



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #8
JULY 2009



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ENCOUNTER
SOMETHING, SOMEONE, OR SOME PLACE FOR THE
FIRST TIME, EITHER BY CHANCE OR DESIGN...**

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More Firsts

Maybe it's because our contest this issue was all about "firsts," or maybe not. Either way, we experienced some interesting firsts this issue.

- 1) For all five authors published this issue, this is their first time being published by OTP. These folks have never even made "honorable mention" in a mini-contest before.
- 2) We're publishing a story by one author who seems to never have had fiction published before.
- 3) This is our first issue with no cartoons! Boo! My usual folks weren't available and I didn't find out in time to get somebody else.
- 4) This is our first issue in which the first place story was the unanimous favorite among our judges. Typically, at least three stories are labeled "favorite" by someone. Not this time. Everybody loved "When Cynthia's Sexual History Fell Down the Stairs," and we hope you do too.
- 5) In the months between this issue and last, for the first time, our mailing list expanded to over 1,000 active subscribers.

I consider #2 and #5 to be terrific, #1 and #4 to be interesting and unusual, and #3 to be awful. I like the cartoons, especially since I write about half of them.

What's your opinion of the cartoons? They're a significant expense. If I'm the only person who likes them, they might be unnecessary.

Let me know your thoughts by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, please enjoy this issue.

Keep writing and keep reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick and/or Bethany Granger
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

(No) Cartoons This Issue

Sorry, but we were in the process of hiring a new artist and we couldn't get all the arrangements ready in time. Next issue for sure!

FIRST PRIZE

Ann Rosenquist Fee is the winner of *The Missouri Review's* 2009 audio fiction competition. Her stories appear in *Frenzy* and *Never Have the Same Sex Twice* (Cleis Press), *The Blueroad Reader* (Blueroad Press), and several online journals. She teaches a workshop on erotic writing at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. Her website is <http://annrosenquistfee.com>.

When Cynthia's Sexual History Fell Down the Stairs

by Ann Rosenquist Fee

Who knew her pubic bone couldn't take the weight? Cynthia was breakage waiting to happen.

She'd stacked two baskets on her hip so she could take the clean laundry upstairs to fold. But the bottom basket fell against the top of her pubic bone and cracked it in half, and a gash blew open from Cynthia's crotch to her navel. The force of the crack spun Cynthia around and busted the zipper on her capris. Cold air shot out from inside Cynthia as if her spine were a frozen blow dryer switched to high.

"Oh my God," Cynthia said, as she watched everything fall and land at the bottom of the stairs on the living room floor.

On top of some jeans were the first tampon Cynthia had ever tried and the sound of her sister on the phone that day asking, "Are you okay? Is it in? You have to stick it all the way in."

All balled up with her husband's t-shirts were Cynthia's busted hymen and the cheap bedspread that had belonged to her sophomore boyfriend's parents.

And over by the kids' sweatpants was the condom Cynthia had seen her husband tie shut and fling out the sunroof toward a farmer's field one Friday night a few weeks ago, right before they'd headed back to town to get cash for the babysitter.

It was just like how it was described it in public service announcements, full-page magazine ads with women walking on beaches, smiling because they've done their monthly self-checks and taken every precaution against Midlife Entropic Sexual Spillage.

But for Cynthia, it was too late. She stood for a long time at the top of her stairs, holding her hips, looking at the mess and trying to decide if she should wash everything again.

The phone rang and Cynthia took a long time walking down the stairs to get it. She answered the phone on speaker and put both hands back on the sides of her hips, trying to pull her stomach closed.

"Hello?"

"Oh my God," Cynthia's sister said, "I'm so glad you're there. Because right now I'm just so fucking glad I'm forty. Have you read that book I sent you yet on turning forty? You need to read it. I was just out walking along the lake and I walked past people playing beach volleyball and for the first time in my life I wasn't intimidated. I mean, what. Who really wants to play beach volleyball? But I guess I just now figured that out. I'm so glad I'm forty. I mean really fucking glad. How are you."

"My pubic bone broke and everything's all over the floor."

"Oh my God. Oh my God. You know that exact thing happened to me, right? Exactly the same. Except probably worse. I'm sure it was worse. What does it look like?"

“There are these piles,” Cynthia said. “Three big ones, and one of them is talking and actually it’s your voice about my first tampon.”

“I’m not surprised. Go on.”

“The other two are worse. They’re sticky, the one smells musty like this old chenille bedspread and it’s got my hymen on it, and I think it’s playing Van Halen. The other one smells like cow shit. I can’t even look at that one. I don’t remember the farmer’s field smelling like cow shit but here it is all tangled up with a condom and Allison’s sweat pants. I can’t look at that. I think I have to sit down.”

“Anything else?”

Cynthia sat on the top stair with the phone squeezed between her shoulder and her jaw, her hands on her pelvis which seemed at least to be sealed but still giving off crackle noises.

“No. Nothing else. Just that.”

“Mine was totally worse. You’re so fucking lucky. If it comes up off the floor with Pledge Orange, it’s just a warning spill and you’re ok. If it doesn’t, you have a lot of work to do. Do you have Pledge Orange? Go find some and try to clean it up and call me right back. I’m hanging up. Call me right back.”

Cynthia put the phone down and took small steps back up to the attic landing where a half bottle of Pledge Orange sat in the dark waiting for the cleaning lady every two weeks. She dumped some onto a rag, put the Pledge back next to the Windex and the Lysol Tub ‘n Tile Spray and walked back downstairs to where her sister’s voice and Van Halen and chenille and cow shit mingled on her otherwise pristine floor.

Cynthia tried the tampon pile first, touching the Pledge-soaked rag to the edges of the jeans in a heap by the front door. The people who had re-finished the floors had warned her to use only vinegar and water to mop the new poly coating—nothing oil-based!—but this was an exception.

The Pledge beaded on what seemed like a tight seal holding the laundry to the wood. Nothing budged and her sister's voice just kept talking.

Same thing when she went at the edges of the t-shirts and the bedspread a few feet away behind the leather couch. Her scrubbing only made Van Halen sound warped, like an old-fashioned cassette left in the sun.

She didn't even bother with the condom and sweatpants pile, the one right in the path between the bottom stair and the kitchen doorway.

She called her sister back. "The Pledge did nothing. And I used Orange."

"Did you really? Not generic?"

"Really."

"Oh, God. Then it's bad. Mine was worse but I can tell yours is bad. I can tell you haven't been paying attention to the news, or to the ads that are fucking everywhere. Have you even done a single self-check? I'll tell you what to do and you have to actually do it. I mean I'm not kidding. If you want to get rid of this."

"Fine," Cynthia said, tying the drawstring closed above her broken zipper. "Go ahead. Tell me what to do."

"First, you've got to cover the shit up. I mean I know your family's great and whatever, whatever, but I don't think you want your kids to see your hymen. Cover it with plastic, that's the first thing. Then you have to do the things that make the piles actually disappear. The stuff you should've been doing all along but whatever."

"I get it," Cynthia said. "Go on." Cynthia took a careful step toward the kitchen to find Hefty Steel Sacs to cut up and use for tarps.

"Ok. Not to be weird, but I'm going to read this to you from the monthly reminder I got from my gynecologist. It's printed on a tampon case. So you carry the case every month and you can't forget. It's pink. Maybe you should switch to my gynecologist? Ok, I'm reading this to you."

“Just tell me what it says.”

“It says three things, and you remember them like this, ok? *Flirt, Squirt, Hurt.*”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Obviously. They mean this. *Number One: Flirt! Quick, passing eye contact or even brief conversations with strangers keep the pubic bone strong by bringing back the rush and flush that comes over us daily when we’re in our early teens. The increased blood flow forms a layer of protection that reaches its peak sometime around legal driving age. As we approach adulthood, and begin to act on the flirt versus racing home to tell our friends about it, our circulation gets sluggish. This erodes the protective layer and puts the pelvis at risk. Three to five encounters per week are recommended. Are you getting this?*”

“Please.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“This is ridiculous. Go on.”

“Number Two: *Squirt. Sure, help your partner climax. But don’t call it quits after that—even if you have to wake up early or get home to the sitter!*”

“Oh my God.”

“I know. There’s more. *Whether or not you’re capable of female ejaculation, consider Squirt a reminder to get yourself OFF before you put your clothes back ON. Orgasms improve muscle tone and increase the production of the only hormone that guards against martyrdom. Without them, women become dangerously altruistic and brittle. If there’s no partner available, good for you! Twice the time to tap your lap. One per day minimum.*”

Cynthia stood back and looked at the Steel Sacs on the floor. The one over the hymen pile muffled, but did not silence, “Drop Dead Legs.”

“Move on,” she said. “What else.”

“There’s one more. Number Three: Hurt. Whether your cramps are a slight annoyance or a day-long event that has you hunting for old Vicodin, they’re a part of life. A part that calls for balance. The best Yin to your cramps’ Yang is a pounding right hook to the jaw of a consenting friend. Women’s hockey leagues that allow checking and tavern-basement kickboxing chapters have been established in several communities. Visit MidlifeEntropicSexualSpillage.org for listings and legal guidelines. If physical violence isn’t practical, verbal assaults and even offensive dress can help build the necessary shock absorption layer that keeps the pubic bone sassy and safe. One physical or three verbal assaults recommended per month.”

“It does not say that.”

“It does!”

“I have to go.”

“Fine. But did you get all this? Did you write it down? Do you want me to bring you my tampon case?”

“I got it. I have to go,” Cynthia said, and hung up, and then had to check the phone to be sure the call had disconnected because she still heard her sister’s voice but it was coming from the pile by the door.

*

It was late spring but Cynthia turned on the Subaru wagon’s heated seat anyway thinking the warmth might take care of the last of the noise from her pelvis. The Steel Sacs had covered the piles just fine, and later she could weight them with river rock from alongside the driveway to help trap the noises and the smells.

On the way to pick up Allison and Nick she called her husband to ask if he minded having dinner out.

“Not at all,” Marty said. “Any reason?”

“Yes,” Cynthia said. “I have to explain what my high school boyfriend’s parents’ bedspread is doing stuck to our living room floor.”

They went to the nice place in town, The Neighbors' Italian Bistro, Cynthia and Marty took advantage of the "free while you wait" wine. Allison kept her headphones on and sat low in the booth hoping no other sixth-graders were out with their parents. Nick drew weapons on his placemat.

