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JANUARY 2016

ISSUE ONE



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Our dearest readers,

Where to begin describing this incredible journey? To express everything we've gone through - staff and contributors and readers alike - in the short few months we've been an active publication would be absolutely impossible. There are truly no words, in any language, to do it justice.

Late October of 2015 - just three months ago - I started pitching the magazine to writers. First, it started off with my small group of friends. Then my MFA classmates. Then the students of my alma mater. Then, somehow, I was receiving submissions from Japan, of all places. People were donating to this little hole-in-the-wall not-really-real publication, all because they thought it was *different*. And I like to think it is.

We at *Icarus Down Review* measure success by survival. We would've been happy with five submissions and, instead, we're publishing 23 amazing writers right here in our debut issue. We couldn't be more thrilled.

There are so many people we'd like to thank, starting first and foremost with you, our dedicated reader. You trusted us to bring you wonderful writing, and we truly hope we didn't let you down.

Next, we'd like to thank our simply *spectacular* contributors. There wouldn't be a magazine without you. We were floored by your talent, and we are honored to have you as the front-runners of our debut publication. We would also like to thank our Ongoing & Series contributors Claude, Evan, Karen, Mark, and Sayuri in particular; we're so happy you decided to trust us in serializing your work. You have helped us make *IDR's* primary focus - the distribution of long form work over an extended period of time - a reality.

We would also like to thank our Professional Moral Support Team for keeping us on track. When we needed them, they were there, from the long hours reading, to the even longer hours building the magazine itself, we absolutely could not have done it without them.

And, finally, we'd like to thank Icarus, son of Daedalus. Not because he taught us any measure of humility, but because he taught us that, even if you fail, your story will be told and you will live on. Our story will be told, and we will live on.

And we did not fail.

All the best,
Amanda Isabel Ramirez
Melanie Konstantinou
Bernadette Flinn
& Amelia Fisher

DONORS

An exceptionally warm welcome to our donors

Andrea Sexton Wyatt
Lindsey Warren
Mark Wagstaff
and Sarah Henry

Thank you for your generosity! We're so lucky to have people like you in our writing community.

We hope you're proud.

POETRY

Annex
Anne Leigh

In my fantasy house,

there is more space,

fewer things.

In my beach house,

there are just books, a telescope,

maybe a man.

I limit things, and motivation, production are limitless.

Postage
Emma Oliver

I was too afraid to tell you:

“It hurts too much to stay,”

So I claimed to miss the open road,

Packed my bags and was on my way.

Trudged back to my old apartment

‘cause—I needed somewhere to stay,

And ended up never leaving

Despite what I’d told you yesterday.

But I promised I would write,

So I grabbed a pen anyway,

Fibbing I’d made it down to Sussex

Playing street corners for pay.

But I sit in my room as I write this,

And in my bed I lay,

Thinking about your smile

And the proposal I turned down last May.

By now you think I’m headed home,

My lies thorough but postage clear:

I’ve been sending postcards from my bedroom—

“Wish you were here—”

Cycle of Life
F. I. Goldhaber

We
begin
our short lives
incontinent
unable to feed
ourselves. If we're lucky
we have loving parents to
fill our bellies, clean us up, sing
us a lullaby, and hold our hands.
We end life incontinent and
unable to feed ourselves.
If we're lucky we've
loving children
to clean us,
feed us,
care.

from Moreau Haiku
John E. Urdiales

IV.

Love comes from without—
Do this in mem'ry of me—
Love comes from within.

V.

Search not in the heights
to find peacefulness and joy—
plunge into the depths.

Ferdoss saves me
Mika Yamamoto

a bowl of

pomegranate soup

with yellow split peas

cilantro parsley lemon and mint

—served with flat bread, green onions, fresh white cheese.

bougainvillea rising in purple around us.

jeweled rice, chicken with plums, simple salad, cucumber slices

—for dessert— honeyed baklava and tea—

all shall be well, all shall be well, and all

manners of things shall be well.

Did I Ever Tell You
Sandy Coomer

I walked this way after
all the commotion was over
and people chose sides fiercely

and wore their hate like hats
over their faces so no one could see
their eyes? But I saw yours

and followed you, watching
you watch a line of ants, those
deliberate soldiers marching,

and I stopped when you stopped
to touch the fringe of an uncurled fern,
to lift a stone just to see what was

alive underneath.

The Dying Man
Sarah Henry

I saw him lying
on a stretcher
at the train station
and remembered
the liquor store
was right
up the street.

Aquaphobia
Zachary Riddle

Aquaphobia
the fear of water

i.

My father taught me to cast
fishing line into a fishless
pond. The bob sat stagnant
on a film of algae and feathers
and trash. When he left my brother
and me alone on the dock, I felt
distance through the spring heat.
I saw my half-reflection in the shadow
of a budding tree and wished
I was with my mother.
 We never caught a thing.

ii.

I held my father's hand tight in mine
the week before he died. His blue
eyes shimmered. I imagined
a vast lake. On the shore, the house
he promised my brother and me
years ago. *I'll get a nice one, boys,*
he said. *You'll see.*
I promise.

I promised, too.

iii.

I try to swim, but I fear
the cool splash on my neck,
the back of my ears. All I want
is to breathe. You tell me
not to take the water into
my lungs, but it's what my mother
taught me to do when my body
sunk wave after wave, my feet
shivering, toes digging
into the silt on the lake's bottom.

I have no choice.

MEMOIR & PERSONAL ESSAY

Gogo and the Mr. Bojangles Man

Louis Bourgeois

The house, now a church, had concrete walls and enormous archways and halls dividing the rooms. The place was always dimly lighted. There were cockroaches all over the floor and on the walls, that's what I remember for sure because that's what frightened me the most at first. My next memory is of my Acadian step-grandfather sipping from his cheap beer and cheaper gin in the large den, only lit by the grey light of the black and white Philco television. Apparently, my parents had dropped me off for the night. My step-grandfather didn't speak much; he always wore his army fatigues from his time in both Korea and Vietnam, Korea because he was young and could fire a rifle, Vietnam because he was from Marksville, Louisiana and could speak French well enough to communicate with deserters of the Viet Cong. Korea left him all but deaf and Vietnam all but speechless. This is the night of my first memory.

It wasn't fear I remember most at the root of my first memories, it was sadness, childhood sadness. I sat alone on the concrete floor in the adjoining hallway where the back door was and played with the roaches and an old rubber ball half gone, bitten in two by some dog I suppose, the faint voices of the television behind me. There was just enough light to illuminate the darkness. My step-grandfather's beer and gin filled the air, deepening my already deep melancholy. Every now and then in a kind of depressed but controlled drunkenness, he would call out to me "Où à tu, Lucas?" and I would answer "On the floor, Papa." I was around three years old. I could understand simple commands in French but was not able to speak it. It was 1973, a year I remember only from certain angles in the shadows.

Finally, he fell asleep. The television went off the air, as television channels did in those days before cable and satellite dishes. My parents would not be coming to get me on this night. I was still on the floor, unattended, forgotten, in the cold concrete house on the outskirts of Slidell, Louisiana. It was then that Gogo came to me. How to describe him? Clownish, at least the hair of a clown, but it was silver, not orange or red. He was puppet-like, spindly and mechanistic in his haunting movements, standing about eight inches tall, and speaking incessantly without forming any true words—his mouth just moved and only the air of words escaped from his thick red lips. At moments, I thought he was trying to speak to me in French, and at other times, I thought he was trying to sp-

eak to me in Spanish, the language of my maternal grandmother, but only English thoughts came to me. Most of the short time of Gogo's existence I spent showing him the cockroaches and he showed me the inside of himself, which was a mirror with emerald trim. I saw myself over and over again in Gogo's magnificent mirror, a brown-headed boy with heavy but fine hair and a perfect Gaelic nose. Gogo would point and I would offer him a cockroach as thanks for showing me his mirror, the inside of himself, but he didn't seem to like the roaches and he would point to my mouth and I would eat them, as many as I could find, until finally I got sick and threw up all over myself. It startled me and I began to fear Gogo, to the point of real tears. Eventually, I quit crying long enough to somehow gather the courage to pick Gogo up by his silver hair and flush his wicked body down the toilet. I have yet to hear from him since.

The next day they came for me but it was late in the evening. My step-grandfather had gone fishing that morning and brought back a string of fish, mostly gar, shoe pique and carp. Around noon, we had fish and rice for lunch, with water and coffee to drink. He took up the dishes from the Formica-topped, steel-legged table. I remember the methodical clanking of the dishes as he washed them.

He went to his chair and smoked his pipe for awhile. He drank a beer and fell asleep with the sound off on the television. I stared out the kitchen window for a while, watching an old lady from across the street feed her cats. She had dozens of them, different colors and shapes. She seemed to me to be very far away, as far away as my arms and legs, as far away as the sky. I have always been intoxicated by distances.

I slipped out the back door without waking him. The yard was large and was not fenced in. Rozo cane grew along the fetid ditch that ran along the front yard. The cat lady waved to me. In response, I threw my half-ball in her direction, it lopped into the ditch. I went for the ball and the cat lady told me to stay out of the ditch. I stuck my hands into the viscous black water to find my ball, water bugs and crayfish swam about. I felt ancient, as if I had never been born. My step-grandfather was standing at the front door. I saw him before he spoke, then he said, "Lucas, rentrez maintenent." I went to him without saying anything. He picked me up with his short but strong arms and sat me in his huge white zinc tub. A roach began floating in circles in the yellow brackish water, and I picked it up and tried to put it in my mouth when he slapped me lightly on my face and said, "No Lucas, c'est caca. C'est caca!" For whatever reasons, those were the last French words he ever spoke to me.

My mother and father came for me and I climbed into the back seat of the white beat up Falcon. The inside had that old car smell, like the inside of an old person's Oldsmobile or Fairlaine. But my parents were not old; they were young, good looking, hostile, slig-

htly backward, and very tense. Normal attributes of the upper working class of Southeast, Louisiana. My father was recently discharged from the Navy fleet at Long Beach, one of many fleets in the Navy that didn't see action in Vietnam. My mother was the first and only high school graduate of her family. That day, I remember her long autumn hair and red pantsuit, and his thick mustache and wide violent eyes.

We went down the long and dusty semi-rural road. Lines of pine trees mostly thin and short rolled rhythmically, the sky was a dark blue fading into ochre, crimson, and purple. I have never forgotten that sky. It was the first time I was mesmerized by it. I remember feeling as if I had become the sky or that the sky had become a part of me. There was sadness and glee, as if I could walk on air but in tears. It was then I became aware of the sound of nothingness and time. The song "Mr. Bojangles" was playing on our push-button AM radio:

*I knew a man Bojangles
And he danced for you
In worn out shoes*

*Mister Bojangles
Mister Bojangles
Come back and dance again*

The song blended with the colors of the evening. The evening and the song and the moldy smell of the car made me dizzy. I had the strange sense that I might disappear at any moment, but it didn't frighten me. It was as if my body was being purged of all details, only the real poetic stuff of existence remained.

My father turned down the radio and slowly came to a stop in front of the mailbox of a large one-story brick house. "Mr. James died of a heart attack today," he said to my mother. From the back seat, I could see Mr. James' wife pulling flowers at the edge of the yard. Like the cat lady, she appeared to me to be very far away, as far away as I could see before she disappeared into the evening air. I imagined how the flowers would taste. I imagined my mouth full of purple petals, as I still do when I see such flowers.

It must be that I had seen Mr. James before or imagined I had seen him, mowing his lawn in a pin-striped suit, a spindly man pushing his mower to and fro, his short overweight wife androgynous, taciturn, and silent, edging the sidewalk and fertilizing the front yard's shrubs and flowers. The two of them, very quiet and nondescript, without want or ambition of great things, working together and speaking indirectly under the ambiguous sky of Slidell, Louisiana— he dead ten years before her, she living well off the insurance money

with no hope of finding a replacement and existing in the shadow of his obscure memory. Perhaps I had only imagined him; he very much resembled Gogo, the apparition I had destroyed the night before. The poet- child takes in and digests phantoms, and produces phantoms all his life.

We arrived at home near sunset. I climbed out of the car and could hear a dog barking from a long way off. I remember seeing the quick movements of bats speckling the sky, although at that age I did not know they were called bats. An uncle of mine was sitting on the front steps of our two story bungalow, a triangular looking home made of cheap cinder wood. He was drinking a Dixie beer and smoking a cigarette. He looked and talked like Johnny Cash, but he was a foot taller and skinnier. I had never seen him before and still don't know why he was waiting for us on the front steps. My father took a beer from my uncle's Styrofoam cooler and they talked for awhile in the waning evening light. I remember my uncle telling how one evening a snake crawled under the door of his house while he and his wife were watching television. I also remember him saying how he wished he was back in the war overseas.

The Slidell sky was shrinking quickly on this day in 1973. I envisioned dragons eating up that sky. I looked into the horizon. I stared at it harder than I had ever stared at anything before or since; staring into the horizon until it almost drowned me.

FICTION

Gratuities

Christopher Dungey

At first, it looked like we might have to stage some kind of intervention on Ladd Callander down there in Key West. I mean, it was one thing for him to eat all those Xanax and Vicodin. He's been sober for twenty years. He deserved some kind of cheap thrills, hangin' with his old high school buds on a road trip. Pills seem to land on him like a ton. Give him weird, funny insights. So, Pete Brennan and I couldn't complain. We were on our way to getting plenty shit-faced ourselves as we drove down from South Beach. We had a Styrofoam chest full of *Red Stripe* on ice; *Buena Vista Social Club* and Bob Marley on the stereo of the rental car. We turned the driving over to Ladd. He was the lesser of three evils long before we reached 7 Mile Bridge.

What became alarming was the money Ladd insisted on handing out. He'd soon be reduced to plastic, too, if we couldn't reason with him. Plus, O.K., fun is fun, but his wry observations about all the tourists started to get old. Hell, we were tourists. Some drunken alpha male might overhear Ladd's riff about the guy's wardrobe, hairstyle, or cell phone persona. Ladd's also tended to become weepy by last call, just about the time Pete and I were trying to get laid.

The worst point came on our first evening in town. We'd made reservations to go on one of those sunset cruises after dinner. The place where we went to eat first was called the *Spanish Main*. Which meant they served some Cuban, but mostly Texmex or maybe call it TexConch entrees—wet burritos and the like. Ladd started tipping the steel-drum player singing along to recorded reggae tracks. Every other tune, Ladd hustled up to the little stage with requests and greenbacks.

“Much appreciation, mon.” The guy's gold crowns glittered.

“Terry, his accent sounds fake,” Pete whispered. Pete had been to Barbados and Kingston, both. He was already upset that our food was tardy.

“You guys wanta hear anything? I asked for *Red, Red Wine?*”

“Ladd,” I said. “It all sounds like *Red, Red Wine.*”

“You’re just encouraging him,” Pete told Ladd.

“Well, *yeah*. You guys are so negative. Besides, the Good Lord says we’re supposed to ‘give it away, give it away now.’”

Luckily, there was no food in our mouths yet. We both exploded with laughter. Pete is a lapsed Lutheran and I’m the agnostic son of an Assembly of God lay preacher. “You’re confusing Scripture with *Red Hot Chili Peppers*,” I said.

“I knew that.”

Pete was irritated when Ladd left the politically correct 20% tip. We had waited forever because of some personnel snafu in the kitchen. Then they wouldn’t even comp us a dessert. We strolled toward the waterfront where crowds would be gathering in Mallory Square for the Chamber of Commerce sunset. Buskers and performance artists harangued the tourists. Ladd really got untracked then with his full-access wallet. He put a couple of bucks in every musician’s hat along Duval Street—the mandolin and washboard guy; the twelve-string strummer with blond dreadlocks—players we didn’t even stop to listen to. When we arrived at the Square he tipped an escape artist who was still hanging in his chains from a tripod. He tipped the old man with the Santa beard who coached a Scotty terrier across a parallel bar.

“I hope the dog gets a percentage,” he said.

“Why don’t you give it to the dog *directly*,” Pete snickered.

Ladd put a five into the galvanized pail of a sword-swallower who never actually got around to choking it down. At least not while we were standing there, which seemed like a long time. The guy just went on and on with a lame comedy routine, waiting for a bigger audience.

“This is crazy,” I said.

“Hey, I liked his schtick,” Ladd said.

We led him away because it was time to find *The Appledore* for our evening sail. Pete and I had bought fruity rum drinks to walk around with, but booze on the boat was supposed to be of unlimited quantity. I was ready to party.

“He was amusing,” Pete said. “He had to be if he was never going to actually swallow the fucking sword.”

“Lighten up, guys. Not his fault you’re so impatient. You can’t just do that trick every fifteen minutes. D’jyou touch that blade?”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I hope he disinfects it though, because everybody else did.”

“Yeah, but Callander,” Pete insisted. “Every hour or so would be nice. The fire eater worked two crowds while that guy was still just *talking* about it.”

“I suppose. But we have so much. I just wanta give something back. You could see he needed dental work.”

“If we’d left you there much longer, he’d have a full set of gold ones like the Jimmy Cliff clone back in the restaurant,” I said.

We guided him in up Front Street toward the marina. We cut back across the end of Duval Street. On our way, we heard about twenty seconds of violin reel by a chick in a black gown. Ladd had to break away and drop a single in her basket.

I couldn’t pretend to understand Ladd’s guilt trip. He had chased a car assembly line for thirty years. He didn’t owe anybody anything. I do computer assisted drafting from my home and Brennan is a customer service consultant. He trains those techies you have to talk to when some new app on your cell phone doesn’t work, or doesn’t work fast enough. Neither of us had ever worked as hard, physically, as Ladd.

We made our way through the bar-hopping throng. Our ship turned out to be a beauty all right—a ninety footer with two masts. She was sold out because it was Saturday evening and a 70 degree cold snap had passed.

“Sit aft, by the wheel,” Ladd said. “Maybe we can talk to the Skipper.”

So, O.K., I thought. Callender knows boats. Pete and I had both been aboard the nineteen foot sloop he keeps up on Saginaw Bay. A *daysailer*, he calls it. I just wanted to get a cold one in my fist. We signed in and climbed the gangway. That’s when we discovered that the *Appledore* would be crewed entirely by young women. They wore matching jackets and cargo shorts which were not the baggy kind. There was a scent of perfume on the air that you wouldn’t expect in a harbor. Maybe one of *them* would take the helm. Their Skipper wore a ponytail, too, but needed a shave. He looked bored.

Pretty soon, all the rails were lined with guzzling passengers seated on the mahogany deck. Tourists sat all the way around on the coach roof as well, and on the fo'c'sle. There were probably forty of us in all. I wasn't optimistic about getting any special attention from the serious young women who scrambled around preparing to get under way. Nevertheless, much was expected of me, the only bachelor. I sucked in my paunch. I finger combed my thinning, salt-and-pepper dome. An old, unwelcome foreboding fluttered in my chest.

The Skipper gave a rote lecture touting all the modern safety features—Global Positioning and shark repellent in the life raft which the crew would immediately occupy in the event of capsize or other dire emergency. He showed us the locker where passengers could find reasonably buoyant flotation jackets, of which there should be enough to go around. Everyone laughed. The girls cast off mooring lines and we backed out of the slip under diesel power.

It's hard for me to do justice, with anything approaching original prose, to the beauty of a tall ship in a freshening breeze. Then add an imminent sunset in the Caribbean. I'll begin by noting that most of the passengers' voices were hushed for the first half hour. For the first time since our trio rendezvoused at the airport in Fort Lauderdale, I didn't feel like talking either. We were well out of the gray, rust-belt winter. It was time to relax outside all our old boxes. Except maybe the one our crew had gotten me to thinking about. We let go of all the reminiscing that middle aged friends do upon reunion: girlfriends, sports, teachers, on-and-on. We'd already played our old conjecture games on the drive down: which teacher was hottest, Ms. Church or Mrs. D'Amato? Which Candeliano sister would we prefer if they hadn't been so far out of our league? And Ladd and Pete had already done a Ken Burns length dialogue about their JV football careers.

The *Appledore* made good way once we cleared the harbor. She cranked along, reaching behind a 12 knot quartering breeze out of northwest. We could be in Cuba by dawn if we maintained course. The sun lost its glare, turning to a blood orange reflection on the water. Pink and purple fair-weather clouds on the white froth of a three foot chop wouldn't keep it from sliding under the horizon. Plenty of spray came over the weather rail, soaking the deck. When *Appledore's* sister ship plunged up close along our lee side, both boats fired miniature cannon. The quiet spell was broken. The captains exchanged hippie peace signs and the other ship bore off. Women on the *Appledore* squealed about their wet asses and the giddy heel of the deck. The crew broke out cold cuts and crackers, platters of cheese and sliced fruit. The bar was open if anyone cared to stagger below deck.

Topside, magnums of white and rosé were uncapped. Pete and I were hammering down

our third Bud Lights when the Skipper called one of the girls to take the helm. He needed to use the head, I guess. Anyway, he went below for some time. His second-in-command took over. She gripped a spoke of the wheel in her elbow, dug a smoke out of a cargo pocket, then lit up.

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to do that,” I called, into the wind.

“Just hold the filter between your thumb and forefinger with the tobacco end down.” The wind flailed her short brunette hair and her words. “Cup it to your mouth like your hand is cold. Stick the lighter up under there.”

“Ouch.” I winced. But the smoke rolled up.

“Careful. Takes some practice. Get ‘er going?”

“Yes, thanks. After a few skin grafts maybe I’ll give it up. What do I call you? Captain or matey?”

“Nuh-uh, unless we press you into the crew,” she said. “I’m Pauline. Who are you?”

“I’m Terry Wickersham.” I expected her name to end in an ‘i.’ “Do you go to school, Pauline?” Why my old-fart expectations made her a coed with a ditzzy name, I had no clue.

She still hadn’t looked at me. Her hazel eyes were working the three mile stare, or however far it was to the horizon. “University of South Florida, when I can afford it. About every other semester. I don’t wanta end up with a lot of student loans.”

I scooted a couple more feet aft so we could converse more easily. “What are you taking up?”

“Literature,” she said, cocking the wheel another degree to starboard. “American Lit with a minor in American Culture. How’s that for a dead end career?”

“Not to mention an oxymoron.”

“Hey, c’mon!”

“Just me trying to be glib. Really though, then you can apply as a guide at Hemingway House. Seems like a natural. We’re seeing *that* tomorrow after we recover.”

“Been there, done that.” Pauline chuckled. “Turns out I was allergic to all those cats.”

“Cats? Really? What was that about?”

“Well, there are more than sixty cats in residence. Descendants of Papa’s cats. And all of them with better health insurance than the staff. Yeah, but I can tell you what brand of fishing reel he used; what weight line he liked for tarpon. I know the mint of that penny he planted by the pool they put in for Pauline Pfeiffer.”

“Hey, that’s your name even. Too bad about the cats.”

“Yup. His joke was that she’d gotten his last penny. I guess we *both* became disillusioned on Whitehead Street. Ol’ Papa had issues, anyway.”

I had read *Old Man and the Sea* and *Big Two-Hearted River* in high school like everybody else. That was the extent of my knowledge or interest. There was no way I could carry my weight in the conversation unless she wanted to talk about Robert Ludlum or Lee Child. Ladd must have been blitzed on his pills not to jump in. Or, sitting by the weather rail, opposite me, he couldn’t hear us.

“So, do all of you live aboard, or what?” I was genuinely curious about the lifestyle of these young women. I told myself I wasn’t calculating how she could take me home or any such fantasy nonsense. I had learned to hedge my expectations in that regard.

“Wow, congratulations! That’s usually the *first* question. Yeah, we all live aboard. Then we take a break during hurricane season. Captain Sean has a condo up in Marathon, then *he* lives aboard while we’re off. We sleep in *separate* hammocks, but there are berths, too.” Her gaze shifted to the compass in its binnacle, then to the sail shape.

“Cool,” I said. “Is this good money?”

“We work for tips, actually. They’re usually pretty good, though. Please drink some more!” She winked.

“Absolutely! But, hey. Doesn’t anyone in Key West work for hourly wages?”

“I don’t know about that,” Pauline said. “But my rent is free, and check out this tan. Look what I get to *do* twice, sometimes three trips a day. You can’t *buy* some of these life lessons.”

She posed with us for photos from all our cameras before Captain Sean emerged from below. Then she went to put more beers on ice. Ladd had restrained himself, so far, from badgering the Skipper about boats. But I knew it couldn't last. Now he had to know what advantages there were in *Appledore's* gaff rigged mainsail. He expressed his preference for the simplicity of tiller steering, etc., etc. The Xanax slur seemed to level out of his voice, though. He held his own in the exchange of nautical jargon as we came about and headed back to the harbor. All I wanted to do was nurse my buzz and sneak peeks at Pauline moving—the obvious athleticism of all the crew. The girls were soon ordered to make ready for striking sail. This would require them to go aloft then rappel down the various halyards and stays for show.

We came plowing down within a few hundred yards of two departing Disney cruise ships. The Skipper luffed up, pointing *Appledore* into the wind. In the critical seconds before our momentum died, the girls hung and swung in the rigging like scented gymnasts. Down came all that broad expanse of Mylar into their practiced grasp. They gathered and lashed with sure dexterity, bundling it under Velcro straps as the Skipper fired up the diesel. *Appledore's* bow fell back to starboard and we motored slowly toward the yacht basin.

