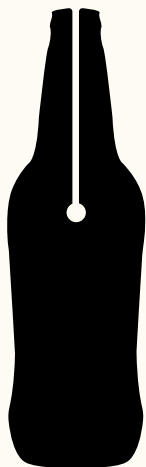




PRESENTS



FREE BEER

&

FICTION



THE COMPLETE ANTHOLOGY

2014 – 2015

We begin with a toast ...

TO BEER THAT'S COLD

AND STORIES WELL TOLD

ABOUT FREE BEER & FICTION

One of the oldest art forms is the written word.

*Even older is the spoken word. Welcome to
Free Beer & Fiction, a creative writing workshop at
The VIA Agency.*

*Regardless of your title, position or field of
expertise, the goal of this program is to challenge
yourself to not only think and write creatively, but
to put yourself out there, and read your story in
front of a live audience.*

*Each month we choose a topic. We pull three
names from a hat. Those three people have one
month to write a short story based on that topic
with only one rule: It has to be read aloud
in 20 minutes or less.*

Why the free beer? Well, why not.

A SPECIAL TOAST

We are nothing, if not passionate. We love what we do, and we are fortunate to do so in Portland, Maine. But Free Beer & Fiction would not be possible if it were not for our founder and CEO, John Coleman. He has built a company with a culture that encourages people to take risks and thrive in the uncomfortable moments.

Here's to him.

FREE BEER & FICTION

The Complete Anthology: 2014–2015

Presented by The VIA Agency © 2015

Some subject matter in this book may not be suitable for children, or adults for that matter. Reader discretion is advised.

SPECIAL THANKS

Free Beer & Fiction is a compilation of short stories written by employees of The VIA Agency. Thanks to them for their willingness to write and read aloud their stories, and to the many other people responsible for this publication. A special thanks to the following, who gave of their time to make this possible.

Aaron Staples, Illustrator

Jenn Arredondo, Studio Designer

Duane Holmblad, Studio Manager

Paul Choiniere, Senior Print Production Manager

Kateri Carelli, Senior Integrated Producer

Daryl Turicek, Front-end Developer

Patrick Krulik, Creative Technologist

Alexa King, Photography, Video and Editing

Sam Peisner, Video Editor

Amanda Newton Gray, Producer

Sven Fahlgren, Director of New Media and Production Services

Patti Lanigan, Senior Copy Editor, Proofreader

Nicole Boucher, Associate Proofreader

Brittany Charette, Creative Assistant

Dan Pappas, Art Director, Designer

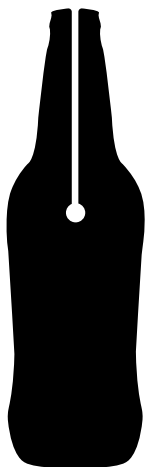
Chris Gilbert, Copywriter

Kevin Phillips, Creative Director

Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director



PRESENTS



FREE

BEER

&

FICTION



THE COMPLETE ANTHOLOGY

2014 – 2015

CHAPTER NO 1

February 6, 2014

THE FIRST TIME

I'LL GO FIRST..... pg / **20**
by Kathleen Parr, Associate Creative Director

IN DREAMS..... pg / **25**
by Chris Gilbert, Copywriter

THE RATTRAP..... pg / **31**
by Steve Holt, Copywriter

IT WAS QUICK..... pg / **43**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director



CHAPTER Nº 2

March 6, 2014

LOVE GONE WRONG

THE SUMMER OF LOVE LOST pg / **50**
by John Coleman, CEO, Founder

BAZOOKA pg / **64**
by Doug McFadd, Photo Asset Manager

RECEPTION pg / **72**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

LOVE GONE WRONG pg / **87**
by Jamie Holt, Copywriter



CHAPTER Nº 3

April 3, 2014

METAMORPHOSIS

THE OBSOLESCENCE OF BILL pg / **92**
by Chris Jacobs, Associate Creative Director

SNOW pg / **103**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

A TUESDAY, RUINED pg / **108**
by Brett Willis, Copywriter



CHAPTER Nº 4

May 1, 2014

SURPRISED

FORREST pg / **124**
by Leah Rohner, Account Executive

15 TO FREEDOM pg / **131**
by Dan Pappas, Art Director, Designer

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ANDY MOOG .. pg / **141**
by Mike Daitch, Group Creative Director

NEVER THE WHY — A STORY..... pg / **150**
IN THREE PARTS
by Greg Smith, Chief Creative Officer



CHAPTER NO 5

June 5, 2014

HEAT

MY GIRLS pg / **166**
by Mary Hanifin, Executive Producer

THE LION GUIDES pg / **183**
*by Sven Fahlgren, Director of New Media
and Production Services*

JEREMY, THE GLO WORM pg / **192**
by Patrick Krulik, Creative Technologist



CHAPTER Nº 6

July 10, 2014

MADE IN AMERICA

ODE TO OPA..... pg/ **204**
by Kelly Scharf, Account Executive

MAY DE AMERÍKA..... pg/ **214**
by Aimee Kudlak, Senior Studio Designer

REPRESENTATION..... pg/ **229**
by Chris Jacobs, Associate Creative Director



CHAPTER Nº 7

August Summer Party

GOOD COMPANY

HASHTAG BESTIES pg / **238**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

THE GATHERING pg / **251**
by Bobby Pfeifferberger, Associate Creative Director



CHAPTER Nº 8

September 4, 2014

SCHOOLED

THE NINGKATOK ROAD..... pg / **257**
by Greg Smith, Chief Creative Officer

THE GRIFFIN RICHARDS SCHOOL..... pg / **264**
FOR THE DAMNED
by Steve Holt, Copywriter

SKOOLED (A FIRST DRAFT)..... pg / **271**
by Steve Street, Creative Director



CHAPTER Nº 9

October 2, 2014

SPOOKY

SEARCH AND RESCUE..... pg / **284**
by Sallie Allen, Associate Creative Director

SPOOKY STORY..... pg / **307**
by Moya Fry, Client Strategist

INTO THE FOREST DARK..... pg / **315**
by Judi Cutrone, Senior Social Media Strategist

WE'RE ALREADY DEAD..... pg / **331**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director



CHAPTER Nº 10

November 6, 2014

FUCK CANADA

FUCK CANADA PROLOGUE..... pg / **338**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director

O CANADA..... pg / **341**
by Stephen Davis, Senior Copywriter

A SHOT IN THE DARK..... pg / **353**
by Pete Wiernusz, Analyst





CHAPTER NO 1

February 6, 2014

THE FIRST TIME

Being our very first Free Beer & Fiction assignment, what better topic than to write about “The First Time”?

I’LL GO FIRST..... pg / **20**
by Kathleen Parr, Associate Creative Director

IN DREAMS..... pg / **25**
by Chris Gilbert, Copywriter

THE RATTRAP..... pg / **31**
by Steve Holt, Copywriter

IT WAS QUICK..... pg / **43**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director



I'LL GO FIRST

as told by

KATHLEEN PARR

The quiet is funny. Because this was always such a noisy house. A jumble of kids and dogs. Ours. The neighbors'. Ping-pong, doors slamming. Records blaring. Electric guitars, Jesus, those guitars and drums. The stereo. The boys fighting. The girls crying.

Nowadays, it's so quiet I can pick out sounds I never really noticed. The air conditioner kicking in. The Yankees on in the other room. A buzzing near the window. Damn, is that a hornet's nest? I'll have to take care of it. Or fuck it.

I can hear Margie in the kitchen. It's like she's cooking for a holiday. It sort of is one, I guess. A spontaneous family reunion.

She's trying hard not to bang the pots and pans. But it



can't be helped. I wish she wouldn't apologize. She's always apologizing. When she's not being chipper. Upbeat. Chattering away about nothing. It's annoying. I hate it when people are "on." And I just want to tell her to please, please, please, Margie. Please. Just shut up.

Don't think that way. Don't look so put out. Smile. Because that's what's working for her. She's a good listener. Which is a good thing, marrying me. And then raising a brood who took after me in that department. She had to be. A listener. But now I do more listening. And now that I am listening, it turns out she's kind of boring.

I thought she was funny. Had a good sense of humor. She laughed at all my jokes. But I'll say this for her; she's not just a good audience. She's smart. Talented. She paints. A wonderful mother. I love the way she cooks. I miss that as much as anything.

She's pretty. No, actually, she's a beauty. Greer Garson, Ingrid Bergman beautiful. A class act. Lady in the living room. Lady in the bedroom. Such a lady, come to think of it, I've never actually seen her naked. I've felt her naked. I like the bits I've seen. But never all at once. Never in the altogether. Always in the dark. I guess that's what you'd call modest to a fault. But that's her. I didn't expect any different.

Oh. She's here. Fussing. Oh. More company. Jack and Sheila were here yesterday. My brother and sister. It



was nice. No politics for once. Just good stuff. Sheila reminded me of the time I hid the fireworks under the front porch. And the fire department had to come and get them. My poor mother.

I'm trying not to feel bad. It's too late for that. Margie forgave me a long time ago. She put up with a lot of crap from me. I never hit her. I never fooled around on her. Never. I would never break that trust. When you're in sales, you travel. I saw plenty of guys hitting up girls in bars. Waitresses.

Why? For what?

But I drank. I liked the taste. I liked the buzz. Not sure I was an alcoholic. But I was a pain in the ass. I threw my weight around. Finally, I gave it up for her. God I can remember that night. The hysterectomy. Routine. Until the phone rang at 4 a.m. I didn't even hear it. Chrissie did. She woke me, fear in her voice. It's Doctor O'Leary. He'd delivered three of the kids years before. Margie was hemorrhaging. Chrissie and I stayed up. She was bawling her eyes out. I decided to quit drinking then. My pact with God. Margie was fine. And I was better. Everything was.

I don't know how we did it. Five kids, no money. But we managed. No, she did.

Now she's driving me crazy, but I love her more than ever. I hope she can forgive me.



For not being as tough as her. Who knew I was such a pessimist? I hope they can all forgive me. Again. I know they want me telling stories. Giving advice. Making light of it. But I clammed up for once in my life. How is that possible? Talking is how we figured things out. Debating for the sake of it. Let the talker talk. That's what they used to say about my grandfather. Then I took the talking stick and wouldn't put it down. But now I can't talk about it. Or be philosophical.

I have figured it out. But it's all in my head. Now I say small things. But they're big. The last time Chrissie was here, I told her she was beautiful. For once in her life she didn't argue. She got choked up. And thanked me. Believed me. That's all I wanted.

What time is it? It feels like night. There are no daytime noises. Nobody's mowing their lawn.

This is how it was with Sean. Everyone on and around our bed. Like now. That was the worst thing that ever happened to us. The first bad thing that ever happened to us. We were devastated. And shocked. Because Sean was only a dog. A premonition. How would we handle it if it was one of us? One of the kids. But we all made it. We done good, Margie.

The boys never had to go to war. I would've taken them to Canada myself if Vietnam kept going. All five married to good people. Even my baby girl. It took them so long to get going, and now they're on their way. And they're



on their way here. They're talking to me. They're telling stories. They're laughing. It is a kind of holiday after all.

I don't drink. I don't think. I feel. And whatever I'm on feels good. I feel and I hear. I hear them. I feel love. I'm floating on love. It's warm. It's carrying me away. It's late.

Oh, good. Thank God. She's here. My firstborn.

I knew she would make it. I knew I would make it. It's Chrissie. Oh. My beautiful Daddy. I love you. I'm here.

She's here. They're all here. Finally.



IN DREAMS

as told by

CHRIS GILBERT

The collection was kept on the third floor of his sprawling mansion, meticulously mounted and systematically arranged down the expanse of a narrow, dimly lit corridor.

The hunter would wander the hall gazing longingly at his trophies, reliving each hunt vicariously, not wallowing in the fact that his hunting days had long since passed.

His collection was vast, and though to the untrained eye many of them seemed remarkably similar, each had a distinct story to tell.

With each gentle caress of a trophy, his mind could return to the time and place of each conquest. He read them with the clairvoyance of a palmist and the dedication of a monk, returning every evening.



He beheld them with a tender yet determined hand, the way a muscle-bound warrior might trace his battle scars that had long since healed yet still stung a dark recess of the soul.

Tonight his prizes managed to steal a shaft of light filtering through a vacant slat in a set of perpetually drawn shutters. They greedily soaked up every last drop of the retreating sun's rays, bursting into a kaleidoscope of colorful light.

As visions of his past glories danced in his head and flashed like fireworks across his glossed over irises, a great calm commandeered his atrophied frame. His face cleaved into an ear-to-ear toothless smile as he closed his eyes.

No longer was he tethered to a mortal coil. His mind, now emancipated, could traverse the landscapes of his memories with a fleet-footedness belying his advanced age.

Subconsciously, yet with unbridled purpose, he lifted a finger to the nearest trophy, hovering just in front of its perfectly spherical form.

The object of his attention wasn't obviously special. It wasn't the biggest, the most radiant or even the shapeliest of his specimens, but it nevertheless seemed to have a gravitational pull on him; other trophies seemed to exist in its orbit, arranged in its wake.



In an instant, he cast his memory back to that fateful moment, so long ago.

There he was, a small boy, sitting on the bench in a baseball dugout. As the game unfolded before him, he was riding pine, fixated on chewing an enormous wad of bubble gum.

His brow wrinkled into a picture-perfect ripple of consternation as spittle dotted his lips, vestiges of the countless failed attempts at blowing a bubble.

His idols on the wrapper made it look so easy, but Big League Chew seems a tease when you're struggling in Little League.

The setbacks didn't stop him though. Over and over, he worked the now tasteless substrate like a machine. Not stopping for anything.

Thhhthhhbbibbithhh. No dice. Whiffed again.

Undeterred, he kept chewing.

Not even a heat-seeking foul ball careening toward him could shake his focus. As the ball rattled violently around his chain-link sanctuary, he tried one last time.



It was the bottom of the ninth, tie game, bases loaded and only one out. The stuff dreams are made of.

Coach Jefferson's knuckles were frosty white as he clung to the dugout fence for dear life.

The lefty reliever on the mound was in his element, hurling fire, mowing his boys down.

He'd already played the ace up his sleeve by pinch-hitting in the seventh ... and with only a joker left, he needed a miracle.

Suddenly, the crowd erupted into a cacophony of jeers from the home fans and jubilation from the visitors as another kid went down swinging with the game hanging like a chad in a balance.

"Trevor! Damn it, Trevor, you're up!!" Coach J shot down the bench, but Trevor was oblivious, hunched over and grinding down on his gum.

"Trevor?" Coach thought to himself ... "Not only have I lost it, but I'm about to lose this damn game."

With another failed attempt behind him, Trevor snapped out of it and answered the call.

He flipped a batting helmet on and meekly emerged



from the steps of the dugout, dragging his bat like a tail between his legs.

All eyes were now squarely on him as he took a dizzying practice cut in a vain attempt to battle back against the cyclone of butterflies in his gut.

And somewhere between the dugout and the batter's box he remembered the gum.

He now paced his chewing maniacally, hoping to catch up with the buzz-saw beats of his heart.

As Trevor pawed at the dirt in the batter's box with his cleats, the pitcher took signs.

Silence.

Windup.

Back-door slider, swing and a miss. Strike one.

He just managed to foul tip the second. Strike two.

As the pitcher began his windup, time seemed to slow.

The crowd held its collective breath while Trevor closed his eyes and began blowing.

As the ball struck his helmet, he hit the decks.
He'd won the game, but at what cost?



As the dust settled he proudly shoved both fists skyward from his flattened position, laughing. Just laughing. Euphoric, probably concussed.

Laughing not because he'd won the game, but because in that split second, he'd formed his first bubble.

As he stood up to get high fives from his teammates, he dusted off the bubble of gum, still fighting to hold its shape. He vowed to never let it go.

And there it was, all these years later.

No it wasn't the biggest, and it had all but lost its pink hue, but it was his first.

Before he took to the stairs to depart for slumber, he cast one last parting glance down the hall.

He marveled at every last chunk of Bazooka, Dubble Bubble and even a wad of Fruit Stripe his doubters had said couldn't be blown — as if it were the last time he'd see them.

As the last glimmer of light retreated into the night his smile was still broad, still without teeth. He'd lost them years ago, and could no longer pursue his hunts.

Only in dreams.



THE RATTRAP

as told by

STEVE HOLT

Woodbury School, King's Cross, Vermont, 1953.

My name is Bunn Dwelle.

We never got caught. They thought the furnace had blown up. But I'll get to that in a minute.

I let go of the carton of chocolate milk, and as it gained speed descending down the chimney, I could see flecks of ash spin and churn. I leaned closer to hear the satisfying "THOCK" as it hit the flue below, splattering violently, and extinguishing the fire that was roaring in Mr. Cooper's French class. Faint shouts and cries of alarm rose out of the chimney like audible smoke. Later that day, I heard from Fred Pringle that James Kelly had been so surprised by the dairy bomb hitting the fireplace that he shat his seersucker pants and had to leave class.



Needless to say, dropping pints of chocolate milk down the chimney was one of my favorite pastimes.

Let's get one thing straight. When I was 13 years old, I got into a fair bit of mischief. The things I did back then would get me kicked out of any school these days so fast it would make your head spin. I was 13 years old in 1953, and I had spent the past five years in bed, sick with encephalitis. I came very close to dying — they just didn't have the technology or medicine they have today — but I thank God I made it to the other side. I had to learn how to read and write and walk again after being so sick. Imagine entering the seventh grade with a second-grade education. That's where I was. I was a bright kid, but that's probably why I got into so much trouble back then. I didn't know what else to do with all my energy.

Every day at 12:30 sharp, the milkman would pull up in his truck outside the school, and all the boys would run down with a dime and get a pint of plain or chocolate milk. Every once in a while, I'd bring the milkman a couple of rolls of NECCO wafers from the concession stand and he'd sneak me two extra pints. I would stow them in my book bag and then climb up the fire escape during a free period, hang off a dormer, and drop them down a chimney. It's even more fun than it sounds.

I had a hideaway in the attic. It was a small dusty room under the eaves of the old schoolhouse. I would spend a few minutes up there each day, working on a crystal



radio kit. I could connect it to a large antenna that I had crafted out of the secretary's coat hangers and a whole roll of Kaiser broiler foil. I truly loved that old schoolhouse.

Woodbury School was built by Hollis Larcom, one of the highest-ranking officers in Lincoln's Signal Corps for the Union Army. He came out of the Civil War with a little money in his pocket and began building the school. It was a sprawling Greek-Revival farmhouse, and all the doors were locked with skeleton keys. The nice thing was, you could go to the hardware store and buy a handful of skeleton keys, and most likely one of them would work. This way, I could go into supply closets or the kitchen and pick up anything that struck my fancy.

Don Briggs, the headmaster, was a bit of an odd duck. He had a funny, albeit terrible speech impediment that affected the way he said the word "school." When Principal Briggs said "school" it came out sounding like "stool." In addition to being principal of Woodbury, he was also superintendent of our sister school, The Linnie School for Girls. Unfortunately, in the spring when Principal Briggs addressed all the parents at the annual Linnie-Woodbury mixer, he would have a few sneaky drops of gin, and then yell at the top of his lungs, "I love my stools! We have the best stools in the state!" Just think what might have happened if he'd wanted to change the school colors. "I think our stool color should be ..." Yikes.



Ms. Reeves was the secretary. She was a spindly, nervous woman, with a very pale white face. Unfortunately, her face looked a little bit like a gopher staring into the headlights of a speeding car. She would wear her hair up in a big beehive hairdo with a button-up cardigan sweater, a long wool skirt, and practical shoes and nylons.

From the basement of the school, my friend Fred Pringle and I ran a concession stand. Running this concession stand, trust me, you felt like Al Capone. Boss of all, understudy to none. You're older than me? Get in line! I sold candy, lukewarm root beer and ginger ale, and surplus Army and Navy gear from the war. Kids could come down to the basement and buy a pack of M&M's and an authentic German luger. That's pretty twisted, if you think about it. But that's how it was. We set up shop on part of the masonry foundation and used some extra beadboard that we had found in the old wine cellar as a counter.

How did we get all these supplies? Most of the World War II stuff came from the Army/Navy store in Burlington, about 20 miles away. Everything else came in the mail. In 1953, between *Popular Mechanics* and *Boys' Life* magazine, a young man could order just about anything he wanted. I'm talking about items that would make a boy's head spin. Things like: the "amazing midget camera," a spy camera that could fit in the palm of your hand; authentic Sundial-brand Boy Scout Buster Browns or the exotic "Malayan Kris," the strange and crooked Oriental dagger. How about a .22-caliber Mossberg rifle? Yup, that'll be



\$24.50. Dueling swords, what color do you like best? Or my personal favorite: the two-inch wide, five-inch tall Skymaster crystal radio kit. There were pages and pages of items to tantalize the imagination of every boy in America.

After weeks of convincing my father, he allowed me to send away for a crate of fireworks. They arrived in a wooden crate, packed in sawdust, having made the journey up north from Texas by train. I can still smell the crisp night air as my father took me down to pick up that box. Inside one would find the hellacious bang of a dozen Black Cats, the echoing blast from a barrel bomb, eye-dazzling Roman candles spitting furious balls of flashing color, the ever-patriotic post-war 21-gun salute, and of course, the crowd-pleaser, the notoriously simple cherry bomb.

Now that I've set the stage, it's time to get to the story at hand: "The Rattrap." It all started with Dr. Sawyer. Dr. Sawyer was the head of the lower school English department and he coached Junior League football. For the most part, he liked me. He would call me Felix as a nickname, and if I ever ticked him off, he would pick me up by the ears, felicitously, and bounce me up and down in my chair. But every once in a while, I had the unique knack, more than the other boys, for really ticking him off.

I think deep down, Sawyer knew I was a good kid, and as ashamed as I am to say it, I took advantage of his unspoken vote of confidence. One time I filled his pipe



full of shredded eraser. That sounds bad, but it could have been worse. I wanted to fill it full of dried dog shit, but Dick Castle talked me out of it. But with all this considered, I certainly never meant to hurt anyone.

One day, when I was messing around in class, throwing pencils and drawing cartoons in my textbook, Dr. Sawyer got completely fed up. And to get my attention, he pulled his desk chair out and flung it into the corner of the room. He NEVER sat in his chair, or even touched it for that matter. He would almost always lean on his desk and walk around, gesticulating about Dickens, Poe or London. When he threw that chair, it certainly got my attention, but it also gave me a neat idea.

At least I thought it was pretty neat. Actually, shit, this idea was pretty damn good! Here's the setup: I had 10 galvanized metal screws, a Victor name-brand rattrap, a ball of waxed brown string, a metal rubbish bin, a pack of percussion caps and 3 pounds of black powder. How did a 13-year-old boy get his hands on black powder? Well, Dick Castle's father was a gun collector and he loaded his own shells. He would show us how to properly clean and care for guns, oiling them and polishing them with brushes, clothes and bristles on wires. So Dick took care of the powder.

My plan was this: I would set up percussion caps on the rattrap, then bury the rattrap in black powder at the bottom of a trash can. I would run a string from the snare of the trap up through the floor and tie the string to the



leg of Dr. Sawyer's chair. I would then proceed to get Dr. Sawyer so mad that he would grab his chair and fling it across the room again, which would set off the trap, ignite the black powder, and create more black smoke than Pompeii itself.

On the morning of the rattrap smoke bomb, I had traced the outline of the trap's hammer (and for those of you who haven't slaughtered a bunch of rats, the hammer is the spring-loaded bar that snaps down to make the kill). Along that outline, I had screwed in the 10 screws to the trap's platform so that the hammer snapped down perfectly atop the screwheads. I brought a small hand drill to school, the kind that has what looks to be an old doorknob on top of it. During faculty lunch period, when all the other boys were outside, I drilled a small hole right under Dr. Sawyer's desk leading straight through to the basement. I remember there were two or three guys watching out for me and cheering me on. They had no idea what was about to happen. Oh my lord, they would never forget it.

Two hours later, there I was in the basement with Dick Castle, filling the metal trash can with black powder, three to four inches deep at the bottom. I gently nestled the rattrap into the powder and set it with the focus of a surgeon. After the smoke bomb was set, I marched up the stairs and into English class with Dr. Sawyer. I went into class early to double check the chair and the string attached to it. I plucked the string ever so gently to feel the tension in the line. Holy shit. Here we go.



I intentionally planned it so when the smoke bomb went off, it would be during the very last class of the day. I had a good friend in the grade above me who was in charge of ringing the electric school bell at the end of the day. I let him in on the secret and told him that if anything happened, run over and push that bell as soon as possible so everyone could bolt.

We entered Dr. Sawyer's class, hooting and hollering, wearing tweed coats and blue blazers, all of which were slightly too big or too small for us. We took our seats and dangled our legs underneath our chairs, flipping open our worn canvas or scratched leather book bags. I was sweating bullets.

As Dr. Sawyer entered the room, we became quiet. He shifted his weight from right to left, dragging his leg behind him. No one really knew how he had acquired that limp, but my, there were stories. Some said he hurt himself years ago falling off the roof of a garage after stepping backward into a bucket of lead paint. Fred Pringle used to say that Dr. Sawyer had that limp ever since he saw Delight Francis, the town prostitute, who used to hang out on the corner of Elm and Crooked Lane, wearing nothing but some frilly underwear under a long beige duster.

Sawyer went over to his desk and placed a few thick manila folders onto it. "Hello, gentlemen," he said, looking us up and down as if he could sense the anticipation. "Take your seats and let's pick up where we



left off from yesterday.” There was Frank Bitetto, Paul Lindemeyer, Robert Moritz and Fred Pringle, among others. And then there was me, Bunn Dwelle.

Class began as usual; Dr. Sawyer was spouting off about one of the chapters in *The Odyssey*, but no one was listening. All eyes were on me. Now, with the trap set right below us, I had planned something special to enrage poor Dr. Sawyer so furiously that he would grab that chair and heave it across the room.

I had hollowed out my copy of *The Odyssey* and made a secret compartment inside. I had read the comic book version of *The Odyssey* anyway. I stuck my Skymaster radio inside of the book and propped open the cover just enough to have the small speaker stick out. On the other end of the book, I could wiggle my fingers through the pages just enough to adjust the volume dial.

Usually I could get about two or three channels during the day. I would listen to radio programs like *Gang Busters* or *The Railroad Hour*, or a western program about backstabbing cattle rustlers and villainous bandits.

And so it began:

Volume up. “Keeping a tigress from the throat of a vixen. A show of hands, a show of hands! I must swear you to secrecy!”



Volume down. Dr. Sawyer turned around and eyed us all intently, and then continued.

Volume up again: “Oh, a tongue in their heads, that is not so bad, but what will happen when they no longer have God in their hearts?”

Volume down. “What’s going on?” He walked around the silent room. He went back to the blackboard.

Volume up. “Gold! Gold! Gold! The blacksmith dropped his hammer, the baker his bread. It was a day of paper towns and quick money. Suddenly the eyes of the nation were turned on gold-producing California.”

Volume down. Dr. Sawyer whipped around; his face was beet red with anger. He was not going to be played the fool.

“Who has a radio in this classroom! This is unacceptable. Everyone out of your seats. Empty your bags and your pockets.” We did so, and he found nothing. “If I hear that radio one more time, there will be hell to pay.” And with that, he turned back to the blackboard.

I waited. I waited.

Volume up: “Give me a kiss, darling, and I’ll tell you a secret. Well, I’ll show you! Hand over that bouquet, zipper-lips!”



I have never seen an angrier man in all my life. Dr. Sawyer looked like a demonic bull straight from the bowels of hell, eyes wide with fury. With a final steaming yell, he pulled out his chair with a violent swing ... and with a resounding boom and a rush of air, the floorboards literally jumped off their nails. It sounded something similar to a jet plane taking off in the basement. You could feel the pressure underneath your feet. I was fucking terrified.

When it went off and Sawyer ran over to the basement door and heaved it open, thick black smoke billowed out of the basement. All the color drained from his face. As he held a kerchief over his mouth and nose, I went over to his desk and grabbed the string up through the hole. I yanked on it, effectively pulling the rattrap out of the trash can below. When I couldn't pull it any further, I pulled out my penknife and cut it loose. I rolled up the string and put it in my pocket. And then the school bell rang loud and clear, and we all sprinted out of that school like fireflies out of a glass jar — buzzing and breathing and pulsing with adrenaline.

We never got caught. They thought the furnace had blown up. After all the smoke had settled, Briggs and Sawyer went down into the basement, and all they found was a dirty old trash can and a rattrap (of which there were many).

Of course I had pulled up the string through the hole



in the floor and put it in my pocket. I still have that bit of string to this day. You know what I use it for?

I keep the keys to my basement on it.



IT WAS QUICK

as told by

TEDDY STOECKLEIN

You never forget your first. Mine was Jill Bloomfield.

It was 1985. Jill and I were not dating. In fact, we hardly knew each other at all, until one day she asked if I wanted a ride to school. She was a 17-year-old senior and I was a 14-year-old freshman. She drove to school. She was super hot and the captain of the varsity tennis team. I was a geeky, skinny kid who joined the AV club and still played Dungeons and Dragons.

The Bloomfields lived down the street from me. At the bus stop I'd see Jill drive by in her mom's hand-me-down silver Honda Civic. She never noticed me. But then one day, she stopped. She rolled down her window and yelled to me, "You. You're in the AV club, right? Get in."

There had to be a motive. There was no way one of the



hottest chicks in school would single me out. Surely she just needed someone to hook up a projector or show her how to work the VCR. My voice crackled, “Who, me?”

She didn’t need my technical skills at all. She just wanted to give me a ride. Crazy, huh? Well, that’s what happened. Jill started picking me up and driving me to school every day. She wouldn’t come to my house though. She’d pick me up at the bus stop. It was on her way.

This went on for a few weeks. The other kids must have thought Jill and I were “doing it.” We weren’t, but I didn’t let on either way. I just played it cool. We played a game she called “Would You or Wouldn’t You,” where we’d ask each other whom you’d sleep with at school. The Spanish teacher, Señora Jones, was a definite. Jill said she’d sleep with her too, and probably do a three-way. Wow.

I had never had a girlfriend before, but to say we were dating isn’t true. We never even came close to holding hands. But I fantasized about her — a lot. I don’t think an hour went by when the thought of Jill and me in the back of her Honda Civic didn’t give me a vicious boner.

For me, even a stiff breeze could spawn an erection. They inevitably occurred in the last three minutes of a class, right before the bell rang. Those were the worst. I became a master of the “elastic tuck,” a risky maneuver because it involved sleight of hand and deception. As you got up from your desk, you had to mention the weather outside and simultaneously put your right hand in your



front pocket, grab your boner and tuck it up under your belt.

Jill Bloomfield caused most of my erections, and sometimes I just had to take care of business. I could spank the monkey in a moment's notice, just about anywhere. My favorite spot was in a bathroom at the back of the library — an unmarked door hidden by the microfiche machines. But when the moment hit me, I could crank one out just about anywhere. And Jill gave me a lot of ammunition.

One night I was in my bedroom, which was in the basement of my house. The window was at ground level, so it was about six feet off the floor, and my desk was against the wall beneath it. It was 1 a.m. My parents were asleep two floors up. I was working on my trigonometry homework. I heard a gentle tapping on my window. It was Jill.

Holy shit. What was she doing at my house? I motioned for her to go to the back door. I let her in. I could smell booze on her breath. She said she was just at Rebecca Fay's house for a senior party. Rebecca's parents were always away.

In the spring, seniors had a lot of parties, probably to plan their senior pranks, which were becoming an almost daily occurrence. Every clique at school had its own prank, and they all tried to outdo one another. Some of them were legendary — like the time the cross-country team



replaced the hands of the giant clock above Benedum Hall with Mickey Mouse hands. No one noticed until the graduation ceremony. And then there was the time the Tree Hugger Troop flooded the freshman lounge, affectionately called “The Pit,” with two feet of water, turtles and frogs and over 1,000 goldfish.

Anyway, Jill was now sitting on my bed. I was pretending to work on my trigonometry. All I could think about was how a girl was in my bed, in the middle of the night. Would my parents hear us? Was she wearing a bra? Was I getting a boner? My brain raced. I was wearing pajama pants, which made the elastic tuck nearly impossible.

“Stop doing that,” she said.

“What?” Could she see my boner?

“Your homework,” she continued. “Come sit next to me.”

She grabbed the pencil from my hand and pulled me toward her and onto my bed. She did not waste any time. Her tongue darted in and out of my mouth like a sewing machine. My first kiss was a French one. I followed her lead. I stuck my tongue into her mouth.

“Want me to get the lights?” I asked.

“I’ll get them. I need to use your bathroom,” she said.

She left the room, hitting the lights on the way.



I could not believe what was happening. Moments later she returned. She was naked. I still had my underwear on. She laughed and then took them off. The slightest friction and I was a goner, so I tried to keep her from touching my boner.

I was at a loss for words. "Should I get a rubber?" I didn't have a rubber, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

"I put in a sponge," she said. What the hell is that, I wondered. "So you're fine," she continued.

And then it happened. I think. She put me inside of her and that was it. Game over. A one-pump-chump. I was praying to stay hard, but it was no use.

"Awe, that's sweet," she said.

I was mortified, but it was official. I had just lost my virginity. Jill put her clothes on and that was it.

At the bus stop the next morning, I did not see Jill. She didn't pick me up. She didn't drive by. I just took the bus. I walked into The Pit and headed toward the usual corner where the rest of the geeks hung out. I wasn't sure if I should tell anyone. I mean, were Jill and I dating? Is it uncool to tell people? Would it seem like I was bragging? Should I extol the fruits of life to these guys?

Gil cut me off at the pass. "Did you get laid last night?" he asked.



“What are you talking about?” I said.

“Did you? Because last night we were all visited by someone on the girls’ tennis team. Were you?” The look on my face said it all. “Holy shit,” Gil said.

Within a few hours it was confirmed — the five seniors on the girls’ tennis team took the virginity of the five freshmen in the AV club. My biggest coming-of-age moment was someone else’s senior prank — I was grateful.





CHAPTER NO 2

March 6, 2014

LOVE GONE WRONG

Soon after our first Free Beer & Fiction meeting was Valentine's Day, which inspired our second topic, "Love Gone Wrong."

THE SUMMER OF LOVE LOST pg / **50**
by John Coleman, CEO, Founder

BAZOOKA pg / **64**
by Doug McFadd, Photo Asset Manager

RECEPTION pg / **72**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

LOVE GONE WRONG pg / **87**
by Jamie Holt, Copywriter



THE SUMMER OF LOVE LOST

as told by

JOHN COLEMAN

I've come to appreciate the simple life I now lead; there is little that bothers me. So when the lovely young waitress spilled the remains of my tomato soup down the front of my shirt, we were both surprised by the tears that filled my eyes. I quickly forced a laugh in an effort to make sure she knew I was fine. But the warm, wet spot on my shirt had opened a box I thought I had closed long ago — a memory of something I have never shared with anyone — of something so opposite simple, that even now, after all these years, I can't begin to decipher its complexities, but I still feel its power.

I grew up in a small town outside of Port Arthur, Texas, and came of age in the early '60s. But my '60s were in Texas, conservative Texas, so they were more like the rest of the country's '50s. I was born at the tail end of a big



and loving family, seven of us in all. We were an oil family going back generations, not the big-oil kind, just the middle-class kind. My people labored to take the black gold from the ground, working for the people who craved the boom bust oil madness.

But I didn't really fit in. Football, God and Texas were the holy trinity in our household, and I was a heretic on all three counts. I was a quiet, young intellectual. "Intellectual" — that was a word I would have to explain to my father. He loved me; he just didn't know what planet I came from. He was the tall, dark, handsome kind of guy, a real-life John Wayne, whose actions did all his talking. My father and brothers hunted, fished, broke horses and wrestled. I read books. And really weird books by my family's standard. You know, useless authors like Homer and Dickens. Even my sisters were tougher than I was.

So when I told my parents I wanted to break with family tradition and go to college, to study English no less, they struggled to understand why I needed a degree. How the hell would knowing more about English help with drilling for oil? Plus, they thought I spoke pretty good already. But they loved me, and they knew that I was different from the rest of them, so they would give me their blessing and support — as long as I went to a good Texas school with a good Texas football team. So I headed off to Baylor University, an ole fashioned, God-fearing, football-loving southern school.



Once there, I realized I was surprisingly like my family in one way. My inherited work ethic drove me to the top of my class, which meant I didn't find much time for fun. I never turned on, never tuned in and certainly never dropped out. But I did become somewhat of a rising star in the glamorous world of poetry critique, which allowed me to be accepted into a master's program at Columbia University and to avoid the Vietnam conflict for a few more years.

So, I found myself in the summer of 1970 with three months of freedom, a fact I was rubbing in the face of my favorite cousin, Ashley, at our Memorial Day family reunion. Ashley was what you might call the black sheep of our family, but there was absolutely nothing dark about her. She was gorgeous, capable and a total free spirit. The year before she had moved out to San Francisco, because it was ground zero for the Summer of Love, and she wanted to dive into the middle of it all. She had picked up a job as barmaid, gopher and all-around pixie at The Fillmore Auditorium. Ashley begged me to come out and visit her over the summer, promising that a little west coast grooviness would help me from being such a square.

Four weeks later I found myself sitting in the back stacks at the City of Lights bookstore. I had toured San Francisco the last few days with Ashley and enjoyed the sights, but I was happiest reading my Columbian predecessors Ginsberg, Burroughs and Kerouac in this hallowed place. I hadn't been a fan of the Beat poets at



Baylor, but there was something about my west coast trip that was loosening me up a bit; even the LSD-laced prose found within the pages of *Howl* didn't seem so strange.

I hung out at the bookstore until closing and then went over to the Fillmore to connect with Ashley, who let me in a backstage door. I was just in time to see the final few songs of the reconstituted Jefferson Starship. Taking The Jefferson Airplane into space hardly helped their music much in my opinion. But the scene in the concert hall was special; that much I could tell. There was a reverence in the place you could see in everyone's bloodshot eyes. I stumbled into the back hall on the mezzanine level, where the walls were covered with playbills from the last 10 years. Though I wasn't into the '60s psychedelic music scene, I knew most of the names. This place seemed like some kind of chapel for the hippie generation. After the show I met Ashley at the bar there, where she was counting tips.

It had been a good night for her, and she handed me a drink with a smile. It was hard for her to understand why I wanted to spend the night at a bookstore instead of seeing the electric Grace Slick on stage. Out of the blue, she asked me if I was gay. Which bloody well shocked me! "No," I said, "Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem so repressed that you must be hiding something," she said. "There are tons of gay men in San Francisco and you should be more open about it. You are just so uptight. Loosen up." Then she flashed me and



laughed uncontrollably when I turned beet red.

Ashley had to work early the next day because the Full Tilt Boogie Band was going to be taking over the Fillmore for the week, practicing for a special concert the following Saturday that was going to be recorded there. I did know the band because their lead singer was from Port Arthur, Texas. The wild, even dangerous, Janis Joplin. She was a slow-motion train wreck from all I had heard. But she had made our hometown somewhat famous, even though she scared the hell out of most of its citizens.

The next day, I wandered through Golden Gate Park reading, writing and soaking up the warm sun. I decided to get Ashley a take-out dinner that night because she was looking at a long evening. The band hadn't shown up yet. Well, as I found out when I got there, only the singer was MIA. Ashley was running around trying to help the band set up, and had to keep everyone happy and well watered. Finally, Miss Joplin surfaced, but she was still at her apartment. Ashley pleaded with me to go pick her up. I was less than pleased, not knowing what to expect from such a famously unpredictable loose cannon. But I agreed just because Ashley seemed so uncharacteristically frazzled.

As I approached 122 Lyon Street, I saw her standing there, swaying side to side in the wind, like a decorated Christmas tree tossed to the curb. I slowed down and she hopped in, not even asking if I was her ride. She opened her huge tapestry bag and said, "Can I get a light?" So I



reached up and flicked on my overhead light. She slowly looked up at me in the dimness and peered out over her trademark round blue glasses. Then I noticed the marijuana cigarette in her hand. I closed my eyes, feeling like a four-star hayseed. She shook her head, pushed in my car lighter, stared at me blankly until the lighter popped, lit her joint — with a long, hard drag — and turned to lean her head against the window.

We went along in silence, but I was completely uncomfortable with her at my side. She smelled like earth. She breathed like a lioness. And I swear, I could feel her energy as though my side was over a barbeque grill. While at a stoplight she raised her head from the glass, turned to me and said, “Do I know you?”

“No, Miss,” I said. “No, Miss,” I thought to myself?!

She rolled her eyes and said, “Wow, man.” I rolled my eyes too, embarrassed at what I had said and by the fact that I actually seemed to care what this crazy woman thought. She closed her eyes and tilted her head against the window again, but not before saying, “You talk just like my family — yikes.” We were quiet for the rest of the drive, and when we arrived, she slipped out of the car without even a thank-you.

It rained all the next day, and the famous bay fog smothered the whole city. I stayed cooped up at Ashley’s, reading. But by seven that night I was a little stir crazy, so I took some dinner over to Ashley again and hung out at



the bar with her. She told me of the day's pandemonium. The rehearsals were already way behind, and it was only Monday. And half the band was too high to even play any of their new songs. It looked like she would be camping out at the Fillmore all week because the troupe was basically a nursery school class, and she was turning into their class teacher — "A young sexy one," she added quickly.

As we sat there, Janis strode up to the bar and asked for a bottle of Jack Daniel's. She plunked down next to me and said, "Hey, Texas, I hear you're gay. Is that why you ran away from our *great* Lone Star State?" I gave my cousin a dirty glare and opened my mouth to explain that though I had nothing against gay people, I was indeed straight. But Janis was off on a new tangent, screaming that the chandeliers in the main hall should be draped with flower chains and magic mushrooms. She grabbed the bottle, slapped me on the ass and said, "Glad you're not keeping that thing just for the boys." And off she went.

I have to admit, I found her disgusting, the way sixth-grade boys find girls disgusting. Yes, I thought her one notch above a polecat in heat, but I couldn't stop thinking about her. So the next day I hung out again at the venue around dinner, realizing that's when the band's day began. I watched Janis saunter and glide from person to person, laughing and jesting with everyone, but never giving anyone her full attention. She was about as genuine as a politician kissing babies. With one dramatic exception — during those moments she was on stage



singing. She'd hold the mic against her lips, eyes closed, wrenching the words from the bottom of her gut and spewing them from her lips, as though her life depended on her making someone care. I can't say I ever listened to her music seriously before that week, but being in the room watching her, hearing her, I knew she was as real a poet as Elizabeth Browning. One of the tortured kind, those who have no other choice in life but to express themselves to the very edge of their being. As soon as the music stopped, she immediately became the gadfly hippie again, flitting from flower to flower.

