

FOR PAGE & SCREEN MAGAZINE

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“In Her Garden Nothing is Forbidden”
by Rachel Wojnar

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Ring Silver to Paper

A stageplay

by Niamh Carmichael

SETTING

The church in their town. The stage is split into two sections; one quarter section on the left and three quarters on the right. The left shows the main part of the church; the big pipe organ on the back wall and rows of pews facing it. An old pastor waits under the arch. The right shows the room that Amelia and Bea will be in—the main setting, which is a storage room. There are a few chairs and some boxes of books and a small organ on the right side, the back of it to the right wall. There is a door to the right of the organ on the right wall. On the back wall is a window, through which the audience can see the upper part of the big organ, including the cross, showing that the room they're in is the upstairs of the church, looking down over the main room where the wedding is taking place. The main hall of the church ends with the tall pipes of the big organ stretching up to the ceiling with a big wooden cross on the wall at the top of the pipes.

TIME

Over the course of a year and a half or so, present-day.

SCENE 1

AT RISE:

Pink and purple and white flowers are strewn along the pews and draped over the arch at the end (in front of the organ).

AMELIA sits on the bench of the organ with her back to it, watching everyone through the window and twisting her fingers nervously. She wears a nice purple dress.

The door creaks open.

BEA

(Softly)

Hi, Amelia. I thought I'd find you up here.

Amelia jumps and turns around.

AMELIA

Bea, you scared me. Hi.

BEA

Sorry. Gee, it's great to see you... How's Juilliard? Living your big fancy musician life?

AMELIA

(Chuckles)

Yeah, sure. It's fine. You?

BEA

(Shrugs)

Oh, you know. It's Smithfield. Nothing much ever happens, does it? I think the biggest thing here in our whole lives was you leaving.

AMELIA

I don't know. That time the grocery store ran out of milk was pretty jarring.

BEA

Ah, right. Forgot about that.

AMELIA

Well, are you nurturing the young minds of Smithfield?

BEA

Nah, not yet. Elementary school doesn't have any new positions—I asked, you know.

Sits next to Amelia on the bench. She presses a key on the organ and an out-of-tune note warbles flatly. She winces.

AMELIA

I wouldn't have much hope in this thing.

(She nods towards the organ.)

I don't think it's been played for a few years. Probably since we were last in here.

Amelia turns around, hovers her hands over the keys, and attempts to start playing something, but the out-of-tune keys are too bad and she stops.

BEA nods in agreement.

BEA

I miss that. Hey, I wonder...

She stands and rummages through a box of old books. She pulls out a volume of hymns and flips it open halfway, then pulls out two pieces of paper that unfold to be paper rings.

AMELIA

Ha. We made those out of the program for the day.

(Then, playfully)

The rings for our very own Josephs.

BEA

But of course.

They sit for a couple seconds awkwardly, until music from the grand organ begins playing. Everyone else in the main room of the church has stopped talking and taken their seats.

AMELIA

(Looks at Bea in alarm and whispers.)

Oopsies. Do you think we have time to get back down there?

Bea begins to whisper back but is interrupted as the lights turn on on the left quarter section of the stage and the audience can briefly see a woman in a long white dress with a long train walking towards the back wall with the arch, pastor, and pipe organ.

The lights then shut off and turn back to Amelia and Bea, who stands and moves to the other side of the window. She looks down at the wedding.

BEA

(Admirably)

Beck sure is pretty, isn't she? She and Tommy look great together.

Goes to stand on the other side of the window, looking down. She nods.

AMELIA

Did she cut her hair? I never thought I'd see the day.

BEA

(Still in hushed tones, but excitedly)

Oh, yes. It was a bet, actually. Dave and Lana got engaged before she and Tommy, so she had to cut all her pretty pretty hair off to her chin.

AMELIA

Tommy and his bets. One time in fourth grade he ate a potato chip off the basketball court because he lost a bet. Nice to see things don't change.

BEA

I remember that.

AMELIA

See, you have to update me on these things. I feel very behind on everything.

BEA

Well, you've been a little MIA for a couple years.

Bea leaves the window and sits down, leaning back against the left wall.

BEA

God, that sounds so bitter. I don't mean it like that. If I were you, I probably wouldn't talk to us all that much anymore either. I mean, you always wanted to live that big fancy life and you have it. I'm proud of you, you know?

A coughing fit from the church (an offstage voice) interrupts them. Amelia looks back out the window in alarm.

BEA

Yeah, that's Pastor Todd. He's been very phlegmy lately, one of those month-long colds you just can't shake off.

AMELIA

Poor Beck. Getting coughed all over on her wedding.

Amelia leaves the window and sits back down on the organ bench, facing Bea.

AMELIA

I never meant to be MIA. It was just crazy busy.

BEA

(Sincerely)

No, I'm sure.

AMELIA

But, really, what's been happening? Just give me the headlines.

BEA

Besides Beck and Tommy getting married? Um... Wiggins retired, Jackson Campbell took over his dad's hardware store, Jennah's going to have a baby soon.

AMELIA

A baby? That's crazy. I didn't even know she was married. Well, I guess, is she?

BEA

Yeah, she just didn't want a high school reunion type thing like Beck. You know, our entire senior class was invited? And almost everyone came.

AMELIA

I've been sitting up here watching everyone. It's very nostalgic. God, this is weird.

(Thoughtful pause)

Is it, like... sacrilegious to say God in a church?

Amelia peeks out the window at the cross above the organ.

PASTOR TODD

(Offstage)

...You may now speak your vows.

BEA

I don't know if it's encouraged, but you haven't been smited yet. Smitted? Smote?

AMELIA

Smitted, I think. Jennah's really pregnant? I mean, it's crazy. I still feel eighteen years old. That's so weird.

Amelia folds her arms over her stomach. She's turning the paper ring over between the fingers in her right hand.

AMELIA

(Still in awe)

Wow. A baby.

(She looks at Bea in concern).

Are you good?

Bea crosses her arms tighter over herself.

BEA

I don't know, is it really that weird?

AMELIA

Maybe just to me. I don't think I'm going to have any for a while yet. What about you?

Bea's arms shift again. She looks up at Amelia and smiles a half smile.

AMELIA

...Oh! Bea, wow. Who's the guy?

(playfully, as she holds up her paper ring)

Is he your Joseph?

BEA

He's nice. He's a very nice man. We haven't been together all that long.

AMELIA

I hate to ask this...

She glances out the window again to the cross.

AMELIA

(Lowers her tone a bit)
Are you...you know. Keeping /
it?

BEA

/ Oh, don't ask me that. Don't. I
don't know. I can't think about
that.

AMELIA

(Wryly)

You might have to pretty soon.

Bea glares.

AMELIA

Sorry.

BECK

(Offstage, happily.)

I do.

AMELIA

It's the big moment. Took long enough.

BEA

(Laughing)

Shh, don't make fun. It's their wedding day!

AMELIA

Big deal. We could do that.

She kneels on the ground in front of Bea.

AMELIA

(Dramatically)

I do, I do! A hundred thousand million times, I do!

Amelia takes her paper ring and puts it on Bea's ring finger.

Bea puts her ring on Amelia's finger.

BEA

Now say you don't mean that. You're very happy for them.

AMELIA

I am very happy for them. I mean that.

Offstage, we hear cheers. The lights switch briefly to the quarter stage to see Beck and Tommy share a kiss, then switch back to Amelia and Bea.

PASTOR TODD

I now pronounce you man and wife.

Pastor Todd coughs.

Amelia looks at Bea's stomach. Bea shields it defensively with her hands.

BEA

I'm not growing an alien. Don't look at me like that.

AMELIA

Are you going to tell him?

BEA

Do you think I should?

AMELIA

This is the first time we've seen each other in five years and you're asking me to make such a huge decision for you?

AMELIA

There's no way.

BEA

(Reflectively, almost as if to herself)

I probably should tell him. Fred, by the way. That's his name.

Pause.

BEA

I envy you.

AMELIA

(Looks back at Bea)

Oh, don't. Really. Juillard...it isn't all it's cracked up to be.

There's a knock on the door and it creaks open again.

AMELIA'S MOTHER

Amy, there you've been. Bea, honey, great to see you. Listen, the reception is at a different location and we have to get there quick if we want seats. Your dad's getting to the car now.

AMELIA'S MOTHER beckons and ducks out of the room, closing the squeaky door behind her.

AMELIA

(Looks at Bea)

Are you going to the reception?

BEA

(Shakes her head)

No, I think I need to talk to Fred.

AMELIA

(Nods)

Well. Till next wedding, then.

(Hesitates, opens her mouth to say something else, but doesn't. She continues kindly, not in a foreboding way)

Good luck.

BEA

Till next wedding.

The lights fade out on the entire stage as Amelia walks out and Bea lingers in the room.

SCENE 2

Around a year later.

The stage is split the same way—but this time the left portion shows not a wedding but a christening. There is a big white basin and a banner over the pipe organ that says “ELLA AMY ANDERSON.” The banner can be seen through the window of the room on the right side as well.

The lights are set on the left side of the stage and we can see Amelia, wearing a yellow sundress. Bea enters.

BEA

(To Amelia.)

Hey, you came!

AMELIA

Yeah.

She draws Bea closer by touching her arm and ducking their heads together conspiratorially.

AMELIA

(In a hushed tone)

Hey, do you know who this is for?

BEA

Huh?

AMELIA

Yeah, because I don't. I didn't open my mail for a couple weeks, so I never saw the invite. I was just back in town to see my mom. Complete coincidence, really. It's great to see you, though. Do you know whose baby this is?

BEA

Uh...

FRED walks up holding a white-wrapped bundle. He gives Bea a peck on the cheek and hands it to her.

FRED

Can you take her for a couple minutes? I'm gonna take a smoke break.

BEA

(Quietly)

I wish you wouldn't.

FRED

Hon, my mom came in town for this. She's driving me nuts. I need to.

He walks away, pulling a cigarette out of his suit pocket.

Amelia looks at the bundle (ELLA AMY ANDERSON).

BEA

Amelia, meet Ella. Ella, this is Amelia, a very good friend of mine.

AMELIA

Hey, Ella.

(Touches Ella's little fist.)

So, you kept it! Her. Kept her.

BEA

Yes, I did. I'm surprised you didn't hear.

AMELIA

Ah, well. I deleted Facebook, and I haven't talked to my parents too much about Smithfield. I guess I've been a little MIA again.

BEA

(Shrugs it off)

Hey, it's fine. You wanna sneak upstairs before the ceremony?

The lights dim as they walk left off the stage. They come back on from the right side of the stage as Amelia and Bea come back onstage from that side through the door.

AMELIA

Ella's first misdemeanor. Already sneaking up here and she's only a few months old!

(Pause)

So, that was Fred.

BEA

That was Fred.

AMELIA

Your Joseph?

BEA

Maybe.

She sits on the organ bench and presses a key. She wiggles her finger, displaying her wedding ring.

BEA

My husband, at least.

The organ key warbles out off-tune.

AMELIA

Ella's lovely. What a pretty baby. She has your nose!

BEA

Let's hope it stays that way, too.

(Jokingly)

If you saw Fred's...

Amelia rummages in her bag.

AMELIA

(In a sing-songy tone)

I have an idea...

She pulls out a small silver flask and swings it between her fingers from side to side.

BEA

Can't.

(Gestures to Ella in her arms.)

They say you're not supposed to drink when you're breastfeeding.

They fall silent again.

AMELIA

Are you okay?

BEA

(Scoffs lightly)

What, because I can't drink?

AMELIA

No, that's not what I meant.

There's a pause.

BEA

(Looks up at Amelia)

How's New York? Your big fancy musician life?

(Pause again)

I really do envy you.

AMELIA

(Laughs)

Oh, my god. Don't.

BEA

No, I mean it. You're so...successful.

(Quickly)

I love Ella, of course. So so much. It's insane, really. I didn't know you could love something this much.

(Looks down at Ella then back at Amelia)

But I just feel...Jesus Christ, I'm so stuck. I'm never getting out.

AMELIA

I didn't get out. You want to know something?

She sits next to Bea on the bench, facing the other direction—facing the organ—and presses a couple keys.

AMELIA

I dropped out of Juilliard six months ago. Last year, when we were at the wedding? I was failing all my classes but one. Bea, I work at a Waffle House. You envy me? At least you have a family. I live in an empty apartment with a dead plant, and I can't remember the last time I had a conversation with someone besides, 'Welcome to Waffle House, may I take your order?' And it might be in New York, but that doesn't make it any less lonely. It seems like everyone around me, everyone I walk past on the street or stand next to on the subway, is doing something. They all have somewhere to be, someone to go see, something to get done. And where am I?

BEA

We're just at a couple of dead ends, aren't we?

*She stands to look out the window at the people down below,
reflecting on the little people in her little town.*

BEA

You're stuck in a city with too many people, and I'm stuck in a town with too few.

AMELIA

I can never come back. That's too embarrassing. But you could leave. You could.

BEA

Oh, Fred would never.

AMELIA

(Raises her eyebrows)
Well, they do say that 50% of /
marriages end in divorce anyway.

BEA

/ Don't even suggest that. He's
my husband.
*(Her voice wavers, like she's
trying to convince herself of her
words)*
Maybe not my Joseph, but...still.

AMELIA

*(Her tone is mostly joking, but she has a hint of harshness she usually
tries to keep out)*

When he's not on his smoke break, you mean.

(Then, at Bea's glare)

Sorry. Dropping it. Of course, we could always just stay up here for the rest of our lives. Eat the hymn books for sustenance and play the organ for entertainment. A content life, I think.

BEA

Ah, but then Ella would never be christened, would she?

Amelia puts her palms up sideways, shrugging.

AMELIA

Sacrifices must be made.

The door creaks open.

Fred leans into the room, not fully stepping inside.

FRED

They need the baby, it starts soon.

He leaves.

BEA

I don't think we're going to be able to stay up here for the ceremony this time.

AMELIA

No, maybe not.

BEA

Hey, you know college isn't for everyone. I mean, I never went. It's—

AMELIA

Thank you, Bea, but it's fine. Really. It's Ella's day! Let's focus on that.

(Peeks at her.)

She looks so peaceful right now. That is not going to last.

(To Ella)

It's going to be very cold and wet very soon. Just hang in there.

BEA

Lord, I hope she won't hate me for this later.

The lights go down again.

SCENE 3

It's a few months later.

The lights are on both sides of the stage, the left showing a long propped up wooden box draped in black, a photo of Pastor Todd, and a pink and white flower bouquet near the picture. The right side of the stage has Bea dressed in a black dress, sitting on the organ bench, facing towards the organ. Instead of her silver wedding ring, on the fourth finger of her left hand she wears the paper ring.

Bea hovers her fingers over the keys, then slowly and deliberately attempts to play "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." Presses a wrong key and restarts.

The door opens with a creak.

Amelia enters and sits next to Bea on the bench.

AMELIA

Well, you're much better than I remember you being.

BEA

Amelia! What are you doing here?

AMELIA

I'm here for Pastor Todd, of course. But...guess what!

BEA

What?

AMELIA

(Excited, but also a little apprehensive)

I might also be moving back. No more big fancy musician life, I think.

She scoots a little closer to the middle of the bench and begins playing “Twinkle Twinkle Little” Star for Bea. She doesn’t miss a key. After a couple seconds, when she finishes, she smiles at Bea.

AMELIA

You were very close.

BEA

No more New York?

AMELIA

I don’t think so. Is that embarrassing?

BEA

No. There’s, uh...there’s no more Fred, either.

She holds up her left hand, wagging her ringless finger.

AMELIA

(Suddenly taken aback)

He didn’t—die, / did he?

BEA

(Also taken aback)

/ No, no! Jeez. No, he moved to Minnesota. God.

BEA

(Sighs deeply, is calmer again when she speaks)

I didn’t want to go. I don’t think he wanted me to go. So, no more Fred.

AMELIA

(Playfully)

I’m not sure that Pastor Todd would approve of that. When we were seven he told me to save my “precious gift” for my husband and to never, ever lose the husband. It was very stern. He shook his finger and everything.

She mimics his movement, wiggling her index finger disapprovingly at Bea as she speaks. She scratches her head reflectively.

AMELIA

Though I didn't know what he meant at the time so I'm not sure how helpful it really was.

BEA

Well, then, I wonder what new Pastor Mark's stance on that is.

AMELIA

No more New York, no more Fred...No more Pastor Todd. And we thought we were at dead ends last time I was here.

BEA

No, no.

(Thinks for a second.)

No, I don't think it's like that. It's an end, but not a dead one.

Pause.

She looks out the window, down to the casket (which the audience can't see from the window angle).

BEA

Though—that might not be fully accurate either. It's like. You know how wildfires are actually a good thing? They clear out the undergrowth to allow for new plant growth, and they return nutrients to the soil. And regular ones make it so that there won't be a huge terrible one, because it never gets to having that much fuel. It's like that.

AMELIA

I'm confused.

BEA

We're clearing out our undergrowth. It's a fresh start, basically.

AMELIA

Poor Pastor Todd. He didn't deserve to be part of our wildfire. What, uh...

BEA

What got him? It was that cough, I swear. He had it for like two straight years, since even before Beck's wedding. Right up until the very end.

AMELIA

Eugh. Next time I'm even a little phlegmy here, I'm getting all the tests I possibly can. Maybe they'll give me a discount if it's my first time back in six, seven years. Like a 'welcome back' deal.

BEA

I'll give you a welcome back deal. If you don't want to stay with your parents, you can crash with me for a while. You just have to promise to give Ella piano lessons when she's old enough. How old do you have to be to play piano, anyway?

AMELIA

Older than she is. Deal.

They shake hands.

Amelia is wearing the paper ring.

AMELIA

Let's go downstairs. Pastor Todd wouldn't want us waiting up here when we could be mourning him with everyone else down there.

BEA

You know, Rebecca Colts—remember her? Sweet old woman, the old organ player? She retired—arthritis, I think. But there's an opening.

AMELIA

Maybe I'll look into it. If I'm not too busy turning Ella into a prodigy, of course.

BEA

Of course.

THE END



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Marching As to War

by Robert Knox

Dear Penny, I loved your letter, especially the part about your father's love of marching. I never knew any of this about your father. I could say, simply, *I never knew your father*. But then I might also say, with some justice, that I never truly knew mine very well either.

I'm happy to have learned that your father had a love for the Navy. During my years at 54 Downs Road, I never heard my father mention serving in the Army (but *once*, which I'll get to), even though there was a German "souvenir" rifle in the basement, and some people, especially my cousin, brought up the subject of how that rifle got there. I don't believe my father loved the experience or particularly felt at home in the Army, though he did acknowledge that he felt fortunate that his unit, while sent to France, was never involved in serious combat. From my cousin Jimmy (a few years older and a lot more pushy than me) I got the explanation that the souvenir German-made rifle came from a parole encounter with a German soldier in which Dad "shot the rifle out of the guy's hand. He dropped it and ran." I suspect that peer pressure turned the weapon into a souvenir.

I did eventually hear about Dad's posting to Europe. He was in his seventies by then—and his seventies seem, in retrospect, a lot older than my seventies (but then he smoked)—and had apparently been visiting stored materials. I'm thinking, in retrospect, that Mom was demanding that he go through some old stored boxes and decide what he wanted to keep. What he wanted *someone* to keep—though he did not explicitly say so—was a box of newspaper clippings, concert programs, and the like dating from the time when his unit was posted in Austria for "occupation" duty. The concert programs referred to performances in Salzburg, which his regiment or a part of it "occupied" for some months and, with little to do, spent their time going to public events or accepting social invitations. The Austrians, no doubt, were trying to "get back to normal." That meant lots of singing. Among the performances was a

concert by the Vienna Boys Chorus, some Viennese boys apparently having survived the experience of being absorbed into the German Army during the war. Most of these programs referenced Salzburg performance entities, churches and the like, evidence perhaps of how quickly nations, and their most important cities, went back to being who they were after the trauma of war. Even, or maybe especially, those on the losing side. Or at least they tried to.

His attendance at these events, as Dad recounted, was all due to the persuasion of a fellow soldier (unit friendships were important then) who “understood” cultural opportunities such as chamber music performances of classical works and all those choral performances, and who was in short more liberally “educated” or “cultured” than Dad. But they were important enough to him that he had kept the evidence for so many years and now he wanted to show it to somebody, and apparently I was the person he wanted to show it to. Interestingly, this educated friend was a guy from Massachusetts whom he recalled as “Bob.” (And here I am, another Bob from Massachusetts.) The box of Army memoirs also included lots of darkened copies of GI newspapers, a primary source for wartime memories.

The sad part of this is that I simply did not realize that he was hoping I would volunteer to take possession of these scrapbook items right then and there. It’s an indication of how distant, almost formal, our connection has always been, that I didn’t take the hint. And, of course, he didn’t directly ask me to take possession of these scrapbook memories of his, perhaps because he never wished to burden me (or anyone) with a personal favor.

Or because he couldn’t bring himself to say, “Hey, I’m an old man and I smoke too much. Maybe it’s time to think about endgames.”

All that aside, I found Dad’s box of war memories affecting and intriguing. Anne, who heard some of this as well—maybe just a few words, but Dad might have begun rationing breaths by then—found them affecting as well. I told my siblings a little about Dad’s “occupation Army” scrapbook clippings when I next spoke to each of them.

But then interest in the story faded, the way it does when nobody takes it upon himself to do anything. And when some years later—not that many, Dad was still smoking, and breathing less and less well—my father died, Mom quickly declared she did not wish to go on living in the house alone. Old houses with half a century of memories

take a lot of cleaning up, storing, and giving away before you can put them on the market. Mom asked each of her three children to come over and “take what you want” before she moved to “senior independent living center.”

Lots of glass pieces, old photos, utensils, formal dining ware, childhood toys, kids’ stuff we’d all left behind were spread out in the basement for our inspection. I took some pieces of glassware we really had no need of and a pile of my father’s flannel shirts.

Finally, it occurred to one of us (my brother) to ask, “What about that Army scrapbook material of Dad’s?” He’d looked, but couldn’t find it anywhere.

“Oh, that old stuff?” Mom answered. She’d thrown it all away.

I can picture her shrugging, lips turned down. Thinking, “Why didn’t anybody tell me they wanted them?”

The sad part, of course, is that I’d never truly known my father. I’m not sure Mom did either. I attributed my ignorance of my Dad’s life to his reluctance to “share” much of anything about his early years. He was a man who never talked about himself; certainly not his childhood, his growing up, his birth family, the struggles of his youth... Rumors concerning this last subject had long percolated through the younger generations. For instance, when (and why) did he become a “pin boy” at a bowling alley? What were the circumstances in those Depression years that did not permit him to finish high school? What of the rumored “fight” between two of his brothers that may have caused some other family divisions?

The past, any of it, seemed to be an embarrassment. I think we all picked this up in our way. “Secrets,” we sensed, are inherently things we are not proud of. Eventually, we all worked it out that the person we were told to call “Grandma” was not Dad’s birth mother. When I wondered about this to Mom, she told me his birth mother had died when he was still young. She told me never to mention this to my father, because it would “hurt his feelings.”

We all have reasons to keep our secrets. At least that was the lesson I took away from Mom’s counsel. But then her own birth father had died when she was young. Did the two of them share this history of parental loss? I don’t know, but I had taken in this lesson with mother’s milk (if, in fact, there had been any of that). *Don’t ask unwelcome questions. Keep away from the sore spots.* Mom, however, was more

willing to bare some of her own wounds. Yes, she had lost her birth father before she truly knew him. Her mother, however, was a merry widow and soon attracted a well-off, and older, man to marry her and provide for her younger children. Mom was the youngest; her older sister told her what to do for half of her life. Her mother's second marriage held the family together through the early years of the Great Depression, until her increasingly straitened stepfather (hard times having sunk the recording industry) died, and his creditors came for the house.

Poor Mom. She lost two fathers, two houses. To her credit she managed to get by with one husband, who in turn kept his part of the bargain—holding on to both a job and a house in the postwar suburbs. Although, on occasion, she let on that married life hadn't turned out to be as much fun as she'd hoped. After spending her days home with the kids, she let on to her now grown kids, she would have liked to go out for the occasional evening and "have fun." As for my own evaluation of the lessons taught by the nuclear family, I'm still weighing the evidence. Sometimes when I sit in the soft chair in the corner of the room, allowing others to talk and talk without volunteering a word, I think in the end I've become a lot like Dad. And not necessarily in the best of senses.

Dad had one other Army story, that came up again that afternoon (I had heard it once before) when he shared his stash of long-ago Occupation Army memorabilia. Because of course, Dad's regiment hadn't arrived merely in time for Occupation duty. It arrived, or part of it did, when the Battle of the Bulge was still chewing up armies in France. My father, as I learned that informative afternoon, had kept newspaper accounts, published only after the war's end, about the tragedy that befell his regiment when it crossed the English Channel to join the battles on the Western Front.

The regiment crossed the waters in three transport vessels. One didn't make it.

Its loss—the loss, that is to say, of the tremendous number of human lives that perished in the cold Atlantic waters when the ship sank—was a tragic scandal, covered up by official sources until after the war's end. The ship, one of the many large civilian transports pressed at one time or another into wartime service, carried some eighteen hundred soldiers, many of them drafted into the Army soon after graduating high school. Dad was a little older than that. The service had not wanted him at first because his poor eyesight required corrective lenses. Then, as the

war churned through more bodies, the Army lowered its standards, and scooped up people like Dad along with the recent high school grads.

After I graduated from high school, as I could not help recalling, I went off to a college dorm with only the weakest sense of gratitude for how fortunate my own path through life had been. But Dad considered himself lucky as well. Three ships set off across the channel that cold, but clear New Year's Eve. Dad was not on the big transport that took the largest number of bodies and was targeted by an enemy U-boat that sent a torpedo through its hull. The US Army command in England believed that the determined Allied anti-sub campaign had finally cleared the channel of German U-boats. But one, evidently, had snuck back in.

As the ship slowly sank, young soldiers crowded the deck, scanning the sea for sign of rescuers. One of the two other transports drew close, but not close enough, fearing a collision. The troops on the other ship shouted to the men on the doomed vessel, urging them to jump, to throw themselves into the sea and await rescue from the transport's small boats. Some did. But the North Atlantic water is cold; human bodies do not last long before muscles stiffen and flesh turns to stone. I see these moments in my dreams.

Dad's account of the disaster offered a few more details. His own vessel was too far away to attempt a rescue. The sinking ship telegraphed for assistance from France, no longer so far away. A break in the clouds and officers could glass the European shore. But no one responded. It was New Year's Eve; there were parties to go to. A few small boats from the English side of the channel began to arrive. But navigating a small boat below a dangerously listing transport is a demanding act of heroism. Some came close enough to rescue the men who threw themselves in the water. Others hesitated, waiting for a safer moment, until it was too late. For most of those on board the sinking ship, it was too late as soon as it took a mortal hit from a torpedo and began sinking.