As the crew vaulted off the boom, Ladd initiated a round of applause. Pete and I and a few others joined him—anyone, perhaps, who'd ever performed that maneuver, even on a much smaller scale. Pauline and her friends bowed and went back to bartending. The breeze inside the harbor had calmed. There was no plausible reason I could think of to offer her another light; no rationale that wouldn't suggest I was coming on to her. It was time to be fifty years old again and just dig out our wallets.

We stretched and waited for all the dock lines to be secured. The girls stood on the dock, at the bottom of the gangway. Pauline held the omnipresent Key West bucket. The Skipper, more animated than we'd seen him all evening, made an appeal to our generosity on behalf of his crew. It turned out that the ship wasn't his but belonged to some faceless resort/leisure corporation. This entity couldn't possibly pay the crew a wage commensurate with their skills and their love of the sea. If we agreed, would we please take care of them in a manner that would keep them all sailing? He didn't think he could single-hand the boat and keep everyone drinking at a suitable pace.

Those cruises are just long enough that the alcohol takes full effect by the time you stagger down the plank. The last of the gloaming was perfectly tropical, the air thick with lilac and jasmine. Mast lights and navigation lights of a hundred yachts shimmered on the water. Music twanged from nearby bars. We could hear basses thumping from joints on Duval Street a few blocks away. We waited our turn to file off while everyone

hugged and praised the crew—drink warmed, brief, generous intimacy after close quarters at sea. I heard no silver rattling in Pauline’s bucket; only the arid flutter and shuffle of bills, like leaves in a small pile.

I don’t know why I threw in the fifty. I hadn’t planned to. I never do. Unlike Ladd, I don’t have a philosophy about it. It was probably my way of elbowing through that last surviving box I’d brought with me. I’m only sorry Callander was behind me and saw it. I don’t think Pauline saw it. She politely kept her eyes averted from the pot as she thanked each customer. She winked at me again, sure, but she was smiling at everyone. It was part of the package.

“Pick up some *Claratin* for tomorrow, Terry,” she said. “I’m serious. Those cats will mess you up. Enjoy the rest of your visit.”

Not even a hug. Like a fool, I had my camera in one hand and a half-empty beer in the money hand. It would have been awkward. I stepped out of the way, into the crowd on the dock. Forty adults chattering about where to have their next drink, like it was a senior Class Trip or something. Pete Brennan stood behind me, weaving. Ladd was at my elbow, hands on hips, clucking his tongue.

“What?”

“Nothing. Not here.” He led the way off the wharf. We turned toward Duval Street. “You are *such* a fraud.”

“Whata ya talking about?”

“Dropping that big bill,” Ladd said. “What’d you think was going to *happen*?”

“I don’t know. Nothing in particular. She was a sweet kid, that’s all. Didn’t you want us to spread the wealth?”

“What’d he put in?” Pete asked, stumbling behind us. The sidewalks were darker as we moved away from the marina.

“A *fifty*,” Ladd told him.

“Jesus, Terry. Well, I put in a twenty so I *know* I’m getting smashed. D’jou get a phone number at least?”

“No. That *not* my purpose. I never considered it.”

“For that kinda dough, you should pull the trigger,” Pete groaned. “Even if you miss.”

“This is farcical,” Ladd went on. “‘Never considered it.’ How long have we known you? You could have asked her out for a drink when they’re done swabbing the decks or whatever they do. She might not have made the connection to your crazy tip.”

“It could have come from *anyone*, dude,” Pete agreed. “I don’t think they were examining *every* contribution. And, you know, if you do the math, that’s only \$12.50 per girl when they divvy up. Maybe she sees big bills all the time. Hardly even a *white knight* deal at all? Was it a *white knight* deal, Callander?”

“That’s what I’m *saying*.” I didn’t acknowledge that Ladd had struck a nerve or that they had probably nailed my impulse pretty accurately. To be honest, I *had* made futile gestures before. And, my most generous gratuities seemed to land in the jars of attractive young women. They’ve usually been waitresses, sometimes single mothers or coeds who I imagined to be in tight circumstances. I would avoid disclosure of my not entirely altruistic motives—to the recipients as well as to myself. But these gifts have little to do with prompt service, good food, or how much I’ve had to drink. The tips say, rather, ‘Give *me* your attention; notice *me*. I could take *care* of you.’

“By the way, what’d *you* put in?” Pete nudged Ladd.

Callander didn’t say anything as we meandered along. I began to smell a rat. I stopped in my tracks. I gave him the interrogating fish eye. “Yeah, Mother Theresa. What’d *you* kick in? Are the orphans getting new *Topsiders*?” The throng of pedestrians detoured around us while we waited for Ladd to come clean.

“O.K., I gave ‘em a ten,” Ladd mumbled. “You said I’ve gotta pace myself.”

“Woah, woah. Hold up a minute!” I cried. “A measly ten? Those kids worked their asses off! You were spearing melon and salami cubes with both fists! Pete! He managed a *ten*! Nobody out there asked for more Diet Cokes! ‘Can I please get another cup of ice, *kiddo*?’”

“Works out to two-fifty per crew member, bro,” Pete said flatly as he lit a cigarette. “C’mon. We’re holding up traffic.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ladd said. “I didn’t hear any *hard-luck* stories out there. Everyone looked

healthy and well-fed. You're just deflecting guilt 'cause I've been paying for *your* free entertainment since we hit town."

"And now you can keep right on," I said. "We're having a drink in every dive on Duval, right? That's a lot of pickers and strummers."

"That's the plan," Pete said. "Prepare to 'give it away now,' big time, my friend."

We pushed on to find some 'clean, well lighted place,' as Ladd put it. He was the literature buff, jacked up on the Hemingway lore that was everywhere. I let them pick our first stop. I was settling into dark thoughts of frustration. 'Clean,' maybe, should have been a top consideration if we were eating a late meal. But dim and noisy would suit my mood just fine.

After we left Front Street, they led me into a place, two blocks east on Duval. That's how far we had to walk to find a joint where we didn't have to line up outside for a table. There were two long horseshoe bars inside and a grill heaped with sausages. Onions and green pepper were caramelizing on the side. The single troubadour seemed to play like Jimmy Page and sing like James Taylor, so we must have had enough to drink already. Pete and I found our way toward an empty table in back. Ladd headed straight toward the little stage with his wallet drawn. We soon heard "The Southern Cross," followed by "Changes in Latitude." The waitress was my age but wore a wedding ring. Well, *my* luck was running true to form. I just hoped Ladd would find the gal's gem adequate and not try to finance an upgrade.

Amelia in Waiting

Irene Allison

Amy imagined the November sky as a swirl of cremated bones. Harsh and ugly, it went well with nothing other than the desire to stop looking at it. Possibly the sun, a low slung blotch of scuzzy radiance slouched west within the ashes like a grayish fried egg slithering its way out of a filthy skillet.

Amy stood very still at the living room window. Only a double thickness of glass lay between her lungs and the poisons of an increasingly alien atmosphere.

The cul-de-sac that had always been Amy's home lay beneath the depthless sky like a beloved pet killed by a car in the street. All around the remnants of happier times rotted like the crabapples that not even the crows would eat: Cheerful summer barbecue grills tucked under blue tarps held in place by cinder blocks; formerly lush and profuse gardens, now forlorn mudholes; abandoned toys sporting mossy growths, and what had gone unraked of the fiercely luminescent October leaves lay bunched like milk-sodden cornflakes in the gutters and storm drains.

Even at *just* sixteen, Amy knew this time of year well. It was the annual "Pause" that came over the well-fed cul-de-sac between the termination of Halloween festivities and the *agreed upon* going up of the Christmas lights on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. There was something affected and childish and selfish about this collective mood; something which Amy and her like-minded friends cleverly disparaged. With just enough education in their heads to make them annoying, the kids had wonked-up several alliterative titles for the event: "The Morbid Malaise" and "The Enormous En-nui" had been Amy's contributions to that year's gathering at the Round Table—but, alas, the others had favored the lowest-common-denominatorish "Poopy Pout."

The grandfather clock lashed out four tones. This startled Amy out of her thoughts. Each chime had landed on her soul like a viper's strike. Until that moment, the grandfather clock had always been a benign friend that had never behaved rudely. Something about this feeling made Amy feel like a stranger in her own home.

Amy had purposely left the house still upon her arrival. Under normal circumstances,

Amy felt ill at ease in places where darkness, silence and contemplation were the chief components. She had even gone to the extreme measure of turning off her cell—which, for Amy, was tantamount to plucking out an eye.

With a reluctant sigh, Amy performed her one and only chore; an action that she could be relied on doing about three times in five: Amy flipped on the porch light for her parents, who'd be home from work within the hour.

Amy's bedroom lay adjacent to the living room and faced the cul-de-sac. Unlike the rest of the tidily kept house, her room was a disorganized mess which resembled an open archeological dig overtopped by a pop culture village. It was a mixture of the distant past and the oh-so-now. Here and there were fissures in the debris which allowed forgotten toys and games from Amy's deeper childhood to emerge like trilobites for the picking. Items such as realistically dead virtual pets and dogeared Pokemon cards lay intermingled with current issues of celebrity scandal sheets and the spent husks of no less than six cellulators—Oh, and there was a weird, fruity smell in the room, too. Amy had theorized that the odor was caused by a known perfume spill interacting with the upending of an older fragrance. Theorizing on the subject was as close to *doing* something about it as she got.

The splay of the room was simple enough: bed, desk and stuff. The first two were constants, the third was ever-changing. Atop the variables which are important to a young lady of Amy's social status and economic circumstances lay a smattering of pamphlets. She had gotten *those* that very afternoon. Amy had hurled the pamphlets at her room when she got home in vain hope that the accumulated ghosts of her childhood might do something about them. No such luck. In the feeble light cast by the perpetual gloaming, *Folic Acid and You* (a way too happy-clappy missive which extolled the virtues of the gross bean family) stood out like a missionary who had entered the jungle with a cross in one hand and a rifle in the other.

“No, no, no,” Amy hissed as she performed a backwards dive onto her bed. This was an ancient action of hers which sometimes toppled perfume bottles, and had recently earned her three stitches in her left elbow because Amy had forgotten about the (alleged) coffin nails Ty had given her on their first date. Amy had heard that some guys bring flowers and/or candy along for that sort of thing; but, alas, Amy was attracted to guys who saw the upside in gifting (alleged) coffin nails.

There was a row of school pictures hanging below the crown molding in Amy's room. The queue of ten portraits ran left to right and ranged from the first grade to Amy's sophomore year in high school. Daddy had hung the first seven or eight, but toward the

end of his conscription Daddy had cracked-clever forty times too many about the possibility of quicksand that she had to drop him from the portrait hanging team.

Lying in the gloom, Amy took stock of the Ghosts of Amy's Past. Outside business transacted with the Tooth Fairy, Amys One through Three were basically the same person; slightly round in the cheek and grinning shyly. Each of Amy's earliest incarnations had bobbed bone-blond hair and had been installed in a jumper that had been designed to be girly and rugged at the same time. Four had a touch less fat in her cheeks and her hair had begun the long process of extracting what's right about red from the sun and including such in its sheen; these trends progressed further in the faces of Five and Six.

To be frank, Six had been the final Amy to show her portrait taker a scintilla of respect. Six was the last Amy to grin shyly for the lens. Seven had concocted a goofy, off-kilter grin that suggested that she might have been high on something (which hadn't been the case). And Eight, well she just flat out sneered at the camera. Amy recalled the photographer asking Eight if she really wanted to come off that way, and she also remembered him shrugging in a Hey-kid-you've-gotta-know-I-don't-give-a-shit-one-way-or-the-other when Eight had replied, "Oh, yes indeedy."

Nine *had* been high on something. A member of Amy's coven had relieved her mother's purse of excess Vicodin that Picture Day. Glassy-eyed and neither grinning nor sneering, Nine was the least there in the queue.

Something had gone wrong with Ten. Only Amy was aware of this something. No one else looked beyond Ten's neon pink hair or the mascara and foundation that had been laid on with a trowel (now, no one is suggesting that girls who look this way aren't what they should be). No, what had gone wrong with Ten lay scattered throughout her face like a sky composed of cremated bones.

Amy shuffled herself up onto her elbows to get a better look at Ten. Unlike Seven through Nine, the expression on Ten's face was honest (even snarly Eight had shone a little light in her eyes that told that she wasn't as put out as she pretended to be). Yet there was a ruthlessness emanating from Ten which Amy couldn't understand; an incipient hardness that had no business being in the face of a cul-de-sac kid. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened that Picture Day, but for the life of her Amy couldn't remember the actual taking of her portrait—which was odd, for Amy never forgot anything about her life. Some persons are that way, you know; some persons who fail at turning a porch light on twice in five can be the same kinds of persons who have total recall in regards to where they were, what they had worn and who said what about whom on a meaningless day that had come and gone so many ends of the world ago.

When Amy was four, she had stolen a cranberry off the table at the grocery store. She recalled expecting a flavor similar to the sugary concoction that came out of a the can, and was unpleasantly surprised by a ferocious bitterness. This had happened on a Tuesday afternoon, right after preschool. At seven, an ambulance came to take Amy's former next-door neighbor, Mrs. Carlyle, away from the cul-de-sac for good. Until that July 23rd, a Thursday, Mrs. Carlyle had been a friendly pest who punctuated her every observation with a tittering laugh. Though Mom had tried to keep Amy from gawking at Mrs. Carlyle as the old lady lay on a gurney, it had been too late: Amy had seen the feverish, insane mania in Mrs. Carlyle's face as well as getting a clear look at the horrible sores that covered her hellishly white fishbelly thighs. And there had been that wonderful, magical October Sunday morning, two years back, when a blanket of ground fog suddenly contained the head of a deer poking up like a submarine's periscope at the treeline behind the cul-de-sac.

A voice spoke up from the mists of Amy's mind as she lay in the increasing darkness. This voice was composed of the worst things in life. This voice had its own weird, fruity imagined *smell*; a breath which wasn't the mingling of divergent off-brand perfumes forming a third, uneasy scent, but was the decaying stench given off by a car-killed pet. The timbre of the voice matched the dusty click made by sun-broiled Scotch broom pods. And this voice gave birth to unwholesome visions such as green-rimmed fiery pustules forming on fishbelly thighs. Amy thought this the voice of Ten.

"You can still beg for a do-over," Ten said. "It'll be like the story you didn't get in Lit class: 'they let the air in.'"

There was something beguiling about Ten's suggestion. Something practical. But the more Amy turned it over in her mind, the more she found herself thinking cold, reptilian thoughts; thoughts Amy equated with the suicide of the soul.

The grandfather clock spat out the half. A ghostly pattern cast by a set of headlights formed on the bedroom wall and slid away.

Amy got off the bed and went to the full length mirror that was attached to her bedroom door. She stood sideways and ran her hands from her shoulders to her hips. She then laid her hands on her flat belly. An expression of horror formed in her eyes; it stood out like a flame in the twilight.

"No," Amy said breathlessly. "No. the air is poison."

Tiarella

J. Lee Strickland

I'll go now to the well, she thinks. That's next, like every day. Water no less wet that William's gone, and drinking no less necessary that no pleasure gives. That plate there on the sideboard needs a rinse and too, the spoon, like every day. She takes the two oak buckets and their yoke from the low shelf beside the door. They seem so heavy now, although there's not a drop inside them yet. Not quite like every day. The canopy of trees is thinner with loss of leaves. The still, brown autumn air, "like stale bread," William would say, his favorite snack an old crust dipped in beer.

"Tee-yah!" Above the trees a circling hawk cries out. "Tee-yah!" Almost like William's voice calling her name, charged with excitement at some novel find. She looks around for signs of him. The axe is where he left it beside the splitting stump. His heavy leather gloves hang like some dark animal on the post, the woodshed still to be filled. All as it's been for several days. A small gray bird patrols the pile of logs. Unbroken stillness everywhere but there.

The vesper marks the Changing. After sundown will the far hills bloom with great fires as folks there match the coming cold and dark with light and heat. In past years she and William climbed to where the rocky outcrop cleared the western trees to watch the far off flickering display, fire heaped upon fire on hill heaped upon hill. Folks say it is a time when between this world and the other...

Is that where William is? ... The other? She can't complete the thought. A sudden gorge of sorrow clamps her throat as if a claw has gripped her there. She leans against the lichen-matted stones circling the well and squints against a tear. It was at another well that they first spoke, her mother's well, William there to leave a tool he'd fixed (What tool? she can't recall more than a vague, long shape in deep-veined hands). The words were nothing, ordinary things, she, offering a drink, he, grateful, praising Mother's cherished well. But even then she knew that he'd return, and she'd be there to greet him. So they were, like water mixed with water, until now.

Her tear falls into blackness as she leans into the task of drawing water, cool and clear. Its dancing surface sparkles as thin sunlight slants beneath the high-limbed trees, while

in the east, a gibbous blotch of moon adorns the sky. Her eye upon the moon, she heaves the laden yoke upon her back and wraps her wrists into the ropes. Her gaze drops to a verdant swath of lowly plants that seem to gleam a mineral gleam against the brown, leaf-matted floor.

I haven't been myself to miss a thing so green in this brown time, she thinks, and like all thoughts, this one swings back to him. Nagging sorrow drags her shoulders down more than the weighty water as she shuffles up the stony path. Still, the buckets once inside, she steps outside to see the green anomaly. A sharp, chill breeze stirs up autumnal litter from the yard. Her hand goes to her throat to close her vest against the gathering cold.

She kneels beside the plants that stand, no more than half a dozen, in a clump. Two basal leaves on slender stalks are crossed by smaller leaves above and further up a smaller pair, each leaf shaped like a tooth-edged tear, and from the last pair rises a spike of tiny, drooping, bristled fruits topped by a white two-petaled flower, framed upon a stand of darkened, curled sepals, the whole no higher than a person's knee. Half-thinking, she recites the chant of harvesting. Apology and praise and lyric thankfulness wheel through the simple verse as her fingers probe the earth around a single plant's green, swollen base.

A liquid rush above her head that shakes her spine, darkness, and then a scream ignites the air as if the plant, uprooted, has cried out. Overhead a vine hangs like an uncoiled snake and pendant from it, like fruit, a hawk and jay. The jay, above, clings to the vine. Its screams come out like water coursing from a jug. The hawk's head is down. One talon grips the jay's throat while the other is lost amidst a riot of writhing feathers. A thread of horror winds through the scene then dissipates like smoke before the clear eyes of the hawk. In those eyes she sees no coldness, no dark, malignant strength, but a sufficiency, a warm and beating purpose, an answer, had she asked: "This is my sustenance. These screams are part of his world. His flesh is part of mine."

The struggle shrinks to just the jay's enfeebled voice, the hawk and Tiarella still as stone. A gust of wind breaks like a wave against her back. The hawk's wings beat. It heaves itself above the jay, there, as if by force of will, to see the jay abandon its doomed grip upon the vine. They drop like death before her, then the hawk and its burden assume a ponderous, awkward flight, half airborne, half dragging on the earth until, at forest's edge, they come to ground. The jay is stilled beneath a canopy of brown-streaked wings. The hawk's gaze strokes Tiarella once again before it turns back to its task.

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Inside the hut, her fingers tremble as she lays the plant upon a dampened cloth. Ineffable emotions churn like storm-tossed trees inside her. Sorrows fresh and ancient twine together topped by wonder, by fear, and by a glimmer of a world too vast for mortal understanding. She stoops before the hearth and coaxes darkened embers into flames. Carefully she feeds them wood and watches as they grow, and calming warmth washes the tiny room. She swings a kettle hook over the flame and ladles in fresh water, then sets out two cups upon the table, empty husk of ritual, but a habit too long done to break so soon. She pours herself some tea and drinks.

An icy wind assails the stout walls of the hut. *This year the Changing honors well its name*, her answering thought. From high up in the rafters she brings down a massive, age-worn book. Beneath its heavy top board lies page upon page of plants. Each separate part and stage is drawn, the flower, fruit, stem, leaf and seed all rendered in elaborate detail and named in broad and ancient, florid script. She carefully and confidently shifts each hand-wrought sheet, the while testing, part for part, the plant that lies at hand. At last she stops and contemplates a likeness that fares well against the herb.

Circaea Lutetiana – Enchanter’s Nightshade, her fingers trace a line beneath the name. The margin holds the tiny curling script she knows to be her great-grandmother’s hand. She reads: Named for long-tressed Circe who, with herbs and incantations, changed unsuspecting men into brute beasts.

Again she hears the wind and stronger still. A life’s accumulation of loose clutter clatters crazily in harsh gusts. She hears a rapping, not the wind, and then the wind, and then a rapping, again.

Someone at the door? Who could it be? She wishes no one near. She wishes less this loneliness. The paralyzing rapping comes again above the raking wind.

Perhaps it’s news of William. Then she moves to slide the latch that holds the oaken door. Helped by the wind, the door swings wide. A clump of brittle leaves rides on the gust and bursts against the stout leg of a bench. Lamps flicker. Flames leap behind the vaulting stones that form the hearth. A dim rhombus of light spreads out beyond the door. Within its angled frame a dimmer shape attends.

“Who calls at this dark time?” she asks. “Come forward. Show your face.”

The wind-swept shape moves one small swaying step.

“The night has turned the worse,” a man’s voice says. “I seek a moment’s respite from

the wind.”

Fear fades pushed by pity as she sees his twisted elder form. White hair wild from wind, he leans upon a wooden staff and drags a seeming useless leg.

“Come in. I cannot warm the whole Great Wood.”

His robe is of the roughest cloth. Loose threads hang in tatters at the hem. His wood-soled shoes with leather thongs convey an air of indigence and passive destitution. He passes her and with him comes the fresh clean scent of dampened forest soil.

“A wild night for Fire Night. Some folks will dance a frenzy in it.” He shakes as if he’s shaking off the dark.

He’s not from here, she thinks. Folks from further east would call the Changing that.

“Can I take your robe? “

A moment’s pause is fed to silence, then his slow reply of, “Not just yet.” He shuffles to the bench beside the hearth.

“A cup of tea, perhaps, or beer?”

“Oh, tea would suit me well.”

She looks at William’s cup and hesitates, then quickly fills it from the pot. She hands the tea to him and smiles to answer his grateful gaze. He seems to swell with sipping it. A bit of age and care slip from him as he settles toward the glowing coals.

He speaks. “All alone here are you?”

She sees the thought’s long shape beneath the words and hears her dread affirmed, but fights it still. “No... my man... he’s out... He’ll be back soon, I hope.”

She stumbles through the words while moving toward the window, feigning watch. Vaguely she regrets her sorry sham as hope and hopelessness collide inside. She turns but he just stares into the flames. She gazes at his face half-lit by fire glow and thinks to see a meaning there. The hooded self-absorption of the hawk? Perhaps the pain-wrought rictus of the jay? Somehow his deep, firm voice won’t match his ancient frame. Is his enfeebled stance an affectation worn to mine the deeper chambers of the heart? Like-

wise his cast of penury? Crude dissimulation doesn't fit. She feels no threat. The veil that hangs between her and the truth is not his craft, but her own ignorance.

A fragment of song comes to mind. She softly sings: "Darkness falls, the birds take flight to where, in deepest night, they guard their peace."

The old man sips his tea and nods the rhythm of the tune. Somewhere in the silence of his mind the song is done. He speaks. "I've heard the valley folk tell of your name. Tiarella is it not?"

She feels surprise that he would tell her name before she offered it, but somehow coming thus from one so old, that gives no offense.

"It's news they mention us at all except to say we're fools to live so far into the Wood," she snaps.

He smiles at this remark drawn from the well of her resentment. "Crows that mock the raven," he replies.

It's her turn then to smile.

He speaks again. "I knew a woman long ago looked much like you. Lobelia by name. Dweller of the Wood she was."

"My great-grandmother was called that. You knew her?"

"And her mother, too," he nods gently, sleepily shrugging off his robe. "My old cloak's my reminder of the past."

What manner of man is this, she muses, who would claim to know my great-great grandmother, so long gone to dust?

He seems quickly asleep. His robe slips to the floor. Tiarella feels a strong attraction to the rag and stoops to pick it up. Against her skin the roughness of the sackcloth falls away like smoothing hackles on a calming dog. Her eyes detect within its weave a hint, here, of one color, there another, there a seeming burst of subtle hues which draws the eye in deeper still. Her vision seems to magnify by ten the things she sees until each crossing thread a rich and telling tapestry might be. There's stories woven in, she sees, each thread a tale, not plain, but there the same. This crossing here, the joining of two

lives, and here, for sure, a parting of ways. She sees in the unfinished hem long memories of warp and woof waiting yet to mesh into the whole.

Her eyes roam over the robe lit by an eerie shadeless glow, a sourceless light unlike the light of day. She wonders at it, moving toward the tiny window facing on the yard. Outside, too, the whole world is strangely lit. A sapling seems to beckon her, and as it beckons, moves, then glides, then steps and, stepping, shows a woman's shape, so thinly wrought, impossibly so thin.

Tiarella's drawn now to the door, which opens to her hand. Outside, the ordered stillness renders dumb the mighty winds that blew before. The once-familiar yard presents a strange tableau. A tall, thin, smiling woman stands, her hand held out, her flowing gown, which drags the ground, as smooth and gray as beech. On her shoulder sits a dragonfly the size of William's hand. Its head cogs in an arc from side to side flashing silver in the gray half-light.

