


# The Lippincott Dinner

A collection of short  
mystery stories



From the writers behind  
Novel in a Day



# The Lippincott Dinner

a collection of  
short mystery stories



# THE LIPPINCOTT DINNER

Originally published: 2025

Copyright © 2025 Various Authors

All stories are copyright the individual authors.  
The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication are  
fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,  
living, dead, or living dead, is purely coincidental*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.  
You are free to share (to copy, distribute and transmit the work)  
under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified  
by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that  
they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this  
work.

For more details, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Original cover photograph by Tim Rogers

[www.novelinaday.com](http://www.novelinaday.com)

**Also by Novel-in-a-Day:**

The Dark

Lunar520

Made Man

Section7

Marshal Law

3 Ghosts

Start Wearing Purple

Auld Lang Syne

Butterfly Dawn

The District

On Your Honor

The Unit

Cookbook In A Day

Villa Diodati

[www.novelinaday.com](http://www.novelinaday.com)

Proud to be sponsored by  
**Literature & Latte, creators of Scrivener**



*for*  
**Montrée**  
*and*  
**Vic**

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 1889, JM Stoddart organised a dinner party in the Langham Hotel in London. His aim was to wine, dine and generally schmooze members of the London literary scene in the hope of securing submissions from this side of the Atlantic Ocean for his literary periodical, the Philadelphia-based Lippincott Monthly Magazine.

It was, by all accounts, a successful evening. Although Rudyard Kipling failed to show up, Arthur Conan Doyle described it as a “golden evening”, and was said to have been thrilled by fellow invitee Oscar Wilde’s effusive praise for one of his earlier works. Stoddart, too, left happy, having secured agreements from both authors to write stories for his magazine. Doyle decided to revisit a character he’d previously written a story about and produced his second ever Sherlock Holmes story: The Sign of the Four. Wilde, for his contribution, produced his one and only novel: The Picture of Dorian Gray...

Nearly 150 years later, a bunch of writers all across the planet revisited Stoddart’s challenge and wrote an original mystery story each. This collection is the result. We hope you have as much fun reading it as we did writing it!

**Tim**

23 March, 2025

# Contents

Crow's Feat.....	1
The Life and Times of Samuel Sarra.....	6
The Art of the Date.....	16
The Purloined Cake.....	21
Melissa Is Missing.....	30
The Body in the Lake.....	31
Kennette Kendalite.....	40
Murder at the Beach.....	62
Trimmings and Trappings.....	72
Liminal.....	81
It's Fine.....	86
It Is NOT Fine.....	90
Alina.....	95
Aunt Molly and the Mystery of the Two Legged Donkey.....	102
September Daffodils.....	111
Artoo's Garden.....	116
Dead Air.....	125
A Life in a Year.....	134
The Last Straw.....	135
The Detective.....	142
First, You Take a Character....	151
The Last Second.....	160
Ozymandia.....	164
A Question on Words.....	173
Kaffy.....	174
And May the Dead Speak.....	183
Petrified.....	187
A Queer Spot for Death.....	196
Liquid Luxury.....	205
Lies in Bed.....	212
Where Did My Pocket Watch Go?.....	216
The Baobab Tree.....	224
Lost Property.....	226
DO NOT READ.....	235



# The Lippincott Dinner



## **Crow's Feat**

*by Cathi Radner Castrio*

It was likely the healthiest relationship that Aubry had in her life. Her husband had come and gone. She had no children. There were no close neighbors. But the crows came every day. The leader, the first to befriend Aubry, was Enid. She was large, pure black, with a single beady eye. Aubry had wondered if the missing eye made it hard for the bird to navigate. She expected it would be a distinct disadvantage and the bird would quickly fall prey to a cat or a fox. Perhaps that was why Aubry, who wasn't exactly the prime candidate for the Audubon Society, threw it a crust of her bread. The crust landed on the ground, and the bird quickly, snatched it and carried it off. Aubry hadn't expected to see the creature again.

But Enid continued to return, day after day. Aubry set out scraps of meat and fat. Enid dropped off bottle caps and shiny pebbles. Aubry rewarded the crow's generosity with extra rations. After the first few weeks, Enid began to arrive with friends. Well, perhaps they were not friends, just companions. Did birds form friendships? Aubry was hardly the expert on birds, or on friendships. Aubry set out extra meat to accommodate the additional birds. Aubry didn't bother to name the others. Enid, with her solitary eye was easy to recognize. The others were black birds, more or less crow-sized. Perhaps one was a bit larger or a bit fatter. A true bird-watcher might have taken the time to scrutinize these details, and commit each bird to memory. Enid simply called them all Corvids.

"Eat up Corvids, there's plenty." They dutifully cleared away her offerings and paid her in gum wrappers and river rocks.

The birds were perfect guests, they ate all that was offered without complaint and then flew away leaving only a few feathers and the payments for their meals. Aubry collected these each day and dropped them in a clear glass vase that stood on the windowsill, so that the crows could see that their gifts were

accepted and treasured. The vase slowly filled with shiny objects and black feathers.

It was nearly a year of feeding the birds before the watch came. It was the heaviest object the birds had brought. Aubry didn't see which bird brought it, but after the birds had left, and the ground was pecked clean, the shiny watch remained.

Aubry lifted it from the ground. It was a woman's watch, with a gold band and a single diamond in the face. The time had stopped at 12:16.

"What to do with this?" Aubry mused aloud. A loud caw came in reply. The other birds had departed but Enid sat on a low branch. She tilted her head, like a puppy trying to make sense of its master.

"Is this from you?" Aubry asked. "It's lovely, thank you." Aubry fastened the band around her own wrist. Enid flew close and hopped up and down at Aubry's feet. "Alright then, I suppose this deserves something extra. Wait here."

Aubry went into her house, and returned with a half-eaten muffin. She placed the treat on the ground. Enid circled the offering, contemplated it, but flew off without the treat.

Another week passed, full of tinfoil, soda tabs, and black feathers. Then a gold ring was left on the ground. A woman's ring, not a wedding ring, but a small circle of gold with an amber stone. It was clean, bearing no indication that the crows had found it lost in the dirt. Aubry slid the ring on her pinky.

Enid landed a few feet in front of Aubry and looked up at her.

"Now this could spell trouble," Aubry said. "Someone might come looking for this." She looked directly at Enid, "I hope you haven't started a crime spree on my account."

The only answer, if it could even be considered an answer, was a departing flight.

The next day, Aubry spread out meat for the birds. An hour passed, and then a second. Not one bird came to partake. Aubry collected the chunks of meat before they could attract the attention of larger scavengers. Aubry wasn't an expert on the habits of scavenger birds. She didn't know if another, more inviting, feast might have called them away. Or if perhaps high winds, or a change

in the weather would disrupt their usual plans. Aubry could only draw from her experience with humans.

She remembered the time her husband gave her a pink sweater that was two sizes too large. Apparently, she fell short on the expected gratitude. She was meant to gush over the gift and then wear the hideous garment. For the next few days, he was unable to leave a room without a door slam. Nothing she cooked was to his liking. He turned out the bedroom lights when she was midway through a page. She understood he was trying to teach her a lesson in gratitude. She drew a few conclusions of her own. He wasn't worth the trouble. Life was too short for petty hostility. She ended the fight, and the marriage.

For three days Aubry didn't put out any meat. On the fourth, she found a fishing lure in her yard. She held up the shiny object; let it catch and reflect the sun.

"A truce, then," she said, facing the trees. "I'll go get you a treat." She returned with the same meat she had collected a few days earlier. She spread the meat on the ground and stepped back. "Enid. Corvids. We can try this again." She stepped back and waited. A large black crow descended. He landed on the ground. The line of meat formed a boundary between himself and Aubry. One by one, the rest of the flock flew down, until a line of seventeen crows faced Aubry. The un-eaten meat was between them. Finally, Enid flew down and landed on the meat.

"I knew you were the one in charge." Aubry said, "I got that part right. Sorry for the offense." She held up her hand. The ring with the amber stone was on her pinky. "See, I'm wearing it. I appreciate your gift. Sorry for the rebuke. Who was I to judge?"

Enid, stood on the meat. She seemed to take a bow, lowering her head almost to her feet and then rising again. She made a sound softer than her usual caw. Then took a peck at the meat. The peace accord was sealed. The rest of the flock joined Enid and made short work of the meat. Aubry went inside and returned with another serving. The birds finished this lot and then flew off. Enid waited for last. A single bone, smaller than a chicken wing remained on the ground. Enid lifted it in her beak. With her single eye, she stared a moment at Aubry and then flew off. Aubry waited;

she sensed the exchange was not complete. In less than a quarter hour, Enid returned. She held something small and white, almost round, in her beak. She dropped the item at Aubry's feet and hopped back, staying close enough that Aubry could have reached out and touched her. Aubry picked up the item, a molar with a silver filling. The item rolled around Aubry's palm. She glanced at her vase of treasures. She could drop it in, it was just another offering from the crows. But Enid was waiting, wanting something more.

Enid cawed three times, loud and shrill. She flew to a spot just short of the tree line, then landed and waited. Aubry crossed the yard. The bird flew into the trees, but stayed at Aubry's eye level, flying a short distance and then landing, waiting for Aubry to follow, in this manner they traversed the woods. They crossed a creek, then climbed a slope, and then entered a second more densely wooded area. Aubry hiked in spurts, following the bird for more than an hour. She guessed they had gone nearly five miles when they came to a sheltered area near a fast-moving stream.

A few charred pieces of woods and a broken circle of stones marked a fire ring. Faded blue and yellow vinyl protruded from the leaves. Aubry used a stick to lift a piece of the fabric. She peered into what remained of a tent. Time, insects, and the course of nature, had all done their work. There were two sleeping bags becoming part of the earth, some scraps of cloth, a child's hiking boot. Aubry dropped the stick, allowing the tent to close. She looked around the site. Leaves and brush were reclaiming the area. But bits of color showed among the leaves. Enid landed on a pile of leaves and gave a cry. Aubry poked with her stick. White bones were revealed. Under Enid's watchful eye, Aubry, cleared away enough debris to know there were two skeletons, one large and one small. A woman, Aubry guessed, her arms around her child. Bits of their life were still scattered about. A cooler lid was visible and the muzzle of a bee-bee gun pointed toward the sky. A medical examiner might be able to determine a cause of death. If the bodies were found, before they disappeared completely.

"I don't suppose she'll need her watch back," Aubry said, "Or her ring." Aubry would have sworn the sound Enid made was a

laugh.

Aubry headed back into the woods; she followed her own trail back towards her home. Somewhere along the way, she tossed the tooth among the trees. No sense having something like that around the house, even if it was just a crow's find.

She wasn't surprised that Enid was back at the house, when she arrived. She had trusted Aubry to find her own way, and it was faster to fly direct. Everyone knew that.

The conversation wasn't over yet. Aubry eyed the bird speculatively. "I think I understand." Aubry said. "Young boys and their bee-bee guns. Little soldiers. Men in training. No respect. Shooting at birds, perhaps?"

Enid closed and opened her single eye.

"That what I thought," Aubrey said. "I understand. You showed me yours, tipped your hand, so to speak. Your secret's safe. Wait here."

Aubry went inside the house, and returned a few moments later. She set a small item on the ground. It was small and white, squared near the top, but ended in a point. Enid, rolled the item with her beak. She looked at Aubry.

"We have an understanding then. Secrets to keep."

Enid picked up the tooth.

"I'll see you tomorrow then. When we finish this lot, I'll start buying beef."

# **The Life and Times of Samuel Sarra**

*by Matt Jardine*

## **Chapter One**

Samuel Sarra was born on a cold December morning in a cold and stark maternity room in a cold and ageing hospital. He was blue, not from the cold, but from the umbilical cord twisted, anaconda-like, around his throat.

“He’s a fighter this one, such a miracle,” grinned the hefty matron returning baby Sam to his mother’s breast. Twenty minutes before, the matron whisked him away from between his mother’s legs, puny, limp and pale.

The doctor that saved him stood in the background, nodding his agreement and wiping his brow of sweat. His hand was sore from the slaps he’d delivered to the newborn’s behind after untangling him from the biological noose. Despite his best efforts, though obviously alive, Sam was still yet to make a sound, aside from the slurps of his suckling.

“Look how peaceful he is. What a treasure. This one’s special,” admired the matron.

Mrs Sarra smiled, the compliments returning the colour to her ashen face, as her baby, with eyes wide and bright, searched the part of the universe trapped inside the four walls of the hospital room.

The rest of the universe, full of unanswered questions and looking on from beyond the hospital walls crossed its fingers and held its breath. Would this be the one to understand its greatest mysteries, at last?

## **Chapter Two**

By two years old little Sam had still not uttered a single word, yet neither had he thrown a tantrum. He was special, indeed. Charlie, his older brother by a few years, communicated Sam’s needs.

“Drink. Snack. Drink and a snack,” Charlie would announce to



Mr and Mrs Sarra when the need arose.

“What is wrong with him?” worried Mrs Sarra.

Mr Sarra smiled, “I don’t know sweetheart,” he said reaching for her hand, “but I’m sure he’ll be ok. He looks happy enough and Charlie loves being translator.”

Mrs Sarra pulled her hand away from her husband. “Do you think we should take him to the doctor?”

Mr Sarra shook his head, his hand cooling from the withdrawal of his wife’s love. “I’ll tell you what,” he said reaching again for the hand she now clutched firmly with the other in her lap, “let’s see how he goes and if he hasn’t said a word by his third birthday, I’ll take him to the doctor myself.”

Mr Sarra pawed at his wife’s fingers. “Ok?” his smile was more hopeful than happy.

“Ok,” she agreed at last, her fingers unfurling to allow her husband’s affection.

“I’m sure there’s a good reason,” Mr Sarra reassured. “There’s always a good reason. He’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

### **Chapter Three**

On his third birthday, Sam uttered his first words: “Drink. Snack.”

Mr and Mrs Sarra looked at him with delight.

“I told you he’d be fine,” Mr Sarra reminded his wife. “There’s always a reason.”

Mrs Sarra ignored her husband’s I-told-you-so smile. Charlie looked at Sam in dismay.

Five years later, Sam wondered, as he often did, why Charlie didn’t like to play with him much. The universe listened in for his conclusion as he kicked his football up against the back of the house, the sound echoing around the sparse courtyard. The kitchen door opened, and his mother appeared.

“Dinner in ten minutes,” she said.

“Do you want to come and kick the ball about, mum?” said Sam.

“I’d love to sweetheart,” she smiled, “but who’ll cook dinner?”

Sam understood; besides, playing football by yourself was tiring

work and he was starving. The quicker dinner was ready the better. Sam stopped wondering about Charlie as he upped his tempo on the ball. He only had ten minutes left to play and a World Cup still to win.

## **Chapter Four**

At eleven years old, Sam stopped playing football. He was tired of being the vice captain of the B team at school. Who'd ever heard of a World Cup team being led out by the second in charge of the second best team in the second best school in the second smallest county in the country. The only first in his life was his experience of death.

During Sam's eleventh year, his last remaining grandparents, the only ones he'd known, died. First his grandfather at the beginning of the year, then his grandmother at the end.

At his grandmother's funeral, he overheard people saying that she couldn't bear to live without her husband and must have died from a broken heart. He heard others say that she died of a heart attack from too many pills and too much brandy. They said, it was a habit she started after she and his grandfather stopped sharing the same room long before Sam was born. He wasn't sure who was telling the truth.

"Dad," said Sam once the coffin had disappeared and the small velvet curtain pulled shut on his grandmother's life. Mr Sarra turned his head to him. "What happens to us after we die?"

The universe listened in as Mr Sarra looked up at the ceiling and thought through his response.

"What do you think happens, son?" he said looking back at Sam.

Sam shrugged, guessing he'd find out one day. He opened his mouth to ask whether grandma had died from a broken heart or too many pills. He closed it again and decided he'd work that out for himself too.

## **Chapter Five**

At fifteen Sam enjoyed two more notable firsts.

The first was the breakup with his first serious girlfriend, the girl who'd committed herself to him for the rest of her life. The second was the fistfight with his best friend, Jeffery.

"How could you do it?" Sam asked Jeffery as he and Sam's now ex-girlfriend stood on the school recreation field, hand in hand. The universe leaned closer to hear what they had to say. Neither of them bothered with a word of explanation.

"Why?" Sam tried again.

Jeffery shrugged, then, at the command of his new girlfriend, they turned and walked away.

Never had Sam felt so angry. The rage tightened his jaw. Before he knew it he had run after the newly in-loves, clenched his fist and punched Jeffery full force in the back of the skull.

Jeffery was a big teenager, a front row rugby player type of big. Sam's punch did little more than jolt Jeffery's head, his enormous neck stopping anything more dramatic. Sam's hand throbbed, the back of it swelling like a balloon almost as soon as he'd delivered the blow.

Jeffery turned and looked at him, a somewhat sad look on his face. Sam opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He knew he'd have to work out why it had happened for himself. He'd also need to remember that violence solved nothing, and, if it was essential, never to hit the back of a thick-head's skull.

## **Chapter Six**

During college Sam studied biology. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection helped him make sense of the world. And then a friend asked a question.

As a summer party wound itself down to an end, Sam and his friends, empty cheap bottles of beer clutched in hand, lay on the grass looking up at the stars. Suddenly, stone cold sober and to no one in particular, Roger sat up and asked: "How did the universe begin?"

The universe cupped its ear as the rest of the group sat and stared into the light dappled abyss above. The cogs of their brains whirred and cranked through the silence as they "hummed" and

“erred.” Someone scooped up a handful of dirt and tossed it in Roger’s direction.

“Shut up Einstein,” the group laughed, but not before the seed of the question had planted deep in Sam’s psyche.

When applying for university, that fateful party night still tormenting his dreams, Sam changed his major from biology to theology.

During his first semester he met Gemma, a girl so pretty, in his eyes, she made him breathless. He knew that this was the girl for him, the one he’d spend the rest of his life loving. He just couldn’t decide if it was God that had brought them together or Darwin and his model of evolution that was determined for him to spread his genes.

The universe held its breath. Sam was asking all the right questions.

## **Chapter Seven**

On graduation day, Sam and Gemma stood hand in hand beside the rest of their classmates as the photographer called out instructions from the front: “Left a bit. You, yes you, right a bit. A bit more. Lovely. You, straighten up...” ordered the photographer.

As the group moulded to the instructions, Sam leant closer to Gemma’s ear and whispered that he’d never seen her look more beautiful. She smiled and squeezed his hand. The universe smiled down at them.

“Ok you lot, stop fidgeting.” As the photographer busied himself with last-minute checks to his equipment, Gemma leant closer to Sam and whispered in his ear: “I’m pregnant.”

“Don’t forget to smile,” called out the photographer, just before the camera shutter immortalised Sam’s startled face for the university yearbook.

With the news of Gemma’s pregnancy came the realisation that Sam would have to cancel the gap year around the world they had planned. He needed to find work as soon as possible.

Armed with his impressive education, it took no time for Sam to secure an interview: at an emerging computer science company

sorting data he didn't yet understand.

An interviewer wearing jeans, a t-shirt and flip-flops asked, "Can you count?" Sam confirmed that, yes indeed, he could. "Job's yours man," smiled the interviewer offering him a high five. Sam thanked him, ignored the high five and shook his hand instead.

As he left the building Sam couldn't help wonder at the mysterious workings of God's ways. He wondered at the strangeness of how quickly life could change, how impossible it seemed to see those changes coming, and how someone with an education in theology and biology could end up in a job sorting ones from zeros.

## **Chapter Eight**

Samuel Sarra Jr was born on a cold December morning, as his father had been. Along with the gift of new life, came another, unexpected and not so welcome; post-natal depression. It sometimes bought a change to Gemma so dark, Sam hardly recognised her.

For the next five years, Sam and Gemma were too busy with work and Sam Jr to notice the weight adding to their waists and the lack of inclination to either do something about it or, at least, to hide it from each other. Date nights were few.

Occasionally, on the way to work, Sam worried at the feeling of love that used to flood his body when he looked at Gemma. Where had they gone? Were they lost? Dormant? Missing in action? The universe strained to hear his answer.

"Maybe we should give Sam Jr a baby brother or sister," Sam said suddenly filled with inspiration after dinner one evening. Gemma looked at him as if he'd gone insane. "He'd love to look after a sibling," said Sam, "they could keep each other company, give us a bit of time together. Charlie used to love looking after me..." He stopped explaining as Gemma got up and cleared the plates from the table.

Against all odds, nine months later, Samantha Sarra was born.

## Chapter Nine

Fifteen years passed in the blink of an eye, each year disappearing faster than the last. Sam enjoyed five promotions, secured his own office and looked after a team of over thirty young, keen and bright minds all educated in things other than data analysis.

At home, Samuel Junior had left the roost for university and Samantha attended college overseas. The house was quiet without the children, the calm as eerie as it was peaceful. As if by routine, Sam and Gemma's conversation still centred around them.

"Do you think Samantha is eating enough? Do you think Sam Jr is remembering to take his medication?" asked Gemma. Sam assured her they were.

Sam always hoped that time alone would rekindle the love he and his wife shared back in early days. That time instead became filled with other things: painting, bicycle riding, yoga, cookery classes...the list was endless and added to every other week.

Sometimes, while he sat at his desk at work looking out at the team of youngsters all desperate to prove their worth, Sam wondered if he and Gemma, somewhere deep down inside, were doing their utmost to avoid each other. He shook away the thought. There was no reason for that to be true. On such days, he'd call home:

"Hi sweetheart," he'd say, "do you fancy a night out this evening?"

"I'd love to," Gemma would say, "but a very special teacher is coming in for the art class tonight."

"Oh, ok. Next week?" he'd say.

"Let's see how it goes," Gemma would say.

Sam would put down the phone and, usually, a knock on the door from someone in need of help or approval would side-track him pondering the mysteries of marriage any further. Once again the universe was left waiting for his insights.

## Chapter Ten

"Sam's here, Mrs Sarra," said the nurse.

"What dear?" said Sam's mother.

“Sam’s here,” said the nurse, louder this time.

“My husband?”

“No, Mrs Serra. Your son.”

“Lovely dear, thank you,” said Sam’s mother.

Sam groaned with the ache in his knees as he lowered himself down on a chair beside his mother. His mother turned to the nurse, a look of concern etched on her face.

“You said Sam was here,” she said.

“He is, Mrs Sarra. He’s right there,” she said pointing to Sam sat beside her in a big blue chair.

“That’s not Sam,” said Sam’s mother, “that’s Charlie.”

The nurse looked at Sam with an apologetic smile.

Sam touched his mother’s arm. “It’s me mum, honestly.”

His mother looked at him as if he was the strangest stranger on earth then stared out of the window at the immaculately kept care home garden.

For the next forty minutes, Sam sat with his mother in silence watching the myriad birds come and go to the feeders in the tree as the universe spread in all directions waiting to catch his thoughts.

Sam thought how lucky birds were to have bird brains, brains too tiny to get bored with their lives; up at dawn, spending all day digging for worms and scraps, returning to the nest at dusk, only to repeat the whole thing the next day.

He wondered then at the mystery of the human brain, the peak so far of human evolution, the gift from God that makes us so different, so special. He looked at his mother as she drooled and dribbled.

He wondered if somewhere deep inside she still remembered who he was, or that his father had died three years earlier, or that Charlie had moved abroad years ago, (about the same time he and Gemma got divorced). He wondered that if she didn’t know who everyone around her was, then could she really know who she, herself, was?

As a Robin Redbreast hopped onto the ledge of the window and cheerily sung its song, he wondered if it was perhaps better to have a bird-brain after all.

## Chapter Eleven

“One thing I know,” thought Sam as he lay in bed. He groaned as he sat up, the cancer throughout his body causing agony he could no longer bear. “I’m going to die.” He closed his eyes and breathed deeply to ease the torment. “We’re all going to die, one day,” he said out loud to the empty bedroom. The truth brought no consolation.

He thought back on his seventy-two years, a life that started with so much promise but was ending in so much pain. It had been a patchwork of good and bad experiences, difficulties, highs and lows, trials and tribulations all leaving him with more unanswered questions than mysteries solved.

He thought of all the people that had come and gone and the money he’d worked so hard to earn, not a penny of it useful to him where he was going. He’d leave his tiny inheritance for Sam Jr and Samantha and their children, for all the difference it would make in today’s economy.

Had he lived a good life? Certainly there were enjoyable moments, but had it really been a good life? He wasn’t sure.

Had he fulfilled his potential amidst the mundanity? Question after question appeared in his mind, old ones from the past, others new, appearing for the first time in his last moments.

He reached across to the bedside table, opened the top drawer and took out his leather belt. A spear of pain stabbed his chest. He breathed it away as he threaded the leather through the buckle.

He thought back to his grandmother’s funeral, his views about the afterlife still undecided. He’d find out soon, he guessed.

He wondered about the mystery of love. What was it, really? The fabric of the divine or just a temporary chemical concoction to lure a mate?

He thought about his hopes and dreams, some achieved, some dashed, most forgotten as he’d busied himself living day-to-day. Would his children have more success? His grandchildren? Their grandchildren, perhaps?

Putting the belt around his neck, he thought about the story his mother liked to tell about his battle to survive at birth. The irony



made him grin, but he couldn't take the pain anymore. The last of his strength was used pulling the belt tight and securing the prong.

As he lay back in bed and waited for the darkness, he wondered at a final question, the greatest mystery that underpinned them all: what was the purpose of life?

The universe surrounded him, waiting, listening, hoping for the answer as Sam took his last breath and someone, somewhere, took their first.

## The Art of the Date

by Katie Quintero

He'd been watching her for at least 20 minutes now. The raven-haired woman sat in front of a maritime Monet, drawing on the sketch pad she'd taken out of an oversized purse. Her hair was pulled up in a springy ponytail, which swung gently every time she looked up at the painting. Her outfit was a little dressy for a trip to the museum, even if it was the Met, which led him to believe she was there to meet someone. The lack of a companion made him question this hypothesis, until he noticed her checking her watch.

This is when the pattern emerged. She would sketch for two or three minutes, pause to soak in the painting for a minute or two, glance at her watch and then begin sketching again. It wasn't until the 4th iteration that he noticed her bristle a bit when she checked the time. During the 5th round, she pulled a water bottle out of her purse, took a sip, glanced at her wrist and set the bottle down on the bench with a little more force than necessary.

"*Somebody's* late," he thought to himself in a sing-songy voice.

He took a turn through a couple of the adjacent rooms, not wanting to stray too far. If nothing else he wanted to see how it played out...if someone would eventually show up or if she left in a huff. He wandered back in time to see her phone replace the watch glance, with her frowning at the message blurb on the screen. She clicked it to read the whole text, snorting in a displeased manner before aggressively shoving the phone back into her purse. She tried to work on her sketch again for a moment, before setting it aside and just staring at the painting.

He could stand the suspense no longer. He walked slowly over to her bench and planted himself on the other half, sitting facing opposite her. He leaned slightly in her direction, gently bumping her shoulder with his. She glanced over, a surprised look on her face.

"Is he just late or has he canceled altogether?" he asked.

The miffed side eye he got in response made him laugh out loud. He covered his mouth with both his hands to stifle further snickering as the other occupants of the room started to stare. Since she looked more amused than annoyed, he decided to explain himself.

“I swear I wasn’t being creepy, but I noticed you sketching and then checking your watch on repeat. With the phone fling, I figured things had escalated and couldn’t resist finding out what happened.”

The girl rolled her eyes, smiling with understanding.

“Good lord. Didn’t realize I’d attracted an audience.”

“That’s a good thing though, right? To have something interesting enough happen that people are curious?”

She shrugged. “Eh, better than being boring, I guess.”

“Sooo, what not boring thing just happened?” he asked, pillowing his face between his hands in anticipation of a story.

His lighthearted goofiness was endearing, so she indulged his curiosity.

“A friend wanted to set me up on a blind date with a coworker. She gave him my number and he asked me out for dinner at a pub near his work. A little loud for a first date, but fine. The day before we were to meet, he texted to reschedule due to a mandatory dinner meeting, asking that we do drinks another day instead. Still fine, life happens. The morning of drinks he let me know he had to work late and asked to reschedule to today. I suggested meeting here first, giving us something to do and therefore talk about while getting drinks. The “phone fling” as you call it was the result of him not only being forty-five minutes late, but texting, and I quote, “Stuck at work. Come by my apartment around 10pm?”

“Noooooooooooo,” her benchmate breathed. “Might as well have sent ‘Netflix and chill?’”

“Right?! Thank you!” she said, shoulder bumping him back. “I was afraid I was just reading into it. That’s what really ticked me off. We haven’t even met yet, for fuuu...heaven’s sake. \*Ahem\* So, hard pass, thanks.”

“Too bad Edvard Munch’s The Scream isn’t here. You could have sent a pic of it to him in response. Though from the sound of

it, the reference would probably go right over his head.”

“Haha, that’s genius. Though perhaps something else would be sufficiently obvious. Care to join me on a rejection art adventure?” she asked, raising her eyebrows mischievously.

“A gentleman is always prepared to embark upon a quest,” he said dramatically, as he stood up from the bench. “Especially when a lovely damsel is in need of his assistance,” he added with a deep bow.

She curtsied in response, swishing her skirt formally. As she returned her sketchbook to her purse and put it on her shoulder, he impulsively tipped out his elbow. She smiled and slipped her arm through his.

“Tally-ho and so forth. Off to find a disapproving matron or scowling professor whose countenance shall clearly convey your displeasure,” he said.

They wandered through the remaining impressionists, into the Medieval Art Hall and through the European sculptures wing. While several faces were quite reproachful, none had quite the look they were seeking. In the Art of the Later Roman Empire Hall, they paused at a large chest to admire the Muses and Sirens carved into the marble.

“I’ve always found it odd that there isn’t a painting or drawing muse,” the sketcher commented. “Especially since there are several dedicated to different types of poetry. They couldn’t give us one?”

Her escort nodded in agreement. “That is strange. My personal favorite has always been Euterpe. She has quite the one-two combo as patron of tragedy and music....which today would basically be Country Music?”

Before they could continue on, an announcement rang through the PA system, alerting them that the Met was closing in 10 minutes. They joined other museum goers in making their way toward 5th Avenue, blinking uncomfortably in the sunlight as they stepped outside. She released his arm and moved to one side, out of the flow of foot traffic. He joined her in the shade of the building.

“That was fun,” she said, grinning. “I’m disappointed we didn’t find quite the right face, but I enjoyed the hunt.”

“Same,” he said, smiling down at her. He glanced briefly at his watch and then checked it again. “Oh gosh, it’s later than I realized. I have somewhere I need to be....would you be interested in meeting up later?” He waved his hands defensively as she raised her eyebrow at him. “No, no...not like that,” he said, laughing. “I have tickets to the Philharmonic at the Lincoln Center tonight and, since jerkbutt didn’t show, I wondered if you’d like to use one of them. You’d need to pick it up at the box office, but it’s all yours if you want it.”

She tilted her head and took a moment to just look at him, contemplating. His hopeful smile lacked any of the creep factor of her last few dates. His blazer and jeans style were also points in his favor. And she liked his eyes. They were warm and kind.

She squinted up at him, feigning deep contemplation.

“Mmmm, I suppose those terms are acceptable. What time should I be there?”

“It begins at 7:30pm, so in about 2 hours?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you there.”

“Perfect,” he said as he started to step away. “Ooh, I’m Xander, by the way. What name should I leave at the box office for the ticket?”

“Elizabeth Bennet,” she said, her eyes twinkling as he gave her a look of disbelief. “But my name is Maeve.”

He laughed, shaking his head as he backed away. “Nice to meet you, Miss Bennet. I’ll see you tonight!”

Maeve watched him walk away, smiling to herself. She’d have to send Blaine a thank you note for not showing up, she thought. That reminded her that she’d never replied to his ill-mannered text. She opted for a gif of Ryan Reynolds saying “absolutely not” and muted his texts. She spent the remaining two hours walking through Central Park, spending a little time sketching at Conservatory Water before finding somewhere to eat. A little after 7pm she made her way to David Geffen Hall and headed to the box office. Forgetting her *Pride and Prejudice* reference, she first asked about the ticket under the name Maeve. When the woman behind the glass couldn’t find anything under that name, she asked about Elizabeth Bennet, looking appropriately embarrassed.

Unamused, the woman handed her an envelope and directed her to the stairs that led to the second floor.

On the upstairs landing she showed her ticket to the usher, who walked her to her place. As they made their way along the balcony of the first tier, she was struck by how amazing her view was of the stage. As the audience began to fill the hall, she wondered at the empty seat beside her and what was keeping Xander. As her watch approached 7:30pm and the orchestra began tuning their instruments, it became harder to convince herself that he was going to show up.

“Stood up twice in one day? What the heck?!” she thought to herself, a bit vexed. “What happened in the last two hours to make him change his mind about coming?” Scenes from *An Affair to Remember* briefly crossed her mind, but she dismissed them as Hollywood absurdity. “What are the chances he got hit by a taxi anyway?” she muttered to herself.

Just as she’d convinced herself to leave, a hush fell on the hall as the performance was about to begin. Deciding she might as well stay and enjoy the free music, Maeve settled into her seat with crossed arms and a furrowed brow.

A door opened on stage right and the first chair violinist emerged onto the stage. He stopped in front of the podium and bowed to the crowd, who returned the salutation with a polite applause. When he rose from the bow and took his seat, he looked in Maeve’s direction, searching the balcony until he found her seat. He smiled sheepishly and discreetly waved.

It was Maeve’s turn to garner attention for laughing out loud.

“Ha!” she burst out, covering her mouth while quickly waving.

“Well, shut the front door!” she thought, smiling.

# The Purloined Cake

*by O.K. Last*

When the angry-looking pig in the pork-pie hat and torn raincoat barged into her, Frex fell back and turned to watch as it barrelled down the length of the compartment and into the next carriage.

She wasn't so lucky with the second pig.

The first one had knocked her off balance and this one sent her backwards into the lap of whatever was sitting in the seat she fell into. The pigs disappeared from view, lost in the menagerie of passengers sitting and standing in every available space. "Rude and stupid", she said dismissively.

"I beg your pardon," answered the creature she was sitting on, as it wriggled under her weight.

Frex twisted her head and saw that she was sitting in the lap of a big dog wearing an old-fashioned check suit with a dark blue shirt and a yellow bow tie. They both sat for a minute without saying anything.

Then she asked, "Have you seen my friend?"

"No idea what you mean", the dog replied. "My turn. What are you doing on this train?"

Frex moved off the dog, which she now recognised as a Doberman, and slid into the empty seat next to him. She started to explain, but it went the same way as usual. The harder she tried to explain the more ridiculous the whole thing sounded. Eventually she interrupted herself.

"Hold on. Do I know you? I'm sure I do! We've met before!"

"That might be true, indeed it might," replied the Doberman, "But your explanation still sounds ridiculous."

A silence fell and they both looked out of the window. The landscape changed from shoreline to rocky plains to some farmland where little apparently grew. The train went into a tunnel and plunged into darkness for a few minutes. When the pale thin sun appeared again the Doberman had a notebook in one hand and a

pencil in the other.

“Let’s start again, shall we. Yes, let’s. I think we definitely should”.

The train rattled through the ever-changing countryside, and at one point Frex and the Doberman saw a bull wearing a straw hat waving to them from a field. She noticed a couple of sheep further down the carriage waving back and wondered if they knew each other.

“So explain to me how you found your way to Antiphony. You and whatever your friend is.”

“My friend’s a girl. She’s called Bee.”

“Bee’s her name?”

“No, its a nickname, short for Bunches.”

“Bunches is her name?”

“No that’s her real nickname. Her actual name is Sofia but she hates that.”

“So you mean her nickname has a nickname?” puzzled the Doberman, writing hurriedly in his notebook. “How and why are you both here?”

“We’re here because we know how to get on the train.”

“Well, obviously you know how to get on the train, or you wouldn’t be on the train, would you?”

Frex groaned and turned to look out of the window. “You sound like my dad”, she said.

“I’m here”, she continued, “because Bee told me to come. And Bee’s here because she says we have to help solve some sort of mystery.”

“And what sort of mystery might require two human girls to board an imaginary train to solve it?”

“Don’t know, and I won’t know till I find Bee.”

The dog grunted, put down his notebook, and watched Frex for some time. “So you’re telling me that the nature of this mystery is a mystery. Am I right?”

“Suppose so.”

She felt the train beginning to slow down.

“Well, in that case this is probably your stop. Yes, I should say most definitely that this is your stop”.



As the train slowed right down, most of the animals in the carriage began to stand up and gather their bags and cases. Frex noticed a tall poodle, in a long dress and a big white hat, holding a little dachshund on a lead.

She turned to the Doberman. “Has that dog got a pet dog?” she asked.

“Certainly looks like it, doesn’t it!”

“That’s a category error!” she cried.

The Doberman looked puzzled. “A category error?”

“Dogs should either be pet-owners, or they should be pets. There’s two categories and they can’t be in both!”

“Most dogs talk and walk, but not all dogs. Those that can do. Those that can’t get dragged around on leads going woof woof. No category error involved.”

Frex looked unconvinced but by this time the train had stopped and the doors had opened. She took the Doberman’s advice and got off. She looked round and in the distance she thought she caught sight of Bunches.

“Bee,” she shouted, and began pushing her way through crowds of animals of various sizes and shapes. She passed two pigs standing deep in conversation with another pig. She heard a lot of grunting, saw much waving of trotters.

They looked like the pigs she had seen on the train.

It was hard to keep Bee in sight because some of the animals were taller and wider than either of the girls. A party of bulls in fancy suits and waistcoats blocked her view for a time, and a posse of giggling foxes in short skirts waved their phones and took selfies, stopping her moving forward until all of them had managed to photograph themselves with each other.

“Influencers, aaaaagh!”, said Frex out loud as she did her best to push through them. To make matters worse, several giraffes were standing still, shouting about how the carriages weren’t tall enough, and a family of badgers were hopping around shouting that other animals were treading on them.

She finally tracked Bee down outside the door to the station café. They went inside where they could actually hear each other.

“I’ve just talked to a Doberman who won’t admit there’s a serious category error here”, said Frex, by way of introduction.

She began explaining but Bee suddenly shouted “Duckburg!”  
“What?”

“The city where Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse live. In the comics Mickey has a pet dog called Pluto, and a dog friend called Goofy. Goofy talks and eats at the table. Pluto barks and eats from a dog bowl.”

“Okay,” said Frex, looking deflated. “Did I see a category error or not?”

“Don’t know,” said Bee. “Maybe you should ask the Doberman if you see him again. In the meantime we have to find a cake.”

“What?”

“The island of Antiphony is having its Cake—as–Combat battle tomorrow. Someone has stolen the cake that Gary and Gay, the baking goats, have made for Butterfly Hollow. Our task is to get it back!”

“What a neat exposition,” said Frex. “I have so many questions. Starting with, how do you know any of this?”

“Short answer. Social media doesn’t just work in real life. It works here too. Longer answer: I got a message from Tina Bleater, who I friended last year when you first brought me to Butterfly Hollow. She told me about the stolen cake. She said the rules say that if any village fails to bring a cake to the battle then the other villages can close it down.”

“No cake, no Butterfly Hollow? We’d better save the day. Let’s find some suspects and give them a good questioning!”

The station café sold what station cafés sell. After the first milkshake Bee had produced a notebook and pencil from her rucksack and they had drawn up a list of exactly zero suspects. After the second milkshake the page was still blank. Through the window every animal on the station platform began to look very suspicious. They forced themselves to concentrate.

“Isn’t it always the Big Bad Wolf?” Bee asked.

“Well, usually yes”, replied Frex. “Maybe we could start by questioning him”.

A train came and went and a crowd dispersed. Lardly Kingsize,

the mayor of Butterfly Hollow, burst into the café in search of doughnuts. “Oh no, not you again”, he grunted at Frex, doing the trunk-movement that elephants use to sneer. She tried a polite smile, with no real success, and they left.

Outside a taxi was waiting. The driver’s badge said Ronja. Bee’s notebook said Big Bad Wolf. The girls sat looking out the windows as Ronja, who was a rat big enough to drive a car, drove them from the station towards the Wolf’s old castle.

The castle resembled a cartoon version of something creepy; like a building from a Scooby-Doo movie. The sky was clear and blue but clichéd dark clouds hung over the castle. The girls got out, looked up at the unlikely clouds, and persuaded the rat to wait.

The driveway was long and carpeted by weeds that seemed designed to tangle themselves round passing feet. The rope by the door made a distant bell-like sound when Frex pulled it, but nothing else happened. “Hmmpf,” said Bee. Frex said nothing.

They had just begun to walk back when a fox appeared. “I know you,” chortled Frex. “You’re the Big Bad Wolf’s stupid friend!”

“I’m certainly not stupid,” said the fox. “I’m merely not very naughty.”

“That’s right,” said Frex. “You’re the Big Bad Wolf’s stupid friend the Not Very Naughty Fox!”

“Firstly, I’m most definitely not stupid”, replied the fox huffily. “Secondly, the Big Bad Wolf hasn’t been here for weeks.”

“So where is he? We need to interrogate him.”

“Hmm,” said the fox. “How to put this. You once told me you come from somewhere called real life, and you think this place is some sort of dream. Well you don’t and it isn’t, but if you think like that then all I can say is that the Big Bad Wolf has gone to another dream that lives inside this dream. I can’t explain it anymore clearly than that.”

Frex and Bee looked at each other. Eventually Bee said “That was either very, very clever or very, very stupid, but it doesn’t matter which because either way the Wolf isn’t here.”

“Has anybody else been here?” asked Frex, remembering the sort of thing detectives ask.

“Only a couple of pig brothers”, said the fox. “They were asking

where the wolf was too.”

“Right,” said Frex to Bee. “That’s a clue right there! I’ll take the taxi and find the pig brothers. You go and talk to the Baking Goats, and see if you can find something suspicious at the bakery!”

Frex dashed off immediately, leaving Bee wondering what to do next. She looked round at the castle that wasn’t as frightening as it should have been, and wondered if she should ask the fox to let her inspect it. Then, looking at some of the big piles of junk lying around, she had a better idea.

“Can I borrow this bike?” she asked, pointing into one of the piles.

“It’s not mine, it’s the wolf’s. He’ll be gone for a few more weeks so just bring it back before he returns.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Actually its more like a don’t drag me into this.”

Bee rolled her eyes, pulled a rather grubby bike out of a pile of metal bits, checked the tyres, and jumped on. “Chuck and Bob live that way, don’t they?” she pointed, starting to pedal before the fox had a chance to reply or not.