It wasn't until Wednesday afternoon that I spoke with her next. I was sitting on the back stairs near the loading dock, soaking in the first sun since the weekend. She came out and sat down beside me and threw her arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Texas, can I have a light?" she said with a laugh. I laughed too, and asked her how she thought the west coast sun compared with the Texas sun. She looked at me in surprise and went into a serious response of how the warmth of the sun here made her feel safe. I asked her why she didn't feel safe otherwise. And she talked about her family, the war, the money, the road, on and on. It was as though she had never been asked a sincere question before. But when I opened my mouth to speak again, the drummer hollered out to her, "Get your ass back in here," and as though she had been caught half naked, she swooped up her shawl and flew away.

Ashley called me the next day and asked that I "please"



come down to her work. The band had invited half the city to the Fillmore and stayed up all night partying. The place was totally trashed. The festivities didn't get over until the cops came by around breakfast time. By all accounts, Janis had put on a show and a half, mesmerizing the throng and flirting with the "pigs" when they arrived. All was forgiven and people were sent home, but the cleanup effort needed reinforcements, so I was shoving trash and bottles into a big bag outside the green room when I heard someone crying softly inside. I peeked in and saw Janis rolled up on the couch, hugging her knees. Even from across the room I could see her face was wet with tears. I tried to think of what I could say, but in the end, I helplessly slipped back into the darkness and got lost in the wasteland.

Friday noon was the last official rehearsal before the live gig Saturday night. Janis only had to make a brief appearance because they wanted her to save her tired, strained voice for the recording. With an afternoon free, she was antsy. I had taken to spending all day just hanging out at the hall. Janis remembered I had a car and ambushed me with another demand to hit the road with her later that afternoon. Janis was wired and needed to run free for a bit.

Ashley told me just to keep her distracted and out of trouble. How hard could that be when all she wanted to do was go to Sausalito for fish tacos? Like my old lab, she held her head out the window as we drove over the Golden Gate Bridge. She had an outrageous comment for



everything we passed along the drive, but that didn't keep her distracted from finding fault with everything about me ... my fancy words ... my effort to hide my Texas drawl ... my hesitation to have a beer. Yet she was giving me more attention than she had given anyone all week, even if it was mostly at my own expense. When lunch was done she ordered me to drive to her pad.

Her place was a cross between a yard sale and an opium den: spacious, high ceilings; huge windows facing southwest. It was much like her, kind of a wreck but with an intriguing aesthetic. She lit up a joint and went over to the pile of LPs on the floor. "Time to give you a real music education," she bellowed in her throaty voice. She played me Lead Belly, Odetta and Billie Holiday — Bessie Smith, Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin. Even though she was lost in the music, she didn't take her eyes off mine, daring me not to listen to every single note.

When she put Tina Turner on the turntable, the look in her eyes turned blazing. She grabbed a half empty bottle of wine in one hand and me in the other. I had no confidence I could dance one second, let alone the 25-minute fit we both went into. When the thud, thud, thud of the needle hit the end of the last song, we were both panting. And she was looking at me like a hunter fixated on its prey.

She dragged me across the room to her bed. My heart was pounding. She kissed me so intensely that I dropped my beer. In a second I was pushed back onto her blankets,



she on her knees, straddling my crotch, like an Indian warrior. I had read about how the Native Americans honored their kill. They respected the bison and elk because they believed they shared the same spirit, but when it came time to feast, the animals were devoured savagely. That was the kind of wild look Janis had, staring down at me.

When we were spent, she clung to my side and lay her head quietly on my chest. A bamboo fan turned slowly above us. I started to whisper a passage from a Shakespearean sonnet that had pushed its way into my scrambled mind:

*Love is not love
Which alters when it alterations finds
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken.*

Beautiful words, words from my distant academic world, yet they seemed so bizarre in this foreign place. I had always been the critic of poets, not the poet himself. But in the last weeks I had been compelled to write. Words too personal, so deep, that I had never spoken one aloud. Until then. And I started to let my words free. As one stanza broke loose, the others began to pour from me. Words of fear and envy, joy and lust, sorrow and redemption. I couldn't stop them. Then on my chest I sensed a warm, wet feeling. It reminded me of something long ago. Bed-wetting. Now, if you weren't a bed-wetter,



I think this would sound very odd. You might think it a disgusting, odorous experience; one of being tucked in your own soaking sheets. But in fact, my thoughts were of being in a warm, cozy, safe place. And I started to laugh aloud at my strange memory.

Suddenly, Janis jerked her head from its resting place and looked at me with such profound innocence that I immediately became still. Tears streamed down her face. “Don’t laugh at me. Don’t laugh at me,” she cried. And then, and then I don’t really remember what happened next.

She reached across my chest and grabbed a small embroidered purse, the kind you’d pick up in a Mexican gift shop, and tossed it on the bed. She seemed to have startled herself and was slipping back into “Janis the Show.” What tumbled onto the covers were the tools of a junkie. She said, “Don’t freak out. I’ll just give you a little.” This was not my scene and I felt my body tense. She wrapped her arm, prepped the needle and said to me, “Here ... set me free.” I froze, so she jabbed the syringe into her arm herself.

“Come on, Texas, at least shove the plunger in. You seemed to like that a minute ago.”

In a moment of panic, I did as I was told, and pushed the syringe down. Her face looked like a person whose parachute had been opened inside a plane, and I saw



her being sucked away from me. As she drifted off, I saw what I hoped was a peaceful smile on her lips.

Just then, the door to her apartment busted open, and the band and groupies took over the place like a swarm of hornets. Before I knew it, everyone was dancing, screaming, fucking, drinking and laughing. The chaos gave me such anxiety I felt I couldn't breathe. I had to escape. So I left without saying a word and wandered through the night streets back to Ashley's.

In the morning, Ashley woke me up saying she was starving and wanted to take me to a diner where I could tell her everything about the babysitting job she gave me the day before. We found a local place that catered to Deadheads and journalists, which seemed normal for San Francisco, and grabbed a booth. I was still processing the events of the night before and stalling to give details until I could figure things out a bit. But Ashley could sense something was up because I was so circumspect, even by my standards. As I started doling out amusing fragments from the day's adventure, I heard some people in the booth behind me mention Janis Joplin's name. I paused, but then plowed ahead, until I heard someone say, "Shit man, what a waste." Then I slowly turned around to the booth behind me and asked the lean, strung-out gentleman with the scraggly brown beard what he had just said about Janis. His blank face looked right through me and said, "She's dead."



It's funny how a little spilled tomato soup can unlock a 44-year-old memory, a secret really; that you swore to yourself you would never dig up again. But as I sat there crying and laughing, and trying to console my young waitress for her mishap, I could remember that moment I learned of Janis's death as though my young waitress had just told me the news. You see, the secret wasn't that I pushed the poison into her arm, 'cause I told the police every detail about our time together. They didn't even write down a single word I said though, for they knew, by their standards, she was a crazy time bomb. No need to bring down a nice, Ivy League, goodie two shoes with her. No, the real secret I had buried was ours. I remember exactly what Janis said to me when she lifted her tear-filled eyes from my wet chest and I saw her pure and un-tortured face for the first time. She said, "I love you." And that's what terrified me most about her. Against our long efforts to hide, she was forcing us both, for the first time in our lives, to deal with love. And then it all went so horribly wrong.



BAZOOKA

as told by

DOUG McFADD

I know I'm not happy, but I know that I can't let on to myself that I know. That would tip my hand and might alter the fragile yet genuinely effective façade of my success and good spirits. This I believe. This is not to say I don't feel happy sometimes, or that I expect it to last — these things are cyclical. What it will take is a little legwork getting some assignments and a bit of luck in love. Or, just some sex at least would be a good start.

After three weeks back in the States I still have not adjusted to things. It's five a.m. and I'm just getting to bed, not from some late night party, but from a more pure endeavor — to finish a book.

A few hours later here in the café at 8:45 I feel I'm in a slow rolling fog, with my eyes fix focused on things outside, but not quite in focus, and my mind slow and I



look at my coffee. It's not going down as it should, while my warm muffin goes cold sitting on its plate just as it did when I received it from the clerk whose strawberry-colored dreadlocks belied his Patsy Cline musical taste. This day I would not get any assignments; this morning it felt like I would likely not have income again.

The days had been like this for some time now, but that did not really contribute to my sadness. Today it only made the rich South American coffee bitter to my empty stomach and did not persuade me to touch my muffin. Here at Toscanini's, the wavy rugged brick walls offered no homage to the overpriced art hung about. It was not *such* bad art as I had first thought, a collaged collection of textures and papers; light, crisp encaustic works, yet lacking any personality. Whatever — the brick looked good anyway.

I was starting to feel like I might make some good pictures again since coming back from Norway. I was feeling like I would get some work, and soon. I knew this experientially. That pressing on heedless of past failures, one gets what one needs. The coffee wasn't as bitter now either.

The counter line was getting longer, and it was warmer now that the sun broke the haze and heated the place through the plate-glass windows looking out on Central Square. The muffin, still lonely for a bite, sat untouched. It was then, for a moment that I looked up at the long line and I happened to see a girl there toward the end whom



I'd seen before. She was tall and had an attractiveness of personality that made it almost unnecessary to think overly of her physical beauty, and her tooled leather belt endeared her to me.

I didn't notice anyone else in line then, and standing up, I looked into her eyes and asked, "Do you work at the architecture firm down the street?"

"No, I work upstairs," she said, not annoyed with me.

"What do you do?" she shot back.

"I'm an unemployed photographer," I said. And instantly regretted my adjective.

"Oh," she said. This with her eyebrow raised. "We use a lot of photographers. Do you like to travel? What kind of photography do you do?"

I was hooked. It was the kind of thing I needed. I had to get out of my slump. She seemed genuine about it, and if it led nowhere it was still a wonderful feeling — no one could knock that.

"Mostly photojournalism and some commercial work. I like to travel. I work down in DC sometimes and I'm just back from an assignment in Europe." It came off well enough considering.

She said she worked at a design firm producing children's



educational programs and exhibits. These needed to be photographed.

“Do you have a card?” she asked.

“I have a website. It’s on my promo card, here.”

We exchanged numbers and pleasantries. She was a nice girl and I was a little sorry to see her go ... that’s 8:45 in the working world. But, my friend Ken would be back in a few minutes and my muffin looked appetizing again.

I had yet to tell him about Norway, or the Danish Ferry and *The Carlo Incident*.



The Carlo Incident

I was traveling with my cousin after shooting a story in Norway, and we were on a ferry from Oslo to Copenhagen. At a lounge on the ship, Brian, myself and some member of the party to our right who was passed out more often than not sat at one table by a window.

The seating arrangements changed frequently in this lounge, as a group would get up for refreshment and another group would swoop in and occupy their old seats.

At some point the passed-out guy got up and left as a single member of another party came back to find his



seat behind us taken by some others. So, because he looked like he needed a seat, we offered him our extra, or maybe he just plopped down. Then he reached over to his old table and picked up his tobacco and rolling papers. Cordially, he introduced himself as Carlo Candini, and we likewise introduced ourselves to him.

While most in the lounge wore sport coats and cocktail dresses, Carlo had a grunge thing going with his plaid shirt and wire-rimmed glasses under a curly brown mop of hair. He was a funny guy, Carlo from Bologna. He told us that he was naturally at odds with the French as wine growers ... and that almost seemed just a spat compared to his view of the Florence populace, where soccer fans of Bologna clashed in knife fights and Molotov cocktail parties. But he told us he was a gentle artist type and that Carlo only killed when it came to French wine or rival soccer fans.

By then Brian and I were slightly skeptical of this grunge artist's bravado. At which point he brought to our attention the mayhem that come to find out was part of the Great Nordic Biker Wars between 1992 and 1997. Carlo claimed that rival biker gangs Hells Angels and Devil's Disciples battled in the streets with bazooka anti-tank rockets and automatic weapons. It turned out that the bazooka incidents were between the Angels and Banditos gangs in nearby Sweden and much of it was entirely true; however, this is what he said:

In a Copenhagen square a group of Hells Angels met



some Devil's Disciples. It was a real mess, as it seemed one of the Angels had a bazooka strapped onto his chopper.

"You know bazooka?" asks Carlo in his rising Italian accent.

"I know bazooka." That was my reply as Brian started to lose it over this preposterous story.

Carlo went on, "... *many* people die."

I think Brian did lose it, spewing some Jack 'n' Coke, and started laughing, but he was off to the left and behind Carlo a little. Fortunately, Carlo was looking right at me, as well as trying to roll the same cigarette he had started a while back, so he didn't notice.

"Not another bazooka fight," I replied, then added, "in Copenhagen," for good measure. My composure had seemingly strengthened by sitting there with a more or less blank look on my face for the past few hours.

He was a little surprised I think that he got no great reaction from me. Later he did finish rolling his cigarette; it kept going out when he was talking, however, especially when he talked with his hands. I might add that this was a real pinner of a smoke and hardly seemed worth the effort to relight, but he did again and again.

After a few more of his stories a little later he left — his



material kept us in stitches for weeks though.

When Ken got back to Toscanini's we talked about writers and how no one, *or* hardly anyone writes good novels these days. I left Carlo for another time with him.

Ken had taken to reading nonfiction and I was still hooked on a few post-modern champions. Then he mentioned *The Tin Drum*, and other works I should know but didn't. We talked about life as a freelancer and his affection for a position he got at NPR. Also, he talked of his own half dozen or so novels, of their seeming obscurity and unappreciation. Obviously we were not good friends, but coffee house companions. I was always glad to see him.

At last he gave a little thought to a journalism piece I was thinking about producing in Beirut. The story would cover the growing Gen X youth culture and rehabilitation of the once serene, cosmopolitan capital of Lebanon. Ken sounded sorry that I had seen a newspaper friend of mine the day before who I thought might go with me to write the text. And she did.

Ken said he could pass on some Middle East contacts that would be helpful and wondered what other stories might come of it.

"I figure they will develop when I get there." And that's what usually happens.



My newspaper friend had an interesting albeit short history as a PI and thought her old agency would have contacts there as well.

“In case we get into trouble,” she said.

It sounded like she was in. So that day maybe got better in the end.



RECEPTION

as told by

JESSICA FIDALGO

Leta sighed inwardly as she watched Ralph attack his lobster with gusto across the table from her. She had no idea what time it was, but it felt as though at least a year had passed since this date had first begun. The thought made her feel guilty, just as almost every other thought she'd had tonight, since Ralph had first arrived at her house to pick her up.

Ralph delivered packages for Airborne Express, and the software company where Leta worked as a receptionist was one of the late afternoon stops on his regular route. Leta had first met him when she started the job about six months ago, but she had only really become aware of him in the last few weeks. More often than not the office had no packages for pickup, so each day when Ralph poked his head through the front door and quipped, "Got any presents for me today?" Leta would wave him off breezily



and keep about her work without giving it much thought. “Not today, but try again tomorrow; maybe you’ll get lucky,” she might say, or, if there did happen to be something going out, “You know what? I’m pretty sure this one’s full of unmarked bills! You wanna split it?” There were always lots of people coming and going past her desk, and Leta dealt with everyone with the same smile and the same friendly manner, which was what made her a good fit as the receptionist. Until recently it had escaped her attention entirely that what was simply routine friendliness to everyone else was to Ralph an irresistible siren call to love.

She had observed that he seemed to linger a little longer than necessary after she gave him the signatures on his waybills, but this didn’t raise any alarm bells for her. She had rightly assumed that he didn’t get a lot of attention from women, and if it gave him a thrill to stand around the desk polishing his Airborne Express jokes, that was all right with her. Leta knew nothing at all about Ralph, but she was perceptive, and Ralph was the type of guy about whom you could tell a lot just by looking at him. Lived at home with his parents? Played a lot of Dungeons and Dragons as a teenager? Virgin at the ripe old age of 30? Of course there was nothing inherently wrong with any of those things; they just weren’t the attributes of the man Leta expected to see herself with. So it wasn’t so much that she had dismissed Ralph as that he had never quite made it onto her radar.

Until the day not long ago that he had come right up



to the desk and asked her for a date. Leta had been sitting at her desk using a label maker, and the tape had been sticking to everything in sight except the folders themselves. She was distractedly prying the corner of “Reconciled — 2008/2009” from her thumbnail when Ralph suddenly appeared in her periphery.

“Nothing today, thanks,” she started to say, but all of a sudden he was blurting the words, so quickly and furiously that she had had to ask him to repeat himself, though she had a sinking feeling that she had understood the sense of what he was asking the first time.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “What?”

“I said, would you be interested in going on a date with me, Saturday? Next Saturday,” Ralph had practically spat. He cleared his throat and continued, a bit more loudly. “Of course you may have plans. It doesn’t have to be Saturday; it could be anytime, it could be whenever you were free. Any time you would like.” Having delivered himself of this, he stood there looking at her expectantly, and Leta had a fleeting vision of Ralph rehearsing these words, perhaps sitting in traffic in his delivery truck, or while applying his aftershave in the bathroom mirror, or on the elevator on the way up to her office floor. The preparation, the nervousness, the angst! All of his perspiring humanity on full display. Leta knew instinctively, instantly, that it had taken all the courage that Ralph could possibly muster to ask for this; all the bravado that could be scraped up was concentrated in



this grand hopeful gesture. And in that same instant she knew there really was no way she could possibly say no.

Leta had masked her surprise as quickly as possible. “OK, sure,” she’d said, her voice pitched a bit more brightly than normal. “What did you have in mind?”

Before he had a chance to respond, the phone started ringing and Leta reflexively picked up the receiver to answer (“Northstone Data Systems, how can I help you?”). Ralph was suddenly backing toward the door, giving a thumbs up and mouthing, “That sounds great!” perhaps thinking that he would beat a hasty retreat before Leta thought better of the whole idea and changed her mind. “I’ll put you through,” Leta told the person on the other end of the line, but she was so uncharacteristically flummoxed that she hung up on them instead.

She sat stunned for several minutes, trying to make sense of this strange little scene. Leta was not entirely sure that she really intended to go through with having a date with Ralph, but the more she thought about the matter she couldn’t see a graceful way to withdraw. If she broke the date it would be incredibly awkward to have to see him every day when he came to take the packages, which could hardly be avoided. But if she kept the date she would face the inevitable consequence of having him ask her out again and again. For she was sure that no matter what happened, no matter how doomed the fate of this incurable soon-to-be evening, Ralph would want to go out with her again. Not that Leta had such staunch



confidence when it came to her power over men. If anything, she was fairly convinced that she held no power at all when it came to men. Guys she liked very much and hoped to see again inevitably failed to call, or if they did stick around for any length of time, they eventually revealed themselves as completely unsuitable partners. This could happen any number of ways; there was a laundry list of reasons to disqualify a person — they'd be too obsessed with sports, or never read books. Maybe they dismissed ethnic foods out of hand without ever even trying them, or they tipped badly, or didn't tip at all. Perhaps they used the term "jugs."

In due course she decided to consult her officemate Meg on the situation. Meg was a little older than Leta, no more than four or five years, but she was married and she thoroughly enjoyed revisiting the single life vicariously through Leta. The two women often got takeout sandwiches or salads for their lunches and ate together in the conference room at the office, which was rarely used for conferences, and Leta would give Meg errant bits of gossip on her and her single friends. The fact that Meg didn't actually know any of the people involved in no way diminished her relish for these particularities, and for her part Leta looked up to Meg and valued her opinion on a wide range of social dilemmas.

Meg could scarcely credit the story the next day over lunch, even as Leta was spilling every last detail of the encounter with Ralph. "Oh my GOD," she said, forking up a cherry tomato covered in blue cheese. "I can't



BELIEVE it. I wish I had been there. You gotta give him credit; that really took balls.” She chuckled to herself, taking a swig of her Diet Coke. “What did you SAY?”

“I said I’d go,” Leta admitted forlornly. “I agreed to go out with him, I think. I’m pretty sure I did.”

Meg frowned through her straw. “Seriously!? Wait — you did? You said, ‘Yes I will go out with you?’”

Leta thought carefully. “Yes,” she affirmed. “I didn’t use those words exactly, but that was the general sense of the response.”

Meg rummaged through the remainder of her salad, searching out another cherry tomato. “Am I thinking of the right guy? He’s the FedEx guy?”

“The Airborne Express guy,” Leta said patiently. “You’ve seen him. You know. Ralph.”

“I can’t be thinking of the right guy. What’s he look like?”

Leta sighed and began fidgeting with a stray ketchup packet. “You’re thinking of the right guy.”

“Skinny? Kind of on the short side?”

“That’s him.”

“Wire-rimmed glasses? Kind of bowlegged? Wears an



Airborne Express uniform?” At this the two women dissolved into hopeless laughter. “Shut up,” Leta protested, burying her face into her own lap. “You have to help me!”

Meg wiped her mouth with a napkin and put down her plastic fork, suddenly all business. “OK seriously — seriously! This is what you need to know. Leta! Are you listening? This is important.”

“I’m listening,” Leta said, in a muffled voice from beneath her palms.

“This is advice that will serve you not only in this situation but throughout your dating years,” Meg continued sagely. “Are you ready? Here it is: Not everyone who wants to go out with you gets to.”

Leta lifted her hands from her face and peered at her friend unhappily. “But I already said yes,” she protested weakly.

Meg shrugged and broke her white chocolate chip macadamia nut cookie in half, offering the larger chunk to Leta. “Well, it’s one date. He’ll probably pull out all the stops. Get him to take you to some crazy good place you never get to go, like — I don’t know — get him to take you to Morton’s for a big fat steak.” Meg’s husband, Don, was a strict vegetarian and she also enjoyed the vicarious exploration of meat- and seafood-related adventures. “It won’t be so bad.”



In the end, Leta calculated that of the many awkward options available to her, keeping the date with Ralph was the least, though she was forced to reevaluate this decision each day for the next week at about four o'clock, when Ralph made his usual stop. The next time Leta saw him following his grand proposition, he seemed even more flustered than usual, almost as though he expected to enter the lobby to find a horde of Northstone Data Systems employees pointing at him and laughing. But having found that nothing substantive had changed, the day after that he seemed even more at ease, and by Friday afternoon he was positively buoyant. "You're going to need a crane to let this guy down easy," warned Meg, who for the last few days had timed her secret afternoon cigarette break to coincide with Ralph's arrival so as to monitor the rapidly unfolding situation. In reality Meg was simply overjoyed to have something to think about at work besides the minutiae of the Northstone Systems software manual she was tasked with editing, and she was privately glad that Leta had disregarded her original advice about breaking the date with Ralph.

By Monday it appeared that something monumental had shifted in Ralph. You could sense it in the way he carried himself. When four o'clock rolled around he practically swaggered up to the desk. "Working hard or hardly working?" he cracked, and Leta had to draw on deep reserves of inner strength to keep from groaning aloud. "Somewhere in between, I guess," she murmured by way of a response.



She watched out of the corner of her eye as Ralph scanned the packages into his hand-held device one by one. There was really nothing so wrong with him, she thought, and as she watched she tried to almost will herself into finding Ralph attractive, concentrating her efforts on the smooth skin of his face and his friendly brown eyes. What was it, she wondered, that caused a spark of attraction between some people but not others? And why was it so hard to fake?

If only there were some sort of pill you could take that would make you feel attracted to someone. This could solve so many problems. You'd be free to just pick a guy who would actually be good to you, a sweet guy, someone who wanted children and liked animals and had a stable but interesting job. What if someone fell in love with you, she mused, and he had a great personality but he had one of those gland problems that made him severely obese, or a colostomy bag? Would you really be so shallow, she asked herself, to reject someone as a potential life partner just because he had a colostomy bag? This stern self-imposed lecture ultimately raised more questions than it answered because Leta really didn't know what a colostomy bag looked like, or how or why it functioned. She had a vague sense that it was something people generally wanted no part of, but at that moment she dismissed the topic as irrelevant to her current situation because she was fairly certain Ralph, at least, did not have one.

Having finished with the freight, Ralph turned his



attention back to her. “I was thinking we would have dinner Saturday night at Feast,” he said excitedly. “I took the liberty of making us a reservation at 7.”

Leta cringed inwardly. Why would he say “took the liberty of”; it was such a corny phrase. It reminded her of “without further ado,” another phrase that she hated. All at once she felt hot around the neck of her sweater, and she pulled at the fabric to try to feel some air against her skin. She felt miserable and irritated and, God, why was it so HOT in there all of a sudden? It was all Ralph’s fault. What on earth would possess him to ask her out, and why, oh why had she said yes? He was going to ruin her weekend, and then he was going to ruin her job, coming in day after day after day after day to retrieve these stupid packages, these meaningless artifacts of capitalism. She hated everything; she hated her boss for refusing to switch permanently to UPS, and she hated Meg for eavesdropping from the mailroom behind her desk. She especially hated Andrew Pinkus, owner and CEO of Northstone Data Systems, who was nothing but a rich fat cat and a trust-fund-loss-fearing closet homosexual. She hated her parents for not encouraging her to apply to better colleges, and she hated herself for making such mediocre grades in high school because of being distracted and obsessed by chasing boys and performing in show choir. If she’d had more ambition and a better education and a view toward the future she wouldn’t even be here; she’d be wooed by successful attractive men with shoulders and footwear made of leather; she wouldn’t be facing the prospect of a night alone (oh God



was it really in two days?) with this *Ralph*.

“I’ve heard that’s a good place,” she said weakly.

“I will pick you up at 6:30 sharp,” he said happily. “Where do you live?”

Leta swallowed. “I’ll write it down,” she said, glancing around her desk for a Post-it note. “Do you know the north side?”

Ralph handed her his pen. “Not really, but I’ve got good maps in the truck; I can find it. I don’t drive that much up there, mainly just from Indiana to here and back again.”

“I didn’t know you lived in Indiana,” Leta said idly, jotting her address down. “I don’t, um, know much about it.”

“The crossroads of America,” Ralph said cheerfully, reclaiming possession of his pen and carefully accepting the yellow slip of paper she held out to him. “You know,” he said seriously, leaning forward onto his elbows against the mantle of her desk, “I’m in a completely different zone from you.”

For a moment Leta felt flooded with relief. He understood! He understood that they were just too different, that she really was kind of out of his league. Maybe he had been feeling uncomfortable with the idea too. Maybe he would be the one to break the date, and



all she would have to do would be to find a way to seem sympathetic and kind in response. “You are?” she said to him now, cocking her head to one side inquisitively. “How so?”

“Time zone!” Ralph said, grinning. “I wake up in the EST and go to work in the CST. Takes me an hour to get to work but I don’t miss it at all. It’s kinda like that movie *Back to the Future* — I skip over that hour to arrive at precisely the right moment in time. Of course then I lose it again on the back end, but hey, you can’t have everything.” He adjusted his black Airborne Express cap as he stood up straight. “I better run. See you tomorrow!”

“See ya,” Leta answered dully, but Ralph didn’t notice. He tucked the packages under his arm and headed off down the hall.

And now here they were at Feast, Leta, with her enormous misgivings and half-hearted makeup, and Ralph, with his enormous lobster. Leta was sure she had read somewhere, numerous places actually, that lobster and spaghetti were the two foods one must always avoid ordering on dates, for obvious reasons. FOR OBVIOUS REASONS! Which of course weren’t obvious to Ralph. Was nothing, nothing whatsoever, obvious to Ralph?

“How’s your veal piccata?” he asked enthusiastically, butter glistening in the corner of his mouth.

“It’s good,” she said, which it was. Don’t encourage him,



she thought, childishly, and then, “A lot of garlic though.”

Ralph made a slight, knowing grimace, in solidarity against garlic, but kept poking and scraping at the disembodied claw of the lobster with his instrument, whatever it was called; a poker? A tweezer? Leta didn't know. For thirty-some dollars shouldn't something come to the table ready to be eaten? she thought. Why was it considered such a delicacy to have to work so hard to have dinner?

Leta tossed back the last dredges of her sauvignon blanc and looked around the restaurant. Someone, she decided, had most certainly recommended this place to Ralph for its atmosphere, which was romantic. So far that evening she and Ralph had discussed the merits of Northstone Data Systems as an employer versus those of Airborne Express, the merits of dogs versus cats, and the merits of wine versus beer (Ralph eschewed wine; he sometimes indulged in a beer but had decided after a great deal of trepidation that he oughtn't, this evening, since he had to drive back to Indiana. Across a whole time zone! — a joke which had failed to land with the waiter). Ralph was relaxed and was enjoying himself, which was fine, which was the point. But the dinner was nearly over, keeping in mind of course that Ralph might still find a renewed zeal for excavating what was left of the lobster. Leta did not plan to order dessert or coffee. The wine had gone to her head already; she felt hot again, and a bit sad. What had all of this had even been about, she wondered. Pity? Did she pity Ralph? It wasn't that, not exactly, at least; she felt no



more pity for him than she did for herself. She was lonely too. She too craved the audacity of the grand gesture. She wanted to feel the same thrill she knew Ralph had felt that day, when he finally had said to himself, “Today!” his stomach dropping somewhere beneath the floor of the elevator as it rose to the eighth level where Leta sat, unsuspecting, oblivious that she would soon receive the full bore of his ardor. What did he think would happen, she wondered. What *does* he think will happen? Does he envision driving me home, walking me to my door, kissing me? Has he ever kissed anyone?

She leaned forward across the table onto her elbows, bowing her face slightly to avoid the heat from the candlelit centerpiece. “Ralph,” she said, realizing as she spoke his name aloud that it was the first time she ever had. It sounded foreign and unfamiliar to her, like the first time she ever ordered quesadillas.

“Can I ask you a question,” she said intently, somewhat tipsily, peering over at his face in the candlelight. “Why’d you ask me out?”

Ralph looked at first startled, and then an expression crossed his face that Leta didn’t quite recognize. It almost looked to her as though he were about to vomit. Perhaps he wasn’t used to lobster, she thought idly to herself, and then she looked beyond Ralph’s face to the elegant couple behind them, seated closer to the window. Both were dressed to the nines, not a hair out of place for either of them. Beautiful people, together.



It was so easy to picture them hours from now, tossed in sticky expensive sheets, the smell of the man's aftershave in the woman's tangled hair mingling with the musk of their sleep. Ralph was answering her now, he was saying something in response, he was telling her the truth, but Leta did not hear. She watched as the man poured himself and his companion another glass of wine, watched them lightly clink the glasses together without skipping a beat.

"Yeah," she said, turning her awareness back to Ralph, knowing that it was her turn to speak, nodding her assent to everything. "That's pretty much what I thought."



LOVE GONE WRONG

as told by

JAMIE HOLT

All was divine. Life was fabulous. I was in hook, line and sinker ... lucky in love was I.

We met one evening, introduced by friends who thought we might get along. Well, yes, they certainly seemed to know something about us because the chemistry was immediate. The air seemed electrified. The night was magical and, seemingly, endless.

We left our friends and grabbed a cab to the Carlyle, where we sat for hours and hours talking and laughing; everything was so new and shiny. We peeled away at the layers of our lives, slowly, deliberately taking our time to explore the every which way of each other until we were nearly exhausted from excitement in the newness and the luck of our having met.



That evening stretched into the next day. We never left each other's sight. This was right, so right. Our meeting was always meant to happen. It was our destiny. We would be this way forever. No one before us or after us would feel what we felt at that very moment. We were alone in our lust. Alone in our own world, the one we were creating exclusively for the two of us.

No one could understand what we were feeling. Not a sister, not a best friend ... not even the dog. We were alone. Spinning in our own solar system at our own speed. We were inevitable.

It was that evening over champagne and caviar, that the final layer of the onion was peeled back, exposing the most unexpected of truths.

Married with three children under six.

Tell me your wife doesn't understand you. That the two of you have been unhappy for years. That you sleep at opposite ends of the apartment. That you think maybe at least one of the kids is the UPS guy's. Tell me something to hold on to. Tell me you'll leave her because you can't live without me. Tell me.

"Check please," you asked of the waiter. "Right away, sir," he replied happily. Too happy. Why is he happy? Why are you happy?? My life as I've now imagined it to be has had all the details, of course, mapped out since we first laid eyes on each other — from the three bedroom



2 ½ bath on the upper west side to the color of the marble on the kitchen island. I could see us pushing baby Max to the boat pond and all around the park. My engagement ring would be beyond huge; it would make Kim Kardashian jealous. Our Christmas would be spent at our home in Marbella, and during the summer we'd spend every weekend at our house in East Hampton. Your undying love for me would be almost too much for you to handle, and moments spent away from me felt like a lifetime to you.

It was all planned ... all of it! Poof ... gone ... invisible ... destroyed all because of your selfishness.

How dare you find someone before me when I hadn't before you? How could you betray me this way? Here, all this time, I've been waiting for you, and you have the nerve to have made a life for yourself. Without me, you cad, you horrible man.

I hate you.

It was dark by the time the cab dropped me at my apartment. A humble studio, made livable by the added space of the NY "alcove." I walked around. No actually if truth be told, I just stood in the middle of the room and spun around ... taking it all in.

No second bathroom, no half bath, no third bedroom or second or even a first ... just the fold-out couch from Jennifer House. I peeked into the kitchen and confirmed

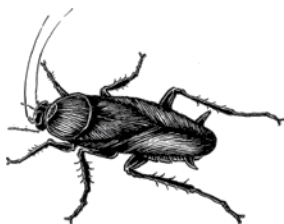


that the dwarfed kitchen appliances were still where they had been 36 hours before.

Life as I knew it, all over again.

Oh well ... it was fun while it lasted.





CHAPTER NO 3

April 3, 2014

METAMORPHOSIS

*Spring was in the air, which meant
a welcome change in the weather in Maine.*

Hence the theme “Metamorphosis.”

THE OBSOLESCENCE OF BILL pg / **92**
by Chris Jacobs, Associate Creative Director

SNOW pg / **103**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

A TUESDAY, RUINED pg / **108**
by Brett Willis, Copywriter



THE OBSOLESCENCE OF BILL

as told by

CHRIS JACOBS

It started out as a small scab on the interior of my right ankle, one of life's minor injuries that you can't for the life of you recall inflicting upon yourself. But there it was, not far from the Illinois-shaped birthmark along my shinbone.

The lady friend marveled at its greenish outline, even rummaging for a magnifying glass to inspect the grotesquery. Where does she get these things? She's strange like that, enviably in love with the world and all its singular imperfections. She collected travel brochures and her cat was lousy with chronic mange. I guess what I'm trying to say is she's an artist. A special sort.

But back to the scab, because that's how it started out. By the next morning, it had grown, expanding down to



my toes and up toward the mid-shin area. It continued its scabby march of conquest throughout the day, and by bedtime nearly the entirety of my right leg was coated in a hard greenish-brown rind. Gross, right?

Well, it gets grosser. The scab spread wildly over the ensuing hours, charmingly accompanied by skull-eviscerating headaches, fearsome tooth spasms and a general bone-deep malaise. I mostly kept to the couch during that time, feverishly seeking oblivion within a steady LED bath of shitty daytime television and baffling early-early-morning programming. You always hear about the new “Golden Age of Television,” but I guess I slept through it. Such is the breaks.

Thinking back, it must’ve been that Saturday when someone first noticed. As usual, that “someone” was Henry, a friend of mine, a real perceptive bastard. Henry and the lady friend came knocking at my door that morning, in advance of our monthly visit to the Tri-County Swap Meet.

Shambling into the kitchen, Henry turned to me, all eyeballs and curiosity.

“You look interesting,” he said.

“Thank you?” I replied.

“Um, I mean, different. You look structurally ... different.”



Then lady friend weighed in.

“He’s not wrong, Bill.” Oh yeah, my name is Bill. Sorry, I should’ve introduced myself earlier.

Fumbling for a response, I offered up some lame thing about meditation and my half-assed macrobiotic diet.

As if remembering something suddenly, Henry reached for his phone, hastily tapping something into its browser. A rush of confirmation seeped into his face.

“Bill.”

I waited. That’s a Henry signature right there — one word, stated conclusively, then held for a few beats to let the moment or whatever sit in the air. Never quite figured that one out. Anyway.

“You’re an Allosaurus, Bill,” he continued. “Look.”

We huddled around the phone, looking at a diagram of *Allosaurus fragilis*, a late Jurassic member of the Tyrannosaurus family.

“I wouldn’t say completely Allosaurus,” lady friend added. “You’re like a freakish crossbreed between modern man and ancient carnosaur.”

Both Henry and I looked at lady friend for a long, uncomfortable second.



“Sorry,” she said, sheepish to the core. “But I’m not wrong.”

And so she wasn’t. Standing before a mirror for the first time since my couch-bound convalescence, it was all on display — abnormally large skull; small three-fingered arms; a thick, muscly tail; rows of perilously sharp teeth. But it wasn’t the Allosaurus traits that stood out so much as the remnants of my previous, unaltered self: a splash of dusty brown hair atop my head, untamed eyebrows, thoroughly human eyeballs, and an upright bipedal posture copped straight from the *Homo sapiens* playbook.

Henry left not long after his diagnosis (we decided against the Tri-County Swap Meet), leaving me and the lady friend to attend to the first of my self-realizing crises.

“Maybe it won’t be a big thing,” the lady friend offered, chewing distastefully on the words as if even she couldn’t believe this was what she was saying.

I tried to chuckle and wound up mauling the inside of my mouth with the daggers that had grown where once my imperfect-but-still-totally-acceptable teeth had been.

“Lady friend,” I said. “I’m on the wrong side of 35, and apparently I’m some kind of Dinosapien. Look, I have a tail. What if I have a sudden surge of carnosaurian rage and wind up eating a bunch of humans? Jesus. I just



called people ‘humans.’ It’s worse than I thought.”

“Bill,” she stopped me. “Do you feel like eating people now?”

“No,” I admitted. I felt like eating Indian food.

“Do you still like Led Zeppelin and hate raisins?”

“Yeah. Both true.”

She put her hand over my chest, now hardened by the whims of dinosaur physiology. Funny how a freak occurrence had done what 15 years of going to the gym couldn’t.

“Well, then,” she concluded, “maybe the thing to do would be just keep living your life.”

Again, she wasn’t wrong.

Throughout the coming days and weeks and months, it became clear to me that, generally speaking, people tend not to see the things they don’t want to see, even when those things are absolutely, undeniably visible. That is to say, mostly, the lady friend was dead-on: it wasn’t such a big thing.

Except sometimes it was, of course. A parking lot



attendant down in the Financial District had a minor cardiac event upon seeing me, despite my efforts to calm him; when catching a movie on a gloomy Sunday, I would have to stand at the back of the theater given my new dimensions; air travel was pretty much out of the question; small children would cause a scene from time to time, but mostly out of excitement it seemed; animals uniformly hated me. That last one was particularly tough.

But I kept living. This may seem like a total no-brainer, but I switched over to the Paleo Diet and found myself feeling healthier than usual. I was re-inserted into the flow of traffic after parting with \$1,956 to make the necessary modifications to my Ford Focus. A helpful woman over at BedMart Plus helped me finance a new custom-built mattress, one of those “Sleep Number” deals.

And I would really like to applaud my employer, Thompson Schuyler Gedamin. Prior to all these developments, I had a somewhat promising advertising career in a support role at TSG; a few years back I helped the guys who helped the guys who created that instant-rice ad where the baby hedgehog steals the policeman’s hat. Stuff like that. Inconsequential perhaps, but the inconsequence was *mine*, you know?

Upon return from my euphemistically titled “Personal Leave,” everyone at TSG really went out of their way to make me feel as comfortable as possible. Within the week, an ergonomic workstation was installed in my office, so the whole shortened-forelimbs thing wasn’t such an



obstacle anymore. I was even added to the company's Anti-Discrimination and Harassment Policy; a little strange, but appreciated.

The lady friend left me shortly after “The Change,” as we politely referred to it. Look, I get it, I really do. People have needs, and it's a challenge for many of those needs to be met by someone who is roughly 70% *Allosaurus fragilis*. Before you go judging her, try putting yourself in her often-mismatched Keds. What would you do?

The non-disclosure agreement she had me sign was a little more puzzling. By now, you've noticed how I tip-toe around the issue of her actual name; well, that's not a mistake, or even a stylistic choice on my part — it's mandated by law. But even this I can understand — in these oversaturated times, self-aware individuals need to be ever-vigilant with their public personas. Perhaps she knew I would be retelling this story many, many times. It's one of those kinds of stories. I heard she's dating a rock-climbing instructor from Belize. I didn't know that people were ever actually *from* Belize, but anyway. Life continues apace.

Only in those hushed moments of reflection do I wish for the company of a significant other, someone to share the tragedies, victories and peculiarities of How I Live Now.



Eventually, I started in with a therapist, as this seemed like the kind of situation where you go to therapy.

Sitting in Dr. Radley's dusty uptown office, I tapped gently on a nearby windowsill. This was usually how things started.

"Bill, I want you to envision your best self," he began. "What do you see?"

I closed my eyes and thought about the 1992 Minnesota Twins. I have no idea why. My mind is still like that, no change there.

"Bill?" the doctor echoed after a moment.

I refocused my attention. "Well, I, uh, probably don't see an Allosaurus."

Dr. Radley scribbled something into that infernal notepad of his, keeper of untouchable doctorly insight and soft scientific judgment. After a minute, he looked up from his notes and spoke with an unnerving enunciation.

"I hear that you feel you are an Allosaurus. Why do you think that is?"

I started talking about the scab, the sick days, the shortened forelimbs, etcetera.



“Right,” the doctor interrupted. “But *why* do you think that is?”

“No idea,” I replied, the first pangs of annoyance growing in my gut. “Maybe I should consult a paleontologist?” I considered that a pretty good line, but it died a limp, dusty death.

“Well,” Radley began, waving off the attempted levity. “Perhaps it signifies something, an unaddressed issue that’s just now manifesting itself. Feelings of obsolescence, fear of aging, something like that.”

I thought about the \$60 check I would be cutting within the half hour and restated the obvious.

“But I’m a *real* Allosaurus-man, not a *figurative* or *symbolic* Allosaurus-man.”

Once again, a confounding pause before the doctor’s terse response.

“Interesting.”

“Yes, I know it’s interesting,” I said. “That’s why I’m here. Because it’s interesting.”

“Yes, well,” he said with a self-satisfied sense of finality as he shut his notebook, “let’s wrap it up here for now. And remember, I’m on vacation next week.”



Every week or so during that first year, I'd be struck with a seismic rattle of possibility. I was an original; a first; a Jurassic-American with small keratin-sheathed horns above my eyes. I could approach this in whatever-the-fuck way I liked. For a short period of time — and with apologies to Kafka — I thought maybe I could construct a tortured philosophical persona from my experiences. Maybe start a blog, who knows. But I soon realized that the office already had one dour intellectual asshole (Jonas in Building Operations), and besides that, it's a personality type that becomes exponentially less appealing the further you get from the age of 18.

I considered a partnership with the local Natural History Museum, providing tours and dishing out nuggets of prehistoric wisdom to the adoring masses. But before you know it, I'd be on some afterschool PBS show, my last living shreds of dignity sacrificed into the ravenous maw of the edutainment beast. Thanks, but no thanks.

The more time goes by, the more I am contented simply to know that possibility exists, and in such abundance. After all, there are few things more human than possibility; maybe this was a subconscious clinging to some vestige of youth and humanity, as Dr. Radley might say.

And what about the actuality? What does it all mean? Why an Allosaurus? Why me? Fuck it, it's a mystery.



