

Typehouse

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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting fiction, poetry, or visual art, email your submission as an attachment or within the body of the email along with a short bio to: typehouse@peoples-ink.com

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Cover Photo

Lost Archive by *Fabio Sassi*

***Fabio Sassi** started making visual artworks after varied experiences in music and writing. He makes photos and acrylics using tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Often he puts a quirky twist to his subjects or employs an unusual perspective that gives a new angle of view. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [fabiosassi's portfolio](#)*

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THREE VERY SHORT STORIES

INVOLVING FOOD AND SOME VIOLENCE

Judy Freni

I The Lobster

Popeye was a cull. He had lived alone in one of the tanks at the Lobster Hut in Mattapoisett almost his whole life. By the time Mary Ann came to work at the restaurant the summer between her junior and senior year he weighed close to fifteen pounds and his lone claw was the size of a big man's fist.

"What is that thing?" she asked Mr. Pereira, her boss, the day she started work as a waitress. She tapped on the glass with her fingernail and peered into the water. Bubbles from the filter gushed up the back of the tank and percolated on the surface. The lobster scuttled toward her across the bottom on its eight thin little walking legs.

"That," said Mr. Pereira, "that is the biggest damn lobster you're ever likely to see. His name's Popeye."

The crustacean's beady black eyes looked out at her. He flexed his claw.

"Popeye?" Mary Ann said. "Why?"

"Look at that claw," Mr. Pereira said. "Doesn't that remind you of Popeye's arm?"

“Not really,” Mary Ann said.

“Come on, of course it does. That great big spinach-fed arm with the ham fist at the end of it?”

“Well, maybe,” Mary Ann said.

Popeye scraped his claw against the glass.

“He’s saying hi,” Mr. Pereira said.

“Oh, right,” said Mary Ann. “Like I believe that.”

“Really,” said Mr. Pereira. “He is.”

#

The Lobster Hut was built on a wide pier overlooking the harbor. It had two dining rooms: one inside with real tables and chairs and waiter service, the other out on a deck where people sat at picnic tables and ordered their food from two take-out windows cut in the side of the building. Most days Mary Ann worked the four to midnight shift on the deck. Some days she worked the lunch rush instead and sometimes she did a double shift and worked lunch *and* dinner. Every two weeks Mr. Pereira rotated the indoor and outdoor staff and Mary Ann switched with another waitress and worked the indoor dining room.

The Lobster Hut served platters of fried clams, the real ones with big, bulging, creamy bellies. Lots of tartar sauce to dip them in. Lobster rolls. Quahog fritters. Lobster bisque. And of course the whole steamed lobsters that most people ate with plastic bibs tied around their necks so the drawn butter wouldn’t drip down their shirt fronts. The vents from the kitchen blasted warm air filled with the smell of seafood onto the deck. It mixed with the smell of French fries and cole slaw and roasted corn at the tables. Salt water and seaweed smells from the harbor. Gulls screeched constantly overhead and dived for scraps on the deck. The deck was a hard place to work, noisy and fast-paced and hot. Mary Ann was sweaty and uncomfortable out there but she still preferred it to the indoor dining room where the air conditioning made her shiver and there was no salty breeze to blow back her hair.

#

Mary Ann had been working at the restaurant for about three days before she first noticed that Popeye seemed to be looking at her every time she walked past him. When she crossed in front of

his tank in the lobby on her way to the outdoor deck, he would come out from where he was hiding in the dark, bubbling water at the back and skitter along the glass front, following her movements as she walked.

She stopped and looked in at him. His little black eyes looked back at her. She walked along the tank and he came along with her on the other side of the glass. She turned and walked back to the dining room door, then looked over her shoulder. Popeye had also turned back, walked the length of the tank and was now looking at her from the short side.

"I think that lobster knows me," she said to Mr. Pereira as they were leaving the restaurant one night.

"I told you," he said. "He likes you. He's liked you since the first day you were here."

"That's just crazy," Mary Ann said.

"Why?" Mr. Pereira asked.

"Because," Mary Ann said. "Because he's...he's just a giant bug. How can he know me? That is really creepy."

"He knows who he likes," Mr. Pereira said.

#

The next day when no one was looking, Mary Ann put her hand in the deep tank, then slid her whole arm in and down toward the bottom until the water almost touched the short sleeve hem of her t-shirt. She swam her fingers around in the water and waited to see what would happen. Popeye came out from the back of the tank and walked toward her hand. He reached forward with his feelers and touched her. She put her hand on his hard carapace and pressed him down to the floor of the tank. He stayed there, not struggling to escape, waving his feelers in the water and opening and closing his claw. She ran her fingers along his back.

"Pheromones," Mr. Pereira said, coming in from the kitchen.

"That's disgusting," said Mary Ann.

"He's in love with you."

"No way," she said. "Gross."

#

She didn't even realize she'd started singing to Popeye during her breaks. Nothing romantic. Just little upbeat tunes that came into her head as she walked by the tank. But Popeye seemed to respond, rotating his eyes and waving his feelers. She found herself paying anxious attention to the groups of people waiting in line for a table in the dining room. He's not for sale, she would tell them when she found them gathered around Popeye's tank, overheard the excitement in their voices at the idea of a lobster that size sitting steamed on a platter. The very thought of someone's bratty kid holding up Popeye's giant cooked claw in a Facebook selfie made tears well up in her eyes. And she hated it when she heard people making fun of him. She would stand with her fists on her hips and stare them down. How would you like it if someone said that about you, she'd ask. People laughed and thought she was kidding. It was no joke to Mary Ann.

#


Families with young kids almost always ate on the deck overlooking the water. They'd put their orders in at the window and wait for their numbers to be called. Sometimes, when the deck was overcrowded or the weather wasn't great for eating outdoors, they would sit in the indoor dining room.

Mary Ann did not like badly behaved kids in the dining room. It was bad enough when they were running around on the deck, chasing the sea gulls and knocking over ketchup and soda on the picnic tables. At least the deck was outdoors. The dining room, though casual, was a notch above and she wanted kids in their seats, not getting under her feet when she was carrying overloaded trays of food high above her head. And she really hated parents who ignored their children's bad behavior, allowing them to put their feet up on the chairs or shred paper napkins onto the floor or drop chowder crackers into their water glasses and stir up the mess with their straws.

A boy and his father, both sunburned and wearing Red Sox caps low on their foreheads, came into the dining room one night around seven. They were seated at a small table near the windows. They kept their hats on. The boy, about eight years old, immediately began kicking the chair rail with his sneakers and ripping open sugar packets, tipping the contents into his mouth.

"What can I get you guys?" Mary Ann stood in front of their table in her short white waitress's skirt and white t-shirt with the lobster embroidered on the pocket.

"Not sure," the father said. "It's our first time here. What's good?"



"Everything," Mary Ann said. "It's all fresh. Just caught."

The father looked down at the menu.

"The clams are strips or bellies?"

"Bellies," Mary Ann said. "We don't do strips."

"I don't like bellies," the boy said. "I only like strips."

"Sorry," Mary Ann said. "No strips."

"I'll have the fried haddock platter," the father said. "With fries and onion rings. And a Pepsi." He nodded at his son. "What do you want?"

"I want strips," the boy said. He dumped a packet of sugar on the table, ran his finger through it and put it in his mouth.

Mary Ann tapped the point of her pencil hard against her order pad.

"Look," his father said. "Why don't you have a lobster. There's a whole tank full of them out there in the lobby. We can go pick one out."

The boy drummed his feet against the chair rail and sucked sugar off his finger.

"A big one? Can I have a big one?"

"Yeah, sure," his father said. "Come on. Let's go look."

Mary Ann followed them into the lobby.

"I want that one," the boy said running up to Popeye's tank.

Mr. Pereira was standing near the cashier, looking at receipts. He glanced up when he heard the boy, saw his face up against the glass of Popeye's tank.

"He's not for sale," Mary Ann said.

"I -WANT- HIM" the boy said banging his fist against the glass.

Popeye had retreated, far to the back of the tank, where he sat moving his feelers along the bottom.

"Stop doing that," Mr. Pereira said. He walked across the lobby and stood next to the tank. "He's not for sale. Pick one of these." He pointed to the other tank, full of lobsters clambering over each other. "There's some good big ones in here. I'll steam one of these."

"I want this great big monster one," the boy said again. "Daddy, I want this one."

"They're really tough when they're this big," Mary Ann said. Popeye had come cautiously forward, close to the glass front, looking out at her with his beady eyes. His antennae waved slowly in the water and he opened and closed his huge claw.

"Do you see a sign that says this lobster isn't for sale?" the boy's father said. His jaw jutted forward unpleasantly. "I don't see any sign. You sell lobsters. That's a lobster. You can give us a doggy bag for what he can't eat."

A crowd of waiters and diners gathered in the doorway to the dining room, watching. Mary Ann and Mr. Pereira stood silently in front of the tank.

"Do I have to get him myself?" the boy's father asked.

"That would not be a good idea, sir," Mr. Pereira said.

"Not a good idea at all," Mary Ann said. She backed against the tank and spread her arms out to cover the glass.

"Get out of my way," the boy's father said, shoving Mary Ann aside. "I'm getting that damn lobster."

Mary Ann stumbled and banged her elbow hard against the counter where they kept menus and lobster souvenirs.

In the tank Popeye stood up on his tail and scrabbled at the glass with his huge claw.

"If you don't calm down and step away from the tank I'm going to call the police," Mr. Pereira said.

"Like I give a shit," the father said.

Mary Ann stood rubbing her elbow. She stepped forward. Mr. Pereira reached out and put his hand on her wrist.

"He's not pegged," one of the waiters called from the crowd by the door.

"So?" said the father.

"So," said Mary Ann. "You'll see."

"See what?" the father said.

Mr. Pereira shrugged. Mary Ann shook her head. The father plunged his sunburned arm into the tank. Popeye scuttled to the back under the filter bubbles. The father's fingers swam through the water, opening and closing, trying to get a grip on the giant lobster.

"Dad," said the boy. "Daddy, I don't want him anymore. He's scaring me."

Someone in the crowd by the door called out go get him, mister. Someone else said he's nuts with his hand in there.

"Oh," the father said. "Aaaaarghhhhh!"

The crowd moved forward. "Oh, shit," someone said.

"I told you," said Mary Ann.

The father's hand and arm came surging up out of the tank in slow motion, breaching the surface like an Orca, the muscle in his bicep bulging from the weight of the fifteen pound Popeye now attached to his index and middle fingers by his massive claw.

"Get him off! Get him off!" the father screamed. Popeye and bloody pieces of two crushed fingers dropped to the floor. The father collapsed back against the wall, slid down to the floor howling into his bleeding hand.

"Daddy? I don't want him for dinner. I really don't," the boy sobbed. "I'll have clams, I promise."

Popeye lay in a puddle of salt water, his claw moving across the linoleum and his feelers testing the air around him. Mary Ann bent down and lifted his heavy body. He was cold and smelled of the

sea. Fifteen pounds of hard shell and claw nestled against her shoulder. Popeye tickled her neck with his antennae. She hugged him close.

II The Birthday Cake

I promised that shit a Fudgy the Whale cake for his birthday and that's what he got. That and a set of king-sized Harley sheets from Wal-Mart with red and orange flames printed on them. They were stiff like cardboard when I took them out of the package and smelled really poisonous from whatever chemicals they use in a sheet factory so I washed and dried them with rain-scented Tide and a lot of fabric softener. Then I put them on the bed with that fuzzy red blanket we have and even put a red light in the ceiling fixture to make it sexy and all. Don't know why I bothered since he stayed out drinking with his friends way past the nine o'clock he said he'd be home.

\Once it got to be nine-thirty and he hadn't shown up I called his cell to check and it went right to voice mail so I said where the hell are you and hung up.

I'd had the whale on the table for a while letting it thaw just a little so it would be easy to cut when he got home. I waited another fifteen minutes and when he didn't call back I stuck the Carvel box in the freezer and wandered around the house in the other part of his birthday surprise--my new see-through shorty nightgown with the marabou around the neck and no panties--smoking like I wasn't supposed to because I quit last week, and saying nasty things out loud to the walls about that big shit-face jerk.

The big jerk is named Jimmy but all his friends plus me call him Ahab, like in the book about the whale, joking because he has a fake leg. My Ahab's fake leg is titanium. He lost the real one in a motorcycle accident, drunk driving in the rain on Route Twenty-five just outside Southold. He hit a slick spot. The bike went one way and Ahab went the other. He slid across the whole road, both lanes, and slammed into some trees. Just about crushed his leg. Messed it up so bad there was nothing they could do but take it off below the knee. The bike barely got a scratch--it's been in the garage since--but Ahab wound up in the hospital for a good while and then after that he spent the next six months in rehab getting fitted for the leg and learning to walk again. It was his own damn fault and he's lucky he didn't lose a whole hell of a lot more than his leg.

We've been living together for about two years, ever since I finished up my practical nursing course and he got out of rehab. Rehab's where we met. I was working there part time while I was going to

school. Doing stupid stuff like pushing wheelchairs and helping people get where they had to go once they graduated to crutches but still weren't too sure of their balance. Sometimes just for laughs I like to tell people oh, yeah, we met in rehab, just to see what they'll say. Like we were a couple of druggies. But they usually figure out what I mean because of his leg, not to mention that I'm still working there but full-time now. I want to be a real nurse so I'm taking some courses that will help get me into a decent nursing school. Maybe work in a real hospital and not just a place like the rehab.

Ahab quit community college after the accident even though I told him it was a dumb thing to do and he'd never go anywhere without some advanced education. He has disability and wants to go to film school but I don't think that's ever going to happen.

I'd like to get married, maybe have a kid or two, but he refuses. He says he has his reasons, one of them him not being the marrying kind whatever that means. Sometimes I wonder why I put up with his shit. When I finish nursing school if he hasn't motivated his ass up off the sofa where he spends most days, well, that will probably be it for me.

So around four a.m. in he comes, stomping that damn leg up the back porch steps and cursing, probably because I shut the outside light off and he can't see where the hell he's going in the dark. *Stump, thunk. Stump, thunk.* That's his real leg with the heavy work boot first and then his fake leg with the fake foot in the other boot. *Stump, thunk.* Ahab's a big guy. He makes a lot of noise.

"Carla!!!" he pounds on the back door.

I fell asleep on the sofa around midnight, too pissed off to stay up waiting for him anymore, but some asshole in an SUV with the radio blaring and the bass pounding right outside the house woke me up about an hour ago. I'm doubly pissed because of that. I couldn't get back to sleep so I've been killing time playing mindless games of solitaire on Ahab's laptop at the kitchen table. "Shut up," I say to myself out loud but not so loud he can hear me. "You'll wake the neighbors. Use your fucking key."

I hear his key against the lock but it's not going into the hole. It just keeps scraping against the metal.

"Carla," he yells again. Some dogs start barking across the street.

I get up from the table and open the door.

"Jesus Christ," I say. "Will you shut up for God's sake."

He comes inside and stares at me, points to my nightgown, which is all wrinkly now and stuck to my bare ass from sitting on it while I played solitaire.

"What the fuck is that?" He starts to laugh. "You look like a Vegas whore in that get-up."

I don't say anything. I just stare back at him, pull my nightgown off my butt and fluff it out. Then I go across to the refrigerator, open the freezer door and take out the Carvel box. I put in on the table and take off the cover. A re-frozen Fudgy stares at me with his little red frosting eye. I reach into the box and pick him up by the tail. He's hard as a rock and all raspy with freezer burn. My fingers go numb pretty fast.

I walk back across the kitchen and stand in front of Ahab, give him a look that means business.

"Carla," he says with that tone in his voice I don't like. It's a warning tone and it just gets on my last nerve.

I swing my arm fast and hit Ahab in the face with the frozen whale, take out a good chunk of skin and flesh on his left cheekbone. It knocks him back a step or two. Blood starts to run. Fudgy's body breaks off from the tail and drops to the floor.

"There's your fucking whale," I scream, shaking my fist and the frozen tail in the air. "Happy fucking birthday." I drop the tail and it lands next to the body.

"Jesus, Carla," he says putting his hand up to his face.

I stand in the middle of the floor, opening and closing my freezing hand, trying to catch my breath.

"Jesus," Ahab says again.

"I'm sorry," I say, all the fight and anger gone out of me. I go over to the sink and run warm water on a towel, go to Ahab and press it against his bleeding cheek. He winces. "I'm really sorry. I'll get you a band-aid."

