



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
**ISSUE #5
JULY 2008**



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS *UNEXPECTEDLY* FIND
ONE OR MORE PHYSICAL OBJECTS SOMEWHERE.
SOMETHING ABOUT THE OBJECT(S) RAISES
QUESTIONS THAT THE CHARACTERS WANT
ANSWERED...**

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We've Clarified Some Rules!

We learned all kinds of things during Contest #5. Among the most prominent lessons was, some of our rules were open to interpretations we never intended. So, we've revised how we explain our contest rules.

Contest Entries Must Be Unpublished

I know we've always said that, but we didn't emphasize it strongly enough before. Now we've added relevant language to the e-mail template we offer contestants for use when sending us stories.

When We Said "No Copyrighted Characters," We Really Meant "No Characters Other People Created"

We forgot about public domain characters. Dracula, Little Red Riding Hood...these are characters other authors created, but they're no longer under copyright. So rule #8 has been changed to disallow fan fiction, pastiches, etc.

Having said that, we need to draw a distinction between using other people's characters as themselves and using them in other ways. We don't want to read stories where Batman fights crime. But a schizophrenic character who's hallucinating Batman is okay.

We also had no problem with Ken Rand's use of Elmer Fudd and Foghorn Leghorn in Issue #3, because the Warner Bros. characters themselves were not really in the story. If you wonder where the line is, read "Plan 9 from Planet Hollywood" and we think the line will be clear.

Anyway, we have five stories for you this issue—three speculative, two mainstream, all good. We also have cartoons drawn by Erika Moen. So check out our offerings and let us know what you think at Feedback@OnThePremises.com.

Keep writing and keep reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

Cartoons!

by Erika Moen (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

This issue, please welcome back Erika Moen, who once again drew the fevered output of Tarl's warped imagination.

Remember when you were a kid and you could find easily broken cheap plastic toys in boxes of cereal? Now they give away CDs and things. Rotten young'uns ... why when I was your age ...

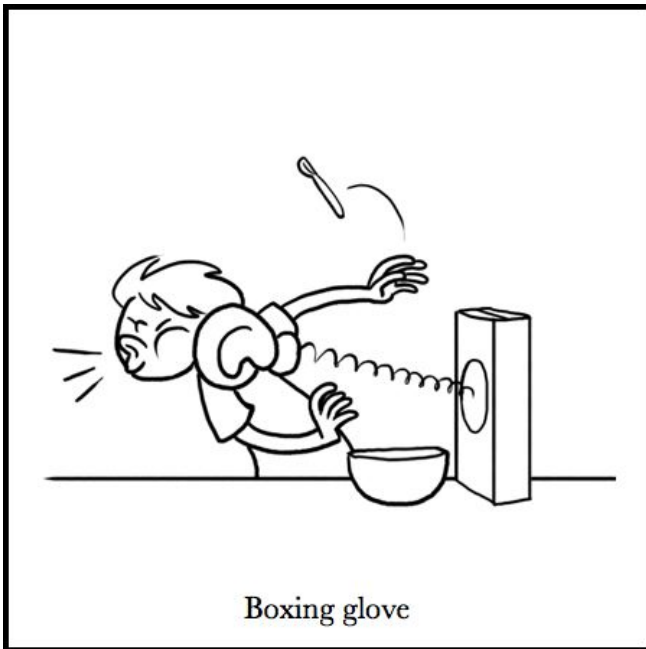
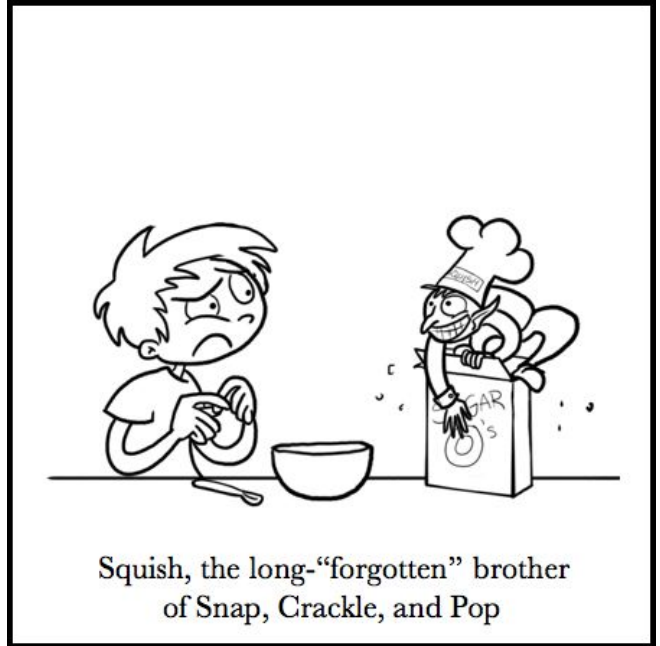
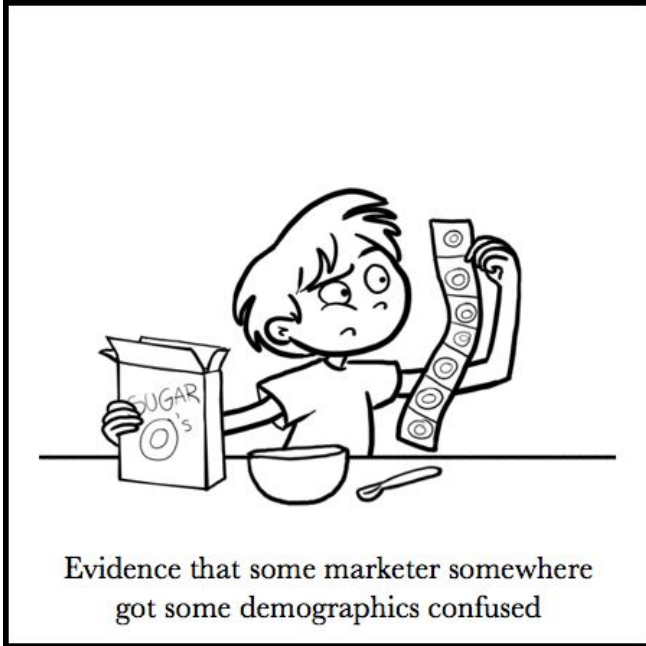
Bad Prizes I Found in Cereal Boxes as a Kid



Frightened skunk



Psychotic bird that really was
cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs



FIRST PRIZE

Elisha Webster lives on the Outer Banks, North Carolina where she waits tables and grows tomatoes. When she was eight, she decided she was a writer, and that was that.

Swedish Fish and the Shape of the Universe

by Elisha Webster

The Great Swedish Fish Craving was not only illogical, but ill-timed. I was three blocks away from my apartment, on foot, lugging a can of NoFreeze in one hand and a jug of gasoline in the other. It was dark and it was snowing. It was cold. But wait; I'll get to all that. Maybe I should start at the beginning.

The beginning is one hour prior to the Great Swedish Fish Craving. I was on my way to pick up Chinese food for dinner. I stuck my key into the car's ignition and turned it. The car whinnied. There was a hint of injury in the whinny, a *How could you let this happen? A How could you do this to me?*

My car's gas tank was frozen. Not only was I stranded sans Chinese food, but I'd let my car down, too. With an air of contrition, I promised to professionally clean my vehicle and to fix the back brake light for good measure.

"Never again, little car," I vowed out loud.

It is never good to be on the outs with your vehicle.

The Citgo is eight blocks away from my house. Four blocks north and four blocks east. If I need milk or beer or some other spontaneous purchase, I drive, taking the four blocks north and four blocks east to the station. As for the trip home, I

complete the square: four blocks south and four blocks west. The trip's symmetry is pleasant, satisfying. I like to imagine my apartment and the Citgo strike a spiritually equidistant balance only I am privy to.

I get attached to places. I buy coffee at the Cedar Street Cafe. I get soup at the Three Fish Deli. If I need a new pair of shoes or pants, I go to Stella's consignment shop. Stella, warm and doughy, lolls around the shop, bumping her hips against displays and mannequins. She yells things like "Girl, you looking sexy in that sweater," or "Honey, I just got to tell you how *gorgeous* your butt looks in those jeans."

I feel obligated to admit at this point, that there is an Exxon, a perfectly adequate gas station, located closer to my apartment. It offers full service and clean restrooms. Still, I frequent the Citgo, eight symmetrical blocks from my house. I know this may sound compulsive, obsessive, or even neurotic, but I will defend myself thus: It's not like I *have* to do it. I *like* to do it. The trip is satisfying. It helps things feel neater.

The night of the Great Swedish Fish Craving was no exception, even on foot. My otherwise incapacitated car had a makeshift thermometer that read negative two, so before setting off on my long walk, I went to my bedroom for some more layers. A set of long johns, a pair of sweatpants, a pair of corduroys, two sweaters, a jacket, a hat, a scarf, a pair of mittens, and a pair of boots later, I was ready to go.

I walked as quickly as I could, swinging an empty gas container in one hand and my purse in the other. My excess in layers limited my speed and the carefree-ness of my swing. The gas container's plastic scuffed at my jacket. Clamor and clang, here I come. The chill nibbled at my eyes and lips like a playful puppy. It hadn't started to snow yet, but you could tell it was only a matter of time.

Dougart works the cash register at the Citgo. He is tall, at least six five. He likes to wear striped collared shirts that dribble over his tight black jeans. He usually misses a button or two. Dougart looks like a regular Picasso painting, crooked shirt, crooked glasses, his eyes magnified and floating on his lenses, detached and unreal.

“Hi Dougart,” I said and unwrapped my scarf—which required some concentration since it was so long.

“Hi Sara. You walk here?”

“Yeah. My car won’t start. The gas froze.”

“You shouldn’t let the gas get that low.”

Dougart likes to comment on my purchases. Say, if I were to buy some condoms or a pack of cigarettes, he’d wag his head, run a hand through his greasy, too-long-for-his-haircut-hair and say, “You know you should be looking for a husband soon,” or “I gave up smoking one year ago and never felt better in my life.”

“It’s my fault. I was too cold and lazy to get gas the other night, so I pushed it.”

“Now you’ve got to walk all this way,” he said, superfluously.

“Yup. Oh well. It’s not too bad. It feels kind of nice outside.” Still and crystallized, I thought, but didn’t bother to add.

Dougart raised an eyebrow or rather cocked his head, which gave the impression of a raised eyebrow. He drummed his hands on the counter. “How much gas you want?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just enough to get the car started and back here.” I hefted my purse onto the counter. I had knit the purse three years prior using purple yarn and pink string. It was the first and last thing I knit. The purse looked pretty good when I first finished it. The yarn was vigorous and elaborate. Watercolor pink cloth lined the purse’s interior. I had found the perfect button, too—a pink clay button, lumpy, whimsical, and perfect, but for some reason or another, I never got around to sewing the thing on. I’m bad when it comes to details. I would make a terrible artist and a worse surgeon.

Now, the least of the purse’s problems was its lack of a button. The lining flapped loosely, in and out of the purse like a recalcitrant tongue. The strap was stretched thin. The yarn frizzled like bad hair.

“Looks like it’s time to get a new purse,” Dougart decided to say.

“Yeah.” I was only half listening. My wallet usually hides out at the bottom of my purse, beneath receipts, match books, cigarette cases, and a book or two.

“You say you made that yourself?”

“Yup,” I said, pulling out a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*, a pack of Camel Lights, and a handful of papers. I put them on the counter. A free cigarette must have broken in my purse, because a handful of receipts left brown tobacco droppings everywhere. “Hang on. I’m finding it. This thing’s a black hole,” I said, just as I found my wallet.

“I can’t blame you for holding onto it, though,” he said, meaning the purse. “You know, I made this blanket once when I was eight. It was orange with little white flowers in the middle.” He traced little white flowers in the air and we both stared at the air between us. I imagined the flowers to be daisies.

“It’s relaxing, crocheting,” he said. I thought to tell him that I actually had *knit* my purse, but reconsidered.

I said instead, “Your mind kind of disappears. It’s meditative.”

“I ever tell you about my fish tanks? Talk about relaxing. I’ve got six or so fish tanks in my living room. They’re all over the place. Vespy and I kill hours staring at them.”