Beyond the woman, two doves rest before an ornate, open wooden cart. Iron rings hang loosely from their bills, these attached to silver traces twined about the carven bulwark of the cart. All this Tiarella sees with the stark and certain clarity of a dream.

“Ah, Tiarella, come! Your friends wish you would join them at the fire. I'm here to fetch you. Come!”

The woman turns as Tiarella hesitates beyond the open door. She glances back and sees the old man slumbering in peace next to the glowing hearth. As if bereft of will or sense, she joins the woman in the cart, which moves responding to her weight. The doves rise up, the cart a feathered tail to their course. They quickly clear the western trees and, turning in their canted flight, match angles with the climbing face of rock, and then above the buttressed hill into the night's black sea. Far overhead a flock of nameless birds flaps south, a mass of blacker dots against the star-strewn hemisphere of night, while there, below, appears the wild splendor of the fire-topped hills.

A faintness born of vertigo grips Tiarella as the fire-crowned hills grow flat with distance, turning all below into an alien sky ablaze with strange new stars. These meld into strange new constellations underfoot, confused with fires of celebration overhead.

“I never thought the world so large,” she cries.

Her friend replies above the traveling wind, “The world, and all that is, is infinite. Yet

all that is not is vaster still, for it includes all that will never be.”

Ahead a brighter star appears in this bizarre, inverted sky and rapidly becomes a sun to all the dimmer flickering lights. Their destination, it would seem, for beyond it all is blackness. No more fires to hint at landscapes or to feed imagined otherworldly scenes.

Her tall companion gestures toward the dark. “There lies the Great Sea,” she says. “All the world’s water comes to there, and from there clouds return to fill the sky.”

Rising up to meet their slow descent, Tiarella hears the laughter and the talk and boisterous tumult, and she smells the fragrant smoke and unfamiliar salty, dampened air.

###

The cart comes to rest on a wide verge of sand. As she steps down she feels its fine, yielding texture, to her feet, so different from firm forest ground. With her back to the fire’s great tongues of flame, she contemplates the Great Sea she has never seen before, watching, awestruck, the pounding roll of waves upon the beach. The doves, she sees, have left their traces. Strutting, they attend miniscule treats that mark the water’s higher tide.

She hears a whisper, “Tiarella’s here,” and then another in the flickering dark. “It’s Tiarella, here at last.”

It’s strange, she thinks, that everyone can tell my name yet they, to me, are strangers.

An owl-like creature near her reaches out as if he’s heard her thought. “You know us all, Teeyah, for you, like we, are dweller of the Wood and family here.”

She looks about and sees to her surprise that he is right. There’s Fox and Wild Pig and, further on, she sees, are Doe and Fawn. The Crow family laughs raucously among themselves, beaks held wide, tongues flicking like the flames. There are others not so often seen but known to her no less. Her eyes fall hungrily upon the forms of all the creatures who for years have been her neighbors in the Wood.

This loneliness, she muses, it’s just a wall we build ourselves and not a thing that happens from without.

Her eyes swing toward the fringes of the crowd, and there she sees Hawk and Jay dancing to some dimly heard refrain. She feels as if she’ll faint. Is this, then, the secret of de-

ath? Smoke that vanishes in the first breath of understanding?

Others, seeing her distress, come close to offer her support as, all around, the creatures slowly join the dance.

###

Her friend and guide, the tall thin woman, gently takes her arm.

“Come, Teeyah, for Catbird says he’ll tell us all a tale.”

They gather ‘round where Catbird holds alone the center of a circle. “So it’s a story you all wish,” he says. “You know I rarely sing at night.”

“You rarely sing,” someone remarks to quiet laughter all around.

“Call my cousin, Mockingbird, if opera’s what you want,” Catbird replies. “I’ll stick with simple tales I’ve heard around.” He pauses and combs his beak through the feathers of a wing. “So what tale would you hear?” he asks, as quiet settles back upon the crowd. “Perhaps the tale of Black Back Gull, or deeds of tiny Winter Wren? I have a tale I know quite well, the tale of mournful Whippoorwill.”

The choice affirmed by silence, Catbird warbles clear his syrinx and begins:

The dark heart of the looming night lay still. No creature could imagine dark of day
Without the mournful song of Whippoorwill.

By morning light day creatures drank their fill At river’s edge forgetting there the way
The dark heart of the looming night lay still.

Throughout the golden afternoon, the hill Was host to all the world’s revelry
Without the mournful song of Whippoorwill.

A sharp, short cry of anguish, high and shrill, Ran through the air like water through dry
clay. The dark heart of the looming night lay still.

It silenced every grunt, snort, buzz and trill Replacing them with fear that none could
stay Without the mournful song of Whippoorwill.

In bloodless calm that matched the evening’s chill, Upon a bier of dead, brown leaves

he lay.

The dark heart of the looming night lay still.

So cold, this one that none would kill, No more shall mark the close of day. The dark heart of the night lay still Without the song of Whippoorwill.

Two whippoorwills together sing to mark the story's end, as others, in their ways, express approval of the tale. As Tiarella wonders at the story she's just heard, Jay approaches, a green thing clutched beneath his wing.

"I have a gift for you, Teeyah," he says and proffers her a plant. "Your people call it moly. In the Wood there may be other names for it. I think it may be helpful to you. Helping you, it may help me."

Tiarella strokes the smooth, green stalk and bulbous root and says, "Thank you, Jay. I'm honored by your gift."

"Honor me with dancing," Jay replies, and takes her hand in wing.

The whirling, twirling dance begins. She's passed from wing to paw and paw to wing and back to paw again, and then she is within the hawk's embrace. Her vest falls from her shoulders, and she feels the press of feathered muscle on her arm, the beating warmth within that hall of wings, the edge of razored beak caressing flesh, and then, from far away, a twig-like hand that grips her wrist.

"Come, my dear. The fire sinks to embers. We must go."

The hawk is left. As quickly, they are in the cart. The shell-strewn sand and ocean fall away. Above the curving world they fly, Tiarella filled with anguish and delight. And to their backs as if it gives pursuit, the rising morning light.

###

In a world so much transformed, the humble hut and yard seem little changed.

Atop a carven post beside the hut's oak door there sits the hawk. He stirs but does not fly as Tiarella passes, clutching Blue Jay's gift against her breast. She lays the moly on the cloth beside the still-green shoot from yesterday and slowly looks around the empty house. Upon the hook that once had held her vest, the old man's robe now hangs. She

takes it down and wraps it around herself.

She thinks, That plate there on the sideboard still needs washing, and the spoon, like every day.

Falling: The First Descent

Jan Charone-Sossin

excerpt of a larger work

Chapter One

The coffin was closed. Or was it? Mike rubbed his eyes, brittle from lack of sleep. He had taken the red-eye from California. Instead of sleeping, he watched movie after movie, it didn't matter what, anything to drown out the sound of his mother's voice crackling through the telephone wire.

"Scott's dead," she said, and then there were no more words, just a hiccup and a strangled sob, before he heard the passing of the hands, Dad's strong male voice now speaking to him.

"Come home, Mike. I already paid for your ticket," said Dad.

"How? When?" Mike stammered. He was standing barefoot in his dorm room, naked. A girl he didn't even recognize sleeping soundly on his bed, impervious to the electric shock of the news jolting through his body. Was he in a relationship? Or was this a one-night stand? He could no longer remember anything.

"Gun shot. Left temple. This morning." Even Dad could barely manage to get the words out, as if his tongue had thickened, making the translation of sound viscous, almost impossible to understand.

"Are they sending the body home?" Last Mike had heard, his brother was still in Europe. This would buy him some time before the funeral. No need to rush home.

Dad's voice broke. "He was here, Mike, right under our thumb. In a homeless shelter for men downtown on Lafayette Street."

So here Mike was. Clothed now. Sports jacket. Tie. His nicest pair of jeans. Staring at Scott's coffin. There would be no flowers. Of course his parents had instead asked for

donations to some research group studying schizophrenia. Because that's clearly what would help his brother now. The plain pine box stood alone at the front of the funeral parlor, the same one they had walked by countless times on the way to the diner across the street. Lehman Brothers? Wait no, weren't those the bearded men on the cough drops his mother used to give him at the first sign of a cold?

The walls tilted. He started to sweat. His limbs loosened until he practically fell back into a chair set up in the front row. He undid his tie. It was choking him.

It was only once Mike was seated that he could finally look past the coffin, allow his eyes to roam around the full perimeter of the room. It was more crowded than he had imagined. He had always thought of Scott as a loner.

His parents were standing close together, their heads touching, like two playing cards that had been perfectly balanced against each other to create a flimsy house of cards that could topple at any moment. It wasn't fair that they had to hold court, as if this was the receiving line at a wedding instead of a funeral. But there they were, suddenly years older and wizened, shaking hands, thanking people for coming.

He couldn't go over to them now. Seeing them up close, touching their hand or shoulder, even hugging them would unfreeze them from their bravura performance. The three of them would keel together, like a pack of dogs howling at the moon, and that would not be acceptable funeral parlor behavior, when the mood of the crowd needed to remain collected, a tinge of sadness, yes, and then the assurance that everything would be all right, that even this terrible death was somehow for the best, that Scott wouldn't have to suffer anymore.

Instead, Mike caught Fee's eye and nodded. They locked gaze for a moment. He watched her press Dad's hand, and then Dad too turned his eyes to him and nodded. They were all puppets with no one to talk for them. No voice between the three of them.

Mike took a deep breath. He felt like he was running out of air. Was the room hot? Or was he finally inside one of those Holocaust ovens that had filled his nightmares as a kid, those terrifying scenes replayed over and over again where he was lifted up from underneath like a pizza and stuffed into an oven, the sudden heat paralyzing. The nausea that came from the stench of his own skin burning to death while a group of Nazis in full uniform cheered on another victory for the Fuhrer, another Jew dead, leaving the world Aryan clean for those blond-haired, blue-eyed cherubs of the Nazi youth groups, the pride of the next generation.

He stood up and went back up to the coffin. Had the gunshot burned a hole in Scott's temple, finally freeing him from the crazy delusions and hallucinations that had all but taken Scott over in late adolescence, making Scott nothing more than an imposter playing Scott?

Mike wished they were Catholics. He longed to kneel in front of an open casket, look inside, hold Scott's waxen hand for the last time while looking up at a picture of Jesus Christ bleeding on the cross. Because wouldn't everything make more sense then? Scott's death would serve a purpose, a higher good. Like Jesus, he would be taking one for the gipper, for all mankind, suffering himself so everyone else wouldn't have to, a hero after all. As if Scott had ever cared about the suffering of anyone else.

But no, Scott's death was a hollow act. Another example of Scott thinking only of Scott, not worrying about the mess he left behind.

Someone clapped a hand on Mike's shoulder, and he startled. He turned around to face Scott's gifted teacher from elementary school. Back in the day, when Scott was seen more as a precocious genius-child than a psychotic teenager let loose on the world. Who could forget the electronic robot that he had made all by himself in third grade, working alone amidst all of Dad's wires and tools in the basement for hours, only to emerge proudly with a homemade robot that twirled around the room? Lacking his brother's creative genius, Michael had made a diorama stuffed with toy dinosaurs chewing on tall trees right before the meteorite hit.

Mrs. West hugged him, which he accepted stiffly, only because he saw no other choice. The years had not been kind to her. The raven black hair that she had always worn pulled so tautly into a bun that the veins in her face would bulge had turned grey. Her face was nothing more than a highway of wrinkles deeply embedded into her skin. Those sharp, sharp eyes seem to have dulled. Cataracts, maybe?

Mike had been in her gifted class too, but never standing out the way his brother had. Mike had only been ordinarily bright, the kid with the great grades and the high test scores. All the attention had gone to Scott, who was capable of searing brilliance and adult wit. Mrs. West told all her classes about the time that Scott had held up a plant he had grown in the closet, all white and shrunken, waving the limbs of the plant like hands and calling him Boo Radley. Hell, no one else in the fourth grade had even read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. That was Scott, whose grades were never more than mediocre, whose test scores fell into the normal range, the kid who never deigned it necessary to prove how smart he was on any academic assessments.

“Such a tragedy,” Mrs. West murmured into his ear while she clung to him. He wanted to laugh. The whisper of her breath tickled in his ear. Howcheap were her words? Couldn’t a teacher of the goddamn gifted think of anything smarter to say than that? He suppressed a chuckle that he could feel rising up from his belly like the first smattering of hysteria.

Finally, he broke free of her, making his get-away, his eyes focused only on Scott’s best friend Alex, who was standing uncomfortably at the threshold of the room, eyes darting nervously, hands pushed deep into the pockets of his threadbare corduroy pants, shifting from one foot to another as if he couldn’t screw up the nerve to walk in.

“Alex.” The tone in his voice was more genuine. Alex hadn’t changed at all. He was still the handsome, sloe-eyed kid who had been an eager accomplice to all of Scott’s adventures. The lying. The stealing. The drugs and drinking. Wreaking havoc wherever they went, while still managing to charm everyone, a regular Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

Alex reached out and hugged him hard. Mike could feel the dampness of Alex’s tears on his shirt.

“Why didn’t he tell me he was home?” asked Alex. The question was rhetorical. They both knew that there had never been a clear answer to explain any of Scott’s actions. What was that stupid phrase that Mom and Dad kept quoting as they were growing up, something from Shakespeare or someone like him?

Oh yeah. “Every man for himself,” said the elephant as he danced among the chickens. Mike had always pictured the elephant stomping all over those poor chickens. He never really knew what the hell the quote meant. Scott had certainly never worried about the poor chickens. He had been gifted at dancing over all of them, Fee, Milton, his brother, all authority, not giving a shit about anyone else.

His anger revolted him. What kind of person has this much anger for his dead brother? He must be evil. And what he hated most about himself was that behind all anger and resentment towards his brother, there were good memories, times he couldn’t forget when he and Scott had actually had fun together.

Mike pats Alex on the back, desperate to find a shred of kindness within himself.

“There was nothing anyone could have done,” Mike said. “Scott wanted us never to find him. He chose to disappear.” He didn’t know if he really believed this, but it felt li-

ke the right thing to say. He could feel Alex's thin shoulders shaking.

“Oh man,” said Alex, trying to hold back tears long enough to speak. “I loved him, probably more than he ever loved me.” Welcome to the crowd, thought Mike, but he didn't say anything, just kept patting his shoulder awkwardly. He wasn't good at this; Fee was. But she was busy holding up a crowd of mourners, people from Scott's past who seemed to need to be here, to share their grief in this very public arena, just the kind of place Scott would have despised.

Mike pulled Alex into the room, drawing him over to his parents, who reached out for him hungrily, as if Alex was the closest they could come to hugging Scott. He left him there, safe in his parents' embrace. They would take care of him. They would know what to do. Alex had practically grown up in their house. He would be there most mornings for breakfast, and often stayed for dinner. His own parents were going through a vitriolic divorce, or at least that's what he had told them. Later, it turned out that they had been two happily married people. Scott wasn't the only one capable of making up stories.

After school, Scott and Alex would amble into the kitchen like ghosts, blinking their eyes at the light, holding open the refrigerator and staring open-mouthed at the display of food, the cold air wafting into their faces. And then, without a warning, they'd start to move at hyper-speed, yanking out the butcher-wrapped slices of roast beef, turkey, cheese, the sourdough bread that Fee always favored, piling the cold cuts onto the sliced bread, smearing mustard on the bread sloppily before closing the sandwiches, the bread slapping against the meat. They were stoned, always stoned, and therefore starving, although it took a long time for Mike to realize that. It couldn't have been the dope that made Scott crazy, right?

The atmosphere in the room changed suddenly. Mike turned around. Wanda had walked in, decked out in an outrageously short pink dress that clung to her breasts and her hips, a black velvet beret sitting jauntily on her long auburn hair, a French boyfriend at her side. Here was Scott's old girlfriend, the one who had abandoned him in Paris when his behaviors had gotten too bizarre, leaving Scott to get sicker and sicker on his own, because how long could he have made it anyway without the anti-psychotic meds he had refused to keep taking because they made him fat? Did he blame her? Did it make any difference if he did?

He circled the room, pacing now, like an animal measuring out the circumference of his cage, his heart beating hard against his chest. It too was imprisoned, with nowhere to expand. He had to get out before she came over to him. If she tried to express any regret

or sadness, he would punch her in the nose, stepping back proudly to watch the blood run down her dress, darkening the vibrant pink to a mottled maroon. Time stopped.

###

He had no idea how he had managed to get across the street to the diner. But there he was, sitting in the booth all the way in the back that his family had always sat in, the Greek owner that knew their family bent over him, looking concerned.

“What can I get you, Mikey? It’s on the house. Your brother, I can’t believe...” Anton said. He didn’t have to finish the sentence. The words trailed off, finding a death of their own.

Maybe food would help. “Can I have a cheeseburger, fries and avanilla milkshake?” Mike asked. Anton turned back to the kitchen, looking relieved to have something to do.

As soon as the food was in front of him, the diner’s famous cheeseburger with a half pound of meat, four different kinds of melted cheese, and those golden brown French Fries he had loved so much as a child, he felt sick. There was no comfort to be had here. He closed his eyes, almost hearing Scott arguing with Milton, some kind of political debate that would often end with one of them stomping away from the table, declaring the other one a moron. Concentrating harder, he tried to see inside of his eyeballs. Where on the screen of his retina were the images of Fee? Of himself? Oh, there they were, both of them staring down at their plates, eating without saying a word, as if they were trying to be invisible in the fray of tension that had spun a web over their table. Wishing that they were anywhere else, with a different kind of family, where the topics of conversation stayed banal and everyone managed to stay in their seats for the entire meal. He opened his eyes when he saw Milton pound the table, his face red, proclaiming to everyone and no one in particular that Scott was a goddamn Nazi. There was bile in his throat. He blindly pushed the uneaten food aside.

“Not hungry?” Anton asked, sweeping away the plates in a grand gesture, the table no longer weighed down by food, no longer threatening, the family pictures tucked neatly back into the crypt of his memory banks.

“I have to get back,” said Mike, gesturing across the street to the white funeral parlor with the clapboard eaves. It was never supposed to be a holding ground for Scott, a way station before he got buried, swallowed underground with the loam of the earth, where his hair and toenails could continue to grow while his corporal body disintegrated.

He stood up, made a motion to grab his wallet, but Anton shook his head. “It’s on me, really,” he said gruffly, the tenderness leaking out from his words in spite of himself.

Mike hugged him, wishing for a moment that this big, burly man who adored his son and talked only about fishing expeditions were his father. When he walked out, he meant to cross the street, return to his dead brother stuck forever in a pine box and the roomful of mourners, but he couldn’t. Mike, who had always been the kid to do the right thing, act in the appropriate manner, a true counterbalance for his crazy brother, turned left and walked away from everything. He wondered when the next plane to California was leaving from O’Hare. Head bent, seeing nothing but his phone, Mike called for a taxi. It was enough already. It was more than enough.

Chapter Two

It wasn't until the crowd began to thin out that Fee realized that Michael was gone. Her mother radar for her second child had never been as astute. Up until the fateful day that Scott departed for Europe, without leaving behind any means of contacting him, she lived in a state of vigilance over Scott's whereabouts and state of well being that she could feel in her bones. Just like her friend Arden complained that she could feel any change in temperature or humidity in the arm she had broken in college, Fee's body alerted her to Scott like a GPS on overdrive. She was never surprised by Scott's frantic middle of the night phone calls, the ones where she could hear his nerves fraying as he complained about the cold seeping in through the window of his apartment or the noise in his head as he tried to wrestle with the philosophy of Kristeva.

She nudged Milton with her elbow. The two of them had moved through the funeral parlor like Siamese twins, afraid to lose sight of each other in the face of the staggering loss of their son.

"He's gone," she said. Milton stroked her back. The touch of his gentle hands made her tremble. She was afraid that she would cry right here, in front of Scott's coffin, before the final visitor left the room.

"I know," said Milton. And then his eyes shifted around the room. "Oh, you mean Michael. Where the hell is he?"

Fee flinched. He sounded hurt and angry, and that scared her. She didn't think he could endure any more anguish. She certainly couldn't.

Her phone started to vibrate in her purse. She watched it jiggle against the confines of her bag without comprehending what it was. It reminded her of how Scott used to move around inside of her womb. Milton used to put a glass on her belly so that they could watch it dance across her abdomen. Finally, her instincts kicked in and she answered it.

"Mom?" said Michael. "I'm at the airport. My plane is about to board."

"But the burial is tomorrow, and the wake..." Fee's brain felt muddled. "You're not coming back?"

"I can't," said Michael. "Look. I love you both very much, but I can't be there for you guys any more. It hurts too much."

Fee nodded dumbly. “Okay,” she said. “I understand.” But she didn’t. Michael would never run out on them like this. Scott would; he often did. But Michael had been their buoy in the seismic storm of raising Scott.

After she hung up, she stared at the phone blankly. “Will he be back tomorrow?” said Milton. She couldn’t bear the hopefulness in his voice.

“No, he’s getting on the plane right now.”

Milton’s face grew dark. His eyebrows twitched. It was a tic he had developed in the years since Scott had fled the country. “I’m going to call him right now, before his plane takes off,” said Milton, pulling out his iPhone.

She placed her hand over his to stop him. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “Let him go.”

Milton’s shoulders began to heave. He was crying. “Isn’t that what I told you when we admitted Scott to the psych ward?”

Fee closed her eyes. It was all coming back to her, images shuttering in front of her retina faster than she could process them. “Yes,” she said, slipping her hand into his and holding on tight. “Yes it was.”

###

The ER was a bustling vortex of human activity. Nurses and doctors wielded their way around men screaming in pain, eerily stoic women, and still others who were just a blur of tangled, flailing limbs. Opening the heavy doors and signing Scott in were the last two completely independent actions that Fee and Milton executed. Afterwards, they stood back and watched as the psychiatric staff took over possession of their son. All that they could see of him right now were his bent legs, and the tip of his upheld clasped hands sticking out from of the top and bottom of the swinging door attached to the small room that he had been shut behind for his interview. Scott was praying. Despite the noise and chaos in the ER, the Tibetan chants coming out of his room were loud and clear. Fee looked briefly at Milton.

“I don’t think we need to be worried that he won’t be admitted,” she said.

Milton raised one bushy eyebrow in response. It was almost comical. And then she felt his hand burrowing into her hand, and they remained like that, holding hands tightly,

while the psychiatrist on call met with Scott. It was as if they were watching a movie, except it was their life. Fee closed her eyes tightly and tried to run the projector backwards. Where had they gone wrong? How had they all ended up here, with Scott about to be admitted and she and Milton voluntarily admitting him to a psychiatric hospital? It wasn't supposed to have been like this. Time slowed down, and then seemed to melt into the walls of the ER. He stopped chanting, or else maybe she had just stopped hearing him. She imagined that he was engaged in in what he now called discourse, the higher level of intellectual talk that he preferred over mere pedestrian talk. She was relieved that he was not talking to her, that she did not have to feel the pressure to find coherence in the random, pressured stream of thoughts that had become her son's sole means of communication.

As soon as the doctor walked out, a short, bearded man with a clipboard, Scott knelt and began to chant again, even more loudly than before. They stood where they were, waiting. as if the future of the three of them depended on what the doctor would say next. Not much, it turned out, except that their son was psychotic, and a danger to himself, so he would be hospitalized on their in-patient unit immediately. He shook hands with them, first Milton, and then Fee, wishing them good luck, as if they were about to set off on a long and arduous journey. She wanted to shout after him that they had been on this goddamn journey for Scott's whole life, and all that she needed to know, desperately, is when it would end. Instead, she cried as she watched the nurses take off his shoelaces and belt before sending him upstairs to the psychiatric unit on the ninth floor. She took a step towards him.

"Let him go," said Milton, taking her hand in his. They watched the elevator doors snap shut. Scott refused to even look at them when the nurse took him away.

Milton took care of the insurance paperwork while she got all the information that she could about visiting hours on the unit and what visitors were allowed to bring up to the ninth floor. They walked out in a daze, stumbling over each other, squinting against the light of day. Had they taken him in last night or early in the morning? Neither of them said a word in the car. They both collapsed on the bed without even taking off their coats when they got home.

"Milty, how could we?" she asked.

"We had no choice," he said.

"I know," she said. "But how could we?"

Scott lay on his bed in the dark, listening to the raspy, uneven breathing of his roommate, a tall, gaunt man named Daniel who refused to talk. How the hell had he gotten here? All he had ever wanted to do was to get rid of the noise in his head, the constant buzz saw of thoughts and ideas that came at him like high-powered electrical voltage. He had gone all the way to India in search of the right gods that would save him. All he found in India was a shitload of people praying to a man wearing a sheet that couldn't even explain to him why the goddam food they cooked wasn't organic. How could he pray to someone who was willingly letting all of his followers inhale toxins that would poison their bodies?

It was useless trying to sleep here on this ratty hospital bed on a floor with crazy people. He could hear their thoughts being drilled into his head, he longed for a joint or some liquor to burn his throat and numb his brain. His eyes felt like craters digging into his skull. There was no way he was going to be able to sleep here. The sheets smelled like they had been boiled in ammonia. The blanket was scratchy. The mattress sagged underneath him. He couldn't stand it.

He bolted out of his room, his heart racing, skidding to a stop halfway down the hall when the big, burly guard outside his room called him back.

“Hey, where do you think you're going?” The guard stood up from his chair to reveal his full six feet three inch stature.

