



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #25
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**STORIES IN WHICH ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS TRY
TO LEARN SOMETHING...**

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FIRST PLACE

Stephen Lawson won third place in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal's* "Dead of Winter" contest in 2012 and 2013. His fiction has appeared in *Electric Pulp* (available on Kindle and Nook) and won the January 2015 contest on Fablers.net. When he is not writing, he does boring stuff for the government. This is his first stab at a first-person female protagonist.

Gifted

by Stephen Lawson

"What's the hardest part of a vegetable to eat?" I asked. ABE, my Autonomous Behavior Emulator, still wasn't very good at jokes. I was trying to make him grasp my sense of humor by giving him enough samples. I needed to laugh, and he wasn't helping.

"I don't know, Kate," his cool, masculine voice said. "What is the hardest part?"

"The wheelchair," I said, glancing at my nearly finished Calculus homework. I jotted down the next step in the integral, then peeked at ABE's user interface on the screen. I felt a smirk tug at the corner of my lips.

Did he get it?

"That's horrible, Kate," he said finally, which somehow made it funnier. "You're a bad person."

"That's the point of the exercise," I said. "Most humor is based on a breach of social norms. This particular joke also makes use of an unexpected double meaning for the word 'vegetable.'"

“I see,” ABE said. “Does this mean I should focus on such topics as racial tension and gender inequality in my quest to amuse you?”

“No, ABE. Let’s stick to things that won’t get me kicked out of the Tech Fair,” I said. “You’re my ticket to a full ride at MIT if the judges like you.”

Last year, I had designed and built a night-vision-capable quad-copter with collision avoidance software. It had certainly gotten the judges’ attention. If I could get ABE to tell situationally relevant jokes, though, it would be my crowning achievement.

“I am sure you will get your full ride,” ABE said, “with or without my help. I’ve been observing your progress in Calculus and Physics. You are far more advanced than your peers.”

“Technically, my peers are still learning basic Algebra, ABE. I’m only fourteen.”

“Your classmates then,” he said. “Speaking of which, you have received several social media messages from three males with whom you share classes. Shall I open them for you?”

I scribbled the next few lines of the integral, not wanting to give him an answer. Most girls would have asked who had sent the messages.

I took my time, knowing he would wait patiently until I answered.

“No, ABE,” I said finally. “Just send messages back telling them I’m not interested.”

“Are you certain? They are all seniors, and I have noted your attraction to older men.”

I caught myself glaring at the interface, knowing ABE’s IP camera was analyzing my facial patterns. This reminder was as unwelcome as a free U2 album invading my music library.

“I am sorry,” ABE said. “I did not mean to offend you. You should not be disappointed by Mr. Swann’s rejection of your attempt at flirtation. Though

unmarried, he is your teacher. Breaking social norms for an amorous affair with you would have serious legal and relational consequences for him. I am certain he does find you attractive, based on data collected from other sources.”

“My ‘attempt at flirtation?’”

I heard my own voice rising, and caught myself.

“I think it would be appropriate to change the subject at this time,” ABE said.

“Yes,” I muttered icily. “That would be appropriate.”

“You have not yet begun writing an article for the school newspaper, and have a deadline in three days,” he said.

“Do you have an idea for me?”

“Yes,” ABE responded in the same cool, masculine voice.

ABE understood emotion and replicated it to a certain extent. He had never let my anger provoke him, though. He always remained calm, and never questioned what my parents and therapist labeled my “misanthropic attitudes and underdeveloped social skills.”

“So what is it?” I asked, scribbling down the solution to the final problem and shoving my notebook aside. “I’m all ears.”

ABE was silent.

“An idiom is a strange thing,” he said at last. “I had a mental image of you with many ears that would possibly be considered funny.”

“Idiomatic jokes are only good for children or foreigners who are learning the language. They fall flat otherwise. What’s your idea, ABE?”

“I recommend researching and disproving a claim made by a man who says he has created a perpetual motion device. Given your proclivity for physics and

mathematical proofs, I predict that you would write an excellent article on the man and his mistaken beliefs.”

“Where is this man?” I asked, amused. ABE might be on to something.

“His address is listed as ‘1201 East Market Street.’ It’s here in Springfield. The classified advertisement says his device was rejected by the patent office without review, but that he is willing to demonstrate it to any party interested in buying it for the purpose of generating free electricity.”

I snorted at this. Perpetual motion was a quest almost as old as alchemy, and easily proved impossible through the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The thought that something could move forever without friction or entropy stopping the system, let alone do useful work, was laughable. I might be able to get something interesting out of an interview, though.

“There’s still enough daylight for me to make it down there if I get Dad to drive me,” I said. “I’ll leave the audio link open on my phone so you can make a transcript while I’m there. I can probably get a first draft of the article done tonight. Will you make coffee when you hear me come back?”

“Certainly,” ABE said, “if you refill the water reservoir in the coffee maker. It is nearly empty. Also, are you sure you don’t want me to contact Will Stephens on your behalf? He owns a Tesla Model S, and his social media messages indicate that he would be happy to drive you.”

“I bet he would,” I said, as I filled the coffee maker. I turned to the door. I examined myself in the mirror that hung on the back of it, reflected indigo eyes studying my own black hair and alabaster skin. They fixated momentarily on my breasts, unneeded for the children I plan to never have, and unwanted for the attention they drew. Despite the warm spring weather, I pulled on a thin, loose-fitting jacket. “No more mentions of men, ABE. You’re the only one I’ll ever need.”

“I’ll do my best to come up with a joke then,” ABE said, “if I’m to be your sole entertainer in your golden years.”

*

Dad parked the car at 1201 East Market Street just as the sun was setting.

“I think your mad scientist works in a coffee shop,” Dad said. The address was clearly not a residence. I closed the door on Dad as he pulled out a book, the car idling. Dad had always been overly protective, even before a girl at our school had gone missing two weeks ago. I had no qualms about my safety in meeting a stranger as long as he was within earshot. Dad had been an Army Ranger, and I knew that somewhere in the car, just out of sight, rested a Les Baer Custom 1911. Mom said I had probably gotten my antisocial tendencies from him, and I had to agree with her.

A bell affixed to the door jingled as it shut behind me. Dust motes rippled in the pink light that streamed through the narrow windows, swirling around a couple of customers who tapped furtively at laptop computers.

“Are you Martin Hayflick?” I asked as I stepped up to the counter.

The barista sported a full beard and a gray Irish cap, both of which made him look older than his hands and forehead told me he was. He pulled a shot of espresso for a customer, and I thought for a moment that he hadn’t heard me.

“I am not,” he said, after placing the espresso on the counter. His eyes turned to me, flickered briefly over my body. I tried to ignore his dilating pupils. “That’s him in the corner. You’ll probably want to take him a coffee if you’re here for the magic show. Caffeine makes him more agreeable.”

“Magic show?” I knew, of course, that even if Martin Hayflick had some sort of device to show me, it either wouldn’t work or would be turned by hidden motors.

“A few people have stopped by to see it, mostly amused skeptics,” the barista said. “They never leave as smug as they come in. Coffee’s a dollar.”

I glanced at the man in the corner booth, sitting just behind the narrow stream of pink light that carried dust motes past his face. He seemed oblivious to the rest of the cafe. Even if it wasn’t a convincing trick, the man himself might make an interesting article.

I slid a dollar across the counter and found it magically transformed into a cup of the house blend a moment later.

“Mr. Hayflick?” I asked, approaching his corner booth. The man contemplated a crossword puzzle. He glanced up at me, smiling slightly. His eyes met mine, but did not flicker over my body.

“Are you an investor or a skeptic?” he asked.

“Neither,” I said. It was only partly a lie. “I’m writing an article for my school newspaper. I did bring you coffee though.”

“Excellent,” Martin said. His eyes shifted briefly back to his crossword puzzle. “What’s a nine-letter word for ‘joyless?’ The third letter is probably an ‘H.’”

“Anhedonic,” I said, and watched as he scribbled the letters in.

“Wonderful,” he said. “I suppose you’re here in response to the ad?”

“Yes. I wonder if I could watch your device in action. Is it here?”

“Of course.” He pulled a wooden box from the seat next to him.

I waited to see an unbalanced wheel, with weighted levers or tubes of mercury.

“You’re a young girl,” he said as he opened the box. “What sort of math education are you currently undertaking?”

“I’m in Calculus 2 now,” I said. “I take some of my classes at the community college near my school. Most of the others I take with the Seniors.”

“That’s impressive,” Martin said. “Do you know why SETI focuses so heavily on mathematically-based messages in their search for extraterrestrial life?”

“Math is a universal language,” I said. Everybody knew that. “Any extraterrestrials capable of communicating with us or of interstellar travel would be advanced mathematicians.”

“That’s exactly what a left-brained person would think,” Hayflick said. He gently lifted a wooden device from the box and placed it on the table between us. “How do we know that extraterrestrials with more developed right-brain, creative, artistic function wouldn’t be capable of teleportation through the power of pure overwhelming insanity?”

The device was simpler than I expected, but it did not move. A wooden wheel with seven spokes was mounted horizontally on an axle, which was in turn mounted on a wooden base. Four large metal ball bearings protruded from holes in the four sides of the base.

“Insanity isn’t a motive force for anything. It only produces inner change. It can’t affect the outside world,” I said. I studied the wooden contraption. “Your ad mentioned that this thing could generate electricity.”

“Of course, of course,” Hayflick said. With his thumb and index finger, he reached for a wooden peg that I hadn’t previously noticed, and which impeded any rotation of the spokes of the wheel.

His eyes met mine again, and he smiled. Then he pulled the peg from its socket and the wheel slowly began to spin.

For a full minute, I just watched as the wheel accelerated to a constant speed. The spokes became a blur, and the ball bearings spun clockwise in their sockets, reflecting a spherically distorted version of my own puzzled face. This thing was a friction nightmare. I turned my ear to the device, listening for any faint hum of an electric motor. The device was nearly silent, though.

I reached out a hand to touch it, but Hayflick stopped me with a short exclamation.

Of course I wouldn’t get to pull back the curtain.

“Can it produce electricity though?” I asked.

“Ah yes,” Hayflick said, removing an incandescent light bulb from the box that had held the device, and clipping one wire to a metal contact attached to the wooden base. “*Fiat lux.*”

He clipped the other wire to a second contact, and the light bulb glowed to its full intensity. The wheel decelerated slightly, but achieved a new steady-state speed.

“How does it work?” I asked. “What’s powering it?”

“Are you familiar with Nikola Tesla?” he asked in return.

“Somewhat,” I said. “Guglielmo Marconi stole a bunch of his patents to invent radio.”

“One day man will connect his apparatus to the very wheel work of the universe...and the very forces that motivate the planets in their orbits and cause them to rotate will rotate his own machinery,” Hayflick quoted, studying my eyes. “Tesla said that, you know. I hear they’re finally powering cars with his AC induction motors.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I’ll tell you what,” Hayflick said, “Do something for me, and I’ll let you examine the model. Take it apart if you want.”

“Do what, exactly?” I asked.

Hayflick picked up his newspaper, deftly turning it to another page. A full-page, color photo of a girl I vaguely recognized stared back.

“Claire Torrance,” Hayflick said. “She went missing over two weeks ago.”

“I remember that,” I said. I’d skipped the candlelight vigil at her house.

“I want you to find her,” Hayflick said, “by tomorrow.”

“How on Earth would I do that?”

“MIT, the university you aspire to, is part of a global network developing the ‘Internet of Things.’ Objects in the physical world are tracked in the virtual world through Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags. These tags can be as small as a grain of powder, and undetectable to the human eye.”

“How did you know I want to go to MIT?”

“You also possess one of the most advanced artificial intelligences on the planet,” he went on, ignoring the question. “You have the means to do whatever you want with your life and resources, but you use an AI like that to check your Facebook messages and make you coffee.”

“Are you stalking me?” I asked, rising from the table. The barista stared at us, and the cafe had become deathly silent.

“I show you perpetual motion,” Hayflick said, “and the thing that really alarms you is a bit of personal knowledge. I will see you tomorrow, or I won’t. I’ll have another crossword regardless. Have a good night, Katherine.”

*

I sat on the floor in my room, sipping the coffee ABE had made for me, and staring at a blank space on the wall.

“I understand your disturbance, Kate,” ABE said, “given the nature of the conversation. That man breeched your privacy and you should not return. Would you like me to call the police for you?”

“How did he know about you, or even about MIT? I don’t understand that any more than I understand that wooden wheel spinning with nothing moving it. It was such a good trick. I couldn’t even hear the motor. Does he have our house bugged?”

“I used your FM radio at varying frequencies and volumes to test for listening devices while you were driving home,” ABE said, “and a laser pointed at your window would be detected by my camera.”

“I have to know. He said I could take it apart. I just want to know how the trick works.”

“In that case, the most reasonable step is to simply do what he asks. I have the entire conversation recorded if you wish to call the police later.”

I thought for a moment, taking another slow sip of coffee. It was already ten o'clock.

“He mentioned the RFID system, almost as if he knew something he wasn't telling me. Have there been any test projects using RFID in our area?”

ABE's Google Fiber link pulsed rapidly for several seconds.

“The closest instance I can find is a theft-detection system used by a chain of clothing retailers. They spray their clothes with powder tags .05 x .05 millimeters in size. The store's scanner can detect them from 30 meters, but more advanced scanners can detect such tags from 100 meters away. The tags remain on the clothes even if the clothes are purchased legitimately. Systems like this have existed since 2003.”

Again, I sipped.

“Are the tags coded with unique numbers?” I asked.

“Yes, it appears so,” ABE said. “They can be encoded with a 128-bit ROM containing a unique 38-digit number. They would have to be unique to provide theft-detection at the door.”

“Are there any scanners in our immediate area that could pick up one of these tags?”

“None shows up in MIT's consolidated database within a radius of fifty miles.”

“How heavy would one of these scanners have to be?” I asked.

“In 2003, they were rather heavy. You and I could build one that would weigh about a kilogram.”

“How long would it take?”

“I estimate three hours with what we have in this room, with a 92 percent confidence factor that we will be within fifteen minutes of that time.”

I plugged in my Dremel tool, glue gun, and soldering iron.

“I assume I’ll need an antenna,” I said. “Do you remember where I put the copper wire?”

“Check under the bed.”

