



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #24
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**WHAT IS PROPERTY? WHAT HAS IT? WHO OWNS IT?
WHO NEEDS IT? WHO GETS IT? HOW DOES IT
WORK? AUTHORS WERE CHALLENGED TO WRITE
STORIES THAT FOCUS ON AT LEAST ONE ASPECT OF
THE IDEA OF PROPERTY...**

Table of Contents

Misplaced..... 3
by Suzanne Ketchum Adams

The Wedding List.....18
by James Holden

Self Defense30
by Samuel Wilkes

Debits and Credits39
by Scott MacAulay

Interview With Myself During the War50
by Jacqueline Schaalje

Sold.....66
by Matthew Harrison

The White Envelope.....71
by Janice Egry

FIRST PLACE

Suzanne grew up in rural Maine and small-town Pennsylvania and now stalks the wilds of the Boston suburbs. She has worked as a museum docent, special education aide, nanny, customer service rep, paralegal, and librarian, and is now a photo archivist. This is her first publication anywhere and the first time she has won a contest.

Misplaced

by Suzanne Ketchum Adams

When Casey's alarm goes off, she cannot recall at once where she is. The dim suburban music of birds in backyard feeders remind her that she is far from her childhood home. She lies in a narrow single bed. As she rolls onto her side, an upholstered arm of the pull-out loveseat comes into focus, a geometric print in bold primary colors. Escher prints in plain black frames cover one yellow wall, thumbtacked drawings and watercolors cover the adjacent one. Now Casey remembers. Artwork by Andrea, the dead wife and mother. Fortune has landed Casey here, strange as that is, with this good but grieving family. This room, Casey supposes, was Andrea's office or studio—though neither Paul nor the boys have volunteered this information.

Casey's home and employment are now one. She pulls on jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt, fastens her brass locket around her neck. Without the locket she does not feel dressed.

*

In the kitchen, sixteen-year old Jake scrapes the last corn flakes from a bowl.

“You’re up early,” Casey says, scooping coffee into a filter. “Tim up?”

“He’s in the shower,” Paul says as he comes through the door. He’s not dressed or shaved yet; Casey remembers he’s flying to Chicago later this morning on business, his second out of town trip since she began here six weeks ago.

“So.” Paul sets down a cereal bowl. “You two have a driving lesson today?”

Jake shrugs. “I got soccer practice.”

“Maybe after that,” says Casey, looking at Jake encouragingly. Paul had expressed so much frustration over Jake’s driving that Casey has offered to teach him, and Paul has gratefully agreed. Casey wonders why Jake shows so much reluctance about the lessons in front of his father. When Paul is absent, Jake seems eager to go.

Paul says his good-byes to the boys as they leave for school. After he is showered and dressed, he comes back into the kitchen while Casey cleans up.

“I just want to say again how much I appreciate all that you’re doing here,” Paul says. “It’s a hard time, of course, but...” his voice cracks, and he drums his fingers on the counter. “Well, the boys like you, and...” he swallows. “The driving... I mean... Jake.” A pause. “Thank you.”

Casey gives him a sad smile. “I’m glad I can help.” She isn’t sure that Tim likes her at all.

She watches through the kitchen window as Paul rides away in a cab. Then she hangs up the dishtowel and walks down the carpeted hallway to Paul’s bedroom.

She wonders, as she takes in the rumpled, unmade bed, if Andrea used to make it each morning. Paul has told Casey expressly that she is not to clean his room or the boys’; that they need help only with cooking, laundry, shopping, and driving.

With the valid excuse of dropping off Paul’s clean laundry, Casey has visited this room before. She picks up the silver-framed photograph on Andrea’s dresser. This picture of the young, happy family caught Casey’s eye on her first day here six weeks ago. Paul, with a full head of hair, holds little Jake, a chubby-cheeked

toddler. Andrea, looking athletic and confident in her green V-neck sweater, cradles the pastel blue bundle that is baby Tim. Andrea's wedding band shows on her hand curved around the baby; she wears no diamond.

Pancreatic cancer had taken Andrea just three months ago. Casey knows how tragic this is for Paul and the boys. But they'd had *this*. This moment of perfection, of togetherness. Casey wants to live her way into this photograph, this Kodak moment that she's never had. Had there ever been a little pink blanket that she'd been wrapped in? Casey likes to think there was. Maybe her mother took it with her as a keepsake. *But why would she take a blanket when she could have taken me?*

Next to the photograph is a jewelry box of embossed leather. Casey glances toward the hallway, then opens the latch on the box.

A plain gold band—the same one, Casey is sure, that Andrea wears in the photograph. Casey pictures Andrea in the throes of illness, losing so much weight that the ring begins to slip from her finger. Andrea must have asked Paul to put it back there in her jewelry box when she'd known she would never wear it again. Casey picks up the wedding band and squints to read the engraving inside. *Paul & Andrea, June 3, 1978*. Seventeen years ago. She puts it on her own finger, turning her hand in the light to admire it, wincing at her bitten nails. It is a snug fit. *I'm not taking it*, she tells herself. *I am just borrowing it until Paul gets home tomorrow night*. She takes it back to her room, pulls it off, and places it in her own jewelry box.

*

Later that afternoon, Casey rolls out pizza dough while a garlicky tomato sauce simmers on the back of the stove. Jake arrives home from soccer practice, flushed and smiling. An out-of-town band concert means Tim won't be home until late.

Casey looks up and returns his smile. "Your Dad isn't too crazy about pizza, so I thought we'd have it while he's away. I don't know if the band stops for dinner, but we ought to save some for Tim."

"Don't know if I can hold back," Jake jokes. "I could eat that whole thing myself."

Casey spoons sauce over the dough and gestures towards the assortment of vegetables, cheese, and pepperoni. “Come put on the toppings you like,” she tells Jake. She is suddenly aware they are alone in the house, and something flutters deep in her stomach.

Jake takes a step toward the vegetables, and closer to her. He smells vibrant and strong. Casey takes a step back and stares out the window.

He picks up an olive and brings it up to her lips. Casey grows still, but a giggle erupts from her throat. The sunlight comes in low through the window, illuminating motes of dust. Roscoe, the aging golden retriever, laps water from his bowl.

“Jake, what are you doing?”

He slips one hand under her dark hair and rests it on the back of her neck, brings his face close to hers. “Casey. I like you. We...” His eyes are huge and pleading, like Roscoe’s.

“Jake.” Casey steps back, shaking her head. “We can’t do this.”

“But you want to, don’t you?” He swallows hard, but does not take his eyes from her. “I can tell.”

She closes her eyes and shakes her head slowly from side to side. “Pick out some toppings, Jake, and we’ll put this thing in the oven.” She tries to look stern.

“It’s Dad, isn’t it?” Jake lifts his chin. “You...got a thing for him.”

Casey lets out her breath slowly, studying the pattern on the kitchen floor.

“Jake. This is all wrong. You’re...underage. I’m 28 years old, and. I’m not here to...I’m here to help...take care of you and Tim.” Casey’s voice quavers, but she crosses her arms and looks Jake straight in the eye.

Jake stares at her a long time, then turns and leaves the kitchen. The door to his room slams shut.

Casey shoves the pizza aside, grabs Roscoe's collar, and takes him for a walk around the block. She doesn't think she's done a thing to encourage Jake. She's just tried to be friendly, just like with Tim. But none of it's turned out right. And Jake isn't Tim.

The phone rings as Casey steps back into hallway and removes Roscoe's collar. It will be Paul, checking in. What if he asks to talk to Jake? She doesn't want them talking to each other right now.

It's not Paul.

"Casey!" a low voice grates in her ear, "I'll be damned."

"Dad." Casey groans between clenched teeth. "How'd you get my number?"

He lets out a long, mean laugh. "Think you can hide? Leaving here the way you done? You little ingrate."

"You've been drinking. I don't have to listen to this."

"Oh, it's always me, ain't it, Miss High and Mighty? Lemme tell you something... you gone and got yourself educated, but you just like your mother at heart. Snotty little whore." His rattling, mucous-filled cough starts up, and from the sound, he is not bothering to turn his head away from the phone. "Look at you! Up and gone, just like her."

Casey slams down the phone, and leads Roscoe to her room. She lies on the bed and cries, Roscoe whimpering beside her. Blindly, Casey strokes his silky coat.

A soft knock on the door. Jake pushes it open, stands there gawky and red-eyed.

"Casey?" he approaches the bed. She looks up. His eyes are as sad as hers.

Sobs shake her whole body. No words come. Jake lowers himself to the bed and pulls her close. Casey does not resist him now. She cradles his head to her breast, letting her tears fall on his hair. He turns his face up to hers and kisses away each tear as it falls. His lips follow the tear-tracks down her chin and throat.

Roscoe slinks away. Casey lets Jake hold her, lets him undress her, lets him touch her everywhere. There is nothing now but sadness, comfort, bad feelings, good ones.

After the swirl of sobbing, the moaning, the release, they drift off to sleep in the tiny bed. Hours later Casey awakes. Jake's arm is draped across her; his face, asleep, looks astonishingly young. Casey is hungry; she remembers now that the pizza never made it to the oven, or to their stomachs.

"Jake," she whispers.

"Wha-what?"

"Please go back to your own room."

"Why? There's no one else here..."

"Tim might be home, or will be soon. Please just go."

He hesitates.

"I'm going to put the pizza in the oven. You can come have some later, but go to your room first. Don't let Tim see you coming from here."

Jake looks, suddenly, like a little boy in trouble. But after a moment, his face breaks into a grin. He gives Casey a playful pat on the ass, and quietly leaves the room.

*

Casey has just taken the pizza from the oven when Tim comes in the back door. His face registers surprise when he sees the pizza; it is after ten o'clock. But he accepts a piece, then another.

"Late night," Casey ventures. "How was the concert?" She pushes away the memory of early evening. She will get things back on track.

“Good,” Tim says. He’s already on his feet, stuffing the last bite of crust in his mouth, and rinsing the plate. “Good-night,” he says, over his shoulder, as he picks up his oboe case and heads down the hall.

He is a boy of few words. Only once has she heard him speak in more than monosyllables. That was when Casey asked about his tropical fish, which he keeps in a tank in his room. He named them all after famous oboists. They were all silver and black Zebrafish, and when she had asked why he didn’t get more variety, he’d shrugged. Zebrafish made him think of oboes and flutes, and anyway, he said, different kinds of fish couldn’t always live together in the same tank. Any new fish might upset the balance of the whole thing.

*

“This can’t happen again.” Casey raises her chin and holds up a hand to Jake, who has come up to put his arms around her while she makes the morning coffee.

Jake’s mouth goes slack. He turns and stalks out of the kitchen. Casey doesn’t see him again that morning. She hears him talking to Tim as they both leave the house; she can only hope Jake doesn’t tell him what happened while he was away.

After the boys leave, Casey showers and returns to her room to dress. She reaches for her locket, only to find it missing. Casey searches under the covers, in the space between mattress and love seat, all in vain. With both shame and longing she recalls Jake undressing her, and a vague memory of her locket sliding down over one breast.

After frantically checking under the bed and in every dresser drawer, Casey heads to Jake’s room. It must be there, and she needs it. She’d purchased it herself in high school. It wasn’t expensive, but it held a photograph of her mother as a young woman. Only this photograph had survived her mother’s abandonment of her home and family. Casey guards it jealously and shows it to no one, fearing that the little bit of her mother she still has would disappear if someone else sees her picture.

Casey looks into each of Jake’s dresser drawers, through the chaos of his desk. She searches the pockets of his jeans and turns up nothing. Nothing under the pillow

of his unmade bed. Could he have it with him at school? Is he showing it—her precious locket, her beloved mother—to callous teenage boys as some kind of trophy of his conquest? She feels sick suddenly. Why would Jake want her locket so much? And what will he do with it now that's she refused him?

Casey can't think anymore. She gets in the car and drives, not knowing where she is going. She'd once seen a bumper sticker: When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping. She pulls into the parking lot of a nearby department store.

*

Back at the house, Casey clips the tags from the green V-neck sweater and pastel blue receiving blanket. It had been easy enough to slip the sweater into her extra shopping bag when the saleswoman wasn't looking. Then Casey had moved on to the children's department, where she'd slipped the little blanket into her oversized handbag. A uniformed security guard had given her a curt nod as she left the store, but did not ask to check her bags.

Now Casey lays out these items on her neatly made bed. Green sweater, blue blanket. Just like the picture on Andrea's dresser. Casey slips the green sweater over her head, wraps a small pillow in the pastel blanket, and cradles it in her right arm. She stands before the mirror, studying the results. She wants to rush into Paul's room to have another peek at the picture, but Tim—or Jake—could arrive home any minute.

She opens her jewelry box and slips Andrea's wedding band on her finger, but the missing locket nags at her again. She will have to confront Jake when he gets home. It will be hard to talk to him without Tim noticing, and without making Jake any angrier.

The blue blanket, as it brushes against her chin, feels stiff and starchy, much too rough for an infant's delicate skin. Casey puts the ring and sweater away, and heads to the basement to wash the blanket. They won't look there, will they? She doubts it. She's been hired to do the laundry. But who knows? Jake might start doing his own laundry, just for spite. Regret surges through her. Last night Jake comforted her when she needed comfort. She can't tell what he might do now.

On her way up from the basement, Casey almost runs into Tim, home from school and heading straight for his room. “Hello, Tim!” she calls after him, and he mutters something, but does not look back.

Blanket. Jake. Locket. Supper to make. Tim. Casey can’t think what to do next. Jake not home. Six o’clock already. The phone rings, loud and urgent.

Jake. Paul. Her father. She doesn’t want to talk to any of them. But if it is Paul calling, she doesn’t want him to think anything is amiss. She picks up the receiver.

“My flight gets in at 9:36.” Paul’s voice reassures her with his schedule, his precision, his predictability. “So I should be home around 10:15. Everything okay? Boys around?”

Casey nods absently. He is a good man. She loves him.

“Casey? You still there?”

She gives herself a little shake. “Oh. Yes. Tim’s home. Shall I get him? Jake’s...not back from practice yet—he’s getting a ride.”

Paul chuckles, and she can picture him shaking his head, his eyelids at half-mast. “Don’t bother Tim, unless he’s right there... I’m sure he wouldn’t have much to say. If he’s still up, I’ll see him when I get home. How’re the driving lessons going with Jake?”