Dad had kept a newspaper account written many months, probably a year, after the disaster. Only well after the war was over, the victory won, did the full story come out to the public.

Another consequence followed. As Dad told the story, the disaster changed his and the remainder of his regiment's wartime experience as well. They had been headed to the maelstrom of the Bulge. Now, much reduced in numbers, the survivors were given a softer

assignment: go keep watch on the Nice Triangle, where Allied forces were besieging a trapped German garrison. Keep them from breaking out, the generals commanded. We'll send another American force, with some other people's dads, deep into the forests of France to keep the Germans from expanding the Bulge. We will patiently target their tanks, their artillery, their aircraft. They will not be able to replace their losses, nor can they defend the skies. We have bombed their factories, their cities.

In the basement during my childhood years, as mentioned earlier, we stored Dad's wartime keepsake, a German Mauser rifle. He had shot it out of the hands of an enemy soldier, so goes the story, with a BAR (a Browning Automatic Rifle). If the story is true, perhaps his eyesight was not so bad after all. Anyway, his messmates insisted that he keep the rifle as a souvenir. It sat for years in a dark corner of the basement, attracting the envious attention of my warlike cousin.

Though in the end, after Dad passed, nothing could be found. The rifle was missing. Dad's folder of print memories: programs of choral music. Copies of the Army newspaper stuffed with regimental news, division news, whole Army news. How soon various units would get to go home. Who got promoted. The trivia of the Occupation. Maybe a journalistic report or two on those cultural, musical, programs that Dad went along to hear, dragged by his mate, the Massachusetts soldier boy called Bob. The town removal service had picked up the trash before we had a chance to hunt for Dad's memorabilia.

Dad had kept the programs, the military service newspapers, for whatever reason. Maybe he knew there would never be another world war; at least not like the one that kept him cooling his heels in Austria. Maybe he wanted a record of what he did to pass the time while he waited it out, not that he had a choice.

He came home ("demobbed") almost a year after the war ended, some time in 1946. That was also the year in which he married my mother. They had met before his unit was sent to England. She had waited. Well, perhaps she had no other offers, as the men had all gone off to war. Like thousands of others, she worked in a job, an office job, that might not be available when the men came home.

I don't know, I will never have any way of knowing, what my parents felt for one another. They were not demonstrative, at least in their children's presence. I'm not sure my Dad was ever demonstrative. If he

wished to report favorably on some experience, he called it “pleasant.” Mom used the word “fun,” but often in a context that suggested she was not quite having enough of it.

My father, I would hasten to add, was a model citizen. He kept himself employed, switching employers—when a favorable opportunity presented itself—only once. The basement accumulated the kind of knickknacks you acquire for being a good employee (and also a good bowler). Did he pass these traits on to his sons? I would not necessarily claim them for myself; the record is spotty.

I once came across a paper, a composition he had written for what must have been a mandatory “English comp” class when he was getting his bachelor’s degree through “night school.” I was teaching such freshman comp courses at the time of this discovery, and I knew at first glance that I would have given this paper a very low grade; perhaps barely passing. I’m not unhappy that this assignment is the kind of “old stuff” that Mom threw out. But I wish we had kept the Austria stuff.

I cling to my own memorabilia, desperately, even unreasonably. As if seeking proof that I have lived my life as I chose, not unproductively, and with some claim on the attention of the world. Still, my hoarding is a little excessive; even I have to admit that, looking around at that number of irrational keepsakes that burden my workroom.

And yet I wish we—my birth family—had among the four survivors managed to keep my father’s slim treasury of personal remembrances. His assignment to one transport, rather than another, is evidence only of a stroke of good fortune, I realize. But it was remarkably consequential. Fate is seldom so exacting, so brutally clear. If fate, chance, accident, had put Dad on the other boat, our family (and all the stuff we have accumulated, singly and collectively) would have never seen the light of day. Somebody else’s, surely.

But not ours. And I, for one, would miss it.

Yours,

Bob



ROBERT KNOX is a novelist, short story writer, poet, and freelance correspondent. He is the author of “Suosso's Lane,” a historical and mystery novel based on the notorious Sacco and Vanzetti case, and of “House Stories,” a collection of linked short stories, published by Adelaide Books in 2021. His novel “Karpa Talesman” was chosen as the winner of a competition for a novel of speculative fiction and has recently been published by Hidden River Arts. The book is available from Amazon.

A Viennese Bonbon

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Los maridos y los gatos, son de la misma opinión,
pues teniendo carne en casa, salen a buscar ratón.*
(Husbands and cats, all share the same view, since
having meat at home, they go out in search of mice)
—Spanish proverb

Allegro moderato

The composer sat at the pianoforte, brooding. It was time for the composition lesson, though his pupil was often late. Time means little when you are seventeen.

He got up and started pacing his drawing room. “The rich have no manners.” Yet his mood changed as the student waltzed in, trailing behind a warbling cascade of greetings and excuses. She exuded beauty and grace, and her clothes were in the latest styles from Paris, though the composer had no way of knowing this. She was resplendent in a light pink silk dress with a low, squared-off neckline and a waist that was several inches above her actual waistline and fell just below the bust, an arrangement that emphasized the fullness of her young breasts.

There could be no sharper contrast than the one between her clothing and her teacher’s. He was, as usual, dressed carelessly in the manner of fifty years earlier, a cotton banyan like a dressing gown hanging over shirt woolen coat, vest, and breeches. Refusing to don a wig, he wore his hair long, brushed back from the forehead, and tied back at the nape of the neck with a black ribbon. On the streets of the bad part of town he might have been arrested as a vagrant.

“Good morning, Miss Gelberkopf,” he started.

“Please, please, call me Louise,” she cut him off. “I am only a girl.”

The composer harrumphed in disapproval, but continued: “Are you ready for today’s lesson, Louise? Did you do your homework?”

Louise set down the violin case and opened the satchel she had slung over her shoulder. “Yes, I tried to write a fugue using the theme you proposed, but it was hard.” She gave an embarrassed grin and handed over several sheets of manuscript paper covered with scrawls and scratched out musical entries.

The composer put on a pair of round spectacles and glanced up and down at the scribblings for a few minutes. Then he looked at the girl, who was leaning over his seated figure holding her breath. Choosing his words as carefully as he could, he pronounced: “Louise, this is a good start, but you need to flesh out the ideas a bit more. The phrases you put down here don’t flow harmoniously from one to the other, but are disjointed....”

The lesson was interrupted when the drawing room’s back door opened to usher a middle-aged woman in elegant street clothes. “Pardon for the interruption,” she said, turning to the composer. “Felix, coming back from the store I found at the door a messenger from your publisher. They need to talk to you right away; there is some problem with your score.” She then turned to Louise: “Miss Gelberkopf, can I offer you a cup of tea and some Mohnzelten?”

“No, thank you, Madame. I must watch my weight,” replied Louise, bowing respectfully.

The composer squeezed the lady’s arm. “Jill, please tell the messenger that I will go to the publisher’s office before noon. It cannot be that urgent. They probably can’t make out my scribblings.”

As the lady departed, the composer remarked: “Louise, did I tell you that my wife is an accomplished cellist? Perhaps the three of us can get together to do some music.”

“That would be lovely,” replied the young girl. “I’m not good, but as long as the violin part is not hard, I can probably handle it without embarrassing myself too much.”

“Well, we shall play one of Haydn’s piano trios. They are pretty but not too demanding.”

* * *

Soon after that conversation, the composer, Jill, and Louise started meeting in the late afternoon to play Haydn piano trios. The music was inconsequential, but ideal for the group, since the piano part was

predominant, and the composer was an excellent pianist. The violin had limited solo opportunities, and usually only played the melody in unison with the piano; the cello's role was mainly to support the low register line in the piano.

Since her part required little concentration, Jill was able to observe the interaction between her husband and the young student. Louise's regard for her teacher was growing into something like worship; both in playing and conversation, she repeated as the gospel her teacher's utterances and cast admiring glances at him when she could tear her eyes away from the score. The composer, whose demeanor was usually distant and somewhat inattentive, seemed to be warming up to his charge and even engaged in a bit of polite repartee with her. Jill was not alarmed by this change, but welcomed it as a sign that the genius she had married was finally starting to join the human race.

Thus, their concerts were placid and, like the music, only became vigorous at the coda of the fast movements, which usually ended with the main theme being played fortissimo by all instruments. At that point, the composer and his wife would thank Louise for the pleasure of her company, and this would bring another urbane get-together to a close.

Scherzo (Allegro)

"Dear Louise," started the composer. "You are not making enough progress. The music you write is lacking in fresh ideas, as if composing were a chore to be gone through rather than a source of joy."

"Oh, Felix," replied the girl, sighing. "As this point, I have no ideas left. I persevere because of my parents...and because of you."

The composer frowned. "Well, stressing out over your compositions is not going to help. Perhaps you should take breaks when you are trying to write. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Read a book. You may come back to your task feeling refreshed."

"I have tried all of those things. They don't seem to help. I'm still in a rut when I come back to composing."

"Perhaps you need a vacation."

Louise's eyes brightened for a moment, then sadness returned to them. "A vacation? My family would never allow it."

The composer uttered a strange, uncharacteristic small laugh, almost a cackle. “What if we made it a working vacation?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m in need of a vacation myself. Perhaps Jill and I could spend a couple of weeks in Hallstatt, renting a room in a hotel by the lake. You might come with us and spend your time whichever way you want, including writing some music. What do you think?”

“Oh, I would love the idea of spending time with you, away from the city.”

“Well, I’ll take it up with Jill and, if she is amenable, I’ll talk to your parents as well.”

* * *

Jill was not enthused by her husband’s proposal. Although she enjoyed traveling and had taken a number of tours of Europe and the near East, she was unimpressed with the idea of spending a couple of weeks in a rustic spot like Hallstatt, with nothing to do but sit by the lake. “I’ve been to Hallstatt a couple of times, and quite frankly, it’s rather boring. If we go on vacation, I’d rather go to Paris or even Venice.”

The composer was not expecting meeting resistance from his wife, who was normally quite accommodating, but recovered fast. “Darling, I’m beginning to work on a new symphony, and would like to go to a quiet place to let the ideas germinate. Also, I am thinking of inviting Louise to come along with us. She’s stuck on her composition studies, and the fresh air of the country might clear her pretty head.”

At the mention of the student’s name, Jill did a double take. She liked the young girl, and had appreciated Louise’s good influence on her reclusive husband. However, the idea of bringing Louise along kindled a small flame of jealousy that had been growing surreptitiously in her heart. Twenty-five years earlier, when Jill and the composer first met and ultimately married, Jill would have laughed at the idea of such an immature young thing being competition. Jill was then beautiful, polished and vivacious. No way her fiancé would even pay more attention to a half-baked teenager than to her, whom he called the love of his life. But now things were different. For one thing, she no longer felt beautiful...

After a long silence, Jill chose to give in to her husband's entreaty: "I suppose I could find things to occupy my time at Hallstatt. I still have not read Goethe's 'Sorrows of Young Werther,' and there are other books that I have been setting aside for future enjoyment. Also, Beethoven has a new sonata in A for cello and piano, and I want to study the score to see if you and I can learn it and perform it together. So, yes, let's go to Hallstatt. I hope we'll all have a good time."

The sudden relief that registered in the composer's face sent a rising scale of warning beats in Jill's racing heart. Outwardly, however, she smiled and started making plans for the upcoming vacation.

Andante cantabile, ma però con moto

The boat deposited them right at the lake level cellar of the ancient brewery and guesthouse. The composer turned to his companions and declared self-importantly: "When I made the arrangements, I ensured that we could proceed directly from the boat to our rooms at the hotel. It should all be very easy."

Jill worked hard at remaining impassive. As the practical one in the family, she usually made travel arrangements for the couple, and the interest Felix displayed on this occasion was suspicious. Anyhow, she had stayed at the Bräugasthof before and liked its romantic rooms filled with antiques and the outstanding views of the lake from the room balconies. She had no fault to pick with her husband's initiative.

They arrived too late to do any sightseeing and had to content themselves with a nice dinner at the restaurant, right on the lake. The following morning after breakfast they took a leisurely stroll along the town. They had lunch and were faced with the first decision: what to do next.

"I would rather return to our room and read," said Jill. She was starting to feel in an elegiac mood, the weight of years and the strangeness of the situation bearing on her shoulders.

"Fine," replied the composer. "Louise and I will go check the shops around the market square."

"Have fun," replied Jill, and smiled, though she felt tears starting to choke her inside.

* * *

The following morning, over breakfast, they discussed how they would spend the day. "I hear you can tour the salt mines, supposedly the oldest in the world," proposed the composer.

"How do you get there?" asked Jill.

"I am told it is an hour hike up the hill to the main entrance," replied her husband.

"I think I will stay in town," replied Jill. "Drink coffee, read, and maybe have a schaumrolle at the pastry shop. "But you guys should return soon, so that Louise can do some composing."

"We'll do," replied the composer.

They stayed out until dinner time. The composer looked exhausted, but offered no complaints.

* * *

The following morning, Jill suggested that they stay in town and get some relaxation. Louise had a different idea. "Yesterday, at the salt mine, someone suggested that we should visit Rudolf's Tower, which is supposed to offer stunning views of the village. Emperor Rudolf had the tower built way back in the 13th century to protect the village and its salt mine. It should be interesting."

"Is it easy to reach?" asked the composer doubtfully.

"I imagine so," replied Louise, sensing the older man's reluctance.

"Well, I guess I can use the exercise," the composer replied, squaring his shoulders.

After the couple left, the older woman sat on the balcony of their room, looking without seeing as the sun rays drew silver ripples on the surface of the lake. She started to cry.

"Is she going to steal him from me? What can I do to stop her? Am I going to turn into another abandoned wife?"

She agonized over her choices all afternoon. Finding no easy answer, she buried herself in the different, but not dissimilar, woes of young Werther.

* * *

The composer had a restless night. He woke up often, assaulted by a sense of guilt that he did his best to suppress. Yes, he liked the young girl. Just as much as he had liked his wife, all those years before. But now things are different. Jill is turning into an old hag, Louise shone like a young, unbroken colt. What was wrong with wanting to have both? Can a man love both a dog and a cat? His time to have fun was running out, and before he knew it, he would be in an old men's home. Wasn't he entitled to one last fling?

On the other hand, his sense of morality kept raising its puritanical head. A woman is not a dog or a cat, and the love you swore to your wife should come before this infatuation.

On the other hand, Louise was so beautiful, and so available!

On the other hand...

* * *

The composer was almost too tired to go down for breakfast the following morning, but Jill prodded him out of bed. "You need to get some nourishment, and then spend the day resting," she cautioned.

As they met Louise for breakfast, the girl was already making plans for the day. "The man at the front desk told me that there is one hiking trail that should not be missed, called the Salt Brine Trail. The trail runs from Lake Hallstatt all the way to Lake Traunsee, and the views of the entire lake area are spectacular. Should we give it a try?"

Jill could no longer restrain herself. "Maybe we should all stay in town. Felix is looking very tired and is showing his age. Men in their fifties should not be trekking around, particularly if they are out of shape—"

The composer cut her off: "Darling, I'm still not an invalid. Louise, let's take that trail and see where it leads us."

Jill realized her mistake and bit her lip, dropping into a stony silence.

* * *

An unseasonable fog blew across the lake the following morning, the fifth of their vacation. The composer stayed in bed until the breakfast hour was almost over, and Jill had to prod him to get into his

breeches and escort her to the restaurant. He ate almost nothing, but downed cup after cup of hot tea, saying that he felt chilled to the bone. Louise, who had come down earlier and was having a leisurely repast by herself, joined them at their table and placed a sympathetic hand on the composer's shoulder. "Is there anything wrong, Felix? You look rather pale."

Jill started to make a curt reply, but the composer spoke first. "Nothing, dear. This fog has gotten into my bones and made me chilly. It's reminding me of my years."

An uneasy silence followed. Finally, the young girl shook her head and replied airily: "What years? You were with me on three hikes, and held up rather well in each instance. Just rest today, and tomorrow we'll figure out what to do."

* * *

By mid-morning the fog had lifted, and the rest of the day promised to be warm and bright. The composer suggested: "Maybe we should take a boat tour of Lake Hallstatt. I bet we can get beautiful views of the town from a different perspective."

Jill was opposed to the idea, but the composer brushed aside her objections. "I feel fine, and staying indoors on this beautiful day would be a shame. Let's go."

The hotel arranged for a boat to be hired and the trio boarded for a two-hour tour. They were barely half an hour out of town when things began to go wrong. The composer's breathing became agitated and he started sweating, even though it was a cool afternoon. "My chest hurts," he complained.

Jill wasted no time and got the boat to turn around at once, and had the composer escorted to the town's small infirmary, where they carried out a bloodletting and administered some dubious tonics. Luckily, the crisis abated on its own and the composer was discharged not much worse than upon admission. Jill then made a quick decision: "Let's take you back home. If you are going to die, let it be on your own bed."

On the boat ride from Hallstatt, Jill and Louise took turns hovering uncertainly next to the cot where the composer lay. For the moment, they were united in their grief and their hope the man they

cherished would recover. Little by little, the composer's breathing became more regular and, by the time they were able to return home, the crisis had passed, but its memory would linger for a long time.

Allegro moderato

The months that followed went by rather quickly. The composer had been left enfeebled by his heart episode and remained at home, working on his symphony. Louise excused herself from further attempts at becoming a composer and concentrated on improving her skills as a violinist, a calling for which she had real talent. She gave a well-attended recital in the Fall and met there a young nobleman from the provinces by the name of Franz, who was no musician but had an eye for beautiful girls.

Jill cared for her enfeebled spouse and concentrated on running the household and the publication of the composer's works, which were slowly being recognized and gaining acclaim all over Europe. Throughout this period, she was accosted by misgivings about the happenings earlier in the year. But for the heart attack, would Felix have cheated on her with a girl who could have been the daughter they never had? Even if no open transgression occurred, was there any doubt that he was taken with Louise and might have divorced Jill had fate not decreed otherwise?

But Jill's chief doubts were about herself. Had she been too weak, too accommodating, too willing to let the incipient affair progress before her eyes without doing anything about it? She had never mentioned the matter to Felix who, insofar as she knew, had no idea that his wife was aware of his treasonous desires. Should she have done so? Should she dismiss him now, as not worthy of her affection?

At the end she concluded she had done the right thing, whether by design or through pure luck. Her husband was weak, but most men were. His infatuation with Louise had been an act of defiance at the inexorable march of time. He probably did not deserve her fidelity, but often marriages survive by the acceptance by each party of the other's foibles. Besides, he was a man of genius, and posterity would likely judge him benevolently. Shouldn't she?

Late in December, as the year 1811 wound to a close, the composer was sufficiently recovered for the three of them to have dinner

at one of the finest restaurants in town. There were multiple reasons for a celebration: his new symphony, now at the publishers, would receive its world premiere in the spring, with the composer at the helm health permitting. Jill had launched a new career as a soloist, and was sought after by orchestras through the Empire and beyond, thanks in part to the scarcity of accomplished cellists in those times of war and turmoil. And Louise had become engaged to Franz, with a wedding scheduled for the coming Fall.

* * *

As they downed a final glass of obstler, the composer remembered something. Turning to his companions, he announced excitedly: “My publisher says that Beethoven has just submitted the manuscript of a new piano trio in B-Flat. If it is as good as his other work, it will be quite difficult to play but wonderful. I have a mind to purchase the score as soon as it is published. Would you two be interested in learning it so we can play it together?”

Louise gave a non-committal shrug. “I’d love to, but Franz is very possessive and may take umbrage at my spending too much time learning to play it.”

“What a pity,” replied the composer, trying to hide his disappointment. “The world will miss what could have been a great performance by the three of us.”

Jill smiled and took a last bite of her after-dinner candy. Like the confections from the Demel pastry shop, the story of her husband’s failed romance with his student was a Viennese bonbon, sweet chocolate on the outside concealing perhaps a bittersweet surprise in its heart. It would never replace a full meal prepared by an expert.



Born in Cuba, MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ (he/him) migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" was published in February 2023.

Imprint

by Mark Keane

Few people remember Stefan de Gries. Twenty years ago, he was something of a cause célèbre, and featured on the pages of the serious and not so serious press. The public came to associate him with names that have stood the test of time. In Stefan's case, his renown earned him a fleeting remembrance.

I often mention his name as a test to people I've just met.

"That reminds me of Stefan de Gries," I might say.

This remark is usually greeted with a puzzled or an unconvincing knowing look, or a frown and head shake.

"That name sounds familiar," is a typical response, or "I know the name, but I can't place it."

I observe the nagging irritation as my new acquaintance fails to pin the name to a face or a tangible identity. Very rarely, someone says something along the lines, "Stefan de Gries, did he come up with a way of converting books into portraits?"

"Yes," I reply. "That Stefan de Gries."

* * *

I met Stefan at university. He was three years older than me. A small man, little over five feet tall, and already balding in his mid-twenties. He cultivated a sharply sculpted goatee when facial hair wasn't fashionable. Stefan fell into the category of perpetual undergraduate, changing subjects mid-semester, missing coursework deadlines, and skipping exams. He started with English literature, then changed to classics, modern languages, chemistry and, finally, mathematics. It wasn't because he lacked focus or didn't care what he studied. If anything, Stefan cared too much and had too much focus. In the end, he withdrew from university to pursue his unremitting curiosity.

I ran into him every so often in The Vaults, a subterranean bar frequented by young lecturers and postgraduates. Stefan sat alone, staring at the ceiling or scribbling in a notebook. I'd peel away from whatever group I was with and join him. We discussed his latest obsession—a book or an artist or an abstraction. I recall conversations about the “sphere packing problem” and the latest developments in treating schizophrenia. It was always with regret that I parted from Stefan, and followed my group to the next bar. I remember little about my social circle at university, but I'll never forget Stefan.

* * *

He remained in the university town and I moved to the city, pursuing a career in the commercial sector. We maintained an irregular correspondence. Whenever I had cause to return, I made sure to meet up with Stefan and learn where his curiosity had taken him. On one visit three years after I graduated, Stefan mentioned the work that would bring him his short-lived fame.

“If we scrutinise a piece of truly creative writing,” he said, “I believe we will find a pattern that identifies the creator. Not the so-called voice of the writer, but something more tangible—a visual element that is bound up with the written word.” He stroked his goatee, a familiar mannerism whenever he struggled to express his thoughts. “The one who creates the work may not realise it, but their identity is embedded in what they create. It makes sense, does it not? The average person merely uses words. A computer programme can generate text, but not with the originality or distinction of a creative mind. The great writers, those who stand apart as visionaries, shape words and meanings. They adapt and rearrange, stretch and condense phrases and sentences in order to communicate a particular vision. It stands to reason that in a work of sublime creativity an imprint must be left of the creator.”

* * *

Over the next six years, Stefan experimented with the text of books long regarded as works of creative genius. Whenever we met, he refused to reveal details beyond an oblique reference to the writer's imprint.

In the process that Stefan finally presented to the world, he took sixty thousand words in blocks of five hundred, whited out each word and blacked in the spaces. He assembled the blocks in a montage of ten rows and twelve columns, arranged in accordance with the source material: across the first row, text one through to twelve, and then onto the next row. The final result displayed a monochrome image of the writer's face.

He submitted two examples, what he called his prototypes. The first made use of text from a celebrated work that ran to seven volumes. There was no doubting the identity of the writer from the resultant image—the heavy-lidded protuberant eyes, hair parting, and full lips. His second example drew on a work of irrefutable genius, the undisputed high point of modernism. The author was even more recognizable, Stefan's image capturing the thin face, stubby moustache and stern, uncompromising gaze.

The Stefan de Gries word portraits generated a flurry of interest—amazement and suspicion in equal parts. His critics put it down to a chance combination of words. Stefan refuted this, and explained his systematic optimisation that involved innumerable mathematical permutations. His analysis had led to the ultimate arrangement of sixty thousand words in a ten-by-twelve matrix, which he stressed was essential to accommodate the writer's unique creativity and generate a realistic image.

He patented the process as sole licensee. It had worked for the two prototypes, so it should work for other bona fide literary creators.

"Just follow the patent," Stefan told the critics. "The writer is imprinted in the work."

Many did as he suggested and produced striking images from various literary sources. The earliest writers in neck ruffs, nineteenth century men of letters with bushy or straggly beards, and the great wordsmiths from the twentieth century. Female writers of distinction too, the images nothing short of photographic.

All a portrait required was a single published work of at least sixty thousand words. Across the world, Stefan's patent was tested, taking the writings of well-regarded writers from Hungary to Iran to Angola.

In many cases, it didn't work; the montage generated a jumble of black and white with no obvious pattern or image. This led to a re-

evaluation of those writers' artistic credentials, and set in motion a mini-industry of literary criticism.

The images appeared on magazine covers, buses, billboards, TV and cinema screens. Major art galleries hosted sell-out exhibits configured around Stefan's original prototypes. Other images bearing Stefan's signature were sought after as valuable collectibles. The money rolled in, and the university drop-out became a millionaire. Commentators seized on his story as a message of hope for every dreamer: don't despair, the opportunity to make it big is within reach.

As more images appeared, they entered the mass market. It seemed every student flat had a poster showing one of Stefan's word portraits with stylized footnotes that included a potted biography of the writer and familiar quotations. A games manufacturer produced a do-it-yourself version with the tagline, Word-Pix—paint your own literary portrait. The package included instructions with blocks of text on small pages, black and white markers, and a frame to display the portrait.

* * *

When I caught up with Stefan in The Vaults, I remarked that he must feel a degree of satisfaction at having his theory validated.

"You were right," I said. "There is an imprint of the writer in the writing."

Stefan smiled. "That's what I've always believed."

"Well, now you've shown it. The proof is in the image. No one can deny that."

"There are many who do."

"Ignore them. What about all the posters and merchandise? It must be hugely lucrative."

"I have all I need." He pursed his lips. "None of that interests me."

"So what does interest you now?"

"I've moved on to a different aspect of creativity." Stefan tapped his index finger on the notebook that lay on the table. "Another imprint, but one that is purer and not reliant on imagery."

He refused to give any details. I didn't press him, knowing how tight-lipped he was when it came to his projects. It would all come out in good time.

* * *

And it did, four years later, in the form of the de Gries equation. The mathematical formulation was first published in a literary journal. Most readers had no interest in the numerical niceties, and focused on the de Gries coefficient, or G value, a number Stefan proposed as unique to each writer. I read so many articles about the equation that I have memorised the first three terms.

$$G^{\ln\Delta} = 233.5a + 74.3b + (6.8c/3.3d)^{1.5} \dots$$

The full equation included an entry for each letter, a to z, and one for the spaces between words, denoted by Δ .