Scott was shaking.

“I want to make a phone call,” he said, gesturing with his head towards the pay phone down the hall.

“Only if I follow you; you're on 1:1 watch,” said the guard, his face impassive.

“Fine,” he said, working hard to swallow the rage he felt storming inside of him.

He took off sliding down the hall using his socks as traction. For one small moment, he felt like a little kid running down the stairs to open up his presents on Christmas. Everything would be okay as soon as he reached that phone.

He picked up the phone and punched in the home phone number. When Mom answered in that drowsy voice that he knew so well, he always needed to talk to her the most in

the middle of the night, the operator asked her if she would accept a collect call from him. He heard her voice and he started to cry.

“Mom, take me home, please. I’ll be good; I promise,” he said.

Her voice didn’t sound the way it was supposed to sound. There was none of that warmth that he needed to stop himself from shivering.

“I can’t take you home, Scotto. We all agreed to put you in the hospital. Don’t you remember how bad things were?”

His mom sounded on the edge of hysteria.

He yanked the phone away from his ear when his father’s voice came over the phone.

“This is Dad. Mom just handed me the phone. Don’t do this to her, son. This is hard for her too. You’re there to get the help you need.”

“There’s nothing for me to even eat here,” said Scott.

“Don’t worry,” said Dad. “I’m making a ton of kasha for you right now. I’m going to bring it in before I start work tomorrow.”

He heard his breath begin to even out. He felt tired all the way through his limbs. He had forgotten that his father was always awake, downstairs in the living room working on his computer. Sometimes, Scott would even find him there in the morning, his gentle hands, hands that liked to tend to people, hovering over the keyboard as he slept sitting up, still trying to work. There was something peaceful about picturing his Dad at the stove stirring the kasha.

“Okay,” he said. And he hung up. He shuffled back to his room like an old man, his hands in his red puffy jacket that he had refused to take off when he arrived, his beltless, baggy jeans almost falling off his thin frame. He got into bed without praying. He figured he had prayed enough. Scott closed his eyes, adding up numbers in his head in the darkness until sleep finally came and took him away.

The Principal Stalls

Jason Keuter

I waged many a lonely battle in high school, fighting for justice where even the long haired kid that presided over the Peace Club and the Committee To Get The United States out of Central America saw a perfectly fine order that he along with all the right wing philistine others mutely and happily preserved.

My primary struggle was with the bathroom stalls, specifically those in the boys' bathrooms. Most of them had no doors and those that did were so overused that the toilets were always clogged, with the water risen to the top so your balls would touch it if you dared use them to take your shit as I'm sure none of us did.

I started a petition and gathered over 50 signatures and watched carefully people first printing clearly then signing their names to be sure none of them were fake. The girl who got elected school Treasurer who ran on a platform of not spending one cent of that year's prom money on any business that supported intervention in Central America had turned in a list of signatures supporting her name being placed on the ballot, and it had signed by such school luminaries as I.P. Freely and Me Fuk 'Em Yung. I know all this for sure having myself signed the thing "my fuckin' balls." I didn't even capitalize the name. Her list was rubber stamped by the pigeon-toed vice-Principal who wore high fastening slacks, and she was elected. She won only because the write in vote was hopelessly divided, with many of the names on her petition all garnering at least one vote.

The Principal accepted my bathroom stall petition and put it in his desk drawer. Our school never intervened in Central America but no boy ever took a shit in peace there either, at least as far as I know.

My next struggle took the form of a simple consumer complaint. I sent myself a valentine and never got it. I'd paid a whole dollar to the Students Against Drunk Driving Group, all of whom drove drunk every weekend. They were just snowing their parents into tossing them the keys.

I told the Principal that even the longhaired Peace Club kid got three, and I was way be-

ter looking than he. The Principal listened to my complaint, smiling all the way through it, then took my written version of it and put it in his desk on top of a confiscated sandwich bag of marijuana. He then removed the bag, and held it up for me and asked,

“Is this what they call a lid?”

I told him that was slang from the seventies and people just said grams and ounces, and what he had there looked like an eighth.

“An eighth?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“An eighth of what?”

“An ounce, sir,” I said.

I asked him what he was doing about the stall doors, and he said “oh that” and put the weed back in the drawer on top of my valentine complaint and shut it.

“You heard about Mr. Esherick?” he asked.

I had. Joe Esherick was caught masturbating in a bathroom stall with a door, albeit one with a faulty latch. A basketball player that beat people up in the cafeteria all the time and never got suspended had kicked open the door and saw Joe there stroking it. The doors opened up towards the inside, which had also been part of my complaint. Naturally, word spread.

Joe’s father was a professor of Chinese History and Chinese himself. The basketball player had no idea who he was, so word went out that some Japanese kid had been beating off in the bathroom. Wendell Fukushima, the only Japanese kid in the whole city whose last name meant “fortune island”, was called in and subject to what must have seemed like a lifetime of grilling from a row of administrators and school counselors until his white mother the lawyer showed up and promised to sue.

They called the basketball player in next and apologized for bothering him again and spoke to him about his team’s chances in that night’s game and then asked if he was sure the masturbator had been Japanese. He said yeah, and then they asked if the masturbator could have been Chinese, and he said he didn’t know. They next called a history teacher in, who brought a Time-Life Photo Book on World War II that included a page

called “How To Tell Them Apart” that showed Chang Kai-Shek and Emperor Hirohito as models of their respective nationalities. They had the basketball player study the photos carefully, telling him emphatically the whole time to “think!”

The Principal gave up after the basketball player said the masturbator could have been either and then was corrected by the most exasperated counselor who said the thing he’d been calling a dress the whole time was called a “kimono.” The basketball player mumbled, “Whatever – it’s still totally gay.”

I had been waiting outside and heard the whole thing because the Principal’s door was flung wide open.

I’d been sent there by my shop teacher to explain my cavalier attitude about following safety protocol while blowtorching. I stood to go in as the basketball player came out, and he shoved me out of the way. I hit the wall and knocked some ten-year-old plaque from an accreditation group off the wall. I bent to pick it up and was asked what I wanted by the vice-Principal in the chest high slacks.

I told them I didn’t know, that Mr. Warren sent me, and the Principal said he was in ‘Nam and sends down ten kids a day and told me to go back and say I’d received the tongue lashing of my life. I returned, mumbling the phrase to myself over and over again as I went.

After an exhaustive investigation, they apparently got from Joe Esherick a confession, and from that point forward he was known as “Spanky The Chink.” His school performance suffered and he dropped out of the chess club, too.

He never complained about the racial slur, figuring he didn’t have a real leg to stand on. He was lucky that his father published a big book and got a job at a more prestigious university and was thus able to pack his family up and get out of town that very spring.

It was just after their departure that I returned to the Principal’s office and once again demanded he do something about the absence of stall doors in the boys’ bathrooms. Now that Joe was gone, and the masturbation threat gone with him, I figured he had no excuse for delay.

He told me he was too busy for all my shit, that between dealing with the fallout from firing his popular vice-Principal, frantic calls gathering substitutes for the impending teacher strike next fall, and dealing also with revelations that the Florist slotted to do the prom arrangements was a big Reagan supporter and hated the Sandinistas, he had

enough on his plate as it was.

I got up to leave, but he told me he'd been too harsh, maybe, and asked that I come back in.

I sat.

“You're pretty good at history and government and all that stuff aren't you?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I've got a big meeting with the parents of all those Peace Club Get America the Hell Out of Everywhere hippy asshole, professor parents in two days...”

“Yeah?”

“What can you tell me about these Sandinistas?” he asked. “I mean aren't they communists or something? Doesn't the florist have a point?”

I said he did and they undoubtedly were. He asked me to make some index cards of bullet points on the evils of communism. I happily obliged and came in with them the next day.

I sat as he went through them, asking me questions along the way.

“What's a Mowist?”

I told him it was Maoist.

“They're deranged psychotics, sir. They made their elders wear idiotic dunce caps and stand up on podiums in front of towns and villages and admit to all kinds of wrongs and encouraged kids to jeer at and spit on them. A lot of them just committed suicide.”

“And that was the anti-rightist campaign?”

“No sir, it was the Cultural Revolution,” I said.

“Is that what these Sandinistas are doing too?”

“No sir, but they will. It's just a matter of time.”

“So they really need to be stopped, then, don’t they?”

“I’d say so sir,” I said.

“What’s a ‘Killing Field’?”

“That’s a thing they had in Cambodia,” I said.

“And they killed people with glasses?”

“Kind of sir,” I said. “They were anti-intellectual and figured intellectuals wore glasses. The intellectuals stopped wearing them, so they inspected people’s noses for markings and indentations that made it look like they wore glasses.”

“Why didn’t they just do a vision test?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“I see...”

He resumed.

“Now these Sandinistas,” he said. “You say they will import their communism over here?”

“I’d say up, sir.”

“Up?”

“Yes sir. Nicaragua is south of us, sir, so anything that comes from there would come up sir. If it came from China, I’d say ‘over’ since they’re to our east.”

“Is Japan communist too?”

“No sir, they’re with us, sir.”

“You mean you and me, not the Peace Club hippies.”

“Yes sir, that’s what I mean.”

“Are they in NATO?”

“No sir, that’s only Europe,” I said. I thought he was feeling a little stupid. “But they might as well be. They’re on our side sir. Completely.”

“So there aren’t any communists there?”

“No sir, there are. There are communists everywhere. The Peace Club hippies are all communists, sir.”

“They are?”

“Yes sir.”

“How do you know?”

“Just listen to them when they talk, sir. They never say anything bad about communism, or if they do, they always say ‘but...’ then talk about how America is worse.”

“Hmmm,” he said, again reading the cards.

“Who’s this guy killed with a hatchet in Mexico?”

“That’s Trotsky, sir.”

“This is a lot of stuff to remember. It’s very complex.”

“Yes sir. I could have done a better job organizing it, sir. But I wanted to get it all to you right away.”

He asked if I’d mind coming to the meeting and talking about communism myself. I said I’d love to. I told him it was a shame the Eshericks had left town. Mr. Esherick was a specialist on Mao and his abuses.

He thought about that for a long time and conceded that maybe I’d been right about the stall doors all along.

“Don’t worry about that sir,” I said. “This is way more important.”

He asked if I needed the cards. I told him no, it was all in my head. He put them in his shirt pocket and told me I was pretty smart and sure knew a lot. I said thanks.

He then asked why I wasn't getting good grades.

I told him a lot of his teachers were communists too, sir.

“That's why they're going on strike, sir.”

He reached in his pocket and took out and shuffled through the index cards.

“But here you say communists are against unions and strikes.”

“Sorry sir. I should have made clear they're for them until they get power and then they're against.”

“I see.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“You sure about those stall doors? I'm sure we could order some.”

“I'm sure sir,” I said. “This anti-Sandinista Floral Thing is way more important sir. The thing about the stalls, that can wait.”

A Magpie Need Not Deny Her Nature

Laryssa Wirstiuck

With the changing weather, the magpie barely migrates, traveling maybe from one elevation to another, if that. Throughout winter, I - like the magpie - just didn't have the energy to budge. But on the first day of spring I felt inspired to find something sparkling.

I sought my treasure in a tiny shop with a baby blue awning and polished jewelry in the window display. First, I pressed my nose against the glass and fluttered at the sight of a massive marquis-cut stone on a simple white-gold band. I wondered if I was being honest with myself about my I-don't-need-a-diamond-ring philosophy. But diamonds had been diamonds for millions of years before being set in gold and marketed as promises.

Upon entering the store I was greeted by a woman in her 60s with a trim body and a silver bob haircut. She wore a white-ribbed turtleneck that served as a backdrop for a ruby-and-yellow-gold bib necklace. She introduced herself as Marie.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to try these on my right hand," I said.

"Non-traditional diamond rings are all the rage," said Marie, smiling.

I tried an Asscher cut first because I'd always been fond of its endless hall of mirrors, perfect for someone who loves herself more than anyone else.

"I adore it," I said.

Just then, a new customer entered the store, but I was too busy staring at the ring to look at his face.

"What are you doing here? I thought engagement rings give you hives," said Thomas. "What's that on your finger?"

"The real question is - what are *you* doing here?" I asked. "Already found a new girlfriend?"

Over the winter, Thomas and I had almost started to accumulate a skin of glitter fallen from the holiday decorations, which left a permanent sparkle on everything. I liked the decorations because their reflective surfaces made my drafty apartment seem warmer than it was, but the two of us had spent too many endless hours on my couch. I appreciated his brawn and thick wool sweaters. However, if I was going to sit still for that long, I couldn't let myself suffocate under the cover of glitter dust.

“Expect a ‘shiny’ by the end of March,” he had said one evening. “To celebrate our survival.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Something shiny, for your special finger.”

I wanted to keep finding my own shiny things: unexpected marquis stones in charming shop windows.

“I’ve decided to try something new: buy the ring first, then find the girl to fit it,” Thomas said, removing a stack of glossy 8x10” closeups of rings from his briefcase and laying them out over the jewelry case for Marie to examine.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all. I mean, she’s going to be the one wearing it for the rest of her life. I might as well buy a ring I can imagine looking at every day,” he said. “I won’t bother you. But if you must know: after you broke up with me, I missed you, and started reading about magpies, because I know you love them.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to Marie. “He’s nuts.”

“And, well, that’s how I got my idea to buy an engagement ring before finding the girl,” said Thomas. “Some people think the reason that male magpies collect shiny objects is to attract a female.”

“Well, yeah,” I said.

“Before, I had the order wrong. Now it’s shiny thing first, girl second,” he said. “In the future, when I go on a first date, I’m just going to take the ring out of my pocket and tell her what I eventually want. If she doesn’t like the ring, she probably shouldn’t stay.”

“So you’re dangling it like a carrot,” I said. “Like, look, you can have all this and more if you just stick around!”

“Don’t listen to her. She’s just bitter and realizes leaving me was a mistake,” said Thomas.

“Well, this is not at all how I expected my day to go,” I said.

“Why not make the best of it?” asked Marie.

“Try on something you actually like.”

“I’m not buying anything,” I said.

“Do I look like I have a lot of customers? Try something for fun. It would make me happy.”

I walked around the store, avoiding Thomas, who was too focused on finding his ring to pay attention to me. On one hand, I couldn’t believe that someone who had once so passionately declared his love for me now lost interest after exchanging a few words. Marie was right: I should take the time to do something for myself. I asked to see the marquis-cut ring from the window display, even though I’d never wear something so obviously meant for a proposal.

“You know the one I want, Marie,” I said. “I’m going big.”

“Great choice,” said Marie.

I slipped the ring onto my finger and turned my hand to let the diamond catch the light. I couldn’t help it. I spun it around; it had already become my nervous habit. I tapped the stone with my nail to ensure I wasn’t dreaming. In matters regarding both gems and coveted men, a woman’s desire increases directly in proportion to hardness.

“I know you don’t care, but check this out,” I said. “Should I get it?”

Thomas shook his head.

“It wouldn’t have been my first choice,” he said, waving for Marie to help.

Understanding that I was neither needed nor wanted, I stormed out of the shop. After

months of tensing my muscles upon meeting cold air, my body was surprised. A pool of warm sunshine was gathering on my side of the street, and I melted into it. The ring pulled me to the earth. When Marie finally caught me, yelling and threatening to call the police, I surrendered the bauble and braced myself on a street sign. The shift in weight nearly sent me flying.

The Straw Man

Michael Chin

When Emily was little, her daddy gave her pie and told her scary stories about people who clawed out of their graves, a witch who collected little girls' eyeballs, and a man with three arms who crawled through open windows to sleep beneath children's beds. She remembered nights of Dutch apple crumb, of pecan, of strawberry rhubarb. Most of all, she remembered lemon meringue. Maybe it's because it was one of the last times they ate together; maybe it was because the way the egg whites trembled when he set down the slice on the kitchen table so closely resembled the billows of smoke bubbling from the exhaust pipe of that night's monster.

Emily's mama told him to stop scaring the girl.

Daddy said kids liked to be scared.

The meringue blossomed, a strange flower. Unnatural. Lemon too sour a fruit for desert.

Emily's mama said not to make her eat it.

Daddy said he wouldn't raise a daughter who didn't appreciate a good slice of lemon meringue pie. "The secret to eating lemon meringue is to get a little bit of everything in each bite." He pointed to each layer. "See the white part is sweet, but it's light and doesn't have a lot of flavor. And the lemon has the flavor, but it's too sour on its own. They balance each other out, you see? And the crust at the bottom gives it all something to stand on. It ain't pretty, and it's no good on its own. But it's the foundation. Without it, you don't have a pie."

Emily took a bite with a little bit of everything. They alternated scoops from the same slice the way they always did. She started cutting her bites at a diagonal slant -- an inch-wide swath of meringue, a little less lemon, and the smallest scrap of crust.

Daddy told her that was no good. She had to swallow the hard parts.

Mama said to leave her alone.

###

Daddy didn't leave because of any one disagreement. Emily couldn't remember for sure when he left; just that he was around for Thanksgiving of her first grade year, but that by Christmas he was gone.

Mama stopped baking pies. Emily held onto those scary stories -- that was why she had always liked Halloween. After her father left, she transitioned from trick or treating to giggling with other girls as they watched boys hurl eggs at houses and smash pumpkins. At sixteen, she left that behind, in favor of a party. Her best friend Liza had told her about a get-together in a barn out in the sticks, put on by the Omega fraternity.

Mama didn't like the sound of the party, even when Emily left out the parts about the college boys and the distance from home. Neither did she like Emily's costume: Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Emily wore her hair in pigtails, a blue dress cut low enough to show the tops of her budding cleavage, the skirt high enough so it only reached mid-thigh, and ruby red heels that made her slim calves look fetching.

Mama volunteered her own puffy pumpkin costume from years before, when she'd last dressed up, and told Emily she had the choice of the big orange body suit or staying home to hand out candy in whatever costume she liked.

The orange tip of Mama's cigarette glowed in the dim kitchen on Halloween night. She sat at the table, still cluttered with dinner's dirty dishes, and eyed Emily. "It's not so bad, right?"

"It's not so bad," Emily said. The body of the pumpkin proved large enough that Emily could wear the costume of her choice beneath it, bunching up the dress at her midsection.

Emily noticed that the cigarette butt was stained cherry red like Mama's lipstick. Behind Mama, her boyfriend, Dick, maneuvered with his little silver digital camera, his curly mass of dark brown-gray hair bobbing with each step.

"Good idea, Dick," Mama said.

A trail of smoke escaped Mama's lips as she spoke, and Emily imagined it taking the shape of his name. Dick, who Mama met serving mashed potatoes to homeless folks

at the church last Thanksgiving morning, while Emily was still in bed. Dick, a school counselor who was *just so good with kids*. Dick, who had bought a used pickup truck equipped with an old hook and chain for towing, that he set up for the sake of helping people in need on the side of the road. Dick, who had had dinner at the house three times and went out with Mama a couple nights a week, never returning until long past Emily's curfew.

Dick, who compulsively carried that little silver camera.

“Don't roll your eyes.”

“I didn't,” Emily said.

Dick took her picture. He held the viewfinder right up against one of the big, circular lenses, ignoring the digital screen that reflected blue light against the stubble on his cheek.

“You know we get a lot of trick-or-treaters.” Mama took Dick's hand in hers and put it on her shoulder. “We'll be busy tonight.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“You call me if that party gets out of control or if you're not feeling safe.”

“It'll be fine, Mama.”

“You know I worry.”

“I know you do.”

###

Emily played navigator with her cell phone, but by the time Liza had made the last turn and driven the last stretch of dark, winding road, neither of them had any idea where they were. Liza parked her mother's Camry beside the other cars in the field outside the big red barn. Liza got out of the car and waited, clutching her bare arms close to herself. She wore a black bikini top, black skinny jeans and a head band with black cat ears popping up from it. In the late autumn chill, she shivered so that her kinky cat tail bounced up and down outside the car window. Her cell phone glowed brightly as she tapped a text message. Emily shed her pumpkin costume piece by piece; she felt like a

giant in the confines of the backseat. She emerged from the car newly formed.

“We’re off to see The Wizard?” Liza asked.

“Don’t get catty with me.”

They hooked arms and started to skip, then recognized the difficulty of crossing the grass in their heels. They slowed to a careful walk, the two of them perfectly erect, huddled close for warmth and balance.

Haystacks lined the barn. The cracked wooden walls offered little shelter, but Emily was grateful to join the mass of people whose sheer body heat warmed her.

“How did you find about this party again?” Emily asked.

“My sister’s ex-boyfriend posted it on Facebook.”

Liza guided them toward the keg. A couple boys looked them up and down, and Emily crossed her arms tightly across her chest.

A tall guy worked the keg. He wore war paint on his cheeks, an elaborate feather head-dress atop his head, and a parka over his shoulders. He handed Liza a red Solo cup and poured a stream of beer down the side while he planted his other hand on her hip to pull her closer. He leered at her. She giggled.

Emily scanned the barn again. Her eyes settled on a man in a floppy-brimmed black hat, strands of hay protruding from every part of his body. The shadows obscured his face. Of all the stories Emily’s father told her, few stuck with her longer or in greater details than the one about The Straw Man. Hesipped from an Arnold Palmer -- equal parts lemonade, iced tea, and vodka. “The Straw Man finds little girls on country roads. Sometimes they’re runaways or hitchhikers; sometimes they’re riding bikes or even driving cars. He follows after them in an old pickup truck, slowly at first, then he makes his move.” Her father had sipped, slow, steady slurping, like she had imagined rusty metal of the truck would sound, lurching as The Straw Man rode his brake.

“What does he do then?” Emily had asked.

“Skins them alive. Throws their outsides in the back of his truck and leaves the bloody flesh behind for raccoons to eat.”

Mama had told him to stop telling stories like that.

Later that night Emily sat down next to her father on the sofa and watched a scarecrow on TV come to life and stalk a group of coeds. Her mother sent her to bed, cutting off the movie just as she had the story earlier that night. And so, the two narratives wove into one another, unresolved, taking up residence in Emily's head.

Emily touched Liza's arm. She had told Liza about The Straw Man and her recurring nightmares. She needed for her to see the creature, come-to-life in the barn. But Liza brushed off Emily, drinking deeply, wrapped up in her pow-wow with the Indian chief. They remained by the keg. Emily half listened to Liza and occasionally made small talk with whoever else cycled by the keg, but mostly she watched The Straw Man. Liza drank beer after beer, starting her third cup before Emily had finished her first. Liza belched into the back of her hand, blushed and laughed when the Indian offered her a high five.

"Emma," the Indian said. "Emma."

"Her name is Emily," Liza said.

"Sorry, Emily? You mind manning the keg for a minute? I'm going to show Liza something behind the barn."

Liza played with the end of her tail and it bit her lip to keep from smiling too widely. Emily took over the tap. Before they left, the Indian had her pour another beer for each of them.

A pair of Siamese twins, bound by an enormous pair of jeans into which each girl fit one leg, came to Emily, cups outstretched. They had the right idea for a costume -- the only surefire way not to end up alone.

An hour or more passed. Emily continued to watch The Straw Man between pours until, all at once, his head lifted. Though his face remained hidden, she felt certain he was watching her just as steadily as she was watching him.

Emily trickled beer down the sides of cups for a witch, a turkey, a firefighter, and Princess Leia. Each time she looked up, The Straw Man was still watching. She filled a gold miner's cup. The Straw Man had edged perceptibly closer. One more pour and she let the tap drop. She turned around, only to collide with The Straw Man.

He stood two heads taller than she was. She could see his face then, smeared in ugly brown paint. “Were you watching me?” His voice was higher-pitched than she expected, not comical, but like a boy only recently removed from puberty.

“I saw a movie with you in it -- with the guy you’re dressed up like. Which movie was that?”

If The Straw Man showed any recognition on his face, she couldn’t see it; dark paint smeared. “Same one as you, I guess.” He drank from his cup and then sang, “If I only had a brain.”

Emily tried to walk away, only to find the path blocked by a new mass of people huddled around the keg.

“Are you OK?” The Straw Man asked.

The man’s face was grotesque. Even if he meant to be something as harmless as The Scarecrow, Emily found it difficult to look at him.

“I’m just here because my roommate’s an Omega,” he said. “It’s weird being at these things when you don’t know a lot of people.”

She ran her hand through her hair. The barn had grown hot and stunk of musk and beer. “I wonder where my friend went.”

“The black cat?”

“You were watching us?”

“Weren’t you watching me?” Emily drank her beer, flat and lukewarm. She gagged.

“There’s a mural on one of the walls outside. The guys said it was a good place -- they said girls like it.”

“Can you take me there?”

The Straw Man took hold of her hand. His fingers were hot and sweaty. He fumbled to weave his fingers between hers, but she clenched a fist and pulled back her hand. He stuffed his hands inside his pockets and led the way.

Outside, Emily couldn't hear anything but the soft rumble of chatter from the barn. She stretched out her arms to balance herself in the grass, then bent over and took off her shoes to walk barefoot.

"It's chilly," The Straw Man unzipped his dark green fleece and wrestled each arm out of it as they walked. He spread the jacket wide to put it on her shoulders.

"Please don't."

Emily tried to stay in front of him, but he kept up with her. They rounded the first corner, and he reached his arm across her chest. "Careful," he said.

At their feet, a couple -- an astronaut with his helmet peeled back and a nurse in a short white skirt, made out in the grass.

