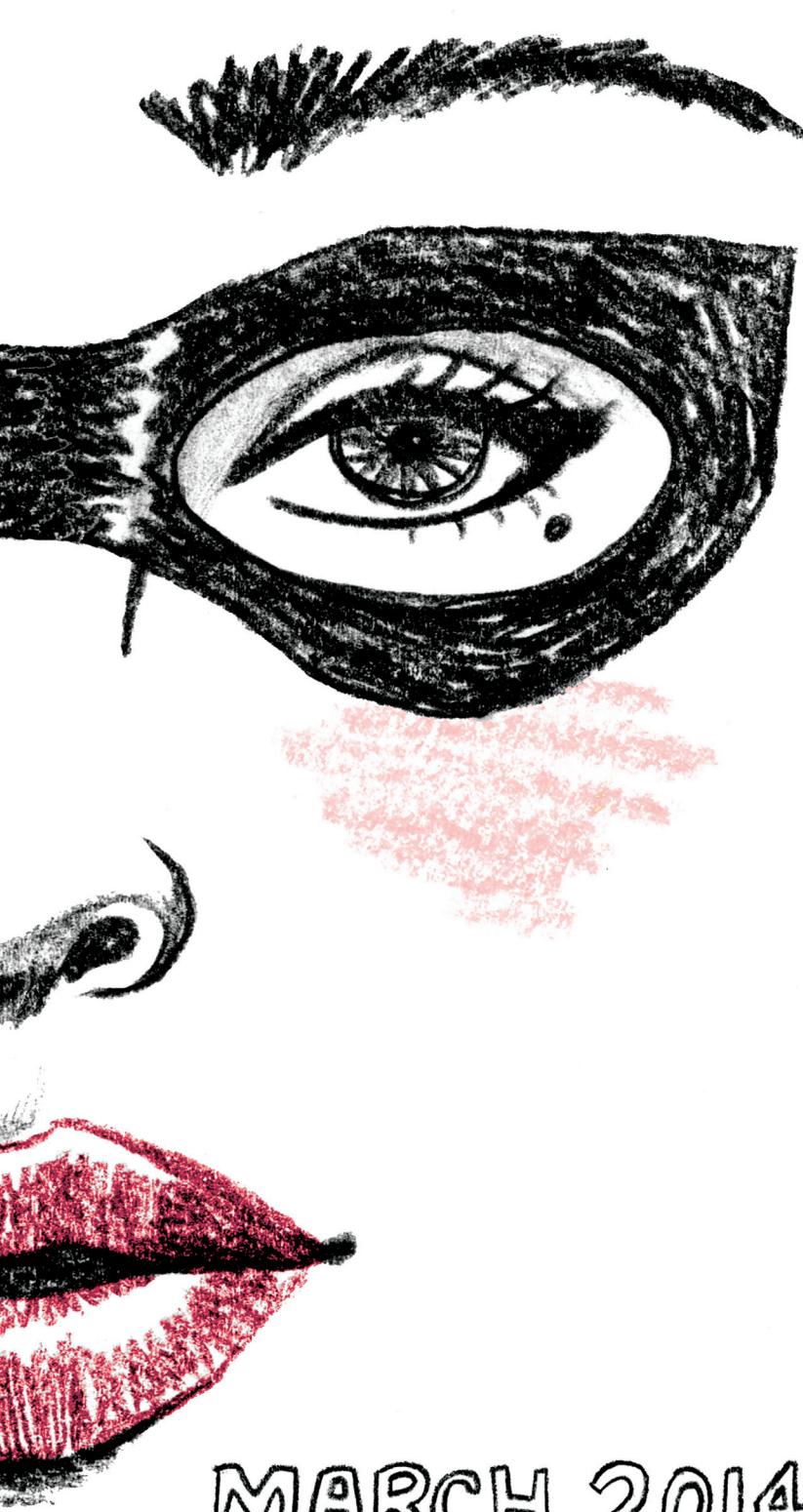
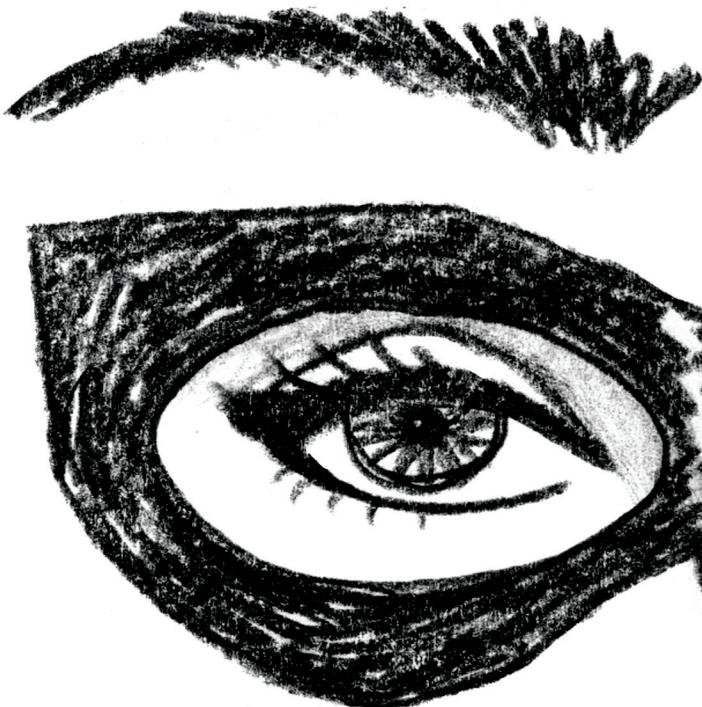


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USED GRAVITRONS QUARTERLY

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EDITORIAL

Hey, Crooners!

I'm excited about this issue. I'm always excited about Used Gravitrons issues. And boy, have we got some issues. Am I right? I mean, you can count 'em on three hands. This is number fifteen! Next month we celebrate our four year anniversary. We've published a lot of harebrained stories from a lot of prodigious writers. The art has been smashing. The lights have been dazzling. There were times when I became dizzy. And all of this is about to get better. We've got a new face aboard the U.S.S. Gravitron. Meet Morgan Perrine. He's got some great ideas, a ton of enthusiasm and he likes the way you look in that yellow dress. Here he is...

-Mike

Hello Dear Readers,

Early in January I agreed to take on a co-editorial role at Used Gravitrons with Mike, and have been easing in to it since early February. Part of the slow transition is due to my inability to manage time well, but more importantly I want to make sure I don't massively fuck up the tone and vision of UG. Or just massively fuck up in some other, unforeseen way. So over the next few months you will start to see my name appearing on things here and there, and if anything goes incredibly wrong in ways that seem almost impossible, it was probably me and I'll try not to do it again. Hopefully there won't be much jail time.

-Morgan



Boroque

by Neobie Gonzalez

I once fell in love with a girl with many doors. Or maybe I didn't really. Maybe that's just what she would have wanted me to call it, even though at one point that's what it felt like, and then it didn't anymore. We met at a party. I saw her in the kitchen, talking to some guy who owed me money. It was him I was really after. But I turned to her and I saw her door and I said, "ding-dong" and she laughed, like no one's ever tried that on her before. I'm sure someone already did, a few people, in fact, and she was just laughing to make me feel better about it.

She was like that. She would lighten the mood on purpose so others weren't uncomfortable around her, because she could make them uncomfortable when she wanted to. She only had one door then, three inches long from shoulder to arm and about two inches wide. It looked like a tattoo. She looked like the type to have tattoos. She had a nose stud, after all. But she didn't have tattoos; she only had that door. It looked pretty cool on her, so I told her so. "Cool door," I said, and she blushed, again like no one else had complimented her on it before I did. Someone must have. Or maybe people hadn't talked to her much. Maybe they thought she was weird. Maybe it was her hair, which was dyed red at the roots and green at the tips. Maybe they felt the pressure of Christmas when they saw her, and no one really wanted that happening too often.

I didn't like Christmas either but I was starting to like her door. She told me the story behind it, something about houses and accidents and never finding a way out. It had only been there a few months, so she wasn't sure. At first she thought she was just allergic to something, but she was sure she never had been.

I don't remember much of what she said. She talked too much anyway. Besides, we were alone in the kitchen then, and it was too quiet to really listen to her. I just kept my eye on her door. It was one of those old doors, old like it existed before she was even born. It had an elaborate handle, its top arched. "I think it's baroque," she said, elongating that O like it meant something more than it should.

The door had a keyhole the size of my pinky's fingernail. The whole thing would've been golden, would've looked better golden, if it wasn't made out of her skin, which was brown. But I guess it suited her. She told me more about her door and I nodded a lot, mostly wondering how to tell her about myself even though there wasn't much to say. I could've told her that I worked for my father, or that people always asked if I just got out of bed, because I almost always looked like I did. I also could have told her about how terribly boring I was. But that was too obvious so I didn't. I thought she was boring too, if it wasn't for that door, but I didn't say so either.

A couple of guys started walking towards us as she spoke. They heard her talking, they said, and, wide-eyed, begged her to repeat the story. They made it sound like it was her only story, and maybe it was the only one she had worth telling. As she began, pleading them not to tell anyone else, I cut her off. I think that's when I asked her out.

We saw each other again the week after that. I took her to some concert. During the drive home, she told me she had a fine time, but didn't really enjoy being around crowds. She was tired of others asking to see her door all the time. I asked her what she was doing at the party then, with all those people, that first time we met. She shrugged and said, "You know, free food."

Then she explained why she left early that night. I didn't even ask but she went on about it. She said she heard some girls talking about her behind her back, calling her a burn victim. She told them off, told them the truth, so one girl got a key from someone's purse and jabbed her arm with it, to see if they could open her up. She ran off right after.