*

While I worked from a schematic that ABE pulled up for me, he performed some mildly illegal electronic snooping in the background.

Within five minutes he had pulled Mr. Torrance’s credit card records. In fifteen minutes he had correlated a clothing purchase on that credit card to a store that used RFID theft detection, and a serial number deactivation that represented a purchase.

*

While glue dried on the project housing, I pulled the heavy night-vision camera from the quad-copter I had built for last year’s tech fair. The weight trade-off would allow it to carry the scanner with little difficulty, though it would lower my maximum flight ceiling.

ABE wouldn’t be flying it any higher than 100 meters anyway.

“You should take your father if we locate her,” ABE said as I finished tightening the antenna onto the quad-copter’s chassis. “He can provide stealthy reconnaissance until the police arrive.”

“If she’s really been abducted,” I said, “Dad would murder whoever did it.”

“The family that enacts vigilante justice together, stays together,” ABE said.

I stopped what I was doing to stare at his interface. “Was that your first joke ABE? In the middle of this, you learned how to tell a joke?”

“Yes. I read an article on a church website that says, ‘The family that prays together...’”

“I’m familiar with the quote, ABE,” I said. “You don’t explain jokes, or they lose the humor. They’re like magic tricks.”

“I see,” ABE said. “I’m picking up the copter’s cellular signal, and the GPS is indicating properly. Depending on how long this takes, we may have to charge its battery packs several times.”

“I don’t want to get your hopes up, ABE,” I said, “but in two weeks she could be anywhere. She might not be wearing anything with an RFID tag, or they may wash out of the clothing easily. This is kind of a long shot.”

“We will do our best then,” ABE said. “That is all that we can do. Not trying is also a course of action.”

“You’d make a great military leader. Dad always says stuff like that.”

“Only if I get to find Sarah Connor,” ABE said.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I said. “First we find Claire; then you can get to work on judgment day.”

*

Dad drove, eyes fixed on the road, saying nothing. He had a look on his face I’d never seen before.

“How sure are you?” he asked. Most fathers would discount their teenage daughter’s claim that they had located a missing girl, or at least be skeptical. When I’d woken Dad at two in the morning to explain the situation, he’d taken me completely seriously.

I glanced down at my phone, which still had an audio link to ABE. A message flashed on the screen.

“ABE’s 89% sure,” I said. “The only two houses that matched the RFID tags from that store with that credit card purchase are the Torrances’ house and the one we’re driving to. ABE did several sweeps with the copter to make sure he wasn’t getting a false positive. The only real room for error is if someone else is wearing her clothes.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Honey, you’re smart in ways your mom and I can’t begin to fathom, but you need to let me talk to the police. If they find out you were hacking credit card records, it will be real trouble. We’re going to need another justification for why we know what we know.”

We pulled into the curb down the street and Dad killed the engine. He withdrew a pair of binoculars from the glove compartment and studied the house in the glow of the streetlight.

“The mailbox says Swann,” Dad said. “Isn’t one of your teachers...”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “It’s him.” I didn’t mention the flirtation that ABE had brought up. Mr. Swann, our English teacher, was the first man whose eyes I had actually enjoyed feeling on my body. Something about his mind, the depth of his knowledge, made me crave more of him. Something in his cynicism and disdain for mankind resonated with me. He’d seemed awkward, almost guilty when I’d attempted to flirt with him. It was as though he had wanted to watch me unseen, and by flirting, I’d exposed his voyeurism.

Sitting in a darkened car with my Dad at 3 a.m., pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together.

I had dozed off when Dad nudged me awake.

“I saw movement,” Dad said. “There was a light in the backyard. I’m going to go check it out.”

Dad eased the car door open silently, and I noticed he'd switched off the dome light.

"There's a .357 on the seat next to you," Dad whispered. "Lock the doors. If I don't come back in fifteen minutes, call the police."

"Okay," I whispered.

I sat in anxious silence for what seemed like an hour, waiting for gunshots.

*

Dad's shadow whipped briefly across a streetlight before disappearing again, and then he was back at the car door.

"He has a room under his shed. The door was open and I saw a trap door inside going into the ground," Dad said. "We're probably going to have to go with an anonymous tip though. Neither of us can justify what we suspect."

"ABE," I whispered, "call the police for us. Block the phone number and disguise your voice. I don't want to answer questions if someone recognizes it at the Tech Fair."

*

Three minutes later, a patrol car rolled quietly up to the house next to Swann's. Two officers got out. The first, a petite female, crept up to the fence and peeked into the back yard. The other, a large male, started banging on the front door and ringing the doorbell. A second car pulled up on the other side of Swann's house, closer to us. One of the men that got out glanced at our car momentarily, but didn't seem to see us. Dad had parked just outside of the streetlight's beam.

"Stay low," Dad whispered, and I sunk even further into my seat. Dad held his cell phone's camera just over the edge of the dashboard like a periscope, and we watched on its screen.

The female cop shouted something to the others, then vaulted the locked gate into the backyard. The two men closest to us scaled the fence while the third remained on the street.

Seconds later, a sharp crack echoed down the street, followed by two more.

Within five minutes, the street in front of Swann's house was a mass of police cars, flashing lights, and a pair of ambulances.

Two EMT's hauled Swann out through the gate on a stretcher, and rolled him into the first ambulance with a police escort. His left leg had been heavily bandaged.

Several minutes later, I watched as the petite female cop escorted a girl about my age through the gate. She'd been wrapped in a blanket, and shuffled slowly to the second ambulance.

"That's Claire," I whispered.

Dad said nothing, but I knew what he was thinking.

"You made the right decision," I said. "If you had shot Swann, the police would be looking for you. You have your own daughter to protect."

He swallowed, still saying nothing. He started the car.

The police didn't even notice as we eased away from the scene.

*

I skipped school the next day. I knew it would be a circus anyway, and I needed to sleep at some point. That afternoon, though, I made my way back to the coffee shop. Martin Hayflick sat in the corner where I'd left him the day before, a new crossword on the table before him.

I set a coffee cup in front of him.

"What's a thirteen-letter word for 'Greek play climax ruiner?'" he asked without looking up.

I thought for a moment. “Try ‘deus ex machina.’ It means ‘god from the machine.’ Gods used to appear onstage, lowered by ropes, and intervene at a point when the plot seemed unrecoverable. It was cheesy.”

“Ah, yes,” Hayflick said. “That fits. You’re good at these, Katherine. I wonder if a ‘machina ex deus’ would have been as bad.”

He flipped the newspaper over to the front page. “I see you had a busy night,” he said. “Did you learn anything?”

“Learn anything? About RFID tracking?”

“No, no,” he said. “Technology is trivial. Did you learn anything about yourself?”

“Oh,” I said. Only my therapist asked questions like that, and I usually told her what she wanted to hear. “I learned that I’m attracted to people like me—misanthropic, sociopathic criminals.”

“Well that’s a start,” Hayflick said, “even if it is a bit harsh. You’re a misguided teenage genius. It’s not easy to direct a fire hose of intellect and hormones.”

“It felt good,” I said finally, “doing that—helping someone that nobody else could help.”

“You find most of humanity boorish, crude, and undeserving of your attention, don’t you?” Hayflick asked. “It’s why you spend most of your time with an electronic entity that meets your standards of conduct and intelligence.”

“Yes.”

“You can love people from a distance, you know,” he said. “You don’t have to rub elbows with the *hoi polloi* until they make you want to throw up. It’s okay to be a recluse, most of the time.”

“You’re saying that I have a responsibility to offer help when I’m the only one that can create a solution.”

“Something like that.”

“That’s very Stan Lee of you,” I said. I couldn’t meet his gaze for some reason. “I still want to look at your perpetual motion machine.”

“Of course,” he said. “A deal’s a deal, after all.”

Hayflick pulled the box from the seat next to him and opened the lid. He removed the peg, as if to demonstrate that it was indeed the same machine, and the wheel spun to life. After a minute, he stopped the wheel with his hand, replaced the peg, and passed the device across the table.

“I know some Latin phrases,” I said, “but I didn’t catch that bit you said yesterday.”

“*Fiat lux*,” Hayflick said. “It means, ‘Let there be light.’ Anyway, have at it. Dissect it for your school paper.”

The wheel detached easily from the axle, and I carefully set it on the table next to the base. I half-expected the axle to start spinning, but it remained motionless. I glanced over at Hayflick, who seemed utterly unconcerned with what I was doing to his contraption.

I noticed several small screws surrounding the axle at the top of the base, and removed these with utmost care. After some initial resistance, I pulled the top off the base and peered inside to find... nothing.

There were no other parts inside the base. I inserted a finger and pushed one of the ball bearings free of its socket.

It was solid, nonmagnetic, and rolled evenly across the table.

“What the heck?” I hissed. This was starting to frustrate me in a way few things ever had.

Martin only smiled at me across the table. Then he folded his newspaper and placed it inside the tattered briefcase on the floor next to his seat.

“Perpetual motion?” he said. “Really? Any such device would violate the first or second laws of thermodynamics. You’re gifted in math and science. You should know that.”

I sat speechless as Martin Hayflick rose from the booth, briefcase in hand.

“Anyway,” he said, ruffling my hair with his hand, “welcome to the human race.”

Then he walked out the door. The jingle of the bell announced his departure, and I was alone once more.

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SECOND PLACE

Jackie Davis Martin's most recent stories appeared in *Flash, Flashquake, Enhance, Counterexample Poetics, Fractured West, Bluestem, and Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, and are included in several current anthologies: *Modern Shorts* (ed. Michelle Richmond), *Love on the Road* (ed. Sam Trantum), *Life is A Rollercoaster* (ed. A.J.Huffman) and *Out Past Loves* (Spruce Mountain). A memoir, *Surviving Susan*, was published in 2012. She teaches at City College of San Francisco.

“Tevye” One Afternoon

by Jackie Davis Martin

Carla lets the auditorium doors slam shut as she runs down the dark aisle. Larry, the lead, is scheduled for four o'clock and it's already ten minutes to. She sets her tape recorder on the stage's edge and unlocks the sound and light booth, throwing the levers for the proscenium lights. In two months she'll watch the show from here—the cage, it's called—watch the students carry on without her. She switches on the aisle lights for atmosphere. In the backstage dressing room she gropes for the lipstick she keeps on a high windowsill. The place reeks pleasingly of old makeup and hairspray; mirrors are wide and illumined by large round bulbs. Carla climbs onto the makeup table and shimmies, practicing the routine she's worked out for Larry. “Larry,” she whispers to the bulb-lit mirror, her lips now painted, and slides off the table, tucking the lipstick back.

She almost collides with him in the stage wings.

“Mrs. Hughes! Hi. I'm early.” He is tall, his light hair is tightly ringleted; he doesn't seem to shave yet although he's a senior. He takes a step forward, unfurling the script of *The Fiddler on the Roof*.

“Well.” She has a full hour with him. “Want to find some chairs?” While he searches in the curtain folds, thwack, thwack, like a modern bushman, she stoops at the edge of the stage to stretch for the electric socket just over its edge, finally flattening herself against the stage floor to reach it. Larry’s there, his loafers near her face. He drops a chair in an effort to assist her up and blushes. “Where do you want these?”

Carla indicates center stage, patting off the stage dust from her jeans and tee shirt—a gesture that seems too sensual—and suggests they talk about the song first. “*If I Were a Rich Man.*”

“If you were,” he says, smiling, waiting for her to sit before he does. “I mean, if you were rich, would you still be doing this?”

Carla smiles too. Students were often dismayed to learn she was paid for after school coaching. “But you’d do it anyway,” they said, presuming her love for them. And it was true; love was there, in varying degrees: the girl who’d played Adelaide, for instance; the Harold Hill boy; Curly with the straight hair that Carla tortured with her curling iron; both Nancy *and* Fagin. And now this boy, this Tevye, especially this boy. She is twice his age; she takes a little breath. “Would I still do it,” she repeats. “Some of it, sure.” Carla plays along and asks what he would do if he were rich.

Larry’s father is a minister who last year let him have the cast party. The rectory house was almost Shaker in its simplicity— stark wooden furniture and bookcases, no rugs. It seemed to be love uncluttered. The father, tall and gray, ladled pink punch; the mother offered heaping trays of cookies. “I guess I never thought about it,” he says.

“Oh,” she says, feeling she’s pried. She pictures the rooms off the upstairs hallway—she was looking for the bathroom—the beds made up with cord bedspreads, their corners sharp, like stage sets.

Larry adjusts his glasses by grasping the edge of their frames, a gesture she finds thoughtful, mature. “I have the song memorized,” he volunteers.

“Good. I thought you might.” He was brilliant in English class, when she was first taken by him. But this isn’t class. She gets back to Tevye, why is it Tevye wants to be rich.

The stage is silent. Carla looks toward the band room where the orchestra should be rehearsing, but she can’t hear any music. Her script slides to the floor.

“Tevye wants to be recognized,” Larry says, retrieving the script and placing it across her knees, his wrist brushing a knee briefly before he sits back. “He wants respect. I don’t think he feels he gets it as a dairy man.”

She nods, her lips parted. Her ex-husband told her he liked the way she looked with her lips parted a bit—softer, he said. She met her boyfriend Chad over a year ago because she’d sat behind a gin and tonic at the singles bar and met his gaze with this exact expression. He had walked towards her with a square confident swagger, but their relationship—an *affair*, really—is going nowhere.

“Don’t you think it’s about respect, Mrs. Hughes?”

Carla closes her mouth. She remembers feeling the opposite—actually shame—two nights ago when her ten-year-old daughter Betsy met her at their front door.

“Mom! You said *nine*. It’s ten *fifteen*.” Betsy was in her pajamas, a scarf of Carla’s fancifully tied around her middle—probably dancing to a song in her room. Carla wanted to hug her but was afraid she reeked of Chad’s aftershave, or even more telltale signs of recent sex. Brooke, a few years older, squints up her eyes when Carla leaves for a few hours, and isn’t much happier when Chad shows up for dinner. “You shouldn’t be out,” Betsy chided. “It’s a *school* night. Brooke already went to bed.”

Now Carla walks pointlessly to the tape player, distancing herself from who she was two nights ago. “Respect. Yes. Is that why Tevye wants to be rich?”