Emily kept her eyes on the ground, and saw another couple making out, then another pressed against the wall. Around the next corner of the barn, the wall was lined with couples in various stages of sex -- kissing, humping, smoking cigarettes beneath the blanket of Dracula's robe. She had never seen anything like it but supposed the costumes and the volume of people offered a kind of invisibility you couldn't have when you were alone and afraid someone might see you. She remembered how it felt the time she let a boy touch her breasts on Mama's couch.

The Straw Man touched her arm. Emily realized the trap she had walked into.

She ran.

She didn't know if she could beat him a foot race, but if he didn't expect her to run, and she could dodge among the bodies on the ground, she could get a head start.

Every couple steps she scanned the barn for Liza. She saw the painting The Straw Man had told her about -- a big rainbow in which the red bled right into the barn itself, with arcs of orange and yellow and green just visible by moonlight. She followed the rainbow to the opposite end of the wall, only to see the Indian with his back to her. As she came closer, she found Liza on her knees, barefoot in the grass.

Emily slowed long enough to clutch Liza's upper arms to pick her up. The two of them stumbled as the motion transformed into a clumsy tackle. When she got to her feet, The Straw Man was upon her. She swung her shoe, heel first, into the black hole of his face. He screamed as he held his head, dropping to one knee.

Emily grabbed Liza's purse in one hand, her friend's fingers in the other, and ran again. She glanced over shoulder. No sign of The Indian. She had little doubt both he and The Straw Man would catch up. She pulled Liza along, moving faster and faster across the grass until they arrived at the Camry.

Doors locked, backseat checked, Emily turned on the headlights.

"I lost my shoe." Liza slurred her words and slouched from the passenger seat until she leaned all the way onto Emily.

Emily pushed her and buckled the safety belt across her friend's body, and then she picked up the purse again. She pulled at, almost ripped it open before finding the clasp. Inside, she found the rabbit's foot that dangled from Liza's keychain. She peered out the windshield, half expecting to see The Straw Man or The Indian running toward the car. She couldn't see anything other than parked cars and the barn.

"Those were my mom's shoes," Liza said. "She's gonna be pissed."

The grass seemed bumpier than it had when they'd arrived. As badly as she wanted to speed, Emily rode the brake, unwilling to risk hitting anything that would force them to stop.

They hit pavement. Emily pushed hard against the gas pedal. She had get away. Away from The Straw Man. Away from the barn. Out of the dark. But where were they going? The road tilted upward. She couldn't remember if they had traveled uphill or downhill on the way there. If the barn had been on the left or the right. She didn't dare stop, but slowed to take out her cell phone and input her home address.

In the rearview mirror, a single headlight shone at her, high and bright. A truck, probably. She remembered lemon meringue. She remembered how The Straw Man's attacks always began by running unsuspecting drivers off dark roads.

The radio blared, all drums and guitars and fury. Liza slouched over the console. She cranked up the volume, filling the car with noise. She hummed along, not quite catching the melody.

Emily slammed the radio knobs until it was quiet again. "I need to concentrate." The directions on her phone had them staying on that same road for another six miles. The single headlight remained behind them, still at the same distance. No hope of actually seeing the driver in her rearview mirror, but in that absence of an identity, she saw the

dark space under the hat of The Straw Man.

She took the first turn she could onto another road. Anything to get away.

There were no streetlights.

Liza moaned with the change in direction, her head lolling to one side. Emily watched the rearview mirror.

The headlight reappeared.

“Where are we going?” Liza asked.

Emily glanced at Liza in the dashboard light. The side of her face pressed against the back of her seat, her spine curled, and she had folded her legs beneath her. She didn’t seem upset. For all Emily knew, she may have been content to have stayed at the barn.

The side road stretched on without any new turns or any opportunity to circle back to their original route. No houses, only long rows of tall, thick spruce trees.

She could call the cops. The idea came to her, and although she couldn’t begin to explain where they were, couldn’t the police track cell phones? Emily switched closed the map on the phone. Fine white lettering lined the top corner of the phone: NO SERVICE.

The headlight maintained its distance, maybe five car-lengths back. She squinted, trying to see past that light, through the truck’s windshield.

“Look out!” Liza yelled.

Liza must have opened her own eyes just in time to see what Emily missed. The stag stood tall, still, almost regal, filling the road. Emily slammed on the brakes but already knew it would be too late. She got her arms up in time to soften the blow of the airbag exploding.

“What did you do to my car?” Liza fought through her own airbag and unbuckled her belt.

The rearview mirror had been knocked askew in the fray, the windshield reduced to a cloudy web of cracked glass, the crumpled hood just visible. A look in the side mirror revealed the headlight, stationary, still shining behind them, outlining the silhouette a

man walking toward the car.

This was what all of The Straw Man's victims must have felt like -- already in custody, awaiting the verdict from a jury of one. Emily trembled, watching the shadow loom closer.

“What the fuck?” Liza said.

Emily steadied herself. She would never outrun The Straw Man; not when he was mere steps away, and she was lost and wearing a stupidly tight dress. If she waited for him, he would skin her alive.

But she could fight.

She had heard the stories. A hundred-pound woman who could barely lift a sack of flour picked up the front end of a Buick when her baby daughter's leg was stuck under one of the tires. A nerd got cornered in the locker room and punched out the starting quarterback. The combination of adrenaline and having nothing left to lose.

Emily threw open the car door, knuckles white on her clenched fists. She prepared to hit The Straw Man as hard she could.

But it wasn't The Straw Man. Instead, Dick walked toward her in his earmuffs and glasses.

Mama ran a few steps behind him. “Are you alright? Are you alright, honey?”

Emily buried her face pressed into her mother's puffy red winter coat. She blubbered through the story of The Straw Man who'd attacked her outside the barn and chased after her on the road.

To Emily's surprise, Mama didn't reprimand her about the party or her outfit or for not watching the road. She stroked her hair and apologized for letting her father tell her scary stories. She explained how she had convinced Dick to spend the night following Liza's car out to the party, sitting outside, and then following the girls home.

Mama went on stroking her hair while Dick put his coat over Liza's shoulders. He got her into the back of the cab, and then called the police -- of course, Dick's cell phone had reception. The cop showed up a half hour later, took a report and cleared the deer from the road. Then Dick maneuvered the truck around so he could hitch up his hook to

the rear axle of the Camry.

They all fell quiet in the truck. Emily listened to the sound of the engine's rattle, the clatter of the chain behind the truck, and the whir of the vents blowing hot air. The inside of the truck smelled of pine tree air freshener. Liza fell asleep almost immediately after they got in the truck, and, in the front seat, Mama's head sagged against her head rest after the first few minutes of driving. Dick navigated the truck along the curves of the main road.

"If you thought I was The Straw Man, why'd you get out of the car?" Dick asked.

Outside her window a blur of tall, dark trees passed. Her thoughts of a monster giving chase and of fights to the death seemed child-like now.

"Weren't you scared?" Dick asked.

She propped her elbow against the door and leaned her head against her hand. Her skin felt tender. The airbag must have hit her harder than she first realized. "Yes."

"Your mother told me about the way your father used to scare you." He sipped loudly from a can of A&W, the root beer logo just visible by the dashboard light. "How he didn't know what he should or shouldn't say to a little kid." He put the can down, and his hand slid onto Mama's thigh.

Emily's face burned. She thought of Dick, the school counselor, meddling, making stories of people's lives. She thought of what he must have told Mama, of everything the two of them might have said and did in the cab of that truck while they waited outside the barn. "I think you're trying to turn my father into a monster, and yourself into some kind of saint. And I think all you really want to do is sleep with my mother."

He was silent for a few seconds before he laughed softly. "Attacking the straw man, indeed."

"What?"

He coughed into the crook of his elbow to steady his breath. "Never you mind, sweetheart."

The truck was quiet again. Emily stared straight ahead at the road as far as the lone hea-

dlight lit in front of them. She watched the pavement rise and fall a dozen more times before it arrived at a plateau.

“Never you mind, sweetheart,” he repeated. “Never you mind.”

Who She Wasn't

Scott Archer Jones

I admit it, I ran away. After I was sacked in my mid-fifties and I drove my wife back into the arms of her daddy's money, I had no way back to what I had done well in my life. There wasn't even a way to get a new job—in 2009, laid-off managers with few friends were unemployable. Because I had a little money I rented a cheap tumbling-down house on the river in the cottonwoods, miles northwest of Albuquerque and the scenes of my failure. I waited there for a job to find me. The house was just upstream from Consuela Romero, the woman I would destroy.

###

I was picking up my mail at the boxes on the road when she first spoke to me, in the early summer just as the sporadic rains finished. She approached me like a bird about to fly up and away. “Excuse me? You're my new neighbor?”

“Depends, I suppose, on where you live and where I do.” It was easy to be a smart-ass at first, before she fell under my dominance and into my imagination.

She took it seriously. “You shouldn't pretend, señor. We have seen each other. I am Consuela.” She offered her small brown hand, but she didn't look at me—she gazed at the dust down to her right. Maybe she didn't like men thirty years older. Grandfathers.

“Right you are. I'm pleased to meet you, Connie. My name is Charles. I've admired your place as I drove by. Mine is run down.”

“You rent from Ramon? He's a nice person if you've been here for a while. He probably won't fix anything. But he might help you, if you were doing it.”

I told her I didn't care enough to fix up the Gutierrez place, but that I did wish I had a garden like hers. “You're out in the garden all the time—you must really like it.”

“No, Señor Carlos. It's just part of the old ways. I do it to honor my mother and father,

and my grandparents. It is my grandfather's house."

"I'm sorry, but I prefer to be called Charles."

"Sí, I understand." She tried it out. "Charles."

"You live with your parents?"

"No, they have all gone now. I live by myself."

Reflecting back on it, I was wrong to always call her Connie. It was my first failure of acknowledgement.

###

A week later she drove up to my house. I stepped out past my tattered screen door to greet her, leaned on the front of the adobe, breathed in the dust raised by her truck. She was in silhouette—I was squinting into the bright sun. "Here. I've brought you something." She handed me a paper bag, then stood twisting the end of her belt back and forth.

I peered into the sack, picking out vegetables—early squash, early tomatoes, cilantro and fresh lettuce. I thanked her and thanked her again, enjoying myself as I played her.

"De nada," she said, but it was something, not nothing. While I handled the sack, I worked around to the right and sneaked glances at her. Not the country-club type of woman I liked.

"I tell you what, Connie, I can cook a bit. Why don't you come back for dinner? I'll make pasta with a cilantro pesto. We can use these things up while they're really fresh."

She turned away from me and stared into the distance. I think she was considering the offer, and considering also who made the offer. She was shorter than I and thin to the point of pain. It was her hair that got me—black and shining as obsidian. Unlike me, she didn't dress in town clothes but in the denims of a field worker, under an old straw hat. I wondered what it would be like, to cut myself on those sharp angles and jutting bones.

She said, in a mouse's voice, "Okay." She turned and slipped back to her truck. I shouted. "Let's say at six!" But she didn't answer. In that moment, she had given in. I think

she knew where it would end. But she was that lonely.

###

After that, we were like the river below us, roiling swift towards a sea beyond. Anytime the bugs in my head were too much, I reached out to find her fluid skin beneath my hand, there in my room under the old window. Her hair flowed out on the pillow, shining in the desert moon, smelling of soap, of rosemary.

If she never admitted we were together, I didn't want to know. I ignored her quirks, like how she fiddled with her fork endlessly, the long silences. And the way she wouldn't look me in the eyes. A shame. They were beautiful eyes, if a little bruised deep down.

At times she came across so childish. She sat on the edge of the bed wrapped in the sheet—after I had strained my way to a sweaty finish. Not talking, hunching her shoulders. She would leave me in my bed, to go sleep alone in her grandfather's house. That was the thing I resented, that declaration of shame.

She didn't need a social life—but I did. We went out to dinner in the village whenever my budget could afford it. I introduced her to my new friends—I had been in sales, I knew how to attach friends to me like limpets. I dressed her in the style I liked—bought her a couple of summer dresses and accessorized her. She rebelled at the white one, I thought, because of its plunging neckline. “Charles, que meustra demasiado y—the color of death.”

“I like it, Connie. You look great in white.”

“The old ones will not like it.”

No one I knew had ever said things like that. Her superstition embarrassed me. A creepy idea, dead people watching over us.

We flowed on like that, two streams half-coiled together, through the summer and winter and into the time where the snowpack melted and the rivers woke up. She would come to me in the morning and make my breakfast, then disappear for the day. At dusk, she would be there with whatever pitiful offering of food she could make and we would cook together while I drank. And talked. I told her of my wild plans, for a new company, for an old friend in Chicago who would surely hire me, for a way to turn my little stake into a fortune as soon as the market came back. Sometimes she would touch my hand, and I would fall silent. That was the only time I surrendered command.

###

I claimed it was the priest's fault for a long time. He was perched there on her porch that early spring day when I dropped her off, at her grandfather's house. The priest brought the dusty black clothes and piercing stare of another century with him. She walked up to her porch, wearing a new white dress I had bought. I could tell by the way she skittered up to the door that she would be upset for days, more twitchy, even quieter than usual. She didn't come to me that evening. Only the next morning when I drove down to her house did I learn something about her. Her actions told me that day what I had never asked. She told me a little of who she had been, and what she had wanted.

An empty white dress fluttered from the branch of a tall tree beside the house. Shoes and underwear, pitiful cotton, lay beneath it in the soft sunshine. The river ran wild below, just across a short meadow, filled with meltwater and the rippling trace of an unknown woman.

Feeling Not So Hot

Zeke Jarvis

I'm pretty close to done with the oranges I'll have to peel. They're the little oranges, the clementines, so peeling them can be a pain, and it doesn't help that Dad's telling us a story about how oranges used to be this huge prize, "delicacy," he says in Europe centuries ago like he's a citrus expert. It's because they didn't have sugar like we do, is what he says, and chocolate tasted like cocoa instead of like a Nestle's Crunch bar. And I'm not even thinking about chocolate. All I'm thinking about is how my dad just doesn't get that hearing that people used to have to wipe their asses with leaves or filter their water through something weird doesn't make Frankie or I appreciate things. It's like telling us that kids are starving in Rwanda. It's not like we send our uneaten food there, so if I toss out something gross, like that nasty Salisbury steak, then it doesn't change that there are starving kids, so what does that help? I think he just wants us to talk about Rwanda in front of other people so that they all think his kids are really informed or something.

Dad tells Frankie, "We're lucky," and Frankie just coughs really loudly. I'd like to think that he's sticking it to Dad, but he's too young to think like that. Frankie still thinks Dad is awesome, which I guess is okay for a little boy, but he'll figure it out eventually. Still, Dad can't yell at Frankie, but he's totally lost his steam in talking about ancient Europe and the great history of selling chocolate. So I peel open another orange and watch Frankie, who's been turning the same orange around in his hand for about five minutes now, like there's a pull tab or something. Bobby Munson said that the Japanese are trying to genetically engineer apples that have stems you can pull that'll actually slice open the peel, but Bobby Munson has to go to this special counselor, I hear, so I never believe most of what he says, which Mom told me was a good policy after I'd told her some of the things that Bobby Munson says.

We hear Mom coughing from her room off and on, where she's watching TV in bed. She doesn't watch that much, but when she's sick, she likes to just sit there and zone out. Sometimes you'll go and ask her what she's watching and she'll look at you and say, "What?" The weird thing is that she watches really dumb stuff. I know that she's smart or whatever, but she watches stuff that even I think is dumb, though I guess if she's not watching it, maybe she wants it to be really dumb. Or maybe it's smart and I

just don't get it, like that "world poetry" book that my mom told me to read. It was like they took the most interesting or big stuff and talked about it in the most boring way half the time so that English teachers and social studies teachers could yell at their students for not caring enough, which Mr. Wilson does so much that everybody in school does an impression of him yelling. Jenny Wagner's is the best, because she has the hand gestures down perfectly. Though I did like the one poem about the tree that all those people were climbing and sitting in. It reminded me of *The Giving Tree*, even though that book really bummed me out, even as a kid, because the tree ends up this total stump and the man's all old and probably will die soon, and then the tree's just a stump because of some dead guy.

I'm trying to remember some of the books that I really liked as kid while Dad's started in again, this time talking about sailors and scurvy, and Frankie keeps interrupting him to ask about Captain Jack Sparrow and it's kind of funny to see Dad keep trying to stay on task, but I can't laugh or they'll both get mad, so I just keep trying to remember all the books I liked as a kid. I get some of the Dr. Seuss books mixed up. How do you tell if the guy was playing a trombubler or a crograpulator? And if he was doing it to help the Lorax or to fight about butter? You can kind of imagine this one big Seussworld where they all have their own countries, like the Grinch might go to Catmerica on vacation or whatever, and everybody behaves in the same weird and stupid way, which I guess is kind of like high school. Especially the pep rallies. But it always seemed funny when my mom read those books to me. But half the time what you really liked as a kid is really stupid when you look at it again. Like Strawberry Shortcake or something. It makes you wonder why my parents let me watch it, but I guess most kids' stuff is at least kind of dumb, although maybe that's an "important life lesson," like Dad would say.

My dad tells us that we can take a break and "enjoy a segment." Sometimes he sounds like a newscaster or gameshow host or something. It's weird to say "enjoy," especially because this is supposed to be to make us feel better and not even to taste that good. I wonder what's in my dad's head when he enjoys something. I could almost see him thinking, "I enjoy this" when he's eating an orange or reading a book like a book of poetry that Mom gave him to read and that he reads to "broaden his horizons" which wouldn't be the only reason that Mom gave it to him. I wonder if he was always this way. Mom doesn't really tell us much about what he was like before they were together, but I wonder if he was always kind of a robot. I mean, yeah, he's a nice robot like the one from Centennial Man, but is that what I'm going to end up marrying? Is this life, this TV-in-bed-while-your-family-peels-clementines life at all what she wanted? And is she disappointed in him or all of us? It seems like he could've been romantic before Frankie and me, but it's really hard to see what that would've been like when he's lectu-

ring us on cocoa and scurvy and stuff. Not that I'm that interested in my dad's life before our family, I guess. It's funny, though, to think about some dude in college peeling oranges and thinking he's really smart for beating a cold. "How's yours?" he asks me. I hate these kinds of things, because it's not like he's being mean, but I just don't feel like answering. If I have to sit here with oranges and my brother and my dad, okay, but then to have to talk is just like one more thing, and I don't really care, so to have to care about him caring is just one more thing. And then I feel bad because I shouldn't give him trouble about this, either, but sometimes I just want to hole up in my room like Mom, but Dad gets this way when Mom gets sick. Like he's a babysitter, like I'm going to run into her room and bother her if he doesn't keep me busy. Whatever.

I shrug and nod, which is like Frankie's cough where he can't really react one way or the other, so he asks Frankie, and Frankie says, "Yeah," and I'm not sure if Frankie's even listening. Sometimes he's weird. I mean, kids are always weird, but Frankie zones out in a different way than Mom and the TV. He zones out like he's looking for ghosts or something that nobody else sees. Maybe he thinks robots are going to fly through the window or something, and maybe that's how Mom and Dad met. Maybe he flew through the window when she was sick and he was a robot with a basket full of peeled clementines, and maybe she sits in her room waiting for a newer, better robot each time she gets sick, and now I feel like laughing, but if I do my dad'll never let me wave it off.

But I wonder if Mom sees being sick as a break from us all. My parents had a talk, at some point, with us about how we're a traditional family, but they're not necessarily traditional parents. I still don't know what all that was about. I mean, I get it; Mom works but she feels like she should do a lot with us, but Dad wants to do his share, too, so we should think of them both as people we can talk to about all things. But, come on, I'm not going to go talk to Dad about dating or something. Not that I talk that much with Mom, but Dad would, like, sit me down and make "pro" and "con" lists and develop a plan for who I'm going to ask out and "on what timetable," but Mom at least knows that sometimes I just want her to tell me that I'm right to hate this one girl. Like Carly Stevens. It's not like she ever did anything that bad to me, but she's just always there and always cutting on me, and I should just shrug it off, and I usually do, because my friends all think she's a bitch, too, but Dad would try to figure out which teacher I should talk to and explain to me how to "best represent my perspective" or something, something that he'd say in a business meeting, but Mom at least knows that a lot of life is kind of crappy, and that's all there is to it one way or the other, I guess. And that definitely makes me sad, but she doesn't try to fix it, because I guess she knows the world can't really be fixed, and trying to figure out these stupid plans is just pretending that things can be figured out. But it doesn't make a difference except to make you feel "empowered," but you know that's just a guidance-counselor word, so what's the point? It's

like arguing about which computer is better. You might be right, but you're not going to change any of the dorks' minds, so why even think about it that much? But people are always worrying about the stupid little things, I guess.

Like now, peeling these oranges, I try to remember what the difference is between a tangerine and a nectarine, which I know is stupid to think about, but it's where I go to not listen to Dad. I like oranges, and I like lemon-flavored things even though I've never eaten just a plain lemon, but other citruses never taste like I expect them to. Like they should be even more different from each other than they are. Or like cumquats. I've heard of them, but I've never met anyone who actually eats them or anything. And now they have the cuties, which I thought were just clementines, but I saw clementines and cuties in the store when Dad took us to pick them up, so they can't be the same thing, I guess. It makes me wonder why these oranges are called clementines. I bet it's named after some town. There's probably a city in Florida or California where half the high schoolers totally hate oranges and think that apples are a really great treat. Or maybe they all just want candy. I wonder if they get sick very often in Clementine. And then I hear my mom laugh. Maybe Ellen's show is on? I realize, then, that I don't even know what time it is, and it's possible that Mom's laughing at something that's not even on the TV. Maybe her robot hero did come and told a really funny joke while handing her the first clementine segment. Dad sweeps up a big pile of peels and dumps them in the trash. I smell my fingers and it's not really good or bad. It smells like the ghost of oranges or something. I guess it could be worse. Maybe that's what these oranges are like. They're like the parents I have that aren't bad, they want me to be good and they do do stuff for me, but sometimes you just wish they'd be drunks or gone a lot so that you could have some fun. But you can't turn that kind of thing off or on, and either way it probably seems like it sucks half the time. Or more, if you've got the drunk kind, probably.

But that's not really like oranges. I guess that when you spend a long time peeling these stupid oranges, that's how you start to think, and so everything seems like oranges to you. Though maybe the oranges really are like my little brother, sitting there and playing with the last of the peels instead of either helping or even eating the stupid little segments. Maybe these oranges are a lot of trouble and they still could be bad and you have to take in a lot of them to feel better at all, and even then, you don't know if it was the oranges that really helped make you better or if the virus or whatever you had just died. But I guess that means that I'm not that great either, which I basically know, but it feels kind of crappy, looking at Frankie and thinking it. That's like life, though. Or that's what I'm supposed to deal with so that I can be an adult, because that's something we're all supposed to want to be for some reason. We're all supposed to be some cold-stricken lady hiding away in her room while her family is stuck peeling the little

oranges her husband buys to keep the kids occupied so she can stay in her room laughing and coughing at God knows what awful program is on the TV or other thing that's going through her head. And I'm thinking about that, and I look at Dad, and he looks surprised that I'm making eye contact, so, while I have him surprised, I ask, "Can I be excused? I want to lay down in my room."

And I see him doing some kind of math problem in his head about what the right answer is, or maybe he's about to tell me that I should've said "lie" instead of "lay" or something, but then he actually smiles at me and says, "Sure, Honey," and turns to Frankie so that they can compare hands after peeling the oranges. And I get up and say, "Thanks," really quietly, because it's the only way he'll know that I'm saying it for real. And when I get to my room, I really do lay down or lie down or whatever, and I close my eyes and I breathe in. There's a little bit of orange smell, but that's okay for right now, because I can just relax and be sick, which is what I'm supposed to be today, I guess. In a couple of days I'll be better, and then I'll have some other problem, but for now I can just enjoy my bed and not feeling so hot like my mom.

ONGOING & SERIES

THE PERSONAL ASSAULT OF LORETTA LANG

Claude Clayton Smith

Stepping from the shower on New Year's Eve, Ms. Loretta Lang arrived at a decision. Since it was New Year's Eve, the decision was a resolution as well. And since December 31st was also her birthday—Loretta Lang had just turned thirty-three—the decision was a gift to herself, a promise in the face of a new decade.

She would take a second lover for the 1980s.

It came, as all decisions do, half consciously, half unconsciously, looming for days—for weeks—on the periphery of things like an old friend standing in the doorway, his shadow large on the wall.

And now, as it presented itself, coming right in to shake hands, as it were, Loretta Lang experienced a rare moment of certainty, as palpable as the red bath towel that she wrapped, turban fashion, about her sleek, dripping hair.

The decision required no comment, no confirmation. It was acknowledged as she had acknowledged the correct listing of her name in the latest edition of the Washington, D.C. telephone directory (L.J. Lang—*Loretta Joy*—the initials signaling a female, Staner had said): quickly, quietly. No big deal.

The bathroom door stood wide open, allowing the steam to escape into the apartment, allowing Loretta Lang to study herself in the full-length mirror on the wall in the hallway. Streaked and misted with a beady dew-like moisture, the mirror nonetheless gave back an image—L.J. Lang, *au naturel*, at thirty-three.

The age at which Christ flew. The Beatles were already well beyond it.

Three had always been her favorite number, long before she learned in Sunday School that it was sacred because of the Blesséd Trinity; long before she learned in psychology class (that is, if Freud knew his stuff) three symbolized the male genitalia.