"I think I know what happened," Marty said, barely out loud so Nick wouldn't hear. "I did a quick search before I left the office. Wikipedia. It's the Spillage, isn't it?"

Cynthia, flushed from the wine, choked up for the first time that day and looked at Marty's kind blue eyes and then at his arms reaching out to her on the table.

"Yes," she said, and put her hand in his. "It happened this afternoon. Three big piles and Pledge Orange did nothing. I know what to do, I think, but you're going to have to—you and the kids, I'm so sorry about this—you're all going to have to step around it for a while."

They ordered, ate, and chatted in the usual dinner-time way. Then Cynthia and Marty used the back of Nick's placemat to draw a map of the living room and explain where the tarps were held in place and where they'd have to walk for a while until mom was able to make the piles go away.

They left it at that. No need to use the word Spillage with kids. It would only be a burden.

Allison kept her head down so she didn't have to make eye contact. It was the same way she'd acted when Cynthia had taken her training bra-shopping the summer before. But she kept her body close to Cynthia's on the walk back to the car, and Cynthia wondered if the sixth-grade health unit had touched on M.E.S.S. She recalled, just then, a series of ads in Allison's *Seventeen* magazine featuring movie stars wearing recycled plastic pins with *Flirt*, *Squirt*, *Hurt* stretched out in a flat cursive line shaped to look like a pelvis.

Nick asked if he could use rocks from outside, too, to make things in his room, and whether he would still be allowed to have friends over. Marty said no to both, not for right now, that they should just give mom a little time. But he would be

allowed to use his computer with headphones on as much as he wanted for a while, to drown out the music and his aunt's voice.

Later that night, in their bedroom with the door locked, Marty slid his hand back and forth over Cynthia's pelvis.

"Wikipedia says you need to climax more often," he said.

"I know," Cynthia said, and she let the wine from The Neighbors Italian Bistro keep her loose and warm while Marty put his mouth where everything had tumbled out just hours before.

*

The next day was Saturday. Cynthia was between errands, just after dropping Allison at a friend's house and before taking Nick to get a haircut, when she stopped to put gas in the car. She was hanging the hose back up when a man in a cowboy hat stepped out from behind the SUV parked on the other side of the pump.

"Hey there. Buy you a gallon of gas?"

"What?"

"Gas. Can I buy you a gallon of gas? Ma'am?" He tipped his hat and smiled.

"Is it a KwikTrip offer?" Cynthia looked at his shirt for a badge but just saw plaid with snaps on the breast pockets.

"It's like can I buy you a drink," he said. "Maybe I could buy you a drink?"

"Oh," Cynthia said. "Oh." She put her head down and turned toward the car, and then stopped and faced the cowboy. She smiled back. "No thanks," she said, and turned on her sneaker heel and walked the long way around to the driver's side of the Subaru.

Back at home on the living room floor, Cynthia's sister's voice faded and the pile with the tampon lost the airtight seal that had been keeping it stuck to the floor.

The tampon disappeared except for a dry tuft of string, and her sister's voice faded to a thin whine with an occasional audible "all-the-way-in."

When they got inside the house, Nick pulled his headphones over his fresh haircut and settled into *StupidVideos.com*. Cynthia went upstairs to take sheets off the bed to wash and found a gift bag and a note on the dresser: "Went to the office, love you and miss using the living room," it said. "Try this."

Inside the gift bag, and a smaller silky bag with a ribbon drawstring, was a purple Dr. Laura Berman vibrator. Cynthia blushed in the empty bedroom. It was from Marty, but it wasn't Marty, it was plastic. It felt wrong. But the piles on the floor wouldn't go away without drastic measures.

Cynthia locked the bedroom door, lay back on the bed and held Marty's gift in one hand and Dr. Berman's instructions in the other. An hour later, the phone rang.

"It's me," Marty said. "Did you use my present?"

"Oh. God," Cynthia said.

"Wow," Marty said. "Sounds like yes."

"Yes."

"And?"

"I don't know, I haven't been downstairs to look. I'm still on our bed. God, Marty, I don't want you to be offended.

"Offended?"

"I liked your present a lot."

"I was hoping."

"But it wasn't you."

“Sweetheart,” Marty said. “Last Saturday I called from work and you told me to bring home milk and toilet paper. Today you’re breathing like my hand is down your pants. It’s ok.”

“Ok,” Cynthia said. “Ok. Thank you. Bring home milk.”

Rooms away, Nick was talking back to *StupidVideos*. On the living room floor, Van Halen had died down and Cynthia’s hymen had evaporated. Her boyfriend’s parents’ bedspread was still there but the musty smell was ebbing and the pattern was starting to fade, the whole pile shrinking back to the size one would expect from a dozen or so Hanes XL men’s t-shirts.

Cynthia, barefoot and flushed, surveyed the piles. Better. Smaller. The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God. How are you? I mean how are you, and have you done anything at all yet? Did you tell Marty? Is he being an asshole? I mean I’m sure he’s acting nice, but is he really being an asshole? Do you need me to come over with my tampon case?”

Cynthia looked at the phone.

“Do you? Hello? What?”

Cynthia held the phone out from her rosy cheek, smiled into the mouthpiece and hit “end call.” Hurt. Done.

The phone rang again. Cynthia let voicemail pick it up, then listened to the message on speaker.

“That’s just what I was going to tell you to do,” her sister said. “That was perfect. Fucking perfect. Fuck you too and good job.”

Just as “fuck you too” rang out across the living room, the seal on the third pile disappeared and the last of the Steel Sacs collapsed into the laundry underneath. There was nothing now but t-shirts and jeans and sweatpants on the light smooth floor.

Cynthia sank down in her wrinkled linen pants and let her knees spread open. She gathered up the laundry and smelled what it smells like when the room is quiet and the cow shit has come and gone: fresh, clean, salty sweet and safe and right down to Cynthia's small strong bones.

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SECOND PRIZE

C.B. Calsing was born and grew up in San Luis Obispo, California. She now lives in New Orleans. She recently graduated with her master of fine arts degree in fiction from the University of New Orleans. She teaches English, edits for a prominent e-book publisher, and writes. Her work has appeared in college literary journals, anthologies, and on Web sites. More information can be found at <http://cbcalsing.com> and <http://cbcalsing.blogspot.com>.

To Wade Alone

by C. B. Calsing

Betty Carmichael sat on a wooden rocking chair, especially designed for her small frame, and watched the roustabouts tear down the sideshow tents, the dining tents, the dressing tents. Late evening had fallen over the trampled-flat field, and the time had come to move up the coast to the next engagement. Still, from beneath the far side of the big top came the cries of astonishment and peals of laughter that heralded another successful performance. Inside the tent, the audience wouldn't hear the songs of the workers as they and the elephants lowered acres of canvas to the ground. Betty heard them. She listened carefully.

When the audience exited the big top, the city that had stood around it—the rides, the games, the general ballyhoo—will have disappeared, returned to the untilled lot that had existed the day before. Already, the local who supplied horses for the hippodrome exercised his steeds. For another nickel, those wanting to stay longer, and pass a bottle in the evening, and lose a few more coins could find a place on the hastily erected track fence.

Betty sighed. She'd never seen the performance within the largest of the tents. With rubes present, she exhibited herself only if they paid, and her size precluded

her from a spot behind the curtain. The other performers worried she would fall underfoot, or that one of the horses or elephants would trample her in the dim light. She resented this particularly, since a troop of male clowns, none much larger than herself, had an act during the main performance, and no one ever worried about them getting squished. They had strength in numbers, though, and each a full three inches or more on Betty's thirty-nine.

This time of night, when the star performers held the audience in sway, Betty could sit in her chair and take in the evening. Here on the edge of the action, she could smell the sea air coming in from the beach. The coast lay only a few miles more to the west. Betty had never seen the ocean, but the matron of the unwed women's train car had told her of a vast expanse of foaming gray with waves that, the caretaker assured her, would go clear over Betty's little head. Betty had seen the Mississippi River, but only from the window of her train car. Her parents had never taken her to see Lake Superior, despite living so close.

Tonight the train would wend its way along trestles and across bays, but they'd reach their destination far before dawn. Betty felt the activities of the day weighing on her already. The lost opportunity to witness the darkened waters of the Pacific added to her somber mood. Such a vision she had in her head of the ocean! She wanted it proven correct, to see those mighty waves the matron described, even touch a toe into the cold, frothy waters.

Another round of cheers erupted from the big top. The Chinese acrobats, a big hit on the West Coast because many Chinese bought entrance to the cheap gallery stands, would probably perform next. Betty knew that much from what the road manager told her. She'd seen them practice but had never watched their entire costumed act. When they'd run through full dress rehearsal, Betty had already taken her seat between the giant and the fat woman in the freaks' tent.

The road manager carefully determined the order in which he arranged the display of the freaks, to play up each individual's abnormality. During the show, Betty appeared particularly diminutive when she sat on her rocker, knitted, and chatted with the fat woman, Babs. Babs had the Human Skeleton to her left, and the manager had planned their nuptials as next season's big promotion.

Betty smoothed her skirt and looked down at her tiny hands. The road manager had tried the same thing with Betty and the giant, who sat on Betty's other side in the tent, but the giant, a true gentleman from Belarus, had refused to marry in a publicity stunt.

"Lez go, lovely."

Betty raised her eyes, across the thighs, the broad torso, up to the dark, hooded eyes of Long John. Unlike many roustabouts, Long John, a man the color of western earth with slick black hair falling into his eyes, had served many seasons on the tour. He reminded Betty of the Indians in the penny dreadfuls she read as a child. He moved silently, as if he could come up behind her and take off her head without her ever knowing. She did not like Long John; she hated having to rely on him.

Each night, he collected Betty, her trunk, and chair and returned her to her bunk on the train. Standing there in the starlight tonight, he'd already, silently, picked up Betty's trunk and had it balanced over one large shoulder. In that trunk, Betty stored all of her belongings: her knitting, the cabinet cards of herself she sold on the side, a few mementos from home. Silhouettes of her parents, a small Bible she'd received at her baptism, a brooch woven from her grandmother's hair.

In only a few more moments, the performers beneath the big top would conclude their routine, and the rubes would head for home. Betty's time in the open had ended. She stood and turned to walk toward the dark mass of the locomotive on the far side of the field. Steam already billowed from the smokestack, rising above the train in luminescent clouds.