Casey leans back against the counter, exhaling as if from a cigarette, wishing, in fact, that she had one. “Oh, a few setbacks,” she manages to say, “but I’m sure he’ll bounce back. I think he needs a little break from it right now.”

“You know best,” Paul says, and remorse shoots through Casey like an electric shock. He trusts her so.

*

Casey hangs up and runs to the basement. She lifts the twisted, wet little blanket from the washing machine and places it with several fabric softening sheets in the dryer. Paul has been good to her, and she’s tried so hard to be good to him, to be of

use to this family in their grieving time. But now—she sighs as she turns on the dryer—this business with Jake. She regrets every minute of it. No. That is not true. Not really. She had been hurting, and Jake had been impossible to resist. He was like a cross between a grown man and one of the stray puppies she'd secretly fed from the woodshed back home. Huge brown eyes and that way he looks at her, like she's the answer to everything.

Supper. Back in the kitchen, Casey throws open the refrigerator door to see what's there. Ground beef and potatoes. Meatloaf. Comfort food. Yes. Toenails click on the vinyl floor, and Casey looks down to see Roscoe panting, his nose near the deli drawer. She reaches out a hand and absent-mindedly pets him. She'd been thrilled when accepting this position to find they had a dog. Her childhood fantasy of a happy family. *But he's not my dog*, Casey thinks now, as she closes the refrigerator door and rolls potatoes onto the counter. *He's not my dog*. She turns on the oven. *It's not my house. They aren't my boys*. A hard lump forms in Casey's throat. *He isn't my husband*. The refrain in her head won't quit. *It's not my kitchen*. She tears the plastic off the ground beef, dumps it into a bowl, and cracks two eggs violently against the rim. *Not mine. Not mine*.

Casey thinks of the wedding band and the green sweater, and something twists in her stomach. She thinks of the little pastel blanket, being tossed in the warm heat of the dryer below her, and a fierce sense of possession fills her. *My blanket. Mine*. Something like calm comes over her.

Casey slides the pan of meatloaf into the oven along with the potatoes, and runs down the steps to the basement laundry. She glances behind her before opening the dryer. The blanket's still damp. Casey folds a few of Paul's polo shirts at the laundry table, puts them in a basket, and takes it to Paul's bedroom. She has to see the picture again. She pushes the door open with her hip, both hands occupied with the basket, and puts it down in front of the photograph. Her eyes fill with tears. Even with the green sweater, she looks nothing like Andrea. She will never be Andrea. And Jake is no little boy.

And then she senses someone standing in the doorway, and looks up to see Tim's shocked face.

“Sorry,” he says, “I thought Dad was home. I...”

Casey can see his wheels turning, wondering what she’s doing in his father’s bedroom. She’s glad she’s brought the laundry basket.

“Oh, Tim, I was just putting away your father’s laundry,” she says, patting the basket and placing a small pile of Paul’s folded shirts on top of his dresser. “He called, you know—he’ll be home around 10:15. He sounded like he was hoping you’d still be up.” Casey ventures a smile in his direction. Tim doesn’t say a word, just stands there, almost nodding, Casey thinks, but not quite. Casey tilts her chin towards the photograph on Andrea’s dresser. “I was just looking at this picture,” she says. “It’s so... so sweet.” Casey swallows, trying to call forth the right words. “You must miss her,” she almost whispers.

Tim’s eyes are fixed on the carpet, and Casey can see him swallow, too. He turns and leaves the room without a word. Casey knows better than to stop him. She promises herself that the next time Paul and the boys are all out of the house, she will return Andrea’s ring to its rightful place. She crosses her fingers that in the meantime, Tim will not arouse Paul’s suspicion by mentioning her presence in his room.

She bends down to pick up the empty laundry basket. When she looks up, Jake is standing there, jaw tight, staring at her aggressively as he holds out the receiving blanket with one hand. With the other, he pushes the door closed behind him.

“What’s this?” he demands, whipping the blanket around the way boys brandish towels in a locker room. “Are you—are you... pregnant?”

Casey gasps. “No! It’s for a friend of mine,” she lies, “a friend who just had a baby boy.”

Jake looks doubtful—Casey had said she was new to the area. “A friend... around here?”

“No, back home. Look, Jake,” she recovers her balance, pulls herself up straighter, “I’m sorry you’re hurt. It never should have happened, any of it.”

Jake says nothing, breath comes out hard through his nostrils.

“But, Jake. I need my locket back. Please.”

A flicker of a smile plays across his lips. “Who is she?”

The picture of her mother. That he had seen it felt like more of a violation than anything that had happened between them.

“Your mother?” he prods her.

“Yes,” she whispers, her eyes on the carpet.

“Did she die too? Is that why you came here?” He is angry, and suddenly suspicious.

“No. Yes.” Her chin shakes in confusion. “I...”

“And what are you doing in here?” He watches her, and she knows there is no right answer. “You took my mother’s ring.” His chin wags in bewilderment. “Who do you think you are?”

Casey’s eyes grow wide. He’s found out; it can only grow worse now. She closes her eyes. All she wants now is her locket; she knows she will not have a home here much longer.

“Jake.” Her voice is desperate, tired. “I’ve made a mistake. A lot of mistakes. Please. I’m putting the ring back. I’ve... that’s been my plan all along.” Casey, for the first time, feels very old. “But please. I want my locket back. I need it. You must know... to have something... it’s all I’ve got.” She closes her eyes. Maybe when she opens them he will be holding out the locket.

“You can’t just—” a ragged sob escapes from Jake’s throat, “come here like this and then—oh, man. Casey, what are you?”

She charges past him in the doorway, runs down the hall. Slams and locks the door. In the narrow bed she slaps a pillow over her head, yanks up a quilt. No one must hear her cry. None of that. Bound to fall apart. Everything. Her head throbs.

She turns on her side, facing the wall of Escher prints. Stairs lead nowhere, faceless knights march in formation and end up back where they started. While she stares unblinking at one staircase, it suddenly shifts direction. Casey turns and faces the door.

*

She awakens to voices shouting and the shrill, recurrent beep of the smoke alarm. Amidst the shouting, a door opens and shuts. Paul's alarmed voice reaches her, as he asks the boys what the hell is going on, and where on earth has Casey gone?

She rolls out of bed, checks her face in the mirror (no red eyes) and slips into her clogs. *Pull yourself together.* She runs to the kitchen. An acrid smell, a fog of smoke. Charred meatloaf and scorched spuds.

"I am so sorry," she says, skidding past Paul, who is disabling the smoke alarm. "I fell asleep... I thought I'd set my alarm..." flustered, she grabs two potholders, turns the oven off, and hurries the pan of meatloaf out to the deck. Jake follows, carrying four blackened potatoes in a kitchen towel.

"You trying to burn the house down now?" He shakes his head in disgust. "There's no end to your little tricks."

Casey turns away, her eyes smarting. Paul will think it's because of the smoke.

She finds him in the kitchen with Tim. They open more windows, turn on the exhaust fan.

"Oh, Paul," she croaks, "Some welcome home! Guess I won't lie down again while anything is cooking. Even something as forgiving as meatloaf and potatoes."

Paul gives her an odd look. "Well." He clears his throat. "That's why we have smoke alarms. So," he says, glancing around the kitchen and finally opening the refrigerator door, "I take it you haven't eaten?"

She wishes this were his attempt at humor, but a glance at his face tells her that it's not.

“No. The boys and I haven’t had supper. Did you... did you eat?”

He shrugs. “I’ll have some... cereal.” Tim is already pouring himself a bowl. Jake was nowhere to be seen. Not, she hoped, fetching that blanket from her room. Or the ring, either.

Casey can think of nothing but escaping from the kitchen. But she busies herself washing the pots and bowls she’d left in the sink earlier, then unloads the dishwasher.

“Is there anything I can get you, Paul, before I turn in?” she asks. “It’s been a long day—for all of us, I think.”

He finishes a mouthful. “No, we’re fine,” he says, inclining his head to include Tim. “But I would like to speak with you in the morning, before I leave for work. There are several things we need to discuss.”

Casey can only nod, murmur her good-night, and walk down the hall. Not until morning will she be confronted. No doubt Tim has told Paul of her lingering in his room, and who knew what Jake has revealed. And being absent and asleep while supper filled the house with smoke really doesn’t help Casey’s case.

But she has to get that locket back before she is fired. She will have no leverage then. Jake has disappeared, but the door to his room is closed tight. She thinks he is in there, but he might have left the house in the midst of the commotion. Casey ponders what to do, her desperation mounting. She returns to her room and writes a note.

Dear Jake,

I am sorry about all our misunderstandings. I know we are both hurt. But I must have my locket back. I will do anything you “want.” It can be a win-win. Please come see me after you read this.

Casey

Casey puts the note in a small pink envelope, seals it, and waits until she’s heard Paul and Tim go to bed. Then she tiptoes down the hall and slips the note under

Jake's door, and knocks as softly as she can. She listens, ear to the door, and hears the padding of feet, the rustle of paper. She sidles away from his room and stands flush against the wall near her own door.

Jake opens his door, looks right, then left. His eyes widen and his nostrils flare as he sees Casey. His long stride carries him down the hall in seconds.

"You whore!" he rasps. "I'm not what you think I am." He gulps back tears.

Casey is struck speechless.

"Here, take it." Jake stuffs the locket into her right hand. "I wouldn't deprive you of your mother." His eyes narrow. "Or try to take her place, either."

Casey's mouth drops open and her free hand reaches up to cover it. Slowly she backs into her room. "I am so sorry," she says, lowering her eyes just before she closes the door, shutting him out.

In her room Casey pulls out her cheap faux-leather suitcase. She packs the little blanket first, followed by the green sweater, but suddenly they mean nothing to her. Tokens of something that she had not been quite a part of. But leaving them behind will only raise more questions.

Andrea's ring she leaves on the dresser. Let Paul think what he will. Casey had thought she would write a note to Paul, but she can't. Not when she thinks of her note to Jake and the reaction it brought.

Casey gets her winter coat from the closet and puts it on. There is a little chill in the air. She picks up her locket, opens it, and kisses her mother's picture. The woman looking back at her is younger than Casey is now. Wounded and wild.

"We were both made for leaving, I guess," Casey whispers. Hoisting the little bag that holds all she owns, she walks through the door.

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SECOND PLACE

James Holden works as a political geek and lives in London, England with his wife and daughter in a retirement village, despite only being in his thirties. He has previously had work performed by London Liars' League, published in *Silver Apples Magazine*, and occasionally blogs and writes for the Clerkenwell Writers Asylum. (<http://www.clerkenwellwritersasylum.wordpress.com/>)

The Wedding List

by James Holden

Dartington Florabundance Daffodil Vase H22.5CM

It was Ben's brother Olly who started it really. He had come to Ben's on the Friday evening for yet another round of alcohol therapy, but after four cans of lager asked "what happened to the wedding present that I got you?"

Ben gave his brother a long hard look. "Are you being serious?"

"Well, I was just wondering."

"Is it because you want it back?"

"I... well..."

"Tight fucker," said Ben, slamming his can down onto his thigh, a little bit of beer spilling out.

"No. No! It's not like that. I'm just... curious, that's all. Did you split the presents between you?"

“You know she walked out with nothing. I haven’t heard anything from her since she sent her sister round for her clothes, and that was three months ago. Two and a half years of marriage and all I got was a note saying not to take it personally, but ‘I wasn’t what she wanted.’”

Olly said, “Do you know what, bro? I never liked her. I mean you’re lucky, really, because now you can start your life over? Find someone better. Because you were too good for her. Or play the field—just think, mate—the world’s your oyster.”

Ben looked despondently at his can. “What did you give us?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“I’ll find out for you.”

“I was only joking.”

“It’s no bother,” said Ben, getting out of his armchair and walking upstairs to the spare room. After a brief search of the wardrobe he found what he was looking for: a cardboard box with the word “wedding” written on it in thick felt tip. Tearing at the Sellotape, he pried open the flaps, and started sifting through the detritus: spare invitations and thank you cards; a seating plan for the Breakfast; a leftover bag of sugared almonds that had served as favors. He found what he was looking for and pulled out a copy of the inventory from the department store that had accompanied the delivery of their wedding presents.

Ben walked back into the living, sat next to his brother and looked down the list of presents that friends and family had selected. He found his brother’s name, next to a brief description of a crystal vase.

“There you go—that’s what you bought us.” He pointed at the vase on the hearth. There had been no flowers in it, or in the house, for the past three months. Looking round the room, he noticed that the room was filled with presents and purchases that they selected together and then been given.

“Are you sure? I’m sure I bought something more—fun—than a vase.”

They sat looking at it until Olly made his excuses and announced that it was time to leave, having run out of non-Nicola related things to talk about. Ben held it out to him.

“What am I going to do with a vase?”

“It’s what you got me, us, for a wedding present.”

“Right...”

“You said you wanted it back.”

“That’s not what I said, Ben. Anyway, I don’t think I’m a vase kind of person.”

“Well you’re taking it, because we—I—don’t want it anymore.”

His brother shrugged. “I’m sure I can find something to do with it. ‘A vase,’” he said in a grand sounding voice, before launching himself into the night.

8x Orla Kiely Linear Stem Dinner Plate, Dia. 27cm

Ben woke the following morning, fully dressed, in the armchair. Taking a while to stand up and stretch, he looked down at the half-empty bottle of whisky next to him, his head starting to pound. He started to open the blinds in the living room, but quickly shut them again as the light hurt his eyes. Instead he shuffled to the kitchen, and made himself some coffee before struggling upstairs.

After showering, a second cup of coffee and a slice of dry toast, Ben felt like he could function for the rest of the day, or at least until mid-afternoon. Picking up a bin-bag, he tidied the living room, clearing away the squished beer cans on the windowsill and the pair of empty wine bottles next to the television. He cleared away an empty pizza that was nestling underneath a silk cushion on the sofa, and put socks that had been discarded next to the shoe rack in the hallway into the washing machine. He grunted as he picked up the present list from the night before and stuffed it into the bag.

He didn't just stop at clearing out the rubbish: Ben dusted and vacuumed the living room and dining room before deciding that he had exerted enough energy for the morning. Sitting down in the armchair he looked round the tidy room.

His eyes kept being drawn back to the space where the vase had been on the hearth. But he didn't think the room looked empty without it—instead he felt like he'd managed to get rid of a small painful reminder of his doomed marriage with Nicola. There were reminders all over the house. *She'd have sent her sister round if she wanted it*, he thought. But where to get rid of the stuff? A charity shop? Maybe the polite thing to do would be to hand the presents back.