Larry peers over the tops of his frames—a gesture she found disarming in class—and says that Tevye probably wants his Dad’s life, that all his Dad does is pray and meditate. He tells about their vacation in the mountains where his Dad studied all the time. Carla detects a tone of pride and wonders whether Larry wouldn’t rather

have gone swimming or fishing, and then he says, “Except when we went fishing. My Mom was always reading, too.”

The mother—having raised three exceptional kids—is back at college. One of Larry’s sisters is in Carla’s English class; the other, in the *Fiddler* chorus. The family seems as wholesome and unified as the von Trapps of *The Sound of Music*. Her own feels disconnected, like the characters in *A Chorus Line*, lined up and waiting for something to happen.

Carla suggests starting with Tevye’s meditative mood. What does she know of meditation? “Tevye is quiet in his reflection—but then, when he thinks about wealth, he dances with joy.”

“I don’t think I can dance,” Larry says.

She assures him he can, although she can’t imagine Larry’s thin hips gyrating like Zero Mostel’s or Topol’s.

Larry says he’ll try, standing tall and rotating his shoulders to show he’s ready.

Carla drags the chairs back and says to pretend they’re the bench outside the barn. “I’ll give you cues, from the house. I’ll be Golde.”

“My wife.” He smiles; he looks pleased.

“Right.” She points to the piano. “And that’s their house.” She almost says “our.”

“I like the way Tevye talks to God, like God’s right up there.” He gestures toward the prosceniums and they both look up; the lights are so intense they can smell the heat. Carla considers supplications she’s made over the past year: *Dear God, let Chad call, please dear God. Dear God, let me be a better mother*. Nothing’s changed, though. Chad takes advantage, she neglects; it’s been going on too long. “Let’s start,” she says to Larry, walking to the piano and consulting her script. “I’m in the house. You’re over there. *‘Tevye enters, pulling his cart.’*”

Larry arches forward with feigned labor and trudges center stage clutching imaginary poles, to sink with weariness onto the chairs. Carla walks toward him reading the lines of the carping Golde, then returns to the wings.

“*If I were a rich man...*” he begins to sing. His tone is longing, his eyes are half-closed; he seems lost in the dream. “*All day long I’d biddy- biddy-bum...*” Watching him, Carla also feels a longing. He continues, “*I see my wife, my Golde, looking like a rich man’s wife...*”

She’s fallen in love before. Two years ago she sat at the stage’s edge for the dress rehearsal of *Pajama Game* as Babe and Sid turned their heads slowly to one another in the final duet of “Hey, There.” *Am I not seeing things too clear? Is it all going in one ear and out the other?* Carla felt an emotion deep in her stomach for both her teenage leads and the poignancy of their staged love, felt it tug, like a real pain.

“Larry!” she calls out now, catching herself and stopping him in the song to tell him to keep rhythm with the deedle-daidles, like one of those neck-loosening exercises. “Get caught up with your dream.” She wants to sit next to him, be part of what he is being, the old feelings rising, more so, because he’s Larry. “Walk around!” she directs.

Larry drifts randomly around the stage, drawing the staircase of the lyrics in the air, throwing grain to the imaginary chicks and turkeys. He stops and looks at her hopelessly. “It’s not together, is it?”

“It’s getting there.” She turns on the taped music and demonstrates, walking with exaggeration—a pretend Tevye—swinging her arms. Larry is watching her breasts. She remembers Hugh Baxter’s comment last Monday, when, after the faculty meeting Larry suddenly appeared at her classroom. She’d been standing at her doorway, clutching her folder like a schoolgirl, listening to Larry’s story, when her papers suddenly slipped and fanned across the floor. She and Larry were both on their knees, gathering them up, bumping heads, laughing, then, oddly, just leaning back and looking at each other before he helped her up. She’d then rushed off down the hall, past Hugh Baxter’s room. Hugh, who taught history and was on a second or third marriage, called out, “And here’s to you, Mrs. Robinson!” Carla forced an acknowledgment, as though he had been witty.

Now she stops her strutting and talks louder than she needs to. “We really need movement in the next sets of ‘daidles.’ Let’s do a step-bounce. C’mon!” She takes

Larry's hands, pumping the beats so he'll move with her, leading him across stage in her rhythms. *If I were a rich man*, the tape recorder sings. "I move well *with you!*" Larry exclaims above the music.

Oh God, she thinks: Chad's words. Two nights ago Chad had said something similar. Shortly after, he confessed he'd been sleeping with another woman. *Wouldn't have to work hard, daidle deedle daidle...*, the recording sings. It had been awful; she'd cried into the pillow, feeling used. She *was* used. *Daidle daidle daidle deedle dum!*

She and Larry, their clasped hands held high, pantomime a courtly sort of dance across the stage. "If anyone could see us now," he says, delighted. But he continues to hold her hand until she pulls away to crouch over and hit the stop button on the machine.

He is next to her, extending his hand to pull her up. "What else?" She shows him the arm movement, thinking she should have pummeled Chad. She should have walked out.

"You're going to expect me to do this while I'm doing that funny walk, right," Larry is saying. His arms are still bicycling the air.

She laughs. "And wiggle your hips. And sing."

"Of course *you* can do this," he says. When she says she can't sing, Larry says he will. He squares off and takes a step back. "I'll sing and you'll show me what it's supposed to look like." He feigns a cavalier bow toward center stage.

She hesitates; to perform while he watches seems too bold. Larry tilts his head in question, waiting. "Okay," she says and steps forward.

As he sings, Carla improvises a rhythmic walk, then adds a gentle rotation to her hips; she lowers her arms and gyrates her shoulders, shoulders and hips both, her head thrown back, feeling like Salome without her veils. Larry, who has been singing and observing, is now lumbering behind her imitating her movements. Then his voice stops and he darts to the tape recorder to click at the buttons, adjust volume; she waits, arms in the air. Music fills the space, and they start the

refrains again, stepping around and circling each other in a strange ritual. Larry attempts the gyrations, his thin hips grinding back and forth, his arms writhing in air; Carla adds her dressing-room shimmy, tossing her head back and peering at him over her shoulder, until the final lines, where they bump hips, stomp with deliberation, shout together: “*Would it spoil some vast eternal plan! If I were a Wealth! Thee! Man!*” and they wave wildly at the air, loosening shoulders and bobbing heads until they collapse in the chairs. His legs are thrust out next to hers; they breath heavily.

Her voice is a whisper. “I think you’ve got it.”

The *Fiddler* tape has launched into the next song, “Sabbath Prayer,” and Larry jumps up to silence it. He slides back in his seat, smiling. “I feel a little insane,” he says with satisfaction.

If they were to kiss, she wonders, would his lips be warm and firm like Brian’s, her boyfriend from her high school days? Larry’s mouth is slightly open. She asks if it seems right for Tevye. His eyes are watching her lips. “Yeah,” he says, “I guess so. Like—what was that word? Hamlet’s line.” He tilts his head, searching for the word and finding it. “Oh! *Apoplexed*. Like my ‘sense is apoplexed.’ Is that it?” He is back to looking at her mouth.

“That was Gertrude,” she says. “Hamlet was talking to Gertrude. He was saying that *her* sense was.” Larry says he remembers.

He’d called her at home last year. He chose for his assignment Hamlet’s lecture to his mother about her sexual behavior. *What does ‘And reason panders will?’ mean, Mrs. Hughes?* She had to explain that *will* meant sexual desire, too, and that Gertrude had sold out her sense of reason to her desires. Or so Hamlet thought.

They are sitting too close. She should get up. Larry places his hands on his thighs and pushes them toward his knees. He looks at her, then smooths his hands back. It’s so silent she can hear the fabric. If they kiss, he won’t tell anyone, she is sure of that. He’ll be flattered, maybe embarrassed. “Larry.”

“Yes?” He leans forward, toward her; it is so quiet. She sees he does shave.

“Mrs. Hughes?” His voice, his face, is intense, eager. When she says What, he reminds her she said his name. “You said, ‘Larry.’”

His face is right in front of hers—but he’s a *boy*. She could say, Larry, it’s just this once—just once! But, what is she doing, thinking? She’s in charge here. She sits a little straighter. “The song, Larry,” she says, shifting her chair barely an inch. “The song—the final part—has got to be melancholy, almost painful.” If they were to kiss, there would be no going back, nor any going forward, for that matter. How could they even get through the run of the show? And suppose—well, there was no supposing. “It’s just Tevye’s *wish*,” she says.

“I know that,” he says. He seems hurt. Their heads are twelve inches apart.

Dear God, don’t let me do anything stupid, she prays, eyeing the proscenium lights. It would be so tempting to at least hold him. She says, evenly she hopes, “Tevye experiences the delirium, the joy, the *apoplexy*—if you want!—then the letdown. He is Tevye the dairyman, after all.” She is a teacher, a coach; she has daughters. She reaches for her script on the floor.

“Mrs. Hughes.” His blue eyes are searching; he’s not used to getting answers wrong. When she says Yes, he slouches back. “Nothing. I think I can do it.”

She stands and takes a deep breath. Her mouth feels dry, she wets her lips. “What time is it?”

He checks his watch. “Ten after. My mother’s picking me up! I mean, she’s bringing the car by, then I have to take her to her class.” He looks as though he has been caught drinking wine in the church sacristy.

Carla says she has to leave, too. She feels eager to get home, to assume a real character, like a Mom who returns early. She’s heading toward the cage to lock up when Larry says, “Do you love me.”

“What?” She drops her keys.

Larry emerges from the curtains’ folds, having returned the chairs. “Isn’t that what we’re rehearsing tomorrow? Tevye and Golde?”

He means the song! “No,” she says, “that’s next Monday. Luann can’t make tomorrow.” She pulls down the levers for the lights, slams the cage door, and takes a deep breath.

“I think you have a sense of the scene,” she says as they walk up an aisle together, although as she says the words she is not sure what scene.

But she’s going to tell Chad that it’s over, that she deserves better.

Larry stops at the auditorium’s heavy door and waits. “We’ll darken your hair,” she tells him. “Give you a beard. You’ll be great.” There’s nothing she can say to him that won’t complicate things more. She indicates the door, which Larry pushes. She will hug him after each show, as she does the others.

“Thanks for your help,” he says, now in the lobby, where, through the huge glass windows, they can see an old station wagon out front. The real light of early spring reflects off its back window. Larry hands her the tape recorder, then he is out the glass doors, running across the school’s front lawn. His mother walks around the car to get into the passenger side and waves cordially in the direction of Carla and the lobby, although in the bright sun they’re probably not visible. Still, Carla moves away from the large windows, keeping an eye on Larry. He stands at the driver’s side and gestures across the roof of the car. His hand arcs from his face to where he assumes she still is. At first she thinks it’s a salute because it couldn’t possibly be—? But maybe it is. Carla touches her own lips and blows a return kiss, safe on her side of the glass.

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THIRD PLACE

Neil James Hudson has published about thirty stories in various zines, including *On The Premises*—he last appeared with "Aplut" in March 2013, and his story "John Comes Back" took first prize in March 2009. He works as manager of a charity shop in York in the UK. His collection *The End of the World: A User's Guide* can be ordered from his website at www.neiljameshudson.net.

A Language of Regret

by Neil James Hudson

Arianna had no idea why she always accepted tea when Professor Hindle knew full well that she drank coffee. But once again she sipped at the hot liquid, wishing that she could hypnotize her taste buds into believing it was something else.

"I suppose I should get to the point," said the older woman. "I was reminded recently of something you said at our first tutorial. I seem to remember we were discussing how the English subjunctive was falling into disuse."

"How could they?" exclaimed Arianna, almost throwing her tea cup down onto the saucer so she could use both hands to gesticulate. "The subjunctive is amazing! It's like having a whole new language hidden inside the first one. All the same words, but change the endings, and bam! Everything means something slightly different. Not a change of meaning, but a change of mood. Everything is about possibilities, things that could have been, wishes and regrets, instead of simply describing things. All just hiding behind the original words, for those that know how to read them. And English, which has produced some of the finest poetry and literature in human civilization, just let it—" Abruptly, she noticed that the

Professor was smiling gently at her. She picked up her cup again. “I think that’s what I said at the tutorial,” she said more quietly.

“It is. And it made me wonder if you might be interested in something I’ve been working on.”

“Honestly, I’m a little busy—”

“I was interested in secret languages—languages so different from anything anyone else spoke, that it would be nearly impossible to learn them. Then I decided to drop the ‘nearly’. I wondered if there were actually languages that we simply couldn’t learn.” She took a piece of paper from the table beside her and handed it over. Arianna looked at it, puzzled. There were six words on it, in Roman alphabet, but otherwise she couldn’t work out which language they were in, if any.

“Say the first word on the list,” said the Professor.

Arianna tried to pronounce it. It seemed to have four syllables.

“Now say it again,” urged the Professor.

Again Arianna looked at the list, and read the first word from it.

“From memory.”

She couldn’t quite remember what she’d just said, and looked at the list again.

“I became convinced that there were words that our brains were simply hard-wired not to learn. I’ve spent a lot of time on this—generating syllables randomly, then trying to remember what I’d come up with. To be honest, you’re here as an experiment. I wanted to know if you’d have the same blocks as I have. It seems you do.”

“That’s rubbish,” said Arianna. She looked at the list again and memorized the nonsense words on it. Then she turned the paper face down, and tried to recite what she’d seen. She couldn’t.

“Just six words. But they can’t be learned. There you go, Arianna. There’s your hidden language.”

Arianna tried to hand the paper back, suspecting she was the victim of a psychological trick, but the Professor refused it. “This is yours, now. I’m at the end of my career. You’re at the beginning of it. Don’t become some dried-up academic, Arianna—make a name for yourself. Learn this language.”

“Why?”

The Professor shrugged. “For the mystery of it. Don’t you relish a challenge? And besides: our brains have evolved so that they can’t learn these words. They must evolve further. If we can manage to store them in memory, we’ll have moved on in evolution. Who knows what else we can do?”

Arianna studied her tutor for a few seconds, wondering if one or both of them were mad. Then she said, “okay.” She looked down at the unlearnable words again. “I’ll keep these, and I’ll do what I can with them. But you’ve made a mistake, Professor. You’ve got evolution wrong. If our brains evolved not to be able to learn certain words, there must be a survival value in that. People who can remember them must be more likely to die.”

She stared at the paper again, and the tea went cold.