I go in the bathroom and rummage around in the medicine cabinet but no luck. We're out. Geez, you'd think a nurse wannabe like me would be more prepared but all that's in there is a few gauze pads and some white first aid adhesive tape. I bring them back into the kitchen.

Ahab is sitting at the table with the towel up against his cheek. He's taken two bottles of beer out of

the fridge. Condensation drips down the glass onto the tabletop.

"Let me see," I say.

He takes the towel away from his face. The flesh is split open over the cheekbone, a gash about one inch long. It's stopped bleeding but it's purple around the edges and is beginning to swell.

"That needs a butterfly," I say.

"You're the nurse," he says. "Not to mention the fucking assailant." He takes one of the cold bottles of beer and runs the wet glass over his cheek.

"Don't do that," I say. "You'll get germs in there."

I get a pair of scissors from the drawer under the sink and cut a couple of butterflies from the adhesive tape. I have to get up really close to put them on his face. I'm not sure I trust him but he reaches out and puts his arm around my waist, pulls me toward him so I have to straddle his thigh on the kitchen chair.

"Hmmm," he says, feeling my bare butt and boobs through the skimpy nightgown.

"Hold still," I say. I put the end of the first butterfly on one side of the cut, pull the gash closed and tape it down hard on the other side. Then I do the same with the second bandage.

"Ow," he complains. "That hurts."

"Tough," I say. "And by the way. I'm not sorry."

"Oh, Carla," he says.

"Oh, Carla, what?" I say.

He kisses me and hands me the other bottle of beer and he puts his hands up under my nightgown and messes around a little. We drink some beer and then we go to bed on the flaming sheets under the sexy red light and mess around some more and then we both fall asleep.

When we wake up the whale is a puddle of vanilla ice cream and fudge on the kitchen floor. That red eye is still staring up at me from the mess, like he's accusing me of something. I'm not sure why, but I feel like I let him down somehow.

III The Pot Roast

She couldn't believe her luck. Summer vacation was over. The children were finally back in school. Harvey was at the office. The house was neat. She was neat. Her hair was pinned up in a bun and she wore a freshly laundered housedress that buttoned down the front. She had the whole day to get the last of the summer cucumbers pickled, make some bread, get out the pressure cooker to put up a pot roast for dinner and perhaps do an apple pie as well.

By noon the cucumbers were sliced and salted and tightly packed in a dozen large glass Ball jars on the counter next to the sink. She had put a small bay leaf in each jar. The pickling brine was simmering in a kettle on the stove, filling the kitchen with the pungent smell of vinegar, brown sugar and spices. The pot roast had been dredged in flour and seared on all sides in a frying pan and placed in the pressure cooker with some water, onions and carrots. She sealed the top and turned on the heat.

Her hands were covered in flour, kneading and turning a mound of yeasty bread dough, and she was deeply engrossed in an exciting episode of Helen Trent on the radio, when wouldn't you know, the darn Fuller Brush Man showed up on the back porch. She'd purposely locked the front door and pulled the curtains in the living room windows as well as those all along the sides of the house so it looked like no one was home but he came boldly around back, up the porch stairs, and knocked on the screen door.

She wiped her hands on her apron and went to the door.

"I'm your Fuller Brush Man," he said through the screen.

"I know who you are," she said, nodding toward his sample case. "I'm not interested."

"I have a gift for you. I'll just step in a moment?" He opened the door and she cursed herself for not latching the hook after the children had left for school.

"I'm really not interested," she said again but he already had his case up on the kitchen table.

"I'm very busy," she said. "Perhaps another time."

He took a brush out of his case. He was a well-dressed young man with sandy hair and a nice smile. His suit and tie were clean and his black shoes were polished.

He held the brush up to her.

"What do you think of these bristles, ma'am?"

"They look very nice," she said, "but I'm really not interested." She picked up the ball of kneaded dough and placed it into a greased mixing bowl, covered it with a tea towel and put it on the counter next to the stove where there was warmth from the pressure cooker and the simmering pickling liquid. The valve on the pressure cooker rattled.

"See," the Fuller Brush Man said, tapping the bristles lightly against the edge of the table, "this brush is shaped in a special way to get at all those...you know...those hard to reach places your regular brushes won't go."

He looked at her in a way she didn't like and ran his hand up and down the bristles on the brush.

"Mmmmm," she said. "You really need to leave." She went across the room to the Hoosier cabinet and took her rolling pin out of the top drawer. "I have to make a pie," she said.

"I won't stop you, ma'am," he said. "You just go right on about your business." He gave a dry cough, like something was stuck in his throat. "Do you think I could have a glass of water?"


She put the rolling pin on the counter and went to the sink. She ran water into a jelly glass and handed it to him.

"Thanks," he said. He drained the glass and set it on the sideboard next to the sink. "You know, these are not just brushes. They're modern household tools that will help any housewife keep her house neat. They take the drudgery out of cleaning. And they'll leave you a lot of free time." He wiped his hand across his mouth. "For fun. I'll bet you don't have a lot of fun." He swept his arm around the kitchen. "What with all this cooking and cleaning and taking care of a house and all."

"I don't need any brushes," she said again. "I think you should leave."

"Well, now, that's not very friendly," the Fuller Brush Man said. He placed the curved brush carefully back in the sample case.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I don't mean to be rude but you need to leave."



The Fuller Brush Man walked across the linoleum and locked the screen door, then closed the storm door behind it and locked that.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He smiled at her, a great big grin that showed a dimple in his right cheek.

"Well, ma'am, you're now what's called a captive audience." He walked back to his sample case. "See, I've got something else here that might interest you." He reached in and pulled out a long brush with stiff bristles. "Nope," he said. "That's not it. Darn." He rummaged in the case. "Where is that doggone thing? Oh, yes." He smiled at her and pulled out a black-handled knife with a large, shiny blade." He held it up and wagged it back and forth.

She backed against the counter and put her hand on the rolling pin, gripped it tight with her fingers and felt the muscle in her bicep harden.

"What are you planning to do with *that*?" she asked.

"Not sure," he said fingering the knife. "That depends. I might and I might not do anything. Right now all I want to do is sell you a brush or two."

"I thought you said you had a gift for me," she said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"You said you had a gift for me when you first came in."

"Oh, I do," he said. "I surely do." He put his index finger against the tip of the knife. "What's your name, missy?"

"Evelyn," she said.

The pressure cooker gave a whistle.

The Fuller Brush Man turned to the stove.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Pot roast," she said. "For dinner."

"Is it ready now? I'm hungry."

"No," Evelyn said. "It's nowhere near finished cooking."

"I'm hungry," he said again. He stuck the point of the knife into the kitchen table and twisted it. Splinters of wood rose up around the blade.

"I can fix you something else," she said. "A sandwich? I have leftover chicken. Some soup? Some chocolate chip cookies?"

The pressure cooker rattled on the burner. The valve whistled

"Sounds good."


Evelyn started toward the pantry, a small alcove near the cellar stairs. A swinging door separated it from the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Just in here. I have to get the bread."

He pulled the knife out of the table and pointed it at her. "Well, just don't do anything dumb."

Evelyn went into the pantry. She opened the breadbox and took out the bread. The pressure cooker whistled and rattled. She counted out four slices, wrapped up the loaf and put it back. She hummed a little song to herself while she stood and tapped her foot against the floor. There was more loud rattling and whistling from the kitchen and then, as she was fairly sure there would be, the blast of a large explosion and a scream from the Fuller Brush Man. Evelyn pushed open the swinging doors and stepped back into the kitchen. The Fuller Brush Man was moaning on the floor, his face and body covered in shreds of boiling pot roast and vegetables. The black-handled knife lay next to him. Evelyn picked up the knife and stood looking down at him. Then she leaned over and poked him with it. He groaned. She poked him harder, enough so the tip of the blade went down through his suit and his shirt and his undershirt and into his shoulder just a bit. He yelped and tried to raise his burned hands to protect himself. She poked him again, in the chest this time, deeper and then deeper, so the blood bubbled up and mixed with the shredded pot roast and then ran down his side and pooled on the floor. He moaned a long moan and then his swollen eyes rolled back in his head. Evelyn tossed the knife aside, bent down and grabbed the Fuller



Brush man by the hair with her fist. She lifted his head and pounded it into the linoleum.

"You bastard," she yelled. "You sonofabitch. You..."

She released a flood of obscenities she wasn't even aware she knew.

She let go of his head and let it fall back to the floor. It made a loud squishy thunk when it landed.

"You bastard," she said again.

Because of the Fuller Brush Man she'd missed almost all of Helen Trent. The show was over. A stupid Jell-O commercial was playing and now she had this darn mess to clean up before the kids got home from school.

On top of everything else, Harvey was going to be really angry there was no pot roast for dinner.

Robert Laughlin lives in Chico, California. His "Men at Work" stories will be collected for book publication at a later date. Apart from the "Men at Work" series, Mr. Laughlin has published over 100 short stories, two of which are storySouth Million Writers Award Notable Stories. His website is at www.pw.org/content/robert_laughlin.

Men at Work #129

Robert Laughlin

Federigo, a mall manager

I see the digital clock above the defunct Sbarro wink to 4:58. My long moment of reflection in the food court is over; I get off the bench and make the two-minute walk back to my office, passing mostly boarded-up store fronts and never having to step aside for a shopper on an intersecting path.

Corinne is already gone for the day when I return. The hoped-for miracle hasn't happened—there is no recorded message on the office phone and no envelope lying on the floor below the mail slot. Wessel's Shoes has missed the official deadline to renew its lease, so now I have to call the owners and tell them we've reached one-third occupancy, the threshold they agreed on. I'll spend all day tomorrow sending the remaining businesses pro-rated refund checks, with ninety days warning to clear out before the bulldozers arrive.

This isn't Minnesota, home to the Mall of America. It's the Sun Belt, and, fifty years after the national mall-building frenzy, people finally learned they don't need indoor shopping centers where there are no nasty elements to shelter from. Not that I'm a quick study myself; I still have to pay down a house four blocks from the job I thought would last as long as I needed it.

Michelle McGill-Vargas hails from Gary, Indiana where she enjoys writing historical fiction, flash fiction, and short stories. Her writings have appeared in "Lutheran Witness", "Splickety Magazine", and "The Copperfield Review". Until the day her historical fiction manuscripts get published, she pays the bills as a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing. Read her short stories at <http://www.shortfictionbreak.com/> and visit her blog at <http://www.michellemcgillvargas.wordpress.com/>

Return to Ordinary

Michelle McGill-Vargas

"Come with me," Eric said into my ear. His words were the first sounds I'd heard since our group bedded down in front of the crackling fireplace for the evening.

I'd been peeling an apple and almost sliced off the tip of my finger with the knife at the suddenness of his baritone. In the weeks spent with this particular group of survivors, I'd only heard Eric speak maybe half a dozen times. Actually, nobody ever really said much of anything. Training our ears on a marauding band of starving thieves was more important than idle conversation. What was the point of getting to know people who'd either die or disappear at a moment's notice anyway? So at day's end, we usually welcomed the cricket chirps or the rush of the few healthy trees fanning the air. Reminders of our old lives before nightmares interrupted our slumber.

Eric crouched at my side, bouncing on the balls of his feet like an anxious child. He leaned over and whispered, "I wanna show you something." Then he stood and disappeared into the back of the abandoned farmhouse we'd been squatting in.

I rose from my spot on the living room floor, rubbed my numb butt awake, and waded through the snores toward Eric's hulking silhouette waiting at the closed back door. His fingers tapped the metal knob; the other arm extended toward me. He opened the door just a crack and slid out. I followed suit. I'd experienced too much death and horror since Yellowstone blasted a hundred-mile wide crater into the earth five years ago to care whether accepting Eric's invitation was a bad idea. Yet I still tucked the knife in the front pocket of my jeans.

Every week or so, we'd lose another member of our group, their corpses found lying peacefully in their sleeping bags or outside at the foot of a tree, the despair finally erased from their faces. I envied their escape from a world turned upside-down while the rest of us remained, scratching out an existence. But I quite liked Eric. His brooding silence gave me a chance to speculate on what he'd been in his former life. His curtain of dirty-blond hair covering the lower half of his face, the river of cryptic tattoos streaming down both arms, the bald head he kept meticulously shaved. In another time, his presence in our group would have drawn confused stares. Even we had exchanged suspicious glances when he found us.

Given my brief encounters with him, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd been a nurse or a kindergarten teacher rather than the devil's disciple our first impressions assumed him to be. Once, while securing the perimeter of our camp with fishing line and pieces of scrap metal, I'd mumbled how I missed writing. So on a supply run, he returned with a bag full of rolling papers and a stack of pristine spiral notebooks. My discovery of them on my pallet was the first time I'd seen him smile—or what I assumed was a smile beneath all that hair. He'd even taken a few of my night watches, allowing me an extra two hours of fitful sleep. Always without a word from him.

I could barely see him on the porch. An orange sliver of dusk peeked out of the hazy western horizon. The rest of the heavens were blanketed in tons of ash Yellowstone had belched out. But I could still detect Eric's hand cupped around his mouth, his head angled slightly to the side as he lit a homemade cigarette dangling between his lips. He shook the match dead and then tossed it over the porch railing into a dormant flowerbed. Then with a flashlight, he led the way across the empty field behind the farmhouse.

I knew enough not to speak or make a sound as we stepped through the stunted grass as if it were littered with animal dung. For several minutes, I remained at his heels in a wake of the burning plant life puffing from his mouth, blindly following him to God knows where. Not wanting to lose what little bit of Eric I could see, I gave a quick glance over my shoulder at the farmhouse now swallowed in blackness behind me. Even in the daytime, the desolation of the area could be unnerving. It was nice that we didn't have to fight anyone else for the scant resources available to us, but should trouble come, there would be no help. Our screams would either float away unanswered or summon more trouble we didn't need.

Eric stopped at a gigantic oak tree just inside the wood and barbed wire fence surrounding the property. Beyond that was a half-dead, coniferous forest. He tilted his head back and blew a cloud of smoke in the air. "Can't tell it's there, can you?"

I looked up. "What? The tree?"

He pointed the beam of light to a tangle of boughs spread out like a blackened mushroom cloud. His arms groped for something against the tree trunk. A rope dotted with large, fist-sized knots of leftover clothing from the farmhouse's former occupants swung from a gnarled branch.

"Climb on up," he said.

"To what?"

"Just climb."

Common sense told me to leave. But excitement over this rare break in monotony won over. And Eric's willingness to share something about himself intrigued me. I obliged, supplementing my hand-over-hand ascent with my feet scraping against the trunk. Eric was just behind me, urging me with a hand to my back. Several feet up, the top of my head struck something solid. I rapped my knuckles on what appeared to be a wooden board.

"There's something up here!" I said as quietly as possible.

"Push it up."

I did, and realized it was a tiny door, like in a ceiling attic. Eric gave me one last assist until I found myself rolling onto the floor of a small tree house. The scent of charred wood reminded me of autumn back home in Indiana. "When did you find this?"

"Last week," he said, once he'd heaved himself onto the platform. Then he gathered up the rope and closed the door.

I took the flashlight from him and scanned the space, careful to keep the beam low. The tree house resembled a deer blind large enough for three adults to lie side by side or stand upright with room to spare. A red bucket tied to another cloth rope was in one corner. Tightly rolled blankets were in another. The roof was constructed of tree bark, slanted over the shanty's walls. Four-foot wide rectangular openings were cut into each, providing a panoramic view of the area.

"So this was what you wanted to show me?"

Eric motioned for me to join him at the eastern opening. "Look." He pointed toward the sky. A rift in the ash clouds revealed a cluster of lights, tiny pinpricks against an ebony tapestry. Some were brighter, shimmering in the sky. Others maintained a steady glow.

I leaned against the railing and sighed as if I'd been holding my breath. I turned to him. "How long has this—?"

"About a week."

"And you're just now telling us about it?"

"I'm telling you."

Eric stood beside me and mimicked my posture: his forearms resting on the sill of the opening, hands clasped together, his eyes locked on the twinkling awe in the sky. His angular profile was muted by the sparse moonlight we've grown accustomed to since the eruption. I expected us to remain like this, quietly reflecting on this gift of peace not available to us down below. But then he began to speak.

"Never thought I'd be standing this close to someone like you, let alone depending on a group of, um..."