Picking the wedding list from the top of the bin bag, he methodically went round the house, emptying the sideboard of plates, bowls, cups and glasses. He took duvet covers, sheets and towels from the airing cupboard. He took frames from the wall and gadgets from the kitchen cupboard. And when he had stacked them all on the dining room table (itself a present from Uncle Frank and Aunty Linda) he attached a post-it note to the presents so he knew who to return them to.

Wondering where to start, he decided to return the dinner plates to David and Sarah, two of their close friends who had got married the year before. Ben figured they wouldn't ask too many questions about why he was doing it. It would be good to see a pair of friendly faces, and it also occurred to him that they might be able to tell him how Nicola was. He wrapped the plates in pages from the free local newspaper before placing them carefully in a sturdy carrier bag.

It was David who answered the door when Ben arrived. "Mate, how are you doing?" he said, looking up and down the street before pulling his face into a look of concern.

"Erm... you know," he said with a shrug. David looked like he didn't, so Ben added "not too bad."

"Good." He smiled. "Do you want to come in?"

"That'd be good, yeah."

David led Ben through to the conservatory, the doors open to the autumn sunshine. “Sarah’s out at the moment, gone shopping with her sister, I think.”

Ben nodded.

“Anyway, it’s good to see you. I can’t remember when you last came round.”

“Probably, not since, you know...”

“Yeah.” They lapsed into silence. “Been up to much?”

“Been having a bit of a clear out. But can I just ask you, David—when she broke up with, oh—thingy—did she do a runner like this?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“God, what was his name?” said Ben, slapping his forehead. “Joe—that was it...”

“Joe?” said David, a startled look in his eyes.

They were interrupted by the sound of the front door closing, and Sarah shouting for David.

“In the conservatory,” he shouted back.

Sarah appeared clutching several bags, telling a story about how difficult it had been to find a parking spot, stopping mid-sentence when she saw them sat there.

“Ben. This is a surprise.”

“Isn’t it?” said David, smiling at her.

“So. How are you doing?”

“Oh. You know... Bit better today,” Ben said smiling.

“Good. Good. Shall I... David. Why don’t you go and make us a coffee.”

David stood up. “Milk, no sugar right,” he said, and Ben nodded. After he had disappeared into the kitchen, Sarah sat down next to him.

“This isn’t very fair, Ben.”

“What’s not?”

“Coming round like this. It’s been very difficult for us.”

Ben snorted.

“I’m not taking sides in this at all. But, you must know I’m still friends with Nicola.”

“Right.”

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Umm. Not really.”

“Well, it just puts me and David in an awkward position. Maybe you should ring or text before popping around next time.”

Ben looked down at his feet before looking up as David walked in with a tray.

“Anyway, I’ve brought you something,” Ben said, looking up after David had passed round the mugs. He reached for the carrier bag, and handed it to David.

“What is it,” he said, looking at the newspaper-bound plates.

“It’s the plates you got us for our wedding present.”

“Oh,” said David, taking out a plate and unwrapping it.

“What’s this about, Ben?” asked Sarah.

“I’m finally clearing stuff out and thought people might like to have their presents back.”

“Are you trying to impress Nicola? Or send her a signal, or something?”

“Steady on, Sarah,” said David.

Ben sighed. “No. But even if it was like I was trying to send her a signal—it would be because I haven’t got any way of contacting her. All she left me with was a note saying that ‘she couldn’t do this anymore’. What does that even mean?”

David nodded.

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” said David, Sarah looking at him with an open mouth.

“Is she with someone else?”

David hesitated. “Ben—you can’t come here and start grilling us about what Nicola is up to. She’s fine, upset like you are but fine, and that’s all you need to know.”

“She was—*is* my wife!”

“She’s still my friend,” said Sarah.

“Bitch,” muttered Ben under her breath.

“Are you going to let him speak like this in our home?” she said turning to her husband.

“Ben, maybe you should leave. I’ll give you a call during the week—maybe we can go for a drink sometime.”

“Yeah, right,” said Ben, leaving quickly, as the sound of an argument erupted behind him.

Sanderson for Portmeirion Porcelain Garden Three Tier Cake stand

The following day Ben woke after a good night’s sleep. He still had a whole day of the weekend left when he could try and return something else off the list. Running his finger up and down the list of presents he decided that maybe he should try someone from Nicola’s family. There were a clutch of cousins and siblings—her parents weren’t on the list as they had bought them a bed. *I wonder if I should*

return that? he wondered, before discounting the idea on the basis he'd struggle to get it out of the door on his own.

He settled on the idea of returning something to one of her elderly aunties as the safest option. Her Aunty Jean had given them a Dyson Vac, which if pushed he quite wanted to hang onto until he had found a replacement. But Aunty Madge had given them a cake stand that he had never really liked.

Motown blasted out of his stereo during the hour long drive to her house, his hands tapping on the steering wheel in time to the music. As Ben pulled up outside he wondered what she had been told.

When she opened the door she looked at him a little unsure. "Can I help you?"

"Yes—I'm Ben. We've met before—at Dougie's christening and Brian and Dot's golden wedding. I was in the area and had something for you so thought I'd drop it off for you."

She looked him up and down before standing to one side. "Well, you'd better come in then."

They sat down in the living room and Ben fielded her questions about the weather and his views about the Leader of the Opposition, with one eye on the bric-a-brac that dominated the mantelpiece and coffee tables in the room. Her conversation was so casual that Ben began to wonder whether she was aware that Nicola had left him.

But after brief monologue about how lucky the royal family were to have found the Duchess of Cambridge, she turned to him. "Nicola was always a bit flighty with that army guy she used to go out with. With you—well. It's sad what's happened."

He cleared his throat.

"But I don't understand why you're here. I suppose I've always found you pleasant and courteous, but I hardly know you."

"I've come to return something," he said, and drew the cake stand out of the box. "It's what you gave us for a wedding present—I figured you might like it back."

“You know, Nicola’s Mum said after the wedding that it wasn’t the kind of thing young couples wanted these days,” she said, looking at the image on the box. “But I’ve always liked Portmeirion. Did you use it?”

Ben thought hard. “We did a couple of times. When we had people round for birthdays. There was one time that Nicola tried to make these butterfly buns and... But you don’t want to hear stories about Nicola, really, do you?”

“If it makes you feel any better—and please don’t say this to Nicola, but you have much better manners than Joseph did.”

“Do you mean her ex, Joseph?”

She smiled at him but he sensed that he shouldn’t carry on.

“Well, I should be going. Things to do, you know.”

“Well, thank you for bringing it round. I’m sure I can find some use for it,” she said as they got up and walked towards the door. As he left he realized that he would probably never see her again, and wondered about Nicola’s other relatives—his family for the past five years—that he would never see again and to whom he would never say goodbye.

Kate Spade New York Darling Point Photo Frame

On Monday morning Ben felt a bit better. But although he had a little less stuff in his house every time he passed a photo of her round the house he started to get upset again.

His colleagues seemed a little stunned when he brought in the silver photo frame they had bought him for a wedding present. “Where did this come from?” one colleague asked, lifting up the post-it note saying “for whoever wants it” stuck over the “Mr and Mrs” embossed into the silver frame. Ben shrugged. He’d filed the wedding photo it had contained away, meaning it was one less picture of her he had to look at on a daily basis.

Having had to pass it all day every time he went to the printer, toilet or for a brew, Ben felt much better the following day when he got into work and found that it had disappeared. *Bet it was the cleaner*, he thought, although he wasn't really bothered—he was just glad that it was gone.

On the Friday he surprised his colleagues by not only agreeing to go down the pub (“I think I've had enough being an anti-social bastard,” he said when it was time to go to The Brief Altered), and even flirted with the new girl from legal to whom he hadn't previously said a word.

2x LSA Polka Metallic Wine Glasses, Set of 4, Multi

Saturday morning he was woken up by the sound of footsteps downstairs. He wondered if his Mum come to check if he was okay—the first couple of weeks after Nicola had first left she let herself in at random times to Hoover, clean and check up on him—on one occasion he had come home from work to find a bolognaise in a slow cooker he didn't even own.

Pulling his dressing gown on, he crept downstairs and found Nicola looking through the boxes he had left on the dining room table of the wedding list gifts he still had to return.

“Nicola! What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Ah. Ben, good morning. Sorry to have just let myself in—I guessed you'd be out as your car's not here.”

“I went out with work last night and got a taxi home... Anyway what are you doing here?”

“I came to see if there anything I really wanted before you gave all our possessions away. Sarah says you were round at theirs last week.”

“They're my friends. Well, I assumed they were—they're certainly in your corner.”

“They’re both worried about you Ben. What the fuck were you doing trying to return the present they gave us for our wedding anyway in the first place?”

“What am I going to do with a dinner service?”

“I could have had it. They gave it to the pair of us.”

“Yes. US. Where is ‘us’ since you left ‘us’ three months ago? I haven’t heard anything from you. Total radio silence. I need to move on, Nicola, and returning the presents seemed to be the best way of doing it.”

“And how did Aunty Madge feel about your ‘therapy’?”

“Aunty Madge, right,” he said sitting down. “I decided that if I started with her I could build up to your parents, or maybe your sister. Find out if you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“So Sarah tells me. And how’s your new bloke? Is he why you left?”

She sat down onto one of the dining room chairs, placing her hands on the dining table. “Have you ever heard me talk about my ex, Joe?”

“Y-e-s. He’s in the army, isn’t he?” he said, sitting down opposite her.

“It was... it was always him for me, Ben. But we had a bad break up and he went on tour and then I met you. But he came looking for me this last time he came off tour and... And then, I realized... well. I should have told you. But I couldn’t face crushing you like that. Because I did love you.”

“Just not enough.”

“If you want to put it like that. I screwed up. But you’re a good man, Ben. You need to forget about me and move on.”

“I was, until you showed up. Is there anything here you want,” he said.

“Umm,” she said, casting her eye over the stuff that was arranged on the dining room table. “The wine glasses, if that’s okay—they came from my granddad.”

“Can I keep one?”

“I suppose so. I can live with seven.”

“It’s six actually. David broke one when we had that wine and cheese party.”

She smiled. “Yeah. I remember. Six is fine.” She took one from the box and handed it to him. “I’ll drop you an email sometime.” She walked to the door. “And good luck, Ben.”

He watched from the door as she walked down the driveway with the two boxes of wineglasses. He noticed that her sister was in a car parked outside the house and pulling a big grin he gave her a wave. He watched as Nicola got into the car, her sister turning on the engine and driving to the end of the road before turning left. He smiled to himself, watching as the wine glass he threw shattered on the pathway into shards too many to count. *I can sweep them up later*, he thought, and headed inside.

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THIRD PLACE

Samuel Wilkes is a writer, attorney, musician, and ring toss hustler living on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, Alabama with his wife and plump wiener dog. He has a love-hate relationship with Alabama, but consistently draws inspiration from her. His short fiction has been published in *WhiskeyPaper*, *Crack the Spine*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Steel Toe Review*, *From the Depths*, and several others. One of his short stories was nominated for the 2014 Pushcart Prize. You can follow him on Twitter at @Samkwilkes.

Self Defense

by Samuel Wilkes

We shot out of Nashville shortly after midnight, pushing the limits of a Camaro owned by Daniel's buddy, Stuart. He knew we were taking his car, but would later deny it when questioned. Daniel and I set out on I-65 heading south through Alabama towards the Gulf of Mexico. This was our trip to start anew—new life, new ways, no chains, and no obligations. The road was ours, just two headlights rolling down the empty highway.

Thirty minutes in I started singing "Me and Bobby McGee." It fit our situation too damn perfectly. Daniel shot me an annoyed look though, so I casually faded out. I never knew how he would react to certain things. At first I thought he might join in the chorus, as he was known to do sometimes, but so far he remained oddly silent. I could tell he was thinking about our future. I could tell he was thinking about a lot of things. Years of prison straight into an unsettled freedom can do a number on the senses. Even when the leash is gone it's hard not to feel as if it's still there. Near the Alabama state line, he finally spoke up:

“What’s the first thing you want? Beer or sex?”

I was taken off guard and not exactly sure what he was getting at with regard to sex, but quickly responded nonetheless, “Beer.”

Daniel agreed, so we stopped at the next available twenty-four hour gas station. It was the only store open at the exit. Two parking lot lights flickered, all the others were dead. Daniel liked the looks of the situation.

“You want any particular kind?”

“No, as long as it’s cold,” I said casually.

“Stay here,” he said, tapping a wink in the dark.

I never saw the clerk, but I did notice one other customer in the store roaming around. I wondered if Daniel spoke to him or just went about his business. He handled situations so well. Much better than me.

As he returned with the beer the flickering lights created a strobe effect. He appeared to walk in slow motion. I felt like I was watching a Tarantino film, with a bass drum beating in sync to his every cool step. He rode the rhythm naturally. He controlled everything. And that was fine. I surrendered to his control.

As he opened the Camaro the frigid air hit my face. He handed me the Budweiser and we returned gliding down I-65.

“Cheers to a new start without chains,” I toasted, holding up my can.

“To opening new doors,” Daniel said, taking a swig.

I could see a flash of his sinister smile and thin brown eyes as we passed under an interstate light. We sucked down three beers each and started feeling loose for the first time in years. Stuart’s radio didn’t work, so silence rode in the car with us. I didn’t like to initiate conversation unless I knew Daniel was in the mood to talk. Over the years we had talked about nearly everything under the sun; we no longer had need for words. So near the Athens exit I tried another round of “Me and

Bobby McGee.” This time Daniel winked his right eye and laughed. This time I had approval.

I’ve always considered myself to be a heterosexual male. But strange things happen when you’re confined with another person for years. Bonds form that one would ordinarily not think plausible. It’s hard to put in words, but it was there. Daniel always knew I was his; he had picked me and stood up for me. I could honestly say I loved the man. But I’d never actually said it out loud. I wish I would’ve told him that night.

“So what now, partner? We got our beers.”

Daniel smiled and rubbed his black stubble, “Let’s see, I know there’s a dirt hole of a strip club in Decatur where we might round up some pussy.”

“Now you’re talking!” I said enthusiastically to hide any sign of disappointment.

*

Shortly after 2:00 a.m. we pulled up to the Green Duck. A neon leg kicked above our heads, waving us into the hole. Daniel winked and finished off his beer. I followed suit. He then reached across my lap to the glove box. I watched as he pulled out an envelope fat with cash.