And precisely at this moment of acceptance, I noticed a strange quarter-sized tuft of white fur that had appeared on the side of my left kneecap.



SNOW

as told by

JESSICA FIDALGO

The snow will never stop falling, so why should you get off the couch? If the snow never stops falling, eventually you'll all be frozen in place anyway, and that might take awhile, so you might as well be comfortable. Remember Pompeii? After the thaw maybe a new race of men will unearth your fossils and look for clues about what life was like in the year 2007. Wonder what they'll think of TiVo. And Devil Dogs, because those will still be there among all the rubble, still edible. They'll be like, "This was their food? Incredible."

Your kid looks so peaceful in that swing, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth. You'd better hope that fucking thing doesn't break. Probably should have bought a backup. You really should have, seriously. Why don't you call Dave and tell him to buy another swing on his way home from work. He'll love that idea. You know



just what he's gonna say to that. "What's wrong with the other one? Where the hell would we even put it?" Forget that. You should prop his head up better, though. He's all schlumped over. That can't be comfortable. Don't prop him up; that's a stupid idea. If you wake him up you'll kill yourself anyway.

Don't check the clock. It doesn't matter what time it is; you have no place to be and nobody to go anywhere with. 2:12. Four hours till Dave comes home. Four hours and 48 minutes. No, three hours and 48 minutes. You are so bad at math, it's pathetic. You can do it, you can make it, stop looking at the clock. You should *not* call Dave. You've called him twice today already. He gets so irritated with you. He hates the phone. He always sounds like you're trying to get a United Way donation out of him. Ha ha, you should call and say you're from United Way; that would be funny. Disguise your voice with an accent. You can do a good British accent. "Hullo, gov'nor! I'm calling on behalf of United Way!" That's stupid. Why would a British person be calling for United Way? They don't even have that. Maybe they do, how would you know? You wouldn't know.

Snow snow snow snow snow. Now is the winter of your discontent. Stop quoting Hamlet. What does Hamlet have to do with it? Watch TV or something. If you turn on the TV you might wake him up, though. Read a book, God, stop whining for five minutes, give it a break. You have barf on your shirt. Change your shirt, that's disgusting. Eh, what difference does it make? Don't change your shirt,



it's just more laundry. No wonder Dave never wants to fuck you now. Would you want to fuck someone who smelled like vomit? Why don't you read a book? You can't concentrate on anything for more than two seconds. You know why that is. You're jonesing.

Dave will be back in three hours and however many minutes so you can't have a drink; that's out of the question, so you may as well forget it. Anyways you never have just one drink. One drink is not the problem. Not that you have a problem. You can stop anytime you want, right? Right. Where've I heard that before? Just don't start that tonight, trust me. He's gonna know if you've been drinking, he's not an idiot. You didn't marry an idiot. Well, unless you have vodka. Even Dave "the Nose knows" can't smell vodka, no one can smell vodka. If you had some of the vodka that's in the freezer behind the bags of ice, then yeah, he probably wouldn't know. Look at your baby. You don't need a drink, you don't need anything. Look at that precious face. Back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.

Don't you read the paper anymore? You used to know current events. You should expand your mind more; you should take a class. Maybe you could read the paper if it wasn't buried under like 10 feet of snow. You should move to Florida. You should have moved when Dave got out of law school. You could have gone anywhere then, and now you're stuck here. No, don't move to Florida. Forget that. Florida is rednecks and old people. God's waiting room. Forget Florida. It'll be spring soon;



you just have to think positive. Soon it'll be like 90 degrees out and you'll be bitching about the heat. It'll be margarita weather — ole! Mm. Margaritas are so damn awesome. You should have one right now. No, forget that; you don't have margarita mix. If you're gonna have a drink it's pretty much gonna have to be vodka, unless you want to crack open that bottle of rum James and Christine brought you from Barbados. That thing's been sitting there since you got pregnant. Ugh, what are you going to drink rum with, an ice-cold glass of Pedialyte? Anyway, rum smells to high heaven. Dave'll come home and find you reeking like a tube of Banana Boat sunscreen. You can have vodka and that's it. And you should mix it with orange juice because you need the calcium. You bought the kind with added calcium, right?

Why are you so fixated on vodka? You really do have a problem. You should Google some 12-step programs or something. I mean you're obviously going through some stuff or whatever, but this just makes no sense. You have this beautiful healthy kid, you should just focus on that. That's what you wanted, right? That's what allllllll that science was for. You got a shot in your ass cheek every day for like a year just so you could have him. Now the least you could do is appreciate him. What if he wakes up and needs you to do something and you've been sitting here drinking vodka? How will that look? Of course he won't really *know*; he's just a baby. It's not like you'd get so drunk you'd **drop** him for God's sake. You're not that bad. You just need a little something to help you through this winter, that's all. It has been a really long



winter for you, really really long. Dave doesn't get it. Dave is, like, out with all the beautiful people all day long, having lunch in nice restaurants and having gossip and fresh air and Starbucks. You should explain things to him. You should sit him down and tell him you think you're depressed. You're not sure you want this kid. You're not sure you want to stay married. You're not sure you can do any of this, and you're not sure you want to try. You should tell him that. You really should.

You might need a little liquid courage for that conversation though. Go ahead and have that drink, sweetheart. It's not a big deal; it's just one teensy weensy screwdriver. You're not going to mix it that strong. And the baby will be fine; he's in his swing; he's happy. Don't make such a big deal out of it. Don't overdramatize. It's one tiny drink and it's almost dark out, and anyway it's Friday, right? Right?

Right.



A TUESDAY, RUINED

as told by

BRETT WILLIS

Haunch's scruffy eyebrows lowered.

"Gin-water," I repeated.

"You sure you don't want to spend the day outside?"
Haunch said. "Get some air?"

"You heard me," I said.

Lord knows why Haunch still worked at Yindle's; the whole place stank of permanently wet rags. The booths' seats had ripped, been duct-taped back together and then ripped again. No natural light penetrated the place. The cigarette-burned bar looked like the surface of the moon.

My gin-water slid to a rough stop before me. I took it to half-mast in a gulp.



I didn't mind Yindle's. It helped me think. In fact, I'd spent most of my youth there. Yindle's was where my father had taken me for playdates before he'd gone to Vietnam for good. It'd been my haunt ever since.

And I was here now for the same reason as always: to scheme out how to leave this hopeless town behind.

I placed palm to face in preparation for deep thought. Something was happening today. I could feel my brain pulsing; good ideas, real ones, stirred loose like crustaceans from wet clay. I became certain the day had finally arrived, the one where I came up with a way to get the hell out of here.

With a slam, Lynda appeared in the doorway with our goggle-eyed child. Bar patrons recoiled from the blinding, natural light. She approached my seat instinctively.

I swigged the last of my gin-water and raised my hand for another.

"You're taking him," she said, holding our baby like a noisome cheese plate. Haunch placed my gin-water in front of me. I looked from the drink to the child.

"I'm busy," I said, waving at the untouched drink.

Unfortunately, the ideas were already recoiling, shuffling back into hiding. She handed the baby to Haunch, took



my drink, downed it with a straight face and strode for the door.

“Where’s your mothering instinct?” I said.

She raised a long knobby finger and vanished back into the impossible whiteness of mid-day.

“How are you two still a pair?” Haunch asked.

“Patience and compassion, sir.” I said. “Human emotions you lack.”

I handed the child an over salted nut. Haunch took it away.

“Choking hazard, Lyle.”

“It’s a hard world,” I said. I didn’t give Jr. another.

All the other crusty patrons had gone back to their meaningless conversations, except one. A man I recognized immediately.

Gunnar Solipse. My nemesis.

His thick mane was still beating mine in the race to the back of his head. I’d always joked about its departure with Lynda until mine had begun to go too.

His barrel chest seemed to have slipped further into his



stomach than last I'd seen him. I was surprised how much he'd let himself go.

He probably thought the same of me.

What surprised me most was not solely his presence in the bar — for the first time ever, I might add — but the presence of a baby of his very own, strapped to his chest like a wriggling tumor. The baby looked about like I thought it would.

Across the nearly visible stink of Yindle's our eyes met. This bar wasn't big enough for two babies, and both of us knew it.

I performed vigorous semaphore to bring Haunch over. Haunch stalled.

"Sir," I said loudly, pointing a finger at the top of my head. "Sir! I require assistance."

Haunch sighed and approached. I jerked my head toward Gunnar and his child.

"Needs to be put in his place. Guard my kin."

I sat Jr. on the counter and stomped up to Gunnar. Couldn't let him make the first move.

At my approach, Gunnar pointed and whispered something into his baby's ear.



“Whatever he told you is a lie,” I said to Gunnar’s baby.

“Lyle,” said Gunnar. “I didn’t know you came to Yindle’s.”

Gunnar knew damn well Yindle’s was my joint, just like I knew that Lucky Ducky’s had been infested with Gunnar’s ilk since before Langsdale had a name. We both squeezed each other’s fingers, hard.

“I see you have a baby girl,” said Gunnar. He pointed to Jr. with his own baby’s chubby arm.

“Boy. Lyle Jr.,” I said.

“This is Gunnar Jr.” Gunnar extended his child’s hand and I took it. The baby’s grip was weak. Weak child.

“Bring Lyle Jr. over. I’d love to introduce the two.”

I motioned for Haunch to bring Jr. over. He shook his head. I waved my arm again. Haunch began to clean a tumbler. I retrieved Jr. myself.

“So this Gunnar Jr. of yours. He a sportsman?” I asked.

“Gunnar Jr.’s dead ringer at games of finesse.”

I snapped my fingers before the baby’s face. He startled and froze — I snorted — weak bearing too.



“Jr. here,” I patted my child’s enormous head. “He’s an all-arounder.”

“Average player, then?” said Gunnar.

“More of a multidisciplinary savant,” I said. “Reflexes of a bobcat.”

Gunnar tossed a dirty nickel to Jr., which bounced off his camo onesie. Gunnar snorted. I snorted back. Jr. picked up the still-rattling coin and shoved it in his mouth.

I felt the old rivalry crackling like a downed power line; we stared at each other hard. Fist-music was on the horizon. Unfortunately, the air conditioner let out an abrupt asthmatic chug that set both boys to crying; this defused the tension, as we were forced to dandle them vigorously.

“How about a drink over here?” I shouted to Haunch.

“Rum with a splash of water,” said Gunnar.

I frowned. “Gin ... with some water too.”

“Well, now that we’re all here, why not have a little fun,” said Gunnar. “Perhaps some friendly competition.”

I was thinking the same thing, but I needed Gunnar to suggest it. That way, I was well within my rights to choose the first game. That’s how it works.



“I have just the game,” I said.

I drew a chalk circle on the floor; the boys would engage in Sumo.

“You get forced out of the circle by your opponent, you’re through.” Gunnar nodded his child’s head.

We placed the boys across from each other and, at Haunch’s birdcall, turned them loose. Unfortunately, the first round was sunk by their mutual fascination with Jr.’s coin. I took the offending item away and we reset.

The second round featured both boys crawling out of the circle voluntarily.

The third yielded a stalemate in which the babies stared into the distance, drooling. Despite ample time, no clear winner could be declared.

All the while Gunnar and I furiously slugged back drinks. I didn’t know his plan and he didn’t know mine. Truth told I didn’t really have a plan, but I wasn’t going to be out-drunk by Gunnar. Never.

Gunnar devised a new challenge: endurance. The boys would hang from the bar; loser’s grip failed first.

Once released to hang on their own, both boys promptly tumbled into the lost-and-found jackets we’d piled beneath them. Again, no clear victor.



I could feel my equilibrium failing. Gunnar too seemed to be feeling the drink, since, more than once, I noticed him open his eyes wide and shake his head like a shaggy dog. I still felt I had the upper hand.

Gunnar and I couldn't come up with a third test and so fell to argument.

"I am a small business owner!" said Gunnar.

"The only small business you conduct," I rejoined, "happens above a porcelain hole."

"You know, ever since you went to college, you thought you were better than me."

I'll admit that I did. I had knowledge of a larger world than Gunnar and he knew it, he and his little homemade fix-it business. And despite the fact that I'd worked a similar fix-it business in town these past 13 years, I still had him beat in education.

"Indubitably," I said, doffing a make-believe cap. "If you can even understand what that means."

"See, there it is! Bald-faced."

"Better than bald-headed." I patted his dome.

Gunnar swung. The blow glanced off my jaw and sent me reeling. I thought my reflexes were better.



“Is that how you treat your wife?” I asked, fingering the numb ache of my chin. “‘Cause I sure as hell don’t treat Lynda that way.”

It was a unique situation. See, Lynda, my wife of eight years now, was Gunnar’s ex-wife. She’d left him soon after high school for unknown reasons — unknown, at least, to me. She’d once explained that Gunnar was a stubborn man, incapable of seeing what was right in front of him. I got a chuckle out of that.

At his ex-wife’s name Gunnar bowled me into the bar. I slapped at his shining pate, my fighting form a bit loose from the drink. The ensuing fracas saw patrons, stools and drinks upset.

I tried to sweet talk Officer Nate Corly as he zip tied my hands together. Gunnar tried the same. Unfortunately, both Gunnar and I had bullied the sweet donkey-piss out of “Nardly” Nate in high school, and he rammed us into the cruiser with gusto.

Haunch stood in the doorway of Yindle’s, holding both babies. Gunnar Jr. waved bye-bye to his father while my Jr. fiddled with Haunch’s bow tie. I felt a pang of jealousy.

I warned Corly not to put us in the same tank unless he wanted blood on his hands. Gunnar echoed my sentiments with dog barks and howls. The rest of the ride I do not remember.



Next memory I have was Corly cutting our constraints and shoving us into the drunk tank. We both stumbled to separate cots and slept.

I woke in the night to find Gunnar staring out the barred window. It was too high to get your elbows on, so he just stood before it, neck craned, like a child looking up at his pa. I snuck a flask of rum out of a cargo pocket. Sourced as I was, I could still outwit a tenderfoot like Corly. At the sound of the cap unscrewing Gunnar turned.

I took a swig.

He turned back to the window and neither of us said anything for a while.

After a couple more swigs I started feeling magnanimous. Who knows why?

“You want some of this?” I asked, clinking the flask on the metal edge of the cot.

He shook his head and patted his own pocket, removing a bottle of gin. As much of an oaf as he could be, Gunnar was a clever bastard. He turned and looked at me, full on. There was something on his mind.

“You think this is a nice town?” Gunnar asked. “In the grand scheme of all towns.”

“It’s no metropolis,” I said. “But then again.”



“We have Pitterman’s Market. That Church of whatever.”

“The sunken river walk.”

“Great for toad-catching.”

“Man wouldn’t really need to leave here, if he didn’t want.”

“Wouldn’t indeed. Many haven’t.”

In that cell — with only the buzzing of various beetles outside and the disinfectant odor of the painted concrete — it felt like we were really alone, like the last two men in town. Hell, last two men in civilization. Felt good to talk to Gunnar straight.

“You ever been out?” I asked.

“Out of Langsdale?”

“Yeah.” Gunnar sat down across from me, our knees almost touching.

“Just on our band trip to Pillsburg.”

“Right. Right. When Gill Clohessy puked in his tuba.”

We chuckled and stopped short, looking away.

Gunnar uncapped his bottle and took a swig. Mine was nearly empty.



“Sorry about my comments earlier,” I said.

Gunnar waved a hand at me. “Forgiven.” He paused. “Does Lynda ... mention me?”

“I’d say probably as much as Vicky does me.”

Gunnar had actually remarried Victoria, my first wife. Vicky and I had been up to our necks in love leaving high school. Got married the day after graduation. Then one day, well after I was out of community college and had started my business, she broke it off. Turns out she thought she’d married someone who wouldn’t turn out to be a fix-it man. And then she went and remarried another. People! Always wanting something different while acting the same.

Gunnar bobbed his head, as if answering a question for himself. I finished off my rum and let the flask clatter to the floor. Gunnar took a pull off his and offered it to me. I took it and thanked him.

“You know, I thought you’d be out of this town by now,” I said, wiping my mouth.

Gunnar turned.

“Me?”

“Yeah, the fix-it business you run. Tight ship. You could take it to the capital. People need that stuff in the city.”



“Ahhhh,” Gunnar waved a hand. “Can’t deal with the logistics and the bureaucrats. Plus, with the kid ...”

I nodded.

“And how about L.R. Handiwork?” he said. “You take any business classes in college that could’ve helped you make it big?”

“Never got to any business classes. I dropped out.”

I didn’t know why I said it. I’d never told anyone I’d dropped out, not even Vicky. I’d pretended to go to classes for three years. I’d park way out in the lot, hot box my Thunderbird and listen to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on tape. Had to sound like I was learning something to keep up the ruse. I really didn’t see the point in extra schooling. I already knew handiwork; it was one of the only things Pop taught me before his departure. I thought it was all I’d need to get out of Langsdale. Turns out I’d been wrong.

“You know I always envied you for that,” Gunnar said. He seemed to have softened somehow, like cardboard in water. “Your extra schooling. I thought that set us apart. You know I only started my handyman business because of you. Thought you knew something I didn’t.”

It was my turn for disbelief. I wanted to shake Gunnar’s thick hand.



“You think if we partnered up, we could make it out?”
Gunnar asked.

I looked at him. Not a hint of irony.

“I’m sure we could tackle more that way. Get a better price too, less competition.”

Out the window the sky was blooming. Somewhere a lawnmower ripped to a start. Gunnar and I passed his bottle back and forth, talking business.

“That’d be a hell of a thing, us partnering up.”

Gunnar snorted. He looked up at me and then back down to the bottle.

“You know, Vicky once asked me why we were never friends. I said she was crazy. But now ...”

I was about to say something back when a door slammed down the hall. We both hid the booze and listened to the tip tap of government-issued shoes.

Corly appeared at the door and jerked his thumb. Vicky and Lynda were waiting for us at the front desk, chatting conspiratorially. Neither Gunnar nor I made eye contact as we walked out to our cars; we both played the hangdog for our wives.



It took me a full week to recover from that hangover. I thought about ringing Gunnar but didn't end up doing it. Neither did he.

Sure, I've seen him around and in jail a couple of times in the years since. But we never say much. We're still competition, after all. Can't let him get the upper hand.





CHAPTER NO 4

May 1, 2014

SURPRISED

They say March is “in like a lion, out like a lamb?” Well, in Maine, just when you think winter has passed, you get blasted with a late winter storm, which led to this month’s theme, “Surprised.”

FORREST..... pg / **124**
by Leah Rohner, Account Executive

15 TO FREEDOM..... pg / **131**
by Dan Pappas, Art Director, Designer

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ANDY MOOG... pg / 141
by Mike Daitch, Group Creative Director

NEVER THE WHY — A STORY..... pg / 150
by Greg Smith, Chief Creative Officer



FORREST

as told by

LEAH ROHNER

Forrest was born on a remarkably ordinary June day in 1952, in Matamoras, a small town located in the top right corner of Pennsylvania. The town hugged the state border of New York, where the dividing line was drawn by the Delaware River. Forrest's father was a German man by the name of Harold. Harold was tall and stocky and preferred to wear three-piece suits on the weekends. It did not take long for Harold to acquire the nickname "Fancy" from the other men in town. Forrest's mother was also German with the maiden name of Schultz. She was beautiful in her youth, but after having two boys by the age of 27, her looks had started to fade. Forrest's brother, David, was three years older. David was quiet and soft-spoken, as if haunted by something no one else knew about.

As a child, Forrest was blissfully unaware of the things



that happened outside his daily rituals. The sun would rise, the parents would leave for work in New York City and the kids in town would be left to their own amusement until dinnertime. The boys found entertainment by swimming in the river and cruising around town on their bikes with playing cards in the wheel spokes. This filled their hearts and their minds with thoughts of riding something better.

At that time, many of the yards were not divided by fences, which created the perfect setting for games of cowboys and Indians. The boys gleefully played with their BB guns in hand and adrenaline pumping through their veins.

During one standoff, when Forrest was about 8, the game almost came to a permanent end. Forrest, rushing through the yard, maneuvered around his mother's clothesline, trying to take out one of his opponents. He stopped suddenly, bent at the hips, and looking back between his knees, fired his BB gun at Mike. The BB landed perfectly between Mike's unprotected eyes. A magenta welt formed within the hairs of Mike's fair uni-brow, and a stream of tears began running down his cheeks. That evening Forrest, accompanied by his humiliated mother, went to apologize to Mike's parents. Events like this occurred often for the boys. And as they grew older they only got more adventurous.

At the age of 13, Forrest and two friends jumped a train heading north. The surprise wasn't that they'd gotten on



the train, as they'd done that plenty of times before; the surprise was when the train they were on didn't stop. It didn't stop until they were just outside of Chicago, where they were discovered by an unfriendly engineer. The boys were taken to the police station and their parents were contacted. Forrest's father told the officer, "Keep them. They're all yours." But he couldn't have been serious, because he arrived the next day to take the boys home. Needless to say, it was not enjoyable having to sit in the car for 10 plus hours feeling remorseful for their grand adventure.

When Forrest turned 18, he received his draft card in the mail. He was given a lottery number determined by that ordinary day he was born on in 1952. It was now his turn to anxiously tune into the local news and listen for how his life would unfold. Before any numbers were pulled, Forrest's brother, David, announced that if his younger brother's number came up, he'd go in Forrest's place. He'd already done one tour and knew that if his brother were to go to Vietnam his mother would have lost both sons to war. As the lottery came to a close and Forrest's number was never chosen, he felt incredible relief and guilt. He had been able to be a normal, simple teenager up until this point, while his brother had already gone overseas to lose his innocence and closest friends, and witness the horrible events Forrest was protected from. In the months that followed, Forrest's brother went back to Vietnam for a second tour. Forrest didn't know if it was because he felt he needed to be patriotic or if it was because war was now his brother's safe place. But



whenever he wrote home, which wasn't often, his brother asked for three things always: cigarettes, whiskey and dry socks. And that's all Forrest knew about his brother for the next 30 years.

Forrest went on to college in Ohio and would often hitchhike his way to New York City when he was bored. After the second year he never returned to school, nor did he return home. Instead he stayed in New York, finding comfort in the constant noise and flux. Forrest was like the most basic law in physics, an object set in motion staying in motion.

He was 25 when he finally returned home. It was his old friend Mike who told him the news that their close friend and regular on the cowboys and Indians battleground, John, had committed suicide. The three days of catching up with old friends and family were shrouded in an alcoholic haze. Forrest found comfort in the warmth he felt while drinking. On the night of John's funeral, Forrest was alone at the cemetery. As he looked at the freshly laid dirt he thought of how John's mother had not respected his wishes to have his ashes spread. This knowledge was a burden to Forrest because he knew it would bother his dear friend.

In his drunken state, Forrest located a shovel, and for the next couple of hours he dug, eventually unearthing the box of ashes. He shrugged out of his leather jacket, opened the box and dumped the contents on the inside of the jacket, which had become a makeshift knapsack.



He filled the hole as quickly as possible and with John's ashes in his jacket, made for the Delaware. He knew of an old railroad bridge they used to jump off as kids — this was where he would set John free. Forrest made it to the bridge, took a slug of his whiskey, got a firm grip on his jacket and let the ashes fly. Had he been more sober, he may have paid attention to the wind direction, but even with some of John's ashes on his face, Forrest let his friend find peace.

For quite some time, the death of his friend weighed heavily on his heart. It wasn't until he met Louise that he finally felt whole as a person. They'd met through mutual friends. Louise was a few years younger, a waitress in the city who defined herself as an art enthusiast. The first night they went out was fairly uneventful, but in the days that followed, fate allowed them to run into each other again on the street. They both sensed something special. Forrest knew nothing of art and wanted Louise to show him this world she kept so close to her heart.

They began exploring museums and galleries together and quickly became inseparable. Their life was simple; they lived and loved each other. They got married, moved to the suburbs and had a family. As their two sons grew older and eventually moved out of the house, Forrest and Louise began traveling more. It was something Louise had always yearned for, and being out of their empty house distracted Forrest from how much he missed having his kids around.



As Louise and Forrest traveled across Europe, Forrest was finally able to see the art his wife always gushed about. She would enthusiastically explain a Jan van Eyck painting to the minute details of his iconography, and Forrest would fully enjoy it. Truthfully, though, it wasn't until he was able to see the painting in the white-wall, windowless room of the National Gallery in London that he fully appreciated his wife's passionate dissection of it. They also visited Italy, where Forrest instantly fell in love with his surroundings. He enjoyed Venice — it was exactly as he'd always imagined it to be, straight out of a postcard — and Rome was ancient and exciting, but Tuscany was the place he dreamt about. Louise and Forrest visited year after year, never tiring of the magnificent history. However, it wasn't until their third trip to Italy that they discovered Cortona.

A small town situated on a hilltop, Cortona had one main street that was only occasionally open to cars. The buildings were all the same shade of limestone, and at the very top of the hill stood a beautiful church dedicated to Saint Margaret, the patron saint of the town. There were only two roads leading up to the church, both equally steep. The difference between them was that one overlooked all of Tuscany. From that road you could see the rain fall on Montepulciano in the distance, while the midday sun beat down on the sunflower fields below. Atop this hill, Forrest and Louise would reflect on their love for each other and all that was good in their lives ...



... at least, that's what I wanted to believe as I watched a paramedic collapse Forrest's sternum while performing CPR, desperately trying to breathe life back into his pale body as his wife watched in horror. Truth is, I didn't know Forrest, or his wife. They no doubt had entirely different names. I did pick up that they were American, but aside from that, I knew nothing about them. But I wanted to. I wanted to believe that their lives up until this horrible moment had been perfect.



15 TO FREEDOM

as told by

DAN PAPPAS

Act I

“Vegas?”

“Yeah dude, fucking Vegas.”

Though being roughly 26 years, 4 months, 6 days, and 17 hours old, I had never truly had the kind of Vegas experience you would normally associate Vegas with. Instead of blowing my life savings on black and burying prostitutes in the desert sand, the only memories I had of Vegas were of sleeping on my grandmother’s floor in a sleeping bag, the arcade at the Circus Circus, and dollar foot-long hot dogs smothered in nacho cheese at Slots ‘A’ Fun.

“Right now though?” I squelched. “I mean, I don’t



consider myself a pussy. I've actually been known as quite the wildcard in some circles."

Wade rubbttled, "Exactly, cards ... we be could throwing chips at 'em. I don't know how many chips — that'll be determined by the house's minimum ... but chips equal money. MONEY. YOU LOVE MONEY."

Dammit ... Wade was right. He's always right ... he's an asshole, but he's right. I do love money. "Money," I grimaced.

"Then what are you waiting for? Smash the rest of that grab bag beer and let's get real!" A command that Wade had pieced together between burps and blurry glances around Bernie's, our standard Thursday night haunt.

It wasn't "smashing" the rest of my grab bag beer that was the issue. The issue was that it happened to be my *ninth* grab bag beer and we had only been at the bar for two hours. Thursday nights in Rancho Cucamonga are far more exciting than you'd be led to believe. Especially at Bernie's.

"Well how the fuck are we supposed to get there? It's at least four hours away from here and that's in the Tercel, which we're not taking."

"Yeah we are ... you know we'd get boned in gas mileage taking my truck."



“Point made, but, dude, we can’t drive. It’s not responsible. It just ain’t.”

“You know what’s not responsible? Letting a wild, hair-brained, fly-by-the-seam-of-our-jeans moment die in the face of fear. Besides, we’ll be totally cool. A real YOLO moment. But you’re right, WE can’t drive. YOU can drive.”

I don’t know what I was more upset about, that Wade was pressuring me to drive or that he had the audacity to actually drop a YOLO IRL. Whatever.

“No. This whole premise is stupid.”

“OK it’s cool, man. We can be fair about this. Rock paper scissors? Ya know, the ‘ole ro sham beaux?”

“Deal.”

Why was I agreeing to this madness? One of us would be driving drunk, something I was staunchly against.

But here we went, rock paper scissors. Scissors, which is always what I drew. Scissors, which always gets thwarted by rock. Indeed, rock thwarted scissors. And in one swift hand, fate decided that I would be driving the Tercel with a droopy-eyed and floppy-haired Wade nestled in the passenger seat to Vegas. Scissor me timbers.

“Shit. I’ll smash this and settle out. This sucks,” I bitched.



“You’ll thank me in about five hours. And I’ll buy a room. Forty dollars can get you far at the Hooter’s Hotel. Far and two dozen wings.” What a sales pitch.

“Deal.” I repeated.

“Also, since I’m such a bro, these are on me.” Wade proceeded to scratch “Deal with it \$ucka” in the tip section of the bill. Yes that was a dollar sign in place of the S. What can I say? The kid’s a poet.

At this point I should’ve just taken Wade home, but our commitment to not seeming like a wuss to each other led us deep into the night.

Act II

There we were, packed in the Tercel, cautiously cruising east on Foothill Boulevard, a few blocks away from the on-ramp to the 15 North, or “The Road Paved by the Daring,” as Wade blabbered on about “THE 15 TO FREEDOM.” We were doing it. Maybe it was the adrenaline; maybe it was that last Miller Chiller at the bar. Whatever it was I felt a kind of righteous thrill that I’d never felt before. In this hazy moment, I was convinced that this was how life was meant to be lived, drumming on the steering wheel and thanking Wade for ‘convincing’ me that this reckless endeavor was a good time. His only response to my excitement was, “Dude, it’s cool ... I was stoked when my balls dropped too.” What a charmer.



First we passed through Hesperia, then Victorville, and at a little over an hour into our pilgrimage of penitence I had to piss. This was not just any piss either; this was life or death. This was war.

“What do we do? We can’t stop the car. It’s too risky.”

I squirmed.

“Don’t worry, man. No one’s chasing us. We’re not the subjects of a Bourne movie. We’re just a couple of fellas minding our own business here in the high desert. Besides, we’re a few exits away from Barstow, and I’m fixin’ to pick up a few provisions from the Flying J’s. I stop at that Flying J’s every time I’m in the area, for tradition and for strength,” Wade boasted. “A couple of renegade fugitives from the big city are the least bit of concern for these country yokels out here.” He chuckled and punched my arm.

I didn’t have much of a choice. I was understandably scared of getting in any kind of trouble with the law, but at this point I was more afraid of the kidney infection that was beginning to manifest. Making a quick pit stop at Flying J’s it was. The exit was only a mile away. Thank Christ.

Who would think that a truck stop in the middle of the desert at 1:14 in the morning would be such a hotbed of activity? Are people really just hanging out here right now? Desert people. Desert folk. But then again, where else can you buy an A-frame trailer jack, a bag of hot ’n



spicy chicarrones, and a sampler pack of Four Loko all under the same roof. That happened to be the exact list of “provisions” that Wade was picking up. Minus the trailer jack and doubled up on the Four Loko.

After my sweet relief, I let my worries flood back and accosted Wade for buying more booze.

“What do you think you’re gonna do with that?!”
I screeched.

“Drink it, duh. I got one for you too, dog. We can’t show up to Vegas and not be in the zone.”

In the zone. Famous last words, I would assume. Let’s worry about getting to Vegas first, then worry about the zone later. My excitement for the trip began to wane, and my worries of getting busted began to inch back into my consciousness, but I didn’t want to make a scene on our one pit stop. I was already paranoid enough, and Wade didn’t seem to have any issue with his recklessness. Something in me just let go. This was when I finally committed to this crazy trip for real. I threw the caution to the birds. Or something like that, right?

So there we were. Wade and I sipping Four Lokos, holding 90 and breezing by the world’s tallest thermometer in Baker. We were doing it. Already this was more excitement than I’ve had this past year, regardless of how shitty it actually was. And already I felt that I had gotten the story I wanted from this Vegas trip.



I was wrong.

Act III

The next recollection I had was abruptly opening my eyes in a moment of panic, my heart racing, and my face pressed against my iPhone 3GS as it vibrated uncontrollably. It was my parents. How was I supposed to explain to them that their call woke me up, fully clothed, hood on, and face planted on top of my phone on top of the covers of a rollaway cot at the Hooter's Hotel. I didn't. Instead, with a strained flick of the wrist, I chucked it against the hotel wall. I dodged their call, but also rendered my phone in a constant black screen of death. Maybe it'd be better that I didn't talk to anyone this morning. And why was it so hot in here, and bright. The desert was a cruel beast.

I had so many questions. What was this place? Why was I having such a hard time breathing? Was this a stroke? As soon as I remembered my own name and a few initial unravelings of how recently my life had gone so wrong, I made a dry-throated gasp.

“Wade, we gotta bail ... now.”

I heard a muffled murmur, but it turned out to be my own guts letting out a battle cry of disapproval. Don't worry, guts. Apparently I had already surrendered some time ago. The pile of puke next to the cot was the proof.



“Seriously, dude, we gotta get outta ...” As I pulled the comforter off the bed next to me I was horrified to find that the mound under the sheets was not an incapacitated Wade, but instead an empty fifth of Evan Williams, a greasy pile of gnawed buffalo wings and a receipt with a sloppy handwritten note in the tip section that read, “Deal with it \$ucka.” Did I see this before?

Fucking wonderful. At this point I suppose I would be hard pressed to make my 12:30 closing shift at Java Bones, which had been named home of Rancho Cucamonga’s premier coffee mixologists. My manager was gonna have a shit fit. What was his name? Wyatt? Wayne ... oh yea ... wwwwhy do I pick up shifts on my “days off”? Money. I love money. Money, which apparently I’m down now, since the 40 clams I left Rancho Cucamonga with are clearly missing. I thought you were supposed to win money in Vegas. I gambled. I lost.

Feeling defeated, I slung my hoody over my shoulder, stepped out of the room and began my quest to hopefully track down a few more clues as to what had happened in the past nine hours. I thought Wade was wearing that hoody last night. Where was this idiot? And shit, where were the keys to the Tercel? Who drove the Tercel? Did I? My nausea took a turn for the worse.

I descended six floors down the “Ocean Tower” elevator and began my walk of shame through the casino, trying to track down any indications of where an ’89 subcompact sedan or a best friend could’ve ended up in



a night now shrouded in mystery. What if I never found either? Why was I having such a hard time focusing on anything? And why was my right hand shaking so bad? Didn't I take some kind of pill to control that? I hadn't "taken" anything in a long time. A long time. I'm a good kid.

In a fuzzy glance I caught notice of what I guess you would call a "Hooter's Girl" behind the check-in counter whisper something to a security guard and then point at me. Big deal, I thought. I can't be the only one that's walked through this hellhole with a little crusty puke on 'em. Get over it, people. "Right, desert folk." I shook my head. Oh, parking garage this way? Please lead me to something, you glorious palm tree-shaped directory sign. Lead me to something.

With body tremors and spasms full force, I hobbled out of the casino and into the parking structure. I was temporarily blinded. I'd heard of "Vegas lights" before, but really, people? Is it necessary to have flashing, dancing lights on the inside of a parking structure? At 10 a.m. nonetheless. And this vibrant of red and blue? Desert folk. They think they're fancy.

As my eyes attempted to focus in this blazing cacophony of light, I was able to fixate on something thankfully familiar. There it was, my Tercel tucked neatly into a corner space on the second floor. But why were there so many people surrounding it? What were they doing? Wrapping my ride in Saran Wrap? Funny prank, rascals ...



you got me. Haven't I had a rough enough night, and now rough enough morning already? My head was pounding.

As I approached, things came clearer into focus, and I started to notice that a few details of my initial assessment were not as I had thought. Fuck, it's bright out. Though that is definitely my Tercel ... that's caution tape that those people are surrounding my car with. And those aren't just slack-jawed lookie loos ... they're police officers, paramedics and forensics agents. What did they do to my car? Those fuckers. Maybe these gentlemen will explain to me what's going on?

"Excuse me, officers ... that's my car and ..." I blacked out.

Again.

When I came to, I was lying on the frigid concrete floor of a private quarantined holding cell, and everything rushed back to me in vivid color. I hadn't been taking my Benperidol for a while now. And I didn't actually have a shift at Java Bones today. In fact, I had been fired some time ago. The officers filled me in on the one detail that I just could not for the life of me recall. The body they found in the passenger seat of my Tercel was only identifiable by the name tag on the barista apron that it was wrapped in. That's right, I chuckled ... his name was ...

Wade.



THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ANDY MOOG

as told by

MIKE DAITCH

Monday.

The phone rings at 6:45 p.m. Ben is cleaning up a stain on the carpet. The aging carpet is now dingy and gray except where Andy Moog has vomited and Ben has used the pet stain steam vacuum. Dozens of perfect little circles of clean, like cartoon Swiss cheese. The phone rings. Ben hits the ignore button. He picks up the little vacuum, one more hole in the wall-to-wall Swiss cheese.

The phone rings again at 7:30.

“Hello?”

“How is Andy Moog?”



“He retired in 1998.”

Silence.

“She’s fine; she didn’t throw up today.”

“I have to work late again. Go ahead and eat without me.”

Andy Moog, the goalie, played for the Boston Bruins from 1988 to 1993 when he let the game-four, series-winning goal get past him in overtime. 1993 was an unimaginable disaster. The Buffalo Sabres swept the Boston Bruins, and Karen Andersen got a puppy. It had been a gift to herself. To help cheer her up. She had gotten pregnant. She had been on the pill. Across the street from the clinic was an animal shelter. She had to have the tiny Chihuahua. Her boyfriend at the time, Sebastian, said Andy Moog was a sieve; he insisted that she name the puppy after the goalie.

Sebastian loves hockey. He watches every Bruins game. In college, back when he and Karen were still dating, Sebastian would put the game on and make Karen name five players on the team. Karen would play along; secretly she hated hockey, but she learned the players. Ray Bourque. Lyndon Byers. Gordy Kluzak. Cam Neely. And Andy Moog. Eventually she learned to like the game too, but by the end of the '92/'93 season she had learned to hate Sebastian.

Tuesday.



The phone rings at 7:45. Andy Moog is sleeping on the sofa next to Ben; she looks like she did when she was a pup. She isn't a puppy anymore; she's just old and slowly wasting away. The phone rings.

"Hello?"

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Sitting on the couch with Andy."

In the background Karen can hear the hockey game. She wants to puke.

Andy Moog, the Chihuahua, is probably dying. She is losing weight. She has diarrhea. And she pukes every day. Ben never much liked the dog, but he has learned to love her. Ben has been gaining weight. He isn't young anymore. He wonders if somehow he and the dog are in an inverse relationship. If he loses weight will the dog gain it back?

Wednesday.

The phone rings at 8:25. Ben is eating cheese and crackers for dinner.

"Hello?"

"What are you eating?"



“Swiss cheese.”

“Don’t give any to Andy Moog. She’ll puke.”

Ben takes the cheese away from the dog. “I won’t. She’s fine.”

Andy Moog loves cheese.

“Listen, my whole team is going to the Bruins game on Saturday.”

The game is a reward from Karen’s boss for all the hard work and long hours they have been putting in. Significant others are expected to come.

“I know you don’t like hockey. You don’t have to come. Sebastian can pick me up.”

After Karen and Ben got married people would ask Karen if they were trying to have a baby. Ben would answer that they weren’t really trying yet, but they had “pulled the goalie.” This always made Karen cringe. Ben never much liked hockey, but he loves Karen very much.

Then she got the new job. At first Karen was very excited about her new job. She would come home and she would tell Ben all about her day over a cocktail or a glass of wine. How they all hated this one girl, Gretchen. What a bitch. How they were all going to do this silly hot dog diet. You get to eat hot dogs. And that Sebastian, you



know, Sebastian from college, the hockey fan ... well, it turns out that he works in the accounting department. Small world.

Then the late nights started. That's when the phone calls started.

Thursday.

The phone rings at 6:10. Ben doesn't answer it. He pretends he is on his way home; he won't answer the phone if he is driving. Karen thinks he is a pussy, but she understands.

At 9:15 the phone rings again.

"Hello?"

"Why didn't you answer?"

"I was driving."

"I have to work. I am going to be late."

Karen was never late before, not like this. Ben can hear glasses and music and people talking.

"OK, good night."

A few months ago Ben had gone to the doctor. They told him to lose a few pounds, cut back on salt. Basically he is



healthy, so let's not jump to any conclusions. They said he would get the official results in a week or two. Keep an eye out for a blue envelope. But, don't worry, these things often take time. Are you tracking her ovulation?

Friday.

At 6:42 a.m. Andy Moog is licking Ben's face before the phone has a chance to wake him up. Karen is not in bed. Ben gets up and feeds the dog. She barely eats. Karen has clearly been home. She is not home anymore. Ben goes to the bathroom. Andy Moog hobbles along behind him. There is something speckled on the toilet seat. The tiniest splatter. Thanks to Andy Moog, the dog not the goalie, Ben is an expert at vomit. This is not Andy Moog's vomit.

On the kitchen table there is a note.

*"Couldn't sleep.
Went back to work.
Will probably be late.
-Karen"*

Ben had started keeping track of Karen's period on the back of an envelope that had once carried a Comcast bill. Now, more than two years later, he is on his third envelope. This particular envelope is blue and had carried the unconceivable. Its blue is the color of a link on WebMD.com. The envelope had been torn open, the contents — the letter — then carefully reinserted. Ben has to find space on the envelope to jot down her cycle



where there aren't rips or tears. He invented a type of shorthand. An open circle is nothing, just another day. An "X" is her period. All those little circles. Too many little circles. The envelope looks like Swiss cheese. Ben puts the pen down. One more hole in the blue Swiss cheese.

Saturday.

At noon the phone rings. Sebastian is here. In his BMW. With a pretty blond girl. Gretchen, that bitch. They all go to the game. In the first intermission Sebastian hands Ben a beer.

"Hey, buddy, do you like the game? You follow it?"

"Not really."

"C'mon, this is Boston. I bet you can name five players for the Bruins. Give it a shot."

"I ... really I don't know."

"C'mon, you must know the goalie's name at least."

"Andy Moog?"

Karen snaps.

"Jesus, Ben. Andy Moog? Are you fucking serious?! The goalie's name is Tuukka Rask! How the fuck do you not know the goalie's name?! You're at the goddamned game!"



She has been very moody. More so than usual. She has to be getting her period soon. She has to.

The Bruins lose in overtime.

Tuukka-fucking-Rask.

Sunday.

The phone doesn't ring.

Andy Moog doesn't wake up.

Ben throws out the pet stain steam vacuum.

Monday.

At 8:30 a.m. Ben calls in sick. He is torn up about the dog. Still in bed, he hears Karen tell her boss she won't be in today. Andy Moog is dead. She slams the back door on her way out.

The phone chirps at 8:55. A text from Karen, "I have a doctor's appointment."

The little bubble that lets you know she is typing appears. Its three little dots look like the open circles on Ben's chart. Then it's gone. Nothing else to say.

Still in bed, Ben hears a car door. He checks his phone. 1:30. Karen comes into the bedroom. Her eyes are hollow.



She has been crying and looks very tired. She has lost some weight. She is carrying a cardboard box with a handle. The box is punched full of perfect, round holes. From inside this block of what looks like cardboard Swiss cheese a tiny wet nose pokes out. Ben gets up and shuffles over to Karen. He hugs her very tightly.

