



Crooked/ Shift

#2

October 2014

MATT ROTMAN – Editor-in-Chief
BRANDON HENSLEY – Contributing Editor
TRAVIS MAY – Contributing Editor, Webmaster General

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ISSN 2333-973X

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

There's no way getting around it: I think this is a damn good issue. Biased? Perhaps. But I believe each entry will speak for itself. And as second issues go, it bests the old and promises good things for the future.

(By the way, that was my best Keith Morrison-esque *Dateline* intro I could muster.)

There are a couple notable absences here, one being Lobb Rittle's *Most Unusual* column, though he shall enlighten us with cinema's weirdest next time around. The other is a complete roster of male writers. When I started this enterprise, I was concerned with the inevitable lack of diversity, given the genre. Like it or not, the horror/pulp genre doesn't surround itself with a legion a female writers. So it's my pleasure to announce the authors presented here in this issue are almost a 50/50 split. I hope this trend continues.

Alas, I will keep this short as to not delay getting this issue out on time, but I wanted to again thank everyone who submitted, whether you were accepted or not. We enjoy reading everything, and one of the worst activities I can think of (as a writer myself) is declining works by other writers. Please keep 'em coming!

And, of course, have a wonderfully terrifying Halloween.

Matt Rotman
Editor-in-Chief
October 22, 2014

Review: Season One of *The Strain*

By Matt Rotman

I'm not sure as to why I don't consider myself a Guillermo del Toro fanboy. Perhaps it's because that moniker carries with it a particularly dark, obsessive quality that is at odds with my generally apathetic disposition. But I'm certainly a considerable fan of del Toro's work. *Pan's Labyrinth* was the only film I ever gave four out of four stars during my tenure as film critic for Illinois State's student newspaper. I think *Cronos* and *The Devil's Backbone* are criminally under-seen in the horror community. *Hellboy II* is a worthy contender in the pro-life/pro-choice debate of *Best Comic Book Movie...Ever*. There was ultimately about forty-five minutes of a good film in *Mimic* (cue fanboys crawling all over themselves to remind me the studio interfered with del Toro's vision—yeah, yeah, no comments section here, motherfuckers!). And *Pacific Rim* simply reminded me of Christopher Mintz-Plasse's quote about Coke in *Role Models*: "I like the idea of it more than I actually like it."

That, as it may very well be, doesn't matter one good goddamn. Del Toro's fan base is a rabid buttress of Internet ankle-biters to which unbiased criticism rarely penetrates. If you were to graciously opine that *Pacific Rim* is a little stupid, you'd receive a pale, freckled chorus of virgins shouting back: "Yeah, well, it was supposed to be campy. GDT [sic] said so himself!" It would then appear there's some deductive equation previously unknown to all of us:

GDT is a genius. GDT said his films are supposed to be stupid. Therefore, GDT cannot make a stupid film.

Yeah, that's right—I just didn't get it. As if we're all unenlightened chodes still trying to grasp the anti-neoliberal subtext of *Troll 2*. I mean, there had to be at least one guy who chopped his own dick off after *Pacific Rim*'s Rotten Tomatoes score dropped below 100%. That's just how these people are.

And the nerd inside of me appreciates that very, very much.

But the critic and reveler of pulp horror, who also both reside inside me, begin to grow weary with such nonsense. I could really dig in here and half psychoanalyze (what emotional emptiness exists to the extent one needs to project flawless attributes to a perceived martyr?) and half prophesize (as with any piece-of-shit dad, you're gonna eventually get let down). Though why bother at all with such grandstanding when *The Strain* can do everything for me?

The only big spoiler for the first season of *The Strain* I'm gonna give you is this: it is really, really bad. How bad are we talking here? On a scale of one to ten, *Laserblast* being a one and Uwe Boll's masterpiece, *BloodRayne* a ten, *The Strain* straddles somewhere between the four or five range. If you believe I speak with hyperbole, then a) you haven't seen the show, or b) you're a twelve year-old kid whose innocence I so, so admire. Think I'm being a dick? Here is an actual line of dialogue from the pilot episode (I'll even set the scene for you).

A Boeing 777 goes dark one night on the tarmac at JFK—no communication from the cockpit, the window shades are drawn—it just sits there. For whatever reason, the air traffic controller and his supervisor walk out of the tower to inspect the plane firsthand, for which I can only imagine is routine FAA procedure. As they go underneath the plane, the air traffic controller (whose name in the script must be TOWER GUY, he's that non-descript) puts his hand on the hull and says:

"This looks so much bigger on the ground than on the screen. I mean, they're like buildings with wings."

Look, I can appreciate the fact that maybe not everyone reading this has taken screenwriting classes, so I'll give you a little lesson. If air traffic controllers are this stupid, we are very, very fucked. And if you read that line on paper and thought it would only sound better coming out of a well-trained thespian's mouth, please, for the love of God, don't procreate. That, or you're a writer for *The Strain*.

However, this isn't all to say I don't like the show, because I do. Very much so. In fact, I was blown away by it—blown away in the same way one just realized they're on the tenth floor of a building scheduled for demolition in the next five seconds. I guess what I mean to say is a story of the magnitude *The Strain* is trying to tell has so much potential. As I mentioned above, I'm not even a del Toro fanboy, but when I heard he was bringing a horror show to FX about a vampiric pathogen that wipes out the entire globe and would focus on the monstrous aspect of vampires instead of the cute, touchy British kind, I felt something move below the equator. And in that regard, *The Strain* is really quite awesome.

On paper.

Take this setup: It turns out all but four of the passengers on that 777 were dead. The CDC is called in, a team led by Corey Stoll's character, Eph Goodweather, sporting the much maligned wig. The plane and survivors are quarantined, and the investigation begins as science must contend with the mythic parameters of old school vampire rules. Not bad, right?

But then did I mention Eph is an ex-alcoholic, workaholic father who chose his career over his family and is being punished with a divorce he doesn't want? Or that he's sexually involved with his hot, Latina sidekick, Nora (Mia Maestro), whose character's main plot distinction is to just be his hot, Latina sidekick he's sexually involved with? Or that he also really doesn't like that his ex-wife is now living with some dude? How about that Nora has a mom suffering from Alzheimer's, who then serves to be one big pain in the ass when the shit hits the fan?

Did I mention the show runner of *The Strain* is Carlton Cuse of *Lost*? I'm not, by any stretch of the imagination, a fan of *Lost* (or is it *L.O.S.T.* or *L#oeS~T*—oh, well, they're all in purgatory the entire time, so you don't need to watch it now), but I have a hard time imagining J.J. Abrams signing off on such shitty character building. It certainly doesn't help matters that Cuse's *Lost* buddy, Damon Lindelof is over on HBO with the character study virtuoso (though incredibly boring) *The Leftovers*.

This is the point in the review where the fanboys begin pointing out that all of this is irrelevant, because *The Strain* is a trilogy of books, and Cuse is just keeping with the story. Fine. Lord

forbid you insult the six people who've actually read *The Strain*. It probably should be noted that the only reason the books exist is that in 2006, del Toro pitched the idea for *The Strain* as a show to Fox and was turned down in a rare moment of sobriety for the Fox development executives. Therefore, he hired Chuck Hogan (co-creator of the FX show) to write the series of books. Once they were published, the studios came calling. I will spare you the indignity of providing an excerpt here, so take my word for it: all three books are god-awful.

However, the storylines between the books and the show are near identical. The backbone to the entire plot is Abraham Setrakian (the janitor in Harry Potter, David Bradley), a Holocaust survivor who had his first run-in with vampires during the Nazi occupation. He was forced by maniacal Nazi officer, Thomas Eichhorst, to build an extravagant coffin for The Master, the Nosferatu lynchpin pulling all the strings. You discover Eichhorst is doing the Master's bidding in the hopes of receiving eternal life as part of the legion of strigoi. A promise that is indeed fulfilled.

Richard Sammel's portrayal of Eichhorst and his interactions with a young Setrakian in the Treblinka camp are by far the highlights of this disastrous season. And perhaps that should give you an idea of how bad the characters are crafted—when the evil, Nazi vampire is the most likable character on the show, you've got problems. The joy of watching Sammel's performance is him allowing the small amount of humanity that burdened Eichhorst with vulnerability in his pre-vampire days to underscore his malevolent actions in the present day. It's a magnificent tightrope act to watch, and the series deciding to go entire episodes without his presence is a magnificent shortcoming.

David Bradley's performance is perfunctory to the point of well-intentioned (and well-welcomed) camp. After all, a crazy old guy with a sword trying to convince the CDC that New York is under sieged by vampires is a fun thing to watch. But his backstory is bogged down by underdeveloped angst, in which Eichhorst is responsible for the death of his wife in the 1960's. The show very much wants us to care about that, but it's impossible. Every attempt at exposition is heavy handed in a Mexican soap opera sort of way, and when the inevitable back flash reveals what happened to his wife, we're just thankful it's over, so the story can move on. But hey, at least he has her heart in a jar. That's pretty cool.

The same kind of heavy handedness goes for all the characters. *The Strain* really wants us to know Eph cares about his ex-wife and son, but it never really deserves its emotional payoffs. Amidst the procedural workings of the story, del Toro, et al. are ignorantly preoccupied with telling *how* a vampire epidemic could potentially unfold, instead of allowing the epidemic to happen to real people. The cold, *CSI*-like approach may be wonky and fun, but it destroys the Romantic elements essential to making a gothic horror story come to life. All of the characters appear to just have been dropped into the dystopian shithole, when the dystopian shithole should be the one dropped on them. Again, if I were teaching a screenwriting class, *The Strain* is a classic example of writing character action in a way that moves the plot forward; i.e., every character is doing something necessary for the plot to continue, instead of allowing the characters to react irrationally and human, which serves to deepen the connection between the audience and characters.

And all of this wouldn't be so unforgiveable in a two-hour del Toro film. But in a thirteen episode first season, the part of the series when you're supposed to be introduced to the characters you'll be with for years to come, it's a death blow. Taken together with the odd pacing, it's unrecoverable. That's right, *The Strain* somehow manages to turn the vampire apocalypse into something spectacularly boring.

Case in point: the show spends its first four hours watching each of the plane's survivors undergo their metamorphosis in vampires. You have a rock star, Type-A big shot attorney, nerd, and pilot. Kudos for diversity, I guess. However, watching all four change into the same creature in slightly different environments doesn't really add anything to the story—especially since all four

story arcs end after they change (with one minor, *very* minuscule exception). Not only that, but when the focus puts these characters in the forefront, it relegates its huge cast of major characters to the backburner. Then, adding insult to injury, the small selection of scenes with the main cast are wasted on minuscule items, such as Eph attending an AA meeting and Nora visiting her mom in a nursing home.

What makes this truly odd is that *The Strain* shares the same network space as *American Horror Story*, the fucking postmodern guitar solo, melt-your-face-off rock opera of horror storytelling. (If I were, indeed, teaching my class on screenwriting, the entire class would just be watching *American Horror Story: Asylum*.) I understand that not every series has the luxury of condensing its serialized structure down into such microelements, but there is one thing *AHS* does that every show runner not named Joss Whedon could learn from: cut out the bullshit. The scary thing about *The Strain* is that it actually thinks its bullshit is necessary and important. People tune into a show like *The Strain*, because they want to see genuine horror and action, vampires with their fucking heads cut off, victims sucked dry and mutilated. Instead, they get a boring story about a lousy dad with some vampires thrown in as an afterthought. On the other hand, *AHS* understands you're not tuning in for its esoteric Freudianism, you just want to see something fucked up (if there is anything good about Freudianism, that's it).

That being said, when the show decides to be scary, it delivers. But the scenes are too far in between to keep coming back for if you're a horror fan. *The Strain* isn't even good enough to enjoy on an ironic level. Mainly, because it's just so fucking boring. If you crave Guillermo del Toro and vampires, go rent *Blade II* at your local Blockbuster. Oh, wait...

On Literary Horror: H.P. Lovecraft vs. Dave Eggers

By Douglas Smith

(Topics discussed: The sensation of fear, the importance of secrecy, martyrdom, the occult, the internet's destiny, waking the dead, visceral versus actual experience, hand jobs, and surfing in the modern era.)

I was on an H.P. Lovecraft kick and sought out a densely printed edition of his work to gift to a friend of mine who was about to catch a plane to Morocco where he lives and teaches world literature at a university. During the ensuing weeks I continued bingeing Lovecraft's Weird Tales, constantly fascinated by his ability to generate descriptions of the workings and practices of the occult. I turned giddy from the exposure to that unfathomably imaginative collection of dark and creepy tales--my version published under the title of the mythical text to which Lovecraft so often alludes--The Necronomicon. I shot Morocco an email to see if my friend was getting into any of the bliss and awe that I was and he responded by saying that he was enjoying the stories, but they had been injecting his dreams with smoky themes and causing him to awake with the willies, so he had moved it from the reading before bed pile to the reading by the pool pile. That made me feel like he was politely passing on it because I don't believe he has a pool at his apartment in Fez but I could be wrong. The exchange got me thinking about fear and literature's ability to stoke fear in its readers. I am a big admirer of the writing of H.P. Lovecraft but it doesn't frighten me. You might even say that I am one of those who find comfort in the Cthulu. I had to nearly sprint back to that comfort after having the living crap scared out of me by the book that I read on the heels of The Necronomicon, which was a peep show at the alleged motivations of the burgeoning class of millennial information sharing junkies in Silicon Valley; a foretelling of a potential cyber apocalypse by Dave Eggers called The Circle.

One of the things that stings me about The Circle is that there is a character in the book that I really identify with, which isn't intended to mean that I share all of his paradoxical features. This character is a mid-level artist with a self-importance streak and an awkward loyalty to his relationship with the parents of his high school girlfriend. He builds chandeliers out of deer antlers that were humanely obtained, lets his physique go, dresses in a slack fashion and is highly defensive of his right to privacy. His name is Mercer and he eventually fails at martyrdom, launching his car off of a bridge over a deep gorge, Thelma and Louise style, because the internet is chasing him. During the book

Mercer does an excellent job of sticking to his convictions but he still ends up on the losing side in this one.

When books force their readers to pick sides those readers become vulnerable, and feeling vulnerable is scary. When I am reading about escape artists trapped below pyramids, doctors obsessed with re-animating human corpses or ancient spinners of black magic using their young relatives as avatars, it isn't so much that it's easy to pick which side to be on, it's that it matters a lot less. I can root for the blood-sucking vampires over the mortals if I want because in the end I am not really worried about my position with respect to the content of the stories to be something that comes back to haunt me. In other words, there isn't much there to keep me up at night.

The Circle puts forth a philosophical pickle. Trying to establish a position with respect to the ethics and power of the mega-company that shares the book's title is scary on its own; the realization that its inertia is already so massive that even having a position may be superfluous, or at the very least long overdue, is enough to make me want to--well--drive my car off of a tall bridge.

Secrecy is a common theme in these books. Fans of Lovecraft find joy in the discovery of secrets. Any number of Lovecraft's stories would provide a sufficient example, but for our purposes here, let us consider one of the longer ones, "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward."

It is revealed instantly in the story that Charles Dexter Ward is recently disappeared from a home for the mentally insane. We come to learn that Charles is the very astute and disciplined son of a prominent Rhode Island family and that he is a devoted antiquarian. As the pages turn, the source of his madness trickles out of a dark past like so much slime. Sometime in the year 1918 Charles stumbles upon an official record stating that his great-great-grandmother, Eliza Tillinghast, had her name and the name of her daughter legally changed from Curwen back to Tillinghast after her husband's death, citing grounds that the deceased's name had become a "Publick Reproach." She subsequently remarried, but the discovery unearthed the identity of Charles's actual great-great-grandfather, one Joseph Curwen. As he probes for details about his ancestor he is confronted with a string of intentional cover-ups and whispers of allegiances with the occult. The mystery taunts young Charles to be persistent on his quest for knowledge and he encounters just enough clues to keep constantly forging ahead. The pursuit morphs into an obsession as Charles tries to seek out the location of Curwen's grave, dug supposedly in 1741, and the circumstances that led up to his death.

"The Case of Charles Dexter Ward," is fueled by discovery. As information is revealed it continues to be the missing components that drive the action forward. It's the allure of the unknown that keeps Charles's and the reader's motivations up. It helps that Charles is well born and benefits from his access to resources, time in particular, for following the trail. Trips to Salem, New York and New London pay off as he learns the location within Providence of the original Curwen home. By the time he visits the site, he has the benefit of several other pieces of information. As I have already mentioned, Joseph Curwen was once married to Eliza Tillinghast. This marriage was arranged under pressure from Curwen and we don't know to what extent. What we do know is that at the time Eliza Tillinghast was already betrothed to another man, and that it is the scorned fiancé who originally opted for vigilance of the suspicious Curwen. This man was a sailor named Ezra Weeden who eventually entrusted a compatriot in his stakeouts named Eleazar Smith. Weeden's notes on Curwen have vanished but Smith's remain and from them it is confirmed that Joseph Curwen lived an exceptionally long life, seeming not to age, that he was cordial but anti-social and in apparent possession of secrets that only the dead should know. He had a farm close by that was

shrouded in secrecy and consumed incredible amounts of supplies and food considering no one but an old Indian couple lived there. It was on this farm that Curwen allegedly communicated with the dead, may have even raised the dead. It was on this farm that Curwen probably died.

Charles isn't able to locate a physical description of his great-great-grandfather, but he does find mention of a portrait that Curwen had commissioned to be painted on one of the wallboards of the library of his Providence home. When Charles visits the address of the house, which has been completely redone on the interior, it is for this panel in particular that he hunts. After an hour or so of looking, Charles uses his pocket knife to expose a small portion of the oil painting under many layers of peeling paint. Rather than hastily, digging out the image, he hires experts in art restoration who work for many days to reveal the painting. When it is finally exposed and cleaned, the likeness is of Charles precisely.

Charles's father is enamored by the creepy portrait that resembles his son and pays handsomely to have it removed and installed in his son's study. Charles oversees the removal of the wall panel and transportation of the piece. Once it is completely detached, he notices a recess in the brickwork behind where it was mounted.

"The youth approached and looked within; finding beneath the deep coatings of dust and soot some loosed yellow papers, a crude thick copybook, and a few mouldering textile shreds which have formed the ribbon binding the rest together. Blowing away the bulk of the dirt and cinders, he took up the book and looked at the bold inscription on its cover. It was in a hand that he had learned to recognize at the Essex Institute, and proclaimed the volume as the 'Journal and notes of Jos. Curwen, Gent., of Providence-Plantations, Late of Salem'" (Lovecraft 687).

At this point I intend to cease my summation of "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward." Giving the ending away would be contrary to the spirit of the point that I am trying to make: that mystery is more satisfying than omnipotence.

Secrets such as the dark legacy of Joseph Curwen, and every other type of nature, are what the shark-like monopoly Dave Eggers calls The Circle are trying to dispense with permanently and completely. By compiling data, watching everything all the time, and being relentlessly public, The Circle attempts to erase the blanks from history.

It is already cheap and easy to set up wirelessly connected security cameras, and it doesn't seem far fetched at all to me that inexpensive, solar powered, satellite connected cameras will be available and placed essentially everywhere. In the book, surveillance, transparency, call it what you will, goes to this level and beyond. This concept incites a sensation of real and genuine fear in me, as though there is nothing I could imagine wanting to happen less. But why is that? Is it because I have a gang of embarrassing and kinky habits that I don't want you knowing about? Frankly, yes, and I'd like to keep it that way. What I can do for your curious and dirty mind is assure you that whatever it is that I am doing when you aren't looking isn't all that big of a deal, isn't affecting anyone but myself, and I also realize that not everyone can say that. Is it worth it to protect my right to conceal the fact that I like to sleep wearing women's undergarments on a bed of nails, or whatever, if it comes at the expense of having an environment in which the likes of child abductors and serial killers can operate? That is a pretty tough call. It's also a non-call, since it isn't as though any of us are going to be the ones to make these decisions.

Characters in *The Circle*, politicians in particular, start going “clear.” What “clear” means is that the individual has pledged to lead a completely transparent life. They wear a camera on a string about their necks which provides video and audio feed to whoever cares to stream it off of their websites. Of course everyone everywhere is constantly hemming and hawing about the back door dealings of shady politicians and it is easy to envision the type of pressure that would suddenly be exerted on public figures if such a practice became common. All future Monica Lewinsky’s would be erased from existence. Does that seem tragically sad to anyone else? Or am I just a pathetic relic from a quickly fading generation whose parents were so unconcerned with safety that they didn’t even require their children to be in seat belts in the car. Of course the book contains a polarizing approach with respect to this technological advancement. Mae, the book’s protagonist and a white hot new employee of *The Circle*, goes clear and broadcasts a grindingly unnatural dinner with her parents to an audience of well over twenty million online gapers. On her drive back to the bay area, after the dinner, she is inundated with messages questioning her parent’s appreciation of and participation in the “clear” lifestyle, particularly because *The Circle* has generously agreed to add the entire family to Mae’s comprehensive health insurance policy, a daring move considering her father suffers from multiple sclerosis. Mae swings the car around, determined to confront her parent’s publicly about their opinions about *The Circle*, its generous financial assistance in exchange for the simple request of complete transparency, and the alleviation of the terrible burden of stress surrounding the medical bills stemming from her father’s condition. What she winds up interrupting in her surprise return visit is her mother, with the aid of ample bargain hair conditioner, administering a hand job to Mae’s father, a man who is clearly by this point of the novel floundering in his attempts to find a will to live. Twenty-seven million souls witness the embarrassing moment, and they have an interesting reaction.

A school of thought here is that most of the naughty things that many of us feel like we are executing behind closed doors are not really all that weird or uncommon. There is no reason to be ashamed about them because lots of people are doing them and it’s time to dissolve the stigmas. And that activities that exist outside of these behavioral patterns (molestation and rape, etc.) are best routed out and dispensed with anyway. Hello logic, vivid and indisputable. With it comes the question: should logic be the force that guides human behavior? Or are we spiritual beings that were designed to function according to a more complex set of terms?

H.P. Lovecraft, for all the hideously unthinkable monsters that he didn’t escape having to live with, managed to elude social media. The types of interpersonal relationship dynamics we may be constructing online, and the extent to which we attach importance to these “profiles” is a worthy topic and outside of the scope of this paper other than to utter a single warning: that mystique is valuable and can not be reclaimed once it is lost.

While it is hard to but up against the practical advantages of information sharing, the one thing that convenience outlets like the internet have failed to create is more time, meaning time retains its value. And while it can be nice to know how to evade traffic jams on the way to whichever surf break you are certain is working because you have checked the live cameras, there is the issue of having to take the time constantly to read and upload posts, and the reality is that if everyone has the same information access as you, the waves are likely to be crowded. Of course this theme is one of the major quandaries of the lifestyle *The Circle* and the bulk of its staff are attempting to project onto the globe, like it or not. The time that it takes to participate in discussion has to come from somewhere and it seems to often come out of the time that could have been spent

participating in activities; experiencing, in lieu of commenting on experiencing, or more often, the presumptuous stabs at what experiencing ought to be like.

For example: in *The Circle*, there is a group of three business entrepreneurs called the Three Wise Men. This triumvirate comprises the brain trust of the ground-breaking company, even if their personal convictions sometimes run contrary to the company's mission. One of these men, Tom Stenton, has a disabled child and at one point he tries to make the meek point that a person ascending a treacherous mountain like Kilimanjaro with a camera about his neck could viscerally provide the experience with poor children, such as the disabled Gunner, for whom taking on such a challenge is impossible due to his physical impediment. What Stenton manages to ignore completely in his hypothetical experiential description is any notion of stakes. Gunner doesn't need to train to watch the camera, endure cold or fatigue, the threat of incoming weather, blinding conditions or death. To me, the idea that a virtual experience could stand in for a real one, that is real horror. Knowing the unknown, there is no way I want to do that. Why would I get up if I knew what was going to happen?

Both Eggers and Lovecraft are frightening in their respective habits and which is more so is a matter of subjectivity. It's compelling to ponder how they both achieve it while being so disparate. Horror I suppose, like humor, resists being reduced to a formula. Lovecraft's monsters entice us to chase facts through disintegrating documents over a hundred and fifty year span and Eggers' threaten to make all information not only preserved but instantly accessible and sufficiently judged by human mini-gods.

Absurd Theatre Experiences

By Celia Jones

Taking the Parents to New Theatre

In my second year of University, I felt it was my mission to broaden my parents' theatrical experiences from the usual Neil Simon comedies they attended at their local theatre group. The Absurdist Theatre Movement was becoming rather popular, and I wanted to learn more about it. My father was always interested in what I was studying, so I arranged for him and my mother to see a performance with me in San Francisco of a play, or mime, by Beckett called "Act Without Words"

The curtain opened on an empty stage, no scenery, nothing except for two large burlap sacks. A big stick, a goad, prodded one of the sacks and a scruffy character "A" reluctantly came out of the sack, brooded and unenthusiastically put on the clothes that had neatly been placed next to his sack. He ate a carrot and spit it out, then carried his sack to the middle of the stage. He brooded again and took off his clothes, dropping them in an untidy heap onstage, and went back to sleep in his sack.

The goad returned, this time poking the second sack. Immediately, character "B" woke up and left the sack. He did everything vigorously, consulting his watch, compass and map several times.. He dressed rapidly and ate his carrot with appetite. After performing his own duty by carrying the sacks to the further side of the stage, he removed the same clothes character "A" had left in an untidy pile and folded them neatly once again, winded his watch and crawled back into his sack.

The goad returned, prodded the first sack again, but got no response. After another poke, the sack began to move, and character "A" slowly crawled out, brooded, etc. The round was ready to begin again.

All this 'action' took about an hour. I was fascinated by all the symbolism; here were two types, very different, but when combined presented a composite picture of man. What a revelation!

Just as the goad was about to wake character “A”, a rather loud snore echoed in the dark of the theatre. At first, I thought it was character “B” in the other sack, sleeping soundly, but the snores continued even after that character re-emerged from the sack.

Fearing the worst, I reluctantly turned to catch my mother sitting on the other side of my father, eyes closed, with gaping mouth emitting the loudest buzz-saw sounds I’d ever heard. My father ‘prodded’ my mother awake, “Katie, Katie, wake up and watch the play.”

Moaning awake, my mother said in a clearly audible voice that echoed in the silent theatre, “Oh, it’s sooo boring!” I could feel a hundred pairs of eyes suddenly fixed on us and knew we had to leave immediately. My father helped my mother gather her things, including her large, opened handbag filled with all the usual snacks, apples and boiled candies which came cascading out, as we hastily made our exit. I prayed that people would think this was part of the show, part of man’s struggle with the ‘absurdity and fruitlessness of existence.’

However, there was more angst outside the theatre; as we walked towards the car, we saw a large empty ‘existential’ space where our car should have been. Apparently, my father had unintentionally parked in a tow-away zone, and we finished our theatrical experience with an ‘absurdly’ expensive recovery of our impounded car from the city garage across the city.

University Acting: The Day I Became a Mosquito

I wanted to embrace it all that first year at UC Berkeley in 1966. Moving from a junior college in a small town to a cosmopolitan university community I looked forward to gaining a freedom to develop creatively as I never had before.

When I’d heard that the drama faculty had brought in an Italian expert in Commedia dell’Arte to teach a mime class, I didn’t hesitate to sign up for the audition to become one of the 20 privileged students allowed in this course. Auditions were held in an old hall with a stressed wooden floor that smelled of sweaty sneakers and peanuts. Interested students who wanted to join the class had to perform a solo mime in front of the rest of the applicants. On the spur of the moment, I could only think of one mime I did as an exercise in one of my high school drama classes, where we had to become an animal that embodied certain character traits.

Inspired by DH Lawrence’s poem, “The Mosquito”, I thought a mosquito would embody the qualities of rapaciousness and sneakiness. Chosen to audition first, I started my mime, by turning my head towards my tail with a greedy smile and waved my arms as I ‘floated’ lightly toward my victim. As I sighted my victim, I mimed grabbing hold of my snout-like shank. Then I hunched over, pulled up the snout and jabbed it into ‘my victim’s’ skin. Sucking the delicious blood, my stomach protruded in swollen satisfaction, I finished off with rubbing my legs together and heavily floating away, flapping my arms. The audience was totally silent; maybe it was an unwritten rule that you don’t clap aloud for a mime performance. I started to wonder if this was the right sort of mime to do for this audition. In high school, I told myself I was being ‘creative’ when I was probably making a spectacle of myself.

The next person to audition was what one would now call an Angelina Jolie look-a-like—a raven-haired, pouty-mouthed, long-limbed girl with large brown eyes. I remembered this girl from one of my other drama classes. I think she came from New York.

With smooth, graceful movements, she performed a mime about a girl's day on a beach. She walked onto the stage carrying a large invisible towel and beach bag, which she placed on the sand. Then she looked around, checking out the other sunbathers and smelling the salty air. Sitting down on her towel she took out of the bag some suntan lotion and slowly rubbed it into her legs. This was followed by an adjustment of her bikini before lying down sensually, to enjoy the warmth of the sun. She was beautiful, and her mime was so real that I could almost smell the coconut suntan oil.

The audience clapped out loud when she finished. I cringed when I thought of how bizarre my mosquito mime must have seemed compared to hers. A wave of heated embarrassment flooded over me. What was I thinking of doing a mosquito impersonation? So, no surprise the next morning when my name didn't appear on the list of successful mime students was posted outside the hall.

Getting a Role in Graduate Student's Absurd Play

However, this experience didn't discourage me from participating in drama activities when I got to the university. At UC, Berkeley, if you signed up for a drama course, you were required to act in workshop productions directed by graduate drama students. I guess it was one way for the students to shanghai actors to perform their original play scripts. My first experience there was not a totally positive one in a play called "Uncle Sam", which was kind of a modern-day "Antigone". Being Berkeley in the 60's, it was an anti-war, anti-authority play that didn't make much sense to me, but I thought that it was probably deeply metaphoric. As a naive freshman, I felt it was an honour to be cast in the leading role of a young rebellious woman who risked her life by defying her uncle, the king.

The writer/director graduate student Rosemary was a tall, elegantly thin wraith with curly, flowing blond hair and floral, hippie dress that gave her an ethereal demeanour. My recollection of performing this play is rather fuzzy except for one scene with 'my uncle', where the script called for me to slap him. Since I had never before slapped someone in the face, I was reluctant to do it on cue, and my initial attempts in rehearsal were rather feeble, not wanting to hurt the other actor.

After watching a couple of my limp-wristed efforts, the ethereal Rosemary suddenly transformed into a fury spitting out, "You call that a slap!?" In a flash, she was on me like an oversized Valkyre, demonstrating on my face how to do a proper stage slap. "This is how you do it. Just cup your hand and hit on the jaw line so it makes a loud noise but doesn't hurt," giving my mush an almighty crack.

"Bullshit," I cried, "that hurt like hell!"

"That's because you flinched. If you didn't flinch, it wouldn't have hurt," the harpy growled. "Let's try it again, and don't flinch," she said as she slapped my flinching face several times in quick succession. I'd heard that you had to suffer for your art, but this was ridiculous as I struggled to hold back my tears.

We eventually got the slap right; at least it didn't hurt me a bit when I performed the slap myself. Whenever I remember that play, I always associate it with a scene from the offbeat TV

series “Monty Python’s Flying Circus”. You know the one I mean, where John Cleese and Michael Palin are standing on a pier, each with a large fish in hand. They proceed to slap each other with their fish in a ballet of military precision until one falls in the water.

The Absurdist Theatre Movement was becoming rather popular, and I wanted to learn more about it. My father was always interested in what I was studying, so I arranged for him and my mother to see a performance with me in San Francisco of a play, or mime, by Beckett called “Act Without Words”. I felt it was my mission to broaden my parents’ theatrical experiences from the usual Neil Simon comedies they attended at their local theatre group.

The curtain opened on an empty stage, no scenery, nothing except for two large burlap sacks. A big stick, a goad, prodded one of the sacks and a scruffy character “A” reluctantly came out of the sack, brooded and unenthusiastically put on the clothes that had neatly been placed next to his sack. He ate a carrot and spit it out, then carried his sack to the middle of the stage. He brooded again and took off his clothes, dropping them in an untidy heap onstage, and went back to sleep in his sack.

The goad returned, this time poking the second sack. Immediately, character “B” woke up and left the sack. He did everything vigorously, consulting his watch several times or his compass and map. He dressed rapidly and carefully and ate his carrot with appetite. After performing his own duty by carrying the sacks to the further side of the stage, he removed the same clothes character “A” had left in an untidy pile and folded them neatly once again, winded his watch and crawled back into his sack.

The goad returned, prodded the first sack again, but got no response. After another poke, the sack began to move, and character “A” slowly crawled out, brooded, etc. The round was ready to begin again.

All this ‘action’ took about an hour. I was fascinated by all the symbolism; here were two types, very different, but when combined presented a composite picture of man. What a revelation!

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unintentionally parked in a tow-away zone, and we finished our theatrical experience with an ‘absurdly’ expensive recovery of our impounded car from the city garage across the city.

Bitten Again by the Absurd Rhino Bug

After graduating from UC Berkeley, my first husband and I immigrated to Melbourne, Australia, where I finished my Diploma of Education and we both took up high school teaching jobs. As an energetic but new teacher, I agreed to take charge of the school productions. Since only naive or new teachers volunteer to produce the school play, I usually found myself wearing many hats—i.e. director, set designer and builder, lighting and sound direction, make-up artist, publicity, ticket sales and front of house manager. Sometimes, I’d get some other adults and staff, but only after much grovelling and only when it was convenient for them. The kids sniff out an atmosphere of freedom from close supervision and potential for serious anarchic fun that can be had backstage. Out come the rum in the coke bottles, the occasional joints, the searching for dark corners where they can make out and the fights with the expensive make-up. Final technical rehearsals always seemed a shambles, and I’d have nightmares about what would happen on opening night. I cursed myself for again taking on the responsibilities of another play. Amazingly, however, students would inevitably rise to the occasion, suddenly come alive in front of live audiences, cover up awkward mistakes and missed lines like professionals and give wonderful performances. Normally nondescript kids would become admired heroes around the school for weeks later, reliving over and over their joy in acting, the theatrical triumph and the appreciation of the audience. Social isolates became part of the acting cliques and would regularly have reunions with the other cast and crew members. Despite my hysteria, years of directing the school plays provided me with a great deal of satisfaction, that is until I attempted my favorite absurdist play “The Rhinoceros” by Eugene Ionesco.

The leading actor’s role was pivotal to the success of the play, and I was going to opt for a reliable student Jonah who had acted competently in another play, until another boy Adam auditioned. Adam had done well in a small cameo part in another play and went to the trouble of memorizing a whole monologue from “Rhinoceros” for his audition. The school principal discovered that Adam, a homeless boy shunted from pillar to post, had tried out for the lead part and encouraged me to give the role to him. “This could be one of those life-changing experiences for him,” he zealously argued. With some twinges of doubt, I went along with the principal’s advice, flattering myself into thinking that I would be one of those teachers who would make a positive impact on Adam’s life. After all, he did memorize and deliver a whole scene for his audition. Also, Adam seemed to personify the non-conformist character of the play, resisting becoming a rhinoceros like the other people in the village. Winning the major part in the play seemed to boost Adam’s confidence enormously.

Unfortunately, those were the only lines in the whole play that he ever did learn. Despite my coaxing, cajoling, threatening, he just couldn’t learn one more line. His excuses seemed plausible, and his promises to learn the lines were earnest, as were the principal’s insistence on giving Adam more leeway. It wasn’t until one week before the production date at a technical dress rehearsal that it became clear that Adam didn’t know any of the lines for the play. The prompter had to give him every other line. There was a sickly lead feeling in my stomach. I was angry not only at Adam’s betrayal of my trust in him, but also at my stupidity in being bluffed into letting the situation go on this long. Only one week before the curtain was to rise on this play. Over \$1000 of school money

was spent in theatre hire, costumes, make-up, technical effects, publicity and tickets. The principal, vice-principal and senior teachers would all be there for opening night's performance.

It was obvious that I had to get Jonah to take Adam's part. It's not much fun as a teacher having to beg a student to take a part that he feels he should have been given in the first place. However, after much grovelling and promising that he could use the script onstage, Jonah finally consented to do the part, while Adam was given a minuscule walk on role of a fireman. The next few rehearsals were technically complex, especially since I had added slides of rhinoceros taken at a local African Wildlife Park as well as the strange rhino grunting and musical sound effects. I assured the students and myself that it would be 'all right on the night' as my plays usually were despite setbacks and hitches that always plagued my productions beforehand.

Opening night was upon us in a flash. The night began with an argument with the members of a student band I'd asked to play at intermission, because I wouldn't let them play the song "Cocaine" for parents, friends and teachers. There was a mix-up with the tickets, and many seats had been double-booked, causing a few altercations. The motorized device controlling the curtains was acting up, and it looked for a while like we wouldn't get the curtains open at all, and we'd have to perform the whole play on the small apron area in front of the curtain. This didn't bode well for the rest of the evening; as I announced the cast change and explained that one character would have to use a script, the curtains slowly creaked open.

Then, in my role as technical director, I tried to get comfortable in the lighting box cramped with four students crunching away on potato chips and expelling gaseous emissions from their coca cola drinks. Anyway, we got the technical cues organized, and I was heartened by Jonah's entrance onstage, which was amazingly confident, considering he'd had the part for only one short week.