I raised an eyebrow. "Survivors?"

"Black people." He fidgeted, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, then stared down at the floor. "I can imagine what you all probably thought when you first saw me."

"That you were some Grand Wizard of the local KKK?" I lowered my head, glad that he couldn't see the amused look on my face. "Funny how things work out, huh?"

"Yeah, well, you'd have been right."

My amusement began to fade. "About which part?"

Eric didn't answer. He was standing straight now, arms at his side, looking at me. Was there a smile on his face? Did he find the irony in our situation humorous like I did? Or was there another reason for bringing me out here?

"You said you wished for just a moment that you could return to the ordinary," he said. "To go back to the way things used to be."

"I meant something like watching TV or sleeping with both eyes closed for once."

"There're some things I miss doing, too."

My voice quivered. "Like...what?" I had the sudden desire not to hear him speak anymore. I took a step back, my hand on the knife hilt protruding out of my pocket.

He exhaled and approached me. I tried keeping a safe distance from him, but we seemed to move in tandem, the thud of his steps against the wooden planks matching mine. I rubbed the sweat from my palm on my pants, not wanting the knife to slip from my hand when I yanked it out. In three backward strides, I was cornered. Eric was an arm's length away. For the first time, the hours of chain smoking permeating his hair and clothing nauseated me. I fumbled with the knife, but, of course, it went clattering to the floor. The sound distracted him for only a moment. I started to retrieve the lost weapon, but the space between us disappeared. His boot crunched atop the knife. He picked it up, examined the blade, then tossed it to the other side of the tree house.

I wanted to scream. I should scream. But who would hear me? Even if whomever from the farmhouse was on watch happened to hear me, they wouldn't risk their safety or the safety of the group to investigate in the dark. At this moment, I figured all the other deaths weren't suicides. They must have been Eric's return to his ordinary, twisted life.

"Eric—"

His hand went to the side of my face. My palms pressed against the stone wall of his chest but he didn't retreat. Lips smashed against the tip of my nose, then found their way to mine. Soft and hairy pecks tickled my chin and upper lip. The movement of his jaw, like some slow groove in a darkened basement party, brought my arms around him. Then he enveloped me in a safety I hadn't felt in years. For once, I wasn't thinking about what could be lurking in the shadows, about how many more years of chaos awaited the world until the warmth of the sun returned. I was remembering what it was like to be with a man who made me forget my name.

When Eric pulled away, he said nothing. Just returned to his position at the tree house opening. Once the world stopped spinning, I joined him. Our shoulders barely touched as we gazed up at the tiny field of stars in the sky until the remnants of Yellowstone finally overtook them.

Max Mundan is the alter ego of poet/provocateur David Rutter . Or is it the other way around? Max Mundan is far from certain. He has been published in a slew of magazines and literary journals, including The Metric, Vagabonds, Dressing Room Poetry Journal, Eunoia Review, the Stone Path Review, Agave, Typehouse Magazine and the Los Angeles Times, to name but a few. He operates popular websites at maxmundan.com and maxmundan.tumblr.com. Thought Catalog just published his first poetry collection, "Junkies Die Alone."

STILL AN ASSHOLE


Max Mundan

Greg has been off the junk
for almost seven years now
He no longer needs to spend his days
hanging out at the needle exchange
or his nights
pistol whipping convenience store clerks
so he can pocket all the money from the till
Greg is clean
Greg is serene
but he's still a fucking asshole

Greg can not remember the last time
he had forced a young, junkie girl
to give him a sloppy blowjob
for a little taste of dope
and his mother didn't need
to hide her purse anymore
every time he came to visit
Greg doesn't need to deal
Greg doesn't need to steal
but he's still a fucking asshole

Andy said to me one day,
"Do you know what Greg does?
He invites the newcomer girls
over to his house,
under the pretense of helping them work the steps,
but before you know it
he's got them stripped naked
and is teaching them recovery
with the business end of his dick."

I answered, "This surprises you, how?
He was an asshole as a junkie.
He is still an asshole now.
Greg is just a fucking asshole."



Anne said to me this morning,
“Greg promised that if I let him fuck me,
he’d make sure my boyfriend never found out,
but he’s told every goddamn guy in the program
and now I can’t show my face
at any of my meetings.
I thought clean people
were supposed to behave better.”

So I said to her, “Getting sober
doesn’t make you a better person.
He was an asshole as a user
He’s still an asshole now
Greg’s just a fucking asshole

Greg has only vague and distant memories
of embezzling money
from the nice guy he worked for
or selling straight baby laxative
to the sad and desperate street hypes
Greg doesn’t need to lie anymore
Greg doesn’t need to cheat anymore
He just does it ‘cause he likes it
He is still a fucking asshole

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

Max Mundan

Dana only wanted me
to fuck her
She didn't like me
sucking her pussy
She wanted to save something special
just for her boyfriend
That's what she told me
and, if you want to know the truth
I didn't really give a damn
The only thing I'd been doing
down between her legs
was showing off
I was perfectly happy
to save the effort
and the energy

When I first met Dana
she gave me a look that says,
"You may have fooled the others
but you don't fool me
and if you promise not to waste my precious time
with bon mots and attempts at wit
then you can fuck me
till you're blue in the face."


I know that look
I've seen that look before

and fuck we did
over and over
for several weeks one summer
that felt like a year
and we somehow managed to hide the rutting
from the wonderful people
to whom we'd promised to be faithful

Se we went at each other
day after day
with acrobatic, if joyless, precision

Strip the clothes
hit the bed
thrust, roll, fuck
disengage
then hide the evidence

and, in the end, it was obvious to me



that what Dana and I were doing
had very little to do
with trying to make each other cum
This was sex as penance
It was just to prove
to the world
to ourselves
that we weren't worthy
of being loved

BETWEEN FIRST AND SLAUGHTER

Max Mundan

Susie had lived
on a rat-eaten blanket
on the sidewalks of Main Street,
between First and Slaughter

She was 97 pounds
of bad language and bile
but she'd hadn't the muscle
to fight off the crack-heads and junkies
who needed her body
to keep warm at night

Since Susie'd blown out her veins
before hitting the street,
she'd been shooting
in the fat of her stomach
She'd hoped that the smell
would deter the bad men
but their type
was not so easily discouraged

When she'd begun to ooze
green puss and red blood,
a regular downtown Christmas,
she was fresh out of millionaire benefactors
and affordable insurance
to get it taken care of

This morning,
when Austin came to pick me up,
where I was waiting,
between First and Slaughter,
he pointed to the filthy blanket
tied up in a ball and asked me,
"What the hell's that?"

"That's Susie," I answered,
"and she didn't matter,
to anyone."

James Mulhern is a high school teacher and college professor living in the Fort Lauderdale area. One of his short stories was included in a Best Short Story collection published in 2008, and another was a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Fiction in 2013. This March he was awarded a fellowship to Oxford University in the UK for the summer of 2015, where he plans to continue working on a novel.

Useless Things

James Mulhern

It seemed I was engulfed by believers in those days. The Italians and the Irish were obsessed with church, religion, and the pope. I think part of it stemmed from their pride in having witnessed the first catholic president.

Nonna called and asked if I would accompany Mrs. Muldoon and her to a Faith Healer that Mrs. Muldoon had heard about on the radio. The woman had allegedly cured a young girl whose cancerous tumors miraculously disappeared and an old arthritic man who could barely walk.

"Does Mrs. Muldoon have cancer?" I asked.

"No. She said she wants to see the woman as a precautionary measure."

"That's silly, Nonna."

"Of course it is. Mrs. Muldoon is crazy, but I can't refuse to help her. That wouldn't be nice."

"Why can't she go on her own?"

"Oh Molly. She can barely find her way to Broadway to do her food shopping. How's she gonna manage a trip to downtown Boston? That's like asking her to travel to Africa."

I agreed, and one Saturday in May, Nonna and I drove in her Plymouth Fury to Mrs. Muldoon's house. The day was brilliant. Not a cloud in the sky, bright sun, just a few clumps of dirty snow left over from a freak storm the previous week. There were puddles all over, and small streams ran in

the gutters along the street. The temperature was in the low 50's; water dripped everywhere. A chunk of icicles fell from the railing as we stepped onto the porch. I saw Mrs. Muldoon seated through the sheer curtain in her living room. She reminded me of one of the fortune tellers behind some lacy fabric at Wonderland Amusement Park. She got up when she saw us and opened the door.

"Come in. Come in. But stomp your feet first. Don't bring any of that wetness in here."

The house stunk like mold and sour milk. The living room to the right had boxes with clothes and old shoes spilling out. The fancy aluminum Christmas tree was in parts before the fireplace, and the ornaments sat in a pile on her dark brown couch.

"Mary, it smells in here. And what is that mess?" Nonna pointed at the boxes.

"Oh, I'm going to have a garage sale if I get inspired. Or maybe just donate the things to the Salvation Army. I hear they pick up stuff, don't they?" She led us into the kitchen.

"I don't know. But what I do know is that the clothes from those boxes smell pretty musty. I'm not sure anyone would want them unless you put the stuff through the laundry."

On her grey Formica table were several plates with leftover food—bits of toast, old bacon, half-eaten sandwiches. The trash basket to the right of her white porcelain sink was overflowing. Dirty take-out boxes with wire handles had fallen between the sink counter and the basket.

"We gotta get you a maid. What's going on with you, Mary? Why you let your house become such a pigsty?"

"I've been busy, Agnella."

"Doing what?!" We were standing in front of the sink with hardened Comet in the basin.

"Oh, this and that. Let me grab my coat from the back hall and we'll get going. Molly, are you excited to be healed?" Her pretty blue eyes sparkled. I thought she must have been very attractive when she was younger. Such fair skin and perfect teeth, or were they dentures?

"I don't think I need to be healed. I'm healthy, Mrs. Muldoon."

"Darling, we all could use healing. Ya know it's not only physical healing," she said, putting her arms into her red wool coat sleeves. I liked the black fur collar. "It's spiritual healing as well."

I was surprised by her peppiness, and frankly, how happy she seemed. She was usually such a bitch. She seemed as excited as my girlfriends before a date.

I was about to say that I didn't need *spiritual* healing, but Nonna, as if reading my mind, gave me a look that said, "Keep quiet." She had spoken with me a few weeks back about perceptions and how important it was for me to develop good interpersonal skills. She said that my directness was admirable, but others might perceive it as rudeness. I was surprised when she quoted Emily Dickinson, a writer I had been reading: "Tell the truth but tell it slant." She had picked up my poetry book from one of her armchairs in the living room, and opened to one of the dog-eared pages.

It took about 25 minutes to get to Tremont Street in Boston. The healer's business was on the street floor of a six-story building with a variety of ornate architectural features. At the very top was a mansard roof with dormer windows. The granite exterior was dirty with lines of black and green that had formed when rain pools on the many outcroppings and ledges seeped down the face of the building. The parlor where "Lady Jane" cured people was underneath a printing company squeezed between a luggage store on the left and a jewelry store on the right.

We parked across from the building, along the edge of the Boston Common. I could see a line of desperadoes that extended from the front of the building and around the corner to Court Street. Nonna's parallel parking was awful and Mary kept screaming that we were going to hit the car behind us. At last we were parked. For a few moments we sat in silence, the three of us taking in the sights around us. Two skid-row old men on a bench, wearing derby hats and unkempt, mismatched suits, shared a bottle wrapped in a paper bag. One of them pointed to something at the top of the building. I followed his finger to a flock of large black crows perched on a ledge underneath an overhang.

The people waiting in line looked pathetic. Mostly old ladies, a few men, some with canes or crutches; a young blonde girl in a wheelchair. It was a motley group, a range of ethnicities, all seemingly poor.

"You sure you want to go, Mary? These people look pitiful. I think they need curing more than any of us." It was true. We were wearing nice dresses and overcoats. I thought we would be out of place in that crowd.

"Of course I want to go. Remember you can't judge a book by its cover." Mrs. Muldoon pushed her door open and pulled herself into a standing position.

"Well all I can say is that this is one hell of a book," Nonna answered. She and I followed Mrs.

Muldoon's lead, who told us to hold hands.

When we crossed, Nonna cut in front of an Indian couple standing in line, explaining to them that I had leukemia "very bad" and the doctors gave me three months at most. "It's urgent that we see Lady Jane. You don't want the poor girl to die, do you? She's my granddaughter!"

Mrs. Muldoon whispered irritably, "That wasn't a nice thing to do."

The Indian woman was beautiful with large very dark eyes; it was hard to discern her pupils from the brownness that surrounded them. She had a red dot between her beautifully shaped arched brows, which I later learned in an Intro to Religion class was called a Bindi or Kumkum, marking a spiritual center or chakra, placed there out of respect for an inner Guru, all of which I thought was bullshit. She wore a purple sari and a pink head scarf. Her short bespectacled husband had a flat nose with large blackheads; tufts of hair sprouted from his nostrils and ears. He wore a blue navy suit. I figured that he met his wife here after work.

They spoke for a few moments in Hindi, then stepped back and nodded for us to move in front. There were grumblings and complaints from those behind the couple.

"Hey, go to the end of a line like the rest of us. What makes you so special, ladies?" an Irish-looking guy with a broad red face and a scully cap said.

Nonna teared up. "My granddaughter is dying."

The man's face blanched, and he looked at me with a sad expression. "Sorry, lady. Not a problem."

I tried to appear sick. I started shaking a little and drooled, not sure what a leukemia patient's symptoms were. The Indian couple stepped further back. I managed to create a string of saliva that dropped like the thread of a spider's web hanging off my chin.

We turned forward and Nonna put her arm around me as if trying to keep me from fainting. Mrs. Muldoon looked upward at the gathering of crows, which had increased since I first noticed them.

Nonna followed her gaze. "I hope they don't shit on us," she said.

"Oh, but Agnella, it's good luck. Let them poop if they need to. I've got a handkerchief in my purse." The idea of birds pooping on my head was vile, but I refrained from making a wiseass comment.

Finally we were inside. The healing room, or parlor, or whatever you call it, had metal fold-up chairs

along the sidewalls. Some of the armrests were rusty. I thought we would need a tetanus shot if we used them.

Lady Jane sat in a large throne-like chair on a platform at the back of the room. She couldn't have been more than 27 years old, bleach blond long hair, a pixie face with deep-set shiny green eyes. She was very petite. I was surprised that she wasn't a much older woman. She wore a tight-fitting black and white dress with a high hemline. She was busty and had long satiny legs that ended in white ballerina slippers with a flower pattern of red gemstones near her toes. Her white string shoelaces were untied.

"Well, she's not what I expected," Mrs. Muldoon whispered, and sighed. "She looks like a tart that's trying to make a few extra bucks before she goes to her other job in the Zone later tonight."

"What's the Zone?" I said.

"It's where all the hookers hang out, just around the corner. Perverts, pimps, drug dealers, and dirty bookstores," Nonna whispered.

Lady Jane made circular motions with her hands over the head of an old man with a cragged face. Her eyes were closed and she was mumbling.

It was only a moment or two before he yelled "Hallelujah" and threw his crutches towards the chairs on the left side of the room.

"Watchit!" an old blue-haired woman shouted. Her voice was low and she sounded like a man. "You almost hit me."

When it was our turn, Lady Jane said, "I take it you three are together." She had a fake British accent with a hint of Georgia twang.

"Yes, we are together." Mrs. Muldoon sighed, clearly disappointed with Lady Jane.

"What can I do for you?" She looked at each one of us in turn, scrunching her face. I noticed a pimple on her nose.

"Well cure us. Do your mumbo-jumbo so we can get outta here. This place is a dump," Nonna said, surveying the room. "I think we're more likely to catch a disease here than be cured. Maybe the bubonic plague. So cure us quick before a rat bites one of our feet."

"Yes, I know you want to be cured, but first you must tell me what ails you."

"For Christ's sake, at our age, everything ails us," Nonna said, "Where do you want me to start. How 'bout you make my breasts perky like yours?"

Lady Jane pretended to be indignant, then said, "I can't do anything to help your breasts, lady. I'm not a plastic surgeon." Her Georgia twang was strong.

"Agnella, you mustn't talk like that to this woman," Mrs. Muldoon said. "I would like to be cured spiritually, Lady Jane. Forget about my body. That's too far gone. I want my soul to be cleansed."