I told her that was terrible but, to be honest, shouldn't she be used to it? You don't close doors on people and expect them to just walk away. That's stupid. She was silent after that, so I said I was sorry. She smiled, and I asked if I could, please, maybe see what was behind her door, just to get it over with. I wouldn't poke her with keys or anything. I even promised not to touch it. She could just let me see, just a peek, if she felt like it; maybe I could be the first. Obviously she didn't feel like it, but she laughed while telling me so. She sounded nervous. I didn't understand why she would be. She must get that all the time.

We kept seeing each other, but not on purpose. She worked part-time as a cashier at the convenience store nearest my apartment. Sometimes I would go there to buy gum. I didn't really go there to see her. I just wanted some gum. She didn't say much when I went there anyway. She was busy.

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She looked right at me when she took my money though, looked me right in the eye, so I knew she was forced to be polite but was thinking about me still.

One day, she handed me my change and said, "Wait." She held her breath then asked if we could go out again. Just like that. She apologized for not letting me see what was behind the door. I told her, "Okay," and we arranged to meet for dinner. That night, she wore a jacket. I hated it.

I was getting tired of asking about her door but I just couldn't stop then. I took her out more often after that. On our fourth date – a movie, I think, I slid my hand over her shoulder and the door on her arm creaked. "Oh," she said, "that's never happened before." I asked her if that was a bad thing, but she told me it wasn't so we kept watching. I held her like that for the rest of the night, except of course while I was driving.

The next morning, she found two new doors: one on each thumb. She showed them to me when I dropped by the store. The doors were tiny and they matched, smooth like glass panes that you'd crash into if you weren't careful enough, or if you were too busy focusing on what was on the other side of them. But these doors were opaque. So I stared at them and whispered, "Open sesame." It didn't work but it made her laugh, as usual.

I held her hands and kissed her thumbs. I thought I had to. I thought the new doors would swing open, or at least creak like the other one. When they didn't, I asked her if they ever would. She didn't answer, just turned to the customer standing in line behind me. "Hi! May I help you?" she said, smiling, to the woman carrying too much fruit. I knew I couldn't talk to her there. I left.

She didn't want me to find out what was behind those doors, and I wasn't sure if she knew either. Maybe she opened the doors when she was alone, or while I was asleep. Maybe she couldn't open them at all. She never told me. She just started growing more of them, and she kept showing them to me like a tease.

She had one near her ear, small too, which would slide open every time it sensed movement. But it would slide shut when I looked in, because I was too slow maybe, or because she was too stubborn. She had another on her ankle, the door of a convertible, brown like the others, a bit darker, and yet shone when it caught the light. I rarely saw it. She wore boots often. But I asked her to stay over once and was thrilled when she agreed. I saw her feet and touched that wing-shaped patch of skin, called her Hermes but she didn't get it.

On her birthday, I told her I loved her. We stayed for lunch at her family's house, which was so crowded that the four of us couldn't fit in a room, and you couldn't even tell one room from the next.

She was bending down to blow out the candles on her cake when I said so. I meant it. I really think I did, seeing her face so close to the flame, her head and her shoulders and the doors, all lit yellow-orange against the vanilla icing and sculpted sugar flowers. It was a beautiful sight.

So she threw her arms around me and hit a shelf of figurines. Her mother jumped up when she heard, first in delight then quickly in shock, as her applause was cut short by the pile of books toppling towards the floor. As I avoided them, I backed into their life-size statue of some saint, which stood next to the electric fan, and both of them wobbled, one after the other then at the same time. Her father said nothing. He just straightened things up a bit and looked away a lot.

After we washed the dishes, she brought me outside and started talking about buying a house, raising a family, all of that. I wondered if the babies would have doorknobs for noses. Maybe their heads would be clean and smooth and faceless, or maybe they would have flaps. I asked her. She stared at me. That was how I found out about the door on her palm.

She slapped my face and my cheek felt cold after, so we looked at her hands and there it was. That door was the frame to an aging mirror, dirty and spotted but usable still. It had a tiny knob, and I tried pulling it to see what was behind the door.

She didn't put up a fight. She was as curious as I was. It was different from the others. It had a mirror, after all. Hard and glossy. So she let me pinch that small handle of skin, me, because maybe she was afraid of doing it herself. I turned it and found a closet, from which hung small clothes. I took out one of the shirts from her palm, placed it carefully over my chest, and asked her if I looked fat in it. She glared at me but laughed. I wasn't even trying to be funny; I really thought I'd gained weight since seeing her. Soon she forgot what we fought about and we drove back to my place, stumbled into bed. Later I dusted that shirt and threw it in the laundry basket. It had cobwebs.

We used that door more than the others. It was especially convenient for when I had food stuck in my front teeth, which were pretty far apart for my own good. Every time we went out to eat, I would use her palm to check, instead of what I used to do, which looked like I was sneering at the back of spoons. We also took out the clothes and put packets of gum in instead, and that was, I guess, handy.

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Meanwhile, she used it to check her appearance, because I kept telling her she needed more make-up. She really wasn't that pretty. She was average and tried hard not to be. She had the features of someone you were sure was going to be a mother, somehow. But she was too easy to impress so she couldn't possibly act like one.

She had ten doors when we went to see the doctor. She had been scared to do it alone, but she said she had me now. She thought she would disappear soon, become all door. I told her it was nothing to worry about. Besides, all they'd do was to open her doors and check. It didn't sound so bad, but she cringed when I said it and I wondered if maybe it hurt her after all.

They called us to the doctor's office soon enough. I was ready to see where all her doors led to, but she stopped me and told me to wait outside the room. I tried to argue and stepped right in. But she pushed me out and shut the door, which wasn't even one of hers.

She looked okay after the check-up, had a calm expression on her face that said "I may be drugged." But she told me the doctor found no complications. The doors were fine, of course, but the mole on her upper lip might need to be tested. She asked where they came from, the doors, that mirror, and the guy said he didn't know. He was pretty sure they had nothing to do with houses though. They weren't the least bit malignant either, and she wasn't running a fever or anything. But he asked if she wanted to stay a while, let them study her. She refused and told them she had better things to do.

I asked what he said about the inside of them, because isn't that what really mattered? What if they made her susceptible to diseases? What if rats thought of her as home? She looked away and pretended not to hear me. She walked towards the car, smiled, and told me we would celebrate.

That night, we had dinner at my place and drank wine, then caught the latter half of a movie that wasn't as bad as we first thought. I think I drank a little too much and lightly punched her arm. The door didn't budge. I knocked on it and didn't hear anything. I knocked on it again. I kept knocking until she moved away. She tried to laugh it off. I pulled her closer to squeeze her arm and scratch at that door like some cat left out in the rain but instead she kissed me.

So I kissed back and we ended up in bed. I kissed all her doors, all of them pronounced healthy by a medical professional. I even kissed the one below her belly button, the one ridged with the bars of a jail cell, then I kissed her all the way down, hoping the only door that mattered at the time

would open. She spread her legs and the room shuddered with the sounds of locks unlocking. I stopped, told her I wanted to see everything but she said no. She wanted the lights off.

I kept going anyway, trying to love this girl with many doors, sliding my hands all over her and over all those doors until I felt a button, a tiny lump of skin, growing on the back of her thigh. She had her eyes closed so I pushed that button, thinking it a doorbell, expecting its chime to echo through the room as she came. But there was no sound, only a pull, and I fell towards the black shape of her and into something, into shadow then onto stone. I felt a draft on my back. I stood up, naked, and found myself staring down a winding flight of stairs. I glanced behind me and saw only cracked walls and a lit torch. I took that torch and climbed down those stairs and I am still climbing, only slowly now, torchless already and still looking for her and for some door, any of them, to lead me back into bed.

I want my blanket. It's so dark here I might as well sleep.

Escape To Never Land

by Rebeka Singer

The steps creaked as I tiptoed in loafers upstairs to our bedroom. Wendy lay sleeping—a bare arm cradled her head—dreaming deep, beautiful dreams. There was a glass of warm bourbon on the nightstand. Traces of lipstick impressed the glass and I lifted it to my lips and tasted her.

I could always tell when she dreamt. It was her face. Her face was calm; a slight smile curled her lips, and her breath slowed to the rhythm of currents in the seas of a land that never was. This face I loved. Not the one that squinted and puckered, frowned upon me when I came home late from work, never called, forgot to tell her that I still loved her.

“Peter.” She was always maternal. “You’ll never grow up.” She would gently shake her head. My stomach sunk and I swallowed: Why should I? I walked the plank; she stood at its end. Looking at her eyes redden and glaze with a wet film, I longed, so sorry, to tell her: I know, I know.

I taught you to fly, Wendy. Fly from me.

She left the dormer window wide open to the chilled London night air. She never got cold—a woman who never got cold. Never was afraid—not afraid of the night, or the large, empty Victorian, or the night prowlers with hooked hands and drunken bellies roaming the streets. Never afraid.

“Tell me a story, Wendy,” I whispered. “You’re so good at that.”

She must know—must know my story. Must know I love her. Must know where I had been. Where I was when I wasn’t home being her husband. I was with her, then. The ballerina we met at the gala months ago that skipped in a green gown around the ballroom: light-footed, glowing smile, golden curls pouring down her back. Wendy watched her. Everyone watched her. Now I watched her as many nights as I could escape and fly to her bed. I wanted to capture her, hold her and cherish her in a jar; watch her glow and dance on the mantle piece, release her for my pleasure.

Oh, Wendy. You can escape, still. Escape to Never Land; escape from it. Wander from this sinking ship, from this shadowy cave, from these high-ground ruins.

