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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

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POEMS

POETRY EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up the Winter 2018 Issue of *Euphony*. This journal is a product of many weeks of reading, analyzing, and discussion among our staff. So, it is with great excitement that I present to you our newest selection of poems. In compiling these pieces, I drew on the connections between sound, silence, rhythm and imagery, among other elements, of each poem. After identifying the interweaving connections, an important question emerged: how can poetry accomplish similar goals through different approaches?

Take, for example, the first two poems. Though juxtaposed in their rhythm and level of abstraction, they are united in how they capture an other-worldly and phantasmal mood. From exploring the out-of-body and supernatural theme in these poems, the question persists as the pieces flow and begin to express themes of the more physical body, such as its deterioration and the ways in which it senses and remembers the world around it. Finally, this progression culminates in the exploration of memory itself. I hope that in reading these poems, you are similarly moved to find the linking threads that will encourage your own questions, discussions, and answers.

Throughout this process, we were able to read so many interesting pieces, so thank you to our authors for allowing us this opportunity, and thank you to our wonderful staff who took the time and dedication to read and discuss the pieces every week. Happy reading!

Sincerely,
Mahathi

Nocturne with Fading Childhood

David Ehmcke

The night yawns and opens
its great mouth over the sky
to reveal dozens of scattered
milkwhite teeth spread across
the tawny gums of dawn.

I am in my bedroom, wearing
my childbody like a new skin.

I wear it well. I wear it long. I do
not recognize myself. I pull
each eyelash from its lid and
gather them like currency
in my palm. Hundreds of inkblack
wishes. All for me. All mine.

I blow them away and each
collect on the floor like dust
in my long-forgotten home.

I am feeling dramatic today.

O' how I yearn for the touch of
another. O' how I yearn to
dream forever. I pull the blankets
over my head and wish for some-
one to take me away. Someone to be
mine and stay mine. Someone
to be mine and stay. But dreams die
despite themselves, our fantasies
dying with them. At mid-twilight,
I wake and unlock the door. I am
helpless and begging for a home
invader or vagabond to slip in and
save me from my restless slumber.

This is the scene I cannot bear:

There, the door, my sleeping body.
Waiting for someone, anyone
at all. In the morning, I glue back
the lashes one by one by one.

Salvaging the Antique Plumbing

William Doreski

This baggy old structure features
three or four bathrooms walled in,
sealed off decades ago. Ghosts
won't rattle my dentures, rats
and mice won't trouble my soul,
but I hope that big grisly spiders
won't appear when I burst the walls
to salvage the antique plumbing.

Clawfoot bathtubs worth a bundle,
solid brass faucets, cast-iron sinks.
Nothing evil could have survived
so many years behind plaster.
No matter who drowned who in gouts
of bubbles and suds, the vacuum
left by the departing spirit
will have purified itself by now.

I could chant the final chant in case
something still needs to lie to rest.
I could dance a few graveyard steps
to assure whatever lurks that respect
for death hasn't departed this earth.
With crowbar I groan up the baseboard,
then swing a big hammer and shatter
a century of plaster and lath.

A silence thick with the past tense
reclines like an odalisque, eyeing
the nether parts I thought to conceal.
Yes, a clawfoot tub with porcelain
finish virgin as a snowfall.
All the hardware museum fresh
and cool to the touch. But something
malforms this vision, something

misting from the tub to obscure me
from myself, so I drop my tools
and rush outside as the building
sighs and collapses like a lung—
the shock of too much interior
exposed, too much eloquence
of brass, porcelain, and iron
for this moment to endure.

Gill Cut

J. David Liss

When the tourists don't want the fish
Captain says, "Can't throw it back now.
Take it home."

Packed in ice, the fish didn't know it was dead
I've filleted a thousand, but
When I slapped it on the board
The damn thing moved as my knife came down

Eyes wide, mouth wide
The blade hit its spine
Then sliced my left pointer finger
A half an inch deep, my finger
Pumping blood to push out
The fish's blood.

Three days later the bleeding stopped
The slice across my finger
A bitter red slit
Rimmed with dead white skin
Pulsing like a fish's gill.

That night I dreamed
My finger was a fish
Accusatory, pointing,
Sucking air directly to the blood.

Apology

Ann Pibel

I send you Modigliani
paper dolls – supine nudes,
love-stamped —

what I want to say is trapped
inside their long throats,
behind almond eyes —

words tissue-thin,
bloodless as an old scar,
painful as a lost limb,

but there is a pulse
in the wrist that reaches
off the page

beating its unsteady verse
for you to hear
with fingertips

Ithaca

Donald Parker

We were young, hearts all that mattered,
Ithaca, only the moment recreating
Earlier innocence, a journey beginning
Hardly noticing our bodies,
Only conveyors of there to here.

Blue jeans and T-shirts on the beach
Holding the heat, the sun waiting
Ready to towel us dry, warm
To cashier the waters chill

Aleppo pine, wild olives, oaks
Branches reaching skyward like
Cemetery cypress giving shade
And resin with a family tree of
Frankincense, *retsina*, and Myrrh.

And now, and now, now
Another Ithaca, long hallways
Sterilized steel needles, not pine,
An enlarging circle of red unseen

All focus on the body
Blue scrubs, young, watching the screen
Waiting; beeps and blips, a heart trying to write

I still hold your hand.

Jersey City Fall

Richard Krohn

On fields described by curbs, by end-zone poles
and signs (Please Park In Lot Behind The Lodge),
our two-hand touch mimed late December's bowls
until the day past Dad's old rusty Dodge
a hydrant clipped my unsuspecting knee,
the pass near-missing Witch DeLucci's rail
but not her door or tiny manger scene,
my cry too late for confiscated ball.

Next fall our 9th -grade team pushed blocking sleds,
no time for costumes, sweets for Halloween
(we wouldn't beg like stupid little kids),
but Mischief Night I crossed the street unseen
and stuck two Luckies with cherry-bomb wicks,
her milk box empty when I flipped the lid.
They smoked like mass as I nestled them in,
then crept back down that silent stoop, and hid.

I never confessed, not to priest or cop.
That blast still echoes up and down my block.

Artist and Model

John Grey

He reorganized her nature
into free space,
each stroke fighting against the flatness
of the canvas.

His brushwork
upended structure,
physiognomy
until she was all this and more.

He captured the slant
of her cheek
in her mouth's fingerprint texture,
paralleled the principle of her eyes
in the very place where they were looking.
He did not allow
appearance to
run away with his truth.

Days later,
he put down his paints
and her eyes scoured the canvas.
Where am I? she asked

He shook his head.
How she saw herself
had never been part of the plan.

Memento Mori

Claude Wilkinson
-after paintings by Andrew Wyeth

I. Christina's World

The girl doesn't seem a girl,
but the memory
or dream of a girl.
Wyeth himself claimed Christina
could have been left out
and the painting
would've remained the same,
that her physical presence
was no more important
than a beached lobster's
or anything else's in one
of his many other watercolors,
that her essence was bound
in a toy-blue sky,
in the sweep of earth tone fields.

So you may think,
what a thing to say about
such a once starry-eyed spirit,
especially if you've gazed
into her haggish, glintless portrait
he did a mere twenty years later.
Maybe you too sorrowed
for the absence
of her slender youth,
her fascination with
the pepper of crows
sifting from a barn's loft,
with a weathered farmhouse
also on the distant horizon,
as she lies in our foreground,
her then lithe body
halfway between tucked and prone.

Not mindful of the meals
that will always
need to be cooked,
linen that will need
to be washed and aired,
eggs to be gathered
and chickens fed,
with her back to the rest of us,
it's as if she somehow understands
that she should hold
this moment, alone, for as long
as she possibly can.

II. Tenant Farmer

There's much
about the strict gables
and high chimneys,
its crumbling courses
of sooty brick
and small, dark panes
that say this
wasn't a house of apologies.

Love was stark,
measured in provisions.
And so another day
white under snow,
still gray with more,
there seem to be
enough backlogs sawn
to stoke fires for a while.

With no crops
to be grown or gathered
in hard weather,
with what little work
that could be done,
there were surely
parsnips and tomatoes
canned in the cellar,
wild jams lining shelves
in the old lean-to,

and for any debt
that had to be paid
in kind this winter,
strung plumb by her neck
over the naked limb of a willow
a coldly rendered doe.

The Only Time I Saw My Grandmother Naked

Lena Breda

I saw my grandmother take off her breasts
She did it casually
as one strips a pair of socks
Help me Lena she said
as her arms flailed behind her
struggling to grasp the clasp

I had never seen someone so naked.

Come on now, be quick about it

Then they were gone
Ginormous molded silicone breasts
with a pilling band draped over the bed post.
My grandmother rubbed the twisted skin where her breasts used to
hang
(a crooked break
a dark mark
— What did we do to earn this punishment?)
and sighed

Jesús Cristo

Lena this is what happens to you when you get old

I wonder if I could as easily take off an arm
a knee
a foot

Lena are you listening?

I nod and stare at her breasts on the bed post.

At the Saturday Morning Farmer's Market

Terry Savoie

Searching high & low in the crowded
aisle then pushing my way in
for a pint-size, balsam basket of ripe raspberries,
blood-red & ripened on the cane,
so that I'll be able once again to see the morning sun
glistening in each of their perfect spheres,
an offering to the heavens & for my father,
so long gone now. Raspberries

are all I have left of him who never spoke two
good sentences to me to save life,
his or mine or anyone else's. What I do have of him
is what went unspoken, the earthly joy
he took in ripe raspberries straight from his garden,
wet with dew & sprinkled over his Corn
Flakes before he took off for work,
fresh berries on a bowl of cold cereal

so that, if I listen closely next Monday
when I'm eating my raspberries, I'll hear him
in the thick & luscious sounds I never heard during his life
as I watch him again in my mind as he scatters
red berries into my bowl & smiles
down at me:
a father & his four-year-old son eating breakfast
together before he heads off to his hell,

another ten hours of his life
facing the foundry's blast furnaces.

Black and White Television

Ed Tato

Pins and needles,
as I lie on my side,
sting feet
wedged between TV and tea cart
and radiator, waiting
for the heat to start.

I burp
and taste and smell
garlic and onion fried with potatoes
for breakfast after mass.

I stretch the couch-cover to cover
as much of my upper body
as it will cover.

The TV's sound
is off — the radio's on —
so we can hear the hometown announcer,
who reverently confers our part in History.

Wet snow swirls in thickly falling snowflakes
as Jet linebackers and backs crowd the ball
waiting for O. J. — who everyone knows
will rush
for the record at the snap.

Our Dutch oven rattles as pot roast boils for supper.
A haze of breath spews from each facemask.
My brother's heel thumps the couch near my head.

My father's Zippo clinks open, fires, snaps shut —
my mother bolts from her ironing board —
to get another beer for him —
her wine spilling again
as she does.

PROSE

PROSE EDITOR'S LETTER

What defines the short story? As a reader, I like to leave this question unanswered. The dynamism of the genre of short prose turns the space between each story into a bated guessing-game as to what new permutations of characterization, imagery, tone, attitude, knowledge, or morality may await us. Through experience, we learn less quickly that which defines prose as excellent than that which appeals to us individually. Through the assembly of diverse opinions united by a common passion for good prose, Euphony strives to find and share writing that continually challenges our assumptions of what it means to write well.

The prose section of our Winter 2018 Issue has been arranged loosely along two thematic arcs. First, we observe the ripples of political turbulence from three perspectives: the alienated friend; the disillusioned, obsolete actor; and the neutral observer, watching the fanciful intricacies of politicization. We face the truth of time's power to transform or wear away the institutions we once looked to for identity and direction. The second arc explores the search for independence in a chaotic world. Through our relations to family and friends—be they the draining struggles of loss, the tensions of reconciliation, or the almost lachrymose happiness of the recognition of love—we must inevitably face ourselves and our futures. But although the way may be difficult, we may nevertheless find peace in our path.

A continuing thanks to all our contributors and staff: your constant creativity keeps us vivid. We hope you enjoy our selections.

Cheers,
Ben

Pilium

Alise Wing

When Papa killed the whale everyone brought us congratulation casseroles. The only casseroles we'd been given before were pity casseroles, which is what they all brought after cousin Carl hung himself. Those crowded the fridge because no one felt like eating. The congratulation casseroles took over the kitchen counters, too, not because we didn't feel like eating but because we had so much whale meat already.

When Papa killed the whale I got to help cut it up, but I couldn't wear the parka that Grandma made me because it'd get all dirty. She made it out of fleece from Michel's Craft supplies, and it had Dora the explorer on them. I had to wear pajamas and rubber boots instead, with one of Papa's old sweatshirts to keep me warm. The fat was jiggly and cream-colored and tricky to slice through. It had hidden sinew. Your knife would be sliding along nice and easy, then all of the sudden it'd feel like trying to cut through a rubber doormat. I was all red by the end. My rubber boots hung onto the whale's smell for weeks after the last seagulls left the carcass.

When Papa killed the whale he had to stay up all night with some of my uncles and a gun to keep away the bears. I couldn't sleep, so I went to visit him in my clean Dora parka and my bloody boots. He was angry when I got there - there were bears around and I could have gotten eaten, he said, but he let me stay and we drank coffee from his thermos with lots of creamer and sugar and watched the sun rise.

When Papa killed the whale everyone went down to the rec center to eat it together. We ate it broiled with salad and fry bread and canned fruit cocktail and lime jello. All the kids played hide-and-seek under the tables, our feet squeaking on the linoleum which was plasticity and off-white just like the whale fat.

Ever since then I've associated linoleum with whale fat, which was why I had the whole whale thing in my head sitting in my college cafeteria as a freshman, staring at the floor. I was hundreds of miles away from home, sitting with some kids from the marine biology club who were talking about how they *couldn't fathom* the *ignorance* and *cruelty* of people who killed whales. Words slid around in my mouth like marbles, impossible to put in order but impossible to swallow. In my sock drawer I kept a photograph of myself beaming among the bloodied carcass. How could I explain that? That it had never been about the killing, but about *pilium*, a word my grandmother tried to explain to me, when a being gives another being power, a sort of blessing.