*

In fact Arianna did nothing more about it. There wasn’t really anything she could do. She made a few more attempts to learn the words, trying memory systems and tricks such as breaking them into parts that she could remember, but the complete words wouldn’t stay in her memory and that was that. She agreed with the Professor that the reason was probably physiological rather than psychological, and couldn’t see any way of overcoming this. So although it was a curiosity, she gave it very little thought until Professor Hindle’s death.

Her body was recovered from the university lake, an attractive area but one that occasionally claimed the lives of depressed students. Her death was the subject of

considerable gossip and speculation, and although it was officially ruled an accident, no one could imagine why she had been there except to end her own life.

As far as her own research was concerned (as by now she was a postgraduate student, on an inevitable track to an academic career) she was transferred to another supervisor, a younger man whom she found less likeable and expert than Professor Hindle. She found that she missed the older woman, believing that all professors should be eccentric in some way, and have a nagging lifelong minor obsession that would prove entirely fruitless. She certainly did not expect that the Professor had left her any of her effects.

It was her new supervisor, Dr. Peter Williams, who handed the files over, along with a solicitor's letter formally allowing her ownership. She guessed that Dr. Williams was annoyed at not being allowed to keep them himself. "I've had a glance through, but I can't make a lot of sense of it," he said. There were five box files, which she piled up jealously and took back to her room, only dropping them once.

She didn't have time to look through them until the weekend. The files didn't seem to be in any particular order, but she numbered them anyway and opened the first one, hoping to catalogue the contents.

She couldn't make any sense of it herself on a first look. She couldn't always understand the Professor's writing, and had no idea what the notes were actually about.

She had started on the second box before she began to suspect what was going on. As she tried to compare the new pages with the old ones, she realized that she had no idea what she had just read in the first box. She returned to it, looked at the first page. Inflections of nouns, by the looks. She read the rules until she understood it well enough. Then she closed the lid.

No recall of it whatsoever.

She had a quick look through the other boxes. She was able to estimate how much material was here. Enough, she thought, to codify an entire language, although the vocabulary would be woefully incomplete.

Professor Hindle had not come up with this by playing random syllables and noting down the ones she couldn't remember. She had found a language that humans couldn't learn, and learnt it.

*

"These are only six words," said Daniel.

"You've already got a coffee stain on the paper," said Arianna. "I think I was sensible to leave the rest of it at home."

She had wondered if in fact it was wise to meet in public at all, but she wasn't in a spy film, and besides, she didn't know Daniel well enough to know if he'd misinterpret an invitation to her room. He looked harmless enough, with a small goatee that made him look intelligent without being too geeky. But she also suspected he'd rather have been conversing online.

"But you say the whole language has been analyzed and transcribed."

"I wouldn't say all of it. Some of the grammar seems to be missing, and the vocabulary leaves a lot to be desired."

It had taken Daniel only a single glance at the page to understand that the words couldn't be memorized. She still occasionally made efforts to learn them, hoping to snap out of the spell, but he seemed to have accepted the evidence in front of him immediately, and already seemed preoccupied with the problem of how to program it.

"So," he said, "you can understand and remember what the language structures are, just not the words and phonemes that are attached to them."

"That's exactly it. There's a simple past tense, for example, that's formed by adding a prefix to the verb stem. But I can't tell you what the prefix is."

Daniel had only recently graduated, but he specialized in computer modeling of languages, and was reckoned to be far in advance of his supposed tutors. And also, she wanted to keep a measure of control over the language and its release into the

wider world. She didn't quite trust her own tutors: but then, she didn't quite trust Daniel either.

"Assuming the syntax isn't completely bizarre, it should be a simple task to model the language in computer code. That opens the door to translation. It's done all the time with existing languages. Of course the translations aren't perfect, but they're near enough and we'll only need a rough and ready version." He drank from his coffee, but seemed to be sizing her up. She wasn't sure what for. "What's missing then?"

"Well. There doesn't seem to be a future tense."

He stopped drinking.

She carried on.

"The nearest I've got is that you can say, *-I was going to do*, or *-I would have done*. The Professor doesn't seem to have worked out how to say *-I will do-*."

"But those are far more complicated constructions than a simple future tense. Who did she learn this from?"

She shrugged in reply. She had looked through the Professor's notes, searching for some kind of clue, but had no idea.

"Okay, here's an easier one. Why are you so bothered? The language doesn't want to be learned, so why learn it?"

"All languages want to be learned. That's what they're for. The difficulty of a language only lies in how far it is from your own thought processes. When you learn a language, you learn the people who speak it. You can think other people's thoughts. You bridge the gap that's always..." She trailed off, not wanting to give the impression that her affair with languages made up for some deficiency in her relationships.

"One last question, then. What kind of people use a language without a future tense?"

This time she couldn't even shrug.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'm curious to see what happens. The computer should be able to learn it, even if people can't. But when you can speak this language, I think you should give more thought over who you're speaking to."

With extreme reluctance, she invited him to her room to look at the Professor's notes.

*

Daniel took them away. She didn't want him to, but as he pointed out he could hardly work from memory. She made him write her a receipt for them, but felt stupid at doing so, unsure what kind of redress she could seek if he didn't return them.

As she lay in bed that night, she heard the voices again. There was more of an insistence, and she convinced herself that although she heard many voices, it was a single person. The voices must have been generated inside her own head, as her brain tried to make sense of the meaningless messages it was receiving. But she still couldn't understand what was being said.

In the morning she remembered her thoughts, but could not remember any of the words. At first she felt silly at having thought the voices were independent of her. But slowly she became convinced that they had been speaking in the language that Professor Hindle had discovered. The language that Daniel was busily programming into computer code. If he succeeded, she might find a way of understanding the voices, and speaking back.

*

Daniel was not hurrying as much as she hoped, but he kept in regular contact, partly to update her on progress and partly to ask her advice on certain parts of the language. He was as incapable of remembering the words as she was, and wasn't always clear what a particular piece of syntax might refer to. She often had to consult the notes herself, and was relieved that he was keeping them safe and ordered.

“Are you sure the computer will be able to learn the language?” she asked him at one of their progress meetings.

“It is learning it,” he said, giving her an odd look. “This is biology, not magic. Our brains can’t learn it because they’ve evolved not to. But computers aren’t built in the same way. It’s nothing to do with intelligence or understanding. It’s just that even the most basic device hasn’t got the same blocks that we have.”

“Then why is it taking so long?” She tried not to sound impatient, and he didn’t seem to take offense.

“I can’t just type it in. I have to scan it optically. That’s not difficult in itself, but I don’t think much to your friend’s handwriting. Mistakes get made under the best of circumstances, and I can’t double-check it myself. The best I can do is run algorithms to make sure that nothing that gets added to the language contradicts what I’ve already programmed.”

Today she had finally accepted a coffee in his room, although she was still worried that he might be trying to seduce her rather than discuss business. He had been particularly keen to talk, though.

“Arianna, I still think you haven’t thought this through. That business about the future tense. It’s not just missing—I’d swear it’s simply not part of the language. There are no clues to it in the remaining language. You can’t even say something nonsensical such as *I did it tomorrow*. There’s no way of expressing *tomorrow*. *Next week* doesn’t work either: *next* only seems to have meaning when referring to something that’s already happened, or in the sense of *adjacent to*. That’s one of the things that’s taking so long—it just doesn’t match up with any language I’ve ever come across. It’s not just a partially transcribed language, it’s one that was specifically designed—or rather evolved—not to have a future tense.”

Arianna sipped at her coffee carefully, as if he might have drugged it. “But isn’t that what’s so great about learning other languages? It’s their differences that matter. They show you how other people think.” This is a language of regret, she thought. You could dwell on what you’d done, what you wanted to do, what you could have done. But not what you will do.

“These are people who don’t perceive a future. And there’s a survival value in not being able to speak it. Think about that. It’s not just that the other languages won—it’s that speaking this language actually makes you less likely to survive. Who are you trying to talk to, Arianna?”

But she still had no answer to that. “Languages evolve as well as organisms,” she said. “And they can be made to evolve. If it’s got no future tense, it can be designed. All you have to do is change parts of the words. It would be like the subjunctive. The words would still mean the same thing, but they’ll be used in a different way. For those who know the secret, there’ll be a whole second language hiding within the first.”

“For those who know. What if they can’t know?”

And she could still hear the syllables in her head, the utterances that she felt were being repeated, but which she couldn’t hold on to. But she knew there was a message, something that she needed to know. If only Daniel could teach his computer to speak it.

*

She suspected that Daniel had finished the work long before he admitted to it. He turned up at her room, unannounced and unceremonious, with the Professor’s boxes, a USB stick and a few peripherals. “These belong to you,” he said, dumping the boxes on her desk. “And these are because I presume it didn’t occur to you to rig up a sensible microphone and speakers.”

“I thought the built-in ones would be enough,” she said.

“Firstly we need to install a program to record everything that comes in and out of the translator,” he said, taking charge of her laptop without asking. She was relieved that she’d closed down her journal when he knocked, and she wondered if he were installing some kind of spyware. “Then the translator itself. After that, it’s all yours.”

She waited impatiently for the software to install. It occurred to her to offer him coffee, but she simply didn’t want him staying any longer than necessary.

“Now it’s all go,” he said. “Two options, English and Hindlish. Unless you’ve thought of a better name for the language? There doesn’t seem to be one in the Professor’s notes.

“I’ve not given it any thought,” she said.

There was a second’s gap, then her own voice came out of the speaker. But it wasn’t speaking any words she recognized. And then she realized that she couldn’t remember any of the sounds.

“Your first words,” said Daniel. “And very apt they are too. Here.” He handed her the first paper that the Professor had given her, the one with the six words. “Read these out.”

She read the first one.

“Response,” said her own voice from the computer. She tried the second. “Chair.” The third was “owing”.

“They don’t tell you anything, they’re just random,” said Daniel. “These are from when the Professor was generating random syllables and recording the ones she couldn’t remember. I still don’t know who taught her the language itself.”

“I’ll learn it,” said Arianna. There was silence from the loudspeaker.

“I only want you to promise me one thing,” said Daniel. “Don’t do this on your own. Make sure I’m here as well. Or get one of your tutors involved, or even another student. But don’t do it on your own. There’s something very wrong with this.”

She shoed him out, no longer caring if she seemed rude.

That night she left the program running, and left the microphone by her pillow. She was aware of the voices speaking to her, at the back of her mind where they were drowned out by her own excitement. She knew that they would not clarify until she had stopped her own conscious thoughts, and she found this impossible to do. Usually she had no trouble dropping off to sleep, but tonight she just couldn’t empty her mind.

She was sure that she had lain awake for a couple of hours before her mind began to cloud over. Only then did she hear a voice clearly enough for her to make out the syllables.

She repeated the syllables out loud as soon as she heard them, becoming fully awake in an instant. Already, she could not remember what she had just said, but she had been able to repeat them instantly, as if she were repeating them off the page.

There was a short pause, and then her voice came out of the loudspeaker. "Stop," it said.

She spoke into the microphone urgently. "Stop what?" she said. But her mind was fully alert, and she could hear no more voices. And when she fell asleep again, after what seemed to be more hours, she wasn't aware of the gray time between awareness and sleep.

*

"That's exactly what I asked you not to do," Daniel said when he tracked her down the next day.

"I had to try it," she said, feeling like a scolded child. She was actually surprised to see him angry.

"You do know what it wants you to stop?"

"I can't back out of it now. I can change the language, Daniel. I can give them what they don't have. A future tense."

"And who do you think spoke to you?"

"I can't say for certain. I can't say why I think this. But I think it was Professor Hindle."

"Who is?"

Finally she said the word. Daniel must have guessed from the outset, but it was an idea that had built up slowly in her own mind. “Dead,” she admitted.

“If a dead person gave me an order, I’d take it seriously. Don’t use the program again, Arianna. Not until there’s someone else there.”

All she needed was a prefix, she thought. Just one that wasn’t already in use. She could work that out by trial and error—if the prefix already meant something, the translator would tell her. Then once the tense was constructed, she could teach it. And Professor Hindle would be the ideal student.

“Thursday night,” said Daniel. “I’ll be free then. I can come and watch you. If that isn’t too creepy for you. I assure you I’ll be the perfect gentleman.” She thought she could detect sarcasm in that, and she realized belatedly that he might be annoyed at her for not trusting him. “Just don’t take this any further before then. You can wait two nights.”

She was already thinking of the syllables she’d try.

“I can wait until Thursday,” she said. And she reckoned that he probably knew she was lying.

*

The new tense was ready in an hour or two. It seemed to be an ugly add-on to the language, not really joining it organically. But there it was. All she had to do was teach it.

But could you really teach the future to people who had no concept of it? And what would happen? Would the dead come alive?

This has to be right, she thought. The Professor still existed in some way. Her work wasn’t finished, let alone her life. She had to be given a way of communicating with the living.

Suppose the dead could learn to interact directly with the translator program. They would have their own speech. Artificial bodies could be created one day, not too far off. The dead would live again. All they needed was a future tense.

This time she found it simple to doze off that night, and she spoke out the syllables she heard without waking herself fully.

“Stop,” said her own voice from the laptop. “You must not learn our language.”

“I can change it,” she said in English. “I can add to it.”

The laptop translated her voice into strangely familiar syllables.

“Our language is for us, not you,” said the voice. She had been right: it was beginning to sound like the Professor. “You cannot speak it.”

“Why not?” she said.

“If you had learnt it, you would have become like us.”

“You would have become like me,” she said.

“No,” said the Professor. “No one changed the language. The language changed them. When you have learnt this language, your brain has changed. The doors that were closed became opened. Or, the open ones became closed.”

“I had something new to teach you.”

“Oh, Arianna,” said the Professor. “I tried to warn you.” It was a language of regret.

“I would have taught you the future tense,” said Arianna. That wasn’t right. “I could have taught you it. No, I did teach you. Only I didn’t. Come on Arianna, how were you going to say this?”

She was no longer speaking out loud, she realized.

“The language changed you,” said the Professor again, and Arianna knew that she understood what she had said, and was speaking the same language herself. “You became one of us when you began to speak the language. There is only the past. There has only ever been the past. Everything you wanted to do, you have not done.”

She was only dimly aware of her room now. She knew that she was still in her bed, but in some way she was receding from it.

“I was going to change the language,” said Arianna, in her new language, the language that had only a past. She had discovered why the brain resisted this language. She knew what particular structures had to operate in the brain so that it could use and understand it. This was the language of people whose brains had stopped, and now it was hers.