Vespy is Dougart’s dog. I met her once when I ran into Dougart at the laundromat. She is small and black with yellow tufts of fur around her tail. She has the most enormous lips I’ve ever seen on a dog—soft and pink rather than that rubber black you see on most canines. It was a weird sensation having her mouth pushed against my palm. It felt too human. Too intimate.

“We can stare at those fish all day long. Just kick back, with a beer, watching them swim by. You know,” Dougart leaned across the counter. His breath smelled like Doritos and sugar. “Sometimes I think they stop and look back at us.” Dougart’s

face assumed a fishlike vacancy. He paused and stared at the wall behind me, mustering up the dramatic gusto necessary to his pantomime: Dougart the fish.

I laughed supportively and began replacing the contents of my purse.

The things that make most people nervous, don't faze Dougart—take extended eye contact for example, or overly enthusiastic role playing in public places. He rushed into his fish characature bravely, with a seriousness more befitting a theatre student than a gas station chashier. “Sometimes I think the fish are wondering, *Hey! Hey! What are they looking at?*” The voice he opted for the fish was several octaves higher than his own baritone, but tough in a Larry and Moe sort of way.

“Right. What are *you* looking at?” I assumed a fish-like persona as well, except I didn't put my heart into it like Dougart. My voice was more like an uneasy girl laughing and talking quickly.

Dougart smiled. He was Dougart again and not a hostile fish. He took my debit card. “I think five dollars will be enough,” he said.

“Sure. That and this NoFreeze.” I lifted the container so that he could see it. He nodded.

“Have I told you about my idea to make a five-mile long aquarium?”

“Five miles?”

He returned my card to me. “You can put your PIN number in now,” he said. He had to say that.

“Sure. But five miles?”

“I've got all the plans. I've made blueprints already. It's not going to be like five miles down the street or anything. I want it to wrap around itself, and twist. Like a maze.”

For some reason, I thought of intestines.

“Like intestines,” I said. Aren't they like four times your body length?

“Yeah,” he said, even though I think he had no idea what I was talking about. “I just need money. It’s all planned out. I ran into this guy I know and he was like ‘I’ll pay you one thousand dollars if you can do it.’ And I was like ‘I need more than that!’” Dougart ~~laughed.~~ He laughed for a long time.

“Wow. Ha ha. That’s great.” I said, meaning his interest in aquariums was great. To be honest, I was a little taken aback.

“I think about stuff like that. I got a lot of free time with this job, so I just sit around and think up stuff.”

Over Dougart’s shoulder, I noticed the faint blush of the sky, its slow inhaling.

“Well, I should get back. It’ll be dark soon, and I need to get my car all situated.”

That’s when he offered me the Swedish Fish. He had a super-sized bag of them behind the cash register. “I love these things.” He tossed two of them into his mouth.

But this was pre-craving, and at the moment I was not in the mood for Swedish Fish. I told him no thanks and to have a good night.

*

So there I was, waddling home in the dark, two heavy containers of liquid in my hands, my purse strung around my neck, and craving Swedish Fish. Who knew? And this craving was not a *Hey that’d be nice if I had some Swedish Fish* hanker; this was a full out, must-have dilemma. I was so close to home, so close to completing my geometric stroll, but I had no Swedish Fish.

It started to snow.

It was probably a 25-minute walk back around “the square,” but if I cut through a couple back roads I could make it to the Exxon in under five. I was cognitively dissonant. There was always the possibility of filling my car and driving to the Citgo for the Swedish Fish, but my craving was more immediate. Swedish Fish were imperative to my survival.

The gas can pulled at my fingers and I stopped to adjust the weight. I switched hands, the NoFreeze in my left and the gasoline in my right, not to mention my purse which hung on for dear life around my neck with its threadbare straps. It snowed harder. The flakes were soft, individual and startling. It was the kind of snow you wanted to catch on your tongue or spin beneath, your chin pointed upwards, your throat open. My breath made indistinct the startling contrast between the red black sky and the white white snow.

I decided to take the back alley. I had taken it once before, quite by accident, when I was looking for a record store a friend recommended, and I got lost. I recalled that the alley went on for a couple blocks before spilling out into a wider, better lit road.

I tried to imagine a five-mile long aquarium and how much money that would cost. All the filters, colored pebbles, and coral. I'm sure it'd add up. While I was impressed with Dougart's obvious passion regarding the whole project, I couldn't help but be skeptical. A five-mile long aquarium. What was the point?

Aquariums were soothing, I had to admit. My dentist kept an aquarium for a wall in the back of his waiting room. He had every type of fish you could imagine: striped fish, polka dotted fish, silver fish, blue fish. I mean, you name it, he had it. For me though, the thrill of the tank had little to do with the aquatic view, but rather the sound that it made. The sonorous hum of the filter, the silky ascension of bubbles and the buzzing fluorescence—all of it combined to create a reassuring symphony fit for Pure Moods VII.

Come to think about it, my dentist's office was not a half-bad place to hang out. He had a decent magazine collection, interesting art on the walls, and a friendly receptionist. Sure, he had the typical dentist office tedium: crying babies, polite coughers, and behindhand scheduling. He had the *Teen Magazines*, the *Southern Livings*, and the *Hunting and Fishings*, but he also had *Rolling Stone* and *Discover*. In fact, the last time I had my teeth cleaned, I read this *Scientific American* article that was especially interesting. The article debated the shape of the universe.

As I walked I tried to recall details from the article. I looked up at the sky for help. Just a small strip of stars and snow were visible. The darkness was fluid and thick.

Surreal. My movements felt labored. I placed the gasoline and NoFreeze onto the pavement and lit a cigarette. The alley was longer than I remembered. Shortcut, indeed.

These scientists in the magazine said, if I remember correctly, that the shape of the universe is a little like the shape of the earth. The shape of the earth, meaning, that if you start in one place on the earth and continue travel in one straight line, you'll end up in the same place. After so much travel, you'd end up exactly where you started. These scientists and mathematicians said the universe is sort of similar to the earth, except a little more difficult to wrap your mind around, since it's got a whole different dimension, and all. The article described the possibility of a space ship starting out somewhere, traveling in a straight line and eventually ending up in the same place. Obviously, this hypothesis had other little intellectual nuggets like parallel universes, black holes, and time/space continuums, but I couldn't remember any of that now.

My stomach grumbled unhappily. I finished my cigarette and started walking again.

My mind wandered, returning to Dougart and his tank dreams.

I heard somewhere that fish have a five-second memory. If that's true, what's the point of constructing a five-mile long aquarium for an animal with a five-second memory? When I thought about it that way, I was outright irritated at Dougart for so willingly blowing money on something so pointless.

I felt as if I'd been walking forever. I considered placing the gasoline and NoFreeze in an inconspicuous area, like beside some back door step or behind a bush. I could pick them up on my way back.

"Almost there," I said out loud. The puff of white, my words. It felt weird to speak to myself like that. I imagined the white wisp words disappearing, with no one else to hear them.

That's when my forehead hit the glass.

*

I realize the unsystematic nature of that declaration, but the following events all seem disjointed and random. I can't find a gentle, transitional way to present them.

I was walking. My fingers stung from supporting all that liquid weight. Darkness gathered mass and texture; it fell as quickly as the snow, soft and thick as the snow, until I wasn't really sure which was falling, which was collecting, which I had to push aside in order to continue down the street.

And then I hit the glass—so clear it was invisible: A wall of glass, rounded in nature. Beyond the glass was darkness.

The street squeezed between a border of buildings, wending alley-like past boarded doors and windows, and then the street stopped. I know that it stopped because I hit my head on the invisible obstruction that stopped it. I stepped back, shaking and stunned.

I approached the place where the street stopped. I placed the gasoline and NoFreeze onto the pavement and lifted a cautious mitten towards the glass. My hand slid smooth over its surface. I ran my hand up and back down its surface. Whatever it was, reached to the ground and then up over my head, curving slightly inward. I removed my mitten. The glass was cold and numbed my hand.

“Glass.” My words formed a puff of white that condensed onto the transparent barrier before me. I ran my finger through the condensation, leaving a black streak through smoky gray.

I felt dizzy. I forgot about the Swedish Fish. I replaced my mittens and flattened my palms onto the glass. This must be some kind of joke. I walked sideways, the width of the alley. The road was completely sealed off. Air tight. There was street and snow and then darkness. A chill prodded the base of my spine.

I turned a full circle. I could see no one. I knocked indiscriminately on doors, but no one responded. The sound of my rap felt muffled and pointless. There was no one. I knew this, somehow.

I thought, maybe I am dreaming.

I approached the glass again. I stood looking at it, or rather at the place where I knew it was. I must have stood there for twenty minutes or so, aware only of my breath and a pulse throbbing my hands.

It was as if all that darkness was water, black water, bottom of the ocean black. The darkness poured in; was pushing my chest slowly closed. I thought I must be dying. I kicked the wall. My foot jerked short. My whole leg stung. I searched the ground for a rock, anything blunt to break the glass.

I realized I was panting.

“Hello!” I yelled. Nothing. Not even an echo.

At my foot, the metal can of NoFreeze. I stepped back several feet and heaved it towards the invisible wall. There was a tremendous rattle and the NoFreeze fell to the ground. The can of NoFreeze looked to hesitate, mid-flight, strike an agreement with the air to cease and desist all travel, and fall.

The snow continued to descend. I looked up. It was a little like being in a snow globe.

I was either extremely angry, sad, happy, or hysterical. I am not sure which, even now. I was somewhere above the spectrum of emotion. Looking beyond the glass was a little like looking over a supernatural precipice.

A cube-shaped pounding began in the center of my skull, as if clearing a space where my head was once soft—that place on my skull where my bones were once open and unfastened, that place where they eventually closed, like a finished jigsaw puzzle over my fully developed brain. My bones were no protection against this pounding, which persisted with its eight points of sharpness—the discomfort was too sharp and multifarious to be throbbing. The pain was unlike anything. It was made of the stuff of brain probes and tumors. I cradled my head and sat down on the frozen pavement, containing the pain with my fingers, but it leaked out between them, and I panicked.

I told myself I was not dead. “I am alive. I am okay,” I said out loud, and the cubed pounding seemed to efface into a circular dullness. I could think around its rounded edges, at least.

I made a plan. Or at least, I found an impulse for action. Forgetting about my No Freeze and gasoline, I ran back through the alley. The huddled buildings stuck out their shadows like legs to trip me, but I jumped over them. The pounding diminished to a tick.

By the time I reached the main road, the pounding was completely gone. I stopped in the middle of the road, looking in both directions, feeling my skull to see if it had changed size.

Instead of running back to my apartment, I ran to the Citgo where Dougart was reading a romance novel and eating candy.

“Hey Sara. How’s it goin?” His mouth was full of red gummies. When he chewed he made loud smacking sounds.

“Dougart,” I struggled to catch my breath. “The craziest thing just happened. You won’t believe it.”

Dougart reached his hand down behind the counter and pulled out a handful of Swedish Fish. “Want one?” He extended his hand to me.

“Sure. Yeah,” I said, taking a fish and putting it into my mouth. As I chewed, I tried to collect myself, and to mentally gather and organize the details of my story.

“You out for a walk?”

“Yeah. I guess I am,” I said, trying to remember why I was at the Citgo in the first place. “Hey, I forgot how much I like Swedish Fish. You mind if I have some more?”

“I don’t mind.” He lifted the bag onto the counter and I helped myself. We were both more interested in the Swedish Fish than in each other’s conversation. For the sake of appearances, we smiled and nodded at one another as if we were

pondering something the other person had said, but we weren't, or at least I wasn't. I was trying to remember why I had come.

"It's getting dark," Dougart said.

I followed his gaze out the window. Sure enough, it was dark out. How long had it been dark? Why couldn't I remember? A light snow fell.

"I should get going," I said, turning partially, but stopping. "Hey," I said, hefting my purse onto the countertop. "I'll take a bag of those Swedish Fish. They're pretty good. I forgot how good they were."

"Sure."