Betty stepped tentatively over the uneven ground. She knew Long John followed her, trunk over his shoulder and the back of her small rocking chair clutched in one meaty fist.

They stopped at the stair to the unwed women's train car. Betty knew what must come next. She never liked it. She could not easily reach the first step. Every night after a show, Long John, with a grunt, would lower the trunk and chair to the ground. Then he stepped forward and grabbed Betty's waist with his fingers.

She glanced down. In the dim light now issuing from the train car, she could see his fingers meet at the middle of her waist. She felt the pressure where his thumbs did the same on her back. His hands encircled her like a barrel's metal hoop, holding her even more stiffly than the whalebones in her corset.

Betty gritted her teeth, and Long John lifted, in one oddly graceful movement, setting her down on the surface of the rail car. Betty turned down the hall of small berths, found her own, and entered. Long John came in behind her, placed her chair and trunk high on the rack to keep them out of the way, and left without another word. Betty exhaled, happily free of his presence.

The car matron had already lit one small lamp for Betty, and it cast a dim glow through the cabin. Betty's room sat on the side of the train facing away from the circus, so she could not watch the breakdown of the big top. In less than an hour, the workers would finish, and the train would head up north toward Salinas. After Salinas came San Francisco. Betty had heard wonderful things about San Francisco. Entire countries, it seemed, existed within it. China, Italy... people there pulled crabs out of the cold water that were larger than her head. And of course, Alcatraz, where notorious war prisoners from all over the world served their time. It seemed unreal to her, yet the road manager had assured her she'd see others, more amazing, eventually—New Orleans, New York, Chicago. Even, if the Queen's health improved, London, where they'd give a command performance with Betty dressed in the Queen's black. The manager had promised Betty she could sing for the Queen, something she was not allowed to do in the freaks' tent, even though the talker used her "voice of an angel" as one of the baits to get people inside. Betty suspected the manager didn't want her to sing because it would make her a more prominent attraction and he'd have to pay her more.

Betty decided to get ready for bed. Sleep could come hard on the train when the chorus girls returned from the last procession in the main tent. Betty, though close to most of them in chronological age, possessed little in common with the willowy dancers clad in their faux oriental chiffons and silks. She worked hard not to envy their tallness and perfect symmetry of limb, but it seemed a battle she'd eventually lose.

Betty removed her boots, looking glumly at their sturdy brown leather. Fancy young girl's boots pinched her chubby feet, so she wore the boots of a schoolboy. She unbuttoned her show dress, a piece as good as anything from Paris but made for a child. The hem of it covered her feet, so the manager saw no reason to spend the same expense on custom shoes. Betty carefully hung the dress from the rack, standing on her tiptoes to do so. She unlaced then unhooked her corset, stepped out of her bloomers and camisole, and put on the chemise already laid out on her tiny bed. She climbed beneath the freshly laundered sheets and quickly nodded off, enjoying the momentary stillness.

It seemed that the giggles of the chorus girls, the shrill whistle of last chance, and the straining and screeching of the wheels breaking the friction hold on the track arrived all at once. All familiar, comfortable sounds to Betty, she awoke only to acknowledge the rightness of it. Before long, the chugging and swaying of the train lulled her back to sleep.

*

The second time Betty woke, the sound of the fire alarm filled the train. Brakes screeched. When the train finally came to rest, Betty scrambled out of bed and threw on a dressing gown over her nightdress then laced on her boots. She opened the door of her small cabin and looked into the hall. Chorus girls filled it, dressed in scanty silk bloomers and chemises, their hair wrapped up in kerchiefs to keep it set as they slept. Betty smelled no smoke.

"Oh, Miss Betty." One of the girls threw her hands to her face to express her evident shock at seeing Betty watching everything so calmly. "We really must get you out of here. There's a fire, you know." The girl turned and headed for the exit.

"Miss Betty!" The car matron this time. She too stopped and looked down at Betty. She bent at the waist to get to Betty's eye level, putting her hands on her knees. Her motherly breasts swayed. "Are you afraid, little one? Come on then."

She wrapped an arm around Betty. Betty, reluctantly, embraced the matron. She couldn't argue with the older woman. The matron rested Betty's head against her shoulder as she would a babe who needed burping. Betty sighed deeply. She had

meant to wait for the car to clear out before leaving, so the girls wouldn't trample her in their tizzy. She wished now for the trampling rather than the coddling.

She closed her eyes and thought of the home she would build someday. Low counters so she could fill her own water glass at the tap. Doorknobs only two feet up so she could turn them, Electric lights with switches low enough on the wall so she could use them on her own. All the furniture scaled to her size, with only one chair for a big person, so that visitor would feel out of place in the tiny, delicate house.

The matron set Betty down in a cluster of chorus girls, and they surrounded her like a circle of aspen; their diaphanous underthings flittered in the ocean breeze.

Through the shifting curtain of silk, Betty could see the front of the train stopped on a narrow trestle, nothing but air beneath for a hundred yards. The trestle spanned a small bay, and to the west, gunmetal flecked with white, lay the Pacific Ocean. So close. Despite the chittering of the chorus girls, the threat of danger hanging in the air, a smile pulled at Betty's lips. She looked for a way down, and her smile grew. In the moonlight, Betty could make out the pale cut of a switchback road heading down the side of the cliff where her end of the train sat.

She looked back at the south end of the train, toward the caboose. Smoke billowed out of one of the menagerie cars. Betty could see workers separating the car from the rest of the train. Handlers harnessed elephants to the caboose and towed it and its adjoining cars some feet away from the burning car. On the north end of the train, the engine steamed to life and pulled the bulk of the train to the far side of the trestle. Betty watched as her own car passed over. Now she smelled burning hair, and over the murmur of chorus girls and the distant surf, she could hear apes screaming, oddly human, from the isolated boxcar.

The apes' cries distracted the chorus girls, who huddled together and grasped each other. The mass they formed pushed Betty out of the group and behind it. She continued to gaze on the scene silently. A bucket line formed from the tank car, full of water, to the burning car. Pails of water moved down the line. The contents doused a few flames, but more leapt up.

Betty turned away and walked toward the edge of the switchback—a relic, she assumed, of the railroad industry. They must have had to move equipment to the bay below to construct the trestle. Sand and shells littered the path beneath her boots. She smelled salt now over roasting animal flesh. The salt drew her down, down the road to the water, away from the train, away from the chorus girls and car matron. She walked toward the beguiling Pacific.

Betty rolled “Pacific” around in her head. It meant peace, tranquility. Though the sea’s surface could change between swell and tide, it appeared forever constant, a sheet of malleable glass that, when calm, could look the same now as it would in a hundred years. Beneath its veneer, mussels and barnacles and limpets always lived on the same place on the same rock. The same kelp drifted in and out, anchored to the seabed by holdfasts, swell after swell. Betty thought of her parents’ home in St. Cloud. She’d grown up there, sheltered and protected. They never sent her to school, never brought friends around for her to play with, never even gave her a brother or a sister. Her parents were barnacles, tiny animals content to stay in a single place, allowing the tides of the world to bring them what they thought they needed. Betty, though, was a great whale migrating about the wide world on the current of a locomotive. In this, at least, she was big. Of course, her parents did not recognize this. She’d horrified them when she’d joined the circus—a place she thought she would be welcomed, her deformity a unifier rather than a reason for distance—but at the end of the season, they never scoffed at the money she wired home.

The soft swish of sand replaced the crunch of gravel under Betty’s feet. She looked down. The sand glowed in the moon, the foam of the waves the only thing brighter. Now salt—no cheap chorus girl perfume, no horse or elephant sweat, no burning hair—reached her nose. Salt and kelp and moonlight and the swoosh of the surf directly to the west. Betty walked toward the sound, stopped, removed her boots, and dug her toes into the powdery substrate. She detected tiny imperfections in the sand; she assumed a shell, a shred of dried kelp, a sticky blob of tar. She left her boots. As she walked, they became a dark patch on the sand progressively indistinguishable from seaweed or drift wood or whale bone.

Betty walked toward the water, holding her peignoir up around her knees. Above, in the distance, she heard the train whistle. She kept toward the water. Had they

already extinguished the fire? The matron had to count to make sure all were in her train car before they left, but would she notice a missing midget?

Looking up, Betty watched the train back up over the trestle. They must have extinguished the fire somehow. She wondered if any of the apes survived. Their cost would surely come out of their handler's salary if they hadn't. He smoked in the car sometimes, or left a lamp burning. Betty shook her head and returned her gaze to the water. Small waves crashed and broke close to shore, while larger ones ruptured farther out, sounding like the muffled applause of the audience under the big top.

She wanted to put her foot in, just to feel the cold against her skin. She wanted to write home to St. Cloud to tell her parents that one night, when the monkeys burned, she waded in the Pacific, by herself. No Long John with his hands around her waist. No matron checking on her; no chorus girls fawning over her as they would a china doll. Two more steps and the sand became wet beneath her feet. Two more steps and the first live water wrapped around her ankles. Betty's feet froze. Cramps crawled up her legs. She stepped out farther, feeling the surge and pull of the waves around her calves. Up above on the bluffs, she heard the train whistle again. If they came looking for her, could they pick her out in the darkness? Would her white dressing gown, floating around her, look like sea foam on a wave?

To her knees now. Now thighs. Another step and Betty let her knees fold, and she submerged, her head below the icy water. It roared in her ears. She felt herself lift and sink with the waves as they sped at the sand. Unidentifiable matter swept past her, brushing tendrils of goose bumps across her body. Betty thought of sideshow mermaids in jars of brine and dried shark specimens and the anchors and swallows on the tattooed man.

She found firm ground and stood again, pushing her hair back from her face as she did. Behind her, she heard shouts. She turned and watched bobbing lanterns descending quickly down the switchback and across the beach toward her.

In her distraction, a wave pushed Betty off her feet. Water closed over her head. Her eyes stung, and she struggled to stand. She came up, her mouth full of water,

her nose smarting with half-breathed sea. She refused to look at the beach, refused to acknowledge her caretakers as they came for her. She took in deep draughts of air. Her limbs trembled with the cold. She wanted this moment alone, an experience all hers.

She rose and fell with another wave and another. The chill seeped into her, sat in her head behind her eyes, in the place behind her belly button, in the muscles of her calves. She wanted the sensation.

Hands grasped her waist and hauled her from the ocean.