Lady Jane put her hands in a crisscross on Mrs. Muldoon's heart area, then closed her eyes, while she softly murmured an ostensibly sacred language. I thought I heard what sounded like 'pussy' in her gobbledygook. I think Nonna heard it, too, because she gave me a look at that moment and rolled her eyes.

"The masters have told be you are spiritually cured for your trip."

"Cut the crap! Mary's not going on any trip."

"That's not true, Agnella. I am," Mrs. Muldoon said excitedly, as if there might be some authenticity to Lady Jane after all.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"I'm going home." Mrs. Muldoon was beaming.

"To your family in Ireland?" Nonna asked.

"Yes, to my family."

"And how can I cure you, little girl?" Lady Jane said, looking earnestly into my face.

"I don't know."

Again she did the crisscross thing with her hands. Again she murmured her sacred prayer. And again I heard a distinct "pussy."

When she opened her eyes, her face was pale. "What's your name?"

"Molly."

"Molly, I hate to tell people things like this." Now she was speaking completely in her Georgia twang. "But I see gruesome deaths in your future."

"Let's get outta here," Nonna said, clearly upset. She started muttering in Italian.

"You are going to witness several deaths in your lifetime."

"Who doesn't witness death? We all die." Nonna said.

"No, Molly's situation is different," Lady Jane said, speaking to Nonna as if I weren't there. "I take it you are the grandmother."

"Yes. That's easy enough to tell. I couldn't be her mother. Too old and dried up."

"You are very good to Molly. You mean more to her than her own mother."

It was eerie how this woman knew that. "Okay," I said matter-of-factly. "Tell me about these deaths."

"You have the unlucky fortune of being someone who will either find dead people or be with them when they die, sometimes in violent situations. I guess you might say, 'You're an Angel of Death.' " And then she started giggling like a little girl. It seemed out of her control, and she curled up in her throne.

The Indian woman behind us whispered something to her husband, and then they rushed out the door. I wonder now if the woman's inner Guru told her to get the hell out of there.

"Angel of Death! *Ffangul!*" Nonna said. She pulled Mary and me out of the line and we followed the couple. Before the door shut, I looked back and saw that Lady Jane was still laughing. She waved to me. I mouthed, "Fuck you," echoing Nonna's sentiment.

During the ride home Mrs. Muldoon and Nonna argued over what "Angel of Death" might mean.

"Maybe she'll be a police officer," Mrs. Muldoon said. "That's a nice profession. Protecting the citizens. And all police officers witness death now and again, don't you think?"

"Are you crazy? No granddaughter of mine is going to be a police officer. I think that broad saw that

Molly was gonna be a doctor." She smiled at me in the rearview mirror. "What do you think she meant, Molly?"

"I think she was just making things up to frighten us. Maybe she spotted someone further down the line who would actually pay, and she was in a hurry to get rid of us."

"The man on the radio said she doesn't accept money. Believes she has a calling is what he said she said," Mrs. Muldoon answered.

"He said, she said? Do you know what Mary's talking about?" The car swerved as Nonna turned to look at me.

"Lady Jane I mean. . . Watch it, Agnella!"

"I noticed people slipping her bills," I said.

Nonna zipped through a red light.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You're going to get us arrested, or killed," Mrs. Muldoon said.

"Don't worry. We have a cop in the back seat. She'll use her connections and get us off the hook."

We all laughed.

As we were passing a section where you could see planes from Logan Airport, Nonna asked Mrs. Muldoon, "When is your flight?"


"What flight?"

"The flight to Ireland. When you go home?"

"Oh . . ." She paused to think a bit. "I'm going the third week of August." I thought it funny that her pronunciation sounded like "turd."

"I'll be sad to see you go, Mary. At least we have you for a few more months though." She patted Mrs. Muldoon's shoulder. The car swerved again. "I'm gonna miss you, Mary. But I'm sure you'll be happier. Everybody needs family. And you got nobody here, right?"

"Nobody."



I leaned back in the seat and thought how Mrs. Muldoon and I shared something. Sure, I had Nonna, but I still felt very alone. But aren't we all essentially alone? A psychiatrist told me years later that each human being is limited by his consciousness. All lived realities are filtered through our individual prisms. He said that we die alone as well, no matter how many people are around us at that time. His words reminded me of something the writer Hunter S. Thompson once said: "We are all alone, born alone, die alone, and—in spite of True Romance magazines—we shall all someday look back on our lives and see that, in spite of company, we were alone the whole way."

I didn't understand Mrs. Muldoon's obsession with cures. She asked Nonna and I to take her to the ocean on August 15th.

"Why August 15th?" I asked.

"Something about a cure in the water. Evidently it is the feast of the Assumption."

"What's that?"

"A day that celebrates the mother of Jesus going to heaven. Mary claims the salt water is supposed to have a cure in it. I guess the ocean becomes one big tub of Epsom salts. I don't really understand it all, but Mary is adamant about going, and she wants both you and I to take her."

"Is she sick?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then why does she keep wanting cures?"

"Molly, I don't know. All I know is she's a sad, sad woman who never got over her husband dying. And she's been drinking her own self to death ever since. Maybe she thinks it's you that needs the cure." She laughed.

"Why would I need a cure?"

"Because sometimes I think your head's not screwed on right. Now stop asking so many questions. How the hell am I supposed to know what goes on in Mary's mind? Maybe she thinks we both have sick souls."

I laughed. "Nonna, I don't have a sick soul, and neither do you."

"You can never be sure. Listen, consider it insurance. If there is something to this whole cure thing, maybe good will come of it. And if there isn't, so be it. The point is that she asked us to take her. And I refuse to deny an old friend a last request before she travels home to Ireland."

I agreed to go, and on the appointed day, a Saturday, Nonna and I drove to Mrs. Muldoon's house. Nonna parked her Blue Fury in front. Mrs. Muldoon was seated in a rusted orange chair on the front porch, one of her last pieces of furniture. Over the past several weeks she had donated most of her possessions to charity, except for a few pieces of furniture in her living room, kitchen, and bedroom.

Her house was on the market, but she was lackadaisical about selling it, leaving it in the hands of a realtor downtown. She said she didn't really care when or if it got sold, which I found strange. But what did I know about such things? I was a young girl excited about the start of college in a few weeks.

Nonna stopped the engine and honked. Mrs. Muldoon was asleep. She wore what appeared to be a housedress, mostly white, with a spattering of blood-red dots, and hideous black boots.

"What the hell is she wearing?" Nonna got out of the car and walked precariously up the rotting wooden gray steps. I followed and waited at the bottom of the stairs. When she was beside Mrs. Muldoon, she shook her. For a moment, I thought she might be dead.

"Mary! Wake up."

She woke, a confused look on her face, Her auburn hair was a sweaty mess. The sun highlighted a matted ring of locks that circled her head. She must have been wearing a hat or head scarf earlier.

When she finally awoke, Nonna said, "What's the matter with you? Did you forget we were going to the beach?" She glanced at Mary's feet, tsk-tsking at the pair of black rubber boots. "You look foolish in those things. How you gonna get the Blessed Mother's cure if you don't get wet?"

"Agnella," Mary said, rising at last, "there's those awful rocks before you get to the sandy part of the beach, and my feet are sore enough. Don't worry. I'm going to take them off once we settle in a good spot. I may even strip naked. Wouldn't that be a sight to behold?" She laughed. Nonna did too.

"And where is your bathing suit?"

“Underneath my housedress, of course. You certainly didn’t expect me to sit here like some fool in my swimsuit. What would the neighbors think?”

Nonna helped her down the steps, which creaked and almost seemed to cave in at one point, then helped her into the passenger seat. I got into the back.

“I’m delighted you could come, Molly,” she said, turning around. “It’s a celebration for both of us, a baptism of sorts, as we begin our new lives.” I realized that the red spots on her gown were tiny roses. “You must be looking forward to your studies.”

“Yes, I am. And I’m happy to go with you, Mrs. Muldoon.” I wasn’t. I hated the beach, still do. The hot sun and sand, crowds of people, radios blaring, the smell of baby oil, the jellyfish in the water. I did admire the sharks because of their single-mindedness, the way they hunted for prey. In those days, I imagined one of the annoying boys from my high school getting bitten, but the chances of that happening were slim.

We parked on the beach side across from the Renwood Dining Room, a place Nonna had taken me a few times. Mrs. Muldoon was right about the stones. They did hurt your feet. The beach was packed with people, and it was hard to navigate through the crowd, especially because Mrs. Muldoon was a little tipsy. I realized she had been drinking on the drive over and had to roll the window down. She stunk of sweat and gin. Radios blared, children created sand castles, groups of ladies gossiped, and the sun was so damn hot.

Finally we found a spot to put our blanket and fold-up chairs. Most of the women wore full-piece swimsuits, and many had housedresses like Mary. Three girls about my age ran out of the water as their little brothers splashed them with water from behind. To our right, a man dressed in pants and a shirt, which I could never understand at the beach, fixed the chain on his overturned bicycle. I wished we had an umbrella. I had to use the palm of my hand to shade my eyes from the sun.

When we were settled, I asked Mrs. Muldoon about the cure in the water. She sat between Nonna and me in our spot close to the ocean.

“Well, darling, today is when we celebrate the Blessed Mother’s Assumption into heaven.”

“I don’t understand.”

Nonna rubbed baby oil on her arms, legs, and face, then lay down, uninterested in our conversation.

"What don't you understand?"

"The Assumption part. What does that mean?"

"Mary was raised into heaven three days after her death."

"What do you mean raised? She just flew up into the air?" I laughed.

"I think so, Molly. Yes."

"How is that possible?"

"Darling, you got to have faith."

"But it doesn't make sense. How can somebody just fly into the sky? And what's the connection to a cure in the water? Was she on a boat?"

"I don't know, Molly. Don't think too much about it. Just believe it."

"I don't believe it. It sounds ridiculous, and I can't follow the logic."

Nonna sat up and gave me the eye, warning me not to press the issue. Mrs. Muldoon pulled off her boots, then stood and took off her housedress. Underneath was a stylish black-and-white full-piece swimsuit. I never noticed what a round hard belly she had. She almost looked pregnant. For a second, I imagined she was going to demonstrate the assumption and fly upward.

"Logic has nothing to do with it, darling. I don't question these things." She walked into the water. I watched her plod through the waves, then dive into the ocean and swim out a bit.

"Molly, how many times do I have to tell you not to ask so many questions? It's rude. Most people aren't like you." Her eyes followed Mary who was now a ways out. "Most people are lemmings and sheep. You have the good fortune, or maybe the bad fortune," she smiled at me, "of being a lion in a world of lemmings." She put her warm hand on my leg. "Who gives a damn if Mary flew into the sky or not? Maybe that's what people did a few thousand years ago, though I doubt it."

She turned and looked at the man tending to his bike, then whispered to me, "I wish God would reach down and pull him off the beach. Can't stand the sound of that spinning peddle and chain, and his hands are a greasy mess." We both laughed. A woman wearing a white shawl and long

white robe walked by. She reminded me of a bride.

"Do you miss your husband, Nonna?"

"Here we go again." She laughed. "You ask the strangest things."

"Well, do you?"

"Of course not. Men are a pain in the ass."

"What about Mr. Scarfone."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, he's just a good fuck."

"Nonna!"

She whacked me playfully with the bag of fruit and rolls she had brought. "Well it's true. And you should see the size of his cazzone." She moved her palms apart.

"His calzone?"

"No." She laughed. "Cazzone," emphasizing the "z" sound. "Maybe that's why they call a calzone a calzone. It looks like a penis."

She lay back down. "Look that up someday in one of your fancy college books."

"Nonna, I don't think my college textbooks will have that information."

"Then what the hell good are they?"

We both laughed. She closed her eyes and patted the blanket to straighten it out.

After a while, she fell asleep. Mrs. Muldoon had stopped swimming and stood in the water, like so many of the people. But unlike the others, who were chatting with one another in pairs and groups, Mrs. Muldoon looked towards the horizon. I wondered if she was thinking about her journey home. Seagulls cawed. Children laughed and screamed with delight.

I was sweating, so I went for a walk towards the end of the beach, where it was less crowded. There was a fishing jetty and an area of large rocks. I explored the spaces in between the boulders, looking for a lonely starfish, a shiny stone, or a clam with a secreted pearl. I unearthed small crabs

that scampered across the sand. At one point I startled a mourning dove that sped from its cleft into the bright sky. It made a whistling sound as it rose and flew off, then descended over the water where Nonna stood alongside Mrs. Muldoon. The waves glimmered like sparks from an unquenchable fire. On the jetty, a father and his son cast fishing lines into the sea.

Suddenly, Nonna and Mrs. Muldoon fell, surprised by a spirited breaker that razed them in its wake. I ran to help, but laughed, too, at the spectacle—Nonna and Mrs. Muldoon seated on their asses, just a few feet from where the waves trickled to their end. In an instant they were kneeling forward, laughing so hard that they cried. I helped lift them, They groaned in between guffaws, complaining that the soles of their feet were cramping from shells and stones beneath their feet. Every time I lifted one of them, another wave splashed over us, and they fell back down, laughing even harder.

Mrs. Muldoon said, "My permanent is all ruined," while she fussed with her hair.

Nonna said, "Well, it didn't look so good to begin with, Mary. Consider it a cure."

Mrs. Muldoon reached for me, "Now pull me up quickly, before the next wave hits."

I did so, mesmerized by the wet silvery scalp that shown through her auburn hair.

I resisted the urge to touch the crown of her head. At last she rose from the sea.

"You're an angel," she said, when she finally stood.

"What about me?" A wave splashed over Nonna. "Maron"! Pull me up, Molly. If I get hit by another wave, I'm gonna curse this water. Thought this was supposed to be a blessing. More like a tidal wave if you ask me." With that, a wave sprayed all of us, but Mrs. Muldoon and I managed to pull her up.

Later we moved towards the quiet end of the beach. We sat in the shade of a bony cliff, eating panettone (a type of raisin bread), bananas, apples, and cherries drenched in brandy. Nonna also pulled baby-sized jars of Grappa out of her purse. I draped a necklace of dried seaweed upon Mrs. Muldoon, and told her it was my version of a Hawaiian lei, a wreath presented ceremoniously to people who were coming or going.

"In that case, you need one, too," Mrs. Muldoon said.

"What about me? I could use a good lei," Nonna said, smirking.

I found two more pieces of seaweed and Mrs. Muldoon hung them on us. Her fingers were icy cold, like those of a corpse. I shuddered as they touched my warm skin.

The three of us made a toast to new beginnings, and we talked about the future until the sun began to set.

We were hungry again when we left the beach later on, so we crossed the street and enjoyed a nice meal at the Renwood Diner. I had the seafood platter and Nonna and Mrs. Muldoon had sea scallops with pancetta, mushrooms, and fresh tomato.

Mrs. Muldoon made a joke about this being our last supper. "Well, it is in a way, don't you think? I won't be seeing either of you again after tonight."

"Of course you will. You're not leaving until five days from now," Nonna said, motioning for the check. "I'll drop by before your flight on Thursday if I don't see you before then." The waitress put the bill on the table.

"Let me pay for that," Mrs. Muldoon said. "I appreciate you girls bringing me to the ocean today. I feel refreshed and healed. And you made me very happy today."

"Well I'm glad that you feel good, Mary, but I insist on paying." Nonna took cash out of her purse and placed it on the check. The waitress picked it up.

"I'll see you one more time, Mrs. Muldoon. Nonna's driving me to Boston University to speak with a counselor on Thursday. On the way over, we can both say goodbye."

"That would be nice, Molly." She smiled at me, then pointed at the faded beige and blue pattern of fish swimming above clamshells and starfish on the ocean floor. "I always loved the fish in this wallpaper. This one here looks like he's coming right towards us."

"I wish there were some shark," I said.

Nonna laughed. "Of course you would."

"Did you know that a fish is the symbol of Christ?" Mrs. Muldoon said, sipping her last bit of wine.

Nonna spoke while she chewed a roll. "No, I didn't. Where'd you hear that, Mary?"

"Oh, I don't recall, Agnella."

After the waitress returned with Nonna's change, she put it in her purse, snapped it shut, and stood up. "Well, I'm tired. I don't know about the both of you. Let's get outta here."

We dropped Mrs. Muldoon off and she waved from the front porch before she opened the door. I noticed several trash bags along the gray clapboard wall.

"Wonder what's in all those bags?" I said, as we drove away.

"Junk. When you get old you accumulate a lot of useless things, Molly. And eventually you become one of them. So live while you can."