The de Gries equation was based on an analysis of a database of over two thousand literary works. To arrive at a value for G, one had to input the number of times a or b or c, and so on up to z, appeared in a sample of writing, and include the number of spaces. The multipliers in the equation represented constants that Stefan had arrived at after exhaustive mathematical iterations.

The equation only applied to English language text, and the de Gries coefficient showed slight variability with respect to different translations. A minimum sample of four hundred thousand letters and spaces was needed to ensure a statistically reliable result. One further proviso was that the analysis should start at the beginning of a chapter. Stefan's detractors claimed he set as many provisos as there were terms in his equation. An exaggeration of course, but Stefan faced increasing opposition. The more virulent critics denounced his equation as superficial and offensive to the art of great literature.

Stefan's supporters outnumbered his detractors. Amateurs and academics applied the equation, starting with the two writers who had served as his image prototypes. Repeated testing using different excerpts from the seven-volume masterpiece of the heavy-lidded genius generated a de Gries coefficient of 6.8. As for the modernist maestro, the analysis returned a value of 3.2.

It didn't stop there. All the literary greats had their number established. A 13.7 for one sardonic existentialist, a 9.1 for an iconic author of fantastical fables, and a seemingly high 33.8 for a prominent essayist. In due course, the coefficients were compiled and published; the values ranged for 2.1 to 46.3.

Every living writer coveted a coefficient. Publicity-savvy creators quoted their numbers, incorporating the de Gries coefficient in their biographies along with prizes and awards. Lists were generated, placing authors in order of increasing or decreasing coefficient.

A consensus emerged that the lower the number the greater the writer; a coefficient less than 10 was deemed necessary to be considered truly great. This led to suggestions that certain writers tailored what they wrote to achieve a lower coefficient. Some were said to employ numerical consultants to provide guidance on how to keep their number down. When Stefan was approached for comment, he refused to acknowledge these rumours, stating that the coefficient should only be considered after the act of creation.

Normally, Stefan kept away from the limelight and didn't participate in debates. I remember seeing him once on television, looking nervous and coming across as irritable. The interviewer asked what it really meant; words converted into a portrait of the writer, and words transformed into a unique number for the writer. Did it mean anything at all?

"A pattern," he said. "Like a fingerprint. The true writer produces what he is compelled to produce, what is in his sinews and bones and soul and brain. For that reason, what he generates carries the essence of who he is. This manifests itself as an image or a number. It makes sense, does it not?"

* * *

Shortly after that TV interview, I made a trip to the university town, and arranged a get-together with Stefan in The Vaults. He had aged, his face heavily lined, the goatee flecked with grey, wisps of hair drawn across his bare pate. I asked him if he thought his number analysis had been a success.

"That's for others to decide," he said. "I presented my conclusion. There is nothing more I can do."

I was struck by his lacklustre response, a resigned acceptance that bordered on uninterest.

"What will you do next?"

"I have something in mind." He hesitated. "Not images or numbers. Something bigger. It will take time."

“Can you give me any idea what it is?” I raised my hands in a gesture of reassurance. “Some inkling. I’m genuinely interested. I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“Not an image or a number, but back to words,” he said. “It will mean going through the entire body of work of a writer. Not just blocks of text or four hundred thousand characters or sixty thousand words, but everything that has been written. An analysis of the entire oeuvre to converge on an expression that encapsulates the writer’s vision. Perhaps a sentence, or a phrase, or a single word.”

* * *

I kept a lookout for articles and stories concerning Stefan but came across nothing, no hint of what he was doing. Interest in his image and number analysis had waned, supplanted by other eye-catching ephemera.

His responses to my messages were perfunctory. I telephoned, and asked if he was making progress on his latest project.

“Progress suggests a destination,” he said.

I made fewer calls, and we gradually lost touch. Whenever I was in a gift shop, I would look for fridge magnets, calendars or postcards with one of his writer imprints and found none. Soon enough, the same was true in secondhand and bric-a-brac shops.

* * *

A year ago, I returned to attend the funeral of one of my coterie of undergraduate friends. On the way back to my hotel, I spotted Stefan sitting on a bench in one of the public gardens. He had shaved his goatee. What I saw now was a nondescript small bald middle-aged man. It made me think of his word portraits and his imprint on my brain. I noticed he had no notebook. He leaned back in his seat, looked around, caught my eye, and returned my wave.

“Stefan. I was hoping I might run into you.”

“It’s good to see you,” he said, friendly but not overly welcoming.

After some aimless chit-chat, I asked what he was working on, what direction his work was taking him.

“I’ve stopped all that.” He looked away and rubbed his bare chin. “Better to live and absorb the here and now rather than endless analysis. It serves no purpose.”

We sat in silence. I didn't know what to say, and he didn't seem inclined to continue the conversation. Then, he stood and extended his arm.

“Here’s my wife.”

She approached our bench, a petite woman, younger than Stefan, glasses, short auburn hair, and a pinched face. I stood and shook her hand, receiving little response in return.

“I’m pleased to meet you.”

She smiled. Stefan stared at the ground.

“I’ve known your husband for many years,” I said. “We were at university together.”

She continued smiling. Stefan shuffled his feet.

“You must be very proud of his achievements,” I continued. “Do you have an interest in literature or mathematics?”

“No, not really.” She looked over at Stefan and raised an eyebrow. “I used to try crosswords to keep him happy.”

"I garden," Stefan said, abruptly. "No easy matter, trying to control nature. And now, we must leave." He made a show of checking his watch. "The Garden Centre closes in an hour, and there are some rose bushes I want to plant. It was good to see you again."

He turned, took his wife by the arm, and hurried away. I watched them until they were out of sight.

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Strange Meeting

by Jonathan Oliver

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.”

On paper, it was meaningless. The letter, note rather, pushed under my door late last night. I had to hear him say it, speak it out loud so I could hear where the accent fell, listen for the emphasis to lay bare the reality.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.”

Reaching out to me personally, a recognition of my importance, proper gratitude—unless, of course, the sense was sarcastic, only his tone would tell me that.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.” A nod

to my power, recognition that I could have made a different choice, spent my energy on another course altogether.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.” We are

both hard-pressed, up against the clock as much as each other, so this decision is most welcome.

Bear with me. Grammar, semantics, intonation were boring at school, and they bore still now. But in such a crisis as this, it is sensible to examine the minutiae, to read between the lines and between the words as well, to really know thine enemy as thyself. Because, don’t forget, we are facing annihilation...

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.” The

unnecessary ‘with’ apart, this is a word full of context. No promises, but a meeting suggests at least the possibility of negotiation, the opportunity to lay my ominous cards before his eyes, the chance to let his ears identify the steel in my voice.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.” As if

there were a choice, as if I could have picked another general, another admiral. But a silent confirmation that I had picked the right person, not gone over his head to...whom? The Prime Minister, the President, the King?

And finally, “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.” Now is the time and the time is now. We both knew that yesterday wouldn’t have worked, while tomorrow would be far too late. One of us, probably both of us, would be dead and our people beyond saving.

I hadn’t slept last night, but nor had I heard the message slip into my room. Why had the messenger not knocked? Was it my side he was wary of, or his own? Did that make “...to meet with me...” the most apposite reading? In which case, there was the potential for betrayal and double-dealing, making our victory more certain. I went out onto the balcony, the view blotted out by cloud or fog or smoke, adding to the invisibility with my meditative cigarette. Coffee would have helped, but there was none. Perhaps he would have access to supplies; an offer might be a clue to his predisposition. It was increasingly obvious that I would have to go back to his quarters “today”, and the fewer people who saw me (on his side or my own), the better.

I made my way successfully from our lines into his, the weather, the atmosphere and my particular skills enabling me to avoid detection. I located his heartbeat, locked on to it, ghosted into the familiar room like a note under a door. To my great surprise, given the circumstances, he was asleep, tucked up happily in his bed like a hermit crab in a tin can. I placed my hand over his mouth, waited for his eyes to flutter open, scooped him out of his sheet shell and sat him down at the breakfast table. Then I, his guest, sat also and watched him fully wake, which didn’t take very long at all.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today,” he said, completely at his ease and with no detectable inflection whatsoever.

I had been prepared for a slew of different scenarios, but his insouciance and the utter lack of intonation in his greeting had me scrabbling for purchase. I begged his pardon and asked him to repeat himself.

“I said ‘Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today’,” he repeated. (Or did he?)

No, I was getting nothing. I heard the words but no hint of hidden meaning.

“Would you care for some coffee?” was his next gambit, and I’m afraid I rather stuttered my acceptance of this offer. He, in his pyjamas, was far more comfortable than I, dressed to kill. This would

not do. I had to take control, to regain the upper hand I had thought I had, on my balcony.

“No, forget the coffee,” I said commandingly, though I would really have liked a cup. “You said you wanted to see me..?”

“But my dear fellow,” he replied, resuming his seat, “there was no need for you to risk the dangerous crossing. I could just as easily have come to you.”

This was a moot point, given the hostile disposition of our forces, but it was also not the point at all.

“And there was no rush,” he continued. “Any time over the next few days would suffice.”

No, no, this was clearly nonsense! Time was at a premium, every minute counted...

“Besides, if I wasn’t available, you could always have chatted with one of my colleagues.”

Just in time, I caught the twinkle in his eye, realised that he was spinning me a yarn, winding me up for reasons of his own. I took a firm grip on my rising folly, shook it till it squeaked in surrender, assumed the persona of someone relaxed and self-confident. I sauntered over to the window and looked out on a mist that seemed to be thinning in spite of my second cigarette of the day.

“Actually, coffee would be delightful, thank you,” I said. “There’s no need to charge into things, is there?”

I was gratified to catch a flicker of annoyance on his smiling face, before he rose to pick up the telephone.

“Send me two coffees,” he ordered, a little sternly in my view. “Black, I suppose?” turning his head to me.

“Oh no, nice and milky for me,” I answered, enjoying the difficulties that would produce.

He almost snarled “White!” into the phone. “One white, one black, and be quick about it!”

I had regained the upper hand and was resolved to keep it. I turned my grin into one of my hard stares and was gratified to see that it had its usual result. He tried to look me in the eye but was forced to drop his gaze, his shoulders drooping in tandem. I said nothing, didn’t move for maybe five full minutes. When the knock came, I sat down, allowed him to collect the coffees and bring them to the table.

On hearing my disappointed “What, no sugar?”, his apology was both heartfelt and abject. I generously assured him that it was of no importance, he really mustn’t worry. After sipping my coffee, which really was rather good, to a slow end—while he allowed his black brew to go cold untouched—I felt the balance of power was very much in my favour. He asked if he could change out of his pyjamas. I said he could, but he must get dressed in front of me. The sight of his simultaneously scrawny yet flabby intermediate nakedness convinced me that God, the gods, were on my side.

Once he was arrayed in battledress, I went for the jugular. “Are you American?” I asked.

“Er...what? No. Why should you think that?” he replied, shocked at the very suggestion.

“Educated in the USA?” I countered.

“No, no. Not at all. I don’t under...”

“...to meet with you today’,” I interrupted, quoting and simultaneously displaying his note. “That’s not what we say in this country; the ‘with’ is superfluous, tautological even. We meet someone, you understand, not meet with them. No doubt you would be excited *for* the opportunity...” I allowed a little trace of contempt to show here. “About, my dear man, ‘excited *about*’... That is the correct way to put it.”

The confidence he had regained with his uniform drained away with his linguistic shame. Red in the face, he looked humiliated, as if he’d been caught mis-translating a simple passage from Book XI of Homer’s ‘Iliad’. I pitied him.

“Thank *you* for taking the time to meet *me* today,” I said, with the appropriate emphases and of course without the ‘with’. He was completely vulnerable now, at my mercy, no shell (or tin can) to protect him.

“Obviously, you will withdraw your forces immediately and ensure your allies do likewise. I suggest you nominate 3 or 4 of your general staff, rank of Colonel or above, to join your good self as hostages, until such time as we are agreed on the conditions of your surrender. Does that meet *with*,” and I allowed myself a sly little smile here, “your assessment of the current situation?”

What could he say? The twinkle in his eye was long extinguished, his cool gone completely cold; he looked like what he

was—a beaten man. He slunk over to the telephone, slurred the necessary orders, slumped back in his chair. I was magnanimous. Coming back, taking on my enemy again, had been the right thing to do.

“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.” Wisdom was mine and I had mastery. There was no need to gloat, to prolong his misery. We all make mistakes, does we not? I lit the cigarette of victory, and with the same flame consigned his foolish note to ashes. Across the table, he watched the cremation with dog-like gratitude. He tried to speak but his mouth was dog-bone dry. He picked up his cup with trembling fingers, slugged the iced coffee, set the cup back down, looked at his watch. Knowing what was coming—for I could read him like a piece of pulp fiction, always had—I smiled.

“Thank you,” he whispered, “for taking the time...”



Jonathan Oliver is an English actor, with many years of experience on stage, screen, radio and audiobook. He has performed all over the United Kingdom (including at Shakespeare's Globe, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company); in France, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Abu Dhabi and the USA. He has also appeared (in non-singing roles!) with celebrated orchestras in Budapest, Lyon and London. He studied English Literature at Manchester University and has written 3 novels, 2 plays and several short stories.

Jonathan lives in London with his playwright wife. He would like to live (also) in Greece and Arizona...

A Pilgrimage to Dennis Hopper

by Ron Clinton Smith

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The first time I saw Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider* I didn't think he was acting. I thought he was some stoned-out freak shoved in front of a camera to see what he'd do. When I realized later he'd written, produced and directed the film, acting took a paradigm shift for me. He was brilliant *and* crazy as hell, his own kind of signature wacko that got in your face and howled like a hyena. Like Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet* on his knees inhaling gas, fondling Isabella Rossellini, crying, "Baby wants to fuck!" He'd called David Lynch after reading that script and said, "You have to let me play Frank Booth, because I *am* Frank Booth." Like Brando, Dean, Nicholson, he showed you what human beings were really like, *really* did, not some half-baked vanilla version. If you were afraid to offend, embarrass, horrify, mystify, disgust or shock people, you were in the wrong profession. If you thought acting was about being pretty, you'd missed it. Not only was he going to show you what people were really like, he was going to reveal the bizarre truth you never imagined.

Once, Hopper was arrested, naked and raving drunk in public-- a natural lineage of behavior from James Dean, his mentor, pulling a knife on a director. And there was the time the young Hopper worked with old school director Henry Hathaway, who made him do eighty-five takes on a scene because he refused to do it the director's way, the old codger tiredly lifting his megaphone, saying, "Do it again," eighty-four times until Hopper finally cracked, did it the director's way, and stormed off the set.

Early in my film career I have an audition for a movie Hopper's directing in North Carolina called *Chasers*. I am instructed not to approach him or shake his hand. All right, I think, a rule from the rulebreaker. Expect the unexpected. I have a mishmash of early film pieces on tape I'd planned to hand him, but hearing these instructions

make me decide to wait to see what the vibe's like. Maybe it'd blow an otherwise perfect audition. I'm half-broke and have to drive five-hundred miles in my old Volvo, which is acting up with electrical problems. My plan is to start out at noon, which would put me there around dinner time, when I'd get a cheap room, go over my lines, and grab a good night's sleep before reading in the morning.

Regional actors are used to these journeys, but they're drudgery. Richard Jenkins asked me on a set once, "Is it true you guys drive hundreds of miles to read down there?" To him it sounded like a military mission, and he wasn't far off. I'd made round trips on the same day as the audition, driving home afterward to save money, which always seemed pointless. When I arrived at the interview after eight hours on the road, my head was mush and I didn't have a prayer of getting the part. Casting would look at me quizzically like, what the hell's wrong with you? I'd drive home frustrated and pissed off, babbling to myself, pounding the dash and cackling out of my mind, doing far better work in the car than I'd done in the audition.

This is before cell phones, so if there's car trouble I'm at the mercy of the road. The first stretch out of Atlanta is a monotonous corridor of rolling highway and unbroken tree line for a hundred and fifty miles through Augusta toward Columbia. It's late September and the leaves are turning, blue sky lifting and falling against gas stations, fast food restaurants, and fireworks billboards. I have a couple of peanut-butter sandwiches, an apple, a banana and a Thermos of coffee, and I eat while listening to Atlanta stations fading, putting on some *War*, thinking about my wife and two boys, two and eight. I don't like to be apart from them. Business is business, you have to do it, but you'll never convince me there's anything natural about it. I feel more like this when I'm broke and have to spend the little I have to drive hundreds of miles from my family without any assurance it'll pay off. There's not enough work in town, so I go where it is; I'm the hunter-gatherer, the fisherman heading to sea. I love my vocation and know I'm good at it, but trying to land it can be a lonely process. But hell, I'm a writer too, so I must love something about being alone.

When I gas up near Darlington, the car won't restart. Lovely, I think—then it sputters to life, and I say a prayer I won't get stranded on the road hundreds of miles from my family and not even get to read for the man. I wonder if he'd ever been broke with car trouble and trying to

get acting work. Then I remember that was everyday business for Hopper. When he crossed Henry Hathaway, the old director had him banned from Hollywood for years. No one would hire him. Everybody got kicked around by somebody, and as one of the *enfant terribles* of modern filmmaking, nicknamed “Dennis the Menace,” Hopper’d made himself a human soccer ball until he was making his own pictures. Just get me there and back, I think, let me deal with car issues when I get home. I have enough cash for the cheap room and food, and my wife’s loaned me her Chevron card; if I had a credit card, it’d be maxed out already.

As soon as I hit I-95, the signs for South of the Border start up, a Mexican theme park just south of the North and South Carolina line. Sombreros and clichéd cheesy little mustached grinning Mexicans with chili necklaces barking at you from an endless string of trashy billboards. For fifty miles these bright garish signs blot out the landscape, which is more interesting now. Then I cross the Little Pee Dee River, which makes me miss my baby boy. who’ll have no comprehension of why I’m not home tonight. Then I see the phony sad Mexican theme park off to my right like a city from fake hell, spinning sombrero rides and towers and restaurants with orange and yellow and black sombrero roofs, giant strings of chilis everywhere, and though I can’t make out a soul there, I’m sure a few people are gobbling frozen bean burritos to the tune of piped-in Mexican standards.

I watch for Lumberton signs and my turn onto State Highway 74 for the last ninety-mile jaunt east to Wilmington as the light’s fading. *Blue Velvet* was shot in Wilmington, which David Lynch called Lumberton, showing the big lumber trucks all through the movie loaded with trees, a radio DJ hawking, “*Time to get up, woodchucks, and get those chainsaws revving, a beautiful day for lumbering!*” As soon as I hit 74, the trucks are pounding past me heading the other way. It’s a split four-lane for a while, which narrows to two lanes, and I’m in farm country with wide stretches of fields and ramshackle houses and barns in the middle of withering crops, falling down, leaning, glorified piles of lumber that saw the Civil War. A poor, humble, beat-up landscape.

I’m in good spirits on my last leg, running lines for tomorrow, an Air Force General I’m reading for, and another throwaway role, when my car starts to sputter and lose power. Finally it’s not firing at all and I pump the gas, begging it to go, and it gives out completely, and cuts off

so I have to muscle it without power steering onto the shoulder. Oh hell, I think, sitting a minute, trying to revive it, looking off into the dark swampy trees. Twenty minutes of light left and I'm stranded on a desolate bleak highway rived only by the Tamiami Trail I hitchhiked up one night with a friend out of Miami, so dark you couldn't see your hand.

This is bad though. It's the highway Michael Jordan's father would be murdered on years later when he stops to take a nap, or maybe just had car trouble. Every few minutes one of those thundering lumber trucks from *Blue Velvet* comes rumbling by, blowing me back a few feet, peppering me with debris and dust, the drivers not even glancing at me. Am I screwed? I've come all this way to be stuck here with a 10 A.M. call to read for Hopper in the morning. If I don't get there on time, the trip's shot and I have to fix my car and limp home defeated. Dues make you a better actor, I tell myself; *of course* they do.

With a flashlight I tinker with the distributor cap, trying to dry it off inside. This was the problem before, but nothing I do gives a spark, and the battery slowly bogs down, and I'm desperate. At last light a local State Patrol car pulls up and a grinning, crew-cutted young officer says, "Havin' trouble?" and I've never been happier to see a cop. I tell him I need to get to Wilmington tonight and my car's shut down; he tells me to hop in, he'll run me over to Gabby's Gas in the next town.

"Old Gabby'll help you one way or another," he says, "This ain't the place to get broke down tonight. No tellin' who you'll run into on this bad man's highway."

In a few minutes we pull into a blue-plastered Pure Station from another time in a tiny town already closed down for the night. Some old character's yelling into his phone, slams it down, and the State Patrol kid introduces me to Gabby and tells him my problem. Gabby says, "Hell, I got nothing else to do tonight but go home and fight with my wife, I'll tow you to Wilmington, no problem!"

I tell him I don't have any cash but can write him a check and promise it'll be good, and he says, "I trust you; and if it ain't good, I'll come down to Georgia and take it out of your ass, how 'bout that?"

I thank him, say goodbye to the State Patrolman, and Gabby and I are headed over to pick up my car with his tow truck.

Gabby's about five foot six, with wild long wooly-white hair, and looks like a cross between Will Geer and Wild Bill Cody. He has no

A/C and growls and yells over the noise from his half-muffled engine, shaking his Lucky ashes out the window, George Jones droning on the radio. The side of his truck says, “GABBY’S GAS...YOU BLOW ‘EM...WE TOW EM!” He’s got the energy of a leprechaun, bouncing around the truck, rattling chains, hooking up the wench, lifting my car while he’s yelling he’d rather do this than go home and listen to his wife piss in his ear, and we barrel east again for the sixty-mile haul to Wilmington. I figure I’ll tow the car to my cheap motel, do the audition in the morning, then try to find a full-service Chevron for repairs, but Gabby says “Hell no, I’m finding you a place to fix your car *tonight*, I ain’t draggin’ you over here to leave you in some goddamn parking lot. You married?” he shouts above the roar of the truck, his hair flying back in the wind as we tear along the dark four-lane, his dispatch radio popping off static.

“Yeah,” I say, “Nine years. How ‘bout you?”

“Aw hell, been married three times; my second wife tried to kill me five years ago. Swore I’d never remarry but my third wife was too damn good in bed. *Readjusted* my thinking.”

Dennis Hopper’d love this guy, I think.

“My second wife was a wrestler, see. Got into an argument one night and she put me in a headlock and almost snapped my neck. Got two herniated discs.” He points to his ruddy vertebrae. “A torn meniscus in my right knee. Had to get a restraining order against the psycho bitch and she’s turned my daughter against me. Got kids?”

“Two boys, two and eight.”

“Yeah, well, once she’s got a kid with you she’s got you by the short hairs. Not just for Money. She can hurt you every which way. Your kid’s a part of you, see, and then she finagles that part of you against you and then you’re fucked, brother. Thank God for my new old lady. She likes to fight too, but what woman don’t?”

“How long you been drivin’?”

“Thirty-eight years this November, since I left the Navy. Driven three million miles in that time, give or take a hundred-thou. Think I’ll pick up a cold six-pack when we land over here for the trip back. Nice night for it.”

We cruise into Wilmington, passing the ghostly USS North Carolina docked for tourism, with its hundred-and-thirty-five guns lit up against the harbor, and I give Gabby directions to the Greentree Inn on

Market. It's a short walk to restaurants and a mile from the Screen Gems lot where I'm reading in the morning. As luck has it, a full-service Chevron's next door, and Gabby unhitches and drops my car off while I write him a check for eighty-five dollars.

"Give it three days and it's good as gold," I say. "My number's on there if there's any problem."

He peels a 16 oz. Pabst Blue Ribbon off his six-pack and hands it to me. "Fill up a hot bath, sip on this baby, get a good night's sleep, and go show Mr. Hopper what for in the mornin'. *Do it for Gabby*. Tell him I'll be in his damn movie if he needs a wiry old Navy man."

"You'd be the best thing in it," I tell him, meaning it. "Drive safe, Gabby."

"I'm indestructible, brother."

It's not exactly the way I'd planned to get here, but as I write a note for the mechanic telling him I'm next door, I know the angels are still with me. I check into the Greentree, which has crater-like monster potholes in the parking lot as if the place had been bombed, call home, and take Gabby's advice about the hot bath and cold beer. I toss around half the night dreaming a montage of my General's scene, flying along in Gabby's truck, and standing out on that desolate highway, stranded in *Blue Velvet* with Frank Booth, those damn lumber trucks plowing past me like dark rolling Leviathans.

In the morning I'm told I need a new distributor and they can have it done by noon. I eat at the Huddle House, focus on my roles for an hour, and start the short hike to the Screen Gems lot. It's a crisp fall morning, I'm feeling fresh, my car's being fixed, I'm reading for a notoriously eccentric Hollywood legend, and I'll be back in my own bed tonight, God willing. I check in at the guard station, sign in at casting, make sure I've got the right script, and join the nervous actors sitting in chairs along the hall, silently mouthing their scenes. A few actors drift out, looking flustered or relieved, then Dennis Hopper pops out wearing a tan sport jacket over a black T-shirt. He coolly shuffles down the hall. In a minute he strolls back with that relaxed, confident, cocky, short man's gait, a quick rhythmic swagger, and everyone mutters and chuckles when he steps inside.

Somebody goes in, I don't notice who, and five minutes later the door flies open, and a chunky black actor leaps out on one foot with a big sweating grin and a loud clap, dancing the Skate down the hall,

going, “All y’all can go on home now! *Yeah!* I got that one in the bag, baby! *I got it!*” He snaps and fist pumps. “Don’t even need to go in there. I got the part! Hell yeah, baby, Mr. Hopper done found his man, and it’s me! All you suckers can take a hike!” He’s completely sheened out, doing a combination James Brown-Ickey Shuffle that seems to go on endlessly. Men, women, children, black, white and Hispanic, watching this jive clown dance down the hall and turn the corner, yelling, “*I got it! Got the part, damn right!*” until he’s out of the building.

Of course he’s completely full of it. The lamest trick in the book’s trying to deflate your competition by making them think your part’s been cast, so you’ll lose focus and do a lousy audition. Casting rarely makes decisions while you’re in the room—not until they’ve seen everybody—so it’s silly, jive, bush-league bullshit. I have no idea what the fool’s reading for, but the vision of him popping out of that door, putting on that strutting little show, is a small actor’s perk, part of my own personal comical movie for the road. I never see this guy again in the real movie or anywhere else.

Finally my name’s called and I go in feeling exhilarated and relaxed, which is good. Obviously fate wanted me to be here, I think. There are no accidents. This can be the best part if you let it.

It’s a big room with seven or eight people, producers mostly, sitting behind two long L configured tables. Someone greets me and I hand him my headshots and wave hello to Dennis Hopper, remembering my instructions not to approach him. I have my tape in my briefcase just in case.

“What you doin’ for us today, Ron?” he says, and I tell him I’m reading the Air Force General. “Good, let’s see it. Go ahead, roll it.”

