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Call For Submissions

Typehouse is a writer-run, literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We publish non-fiction, genre fiction, literary fiction, poetry and visual art. We are always looking for well crafted, previously unpublished writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. Please send all submissions as an attachment or within the body of the email along with a short bio to: typehouse@peoples-ink.com

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Colleen Jurkiewicz *lives in Port Washington, Wisconsin with her husband. She was a writer long before anyone paid her to do it, and will be one long after people stop buying her work. In addition to writing fiction, Colleen covers local news for various regional media outlets, and in her free time enjoys crafting, cooking, drinking cheap wine and walking along the shore of Lake Michigan. Find out more about Colleen at http://colleenjurkiewicz.com.*

The Summer of Her Long Hair

Colleen Jurkiewicz

In September of her sophomore year, Johanna dropped out of volleyball and stopped cutting her hair. She began to skip lunch, then breakfast, eating only in her room and only when she was alone. By the first day of the following summer break, she had plummeted from a hundred and forty pounds and now hovered between one-twenty and one-fifteen.

That was a hot June day, and school let out at noon. She left without saying good-bye to anyone. Her hair had grown to reach the top of her lower back and fell like a dark curtain from the crown of her head; it smothered her exposed neck and shoulder blades as she walked from school to the docks where the summer residents were beginning to hold court. The sun had no pity for Johanna during that two-mile walk down the shoulder of the highway that led into town, through the manicured shopping district and into the rougher skeleton of what had been Blitzman's Dairy Factory thirty years ago.

At school she had been wearing a cream-colored cardigan over her halter top. Now she peeled it off and left it in a ditch just outside of the center of town.

That was the day she got the job at Catskill's Diner, the old converted shanty by the water. No one knew her at Catskill's, though she'd lived just outside the riverside town all her life. The clientele there were all remnants of the town's former life, when it was an unrefined settlement of manufacturing employees and tradesmen, and she would have no reason to know them. Johanna's father was an orthodontist and she attended a private academy on a gated estate along the highway which drew students from the newer, wealthier resident families and the suburbs of Milwaukee and Madison. Johanna and her friends did not eat at places with misspelled, handwritten "Hiring – Girls Wantd" signs in the window.

Catskill's had a moderately sized dining room with a dozen peeling channel-backed booths in front of an old-fashioned counter, which was meant to look charming but only looked dirty. The place was mostly empty now, save for a few stoic patrons at the front counter who turned to size up the girl as she tripped the doorbell, stepping primly in from the heat and sunlight. A tall, older woman with bleached hair leaned against a paint-splattered soft drink machine in the corner, arms crossed. She wore a white uniform tied at the waist with a maroon apron.

"I want a job," Johanna told her.

"You ever waitressed?" the woman asked. Her nametag read *Tatum*.

"Yes, I have." Johanna felt a nervous trill as she did a quick mental review of the resume concocted the night before. She had never lied to a stranger before.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

Tatum smirked, silently acknowledging the lie. She had tired eyes and a bored, slouching expression. She smelled like cigarettes and her orange face was thick with grocery-store make-up, the kind Johanna's mother, Ruth, had bought for Johanna to play with when she was a little girl.

It had given her a rash, she remembered.

A sandy-haired young man dressed in a grimy white shirt poked his head through a half-window from the kitchen. "Tater-Tot, you gonna hire this girl?" He jerked his head backwards at Johanna and raised his eyebrows. He didn't just look at her; he was staring, letting his lazy gaze linger on every part of her face, shoulders and neck.

She could not stare back. She wasn't strong enough.

"Screw you, Angelo," Tatum snapped. She looked wearily at Johanna and fumbled around in her apron. "The cooks are going to try to date you, just so you know. That a problem?"

Johanna shook her head.

Tatum produced a flimsy cigarette and lighter from her pocket. "Well," she said. "It can be fun here." Then she sighed, as though to imply that yes, it *could* be fun, but it wasn't, and this was just another of life's indelicate realities. "You can make good money. The tourists don't tip well, but our regulars are good people and they treat you right if you treat them right."

"I learn quickly." Johanna did not have any idea if this was true or not.

"Okay," Tatum said without interest, lighting the cigarette. "Well, we're awful short-staffed. Some little slut ran out on her shift last night."

"Was it Bridget?" asked one of the men at the counter, taking a sip from his coffee. "I knew she wouldn't last. Randy, what'd I say the other day – I said I'll pay you ten dollars if that Mexicali hooker lasted the rest of the week. I said that, didn't I?"

"Shit, of course it was Bridget. I think she took one of the cooks with her – they had been screwin' around – but Angelo can just get another one from Milwaukee. They grow on the trees down there." Tatum took a drag of her cigarette and addressed Johanna. "You can start tomorrow. We'll put you on the eleven-to-seven shift to start with. I'm Tatum and I'll be your boss – owner lives in Florida. Jew, you know. You'll be on your own most of the time. We'll pay you in cash, because what we do here is none of the government's business." She coughed violently into her fist. "I'll train you for two days and then you'll be on the floor, making your own tips."

She paused, expecting questions. Johanna had none. Her head was still filled with the words *your own*. Your own, your own, your own.

"We're not going to have any trouble, are we?" Tatum asked. "With your parents?"

Johanna gave her response on her way out the door, not interested in having a conversation. "My parents are gone."

The next day, Johanna wore black pants, a white polo shirt and cheap ballet flats from Target. They were all old clothes, just this side of being donated, and she thought it would help her fit in. When Tatum saw her, she looked down at her shoes and said, "Honey, them sparkly shoes are real cute, but let me tell you something – I tell all the girls this – if you wanna waitress seriously…"

And she gestured meaningfully with the smoldering butt of her cigarette, like an evangelist preaching the Gospel. "…you wanna get yourself a good, comfy pair of shoes."

At that moment, Johanna wanted more than anything in the world to be like Tatum, steady and strong and sensible, the sort of woman who knew how to arm herself with appropriate footwear.

"Got an awful lot of hair." Tatum reached out to grope Johanna's long black tresses. When she blinked, her eyelashes stuck together for a brief moment, strained by clumps of cheap mascara. "I never could get mine to grow in thick like that."

Johanna didn't say anything.

"Tie it up," Tatum ordered, turning away. "People don't pay for hairy food."

Tatum's voice was like tobacco; everything else was like leather, hard and tan. She was a person that wouldn't break if struck; she was made of stone. Johanna was jealous; most of the time, she felt like porcelain. And so over the next few months she did everything as Tatum did it, mimicking the woman's actions and speech patterns like a child aping her mother's posture, hoping that maybe if she pretended, porcelain could turn to stone.

* * *

Johanna had no prior work experience. Her parents forbade her to get a job, even a summer one. "You have a job," her father always said. "Being a student. Being a kid. That's your job."

Johanna had never understood the existential despair of the unemployed. She was baffled by people who got fired and turned to drinking or beating. *So what,* she had always thought. *So you lost something.*

But now she no longer felt like a student and she no longer felt like a kid. The identity she thought was permanently her own had faded like a summer tan. There was no trace of it left. And so she learned that identities, like everything else, are just on loan from the universe for a little while, and they can always be taken away.

Her mother, Ruth, had a tumor the size of a very small ping-pong ball at the base of her spine. Her general practitioner thought it was a muscular cramp and diagnosed sciatica; only after months of weekly chiropractor visits had the doctor ordered body scans from an oncologist, and by the time they found out at the beginning of last school year, it was too late to do much of anything. They tried, valiantly, of course – doctors always try. Johanna knew that now, because that's what they're paid to do, even when the trying makes everything worse, even when it would be better to recognize when a thing is done and lost.

Ruth began an aggressive treatment of radiation and chemotherapy, since the tumor could not be extracted from its delicate position by surgical means. Her husband took time off work to drive her to and from treatment in Madison, and they usually did not arrive home until late into the evening. Friends at school asked Johanna about her mom and their parents dropped off casseroles at the house. Johanna prayed very hard.

Nine months later the treatment had proved unsuccessful in shrinking Ruth's tumor markers. Chemotherapy was ravaging her body and laying waste to her soul. She had no hair left, not on her head, not on her face, not in her nostrils. She was sick all the time and she wept often and for no reason. She thought she was dying and sometimes she acted like she wanted to.

Johanna could not remember the day when she decided that her mother's disease was no longer a misfortune but a horror and a bore. She could not remember the day she decided that God did not exist. She could not remember the day she let her anger and fear turn inward, making her thin. She could not remember the day she stopped eating. She was only a child, after all. She did not recognize important things when they happened.

When Johanna looked at her mother now she felt no sympathy, only an echo of compassion that was jagged with disgust. Ruth had not died, and she had not gotten better. She lingered somewhere in between wellness and death, and she held Johanna and her father there with her in this unbearable limbo where

movement was impossible, where no one could go forward.

Ruth wept often and spoke constantly about dying. She canceled all her magazine subscriptions. She stopped taking pictures because she had always said that pictures would make her happy in her old age, and now old age was something she had given up on.

She looked at Johanna differently. She said good-bye with her eyes every time they fell on her daughter's face. "What will you do when I'm gone?" she kept saying. "What will you do without your mother?"

"I couldn't go on without you," Johanna would say, but it was a lie.

* * *

After ten weeks at Catskill's, Johanna had scars up and down her arms from where she had been burned by hot plates. She had them on her fingers where she had slipped slicing lemons. She had them on her sides, from the heavy ice buckets that she perched against her hip as she carried them up from the basement. She had bunions on her feet from standing all day, and her hands dried out, cracked and bled from the homemade water-and-bleach solution used to clean the tables. She began to wear heavy make-up to work and it felt good, thick and greasy over the contours of her face, and when she caught sight of herself in the wall-length mirror behind the counter, there was no recognition. And all the while her hair kept growing, thicker and longer and wilder.

All the cooks except Angelo were illegal, because it was easier to pay them in cash and treat them poorly that way. The Mexicans were friendly to Johanna; she understood a small amount of their language because she studied Italian at school. They flirted with her, teased and protected her, calling her *mi novia* and constantly making her food. She laughed at the jokes they made – jokes she didn't understand. She wore sneakers every day, and knew she looked ridiculous in the uniform they gave her – long, white and starchy – but it made her feel sexy all the same.

Johanna didn't like the sandy-haired cook, Angelo, and when he would greet her at the beginning of her shift, she glared at him coolly. As the head of the kitchen he was busy, making the soups, doing inventory and managing the staff, so while he stared like the rest they had never had much chance to speak, thankfully, until one evening in late August when her hair was at its longest.

It was the beginning of her Thursday night shift; she was on closing duty alone, and he came up behind her as she stacked away the lunch menus beneath the countertop. The sun was high and glaring at the empty dining room through the haze of the unwashed windows. She heard the kitchen door open behind her and smelled rancid cigarettes.

"Yo," he said, reaching out to touch her lower back. She spooked like a horse, overturning the pile of menus onto the floor as she whipped around to face him. He smiled wide, his whole face illuminated by mirth, and he stepped closer, pinning her against the edge of the countertop with the front of his thigh.

"You like to ignore me, don't you, Miss Johanna?" He rested his palms against the countertop, the inside of his elbows pressing on her hips.

Her name sounded strange when pronounced in his mouth. It made her resentful. *Give me my name back,* she thought.

"What?" he asked, and bent his head so low she could feel his breath. "You don't like white guys?"

She wished she could lie. Or she wished she could at least be tough, like Tatum. But she was neither of these things – she was not wily and she was not strong. She was only sad. And there was no power in sadness.

"You don't know that I don't," she said.

He smirked. "Tatum may not know who you are."

She inhaled.

"But I do. Your dad did my braces." He clicked his tongue and smiled wider, emphasizing his straight, white teeth. "See?"

A hot, powerful surge of panic made its way from her heart to her gut. She jerked her hands, trying to move away as a strong feeling of nausea brewed deep within her, where Angelo had just put his hand.

"Aw, come on, baby," he said, gently tightening his grip.

Because she turned her face his lips landed on her upper neck, just below her ear, but all the same it was disgusting, the nearness of him, the unsolicited intimacy, as he pressed her against the counter. "No." She shoved him – hard - extending her hands against his chest with more force than she had ever mustered before. She inhaled deeply as he stumbled back and inches were created between their bodies. The world became heavier again; it stabilized around her.

"Okay. Easy." He said it like an apology, holding up his hands. The playfulness was gone from his face; she had shocked him into politeness.

So there was power in anger, she realized.

He backed away, hands still up, like she was holding a weapon to him. "Easy…look, I'm sorry, I was just – playing."

She stared at him for a long moment that turned into two, then three. Morality, she had learned, was not as simple as the Book of Leviticus made it seem. A lie or a sin, if given enough time to ferment, could morph into something different.

She grasped the sides of his neck, thrusting her face into his; he cupped his hands beneath her chin, like she was a gift he was receiving, and tore at her mouth with his lips and tongue. Her first instinct was to clench her muscles, back up and push away, but she fought it and pressed herself harder against him, like he was bad-tasting medicine she just needed to gag down. She had never been kissed before, and it felt wholly unnatural, so everything that he did she mimicked, and when he began to slide his lips down her chin, then her neck and finally to the sunken skin and jutting bones of her clavicle, she tipped her head back.

"Whoa." Then he stopped, startled, and held her at arm's length. "Hey, so, how old are you?"

"You don't care about that," she breathed.

"Yeah, but you're, like, churchy and stuff." He pointed at her neckline. "Shit. It's like a sign from God. I'm not going to hell for a flat-chested teenager."

She reached up to touch the necklace that hung there, a pewter Crucifix her mother had given her – she couldn't remember when, or why.

"You Catholic?" he asked.

"I don't believe in God," she answered.

"Then why do you wear it?"

To solicit tip money from Christian customers. Because her other necklaces were too nice to wear here at this dump. Because she had once loved God, and if you love someone once you can never truly be rid of them.

These excuses were all fragments of fact. When pieced together, they constituted less than the real truth.

"I wear it to remember an old friend," she said.

"Did they die?"

"No." She shook her head. "They're just gone."

"Are they coming back?"

The bell on the door jingled. A customer was coming in, the first of the night. Angelo looked over at the door but Johanna didn't move. Her fingers were still stroking the corpse of God.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know if they'll come back."

Johanna returned home late from work that night. An unexpected dinner rush had left her exhausted, aching and rich. She sat down on the gleaming linoleum of the kitchen floor and counted her tips in the moonlight – $96.45, bringing her earnings that summer to over one thousand dollars.

The feel of the money in her hands made her heart beat fast, first with excitement, then with panic. One thousand dollars. More than enough. She got a half-empty bottle of Maker's Mark from the dining room and finished it, right there on the kitchen floor. A night of firsts, she thought – first kiss, first drink – and she wasn't sure if she would survive any of it, but she wasn't sure, either, if she wanted to.

She must have passed out, because when she floated gently back into consciousness she was still there on the cold kitchen floor, her head now in her mother's lap. She was vaguely aware of Ruth's fingers in her hair, stroking gently, and of a pungent, rancid smell.

She had vomited all over her mother's legs.

"Oh, God," she moaned. "I'm awful."

"You are never awful, Johanna." Ruth's words worsened the nausea. Love without reason, without motive – it was confusing, it was sickening, it was a perversion, Johanna thought, and she could not understand it at all.

She let the fullness of her weight fall against Ruth's shins and tried to match her breathing to her mother's. She did not know how long they stayed like this, but it was long enough to make her heartbeat normal again, long enough for the sun to rise, long enough to Johanna to realize that the world was still spinning, and she spinning with it.

"Am I going to die?" she murmured.