However, unease set in as I watched Jonah take larger and larger strides across the stage before dramatically closing the script and deciding to adlib his absurdist dialogue for the remainder of the play. My four helpers and I looked down in horror as he ranted on brilliantly, enjoying being the centre of attention, controlling the whole production. All of the technical effects, the slides, sound, lighting, which depended on line cues, were thrown up in the air. My companions kept asking me where he was in the script, but he was re-writing the play. The other actors didn't have a clue where they should jump in with their lines, and I felt like I was in a nightmare loop, having an out of body experience, looking down at a chaotic, absurd happening. The young audience revelled in the chaos but to me, it was never-ending, and I was mentally frozen as I watched with disbelief as the events in disbelief. The nightmare seemed never-ending, but the worst was yet to come. Adam, as the ever resourceful fireman, took it into his head to enter from the back of the audience carrying a heavy six-foot wooden ladder he found backstage. It all seemed to happen in slow motion as ran up the aisle, his long hair flying out from the fireman's helmet as he swung the ladder around towards the stage. A sickening thud echoed through the theatre as the moving end of the ladder hit and knocked unconscious an elderly member of the audience who was unfortunately seated in the front row.

That marked the end of the performance. From my box on high, I watched the school administrators gather around the stricken audience member, praying that she would be all right and wouldn't sue the school and me for damages.

There I sat, absolutely stunned speechless as the excited cast members crowded around me asking what I thought of the performance. There had been so many laughs from the audience at all the things that went wrong that they felt it was a success. On the other hand, I couldn't believe that all the effort, the hours, the frustration resulted in this disaster. There I was, having an out-of-body experience, looking down at the students surrounding me, watching them grow nervous when they saw me sitting rigid with eyes glazed over.

A Plague of Drownings

By Jeffrey Perso

“Satire is local.”

—George Steiner

I had been back in L, the town of my birth, for less than twenty-four hours, John Voltaire wrote, when the bargeman’s body bobbed ashore. According to the Medical Examiner’s report, issued on the morning of May 28, the bargeman had been in the water for almost a month—three weeks at the least—but his absence had not been reported by anyone. This was not because his neighbors kept to themselves, which they did, nor because the good people of L stayed out of other peoples’ business, which was also true. The bargeman lived alone in a one-room tarpaper shack on Isle la Plume and it was not unusual for him to be missing for days, if not weeks, at a time, due to the nature of his work, barging as far south as New Orleans, deadheading there, and then returning, stopping in St. Louis perhaps to take on coal or barley hops before pushing north another 600 miles to dock finally in L. So no-one thought that there was anything fishy about not seeing him out in his bass boat or digging for worms in the woods behind his shack, if they thought about him at all, which was not likely, the good citizens of L so often lost in musings and day dreams, and no-one was really all that surprised when he washed on to the beach anyway. Like many people in L the bargeman was a heavy drinker and it was supposed that he had probably had one too many and fallen overboard, intoxicated, unable to swim, chugging water now instead of beer, rubber waders filling too, the cold current carrying him downstream, caught for a while in the grasp of weeds and suffocating muck before eventually surfacing onto the shoreline sand. Of course he was not the first to drown in L, only the first to do so after my return, Voltaire noted, and his passing was little remarked upon. Residents of L were “like frogs sitting around a pond,” he thought, and had been drowning for years, almost instinctually hopping into the water at the slightest provocation, and there was little reason to doubt that they would not continue to do so, especially in light of the recent flood, the Mississippi River cresting at historic heights, reaching 17.9 feet on May 5, six feet above flood stage, workers and National Guard troops building dikes, volunteers filling nearly

70,000 sandbags in just three days. And for the most part the dikes worked, Voltaire conceded, until an 80-foot section of a North Side levee broke and water filled at least 50 homes, forcing evacuations as well as closing roads, bridges and railroad service. Not to be deterred, the hard working citizens of L continued to go about their daily activities, and Roland Fisher 55, drowned while ferrying employees across the river to work the first shift at the Northern States power plant. Later a washout caused a 107,000 gallon gasoline storage tank to topple, prompting fire officials to ban smoking, the burning of leaves, and backyard barbecues. Telephone and electrical service was lost for nearly a week and National Guardsmen, with bayonets fixed, marched alongside dark dikes, watching for looters and leaks. Ten days later the river began to recede; streets reopened; residents returned home; and the drownings continued. In fact, John Voltaire wrote, the day following the discovery of the bargeman's body, only one day after my return to L, two college students were found a mere twenty yards apart inside the city boat club harbor, coupled to steel dock pilings by their belt buckles, causing no small consternation among patrons consuming a nice Pino Gris and shrimp linguine, al dente, shore side on the lovely patio. Like the bargeman and the ferryman, there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for the drownings, according to the local press and elected officials. The two young men, both of Hmong heritage, sophomores at the local university, had been drinking in a downtown Third Street pub the night before when an altercation broke out between the Cambodian natives and a group of fraternity brothers. According to eye-witnesses, the police report said, racial epithets were hurled, beer was thrown, and the two Hmong men fled the bar, immediately followed by the frolicking fraternity brothers who chased them toward the river, only three blocks away. Seeing the encroaching Greek gang, eye-witnesses testified, the police report said, the Hmongs, thinking to save their lives, jumped into the river and began to swim out into the middle of the black, wide, still flood-swollen swift channel, the laughing, shouting fraternity brothers now heaving heavy rocks picked up from the shore toward them. There were no cuts, contusions, or bruises on the bodies to indicate that the rocks had hit their marks, the coroner concluded, so the deaths were ruled "accidental," and no charges would be filed, the press reported, other than disorderly conduct and public drunkenness, misdemeanors both, the incident constituting merely "a cultural misunderstanding" (it was said that the Hmongs could barely speak English), there being no societal advantage to be gained by inflicting permanent damage and stain to the reputations and lives of these promising young fraternity brothers, all of whom, it was said, came from prosperous, upstanding families, families, it might be noted, who could trace their ancestries all the way back to L's original, founding fathers. And as I quickly learned, Voltaire remembered, if that seeming plague of drownings were not enough, if that outrage inflicted upon the finer sensibilities of the decent offspring of L needed further fuel, the Chief of Police and Mayor and Public Health Commissioner later that same day reported during a press conference at City Hall (there was, as one might imagine, coming so soon after four other recent drownings, growing public concern) that very morning a group of fishermen had stumbled upon human skulls and body parts on a back-channel sandbar, buried in shallow graves, the second set of such remains found in L that spring. "The skulls were just sticking out of the ground," one breathless boater told authorities. According to a forensic anthropologist, the director of a burial sites preservation program, speaking at the press conference, carried live on local radio and television, remains included a complete human skeleton, some

clothing still intact. Also found was a woman's body partially submerged in a puddle. "It's too soon to tell the person's age, or how that person died, or if she was sexually molested," the forensics expert said, adding that cycles of freezing and thawing cause the soil to heave, and this may have forced the skeletons up from the ground. "Isn't this abnormal?" a reporter from the local newspaper asked, "not to say odd? I mean, it's like the earth is puking up dead people." "It's hard to say if the number of bodies found recently is unusual," the expert said, "because the Department of Natural Resources does not keep records of such things." "Nor does the Department of Justice," the Police Chief added. "Is it out of the question," a television reporter asked, "to think that as the flood waters recede other bodies may be found?" "What about foul play?" a radio reporter interrupted. "Is that what we're dealing with here?" "We are currently looking at all possible explanations," the Police Chief said, "and yes, we must anticipate that other bodies may yet surface as the flood waters continue to abate, but we have no evidence to support speculation concerning criminal acts." "Let me add," the Mayor added, "that the public should remain calm. There is no reason to assume the worst, no reason to panic. Appropriate actions will be taken. To that end I am announcing at this time the formation of a task force, led by the Police Chief himself, to investigate these incidents, as well the establishment of a committee to study possible solutions for the prevention of further drownings, if they are indeed the results of accidents, as we fully expect to find. Such solutions under consideration include, but are not limited to: required life guard and CPR training for all residents of L, the construction of concrete walls, wooden barricades and electric fences, twenty-five feet high, alongside both east and west river banks. Also the possibility exists for the creation of volunteer citizen patrols. For the health and welfare of the people of L, all options are on the table." On a similar, health related note, the Public Health Commissioner interjected, "The Health Department would like to take advantage of this opportunity to urge residents to be cautious swimming in local lakes and streams," he said, after blue-green algae blooms were found on Lake Onalaska. "Hot, humid weather provides ideal conditions for the growth of these blue - green algae," the Commissioner warned. And Lake Onalaska – as well as other waterways in the surrounding environs – is a perfect incubator. "The algae can produce toxins when swallowed," the Commissioner said, Voltaire remembered. "Signs of illness range from eye, ear and skin irritations," the Commissioner said, "to projectile vomiting and unceasing, explosive diarrhea."

And so life goes on, John Voltaire noted, such as it is, even in L. The sun and moon rise and set, and rise and set again. Earth wobbles on its axis, mosquitoes and bats bite, spread encephalitis and rabies. Carrion birds fatten on road-kill raccoon. Enclosed between one red dawn and the next blind Mayflies propagate and die, mouthless, scraped from greasy bridges by snow plows. Another body is found in the river or woods, another wall or barrier built, another crypt closed and coffin capped, another case of water-induced diarrhea staining the city's underwear. No matter how long I stay away, he wrote, not much changes in a muddy mid-western town sunk into the carp-rank banks of the Mississippi River.

Good Neighbors

By Todd Natti

The Standard was one of the ugliest buildings in downtown Buffalo. It had a cheap art-deco look and was clearly built during the time when the city's outlook had bordered on optimism: factories billowed smoke into the air, trains ran in and out of the Central Terminal, and most importantly, people came to live. The Standard had seen those times. It had its heyday. Now, like the city, it sat dying and alone during one of the many humid August nights Buffalonians knew too well.

"Christ," Kevin Leigh said, looking up at the building. "Aren't you a sight?" He pulled out his phone and listened again to the message the landlord had left. She sounded out of breath and her voice was deeper than he liked, but at least she was straight to the point. She wanted him there the next morning, wouldn't say specifically why. Normally he wouldn't have bothered, but she put down a substantial deposit that he couldn't ignore. He figured it had something to do with tenants and rent or contractors not fulfilling their obligations. From the look of the place, he couldn't imagine that a contractor had been inside in decades. There were only two lights on in the entire building, near the upper floors. Hopefully you look better in the daylight, he thought as he put his car in gear and pulled away.

It didn't. It may have looked worse. The humidity didn't help. It was thick, like an invisible sauna had descended upon the city. It made the garbage in the streets smell more than usual, created a haze over potholes, and made Leigh not want to get out of his car. He sighed and turned up the air conditioning, reminding himself he'd already been paid as he looked in the mirror and smoothed out his eyebrows before checking for nose-hairs. He adjusted his tie and leaned his face toward the vent. "Oh lord," he said to the empty car. "If there's a heaven, it has to be air conditioned by German Engineers."

He was so lost in the cool air he barely heard the knock on the window. An overweight woman's face was staring at him. Sweat beads rolled down her cheeks, pausing momentarily when they hit what must have been acne scars. She had bleached hair, but not enough to cover up the grey strands at her roots. When he realized that this might be the client, he nearly banged his head on the ceiling as he sat up. He hesitated a moment before lowering the window, wanting to enjoy the cool for one more minute.

But the moment came and as he rolled down the window, Leigh swore he could hear the cool air particles scream as they collided with the wall of humidity, rich with the aroma of rotting garbage and fresh tar.

You the lawyer?" the woman said.

"Yes, ma'am," Leigh replied.

"Good," she said. "I'm Dolores Ridge, the landlord. Now look, I've been standing out here on this goddamn asphalt for the last fifteen minutes watching you sit in your car, so, if you don't mind, I'd like to get going. It's a lot of steps to the unit and the day ain't getting any cooler." She turned and began walking toward the entrance of The Standard.

Leigh got out of his car and followed. "Miss," he began.

"Missus," she corrected. "Missus Dolores Ridge. Most just call me Landlady Ridge. So you can call me that, too." She turned an eye to him. "Might want to lock that car. Riff-raff around here will strip it in a second. Can't leave anything for granted here. Not anymore."

Leigh looked up and down the vacant street, clicked the lock and alarm button on his keychain and followed Landlady Ridge into the building. One of the windows out front had cardboard taped over a crack.

By the time Leigh stepped into the rotunda or whatever it was supposed to be, he wished that he had not. It was a dark room, full of stale air. There was an old couch seated under a dust-covered mirror. The mailboxes were full of dents and some had been torn open. The rug on the floor was torn in places and the linoleum underneath was bloated and cracked.

It took two steps inside for him to start sweating. Not the fine film that covered his face after a good game of roller hockey, but the pungent thick streams that originated under his hairline and made camp at the tip of his nose before teetering off into the great beyond that was the ground. He wiped his brow with his hand, dragging his fingers down around the bridge of his nose to try to clear the droplets away. His cheeks, which were already perpetually red, became a deep maroon that spread from his ears to his lips.

He cursed himself under his breath. He was not prone to sweating like this. It usually only happened when he went to the gym. He would do his pecs and lats, his calves and gluts, and the other muscles he did not know the names of. This was all followed by a two-mile jog. He would finish up with a shower, getting rid of the stink before it could stain him and follow him around all day.

He figured it must have been the air. Dense and wet, the humidity had plagued Buffalo for the past few weeks. It was always this way in late summer. June was cool, the temperatures brought down by the winds of Lake Erie. July followed suit at the beginning but decided it was bored by the idea and began to warm up. August was, well, it was damn hot. Not the dry heat of the desert, but the wet, sloshing warmth that the Deep South reveled in.

"Just to be clear," Landlady Ridge said. "There's no elevator."

"You're kidding."

"Broken for almost a year. Can't get anyone to come out to fix it or pay them, for that matter, if they would come."

When Landlady Ridge had called him the previous week, he figured there would be an elevator. A fifteen-story apartment building downtown had to have an elevator. The thought that there wasn't never crossed his mind.

So he sweated profusely as he followed Landlady Ridge up the steps. As they began their climb, his vision became transfixed on her derriere. It was big. Bigger than it seemed skin could allow. She swayed when she walked. Back and forth, back and forth, like a metronome or a pendulum. She's going to hit the railing and the wall with each step, he thought. But she did not. Came close a few times and the thought of an oversized pinball trying to maneuver its way through the bumpers came to mind. He stifled a laugh, but not enough, because she stopped her ascent.

When she turned to look at him after he laughed, it was like watching a whale trying to look over its shoulder. Leigh was quite sure that she could not move her neck. Landlady Ridge moved her

entire body. Her legs readjusted on the step and Leigh thought for a moment of a boulder on a mountain. All she had to do was miss a step and he would be crushed, no doubt about it.

"What's funny?" she said as her head made its way around to look at him. Her face was sweatier than before and the redness of her cheeks accentuated the acne scars.

"Nothing," Leigh replied, "Just thinking of something I saw on television."

"And it made you laugh."

He nodded. "It made me laugh."

She looked at him for a moment and he smiled, showing off his teeth. Pearly white and looking just right, he said to himself each and every morning. Landlady Ridge turned around again, muttered something, and returned to the ascent. Leigh let her gain a few steps before following.

"My father owned The Standard when he was alive," she said as they climbed. "I inherited it when he shuffled off this mortal coil. Had a heart attack at a Bills game. One moment cheering, the next: kaput."

"Sorry to hear that," Leigh said. "I'm sure he was a good man."

"Damn straight," she said. "An asshole, but still the best man I've ever known."

As they approached the seventh floor, Leigh found himself becoming mesmerized by her swing again. He was so in tune with it, he almost didn't notice the open door next to him. In it stood a man that Leigh guessed to be in his late thirties or early forties. He was balding, with cracked glasses balanced on a crooked nose. An oversized pot-belly rested over his belt, held back by a thin stained t-shirt.

Landlady Ridge must have sensed that Kevin stopped because she swung her body back around to look at him. Leigh looked up at her, at the man, and then at her again.

"Back inside, Mr. Dean," she said. "I've got this under control." The man obliged and went back into his apartment, shutting the door behind him. "Overprotective riff-raff. I can take care of myself," she said. "Everyone here knows that about me. Everyone."

"And how many tenants are there in the building?"

Either she didn't hear him or ignored him. "Come on, we're almost there," she said.

When they finally reached the eighth floor, Leigh had to catch his breath. The stairs had been one hell of a climb, more than any other he could remember. How people did this every day was beyond him. Judging by the state of the building – old, cracking brick, weeds growing up the sides in unattractive ways – and the stairs – grey concrete and metal railings with spreading rust with a lovely wall paper of cinderblocks – he could only surmise these were some of the cheaper apartments in the area and that the tenants were likely not the most upstanding.

It took them a minute to get in the apartment. Landlady Ridge had to wiggle the key back and forth violently to get it to open. Her whole body shook as she did so and her breath came in short, ragged gasps.

Oh god, please don't let her have a heart attack, Kevin thought. I'm not trying to resuscitate her or drag her down the stairs.

Landlady Ridge did not have a heart attack. Instead, she opened the door. It cracked and creaked as it opened. She went in to the apartment and he followed.

The first thing he thought when he saw the apartment was: canary. The unit was all yellow. The wallpaper was yellow with little black vines and flowers running up the sides. The kitchen floor alternated yellow and white in a checkerboard pattern. The cupboards were yellow. The refrigerator was yellow. The countertops, once white, were yellow. It was like being in a rotten candy cane.

What surprised him most of all was that the apartment was furnished to a certain extent. There was a couch that looked like it was from the Seventies, a television from the Eighties and a kitchen set that must have been picked up off the curb. The ancient refrigerator hummed noisily.

Landlady Ridge turned to look at him. "So this is it," she said. Her breathing was coming down a little. "This is the place."

"That it is," Leigh said, looking away from her and instead at all the yellow. "So, since you wouldn't discuss with me on the phone in detail why you wanted my services, why don't you tell me now."

"I want to sue the Vicktors."

"The victors?"

"The Vicktors," she said. "V-I-C-K-T-O-R-S. The Vicktor family. They are related to former tenants of mine who are causing trouble, making it so I can't rent this place out to nobody new."

"Wait, what? The family of the former tenants?" Leigh said.

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But what I don't understand, Miss—"

"I told you before, it's missus," she said. "I'm a Missus Ridge. Kept my maiden name. Family tradition. My husband didn't mind, didn't mind one bit."

Leigh shuddered at the thought of her husband. He imagined him to be thin, that ancient stereotype of the fat wife and the skinny husband. Yes, dear? More cake dear? Anything you want, dear. Sorry, dear. Better than the thought of an equally fat Mr. Ridge plopping his round body next to hers at night before they tried to make hot, suffocating, splotchy love.

"Missus Ridge," he said. "What I don't understand is why you want to sue the family of former tenants. Why not sue the old tenants themselves? If they are making trouble, it should be easy. What sort of things do they do?"

"They make noise, shout and scream, bang around," she said. "Each and every day they do it. I get complaints from above and below. People are talking of moving out. I can't have that, no I can't. You know how much money I would lose? And how am I going to get new people in those places? Hard enough filling this place up as it is. I already had three move outs of this unit alone. They move in, two days later, they move out, threatening to sue, so I just let them go, break the lease without penalty. It's costing me money, goddamn it. And I don't like to be losing money, I don't think I need to tell you."

"No, I am guessing not," Leigh said. "But, first, before we can decide about any legal action, I need to know a few things. When did the raucous tenants move out? What are they doing to continuously cause trouble? Why don't you just call the police?"

"Can't call the police," she said.

"Why can't you call the police?" he said. Her coyness was annoying him, and he was already annoyed at the heat and the stairs. He expected her to ask about attorney-client privileges or if he could simply keep a secret. Instead he got:

"They don't come anymore."

"They what?"

"You listen much? They don't come anymore," she said. "Told me I called too much and they would write me up if I kept on doing it. I told them to go to hell. Then they busted the window out front." Leigh remembered the window in the lobby with cardboard covering up the spider web crack in the glass. "They said it wasn't them, but I know it was. Who else would do that?"

Try any other one of the tenants in this dump. Guy downstairs looked like a real winner, Leigh thought. He wanted to say it, wanted to just fling it in her face and walk out of the apartment and head to the Anchor Bar for too many wings and too many beers. Instead, what he said was: "We can talk about the window later. Since the police won't come anymore, as you've said, why don't you wait and get the former tenants when they try to come into the building?"

"Can't see them coming in," she said.

"What do you mean you can't see them?"

"I mean what I mean," she said. "You can't seem them coming in. I've sat and watched in the stairwell, but they don't come through there. Then there is the banging and screaming just the same, every single day."

"Then how do they get in?" Leigh said. "Is there a fire escape?"

"Been broken for years."

Lovely, he thought. "Are they staying with other tenants?"

She shook her head.

"Then how are they getting in here to make all the noise you say they make?"

"They're ghosts."

"Excuse me?"

"They are ghosts," she said. "You know, you ought to check your ears, seems to me you got too much wax in them. Can't hear a damn thing I've said, can ya? I'm almost regretting calling you. I have a problem, I want you to fix it. I want what is due to me, and you are all like 'Ghosts?' Good lord, Mr. Leigh. You act like you've never dealt with them before."

Leigh didn't respond. He looked at her. He turned and looked at the door. Jesus, he thought. The yellow of the room surrounded his eyes as he looked back to her. Then he took a step back, rubbed his chin and looked back at the door. It would be so easy, begin to turn, agree with her that there were ghosts in the apartment, and then run like hell, down the stairs and out to his car.

It was that or stay and listen to the rest of this woman's story. Maybe it would make an interesting story to tell when he went out with his friends. Also, there could still be money to be made here. He made his choice. Leigh did not run. He turned back to her and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had a bad sinus headache.

"No, Mrs. Ridge, I have never dealt with ghosts before," he said. "I don't quite believe in them, either. It's silly kids' stuff and superstition. Good for movies and Stephen King books, but they don't factor into real life." He looked at her and saw her face scrunch up, like she was about to yell at him, berate his non-belief. He wasn't in the mood for a shouting match, so he said: "But let's suppose for moment that you do have ghosts. Why call me? Why not some parapsychologist or an exorcist? It doesn't really seem like a legal matter, if you catch my drift."

"I don't catch nothing," she said. "And beside, I already called them scientists and priests and they couldn't do a damn thing. Said they would need more tests and more money. Seemed to me like a bunch of hocus pocus, so I wasn't going to pay them a dime."

"So you call me, who is charging you right now," Leigh said.

"I figure if you can do what I need done, then the money will make itself back to me right away."

"And what is it you want me to do?"

Landlady Ridge let out a long, wet sigh that sounded more like a clogged drain trying to clear itself. "Like I told you," she said. "I want you to sue the Vicktors. The family. It's their dead relatives that are haunting this place, so I figure they should have to pay so their relatives can stay here. You see what I'm saying?"

Leigh blinked.

"I got it all worked out," she said. "They have to have a permanent lease on the apartment. Pay me each and every month since no one else will live here. That way the ghosts can scream and scamper all they want and I'll still make money off this place."

"And what about the neighbors?" Leigh said. "You told me they were threatening to move out as well."

"Did I?" she said. "Well, don't worry about them. I'll take care of them so they'll be right as rain. Maybe even the settlement will give a little extra so I can pay them off. You know: here's

something for your troubles and such. Not a lot, just enough to shut them up. There are only poor people in this building, Mr. Leigh. A little money goes a long way.”

Leigh did not doubt that. “Why not have the Vicktor family buy this unit?”

“Because I can make more money off them renting,” she said. “It’s a long term investment, you know? I can milk them good and long. Besides, my pop owned this building and damned to hell if I’m going to sell off a unit. It’s mine till I die.”

“Alright, fair enough,” Leigh said. “But there’s still the problem of the ghosts. You can’t prove there are any here. No jury will buy it, no judge will let it go to trial.”

“I thought of that, too,” she said. “Which is why you’re here. You’ll see them and then agree to take the case, then we can record it when they come again or get a judge to come out here and see.”

“I will see them?” Leigh said. He looked around the apartment but only saw yellow. “It’s the middle of the day, Mrs. Ridge. Ghosts come out at night.” He could not believe that he was having this conversation. Should have gone for the door, he thought.

“Not these ones,” she said. “They were murdered during the day, so they come out during the day. Once a day, every day, like clockwork.”

“Murdered?” Leigh said. Until this point he had not thought about how the ghosts had come to be in the apartment. The conversation was so odd that it did not cross his mind that there may have been one hell of a nasty event to get the spirits into the yellow unit to begin with.

“All four of them,” she said. “And that includes the baby. Someone broke in during the day and slaughtered them all. Police never found out who did it. They figured that Maxwell—”

“Maxwell?”

“The father. Maxwell Vicktor. They figured he owed somebody money and that person came looking. Personally, I wouldn’t be surprised. I was going to evict them anyway, hadn’t paid their rent in two months.”

“How come I’ve never heard about any of this?” Leigh asked.

“You think things that go on in this part of town make it into the paper that you read?” she said. “Hell, they sure as hell don’t make it onto the news. There are murders and robberies and rapes and all kinds of hell around here, Mr. Leigh. That’s why I live on the top floor, harder for them to get to.”

Leigh looked at her. Top floor? Bullshit. But she did not laugh, so neither did he. There was no doubt that things that went on in this part of the city were not publicized, but a whole family slaughtered? He found that hard to believe.

“So yeah,” Landlady Ridge continued. “Someone busted in through the door and took to them all with an ax or meat cleaver or something. Chopped all of them up. Took me weeks to clean up. Leaked down into the apartment below, too. So I had to clean that up, as well. All out of my own pocket, you know. So I want some sort of reparation, a payment for my troubles.”

“And you want the dead family’s relatives to give you that?” Leigh said. “I don’t know. It’s not their fault the murders happened. It’s not their fault the ghosts are hanging around reenacting whatever happened to them.”

“Well it sure as hell is somebody’s fault.”

“Wouldn’t that be the murderer?”

“Not since they didn’t catch no murderer,” she said. “So I have to find other ways to get my money. I can’t rent this place with the shit that goes on here. I need my money, Mr. Leigh, and you have to help me get it.”

Leigh suppressed a groan. This woman in her flower-speckled muumuu was giving him the creeps. Sue the relatives of a murdered family? Being disbarred would not compare to the humiliation.

"Okay," he said. "Suppose I help you out—"

"I sincerely hope that you do."

"Yeah, well, there is still the problem of the ghosts. You can't prove that they exist, that they are real, so how can you hope to win any lawsuit? I am sorry Mrs. Ridge, but this isn't something for me. I am going to leave now. Sorry I could not have been more of a help."

"Sorry?" she said. "Not yet you aren't. When you see them then you'll be sorry. You'll be sorry you didn't take my case because you'll know you would have won."

"I'm not going to see any ghosts, Mrs. Ridge," Leigh said. "I'm leaving."

Landlady Ridge's face scrunched up again. "Well, it's too late for that, Mr. Leigh. Why do you think I asked you here at this time? You are going to see them any minute now."

Leigh felt his breath catch in his throat. It wasn't the prospect of seeing ghosts that made him uneasy but instead Landlady Ridge's conviction. He had not wondered why she had asked him to come so early in the morning, not once had it crossed his mind. Prospective clients sometimes had odd schedules, simple as that.

"What?" he said quietly right before it began.

Landlady Ridge smiled at him as the chairs at the table began to move. They slid out, as if pulled by a string. A cupboard opened for a moment and closed. Then the refrigerator door did the same. Leigh could feel his sweat coming back.

"What?" he said again.

"Oh, you'll see," said the landlady.

When he looked back at the table, a family was there. Four of them: father, son, mother and baby. They were dressed in modest clothes, the same type he would find most people living in the building wearing. It looked as if they were mimes eating breakfast.

Unlike mimes, however, he could hear them. It was a distant noise, like listening to people talk through a long, thin pipe. It was there, plain as could be. The sound of chewing or the giggle of the little boy when the father made a face at him, it was all there. Jesus Christ, Leigh thought. He looked at Landlady Ridge, but she only smiled and tilted her head for him to keep watching.

He looked back at the ghosts. The mother was talking to the father as he mimed eating his morning cereal, pausing only to take a drink of some unseen thing. Leigh guessed it was coffee by how slow the man sipped.

What time will you be home? the mother said.

I don't know, the father said. Not too late.

The baby laughed and the mother turned. She tickled it under its nose. The baby laughed again. The little boy smiled.

And the rent? the mother said, not turning to look at the husband.

When we have the money, we can pay. Until then we need to eat and have heat.

What if she cuts our heat again?

He didn't respond.

I don't like her, she said. Do you see how she looks at us all the time? Thank god she rarely comes out of that pigsty upstairs. She's disgusting. And Teddy? I can't even think about him. I won't think about him. Just come home as quick as you can, okay?

Okay, the husband said. Okay.

Leigh looked over at Landlady Ridge. The woman's brow was furrowed, her bottom lip sticking out and her cheeks bunched up. He wondered how many times she had heard this and if it still hurt to hear the words. From the look of her face it seemed so. And who was Teddy?

The thoughts were eclipsed by the fact that he suddenly felt like a voyeur. Whether this was real or not, it was something that he should not be seeing. I don't want to watch these dead people

eat breakfast for the thousandth time, he thought. And I sure as hell don't want to see them murdered.

Then came the noise. It was a pounding from out in the hallway, distant at first and then progressively louder. For a moment he thought if Landlady Ridge's husband was as fat as she was, then he must have been coming down the steps to join in. But he knew that was not the case when, from the corner of his eye, he saw the family look up at the door.

Is this it? Leigh thought. The door began to shake with each successive pound. He thought of the scene in an old movie about ghosts he had seen, where they banged on the walls so loud it was deafening. The noise at the door was not to that level, but it was getting close.

To his side, the spectral father stood up but the wife grabbed his arm. She shook her head and mouthed No. The father looked at her for a moment and then pulled away. He went to the door while the rest of his family sat wide-eyed. The baby began to cry.

Who's there? he said. Leigh heard no response. The father must have, because he then said: What do you want? Another pause. I told you I would pay you when I had it. Silence.

Leigh looked at Landlady Ridge, who said: "See? Owed money. I'd take a step back."

The door burst open. The father fell backward onto the floor. The mother screamed. The baby wailed.

As the father tried to crawl away Leigh looked to the door. He did not know what he expected to see, but expected that it would be someone or at least something. There was nothing but the open doorway. Then he saw the footprints.

"Holy god," he said as he watched. The carpet was indenting as if someone was walking on it. Whoever it was, it was missing the big toe on its left foot. He stepped back as the footsteps made their way to the father.

Leigh turned his head but felt the damp, cold palms of Landlady Ridge on his cheeks, turning him back toward the scene. He tried to look at her, but she was behind him now, holding his head firmly.

"You have to watch," she whispered. "So you can help me with my case."

"Let go of me," he said. "I can't see this."

"Hush now," she said. "It's almost over."

On the floor the spectral father was screaming as something stepped onto him. His body bent backward as his stomach was pressed into the floor. He and the family were screaming and Leigh closed his eyes. He squeezed them tighter than he had in his entire life.

When Leigh told people of the event afterward, he never described the noises he heard after he shut his eyes. He would light a cigarette and skip to the next part of the story. He did not want to describe the screams, the horrible ear shattering screams. Nor did he want to describe the wet thuds, like someone running an ax into a mud pit full of twigs. Thwunk and crack in the same second. He did not tell people that. He physically could not.

There were two things he did tell them. One was that no neighbor banged on their respective ceiling or floor about the noise and the second was the two clear words he heard mixed in with the screams. It came from the mother. The baby was not crying anymore. The son and father made no noise. Right before another wet thwunk and crack, the mother said two words: Teddy. Please.

Then there was silence. When Leigh opened his eyes again, he could see the bodies fading away. Their translucence dissolved until there was just him, Landlady Ridge and the choking yellow décor.

"Jesus Christ, lady," Leigh said, pushing her off him. "What the hell was that?"

"It's what I told you," she said. "It's ghosts. You had to see it. You had to so you could understand why no one else wants to move in here. Impossible with all that damn racket."

"I think racket is an understatement," he said, wiping the sweat off his brow. He tried to gather his senses, not look at Landlady Ridge, get some sort of bearing on the situation. "Look," he said. "I don't know what all that was, how you pulled off that little light show—"

"It wasn't a light show."

"I'm going to stick with the belief that it was," he said. "Or that I'm on some sick sort of reality show. At least for my own sake. Either way, let me tell you this from a professional standpoint, since you are paying for my time: there is nothing that can be done here. Maybe if you found this Teddy character you could sue him for in civil court, since from what it sounds like he was the one who committed the murders."

"Can't do that," she said. Before Leigh could ask why not, she said: "Police never found no Teddy. Hell, I don't even know one." She furrowed her brow when she looked at him.

"Okay," Leigh said, beginning to move toward the door. "Well look, if it will make you happy, I'll ask around, see if there is anything, anything I can do to help you. But honestly, I wouldn't get my hopes up. Okay?"

She didn't say anything, just kept staring at him.

"Okay, well, I'm going to go, alright? Maybe I will check with the tenant I saw downstairs, see what information he can tell me. Or maybe some of the other tenants. Build something to help you out." She just kept staring at him. "I'll let myself out."

He walked through the open door, making a beeline for the stairs. He decided he would talk to the tenant below, not for Landlady Ridge's sake, but to see if he could salvage something out of this horrific, wasted morning. He stopped on the seventh floor and straightened his tie. The door that the man – Mr. Dean, if he recalled correctly – had been standing at was closed, so he knocked a few times. The sound of footsteps could be heard from behind the door and Leigh quickly glanced up the stairs to see if Landlady Ridge was watching. She wasn't.

When Mr. Dean opened the door, Leigh showed off his pearly whites. "How are you, sir?" he said. "We saw each other earlier, albeit briefly, as I was headed upstairs."

The man stared blankly at him. His crooked glasses slid down his nose a little.

"Yes, well, I was wondering if you could tell me – "

"All day and all night!" the man blurted out. Leigh took a step back. "The damn noise! The damn ghosts! All day and all night! They keep me awake! I can't live like this!"

"Okay, sir, okay, nothing to get worked up about," he said. "What I wanted to ask you about was..." His thoughts drifted. He looked behind the man into his apartment. It was dark. There was a couch in the middle of the room, worn out and decrepit. There was no lamp. There was nothing in the apartment but the couch.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dean," Leigh said. "Did you say all day and night?"

"Ah shit!" came the deep baritone voice of Landlady Ridge from the stairwell. "Now he knows. Get him Teddy!"

"Teddy?" Leigh said, turning to see the man's arms dash out and grab him by the lapels. Leigh tried to say something, but before he could Teddy swung him into the concrete wall of the stairwell. Then swung him into it again. Then a third and final time before letting him go. Leigh slumped to the floor, half-conscious, but could still see the missing toe on Teddy's left foot through his bloodshot eyes and hear the deep thumps of Landlady Ridge coming down the stairs.

"Can't do anything right, can ya?" she said. "I told you: it's once a day, just once a day. Maybe if you listened to me once in a while we wouldn't have this problem. How are we supposed to get any money if you keep bungling it up?"

"Sorry," Teddy said.

"Well, you can stuff your 'sorrys' in a sack," she said. "Now we have to get rid of another one. You know I don't like walking up and down these stairs repeatedly. But you leave me no choice. Well, damn. Pick him up."

"The Stair-Fall again?"

"Of course the Stair-Fall again. Now quick, I have to make lunch in a little while."

Leigh felt himself being picked up from behind, warm, greasy arms tucked under his armpits. They carried him to the edge of the stairs. Leigh couldn't find any words, couldn't even open his mouth as he felt his toes being pushed over the rim of the top step.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Landlady Ridge said. "Push him!"

Teddy did and, for a brief moment, Leigh felt himself freefalling. Images flashed before his eyes. They were random. His sister crying at a birthday party. His passing the Bar. The defendant that tried to choke him and how he got his hand to his neck fast enough so the man couldn't get a grip. It was a split second, but that was all he needed. It was reflex.

Just like it was reflex when he put his arms out to break his fall down the stairs, slow the descent, not break his neck. He felt his arms give a little and felt the top of his head hit a stair. He didn't hear a crack, but it wouldn't have mattered. His fate was in gravity's hands. Leigh came to rest at the bottom of the steps, on the ledge between the sixth and seventh floors. He landed on his chin and his teeth clashed together and he felt a tooth break. It flew out of his mouth and made a small ting on the concrete.

He thought for a moment that he was going to black out but somehow he remained conscious. The specks in his vision were now stars that cut across his view like boats speeding on a quiet lake. He could hear muffled voices coming from above. They began to clear up as he used all his strength to try to crawl away.

"And now look at him," Landlady Ridge said. "Not only still breathing but still trying to get away. You bungled this one, Teddy. Bungled it good. Now go get him."

Teddy looked at her beady eyes and nodded. He moved toward the stairs, taking it slowly, trying not to slip on the blood Leigh had left behind.

"Christ almighty," Landlady Ridge said. "I said: go get him!" She pushed Teddy forward and he fell in the open space. Unlike Leigh, though, he didn't seem to have much in the way of reflexes and tumbled down the stairs, landing face down with a damp thump. Blood curled out from his nose and his one eye was pinched shut by his shattered glasses. His other eye looked at Leigh, who was across the landing and staring right back.

"Teddy!" Landlady Ridge shouted. "Oh god, Teddy, I'm sorry! I'm coming!"

Leigh thought he heard Teddy try to protest a little, to keep her where she was, but all that came out was wet gurgles and blood. His good eye started scanning around, trying to see if the woman was really coming down the stairs.

She was indeed and fast. Leigh saw her attempt to stampede down the concrete steps, calling Teddy's name. Then there was just screaming when she lost her footing. Her body began to lean forward before somersaulting down the stairs. Leigh looked back at Teddy who was staring at him with his one good eye, gurgling something frantically. Leigh closed his eyes and tried to block out the sound of the screaming and the gurgling.