That night I fell asleep as I thought about "useless things" and living "while you can." I dreamt of seagulls pecking someone's eyes out, sharks in bloody water, and a singing red fish with white stripes along its sides. Dreams are so strange. I tried to remember the song of the fish, but I couldn't recall the words. A feeling of emptiness lingered, an emotion I often felt.

Nonna tried to call Mary on Wednesday evening to find out the time of her flight, but the phone service had already been disconnected, so we drove over around 8:00 am on Thursday morning.

"She may have already left." Nonna pulled the car into Mary's driveway. "But we might as well see if she's still here. I forgot to tell you, but when we were in the ladies room at the restaurant, Mary told me she had a present for you. She said that she left it on the table just inside the archway to her living room."

We got out of the car and walked up the steps. Nonna held her nose. "Those bags smell God awful. Maybe she dumped all the food from her refrigerator into one of them."

I rang the doorbell. We waited a few moments, then Nonna turned the door knob. When the door opened a horrible smell gushed at us--a combination of shit, vomit, body odor, and rotting fish, stronger than you can imagine, unless you've experienced it. I noticed a small purple box on the table as we turned into the living room. A few flies buzzed in the hot, humid air around our heads. Three standing lamps were lit. Nonna bent over and vomited.

I walked towards Mrs. Muldoon's corpse. She was seated in the purple chair that Nonna hated so much, eyes half open and bulging, swollen tongue protruding. There was an intricate pattern of blood vessels and blisters on her face. She wore the same housedress from our day at the beach. It was smeared with blood and a yellowish fluid that dripped from her nose and mouth. Her face, arms, and legs were bloated; her abdomen was distended. Her skin was green, red, purple, and black. White lines crisscrossed areas of deep red on her calves. There were two shimmering pools

of urine on the mahogany floor at each side of the chair, as well as feces on the seat cushion.

I kneeled down and pressed my finger against a dark purple spot above her right ankle; the skin was so cold. The flesh broke and blood trickled slowly down the side of her enlarged foot. I stood up, then crouched to stare into the small slivers of her eyes. The pupils were fixed and dilated. The corners of her eyes were filmy and I thought I saw wetness along the sides of her nose and cheeks. Were they tears or simply the body's fluids seeping out? I touched her pretty red hair and some it fell to the floor in clumps. A maggot emerged from her flaking scalp.

I heard Nonna still gagging behind me. She kept saying, "We gotta call the police." Although I found the smell overpowering and coughed a bit, I couldn't move away. I guess you could say I was mesmerized.

"Molly! What are you doing? Call the cops! I'm too weak to get up."

I picked up the black-and-white photograph from the t.v. table and examined it: an attractive couple, the young Mrs. Muldoon and her husband, in their wedding attire. Both of them dressed completely in white. He wore a white tuxedo with a bow tie and a wing-tipped collar. On the top of her auburn hair sat a veil with a crest of small white flowers; there was a pearl necklace around her neck. Both smiled above a large bouquet of white roses that obscured parts of their chests. In the dark background, blurred white faces hovered like disembodied heads.

"Molly!"

I turned the photo over. In blue cursive, now faded, Mrs. Muldoon had written "August 15th, 1937. The happiest day of my life." Next to where the photograph had lain was an empty pill bottle. I pulled it close to read the label "Diazepam, 5 mg. tab. Take one tablet twice a day as needed."

Nonna had reached the phone. I heard her talking to the police. "Hurry," she said and hung up.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screamed at me. "Get away from her."

I turned, accidentally stepping on one of Mrs. Muldoon's bare feet. The skin cracked and a clear fluid oozed from her big toe. The nail ripped off, falling like an autumn leaf onto the floor.

Then I walked over to the small purple box with my name on it. Inside was a gold necklace with an emerald and diamond cross.

Nonna stared at me. "What is it, Molly?"



"A useless thing."

Law Alsobrook is a graphic designer and educator at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar where he teaches design courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels. At present, he is currently pursuing his PhD at Plymouth University's Planetary Collegium in the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts where his research focuses on the role of narrative and language as mediating agents of consciousness.

these particles, us, drifted for eons

Law Alsobrook

to the one, i love,

i give:

the sylphic dance motes hung in their quiet lair,

stars flensed from midnight-sky above our patch of home,

the chatoyant light splashing over breakfast.

i give:

the redolence of coffee that we bask together in its secret lore,

pallid bones heaped from the swell Spring turning,

our sudor that swaddles in petrichoric embrace.



i give:

the cardinal kiss announcing my ardor afresh,

the gentle music collected from hands poised in writing,

the cursive script gliding along the hall.

i take:

these moments for eons.

these particles for us.

this long breath of flesh.

David Braga is a graduate student at Emerson College. His work has previously been published in Pantheon Magazine and Riding Light Review. He lives in Boston with his fiancée, Michelle.

Tabernacle

David Braga

Max and I pulled up outside the church at a little after three in the morning. The building, a large, brick trapezoid looking thing, was hidden from the main road by a thicket of trees and an immense parking lot. We wouldn't have to worry about being seen, so Max drove right up to the front door and parked.

In the back of his car we had two ski masks, two pairs of black gloves, two thick potato sack style bags, a twelve gauge shotgun (not loaded) and a bag of oranges. The shotgun was tucked under the back seat; we wouldn't need any firepower for a church robbery. The oranges were for Max, on account of his Vitamin C deficiency, an ailment not aided by his dope habit.

He went over the details one more time. It was his gig; he'd gotten the tip that security was lax because of remodeling, had gotten a key and the alarm code from a channel he said he'd rather keep private. Our target were gold carvings mounted on wood backboards along the church walls marking the Stations of the Cross. Max had a guy we could sell the gold to, that guy would melt it down and sell it to another guy, before it got sold to someone who could actually make something out of it. By then it would've changed hands enough times that it'd be near impossible to track back, especially given that it was a small haul. That was always the trick, keeping the score tiny. People lose a little bit and they get frustrated; you take their whole house and they get the real police on you. We'd take only what we'd planned, and be paid after we turned the loot over to Guy #1.

When he was done explaining, I asked Max how he'd found the place.

"This is where I go," he said.

"What?"

"This is where I go to church," Max said, running a hand through his hair like he was embarrassed to be explaining. "That's how I got the connection. Here." He handed me my mask and gloves. I pulled on the gloves and tugged the mask over my face, making sure the eyeholes were set so that I could see. I don't know what it is about the shape of my head, but these ski masks never sat right on my face.

"Since when do you go to church?" I asked.

"It's an AA thing," Max said. He collected the sacks from the backseat. I'd known he was in the program, but hadn't been sure how seriously he'd been taking it. It was hard to trust him when he talked about his recovery since I knew he was shooting up every chance he got, and that the heroin was the only thing keeping from the drink. But to each their own, I guess.

We got out of the car. The night was warm and nearly silent around us, the only sound coming from the insect orchestra playing its nightly hymn in the trees. Max handed me my bag and we started for the front door.

"How long is the turnaround for getting paid?"

"Probably about a week," Max said. He retrieved the key from his pocket and slid it into the lock. The door opened with ease.

An alarm sounded once - shrill and shocking in the calm of the night - but before I could react Max had typed the code in and cancelled it. I shut the door behind us.

"A week?" I asked. "And we're sure there's enough here to cover?"

"Should be," Max said.

Should be was close enough for him, he was only doing this for dope money. However many scores he could afford was more than he had, so there was only ever going to be a net gain. Me, I was in different circumstances. My girl had walked out on me two months ago, leaving me half short on the rent twice over. I'd borrowed some money from a few guys I knew from around town to square away the difference, but then got the idea to try to get a little more financial security by doubling their loan at the poker table. But of course there was a bad run of cards, and at the game there was always someone willing to stake you just a little bit more cash if you promised to pay it back in a reasonable amount of time, so I borrowed a bit more and the cards kept coming up wrong, and then I was five digits in the hole, and the people I owed were not the sort of people you wanted to skip payment on. So for as much as Max wanted this, I needed it. There were certain

parts of my body that I wanted to remain functional. 'Should be enough' and a weeklong turn-around was cutting it pretty fucking close.

Max had relocked the door behind us, something I'd forgotten, not that it should've mattered this late at night. I didn't see any construction or remodeling tools lying around, but Max told me all of the work was being done in the basement, which was the parish meeting hall and community center. That's where his meetings were. In the front hall there were pamphlets for finding God in the everyday, for youth services and joining the choir, volunteering to keep the terminally ill company at hospitals and hospices. I felt like I should've been feeling guilty, but the fact was that I was too desperate to feel anything. We could've been robbing a children's hospital for all I cared. It wouldn't have made one once of difference to me.

The inside was different than I thought it'd be. The main area, the real churchy part, was just a big open room with white walls and wooden pews set up in a half circle around the altar. I'm not sure what I thought I'd see. Stained glass, columns maybe. Even the crucifix hanging in the front of the room was surprisingly bloodless. I'd expected more gore, more force-fed guilt.

Max had already started on collecting the Stations on the left side of the room, so I got working on the set on the right side, which meant I only got the second half of the story. I guess I was familiar with it anyway. Jesus carries the cross, falls a bunch, gets nailed to it, and dies. In the last one the bury him. I figured there must have been one showing the resurrection - that was the big show, wasn't it? - but it just ended with him dead.

"What a fucking bummer," I mumbled to myself. I turned the last one over in my hand, weighing it, trying to guess how much the gold carving on it would be worth, if it would be enough. I wasn't much for knowing the conversion rate of precious metals, but I knew enough to know that since we had to split it halfway it was going to be close. Real close.

I walked my stash back to the entryway where Max had left his bag. He was gone for the moment, probably off to take a piss or snatch something secret he knew about. I wouldn't hold it against him if that was the case. This was his job, he'd just brought me along because we'd made a good team in the past.

For the second that I was alone the whole building was silent around me, as if in between breaths, waiting to exhale and scold us. I looked up at the eyes of the wooden Jesus over the altar, nailed forever to his cross, dangling high so that on Sunday's everyone could see his eternal suffering. I thought I might feel moved, almost wanted to, as if feeling something now would prove I was still capable of emotion. But it was only wood and wire. The people that knelt before it every week were

no different than Max kneeling down to the God he shot into his arm every evening. Or the kneeling I'd be doing if I didn't come up with eleven grand by the end of the week.

Behind the alter I saw something shining; a gold box, tucked into a square hole in the back wall. When I walked closer I wondered how I could've missed it before. It was pure gold, a box with a small door on the front and a cross on top, angels carved into the sides. This was it. This would be enough to set me up, set both of us up, for months. It was a literal goldmine.

I put my hands on it. It was cold, colder than the stations had been, and heavy. I tried lifting it, digging my fingers underneath its base, but it was too much for me. But with a second set of hands we could get it out of here.

"What are you doing?" Max called from the back of the church.

"Help me with this," I said. "I can't get it by myself."

"We can't take that."

"Sure we can," I said, trying again to lift it. "This would be more than the whole lot we've already got by a mile. Come on and help me."

"Can't take the tabernacle," Max said. "That's where they keep the hosts."

"What?" I asked, taking my hands off of it. And then I listened while Max explained that this thing, this box, was gold because it was where the church stored those wafers they gave out on Sundays, only these were the wafers that had been blessed - consecrated was the word he used - by the priest, so that they became the living body of Jesus. I had to ask about that part again because I thought I'd heard him wrong, but I hadn't. He said - he believed - that the bread in there was the literal, physical, living presence of God. That's why it was protected in a case that looked like it was made for royalty. That was why we couldn't take it.

There was a moment of silence between us.

"That's the most absurd fucking thing I've ever heard in my entire fucking life," I said.

"It's what we believe," Max said. We - it was a powerful word. I shook my head.

“Max, I don’t know if you’re aware of what will happen to me if I don’t get eleven thousand dollars by Monday morning, but I think Jesus would be willing to make an exception in the name of preventing extreme bodily harm.”

“Can’t do it Garreth,” Max said again, unmoved. “Look, we’ve got enough as is-”

“Max, I need this, alright? Plus, we already ripped the place off, right? That’s okay but this isn’t? God has different rules for different decorations?” I was trying not to raise my voice, but was having a hard time with it.

Max just stood there in his mask and gloves like any criminal you’d see on TV, shaking his head.

“You know what’ll happen if I don’t pay them, right?” I said. “You know these guys. You know what they’ll do to me. You can abide by that? You can stand back and let that happen?” I looked up at the crucifix. “Your God can?”

He was silent. I looked hard into his eyes. “It’s just a box.”

“I can’t do it,” Max said. “If you can manage to carry it on your own, fine, but you’ll have to get another ride out of here. I’m not having anything to do with that.” Then he turned and walked back to collect our bags.

I stood for a moment in absolute disbelief. This man - the man who was telling me what we could and could not steal from a church that we’d already robbed - this was the same man I’d once watched kick the shit out of the Pakistani night shift worker at a convenience store we were knocking off. Just for the fun of it. We’d already taken the money, gotten everything we’d came for, but still Max threw the man to the ground and kicked him over and over in the ribs until blood was oozing from between his teeth. When I’d asked him later why he’d done it, he said the man had looked at him funny, like he was better than him. That had been enough to set him off. And now he was telling me what I couldn’t do because of his own superstitions.

But I couldn’t question it anymore. Max was already walking out the door, back to the car, and I couldn’t lift the thing on my own no matter what I did. I wanted to chase after him, to hit him and scream at him until I knocked all the stupid out of him and made him help me, but instead I just walked away, silent and furious, and took a seat next to him in the car.

I looked at the time on the dashboard. 3:18. We’d only been inside a little over fifteen minutes.

“Can I ask you something?” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

Max nodded, started the car but let it idle.

"I'm not trying to be offensive, before I ask it, really," I said, although maybe I was. Maybe this was my only way of a rebuttal. "But if you really do believe that...if you believe that God - that the living creator of everything, that's the God we're talking about - is inside there, how can you ever leave?"

Max was still for a moment, thinking, then shrugged his shoulders. He backed the car out, kept the headlights off. It was a practiced routine; we wouldn't turn them on until we were back on the main roads.

"Eventually you have to leave," he finally said. "That's just how it works I guess."

I wasn't sure what else there was to say. We drove back in silence, Max content in the ambiguity of his belief, me seething at it. I wondered how it was that if the Creator really was inside the tabernacle I hadn't felt anything. Not guilt, not pity, not love. Nothing but the cold of the metal.


When Max dropped me at my apartment he told me he'd be in touch about the money. "By Friday, at the latest," he said. That was that then.

#

I went back to the church two weeks later, this time in daylight, on a Sunday afternoon. I'd been having dreams about it, but only in the vaguest sense. They were nothing specific and yet I somehow knew what they meant, dormant visions of men turning to dust; deserts of wood swallowing the world. In my waking life I'd made enough off our score (and a few more loans) to pay off my debt, and was well on my way to working myself into another one, but that seemed inconsequential. What mattered, even if I couldn't explain it, was that I return to that house of worship that had somehow lodged itself in my subconscious. And so I did.

I took a seat in the back. It was the first time I'd ever returned to a spot I'd ripped off, and at first I thought I might be hit by nausea or panic when I saw the walls, now devoid of their Stations, but nothing came. Instead I almost felt calm. The people on either side of me were ordinary folk, families and loners, some well dressed, some rushed, some in their football jerseys waiting for mass to end so they could get on with the big game.

When he gave his sermon, the priest did not mention the robbery. Instead it was about talking to God, keeping a relationship with Him, as if He was only a text or phone call away. There was a lot of standing and sitting and kneeling after that, which was hell on my back, but then I saw them open



that gold box - the tabernacle, Max had called it - and retrieve a tray full of little circular wafers. He mixed these with the ones he'd just held above his head and blessed, and after a bit of handing out to the choir and other people who seemed to be more important than the rest of us in the pews, everyone formed lines and waited for their turn to eat God.

I wasn't supposed to go up in line, I knew enough to know that. But I did anyway. Once you've robbed a place the other rules don't seem as important. I stood behind a young wife and her family. She shushed her children as we all took small steps forward, foot in front of foot, hands clasped in respect or prayer. I kept my eyes on the crucifix as we walked, until the priest was in front of me, holding out the Eucharist.

"Body of Christ," he said.

I gave him an Amen. I'd heard the others in line do the same when they went through the routine, and he handed the circle of thin bread over to me. I placed it on my tongue and walked back to my seat, turning it over in my mouth the whole time. When I got back I knelt because the people next to me were kneeling.