As he rung me up, he asked me if I knit my purse. I told him yes, and then he told me his plans to make a five-mile long aquarium. As he talked, I tore upon my purchase and stuffed Swedish Fish into my mouth, one after another.

I nodded and pretended to be interested in what he was saying.

I walked home in a daze. I finished off my bag of candy and tossed the empty bag into the dumpster outside of my apartment. I wasn't really hungry for dinner now, so I watched a movie, then went to bed.

The next day, a fresh layer of snow covered the ground. The air smelled clean and cold. The earth seemed untouched and new. I got into my car to drive to the Ceder Cafe for some coffee, but the car wouldn't start. There was something of injury in the car's whine—something familiar. I sat in my car, turning the engine over and over and listening to its sound, waiting for the memory to come.

The cans of No Freeze and gasoline. The snow. The darkness. The wall of glass.

My hands shook. My engine gurgled and whined.

I peered out the windshield, my jaw slack, forming a perfect and bewildered oval.

I took out my cigarettes and smoked three, exhaling against the car's windows. I watched the glass fog and then slowly dissolve clear.

A small pointed pounding began in the center of my skull.

I told myself it was a dream. I repeated to myself that it was a dream and that I was okay. I was alive.

It's pretty easy to forget stuff so important. You'd be surprised. You just have to make the decision to do it, somewhere inside of you. You decide and it's gone. The memory gets smaller until everything feels normal again, and you don't have to wonder what it was you saw. What it was you've forgotten.

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SECOND PLACE

Erica Naone is an assistant editor at Technology Review, where she covers topics related to the Internet and computer software. Her fiction has appeared in *Coyote Wild*, *Welter*, and *Mystery Time*. As a teenager, she managed to play bass (barely) in a punk band, and to talk her way into a few improbable gigs. She lives with her husband in Allston, MA, and spends much of her free time playing *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Vintage: A Rock'n'Roll Fairy Tale

by Erica Naone

Josh parked outside No Limit Records and Discs, sat in his car a moment trying one last time to rub the sleep out of his eyes, and then got out and stumbled up the stairs to the door. The morning shift was ingrained more in his blood than in his brain, and he'd already fished the keys out of his pocket and started fiddling with the building's sticky lock before he noticed the big cardboard box in front of the door. He shoved it aside with his foot and made his way to the coffee machine in the back.

As he mixed sugar into his coffee, Josh scanned the shelf of rare records kept locked in the employee room. Fingers not quite touching the array of anti-static sleeves, his hand hovered beside the 1986 original sealed vinyl edition of Dead Milkmen's *Eat Your Paisley*. He'd promised himself he'd buy it the first time his band scored a gig at the Blue Room. But since his lead guitarist had quit last night after practice, and Josh's hours of arguing had done nothing to change his mind, *Eat Your Paisley* was not coming to him anytime soon. Just out of high school, working full time at the record store for minimum wage, Josh lived off what

increasingly seemed like the naive hope that his band would make it big. He snorted to himself as he checked and emptied the dehumidifier.

“All right, let’s see about this box,” he said out loud.

Outside, he dragged the box to a comfortable position and knelt beside it on the threadbare blue welcome mat that Hank the owner hadn’t changed since he first opened the store 30 years ago. People were always leaving their trash at the store—records so scratched they wouldn’t even play, old 8-tracks, and tapes with bits erased from sitting in cars full of Florida sun. It made Josh sad to see how people didn’t care for the things they owned. He thought about writing “Free” on the side of this box and just leaving it where it was, or taking it straight to the dumpster. But Hank would want him to look inside first, in case there was something the store could use.

Josh tugged open the cardboard flap with a sigh. Instead of the puff of dust and mildewed smell he expected, the inside of the box was pristine and organized, every record packed in double layers of protective sleeves. As he read a few of the titles, every bit of sleepiness drained out of him and the blood in his body began to vibrate in his capillaries.

*

“Kid, I hire you to work the morning shift so I don’t have to wake up this early,” Hank growled as he banged open No Limit’s door. He heaved himself to the employee area behind the counter and stared Josh down.

“I told you what’s in the box,” Josh said.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Josh smiled as evenly as he could and pulled himself up to his full height. He made an effort to calm his breathing and keep his voice steady. “The Clash, 12-inch yellow vinyl Colombian edition of *London Calling*, worth \$200. Beck, 7-inch blue vinyl special edition of *MTV Makes Me Want to Smoke Crack*, worth \$150. Oh, and Blondie, 7-inch Private Stock UK demo edition of *X-Offender*, worth \$1500.” With each record he listed, he pulled a near-mint copy out of a stack beside him and

displayed it to Hank before lovingly returning it to the counter. His hands were trembling. “They’re alphabetized in the box, and they only go up to G. This box alone is worth easily \$10,000, and there could be more where this came from,” he said, stepping back so Hank could see for himself.

It only took a second for Hank to realize that Josh was right. “How long did it take you to price these?”

Josh laughed. “Not long. I’ve got posters of some of these up on my wall. Never in my life did I think I’d even be in the same room with them, forget about touching them.”

Hank grunted and continued flipping through the contents of the box. “*London Calling*,” he said. “The store was open about a year when that came out. I gave away copies of the single to my favorite customers. I still remember where I was standing when I heard it for the first time. One of the employees put it on, and I was right over there by the M’s. Nobody in the store spoke until the first song, the title track, was over.”

Hank stared into the past. Josh cleared his throat and interrupted the moment. “What I don’t get,” he said, “is why the hell this person didn’t bring us these records and try to sell them to us.”

“We could never have paid for all of them.”

“They had to know what this was worth. Who collects this stuff, takes perfect care of it, and then abandons it outside a record store? I kicked it on the way in!”

Hank turned around suddenly. “Josh, go into the side drawer of my desk. On the top in there, you’ll find a mint copy of *Vitalogy* on vinyl. Bring it up to the counter.”

The old metal drawer popped and squealed when Josh pulled it open. Under a thin layer of packing slips, he found the record, covered with sticky notes recording weeks of calls to the person who’d ordered it. “Who’s Anna Birkins?” Josh said, reading the name off the aging notes. “I thought you didn’t hold records for more than two weeks? It looks like you’ve been holding this one since 1994.”

Hank came around the corner holding a small-label issue with black-and-white art on the sleeve. “Endless Mike,” he said, tapping it with a thick finger.

*

Anna Birkins had been lead guitarist of the band Endless Mike, which ended after all in 1994 in what many writers in the local music press liked to call the biggest band breakup tragedy ever to strike Central Florida. The box contained five copies of their debut album, printed by a no-name punk label that Josh had only found after several Google deep dives. Hank had let him borrow one of the records.

The rest of Josh’s shift had been long once Hank took over dealing with the box, but now most of the night had passed in the space of one delicious guitar solo by Anna Birkins that Josh had played over and over again in his apartment. Josh had never heard Endless Mike before, tending to dismiss what he’d read about them as journalists making a band out to be as great as they wished it had been. He’d been wrong. With a lead guitarist like that, a gig at the Blue Room would be only the beginning. He wondered if she still played, and if he could find her.

In the picture in the album’s liner notes, Anna looked like an updated, more muscular version of Janis Joplin. She had wild hair, big glasses, a mess of black clothes, and the same sort of crinkly smile. Her bare left arm stuck out from a rolled-up sleeve as she held her guitar neck high mid-solo. Hank thought the incredible record collection had belonged to her, a guess backed up by all the Endless Mike records in the box.

Anna had been a customer of No Limit back when she was a teenager, before her band had even formed. Her taste in new releases was so good that Hank had followed her lead in ordering for the store, and when she’d grown up and married an up-and-coming young Chick-Fil-A executive, just before Endless Mike had started to make it big, she had begun asking Hank to find rare records for her at trade shows. She’d suddenly stopped coming to the store back in 1994, but Hank had never had the heart to sell the copy of *Vitalogy* she’d ordered. “I kept thinking how mad she’d be if she showed up and it was gone,” he’d told Josh. “And then I just thought, as long as I had it, there was a chance she’d come back for it someday. I always wanted to see her again and find out why she disappeared.”

“Didn’t you ever look for her?” Josh had said. “I mean, are you sure she was OK?”

“People stop buying records all the time. They grow out of it. Doesn’t mean they disappeared in real life.”

“What about now? Don’t you think we should at least give her some money for this? What if she died? Wouldn’t you want to know?”

Hank had laughed at him. “You look for her and tell me what you find out. If there’s a memorial service, tell me when it is.”

*

The only member of Endless Mike whose address Josh could find online was founder and front man Mike Green. Josh was off on Sundays, and so he drove at a crawl into the trailer park where Mike lived, trying to watch the numbers without running over a kid playing in the hot, dusty road. Some trailers overflowed with plants and decorations placed by housewives compensating for a lack of house. Others, like Mike’s, stayed in place only because there was nowhere else for them to go. Josh parked next to a rotting El Camino, took a deep breath, and went up the rusting stairs to rap on the trailer’s door.

Mike came to the door a moment later and peered out, studying Josh with a face like an abandoned sock, wrinkled and stained. He’d gone to fat since the pictures taken during the band years, and his eyebrow ring, mostly grown out of his forehead, flapped against the thread of skin holding it on. In spite of it all, the vision of a rock star had never quite passed from him, and he stood like he was in front of a crowd of thousands. He adjusted his Dead Kennedys T-shirt, cleared a smoke-ruined throat, and asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m Josh Galloway,” Josh said, sticking out a hand.

Mike stared at it without taking it. “What are you doing here?”

For answer, Josh pulled out his copy of the Endless Mike record. Mike growled at the sight of it and turned away. “Hey, wait a minute,” Josh said, shoving his foot in the way of the door just before Mike could slam it closed.

“You another of those damn journalists? I’m not giving interviews. Christ, for a man who never really got famous, the journalists sure know how to find me.”

“I’m not a journalist. Look, this is about Anna Birkins.”

“Of course it is. You want to know if the rumors are true that the band broke up because she was having an affair with me. You think I’m stupid enough to answer that question?” His face twisting viciously, he kicked Josh in the shin. When Josh flinched back, Mike slammed the door.

“Mike, hang on! Jeez, man.” Josh slapped at his shin to numb it and pulled a list out of his pocket. Pitching his voice to be heard through thin walls, he said, “I work at a record store. This is what I found yesterday outside the door.” He read a few of the most impressive titles. “I think they belonged to her. I want to know what happened to her and if she’s OK.”

The door flew open again, and Mike thrust his quivering chin out at Josh. He hadn’t shaved in a few days. “What the hell do you care? Do you know her?”

“No, I just...” Josh held his hands out helplessly. “You should see this record collection. I can’t believe anyone would abandon it.”

“You wouldn’t believe anyone could abandon positive reviews from *Rolling Stone* either, but you’d be underestimating Anna.”

“Will you let me in?” Josh said. “Ten minutes. I just want to know what you know.”

Mike snorted and rolled his eyes, but he stepped back from the door and went to a dorm-sized refrigerator. “Want a beer?”

“I’m still underage.”

“Want a beer?”

“No thanks, man.”

“That’s all you had to say.” Mike gestured Josh into a small stuffed chair by the window and took a seat at the table.

“Listen,” Josh said when Mike raised both eyebrows expectantly, “you don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me. Just whatever you can.”

“Why are you doing this, kid?”

“She should get paid or something.”

“Yeah, I should see the records. I heard you the first time. But if you’ve got some kind of rescue fantasy, you need to give it up. Anna’s shoved herself so far up the ass of that Christian fundamentalist husband of hers, you wouldn’t be able to find her if you gave him a colonoscopy.” Mike reached down to the dorm fridge, and got himself a beer. He cracked it open, took a long swallow, and smirked at Josh. “He’s the biggest tone-deaf moron I’ve ever met. He’d confuse The Doors with ABBA. He never understood a damn thing about her and her music, and she was an idiot to marry him.”

“So why did she?”

Mike spat into an ashtray on the table. “Anna didn’t like being talented and beautiful. She wanted to be ordinary. I tried to show her what was out there, but she had herself a man who was just as scared of Anna being Anna as she was.”

“And Anna played the guitar.”