There was a massive whump, a wet snap, and then silence. Leigh slowly opened his eyes. He blinked. Landlady Ridge was staring at him, her head bent at an impossible angle. Her chin was facing upward, tracing the concrete wall at the bottom of the steps. Her eyes were wide and her face muscles slack. Her large body acted like a pedestal, keeping her positioned against the white concrete. Teddy, on the other hand, was gone.

Leigh sat there for a while, looking at her, thinking of Teddy under her. He saw the piece of his tooth next to her slack hand and then he began to cry. He cried more than he had in his life. He

sobbed for over fifteen minutes, not noticing that no one came out of the apartments to see what all the noise had been. When he finished, he wiped his eyes and the stairwell became quiet. He tried to stand up, found that he could without a lot of pain and began to descend the stairs.

When he got outside, he looked at his reflection in the cracked front window of The Standard. He was bruised and bloodied, his suit coat and shirt torn in a few places, and a noticeable gap had defeated his once perfect smile. He frowned a bit and pulled out his cell phone. He called the press and then the police.

The local media beat the cops to the scene. They arrived before the ambulance, but not by much. They found Leigh was sitting on the front steps of the Standard, his head in his hands. As the reporters did their best to set up quickly, the EMTs pushed by them and put him on a stretcher. When the reporters descended upon him, the closest tried pulled back in disgust, but were pushed forward by those in the back. He smelled awful, blood was coming out of his mouth and his cheeks were stained with dried tears. The initial aversion subsided as they began asking him questions.

Leigh didn't say anything, He just watched as the sky rush past his field of vision. He could hear the reporters shouting to him. They were asking questions and their voices seemed to lump together in a chorus. The cameras were in his face. The questions were all around him. He couldn't make out what they were saying but it didn't matter. This was the moment. With the reporters gathered, the ambulance siren blaring and The Standard sitting quietly with no lights on inside, Kevin Leigh opened his swollen eyes, looked into the nearest camera, and showed what remained of his pearly whites.

The Miraculous Humpback Mountain Corrective

(A Cracker¹ Melodrama)

By Art Bupkis

Chapter 1:

Set Up in Hard Country Times

Chapter 2:

Now ta Business

Epilogue:

Just Deserts for All

Chapter 1: *Set Up in Hard Country Times*

Ike opened his eyes slowly, awakened by wind slapping the plastic curtain that posed as the door to the small vinyl hut. It was a dim dawn. Miranda, his old, fat bitch of a mate passed a perfunctory grunt as he climbed over her to leave. Stiff in the chill dank that remained from the early morning's hail storm, Ike bent over, considered the merits of what was left of yesterday's lamb and rice stew, shook his head, then turned to look about, face into the late-March wind.

Although there were still a few chunks of dirty slush floating in puddles here and there, the farmyard was a nearly monotone black bean soup of mud, curdling beneath a cover of iron-grey clouds. It was sure to be one sloppy, hateful day moving the sheep and goats to summer pasture, up on Humpback Mountain.

Ike lowered his head, and puked. He tried to bark, but heaved again. The mess missed his long, white fur, but barely. Ike moaned.

The "Quaking U Ranch" was a tin-dime operation that one Forest Bodine ("Fob") Ewer ran with his lovely wife, *Cantina-Marina Vizcaya-Puey*. Squat Cantina, with her bouffant hair dyed tow-

¹ If you're not at least moderately fluent in Southeast Cracker-Trash, I suggest you play your computer's text reader as you read the dialog.

— A. B.

white, and her body tented in a tan and sepia-spotted moo-moo that draped her bulk like a burnt crust covering an over-stuffed chicken potpie, now made a grand, John Waters-esque entrance from the dirty white doublewide that stood behind the dog house. Slamming the trailer door, Cantina let out a sharp bitch around a dangling *Marlboro Light*. Where the hell was Fob?

It was Fob Ewer's good fortune to be hard of hearing.... and to have a poor sense of smell. Both made life on the Quaking U easier. Made life with Cantina a lot easier. As Cantina went on, now exerting to hold her volume over a mounting chorus of bleating ewes and nannies, the large, smiling cracker rounded the barn, then just continued his slurp, suck and smack high-rubber boot amble right through the front yard's ill-kept pigsty over to his pick-up truck, all the while pretending to be totally oblivious.... even as a squealing piglet added its insistent, high-lonesome tenor to the barnyard hootenanny.

The aluminum door slammed again as Cantina disappeared with a huff back into the trailer.... after winging an exhausted butane lighter at Fob's head, and tossing a cold, half-smoked cigarette into the dogs' water bowl.

Having gone bust three times on pigs and peanuts in southwest Georgia, at age 60 Fob Ewer was now trying "ranching" in addition to pork, here with mutton sheep and a few meat goats in the southern Appalachian hamlet of Bear Bottom Holler, Alabama. Mail-order Cantina ("Clasy Basque senorita will make any rich rancher happy.") was supposed to supply him the sheep savvy he didn't have.

Cantina's family may have been Basque immigrants, but fisher folk, not shepherds. Cantina, as revealed post-nuptial, had grown up in Long Beach, CA. Some joke on Fob, you betcha.

This morning's rendition of the Ewer's repertory Southern Gothic comic opery received a fitting coda when Miranda emerged to contribute bassoon flats of slobbering, belching and passing gas as she wolfed down the stew Ike had spurned. Her interlude ended, and now decorated with a slick of grease sticking grains of rice to the corners of her under lip, Miranda went to stand at Ike's side. Her white shaggy fur, heavily matted and dust-powdered from months of malignant bath phobia, got its only brush of the day when a fresh gust of north wind wafted through Bear Bottom Holler, down from Humpback Mountain.

Ike retreated around back for a few gulps of the Quaking U's hard-edged sulfur water in a puddle below a rusting faucet. He then walked slowly around the pigsty to the dented white Ford 250 4x4 Fob was loading. There he took his place on the back seat, put his paws over his head, sighed, and tried to nap.

About this same time, far to the east side of the Quaking U's stock pens, Billy Swilling was stirring. Billy had gotten into Hicky from Jacksonville, Florida by bus only the evening before, and it had taken him another full eight hours to make it up the winding two lane roads to Bear Bottom. Skinny, freckled, tee-shirted, 17-year old cracker dropouts rarely had much trouble hitching in this country, but traffic yesterday had been scant, so he'd had to hoof it most of the way.

At least he'd made it in before the three a.m. hail storms, though barely. Subsequently, Billy had only gotten four hours' sleep in Fob's one-room bunk-shack. He was still exhausted. Nevertheless, he was in better shape than most mornings. Usually Billy'd downed a six-pack or two as a nightcap before bed, but none had been around this morning.

Well, hell, that 'a be different tonight.

One of the reasons Billy had accepted this dip-shit summer sheep job—again--was that, in addition to being one of the few who would even consider hiring him (much less twice), Fob delivered an allowance of seven cases of 16 oz. PBR²'s a week.... that, & grub, & \$400 a month, and with no tax reporting either. With all the essentials covered, and no expenses, Billy figured that

² Translation for Yankee yuppies: *Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer*.

from this summer's work alone he'd still have enough cash left by next February to bus to Daytona to hang with friends for Biker Week.

...And—no small thing—there was also another, indeed extraordinary bonus in working summers up on Humpback Mountain, one that Fob Ewer knew nothing about.

Rounding the pigsty as he headed from the bunk-shack toward the pickup, Billy was also happy that soon he'd be miles away from every bit of Fob Ewer's shit.

"Well, Mr. Swilling, sir! Good ta see yur sorry ass made it up here once again." As usual Fob was twice as loud as his deafness dictated.

"Said I'd come, long 's the deal 's same's last year," Billy mumbled.

"Deal 's 'bout the same, sonny-boy. Same pay, grub, 'n that beer piss ya live on, but it'll be just Billy-boy up there with the flocks this time. You, the dogs, 'n a burra."

"C-come again?" Billy stuttered.

"Yep, I smarted up. Last three years I send two a ya white trash boys up that mountain ta graze them sheep 'n goats. Give ya a fine 12-gage side-ta-side, 'n ammo, 'n all such, 'n tell ya just keep the coyots off ma lambs 'n kids, 'n keep the animals sorta together 'til time ta come down fur fall.

"Well every year if don't the bums I send up there—like you 'n that no good fur noth'n Justin Thyme last year—don't they just spend all their days 'n nights drink'n 'n sleep'n. 'Cept those queers the first year play'n Love Boat. Shit. Should'a called the Klan in on 'um, sted of just get'n the sheriff ta run 'um off.

"Ain't a one a ya damn bums watch the animals right, God-damnit! Lost sixteen lambs last year! 'N I pay both a ya shitheads \$400 a month, plus grub 'n beer, fur Jesus Christ sake.

"Nope, this year got me a better idea. Got me a right fine idea. Gonna have me a bunch better stock guard'n crew this time.

"Just got me two them Great Pyrenees dogs up the Knoxville pound. Real French Basque sheep guard'n dogs. **French** Basque, I tell ya, not Spick Basque, like that sorry-ass Cantina I married beliv'n she'd know somthin' 'bout sheep. Shit.

"Them fine work'n dogs' bred ta kill big fuck'n wolves. Don't need no special trainin', neither. Coyot's be just a snack for 'um. Lord knows, all the worth difference between them pedigree dogs 'n the likes a you, son, sure proves the importance a good breedin'.

"Also, I now got me one right mean jack-ass burra, too. Didn't know burras chase coyots, did ya? Even kick 'um ta death, they catch up with 'um. Also use the burra ta pack yur swill up 'n down every week--'n yur grub, too, if ya still eat'n anything 'n don't just live off'a that beer piss. Pyrenees dogs, burras, goats 'n sheep gets along real good, too. Stick together. Bred that way. Won't be need'n yur protection, trash boy.

"So, 'n what's yur job now, bubba? Well, Mr. Ela-u-ment-u-ary School Grad-u-mu-ate," (Fob was on a roll) "yur job is one, 'n I mean only, ta keep them fine, hard work'n dogs fed.

"Yep, dirt-dobber, ya can stay piss-puke drunk all the time fur what I care, so longs them dog food cans gets open every single day. Burra feed hisself up there on a mountain, easy.

"This year won't even count on ya ta herd the stock up 'n down, neither. Rented a cattle trailer ta drive 'um up. Couldn't do it by yaself anyway. Truck do it 'n four runs."

"Me up there by myself?" That Billy was a quick one.

"Yep," Fob grinned, right proud. "How many businessmen ya know today cuts labor costs clean 'n half one year ta next, while improvin' operations one hundred million fuck'n percent? Bet with them Pyrenees 'n a jackass on guard duty I don't loose any stock, neither. Dogs 'n asses much more dependable than trash any day."

"Ok by me," Billy said with more cheer than Fob expected. (What is wrong with that boy any way, besides just plain ol' fuck'n stupid?)

All this chatter annoyed Ike no end, but he continued to pretend to nap until Fob called Miranda to get in the damn cab, too. Ike had to move over. Billy took his place in the flatbed. Fob rolled out, cold mud a'fly'n.

The sun broke. Ike perked up. The two dogs stuck their heads out either rear window to take in the smells as they angled away from the grays, blacks and sooty whites of Bear Bottom Holler, up towards Humpback Mountain.

What smells! Not just cat, squirrel, possum, 'coon and fellow dog, but the shit of every American herd variety: horses, cows, pigs, sheep, goats, even a buffalo. And then there were the human smells. Ike didn't care much for the Ewers, but what came from the flatbed behind stirred old feelings.

Billy was asleep, even amidst the bounce of the gravel road. He was now wearing a ratty waxed-duck cattle coat over his tee-shirt, and over his eyes a black Resistol with a badly bent back rim. Central Casting "cowboy dropout", Southern style. And with personal hygiene to match—enuresis, or maybe just many weeks unwashed underwear.

They rode only about a mile before pulling into a quarter-acre field. There, tethered in a small half-stall surrounded by a few sheep, was a grey and black spotted burro.

"OK, Freddy, ya ready?" Fob slipped a halter over the burro's nose.

Fob liked this ass. Freddy was a small but powerful animal with a broad rump and a great wire-shag of winter coat. He looked like many a farm ass, you might even say "classic", except this burro's bearing betrayed something definitely not good in most work animals: Freddy was a joker.

You saw it immediately. One ear black and the other grey, and both always a wigglin'. Almost Mongolian-squinted eyes, and huge buckteeth he showed off extra large during his frequent fits of braying. The combination was sorta like Bugs Bunny as a pie-garbed jester—or maybe not so much a mere jester as the venerable *Signore Punch*. You could easily image Freddy holding a well-worn whacking stick behind his back, just a set'n up to smack ya up-side the head. ***Arr! Arr! Arr! Haww!***

"Billy, get your butt out that truck." The dogs stayed put.

"Freddy, I'd like ya ta meet yur new lackey, Billy Swilling. But ya don't need ta call 'um that. No, Sir. Just bray when ya want 'um. Sure Billy here speaks jackass right well. Don't ya, son?" Fob was his own favorite comedian.

"And you listen up here, Billy-boy. Yu're ta address this fine senior employee as 'Mr. Twister, **Sir**'. See why he got the name "Twister" right soon.

"Ok, I know 'Mr. Twister, Sir' may be too much fur that little field-pea brain a yours ta remember, so 'Mr. Freddy' 'll probably be just fine with the burra. He ain't formal."

From under his hat Billy muttered something incoherent before he tried to snake spittle over the pasture gate. The wind caught it and plastered the milky hocker to the crown of his hat, not that Billy noticed. Ike moaned.

Freddy cooperated and was soon saddle-packed with provisions. These were mainly dog food and beer. Billy called Fob a motherfucker under his breath for only packing four cases of brew. Justin Thyme was a Baptist half-can, so most of last year's beer had gone straight down Billy's gullet.

Though deaf, Fob could read lips, and he caught enough of Billy's mumbling to yell at the little shithead that, with only one worker this year, he was damn lucky there weren't just three cases. Wasn't about to give any big raise to the little fuck.... and if that weren't enough beer for him, he'd sure be free to supplement with jackass piss.... and could suck it right outa Mother Nature's own tap, too, Goddamnit!

"Now shut the fuck up 'n get yur stink'n, sorry, shitty, lazy ass outa here, 'n up that mountain, 'n ta work. **Goddamnit!** Good-fur-nuth'n, turkey-turd, shithead trash."

Freddy continued cooperative as Billy headed the little pack train out and up. Miranda struck off at least 50 yards away from the human—typical Pyrenees—but Ike stayed right at Billy's side on the first flat of road, tail wagging, enthralled.

They made their way quickly the first mile to where a Forest Service road, really not more than a thinly-graveled path, angled away from the highway along the base of Humpback Mountain. The wind eased. Billy relaxed, air-guitaring "*Free Bird*" as he strode along with Freddy and Ike. Contrary to all expectations, it was becoming a fine spring day.

A mile further and the rocky path Billy & Co. were challenging intersected the highway yet again as it snaked up the mountain by a longer, more gentle route. Like most Forest Service lands today, "multi-use" was the Federal mandate for Humpback Mountain. Here at its base there was some pulp lumbering and a little hunting (coon and fox squirrel mainly), but they were now headed to what passes for "high country" in the South. This isn't flowers and grasses above the treeline, like in the Rockies, although there were a few scattered meadows here and there where once some seasonal bogs were trapped amongst the rocks. No, real pasture would be elsewhere, where the clear-cutting had been. Here it was mostly rhododendron and evergreens growing in thin sandy soil.

There was one thing on Humpback Mountain, however, that is common in the Rockies--a ski resort. Around the next bend, off the road a few yards on the high side of the paving, was a large billboard:

Humpback Mountain

Home of

Moby Dick's

"The place for a WHALE of a day skiing!"

Below this imaginative caption was a white cartoon whale, rendered as if drawn by Hanna-Barbara Cartoons' B-team artists while on Quaaludes. It looked--maybe--somewhat like a retarded whale.... with a buffalo hump. Its tail draped over something that might have been meant to be a ski, but the look was closer to Capt. Ahab's peg leg, the one sculpted by a woodpecker. Ski poles? Harpoons, naturally. Oh, and a sporty navy blue whaler's cap, emblazoned "**Dick**" in hot pink.

If one were so unlucky as to be ski-Jonesing while stoned and just had to drive up to the nearest slopes (*a' la "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle"*), there atop Humpback Mountain sat Alabama's very own "**Moby Dick's**"--complete with a Starbuck's Coffee shop in the lobby.

The owner of this tacky little day-skiing operation was one Humberto Malevilla, a large, pallid, blubbery man who was so enthralled with the entrepreneurial potential of his mother-given name that he had used all his take as a Miami pimp, child pornography broker, and small-time extortionist to buy land up on Humpback Mountain to build this "resort". True, Humberto'd never read *Moby-Dick*, but he'd seen the Gregory Peck movie many times on late-night Miami TV, and having come to south Florida in the '70s as one of the Miaguel boat-lift's minor criminals, he knew all about fishes like whales.

"Hey, fuck'n Hemmingway go ta feesh 'n Cuba, right? We all experts 'bout feesh in Cuba, man."

Why a ski resort? No, it wasn't that cold, white mountain of a whale that had really inspired Humberto.

"Look, man, at de ski places all de blonde Anglo chicks sets up all de time in hots tubs 'n such while dey dumb-dick boy friends up stuck in gondolas or somethin', or weth broke legs in de hospital, or whatever. Jus leave de women, man! Sheet, easiest Anglo pussy ta score in de whole funk'n worl."

"Wit a ski place I also gets all sorts a dope runners 'n such up from da Caribbean, see. I be running a fuck'n ski pussy Taj ma Dope Hal for plenty rich South American dudes, too, man.

"You come see me den, amigo. Show you some fuck'n good time."

And, as there was no other ski place south of Knoxville, TN, how could Humberto miss? The trick, however, would be to attract both dumb white guys with chicks, and Latin Carribo-trash with money, or at least drugs.

When *Moby Dick's* opened, Humberto handed over \$500 to ensure “press coverage”. **The Hickory Nut**, Hicky's major news outlet, gushed:

International developer, Mr. Humberto Malevilla of Coral Gables, Florida, says he has long recognized the fantastic potential of our region for winter sports tourism. Now, his newly finished, **Moby Dick's Ski Resort**, opens on top of Humpback Mountain this Thanksgiving weekend. Drop that drumstick and head on up for more fun than you've ever stuffed into a vacation before! And bring your date.

Don't have skis? A professional rental shop is right there at the lift behind the lodge. Don't know how to ski? Hosts Sonny Bono and Ozark skiing sensation, Swifty Fall, star in a state-of-the-art, 15 min. video, **Ski Without Prudence--Why bring the wife?** It can be rented (\$17) for viewing on the 24", coin-operated TV in the lobby. You'll be amazed how easy it is to ski!

Given all this, no question, you'll want to come back to **Moby Dick's** again and again.... and again!!

But, wait, want even more excitement? YES! **YES!**

Although he is starting his resort for skiing now, soon *Senor Humberto* envisions Humpback Mountain as the home of a year-round theme park, one where the adventures of American whaling are the inspiration for many other sensational, **“LEVIATHON”** attractions!

Yes, coming soon, the world-class **“Moby Dick's New, New Bedford Resort, Villas and Shopping Village Theme Park”** expansion site will practically spout seasonal flair! During the winter months, strategically placed artistic dioramas will engross both local and international visitors with the high arctic whaling enterprise that was once so important to our then new 19th century nation.

But let's not forget the summer season—yes, **Hawaii!**

With the warming sun, New, New Bedford will magically transform into **Waikiki East**, for a summer of paradisial pleasures. There, **“Ishmael's BIG Kahuna Skateboard Tsunami”** will fill all you daring "BIG Kahunas" with every thrill of monster big-wave surfing. Or how about the challenge and all the excitement of big-game charter-boat fishing for striped marlin or blue-fin tuna? Take off from **Capt. Ahab's Dock & Bar** aboard the six-seat **Princess Pequod** to troll the resort's well-stocked two-acre catfish pond.

For the pleasures of adults only (the real attraction!), already at **Dick's** is the racy **“Queequeg's Lounge”**, right in back of the lodge. Here pleasures reminiscent of a whaling ship's restful, romantic--and let's not forget, hedonistic! --landings at the 19th century Royal Port of **Lahaina** abound.

Out on **The Poop-Deck**, authentic grass skirts and coconut-husk bras are available for the ladies (a \$28 rental³), along with Dole “**Maui Wowwie**” white Chablis *pina colladas* (\$19⁵⁰), served to all 21 and older, or with I.D.

Yes, surely the ghost of talented but naughty ‘ol Messer Paul Gauguin is at this very moment pleading with St. Peter—or whomever--for leave to visit!

Thus, lucky readers, **La Grand Resort de Dick** is now a glittering crown atop Humpback Mountain, and a bright, dazzling beacon that will soon be drawing the rich and famous from all over the world to our very own dear little neighbor, Bear Bottom Holler. **Move over, Lake Tahoe!”**

Humberto spread Xerox copies of **The Nut** around all the Birmingham, Nashville and Atlanta hotspots, as well as in Miami and Freeport bars. So none would miss his literary sophistication, at **Dick’s** opening he instructed his car-hop/bell-hop/room-service/front-desk man to greet all arriving guests with a cheery, “Hello, folks! Just call me Ishmael! Coffee? Only twelve bucks. Starbuck’s best....”

Despite such creative marketing, however, *Moby Dick’s* was not a moneymaker. The Nashville and Birmingham crowds stopped coming when rumors that *Dick’s* had dozens of slot machines sequestered in the back proved untrue. (Humberto tried, but could find only one, and it was rusty.) Atlanta skiers never appeared, either. Humberto hadn’t done any meteorological research before investing. He thought snow is heavy in all US mountain ranges. Snowmaking machines had never been part of the plan.

To be fair, Humberto had always figured he could rent, maybe even sell, most of his rooms to rich computer geeks who weren’t skiers or “players” at all. He envisioned them sitting in little pre-wired cubicles and “cyber-commuting” to work, all the while telling friends that they were “up on the slopes”. He’d already built one 6’ x 10’ “chalet” as a demo.

Then, also, he might even cater a special section of *Dick’s* brothel to shy, but rich geeks. AC/DC? Could a drunk geek even tell?

Of course the brothel was open for business by *Dick’s* opening day. Unbeknownst to Humberto, however, the sign on “*The Poop-Deck*” that directed customers 100 yards through the woods to “**The Black Cauldron of Fleshy Delights**” was interpreted by the few who ever visited *Dick’s* as directions to some over-priced ethnic bistro. That error guaranteed that the one “professional” Humberto had recruited for “*The Cauldron*” so far—a Jacksonville, FL street queen named “Sugar” who had previously made a scant living off dead-drunk Midwest tourists at *The Landing*—soon rode out of Bear Bottom Hollow after hotwiring Humberto’s Cadillac Escalade. (“So L-o-o-o-n-g, **SUCKA!!!!**”)

When up, *Dick’s* lost bucks faster than Sugar and the Escalade had hurtled down Humpback Mountain. Now, just a few years later, the buildings were all boarded up—at least until Humberto could think up some new scheme.

After the resort’s closure, Fob Ewer, seeing his own opportunity, had convinced Humberto that it would be to his advantage to keep the ski run clear to preserve *Moby Dick’s* resort potential. He could do so for free just by letting Fob summer pasture up there. “Makes grande sense, eh, *Mucho Amigo?*”

³ Alabama state law requires that all rental clothes be fumigated after each uses to eliminate lice and chiggers, so be sure to tell the staff if you’re allergic to arsenic or mercury products.

What didn't make sense to the good ol' boy, though, were the expensive solar-electric panels Humberto had installed on *Dick's* roof last fall, but Fob thought he'd eventually figure a way to benefit from them as well. In the mean time he stayed right friendly with *Senor Malevilla*.

At the billboard for *Moby Dick's*, Billy crossed the highway and continued up Humpback Mountain. Miranda was nowhere to be seen, but Ike skipped right beside Billy and Freddy like some idiot white setter--most un-Pyrenees behavior. If you've ever had a Pyrenees dog, you'll know why vets call these little polar bears "Great Paranoids". Though fearless and determined when confronting a belligerent ram, or even running a wolf, even the best-treated Pyrenees tend to shy away from humans. Yet now Ike was undignified, fawning--weird.

Although guarding comes pretty much naturally to any Great Pyrenees, Ike had had no prior experience with livestock. That was Miranda. She'd come from an east Tennessee hill farmer who'd kept llama's for summer tourist packing expeditions up in the Smokies. Ike, on the other hand, had belonged to an old woman who ran a small board and care home for folks with mental disabilities. There, Ike watched over humans. When the B&C operator died, four year-old Ike went to the pound.

Everyone had been so loving to Ike at the B&C. Billy smelled just like those folks before diaper changes.

Then there was Freddy, the burro. After cooperating the first two miles, now every few yards he'd stop, crane his head around to Billy, curl his lips back, and buck-tooth laugh like some drunken Mississippi deb in the back seat of an SUV getting her first hit off a balloon of nitrous. Twister sure was twisted all right. At first it was funny. Soon, right annoying.

But Billy didn't figure half of Mr. Freddy Twister. No, mam. Freddy was used to being a naughty boy.... a very naughty boy.

"*Senor Freddy-the-Twister*", as was his right full stage name, may have looked like many another small spotted ass, but he was, in fact, a star of considerable international fame. Yet, as in many a romantic story, Freddy was a star who had fallen earthward from his mother's womb with no good prospects whatsoever.

Born on an impoverished Chihuahua, Mexico subsistence farm, at one year old "Ferdinand", as the farm children had named him, was sold for what little the family could get. Might have ended up as dog food, but at the auction in Ciudad Juarez his clownish looks and spirit caught the eye of a small-time impresario. After a month's formal training, and with his name Anglicized to "*Freddy*", he opened as the male lead in a "TJ" donkey show.

You might be under the progressive delusion that Tijuana, Mexico is now a cleaned-up, hard-working city, one that functions mainly as a labor-well for southern California homes and businesses.... except for a few entrepreneurs engaged in drug dealing and murder-for-hire. If so, you keep out of TJ bars. Otherwise you'd be sure to have been approached, even recently, by the resident "concierges" about "shows" in the back rooms. Not getting such queries can be due to female gender, but it's rare. Chicks, whether alone or in groups who wander into such places usually leave quickly--unless contemplating hooking as a career, and in town to do a little market research. If so, a select few of those might even be interested in work requiring real talent... "*You maybe be interested in being on stage? Si, Senorita? A star? Si? An artista? Si? Mucho dinero....*"

What had made Freddy a star? Yes, his tools of the trade (so to speak) were a tremendous endowment, but not beyond the gifts Mother Nature has bestowed on some other burros. Yes, he also performed each night's acts with the gusto one can only hope to see in the best long-run Broadway actors--a truly dedicated professional--but again, not special, given the gig.

No, what set Freddy above the rest--made him "*El Gran Uno*"--were his acrobatic comic abilities. Right up there with Jackie Gleeson, maybe even Curly Howard of "Stooge" fame.

Three times a night Freddy entered, stage left, stopped, craned his head to the audience, winked his right eye, then let out a buck-toothed bray, with both ears (festooned with ribbons & bells) a-waggin'. Next, he practically flowed over to his co-star, and gave a courtly bow—all the while doing a Chubby Checker-style pelvic rock & roll.

"Yea! twistin' time is here!"

Then... ...quiet...

...steady now boy...steady...

His mount would make a Chinese Olympic gymnast jealous.

Music, *Maestro!*

After a fittingly romantic opening movement, by-the-by the band would begin a progressive pace-up towards a *veloce crescendo*. Freddy, now firmly mounted bareback in the saddle, would accelerate his butt right along. Both ears did the same. **"Bolero"**, *a la* 'Jingle Bells'.

Finally--as many an aficionado remarked was fully worthy of an *artiste* of the stature of fellow countryman, Placido Domingo--Freddy added his fine high tenor braying to entwine with his diva's rapturous *mezzo* moans. The delirious final arias would ring through the hall as triumphant as any at *La Scalla*. (Imagine Enrico Caruso and Maria Callas together, if you can.) A solo Mariachi trumpet blast saluted the show's gushing climax.

"Ole, El Twister! Ole, Amigo!"

"Ole, Burro Magnifioso!"

"Muchas Gracias, Muchas Gracias, Senor Freddy y Senorita de Amore!"

"Bravo, Bravo, El Cahones Mui Superior!"

and

"Ain't That Some Fuck'n Ass!",

etc., etc....

arose like thunder from the appreciative Mexi-Cali culture buffs cramming stage side.

Freddy would then dismount, turn, and actually rise on his two hind legs to make a classically humble but glowing bow, with left arm (err, leg) to his heart, his right out-stretched to the audience.

"Jesus mother-fuck'n Christ! You ever seen anything like that fuck'n ass?! Hot damn, what an animal! Won't see anything like that in San Diego, Bro." (Lots of sailors in the audience.)

Sadly, but not surprising in today's world, it was political correctness that ended Freddy's first stage career. As often happens in every country, even Mexico, one year a candidate for TJ's mayor ran a campaign based on promises of moral clean up. Uncommonly though for Mexico (or the US, for that matter), not only did he win, but much rarer still, he was sincere. Not the usual Beelzebub in an evangelist's Italian silk suit.

Here's the story of Freddy's fall:

One night, in the middle of a virtuoso performance that required of Freddy a difficult, rarely staged ventrum-to-ventrum love duet with a diva of girth, the house was raided. Freddy bolted out open stage-door right, with the lady still clinging to his heavy fur.

"The Queen of Biscaya" screamed bloody murder beneath Freddy, all the while trying to keep her pristine bottom off the macadam as the donkey galloped down the street and into the main plaza. There he stopped with a lurch to rear on his hind legs—launching Madam in a beautiful but flat parabolic arc right into the fountain--before braking into what five USC frat boys later swore was an impeccable rendition of "*The Time-Warp*", performed (they swore again) with all the requisite pelvic thrusts, jumps and side-steps of the original. The timing was immaculate, too, as the college crowd, then letting out from the five thousand, seven hundred and fifth showing of ***The Rocky***

Horror Picture Show in TJ, sang and danced right along. Afterwards, they might all have twisted the night away had the *Federales* not arrived, equipped to quell a riot.

Next day, the better papers published only a small picture of a small donkey and a dumpy woman draped in a blanket being led off by the local TJ police. The popular underground paper, **TJ! Ole!**, however, posted a full front-page spread, with Freddy mugging to the camera below the headline:

"Great jobs for performing artists still in TJ!"

Having little appreciation for the performing arts, after the three-year trial of the "theater's" "impresario", in which Freddy was Exhibit A, the new, humorless city administration sold him to a horse trader. When Fob saw the ad for a "Cut-rate, trained burro, est. \$9.95", he drove right down. The burro he saw was then quite calm; there is something to stories of exhausting the stud. Freddy rode easily in the trailer during the long trip back to the Ewer ranch.



Matt Wall

Mountain air may have been what revived Freddy, for right after Fob started pasturing him with a few sheep to begin preparing the burro for his new vocation, it was time for rehearsal again. Freddy always knew he belonged on the great human stages, but he was both dedicated and schooled enough in *The Method* to conjure the true spirit of TJ right there in Alabama, even when rehearsing with talentless ewes. Soon Cantina was yelling at Fob to pasture that loud, disgusting animal far away from her home.

Billy knew none of this. Two miles further up the Forest Service road he and the animals broke into the clear-cut at the bottom of *Moby Dick*'s only ski run. They all stopped in unison to stare up at the odd, dromedary-shaped, grey-brown granite rock at its crest that had given Humpback Mountain its name centuries ago. ...And, there, just below the bottom of the hump's western edge, was *Dick*'s, right where it should be. Ike sighed.

Chapter 2: Now ta Business

When Billy & crew finally rounded the curve to be in full view from *Moby Dick*'s driveway, Fob was already there. And fuming. Billy had lit up a doobie about half a mile below, and wasn't aware that it was now already three hours later.

"Where the hell you been?" Fob's question just about summed it up for Billy, too.

Fob opened the gate of the stock trailer behind the Ford, and a hundred head of sheep and about a dozen goats tumbled out to scatter into the field at the top of the ski run.

"Now here's the keys ta the help house. Stay out the lodge. Feed ma dogs. 'N don't burn the woods or the fuck'n place down. Other'n that, see ya tomorrow morn'n with another load." Fob rolled out. Billy spit dust.

"S-suck my dick!" he sputtered, but only after Fob was long down the drive.

Billy tied Freddy to a faucet bib in front of the vinyl-sided, faux-cedar singlewide, and let himself and Ike in. The dog moaned. Squirrels had been using the place as the Ritz, and chewed vinyl and squirrel droppings were everywhere. Yet the refrigerator still worked when Billy tripped the circuit breaker, and with the beer now safe in its frosty vault (minus the two hot ones he'd already blow-chugged), Billy was too tired to give a rat turd himself about what the place looked or smelled like. He collapsed to nap on the aluminum glider sofa; it was fairly clean, as most of the squirrel droppings had fallen through the plastic mesh.

It was dark when Ike finally roused Billy enough to let him out to pee. Billy stepped out to do the same.... and to untie Freddy. Miranda was even there, maybe just hanging for food, but she also seemed happy.

Billy, too, was glad everything was now going easy. He flipped on the porch bug light, then walked back in to open up some dog food.... and get himself another couple of beers. Soon he was back on the porch, watching the dogs eat, and scratching Freddy between the ears.

It wasn't just their common experience with the Ewers. The boy and the three animals were bonding for reasons that would remain forever unknown to them.

You've already heard enough about Freddy to maybe appreciate that, save for his early foalhood, no one had ever cared much for him. Even when a star, after each act he was penned up, fed and water supplied, then just left alone until the next show. Hard as it may seem, Fob was the best owner Freddy had ever had. Just as bad, Freddy had been kept away from other animals, except for the sheep at the Ewer place. But despite their utility for "stage practice", Freddy honestly never thought much of sheep. Vacuous. (Pigs? Yes, quite bright, but Fob never let him near them.) Now, being a creature of refined intelligence and sensitivity, Freddy found the dogs, Ike and Miranda, fascinating. As for Billy, well he sure was good at scratching between Freddy's ears.

As you've already heard, too, Ike had spent his previous life around retarded folks at the board and care home. They'd always been hugging and babbling him. Any original Great Pyrenees shyness around humans had been extinguished long ago. After the home closed, Ike's loneliness

was severe. Now having completed dinner, he walked over and leaned against Billy, who moved the hand that was not scratching Freddy's head over to scratch the dog's. Quite nice.

And Miranda? Fairly simple. When not helping with summer llama packing trips she'd been left tied to a tree outside a trailer, 24:7, as a "guard dog". That was eight years. When the farm was foreclosed, she too was dumped at the pound. Now Miranda loved nothing more than to wander off alone across the fields for hours; but a good meal and companionship at night are hard for any dog to resist, and Miranda had had today's good wander already. The food wolfed, she plopped at Billy's feet.

Billy was originally from Mayport, Florida, east of Jacksonville. Shrimper's son. Both parents were originally from Norfolk, VA. Father started as a sailor, just like his own dad; mother was a third-generation barmaid.... yep, the old Navy cliché, *in toto*.

Billy was typical of the squid spawn strung out over several miles of beach towns south of the Mayport Naval Base, the third largest in the country. When Billy was two Mother ran off with a pit monkey she'd met one weekend at the Gator Nationals drag races over in Gainesville. Not heard from since. Dad drank heavily, and long before meeting Mom. When discharged from the U.S. Navy, just short of a dishonorable discharge for biting off and swallowing half a Marine sergeant's ear (a clear dereliction of "mission completed"), he'd gone to work on one of the aging shrimp trawlers out of Mayport's commercial docks.

Since childhood Billy had mostly stayed with his dad's younger half-sister in near-by Jacksonville Beach.... that is until her crack habit got too debilitating, and her pimp, pissed at being shorted for money yet again, beat her so badly that she ended up in Duval County Medical Center. Afterwards she couldn't work for months, and lost the apartment. Billy was fifteen.

By then he'd just made it to 7th grade. He dropped out all together that spring. Yet, to date, Billy had only a minor juvenile record, a single count of second-degree moper. (It had been ninety-five, heat and humidity, and he was apprehended with no money, hanging out in an air-conditioned mall.) Yeah, he'd picked up a few burglary tricks from salvage workers he'd met up at Pete's Bar and Grill in Neptune Beach, but so far he'd only practiced at home. It wasn't hard to find busboy jobs at The Beaches, and Billy lived cheaply. After his aunt's misfortune he stayed in Dad's apartment off Atlantic Boulevard when Sr. was on the water. But the two of them didn't get along, so when the old man was in shore, Billy usually slept at a friend's.

Or had. Billy was already challenging his dad's prowess as a drinker, and "Case a Night-Bill" became *persona non-grata* when he barfed on the friend's couch. Now when Dad was on shore, Billy slept on the beach.

No, far from a country boy ("redneck" doesn't just signify "farmer", especially to those who fish in the south), Billy had never even been away from the coast until last summer. He'd taken Fob's out-of-state offer, the one he'd seen in the classifieds of **Tattoo Illustrated**, mainly because it seemed a more inviting way to spend the season than just hanging around The Beaches and getting his skull cracked in by one particular sub-human piece of shit, Fred Malphurs, the clam-dicked husband of that sorry skank, Robin Riffy.

