

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Thirty – Autumn/Winter 2021 – Mystery

Tigershark Magazine

Issue 30 – Autumn/Winter 2021

Mystery

Editorial

This issue may not be quite what it seems. What you read may not be true. Or, what should be mere fiction may in fact be real. Which is which? What is what? It's a mystery...

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme: The City

From everyday tales of urban life
to lost ruins and planetary conurbations...

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Investigator

Seeks to resolve mystery

Truth remains unknown

By Aeronwy Dafies

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groundhog crossing open field
its furtive movement
no courage or muscle tone

By David Edwards

Mercilessly

By Brett Dyer

He stumbles back from the surprising blow, shocked at the resilience of the Doctor. As the doctor rises to his feet, he shifts his weight to his back left leg, pivots to force his full body weight into a forward back-hand. Connecting with the doctor on the forehead.

The doctor drops – unconscious from his devastating blow. Waiting little time, he applies a garrotte to the neck of the patient, dragging his intended victim to the other room and his fate. All whilst the nurse whimpers in fear.

He secures his victim to a table in the room, his new killing room.

Ends



Advert

Running Coyote and Fallen Star

By Gavin Boyter

is now available.

Here are the links to the book:

Amazon in the UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B092TGXCQV>

Amazon in the US: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B092TGXCQV>

As well as the story published in Tigershark ezine, it includes another 47 stories
(of which 15 have appeared in literary magazines).

Mystery

By Freya Pickard

pin-point in history
a tree, a hill
the first blush of sunset
the first flush of sunrise
across the spectrum
everything comes down to this;
God's mystery

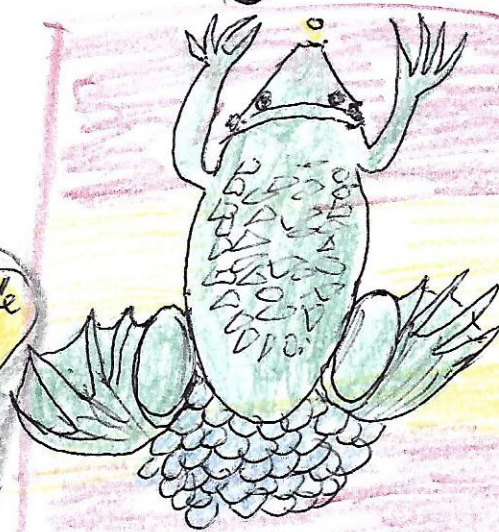
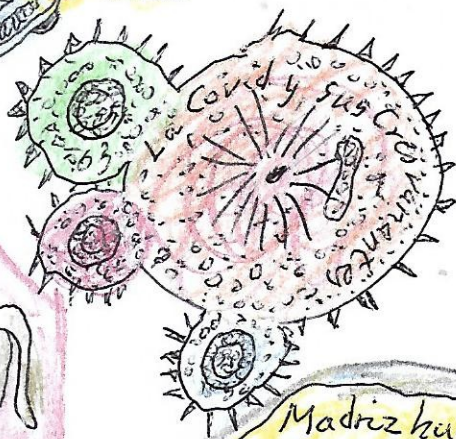


The Answers

By David Punter

1. A handler of large amounts of illicit diamonds.
2. Both orbit their planets at an identical angle to the perpendicular.
3. A baby rabbit born with a vestigial second scut
4. 'Two blades drawn languidly' (a disqualification in certain forms of Provençal fencing)
- 5 (a). In a log cabin in the northern province of Fritzhof
(b). In a lay-by off the M4 near Reading.
6. Only if the purported weapon can be proved to have been devised or carried for an entirely different purpose.
7. A minor heroic character in the third (lost) version of the Mabinogion.
8. Mid-light featherweight (before 1921).
9. 37 years, unless zero carbon emissions are achieved immediately.
10. Impossible.

DE MADRIZ AL CIELO



La Ranade Madrid



Perro flauta



Repite rápidamente
Topa, topa, topa, topa... junto
al río Manzanares.



Tres adoquines rojigualda
en la Plaza de Colón



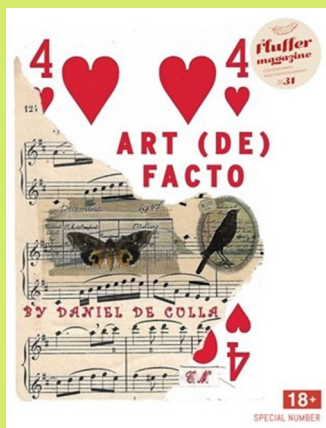
Ciclo general de los estrongicos
en la cabeza de los adoquines

Love in the Age of Coronavirus

By DJ Tyrer

Long distance, arm's length
No lips' touch, eye glance only
Awaiting announcement of indoor visits
Obey government guidance
No kissing, masks on
New age of safe sex

*Worried about your viral load? Concerned about mask-less marauders?
Investigate lockdown mysteries in DJ Tyrer's short poetry collection, **A Wuhan Whodunnit**
available to download for **free** from the [Atlantean Publishing website](http://atlanteanpublishing.com).*



Fluffer Magazine issue 31

Fluffer's new issue is out with 96 amazing pages!

Adult content

Fluffer Magazine is available in pdf version or on paper.

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fluffermagazine.net

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ANDERSEN, HANS CHRISTIAN – The Little Mermaid
APULEYO – El Asno de Oro
AQUITANIA, GUILLERMO DE – El Trobador
BANTI, ANNA – Artemisa
BATAILLE, GEORGES – Gilles de Rais
BENNET, JEFFREY – El Calentamiento Global
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BROMIOS, CYN – Onan and Tamar
BROWNE, ANTHONY – King Kong
BUKOWSKI, CHARLES – Hot Water Music
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DOHERTY – El Templario
DOMINGUEZ MORO, ROBERTO – El Confinado
FOWLES, JOHN – El Mago
FRIEDAN, BETTY – La Mística de la Feminidad

also De Culla's Hand-Drawings

Anagrams for Breakfast

By K. A. Williams

It was Saturday morning and while I was eating breakfast, I noticed that a folded white sheet of copy paper had been slipped under my apartment door.

'Hwta sha alwls, rodos, nda orof?' was typewritten in black printer ink.

What sort of gibberish was this? Why would anyone slip a note under my apartment door, and who had done it? I took a closer look at the words. Maybe this was an anagram.

I deciphered it during breakfast and came up with 'What has walls, doors, and roof?'

A riddle then. Okay. Maybe the answer was a house or building.

When I got up to pour myself a second cup of coffee, another sheet of paper was under the door.

On this one was, 'Hwree od ouy hckec otu ookbs nda soievm?'

I dressed and then deciphered this one. It took longer, I had trouble with the last word, but I finally got it. 'Where do you check out books and movies?'

That was easy. The answer was library.

Then I noticed another sheet of paper. It was straightforward. 'Meet me there at noon.'

I thought I knew who had left the notes and why. Even if I was wrong, the library was a safe place to meet.

I parked in the back of the library, near the picnic area, and got out.

I could see someone at one of the tables setting out food, and went over.

As I got closer, I recognized my best friend, Tammy.

"Happy birthday, Julia!" She hugged me. "I see you figured out the anagrams."

"What if I hadn't?" I looked at the sandwiches, drinks, and cupcakes set out. "Were you going to eat all of this yourself?"

"Of course not, I was going to call you. Did you know it was me?"

"I thought it might be you. But I rather hoped it was a secret admirer."

We laughed about that and then she handed me a cupcake with chocolate frosting and sang 'Happy Birthday' to me.

"Thank you for all of this," I said.

"That's what best friends are for."

The End

“HE SLEEPS WITH THE PUTTOCKS”

By Neil K. Henderson

Sources close to the CID reveal an anonymous message concerning the whereabouts of missing gang boss Trosher Wune was received late yesterday. “HE SLEEPS WITH THE PUTTOCKS,” said the note attached to the brick. No further information was given, and police chiefs are now debating if “puttocks” is a reference to puddocks, or toads – in which case the gangster’s body may be buried in marshland – or whether “the Puttocks” may refer to a family known to police, who keep a ‘no questions asked’ boarding house. In that case, Wune may still be alive.

“I’m not saying if Trosher Wune is sleeping with us,” said Ernie Puttock when interviewed. “I run a respectable boarding house. I can’t go waking people up to see if they’re sleeping here. Of course, you could always ask the wife – but if he’s sleeping with her, he won’t get much shut-eye.”

Meanwhile protesters are blocking attempts to drain a local marsh known as Budger’s Sump. “They’re a tough lot, those women,” confirmed an officer. “Professional mud wrestlers, mainly. I doubt anyone trying to dispose of a body could get past them, so we’re concentrating our efforts elsewhere.”

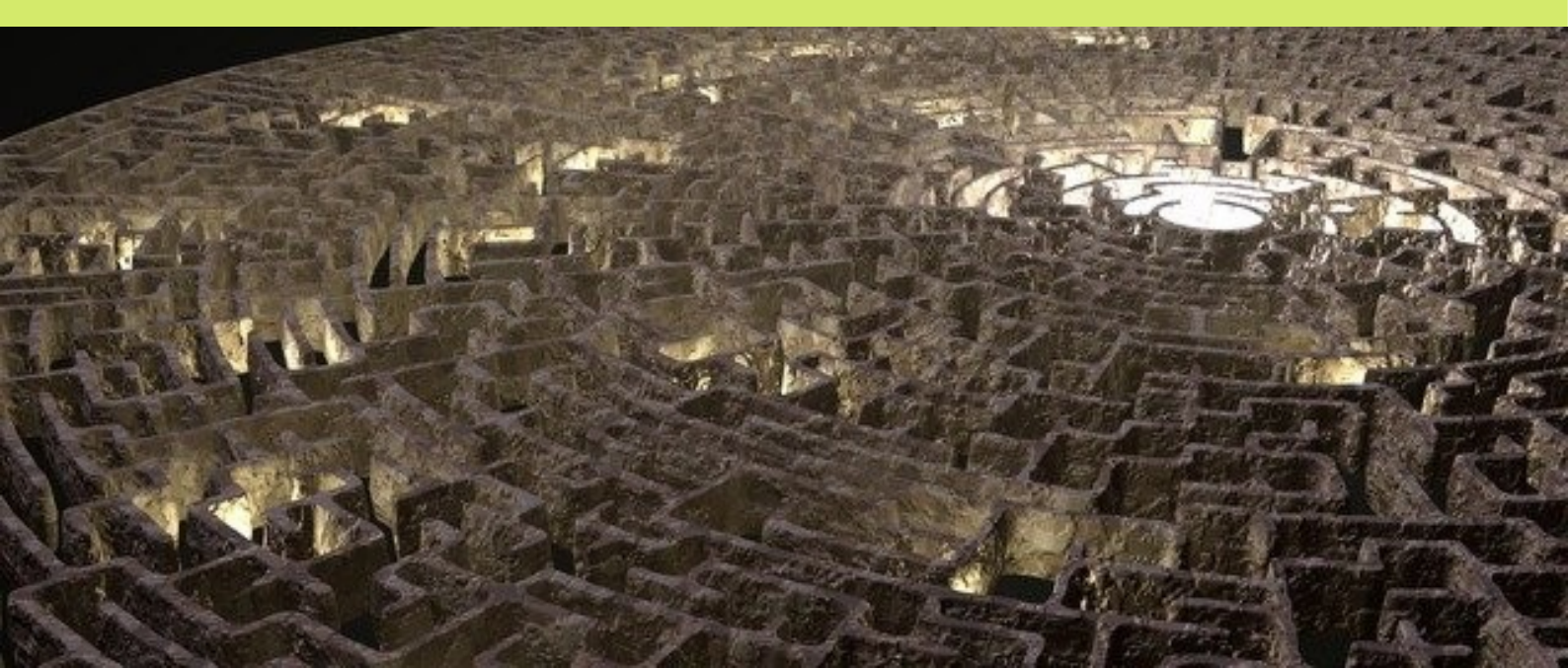
“It’s conceivable,” says criminal etymologist Martin Stabb, “that puttocks is a contraction of punt hooks – like rollocks for rowlocks – which gives a wider scope to the search. There is no punting in the canals round here, but forces in other areas have been contacted, while the connection with barge-poles may be worth considering.”

Leading pathologist Sir Gronnog Spirlington has thrown a medical light on the mystery. “There is a disease known as Graecoblisterium scabiosis or Corinthian Boils, commonly referred to as ‘the puttocks’. Symptoms include a toadlike lumpiness of the skin, bulging eyes and a sticky tongue. However, the extreme itching and paranoia make it most unlikely Trosher Wune would be sleeping with it.”

Associates of Wune agree that sleeping was something he rarely did. “He’d be up all hours,” explained an anonymous snout, “watching those mud-wrestling dames on video, or torturing an informer.”

Other connotations of the word puttock are being investigated – such as the similarity with Puck, a mischievous sprite or fairy. “Don’t be surprised if we start poking around your garden,” said a spokesman for the police. “Anything could be sleeping at the bottom of it.”

Ends



The Rockford Files

(an old TV show)

By Mark Hudson

In the eighties, my dad had a friend that he met in college, they were roommates, and my dad's friend ended up being a writer for Hollywood TV shows. One day, he came from California to visit my dad, and he brought a Rockford Files script he did and gave it to me. I was in sixth grade at the time. I think I still have it somewhere.

A man tonight was talking about someone from the seventies or eighties who was on unemployment, and he wasn't bothering looking for work. The government was pressuring him to get a job, and he had a criminal background.

Finally people said, "At least do something productive!"

So he saw an ad on the back of a matchbook, "Become a writer. Send stories to this address."

So he said, "I know, I'll become a writer."

But he couldn't really write or spell, and he was writing nonsense.

So someone said, "Write about what you know."

So he wrote a manuscript about crime, selling drugs, and going to jail. Someone helped him type up the manuscript, and they sent it to the address on the matchbox.

Next thing you know, it got accepted as an episode for Rockford Files! I can't prove that is a true story. But it brings true meaning to the statement, "Write about what you know!"



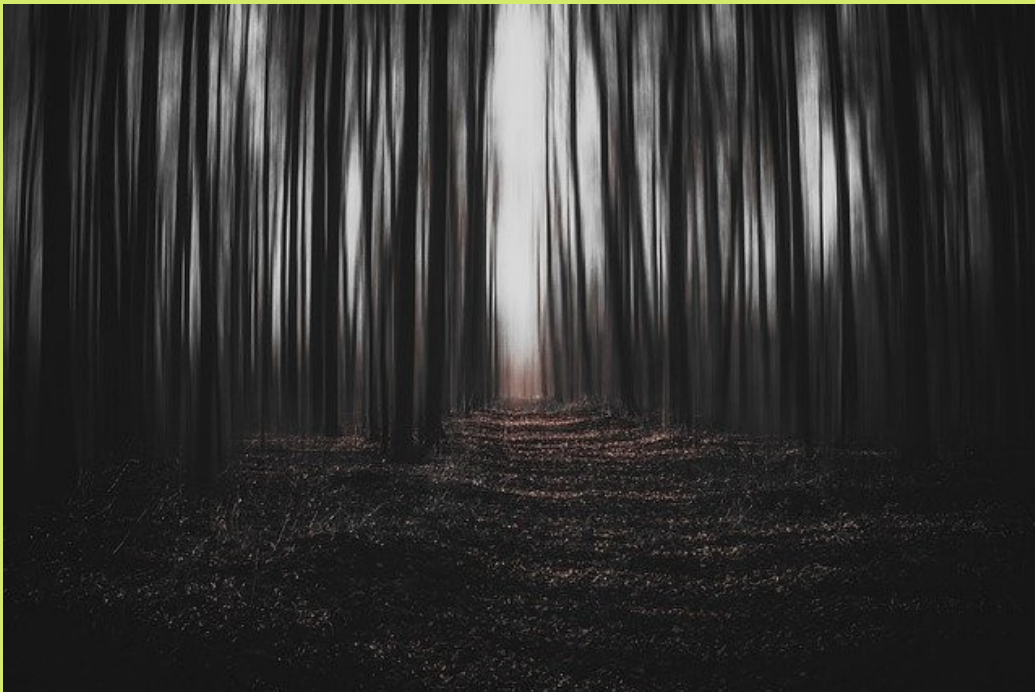
Poem by the Man Killed by a Grizzly

By John Grey

Someone's stumbling down the mountainside.
Maybe it's the one lost up there so many years ago,
just a trace of fire, some blood, bear prints,
where I once pitched a tent myself,
a peaceful night, woke to
whippoorwills, some crickets,
dew and early morning deer.
But there's a horror behind every
fresh-faced tale of peace and solitude.
Is it just snow-melt gushing?
A few rocks losing an argument with gravity?
Maybe a full scale avalanche?

Men in the tavern swear they hear.
A women who thought she'd done with weeping
sits by the window listening meaning into every sound.
A memory comes from nowhere.
Out of fear of the wild, the uncompromising,
and how little it reflects the raging hearth,
the woven blanket on a knee.
I know the source of that noise.
A place of mystery sure enough but not of miracles.
There's ravines for falling, stones for stumbling,
streams for drowning, and yes, even bears
to recast odds entirely to that creature's side.

No one's stumbling down the mountainside.
What's gone is gone.
The past is many locks but so few keys.
A noise is but a plain simple fact
or a punctured dream.
I know the routes this man has taken.
I've pulled back at the edge of them.
But it was already too late.
I'm here to say, yes it's me,
but only I'm to know that.



The Village Under a Spell

By David Micklem

From here, high up on the cliff, above the wheeling gulls, looking down over beached fishing boats, the harbour wall, the village appears benign. A postman's van's silent start is heralded with a blue plume of exhaust as it makes its way up the long back hill. The mist has turned to rain and a figure on a tiny patch of grass is collecting sheets from an invisible line. Smoke from half a dozen chimneys gathers above a beach, an expanse of sand and shingle, three lines of chains converging on the blue and orange boats. Little else stirs. A dog's bark, the dog unseen. Salt in the air, the smell of low tide, seaweed rotting.

Back the way he has come, a long muddy track with a thin line of grass marking its unsteady centre. Once a Ford hatchback, now a cage of orange and grey metal, the perished remains of tyres, the seats home to small rodents, some plastic bags, half a dozen metal bulbs from a soda siphon.

Through a gate, the wind at his back, hair plastered against his neck, and out onto the gravel road that describes a wide arc south and east, back to the main road and then on down, and round, and down, into the village. At the end of the track he turns onto the main road, crosses and passes through the low iron gate and into the graveyard of the church. He pauses under the lychgate and rolls his shoulders. The cold and damp have taken grip, his long black coat and the t-shirt beneath soaked, his thin grey body holding little warmth.

He takes a short breath and straightens. The cat is as he left it, its fur flattened in the rain, the body slowly spinning from the nail through its tail, hammered hard into the door of the church. The oak has split and there are scratch marks on the worn varnish.

He takes a backwards step, not looking, out from the protection of the lychgate onto the main road. He ascends the hill, aware now, it seems, of his surroundings, looking left and right, peeling off into a cul-de-sac of 1930s houses. There is a path that cuts between two bungalows and he slips in through a gap in the fence to the side of one of the houses. It's unoccupied, and he edges along a narrow path overgrown with tall weeds to what might be a coal bunker. He crouches to lift the hatch, looks back the way he's come, and then steps into the bunker, closing the lid as soon as he's slipped inside.

In the darkness he runs his palm along the wall and finds the tilley lamp hanging from a nail. There is a lighter in his coat pocket and he thumbs the sparkwheel, touching the flame to the wick.

The room is a six-foot cube, the floor and ceiling blackened with coal dust. The walls are lined with dozens of pages ripped from a book, carefully taped together.

He's on his haunches, his sunken eyes flickering and circled with a pale blue-grey sheen. Against one wall is an arrangement of artefacts from the church - a wooden crucifix, some silver goblets, half a dozen candles, a plain cross. On either side, framed pictures of religious scenes, faded, the glass tarnished. There is a pile of tools in the corner - a hammer, nails, a saw, a ball of string, screwdrivers, some screws.

He places the tilley lamp on the floor and takes a small parcel wrapped in a plastic bag from his coat pocket. Inside, a dead hedgehog, its feet curled. He lays it gently on its back on the dirt floor. Crouching awkwardly, he sweeps a fistful of nails into his hand, resting the hedgehog in the palm of the other. Despite the cramped space, the sweat in his eyes, he is methodical, practised. One by one he grips a nail between thumb and forefinger and pushes it into the body in his palm. He is careful to ensure the heads of each nail stick out beyond the spines of the dead animal. He counts them out loud, one to seven.

When he is done, he sets the hedgehog down on the plastic bag and takes a single piece of paper and a pencil from the top pocket of his coat. He takes a bible to lean on and, with great concentration, draws on the paper a series of symbols. He gives an impression of a child mastering the alphabet. He folds the paper and pushes an eighth nail through it and into the body of the animal.

The animal is wrapped again in the plastic bag and the lamp extinguished. He stays crouching in the dark until he can feel his legs going numb. Sliding the wrapped creature carefully into the pocket of his oversized coat, he palms the underside of the hatch, shielding his eyes against the light.

He makes his way back down to the village. Skirting the churchyard, he allows himself a quick glance at the front door of the church, the cat. He feels emboldened. There is heat in his chest, like brandy and smoke. His thumb fiddles a nail head through the plastic in his pocket. This will be the day. Everything exactly as he's planned.

End

Blood Stew

The Windshine Chronicles Book 3

By Todd Sullivan

ISBN 978-1737132028, 323pp, pb, Mocha Memoirs Press

Available from [Amazon](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B073333333) in paperback and on the Kindle



Nam-Gi raised the scroll before him, his dreams inscribed in flowing black letters on the rolled parchment.

Okay, it's not as dynamic an opening as those of **Hollow Men** (reviewed in issue 25) and **There Will Be One**, (reviewed in issue 26) but the words have a potency all their own and let us know that this is very much its own volume, one that the reader has before them because they have enjoyed those first two volumes and is willing to trust the author to entertain them a third time. After all, if you haven't read and enjoyed those two volumes, why pick this up? (Although, to a large extent, I think a reader new to the series could fully understand events without the necessity of reading them.)

Indeed, not only is the pace of the book different – in a good way! - but, the volume is different because it is longer than the first two volumes combined. Where they were sword and sorcery romps, this is more like a standard fantasy novel, offering more background and development with multiple threads that, eventually, come together in an exciting climax.

The main plot follows the misadventures of a disabled youth, Nam-Gi, who is studying magic under a dark elf, but is made to feel a burden for his family, the meagre income from their failing restaurant being used up in buying the medicine that eases his pain. He attempts to use his nascent skills to assist his family's fortunes, but things go awry and, not unexpectedly, he finds himself caught up in an adventure – but, not the sort he imagined he might experience...

I must say that, as much as I enjoyed the adventure in the previous two volumes and that which filled the second half of this, Todd Sullivan's evocative descriptions of the restaurant and Nam-Gi's family life seized me in a way that fantasy fiction seldom does. I would happily have read more! Adventure is fun, but this added real depth to the world and made me much more invested in Nam-Gi's story.

Of course, some readers, drawn in by the action in the first two volumes, might feel that life in a failing restaurant doesn't sound that entertaining and, whilst I would say, give it a try, there's no need to worry as Nam-Gi's trials are interspersed with the discovery of a mysterious body in the ocean that leads to unforeseen tragedy and the arrival of a Cloud Elf with a powerful enmity towards the Dark Elves that have settled in South Hanguk.

Now, I will admit that I initially didn't care much for the Cloud Elf, probably because I was more invested in Nam-Gi, but I think it's a testament to Sullivan's writing that such an obnoxious character managed to be repellent without actually damaging my enjoyment of the story. (Like those who might find the restaurant tale tedious, I think I benefited from the fact that events kept switching between the different strand means you don't have to wait too long before the story moves onto something else.)

Surprisingly, Windshine the Dark Elf only appears in the second half of the volume, when she once more accompanies the young heroes she observes on a quest, this time in a race against those from other districts, including a group observed by Nam-Gi's mentor, to destroy a monster unleashed in the first half of the volume. Of course, the Cloud Elf intrudes into their affairs, intent on slaying the Dark Elves for the crime of leaving their homeland and infecting the humans of South Hanguk with their 'evil', complicating things and leading an epic showdown, as well as revealing a little more about the mysterious Dark Elves.

Blood Stew isn't quite the same as the earlier volumes, so might not be to everyone's taste, although I think that everyone who enjoyed **Hollow Men** and **There Will Be One** will appreciate the second half, making it well worth reading, even if the first half isn't quite what they want. However, I do think that the first half *will* prove to be what most of them want, even if they don't know it going in!

In many ways, I would say this is a more mature book, the series having come of age, so if you enjoyed the first two volumes but wanted more depth, this will be just right for you. It certainly leaves me thinking that Todd Sullivan has a lot of potential. Personally, I would him explore South Hanguk – or, some other fantasy realm – in the style of his depiction of Nam-Gi's family's restaurant.

Like **There Will Be One**, **Blood Stew** manages to be both a good sequel and a good stand-alone story. It is an excellent fantasy tale that builds upon being different and, regardless of your view of its individual strands, I am certain you will find that, together, they form a compelling whole. Highly recommended.



The Redemption

By Michael Lee Johnson

My eyes green
are 2 glass windows
into the past.
I keep the blinds
pulled down tight.
Carnal knowledge
is a Biblical definition of sin.
I live in darkness,
the shame of those early years.
I pull myself out
redemption in old age,
a saviour,
before the grave,
I flatter myself
in a mirror, no reflection.

Hidden Alcove

(based on an article in the Chicago Reader, April 30, 2015)

By Mark Hudson

There is a hidden alcove behind a Field Museum wall,
it's been hidden for eighty years, hiding a display.
They hope to move stuffed hyenas to this hall,
that are as ancient as the areas where they lay.
The father of taxidermy was the one, who began it all,
In 1896, he'd explore Africa and hunt his prey.
He killed a leopard, bare-handed in a brawl,
and was well known for the ability to slay.
They hope this project is a thing they'll install,
but they need to raise money, people must pay.
The construction crews made the wall start to fall,
revealing things like newspapers from old days.
They will always find a brand new mystery,
that has been hidden in the archives of history.



Utopia Now

By Paul Grover

This will be the last thing that I ever write. As I huddle over in the corner of the room, encompassed by the soulless white interior – away from any prying lenses – I’m more than cognizant of the fact that my biometric data is being perpetually monitored. My Smart Home knows I’m afraid. My pulse beats like a drum and the walls register every note. I ignore my Smart Assistant’s queries regarding my well being. Its soothing feminine voice is merely camouflage for the malevolent code that comprises it; it’s an artificially intelligent mermaid humming on virtual rocks, eager to lure those who’re lost to a premature deletion. As much as I may wish to turn the tides, my silence means the impervious windows will soon lower themselves, allowing entry for the patrol drones: cold, calculated, and indiscriminate with their blunt enforcement. With my apartment having already activated lockdown mode, there’ll be nowhere to run. The exits will be sealed and the veil will drop revealing the prison that’s always been.

Perhaps I should have just stayed in my sleeping pod this morning. Although with sleeping patterns regulated, such unproductive behaviour would have adversely affected my social credit score. Not that that’ll hold any significance for me after today. Having finally obtained the necessary materials, I felt compelled to materialise these thoughts while I can, consequences be damned!

Before I elaborate further, I can’t help but gaze across the claustrophobic living space – past the central screen wall – to the Smart Womb on the opposite side of the room. Will what’s gestating inside be punished for the sins of the parent? I’m sorry, but it’s now or never. Despite the painstaking effort to achieve a score worthy of the one child quota, I must sacrifice any chance of ever seeing you free of that biological/mechanical contraption. I must refuse myself the urge to develop a bond with you; it’d just make this all the more tortuous. My heart prays you are judged fairly, but unfortunately, my brain knows better. However, it’s knowing the strict conditioning that your upbringing would entail that has prompted my decision. It was bad for my generation, it’s inhuman for yours.

Technology was supposed to be our salvation; automation doing the hard work for us, freeing up us humans to indulge in more leisure time; self-driving cabs transporting us to wherever we desire, with zero risk of road traffic accidents; an abundance of free and renewable energy for all. It sounded so promising on paper. Paper... Something no longer permitted. The drones won’t be pleased when they find mine.

Typically, those who possessed the keys to these advancements didn’t want an egalitarian society where they live on par with the rest of us. They were desperate to maintain their superior status; a king without his crown and castle is just another peasant, no matter how comfortable that peasant is able to exist with improved living standards. So, those at the top twisted the narrative, and our liberties had to be exchanged for these benefits. Fear is the currency of control, and we were convinced invisible threats just out of sight would arise if we didn’t comply. Our physical and mental health had to be held under constant observation, for we are all a danger to ourselves and each other, so we were informed. And thus we sleepwalked into this technological dystopia, naively believing it was for our own collective goods. The media/propaganda hysteria campaigns were so successful that tyranny wasn’t forced upon the populace, it was demanded by it.

The drones will have been deployed now.

Increased down time equaled the farewell of the archaic monetary apparatus which was the norm before, but somehow it got replaced by something even worse: digital social credit scores based on behaviour; do something the global state doesn’t approve of and you’ll find yourself restricted from travel and internet access, indefinitely. Of course, it’s difficult to break the rules when anything remotely controversial is heavily censored, and when everything from diets to relationships are carefully calibrated. You’re only offered the amount of lab grown meat and genetically modified fruit and veg that’s congruent with your metabolism. You can only date someone whose psychological profile is deemed to be in harmony with your own. Your personal preferences for appearance, personality, or any specifics, aren’t considered politically correct and therefore classified as irrelevant.

They must be getting closer. I try to prevent myself from breathing so heavily, afraid my breath will blow the words from the page.

Clean living came with the caveat of utility rationing. Surpass your daily energy limit and it's no warmth or electricity for you – other than what's required for the A.I. control grids to keep track of your every movement, obviously. The Smart Taxis won't drive you anywhere outside of the Smart City's limits, as anything beyond has been branded as environmental no go zones, where only those with the highest social credit scores are rewarded the luxury to visit. Not without a jab, though. We've become so reliant on our monthly mandatory inoculations that our immune systems aren't self-sufficient anymore. To miss your appointment is to simply perish. Which reminds me, the global population is to always be maintained at five hundred million, in perfect harmony with nature... Or because the ruling class don't like sharing the resources, despite there being more than enough to go round.

It feels so unusual to write with a pen, and a struggle with the amount of sweat that's forming from my pours, but I can't focus on my liquidised anxiety when time is of the essence!