I run through the scene with the reader standing next to the camera. Leaning back in his chair, with his hands behind his head, Hopper tells me to take my time next take. I do it again.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s better, all right,” He half-shuts his eyes, leaning forward. “*This time.* This time I want you to do it the way Gene Hackman would do it. Do it like Gene Hackman would do it, yeah. *Yeah.* Do it like Gene Hackman this time.”

Is he joking? I wonder. He seems dead serious. I’ve had some unusual directions, but this is one of the strangest. Dennis Hopper’s telling me to do my role as if I’m Gene Hackman, his co-star in *Hoosiers*. It isn’t that I have a problem with the direction. I’ll do it like an ostrich

if he wants me to. And I'm crazy about Gene Hackman—who isn't? It just throws me for a second. I've never been told by a director to do a role as if you're some other star doing it—and this is a star telling me to do it. At the same time I'm chuckling inside. This is Dennis Hopper. Did I expect a normal audition? Sometimes directors give specific notes to see if an actor will follow directions—and I'm not bad at impersonations—and it's the spirit of the guy you're after anyway. So I give it my best shot.

"Not bad," he says, staring at me a minute, and I think he likes me. "You got anything else? Another role?"

I tell him I've got an MP role and I run through that once quickly, and he's sitting back in his chair again, leaning back on two legs, hands behind his head, nodding, saying "Okay, that's fine," and I think, what the hell, you've got some kind of connection maybe, who exactly made the rule anyway, and I take my tape out of my brief case and approach his table. He looks a little surprised as I walk up, and he stands very slowly, as if we're doing a scene together, reaching across for the tape as I hand it to him. For a few seconds we're staring at each other like we're in some kind of movie scene, and I'm thinking he's thinking, whoever this guy thinks he is I'll play along just to see what he does—sure, what the hell; and there's this moment, this brief suspension in time, when all the beautiful, insane, manic-headed, and off-the-wall crazy roles he's done well up into a few seconds for me, to show him I'm connected if by no other means but appreciation for his colors and originality and boldness and in general doing it his way and not giving a shit about anything else, and he gives back to me, a kind of awed respect at who I am, with a handshake, even if it's only just appreciating that I appreciate him—or else he's just amazed I'd have the balls to approach him like this—*didn't this guy get the memo?*—and he has respect for an actor who's not afraid to make a fool of himself since that's been his bread and butter his whole career. At the same time I'm thinking, I wasn't supposed to do this, was told not to; oh well, hell, it feels like I'm supposed to, so fuck it. Maybe he just thinks I'm insane to be approaching him and this is the best way to get rid of me, the way he stares at me, leaning forward, I can't tell, but I don't think so. No, we have a moment of some kind of recognition, whatever it is, and I mumble "It's a true pleasure." I thank him and everybody else in the room, and I'm out the door.

It's a funny feeling early in your career when you meet a kindred acting spirit, one you've known for years that didn't know you. Actors mean something to people not because they're more important, but because they've made themselves completely vulnerable and let people live and die through them. What an actor does is like a dream people carry around in their heads for years, and sometimes it explains your life to you better than anyone else could, explains life itself and makes sense of the nonsensical, lets you know that all of your nightmares and fears and awkward moments and heart-rending are shared by everyone, pulls everyone together in a scene that lets you laugh at the absurdity of every one of our lives. Actors have some of this too for other actors, but a whole lot more. It isn't star or celebrity worship, although everybody's got a little of that. You know these are just people who sweat, bleed, cry, have their hearts shattered and beaten down and die just like you do, and many of them have bigger problems *because* of who they are. It's like watching a great running back run in an open field. You think, I can do that, *I can see myself doing it*. You've been mentored by these people, been inspired many times, been told by their performances: look, you've got something you can do that nobody else can, it's as much yours as this is mine, so don't hold back—make it happen. I've paved new ground for you, let's see what you bring to the table. And for God sakes don't *bore* us!

I'm feeling high as I stroll back to the motel. I'd just done a damn good read for, entertained, even—one of the best real-life characters in the business. *Something* had happened in there, though to this day I couldn't tell you what. And now I'm heading home. My car's ready, it's early, and I'm on the road wondering what the hell Dennis Hopper thought when I handed him that crazy tape. He'd looked at it like it was some illuminated object, a mysterious charm or amulet—a gift to me just doing that—letting my tape have value for him for a few seconds because it obviously did for me.

A few weeks pass and I don't hear a thing. Gabby cashes my check and there's other work at home and after a while I'm let down, assuming I didn't get the part. Maybe approaching him did blow the whole audition, but I doubt it. He would've done the same thing. An actor has to deal with so much rejection he can't dwell long on one thing, but sometimes not getting a role will eat at you for months, and this one's a bit of a mystery.

When *Chasers* comes out in theaters I don't go see it. I wait until it pops up on cable. When I finally do see it I look closely for the parts I read for and they aren't in the movie. Which makes me feel better, but strange too, because all of that work and study and driving, breaking down, getting towed, car repairs, and everything else was done for ghosts of roles that weren't going to live anyway.

As time goes on, I realize this trip wasn't made for me to play some insignificant role in Dennis Hopper's film. It was for him to play a lasting one in mine. I sit back with a tall 16 oz. Pabst Blue Ribbon watching him run through his forgettable movie, playing a goofy, comical character named Doggie, driving a fat red Cadillac, and I laugh about being told by Dennis Hopper to "play it like Gene Hackman." Knowing he had a small independent movie in his head of me. Wondering what he thought of my tape—if he even looked at it.

In *The Last Movie*, Hopper tries to help a Mexican filmmaker make a western in which they use real bullets, and his character surreally gets killed making the thing, gets shot on camera filming a movie of a shootout. It didn't do very well at the box office, but it's one of my favorite Hopper films. It's a sort of signature film of his, a perfect metaphor for Hopper's surreal and dreamlike life. If films are an actor's life, what better way to die than to pretend to be shot on film and actually get shot and die there?

Someone once said, "We must follow the film wherever it takes us," and Hopper made his life like he made his movies, with total abandonment, insane commitment, and irreverence, breaking all the rules as a matter of course, becoming Hollywood's "greatest survivor." Considering he started huffing gasoline from his grandfather's truck at age seven, you have to marvel at how a career like his was possible.

The short film I have in my head of going to see the wild auteur was for me better than the film I went to read for. It was the real reason I went to read for him. It's not always about the celluloid film and our role in it, although we *think* it is, the permanent record and performance that everyone sees, that pays the bills. Sometimes it's about that odd little random piece of flickering brain footage that keeps on spinning out forever for us of the wildheaded people we spent time and space with, if only a few moments. People who had already changed our lives in unknown and derelict ways, as human beings, and film actors alike.



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The Horse Spoke

by Eamon Walsh

It was a Sunday morning. Two carriages set off from the small town of Babbitine toward the larger town of Broom. The two towns were twelve miles apart, separated in the middle stretch by a lake on the east of the track and desert on the west. The train ran four times a day, twice on a Sunday.

The first carriage held only one passenger, Sebastian Pori. He lived in Babbitine but, as on most Sundays, he was on his way to have dinner with his parents and younger sister in Broom. He was forward-facing and not happy with his life, not aware that he had just under twenty minutes of it to go. Sebastian Pori was unhappy because that morning his girlfriend of two years had ended their relationship. She told him that she was tired of him going with other women and making a fool of her around the town. He denied it, although they both knew it was true. He had slept with four other women in the time he had been going out with Eve Borum. Despite his reputation as a small-town gigolo, it was the first time any woman had taken exception in the way that Eve had. His mother liked Eve, and so did his sister, so he decided not to tell them, not yet at least.

The second carriage held only two people.

Cecile Aptos was riding backwards toward her end. She too had her complaints. One was that she had not been asked to be a bridesmaid at her friend's wedding. She had supposed that, after being friends with the bride from the age of four, she was certain to be asked. But no, two more recent friends were asked instead. One of them, the bride had barely known for a year. Her mood was not brightened by the fact that she was on this train rather than in bed, as would be more usual for her at this time on a Sunday morning, because her boss had asked her to cover for sickness at the beauty parlour where she worked. It was not the first time that she had had to cover for the sick person who, Cecile suspected, made more of her migraines than was reasonable.

Grenille Grand was seated, forward-facing on the opposite aisle to Cecile Aptos, next to the sliding door. She was nervous because she had an interview at eleven in Broom for a job in a supermarket. She wondered what they would do if she didn't get it. It was only her and her mother now, since their father had left them for his fancy-woman. And they were coming to the end of their state money. After that, it was vouchers and daily humiliations. She was desperate for the job and had spent money she didn't have on a new jacket.

The driver, also unaware that he was coming to the close of his life, was Paul Boem. He had been on standby that day and had been called in after his colleague didn't show up for his shift. Not expecting to be working, he had spent the previous evening in his local bar, not getting to his bed until after two. As they approached the section of raised track which bent west between the lake and the desert, he was thinking about a joke someone had told him. He was repeating it to himself, rehearsing it in advance of his own telling. It involved two men—rural types, with rural accents—and the sale of an old horse.

Within a mile of the wide arc, he should have eased the lever back and reduced the speed of the train from eighty to thirty. There was a 30 sign to remind the drivers, but as he approached it, he was reaching back into his jacket for his cigarettes. He was also trying to remember the run-up to the punchline. He knew that the horse spoke, and knew roughly what it had said, but when?

Sebastian Pori, Cecile Aptos, and Grenille Grand did not know each other but had all travelled on this train many times before. So, coming up to the lake, they knew that something was different, but they did not realise that it was the speed of the train; not until on the leftward curve they each felt themselves leaning away from their concerns and toward death.

Just before coming into contact with the seat in front of him, Sebastian Pori had decided to spread rumours about Eve Borum being a whore. She was not a whore, but he would tell people that he had ended it with her because she was selling herself to other men. It was a story which might bring his mother and sister round to his side.

Seconds before having her head crushed by the luggage-rack, Cecile Aptos decided that she would not attend her friend's wedding, and would not send any greetings. She decided that it would be too humiliating to play any part in the thing and that it would be better to cut

all ties with the bride. She would get herself other friends, friends who might be more loyal.

Grenille Grand, just prior to being thrown like a rag around the rolling carriage, said a short prayer. She prayed that the supermarket manager would be a woman, a kindly woman who would comment on her jacket and give her the job. She made a promise to herself and to God that she would go to mass for seven consecutive days if she got the job. She did not know what they would do if she did not.

Before the brake lever entered his chest, Paul Boem smiled as he remembered. The horse spoke after the buyer had asked three questions of the seller. Was the old horse still strong enough for farm work? Had it had any disease or injury? And was it an intelligent animal? Upon the last enquiry, the horse came in with the punchline. At the moment his life ended, Paul Boem was wondering if the horse, too, should have a rural accent.

For a long while, after those people and their concerns were taken with suddenness from the earth, the air creaked and was filled with dust. In the shale ten feet below the track, the train looked like a big animal taking a long time to settle. But then when everything was still again, silence returned to the lake and the desert. And the silence seemed profound and mysterious, as if what had just happened might mean something, rather than nothing.

After an hour or so, as if a respectful period had passed, a bird landed on the second carriage.

Then another, and then more.

Later, from many miles off, the sirens. Some sounded like they were coming from Babitine, some from Broom. They would come along the narrow track that runs alongside the lake. And they would see a line of birds watching them from the upturned train.

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EAMON WALSH is a writer of so far unpublished novels and occasionally published shorter fiction. He lives in the north-east of England.

The Burdening

by Gi Jariya

FADE IN:

INT. USED BOOKSTORE - BACK ROOM - DAY

OLIVIA, a 20-something freckled college student with a spunky wardrobe, and RUBY, an (older) 20-something tattooed bookstore owner, sit across from each other. Ruby is looking over Olivia's resume, as Olivia examines her tattoos—both arms are covered, with flowers, birds, a skull, and a few symbols Olivia doesn't recognize.

RUBY

Everything looks good here.
You've got great experience.

OLIVIA

Thanks.

RUBY

What interested you in
applying here, if you don't
mind my asking?

OLIVIA

(shifting nervously in her
seat)

Yeah, um, I have
fibromyalgia, which causes me
a lot of chronic pain, and I

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

thought this would be a low
stakes job that's not too
physical. And I've always
loved bookstores like this.

Ruby doesn't reply, but is looking at Olivia with
a relaxed, open expression on her face.

OLIVIA

Did I say something wrong?

RUBY

No, no, sorry. You're
perfect. I mean, you're
really pretty. I guess I got
distracted. How
unprofessional of me.

OLIVIA

(blushing)

No, don't worry about it.
Thank you. So are you.

RUBY

Well, now you're just being
polite.

OLIVIA

No, really, you're so pretty
it's...intimidating.

RUBY

(laughs)

Well, that's probably just
because I'm interviewing you
for a job. Which you
shouldn't worry about,

RUBY (CONT'D)

because I'd love to hire you,
Olivia.

OLIVIA

Really? Oh, thank you so
much. I really need this job.

RUBY

And I really need an
employee. And like I said—
you're perfect.

INT. BOOKSTORE - MORNING - FEW DAYS LATER

Olivia walks in for her first day on the job, making her way to the back room, where there is a makeshift kitchen—a counter with a sink and a small stove on which sits an espresso maker. Ruby has her back turned toward the counter when Olivia walks in.

OLIVIA

Hey, Ruby.

RUBY

(turning around)

Hey, you. Made you a coffee
for your first day.

OLIVIA

Oh! Thank you.

When Ruby hands over the steaming mug, their hands brush against each other. Olivia blushes, before raising it to her mouth and gently blowing on the liquid. She and Ruby maintain eye contact as she takes the first sip.

OLIVIA

Wow. That's really good.

RUBY

(holding her own mug)

Secret recipe.

A beat as they both take another sip.

RUBY

You ready for a tour?

INT. BOOKSTORE - CONTINUOUS

Olivia nods and drops her bag to the floor, following Ruby out of the back room. The store is yet to be opened, and they both clutch their coffees and periodically sip them as Ruby takes Olivia through the shelves, pointing out the categorical sections.

RUBY

My granddad left me the store about five years ago, in his will.

OLIVIA

Oh. I'm sorry.

RUBY

Don't be. We weren't really that close—he was kind of a weird guy. Books were pretty much the only thing we ever

RUBY (CONT'D)

had in common. He was an author, Luther Wainwright.

OLIVIA

I've never heard of him.

RUBY

Most people haven't. His book
should be around here
somewhere...oh, let me show
you the register.

Ruby leads Olivia to the cash register, where
they set their coffee mugs down. She pulls out
the chair for Olivia.

RUBY

Here, why don't you sit?

OLIVIA

Thank you.

RUBY

(leaning toward Olivia)
Okay, so—this is an ancient
register. The book prices are
written in pencil on the
first page, so you just
manually put it in, for
example...

Ruby grabs a book from the shelf to their right
and opens the cover, showing Olivia the price,
and then reaches over to punch it in the
register. When Ruby leans toward her, Olivia
looks at her, entranced.

RUBY

Then you just put it in here,
press 'tax' and then
'subtotal.' Then you punch in

RUBY (CONT'D)

how much they give you, and
the change will calculate for
you.

OLIVIA

(nervous laugh)

Good. I was worried about
that.

RUBY

You're so cute. I think we're
ready to open now. How do you
feel, Olivia?

OLIVIA

Good. Really good. I'm
excited.

Ruby squeezes Olivia's arm, affectionately.

RUBY

Good girl.

MONTAGE

Olivia getting the hang of her job.

Olivia rings customers up and makes small talk
with them.

Ruby holds a stack of books for Olivia as she
shelves them, the two of them laughing about
something.

Olivia helps customers to specific sections in
the store.

Ruby and Olivia squeeze past each other in the cramped aisles, Ruby affectionately touching Olivia's back.

The sun slowly sets outside.

END MONTAGE

The last customer leaves and Ruby flips the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED.

RUBY

All right. Ready to go upstairs?

OLIVIA

There's an upstairs?

RUBY

Oh yeah.

INT. UPSTAIRS RARE BOOK ROOM - NIGHT

The Rare Book Room is very different from the rest of the store. The books are older, dustier. Olivia and Ruby stand by a small table, where Ruby is lighting candles.

RUBY

The lights don't work up here, so we have to use these candelabras.

OLIVIA

Oh, okay. Wow.

RUBY

I know—makes it a bit creepy, doesn't it?

OLIVIA

You said it, not me.

As Ruby leads Olivia to the back of the room, Olivia takes in the details in awe: the old editions of books, the Persian rugs that overlap on the wood floors, multiple candelabras, the fact that the room gets darker the further they venture into it.

OLIVIA

This is incredible.

RUBY

(gesturing)

There's my granddad.

Olivia's gaze follows Ruby's to a portrait of Luther Wainwright, hung above a section of mystery books in a beautiful gold frame. The portrait looks as if he had sat for a painting, even though Olivia guessed he had to have been alive during the time of digital cameras.

His mouth is closer to a frown than a smile in the portrait, in which the artist had brilliantly emphasized the wrinkles set in his skin, especially around his mouth and eyes—eyes that were an unsettling blue, with a resting sense of disapproval in them.

OLIVIA

Seems like a charming guy.

Ruby laughs.

RUBY

Alright, here's the safe. The combination is 13-23-66.

RUBY (CONT'D)

Left, right, left. The bigger bills, like 50s and 100s, go in this drawer. The rest you put here, and record the drawer total on this clipboard.

OLIVIA

Got it. Okay.

RUBY

Yeah, and if you have any trouble, you can always reach me.

OLIVIA

(smiling)

Thank you. I really appreciate that.

RUBY

Oh! Here it is.

Ruby reaches past Olivia's shoulder and grabs a book from the shelf behind her. She only glances at it for a moment before handing it to Olivia.

RUBY

Grandad's book. I knew I had a copy. They went out of print a while back.

Olivia doesn't respond, because she can't peel her eyes away from the sickening cover. The book is titled *The Burdening*. The cover features a man's face, contorted in pain, splitting down the middle from widow's peak to chin. A black liquid is draining from the right eye, and a green snake

is slithering out of the left side of the mouth.
Olivia is visibly disturbed.

RUBY

Freaky, right?

OLIVIA

(still looking at it)

What's it about?

RUBY

Hell if I know. I tried
reading it a few times, but
my grandfather was not an
easy man to understand.

Olivia says nothing, simply handing it back to
Ruby, who puts it back on the shelf, front-
facing. Olivia can't keep her eyes off of the
cover.

RUBY

Now I remember putting it up
here a few years ago. It's
one of the last copies that
exists and I just don't have
the heart to sell it... but
feel free to borrow it, if it
interests you.

OLIVIA

Yeah, I think I'm good.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - NIGHT

Ruby shows Olivia the proper way to lock the
door. Olivia stuffs her hands in her coat
pockets. It is cold enough to see their breath
in the air.

RUBY

And here is your very own
key.

OLIVIA

Why, thank you.

Their hands touch during the exchange.

RUBY

Where did you park? I'll walk
you to your car.

OLIVIA

Oh, no. You really don't have
to do that.

RUBY

Please, I insist.

OLIVIA

Okay.

They begin to walk in the direction Olivia parked, their difference in height apparent in the dim street light. Olivia has to crane her neck up when she talks to Ruby, but that doesn't stop her from doing it.

RUBY

Besides, what if something
were to happen to you? Then
I'd have to go and hire a new
employee.

Olivia laughs, their shoulders just barely
bumping.

RUBY

(laughing)

What? It's a lot of work!

OLIVIA

Well, I am glad you picked me.

RUBY

Me too. You were really good company today.

OLIVIA

Thanks. I had a really good time.

RUBY

Me too! Too bad from now on you'll be running the store on your own.

A silence falls between them as they reach Olivia's green Subaru. She opens the driver side door but doesn't get in, glancing at Ruby over the top of the car.

RUBY

Well, I'm just a phone call away, if you need anything.

(pause)

Or if you just want to get together.

OLIVIA

Okay. Thank you, Ruby. I better get home—I'm a little beat.

RUBY

Okay, rest up. Have a good
night, Olivia.

OLIVIA

You too.

Olivia gets in her car, turns the key and starts the engine. When she pulls out of the dark parking lot, Ruby is nowhere in sight.

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY - FEW DAYS LATER

Olivia arrives for her first official shift. Ruby has already shouldered her bag to leave when Olivia reaches the back room.

RUBY

Hey, Olivia. I'd love to stay
and chat, but I have to go
meet with a seller.

OLIVIA

Oh, no worries.

RUBY

Any last-minute questions
before I go?

OLIVIA

Um, I don't think so. But I'm
sure I'll think of at least
ten the minute you walk out
the door.

RUBY

(laughs)

I'm sure you'll be fine. Call
me if you need anything.

RUBY (CONT'D)

Oh, and I made you another
coffee.

OLIVIA

Oh my gosh, thank you.

RUBY

I have to take care of my
employee!

Olivia smiles.

RUBY

Okay. Gotta run.

They say goodbye. Olivia takes her mug of coffee and sits behind the register. She looks around her, at the dusty first editions that are stacked to her left, the leather-bound classics to her right. She takes a long sip of coffee and a deep breath. She is ready.

MONTAGE

Olivia running the store on her own.

She rings up customers at the register, chatting with them.

She shelves books, this time holding the stack herself.

She leads customers to specific sections in the store, smiling as they thank her.

She finishes the coffee Ruby made her.

She checks the time on her phone, to see that it's closing time. She marks her page in the book she was reading and sets it down.

END MONTAGE

Olivia stands up from her seat behind the register, and almost passes out. She grabs onto the counter for support, squeezes her eyes shut, and regains her balance.

Shaking it off, she tidies up the area, rinses out her mug in the sink of the back room. She counts the cash from the register, records it, and grabs the key to upstairs.

INT. UPSTAIRS - RARE BOOK ROOM - NIGHT

Olivia lights the candles carefully, constantly glancing around in the dim light. She quickly but carefully locks the money in the safe, making a point not to look at *The Burdening's* cover as she leaves, blows out the candles, makes her way down the carpeted stairs and locks the door behind her.

Back downstairs, she gathers her things from behind the register, putting them in her tote bag. A loud smack suddenly reverberates from somewhere inside the store, making Olivia jump. Shaking her head to herself, she grabs her key, shoulders her bag, and heads toward the front door.

Before she reaches the door, she freezes in her tracks, staring at the ground. *The Burdening* is laying on the floor, staring her in the face, directly blocking her path. Slowly, she bends down to pick it up and studies the horrifying

cover. Then she opens it, and on the first page are two words:

"HELLO, OLIVIA."

She gasps, a scream lodged in her throat. The book falls from her hands and back to the floor, causing another loud smack. She stares at the cover, the sickening image of the man's face splitting open down the middle.

Then, very carefully, Olivia uses the toe of her shoe to open the cover again, only to find a regular title page:

"THE BURDENING BY LUTHER WAINWRIGHT FIRST EDITION, 1913."

She sighs, picks up the book, and puts it on the nearest shelf. She takes one more look over her shoulder, but sees nothing else out of the ordinary. Then she locks up and leaves as quickly as she can.

INT. OLIVIA'S STUDIO APARTMENT - MORNING

Olivia sits propped up in her bed, her laptop open in front of her and her phone laying face up on speaker. MOM, the call reads. Sunlight streams in through her window, creating lines on her bed. On her computer she is Googling Luther Wainwright and his book.

MOM (V.O.)

So how's the job?

OLIVIA

It's good. Very manageable.
And I'm surrounded by books
all day, which is really fun.

MOM (V.O.)

Have you made friends with
your coworkers yet?

OLIVIA

I don't really have any; I
run the store on my own. But
my manager, Ruby, she's
really cool, and we—

MOM (V.O.)

Wait, what? She put you in
charge of the store by
yourself?

OLIVIA

Yeah. I close.

MOM (V.O.)

At night? Oh Olivia, I don't
think that's a good idea.

Olivia clicks on an article about Wainwright's death, the cover photo being the same as the portrait hung in the Rare Book Room. Olivia is paying more attention to the article than to her mother's voice.

MOM (V.O.)

It's probably dark when you
leave, isn't it? I worry
about you walking at night.

OLIVIA

There are plenty of
streetlights. Besides, I've
been a woman for 22 years,
Mom. And it's a really good
job. It's perfect for me. I'm
not going to give it up.

MOM (V.O.)

(sighing)

Okay.

A silence falls between them. Olivia clicks on
another article, a review of *The Burdening*, which
she learns was originally published November 23,
1913. She sips her tea.

MOM

Are you taking your medicine?

OLIVIA

(monotone)

Yes, mother.

MOM (V.O.)

Don't get smart with me. Do I
need to remind you how
expensive that medicine is?

OLIVIA

No, Mom. I know.

MOM (V.O.)

Good.

Olivia skims the book review, frowning at the
photo of the book cover at the top. She scrolls
down, and on the side, under SUGGESTED ARTICLES,
is this headline:

LUTHER WAINWRIGHT CONSPIRACY: THE BURDENING
BASED ON TRUE STORY.

She clicks on it, begins to read. The article mentions a conspiracy that Wainwright had written the book about his own life, that he came from a wretched and murderous family. Several words stand out: SUPERNATURAL, POSSESSION, GHOST, MURDER, BLOOD, DISFIGURED.

MOM (V.O.)

How's your, uh, friend?
Julie?

Olivia sighs, leans back in her bed, and picks up her phone, leaving it on speaker.

OLIVIA

Her name is Julia. And does
it actually pain you to say
the word girlfriend?

MOM (V.O.)

Fine. How is your girlfriend?

OLIVIA

Well, she's not my girlfriend
anymore, so I guess you're
off the hook with that one.

MOM (V.O.)

Oh.

OLIVIA

Yeah.

She looks to the left of her bed, at a small cardboard box labeled "Jules," with various books, records, clothes, and knick knacks. Olivia

tosses her phone onto the bed and focuses back on the article.

MOM (V.O.)

Can you please get something
to protect yourself at night?

OLIVIA

Sure. I gotta go, Mom.

MOM (V.O.)

Okay. Love you.

OLIVIA

Love you too. Bye.

She hangs up, and rubs her face in frustration. Pulling her laptop closer, Olivia orders a pocketknife with same-day delivery, then closes her computer.

Olivia sits up slowly, grimacing in pain as she hangs her legs off the side of the bed. She walks over to her closet, looks through her clothes for a moment before having to sit down again. She picks up her phone and calls Ruby.

INT. BACK ROOM OF BOOKSTORE - AFTERNOON

Ruby is in the bookstore's back room, scooping coffee grounds into the espresso maker. She answers the phone, and we cut back and forth between her and Olivia.

RUBY

Hello?

OLIVIA

Hey, Ruby. I'm really sorry
to do this, but I don't think
I can make it in today.

RUBY

(pointedly)

Oh.

OLIVIA

I know—it's last minute. I've
just been having these really
bad flare-ups, and—

RUBY

Okay. But next time I need
you to let me know sooner.