I sat beside her in bed, watched her wandering mind undulate and fly away away away. I removed a vial of gold flakes from my pocket. I had begun buying the flakes, soft and pliant between my fingers, after a colleague at the firm swore they were like magic. Gold would keep a man's body young, his mind trenchant. I admired the glittered flecks in the palm of my hand, shimmering mermaid scales bathing in a moonlit lagoon. I sprinkled the handful across Wendy's angelic face. Her skin sparkled under the stream of moonlight flooding through the window. I walked over to shut out the night—the cold, the prowlers. I watched her sleep, mottled in gold dust, levitating away from me, away to the Never Lands of her dreams where I wished she could escape to and live forever.

Well, Hell

By Brandon Mc Ivor

Hell was hot. Naga didn't mind the torture—the whippings, the stretching rack, the branding—he'd had worse; and he didn't mind the berating, which could be pretty nasty, but still, sticks and stones. Naga didn't even mind the glimpses of paradise—made visible just so the damned could know what they were missing—because it really just looked alright up there. But he could not, for the life of him, stand the heat. It wasn't a burning, scalding sort of heat though; it was just warm enough so that the air felt thick and stuffy. Naga was always sweating, always short of breath, and always conscious of how red and sticky and tired he must have looked. It wasn't fitting, he thought, for a man of his stature. More than anything, it was the heat that got Naga to thinking: I must have done something wrong up there.

But no matter how he parsed out the events in his life, he could not find that damnable fault. Whenever he was cast into the lake of burning sulphur, he would take the opportunity to gather his thoughts. He would organize lists, detailing the reasons he might have deserved what he had gotten:

- He had—just once—trodden on sacred ground without removing his boots. But the sign had been faded and poorly written, in the first place.
- He had made fun of a mercenary's stutter behind his back. But to Naga's credit: the mercenary had been deaf (so he couldn't hear what Naga had said anyway), and the impediment really was quite funny.
- He had prepared wild game in the improper way—clubbing a boar to death instead of bleeding it. But again, his troops were starving and on the run, and if they had waited to prepare the meat in the prescribed way, they would all be dead.

And the only other thing he could think of was that he had hacked up a thousand or so people into little, tiny pieces. But the people had been bad, or, at least, had been ruled by bad people.

And that was it. As far as Naga could tell, there had been an unfortunate mix-up, and he had just gotten the short end of the stick. Simple, and unfortunate as that.

地獄

Once, another member of the damned had confided in Naga, “You know who put us here, don’t you? It’s us, man! You and I—no one else! We feel a need to punish ourselves! Don’t you see, man? Don’t you see?”

To which Naga responded, “I don’t.”

The other man looked defeated. He pleaded with Naga, explained things from different angles, and finally confessed: I knew the book was evil, but dammit—I read it anyway!

Naga, completely flustered, managed, “I...I’m sorry. You’re delusional, and you’re wrong, and you’re certainly being punished for far more than that. For one, you’re very pushy and—”

The man’s jaw dropped, and then, a devil suddenly snatched him away and divided him into 36 different pieces. Naga blew a sigh of relief, and threw himself into the lake of burning sulphur, so that he could get some thinking done.

Once he was sure that no one could see him, Naga puffed, and mopped his brow, and fanned himself with his hands, because it was so terribly hot down there. Then, Naga’s mind began to wander, and he thought to himself: what if I did have enough time to bleed that boar?

天国

Naga had died on the battlefield, and he wouldn’t have had it any other way. The only thing that bothered him was that, of all people, his rival, Oda, had killed him. Oda had mistakenly thought that Naga’s lands belonged to him. The truth, of course, was that Oda and his clan didn’t belong anywhere, and even the slushiest lot of swampland was too good for them. For goodness’ sake, thought Naga, they worshiped a monkey god! Of all the ridiculous, blasphemous things!

But, as the centuries turned to millennia and the heat didn’t let up, Naga could just barely make out little tails and those slightly protrusive noses when he looked up into paradise from his humble place on the stretching rack.

地獄

Naga could not tell if it was just him, or whether they really had thought of everything, but as the millennia went by, he could have sworn: hell was getting hotter. And all the while, his conscience was stewing in the stifling, almost viscous heat. Naga managed to keep his composure for three thousand years, until, one vindictively hot day, he fell to his knees in front of everyone, and tore his clothes off—chest heaving and forehead streaming—and he wailed, “My God! What did I do wrong? It is so goddamned hot in here!”

He immediately regretted it, as he was surrounded by scores of others who, he imagined, would have thought better of him. Naga, still on his knees and naked as the day he was born, scanned the crowd with upturned hands, basically pleading for sympathy. But everyone looked away, ashamed, distracted, or disappointed. Naga scrutinized the onlookers and he thought about the heinous evils that they all must have committed to warrant their tenure down there.

And he screamed, “Why am I here?”

Then, as everyone was dispersing, he saw his second in command, Katsu, who was frozen where he stood. It was the first time Naga had recognized anyone in all his three thousand years. Once the stragglers had cleared out, ready to suffer their next punishments, Naga approached Katsu and—he couldn’t help it—he threw his arms around him and started crying like a small child.

“Katsu!” he cried, “We had it all wrong! I led you and everyone else astray—I’m the reason you’re here, Katsu! Me! The one true god is a monkey, Oda and his clan were the chosen people, and—my god—Katsu! Everything I ever believed in was wrong!”

Katsu’s arms hung limply at his sides—incredulous on seeing his commander in such hysterics.

“Commander Naga,” he began, “what...what happened to you?”

“Katsu, surely you must have realized it too. We’ve had three thousand years to think it over.”

“Commander,” said Katsu, bowing, “I just arrived. When I saw Oda cut you down, I took my own life, so that I could join you in heaven.”

“What?”

“I could not have drawn more than three breaths after you were slain before I fell upon my own sword.”

Naga’s eyes, dry for three thousand years, filled with tears for the second time in half a minute.

“Oh, Katsu,” he moaned, “If only we had just listened to Oda!”

天国

One hundred thousand years passed for Naga, and finally, the last of his troops made it into Hell. The opportunities were scarce, but he managed to speak with each of them individually. He would squeeze into the same iron maiden as his men and he would weep bitterly, begging forgiveness; if his head rolled over to their feet during routine dismemberments, he would shout out desperate apologies, his face half buried in the dirt; and he would leap into vats of bubbling tar with his men, just to tell them that he was all wrong, and that Oda was the holy emissary of the monkey god himself.

After Five hundred thousand years in Hell, Naga reasoned: my war on Earth must finally be over. Oda has probably taken control of the old lands, and the chosen people are finally enjoying their time in the sun. Naga fiddled around with the numbers, and he reasoned that about three days must have gone by on Earth since his passing. After all his suffering, Naga finally knew. He knew what he had done wrong, and he knew why he was in Hell, and why Oda was ruling on Earth and everything.

Naga was almost satisfied—he would have even smiled—but then, he saw something that made his flushed-red face turn white.

From his quiet spot in the lake of burning sulphur, Naga thought he saw someone who looked a lot like Oda who had been hung up on a rusty meat-hook. He had a look of bewilderment on his face, and then, he screamed out, as he was slowly, methodically flayed by a lesser demon.

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Flying Monkeys Leave Clouds Only to Chuck Eggs:

**An account of a young gay couple's road trip across
the southwest United States, told in surrealist
metaphor and pillowtalk fragments**

by Corey Soul

Two days of flying the world's largest stiletto had brought Liam and Alex a total of three and a half miles east. The model that floated over coastal desert shrub looked like something worn by Dorothy in a spin-off film entitled *The Wizard of Jizz*, and, collectively the combination of shoe, basket, propane tanks, young lovers and trapped CO₂ added up to a weight of just-lighter-than-air, making it an ideal target for trans-dimensional tornadoes. The shoe, which had just last week floated capitalistically above the largest strip club in the Sports Arena district of San Diego, was now in command of its young commissioned captain and his slightly younger boyfriend.

"We're going around the world," Liam announced shortly after pulling Alex into the basket. It was skillful (and a tad showy) how he drifted into his boyfriend's cul-de-sac at 6 a.m., fitting a 135 foot by 65 foot pump perfectly between track home windows. He didn't land, but coasted and smiled when Alex dashed out of his front door and sprinted to catch up. As his passenger jumped aboard, the pilot fired the burner to compensate for weight, and kept it on, a consistent whooooooshhh that lit up the silent community with sound, as the titan's footwear approached the dead end. Alex reached out and brushed his neighbor's chimney with his fingers. And like that they were above it all.

"Welcome aboard the Phoenix," Liam said as he handed Alex a coffee. "Our great aircraft is a Salvatore Ferragamo size 1500 'Tina' Pump, our latest and largest model. It is made of the best rip stop, fire-resistant nylon and will fit Cinderellically on the left foot of a 750 foot tall drag queen."

"Stylish. And for her right foot?"

"There is none. There is another left foot, though, a Reebok sneaker owned by a Sports Authority in Albuquerque."

Liam had the temperament of a hot air balloon. His voice was monotone, smooth, and quiet, like it was riding a relaxing updraft. There

was no need for reaction time in ballooning. It was a simple and methodical movement through near-still air. If you were high enough, every mistake could be corrected with skill and patience. So every movement Liam made, in life and now as he drifted silently above sleeping Spanish style homes at the helm of a giant pump, was done with much consideration. In fact, the only thing quick about Liam was the rate of his facial hair growth, which he was quite proud of. He shaved every day, but a day was plenty of time to raise and cultivate a full beard with hairs that curled twice.

“Two left-footed shoes seem impractical,” Alex replied. He was a head and a half shorter than his boyfriend and wasn’t ashamed of his effeminate voice. It came as a surprise to many that he was in trade school to become a tractor mechanic. Very open about his sexuality, Alex wasn’t closeted in much except for his strong dislike of facial hair.