“Let’s name him Tuukka Rask.”



NEVER THE WHY — A STORY IN THREE PARTS

as told by

GREG SMITH

Carl Gregory, of 34 Fieldston Road, a tony section of Riverdale, ran a numbers unit, as unlikely as that seems.

It started as a side project when he got passed over as junior partner at Lehman Brothers in 1998. A mucker from Rutgers, Carl never fit in with the Ivy Leaguers who littered the analyst training program at Lehman. In his mind it was because he was more of a spreadsheet guy and less of a people person. No matter. He missed out on junior partner, in a world full of innocence relative to today, where the greed and the politics of whom and why they made partner was just as obscene as today, but now looking back, for Carl at least, it seemed a finer time. It was of course before the Twin Towers fell. A time when everyone from the freshly minted partners to the guy running bagels with butter up to the executive floor still



believed in at least a little something. That all died that day in 2001. And then, in the summer of 2008, it all died a little harder.

But Carl had moved on from all of that way back when. Having been passed over for junior partner, Carl decided that the game was rigged, and instead of being pissed off by that fact, he woke up to that fact, and he devoured it.

Carl stepped out. Out of himself and all the bullshit. He started small at first. A few spreadsheets on top college football games, a few bets from some smartasses he knew from his time on Wall Street. But what Carl lacked in outward personality he made up for in ambition. And so, by the end of 2003, Carl had used all his acumen to build an offshore empire — a gaming book that totaled over 200 million bucks a year, taking bets on damn near anything.

All good. Except for the rather unfortunate and ugly fact that not all sports gamblers were as regular in paying their debts as they were, with say, their cable bills. By the end of 2005, Carl found himself faced with a bit of a collections issue.

Being an educated and seemingly humane individual, Carl tried a number of reputable collection agencies to help him navigate the delta between what he was owed and what he had in the bank. While admirable, at least in some eyes, this approach lasted for a bit over a year, until it became clear to Carl and his partners that they had



no problem getting commitments of cash in. They had a problem *getting cash in*.

And so it was on a rainy night in 2006, that Carl found himself in a dingy restaurant in East Harlem sitting across a table from Angelo Guttierrez. Otherwise, and heretofore, known as the Goot. Only in America would Angelo “The Goot” Gutierrez find himself sitting with someone like Carl Gregory, but so be it. If the American Dream were still alive at all, it deserved, perhaps, to manifest itself in such a nightmare.

Unlike Mr. Gregory, the Goot never graduated from a premier college. Nor did he ever enter a top training program at a now defunct and disappeared investment bank. He did not own and operate one of the largest sports books in New York City.

No, the Goot’s tale was different for sure. But one that commanded as much respect, albeit from a different group of constituents.

The Goot’s dad died, or disappeared (what’s the difference really), when he was 6. The Goot was the youngest of seven, but he was never really young at all. The Goot saw shit from a young age, did shit from a young age, and learned a lot of shit from a young age.

In fact, by the time the Goot was 16, he was a legend larger than life. Except he wasn’t. At 5' 8" inches and 155 pounds he was small. But when he flashed those eyes,



when his neck ran hard, muscles pulsing out, he didn't seem so much small as scary. Scary and tough. The Goot was so tough, it was pure. As his now deceased running mate, Blades Bolivar, once said of him, the Goot could fuck you up with his eyes. That's how tough he was.

Like Carl Gregory, the Goot was ambitious. He didn't just want to be another street tough, another violent loser doing time and spilling blood while others got rich. So the Goot plied his skills as a top bagman for much of his 20s, until he settled in in his early 30s as the number one collections guy for every major street book in all 5 major boroughs. By 2005, if you needed a debt to be paid, in the legal tender or in something more insidious, the Goot was your man.

The meeting between Carl Gregory and the Goot in East Harlem in 2006 took all of 15 minutes. Gregory was unhappy to be there. He found this side of his business, as he always would, frustrating and unseemly. The Goot too was not keen on lingering. He just wanted the logistics — the who, the where, the when, and of course, the how much — how much was owed and how much he'd be paid.

But not the why. Never the why. He could care less about the why. The Goot had insulated himself from the why many years ago.

Carl Gregory and the Goot walked out of that East Harlem dive with both men getting what they wanted



out of the evening. It was the beginning of a profitable partnership that would last for many years. They would never speak again in person. One man would move forward in good conscience, focusing on the numbers that he loved and that gave him solace, the other moving forward distributing violence, never even thinking of solace, trying not to think at all.

PART TWO

Over the next five years, the Goot found his work with the Gregory Group rewarding in that it was simple. They were businessmen and he appreciated it. They gave him the information he needed, asked no questions and paid on time. Like him, the guys from the Gregory Group were devoid of emotion, what was referred to on the streets as “drama.” For the Goot, who had grown up in a large family full of “drama,” the Gregory Group was like a long lost friend you never even knew you had, let alone were missing. For the Goot the arrangement with the Gregory Group seemed practical, and he welcomed the fact that it required no more commitment other than the fact that he take a job and do it.

The Goot was never one to fall in love, to have close friends (especially after Blades got killed), to show much of himself at all. The Goot did not go to church; did not drink; did not gamble; did not text, tweet, post, call, hang out or fuck around. The Goot still had a pager as late as 2012.



What the Goot did do was his job. He'd be given a name and an address, and the the number owed, and he'd go out and find that son of a bitch and either get the money or get an agreement as to how the money would be paid off, or fuck up the poor son of a bitch who had exhausted the previous two options. And he did it without anyone knowing he was doing it. He was smart, discreet and ruthless, but only in so much as that he did not ever think anything of any of it. He just did it. And he did it well.

By 2013, Carl Gregory never even thought about the Goot. The Goot was under his employ, doing his job, and all that Gregory cared about was that the Gregory Group's collections had improved by 80% since the Goot had come on board. Did Gregory know that since the Goot had started in 2006 that he had killed 11 people because they owed the Gregory Group money? Probably not. What is certain is that Gregory didn't care to know one way or the other. And if he had known, he'd have probably cared even less.

So it was that the Goot found himself at the subway station on Jerome Avenue, meeting a guy that the Gregory Group had sent uptown to give him his next assignment. On paper it seemed like any other, because it was. A client who went by the name of Mr. Dreyfuss had run his course. The book was all there for the Goot to see — 10 years of winning and losing, mostly losing but by a slim margin, but most importantly, always paying.



Until he wasn't.

For the last two years, Mr. Dreyfuss had been piling up the losses, but even worse the money owed. The Gregory Group had exhausted all the regular channels and now it was time for the Goot. The guy they had sent to the Jerome Avenue Station laid out the usual scenario — they'd like to get as much of the money as possible, but if that seemed improbable they expected a message to be sent. The Goot understood. Something needed to be collected — money, blood or something in between, a promise even.

The Goot said little, took the information as he always had and stepped away from the subway platform on Jerome Avenue. He felt mildly annoyed that this Mr. Dreyfuss lived all the way up in White Plains, but beside that minor nuisance, he gave it hardly another thought. He'd grab a slice of pizza at Piggy's, go home and watch the Knicks lose again, and wake up in the morning and drive up to White Plains and take care of it. That was all. That was it.

PART THREE

The Goot stepped out of his 2007 Hyundai Sonata and walked the 100 feet to the address he had for Mr. Dreyfuss. The Goot looked up at the house. It was a classic Tudor, a little worse for wear, but impressive still. The Goot always tried to resist the temptation to wonder



who these people were, but as he stepped up the path to the front door of Mr. Dreyfuss' residence, somewhere in his deeper subconscious the words "doctor," "dentist," "lawyer" danced with one another.

As the Goot pushed the doorbell, he did what he always did on a job — let out a short, hard breath, hoping for the best, expecting something less, readying himself for the worst.

He waited.

He rang the bell again.

He waited.

He was anxious on the surface, but deep down at peace with himself. He had been here before. Many times. Whatever was to come, it was something he had prepared for, resigned himself to. This was the path he had chosen. His life, his work.

He rang the bell again.

The "last time" he told himself. In a minute he would just go in. His hand grazed the gun lodged in the back of his sweats.

He heard footsteps from within. Light, moving slowly, a shuffle.



The door shook on its hinges as it began to open.

The Goot let his hand rest on his gun. And then as the door opened, he let it fall. Sighed again.

Standing before him was a small woman, at least 70 years of age, strangely elegant and poised, even pretty perhaps.

“Who are you, dear?” she said to the Goot.

“Fuck,” the Goot thought to himself, “collateral damage.” But being the pro he was, he pushed the thought aside and got down to the task at hand.

“I’m looking for Mr. Dreyfuss,” the Goot explained.

The woman took a deep breath, a look of confusion briefly crossing her face. She looked deep into the unyielding eyes of the Goot. And like that, her face changed to a majestic state of complete acceptance. She smiled weakly at him.

“I see,” she finally replied. “Come in.”

The Goot hesitated. “Is he here? Mr. Dreyfuss.”

The woman held his gaze. She smiled even more broadly. “Come in,” she repeated and turned away from the door, leaving it open wide for the Goot to enter.

“Fuck,” the Goot said, this time out loud, under his breath.



He stepped through the door and followed the old lady into the house.

A small vestibule gave way to a central hallway, to the right a handsome staircase leading to the second floor. The Goot paused, and took in the study to his left. There was a baby grand piano in a corner of the room, on top of which sat several old photographs. The woman stopped halfway down the hall and turned back to address him.

“Come into the kitchen. I’ll pour us some tea.”

“I’m here for Mr. Dreyfuss,” the Goot objected, but she had already vanished behind the swinging door leading into the kitchen.

The Goot entered the study. From an old, handcrafted wooden desk he lifted a picture of a man who looked to be in his 60s. Dreyfuss, he wondered to himself and moved on toward the piano. There he saw a photo of the old woman, but in it she was no longer old. The beauty and elegance he had first suspected upon seeing her at the door was now on full display; her hair pinned up like a ballerina, the swanlike neck, the soft warmth of her green eyes, all transcended the dull aging of the photo.

“Not bad eh?”

Startled, the Goot turned to see the woman standing on



the edge of the study, holding a tray of tea. Instinct taking over, he moved abruptly toward her.

“I’m here for Mr. Dreyfuss.” Now upon her, he slapped the tray from her hands and its contents shattered across the hard wood floor.

“Dammit,” she said, disappointed, more hurt than afraid.

The Goot could not make sense of it. His anger rose. Reaching out he grabbed her arm, felt its frailty in his grasp, and pulled her toward him. “Mr. Dreyfuss. Where is he?”

She tried in vain to pull away. He stared at her fiercely. “Listen lady, I’m not leaving until you tell me where Mr. Dreyfuss is.”

The woman did not shy from the Goot’s gaze. She matched the black death pool of his eyes, and rather than looking away, she stared even deeper into them. The Goot was unnerved. What was it he was seeing in her eyes? It was not defiance. What was it? It was more frightening and more powerful than that. What was it?

The Goot pulled the gun from the back of his sweat. “Listen, you crazy old bitch.” He pressed the gun to her head. “You tell me where Mr. Dreyfuss is now, or I fucking blow your brains out. You hear me!”



The woman said nothing. She continued to hold her gaze on him.

“Where the fuck is Mr. Dreyfuss!” He pulled her even closer now. He could feel her heart racing, but her eyes remained steady. What was it in her eyes? What was it?

“This is the last time I’m asking you, lady. Where is Mr. Dreyfuss?”

His left hand moved from her arm to her head. He grabbed the back of her hair and pressed the gun harder against her skull.

“I’m Mr. Dreyfuss,” she said simply.

Disbelieving, the Goot snorted and stared deep into her eyes. She said nothing more. Just continued to meet his eyes and it was then he saw it. She was not lying. That thing in her eyes. He could now see it for what it was, even if he couldn’t articulate it. It was not defiance or confidence, certainly not deceit.

It was understanding.

She knew. She knew. As well as he did. Even more than he did. Why he was there. How it had all come to pass. For as unlikely as it all seemed, she was indeed Mr. Dreyfuss.

The Goot let go of the woman, let his gun fall to his side



and stepped away from her. The woman continued to stare at him. She smiled warmly.

“When my husband died a few years back, I stumbled on what he was up to with what he used to call his funny money. I was lonely, bored. So I kept it going. I would do a little research online, mail in my positions for the week and hope for the best.”

The Goot allowed himself to listen, knowing that he should not, that it was against everything he stood for. Or was it?

The woman continued. “I did all right for a while. Not really, I suppose, but it was manageable. It was all very manageable. Until I got sick. I should’ve stopped then. But I was old and foolish and lonely.”

The Goot let out a long deep breath. “It’s not my problem, lady.”

“I know that,” she said confidently.

They stood for some time, connected by the silence and the unlikeliness of it all.

“Can you make good?” The Goot asked, knowing the answer. “If not now, over time?”

The woman finally broke her gaze. “I’m afraid not. I could sell the house I suppose, but that seems silly. I’d



rather not do that. Not at my age.”

“Look, lady, you gotta do something. The people I work for —”

“Oh I know,” she said, stopping him. “I understand.” She was looking at him again. Slowly she crossed the study toward him. This time it was her grasping his arm, but gently, warmly. “I understand. I do.”

The Goot felt his face curling up in confusion. What was this lady saying to him? For the first time on a job, the Goot felt himself conflicted, uncertain.

“You do what you have to, son. I understand.”

“Jesus lady —” The Goot tried to pull away from her, but she tightened her grasp, raised her other hand to his face and softly touched it.

“No. You listen to me,” she said. “I’m not telling you what to do. But I am telling you what I won’t do. I won’t sell my home. I won’t burden my children with this. And I won’t beg you.”

The Goot tried to look away, but the woman held his face firm in front of hers, forcing him to meet her eyes. She smiled that smile again, kind and knowing.

“One other thing I won’t do is judge you. Whatever it is you decide.”



And just like that the Goot felt the first wave of tears rise to his eyes. His face contorted at first as he tried to fight them. He felt his breath leave him, leave him as though it would never come back. But it did and he let out a loud harsh gasp as the air filled his lungs. Then he let go of the tears, let them come and let them go.

The Goot fell to his knees. The woman let her hands fall upon his head and caressed his hair gently. The Goot, not knowing what he was doing now, just doing it, wrapped his arms around the woman's waist, kneeling before her. She bent down and kissed him on the head.

For several moments they stayed like that, silent, wrapped in a fragile balance together, each knowing what was supposed to be done, but not knowing what would be done, or what should be done, holding one another, each with an almighty fear of letting go, a fear not for their own self, but for the other.

And then, finally, the Goot began to rise, felt himself buckle, saw one last chance at his own redemption, and he took it.





CHAPTER NO 5

June 5, 2014

HEAT

*When your spring is more like winter,
can you blame us Mainers for looking
forward to a little “Heat”?*

MY GIRLS..... pg / **166**
by Mary Hanifin, Executive Producer

THE LION GUIDES..... pg / **183**
*by Sven Fahlgren, Director of New Media
and Production Services*

JEREMY, THE GLO WORM..... pg / **192**
by Patrick Krulik, Creative Technologist



MY GIRLS

as told by

MARY HANIFIN

“Flight 604 with service to Phoenix is now boarding ‘even more’ passengers.” I look down at my boarding pass. Nope. I’m not even more. Just enough I suppose.

At least I have an aisle seat. And I am looking forward to this. Really I am. We always have so much fun. After it’s all said and done, I never regret that I made the time to reconnect with my oldest friends. I sort of dread it leading up to it. It’s always the first weekend in June. June, the absolute busiest month of the year for a mom.

School is winding down, and every other day there’s some big event. The second grade concert. The Scholastic Book fair, field day, bubble day. I have no idea what happens on bubble day, but goddammit I signed up on that Google doc to bring juice boxes and to volunteer. Right when I get back on my red eye. That’s gonna be fun.



We've gotten together at least once a year since college. We're good about it. Every year it varies. We've met in Boston, NY, the Outer Banks and, of course, the big trip to Hawaii when we all turned 30.

Regardless of where we are, it usually involves certain spa services, mimosas by the pool and lots of time sitting around in bathrobes, and catching up. The first night we cover the big stuff:

Ally's husband, Jimmy, finally found a new job; Maggie and Jake bought beachfront in Belize; Jane-a's mom is finally getting over the loss of her dad; you know, that sort of thing.

Usually by the afternoon of day two we're getting into the real stuff. It really is as if no time has passed.

The only one I really speak to on a regular basis is Ally, my best friend. We were always the closest at school too. I remember meeting her at the end of freshman year. We lived off campus in different apartments but shared the same landlord. We were both losing our roommates for sophomore year, so our landlord encouraged us to live together in my apartment — you know, to consolidate. She facilitated the meeting — which I was totally against. I was perfectly capable of finding my own roommate.

When Ally gingerly stepped through the door to take a look at my apartment I hated her immediately. She was gorgeous. Totally put together, very stylish. Who looks



that put together at the end of freshman year? I had put on the freshman 15, and I was looking a little haggard after a big first year of living away from home.

She tells the story the same way. She had no interest in meeting me. She was very happy in her place. She had fresh flowers every few days, her mom had helped her sew some cute valances, and she had even painted the inside of the cabinets to brighten the place up a bit. She was disgusted by my apartment, and I looked like her worst nightmare of a roommate. Party girl living in a dreary first-floor apartment. Oh my god, are those dirty dishes in the sink?

But somehow the evil off-campus slumlord prevailed, and we ended up living together, and our lives would never be the same. We are now friends for life. She gets what I say before I say it. She loves what I love and vice versa. We are both busy living in different states with our families, but we always know exactly when to call each other. We have that special bond that is reserved only for college roommates. No matter where our lives take us, we will always have that time together. That time that shaped us into the women we would ultimately become.

“We will be landing in Phoenix in approximately 15 minutes. The temperature on the ground is a balmy 105 degrees.”

Man I love a little sunshine, but 105 is hot. I have east



coast blood and Irish skin. Let the record show that I voted for a weekend on Nantucket.

We're all meeting in Scottsdale this year because Jane-a and her husband just moved out here last fall, and we all graciously agreed to come to her. Instead of Nantucket. They moved their spice import/export business out here from Taxachusetts, they call it. I think that the move was precipitated by Jane-a's constant search for happiness. She married Joe right out of college. He was the most handsome, charismatic senior when we were all freshmen.

All the girls wanted Joe. Beautiful Jane-a snagged him right away, and he never knew what hit him.

When we were juniors, she gave him the old ultimatum and told him what ring she wanted, and he happily obliged. To this day, he's the nicest guy. Very successful in the spice trade. Never got the beer belly, still even has all of that great hair. But poor Jane-a continues to search for happiness. The new G-wagon, the implants, the Botox, just Band-Aids. Over the last few years she's found some happiness in her MLM vitamin business. She's got her own "home-based business." She's achieved "Platinum Pacesetter" status. She even threw a big party for it. Printed invitations and all.

Poor Janey. All she talks about now is her quest to live her life as her "authentic self."



We timed it so that we all arrived around the same time, me Ally, Steff and Maggie. Steff and Maggie were both coming in from NY, me from MA and Ally from RI.

As I stepped into the terminal I heard that laugh. Steff has the loudest, funniest, most endearing ... or annoying laugh you've ever heard. She has no self-awareness about it at all. She could be at the beach or in a library and the volume never changes. It's one of those laughs that you can't help join in on, but you also can't help but look around the restaurant to see whom you're offending.

I could see them all at the bar across from my gate, Bloody Marys in hand. My girls. Let the weekend begin!

Jane-a's house is stunning. Gorgeous pool in the center with the hacienda-style architecture sprawling around it. What is this 7,000 square feet? Wow, good for them; either Joe is moving a lot of turmeric or Jane-a's vitamin empire is actually real. Hmmm, maybe I should be looking into the "6 secrets to creating your own wealth" that she's always talking about.

The plan for the weekend is to spend tonight here. Then tomorrow we check into the Casablanca suites for some pool time and some sitting around in our bathrobes with our freshly painted toenails.



Joe stayed to say a quick hello to all the girls. He's not just one of the hubs (as we call them); he's a college buddy too. God he's still gorgeous. "The keys are on the table by the door, babe. The Jeep has a full tank of gas and I made you girls a big pitcher of prickly pear cactus punch. Don't raise too much hell, ladies." He gives Jane-a a sweet I'm-still-totally-in-love-with-you kiss and takes off.

Jane-a thought it would be a great introduction to her new posh desert life to go on a Jeep tour. She claims that she knows a great three-hour loop. She's gotten really into all aspects of desert life. On the ride from the airport she tells us stories of the Havalina family that live behind their pool house. And how Joe got their first rattlesnake last week. And did you know that there are 623 different types of cactus just in the Scottsdale area? Apparently jumping cholla are the most bothersome. Their dog Romney keeps getting caught in them. Poor sweet Romney, he doesn't seem to be adjusting to desert life as well as Jane is.

While I look out the window all I see is brown dirt. Lots of it. I can't imagine what the "loop" might be. But I'm up for the adventure, and who cares what we're doing as long as we're together.

After we settle into our wing of the hacienda we load into the Jeep. Maggie does the checklist.



Water? Check.
Sunscreen? Check.
Cellphones? Check.

Has she done this before? And btw aren't we supposed to do this with a tour guide? I'm sure it will be fine. It's a three-hour loop!

Steff and I are in charge of the roadies and the snacks. Pouring prickly pear punch into a Solo cup balanced between your knees while riding on a bumpy desert road is a skill, I will tell you.

Ally made a mix CD. She always does. I have one for every girls' weekend since college. How many now? Over 20. I've stopped counting but I cherish them all.

Ally's youngest is heading off to college in the fall. She's been telling me how lost she feels. She quit her job in the film business to raise her kids. She was the most-sought-after stylist in the biz. Went out to LA right after school to live with a cousin who was a screenwriter. He got her a small gig and she took off.

After her daughter Ava was born she had no interest in it. She moved back to her hometown with her husband and raised two more beautiful kids. She is now the most-sought-after PTO volunteer as well as the most-sought-after-part-time-landscaper in town. Ally just loves to



make things beautiful. She has the touch.

As we set out on our bumpy ride, Jane begins to tell us about the Superstition Mountains, about how there is said to be a ghost town nestled in one of the valleys that is only visible at night. It's a legend around here. Of course Jane—a believes it. I try not to, but secretly I feel a little chill, which is physiologically impossible since it's hovering around 107 degrees right now.

Maggie says that's a bunch of hooey. She's the practical one. All business. We were never that close at school, but over these last years I've really come to value her friendship. She's a genuine, kind, generous friend.

After school she went on to get her law degree from Harvard and hasn't looked back since. She graduated first in her class, got a position at the top patent law office in the city and is now partner. She fell in love with a fellow workaholic attorney and they married a few years ago. They work out together at 5 each morning in their home gym overlooking Central Park West, lawyer all day and finish up with a fancy dinner and an expensive bottle of wine. They love their life — who wouldn't. They've consciously decided against kids and instead spend their vacations free diving off their beach in Belize. No kidding. And it does sound glamorous, but I wouldn't give up my kids for anything.

Janey is now going on about the history of the saguaro cactus, about how they had such a hard time building



their pool house because the goddamn things are so old and you can't touch 'em. They literally had to build it around the cactus. We all offer sympathies and go on about the unfairness of it all. Who do they think they are telling you where you can and cannot build your very own pool house!

She's now on her second PPP, and honestly, I don't know if her driving's getting worse or if our off-road journey is taking us a little too far off-road.

During the first hour we see three other Jeep tours. Real ones. They had PA systems and built-in fans at each seat; one even had a video monitor narrating the trip. The passengers were all geared up too — big floppy hats, canteens of water and zinned up noses. We looked like a bunch of bimbos in a Barbie Jeep.

God it's hot. Seriously hot. We're not getting a breeze anymore because we have to drive really slowly. Lots of big boulders.

Steff has polished off the punch and has broken out her tequila stash. How did she fit that giant bottle in her purse? No one asks anymore. We figured she'd have something. Don't get me wrong, she's totally functioning, but she was always the one with the most questions about what happened the night before, if you know what I mean.



Shots? Sure why not? We're in the desert. Isn't that what they do? God, we should drink some water. It is so hot. "Did anyone bring any of that zinc?" I ask. No one has zinc, but we do have a bag of Hint of Lime Tostitos! Of course, what goes better than that with tequila.

I look around at the endless brownness of it all. It is beautiful. So unique. So different from what I know back home. I don't think I could live here, but it would be a great family trip. Pictures! Need to take some pictures. As I fish my iPhone out of my bag, it happens. Bam. I don't know if she didn't see it or if she was feeling just bold enough to try and go over it. But we went over a boulder and didn't make it to the other side.

"Is everyone alright?"

Shit, Jane is bleeding. Steff is wailing.

I click into emergency mode. Calm. Some people panic; I was blessed with the overwhelming *calm in the face of chaos* gene.

The Jeep has stalled and only the back two wheels are touching the ground. Maggie's searching the glove box for a first aid kit. Nothing. "I have tissues in my purse. Let's clean it with some water. Steff, calm down. It's OK. We're fine. Janey has a little bump; we'll call for some help and get out of here."



I find my phone on the floor of the Jeep. This will be quite the story. We'll get everyone squared away, post some selfies of us in the desert next to our broken down Jeep on Facebook and wait for help.

I look down. No service. "Whose phone works out here? I've got nothing." Ally, nope, Maggie, nothing, Steff, out of battery. I check Jane's. No service.

Water. OK let's get some water for Janey. We have two liters of water. OK that's cool. I've seen the movies; we'll each have a capful every hour, or two, or whatever — I'll ask Maggie to do the math.

"Janey, honey, do you know where we are?" Yes, those are the Superstition Mountains on our left. We were supposed to get to the end, turn around and head back the way we came.

The end? I don't see an end to anything out here.

I think Jane-a may have a concussion. Her pupils don't look like they're dilating, but honestly I can't tell. It's so goddamn sunny I can't see straight.

"Does Joe know where we are?" I ask. "Well, yes, but he's in Sedona for the weekend, and we weren't gonna talk till Sunday.

Ally jumps into the driver's seat to try and get the Jeep started. It turns over, but it sounds weak and isn't



catching. And, shit, something looks like it's leaking under the Jeep. Maybe if we can get it off the boulder we can get it started.

"Girls, we've got to try and get this Jeep off this goddamn rock."

"Janey, are you OK? Steff, calm down. We are going to be fine! Let's do this!"

After a good half hour we give up. It's a lost cause. Totally stuck. As a matter of fact I think we made it more stuck. And I think that leak is transmission fluid. I'm no mechanic, but I know it's not good.

OK, well, I'm sure we'll see another Jeep tour. They'll help us. Let's just wait it out a little bit.

What do we have for food?

"We have half a bag of Tostitos, a baguette, smoked Gouda and some melted dark chocolate."

"Chocolate! Who takes chocolate into the desert!" Steff gives us all a sheepish look.

We settle into our spots in the Jeep trying to get comfortable while waiting for help. "Someone tell a story," says Jane-a. Steff tells us all about how her husband got



canned as the lacrosse coach for drinking on the sidelines. They lodged a formal complaint against the league. “Everyone does it!” she said. And he’s a great coach. Those seventh graders love him.

Maggie starts to tell us about her most recent patent for a new pharmaceutical lubricant that will revolutionize joint care when Ally blurts out, “I’m leaving Jimmy!”

Steff grabs the tequila and pours us all a shot.

As Ally tells us the long story of her sordid affair with a fellow landscaper, the heat of the day burns on. We’re all pretty red, though we’ve now reapplied our diminishing sunscreen several times.

Maggie has taken her shirt off and now has it over her head.

He’s 30, she said. They started the affair last summer. He made her feel sexy, she said. Made her feel alive, she said. Really Ally? It’s all so cliché! You have everything you could possibly want. Jimmy is wild about you. What will the kids think? Find that spark at home. You can make it happen!

But no, they’ve kept it going and she’s truly fallen for him. He just got an apartment in Providence, and he wants her to move in with him.

Ugh, I can’t take it. Why didn’t she ever tell me? And



where the fuck are the fucking Jeep tours?

Janey and Maggie are arguing.

“You are supposed to leave your clothes on! I live out here. I know!”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m hot! If you’re hot, what do you do? You take your clothes off!”

“I’m telling you, the sweat is good. You’re supposed to sweat; it keeps you cooler.”

“Fuck that, Janey, you sweat. You’re the one who got us into this.”

“Hang on guys, please don’t fight. We are going to be rescued any minute now. I know it.” I can’t believe I just said that. I can’t believe that we have to be rescued. Damn, this is serious. We could die out here. It’s now almost 7. I think the sun is gonna go down soon. I’m scared. I’m thirsty.

“Maggie, when can we have some water again?”

Steff starts to scream. She’s squatting behind the Jeep going number one, and there’s a big-ass rattlesnake about five feet away from her.

“Don’t run!” said Jane. “Move slowly toward us. Slowly,



slowly.” She makes it safely back into the Jeep and reaches for the tequila.

“Honey, I don’t think that’s the best idea.”

“Listen, if I’m going to die out here in the desert I’m not doing it sober.”

Good point.

The rattler has slithered away, thank god, but there’s more where he came from.

It’s now much cooler. The sun is setting. Steff is sleeping. Did she pass out?

Janey is softly crying. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s not your fault,” we assure her, but Jesus, it sort of is, right?

“Let’s have some dinner,” says Ally. We break into the baguette and Gouda. Two pieces each — we save Steff’s for when she wakes up.

It’s fully dark now. We’re keeping the Jeep lights on as long as the battery holds out, but I don’t think we have much longer. It’s much cooler too. The temp on the Jeep says 77, but I’m cold. I think it’s the sunburn.



I love these girls. My girls. But god, I miss my kids and my hubby. He'd know how to get us out of this. I'm trying to be brave, but I'm running on empty here.

Suddenly I hear noises. Foreign noises. Scary noises. All I can think of is the secret ghost town that is only visible at night. I think I can see it off in the distance. "Everybody OK?" I say, trying to be brave?

I focus my eyes. Then I see it. I really see it.

Out there in the distance. I see a shimmering light.

I'm frozen. Watching. I don't want to say anything, but this is how it's going down. Not starvation, not death by rattlesnake, but we're going to be killed by the ghosts of Superstition Mountain.

It's moving toward us. This is it.

"Do you guys see that?" Maggie asks with excitement.

"Scream! We're here! Help!!!"

"Shhh!" I say, "That's not what you think."

Steff wakes up. And they're all screaming now. Screaming and beckoning the spirits!

I can't watch. Just kill me now. I squeeze my eyes tight. I think I'm gonna pass out.



When I come to, moments later, I'm being welcomed into a Jeep filled with a bunch of tourists wearing night vision goggles. A desert at night tour! Of course! Hallelujah. With tears of joy and lots of hugs and thank-yous we abandon our broken ship and head for salvation. We've been saved.

We made it home in time for a decent night's sleep at Jane's and an early check-in at the Casablanca the next day. Bathrobes, manicures, mimosas by the pool — we did it all. Success.

As I pop an Ativan, settle into my neck pillow and put my seat back I feel lucky to have these friends. Friends for life. Can't wait to do it all again. But goddamit, next year we're going to Nantucket.

Pilot says we have a five-hour flight. Better get some sleep. I want to be nice and fresh for bubble day.



THE LION GUIDES

as told by

SVEN FAHLGREN

The man's eyes flicked downward toward the instrument panel, then back up, scanning left to right. His left hand held the yoke while his right adjusted the throttle; together they played in concert, for navigation held no before or after, just the now and the ability to exist, a challenge to which all trained pilots rise. Protocols are triggered; protocols bring structure to an otherwise unstructured environment.

The headsets, too big for a child, were heavy but welcomed, for they brought both connectivity and isolation that otherwise would've been severed and exposed. With them the boy was able to hear air traffic control and weather data and talk to the pilot, but mostly they allowed him to remain in his thoughts, thoughts that provided a bubble of distraction given that the situation outside seemed to be worsening.



The headsets were also used to muffle the roar of the C182 Skylane, a single-engine Cessna that had been purchased in San Diego and flown to Homer, Alaska, for the season. Conversely, it was time to fly the plane home to Seattle, and having spent two weeks on the gillnetter, the boy was tired, cold and ready to be home. From the man's radio calls the boy understood that radio contact had been lost for a little while now, and visual reference long before that, for they were now fully encapsulated in a bank of radiant fog.

"Yakutat, Yakutat, this is Foxtrot 4-5-1 heading 1-5-1 degrees south by southeast requesting contact, over."

Static.

"Yakutat, Yakutat, this is Foxtrot 4-5-1 heading 1-5-1 degrees south by southeast requesting contact, over."

The boy was not fearless, but had he lived long enough to fully understand fear in order to be fearless? Perhaps it was faith in the nonreligious sense, the kind that one seeks during times of crisis that gives one a sense of security? Or could it be simply that he was well trained; trained to know how to control his body and emotions, to know when to be quiet and when to ask questions?

Survival tactics.

He shivered and brought his arms in tight. It didn't help



that he only wore his kelly green vest over a very large Incredible Hulk T-shirt and damp jeans. The man seemed comfortable though in his button-down wool shirt, wool pants and gray wool socks that danced upon the rudder pedals. Even his hairs looked like wool, teased out save for the headset that divided the mass.

The man caught him staring — he was a lion.

The boy looked down and noticed that he was bleeding. He had been rubbing the piece of ivory he was holding so hard with his thumb that it had sliced open on the jagged base from where it had been shattered from its host's bone. He sucked the blood, then hid the thumb. He stroked the ivory with his other thumb, more careful this time. It felt good, smooth, worn. He wondered if he would be able to do some scrimshaw like the old-timers back at the village, but he liked it plain too; it told its own story with the longitudinal cracks, indentations and discolorations of amber.

He smiled because he now had evidence of an epic adventure that was sure to impress. He would tell of how, earlier that day, the dead walrus was spotted on that strip of black volcanic sand and how the man had circled back to land. It was a small strip of beach, increasingly isolated from the mainland by a rising tide; if the boy had a piece of chalk, he thought, he could've written a message to other aircraft flying over that day because it had the just cleaned look of a school chalkboard that went on for hundreds of yards ... or the biggest and best maze ever ...



or Sam + Paige within a heart, knowing that it would be washed away by the tide.

“What are we doing?” the boy asked, his voice sounding ever more familiar through his headset.

The man looked over and gave a wry smile.

Throttle in, flaps down, vibrations ceased and the propeller materialized once again to its solid form through the windscreen. The man stepped down, reached behind the seat and pulled out the Smith & Wesson Model 29, a .44 magnum handgun with an 8-inch barrel that he called his bear gun; it was as black as the beach and too shimmered in the sun. With his oversized gait he lumbered toward the graying carcass.

The boy was relieved, for he needed to pee badly. He ran over to a piece of driftwood.

BOOM!

BOOM!

He had turned to see the second round go off. It took two more and some carving with his knife for the man to extract the tusk. The other tusk was missing; the man looked at the boy, offered the gun; the boy shook his head. The man aimed again and dislodged a molar.

“This is for you, and give this one to your brother.”



The beach reminded him of the last beach they had been on except that this one was wider and had a protected cove called Lost Harbor, which is where all the gillnetters put in during rough storms, or for the quick mending of gear and fresh water resupply.

He was the only kid in the group, surrounded by men whose families had been fishing the same waters for generations — men, who when stories were told, raised their hunters' hands and clamped down upon his shoulders as if hauling him from icy waters. Each story followed a recipe of equal parts wonder, bemusement and advice — the trichotomy of Alaskan fishermen.

These men were outlaws unto themselves; men who followed an unspoken creed known only to those that do and learned by those that do not. This creed ensures that everyone follows the rules — when being watched, and allows them to break the rules when not. Living by this code enables them to mend sweaters and netting by the fire together or to sit together for hours in a makeshift sauna utilizing animal hides, driftwood, twine and football-sized stones, and assures them that when one is in his darkest hour, the others will cut net — this insurance cannot be bought, only earned.

The one missing his left arm just above the elbow was called Saint. A few years back he had had engine failure while long lining for tuna in the Pacific. For three days he pulled the drive-belt by hand while he drifted. On the third day the engine finally turned over, yet Saint wasn't



able to remove his hand in time. He tied off a tourniquet and headed for Honolulu. That didn't slow him down though; his wit was sharp, and the boy was amazed to see that Saint could tap a Camel and strike a match faster than any of the men. "I just want it more than you," he would say. "That's why I get laid and you don't."

The aircraft rose then dipped suddenly. The lap belt pinched. As he tried to loosen it he became aware that he had to pee again. Taking stock around him, there was nothing to do but hope that they would be landing soon. He turned to check on the wooden box. Quarter-sized holes had been drilled along the sides. His eyes met that of the peregrine's, a glint of light refracting from its lens. Would it prefer to be out there he thought, or is it that he too is well trained?

He thought of his mom again, how he had begged her to let him go; how, despite her concerns, everything would be fine; that in lieu of missing two weeks of school he would write a report about his trip and present it to the class; that this was the opportunity of a lifetime that could not be missed. And how he now wished she had said no, and it wasn't the first time that had been wished.

Due east of Kodiak Island the boy endured one of the longest days of his life. For him it began at dawn when it was time to pick the first set. The man steered from the stern and used his foot to engage the drum. He picked garroted salmon from the net, letting them slide toward



the boy, who was waiting in the hole on a mound of shaved ice, ready to shovel and stack.

Halfway through the pick, amid the whirls of gears and wet flopping fish, one King Salmon fell loose and slid under the boy's nose, and of all the salmon being caught that day he felt sorry for this one. Maybe if he saved just one it would make everything seem less raw ... he gathered his courage. "I want to throw this one back."

The man paused for moment, then said, "Sure."

"Really?" said the boy, all too familiar with the man's ways.

"Sure, but that's a movie and some popcorn."

The boy picked up the fish, ready to do the good deed, took stock around him, of the salmon already packed neatly in ice, of the junk fish squirming on deck amid blood and waste. Then he dropped back into the hole, where the cold air was immediate, and picked up the shovel.

Later that day he was wet, cold and tired. The seas rose to 10 feet, and there was a small craft advisory; a miasma of oil in the wheelhouse rapidly induced seasickness. Over the engine's roar the boy uttered loudly, "I think I'm going to be sick." The man, hands firmly on the wheel, kept the bow heading into the waves.

"Go up top, sit in the Zodiac, lock your elbows around



the lines and wear your float coat,” said the man.

In hindsight, the boy was fortunate that he wasn't washed overboard, for as he rested in the Zodiac, facing crest after crest of angry sea and salty air, the bow would arch into the grayness above, then fall into the grayness below, differentiated only by the frothing teeth of the trough. He faced the wind and rain, shook saltwater off his matted hair like a dog and tasted acrid minerals on his tongue, an elixir that proved useful given his delicate state. For over an hour he bore witness to the vessel's survival, vital, for without whom it becomes just another boat caught in a storm, but with whom gods exist in the face of existentialism.

Another jolt of turbulence brought him back to the plane; the instrument panel started to glow as night took grasp. He liked the symmetry of the cockpit, how he and the pilot both had yokes, pedals and mirrored gauges so that he had his own set to monitor. The outside temperature read 38 degrees; a real concern if it kept dropping because the small plane wouldn't be able to handle the forming ice, he was told.

The struts could barely be seen not five feet from his nose, accentuated only by the pulse of the strobes.

“How do you hear me?”

“Foxtrot 4-5-1, this is Yakutat tower. How do you hear me? Over.”



After a clear heading and updated weather data, it was good to know that they were being tracked on a radarscope. The boy twisted the air vent open and prodded the soup with his finger; it came back cold and moist.

In minutes they were down, the runway felt before it was seen. The airport was more of a landing strip with a few corrugated hangers. The man and the boy entered the fluorescent lobby with the falcon and a small box of groceries. It was deserted and there was nothing to do but eat crackers and sardines while waiting for the fog to lift.

He sat in the black vinyl chair and drifted; he leaned against the man's shoulder, then slid farther down his arm. The man cradled his head and lowered him onto his lap, gently moving the hair from the boy's brow. He drifted further into darkness, only faintly aware that a blanket had been provided, and he knew that this was all the warmth he needed.



JEREMY, THE GLO WORM

as told by

PATRICK KRULIK

“I can’t fuckin’ wait to meet this Mickey Mouse fella.”

“Robbie, I’m not gonna tell you again — we ain’t going to no Disney World, and you know I can’t stand it when you talk like that.”

“Sorry, ma’am.”

“Now finish up them Cocoa Puffs and get your butt outside ta help your dad load the van. It’s almost 5 and you know we gotta be on the road before dawn.”

It was June 5th, 1989, and both of my parents had just been indicted for racketeering and securities fraud in an insider trading investigation in New York City, so I was sent to spend some quality time with my cousins in the shithole town known as Follansbee, West Virginia.



My mother despises my dad's family, but since her only sister drowned in a boating accident off the coast of the Philippines last year, I'm stuck with the hillbilly side of my DNA for the foreseeable future.

I arrived in Follansbee on a Tuesday night and learned that I wouldn't see daylight shine down on this town for quite awhile yet — an unscheduled family “vacation” had us leaving town before sunrise on a 36-hour roadtrip to Florida.

My cousin Robbie; Jeremy, the Glo Worm; and I headed outside into the dark pre-morning sky. It must have been 80 degrees already, but the humidity made it feel like stepping into a 100-degree sauna.

Uncle Rusty, who could be seen by the bright orange glow from the cigarette hanging from his mouth, was prepping the van for takeoff by positioning a Sears turtle shell top carrier to the top of the van.

“Robbie, you and Billy go pull them seats outta the van and lay down them blankets.”

Removing the back seats from the gray Dodge Caravan and spreading out a slew of blankets, pillows and any other semi-soft thing he could find was what my cousin Robbie referred to as “mother-fuckin' luxury travel.”

The kicker to this “luxury” setup was the 12-inch all-in-one TV/video cassette player bungeed to the top of a



fuchsia-colored milk crate and jammed between the two polyester front seats of the van to achieve the “most kick-ass viewing setup.”

I’d only met my cousin Robbie once before when my Dad’s mom died two or three years ago. He’s a nice enough guy, but pretty rough around the edges and can’t seem to stand still to save his life. And despite his affinity for the F-bomb and being almost 15 years old, he’s *obsessed* with cartoons and kids’ toys, especially his filthy Glo Worm, Jeremy, who *never* leaves his side.

I’d mentioned the funeral to him last night when I arrived. To which he responded, “Fuckin-a, I’ve seen tons of dead people. Ain’t nothin’ new to me. In fact, I seen a guy floatin’ down the creek just the other day — was hot as hell out, so I just pushed him on by with a stick and jumped on in. Me and Jeremy ain’t scared of fuckin’ nothin’.”

“Robbie, stick that plug into the cigarette lighter and we’ll see if we can’t get this baby hummin’,” said my Uncle Rusty.

Robbie yanked out the cigarette lighter and swiftly jammed the TV plug in.

“Now we’re cookin’ with gas,” Rusty said, as he turned the car ignition, watched the 12" flicker with life and took a long drag of what already seemed to be his fifth cigarette of the day.