"No," Ruth said. "You'll live to see a hundred more nights like this one, baby."

"You're not mad?"

"No."

"I made a thousand dollars this summer." She closed her eyes.

"That's a lot."

"I was going to leave." Every word was a struggle, a little battle, but she worked hard to expel them, to vomit them up. "I just want this to be over. I just want you to die, Mama."

Johanna reached up to grasp the fingers entangled in her hair, as if Ruth were the Pope or a deity from which she was begging indulgence. Is it enough, she wondered – breath in your body? Life, and nothing more?

"And are you?" Ruth asked. "Going?"

"Do you tell the truth when you're drunk?" Johanna ignored her mother. "Do you mean the things you do?"

"Yes," Ruth answered, with a swift certainty. "At the time. At the time, you mean them."

"I can't go on without you," said Johanna, and she meant it.

"I know, baby." Ruth's hands didn't even flinch.

That morning Johanna cut her hair with a pair of scissors from the kitchen. She washed the make-up from her face and went to bed naked and clean, with scars up and down her skin. They never saw her at Catskill's again.

Margaret Mary Riley is a student in the deep South. She has been published by InPatient Press, Corvus, and Subliminal Interiors. She has a blog at: http://rileymargaretmary.wordpress.com/

Mental House Blues

Margaret Mary Riley

INPATIENT CARE UNIT – the paint
peeled and
cr
acking
showing strips of old wallpaper, and beneath that
flakes of plaster that fell onto my face in the night,
but in the afternoon
we crowded around the solitary room
dead bolted, crouched naked, bleeding from our eyes
"God lives in your eyes" "I know"
I leaned against the door, slamming my fingers,
the Psychiatrist
pushed his boney hands through my brain
as Gabby, the secret hero of this poem, rumbled and slammed her wrists against
her face
kissing her arms until her skin soared open
kissing the window of that bolted room
I was never as naked as she
Junkies clawed at the couches, rolling across them
needle scarred, using toenails as needles
"I want my Fucking Fix" - Samuel mumbles, crack broken teeth, gnawing his lips
"You have had a brain attack"
the Psychiatrist draws a line over my neck and wrists,
salvation prescriptions and bullshit admirations.
I am on a stretcher,

and

this is what they call a Confession.

4 a.m.,

Margaret Mary Riley

4 a.m., ignoring science –
my mother tried to get away,
she tucked herself tight under the kitchen table
a table is a table is a suicide note
I tucked myself tight under the same table 20 years later, a table
is a table is a table is a stretcher through the ICU
4 a.m., ignoring science –
I fondle the needle scars of a junkie as we count the pieces of wallpaper
that float across my face at night in the mental hospital, and their tables.

and
now
5 a.m., ignoring science –
my mother calls me "Your Eyes are full of God"
a phone call is a phone call is a suicide note.

Jacob Harris *is an Australian writer who lives in Melbourne, Victoria with his wife and young son. He enjoys canoe building, haircuts, cigars and writing short fiction.*

City Bird

Jacob Harris

When I took the job, I was under no illusion it would be an easy ride. Everyone hates door-to-door sales, and that knowledge adds apprehension to tedium. In a city this size, no one has the time or inclination to stop and chat with a stranger; it's all crime rate and grit and stick-to-your-own. The little old ladies, who in other towns might like to invite you in for a cup of tea, all have fearful eyes and bars on their windows. For hours I'd had doors slamming in my face. I had clambered up and down innumerable dingy stairwells, full of hot air pumped in from the backsides of air conditioners, until I was a human sous-vide in a polyester suit with a folder of carpet samples in hand. So when this smiling pig-dog welcomed me in, I didn't think twice.

His face was at once plump and vicious. With black little eyes: two pinched raisins in a lump of cold mashed potato. Of course I only took stock of these things as the front door clicked shut behind me. In the short time I'd been in this line of work, I'd learned the first thing to look at when invited into a place, was the floor. And this one was probably the worst I'd seen. It looked like he'd been slaughtering small forest creatures on it. The whole place smelled like death and animal grease. The burning December sun blazed in through the pigeon-shit-spattered single window, and brought no joy into this small, grey world. It just augmented the stink; gave it arms to choke you with.

I'd been preoccupied with the prospect of making a sale. After funnelling all my money into a failed enterprise, I was struggling to keep up payments on the accumulated debt. Now I found myself perched on a small wooden chair, staring into the abyss, trying to sell new carpet to an animal at $20 a metre. "Tho…" He spoke in a dribbling lisp. "Let me thee your thamples." White flecks of spittle settled on his diminutive chin, as his tongue stabbed at the air. His stocky frame was enveloped in a thick layer of body fat that hung in curtained folds from his arms and sides. Despite this, he somehow retained a certain agility when he moved, like some grotesque belly dancer.

In the three days training I had had, my employers had taught us about body language. "Be open," they'd told us, "don't cross your arms or legs." I opened my sample folder in the crook of my left arm and made an awkward sweeping gesture with my right. "Do you prefer short pile or plush?" The words came out in an almost comical warble. I was a flighty bluebird in cheap pin stripes.

Not that I'd ever seen one. I had never left this city; this sprawling metropolis whose monochromatic buildings rise stoic and sombre through the smog, like looming granite monoliths; whose traffic lumbers like a great migratory herd edging through the valleys, and where each morning a cacophony of sirens and car horns rises in the thick city air like the song of a thousand metal larks. It is a warren for the swarming millions of little grey rabbits, who flock together to copulate and collectively shun original thought.

For a while now I'd been coming to terms with the idea of working my life away in some banal job. You see, I'd spent the previous 15 years developing an invention I like to call the Parasuit. Comprised of an ultra-light aluminium frame with a gossamer thin polyester sheet spread across it, this contraption folds up neatly into a custom made pouch in the back of a re-enforced suit jacket. The wings can be deployed at any time with a sharp downward motion of both arms, and are controlled by a network of strings found in the breast pockets. Although the wearer may appear to have rather poor posture, it is not at all cumbersome and, by all outward appearances, is a rather smart suit jacket. I was quite sure it would make me very wealthy. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm for the Parasuit was not shared by others.

"I do like a plush pile but I find it'th much harder to clean." I shuddered. To think what he must clean out of his carpets was enough to drain the colour from my well-groomed countenance. I imagined him on all fours, face covered in gore, going at the carpet with a scrubbing brush, all wide-eyed and crazy, teeth gnashing like a maddened baboon. Any moment now, I thought, he's going to drop this façade and clock me with something. Then he'll drag me into the back room and… it was too awful. A panicked stallion galloped in my chest. I glanced back to the door, locked and bolted. Just play it out.

"That used to be the case," My exterior clicked onto autopilot. I couldn't tell you how many times I had sat in front of the mirror and rehearsed these lines, honing my song, "but our new premium range of plush piles have been lanolated to make cleaning a breeze." As I mouthed the words I watched him watch me. Was that a smirk playing on the soft corners of his jowls? He was sweating into his once-was-white singlet. Was he nervous? It could have been the heat. Hard to be sure. Damn it! I wish I knew what was going on

behind those cold black stones.

"Really," he cocked his head to one side, " ith that tho?" He really was a pig-dog. I just knew that at any moment he could lurch forward and take me in his jaws and break my neck. Then he'd pick my pretty feathers from his teeth; farting, unapologetic, gauche. I could feel it in my hollow little bones. I should take flight. But a small bird in an enclosed room is wont to slam against the proverbial pane.

"Yes absolutely, it's the natural power of lanolin!"

"And what ith that?"

The atmosphere in this claustrophobe's sarcophagus began to congeal; it became viscous in my airways. Not that I wasn't used to small spaces. This whole city was a vast maze of conjoined small spaces. Small rooms, small hearts, small lives. Bantam and brevity. But this was different; his presence filled the room somehow. He circled me from every angle. I felt dizzy.

"Sorry, what?" The stallion was bolting.

"I thaid, what ith that?" He repeated it slowly, deliberately, and not without suspicion.

Was there something on my face? On my tie? I checked. Nothing. Oh God. A single print hung from the wall behind him; a black and white photo of a muscular man cradling a baby, blown up to A3 and moulding inside its Perspex frame. What the hell kind of freak was this guy anyway? That's the thing about this city; there are freaks everywhere. Miscreant lurkers. They blend into the surroundings, though. Bred here. It's like you can't even see them unless you look straight at them, and then bam, there you are staring some freak in the eye and thinking, "what the hell kind of freak is this guy anyway?" He might be your neighbour, or live down the street. He might be your meal ticket, or your undertaker, you just don't know. You don't have a clue about anyone. We all live side by side in autonomous oblivion, constantly rubbing shoulders and flinching with each accidental contact. Focus!

"I do beg your pardon, what is what?" I was pissing him off and there was nothing I could do to stop myself, like a falling dream.

"What ith lanolin?"

He must be toying with me now. But that's what dogs do right? Maim their prey, then play with it until their hunger gets the better of them. Or is that just a cat thing? Like those city cats, alley cats I guess; matted fur on broken faces, always fighting and screwing in the dark places. Howling in the night like medieval torture victims. "Oh, um. It's a wool by-product. Erm, an oil. Marvellous properties."

Something started vibrating and rattling on the other side of a small archway, obscured from view by one of those plastic curtains with the multi coloured strips.

"It'th the fridge," he said in monotone. I must've been staring.

"Oh, ha ha ha! Yes of course." I was slipping. Was his hunger about to take over? Stick to the script. "Spills can be cleaned up easily with a damp cloth, and dust particles won't stick to the carpet fibres."

"Tho it'th sheep oil ith it? Animal greathe?" And there it was: animal grease! Why the hell would this guy want a goddamn lanolated carpet when, if my olfactory perceptions were to be trusted, his whole apartment was already stewing in animal grease. It was hot enough too. I was on a steady broil.

"Hmm, yeah look," time to take radical action, "I guess it is just animal grease. You're probably not interested right? I'm sorry for wasting your time." I closed my sample folder and got up to leave, but he cut me off at the pass and stood in front of me- arms raised like an angry grizzly bear.

"Whoa! Thit down, won't you. I do need new carpet, look." He gestured toward that terribly degraded floor covering, with its sinister stains. I sat back down, clutching my folder to my chest. There was no escape. This was my fate: I was to be consumed by this gargoyle.

"Are you alright?" he asked. " You look a little pale."

" Ha, ha, yes quite, thankyou." Oh God, oh God!

"It'th jutht that, animal greath, you know like tallow, it interethts me."

How can tallow possibly be of interest to anyone unless you're a raving mad sociopath who likes to dig his claws into the soft fatty deposits on a salesman's belly, tear it out and, by the smell of things, smear it every-goddamned-where!

"Oh," I felt a tic in my right eye. The fridge in the next room was preparing for take off.

"May I show you?" He grimaced. He moved toward the kitchen with a dancer's grace. Reaching his arm back through that plastic curtain, he revealed a large meat hook in his right hand.

Airways constricting. Fly little bluebird. When I tried to stand the second time I did so too fast and lost my footing. I spun around in an involuntary pirouette, and just had time to see my heavy folder fly through the air before the blackness took hold.

The hot wind blowing in through the broken window brought me back to the waking world. My folder must've gone right through it. The beastly creature looked even worse in full light, and not the least bit pleased about my act of vandalism. He seemed unsure of what to do next. He looked from me, to the hook in his hand, to the window, and back to me. His face tightened into a grimy mess of wrinkled flab as he made across the room for me. Before I could think, I rolled out of his path, jumped onto the chair I'd been sitting on, and in one fluid motion launched myself through the broken window, expecting to land on the fire escape below.

I braced myself for the impact. It didn't come. I opened my eyes to find there was no fire escape and I was hurtling at full speed to my certain demise. All at once, my heart lifted as I made a sharp downward motion with both arms. The Parasuit deployed at lightning speed and with a violent jerk caught me in an updraft blowing up the side of the building. I turned around just in time to see that pig dog's head sticking out his broken window, mouth agape as I was carried swiftly skyward.

I continued my ascent up the side of the building, then up further still, through the smog until I was gliding through the clear blue sky with the smog below me like a thick grey sea. I continued in this manner for an indeterminate length of time until eventually the smog began to thin and I could see a crisscross of green and yellow paddocks below me. It was only now that I remembered the network of directional strings in my breast pockets. To an onlooker I must have seemed like some kind of flying raptor playing an imaginary piano as my fingers worked at those marvellous strings. I flew here and there through that

brilliant sky until I tired and eventually came to rest on the top of a grassy hill.

As I sat there and breathed the clean, fantastic air, I decided I would not return to the city. At least not yet. Instead I would continue in this direction, and seek out the places where bluebirds sing in the trees; for I had heard they were something to behold.

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In Yellow Chalk, The Café Sign

Jim Davis

said *Harvest Grain Griddlecakes* – I am surprised
again by language faults. Halved raw
almonds sprinkled over buttermilk pancakes.
She was wearing hummingbird earrings.
Listening to Solsbury Hill in the company of lovers.
The way they sit, his knee tight to her crotch, kitty-
corner, the third at their table uncomfortably wheezing.
Remembering Limerick, the first few drops from wash
on the line, unclipping clothespins under clouds. She leans
into him, sipping water from a glass through a straw.
Elsewhere, the Scanlon's sheep dog, Bailey, sinks
its teeth into the Collier's Pomeranian, Sheila, shredding
years of salted steps, exchanged envelopes over the fence
for what's gone and done in an instant.
She wanted a boyfriend with a car.
Loading my coffee with cinnamon, milk, drowning
flapjacks in margarine and maple. I spread
out in the rays of noon pouring through the window, better
than those days tied in knots among small shadows: curl
of the coffee mug handle, the radio knob's ellipse,
or below the brow of a girl who made a home for me

below her brow. It was a good place to live, however
dark and funny smelling, and besides, my hands
tend to splinter on the ropes.
The yellow dust of ages packed into bone.
Tonight, millennium birds
will be roasted and served beside russet potatoes,
which means, dear pancakes, that I am so hungry
for the present, I'll have to eat my past.
Red beating hearts at the honeysuckle birdfeed.

Rosh Hashanah

Jim Davis

Call me Adam, City, I harangue
the shofar, stiff with guilt
from collecting on a free soda coupon, tip big
so Future will allow me a moment with ash
boring municipal workers injecting pesticide
in the sidewalk trunks of grated ash. Crabapples
rotting in the parkway, crabapples hung over
cardboard/lipstick homemade NO PARKING signs
paper clipped to the barbed link-wire fence –
soft brown apples like baby-fists, not golden, not delicious
or the rats would've dug in by now. The place for chilaquiles
shut its awning eyes. Stagger toward me, DKNY
bone-tie, rich-drunk, listen: crying is the baby's punching
bag warble in the back of your gin-broken throat –
powerlines tethered to your wrists & nipples
as you sloppy-Scotch your shirt. To be me, you have to
remember the previous week's yielded
a first kiss twice – neither will know.
& though Barry's Drugs is playing jazz
between tracks of Nirvana's live album, shuffled,
& Barry's niece spins on a faded khaki mop, you will
bat your lashes, roll your tattoo sleeves, hum to
love myself, better than you
& motor on. Lilith, was that you on rollerblades
in a green bandana? Ordering omelet feta, banking
on Tesla's success in the Netherlands so I can live
when I feel like it. I listen to Elvis Costello & I have
given myself a ballpoint tattoo in the shops on Milwaukee
where bathroom use is mostly free. This is what's left

of the trumpet feast. Assorted pleasantries. Last night

I used an earwax candle, burned a patch of my strawberry hair.