OLIVIA

I'm sorry, again. My
condition can be really
unpredictable—

RUBY

I don't need the whole story,
Olivia. Will I see you
tomorrow?

OLIVIA

(clearing her throat)

Um. Yeah. See you then.

Ruby hangs up.

INT. OLIVIA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Olivia looks at her phone, feeling unsettled.
Then she gets back in bed, picking up a book from
her nightstand.

The hands on her bedside clock move twice around.

INT. OLIVIA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

The clock ticks, Olivia lies in bed. She has fallen asleep while reading, her book laying open on her chest. She wakes to a knock on her door. Confused, she pulls herself out of bed and walks across toward the door, looking through the peephole before opening. On the other side is Ruby, holding a brown paper bag in one arm.

OLIVIA
(groggy)

Hi.

RUBY
Hey. I'm really sorry if I
was rude earlier, on the
phone. I brought a peace
offering. Soup.

A silence between them, as Olivia registers the situation. It's clear she's still waking up from her nap, and becomes suddenly aware that she is in her pajamas—a long t-shirt and a pair of men's boxers.

OLIVIA
Thank you. But you really
didn't have to come all the
way here.

RUBY
I also wanted to check on
you. Make sure you're okay.

Ruby looks past Olivia's shoulder and into her apartment, shifting awkwardly in the doorway.

OLIVIA

(hesitantly)

Do you want to come in?

RUBY

Sure. I won't bother you
long—how about I heat up the
soup for you?

Olivia shuts the door, watching Ruby shuffle into her tiny kitchen in the corner of her studio. Ruby sets the paper bag on the counter and takes off her coat, hanging it over the back of a chair.

RUBY

Where are your bowls?

OLIVIA

(pointing)

That cabinet.

Olivia watches, standing equidistant from the door and the kitchen, as Ruby finds a bowl and takes the soup out of the bag, pouring it with care. After Ruby puts the soup in the microwave for a minute, the two of them stand in silence, looking at each other smiling—Ruby's open, Olivia's cautious. When the microwave beeps, Ruby opens the utensil drawer on the first try and takes out a spoon. She places the bowl on one side of Olivia's tiny dining table, and takes the seat across from it.

OLIVIA

You're not having any?

RUBY

No, no. I made it for you!
Didn't even think to make

RUBY (CONT'D)

enough for myself...but don't
worry about me. I ate
already.

OLIVIA

Well can I get you anything?
Maybe some tea?

RUBY

Tea would be perfect.

Olivia fills up the kettle and places it on the burner. Then she sits across from Ruby, and looks down into the murky liquid-chicken noodle, she guesses.

OLIVIA

Really, Ruby. You didn't have
to—

RUBY

Oh, please. Stop it. You're
my friend! Friends take care
of their friends.

Olivia looks surprised to hear this, but smiles. She takes a bite of the soup, as Ruby watches.

OLIVIA

Wow, that's good.

RUBY

I'm glad you like it.

The tea kettle begins to whistle, and Olivia stands up. She hesitates, getting a head rush, and suddenly Ruby is at her side, holding her

elbow in one hand, the other placed on the Olivia's lower back.

RUBY

Woah, there. Why don't you sit? I can make my own tea.

OLIVIA

Okay.

Neither of them speak for a moment, as Olivia has more soup and Ruby opens cabinets, looking for mugs. She finds them, as well as the teabags, and carefully pours herself a cup.

RUBY

I'm sorry you've been feeling so bad.

OLIVIA

It's okay, I'm used to it.
It's just been really bad,
lately—migraines, nausea,
lightheadedness. Not symptoms
I usually have to this
degree.

RUBY

Wow. I'm so sorry.

OLIVIA

Yeah. And I'm a person who likes to be in control—sometimes it just feels like I have no control over my body.

RUBY

That must be scary.

OLIVIA

(meeting her eyes)

It is. You know, speaking of scary...something happened in the bookstore the other day.

RUBY

What do you mean?

OLIVIA

Well, I was leaving to lock up and somehow your grandfather's book ended up downstairs, and I guess it fell from somewhere, and it was directly blocking the door when I was leaving.

RUBY

Oh.

OLIVIA

Oh?

RUBY

What?

OLIVIA

Nothing, I guess I just thought that you'd have a bigger reaction...I mean, do you have more than one copy?

RUBY

Of *The Burdening*? No. Just the one by the safe upstairs. Maybe you just forgot bringing it down with you. Weren't you gonna borrow it?

Olivia says nothing, still confused, staring down into her near empty bowl.

RUBY

(laughing)

Or, you know, maybe it was my granddad. Sometimes he likes to visit, make sure things are in order.

OLIVIA

What do you mean?

RUBY

Aww, look at you. Relax, honey. There's nothing to be afraid of. That was probably just his way of greeting you.

INT. BOOKSTORE - NIGHT - BEGIN FLASHBACK

The book's title page reading: HELLO, OLIVIA.

INT. OLIVIA'S APARTMENT - END FLASHBACK

OLIVIA

Hmm.

RUBY

Did the soup help you feel better, at all?

OLIVIA

Actually, yeah. Despite learning that your grandfather is a ghost that haunts the store, I feel fine.

RUBY
(laughs)

Good. I'm glad.

They smile at each other. Ruby sips her tea.

OLIVIA
Why don't I put on some
music?

Olivia makes her way over to her turntable, which is surrounded by green milk crates filled with her records. She pulls out a Nina Simone record and puts it on, the needle creating that familiar crackling sound. Then she sits down on her bed. Ruby is still at the table, clutching her tea.

RUBY
Can I look through your
records?

OLIVIA
Be my guest.

Ruby crosses the room and places herself in front of one of the crates, her cup of tea placed next to her. Olivia watches, relaxed, as Ruby's dark red fingernails flip through her music, pulling out a record every now and then to study the album art.

RUBY
I really like this art.

Ruby pulls out The Cramps' *Smell of Female*, and takes a seat next to Olivia on the bed. She starts to point out the details of the album cover, but Olivia isn't listening, instead focusing on Ruby's red lips as she speaks.

RUBY

Hey. You okay?

OLIVIA

Mmhmm.

Gently, carefully, Ruby reaches to tuck a strand of Olivia's hair behind her ear. Their eyes meet.

OLIVIA

(softly)

Are you gonna kiss me?

RUBY

Do you want me to kiss you?

OLIVIA

(inhales)

Yes.

Ruby brings her hand to the side of Olivia's head and they kiss, slowly. Both women completely fall into each other. Ruby takes charge as her body hovers over Olivia's, the two of them laying down together on the bed.

The record continues to spin in the player. Nina Simone's *I Put A Spell on You* echoes through the room.

INT. OLIVIA'S APARTMENT - LATER

The needle has made it through Side A of the record, but it's still spinning, soundlessly. Olivia and Ruby are lying in bed, naked and facing each other. Olivia notices a tattoo on the inside of Ruby's forearm, of a snake eating its own tail.

OLIVIA

(tracing the tattoo with her
finger)
What's this about?

RUBY

It's called an Ouroboros. It
represents both the beginning
of time, and the end. As well
as the belief that chaos
envelops the world, and order
can only come out of chaos.

Olivia listens intently, but doesn't verbally
respond. Instead, she presses her mouth to the
snake on Ruby's skin, lingering in the moment.

OLIVIA

I've really been wanting to
do that with you.

RUBY

(smiling)
I don't believe you.

OLIVIA

Really? Did I not convince
you just now?

RUBY

(teasing)
Nope. You'll just have to
show me again.

OLIVIA

(blushing)
Mhmm. Okay.

Ruby leans forward and kisses Olivia again, just once but powerful. When they break apart, Olivia rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling.

OLIVIA

That was...

(she sighs)

I can't even put it into words.

RUBY

How do you feel?

Olivia turns back to face her. She can't seem to stop smiling.

OLIVIA

I feel... really good.
Startlingly good. Almost
like... I'm high, or
something. I don't know. But
I love it.

RUBY

Good.

INT. OLIVIA'S APARTMENT - MORNING

When Olivia wakes up, she's alone in her bed. It's clear she doesn't remember falling asleep. She checks her phone to find a text from Ruby:

Ruby: "Gone to open store. Last night was amazing. See you later. Also, brought in a package for you."

Olivia then spots the small brown package sitting atop her dining table. She pulls her t-shirt over her head and gets out of bed. She tears open the

box with kitchen scissors, and pulls out the pocketknife she ordered.

EXT/INT. BOOKSTORE - LATER THAT DAY

Olivia is visibly nervous as she heads into the bookstore, her bag shouldered. She makes her way through the shelves and into the back room, where Ruby is, her back turned, facing the counter.

OLIVIA

Hey.

Ruby turns around, her face lights up. She is holding a steaming mug of coffee.

RUBY

Hey, you.

Ruby effortlessly closes the distance between them, wrapping her free arm around Olivia's waist and kissing her tenderly. Olivia melts into it, her bag dropping to the floor.

RUBY

Alright, I gotta go.

Ruby hands Olivia the coffee and kisses her forehead, which naturally aligns with Ruby's mouth.

OLIVIA

Why so fast? Do you want to stay for a bit, and...hang out? Talk?

RUBY

I'd love to, but I have some important things to do,

RUBY (CONT'D)

business stuff. Nothing you
need to worry your pretty
little head about.

Ruby gives her another quick kiss before leaving her standing alone in the kitchen. Olivia quickly abandons her coffee on the counter and rummages through her bag, pulling out an old paperback. She rushes out of the room.

OLIVIA

Ruby, hold on! I brought you
this, just a book I think
you'd really...

Her voice trails off as she reaches the front entrance. Ruby is nowhere in sight, even when Olivia peeks out onto the sidewalk, looking both ways.

INT. BOOKSTORE - SAME DAY

Olivia is in the area behind the register, price tagging a set of new releases. A male customer walks up to the counter, ringing the little bell. He's on the older side, with brown skin and a white mustache. Olivia approaches the other side of the counter.

CUSTOMER

Hey, how ya doin' today?

OLIVIA

Not too bad, how about you?

CUSTOMER

Good. Good. Hey, is this for sale? I couldn't find a price.

Then he slides a book onto the counter, and Olivia finds herself staring at the cover of *The Burdening*. Her eyes widen, unable to look away.

CUSTOMER

Uh, miss?

OLIVIA

Yes? I'm sorry, um, no, I don't believe this is for sale.

CUSTOMER

Oh, okay. No worries.

OLIVIA

Can I ask—um, where did you find it?

CUSTOMER

(looking around)

You know, I can't remember. It was just the first thing I saw when I walked in. Couldn't walk away from that cover.

OLIVIA

(under her breath)

Yeah, I know what you mean.

The door of the store creaks, opening and shutting, as Olivia stays staring at the book. Slowly, she slides it closer, and opens the front

cover. It's just a normal title page. She exhales. She picks up the book, flipping through the pages.

The book was made with a flip book drawing of a snake, which slithers around the text as she flips through. She flips it over, and reads the synopsis:

"Wainwright's debut novel tells the story of a man with a torturous family history and a tragic fate ahead of him. He must kill in order to protect what he holds closest, even if that means risking everything."

Olivia gives the cover one last look. Then she moves toward the desk she was tagging books on, and places *The Burdening* in the drawer, slamming it shut. She goes back to tagging the books.

As she's finishing up, a few more customers enter—two women in their 60s or so, both wearing hats, giggling as they come in together. One of them inhales deeply, before saying, to her friend:

WOMAN

Ah, nothing like the smell of
a burdening.

Olivia freezes.

OLIVIA

Excuse me, what did you just
say?

WOMAN

I said, 'nothing like the
smell of a bookstore.'

OLIVIA

(nervous laugh)

Yeah.

WOMAN

Are you okay, dear?

Olivia straightens her spine, looking at the woman. She grabs a stack of the books from the desk, tucking them under her arm.

OLIVIA

Yes. Excuse me.

She moves around the counter and then around the two women, to the NEW FICTION section. She begins shelving the books, slowly, while taking deep breaths.

INT. BOOKSTORE - EVENING

Olivia is sitting at the chair in front of the register, bent over and lost in a paperback. A few lone customers wander around, mostly keeping to themselves. A moment or so after the last one of them leaves, a huge crashing sound causes Olivia to jump in her seat and drop her book.

She crouches down, fishing something out of her tote bag. It's the pocketknife—which she doesn't open, but hovers her thumb over the trigger. Slowly, she leaves the register area and creeps toward where she heard the noise.

As she steps into one of the aisles, her eyes land on a huge pile of books in the middle of the floor.

OLIVIA

Hello?

No answer. She walks over, still guarded, and looks at the bookcase. Two whole shelves are completely empty, but no other books look like they had been touched at all. Olivia quickly bends down and begins picking up the books, one by one. Her eyes glance over the covers, the author's names in large font. Stephen King. HP Lovecraft. Dean Koontz. Ray Bradbury. Mary Shelly. Olivia hesitates.

Slowly, she stands up, a pile of books clutched in her arms. She looks at the shelves they fell from.

And there's *The Burdening*, cover facing outward, matching her eye level. Below her, a placard that names the section: HORROR.

The books fall from her hands, clatter to the floor. She turns, runs back to the register, grabbing her phone. She calls Ruby, panting, phone anxiously pressed to her ear. It doesn't ring, and she realizes she has no service.

She grabs the store's old landline phone, opens Ruby's contact page in her phone. She dials the number, looking back and forth between the two phones, fingers trembling. Phone to ear. Nothing but static from the other end. She recklessly slams it back in the receiver.

Frantically, Olivia grabs her keys, locking the front door and flipping the sign to CLOSED. She quickly opens the register, grabbing all of the cash and tying it together with a rubber band.

She grabs the key to upstairs, and reaches in her pocket for—

her pocketknife is gone. Olivia pats down her other (empty) pockets before rushing back to the horror section, where the books are still scattered on the floor. And there it is, next to a copy of *The Shining*: her pocketknife.

INT. UPSTAIRS - RARE BOOK ROOM - SUNSET

Olivia moves quickly. Her hand shakes as she lights a match to light the candle she's holding, the cash tucked under her arm.

She carefully makes her way through the rare book room, beelining for the safe. She gets there with no trouble, sitting down to enter the combination.

13-23-66.

It doesn't open the first time. She anxiously tries it two more times before it finally wrenches open and she throws the cash in, not bothering to record it on the clipboard. Olivia slams the metal door shut, stands up, and turns around to leave.

And there it is, on the shelf behind her. *The Burdening*. She stares.

Then, she can't help herself—she's grabbing it off the shelf, opening to the first page. It reads:

RUN, OLIVIA.

SHE'S NO GOOD.

She snaps the book closed, squeezes her eyes shut, and takes a breath. She opens it again, and finds the same words. She thumbs through the rest of the pages—they're all blank.

OLIVIA

(whispering)

It's not real it's not real
it's not real it's not real
it's not real it's not
real...

She rips out the front page, crumpling it and letting it fall to the floor. Then she's ripping out chunks of pages at a time, throwing them to the floor at random. Soon she is surrounded by book pages, her feet buried beneath them. She rips and rips until she is left holding nothing but the clothbound cover. She takes one more look at it.

Olivia then opens her pocketknife with a click and carves at the man's face, targeting his eyes specifically. Panting, tears running down her cheeks, she drops what's left of the book to the floor and starts toward the exit.

There is a crunch of broken glass. Olivia stops in her tracks, looks down at her feet. Following the trail of shards, she slowly tilts her gaze up until it lands on the portrait of Luther Wainwright. She gasps.

His eyes have been blackened out, now dripping with ink, mimicking the cover of his own book. There's a seemingly real green snake slithering out of his mouth, still moving. The glass from the frame has been shattered, now gathered by Olivia's feet on the floor. Crying and shaking

now, she backs up, unable to tear her eyes from the portrait.

She steps backward onto the mess she had made of *The Burdening*, losing her balance when her foot meets the disfigured cover. She slips, falls backward toward the safe, which she hits the back of her head on as she falls.

Painfully, she tilts her head forward, impulsively reaching to feel for the spot she hit. Her fingers come away sticky with blood.

A slamming sound reverberates through the room. Olivia painfully pulls herself to her feet, takes a deep breath, and grasps her knife tightly in her right hand.

Books are now strewn across the floor of the aisles. Olivia holds her knife at the ready, just in front of her, as she steps over and around the fallen books. Some have fallen open, their pages crinkling under Olivia's boots. She stops at the end of the aisle, pressing her back against the dismembered shelves, taking deep, ragged breaths.

Someone walks on the other side of the shelf. She closes her eyes, inhales, and then quickly turns the corner.

Her pocketknife plunges into Ruby's stomach.

Olivia gasps, turns white with shock, her eyes wide and mouth dropped open, as she registers what she's done.

Ruby stumbles back, but catches her balance. Then Olivia watches as Ruby pulls the knife out of her

own stomach, wincing as she does so. She doesn't look at Olivia as she clutches the bloody knife in one hand, and hovers her other hand over her fresh wound. Her fingers move back and forth, almost in a dancing fashion.

Olivia watches, frozen, as the wound shrinks, the red pool of blood disappearing to only the stains that had gotten on her clothes. Ruby finally looks up at Olivia, and smiles. This smile is entirely different from the ones she had given Olivia the night before. It's sinister.

Olivia tries to speak, but nothing comes out but stuttering and murmurs. She looks from Ruby's face, shining in the candlelight, to the bloody knife, which is now turned in her direction.

RUBY

Hello, Olivia.

She takes a trembling step back, but Ruby simply matches it with a step forward.

RUBY

I noticed you didn't drink
your coffee today. Even after
I made it especially for you.

OLIVIA

W-what's happening right now?
I don't understand. You,
um... I...

RUBY

I've been spiking your
coffee, dear. Two parts
infatuation potion, one part
hallucinogen.

Ruby steps forward again, places her free hand on Olivia's cheek. Olivia flinches under the touch, but she's paralyzed with fear, doesn't move, doesn't speak. Ruby smiles again.

RUBY

The sixty-sixth employee I've had, and you lasted less than a month. I'm sorry it had to end this way, honey, I really am. You were one of my favorites.

Ruby then leans forward, kissing Olivia on the cheek, softly. Olivia doesn't have time to speak before Ruby plunges the pocketknife into her stomach, then pulls it out. She loses her balance, but Ruby catches her, the knife clanging to the floor.

Ruby holds Olivia gently. As they are lowering to the floor, Ruby positions Olivia on her lap, tenderly pushing hair from her face. She watches with a relaxed expression, Olivia's breaths sputter, slow, and then taper off. Ruby takes a deep, replenishing breath.

She looks up, her irises blood red.

CUT TO BLACK.



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The Call

by Kristina Ryan Tate

Her call came in the middle of the night, voice hoarse. “He threw us out,” she said. By *us*, she meant her and the baby.

“Bailey?” I asked, sitting up in bed. We hadn’t spoken in over a year. My boyfriend stirred beside me before settling back to sleep. It was dark, I guessed 2am. He and I both had class at 9am that day, me a writing class I was dreading, something I was foolishly “trying out,” and he the anthropology class he could sleep through and still ace; we were juniors at the university, 20 and 21.

“Can’t you call your grandma?” I asked, but I was already standing, putting on pants.

“Noooo...” Bailey said, a long drawn out moan. “You’re the only person I could think of.”

“I’m coming, baby,” I said reflexively, morphing into the teen I’d been with her, malleable, obedient. Moments later, I was climbing into my car, preparing to drive two hours across town. There’s something about the call of the motherless, we hear it in each other like a beacon. We answer it no matter what it takes from us.

* * *

It was weird to think of Bailey as a mother since neither of us had one. Except Bailey’s mother hadn’t chosen to leave like mine. She died when Bailey was ten, while she was giving birth to Bailey’s brother. The baby died too, leaving Bailey all alone with her grandparents, who were terrible religious fanatics who’d believed they could forge a path for Bailey that was different than her mother’s—teen pregnancy—through sheer control and prayer. How disappointed they must be.

I had little memory of my own mother. As a girl, I used to think she’d had a nervous breakdown—that’s what they told me. “Mom’s gone crazy.” I sang it, like the Eminem song, like it was no big deal, these

things happened. But as I got older, the loss had started to sharpen into jagged, unexpected pangs. Why did she leave? Whose fault was it? Things came back to me. Inexplicable things. Broken, misshapen memories without a clear beginning or end. One memory: she was cooking dinner when my father came home from work. Although I couldn't hear their words, I sensed tension in them. Then I was down the hall, huddled beneath the bottom mattress of my bunkbed, my brother in my arms. Then back in the kitchen, our mother cleaning tomato sauce from the cabinets. The kitchen was covered in it.

One day, she was gone, no explanation.

* * *

I found Bailey on the curb in the dark, her baby asleep in her arms.

"He wouldn't let you wait inside?" I asked as she climbed in. Bailey had eyes the color of trees, and her long blond hair was real, not bleached like other girls.

"No way, fuck that crazy mother fucker," she said, ducking into the car, the baby on her lap, only she wasn't a baby anymore, nearly two, limbs dangling across Bailey's stomach, a line of drool dribbling down her chin. She smelled like burnt strawberries.

Her name was Madison, and she was the daughter of a boy Bailey had dated in high school. Bailey had kept the pregnancy a secret from nearly everyone, including her grandparents, but not me. It was the end of senior year, and four months later, when she'd started college—enrolled on a volleyball scholarship—she was showing. The coach kicked her off the team, and her scholarship was revoked. That was how everyone else found out.

Her grandmother pushed Bailey to give the baby up for adoption. The two fought ruthlessly about it, until Bailey finally moved out and we lost touch. I didn't clench onto her back then. There was no fanfare to our friendship's end. I'd entered college, and our lives were different. But sometimes I saw scraps of her life on Facebook, a rant about the jerk she'd shacked up with, a poem to the guy who got away, images deleted, enough to piece together what might have happened, and a pang of understanding. She was searching for a man to fill that void.

“Every time he gets all shit faced, I got nowhere to go,” Bailey said. She held Madison tight against her chest—she didn’t have a car seat. “I’ll get my things later,” Bailey said, whispering, resolve in her voice.

Except for two canine teeth that stood out in front of the others, Bailey had a perfect face. A tiny nose, pointed chin, thin pink lips. She’d always hated those teeth, self-consciously closing her mouth over them, but I thought they were beautiful. They pushed her lips up just slightly, so that her smile was more particular than anyone else’s. It made her look younger, more innocent than she was. Even with the bruises I saw now.

“Thanks for nabbing me, Stevie,” Bailey said with something like affection.

“Of course.” I pulled onto the highway, my hands clammy at the wheel, a knot in the pit of my stomach. How could I abandon her when she had no place left to go?

* * *

Derek didn’t ask questions. He moved to the couch so that Bailey and I could have the bed, and we put Madison’s pack and play at the foot of it. In the morning, he and the baby played in the living room, the soft pings of her toys and Derek’s coos floating into my room, a little alarm clock Bailey slept right through.

“Laaaaaady,” Derek said when I stumbled out. I left Bailey asleep. The green hue of her bruised face had darkened into an ugly black and blue overnight.

On the couch, I curled my legs beneath me and leaned into him. Madison went to playing by herself, like she was used to being ignored.

Derek had his own apartment closer to campus, but in the two years we’d been dating, he rarely slept there. We’d met in anthropology class our Sophomore year. I’d taken it as a random science requirement for my Liberal Arts degree—I hated science, was terrible at even the social sciences—but anthropology was Derek’s major. He was thoughtful and kind, if occasionally boring, but my favorite thing about him was the way he went with the flow.

He said, of course it made sense for Bailey and Madison to stay.

Bailey took my car to pick up her things. She swore her ex would be at work, but I worried about her going alone.

“Seriously, Stevie, don’t be so dramatic,” she said, so I refrained from texting her all day. Still, my body was tense, my chest clenched into a kind of wrangled breath, until finally, I glimpsed my car in the parking lot when Derek dropped me off.

“Love ya,” I said half-heartedly, rushing out of the car.

“You’re home!” Bailey called from the kitchen. She was at the stove cooking. I recognized Hamburger Helper immediately.

I dropped my bags in my room, noting Bailey’s hair accessories in a bowl on my dresser. In the bathroom, her makeup was there too, stacked in a plastic set of drawers beside my own. I recognized beauty brands she’d turned me on to in high school back when we were inseparable. I’d leave my house at 5am to get to hers by 5:30am, riding my bike along the canal. I left my brother to explain my absence to our father who reputedly searched the house for me, dumbfounded, before giving up. Those days, we made fun of our father a lot, his inability to parent a running joke. “What a doofus,” my brother and I said to each other, mimicking his blank stare. He was a Golden Retriever, dumb but lovable.

Bailey and I made all sorts of plans back then. To attend college together, to move to another state where her grandmother and my father—her control and his neglect—couldn’t reach us. We said we’d sell everything we owned and move to Costa Rica. We said we’d become movie stars. We said we’d be models, but stars too, like Marilyn Monroe who “didn’t listen to anyone.” We’d be legendary for our beauty and our wily nature, like Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile. We promised each other forever, the kind of forever you only believe in during adolescence when dreams are all you have.

“Do you need help?” I said as I pulled open the fridge, pouring myself a beer. Bailey didn’t drink.

“No, you rest babe. I want to do this for you, for all you’ve done for me.” Madison was at her dad’s, Bailey explained. He had her every other week.

As I sat on the couch, I noticed other things: Madison’s toys organized neatly in the corner in little wicker baskets with labels, DVDs leaned against the TV, and on the bookshelf beside my Jane Austens and the Brontë sisters was a photograph of Bailey and me. Sixteen, maybe. She was clinging to me, one lanky arm wrapped around my neck, and on

her small, delicate face, that innocent-toothed smile. We held each other so tight.

* * *

It has come to our attention that there are persons living in the apartment who are not listed on the rental agreement, including a child.

Bailey handed me the letter before I was through the door. I tried to read while she bounced around the kitchen. It had been one month since she moved in and we'd settled into something of a routine, me returning from school every day to her with dinner prepared. It didn't actually bother me, all this time she spent here, like it was a home we shared.

Then my eyes landed on it: *All tenants must vacate immediately.*

"But it's ok," Bailey was saying, "I already found us another place and it's right across the street." She picked up my laptop and lifted it to my face while I stood in the apartment's crowded entryway, my backpack still on.

Madison was slapping an open palm against Bailey's bare knee. "Momma! Momma!"

"I'm getting kicked out?" I asked.

Bailey waved her hand, as though my concern were a pestering insect. "This place is two bedrooms, I'll be able to get my own bed, and the bathroom, my god wait until you see the bathroom. The living room has vaulted ceilings and a big open kitchen. Much more open than this place." Bailey swept her arm toward the kitchen where there were several steaming pots. She motioned for me to take the computer and she flitted over to tend to them.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why didn't the landlord call me?" I dropped my bag and slumped down at the kitchen table. I could have explained the situation, could have told him that it was only temporary, that I was helping a friend in trouble. "He can't just kick me out. I have rights."