My uncle Rusty was recently promoted from “Sales Associate” to “Assistant Store Manager” at the local Radio Shack down at the Hightown Strip Mall, but forgot to lock the front door the other day when going out back for a smoke and was robbed of more than \$4,000 worth of CB radios.

They threatened to fire him, but there were only two other applications on file. One was a registered sex offender, and the other didn’t have any arms. So they reluctantly kept him on staff and demoted him to “*Assistant Sales Associate*” on the condition that he take two weeks of unpaid leave. Hence the impromptu “vacation.”

“Robbie, start haulin’ that luggage out here and we’ll pop ‘em into the carrier.”

Robbie threw Jeremy, the Glo Worm, into the back of the van. “We ain’t goin’ nowhere, Jer. We’ll be right back — don’t you worry one fuckin’ bit.”

We started hauling out the “luggage,” which consisted of a duct tape-covered plastic Ghostbusters suitcase; a zipperless human-sized black duffel bag overstuffed with clothes; one dusty black suitcase; three 2-liter bottles of Mountain Dew; five cartons of Marlboro cigarettes; six large, heavy loosely closed cardboard boxes; three bags of Cheetos; a handful of Fuit Roll-Ups and eight or 10 VHS tapes, including *Fievel Goes West*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie*, and *The Land Before Time*.



Uncle Rusty finished lashing the top carrier to the roof of the van and loaded in the suitcases, the giant duffel bag, my one bag from New York, and all but one carton of cigarettes. Everything else went into the van.

Robbie and I took the six boxes and stacked them 3x2 against the back hatch of the van on the floor. “Fuck yeah,” Robbie said. “This way we can watch TV sittin’ up by leaning up against these here fuckin’ boxes — ain’t that right, Jeremy — luuuuuuuxurious.”

Aunt Peggy came out a few minutes later with two large zip-locked bags full of diagonally cut bologna sandwiches and lit a cigarette. “Y’all ready?”

She was my father’s only sibling, a sweet lady and quite pretty actually, despite her current situation. She and Rusty met in Florida when she was on a high school road trip and Rusty was stationed with the Coast Guard. They both ended up at the Rusty Bucket in Daytona one night. He bought her a few drinks, they danced a little, he knocked her up, and 14 years later here she is stuck living in a single-floor, decrepit shitty old house in the middle of no-where’s-ville West Virginia with a deadbeat husband and a son-of-a-bitch son.

“Fuckin-a I’m ready,” said Robbie. “Disney World, here we come, motherfucker!”

“Watch yer mouth,” replied Peggy.



“Yes ma’am.”

I crawled into the back, and Robbie positioned Jeremy on his lap for the long ride as Rusty jumped into the driver’s seat and Peggy sat next to him, riding shotgun.

“Ain’t no time to waste,” said Rusty as he threw the shifter into reverse.

Robbie agreed and didn’t waste any time as he busted out the *Dink, the Little Dinosaur* tape, slid it into the VHS player, ripped open a bag of Cheetos and repositioned himself and Jeremy up against the boxes. “Now this here is what I’m talkin’ about — throw your shit-kickers up and relax, motherfucker.”

With the windows down and *Dink, the Little Dinosaur* on full blast, Rusty sped off on Route 2 following the Ohio River south. “Gotta get gas,” I heard him yell to Peggy over the cartoon.

We screeched into a red and white Tooley’s Gas and Mini Mart and pulled up next to the first pump just as the sun was rising over the eastern hills. Rusty switched the ignition off as an overweight old man in blue overalls and a blue hat two sizes too small emerged from the shop and slowly made his way over to the van.

“Aw shit, Pa — we were just gettin’ to the good part — at least keep the fuckin’ battery on!” Robbie yelled out as he stuffed another handful of Cheetos into his mouth.



“Hold yer horses,” Peggy replied. “It’ll only be a minute.”
“What’ll it be?” the attendant asked.

“Fill ’er up” Rusty replied. “Give the oil a check while yer at it.”

“Yes’r.”

The attendant walked around the car, lifted the handle, stuck the pump into the tank and proceeded to unlatch the hood. Rusty pulled out another cigarette, lit it and nervously drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

The attendant pulled out the dipstick, wiped it on his overalls and yelled out, “Ya ain’t got much oil in there, fella.”

“Best throw in a quart then,” replied Rusty.

“Well, ah, we’re fresh out of oil — had a real busy week. Seems everybody’s gettin outta town lately.”

“Well shit, I spose we’ll have ta get some down in Wheelin.”

A red, rusty, beat-up Ford pickup truck sped past us and stopped in front of the store. The man driving, wearing a washed-out blue Ford trucker hat with disheveled hair down past his ears, threw the truck into park, slammed the remainder of his tall-boy can of Busch, crushed it in



his hand, threw it on the passenger side floor and headed into the store.

The pump ticked off.

“What do we owe ya??” Rusty asked

“That’ll be, ah, \$12.39.”

The man in the trucker hat emerged from the store with a fresh six-pack of Busch, jumped into his truck, tore a single can from the plastic webbing, cracked it open and took a long slug before throwing the truck into drive and speeding off up Route 2 north.

Peggy lifted her small pink-and-white change purse and pulled out two 5s and three 1s and handed them to Rusty. “Here ya go,” said Rusty.

“I’ll have to run in and get ya some change.”

“Keep it,” Rusty said as he cranked the ignition and took off through the parking lot.

Back on Route 2 speeding south the sun was in full view and the highway was warming up quickly.

“Ma, turn on the motherfuckin’ AC, will ya? It’s fuckin’ warm as shit back here.” Peggy reached down and turned the temperature dial to the coldest setting and cranked the fan to full blast.



Rusty grabbed a fresh smoke and craned his neck down to light it just in time to see the check engine light pop on bright red. A stench of burning rubber filled the van, and streaks of gray smoke flooded from the hood.

“Jesus Fucking Christ!” Rusty yelled out in frustration as he steered the van over the rumble strips onto the left shoulder.

Rusty turned the engine off, pulled the hood latch, jumped out of the van, slammed the door shut, threw open the hood and released a giant plume of white and gray smoke.

“Whatdaya think’s wrong, Rus?” Peggy yelled from the passenger side as she filed her nails.

“Hell I dunno. Looks like the motherfucker overheated of sumptin’,” said Rusty as he eyeballed the radiator.

“Best if y’all come on out and wait in the grass till I figure it out.”

“All right boys hop on out,” Peggy said.

Robbie set Jeremy, the Glo Worm, on top of one of the cardboard boxes and scooted out on his hands and knees. I followed and we made our way onto the grassy part of the median.

“Motherfucker, we was just gettin’ to the good part too.



We ain't never gonna find out what happens to good old Dink, ain't we, motherfucker," said Robbie as we walked away from the van.

I sat down in the burnt-out patch of grass in the center of the median and watched as Rusty poked his head around the smoking engine. Robbie picked grass and tried to teach himself how to whistle while cussing after every failed attempt.

A black-and-white cop car cruised by heading north, quickly pulled a U-turn through the median and slowly pulled up behind the van. A short, fat man in a large hat stepped out, adjusted his belt under his enormous gut, tugged on his oversized brim and wobbled toward the van.

"Hey, where the fuck's Jeremy?" Robbie yelled out. Robbie ran back up to the van, grabbed the hatch handle and threw the trunk door open. Jeremy came tumbling out along with the top three cardboard boxes, which came crushing down on the blacktop, popped open and spilled about 30 CB radios onto the shoulder and fast lane of the highway.

The police officer picked one up off the blacktop and examined it. "These yers, fella?"

Robbie replied, "Ain't fuckin' mine. Must be my pop's. I was just worried about old Jeremy here," he said as he bent over and snatched Jeremy, the Glo Worm, off the



ground. “Jer, you scared the fuck outta me — don’t do that again, motherfucker.”

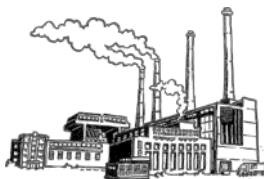
Rusty popped his head out from under the hood to see what the commotion was all about.

The cop and Rusty locked eyes.

After a few seconds the cop quickly turned on his heel, awkwardly jogged back to his car and grabbed his radio. “Hey, dispatch, didn’t you fellas mention something about some stolen radios recently? Just came across a fella with a whole boatload in the back a his van and think they might be what yous looking for?”

“Oh yeah, sure did. Call came in just yesterday. Them radios is HOT.”





CHAPTER NO 6

July 10, 2014

MADE IN AMERICA

July 4th is one of our favorite holidays.

*To honor our great nation, this month's
theme was "Made in America."*

ODE TO OPA pg / **204**
by Kelly Scharf, Account Executive

MAY DE AMERÍKA pg / **214**
by Aimee Kudlak, Senior Studio Designer

REPRESENTATION pg / **229**
by Chris Jacobs, Associate Creative Director



ODE TO OPA

as told by

KELLY SCHARF

Juli swung open the front door of her apartment and recited her daily checklist aloud: “Phone, keys, wallet, purse.” She nodded, confirming all her necessities for the day. She took a deep breath and made her way to the elevator. Today was May 15th. The day she had been waiting for was finally here ...

She had spent years, decades even, preparing for this day. As a child, Juli was known for having her head in a book or a journal in her hand at all times. While her siblings were outside playing various games and sports with the neighborhood kids of their Long Island town, Juli could be found sitting on the sidelines, feeding her limitless hunger for knowledge.

She was a sponge — she held no bias about what should or shouldn’t be learned and held no single area of interest



above the rest. Until that one summer night when she discovered a passion that would dictate the rest of her life.

Juli's mom had frequently offered up her daughter's babysitting services to the women in her Junior League group. Juli didn't mind this. She actually found some intrigue in getting to explore another family's house. Juli would study their furniture, their photos, their refrigerators and perhaps her favorite, their libraries.

On this particular night, after putting the kids to bed, Juli began her survey of the house. She recalled her mom telling her about how this family recently moved out to the island from the city. Juli assessed their collections and décor while imagining their life back in Manhattan. She was fascinated by this home: The art and the furniture were modern and seemed like one-of-a-kind creations, which was especially intriguing to Juli, whose own house looked like a Pottery Barn catalog.

When Juli made it to the study, she immediately noticed that there were two desks as opposed to one. "How equalizing and forward thinking," thought 13-year-old Juli. She went over to the Hers of the His and Hers desks and was immediately drawn to a stack of fashion magazines, some even from Europe.

Juli hadn't really ever thought of fashion as something to be studied. But her interests were piqued, and she carefully went through as many magazines as she could until it was time to assume her position on the couch



waiting for the parents to come home. Not wanting to part with these newly found treasures, Juli slipped the largest issue she could find into her bag before heading to the living room.

Juli's interest in and appreciation for both the history and the art of fashion increased rapidly. She read the biographies of celebrated designers, studied trends of the past and present, and even tried her hand at designing and constructing her own creations. Juli was not very successful on the sewing machine. She was, however, victorious (after months of convincing her parents) in getting her very own subscription to *Vogue* magazine for her 14th birthday.

Juli excelled academically throughout her teenage years and shortly after high school boarded the Long Island Railroad with a one-way ticket, never to look back. Juli also thrived in her college years as an English major concentrating in journalism at New York University.

She loved living in New York City — she felt a sense of excitement each day as she stepped outside and had the chance to observe a whole new stock of people and, of course, their wardrobes.

Throughout her college years, Juli worked at various publications, contributing as an intern, a writer and a coffee order taker. She felt a great sense of independence during this time and truly enjoyed the experiences.



As graduation approached, Juli began to think about where she wanted to settle into a career. Fashion and trends were still of major interest to her, but her current internship working for the *Daily Metro* (yes, that's the one that people dressed in neon vests hand out for free on corners and in the subway) consumed her time. There was always something to be done, and with the quick-turn around time for issues, Juli's focus shifted from high fashion to current events.

Juli graduated with honors and began to apply to every fashion magazine house she could find. Her absolute dream was to work within Conde Nast, which published every fashion magazine that mattered: *Style*, *Allure*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour* and, of course, the very magazine that started this whole journey back in Long Island 10 years before, *Vogue*.

Without any direct connections to Conde Nast, Juli felt that it was solely up to her to get in there. She called; sent letters, emails and faxes; and at one point even considered carrier pigeons and singing telegrams. (She did not end up sending a flock of birds or a barbershop quartet.)

In the meantime, Juli accepted a full-time position at the *Daily Metro*. She continued to thrive there and even got her editor to sign on for a biweekly fashion report that highlighted up-and-coming designers.

Ten months later, Juli finally got the call from *Vogue* — they wanted her to come in for an interview. Juli was



elated. She felt like it was finally her chance to shine. The days before the big interview some nerves and mild panic attacks ensued, but Juli assured herself that this was what she was born to do.

Juli assembled her portfolio and spent many hours debating, even dreaming about the next biggest decision of her immediate future: What should she wear? Would a suit be too conservative? Would bare legs be trashy? Should she get her curly locks blown out straight? Would she end up riding in the elevator with a famous designer like Karl Lagerfeld or the woman responsible for it all, editor-in-chief of American *Vogue*, Anna Wintour? She had to talk herself down off this ledge ... Anna was probably in Paris and probably has her own private elevator. Either way, Juli knew that she had to make an impression.

Juli marched up the subway steps of 42nd Street station along with the morning commuters. She felt like she was a part of something bigger than herself, like she belonged and had done this routine for years. “I could get used to this,” she thought to herself. Juli checked her phone for the time, 8:25 a.m., an hour and a half to kill before her meeting. “Oh shit, sorry!” Juli blurted, as she collided with a petite Mexican woman handing out the *Daily Metro*. Juli composed herself, spotted a Starbucks and headed for it.

Juli ordered a shot of espresso and took it to the bar facing the window. She studied the passersby as they



autopiloted their way to their offices, newspapers and coffees in hand for another day of work.

Time was moving, so Juli headed to the bathroom for one final review. She had decided to go with a classic black Ralph Lauren dress with an empire waist and capped sleeves. The dress was flattering on her frame and didn't expose too much. She accessorized with a vintage set of pearls, handed down from her grandmother, and CeCe, the stunning black leather Celine purse Juli and her roommate Alexis shared custody of. Juli went with her natural curls, pulled back so you could see her face, per her mother's advice. She applied another coat of Chanel lipstick; the color was called Pirate and it completed her classic, sophisticated and confident look. Showtime.

Juli walked the two blocks over to Conde Nast headquarters. She checked in with security and rode up the elevator, alone, to the 22nd floor. A stunning model-esque receptionist named Kara greeted Juli, brought her a bottle of Evian and assigned her to wait in a conference room, where she would go through a series of interviews.

The next three hours were a blur. Juli met with HR and three members of the editorial staff. She regaled them with the story of how she discovered her first *Vogue* and went so far as to steal it because she knew how special it was. She spoke of her experiences at NYU, her work at the *Daily Metro* and her desire to learn and contribute to



the future of *Vogue*. The conversations flowed well and as the final meeting wrapped up, Juli felt as confident as ever.

She walked out of the building with her head held high. She was sure to clear a six-block radius before she called her mom. “Mom, Mom, the meetings went so well! I really think this is gonna be it!” were the first words out of Juli’s mouth. Her mother asked her for an exact play by play and Juli’s mind went blank. “Shit, Mom, I actually can’t remember exactly what we talked about ... the basic stuff I guess? Either way, I do know that it went awesome and they said they would be in touch!” Juli’s mom was happy for her daughter, but something in her tone sounded off. When Juli asked her what was wrong, she said that Opa had taken a turn for the worse and that it might be a good idea for her to come that weekend.

Later that day, Juli was able to get on a train from Penn Station heading east for Long Island. Her mood had been shifting from happiness about her successful interview to sadness about her grandfather. She reflected on her Opa and his life ...

When Opa came to America, he was only 17 years old. He was born in a small province outside of Munich and named after his own father, Klaus. He had grown up in a time of hardship, struggle and conflict. Opa never liked to talk about his childhood. Much of the family left it alone and never asked, but inquisitive Juli had to know.

Juli had grown up in a town very close to where Opa



and Oma lived. They opened a small hardware store when Juli's mom and her siblings were very young. Their shop was a community staple and everyone, even people who weren't family, would lovingly refer to Klaus as Opa.

Juli always treasured the time she spent with Opa, even as a child. He was unlike any of the other grandfathers she knew. One summer he took seven of the grandchildren white water rafting down the Delaware River. Opa could build or fix anything. He wasn't big in stature, but he was the strongest man Juli knew.

In her junior year of high school, Juli's history class was studying World War II. One day, while visiting with her grandparents, Juli followed Opa out to the backyard as he tended to his pristine garden. She made some small talk with him and then approached the topic.

"Opa, can you tell me what it was like growing up in Germany during World War II?" Juli finally asked him. Opa said, "My Juli, it was a very sad, difficult time." Juli explained that she had been learning about this time period in school and that she couldn't believe all the stories. "Did you have any Jewish friends?" she asked. Reluctantly, Opa replied that he did in fact have some Jewish friends, but a day came and he never saw them again. Juli pressed him for more information. "My teacher told us that there was an army just for kids and said the boys really had no choice but to join and fight even if they didn't want to. Did you have to join the army, Opa?"



Opa stepped away from Juli, but she moved right in front of him. Opa's eyes filled with tears. "Juli, what I have seen in my childhood is very painful. It was as bad as you can imagine. I left Germany to get away and start a new life. Please do not carry on with your questions." Juli respected her grandfather's wishes and assisted for the rest of the afternoon in the garden.

Juli arrived at the Locust Valley Railroad Station and saw her mom and older brother waiting in the parking lot. They all embraced, and Juli's mom tried as best she could to prepare her daughter to go see her grandfather. She told her that the past few days had been hard for Opa. He was very sleepy and not eating. Juli's mom cautioned that Opa may not open his eyes or speak, but he would know that they were there.

Juli's heart sank. She hadn't even gotten inside the house and she was already crying. She was afraid to see her once loud, bustling Opa lying still in bed. Overwhelmed with feelings of guilt for not being around in recent years and passing over weekend trips home to spend time with friends in the city, Juli was a mess. She took a few minutes to compose herself before going into Opa's bedroom.

The room was dark with the exception of a bedside table lamp. The bed, which Juli remembered piling into with cousins and her grandparents, looked massive with just Opa tucked into it. He was wearing an oxygen tube around his face and his eyes were closed. Juli sat down on



the bed and held his hand. “Opa, It’s me ... It’s Juli.” Opa nodded his head and held Juli’s hand back. “My Juli,” he whispered back, “tell me about your life.”

Juli told her grandfather about her job at the *Daily Metro*, about her roommate and about a new Italian restaurant that had opened in her neighborhood. She spoke slowly and noticed that Opa smiled while she was describing the handmade ravioli spot. Juli told Opa about her exciting new opportunity at *Vogue* and her positive feelings after her interview earlier that day.

“Opa, I just want to say that I’m sorry I haven’t been around that much the last year or so. I’ve just been working so hard and really trying to focus and find my way in the world. I wish I could have been here more to hang out and take care of you.” She kissed his hand.

Opa was weak, but with determination he opened his eyes. He spoke to her. “My Juli, do not apologize for chasing your dream. You see, if I had not chased my dream for a better life, none of us would be here. I came here for all of us and for all of our futures. Never, ever be sorry for going after what you want. This is America, the land of opportunity. Seize your dreams.”



MAY DE AMERÍKA

(PRONOUNCED: MAY-DE-AH-MA-REEK-A)

as told by

AIMEE KUDLAK

The old woman sat in her timeworn chair on the veranda overlooking her flowering Amapola trees and Bougainvillea garden. Her long white hair was tied in a bun on top of her head. Her once beautiful face was deeply lined from many years of Mexican fiestas. The day was warm and clear and the air heavy with fragrance. An occasional breeze from the west carried the scent of blossoming limón trees from a nearby grove. Retardo, the crazy cat, sat purring on her lap. A bee buzzed by on its way to work.

The old woman finished her rosary, blessed herself, kissed the crucifix and dropped the rosary beads into the pocket of her apron. She never did like the correct way to say the rosary. All those Hail Marys were oh so boring. But she liked the feel of the round beads between her fingers.



Each bead represented some acquaintance who had died, and she would say, “Hola, Juan, how is it up there? Have you seen that comic, Roberto?” or, “Consuela, how is your little one? How pretty she was. Give her a hug for me.” The old woman was not particularly religious but kept plenty of ajo macho, elephant garlic, planted near su casa and a large potted aloe plant outside her front door to ward off any evil that might come her way.

Today the old woman was deep in thought. She accepted that her days on earth were coming to an end, but she was not one to be frightened by change. She was adventurous all her life and she was no different now. She believed that death was like birth. A transition from one form of being to another. And she was OK with this.

She planned to start giving her possessions away. Why should she keep the precious things she collected all her life? They would become another person’s junk? Yes, it was time to clean su casa. She would start today.

She would start with Jesús.

Jesús was 16 years old and a very hard worker. He had been working for the old woman since he was 10. He started out delivering the groceries, weeding the garden, bringing in the mail, helping with the laundry and doing so many other jobs she created for him. Jesús knew that she liked his company. And he liked hers.

The old woman saw strength and beauty in Jesús’



character and body. Oh, how she would have liked him around when she was young. Maybe her life would have taken a different path?

The old woman knew Jesús would be finishing up with the gardening work soon and would come to la casa for his pay. She would offer him some fresh-made coconut pie to entice him to stay, which would not be hard to do. Ah, yes the pie. She had almost forgotten that it was still in the oven. She shooed Retardo off her lap, stood up, got her balance, took her cane and slowly shuffled into su casa and made her way to the brightly lit cocina. She carefully took the pie out of the oven and placed it on the counter. It was perfect, made just like her mother taught her. She would let it cool before sprinkling the top with roasted coconut. The aroma was heavenly.

She filled a bucket part way with cold water, just enough for her to carry, and brought it out to the veranda. She sat down in her chair and waited for Jesús to come. Retardo resumed his place on her lap.

“Buenos días, señora May de América. Cómo está? How are you today?” asked Jesús as he arrived.

“Oh, muy bueno. I am feeling wonderful today. And how are you? Jesús?” she asked.

“Tired, hot, thirsty and hungry,” he replied.

“As usual,” May de América responded.



They laughed at their familiar rapport.

“Well,” said May de América, “here is a pail of water for you to rinse your face and hands. I just took your favorite coconut pie out of the oven. There is Coke in the fridge. You can grab me one when you get yours. Come back and sit here in the shade while the coconut pie cools.”

“Coconut pie! You know my very needs,” said Jesús.

“As you know mine,” laughed May de América.

Jesús rinsed the dirt off his face and hands in the bucket of water. He then went into la casa to el baño and washed a little more with soap and water. He grabbed two Cokes, a cerveza and some limóns from the fridge, and gobbled a handful of roasted coconut intended for the pie. Jesús went out to the veranda and sat in the chair next to May de América. He poured the cold cerveza into a glass and handed it to her with a piece of limón. He opened one of the Cokes. They sat for awhile in silence. It was late afternoon and the birds started feeding on the flying insects.

Jesús turned to May de América to casually ask her about a possible advance in pay, when he noticed for the first time a scar on the side of her hand.

“How did you get that scar on your hand? I never noticed it before.” he asked.



May de Ameríka turned her hand to look at the scar, which was almost lost in her aged and discolored skin.

“Oh, I forgot about that scar. I don’t remember how I got it. Honestly. I could have gotten it anywhere. I just don’t remember.”

She paused deep in thought for several minutes staring at the scar. She became scared because she could not remember how she got such a scar.

Suddenly she came to and said excitedly, “I do remember! When I was a child, I climbed a hill just outside of town. There was a legend that at the top of the hill were two very old coconut palm trees that were in love with each other and would not let anything come between them. It was odd that no other trees grew there, only the two palms. They were thought to be hundreds of years old but never seemed to age. I always wanted to see them up close, so one evening I climbed the hill until I reached the trees. They seemed harmless, so I reached out my hand to touch one when suddenly a wind came from nowhere, and the tree leaned over and cut me on the hand. It frightened me so much, I ran down the hill as fast as I could and jumped into my mother’s arms crying. She put healing salve on the cut and told me never to go up the hill again. She said that the place was haunted with a very strong love spirit and anyone that comes between the two trees never comes back.

“There were many tales about the trees. There is one I



remember well. They say there was an extraordinarily beautiful young girl who lived in a small village outside of Merida. She was 16 years old, with pure golden skin and the features of a Mayan. She had deep-set eyes, a strong chiseled nose and a wide smiling mouth. She was tall and lean, unlike most Mayan people. Her most striking feature, which made some people uneasy when they looked at her, was her emerald green eyes. They were like shiny lights beaming in the darkness. They say she was an Heberno Mexicano, a Mexican with Irish blood. You see, the Irish came to Mexico during the potato famine in Ireland in 1846. They migrated to the Americas and to Mexico and sided with the Mexicans during the Mexican-American War. They settled in Mexico and raised families.

“The young girl was an embroiderer and made beautiful garments for the women of her village. Her specialty was wedding dresses. They say that all marriages were happy ones when the bride wore one of her gowns. She was also an excellent hammock weaver and could weave special potions into the hammocks as she made them. If she touched gold, the owner of the hammock seemed to get wealthy. If it were silver, the owner would have a good home. If it were wheat, the owner would have a good marriage. She never would cry or be sad when weaving a hammock, for she did not want to pass on sorrow. No mother miscarried and no child died in one of her hammocks. Some feared her special talents, but most newlyweds sought out her hammocks because of their success in romance and child making.



“It was the holiday of Los Días de Los Muertos, the celebration of the dead. Merida was the center of the festival. From all the surrounding towns, the locals would come in their finest attire. Beautiful hand-embroidered dresses and shirts. Gorgeous headdresses. The sounds of whistles, horns and bells rang throughout the town.

“There was a band coming all the way from Mexico City. This was so exciting for the townspeople; they never had a band come from so far away.

“The festivities began in the cemetery, where people visited their long-lost dead relatives and friends. Then it moved to the Zocalo, where an altar was set up for offerings. There was food and drink, music and families, and babies galore. There was laughing and singing and dancing with an abandonment that most cultures in the world have never experienced.

“The band from Mexico City started setting up. How could this night get any better? The girls stood together and giggled at the musicians. The boys held their ground, eyeing the girls, eyeing the band. The musicians came out onto the stage, and that was when the girl with the green eyes moved out from the shadows. The band started playing, and the people started swaying and dancing. The rhythms became part of them.

“There was a particular musician who stood out, and all the girls watched him. A handsome guitar player who sang with a melodious voice and strummed his guitar



as if he were making love to it. All the women, young and old, wished they were that guitar. His body moved with the rhythm, and his eyes, well, they were green. He looked across the floor and his eyes met hers, and they smiled at each other.

“After the concert he found her with her girlfriends and offered to buy her a Coke. They grabbed their Cokes and took a walk under the stars. It was a clear and beautiful night. They talked about their lives. To her, his life seemed so much more exciting than hers. How she would love to travel playing music to audiences all over the world. To him, her life seemed so stable and inviting, and how he would love to settle down with a house and family. They did not share these thoughts with each other. They felt an attraction between them that they could not control, nor did they want to. They agreed to meet the next evening at the same place. She would take him to a hill with a wonderful view.

“That night, the young girl could not sleep. She was in love with the green-eyed musician. He was in a traveling band, and she would have to seduce him if she wanted to keep him. She thought about the herbs her grandmother showed her for love. Indeed, some of these were the same ones she weaved into her hammocks. But there was no time to make a hammock. She cried and thought all was lost. The next morning she finished the most beautiful dress she had ever created. It was made of the finest cotton and embroidered with fine red silk. She was making it for a bride but decided to wear it to her



meeting with the green-eyed musician.

“That night they met as planned. She smelled of roses and he of sage. They talked and even sang some traditional songs. They laughed. The night was warm and the field was full of fireflies. There were so many they lit up the night. She took his hand and said, ‘Would you like to see the view I told you about?’ He said yes.

“They walked up the small hill, through the long grass, and brushed away the fireflies. At the top of the hill was a view to the ocean where fluorescence could be seen so very far away. There was a hammock hung between the two coconut palm trees. She led him to it, and they both lay down. They rocked and rocked and rocked and held each other and kissed and swore they would never ever part. He held her in his arms, making these promises, knowing he would be leaving the next day.

He walked her home, and kissed her softly on the neck and lips. He promised he would see her the next day and said goodbye.

“That next day never came. She woke the next morning as if in a dream. She washed and dressed, and put on some lavender and limón essence. She walked to the market to buy some supplies for her weaving and ran into her friend, Amelia, who was at the festival two days before.

“Amelia excitedly told the green-eyed girl that the band



had left town that morning. ‘They say they are going to Cuba and then to Florida and then to Spain. They were muy excelente. Don’t you agree?’

“The green-eyed girl smiled but was devastated. Her heart sank. She could not feel the earth beneath her feet. She moved not knowing where she was going. She climbed the hill to the two coconut palm trees, and the hammock was gone. He took the hammock! She wailed and cried so hard that even the birds were weeping. She asked God to keep him safe, for one day they would meet again.

“The green-eyed girl went back to her loom and from the most special sisal, with the softest and finest fibers in all of Mexico, she started to weave a hammock with potions so special that no mortal man could escape from its welcoming arms. It took one whole year for her to finish the hammock, and all that time she thought only of the musician. When it was done, the green-eyed girl slept in the hammock to make sure it was well made and comfortable, and it was.

“She went to church and prayed to La Virgen de Guadalupe to give her strength and guidance. She also asked for forgiveness and empowerment.

“That night she went up the hill and hung the newly made hammock between the two coconut palm trees. She lay down, and it soon enveloped her and rocked her to sleep. She slept the best night of her life.



“The next day the people of the town, knowing the girl went up the hill, were shocked to see that the hammock was empty. They went to her mother’s house, but she was not there. All the townspeople frantically started looking for her. They went to the next village and the next, but she was not there. They thought the hammock had eaten her up. They were afraid to go near the hammock. So it hung there for months, then years. It never aged. The palm trees kept it safe.

“Then one day a handsome young guitar player arrived by bus and started asking about the green-eyed girl he had met so many years ago in this very town. He thought she would now be about 20 years old. The townspeople remembered the night his band from Mexico had played at the festival. What they did not know about was the affair the green-eyed girl had had with the guitar player. They told him about the special hammock she had made and how she had hung it between the two coconut palm trees, slept in it and disappeared. They told him she had put a spell on the hammock, that anyone who slept in it would disappear and never come back.

Jesús politely interrupted the story.

“This is such a great story, but, por favor, I need to take a whizz. Can we take a short break?” he asked.

May de Ameríka had to pee too.

“Vamos,” she responded.



So they both went into la casa, took care of their needs, got a Coke and cerveza and two pieces of coconut pie. Instead of going out to the veranda, they ate their pie in la sala, where it was cool. Not missing a good time, Retardo joined them.

Jesús asked May de América to continue her story. So she did.

“The night the musician came back to town a storm was in full force. The wind blew and the trees swayed with the wind. There was an eerie high-pitched whistle that frightened even the wild animals. Lightning and thunder filled the sky. The musician climbed the hill through the storm and reached the two coconut palm trees. He looked at the beautiful and inviting hammock. If this was her wish, that he would be encompassed in the hammock, so be it. He lay down in the hammock. The wind stopped, the trees remained still and the sky cleared.

“In the morning, news spread like wildfire throughout the town that the hammock was gone. Then it was learned that the musician had also disappeared. Some say the green-eyed girl was so angry with the musician that she weaved herself into the hammock, waited for him to return and killed him for leaving her. Some say that anyone could have slept in the hammock, that it only ate liars, but no one tested that theory. Some say the palm trees killed both the musician and the girl for coming between them. And some say after the green-eyed girl hung the hammock she went off to distant lands in



search of the musician. And that if he ever returned to the town and lay in the hammock, the hammock would show him where to find her.”

May de Ameríka started to eat her coconut pie.

Jesús asked, “Is that the end of the story? Did anyone actually die from sleeping in the hammock between the two trees?”

“I don’t think anyone went near the hammock; just the musician, and no one knows if he died, because he and the hammock disappeared. So there is no answer to the story’s end, but no one ever went up to those two coconut palm trees ever again. The trees finally died,” said May de Ameríka.

“Except you,” said Jesús. “You went up there.”

“Well, yes. But I didn’t get too close. And only got a little scratch,” answered May de Ameríka shyly.

May de Ameríka was tired and needed to take a nap.

She said, “Well, Jesús. Let me get your pay, and you can take home the rest of the pie to your family. I would like to give you a raise, for you have done wonderful work all these years. But before you go, can you get some boxes down from the top shelf in the bedroom closet for me? I can’t reach them and I want to start cleaning out old things.”



“Of course,” said Jesús.

He went into the bedroom, opened the closet and found several boxes on the top shelf. They were not heavy, so he took all of them down and took them into la sala.

“Jesús,” said May de Ameríka. “Can you please take these boxes to the dump. I don’t care what is in them. I know they are full of old things that no one will be interested in. Will you please do this for me?”

“Of course. No problema,” said Jesús.

He took his pay, thanked the old woman and put it in his pocket. He carried the boxes and put them into the back of his pickup truck, and with much appreciation he took the rest of the coconut pie back to his family.

He forgot about the dump.

Several days later he stopped into “Tacos-R-Us” for a burrito and heard people talking about the death of May de Ameríka. He grabbed the daily newspaper and found the obituary about the passing of May de Ameríka. She had left no family.

Jesús read in disbelief. He was just with her on Monday and this was Friday. She seemed so well, so happy and so full of life. What could have happened in these last few days? He was so upset. He cried for his loss.



Jesús suddenly remembered the boxes in the truck that he had never taken to the dump.

He went to the truck. In the first box were hundreds of small drawings of plants and handwritten notes of their uses and potions. In the second box was a beautiful Mayan dress, handsomely embroidered in red silk as if done by an angel. And in the third box was a hammock, which upon opening made Jesús' heart jump. It was the most beautiful hammock he had ever laid eyes on. He felt a powerful force emanating from it and was afraid to touch it.

And then he suddenly knew. He knew the hammock's history. He knew May de América was the girl in the story. He must treat this hammock very, very carefully.



REPRESENTATION

as told by

CHRIS JACOBS

I ducked down somewhere along the blazing brown path between Parowan and the Red Hills, holding tight to my knapsack. Behind and above me, a sight I never expected to see: a pack of fucking Kawasakians, mythical in their bearing, blithely puttering forth on their weather-beaten scooters. It made no sense. People just don't rep the foreign clans out here. It was rare enough to encounter groups claiming the larger brands from what used to be our nation's hubs of international commerce.

Time slowed to a crawl as the scooters slowed down and stopped nearby, their rotten exhaust leavening the scorched dust dotting the air. I stole a quick glance before hunkering further down into my spot. The Kawasakians rode laughably outdated vehicles, but I guess everything everywhere was laughably outdated now.

I didn't dare risk checking the supplies in the sack.



Besides, I could still feel the bundled grip of beef franks, the small tins of beans, and the bread, wonderful bread, more precious now than the jewels that adorned the necks of more fortunate souls in times gone by.

The haul had cost me three days of labor at the Ancestry.com encampment up near Minersville. It was a stroke of luck that they were even willing to bargain with me in the first place; traditionally, the Ancestrydotcommans were no great friends of the 1-800-Contacters, which had been my clan since birth. But the brand I repped had originated in Draper and theirs in Provo, so a working relationship had been forged.

I wondered what the Ancestrydotcommans would do if they stumbled across a legitimately foreign clan. Shaking my head, I looked down at my forearm, attempting to wring inspiration from my clan mark, a 1-800-Contacts logo tattooed with India ink. But its lowercase humility and comforting serifs proved woefully short on ideas.

How I got here, how we got here, how everyone got here is a story five or six generations removed from myself. But the details were meticulously cared for throughout the clan, resisting attempts to incorporate a dinosaur here or a cyborg there as they were passed down from the old folks to the young folks. I suppose what happened is fantastic and terrible enough on its own.

Long ago — not THAT long ago, but fairly long ago — we were a humming apparatus of commerce and relative



stability. There were wars and there were tragedies, injustices too, but the apparatus persevered. Many, many people had homes and food and water, even vehicles and animals that weren't for eating.

But a curious thing had been happening. Over time, corporations and their brands had ascended into an intractable position of governance and cultural domination. And with few exceptions, pretty much everyone everywhere had given them a leg up in getting there, thanks largely to two words that now carried the sinister weight of a dusty historical bogeyman: "social media."

You see, in addition to all the homes and food and animals and vehicles, people had these computing machines. And those machines connected to a vast network of data and communication. Through this network, the corporations and their brands would speak directly to the masses, constantly developing newer and more insidious methods of entwining themselves into the lives of individuals.

The courts had decided that corporations *were* people, and the corporations were constantly taking to social media to vow that people were their brands, that there was no separation, that together we formed an empowering, mutually profitable whole. That's what people believed, and they believed it *hard*.

None of this amounted to much more than a political



issue for those who cared about such things. But the powder keg had been willed into existence, ready for the spark. And that spark came after a string of particularly potent economic downturns amid a climate of constant crisis, be it financial, ecological, political, interpersonal ... all of it.

The resources went first, followed closely by civility, followed by whatever illusions of safety remained. In much of the world, this was life as usual; but in many other parts, particularly *this* part, people were not resilient.

So folks turned to the brands, looking for what seemed a logical refuge. After all, no separation, right? We are them and they are us? Suffice it to say, the corporations saw it differently, and a long, bloody stretch of conflict rose from the chaos.

In battle after battle, groups of people bound by location and necessity had surged into triumph over their corporate targets. Here and there, people claimed the brands and companies as their emotional birthrights, establishing bases in drab suburban headquarters, stand-alone retail outlets, financial district high-rises, and restaurants of varying size and quality.

A thorough Balkanization was moving closer to completion. But it took the gradual downward tug of history to reach this point, both in general and here in this ditch, where I hid from a pack of fucking Kawasakians.



It just wasn't normal. As much as our nation had been shattered into a million constituent parts, folks still clung to a sort of fractured national pride. Residents of the larger regions might claim multinational corporations or global brands as a survival instinct, grasping for the resources and organized methodologies of those entities. Aside from that, it just wasn't done, and it certainly wasn't done out here.

The fat, stylized K found on different body parts of the scooter gang's members confirmed that this wasn't some wayward clan that had reclaimed another brand's goods. Any respectable clan would have rebranded the items in the first place. My clan alone had 1-800-Contacts teakettles, combat boots, ATVs, generators, kayaks, helmets, briefcases and more.

A long-haired Kawasakian left his scooter and shuffled toward a ridge not far from my hiding spot. This one had the K creeping out from his collar and up along his neck, a tidy piece of work that spoke to the sophistication of the clan. These tattoos were a rite of passage for clan members everywhere; at the age of 7, we all had our brand mark needled into us, generally on the forearm. From there on out, clan members could elect to receive other brand-themed embellishments, with most adults carrying no less than a half-dozen tattoos.

At least within this region, most clans were known for the relative refinement or crudeness of their primary tattooists. In particular, the Pocatello branch of Clan



Wendy's had beautiful work, incorporating mandalas of lettuce, tomatoes and onions around their standard mark of a beneficent red-haired girl. Conversely, you only had to look as far as Salt Lake to see the graceless botching of the Discoverfinancialservicians, their attempts at inking a fairly simple word mark more often resembling an uncontained melanoma.

Could I make a run for it? Scramble out into the brown expanse and hit along the sagebrush-lined trail that would take me back to the 1-800-Contacts encampment near Maple Spring Hollow? There were usually a dozen or more clan members there, and if it came to it, I was confident in our ability to handle the Kawasakians. Just in the past two years, we had emerged from skirmishes with Clan PetSmart, a platoon of Krogerites and even a small detachment of Comcasticans.

But I'll admit that the prospect of fighting a legitimately foreign clan had me spooked. Who knew what they would bring to the battle? This was uncharted territory here — within all my clan, there had never even been rumor of groups repping foreign brands, and we were people who enjoyed a good rumor; there were rumors that a handful of computing machines from the pre-conflict era still existed, despite all evidence to the contrary; there were also far-fetched rumors of groups that remained defiantly unbranded. Imagine that.

A soft clump of soil fell down upon my head as footsteps approached. I dug myself deeper against the ditch in a fit of instinct, but it was too late. A trio of Kawasakians



looked down upon me. Their faces displayed the calm that comes from knowing the numbers are on your side. Behind me, the knapsack jutted out.

Shaking some dust from his head, the largest of the Kawasakians stepped forth and spoke in a language I had never heard. A woman to his left translated in tentative English.

“We ride to the western coast,” she said.

I nodded, still thinking I maybe had a chance to sprint past the trio and on into freedom. A tense silence lasted for perhaps a minute. Finally, the large one casually spoke a few words to the woman and walked away. She cleared her throat, spitting out a pocket of dirty pent-up saliva.

“Our apologies,” she spoke, stepping toward me. As I moved to get up, the third Kawasakian lunged in. I caught a flash of a Kawasaki-branded Taser just before it hit me in the ribs. And then I did what all people do when tased.

I came to later that evening. Looking around, the situation came into focus. My arms and legs were bound with nylon rope, and I was lying down on what appeared to be a small trailer bed as it rolled along behind the scooter fleet. The air smelled colder, cleaner.

Our convoy continued down the road to somewhere as I rolled over onto my side. Up on the horizon, colorful



explosions crackled in the sky, like nothing I had ever seen. My heartbeat accelerated in a spasm of anxiety, compounded by the unsurprising fact that my knapsack was nowhere to be found.

I quietly lamented the apparent passing of those beef franks, those beans and most tragically the bread, oh, the bread.

In times both good and not so good, our people had always found solace in the words that had trickled down from the beginning, words that were the very essence of our clan. Once again, I turned to these words, quietly reciting them as we barreled forward into the night:

*To provide the easiest, most convenient
experience possible takes vision.*

*And our vision is a commitment to people that will build the
only real value we can ever have: our reputation.*

*Dedication to the hassle-free way of doing things must extend
into every last thing we do. For it is not just an approach;
it is what defines us.*

*Together, we're creating an innovative, industry-leading process.
Where once there was darkness, there shall now be sight.*

For if there is one thing we possess, it is this:

A vision to be the best.





CHAPTER NO 7

August Summer Party

GOOD COMPANY

In early August we have our annual summer party. It's a gathering of colleagues without conference calls, spreadsheets and presentations. Just music, food, beer and "Good Company."

HASHTAG BESTIES pg / **238**
by Jessica Fidalgo, Copywriter

THE GATHERING pg / **251**
by Bobby Pfeifferberger, Associate Creative Director



HASHTAG BESTIES

as told by

JESSICA FIDALGO

Tina occupies a precarious place in pubescent society, and she knows it. She has friends, but not very many, and none of them are especially popular. And more than anything, Tina longs to be popular. She studies popularity and the girls who possess it the same way biologists examine the social ties between groups of penguins or meerkats. If Tina stays alert, stays watchful and focused, she knows she can achieve it by the same means she would any other goal; the piano, straight A's, the Girl Scout Gold Award for excellence in cookie sales.