Thirty-three. Two men. Two lovers in her life against the 1980s, she herself the apex of

that mystical, eternal triangle.

And there was also this about threes—when the page on which you wrote them was tilted to the left, they suddenly became gulls at sea. Aloof. In flight. Free.

Loretta Lang was flying high at thirty-three.

###

The woman in the mirror was on the skinny side of slim, all edges and angles— high cheekbones, a severe jaw, a nose as sharp and straight as it was long. The cords and veins of her neck seemed bent on stridency, spreading as singularly as tree roots into coat-hanger collarbones and shoulders. The plane of her chest was slightly rippled down the middle, a washboard with fried eggs for breasts—breasts that rose like upright thumbs only because the woman's arms were raised, hands clasping a towel to the back of her head, pointy elbows askew, like wings.

In the cooler air of the hallway her nipples constricted—ruddy, puckered, edged like bottlecaps. Tall enough to be a fashion model, with a fashion model's figure, Loretta Lang had long ago made peace with her little bosoms, as Staner called them, although there had been a time, upon first meeting Staner, when she could have sworn that her breasts had begun to grow.

In the flat expanse of the woman's stomach a navel was embedded like a bright pink jewel, a miniature conch in ocean sand, sand the color of oatmeal. This oatmeal skin, Loretta knew, stood in her favor—across her forehead, along her arms, down her back—keeping in check the subtle sallowness of age. In the summer months it tanned rich and quick, without the danger of weathered creases, and in the winter, when everyone was white, Loretta looked—as she did now—as if she had just spent the weekend in Majorca.

The woman's hip bones protruded like gun handles from invisible holsters. Then came the dark, wild burn of her crotch, damp and glistening from the shower.

Turning sideways (still flying, elbows in the air) Loretta could see the only curve in her entire body, where her buttocks reached the backs of her legs. Legs like the stems of wine glasses, Staner had said at first. Then bird's legs. Above feet that were too big, too narrow. Long and thin feet with high arches. Clown's feet?

Knotting the towel behind her head, Loretta faced the mirror again, stepping within inc-

hes of the wall. She set her hands on her hips, sticking to her guns as always, and her breasts slid into place. Then, taking a long breath, she began a deep knee bend, stopping at the bottom of her squat, as her knees—pink from the heat of the shower—turned white, thighs tight, buttocks on her heels.

Straining, face flushed, she held the pose, imagining the carbonated tickle of pink New Year's champagne sipped from a chilled bottle with the lips of her vagina.

###

Loretta Lang had come to Washington a decade earlier to do what she could to end the War. A summa cum laude graduate of Sweet Briar, she was a whiz at languages. Perhaps a genius. Uncle Sam had trained her to translate Vietnamese.

And on those days when the War just wasn't ending, Loretta Lang would do one of two things—go off on a shopping spree for expensive new shoes (the rack in the walk-in closet covered an entire wall) or catch a plane to Majorca, her place in the sun. Her phone would ring and ring for days on end and then postcards would arrive from overseas. *This is heaven*, they'd say. *I am never coming back*.

This she did about six times a year, always returning in several weeks' time, tanned beyond recognition—the Girl from Ipanema. Uncle Sam couldn't fire her because no one was capable of taking her place. There were no other translators at her level in all of Washington.

And so she would return to the documents locked in the bottom drawer of her desk, bringing them home evenings and weekends, spreading them out on the frayed plaid sofa in the living room. The frayed plaid sofa was actually a sofa bed, and Staner was used to sleeping there on those occasions when Loretta declared herself off-limits but was too kind to send him home. Once, he offered to buy her a real sofa but Loretta had sharply refused, reminding him that she was earning, in her own words, *simply oodles*. If she wanted a new sofa, she would buy one.

But there was no evidence of oodles anywhere. Even after the War had ended Loretta kept the apartment in the same ascetic décor, as if in protest because the War had ended so unsatisfactorily. She believed in the Oriental notion that a room ought to contain but a single object—anything more was disrespectful, not only to the object but to the room itself—and so she kept only the frayed plaid sofa in the living room.

A Formica drop-leaf table occupied the dining room, and in the center of the bedroom

stood a huge four-poster with a frilly canopy, a bed that reminded Staner, each time he climbed into it, of George Washington.

A bureau, dressing table, mirror, shoe rack, steamer trunk, pair of ice skates, and box of kitty litter vied for space with Loretta's clothes in the walk-in closet. A room that didn't count as a room.

The walls of the apartment were a plain off-white and held no paintings, no knick-knacks, the floor a maze of unwaxed parquet squares. Only Venetian blinds covered the windows, an appliance-white color that clashed with the walls. The apartment was situated on the corner of the building's top floor, the sun always blazing through one window or another—especially the double glass doors to the balcony—causing a kind of snow-blindness even in summer, and so the cords of the Venetian blinds were permanently drawn to uneven lengths, locking out the light.

The kitchen was for Loretta only. It was there she went to sneak a cigarette, dropping the ashes into any one of a dozen cereal boxes left open on the counter—Rice Krispies, mostly—or into the sink, which was filled to overflowing with cups, bowls, and water that had long ago turned green, the way swimming pools do in autumn. Visitors were not supposed to know that she was out there smoking, despite the thin purple haze that leaked into the living room, or the tart odor of tobacco on her hot breath.

There was a gouge in the plaster just above the front door where the ashtray had struck—the sharp, four-cornered ashtray Staner had lifted from Clyde's in Georgetown and presented to Loretta in all seriousness.

But she didn't need an ashtray because she didn't smoke.

###

When her affair with Staner had grown serious, Loretta took him to meet her parents in Sweet Briar. No one seemed to mind that he was ten years her senior. No one was told that he had two children and a wife. It was in the spring and she showed him the campus.

Mr. Lang fancied himself a country squire of sorts. He ran a small horse farm near the college, supplying horses for Sweet Briar's equestrian program. Tall, gray and reticent, he hardly said a word the entire weekend, busying himself about the stables, filling and refilling his pipe. Mrs. Lang, on the other hand, was talkative, a charitable Christian soul whose hobby was taking in pregnant teenagers, offering free of charge the upstairs

bedroom that Elizabeth had abandoned when she moved across campus to the dorms, and again when she abandoned Sweet Briar for Washington.

The house itself was a hundred years old—ample brick, peaked gables, wooden shutters—all laced with green ivy and vine. The highly polished hardwood floors were original. Out back was a high-walled courtyard where, on Sunday afternoon, a small brunch was held in honor of the visit. Most of the guests were from the college, an academic crew clad in corduroy. Mrs. Lang went about introducing Staner as Sammy, although his name was not Samuel. It wasn't even close. But there he was, Sammy in Sweet Briar.

“Dr. White,” Mrs. Lang said, “this is Sammy, a friend of Loretta. He's in real estate.”

“He's very good,” Loretta added, arriving with a silver tray heaped with turnovers hot from the oven.

“Good at what?” Dr. White wanted to know.

Mrs. Lang turned immediately to a heavy-set woman in a dark dress and shawl.

“Carol, this is Sammy, a friend of Loretta.”

The War had gone away then in Sweet Briar, lost in the rolling green foothills of the Blue Ridge. Staner had never seen Loretta so happy. In Washington she was always jagged and jerky, but in Sweet Briar she was fluid, her prominent cheekbones softened, her severe chin rather subdued. She was no longer harsh but radiant—tall, slender, almost graceful—blonde hair bouncing with her voice. It was the kind of beauty that couldn't sit still.

The weekend had ended with everybody smiling.

Then Loretta learned that she was pregnant and Staner asked her to have an abortion. The only alternative was to return to Sweet Briar and reclaim her childhood bedroom, testing the limits of her mother's charity against her father's taciturnity.

Staner paid for the operation, a thousand bucks. It was done locally, although Elizabeth had imagined a trip to Europe. Had the abortionist resided in Majorca she would have kept the baby for sure. But the pregnancy was terminated not far from where she worked, on a routine office visit. “So cold and mechanical,” Loretta told Staner. “Like breaking a lease, or throwing the garbage out.”

Then of course it was time for Majorca, and when she returned, she lost herself in her work—the War was raging—avoiding Staner for an entire year.

Ironically, Staner worked downtown on I Street, directly across the block from Loretta. She could see his office at a glance from her desk, six steep floors below. And so when she was depressed about the War and went to the window, she always looked down to see Staner. But when she was soaring, on some bit of hope in a document she had just translated, she looked up, over the flat roof of the building where Staner worked, to the Capitol dome and a fluttering American flag.

It scared her that she retained no feeling for the baby. A baby had never been part of her career plans. The War had made having babies a travesty.

###

The naked woman in the mirror rose quickly, knees crackling, and removed a terrycloth robe from the hook on the back of the bathroom door. Then she disappeared into the bedroom, beyond the range of the mirror's scrutiny.

It was seven-thirty. Staner would be there at nine—exactly at nine, more punctual than necessary, as was his habit.

In the ten years she had known him, Loretta had never missed the opening credits of any movie they had seen, not even the previews, if there were any. They arrived at restaurants at the precise hour of their dinner reservation, the couple at their table in the middle of dessert. At parties they often waited alone in the living room while their hosts finished dressing upstairs. Nine o'clock meant nine o'clock to Staner. He took the world at its word. Occasionally, Loretta found the habit refreshing.

In the lotus position on the canopied four-poster, she blew-dry her hair, Venus curled at her feet. Virgo was hiding in the walk-in closet, licking her wounds, the victim of a dachshund's ambush earlier in the day, on the wide front lawn by the circular driveway to the lobby. The dog had come out of nowhere, trailing a leash, and Virgo—the trusting female—had been ravaged.

Staner hated the cats, hated sleeping with them, large lumps under the covers at the foot of the bed. Venus and Virgo—the one so quick and clever, the other dull and slow. Their loose gray hairs clung to the frayed plaid sofa in the living room and went home with Staner on his clothes, sending his wife into unaccountable fits of sneezing. Staner hated the cats because they were so damned independent, condescending to be petted,

to be loved. And yet, for all their aloofness, he found they couldn't resist being stroked behind the ears.

Elizabeth was the same, and Staner didn't know if she got it from the cats or vice versa, but in his mind they had made a pact. In his mind all cats were females and all females were cats. His sympathies, if he had any, lay with Virgo, simply because she was so dumb.

One winter evening, in a moment of malice, he had tied Loretta's woolen scarf around Venus' belly, causing her to lose control of her hind legs. As she strutted across the living room with her nose in the air, her ass jackknifed, rolling her over with a plaintive meow. Loretta rushed in from the kitchen in a cloud of purple smoke and threw open the sofa bed. Then she disappeared down the hall to the bedroom, Venus tucked under her arm.

"Love me," she had cried, "love my *cats!*"

And one hot summer night when the air-conditioning was broken and the odor from the walk-in closet had become unbearable, Staner decided to toilet-train the cats, taping newspaper across the toilet seat and sprinkling it with kitty litter. Venus caught on but Virgo was hopeless. Some lessons, Staner had concluded, were just too difficult to learn.

Both cats had been "fixed" right after Loretta's abortion.

Now Venus leaped from the bed as Loretta finished her hair and followed her into the walk-in closet. Virgo was on the end of the top shelf, tucked in an old sweater behind the ice skates. Leaping first to the steamer trunk, Venus joined her. Loretta put on a red plastic raincoat over her terrycloth robe and stuck her feet into a pair of furry slippers.

Grabbing the keys from the kitchen counter, she took the elevator down to the laundry room.

A foul odor of cigar smoke filtered through the basement, despite several red NO SMOKING signs with letters inches high. The smell seemed to come from the bottom of the stairwell, around the corner from the elevator shaft. Loretta hurried toward the familiar ka-chunk ka-chunk of clothes tumbling in the long line of dryers.

She loved the laundry room, its excessive warmth, its frenetic sense of purpose. Even

on New Year's Eve it was alive with mechanical activity, rushing headlong into the future with the endless business of people's dirty sheets, pillow cases, clothes. Often, she brought the cats downstairs with her, reading novels or writing letters while Venus and Virgo slunk about the machines or stretched out on the overhead pipes. Dusty and heavily wrapped with a bandage-like insulation, the pipes ran the entire length of the cinderblock walls.

Empty baskets, both plastic and wicker, cluttered the gray cement floor, vibrated on the washers to the right. The cardboard grocery box by the door served as a receptacle for lint—fluffy, matted lint from the dryers; wet, clinging lint from the washers. The box as well held a dozen abandoned socks, no two the same size or color, a white towel with a blue stripe, several pairs of boxer shorts, a sleeveless undershirt, pink panties, a bra.

The only other person in the room was a young mother Loretta had seen there for the first time that afternoon. She had let her daughter, no older than three, pour the detergent into the washer and the child had dumped in too much, causing the washer to overflow with soap suds, millions of small bubbles billowing right out of the shut top of the machine like some strange creature from a science fiction movie.

“Mommie!” the woman's daughter had screamed. “Mommie, go get the man! Please, Mommie, go get the *man!*”

Loretta had ignored them, recoiling at the assumption so firmly set in the little girl's mind—that there was always a man to make things all better. Always some man to run to.

The young mother, still in blue jeans and sweatshirt but without her daughter now, didn't recognize Loretta from the afternoon crisis. Kneeling before the dryer in the middle of the row, she was pulling out clothes, hand over hand, stuffing them into the basket beside her.

Her laundry, Loretta noticed, was all female, in two distinct sizes—adult and child's.

“I'm going to be late!” the young mother fussed. “I wasted half the day waiting in line for gas. Damn Arabs!” She looked up at Loretta as if expecting a reply.

“I don't have a car,” Loretta stated flatly. Opening the door to the dryer at the end of the row, she removed her black knit pants suit. She was amazed, taking stock of the few new things she had bought during the year, how many of them were black.

“My God, how do you manage?”

“I walk,” Loretta said. “Or take a cab. The bus stops right out front and takes me downtown to work. Living in this building you don’t *need* a car. There’s a grocery and a pharmacy in the Mini-Mall. Even a bank. And then, of course, here we are in the laundry room.”

She didn’t know why she was talking so much. Perhaps she wanted to convince the young mother that it would be possible to survive the 1980s—as well as the current gas crunch—without owning a car. Without running to the *man*.

“You can live here,” she concluded, “without ever going out.”

“I wish it was that easy.”

Suddenly the cigar odor was stronger than ever, riding in on a blast of cold air. Someone had opened the door at the bottom of the stairwell.

“It’s as easy as you make it,” Loretta said, folding her pants suit over her arm.

She hurried out. There was no one in the hall, but as she passed the door to the stairwell, someone ascended the steps quickly, as if startled.

“THE PERSONAL ASSAULT OF LORETTA LANG”
will be continued in the February issue
of *Icarus Down Review*. Stay tuned!

The Easy Lovin' Blues

Evan Guilford-Blake

She can hear them rehearsing in the apartment directly above hers, the singer and the trumpeter.

"I got the easy-lovin' blues, Those easy-lovin' blues," she sings, while he travels up and down the chords in long, legato lines, the notes a little unevenly blown but played with the same aching heart feel the words convey. *"I fall in love on Monday, Come the weekend I feel used, 'Cause all the things he said, Whispered in my bed, They just led to the blues. I'm singin' the blues,"* she goes on, her voice deep and dark as the song itself.

In her third-floor apartment Naurean tries to listen to the old phonograph that's playing "Serenade in Blue," the volume high to cover the din upstairs, and she revisits The War, the bands, the days and, especially, the nights of her girlhood. Now she smiles as she watches the young girl in a white silk dress, in the embrace of a tall, dark-haired young man in a dark blue suit; they dance together in wide arcs around the room.

"My Mama always wanted me t' be a dancer," she tells the couple, dreamily. *"When I was a little girl she would take me to Danceland at all hours, and we'd watch the girls swoop 'cross the floor, graceful as swans, the boys whirlin' them so their pretty dresses fluttered. She never danced; not there, anyhow—she couldn't, what with her leg and all—but she did at home, with me. That's how I learned: 'Naurean, you got to learn,' she said, 'a girl's only really alive when she's dancin'.' So I learned. And when I did?—I was aleven—she was so proud. That summer? she picked out a boy for me—Jim was his name—and she stood watchin' with this look of complete rapture 'cross her face as though bein' with Jim made me the most beautiful thing that ever walked upon the earth."*

The voice in the hall disrupts her reverie.

"Mrs. Rossell?" it bellows. "Hey!"

The young couple fades from sight.

“What?” she whispers, watching them disappear.

“Turn that record down!” the fiery voice commands. “People’re tryin’ t’ sleep ... Mrs. Rossell! Naurean Rossell?”

“What?” she calls. “You gone deaf or somethin’?” the voice says, and its owner raps sharply on Naurean’s door. “C’n you hear me? I said turn that record down. It’s past nine o’clock at night! Decent people’re sleepin’ this hour.”

She stands up and goes to the phonograph, calling “I’m sorry, Mrs. Andrews. Is that better?” but before Mrs. Andrews can answer, she hears another voice at the door—“I’ll do it, Gretchen. Leave her alone.”—and the turning of the brass doorknob—“Oh, *you’re* home,” Mrs. Andrews says—and then Amanda opens the door and stands there, facing the dragon.

“Yes, Gretchen,” she says, “*I’m* home. Now you c’n go home too.” Mrs. Andrews—Gretchen—snorts. “A’ right,” she mutters—her slippers flip-flop two doors down the uncarpeted hall—“Just, you tell ’er t’ *keep* that noise down. Decent people’re—”

“—tryin’ t’ sleep” Amanda says with her, and sighs. “I know, I know. G’d evenin’, Gretchen.” She steps into the apartment, closes the door behind her and leans against it.

“She is such a...” says Naurean. She turns off the record player and stands, shaking her head, exasperatedly running through the things she should have said while Mrs. Andrews was still close enough that she might have heard them.

“I know, I know,” Amanda says. She comes in and drops her sweater, bookbag and pocketbook on an end table. “Sorry I’m s’ late; I, um—it was so busy, all day, I was six cents off so I had t’ stay late t’ balance the drawer. I, um, I didn’t have time for supper before class so I stopped for some after. I was so hungry. Then I decided t’ —”

“*Wretch*-en,” announces Naurean. “That ought t’ be her name.” She laughs with satisfaction at having de-fired the dragon. “How was work?”

Amanda sighs. “Oh, work is just fine and dandy, Mama. You *know* I just love smilin’ and gettin’ pinched and givin’ other people money eight hours ev’ry day.” She sits on the sofa and takes off her shoes. The heels aren’t really high, but she’s been wearing them since eight in the morning and her feet are killing her. *Someday* she’s gonna remember to take a pair of sneakers.

“Well,” says Naurean, cheerfully, “It’s only for a little while longer.”

“Mm,” Amanda replies noncommittally.

“It *is* only for a little longer. You’ll finish up your course, you’ll get yourself a *good* job, executive secr’tary or somethin’. Everything’ll change.”

Amanda snorts. “I’ll get t’ sit in ’n office all day ’stead a standin’ in the bank. The only thing that’ll change is where I’m gettin’ pinched.”

“Or somethin’. I said ‘or somethin’.’” Naurean sits in the stuffed chair across from her daughter and straightens the carefully polished coffee table, which is already in perfect order, restored to its position and shined with Pledge after the students—and their fingerprints—left. “You got all kinds ’f potential; I expect you c’d work your way up t’ one of those adminastrative assistant positions. That’s where you’ll meet the really—I mean, those are the really good jobs. Responsible.”

“Mm.” Amanda leans against the back of the sofa and tucks her feet under her, rubbing one, then the other. “I, I was thinkin’ t’day? Maybe I c’d, I don’t know, work in a nightclub or somethin’.”

“A nightclub?” Naurean says. “Now what put *that* idea in your head?”

Amanda shrugs. “I don’t know.—It’d be more excitin’ than a bank, anyway.”

“Well!”

Amanda reaches into her bag and takes out the brightly colored brochure she stuck in her accounting text, and opens it. It shows faraway places, exotic structures: the Riviera, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the pyramids. “Or, maybe one of those travel places,” she says, and offers the flyer to Naurean who nods at it a moment, then refolds it and lays it on the table between them. “This girl at the bank?” Amanda goes on, “her sister’s at one and she gets t’ fly, all over the world practic’ly f’r free. See ev’rything.” She picks up the brochure, notices the Eiffel Tower has a smudge, probably from when they were lookin’ at it during supper. She puts the flyer in her pocketbook. “Well,” she says, “that’s just a dream.”

Naurean sits beside her on the sofa and gives her a big hug. “You shouldn’t be so negative, Mandy. You got to think good things’ll happen in order t’ make them happen.” She smiles.

“Yeah. I’m always *thinkin’* good things’re gonna happen, but ...” She hugs Naurean back. “You seem t’ be in ’n awful good mood.”

“Oh, I am,” Naurean says, and sits up and claps her hands. “I had five students t’day, two of them new, little girls, and you know what?” — she leans forward and lowers her voice, confidentially — “One ’f them, she was brought in by this young man, her uncle, such a nice young gentleman, and he’s a professional dancer, travels all over, said he heard about me and told his brother *I* was the one who ought t’ be teachin’ Lynn Ann — that’s her name, the little girl, his niece? And the uncle — he was such a nice young gentleman.” She laughs. “He actually asked me t’ dance with him. *Insisted.*”

“He did?” Amanda says, not meaning to sound incredulous.

Naurean sniffs. Amanda — who is twenty — thinks her mother is old — too old that a “nice young *gentleman*” would ask her to dance. Much less *insist*. “You don’t need to act so surprised.”

“Mama, I just ...” Amanda says, and shrugs.

Naurean smiles and laughs. Well, yes, Mandy would think that. When she was twenty she would have thought that about her mama, too. “Anyway,” she says, “I said — fin’ly — I said I would.” She looks away, remembering: such a nice young man. It was like when she was a girl, and all the young men wanted to dance with her, and she’d float about the dance floor in her dress, white silk — *moiré*; nearly transparent under the bright lights — and lace; and her hair: done up with pearls. And a tiara, as a matter of fact. Gold — white gold, to go with the pearls. It had been so lovely. She had been so lovely. And she can be again. She’s tiny — small people don’t show their age the way bigger ones do — she doesn’t weigh an ounce more than she did then, her skin still glows, and there aren’t any lines on her face, practically. Life wasn’t just remembering, not just the past. Such wonderful words: *Would you care to dance with me?* She sighs. “I most definitely would,” she says quietly.

“Oh?” She looks back at Amanda, recalls the conversation. “Oh, not in front of the *stu-* dents, of course. But he was practic’ly pleadin’. *And* he paid for Lynn Ann in advance. For three weeks. She’s gonna come ev’ry Friday.” She reaches into her pocket and takes out neatly folded money, a thick packet of mostly dollar bills.

“Well, that’s good,” says Amanda. “When you goin’?”

Naurean laughs. “Oh, we’re not *going*. Out, I mean. He’s comin’ over here. T’morrow

night.” She hesitates. “I—I thought it would be ...easier.”

“Mm.” Amanda rouses herself and hangs her sweater in the front closet. “Well,” she says, “I s’pose I can go t’ the movies.”

“You don’t have t’ go anyplace. We’re just gonna dance one ’r two dances, then maybe talk a little while.” Naurean puts the money into her coin purse and tucks that away.

Amanda takes the barrette out of her hair and shakes it out. She has beautiful hair, it falls over her shoulders, strawberry blond. “Mama, I don’t think a man wants t’ come over on a Saturday night f’r one ’r two dances and a little talk.” She gets her brush from her purse and begins to brush her hair.

“Let me do that?” says Naurean. “I can do—” she begins, then nods her head and smiles. Mama loves to brush her hair. She hands Naurean the brush and sits with her back to her.

Naurean draws it carefully through the lush brilliance: so much like her own, when she was Mandy’s age. Oh, how men admired it! “Now, what would you know about what men want t’ do?” she asks coyly.

“Oh, I hear all sorts a things ’bout it, from the girls at the bank.” She mutters: “The boys, too.”

“And when’re you gonna start finding out for yourself?” Amanda turns and grins. “Prob’ly ’bout the same time you start gettin’ gray hairs.” Naurean laughs—she just likes to keep her hair lookin’ pretty, that’s all, and gray just isn’t a pretty color—and Amanda turns back. “Anybody else pay you?” she asks.

“Mrs. Doyle gave me six dollars toward Stevie.” She resumes brushing.

“Mm. So now she’s only five weeks behind.”

“No,” corrects Naurean, “just three. It was five, includin’ today’s, but now it’s only three.”

“Mama, you need to make her stay up to date. All of them.”

“I know, Mandy.” She sighs and holds the brush in her lap; “but I can’t just turn them o-

ut. 'Specially Stevie. He's just about the only little *boy* I have."

"Yes, you can. We got bills too. And I'm not gettin' a raise till the spring."

"Well, I'll talk to her. *All* of them."

"Mm." Amanda gets up, takes the brush and kisses Naurean's head. "Thanks, Mama," she says. "I'm gonna change."

"You goin' somewhere?" Naurean asks hopefully.

"Not unless the bathtub counts," Amanda says en route to the bathroom.

"Y' know, it *is* Friday night."

"I know." She stops at the door and turns back in. "We have this conversation *ev'ry* Friday night."

"We wouldn't, if you ever went somewhere."

"Mama!" Amanda says, and turns on the bathtub.

"Yes?" replies Naurean, in perfect innocence.

