreds of people came to their wedding breakfast and threw rice at the dove-grey Bentley which drove them to the airport to commence their Hawaiian honeymoon.

No sooner had they settled into a luxurious routine than tragedy struck. Michael went surfing at Waikiki Beach while Roberta sunned herself on the sand. She saw nothing, not even the dorsal fin at which Michael feebly clutched as his body was crushed to fragments by the mighty jaws of a giant shark.

Roberta was inconsolable. She refused to leave Hawaii without her husband. She would not eat and she hid in what had been their honeymoon suite. But eventually hunger took control and she permitted a tray to be delivered to her door. Although alone, Roberta ate with moderation, hiding her hunger even from herself.

All at once she felt a crunch. She put her hand to her mouth and there she found Michael’s wedding ring embedded in a morsel of fish fillet meuniere. The words of her wedding vows came instantly to mind and she sobbed in the Hawaiian sunset as she hungrily finished her dinner.

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## CHRISTMAS

At the end of the year Wayne and Denise lost their home to the interest rates and went to live with Denise's mother, Iris.

Wayne and Iris did not get along very well but Wayne wasn't worried because Iris was rich and her house was luxurious. There was a fine swimming pool next to a large barbecue area and the three planned a hangi for Christmas Eve, to which they invited all of the neighbours.

The week before Christmas, Wayne went away on business. When he had not returned by the date of the party, Denise became worried and preoccupied. She lay on a banana lounge, drinking neat Blackberry Nip, leaving Iris to attend to all the arrangements alone. The guests arrived and everyone had a good time, except Denise who lay in her chair, standing only when everyone crowded around the hangi as Iris brought it up from its hole in the turf beside the pool.

Suddenly there was a shriek.

"Murder!" rasped a shocked, stifled voice. No-one moved, though Denise trembled sufficiently to spill her Blackberry Nip, which stained the unwinding sheet in which was revealed Wayne's baked body.

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## ILLNESS

Damien was a young man of charisma and a rare, dark beauty. He was vastly popular, not only because of his wealth but because of his innocent, child-like charm.

One day Damien noticed lumps on the sides of his knees. The doctors shook their heads sadly and informed him that he had a disease and would die within six months.

Damien tried everything. His friends exhorted him to abandon conventional medicine and to cure himself with crystals. But Damien refused, saying this was nonsense. He sought second, third and fourth opinions from specialists but the diagnosis and prognosis remained the same.

Eventually, in desperation, he allowed his friends to persuade him to abandon the unhelpful remedies prescribed by his doctors and to turn to the crystals. They proudly presented him with splendid examples in blue, green and red and they waited optimistically for signs of improvement.

But all in vain. Damien's cold body was found one day by his cleaning lady. His friends were disillusioned.

"How can the crystals have failed?" they asked each other, incredulous. They felt let down and were too annoyed with Damien even to attend his funeral.

It was only weeks after his death, when the post mortem results were published, that they cheered up. Silly Damien had been eating the crystals ground up in his breakfast egg. It was this which had killed him, not the disease, of which no trace had been found in his remains.

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## LOVE

One day George decided that he was tired of the way his lover behaved. He told him that his behaviour was intolerable and that he was going to leave.

"But I love you," said his lover. "Please stay."

"I can't," said George. "The things you do drive me mad," and he left.

After a few months of living alone, George met a new lover. After a month or two the new boyfriend accepted George's invitation to move in with him and they lived happily together for quite some time. Eventually the new lover began to irritate George and the irritation increased until George couldn't stand it anymore. He confronted the lover.

"I cannot stand the way you behave," he said. "The things you do drive me mad."

"I don't care," said the new lover. "Get stuffed." And nothing changed.

Eventually George complained again, with the same indifferent response. He became exasperated.

"Look here," said the new lover, "if you dislike me so much, why don't you leave?"

“Because I love you,” said George, his ardour stifling his indignation at being asked to leave his own house.

“Then you’ll just have to put up with me,” said the new lover, and they continued to live together, to George’s infinite torment.

# Calluses

by **Claire Boswell**

**Jenny is looking** herself over in the full-length mirror that hangs on the back of her bedroom door, twirling to check out the view from every angle when she decides that if she does anything tonight it will only be oral.

Jenny recognizes that she is not a fat girl, though she wouldn't call herself thin, either. She has those child-bearing hips, two robust curves of meaty flesh. Her breasts are small and round, her cleavage modest even in a push-up bra. Her hair is shoulder-length, mousy brown, the same color as her eyes. She is not a remarkable beauty, but by no means unattractive. She zeroes in on a patch of cellulite on her ass and sighs. No, she's definitely not taking her dress off tonight.

Jenny crosses the room to her closet and drops to her knees, searching for her strappiest shoes, the ones with the ice-pick heels. It is late March, a warm evening, and for the first time since December, Jenny has a date. That calls for sexy, open shoes. Arch baring, toe-cleavage revealing shoes, and Jenny's feet have been holed up inside of sneakers and boots for months. And then there were the stretches of days she spent entirely inside, padding

barefoot across the hardwood floors between the couch and the kitchen, the result of which is a thick layer of dead skin across her heels and the balls of her feet. Her chipped pink toe nail polish is left over from Valentine's Day, which she spent at a "Love Sucks" themed party, sipping vodka and Kool-Aid through a straw and feeling incredibly awkward. But then, Jenny feels incredibly awkward most of the time.

She met her date while waiting in line at 'Mr Beans', the coffee shop two buildings down from her apartment. He will arrive to pick her up at eight o'clock. He told her so two days ago, when they parted ways after a brief chat that went like this:

"This line is ridiculous." Jenny said this to no one in particular after checking her watch and realizing she was going to be late for a meeting. She didn't expect anyone to respond.

But someone did. "Agreed. Ridiculous."

She turned, a little startled, and found herself face to face with a bearded guy wearing a pair of black plastic glasses and a T-shirt that said 'Star Trek: Deep Space Nine'. He seemed nice enough so she smiled.

"I'll bet every single person in this line is late for work," he said. "I am."

"So am I, but it's a necessity," Jenny said. "I'd never make it through the day."

It was small talk. The kind of thing you said to a stranger you didn't mind talking to.

"This place is like a methadone clinic," the guy said, chuckling at his own joke. "Bunch of junkies." Then he held out his hand, and said, "My name's Jimmy." His hand was soft, maybe softer than hers. She shook it quickly and dropped it.

"I'm Jenny," she said. "Nice to meet you." She eyed the Star Trek T-shirt again. She eyed his jeans.

Jimmy jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I work at the book store across the street," he said. Jenny followed with her eyes to the little nondescript storefront with a painted sign that said 'The Book Rack'.

"All used all the time," Jimmy said. "Come by and see us."

And then Jenny was at the front of the line and she turned away to order

her drink. When she turned to leave, she smiled and said goodbye to Jimmy, and that's when he made his move, asking if she had any plans for Friday night. She said she didn't. She said she'd like to. She said she'd meet him outside of her building. He said he'd be there at eight o'clock.

And so Jenny fishes her sexiest shoes out from behind a cardboard box full of clothes she meant to take to Goodwill and glances at the clock on her dresser. It is four o'clock now. For the next four hours, Jenny will devote herself entirely to the task of complete self-overhaul, a frenzy of personal grooming. Some might call it self-care, but Jenny only does it when she wants someone else to care about her. She wants to appear to be a certain thing, to create the image of her best self in hopes that Jimmy, while sitting across from her tonight, over a plate of spaghetti or enchiladas or clam chowder, will decide that he wants to sit across from her at dinner again and again, and maybe even for the rest of their lives.

Then, eventually, she hopes that he and she will both spend four hours preparing their best selves to marry each other, and after that she will no longer feel compelled to spend so much time and effort in preparation. At that point she will begin, bit by bit, to reveal her true self, slowly erasing the best-self image that will lure Jimmy into caring for her. And by then, he will have had time to develop feelings for her strong enough to withstand the revelation of who she really is. This is how love happens.

Jenny wants love to happen to her and so she must improve upon every visible aspect of herself within the next four hours. She will work from the bottom up. She will begin with the soles of her feet. Jenny tosses her sexiest shoes onto the bed, beside her sexiest dress.

A basket of tools sits on the coffee table in Jenny's living room—not tools for building things, but tools for removing things like cuticles and unwanted eyebrow hairs. Tools for curling things. Tools for shaving things. Jenny selects a metal grater, like the kind one keeps in the kitchen for shredding vegetables and cheese, only the blades are smaller, duller. It has a handle coated in blue ribbed rubber so that Jenny can get a good grip on it while she grates away the dead skin on her heels and the balls of her feet.

She sits on her couch and crosses her legs like a man—her left ankle

resting on her right knee, her left leg creating a triangle in her lap. This is how her father would sit at night, relaxing in front of the T.V., a beer can resting on his knee and held loosely in one hairy-knuckled hand. Jenny would imitate him, sitting beside him on the couch and crossing her legs that way and when her mother came into the room she would chide Jenny for being unladylike. Now Jenny only sat that way to gain access to the bottom of her foot. One must assume some unladylike positions in order to achieve the smooth, unblemished foot of a lady—a foot fit to slip into three-hundred-dollar shoes that are really just a pair of spikes with some shiny leather straps on top.

Jenny holds her foot steady with her left hand and places the callus remover to her heel. She runs it over the dead skin, applying pressure. It does not hurt. It tickles sometimes. But it is hard work, and after a couple of minutes Jenny is surprised to find that she has worked up a bit of a sweat. She does not feel beautiful or ladylike as she works the thing back and forth like a saw. She feels like a carpenter, a whittler, a sculptor—like she's working with wood or marble or some other material besides her own skin. Tiny bits of it flake off and fall to the floor, where they land in a pile, a little mound of dead skin on the cover of one of her *National Geographic's*.

Jenny has been collecting *National Geographic* magazines since she was a little girl. She keeps stacks of them beside her desk, and even more in a box at her parents' house. Jenny never reads the articles. She likes the photographs. She collects the magazines for the pictures.

The issue catching Jenny's callus shavings has a picture of a blue whale on the cover and includes an article about a tribe of indigenous peoples from the Amazon River basin in Brazil. One of the photos in that article is a two-page spread of the rainforest floor, writhing with thick tree roots growing moss and fungi and fallen leaves. And also, in that photo, there are four pairs of human feet so gnarled they almost appear to be a part of the tree.

Two days ago, when Jenny last flipped through that issue of *National Geographic*, she skipped past the photo of the feet and the roots in a rush to get to the photos of the blue whales in the even bluer ocean, entire shoals

of fish swimming right into their mouths. Looking at those pictures, Jenny could only think one word: Beautiful.

Jenny never thought to seek human beauty in the pages of *National Geographic*. She has *Cosmopolitan* for that. She does not collect *Cosmopolitan* magazine, but before she throws them away, she reads each and every issue from cover to cover.



As Jenny sits alone in her apartment shaving off her calluses, across town in his parents' basement, Jimmy straps his on. That's right. Jimmy straps on his calluses. He bought them for just over a hundred dollars. They're not real calluses, of course, but factory-made replicas. Special shoes for barefoot running, which the civilized, industrial world has only recently rediscovered as a result of the surge in popularity of all things natural.

Jimmy doesn't buy in to most of the granola trends. He doesn't believe that the acai berry will rid him of his beer belly and if his mother does buy local, organic produce, he's certainly got nothing to do with it. But Jimmy is a firm believer in the bodily benefits of natural running. Barefoot running. He spent hours reading about it on the internet. That's how he discovered and purchased his special running shoes, which consist of a thin flexible layer of rubber, curved to match the contours of his feet and cut to fit each toe individually, with a stretchy mesh upper that clings to the top of his foot. The straps wrap around his heel and secure with a strip of Velcro overtop of the mesh.

Jimmy thinks the separate toe compartments make him look a little like a tree frog when he wears them, and he likes that. Tree frogs are agile, and so is he, with his special shoes for barefoot running.

Ask Jimmy about his special shoes, and he'll go on about them for as long as you're willing to listen.

"With these, you'll work out leg muscles you never even knew you had," he'll say. "They'll make you run faster, too, because they don't—see, with regular shoes, you have the heel, and it's—you know, people don't really



have that, right? These make you run like you were meant to run, which is mostly on the balls of your feet—that's this part here"—and he'd lift his foot to show you—"and that's, that's how humans are really supposed to run. Like gazelles. Barely touching the ground, you know?"

He will say all of this to Jenny at dinner tonight, because he wants to sound interesting and knowledgeable, and he wants to seem unique and open-minded, and he feels that barefoot running makes him all of these things.

He will not tell her that, although they do seem to make him lighter, Jimmy cannot sustain a run in his special barefoot running shoes for more than fifteen minutes or so at a time. If he goes for longer than that, he limps for half a week thereafter. And he isn't kidding when he tells you that these shoes will have you using muscles you never even knew were there. Muscles that have atrophied from lack of use. It hurts to use those muscles again, and too much too soon can cause damage.

Jimmy worries that he might have already caused some minor damage to his tendons in and around his right ankle. Or maybe the bones there. He isn't sure, but it's been aching for days. He continues to run in the shoes regardless. He truly believes in them, in their power to change him, to enhance him. The pain will subside soon enough. He ignores it. He can do that because these shoes make him Super Jimmy.

Super Jimmy whose leg muscles are stronger than most people's in the U.S. because most people never even use them all the way. That alone sets him apart, but then there's the fact that he can wear the shoes out in public—you have to admit, they look a little strange and people do stare—but he's got self-confidence, yes he does. Enough self-confidence to wear his special shoes out in public and to answer people's questions with pride. Yes. Enough self-confidence to stop dicking around in his head about should I or shouldn't I, to just man up and ask the girl to dinner. Which he did, and she said yes.

Her name is Jenny and she lives in the building across the street from 'The Book Rack'. She ordered a hazelnut coffee. Her hair was sort of a hazelnut color. She was dressed like a secretary. Maybe she is one. Jimmy

never asked. He will ask her that tonight. He will be a good listener.

Because he needs to feel like Super Jimmy and not just regular Jimmy when he pulls up in front of Jenny's building in his dad's ancient station wagon later this evening, Jimmy decides to go for a barefoot run. He'll feel better, stronger, more powerful, and he will impress Jenny with his confidence and she will let him buy her dinner again and maybe even let him kiss her goodnight, whether or not he drives a car with wood paneling.

But Jimmy will never pull up in front of Jenny's building, since what he doesn't know is that he *has* already caused damage to his right ankle—not irreversible yet, but he'll change that soon enough. He'll run too fast, for too long, and the walk home will hurt so badly he won't be able to keep from crying. The pain will sear and burn and when he walks through the front door with a limp and tears streaming into his beard his mother will abandon her knitting and rush him straight to the emergency room. There, he will spend his evening waiting and waiting and waiting to find out that he's torn things that will need to be reattached. Right away.

Jimmy will think about Jenny while he sits in the waiting room, wishing he had gotten her phone number. He will entertain the possibility of running into her again on purpose; will plan to spend his mornings in 'Mr Beans' in hopes that she'll stop in before work, and he will explain himself, he will apologize profusely, he will show her his cast—and Jimmy really hopes he at least gets a cast out of all of this. He's never had one before. He will picture Jenny signing it with a Sharpie and kissing him on the forehead, her eyes wet with sympathy. Then, for a moment, he will picture her naked. He will picture her slapping him in the face right in the middle of the morning rush at 'Mr Beans'. He will picture Jenny waiting for him on the street, alone, glancing at her watch as other couples pass her by. He will picture her shivering, rolling her eyes, stomping her feet, cursing his name for all eternity. In the operating room, as he drifts off, his eyelids heavy with anesthesia, Jimmy will give up on the idea of a date with Jenny.

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Jenny will spend four hours polishing and preening and painting herself until she appears better than she is, as beautiful as she can be, and then the nerd from 'Mr Beans' is going to stand her up. She will walk down the stairs of her apartment building with a hand gripping the railing to keep from falling in these incredibly sexy silver thong stilettos. When she makes it to the street she will lean against the dirty wall and wait, her perfume wafting with the breeze. It smells like springtime, grass and honey.

She will wait there, leaning against the wall of her own apartment building, for over an hour before she kicks off the sexy shoes and stomps back up the stairs, wiping her lipstick off on the back of her hand. She will spend the remainder of her weekend entirely inside, padding barefoot across the hardwood floors.

If she read the article about the Rainforest tribes, Jenny would learn about Davi, a member of the Yanomami tribe and how his calluses are a source of pride—thick and cracked, dry and white as the bark of a kapok tree. She would read about how his calluses allow him to do everything he needs to do on the forest floor, to move quickly when hunting or fighting with members of other tribes, to run across jagged, uneven terrain without feeling a thing but the air whipping past his face. How it took him years upon years to build up such a tough, protective layer of skin on the soles of his feet and how the younger men in his tribe admire him for this.

She would also read about Mico, Davi's wife, and how she spends hours each week painting her body orange with the pigment from a plant. How, when she is finished painting herself, she slings her young child across her back in a swath of crude fabric and carries him like that while she fells trees in the forest with the other orange-striped women.

# Decrescendo

by Cynthia Rowe

**Fen took** a final sip of his coffee, now tepid and tasteless.

“C’mon, guys!” shouted the Boss. “Time to get going!”

The other couriers stuffed the last of their sandwiches into their mouths and pushed themselves up for the afternoon shift.

Fen scrunched the polystyrene mug, tossed it in the bin and mooched into the hold, grabbed the trolley and pushed it towards the despatch table where the Boss offered him a square package marked ‘Fragile’.

“Take care! This lot is worth a bit,” he said, placing the paperwork on top.

Fen cradled the consignment in his arms and headed for the street where his scooter was parked. The sky was grizzled, wind sheared off the harbour in icy blasts and, on days like this one, he hankered for home, for the sun-bleached paddocks of the Riverina. Fen had thought life would be easier in the big city, more cerebral and interesting. How wrong he had been.

He pushed the parcel down into the pannier with his gloved hands, strapped his helmet under his chin and set off. The buzz of the bike zapped through his body, the wind battered at his jacket, and the cold seeped into

his biker boots as he headed for the apartment block in the upmarket end of town overlooking the water.

Parking his bike, Fen slid his hands into the pannier, grasped the package firmly and, checking the name on the documentation, pressed the security buzzer. M Carpenter, or a person whom Fen assumed to be M Carpenter, clicked open the glass door and Fen trudged in, clutching the package which was weighty and awkward to carry.

Fen took the stairs, rather than be forced to juggle buttons in the elevator and, still wearing his helmet, approached the apartment door and leaned the back of his wrist on the button.

Hugging the parcel to his chest, he waited.

M Carpenter pulled open the door, his mobile phone clamped to his ear, still talking. "Yeah, yeah."

Fen waited for him to finish his conversation but M Carpenter was in no hurry. *Typical bloody businessman*, Fen said to himself, chewing his lip and going from foot to foot.

M Carpenter indicated for Fen to enter. After giving the soles of his biker boots a perfunctory wipe on the woven mat, Fen stepped inside, hands still grasping the parcel, paperwork balanced on top and threatening to tumble to the floor.

"Hmmm, hmmm, yeah." M Carpenter kept talking on his mobile phone.

Fen's eyes were drawn to the walls slathered with expensive art work, large canvases done in oil, a room filled with antique furniture and sculptures. He took in the arcane shapes and colours, the wide variety of materials used, from ceramic and teak to polished steel.

"Okay then, we'll discuss this further." M Carpenter, dressed in a white shirt and tailored slacks, ran his snakeskin shoe back and forth over a silver and white miniature soccer ball.

Fen placed the package on the ground and stood there, waiting.

"But we talked about this." M Carpenter closed the apartment door and continued to speak into his mobile phone, in no hurry to sign for the delivery.

Fen removed the paperwork from the top of the box, placed it on the ground and, pulling a Stanley knife from his pocket, slotted the blade under the gaffer tape around the package.

“He has understood nothing about the employment market.” M Carpenter paced backwards and forwards, head down as he conversed.

Fen eased a sculpture from the box, a metal circle of spiked steel, gleaming and resembling an opulent modernist crown.

M Carpenter, still talking on his phone, took the sculpture from the courier, held it up and said, “Simply magnificent!” The comments at the other end were unclear. “Oh, I’ve been extravagant,” M Carpenter replied, “having found the new job and ... well, it’s worth every penny. See you. Bye.”

The businessman gave an excited twirl. The sole of his shoe slipped, the phone flew from his grasp and he pitched forward. Fen, horrified, watched M Carpenter fall face down, flat on the work of art, saw spikes spear through the white shirt. Blood spurted and, making gurgling noises, M Carpenter lay there twitching and gasping from having been stabbed by his indulgent purchase.

Fen dropped to his knees.

M Carpenter’s fluttering fingers pattered on the polished boards and Fen attempted to lift the businessman up, without success. The fibrillations seemed to go on forever and he wondered what to do.

Without warning, the front door bell buzzed.

Instinctively, Fen leapt to his feet.

He went to answer, then realising he would be accused of having committed murder, reached over and clamped his hand against M Carpenter’s mouth. The terrible gulping sound sent waves of nausea through Fen’s gut until he felt like puking.

Thinking the plunks and groans coming from the dying man had ceased, Fen removed his hand.

The buzzer rang again.

Fen pushed his fingers against M Carpenter’s lips once more to muzzle him, to stop the incriminating moans. Gore continued to ooze through the

white shirt, dripping on the floorboards in sickening rivulets.

“Shush,” whispered Fen, knowing deep down the businessman was beyond help, was beyond hearing his words. If not dead, M Carpenter was long past resuscitating.

The breathing became muted, faint, a decrescendo.

Fen, son of a cocky, an honest wheat farmer with a penchant for frankness who continued to till his soil come rain or drought, was filled with a dread he had never previously experienced. Fen had fallen off horses, seen animals bloated and dying from lack of water, slaughtered sheep, cut the heads of chickens with an axe. But nothing like this.

The footsteps outside receded.

Fen heard the lift descend. His heart remained in his throat and he could feel the coffee he had drunk mounting. He clambered upstairs hunting for a bathroom and finally discovered a sea of gleaming porcelain and stainless steel taps. He hawked into the hand basin, flushed the vomit down and leaned over trying to get his breath.

He whipped off his helmet and jacket, spat again into the basin and hauled his bloodied blue shirt over his head. Still coughing, he yanked off the T-shirt beneath, also bloodied, and washed his hands over and over, rubbing at the red stains before drying off on a towel monogrammed with the initials MC.

Fen edged into the businessman’s walk-in wardrobe. He lifted a laundered white shirt off a row of hangers filled with designer clothing and shrugged on the garment. His fingers fumbled with the buttons and he selected a tailored jacket and matching trousers from the rack, thinking he could never venture into the street in his own blood-stained gear.

Fen shoved his helmet on his head, crammed his gory belongings into a black plastic bag he’d discovered in a bathroom cupboard and clattered back down the stairs, almost tripping in his haste to be away from M Carpenter’s body.

As he passed the full-length mirror inside the front door, Fen caught a glimpse of his changed appearance. He paused, retraced his steps to assess his new look. “Cool!” he said to himself, lifting the helmet off his head to

take in the transformation. This was how he had expected to appear when he came to the big city.

Fen lowered the plastic bag and decided to investigate the bar in one corner of the living room. There he laid eyes on wine, cheese and crackers and, pouring himself a glass of red, flicked on the television. He sank back into the down-filled cushions of the sofa and, sipping and munching, watched a Classic Western on Pay TV.

The afternoon passed in a series of flickering images. The sun, now shining, became a low ball in the sky and Fen leaned across to switch on a table lamp, savouring the good life while blotting from his mind the sight of the defunct M Carpenter who lay in the corner of the room, now deftly concealed by a patterned Gabbeh rug.

Hungry for something more substantial to eat, Fen pushed himself off the sofa and found a kitchen filled with glitzy appliances, also in gleaming stainless steel.

He slathered pâté on imported biscuits, sank his teeth into cold chicken legs and washed the food down with a mug of espresso coffee, so hot the drink almost burnt his tongue.

As he sat on a postmodern stool eating, the phone on the bench rang. A tasteful tingle. Fen paused mid-chew. Should he answer it?

His heart paddled in his chest.

“Are you there, Emcee? Pick up the phone if you are.” The answering machine clicked off.

The phone rang again. Fen’s heart jiggled anew.

“It’s Brendan here.”

Fen reached out and tentatively lifted the phone from its cradle.

“Are you there, Emcee?”

Fen hesitated, and then lowered his voice to approximate M Carpenter’s timbre. “Ye-es.”

“Sorry to bother you but I need to discuss that management position you advertised for the engineering company. We can meet first thing next week, in the office if you prefer.”

“Ye-es,” Fen answered, long and low.



Laughter broke out at the other end. “Oh, I *see*, you’re not alone? I’ve interrupted, ahem, something?”

“Ye-es.”

“See you next week, then.”

“Ye-es.”

Fen put down the phone and chomped on a fresh mouthful of chicken leg. “Oh, my God,” he murmured, almost choking on the food. “What’ve I done? If I don’t turn up at his office, they’ll know M Carpenter is dead, think they’ve spoken to the killer.”

Monday morning, Fen dressed with care. He chose a navy blue suit, combining it with a blue shirt and tie which toned in nicely.

M Carpenter’s business cards gave the address of the office block in which he worked. Fen stuffed papers into a briefcase and took a taxi to the Junction. He stood outside the building, fingers grasping the leather handle of the briefcase so hard his knuckles turned white. He took a shuddering breath, turned and strode into a dimly-lit foyer whose floor was tiled with travertine marble.

He took a lift to the floor marked ‘Ego Peregrine Management Consultants’ and, eyes lowered, walked along the corridor.

People said, “Good morning” as he passed.

Fen advanced with measured steps.

“Good morning, Emcee,” said a woman in a beige business suit who then went on chatting to her friend.

Fen eventually came to an office with M Carpenter on the door, edged in, and removing his jacket, placed it on a coat stand. The desk was covered with phones, with mugs overflowing with pens and pencils and a lighted computer screen.

The businessman in the next office turned his head and, seeing Fen through the venetian blinds, raised a hand in greeting and continued murmuring into his phone.

*So far, so good.*

Fen installed himself in the black swivel chair.

“Nice to see you, Emcee.” A co-worker poked his head around the door.

“Trust you’re settling in. We were lucky to get you.” He paused. “I like your new haircut, shorter than when you started.”

Fen gave a forced smile.