“Stuart left it for us,” he said.

“How much?”

“Enough,” he smiled, fanning the bills.

Inside, three men sat in clouds of smoke as the dancers trounced around the stage like old mules. Even though I hadn’t been with a woman in years, I wasn’t too excited after seeing this lot. Daniel didn’t hesitate. He immediately made friends with a bartender and started dropping hints for action with one of the busty girls. Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire” was playing. I thought that to be an odd song for a pole dance, but then again they didn’t seem to care about much at the ol’ Duck. Before I could finish my first whiskey, Daniel and two women in thongs floated my way.

“Norman, meet Twinkle,” he said, grinning wide.

“Hello,” I said, suddenly nervous.

Twinkle was strictly business and lacked any fake pleasantries. I didn’t mind, I was ready to get it over with. Daniel took his woman into a back room. Luckily we couldn’t hear them in our adjacent closet-sized dressing area. For some reason Twinkle kept the light on. She was a mousey little woman with stringy blonde hair that probably always looked wet or greasy. Her breasts were no bigger than mine and her stomach was flat and tone with scars of what appeared to be an old C-section—or maybe a knife fight—it was hard to tell with Twinkle.

I watched my pale hand slide down her indifferent shoulder. But I couldn’t feel her. It was as if I was watching a porno starring myself; a mere outside observer. I tried not to look into her eyes. I started thinking of the titles of all the books I’d read, which usually helped to calm myself in these situations. I had always wanted Daniel to read more. And to read what I read; to know and be able to share the same.

“Christ!” I yelped.

Twinkle was confident in her job and quickly took control of the process. I could feel her now, but I remained detached in some way. I wondered if Daniel was having the same awkward experience. But I should’ve known that he wasn’t. I should’ve known he was dominating the situation. To know Daniel, one must understand that he was a man of extremes. The type of guy that smoked his cigarettes well past the filter line every time, crushing the cotton with his thick fingers. He was either methodically planning his fortune or counting boob formations in the clouds. Some days his selfishness could reach a reptilian level, while on others he could be a caring grizzly bear mother. Such a ruthless man could do surprisingly considerate things. He often made me question the notions of good and evil. He kept me moving. He kept me thinking.

I finished quickly and thanked Twinkle for her patience; a little joke that I hoped would churn up a smile, but didn’t. I returned to the bar and sipped on a whiskey. Now they were playing TuPac’s “2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted,” which I thought

was more fitting. My mind gradually drifted into another realm until Daniel came out fifteen minutes later. His face looked new; his strut looked new. I remember his wink appeared slower, and when he patted me on the back it was as though he pitied me, as if he now knew secrets to life that my feeble mind could never grasp. In that moment Daniel sat on top of the world.

Soon as we were back in the Camaro he spilled all the foul sexual details. I couldn't care less and he obviously couldn't care less about my awkward experience, but I acted interested anyway. I couldn't bring him down if I tried. Well, until we reached Cullman.

*

As I read the green mile-marker sign for that goddamn city, Daniel spoke up with a different tone to his voice, breaking a ten minute silence.

“Norman, afraid we got us a problem.”

I rose from the headrest, “What do you mean?” Several scenarios ran through my mind in that third of a second.

“Almost out of gas.”

“And?” I said as I fell back to the headrest, it all seeming trivial enough. “Are there no gas stations left in this part of Alabama?”

“No smartass, we're out of money.”

“What?” I perked up again. “Already?”

“Yea, already! Sex ain't cheap, Norman,” he snapped.

“I know, Daniel. I know,” I said defensively. “But if I'd known we were spending it *all* on that, I wouldn't have—”

“Goddammit!” he yelled, slapping the wheel with a hint of mad laughter underneath.

I couldn't look at him. I was too confused.

"Wait," I paused, with my mind untangling, "if that money was in the glove box, how did you buy those beers?"

"*Norman*, you know damn well I just walked out with those beers. Hell, the clerk wasn't even behind the counter."

I hated when he stressed my name like I was a child. My head fell back to the headrest. I knew right then nothing had changed. There was no new start. I began to hear the front tire whine on the white line. He was thinking too hard, his hands were unsteady.

"Reach behind your seat and grab that bag," he demanded sharply.

More money, I had hoped, stacks of twenties with a note from Stuart saying "good luck on your new start, guys." But no, it contained only what I feared this exodus would lead to.

"Should be two .40 calibers in there. Least that's what I told Stuart to leave us," he said as I peered inside.

I pulled out the clips.

"They fully loaded?" he asked impatiently.

"Yea," I replied, finding it suddenly hard to swallow.

"They hollow-points?"

"Yea."

"We're set," he grinned.

I could tell he was patting Stuart on the back in his mind, thanking him for a job well done. I could tell he wished Stuart was in the car instead of me. He always thought I was a bitch. Hell, let's be honest, that's why he picked me in the first place. I'd always been his bitch. Just his property to do with as he pleased.

“Only a few hours left ‘til sunrise. I’m thinking we take this here next exit and find the first nice house we see close to the interstate. Get some gas money and hop back on the road.”

I slid lower in my seat not wanting to give a reply. I had hoped his past wouldn’t be necessary with our new start. I had hoped. But I also knew it was inevitable. Daniel was drawn to it like a rutting buck to a doe’s scent.

He took the deserted exit without needing or wanting my reply. Even if I had protested, he would’ve talked me into it. He always did. I looked for signs of life while the Camaro slid silently down the country road. New stars appeared as the blanket of night grew darker.

Daniel pointed across my face to an old two-story plantation house with four columns. He killed the engine before I could suggest differently.

“Here’s to new doors opening for us,” he winked, pulling back the slide of the pistol.

I couldn’t fake a smile.

The house stood amongst a dry field that held nothing but dirt and overnight ice. The closest neighbor sat over a hundred yards down the empty road. As we walked across the field, I watched my breath in the cold rural air. I wished I was a teenager, coon hunting with my dad. I wished a lot of things—anything to take me from my reality. I could only hear my thoughts and the dead leaves crackling under our feet in the hushed predawn. Daniel turned to me every so often and nodded. But I could no longer see his thin brown eyes in the dark. The moon hid that night—a new moon I’m told. Though nothing at that point seemed new to me. The old familiar tracks were before us and our train was running down the same damned line.

We entered the old house through the back screen porch. The den held ticking antique clocks, homemade pottery, plastic candies, and stuffed Mallards. I could smell the years lived. The dining room was unfortunately modest, with no fine china or silver set out on display. They didn’t have anything we could use. I

realized at that point our operation wasn't going to be easy. The sweat from my palms started dripping onto my pistol.

DONG!

"Oh shit!" I yelled as Daniel grabbed me.

DONG!

DONG!

DONG!

Every old clock in the house had just chimed the arrival of 4:00 a.m.

Daniel angrily pressed his finger to my mouth as if I intentionally forgot to be quiet. I couldn't help myself though. My nerves were rattled. My pistol shook.

"Bedroom," he whispered, motioning for me to follow.

I couldn't stop him. I didn't try. I merely fell in line.

Each step down the hallway creaked softly on the worn hardwoods. All the doors stood shut. Daniel chose the last one since it seemed to be the master. I could not see, but sensed that he looked back to wink before gently opening the bedroom door.

"Take another step and I shoot," an unseen elderly voice warned from the darkness of the room, as if God himself had spoken.

"Now, now old man, we ain't here to hurt nobody, just tell me where your safe is and we'll be on our way," Daniel said stepping forward.

I heard a soft click before the shotgun blast pierced the night and threw pieces of Daniel's head on the wall. I remember seeing the explosion of red tissue inches from my face and hearing the thud of his lifeless body against the floorboards as I turned to run. Daniel, with all his contradictions and charm, was gone in that split second. So, then too, I was gone. I knocked over a table of pottery and tore the

screen door off the rusted hinges. I ran, crying and stumbling, through the dirt. Everything turned upside down so quickly. The crickets and frogs seemed louder like they were trying to alert the neighborhood. I felt as if in a drunken dream, yet simultaneously awake and sober. Bawling like a toddler all the way, I eventually made it to the Camaro and collapsed. After taking three deep breaths, I cranked the old piece and drove it as far as it would take me—which was only about thirty miles. In my panicked state I completely forgot about our gas issue. I wasn't cut out to be alone.

*

The Alabama State Troopers caught me around 6:00 a.m. at a Waffle House begging for coffee and hash browns. By then I was tired of running anyway. I had long since given up. I already knew where those old tracks led. Later I learned through testimony that the old man and his wife heard us break in well before the damn clocks scared me into yelping. So, I was glad to know it wasn't all my fault. I wished Daniel would've known that at least. I wished he would've known a lot of things that I could've told him. Just open my mouth and make the words—that easy. Might've changed things, but probably not. My cellmate was dead before the Tennessee State Penitentiary even knew we had escaped that night. So, in hindsight, we actually had a good head start on our path to a new life. Just had to go waste all our gas money on love we could've had for free. Love that he had the whole five and a half years while we shared that cell together. Then again, I've learned that love and sex can be two completely different things.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Scott MacAulay is a former educator and community development worker who has lived throughout Canada. Now settled in Ottawa, he aspires to write poetry and fiction grounded in social justice issues and day to day struggles with poverty, mental illness, and social exclusion. He holds a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Leeds.

Debits and Credits

by Scott MacAulay

Ray sits across from me most days; us regulars have our regular spots. They give us order, like knowing every Tuesday it's tuna casserole, Wednesday it's canned stew, Thursday it's beans and wieners, and so on. Ray is just a kid to me, probably no more than thirty. He says he's an accountant to anyone who will listen. When the conversation turns to money, when the next hit, the next swig can be bought, Ray's on top of it. *When's the fuckin' tax check comin' out? When's the fuckin' hydro rebate comin' out?* Ray knows. He's an accountant. He's not bragging, just desperate, I think, for someone to say he doesn't belong here. He's got the ring. He's got the ring from Carleton University that says he got his BBA. From there he joined a local firm and got his CA. After that he kept getting drunk. He got help for depression he told me, but he kept getting drunk. He lost his job, his fiancé, his car, and his apartment. And he kept getting drunk. Now he's stunned, numb, and still dresses like he's going to the office, a blue or black or gray suit. Thank god no tie. People make fun of him as it is. He looks like one of the hundreds of Ottawa bureaucrats who pass on the sidewalks on casual Fridays. I like Ray. The suits are him grasping.

Liz is his light, though. She looks tough, short and square, brick shit-house I guess you'd say, moving like a miniature tank around the floor. She's here every day, working for minimum wage, helping us out, making sure we have meals, making sure we get soap and toothpaste and toilet paper once a week. Her face is flat, her head box-like. Her eyes do seem stressed sometimes, but most of the time just watchful. They are brown. Her hair is almost crewcut blonde, bleached, I suppose. The funny thing is that look of toughness is betrayed when she makes announcements to the forty or fifty of us who are here for breakfast and lunch, that there's a mental health counselor or a nurse from the health clinic coming in. Her voice is warm, melodious, filling the room; it's a hug, comfortable and soft, as I imagine a lady librarian's pillow might be. Lizzie's a big or little sister, an aunt or a nun, depending on your age or background.

Ray's told me more than once how wonderful Lizzie is. She seems so honest, he says, so giving. He's shy, says he doesn't know what to say to her. Says she's here to help bums like us, not go out on dates with them. Besides, he figures, he's too skinny and tall for her. They'd look funny together, with her head not much past his rib cage. Him like a spindly toothpick, her like a block of wood. Him with orange hair and a wedge-like face full of freckles like a little girl's, her all butchy, huffing and puffing when she lugs food bank drop-offs to the storeroom. Still, he tells me at the beginning of each month when the checks have just been deposited and there's the sweet smell of whiskey or the foul smell of beer on his breath, he thinks he loves her.

So I call her over one day, ask her if she wants to take a break, play cards with Ray and me.

"Whew, it's warm," she says, short strands of blonde hair stuck to her forehead. Ray, I guess to sound smart, tells her the temperature, the Humidex, what it actually feels like.

"You know, Lizzie," I say, "Ray's an educated man, has his business degree, and then became an accountant."

"I heard that, Andy" she says.

“Yeah,” Ray laughs, thinly, “Look where it got me.”

“We all have our things,” she says. And then she puts her hand on his and laughs along. “We all have our things.” She actually looks him straight in the eyes, too.

Ray glances at me. The moment breaks when two cops walk in and Liz has to go over to see what they want.

I look at Ray and say, “Maybe.”

He looks at me. “Maybe, Andy.”

He asks her out. They have hot dogs from a vendor and go to a movie. I stay in my room as usual with the TV, flicking through the poverty channels over and over again, talk radio playing in the background. It is a gray room, pretty shabby. It doesn't have a bed, just an equally shabby couch that I sit on, sleep on, fart on, eat my meals from the microwave on. It smells of stale smoke, which it did when I got it from St. Vincent de Paul, and still does even though I open the window when I light up, when I've got the money for cigarettes. I think of Elsie a lot, here, alone. The noise from the TV and the radio, on all the time, at the same time, chases away nothing. The beer, when I've got it, doesn't either. She's been dead three years now. I had a lot of money for beer then. I lost it. I lost everything. I lost her laugh, her saying things would get better, her ways of soothing my temper. We used to go for hotdogs and movies, too. We never had kids. We weren't blessed that way. We made ends meet. After her cancer, I fell down. I never got back up. Just her picture on the wall now, in her bright red dress. God, I love that dress. Her eyes sparkling. I could never work again. I could never sleep again. The doctors gave me pills and pills and pills. I didn't want them.

*

Ah, those hotdogs, those movies, Elsie. This gray old room, my gray whiskers, my sickly blue eyes staring at me in the little mirror above the sink. I've come down a couple a' notches since you... But Ray, young Ray and Lizzie, the angel of New Beginnings, New Hope, there's a couple to watch. Maybe they can climb some notches, eh?

You think they're holding hands? You always had me hold yours. I didn't mind.

*

Ray comes in the next morning, smiling.

“Well?” I ask.

“It was good.”