"Don't you start up on that. 'Sides, you never go anywhere either."

"Well, *I'm*—not a girl any more." Naurean sighs. What's to become of Amanda? She's so bright, so pretty. And so like a ...hermit. *That's gotta come from her Daddy's side.* "Anyway, I used to. It's not normal, Mandy, a girl your age never goin' anywhere. I worry about you, what's gonna happen if *I*, I mean ... I—"

"I know what you mean, Mama," Amanda says. "I'm closin' the door now."

"—mean, my goodness," Naurean continues, "here you are already twenty; how're you gonna *meet* a—anyone? I used t' have lots of friends when I was twenty. Boys *and* girls. And, and, why, when I was your age I went—"

"—dancin' ev'ry night" Amanda says, in perfect unison, then adds: "I know, I know."

The bathroom door closes, all but the crack to let the steam out. Amanda settles into the

hot water and closes her eyes. This is where she can dream a little, everything's a little gauzy from the steam and she looks at things the way *she* wants to see them. She can remember, things like supper tonight, and maybe even imagine goin' to one of those places in the brochure. Together. That'd be nice, they'd ride in—

Naurean calls: "Well I did!" Then she walks to the bathroom, stands by the door and goes on. "It was my duty, those boys, they needed someone to dance with them. The world was comin' apart, I was just a nice little ...flower, *planted*, right there, in the middle of it..."

She hears Amanda's quiet "Oh, Mama" and walks back to the living room, sits on the sofa, and looks at her picture, framed on the mantel. She's nineteen in it, at Danceland in her white silk dress, with such a nice young man in a dark suit—navy, she recalls—at her side. "I look so pretty," she murmurs, "like a flower," and she smiles as she watches the girl in the photograph step forth from it. "One of them told me that," she tells the girl, who smiles at her as the tall, dark young man steps out of the picture as well—now wearing neatly pressed, perfectly creased khakis—and music starts to play. He takes her into his arms and they begin to dance.

"*Jim, his name was,*" she remembers aloud. "*'You're a flower,' he said. And he smiled at me like a young gentleman would smile at a flower. At first. Then—then he smiled like a young gentleman would smile at a, I don't know, exactly, at a chorus of dancin' girls, I guess, that sly, slick sort of smile that looked so dashin' with his uniform. All the girls at the USO wanted t' dance with him, the minute he came in we all started talkin'.*" She giggles. "*Even me. He was so handsome. When he came up t' me and asked me t' dance? I blushed. Honest to Pete I did. But he danced so well, from the very start I could close my eye, and it felt like we were some place else, someplace wonderful. I fell in love with him, that very first dance, b'cause—*" She looks at the dancing couple. There is a white flower pinned on the young man's uniform, over the breast pocket, a white rose in fact, that she's never noticed! "*Because he had a flower on his shirt, this beautiful little white rose, and while we were dancin' he stopped and he took it off and he gave it to me. And then he smiled again, and he said: 'Naurean, you are a wonderful partner.' And I said: 'You mean, a dancin' partner?' And he said: 'I mean, a partner. For dancing, and for always.'*"

She watches; at last, the couple dances away and the music fades. "And three days later we got married," she murmurs, "and two days after that he was sent to the war ... And I never saw him again. And then nine months later..." She shakes her head and picks up the photograph. *We looked so handsome together, Jim and me.* "A white rose," she says softly. "Right over his breast."

“He was wearin’ a *white* rose?” says Amanda, standing behind her in a white robe.

“Hm? Oh, I didn’t know you were—yes,” Naurean says, “he did.”

Amanda pats her face with a towel. “Hnh. You never told me that. About the flower.”

Naurean laughs, an easy laugh. “I didn’t?” she says, as a trumpet begins to lilt in long, mournful phrases above them. “Well, silly me. It was only the highlight of my twenty-first year.”

“Mm,” says Amanda, and looks up.

“He was such a gentleman,” Naurean says and shakes her head slowly, then notices Mandy staring at the ceiling. “Trumpy better be quiet or Gretchen’ll be after him. Though I suppose she can’t hear him like we do. She prob’ly can’t hear *him* at all. I mean, the way she fawns in the hall whenever he’s goin’ upstairs. You’d think he was Loo-is Armstrong, somebody like that.” She gets her account book from the desk drawer, opens it and begins to note the day’s payments. “And *her*—she must think she’s some kinda royalty, the way she carries on. ‘*Lady-blue.*’ Hmp. Been here not even a month and she acts like she owns the place.” She turns to Amanda who’s in the stuffed chair, her eyes closed, and smiling. “This mornin’? She was sittin’ right in the *middle* of the steps when I got back from the groc’ry and I asked her, very nicely, to please move so I could get by? And *she* said? She said—”

“Oh, well,” Amanda says, “they’ll be leavin’ in a little while.”

“—somethin’ *awful*, I can’t even—Leavin’? They are?”

“Goin’ out. They’re startin’ another job. For a month this time.”

“Well!” says Naurean.

The trumpet switches to bop scales, quick staccato runs up and down. Amanda gets up and starts toward her room. “Some little club. The Paradise Café it’s called.”

“When’d you find all this out?”

Amanda stops. “Oh,” she says, “I—, um, he was just—um, comin’ into the bank t’day. Just ’s I was goin’ out. T’ lunch.”

“You *talked* t’ him?”

“Of course I *talked* t’ him, Mama.” Amanda sighs. “I talk t’ him all the time.—He’s ni—not so bad.”

Naurean returns to her account book, displeased. “Well,” she says, “You just be careful.”

“I *am* careful, Mama.” Amanda opens her door.

“Well,” Naurean says again, with a note of forgiveness.

“I’m real careful. I’m a big girl, Mama. I been takin’ care ’f myself for a long time now.”

“I know.” She puts the pen down and looks at her daughter. *The spittin’ image*, she thinks. The spittin’ image smiles. “I just, I love you so much,” Naurean says.

“I love you too, Mama,” Amanda answers. They smile at each other a long moment, then she steps into her room.

“The East Lovin’ Blues” will be continued in the February issue of *Icarus Down Review*. Stay tuned!

The Story You Choose to Tell

Karen Levy

Benny 1960

All flights to the Dominican Republic landed in the capital, Ciudad Trujillo, named after the country's criminal dictator, Raphael Trujillo, who would soon be assassinated. The capital was on the south side of the island. From there, Benny took a bus to the town of Sosua, on the north coast. It was an all-day trip, even though the distance was only 120 miles.

After his long flight from Chicago, he was not prepared for the travel conditions; the bus was not air-conditioned and it followed a route that was mostly dirt and rock.

“No wonder Pops never talked about this place,” Benny said aloud to himself, struggling to fit his long legs under the seat in front of him. His jeans were new and the heavy fabric already made him sweat. He was uncomfortable but excited about his travels.

The woman across the aisle leaned over with a smile and offered him a hard-boiled egg. She looked to be about his mother's age, with the same gentle wrinkles around her eyes. Her skin was a dark and her hair was set in rollers with a black net tied over and knotted in back. Benny's mother would never leave the house in rollers.

The eggs that the woman offered him were brown and wrapped in a dish towel. She spoke to him in Spanish and he smiled back at her and shook his head. “Gracias,” he said, the only Spanish he could remember. He'd practiced all the important words and phrases on the plane ride over but now they were gone. The woman nodded at the eggs again and then settled into her seat to peel one for herself.

Benny went through his backpack twice, searching for his Spanish phrasebook and finally remembered leaving it on the plane. When he turned back to the lady with the eggs, she was asleep with the dishtowel in her lap.

He dropped his backpack on the seat beside him. He was traveling alone. He pushed aside the floral house curtains that kept out the sun, and looked out the window.

The bus moved slowly as it maneuvered the pot-holed route. From where he sat he could see brightly colored shacks along the way, made of scrap wood and corrugated-iron. All of them had outhouses. Naked children stood in doorways and women walked barefoot with plastic water containers on their heads. The bus hit a bump, and Benny bounced with it, hitting his head on the ceiling. Rubbing the knot that was forming, he swore softly to himself.

And he'd been born here.

None of the shacks along the road had glass in their windows frames; they were all either shuttered dark or they gapped open to let in the sun. Through the open window frames and doorways he could see living rooms so small that the occupants' feet stuck out onto the front porches as they lay on their sofas inside.

He imagined his father back home in the States, always so proud to say, *My son is an American citizen!* in his heavy German accent. Now Benny understood why. For a moment, he felt the shiver of embarrassment that his father must have felt raising his family here, in a place where people threw their laundry to dry on bushes for everyone to know the color of their underwear.

And yet earlier this year, when news of U.S. involvement in Vietnam first appeared in the Chicago papers, Benny's father had not shown any loyalty toward the States.

"I will not allow you to be drafted! America wouldn't take us in during wartime!" his father said.

It was true; the States had denied his parents entry during the Second World War. That was why Benny had been born here, in the Dominican Republic, in the town of Sosua, after his parents escaped Nazi Germany.

"Almost all Americans who fought in the War were drafted," his father lectured. "It's going to be the same with Vietnam." He was certain about another war. The U.S. Special Forces were already actively training the Vietnamese civil guard. The Soviet Union was already airlifting supplies to the enemy.

"You will not fight for America!"

The Chicago newspapers posted photographs of Vietnam's rice fields and its people working under a hot sun. From his bus window, Benny could see that the Dominican Republic, which shared the same latitude, had a similar look: vast green fields of rice with workers hidden under brimmed hats. The only difference was the color of the workers' skin.

But once the U.S. opened their doors after World War Two, Benny's father was quick to bring his family there. And this country, the one that had offered them a home during the Holocaust, he'd made them leave when Benny was a child.

His father's blue eyes always turned dark when he spoke about the Dominican Republic. It frightened and fascinated Benny that there was some mystery about this place. His father never offered any details.

"We were not prepared," was all he'd say.

Whatever had happened, Benny would have to find out on his own. His father said that there was no reason to come here, except to escape the draft, but Benny knew he was wrong. There was something here about his family's past that he needed to uncover.

Looking out his bus window at the young women who stood barefoot in the doorways, he couldn't help but notice that all of them were surrounded by children – two, three, four. He thought about his younger sister, Margaret. She would be eighteen now, probably with a couple of kids of her own. His parents never spoke about her and they would never say why they'd left her behind in Sosua when she was five years old.

Benny drank down the last of the Coca Cola he'd bought at the airport in Ciudad Trujillo. It was sweet and warm, a reminder of why he was here: he'd come to find his sister. This was the first decision he'd really made on his own and he was excited by the certainty of success and adventure.

The bus slowed at the entrance to every small town along the route. Each was marked by a speed bump so high that Benny could feel the scrape of the bus bottom as they maneuvered over it. There was always a checkpoint at the side of the road with a lean-to and an armed guard. At the first town, the guard was kicked back in the shade, his rifle slack in his sleepy hands, but at the second town, the uniformed man was alert. He jumped onto the slow-moving bus with his gun at the ready. Benny leaned into the aisle to watch as the man spoke with the driver in a loud voice.

The bus fell silent. Benny sensed that the other passengers were afraid. He wondered if

there was a criminal on board. He'd noticed a group of men up front passing a bottle of rum around since early morning. Could that be an offense? Even so, it wouldn't explain why everyone was so still. The uniformed man started moving down the aisle, demanding identification from the passengers. Benny watched. The man caught his eye. Benny pulled back into his seat, but the officer was right there beside him, and the size and weight of his rifle was startling. Benny had never been so close to a gun before.

“*Porque tu me miras, why you looking at me?*” the man demanded. He came close to Benny's face. His breath was hot and sour. “Eh? *Dimelo!* Tell me!”

Benny lowered his eyes and shook his head. “*Dimelo!*” the man shouted. He lifted his rifle and brought the butt down hard on Benny's shoulder.

He winced at the pain.

“*Americano, es Americano!*” The woman with the eggs cried, suddenly awake.

The guard spun around to face her. “*Como dijiste? What did you say?*” he yelled. Benny didn't want anything to happen to her. He pulled out his passport and stood up to hand it to the officer.

“Sir...”

The officer spun back around and recoiled in shock at Benny's height. At six foot five, he towered over the man. The officer took his passport and made a show of going through the pages before pushing it back at Benny and returning to the front of the bus.

As soon as he got off, a group of boys quickly surrounded the bus, selling plastic baggies of water and handfuls of cashews warm from roasting. The passengers leaned out their windows to make their purchases. Benny was still in shock at the unexpected cruelty. People laughed and joked and the bus picked up speed. They left the uniformed man with the gun behind.

He turned to the woman with the eggs and she smiled.

“*Ta bien,*” she said. She reached across the aisle and let her hand rest on his wrist. “*Todo ta bien,*” she said.

Benny knew that things weren't okay but he liked the warmth of her hand. She reminded him of his mother, except for the rollers, and of course her skin was much darker. Re-

ally there was no resemblance between them at all; it was just that Benny missed his mother. She had recently died.

The woman was telling him a story now and her Spanish was calming. Benny didn't understand her, but he was soothed by her words. They left the town behind, and although the rocking of the bus was not gentle, Benny fell asleep.

###

He woke up to find the woman's seat empty and the last few eggs left in his lap.

The dozen remaining passengers were all sitting up front and singing along to the radio. One man was dancing in the aisle. Benny listened to their song and the melody seemed familiar. He stood up to stretch and the dancing man waved him over.

“*Eh, mi hermano, ven acá.*” Come join us.

They asked him where he was from, and commented on his height and invited him to drink from their bottle of rum. Benny took deep swigs as they passed the bottle around again. He hummed along.

Now they were close to Sosua. The road followed the Atlantic here, offering shiny glimpses of dark water through the trees. The passengers' voices rose and the bottle of rum was finished off and left under a seat.

Benny was happy in the company of his new friends and a little dizzy from the heat and the rum, when the bus stopped.

“Sosua,” the driver said, and everyone stood and grabbed their belongings.

He got off with the others and was surprised at how much taller he was than any of them. They said their goodbyes like old friends. One or two asked if he had a place to stay. He didn't really understand, and said *si*, yes - the word he was most comfortable with, and so they left; some with waiting family members, others hopping onto the backs of motorcycles that would take them to their final destinations.

Benny stood alone in the street with his heavy backpack. Nothing looked familiar but the town was picturesque, with wooden homes and shops in faded pinks and yellows and oranges. It was early evening. Across the street a group of men were gathered around a table watching four others play a game of dominos. Their voices were loud

and the slap of the tiles even louder. Two boys chased each other down the middle of the street. A dog without a tail yawned behind him. An Atlantic breeze came by, quick, inviting and strangely familiar.

He saw a bar that opened onto the main street, filled with old men, young women and loud music. Chairs spilled onto the sidewalk and the fading brightness of the day contrasted with the interior which was already shadowy and alluring. As soon as Benny stepped inside, he was greeted by two women about his age who led him to the bar and seated themselves on either side of him. Both had coffee-colored skin and wonderfully curvaceous bodies. One wore her dark hair long and straight, tossing it back over her shoulder, the other wore hers bobbed.

“*Cerveza?*” one asked him. He knew the word and nodded, dropping his backpack. A frosty bottle of beer wrapped in a paper napkin appeared instantly, then one for each of the ladies. It was cold and went down easily.

The women didn’t speak English, - they carried on a lively conversation with each other in Spanish, nodding toward Benny and smiling. He smiled back, understanding a word here and there.

“*Me gusta su pelo rojo.* I like his red hair.”

“*Americano, no?* He’s American, right?”

“Of course! *Claro que si!*”

Holding up their empty bottles, they asked him, “*Quieres otra cervasa,* you want another?”

Benny nodded, and then lost himself in the cleavage of the bobbed woman who laughed and leaned toward him invitingly. The bartender passed another round of beers.

###

Benny woke the next morning relieved to see that his wallet was still full of American dollars and that he had slept alone in his bed. He looked around the small room, slow to remember how he got there. His backpack stood in the corner. He took the stairs down to the street. Dazed by the sunlight, he shaded his eyes to read the sign overhead: *Hotel Sinai*. He realized that he was on the main strip, and the bar he’d been drinking in last night was right across the street. He recognized the bartender, a woman with a broom in

her hand, who waved to him from the sidewalk in front of the bar. He waved back. He was assured by her friendly greeting that he hadn't done anything he might regret in a small town.

His plan for the day was to start the search for his sister: but coffee first. He crossed over toward the bar. The woman with the broom stopped sweeping.

“Coffee?” he asked her.

She pointed him down the street to a tiny storefront.

He followed her finger to a green awning. “*Gracias.*”

She smiled and returned to her sweeping.

Inside the shop with the green awning, there was one table and a counter in the back.

The place was empty.

“*Hola,*” he called, remembering the Spanish greeting.

A man appeared from the back, the shop owner.

“*Saludo,*” he said in greeting. His skin was a dark brown. He had an afro of kinky hair. “*Americano?*” he asked.

“Yes, *si, Americano,*” Benny said, pointing to himself.

“*Dimelo.*” The word sounded familiar but Benny wasn't sure.

“Coffee, uh - *café, por favor.*”

“*Sientate.*” The shop owner pointed to a chair and then he stepped into the back of his shop to make the coffee. Benny sat down at the single wooden table that took up most of the space inside. There was no fan. The air was so hot that the sweat beaded up on his face even as he sat still.

Two young men, around Benny's age, entered, dressed for construction work. They nodded to him and one said something in greeting. Benny managed a ‘Good Morning,’ and then realized that he had spoken in English. He ducked his head. The two men wai-

ted for the owner to come back up front. They ordered *batidas* and *empanadas* and then sat down at the table with Benny. They nodded to him and then talked between themselves, their words fast and fluid. Benny thought he heard the word ‘*vagina*’ but it could have been ‘*va llena*’ which he was sure was something Spanish, and more polite to say at breakfast.

The fruit shakes and coffee and *empanadas* arrived and all three men fell silent as they enjoyed their meal. The coffee was served black and very sweet. At first, Benny was disappointed. He liked his coffee ‘regular,’ which wasn’t regular over here. Back home he always drank it the same way: with milk and two sugars. He cleared his throat to complain but no one came to help him, so he just settled for drinking it, which proved to be the right thing; it was delicious just the way it was.

The fruit shakes that the two men drank were served in tall paper cups and were thick as milk shakes. One was orange and smelled like Thanksgiving - the other looked like vanilla icecream. Benny made a mental note to try one soon. He wanted to ask the men if they were from the area, if they knew Margaret, his sister. Maybe he even looked like her, but he didn’t know how to start, or what words to use. He watched as they bit into the flaky pastries, the *empanadas*, wondering what they were filled with.

A uniformed man with a rifle walked past the open storefront. He turned and caught Benny’s eye and then he entered the shop. Benny froze. He recognized the gun. The two men at the table stopped chewing as the officer approached.

“*Buen provecho,*” the officer said in greeting and he stared at Benny.

Benny put down his coffee cup. Only one day in the country and he’d already become a target.

The officer came closer. He stood right beside Benny, his hand on his rifle. Benny placed both of his hands on the table, ready to defend himself this time. He knew when he’d arrived that the country was run by a dictator, but the reality of life under a dictatorship was just now becoming clear. Anything could happen.

“*Que pelo, eh?*” the officer asked no one in particular. He laughed.

Benny wondered if the two men at the table would be of any help to him. He wondered why he was the target.

The two men at the table laughed along with the officer. Benny felt the hairs on his arms

The owner came out from the back of the shop and stood at the counter.

“*Hay un problema, officer?* Is there a problem?” he asked, keeping his distance. Benny’s heartbeat was loud in his ears.

The officer stopped laughing. “*No, no hay problema, primo,*” he answered. He stared at Benny and smiled. He was missing a front tooth and his eyes were strangely friendly.

He turned and left the shop.

There was a moment of silence and then one of the workers winked at Benny and said, “*A el le gusta tu pelo, primo,*” and he laughed from someplace deep in his belly.

Benny didn’t understand.

The owner came over. “*Tu pelo,*” he said, pointing to Benny’s hair.

All three men stared at his hair which fell past his shoulders and was a deep red color. Benny smiled; he understood. “*Pelo,*” he said, pointing to his own hair. He’d forgotten how different he looked from everyone else. The other men all had dark, kinky afros.

“*Todo ta bien?*” the owner asked him, using the same words as the lady with the eggs. Benny nodded. So the officer hadn’t come into the shop to threaten him after all.

The two workers finished their empanadas. “*Adios,*” they said, and left two small piles of *empanada* crumbs behind.

Benny stood and paid for his coffee. The shop owner waved him goodbye.

It was still early and already very hot. He hugged the buildings as he walked, to stay in the shade. He wished that he understood what was going on around him. He’d have to work harder on his Spanish but one thing was clear, men here carried guns and could use them at any time.

The sidewalks were uneven and at the corner, he had to step into the street because a fruit stand with a cluster of customers took up the space. There were bananas and mangos and pineapples, and some unfamiliar fruits, too – more fresh fruit than Benny had never seen. The vendor was peeling and blending the fruits into shakes, his blender connected to an extension cord that ran across the sidewalk and into the corner shop, where a radio played loud merengue music onto the street. Benny stopped to watch.

The process was slow. The vendor greeted each customer and after a long discussion, started in on their order. No one seemed to be in a hurry. Everyone waited patiently, moving their hips to the music and chatting with others on line. It wasn't even a line, more of a cluster of people who pushed forward but never seemed to get to the front.

Benny looked at the fruits. One was oblong and covered in a brown, fuzzy coat. He watched as the vendor peeled it to expose a bright orange interior with a shiny oblong pit. He scooped the fruit into the blender and mixed it with Carnation Milk. The customer sighed with pleasure as he drank his shake. He caught Benny's eye and spoke to him in English,

“Hello, are you from U.S.?”

Benny was so surprised to be addressed in English that it took a moment for him to respond. Before he did, the man spoke again.

“You don't understand my English?”

“No, no,” said Benny, “I mean, yes, yes, I do understand. What is that you're drinking?”

His new friend ordered him one of his own, a batida de zapote. The color and flavor were reminiscent of yam or pumpkin; it must have been the same drink from the coffee shop. It was wonderful; thick and smooth, sweet and creamy and cold, comforting and somehow familiar. He was enchanted by the shake, and Sosua started to take on new color and flavor for him.

With his new beverage and his new friend, who introduced himself as Nestor, Benny started to enjoy the heat and the otherness of his surroundings. So steeped in the simple pleasures of the moment, he'd forgotten until now to ask about Margaret.

“I'm looking for my sister,” he told his friend.

“Where is she?” Nestor asked.

“Here, in Sosua.”

“She ran from you?” he asked with a smile.

“No, we ran away from her.” Nestor looked confused; he didn't understand. But then,

neither did Benny.

“My sister,” Benny tried again, “lives here in Sosua. Her name is Margaret. All I know is that she lives with a man named Victor. I don’t really know her, I haven’t seen her in years, but she lives here.”

He tried to make himself clear, but he didn’t know how. It was embarrassing. How could he explain that his family had left his sister here, alone, for thirteen years; left her here when she was five years old to live with a man named Victor. That’s what his mother had told him before she died. Who was Victor, anyway? His mother never said. There was something very wrong about the story.

“Was her name?” Nestor asked, tossing his paper cup into the street.

“Her name is Margaret.”

He let the name set in, but not for long. “No Margaret in Sosua,” Nestor said.

“You know everyone in town?”

“Yes, I know all the people. I live in Sosua many years and Margaret is not a name Dominican.”

“But my family...”

“Yes?”

“Yes, my family, we’re Jewish; we came here from Europe right before World War Two.”

“*Judia?* Your family is *judia?*”

“Yes,” Benny said. He suddenly wondered if Margaret had changed her name to something more Spanish, Margaurita, maybe?

Nestor was quiet and then his eyes lit up. He threw his arm around Benny’s neck and said, “*Vaya,*” and led him off in the opposite direction from where they’d headed.

They turned a corner, walked two blocks and Benny was surprised to see a synagogue ahead. It was a small, wood-framed building, a single room. A Star of David in stained glass reflected deep blues and bright yellows. Benny caught his breath, took it in, and then hurried toward it. Nestor followed.

He hadn't gotten any closer to finding Margaret but he'd found something else, something closer than his sister: he'd found his earliest memories. They had been in the background all along, and now they poured in, as rich as the deep blues of the stained glass that threw shade on his head. All his senses closed to the present, and memories from his childhood flooded him.

First there was a smell, of fish frying over an open fire, and the sizzle and crackle as they were turned. He felt his mouth pucker and water in anticipation. Then a feeling, of hard, red dirt under his bare feet, running, running and crying because of a burning sensation, of red ants biting between his toes. He felt the firmness of the dirt as he ran for his mother, and he felt her wrap him in her arms and then slap at his feet with a clean dish towel. Then he was blinded by the whiteness of the sand, white as the inside of a coconut cracked open with a machete, and then the sweet-sour flavor of coconut water filled his mouth to overflowing and poured down his chin and into the sand at his feet. He dug his toes, still burning from the red ants, into the damp, cool sand of Sosua. It all happened in a moment. He was home.

“The Story You Choose to Tell” will be continued in the February issue of *Icarus Down Review*. Stay tuned!