Biting

Jonah Smith-Bartlett

For my Father David

Randy slid a dollar and fifty cents across the counter to Mr. Carter. Two Cokes and a cup of night crawlers packed in wet dirt in a Styrofoam cup. Randy winced. Like he could feel the slime of the creatures through the container in his hand.

“Going fishin?” Mr. Carter knew the answer. What else would the boy do with worms? Although there was that one boy from Buffalo who ate them on a dare last summer. He spent three days in the hospital, one for physical recovery and the other two for a mental health evaluation.

“Yeah,” Randy said. He held the cup between his thumb and pointer finger. He stretched out his arm. As far away from himself as possible.

“You going to catch anything big?” He smiled widely. Even armed with his best bait, he knew that the odds were against us.

“A largemouth bass,” I said, popping my Coke can open and taking a long sip. The unflappable confidence of a fourteen-year-old boy. “Going to have it for dinner. Grandma said she’d cook it up if we scaled it. Corn on the cob and lemonade.”

“What do you think, Randy? A largemouth bass?”

“If Jim says we’re going to catch one,” Randy replied, handing me the carton. You could smell the wet dirt. You could smell the doomed little creatures. “Then we’re going to catch one.”

“All right then,” Mr. Carter said. “You enjoy your dinner and you tell your grandma that I said hello. And tell her that I asked how she was doing. And tell her that I’m thinking about her. Your grandpa passed what—six years ago? Yessir. Tell her that I’m thinking about her.”

“All right,” I said. Though I forgot. And I only remember now. And I don’t trust my memory. Because in my memory Randy was just as dumb as the day was long. And just as funny as a duck. And clueless like he had been born yesterday. And harmless. “Couldn’t harm a fly,” as they say. Nearly cried when he put those worms on the hook.

After two hours we still didn’t have a bite. Not a good bite. A couple small fish that we tossed back into the lake. A small act of mercy, but we didn’t seem big enough to do anything more. They were wounded, but they were free. We dropped our poles down on the dock. We jumped in. Our knees trembled and our shoulders shook beneath the surface. Mid-July, but it was cold. Long Hooker’s green algae wrapped around our arms. Sunfish nibbled at our toes. Randy whimpered like he was in

pain. But they weren't hurting him. Just innocent little creatures that didn't know any better. The strange pale legs of teenage boys. Bite! Bite!

We spent three more summers in just that way. We spoke less about fish and more, as teenagers do, about the human anatomy. But every day we floated on our backs. We recounted the summer before and planned the one ahead. We laughed at the small waves that lapped against the shore. We were young. Laughter was our natural inclination. During the spring when he turned sixteen, Randy called me to tell me that those days were over. His father was forcing him, against his childish will, to get a job making deliveries for the grocer. They ordered fish all the time, he told me. Every Tuesday a woman named Molly Lattrell, a fine displayer of our favored anatomy, ordered a largemouth bass.

* * *

Ten years went by. Mr. Carter passed and left the shop to his son. His son turned it into a liquor store. Shelves of whiskey, brandy, wine, beer. No more night crawlers. My grandma passed too. We had a small graveside service, exactly as she requested—it was exactly like her husband's. Most of the old town council retired, and young entrepreneurs took their place. The town council voted. They dredged the lake and pulled out the algae. They built a dozen floating docks, all thirty-five yards or so from the shore. They called it a vacation spot. A fine summer destination for the whole family. The neighbors put their homes up to rent, one week at a time. City kids dove in and pressed downward, trying to touch the floor of the lake with the tips of their fingers. The moss was trapped beneath their fingernails. The sunfish bit them and they squealed.

* * *

One day a letter arrived with no return address.

Comrade Jimmy,

Greetings from the Underground. The blacks have taken to the streets. You must have seen it on the news. You must know by now. They've turned to clubs and bricks. They've turned to violence. Martin Luther King's dream is over. If the pigs hit them, they hit back and a hundred times harder. Not just the Panthers. The average Joe. The TRUTH is in the streets. No more sit-ins. No more patience for a better future. If they want a better future, they have to grab it for themselves, and they know it. That is the TRUTH. Black men are knuckling up and black women too. They are tired of suffering. They lead the revolution.

From what I can tell, most white people aren't ready to follow. They aren't ready to take to the streets. They aren't ready for the TRUTH. Or if they do see the change all around them, they pretend that they are blind. They are satisfied with their jobs. They are satisfied with their money. They are satisfied to sit on the sidelines. They are satisfied to sit on the sidelines with the banks and the pigs and the Fort Dix Army boys. They sit on the sidelines. We are going to destroy the sidelines. Everyone must choose. And to choose to do nothing, say nothing...is to say that you are the enemy. You are the enemy and you must know that we are willing to strike. We are ready to strike at any time. The TRUTH is that we are a nest of vipers. We are coiled up. We are going to bite. And not tomorrow. Today.

Bring the war back home. That's what we always say. That's what we're trying to do. America was built on genocide. The slaughter of the Indians. And now the Vietnamese. Bring the war back home! That is the TRUTH. Every so-called patriot has blood on their hands. We don't have a nation. We don't have a flag. We have a mission and we have a calling. We have a duty to our brothers and sisters in Vietnam. Every Vietnamese death justifies a death at home. We are the future and we are today. We are not quiet. We are not peaceful. We were taught by wolves disguised as sheep. And they pulled the wool over our eyes. That was then and this is now. You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

I'm writing to tell you to get ready. Get ready, Jimmy. You need to be ready. Ashes, ashes. It's going to all fall down.

Your comrade,
Randy

* * *

Everyone that I knew hated Vietnam. My father wailed against the government from his reclining chair. My mother wept for those children who ran down dirt roads trying to escape the napalm that burned deeply into the skin of their backs. We stepped into quicksand. We knew what we were getting into, but we somehow thought that we could get back out. Maybe we were foolish. Maybe we were arrogant. Maybe we really were doing exactly what we thought was the right thing to do, but now there was no turning back. Every night on television we saw the bodies piled up. We waited for Cronkite to vomit all over that desk. But

every night they found a voice in a suit and tie that told us with some odd sincerity that it was soon going to be all right.

That was their TRUTH.

* * *

My stomach twisted as I looked at that corner of the envelope where Randy's return address should have been listed. I turned it in my hands, flipping it over and around, hoping that the next time it came faceup, there it would be. Wherever he is now. Pittsburgh, Seattle, Chicago, Detroit. Where was he living, hiding, hoping, striving for that future, first so dark to dawn now soon? That inevitable new heaven and new earth sanctified, or so he claimed, by the blood of innocents. Over there and now right here. *Bring the war back home. That's what we always say. That's what we're trying to do.*

* * *

I remember another summer day. We were both ten. Maybe eleven. We were novice fishermen. We stood at the end of the dock and cast and reeled back in. We had no patience. We cast out and reeled in. As fast as our wrists could go. There had to be a fish on the line. We believed it every time. Ridiculous faith. There wasn't.

"They're not out today, Jim."

"They have to be. There's nowhere else for them to go."

"Why aren't they biting?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should change the bait. We can hook a worm."

"Oh," he said. *Oh*. "Could you do it for me?"

The sun beat down upon our shoulders. Randy was brown and I was red. My grandma brought down two glasses of lemonade, but we didn't drink them. Not yet. After we caught one. That was the unspoken pact. We cast out and reeled in. Nothing. Cast out and reeled in. Again nothing. I felt light-headed. I felt like I might tumble into the lake. And if I did, I might just drown. My grandma looked down from the porch at the back of the house. She told us to drink. Drink up. The sun was toasting us. She stood up on the porch. She was yelling. The frail woman wielded the fear of God.

I threw back my arms to cast one last time. One last time before Grandma could make it to the dock. The hook flew over my head. I jerked my arms forward. Now there was a tug, but it didn't come from the water. It came from the body of the boy behind me. The hook caught Randy right below his left eye. It cut deeply. It tore his skin. He yelped out like a wounded dog. The blood poured down. He said that he was blind. He wasn't. But he got six stitches right there where I hooked him. And the scar would never go away.

* * *

One month later another letter came. Again there was no return address on the envelope. But this time he said more. The what and the when and finally the where.

Comrade Jimmy,
Greetings from the Underground.

The blacks refuse to lay down anymore. Fred Hampton is dead. Twenty-one years old.

The whites? Us. It's finally time. It's right around the corner. Can you hear the shouts of rebellion? Listen closely: They are getting louder. Can you hear the gunfire? We are pulling the trigger. Can you hear it? A thousand Jimmy Deans with guns in hands. Our vile government will fall. It will implode. We will make sure of it. This is the TRUTH.

We are bombing federal buildings. Maybe you've heard that on the news. It's not a secret. The world must know. We have to take credit. We are criminals, but we are not guilty. They are guilty. We are striking when it is least expected, and no government agency is safe. The pigs know it. The FBI knows it. They follow me in their black cars. Their long black cars that sit across the street all night long. Three fat men take turns sleeping. They will kill me, I'm sure of it. Unless I kill them first. Fathers and mothers will weep. So will wives and husbands and children. And then maybe they will begin to feel. Maybe they will begin to feel what they've done to others. I mean really feel it. There's a photo of an American soldier dragging a Vietnamese woman by her hair through the streets of her village. Well, that's all that you need to see.

Bring the war back home. I'm a soldier, Jimmy. I'm not a boy. I'm a man. I'm willing to be a martyr.

What else is there to say?

I want to see you, Jimmy. I think of you often. You're my only friend of the past. I want to show you the future.

210 Minetta Street. Apartment C. Greenwich Village.
New York City.

I will hope, but I won't hold my breath.

Your comrade,
Randy

* * *

It was an eight-hour bus ride, but it was painless. It was the short

trip on the subway that triggered a deep anxiety. A policeman boarded. He stepped off the subway one stop later. For a moment I considered the thought that now I was being followed as well. I saw no one else. Just two girls in the seats in front of me. One was braiding the hair of the other, who said, "How I look?"

"You lookin' good."

I smiled as best I could. Her hair was twisted in all the wrong directions.

"For real?"

"Yeah, you lookin' real good!"

210 Minetta Street. Apartment C. I uttered something under my breath. It might have been a prayer. It might have been nothing more than a short note of fear. Who was on the other side? Was this the boy who couldn't stand the nibbles of the sunfish? My comrade Randy.

"Holy shit," he said. "It's really you."

It was really him.

Not that I could tell at first. His dark hair was long and scraggly and couldn't be separated from the beard below. His nose was broken. Maybe a cop punched him. Maybe the cop got it worse. He sniffled. He breathed in short breaths. The air whistled in his nose. His front teeth were chipped. He was as thin as a ghost. He was covered in dirt, just like those night crawlers. Except dirt of the city and not the countryside. It was different. It caked his skin. It smelled like oil. I could have passed him on the street and I would never have recognized him. Except for that scar under his eye. Six stitches. I did that to him. And now he was this.

Randy invited me inside and I obliged. It was a den of junkies, strung out and hardly conscious. They muttered at me. I had no idea what they said, but inaudible words came from furious faces. Only one boy seemed alert. Younger than us. Reading a socialist magazine. Tarry. Randy told me his name. And then the wraiths. Two women and one man. Liston. McIntyre. Peterson. His roommates. Then he corrected himself. His comrades. The word triggered something in Tarry, who leaped from his chair, took a bedsheet from the floor, and covered a table in the other room. He moved too quickly for me to see what he was hiding. Lumps under the sheet of all shapes and sizes. Large and small. Rectangles, squares, cylinders, circles. Building blocks.

"Make yourself comfortable," Randy said. He lit a joint and took a long drag. Then he offered it to me. I declined. He shrugged.

"What is this?"

Randy laughed. Deeper and full of smoke. Not like his young laugh that was caused by the lapping of the waves against the lakeshore.

"I like to think of it as a workshop," Randy said. "And we're building a new tomorrow. One that nobody sees coming. Not the bourgeois. Not

the war hawks.”

“And these are your engineers?” I pointed at the junkies. I now noticed that McIntyre still had a needle in her arm.

“Don’t let them fool you,” Randy said. “They look halfway dead. I know it. But that one there is Jefferson. And that one, Washington. And that one, Sam Adams. King George has grown awfully fat.”

“You’ve found some awfully strange founding fathers.”

“True,” Randy said. “But we are living in strange times. This is our Declaration of Independence.”

Then a pause in conversation. An acknowledgement of the time passed. And the old friend gone. Not just Randy. I was no longer the boy he knew. Because I wouldn’t play his games now. I couldn’t look at the scar, so I looked at his chipped teeth. He must have exposed the nerves. He must be in pain.

“What happened to you?” I regretted the question as I heard the judgment that soaked those words and weighed them down.

“I woke up,” Randy said. “Eyes wide-open. What’s the song? ‘Was blind but now I see.’”

I regretted coming. I didn’t know that within Greenwich Village was such despair. Such desperation. It was the neighborhood of folk singers. I knew that, and in their songs of protest they gave some clues about this swamp, disguised as it was as the new cultural Mecca. The folk singers lived here. And apparently now the citizen soldiers too. Randy went on and on. Greetings from the Underground. He was composing his next letter in my presence. He was wailing against the world. Someone was the face of the future. Someone was the archangel of death. Someone was the harbinger of things to come, and those things to come were expressed with such vitriolic certainty that I could not swallow them. I spit them up. I can’t remember them now. Then on and on about the military. Complicity. Even the conscientious objectors. There was an officers’ dance a few days away. Music and girls, and the punch would be spiked. How could they dance yesterday, today, or tomorrow? Why did it matter? The white masses didn’t understand it, neither here nor now. They couldn’t comprehend it. They didn’t have the intellect for it. But they would understand it tomorrow. When what was done was done. When what was done was what needed to be done. World turned upside down. The borders broken. The American citizen was no more a person than the Vietnamese. Or the Russian for that matter. Peace was an ineffectual ideal. His breath whistled through broken teeth when he said the word “peace.” Liston on the floor. Sure, a reckless girl. But she was harming no one except herself. At least not today. But maybe tomorrow. Vietnam was halfway around the world. The miles of ocean didn’t muffle the sound of a young mother’s cries.