Then that rotten prick Ronnie Musgrave comes over, those crack-wheedled eyes of his just glaring with trouble. “Hey Ray, buddy, saw you with our Lizzie last night, ya’ fuckin’ dog, fuckin’ the help.” Ray tells him to shut the fuck up. Ronnie messes Ray’s hair with a clammy hand, tells him to take it easy, that maybe he’d like to have a go at her sometime too, that maybe she likes the down-and-out ones. Musgrave’s a big guy, bald on top, thin, stringy hair down to his shoulders. Even from across the table, I can smell the rotting teeth on his breath.

“Leave him alone, Ronnie,” I say. Ray is sitting down. Ronnie is behind him. Ray just stares ahead, pretty well straight through me. Musgrave tells me to mind my own fuckin’ business.

Ronnie says, “Yeah, I sure could use some a...” and then Ray twists quickly in his chair, his right elbow out, and slams Ronnie in the balls.

He shouts, “Go to hell!” and stands up toward Ronnie, swinging his fist right into the big bastard’s gut as he’s bent over. The whole place is quiet, then everyone’s shouting “fight, fight, fight!”

Liz comes running out of the kitchen, the dishwasher and cook right behind her, her short legs moving quickly and her flat face puffed out now like an angry hippopotamus. “Stop it, stop it!”

Ronnie gets upright and grabs Ray in a headlock. “You stupid little prick!” he says, holding Ray tight in his grip.

“Call the cops!” Liz yells at the dishwasher who scampers back to the kitchen.

“I’ll kill you,” says Ronnie, and pulls upward with his arms to increase Ray’s pain. Liz gets behind Ronnie and jumps an astounding height to take hold of his

shoulders, trying to break his grip. I get around the table and get hold of one of his arms, one of the other guys grabs the other one, and we manage to get them apart. Ronnie struggles free, waving his arms. He whips around and catches our Liz on the nose. She's bleeding. Ray wraps himself around Musgrave's waist and puts all his might into his legs, forcing the two of them to go crashing onto the table, collapsing it and ending up on the floor. Everybody at *New Beginnings* is in on it now, gathered round and hooting and imploring the two of them to quit, the cops are coming.

And they do, quickly. Two men in those silly black shorts cops-on-bikes wear in the summer. Except for the black sticks and the guns, cops-on-bikes look like they're going to the beach or a skateboard park. Ronnie and Ray are just holding each other, trying not to let the other move. Cops-on-bikes get them apart and put them in cuffs. One of the cops speaks into the radio on his shoulder, calling for a car to pick Ray and Ronnie up.

"You mean you're not going to ride them in on your tricycles?" somebody behind me asks. Even at such a horrible moment, I have to laugh.

A lot of people follow to watch the end of the spectacle. Liz looks shocked, holding a wet rag to her nose that somebody brought from the kitchen. Her face is white and a few tears leak out as she watches Ray and Ronnie being escorted through the doors of *New Beginnings*. The fine line of eyeliner she sometimes wears is smudged and vulnerable.

I pick a chair up off the floor and place it close to Liz. "Sit down for a second."

We stare at the collapsed table, the chairs strewn all over the place, coffee spilled in the excitement, some broken mugs on the floor.

"What a mess. What the Christ was that all about?" she asks.

"I don't know. Ronnie was looking for a fight, as usual. Pickin' on Ray for his suits or something," I tell her.

"That doesn't sound like Ray. He takes it all the time. I admire him for keeping on wearing them, the geek," she says with a sob and a little chuckle.

“You two have a good time at the movies?” I ask.

“Yeah, I hope so. He’s really smart though. Not the usual type that goes for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I like him, but back home none of my family wore suits to work. He says there’s money in his family. They own a few high rises and stuff. They won’t talk to him, but still. It has to make a difference.”

“You’re the one with the job. He’s the one beggin’ for soup, Liz.” I put my hand under her chin and lift her face to look at me. “Don’t you think that’s kind of funny, in a way?”

My God, she’s a rough beauty! Almost a boxer’s face, but with the eyes and lips of a sculptured Madonna. Suits and money in the family aside, Ray’s about as handsome as a shaved greyhound.

“I guess it’s funny,” she says. “I don’t want him to think I like him because of what he was. And he’s not a leech like a lot of guys. He’s a gentleman. Fuck, that’s so old-fashion...”

A cop comes in and interrupts us, wanting to speak to Liz. She asks if me and a few of the guys would mind straightening things up before lunch.

*

Ah Elsie, it was passion. I don’t blame Ray one bit. Do you remember me hauling dirt for old man McCready off that gentle rise of his in his backyard that Mrs. McCready wanted flattened to make a proper backyard? I’d be working with just a shovel and pick and a wheelbarrow, breaking up dirt, picking up stones, and hauling them to the boggy area behind his fence. Middle of July and hotter than hell. Him crankier than hell, standing over me, smoking one rollie after another. He’d spit and curse at that damned little hill he had to pay me to get rid of.

We were having hard times then, you and me. You were just starting beauty school, just learned you were pregnant. I wasn’t sure what I wanted. Grade ten didn’t get me much. It took me awhile to decide on a plumber’s apprentice with your uncle. All I

could think of was the baby and you, even though McCready kept saying all women were nutters, and me being paid to remove his hill was proof positive. Well, my lovely in the red dress, I moved the hill, and our baby was dead before it even saw the light of day. I trashed our place, punched holes in the walls, broke all the kitchen furniture. What did we do to deserve it? Mrs. McCready heard about it from your mother and came to us with a hamburger casserole, said she was sorry, that there's no accounting for what happens. You put everything in you can and you take out as much as you can.

*

Ray is back the next day. No bruises to show for the scuffle he had with Ronnie, just a sore shoulder from the tumble on the table.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, I lost it, though. He shouldn't have been talking about Liz that way. You know, it was a great night. She told me all about her family in way up there in Owen Sound, how she came here with her very first boyfriend, the two of them going to Algonquin College for business diplomas. She didn't like business much. They split up, he got really physical with her at the end. She took some kind of social work diploma, ended up working here. But, you know man, she listens, too. Heard all my story, said I'd get by, just keep positive. She asked about the drinking.”

“What'd you say?” I ask.

“The truth. I drink when I have money. The rest of the time I think about having money. The only thing close to a savings account I have is the empties that build up the first week of the month. She asked if I could help out around here, stay busy. I said I'd think about it.”

Liz comes over and sits with us. Her big brown eyes show lots of light and luster, not the usual pale watchfulness. “You don't look so bad,” she says to him, her hand on his shoulder. “I heard what Ronnie was saying about me, not that this guy,” she points at me, “told me anything. You don't have to stick up for me or anything, but thank you.” Her voice is songbird sweet.

I give them some time alone by going over to the coffee and glancing through the newspaper. When I get back to Ray, Liz is off talking to a few other regulars. Ray's eyes are on her like he's found his redeemer.

"Lizzie's taking next week off, some vacation time, said she'd take me up to her family's old cabin on Georgian Bay. Haven't been on vacation—except if you call this a vacation—for a long time. Might be good to get out of here."

*

Ah Elsie, my red-dressed lovely, you remember the trips we used to take around the city? Well, we called them trips, anyway. I suppose for most people trips mean a long car ride, an airplane, a train or a ship. Not to us, eh, Elsie? Renting bikes to go along the Rideau Canal was exotic, just as much as the time we splurged and got that horse and sleigh ride on the Canal at Christmas, or our picnics at Mooney's Bay by the falls, making love like mad dogs after dark and sleeping there till dawn. Your world expands according the amount of money you have, I guess. I should give that to Liz for one of those daily affirmations she writes on the board at New Beginnings. I should probably add "and you can fuck it up accordingly" New Beginnings, my ass. It's more like The Last Stop. Jesus! Philosophical and not even drunk.

"C'est la vie," the French say. I don't care much for the French, never did.

*

It is a long week without Ray. *The Last Stop* isn't the same. I hadn't realized how fond I'd become of the guy. Oh, I know people in an off-handed sort of way. Enough to mumble hellos, to receive their grunts of sorry if they bump into me with their trays in the narrow passage between the coffee line and the lunch tables. If a familiar face is missing no-one comments or raises a concern. The face will or will not return. Most of the faces, however, are blurry scrolls of design on wallpaper. I pretend I'm standing too far back to see the details, but, really, I'm not far back. My scrolled face is *in* the fucking wallpaper. How can I possibly tell if something is amiss?

With Ray not around I play cards with Rosie and Jack, mostly. I don't know much about them. Rosie says she's forty, but she looks fifty to me. She's got J-E-S-U-S

tattooed on the knuckles of her right hand and C-H-R-I-S on the knuckles of her left hand. Any time some newbie points to the left hand she cuts them off and says “I *know!* Motherfucker. I *like* the name Jesus Chris, ok? You gotta’ problem with that?” Jack’s nineteen. A nice kid though you wouldn’t think it by looking at him. That nose ring must’ve been painful going in. Spiked purplish-blue hair, ripped shirts, pants tucked into heavy black boots. That stuff used to scare me, some of the punks who come in here. Now, I hardly notice.

I talk to Jack alone sometimes, ask him what his plans are. He says he wants to be a full-time musician, play his guitar. He’s already been in a few bands, but he keeps drifting back and forth between here, where his mother lives, and Toronto, where his dad is. He never lives with them though, been on the streets or in rooming houses since he was sixteen. I ask if he’s any good, does he practice a lot. I try to give some fatherly advice. He’s polite. I’ve never heard him curse, at least not in front of me, which is odd around here. I tell him music is a hard road, though he and I both know I know nothing about it. I tell him he’s got to work hard if he’s going to break through. I know it’s clichés, but it’s not lies. Elsie and me believed some things to be true.

*

Yes, I see you looking at me, Elsie. I lost my belief in those things. I’m in this shitty little room waiting for the first of the month to come so I can buy a couple of packs of smokes and a two-four. I’ll lose myself for a couple of days, Elsie, just lock myself in here with you, my three channels and the radio. Fuck New Beginnings, New Hope. All I do there anyway is pretend I’m the wise old veteran. The wanderers and the addicts whose lives are so deep in the crapper, they actually think I’ve got it together. I go thinking that I’m putting something in, but really I’m only taking the beans and toast. Same as them.

Fuck The Last Stop.

“Stop your self-pity, Andy. You’re in your cups early!” I hear you. I picked up a few bucks hauling garbage for the landlord. Let me finish my beer, a few pills to mellow. You know I’ll sober up and in a day or two I’ll see things brighter. I’ll step outside my door. For now, for now, my lovely, slip that red dress off and come and lie with me. I’ll

hold you. We'll pretend The Tommy Hunter Show is on. We'll pretend it's an evening in spring in the early 70s and you and me are dancing round the parlor floor.

*

Liz and Ray are back. He's across the room talking to Liz as she bustles around the kitchen with the cook, trying to get things ready for lunch. I raise my hand and wave but I guess he doesn't see it. He's lost the suit, just faded jeans and a dark blue t-shirt. Looks like he got some sun on Georgian Bay. The freckles on his face stand out a bit more. His orange hair is lighter. Liz is laughing at something he must have said. She blushes and throws a wet rag at him. He turns to let it miss him. "Whoa!" he yells. I raise my hand again. I guess he's too much in love to notice.

I'm sitting in my regular spot, playing cards with Jack. Rosie doesn't want to play. Her dog got hit by a car. She's beside me, picking at the center of her peanut buttered toast with her fingers.

"Did you ever see my poochie?"

"No," I say.

"I tied him up outside sometimes when I come here. Tiny brown, fluffy thing. Black eyes. Little Fucker. Little Fucker. I'd call him that sometimes. Jocko when my worker come around. I done my make-up a little darker for him this morning and put my hair right."

"You look nice," I tell her. A shoebox taped up with black electrical tape sits on the table in front of her. I don't ask. Jack's excited and telling me about a gig he had on the weekend with a few of his friends at a pub on Bank Street.

"Andy, you shoulda' seen us, man. Gizmo writes his own stuff, and we practiced them a few weeks. He played the place before with some other guys and got the manager to give us a shot Saturday night. First time he done his stuff live. Kinda' blues and punk mixed together, and people loved it. Called us back on when things were supposed to shut down. Maybe it'll happen."

I tell him that's great, he should be proud. We keep playing cards and he keeps talking like a kid about to get a bunch of candy. Rosie rests her empty coffee mug on the box, goes to the bathroom and comes back, and tucks the box under her arm. "See ya' later," she says.

I finally catch Ray's eye and he comes over. He's all smile, his teeth are white and gleaming.

"You have a good time?" I ask. He tells me I wouldn't believe it. The water of Georgian Bay is warm and blue and big as the ocean. They swam, barbecued, and walked along the beach for hours with no one to bother them. Seagulls and waves, just seagulls and waves, and country music on a little radio they carried with them. He looks good. He tells me I should go sometime, says everyone here should go. We just need rejuvenation. He laughs and slaps my back so hard people around us can hear it.

"Everyone around here just needs rejuvenation!" he says again, loudly. Behind him I see Liz carrying a flat of canned spaghetti from the storeroom to the kitchen.

*

Ray's got work now, Elsie, an actual job. It doesn't pay much, but he says it's a foot in the door. Each week for half a day on Friday afternoon when we clear out after lunch to face the weekend, he sits in front of the computer in that cluttered office between the Ladies and the Gents at the back of New Beginnings, New Hope. He records the donations and enters the payables and the receivables, the receipts and the disbursements, all the debits and the credits. Liz even got some business cards printed up for him and he's going around to all the soup kitchens and the charities telling them he's an expert in non-profit financial management.

Monday mornings he lets me in on how the place is doing, because I'm his friend, he says. Truth is he doesn't have much time for me anymore. I won't hate him for it. We'll see what kind of a head he has for figures.

He hurts our Lizzie, I'll gut the fucker.

HONORABLE MENTION

Jacqueline Schaalje emigrated from the Netherlands to Israel to pursue her hobbies of diving, archaeology and hanging out in historical places. She worked as a journalist and marketing manager, then switched to teaching English and Dutch (she holds an MA in English from the University of Amsterdam). This is her first fiction publication, although another story will shortly come out in *MAYDAY* magazine.

Interview With Myself During the War

by Jacqueline Schaalje

How did you react when the sirens went off?

Oh, quite cockily. I quickly saved the website designs I'd been working on and, suppressing a wide smile, I flew out my front door and hurled myself one floor down. Finally—some action!

At the bottom of the stairwell I found the usual suspects.

The right-hand neighbor wasn't home, which was just as well. Hysterical woman dominating everyone's moods. But her daughter was hard to look at too. Her pink blurry eyes pulled her cheeks down; her forehead was prematurely lined as if an imaginary headscarf was bothering her. Her dad sat clutching the burbling little one in his lap. He urged her to sit down on the step, but she preferred to lean her back to the wall.