It tasted thicker than paper but thinner than cardboard. I ran it over my teeth, let my tongue break it into pieces. The longer I held it in the more it dissolved, sticking to my tongue and the roof of my mouth. So this is God, I thought. I ran it around the inside of my mouth again, and then swallowed. So this was God. And I waited to feel something. I waited and waited to feel something.

*David J. Thompson is a former prep school teacher and coach who has been traveling since October 2013. He grew up in Hyde Park, New York, and most recently lived in the Detroit area. His interests include jazz, movies, and minor league baseball. His poetry/photography chapbook, *And Thou Upon Earth*, is available from Nerve Cowboy in Austin, Texas.*



Utah

David J. Thompson

I stumbled on this photo in northern Utah. I like the juxtaposition of the faded box car and its graffiti with the natural beauty of the sky and the mountains in the background. For me, there's few things better than just driving around in the American West.



Dakota

David J. Thompson

Although ignored by most Americans, I love the Great Plains. I find the sweep of the landscape stunning, but I am also drawn to the small towns, farmhouses and grain elevators that stand against the sky. Their presence only serves to emphasize all that wide open space.



Astoria

David J. Thompson

Astoria, Oregon, is one of my favorite cities to visit. The views of the Columbia river are gorgeous, of course, and the downtown is very "old school" with one of the best microbreweries I have found on my travels. There are some great murals on a walking path along the river.



Eagle Posted

David J. Thompson

I took this shot in a little town south of Pocatello, Idaho. I was attracted by the variety of items posted on the old doors, especially the eagle contrasted with the "private property" notice.

Philip Rafferty V lives and teaches in Portland Oregon. His previous work has appeared in Montage, and Beatdom Magazine.

Mary

Philip Rafferty

I depended on Mary to locate my veins back when I transitioned from smoking it to shooting it. Mary was not quite a nurse but close enough. Before she transitioned to the streets, she had done two semesters at Cascade Community College for nursing. So for a time, during that golden age when we began hitting it hard, she was our medic. She knew exactly how to pop it into you so that it bit with that trickle that feels like "ah" all the way. Mary didn't dope then. Why she lived outside wasn't substance related.

We would have been fucked without her. She kept the needles clean, made sure there wasn't any cross contamination, even went as far as stealing a steady supply of rubbing alcohol, and would always produce a new syringe to ensure things were legit.

And oh what a dawn it was to be alive back then. A time before our bellies hurt, a time before the rains came, when the warm air on your skin made the dope even better. There is nothing that beats that initial transition. Fuck. Liquid sunshine poured into you that makes you feel like a god and a god damn baby without a care. Fight that nod too and just ride it till that last bit disappears in your veins. Ride it till the cramps and then begin the odyssey all over again for that delicious more.

Jerry, my sponsor, warns me against such romantic language. Over coffee, when we talk about that old school back then stuff, and how I got to now, he will say to me, "Dick you can't, I mean *can't*, fall prey to that kind of talk. The addiction is strong. Your junkie is panhandling in the parking

lot, his wallet is full, and he is looking for where you are weak so he can score. He wants nothing more than for Dick to slip so *he* can get loaded."


But I don't think it is that bad to talk about those "golden days." Because, just like the summer here in the Northwest disappears in a flash to be replaced by endless rain, those days were short lived and then it began to pour.

Mary tried her best and we ran that first veins all we could. In the beginning, we all chipped in from a day's handling and bought dope together. Mary would dose us out with the perfect amount. She knew your dose and would add a little push to take you there to that next place.

She played nursemaid to a collection of us then. We lived down on the waterfront. Most of that year's cohort was new, thought it was my second season. You can always spot the new people because they are the ones carrying pillows and blankets all around around. Not yet used to the concrete, they still held on to the comforts of the indoors. The stains on their linens were only at the fringes, but as the days passed that ate their way towards the middle.

By Christmas it had all changed. Soggy pillows, dirty throughout, were discarded, and my first holy vein was tapped out. Mary did her best to not make a big deal out of that shot vein and we just moved on to another. But the pristine nature of that fall was gone by winter, and most people began to step out on the co-op we had setup. The needles got dirty, the blood grew sick, and people started dropping.

Deep winter was nothing but buckets from the sky. Mary changed then; don't know why. Her reason for the street was never the dope, but most people aren't straight out for the dope to start. Most of us were out there escaping a trauma, some past fucking haunt, some babysitter who fucked with our shit, a step dad, an abusive mother, the poor place we came from, those voices that only we could hear. But Mary started slipping away from that initial reason. Smoking a little became snorting a bit and then it was straight push and shit she was ODing by February only to be save a few times and then whoosh she was a ghost.



Most slept bare after Valentines Day and the hardcore drinkers were seen up and down the front sipping cooking sherry, sharing the remaining drops of cracked bottles. The junkers were all sick, cold, shaking, and starving for the next.

So I began to tap my own shit when Mary wasn't anywhere to be found. Wasn't that good at it. The scars and marks remind me now that I wasn't good at it. Over that next spring and summer I vein hopped. Without Mary, people started fucking up, me included. Few OD's, couple of Narcan saves later, and on to a new vein was the pattern. Each new vein saw someone not so lucky. And so when my fucking sponsor tells me to not start this story with that golden age I don't agree. They started dropping one by one, as many dead as I have scars and broken veins. Not nearly as preventative without that beginning shit. The golden age makes what followed all the more.

By Valentines Day Mary was gone. Never saw her again. I don't know what happened to her; never hear of her passing, or as erased and on the street when people flop you hear about it. She is not one of *those* scars but rather the first. Always wait for her to pop into some church basement some time and tell the story of our co-op, our time when she played nurse, and about where she went after then. Waiting for that first tapped vein to pump into some location, that initial mark Mary, from the dry days before the rain.

Alexandra Gilwit is a writer, filmmaker, strange Jewish-mess-of-a-person based out of Brooklyn, NY. She generally works in fiction, however this particular piece is her first foray into Non-fiction. To see what else Alexandra is working on please visit her website www.agilwit.com.

Metanoia

Alexandra Gilwit

This summer my roommate, George, went missing. The last time I saw him was on Saturday, but I didn't notice that he was missing until Monday morning when he didn't show up for work.

His boss sounded worried when he called me. George wasn't the type to not show up for work. I dropped the phone and ran to his room but hesitated in front of the door. George always left his door open when he was gone, but this time the door was shut. An image of his dead body rotting under his sheets flashed through my mind as I reached for the handle. I tried to write-off this fear as an over-reaction, forcing myself to turn the knob.

His room was as it usually was, disheveled but cozy. A dirty plate lay on his bed with a brown crust of whatever he ate before he left.

When a person goes missing your reasoning abilities fracture into two parts. One portion of your brain, the larger section, believes the person is ok and stranded somewhere, and will soon return with a crazy story to tell everyone. The other part of your brain knows that that person is dead. As the days go by, the smaller part of your brain slowly takes over. Nobody talks about this side of our brains during the ordeal. We ignore it, we fight it, believing that in some way, by admitting it, it will make it true, when the truth is it was always true. And then, when the worst is confirmed, we all scream out at once that we secretly knew all along, feeling simultaneously ashamed and cogent.

Seeing the plate on George's bed calmed my nerves. He needed to come back to clean that plate, no dead person just leaves a dirty plate, they clean it up, they plan ahead.

#

We are born to exist, not to know, to be, not to assert ourselves. – Emil Cioran

#

George often forgot to knock when he'd come into my room. He was always looking down at his phone. He'd laugh because I would usually scream. "You should be used to me barging in by now." He would then take my desk chair and clear off whatever I wore the night before and sit down, still looking at his phone the whole time. "What up, dude?" George loved the word "Dude," it was the only proper noun he ever used, other than my name, "Alexandra." George called me Alexandra because I told him once that I wished more people would call me that but that it was too much of a commitment because it is such a long name. George is the only person that has ever consistently called me "Alexandra."

On Tuesday I found the number of his ex-girlfriend. A few months before, George had put us both on a group text to tell us about a girl he had met on Tinder, a dating app. His ex-girlfriend was pissed that she was included.

His ex's name was Michelle, and I had met her only once, even though she lived a block away. The only reason I remembered her name was because George obsessively talked about her, obviously not completely over the break up.

Michelle's larger portion of her brain was in full working order, just as mine was. "We shouldn't contact his family yet, we don't want to alarm them. I bet he just decided to leave to go upstate to that party he was talking about last week, his phone must've died." George always thoughtlessly let his phone die, which was surprising since he spent most of his free time on his phone, scrolling through Tinder profiles or Instagram pictures, anything to keep his thoughts from drifting below the surface.

"But George wouldn't just miss work." I replied.

"Yeah, that is weird, well let's wait a day and then contact his sister."

I started to worry that he wasn't going to come back on Wednesday, when I was at the IKEA in

Redhook.

Sometimes when George came into my room he would just sit quietly next to me as I drew. I didn't mind because I knew that he was lonely and so was I. The truth is, I needed George, I needed him there silently playing on his phone, every so often interrupting my drawing to show me a cute picture of a bunny or puppy he found on Instagram. George was always the most consistent thing in my life.

Wednesday was the day I talked to George's sister. Her voice sounded strong but sad.

#

Life inspires more dread than death —it is life which is the great unknown. – Emil Cioran.

#

Right about then life felt a lot like the IKEA that I was stuck in, large and vacuous.

When George was home he was in my room, when he wasn't home he kept his door open, creating the impression that he was always around. He only closed his door on the days when I wasn't around or when I couldn't hang out. Those days he would slip deep into his self and reemerge a little further away.

#

The fear of your own solitude, of its vast surface and its infinity...Remorse is the voice of solitude. And what does this whispering voice say? Everything in us that is not human anymore. – Emil Cioran

#

George's sister asked me to go up to Woodstock, where George was last seen, to put up MISSING fliers. I drove up with Michelle on Thursday. I had a stack of the fliers, about 50 copies, a roll of tape I found in one of the boxes that I never unpacked when I moved in two years before, and a pair of scissors that I stole from my parents' house years ago because I was too lazy to buy my own.

George and I used to watch bad movies until late into the night and talk over them. No one else could stand to watch with us unless they were very drunk or tired. One night I dozed off on the couch and George leaned over and whispered "Alexandra," and I woke up but I didn't open my eyes because I knew that George wanted to kiss me.

#

I live only because it is in my power to die when I choose to: without the idea of suicide, I'd have killed myself right away. – Emil Cioran

#

Earlier that night I told George about my neighbor, Merrick, who killed himself when he was 18. "He was like a brother to me, we grew up together."

George listened and let me lay on his lap as he pet my hair.

"It destroyed his family. His mother used to drown herself in whiskey then stumble over to our house and cry on our floor. He told me he wanted to kill himself before he did it, but I didn't take him seriously enough."

"I'm sorry, Alexandra."

I have always hated when people say "I'm sorry" to misfortune, like somehow you owned this tragedy and it was irreversibly a part of your own being. Merrick killing himself had nothing to do with me, but for a long time I had convinced myself that I could have stopped it.

"Just promise me that you'll never kill yourself." I got up from his lap and looked at him when I said this, to show how serious I was. I was on the verge of tears and he could hear it in my voice.

At the time I didn't know why I did that, George hadn't seemed suicidal to me back then. Our days together up until that night were light and playful. I know now that what I said was pure instinct, that people can reveal a lot about themselves without ever speaking a word, and that we are all intuitive enough to see it, although we might not be conscious of it.

#

"I am like a broken puppet whose eyes have fallen inside." This remark of a mental patient weighs more heavily than a whole stack of works on introspection. – Emil Cioran

#

Woodstock was beautiful, a place that opposed the empty void I felt surging through my insides. We passed out fliers with George's face, and watched his eyes follow us through the windows of most of the town's storefronts. By midday, we couldn't bring ourselves to hand out another flier. That is when I knew for sure that George was dead, although I was still unable to say it aloud.

Michelle and I left the crosswalk and walked down to a creek to watch a family play in the water. The last peaceful day of a confusing summer.

I remember feeling the sun warm my skin, and watching it dance across the water over the family. I remember believing for a moment that I was the one that was dead all along, and this was my heaven and my salvation, a place that could offer me respite from the tiring and perennial pain of reality. I remember not wanting to get up from the boulder I was sitting on, knowing that as soon as I left this spot, time would reveal something horrible.

#

Emil Cioran got Alzheimer's disease in the last years of his life. He went from a man that knew his mind, to a man lost inside himself, often forgetting words or places, and wandering around in vacant confusion.

#

I am told that George was never the same after college, when he took acid almost every day until he finally dropped out of school. Apparently, the drug had made him less present in the world.

There were many times when George and I would be talking and he would just stop and look over my shoulder for a second and then come back and say, "Wait, what were we talking about?" It never seemed like he was completely invested in reality, as if there was a swarm of something better hiding just below the facade of this dimension.

It was during this time that he took to conspiracy theories, watching and reading everything he could get his hands on. He believed that every mass killing in the world was a government cover up, that every official in a position of power was responsible for death. He couldn't believe that the world was just chaotic, that people were just killed for no reason, that tragedy could just be tragedy.

#

Life is possible only by the deficiencies of our imagination and memory. – Emil Cioran

#

The month before he went missing we started to get into fights. I'd say something like, "George, you have to be more aware of other people's feelings."

And he would reply, "I don't know why I hang out with you dude, you always make me feel terrible." And then he would walk out of my room and hover outside my door for a few minutes, and then come back in and say, "I just need you to make me feel better!"

I started to get annoyed that he never seemed to be able to be alone, as he sucked away my own alone time whenever he was around.

On the Friday before he went missing George was sad. His sadness clung to his body like a foul stench. He came to me for guidance and I remember feeling tired.

#

Detachment from the world as an attachment to the ego...Who can realize the detachment in which you are as far away from yourself as you are from the world? – Emil Cioran

#

On those rare occasions when George wouldn't come to me and I'd have to go to his room, he would appear from behind his door with vacant eyes, as if the invisible string tying his body to his soul had loosened and was floating somewhere, far away.

When a person that you care about goes missing, your mind stagnates between states of tragedy

and stasis. You never quite allow yourself to give in to either state, and thus live in a sort of in-between, where the now is blurred and distorted, and nothing truly feels present.

During the week that George went missing I felt so many things. I even laughed a lot. I never cried. I felt scared. I felt ok. Sometimes I didn't even think about George at all, just about the mindless goings-on of my day-to-day life. It was as if George was never gone as long as he was missing, a sort of perverse version of Schrodinger's cat.

By Thursday night, I started to wonder if George would ever be found, if I would always imagine him walking through cornfields somewhere upstate, confused and lost, but alive. Michelle had contacted a psychic, and the psychic told her that he had received some sort of head trauma and was lost.

#

Why do you lack the strength to escape the obligation to breathe? – Emil Cioran

#

On Friday, first thing in the morning, a trucker who had seen the flier called George's sister to tell her that he had dropped George off 5 miles from the Wassaic train station on Sunday.

Back then, on that couch, I had wanted to kiss George, but I couldn't. I was trapped in the real world where kissing your roommate was a bad idea. I remember those early days when George didn't visit me, wondering where he was, who he was with. I remember missing him, wishing he would come by, just so that I had somebody there, breathing next to me, keeping me here.

George's sister came over and we put his laundry into a trash bag so that she could give his scent to the search dogs. George's family asked me if I wanted to go upstate with them to continue the search but I didn't have the heart to go. It felt like an intrusion. I just wanted to cower in my room and pretend that George was going to come back.

George's sister found his body that afternoon, about two miles in from where he was dropped off by the truck driver. From what I am told, the road that George walked down was a lonely place, with vacant seeming farmlands on the left and an endless border of trees and bushes to the right.

A month later a stranger at a bar would tell me about a haunted cabin he lived in in Tennessee, how the place felt heavy and lonely, and how it scared away every friend that came to visit. He would tell me about the time he felt a strange impulse to look up at the trees and saw hanging bodies, looked away, then looked back and they were gone. Afterward, I would become convinced that the road that the truck driver dropped George off on was similarly haunted, that there was a history of death, remembered only by the landscape. I would assure myself that the power of human misery was so much that it could leave an indefinite mark on an otherwise innocent stretch of land, that it could suck a person into it, sort of like a spider web.