I'm sure we were warned of these bleak visions of the future cementing into reality before, but with all written works of fiction and non-fiction alike now digitised, they can be edited or erased at the push of a button, along with any art forms or web pages that could potentially challenge the modern zeitgeist. Hence why paper has been outlawed; the written word can't be edited from a remote location. It's all to save the trees, mind you, according to the PR.

Tick, tock.

While I write this free hand to avoid detection, the compulsory brain chip I was forced to have implanted within my skull recently is surely scanning my thoughts. If they can send messages in, I can only assume they're capable of removing messages out, and heaven knows what's going in after this. If I'm lucky, it'll just be a direct energy weapon via a drone.

Time's almost up.

The butterflies in my stomach are eager to break free, reaching the lump in my throat, but I resist. Resist. That's all I know anymore. If this somehow reaches you at any point in space and time, I beg of you, don't make the same mistakes we did. The establishment is not there to protect you, only to keep you in line at best and systematically reduce you at worst. Freedom is not worth sacrificing for security; it is worth fighting for; it is worth dying for.

A shrieking alarm sounds signalling that the windows are primed to descend. In the distance, the metallic angels of death ominously emerge from the clouds. I brace to throw this note where it may be found. The tower block is one of many that pierce through the heavens; at this altitude, the wind should carry it away into the ether, avoiding the motion detectors of the streets below. I only hope it finds you.

They're here.

End

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An enchanted moment from bee-like autumn

By Pawel Markiewicz

the last autumn – bee
just before epiphany
beehive fulfilled?
bee looking at fall
in the beehive – wings
and the timeless dreamed sparks
meek bees as heroes
queen bee in rumination
marvel of buzzing
an autumnal bee
sleeping or awakening – time?
beehive as temple
fall adoration
the bee flying towards star
meek weird tenderness
marvel of beehive
queen bee meets dear apiarist
in loneliness
can you dream of the
bee-like fulfilment in fall
full of moony moon
may the autumn be
the most tender flight of bees
to sweetness of morns!



Usted No Tiene Velas En Este Entierro (You Have No Candles at this Funeral)

By Jane Fairfax

Concepcion stood on the back step and shouted down the garden.

- Sergio! Clarita! Ven aca!

Then she came in and sat gnawing away at a cuticle until there was a red line around her fingernail. The kitchen table was still scattered with crumbs and half-eaten rolls from breakfast. I noticed one of the rolls in a pool of milk and picked it out so it wouldn't go soggy.

- You call them if they don't come, she said going towards the stairs. - I've got to get changed.

When she came down again, she was wearing a long black dress, heeled boots and a shawl around her shoulders with a marcasite brooch she'd found at the back of a drawer pinning it together. She'd swept up her hair and fixed it with a comb. She gave a twirl.

- How do I look?

- Like you're going to a funeral.

- At least one of does Luis.

I plucked at my T-shirt – I'm wearing black aren't I?

- But. Death metal? Do you think it's appropriate to the occasion?

- What could be more appropriate?

The twins came running in then so she didn't get chance to think up an answer. In half an hour we were all sitting in a row on the back seat of the bus and shouting to each other over the engine noise.

- I can't believe you never got him to put the house in your name!

- I didn't know he was going to die, did I? she said.

- How old was he? Seventy-five?

- Seventy-eight.

She twisted her head round to stare out of the back window at the plumes of black smoke coming from the exhaust.

- These big old buses are terrible, they really ought to replace them. All they do is belch out poison.

- Please don't change the subject.

- Let's just wait and see, shall we?

- What, until they throw us out on the street? I almost screamed but instead I kept quiet. It was all her fault though. At some point I wanted her to know that.

The bus dropped us off on a street corner in a leafy neighbourhood on the other side of town, then chugged off into the distance leaving us standing in alien territory.

- It's this way, said Concepcion, heading north.

The pavement was wide enough for us to walk four abreast. There was no one about and the only sound was a drill on a building site somewhere. The place felt odd to me, even eerie after what we were used to, with its bright green clipped grass and the houses all back behind wrought iron gates with key pads next to them. After a few minutes four-wheel drives began to appear parked up on the verge like hippos round a watering hole. Huge shiny Mitsubishis and Subarus and just the one respectful old vintage Mercedes aligned with the kerb.

- Come here champ, I said to Sergio, when we got to the chapel gate. I tried to smooth down his hair but he kept ducking out of the way and shouting for me to leave him alone.

- Wherever it is we're going, we don't want to go, said Clarita.

We passed from sunlight into the cool shady chapel. There was the old familiar smell of burning incense and candles flickering around an altar set into the far wall. The children were even silent for a few seconds, until Clara decided to say in a loud voice.



- Oh No! Are we going to pray?

- Shhhhhh, said Sergio with a finger to his lips.

- Well are we or not?

Concepcion rolled her eyes.

- Nobody has to pray, ok.

People were standing around in small groups. Everyone there was in designer clothing and quite a few wore shades, on their eyes or perched up on their foreheads. It felt a little like gatecrashing an advert, or maybe even one of those mafia funerals from the films. They all had too much class to stare, but being ignored was just as bad. Now and again someone walked up to the coffin and stayed a few moments to make the sign of the cross or say a prayer over it. One or two people cried.

Concepcion glanced over at me. I could tell she needed guidance. For me to tell her what was the best thing to do. It was often like that.

-Well, what did we come here for? I said.

She nodded and pressed her lips together. - You're right.

The coffin seemed a long way off as we walked towards it. Still no one stared, but I felt my skin prickle just with them knowing we were there. In her gypsy clothes Concepcion looked like she'd come straight from auditioning for a part in Carmen and the twins both had grubby faces. The other children in the room were immaculate, naturally.

We were quite close to our destination, that shiny box in the centre of the room, when Concepcion pulled back on my hand, digging her nails in.

- I can't do it papi. You go up. I'll stay here and wait.

I turned around. She looked terrible, her face was pale and there were beads of perspiration standing out on her forehead. She was wearing a pleading expression, something like a pound puppy about to be sent out in the rain, or worse. It made me feel sorry for her. I thought about telling her to go sit down while we went up on our own. But a couple of things came to mind so I gritted my teeth and said in her ear,

- Oh no. You're coming with me. You don't get out of it that easily.

She came then but I still had to drag her. The casket was surrounded by bouquets; blood-red, yolk-yellow and leaves fanned out in sunbursts. All very geometrical. In the midst of it all there he lay in the silk-lined box with a rosary wrapped around his gnarly hands. His chin was smooth, he'd had a haircut and he was wearing the most beautiful suit and tie. The sight of all that paraphernalia was what made me want to cry most of all, more than the body itself. It put me in mind of one of those dead leaders, a cacique or a pharaoh; the kind they used to bury with horses and carriages and make slave-girls drink poison for. I stared into his face. The nose was more curved than ever and I thought I saw the hint of a smile. He seemed to be keeping a secret.

What could you do with a man like that? How could you hug him, or call him dad? Or ask what kind of day he had?

The twins were fidgeting, standing on tiptoe and generally looking about to argue so I lifted them up one by one so they could see what all the fuss was about. They had seen this kind of thing before.

- Who is it? said Clarita, legs dangling.

- The old man, don't you remember?

- The one who gave us sweetsies?
- Yes, that one.
- What's the matter with him?
- He's dead, stupid, said Sergio from the floor.

I looked over at Concepcion. It was hard to read her expression but she was gripping the side of the casket and her knuckles were white. I had that feeling again. A twinge of pity, but I smothered it.

Then a voice said - Maria de la Concepcion, and she looked up. People hardly ever used her full name. When she saw who it was, she swore.

A tall woman with dark grey hair in a long plait down her back was standing in front of us, arms folded. Next to her was a dumpy old lady in a droopy outfit of fawn and beige.

- Doña Isabela, said Concepcion, by way of greeting.
- I was just saying to Rosalia here. I wonder if she will have the nerve to show her face, the woman replied.

At the mention of her name Rosalia gave a thin little smile that lasted about half a second.

- Well here I am, said Concepcion.

Doña Isabela took in the three of us with one supercilious eyebrow.

- And I see you've brought your bastards with you.

Concepcion puffed herself up as tall as she could.

- They have the right...she started to say, but Isabela didn't let her finish.

She spat, and it landed in Concepcion's lovely face. That's when I changed my mind about how classy they all were.

As if the spitting was a signal, two giant men appeared from somewhere in the dark recesses of the chapel. Each wore an earpiece wrapped around his head and a suit jacket stretched drum-tight across his back. Underneath the material I could make out the raised outline of their shoulder holsters. They moved in on us with oh-so-bored expressions. The second picked up a twin in each arm as if they weighed nothing at all while the first propelled me and Concepcion down the aisle towards the open door. Before any of us really knew what was happening, we were all out on the step with the sun in our eyes and the door slammed shut behind us.

Concepcion turned and banged hard on the oak with the heel of her hand,

- We were leaving anyway desgraciados!

We all just stood there for a few seconds. I tried to let my breath come out more steadily while rubbing my hand over the hurt where the gorilla had grabbed me. There'd be a bruise there later, probably. Concepcion was trying to light a cigarette with trembling hands. At least she didn't look upset any more. She looked more...furious.

Then the twins both started up crying so we took them and went round the side of the building where there was a patch of grass.

I turned to Concepcion - I don't know about you madre, but I thought that went well.

- Oh, be quiet.
- No, really. I think we made a good impression.
- At least we showed our faces.

We sat and wiped the twins' eyes and waited for them to settle down. Sergio was the first to recover, then Clarita tugged at Concepcion's sleeve.

- We're hungry mommy, she said.

Concepcion put her hand into the bottom of her bag and started rooting around.

- Think I've got a packet of pork scratchings in here somewhere.
- So what happens now? I said to her while the two of them were busy eating
- They read out the will I suppose.

- You can't still think we stand a chance with the house? After what went on in there? I shook my head. – You're so naïve.

She looked serious. She was staring off into space at something I couldn't see, and I don't think she could either. She dragged hard on her cigarette and huffed out the smoke so it clouded in front of her eyes.

- You didn't know him like I did Luis.

Ends



Juice Box Girl

(After Midnight Moments)

By Michael Lee Johnson

I'm a juice box girl,
squeeze me, play me
like an accordion,
box-shaped, but gagged edges.
Breathe me inside out,
I'm nude, fruity, fractured,
strawberry melon,
nightshade wine.
Chicago, 3:00 a.m.
somewhere stranded
someone's balcony
memories undefined,
you will find me there
stretched naked, doing
the Electric Slide,
taking morning selfies
upward morning into the sun
then in shutters
closeout pictures
Chiquita bananas,
those Greek lovers
running late,
Little Village, Greektown
so many men's night faces fading out.
Wash cleanse in me.
I'm no Sylvia Plath
in an oven image of death
I resuscitate; I'm still alive.



The Interview

By Harris Coverley

Even though it was nearly nine in the evening, the cheese twirl he was wolfing down in his recording booth was essentially Sebastian Paul's breakfast, although the people who followed him on social media would not have assumed as such, having been treated to a flurry of promotional posts under his moniker for the show, all despatched by his personal team at North London Radio.

He finished the last bit of pastry off and checked the time on the wall: 8:58 pm.

Nearly there, he thought, keep it together for a little while longer Seb, and the drive will take over.

It had been a long night partying in the halls of power, backs scratched, favours traded, shots taken, but Paul never missed a show. His contract would break his balls if he did.

He checked his schedule: debate on reintroduction of the death penalty with the interview, followed by the day's news recap, so on and so on...usual format. He sipped his cooled coffee and checked the time again: thirty seconds to go until air.

Brushing some crumbs off his blue blazer, Paul gave his engineer behind the soundproof glass a thumb's up, which he returned, and then slid his headphones on.

As the digital clock struck nine the pre-recorded opening of false enthusiasm rang out: "It's nine o'clock, which means it's time for *The Sebastian Paul Show*, with everybody's favourite gadfly, Sebastian Paul!"

From elsewhere in the NLR studio a woman whom Paul could never remember the name of read the hourly news in a three minute summation before his own show could commence proper, a situation he resented greatly.

At just past 9:03 it was finally his turn to speak: "Good evening people, Sebastian Paul here, the Voice of Reason, the Fifth Estate, the Man of the Masses, the Professor of Common Sense, and tonight I'm here to give you the *truth* about the death penalty. Those idiots and wets in Parliament could not have made a bigger mess of the whole idea of criminal justice, it really makes you think...", and so it went on until the musical break at 9:10, the period in which the guest for the segment would be ushered in by one of Paul's various assistants.

The guest this evening was something of a crooked man, despite only being about forty or so, with a pair of spectacles that must have been older than him, dressed in a grey suit that may have once not been grey, and with thin lips pulled back tight showing a permanent smile of browning teeth glazed with saliva.

Although he repulsed him intensely, Paul managed to stand up and shake the man's hand as Family's "Burlesque" played somewhere over the NLR channel.

"How are you Mr Lipton?" Paul said, happy that he had remembered a name for once.

"Very well Mr Paul," said Lipton, the smile still tight. "It's so good to be here to try to get a *little* justice."

Lipton sat down in the chair opposite Paul, as the assistant put on his headphones and instructed him not to shout into or touch the microphone, just to talk normally, as well as not to feel nervous, to which the man acceded.

As the song ended Paul sat back down and put his own headphones back on.

He began: "If you don't trust me people — and I have no idea why you wouldn't, you know I'm always right — I have in the studio a victim of our so-called criminal justice system. No, no, not some braindead thug who had his 'cuffs on too tight, but a man who has been subject to a most terrible affront of not having his sister's killer strung up for the sake of honour."

Paul glanced at Lipton and saw the same grim smirk.

Idiots, Paul thought, always the best for this kind of segment.

Enforcing a front of sincerity on himself, Paul asked, "Keith Lipton sir, your sister was murdered, is that not correct?"

“Yes,” said the grinning moron, “very brutally, raped as well before the act.”

It was a rare occasion whereupon Paul felt disgusted, such an act being described by a beaming mouth, but he swallowed his discomfort and carried on: “And is it not true that due to police incompetence your sister’s killer and rapist was never found?”

“I’d go beyond incompetence Mr Paul,” said Lipton, “it has always seemed to me after all these years to be a case of corruption in the force.”

“Corruption? Why do you say that?”

“From what I have gathered through my own inquiries, it seems almost impossible for it not to be, what with no conclusive evidence at all being gathered from what was a very fresh crime scene, not to mention various failures in police procedure that waylaid the investigation.”

Paul snuck a sip of coffee before continuing: “And let me know Mr Lipton, and all the people at home, if you think your sister’s killer, if he were found, should be subject to the ultimate justice?”

“In a sense, yes,” replied Lipton, “but I don’t think that should be the end of it.”

“Oh, really?” said Paul, curious. “What would you recommend?”

Lipton leaned forward on his elbows, his lips nearly touching the mic, and said, “Immediate, *clean* death is not good enough for such crimes, and depending on the severity of the crime itself, the sentence should match that severity...”

“You mean, what? Torture? Breakage on the rack?” asked Paul. He was getting nervous; he was starting to lose control, not a lot, but enough to worry him.

“Depending on the crime, *perhaps*,” said Lipton.

“Nails pulled? Organs punctured? Feet bleed? Water dripped?”

“Or worse...you know, there are new neuro-engineering techniques that could be put to the good use of amplifying the pain through the entire nervous system...”

“You think so?” asked Paul, trying to resist the urge to cut things short. Something like this could either end up as a ratings boon or a PR disaster. He looked at his engineer and saw a pale face shaking its head.

“Do you think that others in your position agree with you?” Paul asked, hoping to regain a little control and steer things to an end.

“They tell me so,” Lipton said, “and many are far more extreme than me.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“Against bounders and beasts who have killed your family, you would fantasise the most terrible from dreams impossible.”

Ofcom is going to get involved if this goes on, Paul thought, and made to end the segment.

“Thank you Mr Lipton,” Paul said, “I’m sure my critics will be glad to know that I’m not necessarily the most right-wing individual in this fair isle...”

Against the instructions of Paul’s assistant, Lipton suddenly grabbed the mic, causing an eruption of rustling, and brought it even closer to his lips: “His suffering should not end until his death is completely unavoidable, and that could be a *very* long time.”

“Thank you Mr Lipton, thank you,” Paul said as he motioned to his engineer to cut the feed. A new promo began, and the same assistant who had brought Lipton in managed to usher him out, that thin smile undisturbed.

The rest of the show went fine, finishing at midnight in time for the final news bulletin.

Paul did not have enough clout to get any producers fired for letting such an obvious nut on his show, but he contented himself by firing a researcher and yelling at the assistant who had dealt with Lipton long and hard enough to draw a few tears from her.

NLR were not big enough to have their own building yet, but they were at least in a building with its own multi-storey car park, which Paul could appreciate even though he had originally angled in contract negotiations for a studio car with a driver.

As he walked to his reserved spot where his black BMW sat with its all white interiors, Paul was interrupted by Keith Lipton coming out of the shadow of a supporting pillar.

“Mr Paul,” said Lipton, “a bloody good show I thought...”

Paul, having dealt with hostile media and fanatics many times before, knew that the best course of action was to smile and keep moving out of any potential danger.

“Yes, I thought so too, thank you,” Paul said as he increased his speed.

“Where are you going Mr Paul sir?” said Lipton, still gurning like a man twice his age. “I was thinking we could discuss my ideas more in-depth, perhaps over a coffee?”

“Too late for me Mr Lipton,” replied Paul, nearly at his car, Lipton creeping behind. “Another time perhaps...”

“No, Mr Paul,” said Lipton, drawing a pistol from his coat. “*This* time.”

Paul froze. He had at some point been advised in the past on how to deal with a kidnaping or terrorist situation, although in the moment that training had drained from his mind.

“Turn to me fully with your hands out please,” asked Lipton, and Paul complied.

“I have no money on me,” said Paul, trying to keep cool but failing. “You can take the car.”

“I intend to Mr Paul,” said Lipton, coming closer. “Take out your keys and toss them to me, in a reasonable manner of course.”

Paul discreetly glanced around for anyone, but the shift rotation had already occurred, the NLR evening staff replaced by the night crew, everyone else in the other offices long since returned home. Cutbacks — that he himself had vigorously supported — meant that there were no more security patrols every hour or so.

Paul considered throwing his keys over the side of the parking level, but thought better of it, and instead consented to Lipton’s wishes.

Lipton caught the keys and directed Paul to the boot of his car.

“I’ve already told you,” said Paul, “I have nothing on me!”

“This is not about material goods Mr Paul,” said Lipton, his smile somehow growing more zealous by the second. “This is about justice.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“At no point did you mention my sister’s name. Could you not bear to? Can you even remember it?”

“Why should I remember it? It wasn’t in my notes, I think...”

“Susan, Mr Paul, it was Susan.”

Something in Paul clicked. Lipton, Lipton...*Susan* Lipton. *Susie*. Susie with the arse. Susie with the mouth. Susie who *got it*, over a decade ago. It had not served him well to be so bad with names.

“*Fuck...*” Paul uttered automatically.

“Fuck indeed Mr Paul,” said Lipton, indecent pleasure giving way to barely restrained anger. “Fuck like you did her, fuck like you did her body, her life, her future, our family...”

Lipton unlocked the car, lifted the boot lid, and made Paul crawl in, pistol to his head. He forced him to curl up into a foetal position, before binding his hands and feet with pre-looped rope.

Paul did not ask what Lipton was going to do. He had already been given a fair idea.

Lipton slammed the lid down.

It was going to be a long night for both of them.

Ends



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Christmas approaching
First frost crinkles latent grass
Huddle by the fire
With presents beneath the tree
Which one never to open?

By Aeronwy Dafies

A Christmas Friend

By Celine Rose Mariotti

It was the first week of December, a quiet day in Kingston, Vermont, and Renee had already started decorating the house for Christmas. The snow was coming down and it looked like three inches already and they were predicting at least a foot of snow by early morning.

Renee Kendall was a widow, her only company her dog, Herman, a little bulldog, who sat beside her while she watched her soap operas. You'd almost think Herman understood what was going on in the stories and maybe he did.

She heard noise outside, so she went to the window and to her surprise she saw a fellow sitting on her porch stairs eating a sandwich. He had what looked like a carry-on bag. Renee opened the door.

"Mr...? This is private property. What are you doing here?"

"Sorry, Ma'am just looking for a place to sit and rest and eat my sandwich."

"It's December and you're sitting outside? It's snowing and we might get up to a foot of snow," said Renee.

"I'll take shelter in some barn along the way, Ma'am," said the fellow whose jacket was a bit torn, his hair needed washing, his shoes were dirty and coming apart. Mrs. Kendall was a bit concerned even though he was a stranger. But in her eyes, being the religious lady she was, he was somebody's son, so she invited him in.

"Come on inside. I couldn't sleep well if I let you go roaming around and sleep in a barn. The Lord would never forgive me. Come along now, get inside here. Look, it's snowing hard already!"

"You're a real sweet lady. I've never met anyone like you. God bless you, Ma'am."

"What's your name?" asked Renee.

"My name is Jethro. Jethro McGillis and I'm originally from Tennessee. I've been roving all over the country."

"I'm Renee Kendall. Well, you're going to stay put for awhile now. Come inside. I'm going to start making dinner. Do you like chicken tenderloins?"

"I never had them Ma'am."

"Don't worry. You'll love them. I'll make some spinach too and a salad. First, I'll make us a pot of coffee. And I'll show you the bathroom downstairs here and you can take a nice hot shower. I've got some of my son's clothes upstairs, so I'll get you something to wear."

"Thank you, kindly Ma'am. You're a generous soul. Someone once told me God is in people. He is sure in you, Ma'am."

"I'm just doing what a Christian lady should do. I'll talk to my friend Felix at the supermarket here and I'll get you a job too," said Renee.

"You're my Christmas Angel! Thank you so much. I've been alone and on my own for some time now. My grandma raised me, and she passed away and I was only seventeen years old so I was still a minor and those social workers placed me in one of those foster homes. The people were mean, and I just took off and ran away and I've just been all over-to Mississippi, and Virginia, and Ohio, Pennsylvania, made my way to New York City; then up into Connecticut; and traveled up to Massachusetts later on and someone there told me I could get a good job working on a farm up here in Vermont," said Jethro.

"You sure have travelled all over the place. First things first, let's get you cleaned up and I'll put the coffee on. Tomorrow we'll go see Felix at the Supermarket, well, up here it's more or less a family-owned grocery store. And my husband's old friend Alex has a farm not too far from here so we'll go talk to him tomorrow too," said Renee.

Renee took some of her son's clothes out of the drawer in the bureau of his old bedroom. He hadn't been home now in several years. Renee wished he would come to see her but her son wasn't the most loving, caring person. He was always on the selfish side. She was lucky that he came home for his Dad's funeral.

She gave Jethro the clothes. He was so grateful.

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'll go take a shower and get cleaned up."

"Excellent! I'll go get dinner ready," said Renee.

That evening they enjoyed the chicken tenderloins, the spinach and the salad. And they had a nice talk. Renee was happy to have company.

"You have a really nice home, here Mrs. Kendall."

"Thank you, Jethro. I love living here. I just miss my husband a lot. He and I did everything together, went everywhere together. He was my world," said Renee.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Ma'am. I know I miss my Grandma a lot. She was a hard-working lady."

"Well, she raised you well. You're a fine man and we just have to get you a nice job and you can stay here and help me out. Plus, I could use the company," said Renee.

"You're very kind, Ma'am. Thank you. I really appreciate all of this. I've been wandering all over for the longest time. It was kind of scary."

"I imagine it was. Come on, we'll clear up and have some coffee and pie."

"Thank you. It's really snowing out there."

"Yes, we get a lot of snow up here in Vermont. That's why I didn't want you to stay outside. You'd freeze. First thing tomorrow we have to buy you a nice warm coat."

"Thanks Ma'am. That is so nice of you."

The next morning, they were both up early and Renee fixed them a breakfast of pancakes, some cut-up fruit-apples, pears and some strawberries and raspberries. She made a pot of coffee too. The doorbell rang and her cousin Alice was there. She was dressed in a long, Sherpa coat, with a hood, two side pockets and had a fleece lining. She wore leggings, a sweater, heavy fleece-lined boots; big warm knitted mittens-a green color with a knitted green scarf to match. And a warm winter hat pulled over her hair.

"I brought some jam; some home-made apple sauce; and some of Arthur's old clothes for Jethro to wear," said Alice.

"Come on inside. You'll catch a death of a cold out there. Good thing you're only down the street from me. Come on! I made a pot of coffee; pancakes; cut up some fruit. I'm about to pour the cranberry juice. Jethro, this is my cousin Alice. We often eat breakfast together-either she comes to my house, or I go to her house," explained Renee introducing them to one another.

"Jethro, good to meet you. Renee e-mailed me last night and told me all about you. As soon as they finish clearing the roads with the tractors; we'll drive down to the Willard's Supermarket and introduce you to Felix," said Alice, taking her coat off.

"I'm much obliged to both of you. You're both very kind.. I really appreciate it all," said Jethro, shaking her hand real hard.

"I'm very happy to meet you Jethro. And glad your long journey brought you to Vermont. I've lived here all my life, both Renee and I grew up together. Our family goes way back to the early 1800's when our ancestor Timothy Hayworth came to America from England," said Alice.

They enjoyed their breakfast and after clearing up the dishes and making the beds, they got ready to go to the Supermarket to speak to Felix. It was now 11:30 in the morning and the roads were all cleared. They all got into Renee's Chrysler Pacifica, and she drove to the Supermarket. When they got there, there weren't many cars in the parking lot and there were mountains of snow packed in the back and the side of the parking lot. They walked in and hoped Felix would be out front near the cash registers, but they couldn't find him. Alice asked Ellen, one of the cashiers where he was. "He's in the back by the meat section. He's overseeing them stocking some of the meat."

"Okay, thanks. Come on, let's go see Felix," urged Renee. Jethro smiled. He knew they were two good ladies who wanted to help him. They walked down to the meat section and found Felix helping the butchers to fill the shelves with the packaged meat. Renee called out to him. Felix turned around and his face lit up to see his good friend Renee. Felix Mandez prided himself on being good friends with all his many customers and Renee was certainly one of them. She came to his Dad's funeral and he went to her husband's funeral.

"Mrs. Kendall, so good to see you!" he called out.

"Good to see you too Felix. How's your Mom doing? And your daughter? And little Peppy?"

"They're all doing fine. Nice to see you, Alice. So, who's this big, tall strapping fellow?"

"He came by my house yesterday and he's been wandering for a few years. He needs a job and right now he's staying with me. I want to help this nice young man."

"Well, I need workers to help stock the shelves, and unload the trucks coming in. Would you like to do that... uh, what's your name?"

“Jethro, sir, Jethro McGillis and I’m mighty happy you’re offering me this job and yes, I’ll gladly do that work.”

“Very good. The pay is \$15.00 an hour. Come with me and I’ll bring you up to my office so you can make out your application and I can talk with you more about the job and our supermarket. Thanks Renee! I can always use another good worker,” said Felix.

“Jethro you do what you need to do and Alice and I have some errands to run; some Christmas shopping too. We’ll come back and pick you up,” said Renee. “Then we’ll go to see Alex at his farm.”

“Thanks Mrs. Kendall. Words don’t come right now to thank you for this wonderful kindness,” said Jethro, tears welling in his green eyes.

“Anything to help a fellow human being,” said Renee.

Renee and Alice picked Jethro up from the supermarket and they drove down the country roads up to Alex’s farm.

“Wow! It’s really pretty up this way. And with all the snow it’s like a scene on a Christmas card,” said Jethro.

“Yes, Vermont is a really beautiful state. We love it here,” said Alice.

They arrived at Alex’s farm and trudged through the snow to walk to the back of the farmhouse to the farm. Alex was there brushing the mane on his horse, Silverado. He heard their footsteps and turned around.

“Renee! Alice! What brings you up here in all this snow? And who’s this young fellow?” asked Alex.

“This is Jethro McGillis. He came to my door yesterday. He’s been wandering about for a few years. He’s from Tennessee,” said Renee.

“We’d like you to give him a job on the farm,” added Alice.

“Have you worked on a farm?” Alex asked Jethro.

“Yes, my Grandma had a farm. I helped out with feeding the chickens, milking the cows, helping to plant some of the crops but Mr. Sanders and Mr. Mutton did most of that. I did ride the horses though.”

“Very well, I could use another hand here. So, you can start tomorrow,” said Alex.

Mabel came out of the farmhouse and Renee went over to tell her about Jethro.

“He’s going to work here as well as at the Supermarket,” said Renee.

“Part-time in both jobs?” asked Mabel.

“Yes, part-time.”

“I’ll get the paperwork. We could use the extra help.”

“Thank you, Mabel.

“Nice to see you, Renee. Come in, everyone and have some coffee,” said Mabel.

The next few weeks were busy for Renee and Alice as they both decided to volunteer at their church for the Christmas Fair. Father Thomas was so excited to have them helping out. He knew how hard it had been for Renee when Dominic died. When he learned about Jethro, he decided to come over one night and sit and talk with Jethro and Renee.

“Father Thomas, come in! It’s so cold out there! I’ve got a pot of coffee on and Jethro I learned loves to bake so he is in the kitchen. He made dessert for all of us-cherry turnovers,” announced Renee, a smile on her pretty face, and her eyes twinkling with joy.

“They do smell awfully good! I would never pass on a turnover. My Grandma used to make them all the time. Boy, they were delicious! Of course, nowadays, I settle for the store bought ones. The cook at the rectory, Ingrid, she can’t bake. Her cooking is so-so but I don’t want to complain as she suffers from low esteem. One word of criticism and she sinks in the chair and cries for a whole hour,” said Father Thomas.

“Poor thing. I know she ran away when I told her we needed help cleaning the tables off we’re going to use to sell the items.”

“Yeah, I know. She doesn’t like to do any work with people watching her,” said Father Thomas. “Look here comes our friend Jethro! Those turnovers look wonderful!”

“Thank you, Father Thomas! Here, you have the first one!” offered Jethro who now felt like he had a place to call home.

Father Thomas took a bite and his eyes lit up. “These are scrumptious! You’re a wonderful baker, Jethro!”

“Where did you learn to bake like this?”

“From my Grandma. She raised me till she passed away one morning. I really miss her. She was a gentle, kind soul who loved everyone. She even threw bread crumbs out the window to feed the birds.”