Gio Clairval *is an Italian-born writer and translator who has studied and lived most of her life in Paris and now commutes between Italy and the UK. Since she started writing short fiction four years ago, she has sold more than 20 stories to magazines such as Weird Tales, Galaxy's Edge, Daily Science Fiction, Postscripts, and several anthologies. You can find her at http://www.gioclairval.blogspot.com/ and on Twitter: @gioclair.*

Ambrotype

Gio Clairval

Floorboards creak under my boots. Apart from the weak cone of light I am directing at the door, the landing is coated in darkness. I cannot chase away the image of Guillaume's blood-speckled handkerchief.

Earlier this evening, my ailing husband refused to quit his armchair to go to bed. He was coughing more than usual and must have been afraid of choking to death in his sleep. This thought fires my resolve. Riches await in this elegant house, jewels to pay for a doctor, and medicines, and a hotel in the Pyrenees, where Guillaume will breathe better. It will be good for the baby, too.

This place holds no secrets for me. Last week, during a dinner at my master's, Countess Irina Marinova complained about her maidservant, bedridden with a fever. The kind professor Lecanu said, "I could lend you my housemaid, Séverine, until your servant is serviceable once more." He didn't even ask if I minded. I was *lent*.

You don't lend a horse, do you? A horse is too personal, but domestics are replaceable; you use them till they wear out like old shoes. It serves me well though: I have now explored every cranny of Marinova's vast mansion.

And here I am, pushing in the door that leads to the drawing room.

This modern invention, the electric lamp I have "borrowed" from Professor Lecanu, barely works. The damned contraption produces a cone of light when you push the switch, and then the light goes out after a second—a flashlight indeed. I have to hit the switch repeatedly to see around me, and the battery is bound to last half an hour at most. It is better, though, than an easily snuffed candle or a cumbersome oil lamp.

A faint smell of well-greased leather orients me. The gleam of the flashlight leaps across the room and plays upon a tabletop inlaid with pearly stones. A fat briefcase shaped like a doctor's bag and belted with lanyards rests on the oval table. I noticed the bag just before going home yesterday, and it is still here, exactly in the same place. I finger the girdle at my waist for the appropriate pin. In a few seconds, I yank the flap open.

The now-wavering light reveals a tangle of jewelry and silverware, as though a previous housebreaker had scampered off without his haul.

I lift the huge bag. It is cumbersome, but I can carry it.

Footfalls from the room above startle me. I grab the bag and run out into the corridor. Candlelight wavers, scantly illuminating a person who is stepping down the stairway, a tall woman in peacock blue—only her dress is clear; her face remains obscured by some quirk of the shadows.

"*Jee-nne homme*?" the woman says with a heavy Russian accent.

The Countess! Heart thumping, I bolt in the opposite direction. My black jacket, trousers and floppy hat have led her to believe I am a man. I still have a chance to get away.

"Stop. I'm not going to hurt you."

I keep running, silverware tinkling and clanging inside the bag. I know the corridor turns twice and then ends. I should try the first door to my right, which leads to a bedroom with a window overlooking the front of the mansion. The facade offers toeholds, and the hooked rope I am carrying across my shoulder will come in handy, too.

The door is locked, and so are the second and the third. No time to crack a lock. I fumble with the next door-handle and the door opens. I flash my light. Burgundy velvet drapes cover one of the walls; pulled aside, they reveal a door instead of a window. A stairwell winds down. I smile at the heaven-sent surprise. One of the house's secrets escaped me after all.

Careful not to make noise, I ease the door shut behind me. An odor of mould fills my nostrils. I whip my flashlight in front of me. Little gleams wink through the shadows. The light circles around the bottom of the stairwell and catches on a door; I stumble down the steps. *Faster*! The flashlight battery will not last much longer.

This door must be the entrance to a cellar.

A second before the light dies, I catch sight of a boarded window to the left of the padlocked door. I use the biggest pin I am carrying to pry at the lower planks until two of them come away. Ice-cold air blows across me. I feel the edges of the frame and find no windowpanes—and no glass shards either.

A blackberry bush extends its thorny branches beyond the hole: the window opens on the ground-floor level, overlooking the rear gardens.

I could squeeze through the gap. Unfortunately, the bag, too wide at the bottom, will not fit.

Footfalls pound on the steps above me. I have no time to pry away any more planks. I hate to abandon my hard-won loot, but it cannot be avoided. I fish something out of the bag. A handful of jewels and a rectangular shape—a tiny tray, maybe—and slip everything into the satchel clipped to my belt. I hastily pile plaster chunks and broken boards over the bag. With a bit of luck, nobody will discover my treasure waiting under the heap of debris.

I unsling the rope from my shoulder, throw it out of the window, and crawl through the aperture, snagging my sleeve on the jagged boards.

Darkness lies before me. At any moment the Countess's mastiffs could emerge from the shadows of the trees.

After dashing across the park, I unroll the hooked rope, fling it, yank at it twice to make sure it is secure, and then I scale the garden wall. My pliers take care of the glass shards embedded in the concrete at the top. I pull the rope up, let myself fall on the flagstones, and, rewinding the rope, run around the corner into Avenue Elisée-Réclus, which faces the main entrance. My husband's old coat is bundled out of sight in the lower branches of an elm; I don the coat and dart away until a cramp in my side forces me to stop

and I sit on a low wall to catch my breath.

Fairy lights span the street. Grand festivities will soon celebrate the beginning of the second millennium, the triumph of progress and the marvels to come, just as the Universal Fair promises. I wrinkle my nose at the lit-up Eiffel Tower, a newly built monstrosity raising its tapered head over a sea of grey tin rooftops. Once the fair is over, they will at least tear that graceless thing down, to the joy of all Parisians. Instead of the ungainly steel construction, I picture an elegant glass spire, the symbol of a new Paris lit by electricity. I will gladly watch this unenlightened century die along with the gaslights. Despite my lowly station, I am not without education, and I agree with the illustrious artists who dubbed the Tour Eiffel, "*le déshonneur de Paris*."

I walk home, keeping to the shadows as much as I can, even though I risk meeting a ruffian's knife. The buildings seem to dance as one house retreats, creating a dark recess, and then the next pushes its belly forward, forcing me out into the bright cone of a streetlight. Even at this hour of night the Latin Quarter reeks of unwashed humanity, horse and dog excrement, boiled cabbage and cheap wine.
To escape, I need those jewels. My future—*our* future—lies beneath a heap of dust and rubble.

* * *

In our garret room, the embers of the hearth still glow. The air-choked gas jet splutters into a blue flame as I light it, illuminating whitewashed walls, a table, an armchair, a bed on cracked parquet. Guillaume, wrapped in the coat I bought him with last year's savings, dozes in the armchair, face as white as his shirt. I dab his forehead with a damp towel. My beloved poet, even before becoming ill with tuberculosis, has always harbored a fatigue of the soul. My former master, a doctor, warned me against marrying a man afflicted with *neurasthenia*, a dark despair with no apparent cause. But good food and fresh mountain air will heal my Guillaume's body and soul.

For now, we cannot afford a loaf of bread every day. And to think I was forced to leave a fortune in that house.

A book has fallen open at his feet. I pick it up. The cover is smooth black leather, the title embossed in gold: *Mystic Fles*h, by Marcel Batilliat. I have never seen this book in our room, and I would have noticed because I love books. In my spare time I used to read novel after novel in Doctor Martin's library, before I

left to marry Guillaume. I may be a servant, but I still cannot leave a book unopened.

I leaf through the pages and read:

... *Smothering serous phlegm like semi-fluid opals encasing minuscule coral twigs....*

A young man's fiancée is dying from consumption, and the fool licks her sputum. He loves her so much the mucus is like jewels to him. Nonsense. The deluded man will catch his sweetheart's illness for sure. Something as foul as consumptive effluvia cannot be compared to precious stones. And flesh is flesh, which can't be mystical in any way. I grimace and close the book. Reading this decadent literature will only add to his melancholy.

Poets! That which his flesh needs is food: rare steaks and strong red wine. And I need nutritious food, too. Stroking my belly, I wonder if I should tell him now. My breasts are tender and I recognize the signs; I was pregnant—and miscarried—two years ago. This baby is a miracle; Guillaume has had no strength to make love for months. It happened just before he fell truly ill. Yes, I should tell him in the morning.

I empty my satchel. Here it is, the only tangible result of my burglary: two rings with turquoises, a garnet necklace and an engraved-silver booklet. I flip the two leaves open. The booklet contains the portrait of a woman in an armchair.

Something is wrong with the woman's face. I study the portrait for a few seconds. It is an ambrotype, a memento mori: the photographer painted pupils on to the dead woman's closed eyelids. The photograph must have been taken more than twenty years ago as the ambrotype technique has been abandoned.

The woman's face looks vaguely familiar.

Guillaume stirs and calls. I slip the portrait into my coat pocket and hang the coat on the hook behind the cupboard door.

"I was worried," he says, "with all those people disappearing." He holds up a hand to stop my comments —we have already had this conversation. "Why are you dressed like a man, ma chérie? You look like a chimney sweep."

I should have changed while he slept.

“What's that belt you're wearing?... Séverine? I'm talking to you.”

“Paulette's putting together a show for the fire fighters' charity ball.”

“Again? And you come home at this hour of night?”

“It's not that late,” I lie. “It's only nine o' clock.”

It must be three in the morning.

Guillaume fumbles for his pocket watch but finds nothing. “Why did you take my watch?”

“You gave it to me for the pawnbroker. Have you forgotten?”

He stares at his long, pale hands. “You were with another man.”

The time of two heartbeats I cannot find anything to say.

He wipes his blood-flecked hand, staining the towel. “I know the money you earn isn't enough to buy the medicines, but I can't believe you've become... this.”

“You can't be thinking...”

He pushes away the curly strand of black hair covering his eye. “Give me a better explanation.”

My mind is empty, and I stand with dangling arms.

His voice rises. “I will never accept any cure, anything that comes from... dirty money.” Now he is shaking with rage.

He has taken my silence for a confession. How can he believe I have stooped to sell my body? Heat reaches my ears. He is high and mighty for a man whose wife must work; a man whose words are worth nothing, can buy us nothing. He lies abed and accuses me of whoring. My fingernails dig into my palms.

Now is not the time to tell him I am pregnant; he would not think the child his own and I have heard enough poison tonight.

Guillaume refuses to look at me. He claims fealty to the spirit of the revolutionary Commune, even if he was born the year after 1871, when Paris' streets filled with revolutionaries building barricades. Yet, despite his ideals, he remains thoroughly possessive, and jealous. So retrograde, so bourgeois.

I rinse my hands in the basin. We have no soap, not even the cheapest. Now that the embers have died, the room is arctic, and I can buy no wood. No wonder Guillaume's condition worsens every day. O dear soul, I regret my rage.

Blurred images whirl in my mind, scattering my thoughts. I see myself open the booklet and look at the dead woman: her painted eyes stare back with mute hunger. Where have I seen that face?

My husband's cough pulls me from my musings.

I help him to the bed, disrobe and climb in beside him. He rolls over as far as possible. I am so cold. I listen to his wheezing breath, and sleep eludes me.

Lying under the mite-eaten eiderdown, I think about the mansion and the abandoned jewelry. I do not want to end up a widow in the poorhouse, with my child toiling in a factory. I will take Guillaume to the Pyrenees. Life without him would be empty. He may be jealous, and he sulks most of the time, but when he smiles I forget we have no coal. His art does not pay the bills, yet his verses fill my heart. Without him, no-nonsense-me would be earthbound, and through his eyes I can see above the clouds. My love. My sweet, sweet poet. My poor melancholic angel.

He is so obstinate I foresee months of mulish silence.

Not the matter. I will save him in spite of himself.

* * *

Wednesday is my free day. In the morning, I put on Guillaume's cast-off coat again—even old and frayed it is so much warmer than my own—and take my spoils to the pawnbroker, but at the last moment I slip the portrait back into my pocket, convincing myself that pawning a dead woman's image is wrong.

A young boy who sells *Le Petit Parisien* shouts about one more skeleton fished out of the Seine, bones cleaned by greedy fish, or something else. The urchin's voice, made coarse by cigarettes and cheap eau-de-vie, spouts sensational headlines to counterpoint this tired century's death.

The pawnbroker's offer for the rings and necklace is ridiculous. I thrust my treasure back into my pocket. Surely I can find a better buyer, like that fence in Rue du Temple. Yes. I shall go next week.

The following morning I set off to work with my stomach tied up like an old skein of wool, but I smile at Guillaume when I leave.

As I step over the threshold of Marinova's mansion, I screw up my courage. I tie on my apron, push my hair under the cap. If only I could check on my haul right away. I need to be sure that the bag is still there before returning to retrieve it tonight. All I can think of are the jewels.

I dream of plunging my hands into the bag and feel pearls, sleek under my fingers. In my imagination, the gems become huge. Emeralds and rubies as big as quail eggs. Diamonds spitting light like spinning wheel fireworks. These are mere dreams. Somebody must have discovered my loot by now.

I remember flashing the light on the steps and seeing thick dust. The Countess must know the thief found the secret stairs and escaped through the boarded window. My footprints in the dust are there to prove it.

Not daring to hope, I run into the corridor on the second floor and into the room that leads to the secret stairwell. I draw the red curtains, grab the doorknob and turn it. The door is locked. Now my doubts become certainty. They know how the thief escaped. The only way to check that nobody has taken my jewels is to go outside and look through the boarded window. But first I must make sure everyone is busy in the mansion.

I slink downstairs, to the first floor, and steal a glance into the kitchen. The butler is inside, drinking cider with the cook. The Countess has not rung the bell for me yet and must be still asleep.

Now, I should steer away from both main and back entrances and go out through the stable to avoid being seen by the footman or the washerwoman, or anyone. The door squeaks a little when I open it. I take a steadying breath and slither between a yellow phaeton-shaped automobile and a landau. The soles of my feet tingle. My heart thumps in my ears. I push the entrance door open a crack and skulk into the garden, around the house, brushing my side against the wall.

Merde! The confounded gardener stands planted like a leek in front of the boarded window. He is studying the gap I ripped open by prying the boards.

No luck. I cannot approach to see if my plunder is still in place. Séverine the Burglar will find out tonight.

* * *

At nightfall, after tucking my husband in, I wait until his labored breathing slows. He lies still, so terribly thin and pale. I sneak out of the room, my chimney sweep's attire under Guillaume's cast-off coat.

Cold crisp air blows down Rue de Vaugirard as I walk past the gendarme in his sentry box. I tip the hat that conceals my hair and shadows my face, and I am rewarded with a "G'd night, *m'sieur*."

Within the cone of buttery light shed by a lamppost, a skinny woman in tattered clothes leans against a door and spits on the flagstones. I leap over ivory-colored phlegm laced with blood. Liquid salvation, ha! The endless street takes me away from the more modest district, although the stench of the Latin Quarter follows as I approach the well-to-do 7th Arrondissement, where sooty walls give place to ornate façades of smooth pale stone. A few minutes later, some petrol-powered engine puffs at my back, and I stop in the recess of a large entrance door as a machine overtakes me. It is a yellow automobile that resembles the Countess's phaeton, the latest model by Monsieur Peugeot. One does not see many of these monsters around. From my darkened spot, I glimpse the chauffeur and a passenger. The automobile slows down as the driver peers into the shadows that conceal me. I cannot see his face clearly. I try to still my nervous panting until the car picks up speed and the swaying taillight disappears ahead.

At Marinova's mansion again, I hide my coat on the usual elm's lower branches. Now I must fling my rope and climb the wall at the exact spot where I cleared the shards of glass during my first mission.