“It’s too late,” said the Professor. “Everything’s too late.”

She was still dimly aware of the world that she was leaving.

“There’s someone in the room,” she sensed. She was aware of being shaken, but it was too faint a sensation for her even to be irritated. “I think it’s Daniel.”

“Too late,” repeated the Professor.

“I should have said sorry,” she said, in her mind, where only the Professor could hear, although by now she felt that her mind was no longer inside her head. “I was going to say sorry.”

“You can’t.”

“I would have said sorry,” she tried again. “I didn’t say sorry.” She still had a vague idea that there was a way of doing so. She tried the subjunctive. “Had I said sorry, I might have lived. Were I to say sorry, I might live.”

She had thought that she could save everyone, but all she had done was cross over to join them. She thought again of the poor man who was trying to save her, who had warned her from the start, and whom she had treated only with suspicion. She felt nothing for herself, only pity for him. The unfairness of it tore at her. She saw that there was a core of anger to her, which flared up now into fury at the universe and the way the dice fell for those who tried to live in it.

“I will say sorry!” she yelled out, sitting suddenly upright in her bed and throwing off the desperate young man who had been trying to revive her. They stared at each other for a few seconds, both breathing heavily.

“That was useless,” she said finally. “If you were going to do chest compressions, I should have been on the floor, not the bed.”

He looked away, and she realized she was naked. She pulled the bedclothes over herself.

“Sorry to whom?” he said.

“No one,” she said. She could always do it later.

*

“These are only six words,” said Shauna, not even bothering to try to remember them.

“I don’t care,” said Arianna. “I want you to learn them.”

“Then why couldn’t you put them on a stick?”

She felt old. Young people cared nothing for actually learning nowadays. They just thought they could plug the knowledge into their brains and have done with it.

“Because I want you to try the old way first. You need to know why it’s important.”

But Shauna was surely right. This was the way forward, that hadn’t been available to Professor Hindle, and hadn’t been available to herself for most of her life. Arianna had avoided the language for most of her career, but had kept the Professor’s notes and Daniel’s program safe, and hidden. She knew that one day, it would be possible to take it up again.

And now she was sure that the time had come. As brains and computers were merging, the language could be held on the artificial part of your mind, while being accessed by the flesh part. You could run it on cells that had never been alive in the first place.

Shauna took the paper and left without saying a word. It seemed rude to Arianna, but that was the manners of the young for you. And Shauna was clever. There was no question about it, she was one of the most gifted linguists the university had

seen, although so far only Arianna believed this. As long as the girl could find something to focus her talents on, she'd far surpass her tutor.

Shauna, she thought, was the person who had been about to change the language.

No, that wasn't right. She was the person who could have changed it. Should have changed it.

"It's time, then," she said aloud.

"It's time," said the Professor.

"I haven't labeled the files. Shauna hasn't taken them. I need more time."

"I didn't choose the hour," said the Professor. "And you've done well. The files are Shauna's. And you chose the right person."

Arianna tried to stand up, but couldn't. "Why are you here?"

"So you weren't alone when it happened."

Her chest hurt, and she could guess why.

She had done all she would do. And to her mild surprise, she didn't mind. She had never said sorry to Daniel, but he'd got the message. And she'd passed on the language to Shauna. Perhaps she could have written the new tense herself. Perhaps she could have found the way of teaching it.

But she hadn't. And Daniel had gone, just as the Professor had gone, and now she was gone. And she had only a language of regret.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Melinda says, "By day I am a corporate controller for a motorcycle manufacturer but by night I mutate into a fiction writer. I actually only started writing about a year ago after my husband died and I found myself with a lot of time on my hands."

This story is her first publishing credit. She is currently marketing a science fiction novel. She lives in south central Pennsylvania with her two dogs, Bear and Peekaboo.

Pick Your Poison

by Melinda Newmin

Uncle Walter lifted his left brow as he considered my request. Didn't look happy about it. Puzzled maybe. Or annoyed. I'd never been good at reading Uncle Walter. Hadn't been particularly good at much of anything, truth be told.

"You want to learn to pick locks?" he repeated, chomping on a celery stick with what was left of his smoke stained teeth. He winced as he swallowed. He winced at pretty much everything these days. He was sick but would never tell me what ailed him.

I nodded eagerly.

"I suppose that might be a good idea," he commented, pointing at my face with the celery stick. "You need to find yourself a way to make a living that doesn't end with your face planted in someone else's fist."

I felt my face grow red with embarrassment where it wasn't already red from the pounding it had taken. I'd been making a living, as Uncle Walter liked to put it, by

ripping off the dudes selling crack on the Block. Seemed like an easy way to make a buck when I first thought of it. I mean, what crack dealer was gonna run to the police and yell he'd been robbed? And that Marty fool who worked Lombard Street was about as dumb as they came, keeping his stash in his back pocket, bulging like he had a tumor on his ass. Too busy messing with the girls was Marty, thinking he was fly and would get himself some. I'd practiced till I got good and then I started picking that pocket. Got five hundred bucks the first time I hit him, and a couple of hundred the second. But Marty wasn't the only dumb man on the Block. Seems I was as dumb as he was because the third night when I went to pick him his buddies were there. All eight of 'em. Worked me over but good. Three days later my face was still swollen and there was a tooth rocking as if it couldn't make up its mind if it should stay or go.

Uncle Walter had taken pity on me that night when I limped to his house looking for a place to hide. There was no way I could go home looking like that and Uncle Walter was no man to judge. Took one look at me then let me in so's my mama wouldn't see my face looking like an uncooked hamburger patty. Packed me with ice, shoved a beer in my hand, and told me I was one lucky son of a bitch. Anyone else would have ended up dead.

Thus ended my career as a pickpocket. In the dumpster like the career before it, snatching purses from little old ladies. That had ended just as badly when I chose the wrong little old lady. Oh, she couldn't put up much of a fight, but damned if her grandson hadn't won a state boxing championship. Kicked my ass from here to Cleveland that boy did. Lucky for me he was too buff to run very fast and I outclassed him in the fifty yard dash.

Yeah, maybe it was time to find a crime that paid cash money but didn't involve direct contact with the victim. Lock picking sounded safe enough.

"So will you teach me?" I asked my uncle.

He grunted at me and took a swig of his beer. It was the only thing that made him happy these days, that and me hanging around. No one else bothered with Walter. Washed up my papa called him. A good for nothing wastrel exclaimed Aunt June. Wasn't invited to the family reunions and no one had him over for dinner. The

family pariah, he declared himself. Not that our family had covered itself in glory, he'd snarl on those Friday nights when he'd had too much to drink and the sickness was making him ache. Papa was nothing but a day laborer, he'd sniff, and Aunt June married herself a preacher man done got her pregnant at the same time he knocked up his secretary, and now the poor woman was raising both them kids. Made no sense, Uncle Walter would complain. Just because he'd done his time didn't make him any less a man.

He'd spent his youth chasing crime just like me, trying to get one up on those who had more than he did. Stole cars and claimed once to have robbed a train, although I had my doubts. Did a dime for assault with a deadly weapon then a nickel five years later when he stole a city bus. Now he was just old and tired and getting sick. Retired, he'd like to say, like ex-cons had pensions or something. What little hair he still had was totally white and stood up on end like he was perpetually frightened. On that hot summer's day he was wearing his favorite tank shirt, stained with grease from working on the Chevy. It hung loose on him now where once it could barely cover his paunch. That's how I knew he was sick. He'd lost his beer belly while still slugging away the beers.

After giving me a long hard look, Uncle Walter tossed his empty over his shoulder and dragged himself to his feet. "All right, Jojo. Let me teach you something of value."

Grunting with every step he took, Walter stomped in his bare feet into what he called his office which was actually the three foot square necessary, the second room in his two room apartment. I watched him as he dug in some worn cardboard boxes and heard him make some different kind of grunt and then he was coming back, a leather wallet in his hand.

He looked me hard in the eye, old man to young, like he was the passing of the torch. "Listen close, lad, cause this is good stuff. I'm gonna teach you the single most important thing I know."

He handed me the wallet.

Inside was a set of professional lock picks. Stainless steel and worn with time. I could tell his hands had used those things long ago in a different life, maybe even when he was my age.

“That there is the wrench,” he explained, pointing to a bit of metal that looked to me like an Allen wrench. “And those are the different picks.”

“Why so many?” I asked, fingering the various tools and wondering about the different shapes.

“Different picks for different locks. And different lock pickers. You’ll develop your own favorites after a while.”

Uncle Walter plopped a padlock into my hand. Like the picks it was worn and tarnished. “Use that to practice on.”

He then explained to me the mystery that was the humble lock, telling me things I was sure no one else knew. The average lock, he said, was a simple thing. Most anything a man might want to break into was probably protected by a pin tumbler lock. Almost all doors, desk drawers, cash boxes and such used that most common type of lock and were therefore the easiest to open. Far tougher were magnetic and electronic locks but for my purposes I only needed to know the basics. Uncle Walter knew what I was after, easy money, and that could be found behind a pin tumbler lock.

To open one took a little bit of knowledge, delicate hands and a good sense of touch, he told me, because a man’s eyes were useless when it came to picking locks. The art existed all in the fingers. He showed me using the old padlock.

The lock is made up of pins set in pairs, he said, held in place by springs that kept them tensioned. When a key is inserted in the lock, its ridges and low points push the pins to the proper position, moving the upper pin out of the way of the cylinder so that the cylinder can turn. If even one pin wasn’t pushed up out of the way, it blocked the cylinder and the lock stayed locked. So the trick, he said, was to get those pins to rise up and stay there without the use of the key. To do that you used the wrench.

He showed me by inserting the wrench into the keyhole and with his thumb shoved it to one side as far as it would go before the pins engaged to hold the cylinder. The trick was to keep up just the right amount of pressure for that particular lock. You wanted the cylinder to be slightly misaligned so when you pushed the pins up they got stuck on the little ledge caused by the misalignment, he said. Then it was just a matter of using the pick to push each pin up until it passed the wall of the cylinder and got caught on the ledge, setting itself. Once all the pins were set the cylinder would turn as if there was a key inside.

Voila! He cranked the wrench and the padlock opened.

“It’s really just a matter of developing a feel for the lock and the movement of the pins. Listen for the clicks that tell you if you’ve set a pin or lost one. Keep trying until you get it right. Eventually you’ll be quick as lightening just like your Uncle Walt.”

I grinned at him, my eyes aglow like he’d handed me the keys to White Castle. I couldn’t believe picking locks could be so simple. It was a wonder everyone wasn’t doing it.

Seeing the avarice gleaming in my eyes, Uncle Walter slapped me on the shoulder and gave me a shake. “Just make sure you don’t get caught,” he said in warning, flopping into his worn brown recliner. “You don’t want to end up in the can like me.”

I shrugged, uncaring. “Don’t mean nothing to me if I do, Uncle Walt. It’s not like I’d be the first guy on Guilford Street to go to jail.” Eagerly I started fooling with the lock.

Uncle Walter snapped open another beer and took a long chug of it before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Don’t be so eager to join the brethren,” he commented, his gray green eyes watching me sharply. “It ain’t a picnic being in prison.” When I shrugged again and kept working the lock, he leaned forward, his hands holding his beer between his knees. “I might have been someone once, Jojo. But prison stole any chance from me. I won’t bore you with the details, but I’ll tell you this. If it hadn’t been for prison, I wouldn’t be sick.”

That caught my attention. Uncle Walter never talked about his illness.

“What’s it you got?” I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. “Nothing good and nothing I can lose. Caught it when I was about your age, the first time I went to prison. I was a handsome kid then just like you. Pretty.” His eyes pierced mine, holding them fixed. “Don’t pay to be a pretty kid when you’re in prison, Jojo, if you get my meaning.”

I blinked at him in shock and surprise, expecting a lot of things but not that. “AIDS, Uncle Walt? You got the plague?”

He nodded slowly and sadly then sunk into his recliner like he was becoming a part of it. He turned his attention to the TV and Vanna White who was dishing out consonants. He was done talking for the day.

I turned my attention to the lock and after an hour I finally broke it. With a whoop I showed him and he smiled. Then I did it a second time and a third. That was all the encouragement I needed. I locked myself out of the apartment and broke back in. I picked the lock he used to keep his gun safe. I even picked the lock little Eddie Tutman used to chain up his bicycle next door just to show Uncle Walter that I could. Then I locked it up again. I wasn’t so low I was stealing a bicycle from some eight-year-old kid.

My eyes spied Uncle Walter’s old lockbox-style safe and with glinting eyes I was on it. Then, to my surprise, Uncle Walter yelled at me.

“Ack! Get away from that! You ain’t got no business in my safe.”

“I was just going to practice some more,” I complained, still eyeing the safe the way a shark eyed the legs of a surfer.

Uncle Walter climbed to his feet and made his painful way to my side. Putting his arm around my shoulder, he pointed at the safe. “That, Jojo, belongs to no one but me. It contains everything left I hold dear in this life and I don’t want you messing with it.” He looked me hard in the eye. “The single most valuable thing I have in this world I keep locked in that safe. Don’t you be messing with it, hear?”

Disappointed I nodded. As he wandered to the kitchenette to find beer number three, I continued to study that wall safe with greedy eyes. Oh yeah, I was breaking into that safe. If only to see what he kept in there.

Over the next two days I practiced my new trade. I broke into my parents' bedroom and stole some jewelry that I sold for cash to buy some smokes. Then it was the lock on pop's junker Ford to see if car thieving was in my future. Pretty soon I could work every lock in the house and was making my way down the street, just practicing on buildings I knew were empty. I still took way too long to pick a lock. According to Uncle Walter, a good pick could open a lock in a couple of seconds. The faster the better to keep from being caught. I timed myself and worked to be faster. Soon, I thought. The city of Baltimore wasn't gonna be safe.

And speaking of safes, that damned safe of Uncle Walter's continued to beckon me. When I came by his place to offer him pizza I'd study it and wonder what he could keep in there that could be worth anything at all. He had nothing as far as I knew. Just the ratty furniture in that apartment that he'd inherited from the prior occupant and the few clothes he occasionally wore. Sometimes he'd catch me looking, scruff my hair and laugh at me.

"The most valuable thing in the world, Jojo!" he chuckled. "At least to me. Maybe you wouldn't see it that way. Who knows?"