“Giant drag queens have two left feet. Here. I’ll teach you how to fly this one so when you come and visit me we can walk like a giant ghost wearing visible shoes across the desert together.”

Alex knew he’d never visit Liam in Albuquerque, but he said, “Okay,” and smiled because he wanted to learn how to fly a hot air balloon and he didn’t want to hurt his boyfriend. Alex also knew that this expedition was an attempt by Liam to remedy false promises made in the early summer months. He had only said “I love you” for the first time a week ago, and Alex had said it back. Now this is not a promise in the strictest sense, but it is something one shouldn’t say just days before leaving for good. But opportunities arise, and Liam’s was a full-time piloting job at America’s premier ballooning company, Vista Flights. He’d be their youngest pilot yet, hardly old enough to legally pour in-flight Mimosas for the company’s affluent clientele. It was impossible to turn down, especially since it was in Albuquerque, the balloonist big leagues. Liam would leave at the end of summer, in less than a month.

Literally seeing their first couple day’s progress from 3,000 feet convinced Liam and Alex that the original plan of going around the world in less than a month was most likely impossible, unless the stiletto somehow sprouted wings.

“Liam? Why the Phoenix?”

“It’s good luck. If it dies we’ll need it to wake back up.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“I’m a AAA member.”

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On their third night boyfriend and boyfriend tested the tolerance of the Walmart overnight parking-lot camping policy, landing the ruby-red stripper-slipper on the asphalt and deflating it over the cars of other campers. They huddled together on the floor of the wicker basket, the stars and a brightly lit sign advertising the store above them.

“We could be at any Walmart right now,” said Alex, trying to sound as whimsical as possible. He rested his head on his boyfriend’s chest and was asleep in moments, a gentle smile on his face.

“I wonder how many cartel crops we passed today.”

“Hundreds. We could stop off and pick some buds tomorrow if you’d like.”

It was late afternoon of the next day, as the Phoenix was passing through a low cloudbank, that the travelers came across the natural enemy of the giant ruby-red slipper: a flock of flying monkeys.

The sun was setting and Alex and Liam had just finished their customary post-balloon-supper intercourse, and the elder man stood from the floor of the big wicker basket and tossed the used condom into the colorful abyss. He followed that with a spout of semen and spit from his mouth, a cocktail he refused to swallow. Maybe it was the vibrant shine of the stiletto that angered them, or maybe it was just the invasion of something new to their world, but immediately, as Liam was wiping cum from his now Santa-like beard (he hadn’t been shaving, much to Alex’s private dismay), he witnessed dozens of flying primates near the size of rabbits attack the flying seed.

Liam called for Alex in alarm. They tossed wax-sealed snack cheeses at the animals, but it was a helpless attempt. The gay men could only watch while some of the flying monkeys screamed and chanted and bared their teeth at the balloon and its occupants, and some pulled Liam’s semen from the latex and Alex’s from midair, and slid it with human hands between their feathered legs.

And as they did it their scratchy mantra began to sound like fag! fag! fag!

“You know I’d knock you up if I could.”

“So I’d have to stay with you?”

“I just think our kids would be gorgeous.”

They didn’t talk much about that incident in the days that followed. Mostly they talked about the other great birds they glimpsed in the clouds. The thunderbird, Roc, and the actual phoenix. They thought or at least pretended they saw them all. They wondered aloud how these great birds perceived their Phoenix, whether they welcomed it, feared it, or were simply intrigued.

Alex was particularly taken by the flying bird of reincarnation, their stiletto’s namesake. He claimed he’d seen it before.

“It was on the day we met,” he said.

As a birthday gift, Alex’s dad bought him a balloon ride and Liam turned out to be their pilot. While his father and his future boyfriend talked about shifts in air density throughout a given day, Alex gazed off to the east and saw a lone bird fly from the lit horizon, as if from the rising sun itself.

“It was on fire.” They spoke of this while camping on the bank of the Salton Sea, the salty bodies of washed up fish pickling on the bank around them.

“All birds look like they’re on fire at sunrise,” Liam said as he groomed his itchy beard with Alex’s pocketknife.

“I feel like I want to say so many things to you. Meaningful things. Not to make you stay but to help you understand your...”

“My what?”

“I don’t know. I guess gravity is a good word. But it’s just that. Words fail me.”

“Me too, I guess.”

“I just don’t want you to go before you’ve heard the things you’re supposed to hear.”

They hit the storm the next night. It snuck up on Liam and he had no time to lower the stiletto before it was picked up by the wind and carried to a dizzying height. Rain mixed with hail pelted the rip stop, fire-resistant

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nylon relentlessly. The sky became a puppeteer, raising and dropping and jarring the inflatable pump like it was deciding whether or not to try it on. With all hope of control gone, the two travelers could do nothing but brace themselves against the wicker basket. For a while it looked and felt like the obligatory storm scene of every pirate movie, until a flash of lighting highlighting a cloud to the north revealed something worse.

Hail bruising his face, Alex pulled Liam to the rail and pointed. “The haters are back,” he yelled over the din.

Another bolt lit up the cloud and for an instant thousands of darting silhouettes could be seen trailing the stiletto. In that instant they were upon them. The flying monkeys screamed and screeched in a brutal language, scowling and laughing hysterically from their pockmarked faces. They chucked their own eggs at the men and at their vessel. Some of them burst to reveal white and yolk, but others revealed goopy underdeveloped young, human babies wrapped in tiny wings without feathers.

Liam covered Alex with a blanket and told him to stay down. The flying monkeys began landing on the basket rail and clasping onto the fabric of the balloon. In anger they bit at the fabric. Liam fired the burner and it lit up the stiletto like a beacon, scaring a few of the attached primates, but they quickly returned. He had nothing to beat them away with, and from the rail they screeched at him, and faintly the rhythm of their angry call started to sound like fag! fag! fag!

They leaned their ugly feathered and furred bodies forward as if ready to pounce.

One of them did. It landed on his back and cracked an egg against his skull, and as he felt a clumpy fetal something fall off him and to the floor, Liam saw the night erupt in flame.

Vaguely he saw the winged invaders scatter, and as the balloon jolted and knocked him off his feet, Liam glimpsed a giant bird of prey, with wings on fire and eyes like twin suns, flash through the clouded sky. That was right before he hit his head on the propane tank.

“Liam. I’m starting to realize the phoenix is everything.”

“Wait. I’m not on your level yet.”

“It’s all we’ve ever wanted. Rebirth. It’s in the best legends and the phoenix is only one of them. Just ask Neo, Harry Potter, that guy from Avatar. Just ask Jesus. They all die for a while and then come back. We eat that shit up.”

Morning found the shoe only somewhat airborne. It skirted along dismal dunes, brushing and knocking the movable mountains but remaining unstuck. A particularly jarring brush woke Alex and Liam together.

They were covered in rotten eggs, fetuses, and shells, but they knew they were fortunate to be alive. Neither of them had any idea where the stiletto had drifted, or what had happened after the phoenix saved them.

Liam tried to fire the burner but nothing he did seemed to propel the pump skyward. It continued to wander just above the rolling sand in a direction of its own choosing. He found that, if he wanted to, he could land the Phoenix, but there was no place worth landing.

The lovers spent the afternoon cleaning debris off each other and the parts of their vessel they could reach. They tossed all the refuse behind them into the dunes like breadcrumbs. In a corner of the wicker basket they found a pile of unbroken eggs. They realized in their cleaning that they didn't have the heart to treat the unharmed eggs as garbage, but neither did they feel comfortable touching them. So in the corner of the basket they stayed.

“What's their deal?”

“They hate us for being alien and new and vibrant on top of it all.”

“That's hardly a crime.”

“They don't understand us. They want nothing but the worst for us.”

“So they toss the only stones they can find. What animals.”

“They don't see it that way.”

The oasis where their journey would end at first looked like a mirage.

“I dreamt I saw my dad again,” Alex said through parched lips. They hadn't had a sip of water since breakfast the previous day, and now that salvation was in sight, the lovers felt comfortable talking about the mundane. “He was on fire and burnt down to nothing. Then he stood up again and looked stronger than ever. You really look so much like him.”

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The hot air balloon trip for Alex's birthday was the last thing his father did as a healthy man. Later that week he was struck with formidable fatigue, collapsing at a neighborhood softball game. Alex wouldn't get another birthday with his father before he passed away of liver cancer. It was months later before Alex and Liam reconnected and began dating.

"You're just as tall as him, and when you shave I see it in your face."

It was in that moment that Liam realized he was the phoenix of Alex's father. That he was a living replacement of someone irreplaceable.

"What will you do when I leave?"

"I don't think about that kind of thing."

"What do you think about?"

"The wittiest way to respond to the witty thing you just said. How much I'd like to walk down a street with you in one of these tiny towns, hands held without tasting hate in the air. How much lube to use next time we fuck. How much my dad would have loved for me to date you if I was a chick."

The basket floated in silence above the tops of palms. Liam searched for a spot to touch down, but the oasis was compact.

"We'll have to drift to the outside again," he said. Through the leaves he could see rushing fresh water from a spring and in an instant he was salivating, something he hadn't been able to do for hours. Along the stream grew simple broad-leaved bushes, but they grew in lines where (he soon realized) palms and native cacti had once grown.

Sensing something, Alex whispered, "Maybe we shouldn't stop here."

Alex and Liam would soon learn that the plants observed were coca plants, a key ingredient in cocaine. Thus they were drifting slowly and silently above a cartel cash crop.