#

Cioran once admitted that the source of his world view was severe insomnia. *"I lost my sleep and this is the greatest tragedy that can befall someone. It is much worse than sitting in prison. I went out of the house at about midnight or later and roamed through the alleys. And there were only a few lunatics and me, all alone in the entire city, in which absolute silence reigned."*

#

I've spent a lot of time obsessing over the place where George was found. I imagine that the road was cursed with silence, letting the weight of infinity rest along its tired cement. I picture him walking down it with a dead phone and no one to talk to. Looking for answers in the trees, and interpreting their silent swaying in the wind as a sign that they were always meant to be his ultimate destination. I imagine that right before he died he listened and could hear nothing other than the movement of a bird in a bush nearby and the sound of his own footsteps on dry leaves. I have never visited that road but in my mind the entire landscape looks like a distant island surrounded by a black void, in a style reminiscent of Rembrandt.

Sometimes I think about that road so much that I have to force myself to stop, something similar to kicking myself awake, so that I don't get sucked into it, like George had.

#

Our place is somewhere between being and nonbeing - between two fictions. – Emil Cioran

#

George spent every dime he ever made on something. He was incapable of saving money or

planning ahead. I kind of loved this about him, although he wasn't always mentally present, he was still able to live life like there was only the present.

His sister told me that she knew he was dead before I had contacted her. She told me that she found his body because when she was walking down that road she felt a strange impulse to look into the bushes about two miles in. When she pulled back the brush a dozen birds flew up from the canopy, sensing the tension that was about to be released.

#

"Where do you get those superior airs of yours?" "I've managed to survive, you see, all those nights when I wondered: am I going to kill myself at dawn?" – Emil Cioran

#

By the state of his decay, the coroner was able to mark the time of death at Sunday morning, at about 8am. George hung himself with his belt on the branch of a tree, two miles from where the truck driver had dropped him off. It had taken George two miles worth of being alone to decide to end his life.

Many months later his sister told me that she could tell he had made a last minute decision because he was still wearing his backpack. She told me that if he had thought it out he would've taken off his bag. I agreed because I thought about the dirty plate he had left on his bed.

I asked her why her parents insisted on seeing his body before the ambulance took him to the morgue and she told me that they needed to. "If we hadn't seen his body we couldn't ever have been completely sure that he was dead. We would've kept looking for him." George's family was more practical than George.

#

In the book, *A Short History of Decay*, Cioran talks about suicide in a chapter called, "The Rope." He writes, "For you were born to hang yourself, like all those who disdain an answer to their doubts or an escape to their despair." When I first read that I experienced a strange glimpse of understanding about George's decision. I understood then, what is hard to write about now. George was always going to hang himself. It was his destiny, or history, or however you want to call it. George was always going to die, every single day. He just chose Sunday morning.

#

On Friday night, George's sister called me to tell me the news. Her voice was still strong but it broke when she said, "They think it was *suicide*." My memory of that phone call is silent, like the intensity of the moment completely sucked out the sound of my screaming and crying. I had thought that finding him would come as a relief but the truth is that a large part of me wanted George to just always be missing. Only then could I go on lying to myself that he was still alive somewhere, lost but safe. Only then could I still expect to see his face every time someone burst through my bedroom door.

#

I don't understand why we must do things in this world, why we must have friends and aspirations, hopes and dreams. Wouldn't it be better to retreat to a faraway corner of the world, where all its noise and complications would be heard no more? Then we could renounce culture and ambitions; we would lose everything and gain nothing; for what is there to be gained from this world? – Emil Cioran

#

After reading Emil Cioran I felt comforted about George, which was strange because death is such a disquieting thing. But, I guess, for the first time in my life I felt outside of the situation, looking in and understanding that what happened was always going to happen. George was always going to be a tragedy, I sensed it from the moment we met, but only now am I able to admit it.

#

I thought that the only action a man could perform without shame was to take his life; that he had no right to diminish himself in the succession of days and the inertia of misery. No elect, I kept telling myself, but those who committed suicide. – Emil Cioran

John McGinley is an author based out of Arlington MA, a town which prides itself in its small part in the Revolutionary War. John is attempting to collect his short stories, and poems in a collection entitled, "If Jazz Musicians Can Make Mistakes Why Can't I?"; and hopefully will be launching a website.

Lunch-Date

John McGinley

I want to take the waiter
home with me.
He knows how to properly
serve me.
He never always my glass
to reach the bottom.
He always asks how my
day is going.
I tell him, and he laughs,
grunts, or grimaces
Whatever is appropriate
he does.

His understanding of me
is better than the one
my wife has of me.
She does not know how
I enjoy my steak;
But the waiter does;
He knows how much cream
to put in my coffee.
He is fully aware of which seat
I prefer, and what time to
have it ready for me.
He knows that I always over-tip.

He does not know that I want
to take the waiter home.
Everyday I tell my wife I went
out for lunch.
She is jealous;
Why do I never take her there.
I am afraid she will meet the waiter
And find out that I want to take the waiter
and then she'll want to take the waiter
Home.

Dina Honour is an American writer living in Copenhagen. Her work has appeared in Paste, Hippocampus and the literary anthology Precipice among others. She's just completed her first novel and is experiencing phantom limb syndrome in her suddenly still fingers. Find her @DinaHonour.

Drunk on the Isle of Misfits

Dina Honour

Sometimes when I am drunk and hungry, gnawing on vodka-saturated limes, I fantasize of telling small, dark strangers my name is LuLu. Cushioned in the lushness of a boozy birthday-candle yen, I dream about slipping unnoticed into an alternate reality of petite cuteness. A realm where women with names like KiKi or Lola reign, tiny and proud.

My name is George. I am six-foot- five without my boots.

Despite this heightened handicap, this uphill challenge, I have a lover. Perhaps lover is too strong a word. Perhaps it is better to say that for three years, Martin and I have been associated with one another: assumed lovers, assumed to love, assumed in love.

My history with Martin is written on barstools in hieroglyphs made of bottles and pints. Ours is a love song sung in a measure of gin. We are drunks on this isle of misfits we inhabit. Beholden to neither king nor country, we simply swallow.

#

In three years of assumed association, Martin has been late for dinner six-hundred and eighty-four times. Each time he is late, each time he stumbles over the threshold, I record it on the side of my refrigerator with a thick, black marker: four short lines and a diagonal slash. Tally marks, like the marks made by gray-skinned prisoners scratching time away in damp prison cells.

#

Martin is fidgety and twitchy with the concept of truth. Honesty, he says, is like a gift. Twice a year, on Christmas and my birthday, Martin spoon feeds me a fact or two about himself then wipes the crumbs from my chin with the back of his hand.

I fell in love with Martin because he is the first man I've met who lets me wear heels. I fell in love with Martin because we sometimes swallow in tandem. I fell in love with Martin because sometimes the heat of another body, even on bar stools inches and feet apart, is preferable to the frost of alone.

Yet is is through Martin I meet Mimi.

#

The first time I saw Mimi, she was draped like tight, perfect skin over the left side of Martin's body, slurring into the hollow curve of flesh below his ear.

She said: "If I wasn't practically married to Hank, I'd be all over you."

I viewed them through a kaleidoscope of upturned shot glasses, through a filter of blue cigarette smoke.

I said: "Martin, there is a tiny woman dangling from you like a Christmas ornament."

He said: "Why are you jealous? She is drunk."

I said: "I hate her."

And I did. I hated the Renoir hair that spilled in waterfalls down her spine. I hated the pore less, alabaster skin, the slinky clothes and the four-inch stack heel leather boots which hugged the slope of her calf. I hated her name. I hated the fact that she was surely a resident of the realm of petite cuteness, tiny and proud.

He said: nothing. He fell forward onto the bar top. His glass was still half full.

I waited for him to sit up. He didn't.

My glass was half empty. I slung Martin over my shoulders, fireman style, to get him home: the advantage to being six-foot-five.

#

Martin tells me: Mimi is a painter. She paints pictures of broken women holding their own severed heads in outstretched palms. Mimi's damaged bodies are dark red and light gray with threads of silver and gold stitching the bones together. An art dealer named Paloma wants to showcase Mimi's shattered, severed, sewn-up girls on big, white walls in SoHo.

Martin tells me: Mimi was married to a man who had only one leg. He had a prosthesis which he used to beat her. But of course, that was long ago. Now Mimi is practically married to Hank and they have eight limbs between them.

I meet Mimi again. She is wearing wooden platform shoes and with her false inches, her head is level with my shoulder. I curl my spine down to hear what she is saying.

She is saying: "You're a bitch. You never let Martin have any fun. You're always screaming at him to leave."

Martin is saying: nothing. He is snoring into a pint of beer. I poke him with my fingernail, and he tilts to one side. He falls backward.

I fall out of love.

#

That summer, Mimi and Hank roast chickens in their concrete backyard and dangle their intact arms and legs from a hammock strung between two, scrawny trees.

Martin leads me to a Mimi-Hank barbecue one Saturday. Though my right eye is swollen plum with bruising, I follow. I do not trust any of them, any of their multitude of limbs or words.

Martin does not question my eye the color of dusk, the smudge of sunset on my skin.

He says: "Make sure you wear your sunglasses."

#

Martin does not hit me but I have bruises all the same. Some of them belong to him, but I carry them black and prune on my skin because I am assumed to be his lover and this is what lovers

are assumed to do for one another. Some are my own, marks from petulant dreams that rise shivering like mirages only to melt and sear the tips of my fingers when I try to grasp them. Swollen promises I've made stumbling blind, deaf and drunk here on the isle of misfits.

Some bruises, like today's, are just from being clumsy.

#

At the barbecue, Mimi wears a lime green halter top. Her lava hair is in pigtails high atop her head. She and Hank swing in their hammock and tear the meat from a supermarket chicken with perfect teeth. I stay until the sun goes down in a tequila sunset and I can no longer see through the tinted lenses of my drugstore shades.

Mimi is circling me, shark like, shoulder blades like sharp fins jutting from her halter.

She says: "I hope you know I was just drunk that night. I'm practically married to Hank, you know."

She says: "You can buy concealer to cover that bruise, you know."

I say: nothing. I know she will not believe me if I tell her this particular bruise is mine, not Martin's.

I fall a little bit in love with her.

#

Martin tells me: Mimi is a manic depressive. There are weeks when she doesn't leave the apartment, but sits inside with the blinds drawn and bottles of red wine lined up in front of her, a corkscrew in her pocket. Mimi drinks red wine because you don't have to refrigerate it.

Once upon a time I thought I was manic. When I ask, my shrink says:

"George, you are chronically depressed. When you occasionally rise above, it seems like a giant leap. But in actuality, you are reaching a plateau where most people exist normally. Your good moods are where the rest of us are all the time."

When I tell this to Martin, he laughs. He drinks an entire beer in one, long swallow. He falls off the bar stool.

I leave him there.

#

Mimi shows me the thin, white scars on her wrist. She tried to cover a canvas with her own blood for authenticity. She used Hank's straight razor even though it was orange with rust.

My own wrists are pale and translucent and scarless. When I show them to Mimi, I tell her that Martin uses an electric razor.

Mimi needs to be watched when she is manic, neck-high in Merlot. I volunteer. On our teetering see-saw of moods, I am the chronic weight at the bottom that keeps her from flying off. Sometimes though, we balance. For a little while, our feet swinging in mid air, everything is perfect.

#

Mimi is painting me now. Every day I go to her small apartment and strip until I am nude, except for the heels I insist upon. When the sun is high Mimi's blinds throw shadow lines across my skin, another kind of prison mark. Mimi wants to paint me with only one leg, but I remind her of authenticity and convince her to paint me with a black eye and no sunglasses instead. When the painting is finished, Paloma is going to exhibit it on a giant, white wall in SoHo.

Mimi calls it: Love is a four letter word.


#

In the two months Mimi has been painting me, Martin has been later for dinner forty-seven times. The day we finish, he does not come at all. My coffee table is littered with empty bottles and chewed up limes. Eventually, he rings the bell.

He says: "I met another woman. Her name is DeeDee. She is four-foot-six."

I say: "The side of my refrigerator is full. There is no more room for black marks."

Mimi says: "I never really liked him anyway. He never left the bar."



I say: "When we go to the gallery opening, I'm going to introduce myself as LuLu and drink red wine because you don't have to refrigerate it."

Or maybe I will say:

"Welcome to the Isle of Misfits. My name is George. I am six-foot-five without my boots."

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The Effects of Burning Flesh

Leon Marks

A woman like me had to expect plenty of stares.

Like his. From the entrance to the bar, where he stood and watched, as if he weren't just escaping the Grand Central crowds, but had hunted me down. His eyebrows were dark and thick, and that gave him an animal quality. He crossed his arms, changed his mind and combed his fingers through his hair. He had the looks to feel confident, but came across like a nervous child.

Finally, he headed right for me, with a determined expression, and reached my table, where I was enjoying my third glass of merlot after a long day. I turned away, genuinely bashful, to find Connie, the older and kinder of the two bartenders, watching me with a maternal eye. Her hand was on the tap, a mountaintop of suds growing on the mug below.

He sat down at my table, uninvited, and said his name was Rafael. He had grey sideburns and a thick brown wave of hair that draped across one side of his forehead. He was older, wiser than the guys at work. He started to smile nervously, then without restraint, and it was radiant. I'd never thought of teeth as sexually attractive before.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Elizabeth," I replied, fingering my hair. "People call me Beth."

"You're amazing," he said. I could tell he'd predicted my skepticism, but his face was so gentle, and also so intense, that I certainly believed him.

His gaze still hadn't left my own, and at one point he tried to conceal a sigh, or even a gasp, as if something had caught his breath. He was feeling something big, and whatever it was, he was one hundred percent committed to it. He repeated my name a couple of times, savoring each syllable aloud. *E. Liz. Uh. Beth.* He took my hand to shake it, like a business introduction.

"Thank God my train was delayed," he said, not letting go. He wrapped my thumb with his own and moved his chair closer to the table, and to me.

"I'm making you nervous," he said. "Sorry."

"Maybe a little," I said, relieved to find him self-conscious.

He showed his big white teeth again. I could smell his breath too. It was sweet, or maybe that was after-shave, or maybe my senses were heightened because his touch was electrifying. Connie refilled my glass and asked if Rafael wanted something, but he waved her on.

"Should I be?" I asked.

"Be what?"

"Nervous?"

He leaned in and slid his fingers up to caress my forearm, a sensation I'd never felt. This apparently was his wordless answer.

Two young women walked by, apple martinis in hand, staring at me and then at him. Our pairing was bewildering to their not-yet-drunk minds. A strong, beautiful older man holding hands with a twenty-seven-year-old woman covered with scars.

"Those girls think you're pretty screwed up," I said. I'd learned to address the elephant in the room quickly, to make it okay for others to react to my face, even to walk away. I used to think it was my way of being polite and accommodating a very natural human response. *You're grotesque, so I must avoid you.* Scarring might be contagious after all. But lately I've realized that I do it for myself. Mentioning it quickly invites strangers to share their reactions or ask their questions. It shapes anxiety into conversation, turns a scar into a person. The scars aren't me, but they're mine. I've never wanted to be a fleeting image, something uncomfortable that's stored in a stranger's mind to fester and rot until some passing comment or random incident years later reminds them of *that woman and her horrible face.*

"I don't see those girls," he said, holding on to my forearm. "I see you."

I struggled to keep my heart from opening. I could start with humor ("So when did you lose your sight?"), but humor didn't suit this moment. I didn't want to cheapen his words and feelings, or my own. I didn't want to say anything that might accuse him of being disingenuous or manipulative, of taking advantage of me, or having a peculiar fetish. I wanted him to know that I was wonderfully aware of my unusual face, that I had long ago accepted it, and that I didn't need anything besides honesty.

"How did it happen?" he asked. There was no judgment, no sympathy. His face was expressionless for the first time.

"A scarf," I said. The usual response was an *accident* or a *fire*, but he deserved something more. I didn't want to shrug or simplify. I wanted to give him the real story, the romance in my flaws.

Whenever I think of that scarf, the memory begins in total darkness. My eyelids feel its fake silk as it slides across my face, unwinding from its coil around my head, which my brother Clyde had fashioned to demonstrate its length, but also to be annoying. When I could see again, my father was chuckling at Clyde's shenanigans, then looked at me with wide eyes, hoping I actually liked it.