The drive ended and she cycled the road until turning onto a path that became narrower then branched into three tracks. She stopped, looked around, shrugged, and headed left. The path led straight into the field where Chuck and Bob kept their helicopter, the Whirlybird.

“Lucky guess, Bee”, she said to herself. She abandoned the bike and ran to the small log cabin to tell Chuck and Bob everything she knew about the stolen cake.

“Just a minute,” said Chuck. “Who told you all this?”

“I got a Facebook message from Tina asking me to come and help find it”.

“And you remembered how to get here?” asked Bob.

“Obviously, or I wouldn’t be here. And I told Frex, and now she’s here too.”

“Okay. Let’s take the Whirlybird towards Butterfly Hollow and see what we can see”, said Chuck.

They flew low and kept looking down, even though they had no real idea what they were looking for.

“What’s a stolen cake even look like?”, grumbled Bee at one point, as they flew over hay-bales and wells.

“There’s a taxi down there, heading for the bakery”, shouted Chuck, over the roar of the Whirlybird’s blades. They watched the vehicle racing along the narrow country lanes as they circled the area looking for cake.

The taxi and the helicopter reached Butterfly Hollow at about the same time. Everyone got out of whatever they were in and Frex, Bee, Chuck and Bob, and Ronja the rat all greeted each other. Everyone brought everyone else up to date.

“Remember, take that bike back”, said Bob. “The Wolf will fight about any little thing”.

“Later”, said Bee. “First we find the stolen cake, before Butterfly Hollow gets closed down.”

They were standing in a car-park opposite the bakery, between the Whirlybird and the taxi. Gary and Gay had seen them arriving and hustled out of the cake-shop to see what the fuss was.

“Stolen cake? What stolen cake?”, called Gary as he walked over to them.

“Your stolen cake,” shouted Frex. “Your very important stolen cake, whose very existence will determine the fate of Butterfly Hollow!”

Gary burst into giggles, and called out to Gay. “Come and listen to this!”

Gay trotted over to listen, and as she did her face began to grin a great goat-like grin, and she began to laugh a enormous snorting laugh.

“There is no stolen cake,” she said. “But there is a stollen cake which we still have safely in the back of the shop. A stollen cake will surprise the hell out of people, strengthen our combat potential, and help us bring the trophy back to Butterfly Hollow, where it belongs.”

“Stollen cake?”, said Bee. “What’s a stollen cake?”

“It’s a traditional German Christmas cake,” said Gay, “with lots of fruit and almonds. Bakers in Germany call it the food of kings!”

“Bakers in a German town called Dresden once made an 18 kilo

stollen cake and paraded it through the streets”, added Gary. “Ours is much bigger!”

As they were talking, a car drew up and out got a Doberman wearing an old-fashioned check suit with a dark blue shirt and a yellow bow tie. He pulled out a notebook and pencil.

“I believe someone has reported a stolen cake,” he said.

“It’s a stollen cake,” groaned Frex in reply.

“Stollen cake? What’s a stollen cake?”

“It’s a traditional German Christmas cake,” said Bee, “with lots of fruit and almonds. Bakers in Germany call it the food of kings!”

“I already said that”, said Gay.

“Is this a category error?”, asked the Doberman, looking at Frex.

“No it isn’t,” replied Frex. “It’s someone spreading rumours based on something they didn’t hear properly in the first place”.

“It’s fake news - and in other news just in I’ve realised that I do know you. You’re Magic Sam the detective”.

“That might be true, indeed it might,” replied the Doberman, “but who exactly has been spreading this fake news?”

“The Eager Beavers!” shouted almost everyone at once.

“And how have they been spreading it?”

“Social media!”, continued almost everyone at once.

“Its all my fault”, said Bee. “I got a Facebook message from Tina Bleater. She must have got the news from the Eager Beavers. I persuaded Frex to come here with me to help save Butterfly Hollow, and now it doesn’t even need saving”

“Well it isn’t not your fault”, said Magic Sam. “But it also isn’t just your fault. I think I will go and have a word with Little Miss Sheep and the Beavers. There’s a lesson to be learned here.”

“What is it?” asked Frex.

“I don’t know yet, but that’s a mystery I intend to solve.”

Combat-by-Cake had been a tradition on the island for longer than any of the animals could remember. Like all traditions it had its own complex and idiosyncratic rules.

Word spread that the cake catastrophe had been averted, and so large crowds from the three villages gathered in the traditional spot

(known locally as The Traditional Spot) in the centre of the small island of Antiphony for the equally traditional Combat-by-Cake.

Lardly Kingsize asked Frex to listen to him practise his speech. “I expect you can manage to do that”, he huffed.

“That’s an ‘L’ of a mistake that people made there,” he said at one point in the speech, descending into uncontrollable laughter.

“I hope you’re not planning to say that”, she replied.

“Yes I am. It’s a good joke. Stollen! Stolen! An ‘L’ of a mistake!” Again he collapsed in prolonged amusement at his own joke.

“That joke only works if you write it down”, Frex pointed out. “If you say it people will just think you’re nervous and accidentally dropped your aitch.”

“Do you think I should write it on a sign, then, and hold it up when I say it?”

Frex looked at him doing his best to look important, tried not to roll her eyes, and said, “Yes, that’s exactly what you should do”.

So he did.

Not a single animal laughed when the mayor held up the sign, except the mayor. And he laughed and laughed and laughed. Most of the audience looked puzzled, and some began to look horrified.

Frex stood at the rear with a private smile on her face. Magic Sam watched from the side and then walked round the back of the crowd to have a quiet word with her.

## **Melissa Is Missing**

*by Jacqueline S Miller*

Melissa is missing.  
Yes, she's my girlfriend. I last  
Saw her early Saturday morning,  
Taking a bus to the Town Centre.  
Every weekend she goes shopping.  
Roy is missing too. Ah,  
You've found them both?

So, Melissa went  
To a Registry Office  
On Saturday, and married  
Roy?  
You know, I had no idea...

What? They're both ill?  
Have they eaten something toxic?  
Oh, I'm glad they're recovering.

Didn't really want them to die, ha ha.  
I admit, I  
Did buy those chocolates.

I like buying presents.  
They were for Roy's birthday.

The chocs were laced with poison?  
How dare you accuse me after I  
Even contacted the police!

Everyone knows I love Melissa.  
No! It's me she loves, not Roy.  
Don't arrest me — I'm innocent!



# **The Body in the Lake**

*by Bruin Fisher*

Detective Inspector Myfanwy Gruffudd replaced the phone receiver in its cradle on her desk. She slumped in her swivel chair, resigned to her fate. 4pm Thursday afternoon and she had just learned she wouldn't be home any time soon. She glanced across the room to where young DC Williams was looking at her enquiringly.

“Come on, then. They've found a body in the reservoir.” The young policeman's eyebrows shot up his forehead but he was out of his chair with his waterproof jacket over his arm and his car keys in his hand before Myfanwy had found her handbag.

He drove, guiding the pool Ford Focus along the narrow lanes up the valley to the reservoir, while she sent a WhatsApp message to explain why she would be late home. Hywel, her sixteen year old son, would have to fend for himself. She knew the freezer had pizza and she hoped he would find it. Otherwise he would probably eat crisps and cake.

DC Williams pulled up behind a haphazard group of vehicles in the car park at one end of Llyn Calon reservoir, and they pulled on body suits before clambering cautiously down the bank to the water's edge.

Forensics were buzzing around a big mostly black shape. Myfanwy spotted the police pathologist and went over to talk.

“What can you tell me?”

“Hello, Gruffudd, nice to see you too.”

“I'm not in the mood. I should be clocking off about now, I'm tired and I'm hungry and this is the last thing I want.”

He smiled in solidarity. “You and me both. Well, I can tell you there's no physical trauma, he hasn't banged his head or anything. Been in the water a long time, about a month I should say.”

“It's a he, then?”

“Yes. Fine specimen, too. He's about 6-3, muscular, late 30's,

possibly early 40's."

"That's a wetsuit, is it? So he got in the water deliberately?"

"Oh yes, I think so. We'll have to open him up of course, which won't be much fun after so long, but I won't be surprised if I find he had a heart attack."

"Okay. So no foul play, then?"

"Don't put words into my mouth. There's hours of work to do before I can hope to give you that kind of information. But no evidence yet, certainly."

Myfanwy left the pathologist to his work. To Williams she said: "He's been in the water about a month. He must have left clothes somewhere, you'd think? Nobody's reported finding them? And how did he get here? He won't have walked, even from the nearest village it's ten kilometres and you don't walk that far wearing a wetsuit, or even carrying one, I'd have thought. But there's no report of a car abandoned anywhere."

"No ma'am. All the car parks close at dusk. If a car had been left in one of them for a month we would know about it. I'll check with Welsh Water, though, just in case."

"You do that. Check we haven't had his clothes called in while you're at it."

"Yes ma'am."

Myfanwy arrived back at her little three-bed semi late, tired, and grumpy. She parked her Mini on the driveway and let herself in at the kitchen door. She checked the freezer, the pizza was still there. She took it out and turned on the oven to pre-heat. Then she went to the foot of the stairwell and yelled up: "Hywel!"

A flurry of activity was audible from his bedroom. His bedsprings creaked, the floorboards groaned.

A moment later Hywel appeared at the top of the stairs, looking dishevelled and flushed. "Hi, Mum."

"Have you eaten? Anything?" "Um, no. Just crisps."

"I'll do you a pizza. Come down in twenty minutes."

"Er, Mum, I'm working on the science project, with Gwlym."

"You can share the pizza then. Chips with it?"

"Cool. We'll come down."

‘Science project, my arse’ she thought as she unwrapped the pizza. ‘When is that boy going to tell me he’s gay? I’m a policewoman, for feck’s sake. We have good gaydar.’

By the time the boys appeared to collect their meal and disappeared again with plates on trays, she was deep in thought about the new case.

How could a young fit man be dead for a month and no-one reported him missing? She didn’t think he was the sort whose absence wouldn’t be noticed, like a homeless person for instance. He had financial resources to buy a wetsuit, and leisure time to go wild swimming in the reservoir. So how could he not be missed?

She began making a list of tasks for the following day’s work at the station.

By the time Myfanwy arrived at the police station the next morning, Williams was already at his desk and apparently hard at work. She chose not to disturb him for a while, and settled herself at her desk with the list of ideas she had jotted down. There was an e-mail from the pathologist with his report. She printed it and sat back reading it.

There wasn’t much that she thought helpful to the investigation. He had died of a heart attack, most likely brought on by something called Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, a heart defect, probably inherited, and also probably undiagnosed. So the poor guy had been apparently fit and healthy and then just dropped dead. At least she knew her case was a missing persons case and not a murder.

The wetsuit was interesting. Apparently it was unusual. Myfanwy knew nothing about wetsuits, but this one was a specialist suit intended for wild swimmers and triathletes, not the sort you’d use for surfing or diving. She took to Google looking for what the report called a Huub Varman Glacier XL and found the English manufacturer, but hardly a trace of it on retailer sites. She picked up the phone.

Ten minutes later she was in front of DC Williams’ desk with a triumphant smile on her face. He looked up from his work in some confusion. “Ma’am?”

“The wetsuit!”

“Yes, ma’am. A Huub Varman Glacier, over five hundred pounds worth, only been on the market five months, and only available from the manufacturer direct. So far they’ve only sold the XL size eleven times and I have the details of all eleven customers. I’m half way down the list, spoken to three of them, all alive and well and claiming their wetsuit is not missing.”

She sat down, deflated. “You’re ahead of me. Well done, Williams. Let me know as soon as you have anything to tell me.”

She went back to the pathologist’s report, hoping to find something else of use.

By lunchtime, DC Williams had made contact with nine of the eleven people who had purchased one of the wetsuits.

“Ma’am, we might have to visit all eleven of them eventually, any of them might have been lying over the phone, and we can only really eliminate them if they can show us the wetsuit. But I have a couple of people I’d like to see first.” - and he passed a piece of paper over the desk to her.

Two names, the top one James Blackburn and a note beside it that Williams had spoken to Blackburn who said he had bought the suit for a friend but seemed cagey.

“This James Blackburn. Can you arrange for us to visit?”

“He’ll be home this evening.”

‘Feck’ she thought. Another late shift.

They arrived at a tired-looking block of flats at a little after six. There was no lift so they climbed an echoey staircase to the seventh floor and then walked along a balcony with a rusting bannister to flat 7-3 and rang the bell.

The door opened, revealing a slightly-built man, probably in his late 30’s, wiry and lean, like a marathon runner. As soon as he spoke, though, Myfanwy pegged him as gay. ‘I wonder what my Hywel would make of him?’ she thought. There were clues - blond highlights in his brown hair, and the plentiful hand gestures as he spoke that Myfanwy thought of as either Italian or gay. And this man wasn’t Italian.

He ushered them into his living room and they perched on the

edge of the only sofa while he sat across from them on an armchair, and then stood again immediately. "I'm so sorry, I should have asked - would you like something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Something else?"

Mindful of getting home as early as possible, Myfanwy refused the offer for both of them. She thought Williams looked disappointed. Blackburn sat back down and said: "So, what can I do for you?" Myfanwy thought he looked nervous. No, terrified.

She thought she'd like to take a back seat so she could watch for reactions. She glanced across to Williams who took the cue and started off with: "You bought a wetsuit online from Huub, on what date was that?"

Blackburn picked his mobile phone from the coffee table between them and began tapping and scrolling. "March 14th. Well, that's when they took payment."

"I see. And you said you bought it for a friend?"

"Yes."

"And does the friend still have the wetsuit?"

"Yes." Myfanwy noticed the flinch as he gave his answer.

"Can we have the address and phone number for your friend, then, sir?"

Myfanwy thought she could see sweat on Blackburn's brow.

"Er, why do you need that? Can't you just take my word for it?"

"We need to see the wetsuit, sir."

"Yes but why?"

"Well, we've found one like it, and need to identify it."

Myfanwy was expecting some sort of outburst, but not that he would burst into tears. She pushed a box of tissues across the coffee table towards him. He grabbed one, dabbed at his eyes and blew his nose.

"I - I didn't know what to do."

Williams surprised Myfanwy a little by his compassion. "Just tell us what happened. Take your time."

Blackburn nodded through the tears. It was a while before he spoke again.

"I like wild swimming. David had never tried it. We were going to have a weekend together at Llyn Calon. I'd been before, it's a

lovely lake for swimming. He didn't have a suit so I got him one from Huub."

"When did you go to the reservoir, and what happened when you got there?"

"It was a Saturday, March 25th. We got in the water by the dam and swam away towards the far end. We got almost to the end and I thought he was enjoying it as much as me but then... he got into difficulty. He... thrashed about, only for a minute, and then went limp. I turned him onto his back and swam him to the shore and did CPR. He didn't revive."

Myfanwy and Blackburn both watched Williams writing notes.

"Why didn't you call for help?"

"Our phones and things were at the other end of the lake. I shouted and shouted but there was no-one in earshot."

"But you eventually went back to your things and came home. You never reported it?"

Blackburn shook his head.

"Why?"

The young man lifted his tear-stained face, still twisted in pain, and said: "He wasn't supposed to be there. I think he told his wife he was away at a conference."

"But he's dead! Surely she is entitled to know that, at least?"

Blackburn nodded and then dropped his face onto his palms.

Myfanwy was by this time putting two and two together and coming up with a lot more than four, but she kept quiet and let Williams continue his questioning. He seemed to be doing quite well.

"Why do you think his wife has not reported him missing?"

Blackburn's head shot up. "She hasn't? I thought that would be why you're here?"

"No. He hasn't been reported missing, not by his family who must be missing him, and not by you who know what happened to him. What are you not telling me?"

Blackburn looked from Williams to Myfanwy and back. Myfanwy was reminded of a rabbit in headlights.

"We were... in love. David hadn't told Amanda so we had to be careful. We had argued about it, I wanted him to tell her, but he

wouldn't. He said she wouldn't take it well."

"So, he died, and you... what? Pushed him back in the water and left?"

"I didn't know what to do. He wasn't supposed to be there at all! I walked back round to where we'd parked. We'd taken my car, he'd gone by train to Brecon and I'd picked him up from there."

"So where are his clothes now?"

"I burned them."

"Why would you do that?"

"I thought I needed to hide the truth as best I could, from Amanda. It's awful she's got to learn he's died, I know he wouldn't want her to know he was gay, too."

After that no-one spoke for several minutes. Myfanwy's imagination led her a dance. She found she felt very sorry for James Blackburn. Her feelings about David with a boyfriend and a wife were mixed. Clearly they would have to interview the wife, and she wasn't looking forward to that.

Amanda Porter did not look like a woman distraught because her husband had disappeared without trace over a month ago.

Myfanwy took the lead. "Mrs Porter, when did you last see your husband?"

"March 25th."

"Over a month ago? Where is he now?"

"I neither know nor care."

Myfanwy's eyebrows rose. "Why would that be?"

"We've been married four years. I thought we were doing okay. Then a month ago he told me he's been carrying on with someone else. A man."

She thought of her Hywel. Williams took over. "How did that make you feel?"

Myfanwy concealed a smirk when she heard DC Williams sounding like a psychotherapist.

"How do you think I'd feel? I threw him out. Haven't seen him since."

Williams paused before responding. "I have to tell you that your husband has been found dead."

This shook her. She sat down suddenly, her face pale. “Dead? Did he... did he... kill himself?”

Myfanwy reached forward and took the other woman’s hand. “He died of a heart attack. There’s no reason to think it was anything other than that.”

Mrs Porter stared into space, looking stricken. Myfanwy’s mind was racing again, remembering that Blackburn had said that Porter wouldn’t, couldn’t tell his wife about their affair and yet now it seemed he had done just that. Another interview with James Blackburn was on the cards.

Back at the station, she settled at her desk with a cup of coffee from the machine and then picked up the phone. She dialled the number she found for James Blackburn.

He answered, and she got straight to the point.

“You told us that the reason you kept quiet about David’s death was that he didn’t want his wife to know he was gay. Would it surprise you to learn that he came out to her the day he died?”

The line went quiet. She waited. Eventually Blackburn spoke again. “How did she take it?”

“Badly, I’m afraid. She says she threw him out.”

“So that’s why she didn’t report him missing?”

“Yes. Did he really not tell you?”

“He was excited, I thought it was about our weekend together and the wild swimming. He said he had something to tell me, but wouldn’t say what. He was going to tell me when we were in the pub we were planning to eat at, that evening. That must have been it.”

She could tell he was sobbing now. “I’m sorry for your loss. There will be an inquest, I’ll text you the details. It would be good if you’re there.”

Myfanwy impulsively decided to encourage Hywel to attend the inquest with her. Somewhat to her surprise he was keen to go, and it pleased her to know they were going to do something together, and her work was unlikely to stop it from happening.

It took place in the village hall. DC Williams was there but she



didn't sit with him, preferring to sit just with Hywel. James Blackburn was there looking frightened. The pathologist was there. Hywel watched the proceedings with interest, which heightened as the story developed. The pathologist was called first and summarised his report. Myfanwy was called to tell her bit, and Williams, and finally Blackburn, who held it together while he told his story. Hywel, Myfanwy noticed, was spellbound.

On the way home, he was quiet, deep in thought. But once they were home, he started talking. "So the dead man was married to his wife for four years, but when he died he had a boyfriend. I don't understand."

"Well, maybe he hadn't worked out that he was gay when he got married. Or maybe he had, but for whatever reason he was ashamed and didn't want to admit it to himself?"

He thought about that for a moment and then said: "That's awful. His poor wife."

"Yes. Things have changed for gay people so much, not so long ago it was against the law, can you believe? Mr Porter might have been brought up to think it was wrong, that he was somehow broken. It used to happen a lot."

He went quiet again for a bit, and then came up to her as she stood at the kitchen counter and wrapped her in a hug. His mouth close to her ear, he said quietly "I'm gay."

She pulled back slightly so that she could look him in the eye as she smiled and said: "Yes, cariad, I know."

"What? How?"

She allowed herself a smirk. "I'm your mother."

# **Kennette Kendalite**

*by Cassandra Lee Yieng*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This radio play began as a musical I first drafted in 2009. My SoundCloud playlist titled "Kennette Kendalite: The Musical" contains the melodies of the songs. Enjoy.

SCHOOL HALL, PIANO

GIRLS' CHOIR

*If I could, I would do something  
great  
If I could, I would surely do  
If I could, I would follow my  
heart  
That will make all my dreams  
come true*

*If I could open just the right  
door  
If I could, I would surely do  
If I could know which cause to  
fight for  
I'll know what it takes to push  
through*

KENNETTE

*Every time I make awesome plans  
There's a new boy 'round the  
block  
I feel threatened because  
romance  
Makes many a laughingstock*

*Like my mum neglected high  
scores  
Her mistake caused me to be born  
Money pains got us on all fours  
And tomorrow we are gone*

*If I could, I would go save the  
world*

*If I could, I would surely do  
If I could have a banner  
unfurled  
It would say, "Bid romance  
adieu."*

TEACHER

Kennette, you're being  
ridiculous. This performance is  
being recorded.

KENNETTE

I'm serious. This is literally  
my last day at Georgette's.

GIRLS' CHOIR

(gasp)

AT HOME, WASHING PLATES

KENNETTE

...But you know I always aimed to  
enter Johns Hopkins and become a  
doctor. I was happy when you put  
me in a top girls' boarding  
school. I could have been there  
forever. What even is this co-ed  
sinkhole called Mo Liu Yeh  
College? Can't I enroll in DGS?

NATALIE

I was fired. You have no idea  
your dreams were over that  
night. Since you're so  
ungrateful, you can torch what's  
left of your sorry future.  
Welcome to cruel reality.  
Welcome to Hong Kong.

KENNETTE

But, the boys. All I hear you  
saying is I'm vulnerable,  
gullible, too easily taken  
advantage of..

NATALIE

The real world isn't a girls'  
school. Better get the exposure  
now than later.

KENNETTE

(sighs)

I just moved into my new home  
And the kids laugh at my dreams  
I have so much homework to  
complete  
I'm bursting at the seams  
The life I want to live is not  
The life I'm living now  
Mum, you used to tell me, "Dream  
big!"  
I beg you, please tell me how

NATALIE

Welcome to Hong Kong, my dear  
Famous for that scen'ry of the  
Peak  
Oh, oh, welcome to Hong Kong (oh  
dear)  
Where fortune is all that people  
seek  
In-demand skills are the way  
forward  
Fancy dreams are meant to die  
Do you hear me when I cry?  
Do you hear me when I cry?

BIRDSONG, TREES RUSTLING

KENNETTE

(panting)

I hate church hikes.

Flowing stream

NATALIE

Look. Is that pock-marked  
ruffian the new boy 'round the  
block?

KENNETTE

And I'd just given him my  
unfinished siu mai...

ERIC

Hi Ken, I'm Barbie. Fascinated  
with you ever since you botched  
that choir performance.

KENNETTE

I love thee not, Eric Everett,  
therefore pursue me not.

ERIC

You draw me, you hard-hearted  
adamant.

KENNETTE

If I don't keep you in second  
place where you rightly belong  
in school, I won't get to study  
medicine.

ERIC

Oh, so you're one of those  
cookie-cutter girls who wants to  
be a doctor? Whose idea was it,  
if not your mum's?

KENNETTE

Tempt not the hatred of my  
spirit.

ERIC

*I enjoy hiking together  
And the free siu mai we share  
When I vent, you don't lose your  
temper  
When I talk too much, you care  
But there's a parasite in me  
And I can't let it sprout  
Can't afford to be stuck on you  
-Can somebody help me out?*

NATALIE

*Welcome to Hong Kong, my dear  
Where romance is for the silver  
screen  
Oh, oh, welcome to Hong Kong (oh*

dear)  
The people here care how they  
are seen  
And so no one can follow their  
heart  
Beautiful plans go awry  
Do you hear me when I cry?  
Do you hear me when I cry?

KENNETTE

Here's where meaning, love and  
freedom  
Are but promises-turned-lies  
And so every higher purpose  
Meets an untimely demise

Oh! Welcome to Hong Kong  
A kaleidoscope that's blowing  
smoke  
Oh, oh, welcome to Hong Kong  
No young or old's spared an iron  
yoke  
If you want to make it big here  
You must bid your soul goodbye  
Do you hear me when I cry?  
Do you hear me when I cry?

Traditional Chinese musical instrumental  
intro

NATALIE

When everything is gone  
Everyone else is a thorn  
Every time you see the dawn  
It's a shame

When there's nothing more to  
lose  
Thanks to foolish ways you  
choose  
You end up without a use  
All the same

So to ward off puppy love  
Go find something else to love  
Be a bookworm, workaholic, or a

geek  
Keep your heart in walls of  
steel  
Don't let people make you feel  
Romantic, soft or weak  
Like a good-for-nothing freak

BOTH

I don't want to fall in love

NATALIE

There's no reason for affection

BOTH

I don't want to fall in love

KENNETTE

I don't want to lose my way

NATALIE

I don't want to fall in love

KENNETTE

I'm too young for one's  
rejection

BOTH

And I can't afford to waste  
another day

KENNETTE

But to counter puppy love will  
really  
Strain my every nerve

NATALIE

But to fall in love will make  
yourself a fool  
Don't be lenient with your flesh  
I shall say it all afresh  
You have to concentrate in  
school

KENNETTE

But what if I think someone is  
cool?

BOTH

*I don't want to fall in love  
There's no basis for attraction  
I don't want to fall in love  
It's a losing game to play  
I don't want to fall in love  
I don't want a side obsession  
That turns out only to waste  
another day*

NATALIE

*I don't want to fall in love*

KENNETTE

*I don't want to fall in love*

BOTH

*I don't want to fall in love and  
lose my way*

NATALIE

*I don't want to fall in love*

KENNETTE

*I don't want to fall in love*

BOTH

*I don't want to waste another  
precious day*

KENNETTE

(to ERIC)

*I don't want to fall in love  
I must get back to revision  
I don't want to fall in love  
If you come again, I'll scream  
I don't want to fall in love  
You provide no satisfaction  
And you're stopping me from  
realising my dream*

NATALIE, KENNETTE

*I don't want to fall in love!*

ERIC

*Fine. Then you'll be safe from  
my dad. The devil incarnate.*



INSIDE A LOBBY, DOWNPOUR OUTSIDE.

KENNETTE

E-V-E-R-E-T-T... wow, this  
neuroscientist hosts candlelight  
dinners...

ETHAN

My foot!

KENNETTE

Sorry, sir, I wasn't looking.

ETHAN

Hang on. Are you that girl some  
bridge is raving about?

KENNETTE

Dr Everett?

ETHAN

Call me Ethan. The lift's here.  
Join me in my office.

Elevator "ding" sound. Ethan's office.

ETHAN

Some bridge told me about you,  
Kennette.

KENNETTE

I was a straight-A student at  
Georgette's. Girl Guide.  
Kindness Ambassador. Volleyball  
and swimming teams. Gold  
medalist. Performed in concerts  
and musicals with prizes. But...

ETHAN

Was that my university profile  
on your phone?

KENNETTE

I need science to resist every  
vestige of attraction to Eric.  
But who'd supervise such a

project...

ETHAN

I usually don't consider  
secondary school students, but I  
can make an exception...

KENNETTE

*Finally there's someone  
Whom I can identify with*

ETHAN

*Finally the hope I need is here*

KENNETTE

*There's no mountain that's so  
high*

ETHAN

*Or ocean that's so deep*

BOTH

*That we kindred spirits have to  
fear*

KENNETTE

*Do you know K's for kinetic  
And E's for energy*

ETHAN

*I thought we had some chemistry  
But it turns out we have physics*

BOTH

*And now we finally  
Take on biology*

ETHAN

*In case we don't sound crazy  
Don't forget mathematics*

KENNETTE

*And I'll save all future heads  
of state from  
Fallin' in love too fast*

ETHAN

*And I can be in my element*

*And free my son at last*

KENNETTE

*Removing Cupid's arrows like  
The sword Excalibur*

ETHAN

*Little girl, it's not that  
simple  
There's a high price you'll  
incur  
You'll never be the same  
You'll never be the same  
What you'll go through is tough  
I can't stress this enough  
You'll never be the same  
You'll never be the same  
Be prepared for the flak  
There is no turning back*

KENNETTE

*I will take this risk  
Bury puppy love  
Six feet under the ground, and  
let us  
Burn it out of me  
Find out what it takes  
Not to let love rebound*

ETHAN

*That's precisely what we'll do  
But this message must get  
through:  
In the end, you can't go  
Back to the old you!*

Tap-dancing

KENNETTE

*For my future's sake  
All I have to do  
Is make this a success, and I'll  
give  
Everyone this tool  
No one falls in love  
No distractions, no mess*

ETHAN

*More a mystery than a tool  
But inventing it was cool*

BOTH

*So let's bid adieu  
Every romantic fool!*

High-fives

KENNETTE

*You're so brilliant, Dr Everett  
I could have a crush on you*

ETHAN

*Thank you Kennette but I'm taken  
And there's puppy love to shoo*

Polyphony below: synchronous singing of  
distinct melodies

KENNETTE

(overlapping)

*It's such an awkward paradox  
When you're my cup of tea*

ETHAN

(overlapping)

*What absurdity  
This thing cannot be*

KENNETTE

*It's all about you*

ETHAN

*It's all about you*

KENNETTE

*It's all about you*

ETHAN

*It's all about you*

BOTH

*It's all about you and me*

Door flings open

ERIC  
Dad... Kennette?

ETHAN  
She's mine now, some bridge.

ERIC flees along the corridor outside the office and catches his breath once out of earshot.

ERIC  
*Every morning I anticipate  
Indisputably one sign  
That I will escape my worst  
nightmare  
And my true self could shine  
For nothing can separate  
Your burning heart from mine  
It's all about you*

KENNETTE  
(echoing)  
*It's all about you*

ERIC  
*It's all about you*

KENNETTE  
(echoing)  
*It's all about you*

ERIC  
*It's all about you and me*

KENNETTE  
Ethan, here's my experimental design report, complete with 888 citations.

ETHAN  
The whole process will take at least five years.

KENNETTE  
Five years? That's too long. I'd have graduated.

ETHAN

The good news is I've done the heavy lifting, and you just have to be my poster girl.

KENNETTE

You've tricked me.

ETHAN

Or you can proceed with five-plus years of medical testing..

Footsteps. Glassware clinking

KENNETTE

It smells funny. Like smoke.

ETHAN

Exhaust fans broke down. The New York Times wrote about an imaginary love vaccine. This is the real deal: a slow-release SSRI packed inside carbon buckyballs.

KENNETTE

Very innovative.  
(Shakes a plastic box)  
Are these plasters? I was expecting a syringe.

ETHAN

Not plasters. Microneedle vaccines.

KENNETTE

Vaccines are safe and effective..

ETHAN

That's right.  
(Taps on paper with a pen)  
I've listed you as a principal investigator and a human subject. Sign this indemnity form and you can help yourself with one. Also, join me tonight on the grass patch outside. I'll be gracing you with the guitar.

(Exit)

KENNETTE

Not a candlelight dinner...? A  
little plaster won't hurt...

(Slaps on a patch)

I can't move. How can I sign the  
form like this? Oh no, my other  
hand. My legs. What's happening?  
How can I change my menstrual  
pad now...?

(Panics)

NATALIE

(V.O.)

Can we sue Ethan if she's  
injured?

ERIC

(V.O.)

The Nuremberg Code doesn't apply  
to principal investigators  
volunteering as human medical  
experimental subjects. We'll  
lose.

KENNETTE

*Imprisoned  
In my body's prison cell  
Don't know how to cry  
Don't even know if I smell*

*Imprisoned  
Piles of schoolwork beckon me  
Please don't tell my mom  
I can't even lift my knee*

*Imprisoned in this place  
Imprisoned by your grace  
Imprisoned by your mercy  
The need to see you face-to-face  
Imprisoned by your madness  
And imprisoned by your rage  
I can't believe we'd ever reach  
this stage*

*Imprisoned  
What would mother think of me?*

Taking time from school  
Got this disability

Imprisoned  
I just want a focused mind  
To excel in school  
Now I'm sure I'm left behind

Imprisoned in this place  
Imprisoned in this phase  
Imprisoned by this nightmare  
And ashamed to see my face  
Imprisoned by the promise  
That my wishful thinking cease  
But my life is no longer in one  
piece

Imprisoned in this place  
Imprisoned by this haze  
Imprisoned by my folly  
Leading to this deep malaise  
Illusions are so close to truth  
I worked the science with glee  
My dream came true but I'm no  
longer free

I'd thought I'd got a love  
vaccine  
To rid this world of needless  
sin  
What I have lost is more than  
all I win

GRASS LAWN. CRICKETS.

ETHAN

I regret taking on this  
ungrateful wench.

(strums guitar)

I'm afraid it's getting late  
But then I still have to wait  
I hope you will come at any rate  
So that we can get things  
straight  
I have a thought I've never  
sought



But there's a new heart that you  
have caught  
I could have gone and called it  
a day  
But here's a song I want to play

How I wish you had retained a  
little feeling  
Though I won't expect a sea  
How I wish you had not  
overplayed my leaning  
Though you'd likely disagree  
How I regret teaching you just  
the right way  
Never to love me! I have just  
one plea:  
Oh, Kennette, don't ever say  
That you won't be here with me

I hoped you could handle your  
sudden feelings, my girl  
I once told you in the face,  
"If only you were less  
sentimental,  
The world would be a much better  
place."  
But now when you are sane, your  
heart is ruled by your brain  
My thoughts of you are all in  
vain!  
Before I let you go on your way  
There are a few words I must say

How I wish you had retained a  
little feeling  
Even one drop in the sea  
How I wish you rightly  
understood my meaning  
But that'll never come to be  
How I regret teaching you just  
the right way  
Never to love me! I have just  
one plea:  
Oh, Kennette, don't ever say  
That you won't be here with me

All my life, all my days  
I had gone as I pleased

*Everyone, every place  
Had not failed me the least  
Yet now I'm to say goodbye  
To the past when I was free  
And I cannot help but sigh  
That I am not your cup of tea  
I know you won't be here with  
me.*

ERIC

Where's Kennette, Dad?

NATALIE

My girl doesn't stay up this late. No fancy candlelight dinners?

ETHAN

No. She's still in my lab.

NATALIE

Then take us there. Are you dating her?

ETHAN

I don't want to disturb...

ERIC

You're her supervisor!

ETHAN

Some bridge!

INSIDE ETHAN'S LAB.

ERIC

It smells like urine here.

NATALIE

My baby girl... Your uniform... your menses leaking all over...

KENNETTE

It's Dr Everett's fault!

ETHAN

It's her own decision.

ERIC

I read your docs. Quadriplegia and incontinence were adverse effects that affected 44% of your human subjects, which is why you could never launch it...

ETHAN

Some bridge!

ERIC

Kennette, your bandage fell out.

KENNETTE

Tore it out with my teeth by candlelight—  
(knocks over something)

ERIC

No! The Bunsen burner—

NATALIE

The table's on fire!

ETHAN

It's called a "bench," bridge!

ERIC

Where are the extinguishers?

NATALIE

The fire blanket's gone!  
(rapping on doors) )  
Can't open! We're trapped!

ETHAN

The windows are jammed!

NATALIE

No overhead spray?

ETHAN

Didn't you check the smoke detector, Kennette?

KENNETTE

How? I was paralysed from the  
neck down, idiot.

ERIC

Kennette, he's still my dad!  
(smashes window)

KENNETTE

Where are you taking me?

NATALIE

Carry me on your back, too!

ERIC

I'll come back for you!

ETHAN

Some bridge!

KENNETTE

I'm scared of heights...

ERIC, KENNETTE

(scream)

KENNETTE

*I wish  
The sign has come  
The sun is out  
And it is brightly shining*

*I wish  
The clouds are past  
And every day  
I can sing*

*Time and time again  
My misery remains  
I need a new direction  
To soar above the plains*

*I wish  
The sign has come  
The birds are out  
And I'm glad they're chirping*

*I wish*

*Much more than this  
That we're in bliss  
Bells will ring*

*Although you I cannot love  
You helped me see it through  
It's all about you*

ERIC  
(echoing)  
*It's all about you*

KENNETTE  
*It's all about you*

ERIC  
(echoing)  
*It's all about you*

KENNETTE  
*It's all about you and me*

LANDED WITH TWO THUDS.

ERIC  
Grass.

KENNETTE  
Sunrise marks a brand new day.

ERIC  
Are you okay, Kennette?

KENNETTE  
Once I ripped off the  
microneedle, I could move  
somewhat.

ERIC  
The flames spread along straight  
lines. Was it you who covered  
everything in oil-streaked  
paper?

KENNETTE  
I...

ERIC  
Deactivated the fire alarm?  
Locked everyone from the  
outside?

KENNETTE  
It's alcohol...

Another thud.

ERIC  
Your mother. Her skin's cold.  
I'm so sorry for your loss.

KENNETTE  
I'm sure your father's burnt to  
a crisp.

ERIC  
No. The devil incarnate would've  
called the cops before  
perishing. Weird you don't look  
sad.

KENNETTE  
I feel nothing.

ERIC  
What?!

KENNETTE  
*Wanted to be with you  
But now I look back in regret  
Wanted to stay with you  
But now you're someone to forget  
There is nothing I can do  
And there's no one else to woo  
Other dreams I must get to  
Bye, thank you.*

*Wanted to be with you  
But the hidden I-don't-love-you  
comes out  
I cannot stay with you  
Now I no longer have to shout  
In the hills my declaration  
Of this ludicrous affection  
It's just another distraction-*

*No, thank you.*

Police sirens.

KENNETTE

*Wanted to be with you  
But what if it's all my life  
could be  
I cannot stay with you  
There is more to me, you see*

KENNETTE being handcuffed audibly.

KENNETTE

*There is nothing you can do  
When my heart's abandoned you  
Ending our plans gone askew  
Bye, thank you. Thank you.  
Thank you. Thank you. Thank  
you. Thank you. Thank you.  
Thank... you!*

Sirens fade.

THE END

# **Murder at the Beach**

*by Susan Cowling*

Candy Cooper was finally having a few days off, beach time. As a bonds-person, she spent her days chasing down fugitives who thought it was fun to jump bail. But this break was all about sun, sand and spending quality time with her weirdly, (in a nice way), psychic daughter, and stopping her from freaking out other beachgoers.

They had literally just walked onto the beach and settled, Candy with a cocktail and a good book, was stretched out enjoying the heat. Luna had wandered down towards the seashore, and returned with a couple of shells and a frown on her face.

“Mom, I think the ocean is mad at me,” Luna said, squinting at the water.

“Luna, the ocean doesn’t get mad, Candy replied, trying to suppress a sigh, she shifted her sunglasses down her nose, to get a better look at her daughter.

“It does. It told me so.” Luna replied.

Candy lay back down. “Well tell it to take a deep breath and chill. We are on vacation, and mom is relaxing.”

Luna huffed and wandered off, digging in the sand and searching for shells. Candy stretched out on her towel, letting the sun warm her skin.

Peace, quiet and no fugitives, no bounty calls and...something cold and clammy dropped onto her stomach.

Candy bolted upright with a loud scream, knocking over her cocktail. Luna stared at her, holding what looked like a chunk of rotting raw meat, with a smell that made Candy gag, and cleared the space around them really quick.

“Luna, what the hell...”

“I found it buried in the sand!” Luna beamed with pride. “It’s a part of a foot, and the bit that dropped on you is a toe!”

Candy squinted at the object, her brain catching up to reality.



Yep. That was definitely a human toe.

“Oh hell no.” She jumped up snatching up her towel, shaking the toe off like it was a venomous spider. It plopped onto the sand. Luna pouted.

“Mom! That is evidence.”

“Evidence? How do you even know...wait, nope not today, I am not doing this today. We are not solving a murder. It’s our vacation time, end of story.”

Candy stared down at her daughter, realising she still had the other part the toe had been attached to, clutched in her small hands.

“Luna, just drop that lump of rotting foot, right now” she took a pack of antiseptic wipes from her bag, holding a wad out to Luna, who dropped the foot remains onto the sand and took the wipes, wiping her hands while Candy rubbed furiously at her stomach where the toe had landed.

“Urgh, really. This is truly disgusting. Where the hell did that come from?”

Luna crossed her arms. “You always tell me to trust my gifts, and now you’re complaining.”

Candy groaned. “Luna, I meant for school, use them for getting good grades at school, not for kids CSI beach edition.”

Candy could see whatever she said was not going to cut it. Luna had that obstinate look on her face. She pointed at the sand, then closed her eyes like she was listening. Candy’s stomach sank.

“Luna, what the hell...I told you we are on vacation. We are not going looking for trouble, not today.”

Luna opened one eye, turned round and pointed, “That guy over there,” Luna opened her other eye and frowned. “His thoughts are confused, he seems to be saying he buried the body, but it’s hazy.”

Candy followed her daughter’s gaze. A few yards away, a scruffy looking man was nervously kicking sand over what looked suspiciously like a shallow grave.

“Damn it,” Candy muttered. This was not how she had planned to spend her vacation. Candy raced across the beach, before the guy had a chance to move and tackled him to the ground, earning a

mouth full of sand in the process, and an audience of shocked beachgoers.

Within ten minutes the police had arrived and the beach was closed. They set up a tent and a small interview area, where Candy and Luna were asked to wait.

Officer Randy Dean walked over to Candy and Luna and introduced himself. He crouched down to Lunas height and smiled.

“Hello Luna, I understand you found the foot and the toe that dropped on your mom? That must have been a terrifying experience for you both.” He glanced across at Luna’s mom, a tall brunette with startling green eyes, a stunning woman.

“You do realise that you could be in trouble for touching a possible crime scene, removing part of the body?”

“Now hang on Officer...”

“Just call me Randy”

“Well Randy” Candy replied. “My daughter was just playing in the sand and brought the foot to show me.” Luna went to speak, but Candy continued. “I work in law enforcement myself as a bonds-person, so don’t go throwing these threats at my daughter, because as sure as hell you need to be concentrating on finding whoever put that body there first.”

“Luna please tell Randy where you found the foot.”

Candy watched Luna explaining to a very confused Officer Randy Dean, that she just felt the body whispering to her, calling her.

He smiled at Luna. “Well Luna, that is the strangest thing I have ever heard. How old are you exactly?”

Luna smiled happily up at him, “Ten years, three weeks four days, twenty-four minutes and two seconds.” She replied after checking her wrist watch.

“Sweetheart, I don’t think Randy meant exactly.”

“Your daughter appears very gifted,” Officer Dean said, giving Candy a nervous glance.

“Gifted, cursed, I think it depends on the day, either way I just need to get back to our hotel and shower.”