The other neighbor's son was playing a video game. No one said hi Liza. So I just kind of quietly joined them.

The siren wasn't loud enough to obliterate the opera music.

"Is that beautiful music coming from you?" asked the neighbor.

"It's just a game," answered the boy, who didn't look up from his black console. As his fingertips tickled and prodded, a hooded monk kept smashing his mace into a Godzilla-type-monster. The opera sounded too sweet, not Wagnerian enough, but the Godzilla made perfect sense to me at this time when our country dumped down fireballs in Gaza, squelching the black-and-green men, and, regrettably, large numbers of innocent women and children with it.

In other words, the only thing missing was the monk. But perhaps that was stretching the analogy a bit.

As the siren was dying down, I lifted my legs like a stork's—over their heads—to step back to my flat.

The boy looked up, smiling.

It might have been too early; I was back in a second. Cracks and blasts exploded in the vast expanse above our building, which suddenly seemed so small, yet was the eye of the attack. It sounded somehow more benign than winter thunder, probably because it came without the theatrical lighting. The Chihuahuas, tied to the kitchen stools, went out of their minds. The window in the front door was rattling. Wow, we went. The neighbors uttered intuitive (yet very incisive) pronouncements as to how nearby the rocket had detonated: very very near.

After a few days of this, did you still wax lyrical?

The second time already wasn't fun anymore. I had eaten half of my dessert when the alarm sounded again. We gathered in the same dugout. I held my phone in my hand. My neighbor, like a boxer, wore a towel round his bare shoulders. The hysterical daughter of his hysterical wife's cheek was smeared with jam. The overriding air was embarrassment. I didn't know what to do with the phone, so I feigned the utmost urgency, and because it was protesting as it was just a simple Galaxy 1, I switched it on and off. I tried opening an attachment in my Google

email, but it crashed. I blamed the rockets for this, but I knew it wasn't the fault of the rockets.

"I haven't shaved for a few days," apologized the neighbor. He stroked the crotchet work on his chin wistfully as if it were Aladdin's lamp. "But one's got to have a bath."

"Why didn't you shave?" asked the keen neighbor's son. He hadn't brought his Game Boy, so he just sat there. His parents weren't anywhere in sight.

"I was afraid of being caught in the middle."

The neighbor's son's face registered no recognition. The beauty of children is they never get caught in the middle.

After the obligatory high-tech blasts outside, I wanted to dive into bed, stick my head under the pillow. Just let go of the stress that was punching holes in my habitual optimism as if it were an unproved theory. But it was still pretty early. I hooked my phone to the charger and dragged my tablet and a small solar lamp out to the balcony. I read several pages of... yeah, of what? The opposite neighbors were watching an English channel which was obscenely loud.

"A frog with a bra on, and it's keeping an eye on the speedometer. That would be a good one for [name I didn't know] if he wanted to compete with the Antiques Road Show. He should try pole vaulting: see if his stick would break!"

The program's panel was sniffing, and the studio audience reacted uproariously, but there was no laughter, not even a peep, emerging from behind the screening oleander hedge. No movement either. Just light pouring out between the branches.

Were they missing the war? All the people I knew had the TV on the news channel which showed the latest developments in Gaza. Like an astronaut in outer space staring down at Planet Earth, and children wanting to catch flowers opening, I kept hoping for some movement in the opposite flat that would betray life. It was an estranging experience that you can't rely on your senses but must deduce that people live at a certain place. These particular ones produced TV. It was like the

people of Gaza. We've mostly never seen them, but we know they exist because they fire rockets at us. (A cynic would say, *they* know they exist because they fire rockets at us.) And that's why the army blows them up, after deducing that a particular building they're bombing is either full of culpable terrorists or empty of innocent bystanders. (Too often, it's neither.)

Maybe I just didn't hear the neighbors, because my ears were jaded.

Was I turning into a weird Israeli, who always looks behind them and wonder why that door is creaking, even when they're in the middle of Amsterdam?

Well, it was going that way, slowly, almost imperceptibly—obviously. You can't live in a country 15 years and remain an outsider.

I was only interested in two kinds of sounds at that point:

1) Sirens. Real ones. As opposed to quasi-sirens or irrelevant sirens, such as sirens from emergency services, buses pulling into the next gear, jokers who installed a siren ringtone on their phones, an old whirring air-conditioning or a hairdryer starting to blow, a baby crying, children trying to imitate the siren while running in the garden, trumpets sounding, a creaking door.

2) Tranquilizing sounds. Bird song, palm leaves swaying, clouds breaking. Friendly nature sounds. Music but not too loud so as not to blot out the siren. Fighter jets breaking the sound barrier provided a sense of safety. Five-year-olds chattering about peanut butter snacks was okay too.

All other sounds couldn't crawl through my filter.

Who was that again who said that all phenomena in the human experience are real? Kant still divided experiences neatly into empirical experiences and experiences that cannot be observed. So what are illusions? Dr. Oliver Sacks defines illusions as sensory perceptions that only you experience. However, when you glimpse suffering people on internet pages, and you're the only person who starts to cry: is that illusory?

What happened to your other senses?

I don't know if this counts, but I immediately knew there was something strange in my study, although nothing was moving apart from the winnowing curtain. A one-eyed something was perching on the upper row of books, in the corner of the bookcase, near the window. That eye was looking at me. My brain was in overdrive trying to make sense of this surprise visit. I decided to deal later with the conundrum of how the pigeon had managed to wriggle itself through the narrow grille. What was more important was to push it back out. Of course it had to go.

If the pigeon had asked: "Could I please find shelter in your house because I find being outside quite scary these days?", I would probably have answered: "Be my guest. War is terrible. Bring a friend too."

But what I don't like is creatures who don't ask permission to come in. (Where I live, it's usually the animals who don't ask.)

You see, a pigeon who asks would probably also be receptive to requests not to poop inside. But from a pigeon who doesn't ask, you can expect anything.

I considered ringing up Yoni to deal with the stupid bird. But on second thoughts I didn't. Unfortunately, Yoni wasn't one of these wonderful practical men from the generation of my father. The kind who don overalls and climb straight onto the roof to seal a leak.

Today, in your best case scenario, a strapping young man, a soldier like Yoni, would first surf to Handyman.com or WikiHow and then he'd have to pop into a hardware store to buy tools. This would take hours while he'd be informed about the best gear. I'm sure that in the case of the pigeon, however, the idea of checking things in HowStuffWorks wouldn't even enter his head. He'd leap at the poor pigeon straight.

Can't complain, though. I'm too much of a chicken to leap at pigeons, or any type of bird, myself. The idea that he'd flail around my head and take an eye out or an ear chip, well, I would not risk it.

The pigeon, meanwhile, wasn't interested in what was going on inside my brain. It kept sitting on his book, leering at me with tired ennui bordering on the disdainful as if he were Tartuffe with a deed to this place. I shooed it. It mocked me. I shooed it again, making a little spring to reach up. I fetched the bathroom wiper and pulled out the stick. My twirling with the stick made the bird perform through the room. It flopped around heavily as if trying to grab onto thermal lift, but of course it didn't find an entrance point. It swooped onto the edge of the desk, but miscalculating that, ended on the printer table. After a little prodding with the wiper stick, it started up again, and plunged onto the other little table, the one with the three-in-one on it. Then it darted all the way to the ceiling, reached for the top of the door with outstretched claw, hit it, and sagged behind the door.

I felt sorry for my abuse of the ungainly bird. The chances that this bomb would find its way out through the trellis looked very, very bleak.

I closed the door. I fervently hoped that a miracle would happen overnight.

What did you do when there was a siren while you were driving?

Whilst driving, I was listening to a string quartet by Fauré. A calming voice mounted the airwaves like a bright child that was called in front of the class. "Rocket siren in Yad Mordechai. Rocket siren in Netiv Haessera." Fauré's playful strings were discarded, like broken toys, squeaky in the background. Again, the voice enumerated reasonably, "Siren in Yad Mordechai. Siren in Netiv Haessera."

I wasn't immediately panicked. I didn't even know where Yad Mordechai was.

The music came on again, but it had lost its luster.

I meant, what did you do when there was a siren in Tel Aviv while you were driving?

I was driving home from the gym when the air raid siren went off. I wasn't sure whether to stop and find shelter in a house along the road. Plenty of buildings vied for attention; they seemed to say: "Come here." "No, choose me, I'm unlocked!" "I have a porch like a gaping jaw, I'm crazily safe." But as soon as I'd picked a place, I reasoned, the siren would die off. Just as I decided to continue driving, many

drivers did the exact opposite. They braked; citizens emerged from their cars, slowly, dazed, peering at the sky. Some cars stood on the dotted lines between lanes and one was parked crossways. I slalomed through the next kilometer. Like in a computer game, I was the only car.

So what about your boyfriend? And the pigeon?

I was telling my past master Golani about the pigeon: “And when I went into the study the next morning, there was a big pile of poop behind the door. Obviously it had sat there a while. There was poop on the book it had clenched between its toes, too. But I was so relieved it was gone, that it wasn’t a big deal. Horrible stink, though. Blobs of grey, yellow and white, shiny like oil paint.”

“Oh, that’s what birds do. Not a big deal.” Yoni said it in an absent-minded tone that seemed to warn me: don’t assume I will be of use wiping butts.

We made love a little roughly, but still passionately, in the hallway on our way to the bedroom, and then removed ourselves to the balcony to drink coffee. Yoni was ready to try soya milk in his Turkish coffee. That was his first time with the stuff.

We talked politics. Yoni wasn’t normally a fan of Netanyahu, but he thought he had handled the war pretty well. I said he had pointed his finger at Hamas already before he’d known the facts; he’d destroyed houses before he had evidence who was behind the kidnapping of the three boys. When Yoni proposed a regime change in Gaza, I had reminiscences of Bush Jr. And what did he do?

“Those poor Gazans,” said Yoni. He was almost shouting. “Hamas hijacked them. They’ve got nowhere to go. They have no democracy. Hamas keeps them in a stranglehold. They deserve a better life. We ought to help them with that. We can give them a Marshall Plan.”

“The Gazans voted for Hamas,” I said. I made a weary sound in my glottis. “Obviously you haven’t turned on your TV in past years. Have you still not understood that the Americans got nowhere in Iraq and Afghanistan? They strove to sow democracy, and what they got is sectarian terror.”

Yoni sipped his Turkish soy coffee carefully. He took another sip. It couldn't have been half bad.

I asked Yoni whether he didn't have to be in the army now. Camp outside Gaza, at least. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Only if a total war broke out they'd call me up. Because of my accident—you remember, I told you how I sprained my ankle and couldn't finish my third year in Golani."

I nodded. It was a pity about the loss of prestige, but at least he wasn't going anywhere.

So war didn't stay exciting very long, did it?

I've told you already. People were dying on both sides. On the Israeli side: mostly soldiers. Capable, talented young men. Bit by bit you'd hear their stories on the media, filled out by details contributed by the aunt of a friend of a nephew of another friend. I knew where this would end. Years later you'd suddenly find yourself doing a facial and the cosmetician would burst out in tears because your innocent chat touched upon a habit that her son used to have. Of course he was her favorite son, the sweetest and the most promising. She'd show me his portrait on her screensaver. She swiped her finger over his cute monkey face hundreds of times per day.

Did you identify with the victims on the other side?

I scraped all the generic bits about them, mostly in foreign media. I didn't have enough Arabic. Photos showed exasperated faces covered in blood and dust. A photo in Time Magazine moved me to tears. It showed a doctor in the hospital morgue. The caption says four corpses of children are placed in front of him. He has just opened the first body bag. An arm is sticking out. Next to his desk, the floor is covered with more body bags. The doctor covers his eyes for he is crying.

As a doctor and as a person I imagined he must have had so many things to cry for:

Because these people were dead before he was called up.

Because of his inability to let these people live.

Because of his inability to prevent these people from being killed.

Because of the madness of Hamas' struggle against Israel.

Because Hamas seemed to have instigated a death cult, which was against his professional and ethical principles.

Because of sheer worry about his family, his friends, his colleagues and his patients.

Because he felt defenseless and exposed.

Because the floor was mucky.

Because Hamas used the hospital as a launch pad for missiles on Israel.

Because some months ago he had caved in to Hamas to allow them to store rockets in his hospital, in exchange for funding, and he felt so stupid.

Because his cousin was a member of Hamas. Now they were eyeing his 12-year-old son.

Because the shame of a photographer's (and the world's) eye on him was overwhelming.

Because he picture that he saw in his mind's eye of himself in the morgue with the heap of bodies was a real turn-off.

Because he hated his job.

Because of self-pity.

Because one of the dead children was a returning patient of the hospital and/or the neighbour's child.

Because he hated the Israeli army and Israeli politics who had initiated this new round of bloodshed.

Because there was no future for his family in Gaza.

Were you relieved when the rocket attacks stopped?

The last air raid siren had been one or two days ago. I'd be hard-pressed to even pinpoint the exact day it had been. It was true, you did get used to everything. It was less confusing than the first days, when war yanked you out of your complacent life. It wasn't just the thought that I could die, but what frightened me even more was that my life would change: I'd lose my graphic design clients, I'd have to move or even immigrate, I'd get injured, a friend would die, who knows. I walked around frozen in fear of loss of an unexpected kind. The absence of rockets created a lull. It wasn't safe, but I was able to resume my normal lifestyle. Yet the rocket scare was always there, ready to burst out anew. And the soldiers were still wreaking havoc in Gaza and the death toll kept rising. Now they'd also closed the airport because one "glass bottle" projectile had landed next to the landing strip. I hadn't been on holiday yet!

"How about coming to visit us?" asked my brother. "We're worried about you."

"You might use the opportunity to get a little rest, get away from it all," said my father.

"You could just come a little earlier this year," said my mother, as if I had a fixed time to visit my parents in Holland. I didn't have one, period. I flew home in different months, if possible when business was at an ebb.

"Can't you understand the bloody airport is closed?" I yelled at last.

Did you sleep in a shelter?

No. Only people with children did that. Galit had just recently moved to a mansion in the nouveau riche quarter of Neve Dkalim (Palm Oasis) in Rishon Lezion, a 15-minute drive from my flat. There were slabs of marble everywhere: on the floor, on the stairs, wall panels. Outside, there was a shimmering pool, with toys scattered on the marble curb.