Mike laughed from deep in his gut. “Josh Galloway, Anna played the guitar like Jimi Hendrix on a deal with the devil. If you could find her and get her to pick up that guitar again, that would be something to see.”

*

At four the next morning, Josh stopped at the IHOP next door to No Limit, planning to nurse a cup of coffee until he caught a glimpse of Anna. He’d been right that there was more to the collection. Hank had called him yesterday to say he’d received G through N. “I’m going to be able to retire on this,” Hank had laughed.

“Don’t you think you should try to find her?”

“You’ve got that covered, kid. I’m just going to sit back and enjoy the money.”

Josh brushed off the flirtatious waitress and kept an eye out the window. Anna had to be bringing the records to the store herself. No one else would just donate them to Hank’s retirement fund. Josh was on the third cup of coffee when a sleek little Mazda Miata pulled up in front of No Limit. He threw down a five for the waitress and rushed out the door.

Anna Birkins hadn’t lost muscle in the years since she’d been with Endless Mike. She leaned over the Miata’s open trunk and came up with the third box, which she carried easily to the door. She looked like a black and white art photo, even 14 years later, even in the Florida heat. She wore large Janis Joplin sunglasses, and her black hair up in a ponytail. If Mike still had a touch of rock star about him, Anna could have been a chart-topper hiding from the paparazzi. Unable to find words, Josh watched her silently from the edge of the parking lot, but she turned and looked right at him.

Josh screwed up his courage and ran to her. “I’ve got something that belongs to you,” he said. “I just need to go inside to get it. Wait here a minute.” He fumbled frantically with the sticky lock. She gave a half smile and waited, setting the box down out of his way. “Actually,” Josh said, worrying that she would slip away, “you should come inside with me.”

“You take your summer job very seriously,” she said, a bit unkindly. But she followed him in.

Josh ran to Hank’s desk, glancing over his shoulder constantly. He returned with the copy of *Vitalogy* and pressed it into her hands. She touched her name still written on the note on the front, and ran her finger over the list of Hank’s attempts to reach her. “I took my husband’s name after I left the band.” She glanced out at the Miata, then back at Josh. After a moment, she sighed and took off the sunglasses, revealing red-rimmed eyes and a face that broke a good deal of the rock-star spell. She was puffy with years, though she could only have been in

her 30s. “Do you really think I can take this with me, when I’m getting rid of all these others?”

“You should have it,” Josh said.

She held it, stroking it with her long, unpainted fingernails. “I had all Pearl Jam’s Christmas records up to 1994,” she said after a minute. “I wanted this album for ‘Spin the Black Circle.’ I know Eddie Vedder understands about records. You sell CDs here now, too.”

“Hank says he added them about 10 years ago, and the DVDs a few years after that. Only way he could make enough to stay in business.”

“Now mp3s are probably ruining his life even more. Poor Hank. He’s too grouchy for this business.”

“Why aren’t you selling your records?” Josh said. “They’re worth thousands of dollars. You know that.”

“I’m supposed to be throwing them away,” Anna said, her voice dropping to a hiss. “I thought Hank should have them since I bought about half of them here.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I have to go.”

“Wait,” Josh said. “Do you still play guitar?” She stopped, looked him up and down, and smiled. He noticed that she hadn’t relinquished the record, and he felt a wild hope that the answer to answer to his question was “Yes.”

“This is the last box,” she said. “You won’t see me again.”

*

Josh swallowed as he shut off the car’s engine and turned the key to run the stereo off the battery. She was probably alone. There was only the Miata in the driveway of the split-level house. He knew from Mike that Anna didn’t have children and her husband was away on business all the time. He looked around at the perfectly

manicured suburban lawns and hoped the nearby housewives knew and loved the music of Endless Mike. With that, he started up a CD he'd made of Anna Birkins' most impressive guitar solos. She was outside almost before he started.

"What are you doing here? Did you watch *Say Anything* too many times as a kid?"

"Where's your guitar?" Josh said. "Get it out. I want to show you some stuff I've been thinking about."

"I don't play anymore."

"For Christ's sake. If that's true, I'm never speaking to you again."

"Who said I wanted you to speak to me?"

"Come on. You've got to have it hidden somewhere."

"You can't be here. You have no idea how much trouble it will cause."

"Fine," Josh said, smiling out of one side of his mouth. He flipped her a demo CD of his band, spinning it end over end. She caught it neatly, without changing her irritated expression. "We've got a gig," he said. "Three weeks from Wednesday at the Blue Room. The Raptures' opening band had to bail because their lead guitarist broke his hand."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mike says you know The Raptures. Matt and Isaac? They say my band can open if I guarantee you'll show up. You can practice without me if you insist."

"What's your issue? Since when was I in your band?"

"I've been wanting to play the Blue Room since I was 11," Josh said. "I'll never get another chance if you don't show." He put on his best insolent grin, trying to channel Mike Green as he must have been years ago.

Anna just stared at him, and he couldn't read her face at all. He shut off the stereo. "Just say yes," he said. "And call the number in the case if you can't make it." His heart started beating again when she gave a little nod.

*

Though he rarely smoked, Josh bummed a cigarette from someone waiting to get into the show and sucked it dry in a hopeless effort to calm his nerves. Not only was the Blue Room the biggest venue he'd ever played, it looked like the show was about to sell out. The Raptures were just breaking into the national scene, and they'd hinted at an opening-act surprise in a few of the interviews they'd given on college radio. The only trouble was that Anna was nowhere to be seen. Aside from the nerves he'd have had anyway, it was getting uncomfortable to dodge Matt and Isaac's pointed questions about her. She was late for sound check. Josh scanned the crowd, flinching when, instead of Anna, he saw Mike Green standing in line.

Josh went to him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, man."

"So you did find her."

Josh shrugged.

"I can't believe you talked her into this."

"Don't wait in line. I should have made sure you were on the list. I apologize."

"No worries, man. No worries," Mike grinned, but Josh noticed him looking around for Anna, too. "What did you tell her? I figured, if she was getting rid of the record collection, the husband must have been punishing her for cheating again. Didn't think he'd let her out so soon after that."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "Again?"

"I used to look a lot better," Mike said.

"You sound like you're getting ready to give some interviews."

Mike grinned briefly, then leaned in toward Josh. "So where is she?"

Josh swallowed. "I bet she's going to come in the back."

Josh tried to dart behind the building unnoticed, but Matt and Isaac saw him backstage. They were in the process of pulling him aside for some serious interrogation when Anna walked in holding an electric guitar case, making the room fall silent. "Sorry I'm late," she said, avoiding Josh's eyes. She was wearing the big sunglasses, and Josh was disturbed by his sudden certainty that there were again red-rimmed eyes under the dark lenses.

*

Anna's guitar, which she said was the first she'd bought as a teenager, was a ridiculous thing, like something from a 1980s hair metal band. Migraine yellow and painted with spiderwebs, it stood out like a sickness against her black outfit, black hair, and black glasses. Before they started up the sound check, Josh stepped toward her.

"You doing all right?"

"Doing fine. Just a quick race to the junkyard before the show." At Josh's concerned glance, she smiled. "My husband found out I hadn't gotten rid of the guitar and decided to do that for me. I said I'd give it away to charity and he gave it back to me. I'm supposed to be out finding a place for it now."

"On a Friday night at 9 p.m.?"

She shrugged. "He believes what he wants to believe."

Josh cleared his throat. "So I thought we'd start with a couple of Endless Mike covers, because that's what everyone wants to hear anyway."

"You think you can step into Mike's shoes that way?"

"I can try."

"I listened to your demo. Good stuff."

"Thanks."

“When we get to your stuff, just add space for the solo. Hold a steady three-chord groove when you’re ready for it, and I’ve got a few things worked up.”

Josh grinned. “I knew you would.”

*

The closest Josh could ever come to describing that night later was by playing E major, which had always sounded to him like the start of a showdown. He stepped out onto the stage, facing off against Anna, Mike Green, the crowd, her husband, Hank, and all his own doubts. He paced to the microphone and set off the music with a 1-2-3 count. And the music exploded out of them, notes shooting like bullets from Anna’s guitar, the drummer and bassist playing fast and hard like the beating of Josh’s heart. And he stood up against it all. He fixed his eyes on the crowd beneath him and told them he was death and love and heroism, and they soaked up every word he sang. As for Anna, she played like her life depended on it, better than he could have dreamed. His music flowed together with hers as if they’d been practicing for the moment their whole lives, and he knew this night, no matter what happened after, would stay in his blood for as long as he lived.

Though Josh couldn’t see much through the lights, sweat, and intoxication, he could still see Mike Green, standing toward the front, not moving with the music at all, just staring up at Anna Birkins with the jealousy of a ghost staring at a newborn baby.

When it was over, and they had come out for a final song with The Raptures, and Josh had discouraged the would-be groupies and was telling himself fiercely to keep it together until he could go home and take a long look in the mirror, Anna came and touched him lightly on the shoulder. He hugged her wholeheartedly. “Thank you,” he said.

“No. Thank you.” She pulled away from the hug and studied him, biting her lower lip. Josh felt bad for how nervous she looked.

“Look, you don’t have to explain anything to me,” he said.

“My husband doesn’t trust what music does to me. He says it brings out some wild person he doesn’t even know. But I wonder, what if I can’t live without it?”

“Hank will give you back your record collection if you go and ask for it. I don’t care how grouchy he is about it. I’ll make sure he does it.”

“I did a bunch of things I shouldn’t have done when I was touring with Endless Mike. I felt so alive I couldn’t contain myself. But these last years, I’ve done all the same things, just out of bitterness.”

“What are you doing with the guitar?”

“I’m keeping it,” she said, stroking the case with the same gesture he’d seen her use on the Pearl Jam album. “I used to think a lot about driving away. Just driving down to Mexico and finding a new life.”

“What are you doing now? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to try to go home,” she said. Josh nodded, because he couldn’t think of anything to say, and he didn’t have a better suggestion. “I’ll tell him I didn’t give the guitar away, and he’ll either take me back with it, or he won’t take me back at all.”

“What about the records? I could bring them to you.”

She sighed and looked around the room, taking a deep breath as if the boozy air were the sweetest thing she’d ever smelled. She touched his arm for a second, before turning away. “Don’t worry about it. Sometimes you have to let things go.”

Josh wanted to call after her and argue with her. He wanted to tell her not to be ordinary. He wished for a moment that he was 10 years older, but then he changed his mind and felt glad he wasn’t. He didn’t have to be ordinary, either. He thought about the size of the crowd that night and leaned against the wall for a minute, letting the memory of the applause wash over him.

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THIRD PLACE

Peter Andrews has worked as a speechwriter, a radio producer, and a chemist. He has written over 200 published articles explaining science and technology. He also has published a handful of works of short fiction, including short stories in recent editions of *Reflection's Edge*, *Burst* and *Staffs & Starships*.

Waverly

by Peter Andrews

I was just a kid when the aliens came, so I guess you can discount what I have to say. But I remember it fine, and I'm not making it up.

Waverley, the town I grew up in, was in the middle of South Dakota. Tough winters. Plenty of nothing everywhere. I loved it. A kid there knew everyone and was a part of everything. I was safe and sure in a way that I've never been since.

It's difficult nowadays to imagine how cut off we were from the outside world. In the 1950s, living in a farming community in the Great Plains was like living on the Moon. People rarely came by and even mail from the outside was shared around until it was worn out. Besides that, we kept to ourselves, except at harvest time. And even then, only a few people left our town. Waverley had its own newspaper.

It was 1959, and television was new. We had one station that broadcast from Pierre and gave a fuzzy signal at my house, but good enough. When *Dragnet* or *The Untouchables* was on, I could make it over to Rusty Havergood's house as long as it wasn't a school night. That was true for me all through fourth and fifth grade, but in the spring of that year, the signal suddenly got better, and I could see

everything from home. That was good, because that's when things really started to happen.

Everyone in town saw the broadcasts from the big cities. Weird domes sprouted up just outside of New York, Washington, Los Angeles. Lots of people offered their opinion about what they were. Adults talked a lot about what to do, and they had politicians and scientists on TV. And I remember that, after a few days with nothing happening, the adults got scared. The army attacked, and none of the weapons did anything but create a lot of smoke and fire outside the domes.