A photo of M Carpenter in his university gown sat on one corner of the desk. Fen ran his eyes over the dead man’s face. Yes, he *could* see a resemblance.

The phone rang.

Fen picked up.

“I need a new engineer by the end of the month. Can you place the ad, Emcee, carry out the interviews a. s. a. p.? The guy before you used SEEK, but I think your methods sound more cutting edge.”

“I will see to it.” Fen wrote down the details of the company, the position, the salary range.

Employees passing along the corridor shot glances through the slatted blinds but no one stopped, no one queried him, not one person appeared to believe he wasn’t M Carpenter—known familiarly as ‘Emcee’.

The days went by.

Fen purchased books on Management Practice, the Marketplace, Executive Hiring and Firing, Organisational Behaviour and the Future. He boned up at night, thinking at last he had the job of his dreams, the job he had hoped to secure when he came to the big city. He learnt to talk about the market, about fiscal policy. He got to know the other employees. Fen was on a high.

M Carpenter’s body now sprawled out in the bath at home niggled in the corner of Fen’s mind from time to time, but not enough to deter him.

Things were going swimmingly.

Two days later, Lucy from Accounts, who was walking along beside Fen, halted and said, “Something’s been bothering me, but now I know what it is. You’ve lost weight since the day of your interview. You look a lot better.”

“Thank you,” said Fen.

Apart from the body in the bath, Fen was slipping bit by bit into M Carpenter’s life. He used Emcee’s toothbrush, he wore Emcee’s pyjamas, he advised Emcee’s clients, he played with executive toys whilst chatting on the phone.

Fen diverted offers to join workmates in a game of squash, pleading an injured ankle and affecting a slight limp.

“I admire you, Emcee, you don’t believe in coming second in life,” said Lucy.

Fen grew more confident until, on one occasion, Lucy followed him into the bathroom. “I know you’re not Emcee!” she burst out.

Emcee’s hands, just dried, became beaded with sweat. “What do you mean?”

“You chose the coleslaw in the canteen and I happen to know Emcee hated coleslaw. On the first day, he told me he was allergic to cabbage—”

“Oh, I was joking! I really *love* cabbage and, and, I had a course of injections and I’m fine now.” Fen turned and met her gaze. “Won’t the others think it strange you followed me into the men’s room?”

Lucy threw him a speculative glance and left.

Fen took the lift. He hurried from the building and headed for the nearest bar. Should he tough it out? he wondered. His hands were unsteady as he downed a tankard of beer.

Fen decided to continue on as Emcee, call Lucy’s bluff. At the canteen, he avoided coleslaw, loaded a plate of stroganoff onto his tray, a slice of chocolate torte with whipped cream and a glass of sparkling mineral water. This time, he would be bold, up the stakes.

“Is there a place for me?” he asked the group seated at a nearby table.

“Sure!”

Everyone shuffled their chairs to make room, Lucy greeted him with a smile and Fen edged in. He spread his napkin on his knee, picked up his knife and fork and the group continued chatting.

Fen joined in, laughing at their jokes, once again at ease in the persona of Emcee.

Abruptly a voice called, “Hi, everyone! Is there space for one more?”

“Oh, you’re back!” cried the group as one. “Move over, guys!”

Once more, chairs were shuffled and jerked to make room at the end of the table for the female executive.

“How was your vacation?” asked Lucy.

“Incredible! Drinking piña coladas under swaying palms was the best medicine anyone could ask for. Wide beaches, white sand...” The newcomer stopped talking, her eyes lobbed on Fen. “Hi, I’m Marion.”

“Hi, Marion!” said Fen.

She looked around the table. “Where’s my old friend, Emcee? They told me he was joining Ego Peregrine.”

“Emcee’s here!” Lucy waved a finger in Fen’s direction. “You just spoke to him. He’s been doing an amazing job in this company, recruiting like you wouldn’t believe, hot on Key Performance Indicators. Due for a promotion, I’d say.”

“But, but where’s Emcee?”

“He’s there!” A spray of digits pointed.

“That’s not Emcee!” retorted Marion.

Silence for a moment, and then: “You’re right, it’s not Emcee”, “Who are you, then...”, “Where’s Emcee?”

The questions flew about and Fen thrust back his chair, bolted from the canteen and skidded to the lift.

Fen wandered about the city streets, still wearing M Carpenter’s expensive suit, tie hanging half-mast. He slipped off the jacket and tossed it in a nearby bin. Lights blurred around him. People pushed past, but he barely noticed.

Come nightfall, Fen made his way back to Ego Peregrine Management Consultants and waited for Marion to emerge. Seeking refuge in doorways as he went, he followed her to a block of flats in the Junction and hid in the shadows until she inserted her key in the lock of the door. He would make Marion pay with her life!

Fen cruised along the highway on his scooter, sun on his chest, the warmth seeping through the lapels of the camel coat he had discovered in the walk-in wardrobe of M Carpenter’s apartment, just before he grabbed his helmet and left. He was making for the Riverina where the grass was golden, the river gums welcoming and nothing to worry about but whether the wet came.

Fen slowed as he passed through a one-street town. On the newspaper

hoardings displayed on the footpath a headline blared: ECONOMY WORSENING, BUSINESSMAN MURDERED, CAMEL COAT STOLEN

Fen jiggled his arms free from the sleeves of Emcee's coat. He bunched up the garment and hurled it into the bushes, glad he'd thought twice about killing Marion for having exposed him, for having brought him back to earth so brutally.

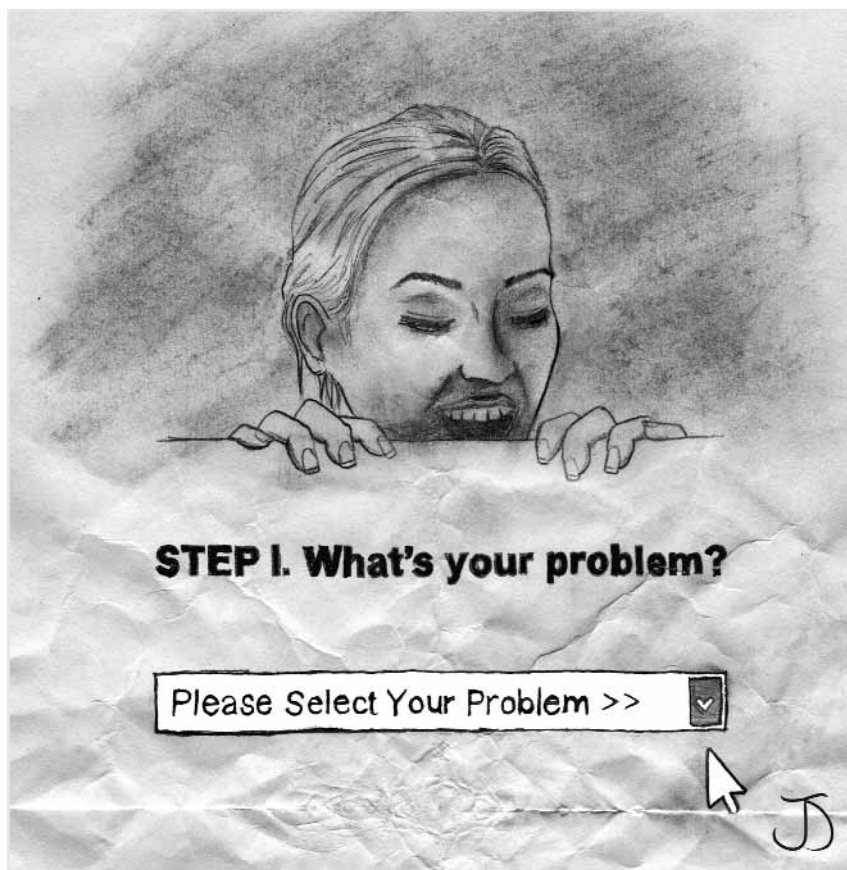
He pressed on the gas.

He'd never told the Boss his full name was Frank Ernest Neill. Would the courier service connect Fen with poor old Emcee?

Nah, he was perfectly safe.

Heading west, Fen saw rain clouds gathering.

*Drawings by John Dodge – part II.*

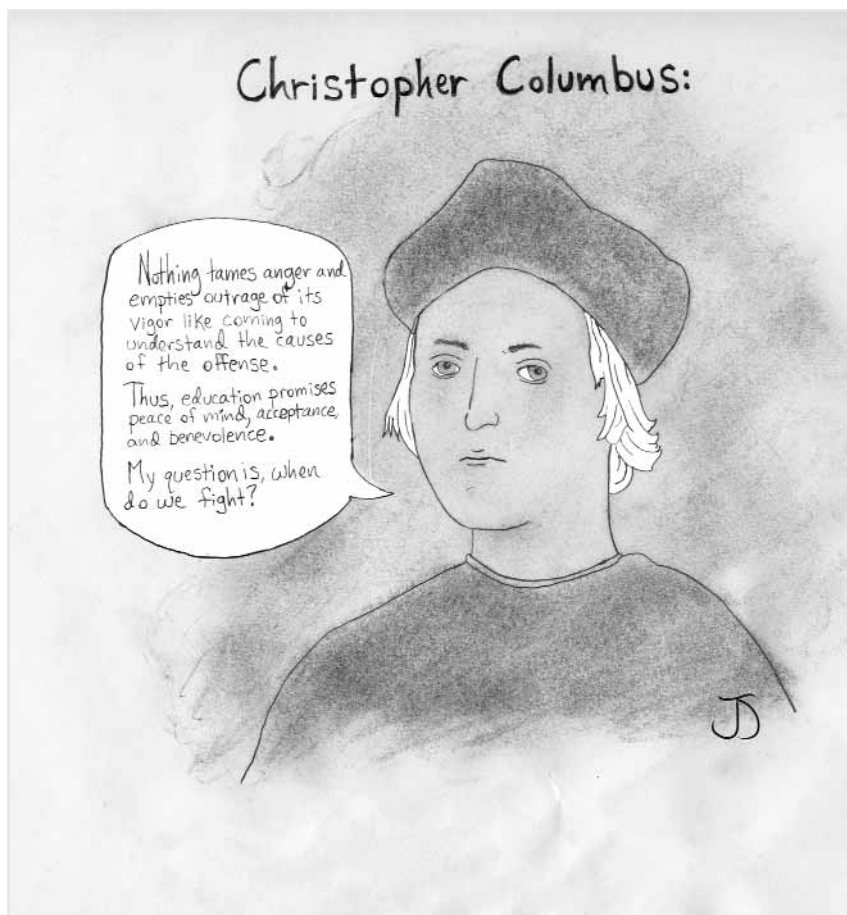


*above: 'Problem'*

*right: 'Karnak'*



*Drawings by John Dodge – part II.*



*'Columbus'*



*Drawings* by *John Dodge* – part II.

THE TRUTH ABOUT  
Julius Caesar:



*'Caesar'*

*Drawings by John Dodge – part II.*



*'Sagan'*

# The Wasp

by Daniel W. Davis

**“Did I tell you** I saw a wasp today?”

George adjusted his tie, scratching at the underside of his chin. His gaze shifted focus in the mirror momentarily, before returning to the task at hand.

“Where?”

“In the library, while I was dusting.”

“Did you kill it?”

Stacy’s hand, applying a final touch of makeup to her cheeks, paused. “Of course not.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m terrified of wasps, George.”

“If you kill it, it’ll go away.”

“Yes, but then I’d have to *touch* it, wouldn’t I? The whole point is to stay as far away as possible, so you don’t get stung.”

“They sting you, they die. Simple as that.”

“Wasps aren’t like that, George. They can sting as much as they want to.”

Stacy finished and put away her makeup. She stood up from the bureau.

“You look good in that suit, George.”

“I’d better.”

He finished with his tie. He turned his head to the right, then the left. Then he turned it back to the right again.

“Shit.”

“George?”

“There’s another gray in my beard. Give me your tweezers.”

“I can’t even see it, George. I’m sure—”

“Give me the tweezers.”

She sighed and began rummaging through the drawers of the bureau. She found a pair of metallic tweezers and handed them to her husband. He plucked out the gray hair, holding it up in front of his eyes.

“Fucker,” he said, and let it drop to the floor.

He set the tweezers on the desk in front of the mirror. He smiled at himself. He hadn’t seen a whiter smile in ages. There was a youthful twinkle about his eyes—*vigor*, he called it. *Youthful vigor*.

“That really is a nice suit, George.”

“It’s Italian or something.”

“You look very handsome.”

George walked over to her. He ran a hand up her dress, starting at mid-thigh. The fabric crinkled slightly as his fingers followed the taught curves of her body, over her breasts, up her neck. His hand came to rest on her cheek, just below her eye.

“You have some new wrinkles.”

She slapped him. “You bastard.”

“You need to look your best. I’ll never be promoted if you don’t look your best.”

“Can you *be* promoted higher? Jesus, George. We’re at the top of the fucking *building*! Isn’t that enough for you?”

He moved her aside and walked to the picture window that made up the bedroom’s east wall. He stared out at the city.

“We can go higher,” he said, and went into the bathroom. “I’m taking a shit. Hide those wrinkles.”

When he came out of the bathroom, she was putting away her makeup again. She was naked.

She turned to him, spreading her legs.

“Is this more to your liking, George?”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Showing you I’m not as old as you are.”

He bit his tongue; the taste of blood made him wince.

“Get dressed. We’re due at the reception in forty-five minutes.”

He left the bedroom and made his way to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, rummaged around. He settled on a bottle of wine, something old that he’d been given a year ago. He didn’t bother with a glass; he took a quick swig from the bottle, then another. He re-corked it and put it back in its little refrigerated shelf. He’d kill the rest of it later that night, after he and Stacy fucked, if he didn’t end up fucking some other girl. You never knew what might happen at these receptions. It could always turn out to be a good night.

When he closed the refrigerator door, he saw the wasp. It was pacing in front of the toaster; the lights recessed above the kitchen counter shone down upon it, making its reflection in the toaster’s metallic surface clearer. And larger. He was momentarily shaken—the wasp looked four times its normal size. It wasn’t until the insect moved, and he saw it on the counter, that he sighed with relief.

He glanced around. Where the fuck was a magazine when you needed it? There was an envelope laying on the counter near him, an ad of some kind probably. But by the time he’d picked it up and turned back to the toaster, the wasp was gone.

It didn’t appear to be anywhere else in the kitchen. Maybe it had crawled under the toaster. He didn’t feel like checking. Let Stacy stumble across it, later that night. It would do her a bit of good, seeing that wasp again.

He wondered if there were others.

After spending a couple minutes looking the kitchen over, putting no real effort into it, he grabbed the bottle of wine from the fridge again. Just in case. He went into the main room, what he liked to call “the lounge.” He

had other rooms, too, with other names.

He sat down in a sturdy leather chair; the cushions wrapped around his thighs and buttocks. He leaned his head back, eyes closed.

“Come on,” he called to the ceiling. “Hurry up in there!”

A minute passed. He opened his eyes and glanced over his shoulder. How the hell did a wasp get this high? Had it hitchhiked its way in? Surely they would’ve noticed it; the elevator ride up here took several seconds, and wasps weren’t known for staying still.

Also—and this question disturbed him the most—how long had it been in the apartment? A few hours? Days?

Not only that—but it was March. Early March. Not the season one expected to find wasps. Perhaps it had been living in the building; maybe there was a nest somewhere. George made a mental note to check with the building super. Get that overpriced bastard to actually do something for a change.

Looking into the kitchen too long from this angle hurt his eyes; almost every surface in the kitchen was metallic, reflecting the lights of the bright lounge. The kitchen hadn’t been his choice; none of the décor in the apartment had been his choice. Or Stacy’s. This was the apartment that came with the position: a clean, metallic kitchen; a clean, informed library; a clean, tailored suit; a clean, obedient wife.

How old was Stacy? Wasn’t her birthday soon? She would be approaching thirty, surely. The cocaine didn’t help to age her well.

He didn’t like thinking about that.

So instead of he thought of the reception, and who all might be there.. The Mayor, probably; perhaps a couple of congressmen. Maybe even that young gentleman who was considered ideal for next year’s presidential bid. It was a good night to own a suit, that’s for sure. A suit, and a younger wife. A man only looked as good as the items he wore.

It all came back to him, damned if it didn’t, so he forced all thoughts out of his head. But when his mind was blank, when all he could see were the city lights below, the wasp crawled into his thoughts, and buzzed, and he turned around to make sure it wasn’t hovering behind him.

The only thing there was Stacy. Her dress was on again; her hair was changed slightly, a little more wavy, more showy. He glanced her over but didn't say anything; she wiggled under his gaze, and he wasn't sure if she was mocking him or not. Probably, but who could really tell with a girl like her?

When his eyes moved away from her, back to the window, she stopped her show. She frowned at the bottle in his hand, and shook her head.

"Starting early?"

He grunted and took another drink.

"I might as well fix myself something." She went into the kitchen.

He thought about telling her about the wasp. Then he thought about not telling her.

There were a few rattling sounds, some metallic clicks, the whirring of the blender. No screams. After a brief thud when she closed the refrigerator door a little too hard, she sauntered back into the lounge and took a seat on the leather sofa opposite him.

"So? Planning on being fashionably late? I see you're already planning on being fashionably drunk."

He scratched at his beard, where he had earlier removed the gray hair. Perhaps another had taken its place. He remembered the first gray hair he'd discovered, about ten years ago, far too early in life to discover such things. It had been, of all places, on his arm. He had stared at it for ten whole minutes, willing it to go away, to change color.

"George?"

He looked at her. "What?"

"Something's on your mind."

"Lotta things on my mind."

"Is it the wasp?"

She didn't have the instinct he had; she was merely telling him what was on *her* mind, and it just so happened to coincide with what was on his. At first he wasn't going to acknowledge it; it was none of her business, what he was thinking of, certainly not if the subject frightened him (when he knew damn well it shouldn't). But there was a look in her eyes that aroused him a little, made him sit up a little straighter in the chair. It was the look that

he'd seen when they'd first met: the look of someone completely out of her depth.

He shrugged and looked away from her.

She shivered. "I hate wasps."

"You're not supposed to love 'em."

"Do you think they enjoy stinging people?"

"I don't know. Who gives a fuck? They're bugs."

"Bugs with stingers."

"So what?"

"So there's one loose in the apartment."

"Maybe it'll sting your lips so they swell shut."

She sipped her drink and sulked. His hand worried at the bottle. He wondered how much pressure it would take for the bottle to break in his fist. Probably not much. Would the glass stick in his skin? Would they have to operate to get the little pieces out? Imagine how much that would hurt—to have a tiny piece of glass lodged under your skin, with no way to get it out.

He glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes until the reception. Would he be able to make it? Perhaps.

"We'd better leave," he said, standing. His back creaked; his knees felt stiff. He ignored both.

She stood, too, but timidly. "With the wasp still here?"

"No. We'll miss the reception so we can kill a fucking bug."

"George."

He ignored her and put the bottle of wine back in the fridge. He thought he saw movement from the corner of his eye, but there was nothing.

"George?"

"Yes?"

"Will you kill it when we get back?"

"I'll get someone to kill it tomorrow."

"You promise?"

"Yeah. Sure. Come on."

She downed her drink, grabbed her coat from the bedroom, and they



left. George hesitated at the front door, and decided to leave the lights on.

He stole a bottle of wine from the reception, shortly after fucking a woman in a darkened hallway of the manor. She was someone's wife or sister. He was too old for the daughters now; if it was merely a quick hook-up he wanted, he would have to settle for someone closer to forty, though he refused to go over that. He suspected that the woman from tonight—Barbara-something?—had been almost his age, but she hid it well, and so he had let it slide.

He wasn't sure what Stacy was doing, while he was doing the woman; nor did he really care. Maybe she had found herself some young man to pass a few minutes with. She probably knew he had affairs; she herself had been a mistress, back when he was dating that advertising exec. Surely Stacy knew that George Carlisle wasn't a man to be trusted with a monogamous relationship. He had money; he still had his looks. He used them both.

"I'm gonna make me a drink," Stacy said, walking into the apartment. Her words collided with each other, making George pause to translate. "Want anything?"

"No. I've got this." He hefted the bottle.

"Don't give yourself a heart attack."

"I don't work out every day to have my heart succumb to booze, my dear."

"Suit yourself. I'm not sure I could see straight enough to dial 911 right now. Just keep that in mind."

"Go fuck yourself."

"What's that, George?"

"Nothing, Stacy. I'll be in the lounge."

He fell back into the same leather chair that he had occupied earlier that night. He took a long drink from the bottle, then let his head fall against the back of the chair. He stared up at the ceiling and smiled.

The wasp flew past, an inch above his face.

"Christ!"

He jumped up, the bottle falling to the floor, the wine spilling out across the white carpet.

"Goddammit!"

“George? What is it?”

“That fucking...that fucking *wasp!*”

Stacy screamed.

“Jesus Christ, woman! It’s in *here*, not in *there!*”

“George, kill it!”

“I don’t know where the fuck it went!”

That was true enough—he couldn’t see the wasp anymore. The lounge was a big room—there were plenty of places for an insect to hide.

He stared at his reflection in the picture window. Every room that *could* have a picture window *did*. That was expected. Like the kitchen. And the wife.

He looked haggard. Maybe it was the fact that a few of the city’s lights managed to break through, to make his reflection wavy, distorted.

Or maybe it was the wasp.

Maybe it was the wasp.

He shook his head. *No*.

“George?”

Where was the fucker? Not on the television; not on the paintings; not on the walls. Maybe it was on the sofa, or the other three chairs in the room. All of them were upholstered in black leather; a wasp could crawl around easily on them and not be seen. Why hadn’t he made his apartment wasp-proof? Stupid of him. Dangerous of him.

“That’s the booze,” he mumbled. Then grinned. “That, too.”

“George?”

He turned around. Stacy was inching out of the kitchen. Her hands were clutched in front of her breasts—which were almost covered, in that dress; he had good taste in feminine clothing—and her eyes didn’t stay put in one place for more than a second.

“Where is it?”

“Not here anymore.”

“But where could it have gone?”

“Back into the kitchen? Upstairs? How the fuck do *I* know, Stacy? It’s a wasp—it can go anywhere it wants to.”

“You need to kill it, George.”

“Me? You’re the one afraid of it.”

“Kill it!”

“Can’t kill it if I can’t find it, can I?”

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. “George...”

“Ah, Christ. Don’t you cry on me, Stacy.”

“I’m scared of wasps, George.”

“What’d they ever do to you?”

“They’ve stung me, that’s what!”

“Maybe you’ve built up some kind of immunity then.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’ll write that off as the liquor talking. You want the wasp dead so bad, *you* find it. *You* kill it. Don’t see why I gotta do everything for you. You’re a big girl.”

She turned and went back into the kitchen. She didn’t scream. Apparently the wasp had not flown in that direction.

Where *was* it? He surveyed the room again. Could the wasp really vanish that quickly? Sure, it could fly, and it was relatively small...but it was big enough to buzz when it flew. It couldn’t go from one place to another silently, especially not when he was looking for it. Could it?

He glanced down. The wine was spreading across the carpet. He picked up the bottle, poured what was left of it into his mouth.

“We gotta call somebody to clean this fucking carpet,” he called out.

Stacy didn’t respond.

He set the bottle on the glass coffee table, too drunk to be concerned about condensation. He glanced around for something to mop up the wine with, but there wasn’t anything in sight, nothing that wasn’t at least half as expensive as the carpet.

White carpet. Who the hell’s idea had it been to install white carpet?

He didn’t know that, but he knew it had been his own idea to drink red wine. And staring down at the spreading stain, he could only think of spilt blood. Not as it appeared in real life—he had never seen it in real life—but in the movies, as it slowly soaked through the cloth, spreading outward,

growing like a mutated amoeba. Maybe it was the booze—*had* to be the booze, he chided himself—but he was suddenly overcome with dread, as if he saw in that puddle some monstrous face, some evil portent of a horrible fate awaiting him.

And then the wasp flew into his vision and landed in the middle of the spreading puddle.

George stared at it. And stared at it. He willed it to go away—not out of fear, but out of surprise. Surely it wouldn't be this easy.

He began to laugh. He heard Stacy calling out to him, probably asking what the matter was, but George didn't answer. Instead, he kept laughing, giggling almost, as he raised his right foot and brought it down hard.

But the wasp was too quick, and it took flight, buzzing past his face. George yelped and jumped back, hitting the table. Somehow he kept his balance, and his eyes on the wasp.

It flew to the window and landed atop the lights of some distant skyscraper. For a moment, the wasp appeared gigantic, big enough to cover an entire skyscraper. George shook his head, willing the image away, and it went easily enough, partly because he was drunk, partly because the wasp was within striking range.

He slowly walked the couple of feet to the window, making no sudden movements. The wasp shifted a little, expectantly. It was about shoulder-height with him, and before he could second-guess himself he brought his hand up and slammed it down on the glass.

He didn't miss. He knew that immediately—he didn't miss, and he began to cry out in victory, but then he felt a searing pain in his hand, a heated iron needle driving into his palm, and instead of victory he cried in agony, ripping his hand away from the window.

The remains of the wasp came with him. And it was still alive. The needle drove in his palm again, and again, and tears blurred his vision as he slapped his hand on his thigh, causing the wasp to sting him a fourth time.

But this last sting was its death throes, and when George wiped his hand along his slacks, the wasp—and its stinger—were left behind.

Stacy ran into the room, phone in hand. She was drunk and tottering,

but the fear on her face was entirely sober as she said, “George? George?”

“Water,” he said. “Water. Aspirin. Fucker *stung* me!”

“George?”

“Stacy goddammit!”

She left him again, hopefully to get what he’d asked for, and he stared at his hand, red and throbbing. He saw the wasp’s remains on his pants and he squealed and wiped them off. The wasp fell to the carpet, and George stepped quickly away, noticing as he did so that he’d moved back to the spilt wine, and that the wasp’s body had landed dead-center in the puddle once again.

George took half a step back, but it wasn’t enough, and he fainted. The vision that followed him down into the darkness was the image of the wasp reanimating itself, and the knowledge that he wouldn’t really know if he was hallucinating or not until he came to, if he ever did, and part of him wished he would stay in the black forever.

# Failed Memory

by James P. Hanley

**Eric woke** slowly, alcohol still dulling his mind. As he looked around he saw his wife leave the bathroom and stand at the edge of the bed, nude. The track-shaped scars were visible on her thighs and in a line from her stomach to between her breasts. Her hair was growing over the shaved patch near her scalp. When he reached for her, she ran behind the curtains. Dust flew up from the fabric as she wrapped the harsh material around her. Outside, the soft wind blew pollen from the emerging buds and dusted the chipped driveway. The repaired 1968 Ford Nova—two months old on the day of the accident—was parked on the street.