“Bring the war back home,” Randy said as he opened the apartment

door. I told him that I had to leave, but I didn't have an excuse. He didn't ask for one anyway.

"Bring the war back home," I echoed. Randy rubbed the scar beneath his eye. He knew that I was a fraud. He embraced me and wouldn't let go until out of a deep discomfort, I pushed myself away.

* * *

Randy made the national news two days later. 210 Minetta Street was a hollowed-out shell. The face of the building was gone. The inside was ash. As dust it floated up in the air as firefighters blasted with water that urban cave of treason. Reporters spoke in flat fact as they had grown tired of dismay. The Weather Underground. Five bodies pulled from the rubble. Someone's hand slipped. Someone botched the job. A homemade pipe bomb was run-of-the-mill. Everybody worried about where it was meant to explode. Nobody cared about where it actually did.

* * *

"Come on, Jimmy." Randy pushed me square in the chest. Not hard. The sign of a friendly challenge. "I'll jump in if you do."

"Don't be a dope."

The storm clouds had gathered. The wind wasn't so strong as to shake our bodies, but it made my teeth chatter. We heard thunder in the distance. Randy grinned.

"Come on, Jimmy," Randy said again. As he spoke my name, we heard the air crack.

"Not gonna happen."

"What if I call you a chicken?"

A raindrop stung my head. Another slapped my cheek.

"Grandma is gonna kill me. She'll kill you too."

"Nah," Randy said, although he knew that she would. He knew that she had no problem taking the switch to anyone, family or not.

"I'm going in." I turned my back to him. Surely he would follow. I looked back. He hadn't budged.

"Farewell then, my friend."

Randy placed his hand over his eyes in a salute and looked at the sky. He couldn't see a speck of blue through the clouds. He laughed as he turned and bounded toward the edge of the dock. He plunged into that cold danger. I ran back toward my house. Annoyed and hurt. I would give no second thought, I told my grandma as I stepped through the door, to the fate of that stupid friend.

The Most Wanted

Richard Dennis

Sue Green waits in the back of the police car, locked behind the steel mesh partition. On her lap rests a purple four-gallon plastic bucket. She grips the handle with her left hand and wraps her right arm around its base, clutching it to her chest as if she were nursing a baby. The car sits outside a funeral home, engine running, roof lights flashing. All of the vehicle's windows are rolled up tight, trapping warm stale air inside. The back seat reeks of collective scents from captive passengers who preceded her. Sue wipes sweat from her forehead without letting go of the pail and looks at her watch. The No. 70 bus leaves Raymond Plaza at 2:15 PM. That gives her a little over two hours. She doesn't want to miss that bus. Not today.

Officer Banville, the arresting officer, is standing at the front door of the funeral home, talking to its owner. Sue cannot hear their discussion, which is probably best for all concerned. People walk by. Most ignore the police car—hardly an unusual site in this part of Newark—but a few peer in at the slender white-haired woman in her late sixties, clad in baggy men's jeans and a blue denim work shirt. A small boy runs up to the window, cupping his hands around his eyes to see inside. Sue smiles and waves. The child's mother drags him away. Sue is still watching the little boy when without warning a man starts pounding on that same window, screaming in a language she does not understand. Sue jerks backward, away from the window. The man reaches down for the door handle, his tone menacing. Officer Banville hurries over and pulls the man away.

Minutes later the policeman returns, opens the front door of the car and eases his bulk into the driver's seat. He fumbles with the key and then shoves it hard into the ignition. He glances in the rearview mirror, exhales and shakes his head.

"Look, lady," he says, "how many times are we gonna do this?"

Sue allows herself a little sphinxlike smile. She has regained her composure and lashed it in place. Sue is no stranger to hostile reactions or police questions. She says nothing. The policeman repeats his question. She answers with a question: "How long until working people rise up to throw off their oppressors?" Sue Green is not her real name.

"It was a funeral, for Christ's sake," the officer says. "They were saying goodbye to a loved one. They don't want to hear about revolution and imperialism and whatever-ism, OK?" The car pulls out into the

street. “Go find a demonstration to march in, or something. Just leave mourners the hell alone. Show some respect.”

Sue leans forward, pressing her face against the mesh, and finds the policeman’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Respect? You mean respect for the system that herds the poor like sheep into the abattoirs of the totalitarian state and sacrifices them for oil company profits?” She squeezes her pail. “And demonstrations,” she says, “are for elitist narcissist cowards. Symbolic theater masquerading as action.” Sue knows first-hand about demonstrations. “They’re like those stupid bombings,” she adds. “They don’t change shit.” Sue knows about bombs, too, more than she cares to admit even to herself. “I talk liberation at funerals because that’s when people’s ears are open and the lies of the ruling class are exposed.” She holds up the pail exactly like a priest holds up a thurible, minus the smoking incense or metal chain. “Their lies go in here. I collect them in my pail. Then I pour the bleach of truth on them, and dump the whole stinking mess in the toilet.” She tips the pail with her free hand and out tumble its invisible contents.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” the policeman mutters. “That dead kid’s father wanted to flush you down the toilet.”

Sue settles back on the car seat. She enjoys sparring with Officer Banville. He fits her image of a policeman: the naive street enforcer of a corrupt system that oppresses the people from the safety of board rooms and country clubs like the ones her father frequented. Officer Banville doesn’t try to redeem her or pretend he cares. But he’s not cruel. He is what he is. She understands that to him she is just like the people on street corners talking to themselves or shouting about Jesus. A nuisance to be driven away. Sue knows that a revolutionary is a nuisance who refuses to be driven away. She is serious about her mission, committed to smashing that corrupt system.

There are times, however, Sue questions whether there is any point in continuing. She feels like Sisyphus in denim. With a pail. Smelling of industrial strength cleaner. Ignored. It’s annoying, really, the lack of response she gets these days at funerals. She has missed out on so much to do what she does. If only people recognized how much she had sacrificed. But Sue takes comfort from having stuck to her principles. One has to have principles, she believes, and be faithful to them. Officer Banville has his, she has hers. Her former friends surrendered theirs. Sue doesn’t stay troubled for long. She stiffens, collects the self-doubts in her purple pail, douses them with bleach, and pours them in the toilet.

Well, she thinks, as the car rolls up Springfield Avenue, she did get quite a reaction today. The smile comes back. It’s the first time police have been called in three or four months. Her message must have gotten through to somebody.

Sue wonders how Officer Banville would react if she told him she had been on the FBI's Most Wanted List for two decades. Would he believe her? Would he even care? The rest of the world lost interest in the movement and forgot her, especially after Nine-Eleven. She was notorious once. Now she's the last holdout of the radical vanguard who went underground in 1969. The others have either died or disappeared or fled the country, or else surfaced, crawling, to apologize for their part in the struggle and seek forgiveness and assimilation. Sue doesn't crawl; she organizes. Today she sits in the back of a police car heading to the precinct for yet another disorderly conduct booking, where she'll get another court date she will ignore. One day, perhaps, they will care enough to run her fingerprints against their database.

The car stops in the parking lot of an abandoned Kmart. The officer, born two years after Sue was dropped from the Most Wanted List, climbs out and opens the back door. "Get out," he says, without looking at her. "And please, go away."

* * *

Sue and her pail ride the No. 70 to her afternoon job. Sue cleans houses. Nine steady customers. She could have more if she wanted. She accepts cash only. The pail comes with her to every job. For almost thirty years she's been mixing funerals in the mornings with housecleaning jobs in the afternoons.

The bus is crowded but no one seems to pay her any attention. An elderly lady makes her way down the aisle, pauses, then takes the open seat next to Sue, sinking into it in a slow languid motion as though she were collapsing into a bed. Sue can smell the detergent on the woman's hands and her clothes. She knows what brand. She can tell that the woman's work day is far from finished. Intuition, born of experience. The woman looks at Sue's pail and turns away. Sue nods her head but says nothing. She doesn't proselytize in the afternoons.

Sue's destination today is the suburban Maplewood home of Dr. Melissa Sanders, popular sociology professor at Rutgers and, like Sue, a Bryn Mawr alumnae. The house is a two-story brick colonial on a comfortable tree-shaded street not unlike the one Sue knew as a child. Missy—she insists Sue call her that—lets her in. "I'm sooo glad you made it today," Missy says. Sue hates it when her customers start gushing. "You'll never guess who is staying here for the next few weeks."

Sue reads the newspapers. She knows. The Times reported a week ago that Seymour Sickler, erstwhile radical guru to a generation of college protestors, had returned after many years of self-imposed exile in Algeria, Cuba and perhaps other places yet unrevealed, surrendering to the authorities at JFK and immediately demanding a public trial. The

article ran a picture of him after he made bail, sporting the same pompous look Sue remembered, but pudgier now and with less hair. Missy was standing beside him in the picture, beaming for the camera like someone had just brought back her lost puppy. "I have no idea," Sue says. "Who?"

"Seymour Sickler. Oh, you probably don't remember him but he was quite the rage on college campuses back in the Sixties and early Seventies. He was at every antiwar demonstration, all the big ones, giving these marvelous speeches. Until he got arrested. He got out somehow—I think he escaped—and went abroad. Now he's back in the country. Isn't that wonderful?" Missy leaned forward and lowered her voice, as if she were sharing an intimate secret. "He'll be here until he gets settled and gets his own place."

Sue finds Missy's excitement both touching and pathetic. Sue hasn't seen Seymour since 1972 when she drove him up to Canada after his prison escape, a trip made excruciating by his endless self-absorbed chattering and constant demands for sex. Missy would have been perhaps five or six years old then. These days Missy must be getting to see his good side. The one that thrilled women, made them feel exceptional, sublime. At least for a short while. Sue knew a different Seymour, the one who tired quickly of a woman after he had taken whatever he wanted from her, moving on without looking back. The Times article hadn't dwelt on that aspect of his charm. Sue considers for a moment whether she should caution Missy to count the silverware.

"Sorry, never heard of him," Sue says. She hurries to the kitchen. She is in no mood to hear Missy's paeans to the glory of Seymour. Or Missy's babble about her stubborn university colleagues and her stupid selfish friends and their cheating husbands, the whole liberal bourgeois mentality Sue ran away from, fought against, once tried to blow up. Literally.

Sue sets her pail down on the kitchen floor and turns on the hot water in the sink. She looks down with fondness at the pail. The purple pail never lies. It never cheats or deceives or pities or compromises. It doesn't complicate things. It doesn't fuck around. It is a useful reliable tool. When the water is hot enough, Sue picks up the pail and sets it in the sink. She drops cleaning fluid into the pail and pours in the hot water with enough force to create suds for the mop. Missy's mop. Sue thinks her pail deserves better.

Sue struggles to lift the filled pail from the kitchen sink and deploy it on the floor. The load is heavy, and she feels a stabbing pain in her shoulder. She steels herself to ignore it. Sue cannot afford to stop working. It's not like Missy offers a 401(k). Sue thinks of the tired old lady on the bus, still working at her age.

She hears the sound of footsteps on the hardwood hallway floor.

She thinks it must be Missy, wanting to talk more about Seymour. Sue shuts her eyes and grimaces. Her shoulder feels like it is on fire. She continues mopping, slower and harder. Sue is mistaken. In walks none other than the famous man himself. Sickler struts over to the refrigerator, talking on a cell phone. He glances at Sue and then the pail, and with a wave of his hand signals for Sue to continue working. Sue is not surprised that Sickler fails to recognize her. Back in 1972 her hair was long and blond. Seymour always had lots of young blonds around him. White-haired cleaning women were never his type. Sue focuses on the mop, scrubbing the tile floor with savage intensity. Abruptly she pulls up and, despite the ache in her shoulder, dips the mop into her pail with a delicate touch like a mother lowering her baby into a bathtub. Sickler grabs a beer from the refrigerator and shuffles off to the living room, still talking on his phone.

When she finishes with the kitchen floor, Sue carries her pail, the mop and a sponge upstairs. She starts with the bathroom. Sue sings softly as she works. Soon the fixtures gleam. She mops the bathroom floor. Then she heads to Seymour's room. She straightens up the room, picking up dirty clothes off the floor and putting them in the hamper that Seymour had somehow had missed. She opens the closet door, takes out his two clean suits and lays them on the unmade bed. They have a nice scent, a foreign scent she thinks. Next to them she sets out his dress shirts and ties. She steps back and admires the arrangement. Then she picks up the pail and carefully dumps the dirty water over them all.

* * *

That night, Sue wakes up, alert. She lies still in her old twin bed, eyes open. She reaches for the table lamp to her left, but changes her mind. She hears voices coming from the hallway outside her room, women talking in Spanish. Sue recognizes the voices—they live in the other room sharing the second floor—but doesn't understand what they are saying. She wishes they would speak English. She sits up and stares at the window in the far wall, watching the window shade turn red and blue. Narrow shafts of light stream into the room from around the shade's edges. Sue understands instinctively that police are outside the building. She takes a deep breath. It is happening.

She swings her body out of bed and stands up. The wood floor is hard beneath her bare feet. Her mouth is dry. She calculates how long it will take them to reach her door. They have come for her in the night, she reflects, like they did for Fred Hampton and the Panthers in Chicago. Like they did for her and her comrades in '71, after the explosion that went bad. They've been chasing her for more than four decades, yet

they can't wait until morning. She finds that amusing. Seymour must have given her up, she thinks. Cutting a deal, no doubt, like the rest of them. The weasel. Adrenaline surges through her body. She rubs her hands together and nods her head. Words swell up inside her, loaded and ready to fire. Sue Green will have her day, finally. She will show Seymour and the rest of the compromisers what principle looks like. Her eyes follow the slivers of light as they dance high on the wall above her pillow. She stretches out her left leg in the darkness until her foot finds the purple pail. Reassured, she leaves it and walks over to the window.