“What a beautiful memory of her! How long have you been all alone in the world?” asked Father Thomas who had grown to like this young fellow who had volunteered to shovel the snow for him at the rectory.

“Yes, I have a lot of cherished memories of my Grandma. She passed away when I was seventeen and I was still a minor, so I had to go to a foster home. They were mean folks so I just took off and I’ve been wandering around ever since then. This is the first time I ever had a home since my Grandma died and I really love Mrs. Kendall. She’s a great lady! And I love it here in Vermont! The folks are so nice and it’s so pretty up this way. It’s the farthest North I’ve ever been, Father Thomas.”

“How is your job going?”

“Oh, I’m so happy at Willard’s. I just love stocking the shelves and meeting folks and helping out with unloading the trucks. And helping Alex on the farm. I’m really happy, Father Thomas.”

“Did you finish high school?” asked Father Thomas.

“No, I didn’t. I was in my senior year, the beginning of it when my Grandma died.”

“I’ll talk with Mr. Dashford, the Principal at the Kingston High School and maybe he can help you get your G.E.D. and then you could go to a culinary school,” said Father Thomas.

“I’d like that very much, Father Thomas. I’ll pay my own way through school.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll help you out,” offered Renee.

“You’re so kind Ma’am. I do love living here.”

The days passed and it was Christmas Eve. Alice and Mabel, Alex and Father Thomas joined Renee and Jethro for Christmas Eve dinner. She and Jethro had cooked up a storm. They had made fried shrimp; fried scallops; mashed potatoes; green beans; biscuits and a salad. Jethro had helped Renee put the Christmas tree up and the Christmas manger. The whole house was decorated. Mabel was impressed.

“Your house looks so beautiful! I just love all the decorations, Renee. You’ve really outdone yourself this year!” exclaimed Mabel.

“I have Jethro to thank for a lot of it. He bought some really cute Christmas Angels and we put them in every room of the house, and he got a ceramic Christmas tree that lights up. He’s been a Godsend for me! I just love Jethro. He’s a good fellow.”

“This meal is delicious! You’re both good Chefs!” said Alice.

“A toast to everyone for good health, good luck and a new Blessing in our lives, Jethro, our Christmas Friend,” said Father Thomas.

Merry Christmas!!!

Ends



One Ray of Light

By DJ Tyrer

“Would you like to share my brolly?” I asked Liam. It was a typical British winter with rain falling in sheets and I was standing by his front gate. We were in the same class at school and regularly walked there and back together. For me, that was my favourite time of the day as we were alone together; I loved spending time with him.

“Thanks,” he smiled, slipping under its black dome. We were very close; I felt a thrill as his arm brushed back and forth against mine.

“It’s good to see you’re well again,” he said after we’d walked a little way in silence. I’d been off school for a week; I was prone to illness, unlike Liam who never missed a day. The doctor had suggested it was a physical manifestation of stress; my mum had been sceptical, but it made sense to me, but then she was unaware of just what pressures I faced at school.

“Yeah, it’s good to be back.” What I really meant, of course, was that it was good to be with him. I had the biggest crush on him.

“Will you be coming to the game tonight?” he asked.

“Yes.” We played D&D every Wednesday night; I enjoyed the escapism. “What happened last session?”

“Simon’s character was killed in an ambush by some orcs, but the rest of you made it to the dungeon. You’re going in tonight. Simon rolled up his new character on Friday. He’s going to play a sorcerer.”

We chatted on in that manner until we reached the school gates.

“Hi!” Simon had spotted us and gave us a wave; he was in another class to us. There wasn’t time to do more than return his greeting as the bell was ringing.

“Better get inside,” I commented, needlessly.

We headed inside and took our seats for registration. Next to us in the row was short, scrawny Brian who was also in our group. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I was kind of glad to have him in our class, as he was a natural target for bullies, distracting their ire from me. Sometimes, I’d stand up for him, but more often I wouldn’t, grateful it wasn’t me being tormented.

I made sure that my gaze was fixed on anything but Liam: I didn’t want my crush to be noticed, mocked. Being in class could be torture: so close to him, yet unable to enjoy it.

We answered our names and I handed in my absence note: I hated to be called forward like that; there was always some snide comment.

The first lesson of the day was German for me; Liam was taking French, so I wouldn’t see him till Geography. I took my seat next to Lily Jones. We’d become good, if not close, friends over the last two years of sitting next to one another for this lesson. We were both shunned by the rest of the class, leaving us little choice but to sit and work together. She wasn’t the prettiest of girls and not very academic, yet an outstanding gymnast who’d represented the county in competitions; naturally, she was a perfect victim for those jealous of her success with plenty of insecurities for the bitches to target. She was the one person I knew who hurt more than I did; we’d discussed suicide as a means to escape the cruelty of the world and whilst I could see little help for myself, it disgusted me that her obvious talent was at such a risk of being wasted. Did the bullies understand just how much power they wielded? Did they care? Or, did they delight in the possibility of destruction? Perhaps...

Geography. That meant I was sitting next to Liam, even if steel-grey haired Mr Clarke was too strict to let us chat. Mr Clarke was the other reason that this was my favourite lesson: I had almost as big a crush on him as I did on Liam. He was maturely handsome, with a military bearing, and whilst stern was very pleasant when not engaged in a struggle of wills with a recalcitrant class. He always had my full attention: the only problem was that I was certain I blushed whenever his gaze fell on me.

Break followed and I made sure to stay close to Liam, Simon and Brian, who were discussing the latest D&D supplement Liam had bought. My bladder was full, but I held off visiting the toilets; the toilets were where you could easily fall prey to bullies unless you went with backup and none was currently available.

Maths was a nightmare. None of my friends were in the class as, for reasons I could never fathom and despite my many absences holding me back, I'd somehow managed once more to gain admittance to the top set. The hour felt more like a lifetime and the only aspect of the lesson I considered an achievement was that Miss Davies never called on me to answer a question. I was just glad Christmas was fast approaching and I'd soon have a break from the lesson.

Having struggled through to lunchtime, I scuttled immediately to the nearest loo, thankfully arriving and exiting whilst it was empty. I then caught up with the others in the quad for some lunch – we all brought packed lunches rather than waste time in the queue; we had other plans for our lunch-break. Once we'd eaten, we headed up to the library where we settled in a corner and Simon ran us through the latest instalment of a *Savage Worlds* campaign we fitted in most days. As long as we didn't make much noise, our presence was tolerated. It certainly beat being outside where I always expected to be picked on.

After lunch was History and, once again, I was seated next to Liam. Mr Harris was more lax in his approach to teaching, offering some opportunity for chatting, which was enjoyable.

The last lesson of the day was English and, once again, I was on my own. Mrs Lewis was the sort of teacher who just droned and it was all too easy for my mind to wander. I was doodling on a spare piece of paper and, without realising it, had broken my golden rule: never let my feelings for Liam show. I was doodling one of those hearts with an arrow through it with his name in it.

"O-M-G!" exclaimed Natasha, one of the bitches, looking over my shoulder. "You fancy Liam!"

Reflexively, I attempted to cover the drawing with my hand, but already she'd torn the page away from me and was presenting it to those on her table to a chorus of laughter.

"You fancy Liam?" May shrieked with amusement.

"Shit, Jim's a fag!" exclaimed Steve.

"I'm not a fag..." I mumbled.

Just then Mrs Lewis seized the paper from Blake who was scribbling something, doubtless obscene, on it.

"I'll take that. And, you four can stay behind for ten minutes for being disruptive."

I suppose I could be thankful I hadn't had a chance to make a scene myself and so wasn't kept behind, too: instead, I was being offered a chance to escape without confrontation. Of course, it would be all over the school the next day, so I was just delaying the inevitable. I could only hope it wouldn't be too bad: after all, I'd been called a fag and a freak more than once. They were right about the latter, but I didn't consider myself the former, no matter what they thought.

The bell rang a few minutes later and I bundled my things into my bag and ran as quickly as I could from the classroom, tears pricking at my eyes.

"Hey, Jim, you okay?" Liam had spotted me. I'd forgotten I'd be walking home with him, was desperate to just get home as quickly as possible and lock myself in my room.

I tried to answer and started to sob. I felt pathetic and confused. I sucked in a breath and managed to say, "I'm not feeling too well."

"You still coming tonight?"

Damn, I'd forgotten about gaming. "No, I don't think so. Sorry!"

I didn't wait for his response, just strode away as quickly as I could. Liam would be waiting for Simon and Brian, and I didn't want them to see me crying, didn't want to be pestered for explanations.

“Fucking baby!” someone from the year above spat at me as I walked past them. Never let them see you cry; boys don’t cry, that was what I was always being told. Yeah, well I’m not, not really, and I do. I bit down on the urge to retort and just scurried away.

I’d managed to stop my tears by the time I got home and thought I might just get away with just saying I felt sick – not exactly a lie – as a pretext for why I was home without going to Liam’s.

I didn’t even have the chance to put my bag down before Mum had shouted out, “Get in here, now!”

Warily, I went into the lounge.

“The school has just rung,” she said and I felt a horrible lurch in my guts. “They said you’re being bullied.”

I crossed my arms and looked up at the ceiling. “I’m not.”

“And, they said...” Her voice choked and I thought she was going to burst into tears. I felt my tears returning.

Looking at her, pleading with my eyes, I whispered, “Please....”

“Jim are... are you gay?” she asked.

“I’m not gay,” I whispered, feeling sick.

“But, the school says you... fancy Liam.” The words were clearly distasteful to her.

I closed my eyes and admitted, “Yes, I do.”

“Oh, my... you’re gay...” She sounded heartbroken.

“I’m not gay!” I shouted. “I’m a girl!”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

That shocked me: Mum never swore.

“I’m a girl. In my mind, I’m a girl. I was born with a boy’s body, but I shouldn’t’ve been. It’s wrong; really, I’m a girl.” I was in tears now and thankful that I felt my Mum’s arms about me, embracing me. She was crying, too.

When we both finally stopped crying, we sat down together and talked and talked. Mum made tea; she was a great believer in the healing power of tea. I explained to her that I’d felt this way as long as I could remember, that it was truly who I was and not some sort of phase or fad. I knew it would be hard for her to understand, to accept; hell, it was not something I fully understood or accepted, and I knew it was *true*.

“It’s been destroying me.”

“Then, why not just be a boy?” She was talking as if it were just a lifestyle choice.

“Not that; the pretending to be something I’m not has been destroying me. Suppressing the real me, suppressing my feelings.”

“I should’ve realised,” she murmured, as if I hadn’t spoken. “You always were... well, girly. Deep down, I mean.”

She was right. No matter how hard you try to pretend, traces will leak through: when I was little, before peer pressure and parental assumptions pushed me to conform, I’d had my girly traits. Later, doubtless, aspects of my personality must have seemed at odds with the masculine norm. But, most of all, I’d always protested at having my hair cut and preferred to grow my nails long – despite mockery at school – in a minor rebellion against what was expected; I’d also always sought to wear jackets and tops that hung in such a way as to give a sensation of wearing a skirt. Nothing too noticeable without a context – after all, I’d often refused to admit to myself why I felt such urges – but, obvious in hindsight, I guess.

At least, Mum seemed to be accepting what I’d told her was true.

“But, you fancy Liam?” she still made that sound unpleasant. “Doesn’t that make you gay?”

“Mum, my mind is a girl’s mind and my heart is a girl’s heart. Don’t you understand? Girls like guys. I’m a girl and Liam’s a guy. I’m not gay.”

I could see it would take a while to sink in.

The big problem was telling Dad. I knew he wouldn't be impressed. Damn, he'd even called me 'girly' in the past: he'd hate to have his abuse verified! Eventually, Mum agreed that she wouldn't tell Dad until I was ready, although she made it clear that she expected the revelation to come soon. Unfortunately, until I admitted the truth to him, there could be no meaningful discussion of my adapting to my true nature. After all, if I started wearing skirts, he'd know something was up! I needed to get my head around the concept of coming out and had to make sure Mum would fully back me against the anger I was certain would follow before I took the step of telling Dad.

Mum would talk to the school: initially to put the issue on hold, then, once Dad had been told, to sit the Head down and explain all this.

Of course, none of that helped as regarded the fact that rumours would be all over school the next day.

"Do I have to go in? I don't think I can do it; I feel ill."

"You can't let bullies rule your life."

"Rule it? They ruin it!" If I stay off a few days, hopefully something else will grab their attention. After all, it was only the four of them who saw the heart."

I wheedled and pleaded with her until she finally conceded that it might do to let things die down.

Of course, I'd not factored Liam into my calculations.

Liam knocked on my door the next afternoon.

I felt a sickening shiver of cold run up and down my spine when Mum called up to say he was there. I was in bed, reading a *Gallagher Girls* novel. I knew why he was there; he'd heard the rumour and wanted the truth.

Walking down the stairs, as soon as I saw his face I knew he was upset. This wouldn't be good.

I went to the front door. The day was chilly and I shivered. Nervously, I played with the cuff of my left sleeve as I waited for him to speak.

"Is it true?" His voice was strangely devoid of emotion. "Is it true what they're saying? That you *fancy* me?"

I did consider lying, but I couldn't. Even though I knew the truth would hurt us both, I knew denial would be far worse.

Lowering my gaze, I said, "Yes."

He didn't say a word, just turned and walked away.

"Liam!" I called after him. "Let me explain!"

He paused for just a moment by the gate, then kept walking, ignoring me.

I fell to my knees, sobbing, clinging to the doorframe as if it were the only thing keeping me alive.

I felt my mother's arms enfold me, lifting me back inside and carrying, half-dragging me to the lounge where she held me and comforted me until I fell asleep.

I returned to school on Monday and, although whatever wave of rumour had swept through it was past, there were the looks and the snide comments that would be expected. Worse was the fact that Liam was ignoring and avoiding me. Simon gave me a pitying look as he went off with Liam, but Brian seemed to share Liam's feelings.

Without them, I was left alone at break and lunch and felt very exposed. Lily, though, did seek me out at the beginning of break to offer a few words of comfort.

“Hey,” she said, as she approached me. “You okay?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “People call me a lesbian and make fun of me. I’m not, but I think I understand a bit of how you feel.” She gave me a hug.

It wasn’t much of a pep talk, but it did leave me feeling a little better as she scuttled off to do whatever she did at break.

Lunchtime was worse as Steve, Blake and Ben cornered me in a stairwell and proceeded to give me a kicking for being ‘a fucking fag’. That was to become a regular occurrence over the next few weeks, whenever my attempts at evading them failed.

My Mum was livid at the beatings and my Dad, who’d noticed their aftermath, even if he had no idea why they’d happened, was insistent I should stand up for myself: easy enough to say, even if I had been anything of a fighter, when I was outnumbered three-to-one.

I had to tell Dad the truth. Mum wanted to talk to the school about what was happening and we couldn’t do that and keep Dad in the dark.

So, at last, we sat him down and told him.

“No wonder he’s having the crap kicked out of him,” he stated as soon as I told him. “He’s sick.”

It hurt to hear him say that, especially to say it as if I wasn’t there, but I could understand his reaction. It had to be a shock. I’d always, deep down if not always fully acknowledged, known that I was really a girl and I’d still felt the disgust, shame and self-loathing. He had none of that certainty, unlike Mum had probably never suspected I might be different: no wonder he was reeling. If I hadn’t been hurting, I might have felt sorry for him.

Over the next couple of weeks, he began to soften. I don’t know if he will ever be comfortable with the idea that he has a daughter rather than a son, but he doesn’t seem to hate me and I count that as a victory of sorts.

At first, so as not to rile him too much, Mum and I compromised on my new feminine look. My hair wouldn’t grow out until after the holidays began, helping give my Dad a chance to grow used to my transition from male to female and I agreed not to wear make-up until the holidays started, either, and then to keep it to a minimum around him. School uniform was straightforward for now as girls were allowed to wear trousers and a blouse looks exactly like a shirt beneath an ill-fitting jumper; wearing a skirt in the new year was something we’d discuss with the school. At home, I agreed to initially restrict myself to leggings and long jumpers or tops and sensible shoes, again so as to not force Dad’s tolerance too fast.

“You can dress more... feminine when the holidays begin,” Mum promised. At least I could call myself Jenny now.

Although Dad hadn’t been keen to acknowledge my femininity, having told him Mum felt able to approach the school and discuss my issues with them. They agreed that I would be able to attend as a girl and that they would ‘implement anti-bullying strategies’ which seemed to consist solely of an assembly just before the end of term telling everyone about me, attracting even more mockery and abuse my way. It became a ritual for me to be punched or spat at in-between lessons and I had to spend my breaks and lunches in a classroom with a teacher.

Worst of all, Liam still wasn’t speaking to me.

That last day of term was when it all came to a head. Someone, I never saw who, tripped me on the stairs between lessons and I hurt my wrist. Then, there was the usual spitting and punching. It was a half-day and we surged out when the lunchtime bell rang to calls of “Merry Christmas!” and choruses of *School’s Out!* I felt glad to be out of there and just hoped things would be better in the new year.

I was jolted out of my reverie by cries of “Get the fag!”, “Kill the tranny!” and “Bloody she-male!”

They were on me before I could react: Steve was among them and probably Blake and Ben, too, but there several others, including some older boys and, I think, a couple of girls.

I really did wonder if I was going to die, the beating was so ferocious and full of hate, but it finally halted and I was left lying there on a filthy pavement, my hair sticky with my blood and their spit, my nose gushing and my body feeling as if I must have bruises atop bruises. I could only be grateful that I wasn’t dead as I slowly pulled myself upright and staggered painfully homeward.

Mum was distraught when she saw me and insisted on rushing me to the hospital, then calling the police, who arrived a little while later and ferried me to the police station when the doctor was done. They took swabs and photos in a process that felt horribly intrusive. Finally, I was able to get cleaned up a little before giving a full statement. Not that I had much to say: I'd only seen Steve and couldn't say exactly what role he'd played. Eventually, I was allowed home to shower and change. I had a broken finger and two cracked ribs, as well as plentiful bruising and a broken nose.

A few days later, a very nice policewoman arrived to say that although some DNA would remain on file 'just in case', nobody other than Steve had been arrested in connection with the attack and that he'd been given a caution.

"A caution? A *caution*! He could've killed Jim! Jenny..." shouted Dad leaping from his chair. I was grateful he made that emendation.

"Unfortunately, we have no evidence he was directly involved in the attack. He admits he was there, but it's his word against... Jenny's. That he didn't contest the caution was a minor victory. I wish we could do more, but there was no CCTV and without suspects, the DNA is useless. Sorry."

I could only hope that police involvement might deter any repeat performances.

After that, Mum was insistent I not go out alone 'just in case'. To be honest, I didn't mind: I was too scared to go out alone, anyway, and kept having panic attacks as memories of the attack resurfaced in my dreams and waking nightmares.

I was in quite a mess, anyway, and wouldn't have wanted to be seen out: my nose was a mess from having been broken; there were stitches on my scalp where it had been gashed and there was a cut and an angry bruise on my left cheek and, to cap it all, my right eye was blacked. Beneath my clothes, there was a patchwork of colourful bruises across my body. My strapped finger was positively invisible in comparison.

But, there was one ray of light: being the holidays, Mum kept her promise that I could dress properly like a girl.

I'd already been nervous about the idea of going to a shop to try on clothes and definitely couldn't face it now, so we shopped online. Mum measured me so that we knew what would fit and I ordered a selection of skirts and tops and revelled in being able to wear them and look as I'd always wanted.

"It's for you," Mum said, handing me an envelope that had arrived in the post.

I looked at it in surprise: it was addressed to Jenny, not Jim. Although the clothes orders were in my new name, I'd had no personal post addressed to me under it.

I opened the envelope slowly, a little scared that it would be some sort of sick joke, but it wasn't: it was an invitation.

"Simon has invited me to his Christmas party!" I could hardly believe it.

"Do you want to go?" Mum asked.

"Yes, I think so... I'm a little nervous, but... I do want to." That he'd remembered from that awful assembly that I wanted to be called Jenny had touched me more deeply than I would've thought.

"Then, we'll have to get you a party dress, won't we?"

I leapt from my seat and hugged her. "Thank you, Mum! Oh, thank you!"

The day of the party had arrived. I was in a sparkly, red knee-length dress that I thought looked pretty good; although short-sleeved, I wore a red cardigan with it to cover the bruises on my arms. My hair was back in a loose ponytail and I had a silvery aliceband on my head. On my legs I had black tights and my shoes were lovely red ballet pumps.

“It’s good,” I said as I twirled before the mirror, savouring my look.

“Yes, perfect,” Mum said with a smile.

She helped me with my make-up: I was still a long way from perfecting my skills with it, especially as my bruises needed covering.

“Right, well, we’d better not dally any longer,” she said. “Dad’s waiting.”

I went down to the car and climbed in.

“You look... nice,” Dad said as he turned the key. I was surprised at the grudging praise.

“Thank you,” I replied, not trusting myself to say more. Maybe he would be able to accept me...

A few minutes later, we arrived at Simon’s house, which was decorated in a suitably festive manner and festooned with lights.

As I reached to open the car door, I felt my breathing begin to surge, my heart hammer, my head spin and my face grow numb; I was having a panic attack.

“You alright?” Dad asked, concerned.

I pulled a paper bag out of the small sequinned clasp bag I carried and breathed into it until I felt more normal.

“Yes,” I told him. He still looked concerned. “I’ll go in, now.”

I climbed out and nervously walked up the path before pausing at the front door. Taking a slow breath, I reached out and rang the doorbell.

A few seconds passed, then the door opened to reveal Simon with a Santa hat on his head. *Last Christmas* drifted out past him.

“Hi! Merry Christmas, J-Jenny! Come in!” He stepped aside to allow me to enter and closed the door behind me.

“A few people are already here,” he continued. “A few more are still to come.”

I knew there wouldn’t be too many: Liam and Brian, of course, a few other school friends, other geeks and gamers, and friends of his from the choir he sang with.

“Don’t worry,” he told me, “I’ve made sure everyone is cool with you being here.”

“Thanks.” I smiled with a shyness I hadn’t felt with him before.

“I’m glad you came.”

“I’m glad you invited me.”

“You’re welcome. Well, come on in!”

Just then, over his shoulder, I saw Liam standing in the dining-room doorway. I suddenly felt incredibly nervous, wondering how he’d react.

I walked over to him.

“Hi,” I said, eyes downcast.

“Hello.... Jenny.” He was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry how I reacted. I was freaked-out at the idea you were gay and hitting on me.”

“I’m not gay,” I responded. “I’m a girl.”

“I know...” He fell silent again. Then, he looked up and said, “We’re under the mistletoe...”

“Oh...”

He leant in and kissed me on the lips and I eagerly kissed him back. In that moment, everything felt right and I suddenly felt as if I had hope. Perfect.

Ends

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Snapshots

By Kavita Sarin

Deep within the recesses
Of
An old, decrepit, iron trunk
Lie remnants of lives once lived.
As I reach out
To pluck with my bare, shaking fingers
Memories of a past not yet faded,
An odor of sadness permeates my being.
A weak, antiquated, yellowing Manila
Holds reminiscences of lives
That pervade my senses,
Memories that imbue my present
With a meaningfulness it would otherwise not have had.
Lying enveloped in these obdurate walls,
Are albums that are proof
Of vital, breathing human beings,
A part and parcel of the person I am today.
I shiver and quake
As much from excitement
As from an unknown fear
And an inconclusive, unexplained anxiety.
Piece by piece, I separate
People, thoughts and impressions
Some sepia, some black and white
And many, many multi-hued
Bits of my past.
Each rectangular, four-sided piece
Holds a myriad of visages,
Countenances that bring to life
Aspects that I haven't yet obliterated
From mind or heart.
As I peer into each, I recollect
Faces as they used to be,
Features that once were.
I retrieve from the recesses of memory
The sharp features
That have now softened, rounded out;
Lissome, full-bodied figures
Now filled out, a little more pulpous,
Heads full of hair, now greyed or balding.
And then, as if from nowhere, it hits me!
Round and square, like a full-fisted blow,
That lands bang in the middle of my solar plexus
And knocks me almost cold,
Leaving me gasping for breath.
Those family pictures!
Those groups of happy, smiling faces

Young, middle-aged and old....
Those crowds of ten, twelve, even twenty!
Grouped as paternal and maternal,
Friends as family, families as friends.
Those groups are now reduced; heavily truncated,
Humbler in the passage of time,
Diminished through the ravages
Wrought by Death.
I weep bitter tears of remorse
For words said and unsaid.
My face is wet with tears of repentance
At the hugs received and not returned.
Sobs of penitence engulf me
As I recall
Soft secrets exchanged
And promises made;
Now – never to be fulfilled.
Reluctantly, I put back those pieces
Of a life lived long ago,
Unwilling to commit them to the inexorable darkness,
Once more to be consumed
By its yawning obscurity.
All the while, leaving me to live,
Grappling
With the vacuity thus created;
Till the next time
I reach into its deep recesses.



The Prisoner

By Samantha Brooke

Rupert opened his eyes and blinked. Groggy as he was, it only took his brain half a second to realise that he didn't know where he was. A jolt went through his body – then a brief moment of disbelief. But no, it was true. The place where he had just woken up was not his prison cell – every inch of which was mind-numbingly familiar to him after fifteen long years. That was where he should have been. Wasn't it? A blurred memory came to him then...

He stood beneath the blazing hot sunshine, squinting up at the sky as the gates before him slid open. Lowering his gaze, he stepped forward, out into the world. Free at last. He barely even noticed the shiny black car that was parked a short way away...

He had been released. He remembered now. What he didn't remember was how he had ended up here – and how long he had been there. Judging by the dryness of his throat and the hollow ache in his empty stomach, it had been considerably longer than just a few hours. But how much longer?

His body felt stiff and sore from where he had been lying on his side. He tried to sit up – and only then realised that his hands were bound behind his back. Looking down, he saw that his ankles were too. It was only then that true panic began to course through his body, his breaths growing shallow and his heart beating frantically. What was going on? Who had done this to him?

He managed to sit, awkwardly, propped up against a wall of unyielding concrete. Telling himself that he needed to assess the situation calmly, he looked around for any kind of a clue as to what was happening to him. The room he was in was vast – like some kind of an underground bunker. The ceiling was low, and everything appeared to be made of concrete with no visible doors or windows.

There was only one thing that he could do. Swallowing with difficulty, he opened his mouth to yell out loud.

"Hello – is there anybody there? What the fuck is going on here? Where am I? Hello?"

His words bounced off the concrete and echoed back to him tauntingly. Shifting himself into a kneeling position, he struggled for a moment with the binds that were tied around his wrists, but it was no good. There was no getting free. Whoever had done this to him, they were no amateur, that was for certain.

Clenching his hands into fists, he pounded them as hard as he could against the wall behind him – until spasms of pain were shooting up his arms and he could feel the skin on his knuckles beginning to split.

"Let me out of here!" he yelled. His voice sounded worn and croaky. "Do you hear me, you psycho? You'd better fucking let me out of here right now!"

Again, his words reverberated in the air around him for a few seconds before fading away, leaving only a ringing silence behind. He was breathing heavily, almost panting. There was no response to his yelling. He counted a minute in his head. Then another. And another. A heavy feeling of hopelessness and frustration began to drag at him. Nerves snapping, he screamed out again.

"What is going on? Answer me! ANSWER ME, DAMN YOU!"

No response. With a growl of anger rumbling in his chest, he began to beat the wall again, heedless of the pain that it was causing him. He continued to do this until physical exhaustion overwhelmed him. His head swam. He felt weak with hunger and dehydration. Slumping down, he lay on his side once again, staring out across the floor with bleary eyes. He felt the weariness pressing down upon his body and mind like it was a physical weight. It was too much to resist. No matter how hard he struggled, he felt himself slipping back toward the black pit of unconsciousness...

When he blinked his eyes open again, the first thing that he saw was that there was another person standing a short way away from him. He scrambled back up onto his knees, all grogginess evaporating instantly as adrenaline pulsed through his body. He looked up to get a look at the person's face. It was a man, and not one that Rupert recognised. He was middle-aged and bald, the dull light which suffused the room reflected off the man's shiny skull. His face was ruddy and he wore round glasses over small, piggy eyes. His plump frame was dressed in what looked like a scientist's lab coat.

"What's going on? Who are you? Where are we?" Rupert blurted out.

"Mr Savage," the man said. He had a high-pitched, almost feminine-sounding voice that was so at odds with his appearance that it made Rupert feel for a moment as though he might be simply dreaming all of this after all. "Good to see that you're awake now. You've already been with us for quite a few days. The drugs that we administered seemed to stay in your system for longer than we would have expected them to, given your height and weight and –"

"What the hell are you talking about? What drugs?" Rupert spluttered. "You drugged me?! You fucking bastard!" Forgetting that he was still bound at wrist and ankle, he tried to get to his feet and leap toward the man in one simultaneous movement. A second later, he had fallen to the floor, hitting his head hard against the concrete. White spots burst in front of his vision. He heard the man next to him give a sigh.

"I'm afraid it was the only way that we could safely bring you here. We picked you up straight-away following your release from the correctional institution on November the twenty-fourth."

"Correctional institution," Rupert scoffed as he struggled to sit up again. "Why not just call it what it is? Prison."

"Yes, indeed. For a good reason."

Rupert couldn't deny it. Not after what he had done to land himself there. He wondered suddenly how his sister was doing. If what this man was saying was true, and he really had been trapped here for days already... Vanessa would have been expecting to hear from him straightaway, she would be worried...

"We have taken the liberty of contacting your relatives," the man before him explained calmly, as though reading Rupert's mind. It was unnerving and it made his flesh crawl.

"What did you tell them?"

"Enough that they believe you to be safe and well, and a participant in a government rehabilitation scheme for those recently released from incarceration. They won't be asking any questions about your absence. Not for a while, at least."

"What? You can't do this?" Instinctively, he began to struggle against his bonds again – though he knew that it was futile. "You can't do this! This is kidnapping – you can't hold people against their will!"

A smirk touched the man's lips.

"It is rather out of the frying pan and into the fire for you, isn't it? I imagine that when you stepped out of that prison, you thought that you were finally free at last. And now, here you are. Do you wish that they'd kept you in prison yet? Because if you don't, you soon will."

Rupert felt a spasm of fear which seemed to touch every last nerve in his body.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he croaked. Then, with a show of bravado which he did not feel at all just then, "Look, I don't know who the fuck you are, or what you're planning here – but you can forget about it. Just fucking forget about it! Do you hear me? You have to let me go!"