“Eleanor,” he called to her, “the neighbors will see you.”

His wife turned toward the open window and unwrapping the curtain, she stood defiantly, her face blank and indifferent.

“There’s little hope; the crash scrambled her mind and you can’t handle her,” his mother said in her practiced pessimism.

“They don’t know what goes on inside her head,” he responded. “This could pass or the medication could take hold and all of this will be over. It’s not that she needs constant tending.”

When he described her state to the doctors, he said that it seemed as if her personality was jarred loose and thrown out the broken window. Her

moods vacillated often, he explained, rising or falling just before the next dose was due, but she was largely emotionless, expressionless and incommunicative. She forgot much and seemed untroubled by the lack of recall. In the weeks following the accident, Eric believed that routine would jar her into normalcy—the familiar cycles and rituals of their common life would restore her muted recollection. He called her *Sleeping Beauty* as she walked around the house in autonomic motion.

One morning, as she sat in the bathtub, he came in to check on her and she smiled weakly at him. Encouraged, he reached into the lukewarm, suds-caped water, and picking up the terrycloth, began to wash her back. Circling her sides he asked, “Do you remember that I used to wash your back, Eleanor, mostly from inside the tub?”

She looked confused; “No.”

“Sure, we loved bathing together; you don’t remember?” faking a disappointed tone.

He looked at her eyes, watching for a faint acknowledgement in the glossy, green pupils or in the movement of her lashes; none came. He had images of her mind stuttering to start, hindered by unfixable flaws as in the off-kilter engine of the car, memory trapped in a leaden section of her mind, but she would occasionally show signs of response to words with association, he thought—the periodic hope, wished more often than real.

“You are beautiful, honey,” he said looking at her as she stepped out of the tub.

During the day while Eric worked at the bank, a tall black woman came in to clean and watch out for his wife. Dressed in somber clothes, the woman would, when done, sit in a high-back chair and read her Bible while Eleanor moved about the house or watched television. On Tuesday, she drove her charge to the supermarket and as if instructing a home economics class, patiently led Eleanor to select from a scribbled list. “She’s gettin’ better,” was her exaggerated report as Eric paid her at week’s end. He envisioned her praying for his wife at Sunday services, trusting in miracles and unpredictable mercy.

On Saturday, he painted the downstairs hall while Eleanor sat outside

on a lawn chair out back, flipping through a magazine that she'd once ordered. Periodically, Eric would look out to see where she was. A neighbor passing by waved at Eleanor and then walked over to the lawn chair. Eric could see the woman's quizzical face and imagined that she had expected recognition but didn't receive it.

That evening, he took Eleanor into the living room where he had set up the movie projector and draped a sheet over a large painting on the opposite wall. She stared at the blank screen, briefly turning her head toward the whirring projector.

"This is a film of our honeymoon. Maybe you'll remember," Eric said.

"I don't want to see a film. I don't want to remember anything and I wish you would stop trying."

"Be patient; it's very short," he pleaded.

Eleanor's eyes squinted as her image danced across the screen in a blue bathing suit against the backdrop of the bleached sand and cresting waves. She was smiling in the film, mouthing undistinguishable words. Eric watched his wife's movement on the screen, recalling the allure of her lightly-tanned body that had seemed to glow in the sunlight. He remembered caressing her while in the water that day, his hands moving below the surface of the waves, and she spinning and diving into the churning sea.

"Do you recall any of our honeymoon?"

"I told you to stop that. I remember nothing," she said.

"You loved the beach."

"It was hot and uncomfortable—all that irritating sand. That's what I remember."

"That was our first time together. We held off until we married. That was your condition." He caught the rise in his voice.

"Are we done?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered and shut off the projector.

"What was she like, before?" the doctor asked during the next check-up.

"I need to know as a point of reference to determine any improvement."

Eric answered, slowly describing her as sweet, outgoing and friendly.



The physician frowned with disappointment. “Anything else?” he asked impatiently.

Eric realized that he could best describe her physically: the long, brown hair, the green eyes, tanned complexion and light make-up; her conic breasts and shapely legs—all physical, as if her character and personality were as vaguely familiar as the dresses in her closet that she’d worn infrequently. He described incidents as if characteristics could be drawn from actions: the late-night calls early in their relationship when she would tell him about her feelings, the surprise gifts, and the closeness to her sister. When he saw Eleanor in the waiting room after meeting with the doctor, he recognized that those physical features that were such a draw to him were largely unmarred but he mourned the disappearance of everything else.

One warm morning, Eric asked Eleanor if she wanted to go for a ride; she’d not been in that car since leaving the hospital. Before the accident, they’d often take long rides in summer, the windows rolled down and the radio on loud to be heard over the disrupted air that flowed in and was entrapped in the back seats. Eleanor was dressed in Capri pants and a gray, long-sleeve blouse. Her hair was curled and loose. Before they left, she went into a dresser draw and took out a kerchief and placed it slowly over her hair, tucking the loose strands underneath—an unconscious conceit that had always been a preparation for a summer ride. Once outside, Eleanor slowed her pace, and Eric wondered if she was getting flashbacks as she neared the car. He opened her door and she slid in the front, watching him as he moved around to the driver side and got in. When the engine started abruptly, she jumped. Eric drove around the neighborhood, periodically glancing at his wife. He wished he could know what was going on in her mind as they passed familiar streets. At first sitting rigidly, Eleanor slowly settled back, and at one point looked at Eric and smiled.

Before sleeping, she had routinely combed her hair, looking at herself in the bathroom mirror. With the door to the bathroom opened, Eric saw in and watched her movements. He used to think that she’d deliberately leave the door ajar as she went through her night-time routine—taking off make-up, brushing her hair, reaching under the nightgown to remove her

panties—all to tease. Now as she did some of the same, seemingly unaware of anything but the motion of the brush through her hair. That night, she turned to look at him several times, and he envisioned desire behind the blank looks, as if lust would be the first emerging emotion. She wore a short nightgown, and he stared at the flash of uncovered flesh as she came out and moved around the room. As she did lately, Eleanor would lie down on the bed, looking up at the ceiling until he'd turn off the light. But that night he moved toward her as he'd often done before her injuries. When he touched her arm, she pulled back.

“We used to cuddle; that was when we got real close together, like this.” He slid across, so close he could feel her breath. “We'd put our arms around each other,” he instructed.

She was still looking at him, and then she stretched out her hand to touch his face.

“That's very good.” He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand.

“We would touch each other all over,” he said, his hand moving down her arms and then across to her breasts. “Touch me,” he said.

Eleanor rubbed his arm.

“No, not there. Here.” He brought her hands down to his groin. “You were so good at touching me there.” His hands were below her waist circling her pubic hair. “We always snuggled without clothes.”

He lifted her up to a sitting position and took off her nightgown. While he undressed, she settled back down. Her thighs twitched.

“Just like before, remember?” Climbing on top of her, Eric leaned on his elbows, Eleanor gripping his back, holding on to the soft flesh at his waist.

When he penetrated her, he could feel her back arch. Looking down at her face, he was stunned by her twisted features, her mouth opening in an oval. Before he could do anything, she screamed like someone falling into an abyss, flailing, until hitting bottom.

# Shahid\*

by **Marie-Claude Bourjon**

*Translated by LJ Watts*

**The body looters** have gone, leaving the women bled white. The child gathers the weapons they discarded in their wake. He thinks of nothing; his gaze drifts over the village where the dying still moan.

Pain hardens his heart. His fist in the air, he curses the heavens. If only he had died, too! If only he could have saved his people! He drags his pickings behind him, shooting at the ruins and the rats. He decides to keep a knife and a pistol, which he hides under his shirt. He roots in the rubble for food and warm garments, for he knows he has a long way to go. Once in a while, he stumbles upon a cadaver dismembered by human fury, but his eyes stay dry.

All the animals have fled the village. Silence has returned to cloak the terror. The sun beats down like every day. The track stretches before him toward the hills where he hopes to find refuge. Hitching his shoulders, he slings the bag of meagre provisions onto his back and starts out on the dusty trail.

A melody swells inside him, one hummed softly by his mother when he

was very little. He sings, mumbling under his breath to give himself confidence and courage. The earth is so dry that his footsteps leave no trace. Soon it will be night. Full of feral fear, he starts to search for shelter. He scrapes a hole in the stony ground where he conceals himself like a lizard. Some dry shrubs will camouflage him.

All at once it is cold. The child curls up under the clothing he has brought with him and clasps his head between his hands. He does not want to hear the furtive sounds in the gloom that surrounds him. He summons sleep like deliverance and implores God not to let him wake up.

The next morning, the heat draws him out of his turbulent dreams. He creeps out of the stunted bushes that protected him and rummages through his bag. In it, he finds a few dates that will satisfy his hunger for a while. He sets off, his eyes locked on the hills. From time to time, he glances up at the sky and, for a moment, he can believe his mother's arms await him.

His march is gruelling. He drives away the images that remind him of what he has just left behind, probably forever, and focuses his thoughts on his footsteps. He drinks the content of his gourd sparingly, afraid he might not find a waterhole soon enough.

While he scrutinizes the horizon, his mood drifts between horror and hope. One more day, maybe a night, too. Surely he will find a camp in the heights. All of a sudden, his attention is caught by a barely audible scratching. Behind him, a scrawny dog is pawing at the ground. The boy places a date at his feet and takes a few steps back. The animal does not move. The child turns and goes on his way.

Fading daylight fills the boy with apprehension once again. He finally finds a spot with better protection. Hidden between two rocky outcroppings, he covers himself with loose stones, twigs and dry leaves. Just as he is about to fall asleep, stealthy breathing rouses him. Despite his panic, he plays dead, like an animal in a trap. He feels a warm tongue lick his face. The dog has followed him. Reassured, the child falls back to sleep.

The following morning, a sensation of warmth against his back awakens him. The movement he makes rolling over alerts the dog, which takes flight immediately. He needs to muster his strength, this time to reach the

summits. Without warning, the metallic beating of rotors plasters him to the ground. Quickly he ducks under one of his blankets. The thudding closes in, deafening. Two helicopters, looming brutally over the crests, make the sky shudder before they retreat in the direction of his village. He has already seen these huge insects invented by man to sow death. They spit fire like the monsters in his nightmares.

The child starts walking again, listening to the silence that surrounds him. He scrapes his hands climbing the grey and ochre rocks. The fatigue that takes over him is the tiredness of a man who has seen too much. At last, he reaches a promontory and sits down to rest.

In the distance, he sees what he was hoping for, but not without trepidation: a camp. From where he watches, there is no way to know who controls it now. Concealing his weapons, the child advances, ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger.

He repeats over and over again what he will have to say. "I come from the village of Mukaradeeb. I've lost my people. I seek asylum amongst my brothers." He chokes back his tears as he heads slowly toward the camp. His arrival does not seem to have been detected. Reaching the gate, and torn between terror and the desire to get it over with, all he sees are a few makeshift tents that look abandoned.

He finds no food or arms, or anything else that hints of recent human occupation. The boy suddenly feels in greater danger than if he had encountered other men. What lurks around him does not have a name. Worse than death, hatred engulfs what remains of his childhood.

The memory of his loved ones, buried now and forever in his entrails, no longer kindles his sorrow. His shredded heart becomes cruel. May the day come when all he knows is the acrid taste of vengeance. May the time come when he can cleave women's bellies and old men's heads without remorse. The child sets out again, not knowing where to go. He kicks violently at the dog that has found him again. He does not wish a companion he might lose. He wants to plane his soul until he does not know who he is anymore.

He no longer remembers how he has survived when, one day, he sees a camp where the activities convince him he is not in danger. The people, the

men and the women, who come to meet him, greet him with friendly gestures tempered by caution. The child stops, exhausted, filled with glacial solitude. They surround him, steady him, lead him to a safe place. Clutching his bag's shoulder strap, he answers no questions. He eats like an animal, watchfully. He lives this way on the outer edge of the camp, because he refuses to give up his fighting gear.

For days he lets no one approach him except to receive his food. The rest of the time, he hides in the rocky knolls nearby. He remains mute when spoken to. The same woman wearing the white blouse comes to see him each time. She talks to him without looking at him. He does not understand what she says. He is buried too deeply in his own distress to hear what goes on outside. But the young woman's kind voice seeps into his skin, his veins, his belly. He runs away when it becomes too much.

One day, he reaches his hand out to her to catch her attention. The young woman's dark, gentle eyes look at him, waiting. The child starts retching. In the midst of his vomiting, he pronounces in a splutter:

"Mother."

"You want to see your mother again, is that it?" she asks.

A spark flashes in the boy's eyes, and then goes out. He does not return for two days.

On the third day, probably famished, he is waiting in front of the entrance to the camp. The young woman brings him food and sits close to him, without a word. When he has finished, he looks at her for a long time, then says:

"Mother."

"Yes, I understand," she says without being certain.

The child picks up his possessions and leaves. She watches his silhouette slowly get thinner on the horizon. The black line of the boy's body dances in the heat rising from the ground.

The sharp shot that resonates in the distance makes the young woman jump. She sees the slender form fall softly, like a sapling, and disappear from the future.

# Waves Toward Zero

by Matt Dennison

**It wasn't** that Janice thought about breasts all the time, only when things were not going well. Or were going too well. Jim McRobert's speaking to her at that night's office party was a rare example of the latter. Flushed and swaying, he had paused in the doorway where Janice stood, just inside the room, smiling through her fear as the magazine had advised, her back against the wall, as the magazine had forbidden. A raucous male voice shouted "Jim-*bo!*" and he spun without looking, sloshing his drink across Janice's blouse. As he looked up and tried to remember her name, he raised a finger and waved it back and forth in front of his eye, ending on a downbeat of recognition. "*Janish!* Sh'prised t'see *you 'ere!*" he said, recovering enough to smile and lean so close that she could feel the warm drafts of his breath on her throat. She had blushed, then, feeling the liquid hesitate, roll out and over the crest of one rib then down another before finding refuge in her navel.

"Wouldn't miss it," she lied, pressing the circular bottom of the glass against her belly, dislodging the wave, sending it on down. The lowered

lights and pounding music of the party allowed her the courage to return his insensate gaze. That and the fact she had already exceeded her two-drink limit in the first fifteen minutes of the party. She had found the strain of constant, wrinkle-free smiling to be somewhat alleviated through the act of raising a glass to her lips, and never refused when the waiter showed up with his tray of warm champagne in plastic glasses. She observed, through the alcoholic magnification of her weak eyes—*Party? Leave Your Glasses at Home!*—Jim’s fat, moist lips contracting and relaxing over rounded teeth, and smiled at these, not him proper. Looking men in the eyes was far down on the list of social skills she had recently undertaken to develop.

“Let me find something to take care of that,” she watched his lips and tip of tongue say, realizing, for the first time, that she had been a lip-reader for most of her life. She wondered if she might find a deaf girl with beauty to spare, willing to deal.

And so she had stood there, smiling, wet, watching his thin back wander away until he was absorbed by the dark and vaguely threatening swarm of accountants.

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Later that night as she sat in her apartment, drinking hot tea and trying to sober up before going to sleep, she realized that Jim McRoberts was right: there was nothing, indeed, that could “take care of that.” But for twenty minutes she had worn her badge of splashed intent, half-hoping someone would ask why she was standing there, smiling. Then she could have told them of the man who had ventured forth to obtain a towel and return to minister to her need, her desire. As it was, no one else had spoken to her all evening.

She stretched out her arm and dropped her glasses on the coffee table, lay back on the sofa and kicked her feet until her high heels worked themselves off. One flew over her head and clattered across the kitchen floor, the other dropped just over the arm of the sofa. For some reason she had thought the shoes would make her more attractive, like the model in



the ad. All they had done was make her so afraid of walking that she had been frozen in place all night, towering over everyone, instead of almost everyone.

Janice forced that painful image from her mind and slid her too-familiar hands up and over where her breasts should have been if events had gone properly between the years of twelve and twenty. *Funny*, she thought, as she looked at the hands on her barren chest, *this almost satisfies my desire to touch a man*. Self-arousal, once the simplest, the best thing, suddenly revealed its myriad levels of meaning. Like two mirrors facing each other, the possibilities of appreciation inherent in the act grew in number, each minutely-framed scenario containing and being contained by the other, none of whom, strictly speaking, were her. She felt bitter tears forming and with a silent, rebellious laugh arched forward to the touch of that perfect lover, herself. But man, she remembered, as her little fingers caught, was a visual animal. What good was her excitement if he saw nothing to hold in his warrior hands? She felt embarrassed and picked up her glasses along with the newspaper, flipped through its pages then settled on the Lifestyle section where she saw a headline, 'Breast Enlargement: Blessing or Curse?' She decided that whatever curse lurked behind the blessing would be an improvement over the hell she presently occupied and wrote down the name of the doctor. She called his office from work the following Monday and made an appointment for Wednesday, her short day.

Wednesday morning, she dressed in her usual manner: a light-colored, high-collared blouse designed to hide what her mother had once told her was an overly-long neck. She didn't think it longer or shorter than anyone else's, but by now the habit of dressing as if her neck were a very private appendage was so ingrained that she never questioned her behavior. Indeed, the one time she had been forced to wear a collarless blouse to work because of a mix-up in her laundry order, she had had to leave because of a very real case of vertigo.

With the addition of a skirt that fell several inches below her knees, the job was nearly complete. She then pulled her hair up in a tight, twisted bun and speared it with three wooden staves. This thoroughly defeated the

purpose of the high collar she wore in spite of the current heat wave, but she liked the serious feeling of her hair pulled tight across her scalp.

Unsure about what finishing touches to apply, she finally decided on her best earrings, faux pearl necklace, and shiny black handbag. After checking the rubber bands she had placed in the joints of her glasses for the extra tension, she inserted the thick black arms into the restraining grasp of her hair, emptied her day purse into her black bag and went out.

Following work and a not-too-horrible bus ride downtown, she found herself in the lobby of the Kress Building, searching the framed-glass directory for a Dr Swaran on the eighth floor. There, room 817. She stood to the side of the busy elevator until only a middle-aged man holding a briefcase waited with her.

She had always hated elevators. When they went down she knew, ultimately, where they were headed. When they went up, she knew that it was a mistake for most. And though no one else behaved as if they were aware of the cosmological blunder they were enacting as they shot skyward, they always appeared more eager than usual to exit and separate.

The doors slid open. She entered, followed by the man, and squeezed into the far corner as tightly as possible. The man stared at the slowly-changing numbers until the elevator stopped, causing her to jump. She did not like that her stop was before his, always preferred that others be denied the heights of her ascension.

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After filling out her medical history Janice took a seat in the carpeted reception area. Twenty minutes later the secretary called her name. Janice stood, straightened her skirt, willed her legs to move. She had never before been summoned by a man.

Once out of the waiting room she found herself in a long, empty hallway. “Tiger or lady, why do I scurry. I’m in no hurry. Oh, yes I *am*,” she muttered as she peered into several rooms before finding the good doctor. She entered, sat on a small, upright chair, and waited. Dressed in an

official-looking uniform, he sat behind his desk with one leg crossed over the other. *Trying to look like a real doctor, I suppose*, Janice thought as she searched the walls for diplomas, finding none. Only full-length mirrors, surrounding her. Doctor Swaran nodded without looking up, raising his thick, black eyebrows in greeting.

“What is it, exactly, that you expect from a breast augmentation, Miss Joffery?” he asked, after he lowered his papers and looked directly at her.

*Exactly? Well, nothing, exactly*, was her first thought. *Everything, the second. Can't it simply be assumed that I want larger breasts, breasts of any kind, and leave it at that?* Was he impatient? She suddenly felt guilty, as if she were on trial for asking too much from life. If only it were not so bright in the room. Then she could think more clearly.

“I want,” she began softly, fingering the handbag on her knees as she stared at its repulsive brass clasp told a hundred times by mirrors. How could she not have noticed it before? She wished the doctor would stop looking at her so she could rip off the twisted lump of metal and slide it inside the bag which she would return first thing after this interrogation was over.

“Miss Joffery?”

Janice looked up, blankly. “Oh, I...” she said, wondering if she had smiled yet. She tried to smile with her eyes. In the mirrors she failed. The longer she took before answering, the more flustered she became. Unable to imagine what it was he wanted her to say, she found herself remembering the afternoon she had spent at Penny Wilson’s house in the third grade. They were baking cookies, an activity her own mother would never have allowed in their kitchen. No one was to bother Viola with silly requests. Penny’s mother, however, thought it was a splendid way to spend a few hours on a day when ominous black clouds were rapidly building up outside.

“Let it rain, we’ll make our own sunshine right here,” she had said, winking at Janice as she strapped on her apron and set the girls to work at the mixing bowl.

As she and Penny turned the sticky mixture with their long, wooden

spoons, Janice watched Mrs Wilson. The gathering storm, the heavy air entering the room through an open window and the sight of the tops of Mrs Wilson's breasts when she leaned over, revealing a secret world where two small animals appeared to nest, produced an unbearable sense of excitement in her. She found herself laughing crazily at practically everything.

Coupled with the giddy excitement, however, was an uncomfortable, nervous feeling that rose from her nameless depths and pressed against her rapidly thinning veneer of laughter. She felt herself increasingly exposed, shamed in some way, though her house was so much nicer, as her mother had repeatedly told her, than most people's. Especially the Wilsons'.

As she waved her spoon in the air, dizzy with laughter, her brittle, eight-year-old fortress cracked and she had cried. As with the laughter, she had no idea why. But now, sitting in front of this strange man, she understood. She knew that she had wanted to stay in that kitchen forever, as the black clouds raced and Mrs Wilson pushed back her hair with a floury hand and laughed out loud as the long strands fell back time after time.

"I want *life* to want *me!*" Janice cried out in a voice she had never heard before, then looked up in surprise.

Dr Swaran did not move, at first. Then he leaned back in his chair and stopped, momentarily, before opening a drawer and removing a business card. He held it upright between his first and second fingers, moved it back and forth then tapped it once, sharply, on his desk and extended his hand. Janice jerked forward and took the card. She saw the word 'Psychologist'.

"I often recommend my patients ..."

She lost the words between mirrors, watched the huge, hairy mouth slowly circling, forming the shape of "No" in hundreds of not-so-clever ways as she floated in the cool withdrawal of silence.

"... convenient time."

The words slapped back loud and flat as a black explosion. Janice moaned and lowered her head.

"So, Miss Joffery," he continued in an increasingly rapid voice as he

picked up her folder and stood behind his desk, “please make another appointment with my secretary and I’ll see you at that time.”

She left without making the appointment.

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After the vacuous silence of the solitary elevator ride back to ground level, the noise and activity of the street overwhelmed her. She hesitated within the wide-funnel entrance of the building and a woman carrying an oversized shopping bag ran into her from behind. When Janice turned around, the woman gave her a shockingly annoyed look before entering the stronger flow and being swept away. Janice gazed into the dizzying swarm of colors and faces which would surely be, if entered, the final waves toward zero she had feared her entire life.

*No one sees me*, she mouthed, then lowered her head to swallow the mud that formed under her tongue. She saw her reflection in the polished black marble that lined the entrance to the building. The complete lack of movement in the trapped stone face terrified her, stopped her throat. She stepped back and the face retreated, stopping only at the frozen-open eyes until the blackness shadowed over. She moved to the sidewalk and breathed deeply. The hot air stunned her into ever-deepening confusion. She clutched and bent, only to be propelled forward, her legs stepping fast and high.

Stoplight. Light change. She crossed the street with a group that elongated and thinned as its more energetic members hurried toward a waiting bus. She hurried, too, desperate not to be left behind. The bus closed its door and released its air-brakes before even the fastest member of the group arrived, but the light turned red and held it fast. Several men yelled, their faces red and running with sweat. An old man in an ill-fitting suit pounded on the door, crying, “Open up! We’re dying out here!” Others mumbled their indignant misery. A well-dressed young man stood next to Janice. His hungry eyes passed right through her as he surveyed the

possibilities. She tried to make herself visible but could not imagine how it was done. She moved her foot forward and pressed down, frowned at the filthy, shut door, but nothing changed.

A woman in a loose, half-buttoned blouse and tight, white slacks fanned herself extravagantly.

“I swear I’m gonna melt if that damn bus don’t open up,” she announced, lifting her dyed red hair.

“You *and* me,” the look-out man said, pulling at his collar as he spun toward the woman who was patting the back of her neck with a small, white cloth that she kept folding and refolding. The anger of those around her grew swollen and ugly until the door hissed open to accept the powerful ones, leaving Janice alone as the bus slowly groaned and pulled away from the curb, covering her with thick, black smoke. She approached a cab that was parked behind the bus stop. The driver sat on the passenger side with his feet on the curb, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar. Janice stood in front of him but he did not look up and she could not force the words. Finally he lowered the paper and looked up at her with cold, flat eyes.

“Lady?”

His mouth hung open as his neck-flesh tightened and released in rapid undulations. Janice looked down as quickly as possible, though she did not turn away until he made a noise and shook out his paper.

“She *like* you, ‘Melio!” a voice hooted from across the street. The driver grunted again and spat into the gutter.

Janice turned and walked slowly down the street, careful not to look too long at any one thing. She increased her stride, pretended to straighten her necklace so she could run her fingers across her chest. Truth. She smiled hard at a man, swung her handbag beyond her knees, alternately tapped her right and then left foot. She reached the curb and stopped, swayed dangerously over the edge then dashed through horns and curses only to end up back in front of the Kress building, staring into its deep black maw which continued to pump people in and out of its cool, purposeful interior.

I must go home, she realized, stiffening. I must be home.

She saw a bus full of pressed faces and winced. The memory of the taxi

driver made her shudder. Fly home, she half-thought, before feeling sick to her stomach and touching the image-thick marble to steady herself. “Help me,” she whispered, and leaned her forehead against the wall, her hand hovering just above faces. After a moment she rolled her head to the left, looked wearily at the street, then pushed away from the wall and began walking in the opposite direction, her eyes focused well in front of her as she parted the oncoming waves—so far in front that when she stepped into the shaded area beneath a store awning she had no idea why she felt cooler. To her right was a small department store window. She saw the decorated boxes and the colorful wildflowers scattered across the base which supported a single mannequin. *So cool*, she thought, following the lines of the dress. So lovely, the way she floated there, arm held just so, lips in a slight, permanent smile.