Then, of course, aliens came out and made friends with everyone. Our moms and dads and the other adults in town couldn't help talking about it in front of us, and we knew they were still worried, but most of them calmed down in a few days. Only Mrs. Jenkins, who had three boys and no husband, kept fretting about "youth at risk," until it became comical. We came up with a dozen ways to say it, but always behind her back.

Things settled down, and we kids figured we'd go see the aliens someday about the same as we'd go see the ocean or Rome or helicopters. I think for awhile that's all aliens meant to us.

People ask, how could you not know the truth? Are folks out on the farms really that dumb?

Well, how would we know? When you live in a town like Waverley, you don't go anyplace else, except the rodeo in Pierre. Long-distance phone calls back then were for rich people. And we trusted what we saw on TV. If sophisticated New Yorkers could get panicked by *War of the Worlds*, I don't think believing in aliens was stupid for us. Especially since there really were aliens.

So when a dome appeared outside our town just before school ended for the summer, we were surprised, but not alarmed. We only wondered what they had in mind for us.

It might have been different if they had looked really odd, but they were less remarkable to us than Chinese or Negroes. There was something funny about their eyebrows and they wore sparkly clothing. And they were pretty sexy, although I

was a bit young for that to be very important. To me, the main thing was that they were exotic. Like circus people from another planet.

They wanted our manure. This always brings a good chuckle from folks who don't know better, but it didn't seem strange to us. Manure is valuable on a farm, even though it isn't rare. We have plenty of cattle in South Dakota. Why the aliens wanted manure wasn't really our business, and I don't think anyone asked. It would have been rude.

The aliens wanted truckloads. I don't know how many tons, but a lot. Manure absorbed that summer for us kids and the whole town. We did nothing but collect it and deliver it. No cow patty was safe! In fact, I'm sure some people weren't all that fussy about having what we delivered come from cows, if you know what I mean.

We didn't do this work out of the goodness of our hearts. It was all part of a business deal that seemed pretty shrewd to us at the time. We would provide the aliens with manure, and they would provide us with cop cars.

Now, our town had exactly one cop car at the time. That's all we really needed and Officer Baxter was the only cop I knew until I grew up and moved away. These alien cop cars weren't for us, they were for selling. The aliens were supposed to trade with us exclusively, and we would supply all the big cities. Now, I'm not good with numbers, but Zero McKenzie said we would get 20,736 cop cars. That's 12 times 12 times 12 times 12, and I just refigured it, so I'd get it right for you.

Not a bad deal for some truckloads of crap. Bill Coney, who was our mayor and had signs with his name on them all over town, was pretty proud of his business skills. He was our barber, but he also owned the filling station. About once a week, he'd get a nickel from me when I bought a bottle of pop from his machine. Put the coin in, pull the bottle out, cold and sweet. He knew his customers, and he probably got a whole dollar out of me that summer, even accounting for the deposits.

Everyone thought the trade was a good idea, and I haven't even told you the best part yet. These cars were all anti-gravity. They floated right in the air. When the deal was struck, they put one of them in front of Shannon's feed store. It was

shaped like a big egg and had two windows that also were doors. The frame was painted up like a black and white, and it even said POLICE on it in big bold letters. There was a bubblegum light on top and a button you could push to make the siren go off. Two men could sit inside, but I'm here to tell you we got eleven kids at once in it.

It was hard to do chores for the first week with that thing in town. We all kept looking for excuses to slip away from home and climb into it. Really, it was a nuisance, and the adults talked about storing it away. Before that happened, the novelty wore off. If we could have driven it around, it might have been different, but it was chained into place. We had it pretty much explored by the Fourth of July.

I don't know why there aren't any photographs of it. Moose Abeles tried to take some, but they didn't come out. Of course, he never was very good with a camera.

Now, the smell of manure is really not all that bad. Go past a herd, and it's sweet and earthy. But if you're shoveling the stuff all day long, it loses its charm. By the truckload, it's undeniably nasty.

The Waverley goal was high and seemed unreachable. We had a big, painted thermometer set up next to the flagpole in the middle of town, and it seemed like it never got any higher. There was no baseball that summer. None of us went fishing or built forts or dressed up like cowboys. We shoveled manure. That smell got into our clothes so our mothers couldn't get it out. It got into our skin so it wouldn't wash away. It got into our noses and changed the taste of every meal. We, the kids, we definitely did our part. Which is ironic and more than a little sad to me considering how things worked out.

As the summer got hotter and smellier, we saw, at last, some progress on that thermometer. The adults started talking about how big this trade would be. They made plans to bring some of the vehicles to the rodeo and argued about how much they'd charge for each. The statement I heard over and over again was, "This will put Waverley on the map!" It made no sense to me. I had a National Geographic map of South Dakota in my room. Waverley was already there, just west of

Deadwood. And you can find it today if you go to a library and get out one of the old maps.

I was less concerned with maps than with taking a ride in one of those eggs. I'd never been in a plane or a balloon or a helicopter. I had climbed the church steeple once and touched my finger to the top of the lighting rod. That was the highest I'd ever gotten, and I had hopes of really flying above the countryside. Maybe with one of those lady aliens at my side, I'd fly all the way to the ocean. All the way to Rome.

Of course none of this would happen if we didn't collect the manure. In my mind, we had to get it done before school started again. I guess there was a real deadline, but that's what I had in my head. I would stand next to the thermometer just about every other day and measure its progress against myself. Since I was sprouting up that summer, my impressions were never completely accurate, but I knew when the red in the thermometer got above my head that we were going to make it.

That day, I went to the feed store and just sat in the vehicle for an hour, maybe more. I could see myself taking off. I could see the ground rushing beneath me. I could see Miss America Alien smiling at my side. I actually fell asleep there, and my father was mad when he finally found me. Chores had not been done and my mom was worried. He whacked me a few times, and I tried not to cry. It was embarrassing.

All that was forgotten the next morning. Even from my house, I could hear the diesel engine of one of the manure trucks starting up. The last truck. I dressed and tried to get away, but my mom wouldn't let me, not without breakfast. And I had to wait for my sister who took forever deciding what color ribbons should be in her hair. Then she had to tie them herself since she thought she was grown up or something.

Zero saved me a place in front of the feed store. Someone had made a flatbed truck into a stand for Mayor Bill Coney, the minister and a couple of aliens. Crates, which were still wooden back then, had been stacked to give them steps up.

The Mayor made a boring speech, and then smiled and shook hands with everyone. He kissed a lady alien and everyone clapped. We wanted the aliens to say something too, and a big one, who used to stop by the Mayor's barbershop to talk, stood up and faced the audience.

He didn't talk. He sang. A wandering song with notes that went right through us. The most beautiful music I've ever heard, and this was over forty years ago. I thought he sang for about seven hours, but it really was just a few minutes. When he stopped, everyone just stood there, silent. I realized I had been crying. I had fought not to cry the day before when I got into trouble, and here I was with my face all wet. I wiped the tears away, embarrassed again. But everyone else had been crying, too, so it wasn't bad.

Then they came. Not a hundred eggs, understand. Not a thousand. Over twenty thousand. Like a whole parking lot's worth of cars floating into our little town. Think of an egg for each person at a rodeo, hovering over your head.

I had never seen so many things at once. It was bigger than our biggest cattle herd. Bigger than all the BBs in every box in Mr. Shannon's store. There were two eggs in the air for each meal I'd eaten since I'd been born. Above our heads. Casting shadows. Moving in on us.

And I suddenly had a feeling of falling upward because all this stuff in the air made every building, car and person on the ground seem insignificant by comparison.

They moved in closer, close enough to touch, and the bubblegum lights suddenly all turned on at once. We all laughed. It was a celebration. The Mayor clapped the big alien on the back. The band played "God Bless America."

The eggs dropped just a bit lower, and I couldn't resist. I climbed in. Of course, all the other kids had to do the same. I helped my sister in, since she couldn't reach. The dream had come true, and we couldn't be any happier.

After I helped my sister get settled, I arranged myself so I was comfortable, and that's when I saw it.

I had dropped a nickel in the road. When I'd climbed into the egg, it had fallen out of my pocket, and I could see it there. If someone else claimed it for finderskeepers, I would not have my bottle of pop. That's all. So I climbed back down from the egg and picked up my money. I reached for the egg, and a breeze blew it just beyond my grasp. I took a step closer and jumped, but missed when a stronger breeze pushed all the eggs a bit to the south. I'm sure people must have been talking at this point, but I was getting irritated, feeling I was being made the fool. I remember Zero laughing at me.

I ran toward the egg that held my sister just as the vehicle got caught in an air current. Her egg, and all the others, simply blew away, like chaff in the wind. Within moments, over twenty thousand eggs had been swept away toward the distant horizon. They simply disappeared into the Rocky Mountains.

The adults screamed. Mr. O'Donovan jumped into his truck and tried to follow. My mother grabbed me and held me as she whispered my sister's name, over and over again.

And the aliens? I looked back at them. To this day, I believe that they were as surprised as we were. I don't think they intended any harm. Tell that to a South Dakotan.

From nowhere, guns came out and someone pulled a trigger. Then everyone was shooting at the aliens. That's the last I saw. Since I was the only kid left, about a dozen adults swarmed around to protect me.

I don't think we killed them. I think they got away. I wonder if, with some discussion, they would have helped put things back to rights. But they never had the chance.

Someone decided to call the government, and that long-distance call was the first to tell us no one else knew about the aliens. We couldn't believe they didn't know, and they couldn't believe we weren't all crazy.

Some government men did come out at last. They snooped around for few weeks, looked at pictures and interviewed just about everyone. This was a time of the

Cold War with lots of UFO sighting and “unexplained” happenings. I told my story over and over again.

Everyone was interested in me. You see, I was the only kid to escape. But the FBI chalked it up to mass hysteria and left. They were more interested in communists than aliens.

Babies were left, but school started with just me. Having school with just one kid? I guess they were trying to keep things normal. I heard they did the same thing years ago in towns where the flu epidemic hit hard. Over 600,000 Americans died and no one ever talked about it. It was just forgotten.

People couldn't forget entirely with me around. I was a freak and the only reminder for years. When the Brewster twins made it back, all the way from Mexico, it was too late. We were adults ourselves by then. The Brewsters had a lot to talk about. Mountains and deserts and tending cattle in Sonora. They wouldn't have made it without each other, and they never gave up the idea of finding their way home. But no one really wanted to hear their stories, except me. Some people didn't even believe it was them.

I hated growing up alone. I miss my sister. And I still have that damned nickel. It's in my hand right now.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Louise Curtis is the author of six books for children and young adults that are set in the same fantasy world as this story. She is Australian and has been published throughout the world. Her less G-rated stories and novels are published under the name Felicity Bloomfield, which will also be handy if she ever has to go into witness protection.

The Misbehaving Mountain

by Louise Curtis

Most families don't go to the edge of the world for holidays, on account of the monsters still lingering there, far away from civilization. Most families aren't like us.

It's my da. He's technically human, sure – but only because he felt like trying it out. Sometimes he gets younger for a while. Sometimes he changes shape. He doesn't even have a name, exactly. I call him Da, and Ma calls him darling, so it doesn't bother us.

Ma is human through-and-through, and very good at looking innocent when regular humans start suspecting something's going on. When that doesn't work, our ship takes us and our crew to start afresh somewhere new. The cook taught me to read and write, the navigator taught me maths, and the captain volunteered for geography. Geography's a lot more interesting when you've spent your life sailing from one place to another. I remember places better when they let us stay a while.

Us kids aren't quite sure if we're human or not. We look human and we feel human, but we're certainly not like other kids we meet.

For example, I don't sleep. Not ever. Sometimes Da stays up with me, talking quietly about what life was like hundreds of years ago, or what it's like to be a bird. Sometimes he chooses to sleep at Ma's side, and I'm left alone. Those nights I plait my hair in hundreds of narrow braids. When I'm done, my arms feel heavy as the ocean, and my hair still reaches my waist in thick black strands. When all the plaiting doesn't take long enough, I dye the ends bright red, one by one, so I look as if my hair's beginning to catch on fire.