"That's... not an option, I'm afraid." The man said, that infuriating smirk upon his lips once again. A fresh wave of light-headedness swept over Rupert, but he gritted his teeth and tried to ignore it – not wanting to show any signs of weakness in front of this man. "The good news, however, is that your initial isolation period is over which means that we can now move you out of here."

"Move me where?" he asked. "Haven't you been listening to me? I need to go, I need to get back to my family. And you have no right to keep me here."

"I'm afraid that's where you're wrong, Mr Savage." The man's smirk broadened. Rupert felt nausea clench at his stomach. "We have every right. We were granted that right by your government. I could give you a telephone and you could call the police right now, and I can assure you that they would not lift a finger to help you."

"You – you're lying." Rupert's mind whirled. His shook his head in disbelief, and he felt the floor tilt and sway underneath him as his dizziness worsened. "That can't be true."

"I can assure you that it is," the man replied. "I should know, as I work for the government myself."

"Yeah, right," Rupert scoffed tremulously.

"Patrick Wallace. You won't have heard of me, as I'm the head of a very secret department. But I can assure you that everything I have said to you is the truth."

"You're a maniac."

Patrick did not respond, but the smirk remained fixed upon his face and his little eyes glinted with something that appeared very like amusement. Rupert's fists clenched again. He wanted nothing more than to punch this man hard in the face. Repeatedly.

"You will now be escorted somewhere more comfortable – but just as secure," Patrick finally continued. " And then, at some point very soon, you will be prepared."

There was a beat of ominous silence.

"Prepared for what?" Rupert managed, through he felt the horrible sensation that his throat was beginning to constrict.

"To be taken to the beast, of course." Patrick's eyes twinkled again behind his glasses. "Don't worry, you shouldn't have very long to wait. You and the others. It's a good job that we began our preparations early this time – as it seems that he's already growing hungry again."

"What are you –" But before Rupert could finish his question, everything went suddenly black.

This time when he awoke, he found himself in a room that was altogether different from the one that he had previously been trapped in. While that had been vast and cavernous, the room that he was in now was extremely small – even smaller than his cell in prison had been. Far from being concrete grey, the walls which enclosed him now had been painted a sickly-looking peach colour. They were entirely bare.

Sitting up, he saw that he had been laying on a small bed – that and a small set of drawers were the only items of furniture in the room. And they were both, he saw, bolted down securely to the white-tiled floor.

Sliding off the bed, he began to pace up and down, his mind desperately scrambling to try and formulate some kind of a plan as to how he was going to get out of this situation. He had to think. His shoes had been removed and his bare feet made quiet slapping sounds upon the tiles as he walked. His clothes, too, had been removed and replaced with different ones – he now wore a loose-fitting cream shirt and matching trousers. They felt itchy against his skin, but that was the very least of his worries.

After a few moments of pacing, he moved across to the single door that was set into one of the walls and pounded upon it as loudly as he could. Then, he stood back and waited. A potent mix of anger, fear and dread were coursing through him. He only had to wait for a few seconds before he heard the sound of footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. Then came the metallic sound of bolts being slid back and faint clicking as the locks were freed. Hinges squealed loudly as the door swung open. A strange odour began to seep into his nostrils – like something had died but somebody had attempted to cover up the stench with bouquets of flowers. It was repulsive – his already sore stomach threatened to rebel.

His eyes watered as he tried to focus upon the woman who now stepped forth into the room. She was tall, with shiny black hair that was dark as a raven's wing and gleamed beneath the artificial light from above. Her sharp cheekbones and highly-arched eyebrows gave her a proud and haughty expression. Her cold brown eyes swept over him appraisingly – the way that someone might survey an item in the supermarket before they bought it, checking to make sure that it was of sufficient quality before they did so. It was a look that unsettled Rupert greatly – and he realised right then that he was far more afraid of this woman than he had been of Patrick.

"Rupert Savage," the woman said crisply. It wasn't a question, and she didn't leave him time to respond. "Good. About time. I expect that Patrick told you what this is all about."

"No," Rupert said. "All that idiot told me was some jumbled garbage that didn't make any sense." He took a step toward the woman. She was alone. Even in his weakened state, there was a good chance of his being able to overpower her. Maybe now was his chance? However, before he could take a second step closer to her, the woman had drawn a gun from the pocket of her jacket and was aiming it at him with a perfectly steady hand.

"Don't go getting any stupid ideas," she said. "I'm simply here to bring you your food." As she spoke, a couple of men came into the room carrying trays of food. The aroma of it set his stomach rumbling at once, his mouth watering as his body clamoured for sustenance. He gritted his teeth as he looked at the dishes. He was surprised to see that it was not the usual prison fare which he had gotten used to over the years. It looked exotic and expensive.

"I don't want food," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady. "All I want is to get out of here."

"All in good time. First, we have to get you nicely fed."

"Listen – I'm not going to eat any of that food," his voice was a growl now. "You really think I'm going to co-operate with you lunatics? Well, think again. Now, I demand to know what this is all about! Why have I been brought here? What do you want with me? Just who the fuck are you people, anyway?"

Slowly, the woman lowered the gun and stared at him, her sharp gaze piercing his own. Several seconds ticked by before she spoke again.

"We're the feeders."

"The feeders?" Rupert repeated, more bewildered than ever. He rubbed a hand wearily over his face, thinking bleakly of how he should have been back at home by now, back with his family. His sister and the nephew that he had never met, only seen in the photographs that she had brought with her during her visits. Would he ever get to meet him now? Would he ever get to see any of his family again? "What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll show you." The woman nodded her head at the two men who had just brought the food in, and they immediately stepped towards Rupert and took a hold of him. "Maybe then you will understand how important it is, everything that we're doing here. It's for the good of everyone."

She turned and led the way through the open door – the two men dragging Rupert along in her wake. He was almost too weak to walk now, anyway. His muscles felt as though they were made of foam and his heart fluttered overfast. In the narrow corridor which they began to move down, he caught sight of his own reflection as they passed a mirrored window. He hardly even recognised himself. His face was white as marble, clammy looking and his chin had sprouted a mess of stubble. Dark purple shadows ringed his eyes and his hair was a greasy, uncombed mess.

The rhythmic tapping of the woman's high heels upon the tiled floor rang out loudly as she led them down one corridor and then turned to make her way down another. Her posture was stiff and alert.

"When you said 'feeders' – what did you mean by that?" Rupert called to her. Turning down yet another corridor, he saw that this one was wider – dark and with what appeared to be damp stone walls. Wherever they were, he was certain that it was somewhere deep underground. Lanterns had been hung on the walls at regular intervals – their flickering light casting eerie shadows that lurched this way and that like grotesquely deformed figures.

The woman didn't respond to his question – just continued her brisk walk. The two men marched along behind her, their steel-like fingers digging into Rupert's arms as they dragged him along. He knew that trying to resist would do no good whatsoever. All he could do was wait and see where she was leading. Every now and again, he thought

that he heard sounds, though. Eerie, echoing sounds – like roaring and banging. After a few moments, the sounds seemed to be growing louder – as though they were nearing the source of all the commotion. Rupert felt renewed fear clawing at his insides like a wild animal desperate to escape its confines. He wondered for a moment if he might be going mad.

It seemed to him that they walked for hours. His body felt shivery, his limbs heavy and uncoordinated, like they belonged to somebody else. And then, abruptly, they drew to a stop. Rupert looked around hazily, trying to focus.

"Here we are," the woman's crisp voice said.

In front of them was a transparent screen which ran from floor to ceiling – on the other side of it was the largest room that Rupert had ever seen in his life. There were no walls visible anywhere around it, no ceiling above. Only darkness. And within, something moved. Something massive – something so incomprehensibly gigantic that Rupert felt his sanity slipping away from him as he stared upon it...

"It was discovered a few years ago." The woman's voice seemed to be drifting to him from a vast distance away now, even though she was standing right next to him. "I won't go into the details of how – but let's just say that there were very many casualties. And there's no way to get rid of him. And of course, he has to eat. That's where we come in. To prevent – or at least delay – this beast from destroying the entire world, the governments all got together and decided upon a plan. It was decided that he would be given prisoners – criminals who are a blight on society and have nothing to offer." She paused for a moment. As Rupert turned away, unable to bear looking at the thing for even a second longer, he saw her gazing at it with something like reverence upon her features.

"He's been here forever, you know," her voice was softer now. "As long as the earth itself."

This time, it was a relief to Rupert when he lost consciousness again.

Ends



The Koestler Bequest

By James How

On his way to a meeting in Edinburgh one morning, dressed these days in a cheap suit, Michael Dawes passed by the building which used to house the university's postgraduate bar. Ancient, deserted Buccleuch Place; cobbles damp and slippery. A cold fog was obscuring the top of the David Hume Tower which, looming over the old street, had been built for the university sometime during the 1960s. Michael realised suddenly, as he caught himself listening to echoes of his own footsteps on the cobbles, that he had not been in the area for many years. Pure chance had led him that morning to walk this way. Now, the building he was passing was just another outpost of the university's Business School, with professional logo on the wall and a shiny, new door. The bar inside had probably been converted, many years since, into a meeting room or suite of Apple Mac computers.

Back when Michael had been a student, the bar had been run on a strictly amateur basis. To reach it, you walked up stone steps and buzzed yourself in through a battered, red door; followed rickety stairs up to the first-floor landing; made your way down a notice-boarded corridor to the back of the building. The bar itself, full of battered furniture, looked out onto an overgrown garden. Michael had spent countless evenings sinking slowly into one of the bar's moth-eaten sofas, a beer on his lap, trying to summon up the courage to make his next move in life, but always overwhelmed by the bar's own particular sense of stasis, which was exacerbated by the fuggy heat given off by electric bar radiators at either end of the room. Alongside all the hours spent dreaming up ways of resurrecting his relationship with his girlfriend, Andrea Mann, his biggest hope had been that, after he finished his PhD, he would glide easily into a well-paid academic job, preferably somewhere new and exciting. But, when it came down to actually doing anything about realising any of his dreams, the world outside the bar had always seemed such a fearful place.

Now, almost twenty years later. Michael lived alone in a flat to the south of Edinburgh. He worked in an office which lay almost in the shadow of the Pentland Hills, spending most of his time filling in forms and checking off numbers on spreadsheets. As he walked out of Buccleuch Place and into the shadow of the David Hume Tower that morning, Michael decided that, if there had been a single moment of lost opportunity, or failure of nerve, or a wrong turn taken in his life more important than all the others, then it was probably to be found towards the end of his student days. In particular, around the time that he and Merlin Carter had spent two nights in a links hotel in Fife, on the eve of the new Millennium.

It was during the week leading up to Christmas 1999 when, with newspapers full of stories about the chaos about to be unleashed on the world's computers by the Millennium Bug, with no plans for New Year's Eve for the first time in his adult life, Michael was spending almost every evening in the postgraduate bar. The bar was only a few doors down from the damp smelling room provided to him by the university as office space. Stopping in the bar for a drink on the way home was a way of putting off his return to his top floor flat on South Clerk Street, which too much reminded him, in all its mouldering aspects, of the recently departed Andrea Mann.

There were rarely more than a handful of other drinkers in the bar. That night, there had been only two given that, so close to Christmas, most students were already away for the holidays. Michael had only ever spoken once, the previous summer, to the bearded, corduroy-trouserred man who always occupied an armchair in the bay of the window, and who was always reading the academic jobs page of the bar's only copy of the Guardian newspaper. The other person in the bar that night was Ian Forrad, a fellow student in the Department of English. Ian was sitting in front of a stack of Turkish dictionaries, just on the point of finishing one of the curries and stews which were served, on a rotating basis, each night at the bar. He was picking at something stuck between his teeth, a look of mild disgust on his face. Unlike Michael, whose work was in disarray, Ian had not only finished his thesis, but also had a contract to publish it as a book. On top of that, he had already secured a job at a university in Anatolia, starting next summer. Meanwhile, he was working nights in a kebab shop to help improve his Turkish, whilst waiting for his viva voce.

"Heard from Andrea?" Ian had asked, looking up as Michael approached.

Michael put his pint of IPA onto a table, then sat down. He took a first sip of beer. “No,” he said. “I’m not sure her mother’s even forwarding my letters.”

“Don’t you know where she is?”

“Somewhere in Bavaria,” said Michael. “I think.” That was the last he had heard, after Andrea had got back from her trip to Switzerland.

Ian began packing his dictionaries into a canvas bag. “I’m working tonight,” he said, standing up. He looked down at Michael, considering. “You can’t wish for things too hard, you know. If you ask me, the moment’s passed. Even if you got Andrea back, it would never be the same.”

Michael drank his pint slowly after Ian had left, thinking about what he had said. Was that true? Would all of his efforts be in vain, even if – however unlikely that might be – he somehow managed to persuade Andrea to come back?

When Merlin Carter came into the bar and bought himself a drink, long after Michael would normally have gone back to his flat, Michael was staring into the bottom of his empty glass.

“You look down in the dumps,” Merlin said, smiling. He pulled off and began wiping down his thick glasses, which had fogged as soon as he entered the room. “Still mooning over Andrea?” he asked.

“I’m ok,” said Michael. “Been working late?”

“Just setting up some experiments,” said Merlin, sipping from his gin and tonic. “I’m going to run them over the holiday period. I love working when the Department’s empty. It makes me feel like I own the whole damn place.”

Michael nodded, as if he understood that. But, in fact, he could not imagine ever feeling like he owned any part of the Department of English. It must be different in the Department of Psychology, which lay on the other side of George Square, where Merlin worked in an old building that, with its glass conservatory roof and railed balconies, from the inside resembled Michael’s imagination of a Victorian tuberculosis sanatorium.

Michael and Merlin had met in the week of their arrival in Edinburgh. At first, it had been a welcome novelty when Merlin said he was working in parapsychology.

“What else could I do with a name like mine?” Merlin had smiled.

Merlin had explained that the Chair of Parapsychology at the university had been established in 1985 after a bequest from Arthur Koestler, the celebrated writer. With strange glee, he added that the bequest had been made following the double suicide in 1983 of Koestler and his wife, Cynthia: as if such a Chair, established in any other way, would not have had the same legitimacy.

“Why did Koestler give all that money to Edinburgh?” Michael had asked.

“He didn’t. He merely asked that a Chair of Parapsychology be set up at a British university. But he appointed John Beloff as his executor. And Beloff had been teaching parapsychology at Edinburgh university since the sixties. So, after it had first been turned down by Oxford and Cambridge, Beloff brought the bequest to Edinburgh.”

“I meant what for?” Michael said. “What did Koestler think would be gained by giving the bequest?”

But Merlin had merely smiled at that, appearing more gleeful than ever.

On the afternoon of the day on which he had walked across Buccleuch Place on the way to his morning meeting, Michael, with the events of that distant December still playing on his mind, had clicked onto the website of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit. A ghastly black and white photograph of the cadaverous face of John Beloff was still prominent, amidst links to articles on subjects such as levitation and ESP. Only a click away was a blog by the current Chair of the Unit, in which (Michael read whilst half watching from his office window the fog finally lifting off the Pentland Hills) the Chair writes that, following all that bad publicity in the early days of the Unit, her own dream, in finally becoming Chair, had at last come true: the opportunity to dedicate her life, without interference or ridicule, to

exploring the outer limits of the agency of the paranormal in our own world. The rest of the blog was dedicated to an elaboration of the Chair's current research, including something about a re-testing of the psi hypothesis with a new variation on the ganzfeld method. Reading that blog, Michael had found himself struck again by the natural ability of the academic, even if working in the most exciting of fields, to make her or his own work sound tedious. Perhaps, Michael reflected, swivelling in his chair, that was why he and Merlin had only ever discussed each other's work on such a very few occasions?

Alone in his office that afternoon, Michael found himself again clicking back to that photograph of John Beloff, who appeared to be staring at something left of camera with an air of quiet contentment, as if congratulating himself once again on his outlandish luck in having brought the Koestler bequest to Edinburgh.

"You won't take a break over Christmas?" Michael had asked on that far away December evening, whilst he and Merlin were finishing their drinks in the postgraduate bar.

"No plans to," replied Merlin.

"Fancy doing something? Seeing as we're both at a loose end?"

For a moment Merlin looked, Michael thought, as if he were gearing up to say that he, at least, was not at a loose end. But instead, placing his gin and tonic down on the table, with a frown at a smear of dirt on the bottom of the glass, he looked Michael suddenly in the eye. "Sure, why not?" he said. "What have you got in mind?"

"Nothing in particular," said Michael. "I was thinking of hiring a car and driving up into the Highlands. I promised to be with my parents over Christmas. But maybe we could pick up a last-minute deal at a hotel for New Year's Eve?"

Next day, Michael did some research on a computer in the empty David Hume Tower. Finally, he came across what looked like a good deal, at the Greywood Links Golf Hotel in Fife. The hotel had just been built; all of its facilities were not yet open. For that reason, there were special offers still available. It was not quite the Highlands, but the spot looked interesting and the deal hard to beat.

"I appreciate being able to do my own bookings," said Michael, when he met Merlin the next evening in the postgraduate bar. "When I first used to visit Andrea in Germany, nothing was online. You had to queue in that travel centre on South Clerk Street, deal with its surly agents, take whatever flights and hotels they deigned to give you."

"Make the most of it while you can," said Merlin, this time inspecting his glass before he drank. "You'll be back in that travel centre after the Millennium Bug has done its work."

After a few dreary nights with his parents, Michael travelled back by train to Edinburgh and spent a sleepless night at the window of his South Clerk Street bedroom: thinking of Andrea, listening to drunken cries rising up from the street, wondering about the experiments Merlin would have been running over Christmas in that sanatorium-like building on George Square, with equipment paid for by Koestler's bequest.

Early on the morning of the thirtieth of December, Michael picked up their hire car and drove to Morningside to collect Merlin from his flat on Woodburn Terrace. They drove over the Forth Road Bridge and into Fife, stopping for a late pub lunch after an enjoyable walk along the coast.

They arrived at the Greywood Links Golf Hotel just after three o'clock. Surveying, with disappointment, the low-rise concrete building, they decided to take another walk before checking in. They parked in a desolate space at the back of the hotel, at the edges of which piles of bricks and sand from the recent construction remained, then took a sandy track down to the beach. After a mile or two another track led back up onto the coast road. They followed it and came out in front of a pleasant looking pub with views out to sea, in which they decided to have a drink and then, after they had finished their drink, dinner. By the time they got back to the hotel it was after nine o'clock: pitch dark, so that they had hardly been able to find their way. They were both tired and, deciding to save themselves for New Year's Eve, they checked in at reception, parting only when led to rooms in different wings of the hotel.

Next morning, Merlin noticed immediately that something was wrong with Michael, who spoke little over breakfast, seemed distracted, looked tired. Merlin knew all about Andrea. It would have been natural to assume that Michael had been once more turning the saga around in his head all night. Consequently, Merlin asked no questions and, as planned, they set off straight after breakfast to visit a nearby ruined abbey, afterwards stopping for lunch in a recommended pub. For their last act of the day of the new Millennium's eve, they took an afternoon's walk as described in a guidebook obtained at the hotel.

"I have to tell you something," said Michael when they met in the lobby that evening.

After their walk, they had agreed to take an hour or so's break, then meet for a drink in the bar. Dinner was included in their package, so there had been no need to reserve a table. No need in any case, Merlin thought, as he passed the empty restaurant on his way to the lobby.

Looking at the lopsided expression on Michael's face, Merlin asked, "What's up?"

"It'll be easier to explain in my room," said Michael. "I'm sorry, but I've decided I can't stay here tonight."

Michael trotting straight up a nearby set of stairs, Merlin had little choice but to follow. Coming out onto a first-floor landing, which smelt even more strongly of new paint than did the corridors in Merlin's wing, Michael led the way towards a door. He keyed himself in and walked into an enormous room with windows looking out towards a part of the hotel's unfinished golf course on one side, the sea on another. Merlin took in at a glance, eyebrows raised, the plush red curtains, armchairs in a corner, filled bookcases, displays of magazines, and low table on which rested a bowl of fruit and flowers wrapped in cellophane.

"I guess they offered me the suite because I made the booking," said Michael. "There're only a handful of other guests in the hotel."

"My room isn't bad," said Merlin. "But this is amazing."

"Here's the bedroom," said Michael, opening folding double doors and moving into another room almost as big as the first. This room was dominated by a huge bed. Lying in that bed with the doors folded open, Merlin saw, you would have had a magnificent view straight out to sea.

Now, Michael was standing by the side of the bed, saying nothing.

"What?" Merlin asked, finally.

"You'll probably have experienced things like this before," said Michael. "Not me, though."

"Don't tell me you saw a ghost," said Merlin, a smile flickering about his lips.

"Something woke me in the middle of the night. At first, I thought it was just waves crashing on the beach. But then I saw a figure at the bottom of my bed. I had a moment of panic. Then I guessed it could be a member of the staff. There're so many doors into this suite. Maybe, I thought, someone accidentally keyed themselves in?"

"What happened next?"

"The figure began to move, very slowly, around the bed. Towards me."

"And?"

"When it got about halfway, I shut my eyes. I was shaking with fear. There was a strange perfume. A sense of pure evil. I was thinking that, at any moment, it would reach down and touch me. I lost track of time. When I finally opened my eyes, somehow it was morning. I must have slept. There was no trace of anyone."

Merlin moved towards the spot where Michael said the figure had first materialised. He looked down at the patch of floral carpet, then towards the nearest door. He took a notebook and pen out of his jacket pocket; scribbled something down.

"You don't think it was a dream?" Merlin asked, looking up.

"It wasn't a dream."

"How much could you see?"

"It was a young woman," said Michael. "Naked. At least, I could clearly see the outline of her figure."

"You were shaking with fear," said Merlin, nodding. "Anything else?"

"I don't know." Michael paused. "Sexual arousal, I guess. Somehow. Given how scared I was."

"You weren't tempted?"

"Tempted?" Michael said, surprised. "By what? I don't know. Maybe for a second."

"You weren't wondering what might happen if you ..."

"No. Blind fear was what I was feeling."

"I think you saw a succubus," said Merlin, looking up from his notepad with all the authority of a doctor confirming a diagnosis. "There are reports in all the traditions. Female demons. Men are said actually to have had intercourse with succubae."

Michael considered. "It's possible it was a cleaner. Maybe she didn't see me at first? Then, when I closed my eyes, she took the opportunity to get out?"

"That wouldn't explain your reaction, would it? Look, paranormal experiences often follow a traumatic event. They're a subconscious attempt to gain back control. There might be a connection with your state of mind. After what happened with Andrea, I mean. The uncanny experience of sleeping in such a large room might have been the trigger."

"I feel like I'm in one of your experiments."

"Not at all," said Merlin, turning a page of his notebook. "Look, let's continue this discussion over a drink downstairs. I understand how you feel. And it's up to you, of course. But I really want to stay here tonight. I don't want to go home. It's the Millennium, after all."

Michael, unconvinced, hesitated. Then a thought struck him. "Don't you see ghosts in old buildings?" he asked. "This one hasn't even been finished yet. How can it be haunted already?"

"No," said Merlin, ushering Michael through the door and closing it behind them. "In fact, sightings are actually much more often reported in new builds like this. You'd be surprised. Something about the disturbance caused by the construction."

Over the course of drinks in the bar, dinner in the restaurant, then more drinks back in the bar - by which point neither of them would have been able to drive back to Edinburgh, anyway - Michael was gradually persuaded to stay. The bed in Michael's room, Merlin had noticed, was so big it could easily have slept three people. Mid-way through the evening Merlin, looking sheepish, proposed to sleep that night in the bed with Michael: both, he quickly added, to provide comfort in case Michael was visited again, but principally in order to satisfy what he called his professional curiosity. He could hardly, he argued, let an opportunity like this pass him by.

Towards midnight, there were still only a few people in the bar. As clocks counted down towards the advent of the new Millennium, Merlin ordered yet more drinks and placed his laptop onto the table, the better to gauge any immediate effects of the Millennium Bug. Midnight came; toasts were exchanged; a roar of cheers came from the direction of the kitchen. Merlin attempted to log onto his laptop and found everything working as it had before. On a television screen behind the bar there were no scenes of planes falling from the sky, as some had predicted would happen when clocks struck twelve.

"No ghost in the machine, after all," said Merlin, laughing into his glass of Macallan single malt whisky.

Michael and Merlin soon retired to their shared bed, having first taken turns, rather self-consciously, to undress in the suite's luxurious bathroom. His head reeling from all the alcohol he had consumed that night, the last thing Michael remembered before going to sleep was his sense of bitter irony at finding himself in bed with Merlin on this of all New Year's Eves, rather than with Andrea, as in years before.

Much later, Merlin awoke with a raging thirst, a desperate need to urinate, and a feeling that he had forgotten something incredibly important. He stumbled out of bed and across the dark room, reaching for what he took to be the bathroom door. Only when he found himself out in the darkened hotel corridor, with the sound of the suite's door closing behind him, did Merlin realise his mistake. He was dressed only in his boxer shorts and, without his glasses, could not see much further than the end of his nose. He knocked on the door, calling for Michael to let him back into the suite. No response. He knocked harder and a dog began growling in a nearby room. He waited, then knocked again. The dog began barking, but still no response from Michael. Now fearful of waking up the whole hotel and being found wandering almost naked in the corridor, Merlin decided to find the nearest toilet. His need to urinate was now urgent. But, despite wandering through endless corridors for what seemed like an age, finding a toilet without his glasses on proved to be an impossible mission. To his great embarrassment, Merlin was eventually forced to urinate under a stairwell, in what he hoped was an isolated part of the hotel. Afterwards, steeling himself, he began the long walk to reception to ask the night porter if he could be let into his room.

Back in the suite, Michael awoke with a start. An icy pang of fear shot through his body as his hand flicked out to where Merlin should have been and, instead, found only empty space. That strange perfume again. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. Last night's figure was again outlined at the bottom of the bed, breasts clearly visible through a diaphanous covering. Once more, the figure began moving slowly around the bed towards him, until her face was just above his own. Beginning to succumb to temptation against his will, Michael, for a single moment in which fear and desire hung in the balance, started to turn his head slowly to look into the eyes of the succubus; until the point at which, fighting terror and paralysis, using all his strength, he at last succeeded in turning his head back onto the pillow, and wrenching his eyes away.

Ends



Dybbuk of My Daymares

By Dana L. Miller

I never had a taste for your tiny dreams,
never could get my mouth around your casuist cut creams
It was always my body and your snatch.
You're just another common rule follower;
perhaps that's why you were so shocked that I didn't follow any of yours?
Perhaps that's why you were just the knob
and I am still The Doors.

The fact that I take in the moment greater than you makes me your mother superior,
not the whipping post for your gnarled self-blame.
You: absurdly lobbying for bicycles on highways when you're the murder semi on every lane.
Try every Twit-ffirmative Action sop in your shriveled sack, baby.
You will only ever be a twat twiddling his non-opposable thumbs.

My body harbored your acts of rescue like it did your throwaway twins,
Like Red Riding Hood's basket for hire,
and maybe a week beyond that--just to draw your ire.
The 'twirlers,' you called them, and I thought:
One for each hand, like drumsticks. This must be the beat.

Spin your sticks as you might,
you couldn't make a fire in our or any other home;
your other helmet ever pointing toward your Rome.
Nothing is ever warm but the fury you feed on when
you can't shred me like you did all the documents that held the ugly truth.
You can't shred, period. It is something only rockstars do.

When you "asked" me to put them through your megalomaniacal meat grinder too,
I did that because I loved you
– but really only up to that day.
No, I didn't want them either, but not that way.
I think now how glad I am they retracted their periscopes, free will or no.
They were your betters too, in their bled-red peacoats.

What did it matter, all in all?
Anything you made is going to have that kind of pall,
and you made a pollinator's paradise of every girl,
then disappeared
at the first sign of real Rumspring-ahhhh (pleading the rum, but falsely).
I am content to seek the cool pocket in the sheets
With my inquisitive toe, with my unburned wing.



The Mytho-Poetic Garden Club

By Dan Belanger

I found the following poem written in long hand on a sheet of light green paper in the middle of the dining room table on the day that Bea disappeared:

Garden Secrets

I watered the garden today,
even though it looked like rain clouds,
rolling in across the Hudson from the Catskill Mountains to the north,
might do the trick
I just had to do it
-The roses, the black-eyed Susans, the echinacea, the impatiences-
everything looked so thirsty!
So I dragged out the hose, thinking
'Their beauty through our kind attention sustained'
Yet some things beginning to wane
the flocks grown tall and spindly
the leaves on the tomato plants beginning to wither
Soon it will be September, then fall will seep in, and sneak into winter,
where the garden will reach its last end
As the gardener's helper for these many years of our life together,
all I can muster is sorrowful acceptance
I think of all the hours that you, the head gardener, spent
diligently tending, gently nurturing,
Only to have it come to this
The depth of your emotion I cannot fathom
I haven't an inkling of the knowledge that you've attained
of the life/death cycle,
the seasons, the planet, our place in the universe
all the intimate garden secrets...
The August Garden makes me think of my mother and your father,
that year we lost them both,
like the flocks, your father in Jersey grew spindly
My mother in Massachusetts, a rose that began to wilt
lives that once bloomed so bright, in their last days blanching
In August there is a mellowing of exuberance,
though a relaxed resplendence still seems to shine
as if from deep down in the hearts of these plants
where something mysterious endures
See it in those last precious blossoms so bright,
their beauty intensified as they share with us a few final bursts of color before taking a bow, and falling to the earth
where they offer over their meager remains
to nourish the soil
that will bring about next year's garden all stars
As I soaked the ground around the roses, tomato plants, and cucumbers
I thought yes,

it will all come to pass,
whether we tend the garden, or let nature take its course
And just as I turned off the water,
it started to rain...

Whether she'd ever intended to share the poem with me or to try to publish it, I will never know. I remember our very last conversation. It was on one of those rare Saturdays that we would spend separated from one another. I was working a street fair in the Morrisania section of the Bronx, handing out PrEP Awareness pamphlets, condoms and safer sex literature. While Bea usually joined me when I had to work weekend street fairs, her back, which she'd wrenched working in the garden, was bothering her that Saturday, so she stayed home.

"Take it easy today," I told her. "Get some rest."

"I will," she said, "but the garden needs watering."

"I know," I replied, "but be mindful of your back. Take lots of breaks. And no weeding, please!"