The limestone house stands out against the black trees; the cast-iron grilles, guardrails, handrails and drainpipes drawing sinuous lines across its white facade.

I rewind the rope, set it across my shoulder and dash toward the back of the house. The flashlight, useless without a new battery, is back in Professor Lecanu's desk drawer. I carry our portable lamp instead, and a matchbox. It turns out I shall need neither: bright light fingers through the brambles covering the hole. I venture a look inside and see a gas lamp mounted on an unpainted iron rod above the basement door. The chain hangs loose from the rings screwed to the door, padlock open, and curiosity grips me for a second. I cannot explore, though; I must grab the bag and hurry off.

I wriggle in through the broken window.

Thank Lady Chance, the heap of debris appears to be undisturbed. Tonight I have a knife and use it to rip away another board. The opening is now large enough for the bag. Hardly have I crouched to retrieve the bag than I hear the squeak of badly oiled hinges. I turn to see the door open, light pouring out. *Parbleu*! I am lost.

A statuesque red-haired woman—Marinova—appears in the doorway. She extends a hand. "Now give it back."

I rise. "I haven't taken anything, madame." Remembering my race down the corridor, I flinch. If Marinova did not see me clearly as I scampered the other night, she surely heard the racket the silverware made as I hauled the bag around.

The Countess points with a closed fan. "In your pocket."

I glance down and see the edge of the booklet protruding from my pocket. I chose to keep it on me instead of hidden in our minuscule room, where Guillaume could happen upon it. I pull the ambrotype out, but say nothing about the rings and the necklace in the other pocket.

Marinova snatches the memento mori with a catlike swipe, pivots on her heel and disappears through the basement door. I wonder why she has not confronted me about the theft. Trying to ignore my shivers of apprehension, I kneel to free the bag from the debris.

Music floats from the same place the Countess entered: string instruments playing a bewitching melody.

The basement seems a strange place to throw a party.

I should go.

Instead, I stand and step through the door, to hear the beautiful music for a moment longer. Concerts and opera are beyond my means.

The bag remains under the rubbish. Nobody has disturbed it so far, and it can wait a few minutes more.

Who is playing this heavenly music in a basement?

I discover a ballroom-sized parlor carpeted with a wall-to-wall rug boasting floral motifs. The sandstone panels and stucco ceiling are carved into extravagant volutes, and everything in the windowless room imitates the curves of flowers and sinuous algae. I do not like Art Nouveau very much, finding it too overwrought, but here the decoration has a sensual, feminine quality that charms me.

A scent lingers in the air, like orange. Another smell, sweet and nauseating, reminds me of the ether my former master, the late Doctor Martin, used to dull his patients' pain during surgery.

A quartet of female musicians wearing last century's liveries and powdered wigs play in a corner.

The sight of the audience makes me forget the music.

Under a bronze chandelier with glass beads and rods, two scores of women sit in three concentric circles. They wear off-the-shoulder evening gowns of bright colors and laugh behind silk fans, like an assembly of *demimondaines* in a luxury bawdy house. Is this the world that Guillaume fantasizes I sell my body in?

Marinova sets the portrait down in a row of others on the marble top of a bronze-mounted mahogany secrétaire, and then speaks in her cold, accented voice. "A little ambrosia, Séverine?"

I start. The noblewoman is inviting a servant to have refreshments with her friends.

"Ambrosia?" I stammer.

A smile curls Marinova's thin lips. "A special honey-flavored roast I myself cooked." She ambles to the buffet, where no waiters serve the guests.

Something about the good lady makes me want to run, but at the same time I would like to stay for a little longer. I have never found myself in such elegant company. The party fascinates me—the luxury of the decoration, the divine scent of roast, the ladies' gowns, not to forget the music. I could also sneak some food for my husband.

My stomach rumbles. While waiting for the unexpected delicacy, I will take a look at those portraits.

Good God. Eyes painted on closed eyelids stare back. These are all memento mori.

The first ambrotype portrays a lady very much resembling Marinova—a deceased sister, probably. The second displays a lady wearing a gaudy hat. The next to last is the one I returned, and now I remember that plain face: Charlotte, the Countess's maidservant, came to Professor Lecanu's house the week before the dinner to bring her mistress's acceptance. She succumbed to her illness, then. Poor Charlotte. I recall her hollowed cheeks and sunken eyes, the telltale paleness and extreme thinness. She did not die from influenza.

A middle-aged lady in a purple gown approaches. Like a few other guests, she wears a broad-brimmed hat. Hers sports a mass of ostrich feathers and a stuffed long-tailed hummingbird perched on the brim. I glance over at the row of portraits, which includes one of a woman wearing a similar hat, with the same long-tailed bird. The dead woman in the photograph looks exactly like the living woman here, through and through.

Puzzled, I alternately scan the crowd and the mementos mori, recognizing other guests. A glance around

the parlor reveals more portraits on other pieces of furniture. My head spins, and I grasp the edge of the secrétaire.

"Are you unwell?" says the lady of the hummingbird. "Your illness is not that advanced, is it?"

"What do you mean? I'm not ill!" As I say these words, my chest tightens, a constriction stealing my breath: the first symptom that wrecked Guillaume's life two years ago. But of course it can't be. I am perfectly healthy. I take a long deep breath and my stomach turns: it is the cloying odor I can smell under the divine scent of honey roast and the ladies' perfumes.

"What a charming chimney-sweep disguise," says the lady.

I touch the rope I am still wearing across my shoulder. I must resemble a cat burglar rather than a chimney sweep.

"You are so pale." She pats the back of an armchair. "Take a seat, child."

I point to the photographs. "What are... these?"

Marinova sails near, carrying a plate with two slices of honey-colored roast. "I see you like our post-mortem." She holds the plate out for me.

Making memento mori of still-living guest is a twisted, macabre joke. These bored members of the elite would do anything to enliven their soirées. I take a bite of the roast on my plate, and the morsel melts in my mouth. Heavenly. I take a second bite.

"Will you join us?" She points a finger to the ambrotypes.

"Thank you for the invitation to... whatever your photography circle is, madame, but I've got to go. I must take care of my husband."

"Your husband is dying."

I am at a loss of words. Even a countess is supposed to have at least a scrap of heart.

She catches by the elbow a fair-haired lady clad in pink. They waltz slowly. The guests rise and move to the buffet as Marinova and her blond dame, whirling about, come close and circle around me. The Countess says, "I'm inviting you because you turned up in my house, showing the first symptoms, but in fact, I hope to use him first."

"Him? Who?"

"Your husband is more... ripe." A hand on the pink-clad lady's waist, she opens her peacock fan with a flick of her other wrist. "The decay of the body can cleanse the decay of the soul." She stops dancing to consider me. "We need new members to provide strength to our community, to fight the debilitating effects of neurasthenia and create a new cycle of Life."

Neurasthenia, the pernicious fatigue of the mind, is the zeitgeist. The newspapers are full of articles on the *mal du siècle*, the disease that comes from America.

"Purified," she intones, "my companions and I shall enter the new millennium ready to foster Humanity's renewal."

This Marinova woman is as mad as a cracked tureen; I nod to encourage her to continue, although she does not seem to need my approbation to ramble on.

"Our motto," she says, "is 'Remember that you, too, will die,' hence the photographs. They incite us to pursue our mission. With the help of you people, we will live eternally."

"You people?" I say. Who? *Servants*? "So your chambermaid has joined you." I try to steady my voice. "Charlotte, the sick maid. When I saw her... special photograph, I thought she'd died. Well. Her portrait is here, but she doesn't seem to be in the room. Where is she?"

The Countess thrusts her chin toward the guests who crowd the buffet, piling food on their plates. "Ladies, shall we?"

The guests step away from the table, affording me a view of the monumental roast.

One of the legs is gone, but the rest retains a human shape despite the large dents where the limbs have been sliced.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a few seconds.

"Some recruits play a special part in our community," Marinova says. "They give up their sickly bodies to cure our souls and preserve our lives. It is a great honor."

"Being roasted?" I bite my tongue but the words have slipped out.

She knits her eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?" She follows the direction of my gaze. "Oh! That." She breaks into low-pitched laughter, and the lady waltzing with her squeezes her elbow. "What's so funny, Irina?"

"Our guest here thinks. She thinks..." Marinova pulls a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabs her eyes.

"Ohohoh! That dish is *Rôti de Marcassin au Miel*, my favorite recipe."

I blink at the thing on the table. "It's just a boar?"

"With honey."

Now I breathe better. Perhaps I should accept and join the circle, if only for the food and the music. "I am sorry, madame. Forgive my clumsy attempt at joking. Your invitation honors me."

"Perfect."

She motions me to the far end of the parlor. I step around the table, between two wings of beaming guests. The last two ladies in the rows seize the drapes and pull them slowly, like theatre curtains. In front of me appears a woman tied to a vertical metallic stretcher. The sight glues me to the spot.

I am looking at Charlotte. The poor woman... *It can't be.*

The rough-cotton chemise is slashed down the front to expose a skeletal torso. A transparent tube sutured under her right breast ends into a squat bottle suspended from the stretcher. A rosy liquid fills the bottle. The chest catheter drains fluid from a lung.

Eyes shut, she is still alive, for the tube twitches with every wheezing breath, and now the pungent odor of ether overwhelms every other scent.

My mind refuses to function for a few seconds before I can force myself to make sense of the scene before my eyes. My previous master trained me in the basics of nursing practice, and I helped his assistant during similar surgeries, their exploits kept secret because the practice of thoracostomy, despite being known for centuries, is not endorsed by the French Surgeons' Order, or any other order in the world. Doctor Martin performed this operation on patients suffering from pleural effusion.

A guest seizes another tube—which is inserted into the canister full of serum—raises it to her lips. If I had not understood by now, the sucking noises would reveal the purpose of the setting, but I cannot believe it. My stomach heaves.

Marinova's contralto reaches me through cotton mist. "These effluvia, however corrupted, hold healing properties. Gems of purification hide in that sordid mucus."

Gems. I recall that novel. Sputum like opal and coral.

"You see," she says. "Phlegm heals that illness of the mind, neurasthenia, the irrepressible ennui."

The door leading to the ground floor stands open at the opposite end of the room, but the door to the secret stairway is five or six steps away. "I'm going, madame. My husband awaits at home."

"Are you sure?" She releases her *cavalière*. "A man who has doubts about his wife's virtue will do anything, even overcome an extreme weariness, to know the truth. Particularly if someone gives him an address."

My hands have grown cold, but I do not want to show fear. "I don't believe you. And anyway my husband

is too ill to walk here." And too poor to hire a landau.

"Perhaps he did not have to walk."

As on cue, the butler's baritone resounds, high and strong.

"Madame, the gentleman is here."

"Let him in."

My husband enters, my slender, pale and beautiful man. Now he spots me, and his eyes hold all the contempt in the world.

"Here you are!" he cries in a voice quivering with rage. Now he stares at the poor woman with the chest tube draining fluid into the canister. "What is this?" His question dissolves into wracking coughs.

The butler strides toward me, holding a pistol.

"Georges." Marinova holds up a hand. "You brought the husband. See the maid out."

"You are very generous, madame." He cuts me with his eyes. "But please reconsider. She'll talk."

"And who will believe anything she says? That a circle of ladies has found the secret of immortality?"

"Immortality?" I shout. "By drinking sputum? You're infected. All of you." It was Doctor Martin's theory: sputum carries invisible contagious germs.

"We do not drink sputum, dear. As you can see, we extract pure phlegm directly from the lungs."

"And that's healthier?"

"Absolutely. See, Hippocrates and Avicenna were wrong. Phlegm and blood are the only important humors in the body. Blood, hot and moist, is linked to the element Air, but it also contains all the

elements. Phlegm, cold and moist, is Water, and the world was made of water in the beginning, as Genesis One teaches."

I review my chances to pull Guillaume out of this mess; they are thin.

Marinova rambles on. "And what is the serum that fills infected lungs? It is Hippocrates' phlegm, of course. Look at our gentle donor here. Her serum contains a principle that antagonizes tuberculosis."

"What is she talking about?" Guillaume, wide-eyed, cuts in.

"An antitoxin," I say in a blank voice. "Like in Kitasato and von Behring's serum therapy for diphtheria."

Marinova nods. "Your knowledge amazes me."

"But no serum we know of works with tuberculosis!" I cry. "Koch tried, and—"

"—we succeeded. We are now immune. Our first discovery, however, was that blood cures neurasthenia. Later on we found that blood mixed with phlegm, in the form of this nice serum, taken daily in small quantities, immunizes from phthisis, cures the fatigue of the mind and stops the aging process. Air and Water! Isn't it obvious?"

I shook my head. She flourished her fan. "We have been ingesting this serum for two decades, *ma chère*. I'm sixty-three."

Her skin is smooth and unlined. She looks twenty years younger.

"It's like in that book I've been reading," Guillaume says. "*Mystic Flesh*." He turns to Durand. "That's why you gave me the book."

"This man came to our place?"

"Last week, yes. He told me about your whereabouts."

My whereabouts? Oh, God.

The butler has been trying to attract Marinova's attention. "Pardon me for interrupting, madame."

"Monsieur Durand, always the spoilsport." For a moment, she seems keen to continue expounding her medical theory, but then she taps lightly her lips with her closed fan. "Oh, you're right. We shouldn't keep this kind man waiting."

"Madame, let me get rid of the maid." The butler levels his pistol on me.

Mind fogged, I wait for the gunshot.

"I said, leave her," Madame orders. "Ladies, take the gentleman to the cabinet."

The women grab Guillaume, and while he struggles, he is no match for their strength against his poor health.

I must do something. Save him.

Feeling dizzy, I pull the knife clipped to my burglar's belt and whip it with both hands in front of me. The demented guests are unarmed and their gowns will hamper their movements.

Meanwhile, Durand, despite his mistress's order, has kept his gun trained on me. I never learned to throw a knife, and I transfer it to my left hand to unsling the rope.

Luckily for me, Durand is too much the servant, and waits for further instruction as I refuse to behave like a docile housemaid.

I snap the rope across his face. He grunts and falls to his knees. I bound toward Guillaume, pierce an arm that is holding him. Teeth and claws, I blindly work to free him. I do not feel bites, kicks and scratches.

Alone against a roomful of furies.

I am thrown to the floor. Through my tears, I see the women drag him toward the back of the nave-like parlor. They push a small door. Old hinges squeal, and Guillaume's screams are deadened.

A woman wails.

The sound is coming out of my mouth.

There is nothing I can do. I ache everywhere. I think of the baby as I struggle to my feet.

The ladies have all disappeared, but the butler is still on the floor, a bloodied hand wiping his face, the other still holding the pistol. He is going to fire.

I bolt to the secret stairwell door, slam it behind me, fumble for the padlock and click it shut. I'll come back for Guillaume. I am about to wriggle out of the window when I stumble upon the heap of rubbish. Groping, I grab the handles half-visible under the dirt, and throw the bag out of the window.

The door at my back shakes as someone crashes against it. A cloud of plaster falls on me, and the light wavers in rhythm with the pounding. Glancing at the lamp above the door, I see a gas pipe that runs on the ceiling.

Thoughts jostle in my head. I must go to the *Gendarmerie*. But Marinova is right. Nobody will believe a serving woman. I shall make something up then, about the butler hiding stolen property in the basement. Will Guillaume still be alive when the gendarmes storm the place? Indecision roots my feet to the floor. The banging on the door stops. Durand is surely headed upstairs to go through the secret door, and he can shoot me from the landing above.