Bailey sat down too, tapping the computer screen insistently. "Stevie, look at the pictures of this place." She perched her elbows on the table, a red bandana in her hair. The weather had finally turned cold, the desert flowers closing and the cicadas leaving for what would be a very short winter, but Bailey still dressed like it was a hundred degrees. She wore tiny spandex shorts like those we'd worn to volleyball practice

in high school, and the evil eye tattoo she'd gotten at 16 poked out from underneath. I'd gone with her to get that tattoo, the two of us marching into the parlor clutching our fake IDs. Afterward Bailey had passed out when she tried to stand up, her body dropping like the rope that held her upward had spontaneously been cut. I caught her. It caused so much drama that I didn't end up getting a tattoo at all. Instead, I held her hand while the beefy tattoo artist fed her crackers and water, until the color came back to her face. She was anemic, she'd explained later with a laugh, and I remembered wondering how weird it was that I didn't know that about her.

"We can move," Bailey said, her voice like a velvet blanket.

"I don't know, Bae. This is a popular neighborhood. There's probably a lot of people in line for this." It had taken me months to secure this apartment. Months of providing all sorts of documents, proof of credit, my college enrollment transcripts to explain why I didn't work full time, letters of recommendation from previous landlords. I told her I would call the landlord the next day to explain our situation. Surely, he'd understand.

"There aren't any other applicants yet," Bailey said, "and I told the woman we're terrific."

"You already talked to someone?" I said, impressed. Finally, I looked at the computer Bailey was holding. I wasn't used to someone else doing all the legwork. The rent was comparable, and it would be nice to have another bedroom. The living room had skylights that flooded the room with natural light. Barstools lined the kitchen counter, a modern touch that I loved.

Madison became more insistent, slapping both of our knees now. "Momma! Momma!"

Bailey jumped up and swung Madison into her arms. "She says it's ours if we sign a lease tonight."

My mind flicked through family dinners in a big open space rather than the cramped kitchen table where we ate now. "It does look nice," I said.

"There's just one thing," Bailey said, smiling nervously, "I don't have any credit."

* * *

We couldn't afford professional movers, so Bailey had the brilliant idea to enlist the Mormon church's help. "There are a million do-gooders," she said.

Sure enough, a troop of teenage boys showed up. Missionaries, we learned. They were mostly quiet and mild-tempered, grabbing anything Bailey pointed at. "Take that," she said, "and that." She took garbage bags from my hands before they were full. "It doesn't need to be organized," she kept saying, scolding me like she would the freshmen on our volleyball team. She was brazen, and controlling, and I'd always listened. It was part of why we had gotten along.

"Be careful!" I told the boys. They man-handled the tv from my bedroom with the built-in VCR that Derek and I used to use to watch porn before Bailey and Madison moved in. Now, it had been weeks since I'd called him. They carried Madison's toys in handfuls, giggling as they ran across the parking lot, making a game of it. In the bathroom, Bailey swept her arm across the counter, dumping everything into a bag, whether it was hers or mine. The whole thing took an hour.

Afterward, I did a final sweep of the apartment. It was dark and sad in its emptiness. How had I never noticed that before? How lonely the place seemed with no one in it.

* * *

Bailey had furniture in storage and one day three dudes showed up with a truck load. She stood in the door in nothing but a white tank top and boxer shorts, directing them to place things here and there. She had a massive wrap around couch that made my love seat look puny. "Get rid of it," she said, guiding mine to the curb.

I didn't fight her. She hung pictures on the wall, of beaches and clouds, of Madison, and for one blissful month, I liked it, loved it, even. I'd underestimated how much pleasure it would give me to come home to a house full of life, food prepared without my asking, care taken to select what I liked—tacos over burritos, everything really spicy—I hadn't had anything like that before. It felt like what home was supposed to be, with a mother there, and I fell into it, freefall.

* * *

My 21st birthday landed on a Saturday a few weeks later. Bailey still didn't have a job, but she'd started babysitting the neighbor boy, Dillon who had a lisp and called Bailey just "Lee." She insisted on the limo. She said she'd pay me back. It was five chicks and Derek. He brought flowers and cake.

When everyone went home, and I finally got Derek to bed, Bailey and I sat at the dining table, using our fingers to eat the rest of the red velvet cake. It said: *Happy Birthday My Lady* in cream cheese frosting.

"At least he has good taste in cake," Bailey said, her mouth full. I nodded. "It's my favorite."

Bailey shoved a large bite into her mouth. "My Lady," she said jokingly, but there was something sinister behind it. Her voice drew out "my" like the grind of a car engine that wouldn't start.

"Please." I rolled my eyes.

"No, seriously, it's cute. He's like your puppy." She leaned back and propped a lanky leg on the table. "Lady, do you need more to drink? Lady, be careful. Lady, I'll take care of you."

"Shut up." I tried to mask laughter. "He means well," I said, more to myself than her, and he did, I knew he did. But after that, Derek's kindness started to wear on me. Although I knew what was happening—that Bailey was impressing upon me a response to Derek that I'd never had before, that might not even be true—I couldn't make it stop.

* * *

While I was at school, Bailey erected a Christmas tree in our living room. The apartment smelled like cookies, and I picked up a candle from the end table to sniff it—cinnamon, pungent and sharp. I pinched the tree's branches between my fingers. They were plastic. I hated Christmas. It had always reminded me of my mother's absence, the way she wasn't around to bake pies, wrap presents, or sing Christmas songs like other mothers. "That's all a bunch of bullshit, Jesus isn't real," I remembered saying to my friends. It was easier that way, not to believe in anything. I liked it more now that Bailey was here. It was a reason for giving, that's what I needed

"Ah good, you're finally here!" Bailey said, emerging from the hallway barefoot, the baby trailing after her. Madison's hair was matted

against her face, sticky with something, probably food, and Bailey wiped it with her palm, pushing the hair behind Madison's ears. At the same time, she launched into an explanation. "I know you hate this sort of thing—you're always saying Christmas sucks, a mean old Scrooge—but I don't want Madison to inherit your disdain."

I laughed. When had she begun to talk about Madison as though she were a baby we shared? "It's cool," I said, actually meaning it. I sat on the couch and bounced Madison on my knee. She bloomed into a smile, her one baby tooth shining white against the soft pink of her gums. "Peweeeee, Madison you stink. Did you do a stinky?"

Bailey sat cross-legged on the floor in front of us. She was wearing a sweater that was too big, black with a torn collar. "Is that mine?" I asked.

"I'm going back to work," she said, ignoring me. "On the weeks Madison is with her dad." She leaned back on her hands, reminding me of the lanky teen she'd been, bobbing around on bony limbs.

"Where?" I said, surprised but pleased. She hadn't talked about work—real work—in all these months.

Madison's diaper was getting smellier. Poop mingling with the cinnamon candle. "I think you should change her," I said, holding Madison out to her.

Bailey didn't immediately take her. She stayed where she was, leaned back in the chair of her body. "I'm going to work at the club," she said.

"What club?" I set Madison down on the floor instead.

"You know, the club. I've been talking to some of the girls, and they said I could strip. And I think I can do it." Bailey sat forward now, excitedly pulling Madison onto her lap. "Don't make that face. My body is still really fucking sexy."

I nodded enthusiastically. "Of course it is!" Her body had bounced back after having Madison like any 18-year-old's would, leaving only a few stretch marks beneath the evil eye, but the club hardly seemed like a good place for her. In high school, Bailey had gone through a period of severe anxiety made worse by drinking. One night, I'd crouched in the bathroom of a party with her for three hours while she wrangled a panic attack. Even then, I'd convinced myself that I was the salve she needed, that I alone could protect her. "What about Dillon? Who will watch him?" I asked.

Bailey recoiled. “Not you too.” She gathered Madison and strutted down the hall.

“No,” I said after her. “I just mean that strip clubs are crazy. Isn’t there a lot of drinking?” I was talking to the hallway. Bailey had disappeared down it with Madison on her hip.

I went to the sink to fill a cup with water. *She never listens to me*, a voice in my head said. *At least she’ll be working*, I told that voice. In the new apartment, we’d put everything in my name—the lease, electricity, garbage, internet—and for the past two months, she hadn’t pitched in for any of it.

The faucet squeaked as I turned it on. The water poured down the drain, smooth and clear, unimpeded by the rubber stopper that normally caught food before it hit the disposal. It took me a minute to figure out what was missing.

“Bailey!” I called, at the same time sticking my hand through the hole. My fingers found the place where the rubber used to be, the edges jagged like torn orange peel. “What happened to the drain stopper?”

“Oh, that fucking thing,” Bailey called from the bedroom. Her voice sounded like it was coming from an out of tune radio, off by a frequency so that it was scratchy and far away. “Madison’s toy was underneath it, so I cut it out.”

* * *

“She goes by Candy,” Bailey explained after Christmas. Some chick, *Candy*, sat beside her on the couch. Her real name was Debbie? Brenda? A girl we’d vaguely known in high school. She’d traveled with a different group back then, the preppies if I remembered correctly. She’d transferred mid-way through, and none of us saw her again, at least I’d thought.

“She’s going to stay with us,” Bailey said. I gathered that they worked together at the club. Maybe it was Candy who had roped Bailey into it.

The two were wearing matching Juicy Couture sweat suits, but Candy didn’t talk. Bailey did that for her.

I folded my arms across my chest. “For how long?” It didn’t occur to me that I could say no.

Bailey laughed. "As long as she needs, like you helped me."

I unfolded my arms, shifting my body so that it appeared more open, turning my shoulders to face them on the couch. "Okay," I said slowly, trying to find the words that would be accepting, nonjudgmental, but inquisitive, boundary forming. Maybe this girl really did need help. "But what about—"

"I don't know why you're being like this," Bailey snapped. She tapped a manicured nail on her knee. They were long, shiny acrylics, a few had jewels on the tips. They looked expensive.

"What am I being like?" I asked. My chest tightened and heat was rising in my cheeks.

"Difficult." Bailey stood and grabbed her cigarettes from the coffee table, the bedazzled "Juicy," glinting across her ass as she walked outside. Smoking. It was her newest habit. She claimed she only did it on the weeks that Madison was with her dad, but Madison hardly stayed with us anymore and Bailey always smelled like smoke. An awful pungent odor that clung to her hair, her fingers, the seats of the Honda she'd suddenly showed up with one day. Candy stood too. She followed Bailey out onto the patio where the two passed a cigarette back and forth, glancing in at me through the glass.

* * *

When my things started to go missing, that was the final straw. First my cell phone charger, then the blow dryer, and eventually some of my jewelry, too. I cried to Derek and he held me. When the warmth of his hands finally calmed me, I lifted my head and tried to kiss him, but he pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't go back and forth like this." He was right. It wasn't fair to him, but I felt that rejection like a blow to the stomach. It left me empty, a hollow vessel of nothing, except rage.

After I moved out, I came back. Again and again, to collect rent. To check on the apartment that was still in my name. The events which lead me to where I am standing today.

"Bailey!" I scream. "I know you're in there. Let me in!" My voice is turning hoarse, my arms are tired, but I am rooted to this place. Hardened with resolve and maybe hate. I will get into this apartment if it's the last thing I do.

I hear voices, *multiple* voices. “Who’s in there with you?” I scream at the closed door, and the voices cease. I move to the window. Although the blinds are shut, there’s a small crack between them. “Bailey, I can see you,” I lie. But then I do see something. The shadow of a body kneeling just past the couch.

I bang on the window. “Bailey! I see you. Let me in!” My knocks are insistent. “Please,” I say, “*Please* let me in.” I bang against the screen. The keys in my hand rip a hole in the mesh. At first, I have a vague feeling of regret—I’ll have to pay for that—but then, it emboldens me. I dig the keys in and rip. “Let. Me. The. fuck. In.” When there’s still no response, I turn to scour the ground for something hard. My eyes land on a big black rock. When my hand reaches it, I remember a night when my mother stood outside our house, screaming at my father to let her in. Had he locked her out? She picks up pebbles from the gravel yard, and tosses them one by one against the glass arcadia door. She must do this for hours, my brother and I inside listening to the soft clinks, until finally, something bigger comes sailing through, shattering the glass into a million clattering pieces.

Finally, the door clicks open. Like a gazelle, I leap toward it. “Are you crazy—” I shove past Bailey, who I barely recognize as the woman holding the door. Her face is streaked with makeup. A man on the couch, smoking a cigarette one leg crossed over the other like he’s watching a movie. A man behind the kitchen counter, a beer at his lips. Candy’s kneeling body.

“What the fuck is wrong with her?” I say. She’s folded over her knees, holding her stomach. It smells like weed, or maybe cigarettes.

“She’s not feeling well,” I barely hear Bailey say.

“Are you guys drunk? Drunk on my dime?” I see Bailey’s wallet on the kitchen counter. It’s a black Coach wallet with a large golden clasp. I’ve always thought it was gaudy. I grab it and wave it maniacally at her. “You owe me over a thousand dollars!” I start ripping out its content, pulling out credit cards, business cards, a condom, paper receipts and throw them on the floor.

“I don’t have any money,” Bailey keeps saying, pleading. She’s crying. “I told you, I have nothing.” The broken window is shimmering from the streetlamp behind her.

“Nothing! Nothing!” I’m rambling now. My face is fire hot, my heart beating fast. There’s five dollars in the main pocket and then,

hidden in a business card slot, two fifties. Our eyes lock. “Nothing?” I say. The green in her eyes is less like trees and more like emeralds surrounded by all that makeup, dark and smoldering. “You’ve been lying to me,” I say. I drop the wallet on the floor, on top of the mess of its contents. The guys have distanced themselves, moving to the patio to watch as though we’re the murmuring television set in their living room. I take several deep breaths in an attempt to calm down, to wrangle the Beowulf I’ve unleashed back inside, to bury her deep. To explain. Maybe even apologize. When I can’t, I flee. The door slams behind me.

Glass shakes loose from the window and clinks against the gravel beneath it, a faraway jingle I can't place until later.

I'm shaking in my car. I toss the \$100 from Bailey's wallet onto the passenger seat. It won't begin to cover the cost of what I've done here tonight, the torn screen, the broken window, my broken heart. I don't know how to explain to Bailey that it's not money I want. I put my hand on the center of my chest trying to ground myself, like Derek used to, and I drop my head against the steering wheel. I hate her. I need her. God, I miss her.

Tomorrow I'll call the utility companies and have everything shut off. I'll fend off Bailey's calls for weeks. "How dare you do this to me, Stevie. God will punish you for this. Leaving a woman and her child in a dark apartment with no air conditioning or water! In this heat!" God, I want to tell her, doesn't exist. He doesn't care about girls like us, and he isn't coming for anyone. But I don't. I don't answer her calls anymore at all.

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God Is Getting Old

by Brian Howlett

Confession at 8.

Superman doesn't bleed but Jesus does.

Tiny droplets of blood trailed down the Son's stomach from where the spear broke skin and stained the cloth that lay bunched around His hips.

Blood or not, Jesus would have destroyed most superheroes. He floats in the air like Dr. Strange. He can make someone rise from the dead and nobody outside the Marvel Universe can do that. He probably has a bunch of miracles we don't even know about.

Nathan knew he was right, even though he got in trouble with Ms. Van Zoutten when she caught him drawing a picture of Jesus fighting the Hulk. Better to keep these thoughts to himself. Nathan looked across to the large stained-glass window framing the other side of the altar. God. He had more muscles than Jesus. And was angry looking, like Thor's or Aquaman's father.

Jesus versus Superman? Jesus would win. But God? I'm not so sure. God has a lot of gray hair.

Nathan repositioned his knees on the hard bench, trying to find a soft spot in the wood. Before confession, you must kneel with head down and eyes closed while you wait your turn and make sure you remember all your sins. One of the fifty 'musts' to observe when you enter the heavy, slow-to-open doors of Holy Rosary Church. But Nathan couldn't resist stealing a glance at the twin stained-glass windows that were unveiled just last month and blessed by the archbishop at a special mass, after a long fundraising drive that even his family contributed to. Nathan didn't understand why an image of Jesus or God needed to be blessed.

The light above the confessional remained red. Maybe the light itself was blushing, like his mom said that he always did, as if it was embarrassed by the tale of sin being revealed inside.

He took two soft-cover hymnals and placed them under his knees. His mother didn't notice. She was reading the hardcover hymnal that belonged to their family, although she hadn't turned a page for several minutes. Some Holy Rosary families had their names embossed in the front cover for an extra cost. The Taylor family name was carefully written in ink.

The confessional light finally turned green. Mrs. Longo emerged, and Nathan couldn't help but wonder what transgressions this tiny woman needed to wash clean. Watering the lawn too much? Gossiping about the Houston family next door, who weren't Italian?

He took her place and as he closed the door the smell of tea and flowers remained behind her. This bench was nicely padded. The panel behind the screen slid open.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned." The next sentence didn't come.

"That's okay, son," the priest whispered. You don't talk in church. You whisper.

Father Stephen knew who he was. Nathan's older sister said that the priest could see through the thin wood screen.

"It's been eight weeks since my last confession."

But of course, Father Stephen knew that, too. Every young member of the parish was on the same confessional clock. The priest's breath filled the chamber, mixing with the smell of Mrs. Longo. It was the breath of God, his mother would say. Nathan paused again.

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

There was everything to be afraid of because Nathan had a whopper of a sin to share.

"I took a strawberry from Pirri's Fruit Market last week."

There, he said it. God and Jesus both knew that he had done it, and now Father Stephen knew it too. Nathan's cheeks flushed at the memory. He had no idea what came over him that day, walking home from school with his sister. She was ahead of him with her girlfriends, so it was just him and the strawberries. They were so plump. Bursting with red like a big piece of bubble gum. Laying in crates right there on the sidewalk.

"You mean you didn't pay for it?"

"No. No Father."

"So, you stole it."

“Yes, Father.”

“Stealing is a sin.”

That’s why I’m here.

“Is there anything else?”

“No, Father.”

The priest leaned closer to the screen and Nathan heard his whiskers bristling against the wood.

“Are you sure?”

Search hard enough, and you can always find another sin to confess. Nathan did not want to disappoint him. Father Stephen was his mother’s favourite priest.

“I threw a snowball at Mary Jane Bradshaw and hit her in the cheek.”

Father Stephen chuckled. “That’s just a snowball fight. I used to do the same thing when I was your age.”

“I put a rock in the center of it and I threw it pretty hard.”

“I see.”

Father Stephen held the pause. In a world of eternal damnation and salvation, time isn’t a concern.

“Do you like this girl?” His whiskers moved gently against the screen.

“No, Father. I mean, she’s nice. I don’t know why I did it.”

“The Bradshaws are a fine family. Have you apologized to her?”

Facing up to her would be more intimidating than facing the priest.

“You will. Tomorrow is Monday. You can do it before class.”

“Yes.”

“That will be eight Hail Mary’s and eight Act of Contrition’s.”

The panel behind the screen closed tight.

The Act of Contrition. Nathan could never remember the words to it. He was hoping for the Our Father instead. If you don’t get the words perfect when saying penance, that was another sin, and one more transgression to share at his next confession.

* * *

Confession at 12.

Red light. Green light.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been eight weeks since my last confession, and these are my sins.”

Nathan no longer had to look up at the priest’s silhouette on the other side of the screen. But being eye-to-eye was intimidating, so he leaned slightly away. He decided to get the big one out of the way.

“Me and Jonesy, Peter Jones, took Mr. Watson’s car for a drive last week.”

“Jonesy and I,” Father Stephen corrected. “And why would you do such a thing?”

Now that the sin was finally released, it was smaller. More manageable. “We just took it around the block. The key fob was in the front seat. Mr. Watson always leaves it there. I don’t know why.”

“So, it was his fault?”

“No, Father.”

“Stealing is a sin.”

“Yes. But we returned it in like ten minutes. Nobody even knew that we took it. And Jonesy drove the car, not me.”

“Blaming someone else is not God’s way.”

But Jonesy sinned, too!

“Yes, Father.”

“And God knows that you took it.”

“I know.”

Father Stephen took an unusually deep breath, as if to punctuate the magnitude of the transgression.

“How did you feel when you were driving this car that doesn’t belong to you, and that the law says you are too young to drive?”

He and Jonesy were scared but also excited. They couldn’t believe that no one noticed them taking it. Here they were, driving past all the neighbors’ houses just like adults. And Jonesy was a good driver. His older brother Lou had been teaching him. It was easy. Afterward, the two boys played back the episode over and over. Laughing. More impressed with each other than they had ever been.

“Scared, mostly.”

“You were scared because borrowing something without permission, even if you return it, is still stealing. Do you see that?”

“I do.” But he wasn’t sure that he did. *Why was it stealing? They hadn’t hurt anyone. They had hardly burned any of Mr. Watson’s gas.*

“God wanted you to be scared.”

Nathan couldn't argue with that. The God in Holy Rosary's stained-glass window was just waiting for you to mess up. You could see it in His face. When the sun shone down on it, the image was more vivid than that of any Cineplex screen.

“Is there anything else?”

Nathan paused. What was the point of telling Father about asking Pauline Lanzarotto to lift her shirt behind the bushes after school? She was happy to do it. And it wasn't nearly as bad as taking Mr. Watson's car. Besides, if God already knew that he had done it, why bother sharing it with Father Stephen?

“No, Father.”

“I see. That will be eight Hail Mary's and eight Act of Contrition's.”

Big surprise.

Nathan went back to the pew. His mother nodded as he kneeled beside her, happy to have her youngest child's soul cleansed once again. *Like a car wash.*

* * *

Confession at 16.

The blood dripping down Jesus' abdomen had turned pink. The weird halo around Mary Magdalene who was standing at his feet was more white than yellow. Jesus had been hanging on the cross for eight years now. In God's window, a small crack had appeared in one of the clouds beneath His left foot. The new priest, Father Lawrence, had announced a fundraising drive to refurbish Holy Rosary, work that would include a few replacement panels for the showpiece stained-glass windows. But how do you draw blood from a stone? More people in the parish were out of work, including some of Nathan's friends' parents. Last month, his mother accepted donations from the food bank for the first time.

He sat alone in the pew waiting for the confessional light to turn green. He didn't bother to kneel. He had been going to church without his mother since he turned fourteen and he had fallen into the habit of showing up for mass late and leaving early. Sitting in the poor people's pews at the very back of the church had its advantages.

What a story he had to share today. Luckily, he would be anonymous in the confessional. The priest had not yet met everyone in his flock.

How would Nathan start? He wasn't even sure how it all happened in the first place. It was Jonesy's older brother's idea. Nathan didn't have to go along with it, but Lou promised him there would be two hundred dollars in it for he and Jonesy.

The hardware store closed at six. By eight, the alley along the side of the store was deserted, and poorly lit. Lou easily jimmied the sliding barn doors at the loading bay open and didn't blink when the alarm sounded.

"We'll be gone in seconds. The stuff is right inside the door."

Nathan turned back to the alley.

"You think the cops care about this place?" Lou continued. "It's not like it's a bank or nothing."

Nathan followed them inside. The store was cavernous and only partially lit. Their footsteps rang out on the concrete floor, every echo a clarion call to the police.

"Right here, like I said." A wall of power tools spread out in front of them. "Just take the circular saws and power drills. And just the cordless one. They're more expensive."

The two brothers quickly removed several boxes from the shelf.

"Nathan!" hissed Jonesy.

"Look, they're already on sale," said Lou. "They're practically giving them away. Plus, they're probably insured, right. Rich people always cover their asses."

"You think this is the first time they've been robbed, Nathan?" added Jonesy. "They won't even feel it."

Two hundred dollars more than covered the cost of registration for the York Youth Football League, including equipment and the cool dark green team jackets that came personalized with your jersey number. Nathan knew he could make the team. He had grown three inches over the summer, was practicing every day, and did well at early tryouts.

Still, taking the first drill was difficult. The yellow Dewalts, lime green Ryobis, and siren red Milwaukee tools jumped out of the darkness, as if the bright colors would render the act of stealing even more obvious. By the time he made the third and final dump of tools into

the truck it was easier, and the boys moved fast. They were gone long before any cops showed up.

But imagine if they had got caught. Imagine how quickly that news would have spread in Holy Rosary. Good news travels slowly from the rich pews in front to the poor pews in back. But bad news travels like lightning from the back pews to the front.

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been thirty weeks since my last confession.” Nathan whispered, hoping that the priest might hear ‘thirteen’ rather than ‘thirty’. Nathan had started rounding down in counting the weeks between confessions. *How are you supposed to keep track, anyway? If the church is so concerned about accuracy, they should issue a confessional calendar.*

He brought his elbows in tight, in prayer formation, trying to find room in the confessional box that grew smaller every year.

“I went out for the football team and didn’t tell my mom.”

“I don’t think that is necessarily a sin, son. Did you try your best, and use the gifts that God gave you on the field?”

“I did.”

The priest nodded, slightly stirring the still, warm air in the confessional.

“Go on.”

“I borrowed the answers to a history quiz from a classmate. I didn’t even open the book.”

“I see. Is that all?”

“I took two dollars from my mom’s purse. But I put it back the next day.”

“Hmmm.”

“So it’s more like borrowing than stealing, isn’t it Father?”

Nathan was more relaxed with this new priest for some reason. Confession was becoming conversation.

“That’s a good question.”

But I did steal a truckload of tools, Nathan wanted to say. Then drank beers with Jonesy and Lou to celebrate.

“One that only God can answer, because only he knows what’s in your heart.”

They have preached that for years, but does He? And would God have been there for me if the cops did show up that night?

Nathan shuffled his knees. “That’s all, Father.”

“That will be ten Hail Mary’s, ten Our Father’s and ten Act of Contrition’s.”

Nathan didn’t bring his rosary beads to church, even though he knew he was saying confession. They remained strung on a picture nail over his bed; the tiny Jesus on the rosary doing His best to cast a divine spell in Nathan’s room. Nathan half-knelt in the pew and counted out the prayers on his fingers. At five Hail Mary’s, he stopped. God on the cracked cloud stared at him from behind the altar. He had the same gray beard, fierce eyes, and mouth curling down at the edges. But Nathan was eight years older.

And so was God.



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Meet Vomit

by Wolfgang Wright

The night before, a Saturday, Andy had gone to a house party, and after consuming nearly as much alcohol as he had blood in his veins, he wound up passing out on the living room floor—a hardwood floor, dinged up and ground into mulch after years of college student neglect, but still hard and unpleasant to sleep on. When he awoke early the next morning, his nocturnal drool having not yet dried, his head and neck ached, his elbow was bruised from an accident he couldn't recall—not that he could recall much of anything—and his bladder felt like a balloon about to pop. Using an armrest on the nearest piece of furniture, a maroon faux velvet sofa with a whale of a man beached across it, he managed to hoist himself up into a standing position, and from there dragged himself down a hallway into a bathroom where he urinated for what felt like the length of an average Tarantino film, ignoring as much as he was able the intense snoring emanating from behind the prismatic shower curtain. Afterward, he washed his hands in the mold-encrusted sink, but avoided sneaking a peek at himself in the medicine cabinet's toothpaste-bespeckled mirror, fearful of his own mien.