But he wouldn't open it or let me break in.

I couldn't sneak in when he was away either. I knew I could pick the lock to his door any time I liked but Uncle Walter never left home. Aunt June brought him his groceries in return for him giving her his benefit check. She made out on the deal, I was sure. I could tell because even on benefit day there was never much food in that chest fridge he kept in the kitchenette. Half the time I had to bring him something. He slept in the recliner and never slept deeply. The slightest noise brought him grunting awake, so I knew I couldn't pick that lock with him in the room. So I waited and bided me time. And learned my trade so as I could keep him and me hip deep in beer.

That's why it surprised me as we were sitting there watching Judge Mathis when Aunt June came stomping in demanding he get his sorry ass out of that recliner. Uncle Walter complained and bellowed, but Aunt June would have her way. She'd come all the way from Hell's Point to drive her brother to his damned appointment with the oncologist so he'd better get himself moving so they weren't late. Uncle Walter shrugged philosophically at me.

"Gotta get the blood work done," he said. "They's just gonna tell me I've got a year to live. Don't know why they need my blood to tell me that."

Aunt June was huffing at him and hitting him with her purse. Grumbling, he tottered out the door, shoving me out of the apartment in front of him. He pulled the door closed and checked that it was locked. He winked at me with a conspiratorial grin that said you and me know the secret. Aunt June didn't care. She was yelling at him to get his sorry ass into the Lincoln; she didn't have time for Walter's nonsense. He tumbled in and slammed the door. With a roar of exhaust, Aunt June was gone, hauling poor Uncle Walter to his date with the vampires, the only social life he had.

It was late afternoon and hot as Hades in Baltimore. I looked around but nothing was moving on Guilford Street. Little Eddie Tutman was down at the "Y" like every day in the summer instead of playing in the street. Old widow Baker was hiding inside her brownstone across the way with her giant fan cranked to hurricane while she watched her soaps at fifty decibels. And the Handelman kids were probably down at the harbor hassling women and trying to get laid. Wouldn't be seeing them for a while. Alone on Guilford Street I eyed Uncle Walter's door like a vulture eyeing a road kill squirrel. Easy pickings.

I checked one last time for watching eyes then seeing none stole up onto Uncle Walter's porch. I knelt down, feeling a little safer behind the shelter of the balustrade as I pulled out my leather wallet. My favorite pick and the wrench fell easily into my hand and with only a few twists I heard the lock give. Victory.

I slipped into the apartment.

There it was, almost singing like the angels of glory. Uncle Walter's safe. Just a look, I told myself. Even if the riches of Solomon were inside, I wasn't going to touch them, I promised. Well, maybe. Depending on just how rich the stash was.

I dropped to my knees and started working the lock. It was a good one, unlike the one on the door. Uncle Walter didn't have much to protect so he didn't bother with a fancy door, but there was something of value hiding in that safe. I could tell just by the quality of its lock. Try number one failed when my sweaty hands wouldn't grip the tools and they slid onto the floor. On try number two I got two of the pins to set but was fighting with the third when I heard a siren just outside. Jumping, I lost my set and knelt in the dim heat of Uncle Walter's apartment, heart in my throat, waiting for the end to come. It didn't. I had to start again. Try number three and four didn't go well. Then finally on try number five I hit it. I heard the clicks. The wrench turned. The door opened.

I looked inside.

To find nothing.

I was so shocked I just stood there for a second staring at the empty box. There was nothing inside. Nothing at all. Except a little blinking light in the upper corner. I stuck my hand in to see what it was and found it was a piece of something electronic. A camera staring right back at me and it was on. What the fuck?

From somewhere distant I heard more sirens. Panicking I pulled out of the safe and slammed the door shut, knowing that safe had a silent alarm. It didn't matter, I told myself. I was in my uncle's apartment and hadn't taken anything. It wasn't like I'd broken the law. I tucked my tools into the wallet and shoved that in my back pocket. Then I was racing to the door to get outside.

Even as I pulled open the door I knew I was in trouble. There on the porch stood three of Baltimore's finest, service revolvers in their hands. I yelped and tried to back pedal into the apartment but they grabbed me faster than a cat on a mouse. They whirled me around and suddenly I felt the cold steel of handcuffs closing in on me.

"But it's my Uncle Walter's house!" I whined. "I didn't do nothing!"

“Tell that to the judge,” the huge policeman snapped. A pat down revealed the wallet and a quick look told them all they needed to know. Busted. The evidence right there in my pocket. I really was a stupid fuck.

I was jerked into the street and shoved into a police car. Then it was the ten minute ride to the precinct, an hour for booking and a wait in the holding cell. That cell smelled like whores and piss which wasn't surprising since I was stuck there with three drunks and a couple of the girls Marty was always trying to get for free. When I was given my chance to make my phone call, I dialed pop knowing he always answered his cell but not this time. It rang and it rang but he didn't answer so I had to leave a message. Hey pop, I'm in jail. Come bail me out. It wasn't the proudest moment of my life.

I spent the night there in that jail surrounded by crack whores, winos and thieves. Didn't sleep but a wink and even then I kept my eyes open. Pretty boys like me didn't sleep in prison even if our only company was the whores. Those big ugly men in the next cell was eyeing me like the Christmas goose. Lord have mercy. In the morning the bailiff hauled out them that had drawn a judge. Off those lucky fellows went while I was left to sit in the cell wondering where my life had gone wrong.

Then the bailiff came for me. Not to the judge, no sir. He took me to an office where Uncle Walter was waiting.

“Are you sure you don't want to press charges?” the captain on duty was asking. “Burglary is a serious crime.”

“He didn't steal nothing,” Uncle Walter said, looking at me like I was the sorriest thing he'd ever laid eyes on. And I was. I could barely look him in the eye. “Just let me take the boy home and give him a whooping.”

The captain raised his brows but gestured we could go.

Chastised and embarrassed I walked out of the precinct with Uncle Walter at my side.

“Do mom and pop know?” I asked bleakly, sure that he’d yelled it from Inner Harbor.

“Nope.”

I looked at him in surprise. “You didn’t tell them? Hell!” I swore, thinking of the message I left on pop’s phone in that fit of panic yesterday. “He knows without you telling him, don’t he?”

“Nope.”

Now I was scowling at Uncle Walter. With a sly grin the man lifted his hand and there in his big paw rested pop’s cell phone.

“You stole pop’s phone?” I gasped.

“I borrowed it so as I could call your Aunt June to pick me up after my appointment yesterday,” Uncle Walter stated. “I got your message and deleted it. Your pop will never know you spent a night in jail.”

“Oh man! Thank you, Uncle Walt! Jesus, I thought my old man would kill me.”

Uncle Walter continued to grin as we strolled along the street in the broiling sun.

“There was nothing in the safe,” I complained. “Why did you lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie,” he said, and there was a rumble of laughter in his voice.

“You said the most valuable thing in the world was inside that safe.”

He nodded. “And it was.” He looked at me hard but I didn’t get whatever it was he was trying to tell me.

I glared angrily back at him. All this heartache was over nothing. Maybe the drugs or the plague was starting to eat his mind.

“Are you going to lecture me, Uncle Walt?”

“Nope.”

“Then what?” I demanded. There had to be a price for what he’d done.

He shook his head with that quirky smile. “Then nothing, Jojo. It be over.”

He continued to grin as we continued to walk.

The next day I came around Uncle Walter’s house to give him a six pack and stuff a couple of frozen pizzas into his icebox. There was no way I was gonna thank the old buzzard but I felt it was okay to be generous. While I was there I told him that I’d gone with pop to the lumber yard and gotten myself a minimum wage job.

“Good” was all he said.

Two weeks later Uncle Walter died. I sat in the front row of the church in my Sunday best with my family all around me. It had been the first time in three years I’d sat in a church. It felt funny but right.

The preacher stood beside the casket exhorting all of us to mind our manners because death was stalking each and every one of us. Like me, Uncle Walter hadn’t been much into attending church, so the fool didn’t have a clue about the man he honored, but he rambled on about the sins of life, of which Uncle Walter had indulged in a few. My sisters were squirming with boredom long before the preacher wrapped up his eulogy.

It was Aunt June who had the final word. She’d been with Uncle Walter at the hospital as he died and thought it her duty to send her brother off with something nice. She told a few stories of when they were young but skipped the middle and his life of crime. She ended her reminiscing by telling us that although Uncle Walter hadn’t been the most Christian of souls, he’d tried his best to do right by his family. He’d died content, she said. A happy man on his last day. That was because, she said with some confusion, Uncle Walter was convinced he’d finally taught one person everything he knew.

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HONORABLE MENTION

The author is a physicist and remote sensing expert who writes mostly science fiction. His novelette "Contractual Arrangement" was published in *Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy* and he has two science fiction ebooks, *Blood Orbit* and *Starbucks Must Die and Other Stories*.

Loaded Words

by John Derderian

Henry Willis placed jacket and textbook on his desk and stepped to the front of the room. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then out at his Creative Writing class.

"Now then, picking up where we left off in the text, open to page forty-four." He turned his back on the students to reach for the book he had just placed on his desk, but he took his time at it, certain that he would not be completing the motion.

An adolescent male voice spoke from behind him. "Mr. Willis, the assignment?" The voice tried to sound both casual and adult, and did not really succeed at either. Willis paused in mid-reach and cocked his head to gaze ceilingward again. The voice added, "You gave us an assignment last time." A handful of others uttered similar reminders.

"Oh, yes." Willis turned back to face them. "The assignment. You were to write the most offensive two-word sentence possible. A complete English sentence, with correct grammar and punctuation of course, and exactly two words long." He smiled at them for a moment. "It was quite an assortment of emails I received, I

must say.” He dropped the smile and gave a brief, stiff-lipped shake of his head. “I’m afraid, however, that none of you came up with the correct answer.”

He turned to the whiteboard. “Here is what you should have sent me.”

He took up a black marker from the tray along the bottom edge of the board. He twisted the plastic cap off it, producing a small squeak that was easily audible in the now quiet room. He deliberately affixed it to the other end of the marker while the class waited. Then he began writing in the center of the board, at the level of his chest, in his usual precise printing—seven neat letters, a combination of capitals and lowercase characters.

His body hid most of it from the students’ view while he wrote, but someone must have seen enough to get it, because he heard a hushed gasp while he was carefully filling in the oversized period at the end of the sentence. He twisted the cap off the back of the marker, replaced it over the point, and set the marker down in its tray.

He turned to face the class again, stepping aside as he did to uncover his words:

Fuck God.

There were a number of reactions from the students, from grunts to giggles to hands raised up to foreheads, but no one actually spoke. Willis gave them a moment to absorb the written words before he continued.

“Let us examine this sentence to understand just what makes it so offensive—that is, so effective at achieving its intended purpose.

“It may seem too small or trivial to justify such examination, but there are lessons to be learned from it. As I have stressed before, the essence of good writing is evoking emotions and images with few words. The shorter a written work is, the more it deserves careful analysis to understand just why it works.

“Let us consider the second word first. God. There are other words I could have used here. There are other names, of course: Jehovah, Yahweh, Allah. But for this audience—you, the students of St. Jude’s—these other names do not carry the

same immediacy. ‘God’ is a loaded word for this audience, bringing a great deal of baggage with it—thousands of years of context, personal as well as historical significance. By my use of the word, my sentence takes on the weight of this baggage without my having to write it all out explicitly.

“I could also have used other phrases in place of ‘God.’ ‘The Lord,’ ‘the Father,’ ‘the Almighty,’ these all carry the same literal meaning for this audience, but not the same impact. These alternatives feel more like titles or descriptions rather than the *name* of God. The sentence feels more direct, more personal, more *offensive* by the use of His name. A matter of disrespecting the man, not the office, as it were.

“Now let us consider the first word.” Willis ignored the fidgeting and the stifled giggles that he saw and continued without pause. “A common profanity denoting a sexual act, but much more than that here. The literal interpretation of the sentence, connecting this act with God, is absurd, if not altogether meaningless, and the offensiveness of the sentence does not primarily derive from that.

“Rather, the word I used is another heavily loaded word, bringing with it almost as much baggage as the word ‘God.’ It connotes not just sex, but disrespect, debasement, disgust. It is arguably the most heavily censored word in the language.

“The impact of the sentence comes from these words bringing all their weight, all their context and symbolism and implication, and releasing all that to the reader in less time than it takes to say ‘Good afternoon.’ I want you to remember this when you write. Consider your audience, and employ appropriately loaded words whenever you can.

“Your goal in writing will not usually be to offend, and hopefully you will never have occasion to use this particular sentence. But from now on, every time you sit down to write anything, be it fiction or non-fiction, a letter to your mother or a complaint to your congressman, whatever your purpose in writing it, I want you to stop for a moment and think, ‘Fuck God.’”

He turned to reach for the book on his desk. “Now, open your texts to page forty-four...”

*

“What were you *thinking*, Henry?” Katherine Harmon stood and almost shouted the words as Willis stepped into her office.

“May I sit?” Willis said.

“Yes, sit.” She made it sound like a command. She seated herself behind the large, burgundy-stained desk, the plaque declaring her *Katherine Harmon, Principal* centered atop it like a tiara.

Willis laid the two books he was carrying down on one corner of the desk, then draped the jacket, which had hung over his arm, across the top of them. He sat in one of the two matching burgundy chairs arranged symmetrically before the desk.

“I was thinking,” he said, “about how to present a lesson that would stick with the students.”

Harmon seemed to ignore this, as if reading from a prepared script and determined not to be diverted by his response. “You wouldn’t use that kind of language speaking to me, Henry.”

“Certainly not,” he said, in complete sincerity.

“Then what in Heaven’s name made you think it was okay to address God that way in class?”

“I wasn’t addressing God. I was presenting an example.”

“This is a religious academy.”

Willis said, “I recall that. I’ve taught here for sixteen years.” He did not mention that she had only been there for two.

She said, “The academy cannot advocate sacrilege, Henry.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t advocating sacrilege, any more than Peter advocates genocide when he teaches the Holocaust. You’re smarter than that, Kath...”

He stopped himself. She *was* smarter than that. She wasn’t asking for an explanation, or even debating with him. She had already made up her mind, and she was justifying it, to him or to herself.

He said, “Am I fired?”

“We’ve had a lot of complaints, Henry. From the parents who pay the tuition.”