“There, now,” Long John grunted as he carried her at arm’s length back to the beach. What had been waist deep to her only reached the bottom of his knees.

Betty shivered, colder than she could ever remember. Colder than midwinter snow in St. Cloud. The car matron took her shawl from her shoulders and wrapped the Betty up in it before telling Long John to set her down. Betty welcomed the warmth, but more welcomed would be dry clothes and a spot by the caboose’s potbelly stove.

Another worker stood nearby, holding Betty’s boots, and she could just make out the road manager, lifting a lantern, at the foot of the switch back. In its light, he shook his head. Betty had caused a delay; her pay would be docked. He retreated up the road, most likely to make notes in his log.

Betty drew a shaky breath, the chill of the ocean still clinging to her bones. She stepped into and laced up her hated schoolboy boots. She couldn’t get high-heeled boots; no one made them small enough. The matron’s shawl enveloped her as would a blanket.

At least they let her walk back on her own.

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THIRD PRIZE

Paul R. Klein's short fiction has appeared in several literary and genre publications, including *The Sink*, *Horror Garage*, and *The Binnacle*. Although he has lived in some strange and fascinating places, including an Ecuadorian rainforest, he currently resides in Cleveland, Ohio, which, in many ways, is also strange and fascinating. Only colder.

All That Matters

by Paul R. Klein

Sunday, May 16, 2010

We never saw it coming. We should have, but the signs were too nebulous or maybe we just weren't looking. Then the first bomb went off and they kept coming, one after the other like the Bible's storm of locusts.

Arlington went first. The experts—the few who survived and hung around to offer their largely useless opinions—say the missile was supposed to hit Washington, but a strong headwind or something pushed it off course. Oops.

Baghdad and Tehran went next. Those were ours. We had no idea who sent the first missile across the pond, but by then we were at war with the entire Middle East, so what the hell. The strikes pretty much decimated what was left of our Army, Navy and Marine Corps, but at that point I guess we figured ground troops were obsolete.

By that time Fuzzy and I had already left for Higgins Lake, in northern Michigan, where nobody would ever drop a bomb, mostly because Higgins Lake isn't really on anyone's map. From there we watched television coverage of New York,

Boston, Los Angeles, Miami and Seattle. By the time L.A. went up, the media figured the best way to document it was to put cameras outside every major city and just wait.

That seemed to work fine.

All of that happened on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, the president addressed the world from a bunker somewhere, but I don't think anyone was listening. Or maybe they were, because Washington went up on Friday. So did Moscow, London, Paris, Rome, Istanbul, every square inch of Israel and Palestine, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Berlin.

By the end of Week One four billion were dead or slowly dying. Electricity, telephones and TV went out halfway through Week Two. Radio lingered around a bit longer, until the radiation fucked up the reception. Just before the radio went out, the president made another speech, if you could call it that. It lasted two seconds. He said, "God help us all," and that was it.

We lost running water in Week Three.

The closest explosion to Higgins Lake was Detroit, a good two hundred miles off. Detroit got a smaller bomb, one or two megatons I think, and fortunately for us the weather blew the fallout all over Lake Erie and Cleveland. So it goes. Or so said Vonnegut. He seemed to have it about right.

But Fuzzy and I—we're good, we're okay. We have clean water from the lake, and a decent amount of food from the IGA, and when that runs out we'll have deer and rabbit and the occasional fox. And fish. All the fucking fish we can eat.

I hooked up with a couple of guys on the street, and now we watch out for each other. Little things, like did we have enough food, ammo, that sort of thing. It wasn't anything too exciting, until the blue minivan showed up. This was during the early part of Week Two, right before we lost electricity and right after Detroit became a parking lot.

The license plate was registered to Wayne county, which is where Detroit used to be. Looked like they were home when the bomb went off, and must have hit the road, trying to outrun the fallout.

In case you're wondering, you can't outrun fallout.

They rolled in about four in the afternoon. Fuzzy and I were shootin' the shit with Harry (two houses up the street) and Tuvi (three houses down) when the blue minivan turned from the main county road onto our street, motored about halfway down, then just stopped, right there in the middle like they just got home.

Nobody got out of the car and nobody turned off the ignition. So we watched for a minute or two, thinking our thoughts, then finally Harry said, "What the hell?" and strolled over to take a look.

I left Fuzzy with Tuvi and joined Harry.

"What do you make of it?" Harry asked me.

Didn't look like anyone inside the van was moving around much, but the rear windows were tinted so it was hard to tell for sure.

I said, "Don't know. But I don't like it much."

We walked up the driver's side of the van, slowly, like the cops do when they pull you over. Neither of us had thought to bring a gun.

"Hey there," Harry said. "Everything okay?"

An arm appeared. Most of the flesh on the hand had sloughed off the bone.

"Whoa," Harry said, jumping back. I had a similar reaction.

We peered inside the van. The driver had quite a lot of hair on his shirt and very little of it left on his head. His skin, where he had skin, was red and bubbly like boiled cheese.

The woman in the passenger seat appeared to be dead. Her head was resting against the door frame and a good deal of blood had drained out of her face.

And my God—the stench. Seemed like you could actually smell the radiation, and on top of that was burned flesh and hair and feces.

The driver wagged his fingers a bit, and his eyes rolled around the sockets until they met mine.

“Hell...” the driver said. I thought he had it about right.

“My...my wife. Help. Please.” He seemed to be having trouble articulating his words, which I guess is what happens when your tongue melts. I pulled Harry away from the van.

“We can’t help them,” I said.

Harry nodded.

“And I don’t like hanging around that much radiation. It’s not healthy.”

Harry nodded again.

Tuvi joined us.

“So?”

“So we’ve got to do something with them, but I don’t know what.”

Tuvi suggested we roll the van into the lake.

“And contaminate our water supply? No thanks.”

Harry said, “Well, we can shoot them, but that car is hot and I don’t think they’re getting out of it. And I sure as shit don’t want it parked outside my house.”

“I’m not sure we should use our ammunition on something we can’t eat,” I said.

The three of us pondered the situation for a few moments, and Fuzzy played with some rocks. Fuzzy's retarded—he can't speak and probably has no fucking clue what's going on. Which is about the only thing I envy about my brother.

“Anyway,” I said, “we're not murderers. Besides, by the time we rig up some way to move the van, they'll probably be dead.”

Harry said, “I've got some towing line in my garage. Can we pull the van somewhere?”

Tuvi said, “How do we get them out?”

Harry and I looked at each other, then I said, “We don't.”

The driver moaned a few times when he realized we weren't going to help him, then he just lay there, staring out the windshield at the water like he was contemplating a swim. Took us maybe half an hour to get the blue minivan hooked up to Harry's truck, and off they went.

Tuvi and I shared a beer and waited for Harry to come back, which he did an hour later with a resigned expression on his face. Tuvi handed Harry a beer and nobody asked about what happened to the blue minivan or the people inside, and that was just fine with me.

Friday, June 25, 2010

Funny thing about the end of the world. It's not as exciting as you'd think.

I mean, at first I was all hopped up on adrenaline—we all were—but now, just over a month since the first bomb hit, I find myself missing baseball and CNN and fuckin' YouTube, for christsake. I've already waded through the dozen or so novels stashed at the cabin—including a galley of the first book I ever sold, a truly awful spy thriller, the only redeeming part of which is the dedication, which says: for Fuzzy. Now I spend my time entertaining my brother or hunting or hauling water. Or writing in this journal.

Sometimes when I go down to the lake to fill up my buckets, I'll look down the shoreline and see a guy fishing at the end of his dock, or maybe a couple of kids skipping rocks. If I'm lucky they'll wave, but most of the time everyone just ignores each other. Maybe it's too soon. Maybe we're all still a little too scared.

Monday, July 12, 2010

Things have moped along for a couple of months now, and the food is finally starting to run low. You see, we have this rule, me and Tuvi and Harry. We eat only what we shoot or catch. That way we know what killed it. But lately we've noticed dead deer and dead rabbits with all these funny lesions, and that makes us worry. We worry that the food we've been eating is contaminated, and we worry that if there's radiation in the animals, then there's probably radiation in the air or the water.

But the four of us, we stick together and share what we catch. Sometimes there isn't much, and one or two or all four of us go home hungry. Fuzzy doesn't like being hungry, and he doesn't understand, but I do the best I can with him. Which probably isn't good enough.

Harry and Tuvi, though, I'm starting to think they resent Fuzzy. I mean, I guess I can understand. Fuzzy doesn't hunt or fish or talk, and he's another mouth to feed. But it's not like I'm asking the guys to give up their food—Fuzzy eats off my plate. Maybe I'll bring it up next time they give me that look.

Saturday, July 31, 2010

I've decided that I know that look, and Harry and Tuvi are giving it to me a lot now.

Pure hunger. A couple days ago, at dinner, Fuzzy tugged on my sleeve and made a sad face and rubbed his belly. And Harry, Jesus, fucking Harry, slammed his fist on

the goddamned table and our plates clattered and Fuzzy's glass of water spilled and he started crying.

Harry took off and we haven't seen him since. Fuck him. He can catch his own goddamned food and eat every fucking scrap. Asshole.

Speaking of food, things are pretty bare at the cabin. Without the three of us pooling our catches, Fuzzy and I have had only one rabbit to share over the last two days. Tomorrow morning I'm going hunting with Tuvi, who, unlike Harry, still comes around to see how we're doing.

Sunday, August 1, 2010

Tuvi and I met at the end of the road and walked to our hunting grounds, about a quarter-mile stretch of woods right along the main river that feeds the lake. We didn't say much, just a comment or two about the strange, greenish hue in the clouds and the way they seemed to be spinning through the atmosphere.

About half an hour into our hunt, Tuvi nabbed a quail. He blew off a wing and had to chase it down in the brush, but he caught it and broke its neck and tossed it in his pack.

Ten minutes later Tuvi had two quail, a rabbit and a squirrel that I wasn't convinced he should eat. I had nothing.

"You should give Harry a break, man," Tuvi said.

I raised my gun and aimed at a bird in a birch about twenty feet away. I pulled the trigger and blew an impressive hole in the branch the bird was sitting on. The bird flew off.

"Damn it."

"I'm serious, John. He's just scared. Hell, we're all scared."

I looked at him. “Fuck Harry,” I said. “If he won’t be civil, I don’t want him near me or my brother.”