No sooner had their suspicions been piqued that the stiletto floated with ease above a small clearing where a man with three armed guards spoke loudly to a man wearing a blindfold. Since Liam had no reason to power the burner, the flashy footgear drifted above the procession without attracting the slightest attention. Both the gay men watched, however, and though neither understood Spanish, they realized quickly by

his inflection that the man in the middle was angry. And if his inflection wasn't enough proof, Liam and Alex watched the man pull a gun and shoot the blindfolded man in the head.

In fear and shock, Liam fired the burned. With a whoosh it lit up the clearing with sound, but if it climbed in altitude at all, it did so only slightly. Everyone in the clearing of the oasis who was unblinded and living turned and faced the balloon.

“¡Una zapatilla!” an armed guard yelled.

“Maybe this trip wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Don’t say that.”

When the balloon was shot, it did not explode. Neither did it sputter through the air like an inflated, untied party balloon. When the drug lord punctured the stiletto with a shot from his pistol, it made a slow, yet helpless descent to earth.

Thus, when the wicker basket crunched to the ground, Alex and Liam simply tumbled a bit, and landed on a soft bed of palm fronds, moist loam, and fallen coca leaves. The stiletto deflated into the gushing stream. Once devoid of air the nylon sank and sagged into the clear depths. So easily was the Phoenix extinguished.

The cartel members were upon them in moments, shouting quick orders to each other that neither Liam nor Alex could understand. It was through common sense of what it means to be captured that they knelt and cupped their hands behind their heads.

Ignoring their surrender, or perhaps taking advantage of it, the leading man rushed Alex and kneed him in the stomach.

“You spying, maricon?” he asked.

Alex was gasping, doubled over on his side, and it was two or three kicks from the drug lord to his boyfriend before Liam was able to break his shocked silence.

“No,” he sputtered, “we got lost.”

The drug lord turned now to Liam. He pulled the barrel of his pistol back to make sure a bullet was in the chamber.

Liam began talking faster. “Some people in Arizona somewhere saw us holding hands and they drove us out of town. We just drove and

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drove and they chased us and threw stones at us. We didn't know where we were going you and we ended up here you have to believe us."

Liam glanced at his boyfriend. Alex's face was already showing bruises. He was lying where he fell, the other two cartel members standing on either side of him. They knew full well they didn't need to hold him down.

"I do believe you," the man with the gun said. "But I know you talk a lot, too."

He leveled his pistol at Liam's head, and shot, but not before being tackled by dozens of tiny winged creatures. Carrying twigs and pebbles and bits of freshly-broken eggshells, the monkey hatchlings assaulted the armed men, who yelled in frightened voices and collapsed under sheer numbers. Not another shot was fired.

The bullet had only just missed Liam. He had fallen over and was now sitting on the ground, mouth ajar in shock and surprise.

Alex recovered from disbelief first. He struggled to his feet observed the hatchlings. "They saved us," he said, bewildered. The bruises on his face made even his voice sound puffy. "I thought they hated us."

Even now, after the fight was over, the tiny winged monkeys made no attempt to harm the travelers. They seemed to be protecting them, keeping a lookout and ensuring the attempted murderer and his comrades were slain.

"It looks like their hate is taught," Liam heard himself say. He stood and brushed himself off.

"This one looks like you," he said to Liam. "And this one like me."

It was true. The first, a bearded ugly thing with gray wings fluttered lazily from one body to the next, making sure the armed men were all dead. The second had a fair face and white wings. It was violating the drug lord's right nostril with a coca twig.

Liam pointed to another standing in front of them, as if awaiting orders. "That one looks like both of us," he said.

Soon all the other hatchlings lined up like the one who looked like his two fathers, and Liam and Alex came to the realization that they were awaiting orders.

"What do they want us to say?" Liam wondered aloud. "Order them to fly to the sky and harass propeller planes? To harvest coca and make us some authentic Coca-Cola?"

Alex, alone in a foreign desert sea with his boyfriend and dozens of their mythic offspring, somewhere between three-and-a-half miles and ten thousand miles away from home, shrugged and smiled. “What do any children want to hear from their father?”

Alex knelt there on the fallen leaves and said, “Your fathers love you even though—no, because you’re weird little monkey things.” Faintly he saw a response in their foreign faces. “Now go forth.”

Dream Blog

By T. M. Hopkins

Moscow Office:

Monday 3rd June

Back from the Steppes. Working on the regional reports, so - no time for play.

Thursday 6th June

Reports done. Feel like I'm being followed. It's not like I've been anywhere - too much work.

Monday 10th June

Still tired. More follow-up reports to do.

I keep thinking I see him - like in the reflections of shop windows when I walk past. A flash of red; someone going the other way. I just see it from the corner of my eye. Turn around and he's off. But he's always around.

Monday 17th June

He's like a dream - if you look directly at it, maybe try to focus - nada. Nothing in the mirror, just a figure always disappearing round the corner. Wearing red.

Friday 21st June

Trying to remember.

The yurt was muggy. Everyone was laughing. The fire was in the middle and the shaman guy looked totally nuts, the complete showman - hair everywhere. It's like one of the guys said, if he'd been quiet for five minutes, that's when you'd be worried; those shiny black eyes.

We had been drinking the whole weekend and it was just a laugh. A show for the tourists.

He did that thing with the white stones for each of us, the Kumalak readings, and then asked if we would like our dreams read. They would summon the dream weaver and we could have a really authentic experience for an extra fifty dollars each. Somebody must have paid it.

I did what the big hair said, let him tie my wrists behind my back (hessian

fibres chewed by virgins or something like that) and I knelt in front of the fire. My ankles were tied up too; this was supposed to protect me from the spirits who would see that I was helpless. I had to inhale the fumes, and chew the bay leaves. Then I had to spit the leaf paste into a bowl so the man with the hair could swirl it around with yak piss or something, and then read the signs. Another swig of apple brandy. Chanting; tribal drums from some toothless guy in the corner, and the smoke.

I passed out with the leaves in my mouth and the guys got worried then. Branden said he tried to sit me up and untie me but the shaman stopped him and put his finger in my mouth. He hooked out the wad of leaves and flicked it into the bowl like he didn't want any contact with it. Then he swirled the yak bowl and tipped the whole thing upside down. Nobody was taking much notice of him because they had got worried that I was so quiet, lying on my side all trussed up like that. They didn't like it but then, the shaman woke me up. Everyone was pretty far gone, but that's the way they tell it. I don't even remember waking up. I just remember being on the way back to the airport, looking at my own reflection in the car window.

Saturday 22nd June

It's great to see Andrea again. Feel like we were away for ages.

Friday 28th June

Things come into my mind, and I know it's to do with that weekend. I see the guy in red – real often sometimes, and then not at all, and I think it's all over. Then I see him again. It's usually just when I wake up, he's leaving my room and I know - he's been there all night. Then, if my mind is drifting, he'll be there in the reflection of a pc screen or window, walking away from me.

He is covered in red. His face is filled in like a fencing mask, without features. Bright red. He has woven hessian webbing all over his body, and his hands are like enormous shuttlecocks made of hessian netting, which he waves around like a sea anemone with fancy cuffs. You'd think someone would notice him. I mean that red is – RED.

Monday 1st July

They don't see him. I know that. In dreams, you're the only one who really knows what is going on. Even if you think you're not controlling it – you are.

Thursday 4th July

So I know he's real, and I know nobody else can see him. I get that – he's

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real for me. It's just that it's been a few weeks and I'm wondering where we're going with this. I mean are we going to carry on with a weird bloke in red walking out of the room every time I come in, or are we going to dance at some point?

Saturday 6th July

Last night, in the dream, he spoke to me. That's a first. I'm thinking this means progress. They want to know if I'll come back with him and finish it properly. That's a laugh. I'm never going there again. And definitely not with him.

Monday 8th July

I've been reading. The books tell me that the people and things in dreams are supposed to be facets of yourself. You are battling against an aspect you don't like. Or screwing part of yourself that you really love. Or whatever. I don't know if I go for that.

Thursday 11th July

Ok. I know I'm not crazy, but who the hell is this guy? I can see him in the reflection of my laptop all day now.

He's guarding me, that's what it is. He's waving his shuttlecock arms around like he's swatting flies. When he's not doing that, he's standing with his arms above his head, like a sentinel on duty. It's freaking me but now I don't want him to leave. Anyway, I know he won't leave. Something went wrong in the yurt that time. They want me to go back.

Saturday 13th - am

Things have changed. I can't do this anymore. They drink, and I drink, and I think it's not affecting me but they are all so ridiculous, and then it does affect me, and I am ridiculous. I was on the floor again last night, by the bar. They said it's like in the yurt and I've got to stop this because it's freaking them.

Can't get my face clean.

I keep thinking of that program I saw where they went to a night club and took swabs off the bottom of these women's handbags. They get puke and blood and anything else that people have walked in, all on the bottom of their bags. And I was on the floor like that, my cheek pressed into the slime. I can smell other people's puke, if I think about it.

Saturday pm

I want to talk to this guy in red. I know he is the dream catcher, but I don't know why he wants me. How will he talk? How did he do it last time? I

can't remember. He doesn't have a mouth.

Sunday am

No good. If I look straight at him, he's gone.

I had a shape in my head when I woke up though. Had some difficulty making it work out, but then I got it. I made chili beef and then stood on the cans to flatten them. Then I had to bend and fold them into the triangle faces I could see in my mind. I made slits for eyes and noses with a sharp knife - broke the tip off it now. I made holes in the back so I can fix them onto a tee-shirt with safety pins. I knew I had to get them on each shoulder asap.

Anyway, it's done now. Sat at my desk to catch up on some work, and old Red didn't show up once. I'll have to wear them under my work shirt in the morning, but if I wear a jacket all the time, they won't be visible.

Monday pm

So that went medium good. Nobody could see the faces, so long as I kept my jacket on. They bang on my collar bone because I have to keep them out of sight and they are too low, below the shoulder.