Sue rolls up the shade, revealing the hulking side of the tenement building not ten feet away. It blocks her view of the street. The red and blue lights sweep across the surface of the tenement. Sue wants to lean her head out the window and get a look at the force sent for her capture. She flips the latch on the window lock and pushes up on the wood at its top edge. The window doesn't budge. A bolt of pain shoots through her shoulder and forces her to stop. She rattles the window, trying to loosen the wood swollen by recent spring rains. She slaps at it once, twice, and then gives it a wicked shove. It rises, but only six inches. Not enough for her head, but sufficient to let in sounds from the street. She hears car doors opening and closing. She hears voices, male voices, barking at each other. A siren wails nearby, and she hears someone shout, "Tell him to shut that thing the fuck off."

Sue drops the shade, turns and walks slowly toward the door. She stoops to pick up her pail, stands back up and waits for their door pounding and their demands. She refuses to dress or fix her long white hair. She wants the world see her this way, hauled from her bed in her thrift store nightgown. Her capture will expose their weakness, she thinks. Their vulnerability. Marian Atkins, fugitive revolutionary, was right there in East Orange, the newspapers will say in amazement, living openly as a cleaning lady named Sue Green. The papers will report her courage, her defiance. Sue Green did not crawl or compromise her principles. Everyone will see.

Sue hears boots on the stairs now, coming closer. More voices. Her pulse quickens. A woman screams, more women scream and then a man shouts in Spanish. Those people need to be quiet and stay out of the way, she thinks. She crosses her arms. The screams go on for several minutes, and then the boots start again, but this time they grow more distant. Screaming turns to weeping. Sue is puzzled. Her attention shifts to the sounds from the street. Men call out to each other, and there is laughter. Car doors open and close again. Engines start and rev up and fade away. The lights disappear.

Sue Green stands barefoot on the hard floor, facing the door. She waits in the sullen darkness, hugging the purple pail that does not lie.

The Prodigy on the Square

Phillip Parotti

Where it came from and how it reached the center of the town's square were questions that everyone asked. And not a few seemed incensed. "The very idea!" the P.T.A.'s president exclaimed. "If this is someone's idea of a joke...," said the fishmonger, shaking his fist. A more precise reaction proved difficult. No one, that anyone knew, had ever seen such a phenomenon.

Almost immediately, people gathered along the edges of the square, standing in groups beneath the pinstriped store awnings, sitting along the curbs, or pacing back and forth before the locked doors of the bank, a precaution taken by the banker in case the event presaged a run on deposits. Conversation became rapid but went forward in hushed tones, and the most immediate questions turned on color.

"Gunmetal gray," said one.

"Do you really think so?" said a woman. "I would have thought blue."

"Black, for sure," said the soda jerk.

The group in front of the bank thought it violet, except for the high school drama teacher who held out for red, particularly along the edges.

"Whoever heard of a red cube?" said the man with the mustache.

"Cube?" said the others, all of them protesting at once.

Questions of color immediately gave way to questions of shape. That it had certain cube-like characteristics, the jeweler admitted, but in the end, he declared it to be a three-dimensional rhomboid. A second man disputed this conclusion by saying that he had never in his life seen anything that so reminded him of the rectangular box of *Corona Superiors* that his father had once received as a Christmas bonus. The school superintendent, after some deliberation, likened it to an over-inflated football, and there the matter rested until the ice cream vendor, precipitating a resumption of the argument, compared it to a truncated cone. When the anchor person from the local TV station arrived, she quickly reported the presence of a forty-seven-ton green sphere, and everyone said "Oh," having had their perceptions clarified.

"Forty-seven tons?" said a mining engineer who happened to visit from California. The mining engineer, considering both its size and density, thought the anchor person's estimate might be off by as much as seventy-five tons and quoted a mathematical formula to substantiate his claim, but when asked by the anchor person to describe his feelings

about the formula, he found that he had nothing to say; as a result, his professional credibility suffered an immediate blow. Thereafter, everyone agreed to call its weight forty-seven tons, plus or minus a few ounces, and having established as much, the anchor person returned to the TV station with her camera and crew. The mining engineer, it was thought, went back to California where he was said to be employed by a major copper corporation which used him to estimate ore tonnage in hopper cars before they arrived at their smelter.

After the anchor person and the mining engineer departed, one man, who had been sitting quietly on the curb, stood up and faced his fellows.

“What,” he asked, “do you suppose it is?”

“A stone?” his wife said.

“That’s probably it,” said the man who had called it a cube.

“Oh yes, certainly,” said another.

“That much is obvious,” said the school superintendent.

But others were not so sure. Fritz, the baker, who had escaped from Prague in 1938, likened it to an enormous loaf of black bread, the kind he had been taught to bake in his youth. Upon hearing this, a tenured professor of physics from the college took instant exception, declaring that never in his life had he heard anything quite so absurd; based upon the scientific evidence, he said, it was obviously a large meteorite which had been hurtling through space for millions of years before falling by random chance onto the town square. The professor contended that study of the object would reveal a great deal about the origins of the universe and no small body of information about the evolution of mankind. Although skeptical, the town’s Catholic priest began a careful inspection of its surface in an attempt to discover if any Latin inscriptions might be recorded on the exposed exterior. At the same time, the leading evangelical pastor threw himself into a heated debate with the physics professor; citing *Revelation* as his authority, he declared the phenomenon to be the stumbling block which Balaam had taught Balac to cast before the children of Israel. Angry words were exchanged, and blows might have been had not the Chief of Police suddenly appeared.

The police chief took one look at what was going on and lifted his radio transmitter. “I want two patrol units on the square immediately,” he said. “Notify the bomb squad and the fire department. And call the F.B.I. The moment I arrived here, I heard reports that this thing is ‘Red along the edges,’ so if a conspiracy is afoot, I intend to nip it in the bud!” With a crackle of static, the police chief replaced his radio transmitter, unsnapped the catch on his holster, and stood ready, waiting for his support teams to reach the scene.

In no time, the bomb squad arrived wearing full body armor. The fire department appeared next, bringing three pumper trucks, and then

the area F.B.I. agent breezed in by helicopter while a convoy of government trucks pulled up and began to unload cyclone fencing. While the bomb squad combed the square with metal detectors and police dogs trained to sniff out explosives, the fire department charged its hoses. Then the F.B.I. contractors erected enough cyclone fencing to secure the entire square. Spectators were issued special permits so that they might pass back and forth through the barrier for the purpose of running errands or conducting daily business, and for the most part, the security net proved successful.

In the middle of the morning, however, three teenagers carrying spray cans did penetrate the fence. They were arrested while trying to make their escape but not before they had defaced the object's north face with magenta graffiti. By noon, then, the prodigy had been sanitized. The bomb squad declared it to be free of explosive potential; the fire department declared it to be non-flammable, and the F.B.I., after an extensive background check, declared it both criminally and politically inert. It was not, the agent said, on the *ten-most-wanted list*, and it was certainly not a Red. After that, the authorities lost interest, and the police, the bomb squad, the fire department, and the F.B.I. went away, leaving four hundred yards of cyclone fencing still standing, still enveloping both the object and the square. A single, off-duty policeman remained in place to maintain crowd control.

Some wanted the fence to remain erect as a protective measure: members of the medical community were unconvinced that the object might not contribute to the incidence of disease in the town, and the evangelical pastor, after publicly citing selected passages of scripture, declared the block to be Satanic and a possible harbinger of the Antichrist. As a result, he wanted barbed or razor wire to top off the fence and guard dogs to patrol the enclosure. Others wanted the fence removed; they found it unsightly, disliked the way that it impeded their access to the phenomenon, and saw no reason to leave the fence in place, and two days later, a committee of these people appeared before the town council where they lobbied for removal of the fence at public expense. Because the councilman from Ward 3 happened to be the evangelical pastor's brother-in-law, he alerted his relative prior to the time the question was scheduled for debate. As a result, when the "Citizens Committee for Removal of the Fence" appeared in the council chamber to make its appeal, so did the evangelical pastor, members of the medical community also appearing to support retention of the fence. Spirited debate followed. Arguments were put, testimony was taken, and the facts were stated plainly; when a vote was finally cast, it resulted in a tie with no abstentions, one member having ducked the meeting in order to catch a classic movie on Netflix. Then, all eyes turned to the Mayor who had a responsibility under the town's charter

for casting the deciding vote.

The Mayor, an astute politician who also happened to own the town's bank, listened patiently while each side restated its case. Then, he refused to cast a vote on the existing question, opting, instead, to strike a compromise which promised something for everyone.

"Whatever we do," said the Mayor, "must conform to sound fiscal policy. In layman's language, that means our solution must increase revenue without becoming a drain on the budget."

Thereafter, the council went into executive session, and after less than thirty minutes, the town's maintenance crews found themselves dispatched to the square. Floodlights were set in place, gaps in the fence were closed, and additional concertinas of barbed wire were strung along the crest of the enclosure. Finally, ticket booths painted in soft pastels appeared before the north and south entrances while the wire received a coat of pink paint.

"The town will charge a purely nominal admission," said the Mayor, speaking to the anchor person who had shown up with both crew and camera to cover the announcement. "Our intention is merely to cover the cost of administration and upkeep."

"I understand," said the anchor person, "that signs have been placed at each entrance stating that *admission to the enclosure may pose a serious risk to one's health.*"

"*And to one's zeal,*" said the Mayor.

"Don't you mean one's *soul?*" said the anchor person, casting a swift glance in the direction of the evangelical pastor.

"I wonder," said the Mayor, "if you might not be more interested in my feelings at this moment."

"*Oh yes, I would,*" said the anchor person, flashing the Mayor a smile. "How *do* you feel?"

"In close personal touch," said the Mayor.

During the first week, the town broke even on its investment. Gate receipts, slim in the beginning, picked up, and by the following month, the town had recovered its initial costs for the floodlights, the barbed wire, the pink paint, and the erection of the ticket booths. Throughout this period, the booths had been staffed by volunteers from the high school spirit squad, but after totaling the month's receipts and establishing a sound basis for moderate economic projections, the Mayor and the council appointed a professional administrator to oversee operation of the enclosure, giving her full power to hire a competent staff and regulate various concessions which had started attaching themselves to the enterprise.

"Ice cream sales seem to be booming," said the Mayor. "T-shirt sales are up, but balloons have dipped slightly. We will see to that by introducing brighter colors and more helium. And we are also looking

into the possibility of a cotton candy stand; cotton candy promises to have a bright future as long as we promote it properly through social media platforms.”

Against the next quarter’s projected earnings, the administrator negotiated a high interest loan at the bank, established a public relations budget, and placed not a few advertisements with the state’s leading newspapers, television stations, and internet outlets. As a result, each new day brought hordes of thrill seekers into the square, some of them from as far away as Nashville where a rumor had been floated suggesting that the attraction sang. At the same time, the administrator sought and obtained Federal grants for the project. With the first, she established a permanent antiquarian to chronicle the history of the prodigy and to inquire into its mystery. The second grant underwrote a research center at the town’s college as well as the *Phenomenon Review* which publicized the center’s findings. Funding provided by a third grant distributed itself evenly between various local medical researchers who worked on cures for any diseases which might develop through contact with the object. Limited funds were also accorded to the local evangelical hierarchy which felt itself called upon to publish small pamphlets warning against the evils of the block. These pamphlets, they found themselves forced to distribute outside the exits to the enclosure owing to the fact that few of their members could afford the price of admission. Nevertheless, as time passed, they accumulated enough in meager donations to erect a tent in close proximity to the exit so that departing sinners might be redeemed and brought back into the fold.

After two or three months, the newness of the thing had worn off to such an extent that few, if any, of the townspeople paid much attention to it. At first, of course, they had flocked to see it, some of them going almost daily, but as spring gave way to summer, the locals became engrossed in their vacation plans, and had it not been for the congestion caused by so many out-of-town visitors, most members of the community might have forgotten about it altogether. But as things turned out, they could not, for the prodigy drew crowds of several hundred visitors each day, and this increasing influx of outsiders confronted the town with a whole new variety of problems. Shoppers on the square, for example, seldom found parking available which forced them to park at a distance and walk blocks to reach their business destinations. Litter increased, gasoline and convenience store lines lengthened, and during the enclosure’s peak operating hours—9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. daily—shortages of every staple from paper diapers to chicken tacos became common. In the town as well as in the surrounding communities, not even casual adulterers found themselves able to obtain motel rooms without reserving them weeks in advance. Complaints were voiced, petitions appeared, and on the Fourth of July, shortly after the enclosure

shut its gates for the night, a candlelight vigil in protest assembled on the west side of the square.

“The community,” said the administrator, “must be made to feel more a part of the project.”

“You’re right, of course,” said the Mayor, who had always seen eye to eye with his daughter.

As a result, at the Mayor’s suggestion, the council voted to set aside a portion of the project’s profits for tax relief, so at the end of the following month, the town’s citizens were gratified to learn that their water and sewer rates had been reduced by as much as two cents per dollar due.

“I would like to ask, Mr. Mayor,” said the anchor person, “how you feel about this development?”

“In close personal touch,” said the Mayor. “I feel in close personal touch.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor,” said the anchor person, flashing him a lush smile. “Thank you so very, very much. I’m sure your constituents will be delighted.” And in so saying, the anchor person went so far as to freshen her lipstick on camera.

Indeed, the town was pleased. Various service organizations lent the Mayor their unqualified support. The high school band gave a marching demonstration in his honor, and the Chamber of Commerce called upon him to be photographed beside the phenomenon. Acting on a tip, the editor of the newspaper went public with the statement: “Our Mayor Is One of the State’s Rising Stars.” When, everyone wanted to know, would he announce his run for the state legislature? All things considered, the future looked very bright. And then, a man with a tail and gills showed up in Slocum.

Slocum, a farming village located about four miles west of the town, had always been within the town’s orbit. Slocum’s citizens had always shopped in the town, found their entertainment in the town, and sent their sons and daughters to be educated in the town. In fact, one might almost say that beyond its name, Slocum had never enjoyed so much as its own identity, being known in the state only as *the village west of the town*. But with the arrival of the man with the tail and the gills, all of that changed.