Come on. A housemaid denouncing a noblewoman of a crime beyond the pale. If I go right away to the gendarmes, it will take hours to convince them to do something. By the time the constables arrive—tomorrow, for sure—the party will be over, and the next gathering could take place anywhere.

Guillaume is too sick. Strapped to a chair, with a tube in his lung, he will not last a day. He's already dead.

Perhaps he is, but should I finish him myself?

But if I don't stop her now, Marinova will murder again.

I shall be in her black book, too. She wanted to let me go out of cruelty, not mercy. After thinking it over, she shall realize she cannot afford to have men in uniform snoop about in her home. She'll send Durand after me, tonight.

Think! The sconce above the doorframe. I can reach it standing on the tips of my feet. I twist and wrench the rod of the lamp off the wall, exposing the open pipe. The smell of coal gas leaks into the air.

The door on top of the stairs whines open. Durand has not given up. I open my satchel, take out the oil lamp, set it on the floor, lift the glass and strike a match.

Forgive me.

Outside, freezing air bites my face. I pick up the bag I paid for so dearly and run toward the garden wall. The noise of rattling chains reaches me: Durand is unlocking the door to the basement. Inside the parlor, the music is still playing. I can imagine the butler yelling "Madame, madame! There's a gas leak!" while the music covers his voice. The ladies must be all to their new donor, but they will soon remember my existence, the second they blow up with the rest.

On top of the wall I look back at the half-boarded window but I do not see the light of my portable lamp. Of course Durand has snuffed it out. There will be no explosion. My hands turn cold. All my efforts for nothing.

I drop the bag on the other side and let myself down.

My back against the moist stones, I brace myself. My head is so heavy. I lean forward, arms crossed and hands grasping my forearms. The ambrotype circle from Hell will carry on. I remain bowed down and cannot move.

But Guillaume, I can still rescue him. I will find the way. Or the gendarmes will free him. It is a blessing that the gas did not explode. *Thank you, thank you*. Destroying the place was a horrible mistake. *Stay alive,*

husband. I'm coming back for you.

I rise and walk slowly, one hand trailing on the wall, as to keep myself anchored to this place while a part of me wants to run. In Rue Elysée-Réclus, I sway by the ornate gate and reach the tree where I hid Guillaume's coat. My face in the dark wool, I smell his scent. This old garment will be my only tie to him until he is back, safe.

I am violently shoved forward. The tree has jumped. My ankle turns, and I stumble. Only grabbing the moving trunk keeps me upright. A strange surging tide fills my head. Warm water runs down my face. When the world snaps back into focus, I hear the bellow of an explosion shatter the silence. Stupid with concussion, I steady myself, and touch blood from a tear in my forehead. A slate, broken in two, has slammed into my head. The top of the wall destroyed, I can see the mansion. It is on *fire*. Yellow flames, charged with heat, leap from the gaping mouths of the doorway and windows, and soar to lick the roof.

Then the obvious explanation comes to me. The lights of the parlor have ignited the gas and the interior is surely blown to pieces.

My ears hurt as if pierced by needles. I cough uncontrollably, but the new life inside me is safe. I have something to survive for, my child to raise. (Oh, Guillaume.)

I pick up the bag of jewels and press it to my chest.

Everything is dust, a cloud of black moths. I will breathe better in the Pyrenees. It will be good for the baby, too.

Flesh is not mystical. Flesh wants to live.

I turn my back to the inferno and run.

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Blocking

Alessandra Siraco

At night we could see them walking around their house, holding hands with their palms flat against each other, scurrying from one room to the next. We held hands, intertwined fingers, while we watched them walk. Sometimes we would kiss for a second when they stopped, and with stolen kisses and glances sideways we felt much younger than the late thirties we were. We didn't know why our neighbors did that, but we guessed sometimes—it's for exercise, out of habit, because they're nervous, because they can't sleep. Once when we were feeling creative, we joked that they were witches practicing their spells. We sat beneath the windowsill and ate gluten-free cookies straight from the package. I ate mine methodically, the edges first and then the middle, but Martin ate the middle first, licked the center and then nibbled outwards in an impossible doughnut shape, like he was trying to escape.

Martin wrapped one hand around my waist, kept the other on the giant cookie, put it flat on his palm and nibbled it that way. He said that he thought our neighbors were sleepwalking, and I said I thought they were waiting for a show to come on, and were getting some exercise in between commercials.

We only started watching our neighbors because we noticed that they were always awake when we were, late in the night; two, three in the morning. Martin and I both had insomnia and we fed off of each other, talking to each other when one of us couldn't sleep until the other couldn't either. One night we looked outside and saw them pacing, and they became our source of late-night conversation.

"Lanie," Martin would say, "what do you think they're doing?"

I pulled away from Martin and watched him as he ate away at the cookie. We lived here because of bread, and I thought it was ironic that now Martin was allergic to gluten and we didn't eat bread anyway, and

could only eat gluten-free cookies and gluten-free snack cakes that tasted like paper. He had discovered his gluten allergy after we moved in. Before we moved, we ate a lot of bread, and baked it, too. Martin was the one who originally wanted to move, because he said the old house was too small and the neighborhood was too rural and the neighbors were too weird. I wanted to move because I couldn't get the bread to rise in our house.

I had been trying to bake Easter bread bears since we'd moved into our old place five years ago. They were in a cookbook I got for a housewarming present. The bears were supposed to be rotund and had raisin eyes, with three dollops of bread for the body and a few longer dollops for the arms and legs. They were the recipe on the first page I turned to when I opened the cookbook, and they became my mission. I gave up on only cooking them at Easter and tried cooking the bread bears at different times of the year, using different recipes, with different yeasts and flours and pans, but none of them rose. Every single time I took the bears out of the oven, smelling fresh for the hour or so they had been cooking, they were flat. Cooked, but flat. We finally figured out that it was the water in our house. Water has great effect on the rising properties of bread, I'd found out, and the tap water in our house just wasn't capable of producing bread; at least not the fluffy, moist kind I was used to.

Martin suggested using bottled water but I saw no reason to buy bottled water just to bake bread. Instead, we bought a house.

* * *

Martin and I ate gluten-free bread the next night, the block kind that you slice on a cutting board and eat with cheese, except we had no cheese so we ate it straight, biting off of the block like it was a fat carrot stick. It tasted like one, too, because it was stale. We bit neatly, leaving tiny ridges of teeth marks in the bread. Our neighbors were pacing again, backlit by the soft glow of what we assumed was their living room. The houses were close together in our neighborhood, so our windows were only a few feet from each other and we could see them clearly.

"What do you think they're doing?" Martin asked. I shrugged. There was never a good answer, no matter how many nights we sat here watching. We would never know what they were actually doing inside that house, not for sure.

I told Martin that once, and he shrugged. "It's just something to do, you know?" he said. Martin loved watching them. He bought snacks specifically for it—"midnight creeping snacks," he called them, laughing to himself whenever he said this. To him, I think watching our neighbors made it seem better that we couldn't fall asleep. Sleeping wasn't a struggle for him anymore, because he knew something he could do during that time.

When we first started dating, the "something" was sex, but that soon became too much because we couldn't ever sleep. Ever. If we'd kept at it like that all the hours and nights and days we couldn't sleep, we'd have been bored of each other long ago.

I was a psychiatrist and sometimes in between sessions, I tried to figure out why Martin and I were so fascinated with these neighbors. There were a variety of disorders I could have diagnosed us with, but I figured there was no point in discussing them with Martin because he loved doing it so much. There was no point discussing why we couldn't sleep, either; I knew there must have been a reason, other than pure insomnia, but it was a waste of time to think about it because Martin took such joy in our late-night activities.

I felt his familiar hand around my waist as he rested his head on the side of the couch. The burgundy suede was beginning to fade there from all the nights he did exactly that. He tightened his grip around my shirt—his shirt, actually, that I'd stolen, a Patriots one that was faded and old—and offered me a lopsided smile. "Your shirt's soft," he said. I watched his eyelids droop and felt his breathing get heavier until I knew he was asleep, sitting up on the living room floor, facing the wall.

On nights like this, when Martin fell asleep and I couldn't, I would get up and start pacing, although I never told him this. Sometimes I woke him again but usually when he fell asleep late at night, I just walked back and forth to the kitchen, the bedroom, the pantry, looking for anything to do that would keep me occupied until it was an acceptable hour to make coffee.

I walked to the back porch and opened the door, letting the cool air seep into my skin. Goosebumps rose on my arms as I stepped onto the damp wood of the porch, felt the chalky consistency of the pollen against the soles of my feet. The yard was wet, muddy, and there was only one patch of grass, all the way back near the fence.

Martin had wanted to have a dirt yard since he'd first visited my parents' house, years ago, when we started dating. We were in our early twenties and Martin had worn loafers to meet my parents for the first time.

My father did not like grass. He didn't like grass, or weeds, or plants, so our front lawn was dirt. Carefully raked dirt. When I was little, I used to sneak outside in the heat of summer and draw patterns in the dirt with rakes, pretending it was sand. I didn't make dirt castles because even then I knew that was pathetic, but it didn't occur to me that raking the dirt in my front lawn was also out of the norm.

I walked across the yard to the street. Our house was oddly placed on the lot because it faced backwards; the front door was actually facing the backyard, a brick walkway leading around the house to it. I had planted flowers on the walkway but they all died within a few months. I over-watered them, drowning them in their own source of life. The street was dark and empty, and I started walking past our mailbox and towards our neighbors' house, down to the end of the cul-de-sac.

The woman, one half of the pacing couple, was outside. She must have left when I was walking around my own house, or at some point between when we stopped watching them and when I came outside. She stopped me before I even passed their house. She was wearing the pink robe I'd seen her in when Martin and I had been spying, and she smelled like flowery perfume.

"Hi," she said. She looked at my dark house and the dark sky. "Why are you awake?" She was barefoot, her feet leaving imprints for a second on her rain-soaked driveway as she walked toward me. Up close, she looked different than she did from the windows of our houses. She seemed shorter, and her skin was wrinkly, but her eyes were bright and she was wearing mascara even though it was late. I could see the clumps in her eyelashes from a few feet away, big ones, on the tips.

"I can't sleep," I said. I didn't bother explaining the insomnia to people because they didn't understand, and would start telling me about herbal remedies and teas they'd recommend. They didn't understand that there was no cure, not really; that sometimes, I just couldn't sleep, not at all. "I'm Lanie," I said, and extended my hand.

The woman shook my hand, a soft handshake, bad for job interviews, I thought. "Fiona," she said. She crossed her arms and stood blocking my pathway on the sidewalk. I wondered if she knew that Martin and I watched her sometimes, could see her and her husband at night in their home. For the first time, I

felt guilty about it, creepy; it wasn't our business to watch them, but we did anyway, had built a whole ritual around it.

"Your name," she said, "is it short for something?"

"Elaine," I said. Everyone called me Lanie except for my mother, who called me "La" and was the only person I allowed to do that.

Fiona nodded. I could smell coffee on her breath as she exhaled, and I wondered if she drank coffee late at night. I didn't, because I figured it would make my sleeping habits even worse, but I was jealous of the people that could.

"I'll see you around, Lanie," she said, and went back inside her house. I saw the lights turn off in the hallway and wondered if Martin had woken up, if he could see this—that he could no longer see inside the house next door.

* * *

Fiona and I started to sit on our porches together. It wasn't an official date—we never planned it in advance and we always asked before we sat on each other's porches—but it became a routine all the same. It was after her husband and Martin went to work, when the neighborhood was quiet and we were both at home. It was always Mondays, since that was the day we both had off. I think it mostly stemmed from boredom on her part, and curiosity about her on my part.

Mondays used to be my day to sleep in, or rather, to wrestle with sleeping in; to I adjusted the bed sheets and flipped and turned until it was the afternoon and I was semi-rested from a week of insomnia. But talking to her was more interesting, to me, and worth the lack of sleep. I enjoyed sitting with her, watching her thin, straight blonde hair wave in the breeze like a soft and silent hello.

She was an aesthetician, and when I asked her what that meant, she pointed to her eyebrows. "I wax," she said.

When I told her I was a psychiatrist, she narrowed her eyes at me. "Do you keep your patients' secrets?"

she asked.

I glanced at her. Usually the first reaction was whether I was going to psychoanalyze them, or how long my schooling lasted, or to describe my most annoying patient. Nobody had ever asked me if I kept my patients' secrets secret.

I nodded. "I believe in secrets," I said. I didn't even really know why. I didn't have many secrets of my own, except the secret I kept from her.

She smiled, approval. "Good." She was my age but she seemed older, talking about things she'd done and places she'd gone that seemed too many and too far to fit into the years we'd been adults. "I liked Istanbul the best," she said. "Because not many people from around here have been there. It's full of secrets to people from here, even if they're not really secrets at all once you visit." She gestured to the empty neighborhood, the silence that invaded the spaces between houses after everyone went to work.

One day when Martin had left for work especially early—or late, depending on how you looked at it, since we never did fall asleep—she and I sat on the porch together watching everyone leave for work. We saw each neighbor walk outside and carry a thermos of coffee, a newspaper, sunglasses, as they crunched down the gravel driveways to their cars. It was November by then and getting cold in the mornings, and we could see our breath as we watched them together. I wondered what I looked like on the days I went to work—I usually carried coffee, but not always. Sometimes I took tea, sometimes water if I was lazy. I wondered if I looked as frazzled and tired as they did.

"Do you ever worry?" she asked. She tugged at a strand of hair that had fallen out of her tight French braid. "About Martin?"

"I worry that he leaves so early and doesn't ever get any sleep," I joked. "I worry that he'll forget he can't eat wheat and accidentally kill himself."

"No," she said, "seriously. I mean seriously worry. *About* him. And you."

"What do you mean?" I didn't know if I should be worried about something, but I hadn't really thought of it before; at least not consciously.

She looked at the road and waved as another neighbor passed by. "I worry because sometimes, Jared says he has secrets." She glanced at me quickly, her face sharpening and her eyes focusing slowly on mine. "He says it in his sleep," she said. "Not while he's awake. He doesn't remember it." She twisted a thread on the end of her sweater. "I mean, do you think that's bad? If he just says that, while he's sleep talking, out of the blue? They must be some pretty big secrets, right?"

I frowned and looked at her. She was talking faster than normal, her words spewing out one after the other, and she was looking at me with wide eyes. Usually it bothered me when people talked to me as if we were in a session, but something about her made me listen closer than I would have normally; something about the way she darted her eyes around at everything except me, whom she focused on, made me wonder if she was saying something I should be paying attention to.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess everyone has secrets."

She shook her head. "Never mind," she said. "Forget I mentioned it."

It was getting colder, and I wrapped my sweater tighter around me. She had hung handmade felt pumpkins on her porch, on the hooks that held hanging plants in the summer, and the pumpkins were still there even though Halloween was over. I saw our other neighbors glancing at them with jealousy as they walked by. Her porch was much nicer than ours. She actually put time into hers—she covered it with decorations and plants and, in the winter, she shoveled it, all of it, not just a path so the paperboy could get through to the door, like we did.

She pulled her feet up onto her rocker and tucked her boots beneath her. "Does Martin have a busy week again?"

I nodded. I watched her pick at her hair, pulling out piece after piece as we talked, spinning them around her fingers, until her braid was completely undone and she had to re-braid it and start all over again.

"Busy, again, but better than last week. He told me he wanted to take a trip when he was done with this deal." I took a bite of a cookie I had taken onto the porch, the real kind, not gluten-free, the Italian kind that was colored pink and yellow and green. It was the morning but I didn't care. The cookie was chock

full of gluten, and I could taste the difference; the yeasty realness of the morsels, the coarse crackle as I bit into the outer layer to the middle, softer part.