Janice’s arm slowly rose in kind as she leaned back to view the model complete before catching a shadow in the glass. Thin, bent slightly forward, her sister-image peered back intently as if to remind her of the painful difference between herself and the cool perfection of the mannequin. *Already old*, Janice thought, feeling the skin tighten across the backs of her wrists, her eyes bleed their color away.

“No,” she moaned, stepping back, pointing her finger at the darkened face. “You are *not* me. You are a lie. You are a *lie!*” she hissed, lunging at the glass as the old woman standing next to her, unseen, cried out and followed her to the ground.

Janice looked up at the face so close to her own, felt the nervous hands touching her arm, heard the dry voice calling for help.

“It’s my heart,” she gasped, squeezing the warm-paper wrist. “Tell them it’s my heart.”

# My Monster and Me

*by* Deborah L. Reed

**When I** bought my house three years ago, the monster came with it. The builder must have assumed I wanted one, for he created a little home for it in the corner of the kitchen. For a long time, I never gave a passing thought to my monster. Oh, I occasionally heard it speak—soft little hisses and gurgles—but its voice was so quiet, the noises so seldom, that I quickly learned to tune them out. For three years, my monster and I had an amicable relationship—it left me alone and I left it alone. Then one day it started to cry.

I noticed the crying Saturday morning as I walked through the kitchen on my way to the laundry room. At first I thought it was my imagination—the monster wasn't crying, it was simply making the same little hisses and gurgles it always did. But as the morning wore on, I became more and more concerned. Every fifteen minutes or so, I found myself walking to the kitchen and pressing my ear against the door of my monster's home. Every time I listened, it was still crying.

The first thing I did Sunday morning was to listen to my monster. To



my dismay, the crying was worse. The hissing sound was about the same, but the gurgling had increased in both volume and intensity. There was no doubt about it, my monster was sick. I literally wrung my hands. I was going to have to call a Monster Doctor. And they weren't cheap.

Now, Monster Doctors are an arrogant lot. In addition to charging an arm and a leg for their services, they make house calls at their convenience, not yours. Although my monster was getting sicker and sicker, I could not find a doctor who would come to my house any sooner than Tuesday morning. I obsessed about my monster all day Monday at work and when I got home the crying was louder than ever. Monday night was bad—I hardly slept at all—but Tuesday morning, to my surprise, the Monster Doctor arrived at nine o'clock sharp, just as he said he would.

"So where is it, lady?" he asked. (All Monster Doctors have two things in common—they always call women "lady" and they have hairy knuckles.)

I wordlessly pointed to the kitchen, then sat down on the couch. Whatever the Monster Doctor did, I didn't want to see it. I heard a soft squeak as he opened the monster's door, followed by a short moment of silence. I closed my eyes and sent up a quick prayer, please, please, don't let this be too expensive. I opened my eyes to see the Monster Doctor standing over me. He wasn't happy.

"When was the last time you checked on your monster, lady?" he said accusingly.

"Well... never," I stammered. "Monsters are ugly and I don't like to look at ugly things."

The Monster Doctor gave an exasperated snort. "You have to check on them once in a while, lady. You have to see if they are getting sick. This one is very, very sick. This one is on its deathbed."

"So what does that mean?" I whispered, but I already knew the answer.

"It means you need a new monster."

I remained on the couch for the better part of an hour while the Monster Doctor did his thing. There was a lot of loud clanging and banging, interspersed with muttered obscenities on the part of the Monster Doctor. At one point he walked past me while I was still on the couch and

returned a moment later with a large box. My heart sunk as I realized it contained my new, very expensive, monster. Shortly after that, the doctor was once again standing in front of me.

“I want you to see something, lady,” he said.

I wordlessly followed him to the kitchen and then gave a loud gasp. My dead monster was lying on the floor, looking for all the world like a gigantic disgusting maggot. It was a sickly white, cylindrical in shape, and a good five feet long. Rust-colored blood was oozing from a jagged wound on its side, and the tentacles on top of it sagged lifelessly. It was even uglier than I had imagined.

“What you have to do, lady, whether you like or not,” the Monster Doctor’s words broke into my thoughts, “is occasionally *look* at your monster. Ugly or not, it needs attention.” He pointed one hairy finger at my monster, whose blood was still dripping on my clean kitchen floor. “This could’ve been avoided with a little preventive medicine. If you had called me sooner, this monster might still be alive.”

I bit my lip and bowed my head. He was right, I realized. Even monsters need a little attention. I had contributed to my monster’s death simply because I didn’t want to look at it.

“You know what you have to do,” the Monster Doctor said as he glanced toward the little door in the corner.

I nodded solemnly. This had to be done. If I looked at my new monster now, while the Monster Doctor was here to give me support, I would be able to occasionally check on it in the future.

“It’s just a baby,” the doctor said softly. “It’s not nearly as ugly as your old monster. Go ahead... open the door.”

I crossed the room and reached for the door handle. I opened the door and looked at my new water heater.

# Family Gathering

by **Shaune Lafferty Webb**

**There's a price** to pay for being an only child—like being visited by four separate branches of the family in so many weeks. In my case, the fault lies entirely with my Aunt Margaret. Of course I was well acquainted with her passion for family history, but I never dreamed she'd take it so far.

It all began a long time ago when, as a child, she developed a fondness for roaming around the old cemetery that was perched on the hill an easy two-street walk from her house. Even in those early years, it must have been an odd expedition to witness. The mandatory picnic basket hadn't yet emerged as part of the ritual but, according to my mother, big sister Margaret never failed to equip herself with one of their father's best pens, innumerable sheets stripped from their mother's precious writing paper and, on one occasion, the family Bible which, through some unfortunate accident, never fully explained, she managed to drop down an open hole. To this day, her retrieval of the Bible from the yawning hole remains an often discussed, yet never resolved, talking point at family affairs. The Bible's tumble did account for the scuff marks on its leather cover and the

grass stains obscuring great-grandmother Isabel's birth date on the first page where someone, curse them!, had attempted to draw up the family tree.

After repeated attempts to lure my mother into these regular adventures, Aunt Margaret finally yielded, conceding that, as my mother put it, dragging a wailing protégé up and down hills between rows of toppling headstones gave altogether the wrong impression. Since my aunt had no children of her own, it was only natural that, as soon as I reached an age when my legs were sturdy enough and my command of the alphabet adequate enough, I was initiated into the hunt.

Every first Sunday of the month, we struck off from my grandparents' house, Aunt Margaret carrying the enormous cane basket and sporting the pre-requisite straw hat, which, over time and exposure to the elements, developed a certain list causing its large and battered brim to flap like the broken wings of some outrageous bird as she marched along. I trailed up behind, keeper of the notebook and never fewer than two pens (in case one ran out), ready to jot down names and dates as she dictated. Invariably, the cane basket was stocked with as many reference books as she could stuff in, a nice thick blanket to sit on, and a picnic lunch that consisted of daintily wrapped chicken sandwiches, a thermos full of home-made lemonade, and a tea-cake she'd freshly baked the night before. Precisely at noon, we'd spread the blanket on the nearest patch of lawn, delve into the basket, and neatly arrange our repast. Our little tea party never failed to elicit the tacit curiosity of the more conventional day-trippers who'd come to lay flowers or eradicate weeds infesting their loved one's final abode.

There were only two rules to these Sunday excursions: I was to behave respectfully at all times and I was never to let my attention wander while my aunt recited the various names and dates from the headstones. It was fun, most of the time, except Aunt Margaret never seemed to appreciate the vagaries of the weather. Many a Sunday afternoon I trudged home, mud splattered and soaked to the skin, anticipating the reprimand I always received when my mother spotted the damage to my good clothes.

The Internet was probably the best thing that ever happened to Aunt Margaret. The long-standing Sunday ritual of slinking around sinking

graves and spooky crypts went by the wayside. Instead, armed with a newfound enthusiasm for exhausting the potential of search engines, Aunt Margaret launched wholeheartedly into an improved Saturday ritual of wafting about the corridors of air-conditioned libraries. And for a while at least I still went along for the ride. The long-suffering librarians usually blanched when they saw Aunt Margaret coming and I'm sure some covert alert was sounded among the staff whenever my aunt discovered some obscure reference that necessitated a sortie into the newspaper archives. Dust and folios went flying in all directions, followed by a less than dulcet "Yahoo" that echoed down the stacks and off the ceiling when the elusive article was unearthed.

Sadly, though, the picnic lunch had also been superseded by a visit to the local coffee shop. The odd show we'd made of ourselves in the cemetery paled in comparison with the spectacle we made in the coffee shop. In her later years, Aunt Margaret had taken to wearing bright orange tennis shoes and the floppy straw hat had suddenly and inexplicably sprouted a garland of gaudy silk blooms around its brim. Worse still, my aunt had adopted a pair of overalls as standard dress. The overalls themselves might not have been so conspicuous if Aunt Margaret hadn't elected to embellish them with vivid red hearts appliquéd in the most inappropriate places.

Inevitably time moved on and, with it, my scope of commitments—first there were my studies to consider and later my burgeoning flower shop began to demand more and more of my time. I tried to explain the situation to my aunt, but my carefully worded plea only elicited a lengthy monologue on the early life of Great Uncle Someone-or-Other who, apparently, had been an avid gardener, hence establishing a predisposition for horticultural pursuits in the family. Frequent protests notwithstanding, my input into her enterprise dwindled to occasionally changing the toner cartridge in her printer.

Three months ago, Aunt Margaret had died at the grand old age of ninety-five, leaving me the custodian of a lifetime accumulation of notebooks, photographs, and photocopied birth certificates. I didn't mind; it wasn't as though she could have taken them with her. But I'd be lying if

I said that I wasn't shocked when I arrived home late one Wednesday evening and found her, end up, nose down in the wardrobe of my spare bedroom, scavenging around through the boxes. She couldn't produce names and dates off the top of her head anymore, she informed me once I overcame my understandable surprise, and was trying to find the burial place of one Reginald Arthurs.

It was that initial acceptance of my aunt's unorthodox visit that got me into so much trouble. Aunt Margaret started popping in unannounced on a regular basis after that and, ultimately, so did each and every late relative as she progressively tracked them down on the other side.

I'm not selfish and my interest in nurturing my ancestral tree hasn't waned. I do enjoy meeting the various members of my family and hearing their stories, but entertaining them has become something of a chore. It's not as though I can just whip out the coffee pot and the occasional cheesecake. And lately, my dearly departed have developed the unfortunate habit of arriving en masse at all times of the day and night. It wouldn't be so bad if only I could persuade them to use the back door, but the sight of all my spectral relatives constantly coming and going through the walls is beginning to upset the neighbours.

# Skin Deep

by Lacy Marschalk

**The radio ad** said the sunscreen company was holding an open casting call for ‘real women, ages 16-24’ to star in its spring marketing campaign, but I knew what that really meant—they wanted undiscovered model-types, girls with large eyes and symmetrical faces, bleached-white smiles and long, lean legs. Perhaps they’d select girls too short to qualify for the runway, with a dusting of freckles across the nose or with a few extra pounds in the butt and breasts—they were looking for swimsuit models, after all—but that was as close to ‘real women’ as they’d get. I knew they didn’t want girls like me—those described as “big boned,” with eyes that were too squinty and breasts that grew at a much slower rate than their thighs and hips—but, having just reached the minimum age requirement a month before, I ended up at the Fiji Sun casting call as “moral support” for my best friend, Shannon, who was already imagining her tight, bikini-clad body on a two-page spread in *Seventeen*.

Shannon and I had met at the beginning of the sixth grade when she moved to Cool Springs from another Houston suburb, and at the time we’d

looked far more similar. I had always been big boned, as my mother liked to say—even though I now know from reality weight-loss shows that the term is a lie, that no one's bones are bigger than anyone else's, that we all have a skinny person embedded inside of us—and Shannon had not yet lost her baby fat, either, and she still had her braces and patches of acne across her chin and brow. But in the eighth grade when her braces came off, she transformed almost overnight. With her new perfect white smile, her long ash blonde hair looked silkier, her face looked leaner, and her skin looked clearer, the pimples fading away. She started getting a lot more attention from boys, having her first heavy make-out session in the backseat of sophomore Matt Peterson's Ford Focus just a month later, while I was still waiting for my first real kiss. But it wasn't Shannon's train of new boyfriends that bothered me—it was the fact that she knew she was good-looking now, that she knew she was better looking than me.

I knew she didn't really think Fiji Sun would select me to model for them; she just wanted some company on the day-long excursion into downtown Houston. But I had nothing better to do that October Saturday, so I agreed to tag along. The radio ad had said the casting call would begin at 10:00, but by 9:30, when Shannon and I reached the community center Fiji Sun had co-opted, the line was already a hundred people deep, and that was only counting the girls we could see from the outside of the building. Once 10:00 rolled around, though, the line began to move pretty rapidly, and by 10:45 we had reached the entrance to the gymnasium where the casting call was being held.

The line wrapped half-way around the gym, with girls paused at three stations—one to register, one to have pictures taken, and one to be weighed and measured. Girls who'd already gone through the stations were waiting on the bleachers on the left side of the gym. At the first station a woman with an orange tan handed us each a pink sheet of paper to fill out and pointed to the numbers at the top of the page. "Hold on to your sheet and don't forget your number," she said, waving us on. While we waited to have our pictures taken, I took two pens from my purse, and Shannon and I filled out the forms—name, address, phone number, age, hair and eye



color. Was I available to work during normal weekday business hours? I checked no, Shannon checked yes. At least I now had an excuse for why they wouldn't select me.

At the next station we stood in front of a beach backdrop—complete with sparkling blue sea, fake yellow sun, and plastic palm tree—and had Polaroids taken. Shannon smiled her happiest smile and tilted her head to the right, her hair a golden cascade down the side of her face. I tucked my hair behind my ears and smiled thin-lipped, as if I were posing for a passport or driver's license photo. The photographer, a girl not much older than us wearing glasses and Bermuda shorts, taped the Polaroids to our sheets before they finished drying and waved us on to the next station.

As our smoky images appeared in the silver emulsion, Shannon bemoaned the poor lighting in her photo and the greenish shadow over her face.

"You still look beautiful," I said, but she just shook her head and chewed her lip, her eyes studying every spot and flaw in her photo.

At the last station we were separated while wardrobers measured our height, weight, the size of our hips, breasts, shoulders, thighs, feet. They read the measurements aloud without emotion, recording the figures on the pink sheets before sending us to sit on the bleachers. "Remember your number, 127," a wardrober said, before throwing my form into a box and grabbing the next girl in line.

Shannon, contestant number 126, was already waiting for me on the bleachers.

"Isn't this exciting?" she said as I sat down. "Our first real casting call. What did you think?"

Before I could answer, a man with shaggy hair and a sun visor came out and called the group to attention. Our side of the gym instantly went silent.

"Thank you all for coming out," he said. "If I call your number, you are excused. If your number isn't called, please keep waiting."

Shannon leaned forward, her foot drumming against the wooden bleachers, but at the end of the list our numbers had not been called. About thirty girls got up when he was finished, some of them crying, some of

them looking like they were about to start. The girls that were left were visibly sizing each other up, comparing themselves to the girls who'd just been dismissed. Shannon squeezed my hand. "That's a good sign, right? We're still in."

"Well, you are way prettier than any of those girls who just left, so I'd say you have a really good chance," I said.

She frowned. "Well, so do you. Those girls that left were a dime a dozen. You have such a unique look—you really stand out in a crowd. That's what these ad execs want."

I thanked her, but I knew she was just being nice. No one ever uses the phrase "unique look" in place of beautiful or pretty or even attractive. But I didn't kid myself that I was any of those things, so Shannon's description of me didn't hurt.

The shaggy-haired man came back out and this time announced he would be calling the numbers of girls who would be moving on to the next stage. Shannon returned to her nervous hand-gripping, foot-tapping position, and at the end of the list we still had not been called. The man told the rest of us to "sit tight" while the second group of girls followed him out of the gym. When he returned he resumed calling the numbers of those who were "excused."

"115, 117, 118, 123, 125, 126, 127, 130..." he called.

Shannon's mouth dropped open and her nails dug into the fleshy part of my palm. Then she dropped my hand and we were both standing and joining the line of girls exiting the gym.

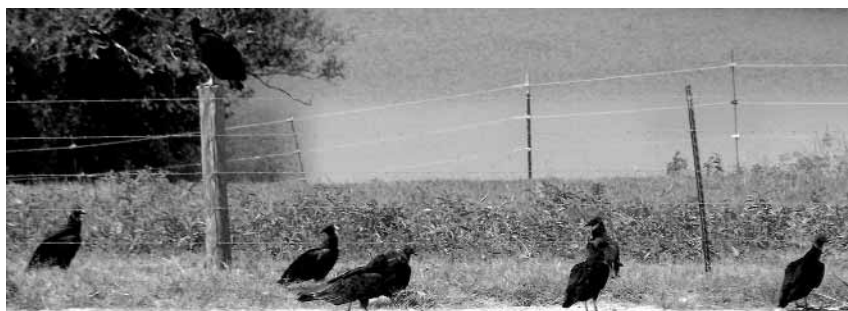
"It's okay, Shannon," I said as we walked to her car. "They obviously had a very specific look they were going for. They'll probably pick some girl who looks just like every other sunscreen model, blonde, blue-eyed, and boring."

But Shannon didn't say anything. She numbly handed me her keys and walked toward the passenger side of her car. On the way home, while I sang along to one of her iPod's more upbeat playlists, Shannon curled up in the seat, crying softly and staring out the window. I had known that she wanted the gig, but I hadn't realized how sure she was that she would get it. I had never expected to be selected—I knew I wasn't pretty enough, that I wasn't

model material. But Shannon, who knew she was beautiful, was perhaps just realizing that she wasn't beautiful enough, that her pretty face and long legs weren't even good enough for the second stage, much less to win the final prize.

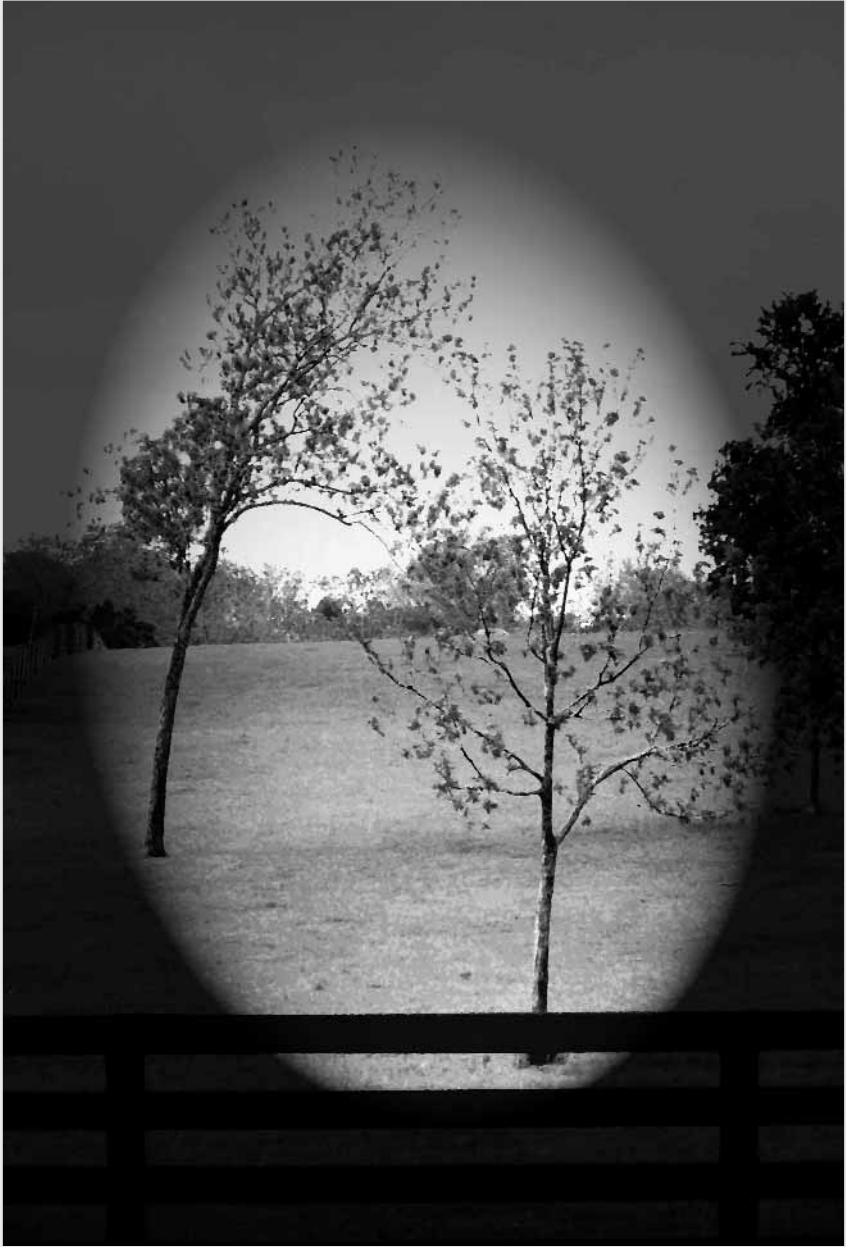
When we got to my house, I got out and she climbed over the console into the driver's seat. "Call me tonight if you feel like doing something," I said, and she just nodded, both of us knowing that she would not call, that it would be days before she could look me in the eyes again, and that, even then, it would never be the same.

*Photography by Christopher Woods*



*above: 'Buzzards'*

*right: 'Some Young Trees'*



*Photography by Christopher Woods*



*above: 'Moonlight'*

*right: 'Winter Sketch'*



# Call of the Currawong

by Gavin Austin

**I see** his smiling face then he turns and disappears. Sometimes he comes unbidden and stays for hours. Other times, I must conjure him from the recessed shadows of memory as I picture his face and incant his name.

The listing rays of late afternoon sun fall in golden bars across my window as I sit, a prisoner of this room, trapped in the third-class suburb of exile. Aging neighbours with desolate eyes speak with foreign accents and tend tomatoes that grow in pots by balcony doors. Along the back streets unreadable graffiti fades in half-forgotten obscurity.

Through the glass I watch night's cunning approach. Currawongs dart from intricate branches and stab the stalking evening with their plaintive cries. They warn of rain and of things more foreboding. Across the road the streetlight awakens and glows with a silver halo.

I draw the curtains on the dying day, shut out the currawongs, close in my isolation. Content in my discontentment, I sink into the embrace of the threadbare armchair and ruminate, addled memory my companion. Cushioned by silence, as is the currawong's call.



It was three weeks ago. I know that because I marked it on the calendar hanging on the back of the kitchen door. Most of the morning had been spent watching the progress on the demolition site where the old Mayfair Hotel stood diagonally opposite my block of flats. A workman with a bulldozer propelled a pile of rubble from one side of the lot to the other and back again rather like a reluctant child pushing cabbage around their plate.

I tired of the seemingly pointless bulldozing and was watering my Madonna lily and admiring its solitary white wick-and-flame flower when the phone rang. It was almost as if it had a different tone, which made the hair on the nape of my neck stand on end and a shiver salsa the length of my spine. I tried to ignore its shrill call.

“Hello,” I said, almost silently, my dread rising.

“Hello,” a voice I nearly recognised echoed.

“Yes?”

“Is that Albert?” An alarm bell sounded, echoed through the dark alleys of my head.

“Yes. Who’s calling?”

“It’s...” Then silence, but the line had not gone dead.

“Who is this? What do you want?”

“It’s Mitchell.”

“Mitchell? Mitchell who?”

“How many do you bloody know?” he snorted. “Mitchell Bickford. Your son.”

My son? Now this was extraordinary. It must have been about fifteen years since I last saw him. Although it doesn’t seem too long ago that I was paying for his schooling. Skinny young thing with wild hair and eyes the colour of the sea on a sunny day. What could he want?

“Right, well ... yes, Mitchell?”

“I need to see you.”

“You might as well know the money’s gone...”

“I don’t want your money,” he hissed. “I need to see you.”

“Right,” I said, thinking a visitor would be a good excuse to give the flat a cursory clean. “When did you have in mind?”

“How about now? While my nerve holds.” His voice trailed away, betraying him. “I’m across the road. Can I come up?”

I looked out the living room window. By the street lamp on the other side of the road, a man stood with a mobile phone clamped to his right ear. He was looking up at my window.

Words would not come at first. I stood nodding my head and, as I did so, the words started to flow as I watched him cross the road towards me.

“Oh, well ... yes, you’d better come up. Buzz number twelve.”

I hung up the telephone and quickly picked up the scattered newspapers, heaped them into a neat pile. There was no time to do anything about the damp socks and underpants draped over the back of a dining chair in the corner. A loud whirr filled the room; I had almost forgotten the sound the intercom made.

“Come in ... Mitchell. One flight up and turn to your right,” I said into the handset, and pushed the button to release the security door at the same time.

A short sharp rap sounded at my door. I opened it and was confronted by a younger version of myself. The wild hair was worn short and held in check by hair gel. His eyes were still the colour of the sea but there was something different. They possessed a dullness. They were the colour of the sea just before a storm was about to hit. And it appeared the tide was on the turn.

“Come in,” I said, gesturing with a sweep of my hand. “Sorry the place is a mess. I haven’t been too good lately and ... well ... I don’t get many visitors anyway.”

“No need to explain, Albert. My place would be the same if I didn’t have help.”

There it was again. A warning bell going off in my head. What was it about the kid that made dread rise like bile to my throat?

“Look,” I said, in a rush to get the words out before I could change my mind and detain them. “You might as well know your old man’s got prostate cancer. Had it for several years and losin’ the bloody battle. The damned thing has finally gotten into my bones. Now they’re givin’ me about three months.”

It had been too hard to tell myself the truth. But, there, telling someone else had done it. I had said it out loud and it was out there now instead of raging about inside my head. I had freed the caged lion.

We faced off, still standing. Then, as if carefully choreographed, we each took a couple of steps forward and sank into an armchair. We stared at each other in silence for what seemed like eternity; the time it took to smoke a cigarette.

“Well ... checkmate,” he said finally, as he crushed the cigarette butt in the overflowing Nescafe-lid ashtray on the coffee table. “I have full-blown AIDS.”

He exhaled the last puff of smoke with the extraordinary statement. His eyes were strangely still, vacant almost, and the smoke added to the surreal effect like a scene from a David Lynch movie.