Anything.

Middle school is coming to a final close in just six weeks, and there is no social limbo in which to take refuge at Warren Gamaliel Harding Memorial High School. There are simply two camps: those who are in, and those who



are out. When the lines between them are inevitably boldly drawn, Tina intends to be safely ensconced inside the friendly confines of the in-crowd.

The leader of this elite and elusive tribe is a singular specimen of authority and incipient womanly beauty known as Diana DiPetro. The staccato one-two punch of her name lends her an almost mythical power over everyone in her realm, not just other kids in school but teachers, retail employees, manicurists, parents. Diana DiPetro is a fair and benevolent dictator, but even so, outsiders are rarely granted access. And so, it is a fateful bit of happenstance that creates a gap in the armor of the popular crowd wide enough for Tina to begin to slip her hand right through.

Thursday, March 27, approximately 1:12 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. First-floor girls' bathroom, outside the cafeteria. Tina is carefully applying Maybelline Color Sensation High Shine Lip Gloss in Raspberry Reflections. Diana DiPetro is in the stall, experiencing a rare moment apart from the fawning rank and file who are almost always in close proximity. Note: The sanitary products dispenser has been inoperable since the Monday prior, having been accidentally jammed with a Putt Putt Fun Center skee-ball token by an anxious sixth grader with an irregular monthly cycle and three prior tardy slips on her record.

Diana exits the stall with a quarter in hand only to discover this inadvertent act of sabotage and is



appropriately distressed. And thus, it begins.

“Cuhriiiiiist!” Diana exclaims, smacking the front of the dispenser with the heel of her hand. “This thing is seriously broken!?”

Tina recaps her lip gloss. Easy, Tina, she thinks to herself. Not too eager, not too cazsh.

“Evidently,” Tina says, rolling her eyes with precision. “There’s like *nothing* in this crappy school that works right.” She pauses carefully. “I have” — she quickly runs down the list of potential terms in her mind: tampons, too personal; pads, too assuming; sanitary supplies, god, ugh, too school nurse. “Products,” she comes up with, finally, “in my bag, if you need anything.”

In fact, Tina’s backpack is amply prepared for nearly every conceivable situation she could possibly encounter. It contains not only an abundance of sanitary supplies in an array of sizes and brands, including scented, which Tina’s mother does not condone the use of (“A vagina should smell like a vagina and not like an automotive air freshener on a rearview mirror.” “Oh my GOD, Mom, stop saying vagina. That is seriously disgusting.”), in addition to a tiny pair of folded up soccer shorts, safety pins, Band-Aids, mints and deodorant, and a dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is her favorite book, but which can also ostensibly double as assigned reading if she finds herself somewhere alone but needing to *appear* as though she doesn’t mind that she is.



Diana DiPetro is relieved and grateful. “That would be sick, thank you so much.” She makes her selection from the proffered pouch and goes back into the stall. “You totally saved my life,” Diana calls from behind the door.

“It’s no problem,” Tina calls back. She zips her backpack shut, sliding one strap onto her shoulder, then turns on the water and pretends to wash her hands until she hears the toilet flush.

Diana washes her hands and dries them. “Thanks again, Tina, right?”

“Yeah,” Tina says, not bothering to pretend she doesn’t know Diana’s name. Let’s keep it real, Tina thinks. You don’t know me, but I know you. “Are you going to French class now?”

“Yeah!” Diana says, opening the bathroom door to admit the cacophony in the hallway just outside. “Are you in my French class?”

“Well, physically, if not always mentally,” Tina says wryly, falling into step with Diana. Good one, Tina, she thinks. Keep the ball in the air. Don’t blow this.

“Oh my god I *love* French,” Diana gushes happily as they walk along. “I mean I suck at it, but I can totally picture myself living in some badass penthouse in like Paris or Tuscany with some hot guy named Julio and we have these just outrageous parties with all the coolest people



like Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian and we wear like a completely amazing new outfit every night and just have like *all the champagne*.” With this she expertly tosses her hair over her shoulder sending it partly into Tina’s mouth, causing a very slight smearing of Raspberry Reflections onto the lower right part of her chin.

“That sounds totally sick,” Tina responds, rolling the dice on her first experiment with the widely accepted repurpose of that word, as she deftly wipes the gloss from her face with the back of her hand.

“I KNOW, right?!?” Diana chirps back. *Snake eyes*. But unfortunately they have arrived at Mme. Fayette’s classroom, and no English is to be spoken once inside.

“Bonjour, Mesdemoiselles!” Mme. Fayette trills as they enter, in a voice that is equal parts Zsa Zsa Gabor and Catholic choir girl soprano. “Bonjour, Madame Fayette,” the girls respond noncommittally as the door shuts loudly behind them.

After class, Tina carefully times her exit to coincide precisely with Diana DiPetro and her chief viceroy, Brooklyn Menzel, with whom she sits on the opposite side of the room. Brooklyn Menzel has about as much going for her as an American eighth grader possibly could have: blond hair, blue eyes, a wardrobe allowance, an in-ground swimming pool and an older brother with the chiseled good looks of a Greek god, or a statue of a Greek god, or maybe a catalog model. In fact, there



is a longstanding rumor that Brooklyn's brother, whose name is Tate, had once been asked to model underwear on the website for the store Hollister but that Dr. Menzel had made him turn the Hollister people down because she was afraid that *her* mother, Brooklyn's grandmother, who lived in South Carolina, would freak out about him posing in his underwear on account of being a Seventh Day Adventist. Something like that.

Brooklyn and Diana are apparently discussing a matter of some importance as they round the corner of desks nearest her. Tina stands up from her chair as they pass, shading herself in behind them as they make their way toward the door.

"She's being such a cooze," Brooklyn is saying dismissively. "So anyway whatever, it'll just be the three of us I guess."

"No, no, no!" Diana protests. "You can't have uneven numbers for rides! Then someone always has to sit by themselves or with some rando. We need a fourth girl."

Tina, straining to hear, moves almost imperceptibly closer to flank Diana on her left.

"Well I don't know who you want me to get," Brooklyn says moodily. "I already asked everyone we know."

Tina fakes a small, non-mucus-producing sneeze.

"Bless you!" Diana says, turning reflexively toward the



sound. “Tina! Hey. Hey! You want to come to King’s Island with us Saturday? We’re going with Kelly Finebaum ...”

“No, Kelly Parrotto,” Brooklyn supplies.

“Kelly Parrotto,” Diana says. “And maybe meeting up with some guys. You wanna go?”

Do you want to go, Tina? ’Cause it’s go time.

Immediately, of course, Tina recognizes the enormity of having been invited along on this trip and the importance of wringing every last drop of sociological benefit from the opportunity that can possibly be wrung. Chances like this come along maybe once in a lifetime, she reasons, maybe not even then. She had been in the right place, at the right time, with the right person (and the right products) and — magically! — opportunity had coupled with preparation at a moment she would’ve least thought it possible. A glorious, dewy, watercolored moment that, Tina can now clearly see, will be remembered for the rest of their lives as the genesis of their friendship. She pictures herself and Diana, 20, maybe 30 years into the future, leaning against one another at a posh restaurant banquet surrounded by their friends and admirers. Everyone is laughing and sipping bright cocktails, and as the evening wears on, someone might have occasion to say, “Now, how do you two know each other again? College?” “Middle school, can you believe it?!” Diana will crow happily, sloshing



the candy-colored liquid around in her glass, and Tina imagines taking the drink from her and setting it back on the table, saying, “I think that’s enough for you for tonight, babe,” and at this Diana will announce to everyone, “Thirty years later and she’s *still* looking out for me!” The other friends will awwwww and raise a toast to them, and Instagram dazzling unfiltered photos of Diana and Tina, hashtag FriendshipIsForever, hashtag Besties, hashtag Sweetest.

Saturday, March 29, 10:02 a.m. Tina presents herself at Diana DiPetro’s house, ready to depart for the King’s Island trip. Tina has in her possession the well-stocked backpack, which now also includes a selection of road-trip snacks, both sweet and savory, two different types of sunscreen and an emergency cellphone that her mother has forced her to bring along, after an extended argument over whether Tina would be allowed to ride the 30 minutes to the park with the other girls chauffeured by none other than Brooklyn’s brother Tate in Dr. Menzel’s Saab, a proposition that Tina’s mother is at first foursquare against, but upon which she eventually relents, providing that Tina agrees to call her from the phone upon arriving at the park and again just before leaving.

“Hiiiiii,” Diana, Brooklyn and Kelly call from the porch. “Heyyyyyy,” Tina calls back, trying to keep her excitement contained, squinting into the watery morning spring sun. There will be no need for sunscreen today, but what does weather matter? They are all young, they are all beautiful, they have nothing to do today but to talk and laugh and



soak one another in. Instinctively they know that the buoyant vibrancy of their youth will not last for all time, but they don't yet know when it might start to crack or fade, and they don't need to. All they need for today is just to be.

Brooklyn rides shotgun with her brother in front, and Tina is sandwiched between Kelly and Diana in the backseat. Tate barely talks but is, as reported, almost godlike in his gorgeousness, although Tina is too focused to pay much attention to him. The girls make effortless conversation, and all that is required of Tina is to interject a remark from time to time, or laugh, or ask a clarifying question ("So did the phone work after you got it out of the pool? Because I've heard if you put it in a bowl of rice ..." etc.) It is all going so well. It is all going according to plan.

They arrive at the park. Tate Menzel has two friends who have come along in their own car, high school boys from his class whom Tina doesn't know. They start out as separate groups. Diana's first priority is to ride Flight of Fear, because last summer she didn't get to ride it because it's at the back of the park and by the time they got around to it the line was hella long, and the summer before that she was too short to get on ("Shut up! The word is 'petite'; you guys are such bitches!"), so the girls head there first and proceed from that to go on as many rides as they can. Diana pretty much always rides with Brooklyn, leaving Tina to sit next to Kelly, who is a loud and incessant screamer on the scarier drops. But the park



is not crowded and they run into the boys enough times that eventually they wind up roaming around as a group of seven for most of the day.

Tina is enjoying herself. She's careful not to say too much or too little, but they all seem to be taking pleasure in one another's company, and the older boys actually seem sweetly protective of them. She feels like things are clicking. Brooklyn Menzel has already mentioned a pool party at her house for the 4th of July and Diana has promised to show her how to use liquid eyeliner. Tina's study has served her well — the effort to make herself belong with them is almost autonomic. And that's how she knows it's right. I'm doing this, Tina thinks. It's going to work.

7 p.m. Tate's friends take off for home. Having ridden nearly every ride at least once, the girls are ready to leave the park too, but Diana decrees that their last act should be to go around on the cable cars so they can see the sunset. "It's our first King's Island trip of the year, you guys! We always do the sunset cable car. Tate, you ride with Tina so you don't have to go by yourself," she instructs them, and they comply. When their turn comes he holds open the door of the creaky red car and Tina climbs up into it. Tate folds his lanky frame in after her and pulls the door shut behind them. The mechanics whir and the car is lifted off the ground and into the sky above the park. There's a perfect view of the sunset. She's trying to think up something she can talk about with Tate, but before she has a chance he leans forward



on his elbows, reaches across the tiny expanse of the car and puts one hand on each of her thighs, not close to her knees but way up high, with his thumbs pointed in. Startled, Tina has no place to look except right into his face. His eyes are literally the color of a robin's egg. The curls in his hair look like something Rumpelstiltskin would have crafted out of gold and he smiles lazily at her in a way that makes Tina simultaneously aware of two important things: Number one, no boy has ever looked at her like this as long as she's been alive, and number two — Tate is not a boy.

“You know you're supposed to get me off, right?” he says.

Tina feels the hair on the back of her neck start to stand up. She feels nauseated, though whether it's the swaying of the cable car or the three snow cones she's consumed over the course of the day, or the feel of the flesh of Tate's palms through the denim covering her legs, she's not sure.

“Excuse me?” she says.

Tate cocks his head to one side, doesn't move his hands, doesn't avert her gaze. “You're supposed to get me off now. That's what we're doing here.”

“It ... is,” Tina says carefully, keeping her voice level. “I didn't know that.”

Tate grins again. “It's kind of like my reward for driving you guys here, babysitting you all day. We always do it



like this every year. It takes forever for this thing to go around, and it's dark, so ... it's kind of perfect." He seems, suddenly, to sense Tina's reticence, and he takes his hands from her legs but doesn't move completely out of her space. He jerks his head back to indicate the girls in the other cable car. "Seriously, *they've* all done it. So are you into it or not?"

For some reason Tina flashes back to her arrival this morning at Diana's house, and the way her Keds had gotten damp from dew where she crossed the front lawn. More than anything she'd like to go back to that moment in time, for there to be some way to not have to know what she knows now. But she doesn't feel scared of Tate Menzel. She feels foolish, she feels mournful, she wants to open up the zipper of her stupid backpack and shake it out the window of the cable car, wants to send tubes and safety pins and Advil and her mother's emergency cellphone raining down onto the heads of the fat sweaty tourists and their bratty progeny below. But she doesn't do that. She just sits and lets the ride take her where it's going to go.

And this, of course, is either the ending or maybe the beginning of something else, depending on your point of view. Not, sadly, what Tina had longed for or expected. Not something as amorphous as childhood or as unfathomable as womanhood, or even as quantifiable as popularity. Not something that Tina would look back on and point to as "the moment I became this" or "the moment I ceased to be that." Not something she could



Instagram. But a moment, to be sure, that seemed to her on this night (at least) to be stretched out above all the others that came before it, extending beyond the cable car, beyond the park, beyond the parking lot and the fast food restaurants surrounding it. Beyond even the darkening sky which, Tina thought, was maybe part of the reason it has been so hard to see it coming.



THE GATHERING

as told by

BOBBY PFEIFFENBERGER

The sunlight is blinding as I stumble out of the tent. The heat is suffocating. The surroundings are foreign, completely wrong.

I am met with a terrifying gang of freaks, ninjas and clowns. I stare directly into the faces of the outcast and misunderstood, and they don't give a fuck, only a "Whoop! Whoop!"

Days earlier, I boarded the bus that would take me to the abandoned military base just outside of Limestone.

"Where you're going," the driver said, "there will be thousands of the most misunderstood and hated people left on earth. It's brimming with sex, drugs, death-rap and demonic clowns. It's Shangri-la."



This proves to be one of the last coherent conversations I will have. From this point on I spend my time lost in a carnival of darkness. The Annual Gathering of the Juggalos had begun.

A deafening chant of “Show your tits” is all that can be heard when I arrive at the campsite. Within seconds the chant changes to a euphoric and even louder “Whoop Whoop.”

I quickly succumb to the rampant temptation and take a hit off a large joint that is being freely passed around. The instant the smoke hits my lungs I frantically begin darting my tongue in and out like a garter snake.

A Juggalette suddenly appears and asks, “Wanna lick my tits?”

Mentally, I decline. Physically, I begin to lick her forehead.

“Shit. That your first Jeffery Joint?” asks the Juggalo now standing next to her.

I stare back unable to answer.

“Hope you’re ready for one wild fucking ride. You just smoked a shit-ton of weed, angel dust, E, cocaine and possibly some Clorox. Whoop! Motherfucking whoop!”

He wears traditional Juggalo fashion: Black and white face paint, no shirt, spider braids, oversized shorts and a



plethora of tragically misspelled tattoos. To me he looks like the offspring of a Hungarian mop dog and a Mexican sugar skull.

He goes by Mayne. His “lette” girlfriend goes by Ike.

Together, we head out into the chaos. Within minutes we come across two giant men covered in hundreds of hatchet man tattoos standing at the edge of Runway Six. At their feet are two buckets overflowing with frogs. From a nearby watchtower, an unseen voice barks out commands as they take off into the swamplands.

Paranoia now setting in, I think, Jesus, if they’ve already gotten to the frogs, surely I’m next.

After wandering aimlessly for hours, Mayne giddily says, “Welcome to the promised land.” The abandoned hangar is part farmers market, part illegal drug concourse. Makeshift signs for weed, angel dust, E, cocaine, Roxy, Vicodin — along with every other drug imaginable — litter the landscape.

Mayne picks up cocaine and weed. And LSD.

A C-17 military transport jet taxied by two golf carts, and one highly motivated group of Juggalos, slowly passes by and disappears down the tarmac into the darkness. Mayne suggests we follow.

My paranoia begins to creep back in.



When we arrive at the C-17 a chorus of “Whoop whoops” can be heard outside. Inside, Mr. Jiggles is on trial for committing one of the most serious offenses under Juggalo law, theft.

Mr. Jiggles allegedly stole, and ate, Mrs. Jiggles’ last pot brownie, which she had hidden in Mr. Jiggles’ truck. Seconds after both cases are delivered a verdict comes in.

“Guilty!” screams the judge. “Whoop! Whoop!”

The crowd, now led by Mrs. Jiggles, madly chants, “Fuck his truck. Fuck his truck.”

Oddly, I find myself wanting to fuck his truck too.

With justice spoken, we head for the emergency exit rows in pursuit of one white truck. Maine plates.

An Aroostook County sheriff’s report will later include the following: midgets thrown, civilians mauled, goats missing, rappers shot, ninjas stabbed and one fucked truck.

I can only attest to the truck.

We take the remaining LSD at an altitude of two thousand feet. I get lost in the sea of lights and activity taking place below. Suddenly the helicopter banks right. Banks left. Descends rapidly. In the cockpit, our pilot has decided to combine MDMA with DMT and turn our scenic flight into his own personal flight simulator.



Once down, we make a mad dash for the main stage. The LSD takes full effect as we fight our way through the bodies.

The energy builds.

The two most powerful Juggalos appear on stage as flashes of light and energy begin to fill the sky. The crowd begins to pulse. Out of nowhere, demonic clowns with grossly contorted faces and bodies ambush the crowd. The crowd surges wildly as the music intensifies. The thunder and lightning grow stronger. The skies open up and release a liquid hellfire just as I am attacked from behind. Surrounded and losing consciousness, I go down, swallowed into the darkness ...

As I continue to stare at the terrifying gang of freaks, ninjas and clowns, a man wearing only a robe and sandals steps through the blinding sunlight only to stop and urinate directly in front of me.

My head throbs; my face is smeared with paint. My shirt is covered in vomit, my backpack missing.

I close my eyes and look up to the sun.

“Are you a firm believer in miracles?” the man asks as he proceeds to offer me a spliff midstream.

I respond with an unbridled “Whoooooooooop Whoooooooooop.”





CHAPTER NO 8

September 4, 2014

SCHOOLED

*The end of summer means it's back
to school for so many of our kids. And so,
September's theme was "Schooled."*

THE NINGKATOK ROAD..... pg / **257**
by Greg Smith, Chief Creative Officer

THE GRIFFIN RICHARDS SCHOOL..... pg / **264**
FOR THE DAMNED
by Steve Holt, Copywriter

SKOOLED (A FIRST DRAFT)..... pg / **271**
by Steve Street, Creative Director



THE NINGKATOK ROAD

as told by

GREG SMITH

I'm riding in the back of a '78 Chevy pickup truck with four Indians (we called them that back then, and they called themselves that too), bouncing chaotically to the cadence of the unpaved road beneath us. No one smiles. Wisely so, because to open your mouth, even a crack, would lead to your teeth being coated with the same thick layer of oil-rich dust from the Alaskan soil with which our faces are already covered.

I'm alone. I know no one. I'm riding with four Indians.

After an hour that feels like a lifetime, we pull into a workers' camp on the edge of the Kenai River. I had never, and have never since, seen anything like it — a sprawling tent town of over 700 workers, living within one-tenth of a mile of one of the largest fish canneries in the state of Alaska, and for that matter the world.



I hop out of the back of the pickup, the pack on my shoulders weighing heavier than all the shit I've been through to bring me to this point.

Two of the “mayors” of the tent town are there to greet us, with the 20 or so other “proles” who have also just arrived in separate vehicles. The tallest of the mayors is named Skip Winnifree. He is all alpha. He tells us to form a line in front of a beat-up card table, to get out our paperwork, and shut the fuck up and just listen.

After about 10 minutes, I'm number two in line at the table, when I hear the other mayor, a guy named Pogo, tell the short, no-necked grunt in front of me to lay his bedding out for inspection. Pogo doesn't say “sleeping bag,” because sleeping bags are for suburban kids going camping in the Poconos with their family. All these guys have ragged little mattresses and blankets stuffed full of shit, which is stuffed full of other shit.

Except for me.

I have a sleeping bag.

From Patagonia. My dad got it for me for 400 bucks, which was a shitload of money back then. (To put it in perspective, it's the same amount of money I paid for the Honda Civic that got me here. Or “almost here” I should say. I bought it, sight unseen, from a guy in Queens after seeing a classified ad in the *Village Voice*. It now sits useless



and abandoned in a Sears parking lot somewhere on the edge of Beaver Creek of the Yukon Territory.)

I step toward the table. Pogo tells me to hand my pack to a rail thin Indian I later learn to know is aptly named “Stick,” then roll my bedding out on the table for inspection. Pogo tells me they are checking for weapons and drugs; that if I’m caught in camp with either, they’ll take me and all my “bougie shit” to the end of the Ningatok Road, where I can fend for myself trying to get back to the “civvies.”

The sun is beginning to set now, but not really. It’s June, and the sky will never truly get dark, just a deeper hue of gray. Stick leads us over to “the mess,” which smells just like it sounds. After a while, I grab a plate of pork beans, a stale quarter loaf of bread and a cup of what Pogo and the others call “crystal,” which surprisingly and benignly enough, is Crystal Light iced tea, with extra sugar added for good measure.

After “sup” we head on over to the “Main” to get our “housing” assignments. I’m told my “roof” is on the corner of Shit and Out of Luck. I laugh, but Stick does not. Seems he’s serious. All the streets in the “Main” have names like that: so “Piss” conjoins with “Vinegar,” “Life Sucks” meets “And Then You Die,” and of course “Smells Like” intersects with “Tuna.”

Five minutes of senseless wandering later, I find my roof at 16 Out of Luck and slide beneath the heavy canvas.



There I'm greeted by a guy named "Burns." Never Burnsy. Just Burns.

Burns could be 40 or 60. He's got thinning gray hair. His face is rusty and worn, with dark black circles beneath heavy eyes. He doesn't ask anything about me or tell me anything about himself. He just says he's "happy to see fresh blood cuz it's been hell busy the last few days in the Big Can." His right forearm is covered in tattoos. This was a time when tattoos were not mainstream, and Burns' tats are rough and crude. He takes out a pack of L&M cigarettes, proffers me one and I oblige. He laughs to himself and then reaches into a large black duffel bag. Not laughing now, he removes a large hunting knife. He sticks the knife hard into the ground where I've laid out my sleeping bag.

"That there's a boot blade," Burns tells me. He can see that I'm stunned, more than a little frightened.

"I thought there were no weapons in camp,"
I say cautiously.

And with this he breaks into a hard raspy laugh, one that makes his eyes squint shut and then water.

"Hell, son, you are greener than a toad. A weapon in the Main is a firearm. That right there ain't for killing." He points to the knife. "It's for protection."

"From what?" I ask.



“From whatever. Bears, varmints and men just the same.”

He can see that I’m still confused, and continues.

“Nobody got a right to kill nobody up in here for no reason. But every man got the right to fend for himself. You see?”

No, I don’t see. Not at first. But then I do. I nod.

“Now you keep that blade on you at all times ’cept when you up working in the Big Can. And you sleep with her right there by your bedding each night and you gonna be just fine.”

Burns squats down in front of me now, leans in close and stares hard into me.

“Gonna be just fine,” he repeats. “Get yourself back to wherever the hell you strayed from.”

And with that he rises to his feet and steps out of the tent. I look at the knife, its black handle rising from the soft earth. Beside it, Burns has left me a sheath to wrap around my boot. I stumble to strap it on and then hear Burns from outside.

“Smitty. You coming or what?”

It feels more like an order than a question. So I don’t answer. I just spring to my feet and step outside. Burns



begins walking before me and I follow. At this point, I'll follow this man anywhere. I am alone. In Alaska. My heart aches to be home.

Burns takes a left on Piss, and as I race to catch up to him I see the flashes of a campfire against the cold gray sky coming from the end of the road. And then I hear laughter and song.

Closer now, I see Pogo dancing like a crazed shaman by the fire, as a guy I would later come to know as Jay All Day (he smoked a lot of weed, weed apparently being to drugs what knives are to weapons). Jay All Day plays "Swinging" on a beat-up, brandless guitar, and sings in a sweet, soulful voice that betrays the sharp angles of his face and the meanness in his eyes.

Of the 60 or so men who sit around the campfire smoking, laughing and singing, at least half greet Burns with loud calls of his name. Burns. Never Burnsy.

Burns smiles and sits, settles down comfortably next to a tiny old Inuit guy he greets with a gruff but kindhearted exultation of, "What's up, you red-faced old bastard?" The Inuit man laughs.

I stand. Alone. Apart from the others. I am not scared. I'm watching. Uncertain but longing to join. To fill the darkness, my own cold gray sky, with something that feels like flame.



Burns looks up at me sternly.

“Jesus, Smitty. What are you waitin’ for? An engraved invitation? Sit your ass down.”

I’d come all this way, because I was afraid that I was just becoming a whisper.

So I sat down with Burns, with Stick, with Pogo and with all the rest of them, on the edge of the Ningkatok Road.

And learned how to roar.



THE GRIFFIN RICHARDS SCHOOL FOR THE DAMNED

as told by

STEVE HOLT

*The school bell rings true,
I don't wanna go today.
Unfortunately.*

Welcome to The Griffin Richards School for the Damned — a definitively horrible or curious place, depending on your liking. How you have found yourself here? I will never know.

And whether you choose the sweet sting of lemon juice hovering precariously on the cusp of a wound, or the raucous syrup of gasoline dripping feverishly off your back ... well, I leave that up to you.

We begin.



The school is a living, breathing thing. It doesn't possess a foundation as much as it possesses a natural talent for sinking into the ground at a beautifully steady rate. On a calm day, you can feel its respiration on your skin, hot and wet. Its massive four-story frame is covered in ancient gray shingles, which grow brilliant lime green moss. Wood for the smoke-belching furnace is stacked out back. There you'll also find a few rows of stunted corn — the cornhusks hanging rakishly off the underdeveloped produce like product-filled ponytails hanging off the heads of girls too young to be seriously wearing makeup.

Surrounding the school is a forest of citrus trees extending as far as the eye can see. It is known as the citrus forest of seriousness. The farther one ventures into the citrus forest, the denser and more intense the experience becomes. Fog rolls in. Wingspans are shown. One hears shouts, flapping and loud cries, and experiences waking dreams and flashes of visceral emotion. Legend has it, it's akin to stretched woolen socks filled to the brim with gelatinous self-realization, which are then pressed into one's ear canals until deafness folds in. I use the pronoun "one" because I certainly don't want it to be you. Leave the forest be. Stay in school.

On the schoolgrounds, you can hear piano music everywhere. It is gentle. It comes from the surface of the



lagoon. And the wind seems to touch every little plant leaf and tree branch with the softest whisper, as if to say, “Hey there, my little bingo-baby, just moooove.”

Math and science courses at Griffin Richards are taught by a gigantic, bellowing piece of female moss named Finisheder Lunch. During chemistry class, the tendrils on Finisheder’s back swish lightly across the blackboard, and her mouth quivers and pulses provocatively as she repeats pronunciations from the periodic table over and over to her attentive pupils: Germanium, Selenium, Strontium, Rubidium and so forth.

As she speaks, her delicate stems gesticulate like viscous flatulence trapped inside a plastic grocery bag, fluttering with the mad sorcery only a foot-long Subway chicken-bacon-ranch, ballast-laden with banana peppers, can muster.

Like all of us, she has her vices. A piece of moss with alcoholic tendencies, Finisheder drinks jug upon jug of Carlo Rossi Sweet wine with unbridled passion. She’ll suck on the top of a wine bottle as bubbles gurgle to life inside. The sweet dark nectar runs down her throat like purple-black curdled milk, prickling and corroding the already prickly and corroded organic material of her mossy esophagus. And she’ll dance under the big full moon, on the edge of the citrus forest.

To learn English and history at GRS is to be annihilated mentally with two boxes of chalk a week, scraped across



a blackboard by P.W. Flip. Both his parents were German, and he has retained a thick accent. In addition to Flip's scratching, you will undoubtedly be subjected to all the gory details regarding the sex lives of Gunter and Deborah, Flip's two particularly mature, albeit frisky, greyhounds.

"I foundt Gunter and Deborah behind zee wood shtack again! I had to spray zem off wit unt bottle of hand Zanitizer! Nauuughty canines."

Flip, a very peculiar soul, has a few especially peculiar possessions that he neurotically pets, or checks or polishes. One of these items is a pocket watch made from a living sea urchin. He keeps it in a small jar of seawater sealed tight with a lid, buried in his jacket pocket. When he desires to know the time, he produces the jar and taps three times on the lid. The sea urchin will stretch out its dainty little spines, yawn and then flip over obligingly, revealing a beautifully ornate clock face on its underside. "Srreeeee o'clock, and all is vell. Time for some poetry by Mueller."

Music classes are taught outside, on sunny days, in the school's man-made lagoon. To get to class, you must take dugout canoes to the center of the lagoon, don scuba gear and flop in. As you descend into the murk, you will begin to hear angelic music playing: harps and violins, tympani drums and the crescendo of horns, flutes and tubas.



The orchestra is conducted by a petite glowworm named Sephora. With a passion for makeup and the burlesque, she always looks flawlessly controversial. Maybe a tiny leather mini skirt, made from the middle finger of an Armani driving glove one day; maybe a homemade sequined dress the next, made with four or five sequins sewed neatly together. She bobs up and down waving her sets of arms rhythmically on a large oak stool, which is chained down by an anchor. When class is over, she, for some reason, always seems sad. She slowly climbs down the rungs of the stool and floats pendulously down into the muddy bottom below.

The Griffin Richards School for the Damned mascot is the botfly, or *Dermatobia hominis*. Our T-shirts for hominis-coming usually read, “You won’t ever know we’ve won until we’re already living inside your skin, nourishing ourselves with it, breathing undetected through your pores.” It’s long, I know, but it really makes you think deeply before messing with the Griffin Richards Botflies. And to be honest, I think it’s catchier than “Let’s Go Tigers.”

The gymnasium is a hollow cavern, built into the side of a rocky crag a quarter mile from the schoolhouse, where Bob Gluten-Free, the gym instructor, holds his exercise classes. There is a rope to climb, a trampoline, a large aerobics floor and a massive weight room, complete with every sort of contraption you can imagine. Whatever you do, do not experiment with the ab-bestower. It can be temperamental.



Unfortunately, Bob Gluten-Free has an irrational fear of rust, which possesses him to carry around a can of WD-40. He'll spritz and spray all the gym equipment, muttering to himself, "Gotta git that rust. Gotta git it!"

On the last day of school before summer break begins, the equipment is ritualistically slathered with a thick layer of petroleum jelly. Due to the heat that time of year, the semi-opaque jelly drips, staccato, to the glossy wood floor below, creating pools of everything oily, slick, unholy and stubborn.

And finally that brings us to the principal. Nobody knows his name. We've only seen his shadow. The only thing we know about him is the story of his birth, which I will describe briefly.

His mother sweated in bed, clenching her organs, smiling through a mishmash of broken teeth and halitosis. His bulbous heels protruded from the 98.6-degree warmth as his toes curled for the first time, grasping his mother's internal labia like toes grasping diving rings in waist-deep water.

It was a breech birth, and the doctor yanked him out of his fleshy cocoon with unceremonious vigor. His mother's eyeballs rolled around and around and around, not so much with pain, but with the undeniable loss that the root sheath of an ingrown hair follicle feels when its unwanted inhabitant is squeezed free, popping into fresh air and light. Is it a good feeling? Bad? Who knows?



His father burst into the room as the principal burst into the infant's wail. They cry from the trauma, I'm sure. The doctor clamped off the chord with three wooden clothespins, then snipped it free. He wrapped the baby in a soft white towel and handed him to his father.

All we know aside from the story of his birth is that the principal is small, feeble and frightened of spirits, snakes and the dark. But I believe him to be a good man.

This is but a glimpse into The Griffin Richards School for the Damned. The institution of course holds many more secrets, many more oddities. So why are you here? How did you become enrolled here? Like I said in the beginning, I will never know.

And I'll end with another haiku:

*School is just a game.
You're never truly finished.
Always in session ...*



SKOOLED (A FIRST DRAFT)

as told by

STEVE STREET

Tim sat in the corner of the room with ketamine slowly seeping into his system.

“You want a meat pie?” Karen asked, thrusting a plate of piping hot pies toward him. Karen took her house parties seriously as evidenced by the slightly elevated quality of her meat pies. Pie enthusiasts like Tim, however, knew that “quality” in the world of meat pies didn’t really exist and despite the many theories, the mystery meat under the pastry lid would forever remain an open case.

Tim snatched the whole plate and put it down next to him.

“Thanks, Kaz,” he said. “How ’bout some sauce?”



Karen rolled her eyes and left in search of the Heinz bottle.

“If you were any other dude she would have told you to go fuck yourself,” said Nick, who sat beside Tim, casually sipping on a VB throwdown. Nick and Tim had been friends since the early years of high school. A common love of skateboarding and toilet humor had brought them together. They hadn’t outgrown either.

“If I was any other dude I wouldn’t be sitting here with a line of horse tranquilizer rocketing toward my brain.”

“Yeah, you’re fucked,” said Nick, his sky blue eyes widening sympathetically. “Sergio didn’t tell you what you were Hoovering up your nose?”

“I thought it was coke,” said Tim, taking a bite from a sauce-less pie.

“How are you not freaking the fuck out right now?” Nick asked, scanning Tim’s youthful face for any notable sign of worry.

“Dude, I’ve moved on from that crossroads.” Tim gestured to the left with an upturned palm. “Lose Your Shit Street ...” He mirrored the gesture with his right hand, “Or Ride It Out Road. Didn’t fancy gettin’ my guts pumped, so here I am, eating pies on Ride It Out Road.”

“Fair enough,” said Nick. “Karen doesn’t seem to like you any less.”



“Not going there, mate. She’s James’ sister,” Tim replied stoically.

“Incoming,” said Nick under his breath, his lips barely moving.

Karen appeared and stood over Tim, enjoying the symbolic power it gave her. She handed him the Heinz bottle.

“Tim, you’re going to shit your pants if you eat all those pies.”

Tim smiled. “There’s a fair chance that’ll happen regardless.”

“Just try to keep it off the carpet, would you?” Karen said jokingly, oblivious to the hint of worry in Tim’s voice.

“I dunno, Karen. Could be the first house party you’ve thrown where shit gets wild,” said Nick. “Albeit down a trouser leg.”

“You’re not funny, Nick, you deadbeat,” snapped Karen, turning her attention to a group of newly arrived guests.

Nick looked at Tim and ran his fingers through his spongy blonde hair. “So, what now?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, mate,” replied Tim. “I’ve never done ketamine before.”



“Somebody say the ‘K’ word?” James had a knack for entering conversations at precisely the right time. James was Greek as evidenced by his larger-than-average nose, but he spoke with a broad Australian accent. He had also grown up with Tim and Nick, in Wollongong, a small coastal town on the east coast of Australia.

“Last time I was in a K-hole I shat my pants,” he said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Tim.

“Wait ...” said James, the excitement rising in his voice.

“You’re in a K-hole?”

“The safe money suggests I’ll be doing a handplant on the edge of the motherfucker before too long,” said Tim, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his T-shirt.

Nick tapped Tim’s kneecap with his beer bottle. “I’ve heard your legs go first. They get all wobbly and numb and shit.”

James chuckled. “Dude, they tranquilize horses with that shit. You’re gonna be sliding outta here like a goanna.”

“I’m good. I can handle it,” Tim said, rising defiantly to his feet. “Who wants another beer?” Without waiting for a response, Tim headed in the direction of the kitchen. I can totally get three beers and return to my plate of pies, he thought to himself. Ain’t nothing hard about that.



Tim's first few steps were fine, but that's where any shred of normalcy ended.

"You're good, mate. Just ride it out. Just ride it out," repeated a voice in Tim's head. The voice was stately and comforting, and introduced Tim's mind to the thought of Liam Neeson sipping brandy by a log fire on a crisp winter's eve. "Indeed it is I, the irrepressible Liam Neeson," the voice continued. "And if there is one thing I can help you navigate, it is a treacherous K-hole. You've got this."

Buoyed by the thought of Liam Neeson steering him right, Tim puffed out his chest and wobbled confidently through the growing crowd of people to the hallway that connected the living room to the kitchen. "Man," said Liam Neeson inside Tim's head, "too bad this isn't a dance contest. You'd be cleaning up right now."

Tim reflected on the comment momentarily, shrugged it off and started down the hallway, which was lined with what he could only assume to be abstract art. "I know, right?" said Liam Neeson inside Tim's head. "She actually paid money for these."

Halfway down the hall, Tim paused at a door that had been left ajar. Without much thought or caution, he peered through the gap between the door and the wooden frame and was greeted by the warm orange glow of a lava lamp. It beckoned him in. With a mental nudge from Liam Neeson, Tim obliged and stepped slowly into



the room without closing the door behind him in the event that he needed someone to hear him scream.

The room was larger than Tim had anticipated. Highlighted in the psychedelic glow of the lava lamp were an aging armchair, an indoor plant of some description and a giant bookcase filled top to bottom with vinyl records. A feeling of weightlessness overcame him — a sensation commonly brought on by extreme joy and drugs. Tim had succumbed to both. He floated toward the records like a supernatural being, marveling at the colorful mishmash of album spines before him.

“Think they have any Kyuss?” Liam Neeson whispered inside Tim’s head. Tim’s life had forever changed the first time he heard the music of Kyuss. It was heavy, yet melodic, each song propelled by a groove with more balls than a rugby team. It filled a musical void that existed between the worlds of hair metal, punk rock and grunge, and for that, Tim would remain forever grateful. He let his fingers dance their way excitedly to “K,” relieved that the records had been alphabetized. “The irony,” chuckled Liam Neeson inside Tim’s head.

Sure enough, nestled next to Live’s *Throwing Copper* was ... *And the Circus Leaves Town*, undoubtedly 1995’s greatest moment. With remarkable poise, Tim had the record off the shelf, out of its sleeve and on the turntable in record time. He turned on the receiver and turntable and gave the volume knob a healthy nudge. The needle



hit the wax, bouncing only slightly, but enough to start track five with an obnoxious scratch.

“Whatever. You’re fucked up,” said Liam Neeson inside Tim’s head.

“I’m fucked up,” said Tim out loud to himself.

The opening notes gushed out of the speakers, flooding the room and swallowing everything in it. A sonic beast had awoken and now it was beginning to roar with distorted ferocity. Tim smiled as the sound consumed him.

With unexpected violence, the bookcase suddenly lurched forward, separated from the wall and pivoted 90 degrees on its base, exposing behind it a harsh desert landscape punctuated with sunburnt cactus plants. Tim rubbed his eyes in disbelief and stared at the gaping hole in the wall once filled by the bookcase.

“You’ve unlocked the Kyuss,” said Liam Neeson calmly.
“Go forth and bask in the low desert.”

Perplexed, high and intrigued, Tim drew a breath and stepped through the hole in the wall. The desert sand was firm and he could feel its warmth through the thin rubber soles of his sneakers. A scorpion scurried fearfully from Tim’s imposing shadow as he looked left, right, then up. A vulture, haggard in appearance, circled above his head, drawing closer with each revolution. Tim thought about running, but there was no point. His legs were



fucked. He watched, helpless, as the decrepit creature landed clumsily in front of him.

“Hop on, Sweet Meat,” said the vulture, his beady eyes scanning Tim’s body inquisitively.

“Fuck off,” replied Tim.

A devilish cackle burst out of the vulture’s mouth.

“You’re in the low desert, Sonny Jim. That kinda attitude won’t get you far.”

Tim puffed out his chest and responded as confidently as he could. “I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust me? You’re the one on fucking horse tranquilizers. I shouldn’t trust you,” snapped the vulture. “What are you thinking taking that shit anyway? It’s made to knock out horses for fuck’s sake!”

“It was an accident,” replied Tim.

“Sure it was,” said the vulture.

“How do you know what I’m on anyway?” asked Tim.

The vulture motioned at Tim’s knees with his ugly beak. “Your wobbly knees gave it away. So, you gettin’ on or what?”

Tim sighed and straddled the hideous beast. It wasn’t like



there was anything else going on. “You smell like bourbon.”

“And you smell like goddamn meat pies,” the vulture replied.

“Where we goin’?”

“It’s a surprise,” the vulture said with a cackle and took off.

The view from the cloudless blue sky was spectacular. Rocky structures deep red in color sprouted from the ground sporadically, absorbing the harsh rays of the sun that appeared determined to cook everything within eyeshot. The wind licked Tim’s face and swept his scruffy brown hair from his forehead. Strangely, he felt free, despite being on the back of a horrid bird of prey.

Instantly, Tim’s ears filled with the swirling sound of instruments wrestling with the expansive outdoors for sonic definition. He knew that sound. He knew that melody. He knew that song. Track seven from ... *And the Circus Leaves Town*, Southern California’s greatest ever contribution to rock ’n’ roll. Filtering out the brightness, Tim squinted and scanned the dusty horizon for the source of the music. He spotted a mass of people swaying rhythmically in unison. At its nucleus, a group of musicians appeared to be performing.

“Welcome to the Kyuss-hole, the realest K-hole known



to man,” said the putrid vulture, winking his beady eye at Tim.

“What?” Tim said, blinking the dust out of his eyes.

“It’ll make sense in a minute, moron,” the vulture replied, beginning his descent toward the scorched earth.

To Tim’s surprise, the vulture executed a reasonably smooth landing. Tim swiftly dismounted, glad to distance himself from the sickly stench of stale bourbon the vulture had seemingly bathed in. He’d only taken a couple of wobbly steps when he heard the vulture’s drawl trail after him. Tim turned, noticing that the crooked smile was now missing from the bird’s unfriendly face.

“Sweet Meat, leave the ketamine to the horses. Plenty o’ people unlock the Kyuss and venture into the low desert. Plenty o’ ’em never leave.” And with that the vulture pushed off the desert floor and disappeared into the burning sky. Tim knew the vulture had a point, but there was not a lot he could do about it now. Besides, track seven was still in full swing.

Determined to get closer to the sound’s origin, Tim sidestepped his way through the eclectic crowd.

“Interesting mix of people, eh?” said Liam Neeson inside Tim’s head.

“Where the fuck have you been?” said Tim out loud.



“Holding my breath. Didn’t you smell that fucking vulture?” said Liam. “And these degenerates don’t smell much better.”

A three-to-one male-to-female ratio seemed a reasonable explanation for the heavy scent of armpit. Nobody seemed bothered by it, however. In fact, nobody seemed bothered by anything — the dust, the lack of shade, the vast isolation of their location. It was as peaceful a gathering of humans as any Tim had ever witnessed, the bodies bound together by an invisible web of low-tuned grooves and gruff vocal melodies.