We took our morning coffee at a large marble bar.

The air raid siren sputtered and then made a sad noise as of a large herd of elephants at a funeral, mixed in with some mosquitoes.

“Let’s go down,” said Galit. We passed the enforced room. Through the open door I saw the two bigger children zonked out on the king-size bed. Whispering, we waited in a corner of the playroom; this part in the house had the greatest number of walls above and around us. Marble can do lots of damage when you get a pile on top of you. I thought of Pompeii, and hubris.

“What did you put in their drinks?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Galit said. “It’s their holiday. Believe me, it’s better if they don’t know what’s going on.”

I expected them to wake up any moment and start screaming “Mummy, mummy!”

“Do you also sleep in that room at night?” I asked.

“We do,” Galit said.

“All of you?” I tried to imagine them in a five-figure tangram on the double.

Galit was grinning too. “You don’t hear the siren when you close the door. Or hardly. It’s better than slipping in your pajamas, pushing wailing children down the stairs.”

The noise died down and we resurfaced in the kitchen. For some reason, a white Mazda turning around the corner caught our eye. We got closer to the window. Two army-clad men got out, and then a third one, all in ironed uniforms, and walked up slowly and leisurely to a house on the opposite side of the street.

“Uh-oh,” said Galit.

“Do you know who lives there?” I asked. The soldiers’ stiff postures drifted against the graver wood door. The darkness behind the door swallowed them. The street fried itself stupid in the sun. Those lovely modern villas froze: they became staid and uncaring cancers of stone.

Galit's tanned arms were filled with goose bumps. Then I noticed my own.

From the way Galit answered, almost stuttering, I understood that she didn't know those folks. But she had read something on some gossip Facebook page that morning, she said. "One of the dead soldiers was from Rishon."

"Is he a Golani?"

"Yes."

"A conscript."

"Yes."

"That's terrible," I whispered.

Later, after I'd gone home to work, I would look for a face that went with the story; an explanation that went with the upsetting morning. Galit and I contemplated how lucky we were that we didn't know any soldiers who were in Gaza besides friends of nephews and sons and friends of cousins, nephews, uncles or colleagues and how terribly unlucky those Israeli families were who lost someone. Because there weren't that many soldiers who died, but only a few dozen, so if something happened to your nearest and dearest you were statistically and otherwise miserably out of luck. Somewhat desperately, Galit kept inventing instances when she could have met some acquaintance or family member of the dead soldier in her street. Perhaps the wish to be involved in his story was an infantile attempt to contribute something. This half-baked substitute for sacrifice lulled us into thinking we were doing substantial stuff, but of course we weren't doing shit. We were just celebrating that nothing affected us. We were survivors of unconcern. We were on the receiving end of sacrifice. We were pathetic.

The fallen soldier was Tal Ifrach, a popular boy at school, who loved sport.

Later that day, Galit sent me a WhatsApp message to ask whether I felt like visiting wounded soldiers in hospital. I didn't feel like it. From another Whatsapp group I heard there were hundreds of clucking matrons round the beds and the soldiers couldn't eat any more chocolate.

Does a pigeon signify peace?

The fat pigeon had taken position on the roof of the house opposite mine. I was happy for him and wished him to grow fat and that he line up his squabs on the ridge cap.

A doomsday message interrupted the news program I was listening to. “Air raid siren in Kisufim, Raim, Nirim, Ein Hashlosa and Beeri.” The message was repeated. “You were saying,” said the original newsreader. “The armored vehicle is outdated and gets stuck all the time. So why are they using them? Why aren’t they using ...?”

“Air raid siren in Yad Mordechai,” said the cutting-in voice. He sounded in an ill mood. Who were they kidding anyhow?

“Excuse me, you were saying?” The interviewer had also contracted the ill mood.

I bothered to look up those villages that time. They were next to the Gaza strip. Also, I finally took the trouble to look up the crazy-suffering Yad Mordechai, which was beleaguered by dozens of rockets daily. This was just north of the Gaza Strip. Most of its inhabitants had probably left.

The fat pigeon’s female companion joined him on the rooftop. I thought of Noah’s story in the Bible and went delirious for them. The ragged female, she was in his neck a lot, raking the muck between his feathers and his ears. At regular intervals, they split. The male was looking south, whereas the female was watching northwards. Guardian doves. When there was a rumble in the sky, they’d start into that direction. But when they knew it was only an F16, they got busy picking their own feathers. As the jet tore the clouds asunder, the female stole up to the male again with swift little steps, and picked him a kiss. The first time he would go along with that; they’d be beak to beak for a minute. But when she kissed him again, he pulled away.

“Look,” I said to Yoni, “you’re just like that stupid pigeon.”

“Why?” he said.

That night, the air raid siren went off in the middle of the night.

Yoni veered up like a loaded gun; duty had shot the habit in his dark warrior body. I was squirming, working the sheet between my legs. We were both naked.

“This is such bad timing,” I moaned. “Why now when everybody’s sleeping? Exactly when we have no clothes on.”

“Where do you normally stay when there is an air raid?” Yoni asked, groping around for his underwear.

“Downstairs.”

I didn’t feel like getting up. Some part of my brain that was normally not very active was working out that as the air raid was going to last only a minute or two, there was no sense in trying to find something to cover myself and hurry down the stairs. By the time we got there, it would already be over. Absurdest thinking ever.

I heard only one door slam open onto the hallway. The building was not noisy, but when you really trained your ears you could hear the doors.

So we stayed in bed. But I was terrified. When you’re doing something irresponsible just once, you know you’re done for. Like the one time I left my laptop in the back of the car and it got stolen. But nothing happened. The rending of the skies took place not above us, but more to the south. Lucky.

Very quietly I went to the loo, after I was sure the neighbors had gone back to bed. I wasn’t sure what I was embarrassed about, but those were days of shame. Not a single rocket fell down in Tel Aviv; not a single hair was touched. And every day made me more ashamed.

What did you think as the war seemed to get worse instead of better?

My work continued. I had as many clients as always, although we did more through emails than usual. As the Israeli military opened its big gob not only to suck up the tunnels and rockets but houses and well-stocked cellars and mattresses and pens and notebooks, my shame made uncomfortable stretches and pinches, coiled inside my stomach and made me retch. The more people around

me stuck their heads into the sand, I only felt worse. More and more people died, mainly on the Palestinian side (of course!). I couldn't understand how most people just accepted that as a necessary evil. Some of my friends (maybe not such good friends) sent me jokes that seemed to evince a frightening lack of empathy, such as:

8 am: Spacious apartment in Shujaiyeh, northern Gaza Strip. 3 rooms.

9 am: Update: 2 rooms with large windows.

10:06 am: Update: breezy one-room apartment.

10:41 am: Update: Sorry, not available anymore.

I sent a message back saying I didn't appreciate the joke. At our next meeting, my "friend" didn't talk to me.

Did you lose your sense of humor?

It was black humor, another friend explained. Yes, yes. But black humor can only work when you see things as totally absurd. For me, for now, that wasn't the case. But seeing as perceptions can change really fast when the social media (your own friends who peddle their political stances!) home in on you night and day, let's not lose hope. In case things get grim, it's better to lose your humor than to lose hope.

First the cockroach came, as gigantic as a matchbox.

While I was reading on my balcony I noticed something advanced over the edge. Blinded by my solar lamp, it crept back. A few seconds later, it tried again. And again. I gave it a shove with the magazine I was reading. But it went the wrong way. Instead of tumbling off the balcony on the garden side, where its fall would have been broken by soft leaves, it crashed onto the balcony. My slipper closed upon it. It made a rich splat sound. I felt really sorry about it. But not sad. It's hard to feel sad when you're mopping with toilet paper.

Followed by the giraffe.

The gaps between the trellises were too small for its head to go through. I never realized that giraffes were that tall. Even from a jeep in Africa they hadn't looked that tall. The perspective was different now. I was close to its head. The moonlight and the lantern dappled the light. Its skin looked hugely touchable like ripe fruit. I patted its neck while trying to hold my own under its whimsical, mourning look. "What do you want?" I whispered, afraid the neighbors would hear and my illusion would evaporate. It swiveled round its head so fast it caused me to mistake its ossicones, those little horns on its head, for its ears. The garden at this time of night looked more like a paradise than ever, between the enormous reeds of oleander and the Chinese roses that hid sunbirds. The giraffe just wanted to munch some leaves and lick at the mini-green lemons, I thought. And keep this a secret from his friends at the safari park in Ramat Gan.

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GUEST WRITER

Matthew Harrison lives in Hong Kong, and whether because of that or some other reason entirely his writing has veered from non-fiction to literary and he is currently reliving a boyhood passion for science fiction. He has published numerous SF short stories and is building up to longer pieces as he learns more about the universe. Matthew is married with two children but no pets as there is no space for these in Hong Kong. His website is <http://matthewharrison.hk/>.

Sold

by Matthew Harrison

This was Ron Brewer's big moment. He had made his fortune, he wanted to spend it, and there through the window of the hover-cruiser was the house of his dreams, brilliant in the afternoon sun.

Ron stopped the cruiser, and opened the door for his wife Tina.

Getting out, Tina blinked at the brightness. The splendid double-fronted house stood in its own landscaped garden; a small fountain played in the center of the pond. "Are you sure, Ron?" she said.

"It's something I want to do," Ron said simply. Why did he need to explain everything to her?

"Well, you've earned it," Tina said, in a voice that suggested he hadn't. And, really, what had Ron done to earn his fortune? A derivatives trader, he'd happened to be in position when someone else's algorithm went crazy. But what really grieved Tina was that they were spending the money on such an old place.

“Couldn’t we—?” she began. But it was too late. A plump bespectacled estate agent had appeared, literally out of nowhere, and was hailing them.

“Welcome! Welcome!” the agent cried. “Welcome to historic Residence Brewer!” He waved an arm at the house.

Ron let the sight absorb him. It was his grandparents’ old home. In the sunshine the white paint dazzled, mirrored in the pond which was itself circled by a white-pebbled drive. The fountain scattered a fine mist which lent an ethereal quality to the scene. It all shimmered in the light.

Ron felt a lump in his throat. He wiped his eyes.

The estate agent was talking quickly. “Timeshares,” he was saying as he ushered them into the hall, “timeshares are the smart way to do property nowadays. We’ve got a range of slots available, the entire month of November—”

“I don’t want a share,” Ron said quietly.

“Oh, *Ron*,” Tina said.

“Then there’s perspectives,” the agent hurried on. “We can do you a nice ultraviolet for—let me see” (he consulted his smartwatch) “for the whole summer—no, I have to firm up on August, but definitely two months.”

“*Ultraviolet?*” Tina exclaimed.

“Oh, you just swap it back into visible light,” the agent explained cheerily. “I believe your husband is an expert in that sort of thing, Mrs. Brewer. Just a small premium, a very liquid market. Or perhaps you prefer infrared?”

Ron stepped into the hallway. The staircase mounted ahead of him, then divided, curving luxuriously away on either side to the landing above. The polished oak floor shone. Even the smell of the place brought back childhood memories. They had kept it well.

“I don’t want perspectives,” he said. His eyes were misting up again. “I want the whole thing.”

The agent frowned. “I tell you what, Mr. Brewer, we could do you an interpolation job. There’s our Regular Experience, sampling reality at fifty-millisecond intervals. With auto-generation in between you feel as if you’re really there, and it’s a very good price.” He laughed. “Beware of imitations!”

“Ronnie, that would be more reasonable,” Tina urged.

“I’ll hold it for you,” the agent went on. “We always advise our clients to try Regular first. There’s some adjustment, you know, for the eyes.” He waved a plump hand across his own face, “But you soon get used to it. Later, you could consider upgrading to Premium. At twenty-millisecond intervals that’s as clear as you want, although it *does* cost.”

“But treat yourself,” he added generously, “I’m sure your wife would like it.” He glanced at Tina for support.

Tina was watching Ron. She saw that it would be no use. Once Ron had set his heart on something, that was it.

Resignedly, she asked the estate agent, “What would it cost to buy the whole thing?”

“*The whole thing?*” the agent repeated. It seemed that this was beyond his programming. “The whole thing? We don’t often get calls for that.”

He looked at them from one to the other. “You’re sure you don’t want Regular? I could give you an even better price...”

Tina shook her head.

The agent’s default algorithms took over. “Seriously, the whole thing’s expensive.” He laughed. “You wouldn’t believe how expensive. You see, you’d have to buy out all the other interests. A property like this, it’s not just sitting here. Every attribute is used.”

Tina looked at her husband. “I think we understand that, don’t we, Ron?”

Her husband nodded.

The agent blew out his cheeks. “Well, if you say so. But I want to make it clear. You’d have to pay a premium to break some of the leases that have been granted on this property.” He gestured through the doorway into the lounge. “There are interpolation clients in there, even as we speak. You’d have to buy them all out.”

Ron looked. The lounge with its cream-coloured leather sofas seemed empty, yet although he knew nothing could be seen with the naked eye, he thought he made out a momentary shape, as if of someone walking across the room. Across *his* room.

“Fine,” he said. “Buy them out.”

As if a switch had been flicked, the agent stopped his patter. He made a gesture; a hologram formed in the hall. To the accompaniment of 3D graphics and light chamber music, the agent took the couple through the various interests in the property—spatial, temporal, sensory, perceptual—and the clients who had leased those interests and at what price.

He showed them the total. It was an extremely large sum. While Tina looked on glumly, Ron called his lawyer to check the details. Then he signed the contract and the risk acknowledgment, and submitted to retinal verification. The money passed out of his bank account, and the deal was done.

“Now,” said the agent, talkative again as he cut the holo, “you have a cooling-off period, during which you can still withdraw—lovely property though it is. We want to make sure you appreciate all the ins and outs.”

He lowered his voice. “We’ve covered the legitimate interests. But there’s also, how shall I put it? the less legitimate interests.”

Tina’s eyes widened. “*Squatters?!?*”

The estate agent winced. “We don’t like to use that word, madam. But I’m afraid with a property as desirable as this, there’s inevitably pseudo-resumption, distributed denial of occupancy, that kind of thing. Of course, if you were to be here physically...”

“We’ll be here,” Ron said.

“Splendid!” the agent said. “Well, so long as you’re completely happy with everything. Full disclosure, that’s my motto! Honesty is the best policy.” And he shook hands with the couple.