“AIDS! How can you have AIDS?”

What kind of twisted game was the kid playing? Didn't he know I could do without hearing this ridiculous crap?

“Albert, I've stood outside this building three times this week trying to muster the courage to face you ... to tell you. The doctors at St. V's say that, despite how well I look right now, things are grim. AIDS-Related Lymphoma. There are lesions on my brain that will shortly take control. So I ... you know ... I don't have much time either. They can't say how long but it's more likely to be weeks than months.”

The words savaged me as he uncaged his own lion.

“Jesus Christ, boy! Does your mother know?”

“Yes.” His stare probed me. “She gave me your address. Found it on the electoral roll at the library.”

“But AIDS? Didn't you know to look after yourself? Didn't she teach you anything? How...?”

At once the anger boiled within me. It seethed and smashed against the cankered parts of my decaying body.

“Jesus Christ, boy! You had a choice. I didn't get a choice with cancer. But you, ... are you totally stupid?”

Tears stung my eyes, purple flushed veined hollow cheeks, and my finger stabbed the air in front of him.

Mitchell leapt to his feet.

“Somehow I expected more of you,” he said. “But I was wrong. I’ve had all this shit from her. You two should have married, you’d have made a great pair. Well, stuff you both.”

I thought he was going to hit me. Or worse, I imagined he was about to drop to the carpet in front of me. Instead, he turned and moved towards the door. I was paralysed. This was madness. He, the bastard child born of two people’s denial, had found me after half his lifetime. Now he was about to walk out. And I could do nothing.

“Stop,” I shouted. “Please stop.”

He paused then walked back towards me, stopping in front of my chair.

“Why?” He leaned forward and his narrowed eyes were close to mine; they searched for the right answer.

I took a deep breath and spoke slowly.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. You are my son. The hows and whys of what’s happened don’t matter. I always wanted the chance to be a father to you. It may be too late. She kept you from me all those years by saying I was a no-good drifter and it was better for the boy if I didn’t call. Last I heard of her she was getting married. Then, out of the blue, you turn up. At first I thought you were after money, then I thought she’d sent you to somehow get back at me. Now, as my wretched life draws to an end, you tell me you have AIDS. It seems like some cruel joke.”

“No joke, Albert.”

“I’m so sorry, boy. This dying thing ... it’s so unfair. Oh, I don’t mean for me, I’m a silly old bugger that never amounted to much anyway. I’m no great loss. But you, you’re a great looking kid with...”

I was about to say with his whole future in front of him, but stopped myself in time. I shuffled my feet and flexed my toes in their tartan slippers. I bit down hard on my bottom lip to still its trembling and tasted the saltiness of blood.

He moved closer and perched his lanky frame on the arm of my chair. I could smell his cologne. His knee knocked with mine. I drew back, made myself smaller and shrank into the upholstery. He reached and placed an unsteady hand on my shoulder.

“Life is rarely fair and doesn’t seem to get any easier ... just more familiar,” he whispered. “I guess it’s what we do with our time that counts.”

He held my gaze with his hypnotic stare. The sea appeared strangely calm as his eyes washed over me.

At once I felt ashamed I could do nothing for this remarkable young man: my son. How bravely he appeared to face life, while I was holed-up in the dark cave of fear. Now he exuded a dignified, quiet acceptance of his impending death.

I reached and patted his thigh with my bony hand. I guess it was the equivalent of a full-on hug for those unused to displays of affection.

“I had to come and see you,” he said. “To see if you’re the man I’d always imagined you to be.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Not at all. I know you are that man I’d told my school friends about. I know you are my father ... my real father.”

I felt an overwhelming giddy feeling that I thought might be pride.

And with that, all that needed to be said had been taken care of. We sat in silence for a few minutes: he with his hand resting on my shoulder and me with my hand on his leg.

“Guess I’d better get going then,” he said, as he got to his feet. “Don’t you get up, I’ll see myself out.”

“Okay, boy.”

He walked to the door, turned its handle and faced back towards me.

“Hey, maybe I can come by again soon?”

“Please promise you will.”

“Okay ... Dad.” He smiled for the first time.

Somewhere in that strange sweeping serenity, I think we both knew he wouldn’t call again.

“Goodbye, Mitch,” I said, as he closed the door behind him. “Take care, son.”

I am transported back to the present and find myself sitting in the same shabby armchair from where I had watched him leave. For some reason the currawongs’ calls are more mournful and unsettling tonight. I block the sounds from my head and flick on the television.

It is raining as I pull back the duvet and climb into bed. I hear the beads of rain softly strike my windowpane with a soothing rhythm. And I hear the wet needles of the restless casuarina outside murmur and sigh in the night breeze. A good night for sleeping, I think as I roll onto my side. My thick-lidded eyes close as I surrender to the embalming darkness. I listen to the song of the casuarina and the rain.

The morphine is starting to take effect. The chemist has added cherry flavouring this time, which helps me to get it down.

The pain gets much greater now and the medication clouds my mind. My blood slows, silts, as it sluggishly courses my vascular tributaries. But I know it is Mitch. He stands at the foot of my bed and tells me he loves me. Then he says something I cannot make out. He is speaking but there is no sound. I look deep into his eyes. I am swimming, drifting, drowning in a motionless sea.

My eyes open apprehensively and look to the clock radio beside my bed. Its fluorescent display blinks 05:22 am. A currawong trumpets an urgent cry to the first grey light of morning. I try to remember what it was that woke me. An alarm bell, yes, that was it. But all is silent in the still room.

I remember his face and his smile just before he turns to leave. A shard of dread stabs me deep in the gut as I realise he has made good on his promise.

I expect she will phone shortly.

# Bicycle Clip

*by* Peter Lingard

**My only** line of sight is under the car against which the small van has jammed me. I don't know how things started but I do know the decrepit looking van skidded toward me, side on and in such a way that I couldn't escape its path. It knocked me from my bike and sent me tumbling toward the car. There wasn't time for fear to set in but I did believe the car was about to run over me. I think the van flipped and landed partially on the car and partially on me, bringing us all to an immediate halt. I'm stuck between the two vehicles, face down with my arms pinned beneath me.

I can't move and I'm in agony. And I'm scared. Jesus, I'm scared. I thought I wasn't scared before, but I am now. Plus, I'm perspiring a lot.

If I rest my chin on the ground, my line of sight decreases and my back-pain increases. I have other bumps and scrapes but they seem cosmetic compared to the pain in my hips and back. Even when I strain to hold my head up, I can't see much. However, I don't want to miss whatever's being done to get me out of this mess. I can see the dry concrete pavement immediately in front of me, the underside of the car's chassis, which is dirty

and has patches of rust and the fat tyres, the edges of which are balding. It must have started to drizzle because the concrete road beyond the car is wet but I can't make out any raindrops. Some of my fellow cyclists stand with their toes pointing toward me at ten-to-two, their multi-coloured shins and ankles atop black-clad feet. We all wear bright colours when we're riding, as some motorists need a hint that they don't own the road. We've been turning out gang-handed, dressed like psychedelic nightmares for months. A fat lot of difference it made today!

Fellow riders, those who stayed with me, occasionally call out. "Hang in there, Mike."

"Does this mean you won't be with us for next week's race?" A couple of guys shushed whoever made that remark. The question had humour but the shushing sounded like a death sentence. "We've got your back, pal."

*My back?*

"Your bike's totalled but the club'll get you another one. The insurance'll pay. It's time we got something back from those blood-suckers."

"We're here for you, Mike. Keep your pecker up."

*Yeah.*

An ambulance arrived a few long seconds ago. I heard its sirens blare from a distance and, as the noise increased, I felt a measure of relief because it was coming for me. Or is someone else injured? Would I know? I can see the reflection of its still-flashing emergency lights on the wet road.

A paramedic's bag descends into view. Its owner drops to his knees beside it, then flattens out and pokes his head under the car. He wriggles forward a little to close the gap between us.

"Ello, mate. I'm 'ere to help you, but things are gonna take a little time. D'ya need anything right now? A drink?"

"No thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

*Are you fucking serious?* "Some pain. I can't shift my position." My words sound strange to me and I realise I'm clenching my teeth. "I can't feel my legs but my hips are killing me. Plus I can't stop sweating."

"Look, there's no way to sweeten this. You've got a van on top of you, so that explains the pain and the pain causes the sweats. We can't get to you at



the moment but we've sent for a crane to come and lift the van. Once that's done, we'll fix you up and get you off to hospital. Do you have medical insurance and ambulance cover?"

*Fuck off!* "Yeah, but I can't get to my wallet right now."

"No worries. We're mixing a pain-killing cocktail for you. If I slide it over, do you think you'll be able to drink it?"

"Do you have a straw?"

"Yeah. Hang on while I effort that." He raises his head and bangs the underneath of the car. A couple of flakes of rust drop to the cement. I get perverse pleasure from his embarrassment and, I hope, pain.

My neck is so tired but if I attempt to rest my head, the pain increases. I swing my head from right to left and back again. It helps.

I enjoy the ambo's absence, providing he returns with the painkiller soon. My life's like that; enjoying solitude in which to think and work. What should I think of now? *Positive thoughts* says a voice inside. But are conscious attempts to think positive, an admission that my situation is decidedly negative? Who the hell gives a shit! There have to be degrees of negativity and I'm not in a position to weigh them up right now, so positive it is. I love my work. My investment company is very successful and there's nothing more positive than that. Thank God I took the chance to start my own company, despite what Pam said. I earn an almost embarrassing amount of money and I'm generous with it. Mind, much of my generosity is at a cost to the taxman. I don't commit legal or social crimes and that must make me a good man. Or does it? Maybe it's a tad arrogant for me to assess myself as good and generous. Leave that for the eulogists; those not fazed at telling lies in church. They won't need to lie about me, will they? Stop! Positive thoughts, you idiot.

This pain is wearing me down. Can I lower my head? I try and the pain soars. I suck in my breath. No! Did I call out? I don't think so. I will not call out... I will not call out... I will not call out. Got to ask the ambo for a pillow or something. They have pillows in ambulances, don't they? Will I get to a point when I'll scream out my agonies? I hope not. I will not call out.

I need a piss. Shit, the way I'm sweating, you'd think my bladder would

be empty. Should I just do it here? Is my lower body lying on wet or dry cement? No. Even if the road's wet, there'll be steam. Someone will notice and the word will go out—he's pissed himself.

The ambo appears again. He's perspiring, too. Sympathy sweats? He puts on a happy face; a sweaty happy face, and makes eye contact with me. I can feel him straining to will his cheerfulness in my direction. Don't bother; I handle misery much better.

"Here you are, Mike. I'll just push it across to you. Is it okay for me to call you Mike?"

I want to reach for the plastic beaker inching slowly toward me. "Yeah, that's fine." It gets closer but the wait is frustrating. "What's in the cup?"

"Morphine. I know you're not screaming with pain but I've seen your situation and I can pretty much guess what you must be feeling. The morphine'll help."

I will not call out. Then again, I can scream if you want. It's getting to be a pain. Idiot! The pain's a pain? The blue cup arrives at my mouth and my trembling lips feel for the straw. I have to unclench my jaw and I almost spill the liquid but the straw helps me right the beaker. Once it steadies, I greedily drink the painkiller which tastes like a canned orange drink my son enjoys. "Thanks. Can you get me a pillow?"

"No worries. The morphine should take a few minutes but then you're going to feel a whole lot better." *You think?* "I'll get a pillow for you right away." Before he can move, I see a black trainer nudge his leg and I hear muffled words. "I'll be right back," he says. He starts his reverse wriggle again, making sure he doesn't raise his head.

Alone again. Wasn't there a song with that title? I try to think of the melody. I put the first three words to music and then it comes to me, not the rest of the words but the tune. I la-di-dah it in my head. What was the singer's name? An Irish guy... or at least an Irish name. Alone again, naturally. O'Something or other. A, b, c, d... O'Sullivan, that was it... Gilbert O'Sullivan. Why am I thinking of such crap? My mind was all over the place before the morphine. Shouldn't I be able to focus now that I don't have to outthink the pain? It's a drug, you ass. Yeah, but... oh shit, it's too much to think about.

The wriggler worms his head under the car again. The wriggler. I'll be Batman. No, that was The Riddler. Maybe I'll write a Batman story using The Wiggler as the nasty. Then again, how much evil excitement can a worm generate... or a fish on a hook?

"We've contacted your wife. As soon as her mother arrives to take care of the kids, she'll be on her way. Apparently, she only lives a couple of blocks away. The mother-in-law, that is—from your wife." *I know. It's four blocks, actually.* "The police will pick up your mother-in-law, take her to your house and then bring your wife here."

I smile. I don't want her here! She'll be solicitous of my injuries and tell me she loves me and she'll break down my defences against the pain. I don't want to start screaming or snivelling. I picture such a scene and something inside me curls in embarrassment. I will not call out. Will the morphine help or hinder me in resisting her softness? Stupid ambo doesn't know I spend Sundays on a bike to get away from Pam. Pam: pain. Yeah, but the pain's changed, so does it follow Pam will be different?

I work six days a week, twelve hours a day so I can stay away from the house. She gave me an ultimatum last year. Said I had to stop working Sundays. 'All work and no play makes Mike a dull boy', she said. She said I needed to spend more time with the kids. The brats. She's turned them into self-centred brats who think they're better than other kids because I earn so much money... because their mother knows how to spend the fucking money with what she thinks is style. Consumerism gone mad. How can I think of the kids like this? Poor sods didn't deserve to have parents like us. Thank God we found Sheila. She's a great nanny and the kids love her and respond to her.

I wish the bloody crane would turn up; get this show on the road. I've got to survive this to make sure my kids survive their mother. That's cruel. I'm lashing out because of where I'm at. Yeah, but, Sundays at home with the family? I do have some good times with Pam and the kids, separately and together. I love them, but I guess I must love them differently than the way other men love their families. Maybe there's something lacking in my emotional make-up because, overall, I'm not a family man. Thank you, Jim, for introducing me to cycling. The sport saved me... and her, too, I suspect.

Well, I'd better take a reservation on whether or not it saved me. Humour! That's got to be good. Maybe I'm not so badly hurt after all.

Wonder what's in her head now? Is she wishing me dead? She's set for life financially and that probably means she doesn't want or need me any more. I can't blame her really. She'd be better off with an attentive partner; someone who cared enough to ensure she enjoyed some orgasms. Am I wishing myself dead?

"I've just heard there's a pick-up truck on its way. We'll have that thing winched off you in a few minutes. How're you holding up?"

"I'm okay. The drug must have taken effect because I'm feeling a bit light-headed."

"Yeah. We gave you a pretty hefty dose. You feeling better pain-wise?"

"Yes, I am. Thanks."

"That's what we're here for. Got you a pillow. It should be easier to get to you than the cup. I'll keep pushing until you say 'stop', okay."

Sweet relief.

Where's Annabel these days? I would like her to be here. No, I wouldn't. Her over-the-top concern would make me feel sorry for myself. She'd be worse than Pam. Annabel. I thought she was boring because she liked sex on her back. She had two mind-blowing orgasms to every one of mine and I cheated on her because I wanted someone who didn't beat me out of my share. Is that what it was? Was I that stupid? And what did I get? Wildly adventurous Pam who was only wild because she was searching for her unattainable share of sexual satisfaction. What a pair we are. We probably deserve each other.

I must have nodded off. Pam is on her front, smiling at me under the chassis. Cyclists' legs are still in the background. Is she wearing a skirt? Are they checking out her legs and arse? I would be.

I've stopped sweating.

"Hello, darling. Did I wake you? How're you feeling?"

"Hi. I'm okay, I guess. They've given me a load of morphine so I'm not really compos-mentis. Kids all right?" Is she flattening her breasts? Jesus Christ, what's wrong with me. Don't be stupid. Focus.

Her smile broadens. “They’re fine. Mum’s looking after them. The police brought me here. You should have seen the speed we drove at. The streets were a blur.”

Hang on. Bringing Pam here... police... speed... the stupid remarks by some of the guys... am I dying? Could I be feeling woozy because I’m dying, as opposed to being high on morphine? “Am I dying, Pam?”

Her smile gets so broad; pinpoint of light reflect off her dental work. Her lips tremble slightly and tears well in her eyes. Crocodile tears?

“Of course not! Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Do your cheeks hurt?”

“What? Why would my cheeks hurt?” A tear rolls down one of them and splashes on the concrete.

“From all the smiling you’re doing for my benefit.”

“Well, that’s true. They told me to be positive and to smile for you. They also said I should tell you that I love you but I told them you already know that.”

“Yeah, I do. Know you love me, that is. I love you.” Oh, God, I do. Well, I do right now. Why can’t I be like other guys and enjoy an uncomplicated love affair with my beautiful wife? Get a grip. You knew she could make you blubber. I will not call out. Don’t give in to it. Relax. Relax in this state! Why not, I’m stoned, aren’t I? “Not that I’m saying that because you said it. I really do love you. Christ, the morphine has turned me into an idiot.”

“That’s okay, Mike. You’re in a lot of pain. The morphine’s good for you.”

Another tear rolls out and travels along her nose. It hangs on the tip for a moment before dropping to the ground. I watch it spread on the concrete that has been sheltered from the drizzle. She agrees I’m an idiot then.

“And the kids. Differently, of course. I love you all. I was thinking that as we have so much money now, I should sell the business and retire. Spend all my time with you. We could travel a lot and see the world together”

Something in her eyes tells me it’s not going to happen. She obviously doesn’t want me spending so-called quality-time at home. She’s very happy with the current arrangement. Shit. So much for me changing... for a love

affair with Pam... for domestic bliss. What kind of love do we have? Stupid question! I know exactly what kind of love we have. Can't we change; start over?

"We'll talk about that later, Mike. Right now, we have to get you out of this predicament and into a hospital. There'll be plenty of time to discuss the future." I hear a squeal of brakes. The paramedic's knees hit the ground and his head appears below the chassis. He whispers to Pam.

"Got to get up now," she says cheerfully, "and allow them to lift the van off you. Five minutes more and then you'll be in my arms and on the way to hospital. She smiles bravely and I have to fight my emotions again. "I love you." She purses her trembling lips and sends me a kiss. I close my eyes and fight to force back my tears.

"Heads up, Mike." It's the ambo and he's pushing another plastic cup toward me. I see Pam's ankles behind him. She is wearing a dress. When the drug arrives, I suck greedily on the straw. She isn't wearing tights.

I hear metal clunking. "Won't be long now, Mike. Hang in there." Was that the paramedic or one of the guys?

Gears grind and some of the weight lifts from my hips, which suddenly feel warm. A picture of Pam enters my mind and I imagine lying down beside her and falling asleep in her arms. It's warm.

The siren slowly becomes a real sound and I realise I'm in an ambulance and we must be in a rush to get to the hospital. I open my eyes and see Pam smiling down at me. I'm in her arms, just as she said I'd be. A medic is doing something to my midsection but I don't feel anything.

"You're going to be okay, darling. They say you'll lose your legs but that's not the end of the world. We'll see this thing through together; together for the rest of our lives."

Lose my legs. "What about my jewels?"

"I asked him and he said they'll probably be okay." She smiled. "I'll be in charge of the physiotherapy in that department."

I can live without my legs. Douglas Bader escaped from a German prisoner of war camp without his legs. Christ, this drug is bloody terrific. Pam in charge of the physiotherapy. Together. Just like she's stayed by me up to now in spite of my selfishness.

“But when I suggested we’d be together before, when we were under the car, your eyes seemed to say it wasn’t going to happen.”

“Really? Oh, you know what... I didn’t mean that. I remember being disappointed because you had voiced what I wanted for our future. I was a little peeved that you said it before me, that’s all. Sorry you saw something different but it doesn’t matter now, does it? We’re going to start a new life and it’s going to be wonderful. I can’t remember the last time I felt so happy. I know it seems wrong to be happy in these circumstances, but I am.”

“Me, too, Pam. We’re going to be okay.”

# On the Seventh Day He Woke

by **Joran C.A. Monteiro**

**It takes** a minute for his eyes to adjust to his surroundings. Thank God. He recognises the peeled paint on the ceiling. He'd somehow made it back to his office. Many mornings had been started this way.

What else can he deduce from his current situation? Well, he has puke on his shirt. It is cold, but not yet dry. He can recognise small pieces of pepperoni in the vomit. He must have eaten pizza before passing out, probably from the restaurant downstairs.

The fact that he is wearing shoes with mud on them indicates that he had been ambulant recently. But where exactly there was no way to tell. He tries to move, but decides after the world becomes black that he should probably wait another couple of minutes. After a couple of minutes he tries again. After another couple he manages to sit up. This brings upon him the feeling that the inside of his head is filled with beach sand laced with needles. In his dumb ambition to move he has started this feeling and now there is no escaping it. He starts to slump backward and downward again but he manages to resist. No, he will overcome. With effort he manages to



slide himself with his back to the wall so he can rest against it while examining the contents of his pockets. In his inside coat pocket he finds nothing. Nor in his right pants' pocket. In the left pocket of his pants he finds an assortment of small change, a die, and a business card from 'LuLu's—Strippers and Cocktails'. He does not remember going to LuLu's at all. The line 'always open and welcoming' on the card does not help him figure the time he might have been there.

After reassuring himself that he can stand he manages to try and stand. He manages to stand. He ambles around his desk to the swivel chair behind it and throws himself in it. Unfortunately the chair has seen better days and when his ass makes contact with the seat the contact is maintained but the contact of the seat with the rest of the chair is severed and with a mighty crash he falls backward of the chair back onto the ground, hitting his head against the wall behind him. Surprisingly the pain revives him and rubbing the back of his head he gets up, now fully awake.

He walks into the tiny dirty bathroom attached to his office and looks at himself in the mirror. His beard is nearly a week's growth worth. Last he remembers he had been clean shaven. He might have lost a few days. Not just one day as he had initially thought. His eyes are an unhealthy yellow and upon closer examination he turns and pukes into the sink bowl for a long time until he is just dry heaving. He fills a dirty glass with water and drinks it, pukes it up, and repeats this process five, six times, before being able to not spit it all back up. He peels his dirty clothes from his dirty body and steps into the dirty shower. The water feels good on his body and he soaps and scrubs himself well, even going so far as shampooing and washing his hair. Then he blows his nose in his hand, examines the result in his hand, then lets the green oyster wash out of his hand onto the floor, careful not to step on it. He turns the shower off and towels himself dry. Next he applies shaving cream and shaves. A little later he looks a lot better. At least presentable. Clean, shaved, and wearing a cleaner shirt and a suit that is only slightly too big.

Squatting in his pass out corner he again examines his vomit. The pepperoni is a dead give-away. His first point of investigation will be the

restaurant downstairs. The crusty but still moist vomit is of greenish colour. He pinches a bit between fore-finger and thumb, rubbing it slightly in clockwise motion. He brings the fingers to his nose. There can be no mistaking it. The Green Fairy is responsible for this.

Outside he squints against the sunlight. Why does it have to be so bright? He lost both his hat and sunglasses during his escapades. He feels naked. Fortunately he can duck immediately back into the pizzeria downstairs. Upon entering a hush falls over the place. This is strange. Apart from Julio, the owner, there is no-one in there, and still a hush manages to fall.

“What are you doing in here?” Julio yells at him. “You know you are not welcome here anymore.”

“I’m just trying to piece together what happened, Julio. Just tell me what happened.”

“I’ll tell you what happened. You stumbled in here a couple of nights ago and demanded ten pepperoni pizzas. Upon the staff commenting on the fact that you were alone, and how were you going to use 10 pizzas, you responded that you were incredibly hungry, and after all you needed to feed your other four heads that you had grown recently.” Julio leans closer to him, and the smell of sweat and grease nearly makes him puke again, but our hero controls himself. He is strong. Their faces close; Julio continues: “Then when you received your ten pizzas you first stuffed your real head and then tried to stuff the other four, which resulted in the pizza flying all over the place. You yelled: ‘Not to worry! They are young! Don’t look, we are shy’. Then you left the place and stumbled upstairs.”

“I see. Very interesting. Was I wearing clothes?”

“Yes,” Julio responds, not very amused.

He glares Julio straight in the eye and continues with his interrogation: “Did you believe my four heads were real?”

“No. Now, go on, get out of here. You are not welcome. I am still cleaning pizza off the ceiling.” He looks up and, behold, pizza on the ceiling. Our hero backs out of the place and mumbles, “It was not *this* head. It was one of the other four. Of course, those bastards have left me alone to figure this one out.”

Outside the sun has not become more forgiving. *Where to next?* He pulls the card he found in his pocket earlier and finds on the back of it the address of 'LuLu's'. It is quite a walk, but he is broke and he has other plans for the change in his pocket than a taxi.

In the first liquor store that he finds he slams the change on the counter and buys a longneck of Melbourne Bitter. Wrapped in a brown paper bag he drinks it slowly, coaxing the beer down his gullet and filling his stomach with the soothing slosh of it. The sun is becoming more forgiving, or maybe he is. Either way, it works out for the best.

Around the last corner he sees his goal. He tosses the empty bottle down an alleyway and steps towards the entrance. As soon as he steps inside he feels an enormous arm lock around his neck, dragging him towards the floor. He somehow manages to keep his footing and ends up standing doubled over, his neck under the damp armpit of some enormous ape.

"You have some serious balls daring to come back in here."

"Do I?"

Our man feels a bit uneasy. It is not every day you are dragged into the back of a strip club and have to sit down facing Crazy Jimmy, one of the biggest hoodlums that rule this neighbourhood. It is even worse he doesn't remember why Crazy Jimmy would be angry with him.

"You have some guts coming back here."

"Yes, Jimmy so I was told." He looks at his toes. Fidgeting in his chair, he clears his throat. "Why?"

"Why? Why? You were on a job for me. I paid you an advance. I even promised to cover your expenses. I never heard back from you. That was a week ago. You spent one day here and after that I never heard back from you."

He is astonished. He had been on a job? Surely he would remember. Dare he ask what job? He has to ask what job. He asks what job.

"You," Crazy Jimmy sighs, "were on the job of finding out how I lost my sanity." He turns his gaze to the big ape standing at the door. "Waste him."

Rust falls off Sam's synapses, and some quick jolts in his brain drop some serious pennies.

“Wait! You don’t understand. I have spent the last week in deep immersion in this case. Time became non-existent. I have been working like a maniac on this and if you stop me now I will never be able to tell you the answer. I need more time.”