Tim emerged at the edge of the inner circle and was instantly nailed with a deep, melodic fuzz that burrowed into his body and penetrated his veins. Then, for the second time, he attempted to rub truth into his disbelieving eyes. It couldn’t be. “Oh yes it is,” said Liam Neeson inside Tim’s head. “You did unlock the Kyuss after all.”

In the throes of an almighty low desert groove, powered by an oversized generator, were four of Tim’s heroes. Right there, right in front of him. Josh on guitar, Nick on bass, Brant on drums and John gripping the microphone like it owed him money. Although there had been lineup changes at various times, this configuration was Tim’s favorite.

“Kyuss lives!” Tim howled. “Kyuss fucking lives!”



Those around him appeared equally enthused — and high. The energy was wild and loose. Long hair swayed back and forth, bare feet kicked the molten earth, T-shirts came off and fell to the ground with careless abandon. There was no denying it, whatever it was. Tim surrendered his soul, wiped the desert dust from his face and clenched his eyes shut. He felt his muscles loosen and his limbs search for rhythm. The density of the groove continued to hit him hard in the chest and reverberate throughout every fiber of his body. It was a magical feeling. It was a truly magical feeling.

Then it vanished. All of it.

“There you are!” said Nick, handing Tim a beer. “You were taking ages, so I grabbed the beers. What’s that smell? Dude, did you just shit your pants?”





CHAPTER NO 9

October 2, 2014

SPOOKY

We all love Halloween. And October first means we get to unpack all our goblins and ghouls to decorate our homes. Why not kick the month off with the theme “Spooky”?

SEARCH AND RESCUE pg / **284**
by Sallie Allen, Associate Creative Director

SPOOKY STORY pg / **307**
by Moya Fry, Client Strategist

INTO THE FOREST DARK pg / **315**
by Judi Cutrone, Senior Social Media Strategist

WE'RE ALREADY DEAD pg / **331**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director



SEARCH AND RESCUE

as told by

SALLIE ALLEN

The late September twilight fell softly across the rural backyard, blurring the already raggedly defined edges. The dense woods that backed up to the small white farmhouse seemed to breathe a deep sigh and creep closer in as the daylight gave way to semi-darkness.

A multi-voiced whisper, undulating and demanding, filled Esther Hanes' clouded mind and spilled out into the dusty living room around her. She sat rigid on the tattered couch, head cocked to one side like a bird, eyes fixed unseeingly on the faded wallpaper that might once have been a homey floral pattern. The only indication of her inner turmoil was the incessant motion of her gnarled hands in her lap, her bony fingers compulsively working and worrying the fabric of her threadbare housedress.



With a start, she became aware of the dogs barking expectantly from their pen out back. She sighed and heaved her frail body up out of the long-sprung couch cushion, tottering unsteadily toward the kitchen. Her shock of white hair stood out in all directions save the back, where it was matted and mashed flat against her head. It had long forgotten the feel of a brush or form of a style.

“Got to go feed the dogs,” she said in the direction of her husband’s hunched back.

Jerry occupied a lopsided La-Z-Boy chair that dominated the room. Beside him an old, single-speaker AM/FM radio blared the tinny buzz of stock cars circling the track. He half-grunted, half-snored in response. He was asleep more than he was awake these days. She wondered what it would be like when he was gone.

In the kitchen, Esther slid her feet into the waiting sneakers by the back door. Absently, she reached the keys off the hook on the wall and put her hand on the doorknob. There she paused, listening intently. The whispers grew louder.

Her left hand hung by her side, working open and closed, open and closed. With the speed of a striking snake, her hand shot out and snatched open the nearest drawer. Deftly, she grabbed a large butcher knife from its recesses. Then, knife held to her side, alternately gripping and twisting its worn handle, she tugged the back door open,



pushed past the screen door and wandered out into the cool evening air.

Deaf to the din of the dogs' rising demands, Esther Hanes angled across the yard. Her errand forgotten, she passed by the rusty pen without a glance, and disappeared into the woods. The dogs continued barking as the whispers faded into the woods after Esther.

The green LED clock on the microwave read 8:52. Travis had a forkful of Mama Dip's takeout pot roast halfway to his mouth when his cellphone buzzed from its charger on the counter. Git, a 5-year-old yellow Lab, lay deceptively still under the kitchen table. He followed Travis' movements with his liquid brown eyes as Travis stretched for the phone and glanced at the text window.

"You call. We haul," Travis said to himself as he pressed a speed dial button for dispatch.

"Emergency services." It was Connie.

"Got a call, Darlin'. Tell 'em 30 minutes, OK?"

"You got it, Mr. Travis."

Travis disconnected and looked at the dog. "Mister Travis," he grumbled. "Do I look like my father to you? I don't



think so. Mister Travis. She ain't that much younger than I am."

Git thumped his tail against the faded yellow linoleum floor in agreement. Travis shoveled in one last bite of the roast before unceremoniously scraping his half-eaten meal into the disposal. With that, he ambled to the hall closet. As soon as the latch cleared the hasp, the door leapt free of its jam. An oversized, army green duffel slumped out onto the floor. Git barked expectantly from the kitchen.

"Well, what're you waitin' for? You know the drill."

Git remained under the table, barely contained, his every muscle at the ready. Travis laughed at the dog's anxious expression.

"Come on, Git. Let's go work."

Git scrambled into action, skittering and skidding on the slick linoleum. He danced and wiggled into position behind Travis, poking his nose in and out between Travis' working arms as he unzipped the duffel to pack radios, a charger and some extra batteries.

"Nobody ever gets lost at a respectable hour, do they boy?"

Git gave him an answering nudge, nearly knocking him off balance. Travis' cellphone chirped in his pocket.



“That would be our marching orders.” He fished the phone out, rocking back on his heels where he was crouching by the duffel.

“Travis.”

“You planning on answering my text, asshole?”

Travis grinned, trapping the phone between his shoulder and jaw so he could continue loading the duffel.

“Hell, Tripp, you’re worse’n a woman.”

“Since when do you know anything about women?”

“We can discuss my voluminous knowledge on the subject en route. What we got?”

“Caldwell County. Sixty-eight-year-old female. Went missing around 1700.”

“Today? You don’t mean the local boys actually called us in the day of, do you?”

“Let’s try not to screw it up too royally. And the troops?”

“Called Connie to put the word out as soon as you texted me. Got about 20 before we roll.”

“Good man. See you in 19.”



Travis hung up and returned to his duffel. Satisfied that all was present and accounted for, he zipped it closed, hoisted it up and wall-knocked it down the narrow hallway bearing the duffel-level scuffs of long-term residence.

Three hours later, Git snoozed alongside Ike, Tripp's Doberman, in the back of Travis' loaded Expedition speeding along I-40. Tripp and Siggy Salvo wiped tears from laughing eyes as Travis held forth. Siggy's small shepherd-mix, Lila, dozed at her feet in the back floorboard.

"There she was, naked as a jaybird, skinny-dippin' with her mechanic and the water moccasins at Peter's Gorge, with half the county out looking for her!" He tapped the rearview mirror, interrupting himself. "Back off now, Jay. You're blinding me, son. I ain't gonna leave you behind." He led the caravan of searchers off the interstate and onto the exit ramp for Hickory and Lenoir.

"Tell her ... Tell her what you said," Tripp choked out.

"I just asked her to move away from them reeds she was hiding in 'cause I was a lot more anxious to call her in as a live find than the dead 'un she was gonna be if she took one more step closer to that nest," Travis said.

"Oh God!" Siggy gasped. "There were really snakes? I thought you just meant the area was prone to them. Not that you could actually see them right then and there."



“Slow down, Travis,” Tripp said. “I think that’s our turn up ahead.”

The two-lane ribbon of road they found themselves traveling got progressively more rural. The ever-expanding spaces between the houses were filled with dark stretches of dense woods.

They slowed and pulled off the side of the road in front of a single-bay fire department. Travis and Tripp piled out to shake hands with the massive poster boy for steroids who swaggered out to meet them.

“Sheriff Lee Spears,” he boomed. “You folks made good time. How many dogs you bring?”

“We’ve got four canine teams here with some relief we can fall back on if we don’t turn anything up in the next 24,” Tripp said, entrusting his hand to the vice of the big man’s and pumping it firmly twice.

“We got a missing Caucasian female,” Spears read from his notepad. “Name’s Esther Louise Hanes. Sixty-seven with a history of schizophrenia. Five-six, hundred-ten pounds. Missed her seizure meds at twenty-one hundred.

“Husband says she tried to cut her neck last week with the kitchen butcher knife. He didn’t call anybody out here because he was afraid they’d take her back to Dorothea Dix — that’s our local nuthouse — and he



needs her here to take care of him since he's all eat-up with the cancer. Ain't love grand?

"PLS was the residence. She went out to feed the dogs around eighteen hundred hours and never came back. Took the afore-mentioned butcher knife with her."

"What was she wearing?" Travis asked, making notes on his own pad.

"A pink housecoat, white nightshirt, we know," Spears said.

"The footwear, we're not firm on."

"Any kind of pants or anything?"

"Bare."

"Well, that ain't pretty," Travis said, earning rueful smiles from Tripp and Spears. All three understood that Esther Hanes' attire added the very real risk of exposure into the equation. Even on a mild fall night, temperatures could drop enough to endanger an elderly woman.

"We set up command post here," Spears went on. "The residence is about a mile up the road."

"We'll need an up-to-date recon map to determine our search grid."



“Already inside,” Spears replied. He motioned toward the deputy at his side. “Farrell, here, will take one of you to the Hanes place for your scent article.”

“She’s been gone seven hours,” Tripp calculated. “So we’re looking at a 14-mile radius. Travis, why don’t you head on over to the residence.”

Travis fell into step beside Deputy Farrell. They walked along the shoulder of the rural road. The only sounds were the swishing of their legs through the tall scrub grass and the fading voices of the searchers unloading their gear.

Travis and Farrell stopped at the mouth of an overgrown tire-track drive. The full moon silhouetted the Hanes’ house up ahead. Small and squat, the house sagged on its foundation, leaning a little left and forward.

“Well, sir,” Farrell said, “I reckon I’ll just wait for you right here. I know you guys don’t cotton much to a bunch of folks trackin’ all over the PLS. Sheriff’s the only one been in so far.”

Travis walked to the front of the dilapidated house. He gingerly picked his way up the rickety steps to the front porch and rapped loudly on the little farmhouse’s loose screen door. Nothing. He knocked again, as hard as he dared for fear of pushing the whole thing over. Finally, he heard shuffling behind the door.



“Yeah? Who’s there?”

“My name’s Kenny Travis, Mr. Hanes,” Travis said through the peeling wood. “I’m part of the search and rescue team that Sheriff Spears called in to help find your wife.”

The door opened and swung slowly inward a foot. Jerry Hanes poked his sharp face through the opening. He looked a hundred years old and as frail as a cobweb.

“You found her?” he demanded. “Is she dead?”

“No sir,” Travis said. “We haven’t found her yet. I’d like to ask you a few questions, if I may.”

“I’m a sick man, Mr. Travis. I need to rest.”

“I understand, sir. But I’m going to need a scent article for the dogs, Mr. Hanes. Have you changed the linens on your bed since Mrs. Hanes last slept on them?”

“The sheets?” Hanes barked. “No. Esther does all that. Why?” He stepped back into the darkness of the house, begrudgingly opening the door wide enough for Travis to edge through.

The cramped little living room reeked of stale urine and cigarettes. In the dim hall light, Travis could see that the chairs and couch all bore stains to support the odor.



“We’d like to use Mrs. Hanes’ pillowcase to scent the dogs off of.” Travis pulled a plastic bag from his pocket.

Rickety old Mr. Hanes motioned reluctantly with a trembling hand for Travis to follow him down the narrow hallway choked with stacks of racing magazines and soiled laundry.

When Travis let himself back out onto the porch, he inhaled the fresh air greedily and made his way back to where Deputy Farrell waited.

“You boys do a hasty of the premises?” he asked.

“Sheriff may have poked around a bit. But he kept the rest of us well away. Why?”

“The old guy’s cagey. Weird. Wouldn’t surprise me if she turns up buried in the backyard is all.”

Back at the fire department, several beer-gut-sporting deputies lounged against the walls looking dull and bored. Tripp was bent over a large topographical map secured to the scarred wood of a folding table with white surgical tape. The PLS was marked in red on the clear overlay, segment boundaries drawn in black.

Jay donned latex gloves and opened the pillowcase bag. He pulled the fabric out and cut it into four-inch squares, carefully depositing each into a smaller bag.



“OK, folks,” Tripp said to the assembled searchers. “We’ve got 10 sectors to cover. We’re going to clear the most likely sectors with the dogs, starting with Sectors One through Four. We’ll divvy up ground pounders to cover the rest. Siggy, you and Lila take Sector One. This road serves as one boundary. This drainage ditch serves as another.

“Travis, you and Git clear Sector Two.” He finished making sector assignments, and the searchers eagerly made their way out to the vehicles for their dogs.

Lila perched with her front paws on the car’s rear bumper, tail and head down, and waited quietly as Siggy secured a bright orange SAR Dog vest around her, attaching a miniature cowbell to her collar and tucking a glowing neon yellow nightstick into the vest’s Velcro tabs.

“Make sure you let her take a good whiff of those outbuildings on the property,” Travis said. “I still ain’t so all-fired sure this guy didn’t chop her into little pieces and stuff her in a freezer box.”

“But you made him out to be so frail and sickly.”

“Crimes of passion — folks get strong when they get crazy,” Travis said as he readied Git.

Fifteen minutes later, Siggy, Lila and Jay stood in the Hanes’ unkempt backyard. The three dogs in the rusty pen reared up on their hind legs and braced against the



sagging wire, chins and voices raised in protest of the invasion. Lila wagged her tail and licked her nose in acknowledgment and deference, but quickly turned her attention back to Siggy and the business at hand.

Siggy walked the dog slowly up to and around each of the three dilapidated wooden outbuildings that dotted the ragged lot. The walls, more suggestions than barriers, let in enough light through gaps, warps and holes to allow her to make out the vague contents of each building at broken intervals.

One housed an ancient tractor covered in dust and cobwebs with an equally rusty bush hog attached at a haphazard angle. Through the cracks of another shed, her flashlight beam danced over a rusty old upright freezer. She shivered, but the dog did not hesitate. Siggy turned and walked Lila slowly past again, her eyes riveted to the freezer as it flashed in and out of view. Again, Lila passed unfazed. If Esther Hanes had been hacked into little pieces, the pieces weren't housed here.

"OK, Jay," Siggy said, satisfied. "I'm going to scent Lila from here. See if we can just follow the Hanes woman's trail." Siggy fished in her fanny pack for the small Ziploc, opened the baggie and held it down for Lila.

To Lila, the world went gray but for the intense crystals of scent that wafted up from the baggie in Siggy's hand. The scent was sharp and distinct: the Find.



“Lila,” Siggy commanded, “Go Find!”

Lila tore away through the dim brush, jumping fallen trees, skirting bushes, her bell jangling wildly.

The Find crystals were few and far between, drifting lazily in the air. Lila turned her head to fully examine each as it floated into range, changing her direction as she followed the scent. She checked over her shoulder to see two flashlight beams following methodically. Deep in her canine awareness, she knew the two shafts of light belonged to her.

More logs, trees, bushes. Lila could hear Siggy’s and Jay’s voices. Her only awareness of their words was that there was no firm, staccato command voice and no mention of her name.

“Is she supposed to run off like that?” Jay asked, looking after the dog’s faintly visible glow stick bobbing far ahead.

“She’s ranging out. She can cover a lot more ground a lot faster than we can. She won’t get out of earshot.”

Lila ran into a small pool of the scent crystals. She inhaled them excitedly, then tore off, following the trail of scent that led from the pool. Her bell jangled more wildly.

“She’s got it,” Siggy announced to Jay, who marked their coordinates on his GPS.



More brush. More crystals bombarded Lila. Her bell continued to jangle as she tore along. The familiar crunch and snap of unfamiliar leaves and twigs urged her on to the next crystal, and the next. The ground passed quickly beneath her feet.

Lila charged along the scent trail, leaping and bounding. She followed it through a shallow ditch, up a hill and to the edge of a steep slope. But as she gleefully barreled down the slope, the Find scent slipped out of her reach. She dashed back and forth through the ravine, frantically trying to recover it.

Lila backtracked up the crumbling slope to catch the scent again. More slowly this time, she tried to follow it straight across to the other side. The Find scent remained tauntingly high, just out of reach. But she could vaguely sense that it was there, a taste more than a smell.

At a loss, she thundered back toward Sigg, ran circles around her, then dashed back to the ravine.

“What’s happening?” Jay asked.

“She seems confused. Must’ve lost the scent,” Sigg answered. “Mark it, in case she doesn’t pick it up again.”

Lila climbed the far slope and ranged out wider and wider, trying to recapture the scent. She could no longer detect even a ghost of the Find on the air. Where was it? Where did it go?



Siggy caught up to the confused dog. Pulling out a small puff bottle, she squeezed a miniature geyser of white powder into the air at the edge of the ravine. The white cloud drifted up, then abruptly pulled down. Siggy stepped a few feet away and puffed the powder again. This time, the cloud carried to the southeast.

“Lila. Come.” Siggy used the dog’s collar to turn her northwest, into the breeze.

“Lila, Go Find.” With renewed confidence, Lila raced away in the new direction. Siggy’s voice and footfalls again faded into the background.

“Dog Team One to Dog Team Two.”

“Go ahead, Dog Team One.” It was Travis’ voice.

“Lila lost the scent in a ravine,” she told him. “Air currents must be swirling down through there.”

“Radiate out from the ravine. See if she can pick it back up.”

Lila broke out of the brush just before the road that served as their boundary, pulling Siggy’s focus back.

“Lila! Wait!”

Wait. The command shot through the dog’s mind trying to take hold. All she could think of was scent and find.



Wait. Lila stopped just before darting across the asphalt. A pickup truck thundered past, kicking up a spray of gravel and fumes.

Siggy gained the road beside her, her heart in her throat at the near miss.

“OK, Lila. Go Find.”

The dog shot across the road, back into heavy woods. But the Find scent had vanished. Lila dashed one way, then doubled back the other. Nothing. She shot back in the direction they had come, brushing past Siggy on the way. The little shepherd tore back across the road before Siggy could stop her, narrowly missing the front tire of another car.

“Lila!” Siggy called out, but the dog was hell bent on rediscovering the scent. Probably the only two cars that would travel this stretch of road all night, Siggy marveled, and her dog practically kissed the bumpers of both of them.

Lila flew back to the ravine, skirted it, then scrambled northeast to where the Find scent had been strongest. Her experience told her the scent wasn’t gone, just hiding. It was part of the game for it to hide. It was the object of the game for her to find it. Her instincts told her it must be above her, so she jumped.

What was that? Was that it? She jumped again. Find scent



tickled her nose. She ran a couple of strides and jumped again, catching more of the elusive scent. She continued on her line, launching herself into the air every few paces. As the ground rose up again on the other side, it raised Lila with it until she no longer had to jump to keep the scent full in her nose. She bounded past Jay without slowing.

Out of breath, Siggy arrived back at Jay a few minutes later.

“What happened? She run into a beehive?” Jay asked.

“I don’t know,” Siggy panted. “Wait. Here she comes.”

Lila appeared through the trees. She made a beeline for Siggy, jumped up and put her front paws squarely on Siggy’s thighs, then bounded off in the same direction she had just come.

Siggy grabbed twice for her radio, missing it on the first attempt in her excitement.

“Dog Team One to Base,” she said as she and Jay jogged after Lila.

“Go ahead, Dog Team One.”

“Dog has indicated a find,” Siggy panted.

Lila doubled back to check on them, then bounded away



again. Siggy and Jay kept up a steady military trot in pursuit.

Abruptly, Siggy broke through a line of trees and almost tripped over the seated dog. She gasped and stopped cold. Jay plowed into Siggy, knocking her forward an unwilling step, then slowly turned his head to follow her wide-eyed stare.

There, face down in the leaves, was the figure of Esther Hanes. Her wrinkled white legs and red sneaker-clad feet stuck out from the bottom of a faded pink housecoat. Her hands were drawn in tight beneath her chest and the back of her gray head was matted with dark, dried blood. A dark stain covered the ground beneath her.

“Is she ... ?” Jay asked.

“I don’t know,” Siggy said.

“I don’t like the way she’s got her hands.”

“Good girl, Lila,” Siggy said, remembering the dog, though she praised her without taking her eyes from the prone figure on the ground.

Lila thumped her tail uncertainly.

Siggy slowly raised her radio. “Dog Team One to Base.”

“Come in, Dog Team One.”



“Subject has been found,” Siggy said flatly.

“Mrs. Hanes?” Jay queried the old woman’s body.

“Ma’am? Esther?”

No response. Jay stepped toward her, then stopped. He watched her back closely for the rise and fall of breath.

“What’s the status, Dog Team One?” Tripp asked over the walkie, making Siggy and Jay both jump.

Siggy paused. They hadn’t checked vitals on the woman, which she knew they should do. But the woman was last seen brandishing a butcher knife, and they couldn’t see either of Esther Hanes’ hands. The prone woman had them curled tightly beneath her chest.

“Jay?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

Siggy depressed the talk button on her handset.

“Unconfirmed status three.”

At that moment, Esther Hanes raised her blood-soaked head a few inches up out of the leaves and turned her ashen face toward them. Siggy’s breath caught in her throat. The old woman’s eyes were wide, lunacy dancing openly there. Her lips were pressed firmly together in a



thin, bloodless line. A low, steady wheeze emitted from her, though her lips did not part to release it.

Lila whined and backed away.

“Uh, cancel status three,” Siggy stammered into the radio.

“Make that a status two. Get those EMTs out here!”

“Out where, Dog Team One? What are your coordinates?”

“Jay, our coordinates. Jay. The GPS!”

Jay fumbled with his GPS, tearing his eyes from Esther Hanes only long enough to find the “send” button and depress it. Siggy struggled with shaking hands to turn her gooseneck flashlight on strobe and clip it to the back of her belt.

“Everything’s going to be all right now, Mrs. Hanes,” she said to the woman’s shoulder, avoiding her wild eyes.

Jay approached Esther slowly. She pushed herself a little higher, the wheeze, low and rattling. Jay walked a wide circle all the way around the woman’s body, searching the ground for the knife.

“Do you have a knife, Esther?” Jay asked, conversationally.

“When the good guys get here to help us out, we’re going to need to roll you over. Esther, do we need to be worried about that knife?”



Esther's eyes remained locked on Siggy. The wheeze rattled forth again.

Siggy and Jay strained in tandem to hear the first hint of the distant siren that eventually met their ears. When four EMTs carrying a stretcher, Sheriff Spears and a deputy came crashing through the brush, Siggy felt her rigid back sag in relief, her knees turn to water. In the flashlight beams, they rolled Esther Hanes over onto her back, just as Jay had said they would. Her neck gaped open horribly, leaves and sticks stuck in and about the angry gash that started an inch below her left ear and carved a jagged path around to her right ear. Her exposed larynx jumped and bobbed as she tried to speak.

The rattling wheeze came from the open wound. It was as if the woman's soul was leaving her body through this newly carved orifice.

Jay jerked his head back, away from the sudden stench of decay that poured out of the gaping wound in Esther Hanes' neck. The four EMTs descended.

"I can't get a pulse up here. Rick, check her feet."

"She's cyanotic," Rick responded. "I can't get anything."

"Get some oxygen on her," the third EMT ordered. Esther's tight fists kept moving up over the gash.

"Ma'am, move your hands down, now. We're going to help



you, but you've got to let us," Rick instructed patiently but firmly.

"I can't get the oxygen on her. Hold her hands down for me."

Sheriff Spears walked the area nearby until he located the large, blood-encrusted knife. He bagged it and handed it to the deputy who shadowed him.

"She's not breathing through her mouth, man," the third EMT reminded them. "She trached herself. Put the oxygen over her neck."

"I got nothing to tape it to," Rick said.

"Then just hold it over!"

On three, the four men transferred Esther's brittle body to the waiting stretcher. With one EMT at each end and one walking beside, holding the oxygen mask to the gash in Esther's neck, they carried her away from the scene.

Lila whined a single note.

Siggy fished in her pack for Lila's leash and bent to snap it onto the dog's harness. Lila's tail swept the twigs and leaves where she sat. And in that inexplicable way that dogs have for understanding what their people need, if not why they need it, she rested her chin gently on Siggy's shoulder.



SPOOKY STORY

as told by

MOYA FRY

Melly is scared of her own shadow ... literally ... Just today for example, in the parking garage, she was walking to her car and heard footsteps following her. She knows she is the last to leave her office (first in, last out, as her dad always said), so she was sure it wasn't a fellow co-worker. Instantly thinking the worst, Melly moved into a comic run-walk, the only fast pace her bulky frame allows. Sure enough, the footsteps behind her also hurried their pace. She clicked the "unlock" on her key ring, which she had safely tucked in a white-knuckle grip and heard the comforting chirp-chirp only a few cars down ... as well as a resounding chirp echo throughout the garage. She slowed her pace. The footsteps also slowed. She finally reached her Volvo SUV, got in — blasting *American Top 40* — and quietly shook her head, brushing off any lingering feelings and reassuring herself that her earlier scare was nothing more than her own feet echoing



in the dark garage.

In general, Melly is overly sensitive, hyperaware and convinced she is going to be kidnapped at every corner (never once considering that the “kid” in kidnapping no longer applies to her 43-year-old self). In another time, Melly would have been considered of feeble nerves, prone to fainting spells and sent to bed with a dram of whiskey in her chamomile tea. Unfortunately, in this world, and as a secretary at a small legal firm, she is often required to work well after sunset, making the dark trip to her car by herself, which taxes her nerves more and more each day.

Whatever caused this feeble disposition, Melly is not sure, but she knows it could not be the result of her mystery novel reading. And, oh, did she love those detective stories especially. Stephen King? Check. Lee Child? Check. The entire Evanovich series? Double check. She even considered attending a book reading by one of her favorite authors, but decided against it after seeing a commercial for the upcoming movie adaptation with the lead detective played by Robert Pattinson. Forty-three and single — Melly’s only love interest lay between the pages of her latest detective thriller, and Robert Pattinson would just not do.

Melly’s nerves had been as thin as doilies since childhood, a period that Melly did not spend much time thinking about. Even in grade school, Melly was not well-liked. Apparently an aptitude for earning teachers’ approval



and an aversion to sports in general were not a recipe for making friends as a preteen. However, as often is the case, Melly was once friends with the popular girl in school. Their moms were friends, likely more from the convenience of sharing a backyard than from actual camaraderie and common ground. But for those few years, Melly was happy and carefree — spending time outside, giggling at sleepovers, and playing hide and seek.

One day in particular, in a rare moment of generosity, Melly and her friend had invited the boys next door to join their game of hide and seek. As summer was just turning the corner into fall, it got dark earlier than any of the kids were expecting, but the game continued on into the early evening.

Melly was feeling pretty confident about her hiding spot in the low branches of the apple tree that bordered her small suburban backyard. As it grew darker, she could no longer hear her friends calling her name and began to doze off. She did not hear her parents calling her name, and they assumed she was spending the night at the neighbors' house. Normally this would have been against the rules for a school night, but they allowed her one small freedom, a remnant from the summer months. Much later, Melly did not hear the strange truck pull into the driveway, the headlights nearly revealing her in her hiding spot, or hear the two men carefully closing the car doors and making their way toward her house.

When Melly did wake, it was to a loud scream. She



groggily shook off some of the leaves that had fallen while she was sleeping, and with the athleticism of a true bookworm, clumsily made her way toward the glass kitchen back door.

To this day, Melly is not exactly sure what she saw through that back door. What she did remember was the killer's face: a graying scruffy beard, close-cropped and balding hair, and large dark eyes. They locked eyes only for a moment, through the glass, when Melly suddenly bolted across the lawn, returning to her hiding spot, where she tried to process what had happened and what she had seen. She passed the rest of the night undisturbed in the apple tree, eventually falling asleep.

The next morning, she was awakened suddenly — eyes wide, and already short of breath — by a young police officer. After that morning, the rest is a blur. Melly became increasingly more absorbed in her schoolwork and detective novels, which actually proved to be a successful coping mechanism. Melly might not have had the guts or confidence to solve her parents' murder, but she could read about the heroic detectives who confronted criminals every day and tirelessly solved their own gruesome cases.

Melly didn't spend much time thinking of her childhood or that night, and she had grown accustomed to the lasting effect the night had on her nerves today.

On this particular night, Melly arrived home from the



parking garage and reassured her still buzzing nerves by going through the familiar routine of turning on every light in the house, including all the closet lights. Her electric bill is sky high, but her job pays well, and apart from her extravagant book budget Melly spends her money on little else.

Once all the lights were on, Melly turned her attention to the stove to prepare her favorite meal. One benefit of being single and alone is that she can eat mac and cheese as much as she wants, hence her growing waistline. No matter, choosing to dress like Mrs. Doubtfire in *Little House on the Prairie*, her “style” is suited to a larger woman.

Dinner passed with relatively few incidents. However, Melly is never at ease while cooking. Since her stove faces the front door, she has to cook with her back to the door, causing her enormous tension. In fact, she often gives up on complicated meals because of the time required to face away from this key intruder entry point. She only heard a few noises on that evening that caused her to turn abruptly, cheese-laden spoon in hand. Her shih tzu, Holden, who is really more familiar than a pet, was the culprit for both sudden noises. The first time, barking at his own reflection in the window and the second, startling himself awake with the sound of his own snoring.

After dinner, as her routine dictated, Melly allowed herself at least one hour of trashy TV. Much like her taste in music, Melly is a fan of the same shows as 12-year-old girls and Midwestern shut-ins. She also likes to listen



to the TV at ridiculously loud volumes so she won't hear any unexpected noises that would cause her to get flustered and miss any of the nail-biting, but inevitable, judge's decisions.

Not having the energy to watch more than one show, once the dishes were washed and drying in the rack, Melly went about her "locking up" routine, which consists of checking every window and door, double-checking and double-locking each. As she moves around the house she turns off the lights once she is certain all the locks in that room have been checked. Being genuinely scared of the dark means her only option is to move forward through a darkening house toward the next lock and lamp. As she accomplishes this task, Melly smiles to herself, pleased at how brave she really is, a grown woman, tackling her fear of the dark every night.

Once upstairs, she changed into her prairie pajamas and stood at the sink, looking in the mirror and brushing her teeth for the dentist-recommended full one minute. As she checked her reflection in the mirror, she noticed that the curtain was fluttering. She was sure she had closed the window that morning, but she had not done her lock check in this room yet. She quickly turned, locked and settled the billowing curtains. Closing her eyes, she faced the mirror again, took a deep breath and said a silent prayer that when she opened them, no intruder would be standing in her bathroom. Sure enough, with only one eye popped open, Melly could see it was just she and Holden alone in the bathroom. As she caught her



reflection in the mirror, toothbrush dangling a la Britney Spears' last cigarette out of the corner of her mouth, she shook her head and vowed ... I can do this. I can get into bed, I can read my book and I can safely go to sleep.

About to climb into bed, Melly realized she had forgotten her bedtime tonic and headed downstairs, again, turning on each light as she passed to light her way through the darkness of her lonely house. Holden was close behind her as always, his paws slipping slightly on the hardwood floors but glued to Melly's legs nonetheless.

Safely back upstairs, glass in hand, Melly settled into the covers, her latest mystery book open on her lap. She thought about the upcoming weekend and how she had uncharacteristically volunteered for the company's annual fall outing, taking place at a nearby orchard. Lying in bed that night, Melly knew she wouldn't go on Saturday. She would make up some excuse and her co-workers would understand; most would be shocked enough to even see her name on the volunteer list. But she couldn't go that weekend. Apple trees are still a source of deep-seated anxiety for Melly. It's one thing to be afraid of the dark on her own; it's another to be a ball of nerves in front of her co-workers.

Brushing away those memories, Melly picked up her book and was cheered to see she only had a few chapters left and might finish the book that night. She looked over for Holden and realized he had not taken up his usual perch on the bed next to her. Holden was still on the



floor, sitting, as if waiting for an invitation for something he hadn't asked permission for a day in his little life. She called his name and patted his favorite spot next to her. Holden only got up, circled and sat back down, only slightly closer to the bed.

He is an older dog and Melly worries she's going to have to splurge on the fancy bed steps she sees on the Home Shopping Network to help him into bed each night. She called his name again, slightly louder in case he was losing his hearing, and Holden responded by shifting nervously from foot to foot, making a fuss.

Frustrated that he was interrupting her precious mystery reading time, she reached down to pull Holden into bed when a hand reached out and grabbed Melly's wrist.



INTO THE FOREST DARK

as told by

JUDI CUTRONE

The man with the vest wiped the sweat from his forehead and said, "It says here that Fred Lou moved to Lafayette County from New York State in September '32. Wife's named Georgina Ferris Lou; died in December '32 of dysentery. Two children listed on the record. I take it that's you two," he drawled with a look at me. "Evelyn Pryer Lou and Roy Treble Lou." He put his folder down for a second and put his wet handkerchief back in his pocket. "Your mother was a schoolteacher," he said. "It don't say nothing about your father."

The man waited for me to say something and waved his hands against the mosquitoes to knock them back. I wanted to tell him that these 'squitas were different, that they didn't want no trouble. One of them had landed on my shoulder as he was talking, just sat there to take a rest. The man in the vest clapped his hands together and



grinned. “Got it,” he said and wiped his hands on his pants. The ’squita on my shoulder buzzed in distress and I frowned.

The man swung down and looked at me, his eyes small and pointy-like. “You not all there, are you, girl?” I looked at his shiny car and saw myself staring back, a skinny little nothing with blond hair, cut short and standing up in every direction. It was ’cause I fell asleep on the floor of the kitchen and woke up with something stuck in my hair, and there was no choice but to cut it out myself. I reached up and touched the place where I’d put the knife too close to the back of my head. I felt the scar with my fingers.

The man’s sigh brought me back. “Look here,” he said to me, talking real slow. “I need to know what your daddy doin’ for work. ’Cause there a story going ’round town that he making mash liquor right there in your house and sellin’ it. Maybe y’all can do that in the state of New York but you can’t do that here, not in Lafayette County.”

He hitched up his pants, spat at the ground and got back in the car. “You tell him I stopped by,” the man called over his shoulder.

I did tell Daddy the man stopped by. I wasn’t going to. But I was walking through the kitchen that night and slipped on something and dropped the plate I was carrying. Wouldn’t you know it; it was the last plate



that didn't have a chip or crack in it or nothing, and I smashed it right into the floor.

I got the belt for it, and bad luck on me that it was early enough in the night that his arm wasn't tired yet, not the least bit; and when my legs went numb and he lifted his hand for another go, I told him between gasps that a man in a suit had driven up, asking after him. His eyes went wide and he forgot all about the belt. He turned right around and picked up his bottle of gin, and I took the moment given to me and crawled on my hands and knees, quick as a spider, and I made it to my room.

My room was the biggest in the house, and I got it because the windows face the cemetery. Daddy didn't like living across from the dead, not one bit, and talked about moving somewhere else, away from the dead and their "prying eyes." Whenever he say that, about moving away, I pray real real hard because I run to that cemetery if things get bad with Daddy. I take Roy T., put him up on my back, and we run and curl up right in the middle of that cemetery, against the stone with the angel on top, until Daddy stops his hollering and he done fall asleep in his chair.

That night, my backside and legs were aching something terrible, but it wasn't so bad that I couldn't do my ritual. I pulled a handful of cornbread from my pocket and put it right next to the bed on the floor. I took another handful and put it right next to the closet. And then I got in the bed, in the dark, and laid down on my stomach to wait.



Sometimes I fell asleep, waiting, but not tonight. My legs hurt so bad. I didn't want to look at them, so I kept my eyes on the closet door and when I heard the first noise, I reached for my candle and lit it up quick. The candle let out a glow in the room but not too bright to draw Daddy and just enough so I could see my pets coming for their dinner.

There was Angus and Johnny, them roaches, and they come first, but then they scurry when they see the light. There was a new friend, a big 'ol ant, as big as a house, and I watched it pick up a cornbread crumb over and over and over in its hands. The flies came last, hovering and buzzing. I watched them all, still too awake for sleep and awake enough to catch the next part of the ritual, which always set my heart pounding in my chest.

Roy T. had been the one to tell me that there were monsters in our house, under our beds and in our closets. I thought it was just a tall tale at first — he only four after all and lately he been lying about everything under the sun — but then I saw the monsters myself, with my very own eyes.

There were two of them in my room. The one that lived in my closet had blue skin, and he was short, no taller than my knees, with a big chest and long, floppy ears and sharp teeth. I called him Jed. The one under my bed was real shy. He was red all over, even his eyes, and had long nails and a big belly and a real deep voice. I called him Jasper.



The first time I saw them, standing over me in my bed, I was so scared that I almost wet myself. I shut my eyes and didn't open them until morning, and when I did open my eyes, the monsters were gone.

My mama said that most things that seem scary are just hungry for somethin'. So the very next night I left them each a slice of bread, one by the closet and one by the door, just in case she was right. Then I pulled my blanket up over my head, and when I heard the closet door open and the long nails scrape against the floor, I thought my heart was going to bust right out of my chest. The nails scraped closer, and I heard a sound, like a big spoonful of marmalade coming out of a jar. The nails scraped against the floor again and the closet door creaked. "Thanks," I heard a gruff voice say.

Since then, I always left them a little something and saw them both almost every night. My heart still danced like a jackrabbit when I heard them nails on the floor, but once I got the candle and got a good look at them, it wasn't so bad.

That night, Jasper pulled himself out from under the bed and looked at me with his big red eyes. "Did you find my marble?" he asked.

I nodded and reached into my pocket to drop it into his waiting claws. "I tripped on it and broke a plate."

Jasper's red eyes widened, and he scrambled to pull



himself out from under the bed, his big belly caught as always. He shook the dust and dirt from his ears and looked at my legs. Even in the yellowish glow of the candle, my legs burned pink, dotted with red where my flesh had caught the sharp edges of the belt buckle. Jasper growled and whimpered, and it brought Jed from his perch by the door, where he stuffed stale cornbread into his mouth. There were still flecks of cornbread on his scaly face when he waddled over.

“It’s OK, Jasper,” I told him, but he didn’t seem to hear me. He just stared at my legs.

I met Jed’s eyes. Jed had seen worse on me. Jed did for Jasper what I did for Roy T. when Daddy would swing through the house, his fists up, and I’d grab Roy T. and toss him in the closet off the kitchen. It wasn’t so bad for Roy T. because a monster lived in that closet too. She had three eyes and fed him stale biscuits and patted his hair. We called her Nancy.

“The ladies have been talking,” Jed said in his gruff voice. When I shook my head, confused, he waved his blue claws around in the air. “The ladies of the house,” he said and suddenly I realized he meant the ghosts that lived in the walls. He’d mentioned them only once, but a girl remembers when she hears there are ghosts that live in her walls.

Jed fixed his dark eyes on me and let out a growl. “They think it’s time for you to run away, girl.”



I shook my head. I'd thought about it, sure, but where would I go? What about Roy T.? I didn't have no money, no family, and I was a skinny girl of eight with chopped hair and knobby knees and more scars than a spooked mare in a prickly bush. I shook my head and closed my eyes, finally ready for sleep, and I said, "Who'd feed you and Jasper if I run away?"

I coulda sworn I felt a hand rest on my head then, over the roughness of my hair. It lingered there and I fell asleep and dreamt of my Mama.

The very next day, Roy T. was walking through the house when he tripped on a shoe and knocked Daddy's radio to the floor. It was a full moon and Daddy had been out back for hours.

We both heard the crash, Daddy and me, and I just had enough time to grab Roy T. and shove him out the front door. "You run to the angel and you don't come back 'til I whistle," I said to him in my meanest voice, and I shut the door behind him.

When Daddy saw his radio in pieces, he sent me into the wall hard and didn't even bother with the belt, just kicked and kicked and kicked. When he was spent, he reached for the bottle and found it empty. He threw it at my head and stumbled out the room, left me there bleeding and wanting to die.

It was hours before I could make it to my room.



I pulled myself up onto the bed and used the blanket to stop the blood where I saw it. When I opened my eyes, Jed and Jasper were there. Angus, one of my roach pets, had wandered over and rested against my hand. I looked at Jed and his dark, beady eyes met mine. “I gotta run away,” I told him.

I stayed in my room the whole next day and made plans, eating crumbs of cornbread from my pocket. It was two days before I could sit up and another whole day before I could walk, but Roy T. helped bring me food to eat. Without me to watch over him and shove him into closets, he had to stay in my room with me, and he did it, though he almost drove me to distraction a few times. I remember Mama warning me that little boys needed to be run like dogs in a field or they’d get into all sorts of trouble. We already in trouble, Mama, I wanted to tell her now. We in it deep since you died.

The strangest things happened when I finally walked, stooped over, out of my room. See, I had made the list in my mind of the things I would need to run away. The list was real short — clothes, food for the road, money and a place to go. The first two were easy enough — I was wearing clothes already and I was real good at hiding food and sneaking it into my pockets. The last two, money and a place to go, well it was like putting the moon on a list.

But then I was in the front room of the house, walking through, when I noticed Daddy asleep in his chair in



the corner. It was Sunday and he always slept through Sundays, so this sight wasn't that surprising. But there was something in his hand, a piece of folded paper, and when I ventured close enough, I saw it was a letter.

Who it was from, I didn't know. I couldn't read. (And I didn't know Daddy could read either, truth be told.) But I recognized the way the last four lines were written when I dared to get close enough. Four lines and a bunch of numbers. It was an address, I was sure of it. I didn't know where it was or who sent it or anything, but I knew as clear as I knew my name that it was a place to go, a place that wasn't here. And even if I wasn't all that clear, what happened next would've convinced me ...

It was hot as a sinner's bottom in that house, not helped by the fact that Daddy fell asleep before opening any windows at all. And yet, at that moment, a cold wind shot through the room. I tell you, it was so cold, I saw my own breath like a puff of smoke. That same cold wind sent the letter falling out of my father's limp hand and onto the floor. And then another cold wind shot that same letter right up and into my hand.

I stared at the paper in my hand and held my breath as my father shifted and shivered in his chair. He turned his head from me and I ran as fast as my hobbled body could go.

Those days, I wasn't taking any chances with Daddy's temper — when night fell and the bottle appeared, I



grabbed Roy T's hand and we went to the cemetery, sometimes sleeping there until the dead of night, when we could sneak home and into our beds.

Every night, I asked Jasper if I could see the letter, and he pulled it out of a small pouch he wore at his waist. I unfolded the paper and stared at the curved writing, and those four lines. Sometimes I fell asleep holding it, but that was all right 'cause Jasper would just reach up with a claw and take it back.

Every night when I looked at the letter, Jed crouched over his dinner and growled, "What about the money?" I had no clue how to answer him and I told him so.

It was one week after the radio fell when I got my answer.