Billy'd met Fred only once--after a vice-squad sweep behind the Jax Beach boardwalk landed both him and Robin in the Duval County Jail. Having had her usual slow night, Robin didn't have enough quarters to make bail, so she'd had to call Fred. Billy wasn't charged; the cops felt sorry for any kid so pitiful as to seek out Robin. But, as he was leaving the police station, Billy ran into Fred coming in for his wife. Subsequently, Fred, too, spent the night in the can, even though Billy declined a trip to the emergency room.

On reading Fob's ad, Billy had also figured he might even pick up some useful farm skills in northeast Alabama, and just maybe might make some kind of new start working livestock sometime, somewhere, perhaps. Well, maybe so. This was very pleasant. Billy liked the donkey and the two

dogs. He never had pets growing up. Ike, Miranda and Freddy were already more like family than just about any others in Billy's life so far....

Elsa was one of those obese, Southern white-haired women that are hard to age after fifty or so. It's like they've always been there--just like that, forever, especially in the eyes of a child.

She lived on the second floor of the run-down two-story, grey concrete block apartment building west of 3rd Street where Billy and his aunt did. Billy and his aunt shared a studio; Elsa's was the one-bedroom overhead.

Elsa was often the only adult around during the day, except for Billy's aunt, but the latter was almost always sacked-out until late afternoon. From back before he could remember, certainly before starting school, several times a day Billy'd bounded up the open-work iron steps along the building's outside--rainstorm or heat wave—to Elsa's place.

"Where you been, my little Billy-Boy? I was hopin' I'd see you sooner. Now here's five dollars. You run over ta the 7-11 'n pick me up a pack of them same Pall Malls you always do. 'N you can get yourself a Coke taday, too. OK?"

The convenience storeowner had no problems selling Billy the cigarettes; he knew whose they were. Elsa had such bad knees that often she couldn't make it down the stairs for days on end. Billy always brought back every cent of the change.

If it were a Saturday evening—when you could bet his aunt wasn't around—Billy and Elsa would watch a movie on the VCR. Wasn't much worth watching on local TV Saturday night. They'd have bologna sandwiches, potato chips, maybe lime Jell-O, and Cokes. Afterwards Elsa would smoke about half a pack of cigarettes during the show.

Elsa liked musicals. Her favorite was *The Sound of Music*. They watched it again and again.

Elsa always got young Billy singing right along with her and the cast. "*High on a hill was a lonely goatherd....*". At the same time Billy would act out the parts of both the goatherd and the goats—especially the goats, skipping from the brown linoleum valley floor, way up to the top of the green sofa-back mountain. *Yodel, Yodel, Yodel // Yodel-LAY-HE-Hooo.... ... Naaa!* Elsa would laugh so hard that, if Billy hadn't been just a kid, he would have worried she'd drop dead of a heart attack.

But once, right after they finished "*Climb Every Mountain*", Elsa just looked at Billy and said softly, "Don't you ever give up, my little Billy-Boy. No matter what, you just keep on go'n, son. You'll make it. I pray for you every night."

After the evening's tape was over, Billy was never ready for bed. Elsa never felt right sending him downstairs to be alone, either, so she'd come up with something else to keep him occupied. Sometimes it was "Billy's Down-Home Beauty Shop".

With bright red, blue and green combs, Billy would stretch Elsa's wooly white hair into bizarre, cannibal styles. Elsa would *owie!* and *ouch!* with each pull of the toothy instruments of torture, then shriek to heaven when Billy held up the mirror for her to admire his latest creation.

But he wasn't through. The cosmetic most worthy of his greatest talent was the bright red lipstick. Not just red, clown-sized lips, but eyebrows like bloody buzzard wings.... and dinosaurs of various dangerous form, drawn on each of her cheeks. How did Elsa ever get all that greasy pigment off her face? She did; her pillow was always white in the morning.

Elsa's hair couldn't take Billy's ministrations every week. Stories were good, especially when trying to get him to settle down for sleep on the sofa. Most were from her own childhood in southeast Tennessee, in fact just a ways up from Hickey, over the border. There her family had worked a small hill farm since The Reconstruction.

Billy's favorites were about the rascally little squirrel monkey Elsa's family had when she was a child. You could buy them back then at Woolworth's for \$10. One Thanksgiving Elsa's older brother, Robert, told her that the monkey had put the cat in the oven, and that's what they were having for dinner. When the roast beast was placed on the table, Elsa screamed and refused to eat.... until she spotted Miss Minnie out the window, stalking a sparrow.

In December Elsa didn't have money for a tree, but she always brought out an old table-top plastic manger set right after Thanksgiving. It was fine for Billy to play with it. He liked setting up long processions. A big, brown, gold-laden camel with a fancy-dressed *magus* and Joseph riding together on top would lead, followed by Mary and Jesus on the donkey, then the sheep and goats, and finally the dogs and shepherds as rearguard. An angel with a silver trumpet flew overhead as their guide. The caravan was headed south to vacation with The Mighty Pharaoh of Egypt during the winter school break.

Elsa never corrected The Gospel According to Billy. In deed, when they all reached Egypt, she would join Pharaoh Billy the Great in singing "Jesus Loves the Little Children of the World".... "*... red or yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight....*", there beside the recliner-chair pyramid.

Elsa was a Baptist, but not "one of those". She went to church when she could make it down the stairs, but she never said a single bad word about Billy's aunt, mom or dad. Elsa was a true Christian lady.

She'd ended up in JAX Beach because her husband had been in the Navy. He'd grown up in Detroit. They met in Pensacola, FL where she'd worked summers as a waitress. He was stationed at the base there. Mayport was Elsa's husband's first assignment after their marriage, and although there were many elsewhere thereafter, Mayport was also his last. He'd died long before Billy was born, and now his pension was just enough for Elsa to live.

Their one child, a daughter, also married a sailor, now a new chief petty officer assigned to the Philadelphia Ship Yards. Although Elsa's son-in-law hoped to get an assignment to Mayport soon, it had been some time since Elsa had seen her two grandchildren, and for Christmas that year her daughter sent her a round-trip bus ticket for a visit.

Elsa left the morning of December 21, to return January 4. On the way up, just outside of Savannah, GA, the bus went off the road.

The memorial service at the First Abyssinian Baptist Church of Jacksonville Beach, right behind the Winn-Dixie Supermarket and the Dairy Queen, was not heavily attended, but Mr. Singh went with Billy. He also closed the 7-11 all day in Elsa's honor.

Billy kept the funeral card. On the back was a beautiful, golden-skinned angel with six white wings, blowing a silver trumpet.

A ram let out a long, loud bleat. Billy took out his old, tarnished & dented C-harmonica, and started to play. "*Keep me search'n for a heart of gold*". Just that. Just that one line of nine notes. It was the only tune he could play.... other than the first line of "*Old Folks at Home*", the Florida State Song. Had to learn that one in elementary school. Up on Humpback Mountain, however, "*Way down upon the Suwannee River*" didn't quite seem right, so now it was "*Heart of Gold*", over and over again.

Freddy swayed in time to the music. Miranda snored. Ike cocked his head and howled softly, as if hoping the whole performance might morph into **Mountain Stage**. (Ike always knew he could sing as well as Neil Young, he just needed a chance to prove it.) Soon, even the sheep and goats were making contented little sheep and goat noises. That was good. Very good. Billy smiled.

Billy tossed the empty dog food cans, then ate his own dinner—a large can of *Campbell's Chunky Beef Stew*, a small package of *Doritos Cool Ranch* chips, two double packages of *Ding-Dongs*, and a *Moon Pie*, all washed down with four more PBRs. After sweeping the squirrel crap out the trailer,

he took a hot shower (the night was already chilly), and put on his best red flannel shirt and jeans. A dab of *Dixie Peach* hair pomade and a gold-plated right ear stud sharpened the look.

Back out on the porch there was a delightful pine- and wildflower-scented breeze (which, thanks to the pomade, didn't muss Billy's hair). Thin lacy wisps of silvery clouds streaked a full moon. Frogs and crickets crooned. Surely this night Cupid was a hunt'n up on Humpback Mountain.

Only one problem. A tactical problem. Billy had never tried to woo a ewe by himself.

Last summer there'd always been experienced help. Justin Thyme maybe was a Baptist half-can when it came to drinking, but he sure was a Scotch-Irish Montana mountain man when it came to sheep. Billy, himself, had known nothing of "*l'affair de mouton*" before Justin had played Cyrano to his Christian last summer—and in that instance of romantic tutorials, Justin, having more than enough fluffy Roxannes at the ready, didn't give a damn which particular "Lamb-Chop" Billy fancied.

Justin was strong, and a fast roper. What would Billy do without him?

It was just a brief worry, however, as more memories of last year came flooding back. There was "equipment" in the *Black Cauldron* designed to make dating easier. In particular, the dromedary-shaped, brown Italian leather "**Camel Rider**"—rigged with padded brass manacles, leg chains and an upper torso cross-strap—was a marvelous piece of imaginative engineering that could be used to eliminate all likely romantic difficulties.... if he could get his "girlfriends" first through the door, then tied down on The Camel.

After another two beers and a toke or so, Billy was ready to rodeo. Ike followed.

The flock was nearby and fairly well settled, but every time Billy got close to one, the ewe would just rise and scamper off. This went on for about half an hour. Billy thought of trying to get the dog to help herd the sheep, but hadn't a clue how. Greenhorn, he was unaware that Pyrenees don't herd, only guard.

Finally, he had another idea. He'd heard sheep will follow goats, and you can get a goat to go anywhere for a salty, greasy snack—nothing like *Cheetos*. A large billy kept following the bag. Soon two ewes followed the goat. Billy shooed Ike away.

The Cauldron was a 30' x 50', windowless, lime-green linoleum-tiled great room, out-fitted with couches, "exercise equipment", and movable screens that could, if desired, be employed to attempt a minimum of discretion. Billy remembered it well.... ah, particularly his most fond memories from last year's season-closing "Sheep Herder's Ball" that Justin had orchestrated. Now if he just had enough *Cheetos* to keep the goat interested while he picked the lock....

The lock popped easily, but the door to *The Cauldron* didn't swing open. Sustained pushing, though, and Billy squeezed in. Trying to reach the light switch, he tripped over a large, soft lump.

Lights on revealed *The Cauldron*'s recent change of use. Billy had tripped over a large black plastic garbage bag stuffed with marijuana.

It was obvious that the room had been used for indoor marijuana farming for months. The solar power units made sense after all; no big electric bills alerting the cops. But now, with the latest harvest in, the grow lights and irrigation system were off. Bare stalks, looking a bit like little emaciated scarecrows, were all that remained in the row upon rows of planters.

Too weak a guard for such a treasure. Besides the scores of full plastic bags like the one Billy had tripped over, there were seemingly endless cola-laden branches still hanging to dry from dozens of clotheslines that strung back and forth from wall to wall.

Billy had never dreamed of so much dope. He stood like some drop-jawed, redneck Aladdin who had just stumbled into Ali Babba's cave. Or was it Hussein's Hash Hut? He rubbed his hand down a fat, oily cola as if milking a tit, then rolled a resin ball in his palm the size of a cherry. Holy shit, what shit!

Would have been good had Billy been as wary as Aladdin. After walking through the room again and again, shouting, "Holy, shit!... Fuck'n Mother of God!", etc.--all the while smoking a doobie cigar he'd made by rolling a double fist-full of pot in a sheet of newspaper--Billy lifted up a garbage bag of dope, and walked right out the door.... and into Humberto's flashlight.

And Humberto's gold-plated Taurus .45 semi-automatic pistol. Humberto, too, had come to *The Cauldron* for some dope this night--his dope. The recaptured, refurbished Escalade was there, lights off, hatch open, engine running, auxiliary gas tanks full, ready for another run to Orlando.

"*What de fuck you do'n hear, ya leetle sheet!*" Humberto's diction was eloquent; Billy dropped the bag.

If Humberto had been better informed of Billy's ethnic type, he would have known he had little to fear from this kid. Just give him a few ounces of dope, threaten to pull out his liver and shove it up his penis with a screwdriver (Humberto did that once), and not only would Billy not tell the cops, but he might even make a passable, and certainly a cheap accomplice, allowing Humberto to better continue the grow operation up there. But of the Southern, Humberto really only knew South Florida types--the ones you can never trust, on anything, no matter what. Period.

Humberto bound Billy prone across The Camel, then sat down on a couch to think.... which wasn't easy. He had taken a handful of Lortabs and Adderall --all washed down with Gatorade *Xtremo*--just before he'd pulled up and discovered Billy's break in.

"*What de fuck you have ta go be heer, keed. What de FUCK, ha? HA?!!*

"*Funk'n you fuck up everythin', man. Should keel you funk'n ass, mothafucka! Yea, keel you sheety, fuck'n, sheety ass, mothafucka sheethead!*" (Of course this is just a euphonious approximation of what Humberto crooned.)

"I ain't gonna tell no one. I swear ta God!" Not eloquent, Billy, but who'd do better, given the circumstances?

Humberto spit, then jumped up and started toward The Camel.

"Ya ain't gonna rape me, are ya?" Billy couldn't suppress his anxiety over what he feared would happen next. His ass was high in the air.

"*Shut de fuck up! Shut de mothafuck, up!*

"*Shut up or I shoot you right now, sheethead cocksucka keed!*" Humberto kicked Billy hard in the head.

Now hot as a habanera, Humberto tried to wipe away the sweat he was dripping onto the .45, but he only managed to drop the slippery thing. Cocked, but not locked, it went off.

"*OH, SHIT!*"

Billy pissed in his pants. Outside Ike started barking. Humberto picked up the .45, checked that a new round was seated, then went directly over to a wall cabinet.

"*I tell you ta shut de fuck up, man! You gonna shut de fuck up? You gonna shut de fuck up, all right. Damn fuck'n right, man.*"

Humberto took out a large roll of duct tape and taped Billy's mouth hard shut. Then, after giving the boy another sharp kick to the head, he walked across the room to another cabinet. The liquor cabinet. He grabbed a full plastic half-gallon bottle of vodka.

"*Gotta cheell out 'n think, Humberto, man. What ta do wit des sheethead keed?*" Humberto began chugging from the bottle as he paced.

Even amidst his fright, Billy was impressed by the volumes per minute this Cuban maniac was downing. Still really just a boy, Billy hadn't had enough experience in the toughest Florida bars yet to know that his risk of being shot, whether on purpose or by accident, was now mounting rapidly as this speedball freak became speed drunk. That is unless....

Humberto tripped, staggered, hit his head against the open cabinet door, then keeled over smartly to land, face up, on the floor. **Out.** Only Humberto's breathing reassured Billy that he

probably wasn't mortally injured. Probably at more risk of death from the alcohol and drugs than from the head injury.

Billy, too, had had too much, and passed out across The Camel.

The sun through the open door illuminated Billy's headache minutes before he could open his eyes. The Escalade's engine was dead, but there were now truck and sheep noises somewhere outside. Ike was barking again. Humberto was muttering and spitting, but crawling in a halting weave toward the entry to *The Cauldron* with his .45 in hand.

"*I get you, too! Mothafucka!*" Humberto shouted as he lurched through the door. He overshot his feet, and landed on his face outside.

Crack-umph! Crack-umph!

Twin 12-gage shells went off in rapid succession. The blinding light scorched Billy's vision, but that was nothing compared to the hammering the reports gave his head.

As to Humberto's head, well, it was gone.

"Mr. Swilling!" It was Fob, only a bit shaken, and louder than ever.

Billy, quite shaken, tried to grunt his appreciation through the duct tape. Fob didn't make a move to untie him, however.

"Well, well! What do we have here, son? Looks like a dope operation. A great **BIG** dope operation." A shit-eating grin plastered Fob's face.

"And it looks like you, sonny-boy, also been moonlighting as some kind 'a weirdo S&M whore. A skinny, ugly, dumb-fuck of a slut, too, I might add. Didn't know ya was so hard up for small change, boy. ***Yuck, yuck, yuck!***

"Drugs 'n whorin'. Son, didn't 'yo momma' ever tell ya 'crime don't pay'? Second thought, yo mamma, probly not.

"What we ever gonna do ta get ya set straight, boy? I feel a right big obligation maself ta help get it done--'n soon, too.

"But what? Church sure ain't gonna be enough....

"Looks ta me like ya might needs ta go ta a prison 'n get ya some big-time corrective. Yes, sir, a 'Big-Time' corrective."

Fob walked around behind Billy, but rather than release him from The Camel, he placed the stock of the shotgun across his hands, still tied behind his back.

"Feel that, boy? That's the stock a the gun probly saved yur worthless life." He then moved the gun up.

"And that's the trigger... 'n that's the barrel.

"Yep, boy, this here gun a mine, the one ya took up here this year just like last year, 'n now has yur guilty prints all over it, why it's the only thing kept yur slimy, drug-dealer partner, Humberto, here, from kill'n ya, after he'd had enough a yur skinny ass."

Fob put the empty shotgun in the corner against the wall.

"Yep, it was self-defense. Sure the judge 'll see it that way, son. I'll testify on yur behalf maself.

"Course ya'll still probly get 10-20 years fur the dope operation I caught ya with when I come up here just ta drop off ma animals 'n found this here murder—ah, sorry, 'self-defense'—'n called the sheriff. Lucky, too, I had this on me, 'n got a drop on ya so's I could tie ya up back on that pervert machine." Fob pulled a stub-nose Smith & Wesson .38 Ultra-Lite from his pants pocket. He then walked to the door and screamed.

"Cantina, get yur ass out that truck 'n get 'n here, right now!"

Stepping over Humberto's fresh hamburger-topped torso, Cantina came through the door, pale, shaking, eyes wide.

"Now keep yur yap shut, woman, 'n do as I say." Fob didn't need to wave the .38, but did.

"No use let'n all this here weed go ta waste in some sheriff's lock-up. Get a go'n 'n pack a bunch of them bags in back the pick-up. Then yur gonna drive down ta the farm 'n dump 'um off in the bunkhouse. I'll get 'um ta Skeeter Jones tamorra ta sell down at Tallahassee. Plenty a dope still be left ta look like what was go'n on here when the sheriff comes.

"N get yur sorry, fat ass right back up here ASAP so's I can call the sheriff 'bout Billy-boy. Call the papers, too. Won't no one listen ta him with a giant front-page drug-bust story right before their eyes. Probably even get me a big reward.

"And you, Cantina, you don't speak noth'n but that Basque yammer. Right?" Fob Ewer chuckled. He was one smart dude.

As Cantina carried one heavy bag of pot after another out to the truck, Fob moseyed over to the help trailer to get his smart ol' self a celebration drink. Billy was tied well enough for a while.

Six-pack next to his chair there on the porch, Fob twisted the cap off a first PBR.

"So here's ta ya, Fob, ol' buddy! Soon a man with plenty a spare change, and maybe a hero ta boot."

But just as Fob finished the toast, screams of the worst Mexi-Cali profanity made him chip a tooth against the bottle.

Short, fat Cantina had been attempting to rearrange some goods in the back of the flatbed to accommodate more bags of pot. But, as the stock trailer was still hitched behind the Ford, there was no access just by letting the back gate down. Cantina had to climb up on the running-board and lean way over the side-rim to move things around.... and as she did, the wind made her moo-moo a flag to heaven....

"*Blue moon, keep a shining in June....*"

Would Nelson Eddie ever forget the voice of Jeannette MacDonald? Would Fred Astaire ever forget Ginger Rogers's legs? (Could Bill Fields ever forget Mae West's mouth?) **Of course not!**

Well, neither did *Senor Freddy*--the hearthrob of the beastie boys' TJ matinees--forget the.... er, cheeks.... of his old co-star. Believe it or not, what had now arisen in the east was the bare bottom of the very *femme fatale* of Freddy's greatest--and last--thespian achievements!

Freddy now had Cantina pinned against the side of the truck. It was as in the old days, way down Mexico way.

Fob dropped his beer bottle, grabbed a shovel leaning against a tree, and came a run'n 'n a curs'n--not that Freddy noticed one bit. Fob hit him squarely across the head as hard as he could.

Freddy slumped. Cursing further after backhanding Cantina, Fob approached the fallen donkey, pointed the revolver at his heart, and cocked the hammer...

Ike exploded, a white bolt through a bark of thunder. He caught Fob's pistol arm, and 120 pounds of determined dog dragged the man to the ground. Miranda was just a second behind. The discharged revolver went tumbling down the hill.

Fob would have been killed for sure had he not managed to pull himself under the pick-up. There *Miranda* kept him pinned. Cantina ran, bellowing and cursing all the way, to climb under *The Cauldron*, wedging herself into the crawl space's sewage-access tunnel.

It took Billy almost half an hour to untie himself. Freddy was out, but still breathing. Ike lay in a pool of blood.

Billy used Fob's cell phone to call the sheriff. The cops took over an hour to make it up to *Moby Dick's*, but neither Fob nor Cantina were going anywhere, not with Miranda on watch. Billy did what he could for Ike and Freddy.

Before his men finished calling in the first report, the Hicky County Sheriff called the news outlets.

EPILOGUE: *Just Deserts for All*

Billy, rather than Fob, became a hero. **USA Today** labeled him "The Good Shepherd of Humpback Mountain", crediting him with breaking up a major drug operation at considerable risk to his own life. Besides receiving a nice Federal cash reward, the Drug Enforcement Agency, always alert to publicity opportunities, also hired Billy to go on tours out west to Indian reservations and county fairs throughout sheep country. There he encouraged kids to rat-out drug dealers.

During one such gig in Flagstaff, AZ, Billy met a family of five recently widowed fundamentalist Mormon "sisters" (ages 19-43) who were now struggling with a failing sheep operation and a bunch of kids an hour north of the Grand Canyon. Big-hearted Bill offered to help them just for bunk & board. Within a month he was not only a Mormon convert, but, on his eighteenth birthday, also became the new family patriarch.

Fortunately for Billy, his new family was determined to put an end to his drinking.... and not just because of The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. The flock's previous leader had died of third degree burns when, after tripping over a manure fork, the pint of *Old Crow* he was hiding in his coat pocket spilled onto a pile of dry sheep shit, which in turn his cigarette ignited when he landed, facedown, therein. The funeral, and the Church Court that decided retroactive excommunication rightly due, were held the same day.

Billy was shown the business end of a manure fork the first time he showed up with a six-pack. The women also showed him how they castrate rams.

Fob, with a signed grazing lease to prove he did business with Humberto-- not to mention a load of marijuana in his truck--was convicted of inter-state drug trafficking, and given a 15-year sentence in Federal prison. He was acquitted of murder. Shooting Humberto was ruled self-defense.

As only the Southern Fates could have it, Fob's first roommate in the Atlanta Penitentiary was none other than **Sugar**, who himself had recently been convicted of lewd behavior while traveling on an Interstate Highway. Originally given just 15 months, Sugar subsequently petitioned the judge for 3 years, hoping to complete his MFA (Master of Forbidden Acts) while in the can.

Cantina, although found with every other counterfeit document imaginable, could not produce a birth certificate or other proof of U.S. citizenship, and was deported to Mexico. A good lawyer eventually secured her return to Long Beach, but for a year and a half she was back in TJ, mopping up after acts taking place on the very stage where, once, she was a star.

Moby Dick's, like the Ewer place, was confiscated by the cops and sold at auction. It was bought by Chip and Dale Weiner, two fabulously rich Birmingham GUPPIES. Mr. and Mr. Weiner told **The Hickory Nut** that *Moby Dick's* was a wedding present from both of them to the two of them. It soon became the South's only publically advertised gay spa and sometimes ski resort--and quite profitable, too. Yes, it is true that at first the good Christian citizens of Bear Bottom Holler were not thrilled with the new *Dick's*, but as money began pumping into local gas/convenience stores, all grew right fond of "The Boys".

Ike and Miranda stayed at *Moby Dick's* and became the resort's mascots. **Miranda** continued to enjoy wandering all over Humpback Mountain. She was around the lodge only at meal times.

After Fob's .38 shattered his shoulder, **Ike** suffered with severe arthritis. Worst in the cold months. He spent most winter days and nights curled up by the fireplace in the sitting room just off *Dick's* lobby. Summers, the shady porch was fine.

Ike was everyone's best friend, accepting pets and head scratchings with obvious appreciation (and proffered cookies and other pilfered treats with stealthy discretion). Ike even got

to be the ring bearer for weddings performed at the lodge. Always dignified, he held the thick gold bands high on the tip of his fluffy white tail to be accepted by each groom in turn.

Fob's braining left **Freddy** listless. Sad, quite sad. Dale had a soft heart, so Chip bought him the poor little burro.

Dale Weiner resolved to restore a life of meaning to his new ward. To boost the equine's dignity, his name reverted to "Ferdinand", and a new stable was built, complete with hot water shower and drying room, as well as automated carrot and apple dispensers, each operated by a mere nudge. For the summers, drinking water was supplied at a constant, donkey-friendly 60° F, and carefully tended *No-Pest Strips* kept the flies at bay in those few barn rooms not air-conditioned. Outdoors in winter, the custom-tailored Hudson Bay Company "*Four Beaver*" pony blankets, imported from Canada, were both practical, and super stylish.

Through such ministrations, and others, after a while the donkey perked up. He even got back on stage, but this time in a respectable role.

Quite religious, through generous donations the Weiners helped establish the new Bear Bottom Episcopal Church, and as a token of gratitude the priest asked if their darling little Ferdinand would carry The Virgin to the manger for the children's outdoor Christmas pageant. Chip and Dale would be shepherds, with sheep from the old Quaking U Ranch.

That Christmas eve, as ten-year old Faith Hope presented The Child to the world in the cold, deep still of night, a light snow began to fall. Even Freddy lowered his head, and closed his eyes. The scene was truly beatific.

Ike was there, too, at the foot of the manger, guarding the whole Nativity assemblage. With his keen dog's ears, he alone might have heard it. At first there was perhaps just some faint fluttering.... then a clear-voiced, silver trumpet sounded sweetly in the distance, all the way from the top of Humpback Mountain.

Ike was silent.

(The End)

God's Gift

By Catherine Weiss

Sarah hated metal. Especially death metal. Or heavy metal. Or thrash metal. *Really play me any kind of metal*, she thought to herself as she fiddled with her car's radio knob, and I'll hate it. She wasn't sure who was on the radio now, maybe Megadeath? Was that a band? Didn't matter anyway. She glanced down to see what station she was on and that's when she ran over Jesus.

She didn't realize it was Jesus right away. She heard something hit the hood, and then a THUMP as her car bumped over something large and a little bit crunchy.

In the pre-dawn light Sarah pulled her beat-to-shit Saab over to the side of the road. She jumped out to see what had happened. Please be a deer, she thought. She walked on the shoulder the ten yards to where a crumpled heap lay on the ground. It was not a deer. Once she saw his face, she recognized him instantly, even through all the blood. His face had been in the news enough for the past year. He of the talk-show circuit and guest judge of America's Got Talent. So yes, she now recognized him. She felt a twist of fear from deep inside her gut.

Sarah had not been raised a Christian but 14 months ago, when Mr. Christ appeared wearing naught but, to Sarah's eyes, a burlap sack and a retro haircut, he began attempting good works around the world. His work was immediately controversial. At first there had been skeptics that this man was who he claimed to be, but their voices got quieter and quieter as the smaller miracles piled up. Water to wine; clearing the President's daughter of her acne-scars; resurrecting the dead cat of a crying man on CNN. Not everyone converted to Christianity—it was not immediately apparent what this magical man could do to actually help the larger problems of the world—but thanks to Jesus's twitter account, most every person on earth was now a Follower of Christ. Sarah always figured she would have been one of that number too, had she owned a smart-phone. Alas.

This is too big, thought Sarah, with dull horror. *I was within spitting distance of the most beloved man in the history of the world, and I ran him over with my car.* She put the back of her hand to his slightly parted lips and felt no air coming or going.

"Please wake up," she said weakly, feeling stupid saying the words aloud even as her panic rose.

But even Jesus only has fifteen minutes of fame these days. Unable to effect lasting change in the Middle East, in the divided politics of the United States, anywhere that needed real help, Jesus drifted into obscurity. Some people thought he was in rehab. Others figured he had gone back to wherever he had been hanging out that whole time.

But no, Sarah realized, *he's been wandering around back roads at o'dark in the morning.* She took a few deep breaths and tried to think what to do. Check for a pulse. In his neck. There was no pulse. It was too late for a hospital to do any good.

She had to make a choice. She could turn herself in, or flee. Jesus had attempted to play a role in abolishing the death penalty in the United States, but had failed. Sarah didn't know much about the law but she knew manslaughter was different than murder, but manslaughter of the Son of God? All bets were off.

But how far could she get if she made a break for it? Certainly his body would be discovered within minutes and roads would be closed off. She would be found in no time, and look even guiltier. Unless—

Sarah popped her trunk and shoved the accumulated debris around to make space. She walked back to Jesus' body and felt as if she were in a dream, the kind where you had a lot of logistics to work out but couldn't get everything done in time. She hooked her hands under his armpits and hefted. The body was heavier than she had expected and the process of dragging him to the trunk was excruciatingly slow. Sarah waited for a car to come around the bend at any moment, shining accusatory headlights on this morbid little scene, but none did. Using all her strength, Sarah heaved Jesus into the trunk of her car and slammed the lid closed. She gave a momentary thanks to God that she didn't drive a hatch back, but feeling awkward, took it back. Aw, hell, she thought, and got back in the car.

Sarah turned the key and nothing happened. *This stupid junk car,* she thought, *is quite literally going to be the death of me.* She tried the key again and the Saab roared to life. She started breathing.

It took Sarah ten minutes to realize she was listening to static on the radio. She flipped it off. Sarah wasn't sure what her next move should be. She was supposed to be on her way to the coffee shop in town where she would be opening. She was still on time, mostly, so she could go there and not be suspicious, but would a body in the trunk of a car start to smell? She had to get rid of it before she could do anything else, she decided. *I most definitely deserve to go to hell for this.*

There was a scenic overlook parking area ahead so Sarah pulled into it. She sat there for a long time wondering if she would pull herself together enough to be convincingly flu-ish on the phone.

"Hi Donna? This is Sarah."

"Sarah, it's you. I thought it would be Jeff. He's been calling every few minutes to check in on the sandwich stuff."

"Sandwich stuff?" Sarah was distracted.

"Yeah, the sandwich stuff. Today is breakfast sandwich day. You know this. It's going to be a disaster. You would think Jesus himself would be coming in to get a cappuccino and a muffin for all the shit I'm getting from Jeff. Get your butt over here pronto and help me."

"Well actually," Sarah started and coughed feebly into the phone, "I'm not feeling..."

"I don't care how you're feeling. Today is not a day to be sick. It would totally screw me. Do you intend to totally screw me?"

"No, but..." Sarah couldn't think of what to say. In these situations, she never could.

There was a click. Donna had hung up. Sarah exhaled and put her head in her hands. Her shift was 6 AM to 1 PM and she supposed she could do that if she had to. She could leave Jesus in the trunk of her car, if she parked in the shade. It was April, and the weather hadn't been clearing much above 60. I hope he's comfortable back there, she thought irrationally.

She drove very slowly into the neighboring town of Millbrook, not wanting to catch the attention of any police officers or canny onlookers. She passed through the small New England town, trees still mostly unbudded, and lawns dormant, and pulled into the parking lot by Jeffrey's, *the coffee shop where I toil,* as she thought of it.

Sarah parked in a shady spot in the back of the lot near the dumpster. She pulled on her slouchy hat as per regulation and stood for a moment by the trunk, her keys in her hand. She considered putting her ear to the trunk to listen for moment but decided against it.

The morning was a rare combination of dragging and hectic. Breakfast sandwiches were a pain in the ass because for some reason it seemed like every fool who had ordered an Egg McMuffin as recently as yesterday suddenly had to have the concept explained to them.

"A breakfast sandwich is, well, a fried egg, with cheese, on a bagel. You can have bacon on it if you want." Blank stare.

The food prep was slow, tedious, and smelly. She had almost forgotten what she had in her trunk when her boss Jeffrey came in.

"Did you hear? Jesus was in the area, and now he's missing. There's a manhunt going on by Bear Mountain. They've got dogs through the woods and everything. They weren't sure where he disappeared from but he didn't turn up for a meeting at 8 or 9 with the town officials or something."

Donna was unconcerned. "He'll show up. Didn't he do this in Bhutan?"

Sarah, on the other hand, had never been able to control the color of her face.

"Sarah, you're all splotchy and purple," said Jeffrey. "Are you ok?"

"I don't feel so good," Sarah said.

"Jesus freak," muttered Donna, but then she winked.

"Your shift is over in...?" Jeffrey asked.

"45 minutes," Sarah replied.

There was a long pause as, Sarah knew, Jeffrey was pondering doing the gallant thing and then dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "You'll be fine."

The last half an hour was agonizing. There were few customers and Sarah found her gaze drifting repeatedly out to the back lot. Donna called her out on her inattention a few times but then let it drop.

Sarah saw a cop car pull up in front of the coffee shop and two stern-looking officers got out. They walked slowly to the door—she could see them through the picture window—and with a shock of dread she thought this is it, they know. The taller officer pushed open the front door and the bell tinkled their arrival. She hoped fervently that they wouldn't notice her sweaty palms and fast breathing.

But no, they wanted sandwiches and coffee and then were on their way without so much as a suspicious glance.

Sarah's shift over, she hurried back to her car and drove it towards home. It was as she crossed the railroad tracks by the river that she heard it: a quiet tap tap tap coming from the trunk.

She kept her cool and didn't slam on the breaks or careen off the road. She drove safely home. She used her turn signal.

Sarah lived in a duplex but the Grimmald family's car wasn't in the driveway. She pulled in next to her side entrance door, so the old house blocked the view of the car from the road and sidewalk. She keyed open her trunk and there he was: Jesus staring up at her with wide eyes, a little worse for the wear but definitely alive.

"I forgive you," said Jesus from the car's trunk. The corner of his mouth twitched. "But, are you gonna help me out of here or what?"

Inside, Sarah handed Jesus a glass of water. Suddenly she was very aware of the stench of egg and bacon grease on her clothes.

"Do you mind if I take a nap on your couch for a few minutes? I'm a little beat up." Jesus leaned a shoulder casually against the wall next to the cabinets.

"Sure, I'll get you a blanket." Sarah left him in the kitchen and collected a pillow and a comforter. "Stay as long as you like."

"Thanks, just a quick nap and then I'll be on my way. I appreciate it." Jesus made the couch-bed and snuggled into it.

"I'll be in my room down the hall if you need anything," said Sarah. She tiptoed down the hall and lay down on her bed to think. *He forgave me. Maybe I'm not screwed after all.*

She drifted off to sleep.

She was awakened by floorboards creaking by her bed and breath on her cheek. It was Jesus, leaning over her. He smiled.

Jesus pinched a wisp of hair that had gotten loose from her ponytail and was dangling in her face. He gently tucked it behind her ear. Sarah felt a tingle run down her spine and shut her eyes to savor the sensation. Here she was with the ultimate celebrity, and it was kind of hot. *But nothing is really going happen—right? Jesus isn't going to—you know—with me, right? Not after the car thing...?* But there were his hands in all the right places. Sarah opened her eyes and looked into his eager face. All at once they were fumbling at buttons and zippers with a furiousness that suggested doffing clothing doused in kerosene and set aflame. Sarah's final thought was: *is that Axe body spray I smell?*

* * *

Sarah stared at the ceiling and worked up the courage—and saliva—to speak.

"It's fine. Really. It's fine. I don't mind. It was nice. Really nice."

"Yeah, thanks." Jesus rolled to the other side of the bed, facing the wall.

Sarah was having *déjà vu*. The foreplay had been hot, but then after fumbling with a condom there were the three quick thrusts, premature finish, and the complete emotional shut-down of her partner. All so familiar. Sarah tried to decide if she was going to go to Jesus and tuck a reassuring arm around his torso. She never could decipher this particular bit of male body language. Was it saying "leave me alone" or "come and hug me"? She decided to let him have his space. She watched him breathing for a minute and then went into the bathroom to tidy up. When she returned, Jesus was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully clothed.

"Were you drunk?" he said, without looking up at her.

"What? When?"

"When you hit me with your car. When do you think?"

"No I wasn't drunk. I don't do that. Also it was early morning."

"Drinking and driving is not okay," Jesus said, pedantically.

"Thanks for the info," said Sarah, starting to get really annoyed now. This guy was just another jerk, after all. *God's gift to mankind*, she thought.

"Whatever, it's not a thing. We should put on some music."

"What do you like?" Sarah decided to get over her irritation—she was genuinely curious about his musical taste. She didn't have any hymns on her iPod.

"Hmm. Got any Slayer? Metallica? I know! Iron Maiden?"

He's a metal fan. Of course he is, she thought. Of course he is.

Company

By M.J. Mellor

17th of December 1912

I am writing this statement as an exercise given to me by my Physician. Doctor Williams insists that I write an account of my experiences in order to reveal to me the apparent nonsensicality and illogical aspects of my claims. This exercise is based on Dr. Williams' assessment of my paranoia as being just that, paranoia.

I have all but ostracized myself from my family and friends. In my opinion this is due to their combined refusal to believe me, and a lack of empathy for my situation, which to me is very real and a cause for great anguish and fear.

My recent actions have led me to become something of an outcast in my village, looked upon as a strange eccentric. People cross the road when they see me; all the local friendly custom I had previously enjoyed and rejoiced in has now gone. Replaced by a cold, stony demeanour from all I encounter. A stark contrast to my previous social placement from a lifetime of village life.