Where the man with the tail and the gills came from, no one knew. He simply showed up one day on the little main street of Slocum, carrying his prehensile tail draped over his shoulder, took out a long-term lease on the old Evans place which fronts the Evans farm road, established himself in the barn, and began to charge admission.

“Mine is not a complicated story,” he told the anchor person when she held out her microphone. “At three months, in the womb, all of us have a tail and gills—you, me, everyone; that’s simple biology. Any

high school textbook can clarify the issue. Where my case differs is that in time—well, before birth in fact—most people’s gills close and their tails fall off. I was not given time: in the third month of pregnancy, my mother suffered a stroke which left her brain dead. In such cases, mother and unborn child usually die, but in my case, the attending physician attempted a Cesarean section. The procedure proved successful, and then, for some weeks, I lived in an aquarium before being transferred to a standard hospital incubator. By chance, my gills never closed, and my tail never dropped off, and thus, I am as I am.”

“Amazing,” said the anchor person. “Isn’t that *amazing!*”

“For reasons that I am at a loss to explain,” said the man with the tail and the gills, “most people seem to think so.”

“And tell me,” the anchor person hastened to ask, “how does that make you feel?”

“I have always felt,” the man said gravely, “that pregnant mothers should take very good care of themselves. On that point, let me be a lesson to all of us.”

When this utterance was broadcast over the five o’clock news, nearly everyone recognized immediately that a sage had appeared in Slocum. The networks picked up the story, the wire services all carried it, social media platforms became jammed, and by noon on the following day, traffic along the highway leading into Slocum had reached bumper to bumper proportions. By mid-afternoon, the fields and pastures surrounding the old Evans place had filled to overflowing with the curious.

In the town, on the square, business around the enclosure fell off by forty percent, and shortly before three o’clock, the administrator elected to close for the day owing to lack of interest, all potential visitors having departed for Slocum. In the center of the square, the prodigy remained silently inert.

“How long do you suppose this will continue?” said the administrator, studying the gate receipts while listening to the news from Slocum.

“I think,” said the Mayor beneath a deeply furrowed brow, “that we will have to look into it. Perhaps we can cut a deal. If we cannot, we will have to raise taxes, and that is an unpleasant prospect.”

Accordingly, the Mayor, the administrator, the council, and the head of the town’s planning commission motored to Slocum. By the time they finally gained admittance to the old Evans barn, the sun had set, but inside, candles brightly lighted their way. They found the man with the tail and the gills hanging from a rafter.

“Oh, hello,” he said, smiling and warmly shaking each of their hands. “So nice of you to come. I’m sorry you found me resting; I’ve had a rather long day, and this so improves my circulation.” And with that, his tail released its grip on the rafter, and he dropped lightly to his

feet whereupon he re-draped his tail carefully over his right shoulder and seated himself on a bale of hay. "Now," he said pleasantly, "how may I help you?"

"Well," said the Mayor, "if you don't mind, we wonder who you are and how long you intend to stay. We're from the town, and your appearance here, your operation...well, it's cutting into our business."

"Oh, dear me," said the man with the tail and the gills, "I am truly sorry to hear that. It was never my intention, I assure you. As to your question, I'm sorry to tell you that I do not know who I am. As a rule, I am called the man with the tail and the gills. My mother, I believe, had an unlisted number; at the time of her stroke, she carried no identification, so there you are. It is perplexing, certainly, but then, what rude birth is not? It is the opinion of several anchor persons that I have long been slouching toward Slocum to be born, but that, in my opinion, is a rather foolish idea. In fact, I am twenty-eight years old; I have worked in nine major carnivals, and I have excellent references. I came to Slocum because I wish to retire from carnival life and take up farming. It seems to me that I have an unlimited future in soybeans, and I have always found outdoor work refreshing."

When the man with the tail and the gills finished speaking, the Mayor and his entourage conferred, and then, once more, the Mayor posed a question.

"Are you at all familiar with our...prodigy?" asked the Mayor.

"Prodigy?" said the man with the tail and the gills.

The Mayor described it, explaining as he did so the situation in the town.

"Oh, I see," said the man with the tail and the gills. "Well, of course, I don't know very much about such things, but it sounds rather like a star, doesn't it?"

"A star?" said the Mayor.

"Yes, I think so," said the man with the tail and the gills. "You know, a harbinger of some sort, like the star of Bethlehem. The substance is in the form."

"Ah," said the entire delegation from the town.

"Now, *that*," said the Mayor, "is really something to think about!"

"Furthermore," said the administrator, "the public relations angle of such an attraction is immense, and it can never be bested."

"Quite true," said the man with the tail and the gills.

"Quite true, indeed," said the Mayor.

And with that the Mayor, the administrator, the council, and the head of the town planning commission took their leave of the man with the tail and the gills and hurried home.

"I'm calling a planning conference for seven o'clock tomorrow morning," said the Mayor.

“I should just about have a new advertising campaign designed by then,” said the administrator. “I think the man with the tail and the gills may have saved our bacon.”

“I think he may have saved us without his evening knowing it,” said the Mayor as the lights of the town came into view. “No one that I know of has ever owned a star, much less a harbinger.”

But in the morning, when the members of the delegation assembled before the town hall, they found the square empty. The fencing remained in place, and the ticket booths, and even the evangelicals’ tent was still standing, but the main attraction had disappeared, vanished, gone, without leaving so much as a faint impression on the grass.

“Could you possibly tell us,” said the anchor person, charging her voice with compassion, as she attempted to interview the Mayor, “just how you feel about this?”

“Devastated,” said the Mayor, “just awful. We had such high hopes.”

“That’s *good*,” said the anchor person, her eyes brimming with delight as she thrust her microphone under the Mayor’s nose while shouting to her camera crew. “Larry, Ben, I want color close-ups on this! Cindy, powder the Mayor’s face; I’m getting a glare. Now, Mr. Mayor, go into as much detail as you can, but keep it short. The public has a right to know exactly how you feel, and if I smell a cover-up, I’ll be all over you like stink on a skunk. A forty-seven-ton green sphere just doesn’t disappear overnight like a mushroom.”

But it had, and nothing that the Mayor could say or do was able to bring it back. The Mayor tried, and so did everyone else: the police and fire department were called out, the F.B.I. was called in, and the National Guard was called up. The Civil Air Patrol covered every square inch of the county, but everything resulted in failure. The prodigy could not be found.

The man with the tail and the gills was questioned, but the only thing he could say was “I must have been mistaken. I can’t imagine a star, much less a harbinger, disappearing like that. I guess I was wrong. I suppose I must admit to imperfection. I gave it my best guess, but I never claimed to be prescient. Perhaps it wasn’t a star at all, although the substance of what you described to me made it seem so, according to form.” But as the man with the tails and the gills also quickly pointed out, he had never actually seen the object.

Weeks passed and then months, and on the first anniversary of the prodigy’s disappearance, the local TV people decided to run a commemorative segment on the morning news. In preparation, the anchor person interviewed a number of dignitaries, scholars, and persons on the street, and the general consensus seemed to be that the town had returned to normal. When asked for statements of feeling, answers varied.

“An act of God,” declared the evangelical pastor.

“A spontaneous, molecular disintegration brought on by solar radiation,” said the tenured physics professor.

“The destruction of an efficient and productive organization,” said the administrator.

“An irreparable loss to the town’s economy,” said the Mayor. “However, you may rest assured that the council and the planning commission are fully committed to seeking out new, clean, high-tech industries so as to make our town great again.”

“And there you have it,” said the anchor person, flashing a warm, wet smile toward her camera. “One year ago today, the *town east of Slocum* was enjoying an unparalleled economic boom as a direct result of the unexplained appearance of a two hundred ton orange pyramid on its square, and then, the pyramid inexplicably vanished leaving the town in ruins and the entire population on the verge of total devastation. An act of fraud? Well, some might think so, but others clearly do not. The general feeling seems to be reserved belief that at some time during the past year the Star of the Harbinger touched the lives of everyone around the square.”

Leeches

Dolly Reynolds

There was a sudden explosion in the population of leeches in the northwestern part of Connecticut the summer that April turned fourteen. The slimy worms swelled the steep and muddy banks of the brook behind her house, and clung to the small turtles and trout that made the brook their home. It was a deep brook, nearly ten feet deep in the middle, swift and clear. April swam in it almost every day with her horses. She wasn't afraid of the leeches; she knew to flick them off with a fingernail if they attached themselves between her toes. She thought of the leeches as powerful and beautiful—an oozing, slimy, miraculous presence with ancient healing capacities. There was talk of harvesting them for medicinal uses; the doctors at the UCONN hospital had reattached a severed ear using the leeches to find the tiny, almost invisible veins. The worms were bloodsuckers but kind.

April couldn't really say as much—the “kind” part—about her mother, Vivian Lee. The “Lee” was new, part of what Vivian was calling that summer her rebirth, her spontaneous regeneration, and her first real adolescence. April's father was gone that summer: in England, studying Milton's *Paradise Lost*. After fifteen years at his law firm he was finally able to take some time off, and this was the dream of his life, he told April. He would be living in one of the university's residence halls right with the students themselves. There was no room for his wife and daughter. It was better that way, he explained, he needed to focus all his energy on the epic poem; and besides, he added, April couldn't go anyway. She needed to take care of the horses.

“And I guess I need to take care of April,” Vivian said, rolling her eyes a bit.

And that all sounded so reasonable to April, except for the fact that right before her father left for England, he packed up the clothes in his bureau and moved them to a studio apartment in Hartford, near his law firm. Her parents were not getting a divorce, Vivian told April. They were not having problems at all, at least, not with each other. April's father didn't like living so far out in the country. He wanted his own place—an apartment closer to his office. He left in the afternoon, while April was working the 4-H horse show, before she had said goodbye. No one came to pick her up when the show was over, and she finally rode home with her neighbor's father in the cab of his pick-up truck, the horses in the trailer behind.

* * *

So there she was, on a hot July morning, thinking about the two large problems that had arrived with the leeches. Upstairs April could hear Vivian running the water for her bath, just as she did every morning at this time, waiting for problem number one to arrive. Problem number one, April suspected, was Vivian's new boyfriend, Duane.

Problem number two was April's classmate, Mark, and he was coming later this afternoon to mow the lawn. This was the time April planned to absent herself from the house—psychically and perhaps actually physically, which she had been practicing at night with the Ouija board downstairs in their haunted basement. She had been getting pretty good at it. Soon, she thought, it was possible she could cease to exist at all—at least in the flabby, lumbering, sweaty, and bulging physical prison currently known as “her body.” It gave April a slight thrill to imagine how many days it would take Vivian to notice that her daughter had transubstantiated herself.

Vivian had left April half a grapefruit for breakfast, which April buried in the garbage and then placed three slices of bread into the toaster. It was not even 8:00 a.m. and already the kitchen was suffocating. April's thighs stuck together as she walked across the floor, and she could feel a slow rivulet of sweat crawl down her back. There was hay stuck in her hair from when she fed the horses earlier, and shavings inside her sneakers. April picked the hay from her hair and smelled it. Timothy. Sweet and green, not too rich. If she lifted her arm, she could smell the horses on her T-shirt. There was a smear of dirt across her chest from the pony's muzzle. The butter was starting to melt in its dish, and when the toast was ready, April poured it on with a spoon. She felt almost happy until she heard the rotted, rusty van of problem number one, Duane, belching and spewing its way into the driveway.

Duane was a builder Vivian had hired to redo her bathroom after April's father moved out. Now April hadn't seen her father for three months and, disgustingly, she saw Duane every day. Before he went to England, April had tried to call her father at his office. Her hand was sweaty on the receiver when the secretary went to look for him. April was just going to say hi, to tell him everything was okay with the horses and all, but the secretary came back and told her that her father was in a meeting and couldn't talk right now. The secretary would be happy to take a message. That's okay, April told her, her throat suddenly tight. No message. It's okay.

Now her father was an entire continent away and very busy. *Paradise Lost* was twelve books long, she knew, and hundreds of pages written in verse like Shakespeare. It would take a long time for her father to

read and study all that. His hands had trembled when he had told April about *Paradise Lost*. At the end of the twelfth book, he told her, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. But even though the whole world was forever fallen, her father said, it was ultimately a hopeful ending. “Why?” Her father had asked her like a teacher. Because in the last lines of the whole thing Milton said for Adam and Eve, “the world was all before them.”

“That’s how I feel now, April,” her father said, pulling his suitcases down from the dusty attic, “as if the whole world were all before me.”

Where am I? April wanted to ask. Where am I in that whole world?

Duane the builder wasn’t very busy. He had a little girl named Kay he brought with him, so Vivian also hired April to babysit while Duane worked. That’s “worked.” He had been coming to the house for three months and almost nothing had been done in the bathroom. It must have been hard to work in there, since Vivian was always in the tub when he arrived. April’s job was to keep Kay at the barn, and under no circumstances was she to come back up to the house before noon. Which worked out fine because Kay was the most horse-obsessed little girl April had ever known, including herself. When Kay saw April come out of the kitchen door, she ran to her, pummeling April’s thigh with her hard little head. Duane stepped out of the van, buckling his cracked leather tool belt across his scrawny hips. His blue work pants were smeared with grime, and his hair was combed in greasy waves across his forehead. There were flakes of dandruff in his part and on his shoulders. Try as she might, April could not shake the image of Duane unbuckling that tool belt in Vivian’s bathroom—standing over her mother in the tub, the flakes of dandruff sprinkling down onto the bath water like snow.

* * *

Later that afternoon, after Kay and Duane had left for the day, April watched from the kitchen as Mark gunned the rider mower in jagged circles around April’s front lawn. Vivian had hired him for the entire summer. This was more to humiliate her daughter, April thought, than for any skill he possessed with their lawn, which was now pocked with brown tufts. Mark was bigger than the other boys in April’s class, and dumber, supposedly. He was the only boy in eighth grade who shaved (or should have shaved), and seemed, unlike his puny contemporaries, to have the possibility of a sex drive. Or so April thought when he had asked her to dance last spring and had held her body close to his, so close she could feel his breath and count the beats as his heart thudded against her chest. Boys didn’t usually ask April to dance: She was too big, too voluptuous, too horsey. So why had Mark? He was probably sick

or perverted, she had told her giggling friends later that night. But before she went to sleep she remembered the rhythmic drum of his chest against hers—*ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom*.