One of the current residents of the house, a chemistry postdoc with enough hair on his head to mop up a Denny's, was in the kitchen making breakfast, and though Andy had only popped in hoping to score a quick snack before slinking, preferably undetected, out the front door, his hairy host coaxed him into taking a seat at a severely-scratched green Formica table where, in another minute, he served up a double stack of pancakes with a side helping of freshly-cooked bacon. As Andy wolfed down the offering, tempering it with sips of Tang from a Minnesota Vikings travel mug, Bunsen—that was his host's name, his nickname anyway, Bunsen—graciously filled him in on how he'd black-and-blued his elbow, occasionally scattering in some other morsels about what he'd gotten up to during the evening, all of which Andy would have otherwise been happy to forget. Bunsen then went on to ask if he was headed

anywhere special today, and when Andy informed him that his only destination was the heavily-blanketed bed in his mouse trap of a dorm room, the chemist nodded and smiled like it was the first good decision he'd ever seen his weary guest make—and based on the report of last night's escapades, it was.

Once outside, the cool morning air pricking at his forehead, Andy ran. He'd been a cross-country runner in high school, along with several other sports, and he seemed to remember on more than one occasion overcoming a hangover by going for an early morning jog around the lake where he'd grown up. True, he was no longer in the same condition he'd been in as a senior, not to mention the fact that he was wearing a pair of chewed-up penny loafers, but his residence hall was only a couple of miles from the stoop he'd just stumbled down, and a remedy was a remedy, right? Roughly four blocks in, however, it occurred to him that it might not have been hangovers but bad moods that running had gotten him over, and that Bunsen, while acting the congenial host, may have added more than just blueberries to his pancakes. He was sick, and he knew that at any moment he might throw up, but as there was a wizened octogenarian nearby sweeping off his front porch, eyeing him as if he'd enjoy nothing more than to describe him to the local authorities were he to retch on someone's lawn, Andy chose to press it one more block and slip into the church he'd often cycled past on his way to pick up some French fries for his hot plate. Problem was, he'd never actually been inside the church before, and by the time he located the bathroom it was already too late. He hurled all over the handicap accessible sign, and after taking a sip of water from a rusty drinking fountain, went in search of the sanctuary, where he plopped down on a pew in back, ran his fingers through his sweaty hair, and waited for the cross in front to cease its merciless spinning.

A moment later a trio of co-eds decked out in their Sunday best came scuttling into the sanctuary and landed themselves in a pew several rows in front of him. Failing to catch wind of him at first, they kept on with their laughter and whatever they were talking about—something about what some animal was doing on one of their phones—until the broad-backed redhead on the right picked up on his groaning and glanced over her shoulder. After the initial surprise had worn off, she wrinkled up her beakish nose and whipped back to her friends to whisper about his presence. Soon all three were gaping at him, as if he were the animal

now, only instead of a cat playing a piano or a dog chasing a laser around the living room, he was a monkey in full heat masturbating at the zoo. Despite his compromised condition, and the fact that the cross in front had yet to steady, Andy decided to take their staring as a cue to leave, but his body was a heap of bricks, massive and unwieldy, and would not obey his instructions to get up.

“Are you here for the brunch?” the girl on the left asked suddenly, catching Andy off guard, who was shocked that any one of the three had dared to speak to him. Perhaps it was the acoustics of the room, or yet another residual effect of all the toxins in his gut, but her voice sounded strangely mellifluous, as if she were singing rather than speaking her words, and to get a better look at her, he brought his fingers up to his eyes and put some serious effort into digging out the sleep. And it was worth the effort, too, because when his vision finally cleared, he saw that she was beautiful, with big, circular eyes, soft, round cheeks, and hair that was done up in fluffy golden curls. What’s more, he could just see over the tops of the pews that her light blue dress was having all kinds of trouble trying to keep her breasts contained. But he was in no condition to flirt, and rather than double down on last night’s foolishness, he courteously declined her offer.

“No thanks,” he said, “I already ate.”

The other girls laughed and whispered back and forth at each other, but the one who’d spoken to him maintained her cool, and after a moment’s reflection, and a pointed warning from the mousy girl in the middle to watch out, he might be dangerous, she got up and came down the aisle, casually so, as if to give Andy every opportunity in the world to soak her in. Because of the blueness of her dress, and the white trim around the edges, including a white belt cinching her shapely waist, and her hair, her lovely, golden hair, he felt as if she were the sun and the sky descending upon him, coming closer so that he might better understand their universal mysteries and thereby get a grip on the meaning of life; and because of this, Andy could scarcely look away from her, but for one brief moment in which he grabbed a hymnal and used it to wipe a spot of regurgitated pancake from off the belly of his Air Jordan T-shirt.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” she said, rather confidently, after settling in next to him, and brought one leg up and tucked it under her skirt. She smiled at him, her glossy lips curling sweetly around a row of perfect teeth, and stared intently into his eyes, rarely breaking from

his own fixed gaze except here and there to glance slightly upwards, perhaps at his hair, which must have been a bird's nest. He considered combing it with his fingers, just to give it some shape, but was afraid that without a mirror he'd only make it worse. Instead, he kept his hands on his lap and tugged at the cuffs of his undershirt, alarmed by how much more alluring she was up close, now that he could make out the blueness of her eyes, the rosiness of her cheeks, and just how large her breasts really were.

"I haven't, I don't go to this church," he spluttered out, wondering about his breath, whether it smelled as bad as he imagined it, or if the scent of her flowery perfume was strong enough to cover it up.

"Where do you usually go?" she asked, lightly and without judgment, purely to know the answer. She also seemed to be trying to sit up a little taller, perhaps to minimize the distance between their heights and give the back of her neck a rest, and so he adjusted his own position, slouching a bit, to help her out.

"I don't, I haven't really gone to church since like eighth or ninth grade, whenever you get confirmed."

"Are you Lutheran?"

"How'd you know?"

"This is a Lutheran church."

"Yeah, but I didn't—oh, I get it, you were asking because—gotchya."

There was a slight pause, and then she said her name, first and last, as if there were a need for it. "I'm Amy Benson."

"Bunsen?"

"Benson. B-E-N-S-O-N."

"Oh, phew," he said, but didn't explain. Over the next few seconds, he repeated her name over and over again in his head—Amy Benson, Amy Benson, don't forget it, Amy Benson—and then he gave her his.

"So what brought you in here today, Andy?"

He swallowed, searching for a lie, but none was fast in coming. "I, I don't know. I guess I just, I was wandering by and I, I guess I just felt the urge to come in."

"Maybe the spirit of the Lord found you and compelled you to enter."

"I wouldn't say that exactly."

"I'm only kidding."

"Oh." He laughed, just a little, the right amount.

"Well we're always happy to see new faces." Her nostrils flared a bit, as if she were about to laugh, but she managed to stifle it. "Actually, this isn't my church either. I'm just attending here while I go to school."

"At the U?"

"You go there, too?"

"I'm a journalism major, and something else. You know, the one where you get so you can talk better to people."

"Communication."

"That's it." He was growing more comfortable with her, feeling like they were having an actual conversation, and that maybe he didn't look as bad as he was assuming. "I'm hoping to be a sportswriter, maybe cover the Vikings or else the Timberwolves, although the Twins wouldn't be so bad either, even though they sucked this year. And I guess if I had to, I'd report on the Wild as well, although I don't really like hockey because of how violent it is, although I guess football is violent, too." Now he was just rambling, saying anything that came to mind, but she seemed to be enjoying it, and snapped her fingers at him, a little too close to his nose.

"Andrew Schwanken!" she shouted. "Now I know you. I've read your stories in the paper. You cover the football team. You're a really good writer. I like how funny you are sometimes."

"Sometimes."

She laughed. "No, I didn't—my dad, he always takes sports so seriously, like they're a matter of life and death. But you talk about them like what they are."

"What are they?"

"You know, fun." She seemed to be on the brink of clarifying her remark, which to someone who was planning on devoting his whole life to sports might have sounded like a slam, when one of her friends, the redhead it sounded like, cleared her throat. They, her friends, were making their way toward the exit, and were waving at her to join them. "Shoot. I have to go now, Andy, to help set up. Say!" she exclaimed, leaning in and placing a hand on his thigh, sending a tingling sensation all throughout his body. "You could help, too!"

Staring at the hand, he said, "With, um, with what now exactly?"

Again, she stifled a laugh. “We’re setting up for brunch.”

“Oh. Oh!” Finally, everything seemed to make sense, and he would have loved to say yes to her, if only to see what her smile would look like when he did, or to see if she would give his thigh a squeeze, but the thought of being around a whole mass of breakfast food so soon after throwing up the same made his stomach churn again. “No, I, I don’t think so.”

She smiled anyway, a kind of bitter, half-cocked smile, as if she derived some kind of sick pleasure from having a man say no to her, though not so much that she would have him do it twice; then, without making a fuss of it, she draped her arm along the back of the pew behind him, leaned in even closer, and blew a breath out over his face. “Are you sure?”

“I just...I don’t think I’d actually be much help, because of the way I’m feeling and all.”

“And all?” Now she was just making fun of him, and when he failed to acknowledge her teasing—again, not because he didn’t want to, but because he was too ill to play along, she jumped up, seized him by the humerus, and yanked him to his feet, saying, “You never know, a little exercise might do you some good.”

She kept a tight, almost mannish grip on him as they made their way out of the sanctuary and into the vestibule, all in silence, except for a few remarks about the weather, but when they reached the stairs her hand slipped and caught his elbow, the one he’d injured last night, and because of the pain, he jerked away from her, putting his full bodyweight onto his other hand, which thankfully had taken hold of the banister, because otherwise he might have fallen down the stairs.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “did I—”

“It’s not you,” he rushed to say, then struggled a moment, trying to remember if the anecdote about how he’d hurt himself was appropriate for the time and place. “I was trying to crush a can with it,” he said, and he rolled up his sleeve to show her the bruise, “but I completely whiffed and hit the table instead. *Hard.*”

“That must have been some party,” she replied, as if fishing for information, encouraging him to reveal more of his intoxicated antics; but she was out of luck, because he didn’t want her to know any more, to know that besides banging up his elbow he’d also sung a song unprompted into a dildo that he’d pilfered from someone’s purse, or that

later he'd tried to defecate in a flower pot, insisting that the flagging ficus growing inside of it wasn't getting enough fertilizer—because he didn't want her thinking of him in that way, as nothing more than a clown to be laughed at, even if he wasn't up for flirting with her at the moment, because there was always a chance they would meet again someday, under more auspicious circumstances, when it wouldn't feel so out of place to ask her out. And so, from then on, he kept his mouth shut, and trusted in her seemingly good nature not to push him into stories he did not want to tell.

Unfortunately, his silence wasn't enough to prevent her from learning more humiliating truths about him, for several minutes later, while he was busy setting up chairs, treating each one as a sacred cow to be carefully corralled beneath the long plastic folding tables, a young, scraggy pastor burst into the rec room in tizzy, rubbing his arm as if he had a rash.

"Amy," he called into the adjoining kitchen. "Amy, sorry to bother you, but have you seen the mop? I've been looking all over for it."

Andy gazed through the open serving window where Amy, looking lovely even in a hair net, was on the verge of cutting into an industrial-sized bag of egg yolk. After a second's thought, she set down her scissors, walked over to the far corner for the mop, and then wheeled the bucket over to the side door.

"Sorry, Pastor Johnson," she apologized. "The floor was sticky, so I thought I'd wipe it up before we got started. Is everything all right?"

The pastor seized the mop handle and held it against his chest like a security blanket. His ears were large and seemed to be flinching in rhythm to the cadence of his speech. "Somebody threw up in the hallway upstairs and I'd like to clean it up before the congregants start arriving."

There was a column of painted cinderblock between the door and serving window, helping to frame them both, and Amy was standing behind it; but when the pastor had finished rattling out these words, her head snapped back into Andy's view. He looked away and pretended to be checking out the wobbliness of one of the chairs, when in reality he was glancing around for another exit, anything that wouldn't require him to have to squeeze past the agitated holy man. But there were no other openings, not on his side of the room anyway, not even a window well out of which to crawl.

“If you need me to take care of it—”

“It’s not the mess that’s bothering me,” the pastor said, scratching now at his thinning hair, “it’s the idea of it. What sort of person walks into a church on a Sunday morning, vomits all over the bathroom door, and then disappears without having told anyone?”

Amy’s friends, huddled around the oven, suddenly swiveled their heads away from their work in order to stare unblinkingly at Andy, and the pastor, seeing this, turned his head as well. By then Andy had already requisitioned one of the chairs for himself, because he saw a lecture coming on, crafted especially for him, and he’d decided it would be easier to take it sitting down.

“Who’s that?” the pastor whispered.

“That’s Andy,” Amy answered, also lowering her voice. “He’s here to help us set up.”

The pastor took a closer look, and squinted, unable to make out exactly who or what he was seeing. “Is he Catholic?” he asked.

The other girls erupted in laughter, but only for a second, before penitently covering their mouths. The pastor frowned at them, then took another look at Andy, and frowned some more. He appeared appalled, as if he’d come face to face with the Roman soldier who’d strapped his Savior onto the cross. He whispered at Amy again, more quietly than before, and when she nodded, he reversed the angle of the mop and drove the bucket out of the room.

Wasting no time, Amy swooshed across the room and pulled out a chair next to Andy, but once she’d crossed her legs and gotten her skirt in order she paused and cautiously weighed her words, perhaps not wanting to offend him, and even blushed a little, as if she already had. A long silence passed between them, until at last she said, “Pastor Johnson has asked that you clean yourself up before the service. You are planning on attending with us, aren’t you?”

It was clear by the way she said it that the “us” really meant “me,” and Andy nodded—he could think of nothing better at the moment than sitting beside her in a church, listening to a sermon, and rising every once in a while to sing a song, this time without holding a phallus. But when he made to get up, she snatched his forearm, though careful not to touch his elbow.

“If I were you, I’d wait a minute,” she warned. “Pastor Johnson is a bit high strung, and he seemed like he was about ready to snap.”

* * *

His piss was shorter this time, though he detected a slight pain in his shaft, either because of mashing it all night between the floor and his body, or because he'd worn it out on his previous go. But the real kick in the crotch came a few seconds later, when he zipped up and went to wash his hands. In the mirror above the sink, he finally glimpsed his face and saw what all the fuss had been about, why one of Amy's friends had looked at him in disgust, while the other had warned he might be dangerous, and also why the pastor had wanted him to cleanse himself physically before a more soulful cleansing took place at the service. It wasn't just his hair that was the problem, or some kind of imprint left on his cheek from the pockmarked hardwood floor he'd slept on. On his forehead, drawn in blue, were a penis and testicles—the testicles big and hairy, the penis veiny and fully erect, spewing forth semen like a firehose.

“Jesus Christ.”

Obviously, the right thing to do now was to wash the offending drawing off and get the hell out of there, go back to his dorm room as he had planned and hope to God his roommate wasn't there playing his banjo. But nothing he had done in the last twenty-four hours had been the right thing to do, and after having discovered that he'd been party to yet another humiliation, he couldn't think of any reason why he should start now. And so instead of wiping off the penis he only washed his hands, then waited for the sound of churchgoers to fill the hallways; and when an old man entered the bathroom and, seeing Andy's forehead, frowned in a ghastly, and then in a more judgmental manner, he hightailed it out of there and returned to the sanctuary.

Amy and her friends were already there, sitting just about where they'd been when he'd first caught sight of them, or rather they him, though they were quieter now, speaking only in whispers to each other, if at all. There were plenty other people there as well, but not right next to them, not next to Amy anyway, and so he strode up the aisle like he was a regular and seized next to her as if her offer for him to join her had not been part of the jest. And perhaps it hadn't been, for when she glanced over and saw him, saw that he was little changed from before, though her friends turned and stared at the cross, as if trying to pray Andy

away, Amy lit up even more brightly than before, putting on full display her cloud white teeth, and as the organist began to play the opening air, she took his hand into her own and tried desperately yet again not to laugh.

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WOLFGANG WRIGHT is the author of the comic novel *Me and Gepe* and the forthcoming science fiction novel *Being*. His short work has appeared in over forty literary magazines, including *Oyster River Pages*, *Marrow Magazine*, and *Paris Lit Up*. He doesn't tolerate gluten so well, quite enjoys watching British panel shows, and devotes a little time each day to contemplating the Tao. He lives in North Dakota.

Daisy Chains

by Venessa Young

FADE IN:

INT. BALLROOM - NIGHT

The room is full of people, the sound of the crowd a blur in her ears. They are looking at REINA, all of them. Whispers echo in the air.

UNNAMED VOICES

(whispering)

What is she doing here? Is
she allowed in here?

She holds her head high, walking to the table laden with sweets, cakes and a pitcher of rosé. A server moves to help her, but she pours herself a glass.

The crowd's murmurs intensify. A voice calls her name from across the room and she turns. CIRCE grins back at her, her waist-length dark curls swishing as she crosses the room.

REINA

(relieved)

Circe.

They hug, Circe so close Reina feels her breath on her ear.

CIRCE

(whispering)

Ignore them.

Reina laughs as Circe links her arm in hers. A gentleman clears his throat when Circe leans into her space, his gaze sharply directed at Reina's arm that has fallen around Circe's waist.

Circe sticks her tongue out at him and Reina has to hide a smile when the gentleman recoils, visibly appalled.

The closest server pours a drink for Circe. They clink glasses, Reina and Circe, the sound ringing in the room. More people turn to look and Reina shudders.

REINA

Should we go somewhere else?

CIRCE

(confused)

Why? Do they bother you?

She looks right in her element, circlet settled firmly atop her curls as she sips her rosé. Her gown looks expensive, a dark midnight blue. The white daisy bracelet on her wrist pales in comparison.

Reina nods. Circe shrugs, but leads the way to the side door while everyone watches like a hawk.

INT. BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

REINA

They'll think we're doing
unsavoury things in here.

Circe is sprawled elegantly out on the blue velvet chaise, sipping her drink as Reina waves her hands around, little daisies sprouting out of the purple carpet.

CIRCE
(snorts)

They've seen two women
together before. Let them
think what they want.

REINA
I don't think that's the
problem.

She twirls a daisy in her fingers and two more pop into existence in her other hand. Reina weaves them together as Circe sits upright gracefully.

CIRCE
So what's the problem?

She is frowning and Reina frowns too.

REINA
You know what the problem is,
Circe.

Plucking two daisies from the carpet, she weaves them into her chain, closing it into a bracelet around her wrist.

CIRCE
Your magic?

She huffs, lying back down. The liquid in her glass wobbles, drop spilling onto her dress.

CIRCE

We have magicians in court,
Reina. It's not a big deal.

Reina's jaw works and more flowers pop up on the rug, a scattering of red amongst the white. She plucks them with more ferocity.

REINA

Yes. It is, to me.

She twists the flower stems together, until sap stains her skin. The flowers explode, spraying red petals onto Circe's dress. Circe pouts.

CIRCE

Those were pretty.

She brushes petals off herself, setting down her drink.

CIRCE

Besides. Who cares if you're
a magician? If the people
want to judge, let them.
They're just jealous they
can't be you, my love.

Reina shakes her head, stroking the daisy chain around her wrist.

REINA

It's fine. You will never
understand.

EXT. MARKETPLACE - AFTERNOON

It is noisy and colourful, an assault to the senses as Reina leans against the fountain. She

toys with the apple in her hand, throwing it up in the air and catching it.

A goose waddles past, hoking loudly enough to scare the children tossing pebbles nearby. They race across the square when a golden carriage rolls up to the fountain.

Reina takes a bite out of her apple when the stall owners turn to glare, disdain visible.

The carriage's golden door is pulled open, and Circe descends, in a ruffled baby blue dress. She grins when Reina lobs her apple at her, snatching it out of the air.

CIRCE

Shall we?

Reina nods, winding her arm around her waist. The stall owners' stares follow as they pass them on their way to the streets up the hill.

The stall owners there smile when Circe passes on their wares, but Reina receives a dirty look when she plucks an apple from a fruit seller's pile. When she drops the coins into the man's hand, he watches her suspiciously, turning the coin over to make sure it is real.

Reina touches the daisy chain bracelet on her wrist, resisting the urge to rip it off. Circe's hand around her wrist stops her and she is pulled away.

CIRCE

Let's move on.

The man gasps behind them, but they are too far gone for Reina to see the roses blooming to life amongst his apples.

The brick-and-mortar streets are higher up the street, up a long slope. The merchants there are more reserved in their looks but still, they stare when Circe holds the door open for Reina.

INT. JEWELRY STORE - AFTERNOON

Real gold and silver jewellery shimmers in their cases, prices on full display. Reina whistles when she sees the prices on the tags, earning herself a dirty look.

She peers down at a case of silver rings, hyper-aware of the shadow following her. When she straightens to look, the man raises his chin, as if daring her to speak.

Reina grits her teeth, glancing pointedly across the room at where Circe browses, completely free of shadows. The man's eyes drop to her wrist.

Reina narrows her eyes at him.

CIRCE

(curious)

Is there a problem?

She walks up to them, eyes flitting between the man and Reina. Reina shakes her head, turning her back on the man as she bends over the counters to examine the stones.

CIRCE

That would look pretty on
you.

She points at a pair of silver flowers designed to dangle and a shopkeeper flits over immediately.

REINA

Circe, I don't need more earrings.

Circe ignores her, grinning at the shopkeeper pulls them out. She holds them up to Reina's ears and nods.

CIRCE

I'll take them.

REINA

(sighs)

Circe.

CIRCE

Humour me. I like looking at you.

Circe buys them, and the silver flowers look beautiful in their blue velvet box before Reina tucks them away in her dress, half in exasperation and half in delight.

INT. FABRIC STORE - AFTERNOON

Racks of silks and satins line the store in every colour of the rainbow. The store assistants are more subtle this time, their only reaction a mild widening of their eyes when Circe and Reina walk in.

A lovely hunter-green cotton at the back catches Reina's eye and she makes a beeline for it while Circe browses the front.

A store assistant grabs her before she can touch it. She glances at the daisy chain around Reina's wrist and frowns.

STORE STAFF

Please do not touch the
merchandise.

Reina looks towards the front of the store where another assistant is chatting animatedly with Circe. Circe, who is brushing her fingers over a swathe of silk.

REINA

My friend is touching that
silk.

The woman glances at the daisy chain on her wrist again, frown deepening.

STORE STAFF

The oils from your hand may
damage the fabric.

Reina huffs, turning her hand over so that the woman can get a good look at the daisies on her wrist.

REINA

Do you want one? They are
easy to make.

A daisy materialises between her fingers. The woman goes white.

STORE STAFF

We do not permit magic in the
store.

Reina rolls her eyes, making a great show of looking over the racks at the door.

REINA

Where's the sign?

She snaps her fingers and flowers sprout from the cracks between the planks at their feet. The woman squeaks and backs away. Everyone in the shop turns.

REINA

Just be honest. You're uncomfortable with ALL magic, aren't you?

She shivers at the fear in the woman's eyes and Circe appears at her side, expression grim.

CIRCE

(sickly sweet)

We'll take our business elsewhere. Let's go, Rei.

Circe drags Reina away and the flowers follow, sprouting beneath Reina's boots until they are out on the street. Vines reach out to topple the racks behind them as the door swings shut.

CIRCE

(sighs)

Was that necessary? You scared the living daylights out of her.

REINA

(frustrated)

You don't know what it's like.

Circle nods, brows creasing. She laces their fingers together, leading to aghast looks from the faces in the shop window.

CIRCE

You're right. I don't. So
tell me.

REINA

Can't you see how people look
at me?

They walk down the street, turning towards the bakery.

REINA

Everyone I give money to
checks that it's real. That
woman was afraid of me
touching her wares.

CIRCE

But you would never hand out
magicked gold. Or curse
goods.

REINA

They don't know that. They
only see the magic that
taints my blood.

She shakes her daisy bracelet.

CIRCE

(outraged)

Your magic is a gift.

Reina laughs, bitter. She glances at the woman behind the counter who watches her with suspicion.

REINA

It is a gift to the ones who
can afford my services. Even
then, they distrust it.

Circe points to a basket of rolls and the woman breaks into a smile, nodding when she tosses a handful of gold coins onto the counter.

REINA

You'll see this weekend. At
your family's party.

She turns away, and does not see the way Circe's lips twist and her expression turns thoughtful.

INT. BALLROOM - EVENING

When the doors swing open, everyone turns to look. The woman closest to her takes a step back when Reina enters, skirts swirling. Daisies spring to life where she steps.

Her dress is made of emerald silk, the plainest dress in the room without the jewels that stud every other woman's outfit.

Reina wears only the daisy chain around her wrist and the earrings that Circe had bought her.

She looks around the room as MORGAN approaches, her dress a garish red and dripping with gold trim and jewels. Her eyes rake up and down Reina's outfit before she breaks into a fake smile.

MORGAN

(suspicious)

Do you have an invitation?
Only friends of the Locke
family are invited.

Reina smiles, sticking her hand into her pocket.
She holds out the card and hands it over.

Her daisy chain flashes, white petals catching
the reflection of the light.

Morgan's eyes widen before she hands the
invitation back.

MORGAN

(sarcastic)

Your dress is lovely. Did you
perhaps-

She waves her hand in a poor imitation of wings
flapping.

MORGAN

-make it yourself?

The crowd around her chuckles. Reina bares her
teeth in a smile.

REINA

I don't need magic to sew my
own dress.

Morgan laughs and reaches forward to touch the
dress.

MORGAN

It must be synthetic—oh!

She is yanked back by a trailing vine. The crowd gasps in horror as a mass of vines explode into being beneath Reina's feet.

THE CROWD
(horrified)

Sorceress!

Reina blinks, confused.

Circe appears amidst the crowd, her expression dark. Trails of vines follow in her footsteps and the crowd gasps once more.

Reina stares.

CIRCE
The silk was a gift from me,
Morgan. The only synthetic
thing in this room is you.

The crowd gasps and then laughs weakly. Circe turns on them, sneering.

CIRCE
And all of you.

She meets Reina's eyes, the veins in her arms glowing gold. The vines vanish, leaving only a single rose on the floor.

REINA
(shocked)

You-

CIRCE
Have magic too. They have
known for as long as I've
been born.

She gestures to the crowd.

CIRCE

So has the town.

Reina sways.

BEGIN MONTAGE

... The stall owner in the market narrows his eyes at her coins.

... The fabric store woman stops her from touching the cloths.

... Circe walking around the jewellery shop alone with no shadowing guards.

... Circe's fingers brushing over delicate, multicoloured silks.

... Circe twirls in the middle of the ballroom in a blue silk dress and diamond necklace.