The desperation and truth are so real that Crazy Jimmy can’t ignore them. “How much longer do you need?”

“One more week and I’ll be able to give you the answer.”

Crazy Jimmy stares at him for a long time. Eventually he says, “You have one more week.”

He sits at the bar and yells out at the bartender, “One bottle of Absinthe, a bucket of ice, and a glass. Put it on my expense account.” The makings arrive and he sets himself up one. “Back on the mission,” he mumbles, “Sam H. Bound always solves his mysteries.”

# Fatland

*by* Joseph Farley

**King Tubby** the Third smiled from his royal seat as his son, Prince Chubby, waddled into the throne room. King Tubby greeted the Prince, and asked, “Did you bring any cake?”

“No, Father,” said Prince Chubby. “The baker says we are eating his cakes faster than he can make them.”

“This is terrible,” said King Tubby. “We have to do something about it.”

“I would ask the Lord Chamberlain to get some cake from town,” said Prince Chubby, “But I am still worn out from the walk to the kitchen.”

King Tubby shook his head. As he did so his three chins swayed back and forth. “This is not good,” he said. King Tubby turned to his queen, a pleasingly plump woman of a certain age.

“Porcina, my dear,” he asked, “Do you have any ideas as to how we might be saved from this dilemma?”

Queen Porcina looked up from a large bowl, her face covered with chocolate pudding.

“Why eat cake at all,” said she. “There are plenty of other nice things to eat, such as pudding.”

“Pudding?” stammered the king. “I guess I could try it, but I was really in the mood for cake.” He leaned towards his wife’s throne. “Let me have a taste, dear.”

Queen Porcina twisted the bowl away from King Tubby.

“Get your own!” she said.

King Tubby turned to ask Prince Chubby to run down to the kitchen for some pudding. He stopped when he saw Prince Chubby sit down on the floor panting. *Why overwork the boy?* There was a rope hanging from the ceiling near the throne. The rope when pulled rang a bell. The bell, when rung, summoned the royal courtiers. King Tubby reached for the rope, but found his arms to be too short. The rope was just out of reach. He rope had not always been out of reach, nor had it moved. King Tubby’s belly had grown and his arms had thickened since he had last managed to pull the rope. His arms and belly had enlarged so much that they interfered with his ability to stretch his meaty hands as far as the rope. The great slope of King Tubby’s stomach was insurmountable.

*I must have my throne moved closer to the rope,* the king thought.

He asked his son, “Do you think you can roll over to this rope and give it a tug.”

Chubby replied, “I’ll try, Father.”

The prince huffed and rocked and moved his balloon body towards the rope. One roll. Two rolls. Three. That was it. He was not close to the rope, but red-faced and sweating, Prince Chubby had had enough.

King Tubby turned towards Queen Porcina, who had finished her bowl of pudding, and was struggling to open a tin of biscuits. King Tubby addressed her,

“My dear wife, would you ever be so kind as to ring the bell.”

“What bell?” she asked “Oooch. I’ve broken a nail trying to open this tin. Send for someone to do it for me.”

“That’s the trouble, my dear,” said the King. “I can not reach the bell rope.”

“What a fool. My mother told me ‘Marry the Duke of Cranberry. He is not of as high rank as the king, but he will treat you better’. Did I listen? No. I married King Tubby. Now look at me, a queen from the noble house of Bigbottom, being asked to pull a rope.”

“Now, dear,” reassured King Tubby. “It’s not that bad. All you have to do is get out of your chair, walk about ten feet and pull a rope.”

Queen Porcina thought, *We should have the servants move our thrones so we can both reach the rope without getting up.*

She stubbornly remained on her throne willing servants to appear. They did not. Her husband implored her.

“Dear, the rope, you must pull it.”

Queen Porcina sulked, “Why can’t you get up yourself?”

“It would not look right, doing physical labor,” King Tubby told her. “I am the king, after all.”

Queen Porcina sighed. Her husband was right. One must consider appearances. She placed her hands on the armrests of her throne and pushed. She pushed and pushed until she was blue in the face, but did not move an inch.

“Oh, my King,” she cried. “I am plum tuckered out. Every muscle in my body and every bone aches, and I can not get off my throne. You will just have to do it yourself.”

“Oh, the shame,” cried King Tubby, “that I, an old man of the royal house, King by birth and by God’s will of Fatland, beloved of the people, must get out of my chair.”

There was nothing else for it. Queen and Prince would need a good rest and a large meal before either recovered their strength. The King had to get off of his throne. He placed his royal feet in their royal shoes firmly upon the royal carpet. He placed his royal hands upon the royal armrests and leaned forward. With power and majesty he began to rise, only to stop half way to his feet. Something was holding him back.

King Tubby glanced behind him, and what he saw was a lot of behind. His rear was firmly wedged between the arm rests. He could go no further without dragging the throne with him. That was not a promising prospect

as the throne was weighted down with gold and silver inlay and gems of various colors, in the form of mud pies, ice cream bars and apple strudel. King Tubby struggled to free himself. He could not. He tried to move the chair. It would not budge. Exhausted and embarrassed, he tried to sit back down, but found he could not do that either. He was stuck, half in and half out of the chair.

“Do not worry, Father,” Prince Chubby gasped. “I will save you.”

The prince made a brave roll towards the rope before being seized by cardiac arrest.

“Son!” cried the King.

“My little Chubby!” wept the queen. “Where are the royal guards!”

“Sleeping off their lunch, I suppose,” said King Tubby with tears in his eyes, “As is their right by custom. Oh, woe is the kingdom.”

While Queen Porcina wept, one bit of good fortune occurred. Her tears eased the seal in the biscuit tin, and her fingers which had instinctively returned to pulling at the lid when she had stopped trying to get up from her throne, managed to pop it off.

“Biscuits!” shouted the queen with astonishment when the contents of the tin were revealed. “Just what I need now in this hour of sorrow.”

The queen began cramming biscuits of different flavors, butter, coconut, sugar, chocolate into her mouth.

King Tubby turned his watery eyes to the open tin.

“Good Queen,” he said. “Please toss me some of those cookies to aid me in my grief.”

Queen Porcina glared at him and pulled the tin away.

“Get your own,” she growled.

This added to King Tubby’s sadness and made him weep all the more.



# Vinyl Strangers

by Michelle T. Tan

**Aea Madrigal** could no longer paint. She at least knew that much.

It had been many months since she had last picked up her brush and actually faced her easel, which stood in front of a large window in her living room, gathering dust in the sunlight. She had already stowed away all her jars and sets of paint, leaving them to dry in a small cabinet at the bottom of her bookshelf, where her glass palette lay undisturbed beside rows and rows of aging, yellowed novels and sketchbooks. Determined to begin her life anew, Aea had even gotten down on her knees and scrubbed the floor of her workshop vigorously until she removed the many splatters of paint on the varnished wooden tiles. She then converted her workshop into a storage room, where she kept all her paintings in the weeks she spent searching for buyers or charities that would accept her works as donations.

On the night her last painting was sold to a private collector, she treated her friends out to a late dinner and celebrated the beginning of a new life. But although they were clearly happy for her, Aea's friends could not fathom why she still retained an empty canvas in her Marikina apartment

when she was so adamant in renouncing her craft. Her fellow artists surmised that she kept the canvas in the hopes of someday rekindling her art, but before they could even suggest the idea to her, she immediately dismissed their suspicions. She told them that she kept it not for sentimental reasons, but because it served as a bitter reminder of what she had been, and what she could no longer be.

Aea discovered that she had lost her ability to paint at the same moment she lost her capacity for love. In the wake of its arrival, this realization had struck her with a mixture of pain and regret, but she was not entirely surprised. It had been as predictable as it had been unexpected.

Only a few hours before, she had been standing in front of a church, dressed in an elaborate white gown with a thick, traditional veil, silently waiting for her groom to arrive. She had stayed in that position for almost an hour, her long, wavy hair tied in a neat bun, hands clutching a lily bouquet. Seemingly unaware of the restless noise around her, she lifted her eyes and gazed into the distance. Aware of the anxiety slowly spreading itself across the crowd, the best man quietly offered to fetch her fiancé, assuring her that he was probably only suffering a hangover from the previous night's party. Without taking her eyes off the horizon, she nodded almost imperceptibly and thanked him for his discretion. As his black car disappeared into a curb, his words still ringing in her ears, Aea wondered why they did nothing to reassure her.

When he returned alone several minutes later, an apology etched across his somber face, she did not bother to listen to his excuses or words of comfort. In a sudden burst of inspiration, she threw back her veil and fled down the church steps, an elegant mesh of silk and lace trailing behind her as she made her way to the sidewalk and hailed a cab. Without even flinching or looking back, she quickly stepped inside and directed the bewildered driver straight to her Marikina apartment. Later, when the sound of her own heartbeat finally stopped pulsing in her ears, Aea sank into her seat and broke down in tears. The sound of her crying concealed only by the loud, unapologetic music blasting from the cab's stereo, she pressed her eyes shut, drowning out the rest of the world in her misery,

enclosing herself in a shroud of callous, unfeeling rhythm. When she opened them again, she realized that she had been clenching her hands around her bouquet the whole time. As she uncurled her fingers from their tight grip, she looked down and softly traced the distinct red lines on her palms. Burying her face in her hands, almost suffocating from the layers and layers of tulle surrounding her, she wondered exactly just how much hurt and ridicule hearts can take.

When he finally noticed his passenger crying in the back seat, the driver had turned down the stereo volume and assumed a more serious demeanor. Taking her to be a runaway bride, he did not bother asking questions and instead dropped her off directly in front of her apartment, tentatively inquiring whether she'd be all right. In an attempt to regain a semblance of dignity, she had managed to mutter a polite "Yes, thank you" before quickly entering her house and slumping onto the cold floor.

Half-blinded by the fierce noon sunlight entering through the windows, Aea desperately glanced around her living room in search of something familiar and secure. Almost out of their own accord, her eyes fell on an empty canvas propped up on a ready easel. Pushing herself up on shaky legs, she tore off her wedding dress and stood in front of the canvas, attempting to channel her feelings into art. But nothing came. An hour later, she would still be standing there with a brush in her hand and a single drop of red paint on the floor. That canvas would remain untouched for the next seven months.

Still reeling from the shame and grief she suffered that morning, Aea did nothing but sleep her way through the succeeding days. She ignored the numerous calls and messages she received, and even took to hanging a "Do Not Disturb" sign outside her apartment door to ward off potential visitors. When she was not sleeping, she listened to the many albums she had accumulated over the years, randomly popping one into an old CD player she had placed on her bedside table, to save her the trouble of getting up from bed. *Anything*, she thought, *to dispel the silence*.

Almost forgetting about life beyond sleep and music, it took her a few weeks to realize that a lot of things had to change in her life, whether she

liked it or not. Having suddenly lost her ability as a painter, she was forced to take on a day job at a local call center, where she met a different group of friends—the kind who spent every Friday night lingering in bars and picking up strangers for the weekend. At first, she shrank away from this unfamiliar world, choosing instead to brood in the comforts of music and isolation. But, as she soon discovered, alcohol quickly took care of these initial inhibitions, and before she knew it, she had bedded her first stranger, and from then on it just became easier and easier.

Over the next few weeks, Aea found that she actually liked bar-hopping, if only for the opportunities for flirting that it presented, something she had not been able to enjoy during her five-month engagement. Eventually, she grew more and more confident in herself as the Fridays passed from one to the next seemingly without pause or interlude. Against the more traditional values of her family, she grew to live her days in anticipation of weekends, spending more and more time in bars as her initial reservations weakened and dissipated completely.

Almost as if expecting a similar punishment for her new lifestyle, a tiny part of her was actually relieved when she found out that her grandfather had died of a failed heart transplant. He had also apparently left her a sizable sum, along with a huge box containing jazz vinyl records and a dusty turntable, which she left unopened in a corner of the storage room.

A few days after the funeral, when she finally decided to open her grandfather's package, Aea was surprised by the sheer number of unfamiliar names she saw: Dizzy Gillespie, Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Max Roach, Gil Evans, Sun Ra, Sonny Stitt. Unable to recognize even a few of them, she felt strangely uncomfortable in the presence of all those albums, and contemplated just passing them on to one of her cousins. But just as she was about to dump them back into the box, she noticed one particular record that contained the name of an intriguing man she had met the week before, and decided to hang it on her bedroom wall in memory of Michael.

Then it just became sort of a habit. Every Saturday morning, as soon as that particular Friday's stranger had left, she would rummage through the

records and choose one at random to display on her wall. "In memory of last night," she would whisper to herself.

Aea eventually grew attached to this ritual, and hanging up these records became just as important to her as finding new strangers every week. On Saturday mornings, she would look forward to sending the previous night's man away so she could scan through her records undisturbed. It never failed to give her a strange kind of pleasure, each time she added one more record to her growing wall collection. She would feel a sense of accomplishment, and even though she was unsure of it herself, she did not bother trying to understand or explain it. Somehow, that feeling was enough for her.

But by the time she hung her nineteenth record, Aea was exhausted. It was a beautiful April Saturday, just after dawn. She lay on her bed and stared up at the looming wall in front of her. She could not find it in her to move from that position. A lethargic numbness had come over her lately, and she had no idea why. Looking back on the past few months, she realized her memories consisted merely of a blur of strangers and half-remembered names. She felt terrible, seeing that she had been floating through life all that time, like she was weightless, insubstantial. She shut her eyes in denial.

Later, when she finally found the courage to open them again, the first thing she saw was her collection of records, resplendent in the morning sunlight. The sun bounced off their black surfaces, nearly blinding her with the intensity of their glare. Almost as if possessed, she stood up slowly and approached them one by one, murmuring words that were barely audible to her own ears. "This," she said, her voice unsteady, "was for the singer." She paused. "This, the aggressive Chinese." She traced her fingers on the edges of the polished vinyl. "Bank manager. Enigmatic bartender," she continued, her footsteps punctuating every whisper. Lingering in front of the wall, she drifted from one record to the next, her hair caught under a ray of sunlight. She finished naming them all, and then stopped and let her hands fall to her side. Her shoulders were trembling. From somewhere, a rooster crowed.

As expected, life went on, and Aea felt the same as before, only perhaps

a little more assured, a little more buoyant. She wondered if this was how she would stay until the last of her days, and decided that it was not such a bad way to end things after all. At least, that's what she thought until she met her twenty-seventh stranger. As usual, she didn't bother to remember his name, but he left enough of an impression to haunt her for several nights afterward.

She had first spotted him sitting in a corner of her usual bar, sporting a loosened tie and two days' worth of beard. He was swirling the contents of his glass absentmindedly, his face turned away from the crowd. From where Aea was standing near the dance floor, it seemed like he was drinking red wine. Intrigued, she downed one last slug of tequila and approached him.

"You have company?" she asked, although she had been observing him long enough to know better. She smiled.

He was caught off guard by the sudden interruption. "Ah, no," he answered quickly, straightening himself in his seat. As she slid herself onto the couch across from him, he extended a hand and stiffly introduced himself. Aea could not help but grin at his awkwardness.

She let him begin his initial attempts at small talk. She pretended to listen carefully, but was actually intent on observing his movements. It amused her that he kept his eyes on the level of her face, seemingly oblivious to the deep neckline of her dress. She also noticed that he kept his hands mostly to himself, except to make a few gestures here and there. His shoulders were relaxed, but he leaned forward a little whenever she smiled or said something. Aea was surprised. She dropped her gaze and saw that he had not touched his drink once since she approached him. There was something different about him, she could tell.

In the course of their conversation, she found out that he was a vinyl collector and an avid fan of 30s and 40s music. Although she was initially surprised that such a young man could be interested in vinyl antiques, Aea quickly realized how she could use this fact to her advantage. With a hint of excitement in her voice, she told him about her grandfather's records and swiftly invited him over to her apartment. She flashed him a practiced smile as she waited for his inevitable assent, confident that it was one of the

smoothest segues she had made in the past weeks. The young man graciously accepted her offer, ostensibly excited to see her late grandfather's vinyl collection.

As soon as they arrived at her apartment, Aea led the man to her bedroom and showed him the twenty-six records she had hung on her wall.

"There's a lot more in the storage room," she said casually. "I guess my grandfather really had a thing for jazz, huh?" She sat down her bed and tried to assume an alluring air.

"Yes, definitely," the man breathed as he began tracing the edges of a record with an index finger. "He left you quite a good collection here, real vintage." Then he paused for a moment and glanced at her sheepishly. "Do you mind if I take a look at the other ones in your storage?"

Aea's smile faded just the slightest bit, annoyed that he wasn't paying her any attention. Pursing her lips in disappointment, she was about to mutter an excuse about a broken lock, but the unsuspecting look on his face compelled her to consent instead.

"Sure," she replied, trying to sound cheerful. "Just go down that hallway. It's the first door to your right."

The young man looked a bit confused. "It's all right if—"

She interrupted him before he could finish his question. "Yeah, go on ahead. I'm just going to take a quick shower," she added with a wink.

When she emerged from the bathroom twenty minutes later, she saw him sitting on the edge of her bed with his back to her, seemingly uncomfortable at being left alone. Half-grinning at his boyish nature, Aea walked towards him and slipped her bare arms around his neck, burying her face into his broad back as she inhaled the crisp scent of his cologne. Feeling him stiffen instinctively at her touch, she carefully turned his body towards her and leaned in for a first, seductive kiss.

Shrugging off her untied bathrobe, she placed a hand on the back of his head and pressed it to her neck, her damp skin tingling at the hesitant touch of his lips. She could feel the apprehension in his awkward movements, but as she pressed her body closer to his, she felt his tension gradually dissolve into raw abandon. Pulling his blazer from his shoulders,

she slipped her left hand inside his polo and slowly, teasingly undid his buttons. As his lips continued to graze her neck, she closed her eyes and moaned softly, completely giving herself over to him.

In the next moments that followed, Aea found herself unable to see or remember anything except as a whirl of sights and colors. Her memory reduced to a barrage of incomprehensible images, she remembered only that she glanced upwards in a single moment of torment and ecstasy, and instead of her plain, whitewashed ceiling, she saw a wild explosion of colors so vivid they pained her. As each thrust of his body bruised and burned her, she witnessed a series of vibrant eruptions that continued to linger in her mind long after they had faded from sight. Blinded by their brightness, she closed her eyes in an attempt to escape the agony, but even in that darkness the colors refused to cease their angry outbursts, forcing her to see them in all their splendor, taste them in all their brilliance.

When her head finally ceased its throbbing, she found herself lying on the floor, satiated and exhausted, her skin glistening with sweat. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, she succumbed to the brightness and drifted off to sleep. Half an hour later, awakened by muffled sounds coming from the living room, she raised herself from the floor and saw the young man, now fully dressed, hauling her grandfather's records out of the storage. Slipping her terrycloth robe back on, she asked suspiciously, "What are you doing?"

The stranger regained the sheepish look on his face of earlier that night as he stammered a reply. "I-I just wanted to try playing them on the turntable." He grinned awkwardly.

Aea's features softened as she realized that his bashfulness made him even more attractive. Combing her damp hair with her fingers, she pretended to consider his answer for a moment, before nodding contentedly and offering to help him set up the equipment.

As they were wiping the dust from the turntable, the young man noticed the empty canvas in the corner of the room and casually asked her about it. Having been confronted with the same question many times before, she was about to brush off the topic when she saw the expectant look in his



eyes. Instinctively, she glanced away and slowly, bit by bit, began to share how she had been unable to paint since several months ago. It was a difficult confession, and she felt the air in the room growing much heavier with every word she uttered.

When she finished, he kept his silence for a while before taking out a handkerchief and walking up to her.

“I think I can help you get it back,” he said softly. “Just trust me.”

Aea stood still for a moment, and the world seemed to stop with her. He was looking down at her with an unreadable expression on his face. Something erupted inside her; she did not recognize the feeling. It was as if she was looking at him for the first time. Finally, she nodded just the slightest bit, hesitant but curious as well. He responded by blindfolding her then placing a brush and a palette in her hand. Just as she started to feel uncomfortable about the whole situation, a slow swell of music from the turntable reached her ears.

Amazed at the striking clarity of the music, she opened her mouth to remark on it when she heard a small crash behind her. Unable to help herself, she giggled a little, appreciating the young man’s efforts to help her. As she strained her ears to listen above the noise of the crash, a rich melody seeped into the lighter notes of the prelude. She listened intently to the saxophone solo, and a shiver ran down her spine as her right hand moved seemingly out of its own accord and began to paint.

She began with a few slow strokes, but as the music escalated into a frenzy of bass and drums and vocals all blended together in harmony, Aea felt herself pouring out of her body and spilling onto the empty canvas. Without really thinking about it, she painted one dark, heavy stroke on top of the other, and for the first time in months, let herself loose. She no longer had any idea what she was doing, but in that moment, she felt at one with her craft, and before she even opened her eyes, she knew it was back. The stranger had given her back her passion.

By the time the tempo began to slow down again, she had already finished painting. With a big smile on her face, she removed her blindfold and gazed at her work for the first time. She gasped at the striking

familiarity. Glaring in its brightness, the painting unmistakably resembled the angry outbursts of color she had envisioned only an hour ago, and which she had almost forgotten. As she stared mutely at the painting, Aea felt a gnawing pain in her chest as the intense, violent mixture of colors unearthed memories of seven months past: soft sunlight gathering in the horizon, loud taxi music, lines on her palms, empty canvas, red splatter of paint on the floor. Confronted with the sudden onrush of vibrant memory, she could do nothing but clasp her chest and let the tears fall.

She turned around abruptly to thank the stranger, but he was nowhere to be found. The storage room door was left ajar, and she saw that her grandfather's box of records had disappeared with him. Her eyes sweeping across the living room, she reconstructed the scene in her mind and identified the cause of the noise she had heard earlier—a lamp had been toppled over beside her couch, and pieces of it lay scattered on the floor. She saw that her front door had also been left slightly open, allowing the darkness of night to settle itself over everything in the room. Without warning, a cold breeze entered the room, and a few loose papers scattered about in the night wind, almost in tune to the violent coda coming from the lone record still playing on the turntable.

Aea stood still for a few moments. It took her a while to digest the scene in front of her. Suddenly, the music and her painting seemed far away. Still holding a brush in her hand, she walked slowly towards her bedroom and saw that the twenty-six records on her wall had gone as well, exposing a bare emptiness in their absence.

Not knowing what else to do, she remained standing in front of her bedroom wall and stared at its pristine expanse. As her eyes searched the corners of the walls where her records used to be, a stray fragment of music from the turntable wafted into the room and reached her ears. Just as the last notes began to fade into silence, Aea reached up a hand to the wall and began to paint.

# David and the Man

by **Chris Curtis**

**David stood** on his bed and pushed aside the curtain. Dawn, low and bright, lit the rooftops and chimneys, leaving sharp dew-soaked shadows on the slate. Fingers fumbled with shorts and shirt, leaving the occasional button for future adjustment. Quietly he opened and closed the door and leapt at the silent stairs, flying, down to the bright street below.

Suddenly he checked his downward plunge, almost tripping on the battered bicycle spread across the stairs below. Mr Williams never left his bike there; it was always under the stairs. He continued downward, stepping carefully through the bicycle frame. In the foyer, early light spread across the red tiles. He peered into the gloomy space where the bicycle was usually kept. A large pile of cardboard and papers, crushed beer cartons and pages of *The Herald*. Suddenly the pile moved, a slithering, heaving motion. David jumped back! *A rat?* He knew about rats. A man's head appeared, pasty, unshaven. Pale eyes regarded him silently, blinked, then, "Hello" ... silence... "Do you live here?"

"I'm David, I live in number six with my mother. I came down to get

the bread,” said David, the words gushing out nervously. “Who are you ...?”

“Have you got anything to drink?”

“No,” said David, suddenly thirsty. “I have to go now, ‘*G\_p L\_i sau nhé*’

The man stiffened. “What did you say?” he asked sharply.

“I said, ‘*G\_p L\_i sau nhé*’”, said David turning back, “It’s Vietnamese. It means ....”

“It means ‘See you later’,” interrupted the man. “Where did you learn that?” he asked softly.

“Mr Phuong at the bread shop taught me.”

The man was silent for a while, then, “When Mr Phuong gives you the bread, tell him ‘*Chào ông*, can you remember that?’”

“Of course,” said David indignantly, repeating the phrase. “Can you speak Vietnamese?”

“I could do many things once,” said the man, pausing and taking a deep breath, “now I can’t do anything. Off you go.”

David backed away, ran to the door and quickly down the street. He had a lot to tell Mr Phuong.

“He said to say, ‘*Chào ông*’ to you” said David as he finished his story.

“What does it mean?”

“Oh, it just means ‘hello’,” said Mr Phuong and then he was silent, looking into the distance like David’s mother sometimes did.

“Do you know him?” asked David.

“I knew many men from Australia. It was a long time ago. We were all very young,” he said seriously, “but here is something for your friend under the stairs.” He gathered up a loaf of bread and a can of drink and put them in a bag. “Please tell him ‘thank you’ from me and my family.”

David did not understand. Adults were like that sometimes, but he was already late so he turned and ran out of the shop. He wanted to tell the man what Mr Phuong had said, but when he looked under the stairs, the man had gone.

# Life's Lies Lost

by **Lara S. Williams**

**The tiny figure** of Marabelle Mais belied the largeness of spirit within. Since childhood she had felt a great amount of love for people. Her parents were unaffectionate pharmacists who disallowed her enormous tides of emotion to be expressed in their home. When Marabelle turned ten her mother tentatively gave her a bottle of Chanel perfume and the little girl, overcome at the thought of smelling like her teacher, leapt into her lap and attached herself in an uninvited hug. To avoid such displays in the future her father made a rule that gift giving be struck from the family. After that, Marabelle's love found outlets by spilling onto unexpected and grateful recipients.

She met her husband a week after the accidental death of his first wife. It had been an unhappy marriage but he, expecting divorce to drive them apart, was horrified at the thought that his dissatisfaction had somehow caused her demise. He came into Marabelle's Marks and Spencer's to return his funeral suit and she found his selfish thriftiness so full of sorrow and fear

that when the manager refused to refund his goods she gave him the money from her own purse. She loved him more that first day, frowning at his proof of purchase receipt, than at any other moment of their lives.