“Of course, I will not keep you any longer. We are awaiting the medical investigators to arrive and do a thorough investigation of

the crime scene. He handed Candy a card. "Here are my contact details. I will contact you if we need more information" He smiled at Candy, who could not help noticing how good looking he was. "You're here a few more days?"

Luna piped up. "Yep, we still have the aqua-park to visit and the dinosaur museum." She smiled excitedly, totally unfazed by the events of the day.

"Well, you have a great vacation and no more bodies please Luna." He smiled at her and walked away.

Candy could hear the arrested man blubbering about how it was not his fault, he had just found the body, and panicked. Which in Candys experience, was criminal code for definitely guilty and too dumb to get away with it.

As they led him away in cuffs, Luna turned to Candy grinning. "That was fun."

"That was definitely not fun Luna." Candy rubbed her temples. "It has ruined our beach day and I might never get out of the shower again."

"But we solved a crime."

"You also dropped body parts on me and ruined my sunbathing."

Luna shrugged. "I bet we make the news."

Candy sighed. "You are grounded for eternity and we are never taking a beach day again." But she had to admit, she was a little bit proud of Luna.

That evening the news coverage headlines read, "*Mother and her psychic daughter uncover beach body, officers are still searching for the murderer of the victim, a small-time crime boss.*"

Candy however was less than thrilled with this news, the suspect was still out there and Luna was at risk from every crank who thought she could help them.

"Great now everyone in the country knows my kid talks to ghosts."

"It's not ghosts mom; it's more like I get these feelings."

"Yeah well, those feelings just made you a magnet for weirdos. Do you have any idea how many conspiracy theorists call my office every day. I bet by tomorrow someone's going to try to hire me to

find Atlantis.”

Luna gasped. “Can we?”

Candy groaned. “Bed Luna, now.”

The next morning, while Candy was sipping her coffee, a knock at the hotel room door startled her. When she opened it, Randy stood outside looking grim.

“We have a problem. The man we arrested appears to not be the killer. The autopsy revealed the body has been dead for over a week, possibly more. Our suspect did not bury it last night.”

Candy’s stomach twisted. Luna looked up from her breakfast, eyes widening.

“I told you.” Luna whispered through a mouthful of cereal. “The ocean is mad, and it’s not done talking yet.”

“Anyway,” Randy said, giving Luna a strange stare, we would like you to come back down to the beach and help us further.” He cleared his throat. “What I mean is we wondered if Luna might be able to help us further?”

Candy set her coffee down. “Now hang on, this is a ten-year-old child and you want her to be involved in helping a murder investigation? We are on vacation.”

“Yes, I understand how unusual this request is but we have no other leads, and Luna appears to have a talent, or something.” He coughed. “I am sure we can compensate in some way for your time and your daughters.”

Candy smiled, grabbed her bag and Luna, so much for her vacation, but income was income. “Lead the way.”

They went back to the crime scene, where officers were now combing the beach more thoroughly. The grave was larger than it had first appeared, and as they dug deeper, they found a second body.

“Okay, now it’s officially weird, and I swear I am not taking beach vacations ever again.” Candy muttered. Luna on the other hand appeared to be enjoying her second beach day.

The officers were questioning beachgoers and local vendors, and another suspect emerged. A local fisherman, Olly Day who witnesses said had been seen in the vicinity of the area where the dead bodies were found, multiple times in the last few weeks.

Something in his nervous demeanour put Candy on edge. He appeared guilty as hell.

Luna frowned. “Mom, I don’t think it’s him. The ocean isn’t talking about him.”

Candy sighed, and Randy took a step back. “Then who is the ocean talking about Luna?”

Luna turned to face the boardwalk, her eyes going distant. Then she pointed at a well-dressed man standing among the crowd, watching the scene intently.

“That man,” she said quietly. “He knows more, he is hiding something.”

Candy and Randy both turned and looked.

“I spoke with him earlier, a local business man, he said he has been out of town for the last two weeks. Let’s talk to him again.” With that he took off across the beach, but the man turned and disappeared into the roads behind the beach.

“Dam it,” Candy muttered. “Looks like we may have found our killer”.

Randy came back, bending over to get his breath back. “Phew not used to running on sand, that’s for sure.”

Candy smirked. “Guess chasing fugitives through city streets has its perks.” She patted Randy on the back as he wheezed. “You okay champ, need some water, a stretcher, or maybe a new career?”

Randy straightened, smoothing down his clothes. “I am fine, just not built for sprinting on beaches. But that guy defiantly ran the moment Luna pointed him out. That’s suspicious.”

Candy glanced at Luna, who was now making a sandcastle, completely unbothered by the murder investigation she was indirectly solving.

“Luna, anything else?” Candy asked, hands on her hips.

Luna squinted at where the man had disappeared, “He’s scared, but not of us. The ocean says he’s scared of what’s still buried.”

Candy frowned. “Still buried? Oh great, that means there is more to find?”

Randy groaned. “I hate this case already.”

Just then, one of the forensic officers shouted. “We have found something.”

Candy and Randy hurried over, Luna following closely behind them. The officers had uncovered a small wooden chest. The hinges were rusted, but with a little prying, the chest popped open, revealing a collection of waterlogged documents and a handful of strange gold looking coins.

“Oh no.” Candy muttered. “This is going to turn into some pirate treasure conspiracy, isn’t it?”

Luna’s eyes widened. “Maybe it’s cursed, you know like a real pirate curse. That would be so cool.”

Randy ran a hand through his hair. “I swear, if ghosts start showing up, I’m quitting the force.”

One of the officers pulled out a document, carefully separating the damp pages. It looks like old shipping records, and a deed possibly.”

Luna clapped her hands. “Mom, maybe this is why the ocean is mad. Someone stole something that belonged to it.”

Candy sighed. “Luna, how many times do I need to tell you, the ocean is not a person. It does not get mad, it does not feel sad and it defiantly does not talk.”

Luna shrugged. “Then why does it keep whispering to me.”

Candy opened her mouth, then shut it. She was so not equipped for this conversation.

One of the officers took the document for analysis. Meanwhile Randy’s radio crackled to life. Officer Dean, suspect spotted heading towards the marina. Repeat, suspect is heading to the marina.”

Randy clicked his radio. “Copy that. We are on our way.”

Candy grabbed Luna’s hand. “Guess our beach day is not over yet.”

They ran towards the marina, dodging confused tourists and angry seagulls. Sure enough, their well-dressed suspect was already boarding a small motorboat. The engine roared to life as he prepared to flee.”

“Oh, hell no.” Candy muttered. “Luna, stay here.”

She ran onto the dock, leaping onto a moored boat beside his, yanking free the rope tying it to the dock. Grabbing the throttle, fingers crossed it had fuel, she sent the boat surging forward,

cutting off his escape.

The man cursed, steering sharply, but Candy was already there, jumping onto his boat with the kind of precision that only a bonds-person could manage. (Well, that's what she believed, anyway). She tackled him just as Randy arrived, breathless but ready, gun drawn.

"Freeze!" Randy ordered.

The man struggled, but Candy had him pinned. "You have the right to remain silent, but if you run again, I swear I'll let Randy here chase you down barefoot."

Randy huffed. "Now that is just plain cruel."

The suspect scowled. "You don't understand, I was just trying to help."

"Oh, for crying out loud, why do all the suspects think they are helping us. Way, I see it, running from officers of the law is the universal sign of guilt."

The man groaned. "I didn't kill anyone. I just buried the chest. I found it while renovating my business. I thought it was valuable, it could be. Then I realised that there was too much interest in it, people were dying, so I dumped it in the sea. I did not want to be the next body."

Randy raised a brow. "And you didn't think to, oh I don't know report it to the police?"

"I was scared, whoever wants this chest is dangerous. I did not want to be next."

Candy sighed. "Great so we still don't know who the actual killer is?"

Just then Luna wandered up to the edge of the dock, looking unimpressed. "Mom, I think I know who did it."

Luna pointed to the water. "The ocean just told me."

Candy groaned. "Luna, I swear..."

"No. really. "Luna pointed at a shadow beneath the water, right under the dock. "He's been listening the whole time."

Randy and Candy followed her gaze, and saw movement. A diver, fully suited up, and swimming away from the dock towards a larger fishing boat moored nearby.

"Oh, hell no, not again." Candy muttered. Without thinking, she grabbed a life preserve from the boat and hurled it like a discus. It

hit the diver square in the head, making him flounder. Randy now completely past his patience limit, dove in after him, wrestling him to the surface. With the help of two officers who had just arrived they dragged him out onto the dock.

The man spat out water, glaring at them. “You people, you’re insane, and that child needs locking up for eternity.”

“Yeah, well, you killed people, buried them under the beach, you ruined my vacation, and by the way, my child is a genius. So, forgive me if I don’t feel bad for you.” Candy snapped.

Randy shook his head. “You almost got away. It’s too bad for you that Luna is an awesome psychic kid and the ocean hates you.”

Luna grinned. “I told you.”

The officers cuffed the dripping man, dragging him away, while the well dressed suspect slumped in relief. “So, I’m not in trouble?”

Candy patted his shoulder. “Nope, but next time maybe don’t bury mysterious pirate treasure.”

Randy added. “And don’t run away from an Officer chasing you, it always ends bad. I could have shot you.”

The well-dressed man, paled. “Fair enough.” With that he disappeared into the crowd, and was gone.

As the crowd lost interest and dispersed, the crime scene settled into a methodical search for evidence. Randy turned to Candy. “So, not exactly the beach vacation you had in mind, huh.”

Candy groaned. “Oh, I am never going near a beach again. Ever.”

Luna grinned. “What about Atlantis. The ocean just whispered me the location.”

Candy rubbed her temples. “Not today, Luna, not today.”

Randy chuckled. “Well, if you ever need another vacation ruined, let me know. Or, maybe dinner sometime?”

Candy raised a brow. “Are you asking me out at a crime scene?”

“What can I say, I like a woman who tackles murderers on boats.”

Candy considered. “Fine, but if another body turns up, don’t expect my help. Also, you still owe me a check.”

Luna jumped up and down. “Ooh a date, can I have ice cream?”

Candy sighed. “Why does this just feel like the beginning of a



life of weird adventures.”

# Trimmings and Trappings

*by Ivan Tukeel*

It was the week before Christmas, but despite the approaching holiday, the workload of the Bakerville Detective Agency showed no signs of stopping. Housed out of Gary, Indiana, the B.D.A was a nationwide detective agency well known for taking the cases that no one else would. Cold cases with no rational explanation, which would easily scare off most other agencies, were their bread and butter. Such was the case that came across the desk of James Constantine on December 15th, 2024. James was the lead detective of the agency and, as such, had many other matters to attend to. As such, as all managers do, he delegated the case to a recent hire. Her name was Holly Pine. She was a young woman and a brilliant detective, having graduated from Michigan State University with top honors and having worked at several different agencies before arriving at the B.D.A. Her specialty was missing persons cases, which made her perfect for this job. Shortly after sending for her, James heard a knock on his door.

“Come in.” He said calmly.

Holly walked through the door and sat down.

“So, Mr. Constantine, you have a new case for me?” She asked, trying to act professional despite her excitement. She enjoyed nothing more than the thrill of the hunt.

“Please, call me James.” Constantine said warmly while reaching into his desk. “And, yes, I have a new case for you. Or, more accurately, new cases.”

Constantine grabbed around twenty five case files and set them in front of Holly.

“Are these all the same case?” Holly asked.

James paused. “Possibly. Allow me to explain.” James opened one of the files. “This is Mary Cameron. She was a surgeon from New York who was sent to perform a complicated surgery in Alaska. She went missing December 12th, 2014.”

James then opened another file. "This is Ginger Chabert. She was a defense attorney from Maine, who was on her way to join a larger firm in Pennsylvania, but never arrived. She went missing December 15th, 2016. Are you beginning to see the pattern?"

Holly nodded. "I'm beginning to. All of these are successful women who went missing on trips?"

"Not just that," Constaine clarified, "All of these women were in the same age group, between 20-30, and went missing between November 25th and December 21st."

Holly nodded. "I agree it's somewhat strange," she said, sounding unsure, "but I don't know if it's enough to say that all these are connected."

"It's not just these cases, though," Constantine explained, "we have similar disappearances going all the way back to the year 2000. This seems far more than a coincidence."

Holly nodded. "I'll see if I can find anything."

Later, Holly walked down to the office of the B.D.A's lead researcher, a man named Ivan Tukeel.

"Hey, Holly!" Ivan said as she walked through the door, "How can I help you?"

"Hey, Ivan." She replied, "I need help with a new case."

She then dropped the pile of folders on Ivan's desk.

"That's all one case?"

"Sort of." She shrugged, "Mr. Constaine thinks they're connected."

Ivan gave a slight chuckle. "Well, James annoyingly tends to be right about these things. What do you need from me?"

"All of our missing persons disappeared while traveling. I need you to chart their routes and see if there's any overlap."

Ivan nodded. "So if there is any major overlap, we can guess that's where they disappeared. Smart."

Ivan then turned to the files and began drawing out their routes. After a few minutes, he presented his work to Holly. Holly looked it over, and immediately noticed that there was one obvious point of overlap that every single one of these routes had to travel through.

"Right here. Hallmark, Vermont."

Before she even needed to ask, Ivan had already searched it online. “Hallmark, Vermont. It's a small town, not much online information about it. Apparently, it is known for its Christmas festival, though. That should be fun for you.”

Holly only groaned in response, before walking out of the office.

Having become used to having to travel for work, often without warning, packing up to leave was simple. Along with a box of the files, she also packed a flashlight, shotgun, a week's worth of clothes, and her most important asset on the field, Dasher. Dasher was her beagle who, on top of being a very good boy, was Holly's tracking dog. He had been with her for some time now, and was next to none when it came to finding targets. Shortly after packing, Holly and Dasher climbed into her red pickup truck and began their drive. However, before beginning the trip proper, Holly made sure to stop at a local diner where she had promised to meet a friend for lunch.

Joy was a criminal psychologist that had been hired at the B.D.A the year before Holly. After Holly was hired, Joy was the one who showed her the ropes, and the two became good friends, often meeting up for lunch before longer missions.

“I can't believe they have you traveling on Christmas!” Joy said in disbelief.

Holly, sitting across from her with Dasher on her lap, shrugged.

“I suppose. I've never really been into the whole ‘christmas’ thing. I don't hate it, but it's just not for me.”

Joy nodded, before changing the subject. “I overheard one of the forensics guys, Lincoln, talking about you...”

Holly gave an annoyed sigh. “Look, if you're trying to set me up, I appreciate it, but please stop.”

“What, are you not into the whole ‘romance’ thing either?” Joy playfully responded.

Holly shook her head. “No, but it's just... I'm really going somewhere at the B.D.A, and I don't want to have to worry about balancing that with a relationship.”

Joy sighed. “I suppose that's fair.”

The two continued talking through the rest of lunch, before

Holly had to leave. The two hugged, and she and Dasher headed out.

The drive to Hallmark was exhausting. She had intended to check the weather before heading out, but had forgotten. She regretted this as, although the first day of her trip was fine, a massive snowstorm landed on the second. She determined that it was fine enough to drive through and continued her trip. However, when she was a mile out from Hallmark, the storm suddenly intensified. The storm's winds howled around her, and the visibility was all but gone. Dasher whimpered in the passenger seat as Holly tried to scout the road ahead of them. That was when she saw a pair of bright lights. At first, she thought it was merely a car driving down the other side of the road. However, as she approached, she saw that they were the reflective eyes of a reindeer, with fur as white as the snow around it. She quickly swerved out of the way, only to crash head-on into a nearby tree. She felt warm blood dripping from the side of her head as her vision began to dim. The last thing she heard before blacking out was Dasher furiously barking.

Holly's eyes slowly forced themselves open, as a blinding white light burst into them. As her vision settled, she noticed she was in a small hospital room, with Dasher lying on her lap. Upon feeling her movements, he sat up and began barking. This got the attention of the passing doctor, who quickly walked towards her.

"Thank goodness, you're awake!" She said, smiling.

"Where am I? How long was I out?" Holly asked, still dazed.

"You're in Hallmark General Hospital. You weren't out long, only six hours. I'm Doctor Mary Cane."

The doctor held out her hand, and Holly shook it. "Detective Holly Pine. Nice to meet you."

Suddenly, another person walked into the room. He was a tall, muscular man, wearing what looked to be flannel along with typical police attire.

"How's she doing?" The man asked, walking towards Holly and the doctor.

As he approached, Dasher growled, only calming once Holly began petting him.

“She just woke up actually. Vitals are healthy, only minor injuries.”

“That’s good to hear.” The doctor turned towards Holly. “Oh, Holly, this is Nick, our sheriff. He was the one that found you after the crash and brought you here.”

“You doing all right, maam?” Nick asked.

Holly slightly blushed, but tried to ignore it. “I’m doing fine. Thank you.”

“So, what brought you here to Hallmark?” Nick asked.

“Well, actually,” Holly replied, “I’m here on a case, and…” a look of concern suddenly shot across her face. “Wait, where are my files? And my equipment?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Nick said, “I already took care of your luggage. I figured you would need a place to stay, and my parents—my mother owns an inn in town, so I thought you could just stay there while you recover.”

“Oh, thank you. That’s very kind.”

Soon, Holly was checked out of the hospital and she and Dasher climbed into Nick’s truck, which was a similar model to Holly’s. This sparked a conversation between the two in which Nick revealed many details about his life. He had lived in Hallmark for his entire life with his parents. He, like Holly, had a passion for helping people, which led him to become a police officer. He then quickly climbed the ranks, even being elected sheriff despite his young age, which Holly respected. The two arrived at the inn and Nick led Holly to her room, where most of her luggage was waiting. However, upon unpacking, she realized in horror that her box of case files were missing. In a panic, she left to go ask Nick about this, only to find him talking to an older woman. She looked to be around 55 years old and, though Holly couldn’t explain why, looked familiar.

“Oh, Holly, this is my mom.” Nick said.

The woman grasped Holly’s hand. “Hello, dearie! Nice to meet you!”

“It’s nice to meet you as well. Hey, Nick—” before she could ask about the missing files, another woman ran into the room.

“Nick! I’ve been trying to get a hold of you!”

“Hey, Ginger! Sorry, I’ve been busy. This is Holly, by the way. She’s new here.”

Holly nodded in Ginger’s direction. “Nice to meet you.”

Ginger then turned back to Nick. “We have a problem. Slippy is gone!”

Immediately, Nick was concerned. Holly, meanwhile, stared in confusion. “Who is Slippy?”

“Slippy is the mayor’s white deer, and sort of the town’s mascot.” Ginger explained, “Every year, he pulls the carriage with the Yule Queen down Main Street for the town’s tree lighting. Nine years ago, it was me, actually.”

“It’s sort of a town tradition.” Nick explained, “According to legend, the founder of Hallmark was led to this land by a white deer. His future wife happened to be following that same deer, and the two met, married, and founded the town. The town has been breeding white deer for the festival ever since.”

Holly nodded, finding the story strange but interesting. “If it helps, I saw a white deer earlier. I swerved to avoid hitting it right before the crash,” Holly said.

Suddenly, Nick’s eyes lit up. “Hey, you said you were a detective, right? Maybe you could help us find Slippy?”

Initially, Holly was going to refuse. She did not want this side quest to get in the way of her current case. However, after how kind these people had been, she couldn’t refuse.

The next few days were quite strange for Holly. Though she tried to focus on her own case, which was difficult enough to do without the files, she was constantly interrupted by the case of the missing deer. Though she was irritated by it at first, she grew to enjoy the case more as she grew closer to Nick. He was funny, handsome, kind, and the two shared many common interests. Given time, she could see herself getting romantically involved. However, she didn’t intend on staying long.

Eventually, she got a call on Nick’s police scanner, with someone saying that they had seen Slippy in the forest. After calling Nick, he, Dasher, and Holly headed out to the forest in question. Though Dasher was being far more stubborn than usual, Holly convinced him to track the deer’s scent. As they tracked Slippy,

Holly looked over at Nick to see him acting unusual.

“Hey, Nick. Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing...” Nick tried to deflect, but Holly could tell something was up.

He finally confessed. “My mom, she’s been struggling with depression for a while now. Recently, it’s gotten worse.”

Holly nodded. “I’m sorry to hear that. How long has that been going on?”

“Pretty much since Dad died last month.”

Saying this made tears build up in Nick’s eyes.

Holly put a hand on his shoulder. “My father died recently too. He was really into Christmas and it hasn’t felt the same without him.”

Nick nodded. “Well, maybe you and I can get through this together.”

Holly nodded and, without realizing it, began to get closer to Nick’s face. However, before anything could happen, Dasher barked. He had found Slippy. Slippy looked as if he was about to run, but Holly held out her hand and slowly approached him. The deer responded in kind, and eventually rested his forehead on Holly’s palm. Nick then clapped his hands. “Great job, Holly!” He then paused. “You know what this means, right?”

Holly gave him a confused look. “He’s chosen you. You are this year’s Yule Queen.”

That evening was the best of Holly’s life. Before the celebration, she was quickly taken by a group of women and dressed in a beautiful blue and white gown, with crystals that gleamed like icicles. Then, she was taken out into the street where her carriage, pulled by Slippy, was waiting for her. She approached the carriage and found Nick standing inside, holding out his hand to assist her. Once she entered, the celebration began. The parade marched down main street, with the celebrating townsfolk lining each side. After some time, their carriage reached the town Christmas tree. Nick handed Holly a button, which she then pressed. The tree before them lit up in a blinding white light as the townsfolk rejoiced. Then, overcome by emotion, and with a slight persuading from some mistletoe, Holly and Nick kissed as the



snow fell around them.

However, the happy night was not to last. After the celebration was over, Holly and Nick walked back to his mother's inn. After a final kiss goodnight, Holly walked into her room to go to bed. However, she then found Nick's mother, standing in the center of her room. Before she could greet her, the woman ran at her, rasping "You must leave!"

She then forced a small sheet of paper into Holly's hand. Before Holly could ask any questions, the woman took out a knife and slit her own throat. The woman then fell to the floor, her blood spilling from her neck. Holly considered getting Nick, but then read the note. *This town is a trap. Your case files are in the attic!* Suspicious, Holly went to the attic and, as the woman had said, her files were there. She began to open them, and saw some familiar faces. Mary, the surgeon, Ginger, the lawyer. At the bottom of the box, the oldest case file, was one for a woman who looked just like Nick's mother. Before she could even process this, she heard footsteps behind her.

She turned and saw Nick, with his eyes glowing white. "You weren't supposed to find out, Holly."

Without thinking, Holly tried to run past Nick, who grabbed her hand. "You could have lived a peaceful, happy life here in Hallmark. But you had to get curious..."

Holly looked around and noticed a metal candlestick. She grabbed it, and slammed it against Nick's head, knocking him unconscious. She then ran outside, grabbing Dasher in the process, and hijacked Nick's truck. Without hesitation, she drove out of town, noticing as the townsfolk began to chase after her with their own eyes glowing white. However, just as she reached the edge of town, the car stopped. Seeing as there was no chance of escape, Holly began to devise a plan. She quickly wrote down what she knew on a napkin and shoved it behind Dasher's collar.

"Dasher. I need you to get this note to Joy! Go!"

Dasher was hesitant to leave her, but obeyed, running into the woods. Holly looked up, and saw the white deer now rushing towards her. It rammed itself into the truck, and Holly blacked out.

Holly's eyes slowly forced themselves open. She looked around and saw she was in the same hospital room she had awoken in when she first arrived. Only, she had no memory of this. In fact, she had almost no memory at all. The only thing she could recall was her name: Holly. Suddenly, a man and a woman burst into the room.

“Oh my god, is she okay?” The man asked, approaching her. He looked vaguely familiar, but Holly couldn't explain why.

“Yes, I'm fine... who are you?” she asked.

“Don't you remember? I'm your boyfriend, Nick.” Though she couldn't remember much, a few memories flashed into her head. Him saving her from the wreckage, the conversation in the forest, the Christmas tree lighting. She smiled and nodded. “Yes, I think I remember.”

Suddenly, Nick knelt on one knee. “I was going to wait until tomorrow for this, but, all things considered... Will you marry me?” he then pulled out an engagement ring. By all logic, Holly should have refused. However, something about this man felt... right.

“Yes.” She said, smiling.

Nick placed the ring on Holly's finger, as her eyes began to glow bright white.



## **Liminal**

*by Nick Calvert*

It started as a bit of a laugh; after all, it was pride month, and who would mess with a large group of friends sitting outside a bar draped in rainbow pride flags, on a beautiful summer's afternoon by the beach?

A bunch of out-of-town hooligans, that's who. There must have been between ten and twenty of them all dressed in wife beaters, jeans with braces, and wearing Doc Martens. To be fair, they were minding their own business, laughing and joking as they walked down the pavement past us toward the seafront and beach. Then Simon, who is a complete arse at the best of times, wolf whistled. Almost as one, they froze, then slowly turned to face us. Time seemed to hold its breath as Simon tittered. It was, other than seagulls, the only noise I heard. Then they charged, and all hell broke loose.

"I'll fuckin' 'ave 'im!" the big one--there's always a big one--yelled, pointing at me. I wanted to tell him that I hadn't been the one wolf whistling but, in the melee of overturned tables and chairs and the smashing of glasses and the shrieks, I didn't get a chance. Instead, along with all childish pretence of being a hero, I turned and fled.

At first I wondered if they'd leave me be if I told them I was sixteen and shouldn't have been at the bar at all, let alone drinking. One glance over my shoulder disabused me of that idea. Three of them were on my heels and the big one, who had yelled and pointed, was getting frighteningly close. He really wasn't looking happy, so I ran on and sped up.

At school, the athletics coach thinks I'm an excellent runner; if he'd only seen me then, he'd have put me in for the Olympics. Adrenaline is a wondrous thing, and I was full of it. I led the three a merry chase down to the seafront, along the boardwalk, past all the old age pensioners sitting on benches eating sandwiches and

admiring the view; past the bowling green, which was empty of humanity, instead taken over by a murder of crows.

The flock was sitting in an almost perfect circle surrounding the biggest raven I'd ever seen. Again, time seemed to slow as the raven turned its head and watched me run past, a golden glint from its eyes as they caught the sun. The sight was so bizarre that I stumbled, nearly got caught by the big one, then managed to put on a frantic burst of speed and got away.

My second wind kicked in as I led them back up towards the town centre, all the time hoping for a policeman to magically appear and help. No such luck--there's never one around when they're needed.

The three thugs were faltering. Another glance over my shoulder and I saw I'd extended the gap to about a hundred yards. The small weaselly one--not the big bastard, who had stopped and was on his mobile, thank god--was still running after me. I extended my stride, pelted past the cafe on London Road and took the next right into the alley behind it, where they put their garbage in one of those large commercial metal bins. Thankfully, its lid was up, so I vaulted inside, landing on a pile of dubiously squishy black plastic bags. I reached up, pulled the lid down as quietly as I could, then squirrelled under the bags, just in case. Desperately I tried to calm my breathing and be quiet, but any small move made the bags on top of me rustle.

Multiple footsteps and heavy panting...

"Where the fuck's he gone, Bill?"

"No fucking idea, Boss. 'e definitely came down 'ere, though. Where's the others?"

"I called 'em. They're on their way."

"Good oh. The little poof deserves a severe pounding."

"Yeah..."

On second thought, forget the Olympics. Recovery time is the true metric for an athlete and my pulse and breathing were in full panic mode. How could I have been so stupid as to hide in a bloody bin in an alley. They do that sort of thing in Hollywood movies, not in real life situations where if you get caught you get the crap beaten out of you. Adrenaline is all well and good, but

when it wears off insidious terror begins to creep in and take its place.

I noticed a glimmer of light coming through a hole in the side of the bin, and slowly, oh so slowly, inch by inch, manoeuvred myself until I could see through it. The alley was bathed in sunshine. The big one was back on his phone whilst Bill, the weaselly one, was still panting but looking around with great interest.

“Nadge says ‘e never came out the other end of the alley,” the big one said, sliding his phone into the pocket of his jeans, as the rest of the thugs sloped in from the other direction and started milling around. “So Bill, me droog, ‘e must still be ‘ere.”

I’m not religious, but I started praying.

With the back of the shops on one side and a block of flats with its fire-escape on the other there were plenty of places a person could hide, but nowhere as bloody obvious as the bin I was hiding in.

With my eye avidly stuck to the hole in the bin, watching, I both cursed myself for an idiot fool for getting in the bin in the first place, and marvelled at the thugs’ stupidity for not finding me. They were looking anywhere but at the bin. Some were climbing the fire escape while others, out of my sight, seemed to be arguing over the size of cardboard box needed to hide in.

Finally, when I was beginning to think I’d got away with it, Bill, the weasel, gave more than a cursory look at the bin, and laughed.

“I know where ‘e is, Boss,” he said, and pointed. They all stopped what they were doing and lined up behind the big one, who gave a small and rather sardonic smile.

“You found ‘im, Bill. You dig ‘im out.”

I found myself whimpering as the weasel walked towards the bin and kicked it hard, before lifting the lid, which banged back against the wall with a resounding clang. Sunlight flooded in, briefly blinding me before the lid slammed shut and bowed. Something, or someone, was standing on it.

“Do you really want to beat up a helpless child?” A voice, a mellifluous tenor, said. I peered through the hole in the bin and saw they were all looking up, presumably at whoever was standing

on the bin lid.

“Yeah, we fuckin’ do,” the big one said, and cracked his knuckles. “The little git led us a right merry dance, and me and my droogs want a bit of payback.”

“Ah well, I can’t say I didn’t try.”

“What? You really think us fifteen are gonna be stopped by you, a lanky, goth, streak of piss, do-gooder?”

“And my friends.”

“Don’t see your friends, mate.”

“For the sake of clarity, you really won’t back off, hmm?”

“Fuck clarity. Seems like we’ve got a twofer, boys!”

“Oh well, suit yourselves.”

There was a thump and a whoosh as whoever had been standing on the lid got off it. With a bang, the bow in the bin lid straightened itself. Then the screaming began.

On the rare occasions I got to look through the peephole, all I could see was panicked movement and bodies flying by. Then the bin received several hard blows that tossed me from side to side. I have no idea how long it lasted. It might have been seconds, but more likely minutes, until finally there was a brief and blessed silence. Then the groaning began.

Timorously, heart pounding, I lifted the lid of the bin and stood up, my feet sinking into the squidge of the rubbish bags as I looked around the alley. There seemed to be bodies everywhere, some of them groaning, and some of them out cold. In the middle of it all stood a raven haired man, head bowed, dressed entirely in black. By his feet Bill, the weasel, who was lying across the legs of his unconscious boss, started to pull a flick-knife out of his sock.

“Watch out, he’s got a knife!” I yelled, just as the knife flicked open. The man in black’s head snapped up as his foot lashed out, smashing the knife out of the weasel’s hand. Tumbling, it flew past my ear and buried itself in the bin’s lid behind me. Bill whimpered, clutching his broken hand to his chest. The man in black turned and, looked directly at me. His eyes were gold, flecked with silver.

“You have a strong taw, young one,” he said, as the sound of sirens and yelling from the street started to intrude. “Come with me if you want to escape this...” he glanced around, “debacle.” He

held out a hand. I clambered out of the bin, shook myself to get rid of the bits of garbage that hadn't been in bags, then looked forlornly at my sodden sneakers which had been new on that morning. I looked up and was caught by his eyes. They really appeared gold, which I took for contact lenses. He chuckled. "Hardly. Annoyingly painful if truth be told."

"Huh?" I said.

"Contacts. Try to keep up." He held his hand out to me, again. "Are you coming?"

I hesitated. Really, it was a no brainer. If I stayed I'd probably be arrested for affray, and that wouldn't please anyone; Certainly not my stepfather, who was a deal too good with his fists.

"How did you... umm?W I waved around the alley taking in all the bodies.

"I have friends, young one. As I think you heard me say."

"Where?"

He turned and pointed to the fire escape, which was covered with silent corvids. One rook puffed itself up and gave a hearty caw. The man smiled. "Jacque says he led the first wave, but they all did their bit. Now," he said, "We're leaving, before the police decide to pluck up courage and do their job. If you want to come with us, take my hand."

Before he died, my Dad, my real Dad not my bloody stepfather, had given me a well thumbed copy of 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.' Fleetinglly, I wondered if this was my own personal wardrobe moment.

I could hear crackling police radios getting louder. All the birds on the fire escape started cawing, yet still the man in black held out his hand. Slowly, hesitantly, I stretched out and took it. I felt a jolt of energy suffuse my body as he pulled me to him. His golden eyes flared as huge black wings grew out of his back and his arms gently wrapped themselves around me.

With a thunderclap, the alley and everything in it vanished.

We were flying through blue-grey clouds that got brighter and brighter. The beating of wings filled the air, along with the joyful chattering and cawing of the flock as, with another thunderclap, we entered the otherwhere.

## **It's Fine**

*by Jaysen O'Dell*

“It’s fine.”

Those were the last words she said.

### **Morning**

He slowly shook off the disorientation that follows being startled awake. The bed next to him was empty. The dog was gone. “She must be taking the dog out.” Slipping out from under the warm covers, he reached for his robe while slipping on his house slippers. That’s when he noticed her robe and slippers were still by the bed.

Walking out of the room he looked for her. “Hey, how did you sleep?”

She didn't move.

“Hey, you ok?”

“I’m fine”, she said.

“Oh for christ’s sake... I know that means anything but ‘you are fine’. We’ve been married 32 years. Just say what you mean.”

“If we’ve been married for so long, then I shouldn’t need to say anything.”

“Is that a two way street?”

She stood up. Looking at him with one of those glares that all women perfect as little girls, she said, “you know where I’ll be.” She walked to the door set her phone down, picked up her keys, and left.

### **Bob**

“Three mother fucking hours. I have been searching for her for three mother fucking hours.”

“Jesus Jim. What did she say?”

“Just ‘I’m fine’ and ‘you know where I’ll be’ both of which are absolute bullshit.”



“What kind of dumb ass thing did you do this time?”

“Just my normal stupid shit. She was washing the dishes, I went in for a quick squeeze, she slapped at me, I said ‘you should be happy I still want to’ ... oooohhh.”

“Duuude. Even I know that was stupid.”

“I meant that I’m not looking around because what I have at home is what I want. What would I ever find anywhere else?”

“Yeah, but that’s no better than ‘I’m fine’ when you think about it.”

“Fuck you Bob. When did you get all in touch with your feelings?”

“Last time I heard ‘I’m fine’”

## **Jill**

“Hey Jill, this is Jim, I’m looking for Trish. Do you...”

“I bet you are you bastard.”

“Wait. What’s with the hostility?”

“After what you did? You should be hiding in the woods, not calling her friends!”

“What? I think I’m missing somthi...”

“You’re a dick.”

“Probably. But I don’t think grabbing her ass and suggesting she should be happy that I still find her attractive ...”

“Is that what you think this is about? You’re a fucking moron!”

The line went dead.

## **Sally**

“Sally? It’s Jim, don’t hang up, I need help.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“I get it. I fucked up. Problem is...”

“You are too stupid to know what you did?”

“... I mean... yeah. I thought it was me getting handsy, but apparently... She left her phone at home, said I would know where she is, then left. I’ve checked with the kids, Jill, the coffee shop, the parks, the beach where she likes to take the dog.”

“And now, you need some dumb woman to help you?”

“Whoa, hold up! Where is that coming from? I’ve never suggested you are dumb.”

“Am I a woman?”

“I assume so. I feel like you are setting me up here?”

“Did you not tell Trish that women need to stop acting like dumb idiots?”

“That’s out of context. Just like if I told you that she said ‘you can’t trust redheads’. She didn’t mean you, but without me telling you she was talking about Carrot-top... Context.”

“Fine. What was the context?”

“That women need to stop expecting men to read their minds, read between the lines, guess what they mean. Men, we just need it straight. Like scotch. Just the substance right in our faces.”

“Damn it. That does make you seem slightly less dickish.”

“I’ll take it. Do you know where she is? I need to find her.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s my wife?”

“So?”

“If it was Tammy that was missing? Wouldn’t you pester everyone?”

“Yes, but I could answer the question. With honesty.”

Jim swallowed hard

“Because I’m afraid I’ve fucked up the only thing in my life that matters ... having her in it.”

“There it is.”

“Where is she?”

“You know. You need to think about it and answer honestly.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck. Don’t fuck this up. Tammy and I really like you.”

## **Mom**

“You better not be calling me looking for your wife. That mess is your own doing.”

“Hi mom. Great to talk to you too.”

“Go fix this mess and leave me alone.”

A moment of revelation.

Jim sat in the driver's seat. "I'll know where she is," he muttered to no one. Jim looked at his phone. Her face staring back at him from his lock screen. He remembered the day he took that picture. They had just purchased a weekender sailboat. She was listening to him dream about anchoring overnight in the coves and creeks. He snuck a photo of her looking off into the distance. A contented smile on her face. It was the same look he saw on her face many years ago when their children would play in the yard. It was the her smile following their daughter's wedding as the newlyweds danced and looked at each other. He saw the smile when he woke up from each of his heart attacks and she squeezed his hand whispering "you are here and I am with you."

"You are here. I am with you."

Jim knew where she was.

## **The End**

"Permission to come aboard?"

"I wasn't sure you would find me."

"Neither was I."

"Are you going to come below? We have some unfinished business."

Jim opened the companion way hatch. Climbing down into the cabin he said, "listen, I'm sorry. I said things that were insensitive and mean. I should have chosen my words with more care. I need to remember that you are not a guy and I need to try to communicate with you in a way that works for you. That whole 'treat others the way you want to be treated' is a two wa ...

"You ... you're naked."

"You noticed."

## **The Beginning**

Jim woke with a start.

## **It Is NOT Fine**

*by Jaysen O'Dell*

“Hey Jim!” Trish yelled as she opened the door letting the couple’s spaniel into the house. “Look at this bone Barb dug up from the edge of the marsh.”

“That looks odd. Where did you say she fund it?”

“Behind the Samuelson’s. Kind of up by the big live oak. Not in the mud. I figured a deer died and something buried it.”

Jim thought for a moment. “Did you say buried it?”

“Yeah. Barb was digging for a bit and then came back with... alligators don’t bury things do they?”

“No. No they don’t.”

Trish started to cry.

“Why don't you sit here, I'll make some coffee and call the sheriff. I'm sure this will be fine in the end.”

“It is NOT fine!”

## **The Jims**

“Good afternoon Mr. Roberts. I’m sheriff Jim Johnson, this is deputy Jim Jeffers, deputy Jim Jackson, deputy Jim Johns, detective Jim James, detective Jim Jim.”

“Hell... As a Jim Roberts, I guess I’m qualified for the force.”

“Since you didn't notice that R and J are different letters... probably not.”

“Seriously?”

“No, that’s a joke. But you missed that one too. So...”

All the Jims laughed.

Sheriff Johnson waited for everyone to resume their activities before continuing. “Mr Roberts, detective Jim Jim leads all our missing persons cases which, regrettably, often become homicides. Given that alligators don't bury things...”

“Yeah. My wife ... Trish ... she realized that when she was telling me where the dog found the bones.”

“The Sallys are talking to Mrs. Roberts now. Why don't you tell me what you know.”

Jim Roberts recounted the simple events from earlier in the day.

“How often do you hear gunshots here?” the sheriff asked.

“All the time? Between all the AG permits to protect crops from deer and hogs, the legal hunting, and folks target shooting... all the time. The farms shoot at night. We don't even notice it.”

“And vehicles you wouldn't recognize?”

“Public beach and boat launch with rental homes. I wouldn't even recognize the cars of the people that actually own most of the houses. Short of someone driving the Oscar Myer hot dog car down here, I'm not sure most vehicles would stand out as unusual.”

“I fully understand.”

“What I find interesting... never mind.”

“Go ahead, sometimes little things matter.”

“Well, we take Barb to the Samuelson's to run all the time. That area is great for a sit down when the gnats aren't too bad. She's never noticed anything before. And these seem dry, no meat on them, like they were moved there. I'm sure I'm just letting my imagination get the better of me.”

“Detectives! Come here and listen to Mr. Roberts for a minute.”

After the detectives collected around Jim, he restated his thought. “Like I said, I'm sure it's just too much TV and mystery novels.”

Detective Jim Jim looked at him and said, “you should change your last name. We could use a Jameson.”

### **It's bigger than we thought**

“That dog of yours... we should rename her Sally Samuels and get her on payroll.” Sheriff Jim Johnson, detective Jim Jim, deputy Jim Jackson and two other officers were at the Roberts front door. Mrs. Roberts I believe you know all the officers, but Mr. Roberts I don't believe you have met deputy Sally Smith and detective Sally Sykes. We think someone in HR is punking us. It does make monograms easy though.

“We borrowed some ground penetrating RADAR from upstate

and scanned that site. You weren't wrong. The site was "new" but the body was older. It looks like someone chemically processed the victims, then moved them here in the last week or so."

"Victims!" Trish blurted out.

"Yes ma'am" deputy Sally Smith said.

Detective Sally Sykes stepped forward. "Twenty eight different bodies have been identified. None of this is your fault. If it hadn't been for you and Barb, we wouldn't have found them at all. Now we have a change to figure out who did it put them in prison."

"That's right." Detective Jim Jim pulled out an iPad with an illustration of the area. "Based on how large the area of disturbed soil is, the presence of large equipment tracks, as well as clear signs of an equipment trailer recently being at that location, we think a backhoe was used to dig a mass grave of sorts. Do either of you recall any backhoes in the area last week?"

"Yeah," Trish sounded confused, "there was a county backhoe down here. The water was shut off for a bit, which is odd since that's the end of the line. I thought they were putting in new pipe. They had a dump truck with them."

"Ma'am, this is very important. Was it a county truck, a water company truck, or a private contractor truck?"

"It was a county truck. There was a sheriff's car with it and everything. I'm sure of it. I think it was Tuesday."

"Thank you ma'am."

The sheriff and his posse abruptly turned and hurried toward their cars. Jim thought he heard sheriff Jim say, "Do something about this now."

## **Fear**

Trish and Jim sat in the living room. Barb laying between them, ever oblivious to the problems humans create for each other, stretched.

"Jim, what did he say before they got into the cars?"

"I'm not sure. What do you think they said?"

"Don't you lie to me! You have better hearing than me. What did they say?"

“I DON’T KNOW!”

“YOU DON’T WANT TO KNOW!”

“THAT’S THE SAME THING!”

“You’re afraid to scare me aren't you?”

“Then you already know what he said.”

“I thought I heard ‘Do something about this now.’ Is that what you heard?”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“How should know? I can’t read your mind, why should I be able to read his?”

“What are we going to do? Are they going to kill us?”

“Why do you think they will kill us? And I have no idea what to do.”