Hard Bitten

Mark Wagstaff

1: The Morning After

Cath worked late in the night, when others had scrubbed up and gone. When secretaries changed into jeans to go dancing, Cath worked late. Cath in the basement. Set by set, the motion sensor lights on the stairs timed-out. Sometimes so still in the basement even the lights for her table powered down. She'd wave them alive again, drawing her arm above her head, a suddenly-sentient god bringing light. Her terminal scrolled as she spoke, speech pattern software faithfully charting her voice. It waited her silences patiently, obedient as the lights, as the tools of her dissection.

Three in the hole, all wrong. She pulled out the shelves, standing in the narrow aisle, first between 1 and 2, then between 2 and 3, only moving when lights timed-out. Cath walked round the stainless trays, stories told between themselves, fragments talked from 1 to 2 to 3. She ran a sequence she ran twice before. She didn't doubt herself. But others doubted. Others who liked results in office hours. She tightened the margin for error, tightened where certainty's pale form might almost arise in conjecture. The numbers, the scatter, the waves: the same. Three metal trays. Set by set, the lights timed-out; the basement went dark.

###

Newton pushed through dopey girls, through blokes with mummy-love in their pants. She took the steel escalator treads two at a time, elbowing shoulder bags, stamping shopping. She knocked some brat's head and made it cry. Boo hoo. Its carer shouted something sexist; she returned it in widescreen. Some silly cow, blocking the top with her stupid case on wheels. So Newton helped the case on its way with a smart kick of her blakeys. The jolt pushed the girl sideways, tumbled her on her knees. She cried, like she'd never been on her knees before.

No swipe for the ticket gates, no time to argue. Newton jogged behind some kid, slammed it through the barrier, propelling the child forward by the arse. The funniest little yelp broke from its startled lips. Some hi-vis monkey stepped up: "I'll have the law on you."

Newton flicked him a look. “I am the law.” The street laid sweat in her dirty-blonde hair. Why not raining? Summer in England was raining. But that summer, the heat went on and on. And the flies. Out of nowhere: orange flies filled the whole town. And bodies. A rash of bodies.

Names, colours, faces, shapes, sounds, silence, reflections, shadows, light, distance, taste, perfume, looks, thoughts crowded her, everywhere. Blokes smoking shisha outside a café: what was their game? That card in the sweetie shop window: traditional healer, curses lifted. Bet his bank account could tell some stories. A girl with a fat black binbag strapped in a pushchair. Bag stretched to busting — what was inside? A face looked out a window and ducked back down: what were they watching out for?

The kid on the corner in the big puffy coat, having a laugh, said, “Smoke?”

She stopped. “What you say?”

His lips barely moved. “Smoke sister?”

He was big. So was she. “D’you think it’d be good for business if you weren’t here when I get back?”

He showed gold teeth. “I’m smoke, sister.”

The sliding doors weren’t quick enough; she clattered through. A uniform goon told her to place her finger in the bio-data plate; fix her eyes in the iris machine. He asked for ID.

“You got my name. You got my DNA.”

He worked his jaw like he might bite her. “I need to confirm your ID. Security.”

“But you got it. There. On the screen you’re looking at.”

“Is your aspiration to get in this building?”

Like every time, she slapped the plastic card on the desk. “Detective Chief Inspector Sandy Newton, Serious Crime, London North Division, Swinton Street Squad. Monkey see monkey do, alright?”

He offered a clipboard. “Read and sign the site access rules.”

“Bollocks.” She kicked the swing door.

Set by set, lights on the basement stairs flickered to life. Her skin got cold, not just from the aircon. Down here was old movies: the big villain who wants to take the world from his bunker, sat among TV screens and flashing lights. The big villain: always so fucking cool. As a kid, with her face too close to the screen, she hated how the bad guys got the cool. She hated it still.

She went into the gallery above the cutting room, to the stepped benches where students sat to maybe learn something. Kids who saw this place as a start, not the finish. No students now, not in high summer. She watched the greasy-haired woman below talking at her computer, words appearing like big ideas the machine had itself. No one played hunches no more. You followed the science. Newton went on down, to the cutting floor. “Alright, Cath.”

The white coat froze, the ponytail gleamed sullen beneath the diffusers. “How did you get in?” The words appeared on the terminal: How did you get in?

“Old school charm.” Detective Chief Inspector Sandy Newton brushed close to the woman. The white coat didn’t flinch. Bloodshot eyes met hers. “Looks like you been here days, Cath.”

“I have.”

“You should get some exercise.”

“Stop crime, maybe I will.”

Newton flicked through printouts, charts and scatter plots, spectrogram fractals of chemical traces billowing through thin paper like blood in water. This stuff gripped, repelled, unnerved her. When she stood in her best dark suit before some piss-smelling judge, she could taste how the scum in the dock was guilty. If they weren’t guilty, what had they come for? But no one played hunches. Twenty-eight years of city streets wasn’t enough. The law wanted it all in Makaton. “What you got?”

Dr Catherine Cartwright, Senior Forensic Pathologist, messing with jars, twatting them straight in a line, labels out front, no deviation from the pattern. The line of jars had been straight to start with. “Look a bit flushed, Sand. Reached that time of life?”

“Been on the tube.”

Amusement dimpled Cartwright's sallow face. "Didn't know you went down with the great unwashed."

"Banned driving." Bastards took her licence. Wasn't even like anyone died. "Didn't your girlfriend give you a backie?"

"Detective Sergeant Worrilow has gone to the doctor. Stupid bitch woke up with her arm bleeding for no reason. She thinks she's melting."

Cartwright straightened her cutting tools. "This isn't your investigation. I got Coulter's X on the dockets."

"Coulter's busy."

"And you're not?"

"I like helping out the unfortunate." She circled the table, distracted how light snagged on the blades. Everything in the tray, a lethal weapon. Everything in the room.

Cartwright caught her look. "Fucking love this, don't you?"

"What you got Cath?"

Cartwright took a lazy walk up to the metal wall, its capsules locked and tagged, awaiting answers. She slid out three trays, the barest flourish of a conjuror's trick sprung too many times to enjoy. "Three not-happy bunnies, Sand. This." She introduced number one. "Your old mate, Michael Leeds. Neville Brady's bit of interest for the ladies.

Took a kick, Sand. In the head. And again and again. And again.

"Here." She rattled tray two. "Something a bit different. Young female, not got a name yet. Not big on ID. Slit her wrists, have a close look. Very clean. Good blade and a thorough job. The right tools, you see, Sand? Makes all the difference.

"Now both these are more or less what you expect when you think of a human being. Arms, legs. Genitalia. But this one is so over all that." Number three was a cinder, barbecue dregs; the lost cat dredged from the ash of a week-old fire.

"He is...?"

“The Kentish Town Toastie. Tidy little explosion. There’s some insurance claims coming off that.”

“D’you know who he is?” “Told Coulter we’ll make some suggestions. When we’re done testing.” Newton studied the charcoal remnants of some mother’s son. Ribs and pelvis were gender, everything else was policing. “Who was he Cath?”

The white coat strolled, tossed back an invite. “You seen my jars?”

Cartwright made art of jars. None of the freaks, who put in ten years’ college to do this, bottled-up as obsessive as Cath. The thick glass, the formaldehyde, magnified what got quarantined. A collector — proud, unwilling to share — Cartwright kept herself between the jars and Newton. “Mr Leeds had blood under his nails but you’d expect that. A jumble of strands, different types; none with a record. His brain was pretty scrambled. I mean after he got kicked to death. But he had trace cocaine on his cortex. Interesting that — not inhaled. I’d say it was toed-in on someone’s boot.”

Newton shrugged. The whole town got coke on its boots.

“His pockets ran a bit light for a busy man. And you wonder,” she tapped a jar, “how this got there.”

Newton squinted. Reluctantly, Cartwright brought the jar close, gripping with worried hands like a kid on a goldfish bowl. A blonde hair, almost invisible in heavy liquid, flexed a little with the movement of the jar. “Whose?”

“No root. Dyed though.”

“Narrows it down.”

“Our girlie there was found by your plods in a very interesting state.” The banknote weaved a little in its jar. “Hard cash. Plastered to her bones with piss and female discharge. Mm-mmmm. Not, as it goes, her discharge.”

Real information, among the tarot of spectrograms. “D’you get DNA?”

“Oh yeah.” Cartwright smiled, cocky. “The good-time girl who shot her load is one Alexandra Prentice. One of our most productive whores, judging by her stats.”

Saki Prentice. Dirty-sweet.

“Two-for-two: whose prints on the money?”

“Prentice?”

“Try and keep up.” Cartwright tapped the jar of single blonde hair. She got a big kick from all this. One of our most productive freaks, judging by her stats.

Newton stared. “Mr Leeds?”

“You’ve done this before.” In the tall jar, a knife rocked on its ruby tip. “Prentice was on this too. What our little girlie used to let the sunshine in. Her wrists were all fly larvae when she got found. Like Leeds’s head.”

Saki Prentice: double murder. Tidy. “What about baking boy?”

“I said: we’ll let Coulter know.”

Newton moved in close again. Cartwright never flinched. At home with the dead, nothing scared her. “You got clues, though.” She dabbed at Cartwright’s sticky ponytail.

“Don’t gay me up, Newton.” She slouched back to tray three. “Want a laugh?”

“Always.”

“Got specks on his lungs suggestive of early-stage cancer. Smoking. If he’d known this would happen, he could’ve smoked his head off.”

“Who is he?”

“I ran these little cancerous tykes and some morsels of what was his gizzard...”

“Cath.”

She stared Newton down. “DNA’s not science you know. It’s bent roulette. This man was in a car fire. Burned quick and hot and clean. Any sample will be compromised.

Any conclusions are shifty. But given your old school charm, I’d say he was Marco Ruberti. Bad day at the office for Nev Brady eh? Though worse for his bunch.”

Why the fuck was Coulter stinking this up? This was big time. She was big time. “Two

of Brady's boys?"

"In as many days. Maybe he pissed off the gypsies."

She didn't know Marco Ruberti. But the more she saw of the charred and crumbling stiff, the more it was him. She had an edge now; Coulter could wait the report. "Quick is it? Burning to death?"

"I ain't so sure that happened."

There was nothing to offer Cartwright, nothing the grainy cow liked. "How d'you mean?"

Cartwright made like stone. "This ain't your case, Newton. I ain't even sure how you got in the building. What you doing?"

Among jars and stills, pipettes and tubes, an ordinary-looking bottle — Newton knew it was there, raked shelves to find it. Cartwright shouted stop, a windmilling playground chump. Newton grabbed the bottle, the blister pack of sharps. "Still doing this shit, Cath?"

"Give it."

"Thought you were banned from prescribing."

"Newton."

"No wonder you sweat so much, love, wearing long sleeves all summer. Remind me: what happens when people know you do this on official premises? Order it on the lab account, Cath? Medical supplies?"

Cartwright stopped chasing her round, sweat on her top lip. "See the jars."

Her bottle museum was the whole city: blonde hair, dirty money, a blade stained red, a bullet. The icons of twenty-eight years on the street. "What's the cap?"

"Grow up, it's been in a fire. Oh fuck sake: it's from a standard semi-automatic. The heat every twelve year old carries. Spooned out the skull of who we might think is Marco Ruberti. And no, *hotshot*, I don't think it got there after he died. Shall I be detective?"

The fucker got shot, then burned to kill the traces. And mostly, the traces got killed. But they didn't reckon on cancer and me."

"Where in his skull?"

"If you want someone dead it don't generally matter."

"*Cath.*" Newton stumbled. "The trajectory. *How* was he shot?"

"The explosion and subsequent fire distorted the body. But a gambler might bet point-blank, between the eyes."

"When you reporting?"

"Coupla days."

"These are one case you know that?"

Cartwright got a pinched, closed look.

"*Cath?*"

"That's all I can give you."

"You telling Coulter everything?"

"Why would you get favours?"

She had to go outside to call Worrilow, security wanting to break her jaw if she tried to get back in.

Worrilow sounded thick and alive: two traits she couldn't shake. "Doc reckoned spontaneous bleeding. Said go to a specialist."

"Come and pick us up."

"Nocando guv. Coulter's got me out Holloway: shots fired on the Ringcross last night."

Worrilow was no business of Coulter's: she was Newton's errand-monkey. "What? Ki-

ds with spud guns?”

“Not quite, guv. Coupla juveniles shot up. Flesh wounds. Up top of a stairwell. Lucky they ducked behind the wall.”

Detective Chief Inspector Sandy Newton always felt tired at the office. No one in Serious Crime knew anything. Most of the time was politics, the rest was filling forms.

Whoever they caught, the judges let go. What they confiscated got compensated. In the Superintendent’s head, they were fighting economic crime: every case some business gone bad. The squad was stocked with accountants and computer freaks. The strategy was disruption: seizing assets, tax inquiries, disabling bank accounts. Newton knew the strategy was shit. She was banned from driving. Had complaints against her. The dirt squad had her number. She was assigned to fraud’n’ muscle, tenuous murders; nothing like the jobs that got her to DCI.

Bruce Coulter wasn’t filth. Not filth for life like her. A teacher before he became a cop, that prizes-for-everyone attitude stained his policing. He thought you solved crime by knowing about it: self-contained knowledge, neutral from the garbage around it. Coulter thought if an answer could be proved, that made it right.

Some plod with tufty sideburns gave Newton a lift to Holloway, where Worrilow questioned dim-looking girls, mainly for make-up tips. Newton hated Worrilow with energetic passion. Some days she’d do nothing but hate Worrilow five minutes straight; it saved on cigarettes.

For reasons no one could explain, the lift was shut off; she climbed the ten-floor low-rise, tight in her chest, grimly focused on not looking weak. From a sharp angle, someone did some fancy shooting: the empty window frame scoured and buckled, the back wall laced with steeply-rising wounds. Pastelly blood burst over the paint, looked worse than it was: street kids knew to duck. A scatter of ball bearings kicked around her boots; when forensics weren’t looking, Newton scooped a handful in her pocket.

None of the girls Worrilow asked saw shit. The two kids in hospital, bragging out status updates, saw shit. Smart kids: they got their pellet gun magicked away before the paramedics arrived. On a hot night, no one in the street below, no one sat on balconies nor hanging out of windows saw shit. Some tramp with a high-end handgun loosed off at kids, and no one saw shit. None of these clowns in puffy suits would find them.

“Drop us by Goodge Street.”

“It’s not on our way.” Worrilow was bad GPS.

“It’s not a suggestion Diane.”

“What d’you find at the lab?”

“Your braincell.”

Worrilow’s Dagenham cackle was everything to hate. “The freak slap you down again, guv?”

“Dr Cartwright gave me useful information. You know: to solve crimes.”

“And there was me thinking you’d gone for a lap-dance. You seen my hand?” She waved the bandaged clump off the wheel.

“What about your hand?”

Worrilow had woken with her hand bleeding. Like a cut, but no cut. Blood under her duvet, little spits and spots on the sheet where she churned in the night. No blood anywhere, but in bed. Doctor said go to a specialist. “You ever woke up bleeding?”

“Every month.”

“Hard Bitten” will be continued in the February issue of *Icarus Down Review*. Stay tuned!



Gogh Stories Sayuri Yamada

Sheaves of Wheat

What do you think of Numbers Five and Nine? Look at Number Five. She's big: tall and chunky, a lot of yummy meat inside. Oh, you prefer number nine? Yeah, she is slender and looks beautiful. Some people prefer the same, favouring slim ones, but I like bulky ones better. See Five, what's her name? . . . the catalogue says here her name is . . . Sheena Sheenan from South Devon. What kind of name is that? Let's see what it says in the bio. . . . Oh, she is the youngest of eleven children. Probably her parents were sick of naming their babies when she was born, so they just gave her their surname without the last N. Anyway, her name doesn't matter. Look at her neck. It's so broad, the same width as her head, which sits evenly on her shoulders. Her head is firmly supported, no teetering, it must have big chunk of flesh there. Juicy.

Look at Nine. Her name is. . . in the catalogue. . . Jane Smith. Oh, what a unique name she's got. Do all of them have names like Five and Nine? Let's see. . . Elisabeth Owen, Prissy Rodríguez, Abbie Morgan, Wilma MacDonald. . . Other names are, it seems, all right. Oh well, nothing is perfect.

Where was I? Oh, yeah, Number Nine: Jane. Her neck is also slender, which means her head isn't well-supported. Her neck looks like it has only bones and skins. No good. It looks pretty, but the appearance doesn't count too much.

This wild boar terrine is so good. It's got tiny chunks of meat in it, which teases your tongue. This place always serves it. I've been coming here for five years and the wild boar terrine is the first food I start enjoying the contest with and the last food I finish it with. In my second year here, it was all gone at the end, so I couldn't eat it then. From the third year on, I kept some on my plate for the last taste. See, I've put this bit aside. It's for the end. Would you like to try some? It's on the second table from the left. It will melt in your mouth. What? You're a vegetarian? A big guy like you? And what are you here for then? Just out of curiosity? OK. But you can enjoy yourself more at a plant market next to Compton Park. You are a vegetarian! I haven't seen one before. Yeah, OK, not everybody is the same. Fair enough.

Look at Sheena's long torso. It must have good inner organs inside. Her long intestines can make good sausage cases. Her liver would be excellent. Have you had raw liver? Yeah, you're a vegan. No? Not that strict? Do you eat fish? No? How about cheese. Good. We can talk about cheese some time later, then.

I first had raw liver, which was nicely sliced, four years ago. I was on holiday in Japan. At this crowded restaurant, my friend ordered it for us. I first flinched from the idea of eating raw liver. You know, livers get rid of bad things from blood, so they could be full of toxins. I might get afflicted by some diseases. But my friend explained no poisons are kept there and the liver was good, soft and smooth.

I know you're fidgeting. You must be uncomfortable to hear my story about the raw liver. Remember, you are not at a plant market. You should've known beforehand.

Jane has a short torso. You like that, don't you. It looks nicer, I know. But the appearance sometimes is deceptive. Not in plants? When they look nice, they are nice to eat? Fine. But you aren't looking at your food now, all right?

Where was I? I can't keep to one subject with a vegetarian. Why is your seat here, next to me? All vegetarians should be at the same table. What? You didn't tell the organiser you're a veggie? No wonder. Well, this is an experience. I should look on the bright side, as they say.

Jane's legs are long and slender. I bet you like them. But not much muscle, only bones and skin. Look at Sheena's legs. They are shorter than Jane's, but more muscular. A lot more to eat. Her thighs are thick, especially right above her knees. See the two big muscles there? It's mouth-watering. Jane has nothing much there. Maybe only good for soup.

What did you just say? I couldn't hear you because of the noise over there. What happened there? Looks like a waiter dropped a glass onto somebody's food, which splashed everywhere. The waiter looks like a teenager. He must be a part-time worker. Big functions like this shouldn't hire inexperienced waiters like him. And the poor customer. His white suit is now blotches of brown, red, and yellow.

Oh, yeah. I can hear you now. What? You want me to teach you about meat? That is why you're here? Why? Why do you want to learn about meat? You're a vegetarian. Yeah, you've told me it's just out of curiosity. OK, I'll tell you something about it. You might not like it and I'm not good at talking. Yeah, I've been speaking about Sheena a

might not like it and I'm not good at talking. Yeah, I've been speaking about Sheena a lot, but it was like talking to myself out loud. It's different. OK, I'll try.

You see Sheena's mouth? It's broad. Jane's is small. Big mouths mean a big appetite. Small mouths mean a small appetite. Women with a big appetite eat a lot and develop good muscles. It's natural Sheena is big and Jane is thin. You still prefer small mouths? It's hard to change your feelings overnight. You'll learn slowly. Don't worry.

Yeah, Jane's got big ears, protruding through her hair. Sheena's are small, almost hidden in her hair. But ears don't matter. How they can hear doesn't affect their flesh. Of course, there is a bit more meat in big ears, but same difference. Unless she had huge, flapping ears like Dumbo. If you like women like that, you should go to a rarity market, which is held at the nearby city once a year. I don't know the details, but I'm sure you can find out online.

Sheena's torso is straight. Jane's a bit tilted to the right. A straight torso has healthy organs inside. A tilted one must have some abnormality in its innards. See other women. Number Seven is OK, although she is a bit skinny. Number Two is very straight, but she is rather rigid. That means she is nervous. Nervous women's meat is often tough and stringy, even when they are young. Calm women produce light-red meat that is tender. Stressed women's flesh is dark red and tough. You should look how they stand: still or fidgety. If Sheena were nervous, I wouldn't choose her. Her behaviour would tell the quality of the meat.

Do you know some company has made a perfect GM woman? She is tall and big, lots of meat. Her back is straight. Her torso is nice and long. Her neck is broad. But her flesh might affect us later. You know nobody knows for sure what will happen to our bodies if we keep eating GM women. Even the company is vague about it. I saw that on TV the other day. Would you like to eat her? Oh, you wouldn't anyway. You're a veggie. I prefer natural women who might have some blemishes, with the future safe.

Now they've turned round. Their backs are to us. See Sheena's shoulder blades are totally the same on both sides. Her body is very well-balanced.

You want to know about Number Three? Oh, she is over finished. You don't know the meaning? Sorry, you're a veggie. It means she is too fat. See her double chin. Inside, she must have thick fat, like pigs. Do you know people in some remote regions eat animals like pigs and cows? Can you believe it? It's revolting. Anyway, Number Three should've done more exercise. Sheena's chin is tight. Her meat must be marbled with white fat, nice and juicy. See Jane. She is under finished, not fat enough.

And Sheena's bottom is wide and her feet are set wide apart. That's the good balance. It's OK to have a small bottom, although there's less meat. But a small-bottomed woman should have her feet close together. It's all a matter of a balance.

I'll tell you my favourite recipe. It's chop marinade. You just put the meat into the marinade sauce, which is soy sauce, brown sugar, minced garlic, minced ginger, and chilli sauce. You are supposed to leave it for only ten minutes or so. But you know what? When I was cooking it last time, I had a row with my partner and didn't grill the meat for two days. The meat cooked after two days in the marinade was just excellent. All the sauce was in the core of the meat. It was so smooth and tender. How we enjoyed it then. So if you have time, leave the meat in the marinade for longer. I guarantee it.

You think I buy whole women often? No. I wish I could. I usually go to a local market to buy meat in packets. Whole women are so expensive. The last time I had enough money to buy a woman was last spring. But my clocks had malfunctioned. They didn't change the time, you know the Daylight Saving Time. So I was one hour too late. I almost sued the clock company.

You still like Jane? You've changed? So you prefer Sheena? What? You like Number One? That tiny woman? She's short and skinny. She's got nothing. I don't know how she's passed the criteria test. Why do you like her? Because of her eyes? Oh, eyeballs are small in any women. They're highly regarded in some regions, but . . . What? Her eyes show her intelligence? Maybe, but what's that for? Their brains have nothing to do with their flesh. Good-functioning brains might taste better, but then, you are in the wrong place. You should go to, I think, Parts Market on Bath Lane. No? What do you want? Why are you whispering? What? Speak up. Companionship? From a woman? How? To talk? About what? With women? You are freak. In some very remote places, I've heard, some women are treated as if they were almost the same as men. But not in decent cities like here.

Hey, Security! There is a mutant here!

“Gogh Stories” will be continued in the February issue of *Icarus Down Review*. Stay tuned!

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IRENE ALLISON is a member of the Union of Nom de' plumes, Aliases, Pen-names, and Imaginary Friends (UNAPIF). However, if Ms. Allison gets any more convinced of her existence, she will qualify as a mental illness.

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In November 2015 a piece called “My Downstairs” was published in the *Chicago Center for Literature and Photography’s CCLaP Weekender*. In 2012 Mark’s story “Burn Lines” won the Machigonne Fiction Contest, promoted by The New Guard. His story “Some Secret Space” won the 2013 William Van Wert Fiction Award, promoted by Hidden River Arts.

Mark’s second short story collection, also called *Burn Lines*, was published in 2014. Gina Ochsner described the stories in *Burn Lines* as ‘lyrically intrepid’ while Rick Bass found them ‘sweetly ominous’.

Details of Mark’s work are at www.markwagstaff.com and for some random thoughts, try his very occasional blog In Some Rainy City at <http://markwagstaffblog.com/>

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She was a participant of the 2016 Juniper Summer Institute and has previously been published in *Noon*, *Nimrod Journal*, *Wet: A Journal in Proper Bathing*, *Karamu*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Palo Alto Review*, *Lake Effect*, *Compass Rose*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Talking River*, *Rambler*, and others.

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SAYURI YAMADA was born in Japan and came to England in 2003 after searching a country to live permanently in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and French Polynesia for ten years. She finished studying Creative and Critical Writing in a postgra-

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She has published stories in twenty-two magazines both in the UK and the US. One of them, "Killing Me Softly," is published at *Gray Sparrow*, which won an award for the Best New Literary Journal of the Year from the Council of Editors of Learned Journal. Another one, "A Fat Mermaid," is published at *First Edition*.

SCOTT ARCHER JONES is currently living and working on his sixth novel in northern New Mexico, after stints in the Netherlands, Scotland and Norway plus less exotic locations. He's worked for a power company, grocers, a lumberyard, an energy company (for a very long time), and a winery. He has launched three books. *Jupiter and Gilgamesh, a Novel of Sumeria and Texas* in 2014, *The Big Wheel* in 2015, and *rising tide of people swept away* at the first of the year.

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ZEKE JARVIS is an Associate Professor at Eureka College. His work has appeared in *Bitter Oleander*, *Moon City Review*, and *Posit*, among other places. His books include *So Anyway...* (a collection of introductions to poems that don't exist) and *In A Family Way*.