We walked farther into the woods. Tuvi was shaking his head. “He’s not being uncivil, John. He’s just hungry.”

I snorted. “Hungry. We’re all fucking hungry.”

I aimed at a rabbit, fired, missed.

Tuvi said, “I’m hungry, too.”

We made eyes and I saw something in his that I had missed before—there was the hunger, sure, but this was something deeper, something fiery and wild and completely unbounded. And before I could say anything about it, Tuvi spun, brought up his rifle and blew the head off a hedgehog. He dropped his pack and bolted over to his kill. There, he pulled out his hunting knife and started shaving the fur off the animal.

I watched him and noticed, not surprisingly, that I was holding my gun a little tighter.

Tuvi got most of the fur off the thing, looked around like he’d forgotten where he was, then sunk his teeth right into the creature’s back.

I tried a laugh, but it came out all wrong. “You need some wood for a fire, Pocahontas?” I said.

Tuvi turned around and looked up at me. He had blood and tufts of fur stuck to his chin. He looked like he’d never seen me before.

Then he chomped down on his catch and I grabbed his pack and got the fuck out of there.

Wednesday, August 11, 2010

I haven't seen Harry in two weeks. Every now and then I'll catch Tuvi stalking up and down the road, mumbling to himself. I learned long before the first explosion that if you see a guy in a conversation with himself, you leave him the fuck alone.

Fuzzy has the blisters. I found them a couple of nights ago at dinner. He kept picking at his left arm and crying out, so I rolled up his sleeve to take a look and sure enough—burns. Which either means our food is poisoning us, or it's in the air and we're done for.

I found some antibacterial ointment in the closet and got Fuzzy lubricated. I tracked down a bottle of bourbon and got myself lubricated.

Once I'd gotten my brother squared away in bed, I dug through the closet and found my old tackle box. The way I figured it, if the radiation was in the water, we'd be dead already. Somehow the radiation must have infected our food supply, which is okay, since I'm such a lousy hunter.

So, from now on, we'll only eat fish.

Friday, August 13, 2010

This morning I was on my way back up the street carrying a stringer loaded with lake perch, a couple of bass, and some crayfish. I heard someone sobbing, turned, and saw Tuvi sitting in his front yard, rocking back and forth. He was mumbling to himself and I considered just walking by. A smart guy would just walk away.

So of course I went over and asked if he was all right.

He kind of jumped, like I'd startled him.

"It's all. Fuck. It's all fucking."

"Hey, man," I said. "What's the matter?"

He rocked. “We’re all gonna die.”

“Maybe. But maybe not.” Tuvi looked up at me and his eyes were all red and watery, and there was blood on his face, but I couldn’t tell if it was his or not.

“Harry’s dead.”

I almost dropped the stringer. “What?”

Tuvi nodded. “Dead. Shot himself.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.” Tuvi resumed his rocking. “I know why, though.”

I stared at him for a while.

Finally Tuvi said, “He had the sick.” He looked up at me. “You know. The sick. No hair. He bled, John. He bled through his mouth and nose and ears and his fucking eyes, for God’s sake.”

That couldn’t be good.

Tuvi continued, “I told him, it’s the food. You can’t eat what you don’t shoot. That’s what I said. Harry told me to shut off and fuck up. Because he was already gone, John—he was already too far gone. Couldn’t even curse right.”

I shifted my feet and said nothing. Man. Fucking Harry.

“He was itchy, you know, scratching his arms. Scratching and scratching and scratching. And the skin just came right off, like...like.”

Tuvi stopped rocking and frowned. “Like skin on pudding. Just. Ffft. Right off.”

“What did he eat?”

“He was having trouble. No live game. I offered him some of mine, but.” Tuvi shook his head. “Said I should give it to the retard.” Tuvi laughed, but I didn’t

think it was so funny. In fact, I thought about punching Tuvi in the face. Instead I took a couple breaths.

“Tuvi,” I said, “listen. It’s in the food. All the food. You need to eat the fish—it’s the only thing we have left.”

Tuvi shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. The radiation hasn’t contaminated the lake.” I thought about adding yet to the end of that sentence and decided against it.

He looked up at me again. Then he rolled back his sleeve and showed me his arm. I looked away.

He rolled his sleeve back down. “I’m finished,” he said.

I unhooked two of the lake perch from my stringer and held them out.

“Here.”

He wouldn’t take them.

“Tuvi. Take the fish. You’ll get better, you just have to stop eating contaminated food.”

Tuvi shook his head. And I got angry—if this amounted to human resilience, then we were all fucked. So much for forging ahead through tragedy. Maybe we all deserved to die. Let the fucking roaches cash in.

“Fine,” I said. I tossed the fish into the dirt next to Tuvi and walked home to have some lunch with my brother.

Wednesday, August 18, 2010

Tuvi’s dead.

I hadn't seen him since that day I found him rocking on his front lawn, but I would leave fresh fish on his porch every morning, and every afternoon when I went back to the lake to fetch our water, the fish would be gone.

Until today. The fish were still on the porch, and had attracted some wildlife.

Tuvi died in his bathtub, which is a good place to be if you're going to melt.

I didn't know what to do with him, so I just walked out and shut the door behind me.

Monday, September 13, 2010

Radiation's in the water now. It's pretty much everywhere now. The rain started nine days ago and hasn't let up once.

Fuzzy's really sick, and all I can do is try to keep him comfortable. Soon I'll be out of alcohol and then we're both in trouble.

Friday, September 17, 2010

His skin had started to fall off. So I got the rest of the bourbon and I found some Percocet in the medicine cabinet, and I lay my brother down on his bed and got his favorite blanket, the one with Winnie-the-Pooh. He clutched the blanket right up against his face like it could take away all his pain the way it did when he was a boy and my heart broke right then and I almost just used the gun. But Fuzzy would have understood the gun, and he would have been scared and he'd have died wondering why I shot him.

I put the first Percocet in his mouth and lifted the back of his head up with my hand and he drank it down with a couple sips of water. And Fuzzy, he trusts me, so he took the pill. No problem. He even smiled at me, showing me all the empty places where his teeth used to be.

So I gave him another Perc and he took that one, too, and the next one and the next one and the next one until the bottle was empty, which was maybe a dozen pills.

The Percs started working their magic pretty quickly, and Fuzzy just stared up at me, and goddamn it, I cried because I couldn't believe what had happened to us, and I wanted to take it back and knew I couldn't.

I drank the rest of the bourbon, which unfortunately wasn't enough to kill me, and I watched my brother slowly drift away, and I cried. In the end, just before he closed his eyes for good, his lips moved, forming one word—his first, and his last.

“Goodbye.”

Monday, September 20, 2010

I went down to the lake today and found the body of a child. His foot had snagged on one of the split pilings, and his body just thumped up against the dock with the tide, his dead eyes staring up at me.

I'm so tired. Part of it is the radiation, but another part is the fear. Fear of what I've done; what I've failed to do.

At least I can choose now how I want it to end.

I'm going to lie next to my brother. I'm going to kiss him on his head where Dad used to when he tucked us in at night. I'm going to pull his Winnie-the-Pooh blanket up and I'm going to hold onto it with one hand for strength. With my other hand I'm going to place the barrel of the gun into my mouth. I'm going to think about my short life and shorter career, and the simple dedication to my only brother, the only person I ever really loved. I'm going to cry and I'm going to breathe and taste the metal.

And this is important; this is all that matters: I'm going to die as I lived—protecting my brother and knowing that, for all of his weaknesses, he was always my greatest strength.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Kassandra Kelly's stories have appeared in *Rose & Thorn*, *Future Fire*, *Clonepod*, *Reflection's Edge* and *Spinetingler*. She received her MFA from Pacific University. She can be heard ranting about the indestructibility of tires in the post-apocalyptic world on her blog <http://madisonafter.blogspot.com/>. She lives in rural Oregon.

The Moon Dreams of Water

by Kassandra Kelly

Edgar was dreaming of the ocean when his phone rang.

Magdalen. He sat up in his bunk and rubbed sleep out of his eyes. She knew it was the middle of the night; she did it on purpose. Even on Earth it was still night.

Edgar touched the screen and Magdalen's hairdo materialized. "Edgar, I've had a complaint."

He tried to focus on her swirled and frothy hair which was so elaborate her little face looked like an afterthought. Below it, she was an ordinary middle-aged Earth woman, more or less his mother's age. Edgar used to think that might be a foundation for their working relationship. He loved his mother.

"Complaint?"

"What's wrong with your hair, Edgar?"

"My hair?" He reached up and felt his own locks writhing. There was some G on the Moon, and the living stations added a little more, but things still floated

around on their own a good deal. He bent over and found his hat on the floor tethered beneath his boot heel. “Better?”

“You look unwashed.” She frowned. It must be summer, Earth time, because she wore a light pink thing with little straps. She had season-specific night clothes; Edgar had seen them all.

“You want me to wash my hair, send more water.”

“Never mind that, Edgar. A Richardson College viewer said you didn’t rotate number 232.”

“Number 232 is not Richardson’s cheese.”

“But you forgot to turn it.”

“Richardson’s cheese is number 791 and it’s in Cave Carpatas. 232 is in Sinuous. That’s a whole different feed—you need a password.”

“That may be, Edgar, but we aren’t running a military installation. We’re aging cheese. Have you cleaned Euler yet?”

Fucking Euler. Edgar rubbed his eyes. “Today, Magdalen.”

“Good. And please go rotate 232.” She clicked off, leaving the company logo where her face used to be. Edgar stared at it blankly. “The Moon Works For You!” and “Watch Us Grow!” encircled a smiling quarter-moon slice of green cheese.

He put on his boots, no socks. His underwear was sprung from wear and swam around his thighs. He ought to break in another pair but he liked these. His mother sent them.

Water at Luna-Cheese was for the cheese, with a ration left over for drinking. There were liters of a jelly compound you were supposed to use for body maintenance. Every few weeks Edgar slathered it on and scraped it off, but it wasn’t like bathing.

It didn't matter. No one from Earth saw anything but his gloved hands in the video feeds. He was supposed to wear a bio-suit when servicing the cheese, but it had been months since Edgar had bothered. And Bobby Finestra, who worked the other shift, never wore anything.