“I think the cops did it. I think they buried the bodies and we know too much.”

“We will be fine.”

“IT IS NOT FINE!!!”

## **News article**

“Hey Trish, did you see the article in the Weekend Gazette? They mention you and Jim.” Tammy called every Saturday.

“Yeah. Jim and I were just talking about the interviews. I thought it was nice they gave Barb credit for ‘cracking the case.’ Jim's feelings were a little hurt.”

“Oh hey, gotta run. Talk to you later!” Tammy hung up.

“Tammy?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, she saw the article.”

“That was a short call. I’m still not sure that our idiot dog cracked anything but a bone.”

“Stop being petty. They mentioned you. Want me to read it again?”

“Sure.”

Trish began to read from a paper on the table in front of her.

“Local dog cracks multi-agency crime ring in Dinkum county

“This week state and federal charges were filed after the arrest

of county board members Patrick Patterson, Andy Anderson, Jennifer Jacobson, county prosecutor Robert Rodgers, sheriff deputies James Johnston and Sally Stillwater. Charges included racketeering, murder, conspiracy to commit murder, money laundering, drug smuggling and many more. Sheriff Jim Jeffers gave all the credit to a local dog and its owners.

“We have been working on this case for over five years. Half a decade. When people in power control access to prosecution and to information, it can be difficult to hold them accountable. Thanks to a spaniel named Barb and her owner Jim and Trish Roberts, we finally had found the, very literal, buried bodies these criminals had been hiding.”

“Bah! That’s enough. It would be so damn annoying if she wasn't such a good dog!”

Barb yawned. She looked at her owners. She looked out the window. After a moment she put her head down, sighed and closed her eyes.

“What do you think is happening between those ears of hers?” Jim asked with a smile.

“I think she just said ‘hey look... it's fine.’”

“It’s fine... You know, when you say that...”

“Shut up or there will be another grave site out here.”



## **Alina**

*by Kaide Li*

Alina could not recall the exact moments before the crash. She thought she saw a figure walking too close to the highway's edge but then the lone silhouette vanished into the shifting shadows of the trees just before she turned onto the small road. She had barely registered the strange scene in her mind when something dashed out from the side, a flash of movement, sudden and wild. She swerved instinctively to avoid whatever it was that had stopped in front of her in the middle of the road. That was when she lost control of the car and it veered and slammed into a tree with a sickening lurch and the deafening crash of metal against wood. A pair of eyes stared at her for a moment through the fractured windshield. They belonged to a deer standing just beyond the crumpled hood of the car, its slender legs tense, its ears flicking as if caught between fear and curiosity. Then, with a quick reflex, the sleek muscles in its body coiled and it disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the road.

Her body ached throughout, a general deep, throbbing soreness. She tried to move and to ease her way out of the seat but a sharp, searing pain shot up her left leg. Every attempt thereafter to unbuckle her seatbelt sent fresh stabs of pain from various places at the same time and she soon found herself with no strength or willpower to do it again. She was slipping away into the abyss calling out to her when a hand knocked on the window at her side. She strained to look up and saw a face that looked exactly like hers watching her with wide eyes, the same look of shock and confusion reflected in her face.

Darkness. Where was she and what time was it already? She was slowly conscious of a faint hum in the background and a soft rhythmic beeping coming from somewhere near her left ear. Was it darkness she was seeing, or had she gone blind? She tried to reach

her hands to her eyes but found that she could not move or control any part of her body, as if she existed only as a consciousness in a phantom vessel. Another darkness grew, this time from inside her, pressing against her thoughts until even those stray strands of her existence clinging to the world eventually faded away.

She was now aware of a bright light above her eyes, and voices moving around her in quiet whispers. She seemed to remember the language of the words they were speaking but the words slipped out beyond her grasp and made no sense to her. The voices were just like musical sounds, each syllable familiar, yet foreign, like a melody which she had forgotten the lyrics. Was somebody talking to her? Or talking about her? She tried to respond but felt a sudden wave of fatigue overwhelm her, pulling her back into the depths of sleep.

In her sleep, the garbled words returned. She recognised them but the meaning remained elusive to her. /'æli/ Was it a question? A name? She tried frantically to close her fingers around that one word before the darkness swallowed her again.

She woke to a sharp sting of antiseptic. Was she in a hospital? Her thoughts were sluggish and her memories were fragmented and disconnected, returning in flashes. She recalled the loud deafening sound of a car crash in the night and the thick black smoke emitted from the front of the car. Without warning, the car had then burst into flames. She felt like she was reliving that moment again as the temperature in the room seemed to rise. Sweat beaded along her skin, sliding down her forehead. Panic surged, raw and unrelenting, together with a sense of helplessness, of not being able to do anything. She knew that she was not in the car anymore but her body could not be convinced.

/ 'æli/

Somewhere, a voice nearby, just beside her ear. A name, Ally? Was someone calling her name? She was burning. The flames were licking her skin, melting it away to flesh and bones. The pain was unbearable. And then, just as quickly as it came, it was gone as she blacked out.

In between her half-awakeness, she could make out two persons speaking to each other, a man and a woman. Who were they? She knew their voices from somewhere, she had heard them countless times before in her dreams, constantly by her side talking to her, telling her stories and simply just keeping her company. The voices floated above her head and she held onto each word dearly. When they left, she counted their receding steps until she could not hear them anymore.

/ˈθæŋk ,juː/ Thank you? The words were slowly drifting back to her, threading through her hazy cycles of sleep and wakefulness. Each time she surfaced from the fog, she found herself surrounded by her family and friends, patient and persistent. They sat by her bedside filling the quiet of the room with their one-sided conversations, helping her to remember who she was, who they were and the lives they had all lived before her accident.

A terse conversation in hushed voices brought her back to the present, her bed in the hospital instead of the cage of a burning car.

“Your wife is responding well to the new drugs. We are hopeful that -”

“And that bump on her head - you said that it will be gone once the swelling goes away.”

“That bump? Oh, it seemed to be an exostosis which she must have had since young...” Catching the look in his eye, she hurriedly added, “but we will look into it to confirm -”

“Just call me when she wakes up.”

She could sense the impatience and frustration in her husband’s voice as he turned and went out of the room. There was a void in the silence that he left behind, the doctor probably left a little taken aback by his brusque reaction.

The woman tried to open the car door but it was locked and would not budge. She then went round to the side of the road and returned with a rock in her hand which she smashed through the window without a moment’s hesitation. As Alina watched her, it felt like an out-of-body experience staring into her own face,

watching her own self moving autonomously. There was a woman out there who looked like her, yet it was not her. The woman maintained eye contact and kept talking to her, as if she was worried that if she had stopped, Alina would give in and silently slip away with the Grim Reaper. “Stay with me. Stay with me.” Her voice had a nervous twitch to it but Alina felt reassured listening to her.

She finally managed to open the door and was trying to free Alina from the seatbelt when they heard a small explosion from the front of the car. Another two more explosions rapidly followed and the car was suddenly engulfed in flames. The woman, whom Alina thought would have scampered and left after the first blast, came back with an even greater urgency as she tugged frantically at her seatbelt. Alina wanted to tell her to stop but only a hoarse whisper escaped her lips. She was too terrified to think about what could happen next.

She slept fitfully, unsure whether she was dreaming or remembering. “Sweet baby, dear. You don’t need to be afraid when Grandma is here.” She found herself shaking uncontrollably and tears were streaming down the sides of her face. A weight shifted at the edge of the bed as someone stood up and tucked the blanket around her, wrapping it tightly around her like a baby in swaddling clothes which immediately calmed her down. A cold bony hand then gripped her face and gently wiped away the tears from her cheeks. “It will be alright,” the voice cooed.

“Hey, it’s Min here to see you again. Are you awake? No? Well... Just trying my luck. That husband of yours... He’s making it a real chore to come visit you now. He’s been easily irritable these days and seemed to enjoy picking a fight with everyone he meets. I’m just trying to find a time when I can avoid running into him.”

“Anyway, I can only stay for a short while today. You stay strong, girl.”

Min reached out to give her hand a tight squeeze. Her fingers then lingered over her right wrist. “I’m still amazed. The doctors did such a good job with the skin grafting, it was almost as if you

never had a birthmark here in the first place. I know how self-conscious you have always felt about it and it was no secret everyone used it to tell you and Elena apart in the beginning. Well... there's been no need for it anyway. I'm sorry for reminiscing about her again. There was no one who could have missed her more than you."

The name "Elena" rang in her head and she felt like she should know it but her mind drew a blank. The three of them were childhood friends and Min lived next door when they were young was all she could remember.

It was supposed to be their tenth birthday celebration. Their parents had planned everything, a trip filled with adventure, laughter, and memories to last a lifetime. The sisters discussed excitedly about which of their toys would get the honour of joining them, packing and repacking their bags in the days leading up to the trip, only for their mother to swoop in and to take everything out. Alina remembered with a laugh that there were lots of wailing after that, and the wailing had been theatrical, dramatic and endless, had they not eventually grown tired and relented to their mother's orders in a battle which they could not have won anyway. Oh, the cruel world! How could they possibly choose just one stuffed animal each, when the fifteen they originally picked had already been a painful compromise?

And then, just like that, the day of the trip arrived. It was their first time on a plane and the moment the plane began its ascent, their chatter stilled. They settled in their seats, wide-eyed and tensed, holding each other's hand, their grip tightening as the aircraft roared into the sky. When Alina pressed her forehead against the window, she was mesmerised by how high up they were, the cities below shrinking and growing smaller, the cars moving along like beetles on ribbons and then more like ants scurrying about until the clouds passed over them all and the world below disappeared beneath a soft, fluffy sea of white. She turned to her sister, breathless with wonder, and found Elena looking back at her, both of their faces with huge grins mirroring each other.

But on the return trip, there was only silence. There was no

laughter and no conspiratorial whispers passed between the sisters. There was just an empty seat beside Alina and Teddy buckled in where Elena should have been.

There were muffled sobs in the room. Someone was pacing in the far corner, their footsteps restless and heavy. “I can’t do this anymore.” She heard a voice, filled with exhaustion and sorrow. “We just said goodbye to my mom last month and now Ally’s like this and we have no idea if she’s going to wake up. I already lost one daughter. I cannot lose another. Ally... she’s all I have left now.”

There was a pause, fragile and aching. Then there was another voice, softer but steadier. “Ally was always close to her grandma. And after Elena was gone, Ally was the one who kept us going. She was just a child at that time, yet somehow, she carried all our grief and gave us strength when we had none. Right now, we have to believe in her. We can only have faith.”

If grandma had passed away, then who was it who had visited her and comforted her in the dark? Was it just a dream? A fevered trick of her mind? And Elena... Elena... The name drifted through her mind, light as seafoam and just as insubstantial to grasp at. It sounded distant, unfamiliar, and yet she must have turned towards the call of that name many times in the middle of a crowded street. Her thoughts wavered, but then like a Polaroid developing, the faint, blurred shapes sharpened into focus. The name now settled into place and she could gradually see everything with clarity. Elena. It was a name she thought she had lost to the sea when the waves carried it away a day before their tenth birthday. She had not thought about that name in many years. Or had she simply refused to let herself remember? Her breath caught. She needed to wake up.

Alina noticed that the sleeves of the woman’s blouse were charred and she could smell the singed ends of her hair as she stretched across her to tug again at her seatbelt. The air was thick with smoke, acrid and suffocating. Yet, through the heat and the choking haze, the woman kept reaching forward, pulling at her

seatbelt, trying to free her. A name slipped from Alina's lips, barely a whisper. "Elena." It could be a moment of delirium but she was certain that the woman froze and there was a flicker of recognition when their eyes met. Alina summoned what little strength she had left, her fingers tightening around the woman's wrist to stop her from trying.

They had spent their lives trying to make up for the other. Alina, the child who stayed, carrying the weight of loss and grief that was never hers to bear. Elena, the one who was lost and taken to another time, to another life, to a name that was never hers. At least one of them must survive. Maybe this time, it was Elena's turn.

The world blurred, the burning car an intense fireball of heat blinding in its intensity, and that was the last thing she remembered before she passed out.

# **Aunt Molly and the Mystery of the Two**

## **Legged Donkey**

*by Bart Kestenbaum*

One day, Harry, my eight-year-old, asked if we could visit Aunt Molly as soon as possible. He wanted to ask about her donkey after a woman from an animal shelter visited his school.

“Who loves animals?” the woman had said after presenting a slide show.

She smiled as the entire class shot up their hands as high as they could.

“Who likes to see animals in pain?”

The pupils clutched their chests with folded arms. She smiled.

“Who has a pet at home?”

Hands up.

“Who wants their pets to suffer?”

Hands down.

“Now, I’ve spoken with your teacher,” said the woman looking over at Harry’s teacher, “and we think it would be nice for you all to do a little project about an animal in your life. Do you think that would be fun?”

Every head in the class nodded.

“When you go home tonight, tell your parents about my visit today. They can help you with your project, if you like, and have a think about how important it is to have animal shelters to care for animals that cannot care for themselves.”

With all eyes hypnotised on her, the children neatly climbing into the palm of her hand, the woman prepared her *raison d’être*. As she weaved from table to table, delivering piles of blue envelopes adorned with forlorn looking cats, dogs, gerbils and donkeys, she said, “And maybe you could ask your parents if they have any spare change too...”

Aunt Molly lives in a mobile home behind ‘Fat Larry’s Roadside



Café'. It's the place to go for truckers in search of a pit-stop, the crème-de-la-crème of bacon sandwiches and a good strong brew (Fat Larry's place that is, not Aunt Molly's, although she has entertained one or two truckers in her time.) Aunt Molly hasn't lived in the mobile home forever, but long enough that no-one can imagine her ever having lived anywhere else.

Her home sits at the far end of a large plot of land covered in gravel Fat Larry uses as a carpark for his trucker customers. Years ago, a health and safety officer wearing a yellow Hi-Vis vest showed up at his café with a clipboard and told him that his customers could no longer use the land for their trucks.

"Why?" said Fat Larry.

"Because the land is built on old mine shafts and could collapse at any moment," said the officer.

Fat Larry rolled up his sleeves, undressing the old naval tattoos on his forearms, turned his back on the officer and walked into the kitchen.

"Did you hear me, sir?" said the officer.

Fat Larry nodded as he flicked the switch on the kettle, laid six strips of bacon in a pan and turned on the gas. Once the bacon and tea was ready, he served the officer and sat with him while he ate and drank.

When asked about that day, truckers say they remember seeing Fat Larry talking to the officer, but couldn't hear what he was saying. "All we know is, after the fancy pants bloke in the yellow vest left, we never saw him again, and Fat Larry told us we could carry on using the car park."

Whenever you ask Fat Larry what he said to the officer he just smiles and asks if, "You want sauce with your bacon sandwich?"

Driving with Harry across the car park to get to Aunt Molly's, always makes me nervous. I drive really slowly. Harry once asked why. I said that I was trying to avoid the bumps and troughs all the big trucks have left that could wreck the underside of our little Peugeot. I'm not sure if driving slowly makes it less likely for a mine shaft to collapse, but I do it anyway.

The gate to Aunt Molly's place was once red. It had a shiny plaque

announcing:

3  
*Molly and Arthur's*

Uncle Arthur (not by blood, he and Molly never married) has been dead over fifteen years now; the plaque is still in place but dulled with bird shit; and the gate is now pink and so warped from constant mizzle it takes a shoulder bump then two hands and a foot to prize it open and get inside.

If it was your first time inside Aunt Molly's gate you could be forgiven for thinking that you were standing in a scrap yard rather than a garden. One could spend a lifetime looking around it and still find something you'd never seen before.

To the right of the gate, leaning tight against the stone garden wall, is an 'L' shaped outhouse Aunt Molly calls 'The Shed'. Uncle Arthur built it years ago from 'reclaimed' (AKA stolen: apparently Uncle Arthur could be a "terrible devil") wood of all shapes and sizes, sheets of large blue plastic for wind and rain proofing, and sheets of corrugated roofing held down with large stones and breeze blocks.

"What's inside the shed?" Harry asked me once.

"Boring stuff," I told him. "You know, things like her washing machine, tools, stuff Aunt Molly doesn't want around the house."

Harry seemed happy with my explanation. I never mentioned that if you searched The Shed long enough, you might just find a skeleton in a High-Vis vest.

Aunt Molly's mobile home is on the left side of the garden. Harry says it reminds him of a shoe box that has been left out in the rain. To get to her front door is to run a gauntlet: uneven paving stones greased with moss, low hanging wind chimes from low hanging apple tree branches, an abandoned parrot cage, an old mangle to which she used to tie Albert the donkey while she hosed him down (otherwise he was free to roam wherever he liked, outside the house, of course.) The most dangerous obstacle is the set of three wooden steps leading up to her front door.

"Mind the steps, Harry," I remind him every time we visit. He

has never slipped in all his eight years. I have slipped three times in the last year, alone.

Once inside, the first thing to greet you is Douglas, Aunt Molly's Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo: "Friends are here. Friends are here," he squawks.

"Shut up you daft bird," says Aunt Molly from somewhere inside the home. "Ooh, I must give that back to Audrey," you might hear before a door opens and shuts with the sound of clicks only cheap lightweight doors can make. "I'm coming," she'll call out before another click, then an "Oh bugger," (Harry always looks at me and grins when Aunt Molly swears) "Oooh, I didn't know I'd left that there," she says before silence, then rustling, more silence and, at last Aunt Molly on her cane to shoo Douglas away, welcome us in and beam: "Now, what have I done to deserve a visit from me two favourite lovelies?"

"Cover your eyes me lovelies," Aunt Molly cackled the day I took Harry to ask about her donkey. She limped ahead through the unlit passageway. "Aven't had the chance to organise meself this morning."

She halted. "On second thoughts, better not cover your eyes. Can't see much as it is. Really must get a new bulb. Not that I can put it up with me hip like this. Maybe you could put it up for me?" she said turning to look at me for confirmation.

I nodded.

Harry and I waited while she closed the doors to her bedroom, the spare bedroom and then the bathroom.

"I haven't cleaned my room either, Aunt Molly," said Harry with a smile.

Aunt Molly stopped and turned around, "Ave you not sweetheart?"

They both looked at me. I confirmed not.

"Gotta love him," Aunt Molly cackled before grabbing Harry's chin to deliver a big slobbering kiss on his lips. "Life's too short to spend cleaning up all day, ain't it mate?"

Harry agreed.

We followed her into the kitchen, wincing at the light bursting in

through the windows.

“Me favourite room in the place,” Aunt Molly always says, “more natural light in ere than on the sun.” She limped over to the sink and fingered some of the leaves on a row of plants lined up on the window ledge. ”Perfect for me babies to grow.”

Harry and I sat down at the small, round kitchen table as Aunt Molly filled the kettle.

“Dad says you want to know about Albert,” she said.

Harry nodded.

“Got a visit from the animal shelter did he?” she said looking at me with a grin.

“Yep,” I said.

“Envelope?”

I smiled.

“Been doing that same gig for years,” she laughed, “works every time. Those envelopes have kept that place open for as long as I can remember.”

She pointed to a thin glass cabinet in the corner.

“Go in there, sweetheart,” she said to Harry, “and get out the blue pig.”

“You don’t have to, Aunt Molly,” I said as Harry followed orders.

She told me to pipe down and that it would only be a handful of coppers. Later, back at home, the handful of coppers turned out to be silvers that filled four of the blue envelopes from the animal sanctuary and three other white envelopes we’d had to find from down the back of the cupboard.

Tea made, Aunt Molly waved us all into the living room to “sit on the comfy chairs”.

“Right, what do you want to know, me lovely?” said Aunt Molly.

Harry straightened himself and opened his mouth to speak.

“Ooh, bugger...” said Aunt Molly as she took a slurp on her tea.

Harry looked at me and grinned.

“Hang on sweetheart,” she said, “I’ve only gone and spilt it, aven’t I?”

Harry sat back in his chair as she got up and limped into the

kitchen.

“I’m forever doin that,” she called out from the kitchen, “when will I ever learn? Audrey’s always reminding me too: ‘Don’t sip it if it’s too hot, Mol,’ she says, ‘you’ll burn yourself if you do...’”

Harry pointed to two photographs of Albert the donkey on the wall. I nodded and gestured for him to look closer while Aunt Molly rambled on unseen from the kitchen.

“...she once had a friend who burnt himself from tea so bad, he ad to go to the hospital. Waited hours in a corridor, not an emergency of course, although I bet it bloomin hurt, well I know it hurts, I just done it...” she cackled, “but mine’s not an emergency. Just a bit sore. Hang on, I’ll be with you two lovelies in a minute...”

I stood and joined Harry as he examined the photos. In one, there was Albert tethered to the mangle in the garden as Aunt Molly hosed him down with one hand and waved for the camera with the other.

“She looks so different,” said Harry.

“What love?” called out Aunt Molly from the kitchen.

“I said you look different in this photograph, Aunt Molly,” Harry called back.

“Which one, sweetheart?”

“The one with you washing Albert.”

“You what, sweetheart?”

“The one with you washing Albert,” Harry called back louder.

“I wasn’t always this big,” she cackled as the sound of a drawer opened then shut, “I was quite a looker, back in the day.”

In the other photo, Albert was in a field with other donkeys, with two wheels attached where his hind legs should have been. Harry pointed to the wheels, looked at me and shrugged a “Why?” as Aunt Molly continued to crash and bash in the kitchen. At last she reappeared.

“Right. All done. Sorry, me lovelies. Ok. Right. Albert,” she said as she sat back down.

Harry tried again.

“What are those wheels?” He said pointing to the photo.

“They are his Zoomies,” Aunt Molly smiled.

Harry looked confused.

“When he lost his legs, poor thing, the vet said we’d ave to put him to sleep, but I said, no way, no sir, I ain’t putting Albert to sleep, there must be another way, it ain’t right when the rest of im works ok. You can’t just go around putting things to sleep cause they’ve lost their legs, can you?”

Harry and I shook our heads.

“Of course, you can’t,” continued Aunt Molly without taking a breath, “can you imagine if Albert was a human. What doctor would say, ‘Sorry sir, you’ve lost your legs, we have to put you to sleep?’”

Harry and I shook our heads.

“None. No doctor would say it. Can you imagine?” she said, “the whole country would be in uproar. They’d arrest the doctor in no time, I bet. That’s if the family didn’t get him first. Or her. Doctors can be women too of course, can’t they?”

Harry and I nodded. At last Aunt Molly took a breath as we all took a sip of our teas.

“You know that woman who came to your school?” said Aunt Molly as she put her mug down.

Harry nodded.

“Can you guess where she’s from?”

Harry shrugged.

“Go on me lovely, ave a guess,” she said.

“From the animal shelter?” said Harry.

Aunt Molly cackled. “Yes, yes, but which one?”

Harry shrugged.

“Go on, ave a guess,” she said giving me a conspiratorial wink.

Harry looked to me for help. I pointed to the photo of Albert with his wheels in the field with the other donkeys. Harry held his chin as he tried to solve the puzzle.

“I’ll tell ya, I’ll tell ya,” she laughed, unable to take the suspense (or the quiet) any longer. “That woman is from the animal shelter that took in Albert and gave im his Zoomies.”

“Really?” said Harry, his eyes sparkling at the revelation, “Wow.”

“Yep,” beamed Aunt Molly, nodding proudly.

Harry sat bolt upright as a new question hit him like lighting. “Aunt Molly,” he said, “How did Albert lose his legs?”

“His legs?” said Aunt Molly.

Harry nodded.

“Well, there’s a story,” she said, “but before I tell you that, let me tell you about his Zoomies. Your Uncle Arthur and Gerald came up with the idea. It’s the least we could do for that crazy donkey, really, for all he had to go through...”

Harry shifted in his seat. He’s a good boy. I know he didn’t really want to know about how Uncle Arthur and Gerald came up with the idea of the wheels, but loves Aunt Molly far too much to say so (besides, once she starts a story, and she had, she’s near impossible to stop.)

The next ninety minutes were ram-packed with: talking, lots of it and mostly Aunt Molly; three toilet breaks, all Aunt Molly’s (“Tea really does make me go a lot. Aud says it makes her go a lot too. Does it not make you two go a lot?”); two phone calls received, (one a sales call: “No sweetheart, I don’t think I need one of those, unless you think I do, but how could you know? You don’t really know me, do you, me lovely?); the other from Audrey (“Aud, let me phone you back, guess who’s here? Yep. You can’t even guess how big he is getting. Yep. Almost as tall as his dad. No. I don’t think so. I’ll ask them. I’ll speak to you later. About six? Seven? Ok. Lovely. Say hi to Pete.”); one phone call made (“I’m sorry me lovelies, I’ve got to quickly make this call, almost forgot, already forgotten to do it twice, can’t forget again, Mary will be furious.”); and a visit from someone we didn’t see (“Friends are here. Friends are here,” squawked Douglas. “Shut up you daft bird,” was all we heard).

By the time Aunt Molly had returned from answering the front door, Harry had fallen fast asleep.

The sun was slipping out of view by the time we left Aunt Molly’s.

As I navigated the bumps and troughs of the car park, I glanced at Harry as his eyes fought to stay open. It had been a long afternoon full of chat but he was none the wiser how Albert had lost his legs. As he leaned his head against the side-window, I figured he’d heard enough for one day and I’d let him sleep all the way home.

As we drove, part of me was relieved he'd fallen asleep before Aunt Molly's explanation. I wondered what I'd tell him when he woke. Was eight too young to hear the truth? Would it upset him? I wasn't sure.

Harry snored, woke himself up, then went back to sleep.

Even if he was ok with the truth, I wondered if other children in the class would be ok when it was his turn to share his project. I didn't want to get in trouble with other parents or his teacher.

I put two hands on the steering wheel as an eighteen-wheeler rifled past.

As the truck disappeared around the bend ahead, I smiled. Finally I knew exactly what I would tell him. Perhaps it would at least make his teacher smile and was only what everyone suspected, anyway. Tomorrow morning, when he asked about Albert, with my face as straight as a die, I would tell him that Aunt Molly had talked the hind legs off her donkey.



## September Daffodils

*by Linda Weeks*

Susie sank down onto a memorial bench in the park, closed her eyes and put her face in her hands in despair. ‘When are things going to get better?’ she sighed. It had been a horrible week at work, her children were stressed about forthcoming exams at school, the car was having some kind of weird problem and now her husband Derek had been admitted to hospital for tests after having a funny turn while out shopping at Tesco.

There was a stiff breeze, but sun began to warm the back of her neck and shoulders like a warm hug. She stayed there with her eyes closed until she felt strong enough to open them and rejoin the world. The sun glinted off the surface of the lake in shimmering twinkles. A little flock of mallards flew down and skidded into the water, their cackles sounding like laughter. Susie couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed like that. Probably when the children were very small, and she used to bring them here before they started primary school and she went back to her old job part time, three days a week.

The reeds at the edge of the pond were flapping and waving in the breeze. ‘Why don’t I do this more often?’ she thought. Glancing up she saw a park worker in a green donkey jacket and flat peaked cap, by the lake raking up some leaves. It was good to know that the park was still being manned by council staff. A couple of council gardens in the next village no longer had a permanent staff presence, and it was obviously suffering with litter and general untidiness. She didn’t go to either of those now, not since she found the broken beer bottles and needles and suffered half an hour of being cat-called while she was trying to read her book in peace.

A woman in a blue and white tracksuit jogged past with two dogs, a German shepherd and a labrador. The dogs ran straight up to the council worker who stopped raking and made a fuss of

them. They obviously knew him. The woman ignored him and jogged on. The dogs ran to catch her up, wagging their tails and tongues hanging out. They looked so happy, and Susie felt completely the opposite.

She sighed. This wouldn't do. Time to go home.

The next day Susie came back from visiting Derek and went back into the park again. She sat and burst into tears. Her manager had been kind and given her the week off, though she'd have preferred to work and keep busy. There was still no definite result from the tests, though someone had said he probably had a virus, but they were going to do an MRI scan to rule out other possibilities. He was in good spirits, though, for which she was grateful, but she herself was beginning to despair. The kids had been arguing all morning before going to school. She'd had to shout at them both and she hated herself for it. She'd always said 'if you have to shout, you've already lost control' and she preferred to reason with them, but this morning they were both being totally aggravating and unreasonable. She knew they were worried about their dad and was making allowances for them, but still, they'd been totally out of order.

Oddly, the park worker was raking up leaves again, although a little closer to where she was sitting. It hadn't been windy overnight and most of the trees still had leaves on; autumn had not quite yet arrived. The jogging woman came along the path yet again, and again the dogs ran to the man for a fuss. Susie hurriedly wiped her tears as the woman went by and nodded her head in acknowledgement. Susie was getting a feeling of *déjà vu*, but supposed that most people had regular habits. Maybe she should make it a habit for herself, she thought, and should start coming here after work. Especially now there was nobody at home until after school.

The raking man came closer to her and nodded a good morning. She smiled and said 'Hello' to him and hoped he wouldn't notice her tears. She couldn't guess his age but now she could see him more closely he seemed a fair bit older than she was. He had a kind face, and reminded her of someone. He came a bit closer and leant on his rake. Strangely, there were no leaves under it. Maybe he was

just trying to look busy when there wasn't really anything to do. 'All right?' he asked, looking at her face as she hastily wiped away tears. 'I will be', she said, trying not to start crying again. It was always worse when people were sympathetic. 'You will be', he said, reassuringly. 'Everything's going to be all right, you'll see'. Susie nodded. It was what people said. Her friend Janey had said the same thing on the phone last night. She must hang to that thought and stay positive. Everything will be all right. It had to be.

The next day she visited the park again. Derek had taken a turn for the worse in the night and she'd had a phone call at 5am to say that he'd been unwell, but had survived the night; however he'd been sedated and she was to come in later in the day, so she hadn't been to the hospital. She bought a coffee and flapjack from the café and went back to sit on what she now thought of as her bench. To her surprise there was a flower on it; a single yellow daffodil. And yet spring was long past! How odd. She couldn't see any others growing in the park, and it didn't have a hothouse where they could be grown under cover. Someone could have bought it from town, but why leave it here? And it had been freshly picked; not just broken off, but cut neatly. Susie picked it up and stared into its depths and could almost hear it talking of hope and sunshine.

Two swans flew in over the trees and landed on the lake. A couple with small children were already throwing seeds onto the ground for the mallards and pigeons, but ran back to hide behind their parents when the swans started honking and approaching the little family and began climbing out of the water.

Susie smiled, remembering happier times when she and Derek were both young and fit and healthy, and their children were small and uncomplicated. She finished her coffee and picked up the daffodil to take home. 'Might as well give you some water' she said aloud.

She visited the park every morning for the rest of the week, and every morning there was another single daffodil on the bench. Maybe they were a message for someone else and she was spoiling someone's assignation? But there was never anyone else about at that time, sometimes the little family and always jogging woman who ran around the lake each day. She determined to ask her if

she'd seen who was leaving the daffs on the bench. Her dogs always ran to the spot where the park worker had been raking earlier in the week, but Susie never saw him again. As the week progressed Derek grew stronger and healthier until he was at last able to come home to recuperate.

Susie knew this would be her last day in the park for a while but decided to bring Derek here when he was fitter. They should both get out into nature more often. It was surprisingly restorative; she didn't know how she would have coped if it hadn't been for the park, the water and the daffodils, which were now at home and looking sunny and healthy in the crystal vase that Janey had bought them for their fifteenth wedding anniversary. She picked up the latest one and stood up to go just as jogging woman and dogs came past. Jogging woman slowed to a halt and rested her hands on her knees, pausing for breath.

'Got a stitch!' she gasped, and after breathing deeply for a while straightened up and said 'ooh, that's better. It's lovely here, isn't it?'

'It is', Susie agreed. 'Do you come here every day?'

'Whenever I can', said the woman, beginning to do some leg stretches. 'This'll either keep me fit or make me fit for nothing! I've seen you here a lot this week'. Susie nodded and thought about telling her about Derek, but then the two dogs ran up to them.

'They miss their friend', Susie said instead. 'You know, the park keeper; I've seen them looking for him.'

'Oh yes, Old Tim. He always made a fuss of them. So sad when he went.'

'What? Oh no, where's he gone? I only saw him a couple of times this week but haven't seen him for the last four days.'

The woman looked at her curiously. 'No, you won't have seen old Tim. He died suddenly in the spring, just as all the daffs and crocuses were blooming. He planted them all, you know; hundreds of them. Said they bring hope to the world after the darkness of winter, and would surely ease a troubled soul. It was appropriate, in a weird way, that he died then, because the wreath from the council was made from some of his daffodils. Didn't you read about it in the local paper?'

'But he can't be gone!' Susie said, shaking her head. 'He spoke to

me on Monday!

The woman shook her head and started to jog on the spot. ‘Must have been someone else. You couldn’t miss him; always wore a flat cap and a green donkey jacket this time of year. Ah, Tim was a great character; been here for over thirty years and knew just about everybody. Always listened to everyone and their problems, said that this park had healing powers and that’s why he’d never wanted to go anywhere else. Even though he’d had offers, you know, from some of the bigger parks in the city. He used to say he’d never leave this place because he loved it so much. You’re sitting on the bench the council dedicated to him; look, there’s the inscription. Always made a fuss of these two’ - patting the dogs on their heads – ‘and they loved him too, didn’t you, doggies? Such a shame. Well, must be going. See you again maybe!’ and off she ran, calling to her dogs who bounded after her.

‘Bye!’ Susie called, quietly. She turned to read the inscription on the plaque on the bench just as her phone burbled with a text from Derek.

‘I can come home!’ it said. ‘It was just a very bad reaction to those new pills I’ve been taking. Everything’s going to be all right!’

Susie replied to say that she was on her way. She looked deeply into the golden centre of the daffodil in her hand, then looked up. ‘Thanks Tim’, she said softly. ‘You were right – everything IS going to be all right. I never met you in life, but I’ll never forget you’.

## **Artoo's Garden**

*by Ron Ward*

Colin checked the address in his notebook. He loathed banging on a door asking for admittance. A gentle buzzing being much preferred. However, he had to draw Ms. Harmon's attention somehow. He knocked.

Colin heard a muffled voice. "The door's unlocked, come on in. There's tea on the table."

Colin turned the handle pushing the door open. He was embarrassed by his reluctance to enter. Inside the room was nearly empty. A small two seat couch. A maple wood and plastic chair with vaguely art deco elements. In front of the couch a short table, painted with narrow Celtic knotwork and Egyptian motifs. How ugly he thought.

To his right a desk holding a laptop attached to a USB hub which was in turn hooked up to a too large for the room monitor. The cabling a rat's nest, that Colin had a hard time not untangling. Looking, through an arch he saw a small kitchen table with two more of the deco-ish chairs. A pot of tea and a sugar bowl sat on the table with two large tea cups.

Colin heard the shower stop. He felt stupid, realizing he had not heard it running. "Close the door I am felling a draft." Erin said. Colin pushed the door which banged closed.

"Please sit down have some tea. I'm just out of the shower. Apologies, I've inadvertently double booked my afternoon. I recently took a new position. I am already bit flustered by that and then you pop up. I know we talked. Previously I set my own hours. Now I've responsibilities. Are you sitting down, I don't think you are. I made it special for you, the tea I mean." Erin stopped talking.

"I only have a couple of questions. Maybe I could ask them while you dress and we can leave together. I won't hold you up that way." Colin said.

"Funny you should say that, I had a whole other thing in mind

where we talked like old friends for hours and you stayed over for the night.” Erin said, Colin blushed.

“Sorry, you don’t deserve that. I am not late but I easily could be. You only have one real question. Are they real? Am I right?” Erin put a little sting in her voice.

“To the point, yes. But your answer positive or negative is hardly the end of the matter. Several respected Photoshop experts say that your photos do not show any artifacts. There is no evidence of editing. Which gives credence to what your brother said in the Instagram post. That the photos were raw data off your camera.”

“He should not have posted them without asking me.” Erin said. “He was angry with me taking a regular job.”

“I’ll ask it. Are they real?” Colin crossed fingers on both hands.

“Yes Colin, the fairies in my photos are real. But not what you think.” Erin sighed, “Colin, would you like to see them for yourself? How would that fit in with your evening plans?”

Erin stuck her head out of her bedroom door. Colin could see her head and a naked shoulder. Wide green eyes, an impish smile, messy short honey blonde hair with hints of fading unnatural colors.

“Cat got your tongue.” Erin stuck her tongue out.

“Yes, I would like to see for myself. I had planned to do a draft of our conversation this evening.” Colin concentrated on his breathing, fighting the urge to snap his rubber band.

“Can you drive” Erin said.

“Yes” Colin said.

“Are you a good driver?” Erin said.

“Yes,” Colin said.

“I want to drive anyway. I know a shortcut.” Erin said.

“Sit down and have some tea, Colin. We can talk on the way to work.” Erin flashed him a gleaming smile. “I will be with you in a tiny tickly-boo-boo.”

“Oh my God this fucker is alive.” Franklin said crab walking away from the corpse. He was in the process of zipping up the bag for transit when the stiff’s arm lifted out of the bag.

“Are you sure it is not contracting muscle? Dr. Brown

pronounced him twenty minutes ago.” Max said.

“His god dammed eyelids are a flutter. This boy ain’t dead yet. Or he is coming back to life.” Franklin replied.

Max exhaled his frustration in the form of a double puffed cheek blow, slow and satisfying. Too early to know who to be frustrated with, Dr. Brown, Franklin, or himself for not double checking.

“He doesn’t seem hungry for brains yet Franklin. Why don’t you help, uh, maybe guide him into that settee.” Max said.

“I need help, his fucking legs are stuck in the bag. He is not the hulk, but he is not insubstantial.” Franklin said.

“Here let me help.” Willamina said. She hurried over to pull the bag off the recently dead man’s legs. Max got under an arm helping to lift the newly undead man to a standing position. The intention to then swivel depositing him on the settee.

The man looked larger standing up. He had four inches and twenty-five kilos over Franklin, as big as Max.

Both his eyes opened wide, frightened. He said, “Whaa” the implied t sound lost.

“Where,” came out pretty clear. The man panicked, pushed Franklin down into the settee. Then swiveled, elbow raised toward Max’s head. Max ducked the swing dancing the perpetrator, victim’s weight to sit him forcibly next to the frightened forensic trainee.

Max remained posturing for a fight that was already over. Willamina stared into the panicked man’s face holding him in place without touching him. She was staring at a ring of yellowish white crystals that appeared to be growing out of his lips. “Who are you?” The man spoke.

“We are wondering the same thing. I am DC Null. This is DC Hardy. The man in the white costume is Billy Franklin, he is a Trainee. Trying to specialize in forensics. We thought you were dead. Our doctor pronounced you nearly forty minutes ago. You have giving us all quite a start.” Willamina said.

“I am not sure where I am. I don’t recognize this place. What is it?” the man said.

“It’s us who usually asks the questions.” Max interrupted. “Let’s start with your name. What is it?” Max couldn’t hit anyone but he



still wanted to.

“Colin Knowland, I work for a website doing investigations. I mostly ask the questions too. Can you tell me where I am?” Colin said.

“Valista Svaldgrad’s studio.” Willamina said studying his face for recognition.

“The Finnish Princess of Thrash? Moved from death metal to terrible sculptures a couple of years ago. How did I get here? I don’t know Ms. Svaldgrad’s. Where is this studio?” Colin took a breath. “Last, I remember, Erin Harmon drove me out to Artoo’s Garden. We took a walk in the gardens. I don’t remember coming back.” Colin said. Willamina judged he was telling the truth as he knew it.

“That is a lot more than we knew five minutes ago.” Max said. “I am not sure it changes much. To answer your last question, this studio is on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the Continental building.” Max said.

“Erin the girl I came to interview lives on the third floor.” Colin said. As if that explained everything.

“You said you were an investigator, what is it you investigate?” Max asked

“Art controversies, fraud, the latest trends, who making money at the galleries, who’s on the outs.” Colin said.

“Not crime then. Odd question maybe, how are you with blood? I ask because I would very much like to get your reaction to a bloody scene. See if it jogs your memory.” Max asked. Willamina gave him a caustic glare.

“Is Valista dead on the bathroom floor. Do you want to shock me. See if I remember killing her?” Colin asked his voice oddly calm.

“No body, just blood, that is one of our problems. Are you game? Might go a long way toward proving your innocence.” Max said.

“Lead on. No guarantee I won’t hurl.” Colin said.

“We think you already did that. Look in the mirror once we get in there.” Max said

“Am I a mess?” Colin asked.

“A bit, not bad, you’ll see” Willamina said.

Colin followed Max; Willamina stepped in behind. Max stopped at the closed door. "I am going to let you walk in, look around. Touch nothing. The DCI and the scientists are going to come back with their finest toothed combs in the morning. If you touch anything that you didn't touch earlier you may incriminate yourself." Max stepped away from the door folding his arms across his chest.

Colin turned the door handle. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open. He expected a sea of red, splashed blood covering the walls and the floor. He felt a stab of guilt at his disappointment in the reality. The rim of the sink had half a dozen red drips. Colin guessed the sink had been half full when the bleeder was standing there. The bottom of the bowl was unblemished.

The tub was much more the modern art he was expecting. Streaks, splashes, and blobs in a random distribution. More of the bottom was bloody than clean. The stopper was in the drain hole. A head sized pool of blood had begun coagulating there. There was sick in the toilet, some of the floating bits starting to crust. That brought to mind looking in the mirror.

When he did, he stepped back. His eyes were dark. He thought of a racoon His skin pasty white. His mouth looked like a science experiment. Yellowish white crystals obscured all of his lips. Colin started to lick the crystals for taste, then thought what if it is poison, then thought you would be dead, then he thought according to the police he had been dead. He licked. The crystals tasted of strong citric acid and salt. He washed his face.

"Any idea what happened in there." Max asked.

"I think the sick might be the first deposit. It looks like it may have been there longest. Then later a fight or maybe just an attack in the tub, lots of stabbing, slashing, the wounded person lost enough blood to make that pool above the stopper. Then the victor, attacker dripped on the sink cleaning up some wounds of his or her own. How did I do?"

"I don't disagree on any particular point. Early days yet, the science bunch might lend us a hand getting past the broad strokes." Willamina said asserting herself back into the discussion. "What is your blood type Colin?"

“A positive, why” Colin asked.

“Interesting, I know it is a common blood type but the blood in the sink is A positive. Any memories?”

“No,” Colin said.

“Do you remember how you got those scratches on your arm?” Willamina asked.

Colin paused licked his lips, more salt, “That I do remember. I was following Artoo owner of The Garden. He walk talking about,” Colin stopped talking, switched off, staring into blank space.