Before Martin knew he was allergic to gluten, we used to go out to eat all the time. I loved picking things off the menus, sitting close to Martin in a booth and asking for more water or what the specials were that night. But after he found out he was allergic, we stopped going out to eat because it became too complicated, and we started eating gluten-free at home. Gluten-free pasta, gluten-free bread, gluten-free muffins. We bought things free of gluten that I didn't know contained gluten in the first place.

And Martin, chomping at the gluten-free snack cakes, smiled and said that he didn't mind having the gluten intolerance because we got to spend more time at home, relaxing.

I ate more of the real cookie and savored its flavor, offering one to Fiona to be polite. They were from my Martin-free stash in the cabinet. She kept talking about Jared and his job, and I nodded along. I didn't really know what to say because I understood Martin's job fully, and I didn't think it was interesting at all. It was finance. He talked about it incessantly, and it was boring, dull—the dullest—but I knew that he was never leaving it.

He was never leaving anything, even the things, or people, that he didn't really have anymore.

* * *

When Martin got home he sat on the couch with a mug of tea. He let the tea bag seep into the water overnight so it was truly tea-tasting, or at least, that's how he explained it. I sat next to him and folded into his side. I liked leaning against him but I hated the way he never put his arm around me anymore—he clutched the mugs of tea with both hands, leaving none to touch my skin.

Martin took a block of bread and bit it, then handed it to me for a bite. He first dipped it in the tea because it was even staler than the last one, and I felt it soften beneath my teeth as I bit into it.

"Do you think that you'd tell me if you had a problem?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, if something was wrong. If something was bothering you, more than the normal amount. Would you tell me?"

Martin nodded. "Of course. Besides the fact that you're my wife, you're a psychiatrist—I think you're the first person I would tell if I needed help."

Later, when we were in bed and tossing, awake, Martin made a move to get out of bed, to go downstairs beneath the windowsill, I assumed, but I pulled him by the hand, sitting next to him on the big armchairs we had near our bed but rarely used.

"You want to just talk?" I asked. I wanted him to tell me something that I didn't know about him, whisper something secret, quiet, in the night; smelling his breath, still tainted from the tea, soft as he spoke with his face close to mine.

"Not tonight," he said, like he had the last time. He smiled and stood up. "It's late; don't you want to relax?"

I followed him downstairs, like I always did, feeling the padded carpet on the stairs beneath my feet, and sat on the hardwood floor, next to him beneath the window.

"I wonder if they'll be pacing tonight," he said. He chewed a piece of cheese he cut from a block in the fridge and I wished he were lactose intolerant.

Now that I talked to Fiona, I knew more about her and Jared's pacing, but I didn't tell Martin that. He didn't know that we were friends. I kept it silent, hushed in my own mind as we watched them pacing back and forth. I knew that she drank her coffee with cream and more sugar than she said she did when people asked. I knew that Jared didn't drink coffee. I knew that Fiona had asked Jared out first, and that they had traveled many places together and that Jared didn't like when their hotel rooms came with built-in mini-kitchens. As we watched them, Martin continued to guess about their lives—what they did for a living, how early they woke up, how often they actually slept. I didn't tell him that I knew some of the answers.

When he fell asleep, I paced the house, walking from room to room trying to think of ways to occupy my

time until he woke up again or it was morning, whichever came first. I wondered sometimes if Martin was even really an insomniac, because he always seemed to fall asleep easily once we came downstairs and settled on the floor. I was jealous of his ability to fall asleep against that suede couch.

I made it to the kitchen and then stopped, felt some crumbs under my feet as I shuffled along the cold tile. I'd need to vacuum tomorrow, I thought; I could tonight if Martin was awake, but of course he was asleep. Our kitchen was dark, darker than most kitchens—a deep blue, so deep it sometimes looked black, like tonight, when everything around it and outside was black too. We hadn't chosen the color but hadn't chosen to change it either, and I had grown to like the comforting cocoon of the kitchen and its darkness.

I pulled the cookbook down from its dusty shelf and opened to the page I had folded over, the page with the Easter bread bears. My family had never made Easter bread, or bread bears. They'd never made much of anything, actually, except for the dirt front yard and the little miniature dog figurines that my mother painted when she was bored. I took the measurements carefully and formed the bears like I was supposed to, rolling the dough into balls and then sticking raisins on top for the eyes. I hadn't bothered to put on any lights, and my eyes adjusted to the dark.

This was the first time I'd tried to make the bread bears in the new house; I figured I shouldn't make them when Martin couldn't eat them, but now, I didn't care. I picked the bread bears because I needed to finish them, to see if they worked in this house, but also—mainly—because it was almost impossible to make homemade bread bears the way they were supposed to be made, the way the recipe instructed, for the utmost and most satisfactory taste, without gluten.

I made sure to measure the water carefully, not sloshing any over the side of the measuring cup. I glared at it as I poured, watching the clear liquid go into the dough, hopefully with qualities that I couldn't see but that I knew were important. Once they were finished, I put the bears in the oven and shut the door. The oven light glowed in the dark kitchen, hoping that this time, they would rise.

Jeff Esterholm's *short stories have appeared in Midwestern Gothic, Flash Fiction Italia, Two Hawks Quarterly, The Dirty Napkin, 34thParallel, Wisconsin Academy Review, Acorn Whistle, Nerve Cowboy, Thema, and Planet Detroit. He received honorable mention in the short fiction category from the Council for Wisconsin Writers in 2009 and won the CWW-sponsored Larry and Eleanor Sternig Short Fiction Award in 2012.*

In New San Antonio

Jeff Esterholm

When Mick Cloutier arrived at San Antonio International, it was in the late afternoon of a late in the week day in May and it was ninety-three degrees. He left the air-conditioned terminal to wait for the airport express shuttle in the dust and exhaust of the taxi stand. His hotel was downtown, one of the many along the Riverwalk.

The air was gritty and got into his ears, nose, and mouth even though he covered them with a clean white square of handkerchief. Based on black-and-white television westerns and childhood summers spent poring over his grandfather's collection of Time-Life books, Cloutier imagined South Texas cowboys from over one hundred years ago, masked with bandanas, thundering into town on payday, reining in hard-ridden horses at the hitching post in front of a saloon with a blowback of dusty wind. Then again, that was over one hundred years ago, and there were jets flying in and out of this airport, the city was the seventh largest in the country, and much of its windblown dirt was collecting in his hair and in his pockets. He decided to wait for the shuttle behind the glass doors of the terminal. What changed his mind were the two women, not travelling together, who walked out with their rolling luggage.

The older of the two, fifty-five by his estimate, with auburn hair, colored at high cost, and dressed in a gray silk business suit purchased at an upscale shop in the metro area she was from, was Denise Turner. A friendly woman, she had bantered with Cloutier at the baggage claim. She was an outgoing flirt and had handed him a business card embossed with her name and position as Chief Financial Officer with Doenitz Pharmaceutical. The other woman's name he did not know, but because of the shocking color of her hair, he tagged her as Tangerine Dream. She had been on his flight from Chicago and returned his smiles easily.

All three boarded the same airport shuttle, though Cloutier would have laid odds on the CFO climbing into the back of the white town car that arrived just before the shuttle. But there they were, Denise Turner in the window seat next to Cloutier and Tangerine Dream directly in front of him. He wasn't concerned, but thought it curious when the driver jumped from the vehicle and ran into the terminal after the shuttle was full. There was the customary glancing around, the silent questioning by the shuttle passengers, and Cloutier had the passing thought, Scrub it, go back into the terminal and fly out of old San Antonio, but then the driver returned, studying an open map of the downtown area. The short white bus finally pulled away from the terminal while the driver, blown into Texas by a Louisiana hurricane, tuned his radio to New Orleans jazz, the music broken up with squawks from his home base.

On the drive downtown, herky-jerky stops at hotel after hotel, Cloutier felt Denise's studied insouciance while he stared at Tangerine Dream: tangerine-colored hair buzzed up from the back of her neck, longer Medusa locks standing out from the top of her head with the assistance of a fruit-scented gel, styled to look like she'd just risen crazily from bed, tousled by her lover's hands. The sparsely lined skin of her neck placed her at, he guessed, thirty-eight, a single businesswoman from Minneapolis, in San Antonio via Chicago.

Denise Turner, Tangerine Dream, and Mick Cloutier got off the shuttle at the same hotel.

* * *

After checking in and registering for the trade show – the annual Southland MedTechPharma-San Antonio – Cloutier walked to El Mercado, watching as a pair of huge birds circled above the downtown streets. They were black with white-tipped wings, black vultures, and he wondered what dead thing they could be hungry for in the metro area.

Cinco de Mayo was the next day and he wanted to see what might be going on at El Mercado that could occupy his mind. A restaurant bar served strong margaritas, the bartender had a heavy hand with the Cuervo and that was all right by Cloutier. He drank and walked, surveying the crowd. Spanish fluidity and the chatter of English, a standard Midwestern newscaster variety, filled Produce Row. Being in South Texas, Chicagoan Cloutier had been prepared for "Y'all this and y'all that, honey," but there was little in the way of that vernacular.

There was the color Cloutier had expected and, to a certain extent, he felt he'd landed in another land. Brilliant greens, reds, blues, and whites. There was a Chicano in a straw cowboy hat singing along with Jimmy Buffet recordings and people were buying him *cervezas*. "Just one more song, Hector," someone called out. He was more than happy to oblige with another cold beer, secure in the shade of the karaoke shelter's white tarpaulin roof. An older fellow, looking one hundred years if a day, wearing a baseball cap with the U.S. Marine Corps emblem above the bill, a cowboy shirt with pearly snap buttons and stiff blue jeans, still had a fair amount of spring in his step and performed with a pair of acrobatic parrots. He stacked the green and yellow birds, settling them with treats to their orange beaks, atop a little girl's brunette head to her utter delight.

The market crowd applauded, the old Marine gave the girl a papier-mâché parrot, and Cloutier saw Tangerine Dream. She was looking at pastel-colored eggshells in a red bin in front of a shop, dropping one and getting into a you-broke-it-you-bought-it discussion with the shopkeeper. A touch at his elbow and Cloutier turned away from the developing scene.

Denise Turner reintroduced herself in case he had forgotten her – he hadn't – and he used his Purell after shaking hands with her, her hands sticky from walking Produce Row and sloshing a margarita. He offered her the small bottle of hand sanitizer and she shook her head, glancing away with a laugh. She spoke with the southern twang of a celebrity cook, but Cloutier guessed it was only a sweet pink fondant covering something other than cake. More like frosting-covered razor blades.

"I saw you registering for Southland," she said. They sat at a table in the shade. "I'm with Doenitz Pharmaceutical."

He nodded. Her card was on the desk in his hotel room. "I'm with Edwards-Griffin, offering 'the Latest in Therapeutic Technology.'" He sipped his drink. "That is, when the price is right." They tapped their margarita glasses together.

"That's what it's all about," she said.

He smiled and she asked, "What?"

"You're studying me, like you did on the shuttle from the airport."

"Listen, I've already had two of these. I could very well be pixilated." She set her glass down. Then she knew what she had begun to consider back at San Antonio International. "Lordy, you're the one, aren't you?"

Yes, frosting covered razor blades. She was the source of his payday.

* * *

Denise was different when he stopped by her room in the morning. Before the trade show opened, well before the keynote speech, they went out for coffee and to talk business, looking for Starbucks and finding Sip, a small local shop on East Houston. But she was different. She gave off this vibe: The night before, the well-to-do suburbanite had invited the pool boy back to the cabana. When he declined, she took his hand and said, "Honey, it's okay if you're gay."

He had smiled. "I have a famous uncle. All those travelling salesman jokes? He's the travelling salesman. I've learned not to mix pleasure with what I do."

Or the difference could have been that, before they could leave the hotel, he checked his hotel room door, not once or twice or three times, but five times.

At the coffee shop, she showed him the whistleblower wannabe's photograph provided by a corporate security section. Cloutier didn't doubt that it matched the photo on the ID and access key card that swung by a lanyard from the woman's neck Monday through Friday.

"Carita Sundman," Denise said. "She has an appointment with the Justice Department later in the week. After the trade show she's flying to Washington rather than back to Minneapolis."

Cloutier smiled at the mention of Minneapolis. He also wasn't surprised that Sundman was Tangerine Dream, the woman on the flight down from O'Hare, staying at the same hotel, attending the same trade show, breaking fragile pastel eggs. Her name was nothing he needed to retain. Tangerine Dream, cold German electronica, was enough. He did wonder, if her information was so explosive for the industry, why she wasn't in protective custody. After nine years in this line of work, Cloutier was convinced that

individuals could benefit from a healthy level of suspicion about the world, understand that there are entities that, with no compunction and paying tens of thousands of dollars, will bring down the hammer. If he ever had children, doubtful, but if he ever did, he would teach them this simple fact.

Denise slid a small packet across the table. It looked unremarkable. "Succinylcholine and a syringe. The fund transfer took place just before yesterday's close of business."

Cloutier looked at her.

"We know your work."

He thought it cold praise. Denise Turner's overnight turnabout flickered around his head like a moth. If it flew too close, it would turn to ash. He placed a napkin over the packet, gathered it up, and deposited it into his suit jacket pocket, as if it was nothing more than a treat for later in the day.

* * *

He was a ghost, his preferred mode, wandering the trade show, walking down the aisles separating the vendors' booths, technology displayed to its best advantage: catheter securement devices, sterile lubricating jellies, micropumps, hemodialysis blood tubing sets, digital microscopes, culture identification tests, polymeric drug delivery systems. That one delivery system, that in particular caught his eye, but the rep was busy with a woman from Johns Hopkins and Cloutier gave a passing glance to a bowl of Jolly Ranchers before moving on.

Medical and pharmaceutical professionals nodded at him in greeting, vaguely recalling him as a colleague met at a trade show in some earlier year, a salesman from elsewhere in the country, but no name ever registered. There was the name badge. But the name was always different. He saw a tangerine head and followed discreetly behind for the next two days of the three-and-a-half day trade show.

* * *

Cloutier left the closing night awards dinner and went to his room to watch a Henry Fonda movie on his tablet. It was his favorite of Fonda's and it was not *The Grapes of Wrath* or *On Golden Pond*. It was Sergio

Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, with Fonda in the uncharacteristic role of the pitiless killer Frank, and it made Cloutier smile.

* * *

Tangerine Dream liked to take in the San Antonio sun by the hotel's rooftop pool in the middle of the day when no one else was around. On the morning of the last day of the trade show, she slipped up to the pool area and Cloutier was already there, near where she normally reclined on a white plastic chaise lounge. He watched a movie and listened to gunplay through his earbuds.

She glanced over and he showed her what was playing. Tangerine Dream laughed and mouthed, "Cowboy movies in San Antonio." He could see her eyes roll behind her shades. Before lying down, she looked around, luxuriating in the sun and the heat. He removed the buds from his ears.

"This is luscious, don't you think," she said.

The windows of the surrounding office buildings were like unblinking eyes.

"I know I'm enjoying it," Cloutier replied. "It's forty in Chicago." He put out his hand and said a name that was not his own. She shook his hand and said her name. He thought, No, that's not it. You're Tangerine Dream. "But I've been up here too long already."

He got up and stepped over to her white plastic chaise lounge, holding out his tablet. A towel covered his other hand and forearm. "Before I go, you have to see this." She smiled, bemused, at his approach. There was no one else by the pool at this hour, just the empty windows of the office buildings. As he put the tablet in front of her eyes – what was it, this last image – the hand with the syringe came from beneath the white hotel towel and plunged a needle into her upper thigh, then pulled back, disappearing as Tangerine Dream glanced down, Did I just get stung? She murmured, "Oh."