This transformation began with the death of my wife, I write this account from my study, where, a large painting of my dear wife hangs on the wall before me. We were leaving a dinner party hosted by a mutual friend one night, not so long ago, and as we were a mile or two away from home I saw fit to drive, despite the dense fog that had descended like into the valley below. We were used to the fog in our village. Most of the residential properties and all of the local amenities settled in the centre of the village in the middle of a deep valley. A valley guarded by three large hills in a triangular formation that formed the outskirts of the village. This peculiar geographical shape provides a terrain in which fog can thrive.

We had said our goodbyes, entered the car and started on the short journey home. The fog was so thick, even more so than we were used to, so I had decided to drive with great caution. Even so I managed to gather speed coming down the hill and into the village where a large stonewall separated the cemetery from the road.

The cemetery is filled with modest monuments to local men and women and there are lots of strange corners and odd side paths, which I had explored as a boy but could scarcely remember the weathered contents.

Without realising, I was aiming for the wall with great speed. While desperately trying to correct my course the driver's side of the vehicle slammed into the wall. It made a dreadful scraping noise, this did curb our speed slightly, but I was still fighting frantically for control.

I saw it a split second before it happened, and thus had no control over the result. The cemetery gate appeared on the driver's side and we swerved in. I became cold at the sight of the church and the obelisks surrounding it peering out of the fog. The moonlight reflected and refracted around the area, all of the monuments danced grotesquely in the moonlight, and in and out of the fog.

The car had adopted a demonic gait as it pounded into the unkempt grass when it violently stopped. I don't know how long I was unconscious for, as I had not noted the time when I left the dinner party, but I remember waking at 1.40AM. I tried to move but my efforts were in vain. There was moistness to the floor around my feet; I had a compound fracture from my collarbone. I turned with great effort and discomfort to see my wife. With my injuries my slow turn revealed to me that in the impact an iron railing had pierced the window and impaled her through the abdomen. She just sat there motionless. I can't help but feel that her death was infinitely more tragic due to the fact that she was pregnant. I let out several cries, which were not received or reciprocated by anyone.

I hauled myself from the wreckage fuelled by desperation to be away from my wife's body and an overpowering need to see what I had hit. I limped over to the railings and peered over them. Wherein I saw a small tomb. I recognized this particular tomb from my childhood, my friends and I had, on occasion tried to remove the lid. My childhood curiosity washed over me once again and I limped forward another few steps into the flowerbed, that was full of lilies, to see that the lid had been knocked in the impact. It was now hanging more than halfway off.

I looked inside and saw to my amazement that it was empty. I was stunned. As a child I had been told that a grand coffin lay inside. My attention was once again directed towards my wife. I hobbled over to her side of the car and looked in.

I genuinely felt something break when I saw her. There I was standing, even with a broken leg and broken collarbone but when I saw her again, my thoughts and perception clear or as clear as they can be after the arduous ordeal of the crash. It was then when I collapsed. I wept so deeply that my ribcage rattled with every breath. This attracted the attention of some locals who were heading home after a night sampling the local ales. The men helped to clear the scene and kept me well away from the wreckage, I was helped home and treated for my injuries by Doctor Williams.

After the funeral I was still bedridden with my injuries. Friends and family were trying to visit me daily but I was in the throws of a deep depression. I was desperate to get out, to get away from the large empty house and against the advice of my friends and Doctor Williams as soon as I could walk with the aid of a stick I decided to take a walk to see where I had the accident in full daylight.

I was just leaving my garden through the gate when I saw an old friend, Albert Worthington. I had known him since I was a small boy. We spoke of trivial things, of the weather and how well I was healing when I told him of the empty tomb which we had visited as children. He insisted that there was something inside it but I was adamant that this was not the case. When he tried to say that I must have been mistaken due to the nature of that particular visit to the tomb I decided against pressing the issue further. Albert insisted that I went to his house that night for dinner. I tried to refuse as I felt that I wasn't ready for social excursions but he would not accept it. I was however thankful for the opportunity to get away from the photos and painting of my wife for a night as they had been haunting and tormenting me.

It wasn't late when he picked me up but even so it was dark. And the beginnings of a dense fog crept in like ghoulish waves lapping at the shore. I was enjoying my night away as best I could when it came time for me to leave. I would not enter my friend's car in the dark as the accident was

and is still so fresh in my mind so with the aid of my cane I was going to walk home. Daniel wanted to join me but I wanted to take in the night air in the hopes that it would clear my head and to do something to purify my conscience.

I started the walk confidently and safely, I had achieved a steady pace and as I was going to walk the entire length of the village in order to get home I wanted to maintain a consistent speed.

It was late. The air was cool and the fog ever thickening. Shortly after leaving, Albert's house, still in sight of it, I became aware of noises behind me. Like an echo of my footsteps, but different. My walk consisted of three noises; first my cane, then one foot, and then the other; 1—2—3 1—2—3 1—2—3 but this echo was just two. 1—2 1—2 1—2 In order to analyse this sound I decided to stop. The faint echo stopped just after I did so I pressed gamely on. My mind wondered through memories of a simpler time, I smiled to myself and thought of when my wife and I had walked all around the village in pursuit of a perfect home to raise a family in when I became aware of the echo again. It was much more pronounced this time. I focused intently on the one two noise, it was footsteps I thought and stopped again. The echo appeared to continue until it sounded as if it were right behind me, so I turned as swiftly as I could to face whoever was following me. There was no one in sight. This startled me, so I took off once more.

I continued on without incident until I came to the centre of the village. It was here that I saw the wall I had hit for the first time since the accident. I walked on thinking of my wife and that fateful night then something caught the periphery of my vision. I thought I saw something in the fog. I thought I had seen a person by the railings that I had hit.

I stared intently at the sorrowful spot, I must admit that initially there were a few tears, the crisp night air carried with it the scent of lilies but then I quickly and sharply turned to anger at the possibility of someone loitering near the site, perhaps out of some kind of morbid curiosity. When I was thoroughly convinced that there was no one there I turned to leave. I then became aware of the curtains in nearby houses rustling and mumbled voices floated on the night air.

I walked on again, my mind drifted on to happier times I was finally finding some solace in the cool night. I approached the final hill but when I had begun the climb I looked up at the road ahead, and saw a man standing statuesque, in the middle of the road through the fog. Now visibility was poor, so I stopped and stared back at him for quite some time. There was no movement from the figure, I bravely pressed on once more as I had convinced myself that it was nothing more than an illusion created by the fog. And apparently this was the case.

I doggedly continued the ascent until my house was in sight. A light was on. No one should have been there. I stopped at the gate, I tightened my grip on my cane should I need to employ its form as a means of defence from an aggressor. Just as I was to make my stoic approach to my house the echoic footsteps returned, much louder than before; one two, one two, as if someone was running towards me. I turned and saw the large shadowy figure from before, I ran into the house, if I had to engage in a struggle I would rather it in there rather than out in the darkness.

I entered the house and slammed the door behind me. No sooner had the latch closed, when every other door and window in the house began to bang violently, a volcano of noise erupted, shrieking noises bounced off every surface and careered around the house. I was petrified, frozen with fear. A vast array of noises shouting, screaming, laughing and crying flailed all around I had never heard anything as horrific in my life.

Trembling, I struggled through the din to my study. The nearest room in which I could sit and try to hide from the apparitions and terror. When to my horror my eyes met with the large painting of my wife on the wall above the desk. Only, it was not the one that had previously graced the wall, but of her horrifically deformed corpse as it looked after the accident. I beheld its accuracy and detail with immense fear and fell to ground where the image captivated me and held my gaze

until dawn. With the sterile light of the morning the painting regressed to its old and much more pleasing appearance.

Since that night whenever I leave I am stalked by the ghostly figure. Hounded, as if I am the game hunted by figures from beyond this life. If I stay, I am tormented and abused by the haunting of what I'm convinced is my wife.

I am constantly being informed of my lunacy and foolishness to perceive such things as reality, but it is! I am beginning to make sense of some of the whispers; I think they are trying to talk to me. Warning me or punishing me. So here I am, branded deranged and unbalanced with nothing for company but otherworldly noises and stalkers in the night.

Moorleiche

By Eamonn Harrigan

The slow curve of a river had gouged a horseshoe shape into the boggy earth south of the bustling town. A mile to the north, a lake with the belligerence of an inland sea rested as though waiting for the pull of a stopper to release a deluge and reclaim its right. In summertime, the water levels dropped to transform the deeps to shallows and the shallows to gritty pebble outcrops. In the high summer, when the days were longest, only wending streams meandered between the bottomless pools which locals said were fed from the bog below. In autumn, the belly of the torrent became ever more swollen until, in late September as a rule, its waters broke and it spilled over the surrounding meadows and gushed toward the lower reaches of suburbia swamping drain and byre. Some years, the farmers spent October ferrying livestock to higher ground. In the rat grey days of winter the lake brooded under a duvet of cloud. The hours of daylight numbered less than seven and the town was an island between the heavyset giant water course to the north and the bloated encroaching flood plain to the south. In spring, the recession commenced a withdrawal as slow as the uprising was fast. In its wake, a soggy wasteland, an ooze of mud, the chronic scent of decay as the remnants of the depths were laid bare to the air. Then the warmth of the sun caked cracks in the soil and the spring daybreak mists revealed its enriched fecundity.

The waters birthed the town, a fording place of times long past, now a granite bridge to belt their waist at the narrowest point. They gave the town its identity, set it apart, and fed it with fish and in latter days with holiday makers. In return, the town gave the water the things it did not want, in the hope they would wash away downstream and to the ocean. It turned its back to the flow and excreted everything. In springtime, when the levels reduced, the things the town thought it had disposed of never to be seen again could sometimes be glimpsed strewn across the flood plain, only visible for a few days before a green carpet covered all their sins. Within weeks, a warm breeze would caress the hay before the slash of the scythe's amputations reduced it to honey stubble.

One fact, known to any inhabitant of the town, but unknown to the picnicking day-trippers, the tanned and tall tourists who cruised leisurely and the visiting anglers, was that the flows fickle nature could exact a price. Perchance a body might be feeling sentimental and cross the bridge in the night. It would be a mistake to pause and lean over the parapet to see the glint of the town nightlife fleck the surface of the inky blackness. To peer down at the eddies and swirls to the lime green fronds dancing below the surface might upgrade such sentimentality to a morosity as deep as the water itself until the attraction of the murky underworld became magnetic.

Perhaps I would be there, staring up.

On occasion, the gods were not in the mood for such subtlety and brewed up a cocktail of wind and waves the height of which had no earthly right to be anywhere but the ocean. On these days, a small laden fishing boat was no place for a soul who wished to see their children smile again. On rare days, in the basking calm of midsummer sunshine, folks would frolic in the shallows. They would lay out tartan picnic blankets and un-wrap tin foil packs of sandwiches to feast amid the high grasses of the callows. The local parents watched hawk-like as none could forget the one from their generation who went in but never came out. Armed with their knowledge and watercraft passed down, the townsfolk kept safe. A sunny day would also attract the children of the less wary and sometimes to places where the locals did not venture. The bottom was a mired minefield of sunken trees, their long dead branches clawing upwards. At the right angle with the encouragement of a gentle undercurrent a rotten branch could clamp a young ankle more tightly than a leg iron.

The river did not always give up its dead.

Rowan was born in the town a stone's throw from the bridge. He was thirteen and in that year his heart was still a-quiver with the thought of breaking school for summer and spending his waking hours on the lush banks. A short time and a hormone storm afterwards, his attentions would be elsewhere but, right there and then, his idea of ecstasy was to sit on the bank. He ached to watch the tip of a fishing float bob along the surface, its movement more intricate and delicate than a prima ballerina, the choreography woven by the pull of current, the draw of a summer breeze and when the time was right, the tug of the unknown. He had spent the previous two months, as the evenings drew long, absconding from school, walking in his wellingtons knee deep in the post diluvian silt. It was here, just the last August, on a postcard evening that he had landed a Rudd like a gold ingot, a magical fish. His photograph had appeared in the local newspaper and his name was now in the record books. So he stood and carefully rolled balls of feed and gently tossed them to a spot around twenty yards out. As the ball exploded on breaking the surface, it sent a cloud of scented breadcrumb to the depths.

To me, the sweet scents conjured traces of ancient memory, of campfires and bread, of the time before.

His grandfather had told him that this spot was legendary as the deepest fishing hole in all the reaches of the regal waterway that gave the country its spine. Rowan was determined that, when the level was right, he would be there and what's more, he had now reached the age where he would be able to spend all night. Having spent many winter nights absorbing angling books from the library he was well aware of the added benefit of the cover of darkness. The final hour before sun up was when everything was most alive. Even those things that lived in a different form began to stretch and prowl and feed.

On the second day of June, Rowan struggled along the path through the meadow. The path appeared every year, an unplanned meander which cut a swath through the tall grass. Whether humans or beasts created nobody knew, it simply appeared as soon as the growth was long enough and it guided all to the inlets and outcrops, over drains at their narrowest and shallowest. He carried a rod bag and a wicker creel, a flask and a bucket of bait. The scent of warm bread from the bucket danced with the honey and almond of the meadowsweet flowers. He was followed at a distance on the path by another boy. An older one, Steven, who pushed a barrow full of fishing tackle so heavy that the beads of sweat on his forehead tempted a chubby horsefly to lugubriously sink her mandibles between the freckles into the soft flesh just below his left eye.

Rowan glanced back on hearing the loud “Fuck!” emitted but quickly restarted his trek. Within five minutes he was there. The clearing in the reeds measured not more than five feet across. He gently laid down his load and began to set up. The first thing he did was dip a bucket full of crumb in to dampen it. Morsels of the bread took flight and drifted over the surface, across the shallows to the shelf where the steep drop brought the depth and the darkness and on further still to the abyss.

As the scent and the food drifted down to rest on the muddy bottom the snuffling fish disturbed my slumber. I had sensed it for a few weeks now, the hunting season was on the cusp. Amidst the detritus, deep in the silt and the rot and the bone fragments, my leathery skin stretched over my pickled organs. The fish pulsing around me were hungry after a long winter of nothing, the free offerings from above caused them to dart, their winter sluggishness replaced by ravenous excitement. Soon they would frolic and breed in the shallows, but now they would feed. I too felt a hunger.

Rowan sat in silence and surveyed the black mirror surface. Across the fields the sun was dying for the day, the amber ball cast long shadows.

“You took my swim you wanker.” The wheel of Steven’s barrow squeaked like a mouse in a trap, the swelling under his eye already looked volcanic.

“I’ve baited up here for the last month, this one’s mine.”

Steven lowered the barrow to the ground and approached Rowan from behind. As he did Rowan drew the pointed spike for his umbrella from his rod bag and ran his finger over the end. He turned toward Steven and drove it slowly into the soft earth, testing it for solidity. Steven smiled.

“Fair enough, I’ll be down at the rocks, you here for the night?”

“Ya, got a good feeling about this one, you?”

“Till I see the first cruiser in the morning, that’ll put ‘em down for the day then.” Steven was already trudging away.

“Give me a shout if you fancy a cuppa later.” Rowan called after him before setting about his task in earnest.

In the depths, the bait had now driven the fish into frenzy, heightened by the splash of more bait balls further downstream. I shook the mud from my carcass and moved nearer the surface, the shoal parted as I rose. The vibrations from the land that crackled through me piqued my appetite, the silhouettes on the bank shimmered in the half light. On the horizon, the golden disk was now drowning between the sky and the earth, transformed to an ochre ever decreasing semi-circle until its extinction. As it sunk further, Rowan baited his hook with a soft white bread flake. He lit the Tilley lamp. He quietly unscrewed the top from his flask and poured a dark sweet coffee. The scents of man, blunt and brazen, momentarily overcame the perfume of the meadows but then diluted on the breeze. He tossed another ball of bread crumb to his chosen spot. Splashes echoed along the ripples singing to him that Steven was doing the same. The soft crumb expanded on impact, an explosion of snowflakes drifting on the current. The fish frolicked in the blizzard like a shaken snow globe and picked off the tastiest pieces before they even hit the bottom.

I eased my way back down. The weight of my innards drew me to the deep; my skin tautened as I crawled along the mud, the creatures of the depths shied away until I slipped over the rim of the bog hole I knew as mine. It had been such since the night they had weighed me down and watched as my bound body sunk. It was before the span of the bridge, before artificial light flickered, a time when the rattle of machinery did not break the quiet. It was a time when groups of people banded together and did not move far from their place. It was no time to be different.

The flow was fast around the rocks of the ford, before man tried to tame the beast with locks and gates and weirs. The lake above the settlement gave way to currents below. To the south, lay a layered bog of turf pockmarked with holes unfathomable. In some places, the ooze of the bog

had grown a toupee of roots and grass which wound around itself to create the illusion of solid ground. Nobody who ever slipped through this skin would return. When man played his controlling hand the bog was drowned, the fast stream convulsed into a languorous behemoth that slithered toward the sea, and the secrets of the turf lay hidden even deeper.

I was fifteen when they caught me, not much older than the boys whose vibrations from the banks ripped through my being. It had rained for two years. I lived with my father alone following the death of my mother. She died bringing me to the world. We were on the edge of the settlement, as near to the ford as we were allowed and as far from the others as was safe. Sometimes, when it was dark, I would walk the path through the mud and reed huts. The other families had groups of children. I was alone. Their features were dark and their hair long and matted. Mine was the colour of straw. It still is. My father said it was because my mother came from the North, far beyond the lake. Her people had been driven from their place and he found her alone and starving. The others in the settlement were wary and forced him to move to the edge. He cursed his bad luck in meeting her every day and pleaded with the gods to spare him the burden of the straw haired girl. The rains brought the flood level to the edge of the huts. It flowed through the crops and turned their roots to fetid soup. Something had to be done.

They came from the shadows. I felt them before I saw them. I tried to scream. Nothing came out. I fell to the earth when the first blow struck; the soil was soft and warm. My eyes caught the outline of my hut. My father stood in the entrance, turned his back. I swivelled around but was held by the wrists and ankles. The whole settlement was around me they chanted a prayer to the gods of rain, even the children watched as they hefted me up and carried me to the bog. I could not even wriggle. At the edge of the bog hole they lay me on the ground. They drove a wooden stake through the muck, hammering from above until it found purchase deep underneath. The knives were cold and dull of blade. It took time to cut the tendons of my legs and arms. I stared at the wide eyes of a two year old in the arms of his mother. They said the gods of rain demanded a sacrifice to halt the downpour. They gouged deep chasms below my nipples. My blood flowed freely. I kicked out and caught one of them below the knee. The force was enough to make the others release and jump back. I struggled free and the circle widened. Their incantations were silenced. I tried to stand but their work was expert, my tendons severed. I flailed on the ground like an upturned beetle; the muck of the bog flew around me, my straw coloured hair turned dark like theirs. When I had nothing left their incantations began again, they bound me and tied me to the stake in the hole. As they weighted me down and eased me in I watched them all the way. Until the broth wrapped me up and the viscous earth sucked me to its breast.

I do not know what happened after but I must have slept for a long time. When I was awoken my bones were silt and my skin was cured like leather hide. My hair was still the colour of straw. I was awakened by a sensation. A long slithering black thing bared its teeth and was gnawing at my side. Without bones my movement is different. But I have strength. I wound my fingers around the eel and squeezed until it broke open. I move now like the eel itself moved. I shook myself from the mud and realized I was hungry, no, I was ravenous. I caught wisps of memory of the time before, of the knives and the stake. I surfaced from the mud and the stump of the stake was before me rotten and coated with moss and weed. The moss waved in a current. My eyes adjusted slowly until I realized I was underwater. I clung to the remnant of the post and held tight. I cried. I have never liked being alone. I stayed there for I know not how long, it could have been years, until, one day, the deep delivered to me her bounty. He was beautiful.

A scent drifted to me. It was heavenly. I released my grip on the post and found I drifted upward. I broke the surface to see lights brighter than my imagination. The settlement had grown; the bog was now in the depths. I slid under again and followed the scent, upstream. As I approached along the bottom I felt sensations I did not know existed. I found it best to slither along

the mud as the other boneless creatures do. I came to an overhang close to the edge and there he was, in all his glory. His flaxen hair seemed drawn to the surface, his eyes were wide open as was his mouth, he looked about sixteen. His face bore a look of magnificent surprise. His right leg was wrapped in the weed and his arms were stretched above his head as though reaching for the sun. The night was by now taking leave and the light from the surface grew stronger. I eased around him, I found I could stretch myself in ways I thought not possible. I freed him and brought him back to my depths. I was no longer alone. When I brought him down to the mud I clung to him. We kept each other company through the warm currents of the summer, the cooling of the autumn when brown leaves floated down to blanket us and when winter came I dragged him deep into the mud to sleep in my arms. By the time the fish snuffled excitedly for food in springtime he had changed. His bones had turned to aspic, his golden hair was gone, he had melted away into the mud and I was alone again.

But not for long, most years the gods delivered to me a new darling, I sought them out in the lake above the town and the slower stretches below. I clung to them and sucked them hollow until the next year. Some years, when my hunger grew savage, I would hunt for myself. It gave me form, when I wrapped around them I subsumed them, I could feel the structure of their bones within me, I could not exist without that feeling. I could never be alone down there again.

It was, by now, a completely dark moonless night, although when Rowan tore his eyes away from the fluorescent tip of his float, a glance star ward displayed a carpet of jewels. He sat cocooned under his umbrella, arms wrapped around him as tight as a strait jacket. He could see the lights of the town in the distance and the low moan of country music floated toward him. The acrid scent of vinegar on chips brought saliva to his mouth just as he heard a muted splash.

“Steven, how are you doing?”

He called out, though his voice trailed off at the end of it as he did not wish to spook any fish and, more importantly, sound scared in front of Steven. There was no answer. A small wave lapped the toes of his waders, although he could discern no breeze. He calculated the distance to the edge of the town and stood up to gauge it. It was not far, perhaps half a mile, but that half mile at that time of night was a woeful place to his still young eyes. He settled back down.

“Keep it together Rowy boy.” He focused on the luminous green dot on the water. It bobbed under once and he tensed, coiled spring-like with his hand hovering over the rod. The float remained stubbornly still for long minutes after and he gradually relaxed and reminded himself how the fish loved to tease. He began to think of the beauty of his record Rudd and how there might be an even greater prize circling his bait but his reverie was disturbed by a rustle from behind, where the grasses stretched away into the darkness. He peered around the curve of his giant green umbrella but found only silence and the light of the stars. But not for long, another rustle, then a patter caused him to light his torch. His float on the surface was forgotten as he wondered what was behind him.

I drew on his line again dragging the light down for a moment to see if he responded, but he did not. So I slithered my way closer to the bank through the mud, up over the ledge to the shallows. He was now only feet away from me. At such close quarters, with his face lit by the lamplight, through the prism of the water, I could see features reminiscent of the little boy who watched as my body was torn and battered from the warmth of the arms of his mother. He needed only to step in to be mine. But he turned away.

To Rowan’s ears the noise behind him grew louder and louder. The light from the torch in his hands cast dancing shadows as his hands trembled. He stood and moved from the safety of his umbrella, from the light to the dark. He swung the torchlight in a slow arc, expecting the sound to be silenced. From amongst the grass stubble the light glinted off little black beads, pairs of them, and the pairs numbered hundreds. As the light passed over the rats they paused then resumed their

noisy foraging unfazed. Rowan sat back down again and smiled to himself. The life behind him and all around him carried on as it would whether he was there or not. He took a deep breath and poured himself another cup of coffee, although his hands were trembling as the liquid splashed in the cup. He settled back down and reeled in his line to check the hook. As he pushed the hook into the flake the pointed barb entered his thumb on the full.

“Jesus.” He muttered.

He cast his line out again hitting the precise spot where it settled before, set the rod down on the rests and waded into the shallows to rinse his wounded finger.

In front of me the hands wafted in the current, the fresh blood rinsing through my senses as I lay in the mud so close to him. Camouflaged amidst the weeds I reached for his hand. As our fingers touched I felt alive. I did not feel alone. Then he was gone.

Rowan shot bolt upright on hearing the sound, his hands dripping. A heart stopping scream cut through the night. This was followed by a stream of gut wrenching roars of agony, howls of pain.

“Steven!” He called.

There was no answer but the screaming continued, amplified by the darkness.

Under the surface, I too heard a sound of resurrected memories. I slithered downstream.

Rowan grabbed his torch and strode down the path, the rats scattered before him unseen. He broke into a run as the howling grew louder. Twice he stumbled and fell in the grass on the uneven ground and scrambled back to his feet. He burst into the clearing where Steven had set up his gear. It was a rocky inlet on the bank, an aberration in the wet land as though left from a different time. Steven’s gear was intact. Still the horrible screams continued and it was then that Rowan saw him. Steven was lying on his back. His body convulsed, his limbs shook as if they had independent life, his head moved back and forth as if he was having the prince of nightmares. A long drool of spittle roped from his mouth onto the rocks where he lay.

From the shallows I watched. The boy lay on the ground and struggled as I struggled before him. But he could not see his attackers. There were none save for those inside him. As I had been powerless on my back and waved my arms and legs before they bound me so he was waving. His eyes were wide open but unseeing. Mine at least had seen those who had done me harm. They had stood by and watched as I was taken.

Rowan rushed to him. He cradled his head in his arms. He pushed his fingers into Steven’s open mouth and pulled his tongue out. Steven coughed and spluttered but Rowan held him tight to him until the convulsions abated. They sat there holding each other until the sun peeked over the horizon and painted the world a different hue.

“You okay?” Rowan asked.

Steven nodded.

“Not as frequent as they used to be, hey, don’t tell my folks yeah, they won’t let me come night fishing if they think it’s back”

“No problem.” Rowan said as he walked back to his fishing spot.

“Hey Rowan” Steven called.

Rowan paused “Yep?”

“You’re still a wanker for taking my swim”

“Whatever.” Rowan smiled to himself as he strolled back to pack up his tackle. In the distance the first cruiser of the day rounded the bend going upstream. The achy throb of the diesel engine signalled the beginning of the day. Now would come the daylight hours, when only the smaller less wary fish would be snared, where inexperience and silliness could lead to disaster.

Steven waded in and scooped up handfuls of water to wash.

I watched him from below. As he leant his face was inches from mine. I was hidden, my skin the colour of the earth beneath me. I stretched myself around his calves as they sunk into the muddy bottom. I could feel his bones through the rubber and the skin and the flesh. My hunger gnawed at my bowels like rats at grain.

He moved his boots in the mud, struggled to release his feet from my grip. I stared into his eyes, I was close enough to kiss him.

His feet pulled away as I released them and slipped back to the depths.

Summer was only beginning.

Arnie's Monster

By John Ammann

"What's in your hand?" asked Carmelita in a nasally, drawn-out query.

Arnie looked up from the pile of sticks and stones that provided safe haven for the four remaining soldiers of ten, who fought a brave battle against the "Little People", and their ninja dog. Several of the squad had been killed in the line of duty, when the father drove the family station wagon through the soldiers' camp and ran them down as they fled for their lives. Others found their end after walking into a minefield that was cleverly arranged by the mother. The son played dead to lure two soldiers close enough so that the ninja dog could attack from behind. Arnie's left hand stayed clinched shut throughout the entire battle.

"What's in your hand?" Carmelita asked again.

Arnie saw her tiny finger was knuckle deep in her nose now and she wiped it clean down the side of the blue dress she was wearing that was covered in little pink flowers. Her hair was in two tiny pigtails on the side of her head. With the sun behind her all Arnie could truly make out was the silhouette of her round face and her pigtails. He imagined she was some great and powerful insect standing over him with its antennae probing the space between them to decide if he was food or not. But then he let himself realize it was just Carmelita.

"Why?" Arnie returned sounding offended. He had been asked that same question everyday since he confided in Sylvester as to what it was he was holding. Now, the question was coming just to provide a laugh, and Arnie regretted ever revealing his secret.

"They told me to ask you," Carmelita said, pointing in the direction of the three fifth graders who stood, tauntingly laughing near the swings.

Arnie looked back at Carmelita, who was, by then, sucking the same finger that was up her nose.

"It's a monster," he said squinting at the bit of sun that Carmelita wasn't shading. Her head was an outline of itself with the two loosely tied braids hung to either side of her head. There were hundreds of loose hairs reaching from their roots from all directions and giving the image of a mist around the girl's head.

"I mean, it's my friend," Arnie continued, "but he's still a monster."

"You don't got no monster in your hand," laughed Carmelita and her upper lip was now wet with the stuff. She licked it away absentmindedly as if it was a thing done many times before.

"I do!" screamed Arnie, "and you better not laugh at him. 'Cause if he hears you, he'll get real mad and do stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" returned Carmelita—mocking him.

"Bad stuff."

"What kind of bad stuff?" giggled Carmelita.

"Real bad stuff. Stuff that'll make you cry. So stop laughing at him."

"I'm not laughing at him. I'm laughing at you. You don't got a monster in your hand." A shiny line of fresh snot glazed her upper lip.

Arnie turned back to his toy soldiers and "Little People" and mumbled, "I do."

Carmelita stood quiet for a few seconds. Arnie waged another war against the defenseless soldiers and ignored Carmelita as best he could. Carmelita's curiosity caught notice of Arnie's clutched fist. She watched his face as he made explosion noises and his hand as he moved the pieces. Arnie's left fist remained a tight knot of white knuckles.

"Can I see it?" Carmelita calmly offered; her face was stiff in anticipation of whatever she thought she might see.

Arnie turned his head in a slow rotation of expectation and smiled. They all laughed when he told them what it was, but then they always wanted to see it for themselves. Arnie turned his entire body towards Carmelita and quickly cupped both hands together. With one eye closed, he drew his hands closer to his face—peering in and probing the small area within his hands. After a second or two, he pulled his face away, quickly covering the peep hole with his thumb, and said, "No!" Then he turned back to the strife he had begun before the, oh so, rude interlude.

Carmelita laughed again, protesting, once more, that there was no monster. "Why can't I see it?" she asked. "If you really have one, let me see it. It's because you don't got no monster. HA HA HA! You're just weird. HA HA HA!" Carmelita laughed and laughed. "If you really had a monster you would let me see it."

Arnie's patience wore as thin as flesh when he redirected his attention back at Carmelita. Her attitude was no longer tolerable. He had heard the same and worse from the three fifth graders who had been harassing and threatening him. It had been that way ever since he moved to Deanwood and was forced to attend Houston Elementary. He smiled up at her, but none of it was to say anything friendly. It was more of a smile of cold, built up demise. It was the smile one gives to his enemy as he watches the last of life run out of him.

Then, in the kindest voice and the gentlest tone, Arnie looked Carmelita right in the soul and said, "I'll describe him for you."

With that, Carmelita pulled her finger from her nose and thought better of listening, but she couldn't move to save her life.

"He's got eyes the size of your head," Arnie began and his face seemed long and stabbing, "but their not round. They almost seem like warm jelly. And when he looks right at you, you almost think that they're going to slide right out of his head. His mouth... well... his mouth is a pit of blood and chewed up body parts that looks like a huge cut opening in his head. His breath smells like hot blood dripping in a fire. He's eight feet tall and his arms start at the very top of his head and even drag a little when he walks. That's why his hands are always bleeding. Sometimes it's because he gets carried away when people laugh at him and, well, I can't say, because I want it to be a surprise when you don't stop laughing at him."

And with the description Arnie submitted, Carmelita backed away with an empty, horrified feeling spilling quietly out of her hanging mouth. Arnie simply turned back to his war and left Carmelita to go home that night and pray that she would wake up the next morning.

School would let out that day with four threats on Arnie's life before the day would call it quits. The three fifth graders were Max Anus, (whose last name alone was enough to keep him in a

bad mood) Carlos Garcia, (whose two front teeth looked like they had been dipped in caramel) and Gooey Spears (who couldn't keep from spitting on himself even if he ate cotton balls for breakfast.)

"Maximum Anus" was always the one who seemed to spot Arnie first and the one who seemed hell-bent on causing Arnie pain. Arnie would hear him from across the school yard, taunting him, right before the rocks would start to pepper his body. Gooey and Carlos would laugh as they chased Arnie into traffic. All the while, Arnie kept his fist clenched tightly.

It wasn't but three weeks after Arnie had moved to Deanwood that word had circulated about his monster. Kids came from Mrs. King's first grade class up to Mrs. Saunders' six grade music class to tease Arnie and offer their hidden interest in what Arnie's fingers stayed wrapped around. It was Max, Carlos, and Gooey who would find out.

It was Friday, after school, when the three fifth graders had taken Arnie behind the parking lot of the school's basketball courts and promised to beat the shit out of him for being a "weird ass". Kids passed by and all looked in, but none offered help. It was certain that someone would tell a teacher the next Monday, but that was about as useful as a bib on Gooey.

"What? You gonna hit me?" dripped Gooey noticing Arnie's fist, then punched him dead in the mouth.

The blood was immediate.

"Make 'em take his pants off and walk home," said Carlos, then he swung his foot hard into Arnie's nuts. Arnie fell to the ground and was half whimpering when Max spit on him.

"Take your pants off," yelled Max. "Take 'em off and give them to me! You gotta walk home bare assed." Max placed another kick in Arnie's face. "Carlos likes you, so you better walk fast."

They all laughed and continued to draw blood from Arnie's nose. Arnie's eyes had gone blood shot to where he almost looked possessed. All the white had fled and left only the brown of his pupil surrounded by fire. His face was a red-hot ball of anger. The streams of blood had started to dip into the corners of his mouth before dripping down to his chest. He lifted his head off the ground and laughed at the three.

"He'll get you," smiled Arnie. "He'll make you pay for hurting me."

Arnie stood and faced them. The war paint surrounded his mouth and shaded his neck in deep streaks of scarlet.

"Who's gonna?" said Max. "Who's gonna make us pay? Your monster, you weirdo?"

Then Max started to punch at Arnie's face again as Gooey searched for stones for the chase home.

"Open your hand and let me see it," said Carlos. His teeth snagged his lip as he withdrew them.

Arnie smiled at the surprise of the three boys and stood up straight and tall as he held his hand out in front of him. Max called Gooey back to the circle and they all watched Arnie open his hand. Carlos felt a little stupid for actually expecting to see something, and Gooey was preparing to slam a rock in Arnie's palm just as his fingers unfolded. Arnie opened his hand slowly as not to drop whatever it was he was holding. One by one, his fingers relaxed and gave view to the small cup of his palm. His hand opened full palm and Max dropped a wad of spit in Arnie's hand.

"Where's the monster?" slobbered Gooey.

Max polished his knuckles for the next round.

Carlos licked the candy on his teeth in anticipation of furthering the ass kicking. All at once, the three stood frozen and terrified. There was a foul smell like blood being cooked or pennies in a pot of hot water. The three boys stood unable to look away from Arnie's hand. Dead in the center was the tiniest cage they had ever seen with the tiny door swung wide. The sun that had been high and warm in the October sky was now casting a long odd shadow that seemed to just appear

on the ground out behind Arnie. A light breeze stirred the leaves in the corners but a more sinister wind was the warm breath on the backs of Max, Carlos and Gooey. They heard the lips part but nothing much else after.

"It's right behind you," smiled Arnie.

Find a Relic, Pick It Up and All the Day You'll Have...

By J. Elliott

*To be satisfied with a little, is the greatest wisdom;
and he that increaseth his riches,
increaseth his cares; but a contented mind is a hidden treasure,
and trouble findeth it not.*

—Akhenaton

Friday 21 October 1904

Dear Diary,

I regret the lapse of time since I last wrote; so much has happened in the last few weeks. I have attempted several times to set the pen to the page, but was unable to begin to address all that has transpired. On the 12th of September, Mama and Papa were due back from a missionary trip to a small community in eastern Pennsylvania. I had stayed behind to stay with my good friend, Miranda, who was recovering from a bicycling accident in Central Park. The poor thing was merrily sailing along and startled a flock of pigeons, which flew all around and in her face. She lost control of the bicycle and careened into a rhododendron bush. While she did not break any bones, thank goodness, she suffered substantial bruising and a badly twisted wrist.

We awaited news of my parents' return but heard nothing. I had hoped that they had simply been detained and did not have time to send word, but then on the 14th of September we received the shocking news that they were both run down by a steam engine while crossing the train tracks at that deathtrap, Grand Central Terminal. After disembarking, and while attempting to cross the tracks, Mother's boot heel caught in a rail. Father tried to free her, but her foot was stuck fast, with not enough time to untie it and free her. Another passenger attempted to assist them, but he smartly jumped clear at the last second. The driver claimed he had not seen them until it was too late what with visibility so obscured by steam and soot.

I have such tumult in my heart that God would allow missionaries, doing his good work, to be struck down, not while out in some wild region, but here in modern New York City, while exiting the train station. Such loving kind souls forever lost to us. At times I am overwhelmed with grief and cannot bear it.

Uncle Ely has accepted me as his ward and I have come to live with Uncle Ely on Canal Street in the apartment above his curio shop, The Djinni's Trove. He has been away in Mexico, but his maid, Flossie, who is hardly older than I, has been very kind to get me settled and keep me company.

Pansy

Saturday, 22 October 1904

Dear Diary,

It is a perfect autumnal day today with the leaves approaching peak coloration. The air has that early morning crispness, and I should be in good spirits to be here in the heart of New York City, but alas my heart is heavy and I lose myself in just staring out the window. My chamber window looks out onto Lispinard Street, which quieter than Canal, has delivery wagons passing regularly to the service entrance of the Brandeth House Hotel just beyond my view. Coming from my quiet neighborhood in Danbury, Connecticut, the commotion from the street is disquieting. Meanwhile, the house I was raised in, the only house I have ever known is to be sold. I am deracinated and overcome with despair. I wish I could say that I look forward to Uncle Ely's return, but I am apprehensive. I earnestly hope he does not resent my imposition into his household. I have never spent a significant amount of time in his company, the odd holiday gathering perhaps, and even then he considered me a child not worthy of more than passing attention. We are fundamentally acquaintances, practically strangers.