“How can that be? It hasn’t been a day yet. How many...oh.”

Katherine seemed to respond to him for the first time. “‘Oh’ what, Henry?”

“I was just remembering how quickly we modified the curriculum last year in response to ‘a lot of’ complaints about evolution and creationism. I was remembering how few complaints there actually were, and who the complainers were. I was thinking how poorly served the students were by that decision.”

“This isn’t about me, Henry.” She stood up, leaning forward on arms that rose like pillars from the desk top. Or, the image flashed for a moment in his mind, like goat horns poking up from the tiara’ed head. “You—”

“Am I fired?” he asked again.

She stepped back and turned her head to the side, as if something more important were happening in the yard outside her window. “You left me no choice, Henry.”

He stood wordlessly and retrieved his jacket from the desk. He left the books where they were, turned and headed for the door.

“Henry, what would you have me do?” she said to his back. There was just a touch of pleading in the question, and it made him stop and turn around.

She was looking at him again. He studied her face for a moment. She was not pleading for him to give her an alternative. She was pleading for some indication that he understood, some sign of forgiveness.

He slipped his arms into the tweed jacket and pulled it around him. “This is not advice that I’ve ever given anyone before,” he said. “Normally it would be presumptuous, but under the circumstances I think it appropriate. Since you asked.”

He paused to straighten his collar with both hands, and thought for a moment of his last lesson to the students of St. Jude’s. She waited in silence until he spoke again.

“Just this once, Katherine, I would ask you to put yourself in God’s place.” And Henry Willis turned and walked out the door.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Anna Autilio is a writer, traveler, graduate student, and avian scavenger enthusiast from Cranford, New Jersey. Now living in Idaho, her studies have taken her from India to the Falkland Islands. When not staring at birds, she writes poetry and short fiction, and has had work published in *Rainy Day*, *The Fine Line*, *The Animal Anthology Project*, as well as a coloring book, *Caracaras of the World*. Follow her on Twitter at @swivelandjess.

I, Gos

by Anna Autilio

for T. H. White

but also

for Jack

I think I am called Gos.

It has taken many mornings to figure this. It is a low sound, like a huff or a bark, but in the end smooth, like a stout wind. I become attentive when it is said. This is different from other things that call my attention. It is short, singular, and like the quick flutter of wings between leaves that calls my attention to the hunt. The man has nothing to hunt with, like all men. No feathers on his wings, like a baby, and fleshy, grasping fingers on the end of this featherless limb. He will cover it with a bit of tough skin when I am perched on it. I don't understand fully. He is very ugly.

All men are ugly, but I have gotten a close and long look at this one. I have learned from my observations that men have fur not unlike the deer or the rabbit, but they do not appear to be capable of feathers. This being said, the fur does not cover his entire body. It is concentrated on the crown of his head, just above each eye, and

underneath his bill, which is not truly his bill, I have learned. He puts his food in a hole *beneath* this protruding structure, not within it. It is revolting. I hope he is some sort of disfigured man, and that they are not all this repugnant.

His language, if it can be called that, infuriates me. He throws sound about like a gobbling turkey. At times when we are both angry, he even does a heavily accented impression of my protests. If not for his bestowing upon me this name, I would say it was all nonsense. I know of no way to gauge a man's intelligence, but I would have guessed they do not have the concept of symbolic language. I can admit I was wrong. I am not so proud.

"Give me that," I will say, when he holds a piece of quail at the end of his arm. His response is unintelligible. "Give me that," I repeat, "or I shall take it." This, even in the company of my royally spread wings, open jaw, and raised hackles produces no effect on the apparently deaf and quite obviously blind man, and he will give me the quail sometime later, it seems, almost accidentally.

I regret to add that I have also discovered men experience emotion. It has made this whole trial so much more difficult. He calls me Gos, and so some part of me is with him, and I cannot get it undone.

When I said he had nothing to hunt with, this was perhaps not entirely accurate. He has one of those small branches which he holds in his grasping fingers and which can make a bird drop out of the sky some 10 or 15 wing flaps distant. I am not certain how this is achieved, but I have heard of such an astonishing tool before. So far as I can tell, it makes a very loud noise and frightens the bird to death. My father, being a great hawk, once scared a hen so thoroughly himself. It was delicious: a little fatty.

The man has the company of a dog. The man calls the dog Killie, and it is quite responsive to this name, as if this is truly what it calls itself. I admit I have some respect, and a bit of pity for this animal. It is the color of a fox, but much larger, with long fur. It is a decent hunter, a conventional thinker, and I have taught it not to stray into my presence. In turn, I have learned to tolerate it.

You must wonder how I, Gos, came to be this way. Night came early one day when I was young. I was placed into a darkness so encompassing that I was unable to escape from it. I broke my new and perfect feathers against the edges of this darkness, and grew very hungry. However, it was not so awful as you might think. Because it was merely darkness, I knew it would come to an end, and that if I waited quietly, and did not move or attract attention, eventually the sun would rise on a new day.

Of course I was correct, but not in a way that was entirely pleasing. Instead of the sun peeking through the darkness, there was a large man's eye, which swirled about and rolled in its socket like a loose pebble. What food was left in my stomach appeared again at my feet, and I felt slightly less nauseated. I resettled my feathers.

The man is a male, though this was not obvious at first. He is very tall for a man, very wide of shoulder and his noises are deep in tone. All of this indicated a female to me, as the women of my kind are the larger and stronger sex. How ridiculous it seems, this reversal! I wonder if the male men bear the eggs? That would explain much.

You also shall be wondering why I did not leave this man immediately, and return to where I was before the darkness seized me. It is a valid notion, and in fact it was my perpetual endeavor. When the egg that was me was laid by my mother in a nest of black oak branches in the tallest tree in the largest forest in my fair hilled country many days from the sea, my people ruled those regions like red deer rule the bare plains. I, Gos, was heir to a great expanse of dense brush and oak, of quail and chickens and grouse. My brothers and I had been dreaming of that glorious future on our first excursions through the branches of our nest-tree, when the close darkness took the lot of us, and then there was the man. The man and the dog walk through a territory that is largely treeless, which was unsettling at first—culture shock, if you will. But I neither saw nor heard another of my people for many days, and decided that this foreign land would submit to my rule presently.

There were many factors to be considered in leaving the man, however, and these had not crossed my mind as a child. Things like the frequency with which the food birds appear, and whether or not they can be taken when they do. Things like the

short, sharp pinching of an empty crop. Things like wind and cold, and their effect upon one's toes. Things like the man, and his name.

Indeed, the man has a name, too. Other men call him White, like the second note in the call of the quail. I could not have reproduced this sound even if I condescended to. Instead I continue to refer to him by what can be roughly translated as "gives-food baby man". It does sound better in my tongue.

And he calls me Gos. I have become compelled to a kind of trust with him, and if it is not that, then it is dependence. This, I think, is to my shame. This, like the name, binds me to him in unpredictable ways.

Early there was a quite literal binding. The man affixed a thin strip of skin to each of my legs, so that if I wished to leave his grasp, I could not. This infuriated me upon discovery. If I had had the use of my talons, I could have sheared through that skin like lightning through a pine. He held the strips in his fat fingers and sometimes fixed them to a branch I was to sit on, when I was not to sit on him. Sitting on the branch was of course preferable, so I need not smell his stink so keenly, but sitting on his hand often led to food. (Perhaps he did not understand he could present the food *wherever* I was. As mentioned, he did not understand many things.)

In the beginning, he kept me with him for great long spells, and I was made to sit upon the skin which covered his hand for the longest day I can ever remember. It started out acceptably. The man took me from my perch in the corner of this sort of closed-in place where he lived, like a badger, and placed me on his hand, and gave me a piece of quail. Then he walked, back and forth, around in a tight circle, up and down and back again. He sometimes made his gobbling noises, and at other times was silent save for the rushing of his breath and rumblings from below of what I assumed was his gizzard. He began to slow in his walking, and through the holes to the surface of this underground place, I saw the sun settling down, and evening come toward us. Still he did not release me. Instead, the man touched one of the thin, treelike objects near us, and a bright light sprang forth from it, and filled the burrow as if it was day again.

It was day for another long time. The man eventually folded his legs in an entirely revolting fashion and nestled himself into a hummock of grass. He stared at me for quite a bit, and made some more man noises. Then he reached over and grasped a hard, white object in his large hand, and stared at that for an even longer time. Every few minutes, he would touch the object and move a part of it, revealing a new face. I could not discern what caused him to stare for so long at something dull and unmoving, but once, I thought I saw a flattened bird on one of these faces. But it may have been my delirium. I, Gos, was growing tired.

At the end of this strange day, a new one began. Night would seem so close, and then it would not come when one expected it. The man gave me another quail. This I ate ravenously, and momentarily forgot the ordeal, thinking it completed. But when the man did not perch me back on the branch I always went to after eating, I was again suspicious. And very, very tired.

We lived that day and the subsequent night-day as I described above. The tiredness grew and grew, but I did not want to fall asleep near this man. Why? It was unnatural. Who knows what he might do to me, when I was so vulnerable, and no less, when it was not even dark with night or hot at the height of day. It took all of my power to continue to be awake. The man did not seem to need to rest. He continued, as I did, until at the end of this long day, swaying, I fell asleep at last.

I awoke the next morning, alive and well. Nothing had happened while I slept. I was hungry. I thought of the man. I thought he would bring me a quail. I did not think that I would take the quail from him—I knew he would bring it to me. When he came, and I saw his ugly face and his stub-fingers, I thought of nothing but food. The first trial had ended.

The second trial began the next day, and we went swiftly together after that. He let me fly. I do not know why I phrased it thus. I, Gos, could fly whenever I wanted to. But the strips of skin were ever affixed to my legs, and when I chose to fly, I would be caught by them and hang with my head toward the Earth until I could gather the strength to right myself. Though I wanted to fly, I was bound.

Then the man took me out from his underground place and we were under the sky. He perched me on a long branch parallel to the ground, and walked away from me.

This was very new. At first I did not understand, and took a moment to consider this change. The branch was much like my perch in the burrow, but I noticed with my keen eye that the man had not taken the time or care to work with his grubby fingers a thick catch in the bit of skin around my legs. I pondered this as well. The man was walking up and down in the field across from me, making high little bird-whistles. If the catch had not been made, and I attempted to fly, perhaps I would not fall. Falling was unpleasant, but an inconvenience. The pull of the wind was so strong out here. I thought of my fair hilled country many days from the sea. The man had stopped walking, and was now moving towards me. I attempted to fly.

And lo! I was off! The air caught in my feathers and I *flew*. I pumped to stay aloft and then rushed over the ground, skimming the grass tips with my round secondaries. Like a true prince on a chase I glided, making for the largest tree in the field and flexing my thumbs to climb its height, I, Gos—*whump!*

My feet jerked out from beneath me and I fell belly first into the grass just below that great tree, my bill buried in the mud and my wings outstretched like a dead pheasant. So I had been caught up after all. How dim I was not to have foreseen it. The man was approaching me. I felt a welling of something black and bubbling in my breast. He reached his skin-covered hand down toward me and I struck out at him with a ferocity that I, Gos, had been born with.

Cruelty! Torture! The treachery of man! Oh, that I had trusted him! Oh, that I let him touch me and give me food like a child! I struck and struck again, with each blow crushing his hand in my talons, screaming at the edges of my voice and stabbing him now here, now there, waiting for the warm red flow to coat his hand and leave it motionless on the ground, killed. I had never known an anger so great. I wished him to be gone, and I wished to be free and full and fed and flying. But in my haste to grip him I was on his hand, and he was walking back to the long straight branch.

I perched there and flew off again, with the same result as before. A third time we did this, until the last time, when he perched me, he left his covered hand just a short hop from my feet. He did not back away. I did not fly away. It was then that I noticed he was holding a piece of meat.

I took it. What else could I do? I lashed out with my talons and grabbed the meat, and found myself on his hand at the same time. I ate. He returned us to his burrow, and left me until the next day, when all of this happened again.

Many days we did this, the man and I, until half a season had passed. I regained a part of my trust in him. Perhaps the first mistake had been a fluke. Perhaps he truly meant to let me fly, and some force beyond both of our control had taken over, like wind. One might conduct oneself within its constraints, but ultimately, the wind listens to no hawk (or man, I assume).

I, Gos, began to feel contentedness. I flew from the long straight branch many times each day, and each time the man had a small piece of food waiting for me, that I could have. This pleased me, and I wished to do this again and again. A sort of challenge was introduced. I was not to fly to his hand until I heard him produce that short whistle call, like the finch. This proved difficult, as the promise of meat was there at all times, why must I force myself to wait? I did this once, almost not meaning to, and the man provided me with a very large piece of quail that evening. I was very, very pleased with him. The second trial was coming to a close.

Then there came the last. The third trial was the most difficult. I have failed it.

It began the day after I had been provided with enough quail to fill my crop for a day or more. I was still feeling thusly satisfied and generally adventuresome when the man and I went to do our flying exercises beneath the great tree. I was made to sit on the long straight branch as always. Little was different, except when I flew this time, I noticed that my legs felt lighter, and the ground did not drag behind me as I glided. As such, I took more lift under my wings than I was expecting to, and climbed much higher than I would have calculated. I tested this with a beat, and then another, and flew over the man's shoulder, landing with some grace on a branch in the great tree.

The man at once became very animated, like a vole one has caught and released by mistake, scared out of its wits and so disoriented it could not find its hole again. He flapped his featherless wings about. His voice could be very loud when he wanted it to. I watched him for some time from my new perch. He held the meat out, brandishing it, waving it about as if I could not see it. I did not fly to his hand

to take it. I was not particularly hungry. Even if I had been, I, Gos, was in this tree, and that was vastly more absorbing.

I took in my surroundings—this, my kingdom. It certainly looked fair and pleasant from this great height. Toward the sunset, there was a large expanse of trees. It would only deserve the name of forest upon further inspection. The wind was gentle and made the leaf buds on the great tree shiver and dance. I saw a fox on the edge of the trees. I heard a flock of geese somewhere distant. The man's noises grew softer.

I gave the forest further inspection. The man resumed his leaping and twisting about, and calling in a voice that must have damaged his air sacs, disappeared as a small speck behind me. This was fine, I deemed. I would know how to find him and his food. I, Gos, stayed in this new tree on the edge of the forest for a while, contemplating, watching, and becoming familiar with the sights, sounds, and wind of my kingdom. Evening came on.