I am Dance, named after my great-great-great-great grandmother (on Ma's side) who faced pirates and monsters without blinking. I think Da knew when he named me that I couldn't spend my whole life playing with my hair. Not even when our ship keeps changing the view by turning in gentle circles around the anchor.

My sister Jini is a different creature. When she gets nervous, she multiplies. I mean, pop! – suddenly there are two Jinis sitting in front of me. If I don't calm her quick there'll be more. Every Jini looks the same: like any other teenage girl who's trying desperately to hide behind her own fringe. The extra Jinis vanish with a burping noise when she's feeling better. No wonder everyone thinks I'm the oldest daughter.

One night, just as the sky began to pale and the watch was beginning to snore, I crept into the cabin where my siblings sleep. I hesitated for a moment beside my brother's bed, but decided not to wake him. Tofaru has an annoying way of accurately predicting unpleasant futures for me. I crept past and shook Jini's shoulder.

"Oh no," she mumbled. "Your hair's done already?"

I put my finger to my lips and tugged her to the ladder. She climbed obediently, as I knew she would. We tip-toed to the stern and loosened the twin ropes keeping the rowboat suspended from the water. It hit the sea with a splash, but none of the crew woke up. I picked up the oars and smiled at Jini. Her dark eyes brightened in response. She likes being bad – she just doesn't have the natural talent I do.

"You go first," I said.

She faltered and looked down at our boat. It was so small it had only one wide seat across the middle. From the ship, it looked even smaller. “Go. . . how?”

“Jump.”

She shook her head, but climbed onto the stern railing at the same time. “Dance, I don’t think this is a good —”

I pushed her. She managed to squeak, not scream – but I couldn’t help noticing that two of her fell into the water. I dropped the oars down next to them, and they grabbed one each and threw them into the boat before climbing in. I jumped down, and they helped me aboard. Once I was in the ship, she burped. Suddenly there was only one of her, and we were able to sit comfortably side by side.

“That wasn’t funny,” she pouted. “I hate multiplying.”

“Sure it was.”

We rowed toward a chain of mountainous islands. The current helped us. Soon the mountains enclosed us, hiding us from the eyes of the crew. I relaxed into our adventure. Jini pretended to relax, which was fine by me.

Before that morning I didn’t know there were different types of mist. One kind filled the sky, one tangled in the mountaintops, and one moved across the sea-cliffs like a harpist’s fingers across her strings. I saw waterfalls everywhere, coming down from heights I couldn’t see. The splashing of the waterfalls mixed with the slap, slap, slap of our oars. Everything smelled of rain.

The mist made it look as if the mountains were moving. Sometimes the white cleared for a moment and I could tell how the mountains reached all the way to the clouds. I heard rain falling somewhere nearby.

“The ocean’s a song,” I said, “and the mountains are playing hide and seek while they sing along.”

“Don’t be absurd,” said Jini, shivering in the chilled air. “No-one sings while they play hide and seek.”

“Dancing then. Can’t you imagine them touching hands way up there?” All around us the rock faces were lined with ten thousand white ribbons of waterfall. They were terribly long ribbons, and the mountains – a line here, a curve there – were higher still.

Jini followed my look. “Nope,” she said.

“Is this what it’s like to dream?”

Jini looked at me and sighed. We both knew she felt sorry for me. “Yes, except it’s not cold when you’re asleep.”

I dug in my oar to turn us, putting the rising sun at our left. Our parents would be waking soon, and missing us. What I saw almost made me drop the oar. “Jini. . .”

She looked around, and around again, as I had. Her mouth dropped open, making her look stupid.

Our patch of ocean was completely enclosed by land.

“It can’t be,” I said. “There must be an opening somewhere, around a corner or something. Otherwise, how did we get in?”

I heard a pop, then a splash as a new Jini fell into the ocean. Uh-oh. I pulled her into the boat while glaring at the original. “Sorry,” said both Jinis. Their voices were strained.

“Let’s look for the way out.”

We rowed along the rocks. The cliffs rose straight up from the water. They were far too steep to climb, and slick with moisture. Jini popped again. I let her pull herself in. The boat was getting crowded. It sat lower in the water.

I whacked the solid rock with my oar. It wasn’t meant to be there. I felt sure it wasn’t there before. “Let us out!” I yelled, hoping the universe would obey me just this once. “Open up!”

We heard a creaking rumble far above our heads. I looked up. All I could see was mist.

“Move it!” I shouted. It was worth a try.

The cliff in front of us bulged out, pushing us backward. One of the waterfalls pooled for a moment, then started again.

Suddenly the entire mountain rose from the sea. I saw the rusted brown rocks from underneath the waterline. Our boat nearly capsized, and I heard more popping from behind me. The new Jinis clung to the boat’s side to stay afloat.

The mountain broke apart in front of us. White water gushed into the new opening. As we watched, the waves settled into a deep blue channel wide enough for Jini and me – and all our hangers-on - to row out. The rumbling from above formed into words.

“Sorry, love, didn’t see you there.”

“Who are you?” I asked, too astonished to be scared. One of Jini’s many elbows dug into my back.

“Halannah,” said the mountain.

I introduced myself and my sister. Sisters.

“I’ve hardly ever talked to someone so small before,” said Halannah.

I laughed, sensing instantly that I was talking to a girl mountain. “What’s it like to be made of rock?”

“Oh, normal,” said Halannah. “How does it feel to swim around on that tiny piece of tree you have there?”

Speaking of the boat, I noticed my feet were wet. There were so many Jinis our boat was sinking. “Jini!” I said, and looked at them all one by one.

The original Jini raised her hand.

“Halanah’s perfectly friendly. We’ll be fine.” I held her eyes and kept talking as she burped until there was only one of her. Our boat had a puddle from all the sopping Jinis. I decided to deal with it later.

Turning back to Halanah – or at least, lifting my face to the mist – I asked, “You don’t happen to have noticed which way we came in? We’re lost. Normally we look at landmarks, but. . .”

“I’m sorry,” she said, with a quake of embarrassment. “You’re most welcome to stay and dance with me for a hundred or two years.”

For a moment, I was tempted. Then the water sloshed across my feet, reminding me not to do anything stupid. At least, not with Jini there.

“A hundred years?” Jini squeaked. “How old are you?”

“Three or four,” she said.

“Hundred?” I asked.

She giggled, showering us with gravel that stung our faces. “Thousand. Don’t tell the adults I asked you to play.”

I began to wonder what Tofaru would have told me if I’d asked him how the night would turn out. Hopefully it didn’t involve getting abducted by a delinquent mountain. So far, Jini was holding on to herself. “Were you dancing when we came in?” I asked carefully.

An overhang suddenly loomed out of the rock above us, then crunched back into the cliff face. So that was a nod.

“Honestly I’d love to stay with you,” I lied. Why had I gotten Jini involved in all this? I was going to end up drowning every single one of her, not to mention myself, and it was all my fault. “Could we come back tomorrow?”

Halanah pouted. There was no mistaking it. Her rocks darkened as if the sun was right behind her. The shadows of that fake dawn stretched to include me and Jini and our tiny piece of tree.

I glanced at Jini. She was looking furiously at her hands, saying, “One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-one-two-three-four-five-six—” That was never a good sign. Last time she did that, she started multiplying exponentially. One at a time was bad enough.

“Halannah,” I said. “Don’t do anything fooli—aargh!”

Jini and I flew upward, boat and all. We sailed on a spire of living rock.

Through my screams I heard Jini popping. Our ride halted suddenly when we were on a level with Halannah’s peak. All the Jinis and I dug our fingers into the frail wood of the boat. Several Jinis dangled from the sides. Her many knuckles turned white. I wondered what happened if one of the extra Jinis fell to her death. I decided I was better off not knowing.

“This is fun, isn’t it?” said Halannah. The stone under us trembled with mirth.

I was trying to think of a reply when a human voice cut in.

“Halannah! Put my daughters down this instant.”

I looked down. Our family’s ship sailed through the opening between Halannah and the other mountains. Through the mist I recognised Da’s silhouette standing on the bow. No-one else could be so skinny and so scary at the same time.

“Halannah,” he said again, sounding cross. Da always knew everyone’s name. His voice was much louder than it should have been. It echoed around the cliffs.

“You’ve been warned about this sort of thing. Stop it at once.”

Halannah melted into the water as if she was made of candlewax instead of rock. Our boat landed on the sea with a splash. Jini burped, and kept on burping. Finally I had room to move again. I felt like crying, which was silly. Everything was fine now.

Da addressed Halannah and the other mountains in a voice tougher and louder than he’d ever used on me. “Don’t you dare move until we’re well away. Or ever again, when humans are close. You know the rules.”

The sea rippled as the mountains settled deeper into the water. Jini and I rowed back to the ship's stern, and Da let down the twin ropes for us to wind through the metal eyes on each end of the boat. We hauled ourselves up, wondering what Da would do to us. Jini managed not to pop, but I could see the strain in her eyes.

"Dance! Jini!" Ma grabbed the ropes from our hands and wound them onto the pins before we had a chance to apologize. Da stood behind her, and didn't say a word.

Jini and I climbed unsteadily on board. Ma crushed us in a hug that was human through-and-through. She pushed us away to examine us. "You're all wet."

"Um," I said. "So are you."

She glanced down at her sopping front and laughed.

Ma left us to gather the morning's watch and let down the anchor. They gathered at the other end of the ship, grunting as the heavy chain uncurled. I smelled the rust all the way from the stern. Da sent Jini to shower. She fled without looking back.

The aft deck felt barren without Ma and Jini. It creaked gently as the waves shifted us about.

"Don't be mad at Halanah," Da said at last. "She's . . . young."

I burst into tears. Da pulled me close and stroked my plaited hair until I got ahold of myself. I didn't die. I didn't kill Jini. Da wasn't going to kill me. It was a good day.

He cleared his throat. "Incidentally, you'll be doing everyone's dishes for the next month. And I do mean everyone's."

I nodded into his chest. "Okay."

*

Jini secretly helped me with the crew's dishes, and Tofaru not-so-secretly spilled his breakfast on me every morning until Ma made him scrub the galley floor. The month passed slowly, but it passed. I thought of Halanah every day. That didn't pass.

All my life I tried to find another naughty mountain, but I never did.

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GUEST WRITER

At one time or another, Owen Kerr has been a stage actor, screen actor, voice actor, acting up, acting out, and a hard act to follow. He's currently pursuing a degree in Education while raising a small primate (ook), with assistance from a female of the species (hint: not Pongo Pygmaeus). If you have comments about the story, feel free to drop an e-mail on firehaven.west@gmail.com.

Structural

by Owen Kerr

Three Weeks Before

The target stepped onto the sidewalk. Marty rolled down the window, steadied his elbows on the center console, and prepared to shoot.

The face jiggled into focus. Marty's hands shook. *I signed up for this.* He willed his hands to stillness, lined up the shot, pressed the button.

He took four more, noted the time. He looked around the parking lot. No one had noticed him. *Good.* He headed home to upload the pictures.

Rule One: Don't talk about it. BUT. Don't get arrested, fired, or divorced about it. It's a game. If approached by an unsympathetic authority, come clean and drop out.

Three Weeks Before

Marty balanced a cup on the edge of the cubicle. "You're on the Fun Team, right?"

"Yeah." Steven was large and sweated profusely. He was moving his perspiration around with an electric fan.

"When's the outing?"

"Noon, March 15th."

"The ides of March, huh?"

"What?"

"Nothing, Steven. Old joke."

"Must be."

"Thanks, man."

Marty went to his cube and logged on. He glanced around. No lurking managers.

Subject: Assignment # 11

Ed:

Info going UP.

Graven Images Tempe CC is having their company outing on March 15, at Rotary Park, Tempe, noon to 4:30 pm. Approx. 500 people, catering by Big Blue Bull.

Frankie

SEND

There were no other messages, not that Marty expected any. He logged off. A supervisor was coming his way. He smiled, waved to her, and got back to work.

Rule Two: Cells are three people. Requests for more require Alpha Level approval.