There were six caves located below grade, deep in the Moon's terra: Copernicus, Sinuous, Moltke, Euler, Carpatus and Schrödinger. Four of the caves were for the custom cheeses and two were for supermarket product. A steel cistern of earth water fed moisture to the caves. The constant trickle through the pipes made Edgar ache for fresh water.

He pushed open the wooden door of Sinuous. All the caves were sealed with wood from Earth, and Edgar loved the smooth, living feel of it. The caves themselves were lined with fitted Moon rocks, mostly granite, and were supposed to be hypo-allergenic and completely sanitary. And they all were, except for Euler.

Edgar hadn't told Magdalen exactly how bad it was in Euler. A weird mossy growth had sprouted on the walls after the last shipment of ripe cheeses had been shipped out. There wasn't anything like it in the training manual. He and Finestra had solved the problem by locking the door and not going back.

Inside Sinuous, he paused to appreciate musty, moisture-rich air. Finestra said it smelled like sex. To Edgar it smelled like Earth, the humble scent of cooking and growing. Of course he had much less experience of sex than Finestra. Since coming to the Moon, he'd only had one friend, Zoe, and she'd left six months ago.

Malden, Finestra's latest girlfriend, was a tour guide at the Moon Monument. Every couple of days, she drove to the Luna-Cheese installation in a borrowed Rover, with sacks of McDonalds or Pizza-Hut. Women were uncommon enough on the Moon, especially ones that Finestra hadn't already pissed off, but one who brought food.... Edgar was half in love with her himself.

He took his gloves from a shelf and walked down a short flight of steps into a cool chamber dense with vapor. It was drier than most cheese caves on Earth, but in the parched atmosphere of the Moon it felt like a rain forest. Three hundred cheeses stood in their delicate sweat.

The cheese was made on Earth and transported to the Moon for aging. It was shipped along with packets of Earth bacteria and water. Each cheese stayed about nine Moon months and it was Edgar's job to monitor the cave environment and get the finished product ready for shipment. Usually the bacteria died after the cheeses left. Fucking Euler.

Edgar also had to make sure the cheese cameras were focused.

He walked through the rows to cheese 232 and grasped the wooden board. He gave it a hundred and eighty degree turn.

"Thanks, Edgar," a woman's voice said through the cheese cam.

"*De nada*, dude." Edgar never understood how they all managed to learn his name. He leaned over the cheese to look into the camera's monitor. The picture was dark, Earth night. "Richardson College?"

"Uh." Pause. "Yes."

"You hacked 232's feed? Dude, why? You people have your own cheese."

A movement on the monitor pixilated the image as if a shadow had passed over another shadow.

"This one seems lonely. You know?"

Edgar nodded, not that the camera could pick it up from his angle. "The owners stopped payment and moved out to Mars Colony. Their cheese stands alone."

The woman sighed. "Our college cheese has the glee club, the marching band and dance line rehearsing in front of it twelve hours a day. It didn't need me."

"Yeah, people do nutty things." He picked up the chart for 232 and checked his notes. "I turned 232 on schedule. Says so on the chart."

"I know. Sorry about that. I just like this side better."

"Get some sleep, why don't you?"

Edgar left his gloves at the door and went back to bed.

*

Not all cheeses had their own cameras. Some were just regular, aged Luna-Cheese cheddars that would be chunked and sold in the supermarkets on Earth and Mars. But many cheeses had owners who paid an extra fee for the privilege of watching and talking to their cheese. Like a lot of Moon traditions, it made no sense, yet this was where the real money was.

Most cheeses were owned by schools and institutions as fundraising gimmicks. Edgar's grade school had one, and he remembered telling the cheese about his summer vacation while staring at the luminous, frosty rind that seemed to hang in space. Others were owned by serious cheeseheads who claimed that Moon aging imparted a special quality. Carpatus Cave had a lot of those cheeses, made with weird recipes on Earth and then sent here for the Moon experience.

In Moltke Cave, forty-five cheeses were owned by retirement homes on Earth and day or night, Edgar could hear dozens of soft voices talking to the cheeses. Some nights when he couldn't sleep, he'd go to Moltke and just listen. The voices sounded like surf. It was restful.

*

Finestra was making coffee when Edgar dragged himself to the kitchen the next morning. He wore a pair of yellow knee-high socks and nothing else. "Don't say it. I know. Magdalen called about Euler."

"In the middle of the night," Edgar replied. "Also someone from Richardson College is watching 232. Has a favorite side."

"Typical." Finestra dumped yesterday's coffee grounds on the floor. "Isn't that the Davidson cheese? It's probably the kid. She's in school. Still on Earth."

The mound of coffee grounds on the floor was higher today. Yesterday's grounds were now dry enough to lift off on their own whenever Finestra kicked them. The whole kitchen was a hopeless dump. When they first arrived for duty, they made

an effort to cook occasionally. Now they relied on Malden to deliver fresh food and ate the Luna-Cheese nutrition packets the rest of the time. Food wrappers, weighed down by dirty dishes and tools, covered the counters. There was no reason to clean up since there weren't enough germs to rot anything. Finestra had been known to eat three-week-old pizza.

Edgar wondered what Zoe would have said about the kitchen. She was an archaeologist, part of a team that took core samples all over the Moon. She'd been professionally disappointed and the few times she slept with Edgar had been after long bouts of drinking when she cried over her eroding skill set. No life here either.

"I'll clean it up later," said Finestra.

"Yeah, sure."

Edgar carried his coffee out to the solar pad to look at the sky, treading carefully so the coffee wouldn't slosh in his cup. The pad was designed for transport landings and the doors to the main building locked magnetically when the roof rolled back. But since there were so few transports, Edgar brought out a lawn chair and tied it down. He sat there each morning and watched the creamy blue vision of his home planet so many miles away. He wasn't actually sure how far away it was. Sometimes when he thought about Magdalen, it didn't seem far enough. Other times, when he evaluated his social life, he felt as though he'd been left to drift in space, forever getting further away from the place he ought to be.

The comm panel on the wall squealed at him. Finestra's voice whistled through the chapped wires: "232's asking for you. Think you have a girlfriend, Ed."

Down on the cheese level, Edgar passed Finestra tapping the system patch on Euler's door. "Man, we got to do this."

"I want to shut off the air a few days before we go in. Three days."

"Yeah, I don't know about waiting," said Finestra. "I think maybe there's still a live camera in there. I can't remember if I shut down all the feeds."

“Jesus. I don’t want to talk about this now.” *Or ever.* Edgar picked up his gloves as he entered Sinuous. The damp, organic smell of the place calmed him as he tapped the camera. “Hey, it’s Edgar.”

The green light on the camera blinked leisurely. “Hey, Edgar.”

He examined the crusted, living rind of 232. It had the green flesh and mold blooms that a good Moon cheese was supposed to have. He wondered if the Richardson College girl knew the cheese would be ready to send home on the transport due in twenty-one days.

“Uh, you want to see another side?” he asked.

“My name is Jennifer,” the cam said. “Come closer.”

In order to look into the camera, he had to scrunch down and put his head next to 232, his chin resting on the cheese board. He saw the pixilated face of a dark-haired girl with fluffy cheeks and big eyes. He couldn’t be sure if she were a live communication or an avatar until she blew out her cheeks and a piece of hair fluttered onto her nose. Avatars didn’t have freckles either.

“I thought you’d be older,” she said.

“I think technically I’m younger, Moon time,” he replied. “How old are you?”

“Old. Twenty.” She sighed again. “It just goes to show. For nine months I’ve watched you turn the cheese, and I made a picture of you in my mind. You don’t look anything like I imagined.”

“Sorry. I guess.” Edgar couldn’t think how to answer. Jennifer was beautiful.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” she said. “You’re cute. Can you talk for a minute? I want to know all about your life on the Moon.”

“I’m sitting in a cheese cave with my head next to a cheddar. Life on the Moon doesn’t get more exciting than this.”

She laughed and it sounded like water pouring over a glass of ice cubes.

Edgar learned that Jennifer loved the Moon. As a little girl, she'd visited the Moon Monument on a field trip and saw the first human footprints in the fine dust. She studied the feeds of Moon exploration and archaeology in grade school. Now she attended Richardson College and watched their cheese, though 232 was still her favorite. Finestra was right, 232 had belonged to her family before they went to Mars.

"Everything on the Moon is silt and dust," she said. "Even diamonds are silt. It must be beautiful."

"We don't have any diamond deposits," he explained. "But I think I know what you mean. The Moon is left behind, abandoned, floating away."

"I'll bet it's lonely," she said.

"Not so much." By now he'd moved the camera so he could sit on the floor and look at her image. He shrugged as he said *not so much*, though he knew that when she signed off he would be lonely, more than he had been before.

"I'd like to visit you," she said.

"Sure, that would be great." He could be safely enthusiastic. No one visited the Moon unless they had a job or were on a tourist excursion. Luna-Cheese was at the furthest end of the original settlement, hundreds of miles from the tourist area. "You'd love the Keplar craters. It was one of the first places I visited when I got here. You can get a real Moon experience."

"Like Apollo?" she asked. "I used to fall asleep imagining what it would be like to be the first person to land on the Moon."

"Not me. I'd be afraid I'd never get home."

"I'll visit you, Edgar."

"Okay, sure." He moved the camera back to its original position. His shift had started.

Late that night, he woke up unsettled. Malden had brought tacos and real beer from the monument, and they'd stayed up surfing Earth video broadcasts and getting silly. The fresh food didn't agree with him after so long on food packets. He passed Finestra's room on his way to the toilet and heard profound snoring from within. It was amazing Malden could sleep with the guy.

He went down to the cheese level, on the pretext of double-checking 232's camera. As he passed Euler, he heard Jennifer's voice from the wall comm.

"Edgar? Why is this door locked?"

"You didn't hack the installation's comm. Did you?" He pulled up the menu and saw the green, leisurely beat of an outside feed. "You shouldn't be able to do that."

"I backed out of the cheese cam. It's easy." Her voice had a chalky sound over the installation's speakers. "But don't worry, it's audio only."

He looked down at his weeks-old shorts. "Well, good. But still."

"If Luna-Cheese cared that much about security, they wouldn't have made it so easy to hack."

"It's an old system," he said.

"Tell me about Euler."

He watched the beat-beat-beat of her feed. "It's supposed to be empty. All the cheese shipped out."

"Let's go inside, Edgar."

"No." His finger hovered over the off switch. "Finestra and I need to clean it out."

"I'm audio only. I won't see anything."