Ideally, they should go higher, nearer my ears, or they can't reach all the radiations properly.

Went to the bathroom as often as I could, to pull my Tee-shirt up to eye level and turn round a few times, to let the faces radiate round so they can do their work. Red says about every three hours should do it, till I get home and can have them permanently up high.

Tuesday

Awkward moment at the coffee machine. I dropped a cup and as I leaned forward, the tin masks dislodged and became visible. I think Janet with the big calves saw something.

More Tuesday

Red came by to check me out, but he moved on once he'd got a good look at me. I know the faces on my shoulders deflect the spirits, protect me. He thanks them for their help. It's all coming together now.

Wednesday

Smell of puke. All the time.

I've tried cleaning the inside of my nostrils with various things on those ear-buds - I heard where you smell something, actual atoms of that thing lodge in these receptor cells in your nose. Tried soap from the dispenser

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at work, and vodka. I'll have to think of something else though - the smell never stops.

Thursday 18th July

The dream catcher spoke to me; about my mind; about dreams. He asked if we all have sand in our minds that prevents us seeing our purpose; or fire in our minds that keeps us from achieving it.

I could hear drumming.

Thursday, late

Nobody on Facebook any more. No more tweets. But I know you are all following this blog, guys. Your profile pic is crap, Max – what is wrong with your eyes? Crimson and cracking. Nasty.

Haven't heard back from Andrea for ages.

Ben- you don't look so good. I saw you in the elevator you know – jeez your ears are bad - so thick and swollen. Like a boxer.

Did you see me?

Red was in there with us in the elevator; I could see him in the mirror tiles on the ceiling. Could you see him Ben?

Did Ben have faces on his shoulders? I've been thinking you might have been looking a bit angular under your jacket, Ben.

Friday 19th

Got my delivery of jute today. I started teasing it out and spreading the threads on the kitchen table. I put a bit on my collar bones, which hurt like shit now. I might pad the back of the faces too, but I don't like to take them off in case they stop working.

Saturday 20th

Booked my ticket. Don't know what to say to them at work. Maybe they won't notice. Andrea won't, that's for sure.

Sunday 21st

Red is pleased. I am doing a real good job.

The faces have names, titles, but I can't hear them properly. They talk too much and I can't concentrate.

Monday

Can't wait for sleep. It should be good tonight.

The others are here. We didn't sit together on the plane or anything, but I

saw them all at the airport. Ben's ears look really sore. And Max's eyes are horrible. Bright red and nearly swollen shut. We all look really bad, guys! My nose and cheeks are pretty red, but Branden was the shocker. He's as thin and grey as hessian thread. He kinda fades in and out as you look at him, as if he can't focus on staying with us. He can't have eaten anything since we were last here. You could blow through him.

Red came to show me what to do and I've managed to fix the faces directly onto my skin now. I hardly feel the piercings. No worries.

Got my hessian and they'll bring the bay leaves. I know the way to the yurt from last time. I guess that's where we're all going.

Sweet dreams fellas.

The Music Room

by Gunnar Jaech

January was born in 2005. She believed wireless communications had existed for as long as turtles and crayons. She did not know why September 11 was an important day. Her mothers were married, and always had been. It therefore shall come as little surprise that when she wandered one day into the old part of the house, and found the big, black plastic circles in a box in a little room, she had no idea what she was looking at. She did know she was still at the beginning of her life, and she liked that.

The room had one little window, too high for January to see out, too dirty for anything but gray-brown light to get through even though it was a beautiful day outside; which was where January was supposed to be. Tess always made her go outside when it was a beautiful day, like that was her job or something. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling in sheets. They stuck to her face and her hair. She tried to wipe them away with her free hand, but it was hard to get all the sides of her head that way, and there were always more cobwebs getting on her, like they were the air or something, and if she put down her iPhone, it would get dirty, so she decided to just go with the sticky-dry feeling the cobwebs put on her skin. Brigid always told her to just go with it if there was something she didn't like, and when January just went with it, usually it got better, even if it was kale or old people music like Justin Timberlake.

January took a record out of the box and looked at it very closely. She wiped it on her t-shirt and made some of it shiny so she could see the lines better. There were lots and lots of lines. The crinkly pale sticker in the middle said Stevie Wonder on it. She dropped that one on the loose-fitting floor boards and took out some more, looking for a better clue. All of the records had different stickers. One said Simon and Garfunkle, which were the names of their twin labradors. Maybe the disks were plates for dog food and all of them were for different dogs, but that didn't explain what the lines were for, and Stevie Wonder was a stupid name for a dog.

January yawned as she discarded the seventh or eighth record, Christmas carols by Frank Sinatra, which landed on its edge and rolled into a hole in the floor. Tess used the holes as a reason to keep January out of this part of the house, because you could fall in, but it wasn't like she was stupid or something. She knew it might be bad to lose one of the disks, so she crouched by the hole and put her hand in. It seemed very deep, because

she couldn't feel the bottom, even when she reached in all the way up to her shoulder. She felt closer to the side. A sharp point stabbed into her finger.

January yanked her arm out of the hole, gritting her teeth and concentrating very hard on not shouting, even though it hurt. This would not be a good time for Tess or Brigid to hear her. She stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked up the blood. Her breathing slowed. She leaned over and put her face up to the hole. It was too dark to see anything inside. She turned on her iPhone, but even the camera light couldn't shine to the bottom of the hole. Maybe it went all the way down to the basement.

At the side of the hole, a layer of torn insulation partially hid a square-sided machine with a circular plate on top. A hooked arm stuck out next to the plate, with a tiny needle at the end. January forgot about the dirt, put down her iPhone, and lay on the floor so she could reach the machine with both hands. As she wrestled it free of the hole, the plate rotated this way or that, and the arm swung back and forth. By the time she managed to get it out, she was tired and filthy, but she had made the connection between the plate on the machine and the disks in the box.

January's finger still hurt and her arms ached. She felt like watching Despicable Me or going on Facebook or making a castle with Legos. She was fed up with having cobwebs all over her and being in this old, stupid room with no AC, which, it only now and somewhat vaguely occurred to her, maybe should seem a little scary, with its one, lone box in the corner and holes in the floor and a window you couldn't see out of. But now there was no way Tess wouldn't see the dirt all over January's clothes or the cobwebs in her hair. January could try to make up a story about getting dirty outside, but Tess would know she was lying, just like Tess always did. There would be no Despicable Me or Facebook to speak of for at least a week, not now, so she had to seize the moment, like Brigid always said.

She stuck one of the disks on the plate and gave it a spin. It kept going for a while. That was clearly part of the idea. She tried moving the arm up and down but that didn't do anything. She tried touching the needle which had poked her against the spinning disk. It scraped.

When she spun the turntable, the needle stayed where it was, bobbing a little, whisking. No, wait, it was moving, slowly, towards the center of the disk. January thought she heard a far away sound like birds chirping. It changed pitch and sounded more like a human voice, then turned into a groan like trees croaking, then went away. The record stopped spinning. Maybe it was her imagination. She gave the record another good, hard spin and held her breath.

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The sound was there. A feeling that was half cold, half sick, shot up her back and settled behind her face, and made it feel like air was blowing through her hair and lifting it up, stuffy though the room was. The voice was real, but far away. At first she thought it was coming from the hole in the floor. She put the side of her head up to the hole. She heard nothing. She gave the record another spin and put her head up close to the record. The far away voice was coming from there. It was a woman singing. It was boring old people music, but January laughed. She had figured it out. This was totally worth getting grounded. She lay her head at the edge of the record player and closed her eyes and kept pushing at the edge of the turn table and listened to Joni Mitchell decry the state of society in the distance. The words were hard to understand because it was so quiet. January tried to back it up a few times, which was how she figured out the coolest part: you could make them play the song backwards just by turning the record the other way, and it made the woman sound really funny, like when Brigid held up a bedtime book to the mirror and read it in reverse.

The light in the window faded and January grew hungry. She decided she would check out one more record and then go back to face her fate. She couldn't wait to tell Tess and Brigid what she had found. Maybe it was cool enough that maybe they wouldn't get too mad or upset. She didn't like how she felt when they were upset. Tess said that was called empathy, and it meant January was a good person who cared about other people's feelings. January wondered why Tess didn't have more empathy when she told January what to do, because it didn't seem like it made Tess feel bad.

The iPhone lit up the names of more musicians January had never heard of. The last record in the box had a sticker with a picture on it of what looked like a hand. The picture was all blurry, like it was moving, and the hand looked weird and skinny, like a skeleton hand or something. January put that record on the turntable in place of Joni Mitchell. She put the needle on the record and gave it a spin. The far away sound seemed like just a lot of hissing and clanking. Someone sang, but it sounded like they had a really bad cold, no matter how fast or slow she spun it. There was a sound in the hole.

January was certain this time. The record spun quietly to a stop. She waved the iPhone at the hole. She waited, eyes wide, not breathing. She had heard it. Something shifting and falling over. Or taking a step. She listened. She stared at the hole. The cobwebs drew dull glows above it in her bubble of weak, white light. She finally breathed. Maybe it wasn't something bad. Maybe it was a bat. When her class went to the nature center, they got to see a bat. Everyone else was scared, but January thought it was cute. Bats were good because they ate mosquitoes. You weren't

supposed to touch them because they might make you sick, or you might make them sick, but they weren't mean or anything. She would leave in a minute, but she was curious about the record. She wondered if it sounded like that because she was turning it the wrong way. January put her fingers down on top of the vinyl and started playing it backwards.

Landmarks in the History Of Waiting

by Larry Pinck

“In the beginning, there was the line. And the line was long. And the wait was interminable. And God looked down upon his handiwork and said, “Eh.”