Marabelle decided that a widower like Charlton, quiet and critical, needed a woman who could make up for the romance lacking in himself. She courted him with kindness and attention. She bought him gifts from her store—ties and gold-capped pens and boxes of Lindt chocolate truffles. Each weekend she organised day trips where they saw foreign films and theatre; drove to the countryside pubs for beer and ploughman's lunch; went out on the river in paddle boats; had devonshire tea and cigars and looked at model homes with plastic fruit in the kitchens. He enjoyed the food and cigars and though he never offered, Marabelle refused to let him pay for anything. His gratitude for her efforts was communicated when he held her hand as they walked up the steps to her semi-detached. She imagined that when they said goodbye she could feel a squeeze around her knuckles that undermined the straight set of his clean-shaven mouth.

Two years after meeting she asked if he would like to marry her and he said yes like he was accepting the morning paper. Their engagement was a small dinner in Yun Fat's Chinese Palace; Charlton's family refused to meet her and Marabelle's parents said she had no respect for the dead and gone. Marabelle gathered friends from Marks and Spencers', happy to announce Charlton had told her she could quit and move into his stately home on Prince Albert Drive.

She also invited Bran, a friend from childhood. He had recently married a woman from his university in Bristol and together the two engineers were starting a new contract with *British Airways*. Marabelle plied him with sweet carrot cake and showed him her ring; he said it was beautiful but not quite her style. She told him it had belonged to Charlton's first wife and, luckily enough, had fit her finger.

A year later they moved from Lancashire to the Isle of Wight. Marabelle failed to forward her new address or number to her parents and so, as they had always wanted, she fell out of touch. There her spring of affection for Charlton started to thin until he became in her eyes what he had always

been to everyone else. She wished to return to the mainland where her heart could search for a new and dangerous target.

Bran was the only man Marabelle contacted during her long exile on the Isle. Charlton was over-worked as the accountant for Goddard's Brewery, and Marabelle started writing letters to fill the hours otherwise taken up with walking in cow fields and growing garlic in her herb garden. Of all her friends, four returned correspondences. Of those four, Bran was the one who interested her.

The first year concerned the birth of his daughter, Isabel; the second and third, her death from AIDS. Both parties knew he used the letters as a form of counselling. He worried he wasn't grieving enough; his wife's mourning shamed his own gentle feelings of loss until eventually the two divorced. In one he wrote, *I don't know if I miss Isabel because I loved her or because she was my daughter. It's like a type of food has been forever banned before I got to taste it. How do I know if it would even be delicious?*

Marabelle, taking on the role, never commented on Isabel directly but asked questions about what he did in the day, what he read, where he went for dinner, how often he saw his parents. By the end of Charlton's four year contract, Bran no longer mentioned his daughter and at the bottom of each letter Marabelle printed, *because you loved her.*

At twenty four Paidric was a decade younger than Marabelle and writing a PhD in bio-mechanics at the University of Lancaster. Two months after her return she was in the city library checking out cooking books and saw him sitting over an open ring binder, splayed fingers pressed underneath his cheekbones. He looked so angry and tired, bent low in his chair, that she sat beside him and asked what he was reading. He turned appreciative grey eyes on her and she realised no one had ever asked him that question.

"Do you read fiction? Clancy or Smith?" She held up a book and pointed to the title. "This is the fourth in his series and it's really quite good."

Paidric did something Marabelle hadn't seen a person do for a great many years; he mused. Mused to save the feelings of a strange, kind woman who read trash.

“I haven’t had time to get into those,” he finally said. “Maybe I could check out one of yours?”

He took her to his apartment in the east of the city. She liked how he lived; books on architecture and British history left belly-up and dog-eared through the lounge and dining room while study texts had pride of place in his bedroom, stacked with the spines in neat rows, pages untouched. He bought them a year earlier before realising his genius was too great to learn from simple university books. He had written three of his own before his PhD was half finished. Marabelle made nothing of his incredible intellect or dedication to education. She appreciated that he bought hand-pressed apple juice and baked his own walnut bread and when her stomach rumbled he cooked spicy spaghetti in a saucepan without oil. After their first afternoon together she took a bus back to the city centre, though he offered to drive her, and licked at the chilli stuffed around her molars.

Returning home with the blight of her first unfaithful act stained across her body was only difficult when in direct focus. Charlton icily kissing her cheek sent a bite of guilt through her belly but when he shouted from his office that he wanted grilled chicken for dinner again instead of the fish and rosemary potatoes she had been asking for, she only felt pity for his unadventurous palate.

After the Mais’ move back to Lancaster, she and Bran met each week to drink liqueur coffee. On a particularly blustery Sunday Marabelle balanced along the rough edges of the wind and tumbled into *The Slug and Lettuce* on High Street. Bran was sitting in the window with a newspaper. He saw her and smiled, one incisor longer than the other, and stretched up out of his chair. When they embraced she felt the curled hair around his ears tickle her eyelid.

“My love, sit down. Order and sit down.” He kissed her twice and crossed his legs under him. Marabelle hung her coat over her feet, opened her menu and ordered.

“You look well,” she said. “A bit pale.”

“You forget, I spent our summer in New Zealand. Cold.”

“Heard any news about the relocation?”

Bran took a sip and pushed his saucer to the edge of the table. “Do you



want me gone?”

“Not for a moment.” She touched the hard, dry skin of his elbow. “You are what makes this horrible city my home.”

“Are you sure it’s not Paidric?”

“He helps.”

“Three men and you can’t commit to any of us.”

She took his hand. “You have all of me. For no other man would I come and drink spirits at eleven in the morning.”

Bran laughed his raucous laugh. “Then I certainly get the best part.” They were quiet for a moment as the waitress delivered Marabelle’s coffee. Bran handed her the sugar pot and watched her slip three cubes into the foam like she was lining up loose pages of text. “Are you seeing him today?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You don’t approve?”

He pitched sideways, one arm on the back of his chair. “It’s not that, Mar. I just wonder why you don’t get a divorce?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you want someone else.”

“Oh, Bran.” Marabelle took a mouthful of coffee. “They’re worlds apart. I don’t need to leave Charlton to have what I want.”

Bran put both hands palm down on the table top and Marabelle saw the beloved signs of her friend tackling a difficult subject.

“You know I’ve never judged what you’re doing,” he said. “And I know that Charlton is busy and neglectful but he is faithful and he takes care of you.”

“With money. He’s very generous in that regard.” She lay her head on her arm and rolled her forehead over the buttons at the sweater’s sleeve. “It wouldn’t feel right leaving him. He’s old now. He’d be lonely. Paidric is young, he doesn’t need a wife.”

“You wouldn’t have to be his wife.” Bran rubbed his fingertips in the roots of her hair. “You could be a girlfriend.”

“Oh darling, we’re too old for terms like that.” She looked up at him

through her hair. “No, I’m afraid I’m married. Done and done.”

“But you don’t love him.”

“You and your easy answers.”

“And you love Paidric.”

“Not so much anymore. He’s just as brilliant, as kind.”

“The heart of Marabelle strikes again.”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t you feel guilty?”

She shook off his hand. “Toward who?”

“The married one.”

“I feel bad when he does something kind.”

“Rarely, then.”

She laughed. “Rarely. But it does happen.”

Marabelle left Bran with his newspaper and a lemon muffin and got on the 38 bus over the River Lune. On Devil’s Bridge she saw children balancing on the iron rails and casting fishing line into the winter-deep waterside. One boy hung lower than the rest and the others screamed and pointed though Marabelle couldn’t see what excited them.

Paidric’s apartment was the same as it had been three years earlier when he and Marabelle ate spaghetti and made love on his torn tanned leather armchair. She let herself in and, hearing the shower, took off her coat and hat and lay them over an open pile of music sheets. She called his name and the water stopped.

“Marabelle?”

“I should hope so!” She listened to the sound of his shower door creaking open, imagining his long, feminine legs unwrapping out onto the heated tiles and the tiny squeak of pleasure he made when the warmth touched his soles.

When she looked in he was shaving. A long stripe of cream ran from his jawline to one purple tipped nipple. He held the razor in his fist, pulling the skin of his cheek tight with thumb and forefinger. He saw her in the mirror and raised his eyebrows in greeting.

“Shaving, for me?”

The razor tapped against the basin. “I was spiky. I know you don’t like spiky.”

“I bought cinnamon pie from the pub.”

“How was Bran?”

“Beautiful. I’ll go cut it up.”

When he came out he was damp and clothed and Marabelle was making coffee. He kissed the back of her neck and tasted the rubbing of Chanel he always found under her hairline. She held a piece of pie over her shoulder and he took a bite, crumbling flecks of pastry down her blouse.

“I have something for you,” he said into her collar.

“Something?”

“A gift.” He shifted the empty mugs aside and replaced them with a thin blue box. Marabelle touched the black ribbon melting from its lid.

“A gift, indeed. Did you wrap it?”

“Open it, Belle.”

The kettle clicked and she circled to the other side of the kitchen counter. Paidric pushed the box after her and leant forward elbows wide.

“Open it.”

“I don’t want presents from you, Paidric. You don’t have enough money to buy me things.”

“I’ll do what I want with my money. And I want you to have this.” With one elongated finger he tipped open the lid and dug aside the layer of pink tissue paper beneath. Marabelle saw black lace and one vivid red bow.

“What is that?”

“Lingerie?”

“You expect me to wear these? Do you know how old I am?”

“You’re gorgeous.”

Marabelle picked up the pants and spread them flat next to the half-finished piece of cinnamon pie. “These are clothes for a twenty year old. I can’t wear these.”

“Bullshit. You’re talking yourself out of it.”

“Oh yes?” She put a hand to her waist and started unbuttoning her

jeans. “Will you put them on for me?”

Six hours later she put the pants back in the gift box and left it sitting beside the cold, milkless coffees.

Charlton’s car door was open when Marabelle arrived home. She pulled up beside the building materials from their driveway extension and looked through her window into his car. His briefcase sat on the passenger seat, one clip standing open like a lone tree.

She knew he was in his office; she crossed to the door and put an ear to the wood. He was typing, quickly and smoothly, punctuating each hit of the space bar with an ugly grunt. She could smell the pine air freshener he sprayed each time he worked creeping across the carpet.

Marabelle raised a hand to knock. The typing paused and she lowered her knuckles.

“That you, Mary?” Charlton opened the door and stopped surprised to see her standing so close.

“Hello,” she said, offering her left cheek to his mouth. He kissed her, leaving a cold wet smudge.

“You’re late today.” He turned back into the room and Marabelle took one step after him.

“I was seeing Bran.”

“Mmm.” He scraped through a handful of papers.

“You’ve left the car open.”

“I know, I’m going out again. Meeting.”

“Fine. You better leave soon, it’s going to rain.” She left and he said nothing to call her back.

In the bedroom she and Charlton had shared lovelessly for three years Marabelle took off her jeans for the second time that day and opened her bureau. Seeing nothing but loose white cotton underwear she closed the drawer and lay back on the bed, naked from the waist down, and watched car headlights slide over the ceiling into the wet darkness of her ensuite. She put a hand to her breast and counted the beats of her heart. The first time Charlton had made love to her she had been so nervous the pulse at her throat left a bruise on the skin. After the act she had watched it in the bathroom mirror and wondered why it wouldn’t stop.

She heard Charlton's car start and waited until the smooth thrum of its engine vanished before leaning over her shoulder and picking up the phone. Bran answered on the tenth ring.

"What were you doing?"

"One of the many things a man does on his own. What's wrong?"

"The New Zealand transfer. Is it happening?"

"Probably."

"I want to come."

Bran laughed and Marabelle had to hold the phone from her ear.

"I'm serious," she said.

He went silent; Marabelle could hear the BBC News starting in the background.

"You're in my sights, Bran. And you were right. About Charlton."

"Divorce?"

"Let me come with you."

After she hung up, Marabelle Mais put on a clean pair of large cotton pants, made a pot of coffee, two teaspoons of chilli powder rolled in, and listened to her heart regain its speed.

# Hello, How May I Help You

by Thomas Sullivan

**“Hello, dis eez Bob.** How can I help you today?”

“Yeah, hi. I just bought a new Dell and the guys at your service store transferred the files from my old machine onto this new one. But now I can’t find my photos. Everything else is fine, it’s just those pictures. I really, really need to find them, two in particular.”

“Okee, ave you checked dee photos folder under the my computer icon on the desktop?”

“Uh, yeah, I think. Pretty sure it was empty.”

“Ver dee files jaypegs or jiffs?”

“What? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Dee format. If you know dee format, you can search dat vay.”

“Oh, god, what a nightmare. Okay look, I’m pretty new to computers and this stuff is all over my head. Like, way over. Could you just, you know, access my computer and do a search or something?”

“Certeenly, hold on a meenut. You vill see a pointer on your screen. That vill be me. Do not touch zee mousepad on your compooter.”

“Okay.”

*A white triangle dances across the woman’s screen, opening and closing windows rapidly. A green time bar runs across the screen for a few seconds.*

“Ho, ho, ho ... I vink I have found dee two photos you are vurrried about. Yes, yes, yes. Hmnn. Okay, pleece hold on a minute.”

*On the screen a web browser springs open. A small message appears that reads “Please wait, now uploading files to www. ...”*

“Hey, hey ... what’re ya doing, pal? I just need you to tell me how to find the folder with the pictures.”

“Zees are very nice photos. Ooh la la.”

“Hey buddy, c’mon. My boyfriend travels for work. A lot. So I take a few nudie pix and send them to him on the road. Hey, what are you doing?”

*A webpage opens and redirects to a site called Dirty American Sluts. Two naked photos of the woman grace the home page.*

“What the hell are you doing!! Stop, stop!! Oh my god, this is unbelievable. I’m gonna contact the company and get your scrawny ass fired, *Bob*.”

“Otay honey, here’s how dis verks. You do not know if I am veally Bob or not. I could be Rick or Rob or Santy Claws for all you know. So now, you vill give me your credeet card noomber and de axes code. Zen I vill buy dat new Ipad. Zen I vill remove dee photos from da site. Zen I vill destroy your card noomber.”

“Listen pal, and listen close. I know you’re over there in Bangeldesh or Indiana somewhere, swatting at flies and boiling your water, but I *will* get you. I promise you that.”

“Aah, aah, you poor confused creature. Are you sure you even dialed zee correct noomber? Huh? Are you sure I verk for Dell and not some coompany dats a sub-coompany of a sub-coompany? Or even a coompany? You don’t know sheet. I could send dees photos to many udder sites if you wish. Perhaps you ave high school reunion approaching?”

“Okay, stop, stop. Fine. You got me you bastard. Hold on a sec.”

*The woman grabs a card and reads off the numbers. At the last minute she jots down the address for Dirty American Sluts.*

“Otay, sank you for calling Dell. Your confeermaayshun noomber for dis call is ex, too, tree, vee, oh, vun. Can I be of any funder assistance today?”

“SCREW YOU!!”

*The woman’s screen goes blank. She reboots the computer, opens a browser window, and types in the address for Dirty American Sluts. When the site appears all it shows is a big yellow smiley face commanding her to have a wonderful day.*





# **Justin Bridges'**

**A • P • O • L • O • G • Y**



***“I’M SORRY... HONEST.”***

Having earlier this year abused and insulted an Australian television celebrity, who told me, ‘I should be ashamed of myself’, I have decided to offer a full apology to anyone and everyone I may have offended in the past.

To assist me in this action I have gathered together, with the help of an old acquaintance, *Myrtle Brickenshaw*, a number of character references plus a sample of my current work ( to test the water to see if I am still employable—and let’s hope *Matt Ward*, and particularly *Andrew Scobie* remember all the favours I have done for them over the years... ).

—*Justin Bridges*



## *References*

( gathered by Myrtle Brickenshaw ) :

1. Justin Bridges' former hairdresser,  
**Mrs Desiree Carthorse**, from Gosford:

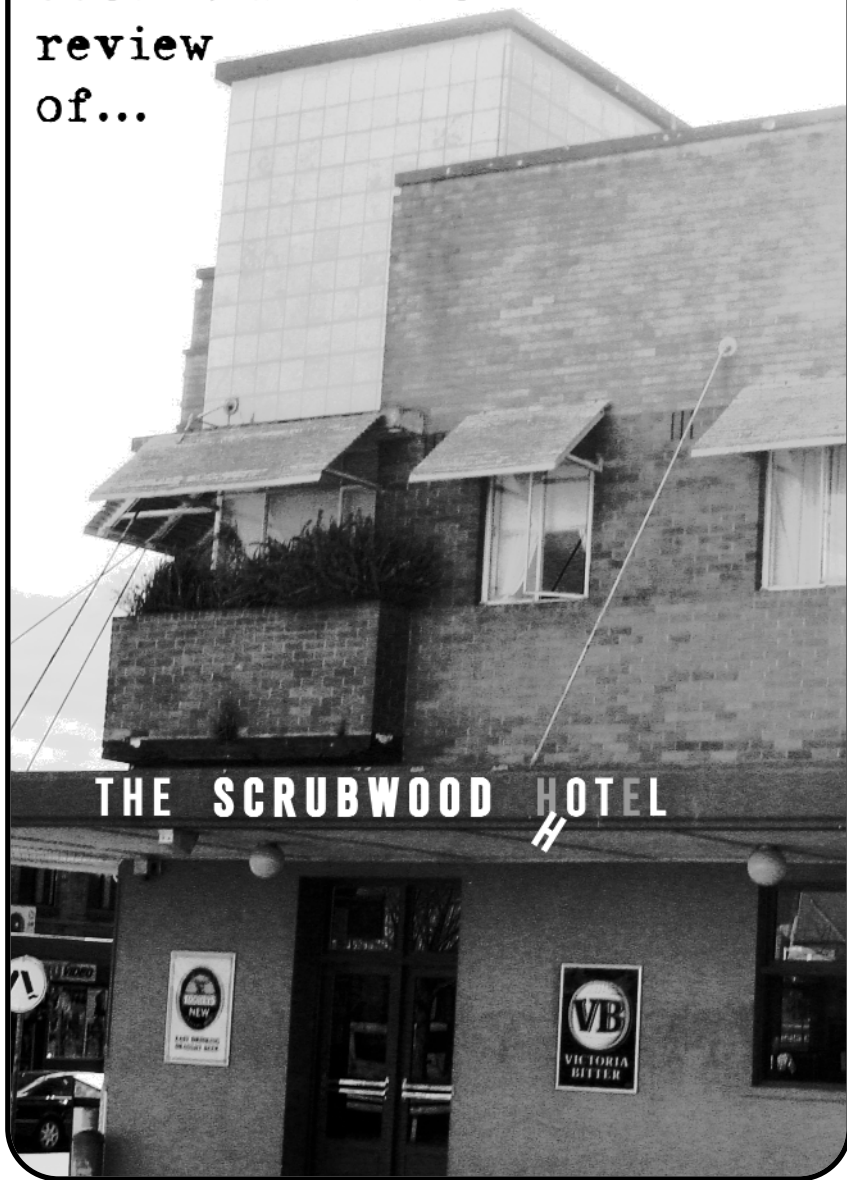
*I knew the boy, Justin when he'd come in for a perm, which was quite bold in a small country town, which Gosford was in the late '80s. He'd always opt for the new romantic curl, stating that it would be the 'most becoming'. He was a mere child, though thought it was imperative that he should look the part of a smart, stylish, man about town. Unfortunately the men of the town, most of them burly truck drivers, didn't see it that way, and it wasn't too long before poor old Justin was driven out of Gosford... My fondest memories of the lad were seeing him bouncing around the salon, singing along to the wireless, his favourite tune being from Westside story, 'I feel pretty'. It was from that moment on I knew he was destined for fame!*

2. Justin's mother, **Mrs Bridges nee Von Trapp**, from Vaucluse:

*Justin is a beautiful boy and my pride and joy.*

3. **Mavis Pomona**, Justin's housekeeper and cleaning lady:  
( *Was unavailable for comment.* )

JUSTIN BRIDGES'  
review  
of...



**W** H E N  
m y  
U n c l e  
T h e o  
t o l d

me over the phone that he was considering buying another hotel in Sydney I was unsurprised, even bored by that *revelation*. After all, he already owns at least a dozen of those dens of inequity, plus other, more disreputable but far more fascinating houses of ill-repute. When he talked further and informed me that he actually wanted me to inspect the premises and stay at the said establishment to report on it, I was mildly shocked. I thought for several seconds, then said, "Yes, dear, Uncle."

A review of a Sydney hotel! My word! Yet another feather in the Justin Bridges' cap! (It is no wonder I was voted the boy most likely to succeed back in private

school.) People have often told me... well, it was mainly Mother who said that such a talented and charitable individual in the one very handsome package is very rare these days; especially one so confident. My growing number of 'friends' on Facebook is but a testimony to my ever-increasing popularity, and I won't be satisfied until I am number one in the completely most interesting stats on that revolutionary cultural measuring stick; that man-made, God-like barometer of world opinion .

(\*\* Editor's note: in actual fact, I have it on good authority that Justin was only a member of Facebook for less than two weeks. In that time he only attracted two "friends", one of which took him to be a psychopath. Evidently, he quit that social application in despondency,

when Joanna Lumley refused his request for friendship\*\*)

Transversely, Uncle Theo was always a mildly boring man with a very unpleasant case of dandruff and dreadful unappealing body odour, but he was rich, somewhat richer than Mother, some would say.... I had no choice but to accept the offer forthwith, lest the old coot take a turn against me and leave me out of his will. Of course, there were my current living circumstances to consider: how would my dear little Burmese, Miss Sheba, cope without me during this time away? Could I trust my housekeeper and cleaning lady, Mavis Pomona (Mrs), to manage the house in my absence? My address at Battery Point, Hobart in Tasmania's richest suburb is one of the finest in that area, and one should never trust anyone to keep one's abode

in order.

I decided immediately: I would hire a private detective to keep Mavis under observation while I was away, and also engage the services of a cat psychologist to treat Miss Sheba, just in case she should suffer any clinical depression during my brief enforced absence. For the moment, I was free to return to the hostile shores of Sydney to complete my mission for Uncle Theo.

After a surprisingly swift flight to Sydney, I caught a speeding taxicab to the western suburb of Scrubwood with a rather jocular driver and booked into that suburb's largest hotel for a two week stay—I had already informed Mother that I would be far too busy on this trip to pop up to visit her in her Vauclose mansion.

The hotel was a fine old heritage building, of 1940s



vintage, I believe, though the accommodation was rustic, to say the least: a small room with single bed, an old wooden wardrobe and an ancient dressing table; a share bathroom (horrors!), and with no room service, nor any cooking facilities within the room whatsoever.

The demographics of the suburb was a strange combination of just about every race on Earth one could imagine, with Turkish restaurants, Chinese takeaway, Lebanese eateries and a variety of Indian, Vietnamese and various other international cuisine. I found it fascinating and looked forward to sampling the many culinary treats of other nations—it would be a definite improvement on Mavis Pomona's sloppy stews and greasy dumplings.

The remaining Anglo-Saxon Australian residents of

the suburb appeared to have taken refuge from the progressively vibrant cultures now surrounding them to gather in the more traditional establishments such as The Scrubwood Hotel. In the following days I encountered plethora of such 'interesting characters', apparent remnants of days mostly long forgotten in our, now, increasingly modern country—throw-backs to a time when the men drank hard, and the women, if they knew what was good for them, kept well out of their way.

A number of the patrons attempted to converse with me but their speech was so alcohol-effected and their dialogue so colloquial I found it hard to decipher. All of a sudden, in a blaze of apparent vaudeville, in entered the hotel, a stocky man, howling profusely:

“Beware the Evil Goose of Duck Creek!” I was soon approached by this older man who introduced himself as Alton. He said he was a New Zealander, to which the other men remarked, “Here’s the ‘Mad Kiwi’ again.”

“Don’t tell them where we live,” Alton instructed me, and proceeded to tell me that ‘the Muslims’ had ‘overtaken Scrubwood’ and that I should sleep at night with ‘a shotgun by my side’.

Eventually Alton departed. Though not before informing me in his long farewell speech that he was ‘a socialist’ who, inexplicably, voted for John Howard at the previous election and that he ‘just wanted to know where his ‘taxes were going’.

“The name is Alton,” he said with a nod, “as opposed to ‘Elton’.”

Over the next two weeks, I encountered him on a

regular basis, where he would repeat that statement ad nauseam.

Downstairs in the main bar was an eatery, of sorts, where one was invited to cook one’s own steak (good grief!) to be then given free reign to fill up their plate with a variety of salads (no complaints there) and receive several fists-full of oily chips. (Yuk!)

“The chips are out!” the young girl called. (I didn’t know they were gay.)

I only sampled this fare the once as I found the steak to be so tough that I imagined only a *true* Anzac could digest it. Looking around the bar at the toothless smiles, I supposed that the local clientele most probably dined here every night of the week, and there were some scary-looking types amongst them. I tried not to stare for fear the

unruly-looking patrons may find cause to do me harm. The thick beards, intoxicated faces; the dishevelled appearances all left me in no doubt that this was yet another of my Uncle Theo's favoured dens of inequity.

The barpersons were mainly friendly, though most found difficulty when I attempted to order my favourite brand of sherry (although, extraordinary as it may seem, I did eventually find a bottle which was quite good): there was a youngish girl who incessantly read books about vampires, to the point that it sometimes proved difficult to order a drink; a plump gentleman who was keen on the local football competition, though by the way he drooled at the television screen, he was seemingly keener on the bulky types who played that sport. There was also a thin

and attractive, but imposing woman of Islander appearance, who towered over me. She insisted every evening that I purchase the raffle tickets she sold to the customers, which, I must confess, was such a necessary acquisition that I, with shaking hands, never once failed to oblige her requests.

"All the money goes to charity!" her deep voice would boom.

I did not know what to make of these people and, I must admit, harboured grave fears for my personal safety. There were various other staff of all shapes and sizes who seemed to know me by name, though I could seldom recall theirs, and, finally, there was an elderly bar lady called Delilah who did the 'grave yard shift'. Word was in the bar, even though I find this a touch hard to believe, that Delilah *was* a vampire. One

of the drinkers told me quite frankly that they would dig her up each night from a local cemetery to work in the hotel until 3.00 am, then return her to her grave before sun-up. I quickly found this establishment to be very strange place, indeed.

A thought came to mind: *Facta, Non Verba*. (The motto of the Bridges' Family Crest.)

Roughly translated, it means, 'When one's life is under threat, protect one's self by displaying uncharacteristic kindness', or, alternatively, 'cunning cowards get to live another day'.