* * *

Mick Cloutier picked up a new and regrettable habit over the last three jobs. He would return to check on his work. Walking down the quiet, carpeted hallway to the elevator tower, he decided to make an

appointment when he returned to Chicago and settle then on whether he was OCD.

As the elevator rose on its way to the rooftop pool area it paused and the doors slid open: a well-dressed, auburn-haired woman joined him. Denise Turner greeted him and asked that he press L for the trade show. "You're not going down? You're going back to the pool?"

He glanced at the red numbers above the elevator door, feeling something was wrong, but finally said, "Yes."

Denise hemmed. "I'll ride up, too."

The trip to the rooftop was quiet but for the low grinding woof of the elevator. Neither of them spoke and this only increased Cloutier's sense that the blades were rising through the fondant. There was the soft ping and the doors opened on a vestibule lined with shelves of white towels, the door to the rooftop pool opposite. On the periphery, Cloutier saw the CFO's hand flash. He slapped it back, grabbing her wrist and forcing the syringe back towards her. The needle pierced her silk skirt and sank into her thigh. He forced the plunger as she looked at him. Cloutier released her wrist and Denise Turner slipped to the elevator floor.

* * *

Poolside, the black vultures beat their wings when he appeared, lifting and then, feeling unthreatened, landing again on Tangerine Dream. They hissed like stop-motion creatures from a Ray Harryhausen movie. "Okay, boys," Cloutier said, and he backed out the way he had come.

In the vestibule, the elevator doors thumped rhythmically against Denise Turner's head. Mick Cloutier took the stairs. His suitcase was packed and he had a shuttle to catch.

Z.J. Barnhouse is a somewhat recent college graduate who has just settled in Venice, CA. He spends his time paying off debts, inviting the absurd, and writing nonsense on his website, http://thebarnhouseeffect.com.

Smash

Z.J. Barnhouse

Clint Dagger is a curious entrepreneur. The man is a genius but he always manages to find himself in unusual situations. He is the archetypal businessman. Has that olive skin and steel gray eyes from the magazines and his hairline is perfect and he has a hundred-dollar-bill smile.

Clint is the type who talks about how the clothes make the man and you have to dress to impress to get the ladies undressed and stuff like that. I believe it. I believe everything he says and I trust Clint Dagger. I've been his accomplice in his ventures and have been seen some odd things on the job with Clint. It seems that every year he comes up with a get-rich-quick scheme that somehow works.

Like I said, Clint is a genius and he called me up last year with another brilliant plan to augment his and my wealth.

My phone rang, I picked it up, and he said, "Phil, you working right now; you got a job?"

I said, "No sir, but I'm lookin'."

He said, "I've got another winning idea. Quick return on investment on this one. This is the one; finally I've got it. Do you ever get stressed out Phil? So stressed that you get angry, want to break something."

"All the time, yeah."

"What if you had the chance to break something when you got angry with no repercussions? Like, take a big sledgehammer, smash something into a billion little pieces, feel that feeling of pure satisfaction that

comes with beating down on something with all your strength and your anger and your frustration and allowing yourself to feel your veins pulsing with carnal lust and rage and therapeutic orgasm—you know that feeling like you just fucked Wonder Woman." He was out of breath.

"Well I've never fucked Wonder Woman, but I'm sure it would be amazing," I said, thrown off, but excited all the same. "Is this your idea?"

"Yes, we'll call it: Stress Smasher! We hop in a van full of old crap that we get from junkyards or wherever and we drive around and people can smash shit with a sledgehammer or a baseball bat! And all they gotta do is fork over five bucks! Fucking incredible right?"

"Whoa Clint, this sounds crazy, but I think you're onto something. Are you in need of my services?"

"Yes, you need to find out where these sad freaks are and we need to capitalize on them!"

And that's how we got started. After that phone call Clint threw some funds together and bought a van and a bunch of junk and a huge sticker that said *STRESS SMASHER*, which he slapped on the side of the white Astrovan he bought.

We didn't know where to go at first, but as a market researcher it was my job to figure out the spots where people were the most stressed out. Clint called 'em *smash spots* and I quickly found several.

* * *

We had a black sheet backdrop and a little stand with a pretty white vase with purple flowers on it, waiting to be destroyed. Plexiglas walls and ceilings protected observers while giving them the chance to watch the action. We'd pull up to a smash spot and Clint would swoosh open the door to the van revealing a screaming flatscreen TV: "ARE YOU PISSED AT THE WORLD? NEED TO RELIEVE SOME STRESS? WELL FOR FIVE DOLLARS YOU CAN SMASH THIS VASE INTO A BILLION PIECES WITH A GIGANTIC SLEDGEHAMMER!" It was Clint's voice screaming this; he had recorded it himself. Over the screaming, a video of him destroying things played, transitioning from one scene to another with a huge fiery explosion effect that he bought online. Behind the screaming, metal music thundered menacing riffs to encourage destruction. Clint and I drove to colleges and banks and law

offices. We drove to Burbank outside movie studios where we waited for actors who didn't get the part. We waited by 405 off-ramps for pissed off drivers. In my Stress Smasher t-shirt and Clint's skintight ab-boasting Under Armour tight-fit and our hundred-dollar-bill smiles we would proudly watch the stressed people of Los Angeles obliterate crap we got from the junkyard and bought at thrift stores. I knew to trust Clint. We were an immediate hit. People didn't hesitate to smash stuff for a few bucks.

Our success went on for months, we bought more vans, more ridiculous junk, and we traveled to tenser territories.

One day Clint and I set up outside a funeral home in east LA. It was a risky move, but I found this to be one of the most stressful places in all of greater Los Angeles. Clint and I had been doing this for a while, so we felt confident and ready for the risk. I was cringing at first, expecting some backlash from the mourners, but after only fifteen minutes we had a customer.

"What's your name, son?" asked Clint, very energized by espresso and adrenaline.

"José," he responded in a sad, meek kinda way.

"Are you upset with the world? Do you need to unleash your anger?"

"Ye," said José, "My baby brother just passed away. Hit by a drunk driver."

A single tear rolled down Clint's cheek. A guitar squealed from inside the van.

"You know what," said Clint, fighting his emotions, "This one's on the fucking house."

He handed José an aluminum baseball bat, put on his safety glasses and stepped back.

José looked at the vase for a minute straight, unblinking, and he seemed to summon every ounce of repressed rage that had been storming in his chest and soon he was shooting lightning bolts into the vase with his eyes. Neck veins pulsed with fury-filled blood, filling José with mastodonian menace. His whole body tensed into one big muscle, contracting and flexing. He bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment, whispered something under his breath. I shot a nervous glance at Clint. Clint flashed me a

hundred-dollar-bill smile.

Like hellfire José came crashing down on the vase with blinding speed and the vase exploded into a cloud of dust with a resounding boom. All of Los Angeles went silent for a moment in the aftermath. José breathed heavily through his nostrils, white-knuckling the bat and staring into the spot where the vase had been. Rippling muscles coiled his forearms; pulsating veins throbbed with blood. There wasn't a single shard left of the vase. Just dust.

Clint approached and patted him on the back and said, "José, wow. That was the most impressive smash I have seen on the job. Seriously amazing."

He flashed the grin and held his hand out for José to put the bat in. Instead of the bat, José handed him a rumpled five-dollar bill.

"Again," he said, "I wanna go again. Something bigger."

Clint winked at me with his business eye and said, "Yes sir, again." He placed the money in his back pocket and he searched the van for a moment, eventually finding a broken cuckoo clock, which he placed on the stand. Clint also brought out the sledgehammer.

"José," he said, "You look like the type of guy who wants to use the big guns. Let it all out—that's why we're here."

José silently traded the bat for the sledgehammer, his eyes fixed in a deadly iceglare on the center of the clock, his new enemy. His intensity began to crescendo again, left eye twitching, focus intensifying, anger surmounting. He swung. The clock disintegrated.

"More, bigger," José demanded.

Clint rushed to comply.

The objects grew in size each time. José would swing and send it into the atmosphere as particles, and he would keep pulling five-dollar bills out of his wallet to Clint's reptilian pleasure. I was mortified by this

demonstration of pain, but by now an audience had gathered to watch the display; people were paying to see José crush everything in sight.

After about an hour had passed everything in the van had been destroyed. José stood there, drenched from head to toe in a thick sweat despite the cool November air, breathing hard, looking unsatisfied. Clint patted him on the back again as the crowd began to disperse and José hung his head, realizing he had to go home and face reality again. He thanked Clint immensely, and Clint comforted him with calculated words of encouragement and hope. Damn Clint was good. José whispered something in his ear before they parted ways and Clint nodded solemnly and said, "It's ok, it's ok."

As we drove to grab lunch after the successful morning, Clint seemed distracted. I noticed his usual buoyant energy had gone, the hundred-dollar-bill smile faded.

I asked him, "What did he say back there before he left? When he whispered in your ear?"

"He was the drunk driver. He was the one who killed his little brother."

Robert S. King*, a native Georgian, now lives in Lexington, KY. His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines, including Atlanta Review, California Quarterly, Chariton Review, Hollins Critic, Kenyon Review, Lullwater Review, Main Street Rag, Midwest Quarterly, and Southern Poetry Review. He has published eight collections of poetry, most recently Diary of the Last Person on Earth (Sybaritic Press, 2014) and Developing a Photograph of God (Glass Lyre Press, 2014). He is former director of FutureCycle Press and current editor of Kentucky Review.*

Pollyanna Puts on her Face

Robert S. King

In a not-so-bad world powered
by mass-produced miracles
and towers higher than she can count,
she tries to diet her way to the top
where tempers and temperatures
are controlled, blue suits seem so cool,
yet she is so hot.

She works on the 30th story
beneath the AC vent roaring like a plane,
beneath a ton of gravity-defying make-up,
behind a whitened smile tight as a frown.
She reads her not-so-good paycheck as not so bad.

She hums with the muzak.
The company water bottle gurgles
some gossip that's not so bad.
The Fox news channel shouts
some real journalism from the break room.

Standing over her,
the boss's breath is not so bad
when it whispers about a raise
if her output goes up
and her numbers crunch well.

Both he and she watch her figure.
Not so bad, her daily spa waistline
allows a sweet tooth now and then,
but her diet pie in the sky,
like the sugar daddy she seeks,
never quite satisfies.

Perhaps from caffeine, her eyes
seem a little wider these days.
They're getting steamed by the coffee,
her usual warm and fuzzy blend today
brewed hot, just below
the boiling point.

Jack Coey *contemplates life from a park bench in Keene, NH.*

If You Let It

Jack Coey

It was the smell that did it. The guy in the next room thought it was rotting food or maybe cat shit, and it got stronger and stronger. He watched to see if he could see the man coming or going to his room but didn't. He saw the cop on the street, and one day told him about it, and the cop said,

"Show me."

They stood in front of the door for not more than about five seconds and the cop said,

"Dead body."

The man was shocked. The cop called down to the station and it wasn't long before an ambulance was in front of the boarding house. Two police cars showed up, and they broke down the door and sure enough there was a body lying on the bed. There was no sign of a struggle or violence, and nobody knew who the deceased was. The cops looked for forced entry or robbery and found nothing. The ambulance men took the body to the morgue. The cops opened the two windows and said it may take a couple of days to get the smell out. It was 2003.

* * *

It was about a week later the man was coming back to his room, and he saw an old lady in a wrinkled blue dress standing at the foot of the stairway leading to the rooms. She wore a blue hat with a feather. He stopped, and looked at her, and she looked back at him, and he asked,

"Help you?"

and she said,

"I was looking for someone."

"Do you know his room number?"

"Twenty-three."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you he's deceased."

The woman was stricken, and he moved to hold her. He took her arm and she was crying. She cried and after a time moaned,

"Too late…oh…too late."

He held her and didn't know what to do. There was a bar on the corner and he could get her a coffee and he could have a beer.

"Could I buy you a coffee?"

She nodded her head, and he led her slowly to the Jolly Rodger. When they entered the cronies at the bar all turned and looked at the man and woman, and one of the men yelled out,

"Hey, Dugan, you got yourself a hot one!"

and the men laughed, and Dugan led her to a corner table. He got her seated and went to the bar and whispered to Dutch,

"Help me out with this babe and I'll explain later."

Dutch grinned.

"Whadda want?"

Dugan returned to the table with a cup of coffee and a bottle of beer. She wanted milk so Dugan went back to Dutch for a carton of milk. The old woman was lost in thought. They sat at the table in silence and from the corner of his eye, Dugan could see the cronies at the bar watching the two of them. The old woman and Dugan looked at each other briefly.

"Who were you looking for?"

"A man named Stokes."

"How did you know he lived in room twenty-three?"

"Daryl told me."

"You sound like you're from the south."

"Yes sir, Tennessee. Much obliged for the coffee."

"Don't mention it."

"I'll get out of your hair."

"No, no, not at all. Who are you?"

"I appreciate your kindness, sir, but I don't want to be no bother."

"Looks to me like you could answer some questions."

"Don't do no good. Harlan's gone."

"That was his name? Harlan?"

"Yes sir. Harlan Stokes, the greatest guitar picker of his generation."

"Really? I never heard of him."

"Yes sir, that there's the tragedy. You should have."

"I always heard music from his room."

"That's Harlan."

She looked at Dugan defying him to disbelieve her.

"I'll get the Nashville bus this afternoon," she said.

"How about a sip of Old Grand Dad?"

A smile spontaneously flickered on the old woman's face.

"I don't drink whisky with strangers," she said.

"I'm Cormack Dugan and I go by Dugan. There now, we're friends, aren't we?"

The smile was there again quickly.

"I'm Mildred Stokes, pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine. How about a sip of bourbon in your coffee?"

Mildred looked hard at Dugan, and at last said,

"No harm in it, I reckon. I don't have anything you want."

"Mildred you can trust me. I'm only trying to find out about this stranger that lived next to me. I would pass him in the hall or on the stairway, and sometimes he would nod and most times not."

Mildred looked at Dugan and he got up with her cup and went to Dutch. He came back and sat at the table. A shaft of sun came through the window. Dugan looked at Mildred and she was far away in memory.

"Mildred can I ask you some questions?"

"I suppose if it would settle your mind."

"He was a guitar player?"

"Yes sir, he was. I've known him for fifty years – we were teenagers when we first knew each other. He was the most talented guitar player you ever heard, an absolute genius. He grew up on a farm in Kentucky, and his father was a stern man, who did nothing to help Harlan with his music. When I first knew him, he was struggling to come to terms with his talent. His father wanted him to be a poor farmer, the way he was, and Harlan felt he had talent; there was more he could do. He broke away from his father, and ran away to Nashville, where he got work as a sideman. It was there he met Elvis Presley; they were both talented teenagers who became like brothers."

"Elvis Presley? That guy was a friend of Elvis Presley?"

"More like brothers I would say. Harlan helped him write some of them songs."

"As I live and breathe…."

"Elvis took Harlan with him to New York City in the summer of 1956 to record *Don't Be Cruel* and *Hound Dog*. Harlan told me Elvis did twenty-eight takes of *Cruel* before he was happy with it."
Mildred laughed.

"Harlan said he was never so sick of a song in his life. Then they did thirty takes of *Hound Dog* before he was happy with that."

"You're kidding?"

"No sir, God's Honest Truth."

"How come I don't know about this guy?"

Mildred became serious and far away. She sipped her coffee and the sun was coming in the window.

"Another?"