"Dude, this is weird." How had she heard about Euler? Magdalen? He clicked off.

*

Jennifer wasn't watching 232 the next time he went into Sinuous. He tapped the cam and checked the feed. There was nothing wrong. It was prime viewing time for 232, as it had taken on the hollow-cheeked look of a cheese that had lost all the moisture it could.

He turned the other cheeses and went back one last time to see if Jennifer was there.

"It's Edgar," he said. "From the Moon?"

Nothing.

He looked for her in the installation's comm system, and then went to Carpatius and checked on 791, Richardson's cheese. He heard the marching band tuning up. The director said, "The next clarinet that squeaks will have to march in front of the trombones."

Edgar turned up the volume. "Hey, Richardson College, is Jennifer Davidson there?"

"The cheese is talking!" someone said.

The next thing Edgar saw in the monitor was a man's bearded face. "How do you turn—oh, yes. Good." The monitor went dark.

On his way upstairs, Edgar paused next to Euler's door. Maybe she'd hacked her way inside, but the comm. panel was dark. He took a cleansing breath and touched the door knob, then jumped back, horrified. It was *warm*.

He opened the comm. panel and tapped on Finestra's room. No answer. The kitchen. Nothing. "Where are you? I'm getting some very weird readings from Euler."

No answer. Dude was probably hung over.

It had to be safe in there. Nothing actually lived on the Moon. Just an environmental malfunction. Edgar opened the door.

Not just warm but hot. He stepped into the darkness and stumbled against a wall of sticky, wet heat. Like a sauna, hot. A year ago this much heat would have tripped the alarms for the whole level, but the sensors were shorted out and replacements were on back-order. He threw the door open and felt the heave of the old convection cooling system as it kicked up a notch to compensate for the blast coming out of Euler.

He went to the system patch and pulled up the menu. Yes, that was the problem. Air and water were still on, but climate control had been turned off. Usually, no climate control meant freezing temperatures at this depth, but Euler was close to the environmental core of the installation, and those pipes were hot. He turned climate control on again and as he backed out of the menu, he saw the beat-beat-beat of a green light. It winked out before he could switch to comm mode.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” He closed the patch and waited until the air was cooler. This time, he grabbed his gloves before stepping inside. As he felt his way down the steps, he heard water dripping off the cheese shelves and puddling on the stone floor. The next thing he noticed was the smell.

“Wet dog,” he said, remembering his family’s golden retriever. But this smell was rampant, organic, like exhaled breath. Breathing through his nose, he pushed on, stepping between the first rows of tables.

Light wasn’t great in any of the caves but Euler was the worst. One soffit radiated weakly in the vapor and one camera spot lit a cheese table. It was true, Finestra had left the camera on. It focused on a circular stain on the board, rather like a water mark on a varnished table top. The feed was, of course, live. He swiveled the camera, flashing the spot light across the empty table tops, then moved it higher to catch the glistening stone walls.

Something moved.

Edgar yelped and jumped backwards. The spot flailed around the cave. He bumped another table and the board smacked to the floor like a wet bath mat. It took Edgar a moment to go back, take up the camera.

Shaking, he moved the spot light to the wall and saw what looked like a curtain billowing in a breeze. It was dark, bruised purple, thin as skin. For a second, he thought the way it undulated was beautiful, like a jellyfish piloting through the ocean.

But this thing was much bigger than the simple moss he'd seen weeks ago. It covered the wall and thrust out between the fitted stones. Ripples of it draped the nearest tables, growing new clusters on top of abandoned cameras and cheese boards, all of it moving like fingers testing the water.

"Dude," he said. As he watched, a rippling sheet of it swept across the open doorway, clung for a moment and slid back. "No one's going to believe this."

The smell suddenly intensified, reminding him of dead shellfish at the beach. Edgar raised his hand to cover his nose and saw purple muck on his fingers. It was on his bare legs, inky streaks with the tang of iodine.

Edgar had to get out now. Shut down the air and water, tell Magdalen. Get Finestra out of bed. The growth was everywhere, glistening like seaweed. He grasped a table, swung it out of his way and his hand sank into more muck. As he hurried toward the door, another sheet swept across the doorway, this time sticking to the frame, sealing the exit. He reached out to punch an opening and the stuff wrapped itself around him, in his eyes and onto his bare skin. He tingled at the warmth and wetness as thousands of tiny particles rubbed against him.

*

"Edgar? Edgar?"

He opened his eyes and saw the girl Jennifer leaning over him, framed by a window filled with purple blossoms. She smiled.

"Where am I?" He recognized the guest room of his mom's house. But he shouldn't be here. He looked at his hands, perfectly clean. That wasn't right either.

“It’s almost lunch. Get up.” She kissed the tip of his nose and bounced off the bed. She wore shorts and her legs were long and brown. That’s right, he thought, it’s summer on Earth.

He got up, looked at his baggy old shorts. “Do you mind?”

“So modest. I love that about you.”

“This isn’t right,” he began, putting on clothes he remembered owning on Earth. “I was in Euler Cave just a minute ago”

Already the memory was disappearing. In another second it would be gone.

“That’s silly. You were right here a minute ago.”

Maybe she was right. It just felt real. He followed Jennifer downstairs to the sun room where his mother was laying out cups and napkins. “We thought you’d never wake up,” mom said. “But then you’ve always been a good sleeper. Jennifer, he was the most perfect, well-behaved baby.”

She went into the kitchen and Jennifer turned to Edgar, laughing. “All moms are like that, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know. Mine is, I guess.” He felt a little muddled, maybe it was too much sleep. The light from the French doors was exceptionally bright and the plants outside seemed more lush and green than they had—when? Yesterday? He tried to focus on yesterday and came up with nothing. There had been dinner, a movie. Beer.

“I drank too much last night, didn’t I?”

“You were cute.”

His mom bustled back into the room with pitchers of water. Her hair, he noticed, was fixed up in elaborate waves and swirls. “Here we are!”

When she sat down, Edgar realized she really did look a lot like Magdalen, even down to the pink silk night shirt. “Mom?”

“Drink while it’s warm, Edgar. You’ll feel much better.”

“Oh, yes,” said Jennifer, blowing a tiny switch of hair which landed on her nose, among her freckles. “Absolutely full of life.”

“Is something wrong, Edgar?”

He looked from Jennifer to his mom, who now wore Magdalen’s cat-eye reading glasses.

“Am I dreaming?” He realized he wasn’t wearing a shirt, though he’d put one on upstairs.

“Life,” said his mom, “is all around.”

“We’re full of life, Edgar,” Jennifer said. She reached across the table and touched his hand. In her eyes, the wide desolate landscape of the Moon seemed to rest briefly.

*

He heard pounding. “Edgar! Edgar, you thieving cheese head! Wake up!”

Blairily, Edgar opened his eyes. Malden was hammering on the windshield of a Rover. A Rover that he, Edgar, was inside of. My god, just a moment ago, he’d been home on Earth. Now where was he? Untangling himself from the safety straps, he sat up. The Moon Monument logo was on the dash. The same logo crested Malden’s uniform, and as if he hadn’t gotten the point yet, a huge version of it was emblazoned on the wall in front of him.

He was still on the Moon, in the monument’s underground transport level. The Rover was parked sideways next to a big school shuttle from U.S. California. He unlocked the door and Malden wrenched it open.

“How did I get here?” His last clear memory was of setting the magnetic lock on Euler’s door. But there was something about Jennifer and Magdalen, too.

“Isn’t it obvious? You stole my Rover!” She looked for something to grab and finally settled for his hair, giving it a fierce tug and hurling him out of the Rover. Malden was taller and stronger than Edgar. “This is lunar property! I could have you penalized for this.”

“You steal it all the time,” he replied, looking at his hands. They were purple again.

“Yeah, but I work here.” She reached for her phone. “I have to call Fin. He was absolutely sick about you, and that Luna-Cheese woman has been calling every five minutes—Hon? It’s me. I’ve got him. Yeah, okay.” She clicked off.. “Fin’s cleaning out one of the caves, so I’ll drive you back. I can’t put you on local transport in your shorts.”

Edgar’s heart clutched. Fin was cleaning Euler. “Did you actually talk to him? Are you sure it was Fin?”

“Of course I’m sure. Ick, don’t touch me.”

*

“What were you trying to do?” she asked as they bounced along L5. On either side of the highway were empty installations and living complexes, some stone, some steel, all with drifts of silt blown into their doorways and windows. “Were you trying to catch a ride to Earth?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I wanted to see the Moon Monument.” Earth was just visible on the horizon. Across the distance, oceans stirred on the blue planet, all the waters pulling away from him. “Maybe I wanted to have a Moon experience.”

“What a tourist.”

“It’s full of life,” he said.

“The hell it is.” She turned on the audio feed and picked up a wobbly Earth news broadcast. “The only life on the Moon is us, Edgar. And we’re not doing so good.”

*

His Luna-phone started bleeping and Edgar sat up in his bunk, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“Edgar? Edgar, are you there?”

He switched on the visual and saw Magdalen. She was showing a little more cleavage than Edgar liked to see on a woman his mother’s age. “Where else would I go, Magdalen?”

“Good. Now that Euler is tip-top, we’re moving up the next shipment. Launch is tomorrow morning.”

“I thought we had a couple of weeks.”

“Here at Luna-Cheese we don’t let opportunity pass us by, Edgar.”

“Are you sending water?”

“The usual shipment. Do me a favor, Edgar, and salve yourself. You’re a mess.” She clicked off.

Edgar stared at the company logo. The installation was quiet. He got up and rooted around for his boots. On his way to the caves he passed Finestra’s door, which was vibrating off its hinges with his snores.

Euler was closed and the system pad was dark. He tried to ignore the delicious, tingly feeling he got when he touched the door handle and found it still slightly warm. Sinuous cave was only a few steps away, and if Jennifer came back, she’d go there to watch 232. Yet he felt a tingle as he keyed off Euler’s mag-lock and opened the door.

Inside, Euler was perfectly clean. No sign of the moss. Finestra had scrubbed the walls with acid and flushed everything out into space. He’d set up tables and cheese cams and even replaced a few soffit bulbs in the ceiling. Edgar inhaled the unscented cool of raw stone. It looked like any other cave in the installation. All it needed was cheese.

“Edgar?” A green light pulsed in a nearby camera.