"You know I hate being told to be mindful, Ozzy!" she exclaimed. "It's worse than being told to be careful! Telling someone what to do never seems like a great way to wish them well. Why not just say you hope all goes well or that my back holds up?"

"I hope all goes well and that your back holds up," I snidely repeated.

"Too late, funny man!" she replied. "And I can't guarantee that I will not weed if there's weeding that needs to be done!"

"Okay," I laughed. "I hope you have a good day no matter what you do!"

"You too," Bea replied, giving me a peck on the cheek before shutting the door behind me.

When I returned from my outreach event, the house didn't feel right. It had a stillness to it. A deep silence, I thought. It made me shiver.

"Bea?" I called out, but there was no answer. I walked slowly through each room. She wasn't in any of them. The place was empty, so I looked out in the garden. A robin hopped across the lawn, and a few finches splashed in the bird bath, but that was it.

Where is she? I wondered. Her car's still in the driveway, so she couldn't have gone far. Perhaps she just went for a walk down by the river?

When a full day passed without her return, I inquired with neighbors to see if anyone had noticed her leaving the house. They hadn't. On the second day, I started calling around to some of our friends. No one had heard from her.

When, after three days, she still didn't return, I called the police. They searched the house, looking for clues, but found nothing.

"Well, at least there's no evidence of foul play," Officer Scott, a kindly older man of color offered.

"Maybe she just decided to take a trip," hypothesized Officer Collins, a young white policeman, as if such an absurd suggestion would bring any comfort.

"But all of her clothes and things are here," I replied. "Besides which, she'd never just leave without telling me. And she would definitely never leave her garden without giving me instructions on when to water and what part of the garden might need weeding."

"You said you found a poem that you think she wrote just after saying goodbye to you last Saturday?" Officer Scott inquired.

"Yes," I said, handing Scott the poem, "here it is."

Scott smiled and nodded as he read the first few lines.

"That's very nice," he said. "My mother wrote poetry. In long hand. She never tried to publish or anything. She just liked it. Said it kept her in touch with what's really important."

As Scott continued to read, though, his smile was replaced by a look of confusion.

“Is there something the matter?” I asked.

“No,” said Scott, “not really. It’s just that you said she’d never leave without giving you gardening instructions, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“But here it says that you were the head gardener,” he continued. “How do you explain that?”

“I can’t,” I told him. “I don’t know why she reversed our roles in her poem.”

“Maybe she was trying to tell you something,” Collins piped in.

“Don’t be a pest, Collins,” Scott chided his partner. “Can’t you see the man is upset enough?”

“I was just trying to offer some hope,” said Collins.

“Hope is not in our jurisdiction, Collins,” said Scott, turning, then, to address me. “We deal in facts. And in this case, Mr. Chanson, there simply aren’t any beyond the fact that your wife is gone.”

“What about her phone?” Collins redeemed himself by asking.

“I couldn’t find her phone,” I admitted.

“She must’ve taken it with her, then,” said Scott, handing me his card as he and Collins started walking towards the front door. “There’s nothing more we can do here. My advice to you is to be patient. Don’t jump to conclusions. Wait and see. If anything happens or you find anything that you think might help, give us a call.”

After the police left, I was immediately consumed by the deep silence that I’d experienced on the first day of Bea’s disappearance. A wave of sadness came over me then as I remembered Bea’s gray day green eyes, which turned blue in the sunlight, simmering down to cinnamon at sunset.

I walked out into the backyard garden. There were still some black-eyed Susans blooming, though many of them had dropped their petals, leaving only their dark centers. The rose bushes insisted on pushing out some new flowers, though not as many as they had in the height of the summer. The once rich green hues of the garden were beginning to fade like the memory of a lost loved one.

Still, there was something of Bea there. I felt her presence as integral to the little green oasis as the scent of the rose of rugosa. It was unmistakable. There were secrets in the garden, she wrote in her poem. What mysteries might be unlocked there? Where should I look?

Just then I heard the front gate open. I looked at my watch. 1:30. The mail, I thought. I walked around to the front of the house, opened the mail box, pulled out the mail, and sat down on the front steps to sift through the mix of envelopes, catalogues and circulars. There were bills from Con Ed, and Verizon. There was a catalogue from Orvis, and another from Foot Smart. There was a hand-written letter envelope. No doubt an advertiser trying to give it that human touch. But when I opened the envelope, I found instead a formal invitation written in script on a manila index card:

‘Ostinato Chanson,
You are cordially invited to join us
at the Annual Myth o-Poetic Garden Party’

The invitation included a time, date and address. I scratched my head, confused. The party started, the card said, at 1:34pm, the exact time that it was at that very moment. The date was August 30th. Today, I thought.

The address was 223 Bay Street, which was just around the corner. I put the rest of the mail back in the mailbox, and walked down Simpson towards Bay. When I reached 223, I walked up the wooden front porch steps and knocked on the green door of the little white colonial. A tall, handsome woman with snow white hair and blue, crystal-clear eyes answered the door dressed in a black shawl and jeans.

“They’re out back,” she informed me, gesturing towards a little path that led down the side of the house. “Cyrus has just begun to speak.”

I thanked her and took the path to the backyard where a group of about fifteen or twenty mostly older men sat in a circle on fold-out metal chairs. A swarthy old man with scraggly gray hair and dark brown eyes stood bent over a crooked wooden cane, talking to the group in a mellow tone of voice that sounded something like the cooing of a morning dove.

“Now we all know that the ancient practice of gardening can be traced back to early Man who gardened as a matter of survival, growing only vegetables and herbs. As civilizations rose, those who gained wealth and social status over others kept gardens for their beauty, having their servants or slaves tend them.

“The ancient Egyptians built garden houses with closely planted trees creating shady walls, their broad, green canopies the roof tops. They interspersed a variety of date, fig and nut trees. Gardens were planted for specific gods, the Egyptians believing that the gods loved gardens as much as they did.

“An oral history of Egyptian garden myth was passed down to us by gardeners throughout history from the slaves who tended the gardens planted for the gods. One of the key beliefs of the slave gardeners was that the spirit of the gardener remained in the garden after the gardener died.

“It was Nour, a young Egyptian who sold himself into servitude to pay off a debt to a rich man, who first learned how to fully integrate himself into the garden that he tended.

“When he realized that he would never make enough to pay off his debt, Nour escaped a life of servitude by dissolving into the lovely Garden of Ra, the sun god. Legend has it that Ra tutored Nour in transmutation, which Ra, speaking in silent light rays streaming through the garden plants, referred to as the art of becoming.

“We are not ourselves, until we become what we love, Ra warmly intimated, beaming through the roses and the flocks and the daisies. I, myself, was once but an ember in the afterglow of the original flame.

“The journey of becoming ends at the intersection of all things, Nour heard Ra say as he found his way to a point on the edge of the garden where Ra splashed shadow with light, mingling worlds of spirit and substance.

“If you look closely, said, Ra, you will see the parade of flowering plants as an endless procession in which life and death march forever towards and away from one another, all things ending at the point of beginning.

“Nour felt himself beginning to come apart, dispersing like dandelion seed into the garden, becoming not any one plant or bloom, but an integral part of the whole.

“His two assistant gardeners, Sabra, who was secretly in love with Nour, and Kamilah, who was secretly in love with Sabra, were crushed. Following the teachings of Nour, they attempted to integrate themselves into the garden, but without success. Finally, unable to go on in the absence of the one she loved, Sabra asked Kamilah to help unite her with Nour.

“As slaves throughout history have escaped the suffering of their enslavement through song and verse, followers of Nour escaped through the green poetry of the gardens that they nourished. Those who followed Nour’s teachings to a tee reached such heights of enlightenment that they became one with their gardens, achieving the green metamorphosis. Others found their way into the next world by following the path of Kamilah and Sabra.

“We of the Mytho-Poetic Garden Club have learned that myth, unlike legend, is not only real, but true. It is the voice of humanity singing in the chorus of nature. Storytelling is our bird call.

“It’s been many years since Salvia Jardin, the founder of our Club, disappeared into her garden. Since then, we have strived to maintain the tradition by selecting one gardener to attempt to merge with their garden each year.

“On the Day of Nour, that gardener attempts to complete the green metamorphosis. It was only with the most recent attempt that we finally achieved success; this year’s Mytho Poet Select having merged completely with her garden! We hope to keep our success alive with next year’s selected gardener who will have a full year to gain as much enlightenment as possible in preparation for the transmutation.”

“Excuse me,” I said, shouting from where I stood in the back of the yard by some privet bushes.

“Yes?” the old man whose name, presumably, was Cyrus, responded.

“If successful transformation is scarce,” I, in spite of my deep concern about Bea’s disappearance, couldn’t stop my snarky self from snidely remarking, “why do you only attempt one a year? Why not increase your chances by attempting several?”

“Who are you,” the old man wanted to know.

“I received this invitation in the mail,” I told him.

“Ah, yes, of course! Ostinato Chanson, welcome,” he said warmly. “Cyrus Baumgartner at your service.”

“My wife has disappeared,” I, returning to my senses, told him. “Do you know anything about that?”

“The truth will reveal itself in time,” he said with a nod and a smile.

“My wife is missing,” I said flatly. “I want answers now.”

“And you shall have them,” Cyrus promised. “To answer your first question, transmutation can only occur on the Day of Nour. Besides, we have no need of increasing our chances. We’ve learned and applied the truth of Sabra and Kamilah. Of course, we only go that route when absolutely necessary. If our Mytho Poets have any degree of success whatsoever in their attempt to trans-mutate, we accept it as a partial metamorphosis. There’ve been many semi-successful transmutations of this nature.

“Mrs. Jankowski transformed into this lovely Azalea you see growing in the corner of the garden. If you listen closely, you can still hear her heart, which never fully changed, beating at the center of the bush. Mr. Blake became that patch of tiger lilies blooming in the middle of the garden. At the center of each bloom you can see something like a candle glowing. That is the lingering fire from Mr. Blake’s eyes. To the right of the lilies, there’s Mr. Elliot, that red maple shrub that seems to quiver even when the air is perfectly still. He was a very anxious man, that Mr. Elliot. On the far-left side of the garden, you’ll see the tragic beauty of Mrs. Woolf, the first ever absolutely sullen butterfly bush.

“I’ve transplanted all of our partial successes into my garden here so that the alum of the Mytho-Poetic Garden Club can be together. Your wife was the only full success that has been recorded since our founder. That’s why we were so dead set on getting you to join. No doubt you’ve learned some key lessons under her tutelage.”

“What have you done with her?” I demanded to know.

“I’ve done nothing,” Cyrus replied. “She is your garden now. Enjoy her.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I cried.

“Nevertheless,” Cyrus exclaimed, “your wife is the first Mytho Poet to complete the green metamorphosis in a hundred years!”

“Lunacy,” I cried, “Why would anyone want to disappear into their garden?”

“Things have gone too far since we’ve lost the art of spiritually becoming one with our world,” said Cyrus. “The only way now that we can save the planet is to literally become the planet.

“If we can map the path of transmutation, we can show humanity the way. The only way to survive now is to surrender, to stop fighting our world, and to instead join with it. We can do it. Your wife kept notes. She shared her early findings. She continued to document her learnings but she never passed her later writings on to us. If we can find her notes, and follow them, I think we can prove our theory. It won’t be long then. And if, for some reason we fail, we can always apply the truth of Sabra and Kamilah.”

“What is that truth?” I asked.

“I have described here only one branch of truth,” said Cyrus. “There are many others.

“The Celtics celebrated the August feast, Lughnasadh, a lamenting of the end of summer, and a looking forward with hope to the harvest of the Autumn. While those who tended the fields technically were not gardeners but farmers, those who gained the wisdom that arises through living close to nature learned the secret, and, like Nour, disappeared into their fields. There are many more such tales.

“Reincarnation and transmutation myths can be found in eastern and western cultural traditions. Native Americans believe in a spirit world that the dead enter after shedding the flesh of this world. Gnostic myth holds that the secrets of metamorphosis exist in the very atoms. Humans, they say, like all things that exist, are made up of matter, energy and consciousness. At the most basic level, we are mutable. Change is an inevitable, and natural process. By observing the natural changes of the seasons, we can learn how to harness this change. We gardeners can become our gardens.”

“That’s not the truth I was asking about, and you know it” I angrily replied.

“What truth, then?” Cyrus asked as innocently as a school child.

“You know which,” I said. “The truth of, what did you call them, Saba and Kamilah.”

“That truth can only be leaned through experience,” Cyrus replied cryptically.

“I’m going to the police,” I said, abruptly turning to walk away.

“Wait!” Cyrus implored with arms raised in a way that made him look like a withered old tree shaking frail limbs in the wind.

Just then, the old woman came out the back door with a tray of sandwiches.

“Have a sandwich,” the aged orator entreated.

“Berceuse Aubade,” I, ignoring the old woman, said dead seriously.

“What,” said Cyrus.

“Her name,” I explained.

“Yes, of course” said Cyrus, smiling fondly. “I knew her well.”

“Why don’t I know you?” I asked with suspicion.

“You were always working,” he explained. “After she had her accident, she had time on her hands. She used to go for walks around the neighbourhood.”

““What of it?” I said, annoyed that this total stranger knew more than I about a whole segment of Bea’s life.

“Well,” he said with brow slightly raised, no doubt in mild annoyance at what he must have considered my ongoing impertinence, “that’s how we met.”

“How come she never told me about you?” I asked.

“She thought you’d be sceptical,” he explained. “You see I told her all about the Mytho-Poetic Garden Club. “

“That’s the name of the club on my invitation,” I told him what he already knew.

“Yes,” he humored me with a reply. “We slipped it in your mailbox, knowing that you tended to check for the mail every Saturday around 1:30.”

“Why?” I asked.

“You’re next in line,” he said plainly.

“Next in line for what?” I asked.

“Nature’s eternal poem must never end,” he replied mysteriously. “And so our work must go on.”

“Ya, well, I’m going on now,” I said, turning to exit the garden.

“Do what you think is right,” Cyrus said, handing me a small red chapbook, “but please, before you condemn us, read this.”

“I’ll let the police read it for me,” I snidely remarked, leaving the premises.

Back home, I stopped myself before calling the police, thinking how absurd my story would sound. I decided to hold off until I had more information. It occurred to me, then, that the real reason that I’d chosen not to call the cops had nothing to do with evidence. As shocking as it seemed to me in the moment, I had to admit that the reason

I didn't call was because I wanted to believe Cyrus Baumgartner.

I flopped down on the couch, tossing the little red book down beside me. A few minutes later, I picked it up and opened it to the title page.

“Salvation Through Sacrifice: A Ritual for Saving the Planet”

by Cyrus Baumgartner

I flipped to page one and read the first line: to save the planet, we must become the planet. On page two, I read a paragraph entitled “A Message from Cyrus.”

“You will notice,” the message read, “that the rest of the pages in this volume are blank. That is because the only true wisdom comes from experience. You must fill these pages with reflections you have while tending to your garden. There are 365 pages left in the book. When each page is full, it will be time...”

I groaned. What rubbish!

I closed the book, put it down, and went out into the garden.

I felt my mind slipping into the green things. Like rain, I thought, that slides off leaves, into soil to nourish the earth. I realized, in that instant, that this was not unique. It happened every time that I entered the garden. What was different was that I was now aware of it. It felt like my material self was dissolving as it did each moment that I spent in the garden.

Over the next year, I spent most of my free time thinking about the garden, and I thought my way to some odd notions, many of which I did jot down in the little book, which I used as notes to piece this story together. I thought, for one, that everything in the garden only existed because of the garden. Without it, the tomato, the sunlight, the rose petal would not exist. The bee and the butterfly. The morning. They were all one thing and so was I when I was there and aware. When I wasn't there, I was nowhere. While I was commuting, at work, or at home, sitting on the couch, watching TV, I did not exist. I was only alive when in the backyard, letting myself float out into it until all thought and emotion dissipated, and I became the garden.

It was a feeling of deep calm that I kept with me throughout the winter, writing a few sentences to describe it each day in the little red book.

When spring came, I grew a vibrant green space, which plumped to potential as summer brimmed with awesome opulence. I barely noticed Autumn as it began its slow creep in with early signs of seasonal withering.

I knew then that it would not be long.

When the Day of Nour arrived, I stepped out into the backyard, half-expecting to see Cyrus and his creepy club cronies waiting for me there. But there was no one. It was just me and the garden. It was a muggy, gray late August morning. The cloudy sky began to spit rain, which reminded me of Bea's poem.

Standing perfectly still amongst the plants in silent meditation, I could feel my mind unravelling as memories pulled apart and blended with one another. Scraps of Mexico merged with Scotland. New York and San Francisco streets ran into one another. It's all really one place, I thought. City lights and little town squares are but blossoms in the human garden.

I felt my body begin to expand. It was painful at first, but as I began to transform, the pain went away. I felt myself sprouting leaves that grew out of my head and arms. My nose flowered into a bright red rose. Dandelions sprung from my ears. My arms and legs stretched and contorted into limbs of a dogwood tree. Tomatoes sprouted from my toes. I could feel my mind spreading in a mist through the garden. But something brought me back. There was a deep thud. Then a scream. Was that me?

“Stop!” someone shouted. Opening my eyes, I saw Cyrus, and two other ancients whom I did not know, standing over me with axes raised above their heads. Running towards them was Officer Scott, his gun drawn.

“I'm sorry, Ozzy,” said Cyrus, his voice trembling with excitement as he lowered his ax, “but sometimes the magic needs some realistic assistance. That is the secret of Saba and Kamilah. You didn't need the help, though. I saw it happening for you, but it was too late. I had already swung the axe.”

"I saw it, too," said one of the other ancient men.

"So did I," said the other. "That's why I didn't follow through on my swing."

"You saw what?" I faintly inquired.

"Your toes!" the first old man giggled with glee. "Your nose!"

"The tomatoes!" the second exuberant elderly man exclaimed. "The rose!"

"But when the axe grazed your shoulder, you harkened back to human form," Cyrus sadly added.

"You have the right to remain silent," Officer Scott interjected as he snapped handcuffs on Cyrus and his accomplices.

"I found her," I said in a daze.

"Who?" asked Officer Collins who appeared just then, walking around the corner of the house with three other police officers.

"Bea," I said. "She's here."

"It's a strong possibility, I'm afraid," Officer Scott said grimly. "She very well may be buried in her garden."

"No," I replied. "She's not buried in her garden. She is her garden."

"You've had a shock," said Scott. "There'll be an ambulance here soon. Sit tight."

"What was it like," Cyrus asked. "You're the only one who's ever returned to tell."

"I could feel her all around me, wrapping me up in the warmth of the earth,"

I said.

Collins and Scott cuffed the two other old men, reading them their rights as they pushed them into squad cars. I was lifted on a stretcher into the back of the ambulance, which turned into Bea's earthen arms just before everything went black.

When I awoke, I saw Scott standing over me.

"Mr. Chanson" he said with a sigh. "I'm afraid I have some very bad news, so please brace yourself."

"What is it?" I asked, a shiver crawling down my spine.

"Cyrus confessed," he said, looking down. "They killed her in the same way they tried to kill you. I'm sorry."

I got out of the hospital the next day, in time to see Collins supervising a team of city workers who were digging up our garden with shovels, picks and a small bulldozer. I was paralyzed with fear as I waited for them to make their dreadful discovery. It took two and a half days for the crew to dig and carefully search through every inch of dirt in our backyard. When they finally finished, it was clear that Bea was not there.

"I can't understand it," Cyrus said. "That's where we buried her."

Next, the city tore up Cyrus's Garden, but they found no remains there either. Even so, Cyrus and the two other axe-wielding men were tried for Bea's murder.

As the trial ensued at Westchester Supreme Court, Cyrus's attorney, a middle-aged balding white man named Jerry Anders entered a plea of innocence by reason of insanity.

"Why?" the conservatively attired prosecutor, a handsome young woman of colour named Sarah Saunders asked.

"It's good for the planet," Cyrus replied defiantly.

"So you did it for the environment?" Ms. Saunders remarked sarcastically as she continued to press Cyrus for the truth. "It wasn't because you enjoyed tricking your victims to see the look of horror on their faces as they realized they'd been duped just before you killed them?"

"Objection," Attorney Anders protested.

“Sustained,” Judge Jesus Del Huerto, an elegant old Puerto Rican gentleman, pronounced before Cyrus, whose eyes seemed to twinkle, just then, with devilish delight, had a chance to respond.

The trial was over in a week, the jury deliberating for just under three hours before awarding the defence their insanity verdict. Cyrus’ accomplices were convicted of attempted murder in separate trials, both sent to Fishkill State Prison. Cyrus was remanded to Gray Moor State Hospital where he was allowed to plant and tend a large garden, the psychiatric team considering gardening to be highly therapeutic.

Although her body was never found, Bea’s still here in her garden, which, despite being demolished by the police, bloomed again the very next spring.

End



Metacom’s Belt

By David Punter

Shipped to England
apparently, as a gift
to the king

James the First and Sixth,
Defender of the Faith,
drooler of the first order

Whether he would have
appreciated the signs
of wampum perhaps

Remains obscure. White
and purple beads, fruit
of whelk and quahog

A form, a shape, of writing
but an unauthorised
version; unversed

Fingers made these signals
as though in smoke
impermanent, transitory

Which is no doubt why
they vanished in transit
and nobody ever admitted

To receiving them, smoky
like the Milky Way
on a dim night at sea

Yet perhaps even now
the wampum belt of kings
might be languishing

In drawer or cupboard,
collection or library,
protected by privilege,

By signs of greater potency
than a writing erased by the sea,
silenced again by power

The rules say the Bible
and the sword; power of print
and violence of empire.

Crossing the Bridge

By Alicia Thompson

I fumble in my handbag on the passenger seat and locate a plastic box of Tic Tacs. I flick it open and pop one into my mouth as I check my rear view mirror. There's a van behind me, and it's tailing my small Honda like an elephant in musth. I'm doing the speed limit of seventy kilometres and feeling nervous because I'm in the middle lane on the Harbour Bridge, so narrow and with only a painted line separating the reverse flow as it whips by.

I check my watch as I climb the northern approach, ready to slip under one end of that soaring metal rainbow.

There's a gap in front of me, so I accelerate to get away from the nosing van. I hear distant car horns in the traffic up ahead. My eyes flick to the rear view mirror. Car horns. Look front — young man will hit staring white-flash-blue-eyes-impact-pain —

Release.



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I am here, but not here. I watch from nearby — an unseen grandstand seat — an echo of my adrenaline still roaring. The Tic Tac is stuck in my throat.

I watch, feeling shaken, in a void of stilled breath, as the aftermath unwinds into realisation. Acrid smoke rises, and tyres gingerly crunch and pop over glass and twisted, gleaming metal, that snags on other ragged metal, and squeals, plinks, and then rattles, as the broken bits fall to the tar.

My poor car is not a car any more. The van has consummated its lust, its nose crushed up to the back of my seat, while the frontal assault has concertinaed my car back to the van's bumper. The white Holden crumpled up to the Honda's nose completes the ménage à trois. Underneath the Honda, blood has begun to drip in a quietly growing pool.

And he is here with me. His eyes frozen open, and like me, observing from the sideline.

We watch dazed commuters drag themselves out of their damaged vehicles, dismayed this has happened to them. The distant keen of sirens is heard with relief as unhurt cars slink by, and people with their pounding hearts and their minds blanked of previously buzzing, urgent thoughts, gather across three lanes, not daring to speak.

It takes three hours to clear the scrunched metal and extract as much of me out of the wreck as possible. He is still in one piece, his head smashed, despite the airbag. The driver of the van has to be cut out; he and his broken legs are eventually eased onto a stretcher and posted into the back of the waiting ambulance. News choppers smelling carrion hover around the bridge, their incessant throbbing rhythm directing the scene. The ambos work coolly and professionally: the calm firmness of their voices balm for the horrified affected. I only see one of the uniformed people react — a young policewoman who retches and vomits on seeing part of my body, as the van is disengaged from the Honda.

And as I look at this yellow-haired youth next to me, anger and resentment finally surge up through jagged fissures in the fuggy layer of shock that is numbing my mind. *What the hell were you doing in my lane anyway, you maniac?* I scream loud and long but no one hears.

How could this happen now when I had such a great life and so much to look forward to? Why me?

My companion turns, his blue eyes pressing into me like two cold fingers.

Why not you?

We are lifted by an invisible tide, compelled into a flow of movement and yet seemingly fused together. We are everywhere and nowhere all at once.

We are in his airless inner west bed-sit. Traffic pours past on the road beyond the window and its grimy blinds.

Some letters lie on the mat inside the door. One from a bank, one from a real estate agent marked Urgent, and another embossed with US stamps.

The kitchen on the left side of the room is a feast of laminated particleboard, swelled and chipped in places; a rust smear starting at the base of the tap divides the sink in two. Above the sink, limp grey lace partly shields the view to the back end of a restaurant where garbage bins loiter. The carpet is rippled and brown with loose threads everywhere.

A pizza box with blooms of absorbed fat, containing three nibbled crusts, sits on the floor in front of a reclaimed couch with cigarette burns on the arms. Two empty VB cans lie next to it. A small bar fridge contains an out-of-date milk carton full of sour junket, a small jar of honey with its remaining inch turned to sugar, and a liberal spattering of black mould.

Next to the single futon rolled out on the floor, hidden in a bedside drawer, I can see a framed photo of a snowy-haired boy with his small arms wrapped around the neck of a German Shepherd, both of them sporting open-mouthed grins.

Two red plastic chairs and another of wood are keeping awkward company around a circular melamine table that has a folded piece of cardboard under one of its legs. In the middle of the table is a terracotta bowl overflowing with squashed cigarette butts and ash. It is pinning down a stack of letters that give off an air of rejection. Propped up against the bowl, the reverse side of one of them has been recycled to say FUCK YOU ALL in thick black Texta.

Waves are pushing and pulling at us. We're in front of a large stone house in Castlecrag with a paved drive sloping down to the road. My family home. I am surprised to see the lawn is less than immaculate.

I'm anxious to see how Mum and Dad are, but the snide voice of my companion intrudes on my thoughts. *Must be nice having money.*

I turn on him. *Well it didn't save me from spending the rest of eternity with an utter dickhead, did it?*

My fiancé Paul is waving back to my parents as he descends the front steps. For a moment I'm torn between them, but the pull from my parents is stronger, more visceral. They stand at the open door until he drives away. The sight of them helps me shake off my anger and I swallow hard. This Tic Tac is driving me insane.

I get closer as Dad puts his arm around Mum's shoulders and draws her back into the house. I can feel my mother's fragility in my whole being — the smallest jar sending shockwaves.

They sit down together on the soft leather lounge in the front room with its view over the water to Seaforth. Mum's head droops down to Dad's shoulder and I feel how emotionally exhausted she is.

"This will sound terrible, Dean, but something in me is relieved that he never got to marry Nicole."

Dad turns and kisses the top of Mum's head, and I wish I could just squeeze into that circle of comfort.

"Yes, love." He lets out a deep sigh that disturbs her hair. "I know what you mean."

My heart is feeling loose and it threatens to slip out of my body and remain with my parents. I want simply to stay and watch over them, but I am now just as keen to catch up with Paul. There's an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I need the reassurance of his presence.

I've dragged Craig to my flat in Neutral Bay. While he amuses himself inspecting my CD collection, my anxiety levels rise as I feel Paul coming up in the lift. He is not alone.

The key turns in the lock and Paul enters the flat. My friend Susan follows him in.

Paul strides over to the balcony and slides the door open to let in the harbour breeze. There is an unfamiliar vibe between them, as they stand next to each other. I'm aware of a great weight pressing down on him. My heart is pulling towards him: I want to comfort him, hold him tight; tell him I'm here.

"Some view, huh? No chance she might have left it to you?"

Paul sighs and hangs his head. "Nup. I'd been hinting for a while that we needed to update our super and wills and stuff, but she was happy to wait till we were married. I'd try and make a claim, but the legal fees would kill me."

"Her parents will give you something. Surely."

Paul snorts. "No chance. That bitch hated me right from the start."

Susan walks up behind him and puts her arms around his waist. My stomach bounces up into my chest.

"Shit timing all round," she murmurs against his back.

Oh my god, oh my god...

Paul shakes her off. "We need to get started. There should be some bags in the kitchen."

Paul continues to stand there for a moment with his hands clasped on top of his head, staring out at the harbour to the middle distance, forcing himself to calm down. Slowly images begin to form, and I get a clearer read on his energy. I can see the one and only thought that keeps bubbling up in his mind: the mountain of debt he thought could gradually be cleared once we were married. I see it taking the form of a water-logged doona pressing down on him until he can no longer move or breathe.

Finally, he snaps to. He starts in the bedroom. He goes through every cupboard and drawer looking for things that are his, or that might logically be his, if he were ever questioned. He starts a pile on the bed that begins with his gym bag and some dry-cleaning, but soon grows as he adds my ipod and the limited edition Max Dupain print he's always admired. In the lounge room, Susan has piled up some books she wants, and Paul spends a good fifteen minutes picking out twenty of my CDs and a further assortment of DVDs. My man is nothing if not systematic.

He eyes off my Riedel wine glasses for a long moment, and then thinks better of it when he can't find a safe container for them. To compensate himself, he grabs all of the bottles in my wine rack.

While I watch all of this I am wild-eyed and absolutely fuming. My hands are tight balls of pain and if sheer determination were enough to bring my antique dresser crashing down on his head as he walked past, I would do it. I feel like I'm suffused with heat as I zip and bounce around the room like a March fly. I had no idea he was such a... such a-a crumb-bum!

I am so caught up in Paul's accumulating acts of betrayal I have completely forgotten my shadowing twin. Until, that is, I suddenly hear *Crumb-bum?* echo derisively in my mind.

My, you have been brought up nice. This pathetic arse wipe, this parasitical cockroach parading as a man, was going to be your husband? You actually slept with this fucking spirochete? I'm beginning to think you owe me one, honey...

The fire in my head is so overwhelming as I pause to focus on this guy who dares to judge, that instead of the roar of vitriol he deserves, all that comes out is a choking gush of tears.

Paul and Susan are still busy hurrying back and forth carrying off their booty. They have made two trips down to the car, and by the time Paul returns on his own for the last time, I'm cried out.

I must have been standing stunned and still for a long time before I realise my twin is right beside me. When I look into his face, I realise how grateful I am not to be completely alone right now.

He raises an eyebrow at me. *Only a complete worm would take Celine Dion and leave Van Morrison. You're better off without him, darl'.* He inclines his head away, indicating we should leave.