Accordingly I did my very best to converse with everyone in the hotel and listen patiently to their bizarre tales: I paid strict attention to the young bargirl and her perverse ravings about vampires, attempted

conversation with the plump man and gave him free reign in his ponderings on the attractiveness of the big burly footballers, and never failed to purchase my fair share of the intimidating lady's raffle tickets. Sadly, I could see that my rating of this hotel was going to be very low, indeed. I had no idea whatsoever why my Uncle Leo would even contemplate purchasing such a rough and tumble establishment as the one I now found myself in.

Oh, the strange types I encountered in those two weeks; the misfits and mentally imbalanced, whose apparent chagrin I easily extricated myself from by entertaining their very madness. One of the regulars was a Vietnamese man who repeatedly asked everyone in the bar, men and women alike, to marry him. I lied, and politely told him I was

already engaged, though he continued to propose to me several times a day for the full two weeks.

There was also a bar supervisor from New Zealand who some of the drinkers told me was named, 'Neanderthal', but when I addressed him by this title he quickly and noticeably became slightly agitated. I gathered that those bar people whose advice I had accepted were not being overly truthful in their information about his true title and I found myself forced to apologise profusely for my oversight.

"My name's Nathan," he said gruffly, though, when I think about it, the title, 'Neanderthal' really did suit him to a tee.

Later, another tall, lanky man with a thin face and wrinkly cheeks introduced himself to me as 'Harry' and

told me he was a truck driver.

"I've been diagnosed as clinically insane," he told me, nonchalantly.

He then proceeded to ask me what drugs I took.

"Nothing," I quickly said, "apart from a drop of fine sherry and the odd cigar. I don't indulge in any illicit substances at all."

He examined me closely with his soft, blue eyes, then shook his head, incredulously.

"How do you manage?" he asked with concern.

Another short, solid man, whom I knew to be called Stan, would constantly ask me which teams I thought would win a variety of sporting events. My reply would always be that I knew nothing about sport, though that never stopped his continual questioning. He repeatedly asked me which teams I 'favoured', and I later

learned from others that he was the hotel's 'SP' bookie.

Alton, the 'Mad Kiwi' made one of his regular appearances, informing me that he had been kidnapped by an Israeli Mossad agent the night before, who wanted information on the radical Muslims living in his street. Silently, I questioned his sanity; I questioned my own for ever staying in a place like this. Worse was yet to come.

Friday nights seemed to be the 'highlight' of the week for the poor, troubled souls of this strange establishment. This was when Karaoke raised its ugly head! I'm not too sure whether it is the Japanese or the Filipinos who are to blame for this monstrosity. All I know for certain is that this unpleasant medium encourages the untalented and mediocre to punish the ears of the discerning, with vocal cords

of such horrendous quality that they could persuade the late Judy Garland to reincarnate to die another million deaths. The Scrubwood version of this painful, so-called, entertainment was a particularly nauseating experience, where the front bar was quickly filled with dozens of would-be country and western crooners, hillbilly rockers and tone-deaf sopranos. The beer flowed and the performances just got worse—if I ever hear 'Cats in the Cradle' again in my lifetime it will be far too soon. Shattered, I retired to my small room to gaze tearfully at the photograph of Miss Sheba I had brought with me. I missed her so much... I told myself that I must remain strong and see this mission out to the end—Uncle Theo was depending upon me to come through

with the goods and rate this hotel to the best of my ability, and I wasn't about to let him down. With renewed vigour I resolved to press on and throw myself into the work of tolerating the strange types in the hotel as best I could, no matter the personal cost on my sanity.

On one occasion, the truck driver, Harry, told me a very involved story regarding a man who worked as a customs agent on the border between two European countries. Evidently, the customs man was confused by another man who would come across the border once a week pushing a wheelbarrow full of soil. Harry said the customs man was sure that the man with the wheelbarrow was smuggling contraband across the border but he could never find any illicit substances within the soil, no matter

how hard he looked. This business, according to Harry, evidently went on for some years: where the man would push his barrow across the border once a week and the customs man would never find any contraband. (I suppose it was a mildly interesting account, though I had no idea why Harry was telling me this puzzling tale.) Finally, Harry told me that the customs man retired, and years later, again met the man who used to push the wheelbarrow across the border. Harry said that the barrow man then, at last, told the now, ex-customs man what he had been smuggling all those years before.

"And so what *was* he smuggling?" I asked Harry with renewed interest.

Harry smiled and scratched at his chin.

"Wheelbarrows..."

The whole story seemed

to be a little suspect to me, but I returned Harry's smile and pretended to grasp his meaning, even though, in reality, I didn't have the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

It was how I dealt with such issues during these difficult times: a smile here, a friendly laugh there... (Honestly, these people were nothing but complete morons.)

Alton, 'the mad Kiwi', made one final visit while I was staying in the hotel, told me he had been seconded to the Federal Police under the pseudonym, 'Scrubwood One' to spy on potential terrorists, gave me a contact number written in brail, skulled three beers and staggered out of the doorway with what looked like an old fashioned walkie-talkie.

At last, and thankfully so, my two week stay was up. I

gladly packed my bags and ventured to the main bar for one last sherry before my taxicab to the airport arrived. And there I sat, on a bar stool, sipping my drink, wondering if my darling Miss Sheba would remember her currently missing 'dad'.

Out of nowhere, and much to my surprise, there appeared almost the entire staff of the hotel and most of the regular patrons.

"We came to say goodbye!" the young vampire girl called. She wore a long, black gothic-like dress and brandished plastic pointy teeth.

"It was good to 'ave you 'ere," Harry said. "You're a good listener, Justin..." He wiped away a tear. "I'll miss ya."

"Come back and see us again," the tall, attractive, and imposing woman whispered. She pushed an



unopened bottle of my favourite sherry into my hands and, before I could object, she winked a brown eye and said with a smile, “for the flight, Justin.”

“Delilah couldn’t make it,” Stan said, “The sun doesn’t go down for another hour yet... Who do you fancy to make the Grand Final?” he then questioned, but before I could give my customary, ‘haven’t got a clue’ reply, someone unexpectedly shouted, “For he’s a jolly good fellow!” And there were loud calls of, “Hip, hip hurray!” Even ‘Neanderthal’ was present, singing along to the tune in a high-pitched whining tone.

Alton, The New Zealand socialist was notable by his absence.

Although shaken by such a spirited farewell, I thanked them all profusely, then, still somewhat confused, I

gathered my bags and met the taxicab. After a swerving drive to Sydney Airport at death-defying speeds, by the same jocular driver I had earlier encountered, I sat on the plane in first class, my gifted bottle of sherry safely stowed in my man-bag.

It was so nice to be home when I finally arrived in Battery Point, Hobart. Miss Sheba wouldn’t let me out of her sweet sight, most probably fearful that I should abandon her again, and the private detective I had hired to spy on Mavis Pomona (Mrs), surprisingly for me, gave my cleaning lady a clean ticket. I rang my Uncle Theo and advised him against purchasing The Scrubwood Hotel in Sydney, telling him, although the staff and customers were very charitable, I thought he could do much better elsewhere.

To my astonishment, he told me that he didn't care a 'damn' what I thought, and that he was keen to go ahead with the purchase.

"Oh, I'm going to buy it alright, Justin," he said, with a smile in his voice. "I'm going to rip it down and build a twenty-storey block of flats—the land, you very stupid boy. That's where the money is!"

"But, Uncle," I questioned, worriedly, "surely there would be a heritage order in place on that old building?"

"Who cares about heritage orders!" was his reply. I heard him laugh. "I've got Scrubwood Council in my pocket."

After he hung up, I sat quietly and gently stroked my little cat with the back of a hand. She began to purr, softly. I felt slightly sorry for those strange types in that

old hotel. After all, it was all they had. I poured myself a small nip of the sherry I had been presented with earlier that day.

I rang Mother and asked her for a favour. At first, she was reluctant to oblige, but I've always been her favourite only son.

Miss Sheba continued to purr on my lap.

"Don't worry, dear," I told my little furry pet. "I won't let nasty old Uncle Theo build his ugly old flats."

Later, Mavis Pomona made a hot cup of Milo for Miss Sheba and I to share. We then retired to bed: my darling, deliriously happy to have me home, and me, content in the knowledge that the contract on Theo's life would soon be in place.

(No-one calls me 'stupid' and gets away with it.)



# Biographies of Featured Authors

( *In order of first appearance* )

**Jason Markle** is currently a professor at Northern Michigan University. The focus of his writing is based on his experiences in the US Army and his desire to understand the conflicts in the world. Jason also loves Greek myth and is a huge soccer fan.

**JP Kemmick** grew up in Montana and currently lives in Seattle. He writes about the things he experiences while on foot or bike. He does what he can with what he has.

**DJ Daniels.** University dropout, public servant, university graduate, music teacher, failed librarian, mother, reluctant researcher; story writer.

**Robert McGowan.** ‘Nora’ is from Robert McGowan’s short fiction collection, ‘Secrets’. His fiction and essays are published in, among numerous others, *Chautauqua Literary Journal*, *Connecticut Review*, *Crucible*, *The Dos Passos Review*, *Etchings* (Australia), *The Louisiana Review*, *The Savage Kick* (UK), *Skive Magazine* (Australia), *South Dakota Review*, and have been several times anthologized. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee, USA.

**Matthew Glenn Ward** is an internationally published Australian author. His latest collection of short stories, ‘John F. Kennedy Lives in the Future!’, is available online through Amazon.

**Carol Reid** lives and writes on the west coast of Canada. Her stories have appeared most recently and are upcoming in *Semaphore*, *echolocation*, *Matrix* and *Halfway Down the Stairs*. She is a contributing editor at *Emprise Review*.

**Andria Olson** graduated with degrees in creative writing and journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she studied with Lorrie Moore and Jesse Lee Kercheval. She currently resides in Chicago.

**William Akin** lives in the Pacific Northwest, perched on the edge of an extinct cinder cone, alongside his wife, two daughters, and a dog with which he has a rather ambivalent relationship. He hasn't a strong grasp on the differences between prose and poetry, nor myth and truth, often confusing them hopelessly.

**Fiona Murray** is a freelance writer based in Melbourne, and her work has appeared in various publications, including *Skive Magazine*, and now *Blue Crow Magazine*.

**John Dodge**, originally born in Denver, Colorado, is currently living abroad in Prague, Czech Republic where he works as a gallery director. His short stories have appeared in *Blue Crow Magazine* and *Matchbook Literary Magazine*. The publication of Dodge's comics in *Blue Crow Magazine* Vol. II coincides with a group art exhibition in Prague entitled, "Where's Your Sense of Humour" that features a selection of these works as well. There is a strong connection between Dodge's comics and his short stories; he takes humour very seriously: "The highest form of laughter is also the rarest: to laugh at oneself. But I think one of the most hilarious things anyone can do is to speak and theorize about what's funny, instead of actually just laughing. For example, I think what I am saying right now is extremely funny!"

**Ricky Ginsburg** is one of those writers who sees a flock of birds heading south for the winter and wonders what they talk about on their journey. His portfolio consists of over 200 short stories, half of which have found their way into various magazines, both paper and electronic, and four novels, as yet unpublished. While much of his writing has elements of magical realism and humor, he also has a serious side, but keeps it in a small plexiglass box under his desk.

**Tyrone Arps** was born in 1971 in Christchurch, New Zealand and immigrated to Western Australia in 1986. He lives with his wife in the Perth Hills.

**Danielle de Valera** is a freelance manuscript assessor specialising in fiction and the memoir. Her short stories have appeared in such diverse Australian magazines as *Penthouse*, *Aurealis* and *Dotlit*.

**Jonathan Elsom**, an established theatre, television, and film actor in the UK for 40 years, has lived in Sydney since 2000. Major roles with the Sydney Theatre Company, Company B (Belvoir St.), Griffin Co. etc., and on Australian TV. Began writing in 2003 and his short stories and poetry have won awards and been published in Australia, the UK and US. Recent fiction published in collections by *Alyson Press* (US), *Blue Crow*, *Short and Twisted*, *Raspberry & Vine*, *Segora*, *Cooldog*, *Global*, (UK).

**J. Boyer** Teaches in the creative writing program of Arizona State University.

**Boris Glikman** is a writer, poet and philosopher from Melbourne. The biggest influences on his writing are dreams, Kafka and Borges. His stories, poems and non-fiction articles have been published in various online and print publications, as well as being featured on national radio and other radio programs.

**Justin Bridges** lives in Hobart, Tasmania with his housekeeper, Mavis Pomona (Mrs) and a small Burmese named Miss Sheba. He hopes to one day have his own television show, where he will interview celebrities and the world famous. He is a practising Catholic who just can't seem to perfect that practice. He doesn't like the colour green and his favourite movie is "Titanic", which he has seen ~~413~~ 414 times, though by the time this is published his viewings will probably be slightly a few more.

**Marc Ellis** was born in Tasmania. After spending his childhood in Launceston he travelled and worked throughout Australia, the United States and Great Britain. He presently lives in Sydney. He has been writing fiction since 1979 and his stories have appeared in *Outrider*, *LiNQ* and *Redoubt*.

**Claire Boswell** is in her second year studying fiction writing at the Virginia Commonwealth University M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing. She is a native of Richmond, Virginia, where she lives with her husband, dog and two cats.

**Cynthia Rowe**, graduate of Melbourne University, has taught French and English in Victoria and NSW. She is a novelist, short story writer and poet whose work has appeared in journals including *page seventeen*, *Poetrix*, *Tarralla*, and *Famous Reporter*. She has been broadcast on National Community Radio, is Past President of Eastern Suburbs Region FAW NSW and Editor, *Haiku Xpressions*.

**Daniel W. Davis** was born and raised in Central Illinois, and is a graduate of Eastern Illinois University. His work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can follow his work and musings at [www.dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com](http://www.dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com)

**James P. Hanley** has been a Human Resources professional for a number of years, and has been published in professional journals, but most enjoys writing fiction.

**Marie-Claude Bourjon.** From her Celtic ancestry and North African childhood, Marie-Claude Bourjon draws a taste for mystery and beauty. She lives near Montreal (Canada), where she is a professional translator. She also practises and teaches martial arts. She has published short stories in various Australian and US magazines as well as in British-Columbia (Canada). E-mail: [ananke01@videotron.ca](mailto:ananke01@videotron.ca).

**LJ Watts** is a seasoned Canadian translator, whose life has embraced many fields of human endeavour.

**Matt Dennison.** After a rather extended and varied second childhood in New Orleans (street musician, psych-tech, riverboat something-or-other, door-to-door poetry peddler, etc.), Matt Dennison finished his undergraduate degree at Mississippi State University where he won the National Sigma Tau Delta essay competition (judged by X.J. Kennedy). He currently lives in a 100-year-old house with “lots of potential.” [columbusmatt@cablone.net](mailto:columbusmatt@cablone.net)

**Deborah L. Reed** currently resides in a small bedroom community in Central Texas with her daughter, grandson, and two dogs. She is a retired Science teacher who now works in Code Enforcement.

**Shaune Lafferty Webb** was born in Brisbane, Australia. Despite having an early enthusiasm for writing, she opted to study the sciences and her career includes positions in exploration companies, a geochemical laboratory, a multinational scientific institute in the United States, and University administration. In recent years, Shaune has had short stories published in *AntipodeanSF* and *The Nautilus Engine*.



**Lacy Marschalk** is a PhD candidate in English at Auburn University. When she isn't writing or traveling, you can find her blogging about both at [lacymarschalk.blogspot.com](http://lacymarschalk.blogspot.com)

**Christopher Woods** is a writer, photographer and teacher who lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. His photo essays have appeared in *Public Republic*, *Glasgow Review* and *Narrative Magazine*. He recently completed a novel, *Hearts in the Dark*, about a crazed radio talk-show host who victimizes his listeners. The novel is, hopefully, a dark comedy.

**Gavin Austin** a Writing Fellow of the FAW NSW Inc, writes short fiction and poetry. His work has appeared in various Australian journals and anthologies, been broadcast on National Community Radio, and has been successful in numerous writing competitions. Gavin has been published in literary collections in NZ, the USA and UK. He has recently published a poetry collection titled, 'Shadow Play'.

**Peter Lingard** sold ice-cream, worked as a bank clerk, a bookkeeper, and a barman. He delivered milk, worked on a farm, served in Her Britannic Majesty's Corps of Royal Marines and 'bounced' leery customers in a London clip-joint. In NYC he owned a freight forwarding company. He came to Australia because the sun frequently shines here and he didn't have to learn a new language.

**Joran C.A. Monteiro** is Dutch. He lives in Melbourne. He writes poetry and fiction.

**Joseph Farley** edited the *Axe Factory Review* for 24 years. His books include: *Suckers*, *For The Birds* and *Longing For The Mother Tongue*.

**Michelle T. Tan** is currently a Creative Writing senior at the Ateneo de Manila University. She has participated in a few local writing workshops in the Philippines and has been published in *Heights*, her university's official literary journal. Two of her works, one short story and one personal essay, are scheduled to come out in the upcoming September issue of the same journal. Another story is also lined up for publication in *asiawrites.org*. She has also recently been accepted to the Ateneo National Writers' Workshop.

**Chris Curtis.** After growing up on the north coast of New South Wales, Chris Curtis moved to Sydney and mixed a technical career in engineering with travel and teaching. Now engaged in "unpaid employment", he lives with his wife in Wollstonecraft where he follows his other interests that include fishing, foreign languages, community service and writing.

**Lara S. Williams** has been published in *Voiceworks*, *Cordite*, *Antipodes*, *Islet*, *Australian Reader* and *Snakeskin* and has work appearing in *page seventeen*, *Red River Review* and *Writer's Eye*. After creating the blog *The Great Affairs* she regularly self-publishes travel articles and is currently the copy editor of *Open Radio North Korea* in Seoul. She completed her double degree in literature and creative writing at Wollongong and Sheffield Universities and is undertaking her masters at Edinburgh in 2011.

**Thomas Sullivan's** writing has appeared in *Eureka Street* and *3AM Magazine*, among others. He is the author of 'Life In The Slow Lane', a comic memoir about teaching drivers education. For information on this title, please visit his author website at <http://thomassullivanhumor.com>



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# Tales of Scrubwood and Beyond

*short stories and poems of  
humour and the absurd*

*by*

**Andrew  
Scobie**

**THERE IS** an uneasy truce in the strange suburb of Scrubwood, where the citizens of differing customs and contrasting persuasions blend into a melting pot of utter confusion...

**SCRUBWOOD IS** where you will find the quintessential “old fashioned” Aussies—politically incorrect to the extreme; the mostly industrious, sometimes totally perplexed Arab and Turkish immigrants; the crazed Europeans; the local drunks, drug addicts and criminals; the madmen, the culturally sensitive; the dreamers, fanatics, and those who live in an imaginary world.

**DISCOVER FOR YOURSELF** the peculiar anti-culture of Anglo-Australians; the difficulties Muslim immigrants have in adjusting to their new western home, and the fearful resentment of those who are at odds with religions and customs which differ from their own; the strange, sometimes bizarre behaviour of the former Europeans, who have integrated themselves into the Australian fabric in ways they consider best; the dedicated, often supercilious few who attempt to build culture in the minefield of obscurity which surrounds them; the uneducated; the ignorant; those who would like to improve their lot; the elderly who struggle with the post-modern world, the wowsers who fight for their own brand of justice, and the drunks who couldn't care less; the drug-affected; the mentally challenged, the gamblers, and the opportunists.

**IT CAN BE SCARY** if you consider that Scrubwood may very well be the suburb next to yours...

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*~ Welcome to Scrubwood! ~*

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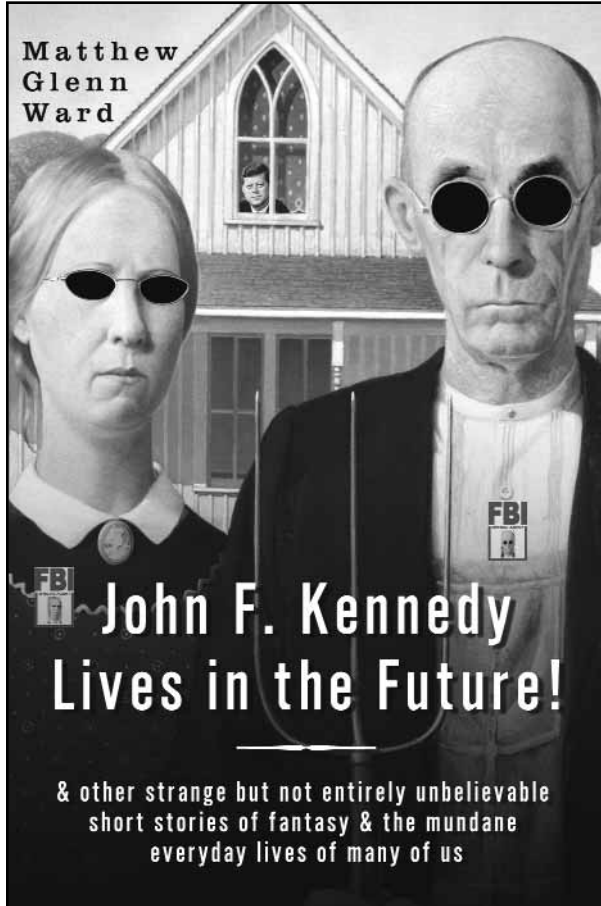
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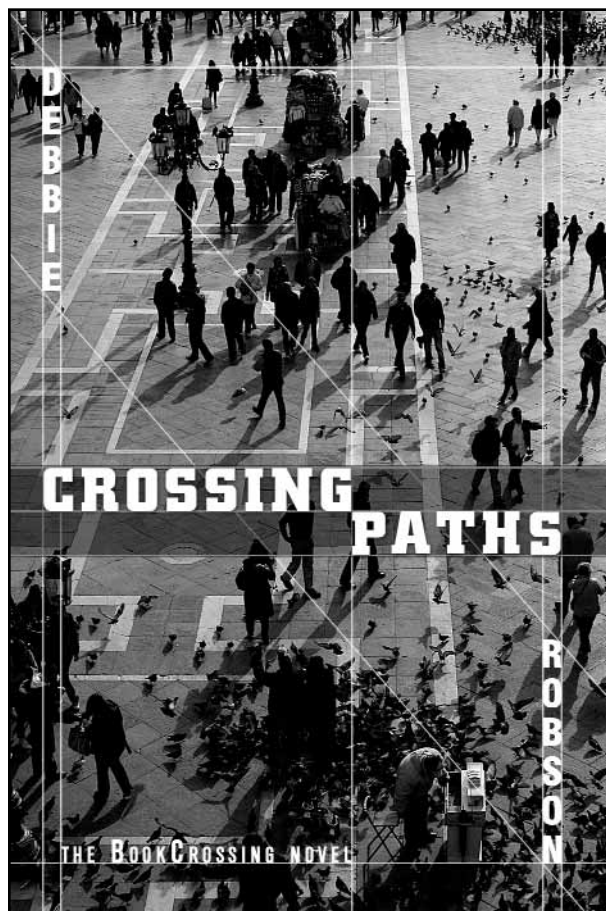
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*“Ich bin ein... The Future!”*

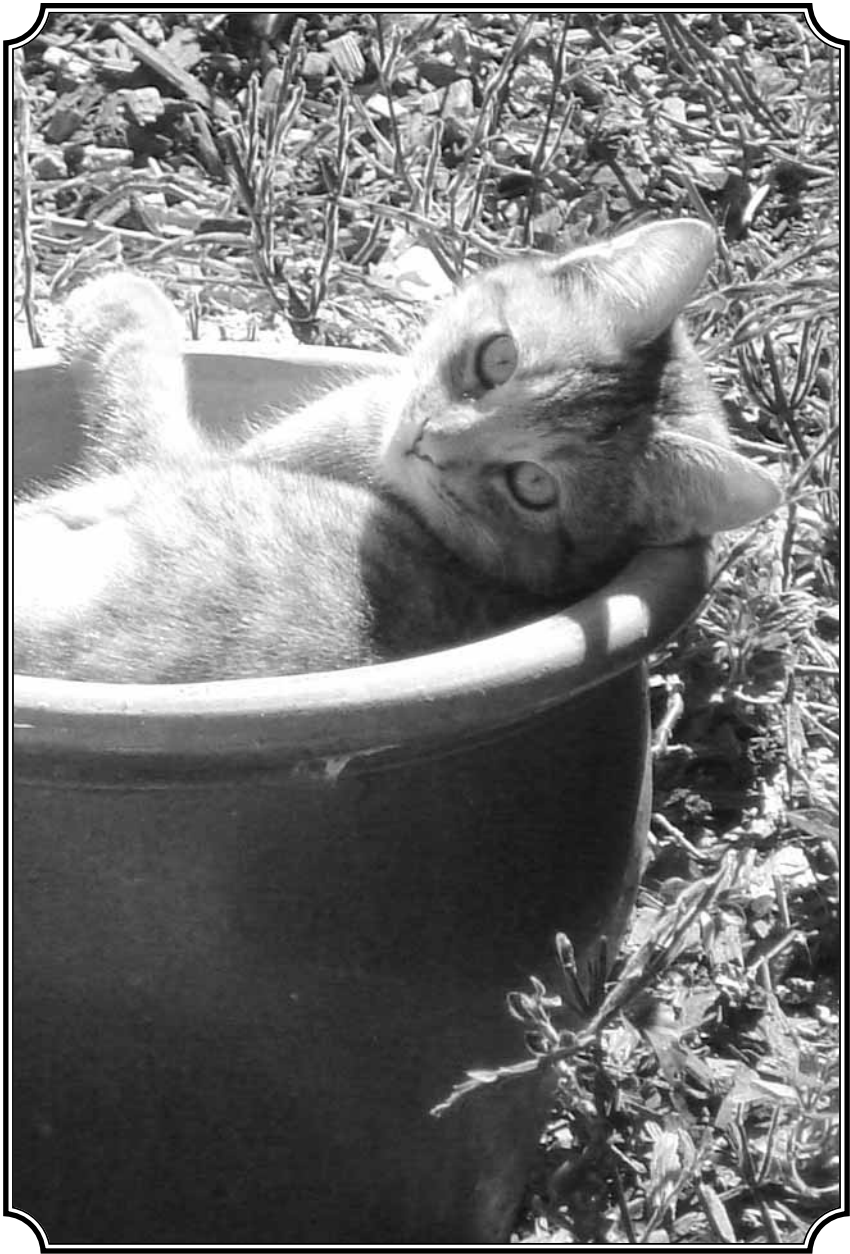


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