“Jennifer?” He scrambled around the table and peered into the monitor. Nothing but shadows. “I need to—” He meant to say *talk to you* but it came out wrong “—swim to you.”

“We need water,” she said. Her voice filled the cave, independent of audio lines.

“You aren’t Jennifer.”

The green light throbbed in the heart of the camera as though the Moon itself had hacked the system. “No.”

He’d known, deep down, that it wasn’t Jennifer he’d been talking to in this cave. He’s just wanted it so much, Jennifer, a real girl who liked the Moon and didn’t mind his old shorts. Who thought he was a little cute. It would have been so great.

He looked at the perfectly clean stone walls. He couldn’t see the moss, but it was still living in here. He felt the tingle at the back of his neck and wondered why he’d ever thought it was unpleasant. “What do I do?”

“The cistern, Edgar.”

All he had to do was touch Euler’s keypad and open the water menu. Route cistern control to Euler’s comm. Open the floodgates. It would start as a trickle, then a gush, and finally a torrent. It would fill the caves and overflow into the halls, and burst through the magnetic locks and sweep into the dust with a roar. From a hundred thousand miles away everyone would see the Moon awash and spinning in her storm.

He hesitated. Maybe one more look in Sinuous to see if she’s come back? He shook off the thought and brought up the environment menu. As he tapped the final key in the sequence, it began: the first drops of rain.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Bernard O'Leary has written the first chapter of quite a few novels, but is new to the world of short fiction. He has a day job which he attends fairly regularly and is studying for a BA in Literature in his spare time. He lives in Scotland with his wife and two-year-old daughter.

A Good Beating

by Bernard O'Leary

I'd been working in the garden all afternoon. My joints creaked and complained as I eased myself into a garden chair and looked at the work that still needed to be done. The garden seemed huge. The uncut lawn rolled on forever.

Most of that afternoon had been spent listening to the shouting and slamming doors on the other side of the hedge. I left them to it, as I usually did when they fought, which was often these days.

It carried on for a while, until I heard the porch door slam, followed by feet running along the patio. My hedge started thrashing around as if a wild beast was stuck in there. Ben's little head popped out from between the tangled branches as he wriggled free and shot across my lawn. Without looking at me, he scrambled up the knotted rope into the tree house and disappeared inside. The rope squirmed like a snake as Ben dragged it up behind him.

The garden was still again. I listened to the birds singing, and then heard the gate creak as Paul entered. He was as pale as chalk and looked near fainting.

"Is he here?"

I pointed at the tree house.

“Ben,” said Paul, trying to sound calm, “please come down here and talk to me.”

“He hit me, granddad!” yelled Ben. “Don’t let him come up here!”

“Don’t tell lies about your father,” I said, but even as I was saying it, I realized Ben was telling the truth. Paul looked close to crying. “Come on,” I said to Paul, “come inside with me for a beer. It’ll give us all a chance to cool down.”

*

The tree house was made out of the bones of Paul’s own childhood tree house. I rebuilt it when they moved in next door, shortly after Ben’s mother ran off.

Paul had hidden from me in that tree many times when he was Ben’s age. It was a good hiding place. Once the rope was pulled up there was no way of getting in, and the angry parent on the ground simply had to wait for the child to come back down.

Of course, when Paul was a kid, I was always happy to let him stay up there as long as he wanted. I’d devised my own system of punishment which I considered very fair and democratic, and which required little exertion on my part.

I would get a good detective novel from the house and read it while waiting for Paul to come down. For every page I read, an extra slap was added to his punishment. I’d normally get to page five or six before he’d tentatively lower himself down the rope, and then I’d deliver him five or six hard smacks across the backside. Sometimes I’d barely have read the first line before he skulked back down. One time, he stayed up there so long that I had to go fetch myself a second book.

I kept my word on that occasion as on all others, delivering a smack for every single page I’d read. By the time we finished, my arm ached and the sun was setting.

*

Paul didn't want to drink, so I gave him water and opened a beer for myself. Through the kitchen window, we could see the tree house. Two little feet wearing red socks and bright white sports shoes were dangling over the side, swinging up and down rhythmically.

"So," I said, "what happened to all this 'I'm never going to hit my kid' stuff?"

"Knock it off, Dad." He sounded more desperate than angry.

I regretted saying that, but didn't apologize. We sat in silence for a while, me occasionally sipping at my icy cold beer, him staring intently out of the window, watching Ben's feet kicking up and down, up and down.

"I'm not sure I can do this anymore," Paul said after a while.

"Why is that?"

"Because things just get worse every day. Because I can't handle it. I think I'm going to crack up. Today, all I asked was for him to vacuum the living room, and he bitched and complained for half an hour, then when he did do it he kept bashing the vacuum against the furniture. I told him to stop and he sighed, and then... I just lost it."

"Did you hurt him?"

He held up his right hand and examined it like it was a bloody murder weapon.

"No. Just scared him a little. But you should have seen the look on his face, Dad. He looked at me like..."

Ben was a good kid, but he liked to test the boundaries with his father more and more each day. Plus, it was hard on him to be without a mother. Hard on Paul too.

"Well, to me it sounds like he earned it, a little."

Paul never replied, but I saw that he was gripping the kitchen counter so hard, his knuckles had turned white.

*

Paul had never hit his son before. As far as I know, that was the first time Paul had ever even really hit anyone. No, I tell a lie—it was the second. Once, when he was around Ben’s age, he got in a fight at school. Just boys being boys, but Paul threw a punch that broke the other kid’s nose.

The headmaster asked me to come down, rather than Paul’s mother. It was the first time I’d set foot in a school since I was a boy myself. It still smelled the same, I remember: antiseptic and sweat. Paul was already in the headmaster’s office when I got there, sitting in an uncomfortable-looking chair, his feet barely touching the ground.

“I do not allow violence in my school,” said the headmaster. “Your son must be punished appropriately. Of course, under the new regime, this means a suspension.”

“The new regime?” I asked.

“The new regime” meant non-corporal punishment; the belt, the cane and the back of the hand having been banned around the time Paul started school. The headmaster spoke wistfully about how, in the good old days, he’d settled matters like this with the thick leather strap that still hung on the wall behind his desk. “But that’s no longer an option, so I must suspend Paul instead, disrupting his education and creating more paperwork for the school. Such a shame.”

“Of course,” I said, “a parent, say, could still physically punish a child.”

“Absolutely,” he said.

“And, if such a punishment was administered...”

“Why, if a child was being correctly disciplined in the home, I would no longer feel it necessary for him to be punished by the school.”

I asked him to leave it in my hands.

As I drove home, Paul kept asking if he was suspended. I didn’t reply, and eventually the truth seemed to dawn on him. He sat still, silent, his skin pale and his eyes wide, until we got in the house and I took off my belt. He almost started to

cry, but fought it back. I paused between each swipe of the belt, giving him time to reflect. He still didn't cry. I felt proud.

*

"Ben, if you come down, I'll let you stay up late tonight. We can get a pizza and play Xbox."

Ben didn't acknowledge his father. There was no sign of life from tree house except his feet, still swinging back and forth.

"Ben, I'm your father, and I order you to come down this instant."

More silence.

"Goddamn it, Ben, get down here this instant, or I'll so help me, I'll cut this tree down."

I thought I saw the rhythm of his legs quicken a little, but apart from that there was no sign that Ben had heard his father. Paul looked at me and shrugged. He sat down in the chair next to me.

"You could try just talking to him," I suggested.

"I've been talking to him for an hour, Dad."

"That's not really talking, son. Why not tell him the truth? He's a big boy. Tell him how you feel. Tell him how hard your job as a single father is. Maybe even tell the boy you're sorry."

Paul looked at me like I was showing early signs of Alzheimer's. "Yeah, right," he said, snorting, "you'd love me to do that. You'd love me to show what a weak parent I am."

"I'm just trying to help," I said. "You're the one raising the boy, you do what you damn well please."

He thought for a while, then stood up and walked back over to the tree. He spent a while choosing his words, then began to speak. He told Ben a lot of things, some of which I hadn't known. He spoke about how his ex-wife had broken his heart, how important it was to him to do a good job as a father, how disappointed in himself he was for what had happened.

My son is a tall man. He stood with his back to me while he spoke, silhouetted by the approaching dusk, and there was something strangely heroic about him. As he spoke, I wondered where he was finding the words, where he inherited his eloquence from. Not from me. I'd never been able to find words like that when I needed them.

At the end of the speech, Ben's legs stopped swinging. He was still for a while, then started to move. His head popped up over the side of the tree house.

"I told you before," he said, "I'm not coming down until granddad calls the police. You're crazy."

He lay back down and started swinging his legs again.

Paul stared at me. Shrugging, I said, "Hey, when did I ever claim to be an expert on kids?"

I had often claimed to be an expert, of course, and when Paul was little, I talked about what a great father I was. Firm, swift punishment, measured out with a surgical degree of fairness. "I teach him discipline, but I also teach him justice." How many times had I delivered that line?

Of course, it didn't last. I snapped one day. I'd been drinking too much, lost my job, Paul's mother was just about ready to walk out on me. Paul said something he shouldn't have, and I popped him in the mouth. A man's punch. I hit him a couple more times. I almost killed him, to tell the truth.

I didn't ask him to lie about it, but he did anyway, telling everyone he'd been mugged. Once, while he was still recuperating, I was in his room after bringing him some chicken soup, and I asked why he had covered for me.

“Because you might have gone to jail if I told anyone,” he told me.

“What if it was fair to send me to jail?”

He considered it. “I don’t know why everybody has to be fair all the time. Maybe sometimes people should just be given a break,” he said before switching his attention to the chicken soup.

A month later, his mother took him away to live on the other side of town. We didn’t speak much after that, until he and Ben moved back in next door.

*

Ben came down eventually, because he was cold and hungry and there was nowhere else for him to go. He was already acting like he’d forgotten the day’s events as he ran back through the hedge.

“Okay,” Paul said, “now let’s see if we can get him to bed.”

“Paul?”

“Yes?”

I stared at him, mute, until eventually I said, “I’ll get a ladder tomorrow. So we can get into the tree house, if needs be.”

“Probably a good idea,” he said, before following his son.

I forget now what it was that I really wanted to say to him. I have a lot of unspoken thoughts. It’s hard to keep track of them all.

The day was getting to the end, and the sun hung low over the houses. I sat alone in the garden, casting a long shadow over the untidy lawn.

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