My chamber is small but very adequate, and the bed is quite comfortable for which I am grateful, even though I sleep fitfully. Flossie is an excellent maid of all maids, for while she is childlike in experience and deportment, she is very diligent at cleaning.

The front parlor is clearly that of a bachelor, with heavy chairs and a massive sofa with balled feet. This room appears as a natural extension of the curio shop downstairs. A tall display cabinet contains a collection of carved animals in jade, wood and soapstone. A wild boar snarls with great teeth exposed; an ox reposes peacefully, and a very delicate swan floats gracefully, gazing out into the room. One shelf contains all manner of short curved blades, daggers, stilettos and switchblades. Several Persian teapots sit on the mantel beneath the great mirror. Next to Uncle's chair there is an imposing ceramic black panther as tall as my waist sitting up like a sleek house cat expecting to be fed. By the window is an elaborately carved humidor.

I look forward to tomorrow when Mother's friend, Mrs. Cross has offered to come fetch me in the morning to join her for church at First Presbyterian on Fifth Avenue. She and mother were close friends and she misses her terribly as well. I am confident that she will understand my despondent tendencies and I shall not have to feign a cheeriness I am incapable of mustering. I'm very fond of Mrs. Cross; like the most desirably aunt, she is a very soft woman, kind and undemanding.

Pansy

Sunday, 23 October 1904

Dear Diary,

First Presbyterian is so majestic! We arrived well ahead of the service time, and a very good thing it was! Mrs. Cross said that often hundreds are turned away as so many wish to attend and cannot be accommodated. Such a different experience from our regular congregation in Danbury! The choir sounded truly angelic, as if a doorway had opened to heaven itself. After the service, Mrs. Cross took me round on a tour of the church and provided some history. It was completed less than thirty years ago. I am much moved to have been able to attend service today and very grateful for Mrs. Cross for including me. I prayed for Mama and Papa, and for Uncle Ely's safe return.

Pansy

Monday 24, October 1904

Dear Diary,

I woke this morning to the clamorous cawing of crows. When I rose and looked out the window, there were four large crows on a ledge above the shoe repair shop opposite – they were level with my window and all four were cawing as if directed at me. It was most unsettling.

I had hoped to get out for a walk in the park with Flossie today, but it seems that rain is imminent. The sky is growing darker.

Pansy

Tuesday 25 October 1904

Dear Diary,

Crows again! This time there were five, and as before, they obstinately cawed in my direction. I recall old legends that crows are harbingers of evil, and if they tap at your window, it means someone will die. Oh I do wish they would go away!

Another peculiar incident took place after I had dressed and was about to go down to for breakfast. I glanced out the window again to see that only one crow remained, and thankfully it was silent, although it stared in my direction which was disquieting. Then I discerned an eerie singing, faint at first, but it grew in volume. There were three young children in thin, shabby coats skipping around in slow circles on their way down the street. They were singing slightly out of tune and gesturing as they moved, sometimes putting hands on hips, sometimes hopping. Just as they reached my window the song reached a crescendo and they all collapsed to the ground in a heap and began laughing. One little girl glanced up and looked directly at me. She was not laughing or smiling. I waved to her hesitantly, but she did not respond. They got up, and began the song and swirling dance again, and soon disappeared around the hotel. Why had she looked directly at me? How had she known I was there? My nerves have been so unsound since coming here...

Pansy

Tuesday, 1 November 1904

Dear Diary,

Last night was All Hallows' Eve. Yesterday afternoon, Flossie and I went marketing and saw some school children dressed in costumes in the school yard. So endearing! There was a tiny waif dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, another was bedecked in a witch costume with a giant black hat, and a little boy was dressed as a pirate, another as a ghost. A few of the children struggled with their costumes as, unaccustomed to wearing them, they found the cumbersome apparel impeded their motion. For some the material sagged, for others the accessories confounded them -- hats fell over faces, the pirate sword tripped the pirate. One little boy, removed from the others as if rejected or feared by them, was clad as a beggar. His garments were oversized and gray with dark stains all around. His motions were not in the excited fashion of his fellow classmates, but in slow, measured steps, his feet dragging in the dirt. His gaze was fixed on the ground. Abruptly he paused, lifted a rock and smashed it down on the ground repeatedly. The suddenness and viciousness of this action distressed us both, and we removed ourselves.

A storm is expected for tomorrow. Great dark clouds began forming in the afternoon and a wind gained momentum during the evening. We have not heard from Uncle Ely regarding when he might return from his travels but Flossie wanted to dust the Trove today in the event that we were to get word of his pending arrival. She asked me to keep her company. It has been some time since I have been to visit Uncle Ely and I had forgotten the dark and mysterious nature of his curio shop. Upon entering from the street, one encounters a human-sized wooden ferret in the form of a witch doctor. Upon its head rests a skull headdress adorned with feathers and beads. He holds a stout staff in his left hand, and a mystical talisman in his right. His face is wise and grave. The shop abounds with such unusual and often sinister objects -- statues and masks from Africa with piercing eyes and glowering countenances and dolls from Haiti that look utterly malevolent. There is a stuffed giraffe head on the far wall, its melancholy eyes gazing across the room in lament. However could someone kill such a gentle creature? Who would want a giraffe on their wall staring down at them? It is beyond my reckoning how Uncle Ely greets each new acquisition with excitement and elation.

Not all of the acquisitions are so gloomy or frightful. Uncle does have a fair number of antiques and ceramics that are rather elegant. There is a pair of Chinese vases of which I am quite fond. Under an elaborate lapis blue border are three ladies at a tea party with graceful cranes flying above them. There are also display cases with jewelry, watches and other accessories from various parts of the world.

The wind was unflagging. Before supper, Flossie and I struggled to re-secure a shutter that had liberated itself and had begun banging insistently. After supper, a damp chill settled over the apartment. Altogether with the shadows, the wind and the afternoon spent in the shop, I had no need of an All Hallows' Eve ghost story to agitate my imagination.

Pansy

Thursday 17, November 1904

Dear Diary,

Three crows this morning persistently cawing. Oddly, they only perch on that ledge opposite my window. This causes me such agitation that I find myself trying to wake earlier and

earlier and get out of bed faster to escape the noise. Now sometimes I hear the cawing in my head even when they aren't there. I feel persecuted, which is preposterous, but there it is all the same. Flossie has seen them too, and believes they are wicked.

I have heard from Miranda who has recovered completely. We hope to go ice skating in Central Park this afternoon if it doesn't rain. Unfortunately, that seems very likely.

Pansy

Tuesday, 22 November 1904

Dear Diary,

I am to go stay with Violet and Raymond for the Thanksgiving holiday. Raymond will meet me tomorrow at the train station and we will travel together to New Haven. Flossie and I will lock up the house and secure The Djinni's Trove. Flossie will join her cousins in the city for the holiday weekend. It will be such a comfort to be with Violet, as I can imagine she mourns Mama and Papa as intensely as I do.

Pansy

Monday, 28 November 1904

Dear Diary,

Raymond and Violet have a cheery little house and they made every effort to make me feel welcome. They are such happy newlyweds and such a handsome couple with a bright glow about them. Thanksgiving was somber without Mama and Papa, but we had a lovely dinner of ham, pheasant with cranberries and rolls, and amused ourselves with word games. I joined them for church yesterday. Their church, as in Danbury, was small, intimate, and elegant in its simplicity. The weather was mild enough to go on an outing to East Rock and clear enough that we could see Long Island from the cliff top. I was very grateful for the company and the leisurely ramble.

I woke up with a start this morning, my heart wild. I had been dreaming that a raven was on my window ledge looking in at me. His eyes glowed yellow. When he opened his great beak, he unleashed a shockingly forceful shriek. I glanced outside and was enormously relieved that there were no birds of any kind to be seen!

We got a letter from Uncle Ely that he is passing through Texas, and expects to be home by the weekend. I am glad and uneasy in equal measure.

Pansy

Friday, 9 December 1904

Dear Diary,

Uncle Ely has returned at long last and has settled home. He has opened the shop, and asked if I would mind catching up on some cataloging of his inventory. We have spent several afternoons going over ways in which I might assist him in attending to customers or preparing items for shipping or delivery. He has been very patient and says that he is pleased at how I have taken to

these tasks. Towards late afternoon, between the atmosphere of the shop and his steady pipe smoking, a mounting nausea develops such that by evening I readily retreat upstairs. Still, the activity does help to occupy my mind, and I am grateful for the companionship, though Uncle Ely is more contemplative than conversational.

Pansy

Sunday, 11 December 1904

Dear Diary,

I attended church with Mrs. Cross this morning. The choir was as angelic and uplifting as usual. Alas, the sensation of bliss and grace was fleeting. After church, Mrs. Cross asked if I minded awfully going on a drive to drop off a gift for a friend uptown. A fine rain was coming down, like a falling mist, almost imperceptible while the damp slithers into the bones. My hands and feet were cold, but naturally I said I would not mind at all. New York in winter is so very bleak. The bright leaves of autumn have all gone, and the bare limbs of the trees reach out despairingly.

We paused momentarily in front of the Brennan Mansion on 84th Street and Mrs. Cross mentioned that it was the home that Edgar Allan Poe had lived in for a year, and purportedly wrote "The Raven" while occupying it. Oh, if Mrs. Cross had any notion of how I have been plagued with crows at my window and the evil raven in my dream! What it just a coincidence or something more sinister? I chided myself. Of course not. Her friend's home was just a few blocks down 84th – it was perfectly natural that we passed this landmark. This winter has affected me most strangely. Ordinarily, fanciful imaginings do not occupy my mind, but I cannot seem to strain them out.

Pansy

Wednesday, 14 December 1904

Dear Diary,

I have been weak with congestion, headache and chills since our outing on Sunday, and have slept most of the days away in fitful episodes. I've had dreams of the raven again, and one last night of evil children carrying away a bundle like a newborn child. On several occasions I have had the eerie feeling that I am not alone in the room, but once fully awake, naturally there was no one else there.

Uncle Ely has been very kind and concerned about my health. My earlier fears that he would be cruel or resent me in his home were completely unfounded. I am weary but filled with gratitude for his goodness.

Pansy

Monday, 19 December 1904

I was not quite well enough for church today, but assisted customers in the shop this afternoon. Sales have increased with Christmas coming. We've sold a Korean chest, some jewelry, and several Oriental bowls and vases.

I am so looking forward to Christmas!

Pansy

Thursday, 28 December 1904

The Christmas holiday was lovely! Uncle Ely and I went to visit with dear Violet and Raymond in New Haven. Their cozy little house was all festive and cheery with the delicate candles, bright paper and crocheted ornaments in the Christmas tree and the holly and pine boughs on the mantel. Raymond's parents and sister came for Christmas dinner. We had a lovely lamb with boiled potatoes and a pudding for dessert. After dinner, we played charades which was very jolly, and Violet played on her spinet. She has always been so accomplished; Raymond beamed with pride. She has said that he has been thoughtful and loving and I could see it in his eyes beholding her. Uncle Ely puffed away on his pipe contentedly. He did not join us in the charades, but the edges of his bushy moustache turned up with amusement, and he clapped encouragement. It was good to see him in good spirits as he is prone to a rather solitary existence. He does not have friends to speak of, nor does he go out to socialize at his club.

Violet announced that she is expecting her first baby late this spring! She suspected that she was with child before Thanksgiving but wanted to be sure before she shared the news. I look forward to being an aunt! I have started embroidering a receiving blanket for the baby. May God forgive me, I confess to being a bit jealous of my sister. She got beauty, grace and talent, while I received a frail body with plain features, and if I had talents bestowed upon me, they have yet to be discovered. All the same, I am delighted for Violet, she deserves every happiness and blessing.

Despite all the good cheer and exciting news of the coming baby, the absence of Mamma and Papa was felt very keenly. This was our first Christmas without them. We tried very hard to keep our grief at bay, but did lapse into quiet moments of melancholy reflection.

Pansy

Sunday, 1 January 1905

Dear Diary,

Happy New Year! What a magical evening we had last night! Uncle Ely and I took the subway to what used to be known as Long Acre but, since the completion of the New York Times building, is now called Times Square. The Times building is grand but so isolated, tall and narrow, like the very last sliver of cake remaining on a cake plate. There was a festival with all manner of food, jewelry, and clothing vendors, along with jugglers and fortune tellers. Last year was the first year the fireworks were displayed at Times Square, but I had a wretched cough just after the holidays and none of us went out. I was positively determined to see it this year! Last evening was frightfully cold, but thank heaven, the sky was clear, the wind was calm and the fireworks were simply grand -- but so loud! The soot floated down like great, dark snowflakes, I even had some catch in my eyelids. The sound frightened some of the smaller children around us, but overall the atmosphere was wonderfully gay. There was such frivolity and hope in the air! It was so moving to be in such an enormous crowd, swept up in the sentiments of hope and celebration. They said over 200,000 people attended last year, and surely this year's number far exceeded that. Once the sun set, it would have been difficult to stretch an arm out straight, we were shoulder to shoulder all evening. Uncle Ely warned of pickpockets and offered to guard my beaded purse for me. I purchased some pretty New Year cards from one of the sellers and will occupy myself writing well wishings to mother's

friends this evening, especially Mrs. Cross. She has been so kind to me taking me to church with her on Sundays.

Today is clear and cold. There are just a few snowdrifts remaining, and they are dark brown with street dirt. It was so splendid to get out last night. This winter has been hard, and dreary, and with the holidays past, despite the promise of a new year, it is challenging to hold optimism when January stretches before us only to be followed by more of the same in February.

When we got back home, Uncle Ely surprised me with a gift. A tiny kitten! He had been hiding her downstairs in his shop. She is a bit weak and has a wobbly back leg, poor darling. She was the runt of the litter. I have named her after my favorite children's book character, Katy, from the Carr novels by Susan Coolidge. Katy, like myself, suffered from illness and was bedridden but recovered and went on to have charming adventures. Kitten is so small and vulnerable, she reminds me of myself as a child. Perhaps I was a runt too. She is so small, she often curls up in my old slipper by the fire and fits within it completely.

Uncle Ely is not one for sentimentality, although on occasions, as with Katy, he surprises me. For all his gruffness, he means well I believe—he is forever speaking to me as if I were still a child, and I am now nineteen! He did not want to allow Flossie or myself to decorate for the holidays, but conceded that we could put a wreath on the door and have candles in the front windows upstairs. He did not decorate his curio shop in the slightest. In fact, it remains a peculiar space caught in its own time, a dark place that seems to have more shadows than it ought, they seem to come right out and challenge the lights. Flossie, whose Scottish mother bestowed upon her delicate child ears all manner of stories of fairies, witches, goblins, banshees and the like, now refuses to clean Uncle Ely's shop unless I am present. (I will not disclose this to Uncle Ely as he would likely be furious. It is our little secret.) Frankly, I am grateful for her company as I am ill at ease in the shop as well. Flossie has named the giraffe Bartholomew, and now sometimes we include Bartholomew in our conversation for a giggle. He's less ominous that way.

Uncle Ely remains an enigma to me. I sense at times that he harbors a great heartache or injury that he cloaks with his private countenance. He rarely speaks of himself or his past. Once I approached him as to whether he had ever been married. He laughed and said that "tangling with a woman would inevitably lead to a passel of children and weigh him down like a barnacle encrusted naval anchor." Yet, there seemed to be a disconsolateness about his face as he said this. I shall have to ask Violet if she remembers Papa ever mentioned anything about Uncle Ely's past.

1905. A new year. I pray that this year will be a tranquil and happy one. I hope to expand my social horizons and perhaps I too, like Violet, might find eventually find a loving and kind husband. In the meantime, I am filled with gratitude for the blessings I do have, known and unknown.

Pansy

Saturday, 7 January 1905, First day of Epiphany

Mrs. Cross and her nephew, Wyatt came to fetch me for church last evening. I had not seen Wyatt in quite some time. He is just a few years older than I and I must say, he is handsomer than I recall! He is in his second year of teaching science at Hotchkiss, the preparatory school for boys in Lakeville, Connecticut. On our ride up Fifth Avenue towards First Presbyterian we had a chance to re-acquaint ourselves. He expressed to me how sorry he was about the loss of my parents and asked how I was adjusting to living with Uncle Ely above the curio shop. I told him about New

Year's Eve at Times Square and helping Uncle Ely at The Trove. He recounted some very amusing stories about the pranks the students had pulled on him as a new teacher last year.

I recalled that we had last seen each other two years prior at an All Hallows' Eve party. There had been word games, apple bobbing, and ghost story telling. He had told a story about how he had seen a ghost on the stairs in his house as a young child. It had given us all quite a fright. Mrs. Cross cleared her throat and pointedly shifted to discuss the evening's Epiphany service and how beautiful the church would be filled with candles representing coming out of the darkness into the light. She fixed her gaze on the pair of us and it was quite clear she was discomfited by the discussion of All Hallows' Eve. Indeed, I was looking forward to the night's service. As expected, it was lovely -- so much more intimate with the low lighting, groupings of candles all around and then each congregant holding a candle as well. Reverend and Mrs. Hargrove greeted us warmly afterwards, and expressed how pleased they were to see Wyatt again.

On the ride back, we took up our conversation again, talking about all the new buildings going up in the city and the new subway stops. Wyatt asked me if I had ever been to Coney Island, I said no, but I had heard it was like a fairy land with all the electric lights at night. I have a post card on my dresser with a picture of the arcade. Mrs. Cross suggested that we should all have an outing to Coney Island when Wyatt returned for a visit at spring holiday.

"I promise we won't have to visit the House of Horrors." Wyatt teased.

It is raining this morning, the drops are aggressively pelting at the windows. I will help Flossie with the wash this afternoon, there is little else to do. As we are not expecting anyone tomorrow, we might as well start early. It will take so long to air dry it all.

Katy is batting at my ankles. It tickles! Even she is feeling restless today.

Pansy

Sunday, 8 January 1905

Dear Diary,

It is with a heaviness in my breast that I write on this dismal morning. The temperature plummeted during the night, and the rain turned to sleet then to snow which has not stopped since late last evening. An arctic wind gained strength and is now rattling the windows. The sky is as gray as my thoughts. Today marks the third anniversary of that dreadful New Haven line train wreck and once again the same grisly photographs of the wreckage have been in the newspapers at the news stands. Mamma and Papa have been most keenly in my thoughts. I miss them so! There have been several more victims of the trains since, yet the Vanderbilts ignore the outcry.

It is so frightfully dreary today, I feel like a caged canary. With the weather so horribly inclement, I did not expect Mrs. Cross and Wyatt to come to fetch me, and this has put me in a sour disposition. Wyatt will be going back to his work soon, and I am quite sorry to miss seeing him again today. I can look forward to more washing and wringing today.

I am not lacking in any regard and should not like to complain, but I do get lonely here. Without dear Flossie, I'm sure I would not know what I would do. It was lovely to get away to visit with Violet and her Raymond in Connecticut while Uncle Ely was off in Mexico, and again at Christmas. To be quite honest, the gloom of The Trove wears upon me. Uncle Ely has had me helping him with cataloging his inventory and I have had to spend increasingly more time there since his return in November. I wish it did not have an access door to the main house and only had the street entrances. Just crossing over the threshold, I have the sensation of a shroud passing over my shoulders. I have examined what causes this unnerving sensation, and have determined that it is

precisely because the Trove contains nothing living. The great giraffe is dead; the African masks, the dolls all are lifeless. The china collects dirt and dust which is forever billowing in from the street. The shop is soulless. Tomblike. I don't like it. I have asked Uncle Ely if we might add some large plants for color in the spring. He replied that it isn't a plant shop, and customers do not come to see plants and that was that. Perhaps I could persuade him to put a plant in the copper tub by the front door. The tub has not sold, and perhaps the plant would draw attention to it. I will attempt to return to the subject on another occasion when he is in a better humor.

Pansy

Sunday, 15 January 1905

Snow, snow and more snow! Canal Street continues to have just enough traffic to keep the road barely passable although sleds would fair far better than wheeled vehicles! Lispenard Street is virtually impassable. Once again the weather has prevented an outing to church. This afternoon I have been huddled near the coal scuttle working my embroidery for the baby and watching Katy tumble about. Little Katy is a great comfort and companion to me. She gets stronger every day and is ever so amusing. She often hides under my bed or under my chair, but then darts out, chases her tail and tumbles all over and then hides again.

Uncle Ely has been spending almost all of his time in his back office. He has been quite preoccupied and not very communicative of late.

Bah! Will the winter ever end? Ah! Flossie has just come with more tea. Heaven!

Pansy

Monday, 16 January, 1905

Dear Diary,

The snow tapered and turned to rain last night, and the streets were passable today. Uncle Ely is all astir, the shipment he sent from Mexico weeks ago has arrived in the city, and it is being delivered to the shop in a few days. He has been mumbling to himself, pacing, smoking his pipe and wringing his hands in anticipation for over a week. He says that the contents are exquisite specimens of Aztec culture and he has been clearing new floor space and display shelving in the shop to properly exhibit them. Flossie and I are apprehensive. We are already greatly discomfited by Uncle's existing collection. From what I have heard of the Aztecs, they were a cruel, bloodthirsty lot, and I would not care to have any objects belonging to them in my environs, but it seems to not trouble Uncle Ely in the slightest. I attempted to broach the subject with him, to which he called me a silly child and waved a dismissive hand at me.

I worry about Uncle Ely's irreligious nature and irreverence. It is a strain to perceive how my dear, kind, God-fearing Papa could be the brother of this reticent man with the soul of a pirate, but I pray for him daily and am in gratitude that he has sheltered me. May God protect us and watch over us.

Pansy

Tuesday, 18 January 1905

Dear Diary,

Feeling restless and needing desperately to occupy myself, I recalled a box of memorabilia that mother kept which was full of letters and newspaper clippings. I found it in the bottom of a small trunk in the wardrobe. I had tucked it away when I first arrived, not wanting to have raw remembrances of Mamma and Papa. It was bittersweet to retrieve the box and peruse its contents. I have discovered a small bundle of yellowed letters and cards from Uncle Ely to Papa from the 1880s. They were stamped from various countries over a decade—Korea, China, India, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, England. I knew that father had said Uncle Ely had gone abroad with the inheritance share he had received after grandfather's passing, but I had not the slightest inkling as to the extent of his travels! The letters were brief, mostly exalting the exotic locations, foods and interesting people he had encountered. There were quite a few from Italy which sounded more enthusiastic than the others. He mentioned a charming family he had found, and that he was contemplating staying on and securing regular employment. Following correspondence was more matter of fact 'Some streets and homes in Lisbon are hundreds of years old. One steps back in time here.' Another recounted how dreadfully seasick he had been on a long voyage aboard a steamship crossing the Atlantic, his constitution and spirit so low he hardly cared if he lived or died. While his messages were concise and typically unsentimental, I still found it heart-warming to know that Uncle Ely had maintained contact with his younger brother during that time. While my father had married, bought a house, started a family, and ensconced himself in missionary work, his brother had chosen a path of wanderlust collecting and trading commodities from around the world. I am beginning to understand Uncle Ely a bit better. I have my own treasure box!

Pansy

Wednesday, 19 January 1905

Dear Diary,

Bartholomew has left us! This afternoon, a customer appeared in the shop, an older gentleman with a bad limp and British accent who said he had been an Army colonel overseas in Africa during the first Boer War. He paid handsomely for Bartholomew as well as for quite a few of the masks and spears. Flossie and I spent the afternoon wrapping the items for delivery tomorrow. This gentleman intends to decorate his library. We wonder if he aims to claim that he was the mighty hunter responsible for Bartholomew's demise! Flossie and I were elated to wrap the grotesque masks. How splendid they will no longer glower at us! We may actually miss Bartholomew however.

Pansy

Thursday, 19 January 1905

Dear Diary,

I have been so overwrought, I was simply unable to write until today. I believe I mentioned the shipment Uncle Ely was anticipating from Mexico. Late this morning, a heavy wagon arrived

and two men grunted and strained to deliver three substantial crates, each large enough to contain a full grown man. The Djinni's Trove store front faces Canal Street but a separate service entrance off of Lispenard Street goes directly into the back office of the shop. Fortunately although bleak and blustery today, we have had no precipitation, so it is fortuitous that these men did not have to contend with that additional hardship. Even with a wheeled cart, the men had great difficulty getting them through the door and all the way to the back office.

The shop office is a confined area to begin with, having just space for a wash basin and stand, the small safe, a long work bench that doubles as a desk and two large storage cabinets. These crates took up almost all the available floor space.

It took some time for Uncle Ely to open the first crate. He worked steadily around the first crate prying it open with a hammer and chisel. As he did so, he explained each crate contained large bundles wrapped in burlap packed in wood shavings. Once the top came loose, we dug through the shavings to the first bundle.

It was as wide as a church bench, roundish like a log and quite heavy. We lifted it out of the crate and onto the work bench. I carefully unwrapped the long bundle. It was wrapped up tightly like a mummy and took some time to unwind. It would have been more expedient to cut away at it with scissors, but Uncle Ely is very careful to keep materials like burlap and paper and twine in case he needs to wrap an object for transport, like poor Bartholomew. The last of the burlap fell away, and – how can I relate it? Before us lay a reclining man-creature with a large bowl on his stomach wolfishly grinning back at us! It had great bulging eyes and skeletal teeth in a wide grin. On its head was a great headpiece painted yellow, blue and red. This demonic object was made of terra cotta, but was badly stained dark brown in uneven patches. The interior of the bowl was dark, dark brown, almost black. It smelled of earth and something else, something musty, rotten.

“This is ghastly!” I said backing away from it.

“It’s perfect!” Uncle Ely responded. “Not a chip or crack. It’s extremely valuable. I intend to sell it to the Natural History Museum! They have plans for expansion. This collection is going to make me a *lot* of money!” He clapped his hands together in glee.

He set the bowl-bearing creature on one of the shelves and we pulled out the next object. This was large and flat like a table top. It too was very tightly wrapped and was quite difficult to maneuver because of its weight. It took some time to unbind as well. This was revealed to be a large mask with empty eye sockets, and a large mouth in a skeletal grin. It had small blood-red gem stones around the eyes and nose. Wriggling like a snake through the eye sockets and mouth was a thin blue line like smoke. It was horrid. My hands trembled as I removed the last of the wrappings.

“This one is a God, they said. Completely unpronounceable Tezcat-something. Supposed to be smoke coming out of him. Fantastic specimen!” Uncle Ely beamed. We leaned this against a cabinet.

He went on to say that he’d want to mount this on the wall opposite the front door. It would be quite eye-catching upon entering the shop, he argued with mirth.

“Might it not frighten your customers away?” I asked.

“Nonsense, child!” he said then explained that he believed customers who come to a curio shop are expecting to see something lurid, something dark, something foreboding. That’s why freak shows are so popular! A person with a minor deformity is just unfortunate, but a person with fish scales and a tail, why, that begs to be seen! The more bizarre, the better! Sadly, I had to agree with his observation.

“Just wait to you see the rest of the collection, my dear, it is simply magnificent.” He pulled a smaller bundle out of the first crate. The bundle contained several pamphlets he said he picked up in Mexico and thought would be invaluable in cataloging the collection. They describe some of the Aztec culture and artifacts. He tossed the bundle on the workbench next to me. On the cover of

the first pamphlet was a crest of an eagle balanced gingerly on a cactus. The eagle's wings were outstretched, its mouth open as if crying out, and its sharp claws barely touching the tips of the spiky cactus.

I examined this pamphlet. The topics ranged from the style of houses and diet of the Aztecs, to their advanced knowledge of medicines and education. It struck me as very peculiar that on the one hand they were a violent society exalting their champion warriors and waging war with neighboring cultures, while on the other hand, they valued education and arts excelling in crafts and weaving as well as in fabricating jewelry, ceremonial breastplates and the like.

Uncle Ely had pulled out another large bundle. "You'll like this, Pansy, it's a collection of jewelry." He set the bundle on the work bench for me to unwrap. He stepped back and watched me. This bundle was lighter and was bound in twine like a package. I removed the twine and slowly unwrapped the paper. It contained several smaller bundles. The first was a gold medallion, just larger than my hand. Inlaid in the center was a magnificent crouching jaguar, its spots raised bits of obsidian set in turquoise. Gazing on this exquisite artifact, holding it in my hands was indescribable. It was mesmerizing in its beauty and refinement. I could not pull my eyes away from it. I could understand for a moment why my uncle chose to travel the world in pursuit of treasures and oddities. To search and search and one day to find something with this grandeur and to own it! I thought of the travelers who had gone out west in search of gold who would have celebrated a raw little pebble of a nugget. There I stood holding this spectacular item in my hand.

"You see, Pansy," he said gently, still looking at my face, "Isn't it utterly amazing?" He took it from me gently, setting it aside and designating that it would go in the safe.

The rest of that bundle was an odd assortment of combs, buckles, rings, and tools inlaid with stones. All were impressive, but the medallion was by far the greatest treasure. My apprehension of this collection was beginning to subside. Flossie appeared in the doorway and announced that supper was ready, so we adjourned to the dining room. The weather outside remains bleak and it very well may snow tonight. The heavy drapes sway like phantoms from the frigid drafts.

Pansy

Friday, 20 January 1905

Dear Diary,

Reverend Hargrove and his wife, Elizabeth called on us this morning. Uncle Ely does not attend church except on a rare occasion, but I attempt to attend whenever possible. They said they were visiting friends nearby and thought to stop in as they were concerned as I had not been in attendance these past two Sundays. Flossie brought us tea and some biscuits and we had a nice visit. Fortunately, they did not stay long. While I greatly appreciated their thoughtfulness, and normally find their company quite pleasant, I was keenly aware that Uncle Ely would far rather be in his shop unpacking his crates. He made a minimal effort to be civil and participate in the banter. I prayed the Hargroves were not cognizant of the tension in the parlor. Further adding to the discomfort, Reverend and Mrs. Hargrove reiterated how lovely it would be to see more of Uncle Ely in church. I knew this overture would not be warmly received. Upon their departure, Elizabeth clasped my hands warmly and said, "You are constantly in our prayers, dear. Let us know if we can ever be of service to you." I thanked her, and they took their leave.

Sometime after lunch, I went down to the shop to check on Uncle Ely's progress. I pushed through the curtain between the shop and the back office to find Uncle Ely between two

hideous monsters. I could not suppress my shriek, as for a moment I judged that Uncle Ely was truly in peril. He stood between them, each almost half his height, being of blackest obsidian, the male composed of a skull with staring orbs with no eyelids, his ribs exposed, and beneath his ribs, his giant heart and stomach cavity wide open. His legs reduced to skeletal feet. His neck was adorned with necklaces of skulls, and his arms were outstretched, as if reaching up to be held by Uncle Ely. On the right was a similar being with pendulous breasts dropping over her exposed ribs and heart, and her headdress was adorned with tiny bodies writhing in torment with minute blades in their chest forms. She too was reaching out with skeletal arms to Uncle Ely. It was as if they had come from hell itself to escort Uncle Ely back down with them.

I fought not to swoon, but had to lean against the bench for support. It was then that I saw the final horror. Another large, squatting, staring demon with huge round empty eyes, also with a headdress adorned with tiny tortured bodies, their supplicating hands raised to heaven, their mouths open screaming. This despicable thing was of a lighter stone, yet was stained dark brown in a rough pattern like a shawl. From it floated the smell of stale smoke and rot, like the smell of a dead rat and the worst tenement sewage. The evil that pulsed from it reached out to me, and I fainted dead away.

God protect us from this evil!

Pansy

Monday, 23 January 1905

Dear Violet,

It is with regret that I relate the news regarding the state of your sister's health. I am at a loss as to what to do, and hope that perhaps you would be able to come as soon as possible. Pansy has been suffering these past few days with a terrible fever. Doctor Whitney came yesterday and believes it was brought on by the cold and by acute distress. Regrettably I fear I am to blame. Pansy was kindly assisting me with some new acquisitions which are, I must admit rather gruesome in appearance, and she came upon them without any forewarning of their macabre visages. She fainted. She recovered briefly but then weakened and was overcome with fever. Flossie has been tending to her, but the fever is causing some perturbing nightmares which are frightening Flossie, and she has become quite irrational. You have a level head, and I feel that your presence may be of great comfort to Pansy. Please come at once if your devoted husband can spare you.

Yours faithfully,

Uncle Ely

Wednesday, 25 January 1905

My darling Raymond,

I scarcely know where to begin. I arrived at Uncle's house yesterday afternoon to find Pansy still gripped with fever. Since her original onset of yellow fever as a small child, I have been bedside with her for through several maladies, and yet this one seems distressingly prolonged and aggressive. She sleeps mostly but fitfully, tossing and writhing on the bed as if in great torment. She perspires profusely despite all efforts to apply cool cloths to her brow and regularly wiping down her arms and legs. She moans and cries out, as if in a sustained nightmare. She rambles names that do not sound like English and mumbles about drumming and blood, always the blood. Flossie, who has always

been a bit of a silly mouse is nigh on hysterical and useless. Uncle Ely was quite right to send for me.

This morning I asked Uncle Ely to describe to me in detail what had occurred prior to this appalling attack. He described to me the artifacts he had selected in Mexico City near the old main city of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan. These artifacts it would appear, were from an archaeological site (I dared not ask exactly how he came to acquire them as I suspect it was not entirely or strictly legal – father often mentioned a certain fogginess and circumspection regarding Uncle Ely's stories of how he comes upon his treasured finds.) The largest of them depict Aztec gods, and most of those seemed to demand blood sacrifices. I had not been in Uncle Ely's shop in quite some time, and he gave me a brief tour, ending in the back room, where he had uncased these figures. Never in my life have I beheld such hideous possessions. I was tremendously grateful for his explanatory prelude, or like Pansy, I may too have been frightened out of my senses. I could not stay in their presence and had to withdraw. Uncle Ely handed me the pamphlets with notes regarding their 'identities' and original purpose.

The horror which I will relate is by no means verging on exaggeration, I take this information directly from the pamphlets. I will only tell you the very worst of the lot, as there are many smaller horrors as well such as fanged serpents, snarling monkeys, fierce eagles with needle-sharp claws extended --these seem like quaint baubles in comparison to what I will attempt to relate to you.

There is a vessel called a 'chac-mool' which in appearance is a ghoulish skeleton man reclining with a bowl on his stomach, a bowl which was used to hold the still beating heart of a sacrifice once it was cut and removed from his chest, and oh, yes, this does indeed bare the stains, dark stains in a dreadful splatter, irregular pattern that must indeed be dried blood.



There are two statues with arms outstretched before them, like large children, but again freakishly lacking any other childlike attributes of innocence or charm; no, these are demonic skeletons bedecked with necklaces of skulls, wearing great colorful helmets with tiny suffering beings crying out for help, blades protruding from their minute chests. They are both posed as if about to step forward. One is male, the other female. These are the Deities of Death: Mictlantecuhtli and his wife Mictecacihuatl. Symbols related to them include spiders, owls and bats. They are said to reside in a windowless house and require frequent sacrifices to continue the cycle of

life. The worst of the lot is a dreadful squatting troll with a skeleton body, vacant staring eyes and grinning teeth. In scale, it is as large as your nephew, Hugh. It has a particularly disagreeable aura about it: threatening, needy and *hungry*. Yes, I know that sounds fanciful, but there it is all the same. Hungry and needy. The booklet identifies this as Xipe Totec a God who required flesh and blood. The poor victims who were sacrificed to this God—if you can really call such a being a God, it seems all twisted, this horrid demanding God—were flayed alive, and the strips of flesh were laid upon this hideous thing like a great coat! So yes, this very thing sitting, grinning in the rooms below this very dwelling were once draped, sickly adorned with the flesh of countless humans!

Is it any wonder that walking into this shadowy room and encountering such horrors, my poor dear sister Pansy collapsed? Uncle Ely says he is making arrangements for some men from the Museum of Natural History to come view this unholy collection in the hopes that they will buy it for their Central American exhibit. Pray God this comes to pass swiftly! I've noticed that even Uncle Ely has been uncharacteristically saturnine after spending a lengthy time in that office. I worry that the exposure to such forces of malevolence is ill affecting him.

Pansy is screaming again and twisting in her bed sheets, and it seems that no matter how much coal Flossie adds to the fire, we can't get this room warm enough. I must go.

Your loving wife,
Violet

Friday, 27 January 1905

My beloved Raymond,

It has been snowing all day, with great howling gusts of wind. One cannot see beyond the lamp post by the front window it snows so earnestly. It would be charming if we were together in a cozy house by a great fire, but here in this house, this room with poor Pansy fading in and out, it is beyond confining. Doctor Whitney was able to come again yesterday, and was hopeful that her fever was reduced and she was calm, but an attack came on again before dawn this morning.

Pansy cried out “so much blood!” and “the steps, the steps, the bloody steps!” and once she sat straight up in the bed, opened her eyes and yelled, “they are fighting over the arms and legs to take home and eat!” I cannot describe fully what effect these ghastly outbursts have had upon me. She collapsed back into the pillow moaning again. These attacks usually last for about a quarter of an hour and it takes me twice that to recover my own composure. Pansy has always been small and meek to behold, but even as a child she had a quiet inner strength, perhaps due to her unflappable faith. I pray that she will resist whatever this illness is and return to us unscathed.

Flossie has told me that for weeks there have been crows each morning cawing at Pansy's window, causing her extreme agitation. I wanted to dismiss this as superstition, but now I too have seen them. Even this morning, with the whipping snow, there were three crows raucously cawing. Flossie says the shoe shop owner has paid boys to throw rocks at them to no avail; they keep coming back.