And a great cry rose up from the multitudes. And their voices were exceedingly whiney. And they beseeched the Lord: ‘We don’t wanna wait. We want stuff right away. All our free time gets pissed away waiting.’

And God heard their cries, but was unmoved. And thus He spoke: “If you don’t like it, fix it yourselves. It is not for nothing, I have endowed thee with brains; well most of thee anyway.”

The following comprise mankind’s most notable efforts to heed God’s suggestion.

I. A Parable of the Queue

Shulamit at the Well is the story of a young girl who discovers the extent to which infirmity can negate the line. Shulamit lived with her family, during the reign of King David, on a small farm in the barren wastes of Moab. She was charged with replenishing the household water supply and every day carried her two large jugs to the well.

Water was scarce and the line never shorter than 5,000 cubits. One day Shulamit withered in the hot sun and fainted. When revived, she was permitted to draw water first.

The next morning, anxious to meet her boyfriend, Shulamit feigned hyperthermia and again swooned. Once more her frailty was indulged. On the following day, however, as she lay in the dirt, Shulamit perceived that acts of loving kindness are narrowly circumscribed on a queue. A lesson reinforced by the tread marks on her back.

Fearful of being stoned, Shulamit fled with a gentle legume merchant who set her up in a small garden apartment in the land of the Amalekites.

II. The Legacy of Rome

Contrary to popular belief, the serpentine formation, i.e., a vertical line folded upon itself into shorter horizontal segments, did not originate in the great hall of Ellis Island. Rather it was conceived in the 1st Century C.E. by Flavius Sardonicus, a sandal designer attached to the Praetorian Guard. In his biographical treatise, “Nero: Crazy Like a Fox”, Ipicus claims the design was intended to restrain unruly crowds awaiting admission to the Colosseum. Riots had previously claimed hundreds of lives and thousands more had suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The system was implemented in advance of a heralded grudge match between popular favorite, Roccus, the Thracian Stallion, and upstart newcomer, Stimey the Nubian. Their first match had ended in a draw with both combatants rendered unconscious by reciprocal blows of the short sword. The concept proved untenable. Disgruntled mobs easily vaulted the barricades and widespread dismemberment ensued. In the aftermath, Nero requested Sardonicus’ suicide and was graciously accommodated.

III. Giuseppe, the Baker of Venice

At the height of the Italian Renaissance, Giuseppe Montefiore owned a small pastry shop on the Via Della Tuna. His touch was lighter than St. Francis, and he was a Leonardo with the cookie cutter. His biscotti were so delicious, “last meal” requests from condemned prisoners often exceeded 100 per week.

One May morning, two noblemen, Duke Leopoldo and Duke Vincenzo, arrived at the shop at the same time. Both men proceeded to the counter; each accustomed to Giuseppe’s immediate attention. The baker was befuddled. Who should he serve first? He had known Duke Leopoldo longer but Duke Vincenzo carried more clout.

Suddenly inspiration struck like a runaway ox cart, and Giuseppe uttered the memorable lines: “Duke Leopoldo you be ‘a number one. Duke Vincenzo, you be ‘a number two. Next week, vice versa. Va bene?”

Both men accepted Giuseppe’s judgment, and on that Spring morning, the “take a number” system was born.

IV. Money Doesn’t Talk; It Smears

The “greased palm” is a line jumping technique based upon the surreptitious payment of a gratuity; often clumsily concealed in a hand shake. It is a powerful tool, but one with risk. As a result, its use has been sporadic throughout history.

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The technique first achieved popularity in late antiquity, but fell out of favor at the onset of the Black Death. Thereafter a cyclical pattern of use followed by epidemic evolved. Not until 1860 did Pasteur advance a medical explanation, when he proved currency was inherently filthy and a breeding ground for microbial pestilence.

Despite these dangers, the practice enjoyed a robust renewal at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Payoffs were the rule at popular amusement attractions. Epidemiologists now attribute endemic influenza to the grubby hand to hand maneuver.

Regardless, the practice remains entrenched in many trendy eateries. A recent CDC advisory recommended maitre d's in such establishments practice sterile technique.

V. The Frontsie-Backsie Paradigm

The Frontsie-Backsie Paradigm, a system for authorized line cutting, was first attempted on October 7, 1964 at the Capital Theatre in Passaic, New Jersey. The innovative technique was executed by teenagers awaiting a live appearance by the Three Stooges and Officer Joe.

One boy, who claimed he invented the tricky strategy while in Hebrew School, was quoted in the Herald News:

"People get really annoyed when someone cuts in line. But this way it's okay. See, the way it works is, if I give you frontsies, then you give me backsies. Or maybe it's the other way around. But anyway, it's no big deal 'cause you can always sneak in the side door."

Initially the paradigm was met with suspicion and misunderstanding of its Euclidean underpinnings. However, the rough waters smoothed and it was employed with great success at the Dave Clark Five's April concert at the Central Theater.

VI. Elimination of the Line

Weapons of mass destruction are generally perceived with negativity. Good and bad tarred by the same broad brush. But if not for advances in mass carnage, the restaurant pager would not exist.

Through the combined technologies of radar, satellite tracking and stealth, for the first time, man may freely defecate without loss of position. We have passed the age in which Franklin Roosevelt cautioned: "The only thing we have to fear, is fear to dump." The same surely holds true for No. 1. No longer need anyone hesitate to dip into the New Yorker or dig into Moby Dick while so engaged. Restaurant industry standards require all pagers be set with a three minute grace period. Thus

affording sufficient time to clean up and be ready to order appetizers when the server appears.

VII. A Glimpse Into the Future

Intractable lines persist. No technology currently available can mitigate TSA inspection queues or Route 17 South in Paramus. Still the struggle continues. Everyday dedicated scientists investigate new modalities for incorporeal waiting. Hurdles remain. Yet never before has mankind come so close to satisfying the biblical injunction, “fix it yourselves.”

Charles Manson's Birthday

by Russell Helms

Regina gagged into the toilet holding to the rim like she was on a roller coaster.

"Oh Lord," said the nurse. "Did you swallow your tampon, Regina?"

Regina took a deep breath and said, "Yes." Her black hair dangled in the cold water. She wore red stretchy pants and a tight white t-shirt that said, "Kapow!" Regina wrote Charles Manson a letter each and every day. She even celebrated his birthday, November 12, 1934.

"So you're not really choking. You just swallowed it, right?" said the nurse. Her name was Nancy. Her husband called her Nancy Nurse. She wore a plain brown skirt to her ankles and a puffy tan top with a light brown jacket and an ostrich brooch.

"I just wanted you to notice me," said Regina. She flopped onto her bottom on the cold tile, hair covering her eyes.

Regina motioned for the aide Antoine to help her. Regina hiccupped. Her breath smelled like menses.

"Why would you do such a thing?" said Antoine.

Nancy shook her head and grabbed Regina beneath her armpits. "Come on, Babydoll, let's get you into the dayroom. Dr. Bottoms will be here soon."

Regina stood and tuned to frequency 4quadrillion&8. She examined the hands under her armpits and saw them as mannequin hands. Tinny music, perhaps from France, bippity bopped inside her head. The devil was telling her to ride a bicycle to the ocean. Once there, the bicycle would float. She could pedal to Israel and see where Jesus died. She gained her balance and looked from Antoine to Nancy.

"Here we go, Babydoll," said Nancy. "Little baby steps to the dayroom. Here we go."

Antoine looked lost and disgusted. He had three kids. Everyday he shaved with hot water, ironed his white pants, and rode the bus to work. The hospital did not allow perfume or cologne, but he always smelled good, like Dial soap. Regina's armpits were hot and smelled of burning steel.

Pianotown didn't have a "hospital" but it did have this "care center" for folks like Regina. In an editorial printed in the local paper during the September of an odd-numbered year, the facility had been described as a "nursing home" for "nutjobs."

Into the square dayroom they went, Regina shuffling her feet in green disposable slippers. A thin man was playing foosball by himself, spinning the rods like mad. The TV was on—talk, talk, talk, rabble, rabble it went.

"Yada yada yada," said Regina. She had Charles Manson's prison ID tattooed on her forearm, b33920. Her favorite number was 17.

"Just a few more baby steps, Babydoll."

They backed her up to a mustard chair, and Regina sat. Cattycorner to her was Wesley. He had his hand in his pants pulling his taffy.

"Wesley, go to your room if you're going to masturbate," said Nancy.

Wesley looked at her. He wore a red plaid shirt and was barefoot. He liked "creamed potatoes," not "mashed potatoes," but "creamed potatoes." "Go to fucking hell," said Wesley. He kept on pulling his taffy and then began to weep like a child.

"Oh sweet Jesus," said Nancy. She had to get back to her charting. "Regina, you okay for now, Babydoll?"

Regina smacked her lips and said, "Yes."

Antoine sighed and left, headed to the bathroom to wash his hands and say a little prayer for the world.

Chronicles of Tim Pt. XIV - Responsibilities

by Mike Wiley

Timothy Cutlass laid the glass board down on the table in front of him. Scattered across the rest of the tabletop were various black and white game pieces. With a swarm of children so large that he couldn't possibly count them all, Tim had taken to hiding out in one of the many rooms of the labyrinthian castle. So far he had succeeded in remaining undetected for what could have been months, possibly years. The twisty beard on his face had grown so long that he began running it under his shirt and down the sleeve of his right arm so that it did not interfere with the game pieces while he played. The beard still poked out of his sleeve cuff but it was a comfort for him to pet and twist the wiry ends at his wrist. They were his only source of companionship. That and the dozen or so friends he created out of strips torn from his pants made complete with paint chip faces.