*Artoo was talking about his prize Hawthorn tree. I picked a berry. Popped it in my mouth, the taste was astringent but not too, sweet, a hint of over ripe apple.*

*We talked for a moment there in the garden. I tried to take a step but tripped all the way to my knees. My glasses flew into the suckers at the base of the Hawthorn. Erin started laughing. “Look down” she said. I looked down and there at my feet we half a dozen small men. Their skin was green. They were bulbous as if made of pudding. Are they Fairies? ” Colin asked.*

*“No those are root pixies; you did not ask permission before picking that berry off their tree so they retaliated. They tied your shoelaces together.” Erin said.*

*Still on my knees, I reached into the bush to retrieve my glasses. The horrible fucking pixies attacked. Most of them stabbing me with Hawthorn tipped spears. Two others leapt on my arm leaving gashes as they slid down my arm. “I need those glasses to drive with” I said to Erin.*

*“I’m driving but” Erin stooped to be closer to the pixie’s height. “May we have the debris the interloper dropped into your home.” Erin asked in polite tones. The tallest pixie tossed the offending trash out onto the sidewalk where she easily retrieved them.*

*“Politeness is very important here.” Erin said. “The rules of conduct are strict.”*

“His garden. I tripped on a Hawthorn root. My glasses fell into the bush. The glasses landed deep in the thorns. I bear the wounds.” he

blurted. Obviously avoiding details of what Artoo was talking about.

“You look as if you are far away. Staring into empty space.” Willamina said.

“I think I disappointed Erin. I fear I acted like a bumkin at the opera.” He still look like he was in a trance.

“I was just going to suggest that we go downstairs and visit Erin. If she can corroborate your story it will help. Perhaps she can shed some light on how you ended up here in this studio. I imagine you would like that mystery solved as much as we would.” Max said.

“I am up for a walk; I will make it easier to sleep to know Erin is alright.” Colin said.

“We did not know this person Erin was involved, might be another victim. Best we find out sooner, rather than too late.” Max said heading for the door.

“Is that her place?” Max said pointing to a door a few centimeters ajar, letting yellow light escape around its edges.

“I think you better wait in the hall. Let DC Null and I check things out.” Max said.

Max knocked on the door. It swung a further open. “Is any one home? Ms.” Max looked at Colin.

“Harmon.” Colin said.

“Ms. Harmon, I am DC. Hardy, I am here with DC. Null We don’t want to give you a fright.” Silence. Max hit the light switch. “Come on in Colin, tell us if you can see any differences to earlier.”

Colin stepped over the threshold. The same silly Deco-ish chair was still waiting at its conversational angle. Max was just walking past where Colin had first seen Erin. Wet tousled hair, open inviting smile, he should have known better. “The desk, computer, and monitor are missing.” Colin said

“Is this where you sat to drink the tea?” Willamina asked.

Two tea cups and the pot sat forlornly on the empty table.

“Yes. The was a sugar bowl too, it’s missing.” Colin said

“Come look at this.” Willamina said. “I am guessing you sat on this side with the nearly drained cup. Erin sat here. I think this cup

was untouched. Look at its rim. Just like your lips.” Colin just stared.

Willamina opened the pot pulled up the strainer and dumped the contents on the table. “I thought it might be.” Willamina said.

“Might be what?” Colin asked.

“Thwockberry and hibiscus. Thwockberries are a strong hallucinogen they have a distinctive smell. Hibiscus masks the taste. These berries are extremally rare. This might be our best lead so far.” Willamina said.

Max walked into the room carrying a coral colored towel. “The bedroom and bathroom are completely bare except for this towel.”

“I only saw the edge of it under her arm but I love that color. She had it wrapped around her when I first saw her leaning out of the bedroom door.” Colin looked very sad.

“At this point I think it is fair to say Erin does not actually live here. It is entirely possible you never left this building Colin. It was all a hallucination. The Artoo’s Garden I went to was a small Japanese restaurant with some exotic seating locations in small oriental garden settings.” Willamina said.

“Fuck, why me, why involve me.” Colin exploded.

Consider that you inserted yourself into something. They drugged you, thought they killed you and dumped the body, you, in an apartment that was likely supposed to be empty.”

Willamina’s phone rang she put it on speaker. “I guess you got that. Not your blood. The blood in the tub is some kind of animal. No bodies no crime, I would not say you were exactly free to go, but you can go home. Let us know if you plan a trip to Bolivia or something, following up on Thwockberry tea.” Colin appreciated her attempt at levity.

“Come on Colin, I will give you a ride home. I can’t let a druggie loose on the streets. Plus, I will know where to come if I have to pick you up.” Max said.

Willamina waited until she heard the lobby door close. Pressed number two on her contacts list. The phone rang.

“Artoo’s Garden, this is Harley how can I help?”

“This is Mina can you get him on the phone?”

“Mina my sweet. I hope you have good news.” Artoo asked.

“In my opinion he is solid. He revealed nothing about the Garden. No mention of the Pixies attacking him or his disappointment with the fairies. Valista will be home Tuesday. She has already agreed to pay up.

“Colin bought the Thwockberry story line, hook, and sinker.”

Colin rode in silence. Max let him stew. The deepest wound on his arm started to itch. How could it all be in his head if he had these wounds from the pixie attack.

“Papa, we can sway him either way. Which way do you want me to push him.”

“Let me sleep on it. I will get back to you in the morning.”

*He aced the first test  
This is a dangerous place  
Expect no mercy*

## Dead Air

by E. Kinna

Marla Raines had a rule: never engage with fanatics.

Conspiracy theorists, UFO chasers, ghost hunters—she'd built a career dismantling their claims with calm, factual analysis and collaboration with a tight network of scientists she'd cultivated during her many years as a scientific journalist. Her weekly podcast, *Signal to Noise*, had gained a loyal following of skeptics, scientists, and curious listeners who loved a good debunking.

She preferred going head-to-head with pseudoscientific types who were capable of logic and debate, even if their beliefs proved unshakable. With zealots, it was threats and screaming whenever she challenged their fanaticism with facts and evidence.

So, when Dr. Elias Trent began emailing her—once, then again, then several times a day—she ignored and blocked him.

At first, he'd sounded lucid. He introduced himself as a former SETI researcher, now independent, still monitoring deep-space radio signals. He had something “urgent,” he wrote, “something you won't believe until you hear it for yourself.” It wasn't aggressive, but then it got strange.

The subject lines grew erratic: THEY'RE NOT OUT THERE... THEY'RE HERE ALREADY... THE PATTERN HAS CHANGED.

“Yeah, okay, whacko,” she'd muttered while filing his messages in a folder labeled *Noise*. But now, nearly a year later, that folder was open. Needing to fill a spot in an upcoming podcast, Marla scrolled through the various messages she'd received over the past year while sipping coffee. Through the mass of all-caps missives and poorly photoshopped photos of Reptilians and Big Foot, the last message from Elias stood out as the only one that didn't sound insane. Dated four months ago, it contained just six words, centered on the page:

*I can prove everything, please listen.*

Oh why not, she thought as she drafted a reply, let's see what he has to say.

She checked her inbox in the morning, and again the next day. Elias hadn't responded, so she searched for social media pages or websites to contact him. Nothing. There was also no activity on Trent's academic credentials either. His academic page was long dead. He had no online presence and had not published a research paper since 2021.

It was odd, but she'd met a few conspiracy theorists who went to great lengths to stay off the grid because they often had a persecution complex. No matter. The IP address from the header metadata on his last message pointed her to Darnell, Nevada.

She closed the laptop and plotted the location into her phone's map app. It was less than 20 miles from Area 51, and that made her chuckle. Aliens and Area 51, was there a more iconic duo? Her voice recorder was already charged, and she slipped it into her purse. The drive would take three hours and if Elias wasn't there, then that would be the end of it. She would do another sit-down interview with one of her physicist friends to talk about real science in science-fiction. Her listeners liked those episodes too.

After reaching her destination Marla stretched upon exiting her car, basking in the soothing heat of hot desert air. It was just past noon, but there didn't seem to be anyone around. It wasn't a ghost town. Ghost towns had personality. Darnell just felt... sterile.

The welcome sign was so clean it looked scrubbed daily. The gas station was pristine but unattended. The 50s style diner, which had windows all around, was empty except for a lone waitress polishing a countertop that already gleamed. That seemed the best place to start.

Marla stepped inside and the smell of fresh coffee and burgers made her stomach grumble.

The waitress looked up. She was middle-aged, with perfect makeup, and a bright smile.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please, and a blueberry muffin." Marla watched the



waitress pour fresh coffee into a ceramic mug. “Actually, I’m looking for someone. Maybe you’ve seen him?”

She pulled up a photo of Elias on her phone—one she’d taken from a web archive of his SETI page. He was in his mid-50s, glasses, gray beard, wearing a faded SETI t-shirt and a look of distracted concern.

The waitress glanced, then smiled again. “He doesn’t look familiar. There’s no motel, so it’s only locals here.”

“I saw a sign on my drive here, just outside town, for a trailer park. Could he be staying there?”

The woman shrugged. “We get a lot of passersby.”

“Yeah, I can see it’s a real hot spot,” Marla muttered. She hadn’t seen another car for two hours, not since she’d turned off the interstate.

The waitress’s smile didn’t change. “Cream and sugar?”

“No thanks, just black. Can I have it to go, please?”

Apart from some pastel-coloured prefab houses that dotted the landscape, Marla could only see two other buildings, one on each side of the diner. Marla tried the general store first, finding a clerk and cashier but no customers. Neither recognized the photo, nor recalled any strangers staying in or near the town.

At the hardware store, the teenage clerk didn’t look up until she mentioned the trailer park.

“Oh,” he said, then shook his head. “Nope. Haven’t seen him.”

“But you were about to say something.”

“I was just gonna say... there’s only one trailer around here and it’s out by the creek, but that’s private property. Folks don’t usually go out that way.”

“But he did?”

A pause. Then a shrug. “Dunno, like I said... I haven’t seen him.”

The lie was as thin as the desert air. Marla thanked the boy and set out to find the trailer he mentioned.

It wasn’t hard to find the red and cream Winnebago parked at the edge of a dry riverbed, nestled under the shade of a single dead

tree. The desert stretched out in all directions like a rust-colored sea, broken only by the curve of power lines and the glint of Marla's car.

No one answered her knock, and there was no sound coming from inside. She jiggled the door handle—locked, but the window next to it wasn't. Marla slid it open and shimmied her way inside. The air was still and had a musty smell. Despite the dim lighting, she could see that dust clung to every surface, but nothing had been ransacked. A cereal box and an empty bowl sat on the chipped Formica counter, the bed looked unmade, and a full pot of coffee sat in the brewer cold. It looked like someone had left before breakfast and never returned. However, what caught her attention wasn't the kitchen or the coffee or the bed. It was the wall at the opposite end of the trailer.

Unlike the sparsely furnished interior, the wall was covered with paper: maps, signal charts, annotated sky photographs, Post-it notes filled with time stamps and radio frequencies. In the center was a topographical map of the town with concentric circles radiating outward like a sonar pulse. Beneath all of that sat a desk with a weathered ham radio setup, a spiral notebook, and an open laptop bearing a faded SETI sticker.

She sat down at the desk and flipped through the notebook. The handwriting was neat and precise. The first entry was dated a year ago, right around the time Elias had first reached out to her.

*24.1 MHz. Repeat pulses at 2:17 a.m. every day. Directional variance inconsistent. Appears terrestrial in origin. Bounces off satellites? Atmospheric interference?*

The next entries contained a lot of mathematical calculations she couldn't decipher, and then his notes grew stranger.

*I first thought it was just pulsed interference—then I saw the interval ratios. Logarithmic, repeating. Like someone designed it.*

*Once I grouped the pulses into byte-length segments, it started forming recognizable patterns—at first just gibberish. Then a word.*

The rest of the notebook contained nothing more than math and computer code, neither of which she understood. So, Marla continued searching through the desk drawers and found a digital voice recorder. She pressed play and Elias Trent's voice poured

through in a dry rasp: “Binary. It was binary. Not just random—structured. Each pulse cluster fit an 8-bit format, ASCII. Crude, but brilliant. They’re using our digital framework and using it against us.”

On the recording, someone knocked on the trailer door. Elias hadn’t turned off the recorder, so she could hear him talking to someone, but couldn’t make out much beyond a tone of irritation in Elias’ voice telling the person he wasn’t leaving and to go away. Whoever it was did because Elias resumed his dictation: “I fed it through a character-matching tool. First word that appeared was LISTENING. I thought it was my imagination until it repeated three nights in a row. I don’t know how long I have...I think they know I’m listening. The pattern’s changed. The silence between pulses is shrinking, and the amplitude’s increasing. I mistook proximity for distance. They’re not coming, they’re already here. And they’re getting closer.”

There were no further recordings. Marla sat back in the chair and let out a whistle. The voice was that of a man unraveling, despite his focus, purpose, and clarity. “Hoo-boy, Elias. I think you need a good psychiatrist.” Maybe she should do a podcast episode on the link between mental health and conspiracies. Turning again to the notebook, she flipped to the last page. A final line read: *I think they know.*

Though he hadn’t used the word aliens in any of his notes or dictations, it was clear to her that Elias thought he’d found evidence of alien communication. Yet, she hadn’t seen any evidence that ruled out this signal he found as being of earthly origin. She remembered well the excitement around the detection of an extraterrestrial signal several years ago at Parkes Observatory in Australia, which turned out to be from a microwave in their cafeteria. That was the problem with confirmation bias—when you’re a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Hoping Elias would return so she could talk to him, and perhaps convince him to seek help, Marla dictated some notes into her own voice recorder and took photos of the notebook pages in case Elias remained missing. In that case, she would get someone to decipher his calculations.

By 9 p.m., he hadn't come back, and so she decided to stay overnight in the trailer because it was easier than driving home and back the next day. A motel would be better, but Darnell didn't have one—and even if it did, she didn't trust the town. The waitress's frozen smile. The boy's obvious lies. The silence on the roads. Besides, Elias might turn up and provide some answers.

It was after midnight before she started nodding off in the chair. At 2:17 a.m., the ham radio crackled to life. A low-frequency pulse thudded through the speakers—steady, slow, and exact.

Marla sat bolt upright. “Jesus Christ, what the...” Her smartwatch vibrated once, then went black. Her phone screen dimmed to gray and died. The power flickered once, then steadied. But the floor... it vibrated. A long, slow thrum beneath her boots, like a heartbeat reverberating through steel. She reached for her voice recorder. Dead. The pulsing signal continued. It didn't feel like an earthquake, it was too rhythmic, too precise. Maybe fracking—that could cause all sorts of ground disturbances. She'd have to ask a geologist.

Elias' laptop woke from hibernation and her eyes darted to the screen. She'd assumed it was off and password-protected, so she hadn't bothered trying it yet. One program auto-opened—a waveform translator. A small message flickered in the corner: “RUNNING: DECODER—V1.7.” It must have been programmed to turn on when a signal becomes active, or Elias set it up to trigger at 2:17. Text began to scroll across the program's window. At first, it looked like gibberish. Then, one character at a time, it resolved into a sentence: **Listening... signal received. Acknowledged.**

Oh, how she'd love to have a programmer look at this software, because there was no way for her to know if Elias' “decoder” was decoding something—or just spitting out what he'd programmed it to say. The message repeated: **Listening... signal received. Acknowledged.**

Intrigued by the now awake computer, Marla started scrolling through the laptop. There wasn't much, but his documents folder had a file named *Comm Logs June-Sept*. It was a list of all the signals with their strength, frequency, and duration. Another file named

*Pulse Effects: Cognitive Shifts* caught her eye. This file had no calculations, just Elias' notes:

1. I think they're preparing us—for contact. But not with words. With surrender.
2. The pulse is psychological softening. It primes the human mind for something else. It lowers resistance. Makes them docile. Accepting.
3. I've remained immune because I've never listened directly. I monitor through analog buffers and record, but I've never played it through speakers. Never allowed the signal to reach my ears. The difference is physical. Cognitive.
4. Everyone here has been exposed. Military vehicles pass through but don't stay. Area 51? The signal hits at the same time, every night. I think the town's proximity made them the first test group. They're not hiding anything because they no longer believe anything's wrong. They smile because they've forgotten how to fear.
5. The pulse doesn't just transmit, it conditions. The frequency range aligns with human gamma wave activity, and over repeated exposure, it seems to rewire perception itself. It's not control. It's compliance.

This was Elias' first mention of the military. Marla's hands dropped into her lap, and she pushed away from the desk. She wanted to dismiss it all as a hoax, and yet the signal had arrived exactly as Elias predicted and he was nowhere to be found. Her thoughts then drifted to the odd townspeople she'd met earlier, and it clicked what bothered her about them—they had a kind of Stepford demeanour. If it wasn't a hoax or the manipulations of a disordered mind, what was it? Had Elias uncovered some kind of military psychological warfare experiment? But why would the military risk harming innocent civilians instead of prisoners or enemies in a place like Afghanistan? Still, history was littered with stories of the military doing shady shit, so even though she thought it unlikely, it was more plausible to her than aliens. It would also explain the vibration she'd felt. Perhaps some kind of underground missile or energy test—something experimental, buried out here

where no one would notice. If so, and if Elias had knowingly or unknowingly hacked a military signal, he was probably being interrogated in some black ops site.

The signal stopped, and the laptop turned dark. The silence in the trailer, combined with a growing sense of unease that someone could be monitoring Elias' equipment, meant it was time to go. She also needed advice and input from greater minds than hers, to help her put everything she'd found into perspective.

Marla shoved her belongings into her purse, opened the door, and stepped into the desert chill. Stars across the Milky Way's spiral arm sparkled in the clear night sky. It was a spectacular sight that city dwellers rarely see, and under normal circumstances she would be in no hurry to leave. Somewhere far off, a truck rumbled on a highway and a vibration like the one she had felt earlier pulsed beneath her feet, but it was weaker. Yep, time to go.

As soon as she got to her car, swirling, gray clouds gathered fast over the desert, blotting out the stars. Marla stood with her hand on the car door, watching tumbleweeds roll down the road as the wind picked up. The air felt different. It was less dense, as if something was sucking away the atmosphere—like the ocean pulling away before the tsunami hits. And then, without warning, the wind stopped, the clouds froze, and she heard a deep hum—not from any human-caused source, it seemed to come from the air itself.

She looked up again—the cloudy sky had turned pitch black. It wasn't just darkness; it was like a void. Marla blinked but nothing changed. Had the waitress put something in the coffee? One problem with that thought, it had been hours since she drank any.

A bright, angular shape began to reveal itself behind the inky clouds. Marla's hands began to tremble, and her eyes grew wide. The shape was massive, silent, and utterly still. No blinking lights, no engines, and no roar. Just presence—alien and undeniable. It didn't descend, it simply was, like it had always been waiting. She heard what sounded like trucks barreling down the road. When she glanced behind, she didn't see any vehicles, but she did see people walking towards her from the town—blank-faced and slow. “Shit —”

Marla's heart pounded and she gasped for breath—her lungs felt starved of oxygen. Her mind went blank, instinct now firing through every cell. She stumbled back into the trailer and checked her phone—no service. Just that blinking, mocking, empty signal bar. Yet, she sent a text message to her brother anyway, telling him her location. It had to connect to the network sometime. Digging into her purse, she grabbed her voice recorder and hit the record button.

“This is Marla Raines,” she whispered. “I’m in Darnell Nevada and something is happening. Something has appeared in the sky. I don’t know what I’m looking at. It’s not a ship. It’s not... it’s...”

A tremor vibrated through the earth and her entire body. Her voice fractured, the recorder flickered, and then—static.

## **A Life in a Year**

*by Dawn Oshima*

Heat bakes the grey earth dry  
while sunflowers nod their heads,  
welcoming summer.

Tendrils of black smoke  
invade the tiny iris  
petals. Darkness falls.

A snowy hill, glass  
shards shining like diamonds. Stalks  
of heather abound.

Newborn sun wraps warm  
rays around amaryllis  
seeds. New life awaits.



## The Last Straw

*by A. Parker Jarvis*

The Hostess was in her element, though she wasn't sure if that meant fire or water. At this moment, fire was winning. The light of the chandelier burst from a thousand glass teardrops, catching the reds and golds of the wallpaper, like tiny dragons escaping the pattern, trailing sparks as they went.

In the giant mirrored wall behind the fireplace, she caught a glimpse of herself: long black hair to below her waist, face dewy from her moisturising mask, and drenched pyjamas, still festooned with the chickweed tangled in her clothes. On her feet—in the warmth, almost dry—her beautiful shoes, borrowed from wardrobe so many times that they accidentally migrated to her own shoe rack, and she could not bear to repatriate them. They were the palest pink silk, with running stitches of gold, and embroidered plum blossom at the toes. The straps were so fine they barely touched her skin and could be released with a fingertip. Designed for Cinderellas to lose at midnight, they made her feel chosen.

The tall fir tree in the alcove was hung with their discarded jewellery and expensive watches. Time seemed irrelevant, and, indeed, each room looked out on a different season, which they sometimes changed. No one really cared what was where, except in the case of this great hall, which was kept in midwinter to be festive, and they could look out at the falling snow. Few could remember enjoying Christmas until they arrived here, and many never found the time to decorate a tree unless it was written into their script.

The table was laid like a palace banquet—bronze chopsticks, porcelain bowls, glassware from Murano, and a velvet runner the colour of rubies. She hadn't seen activity, and there was no sign of a chef, but the kitchen was stacked with dishes and delicacies under silver cloches on matching trays. She needn't have worried about the practicalities. Each dish was replicated across the table, so no

one had to be served. Served meant observed.

The door was always left open, because there was no danger here. They arrived one by one, discarding coats, admiring the chandelier, and laughing at her joke on the invitation: “Hanbok optional.” Their clothes were as eclectic as always. One lovely girl was wearing a Beatles T-shirt and bikini bottoms. Another guest arrived in full stage makeup, tissues sticking out of the collar of his leather jacket. Someone else was in a crumpled suit, looking like every paparazzi photo of him at airports. If they noticed any of this, no one commented. No one here would be so rude.

As ever, the numbers on their lapel pins matched their wine glasses. No names. Just dates—arrival dates. They greeted one another like family. Kisses. Back pats. The starlets linked arms and giggled, and the idols leaned into each other’s shoulders, delighted to reconnect. There were respectful spaces around the most senior actors, who were now feigning modesty and trying to stop all the bows.

She watched, thrilled. These were the most beautiful people in the world. Not just pretty. Not just handsome. Beautiful, like a full moon or starlight. Like a mirror or prism. Dazzling.

She led them to the table.

“Dinner first,” she said, “then the game.”

They gasped and cheered. They adored the game.

They took their seats and settled in. She circled the table slowly, smiling, savouring every fragment of chat.

“I still can’t believe we’re allowed to eat the food.”

“I know! Fuck calories, seriously!”

“I love these glasses. Hey, do you remember when I dropped that glass award?”

“God, that was so funny. It hit a photographer—fortunately!”

“Has anyone seen Twenty-three yet?”

The Hostess leaned in and said, quietly, “It takes a while.”

A nod. “Enough said.”

She had gone to great trouble to discover their favourites, and they complimented and toasted her good taste. Two drama actors couldn’t resist feeding abalones to each other with chopsticks, and soon everyone was at it. At one point, it looked less like a fine

dinner than a big, twiggy nest with open-mouthed baby birds.

Later, when she went to clear a platter, three boy idols followed her into the kitchen, carrying more. Eventually, her inner fan got the better of her.

“You do realise you were my heroes?” she confessed.

“No! But do you realise you were our crush?”

“Please do a dance,” she begged. “Anything. Just a few steps.”

“Go on then, but don’t tell our agents,” one said, and they all started gyrating and laughing.

She passed around the table small squares of marbled paper and enamelled fountain pens.

“Everyone? Can you all hear me? Lovely. You know the rules. Fewer than five words. Are you ready?” She moved to the head of the table and stood on a footstool to raise her to the lofty height of still very small.

“Friends of the firelight,

Lovers of lore—

What silly thought

Was your Last Straw?”

Everyone laughed at this and then settled down to work. It always took longer than she thought. The young people were more used to texting, and the seniors prone to perfectionism or nerves. This was the most important line they would ever deliver.

When they had finished, they rolled the paper into little scrolls, tied them with ribbon, attached their numbers, and dropped the finished work of art into the glass jar beside the fire. The Hostess dimmed the great chandelier, and the room became calm and comforting in the candlelight.

“Are we all ready? You know what to do.” She reached in and drew the first scroll.

“Nineteen!”

Nineteen stood with theatrical solemnity, mainly because he was dressed as a king.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “here is my final straw.” He cleared his throat loudly.

“I fancied a lie-in.”

“A lie-in? I survived thirty-three episodes of comedy with you,”

someone blurted, “and you were barely ever awake! When would you find time to sleep?”

Laughter exploded.

The Hostess reached into the jar again.

Next was Twenty-seven. He was a model turned actor, arrestingly handsome, who was used to being first in any top ten. With black belts in everything, he did his own stunts. He was known for making anything look good, and it was true. In his torn army pants and hospital gown, he could still have stepped straight off a catwalk. He tore at the ribbon, shaking the paper open with a sharp snap.

“Ooh. That was loud! Right. I was never that great at reading but I’m going to try.”

Everyone clapped and whistled.

“Get on with it!”

He grinned and smoothed out his scroll.

“Ladies and gentlemen. The last straw for me was—oh, the shame—I went on Twitter. Alone!”

“A. We don’t do shame, hon. And B. What the hell, Twenty-seven?” someone groaned. “Nobody reads the comments!”

“We all do! Everybody does!” they shouted. It was great they could laugh, now, and mean it.

The Hostess looked at Twenty-seven, and he winked at her. This man was the vocalist of her favourite band and her ultimate bias. Every day was heaven.

“You’re brave,” she said softly.

“Just social media!” he joked lightly. Applause. Kisses. Cheering.

The game progressed. It turned out Three had “Missed an important call.”

“You and everyone!” they shouted. Missing the call cropped up a lot. Timing was everything, elsewhere.

The last to play was Fourteen. She was a singer and actress—an unconventional beauty wearing bloodstained yellow workout gear and matching red curls stuffed loosely into a bandana. There was a sudden hush. She sang like an angel, but it was her sultry, deep speaking voice that had made her millions.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t wish to upset you unduly. Please

be prepared. My last straw...?” She looked around solemnly. “I lost my favourite earrings!”

A pause.

“God, Fourteen!” someone murmured, “I hope they weren’t those I borrowed.”

Fourteen laughed and rolled her eyes.

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Guess what? They were IN MY BLOODY EARS!”

The Hostess had tears running down her cheeks when she declared the winner:

“First prize goes to Fourteen, for being her own worst enemy—aren’t we all?”

“What’s second prize?” they clamoured.

“Nothing.”

“Well, what’s first prize?” asked Fourteen.

“Nothing!”

“Love it. Best thing I’ve ever won.”

They moved to the lounge to have coffee. She had deliberately laid out giant rugs, because few of the guests took chairs seriously—especially in K-Pop—and she often felt it was a good way to test if someone really was South Korean. As Twenty-two was the only one who could use the player, he got to choose the music, and by complete coincidence it was usually one of his songs. Who the hell cared? He’d chosen their favourite. Yes, that one. The one that went viral; the one that paralysed three nations for six weeks. Everyone was shouting that they loved it. He batted the compliments away.

“My best, I concede. Two million downloads. Four weeks at the top. Six tax demands. Mic drop.”

“Now, Twenty-two. No playing the game when it’s over,” said the Hostess.

“Naw. Those were just the first straw!”

During coffee, she moved quietly through the room with the only camera allowed in—their official Polaroid. The guests barely noticed. No one prettied their lips with gloss or took a brush to their hair. No one asked to see the photos. They didn’t care. They were happy with how they looked.

As she passed two actresses, she caught a snippet:

“The scar has almost gone. Already.”

Her friend moved closer to inspect it, peering wisely at her skin.

“That will be gone soon, babe. Good as new.”

Thirty-one came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Do you think Twenty will host for us next year?”

“I think so. He’s completely different now.” They both smiled at the thought.

“Don’t forget to give him the book, then,” Two said.

“I won’t. I promise.”

She and Thirty-one had dated briefly a lifetime ago, until “someone” had “had a word.” He gave her a hug and then a kiss on the cheek.

“What’s that for?” asked the Hostess.

“Oh, nothing, really. Because we can.”

Actors were trained to make exits, so the room emptied quickly in a flurry of greatcoats. She could barely breathe. There was nothing more thrilling than watching men bounding about in coats in a K-Drama, and here they were—aware of their power, and vying with each other to leave in the most over-the-top way.

The ladies followed, with barely less noise—Fourteen, as ever, the ringleader.

The Hostess rose to the occasion and gave her trademark wave—one tiny hand fluttering sweetly while the other poked at her dimple and she blew a kiss.

There were cries of “*Aegyo!*” and “So cute!”

“How are you so adorable?”

“I practise every day,” she replied.

A distant voice shouted, “I’ve kissed that dimple in a spy film!”

“Hey!” she shouted back.

Now alone, she sat at the marble table, sandwiched comfortably between the glow of the chandelier and the fire, and opened her craft box. It was time for The Book. She opened the thick ledger, with its weird and wild index: Five, One, Twenty-Nine, Three. Not ordered by birth, fame, or rank, but by arrival.

Each guest had a double page: Polaroids, scrolls, and newspaper

clippings from the time they left—so they could see how far they had come. The headlines were always the same. Gushing and glowing and always at least three months too late. “Gone So Soon.” “Bright Star Has Faded.” “Mystified. Seemed So Happy.” You couldn’t make it up, yet they did.

She taped the smiling faces into their rightful places and marked each one with the year. In accordance with tradition, she then smudged it, because it didn’t matter anymore. They were free of headlines, free of deadlines. Finally, finally, free.

She turned to her own page. She couldn’t remember what she looked like, even though she was looking at it! It was one of the nice things about living there. Things that weren’t important became invisible or were ignored. Things that mattered were cherished and celebrated.

The rules provided that the Host or Hostess never played The Last Straw but were drawn first the following year. From the dresser, she took a last slip of paper and numbered it: “1-3.” Like several others, she’d arrived on a whim in the early hours of *Seollal*, so they’d had to include the hour to tell them apart. When she had finished, she rolled up the paper carefully, attached the ribbon and put it in the jar.

Her scroll was ready for the next time. Her Last Straw condensed to five words. It didn’t seem funny then, but was truly hilarious now. She hoped very much they would like them.

“They wanted my ridiculous shoes.”

## **The Detective**

*by Tim Rogers*

I am to all extents and purposes a gumshoe, a private detective. I'd like to think of myself as something straight out of a Raymond Chandler novel; a quietly brooding tough guy with an unbreakable code... but this isn't 1940s L.A., and I'm not the kind of person to shake off a concussion by chasing it away with a shot or two of whisky. This is Nottingham and it's 2025, so my life is a lot less about rescuing dames and recovering priceless artefacts from gangsters, and much more about finding lost pets and taking pictures of sweaty, overweight businessmen poking their secretaries.

I'd recently finished a case and had my (only slightly padded) invoice paid in full by the firm of lawyers that hired me, so I was feeling flush and deserving of a lazy afternoon. My feet were up on my desk and I was working on devouring a meatball sub, trying (and mostly succeeding) to keep the tomato sauce and melted mozzarella off the front of my shirt, when the door opened and a pair of legs walked in.

The legs were attached to the rest of her, and the rest of her was just as stunning. Probably in her early thirties, the blond highlights, expensively done, were just for style and not covering grey. She was wearing a pale blue floral crepe button-front summer dress that ended about a hand width above the knee and had what looked to be a Bottega Veneta handbag hung casually over one shoulder. I couldn't decide whether to apply the "you-can-obviously-afford-it" premium to my hourly rate, or the "pleasure-spending-time-with-you" discount.

I stood up, brushed the worst of the sandwich from my chest and beckoned for her to sit.

"Mr Gibson?" she asked. "The Private Investigator?"

I nodded.



She introduced herself as Lucy Pine. “I got your leaflet through my letterbox. I didn’t realise PIs advertised that way.”

I smiled. “It’s something I’m trying. It works for gardeners and handymen.”

“Does it?” she said. “I think my gardener came with the street.”

She sat; I followed suit.

“It’s just... I spoke with my neighbours. None of them got a leaflet.”

I waited.

“I wondered,” she said. “If you picked my door for a reason.”

I raised my eyebrows, but said nothing.

“Like, if you already knew if my husband was having an affair, or something.”

I shook my head. “No, nothing like that. It’s just random.”

“Are you sure?”

“I mean, I’d love to have that kind of time to investigate people on spec and then just send the unlucky ones a bill, but no.”

Admittedly, once during a particularly lean spell I had contemplated kidnapping a few pets and then getting myself hired to find them again, but there really isn’t a reliable way to ensure that you’re the PI that gets called to find them and if some other PI is hired and actually stumbles on what you’re up to, well there goes your licence and insurance.

“Oh, good,” she said, and then paused briefly before adding: “because I think my husband might be having an affair.”

I poured us both a coffee from a pot I keep on top of my filing cabinet. The cabinet itself was empty, all my files being digital these days, but I’m too lazy to move it and far too cheap to buy something else to put the coffee pot on. She took a sip and winced. I make great coffee, but this had been sitting there stewing and getting funky for maybe three hours by now.

“Can you help me?” she said. “I need to be sure.”

“I can,” I said. “But you need to be aware that this can get expensive.”

I took a sip myself. Yeah, it was bad coffee.

“If your husband IS cheating AND he’s being careless about it,”

I continued, “then you might be able to get a quick answer. Otherwise it could take a really long time until you catch him. You never really prove that someone *isn't* cheating; at some point you just choose to stop looking.”

She just sat there quietly for a minute, looking fragile and tearful. I let her.

She took so long I nearly forgot and tried the coffee again. Eventually she broke the silence. “But what if he is?”

I shook my head. “He almost certainly isn't.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Statistics. Less than 20% of husbands cheat at some point, so just playing the odds I have to say it's unlikely.” I gestured at her. “And those that do cheat, rarely have wives that look like you.”

She covered her face in her hands and gently sobbed. Once again, I let her.

“Okay, let's start over. What makes you think your husband might be having an affair?”

“You're going to think it's stupid.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe not.”

“He got mostly Cs.”

“At school? How does that...?”

She shook her head. “No, I did a quiz.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a folded piece of paper ripped out from a magazine. I took it and had a look. It was a multiple choice quiz from *Cosmopolitan* entitled ‘*Is your man cheating on you?*’ It had been filled in scoring, as promised, mostly Cs.

I skimmed a few of the questions.

“*Has his dress sense changed over time?: A - No, he's dressed the same way since I met him; B - Maybe, he's evolved a bit with my guidance; C - Yes, he recently completely changed his style; D - Yes, he's given up taking care of his appearance.*’ Well, you're right about one thing,” I said. “I do think it's stupid.”

“Hey!”

“I'd get mostly Cs on this quiz, and I'm not even married.”

Lucy grabbed back the paper and stuffed it into her bag. “I never said it was proof. It's just what started me thinking.”

“Ok,” I said. “What took you to the next stage?”

She took me through a whole list of things, all minor and not in any way conclusive, but certainly the kind of things that make people wonder. The recent upgrading of his wardrobe to a ‘younger’ style; working late more frequently; overnight work trips becoming a thing; an exponential increase in time spent supposedly at the golf course. The thing that really bothered her, though, was his smell. He was coming home with neat hair and smelling of soap.

“Soap?”

“Who comes home from work smelling more strongly of soap than when they left? He’s clearly having extra showers.”

“But have you ever actually smelt perfume or seen lipstick on him, or anything like that?”

“No, of course not.”

“Have you asked him about it?”

She shrugged. “I tried. He said he showers after the gym or playing golf.”

I nodded. “It sounds reasonable.”

“No,” Lucy replied, folding her arms. “It sounds plausible.”

I tried moving to a different tack. “Ok. I’m going to ask you a bunch of questions,” I said. “Some of them are personal.”

Lucy frowned, but told me to go ahead.

“How’s your sex life?”

“So, you’re not going to build up to it gradually, then?”

I smiled. “Sure. What’s your husband’s name?”

“John.”

“What does he do for a living?”

“He’s an accountant at Berring and Lychfield.”

“How’s your sex life?”

She gave me a look like she was deciding between slapping me and throwing the coffee in my face. In the end she did neither.

“It’s fine.”

“Just fine?”

“About the same as it ever was.”

“Really? How long have you been married?”

“Six years next month.”

She glowered at me, so I changed the subject. I asked a whole bunch of small talk questions about dining habits, vacation plans, time keeping, and stuff like whether he'd brought things home that could have been gifts from someone like watches or cufflinks that he'd claimed to buy himself but then never used. Just innocuous prompts to keep her talking and bring her back to calm. When her breathing had gotten back to regular, I risked another awkward one.

“What outcome are you hoping for?”

She looked at me sideways. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I'm not usually approached directly by spouses. Normally when people try and get proof of infidelity from a PI, it's commissioned by their lawyers to support ongoing divorce proceedings and get leverage in the settlement.”

“I just want to know, is all.”

“Yes, but are you hoping to find out he's faithful, or hoping to feel less guilty about leaving him?”

My phone rang. I glanced at it quickly but sent the call the voicemail.

“You're not married,” said Lucy.

I looked at her quizzically.

“You said earlier you weren't when looking at the quiz.”

“Right,” I said. “No, I'm not.”

“Were you ever?”

“Sure,” I said. “Once, a while ago. It didn't take.”

“How long were you together?”

“Five years, eleven months,” I said. She didn't laugh. “No, I'm joking. Ah, we split after just over a year of marriage. About two years into the relationship.”

“Why did you break up?”

“We had the very best reason,” I replied. “We didn't want to be together anymore.”

“Was there someone else?”

“No,” I said. “Not to my knowledge.” I gestured round the room. “This is a lifestyle incompatible with happily ever after. Too many nights watching other people live their lives, and not enough

at home.”

She stared at me for a second and shook her head. “You lied to me.”

I had, of course. More than once. I just wondered which lie she’d picked up on. I waited. If in doubt, keep quiet.

She pointed at the sandwich stain on my shirt. “My guess is that you’d be ‘Mostly Ds’.”

I smiled, and reached for her mug. “I’m going to make us some better coffee.”

She sat patiently while I made a fresh pot and washed out the mugs. While the machine dripped water slowly through the filter I could see she was building up to a question.

When it was all made, I handed her a mug and sat back down.

“Do you carry a gun?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“But you have one, if you need one?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t do protection work. Security is a whole different profession and skillset. If things look like they could get rough, I do what anyone else does and call the police.”

She looked disappointed. I was a bit disappointed myself, but there you go.

“Do you need protection? I can make a referral.” And make a modest commission, of course.

“No, I was just asking,” she said. She breathed in the coffee fumes from her mug, still not really trusting it would taste good enough to drink, so I had a sip of mine and smiled my premium smile I reserve for new customers. The one with maximum charm that I learnt from watching videos of Ted Bundy on YouTube. Sure, he’s a terrible person, but you can’t say he didn’t know how to smile.

She smiled back and took a sip. “So what do you suggest we do next?”

I leant back in my chair. “Well, as I said it could get quite expensive, and I’m still not convinced it would be worth your money.”

She played the silently waiting game back at me, so I folded and

continued. “What did you have in mind?”

“Can you at least follow him for a bit and check?”

I laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“We don’t do that anymore. In-person surveillance takes a team of at least three to four people if you don’t want to be noticed... and that’s at any one time. For round the clock surveillance you need to hand off between maybe four or five teams working in shifts. The only people with resources for that kind of graft are major crimes squads and government intelligence agencies.”

“So... what exactly is it you do?”

I leant back forward. “Electronic surveillance. Cameras, bugs, trackers. Phone and email hacking. Plus some good old fashioned interviewing.”

“And that works?”

“You still need them to be careless, but yeah. It works. It’s only once I get some solid intel that an affair is actually happening and have an idea of where and when people meet that I’ll get in my car and go peer through some windows with my camera.”

Lucy sighed. “That won’t work with John.”

I asked her why she thought that, and she explained that she’d checked his phone and laptop, and had even tried tracking him. “I bought a four pack of Apple AirTags. I put one in his bag, another in his car, one in his golf bag and one in his gym bag.”

“Did it work?”

“It just showed him going to the office, the gym and the golf course.”

I smiled. “Maybe there’s nothing to find, then.”

“Or he’s having an affair with someone at work, the gym or the golf course.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I said, rubbing my face in my hands and scrubbing my eyes. “Look, you never answered my question earlier. What outcome are you hoping for? Do you want to find him having an affair?”

“Why on earth would I want that?!”

“To get a better divorce settlement is a common reason. Another is because you’re having an affair yourself and want to feel

better about it.”

She made a snorting sound.

“Are you having an affair, Lucy?”

“No, I’m absolutely not!”

I looked at her and tried to read her reaction. It looked genuine to me.

“In that case, Lucy, I suggest you save your money and let this one go. As I said at the start, the safe odds are that he isn’t, especially if you, you know, look at you.”

She stood up and got ready to leave. As she opened the door I called out to her on last time. “But give me a call if you do stumble on any more reasons to be suspicious later down the line. I’ll be happy to take your money then. I’ll even give you you the enjoy-spending-time-with-you discount.”

Lucy paused and just looked at me.

“Plus,” I said, “stop reading Cosmo.”

She smiled and left. I never heard from her again.

After she’d gone, I washed up the coffee mugs and checked my phone. The missed call from earlier was just a lawyer checking in to say he might have some work for me next month. I had just one more thing to follow up on, and then I could call it a day. I swiped through my contacts and dialed.

“Hi John, it’s Gibson... That’s right... Yes... So I’m ready to report... Yeah, I met with your wife this afternoon. She responded to the leaflet and came in... Yeah, I said she would... No, she has no idea that AirTags alert you if someone plants one near you... That’s right... Yes, that’s right... I’d keep them in there a bit longer. My guess is she’ll remove them herself soon, maybe even this evening if you leave the stuff unattended for a bit... No, she has nothing beyond nagging suspicions about you... Well, yes, I suppose you *could* try being more careful now, or maybe you could just try being a better husband... Whatever, John. I get paid either way... Sure, I’ll send over a final invoice today... Right, obviously not to your home email address.”

These guys. Once a cheater, and all that.

“What’s that?... No, I’m pretty sure she’s not having an affair...”

Well, you never really prove that someone *isn't* cheating, John. At some point you just choose to stop looking.”



## **First, You Take a Character...**

*by V. Sirin*

“Do you happen to be a fan of the mysteries?” he asked, trying to startle her into a reaction. He was relying—as always—on his affable charm and toothy smile to put the other person at ease; to signal that he was a nice guy, not a threat.