Uncle Ely has been more disagreeable and sullen. He does not come to meals, and spends most of his time in that back room of the shop. I thought he was preparing the Aztec collection for the museum people, but I do not see what occupies all his time. The items are all unpacked and ready for display. One would have thought him to be more jovial in anticipation of the potential sale, which would increase his fortune most admirably. Inexplicably quite the reverse seems to be transpiring. He would argue with his morning coffee I think, if he were taking breakfast. With the

snow, surely his museum people will not be able to come so we might be free of those fearsome things, though I doubt the delay is the cause of his ill temper.

This morning after breakfast, what with such a difficult morning, Flossie and I lost track of Pansy's kitten. We searched for it all over the house, but did not find it. Reluctantly, oh Raymond, so reluctantly, I went downstairs. The inner door between the house and the shop was open ajar, and as I got closer, I heard poor kitten, she let loose with the loudest hiss of any full sized cat and came bolting into the house. Little Katy's hair was straight up all over and her eyes were huge. Something had frightened her terribly. She had difficulty getting back up the stairs and cried most pitifully. I scooped her up in my hands and she was trembling awfully! I took her back upstairs to Pansy's room and put her in her slipper by the fire. What could have frightened her so? I dare not contemplate, lest my imagination get the best of me.

Your loving wife,
Violet

Sunday, 29, January 1905

My beloved Raymond,

It was about two o'clock this morning. I had fallen asleep next to Pansy's bed. I had had an awful dream with voices calling out and remember seeing so many people all looking at me expectantly. I felt tired and confused, and they were ushering me forward. All I could see was red. The walkway was red, and I slipped. When I awoke, the room was terribly cold and I called for Flossie to bring up more coal. Pansy's eyes opened slowly and she looked at me. She pulled her arm from the coverlet and reached for my hand. She was so weak, her eyes were hardly open. I put my ear to her mouth and she said, "Vi -- Vio-let. You must get out. You are in...great...danger." Her lips seemed very dry. I went to the pitcher and poured a small glass of water. It was so cold in the room, I thought I saw ice forming in the pitcher. I made Pansy sip the water. She licked her lips and said again. "Violet. You must get out."

"Dear Pansy, you've had a terrible fever. I am fine, and you will be too, you just need to rest and--" Pansy interrupted me by grabbing my arm with more force than I would have suspected her of being capable, like the grip of a bird of prey.

"Violet. We need help." She fell back to the pillow and her eyes closed. Violet was calm for a time, her breath coming in slow rhythmic intervals. I was hopeful that the tide was turning. Flossie arrived with more coal, and with much effort the room warmed a bit. I fell asleep in the chair.

"Miss Violet! Miss Violet!" I looked up to find Flossie hovering over me with concern.

"What is it?" I turned to look at Pansy. She looked feverish again, and she was murmuring something.

"You were both at it!" She said. "She was moaning about the blood, and so were you! It frightened me something awful!"

I was so exhausted, I couldn't remember what I had dreamed. My stomach hurt a bit and I felt some morning sickness coming on. I asked for some water. Flossie brought me a glass of water, and I asked what time it was. It was after nine o'clock. I inquired if Uncle Ely had been up for breakfast.

"I don't know. I've not seen him this morning. He may have spent the night in the shop," she said.

I dressed slowly and asked Flossie to fix us some breakfast. Pansy was conscious, and we got her to take some bites of toast and some weak tea. As she had before, she pulled me to her. I put my ear to her mouth.

"Check on Uncle Ely. He has to be gotten out of the shop." I glanced to Flossie, and nodded to Pansy, yes, we'd go check on Uncle Ely.

I still felt so weak, and yet I sensed an urgency. Something was very wrong about those Aztec objects and it was affecting all of us. Flossie and I moved slowly downstairs. We opened the connecting door to the curio shop and stepped inside. There were no lights on in the front display room. I called out, "Uncle Ely?" There was no response. It was so cold we could see our breath. We moved to the back and parted the dividing curtain.

There were no lights on, but through the gloom, we could see that Uncle Ely was lying on the floor between the two standing figures. There was a halo of blood around his head. Flossie screamed. We ran to him and wrestled him from between the statues. The coals were gray in the fireplace, the fire had died away some time ago. The child size fiend-figures on either side of Uncle Ely appeared to reach for us. The squatting ghoul on the table above us grinned as if mocking us. Fear would have paralyzed me completely if I had not been compelled to revive Uncle Ely. We struggled to get him to a sitting position, then up onto our shoulders and out of the shop. This was no minor accomplishment as he is a bulky man, and was offering no assistance to us. Flossie was immeasurably helpful, so is heavy boned and quite strong, not like Pansy or myself. She took most of the weight of him while I kept us steady. It was doubtful we would have gotten him up the stairs, but all of our tugging and pulling must have awakened him, for he did come around mumbling, and he was able to take some steps with us.

We were not sure what caused his injury. There seems to be a gash on his forehead as if he had fallen on something yet had a second wound on his stomach and if poked by a sharp instrument. We had not seen any object near him that might have caused these lacerations. It was most peculiar. Fortunately, neither injury was very grave, we were able to clean and dress his wounds fairly easily once we got him to his bed. We got him to take some beef tea. He was very weak and mumbled incoherently, although I thought one phrase sounded like "they came at me."

Mrs. Cross and her nephew Wyatt stopped by after church to check on Pansy. I explained that Uncle Ely had had a fall, but that I thought Pansy was slowly on the mend. We had been talking just a little while when Pansy surprised me utterly by appearing in the doorway. She was dressed and had even tidied her hair. She came in and sat down. Wyatt looked shocked to see how pale and frail she was, and Mrs. Cross fluttered about how awful it was that she had been so ill. Seeing what a toll it was taking on Pansy to be sociable, they did not stay long. We hugged them and they departed.

"Pansy!" I chastised, "You shouldn't be up and about!"

"There is no time to lose." She said. "I have slipped a note to Wyatt. He will invent an errand to run to escape Mrs. Cross, and he will be back as quickly as possible. I simply wrote, "We need your help. Utter discretion required. Please return alone at once."

She continued, "Violet, I have seen it clearly. We are all in danger as long as those horrid things are about. They've gone after Uncle Ely, but they really want you." I was struck dumb by her intensity and conviction.

"Did you have dreams?" she pressed me. "Didn't you see the steps of the Aztec temple, and the blood running down? The victims being dragged up? The ceremonial drums beating incessantly?"

I felt my stomach where my new baby was and felt a sharp pain. I recalled the dreams-- the screaming, the drums. Worse, I had a flash of a warrior figure jumping around before me with a

head dress of large feathers and a great beak over his brow. He had a chest plate that also bore a fierce eagle on it.

"Violet," she continued, "I know those things are worth a fortune money-wise, but you have to see they are not safe. Even if Uncle Ely gets them out of the house and to a museum, then what? Then how many more people will be exposed to their demonic and insatiable need for blood?"

"Pansy," I started, "This all seems so fanciful --" I wanted to be rational and sensible, but even as I questioned her, I knew that somehow we had crossed into a different realm.

"Violet" she persisted. "Did you read the pamphlets? You know that not all the captured people from neighboring areas were killed as sacrifices, right? Some of them were kept as slaves. Some of them became entertainment and had to play ball games to win or die. They were sorted like vegetables in a market, Violet. If they were old, scarred, ugly, they were not considered worthy to be offered up to the hungry Gods. That would be insulting to offer up something imperfect, right? So the old, the ugly and so on became slaves in the fields, or in their violent games, and who cared if they died? They would be killed anyway if they lost. If they won, they just had to play again and eventually die. The beautiful ones, though, the perfect ones --" she paused, and looked at my belly, "the innocent, unblemished ones, were the best offerings." She had tears welling in her eyes. "They want you, Violet, but they want your baby most of all."

We went to check on Uncle Ely and asked Flossie to bring him more beef tea. Pansy slipped a sleeping draught into his cup when Flossie wasn't looking.

Wyatt arrived about three quarters of an hour later. We did not disclose to him everything, but gave him the overview and swore him to secrecy. He went away again, and returned with a very large sledge hammer. He said he had found some men with a horse wagon who would come around shortly. Wyatt and I walked into the Djinni's Trove together, Pansy and Flossie following us. Pansy was reading aloud from the Book of Psalms. We pulled back the dividing drapery and entered the back room. While Flossie and Pansy and I all said prayers, Wyatt set the chac-mool down on the floor. We covered it in burlap so the pieces would not fly all over the shop, or us. When it was completely covered, and while we continued with prayers for deliverance from evil and a blessing on this place, Wyatt hefted the sledge hammer and let it come down again and again until there were no more shapes bubbling under the burlap.

Next, the shield of Tezcatlipoca was placed flat and covered completely. Did we hear something like air escaping? Was that a wisp of smoke that curled up from the floor? Again and again the sledge came down. Did we see the statues of the Gods of Death take a step back? I only saw Wyatt hesitate a moment. I'm fairly certain he saw what we saw. He blinked several times as if to clear his eyes, glanced at me, then Pansy, then commenced smashing with renewed vigor. Did I hear the drumming only in my head, or was it really in the room? The Gods of Death were laid down side by side and covered completely and the sledge came down again and again. Did the crouching figure snarl at us, or was that a strange shadow? Finally it too was set down, and imagination or no, I heard snarling and even more repugnant, I thought I felt it pulling away from us as we grabbed it by the arms. This too was quickly — dare I say it, subdued? It too was covered and smashed. Next we bagged all the bits, every last one. We were sweeping the dust into bags and secured them tightly with twine. We were almost finished when I passed my broom beneath the work bench and heard a metal sound. My broom snared two knives I recognized from the glass cabinet upstairs in the parlor. They were the perfect size for child sized hands. Flossie and I stared at them in disbelief. Each had a brown stain on the blade. Picking them up gingerly I set them on the work bench to clean and replace upstairs later. Flossie mopped the area with a rag and washed the remaining rag dust down the sink.

It was just after dusk when the horse wagon arrived. Wyatt told the men that we had dismantled a bricked up archway and just needed to remove the debris. He directed them to take

the bundles along Canal Street and dump the bags into the Hudson River. He paid each of them, and they readily loaded up the bundles and took them away. As they were pulling away, Pansy and Wyatt exchanged a look, and Wyatt went with the men, just to be sure the job was properly accomplished.

It is so late, but I had to relate it all. It is done. I plan to be on the train home after lunch tomorrow. It seems an eternity since I have held you in my embrace.

Your devoted wife,
Violet

Friday, 3 February 1905

Dear Violet,

Uncle Ely is recovering nicely from his wounds, and rather more remarkable, has recovered his temperament. I was fearful as to how to relate to Uncle Ely what transpired, dreading a volcanic reaction when I had to inform him that his prize pieces from his Aztec artifacts had been smashed to bits, but I suspect that whatever happened to Uncle Ely in that office (he steadfastly keeps his own council as to what took place) he was not sorry to learn of their utter destruction. Rather, his face relaxed and his head fell back to the pillow. He surprised me by thanking me and asking me to thank you as well. Imagine my relief!

Two gentlemen are expected from the museum tomorrow morning, and will be presented with the smaller pieces, the medallion, the combs etc. Uncle Ely feels confident that they will be pleased to have the medallion in their collection, and it alone will enhance his finances most adequately.

He has apologized again for his mysterious behavior these last weeks and has been more kind and open hearted than I have ever seen him. He even promised that Flossie could take this Sunday off. He has also relented, and allowed that a few living plants in the choice locations in the shop might be a welcomed addition and attract the shopper's eye to nearby objects of interest.

Best of all, while Uncle Ely was recovering and his manner was soft, I beseeched him to disclose to me why he had never married. He sighed, held my hand in his, and related that yes, in fact, when he was in his early twenties and travelling, he was enamored of a girl, Marianne, whose family ran a bakery in a small town in Italy. She was a simple girl, but gentle and kind. He would have found work and stayed there forever if they had had the good fortune to be united in matrimony. Just as it seemed that perhaps her family would approve of their union, a great tragedy occurred. Marianne was out on a walk in the countryside and was attacked by a pack of wild dogs. She fell and suffered deep bites all over her body. The wounds refused to heal and became terribly infected. A high fever developed and she died a slow tormented death. Uncle Ely and her father found the dogs and killed them all, but naturally it could not bring back his beloved Marianne. Broken hearted and miserable that he had not been there to save her, Uncle Ely put his attentions into collecting artifacts and setting up a name for himself and an import business.

Perhaps you and I might set our minds to matchmaking?
Your devoted sister,
Pansy

P.S. We've not seen any crows on the ledge since Wyatt and the men went about their business, and I slept in late this morning with glorious dreams of Coney Island.

An Ineffective Devil

By C.J. Rene

It was a dark and stormy night. Ha ha! Just kidding. It was a little cloudy. It was dark, but really, have you ever had a night that wasn't actually dark? Isn't that sort of required by the definition?(Shut up, Norway.) So, it was night. There were clouds. The moon was full, which made our human roll her eyes at herself. She was desperate and hipster enough to decide that it was "vintage horror."

How to do this, how to do this. The old tin container she'd found at Beacon's was perfectly rusted on the edges, and she'd added the decals herself: faded roses and and and something she thought looked sort of like a ship. Those might be from two different eras, but whatever: irony. She'd worked hard on getting it just right. She decided not to think about what she'd put in the box. She owed her vet a huge favor. Massive really.

It had been a bitch to find a crossroads that wasn't asphalt. (Everything about this had been a bitch.) She'd figured, at last, that the Rockaways might have something close enough with covered with enough sand to decently bury the container. Dirt roads required leaving the city, dealing with the Bridge and Tunnel types, and no thank you very much.

She must have walked 15 blocks before she found a dune that had taken over a T-junction. And not street blocks. These were probably bigger than the 5th to 6th ave block. It wasn't a cross, it wasn't dirt, but at least the fucking moon was full. Adjusting her cat-eye specs, she knelt in her skinny jeans, gripped her flower-handled trowel with a bejeweled left hand and broke ground. Digging just enough to fit the tin in, her feet and knees sinking into the dune, sand slipping into her London Flys. Once the tin was buried, she step-slid off the dune and waited.

Nothing.

Fuck.

Her Louisiana momma said this would work. She texted her.

"Did you wait like 5 seconds before texting me?"

"Maybe."

"Sugar, call me in the morning if nuthin' happens."

Waves crashed rhythmically, lulling her. She should have made some coffee for this trip. Her eyelids rose and fell in time with the sea. The wind disrupted the sea's lullaby. Sand whipped against her face, waking her up a little. She looked around.

"Here I am! How can I help you?"

"SHIT!" She spun around to face a lanky 20-something with smudged lipstick, a rockabilly 'do, and pin-up dress. "You nearly gave me a heart attack. Jesusfuckingchrist." The woman hissed. The girl made her "you have got to be kidding me with this shit" face. And then the pinup laughed, showing off the lipstick on her teeth.

"Just kidding! What can I do for you, Amy?"

"It's Aimee."

"That's what I said."

"No, you said Amy. A-M-Y. It's Aimee, A-I-M-E-E."

"They sound the same."

"I know, but you are thinking Amy when you say, so I'm just letting you know, it's not Amy, it's -"

"Aimee. Got it. Did you call me to argue homophones or did you want something?"

"I'm here because, you know, a, uh, friend of mine -"

"Friend?" The woman's right eyebrow arched perfectly.

"Fine, yeah, my partner, is sick. I, uh, need you to, um, you know, heal her."

"Really?!"

"You ever actually done that before?"

"Yes, of course, yeah, yeah I can do that." She was digging through her pockets.

"Wait, your dress has pockets? Where did you get it?"

"Oh, I made this. You like it?"

"Yeah. Well, I like the pockets. I mean, rockabilly works for you but yeah, I'm more, I don't know, standard hipster I think."

"Right. Okay. So standard deal is 10 years and then your soul gets collected -"

"Wait. No, I'm not doing that kind of deal."

The perfect eyebrows furrowed. "Well, it's standard, you see, and -"

"Look, I'm not dealing my soul for anything. So we need to figure out something more mutually agreeable. What else can I give you that is not my soul?"

"You're asking for healing. From a demon. We trade in souls. I'm offering the same deal we offer everyone. Boiler plate, non-negotiable."

"When was the last time you made a deal?"

"Excuse me?"

"When. Was. The last time. You made a deal."

"Well, I don't see how -"

"When?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's New York fucking City, the center of the world for selling your soul for earthly pleasures and promises. And yet, you are stuck at a crossroads in the Rockaways, far from Brighton and the Russian Mafia, which I bet is ripe for deals, with just a few houses and some fish. Now, if I were talking to the demon assigned to that location, which I am, I would ask myself: why? Why is she stuck here? And if I thought that demon might not want to tell me, I would ask 'Me, what might be the reasons a demon would get stuck in such a terrible location for making deals?' and then I would probably answer myself, 'Well, I don't know, me, they probably fucked up something really bad or are not terribly good at their job so Hell stuck them someplace they could do the least harm.' Am I right?"

"Actually, I got assigned to hipsters."

"What?"

"Hipsters. I go where you call. At least in the City. You made a long trip from Williamsburg for nothing, honey."

Aimee sighed her too cool for school sigh. "So hipsters. Getting a lot of deals there? With their trust funds and rejection of too-much fame? Do they even know how to make a deal? Or do you just show up when someone at Beacon's exclaims 'I'd sell my soul for this dress'?"

The demon glared a little. "So how does that change your problem?"

"I figure, Hell's probably not watching closely; they don't expect much from you. So, that gives you some breathing room, some freedom. You can make different deals, play in the grey area."

"No... No. We do souls. That's the deal. Sorry, Amy."

"Aimee."

"Aimee. So, what's it going to be? Look, I'll give you 15 years, okay? That's a long time. Probably as much as you thought, but maybe more than you were getting anyway."

"It's not the time. I don't care about that. I'm not going to be the – never mind. Look, thanks anyway. Good luck with your 'assignment'." Aimee would cry on the subway.

"What is it then?" The woman was right next to her.

"STOP DOING THAT! Jesusfuckingchrist!" The hiss this time sounded like some kind of sarcastic snake.

"Sorry. Sorry. So what is it? You afraid of Hell?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Yeah, but most people by this point have convinced themselves it's can't be that bad or they just choose to ignore that particular reality. From what I hear."

"It's only 10–"

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen years. Then what? Then they come for me, right?"

"Yes." The answer caught on a hook of hesitation.

"Let's say my partner and I stay together that whole time. I think we would, but you know, things happen. But let's just say we do. What happens next? I die some gruesome death and leave her here to pick up the pieces after me? To deal with that shit? No. No. No. Nonononononoo. In the choice between her and me dealing with that kind of loss, I would rather it be me. Anyday."

"Oh."

"So either you have to come up with a new deal, or I've gotta go."

"I just don't think I can. They don't check up on me usually, but they will at some point."

"Do you really want to send good people in bad situations to Hell?"

"You saying you're a good person?"

"Maybe? But you want to send me to Hell?"

"I mean, it's not like I got up today to send you specifically to Hell. But yeah, that part of the job description sucks."

"Then try something new! C'mon! Fuck the man! I'm your target; do what you want!"

"I... I don't know." The demon sat and looked out at the ocean for awhile and then whispered, "why not?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, okay. I'm thinking injury. It's gotta be painful. Something I can tell a good story about when they figure it out. Neck injury?"

"Um, I'd like to stay away from the neck/head/brain area if possible. What about a femur? They are supposed to be really painful. Pins and everything. Actually, you can just mangle my leg."

"Femur?"

"Thigh bone. Add in the lower leg. Maybe a hip. Hips are important."

"What does she have again?"

"Liver cancer."

"Okay, hip and femur. Left hip, right femur. Extra painful. I can sell that to them, I think."

Aimee was going to ask for the same side but stopped. "Deal?"

"Seal it with a kiss."

* * *

The demon smoothed her hair back and bobby-pinned the escapee. Other demons might slough off their human forms at home. Not her. She wouldn't accept it. Rockabilly was her thing from forever to forever. And it just didn't work on something that looked like the nightmare version of a house elf.

Another demon sat next to her, all pus and oozing sores. Jill. She wondered how Jill hid the smell from humans; she barely managed not to make "the face" that once lead to another demon being ripped clear in two.

"How many this quarter?" She smiled at the giant and immediately ran her tongue over her teeth. She really should splurge on a better brand of lipstick.

"Oh, you know," Jill's voice, high and sugary sweet, couldn't possibly come from that hulking, toady, oozing body. "A couple thousand." Her face fell. "You?"

"Um, well, one."

"Oh. Well, it's easy really when there are no jobs and they stop the unemployment." Jill's specialty was financial deals.

"Yeah, true. I need to just find my niche."

"Well, you do the hipster thing, right?"

"Yeah, but they all have trust funds and connections now. Don't need money and have enough fame not to be a 'sell out.' It's a pretty dry market."

Jill's face wasn't convinced. Or maybe that was her convinced face.

More demons came in and sat down with stacks of stained deals, tossing them on seats mindlessly. One reptilian looking one (Joel, maybe?) snapped at the leg of some clown demon when the clown's papers spilled onto its back. Clowns looked exactly the same in Hell: creepy as fuck.

She gingerly picked up her pristine deal between bright red lacquered nails, checking and double checking that she'd filled it out right. It had taken some convincing (salesmanship, really), but she'd gotten the signature right on the line. She traced the name with her nail at the memory of it: late night, beach, worried lover. She could do this; she could do this job.

"Ffffffuuuuuinally, got one?" Calum. Groaning, she looked at him and raised one eyebrow.

"Why don't you just fuck off?"

"Why don't you tell the class what amazing deal you could possibly have made? Lemme guess. Someone's someone was dying, and they just couldn't bear to see them go." She turned to glare into a corner and turned embarrassed red. She hated his face, and his always-bleeding, bitten snout and the matted, wiry fur. "That's it! Weeeeelllllllll, I guess low hanging fruit is still fruit. Maybe in a couple millennia you'll be ready to make a real deal."

He walked back over to his stack, ran a claw up the side, and pulled out a random sheet.

"What's this? Oh, hmm, let's see. In exchange for one soul after two years, this poor bastard gets ... (wait for it) ... a fishing lure. Granted it is the perfect fly fishing lure, guaranteed to hook 'em on every go. Wasn't even having a bad fishing day, this one. Just my perfect powers of persuasion." His smile split the wounds crisscrossing his face farther open. "What did you get out of your little deal, ssswwweetheart." The other demons snapped to her at the slur.

"None of your fucking business." She was standing, seething. "Are you done? Have a good go? Get your rocks off? Your dick must be so incredibly disappointing if this is how make yourself

feel good about yourself." She picked up the deal on the top of the stack, looked at it before dropping it at his feet. He stopped himself from picking it up. She grabbed another. Dropped it. And another. Her voice went calm. "Huh, Calum? Anyone jumping your bones lately?" She picked up another off the stack and skimmed it and went to drop it, his hands already reaching out to catch it.

"Remy! Office. Now." She smiled wide and swished herself out of the waiting room, slipping the paper into her pocket.

* * *

"Sit down."

"And hello to you too, sis." Remy looked at the tiny chair waiting for her, rolled her eyes, and sat. "Are you ever going to let me sit in an big kid's chair when I come in?"

"Hell's littlest chair for Hell's littlest demon. Why are you wearing that ridiculous shape? It's Hell. Let your demon flag fly. People are talking."

"How many times are we going to have this conversation?"

"How long until you stop dressing up like a human when you are in my office?"

Etta couldn't understand. Her demon form was sexy, seductive, one of the more human looking ones. You knew something was off about her, but something else more powerful drew you in. Remy was sure that was how she'd gotten herself into management so fast without anyone being bothered by it. Etta was lucky and talented. Etta was dangerous.

"Do you actually have a deal for me?"

"Don't act so surprised." Remy handed it over gingerly.

"It's your first deal since ever. I'm gonna be surprised."

"You told me I had to -"

"Yeah, yeah. I know what I said. Look, I'm proud of you. I know this isn't easy for you. I know -"

"That I'm in Hell because of you?"

"Yeah. But you're also in this job because of me."

"I hate this job."

"It could be worse. You could be torturing or grinding souls or cleaning the blood and slime and ooze."

"-torturing or grinding souls or cleaning the blood and slime and ooze."

"So you've heard that one."

"Every quarter."

Etta sighed and leaned back in her human leather chair and propped her feet up on the bone desk to read through the deal. Halfway through, she dropped the page from in front of her face. She looked at Remy with a question, deciding.

"Very funny. Where's the real deal?" Hope in Hell had as much of a chance as a snowball.

"That is the real deal."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, sister, it is."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!"

"Hey! We're in Hell. Mind your manners." Etta wasn't laughing. "You asked for a deal, I gave you a deal." Remy'd rehearsed this part of the meeting.

"This is for a broken femur. We are curing someone's cancer in exchange for a broken femur?!" Etta's face was going that ashy purple she got when she let out the rage.

"Yeah. Broken femurs are really, really painful, Etta."

"We make deals for souls, Remy. Not broken bones. And especially not for CURING FUCKING CANCER!"

"Nothing in the rules says that I can only trade for souls."

"Yes, it does!" Etta was up. She pulled the two foot thick "Deals for Demons" off the shelf behind her and slammed it on the desk. "PAGE ONE. LINE ONE. WORD FUCKING SEVEN. 'WE MAKE DEALS IN EXCHANGE FOR SOULS, AND ONLY SOULS.'"

"Oh." She probably should have read the manual.

"Here! maybe I should write it down for you." Etta started writing on her Hello Kitty notepad, "Broken bones are not currency. Here, take it! Or here, maybe you can ACTUALLY FOLLOW THIS ONE!" Etta threw a paperback, smacking her in her chest. Demon Deals for Dummies.

"Oh, you know what? Fuck you. I don't have to take this abuse."

"It's Hell. It's all abuse, Remy!"

"You asked for a deal. I brought you a deal. I'm not made for this. I - It isn't fair, Etta!" She tried to stop crying. Her mascara was totally getting ruined right now.

Etta put the books away and sat down. She waited for her sister to pull it together.

"This one goes through. Not for you, but because we don't break contracts. But. You have one week to get me a soul. I am doing everything I possibly can to protect you. But you have - I can't - you have to do something. If this deal gets noticed, they are going to reassign you. No more Earth. No more hanging out in New York City. Nothing but Hell. And in your real shape." Remy looked at her. "I can explain this as a warm up deal for a subpar demon. Don't. Don't argue. You get me a real deal. By the book-meaning 10 years and we collect an actual soul-and I can make sure you stay in this department. Okay?" Remy pressed her lips until it hurt. "Okay?!"

"Yeah. Fine. Whatever."

"Why did you even offer the leg thing when she came to you?"

"She wouldn't go for the soul. If someone was going to have to deal with aftermath of a terrible death, she would rather it be her. She wanted her partner healthy, but wasn't going to break her heart later."

"You could have pushed the timeline."

"I tried."

"And you didn't try to talk her out of the Hell part, right? We've stopped that?"

Remy sat there, looking to the right of Etta's desk. "No. I, I just focused on the cure, like you said." Etta watched her sister, eyebrows knitted.

"Look, here's what you do. Go to St. John's Episcopal Hospital. It's in your territory. Lots of people are ready to make deals there, desperate to make deals. You'll be doing a public service."

"Etta."

"I know, but you just need one desperate soul. Find the biggest asshole in the hospital if you have to, but get me one soul. You can go."

Remy got up and smoothed the skirt of her dress.

"See you in a week."

* * *

"Hi. I'm a student at Brooklyn College, and I am doing a study on the treatment of people in different professions. Can you tell me if anyone here has been particularly horrible to the staff?" Remy repeated her script in her head as she walked up to the nurses station on a random floor. This wasn't going to work.

She checked and double checked she wasn't on the pediatric floor or in the maternity ward. She was not touching those tragedies with a ten foot pole, no matter how awful the people might be.

Okay, big smile and confidence, like Etta does. She walked up to the desk and set her purse down.

"Um, excuse me. I'm a stud-

"What? Speak up, honey."

"Yes. Um. Hi. Yeah. I'm a student at Brooklyn College -"

"Where?"

"Brooklyn College."

"Okay."

"I'm doing a study for my sociology class."

"Umhmm."

"And I was wondering if there was anyone, like a patient or their family, who you think, um, treats you and the other nurses really bad."

"You wanna talk to the people that yell at us?"

"Um, well, they don't have to be yellers, but um, yes." This woman was not buying it.

"And what's this for?"

"My sociology class."

"Look, sweetheart. I am sure you mean well, but I can't just give out the names of people that treat us like shit, okay? And did you even get your human subject approval?"

"No, I - I sort of left it to last minute."

"Of course you did. I can't help you." She went back to her paperwork. Remy almost tried again. Persistence perhaps would work. But instead she walked away.

The click of her heels followed her down the hall and into the bathroom. She would just calm herself down (she was not going to ruin her make up right now) and try something else. One soul. One stupid soul.

Her lipstick was still perfect. Mascara in place. Still got it.

The door creaked open and a woman who clearly didn't have it together came in.

"Sorry. I just. Ignore me." Her voice choked. She started to go toward the stall.

"You okay?"

"I'm in a fucking hospital. No. Not okay."

"Sorry." The woman looked at her.

"It's my sister. We're out of money, out of options. I just need to be alone, okay?"

Sometimes the fish jump into the boat. She heard Etta in her head.

"Can I help?"

"You got some kind of magic can make her better? Do you do miracles, sweetheart?" Remy bristled.

"Sometimes. What happened?"

"Eighteen-wheeler. I don't know if we should have even tried..." She stopped and got back in control of her sobs. "Just selfish." She was whispering now. "I'm not. I can't let her go."

"What would you give to get her back? Full health. Everything fine. Almost like the accident never happened. What would that be worth to you?"

"Everything. Anything. I would give anything."

"You are going to have to be more specific."

"You serious?" She squinted her eyes and cocked her head at Remy. "This ain't funny."

"I am not known for my jokes."

"You can fix her? What're you? Some kind of doctor."

"Salesperson. I sell miracles." It was natural. This part was always natural. Selling hope to the hopeless. "You interested?"

"Depends. What's the cost?"

Remy's little demon heart kicked up. Explaining the cost made her want to throw up a little. She wished Calum was here, and then caught herself in that thought and threw it away.

"To save your sister, completely heal her, from a horrible traffic accident? Let's see." Her breath was shallower. Just fake the confidence. "I'll give you ten years and then they take your soul."

"They?"

"I'm in sales. I don't do collections."

"Okay but how can you take a soul? And where does it go?"

"You ever go to church growing up?"

"You're an angel?"

"Oh, honey. Heaven only gives away miracles for free, but only when it wants to. While Hell, we may charge you, but you can one whenever you want."

"Oh. Really? You're from actual Hell?" Remy flashed her tiny demon face, crooked fangs, warts, and all. "Jesus."

"Not quite."

The woman was thinking, looking at the door toward wherever her sister was. "Can you make 20? I got kids, and - I'd just like to see 'em, you know, make sure they are okay before I go."

"How old are they?"

"M'kids? Three and five."

"Normally, I would, but my boss's been coming down on my pretty hard. I uh I - I can only do 10. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Really?" The woman was laughing. "You're a hellbeast and you say sorry?"

"Something left over from my human days, I suppose." Remy tried not to think about the kids. Just focus on getting the deal. The woman looked at her.

"So ten years, then you collect. And I die?"

"Yep."

"And go to Hell."

"Yeah." Remy pressed red lips slightly more together and swallowed down every word she wanted to say.

"Okay."

"Really?!" Remy squealed and jumped in a circle.

"Can you not do that?"

"Sorry, sorry. Yes. Okay. Now, just have to do a little paperwork, but if you just sign - shit, where is my pen. Oh, okay. Here. That will be your copy. And I need you to sign" She pulled out Calum's deal. "No, not that. Where? Oh, oh. In my purse. One sec. I think I left it at the nurse's station. One sec. You just sign my copy and then all the magic happens. Wait right here." She turned back at the door. "Thank you. Everything is going to be okay."

"For a decade." But Remy was already gone.

She could see her purse on the counter and started running toward it. She slid the last few feet, grabbed it, and started running back. Never leave them alone to think; that was Etta's first rule. She needed to hurry. Someone was yelling at her, and she yelled back that the bag was hers. But maybe they were telling her not to run. Too fucking bad.

Remy heard the wails as she rounded the corner back to the bathroom. The woman was sobbing into some man's chest. Remy's heart and bag dropped to the floor. Damn it. The woman looked at her and screamed for her to go away, to get the fuck out of here, get away from her.

She picked up her bag and scuffed the floor dragging her feet all the way to the elevator. She needed a drink.

* * *

The gay bar was a dive. She loved it. It smelled of old beer and old urine, but the people moved around like it was home. One bartender told her she looked hot, and then the other bartender gave Remy her number. Still got it. She ordered a beer from the second bartender.

A twinkly looking forty-something (you didn't see that every day) slid into the seat next to her, ordered three tequila shots in a New Orleans drawl.

"Bill, maybe you should start with one."

"My husband just told me he made the stupidest fucking deal of the century, so I think I am going to drink to forget right now. Three tequila shots. Please. Jack." Jack got the bottle and poured the shots.

"What was the deal?" Bill looked at her. Usually he wouldn't tell some stranger his problems, but that seemed like the right kind of harmless revenge he needed right now.

"Do you believe in Hell?"

"A little."

"You should believe in it a lot, 'cause it's real. And demons are real."

"Huh."

"Yeah, and you can sell your soul to the Devil. And my husband apparently thought that would be the right thing to do for our family. And do you know why?"

"No."

"Well, I'm going to tell you. Because we haven't found a surrogate yet. We've been looking for only three months, but apparently Mr. Impatient thought that it was taking too long, so he sold his shiny soul and now we have a surrogate."

The deal sounded familiar. She pulled out the paper she'd nicked, skimmed it. One surrogate, two kids, 20 years. Apparently, Calum had something of a heart. Her eyes lit up, and she smiled.

"So now, when our not-yet-born children are at the ripe old ages of 15-20, he's going to die a terrible death and spend the rest of eternity in Hell. Can you believe that shit? Twenty years. The love of my life, and I only get twenty more years." He was crying. There was so much crying in this job.

"I'm so sorry." Remy leaned in to hug him. He shook under her arms. She put her lips to his ear and whispered, "What if I could double it?" He stilled and then pushed her away. She was off book with this deal, but she had just stumbled into a whole new market, a niche she could dominate.

"What?"

"Forty years and eternity together. Kids are well and grown, might even see some grandkids. Interested?"

"You're a-"

"Yes."

"And you can-"

"Yes."

"Why would you-"

"Let's just say my sister and I have something of a similar story. Hell's slightly less hellish if you got someone." His eyes got bigger. "Shall we talk?" He nodded. "Great. Come on, Bill," she leaned in, "Drink your tequila, and let's go make ourselves a deal."

Way Down in the Hole

By Robyn Ritchie

Dick pictures weren't uncommon fare on Gavin's phone and yet getting one right as his manager lingered over his shoulder proved to be fairly unfortunate. Jessica Hong's mood turned sour around midday when the lunch rush hit Mama Alia's like a freight train and it went continuously downhill. Tables walked out after the lasagna was eighty-sixed and there were numerous comps because of the Caesar salad debacle and, Gavin supposed in hindsight, seeing a bright pink penis emerging from silken panties was not what she needed right then.

Gavin was told he would be let go immediately – and that in this instance, 'immediately' meant after he finished clearing his tables for the night.

Customers looked at him over menus and the boy whose bright smile had once beamed back at them was now muddled. The sweat circles under his arms turned cold in the insistent AC of the dining room and Gavin realized this was probably something akin to destiny. He had wasted nearly a year doing monkeyshines tableside for tips. Life was more than this, he told himself as he told the customers about the special and the eighty-six. Life was more than lasagna, he thought, and hell, he could do better than this. Potential, his father had told him when he was in middle school. That's what he had. This was the best thing for him, he thought, and when one of the girls looked up at him and asked for a mojito, Gavin wanted to weep.

Tears did not sway Jessica Hong. She booted him like she had promised and added, like a dash of salt to his amputated limb, that casual sexting would lead to much worse than lost jobs.

"Like what?" Gavin asked. His eyes were red under the harsh streetlight outside Mama Alia's.

Jessica clicked her teeth at him. "STDs," she said.

"What does it matter if I have STDs or not?" He looked at her and if tears did not sway her cold heart then maybe a sob story would, he thought. "I have no job now, no prospects or friends or close family members. I couldn't get into college and I can't get out of my crummy neighborhood. Now I'll probably be reduced to sleeping on the street because I can't pay for my apartment. What's an STD on top of all that? Maybe it'll help. Maybe I'll get disability."

Jessica Hong walked away, her pink sneakers slapping against the pavement slightly wet from an evening drizzle. He watched her go, then turned the opposite way and headed home.

* * *

That night at Mama Alia's, Gavin made fifty dollars in tips and he was going to spend it all on weed. One last good night as a toast to all the bad ones ahead. He looked up the number in his phone that had sent him the dick picture and called.

"Hey, baby, how's tricks?"

Gavin frowned. "River, this is Gavin."

"Oh. Well, hey, baby, how's tricks?"

"You got me fired, you know," Gavin said and knew that this wouldn't be cared about one bit. When he was met with silence, he continued, "Anyway, I have cash."

"Okay, well I'll be down in a sec. American Idol is on."