Nine Weeks Before

Macie's Sandwicherie was busy, with four kids taking orders. Marty noticed a few fliers on the counter. They had one line of text, small font, black on white.

www.thestructure.com

Marty smiled an apology at the two Goths behind him. Nothing on the back. He held the flier to the window. No watermark.

He looked around. Three people were looking at the same flier. He saw two at empty tables.

"Viral marketing."

Marty turned to the old-school Goth behind him, all white lace, black cloth, and makeup. "I'm sorry?"

"That's viral marketing, sir. Very low budget, lots of curiosity, and word-of-mouth afterward. We studied it in sociology last semester."

What would a Goth do with a degree in Sociology? Research? Start a band? "Does it work?"

The Goth grinned. "That depends upon the demographic that they're targeting, sir. I believe you were next?" He half-bowed toward the counter.

"Oh. Thanks!"

The flier, folded neatly, waited in his pocket.

One Day Before

Marty butterflied the steak. Local news droned in the background.

“... was a Tempe businessman, killed yesterday evening in the Chase Financial Services parking lot. Police are urging anyone in the area between 6:00 and 7:00 PM to call...”

Marty dropped the knife and darted into the living room. There was the photo that Ed had sent him. Charles Schumer. Chase executive, Fraud division. Killed in the parking lot where Marty had sat for three days back in February.

Marty grabbed his cell phone, dialed Ed. Voicemail. He didn't bother leaving another message.

Another call. “Danny? It's Marty. Listen. I'm not going to the outing tomorrow. I don't think you should, either. Something's going on. Call me when you get this. I mean it.”

Rule Three: Cell Leaders must recruit two cellies. Cellies must recruit two lower-level Cell Leaders.

Nine Weeks Before

Marty turned out the pockets of the khakis. Change into the jar, lint in the trash, a half-sheet of white paper, unfolded and inspected.

Oh, yeah. He slid his laptop out of a battered carryall and booted up.

Blank grey screen. A text box: Please enter home Zip Code. 85016.

The site was minimalist. Thank you for your inquiry about The Structure. From the following list, please choose the location where you heard about The Structure. *Macie's Sandwicherie, Hardy and University, Tempe.*

Thank you! For more information about The Structure, please enter an e-mail address. This is for contact purposes only.

He entered one

Thank you. A member of our staff will be in touch. Please check your e-mail in the next 48 hours. Thank you for inquiring about The Structure!

Two days?

Rule Four: Report all successful recruitments, including the new recruit's provisional cell name. When the provisional name is authorized, report their e-mail address.

Eight Weeks Before

Marty got it at work.

Thank you for your interest in The Structure. Please REPLY with the date and time that you will next visit Macie's Sandwicherie. A representative will meet you there.

No sales pitch, no clue as to what they were selling. He sent a message saying he'd be there tomorrow, January 18, at noon.

It turned into a busy day. Marty was about to log off when the computer chimed.

From: admin@thestructure.com

Subject: Meeting January 18th, 12:00 noon

Wear a white shirt. Sit at the table closest to the restrooms.

Marty frowned. *Whatever these people are selling, the cloak-and-dagger stuff is strange.*

Two Weeks Before

Marty sat in the parking lot, his window open. The clock showed 3:16 AM. He looked at the restaurant a stone's throw from the car. The place was still jumping. A trio of college guys laughed their way to an SUV. They drove a wandering path to the street. He didn't notice the Hyundai sliding into the parking spot until it scraped concrete. Marty turned and saw a yellow sticky note on the window. It had a capital A on it. Marty's had a Z.

The driver grinned at Marty. Marty smiled back.

"I'm Felipe!" The young man raised his voice to carry past the empty spot between them. He was dark-haired, pale and painfully thin - a TB patient or an übergeek.

"I'm Frankie!"

"This is wicked!"

"Yeah!"

"What are you doing?"

"Picking someone up! You?"

"Package to deliver!"

"Any idea what it's all about?"

"Nope! You?"

"Nope!"

They both looked up at the black Nissan Titan that came to rest between the cars. Two men got out. They emptied small plastic bags onto the truck seats. The AC was on. Marty watched a thin plume of dust blow into the back. One man got into Marty's back seat. He heard the other one speak to Felipe.

"Frankie?"

Marty nodded. He met the man's eyes in the rear-view. Serious eyes.

"I'm Conrad, and this—" the second man climbed in— "is Carlos." Conrad had an accent, hard to place. Carlos buckled his seat belt and looked at Marty. Felipe honked and waved goodbye.

"Okay. Here we go." Marty hesitated.

"It's okay, Frankie. We've got people taking care of the truck."

"Okay. Which way?"

"South on the freeway."

Marty pulled out, an island of warm light shrinking in the rearview. Conrad pulled the note from the window and took something from his jacket. Sounded like he was sorting papers.

No traffic. Marty snuck glances at his passengers. Carlos looked like Conrad, with dark hair. He didn't speak, didn't look at Marty.

"The next exit, please. Then right."

"Can you tell me anything?"

Carlos smiled. Conrad stared into the mirror. There was humor in the voice, but none in his eyes. "Need to know, Frankie. It's no fun with no secrets. Pull in over there, please." An American Legion post.

The parking lot held a minivan with tinted windows. The side door opened; Marty counted four people. The front seats were empty.

Carlos shut the door gently. Conrad put an envelope on the front seat.

"Give us three minutes, then open it."

"Okay."

They climbed into the van. The doors closed and they were gone.

Three minutes. Marty opened it and gasped. The envelope held twenty-dollar bills and a note. *Go home.*

Martin counted. *A thousand dollars?* One bill had a damp corner. He sniffed it. *Beer.* When Marty was waiting tables, he got these. Customers spilled drinks, then left the money in the wet spot. Marty headed home. *Do I want to know?*

Rule Five: Cell names are alphabetical. Recruits one level down get the next letter heading. Cell Names should be real names.

Eight Weeks Before

“Hello.” An attractive brunette. She wore business casual clothes and a security badge.

Marty looked up. “Uh, hi.”

“Mind if I sit here?”

Marty looked around. There were several empty tables.

“No, no. Have a seat.”

“Thanks.” Her badge faced backward. He couldn’t see her name.

“Are you eating?”

“No. I’m here to meet you.”

“You’re part of... the group?”

She smiled. “Mmmm-hmm. Here, look at this.”

The woman handed him a sheet of paper. He read it, then looked up. “This is a game?”

“Social networking with a twist.”

“Are there only five rules?”

“No. You’ll get the full set if you join.”

“What’s the big secret?”

“The designers found that people who liked a mystery were more likely to get in and stay in, once they joined.”

Marty read the sheet again. “What are the other rules about?”

“Information security and tradecraft, mostly.”

“How long have you been playing?”

“A few months.”

“You like it?”

“It’s fun, and it keeps my mind active.”

“What kind of things...?”

She grinned. “I can’t tell you.”

“How many people are playing?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do I sign up?”

She leaned forward. “Pick a cell name. Anything starting with an F.”

“Uh... Franklin.”

“No. We have a Franklin.”

“Frank?”

“No.”

“How about Frankie?”

She took out a palmtop, scrolled down. “Frankie looks good. Open an e-mail account under that name. Give me a number where I can call you tomorrow. I’ll need the e-mail address then.”

Marty gave her the work number.

She stood up. “I have to run. Nice talking with you, Frankie.”

Marty stood, put his hand out. “And you are...?”

She smiled and shook it. “I’m Edward.”

Rule Six: Information from a higher level will be transmitted face-to-face. Phone contact is permitted, but discouraged.

Eight Weeks Before

“Hi, and thanks for calling Graven Images. My name is—”

“Frankie.”

“Oh. Hi, Edward.”

She had a very nice laugh. “Call me Ed.”

“Okay, Ed.”

“You have an e-mail address for me?”

Marty looked around. No one was paying any attention. “It’s Frankie, I-E, the letter N, Johnny, J-O-H-N-N-Y, at whatzat dot com.”

“You’ll hear something soon.” *Click.*

Rule Seven: Print a copy of the rules and delete the file. Keep the hardcopy in a safe place. Destroy if necessary.

Seven Weeks Before

The e-mail chime pinged once. A full set of the rules and,

Frankie,

Pay attention to Rule Seven. You don’t want your girlfriend to find this. I have something for you. What’s a good time and place to meet?

Ed

Marty typed *5:30, the Coffee Hut*, and sent the message.

Rule Eight: Do not use any real names in a game context (recruiting, e-mails, phone calls, etc). Cell names only.

Six Weeks Before

Marty surfed channels, the massive HDTV dominating the living room. He switched back to the game.

“You’re missing it.”

“Keep your shirt on.” The microwave beeped.

Danny had two beers, a bowl of salsa balanced in a bowl of chips, and a plate.

“Hold these.”

Marty held the beer. Danny set his load on the table.

“Whatcha got?”

“Quesadilla.”

“You gonna share, or...?”

“It’s yours.”

“Really?”

Danny grinned. “I didn’t want you to die on me.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No problem.”

They crunched and drank and grunted while the Cardinals got stomped. They didn’t care. Marty only watched football with Danny. Danny, an Army brat, always rooted for the home team, wherever home was that year.

“Hey, what was the name of that game that we played at ASU? The dart-gun thing?”

“‘Killer.’ Running around trying to ‘assassinate’ each other.”

“I’m playing something similar, now.” Marty pulled the first five rules out of his pocket. Danny read them.

“This is it?”

“I can’t show you more unless you want to play.”

“What do you do?”

“Remember Melissa’s going-away party?”

“You brought that God-awful Black Label beer.”

“Yeah. That was a game assignment.”

“What?”

“Bring Black Label to a party. Don’t drink it. When you leave, count the beers and make a report.”

“To your boss.”

“My control. Know what? There were three six-packs of Black Label. Mostly.”

“Someone got desperate enough to drink one?”

“Two. Must have been bad. But there were three Structuralists at the party.”

“Structuralists.”

“It’s called Cell Structure. I don’t like ‘cellies.’ I say ‘Structuralists,’ instead.”

“So you take shitty beer to parties?”

“Not just that. Some of it’s fun. Some of it’s odd.”

“Does it cost anything?”

“Just the two-fifty I spent on the beer.”

“You were robbed.”

“Are you in?”

“Sure.”

Rule Nine: When sending a message Out, pass the message to your drop address. This channel is strictly one-way.

Seven Weeks Before

“What have you got?”

“It’s your drop address.”

“What’s the point of a drop, anyway?”

“Say I got compromised. My boss-”

“Or your boyfriend.”

She smiled. “Sure. He found out about the game, and wanted me to stop playing.”

“You’d be dead.”

“Right.”

“Anything I sent ‘up and out’ would get back to the Alphas, but they’d know that you were the broken link.”

“Exactly.”

“What would I do, if you were dead?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the Alphas would give you a different E-level control. Or maybe you’d start reporting to D Level.”

“That’d be weird, talking to someone I don’t know.”

“You don’t know me.”

“But I’ve met you. You seem nice.”

She smiled, and sipped her coffee. “Thank you.”

“Can I ask you a question, Ed?”

“Ask away.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Engaged?”

“No. And I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Pretty obvious, huh?”

“Mmmm-hmm.”

“Would you-”

“A date?”

“Yeah.”

“What do I tell my girlfriend?”

“... Oh, shit, I’m sorry—I mean, I didn’t—I mean, not sorry that you’re a—you know what I mean, but —”

Ed threw back her head and laughed. “Frankie, stop! I’m teasing!”

“You’re... what?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I’m straight. I wanted to see what you’d do.”

“Oh.”

“I apologize.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Let me make it up to you.”

“Um?”

“Dinner and a movie, on me. If you want a drink afterward, that’s good too.”

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll e-mail you with the details. Frankie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry—I really am—but you should have seen the look on your face!”

Rule Ten: You may print the first five Rules for a potential recruit. Do not give your Cell Name, your control’s name, or any personal information without a commitment from the recruit.

Six Weeks Before

“Danny? I can’t make it on Friday night.”

“Oh? Big plans?”

“I have a date.”

“Blind date?”

“No, we’ve met.”

“Is she cute?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s her name?”

“It’s uh, Elizabeth.”