April knew she was fat. She knew she was ugly. She knew she might never have another the chance to get any “action” anywhere. She wasn’t Vivian, much as she detested her mother much of the time. She would never have Vivian’s long legs or slim ankles or auburn hair, or even have anyone want to touch her anywhere ever. Except she now also knew the feeling of Mark’s heart against hers. *Ba-boom*.

“Do you like Mark?” Vivian had asked April one afternoon, laughing.

April hated her mother, but even more, she hated her own heaving, greasy, repulsive body that probably no one would ever want to touch. When Mark stopped at the kitchen for a drink, April wondered what he would do if she placed his sweaty hand over her breast.

“Come help me with the horses,” she said, and walked out the door without looking back. To her surprise Mark trotted behind her like a puppy.

At the barn, April slipped a halter over Lady’s head and combed out the mare’s black mane. Lady looked at her sleepily and swatted at flies with her tail.

“Are you gonna ride?” Mark asked. The happy pony was nudging him with his muzzle, looking for a treat, and Mark was terrified.

“She’s off,” April said, scraping the shedding blade across Nina’s flank. “The vet is coming to inject her hocks. I’m just going to lunge her a little.” She watched as Mark pet the space between the pony’s eyes, gingerly, with one finger. That was a pretty smart way to pet a nippy pony for someone so dumb, supposedly. “You can watch if you like.”

Down at the arena by the brook, April worked Lady in a broad circle—easy at first, walk and trot, until she saw the mare limber up; her gait smooth, her head down, blowing and snorting the dust out of her nose. She took her back and forth over the trotting poles, and then over an eighteen-inch crossbar. Lady seemed sound enough, loose and feeling good, her inside ear cocked towards April and keen for the slightest cue. April shifted her weight to her back leg and Lady broke into an easy canter. April worked her on both leads, then walked her out until she was cool: her breathing easy, her head low. It was hard to see the subtle signs that the mare was in pain, but April knew. She could see the slight break in her rhythm, the worried look in her eye when her back leg hit the ground. She was a good mare; she’d work for April even in pain, but April knew not to ask that of her horse. Not ever.

With Mark watching April dropped the lunge line, and Lady turned into the circle and walked to April, licking and chewing. April stroked her mare’s face and scratched the itchy spot between her ears. Mark

was sitting on a straw bale at the edge of the arena, his eyes on April, his mouth open just a bit. He had taken off his shirt, and grass clippings clung to the pink skin on his chest and back and under his arms.

The brook that bordered the edge of the field, past the arena, was full of leeches in the muck, but deep and clear at the center. April clipped a lead rope to Lady's halter and brought her to the edge, Mark following behind. April climbed up onto a fallen tree trunk then onto Lady's back.

"Watch this," April said, urging the mare down the shallow banks and into the water. Lady waded in deeper and deeper, groaning with pleasure, until the water was up to her back, covering April's sweaty legs and then her shorts. Lady kept going and the brook got deeper still until Lady was swimming across, only her head above water, and April was floating too, her hands in Lady's mane and the cold water filling the space between her legs and Lady's back. It felt so good to her right then that she forgot for a moment that Mark was there at all, but then she felt Lady's back rise up solid beneath her again as the mare swam across and climbed onto the opposite bank, shaking the water off her flanks. April laughed.

"Hey, are you coming?" she called across to Mark.

"Into the brook?" he asked.

"Just keep your sneakers on," April told him. "Don't forget the leeches."

And Mark jumped in.

* * *

Later they sit by the edge of the bank, drying off, slapping mosquitos on their arms, and pulling at the grass between their thighs. Lady was grazing behind them. It was nearly 5:00 p.m. and the sun was low in the sky.

"Do you miss your father?" Mark asked, pushing the hair back on his head.

"No," April said, "I mean, sort of. I understand why he had to go. To study and all."

"Yeah," Mark answered.

"Do you miss yours?" April asked. Mark's father had left town a few years ago, leaving Mark's older brother in charge of his auto body shop. Mark worked there after school, long winter afternoons, while his brother drove a school bus and the cars sat quietly on the lifts in the air. That was probably why his fingernails were always black.

"I don't know," he answered. "Not really. It's more peaceful."

"Yeah," April answered, her throat suddenly tight. It wasn't more peaceful for April. It wasn't peaceful at all—not with Vivian and Duane

and the water running into the tub; April at the barn with Kay, spreading shavings and brushing out manes and holding up hooves for a sweet little girl with a hoof pick who had no idea what her greasy father was doing with Vivian in the tub.

"April," Mark said "Do you think we could come back here sometime? Like, together?"

April looked at his face in the slanting light: at the shallow acne scars on his freckled cheeks and the dimple on his chin. She saw the ways his green eyes curved down at their corners and how his lower lip protruded. She saw that his black eyebrows formed a peak across the bridge of his nose and that his tongue rested on his bottom teeth. She thought about the way he had scratched the pony on the forehead, between his eyes, gently but with effect, as if he were knowledgeable about touch. She remembered the feeling of his heart against hers at the dance, insistent and strong. He was the only boy who had ever taken her in his arms, and he had done so with gentleness, oblivious to the ways the other boys had mocked her teeming breasts. This information clicked into place in her mind like a jigsaw puzzle that had finally been put together, a code that she had translated, a package that she used to mock but now she understood as well as she understood what Lady was saying when she cocked her ears. April knew that this Mark Glasgow, and his pink nipples and the grass that has stained his shorts, all added up to one surprising thing, and that one thing was kindness. A kindness she could feel in her chest, and deeper too, a kindness that beat inside her body and sent flames to her cheeks. Lady looked up just in time to see April's lips come gently down onto Mark's open mouth.

* * *

The next morning April's body felt warm and bruised. It was thrilling. She could remember the way Mark's rough hands felt against her back and how his eyes had become cloudy with desire. April had run her hands over every inch of Mark's body, paying special attention to the soles of his feet. "Checking for leeches," she had whispered in his ear.

"Hello?" Vivian snapped, in the kitchen. "I need you to hurry up and feed the horses." Vivian was wearing cutoff shorts and a shirt knotted at her waist. Her mother had freckles on her belly. It was another hot day and Vivian's hair lay limp against her forehead. "You don't have to babysit today. Duane's not coming. But I need your help with Grand."

Duane wasn't coming? April saw that her mother's eyes were red and her hands were shaking as she poured water from the kettle over her tea. It was confusing: Vivian hated to visit her mother although Grand always seemed kind enough to April. Grand lived a few miles away, at the top of a hill with a view of the villages in the valley below. There

were long windows across the living room and at night you could see the lights twinkling below, like a Christmas card, every night. Grand had had the house built to her specifications after her husband had died of “the tremors.” Grand had a son, too, who died in a car accident when he was seventeen. Vivian’s older brother. Vivian never talked about it, not that April heard, except to say that her brother had always been Grand’s favorite. His name was Nick. At least Grand had had two children, April thought. When one died, there was one left. What about Vivian? She had only her. If April died she’d have nothing.

* * *

In Grand’s kitchen Vivian added skim milk, Scotch, and two handfuls of ice to the blender and pressed on. It was 11:30 a.m. and at Grand’s house, that was cocktail hour. Grand’s housekeeper Ruth had the day off. Vivian handed her mother the milky shake and opened the refrigerator door. April sat at the table with Grand, shivering a little in her shorts. Grand always kept the air conditioner on high. She wondered if she should help her mother make lunch, but Vivian was slamming dishes in an unsteady way that was a little scary.

“Ruth went to the grocery yesterday,” Grand said, from the kitchen table, pausing a minute for breath. She came every other day. “There’s a ham from last night.”

Grand had a clear plastic cannula attached to her nostrils by a plastic tube that ran behind her ears to an enormous, green oxygen tank at her side. April could hear her grandmother’s breathing: a wet, muffled rattle that rose and fell. The house was freezing but April could see a light sweat, like a glow, bead up on Grand’s bony forehead.

“You know what is funny, Mom?” Vivian asked, as she cut two thin slices of the black bread she had brought from the Armenian bakery, removed the crusts, and toasted them lightly. “If a milkman left his truck parked in the driveway all day, the neighbors might be starting to talk.”

Vivian spread the warm slices with a thin layer of sweet butter and placed the bread on a small plate of the Herend china April always loved.

“Use the Dansk,” Grand said.

“But Duane can leave his builder’s truck there, day after day after day after day,” Vivian said, ignoring her mother, “And no one suspects a thing.”

April watched as Vivian lay the ham, a tomato from the small garden the housekeeper tended, and a red onion on Grand’s enormous chopping block and sliced them all thinly. Grand always kept the sharpest knives. Vivian added a few capers and cut the sandwich in two.

“Mother, I’m thirty-five and I feel alive for the first time in my life.”

“Get me a light, will you, honey?” her grandmother asked April, a

True Blue pursed between her lips.

"Is that okay Mom, with the oxygen and all?" April asked.

"Do whatever you want," Vivian said, pulling out the saran wrap and slamming the drawer. "Apparently no one cares about the ham sandwich on its Herend plate I just spent ten minutes making."

"It's a goddamn myth anyway," Grand said, as April held the lighter to the tip of her cigarette. "The oxygen I mean. Don't worry, honey. It'll be okay"

"I guess Ruth can eat the sandwich when she gets back." Vivian said.

"Can I have it?" April asked.

Vivian looked at April, with disdain or rage or she didn't know what, but April was pretty sure the answer was no. April always felt so flabby and dirty and horsey sitting next to Grand in her peach chiffon robe and her peach mules on her blue-tinged, bony feet. Both Grand and Vivian had some sort of biological gene for glamour or fabulousness or even loveliness that had somehow passed over April altogether and hung in the atmosphere, waiting to express itself in some more-worthy vessel.

"We're leaving," Vivian said to April.

* * *

In the car April asked Vivian if she should have cleaned the kitchen.

"Let Ruth get it," Vivian answered. "Let my mother sit in a mess for a while."

April noticed, to her alarm, that Vivian was crying.

"I'm going away tonight," Vivian said. "I was going to leave you with Grand, but I just couldn't."

"Why would you leave me with Grand?" April asked, her chin quivering, "Why would you leave me there? What about the horses?" Who was going to be home with her now?

Vivian lit a Virginia Slim and inhaled deeply.

"Have you ever experienced passion, April?" her mother asked. "With another person, or even with yourself?"

April looked out the window and felt her tears coming faster now.

"Because that's what I want for you. That's my goal for you, and that should be your dream. To be touched. To be touched like I am touched. To know desire and to know how it grows and is sated and grows again."

"Mom," April pleaded, her throat clogged with tears.

"Grand never told me that. I never knew any of this when I married your father. But now I do. And I'm telling you this now so you won't waste half your life like I wasted mine. I'm telling you this as my gift to you. So you won't be alone."

* * *

But April was alone. Her mother was gone and her father was in England with Milton, moving from Hell to Eden to a fallen world. There was no one for her now, not even Grand. It was too scary in the creaking house, so April spent the afternoon at the barn working Lady, grooming the ponies, mucking the stalls and sweeping the tack room. She threw hay into each stall and listened to the quiet, slow chewing as her heart beat faster and the tears came down her cheeks like a river. Could she even call her father now? Would he be asleep? Or in class? She couldn't remember if England was six hours ahead or behind. Was Vivian gone for good? Would her father come home? Probably not, she thought, not with his apartment and so much more of *Paradise Lost* to read. Milton was blind when he wrote his masterpiece, her father had written on a postcard, it poured out of him and he dictated it verbatim to his daughters, who also devoted their lives to making his dream come true.

When it was finally dark, April called Mark and met him by the brook, just as he had asked. And there Mark lay on top of her and pushed her hips into the ground beneath her, pushed hard until it felt that she was almost touching the earth's core, the center of the world, as the fireflies flickered green and yellow and red above them and the crickets sawed away, and for once, for the one shattering minute of shocking, searing pain, for that one endless minute, April did not feel alone in the world.

But Mark left. His brother would kill him if he didn't show up for his job at 7:00 a.m., he told her. He had to go. April was quiet. Did she feel good to him? Did she look beautiful? She had seen this moment before in movies and on TV, and she wanted Mark to say some of the things she had heard the actors say to each other, but he seemed in a rush, although there were hours left before dawn. He was silent as she watched him, pulling on his pants and walking off up the hill to the road.

Then, once she couldn't see him anymore, April waded into the deepest part of brook and floated there in the dark, suspended in the center, imaging the leeches swimming towards her— kissing her skin in all the secret places, attaching their sweet and miraculous anticoagulant lips and tasting her blood, sharing it, getting strong from what flowed from her heart. If only she could have stayed suspended in that cold dark water forever, knowing that for the first time her own body had been touched with desire, knowing that, like Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, now the world was all before her.

All These People, Over All These Years

Craig Ledoux

My father calls me at 2 AM and tells me how he'll kill me. This time it's impressive: a Rube Goldberg machine that throws knives and spits in my mouth and injects me with venom and sucks the venom out with silicon lips so I can be brought back from the brink and ultimately flattened by an electrified hammer. "I'd like to see you come back from that," he tells me.

I tell everyone I know about the phone calls: the ladies on my bus, the village pastor, friends and co-workers, a feral dog I saw once and never again. I especially tell my wife, who I've known since she was someone else. At first she didn't believe me, but once she started spending the night, the phone's pathetic warble, the low, steady bursts of sound from across the bed, my muffled, "Yes Dad, goodnights," left her horrified.

"Toddy," she'd say. "This isn't normal. It's scary. You need to tell him to stop." I'd laugh. I'd tell her, "That's like saying to an earthquake, *Um, hi, thanks a bunch but we're actually in the middle of a fairly life-changing game of Jenga here.*" After a while, she'd start sleeping in other rooms. She'd say, "You can have your creepy little phone calls, but I don't know how much longer I'll be around." Which is basically the thing my Dad likes me to consider regarding me and my time on this Earth.