But I'm too fascinated and appalled to leave just yet. I cling on for a moment longer to watch Paul do a last reccie of the flat. As he walks past the plasma TV, aggrieved he can't justify nicking it too, he pauses to gaze at some photos of me with friends and family. Photos of us. I hold my breath hoping against hope for even the smallest sign of love or regret. He picks up a picture of us in our cozzies up at Hamilton Island. The day he proposed. He stares as if the people in the photo are strangers.

"Oh shit, Nicole. What a mess."

As the shock begins to lose its edge, I once again become aware of the mint pellet lodged in my throat. I go through the motions of exaggerated swallowing; I even try coughing it up. Nothing changes. The damned thing is determined to stay in limbo.

Suddenly I'm aware of being in the country. I have no idea where. The new environment has a slower, sadder feel that gently dissolves my immediate anger. But then I feel threads of tension in the air, dragging at me from this young man who is constantly by my side. I feel his presence tighten — take on armour. We are in a kitchen with dull orange and olive laminated surfaces. At the table an elderly couple sit opposite each other, but side-on to the table, facing the open door that leads outside.

"Do you want another cup?" she says to her husband.

He mentally shakes himself and drags a weather-beaten hand, all gnarled knuckles and veins, over his eyes. He turns to the centre of the table. "Yeah."

He drags the filled cup towards him and it judders over the seersucker tablecloth, spilling tea into its saucer. He adds milk and two sugars and sits tinkling his spoon in the cup for longer than is necessary.

"There must be something we can do for her parents."

He continues stirring.

"Maybe we should try and speak to them? Go to the funeral?"

He sighs and runs his hand over the tablecloth, sweeping off crumbs that aren't there. "Wouldn't do any good, Eadie. Might even make it worse for 'em."

Eadie clutches and unclutches her apron beneath the table and withdraws a balled-up tissue from its pocket to dab at her eyes.

"Some flowers...?"

He casts an eye in the direction of the lounge room with its arrangements of carnations and gladiolas on every flat surface, their sickly funereal odour wafting out and insinuating itself into the very fibre of the house.

“No.” He shakes his head with finality.

“They can’t be certain it was deliberate?” she says, pleading.

“Well, the autopsy will show if he was drunk or drugged up, the doctor said. Wouldn’t surprise me. You know the sorta crowd he’d fallen in with.” He pours some of his tea into his saucer to cool it. He lifts it for a meditative slurp and adds, “As good as murder, if he was.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Reg!”

“It’s true! Bloody good for nothing, never getting a proper job.”

The emotional effort of this outburst leaves Reg shuddering and weeping, one hand shielding his eyes as he lands a fist weakly on the table. “I never...I never understood him.”

I can feel the knifing pain in his heart as he smears the wetness on his face and digs for a hanky in his trouser pocket, which he then holds up to cover the bottom half of his face.

“But you loved him anyway,” says Eadie gently.

Reg responds with a violent blowing of his nose.

A man in a suit with a wall of green, red and brown leather volumes behind him, sits at a desk. There is a thin manila folder by his left side and he is opening some envelopes. He opens each one deftly with a chrome letter opener and makes notes on a pad to his right, his handwriting small and precise, noting the correspondence that will be necessary to send to Century 21 and ANZ Bank.

The third envelope gives him pause. He is careful to avoid damaging the foreign stamps as he slits it open. He extracts a single sheet of stiff cream-coloured paper. It has gold embossing at the top showing an outlined cityscape.

His eyebrows float upward and his eyes widen. The expression of bored routine leaves his face. He makes brisk notes, referring to the letter several times.

Mum refuses to let Dad sell my flat. During the day, when she says she’ll be visiting a friend, this is where she comes. She lets herself in and mopes around, just touching things, as if some little spark of me might catch or rub off. On really bad days she goes into my room, wraps herself up in my doona and cries herself to sleep.

I keep her company sometimes, willing the occasions to get shorter and for her to get stronger. They haven’t and she hasn’t. Craig is tetchy that we are constantly drawn back here when he’d rather be keeping an eye on other things.

Mum is asleep and I go out to join him on the balcony where he is sitting with his arms on raised knees.

He speaks without turning to look at me. *You know the worst thing about all this? I can’t even kill time with a fag.*

Eadie is on the phone. She covers the mouth of the receiver and raises her voice. “Reg? What’ve you done with that box of Craig’s things?”

There are some shuffling noises coming from the back verandah, but no response.

“Reg? That box! Have you seen it?”

“I haven’t done anything to it, woman!” he finally responds, clomping into the kitchen.

Exasperated, Eadie uncovers the phone. “I’m sorry, I’ll have to get back to you after I have a fossick around.” She pauses to listen. “Just let me find a pen. ‘Crossing the Bridge’, you say?”

Eadie’s expression is perplexed as she replaces the receiver.

“What was that all about?”

Eadie looks at her scribbled notes as if it all needs decoding. “It’s... it’s about a letter to Craig. It seems he’d written a play... seems he sent it to some people in America...” The hand holding the note slowly drops to her side as she looks at her husband. “It seems they want to buy it.”

Craig’s aura has increased and he has acquired a translucent glow. I can feel a different energy emanating from him, almost like he is trying to move real objects by force of will alone. This energy is dragging us all over the place, faster than before, bouncing around our invisible boundaries.

Mr Nicholas, the Gill family solicitor, negotiates the sale of rights to stage the play in five US states, starting with ten performances at the Chicago Theatre, with an option to buy more.

“That’s good news, Mr Nicholas,” Reg says cautiously when he hears the result, the whole situation completely out of his ken. He listens as Eadie stands close by. “No, I couldn’t even guess,” he says.

Eadie can hear the crackling of speech from the receiver in Reg’s hand. It drops away from his ear at the same pace Reg’s mouth falls open, his eyes meeting those of his wife.

She can now hear a tiny voice saying, “Mr Gill? Reg? Are you there?”

The play is a success. This is due in part to the mystery surrounding the writer and his premature death: a death that appears to be foretold in the play. Its notoriety gains critical mass until there are offers to ‘bring it home’ to Sydney.

The media attention has placed great strain on Mum and Dad, who have changed their phone number and paid for it to be unlisted, a thing they have never done before. Mum only answers the phone or the door if Dad isn’t home, and even then she often hides frozen, at the back of the house.

So I’m surprised to see her on the phone.

Dad is busy polishing a hole in the kitchen counter as he listens in. I feel a surge of love and concern for him. He’s doing his utmost but Mum is pushing him to limits he never knew he had. Even though it’s close to the second anniversary, she is still keeping regular appointments with her grief counsellor, clinging to her anger with Reg and Eadie, the only people left to hate, like it’s some kind of life preserver.

I’m nervously rubbing my throat, willing this Tic Tac to dissolve, *or something*. There’s a long pause as Grandma speaks, not allowing Mum to get a word in. Mum finally hangs up and looks at Dad with sullen eyes.

“Apparently we’re going to this play.”

The lights are extinguished for an exciting moment, signalling the disconnection from life outside, and then suddenly, the stage is lit up, propelling its hermetic world into motion. Craig and I have the best seats in the house. We hover somewhere high above the first few rows, although we also see it close-up on the stage and from every other conceivable angle. The male lead enters his uninviting flat. Anxiety rises in my throat as my first scene approaches.

I sense my mother's stillness; her rapt attention. The scenes devolve as the male lead's situation gets worse and the girl's approaches a more positive climax.

Then the accident cuts the flow in a blinding flash of lights and a cacophony of screeching tyres. Everything goes black. After a discreet pause, the house lights go up for interval. For a long moment, not a soul moves. They are stunned in their seats.

"A champagne, love?" my father asks.

Mum nods gratefully and he heads off to penetrate the horde. She looks around like a naked bird, feeling that everyone must know who she is. She makes her way over to the bookstall, as the ladies toilet is just behind it, but her progress is arrested when she sees copies of *Crossing the Bridge* on display.

Her dive for privacy momentarily forgotten, she is transfixed by the cover with its sepia photograph of the Sydney Harbour Bridge end-on, its stream of traffic blurred, imagining my little red Honda to be somewhere in that rushing flow, frozen and in tact. Her stomach tightens at the sight of Craig's name on the cover. She reaches out a faltering hand to lift the display copy from its Perspex stand. She riffles the pages backwards, taking nothing in until she arrives back at the front. There, in a small block of text in the middle of an offensively white page, is an explanatory note telling of the author's premature death and how the play was eventually published. Underneath there are a further four lines:

Reginald and Edith Gill would like to dedicate this play to the memory of
Nicole Kessler
who also died on the bridge that day.
She will be in our hearts always.

Eyes shut, Mum gently closes the book and presses her palm to the cover. Something feels different. There is a little spark of warmth in my mother's chest — a small tendril of forgiveness has just unwound in her heart.

It is now that I look for Craig, but he is now so faint, he is barely a mist of light. I can just make out a smile as I hear a murmur of breath pulsing in the air, *Stop... worrying... let... go...*

And so it happened, not long after Craig had moved on for good, I realised that things had shifted; I did somehow feel released.

I took a big breath and swallowed. There was no resistance.

Ends

Amelie is Moving Away

By Ekaterina Cruz Marquez Aguilar

I was going to wish her a happy birthday. Our relationship was very humane and close to the extent that, at the time of our breakup one could not think of accusing the other of anything that would leave behind an open sore, a hurt, or a hindrance which would make a relationship with another person impossible. Of course, I carried flowers. No sweets. Sweets are for lovers. I probably could get away with a phone call but just calling bordered on the betrayal of what we were and what we experienced together. We have done a lot for each other. That we, after all, remained just friends or even soulmates spoke volumes about our characters and what we had to go through.

Her home was really close, so I decided to put my needless musings aside and flash a sincere smile. Today, I wore simple but tasteful clothes. A bunch of her favorite chamomiles in my hand.

A familiar voice answered the door intercom; then it buzzed, signaling the door was open. Climbing the stairs, I thought that she might be not alone and, if so, I might surprise them together. What did I hope for? Did I secretly believe such a girl would stay single until now? We lived our separate lives and had accepted the idea that each wishes the best of luck to the other in their pursuit of love. I firmly convinced myself that I wanted to wish her luck in person, merely to show that I was OK in case that she still had residual doubts about needing to do something more for me. No, we both owed nothing to each other. In front of her door, when I heard the key turning, my last thought was, what if she is actually alone? Why would she? Is it my fault? No, she would not have grudges about the past. Amelie is not like that. We are not like that.

The thought visited me at a wrong time and only further confused me. When she opened the door, I exclaimed with a slightly exaggerated cheerfulness:

- “Amelie! Happy birthday, my dear!”

Amelie thanked me profusely, hugged me, and seemed to get wet eyes, but I could not catch a good enough look: she was too fast at freeing herself of my hug and searching for a vase to keep the flowers.

- “Come in!” called she out from the depth of the kitchen, but I instantly saw that there was no way to come in; all furnishings were covered, packed boxes occupied the whole room.

When she returned, her cheeks were red and eyes glinted. She said as if offering an excuse:

- “All vases have been packed away. Even the tea pot and the cups.”

Amelie was smiling, but her eyes were full of tears. She put one box on top of another, aimlessly, the way other people shift words to fill up silence. I, too, had nothing to say and nothing to cling to. The natural order of things was broken.

- “Are you leaving?” asked I the evident question while trying to be cautious.
- “Yes.”

Amelie stood with her back to me. Her voice was very soft. As if she was feeling guilty for not explaining everything up front.

- “I would like to help,” said I, even though it was far too late for helping.
- “Thank you. It’s all done. You can sit on the boxes in that corner, you know. Don’t worry. There are only throw-away things over there.

Soon enough, I was sitting on the throw-away things, feeling to be one of them. I knew that I could only assist by giving her resolve and asking questions about her departure, but I kept my mouth shut, because I did not have the stomach to cross the line. Amelie walked out and kept packing; like me, she did not do silence well. How foolish!

All this was happening for a reason: her birthday was only a pretext, there was more, but I was too much a coward to admit it in my mind, because, if I had realized it, I would not have gathered enough courage to turn up. And now I am angry with her. Why did she not tell me anything about her departure? Why now, what is the reason –

she has so far revealed nothing. Truth was that I had no right to expect her giving me account of her actions. And still... Now I see it! I was miffed not by her failure to tell me she was leaving but by the sharp difference I sensed. She simply did not think it was essential to inform me; I was no longer important or necessary to her. Why have I naively believed that she would eternally consider me as someone important? What if she simply mistrusted the kind of friendship I offered when we parted ways? Now I started mistrusting it, too.

We both could not find the right words. Amelie came back and talked about little nothings, but her words could not fill out the emptiness of this room stuffed full with boxes. I could end it right there. I could get up, smile cheerfully, make sure that there is someone who could help move her stuff, give her a firm hug and go my own way. Only I wanted something else. Something else but what exactly? Should I tell her? Tell what? That I can't stop loving her? That I am ready again to commit? That would be a lie. The only thing I could tell her with some confidence is that I had new doubts. That I was no longer certain if it was the right thing to let her go and end our life as a couple, laying waste to all our dreams. Something like that needs time, such conversations need a plan, or it can get only worse. Particularly, if after her move she would start her life afresh and I would need to stay away. Should I also start my life afresh? I was not so sure. I have recognized it only now, after she pushed me aside and designated my place among the throw-away things. Or maybe, right after stepping out of her home, everything turns out to be a delusion, and I once more will find myself thinking that I was right and should not torture her or myself. There was no mirror in that room, but I could feel how childish and miserable I looked. It was I who was dithering, not she. Go away, Amelie! Go Away! You deserve better.

And yet I could not calm myself. I convinced her to accept my help; I thought it was a good idea to move all boxes to one place to see if she left anything behind. I was carrying the boxes and thinking which of them may have my gifts and the photographs I made? After all, the photos belonged to both of us, no? All the time, I had the feeling of missing something fundamentally important. It was an ordinary day, the weather was fair, the place well-known, but something was not right. As if the habitual view was dropping down like a filming set, falling to pieces, turning into a mystery covered by tan cardboard and held together by sticky tape. Amelie's departure was not the problem, or not the only problem. I was losing grip of reality. The reality, admittedly, where I still was with Amelie despite parting words uttered or staying apart for several months; the point was I never bade her farewell properly, never let her go. And now the scene set is coming down and the illusion is fading, because Amelie is leaving. No wonder the room has no chairs to sit, no cups to drink tea, and most likely no time is left before the departure. Because we were not supposed to sit around and drown unfinished things in the drivel of daily routine, and the scene was asking for an ending. I should escape this vanishing world as quickly as possible, before it swallowed us whole, or try to stop her, plead with her, beg to give me another chance. How can chairs help with that? Since I have come here, I must do something, whatever is possible, otherwise coming here makes no sense. But instead of acting, I remained inert, losing one precious second after another. Time was dissolving, falling apart, flowing away. Everything was turning to dust and fading. A real mystery! Not only have I failed to grab the last chance, I was losing the very opportunity to reclaim one. I must bring her back!

Once I knew that, the real mystery has started. I had to fight a battle. All started with Amelie running around in haste from one box to another, picking up and dropping things, she virtually was in full panic mode.

- "Amelie, what is going on?"

- "My purse!" I misplaced my purse, my watch is in there, I need to know what time it is now. Never mind, a wall clock must be somewhere here in a box..." she started opening one of the cartons.

We were chasing time – literally. Where is the clock? In which box? I knew why Amelie was agitated, I felt the same. Within the short time I spent here, we re-lived nearly everything we experienced together, and it felt like eternity, although in reality it possibly took only a few minutes. We lacked reference points – no teapot to boil, no news to discuss, no memories to share, no future to speak about. After losing all reference points, we were at risk to get lost in time. Time was falling upside down into an abyss. I kept telling myself: you must stop it! Stop it without delay. Just tell her to stay, it takes only one word, and you will no longer need to search for the clock. Instead, we kept digging in boxes.

With a persistent thought circling in my mind: should I ask her if she loved me? Or if she *still* loved me? No and no! You, coward. Why should I force her into a confession? This is something I must do, so I yelled:

- “Amelie, I love you! Don’t go!”

Silence. I looked around. Towering boxes with added mess caused by our search for time. And silence. Amelie was not in the room.

Then suddenly a small noise, the door knob turned and her voice said:

- “I found it! I found my purse!” She now had a watch on her wrist. “We have very little time left!”

Apparently, she heard nothing. But I felt strong enough to repeat it. She would stop rushing and there would be no need to leave. At that moment, I heard the door bang. These doors will make my hair grey before time! At least, it was not the entrance door.

Where did Amelie disappear to this time? I stormed into the empty bedroom and kitchen; she was not there. I detected a bathroom and knocked on its door, feeling rushed and panicked as if it was I who was leaving. Her voice came from inside:

- “I know, I know. Just give me a minute! I cannot leave like that. I need to change.” An entirely new Amelie will now appear!

She said it mischievously but her words meant so much for me. I didn’t want another Amelie! I wanted to see my old Amelie!

- “Amelie, you are beautiful in any attire.”
- “Wrong!” said she from behind the door. “It is hard to be a woman; glitz and glamour at night and disappointment next morning.”
- “What? Are you serious, Amelie? You are crazy. You are not like that at all.”

She indeed was not like that at all. Yes, she shone at nights; when we rubbed sides with the high society, she stole the show. But it was her inner glow that enthralled others. I still saw the same glow in the morning, albeit without layers of make-up, obliging smile, heavy jewelry, and other conventions. She was a pure, beautiful woman who shone for everybody, but the source of this shining was I. I could feast my eyes on her forever. And now Amelie was preening once more like before a gala. I knew the reason: she wanted to keep in shape, to look part. Now I fully understood that her soul was equally torn apart, and the only way out was to don a lovely dress, get a hairdo and do her face to keep emotions at bay; one must keep the spine straight, not giving a chance to tears for even a single teardrop can ruin the make-up. She was building a barricade; since no door could stop me, she hid behind a mask of a confident woman who was about to change her life. But she was still there, behind this door. It was so easy to tell her everything right now. This easiness also made it impossible; the heart did not believe in a possibility of happiness and leaned towards accepting torture. Human nature is so imperfect.

Amelie came out looking a real beauty. She was indeed a different person. Styled blonde curls, make-up, crimson lips, a red blouse and a light-colored skirt. She was impossibly elegant! A very determined lady. She initiated a move away in spite of having friends, acquaintances, work, and paintings that just had started to sell. But like a true lady, she was bold and just, never letting the vanity fair overshadow the most important things in life: personal allegiances and deep feelings. Now I could see: since we parted ways, she remained single, whereas I wasted my time on hollow flings. I used to be her only trusted person in this town; now, she was alone and realized that returning to her family would be the best option. She never told me where she was going, but I certainly could guess. I knew Amelie and her feelings the same way she knew mine; that is why we stayed together and why this was so important. For all that, I was facing a different Amelie.

And I had no idea how to approach her. Amelie walked through the rooms clacking her heels, making last-time improvements, and putting things right after our pursuit of time. I heard her calling her uncle: he was supposed to find the house keys under the doormat and dispatch her possessions by a mail train. Having run out of things to fix, she stopped and noticed my dismay which she did not seem to like in the least, and said,

- “A move is an emotional thing. I was going to call you once I have settled down at the new place. I did not expect you to turn up.”

- “Don’t mention it! It was not a hard thing to do. Would you mind if I accompany you to the station?”

- “I would be grateful.”

She said that gently but, apart from this, showed no emotion. I really was seeing a different Amelie.

On the street, we hailed a cab. I opened the door for her and got inside. As soon as the car started moving, she cried out:

- “Oops! My keys! I forgot to leave the keys for my uncle.”

The cabbie did not look very happy. The town offered plenty of jobs but also had no shortage of people willing to take them. Amelie took money out of her purse and said:

- “I will pay extra for waiting. We are in a terrible hurry. Please wait. We will be back!”

We climbed out of the car and I stopped Amelie.

- “Give me the keys. I will go. The cabbie might drive away before we return. Where do you want them? Under your doormat?”

Amelie stayed in the cab and I ran upstairs to deposit the keys. I was once more returning into the same house, same apartment. Another stupid thing! Why did I fear that the cabbie might take the money and sneak away? I should have feared that he drives away with Amelie! I swiftly slipped the key under the mat and ran back down the stairs. The cabbie can keep the money and some! I would pay all cabbies if they would only leave us alone and not take Amelie away from me.

We were heading towards the station and I could see that Amelie regained her composure. Talking to the driver calmed her down as if she were a small child. It distracted her from her problems while probably doing the same for the cabbie.

1. “You tell me,” continued the driver. I could see his hand going by habit for a pack of cigarettes, but he checked himself, remembering that it was the wrong time for a ciggy, “is it that hard? I told her: pass the test, then you will get your trip. But no! She can’t be moved. When I was as old as she is now, I was not so immovable, which gives me a real scare. I could be easily bribed by double pocket money, let alone a paid trip.

- “Different times, different mores,” responded Amelie. “On the other hand...”

The cabbie interrupted.

- “I lied. No one offered me double pocket money. Forget privileges! Had I failed a test, I would have been left with nothing for a month and caught blazes from my father! Now, can you see that?” The latter referred to someone obstructing our way. It looked like we were driving right into a massive traffic jam.

- “It is hard to tell which method is the best,” Amelie kept the conversation going. “I was always a good student and just could not fail a test. I did not want to disappoint my mom.”

- “This is because you have been brought up as a dutiful person! Nowadays you only hear that no one owes anything to anybody.

Now, Amelie also looked nervously at the long line of cars in front of us, which were barely moving.

- “I would not say I was very dutiful. My mom loved me as my grandma did.”

The cabbie did not hear her last words. Someone was honking madly. He honked in return. Things were heating up. The day was also hot but I was worrying about something else entirely. I needed to find a moment, one minute of quiet when nothing would distract my mind and I would be able to say the most important words. I stopped musing about the future, hesitating and trying to balance the scales because I could see how trifles were killing the most significant thing of them all. Trifles like this conversation with the cabbie, ostensible politeness, mascara and powder, inordinate anxiety over the future, and fear of repeating the past. Anything but the most significant thing! And here we go: she was sitting and talking to this man totally unperturbed. But I know Amelie: looking unperturbed

was for her a thousand times harder than taking the blow if nothing works out between us again. I must do something.

Now we were in a really big jam. The station was not that far away, but we would be late all the same. Is that my unlucky day? We chased the disappearing time, but once we rediscovered it, my old Amelie was gone, replaced by a distant woman without a purpose. I gathered all my energy and was ready to break the ice, yet had to deal with this cab driver and his platitudes. And there was more! I wanted to steal a minute at the station immediately just before the train departure, but the endless jam ruined even this plan. Is it a curse or a blessing in disguise? If we spend the last precious minutes in a jam, I will be robbed of the last chance. Maybe... No, this is the actual chance! A chance to shake off this driver!

- “How long would this stoppage take? Can you tell?”
- “At least twenty minutes,” expertly stated the driver.
- “How far is it by foot?”
- “About a kilometer and a half.”
- “We will be late,” anxiously whispered Amelie.
- “Let’s run!”

I opened the door, pulled Amelie out, and, without saying a word of goodbye to the driver, we ran.

We were running on familiar streets past unfamiliar people. We passed buildings, signs, billboards, posters, and scraps of other people’s conversations, thoughts, and lives. Something stopped our breakup and brought us back together but seemingly only to take it away again. That feel was collapsing with every step and every turn we took. A little bit more and a yawning chasm would catch up with us sucking us into a freefall.

We ran faster and faster. People travel on business, a book wants to be read, and faith looks for a follower. Everything craves to either create or destroy, but everything wants to be accomplished. The line that would divide us has not yet been drawn. I loved her and she loved me. We were made afraid of togetherness by these trifles, too much consideration for each other, and something else I could not even put my finger on. We have experienced something few others have; we were so close and wanted so much to avoid hurting each other but were we brave enough? We got scared of change that was going to transform us. Throughout our supposed breakup, I never let her go. I dreamed of falling asleep and waking up with Amelie, strolling with her and feeling her next to me, seeing her travelling on her tram. We were everywhere. All that was destined to change today. I have come, because I could no longer tolerate not seeing her, and she was going away because she could no longer take it. We split up, because we gave in to circumstances. Now I had the last chance. Everything around me was collapsing and fading before my eyes. I could find only myself where earlier there were two of us. Route 16 tram passed by, but Amelie was no longer inside! I was alone in the park and will go to bed alone tonight. She was disappearing, dissolving. We were being separated. I had to save us. All that time, she was next to me, even though not in a physical sense. Even now her hand was in my hand, but it belonged to a different person. Where could I discover us again? What could I do? We were not in the park and not at the table in the cafe. The town has become hard-nosed, lonely and small. It was far smaller without her. Without having any idea why, I stopped and she did so, too. I virtually screamed into her face:

- “I love you!”
- “I love you too.”

A tear ran down her cheek. I sensed that she was pulling me somewhere and squeezed her hand even harder. No, she was not pulling me anywhere, she was trying to free herself. But why?

- “Amelie, will you stay?”
- “No!” she cried violently, got hysterical. I never saw her in this condition but loved her even more than ever. “You only say that because I am leaving.”

Finally, Amelie got free and ran towards the station. All I could do was to follow her.

I stood before the train. I could see her approaching the carriage and then turning around. She came back and said,

- “I cannot leave you without explaining what is going on. I used to love you but I love you no more. You are never going to change. Thank you for helping me catch the train and supporting me. Good luck. Farewell.”

I was looking at a beautiful, lofty woman, fair and prudent, who kept her dignity despite the ruined makeup and hair askew from running. And then she was gone.

The town stopped falling apart. Maybe it was the end. Nothing was happening, because everything had already happened. But now it was a different town, a town without Amelie, inhabited by strange people, aliens living on a version of Earth which I would never be able to get used to. I was sitting on a bench. The train departed a few minutes ago. My head sank, and I could not see anything apart from my shoe tips, or think. I felt I was in a fog. I felt fizzled out. Suddenly, I sensed warmth. My body felt something familiar and very pleasant; everything around me was immersed in a soft glow. I looked up. Amelie stood before me. Her hair tied up in a knot, face free of makeup and black mascara streaks, and only puffy eyes revealed that she had cried recently. She smiled a good smile and looked happy. Amelie sat down on the bench, took my hand and said:

- “I will stay.”
- “Didn’t you say that I was never going to change?”

I know that I ought to kiss her, but the last-hour ordeal weighed too heavily on me. I did not have time to recover.

- “That is why I am here with you.”

I instantly knew what was the purpose of all that. We had to live through the ordeal. We had to think all these last-hour thoughts; I had to get rid of my shyness and did it by loudly announcing my love, not just once, but many times; most importantly, I refused to get jitters because of her tears. In her turn, she had to get rid of this other Amelie, who stopped her from trusting her feelings, chastising me when necessary, and pouting, who caused her to fear losing me. She had to tell me I was wrong, which she had failed to say before we split up. “I cannot leave like that. I need to change. Now, a different Amelie will emerge!” warned she when I knocked on the bathroom door wanting her to come back. A different Amelie indeed came out, the one who had to be delivered to the station, and we obliged. The other Amelie took the train to disappear and never come back. But my Amelie, whom I knew and loved, has returned and will always stay with me.

Ends



Two poems written and translated by Ivan de Monbrison

вот,
тело падает в воздух,
он почти летает,
прямо у горы.
Твоё лицо в твоих руках, скрыто,
но я знаю, что ты плачешь.
Одна рука на твоей спине
сжигает твою кожу,
сжигает твой плоть,
и сжигает тоже твой крик .

There,
the body falling down in the air,
is almost flying,
right by the mountain.
Your face is in your hands, hidden,
But I know that you are crying.
A hand put on your back
burns your skin
burns your flesh
and burns your scream also.

Я хожу на голове.
Я вижу других снизу.
Собака писает мне на лицо.
я иду в воду на голове.
Я медленно тону. Тогда
я кашляю кровью.
Солнце падает мне в живот.
Но вечером, луна будет перед мой глазом
и он будет слепым.

I walk on my head.
I see others from below.
A dog pees on my face.
I go into the water on my head.
I slowly drown
Then I cough up blood.
The sun falls down into my stomach.
But in the evening,
the moon will be in front of my eye
so that it will be blind



Hello Sailor!

(Burnt bridges in the Garden of England)

By Evan Hay

Hello Sailor!

OK, I commence with a disclaimer: my prose daren't aspire to the balletic lateral trans-dimensionality exhibited by your oeuvre- of which your latest missive's a gorgeous gilded curlicue. So, one humbly corresponds partly to apologise for missing you regrettably (under the Anheuser Bush) on my recent tour of Tunbridge Wells, & to express puzzlement. Chiefly as I was pretty certain I recalled the location of our proposed rendezvous: you ardently championed the town's Gaiety Music Hall- correct? If not cock, kindly forgive a muddled senior moment. Mercifully, despite senile vulnerability, I confess my evening's escapade didn't eventuate into another full-blown disaster; inversely, as if by magic, my lonely expedition transmogrified into a paradox full of utterly diverting, mesmerizing excitement. Bewitching to moist points of jouissance! Hopefully you too crafted a similar silk purse out of an unpleasant sow's ear? If not, then oops my bad. Notwithstanding, no hard feelings- yet henceforth, be a good chap, politely answer your blooming 'phone! For now however, etiquette aside, please address a ponder concerning our next appointment- whether you're up for (i) hosting retrosexual thé dansants, (ii) cultivated rambling: aka a peripatetic post meridiem chock-full of information, education, entertainment, (iii) hooking up incognito for quirky coffees in one of Canterbury's classified swanky boho bistros, (iv) none of the above? Forever conscientious I rang earlier & presently write snail mail to avoid flimsy voice-messages (agonisingly hit-&-miss), emailing- because in an irenic submission like this it's basically rude- or texting, which let's face it, totally lacks personality.

Accordingly, prithee Squire, cherish one's mellifluous, exorbitantly priced eau de Cologne, liberally sprinkled upon high-quality Smythson Imperial writing paper, & appreciate- I'm trying terribly hard not to spill Beaujolais nouveau across it!