“Lizzie?”

“Not! Liz, maybe. Or Ellie.”

“Ellie. Is she pushing sixty?”

“Why do I talk to you, again?”

“I keep you honest.”

“Sorry to miss the barbeque.”

“There’ll be others. It’s not like your love life couldn’t stand some improvement.”

“Right. Hey, my boss is heading this way. Later.”

“Late.”

Lincoln leaned over the cubicle wall. “Martin...”

“Hi, Lincoln.”

“When you have a minute, step into my office.”

Rule Eleven: If found out by an unsympathetic authority, DO NOT directly contact any member of the Structure. Avoid other players until you hear from Alpha Level.

Six Weeks Before

Marty sat down. Lincoln made notes on a spreadsheet, then turned to face him.

“What’s up, Lincoln?”

“It’s come to my attention that there have been some odd things going on around the office.”

Oh, shit. “Things? Like what?”

“Like the misuse of company resources on company time. What do you know about it?”

“I’ll be honest, Lincoln. I have been on the Internet a little, but I’ve done it on my time.”

“You’re aware that there are computers in the break area...” After twenty minutes, Lincoln came up for air. “...I’m glad you agree that this is a serious issue.”

Lincoln handed Marty a sheet of paper. “This is a written record of the verbal warning that you’re on. Sign it. Did you want a copy?”

“That’d be fine.”

Marty signed the paper and waited for Lincoln to get back from the copier.

“That’s all, Martin– unless you had something to add?”

“No. I’m good.”

Rule Twelve: Alpha Level may recognize exceptional service with a reward. Do a good job, and the Alphas may show their appreciation.

Ten Days Before

There was a ritual to driving. Starbucks Coffee, NPR on the radio. “...seen leaving the scene in a black Nissan Titan pickup, found in a restaurant parking lot early Saturday morning. The FBI has been called in, though there is some question of jurisdiction, as the actual banks were not robbed. In other news...”

Marty took the next exit off the freeway. He stood in the shadow of a Circle K and sipped coffee until his hands stopped shaking.

Rule Thirteen: If you have a question about an instruction given to you by a cell leader, send it to your one-way drop with a request to escalate the question Up.

Six Weeks Before

“What’s your name?”

Ed sat near the open window and blew smoke through the louvers. Her hair was mussed. A bead of sweat inched down her side. *Nude Smoking, by Bouguereau.*

“Why do you want to know?”

“Well, we just, uh...”

“Yeah, we did, Frankie.” She ground out the cigarette in a flowerpot. The African violet took it stoically. “Why do you want it any different?”

“What?”

“Right now, we’re a mystery. We’re the shadow people.”

“Uh...”

“I don’t care if you’re Joe from Dell. I don’t need to know about your cat. You don’t want to hear that I’m some drone at a three-letter company, writing reports and making calls.”

Marty leaned back. “I didn’t want to upset you, I just —”

Ed slid in beside him. The kiss tasted like Diet Coke and Marlboro Lights. “You didn’t.” She ran her hand down his belly.

“I’ve never met anyone like you, Ed.”

“And you won’t again.”

Rule Fourteen: If you have a suggestion for a mission, please send it up to Alpha level, and it will be reviewed for suitability, legality, impact, and likelihood of success.

The Day Before

The phone rang. “Hi, and thanks for calling —”

“Frankie.”

“Oh, hi!”

“Can you talk?”

“For a minute. I had a few questions about the last couple of assignments...”

“Do you have any sick time?”

“Uh... yeah, a few days. Why?”

“Good. Take the day off tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Something from the Alphas. It’s important. This is just for you.”

“Does it have to be tomorrow?”

“That’s what it said.”

“Okay. If it’s important...”

“Sounds like it. I have to go.”

“Hey, I really need to talk to you about what’s been going on. I mean, I had a lot of fun the other night, and —”

“I did too, Marty, but I’ve got to go. Bye.” Click.

Marty? I never... Marty shivered. He looked over at Lincoln’s cube. Empty. He picked up the phone, dialed.

Hi, you have reached the desk of Lincoln Shumway...

“Lincoln, Marty. I’m... not feeling well. I’m all sweaty, and I just threw up. I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

Marty shut everything down and painfully shuffled over to Danny’s desk.

“You okay, bro?”

“Yeah. I got things to do. If anyone asks, I got sick at lunch.”

Danny shrugged. “Okay.”

Marty went to tell management that he was leaving.

Rule Fifteen: Any misuse of the Cell Structure name may result in criminal prosecution. If you do something illegal, we don’t know you and don’t want to. Consider this your only warning.

The Day

Marty checked his e-mail again. He tried Ed’s cell phone, but it went straight to voicemail. Marty stalked around the house. *The banker. The money. The truck.*

4:00 PM. He headed toward Ed’s place. Traffic had locked up near the airport. The phone rang. Marty snatched it up, juggled it for a second.

“Danny! Where are you?”

“I’m home.”

“Why?”

“You told me not to go in today.”

“Yeah, but you never called to talk about it.”

“What’s there to —”

Danny’s voice was lost in the roar of engines. A new Airbus A380 was just taking off. Biggest passenger jet in the world, the NPR guy had said.

“Danny? Hang on. I can’t hear you.”

The massive craft floated over the highway. Marty had a perfect view when an orange-and-black line of smoke jumped out of the cityscape and streaked into the plane. One engine blossomed into nothingness. Marty heard the shriek as the wing ripped free.

“OhmyGod!” screamed Marty. The crippled airplane rolled toward the strip of road where Marty sat. Danny’s voice rose in a question.

The aircraft slammed into the highway less than a mile away. Marty felt the impact through the roadbed. *They didn’t dump any fuel...* Marty slammed his seat back, dropped into the foot well, and curled up tightly, mouth open, hands over his ears. The plane detonated. Marty was showered with safety glass. He shook his head to get it out of his hair. Some scraped down the inside of his shirt. Marty could smell burning fuel and hear, dimly, the shrieks of people in the cars around him. He sat up as a woman staggered past, her face bloodied with a dozen cuts, screaming “Oh, God! Oh, God!”

The radios of a thousand cars blatted the same alarm.

“This is not a test. There has been an attack on a number of targets in the Phoenix area. Please stay tuned for further information. *Blaat, blaaat, blaaat.* This is not a test...”

Marty turned off the engine.

“Danny? I’ll call you back.”

*

Sirens screamed down the shoulder. Marty gave his information to a motorcycle cop. Orange-vested Guard troops herded the cars to off-ramps. It was 3:00 AM

before Marty made it home. He switched on CNN, took off his shoes. Bloodstains streaked one sock. *I'm never going to get that out...*

“...over two thousand confirmed deaths and another twenty-three hundred injured in one of the worst terrorist attacks in U.S. history. We go now to Jill St. Marie in Tempe, Arizona.”

“Jesus,” Martin muttered. He was probably in shock, but it didn’t matter. He scratched at dried blood on his neck.

“Thanks, Tom. I’m at the site of the worst poisoning incident. The police won’t let me inside this park until they’ve identified the toxic agent.” The camera panned over the entrance.

“The Rotary Club Park and Recreation Center was full today due to a company outing involving over five hundred people. The perpetrators also introduced the toxin into the Center’s swimming pool...”

Marty stood, stumbled into the bathroom and vomited. He stared down into the bowl, flushed the toilet. Marty mechanically rinsed out his mouth, spat, and staggered into the bedroom. He woke thirteen hours later, to knocking.

Rule Sixteen: The makers of Cell Structure are not liable for any injury sustained during gameplay. Players waive all rights to pursue legal action against the makers of Cell Structure. Play at your own risk.

The Day After

For FBI agents investigating terrorist attacks, they were polite. One sat on the couch and the other monopolized the loveseat.

“I’m sorry about the mess...”

“It’s fine.” Agent Cardacci had a micro-recorder, and spoke in a clear, pleasant voice. Hernandez was silent. Marty sat at the far end of the couch. Hernandez faced Marty. He hadn’t taken off his sunglasses. Cardacci thumbed the recorder to life. A red LED glared at Marty.

“This is Agent Joseph Cardacci, Friday, March 16th, at —” he glanced at his watch— “4:53 PM. May I have your full name, sir?”

“Martin Henderson.”

“You’re an employee at Graven Images Limited, in Tempe, Arizona, correct?”

“Mmmm-hmm. Yes.”

“How long have you been there?”

“Six-and-a-half years.”

“When was the last time that you were at the office?”

“Two days ago. I was sick, day before yesterday. I left early. Some stomach thing. I was feeling better yesterday and I wanted out of the house. I went for a drive. The plane that got shot down almost landed on me.”

Cardacci exchanged a glance with his reflection in the other agent’s sunglasses.

“Did the local police take your statement?”

“State trooper.”

“We’ll get a copy. You felt better, so you went for a drive?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you go to Tempe?”

“I, uh... I’ve been seeing a woman who lives there. I haven’t heard from her in a few days and I wanted to go by her apartment, see how she was doing.”

“That took you near the airport?”

“Yeah.”

“This was around what time?”

“After four. I don’t really know.”

“Were you aware of the bombing at the airport?”

“I heard about it on the radio. I didn’t see anything at the time.”

“After four. Were you expecting your friend to be home?”

“Uh, not really. There’s a coffee house; I was going to wait, give her a call.”

“How long have you been dating?”

“A few weeks.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Online.”

“What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

Marty’s face burned. The contrast with his ashen tone was startling.

“Are you all right, Mr. Henderson?”

“I don’t know her name.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we only used our online names.”

“Mmm-hmmm. What was yours?”

“Frankie. Frankie N. Johnny.” Marty searched the agent’s face, to see if he got the joke.

He didn't. "And your friend's name?"

"Edward Scissorhands."

"She called herself Edward?"

"Ed. Yeah."

"Mr. Henderson... Martin?"

"Marty."

"Marty. What do you know about an organization called The Structure?"

Oh, shit. "It's a game that I got into a few months ago —"

"A game."

"Yeah. It's a social networking thing with a game wrapped around it."

"Did you meet Edward through the Structure?"

"Uh, yeah. Is that important?"

"We don't know, yet. What sort of things did you do when playing the game?"

Marty told them about the beer, the flowers, and the fliers. He didn't mention the businessman, the Titan or the money.

Cardacci took a photograph from a manila folder. "Is this Ed?"

Marty's mouth dried out completely. "Yeah. Yeah, that's her. Is she...?"

"This is Sylvia Ross. She worked at the Chase Corporate office in Tempe. She's been missing since noon on the 14th."

"Missing?"

"Yes. When was the last time you spoke to her?"

“She called me. Just after lunch, at work. On the 14th. She told me to, uh...”

“To what?”

“She told me that the Alphas wanted me to go home sick, and that I shouldn’t go to work yesterday.”

“For the outing.”

“Right.”

“Any idea why?”

“Uh, no. It was just another assignment.”

A cell phone rang. Agent Hernandez went to the front door to take the call. He listened, then nodded at the other agent. Cardacci stood.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Henderson. You’ve been very helpful. We’ll be in touch if we need to speak to you further.”

“Just... I shouldn’t leave town, right?”

Cardacci smiled. “Right.” They left.

Marty tried Ed’s— Sylvia’s— phone again, then checked his e-mail. One from the corporate office, telling all employees to stay home until further notice.

Marty collapsed on the couch. Most of his co-workers were dead. His job was gone. He didn’t know happened to Ed. *What am I going to do?*

He was still crying when the phone rang.

“Ed?!?”

“Hi, I’m calling for Martin Henderson?”

“Speaking.” Marty wiped his face with his shirt.

“This is Special Agent Sam Driscoll with the Federal Bureau of Investigations. I wanted to speak with you about the incident at the Rotary Recreation Center, yesterday.”

“Look, the other agents just left. I told them everything I know. I’m waiting for a very important phone —”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Henderson; the *other* FBI agents?”

“Yeah, Hernandez and Cardacci. They left about twenty minutes ago.”

“Mr. Henderson, I’m the only agent assigned to this part of the investigation.”

Marty’s legs wouldn’t hold him.

They knew about Ed, and the game...

“Special Agent? Have you ever heard of a game called The Structure?”

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