He found the game set at the back of a small closet while ducking into it during one of the increasingly frequent search-sweeps for him. At first only the children were sent around to inspect the rooms and surrounding grounds. It was easy enough to remain hidden from them. Often he watched them conducting their searches from the tiny window of his new room, peering just over the windowsill so as not to be seen. But as time went on, Tim began to hear the heavy, measured footfalls of Geryon tearing down the halls at regular intervals. The pleasures of endless, mind-altering sex were no longer adequate to compensate for the pressures of fatherhood. Why, oh why? Tim cursed time and again, Why did the world he inhabited have no such thing as birth control?

The day he went into hiding also became day one of his attempt to kick his theodine habit. He hadn't touched a drop since he went underground. Rehabilitation would have to be accomplished solo, without the screaming children, without the women all begging to be satisfied at once, without the endlessly mounting pile of chores, favors, demands, dirty diapers, theodine harvests and battles with the neighboring Zugdusters. That was his newest problem: the Zugdusters.

How long had he been a member of this community without anyone informing him that there was a neighboring tribe of half-breed human things hell-bent on warring them out of existence? How long had

he endured the trials of Geryon and the absurd speeches of James without them telling him that his very existence was in constant jeopardy from these monsters? The explanation was that it had simply slipped their minds. Tim had a difficult time accepting that. Something didn't smell good about the whole scenario.

So Tim passed the time by holding chess tournaments with his cloth-paint friends (Tim occasionally winning) and watching out the window as the Zugduster people made their own sweeps across the back perimeter of the castle grounds abducting the children before his very eyes. At first it was a heart-wrenching affair to witness. Often the Zulu would take a child no more than a few yards off the property before they devoured the helpless thing in two swift gulps (it was the first bite that was hard to watch). But, as with all things that are magic until they become routine, he soon found he was able to endure the tragedies with little more than a sigh. Before long the sighs of acceptance became sighs of relief, because a child that never returned home was a child he would never have to trim the beard for again, or worry about how he was going to teach it to blow snot rockets.

On one particularly average and boring day, Tim was engrossed in a chess strategy debate with his pant's cuff over whether or not one was allowed to castle the king over to the side while in check. Tim swore that he was allowed to initiate the move, while the pant cuff vehemently denied him this ability. Things were just beginning to get heated when the door to the room suddenly burst open.

Tim spun around in his seat. He had been so engrossed in the debate that he let his guard fail. A small girl, perhaps six or seven years of age, stood in the doorway.

"Oh, hello," Tim said, trying not to sound alarmed. "What's your name, dear?" He already had his eye on the tiny window, wondering if the fourteen story plunge to his death rated more desirable than being discovered.

"I'm Wendy," the girl said. She was wearing a light pink, one-piece pajama suit with little bunny ears on the built-in socks. "Are you my daddy?"

Tim sighed, this time it was a sigh of frustration. "Your mother probably has you out looking for me, is that right?" Wendy nodded. "You aren't gonna tell her that you found me, are you?"

Wendy looked down at her feet as though trying to decide what she would do before responding, "No..." The girl hesitated in her response,

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clearly not old enough to weigh the consequences of her actions in either direction.

“Wendy? That didn’t sound very much like you meant what you just said. Didn’t your mother teach you about lying to a grown-up?” Tim stroked the beard coming out of his sleeve and nervously looked across the table at his cloth play friends, then wondered at his use of the word ‘grown-up.’

Wendy shuffled on her feet. “No, I won’t tell, Daddy.”

Whew. Tim sighed once more - a sigh of relief.

She sounded resolved to do the right thing, enough to satisfy Tim so he went across the room, kissed his daughter on the forehead and gave her a gentle push out the door. Then he quietly closed it in her face and went back to the argument he was having with his cuffed opponent concerning the chess move.

Two minutes later, Wendy’s mom, Samara, Geryon and James all burst in the room. They were followed in by a gaggle of Geryon’s other daughters and Tim’s various children.

“What have you been doing?” Samara barked. “The entire estate is a mess! Without all the you to do everything. You’ve got responsibilities to your children!”

Tim cringed. There was that word, he thought. The very sound of it rolling around in his mind gave him shivers. Responsibility...

“Also the Zulu have taken two of my children, Tim. And at least a dozen of my sisters’ kids. This stops now. You can’t hide in here forever.”

Tim shot out of his seat.

“But I can’t consume theodine anymore. It’s killing me. And especially not after the incident.” Tim sat back down at the table, shaking his head over his lap. With his chin down against his sternum, the beard created a ridiculous excess that had to fold out away from his body in order not to push its way back into the flesh from which it had grown.

“Which particular incident are you referring to I wonder?” said Geryon.

“Oh, I think we all know which one...” Tim began. “I remember it like it was yesterday.”

Tim began to tell the tale as if those present had no idea what he was referring to. He jumped right into the action, the part where he was so high on theodine that he dressed all of himself up in pirate costumes

and had a swashbuckling pirate war in the foyer of the castle. “Tims were swinging from the chandelier,” he narrated, “with large knives in their teeth. Lacking upper-body strength, many of them fell to their deaths. Others simply ran about the castle yelling “AAARGGHH!” while they stabbed one another in the back. Everything in sight had been destroyed. I even built a cannon and launched an attack on the mass of Tim-pirates, splintering the bottom half of the staircase and laying several dozen bodies across the floor.”

Tim paused a moment in quiet reflection. He was about to continue when Samara interrupted him.

“That was yesterday, you moron.”

Tim went pale. “It was? Oh. Well, you know the whole time thing... I thought that, but oh never mind. The beard. It indicates some passage of time and, well it’s not important. I suppose I couldn’t remain hidden forever.”

“I saw you this morning. Me, the mother of your children. I saw you. We did it. We had sex just this morning. In the shower. I did kind of like the pirate costume...”

“We did?” Tim broke in. “This morning?”

“And on the fish tank.”

“On the fish tank?”

“Yep. Well, it was more like, in the fish tank. While the kids were sleeping in the room. You were horny as an Egyptian toad and said you didn’t care that the kids were right there. Do you remember any of this?”

“Of course I remember. But that was forever ago.”

“Nope.” She stood out front of the angry mob with her arms crossed in front of her.

“This morning?”

“This morning.”

Tim’s eyes sparkled for a moment, remembering getting down in the enormous tropical fish tank. It was unlike any sex he’d had before. He held the knife the whole time. A piranha had nearly taken one of his toes.

“Ok. But you have to admit this beard is out of control amazing.”

“It’s out of control something... But you’ve had your fun.”

“Time to get back to work?”

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“Time to get back to work.”

“Damn.”

Tim frowned. He scrunched up his shoulders and he frowned and he frowned. He frowned so hard that a permanent crease formed on his furrowed forehead as though it were a scar. Then he got up and followed the others out of the room to continue his life as a polyamorous father/savior/something. This was going to be difficult without theodine. He knew it was what he had to do but wished only that he had been able to hang out a little longer with his new friends so that they could for once finish a game without someone arguing or crying.

And just like that, Tim was back to the grind. Wasn’t life in an enchanted castle supposed to be more... enchanting? he wondered. While his past life hadn’t exactly been exciting in Arizona, at least he hadn’t felt worked to the bone. Things were simpler back then. One wife, no kids. That was an equation he could handle. The math was simple. The days were simple. The nights were calm and drunk. There were so few... responsibilities.

Geryon had told him at the outset that there would be one task to accomplish each week and then there would be a daughter to please at the end of each completed task. That was a simple thing and Tim could handle simple things. Not that he had signed up for any of this, he was abducted after all.

Because the mental anguish involved in dealing with the neighboring Zugdusters was too much to bear sober, the first order of business would be to clean up the house. It was still a mess from his pirate escapade. Without a thousand sets of Tim-hands to do the work, he would have to figure out another way. So Tim called a meeting; a meeting of the children.

When they had all assembled in the great dining hall, Tim walked nervously amongst his mass of his children. What a great commotion they were capable of making, Tim thought. There were hundreds of them packed into the room, ranging in age from a few months to the mid-thirties, if Tim had to venture a guess. There were screaming babies and there were full-grown men. Some of them resembled Tim in their features while some of them may as well have been the offspring of pygmy goats. How this age range was even possible, he couldn’t be sure. Tim didn’t think of himself as any older than forty, but he couldn’t be sure of that either. He climbed up on a table.

At first he had a difficult time of getting all of their attention

at once. He tried calling order and punching one fist into an open palm repeatedly, like he had seen on a reality t.v. show about court room justice. He tried beating his breast and he tried singing. The noise carried on. The children chased one another around the crowd. Some of the men puffed their chests and cast dagger-glances when Tim caught their eye. He overheard one of them explaining that he could take Tim in a wrestling match if it came to it. Tim had no doubt that his son could. Tim was losing his cool up on that table. If he successfully managed to gain the attention of one small part of the room, they would begin their prattling anew the moment he turned his attention elsewhere. It was utter chaos.

At last, he had an idea. Tim unbuttoned the collar of his shirt just two buttons from the top and began a procedure that would eventually turn the room as quiet as an abandoned library. Slowly, slowly, he began to pull the great beard up from out of his right sleeve. The cacophony turned to hushed whispers. One woman gasped with awe and covered her mouth. She tapped her chatting neighbor as a domino effect of wide eyes and slack-jaws went around the room. Tim continued pulling the beard out. It was a magnificent scene. The children had all stopped in wonder, some taking seats criss-cross-applesauce on the floor, others fainting. Tim kept pulling. The beard kept coming. By the time the full glory had been completely revealed, there wasn't a sound in the room.

Tim cleared his throat.

"Aha, um... now, yes," he began, shaking beads of sweat gathering on his creased forehead, still unsure of how to proceed. "Uhem, okay, now that I have your attention..."

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