Dugan took her cup to Dutch who made another cocktail. Mildred was in her memory. They sat in silence, in the sun.

"We was married for about three years, and even though I loved him, I couldn't stay with him. He was tormented."

She took a sip of her coffee.

"Tormented? By Elvis?"

Mildred took off her hat and put it on the table.

"No. By the south."

Dugan didn't get it, and stood up and went to the jukebox. In a moment, *Love Me Tender* was playing. Mildred smiled at the sound.

"It was just recently I was at Wilber Jenkins's death bed that I learned what happened that night. I work as a nurses' aide in a nursing home in Murfreesboro."

Dugan leaned forward and stayed silent.

"The men were drinking one night and there was a pretty negro girl that lived in the black section who one of the men made an advance to that was rebuffed. The more the men drank the angrier the man got and I'm sure the other men were egging him on, and I always believed Harlan was a part in this. They found the girl on a country road walking home from choir practice, and dragged her in the woods and

raped her, then, lynched her from a tree."

"Jesus." murmured Dugan.

Mildred was quiet.

"As God is My Witness, those were horrible days in the south." she at last said. The sun went away. Dugan went to Dutch for another beer. He came back to the table and they sat in silence and shadow.

"Come to find out, Harlan never touched that girl. Don't mean he should'na tried to stop it or say something when it was over, but folks always thought he was a much a part of it as the others and he weren't. Wilber Jenkins told me he stood there dumbstruck and done nothin'. He never said a word to anyone as far as I know and it ate him up. I couldn't live with him no more, he would be in a rage over nothing and my nerves was shot. I couldn't keep food down or sleep or nothing".

The clack of pool balls could be heard. Dugan sipped from his beer.

"He went from band to band and nobody could be around him for any length of time, he was either depressed or in a fury. Then the alcohol and the drugs and the women, Good Lord, I can only imagine. He finally came to Boston when he burned all his bridges, and I can't recall how many musicians tried to help him but there was a lot of them."

The bar was silent as the men studied the pool table.

"Pretty sad."

"Yes, sir, I would say so."

"So why now?"

"How's that?"

"Why are you looking for him at this point?"

Mildred sipped her coffee and wistfully smiled.

"I don't knows that I knows. I reckon I wanted to say to him that I knew he never touched that girl. That doesn't excuse the rest of it – that he let it go on and didn't tell no one, that's more shame than I want in my life, that's for sure, but, I guess cause I loved him or still love him, that I wanted him to know that I knew he never touched that girl, and that would bring him some measure of forgiveness."

"How did you find him after all this time?"

"Daryl told me where he was. Daryl was his first music teacher in school, and Harlan always stayed in touch with him, probably, for the good memory it give him."

They didn't speak. They could hear the clack of pool balls and laughter and some raised voices. After a time, Dugan said,

"What a waste."

"Yes sir that is surely true. Life can be death if you let it."

David Rutter *has been published in a slew of magazines and literary journals, including The Metric, Vagabonds, Dressing Room Poetry Journal, Eunoia Review, Haggard and Halloo, Subliminal Interiors and the Los Angeles Times, to name but a few. Later this year he will publish his first poetry collection, "Rehab Stories."*

Spring St. After Dark

David Rutter

Annie'd shot her nose off
Running from the cops
When they smashed down her door
She'd learned the hard way
To hold the shotgun with the barrel down
It's so easy to slip and fall
When you're in a panic

"Everything happens for a reason,"
Annie used to say.
Extra face hole, extra money
That's the way she looked at it
I wasn't my cup of tea, of course
But I could see how it might appeal to some
She's just another carny
On Spring St. after dark

It's a 50/50 bet
When gunfire splits the night
Some sad sack's got his nuts blown off
Or it's just Val Kilmer
Doin' CPR on his career

There's a film crew
Under every trashcan
On Spring St. after dark

I'm up on the post office rooftop
With a mint julep in my hand
(The best that irony can buy)
Taking potshots at the rats
Who scurry tween the junkies
Lying prostrate in the alley
It's always a crapshoot
Whether these guys will mind at all
If they get hit by mistake

I just watched a skid row whore
Polish off her John
Then reach behind the nearby dumpster
Pull out the baby in a stroller
She had hidden there
Teach 'em young
That's the secret
On Spring St. after dark

Beetle could talk a blue streak
Around you every night
You'd give him anything he wanted
Just to shut him up
There was no choice but be nice
He might be a Hollywood producer
In the morning
Sure as hell
That's what he'd been before

Your track marks
Are your billboard
For the dealers all to see
They might always give you
Something a lot more deadly
Than what you came to find
But you take your life
(Not to mention your soul)
In your own hands
On Spring St. after dark

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The Miracle

Christopher Allsop

Once upon a time, a boy awoke to a dull pain. His upper back throbbed. He groaned— attempted to roll over—but his arms, arranged beneath his pillow, would not respond. The boy's vision blurred with tears and, entangled in his panic, only the unthinkable presented itself clearly: he should yell out and awaken his father in the next bedroom.

There had to be an alternative, he could work it out—the boy was one of the most grown up in his year. He took a deep, calming breath, and as he did so felt a weight—that he had taken for his duvet—shiver above him. He experimented with a second breath and was instantly weightless, looking down upon his bed from the ceiling, with two great white wings extending out either side of him. Releasing an involuntary cry, he managed to right himself and planted his bare feet upon the duvet.

The wings—feathered, arched, and protruding from his shoulder blades—must have grown in the night. How? Why? His heart pulsed. The boy wished to touch the wings' brilliant softness, but his arms hung limp, without response. While trying to work his arms, his wings shifted instead; he soon discovered, with a bit of practice, that he could easily dip them forward and rub the silken feathers across his cheek.

He practiced other maneuvers: folding them up was like crossing his arms, and a sharp exhalation unfurled them. His right wingtip knocked a picture off the wall and onto the carpet. That's not my fault, he thought reflexively, standing still and listening. But no sound came from the hallway. He relaxed. But he needed space. The boy hooked his foot into the gap of his open window, brought it up as far as he could, and, with some wiggling, squeezed out onto the roof.

The cold tiles were slick after the night's rainshower and dollops of soggy moss seeped between his toes. His neighbours' backyards ran away from him in a neat row like teeth in a concrete zip, while Lola's vegetable garden next door reassembled into a tidy grid of string and bamboo. The boy kept one eye on the roof and the other on the curtained windows opposite, waiting to be discovered. His leg muscles struggled beneath the wings' weight, and he found that crouching made it easier to balance. He perched.

But the wings were too heavy, and the boy began to slide inexorably down the slippery plane. He made a grab for the roof's apex, forgetting his disability, and this thought instead translated to his wings and he nearly fell. Panic thrilled through him—again, the unthinkable came to mind, he drew another reflexive breath and the wings lifted the boy into the air. He clung to the roof tiles by his toes, fighting the vertical pull, but the wings were irresistible. It was time to fly—time to trust—and if the mechanism hadn't required him to concentrate on his breathing, he would have screamed. Instead, he soared up into the grey pre-dawn sky.

The boy still couldn't swim, but he could fly as effortlessly as a bird. Up he went, to ever greater altitudes, until his neighbourhood below shrank to resemble the aerial photograph in the porch. As the sun came up, the warm, orange light flared off his wings, entrancing the boy with their rhythmic beauty. He intuited how to glide, which required no undue focus on his breathing—this would please his father. The boy had a tendency to daydream; his father frequently yanked him up at road crossings; sometimes, the boy felt, unnecessarily but he never complained. So he swore on his mother's memory to daydream only while gliding, as he did now while taking in the city: its bristling tower blocks sheathed in gold by the new day, while headlights traced the sunken network of roads still in gloom. He conjured up the Thames as a pulsating jade snake chasing the sun, the light shattering across its scales, its tail tip plunged into midnight and its flickering tongue ever-wilting before its unobtainable prize.

He chased the river—flew faster, spiraling and looping, giddy and laughing. In imitation of an eagle, he hung and dropped at speed. Pulling up—his chest tingling with adrenaline—a particular fear thrilled through him for the first time: the awareness of injury beyond scrapes and bruises. Calmed by this thought, he coasted with the onrush of feather-soft air caressing his face. His arms dangled. He was sure they would work again in time. Until they did, he would eat with his feet, like an eagle. But he couldn't reach his feet to his mouth and the attempt caused a wild spin, so he desisted. A frown rumpled his brow. Father would know what to do—he would ask him this evening.

Reaching the coast, the borderless expanse of shimmering sea was too much to resist. He bolted across the Channel, admiring its crinkled skin, the flashbulbs of white foam. This was the second time he had seen the ocean; the first was in Brighton on the Bank Holiday: fish (allowed to leave the skin) and chips, a chase into the waves, bitter seawater up the nose and tears upon tears convinced he'd ruined the day, a piggyback leading to a souvenir coin. He smiled at the memory; perhaps he would be strong enough to piggyback his father through the sky, to share all that he was now witness to.

As the sun rose higher it warmed his back and legs and with this the boy felt less lonely; he flashed his great wings over Europe. He chased the heat, headed south, over different waters now: calmer and crystal-blue, with an enticing transparency that drew his wide-open eyes closer and closer. A giant shadow descended with him, and in shock he recognized it as his own: the tiny, old shadow of his small body suspended between the colossal dark span that spread out on either side of him, fluctuating with confident beats. But he breathed the beats, he reassured himself. Somehow this chest, small enough to be almost entirely covered by his father's hand, had control.

After a while, his stomach growling, the boy put down in the emerald gleam of a soft-looking field. Alighting gently upon the warm, moist grass, his head filled with the leafy, nutty smells of the surrounding woodland, its underlying odours of damp bark and faint rot. His abdominals strained against the wings' weight. He wanted to sit, but found that the length of the wings prevented him from doing so comfortably, and he was loathe to risk dirtying the brilliant white feathers by touching them to the ground. Eventually, he kneeled and, when restfully balanced, perused the tree line for bright evidence of apple or banana.

If he had been capable of looking over his shoulder, the boy might have spotted the lean farmer crouching behind a bush. The farmer stared in awe at the angel kneeling in his bottom field, pinched himself, and fled to the farmhouse. His son was dispatched to fetch the priest, while the farmer returned with his wife and daughters. Following the angel's example, they kneeled in prayer behind the bushes. This holy scene greeted the priest as he arrived, pain shooting through his left hip, accompanied by the farmer's son and other members of the village seeking to witness the miracle in the bottom field.

When the priest saw the great wings, white and neatly folded in perfect imitation of the candle-holders in his church, he kissed the cross that hung about his neck and looked to the blank blue sky. In desperation had he prayed for a sign, and his faith had wavered, but his confidence—and with it his world—was now restored to him. Moving forward, he called to the angel in stuttering Latin.

Torn from the daydream he'd lapsed into, the boy shuffled about to see who was shouting. He saw the old man first, approaching with unfamiliar gestures, then the crowd at the top of the field. With a flap of his wings, he attained his feet. But his hunger overrode his fear: perhaps they would give him so food? So he smiled.

The priest froze as the angel turned to face him. It was dark-skinned and he also observed how its arms hung at its sides and thought the gesture, or lack of, malevolent. They were being deceived. This was an agent of evil, an unholy corruption of angel and gypsy. It would not torment his flock. Holding his cross before him, the priest charged, yelling and drawing on the agony that seared through his hip.

The boy shot into the air, the rush of wind obliterating the old man's shouts. Tears sprang up. What had he done? He tried to wipe his eyes, and the realization that he couldn't compounded his upset. A frantic attempt to use his wings sent him into a spin so he stopped, fearful of falling into the field. The others were running over to join the apparently now prone old man. The boy circled, blinked, regained his composure. He wanted his father. With a powerful breath, he turned towards home.

The boy traced the coastline, looking for landmarks. Around him, the shadows lengthened and the sea deepened in colour. How long had he been gone? Evening fell upon the world below: the luminous stitching of street lights fenced in the darkness while urban whorls burned. The boy flew hard. Like a moth, he tended towards the greatest concentrations of light, for his father had once told him that London was the greatest city in the world, and so, he concluded, it must have the most lights in the world.

The air grew bitter. He felt shivery, tired, but his wings beat on strongly through the night. In time, he approached a swath of darkness that he thought must be the Channel, and he struck out across its dark face. Above him, the stars blinked out as the storm front moved in over Western Europe.

The Channel was a maelstrom. Rain and gale tossed and battered the boy, stole his breath. He faltered, again and again. Then that familiar bitter odour of sea, the whip of icy spray upon his legs. A wave took him down. The trauma of sudden submersion induced an involuntary gasp and he broke through the surface, but another wave crashed and he was under again, this time with no air remaining. He sank into the peaceful depths, his arms and luminous wings stretching out above him.

* * *

Several years later, a submarine scouring the Channel for war wrecks shone its halogen beam upon the boy's resting skeleton. One wing had been lost to the depths, but the other's skeletal remains proclaimed his difference. The bones were retrieved and transported to a research center where no one could disprove what lay before them. News of its existence leaked, images found their way onto internet sites, news channels, and talk shows, where special guests took turns denouncing it as a hoax and decreeing it proof of the divine.

After watching his third news report on the skeleton that morning, the boy's father switched off the television. He walked through to the kitchen and poured away his drink. Then he poured out all of the remaining alcohol in the house and dumped the empty bottles in a refuse sack on the outside step. The father bathed and brushed his teeth, combed his overlong hair, and took his best suit out of its plastic and dressed. After checking himself in the mirror, he walked down the hallway and opened the door to his son's bedroom. Inside it was cold and damp, with a smell of stagnant water. Rot had set into the sill and the carpet surrounding the window, while a flourishing black mould spotted the walls, for the father had left the room exactly as his son had left it—the window wide open, the fallen picture, the pajama top torn and half concealed beneath the bed. At first, he did this because he believed the police must have missed something during their insultingly brief visit, and if a crime had been committed he would want to see justice well served. But one year turned to two, with no news, and animals began to enter the room at night. He would get out of bed, raging and hollering and waking the neighbours, before chasing the creatures out of the window or sometimes deeper into the house, but then he began to just lie there and listen, and pretend the bumping and scratching might be his son. Recently, with the drink affecting his work for the first time, he began to think insane things such as: what if one of those animals was his reincarnated boy returning home? Last Saturday, the father had gone out to buy a light bulb and returned with a length of well-made rope that remained coiled on the breakfast table where he'd left it.

But now he closed the window. The father sat down upon his son's bed and wept. For he had come to understand that the skeleton of the angel was a sign meant for him, and wherever his son had gone that he was in heaven now, how God is merciful, and that the father would go on living—and that he could.

Heidi McKinley *lives in Iowa City where she writes and watches people and neighborhood animals. She doesn't understand domesticated pets, that is to say, she doesn't understand co-evolution. She figures everything can be explained by mathematics, but because she is no good at math she uses words. More of her work can be found at http://HeidiMcKinley.com.*

You Jumped

Heidi McKinley

At an impasse concerning the future
We met
But I could not part with my fingers
I wanted to touch you
But I wanted to keep you
I wanted to touch you and to keep myself
The open-mouthed world
Mouthed me
A fish grip
Sucking
The robots
The trees
The stick in your teeth
What did you want to remind me of hovering like that
Above the water?
You remembered how we were about to be pine needles
How we were about to be perforated
How the blood is given
How the blood is paid for
You can get 50 dollars a week and a cookie
You fall and you fall and sometimes you stop falling

You grow old and divide

I follow you into the canyon and we take enough water for one day

We do not drink the water we take

Both of us die

I follow you up the canyon wall

I follow you up

But when we reached the edge of space

You jumped