My bedroom window didn't just look out on the cemetery; it looked on the road too. That afternoon, I glimpsed Daddy out front, talking to a man in a pickup. I watched as Daddy lifted a crate of jars into the bed of the truck and secured it. The man handed him some money and a bottle and drove off; the dust kicked up behind him.

Daddy walked into the house, his chest puffed up and out, and went straight into the kitchen, where I watched him reach up to the very highest shelf and pull down a coffee can. He pulled the money from his pocket, counted it carefully and then put it in the can and put it back on the shelf. He took the new bottle from his front pocket and regarded it quietly.



Roy T. picked that moment to come flying around the corner, pretending to be a crop duster, and he stopped short when he came up to me and saw Daddy in the kitchen, but Daddy just laughed and tucked the bottle back into his front pocket. He opened his arms. "There's my boy!" he said and Roy T., that boy launched himself across the room with such speed that the walls shook and Daddy lifted him right up.

He looked over and saw me too and smiled as if he'd been away at war, gone a long, long time, and just walked through our front door. "Evvie, girl, come on now, give Daddy a hug."

Did he know why I walked toward him so slow, one leg lagging a bit behind the other? Did he know why I walked now stooped at the waist, like I carried a boulder on my back? Daddy looked at me with clear eyes, like he didn't know why, not at all, and for a second I didn't know why either. I wrapped my arms around his waist and held tight, my brother's leg warm against my arm.

I might've stayed forever if I didn't feel the edge of the bottle in his front pocket. I said nothing but in my heart, I told my Daddy goodbye.

You might think that a tender moment like that would make me wait, make me delay. No. I knew as soon as I saw that money go into the coffee can that I would be taking it out again that night. I'd seen my father take the cover off his old truck that afternoon and tinker with the



engine. He was aiming to go to the city soon and would take his money with him. If that money was gone, so went my chance to escape.

The only time I wavered at all was when I put Roy T. in his bed that night and his hot arms wound around my neck. I buried my face in his stinky hair and wondered what to do, how I would free us both, if I could even do it. If push came to shove, would I leave my brother there, in that house, and save myself? “Close your eyes and have sweet dreams,” I told him. “Dream of Mama.” Roy T. yawned and turned on his side, asleep before his head even hit the bed.

I turned around and lifted my candle. The glow settled on the creatures in the room, Roy T.’s own monsters, a squat troll named Hop and a giant, hairy beast he called Tom Bean. I didn’t know them as well as I knew my own monsters, but I reached into my pocket and pulled out some bread. The monsters each took a slice, and Tom Bean, who didn’t speak, regarded me with his four sleepy eyes and it was like he could read my thoughts, my doubts. I felt shamed by his gaze and took my light out the room.

Daddy was out back, in his chair. In the glow of the moon, I saw him tilt his head back and drink, long gulps from his new bottle, and then take a swallow from a jar that was in his other hand.



Moonshine. I swallowed hard — moonshine made him real mean, meaner than usual.

I had thought it would be so easy to get that money — just carry over a chair and grab the coffee can from the shelf. But when I stood on the chair and reached, and oh! My sides ached and burned when I reached, I was nowhere near close enough. With a gasp from the pain, I hopped down from the chair and grabbed the nearest thing I could find. With the broom in hand, I climbed back on the chair, my bare feet clutching the sides of the seat, and I used the end of the broom to nudge the can closer to the edge.

I just had to catch it, that was all, but I didn't anticipate that it would be so heavy and I watched in horror as the coins, heavier than I thought coins could be, dropped through the air and hit the floor with a clatter. The can fell fast and I caught it, my hand wrapped around it but not before more coins hit the floor. The sound bellowed through the house.

Moving fast, I hopped down off the chair, my heart in my mouth, and grabbed as much money as I could, but where to put it. Why didn't I think of that? And suddenly I looked down at the floor and saw Jasper's pouch there, waiting. I blinked at it, confused, but didn't question it, I just put the money inside, stuffed it there fast, and there was a BANG as my father's hand hit the door. "Hey! What?" His voice boomed and I stared at the door only to see the doorknob stayed fix. "Goddamn door's locked!"



my father yelled and I jumped as he banged his fist against the door, once, twice.

I turned in circles in the kitchen, the bulging pouch in one hand, the empty coffee can in the other. What did I do, put the can back on the shelf? I grabbed the chair and climbed back up and my sides burned again as I reached up, but it was no use. I couldn't reach that shelf. I glanced at the door, but it was quiet now, a fact that filled me with dread, and when I turned my head the other way, my father stared at me through the window, his eyes on me with my hand on the coffee can. He slammed his fists against the sides of the window and yelled, and I dropped the can completely just as his bare fist shot through the glass. "Girl!" and then he reached through the window, his knuckles running with blood and lifted the window up.

I ran. I held the pouch in two hands and I ran as fast I could through the kitchen and just felt his hand grab my arm; his fingers skated off my skin as he hollered and hauled his body through the window.

He crashed through the house, his hand bloody, his eyes ... I never seen him so angry, not even when he kicked and kicked and kicked me, clear into heaven. I stumbled through the house and glanced over my shoulder, amazed to see chairs fall right in my father's path, that cold wind shooting through me and past me. He tripped over one and swore and tried to pick himself up, only to bat away a tin cup that flew at his head from nowhere. He took



a step and went flying back, and I glimpsed the marbles that had rolled out under his feet.

I gasped for breath, amazed at what I saw, and suddenly felt that same cold wind knock me forward, moving my legs toward my brother's room.

How could I have left Roy T. behind? How could I have thought it for even a second? I heard my father yell and his body hit the wall as he got to his feet and I ran into Roy T.'s room and slammed the door behind me. He stared at me, his eyes wide, and I grabbed the nearest shirt I could find and threw it at him. "Put that on right now," I said to him in my meanest voice and I saw his hands shake as he tried to put it on, and Hop, with his tiny troll hands, tried to help.

There was a BOOM as my father rushed the door with his body, but it wouldn't budge. I looked over my shoulder and saw Tom Bean leaning his own hairy form against the door. He put one giant paw up and my father railed and screamed on the other side, for nothing. "He's going to go to the window in a second," I realized and I scooped up Roy T. and put him on my back and went to that window myself and climbed out, my brother's arms tight around my neck and his knees pressing into my sore sides, the pain so sharp that for a second I was blind.

I stumbled into the grass and fell to my knees. I put the loop of the pouch over my neck and got a good grip on my brother and started to run.



We made it to the cemetery and I swung through the gate, but I didn't know if the cemetery would protect us this time. I'd gone too far. I was worse than my father's fears of the dead. Just then, there was a whoosh and Roy T. grabbed my arms. "Evvie, look!" And I turned around and saw the porch of our house engulfed in giant yellow flames, the smoke so black and thick that it stung my eyes, even across the road. "How?" I whispered but my questions stopped when I saw my father, in the fiery light, had stopped chasing us and stared as the clapboard house fell to the flames.

I turned away and started to move. We needed to run, I knew. We would need to run for a long, long time. And the truth was that I couldn't bear to watch that house fall. Mama had died in that house, after all. I gripped Roy T.'s legs and he sunk his head down against my neck. "What about Tom Bean?" he whispered into my ear, his voice full of sorrow and fear. "What about Hop?"

And Jasper and Jed. And Angus and my pets. I moved between the tombstones, the tears trapped behind my eyes, the smoke all over me, Roy T.'s heart beating fast against my back. "We'll just have to take them with us," I said back to him and I hefted him up and walked on.

And it wasn't very long down that windy, twisty road before we were joined by some heavy, hairy, clawed feet and I felt a familiar cold wind nudge me in the back, pushing me onward.



WE'RE ALREADY DEAD

as told by

TEDDY STOECKLEIN

We are all dead. I hate to be the one to say so, but it is true. Each and every one of us has already died. Sadly, it seems, my purpose in life is to bring you the news of your death — so let me begin by apologizing.

I can prove to you that you're dead. I can't say you will understand it, or accept it, but rest assured you are, in fact, already dead. To help prove you are dead, I propose that we explore three natural phenomena: déjà vu, panic attacks and audible dream catalysts.

Again, I apologize.

With respect to déjà vu, you've most likely experienced this sensation. Simply put, it is the feeling that you've been here before. Sometimes the feeling is faint — just a hint that things are oddly familiar. Other times the



déjà vu is so intense you are supremely confident you've been here before; so much so that you can predict what will happen next; like, say a man will walk up those stairs, right at this moment, turn and say, "I'm sorry."

Déjà vu has been studied by psychologists since the beginning of psychology. There have been, until now, numerous debates about the meaning of it all. But tonight, I give you the truth.

Déjà vu is a hiccup in your brain — a hiccup causing your brain to piece together snippets of memories, in order to very, very quickly catch up to itself. You see — your brain is so fast it can literally skip a beat, rewind and play out a memory again, with the illusion of you experiencing it for the first time, almost. I say almost, because your brain isn't perfect, and remnants of those memories can manifest themselves in a sensation we call déjà vu. Once the brain catches up to itself, the déjà vu sensation subsides, and it's back to normal. Had you been there before? Yes. But it was just an immeasurably tiny fraction of a sliver of the nanosecond before, not in a previous life.

Let's analyze panic attacks. Panic attacks are similar to déjà vu, only much more severe. The reason is people "panic." They panic because that strange feeling happening to them, they believe, is surely the result of something very real. Don't get me wrong, your heart rate may be doubling in pace, or you may not be able to catch your breath, but it isn't because you're having a heart



attack. It's not because you have a tumor. Your kidneys are not failing. It's because your brain is playing tricks on you. You are having a sensation, not unlike *déjà vu*, that is causing your body to release adrenaline at levels a thousand times greater than normal. Your brain is being shocked. And your body is reacting.

People who have had panic attacks sometimes cite feelings of an out-of-body experience — like they're walking the Earth, dead. They can literally see themselves going about their day, aimlessly maneuvering from place to place. This sensation can be triggered by things like dehydration, the loss of a loved one, a breakup, getting fired, getting married, having a baby or simply being really, really hung over. Regardless of its trigger, or the severity of the out-of-body experience, all panic attacks subside. It may take a trip to the Emergency Room, but eventually you get control of yourself.

To recap: *Déjà vu* and panic attacks are two ways the brain shows its muscle. Both demonstrate just how fast your brain is and how it likes to mess with your head.

And now, for the coup de grace: audible dream catalysts. More than *déjà vu* or panic attacks, nothing will prove that you have already died more than this.

What is an audible dream catalyst? Here's how it works. The average human has about eight dreams per night. They're not often remembered. Some people are better at remembering them than others. But the point is



we dream a lot. And sometimes an external sound can influence our dream.

Here's an example. You're dreaming you're in a bank during a robbery. The masked assailant leaps onto the counter, demanding money. The teller doesn't know the combo. The cops show up, and the bad guy draws his gun and starts shooting. "Bang ... bang ... bang."

In fact, the sounds of the gunshots in your dream are actually the knocks on your screen door. It's your neighbor looking to borrow your hedge trimmer. But instead of the knocks on the door waking you, your brain immediately correlates those sounds to a scenario, like a bank robbery, and you continue dreaming. Your brain is tricking you, again. An audible dream catalyst is an external sound literally influencing your dream.

Let's look at this a little deeper. In the bank robbery scenario, how can all the events of the dream unfold before the external sound is even known? In other words, prior to the bank being robbed, you dreamt you were in a park eating ice cream with a friend who had a pet monkey. A man in scuba gear on a unicycle pedaled by, juggling machetes. You found yourself naked. You needed to buy clothes. You had no money, so you went to the bank. And there you are, caught in the crossfire. How can this chain of events within your dream lead up to the moment when gunshots are, in actuality, a neighbor knocking at your door?



This is, again, your brain playing tricks on you. Your brain is so fast that it can actually create an entire plotline based on a noise, the very instant it hears that noise. It is your imagination in warp speed. It is instantaneous.

Ever hear someone who had a near-death experience say their life flashed before their eyes? Well, it can. And that is, in fact, what is happening right now. Your life is flashing before your eyes, right now. It may seem like life is moving at 24/7/365, but it's not. It's immeasurably fast, because you've already died. And this is your life flashing before your eyes. Everything up to now was created, by your brain, this instant, the very instant you died.

I do not know how you died. My guess is it was a global catastrophic event. I say this because we are all here, together, in reasonably the same state. Which means we all probably died at the same time. And how our lives play out from here, in this instant, all depends on our own imaginations. Some of us will die of cancer. Some of us will die from old age. Some of us will die in a botched bank robbery.

Soon our brains will stop firing and it will be "lights out." But before that happens, know that your brain is yours. I cannot control it. You control it. It is your imagination. There is no heaven or hell. There is only this instant. And how you choose to live it is up to you. So as you leave tonight, go home and think about how the rest of this instant plays out. Eat well. Drink beer. Make love. Make things. Save things. Treasure things. Be kind to one another.



Or don't.

Only you have the power to make your life memorable,
or regrettable. And it happens in an instant.





CHAPTER NO 10

November 6, 2014

FUCK CANADA

*November 4 meant elections. And so we voted
for this month's theme democratically. The
choices were "Turkey," "Thankful"
or the completely random "Fuck Canada."
Well, so much for democracy.*

FUCK CANADA PROLOGUE..... pg / **338**
by Teddy Stoecklein, Executive Creative Director

O CANADA..... pg / **341**
by Stephen Davis, Senior Copywriter

A SHOT IN THE DARK..... pg / **353**
by Pete Wiernusz, Analyst



FUCK CANADA PROLOGUE

as told by

TEDDY STOECKLEIN

This week was a big week for democracy in the U.S. I can't say it went according to plan for most of us Mainers, but nonetheless, "Fuck Canada" was a theme chosen democratically by you last month.

No doubt, "Fuck Canada" won because it was random and funny and crass when compared with either "Turkey" or "Thankful," the other two choices. Clearly, the theme of "Fuck Canada" was chosen in jest. But I do want to make a point before tonight's stories.

Who can tell me the capital city of Canada?

This question was posed to me by a former client on September 10, 2001, no joke, the night before 9/11. We were on a shoot in Los Angeles for Rolling Rock Beer, then owned by Labatt Brewing. Labatt is a Canadian



brand, and my client, David, was also Canadian.

We were having dinner at Giorgio Baldi with our production company, about 12 people, when the topic of Canada came up. David made the point that Americans could give a shit about his country except, maybe, during the Winter Olympics.

No one at the table knew the answer to his question. People said Montreal, Toronto, Quebec City, even Ontario, which is like saying the whole fucking state of Pennsylvania is the capital of the U.S.

Everyone else at the table was either from New York City or LA. It's easy to fall into the sense that the world revolves around you when you live in those cities. And when you're American, and you've dominated the world stage militarily and economically, since forever, it's easy to not give a shit about anyone else.

But ask a Canadian what the capital city of the U.S. is. Or who the U.S. president is, or the names of the president's kids, even. Canadians know a lot about us. And a lot about everyone else, even if they say *aboot* instead of *about*. They're very well traveled. They're well educated. They care.

Who is Canada? They're not just a snowy white tundra to the north, or the place where HGTV shoots *Love It or List It*.



They're our neighbors. They're our allies. They've fought alongside us since the Revolutionary War. They're the world's largest peacekeeping force — you know the UN soldiers, the ones with the blue helmets? Most of them: Canadian. More Canadian peacekeepers have died in the line of duty than from any other nation.

The capital city of Canada is Ottawa. It is located in the Province of Ontario, just a few hours north of Toronto. Toronto is the fourth most populous city in North America, bigger than Chicago. The prime minister of Canada is Stephen Harper. He's a Conservative. His wife is Lauren and they have two children. The province of Quebec borders the state of Maine. You can be there in a three-hour drive from Portland.

Do me a favor; sometime in the next year, go to Canada. It's right there. And the next time you meet a Canadian, hug them.

We all know what happened on September 11, 2001. Five days later, when the smaller airports reopened, David had Labatt's private jet to fly to LA, pick us New Yorkers up and fly us home.



O CANADA

as told by

STEPHEN DAVIS

I write this by candlelight, surrounded by the survivors, in the deep, damp caverns of Northern California. Many of the younger ones do not know how they came to live miles below the surface of the earth. It's hard for most to speak of the great tragedy, to tell others how this life of ours came to be. But I feel compelled to tell the story of how a single Canadian changed the world forever.

The moment can be traced back to Friday, November 7, 2014. It was like any other fall day in California for me — walking my dogs with Stedman, roaming our gated compound, enjoying the warm sunshine and the cool, rich Montecito air. I remember those days so vividly, when the air was still free and the clouds weren't filled with acid rain. Stedman and I were strolling past the rose garden, pondering the next cover of *O* magazine when we reached the edge of the compound and the



deserted employee entrance.

In one of the worst decisions of my life, I turned to him and said, “Let’s go outside, where the regular people walk.” He thought I was joking. Stedman knew I didn’t use my feet to go places; I used Escalades. I placed my thumb on the fingerprint scanner and the gates swung open. We stepped outside.

We left the security of my estate behind. It was extraordinary. It felt dangerous, exhilarating, this new public life. The dogs pulled on their leashes and I ran to catch up with them. “Can you believe this?” I said. “Watch me, Steddy!” I raced down the sidewalk, skipping over the breaks in the concrete. He laughed, I laughed and we felt like teenagers. Very, very rich teenagers.

As we were crossing the street, I heard a terrifying howl. Some malicious, mechanical machine was racing toward us. Just over the crest of the hill, I saw a car, one the likes of which I had never seen before, shining like a white-hot sun barreling toward us. The howl got louder and the brightness filled my vision. The dogs were terrified. They started barking uncontrollably, and their furry bodies collided into a giant ball of frenetic energy.

Before I knew what had happened, the car seemed to have raced *through* us, straight into our souls like a bullet of pure evil. I screamed, let go of the leashes and covered my eyes. The world went dark as I crashed to the ground and passed out.



I opened my eyes to the face of a stranger and the sound of approaching sirens. “Oprah! Oprah!” the stranger yelled. “Can you hear me! Guys, I think she’s OK. She’s Waking UUUUPPP! Get it, O?” He held me up and smiled. “Let’s take a selfie!” We snapped a pic as he propped me up. Discombobulated, I looked around. I was paralyzed by what I saw. My favorite terrier, Maximillian — his little eyeballs were hanging from a lamppost. My precious Goldendoodle, Sebastian — his tail was stuck in a tree dangling in the wind. And Stedman — oh my poor Stedman. My spiritual soul mate, my better half, was lying in a ditch, cut in half, his organs sprawled on the ground like some wretched Jackson Pollock painting. I let out a scream and passed out again.

I awoke in the comfort of my bedroom; the curtains were drawn.

“O, honey, take this.” It was Gail by my side. I relaxed at the sight of her. She held a cup of warm tea to my mouth. I drank it in. It felt good, rejuvenating.

“Gail, wha, what happened?” I had no clue how much time had passed, where I was or what had happened.

“I’m not sure if I want to tell you just yet, sweetie. You’re probably still in shock. It’s been a week since the accident.” She said.

“I need to know, Gail! Where’s Stedman? Where’s Maxi? Or Sebastian? Where are they?”



“Take this, honey, and I’ll tell you.” She placed a Xanax under my tongue and waited a few minutes for it to kick in. Gail told me everything about that horrendous day, and the memories came flooding back.

“Did they catch the person?”

She waited a minute before going on. “Yes. It was a chrome Lamborghini. Justin Bieber was driving.”

The Xanax couldn’t quell the fire of rage and fury that went through my body upon hearing his name. That little piece of raccoon shit, no-good Canadian motherfucker stole the loves of my life. I twisted the bed sheets in my hands and let out a scream that filled the room.

“O, it’s OK. He’s in jail now.”

I barely heard her; the Xanax was starting to kick in. I found my inner spirit guide, tried to focus on my chakra and breathed deeply, just like Deepak taught me.

Gail patted my head, looked at me with her sweet brown eyes and said, “You won’t have to worry about that Bieber bastard ever again. The world hates him for what he did to you. He’s getting deported. Back to Canada. Where he belongs.”

I turned to her in my drug-induced state and whispered, “Good. Fuck that guy. And fuck Canada.” I passed out, feeling my soft satin sheets whisking me away to dreamland.



Bieber was indeed sent back to Canada, where he faced trial a few weeks later. He had run over my dogs and killed my life partner. The country, the media and the entire world were furious at him. There was no way he was going to see daylight ever again. Or so I thought.

The judge who sentenced him actually turned out to be a huge fan, a true Belieber. She said it was all an accident and made him a deal — if he gave up his driver's license and lived the rest of his life in Canada, she would let him go, a free man. He took it.

With the world hating him, Bieber retreated underground. He disappeared from public life altogether — canceled all his tours, sold his mansions. He even shut down his Instagram feed. His fans were distraught. Bieber, the bright flame that once shined on the faces of so many young girls, suddenly went dark.

For the next 10 years, the only signs of Bieber were in my nightmares. Selena Gomez finally married Katy Perry, and the airwaves were free of his horrible music. Without Bieber, the world breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, on November 7 of 2024, Bieber released a 10-second YouTube video that changed the world.

In it, he wore a purple camouflage military jumpsuit, dark aviator sunglasses and a thin mustache above his lips. Fifty pounds heavier, and all of it muscle, he stood in front of a purple flag with his initials on it and saluted the camera.



He barked like a dictator, “It’s time for the Nation of Beliebers to rise up. Download my new album, *Hypnotize*, and let’s change the world forever.” He tapped his chest twice and blew a kiss at the camera.

I was beside myself, seeing the man who had killed my Stedman so many years earlier back in the world. I couldn’t bring myself to listen to that little shit’s music, but some strange place inside me wanted to know what it was all about. I yelled out to Gail, who was in the hall.

“Gail, honey, would you dial up the iPod and download that new album of Bieber’s? I want to know what the hell it’s all about.”

“Sure thing, O,” she called back to me.

I could barely make out the music coming from the study, but I definitely heard the crash and the grunts. The music faded.

After a minute of silence, I got worried.

“GAIL! What’s that Bieber singing about? Gail!” She didn’t answer.

I walked out into the hallway to see Gail off in the distance, standing with her back to me, her head cocked to one side. She slowly turned around to face me, like a china doll rotating in a display case.



“Gail, what the hell is going on? What’s Bieber doing?”

The thing that turned around was not Gail. Those crimson eyes; the pale, purple, translucent skin. She wasn’t the person I used to know. The thing standing before me was a true Belieber.

The Bieber creature barreled down the hallway after me, knocking over my Fabergé egg collection, tearing at my silk wallpaper, hissing and spitting. I could feel its evil energy come after me — the monster wanted my soul. I ran back into my bedroom, slammed the door in its face and locked the door. I rushed toward the painting of Stedman and me hanging on the wall, swung the frame back and found the secret keypad. I typed in the code Stedman had me memorize over and over again. The whoosh of hydraulic pistons filled the room as my bed rose six feet off the ground, revealing the steps that led to my panic room. Stedman had made me install it. Even from the grave, my Steddy was still protecting me.

I raced down the steps, swung the heavy steel door closed and heard the massive deadbolts slide into place. The creature had already burst through my bedroom door; I could hear it screaming, clawing and scratching on the steel vault, trying to get after me.

Settling into the safety of my space, I looked around and wondered how long I would be there. I had no idea what was in store for me.



The days slowly turned into weeks as I lived off a diet of shelf-stable truffles, water crackers and pate. I watched the chaos of the outside world unfold on television from the safety of my panic room. Justin Bieber was using his horrible new album to turn people into zombies. The country, the entire world, was turning into a nation of Beliebers.

It started with his fans. They were the first to turn. From there, the disease became transmissible through bites, urine or dancing. Children would infect their parents, parents would infect their own parents, and so on, until pretty soon, there was no one left.

The governments of the world united to try to stop the Bieber crisis. Obama, Putin and even Iran's supreme leader were suddenly besties. Together, they instituted martial law, quarantined entire cities and sent troops into the streets. Their meek attempts at stopping Bieber fever didn't work. It was too easy for soldiers to become infected — the mere sight of a zombie dancing the Bieber shuffle was enough. Armies fell, nations crumbled and zombies ruled the world — all because of Bieber.

It was only a matter of time before Bieber and his army of purple zombie bodyguards seized control of the Canadian government. He deemed himself "Dear Leader" after storming parliament with his purple Ferrari tanks and fiery glitter bombs. He quickly found out where Canada was hiding its secret stash of nuclear weapons by giving Stephen Harper the world's biggest Indian burn



and demanding the codes. It doesn't take much with the Canadians. Fuck Canada.

Those of us who weren't zombies watched in horror as Bieber pointed Canada's nuclear missiles at the world's cities. It was too late for governments to react. One by one, the cities people called home for hundreds of years vanished off the face of the earth. Bieber held a magnifying glass to the world; we were his little ants, the cities were his anthills.

My world, my celebrity, all of my favorite things — were gone. No more book clubs. No more Harpo. Even my latest tour, "Oprah — The Life You Want Weekend," was gone. The most famous spiritual guide in the world, Jesus 2.0, I, Oprah, was in my safe room, washing down water crackers with Pellegrino, alone, watching the world end. I wanted to die.

But what God intends for you goes far beyond anything you can imagine. As I held my suicide pills in one hand and gobbled a last bite of cracker with the other, the phone rang.

It must have rung five times before I realized I should pick it up. In a fury, I grabbed it.

The voice on the other end yelled out to me, "OPRAH! LORD BABY JESUS, THANK GOD YOU'RE STILL ALIVE!" The voice belonged to the man who helped thousands of souls. It was Dr. Phil.



“Oh Phil, bear! Praise be Allah! I speak your name!”

“Oprah, baby, you pulled me out of that shrink’s office in Oklahoma, so I’m pulling you out of your hellhole. I’m in a chopper heading straight for your Montecito compound. Get ready to be saved.”

I panicked. “But what about the Bieber zombies out there? The nuclear ash and dust?”

“O, don’t you worry. You know the show *Doomsday Preppers*? Well, I love that show, and I’m rich, so I’ve got everything we need! M16 assault rifles, anti-radiation suits, even earplugs to protect us from the monster’s music.”

We talked on the phone for a few minutes discussing plans and logistics. He told me when I heard three knocks on my steel door, it was he. I hung up and waited to be saved.

Only a few minutes later, I heard the three knocks at the door and opened it. For the first time in months I breached the security of my safe room as light and dust quickly filled it. I couldn’t see his face but heard his voice call out to me, “Quick, Oprah, put on this mask. It stops the ash from clogging your lungs.”

I hurriedly put on the mask and brushed the dirt off the goggles. As the dust settled and my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw that the man standing before me wasn’t the man who wanted to save me. It was the man who wanted



to end me, the Dear Leader, Justin Bieber. He threw the voice changer box off to the corner.

“Hello, Oprah.”

I stood back, unable to move, crippled by fear.

“Come with me.”

I couldn’t speak; I was paralyzed.

“You have no other choice, Oprah. Come with me!”
he shouted.

Wanting to live, I followed him. We walked through my bedroom, through my second study, down the spare hallway, past the yellow living room, into the turquoise lounge and finally outside onto my patio.

As I stepped outside, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The sight before me was more shocking than an entire nation of Bieber zombies. More surreal than Bieber himself.

“I must be in heaven.” I said out loud.

Wearing nothing but a white sheer sundress and an oxygen mask made of glass, Gwyneth Paltrow stepped forward. “Oprah, this isn’t heaven. This is your new life.” Next to her stood Tom Cruise, Beyonce, Tiger Woods, Julia Roberts and Matthew McConaughey. They stood next to Rihanna, Howard Stern, Elton John, Jennifer Lawrence and Cher — celebrities as far as the eye could



see. They all clapped in unison, chanting my name.

I fell to the ground, weeping. I was in shock. Bieber picked me up by the arm and smiled at me through his oxygen mask.

“I did this for us, Oprah. We’re all that’s left. Just us A-listers. And we’re going to repopulate the earth.”

I collapsed into a ball on the ground, and passed out.

And so I sit here, writing by candlelight, surrounded by the survivors of the great war, in the deep caves of Northern California, with the mission to start a new world. A world spawned from the loins of celebrities and athletes. I can hear the patter of little feet as Gwyneth’s new children, Pear and Almond, run by. Taylor Swift is chasing after them with a flashlight, laughing. Tom Hanks rubs my shoulders and smiles at me. Life really is like a box of chocolates, I think to myself. But when I look into the future, it’s so bright it burns my eyes. Thank you, my Dear Leader. Thank you.



A SHOT IN THE DARK

as told by

PETE WIERNUSZ

“Can I get a Stella and a shot of vodka, please? Blueberry Stoli if you’ve got it. Thanks!”

The bartender responded without a word, simply glanced at the clock behind the bar before walking away and going on, I hoped, to begin pouring my drinks.

“That’s quite an order for it only being 5:15 p.m.,” said the stranger to my left. “Only two things warrant an order like that: work or women. Which one’s got you by the balls today?”

I faked a laugh to be polite, hoping that would suffice, but I knew what was about to happen. I was getting wrangled into a conversation with absolutely no out. I frantically looked for the bartender, a co-worker, ANYBODY, but the bar was practically empty. I had no



escape. After all, I'd look like a douchebag if I grabbed my drinks, got up and walked over to the other side of the room that was just as empty.

Here's the thing. I think I'm a good person. I mean, generally in life I try to BE a good person. I let people cut in front of me at the grocery store if they only have a couple of items, I hold doors open for the elderly, hell ... I'll even stay on the line and listen to telemarketers before I decline whatever Jesus calendar they're trying to sell me. So it was my better self that unfortunately decided to entertain the man by engaging in conversation.

"Eh, a little bit of both I suppose." He nodded and sat with his arms crossed into his gray hoodie. An uncomfortable silence sat around, so I went on. "I just spent the past hour getting reamed out by my boss for accidentally printing and not collating a massive print job."

He chuckled. "Why would anyone NOT want to collate a print job?!"

I laughed; this time it was genuine. He did have a point. Why even include that as an option? Not only that! But include it as a small tony checkbox during the printing process? What the fuck?! I left the office right at 5 to get away, and thinking about it all again only started to bring me back. I read this article once that said if you rank your anger on a scale of 1 to 10 that it supposedly helps calm you down quicker. I mean, it's total bullshit, but for



whatever reason I've gotten into the habit of doing it. This shit show with the print job put me at a 4.

I took a breath, counted down from 4 slowly and reached my hand out to formally introduce myself. "My name is Brad." It was sort of true. I mean, true enough and true in the sense that somebody named Peter would go by Pete. You see, I left out the part that "Brad" is really short for "Bradford." "Bradford" always made me sound like a douche, but "Brad" sounds like a guy you'd want to have a drink with.

He continued to sit with his arms crossed, making no move to reciprocate my handshake. "Nice to meet you, Brad," he said coldly, before firing off into his next question, "What about the girl?"

I paused. "What do you mean?" At that moment the bartender came back with my drinks and pushed them in front of me. I looked at them both, and looked at the stranger sitting next to me. I don't know why I looked at him; I just did. Maybe it was because I felt judged, or maybe I wanted to feel that by talking to him I wasn't technically drinking alone.

I thanked the bartender as I took my wallet out of my suit jacket, pulled out my credit card and handed it over. Before he even had the chance to say, "Let's close it out."

Just then my phone started to vibrate. I pulled it out of the same pocket my phone had recently resided in, and



saw that it was Kaili calling. Her photo wallpapered my phone and buzzed vigorously. My thumb hovered over the “Accept” button, but I couldn’t answer, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I was already out of work and at the bar next door to my office getting some drinks before I cabbied it across town to meet up with her for dinner. So instead I let it ring to voicemail and watched intently. I felt guilty about it for a minute; then moments later a notification appeared that a voicemail was left. She may be the only person who still calls and leaves voicemails, whereas I choose to communicate exclusively through texts. I don’t get it. What’s the point of calling people anymore? Everybody posts everything up on Facebook, so whatever’s left to say can be answered with a quick text. Otherwise I’ll wait till it comes up on my newsfeed.

I put my wallet down on the counter, put my phone back into my suit jacket, picked up the shot, kicked it back and slid the glass away. Sweet, sweet nectar of the gods. Sure it burned — it’s supposed to — but the payoff afterward was always well worth it. Instantly I felt calmer. 2.

“You said that it was both work and women that drove you to do shots at 5 p.m. on a Wednesday. So I was wondering, what’d she do?” He didn’t miss a beat. He went right back into it. It was like sitting across from Wolf Blitzter.

“It’s nothing. She’s great,” I said. I downplayed how great I actually think she is. I had to. Whenever I tell my



co-workers how great my fiancé, Kaili, is, I get eye rolls and blank stares. Like it's unbelievable that I truly found The One. Because, let me just say, Kaili has got to be the greatest woman who's ever walked the Earth. 1.

He looked at my empty shot glass and then back at me. "Come on, bro, out with it."

I sighed. "It really is nothing. In fact, I'm supposed to meet up with her in a little bit for dinner over at Kennedy's across town and meet her little brother for the first time. Figured a drink or two might help ease the tension a little beforehand."

At this point I'd moved on to pulling swigs from my beer. I don't know if the vodka had already kicked in, or what, but I suddenly found myself to be more forthcoming, willing to divulge even the most mundane issues of my life. I mean how often have you been told that letting things out and venting helps? So why not bounce it off some total rando sitting across from me at a bar?

"What do you mean, tension?" he asked with what appeared to be a strained and confused look on his face.

"I've never met the kid, but for some reason he's got it out for me. No clue why, but as soon as Kaili and I started officially dating, he began spreading shit about me to his parents ... who he still lives with by the way!" 2.

All right, that may have been a little harsh, I thought. I



can't judge the kid for that. I tried to back pedal a little. "I mean, I get it though. I moved back in with my parents for a year after college." It was one baby step forward and two giant steps back as I found myself blurting out, "Except this kid didn't even make it through college. He dropped out freshman year and got locked up for trying to jack somebody's car."

He smiled, "How'd he do that?"

"I don't know. Fucking idiot drank too much and decided he needed a new ride, so he broke into a parked Mustang, and used the fucking OnStar button to find an escape route to evade the police! Kid can't even steal a car right." 6.

AAAAHHHHHHH ... The very mention of him always felt like poison running through my veins. That was part of the reason Kaili wanted us to get dinner together, a way of finally burying the hatchet. But whenever she said things like that, I only pictured burying a hatchet into the back of this kid's head ... which I always assumed was covered in tattoos to look like Mike Tyson after a real bender.

Again, I took a breath, and began counting down slowly from 6 before changing the subject. "Anyway, what about you? What's your story?"

He paused, thinking. "I'm just passing through, been



giving the whole backpacking thing a shot. Working my way west to east.”

I faked a smile.

“Oh yeah? So where have you been so far?” I asked, knowing full well that I wasn’t going to pay any attention to his answer. I was just trying to remain polite.

As he went on about his travels, I began fidgeting with my wallet in between the head nods and “that’s cool,” spinning it around on the counter as though it was a top. Opening and closing the pockets. 2.

I began to wonder where the bartender was with my credit card. I always assume that when they take my card out back to run it, they’re secretly shopping off their Amazon wish list. Like I’m funding an episode of *Supermarket Sweep*.

“Is that her?” he asked out of nowhere.

At that point I had zoned out entirely.

It wasn’t until some time had passed that I suddenly became aware of the uncomfortable silence that lingered. I knew the pause in conversation must have come from him asking me something. That’s when I began to panic a little. How was I going to respond without him knowing that I hadn’t even been listening to a goddamn word he’d been saying?



I tried to go the route of pretending that I was unable to hear him. So I leaned in a little and opted for, “Huh? Say that again?” I even held my hand up to my ear like an old grandfather would. Normally that worked, except that night, in a bar that was nearly empty, with no music playing, it looked more than a little stupid.

He grinned, knowing that I hadn’t paid attention and that I didn’t really give a shit about where he’d been.

“Is that her?” he asked again, pointing at my wallet. It was only then that I realized my wallet was lying out on the bar wide open. Front and center was a photo of Kaili. It was some raggedy photo I had taken of her years ago when we were first dating. Taken at that pivotal point in the relationship where you finally begin to let your guard down and stop pretending as though you’re absolutely perfect. Except in this case, Kaili never changed ... she always remained perfect through and through.

“So tell me about her.”

I launched into telling him every little bit about her. It was me bragging about finding the best woman out there, and how she was committed to me. I told him about how she was born in some small rural Canadian town, that when she was 18 she came to the States for school and that’s where we met. That since I’d known her she’d never gone back for a visit or anything. I told him how the moment I had laid eyes on her at some frat party, I knew that she was it. I even went so far as to tell him



how fucking mind-blowing the sex was. I don't know why, but for some reason I wanted him to know that I had found the perfect girl. 0.

"Oh come on, she can't be all that perfect. There's gotta be something that drives you nuts about her," he said, challenging me.

"I'm telling you, she's absolutely perfect. She's brilliant, she's funny and she's insanely hot."

But he wasn't buying it.

"There's always something. So let's hear it. What about her absolutely annoys the living shit out of you?"

I could feel him digging. Like he was some sort of archaeologist on an excavation, desperately trying to uncover buried skeletons.

"Nothing."

"All right," he said, "I'll start with what drove me nuts about my last girlfriend. I dated this chick once who was OBSESSED with those friggin' *Twilight* books. It would annoy the living shit out of me. She'd always talk about them, compare everything I did to what Edward and Bella would do. It was like she thought they were not only real people, but that they were her actual friends. Don't get me wrong, I played along with it, because after all, those nerdy book girls can be hot as fuck."



“So what happened?” I asked. This time I really was interested in his response.

“I just ignored it. Hell, I’ve got flaws too. I get it. Until one night, we were hanging out at her place. I thought we were going to have sex ... but she wanted to talk instead. We’re on her couch and she legitimately asked if given the choice, whether I’d rather be a vampire or a werewolf.”

I laughed. “What’d you pick?”

“I told her she was an idiot, and she absolutely lost it. I’m talking 0 to batshit in about .5 seconds. She started screaming about how we were from two different worlds, how we never saw eye to eye, all that shit.”

“Jesus Christ.” Those were the only words I could muster that seemed appropriate.

“Yeah, best part was when she tried to tell me that she was looking for an Edward to her Bella. That in the story of her life I may as well play the role of that third dude.”

“Jacob” I said ... probably way too quickly.

“What?”

“Ummm ... his name is Jacob, the third dude in the book,” I said, this time a little ashamed that I knew his name at all.



“Shut the fuck up.”

“The only reason I know is because Kaili and I went to the theaters to see the first movie when it came out. We wanted to see what all the hype was about. Totally not worth it though if you ask me.” I threw that last part in just to try and let him know that I was on his side. Though I didn’t bother telling him that Kaili and I had actually read the entire series together, that I knew more than just Jacob’s name. I knew that in the sun Edward sparkles like a diamond, and that werewolves have hot blood, while vampires are cold blooded.

He sat there quietly for a moment, before turning the focus back on me. “I shared mine; now you share yours. What about that perfect bitch of yours do find annoying?”

Suddenly he felt more hostile, and I knew he had only referred to her as a bitch to get a rise out of me, but I decided to play along anyway.

“All right,” I said. “She does this thing where she’ll sit on the couch while we’re watching TV and clip her fingernails and toenails. Granted, she’s got a bag out to catch them, but still, I don’t trust that they ALL land in the bag. There’s gotta be some stragglers that go flying off in different directions. So whenever I lie down on that couch, I’m always a little scared that a leftover toenail is going to poke me in the side of the face, or worse ... right in the eye.” I knew it wasn’t much, and it’s not even that it annoys me, but I felt like I had to give



him SOMETHING.

“Are you fucking kidding me? That doesn’t count! I’m talking about those things deep she says or does where you have to walk away or you’ll go absolutely APESHIT.”

Unsatisfied with his attempt to dig something up, I could tell that he was pressing further. Only then I found that I was starting to get annoyed. That anger that I had felt earlier was slowly returning. I hadn’t wanted to engage in this conversation to begin with, but more and more I realized that I didn’t want to continue. 4.

I gave it some more thought. “I don’t know. I suppose she has this habit of using the word ‘literally’ WAY TOO often. Not everything can LITERALLY be at this second.” I chuckled after I said it out loud, because while I do find it annoying, it’s not like it’s a deal breaker.

“Dude, come on! Any chick you meet at a frat party has definitely been around. She’s got flaws. Think about it. No ‘nice girl’ goes to a frat party just to hang out. They’re looking for something — if you know what I mean.” 5.
“And by that I mean a deep fucking.” He said it like he was proud of himself, with a huge grin on his face. He even made that clicking noise. 6.

Meanwhile, I found myself pulling from my beer more quickly and in larger chugs, searching frantically for the bartender who still hadn’t returned with my card.



“In fact, you’d be an idiot to think that it was her first time trolling around a frat party trying to find some dude. I’d bet that this was a frequent thing for her. Like a hobby. Some chicks knit, some chicks marathon watch *Gilmore Girls*. She probably trolls around frat parties looking to get laid.”

7.

“Hate to say it, bro, but it sounds like this ‘perfect’ girl of yours might have been quite the slut.”

8.

I slammed my fist on the bar counter. “WHERE THE FUCK IS MY CREDIT CARD?!”

9.

He knew he had me. He knew that with a gentle push, he could send me right over the edge.

“Listen, I’m not saying your fiance is a cum-drenched whore ... buuuuuut she probably was.”

10.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY?! THAT MY FIANCE IS A FUCKING CANADIAN CUNT?!”

I snapped.



And in that moment I froze. I'm not the type of guy who says that. I don't even know where that came from! I'm a GOOD guy, I swear!!

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, clenched my fists and started counting down from 10 ... this time out loud.

"10 ... 9 ... 8 ... 7 ... 6 ... 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ..."

I took another deep breath and opened my eyes. And there at the entrance of the bar stood Kaili.

Oh my god. Did she hear me?! No. She couldn't have! Right?! Ummm ... except that the bar was practically empty. There were like four people there, and at this point I could probably have heard a pigeon fart outside. She didn't hear me; she couldn't have. I stood still, waiting, waiting for her to move, to do something.

She slowly walked over to where I stood, my fists still clenched and shaking. No way, she couldn't have heard me.

Rather than say anything to me, she turned to face the fucker next to me, and leaned in for a hug. Only then did she turn back to me and say, "Oh good, I'm glad you got my voicemail! I was worried you'd still head over to Kennedy's. Robbie and I figured that meeting here would be easier for you, since it's right next to your office."

Her eyes bounced back and forth between the two of



us like she was watching a match at Wimbledon. “So ... what were you guys talking about?”

For the second time in 30 seconds I stood frozen. This wasn't me! I'm a good guy! I don't use the c-word. I LET PEOPLE CUT IN FRONT OF ME IN LINE!! I LISTEN TO TELEMARKETERS!!!

And then — like a wave crashing down — it all hit me. It's why he never introduced himself. He knew exactly who I was, he knew exactly what he was doing, and I played right into it. One by one the dominoes fell, and as if I were the last one standing, waiting my turn, I fell back onto the bar stool behind me. I looked across from where I was, and there he sat. His grin was at its widest.

Fuck.