I had to get creative. I cajoled my wife back to bed by being more attentive, rubbing her back, making smoochy faces at her cat, finding a use for the ancient jar of almond paste jammed into the back of the cupboard. We'd make love and drink cocktails and fall into a delirious sleep—her because of the flunitrazepam I'd slipped into her drink and me because I'd won.

But victory, with its characteristic impermanence, began to fade into a wisp of memory as my wife-who-was-someone-else-first began to develop a tolerance for the drug. Each time I upped her dose I succumbed to a fit of nervous shaking. My web searches had turned up the possibility of prolonged sedation, of impaired balance and speech. How many days could she wake up late for work, miss it entirely, take small stumbles or slur her words before I, eminently guilty and a terrible liar, would have to throw myself at her feet and confess, demolishing

one of the few good things I have going.

And none of this fear touched the nights she wouldn't have a cocktail after we'd oinked—yes, we had pet names for sex, though none for each other—or even some herbal tea or water or the warm glass of milk I offered only when I was truly desperate. On those nights I'd spoon my wife until the rhythmic sounds of her body at rest unbound me. At that very moment, I'd curl into a fetal position and clutch the phone to my chest, shaking from elbow to arm as I waited for the first ring, hoping its world-ending sound, followed by a quick beep and my own meek hello, wouldn't disturb my bedmate's sleep.

Of course there were nights when she'd wake and see me with the phone to my ear, and I'd lie, claiming this or that: wrong number, when the call was short. Tech support from Delhi—which was more plausible—when the call was long. Months earlier, “Brad” from the call center in “Connecticut” had turned out to be Sanjit, a charismatic Indian teenager unmasked by a hopeless grasp of idioms. The three of us became fast friends, and he'd call at all hours with a new expression worth trying out. At first, his goal was to come to the US on a visa, and he hoped we'd write him a letter of support. But he soon stumbled onto a scam so genius he was able to move his mother, fiancée, and three sisters into a four-bedroom apartment in a better part of town. The deal was so lucrative, he told us, that he might never leave home. It had something to do with cold storage for damaged or otherwise sickly cats. Thick-legged Montanans between forty and fifty-seven formed his favorite demographic.

The problem with Sanjit was, the more successful he became the less frequently he called. So when my 2 AM call would wake my wife, and I would whisper, “It's Sanjit, shh darling, go back to bed,” she would jealously snatch at the phone and I'd have to pretend the line was dropped, that his fiancée was calling, or it was really only me he'd wanted to speak to. The last excuse drove a wedge between us and poor, unknowing Sanjit. It got to the point where I couldn't mention his name. “If he won't speak to me,” my wife—who-was-someone-else-first would say, “you can shut up too.”

In the meantime, my father would call about rolling me downhill in a barrel of broken glass—from a bar fight down in Dedmond, he'd say. Or it would be a jackhammer crucifixion or an explosive cigar or just a good old-fashioned flaying. He'd talk about irradiated caltrops and deadly allergies and robotic bees. He'd talk about jet engines and falling anvils and modern adaptations of monsters from the silver screen.

And every night I grew more furtive, like a cheating husband learning the ropes. I tried a Bluetooth speaker, claimed loose bowels, went for late-night runs. The more I hid from her the more my wife loved me. We'd go to movies and make love and we stopped drinking cocktails al-

together because we were always too tired and happy and falling asleep in each other's arms.

Except at ten of two I'd rise from bed and peel off each loving appendage. I'd sit in the dark and listen to my father talk about the 'coon barrels in the Midwest, which everybody had and, "Hey, get a big enough barrel, could fit you in there too, like a damned 'coon with your sad eyes and little kicks and last little bubbling gurgles."

And then one night, while my wife was away at a conference in another town, 2 AM came and went, and my sense of relief, my elation at a roadblock lifted, turned to cold fear. What could have happened to my father, the man so punctual the local watchmaker called him for the time? (His claim. Apocryphal?) As each quarter hour was overtaken by the next, I became lost in a single moment, trying to remember the day my father rescued me from the parents with whom I'd spent my first years on Earth. He was thin at the time, with a sharp nose, long, goofy mustache and a sleek leather jacket that was red or red-brown with white piping. I'd been content, a little chubby thing with ice cream dripping down my face. "They weren't bad," my father would tell me, "but they would have ruined you. Anyone could tell." This was a tale older than any other. Before the phone calls even. Once, when I asked how he'd gotten me away from them, my father frowned, and with the most absolute, sad sincerity, he said, "At a certain point, they just stopped being your parents."

At precisely 3 AM, when I've given up and started drifting to sleep, the phone startles me awake with a familiar shout. "You're late," I say, pressing talk after the third ring. "And you're wrong," says the voice, so sure of itself that I've never stopped believing it, long after other children stopped seeing their parents as gods. "If you say I'm wrong I'm wrong," I say, waiting for the reason, knowing that it, like the calls, will always come. Now he sighs, which is secret language for *Have I taught you nothing?* "Spring forward, fall back," he says, almost dolefully. "You forgot to change your clock."

Tonight there's no ceremonial knife, no poisoned lamb's blood or lead pipe in the study, or jihadist bomb, or bludgeoning fist. After this first interaction there is a long silence, and my eyelids droop as I breathe slower, deeper, let my head sink farther down the pillow.

"Do you know why I do this?" he asks me, the words prodding me awake. "Why I make these calls?"

I never have, but it is not a boy's place to question his father.

"It started with your parents," he says, "Your real ones. I wasn't sure until I saw you, but when I saw you I knew. One day, when you find your own son, when you save him from those who don't know any better, you'll know too. And then you and all your brothers will find a second son, and a third, and you'll build your own family, the kind that matters,

and you'll call your sons at one and two and three at the morning, and make sure they know how many ways a person can die, because they need to be ready for it, for death, as much as and even more so than life. And sometimes you'll doubt yourself. It's good to question your driving force. It makes you stronger. But in those moments you'll near come to tears, and you'll think, *All these people, over all these years*, and you'll wonder if it's worth it. But then you'll remember all your sons, the ones you've earned through years of toil, and you'll think about legacy, what you've put on God's-green, and you'll be proud of your efforts and the turmoil will subside and Heaven's doors will open and the angels will come out like winged pillows and carry you off to sleep.'

"I love you Dad," I tell him, an admission followed by another long silence.

"Love is for other people," he tells me, and I sit in the dark, up against the head of the bed, the mouthpiece over my shoulder like a newborn child. I wait until the next hour comes and the dial tone fills the room with a low hum, or maybe this is just how I process silence. I sit there like that until there's no way my father is still listening, except maybe he loves me and he's waiting this same way, ready for words never spoken. I sit with that mouthpiece over my shoulder and think of my wife, who is coming home tomorrow, and the children we'll have through no fault of our own. I wonder if I'll see the same special light my father saw in me. And I wonder what I'll do when my dad stops calling—when the hour is right but the silence is cut by nothing and no one, and I fall asleep knowing the phone will never ring again. Not in that way. I wonder what will happen when my father dies, as all men die, and what that will mean for me and my brothers, who I've never met. And I wonder what will happen when a meteor hits the Earth and no one is there to say it's coming for me. That I'll be tied to no train tracks or feel no ancient revolver pressed coolly against my temple. And I wonder whether I'll die at all, if some medical genius will come around and replace my organs and find a way to stop the rot of the brain. I wonder until the crush of sleep begins muffling higher thought and the progress and regression of breath becomes everything and all. Love might be for other people, but what happens when we no longer recognize ourselves? When we become other as the world around us stays the same? So *what if love is meant for other people?* I project at the dark room around me. We take what we want from this life, just like Dad always told me.

"Even so," I say, finally, and hang up the phone.

Smile

Matt Pelkey

I got tired of throwing beer cans at rats so I told Tommy I'd move us out of the coach house. But he had \$20,000 worth of furniture and said he didn't want it getting banged up in a U-Haul. He said the lady at the jibarito place always gave him free soup. He wanted to stay on the block and I said I'd find us a storefront and give Doodlebug fifty bucks to lend a hand. Tommy shrugged his shoulders, put on Earth, Wind & Fire, and opened a Modelo.

I sell bikes and drugs but I want to stop selling drugs. Tommy sells bikes but mainly furniture. Furniture is good because a nice mid-century something or other can go for a couple months' worth of rent. So Tommy wakes up early and gets first dibs at the estate sales. I'd do it too but I don't want to step on his toes.

For as much as he pisses me off, Tommy's been hustling a lot longer than me and he knows what he's doing. But the lack of ambition. He's literally sitting on furniture, waiting for it to sell, and I tell him that in the meantime he could make a buck or two on bikes but he says bikes don't make any money. True, if you only build one of them a week, which is what he does, tops. He'll start working on something in the morning but then Doodlebug'll stumble in and nod off on the recliner. Sam'll come in with her crew of girls who like girls. Tommy'll put on a record that he swears isn't smooth jazz and that'll be that for the day.

Our shop. We call it that but really Tommy and I live in an alley and our showroom is just a garage with oil stains on the floor. The landlord calls it a coach house but most coach houses have things like basic kitchen equipment and a toilet that won't tip over if you sit on it funny. It's two floors and we work on the first and live on the second. Tommy stores his furniture up there too. He's maybe six inches taller than me and has chairs stacked higher than his head.

I live with Tommy because I figured if we joined forces we could get a business up and running. He was having trouble paying rent and I wanted to stop doing things with the potential for jail time. When I moved in he built a room for himself with some drywall. I threw my sheets on the biggest couch I could find and that's where I sleep.

In the garage I've got all my tools on a plywood rack. I keep spare parts in plastic bins and separate the French from the Italian and the Italian from the Chinese. In the middle of the room is what Tommy calls

the lounge and it takes up more space than I'd like but he says I'm not allowed to touch it. Two recliners. A corner couch that's big enough to fit six or seven people who don't mind sitting close to each other. There's a coffee table to kick your feet on and a vintage refrigerator that shuts down when the temperature gets above 85. Like now.

August is one of the best months to sell bikes because all the college kids are back and the weather's nice. The showroom is up front by the big rolling door and currently I've got two Peugeots, a Raleigh, and a Miyata up there. Tommy's got a nice single-speed with chrome fenders and white tires. I've got three cruisers to work on this afternoon.

The sun is shining and the light reaches just to the edge of the couch. We've got a few people here because everyone who went away for the summer is trickling back into the city. Sam was growing carrots in Tennessee but now she's doing some seasonal maintenance on her Raleigh. She's got the ball bearings from her bottom bracket on a paper towel. Her base-level entourage of Cathy and Erin are sitting on the couch beside her drinking beers. Doodlebug's here but he's always here. He's been sleeping on one of the recliners since ten or so.

Tommy was out getting lunch at the jibarito place but now he's upstairs getting a lap dance from Bryn. Bryn lives in the apartment building a few doors down and the whole thing between them is weird. She was in school doing an advanced degree in art which is confusing to me because one degree in art seems like a bad idea never mind two. But then she finished and not surprisingly couldn't find work. She was unemployed for all of two weeks before her crazy little brain made her freak the fuck out. She started showing up at like six in the morning and Tommy had the garage door open because he's used to getting up for the estate sales. I don't know when it happened, but at some point she offered to do some erotic dancing for him if he paid her rent. He said yes and I'm pretty sure he was joking but she was serious. So now she's doing God knows what and he's paying her rent and I have no idea how he's doing that because he can hardly pay his own. She's maybe ten years older than me and still dresses like a freak. Google her and know what you'll see? A video of her pissing on an ant farm in front of the School of the Art Institute.

The cruiser's done and I line it up in the showroom. Behind me I hear the stairs creak and down come Tommy and Bryn from the second floor. Tommy's hair is all messed up and he makes no effort to fix it as he flips through his milk crates and chooses a record that once again sounds like smooth jazz. The speakers are up because the volume is still high from last night. He lowers it so it's not too loud to talk over.

"We want to put in a stripper pole," Bryn says, taking a seat on the couch next to Cathy and Erin.

"I can't even fit a bed up there," I say.

“But it’s just a pole.”

“Plus a stripper,” I say.

Recently she shaved the sides of her head so the hair is just long on top. Her face is angular and scary and the look she gives me is even scarier.

“There’s room,” Tommy says, taking a seat on the couch next to her.

“I can work with what I’ve got,” Bryn says.

Tommy’s wearing a camouflage tank-top and nylon short-shorts because one of his friends is a DJ who gets freebies from clothing companies. It means everything he wears is fashionable but none of them match.

“We can make it a business venture,” Bryn says. “Bikes on the first floor. Tits on the second.”

“But we’re moving,” I say.

“We’re not going to move-move,” Tommy says.

I have no idea if Bryn’s serious. She’ll say something and it seems whimsical at first but then she’ll actually do it, which is fine except when it means she’s here all the time getting naked on my couch. Either way, I definitely want to move and I’ve been looking for a place on the block but there aren’t many options. The social services building eats up like half the space between California and Taylor. Next to that is the jibarito place where Tommy gets an entire day’s worth of calories in a single meal. The apartment complex where Bryn lives and the liquor store take up everything else.

I don’t see demand dropping for social services, or cheap rent, or jibaritos, so the only place we could go is the oddball tennis shop. I have no idea how it’s staying in business because I’m not saying that nobody in the neighborhood plays tennis, but let’s just say that when I come across the tennis station on TV, I don’t see many Puerto Ricans or hipsters in the stands. Plus there’s the guy who owns it. He must sleep in there because I see him in the alley long before it opens. He looks five years out of shape and he’ll be smoking a cigarette, scratching at the morning wood that’s making a tent of his sweatpants. I guess he’s got a camp going because I’ve seen him walking to the park with four or five kids in tow, but I have no idea why parents trust him with their children.

I lube the chain of the cruiser and back up to check it out. It looks brand new but the thing with vintage bikes is that most people who buy them think they’re thrift shopping. They approach it like they’re buying shirts from the Salvation Army, but T-shirts from the thrift store have pit stains and these bikes look like they came straight off a manufacturing line. The frames are all intact and I replace everything that shows a little bit of wear. Still, I have to keep the price down or nobody buys them.