Good God, how I'd benefit from generous boosts of jollification: what a drag it is getting old. Ecce Mono! Here am I subsisting on stale orts, wonkily discarded upon a proverbial top-shelf dusty with fragmented abstracts of identity, being, knowing, time, & spaces with not a lot of comfort between. Golly! I wish I'd not been subjected to a debilitating private tuition in metaphysics; patently nobody else was. Unburdened, mundane John Bull doesn't deliberate beyond his own peculiar self-absorption. And, those scant few millennials by chance I encounter instantiate superficial narcissists; chattering neologisms, eminently self-satisfied, comfortably outsourcing their numb cerebral integrity to Google. Surveying modernity's intellectual penumbra, I glimpse an unimaginative generation worryingly starved of wisdom, submerged in oceans of exhaustive data. But alas I grow feeble, routinely unimpressed with life: what's it all about matey? The saddle-sore core subject matter of my animation thus far appears to be continuous disorientation. I can't say I've acclimatised to the voulu ways of my bourgeois progenitors, far less reaped evolutionary clarity in anything save the narrowest technical sense. Today, bewildered by grinding unpleasantness (it simply shouldn't happen to kalokagathia of my cystitis), honestly, I'm frightfully haunted by inextinguishable phantoms tormenting an un-healing wounded child within.

Dismissed as a kilted tot, surrendered to boarding schools- even when recalled to a scented bosom of truculent family life (albeit lolling in a sumptuous, commodious, stately home), 'twas to reluctantly countenance ritual familial horrors. Typically dragged off towards a gruesome epicentre of Little England- squandering Crimbo amongst advocates of imperial dilettantism- with those weird osteoporotic sisters Jemima & Aunt Jobiska (off-peak season-ticket holders to Boleyn's Hever Castle); twin-twisted proponents of monstrous great chains of being, where foul's fair & fair's purloined (guaranteeing one of their assorted, wire-haired noblesse oblige types, settles atop a grotesque, beastly hierarchical empire). Residual tribal scarring aforementioned inflames, stinging awfully; suppurating all the worse when one's ultimately washed-up boracic lint, domiciled in a brutal, brakish psychic swamp like post-Brexit Blighty- plagued by its unrelentingly damp, connatural grey boredom, obnubilating joie de vivre.

I blame those blasted boiled Gammons! All that anacoluthon, doltish gibbering, avaricious false witness & conceited corrosive murder of postmodern morality; forsooth, a high percentage of my receding energy's ill-spent, staving off suicidal ideas of electively drowning in stagnant lakes of blood, sweat, & associated tears.

Yesterday, effetely venturing sofawards, curling up beneath Himalayan cashmere duvets, I wondered how many gazillion raindrops have splattered our sceptred-isle since its pleasant pastures were savagely seized, decimated & officially occupied 960 years ago beneath a yoke of nouveau supremacist management. This dullard marvelment fused into my aspic mind as I nursed a furious hangover; barely capable of conceiving anything else until I located a limited edition 50-pence piece slid down the pulverulent rear recess of my snug refuge. Consulting an iPhone, it confusingly appears collectors will tender payments from £4 up to £2,400 to procure this piddling silver coloured coin. Deridingly, comic online commentators announce ‘cheap at the price’ on account of the fact that it’s an edgy 5-star bargain (worth every penny); a shiny heptagon ideal for purchasing inexpensive items- it can also serve to throw at pestiferous seagulls, or, if pushed firmly enough against one’s forehead, it’ll stay perfectly placed for up to a minute in some half-arsed attempt to emerge as if one’s made of money. Alternatively, as an instant source of hard cash flow, perhaps I can attract competitive bids for either of my defective kidneys? I wish.

Woe is me! Like the majority of my cohort of impoverished Gen X, I co-exist with anxiety in a Karl Lagerfeld fur coat (without wearing any knickers), tyrannized by craven sedated torments. My memory dwindles. I seem to fondly recall yesteryear as an era when past associates viewed evolving human experiences as grand chapters in a progressive journey, unfolding to reveal fresh, ever brighter, considerably bolder opportunities for whomsoever was inclined to pursue them. Is it me being a tedious busted flush? Or, hasn’t our self-referential, Post-postmodern condition, sinisterly collapsed into a hypnotic perpetual present?

I’m enviously aware, fortuity affords occasions for you to savour extended stays in Carnaby Street, visiting your polysexual spinster sister; what’s happening in the Smoke nowadays? Out here on a starless puritanical perimeter, one overhears cryptically acerbic vocabularies, interspersed with doom-mongering terms such as ‘gentrification’. Oh, London! Heretofore this clouded country’s cultural engine, cosmopolitan jewel, a sparkling metropolis from whence I harbour a legion of bittersweet recollections; she was formerly a liberal city of strangers: haunt of anomie, a teeming, unreserved Babel of displaced humanity, & entirely better as a result. If ghastly class war rumours of ethnic cleansing are true, seeing ‘salt of the earth’ people’s poets systematically evacuated, observant urban prophets expelled, her creative velvet underground abandoned- then I predict her vacuum shall be coarsely plugged; begetting a constant rehashing of existing styles, annulling genuine hope that our collective national democratic destiny might be radically improved.

Looking after number one, I’m overly apprehensive to risk a pilgrimage to sample a sneak peek following vivid flashbacks lately, conjuring up that grubby nastiness at the calloused hands Geldof’s rent-a-mob. Those buggers really roughed me up. Another instance I when forfeited you amidst madding crowds (I’m not milking coincidence btw). After bravely schlepping to Gillingham station, my train journey passed swimmingly. Alighting at Frati Neri like clockwork, as per custom I cut thru, along Fleet Street towards Horatio’s gross tainted patina where the Strand & Charing Cross Road intersect (like two vectors of fate south of St Martin-in-the-Field). I was feeling froody, primed to relish an evening’s boisterous delectation in one of those modestly priced prelapsarian London pub théâtres we oft frequented. Forget precisely which venue, but robustly I navigated drunken wrestling fuggy throngs to ascend a creaking flight of antediluvian wooden apples, sensually goose pimpled in anticipation of devouring a psychologically refreshing overdose of Harry Pinter’s ‘Dumb Waiter’ (only to be informed that their fucking stage lighting had died).

Remaining cool, I descended. Anticipating your imminent arrival I soldiered past an idle embargo of cacophonous boozers at the saloon bar, decisively winning admittance to sturdily acquire two pints of Punk IPA. Hitherto optimal social conditions unravelled, as I sat tight, sipping India pale ale, keeping a beady eye out for your customary sublime ingress; perched precariously, balanced on a single padded stool next to an odd little ‘Johnny-No-Mates’ drinks plinth adjacent to a solid, expansive, French polished wooden table, generously seating a gaggle of garrulous 30-something toss-pots- one of whom, childishly word vomiting, lamely recounted how dutiful parents recently paid for him & his parasitical siblings to holiday en même temps within a private 10-acre Canarian villa. Oh, he’d literally just gotten his own place, for the very first time too, despite pushing 40. Sadly in earshot, sat on my Jack; a cramped social pariah stuck tight in a gelid gap betwixt pungent symbolism & eternal damnation.

Soporose under a heady influence of my second pint (5.4% ABV) I drifted, plunging into Cotard's delusion via a 'posthumous' reverie: mourning my passing, a grove of London Druids, appreciative of my contributions to British counter culture, ceremonially preserved my physical form in rich sperm body wraps- pouring warm amphora of sacred semen, adroitly enticed out from throbbing lush loins of pedigree Gloucester Old Spots. Archpriests, part of a glorious sacrosanct procession, melancholically carried my floriated cadaver safely underground into the midst of St Mary Undercroft Chapel, whereupon I was rudely awoken by that loquacious mummy's boy opposite, brusquely swatting me across my filbert with what's best described as a Chelsea Briquette. It was actually a soiled rolled-up copy of those fell Faversham Times- an issue featuring my ugly mug (a point of fact groggily interpreted, via booming accusations), pictured as the gloating author of a reprinted, faux, fruity obituary (its seedy tones outraging diaphanous sensibilities). His humourless friendship groups' screeching faces denounced my fiction as wicked, inflammatory impropriety. Caught in a loveless rat-trap, how perilously unlucky was I? Traumatically manhandled by yobbos (not in seductive consensual ways), unceremoniously picked up by my peak lapels, thrown out onto unforgiving cobbles to be curtly assailed with supplementary unrepeatable opprobrium: making it crystal clear I wasn't welcome in the west end, where all my théâtreland privileges were henceforth null & void. The horror!

Misused, a plaything of sick willy-waving bullies- callously ostracised from one's adventure playground; it's too ghastly! Detained at a distressed antique escritoire, my heart cranking out a future as best it can, without a raspberry tart for elevenses; I'm reduced to little more than a poor man's Proust.

Circumstances differed sharply in my heyday. I extemporised such fun! Yonks ago, over interminably busy summer weekends at Covent Garden tube, several years before my negligently insignificant inter-generational trust funds matured, I earned naughty boy pocket-money & no small metro-sexual notoriety, cheekily busking for a singularly unprepared Joseph Public. Forgive me if I'm reheating an old soufflé, but I must divest retrospection before it consumes me! Utilising a cornucopia of indigenous Great British fruit & root-vegetables, I conjured compilations of ad hoc funny moments possessed of bravura invention, sufficient surely to have compelled young Fanny Brice to belly laugh hard enough to shart like a tart. One balmy summers evening, immersed in character (Alfred P. Doolittle, if retentiveness serves), I flourished an oversized leek into a petite Jap tourist's confused slanty-eyed boat race, vociferating cerebrally: 'Oi! Eiko! Scarper! Those confounded Martians have only gone & bloody well landed...' Well, her stiff beau in tow fair took umbrage, got all hoity-toity & formal, avowedly castigating me (as if he were bleeding Prince Hisahito of Akishino), properly cocked to knock-my-block-off seconds before some random Noel Coward impersonator diplomatically intervened (in what I imagine was perfect Japanese), persuading this agitated Asian couple to leave the scene without further ado. Then, in that most crowded of foyers, without a by-your-leave, the Master slyly pinched my arse with a wink, complimenting me in fluent RP on my burlesque performance & poking my histrionically powdered nose, flirtingly whispering: 'I'm sure you'll find better paid occupations shortly, if you've not been scouted already. You're pretty, witty, personable & smart: talent agents will compete to represent you.' And, easily flattered thru my mixed salad days, I naively imagined somebody would...

Guess what? No one ever did! I flirted furiously, albeit to no avail; my despondency compounded when I became cognisant of the exact stature of my puny stipend. I'd naturally held concerns, considering receipt of our ancient family's silver was strictly dependent (sine qua non) on the death of hoary Uncle Ethelred. Just my sodding luck that old iron lived into treble figures. Ethel sucked away more than an equitable share of our bloodlines' legacy, prior to begrudgingly passing a criminally diminished baton onto my sweaty grasp. Waiting vexed me. Particularly those torturous visits to his preposterous pied-à-terre; witnessing his miserably wasted gout-ridden final days, which saw Ethel shamle around repositioning an admixture of chamber pots- adjusted to catch rain dripping into a perforated SE London mansion. Restlessly hobbling, habitually attired in patched Victorian smoking jackets or sporting decrepit grey underpants, cantankerously wielding Moroccan riding crops, intermittently pausing to take ineffective swipes at an equally haggard gay butler. Unsurprisingly, after I was able to cash-in-my-paltry-inheritance-chips, I suddenly got invited back to multiple ill-starred soirees, including one where I rediscovered you. Ha, ha.

Luckily you missed the final abortion. I got stuck to a fearful conversation aside a dreary 40-something, virtue signalling New Labour MP with a contaminated demeanour; having just quit a ministerial position he chuntered on relentlessly about the toll taken on him by an interminable daunting class war. Characterising & valorizing himself as a game socialist, 'one-of-us', who indefatigably stood up, frequently battling his heroic best versus dark dangerous

forces of unparalleled international financialisation & accelerating kleptocracy. Biting my tongue, restraining myself from crying foul, citing the old *tu quoque*, I was nearly reduced to crocodile tears when he announced he'd finally accepted discretion as the better part of valour (thus resigning a spawny political career to head up the V&A). What a tragic demotion! Consigned to a lucrative sweet plum role, promoting a treasure horde; boasting one of the most comprehensive collections of Chinese art (dating from 3000 BC), forcibly expatriated around the mid-19th century as spoils of a one-sided Anglo-Chinese gun boat dispute (over a vast immorally imposed opium trade), between Grande Bretagne & an ailing Qing dynasty's futile struggle to uphold its condemned sovereignty (ashamedly in decline).

This waxen haired politico's disarming honesty, unfaltering commitment to fraternité, global commonwealth, peace & panhuman happiness will be truly missed inside an incestuous Westminster bubble- abroad, waifs & strays worldwide wholeheartedly salute you! Following a substantive shift of 20 years collar since graduating from Trinity, South Ken should, by rights, provide well-earned respite & tender loving care. At this juncture I poured my pint of Guinness over his blonde head, denouncing him as a harlot, or charlatan- I forget which on account of how very drunk I was at the time. A pity memory fails, as the distinction maybe *très* important. In any case, thereafter I gradually received fewer invitations to polite congregations; myopically considered *démodé* by party organisers' who in unison, for spurious reasons best known to themselves became intent on subtly easing me from *haute société*. TBH, by that time, I wasn't really one of them, rather a gentleman of diminished means with a more extreme version of their own class assumptions- always frowned upon, under suspicion as a desultory imposter from the old school; coyly adorned in a borrowed cloak of vulgar individualism, mostly off my tits on magic mushrooms: *c'est moi*, an ultimate arriviste, rouser of rabbles, a *gauche* type that an English *élite* feels it has to tolerate, but only safely at arm's length.

Btw, I'm unsure if it's glaringly obvious from my garbled text, but I've become awfully drunk!

Trust me, decades ago, in a moment's clarity, deciphering ugly misspelt graffiti across marble khazi walls- I summarily accepted I was entangled in an irreversible process of becoming officially banished from London's swinging party circuit. Presciently I'd taken a few necessary provisional steps & tactically retreated to the sticks- cashing in on my Dulwich Village property was the upside. Not reinvesting sensibly, in hindsight, was erroneous. Yet initially it felt tremendous being liquid, popping back to Blackfriars first-class (YOLO), discreetly snaffling up the final crumbs of charitable condolence graciously thrown my way by compassionate party organisers- & when beyond civilisation, back out here in these green & not so pleasant provincials, I sought a rough cottage trade of a kind I knew could be procured economically in the Home Counties, & specifically in the twilight zone backwaters of Kent. Flipping Kent! I've not had a chance to tell you the whole sorry saga about how I blotted my copy book here, have I? Allow me to remedy matters. The preamble to the story is, that having initially alighted in the Borough of Swale, I was earnestly intent on once more cracking the boards, & auditioned to playing the lead in 'Arden of Fevesham', an improvised touring performance ultimately destined for those big bright lights of Canterbury.

The Elizabethan show was extravagantly produced by Pongo Waring (a fellow Old Benendenden); our past familiarity made for neat pie-crust conversation starters, thereafter we guzzled up weightier matters (I retain few mental notes, fewer still from the tail end of our evening as conversation escaped all critical limits, owing to its manic glossolalian *débordement*). Advancing over a hard-days-night Jäger-bombing, reminiscing about our academic high jinks, such as when we narrowly avoided rustication after bringing a carafe of homemade hand-crafted cum, urine, & stinging nettle artisan ouzo to a winter symposium hosted by our curmudgeonly Philosophy Master. Stoutly defending ourselves we maintained our draught broadly set authentic metaphysical tones, rendering imbibers *ekstasis*, albeit with an unwelcome, unpreventable, dual nausea-diahorrea hiatus punctuating the dialectic. What larks!

Unsurprisingly Pongo cast me as desired, booking yours truly comfortably into the Sun Inn, set upon those mean streets of downtown Faversham. Preparation whilst joyful, was psychosomatically exhausting; recuperating between dress rehearsals, reclined across a worn velveteen chaise longue, cruel kismet prompted me to review gossip column articles in that pompous local rag (printing soporific, storm-in-a-teacup copy, jazzed up by 'in-the-know' notoriety pieces tenuously assembled from preposterous kaffeeklatsch, artificially linking z-list London celebrities to Kentish Town's). The opening paragraph rued a poor little rich girls' passing amid her hard drugs overdose misadventure; readers were cordially invited to contribute bowdlerized recollections of any personalities, untainted afore they abandoned their safe moral compass in England's topiaried garden to decay as corpse brides to heroin,

horribly bruised beneath London's hedonistic cesspit. Inauspiciously, I emailed the editor; a recklessly unguarded act! I didn't know the filly but I was bored, nobody was paying me much attention; additionally, the appallingly superficial, Home Counties tone of feigned concern, from the stenching bowels of that horrid anti-newspaper, made me sick to my stomach.

Instinctively, I fired off something, which in the heat of the moment struck me as hilariously satirical entitled 'She's so Modern': 'Poor Lil Peaches Honeyblossom G-C, doyenne of Hello! She twisted her sassy honeydew melon last week in a succulent but 'berry' untimely demise, like so many expired & missing sad tomatoes. Tragic bowl-fuls, including Professor Persian Plum, Agent Orange, Solly Sultana, plus those boys of summer from Santa Rosa, the inimitably sun-bleached Banana Splits. Alas, Peaches will never achieve a ripe savvy old age—fickle figgy fate's assigned this gaiety gel to history's compost heap. In life, PG swaggered as cool as a cucumber, beautifully ornamented by *dé-pêche* mode. Her salad days a tutti-frutti-fashionista-mezze of hip-hop, citrus pop frolics & celebrity dates: she was a veritable toffee apple of style. Tonight, supported musically by Peaches' favourite rock band, The Cranberries, Lemon Aid, a bubbly new charity hastily hot-housed & warranted by the Duke of York, is going to take your money & preserve her memory as a *compôte* to support grieving friends (wobbling in customized knitted Birkenstocks) & families of other well-heeled, yet depressingly fruit-based, celebrity fatalities. Additional donations are sought toward creating memorial floats to adorn this summer's Notting Hill Carnival (on the sundae). Provisionally conceived as wet tangerine dreams, posthumous revelries aptly celebrate a short but juicy lifespan, pithily comfort her crestfallen ululating entourage, blowing raspberry's at foul sour grapes, 'currant-ly' questioning the newsworthiness of PG's zesty demise'.

Well, my discourteous witticism went down like a lead Zeppelin I can tell you. I was instantly a hated target for an army of grieving subscribers who directed violent shit storms in response; pebble-dashing me from head to toe. Even Pongo & other Old Benders took against me. By association, our plays promotional premiere was jeopardised, so wholly out of naked self-interest my participation was sacrificed by the troupe; led punctiliously, in time honoured fashion, by my opportunistic young understudy, for whom twinkling stars artistically aligned. It turned so fractious, I actually needed to lie low in a remarkably dire Paddock Wood B&B (remote, godforsaken, devoid of entertainment), a dour 42-minute bus journey via terra nullius to any soupçon of civilization. Still, I lived. I've done it, & I've suffered: was it worth it? As I slowly recovered, I yelled—hell yes! Hence, the timing of one's reply is crucial in the context of this most fundamental philosophical question. Because last Saturday, by completely blowing my cover, I finally threw all vestiges of caution to those high winds; as tight as a coiled snake that particularly tedious afternoon, I elected once again to add my imitable voice to the sound of the crowd, making hasty arrangements to meet you over an unreceptive mobile 'phone connection.

Needless to repeat my plan was obviously lost in translation! So when, as I thought I heard right, you advocated attending a Music Hall, I replied—*bien sûr!* Ever so slightly discombobulated, but still in good faith, hope, & spirits I journeyed to join you, on time at an uncertain location, waiting around patiently only to be disappointed you didn't show. I stood perfectly still, panic-stricken, as if a strange street mime for a *mauvais quart d'heure* (a deathly span of time during which, no digital hugs, nor even a virtual 'wotcha' from ancillary correspondents via snap chat, email, or twitter—absolutely no communications électroniques). Inevitably I turned a tad nervous, anxious, as if in the grip of a bad dream. So great was my suspense, I was about to declare myself *hors de combat*: weakened by hunger, dizzy with fatigue, anaesthetized from cold. Bracing myself, ready to retire to the comparative safety of South Eastern Railways (& a long journey home); I strenuously tried to disguise a tsunami of raw emotions, but a perspicacious busybody, a random sand Arab cruising under a jaunty moniker 'Osama Bon Hommie' espied me obliquely, before suggestively offering me a freebie as his chaperone into 'England's best community Music Hall'.

The venue was an architectural gem & incredibly, hitherto, I concede that I never knew such an arresting edifice existed in Royal Tunbridge Wells. To avoid gross ingratitude, I accepted; hand in hand, passing giant aspidistras, we entered the establishment, unexpectedly oriental in fashion, to witness live acts, which were nothing if not diverse. As well as rhapsodic Bohemian singers, an amusing *compère* introduced strangely curious comedians, blacked-up minstrels, Rangdo of Arg (a cheeky cockney chappy), reassuring local yokels on hand-held pole stilts, Daphne, the completely convincing mind reading duck, dancing Quakers, pneumatic Daisy Squelch & her big brass six, motley crews of luxuriantly decorated salamanders, siffleurs, dentalists (acrobats hanging by their teeth), water

-spouters (from their anuses: LOL) & enthusiastic fartistes, who energetically extinguished Yankee Doodle candles (blowing from skilfully supple darkened derrières), & released subtly cadenced bursts of colonic music. After such ribaldry, universally well received, punters wandered out into an adjacent bar for stiffeners; together they pursued erratic, inconclusive comparative reflections. ‘Show me the incentive, & I’ll show you the conclusion’, Osama quipped teasingly, as tensions mounted amidst the exuberant white working-class crowd of couples— some married, mostly divorced, single, or separated unions of sexual convenience. Violent femmes, gamine florists, well-to-do match-stick gels, spunking hard-earned profits on *denier cri*, accompanied by superlatively tattooed monosyllabic beaus (no *littérateur* in sight), stereotypical manual labouring types, white van delivery drivers from god-awful provincial transport yards; all elementary enough coves, uneducated, without prospects, endowed with literally no scope for promotion (presumably dragged on a daily basis into a higgledy-piggledy petty politics, extruded from the hopes & fears of proles stuck in a rut, year in, decade out). Still, in the case of those present, perpetual drudgery hadn’t prevented them from glamming up to step out for a jolly. Indubitably, their enduring spirit marked them out as intoxicating & attractive. However, when mixed together with alcohol, libido & a life-times pent up, inarticulate suppression, their passions made for inflammable material. On account of the wide medley of tastes-choices some preferred one act— others supported its apparent opposite (I found their volcanic dialogue invigorating, bold as it was, filled with lively invective. Exempli gratia- ‘you’ve got more mouth, than a cow’s got cunt, you cunt!’). They emotively debated various merits relating to each performance, & yet when no hint of consensus could peacefully be sourced nor even simulated, the audience en masse, studiously waddled off out onto the cobbles for a ferocious straightener, where in the *mêlée*, I lost most of my Hampstead’s (which is ironic, as I’d really big upped those dentists)!

Nevertheless, ‘twas was virtuous, unimpeachable old-fashioned fun until Osama inconsiderately combusted; an expedited farewell, in a spontaneous flash: his shrill scream deafening a blind pencil seller, setting her startled shorthaired dachshund scurrying onto the main road, straight under the rolling wheels of an all-night tourist bus (a vehicle seating no ‘Johnny Foreigners’, just nondescript pasty-faced comprehensive school oiks, rutting as if breeding Bulldogs upon its moonlit top deck). What a romantic shame! Anyhow, despite advancing age & third-degree facial injuries, I’ll recover, probably to return there in due course; if you’re up for it Captain, look out for me on that veritable theatrical battlefield: I’s is the enigmatic guy, wearing a garish knee length 1st aid kilt!

In peroration, forgive me blethering on concerning my bipolar identity issues. I’ve not forgotten your crippling tenancy trials & tribulations. I pray you’re possessed with a prestigious lawyer, equipped with abundant stamina, resourcefulness, cunning, clarity & sufficient ruthlessness required to defend that prosecution. The Crown Estates cadastral survey sounds a major clusterfuck, with reactionary implications unfairly dumped on your luckless neighbourhood. How landlords are legitimately able to treat tenants so, predicated on spurious astronomical observations &/or terrestrial omens, is beyond unjust. Despite our shared republican sentiment, & understanding whilst atomised, your personal experiences aren’t unique- it doesn’t make your disappointment less gruelling. If it did, we’d ameliorate despondency by referring to umpteen similarities.

Nonetheless if you’re subject to eviction, do feel free to sofa-surf here; through wilting nostalgia we can construct a shared sense of ‘fun times’, conceptions of historical public-school silliness, unfolding in dyadic interaction: ‘I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours’. Étonnez-moi! We’ll video ourselves; go viral, tastefully reveal turpitudinous talents, conquer Mannequin Challenges: cock a snook at that dreary idiom- *tempus fugit*. Unless you worry acting motionless at our age would resemble *memento mori*? Fret not! I’d serve port & brandy each session; my medicine cabinet’s well-stocked with *tadalafil max*, cod liver oil, plus numerous efficacious tonics & exotic supplements- sourced subject to availability, from the depths of a dark web (the v. good stuff, think about it). Even if our union remains platonic, we’d still co-habit happily in larger accommodation, sheltering from this encircling tempest, unencumbered by lust, squirreled safely away in a spiritually uplifting candle-lit abode.

Alternatively, your butch sister Aubrey’s welcome to visit, to participate in domineering, invasive pegging extravaganzas. Or, if you fear three’s a crowd, we’ll keep matters impenetrably equanimous (*nullum dolorem*); instead, saucily upgrading to intimately intercrural in a discounted backwater up Sheerness way? There we can share philosophically aligned reminiscences, endeavour to illumine our present & all its technological puzzles. Time was we were assured that feckless middle-class individualists would be catered for, as part of Albion’s property-shared-owning democracy; public assets were incontestably sold off on that basis. Now the sad transpiring fact is – the

stock-market's privatised & private properties strictly confined to ever-decreasing sections of the UK's population. Thatcherism was a massive con- best understood as a cynical systematic transfer of money, power, & liberty, to the wealthy few- nothing more.

Remember, it's not your fault- you're a victim, not perpetrator. And selfishly, I need you doughty shipmate, as a travelling partner, across these pestilential polluted seas. À l'eau, c'est l'heure! You're my sole surviving old school acquaintance, amply fatalistic to endure my engulfing pessimism; dear pen pal & ally. I beseech you, condescend to re-embrace me. Don't allow your-self to be deracinated, or anathematised by pilfering rentiers. Veto languishing, suffocating lamentably in a carceral continuum; you've an absent friend here sport. Perhaps, as previously remarked, I'm a tad burdensome, wayward, mélodramatic; an immature, crudely crayoned autobiography of scribbled, bombastic notes. Arguably a trifle louche, maddeningly incoherent; but I'm here governor, solvent, replete with multivalent magical incantations & washable, reusable sex toys- so call me, I'll definitely answer the dog. Woof, woof!

Don't allow money worries to adumbrate futurity; anticipating reservations, I'll amortize such objections afore they're raised by auctioning my collectable specie (thus funding overdue excursions). Sensitive to your perpetual penury & determined not to allow mere banknotes hinder our noble camaraderie, I'll loan you adequate cash on a non-returnable basis, furnishing forth the wherewithal for a modicum of festivity. If some numismatic nut job pays top dollar, it'll cover your want of means of travel, or, having travelled, of requiting your customarily prodigious thirst- or at least it used to be (in order to have fun, one must retain memories of youth). Stay strong Kathoey; let's reconvene: whether it's in thunder, lightning, or rain. For goodness sake! Promise not to feel personally responsible, or mildly implicit, for the wearisome, wicked woes of this wild world. And I'll strive to remain purposeful, upbeat- aiming to finally value myself in practical ways!

Forever sincerely yours, BRD OBE MBE NDA CBGB DWP BDSM



Locked-Room Mystery

By DJ Tyrer

Mystery, police baffled!
Screams news-sheet vendor
Body found in locked room
Dead, victim of murder
Doors, windows locked within
Barred, no access
Chimney too narrow
For even a skinny child
Impossible to have been killed
Yet, there they lie
Throat slashed
Clearly by another's hand
Forcing coroner to shake head
Call it suicide
Whilst murderer looks on
Smiling secretly

Ben Potter

By Rebecca Lewis

A twig snapped underfoot as I hiked up the track to the top of the hill. My breath froze and hung in the air in a cloud and my ears and the tip of my nose stung as if I had been slapped by the cold air. Ploughed fields stretched away below the track as far as the eye could see and a crow cawed not too far off, its voice breaking the silent spell of dawn. I stopped and caught my breath and as I looked across the fields through the fog I understood why locals called this place the Look Out. You could see for miles, it would have been the ideal place to build a castle but there had never been one up here as far as I knew. I shoved my hands into my pockets and got on with my walk. Here was where we had to cross the pine woods. It didn't take long because we just had to cross the edge of them. Although it was dark under the trees my Jack Russells didn't seem to be bothered by the dim light that filtered through the branches but the ground was too hard for them to dig so they ran up and down in front of me looking for things to chase.

When I came out on the other side of the woods the sky seemed brighter, the sun was making a breach through the fog and I could see further ahead down the track. My thoughts drifted to the office and the unfinished work I had left for this morning. I reached the turn off on the path and glanced at my watch. There was no time for the long route so I headed down the hill towards the village. An old, brown, hiking boot lay abandoned on the track, glued to the mud by the frost. I kicked at it but it didn't budge so I kicked it harder. *How could someone lose a boot and not notice?* The dogs started barking, their hackles up and their tails straight as rods. They often defended me from things that weren't there so I just ignored them and kept walking.

A hot shower got my circulation going again but it was later than I thought so I skipped my coffee and rushed for the bus. It always takes forty minutes to do the Look Out walk, it's the one I do most frequently so I couldn't understand why I was so late.

I remember the day after I decided to set my alarm twenty minutes earlier because getting to work without coffee didn't set me up well for the day. When it went off I was tempted to ignore it and stay under the covers and when I went into the kitchen even the dogs didn't seem pleased to see me at that hour.

Another freezing cold morning, there was no fog, but it was dull. The dogs started barking again before I'd even reached the Look Out. They were backing away from something I couldn't see and it didn't seem to be just a game this morning, in fact they started to make me feel nervous. I looked over my shoulder and then I squinted, trying to see into the darkness of the woods ahead.

"Come on, boys," I set off again. My senses were working overtime as I walked between the trees, I could see clearly through the gloom and I was sure I could smell the musty woodland floor even though it was frozen and dormant. The barking started up again, this time there was no mistaking their fear yet I was pretty sure that we were the only ones up there because I hardly ever met anyone so early in the morning.