"It's beautiful," I said to him. He'd tried so hard, without the benefit of my mother and her advice (it was our first Christmas without her), that I would have loved a scarf from him made of cobwebs. It was decorative, if not durable, and I couldn't immediately pinpoint an outfit that might benefit from its blazing greens and violets. Flurries of silver became denser and denser up the length of the scarf until they formed a roaring bloom of violet and snow in the center. It was garish, for sure. He excitedly described the seamstress in Mexico City who'd sold it to him during last month's publishing convention.

I kissed my father's forehead, then draped the scarf around my shoulders and began twirling like a young girl. Clyde made an ugly face as the fringed ends chased me in circles, the snow flurries twinkling in the red Christmas tree lights, until what seemed only moments later (actually it was weeks) when the fringes were in flames and I smelled burning flesh – my own. The fire had leapt from the stove on which I'd been preparing pasta sauce, and raced up the fake silk scarf to my neck and face, the sudden wail of flames instantly silencing the horror that my heart and lungs and brain were trying to scream out. I hit my head on the tile floor and the scarf left me once again in darkness.

"Everything okay here?" Connie asked. I knew she didn't mean my wine. She'd arrived at our table to glare at Rafael. I found her protectiveness very sweet, but took a gulp of wine and said, "We're

great.”

“Just awful,” Rafael said when Connie was gone. He’d been moved by my story. I watched for a tear, a common by-product, but his eyes were dry. He wasn’t the crying type, and I liked that.

“You’re the kind of man who could have any woman you want,” I said. “Beautiful women. With beautiful faces. Do you really want to be sitting here with me?”

“No, I don’t,” he said immediately. He grinned and tilted his head back, observing me from downcast eyes. “I *don’t* want to be sitting here with you.”

He placed two twenties on the table, stood up and offered me his hand. I took it and we left.

#

We headed to his house in Norwalk. I’d never been in this position before, and I knew I was taking a risk. I could have just given him my phone number. But for a woman like me, playing hard to get was the same as walking away for good.

We squeezed into our seats, pretending the train was crowded so we could feel each other’s bodies close. He had his hand on my knee, and leaned in to kiss my ear and my neck. I shoved him away playfully. A light haze of wine was tickling my mind. He gripped my other knee, the one farther from his reach, and pulled my legs close together, and close to his own, then he slid his arm behind me and cradled me like I was his most precious possession on earth.

From the South Norwalk station it would take us less than five minutes to drive to his house, which he told me was also his “office.” He was a free-lance video editor and had a spare bedroom which he called his studio even though it contained only a computer and a few monitors. He did business with advertising agencies, which took him into Manhattan once or twice a week. As we pulled into his driveway, he told me that he’d dreamed of being a filmmaker, a director of important documentaries or features, but that a series of projects had relegated him to editing, where he was told by collaborators he had a more natural talent. He’d grown accustomed to the editing role over time, and had come to understand its profound importance.

“Who wouldn’t want the ability to edit lives?” he said.

He lived in a raised ranch, sandwiched between two other raised ranches. The house was light blue, but grey from neglect, with a tiny patch of grass in front. Not much to look at. We entered, and I followed him up a half-dozen stairs, pleased to find a tidy living room with a large pewter

chandelier, built-in bookshelves and several framed mirrors on the wall. He offered me a seat on the sofa and went to the kitchen. I heard cabinet doors squeaking and glasses clinking.

"From Chile," he said when he'd returned with wine. I didn't need more alcohol, but he poured and we sipped.

"Are you from Chile?" I asked, stupidly.

"Ecuador," he said. He moved in close to me.

"Your house is very pretty."

"Gracias," he said. "I live upstairs and work downstairs."

He leaned in and rested his fingertips on my shoulder, smiling, and said, "My bedroom is on this floor."

was surprised by his forwardness. To smell a man's breath and cologne up close as he stroked my hair and held my hand. This was how a beautiful woman felt.

"Am I getting a tour?" I asked.

He laughed and shook his head. He took my hand and pulled me down a hallway, through a heavy wooden door and into a pitch black room. After a dramatic pause, he flipped a row of light switches. The bedroom was huge. It had a queen-sized bed, an antique dresser with carvings of angels and devils, metal bookshelves (mostly empty), crimson-shaded lamps, and row after row of track lighting across the ceiling, light bursting in all directions. Wooden blinds kept two tiny windows invisible.

He walked me to the bed and nudged me to take a seat. The bedspread felt rough and synthetic, a minor displeasure in an otherwise abundant feast of sensuality.

"Relax," he said. "We forgot the wine glasses. I'll be right back."

There I sat, pondering the life story of this handsome man living alone in a ranch in Norwalk, who was most certainly damaged because he was drawn to me. Not just drawn, but felt lust for me, that chemical explosion I had learned to suppress. I winced to think I had never been in a strange man's bedroom before. No man had ever touched my face.

I often wondered how things might have been different if I'd had a man, a husband, at the time of the accident. He would have fallen out of love with me eventually, even if he couldn't admit it, but he might have stayed with me out of obligation. He would have had to resist – or not – the urge to pursue other women who offered smooth skin and shapely curves rather than the knobby hide which yanked and stretched my nose and breasts. But I'd decided that loneliness was more tolerable than loss. *'Tis better to have never loved at all than to have loved and lost.*

The furnace shuddered somewhere nearby, maybe under the floor. I rose from the bed and walked the room's perimeter, studying the contents of his shelves – glossy film magazines, a ceramic pig family, Latin American novels – and his blown-up photographs of New York architecture shot from abstract angles. A stone picture frame proffered an image on a small red cabinet. I paced forward hesitantly until a redheaded woman stared back at me, her hair a mane. She had a face pale as porcelain, bright pink lips, and deep green eyes. Her half-smile conveyed confidence, and her peaceful expression a certain grace. Her beauty gave me a shiver. He must have loved her.

What do you think you're doing?

"I'm sorry to stare," I said aloud. To myself.

What do you think you're doing in Rafael's bedroom? I don't mean to be rude, but do you really think there's something here for you? I'm afraid you're delusional. I don't know what's happening in his head. He's entitled to his occasional perversions, but this is pretty depraved, even for him. Maybe he started up with coke again. I certainly hope he didn't bring you here just to be cruel. Rafael may be a lot of things, but he's not cruel.

"I see you've met Donna."

I turned to find him in the door, clasping our wine glass stems between his fingers. He joined me in front of the photo.

"She's amazing," I told him. I stole the word he'd spoken to me at the bar, as if correcting him. *See the difference?*

"We were together until last year," he said. "She moved back to New Hampshire. Her mother's sick."

Rafael gulped down his remaining wine as I wondered how normal it was for a man to seduce one woman in front of the image of another. It was a genuine curiosity, not a judgment. Men could

combine women easily, both mentally and physically, I'd heard, while women could only appreciate one man at a time.

Staring at the photo became awkward, so we both turned away. He led me back to the bed, and placed my glass on the nightstand. He pulled matches from his pocket and lit a tall white candle before turning off all the lights. I had only recently learned to keep my stomach from sinking at the sight of flame.

He leaned me back on the bed, rested one arm across my breasts and stared at my profile, the gnarled side, as his head laid on the pillow. I felt him blowing gently in my ear, and it almost made me giggle, but it also made my insides flutter. I felt like my body had known him all along, like it knew what it would feel like when he took me, even if my mind was still ignorant.

He unbuttoned my blouse and bared my stomach. I felt a draft and feared my skin would sprout goose pimples, so I tried to button the blouse again, but he pulled my hands away and laughed. He kissed my lips, and I was tempted to open my mouth and give him my tongue if he wanted it, but he moved his lips to my forehead, then my cheek, where he kissed the upper half of my scar, then blew on it. I giggled. He kissed my scar again and then I felt his tongue licking it. I heard a sound like suckling. He smelled like old sweat, but it was nice, and I assumed it was how all men smelled. My insides throbbed. I couldn't help but squirm on the bed, rubbing my thighs together as a prelude to opening up for him.

He told me to stand up, so I did. My blouse hung open. He reached into the nightstand drawer and retrieved a pack of Marlboros. As he smoked, he lay back against the headboard and commanded me to take off my clothes, one item at a time.

"Slowly," he said.

Moments later, I stood in the middle of his bedroom naked, except for the two silver rings on my right hand. I hoped the candlelight would soften my scars, make them blend in with the shadows. He touched himself as he stared at me and smiled. He told me to raise my hands above my head.

"Slowly."

He could see it all now. The leathery tissue tangled with veins across the left side of my neck, my breast, my shoulder, and down the side to my waist. The thick trenches and rigid flaps. The reds and browns like dirt roads, spots of fresh pink shining through where the scarring was lighter. I hoped he wasn't overwhelmed, that I met his expectations. I wasn't concerned with my appearance, strangely, but with his stimulation. I shifted my weight and grinded my hips in an

exaggerated manner. I couldn't help but smile. I'd only ever been naked in front of doctors.

"Come here," he said. Of course I obeyed.

I couldn't stop kissing him while we made love. It didn't matter where. I was feeling wonderfully vulnerable and willing, and probably could have cried. When he was on top of me, he sucked on my neck, my cheek. He bit my ears, and I could have said "I love you" even if this wasn't actually love. I could have laughed and screamed. At one point, he stopped and whispered in my ear.

"Is this your first...?" he asked.

I nodded. He beamed, and flashed his teeth in the dark.

#

When I woke up, my phone said 3:25. The candle was down to an inch, but still glowing. Rafael was snoring sweetly, but I was still feeling the sting of pain. I felt the need to go clean myself. I gently slid his arm off my chest and slipped out of the bed. I pulled his tee shirt over my head, stepped into the hallway, and found the bathroom.

As I sat on the toilet, I spotted a straight-edge razor in the soap dish on the sink. I imagined it tracing his Adam's apple, stroking his chin, and gliding up his soft jaw line, until it became my father's razor, the one he'd held shakily to his face years ago, just days after my return from the hospital. He'd finished shaving, but appeared to be contemplating a more violent act against himself.

"Don't think like that," I'd said to him. We were looking not at each other, but at our reflections in the bathroom mirror. He'd already made a tiny slice in his face. I knew he'd never do more than that, not in my presence. A creek of blood had sprung, mixing with lingering puffs of shaving cream. I took the razor out of his hand and hugged him from behind as he started to shudder.

"It was just a scarf," I said quietly. "It's nobody's fault."

"I miss her so much," he said through mucous. "And I almost lost..." He turned and fell into my arms.

"I'm here, Dad," I said. "I'm still right here with you, see? We're blessed."

He was silent for a moment. I could almost feel his mind spinning, struggling. He pulled away and

couldn't bring himself to behold my actual eyes, so found my reflection in the mirror.

"Every time I look at you..." he said through sobs.

Outside in the hallway, I listened for Rafael's snores, which sounded more like humming. I hesitated to re-enter the bedroom. I was wide awake, processing so many emotions, and unsure whether I was in danger or if this was the safest place in the world. I walked back to the living room where we'd drunk our wine, and put my hands on my hips. I smelled his sweat again, and couldn't help but grin. A street lamp warmed the room through the window and showed me the staircase leading downstairs.

I'd never slept at a man's house before, not this way. A few hours earlier I'd opened my heart and body for him, pulling him inside of me, but despite such intimacy, I still knew nothing about him. I'd made assumptions. I'd assumed he lived alone. I'd assumed he had never been married, had no children. I'd assumed he really was a film editor; why would he lie? I'd assumed there was something decidedly *not* normal about him. I realized I was naïve, which could have frightened me, but I had already come so far and, besides, I had long ago expunged my cynicism.

I descended two sets of stairs to the lower level. The carpeting felt soft on my feet, a blend of fluffy shag and tickly fibers, so I massaged my toes with it for a moment. A door on the right was ajar, so I entered. My eyes were drawn to the flashing digits – eternally midnight – of an old-fashioned clock radio. My hands caressed the long neck of a floor lamp until I found the switch and turned it. I was in a bedroom, but it was uninhabited, likely only for guests. Still, I glanced around looking for signs of human presence. I found dust instead. The walls were bare except for one framed photo, another New York skyscraper. The single bed was low to the floor and covered with a polyester blanket, like the ones in cheap motels.

I switched off the light and returned to the hallway. I heard a creaking sound and paused. The furnace blasted again, this time from the closed room next door, which I passed on my way to the third door, which was also ajar. It was the last room on the right, and a dim purple light shimmered from inside, then became green, and then purple again. I poked my head in. It was his office, just as he had described it. A Mac computer and monitor rested on what looked like a piece of plywood supported by saw horses. A second large monitor hung on the wall, and another sat on the floor below it. All three displayed the dull, winding pixels of a screen saver.

I touched his mouse and the computer's fan began to gust. The room suddenly brightened with all three screens in full bloom. Dozens of icons dotted his desktop, and behind them Donna had come to life. Her giant photo – his computer desktop wallpaper – surrounded me on all three screens. This, however, was not the ravishing Donna from upstairs. This was Donna deformed

and terrified. Her mouth was wide open, like she was shouting at the camera. She had train tracks of black thread on both sides of her face. Her left earlobe was mangled and a four-inch gouge defaced her jaw just below it. One nostril was cut off entirely.

I scanned his desktop files and found one which had Donna's name in its title. It was a video. My hand was shaking as I held the mouse. I felt a sudden bond with the woman in front of me. Upstairs her image was so distant, like a beautiful ghost I would never know. But down here she trusted me to double-click. So I did.

The first thing I heard was a scream, so I clamored to the keyboard to lower the volume. Donna was angry and afraid, shouting at the camera – at me – to go away, to get out of her house. She howled about her bed-ridden mother down the hall, and threatened to call the police. I wasn't paying attention to the pleading voice behind the camera, but I knew it was Rafael.

"How can you say that?" she shouted. "He butchered me! Get out!"

He kept calling her beautiful, saying it didn't matter, that he loved her and would make her look beautiful on film. She approached the camera and briefly became the screen shot he'd selected for his wallpaper. There was something about the angle, and her expression, and the light in her eyes, that despite the damage done to her face, she still was a vision. All of her emotions, not just terror and pain, were fighting to come out.

He was sobbing now so the camera was jiggling. She ran to a phone on the wall, and the camera started to back away as Rafael cried, "I love you, Donna! Let me show you."

The video snapped to black and I stared at the computer monitor. My hand quivered uncontrollably as I poked the mouse to minimize the file. Donna's broken face exploded in front of me again.

"She left me," Rafael said behind me. I knew he'd been standing in the doorway. I didn't say anything, and I didn't turn around.

"She'd been attacked on the street," he explained calmly. "She didn't believe I could still love her, so she ran away."

When I turned, his eyes were bleeding tears and his arms were slightly outstretched, asking me to understand. He was naked and looked small, different than the man who had enticed me into his bedroom.

"I didn't care about the damage he did," he said. "I was making a film to prove it. To show how beautiful she still was. But all she could see was ugliness and mutilation. She hated living in her own skin. So she hanged herself."

He panned his glance to Donna's giant image on the wall. His tears came faster and he kept talking, but not to me. He was mumbling to Donna and to himself and maybe to everyone who had ever discarded someone like her. I heard no anger in his voice. Just deep, deep pain like he too had been brutally attacked.

Scar tissue is inferior to the original flesh that it replaces. It's made of a slightly different collagen, which is functionally inferior; it can't accommodate sweat glands or hair follicles. It's better than nothing, but there's something half-dead about it. Donna was unable or unwilling to feel half alive. She was all or nothing. So she chose nothing.

Maybe I was naïve, but I'd never felt anything but grateful. Even in this strange house in Norwalk in the middle of the night, I didn't feel regretful or afraid. I didn't want to collapse into a heap. I felt like a vital woman. A woman who had just been treated like a sex object, but for reasons very complicated. Rafael had used me to prove something to himself. And maybe to Donna's ghost. He'd only wanted my body, not me, but I'd be lying if I said I felt degraded. Not the least bit. Knowing he'd wanted to possess me was a thrilling power. What he saw on the outside of me stimulated him beyond reason. Wasn't this how a beautiful woman felt?

I turned and he was gone. I knew he'd retreated to the safety of his bedroom, where Donna's framed image was immune to the ravages. I pictured him cocooned in his bed sheets, watching the candle's flame gasp for oxygen. Maybe a few tears of loss or shame shining on his cheeks. Then I pictured myself tiptoeing upstairs, slipping out of his tee shirt, floating into his bed and lying with him until the end of my life.

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Sunday in the Park
Kyle Hemmings