END MONTAGE

INT. BALLROOM - EVENING

Circe stands before her, expression pained.

CIRCE

You were right about one thing, Ri. People do see you differently, but it was never the magic.

Her eyes drag down Reina's dress before she turns her wrist to show off the shabby hemp bracelet tied onto it.

CIRCE

It was the money.

Reina sees a FLASHBACK of dirty looks thrown her way as they walked the high-end streets, the shadowy guard following her in the jewellery store.

She spins and flees, dress flaring out behind her. The floorboards remain bare, devoid of daisies.

FADE OUT:

.....

VENESSA YOUNG is a dreamer at heart, a lifelong writer bringing characters in her head to life since the age of seven. She creates fantastical worlds and enjoys playing in the fairytale sandbox. When she's not writing, Venessa can usually be found crocheting, knitting or reading in bed under the blankets. She has been published in Vocivia, the evermore review and *trash to treasure lit*.

punarjanman

by Lee Wing Tung

Mogao Grottoes, 10th century AD

The Buddhists believe in rebirth. Saṃsāra, the endless cycle of repeated birth, pointless existence, then death. When the nuns teach them this, they look at each other across the cramped cave, and Rong rolls her eyes in boredom. Ning turns around and smiles, as she always does at Rong's antics. Her braided hair swings with the motion, and Rong finds herself entranced. "Pay attention," Ning mouths, the humour in Rong's eyes reflecting in her own.

* * *

That night, Ning sneaks into Rong's cot, silent amongst all the other girls studying in the temple. Rong pulls out a thin leather notebook, lit only by the flickering light of the candle nearby.

"Remember that rebirth thing the nuns taught us this morning?"

"Saṃsāra," Ning recites, laying her head on Rong's shoulder. "The painful, endless cycle that ultimately leads to nirvana." Rong snuggles in closer to bury her face in Ning's untied hair, smiling at her 'serious student' voice.

"I found something better than that," Rong announces, voice low. "Look at this. *Punarjanman*."

Ning peers at the few lines of text scribbled in Rong's messy handwriting.

"Punarjanman, a Sanskrit term derived from *punar* meaning 'again' and *janman*, 'birth.' A cycle of reincarnation all beings undergo, indicating a move into a higher consciousness." She glances up at Rong, who is looking at her expectantly. "That's not a lot of information."

Rong flops down, lying onto the bed. "Yeah, that's the point. It leaves much more space for us to think about what it means, you know?"

Not what some random monk thought about it eons ago—that life has to be painfully unsatisfying just because. This one,” she jabs the word on the book, “just suggests that there is reincarnation, and through it we eventually become better.”

Ning lies next to her, silent, pondering. Scenes of two emperors marching out with thousands of soldiers cover the ceiling. The girls had painted them for months, and Ning still remembers her wrist aching for weeks afterwards. She also remembers how Rong would teasingly kiss it better, playfulness twinkling in her eyes as she whispered *do you feel better now, Ning?*

“Do you think I will make you better?” she asks Rong instead. “If we passed onto the next life, would I have made you a better person in this life?”

Rong flips over and takes her hand, a smile tugging at her lips and eyes aglow with affection, just as bright as the pigments of the murals above them. “You’re a far better influence on me than I am on you,” she murmurs, the voice tumbling out of her throat hurriedly like she’s confessing a secret. But really, it’s no secret, just simply unspoken between the two—that Ning, the obedient one, will probably achieve more than Rong ever could.

“Maybe in the next life I’ll be the bad one,” Ning whispers back, “and you’ll be the one to pull me away from my wicked ways.”

Rong pulls her in closer, nose tickling the back of her neck with every breath. “Ning?” she says, in the way that she does—soft and breathy, as though her very name is something to be in awe of.

“Yeah?” Ning replies, brushing her fingers over Rong’s arm.

“If there’s a next life, promise me you’ll come find me again? Promise that no matter what happens we’ll find each other.”

The request is solemn and serious, with tinges of sorrow lying underneath. Ning understands what Rong is asking of her. Inside the walls of the temple, where the courts and laws hold no power, they can be free to be whatever they like. But the moment they are of age and leave this place, they will be thrown into the mess of marriage. And their relationship—whatever this is—will surely get them heavily punished if not killed. The only thing they can hope for, clutching each other in the dark, is that someday the world will be a better place and they will be able to find each other again, picking up where they last left off. That whatever they have will be able to pass through to the next life, and the

next, until someday no one will scorn them, and they are free to love each other.

“I love you,” Ning says, in lieu of a reply. It is the first time she has said it out loud. She has thought it many times, of course. Far too many to count them all. But this is the first time she has spoken the actual words—quiet, with a hint of shyness. “I will always find you, Rong,” she promises. “No matter what life we may go to next, I promise I will find you.”

Rong smiles at that—brilliant, just as her name suggests, and kisses Ning’s temple. “I love you too.”

Years later, Rong’s marriage to a minister prevents any more night talks cuddled up together, and the most the two can get are yearly visits where they have to be careful with their every move. One night, Rong receives a letter telling her that Ning has died of the plague sweeping through China.

I’m coming for you too, my love, she thinks, when the ceiling of her room is too empty and bland, lacking in colourful murals her lover painted, and whispers *maybe next life we will have a better chance at this*.

It takes them a few tries, as all things do.

Dunhuang, 12th century AD

“Did you hear?” Rong’s little brother bounces delightedly at the dinner table. “The royal couple is coming to the city next week. I can’t wait—they say the empress literally *glows*. My classmate described her as the ‘first beam of sunlight hitting the ocean surface.’ What does that mean?”

“Eat your dinner,” Rong snaps. Hearing people talk about the empress with such awe always left a sour taste in her mouth, though she never understood why. “You and your classmates have fun. I want no part of it.”

“You’re going to need to help serve them too, when they come. Chief said so.”

Rong sighs in defeat. She was going to have to deal with these people whether she wanted to or not.

It had been years since she last stepped into the caves. Back then, she was still a child, holding onto her mother’s hand as they wiped

down years of dust from the walls. They were just as vibrant now with colourful murals and delicate statues as she remembered, but she couldn't help but feel there was something missing. She vaguely remembered having slept in a cave filled with drawings of an impending war. She even remembered having helped paint some. If she closed her eyes and dug deep in her head, she could almost visualise a scene—

You've got paint all over your hands, she teased.

And? Are you going to do something about it? replied a mystery voice, warm and affectionate. Rong could never quite remember who it belonged to, only that she loved its owner very, very much.

Would you want me to? Rong would ask, as she reached out towards them.

Then the memory would always fizzle out, and she would be left wondering just *who* she had loved so much.

Sometimes she would ask the nuns if there had ever been such a room, but they would always shake their heads. "Why'd you want to know?" one of them asked.

You see, there's a vision that I keep having about a girl painting murals in a cave that doesn't exist, apparently.

"My mother told me of such a cave before she passed," she muttered, deliberately not meeting his eyes and staring at the wall instead.

"Maybe it was one of the old ones that were destroyed," he said. "Perhaps someone in your family line helped make it and told their children the story of it, and your mother passed it on to you."

Rong thanked the master and left with more questions than answers.

"Empress Ning will be using these rooms tomorrow," the nun frowns at them. "Rong, you are to see that she is taken care of."

She walks off into another room, leaving Rong to handle the details.

Empress Ning was not what Rong expected at all. She didn't speak much, nor glow, but she did smile with a sweet serenity that reminded Rong of a warm, heavy blanket in the winter. She asked questions without being rude, inquiring about Rong's life and her family with genuine curiosity. At night, Rong would brush her hair, untangling all the knots that came from the complicated styles she kept her hair in.

Conversation flowed smoothly between the two. Somehow, Rong felt like she had known her long before they had met.

One night, Ning looks at her as she bathes and asks,

“Do you know of a cave here with a war painting? It had two emperors marching out to attack each other with their armies.”

Rong looks up in surprise. “No,” she says carefully, slowly folding the clothes laid by the bath. “Why do you ask?”

Ning frowns. “It’s nothing,” she replies sharply.

Rong shut her mouth. Clearly, she has forgotten her place—she is still a servant, and the empress royalty, and it does not matter that she feels closer to her than she has ever felt with her friends in the village.

“I keep...I keep thinking, *seeing*, this cave in my dreams,” she mumbles, eyes downcast, staring into the murky water of the bath. “But I can’t ever find it. I’d hoped that maybe...some of the locals here would have better luck, seeing as you’ve been here all your life.”

Rong puts down the clothes she’d been holding. “Maybe it’s one of the old ones that were destroyed,” she replies, echoing what the master told her half-heartedly.

Had she known that Ning would not be willing to drop the topic easily, Rong would have tried harder to convince her that there was no such cave. But Ning was determined to get to the bottom of it, and even more adamant to drag Rong along in her little detective’s trip. Dissatisfied with Rong’s flimsy answer, Ning had all but ran out of the room wrapped in a robe, dripping water down the hallway.

“Your highness, this is a very bad idea,” Rong hisses under her breath, running after the empress. “If the master catches us...” she trails off.

“Don’t get caught, then,” Ning hisses back, fiddling with the lock of the library.

The door opened with a painfully loud screech, and Rong’s heart skips a beat. Ning pulls her inside, locking the door behind her. “Start searching,” she orders, her usual kind tone replaced by icy resolution. A shiver runs down Rong’s back, and for a second she thought, that’s not how Ning is, before the thought disappeared into the wind.

“You are a terrible influence on me.” Rong grumbles under her breath. She starts looking into the boxes of scrolls that the masters have

kept so meticulously, and sticks a hand into one, beginning to ransack the place.

Ning lights a lantern and places it on the table, the glow painting them in soft yellow hues. The two pour over the ancient scrolls on the table, their hands bumping into each other.

“There,” Ning says, pointing at the wrinkled paper. “I think it’s that one.” Her voice wavers, but she glares at the paper as though it had personally offended her.

Rong peers over her shoulder and is met with the cave from her visions, the colours vibrant and the memory finally clear. “The dormitory for students studying in the temples two hundred years ago,” the caption reads.

When she looks up, Ning stares back like she’s seen a ghost. “I was there,” she mutters, face pale. “I...I painted those...and.” she turns to Rong, “You!” there’s pained, uncertain realisation in her face.

“You were there too—*why were you there?*”

Rong stares back, confused. It’s as though the puzzle has been laid out in front of her already, and there was simply one last piece to fall into place, but it is missing and she doesn’t *understand*.

“I—”

Ning grabs her by the arms, eyes flashing with fury and pain and many more emotions Rong can’t put her finger on.

“You were there,” she repeats, “and we—”

Rong is still confused, but memories she is sure she has never experienced have started to rush into her head, overwhelming, leaving her defenceless and paralysed against its urgent force, and she starts to remember. The next thing she is aware of, is how Ning has crashed her lips onto her own, with an almost mad desperation. The hands on her arms have tightened their grip, and Rong is sure that there will probably be a bruise tomorrow, something to prove that this is not a fevered dream her mind had conjured up. Rong leans in, trying to chase this high, but it was already dwindling before she could leap in. Ning has pulled away, eyes welling up with tears threatening to fall. The grip on her arms is gone. Rong reaches out, craving the frantic force behind it.

“I-I-I cannot,” Ning breathes out, painfully stuttering out every word. “Not...not now. Not this time. My duty...it is not this. It *cannot* be this.”

She leaves in a flurry, extinguishing the candle in the room. Rong stands in the darkness, the memory of a love she cannot seem to grasp fresh on her mind.

Walled City, 15th century AD

In this life, they barely even know each other. One lives in the palace with the rest of the emperor's concubines, and the other slaves away in the farms. They go to their graves yearning for something they've never even known in this life.

Shanghai, 18th Century AD

When Rong sees the lithe woman dressed smartly in a qipao boarding the ship to Britain, she already knows in her heart that her lover has slipped away from her yet again. Perhaps it is destiny that is kind to their struggles, or simply because their souls have been apart for so long, that they will know each other with just a second glance. By catching only a glimpse of the well-dressed woman walking away from her, Rong feels in her heart that this is still not the time for them. She lets Ning leave, lingering on her back, hair tied in that intricate, somewhat familiar style that stands out against the other travellers in the sea of people. She can—and she must wait. She has waited for so long already, after all.

Dunhuang Museum, 20th Century AD

In hindsight, this was probably a bad decision, to run off to nowhere at such short notice. But in spite of Ning's impulsiveness leading her here, she is calm. It's like she was *meant* to be here.

The museum is small and quite cramped, but she doesn't find that unpleasant. There's a small pamphlet in the corner of the room advertising paid tours later in the afternoon, and Ning signs up for one. She's made it this far, after all, it wouldn't hurt to spend a bit more to get a better experience.

She's got a private guided tour later in the afternoon, that will supposedly introduce her to the few caves that are open to the public and also give more detailed explanations about the antiques displayed in the museum. The lady at the concierge smiles at her, warm and welcoming,

telling her about the guide, a university student working here as part of her project. “Lovely girl,” she says, taking a slow sip of her tea. “Bit wild, but so creative and clever. History major.”

She’s intrigued. Maybe it’s just the fact that she’s not really dated anyone since leaving high school, or it’s the fact that this mysterious person seems to balance smarts and chaos in equal parts, something she’s never been able to resist. Or maybe it’s just part of the pull she felt towards this place.

The museum starts to get crowded with visitors, so Ning stands at the back next to an exhibition of ancient notes and looks out at the endless waves of people. From the corner of her eye, she catches sight of someone walking towards her, a tall woman with eyes twinkling with impish spirit,

Ning knows her name before the woman even opens her mouth. There is no doubt—she knows her the same way trees know the ground and birds know the sky, the same way monarchs know their kingdoms and handmaidens know their ladies. She would know her through time and space, she knows her now, and she *runs*.

“Rong!”

Her face is different from the one Ning knows. She is taller, her hair shorter, eyes thinner, and skin darker.

But she knows in her soul that it is her, her lover that she has spent centuries reaching out to but never managing to grasp, finally here to embrace her once more. This is the moment that they have long been waiting for, and now that it is here, she has no plan of ever letting go.

Rong’s eyes shine with gentle amusement, and she smiles, “Ning.”

They hold each other like their lives depend on it (and maybe it does). The final piece of the puzzle is in its place, and they *know*, deep in their bones, that they are home.

Behind them, the exhibition reads:

*student’s leather notebook, discovered in the dormitory
translation of written text:*

1st line: a Sanskrit term derived from punar meaning “again” and janman, “birth,” a cycle of reincarnation all beings undergo, indicating a move into a higher consciousness.

2nd line: i will always find you, my glorious sun



LEE WING TUNG (LWT) is a poet and writer from Hong Kong. They are currently studying Education and English at the University of Hong Kong, with a special interest in trying to survive in a world not made for them. Aside from messing around with poetry and writing, they have also worked in the theater as a director and an actor. Recent works can be found in *The Marbled Sigh*. They can be found in corners of libraries and at @eldubtee on Instagram.

The Intruder

by Alex Clements

What woke me was the sound of him moving around downstairs. I knew it was him from the gurgling way he breathed, not to mention the unmistakable slowness of his gait. Beside me, Carl remained in a deep sleep. From the kitchen, I heard the clatter of cupboard doors opening and closing, then the tinkle of our glassware being probed. Only briefly did I entertain the idea of ditching Carl to make my escape, either by flinging myself from the window or hiding in the closet, but even as I visualised these scenes in my mind, I could feel how forced they were. I knew that most people in my position would've probably opted for the panic now, think later approach, but I wasn't most people. And neither, it seemed, was the man downstairs. Not many people would've had the guts, much less the patience to persevere as he had. I didn't know what he was here for, whether he even had a specific reason. I only knew he'd been trying at this for a very long time, and now he'd done it. He'd finally made it inside our home. Frankly, it was hard not to be impressed.

You see, I'd always had a soft spot for people who refused to give up on their dreams. It probably had something to do with the fact that I'd never been able to follow through on anything significant myself, so it only seemed right to champion those who could. That's not to say I wasn't a trier, because I was. Almost to a fault, I was. Throughout my life I'd set countless goals, had held a myriad of dreams, but the instant things got difficult, my hands were reaching for the white flag. Did I enjoy being a giver-upper? Not really, but it's who I was, and I saw no point crying over it. You play the cards you're dealt, right? That was pretty much how I approached everything in life. Good or bad, I refused to be fazed by it. Case in point: the intruder. I could hear him down there, the way he dragged his bones from room to room, occasionally stumbling into a wall or a piece of furniture, but did I let any of it get to me? Of course not. Why cower under the bed when I could just as easily embrace the situation?

I credit my unflappable nature to my mother, for it was her who taught me that in life, it's not what happens to you that matters, but how you choose to respond. I was just twelve years old when she bestowed this wisdom upon me; the revelation emerging in the aftermath of an unfortunate incident involving a hawk and our puppy, Lucy. Still to this day, I struggle to comprehend how fast it all happened. I must've been in the kitchen re-filling that water dish for less than ten seconds, but ten seconds was, it turned out, plenty of time for a hawk to come down and snatch Lucy from her playpen. By the time I'd made it outside, Lucy was already long out of reach, leaving me with nothing to do but stand there and bear witness to her doomed ascension. When she heard what happened, my mother urged me not to blame myself. It's just one of those unpreventable tragedies, she said, staring up at the sky. Then she went inside to start dinner. Despite my mother's assurances, I couldn't abandon my quest for self-flagellation. The way I saw it, Lucy had been taken while under my watch, ergo it was all my fault she was gone. For the rest of the week, I wouldn't shut up about how sorry I was, how I wanted nothing more to trade places with Lucy, how she was worth ten of me. Blah-blah. Unable to bear it a moment longer, my mother changed tacks. Cross-legged on the floor, staring me dead in the eyes, she told me I had an important decision to make. Right now, she said, you get to choose how you respond. You probably didn't even realise you had a choice, so now I'm giving you the opportunity to really consider it. You can either continue doing this, she said, gesturing to the mucus congealing below my nose, or you can shrug your shoulders and move on. Both options are equally available to you. In life, you'll always have that choice. Never forget that.

Seeking greener pastures, the intruder abandoned his downstairs expedition and made to climb our staircase. I say climb, but perhaps it would be more accurate to describe his journey up those stairs as a battle. By the time he'd reached the third step, his wheezing had become so frenzied, I half-expected him to turn around and forget the whole thing, but of course he didn't. No, he kept going. Slowly—very, very slowly—but surely, he kept going. He was about a quarter of the way up when I started to wonder what it would be like when he arrived at our bedroom door. Seeing as he'd broken into our home—in the dead of night, no less—it stood to reason he'd be expecting some degree of shock or surprise, but that didn't exactly jibe with my current state of

equanimity. I could've faked it of course, but all my previous attempts at feigning surprise—be it when unwrapping gifts, or when receiving news that I was already privy to—had always come off so convoluted and pantomime-like, people assumed I was either mocking them, or else suffering a minor-stroke. No, it just wasn't worth the risk. The only solution, I decided, was to throw my head beneath the sheet when he entered. Let him assume I was hiding out of fear. Anyway, there was still Carl, I reminded myself. Carl would offer a visceral enough reaction for the both of us. Naturally, you can never predict exactly how a person will act in that sort of situation, but I felt confident there would be more than enough screaming and arm-waving to satisfy the intruder. Only then, only while mentally choreographing the different ways Carl might've surged from the bed, did I think to question whether he was dressed for the occasion. A quick check under the sheet confirmed he was wearing underwear, but that did little to reassure me. Why? Because Carl was lying on his stomach. Meaning I couldn't check the button fly of his briefs. And if the last year had taught me anything, it was that I needed to check the button fly.

Here's the thing: for as long as I'd known him, Carl had always enjoyed lounging around the house in just a t-shirt and his underwear, his excuse being that he found legwear too claustrophobic. This had never bothered me; if anything, I relished the opportunity to watch those brawny legs waltz around our home, but over the last year I'd started noticing something was amiss: Carl's button fly boxer briefs were frequently being left unbuttoned. At first, I figured that maybe the open fly was meant to be seen as an invitation or something, like maybe this was Carl's way of communicating that he was horny. Only it quickly became apparent that spotlighting these incidents was more likely to result in us fighting than us fucking.

I forgot, okay? Was Carl's most common response, always delivered in a tone that suggested I'd accused him of murder. Other times he gave no verbal response at all, instead he'd just shake his head while giving me a look of such fierce disappointment, I'd swear to never mention it again, but of course I always did. His junk was practically winking at me every time he entered the room—how does a person overlook something like that?

A sharp, feral sort of sound caused me to bolt upright in bed. The intruder had fallen foul of the weak step, the one that seemed to let

out a terrible wail of pain whenever a foot dared graze its surface. Sensing Carl beginning to stir beside me, I quickly fumbled to lay my body in as flat and motionless a position as possible. Under his breath, I heard him murmur something incoherent that I chose to ignore. Though I had every intention of staying awake, I must've fallen into a light sleep, for when I next opened my eyes, I became immediately aware of two significant changes. First, the intruder had advanced to the upper half of the staircase. Second, Carl was now sleeping on his side. Lifting the sheet from his body, my heart sank. The button fly was indeed unbuttoned. So unbuttoned, in fact, that gravity had managed to drag everything—and I mean everything—through the open hole. God, it was a mess. Both figuratively and literally. How had we got here, I wondered. Then an even more pressing question: where do we go from here? Sure, I thought to myself as I tried (and failed) to shimmy Carl's genitals back inside, right now it's just a couple of buttons being forgotten, but what came next? He stopped plucking his eyebrows? I stopped waxing my chest? In a relationship, these things were a slippery slope. I'd learnt that from watching what happened to my sister and her husband. How quickly their problems had gone from her complaining about a toilet seat always being left up, to her no longer bothering with her monthly mani-pedis, to her announcing—at our mother's birthday brunch, no less—that she and Jerry hadn't slept together in five months. I'd always thought Carl and I were safe from such heterosexual atrophies, but it seemed I was mistaken.

The intruder was nearly done with the stairs. I knew because the second step had a rogue nail sticking out of the wood. Carl had blunted it with a hammer a long time ago, but the intruder still released a muffled cry of surprise when his boot caught the edge of it. Conscious of time running out, I scooted further down the bed, hoping that a closer proximity to Carl's crotch would make it easier to manoeuvre things back into place. It wasn't until I had his balls cupped in my hand, when I felt their weight and measured their distance from the fly's base button, that it began to dawn on me that I'd perhaps been seeing this all wrong. This couldn't be the work of gravity alone. His cock might've been able to slip out on its own, that I could've perhaps understood, but the balls, too? No, unless Carl was doing handstands in his sleep, such an escape would've been impossible. Well, that left just one explanation: Carl had done this himself. But why, I wondered, dropping the sheet. A shadow

of some distant realisation fell over me then, first like a breeze, then colder, heavier, like chain armour. I thought I might be having a seizure or something, but soon understood it was just an epiphany. All those unbuttoned flies, they weren't a symptom of listlessness in our relationship, rather they were the timid steps of a man trying to reach his authentic self. How hadn't I seen it before? The overt defensiveness, the expression of disappointment mingled with hurt—or was it shame?—that he wore on his face whenever I'd drawn attention to the mishap between his legs, it all pointed to one answer: Carl was an exhibitionist. A closet-exhibitionist.

At the opposite end of the hallway, the intruder finally crested the top of the staircase. As I listened to him standing there, trying desperately to regain control of his breathing, I pondered the synchronicity of our shared situation. Was it fate alone that summoned him here tonight, I wondered, or had he somehow known—even when we ourselves hadn't known—that we needed him just as much as he needed us? See, with me, the button fly was old news. I'd seen it too many times to ever respond in a way that Carl would find satisfying. The intruder, on the other hand? He was an unsuspecting stranger. In my eyes that made him the perfect candidate for popping Carl's exhibitionism cherry. Then, once that part was out of the way and everything was out in the open, I would be free to swoop in and guide Carl the rest of the way. Already my mind was filling with ideas of how I might indulge him, stuff like pantsing him in the middle of the grocery store or locking him out of the house completely naked—and that was just the beginning.

Having hauled himself approximately halfway across our upstairs hallway, the intruder came to an abrupt stop and then collapsed. You know how they say our brains try to protect us in moments of extreme trauma? Well, I think my brain attempted that, because following his fall, I found it much too easy to convince myself that it wasn't really the intruder's body I'd heard hitting the carpet, but rather a bag of groceries he'd stolen from our kitchen. That's really what it sounded like: a bag of perishables—melons and potatoes, if I had to guess—just thudding against the ground. It took about fifteen minutes for that theory to wither away inside me, mainly because I couldn't account for all the silence that followed. Was he dead, I wondered, or just badly injured? The answer came a while later, right as I was readying my finger to poke Carl awake, I heard movement in the hallway. I

though I'd imagined it at first, but then it came again—a light sound, barely audible, but undeniably human. The relief that flooded my body was so strong it felt nearly purgative. He was alive. Of course he was. I'd been a fool to have ever suspected otherwise. Nothing could keep a warrior like him down, not even gravity. Give gravity its due though, for it certainly put up a fight. At least, that's the impression I got from all the noise the intruder was making out there. I felt certain Carl would wake up and start screaming at any moment, but somehow he slept through the entire ordeal. Most surprising to me, however, was the uncharacteristic speed with which the intruder moved once he'd regained his footing. It was like the fall, or rather the getting back up from the fall, had energised him enough that he was able to cross the final few steps to our door in less than five minutes. There was, however, one minor snag when he arrived there: he couldn't work the doorknob. In his defence, the doorknob on our bedroom door was particularly finicky—the one for the bathroom was the same, visitors were always getting trapped in there—but that knowledge didn't make witnessing his struggle any easier. The urge to go and assist him with that troublesome door was unbearable, but I knew I couldn't intervene. Not when he was so close to the finish line. As the hours passed and I drifted in and out of sleep, I began to wonder if this might be all there was, just me and the faint shudder of that doorknob until the end of time. Well, if that were the case, then so be it, I thought. Better this, better a ceaseless striving than a premature surrender. And I meant it, too. Thanks to the intruder, I finally understood what it meant to stay the course. What it meant to endure.

ALEX CLEMENTS is a writer living in England, where he is currently pursuing a PhD in Comparative Literature. His work has appeared in *The Canterbury Journal*.

We are absolutely thrilled for the opportunity to showcase—for the first time in our magazine’s admittedly brief history—some amazing non-fiction pieces alongside the wonderful fiction stories and scripts of this issue. While the addition of non-fiction to our magazine may be new, this issue still feels so very true to the goals of our team and our magazine.

The authors and screenwriters in this issue have amazing stories to share. They’re heartfelt and funny, they make us reflect on life’s occasional stagnancy and the very human desire to do better, to *be* better. We’re ever grateful for the opportunity to share these stories with you.

—For Page & Screen Editorial Team

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- “A Pilgrimage to Dennis Hopper” by Ron Clinton Smith
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