I take the cruiser out to the alley, find a spot with sun and flip down

the kickstand. Most people who are looking for vintage bikes don't know enough to tell the difference between a two hundred dollar pair of pedals and something I pulled from the bottom of the spare parts bin. But they do know what looks professional and what doesn't, so when I post stuff to sell, I make sure the pictures are good.

The seat on the bike is padded and the springs are nice and shiny so I get up close for a shot of them. Then I back up until the whole thing fits into the frame and take the picture. I wheel the bike back toward the shop but as I'm crossing the alley a rat runs in front of me and then I see the guy from the tennis shop. He's smoking a cigarette and he's out of his sweatpants and into a t-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. His shop is two doors down and I shout a hey at him and he waves back.

"You still doing that camp?" I ask.

"Finished a week ago."

We're close enough that we can talk if we just raise our voices.

"Plans for the winter?"

"Selling tear-away pants," he says, holding his cigarette at his side.

"Give the people what they want."

He nods and I line up the cruiser in the showroom. I stomp to scare off another rat and think about the tennis guy. He's had his shop for maybe six months and I can't imagine he's going to make it past January.

I hear a soft burble and when I turn around Tommy's going at his bong with a hand torch. I've been keeping us pretty well-stocked with BHO and he drops in the oil and it poofs into smoke. My policy is no beer until after I'm done for the day, but if I don't smoke, people start pissing me off. Like Bryn. Like Tommy. Like everybody.

Tommy takes his hit and passes it to me. I kneel on the ground in front of the coffee table. The bowl is still hot but I use the hand torch to heat it up some more. I scrape off a dollop of oil and drop it in. It vaporizes as I pull.

"So the stripper pole," Bryn says.

I'm holding the hit but I have to blow it out to say something because she's already bugging me.

"We're moving," I say.

Doodlebug wakes up and smacks his mouth.

"What do you think Doodlebug?" Bryn asks.

"What?" he asks.

"Or this is even better," she says, pulling the tie from her hair. "We do a nudie calendar. Wrenches. Babes. Tommy in short-shorts."

She twists her hair to form a doorknob-looking thing and ties it so it stands straight up.

"Do you want to get naked, Sam?" she asks.

Sam's dropping her ball bearings back into her bottom bracket and doesn't turn around.

“Not really,” she says.

“We’ll keep it tasteful,” Bryn say. “The little one can use the proceeds to help with the move.”

Sam shrugs and Bryn turns to me.

“Sound good, little one? Your dream comes true and I take twenty percent.”

The weed hits me which is good. I get up and go back to the line of cruisers and tell her ten and we’ve got a deal.

* * *

That afternoon Tommy and I drive to the suburbs to pick up a Raleigh some woman is selling for a quarter of what she could get for it. She’s got a dresser that Tommy is interested in and we leave Sam in charge because no one’s responsible but she’s more responsible than everybody else.

It’s late in the day and traffic is terrible. Tommy’s pickup doesn’t have AC and his driving makes me crazy. He stays in the middle lanes and drives slow as shit so we get tailgated all the time. It takes over an hour but we get there and the house has nice shutters and a porch on the side. There’s a birdfeeder hanging from a branch of a tree. On the lawn is a for-sale sign that we pass as we follow the path to the door.

I’ve got enough cash to buy the bike plus a little extra in case I see something else I like. I try not to carry more than I absolutely need because I know how Tommy works. We’ll go to a swap-meet and he’ll see something that he swears he can make a ton of money on. He’ll ask me how much I’ve got, tell me we can split the profit if I spot him. Sometimes it works but other times he’ll sit on it forever, and then all I’ve managed to do is add one more thing to trip over at night when I have to piss.

I start thinking about that and then my forehead hurts because Tommy drives me fucking crazy. He tips the shit out of the lady at the jibarito place. He spots Doodlebug for his 22s and now he’s paying Bryn’s rent. If he reaches into his pocket there’s usually a twenty there, but man, he’s living in a coach house in a rat-infested alley. Also he owes me about eight hundred and counting.

I take a deep breath and Tommy rings the doorbell and a woman answers it. She shows us to the basement and it’s full of shit and you can tell she’s just trying to get rid of it. Maybe she’s retiring. Maybe she’s moving to Florida. That’d be nice, but she’s not quite that old. You can see her roots and her face tells you all you need to know.

She has everything laid out on the floor and Tommy heads for the dresser he was looking at. I walk around and there’s some hockey equipment and a couple trophies. She must have a kid, but the bike I’m looking at is too old to be his. A Raleigh like that was probably top-shelf shit

thirty years ago. The frame is too big for her and it's a Saturday and I'm wondering who used to ride it and why she's here alone.

She's asking fifty for the bike and I know that's a steal but I also know the only people who'd buy it are in the city and the suburbs might as well be in Alaska if you don't have a car. I'm inclined to argue her down because she's probably been trying to get rid of it for a while and I think about starting at \$25 but Tommy shouts from across the room.

"How much for this?" he asks.

"A hundred," the woman says, standing at the bottom of the stairs, still holding the handrail.

"It's beautiful," he says.

I don't know a lot about furniture, but I know a hundred is steep, and Tommy sure as shit knows that but he gets out his wallet anyway. He hands her five twenties and I give her the full fifty for the bike. We take the drawers out of the dresser, carry it up the stairs and lay it flat in the bed of Tommy's pickup. I go back for the bike and carry it up on my shoulder.

* * *

On the way back to the city Tommy's phone blows up. I can hear it tinkling in his pocket and he hands it to me and asks who's texting.

"Sam says Bryn's not wearing pants," I say. "She says she's harassing cars and the tennis guy is involved and he's scared."

Tommy's pickup is older than most safety standards and our options for music are either pop radio or the tapes Tommy's been picking up at estate sales. Jermaine Jackson is playing but he ejects it and asks for Samantha Sang.

"Have you been inside the tennis shop?" I ask, finding the tape in the glove compartment.

"Used to be a barber shop," he says.

"It's big, right?"

"It's a nice space."

"The tennis guy isn't going to make it is he?"

"I'd say not."

We're on the highway and Tommy's in the middle-left lane. A minivan passes us and a mop-headed teenager makes a face at us through the window. Another car is riding our bumper and Tommy looks in his rearview but only to check on the dresser and the bike.

"We'd have tons of space if we moved there," I say and pop in the tape.

"The windows are huge."

"We could get some foot traffic."

"I don't want people stopping in all the time."

Tommy turns up the volume but I continue.

"Doodlebug and everyone come in all the time anyway," I say.

“I mean customers.”

“But that’s the point of moving.”

“Bikes don’t make money.”

“They do if you build enough of them.”

“The markup isn’t high enough.”

Tommy taps the steering wheel to Emotion.

“We’ll do repairs too,” I say.

“The people who ride bikes don’t have money to repair them.”

I know Tommy’s got his own way of doing things, but I don’t understand why he doesn’t just try. The key is to keep moving in the right direction and basically that’s all I’ve got going for me. I’ve been selling pot and whatever else has come my way since the seventh grade. I know I’m not a shining model of American youth but I’ll tell you this, I never considered myself bad. When I was stealing from Target I wasn’t stealing cars. When I was smoking pot I wasn’t shooting dope. Seriously. I didn’t go to college but I also didn’t go to jail. There were always worse things that I could be doing and it’s taking me a little while to get to where I want to be but I’m getting there and I will arrive.

Tommy’s phone tinkles again and I look at the text.

“Sam says Bryn’s not wearing a shirt.”

Once more and I read the text.

“Them nips are gonna take an eye out.”

“Is that what she said?”

“Verbatim,” I say.

“They’re like pinkie fingers,” Tommy says.

“Wouldn’t know.”

“Not the entire finger,” he says. “Just the last knuckle down.”

The phone goes off again.

“Sam says we should get home,” I say as the texts keep popping up.

“Bryn’s bringing tons of people over,” I say. “There’s a Facebook invite.”

I double check on my phone and indeed there’s an invitation from Bryn. The invite list is 70-some people long and I scroll through it and don’t know more than a handful of them.

“Gritty Titties,” I read. “Support the alley boys and get dirty. Defile yourself. Show some skin. NOW!”

“That’s nice,” Tommy says.

“I’ve got illegal things upstairs,” I say.

“Sam’s there.”

I don’t click on the invite but I know I’m going anyway. Tommy’s phone tinkles again and I see it’s from a different number.

“Bryn wants a thirty-pack.” I say.

The phone tinkles in my hand and I read it to him.

“And some glitter for my boobies,” I say. “Verbatim.”

When we get back there are maybe 20-some people in the alley and a bunch more in the garage. Sam is sitting on the staircase because she knows. Tommy's carrying the thirty-pack beside me and we push through the crowd and find Bryn in the work corner. She's got two big lamps and a camera that looks professional. She's directing Cathy and Erin who are sitting on the tandem bike that Tommy bought for the fuck of it when he saw it at a garage sale. They're wearing jean shorts and no shirts. Cathy is straddling the front seat. Erin is leaning against the back one. They both have suspenders and are busy arranging the straps over their nipples.

"I gotta see at least one!" Bryn shouts.

She's wearing a shirt but only underwear on the bottom. She takes the pictures and calls over some short burly guy who's wearing nothing but blue jeans and carrying a grease rag.

"I like it," Bryn says, "but I need more skin."

He poses in front of the tool rack and tugs at the waist of his pants.

"Keep going until you hit bush," Bryn says.

I look around the room and see some of the pedicab guys who come in when they need parts. Doodlebug brought a couple of the old guys who hang out by the liquor store. There are some girls who look like they probably got an invite from Cathy or Erin plus an assortment of art school kids who stop by every so often because Tommy knows about all the warehouse parties.

Bryn's got everyone lined up for photos and one guy is in briefs. A girl is wearing nothing but underwear with ruffles on the butt. Tommy and I are back in the workspace and he sets the thirty-pack on the floor and rips it open. He hands me a beer and gives one to Bryn and I find a place to stand next to the staircase. I open my beer and channel Tommy because the party is happening and there's nothing I can do about it.

I take a sip and when I bring the can down I see the tennis guy peering in from the alley. I wave at him and he waves back. I flag him over and he makes his way through the crowd.

"Hope we're not scaring away your customers," I say.

"Maybe all the people will take care of the rats," he says.

I get a beer from the thirty-pack and hand it to him.

"Next purchase I make for the store is a BB gun," I say.

Up close I can get a better look at him. His face is red and already sweat is beading above his lip. The collar of his t-shirt is doing a bad job of holding back his chest hair.

"So why tennis?" I ask.

"Why bikes?"

"It's what I know."

"Me too."

He takes a sip from his beer and I see that his arms are strong.

“How long’ve you been playing?” I ask.

“Started at five.”

“So you’re a pro.”

“Topped out at 227th internationally.”

“Is that good?”

“It means I was good but a lot of people were much better.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see Tommy taking off his shirt.

“Doodlebug take your shirt off,” Bryn shouts.

Doodlebug does and for being a 40-some-year-old alcoholic, he’s got some abs. Not big, but countable, and I wonder if it’s muscle definition or if he’s just hungry.

“Choose your bikes, boys,” Bryn says.

Doodlebug goes for one of the cruisers I finished earlier. Tommy gets the Miyata that I built and they arrange them so it looks like they’re going to crash into each other.

“Let’s see that D, Tommy,” she says.

Tommy puts a foot on a pedal and adjusts the bottom of his shorts. Apparently he’s not wearing underwear and Bryn takes the pictures.

“We’ve got twelve months to cover here,” she says. “Who’s going next?”

She looks around the room and lands on me.

“How about you, sweet cheeks,” she says.

I shake my head but Tommy throws a pair of cut-offs at me. I’m thinking of an excuse when Bryn’s face changes.

“Tennis guy!” she shouts.

She walks over and grabs him by the arm. She leads him to the lights and hands him a Peugeot.

“OK,” she says, backing up to look him over. “It’s really easy. Do you have a headband?”

“Back at the shop.”

“We’ll work around it.”

She hands him a wrench and tells him to take his shirt off and he shakes his head. She tries again, coaxes him with her hand on his arm until he pulls the shirt over his head.

“I’m going to find my spray bottle and give you a nice glow,” she says.

She searches the floor and when she finds the squirt bottle she sprays his chest and the water collects on his hair. His stomach is hanging over the waist of his khakis and it’s bulbous but looks firm, like it would sound like a watermelon if he smacked it.

“You look great,” she says. “Now give me some sugar.”

Tennis guy shakes his head but Bryn keeps going.

“Come on,” she says. “You look fantastic, give me a pucker.”

He's standing in front of the bike and I've never seen someone so uncomfortable. The water on his chest makes it look like someone spilled a drink on him. His hair is parted in a butt cut and he brushes it from his eyes.

"Give me something, honey," she says. "Let me see some dimples."

He does his best but he might as well be trying to lift a boulder with his lips. I look at him and swear that by spring I'll be out of the alley. That in 15 years I'll have so many bike shops I'll be pushing paper from Florida instead of turning wrenches.

Bryn takes his picture and turns to me.

"You're up, little one," she says.

I can't let the tennis guy show me up so I change into the cutoffs. I glance at the bikes in the showroom but decide I want the one Tommy and I just picked up. I push my way through the crowd and grab it from the bed of the pickup. Everybody clears some space and I set it up in front of the lights and kick my leg over. I squeeze the handlebars so my skinny arms look bigger than they are.

Bryn holds her camera to her eye. Tommy and Doodlebug watch from behind her. They still have their shirts off and they're drinking beers. The tennis guy is looking at me from the staircase.

"Ready?" Bryn asks.

I nod and wait for her to take the picture. She looks at me and I look at her. I see her lips turn up and she stays like that and I realize it's not a grin but something else. A smirk. A nasty fucking sinister smirk.

She keeps her finger on the button but doesn't press it.

"Ok," she says. "Smile, baby doll."

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