The lone walking boot was gone! The place where it had been stuck to the path showed no sign that it had ever been there, but oddly enough a leather glove was lying in the same place. I had a pair exactly like it so I knew they were expensive, in fact for a moment I thought I might have dropped one of mine but when I felt in my pockets I realised that I must have left them at home. The only way to shut the dogs up was to keep walking so I carried on at a brisk pace.

The kettle hissed as it heated up and I was glad to be home. I looked at my watch and saw that it was late again. I had to hurry my shower and as I was getting dry I realised that I had a headache and I was also getting a sore throat. *Damn this cold weather.* Now I am not the kind of person who rushes off to the doctor as soon as I feel a bit under the weather but as it was Friday I decided to call in sick at work and give myself a long weekend. I took my coffee to bed and thought about what I had just done. It was a bit out of character really, maybe I was coming down with something.

I awoke with a start, the dogs were going mad downstairs. *Was that someone at the door?* My heart thundered in my chest. Someone knocked again. I was half naked and a damp stain on my T-shirt showed that I must have spilled coffee when I'd drifted off to sleep. There was another knock but I lay still and pretended to be out. I couldn't go downstairs like this. After about five minutes the dogs shut up and I crept to the top of the stairs. All was quiet, whoever it was must have gone so I pulled my T-shirt over my head and went down to the laundry room. As I walked through the kitchen one of my dogs started up a deep menacing growl and stared at me. His hackles went up and he was definitely not a happy dog. I checked out of the kitchen window but no one was there. I didn't have the heart to shout at him. Since Sandra had left my dogs were the only company I had and they were a great comfort to me. I had woken up one morning and Sandra hadn't been there, she had just disappeared. No letter, nothing. I hadn't even guessed because she had just carried on as ever, the same old Sandra who I had been married to for fourteen years. She never got in touch and I have never heard from her since. Well, I tell a lie, once I found a missed call from her on my mobile but when I called back a man answered and I hung up. I had to pour myself a brandy and sit down after that. Who the hell was that man and why was he answering Sandra's phone?

There had been another woman after Sandra. Yvonne Bailey, a red head, about ten years younger than me who taught P.E at the secondary school in town. I don't think she was a natural red head but it suited her. She used to bring me a bottle of home made ginger beer when she stayed the night and I had grown quite fond of her despite that irritating habit of hers of making a strange kind of scraping noise in the back of her throat. One evening we had almost argued about it, it was really getting on my nerves while I was trying to watch a film. She got all defensive and said she didn't even realise she was doing it. I can't remember exactly what happened but I know it ended with her getting dressed really quickly and slamming the front door and the gate as she left. I never saw her again, I don't know what she is doing now and she never called me. I tried to call her once but she didn't answer.

It was cold in the laundry room so I threw my T-shirt into the washing machine and looked about for something else to wash too. There wasn't much because I had done a big mid-week wash but there was a pair of old brown socks and some jeans. One of the socks had leaves and bits of soil stuck to the bottom of it so I brushed it off with my hand and bunged that in too and then I legged it back up to the warmth of my bed.

I switched the telly on and settled back against my pillow. If it hadn't been for the splitting headache it would have felt like a luxury to be at home and lounging in bed at this hour! The news was on and as usual was mostly bad, inflation, the cost of petrol, a lethal road accident. There had even been a homicide in my area but I hadn't heard anybody talk about it until now. Apparently it was the second in three months. It's unbelievable really, this is such a quiet country village, but the world is changing and not for the better in my opinion.

When I woke again a prime time TV quiz show was blaring out from the telly. My head was still killing me but I put my dressing gown on and went down to let the dogs into the garden. That dratted barking! The dogs were going mad again and this time I heard the garden gate swing and click. Who was it? I could hardly hide in bed now so I opened the front door. The dogs rushed in bringing in a blast of freezing night air. The front light lit up the faces of two policemen. I swallowed and my legs felt weak. I remember thinking *'this doesn't look like a friendly visit'*.

"Mr. Potter? Mr. Ben Potter?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Can we come in please, sir?"

“I’d rather you didn’t; I am not feeling well.”

“It will only take a minute.”

What could I do, I mean I was hardly dressed for the occasion and I felt awful but still I led them through to the kitchen and sat down at the table. The first policeman glanced round the room.

“Is there anyone else here with you, sir?”

“No. I live alone.”

The policeman pulled out a photograph and put it on the table in front of me.

“Do you recognise this person, sir?”

I glanced at the photo. “Never seen him before, sorry.”

“We are making door to door calls asking for information about this man. If anything comes to mind you can contact me here.” The policeman handed me a card with three phone numbers on it. “Good evening, sir.” They saw themselves out.

I put the kettle on and picked up the photo. It reminded me of someone, he looked familiar. Technology could work wonders these days. The police identikit had done a good job on recreating this man’s features.

I stayed in bed for the next two days only getting up to let the dogs out and to get something to eat. Social media was abuzz with gossip about the local homicides. People wrote tributes to the victims and by the end of the second day I could almost believe that both the victims had been saints. It’s funny how death glorifies people. Even the worst of the worst become wonderful and dearly missed after death. I wonder what people will say about me? Who will remember me? What will I be remembered for? Will anyone care? Sandra won’t I’m sure.

It had taken me forever to adjust to living without Sandra. It had felt like forever but perhaps it hadn’t taken that long in truth. I had to do everything around the house now. The shopping, the cooking, the dogs. If I am honest about it I have to do all the things I hated doing and I was glad that Sandra took care of but now I am grateful to be able to do them because they take my mind off things. What a weird and warped world.

As well as tributes to the victims many locals were commenting on their heroic attempts to aid the law in catching the criminal or criminals who had committed the atrocious acts. Numerous visits to the local police station were boasted and suggestions as to who could have done such a thing were all over Facebook. I don’t want to sound superficial or uncaring, on the contrary, I am extremely curious to find out if they are getting close to nailing the person who did it but if they haven’t caught him or her yet and haven’t even got a suspect it doesn’t look promising, does it?

I wasn’t met with the usual cheery greetings when I got back to the office, in fact I felt rather unwelcome.

“So what has been going on then?” I needed to work out what was up.

“You should know!” Elsa Greenwood didn’t even bother to look up from her computer.

“Should I?”

“The deadline. We missed the deadline thanks to you. Now we all have to work Saturday morning to catch up.”

“I couldn’t help it.”

“You could have done something from home. You just don’t give a shit do you?” Elsa avoided looking at me. Her fingernails clicked on the keyboard and her bracelets jingled as she typed. I fingered the sticking plaster on the back of my hand. One of the dogs had actually bitten me this morning the little bugger. He actually drew blood, can you believe that. He never behaved like that with Sandra.

That evening only one of the dogs came to greet me, there was no sign of the other. I noticed that Glenda had been in. She comes in once a week to clean. I had to call her in once Sandra left because I really hate cleaning and I'm not that good at it. Glenda had changed the bathroom towels and my bed sheets so that meant I had to check the washing machine and hang it all out. There was no sign of the dog as I pegged out the sheets and towels. I looked all over the garden but everything looked just the same and he was not to be found. I wondered how the remaining dog was feeling. It was all too much. My head was killing me again so I took an aspirin and went to bed early.

I slept badly and woke up feeling like I had been running all night. I was exhausted and still had a headache but I felt I couldn't take any more time off work so I dragged myself out of bed and got ready. I skipped the usual walk and took the dog to the end of the road and back. It would have to do.

Elsa Greenwood wasn't at work. The silence from her corner of the office was almost deafening, the words she had spat at me the day before hung in the air, "you don't give a shit, do you?" Was her absence a petty kind of revenge? I wandered over to her desk and went through her inbox. Was there anything I could do to keep things running smoothly for the time being? Not really, she had done it all. Maybe she had stayed late to get it done, I don't know. The silly little gadgets on her desk were all precisely positioned, the furry panda clasping a photo of her cat between its paws. A miniature statue of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a small plastic bottle in the shape of Our Lady containing holy water from Lourdes. I picked it up and shook it but made sure to put it back in exactly the right place.

I couldn't concentrate at all and I spent most of the morning at the coffee machine. The aspirin hadn't worked and I feared I could be experiencing the start of a migraine even though I had never had one before as far as I could remember.

Elsa Greenwood wasn't at work the day after either or the day after that. In fact she was absent all week but by Friday I was getting used to having the office to myself and I didn't notice so much. The only boring thing about it was that I had to switch the heating on in the morning so the office was always cold when I got there. When Elsa was at work her bus was earlier than mine so she dealt with the heating and the office was always warm when I got in.

On Saturday morning my headache had almost gone and I was feeling much better. The dog still hadn't come back so I decided to walk down to the police station and report him missing. They kept me waiting for at least half an hour before a policeman was free to see me but eventually I was invited into one of the rooms at the back behind the reception area and they brought me a coffee as an apology. I have to say they seemed a little taken aback when I explained why I was there but all the same they made me fill out a form and they gave me a photocopy of it.

"We hoped you had remembered something about the man in the photograph, sir." The policeman folded his arms across his chest and looked me straight in the eyes. "Are you sure you don't recognise this man?" He pushed a photo at me, it was identical to the one he had already given me.

"No, I am sorry. He looks like a lot of people I know but he doesn't look exactly like any of them."

"It's fundamental that someone remembers something or recognises this man. We suspect he is guilty of at least two homicides all committed locally and all over a period of three to four months. I shook my head. I didn't know what to say. I thought it was better just to keep quiet because I really didn't know what to say.

I suppose three or four weeks must have passed before I received a formal summons to go into the police station in town. They were organising a police line up. I couldn't think what good I would be. I thought a surviving victim looked at the police line up to identify the suspect but anyway I couldn't refuse to go. My appointment was for two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. I caught the number sixteen bus into town and walked the last half a mile to the Central Police Station. There were three other people in the waiting room all there for the line up. I recognised one of them, Ruth Miller, she had commented on social media that she had already been down to the Police Station to give

information. That made me suspicious because I hadn't been of any help at all but I just assumed they were going to ask as many locals as possible. They called me in last which I didn't really appreciate. I was fed up of sitting in the waiting room but by now I imagined everyone would have had enough and would want to get it over and done with so it probably wouldn't take long.

They told me to sit in front of a screen and a police officer clicked the mouse so that six faces came up.

"I want you to look at each of the faces on the screen. We have found evidence and items that may belong to one of these men. Only one of them is local and we now strongly believe that we are dealing with a local man here."

It sounded odd to me, I didn't think a police line up worked like this but I am no expert. I felt uneasy and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

"We will tell you when to start. Do you know how to use the mouse?"

"Yes."

There was a table in the centre of the room, the one I was sitting at, and three chairs but only one of the police officers was sitting, the other was standing behind the screen facing me. I realised he was the officer who had registered the report on my dog but he looked at me as though he didn't recognise me.

"This is an interactive line up. You can click on the line up member's faces to see them from any angle you wish. You may start."

So I started. I clicked on all of the six faces but none of them meant anything to me. As far as I could remember I had never seen any of these men before. My hand was sweaty on the mouse and my mouth was dry. My head was aching again and I just wanted to be out of there.

"I am sorry but I don't think I can help at all."

"Sir, we believe that one of the men here is connected to the murders and we also believe that you know more that you have said so far."

I wiped the sweat from my upper lip. My moustache was damp and it tasted salty when I ran my tongue over my top lip.

I took a deep breath and clicked on the faces again. How can they be so sure that I will recognise the murderer when I have never seen these men in my whole life? The thought made me really nervous. I pushed the mouse away from me and shook my head.

"Who is the murderer, Ben Potter?" "Let's take a break, Mr Potter. Ben isn't it?" I nodded. "Would you like a glass of water, Ben?"

I nodded again. Someone brought me a plastic cup of water and I gulped it down. "Now then, Ben, have another look at the faces, look really carefully because we are sure that you will recognise one of them."

I shook my head again and covered my face with my hands, then I looked up. Beyond the screen was a large window, the sort you couldn't open and with the blinds pulled down on the other side it reflected like a mirror and at that moment the only face I recognised was my own staring back at me from the window.

Ends



Unwarranted Persistence

By John Maurer

Tumultuous nights of malt liquor and cigarette soaked wallpaper
Eyes wrapped in tortoise shell, screaming at each other *I will burn your moleskine*

Wading through the paddies with my rice paper held above the moisture
The same way I hold my hand rolled shag tobacco in the shower

I like my lungs like my coffee, cancerous and burning alive
Like me at the debonair Davenport that isn't built for how I conduct this deconstruction

Tearing away my skin, pinning it to the wall with thumb-tacks
running ribbons of yarn to connect this evidence of self

My life is a murder mystery that everyone has solved except me
This is the adult equivalent of the child

standing on the chimney with cardboard wings
And no matter what, though I may not fly, I will try



Spiral of Life

By Freya Pickard

growth spirals
lichen-fingered trees
above verdant riot –
life extends outwards

young nettles grow
green and spiky
push through rusted skeletons
of last year's bracken

spiral of life
extends outwards
into eternity

Death in El Paraiso

By Matt MacBride

The cleaners found my cousin Steve slumped over a table in the hotel's coffee lounge when they came to work at six a.m. that morning. At first, they thought he was just another hammered tourist sleeping off a late-night session ... until they tried to get him to move so they could mop the floor.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, so maybe I better start from the beginning.

Steve and I had been pretty close as kids and had kept in touch, albeit infrequently, even after we'd gone our separate ways. But it was a double surprise when I got his postcard from Ibiza suggesting I come out for a holiday. For one, I didn't know postcards still existed and, two, I had no idea he was working as a DJ in Ibiza Town.

He'd written a phone number on the postcard so we soon got the details sorted out. He would meet me at the airport and had cajoled the manager of a local hotel, the El Paraiso, into providing a cut-price room.

Steve recognized me as soon as I emerged from Arrivals, which was good because I would have walked right past him. He was sporting a faux hawk haircut with designer stubble and a full set of piercings. A sleeveless denim jacket exposed a high-end gold watch and a surfeit of artwork on his skinny arms. He was completely different to the nerdy high school kid I remembered.

“Nige! You haven't changed a bit, you dope,” he grinned, giving me a hug. “You still look like a solicitor's clerk.”

He nearly died laughing when I told him I was working in a bank.

The first week was manic. The club where Steve DJ'd was riotous every night and he alternated hourly stints behind the turntables with an older Spanish guy. I stood on the fringes knocking back mojitos as if they were going out of fashion and watching scantily clad teenagers gyrating like crazy. I noticed that the dance floor was always more frenetic during Steve's turn. He really got the crowd going. During his free hours, he joined me at the bar where he was immediately mobbed by girls ... and collected enough phone numbers to start a telemarketing company.

My cousin shared an apartment in a building right next to the El Paraiso and, after his last stint of the night, he usually adjourned to the hotel's late-night coffee lounge for a quiet nightcap. He explained that he was always hyper after finishing work and needed to calm down before going home. That's how he'd become friendly with the manager. He surprised me on the first night by refusing my offer of a shot and telling me he usually avoided alcohol and only drank decaf coffee.

Steve didn't have to tell the middle-aged Spanish barista what he wanted. She brought his regular coffee to the table and I asked for a large brandy. Coffee always keeps me awake.

“Muchas gracias, Juanita,” Steve told the woman when she put my drink down.

“Nada, Stevie,” she replied with a pleasant smile.

“First name terms?” I inquired.

“She's Manuel's mother,” he explained. “Manuel Diaz, the other DJ at the club.”

So, for a week, I spent every night getting plastered and the early hours reminiscing with my cousin, until, on the eighth day, everything went haywire.

It was after eleven on the second Monday morning when I staggered down from my room, desperate for something to alleviate my hangover. Sunday night had been a particularly heavy one. I vaguely remembered Steve telling me that change-over day for package holidays was Saturday so, by Sunday night, the newcomers were in full party mode.

The hotel restaurant was closed. I'd missed breakfast and the staff were getting things ready for lunch. I stumbled to the coffee lounge intent on ordering a litre of cold water and a jug of black coffee but as soon as I walked in Juanita glanced at me and shouted something in Spanish.

It was then I noticed that the far end of the lounge was taped off and that a couple of serious-looking men in suits were examining the area around one of the tables. I realized it was the one Steve and I had occupied. The older looking one of the two hurried over and addressed me in perfect English.

“So, you've finally arrived ... our main suspect.”

Naturally, I was distraught when they told me my cousin was dead, not to mention dumbfounded to discover I was the number one suspect. They sat me down in the uncordoned off part of the lounge and gave me a bottle of water, and then I was asked for my full name and room number.

As soon as I told them, the younger man left us, and his partner introduced himself as Inspector Morales of the Guardia Civil. He went on to say that Steve had been found dead from a suspected heart attack early that morning but, because of his obvious youth, his body had been taken straight to the local hospital and autopsied. Apparently, his unconventional appearance led them to believe drugs were involved. I was incensed.

“No way!” I objected tearfully. “Steve didn't do drugs. He hardly touched alcohol. He didn't even drink anything with caffeine!”

“I believe you,” Morales placated me. “Senora Diaz behind the bar said the same. She also told us that when she closed the bar and left the hotel at three this morning you two were the only ones here, which makes you the last person to see him alive ... and we now have reason to believe he was murdered.”

“Murdered?” I repeated in astonishment. “Who would want to murder Steve? Certainly not me!”

“So tell me what happened after the Senora went home.”

I struggled to clear my mind.

“I was quite drunk. I kept falling asleep. I left him here to finish his coffee and went up to my room. That's all I remember.”

“Tell me, Nigel ... are you a gardener?”

“What? No, I work in a bank.”

“But you have a garden at home. You know all about plants?”

“I don't have a garden,” I insisted. “I live in a flat. I know nothing about plants. Why are you asking me about gardening?”

At that moment, the younger officer returned carrying an evidence bag. He placed it on the table in front of the inspector. I saw that it contained the flashy gold watch that I had left sitting on the dresser in my room.

“Aha,” Morales said triumphantly. “Just as we thought. Senora Diaz said that your cousin always wore an expensive Rolex watch. It was missing from his body. We suspect that he was murdered for it. Of course, you will know that a gold Rolex is worth a small fortune?”

I couldn't help myself. The detectives must have thought I was having hysterics when I burst into a fit of laughter.

“You need to take a closer look at that watch,” I spluttered. “Steve told me he bought it off a street vendor for twenty euros. He gave it to me last night and said he'd get himself another one.”

When the younger officer returned from a nearby jeweller's shop with confirmation that the watch was indeed a second-rate fake, the inspector seemed taken aback. He looked at me helplessly and asked if I knew of any reason someone might want Steve dead.

I thought hard and then snapped my fingers as a possibility occurred to me.

“The other DJ at the club. His name is Manuel. Steve mentioned that the owner was considering getting rid of him and giving Steve a full-time contract. Steve reckoned Manuel was past it and way out of touch with the latest dance music. He told me Manuel was very worried about losing his job.”

The two detectives glanced at one another and conversed in rapid Spanish for several minutes before Morales turned back to me.

“That would seem a reasonable motive,” he admitted. “And he had the means.”

I had read plenty of detective novels and was familiar with the terms; motive, means and opportunity.

“What means? You haven't told me how my cousin was killed,” I pointed out.

“He was poisoned,” Morales revealed. “Those bushes all around the hotel gardens are oleander. Oleander leaves can be boiled down to make a concentrate that can cause a heart attack. The autopsy found it in his bloodstream.”

“So that's why you were asking me about plants,” I said. “Well, I've never even heard of oleander.”

“The only problem,” the inspector confided, “is that we've seen the CCTV from the cameras outside the hotel and, except for Senora Diaz, no one entered or left the building after two a.m. So your cousin's colleague had no opportunity.”

“Maybe not, but Senora Diaz just happens to be Manuel's mother,” I informed him.

The police had no reason to prevent me from leaving Ibiza on my scheduled flight later in the week. I'd had the unenviable task of having to call my uncle and aunt to tell them of their son's demise. They couldn't get a flight in time to attend his cremation so I was the only family member present. I found the whole thing quite traumatic and my nerves were permanently on edge during my last couple of days on the island. The police let me collect Steve's personal possessions from his apartment and I had to buy an extra suitcase to pack them in.

I made one last detour to the police station on the way to the airport to see how the case against Juanita and Manuel Diaz was progressing and was relieved to be told I wouldn't have to attend the trial. My written statement was considered adequate testimony, and Manuel's concern about losing his job had been corroborated by the owner of the club.

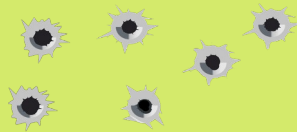
Inspector Morales told me that it was clear that Manuel's mother had boiled up the infusion of oleander while she was at work in the coffee lounge. They had found some evidence that he wasn't allowed to reveal. I said my goodbyes and made my flight with time to spare.

As the wheels left the runway and Ibiza disappeared from view I breathed a sigh of relief and ordered a single malt to celebrate. Then I patted my jacket pocket to make sure the Rolex Daytona I'd kept carefully hidden was still there. Steve had bragged he'd been gifted it by some multimillionaire's wife he'd been bonking and that it was worth at least a hundred grand. I'd found the box and paperwork among his possessions so I knew for sure this one was genuine ... unlike the cheap fake I'd bought in a back alley in Ibiza Town.

The scraps of oleander leaves slipped into the waste bin behind the bar in the coffee lounge had seemingly been enough to convince Inspector Morales of Juanita's guilt. I'd also swapped the electric kettle from my hotel room with one from an empty room, so even if the police had thought to test it they'd have found nothing incriminating. Who would have thought you could use a kettle to distil a deadly poison from a common Mediterranean plant? It's amazing what you can find out on the internet these days.

Anyway, I mused contentedly while I savoured my Glenfiddich. I'll wait a few months before selling the Rolex and then I'll be laughing all the way to the bank. That'll teach my jackass of a cousin to disrespect me for working in one.

Ends



Family Home

By John Grey

Sure there is something in me that needs
to resolve the mystery of the scratching in the wall,
the footsteps on the stairs, the baby crying,
the screams, the piano playing in the parlor at midnight.

But there is another side to my psyche
that fears the implications, that prefers
the unknown keep its distance,
not bother my sleep with its constant demented clues.

So what if, in these very rooms,
a mother once smothered a child,
or a man knifed his wife,
or a woman was locked in the attic –
surely there's some of that in the history of every house.
We're human aren't we. We smother, we knife, we lock away.

Of course, this house has been in my family for generations.
The eeriness, the sense of dread,
are as much a part of me as ancestral blood.

I am the child of whatever ghoulish acts were perpetrated here,
But I live alone. I bother no one and no one bothers me.
No wife, no offspring, I am the end of the line.
Madness and fever, fear and hate —
they haunt borrowed time.
When I die, the deaths die with me.

Yellow Art

By DS Davidson

All that could be seen was the colour yellow. Row-upon-row of canvasses dripped with yellow paint. Just yellow paint and not a vibrant yellow, either, but a sickly colour like that of pus. The paint oozed and ran, dribbling obscenely and dripping down easels and onto the floor where it pooled with rubbery skins that resembles half-healed scabs. The artist sat in the middle of the room, amongst the strange yellow art, picking at a paint-scab in absent-minded repose. His clothes were dirty and splattered with the same yellow paint. Even his eyes, with their distant and unfocused gaze, seemed to reflect the yellow that was all around him.

The critics had written accolades about Tom Berridge and his art, hailing him the next great thing. His first exhibition had led to his being lionised as being at ‘the cutting-edge of art’. His second exhibition had been a critical success. Since then – nothing. The critics had been perplexed and written puzzled pieces in arts journals about his surprising seclusion. At the height of his powers, Tom Berridge had effectively disappeared. Even his close friends and family had found themselves cut-off from him; growing more and more concerned at his hermit-like ways and his curious fixation with the colour yellow, they, too, had been unable to elicit any meaningful response from him.

Now, he barely even painted, just sat staring at the canvasses, staring at an infinity of yellow.

No-one was certain as to when his obsession commenced. It might have been when Tracy had left him. Or, it might have been when his cousin Charles brought him a slim volume of poems back from Paris. Either way, he had developed obsessive-compulsive traits of the most alarming sort and become a recluse. The paintings, if you could really call them that, were all he had now. Even the poems were gone, their pages torn out and used as makeshift canvasses coated in dribbling yellow. But, the words still haunted his mind, repeating again and again like an unholy mantra whispered in his ears. Even despite the paint, the words still seemed visible to him.

There was a hammering at the front door of his house, the raps came with staccato urgency and, yet, barely penetrated into his consciousness. His head tilted quizzically, maybe due to the sound of knocking, maybe due to the words repeating within his head. Still, he sat there, staring. Tom did not even move when he heard the splintering of woods as someone kicked his front door in.

“Mr Berridge?” a voice asked. “Tom Berridge?”

A blue figure loomed into his field of vision, blotting out the field of yellow like horrendous storm cloud. Still, he didn’t react.

“Mr Berridge?” the policeman asked, shaking him slightly.

Tom shifted his head a fraction, but didn’t really look at the policeman, his eyes remaining unfocused.

“In here,” the policeman called to his partner, a note of urgency in his voice. Tom was emaciated and obviously severely dehydrated. “Call an ambulance!”

Slowly, his gaze still unfocused, Tom’s dry lips moved as if he were trying to say something. He swayed as a vortex of yellow whirled around him.

“It is a terrible thing,” he managed to gasp, “to fall into the hands of the Living God.” And, with that, he tumbled backwards onto the floor, knocking over a can of paint, which flowed across the room like a haemorrhage of yellow blood. The policeman leant forward to check for signs of life: there were none.



Ends

Yellow Art was published in [A Terrible Thing](#)

Bound

By Faye Draper

Each bag weighed heavy on her arms. This isn't right, she must have taken a wrong turn. Where were the houses that overlooked the coast? This had to be the wrong part of town. Buildings rotting in the sun, or what was left of them. It's a shame she thought to herself when things are left to rot. Although she couldn't recognise the roads, something felt eerily familiar. She had been here before.

The silence unsettled her, normally the coast was alive. Families, fishermen and teenagers dipping their feet into the cool water. There was nothing, even the birds refused to sing. Frozen and shivering, her soaked winter coat enveloped her, the inner fleece drenched and unforgiving. If only the sun could give her warmth. She must keep going forward, self-pity would not put dinner on the table. She stopped, reaching for her phone. I must text Akira to put the heating on.

Looking ahead she could spot the lone car traveling down the horizon. A yellow ray of light amongst the squalor. She sighed to herself, Akira would not mind her getting a taxi home in this weather. Besides, she was lost. How else would she get back home? She had some Yen left over from her shopping, perhaps he did not have to know. She waved her hand in desperation, she could not bear the herculean task of taking another step. The taxi ground to a halt in front of her, salvation.

"Are you ok?" the kind man asked her. It was then she noticed the droplets falling from her hair, pooling on to the leather seats. "I am very sorry about the water." She looked at the man's reflection in the mirror, his face more concerned than angry. He politely nodded "Where can I take you?". "Kamaya, please". The kind man's face dropped. "Kamaya?" Perhaps the man was new to the area. "Yes.". "Are you sure?" "Yes." She sighed hoping he would not need instructions she did not know how to give.

She watched intently through the window, passing streets that she could not recognise. This is wrong. I must have gotten the wrong bus. Reaching into her pocket she felt the last of her change. "I am sorry I only have two thousand yen; will that make the journey?" "Easily." His smile calmed her for a moment. She looked out once more trying to gain some semblance of where she was. "May I ask why you are going to Kamaya?". "I am trying to get home."

"I haven't had anyone ask for Kamaya since, well you know. There's not much left".

A crippling sense of dread washed over her. "What do you mean there's not much left?" She could feel something creeping up her oesophagus and a burning in her lungs. The taste of salt washed into her mouth before she coughed it up. She stared at the water that landed in her hand. "You know, since the Tsunami. I didn't know there were any homes left?" Her heart sank as she realised she would not be sitting in the warmth with Akira that night. She would not have dinner on the table. She looked once more at the kind man's reflection "I am dead, aren't I?". The kind man nodded once more.

Each bag weighed heavy on her arms. This isn't right, she must have taken a wrong turn. Where were the houses that overlooked the coast? This had to be the wrong part of town.

Ends



The Thief From L.A.

By K. A. Williams

There once was a thief from L.A.
Who robbed a gas station one day
He stole lots of cash
But the cops found his stash
When he ran out of gas blocks away

Last Page Exchange Gives “Uh” The Finger

By Neil K. Henderson

For generations, philosophers have expounded, disputed, debunked and rationalised the cryptic final words of Elgo Critten-Susby’s 1947 discourse *The Meaning Of “Uh”*. But all to no avail.

“The argument is beautifully constructed,” top egghead Balteem Snectorite enthuses. “One is totally drawn into Critten-Susby’s train of thought. We can see exactly where he is going, awaiting only the killer conclusion which will clinch his verdict on the central question of the theory as a whole.”

The actual meaning of “Uh”.

“You’ve nailed it. But the last page of the discourse is phrased in completely different words from the rest. It is totally obscure. To make it worse, the author died before publication, so cannot be consulted.”

And the meaning has remained undecipherable ever since, except... Two months ago Vermin Movies bought the option on *One-Finger Joe*, *The Pervert Detective* by ’40s crime writer Molten McLaverty. The book is almost unknown, despite the popularity of other Molten thrillers like *The Wind Has Many Shadows*, *Get Merden Sletch* and the ghostly *My Farting Bannister*. Producer Stenric Permanoyd was baffled by the ending, which seemed like gibberish, and probably explained why the story sank from view.

“I knew we’d have to change it, so I showed it to a screenwriter. He said it was as baffling as the meaning of ‘Uh’. Then he went white. He looked at me and said, ‘I think this *is* the meaning of “Uh”.’”

Researchers were sent for, and it wasn’t long before the *One-Finger Joe* page came before Balteem Snectorite. He knew at once it was the key to the mystery. “Each final page contains only one sentence, and they look much the same at a glance. I found that both books were printed by the same firm. Clearly, the last page batches were exchanged at the binding stage and nobody noticed when they went out. They are such different genres that each set of readers was unlikely to be aware of the other book, so the connection couldn’t be made.”

It all seems obvious now. At the end of *The Pervert Detective*, One-Finger Joe announces, “‘Uh’ is the primal vocalisation of the inner ‘Hmm...’” While *The Meaning Of “Uh”* simply ends, “Don’t worry, sweetheart – I got my finger on it, and that’s all you need to know.”

Neither book is likely to be reprinted.



Ten buzzards circling
the implication of death
awaiting its scent

By David Edwards