Then he sped off down the drive, rounded a hedge and there, being out of sight of the house, vanished. The house seemed to waver slightly.

Ron turned to Tina. “We’ve made it, darling. A dream come true.” And dutifully he embraced his wife. But he was having trouble getting the house into focus. It must have been the sun, he thought.

Funnily enough, Tina was finding the house a bit blurry too. But since she was doing her best to congratulate her husband she didn’t think about that.

And though in the end their eyes did get used to it, the most genuine thing about the whole deal turned out to be the money that Ron had paid out of his bank account.

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GUEST WRITER

Janice Egry, a former special education teacher, is married to a jazz pianist and two cats. Her works include an unpublished novel, *Burnout*, and poems in *Little Red Tree 2010 International Poetry Prize Anthology*, *Renderings*, and *Slant of Light—Women’s Poetry*. Her poem, “Silence of the Song,” won grand prize in the 2008 Dancing Poetry Contest. Her short story, *The Thing About Being Alone*, won first prize in a FanStory horror contest. Her two critique groups keep her humble.

The White Envelope

by Janice Egry

Luanne Martin-Browne glanced again at the pink Post-It note: “*If you truly want to know. Main Street Diner, twelve o’clock. Third booth.*” The note clung to an airmail letter, postmarked May 30, 1968, addressed to her father, and in her mother’s handwriting.

The diner. At noon. In her booth. Who? Why? *It will be okay. It’s public, after all.*

The cheery doorbell jingled when she entered. A young server stood behind the counter polishing glasses. Luanne slid into the red leather booth, the same lumpy seat she had been sitting in every Saturday for as long as she could remember. It was the same booth where, every Saturday, her mother had ordered two hot dogs with mustard—but hold the sauerkraut—and tall strawberry milkshakes.

Now, on this cool October day in 2009, Luanne would order one hot dog with mustard, no sauerkraut, and a strawberry shake, but she also looked at the menu and read the specials. Today the special was a bowl of chili with a slice of homemade white bread.

The young server stood at her table, tapping his pencil on the small order pad in front of him. He smiled. “And what would you like, miss?”

“Oh, hi. Umm... well... where is Blanche? She usually waits on me.”

“Blanche is ill, quite bad, I guess. They said she went to the hospital. I’m Ravi.” He waited.

“I’m Luanne. I have lunch here every Saturday. They save this booth for me. Sorry, I’m keeping you waiting. I’ll have a hot dog with mustard and a strawberry milkshake, thick please. Oh, wait. No sauerkraut. But, you know what? I think I’ll have a little chili on the hot dog, so no mustard either.”

“Very well. The chili is excellent today.” Ravi bowed as he spoke, and then he hurried into the kitchen.

Ravi returned with a hot dog piled high with steaming chili and a strawberry shake so thick it mounded above the rim of the glass. His broad smile displayed a gold tooth gleaming from the side of his mouth.

“Here you are, Miss—I mean Luanne. Enjoy your lunch.”

Luanne bit hard into the chili dog. The chili flew up, splattering her nose and cheek with hot sauce. She grabbed at the container of napkins and pulled one to wipe her face. As she did so, she glanced out the window. The sun glinted off something shiny across the street. It looked like some kind of metal container in the hands of a homeless person. She had seen him sitting on that step between the newsstand and the deli a few times before, begging for money. She licked her fingers and stared at him. His scruffy red beard hung low over his dirty ragged clothes. His eyes were hidden underneath a wide-brimmed cap so large that it covered his ears. Her interest turned to annoyance, then to anger.

“Ravi, why do wonderful, brave men have to die in battle, and nothing happens to the drugged-out drunkards that beg on the streets?”

Ravi stepped back and stammered. “I... I don’t know. I haven’t thought...”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to spout off. I just get so annoyed when people don’t carry their own weight.”

“Their own weight?”

“Yes. Do what they’re supposed to do—take responsibility for themselves and not cause others to shoulder the burden for everyone.”

The waiter blinked. “I hope my service was okay.”

“Oh, I don’t mean you, Ravi. You’re doing a fine job.”

Ravi glanced up and then directed a man with gray curls to her booth. Luanne considered heading toward the door. She didn’t need trouble. Yet... he *had* found her mother’s letter. Maybe he knew something about her father. She tensed her lips and sat firmly on the lumpy cushion.

“Well?” She demanded. “What do you want?” Only then did she look toward him. He wore a green windbreaker over a well-worn plaid shirt. His salt-and-pepper beard was trimmed to perfection. He looked at her with the bluest eyes she had ever seen, yet the sadness within them made her shiver.

Luanne knew she had seen those eyes before. But the weathered face was not familiar.

“Luanne,” the stranger said quietly. “You came.”

“Yes, I came. You had my mother’s letter. Who *are* you? Did you know my father?”

“I knew your father well,” he said. “I was with him in Vietnam. I’m known as Ken MacDonald now, but then my name was Keith Martin.”

*

Every Saturday at the diner her mother would tell her stories about her father—how his dark, curly hair fell over his left eyebrow, how he would brush it back with the long fingers of his left hand, and how his strong arm muscles flexed when he did so. Then she would say, “Before you were born, Luanne, your father and I sat

together in this booth every Saturday at lunch—until that last Saturday when he left for Vietnam.”

Luanne would take a bite of hot dog then sip her shake. Her mother would say, “Luanne, kneel up on the bench so you can reach the straw.” And Luanne would kneel so high and suck so fast on the straw the cold would give her a headache.

Her mother told her the same stories and showed her the same photo of her father in dress blues, his black curls cut short, his hat resting between his arm and his uniform’s shiny buttons. Her mother would turn the photo to the back and read, “My Dear Helene, you are the love of my life. I am yours forever, no matter where I may be. Your soldier, Pvt. Keith A. Martin, US Army, November 27, 1967.” Keith Martin was twenty-one on the day he autographed that photo. The very next day he was deployed with his unit to Saigon, leaving Helene four months pregnant.

“Sergeant Keith A. Martin. A for Ahearn, after his grandfather,” her mother would say. “Your father was a brave man, a good soldier. Then that morning just before Christmas in 1968 we received the hand-delivered letter telling us he was missing in action. That’s around the time President Nixon began bringing troops home from Vietnam. Your dad didn’t come home with the other seventy-five-thousand men in 1969, and they never found him later.”

*

“Keith Martin? Keith Martin? That was my father’s name! And what is your middle name, Mr. Keith Martin?”

“Ahearn, after my grandfather.” He chuckled. “It means ‘lord of the horses.’”

It can’t be. Luanne felt a scream deep inside. But the eyes! She fumbled for her wallet and flung it open to the old photo of her father in his uniform. The eyes were there. She couldn’t speak. She just sat staring at him. Finally she managed a husky, “Why, why didn’t...”

“It’s a long, terrible story, Luanne, but I’ll tell you the short of it. Then you may wish to leave, and I’ll understand.”

Luanne didn't speak.

"In Country, that is, Vietnam, I tried to do the job I was sent to do, but I couldn't stand being there. We heard about demonstrations at home and about people deserting to Canada. We heard that soldiers who were sent home were heckled and unemployed. Then, on an early reconnaissance mission to Cambodia, our helicopter was shot down. I was the only survivor. Wounded, I hid in a rice field for days watching the enemy search for me. One day a rice farmer found me half-dead and pulled me out of the mud. His family treated my wounds, gave me heroin for the pain, and cared for me until I healed. I was presumed dead, missing in action, so I never went back. I moved among the natives—sheltered by the underground movement—and acquired all the opiates I could find to maintain my habit."

Luanne leaned forward. "But Mom never heard from you."

*

It was 1989. Luanne and her mother were sitting at the red leather booth chatting, and Helene handed Luanne the autographed photo of her father.

"Here, Luanne. I want you to have this. Please take it—and these, too."

Helene held out a stack of letters tied securely with a yellow ribbon. "Your father wrote often the first year he was away. Love letters, mostly, but he would begin every letter by asking about you. 'How's my little one,' he would say. 'How big is she? Is she as beautiful as you?' He didn't write much about where he was or what he was doing. He didn't want us to worry. Toward the end of 1968, the letters stopped coming."

"But, Mom, they're your letters—your personal property." Luanne pushed them back toward her mother. "You should keep them."

Helene closed her eyes and cupped her nose and mouth in both hands. Luanne noticed a tear pushing from the corner of her mother's right eye.

"Mom... Mom?"

Helene pulled a linen handkerchief with blue crocheted edging from her small flowered handbag. She dabbed her eyes and nose. “Darling, I need you to take the letters and the photo. They belong to you now. They’re all I have of your father to give you. Treasure them. Keep him alive in your heart.”

Luanne took the packet from Helene’s shaking hands. She looked at the long, red fingernails, perfectly shaped, and took her mother’s hands in her own. A bubble of dread swelled in her throat. Her tongue refused to ask another question.

After a long silence, Helene whispered, “Luanne, I’m dying. Late stage ovarian cancer. Three specialists have told me there’s no use having chemotherapy or radiation. I have only a few weeks left. And I’m so very tired.”

*

Her mother died two weeks after they had exchanged the letters. Luanne eventually married in 1993. Robert was her dream prince, with a smile that would melt an anvil. His shock of blond hair and deep dimples accented his disarming charm. By 1995, they were divorced. He tired of her silly insistence on lunching at the diner every Saturday. She tired of his late-night escapades with every new bimbo he met. And in his line of work, managing a night club, he met many.

*

“I was too ashamed, and there was no way out. I couldn’t risk contacting anyone in authority or even your mother. I would have been shot by one side or the other.”

“You were a deserter. So how did you get home?”

“I found people who made me fake papers—a new identity. In 1975 when Cambodia seized the US Merchant ship ‘Mayaguez,’ I slipped on board and posed as a crewman. I was one of several men held on Rong Sam Len, a Cambodian island. We were finally allowed to return with our captain to the ship. When the ship was released, all crew were transferred to the ‘USS Wilson’ and eventually sailed back to America.”

“And no one discovered you?”

“Fortunately for me, there was so much confusion and battle activity that I managed to remain undetected.”

“And you still didn’t look for us?”

“I was a drug addict who became Kenneth MacDonald. I had all the right papers, but I could never get hired. So for fifteen years I worked the streets for drugs until a golden-haired angel from the shelter took me for rehabilitation. That was in 1990. I’ve been clean for nineteen years. I think I have it licked, but it’s always creeping over your shoulder, you know.”

“Mom died in ‘89.”

Her father handed her a white envelope. Luanne looked to both sides before picking it up and lifting the flap. With thumb and forefinger, she grasped a single photo and pulled it out. She stared at an image of herself in her mother’s arms. A small bungalow was in the background. Luanne turned the photo over. On the back in Helene’s faded handwriting was, “October 29, 1968, Luanne at six months, in front of our rented house.”

“I knew that. I’ve kept track of you two as best I could, but I never got to live in that house. We moved in the day before I left.”

Ravi approached tentatively. I don’t mean to interrupt. “Would you like anything, sir?”

“Thank you. A cup of coffee would be fine,” Keith said.

His nonchalant demeanor annoyed Luanne. “Mom worked to keep that house—first as a waitress, then as a secretary for a law firm. She was going to school to study law when she got sick.”

Her father lowered his head, fidgeted with his napkin, and rubbed his eyebrows. “I’m so sorry she had to do that. I loved her so. I ate my heart out wishing I could get back to her.”

Luanne's face heated as she became more agitated. "Apparently you didn't try hard enough. From hearing Mom's stories about you, I adored you—imagined you were some kind of prince that would come to save us."

She flung her hair back over her ear. "But you didn't."

"I was too young, Luanne. Really messed up. Vietnam did that to a lot of us. And, as I said before, I was too ashamed to face your mother and to burden her with a drug-addicted shell of myself."

"Well, we managed just fine without you, after all. Mom managed to save enough to buy the house."

"I knew she'd kept it."

"Yes. She always had dreams that someday you'd return and the house would be waiting for you."

"And you—"

Ravi set the coffee in front of Keith and left to check on a customer in the far corner.

"And *I* inherited the house when she died. After I put myself through school—no thanks to you—and got married, I planned to sell it. However, when I rid myself of my rotten husband, I decided to move back into the bungalow. And there I remain." She sat back and folded her arms across her chest.

"That's what I was going to say. I know you are still there."

"So, now what? You expect me to take you in?"

"Oh, no, Luanne. Of course not. But here's the thing. I'm sixty-two years old. I want my identity back, and for that I'll have to turn myself in as a deserter, maybe go to jail, and lose everything I've gained." He shifted in his seat. "I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. That's all."

“Well, you’re not like that beggar who sits across the street doing nothing for anyone.”

Keith placed his left hand on his daughter’s wrist. With his right, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a scruffy red beard and a wide-brimmed cap.

Luanne gasped and leaned forward in her seat. “You? It was you—that beggar?”

Keith shook his head. “I wasn’t begging. I’ve been working to earn money for the shelter that took me in ever since I finished rehab. Donations. It’s a little like the Salvation Army does. But I can’t risk being recognized yet, therefore the disguise.”

“I see.” Luanne searched her father’s face. “So you’re drug-free and penniless.”

Keith smiled faintly. “Not totally penniless. The rehab center hired me as custodian, so I’ve saved a little money these past nineteen years. But now I need to make things right—to take back what’s left of my real life.”

“Well, That’s something. Perhaps there’s hope for *you*, but it doesn’t make up for the fact you deserted us—deserted me.” She could not swallow away the lump in her throat, and tears dripped down the front of her blouse. She finally had a father, but not the father she’d imagined and loved. It had all been an illusion.

Keith sipped his coffee. His face registered years of sadness and he looked so very tired. Luanne wiped her eyes with her napkin. Neither spoke for several minutes.

At last, when she could speak again, Luanne said, “Mom would have supported you. So I will, but it will take me time to adjust to all of this.”

“That’s more than I deserve.” Keith lifted a metallic gold box from the seat beside him. “Whether I succeed or not, this is yours. Take good care of it.”

She raised the lid. A few white envelopes were scattered over a pile of Helene’s letters. Further down was a stack of one hundred dollar bills.

Keith Martin slid to the side of the bench as if to stand and then settled back down again.

Ravi came with the check. “See you next Saturday.” He hurried on to a booth of customers at the back of the diner.

The lunch check fluttered when she dropped a hundred dollar bill on top of it. “Keep the change,” she called to Ravi, as she stood and pulled her jacket around her shoulders.

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