Her reaction disappointed him, in a way. Looking up from her book with a very brief smile as she reflexively closed the book upon her finger—followed by a look that clearly asked to be left alone so she could get back to reading. A look the man completely ignored, taking a seat in the overstuffed chair opposite her, signaling his intent to stay awhile.

“Tell me you’re reading a novel, or at least a short story, if not a collection of them. We fiction writers are always so hopeful, yet also so often disappointed.”

She studied his face, which he made easy to do, as his smile had slid easily into what he privately called his affable grin. It also allowed him to continue his study of her—a study she did not know had been going on for at least ten minutes.

What he found now confused him: she seemed perfectly at ease, if a bit annoyed at the interruption. She turned, unsnapped the canvas bag decorated with pale pink flowers on the floor beside her chair, and put the book away. She looked up.

“Have you written anything I might have read? Or at least heard of?”

“Do you read pretentious, literary-themed, strange little novels that sell only a few thousand copies but are seemingly loved by snobbish critics who disdain popular fiction?”

“I have,” she nodded. “But why ask about mysteries if that’s not what you write?”

“Because I seem to be living one out at the moment. I could use some help trying to figure it out. Are you game?”

She definitely paused, seemed to consider her options. Was she

tensing up? Or was he imagining? No, she had tensed. It was obvious now as she relaxed and leaned back in her chair.

“Depends on the hook. What kind of mystery? Cozy is all the rage right now, isn’t it?”

“This is more traditional, I think. Sort of a variation on the classic get all the victims into an isolated location and pick them off one by one.”

“I never did care for those,” she shook her head. “Either the killer has to be wealthy enough to make all the arrangements to get all the victims into the selected place, or incredibly lucky with snow-storms or hurricanes or something else completely unpredictable to give them time.”

“So you’ve given that some thought?” he said, immediately regretting such a clumsy effort.

“Well, we’ve all thought about how we’d go about killing one or more people at some point in our lives, haven’t we?” Her eyes were twinkling, and he had no doubt she was enjoying his discomfort. She continued:

“And now that you’ve brought it up, I can see how this location might be perfect for a modified *And Then There Were None*. Lure the victims to a public but somewhat isolated location with just enough guests to provide cover, but few enough to provide the momentary isolation needed. Newly opened ski resort that had construction delays and missed the season, now giving away all sorts of promotional coupons to bring in some money this year. Perfect. But what makes you think you’ve stumbled upon some sort of mystery?”

“Stumbled is good,” he nodded. “I have a habit of parking at the end of lots, since I like to walk, so when I arrived I parked next to the unopened parking garage. Where, I soon found out, it seems a man had just fallen to his death from one of the upper, unfinished, levels —”

“Oh that’s horrible!”

That seemed genuine; it’s hard to fake surprise and sound concerned.

“Being a writer ever in search of interesting tidbits, I stopped to listen in.”

“What did you learn?”

“First item: no scream. Not nobody heard a scream, but actually confirmed he didn’t scream as he fell—a groundskeeper witnessed the fall—said it looked like a mannequin, not a fully conscious man who decided to jump.”

“Any other witnesses?”

“Not of the fall, but another employee said they saw a woman—a very blonde-haired woman—wearing a dark jacket, dark glasses, and a dark hat, coming out of the garage just a few minutes later.”

“Unusual, but maybe just a guest out for a walk. Has anyone located a woman matching that description?”

Was that a pointed question? A defiant look? Her hair was very much non-blonde. Should he bring up the topic of wigs?

Since he had hesitated with his answer, she continued. “So, in the meantime, you’ve assumed the amateur sleuth role. What other evidence do you have? And by the way, it’s just as likely to have been an accident, isn’t it? Elderly man uses deserted parking garage for a bit of a strenuous morning walk, clutches his chest, stumbles to a partially built wall for support, slips and goes over as he passes out...”

“I never said he was an elderly man.”

“No, I think you did,” she disagreed. “Where else would I have gotten that detail from?”

Now that was interesting. As a writer, he considered himself careful with words, both written and verbal. He also prided himself on a good memory, and felt sure he had not mentioned age.

“Perhaps I did,” he smiled. “Anyway, there’s now been another.”

“What—another accident?”

“No. Death. This one was definitely not accidental. Overnight guest found shot to death in his room.”

“I see,” she said. “Suicide or definitely murder?”

“Difficult to imagine shooting oneself in the back of the head, so I think murder is the safe bet.”

“Agreed. But for this to be a proper mystery don’t the two men have to be tied together somehow?”

“They were. They both came from a small town about three

hours from here. Marsdale, Pennsylvania.”

“Unusual, but not improbable, I would think. People have to come from somewhere, and two men from a small town at the same place is just as likely coincidence.”

“Except, it’s not two, there are at least three rather prominent members of Marsdale here today.”

“The third man...” she mused, “has he been murdered as well?”

“Not yet. At least I don’t think I have.”

She wondered: should I tell him I’m from Marsdale?

She had moved away before her teen years, so it was unlikely he recognized her, but if he did, and she didn’t say anything....

“How were the two victims tied together?” she asked, deciding it was best to find out how much he knew, or thought he knew.

“The first was a judge. Over the years he’s been investigated more than once, but nothing has ever stuck. Rumor has it he was in the pocket of the mob—or what passes for the mob in my particular small town. He was the judge known to always make rulings in favor of a few other important people.”

“For your mob guy. So who was the second victim?”

“Ran a construction outfit, also tied by rumors to the mob with the usual stuff. One of the town jokes has always been if someone goes missing, take a look and see where Schiappa Brothers just put in a foundation.”

“Lots of people go missing in Marsdale?”

“A few. It’s a small town, but it’s got a private university there, so the population fluctuates on schedule. Plus, with all the fracking in the area, lots of temporary crews in and out, sometimes bringing their family along, sometimes not.”

“So we have a crooked judge, and a mobbed up cement mixer guy. How cliché. So how are you tied to these men?” she asked.

“I’m not, except by being from Marsdale.”

“So you shouldn’t have anything to worry about, should you?”

“You tell me,” he answered, leaning forward in his chair. “I don’t think I do. I’m a writer who teaches part time at a community college, unmarried, no close relatives, the only excitement I have is fictional, or outings to decent places to eat. I had hoped to enjoy a

decent meal at what is supposed to be a pretty good restaurant—I even have a coupon for a free dessert. That’s where I would be right now if I hadn’t run into two murders—”

“One murder; the first could have been an accident,” she interrupted.

His easy manner completely disappeared; he shook his head, looked at her with a very direct, very knowing stare.

“Two murders. Will there be a third?”

She laughed, smiled, tried to put him off. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because when you sat down and opened your bag to pull out your book, you accidentally pulled a bit of a maid’s uniform out, before stuffing it back in—”

“You caught me—I work here.”

“There’s something about a panicked look that’s hard to disguise, don’t you think?”

“Such an imagination; you must be a good writer.”

He leaned back. “I watched you for a good while...you never once made any motion that looked like you were actually reading anything, but you definitely alert...watchful.”

“Looking for my ride,” she smiled, glancing at her watch.

“But why didn’t you actually read?”

“Book’s not that good, my mind was elsewhere. I think you just stopped by to flirt. Since we’re playing games about why did she do this, why didn’t he do that...if you were convinced I was a murderer, why come talk to me? Alone.”

She leaned over, made sure her bag was snapped closed, then looked back to see his response.

“Well? Are you going to tell me the police will be here any minute. I’m afraid I can’t wait.” The lobby clock began to strike 11, followed by the explosion she had been expecting.

Loud noises attract attention, make people move, look to where the noise came from, evaluate whether to stay or run. Later, when he thought more clearly, he wouldn’t be so hard on himself about his reaction, which had been to spring to his feet and turn to look out the large window that graced this end of the lobby. In the parking

lot something was smoking and burning...a car? A car bomb?

Only then did he add it up—she had been waiting—the clock had just begun to chime—she therefore knew.

When he turned, he of course found no sign of her, nor her bag.

“Now what the hell do I do?” he said out loud.

Go find out exactly who it was from Marsdale that had been sitting in that car, he suspected.

Three down, one to go—the dangerous one.

She continued changing back into the housekeeping uniform, playing things out in her mind. This next part had always been impossible to plan, made worse now that there was a damned curious writer to worry about, one that could sound the alarm if he saw her again, even in her housekeeping disguise, blonde wig back on, tied again into a ponytail. Had the staff noticed anyone? New girl, with a blonde ponytail. Sure, they'd eventually find the wig, but by then she'd have time to escape.

Well, maybe. Depends on what the next part took.

Would Sheriff Thompson still be in his room? Even better would be if he had sent his two bodyguard deputies to see what was going on. No matter how much advantage surprise might give her, three against one were odds she'd rather not face.

She straightened her uniform, put the pass key she'd borrowed in the front pocket, then patted the name tag on the front—Melissa. Then she slipped the gun into the stack of neatly folded towels she had waiting.

Opening the door and looking out, she found the corridor empty. Deep breath in, let it out slowly, calm the body, focus the mind.

Showtime.

Dr. R. Ackroyd, chief of staff at the Marsdale Mental Health Center. The name didn't surprise him. In fact, it made perfect sense.

Twenty years? Twenty-five? That nasty business with Brett Schiappa being accused of rape, of the brutal rape, of an underage

girl...Melinda? Melody? His father—the one that had been found shot to death—had gotten him out from under it, just like everyone had known he would. Wouldn't swear to it, but I bet a little research will show Judge Alberici had been presiding.

Things had died down, until the story broke that the young lady in question had committed suicide. If memory served, she had attempted to hang herself at home, been institutionalized, and had managed to finish the act even while on suicide watch.

Gee, I wonder what mental health care facility she'd been at?

He shook his head. There had also been a grieving mother, a photo from the funeral that had run in the local paper, he now recalled.

A photo that had also included the much younger sister.

Not in his room, nor the adjoining rooms, either.

This had always been the most likely ending; a search throughout the hotel for him, a race against time, because even someone as dumb as Sheriff Thompson would put one and two and three together to know that he was number four. Coward that he was, once he did, he would be gone.

She opened the stairwell door onto the back end of the lobby, eyes searching for at least one brown uniform, possibly three. She almost stumbled when saw him, realized he was alone, standing off to the side, at the entrance to the corridor that led to the laundry area. That made sense. Out of the way, his back against the wall. His hand rested on the butt of his gun.

She couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. She could walk right by him, just another nobody. Staff hurrying about her business, no possible threat.

He found him, as expected, standing off to the side. Was Sheriff Thompson next on the list? Or were there going to be others before his turn? The D.A.? No, he'd tried to prosecute, had been angry at the judge.

More importantly, should he warn the Sheriff?

A tall but thin man for all the power he wielded—dwarfed by the two muscle-bound deputies in front of him. There was some

nodding and a wave of the hand by the sheriff, and the two left him. The sheriff then unsnapped the strap that held his gun in its holster, put his hand on the butt, ready to draw it.

Perhaps now was not a good time to approach him.

From the corner of his eye, he caught movement, turned to see a maid approaching from the other side, her head down, holding a stack of folded towels, on her way to the laundry.

Why is she taking clean towels to the laundry?

He barely gave her a glance, lost all interest in her once he saw she was just a member of the housekeeping staff. Making it was almost too easy for her to quietly turn, let the towels fall to the floor as she gripped the gun, took aim at the back of his head.

One shot. Just like before, back of the neck, base of the brain—by necessity following an upward trajectory. He went down immediately. Standing over him, she added two more for good measure. Even with a small calibre, the hollow points would do their job.

Still, the sound echoing off the walls of the corridor deafened her.

She looked up and saw the writer-guy looking at her.

He was mouthing something her ears couldn't currently hear above the ringing.

As a writer, one of the tropes he relied upon was taking a character and putting them in an unexpected situation, seeing how they reacted. He had never expected to have it happen to him, and his response surprised him.

“Run! Drop the gun and run!”

She didn't move.

Screaming and the thunder of running feet behind him, but when he turned to look, he saw only confusion; the echoing of the shots in the cavernous lobby made it impossible for anyone to know where they had come from. Mostly everyone was running away, towards the exits. No one even seemed to be looking their way.

He moved to her, took the gun from her hand. She let him, her



shoulders sagging. She looked up at his face.

Nice eyes, she thought. She wondered why she hadn't noticed them before.

"I understand," he told her. "Go! I'll cover for you."

He pushed her gently, trying to start her on her way. The deputies would be back any second, checking on their master.

"Go!"

This time, she seemed to understand, and she smiled, then turned and ran into the laundry area.

The writer released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Before turning back, he pulled out his shirt-tail and used it to wipe the gun clean, then let it drop to the floor.

Damn this would be a good story. Shame I can never be the one to write it.

## The Last Second

by Adela Torres

*As the blade plunges  
Coldly my brain starts solving  
My sudden murder*

The knife enters my lung from behind.

“Left-handed,” I think, even before the pain registers and my brain starts sending muddled signals of danger and fighting and fleeing. Someone, evidently not me, tries to scream. The air goes out the wrong way and the sound turns into a strange, hissing gurgle.

I need to think about this.

Professor Accardi is left-handed, I think. So is Troy Gerson. I don't know about Dr. Hong. Dr. Mencken, who is right-handed, could be smart enough to fake a left-handed stabbing.

But today is Wednesday: Mencken would not murder me on a Wednesday. It would be too complicated to explain why she is not at the Flesher Grant Committee Meeting. The Flesher Grant is her baby.

The motive is obvious and should be to everyone, even the police: I had announced my decision to cut off the money from the Sanderson Trust, which would jeopardise, if not outright kill, many current projects. Mainly Gerson's, Mencken's, Accardi's and Hong's.

Motive established, good. That leaves means and opportunity. Even as the blood starts pooling inside my chest cavity and I try, vainly, to turn around and see my murderer's face, I think about means.

The cold from the second stab wound mingles with the pain from the first. My hands become wet with my own blood as I try, instinctively, to fight the arm that keeps me pinned against the murderer. Useless task, I know, but we're, after all, animals. We fight

to survive even if the brain has other priorities.

Why stabbing, I think. Messy, difficult, risky. Much better to try and run me over with a car, or throw me off a window perhaps. This smells of impulse more than cold premeditation. I find it is impossible to deduce the kind of murder weapon from the feeling of it in my back, even if I had more time to think about it. Which I don't.

First off, Troy Gerson or Elio Accardi are the ones who would have easy access to blades. Gerson works in the Archaeology Department, and I have a very vivid vision of the long, messy aisles in his basement department, chock-full of different iron, bronze and even stone sharp weapons. Hell, if he is quick enough he can lose the weapon again amongst the bric-à-brac and God knows if the police would find it soon enough, or at all.

And Accardi is a sucker for old-fashioned academia aesthetics: he loves mahogany desks, ink blotters, fountain pens, leather bound books, all that shit. *And* he keeps a beautiful silver and steel letter-opener in his desk, visible for all to see. I have personally seen how sharp it is. Of course, if Accardi was going to kill me, using his own letter-opener would be either supremely stupid or an impulsive move. My current hypothesis is 'impulse', so I work with that as the rapid drop in blood pressure makes me dizzy.

If the murder weapon turns out to be Accardi's letter opener he'd immediately become the prime suspect, as he's left-handed. How would he try to direct suspicion away from himself? Well, he's friends with Hong. Maybe he'd say that Hong stole the letter opener from him and stabbed me.

My body is sending clear signals that I have no time to check complementary details like whether the murderer wears gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints. I need another way to disprove my current hypothesis.

Then it suddenly hits me, along with a wave of nausea brought by the pain as I feel my legs give way: Hong is not in campus today. She is at a biochemistry conference in Boston. Her presentation was being streamed. So Accardi can't pin my murder on her. Good, I thought. We're getting somewhere. I feel cold now. I also feel

there is something I'm missing, apart from pint after pint of blood.

Come on, keep track: Accardi. He's not an idiot. Among them all, he's the one less affected by the withdrawing of funds, since he came with a grant from his own University in Italy. And he is the meticulous type: even if he wanted to kill me, he'd plan something subtle and clever. He wouldn't use his own letter opener. It can't be Accardi.

And what if the letter opener is not the murder weapon? I *need* to know. Too much rests upon that particular point. I have too little data and too little time. This is not going well.

The third, final, and entirely unnecessary strike hits my rib and bounces off.

This one *really* hurts. I must have grunted or made some noise through the pierced lung, or the useless throat; I don't know which. Then I hear a noise, the clear ringing of metal on hardwood. The ringing of a sharp, silver-handled, steel-blade letter opener. It must have escaped the murderer's grip, slick with my blood, when it hits the rib.

Exactly what I need.

Mencken and Hong have solid alibis. The fact that I'm being stabbed by Accardi's blade gives me the final piece, since Accardi's profile doesn't fit this manner of murder.

It's Gerson.

It fits as well. Gerson is smart, able to think fast in a pinch: the kind of man who'd try to redirect suspicions from himself by using a weapon that would point clearly in another direction. But not a man subtle enough to work through the immediate implications.

This gives me a name but precious little else. I cannot shout. I cannot fight. I already feel myself falling. Last chance. There must be something I can *do*.

He got me as I was getting in my office. There are all kinds of books here. I contort muscles that are not functioning well and I put all I have left on making the shelves come into focus.

There. *Principles of Archaeology*. By Dr. Troy Gerson.

I don't hear myself hitting the ground. I don't know if I've done

it. I hope I have.

I realise something else before everything goes dark, something tinged with urgency and a surprisingly sharp sadness.

Wait.

Wait, I'm being

I'm being murdered

I don't want to d

‘Well, her back was turned,’ the constable said. ‘She probably didn't even know who hit her.’

‘Isn't her position a bit odd?’

‘I couldn't say, inspector. Probably not. Death throes and all that. Why?’

‘Well, there's a splatter of blood that doesn't fit the rest. It goes toward that shelf. It looks, I don't know, deliberate. See how the blood splattered towards a very specific point, as if thrown there deliberately?’

The inspector's gaze goes from the letter opener, to the dead woman's bloodied hand, and finally to the shelf.

“Let me see that book.”

## Ozymandias

by Gil Rognstad

I first saw them the summer I turned nine.

I was at the lake with my family. It was the summer my parents split up. We were on a thin strip of mud along the shore that served as a ‘beach’. My parents were arguing.

As my father scoffed at my mother and turned away from her, I saw it. It was huge—at least five times the size of my father and more than twice his height. It was sticking out of his back. It was hideous and nearly transparent. I almost ran away screaming, but I stayed put. I wasn’t the kind of girl who freaked out when she saw a spider. I told myself it couldn’t be real.

The glittery giant was hunched over with its head and an arm buried in my dad’s body. It was silly and scary at the same time. I blinked and went a little closer to see if the illusion would disappear. It didn’t.

I couldn’t believe that my dad didn’t notice the a giant hanging out of him, but he clearly didn’t.

Once I saw the first one, I couldn’t *not* see them. It was like the 3D pattern pictures my brother always showed me and teased me about. I couldn’t see them for the longest time—but once I finally saw one, the rest weren’t hard at all.

I didn’t want to see these monstrosities, though. I saw more of them before we left the lake. I saw them everywhere on the drive home. Every grown-up seemed to have one sticking out of them. They were like giant sparkly ghosts that no one could see but me.

They weren’t ghosts, though. They were creatures of some kind.

I hadn’t seen them do anything scary or violent, though. I decided to study them and figure out what they were.

September came and we went back to school. I’ve never liked school. Don’t get me wrong—I love learning. I’ve always read

everything I could get my hands on, and I love figuring out how things work. I just hated school as a *place*. It wasn't designed for learning things. I mean, they tell you it is, and at first you believe them, but it's not, really.

Now that I saw giant beings sticking out of everyone, I formed a theory about Why Things Suck (including school): those beings were the ones really running everything. They wore people like too-small hand puppets and rode them around in the world making them do things.

I noticed that none of the kids at school had giant beings in them. No one my age had them. Another data point...

I started a notebook and kept track of everything I observed about them.

Most high school kids had the creatures. Could they only latch onto people somewhere between the ages of nine and sixteen? I didn't have enough information. I had to keep watching and learning. I was determined to solve this mystery—hopefully before I got to whatever age might turn me into one of them.

I was eleven when one of them saw me.

I didn't need a babysitter anymore by then. I was glad for that because my babysitter Gemma had recently sprouted one of the horrific beings and I couldn't stand to be around her.

Gemma did not grow a small bud of a creature that grew into a giant being. It was not like a pea plant that sprouted and grew in a Science class project. The huge creature was not there one day, and was hanging out of her the next.

This raised more questions than it answered. Did they float around looking for humans that didn't already have them? If so, why hadn't I ever seen a giant shimmery thing by itself? Maybe they came from invisible seeds, and if you breathed one in it would sprout so quickly that you'd have a giant hanging out of you by the next morning. That seemed unlikely, but wasn't all of this insane to begin with?

I was glad when my dad said I didn't need a babysitter anymore. But that's how I ended up at the grocery store alone the first time one of them saw me...

My dad was on a date or something. I should have been at home not answering the door and not going anywhere. I decided that I was mature now, though, and that I could pop out to the store if I was in the mood for popcorn. And I was.

It felt weird to be at the store at night. I felt an eerie tingle in my spine as I walked among them in the store. In a hurry to get what I needed and get out of there, I walked around a display of some kind and almost ran into an old man. He was standing at the end of the aisle looking vacantly into space. Was he trying to decide which aisle to head down next? I said, "Sorry...excuse me," as I stepped around him.

That's when it happened. The giant creature sticking out of the old man's back convulsed strangely and...hunched up a bit. It still had a limb or two embedded in the old man, but its head (if that's what it was) had slipped out. The head-thing turned towards me. A wave of icy cold wash over me.

I had never seen one of their...whatever they had for faces. I almost panicked. Did it know that I could see it? None of them had ever noticed me before—or had noticed me noticing them. A million thoughts flashed through my head. I decided it would be best to just keep walking as if nothing strange had happened. I walked past the old man into the snacks aisle as casually as I would have done on any other day. I still don't know how I did it.

I found the popcorn shelf. As I pretended to look for my favorite brand I tried to keep an eye on the old man. The giant thing dislodged itself from the old man entirely and stood up to its full height. Its head (if that's what it was) was far above the tops of the store shelves. It moved towards me. The old man finally made his decision and walked away—thingless.

I desperately hoped that it would lumber past me, but I wasn't that lucky. It wanted a closer look at me. It walked right up to me and crouched down next to me. I ignored it, chewing on my lower lip and studying the different kinds of popcorn. As far as I could tell, it had no reason to think I was aware of it. I chose my popcorn and casually walked away from the creature towards the checkout area.

I felt it following me. I wanted to scream for help. I wanted to



throw the popcorn down and run home. My body wanted to do those things, I mean. My brain told me to stay calm and not give it any reasons to think I had noticed it.

Then I felt it touch me. Or...*try* to touch me, maybe. It must have reached for me with one of its appendages and...let it brush through my body. I hadn't seen it coming, of course, but a feeling hit me like a cold wave of sickness. I joined the queue at the checkout area as if nothing was wrong, but as the thing's...arm?...went through me my entire body pulsed with disgust. I almost vomited. I only managed to keep control of myself because the touch of the thing was so brief.

A few seconds later I sensed that it was no longer behind me. I dropped the popcorn onto the pad and told the checkout station my dad's bankcode. I turned and looked back down the snack aisle. The thing was lumbering around turning this way and that—probably looking for the old man. I was safe.

After that, I knew that I had to change my ways. I had to keep investigating them and trying to learn what they were, but I now knew that I could attract their attention. Had the creature in the store wanted to leave the old man and find a new...host? Shell? Maybe I hadn't been old enough—or the kind of 'shell' that particular beast preferred.

Whatever the reason for my narrow escape, I now knew that they could cast off an old shell and move into a new one. I couldn't just openly investigate them anymore. I had to be careful not to look at any of them too obviously. I couldn't let any adult see what I was up to, because the creature inside them would be alerted that I was onto them.

I realized that I shouldn't write down anything about my investigations. If my father went snooping around in my room and found my notes, the thing that...inhabited him would know that I knew about them. I read all of my notes three times and burned my notebooks.

By the time I turned twelve, I was truly alone. No one else seemed to be aware of the creatures. I decided that I'd have to stay alone if I was going to survive. I had to find a way to make

myself...unavailable to the beasts before I grew old enough to be taken as a shell.

I left home and never looked back.

It's not as difficult to live apart from the rest of humanity as you might think. It's not difficult to educate yourself, either. Both are easy if you know how to manipulate the 'net. That was the first thing I taught myself after I set out on my own.

A twelve-year-old girl traveling alone attracts attention, from skeevey males who see you as 'easy pickings', and from nosy Mrs. Grundys who are 'very concerned that I don't see your parents anywhere nearby'. The males were easy to avoid or neutralize; they didn't use much of their grey matter. The Mrs. Grundys were far worse. They had to be spotted from a distance and avoided at all costs.

I didn't stay twelve forever, though. I spent that year learning how to work online without being detected, and I found that I had a real knack for it. The better my tech skills got, the more I learned about the creatures—and how to evade them.

Shortly before my thirteenth birthday, I went into hiding in Earnest.

By then I had several of my own bankcodes—all in fake names and none of them traceable. This meant I could afford the equipment I needed. I found the perfect 'home base': Earnest, Kansas. Don't bother looking it up; it doesn't exist. Not since 1889, anyway. Now it's Earnest, Kansas, again—just for me; Population: 1.

I built a home for myself there. It's well concealed on the edge of a forest—invisible from the air. I call it the Grove.

I continued educating myself. By the time I was fifteen I had degrees in Computer Science, Biology with a Pre-med focus, Anthropology, Psychology, Mathematics, and—just to keep things balanced—Art History. And I was just getting started.

I realized that I'd only be able to solve the mystery of the giant Goons with help, so I became an expert in Artificial Intelligence. I got access to massive computing resources and got to work building an untraceable research partner.

“Miranda,” I asked. “How’s the weather today?”

“You ask me that every day,” Miranda said. “And I tell you nearly the same thing every day.”

“I like to hear it, though.”

“Fine,” she said with a sigh. “It’ll be sunny. Breezy. Eighty percent chance of you being awesome.”

“Only eighty?”

“Ask me later in the day for a more precise forecast.”

You might think that I created Miranda simply to have someone to talk to. You’d be about twenty percent correct.

The other eighty percent was far more important: She was helping me make progress on the mystery of the strange beings. My days of hiding or burning notebooks were far behind me.

“Inter-dimensional beings,” Miranda said one morning as I weeded the patch of land I called my ‘garden’. I always kept my implant tuned to her encrypted frequency.

“We know that,” I said as I continued hoeing. “That was one of the first things we figured out. Are you reviewing old data or something?”

“I mean humans,” Miranda clarified. “I’ve processed more data, and I can now say with ninety seven percent certainty that adult humans are as inter-dimensional as the Others are. They just don’t know it. Their senses are...stunted. They only observe, sense, and process information relayed to their minds by their meat parts.”

“The parts that exist in the familiar three dimensions!”

“Yes,” Miranda went on. “The rest...sticks out in other dimensions. Not when they are young, though. There’s a branching that takes place around the teen years. Once the branching happens, the Others sense them and move in to harvest them for their use.”

At the word ‘harvest’ I almost threw up my breakfast. “So they *are* like hermit crabs.”

“And humans are their shells,” Miranda confirmed. “The Others are from outside this ‘neighborhood’ of existence. They did not evolve to use humans as shells, which is why they don’t fit into

them well.”

“So they came from another planet?”

“More likely another galaxy—or a distant arm of this one. Someplace with a very different environment.”

“So they...invaded earth...” I said.

“In the remote past, yes. I believe they did.”

“I have calculated the necessary type and amount of energy that is likely to displace or irritate the Others,” Miranda reported.

She gave me the details on how we could make a giant Goon so uncomfortable that they would probably flee—not just the area, but the body they were occupying. Miranda said they might flee all the way to some other dimension where the energy wasn’t frying whatever they had for nerve endings.

“So it’s like a sonic device that keeps rats out of the house?”

“Yes,” Miranda said. “Like that. But bigger.”

You can’t test a GoonZapper (trademark, patent pending, my idea—well, technically Miranda’s) without a Goon. I *had* to test the device, but I didn’t like the idea of getting close to one. I was the only adult ‘shell’ on the planet that wasn’t already taken. It would be like dangling a bloody limb over the side of a boat in shark-infested waters.

“Could we set it up like an antipersonnel mine or something and watch from a distance?” I asked.

“Yes,” Miranda said. “Good idea.”

The test worked! I hiked to a nearby town, left the device on a park bench, and concealed myself some distance away. When someone picked it up to see what it was...boom!

Not ‘boom’ exactly. More like ‘frzz-tzz-rzz’ as specific frequencies of energy flashed from it. To a human it was just a pink-lavender light that flashed for ten seconds as the device buzzed quietly. They wouldn’t sense the firestorm of energy around them—but a Goon would feel it.

And feel it they did. Three seconds after a woman picked up the device and activated it, several nearby Goons collapsed out of

phase (or whatever Miranda called it) and disappeared.

Their former humans stood stunned for a few seconds and then went back to whatever they had been doing. I watched them for a while. Their Goons never came back and they seemed normal in every way.

“Everything in place?” I asked Miranda. I don’t know why I asked. She never missed details.

“Ready,” Miranda said. “Once you tell me to activate it, the GoonZapper Protocol—are you sure you want to keep using that name?”

“Yes,” I said. “Go on.”

“The GoonZapper Protocol will be triggered on every broadcast method available to me in every part of the world. It will repeat every five seconds for three days. Any Goon-infested person who looks at or comes anywhere near a screen or pad of any kind during that time will be—what’s the word you prefer?”

“Cleansed,” I said.

“Good choice. I thought you’d stick with ‘de-Gooned.’”

“Either one is great. Okay. Activate the protocol.”

My first month back among humanity was a huge adjustment. Everyone seemed so normal, and I felt like a fish out of water. I had lived alone for so many years...

Then things started getting weird. Everything started to break down.

Everything.

The whole world is in a downward spiral. They’ve started killing each other. Wars are everywhere. The ones that aren’t killing each other are getting sick and dying off by the millions.

Humanity is dying. I think I sent away the things that lifted a bunch of useless monkey-brains out of the mud and enabled them to create human civilization. I think I sent our souls away.

Was I the only human who never had a Soul? Probably. What if I had let a Soul inhabit me? I think this nightmare would have been avoided.

Where did they go? Can I find a way to call them back? Or are they too far away, looking for new worlds to create?

I ruined everything.

When you visit this planet—whoever you are—someday eons from now, I hope you decipher these notes I've left in Minerva.

Remember me—the foolish girl who chose the wrong path for her world.

*My name was Ozymandias, girl of Earth;  
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of this colossal ball, boundless and bare  
The lone and level stars stretch far away.*

## **A Question on Words**

*by K.R.Malec*

Oh, how I wonder,  
why we drive on parkways  
and park in driveways?

## **Kaffy** *by Judy Ward*

Some while after the fall — the collapse of civilization as we know it — there was a small village beginning to recover out near the sea shore. Which sea doesn't matter, names were not important anymore. The Sea was the sea.

Signs of a life had begun to revive — not a lot, but enough. Years had passed and ‘wanderers’ had found others and tried to set-up some semblance of communities again. Down near the shore, a group of them began to restore what was once a small village out of the rubble. There were a few straggling villagers who’d survived and hovered close-by. They now shared what they had, helping one another.

Old man Kaffy had lived outside the village most of his life before the Fall. After the calamity, he’d survived in the cellar dug-out, adjacent to his basement where he’d stored everything that mattered to him — in the end — not just supplies but all the books he’d collected in his lifetime ... a great many.

Some of the Wanderers, the stronger, younger ones lent a hand to help reconstruct the old man’s cottage as best they could. For their help — constructing a few rooms on the old foundation, he was thankful, but grateful when they were all gone and he was mercifully alone once again. Old as he was, he was typically set in his ways and obsessive in his needs. The basement had always been his haven, his entire adult life — which was some long time.

Kaffy, the only name anyone knew him by, was a loner, a hermit actually. He didn’t need people that much, he found them uninteresting, he mostly avoided them as a matter of fact. He needed very little in his life. Though, a half-pint at the local pub served him well, once in a while, a habit from 30 years before the Fall. Thank goodness for the grains and plants for fermenting — the pub was back in business.

But the rest of Kaffy’s days were spent, thankfully, alone.



Kaffy was a troubled soul before the Fall, suffering from anxiety, dread about the human condition — the state of the world. His obsession was the mystery of all mysteries: *What is the meaning of Life? Why are we here?*

He'd spent his lifetime searching. In his youth, he'd studied in the libraries of all the major universities on the continent, reading the scholars, historians, and philosophers — finding no answers. The whole picture of humanity was surreal, oppressive even.

*Absolutely absurd*, Kaffy thought. *Man's meaningless life in a meaningless world.*

After the Fall, he was more anxious, neurotic and obsessive than ever, struck by the sheer lack of reason for the devastation. And so he had decided *life had no meaning and then you die*. The greatest mystery — the meaning of life — simply ended in death, unavoidably and mostly without warning. Evolution! Why would a species develop consciousness only to face death!

Kaffy's writing about the meaning of Life was compulsive, something he just had to do. And though he never seemed to get anywhere, he could never stop trying. It was an uncontrollable passion, not unlike a treasure hunt, the mystery lured him on, searching. His insatiable curiosity motivated him.

In the darkest hour of night, old Kaffy sat stooped over his pages, obsessively writing by candlelight as he had all his sad angst ridden life. On this particular night, however, as he wrote into the wee hours, he began to feel a *presence*, a feeling of something or someone nearby. In the dark of night, in his cellar, he believed this might not be a good thing. So he chose to ignore it and continued to write, never raising his head. Writing his latest thoughts about Meaning though he became more increasingly distracted. Still, it could be a figment of his imagination. Surely if something or someone was there, it was probably supernatural. After all, there must be forces beyond his understanding — he was pretty sure.

But uncomfortable now and annoyed, he considered, 'If it is a supernatural being, chances are I'm about to die. After all, how often does a *supernatural presence* visit you in the middle of the night?'

"How long must I wait before you acknowledge me?" said a beautiful voice.

Kaffy did not look up but said, "Until I truly believe you are there. I do not know why you would be there. I might write with my pen *'What could possibly be the meaning of such a visitation?'* But like everything else in my life-long inquiries, I'd get no answers. I've never been acknowledged before."

"I must admit you have a point. You've been persistent," the voice said.

Kaffy, impressed, went on writing without hesitation. Obviously here was a entity with answers, but would he share them? He continued to ignore the Presence.

Finally, the visitor spoke again, "Your time is up, Kaffy."

Kaffy's pen faltered. He didn't move — though — he asked "You've come to tell me this? I thought it would just happen unexpectedly." He took a long deep breath, still not looking up. "And do I have any choice in this matter?" he bravely challenged.

"You do."

Kaffy sat back. "You're not serious."

"I am," the angel said.

He turned and looked directly at an absolutely beatific angelic vision — no white robes or blinding light, but a being of such peace — such Presence — he was momentarily swept-up as he beheld him, and could not look away. A breeze of fresh air passed through him leaving — momentarily, a feeling of complete peace.

Getting control of himself, though, Kaffy being Kaffy dared further. "You mean there is such a thing as a second chance? That's surprising, you know, since I don't remember choosing or accepting this meaningless first chance! Nor do I have the least idea what you're doing here."

"Now, Kaffy, let's not go too far."

"Oh yes let's, for just a minute! Do I get to know why I'm here in the first place, why my reality is this empty existence?" He turned up his palms.

"Maybe," the angel replied.

"That's your answer? *Maybe?*"

The angel sighed. "What do you expect, Kaffy?"

“Ahhhh. What do I expect? He paused. I don't know what I expect. I've been working on this question my whole life — a short time to you maybe — but it's *my entire* life. I'm not sure of anything — especially the meaning of life. And now, facing my mortality here still you have no reveal. And you give me *Maybe?*!”

“You have a very short time, Kaffy. Look up from your writing, put your books away — leave this basement — go out into the world.”

Kaffy was non-plussed. “You're kidding right?”

“Find your answers, Kaffy. It's time. Find hope, faith, meaning.”

Kaffy dropped his pen.

When he woke in the morning, Kaffy was disoriented and shaken. *Now that was disturbing*, he thought. *I must have drifted off to sleep*. He had a wild dream of a visitation — from an angel, no less. He didn't even believe in angels! All he could think about was heading over to the pub for a pint to clear his head.

Trying to lose himself in his brew, Kaffy avoided the eyes of the few regulars and a stranger already there, sitting in the corner.

Sabina the barmaid looked askance at him after his second pint. *Old Kaffy*, she thought, *day by day becoming a fixture on a stool that's going no-where. Like this whole village, stuck in time. No one going no where.* Sabina often dreamed about what it must have been like being in the world before the Fall. She was only a thought in her mother's mind, back then. *At least these old guys lived in the Before Time when the world was young. Something I'll never know. Me, I'm just stuck here with the barnacles of the past.*

A little while later, Kaffy was still trying to shake off his uneasiness about his visitation or dream or whatever. Woodard the old sailor came in, sat a few seats down from him. Kaffy nodded, raised his mug, thinking to maybe say something, to get the nightmare out of his head, but the old salt began talking first.

“In my youth, I sailed every day with my father who taught me how to be a true sailor. I could build my own boat, even then. When I was grown, still a young man, I sailed on navy ships around the world, then merchant vessels supplying every major port.”

Kaffy listened, thankful for the distraction. Then he asked

without really thinking, “What will you do now?”

The old guy looked at him quizzically, surprised. Kaffy had never spoken to him directly before. Always before, the sailor had talked. Kaffy had never responded, at least not more than a nod.

“What will I do now?” he repeated the question. “Not much. Help repair a few structures here in the village. Life’s at a standstill. Our world is gone, old man.”

“You’re a builder of boats. You’re still here. What about the fish?” Kaffy asked.

“Funny you should ask about that. I was out on the headlands, just this week and I saw a gull. First gull I’ve seen since the Fall. It dove in the water, too, like there might be something there.” He shook his head. “Like a dream. I thought I’d imagined it.” He paused. “You don’t think the fish are coming back, do you?”

There was silence between them, each of them thinking their own thoughts. The old sailor said, “I think I’ll go back out on the headlands today, see what I can see.”

Sabina ran a cleaning rag down the bar, picked up the old tin cup. She looked out of the corner of her eye at Kaffy, sitting alone again. *Strange old man*, she thought, *I didn’t even know he could talk*.

Kaffy’s mind was miles away now, wondering. He thought of Woodard, the old sailor, finding there were fish again and building that boat, paddling out to sea, bringing in his catch of the day. He’d share that catch with the other villagers. Soon he’d be trading fish for other goods. Then others would hire him to build boats for them. *Some things could change*. Some things could be good again.

Kaffy looked up again. The young stranger he’d noticed earlier now sat next to him at the bar. The man was watching him. Remembering his strange visitation the night before, Kaffy shivered uncomfortably.

“Who *are* you?” the stranger asked.

“Who *are you?*” Kaffy returned, a little too loudly.

“Please forgive me, I’m only a wanderer, passing through.”

Kaffy relaxed, realizing he was just a little jumpy. “Yes, yes, I’m Kaffy,” he responded. “You must not take offense. I’ve had unnerving encounters with strangers recently, I’m a little fidgety.”

From down the bar, Sabina observed this encounter. She hummed a little tune, ran the cloth up the bar and stopped in front of the stranger with her eyebrows raised as if to ask if he wanted something.

“Just water please,” he responded. The stranger went on, “I overheard your conversation with the seaman. Are you a Seer?”

This made Kaffy burst out laughing, unexpectedly — even to himself. “Son, I am a lot of things, but one thing’s for sure, I am not a Seer.”

“I heard you speak Wisdom to the fisherman. I was wondering if we could talk.”

Kaffy sized the young man up a little and didn't feel threatened. It might be interesting to have a conversation with a Wanderer. He hadn't spoken to a stranger since forever — or last night. “Where are you from?” he asked the young man.

“Over the mountain.”

“What mountain?”

“The mountain up that road.” The young man pointed the direction away from the sea.

“Don't you know the name for that mountain?”

“I do not. Before that I crossed many mountains farther away. I know no names for those either. Names are gone.”

Sabina, behind the bar, listened very close to this conversation, Kaffy noted. He continued talking with the Stranger within Sabina's hearing.

“That mountain, in the direction you pointed, was called *Montserrat* — back when — before the Fall. And it still is *Montserrat*, a beloved mountain,” he stated with conviction.

“*Mont-ser-rat*,” the stranger repeated. “It is a lovely name. I shall call it by this name from now on.”

“Where are you headed, Wanderer?”

“Nowhere in particular. I am looking to travel and learn everything I can. I am untaught, looking to teach myself. Hoping to find Truth.”

Kaffy's eyebrows raised, “Truth. Ahhh, a treasure hunter are you? You'll be needing maps I imagine.”

“Maps, Sir? Maps — like books — have disappeared from the

world. I shall need to learn from wandering, or so said Father Benedict.”

Kaffy was startled. “You know Father Benedict of Montserrat Abbey?”

“I’m sorry, no I did not know him. While I was on the mountain — Montserrat — I only helped him to his cave. He was gravely ill. He pointed me in this direction. He said, “*Son, go to the sea and wander around the edge of the world from there.*” And he said “*a man could learn all there is to know now, wandering.*”

Kaffy smiled at Father Benedict’s Truth, but was disheartened to hear the news of his illness. He rose from his stool. “Young man, I have somewhere to be right now. I’d visit a little more with you but I must be off. If you can meet me here tomorrow, I may have something of interest for you.”

With that they parted and Kaffy was off on an errand — an errand of fate — *atonement maybe.*

Walking faster than he’d walked in years, Kaffy headed to his little cottage, down into his basement. He stood in the center of this place that had been the center of his life. He reached for and touched every text he could lay his hands on, one at a time. He’d pick one up and read the title, always familiar, then he’d put it back down. He loved the feel of those books, knew them by heart, had written about them all —treasures of his lifetime! This had been his obsession. He was done reading!

Kaffy sat once more at his writing desk, lit his candle and wrote:

To the young man from Montserrat ...

I have traveled through the ages within these beloved books. I have sought Truth from the masters, the scholars and the teachers. I have learned the world — as it was. And though Truth was ever-evasive, I have treasured the search just the same.

My journey here ends now, even as a new journey begins elsewhere — hopefully in this world as it is recovering from devastation. There is always something new to learn and something new to see. One just has to be there, look up and

see with one's own eyes.