River lived two floors up in the building. That floor was rife with drug dealers of all statuses and flavors. Jaybird, the coke guy. Engine, who cooked meth. But Gavin was mild in all things and so he latched onto River and his seemingly endless supply of marijuana. River's prices were competitive, or so said the chat sites on the net, and Gavin loved dearly his bargains. When the familiar knock came at his door, Gavin opened it to River's pale face under unkempt black locks. He smiled and held up bags of dingy green on either side of his face.

"Gold," he sang and pirouetted into the one-room efficiency. "Beautiful gold!"

"How was American Idol?" Gavin asked. He reached into his back pocket for the money.

"I'm not really sure, I got distracted half way in. Got any goodies?" He dropped the bags on the coffee table and made his way to the kitchenette to forage. River never had any food and was always hungry. Gavin used to wonder where his weed money went and realized it probably didn't matter. He put the money on the coffee table and held up one of the bags, eyeing it guiltily.

"So, was that *your* penis?"

"Eh?" River's head popped up out of the fridge. "The one in the panties?"

"Yeah, what other penis would I be talking about?"

"That was old faithful all right." He righted himself and patted the front of his jeans. "Oh, but the panties I just borrowed from a friend. I was copying a set that was posted on *Can You Dig It?* But I don't think it looked quite the same."

Gavin glanced at him. "What is that? A porn site?"

"Not really. Man, you never have anything to eat."

"I'm not a grocery store."

"Well, it's a specialty site really. There isn't always a cock but sometimes. Have you not seen it?" River settled for a week-old banana that sat on the counter and sauntered over to the couch where Gavin sat beside him. "Come on, give me your laptop, I'll show you."

River helped himself to it and had long known the password – *Alia's son*. As he typed, Gavin readied a bowl but the smell turned his stomach quickly. He realized he hadn't eaten since his lunch break eight hours prior and also realized that River was currently sucking on the last edible item in the house. He would also walk out of the apartment with the last bit of money to Gavin's name. Gavin put his head in his hands.

"Look."

As commanded, Gavin looked up and saw corpses before him. He made a frantic attempt at grabbing the computer.

"What's your problem? This has got to be illegal; the CIA is going to kick down my door!"

"Calm down - it's okay! It's okay! I go here all the time, it's totally safe." River held the computer out of reach and kept Gavin at bay with a foot. "Just look, these are all people the diggers dig up. If they have any loot on them, the digger keeps it of course, and sometimes they post pics. Look at the maggots on this one!"

“Diggers? You mean *grave robbers*? ”

“To-may-to,” said River, “to-mah-to. It’s whatever you wanna call it. But they make bank, I know that much. My favorite digger—”

“You have a favorite?”

“—is this local guy called Gloom. He posted a set of diamond earrings he got off an old lady who was like two hundred years old. B-A-N-K, my man. He’s got videos and how-to guides; I even heard the site mods asked him to help run the thing since he’s so hip but he went all rogue and refused. Pretty cool stuff, huh?”

Gavin’s wheels slowly began to turn. River was obviously into much weirder stuff than Gavin had given him credit for and yet oddly, this discovery yielded a potential solution. River scrolled leisurely and Gavin was confronted with pictures of gold, jewels, crowns and filings ripped from bare skulls. And for a wonder, his stomach began to ease.

“A digger,” he murmured.

“Yep.”

“How do you become a digger then?”

River ruminated over his soggy banana. He eyed Gavin and grinned. “You dig.”

River’s visit with his loyal customer produced one more blessing – a discount on weed as penance for ripping Gavin from Mama Alia’s teat. That left Gavin with ten dollars which was just enough for the cheapest shovel at Home Depot. He wasn’t sure what else would be required and so he braved his fears of the CIA and logged onto *Can You Dig It?* once more. Perusing the site provided little more than anxiety – the pictures of diggers molesting their hoards in various fashions – but he came across the user Gloom whose profile had twenty thousand views.

Either the world was filled with more psychopaths than Gavin thought or it was just River clicking the refresh button.

Gloom recommended a host of items that Gavin had no money for currently. But he remembered what River had said and what he had seen to be true on the site.

B-A-N-K.

He would work for a night, gather funds to aid him on future digs, and the cycle would continue. It would go on until he created a stash of money with which he could pay rent and electricity, he could buy weed and tip his weed man like a proper gentleman. He could go to nightclubs, strip clubs, the grocery store. He imagined all this as he did when he was in high school, when he applied to colleges and daydreamed in the days before his rejection letters.

Hope bloomed verdantly in his heart. He would cultivate it with the soil from his digs.

Odeanna Woods died at the sturdy age of thirty-seven when her son, Gavin, was nine. They lowered her into the ground on a sodden spring morning and Gavin and his father watched her go down. People passed the two of them at the end of the day, whispering broken solaces. Gavin heard about Heaven. They said she would go there and nothing would hurt – her disease disappeared and the IV dissipated; all needles and tubes poofed into thin air. She would know peace.

Diggers had probably got to her though, Gavin now thought. He briefly wished to tell nine-year-old Gavin this sobering truth. Diggers ripped her coffin open and inspected her teeth and put her in bright red thongs, spread eagle on their *Can You Dig It?* profile. If Odeanna was in Heaven then Heaven must be a depraved psycho’s embrace.

Gavin grunted as he approached the Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens. The wind harassed him the entire walk over – a full eighteen blocks. He was exhausted and hadn’t yet dug one shovel-full of dirt. The sky was devoid of stars, blanketed by thick clouds. Why hadn’t he checked the weather report?

Each block dumped another pile of doubt onto his shoulders until he was fully ready to turn back by the time he crossed under the iron archway and into the cemetery. And yet that wasn't an option. Gavin had bought his shovel, he had made his profile on *Can You Dig It?* and he was here and he was a digger now, like it or not.

But his hands were shaking – somehow being here was much more intimidating than the mere thought when he was safe in his hovel with River on his right and weed in front of him. The oak trees were dark and tall against the sky and the headstones were nearly impossible to read. Gavin fumbled his phone out of his back pocket and used the light of the screen to read the names. He didn't want a girl.

Franklin Kottier – July 1st, 1956 – November 16th, 2013.

Good enough, Gavin thought, and his shovel struck earth.

Two feet down and the rain began. Gavin nodded at his luck and yet persevered. He was also quite aware that he had four feet to go and it was already nearing 2 AM. He had to get the body out, loot it, and then cover it again before sunrise. For some reason, he thought of himself as he had been a week ago, gliding between tables at Mama Alia's in his black slacks and silver nametag.

He felt a wetness at his cheek that was not rain, and in his surprise at the sudden onslaught of tears, he dropped his shovel.

A hand shot out from behind Gavin and caught it. Gavin whimpered and nearly lost control of his bladder but held it just barely. He turned around and tripped over his left foot, stumbled, righted himself, and saw a man standing there.

He proffered the shovel as the drizzle turned into a storm.

“G-God,” Gavin said.

“Nah,” said the man, and with his other hand he lifted a flashlight. His face lit up and it was young, as young as Gavin's, under wet hair white as sea foam. He gave a lopsided grin. “You'll never finish before sun-up. Where's all your other equipment?”

Gavin trembled and couldn't find his voice.

“Didn't get mugged, did you? That's what happens to new diggers sometimes, you know. Experienced ones come and strong arm them, take their shit.” He took a step forward and popped Gavin's personal bubble. “Then they just push the newbie into the hole behind them and cover it up. That's all there is to it.”

Gavin thought he might faint.

“But it seems like you're just unprepared. Heh.” The man licked his upper right canine and reached behind him into what looked like a fully loaded hiker's backpack. He unhooked a pickaxe from one of the outside loops and slung it over his shoulder. “Mind if I help out?”

“Help,” Gavin said, and he didn't fully recognize his voice.

“Sure. I'm already done with my dig for the night and, hey, I'm into charity functions. Let's crack this together.”

The shovel was thrust into Gavin's hand and his stomach, nearly knocking the wind out of him. The man stood beside him and put the flashlight in his mouth, clenched between kitten-like teeth. He raised the pickaxe overhead - blue eyes wide and tongue lashing at the body of the flashlight - and brought it down.

The diggers worked side-by-side. The experienced white-haired man dug as one possessed and broke through feet of dirt in no time which Gavin thought odd for the man's lithe frame under his baggy clothes. Meanwhile Gavin shrank away every time the axe came down for fear of it cleaving him in two.

They push the newbie into the hole behind them.

It came down again.

And cover it up.

And again.

That's all there is to it.

Then it hit something completely solid and wood and it splintered under the man's fervent force.

He righted himself and smoothed the damp hair from his face. "There we are. Is this your first dig?"

Gavin stared down at the door of the coffin.

"Hello?"

"Eh?" Gavin looked up into those blue eyes like lighthouses in the rain. "Yes, sorry. Yeah. My first... dig."

"Handle?"

"... What?"

"Your name – what's your name?"

Gavin ruminated. He'd almost said his real name but in this business it probably wouldn't be wise and anyway, he'd already made his profile and username. He might as well get some use from it. "Dour," he said. "You?"

"Ah. I'm Gloom. Nice to meet you."

There it was. Gavin squinted from the rain in his eyelashes. Only he would have the exact kind of fortune needed to meet a necrophile's celebrity in the grave of Mr. Franklin Kottier. Gavin thought he should say something – praise, perhaps – but what?

"My weed man is a big fan of yours," he said and shrugged.

"How sweet," Gloom chuckled. "I don't deserve all the attention really. Well, Dour, open it up. Let's see what you got."

Gavin swallowed and nodded. It all came down to this – the veil of the computer screen was gone. It was real and tangible, all sight and smell and sense, and Gavin was far too close to turn back. As he opened the coffin, he reassured himself, both twenty-year-old and nine-year old, that his mother would not be inside.

Gavin lay on his couch in the lazy sunlight the next afternoon. He tossed the tooth up into the air and caught it.

When he opened his hand, it glittered gold. Gavin wondered if it was real. He'd found it in the skull of Franklin Kottier, snug in its home. When Franklin had finally been revealed to the two diggers, Gavin froze in horror and disgust. Franklin was rotted and putrid, the very scent of him urging Gavin to vomit. He resisted and instead listened to Gloom beside him who was wide-eyed and far more excited for Gavin's first dig than he himself was. Gavin inspected the body at his behest and found the little tooth there.

Gavin's nerve crawled out of the grave and ran back home. But Gloom would not let him shy away. Gloom took Gavin's hands in his and forced him to use the pliers he'd packed.

The crack – like lightning striking a mountain in two.

All of that for this little thing he held and was it even *real?* That was the question. He wondered which paid more – waiting tables at Mama Alia's or plying teeth out of rotten old skulls.

The laptop dinged. His *Can You Dig It?* profile had received a private message - a little envelope floating above a gravestone. Gavin rolled his eyes and clicked to find a note from Gloom, subject: POTENTIAL.

Dour – you may be feeling underwhelmed with your first dig, but this is only the beginning. I sense great things in you, diglet, and that's why I didn't push you into that grave. Just kidding. But seriously, you need to turn in

your find and then move on to the next one. Stagnancy never helped anyone. There's a pawnshop on 21st N Street that's digger friendly. I've sent word ahead. — Gloom.

For some reason, his one-room apartment, littered with clothes both dirty and washed, speckled with wrappers and bags from all manner of fast food places, which had never felt any less than cozy before, now felt small, cramped, confining. Unbearably so. Gavin gripped Franklin's tooth and left.

The man behind the counter watched Gavin shuffle inside and looked at him knowingly. Gavin had seen the same expression on Gloom's face just hours prior.

Knick-knacks and 90's electronics covered in dust and emanating the faint smell of mildew lined the store shelves. But no smell of death, not like what had been on Franklin. Briefly, Gavin wondered if he was in the right place.

"Hey, hey! So, you're the one, huh? How's it going, my man? How'd your first dig go?" the man asked, leaning forward against the counter. Thick dreadlocks fell over his shoulders and covered one eye.

Gavin blanched and looked around wildly.

"No one but you and me, kid. The name's Purgatory. Belly up, lemme see what you got."

"Listen, I..." He paused and sighed. Purgatory grinned and waved him over. Gavin shuffled to the counter and discreetly placed the tooth between them. He heard the crack again in the back of his mind and shuddered.

Purgatory picked it up, rolled it between his fingers. "That all?"

Gavin lowered his gaze. "That's all."

There was a pause and within it, Gavin felt an overwhelming force of pity come from across the counter. It lasted only a second and the other man rallied quickly. "It's okay; first digs are tough! I bet you luck out with Gloom tutoring you now."

"Tutoring?" Gavin knitted his brow. "Me?"

"That's what he said! Anyway, any friend of Gloom is a friend of mine. This is pretty standard loot. Fifty bucks for ya, bud, and here's to many long years of digging." Purgatory raised the fifty dollar bill aloft and it caught the fluorescent lighting. Gavin gazed up at it. On his first night at Mama Alia's he'd not made anything in tips. He'd fumbled and shied away and fucked up and found no understanding or even pity in the customer's gazes. On his first dig, he'd done those exact same things and yet, here, he was given both understanding and pity in bucketfuls. Overflowing. Gavin felt something thud in his chest and he grimaced.

The door opened behind him and Gavin flung himself towards Purgatory's counter. He dove behind it and hid near the man's dark calves. Even if it was another digger, he couldn't be seen here, in the den of perverts. He still had a modicum of dignity to preserve.

Purgatory took it in stride. Footsteps, the slapping of sneakers against the tile, led to the counter.

"Heya, miss, can I help you?"

"I just want to get rid of this. How much is it worth?"

Gavin perked up. He recognized that voice, the curt clipping of words and the distinct way vowels sounded on her tongue. Like the way she said her last name to him on his first day. *Jessica*, Gavin thought and bowed his head against Purgatory's leg.

"Hmm, well, this is a fine ring! Where did you get it, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Does it matter?"

"It's just that it's so old. It could *probably* fetch a good price."

There was a pause. "My grandmother just died, and this is what she left me." A short, derisive chuckle. "My older brother got actual money, a trust fund, but I got *this*. So I'm hocking it for whatever it's worth. I'm tired of this shit."

"Sounds all right to me. Let me take a closer look..."

Gavin tuned out after that. The eventual transfer of money was only background noise and Gavin felt his whole body sag, held up only by Purgatory's strong leg. Jessica Hong was no digger, she was a bitchy manager, but she was *his* bitchy manager. He was not one for a life of danger and mystery and corpses. He was Gavin Woods who worked as a waiter and made minimum wage in tips. He was Jessica Hong's punching bag and Mama Alia's son. He thought this as tears sprang to his eyes and yet some other part of him beat the tears back down. That other part of him told him these were use-to-bes and use-to-bes had no place in the now. That other part of him told him to rise.

Finally, Gavin rose.

"Hey there, guy," Purgatory said, beaming. "Done hiding?"

"Yeah. I have to dig, Purgatory."

"Damn right you do." He put a hand on Gavin's shoulder and squeezed. "We all do."

Gavin plunged himself into the earth for a week straight. Night after night he walked the eighteen blocks to the Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens and met Gloom in the dark. Each dig provided Gavin with more money and more money meant more supplies. A hiker's pack, a pickaxe, electric lantern, pliers, hammer, bolt cutter, crowbar – nothing stood between Gavin and his dig, neither wood nor ivory coffin. And Gloom was shadowy beside him and quick and wild, wielding a strength that Gavin could not see the limits of. In the silent hours of AM, they worked.

Gavin grew to be efficient enough to make more than one dig a night and yet Gloom still helped him. On Wednesday, they sat in a roomy coffin with Finnegan Wallace Hampshire Junior who lay between the diggers.

The night before, River had come to Gavin's apartment to deliver packages of green gold. When told about his newly found mentor, River had grown still and intense, body poised like a lynx before a pounce. He'd said, "If you're my friend, you know, you'll get me Gloom's autograph."

Since when were we friends? Gavin thought and said, "I'll see what I can do."

"Or," he exhaled and his intensity seemed to lessen, "a popular digger from the site, anyone, really." He eyed the laptop that sat open on the coffee table. "Being a weed guy, Gavin, it's... super mundane sometimes. You're lucky to have found another job. There's not much upward mobility in this one. Like a glass ceiling."

In the grave, Gavin looked up at the purple sky with clouds floating lazily across the expanse of the moon. He cleared his throat and before he could speak, Gloom looked back at him, caught him in the icy beam of his gaze.

"Do you know why there's so much room in here?"

Gavin paused. He looked down at Finnegan's bones and shook his head.

"He was a stocky fellow. Heh. They probably paid a pretty penny for this fancy box to fit him in. But he wasted away, down to nothing, down to this." White hair fell into his face when he looked down at Finnegan. "Eat a sandwich, skinny."

Gloom reached into his pack and produced a sandwich wrapped in plastic. He began to unwrap it and, as if on second thought, proffered it to Gavin.

Gavin shook his head demurely. "Thanks, but no."

Gloom shrugged and bit into the peanut butter and jelly voraciously. Gavin eyed Finnegan and sighed.

"So," Gloom said after the silence of his meal. He rubbed his hands on his jeans and looked brightly at his pupil. "When are you going to stop fucking around, Dour?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why're you wasting time with men? I've indulged you for nearly a week but now it's time to really get going. You're only going to continue getting a pittance if you keep this up. Where's the money at, Dour? I know you've read my guide on the site. I tracked your IP address. I know you looked at everything, so now, diglet, you're not so stupid. Now you're just avoiding. Heh. Let papa in on the secret."

Gavin's eyes had grown wider with every sentence. He felt his palms moisten and suddenly the smell of Finnegan, which he had been able to ignore until now, was overpowering. Gavin felt like he might choke on the stench and die.

Gloom held a hand up to his ear and tilted his head in Gavin's direction. "What's that? I couldn't hear you. Tell me again. Where's the money at?"

"Women," Gavin coughed on the word, breathless.

"And why is that?"

"Because rich women are often buried with jewels and heirlooms. Women can be priceless." He refused to look up from Finnegan.

Gloom shrugged. "And yet here we are, six feet under with a dusty old dick."

"Yeah."

"If you don't wanna tell me, then don't. But here's something I didn't post on the guide. To be a digger, all you have to do is dig. It's simple. But no half-assing, got it? When you dig, you go all the way down."

Home in the yellow-orange yawn of the morning was quiet and solemn. Gavin usually walked straight to the couch and slept until afternoon the day after a dig. But he went to this silent cathedral and wanted to tear it apart. He wanted to take a kitchen knife to the couch and watch the feathers fly, whirled by the AC. He wanted to break the already splintered coffee table, to throw his CDs and game discs, to smash the TV screen that had been greening lately.

He didn't dare do any of it. This place had stayed constant in a time where nothing seemed familiar. He couldn't let that go, for anything. Gavin went to the couch and curled up. When he slept, it was fraught with nightmares and when he woke, he had the strangest thirst for milk.

This was all Jessica Hong's *fault*. He may have been wasting his life in Mama Alia's but he didn't fucking know it and it was *normal* and quaint and there was a veil sometimes, a veil of consideration and trust and companionship. Family. Now, out here in the wild, that veil was gone and he was confronted with *real* friendship and love and possibility and the stench of rotting corpses. This was what she had condemned him to. This was life.

Well, fine, he thought, body in tremors. Gavin would sit in hell for all eternity as long as he could throw hot coals at Jessica.

"What're you doing here at this hour?"

Gloom stood by a thick oak tree just after sunset. Colors of sorbet covered the gardens and the tombstones cast long shadows. Gavin came to stand before his mentor and they almost looked alike, with their bulging packs and sallow bodies.

"Who said I ever leave?" Gloom asked. He pushed himself from the bark of the tree and slung his pickaxe over his shoulder. "What direction are we going?"

"Down. All the way down," Gavin said. His gaze flickered towards the long rows of graves. "Help me look for a certain grave. The last name is Hong; the death had to be within the last two weeks."

"So, it's a woman?"

Gavin looked up as if startled and smiled brighter than the last flares from the setting sun.
"Duh."

It only took twenty minutes when Gavin was prepared to spend at least an hour looking. But Gloom's ability to find dead people was a thing of beauty. They stood side by side on the grass before the headstone which read DAIYU HONG and their shovels struck at once and they worked until the sun sank and the moon hung high, glowing through pale wisp of clouds.

Gavin wanted to match Gloom's tenacity and raw driving force but his pace was something to be watched from afar. Gavin saw him through the spray of dirt and smirked, turning back to his work. He knew he wouldn't be able to dig with the illusive Gloom forever, but he was glad to have this for now.

The coffin lid appeared before them around 8 PM. Gloom and Gavin stood still, each as the other's shadow. Gloom then bent forward and smoothed the last of the dirt from the lid. He turned to Gavin who was frozen and he whispered, "Do you know what's in here, Dour?"

"A dead body," Gavin said and thought, *Mom. Not Alia or even Jessica's grandmother. My real mom.*

"And what are you?"

"I'm a digger," Gavin said and thought, *I'm her son.*

"Heh. What are you going to do now?"

Gavin produced the crowbar from his pack, unsheathed it like a sword and came to his knees by the latch of the coffin. His voice was thick as he said, "I'm coming home."

In ten minutes, a car pulled up to the gates of the cemetery. It was blue and elaborately dented, so much so that Jessica Hong shut the driver's side door tenderly so as not to rock it off its damaged hinge. She left it on the curb, made her way under the iron archway and through the gate.

Jessica had refused to attend the funeral. She didn't want to hear her mother wailing and she didn't want to see her brother standing there stoically in a fancy new suit that Grandmother's rotting husk had afforded him. But most of all, Jessica didn't want to have to witness the death of her dreams in front of her entire family. Grandmother was now gone and there was no way to patch up years and years of conflict over endless, meaningless, tireless disagreements. Jessica's mother had always turned a politely blind eye to the constant stream of white men Jessica allowed into her bedroom but such a thing would not be overlooked by Grandmother. And yet the final straw was not Tad or Haywen or Kyle. The final straw was Jessica.

When Lan Hong's eighteenth birthday arrived, suddenly she changed into Jessica Hong.

But Jessica Hong had had hopes, she thought as she made the long walk to Grandmother's grave. She wanted the freedom to pursue daydreams, pipedreams, anything save for the nightmare she was now living, trapped in a restaurant with no means of escape. Yes, Jessica Hong and Lan Hong and Grandmother had all had dreams. But Jessica was the only one living now. She was the only one who mattered.

She came upon Grandmother's plot and her sneakers scuffed in the grass. She felt like running but could not. There was no quiet patch of grass but a great hole before the gravestone. There was a sound, like a voice. Jessica felt something deep inside shudder and she fought against it. She cried out, "Who is in there? Come out right now!"

No response but already she had grabbed her phone, flipped it open and shone the light down into the grave.

Jessica noticed first not Grandmother's body in a black dress adorned with printed orchids, nor the man hunched over her, crouched in the coffin. She noticed Gavin Woods standing there, turning towards her, face hitting the light. Amethyst earrings hung from his ears, a string of pearls

around his neck and a bright sapphire pinned to his chest. His eyes shone brighter than all of them and tears ran down over his smile.

“River’s Kush Delivery Service, how can I help you?”

“Aren’t you afraid of answering the phone like that?”

“No, why would I be?”

Gavin frowned. He said, “Come down here, I have something for you. And it’s more important than American Idol so hurry it up.”

Despite that incentive, River still took a good thirty minutes to get to the door. When Gavin opened it for him, the other man waltzed in and headed for the fridge. Gavin caught his thin wrist and spun him back around like a woman on the dance floor. When they came face to face, River’s eyes focused slightly and he grinned. “What is it? A present?”

Gavin produced a piece of paper and folded River’s hand around it.

“Yeah, a present. This is what you wanted, isn’t it? The autograph of a great digger?”

River’s whole face lit up and he hurried to unfold the paper. “Oh man, you really are my friend. This is amazing – so, who is it? Gloom? Is it him? Or maybe Crisis, or Horror. Thank you so much, I’m so excited!”

He looked down at it and in cursive it read simply: *Dour*.

The Monkey's Finger

By Lawrence Buentello

Genie stared at the ugly relic on her desk and frowned; she'd read a story in high school about something like it, but a whole handful of fingers had been involved—

Shouldn't there be more than just one finger? she'd asked the psychic sarcastically. And more than a single wish? But the old woman in the faux gypsy dress only shook her head.

In the story, as Genie remembered, an old couple had been given an entire monkey's paw and had three wishes. It didn't seem fair, but still, one wish was more than she had before she visited the flea market.

"Remember, young lady, you only have one wish," the old psychic had said in a terribly affected accent that caused Genie to roll her eyes and shake her head. "And it must be specific. You cannot wish for more wishes, or to be queen of the world. You must wish for something actual, something you feel you need to enrich your life."

Genie left the tent twenty dollars poorer, but richer by one monkey's finger.

Now, why would a raggedy old woman give a wish away? she wondered as she poked at the finger with a pencil. The finger was covered by matted black hair, and felt gross to touch.

There probably wasn't a wish involved at all; the old lady had just passed the ugly thing on to her to stop her from complaining about the 'reading'. Why shouldn't she complain? The woman seemed to have absolutely nothing promising to say about Genie's future; you really need to work on your act, Genie had told her, and not kindly. The old charlatan should have at least made an effort.

Still, if she had been granted a wish, what would she wish for?

She looked around the dorm room and tried to envision what single wish would make her life perfect. Perhaps if she graduated magna cum laude—or was recruited as a CEO for a giant corporation—or perhaps she should wish for something more personally fulfilling—Alan was handsome, intelligent and totally oblivious to her, despite her best efforts to make him notice her. What if he fell hopelessly in love with her? Would they live happily ever after?

Or what about a billion dollars? What kind of extraordinary life could she create with that much money?

But she wasn't one hundred percent positive that Alan was her soul mate—how could she know? They never even had a decent conversation. And graduating top of her class guaranteed

nothing. And what if she grew tired of being a CEO? No, these were wishes fraught with potential disappointment.

Now she remembered more of the story of the monkey's paw—the couple had wished for money, but only got it as a result of their son dying in an accident; then the wife wished for her son to be brought back to life, long after he'd been buried. The husband had to use their final wish to send their son away again because he couldn't let his wife see the boy in his decayed state.

If she made the wrong wish, like the old couple, she wouldn't have any other wishes to repair the damage. No, she either had to have more wishes, or to make just the right wish. But the old lady said she couldn't wish for more wishes, she had to wish for something specific—

But then inspiration found Genie and she laughed at her own brilliance.

She held the monkey's finger in her hand and said loudly, "I wish for a magical monkey's paw!"

And in a brilliant flash of light a magical monkey's paw did appear in her hand!

Minus one digit, and still attached to the horrid monkey whose wish to be reunited with its stolen finger had finally come true—

Just the Other Side of Twilight

By C.R. Dobson

After pounding the last nail in, I, blood chilling just beneath the surface of my lattice-shadowed skin, felt somewhat safe. The reticulated umbrages adorning my nudity, though beautiful, offered no solace. Sour, lactic effluvia (the hallmark of my enemy) hang-dogged just outside my hiding place—a closed-in porch. The woven slats of cedar separating me from the crepuscular creature were splintery and weak. Luckily, the creature's strength lie not in brute force but in its *sangchand* gaze which, unlike Medusa's, lacked the mercy of a painless, swift transmogrification into stone.

Nervous gas distended my stomach and, working its way through my alimentary canal, caused uncontrollable pangs of flatulence. Tightening my sphincter, I remembered how a woman inadvertently suffocated her baby while trying to quiet its enemy-alerting wails. It was no use. The fart came. Within seconds, I saw the rutilant eyes of the monster glowing just on the other side of the creosote-oozing weave of cedar. It stood on two hirsute muscular legs. Its smooth-shaven thorax was inundated with erumpent breasts that bounced with vigor as it capered and ronedeled with unerring grace. The *coup de grace*: a coquettish simper that seduced me from my sanctuary.

It was then standing in the face of death that I wished to redress my life of excess and solipsism with honor and probity, but that intent was foiled by my sudden tumescence. The eyes of the creature had me. The dancing of the creature transfixed me. My mouth gaped in a rictus of carnal plangency. I came. The zenith of my orgasm—the nadir of my existence.

Gnome: Excerpts

By Robert Lunday

Where does the metamorphosis from dark to light begin? Where seeing and seen are blindness and invisibility; where the seen is blind, the seeing invisible itself. Eyes are derivatives of the skin; the brain itself was a thing of the skin.¹

“What appears on the face and in facial expressions is a spiritual experience which is rendered immediately visible without the intermediary of words.”² We have always lived a photography without cameras: sun-prints, the blooded silhouettes memory leaves on the present.

A slow-moving cinema plays out over the body; muscles frame the mise en scène, pulling back and pushing through the self like a faint wax. Life, a photophilia; the muscles make their movie, fight their battles, pulling back and pushing with enough combinations to make a vocabulary.

¹ William Gregory

² Bálazs

One can be a Gyges, for whom the world is spectacle, but who gives no face, no inter-face, to the world. We're all walking-dead to this man spying through his ring, and we move through the air as if under water. All is now, and faces are lines without connection; eyes, minnows in a stream.

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– in suspicion: physiognomy is the system's distrust of other systems. Periphery is our only freedom; aria, an impressionistic unity:³ light and air are let into the human, a permeability, a projection that respects no boundaries or stops. It was like love: all sense of scale was banished, rivers ran across the sky. Now, though, we are on the verge of a further extension! More contours, allowed into the human, a cross-phenomenal colonization: an empire that began with the animalcules – no, with the first enlightened molecules; and will end at the last contour, last outburst, last look of surprise.

³ Petrarch via Gombrich, *Image and the Eye*

Some things are born in the closing of the eyes. The eyes' closed space, the vitreous humor, holds a sea of vision. Live in the back of the eyelids; or, further out, where the space-mind closes its eyes, and sees the faces that left behind all the mirrors making their own constellation: unborn undead unseen.

Everything external has achieved meaning by becoming extrinsic.⁴ Some lives are lived in a Claude Glass: chemistry (the most primitive speech), optics, and images snatched from the air.⁵ Natural selection, Darwin's pre-cinema of life; eugenics, or "poetic selection."⁶ Poetry as beauty, and at the same time, monstrosity. But the real poetry is in the choosing: put down the glass, reach out your hand, and enter the picture. We only learn from those we love –⁷ love and hate being minimal pairs, whose true opposite is indifference.⁸

Let into the human, the face, sight of which produces in some (like Schopenhauer) a feeling of pollution – a misunderstanding of the monstrous as demonstrative only.

⁴ Kozintsev

⁵ John Szarkowski in Batchen

⁶ Grossman (recorded lecture)

⁷ Goethe in Stanley Burnshaw

⁸ Elie Wiesel

From this angle, you appear a statue; one line out of the profile, a ray, not the movement forward in time, not destiny, but character vectoring the continuous heartbeat; a line of breadcrumbs left by our blinking; a soar above gravity.

Kalos: not beauty so much as fineness.⁹ The fine is fitted to the good like a skin, like the screen of the face on movement – the thing we try to hold and recall. Fine is the good in motion, and beauty when we freeze the motion – a myth, an impossibility.

What projects is real when it reaches the viewer, through a thousand alterations of air. What pulls on the skull is real, but mere faith between mirror-checks – the mirror like heavy water.

The body is such only as it is a way to the world, the world is a world only insomuch as it is a frame for the body. The face is our movement without moving; the voice a movement from behind the face, “this way of coming from behind one’s appearance.”¹⁰

The Holograph waited in the wings, though resemblance of everything made it always essentially so: bodies holographs of souls. Divination made one part of the universe the cousin of every other. Casanova’s genius was to acknowledge that a mole on a lady’s face foretold the existence of another, in more hidden parts.¹¹

“The atmosphere is of itself adapted to gather up instantaneously and to leave behind it every image and likeness of whatever body it sees.”¹² The face is most often a retrospect: someone new reminds us of someone we knew before, a former friend, a type we’ve discovered in our various travels and meetings. Familiarity gradually unfolds, and the new and old faces form intersections of doubt and trust.

*Whenever I faintly imagined the face
Of my truest love (at last!)
 suspended
In this the middle distance of my
Mind’s dark....¹³*

Then there is Garbo’s face in silver: translucency of the general desire, male interweaved with female: a face like a leap, and the miraculous defiance of gravity – light’s own face, if we could get ahead of the beam and see it before it arrived.

⁹ Charles Seltman

¹⁰ Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*

¹¹ In Mantegazza

¹² Leonardo

¹³ Grossman, “To S –“

Faces define zones of frequency or probability.¹⁴ Every action takes a face for itself: not animism, but as the phenomenologists would have it, a physiognomics of existence. Contour creates identity, and every contour has its own wavelength: human is a broad spectrum of wavelengths, sustained only within the theater extended from the body and the tribe.

Claustrophobia's a failure of projection. They rolled me into the MRI, panic-bulb in my hand, an IV of valium in my arm. My adrenalin swarmed the valium Ali-on-Liston; I hit the panic button in three seconds flat. But the rush-hour trains in Tokyo were worse: a hundred faceless people pressed against me, divorced from their faces: claustrophobia is the only honest reaction in a crowd.

— of course, not *faceless*. Their faces were far ahead of them, high-beams on home, projected far from the train; or solar sails, dragging them beyond the density of flesh; whereas my face had gone back into its bud. Proximity is responsibility;¹⁵ and life, a meeting of projections.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

¹⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

About the Authors

John Ammann was born and raised in Washington D.C. Having self-published a collection of short horror stories in 2009 called *Evidence of Hell*, he currently lives in West Orange, NJ with his wife of twenty-two years and two children. Noteworthy: in or around 1990, he challenged Stephen King to a short story writing contest. King's publicist said they considered it but ultimately decided not to do it.

Lawrence Buentello has published over 80 short stories in a variety of genres, and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His fiction has appeared in *Short Story America*, *Ares Magazine*, *Murky Depths*, and many other publications. He lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Art Bupkis is a poet, philosopher and man of letters, The Rt. Rev., Prof., Dr. Art Bupkis, F.A.C.B.S.A., is a widely published literary ward of L. R. Baxter, himself once a professor in the medical schools of the Universities of Florida, Alabama, and California at Los Angeles.

C.R. Dobson is a Yooper born and raised along the shores of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He has put his MA in Writing from Northern Michigan University to good use by teaching literature at a University in South Korea. His poetry and short stories can be found in *The Smoking Poet*, *Sirr Magazine*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *East Coast Literary Review*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Cranky Magazine*, and few others.

J. Elliott is an artist and writer living in north Florida with her boyfriend, three dogs, a cat, and a coop of chickens, including an old, gouty chicken named, Betty White. She is currently writing a Florida-based murder mystery.

Eamonn Harrigan is the author of the novel, *Where the Dead Go*. He has a Masters in Screenwriting from the Huston Film School in Galway, Ireland and won a bursary to attend the Professional Program in Screenwriting at UCLA. He was shortlisted for New Writer of the Year by the Over The Edge organisation in 2008. He writes screenplays, short stories, and novels with a dark twist—some of which have been published in magazines and audio books. He has also non-fiction published writings about the macabre subjects of pensions, knowledge infrastructure, and the greening of business.

Celia Jones lived in upstate New York until her family moved to northern California. She completed an honours degree at UC Berkeley where she experienced many bizarre situations that formed the basis of many of her stories. In 1972, she and her husband immigrated to Melbourne, Australia where she taught high school French, English, and Drama for 20 years and had humorous

travel and personal essays published in print and online. Since her early retirement due to her Parkinson's disease she has been a freelance writer and creative writing teacher.

Robert Lunday is the author of *Mad Flights* (Ashland Poetry Press). A former Stegner and Fine Arts Work Center fellow, he teaches at Houston Community College and lives with his wife, Yukiko, on a small horse farm in central Texas.

M.J. Mellor is a writer and poet currently studying Creative Writing at London Metropolitan University. He has written several short stories and is currently working on his first novel.

Todd Natti is an instructor of writing at Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology and Emerson College, where he is working on his MFA in nonfiction. His work has previously appeared in *Digital Americana Magazine* and *Crime Culture*. Originally from Rochester, NY, he now calls Boston home.

Jeffrey Perso grew up a river rat in La Crosse, WI, where he hunted night crawlers and Northern Pike. He unwillingly donated blood to each of the 53 varieties of mosquitoes native to the state, though he's never been bitten by a bat, but once he shared a bass boat with a water moccasin. These days he teaches in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (a different kettle of fish), and his fiction has appeared in, among other places, *Iconoclast*, *Manzanita*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, and *The Rockhurst Review*. "A Plague of Drownings" is excerpted from his novel of the same name.

C.J. Rene is a writer of short fiction, a hopeful novelist, a recovering actor, and a human rights-focused law student. She recently won Best Fiction in *Kalyani Magazine*'s Write to Roar Contest 2014 and is currently working on her first novel. Her cat is feeling neglected and might be plotting revenge. Her drabbles and struggles with time management can be found at www.cjrene.com or on Twitter @cjrenewriting.

Robyn Ritchie is a twenty-something in a midlife crisis. She publishes sporadically and is getting her MFA at Emerson College.

Douglas Smith is a literary scholar and author of short and long fiction living in western Washington State. His background is in arboriculture, renewable energy systems, and construction. He is an avid surfer and passionate about viewing wildlife in its native habitat. His writing draws inspiration from his eclectic professional and academic history, as well as his extensive travels in Latin America and Asia. He holds a Bachelor's degree from The Evergreen State College and an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College. He can be reached at xdouglassmith@gmail.com.

Matt Wall is a freelance partner in culture-crime with Dr. Art Bupkis, as well as a commercial artist who lives in Gainesville, FL.

Catherine Weiss is a poet and author living in Northampton, MA with a cat, a dog, and a human male. She enjoys losing at Monopoly, listening to creepy audiobooks, and hitting ping pong balls directly at her opponent. Find out more about her writing at <http://catherineweiss.com>.