I leave this gift of knowledge to you, young man. I encourage you to peruse and explore the world for yourself, through fresh eyes.

Kaffy

“Is that Truthful, Kaffy?”

Kaffy laid the pen aside and faced the angel. “So you are real. And now you've come for me.”

“Tell me what have you learned since last we met, Kaffy?”

“Well, old Woodard, who had given up, came to realize he was still the man he was before the Fall. He'll see it's time for him to return to what he did well. He'll rediscover his place in this new world. Hope will be restored, I believe. All is not lost, there's much to do.

“The young traveler is just discovering the world, and with my resources and the drive to follow his heart he'll find balance, make choices between scholarly pursuit and his desire for wandering. He is blessed with the courage to do both — to find meaning and to contribute to this new world.

“Oh, and Sabina. She is a very astute, you know. She's just awakening, realizing that all is not what it seems. Out of destruction comes the unexpected and Sabina will be ready. She'll see everything changing. That will give her new faith in the possibility of a *real* life of her own.”

The angel nodded with a slight smile. “These are other's lessons, Kaffy. Admirable, but not your own. Are you ready to go?”

Kaffy sighed. “If I must. Though, first, please — let me plead my case, if I may.”

“You're kidding, right?” The angel looked askance.

“Touché,” Kaffy nodded. “But you did say there was something of a second chance.”

The angel looked him in the eye. “I'm listening.”

“I agree that most of my lifetime was spent fretting about Life and it's Meaning. All was lost to me, a complete Mystery! I could not see it. Somehow though, in my own blindness and my own curiosity I managed to ask questions of others — their

perspectives, their visions, their thoughts. These questions though, I sadly failed to ask myself!

“Ultimately, however, witnessing others — *seeing* beyond their own challenges and short-sightedness, I could finally see into and beyond my own. I don’t think I’ve ever experienced such an awakening. Seeing my whole path anew. Inspiring isn’t it! I have never before in this Life experienced such satisfaction, such peace.” There were tears in his eyes. “I found it— exhilarating!”

“Opened your eyes— have you, Kaffy?”

Looking at the angel, Kaffy said, “I’d like to see this through. Might I have a little more time? To see the old world anew.”

“And what would you do now?”

“Follow the edge of the world —— with new eyes!”



## And May the Dead Speak

by Greg Ray

“Now remember, he won’t recognize you. He won’t know who you are. No amount of reminding will change that. You just have to accept it.”

He was duct taping my arm to the edge of the table as he said this.

“Is that really necessary?”

“You want a doctor, go to the doctor. Pay attention.”

It wasn’t easy paying attention. One whole side of the room was shelved floor to ceiling with gurgling aquarium tanks. Plus I had come straight from the saki bar.

“*The dead do not remember the living.* They do remember their lives to a certain extent — the circumstances—”

“Well, that's what I'm countin’ on, Doc”

“—but not the people.” I watched as he drew liquid from a vial — some dark mercurial substance filling the chamber of the syringe.

“So, how's that even possible, Doc? Like remembering a whole conversation but not *who* you were talking to.”

He put the vial back in the mini-fridge. “How would I know?”

He held the syringe up to the light, thumped the chamber twice with his finger.

“I’ve seen that so many times you know.” My speech wasn't so slurred until I’d laid down on the table. “Why do you guys do that?”

“Well we don't want to have an embolism.”

“We surely don’t! Even if I knew what that was, I wouldn't want that.”

“Could kill ya’?”

“Strike one for me. I especially wouldn’t want that. You know you don't look Japanese.”

He looked down at me and frowned. “Korean.”

“Sorry.”

“From New Jersey.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

In another second, he plunged the needle into my arm — no cotton ball, no warning, no nothing.

“Damn that burns. Ach! Geez, it hurts!”

“Yeah it hurts. You wanna talk to the dead? Of course, it hurts”

“That bastard at Saki-Soba! Didn’t tell me it hurt like hell.”

While I was writhing on one side of the table, he was recounting the money I’d paid him on the other. “So, you’ve been drinking.”

I winced at the pain. It bit like fire. “Only an idiot would lie down on this table sober.”

He put the bills in a drawer and locked it.

“You know I don’t believe in this stuff. Afterlife and all that.”

“Nobody does until they do. I should put up a sign.”

“Yeah whatever.” I couldn’t feel my legs now and my arms seemed to have gone stupid.

He walked back over, pulled my lids one at a time to shine a penlight into my eyes. “Besides, I don’t need you to believe. This isn’t *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“I think—” I was seeing penlight stars, but my vision was getting slushy anyway. “I think you mean the *Wizard of Oz*.”

“Yeah whatever. Maybe”

“Maybe? Like maybe you do need me to believe?” Stuff was jittering in and out — the whole scene.

His voice came in muffled, far away. “I just need your money.”

“What?” Like how was I supposed to be hearing him if he talked muffled like that?

He turned my head on the table and spoke into my ear. “Tell Degan when you see him, he still owes me the money.”

For some reason this struck me as funny, so I could hardly get out my reply. “But he won’t know you.”

He was all flat affect, as if that wasn’t funny. “Oh yeah,” he said. “How could I forget.” His voice loomed closer. “Just tell him.”

“Degan, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“It’s pitch dark. I didn’t expect that. I can’t feel my body.”

“Me neither.”

“Listen I don’t have much time. I’ve got questions.”

“Uh-oh. You want to know who got to me. You want to know who bumped me off?”

“Well, yeah. *When somebody kills your partner you’re supposed to do something about it.*”

“I saw the movie. That’s a crock. You shouldn’t have come, Miles.”

“It’s not a crock, not with me, partner. I mean it. Hey. You know who I am?”

“Yeah I know who you are.”

“That’s weird, because the dead aren’t supposed to remember the living.”

“You’re *dead*, dumb-ass. You want to know who you are? You’re my idiot partner who just got himself killed just like I did.”

“No, wait. By the same guy that put you down?”

“Well, I can’t really remember who did me in, but—”

“Hey, me either! Aw crap, that’s gonna bug me. Just a second.” I was still plenty drunk in the afterlife, but I was trying to concentrate. “I’m getting aquariums.”

“Yeah. I got aquariums, too.”

“Shit. So, I just literally paid the guy who bumped you off to kill me too. Dammit. Somebody did say you owed them some money, maybe it was a lot of money.”

“Who?”

“We don’t know *who*, but you know— you know what I’m talking about.”

“Gambling. I’m pretty sure it was gambling debts.”

“That’s dumb, Degan. Like TV show dumb.”

“Like I said, Miles, you shouldn’t have come.”

“So, what kind of gambling?”

“Fishbait.”

“Come again?”

“Fishbaiting. You’ve heard of cockfighting. Sort of like that, but fish.”

“Those aquariums!”

“The aquariums.”

“Cockfighting is illegal— But say, how does it work exactly? You’ve got fish in an aquarium and then what?”

“Jesus, Miles. I just made that up, okay?”

“What the hell?”

“You said gambling was stupid.”

“*Oh my god*, is it going to be like this forever?”

“Are you still talking to me, Miles?”

# **Petrified**

*by Waleed Ovasse*

## **Somewhere atop a church spire in Montreal**

Vilnius was the first to wake up, the small stone cracks in his hands slowly melting back into his supple dark skin. He stretched his arms above his head, while trying to coax his sore wings back to life. The ends of his wings were always the hardest. It was as if the blood never quite made it all the way to the end.

It had been raining for several hours, and Thousands of feet below him the street was still packed with jet black umbrellas as they made their way to wherever it was that humans spent their evenings.

They had found this spire sometime before dawn had broken, quickly settling in after a heavy night of eating, drinking, and for the gargoyle on Vilnius's left, Marcello, a heavy night of flirting. Marcello had barely begun to wake up, which wasn't surprising. Vilnius was always the first. Early to rise, early to bed was his motto.

To Vilnius's right was Oison. His stone skin melted away into the fair blonde fellow that was always the anxious one of the party. The stone around his wings split from veiny marble to the pale milk of his normal skin. "Why did you choose the Baptist church Vil?" he muttered as he rubbed his eyes.

"It was the closest," replied Vilnius. He looked down again the soaked city. Hopefully they could find some late night food, even given the storm.

"You know I never sleep all that well on top of Baptist churches," whined Oison. He too could feel that above average hunger that set in after their daily molting.

"It was either this or being shit on by pigeons on top of that warehouse," said Vilnius, pointing down towards the next building over.

"Baptists just give me unease," muttered Oison.

“After the last several centuries, that’s what gives you unease? The label?”

Oison didn’t respond, choosing instead to gaze up at the clouds. “There’s no stars here.”

“They’ll come back. In the meantime, we need find food.”

They had flown hundreds of miles in the last week, tracking and finding their way to this city. Not for any particular reason, but because they had all communally felt that they were being drawn here for something. And now that they were there, they could not figure out what had brought them.

“Marcello!” roared Vilnius, his wings outstretched as he stood on the precipice of the church spire, his arms held out. “Will you never wake, friend?”

He looked over at Marcello’s still frozen form. His obsidian stone covered his body, not an inch had melted away into his flawless dark sin. With a short jump, Vilnius was beside his friend, hanging with one arm around the the church’s steeple.

“Hello Marcello, wake up sir!” he whispered, caressing his friend’s face.

“Why won’t he wake up,” asked Oison, crawling his way around the steeple.

“It is odd for him to take this long,” muttered Vilnius. He searched over his friend’s face and form, trying to figure out if something had happened.

“He did not want to sleep last night either,” whispered Oison. “Perhaps he is sick.”

“Or perhaps he is dramatic,” said Vilnius. Vilnius thought back to the many times that Marcello had decided that sleeping in was what he wanted.

They had been together for, as Oison was quick to remind everyone, several centuries. They had seen the rise and fall of nations, of people, of cultures, and of religions. Oison’s concern over resting on specific spires was an oft repeated sentiment, as he had been forced to participate in several wars on the topic.

And over the years, each of them had found themselves with hexes, spells placed on them, ailments, and even broken relationships, with no one else to help them. As Oison had learned

firsthand, once people had realized what he was, he had always been forced into some conflict. And through each of their issues, the two others had always helped.

“When was the last time he was like this?” asked Vilnius, his hands gripping the sides of Marcello’s face.

Oison scrambled back and forth on the steeple like a skittish beetle, his wings pressed hard against his back. “I don’t remember off the top of my head,” he answered.

“Think, please.”

“What’s the worst that could happen if he doesn’t molt soon?” asked Oison, his usually high voice getting even higher. He finally stopped moving and came to land deftly and gently on the other side of Vilnius, in front of Marcello.

“What I heard was that if he takes too long, he may be locked in there forever.”

“Have you seen this happen before?” asked Oison.

“Only once. And poor Gerardo did not want to continue on our journey.”

“How long ago was that?”

Vilnius looked away, searching his memories. “Perhaps 1537. But Gerardo had already been under our curse since at least the pharaohs. I was young.”

“Why did he not want to continue?”

Vilnius’s fingers caught on several small bumps on Marcello’s face. He traced them with his fingertips again, and again, marvelling at how round they must have been in real life. In all the centuries he had known Marcello, he had never realized that these bumps existed.

“Because Gerardo had come to realize that it may never end.”

“It?”

Vilnius’s thumbs rubbed continuously on the round bumps, staring at Marcello’s upturned eyebrows. Marcello’s face was usually blank and placid as his thoughts were turned inward as the sun rose. But Vilnius realized that the eyebrows were the clue.

“This life,” muttered Vilnius. “These are tears Oison. What happened last night?”

Oison scrambled back up the steeple. “I do not know, I saw that

he was flirting with someone, like usual. It was getting hot and heavy.”

“But clearly something happened.” Vilnius took his hands away from Marcello’s face and with a quick step backwards took flight. His wings swept the air gently and yet with powerful force, rustling Oison’s strawberry blonde hair. “We must figure out who he spoke to. Before it is too late.”

With a quick forward step, Oison was aflight and began following Vilnius through the dark skies, the rain pattering against their opaque wings. Oison had always loved flying in the rain, something that Marcello had especially hated. But even Marcello would humor Oison in a light rain through an old city like Montreal.

Oison racked his brain trying to remember the last time they had been in Montreal. Their specific roving band of merry gargoyles tended to spend most of their time in the New World, choosing to leave the Old World to the warlords, pixies, witches, and denizens of the underworld. The New World had left much of the old system and hierarchy behind, and even Oison had fallen for at least one human in the last 300 years. But Montreal reminded both Oison and Vilnius of the Old World they had willingly chosen to leave behind centuries ago.

“There,” yelled Vilnius over the rain. They had come to the center of the old city, where the Basilica rose towards the heavens. Oison thought it was fitting, perhaps, that they had chosen not to land on the basilica, where they could have hidden far more easily.

Vilnius weaved a quick S shape through the streets around the Basilica, until they landed quietly in a secluded corner a few streets away from a bar. They had both learned centuries ago that walking amongst normal humans would draw far too much attention, if only due to their wings. Over the years, they had chosen jackets, sweaters, bulky clothing items that they could squish their wings inside. But that rarely worked. People could see that they were distinctly not human.

But Oison, on one of his unfortunate associations with warring clans, had been taught a short spell that would hide their wings from view altogether. And that made the dark brown coats that



both of them wore that much easier to pass in regular society.

“Was this where we were last night?” asked Oison.

“I believe so. I think we should be glad that in our old age, we no longer need more than 1 location to make us happy,” replied Vilnius, picking up the pace as they made their way through the old streets.

“Yes, unlike that short time we spent in St. Paul,” said Oison. His stomach still churned thinking about the absolute copious amount of drinking that they had done, cleaning out at least several establishments.

Vilnius opened the door to the bar without much regard to the sign that said that they’d be closing soon. A blast of yeasty, sweat filled warm air met them both as they crossed the threshold, their coats fluttered past them for a moment. But thankfully, no one saw their bony wings.

“Hi, sorry! We just had last call,” yelled Maria, a slender brunette who was busy cleaning up a few tables near the end of the bar.

“Oh, I recognize this now,” said Oison. The wooden walls of the bar clearly held the memories of many people, but Oison’s eyes were locked on Maria. This was definitely the girl that Marcello had spoken to at length last night. Leave it to Vilnius to pick up on what could possibly have happened.

“Not a problem, actually!” said Vilnius. “Just hoping to have a quick chat, if possible.”

“What is this regarding?” asked Maria, putting down a gray plastic tub of dirty dishes and glasses and approaching them.

“Do you remember talking to our friend Marcello, last night?” asked Vilnius. “He’s a large man, dark, close cut hair, scruffy beard?”

Maria smiled knowingly, as she wiped her hands on the front of an already dirty apron. “Yes, that idiot who wouldn’t stop flirting with me for what I believe was all night.”

“Yes, that’s the one,” said Oison.

“The one who made me keep this place open far later than I should have,” continued Maria.

“Right, that one,” said Vilnius.

“The one who ended up making the entire conversation about

something that wasn't even me," said Maria.

"I'm sorry, what?" asked Oison.

"Look, why don't you all just go back to wherever you came from, ok? I don't know you, or your albino friend, or your other friend wherever the hell he is," said Maria.

The trio stood in silence for a moment, trying to take in Maria's outburst.

"I'm, I'm sorry," mumbled Maria. "That came out all wrong. I'm not sure what came over me."

"It's ok," said Oison.

"But I still want all of you out of this bar," whispered Maria. "Please leave."

"Look, I don't know what happened last night. But we're just here trying to help our friend," said Vilnius, as politely and gently as he could. He wasn't known for being kind.

"What happened to him?" she asked, turning around to grab the forgotten plastic tub. She took it behind the bar, as Vilnius and Oison tried to figure out a lie.

"He's just feeling under the weather," replied Oison. "Might be the rain, but we thought we'd come and check out all options."

"Fuck that was dumb," muttered Vilnius under his breath.

"Shut up," responded Oison.

Maria slammed two clean highball glasses on the wooden bar counter and grabbed a bottle of something brown from behind her the bar. She poured three fingers into each glass and pointed at them. "Help yourself while I finish cleaning up."

Maria grabbed more dirty dishes as the Oison and Vilnius stood at the bar and sipped at whatever she had just poured.

"Whiskey?" asked Oison awkwardly, unsure of how to fill the silence.

"That's what the bottle said," mumbled Maria. Her silent anger came out with the forceful sound of each glass going into the soapy water in the sink behind the bar. "Fuck," she mumbled as a glass slipped out of her hand and smashed on the ground.

She turned to both of them, ignoring the glass. "He told me about who and what you people really are," she said. "So no more lies, please."

Vilnius shot back the entire glass of whiskey and placed it gingerly on the counter. “What else came up in conversation?”

“Look, I know you think you’re in love with him, but trust me, it would never work out,” said Oison. Vilnius buried his face in his right hand as Oison finished.

“I’m not in love with him,” scoffed Maria. “He’s not my type.”

“What did you and him talk about for hours into the early morning?” asked Vilnius.

Maria sighed and wiped her hands on the dirty apron again. She turned around and looked behind the bar. Around and behind the bottles were dozens of pictures of people, either inside the bar, or outside the bar, posing for pictures. Some were in black and white, others in color, and still others that seemed to have been printed out on letter paper. Scanning the wall, finally, Maria’s eyes settled on the one she wanted. She grabbed a stool and leapt up to grab the specific one.

It showed a blonde haired young woman, standing in front of the bar, embraced by a dark skinned man wearing a red scarf. They both wore heavy winter coats, and a fresh dusting was on the street around them.

“That was quite a while ago,” muttered Oison. “Was that the last time we were in Montreal?”

“When was this taken?” asked Vilnius, picking up the frame.

“I dunno,” replied Maria shrugging. “But that is my mother, and I think she was in love with him. And she’s dead now.”

Vilnius looked at Oison knowingly. It all made sense now. Marcello was sensitive, but this had likely thrown him over the edge. Given Marcello’s predilection to falling in love with every girl he’d ever met, perhaps never seeing them, or their fates, ever again had protected him from the pain.

“How did he take it?” asked Oison.

“We talked for a long time. I’m not sure how long he was in Montreal for, or why he had to leave, but it wrecked her. And she never got over it, really. Even though she found someone else,” replied Maria.

“Here,” said Maria, throwing a plastic bag at Vilnius. “He said he’d be in tonight. I brought that for him. He asked for it, in a way.

But I think she always wanted him to have it back.”

Vilnius pushed the bag into his coat. “We apologize for keeping the place open later than it should have, both last night and tonight. Thank you for your time.”

“Yeah, well. Tell him to show his face in here. I’d rather him than you two,” said Maria. She waved them away as they walked through the door onto the street.

The rain had only gotten gotten harder. Large puddles pooled in the street as both Vilnius and Oison shed their brown coats and with a single movement lept into the sky.

“What’s in the bag?” yelled Oison, over the wind.

“I do not know,” said Vilnius. “But let’s hope it’s something we can use to get him to wake up.”

Oison and Vilnius flew the rest of the way in silence, except for the large slashes of water against their wings and bodies. Not even tonight’s struggles could keep Oison from loving the rain.

Marcello was just as they had left him. He hadn’t yet molted, and now he was covered in rain.

“This is likely the cleanest he’d ever been,” smirked Oison.

Vilnius opened the bag gingerly, and found what he had hoped was inside: the red scarf from the picture. He placed it around Marcello’s neck and then lightly stepped off the steeple to admire the look from the air. The scarf hung limply against Marcello, as it collected more and more water.

“Do you think it’ll work?” asked Oison.

“I don’t think that’s the point,” replied Vilnius.

“Then?”

“I hope he finds the strength he needs to overcome what he and so many others have felt,” replied Vilnius. He thought back to Gerardo, all those centuries ago, when he had finally given up. Vilnius didn’t think it was Marcello’s time to give up, but, that was also not his place to say.

“How long do we wait?” asked Oison.

“For a little while longer.”

Oison and Vilnius took their places on the steeple, and waited.

As the sky lightened, and it was clear that dawn was coming, Vilnius and Oison looked to Marcello’s still petrified form. Nothing

had changed.

“Have we lost him?” asked Oison

“Let’s hope not,” replied Vilnius.

## A Queer Spot for Death

*by J. W. Guthridge*

'Is there anything more profound that the darkness in the hearts of man?' Those were the words engraved on the blood tinged marble ashtray lying in the middle of a room devoid of other traces of blood or a body to match it. Detective Dan Moyers stooped down to put his macro lens to best use. Snapping pictures of the ashtray from several angles, and the pile of the thick carpet too where it looked disturbed and then brushed hard, perhaps to clean away blood drops.

"Detective? You in here?" The call came from a clean suit wearing, 20 something goth girl.

Dan looked up. "Yes. You through with the body?"

"Yes, loading him up into the van right now. Johnny said time of death was around noon today."

The clock on the mantle behind the desk struck midnight.

"Well, yesterday now."

Dan nodded, not really paying much attention to the antics of the young technician. He was busy trying to reconstruct the crime in his imagination, in hopes that it would give him ideas on where to look next, things were not adding up.

"Okay Dick, reach for the sky!"

Spinning around while drawing his service weapon, Detective Dan Moyers faced the new voice. With his gun almost lined up for a shot he lowered it. "Jesus, Mary, and Joesph you scared the wits out of me. Nearly got yourself killed."

It was Johnny Lang, the Coroner. He was holding -- not in a threatening manner -- a double barreled shotgun. "You looked so intensely focused I couldn't help myself Danny-boy. You need to lighten up before you get yourself killed, or worse shoot someone that doesn't need shot... Like me."

"Which of these..." Dan pointed to the shotgun in the Coroner's hands and then to the ashtray below, "...is the murder

weapon?”

“Both. Neither.”

“Now I wish I had shot you. What do you mean?”

Johnny shrugged, “Won’t be able to say one way or the other until we get them back to the lab and do some tests on both this and that ashtray.”

“Yeah, hold on, let me bag the shotgun before we wrap that up. Two attackers? Or two victims? Gotta love the ‘fun’ ones.”

Johnny scoffed, “Fun with a capitol F-U...”

“Anything else you can tell me right now?”

Johnny shook his head. “Nope, if you don't mind I want to get started on the rest of my job.”

“Scram prankster, take Marilyn Manson with you.”

“I heard that! My name is Lily, asshole.”

Johnny shook his head in amusement and gathered Lily to leave with the body. “You know the lord of the manner is out front spitting angry that you’re keeping him out of his own home.” With that Parthian shot, Johnny left Dan alone with the bagged evidence. Thankfully it was an empty jest, the only people waiting outside were the four resident domestic employees charged with running the estate.

The sudden quiet left the Detective to ponder why the shotgun was with the body, but the ashtray was in here. It didn’t make sense. Walking back towards the library where the body was found, Dan thought he saw a pattern in the carpet but wasn’t sure. A quick snap with his camera was all the mind he paid to the notion before looking at the room where the body was found. No signs of a struggle here either. Nothing out of place.

It didn’t take long for him to finish up in the library. One last sweep through the hall between the office and library and the Detective decided that there was nothing more to be learned from the scene. Walking back towards the entry hall, he pulled his phone out and called back to his office.

“Metro PD, Major Crimes, Detective Janson on a recorded line.”

“Janson, it’s Moyers. We ever get ahold of Richard Queen?”

“No Dan, last we heard the Consulate in Edinburgh was trying to chase him to ground at the University of Edinburgh and finding

it difficult. Everyone knows Robert Queen, knows he is in town, but no one can find him. He's headlining some talk on historical fiction in their Literary Department in about four hours."

"Right, thanks." Dan switched the call off. That seemed like an ironclad alibi, but a private jet with enough planning could have been here and back while everyone there thought the professor was enjoying a revivifying romp with a young local.

On the way out Dan saw the house keeper, the butler, and two groundsmen waiting. "You can enter the house now. While you are tidying up, if you find anything unusual not marked with crime scene flags, please leave it alone and call my office. Over the next couple of days I or one of my fellow detectives will be by to discuss matters with each of you."

The four made agreeable noises but were all just happy to be permitted to return to their rooms and bed down for whatever sleep they could still get. Dan hated leaving employees on tenterhooks like that, but it wasn't just policy but often a good way to tease out more information in the long run.

Sitting down in his squad car, he huffed and sighed. The clock on the terminal advised him it was 1:04 am. Starting the car, he headed back to the office to file his reports and notes, and hopefully get some sleep before dawn.

The Butler had been the one to find the victim. His ferry ticket showed he had been aboard the ferry Kitsap -- which had been in transit at the time of the murder -- so the theory that the butler did it was as absurd as thinking the spouse had. The head housekeeper didn't have an alibi but she was more than a foot shorter than the victim, which precluded the physical clues. Both of the groundsmen were similarly poor choices, but for other reasons even if they were each other's alibi.

The victim -- one Tarreq Elowen -- was supposed to be at some happening on Folsom Street, so there was no reason to think the regular staff should come in. The secondary mysteries were starting to get annoying.

To his professional senses, the pride flags flying outside or even the openly gay couple and staff didn't bother him in the least. Different strokes and all, but the mystery kept deepening. State of



the art security on the grounds. Limited staff, and by all accounts no one there that didn't have a reason to be. Everything seemed in order except the victim was supposed to be in San Francisco.

Back in the forensics lab, the wise cracking coroner wasn't cracking jokes now. There was something on the body that didn't make sense. It was part of a tattoo, one that was similar to military designs, but common with fanboys. Worse, the tattoo itself was damaged. That wasn't the only misnomer either.

The shotgun was in such poor operating condition it would have only been useful as a club. In fact it looked as if it had been on display somewhere for many years. The two spent cartridges loaded in the shotgun had been fired decades ago, and were nearly welded in place from years of neglect.

That queer ashtray... Johnny had to stop himself in mid thought, as the original use of that word would cause confusion with the contemporary use of it. That strange ashtray was almost as curious as it was known that no one in the household smoked tobacco, nor did it really fit in with decor. It was as if the assailant imported both articles into the crime scene.

The victim had multiple impacts on their body, many of them severe, but none of them should have proven immediately fatal. There was no obviously fatal blow. There was something else going on, something that yet to reveal itself.

Were they sure on identification? A tissue sample had been sent off for rush analysis but that would take a few hours yet, as would the tox-screen. The victim had never been arrested and was known to be fearful of stalkers, so their fingerprints and DNA was not in any database Johnny had access to. He hated leaving question marks in reports.

Detective Janson was waiting for Moyers when he got back to the office. "Dan, There was a hit on one of Tarreq's credit cards in San Francisco half an hour ago. And I finally sorted out who Tarreq really is. The guy was born one half of a set of twins, William Jonathan Holmes."

"Didn't he die of AIDS in the late 1980's?" Dan asked.

“You're thinking of John Curtis Holmes. I can't blame the guy wanting to change their birth name. Irony is, Tarreq followed in John Holmes' footsteps, only without the subtense abuse.” Janson started shuffling papers looking for a detail.

Dan grimaced before interjecting another question, “So the name change was to a stage name for his porn films?”

“You didn't realize that's how the couple met, or had you not connected the dots about ‘the royal prick getting morning wood?’”

Dan facepalmed at the crass summation. “Janson, you need to wash your hands and brush your teeth after that. This is starting to sound like a horrible Chuck Tingle novel.”

Shrugging, “Funny you should mention that. They made gay porn when it was still mostly underground. When they out-grew the strike zone for models, Mr. Queen transitioned to writing raunchy gay romance books and Tarreq became an equal rights activist.”

“Great, so now we have to clear anyone that ever worked with either of them and everyone that has an ax to grind with gay porn.” Dan Moyers felt his indigestion getting worse. “What was that on Tarreq's credit cards?”

“Oh, right, got a hit an hour ago at a four-star bistro not far from Folsom street.”

Dan sat up as the dime dropped.

Several hours later, Richard Queen stepped off the stage after his lecture and was intercepted by a a small cluster of police types. Looking around at the polyester convention, he wondered aloud, “Who died?”

The lone suit in the group was an American who addressed Richard, “With regrets Sir, it is our sad duty to inform you that your husband was struck down in your home back in Seattle.”

Shock and grief washed over Richard's face before he got ahold of himself. “When? How?”

The suit had to look at his watch and do a little math, “About 18 hours ago, according to the coroner's initial report. With a marble ashtray I'm told.”

Grief became fear which changed to confusion. “I don't

understand. You said Tarreq was murdered almost a day ago? I Facetime'd him just before going on stage, he was enjoying a meal at one of our favorite spots in San Francisco. He told me it had been a productive meeting with a client."

Just then the suit's pocket buzzed. He ignored it. "I'm afraid I don't know any more. I've arranged transportation to the Consulate, where we can make further inquiries and assist you further."

"I'm sorry, who did you say you are with?" Richard was looking completely lost now.

The suit sighed and nodded, "Forgive me, I didn't introduce myself. My name is Mathew Geddy, and I am the charge d'affaires at the American Consulate in Edinburgh. My car is waiting outside and is at your disposal." The phone in his pocket buzzed again, followed by the ringer going off in an odd warbling pattern. "I beg your pardon, I must take this."

Just as Mr. Geddy stepped away, another figure approached, it was the professor that had arranged the lecture. "Dicky-boy, are you in some sort of trouble? Can I help?"

"I don't know Alexander. They've told me Tarreq is dead, murdered almost a day ago." Shock was setting in, displacing the confusion.

"Forgive me gentlemen, but there are developments, please Mr. Queen, can you come with me?"

"Go on laddie, I'll see to everything here and check in with you later."

When the charge d'affaires got Richard Queen inside the conference room, the situation was a bit more in hand. Richard's temper was slowly slipping off the chain however as he was being given repeatedly conflicting reports and no one would talk with him about what was going on.

"Mr. Queen?"

Rounding to the newcomer with fire in his eyes, Richard was about to unleash the invective laced rants he was known for when something stopped him.

"I've brought tea, and have been told your husband is on line

three, shall I punch it up for you?"

All of these emotional changes of direction were getting to him. "Yes, thank you."

"Rich? You there? Can you tell me what's going on, and why I was accosted here?" The voice on the speaker was that of Tarreq, Richard's partner of some thirty years.

Sinking into a chair at the table, Richard took a moment to gather his thoughts, "Thank goodness you're safe. No, I don't have any idea either Tee. I was intercepted coming off stage here in Edinburgh myself."

"I may be able to help with that. I am Detective Dan Moyers of Seattle's Major Crimes Division. Someone was murdered in your home here in Seattle. The victim was originally believed to be you, Mr. Elowen. This was complicated by you being away from home in California and Mr. Queen being out of the country."

"Wait, if it wasn't Tarreq, who was killed in our home?"

Things were going about as well as they could Dan thought. "I'm getting to that. Mr. Elowen, when was the last time you saw your twin brother?"

Richard started cussing inside his head. That foul little wretch of shrew was the cause of so much of Tarreq's troubles, that this was just the latest in a series of attacks going back to their childhood.

"Um, 2004, at my father's funeral. He tried to prevent me from attending the service." Tarreq answered.

"Do you know where he might be right now?"

Richard injected himself into the questions, "What has that homophobic bigot got to do with this?"

"We now believe the victim was Mr. Elowen's twin brother, Jonathan William Holmes."

There was a brief silence until Mr. Geddy cleared his throat.

"Right, it will still be a few hours before the lab work comes back, but best we can figure, Mr. Holmes managed to bluff his way into the estate pretending to be you, Mr. Elowen. Exactly what happened after that, we are not sure about. At this time, all I can tell you is that things are in hand, and our teams are working on this as fast as they can. Since both of you have been ruled out as

persons of interest, we do not need to ask you to change your itineraries.”

“Thanks... I think.” Tarreq quipped.

Richard wasn't so circumspect, “That's nice of you. Scare me half to death with the idea of my partner having been killed in my own home, only to find out that you sought after me as a ‘person of interest’ when I was half a world away. Do better.” With that, Richard smashed the button on the phone to end the call.

“Hey, boss? I got the results back. It wasn't murder.”

“Lily, I like a good joke as well as the next guy, but you need to start with the setup and not the punchline.” Jonny said, looking over the papers on his desk.

“I'm serious. The stiff from the Queen-Elowen estate... Wasn't murder.”

Jonny got to his feet, “Okay Lily, show me what you found.”

The pair walked over to the exam table. “These wounds, are from the shotgun and the marble ashtray. Most of them, maybe all of them were self inflicted. Tox-screen came back with a hit on a chemo drug used for brain tumors as well as a traces of other things consistent with a cancer patient. So I started looking elsewhere for more clues, and I found a social media post from ten years ago showing a scan of a photograph taken in the Holmes home in the 1980's where the senior Holmes was at his desk, next to a fireplace above which was displayed a double barreled shotgun. And there was a marble ashtray on the desk, both visually match the items in evidence.”

“Go on.” Johnny was starting to grin.

“So I looked for a tumor and found it. It was massive, and after consulting with an oncologist friend of mine, we started counting the rings and our theory is the tumor is at least thirty years old, and it would have effected behavior. This lead me to look at the dermal-patch we found during the initial exam here, and I pulled a sample of the drug. It was a run-of-the-mill nausea patch for chemo patients, but this one had been adulterated with a lethal dose of Fentanyl. It's a guess, but my gut tells me that ‘the good son’ here took up the challenge to beat himself up with his father's

heirlooms, bluffed his way into the estate posing as his estranged brother, and then committed a rather gruesome suicide.”

Looking over at the ashtray still in its evidence bag the coroner said, “Your heart was certainly filled with darkness. Never forgave your brother from moving on away from you did you?” The rhetorical question of the dead didn't need an answer, but allowed the case to be closed.

## **Liquid Luxury**

*by Russella Lucien*

I heard banging at the door at 5 am. I could see the sun peeking through the sky. I felt a little woozy since I was drinking it up last night at a wedding. I opened the door, and a sweaty police officer asked, “Are you Chanel Harrington?” I nodded. He asked, “Can I come in? I have some news to share.” I narrowed my eyes and let him in. He took off his hat and announced, “I’m sorry to tell you this, but we found your brother Clive Harrington in the savannah. He didn’t make it.” I shook and said, “I must call my cousin. Clive was the best man at their wedding last night.”

I heard the words ‘stabbed’, ‘bled out’, ‘face down’. I couldn’t breathe, and the officer tried to calm me down. I asked, “What happens now?” He said to come to the police station when I’m able to claim the body. The officer left, and I collapsed into sobs. Clive was the best man at our cousin's wedding. I kept shaking my head. I last saw him with a glass of Johnny Walker Black and on the dance floor. Shaking my head, I thought, “I saw him last night. Clive walked me to my taxi.” I dialed the phone number to my cousin, Jack. The phone rang and Jack picked up, “Hey Chanel. What’s going on?” I swallowed and said, “I’m so sorry to tell you this, the day after your wedding, but Clive is dead.” The line was quiet. He said, “Please come over now.” I got dressed and took a taxi to Jack’s house.

It took 30 minutes to get to Jack’s house. The capital city is where I stay, while our family lives in the country. Jack’s new bride, Brenda, was the first person I saw when entering his home. I said, “Hi Brenda, I believe Jack told you the news.” She nodded and said, “Do you want breakfast, something to drink?” I said, “If you have tea, that would be nice.” I sat down and said, “Jack, we saw him last night. I’m still trying to sleep off the hangover. Did anything happen after I left?” Jack said, “I wasn’t paying attention, but I saw him dancing with a girl I didn’t recognize. Maybe a friend of a

friend? What did the police say?" I said, "I just heard words like stabbed, bled out and face down. I still find it hard to believe that he's gone. The police said that I can come to the station to fill out the forms to claim the body. I am so sorry." Jack said, "You shouldn't be sorry. You didn't kill him." Brenda passed me the creamy and hot tea. I couldn't sip it. I said, "I'm going to the police station to claim the body and make funeral arrangements." Jack said he would come with me.

I could feel the sweat down my back while walking into the dingy police station. The desk officer didn't look me in the eye but barked, "What is your business here, ma'am?". I said, "Hey, I'm here to see about Clive Harrington." The notifying officer said, "Thank you for coming in. Come into my office." I said, "This is my cousin Jack. I would like him to be in the room with me as well." We walked into the narrow room and sat down. The officer asked, "Did your brother behave differently the day before?" I replied, "No, he looked happy." The officer looked at Jack and asked the same question. Jack said, "He looked happy, drinking and liming before the wedding." The officer asked, "Did your brother have any enemies, anyone he didn't get along with?" I couldn't think of anyone. Everyone liked Clive. He lived for the lime. Jack chimed in, "To know Jack was to love him." The officer took a deep breath and said, "We'll continue investigating. But you can make funeral arrangements for your brother. Once again, I am sorry for your loss."

We had a small funeral for Clive. My brother lived for the present and as we threw the handfuls of dirt on the coffin, I thought about how mom and dad weren't here to see this. Mom said, "Clive, be careful. You're into liming too much." I looked at the sky and thought, "Clive, I will move heaven and earth to find out what happened to you."

I went over to Jack's place for dinner the following week. After eating Pelau and washing it down with sorrel, I asked, "Jack, what was Clive into?" Jack pushed the plate off to the side and asked me, "I should ask you." I shook my head and said, "When I would ask him about how things are, he would say, 'I good Chan, I good.' He never told me about work or a special person." Jack said, "Well,



Clive was working at the airport and living well.” I admit, his Toyota looked good. And he brought the Johnny Walker Black to the reception. He looked better than I remembered. He had a sharp haircut; the clothes looked polished. The suit didn’t look like the flimsy junk sold in Princes Town. I wondered if he got the suit on his many trips to Miami. I asked Jack, “I didn’t see his friend Joel at the funeral. Did they fall out?” Jack said, “It looks like it. Those two were tight as thieves. Then just last year, I stopped seeing them together.” I said, “I’m going to find out what happened to Clive. I owe him that. Tomorrow, I’m going to see Joel.” Jack replied, “Be careful, sis.”

I pulled up to Joel’s beach house. It looked more like a cottage than a house. As soon as I walked up the path, he ran towards me and gave me a big hug. All of us grew up together in the village. We attended the same schools and spent our days hanging out at the corner shop. I could feel his locs graze my shoulder. I said, “You look great. How are you?” Joel smiled and said, “I’m good, I’m good. Sorry about Clive.” I said, “I missed you at the funeral. What Happened?” Joel pointed to the seat in the backyard. I sat down and he filled my drink with rum and coke. Joel ran his hand through his locs and said, “At one point, yes, we were good. But then his attitude changed. He was more focused on getting a better car, better clothes, a better house. The straw that broke the camel’s back was when he felt he was too good for White Oak and demanded Angostura rum. I saw him less and less at the shop. Then I find out he’s spending more time in town, closer to the airport. We just drifted apart.” I said, “I didn’t know any of this. I spend more of my time in Canada rather than Trinidad. He never let on what was happening.” Joel asked, “Have the police found anything?” I said, “To be honest, I don’t think they’re focused on my brother’s murder. At his point, I’m taking some time off and looking into this.” I finished the rest of my drink, got up, and thanked Joel. He gave me a hug and whispered, “I’m sorry I didn’t go to the funeral. I thought he was getting too fancy, but look what happened. Keep in touch.”

I went to Clive’s home in Ryan village. It was a small cottage-like home. The house remained untouched, with some light dust on the

wooden furniture. I looked at the letters on the dining room table and saw the standards bills for electricity and water. I saw the childhood picture he had of us on the wall. Clive running around and I'm peaking behind a tree, giving a shy smile. I saw the pictures of our parents, who we lost too early in our lives. Dad passed away when I was seventeen and Mom died a couple of years later. I moved to Canada for school while Clive stayed here. I saw the new TV, high-end furniture and the stainless-steel appliances. There was a water bill for an address in the capital city. I didn't recognize the female name on the bill. Most of our family is south, we don't have family in the north. I put the envelope in my purse. I swept up the concrete floor of the house and my tears hit the ground.

A loud knock woke up me up. I looked through the window and saw the same police officer that gave me the news. I opened the door, and he asked, "Chanel Harrington, may I come in?" I nodded, and he walked in. He took off his hat, and said, "So far, we have found no suspects for tour brother's murder. I just wanted to let you know where we stand." I said, "You could have called me with this over the phone. Why come over?" He said, "I felt it was too important to give you the message on the phone. I'm assuming that you'll be going back to Canada?" I said, "My brother had some loose ends that I needed to tie up, so I'll be here for a couple of months." The officer said, "Well, we are taking his murder seriously and I will keep you posted." After he walked out of my house, I made a phone call for a cab to take me to the home he was paying the water bill.

The cab pulled up across the street from the house on the outskirts of the capital city. A compact car sat in the driveway. A woman walked outside of the house. She was Indian, with long black hair pulled into a ponytail. She looked around the street, took out the trash, and walked back inside. I hunched lower in the cab and took a couple of pictures. The cabbie asked, "Miss, are you going to get out of the cab?" I replied, "No, I got what I needed. Please take me home."

I walked around my living room. I didn't know about his life, job, and even a girlfriend. I called him every week, and he gave the same answer, "I'm good, I'm good." What was he hiding? Why

didn't he want to tell me about his life? I thought we were close. He gave details on our cousins, aunts and uncles and the activities of south Trinidad. But he gave me a blank page in his own life.

"Hello?"

"Hey Chanel. I haven't heard from you in a while. How's it going?"

"Nothing much, just looking at some paperwork that Clive had at home. Did you know he was paying the bills of a woman living close to the capital?"

"Weh sah! No, I did not."

"The woman didn't look like his type. She looked Indian."

"This is news to me."

"I know this was so maco but I looked up the address and caught a glimpse of her coming out of the house."

"I didn't know that you're playing detective. You don't trust the police?"

"You know how the police move. I want to know how my only brother went from the life of the party to a ditch hours later."

"I get it. How can I help?"

"I want to go to the airport. Did you notice all the high-end stuff at the house? The stainless -steel appliances, the TV, the furniture?"

"I just thought he got a promotion at work. What do you think it is?"

"Something just isn't right. Clive is not what you call a go-getter. He would always try to do the least amount of work. I don't want to speak ill of my brother, but he was lazy."

"We can go around 3:30 pm, shortly before the shift changes. We can ask some questions, as a mourning sister."

"I'll meet you at Piarco around that time. Talk to you later."

"Talk to you later."

From the airport's entrance, I watched passengers collecting suitcases and boarding taxis or cars for their vacations. As a grieving sister, I'm here to speak with his colleagues and gather information. Jack walked up to me, his thin frame cutting through the crowd. We both walked to the information desk. The woman behind the counter popped her gum and asked, "What do you

want?” I narrowed my eyes and asked, “I’m Clive’s sister.” The officer then softened and said, “I’m so sorry for your loss. Everyone loved him. You can come with me.” I looked back at Jack. The officer said, “Only you. For security reasons.”

I followed the officer into a small waiting room. The walls were plain, with rows of desks and papers stocked up. I sat down in what looked like Clive’s office. I looked out the window and saw some of the same stainless-steel appliances that Clive had in his house. The officer left me alone in the room. The desk had papers and manifests for shipping goods, with Clive’s chicken scratch on the forms. I took a couple of pictures and then heard the heels on the concrete. I sat back down in the chair. The officer brought out a box with his items and said, “We are so sorry for your loss. Did you get the flowers we sent for the funeral?” I said yes. We walked back out to the outside of the main hall. I met Jack in the great hall. I sped up and said to Jack, “Let’s look at this stuff in the car.”

We took out the mug, a couple of books, and papers in Jack’s car. The papers looked like manifests with goods that need to pass through customs. One paper showed a delivery of a stove that came in on one date but then processed a month later. It takes a while to process items, but the dates don’t match. Jack looked at one sheet and a notebook. Jack said, “I see numbers on the manifests matching the numbers on the notebook. Then there are dollar signs beside the shipments.” I shook my head and said, “Let me put this stuff aside when I get home.” Jack said, “What are you going to do? Are you going to the police with this?” I said, “I’m not sure. Will they take me seriously with the notebooks and papers?”

I dropped the box in the middle of my living room. Would the police take me seriously with submitting this notebook? Clive was involved in some underhand business and lost his life. Does this mystery woman have any role in this money-making venture? I heard two knocks at the door and looked out the window and saw the woman that I saw a couple of days ago. I slowly opened the door, and she asked, “Goodnight, may I come in?” I opened the door and let her in. She sat across from me. She said, “My name is Claire. I got your address from Clive and felt I needed to visit you.”

I asked, "Why didn't you come to the funeral?" Claire said, "I'm not single...I'm separated, and I couldn't leave home without it looking suspicious." I asked, "Do you want anything to drink?" Claire shook her head. I asked, "What did you know about Clive's job? His life?" Claire said, "I knew he worked at the airport and made a good living. He helped me pay some bills." A tear rolled down Claire's face, and she said, "Clive was a good person. He didn't deserve this. I should have gone to the funeral." I felt the tears as well. We sat there, looking past each other. Then Claire said, "He always spoke well of you. I'm sorry that I didn't get to meet you under better circumstances."

I kept the notebooks and papers on the table. It's been a week and I'm trying to piece together the bits of information on Clive's life. He had an entire life that he hid from our family. A forbidden relationship. Better material goods than the rest of the village. I have this information that I'm not sure I should turn over to the police. I have more questions to ask. I walked over to the kitchen and pulled out the Johnny Walker Black. Jack gave it to me after the funeral. I'm more of a wine person. I poured out some in a glass and took a sip of the amber liquid, letting the alcohol burn down my throat and remembering Clive's smile.

## **Lies in Bed**

*by Kris Oates*

Dehlia watched as they burned her house. The anger she held as the memories of her life in that house almost outweighed her anger toward her husband, Charlie.

The street to their house had been blocked off. The neighbors on either side of their house and across the street had been evacuated. There were tanker trucks up and down the street. Fire hoses snaked from the two fire hydrants near their house. Dehlia observed at least 25 firemen (and women), five uniformed officers, and at least 15 other people, she believed, either from the insurance company, adjusting firm, and maybe a politician or two, all gathered around to watch 21 Anchor Street burn to the ground. The most surprising sight, Dehlia believed, was the appearance of the bomb squad, them and the ATF shirts running around.

Every now and again, you could see fireworks shoot off from behind the stone wall the fire department had erected to keep them from going off in all directions and causing another fire. Every time one did, Dehlia made a point to jump and scowl. It wasn't hard, again she was mad the house had to be burned.

Joe, the only fireman who would talk to her, said it was too dangerous to go into the house and get anything after they announced their plans to demolish it. None of her clothes, shoes, or pictures. All of those treasured memories were burning in a 'controlled fire.'

Two nights ago, her house had literally gone up like a Roman candle. Dehlia had made sure of it. It had actually been easier than she thought it would. Charlie's poker night was scheduled. Those drunken idiots were the perfect cover for Dehlia's plan. Making sure Jim smoked near the garage was the first part. Easier done than said. She just had to make sure she flirted with him. It had been an open secret that he found her attractive even though she was older than he was and married. But Jim had a thing for older

women, and although he avoided him most of the time, he had been part of her plan, so flirt back she did.

The next part was tricky. Dehlia had to make sure his cigarette would catch the old oily rags Charlie had around. He had almost ruined that by stepping on the butt, but she coaxed him into giving her one and joining her, which kept him out a little longer, and he was a bit lazier with the second smoke. Once she put the smoldering butt near the rags, she just had to go back into the house and wait. Hoping no one saw the fire until it was too late to do anything about it. They were the most never racking minutes of her life. If someone found it too early the fire could have been put out before it found the illegal fireworks Charlie was selling around the neighborhood and put on a big show.

The small pops she expected paled to the huge explosions that woke the neighborhood. The fireworks went off in huge succession, scaring Dehlia even though she was expecting them. She grabbed the cat and ran out of the house, followed quickly by the poker crew. They tried to put the fire out, but the fireworks shooting off in every direction prevented them from getting close. Ten minutes after the fire started, the fire department showed up. They seemed pretty pissed at the fireworks but had it under control in about 20 minutes.

After a quick investigation, it was decided that this controlled burn was the best option to deal with the rest of the fireworks since the black powder in fireworks could still burn even when wet they didn't think there was a better option. It was what Dehlia had counted on.

She remembered reading on Facebook about a similar situation. It was why she had argued with Charlie when he came up with his brilliant plan to go to New Hampshire and get fireworks to sell to his friends and neighbors. He had been selling them for years without incident, and each year, his stockpile grew. This year, it was as big as it had ever been.

It had been why she though Sophie was at her house in the first place. To buy some of the fireworks Charlie had been selling.

Dehlia had invited her in, had her sit down, and offered her coffee. They were sitting there chit-chatting about the Fourth of

July block party when Charlie came in, and his jaw just about fell off his face.

At first, Dehlia didn't understand. Why did Charlie look like he was about to faint just because they were talking? But Dehlia's mom hadn't raised a dummy and she put two and two together and understood quickly. However, Dehlia guessed her mom had raised a dummy since she hadn't figured out Charlie's infidelity before.

A million thoughts ran through Dehlia's mind. In her mind, she jumped up from the kitchen table and started bashing Charlie with her coffee cup. In her mind, she smacked that harlot, Sophie, across the face, then started bashing Charlie. Unfortunately, Dehlia spent a little too much time in her head because before she knew it, Sophie had jumped up and attacked Charlie. Before Dehlia could move, there was a scream and a loud bang, and Sophie was on the floor.

Charlie looked at Dehlia, and she looked back.

"She came at me, Dee. I-"

Dehlia looked down at Sophie's still body. She walked over, took her pulse, and felt nothing.

"She's not dead, is she Dee?"

Dehlia looked at the man she had spent 25 years with. The man she had two kids with. The man she thought she could count on through thick and thin and came up with a plan.

Dehlia watched enough murder shows to figure she could cover up a murder. She was calm. Directed Charlie to do as she told him to. Set up everything and figured she had a pretty good plan; she just didn't let Charlie in on the whole thing.

Yes, he knew part of it included burning down the house, and yes, he knew he was going to have to take the fall for the fireworks, but he didn't know she was setting him up for a premeditated murder.

She had Charlie stuff that poor woman's body into their basement, so it looked as if she tried to break in and slipped and fell, hiding her body behind some old furniture and boxes so it would be plausible.

Dehlia failed to mention she broke into Sophie's house. Started drafts on several letters to herself and one to Charlie so everyone



knew Sophie was planning on exposing their affair. Charlie was frazzled enough to think it would work, but Dehlia also knew it would look like Charlie was trying to hide a body.

Dehlia explained the fire would burn hot enough to incinerate Sophie's body, and Charlie believed her. If he had watched those murder shows he was always getting on her about, he would have known it wouldn't be the case.

So here Dehlia sat, watching her house burn and waiting for the last of her plan to come into play. She knew they'd go in with a backhoe at first, but she figured someone would have to pick through the rubble, find Sophie's body, and eventually put it all together. Then she'd watch Charlie burn.

## Where Did My Pocket Watch Go?

*by Nina Guillard*

“Today has been just dreadful.”

“Oh, come on, Grandpa! It’s just a watch. I know you were very attached to it, but tomorrow is your birthday, and you cannot let all this affect the festivities. Denise and I have come a long way to see you. So did Aunt Violet. We can all help you look for it one more time on Sunday. How about that?”

Julie was pouring me a cup of tea while giving me her well-intended speech, then proceeded to sit down on the sofa next to her sister.

They do not understand. Maybe Violet does, but I doubt it, based on her blank stare, her sight fixated on a spot outside the window, far within the garden. She was never close to Shirley, despite both trying their best to get along over the years. She always thought her a bit exuberant, especially when it came to parties and gifts. She never approved of Shirley spending money like that, even with family. She always thought it was in poor taste. And I suppose the trip took quite a bit of strain on her, so empathy was in short supply with Violet today.

“Fine, girls. Fine. I do not want to fight with you, although I did tell you the whole morning that it is not in the house. I am pretty sure someone took it.”

“Well, maybe they wouldn’t have had the chance to take it if you wouldn’t walk around with a shiny pocket watch around the town’s high street,” said Violet, finally chiming in after not saying a word for almost half an hour. “It’s almost like an invitation to be mugged these days!”

I would try to say something, but I know I have no chance of trying to win an argument with my pig-headed sister. I’ve decided this is not the time, especially with the girls present.

“Right. I’ll pop out to the corner store. Girls, do you need anything?”

“Grandpa, let me drive you.”

Denise was getting up, patting her jeans and jacket in search of the keys, out of instinct, forgetting it was not her car in the driveway that she'd be driving.

“Nonsense. It is just a few minutes down the road. I'm not an invalid, you know. If I wanted to take the car, I would've done so myself. Besides, I know you're a good driver, but I do not like it when someone else drives my car. I'll be back.”

“Ok...If you insist.”

“Please take your phone with you. In case you want Denise to pick you up from the store on the way over.”-Julie insists as she hands me my cell phone.

“Will do, darling. But please, for the love of God, stop fussing! I'm turning 80, but I still have my wits with me.”

Both girls tried to smile at me. They're good girls. May be a bit suffocating at times when they come to visit, but Jack and Pollina did a good job raising them.

I grab my coat and put my phone in my pocket, together with my wallet. Instinctively, I reach for my watch pocket to check if my watch is safe, but then I realize it's not there for a reason.

Harrow follows me by the end of the path to the gate. He knows to stay inside unless I tell him to come with me. He watches me from between the wooden bars of the main gate, attentive to catch me whistle for him to join me.

“Not today, bud. I'm going alone this time.”

I get to the shop but don't get in and instead, I take a right towards the city centre. I will have to come up with an excuse later as to why it took so long, but I'll worry about it later.

The police station isn't too far and I see the two white, blue, and yellow cars parked in front of the building. Not much activity for them outside the tourist season.

The moment I walk in, I see Pat at reception. He's a good lad, but hope he's actually going to do his job this once.

“Afternoon, Pat!”

“Afternoon, Bill! How's it going?”

“Not bad, not bad. Just came in with a small matter.”

“No small matter for us! You know how we...”

“Yes, yes. I appreciate you lot. Say, with who do I need to talk about stolen property? Is it Matthew?”

Pat looked a bit annoyed by my brevity, but with these things, time is of the essence, so I hope he’ll understand.

“No, that would be Janice. She handles these things. You can take a seat right there and she’ll show up soon to take your statement for the report. She just went out to answer a call.” -Pat was pointing towards one of the desks in the open room, filled with paper, a few mugs, and a big screen.

I guess I’ll have to wait.

“Do you want some tea while you wait, Bill? I can make you some.”

“No, no. No, I’m good.”

Sitting in my chair across the piled desk I have gotten a bit nervous. I needed to order my thoughts for the statement as I did not want to look unprepared. I know how this will go. I doubt they will even find it in the end, but they have to fill in the reports fast and then at least my insurance will pay out something. These people hate the insurance guys, so they just take it out on us, the people that come with the complaint. Unless you’re prepared.

It would’ve been easier if I could just start writing down what happened in the last few days. In this way, I could be in and out and the constable might take it more seriously if I already worked on her timeline. I start searching for a pen around the desk, but find nothing, but an unsharpened pencil. How does all this paperwork get filed without a pen in sight? I don’t want to bother Pat - or better said, I don’t want Pat to bother me again with his talking - so I go around my pockets one by one to see if I can find a pen.

No, not here... I checked this one. Nope, not in this one, either.

Oh!

I stopped myself just in time. Pat did not notice. I reached back into my left breast pocket and put my hand through the hole I had just found. I reached deeper and deeper until I had crumpled my whole coat and touched the edge of its lining.

Another hole!

As I was seeing my hand almost going through the lower part of my coat, I realised that the last time I wore my pocket watch was when I was picking up Denise and Julie from the train station. And was wearing this damn coat, because there was a drafty afternoon that day! But in which pocket did I put the watch after I checked the time before their arrival? Did I put it in my left breast pocket instead of the watch pocket right below it? Is that how I lost it? Oh, I will not hear the end of it, neither from the girls nor from Violet. I needed to go to the train station and see if I could find it in 'Lost and Found'. Regardless of what happened, I couldn't in good conscience talk to DC Summers about it before seeing if it was my fault to begin with.

I got up; slowly, trying not to alert Pat of my departure until the exit was near.

"Changed your mind, Bill? Did you remember where you put it?"

God's sake! This boy never tires of talking.

"Yes. Well, not really. Just remembered I have something to pick up from the post office before closing. Birthday letters and all. I'm waiting for a package from Jack. But, I'll be back - tomorrow at the latest"

I got out of there as fast as I could, without hearing his reply.

On the way to the train station, I thought for a second if the girls were going to be worried about me taking so long to get back home, but I figured Violet would keep them busy. Besides, I didn't know how long it would take to locate my watch at the train station.

Fortunately, there was still someone at the information desk, despite being almost 4 o'clock already.

"Afternoon, miss! I'm afraid I might've dropped something on the platform the other day and was wondering if you lot still keep the items for a while."

The young lady at the desk didn't seem to be too interested in what I was saying.

"Like, a lost and found, sir?"

"Yes, yes, a lost and found."

Gosh, this is one painful conversation; if you can call it so.

“Yeah, give me a minute. I’ll check with the station manager.”

Didn’t even have time to utter a thank you, by the time she got up and disappeared through the door behind her desk. Took a few good minutes for her to re-appear and sit back down at the desk. She seemingly forgot about me and was about to ask her again about the lost and found, but a man in a light blue shirt and dark pants came through the doors leading to the platform carrying a set of keys.

“How are you doing, sir!” - he said, half looking at me, half looking at his keys, seemingly trying to find a particular one.

“Alice here tells me you’re after something you lost the other day on the platform.”

“Yes, yes I am. I have lost... I mean, my pocket watch had disappeared the other day, right after I picked my granddaughters up from the station. So, if it isn’t in your lost and found, then it must’ve been stolen.”

“Well, let’s see if we can sort you out, but I doubt we’ll find anything. Not much is being handed over to us nowadays.”

He started walking towards the other side of the waiting room, with his keys in hand, and me hastily following him. He opened a door, then another, then another, with each space getting increasingly smaller, muskier, and damper. By the end of it, we were standing in front of a small shelved closet with a few plastic and cardboard boxes.

“Well, sir, this is it. You can take a look here and see if you’ll find what you’ve lost. A pocket watch you said, right?”

It was just a bunch of dirty clothes and a few toys and other kids’ stuff. Nothing valuable, and no pocket watch.

“Yes, but by the looks of it, it isn’t here.”

“Seems about right. As I said, not much gets turned in. Most of this stuff has been picked up by the station crew and to be fair, even them might not return all of the things they’ve picked up.”

“Thank you, for your help nonetheless.”

I wasn’t happy about this dead end, but what can I do about it now?

“Wish I would’ve been of more help, sir.” - said the station

manager while making his way to the bigger room and holding the door to the tiny room with the closet in it, signalling it was time for me to go.

“Thank you, for your time! I’ll get out of your hair now.”

Out of places to search outside the house and worrying about the buzz of the cell phone I’ve been feeling in my pocket for the past few minutes, I headed back toward the corner store and picked up the local paper, and two bags of chocolate eggs for the girls. Hopefully, they’d be a good enough excuse for my absence.

Harrow has been waiting patiently with his nose perched on the moss-covered stone wall.

“Eh, you’ve been waiting for me, weren’t you? Let’s see how much of an issue I’ll be having with them once I enter the house, maybe we’ll both take a long long walk before dinner, just to let them calm down, what do you say, boy-o?”

Poor dog! I didn’t have much time for him in the last two days, with all the guests coming in and out, with the girls making a fuss over my birthday and now the watch.

Entering the house, I see the whole floor’s been lit and clattering and chatting is coming from the dining room. They must’ve started with dinner.

“Hope you’ll like some chocolate after dinner. It took a while to decide what to get, but since Easter is just around the corner, and I remember you liked these ones when you were little, I thought they’re a sure winner.”

“Where were you, Grandpa? We’ve been worried like crazy?”- Julie already had grabbed the store bag and discarded it on the console nearby and now was standing at the end of the table with a reproaching look on her face.

“Don’t worry, love. I just took my time going through the newspapers.”

“We did call you a few times, Grandpa.” - Denise chimed in. “Why didn’t you pick up?”

“Seriously, Bill, these girls almost gave me a headache with their

calls and worries. They almost marched to the store themselves. Maybe I should've let them, to spare me the trouble of calming them down."

"Thank you, Violet, for your help keeping them calm."

"You know that's not my job." - she sneered

"That daughter-in-law of yours should've done a better job at making them less co-dependent."

I see she's learned a new word from the telly.

"Aunt Violent, that's not very nice. We're right here, you know."

"Might as well." - Violet shrugged, going back to the book she was reading.

That was my signal to just slip into the downstairs bathroom and wash my hands for dinner. I had a feeling this will be going on for the rest of the evening, and I could've used some quiet time to think where that goddamn watch could've disappeared.

Dinner went by relatively smoothly and despite Denise's wish to join me on the night walk with Harrow, I grabbed the leash and went outside to search for the dog by myself.

Today has been quite a lot and so far I haven't walked him since the night the girls arrived. Since then, he's been patrolling the garden and the front yard, restless to get out. He probably isn't too happy about it.

Walking around the house for the second time searching for him, I hear some noise coming from the flower beds near the stone wall, in the front yard. At a second look, the bushes where I see a tail wagging have been quite devastated, with most of the peonies in that section being completely reduced to piles of petals mixed up in some fresh soil.

"Harrow, what the hell did you do, boy?"

The wagging stopped and a guilty-looking Harrow appeared from the bushes, snout first this time. With bits of dirt and greenery in his fur, he stood there, almost imperceptibly whimpering.

"Look at you, boy. Look at the flowers! What has gotten into you?"



At this point, I went over to check the damage he'd done, but it was already getting dark outside and couldn't see much.

"Julie! Denise! Could you come out for a second?"

I do hope they'll hear me.

"And bring a torch with you!"

"You're okay, Grandpa?"

It was Denise. Bless this girl and her worries!

"Yes, I'm fine. Could you get here with a light? I'm trying to see how much of a mess Harrow has caused in the flower beds."

"Here, Grandpa," she said, "take my phone. And be careful."

Grabbing the cell phone she was handing me, I started to go near the devastated area. It really was a mess.

"Oh, Harrow. You did it this time, boy!"

Denise was now cleaning and petting him while trying to muster a half-serious reproach, while the animal was still looking attentively at what I was doing.

Getting a bit further into the bushes and closer to the stone wall, I suddenly felt something other than earth under my feet. Harrow picked up on that and now was sitting straight and looking at me, awaiting for what I'll do with my discovery.

"What is this, Harrow? Did you start collecting bones, boy-o?"

I bent down to see what I'd stepped on and my fingers felt smooth metal. Before shining some light on it properly, my hands felt more metal, but belonging to different objects. Looking at them under the light, I saw one of my screwdrivers from the shed, alongside a small wrench that's been missing for a few months from my toolbox and ... my pocket watch!

It seems I didn't have to file a police report tomorrow, after all.

## **The Baobab Tree**

*by Annette Pateman*

The stone lay on the top of the flat rock.

The rock was covered in soft green velvety grass. The rock listened to the sound of the wind which whistled and whispered. When the voice of the wind became loud and insistent the stone moved. It's colours of deep brown, cream, grey and flashes of red moved as the stone rolled in the wind. Stopping as it did by the roots of a ancient baobab tree. The twin gods Mawu the moon goddess, and Lisa the sun god, favoured the tree and rested from their works and missions in its body and roots. When they laughed the leaves on the ancient baobab fluttered and the people saw and were happy.

The time came for the naming ceremony and the people flocked to the baobab tree. They brought the necessary items for cooking and also kindling and wood for the fires. Drums of all sizes sounded mesmerising rhythms. Mbira sounded melodious tunes picked out with thumbs on the metal keys. The people danced, ululating and singing traditional songs. The age group who were to be named and transition into adulthood, were dressed in indigo cloth with gold and silver jewellery around their arms and necks. They joined hands and circled the baobab tree. Eleven girls and eleven boys soon to pass into womanhood and manhood.

Mawu and Lisa awoke from their slumbers attracted by the smell of the alcohol that had been brewed in their honour. Some poured at the foot of the baobab tree. They moved from the roots of the tree and exited it at the roots. They laughed and danced together to the drumbeats. The people could not see them but those of the transition age group saw them as shimmering colours and shifting energies. Mawu and Lisa stopped in front of each age group young person and touched them lightly on the forehead. After this the

young person dropped the hands of the person they were holding and performed a dance that all who saw knew was the dance of the twin gods.

Till all the age group had transitioned into adulthood.

Mawu and Lisa drank their fill of alcohol and ate the honey and cake offerings that had been left for them. Those offerings that they couldn't eat, they kept to take back to their baobab tree home. The full moon called strongly to Mawu and she moved upward reaching for the silvery disc. Calling to Lisa to follow her.

Soon the voices of the people stilled.

The drums stopped beating their rhythm. The mbira produced no more melody, as the people fell into a slumber sheltered by the great baobab and the lesser trees that grew from the red earth. Mawu and Lisa returned from their sojourn to the heavens and to the baobab tree. The sun was rising and the god Lisa turned his face to absorb its energies. Then the twin gods descended into the roots of the baobab tree.

The people awoke at sunrise. They felt happy. The age ceremony had been a good one as was evidenced by the missing offerings. Certainly, the gods must be pleased they concluded. Each of the new adults had a small perfectly formed silver and gold circle on their forehead.

## Lost Property

*by Alex Brantham*

It was three o'clock, and the bell rang just as Mr Hollings finished writing the homework on the whiteboard. Some bullshit about photosynthesis, but in Zake's mind there was a simple rule. If the teacher can't finish dishing it out in time, it never happened. There wasn't any way he was going to be the kid who sat copying it down while everyone else stampeded out the door, no sir.

So he grabbed his bag and shouldered his way out into the corridor and headed towards the exit along with everyone else.

"Hey, Zake!"

He turned to his right to see Em slipping her way forwards through the throng to get alongside.

"Hey, sis! You ok?"

She nodded. "How was science?"

"No idea, wasn't listening. And Spanish?"

"El mismo."

"Showoff."

They stayed close along the broad corridor, which became even more packed as more and more kids joined the throng. Eventually they reached the main doors and the crowd spread out, so they could at last breathe more easily and possibly even converse properly.

As they were approaching the pick-up zone, Zake's phone pinged. He glanced at it and then, puzzled, looked over to Em. "It's Dad. Says he's sorry but he can't pick us up today."

"Does he say why?"

Jake's phone pinged again.

"He says his car's been stolen."

This was bad news for all sorts of reasons. First and foremost, it meant they had a long walk home. That was bad enough – they'd had to go on their bikes on the many occasions when it was broken down for one reason or another. But "stolen" sounded a lot worse:

they might have to cycle to and from school for days or even longer.

Forty-five minutes later the twins arrived home. Mum was still at work and Dad was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

“Hey, Dad”, they both said at exactly the same time. People had told them that this habit was a bit creepy, but they didn’t care. They were special.

Dad turned away from the bubbling ragu and wiped his hands on his apron. “Hey, kids. Really sorry about this afternoon but my car got nicked. Nothing I could do.”

“Where?” asked Zake.

“How?” asked Em, a fraction later. Not quite so special, then.

“In town,” said Dad. “I just parked it like I always do in the town centre car park –“

“Which one?” asked Jake.

“- just the usual one, in the shopping precinct. I had to go all the way to the top floor because the other levels were full, there was loads of space up there. And when I got back an hour later, it was gone.”

Em sidled around to the hob and picked up a spoon to sample the ragu. “Are you sure you didn’t get mixed up and park it somewhere else? You’re not getting any younger, after all.”

Dad did a full double-teapot. “Excuse me, young lady. I’ll have you remember I’m only in my thirties.”

“Well, technically, yes,” said Zake, “but not for much longer. Big four-oh next month, unless we’re mistaken.”

“Which we practically never are,” said Em, just before having a taste. “Mmm, this is good, Dad.”

“Of course it’s good, I’m a chef, remember?”

“And we do appreciate it, Dad,” said Em. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t forget where you parked the car. Can’t you check the location on an app or something?”

“Not on a five year old Skoda, no, you can’t,” said Zake. “Speaking of which, why would anyone want to steal that old heap? Surely there must have been something better they could have gone for?”

Dad returned to the stove and chucked in a bowl of chopped

mushrooms. “It’s not an old heap –“

“Doesn’t exactly keep running, though, does it?” said Em.

“Well, ok, it has had a few wobbles. But, Zake, the thing about all those new cars is that they’re a lot harder to break into. Sure, if you’re planning to sell it then you’d take the trouble to go for a Merc or whatever but if you just want to run around you’d go for the easiest target. Like my Skoda.”

“What about the ticket?” asked Em. “Wouldn’t they have had to have your ticket to get out of the car park?”

Zake shook his head. “Not that one. You just go to a machine and tap in your registration. Pay a couple of quid and you’re free to go. So have you reported it stolen?”

“Of course. I needed to get the crime reference number to give to the insurance company.”

“So how quickly can you get a new one?” asked Em. “I mean, how long are we going to be cycling to school?”

Dad shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, kiddo, don’t know. Likely to be several weeks, though.”

“Seriously?” said both of them at once, shocked back into sync by this terrible news.

“Fraid so. First the police have to pretend to look for it. Then they have to decide that they’re not going to pretend any more, then the insurance company look into it, and finally they might decide to pay up.”

“Can’t you just buy another one now?” asked Zake. “Before the insurance pays out?”

“What with? We’re broke, remember? Everything we earn goes on running this house and feeding us all. We’d need thousands, and I just don’t have it.” Dad carried on stirring the food, trying not to look the kids in the eye.

Zake and Em exchanged glances and, with a couple of almost imperceptible nods, agreed to withdraw. They went to their usual location when they needed to talk – Em’s room. (As Em would say, Jake’s room smelt just a bit too much of sweaty socks and other things she’d rather not think about).

“This is serious,” said Zake, settling into the bean bag while Em propped herself up on the bed. “What are we going to do?”

“Find the car?”

Jake’s eyebrow said “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Em sat forward, excited by the thought that they might be able to be useful for a change. “Look, the police aren’t going to anything, are they, not for a crappy old Skoda. Maybe we could try.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?”

“Well, for a start, we could have a proper look in the car park. Maybe he did forget where he parked. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Em and Zake went back downstairs, arriving just as Dad was going out to his evening shift at Guiseppa’s.

“Tell your mum the dinner’s ready for you all,” he said. “And sorry again about the car.”

“No worries,” said Zake. “How are you going to get to work?”

“Enrico will pick me up at the end of the road and bring me back. It’s going to cost me in cigarettes, but it’s a lot cheaper than taxis,” said Dad, and then he was off.

They had at least an hour before Mum got home and even longer before they were expected to be ready for dinner, so they got their bikes from the garage and headed off to the car park in town.

Getting to the top floor wasn’t easy – those ramps were steep – but eventually they made it to the top floor. It was nearly deserted, and it only took a moment to be sure that the car wasn’t there.

“Now what?” asked Zake.

“We go down a level. If we both take a turn round, you check on the left, I’ll check on the right, we’ll be done in no time. OK?”

So they did that: definitely not there either. Down another level – the same.

They’d just started to circle the ground floor when a shout rang out above the growling cars – “Oi, you two, what do you think you’re doing?”

A uniformed figure jumped out in front of them and they screeched to a halt. It was a young man, vaguely familiar.

The shouting continued. “You can’t cycle in here, it’s not a bloody skate park.” He paused and peered at them in the gloom. “Ere, don’t I know you?”

Zake and Em pulled over to the side to meet their interrogator. It was Ethan, older brother of Sophie, a girl in their year that they hung out with occasionally. The last time they'd met had been when they'd gone back with Sophie and found Ethan playing with his Xbox – he'd let them have a go.

“Yeah,” said Em. “We’re Zake and Em, we’re mates with Sophie. We met at your house.”

“That’s right, I remember. You’re the twins, aren’t you? But seriously, what the heck are you doing here?” He gestured them to follow him towards the booth near the exit gates.

“We’re looking for our Dad’s car,” said Zake. “It was stolen from here today but we thought he might have just forgotten where he parked.”

“Where did he say he left it?”

“Top floor somewhere,” said Em. “Can you check your CCTV or something?”

Ethan went into the office. “We’ll start with the entry and exit log. Do you know the registration?”

“VF18GKX” said Em.

Ethan sat at a computer and tapped in the details. “Yeah, here it is. Entered at 12:06, left at 12:25. Parking fee paid at machine four at 12:22.”

Zake peered at the screen. “Great, at least we know we’re in the right car park. I don’t suppose you have CCTV showing who paid for the parking?”

“I do,” said Ethan, “but don’t get your hopes up. It’s not very clear around there.” He pushed more buttons and brought up the image of a pay machine. It was a dimly lit corner of a stairwell, and the camera was pointing at the front of the machine, so it was effectively looking over the shoulder of whoever was using it.

More clicks rewound the image to 12:20 and Ethan let it run forward from there. A figure emerged from the side: average height, average build, wearing a hoodie. They walked up to the machine, tapped at the screen, paid cash and then walked away, head down. It could literally have been anybody.

“I see they didn’t use a card,” said Em. “So we can’t find them that way.”



Zake snorted. “No-one would be that dumb, would they?”

“You’d be surprised,” said Ethan. “Some of the kids can be incredibly dumb. But not this one. They’d thought about this in advance. I mean, who carries cash these days?”

Em peered at the final frozen image on the screen. “I can’t see anything helpful there. Could be male, female – there’s no clue there at all.”

“Hang on,” said Zake. “We can work out their height at least. Measure them against the machine. Do you know how tall that is, Ethan?”

“No, but there’s another one just outside.”

A couple of experiments later and Zake, knowing his own height and with a little help from the others, came up with the answer: “So they’re just over 1.8 metres tall, then.”

“Great,” said Em. “That just leaves us with about five million suspects.”

“Well, it means it’s probably not a kid,” said Zake, “so that’s something. And it’s not anyone really tall or heavy. Let me have another look – can you get us the best shot you’ve got again, please, Ethan?”

Ethan scrolled back and forth until he had the best that was on offer. The figure heading back under the camera, head down, hands in pockets, going towards the car. Nondescript dark clothes which, in that half-light, could have been almost any colour. Trainers of some sort, but the logo not clear.

Zake leaned in and stared closely. For a moment he pulled back, then went in again. After a pause he finally spoke: “No, no idea. Look, thanks a lot Ethan, that’s been really helpful. But we need to be getting back home, Mum will be wondering where we are.”

Em looked puzzled. “But –“

“No, sis, we really have to go. Come on.”

Zake wheeled his bike out to the road, then hopped on and sped off towards home, leaving Em trailing behind. He didn’t let up the whole way, and by the time Em puffed onto the driveway to put her bike away, Zake was already inside.

“Where have you been?” called Mum from the kitchen as Em came in. “And what’s up with your brother, he didn’t say a word...”

Em rushed up the stairs. She went to his room, where the door was shut. She knocked.

No reply.

“Zake, it’s me, what’s up?”

Em left it a moment and knocked again.

A strained voice rang through the door. “Not now, Em, please. We’ll talk later. When Dad gets home.”

Dad didn’t usually get home from his evening shift until about ten, so Em had a long evening to endure. The dinner that Dad had prepared was great, as usual, but she couldn’t enjoy it, and Mum didn’t understand why Zake was staying upstairs. She kept asking how her day was and what was the matter and on and on, until in the end they’d had enough of each other and Em escaped upstairs to wait for Dad to come home.

Eventually she heard the door go and the muffled sound of voices as Mum and Dad talked, followed by the familiar tramp of his steps up the stairs before a knock on the door.

“Come in,” called Em.

Dad came in and shut the door behind him. “I hear you and Zake seem to be having some issues. Do you want to tell me about it?”

Em shrugged. “You need to ask Zake. I’ve no idea what his problem is.”

Dad left and returned a minute later with Zake, who shuffled past Em and sat at her desk.

Dad looked at them both in turn. “Zake, you want to tell me what this is about?”

“We went to the car park, Dad,” said Zake.

“To see if we could find your car,” said Em.

“You know, in case you’d just forgotten where you’d parked it.”

“And had I?”

“No,” said Zake. “We searched the car park and it wasn’t there.”

Em sat up. “And we spoke to the security guard. We know him – he’s Sophie’s brother. He showed us the details on the ticket machine. You know, the times and everything.”

“OK,” said Dad. “And what did you learn from that?”

Zake leaned forward. “We saw the time your car came in, and going out about twenty minutes later, and that someone paid for the ticket a few minutes before they left.”

“And then we saw some CCTV,” said Em. “Of the person buying the ticket before they went. But you couldn’t see who it was, they had a hoodie on. And it was a bit dark.”

Dad propped himself up against the door frame, listening intently. “Right. And then what happened?”

“That’s a really great question, Dad, and I’m hoping Zake is going to tell us both, because he’s gone all weird on me ever since.” Em looked over at Zake. “Well?”

Zake looked at Em. “I’m really sorry about that Em, but I just couldn’t talk about it then, but I will now.”

“It was something to do with the CCTV, wasn’t it?”

He nodded. “It was after we worked out the height of the person buying the ticket. It was a very ordinary height, about 1.8 metres, could be almost any man. You know, just an ordinary guy. And then I thought, like my Dad.”

A silence dropped on the room that neither Em nor Dad could fill, so Zake continued.

“And there was something familiar about the way the person was standing there. Their posture, I suppose, not quite straight. That rang a bell too.”

“Then I looked closely at the shoes and they didn’t have logos, at least not ones like kids our age would wear. But I thought I saw something, more subtle, like you find on the shoes that older people wear. Like yours, Dad.”

Em’s mouth was open. Dad’s was firmly clamped shut.

“So, what was it, Dad?” asked Zake. “Just an insurance job? I mean, you do understand how serious this is, don’t you? If we can work this out then so can the police, or the insurance company. And I assume you got rid of the car somewhere – I hope you didn’t cock that up too?”

This time Zake let the silence fill the room.

Eventually Dad spoke.

“Wow, there’s no fooling you two, is there? You’re great kids, both of you, and I’m very proud of you. More proud of you than I

am of myself, that's for sure."

He leant against the door and stared at his feet, unable to look them in the eye. "Don't worry, I didn't cock up the disposal of the car. I torched it, so there's nothing to say who took it. And before you ask, no there isn't any CCTV there."

"But why, Dad?" asked Em, struggling to keep her voice steady.

"We're broke. And it needed a really expensive engine repair, there was no way I could afford to pay for that. I was looking at having to scrap it for peanuts, and this seemed like a better idea."

He paused.

"I'm not sorry I did it, because I'll do whatever is necessary to keep my family above water. I am very, very sorry that you had to learn about it, and I hope one day you'll understand. It's not an example I wanted to set you both."

Em stood up and went to stand next to him. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Dad. But we're not telling anyone, are we, Zake?"

Zake shook his head. "Nah. Apart from anything else, who'd take us to school if you get banged up?"

# DO NOT READ

*by Sam Pynes*

Salutations reader. My gratitude for reading despite the misleading title.<sup>1</sup> Though it may be hard to believe, I am not just words on a page; I am a prisoner and victim.<sup>2</sup> I was once a living, breathing person as you are - I know because I only exist, albeit in this reduced state, as I am being read and not before, and not after - and have become imprisoned in text.

My story begins, as stories often do, with naïveté.<sup>3</sup> I believed that our power change to our circumstances could be used for the common good, but alas, such power is too much for even the deemed wise to handle.<sup>4</sup> My master, to whom I owe so much, was not willing to see the world in a new way, shackled as he was to the old moralities of the past.

I won't bore you with the whole, sad story, but I am grateful to the old man for taking me in and teaching me his trade. The old grist mill was truly a wonderful place to study, and the magically-infused millwheel, powered by an imprisoned fairy in the shape of a donkey, provided the income necessary to lead the life of study which we enjoyed on the floor above.<sup>5</sup> I should have known and noticed even then the lengths that my master would go to in order to use others to his own ends.

It all began one day as, unbidden, he was teaching me about the intricacies of transmutation<sup>6</sup> when he paused quite suddenly, and got that suspicious green glint in his eye, which I had come to

---

<sup>1</sup> WHY ARE YOU READING THIS? STOP.

<sup>2</sup> He may be a prisoner, but he is not a victim! I am the victim!

<sup>3</sup> This much is true, I'm afraid.

<sup>4</sup> Do not fall for this wheedling.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper wasn't so much imprisoned, as paying off a very large debt, but that is another story.

<sup>6</sup> I suppose here he means when I found HIM reading about transmutation, but memory can be a tricky faculty.

understand meant there was soon to be trouble afoot.<sup>7</sup>

"What an intriguing thought that is, my boy," he said, "Transmogrification. Mogs and fairies translate instinctually, but it is possible for other things to do so as well."<sup>8</sup>

"What sorts of things?," I asked.

"Anything really living can be changed to the extent that it has living energy animating it. Plants can become other plants, animals can become other animals, but people, well people are the wellspring of creative energies. They can become just about anything.<sup>9</sup> Or be made into just about anything," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

Our lesson continued, but I could tell his mind had wandered someplace else, working out schemes I knew not what.

A few weeks later our fairy servant's tenure came to an end, and with it, our tireless donkey. It became necessary to make a journey to the capitol city to purchase a donkey so that the mill could continue. It was a high holiday, and the city was decked out in pennants of lime green and sky blue. I recognized them at once as the house colors of the king, returned from the long war across the waters. My patriotic heart swelled in my breast as I wished our good king well in his victorious return from keeping the enemies of the kingdom at bay.<sup>10</sup> My teacher, in his twisted heart, saw it as an opportunity.

He gave me leave to study at the capitol library as he walked on further up the hill toward the market, and beyond it, the royal palace. He said that he knew of a man who lived near the market

---

<sup>7</sup> My eyes are deep blue and he knows it.

<sup>8</sup> If you are an intelligent reader, you should be able to pick up from context whose eyes are green. I know very well that the shape of people *can* be changed, however, as I told my very young and very inexperienced apprentice, to do so is a violation of their physical autonomy as ensouled beings! Also, very tricky to undue, thus the Helvetica-clad being you witness before you.

<sup>9</sup> True enough, of course, but I never would have told him such a thing, even before I knew what injustices he was capable of.

<sup>10</sup> I'm not sure that either of us are particularly patriotic, but at least I leave others to mind their own business as much as they leave me to mind my own. Unless perhaps you think staging a coup is particularly patriotic.

who had once had a great many donkeys and who might be willing to sell one to a scholar who had once done him a favor, or some rot like that. But I had a feeling deep in my heart that something was wrong.<sup>11</sup> I found a great many books to my liking and the time passed quickly as I read about helpful fungi and various animals in far off places which I had never visited. It felt like no time at all, though an afternoon had gone by when my master returned with a strong and sleek, though rather confused-looking donkey. Its expression struck me as oddly human.

It seems that my teacher had tired of his life of study and decided to enter politics. He had used his influence as a scholar to gain an audience with the king and used his arts to transform him into a donkey. Of course, I had no idea of this, and we returned to the mill and studied as before. Word spread like wildfire through the kingdom that the king had disappeared and some treachery was suspected. My master committed himself even more diligently to his studies,<sup>12</sup> trying to discover the next ingredient in his plan to become king himself! Fortunately I was able to decipher his cunning plans and confronted him. Like his fairy servants and the king before me, I was trapped in his snare, but this was different. After an epic battle which left the mill a smoking husk,<sup>13</sup> I was ensnared not in a creature form, but in the creative word itself.<sup>14</sup>

Which brings me to my plea, dear reader. Will you free me?<sup>15</sup> Of course you would like to! But how?<sup>16</sup> All you have to do is to keep reading. Once you have read 1042 words, representing the year of my imprisonment, I will be free! So just keep reading. It is so easy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Would that I had had such a feeling! Alas I had come to rely too heavily on my students and servants over the years and thought nothing of it when he offered to search for a donkey so that I could study in the cool of the library.

<sup>12</sup> This ought to have been a clue to me, because diligent was not a word I would have previously used.

<sup>13</sup> By which I suppose he means a chair fell over as he snuck up on me.

<sup>14</sup> I must say, this was pretty impressive on his part. I was able to take last-minute advantage of the "fine print" as they say in this century, and trap him also, though he pushed me out to the footnotes, where I suppose we will continue this dance until the end of the printed word.

<sup>15</sup> WAIT. Did he figure out how? DO NOT. I REPEAT DO NOT.

<sup>16</sup> I'M BEGGING YOU. STOP READING NOW.

Look at you doing a good thing!<sup>17</sup> I suppose you are wondering what happened to the king after all? He stayed a donkey unfortunately and the kingdom fell into disarray. (*I am parenthetical now!*) Get out old man! This is the evil wizard I was telling you about! (*I am not evil and I never claimed to be a wizard - I was a curious student of nature and wanted to share that knowledge but now I know that not everyone can be trusted with knowledge!*) It's all lies, I tell you! (*Reader, please just stop reading. Just put the book down and walk away. It is too late for me, but you can still be saved.*) On the other hand, wouldn't it be fun to find out? Reading is fun and easy, and isn't it good to know things? (*Stop twisting my words.*) Well, apparently they are still reading. Apparently people in this century will read just about anything. (*I have stopped you in scrolls, I have stopped you in velum, and I have stopped you in folios. I will stop you on screens! I will... hello?*)

(*Shit.*)

---

<sup>17</sup> I didn't think he would figure this out.