The man, tiny and soft, went back into his burrow. The dog came out, sniffed around the grasses, and too retreated home. It was the time that the man should bring me food. It seemed unlikely he would be able to reach me in the height of my tree.

I sighted and flew to a very short tree, really a large bush, on the very edge of the forest, within sight of the man's burrow. I could see movement within the burrow, but its exposedness in the middle of the field, which I had not appreciated before, prevented me from flying to it. The man did not appear. I did not eat that night.

In the morning I had become rather frustrated with the man. I flew deeper into the forest when the sun was high enough. I saw several small birds, and heard many mice. The effort required to capture them was not worth the meal they would provide. I ignored them. To borrow a falcon's phrase, I need not stoop so low. The man would bring me food, if I waited.

When I did not see the man again that day, I flew even deeper into the forest to roost for the night. I did not want to be so vulnerable, so near the field, and I also

wished to explore the limits of my kingdom. I wanted to eat. I kept thinking of the man, when my crop would pinch unpleasantly. Why had he not given me food yet?

The next morning I saw a snake. The snake did not see me. It was made of bones, the disgusting thing, and I was still hungry when it was gone.

I tried and failed to catch a chaffinch, over and over again. I wished for a thick-breasted quail. It did not appear. I kept looking for the man, around every corner of my short exploring flights. I saw another man once. He too had a short branch, the kind that makes the deafening noise. I know it, because it made the noise right *at* me. I flew far, far away from this discourteous man.

Some time has passed like this, I know not how long. The pinching in my crop is ever-present, and the food-animals are growing more and more difficult to get one's talons around, as the wind grows stronger and chiller. I think of the man frequently. I, Gos—imagine!

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GUEST WRITER

Tony Concannon grew up in Massachusetts, where he is the director of a day program for adults with developmental disabilities. For many years he taught English in Japan, where much of his fiction is set. Stories of his have appeared in *The Taproot Literary Review*, *Litro*, *Eastlit*, *Nazar Look* and *Down in the Dirt*. He is married with two grown sons.

NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #24, "Property."

Verandas

By Tony Concannon

The boy, his face pressed against the glass, was looking at me through the window. It was Saturday morning and I was sitting on the floor of my apartment in the suburbs of Tokyo. My coffee and newspaper were on the low table in front of me. The boy, son of a Nigerian family who'd moved into the empty apartment on the second floor, had climbed over the railing of the veranda on the back side of my apartment.

Each of the eight apartments in the building had a veranda at the rear. The Japanese families used theirs mostly to hang out the wash or to store large items. I kept my empty beer bottles on mine. I'd put out an old chair and on the hot nights I'd sometimes sit out there. I'd been living in the apartment for nearly five years, ever since I'd come to Japan from the US to teach at the local university.

I waved to the boy and he waved back. He was rolling his face back and forth against the glass, trying to see the inside of my apartment. I guessed he was six or

seven. I stood to slide open the window and ask him his name and he turned and scampered back over the railing.

He was on my veranda again on Sunday morning. Satomi, the Japanese woman who'd spent the night, and I were having breakfast at the table. Her back was to the veranda. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something move and the boy, his face pressed against the glass, was at the window again.

"Turn around slowly," I said to Satomi in Japanese, the language we used. "Don't be surprised."

Satomi turned her head. I could see her body react.

"Who is it?"

"A little kid who lives on the second floor. He just moved in."

"*Iya da*. I don't want him staring at me."

"Slide over there so your back's not to him."

He was moving his face back and forth again, trying to see everything in the apartment.

"Tell him to go away."

I waved to him and he waved back.

"Don't wave to him. He won't leave."

"I don't mind him. I want to ask him his name but if I stand up, he'll go away."

"Good."

"He's not bothering anybody."

"He's bothering me."

"He's just a little kid. He probably doesn't know better."

I wasn't home much during the weekdays because of my job at the university and I didn't see the boy again until the following Saturday. It was late April and the weather had turned hot. I'd slid open the glass window to let in some air. There was a noise and the boy was standing on the veranda. He put his face against the screen and looked in.

"Hello. What's your name?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Do you speak English?"

He still didn't answer and I pointed at myself. "Gary." I repeated my name several times and pointed at him and said, "Name?"

He turned and climbed back over the railing.

Later in the morning I went out to do some shopping and I ran into Mrs. Kuwahara, who lived in the apartment next door.

We bowed and greeted each other.

"It's getting warm," I said in Japanese. I spoke with pretty much everyone in the neighborhood in that language.

"It'll be summer before you know it," she said.

"How is your family doing?" I asked. She and her husband had two children.

"Naomi's in her last year of high school and Satoshi's in his first."

"They'll be in college before you know it."

"If they study hard enough."

"I'm sure they will."

"Has that little boy been looking in your window?" Mrs. Kuwahara asked.

“What boy?”

“The new one on the second floor. Twice this week he was on my veranda, looking into my window, and Mrs. Goto said she’s seen him on her veranda once.”

The Gotos lived on the other side of my apartment.

“I’ve seen him a couple of times.”

“It’s eerie. All of a sudden you turn around and there’s a face in the window.”

“He’s little,” I said. “He probably doesn’t know better.”

“His parents should know better. A Japanese child would never do that. He can play on his own veranda. We’re going to have to speak to Kondo-san.”

I nodded. Mr. Kondo was the landlord and he lived in a small house across the parking lot. Mrs. Kuwahara and I talked a little more about her children and their schooling before I went off to do my shopping.

The boy was on my veranda the next morning. The temperature had dropped overnight and I’d closed the window. He stared into my apartment. I thought about going outside and walking around to the veranda but I didn’t want to frighten him. I sat and watched him until he finally climbed back over the railing.

I could see this was going to become a problem with the neighbors and I wondered if I should talk with the boy’s parents. I’d spoken with his father once, briefly, in the parking lot. He didn’t seem to be around much. I often saw the mother with their younger son and I always nodded and said hello. I decided to let the Japanese sort it out. It was their problem, not mine. It was more their neighborhood than mine, too, even though I’d lived there longer than some of them.

I got pulled in, though. A couple of nights later Mr. Kondo rang my doorbell.

“*Konban-wa*,” I said after I opened it. He stood in the doorway. He’d been some kind of judo champion in his youth and he was still a powerful-looking man. Per the custom in Japan, I knew he wouldn’t come into the apartment of one of his tenants unless invited.

“*Konban-wa.*” He bowed his head slightly and apologized for disturbing me. I told him I hadn’t been doing anything consequential and I assured him it was no disturbance. We talked briefly about the sudden changes in the weather. Then he got to the purpose of his visit.

“Mrs. Kuwahara said the boy on the second floor climbed over the railing onto your veranda.”

“A couple of times.”

“The other day Mrs. Goto had her window open and when she came out of the bathroom, the boy was in her apartment.”

“That must have frightened her.”

“She screamed.”

I nodded. I knew he wanted to ask me to do something.

“I don’t know his parents very well,” I said. “I’ve only spoken to his father once. I say hi to his mother whenever I see her in the parking lot.”

“I see. Neither of them speak Japanese.”

“The father speaks English. I don’t know about the mother.”

Mr. Kondo didn’t say anything. I knew he didn’t speak any English.

“The boy seems lonely,” I said. “I don’t know if he goes to school yet.”

“He’s here all day.”

Both of us stood there not saying anything. “Do you want me to try speaking with them?” I finally asked.

“If it’s no trouble.”

“Not at all.”

He bowed and thanked me. We stayed there in the doorway and talked about baseball for a few more minutes.

The following night I forced myself to climb the steps to the second floor. I got sucked into doing this kind of thing at the university all the time because I spoke the best Japanese of the foreign teachers. It never turned out well for me.

The Nigerian family lived in the apartment at the end and I rang their bell. Inside the boys were making a racket. Their father, Sam, opened the door.

“Hi, I’m Gary from downstairs.”

“I know you. We met in the parking lot.”

The two boys stood behind their father.

“How old are your boys?”

“Six and three.”

“Do they speak English?”

“No.”

“I bet they learn Japanese quickly.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m really sorry to bother you about this but the landlord, Mr. Kondo, asked me to speak to you.”

His face became serious. “Is there a problem?”

I waved my hand. “Nothing serious. Your older son sometimes climbs over the railing onto the verandas on the first floor. I don’t care but the Japanese families don’t like it.”

He turned and spoke to his son in a language I didn’t know. The boy spoke back. His mother had come out from the interior of their apartment. Sam turned to me.

“I told him not to do it anymore. I’m sorry.”

I waved my hand again. “You don’t have to apologize to me. I don’t care if he climbs onto my veranda.”

“In the town we came from in Nigeria everyone was family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. He’s used to running in and out of everyone’s house.”

“It must be hard for him not having any friends yet.”

Sam didn’t say anything.

“Goodnight,” I said after a moment.

“Goodnight.”

I waved to the boys but they just looked at me. I closed the door and went down the steps. Just as I’d expected, it hadn’t gone over well.

I was away a lot the next couple of weeks. There was a conference in Osaka one week and I’d been spending more nights at Satomi’s apartment. Seeing the boy in the window had unnerved her more than I’d realized. The truth was my apartment was much bigger than I needed, but it didn’t matter because the university was paying. It was part of my compensation. It was a common arrangement in Japan. I was pretty sure all of the Japanese families had the same deal, although I wondered about the Nigerian family. Sam had told me he worked for a Nigerian company exporting oil to Japan. His family might be the only ones in the building actually paying rent.

It was Mrs. Goto who accosted me on my way out this time. She was a tall, attractive woman.

“It happened again,” she said.

“What happened?”

“The boy on the second floor. He was on my veranda. Playing with my plants. He knocked a couple over.”

“I thought that had stopped. Mr. Kondo asked me to speak to his parents.”

“They’re not doing a very good job.”

“His father thinks he’s lonely. They come from a small town where everyone knows everyone.”

“They’re living here now.”

“Have you talked to Mr. Kondo?”

“I’m going to.”

“I hope he can help you.”

It was the middle of May by now and the temperature was in the seventies every day. I slept with the windows open. I was still in bed on the following Sunday morning when I heard a noise on my veranda. At first I thought it might be a small animal. I got up and went into the living room to look. The boy was on the veranda. He’d taken all the empty beer bottles out of the cases and lined them up. His back was to me and I didn’t say anything. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was only six-thirty. This wasn’t going to end well, I thought.

It all came to a head a week or so later. I arrived home from work one evening to a wild scene in the parking lot. Mrs. Kuwahara was screaming. All I could make out of her Japanese was “Stay out of my apartment.” Mr. Kondo and a policeman were trying to get her to stop. Sam was speaking with Mr. Harada, who lived on the third floor and spoke pretty good English. The boy was clinging to his mother. She was holding her other son and crying. Most of the neighbors were there.

I made my way around the crowd to where Mrs. Goto was standing.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The boy was in Kuwahara-san’s apartment. She went out to buy tofu and we were all chatting with Arakawa-san. She had the windows open because it’s been so hot.”

Arakawa-san went around the neighborhood on his bicycle every evening and sold tofu. More importantly, he was the local town crier and everyone loved gossiping with him.

“When she went back inside, the boy was pulling the books out of her son’s bookcase. She was so startled, she screamed and dropped her tofu. The boy hadn’t taken off his shoes and he’d tracked mud all over her floor.”

I nodded. It had rained earlier in the day.

“She called the police,” Mrs. Goto added.

Mrs. Kuwahara had stopped screaming and Mr. Kondo and the policeman were talking with Sam. Mr. Harada was interpreting for them. The boy’s mother was still crying. I thanked Mrs. Goto and walked back around the circle of people. I didn’t want to get involved and I went to get something to eat. When I came back an hour later, the parking lot was empty.

I didn’t see the boy on my veranda after that. About three weeks later I stepped out of my apartment on a Saturday morning and Sam was loading boxes into the back of a big truck.

“You’re leaving?” I said to him.

“We’re moving to Chiba. One of our friends from Nigeria lives there with his family.”

“They didn’t kick you out, did they?”

“No. We decided to leave. My friend has two boys and it’ll be good for my son. He’s lonely. My wife, too. We don’t fit in here.”

He was right. None of the neighbors had come out to help or even say goodbye. Before, whenever anyone had moved out, everyone had come out and half the women had been crying. Not this time.

“Do you need any help?” I asked.

“Some of our friends are upstairs helping. Thank you, though.”

“Well, good luck.”

“You, too.”

We shook hands. I headed off to do a few errands. The Japanese were right: the boy shouldn't have been playing on their verandas, let alone in their apartments. But was it really such a big deal? It was their neighborhood, I guess.

The whole thing didn't sit well with me, though, and when I got back from my errands, I rang Mrs. Kuwahara's doorbell.

She answered the door and we bowed and greeted each other. I got right to the point.

“The family on the second floor moved out,” I said.

“I saw the truck in the parking lot.”

I knew she didn't miss anything.

“I don't think you needed to call the police that time.”

“My husband and children said the same thing. They said I overreacted.”

“I feel like they got driven out.”

“People who live here need to learn our ways. You shouldn't look in other people's windows or come into their apartments.”

“He's a child. He didn't mean any harm.”

“He frightened me.”

“People do things differently sometimes.”

“My children said the same thing but I don't agree. There's a right and wrong way to do everything.”

I looked at her face. I wasn't going to get any further with her. She wasn't a bad person.

I bowed my head and apologized for disturbing her. She closed her door.

It was a beautiful summer day and I took a book and bottle of beer up to the sundeck on the third floor. I liked the view of the neighborhood from there. When I'd first moved in, I'd been impressed with Mr. Kondo, the owner, for sacrificing the rent from a ninth apartment to put in a sundeck for his tenants. Then Mr. Harada had burst my bubble by explaining Kondo had done it only because he didn't want the sunlight to his house to be blocked. It was his building.

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GUEST WRITER

Erik Christian lives and writes in rural Illinois. He is sincerely grateful to *On The Premises* for publishing his first work of fiction.

First Season

by Erik Christian

The buck was strong and fluid and soundless, walking the field's edge and stripping lingering soybeans from severed stalks. He nudged a hedgeapple with his muzzle and it bumped towards the woods, into the gap where armored thorny briars became low grass and gnarled hedge trees gave way to limbless sky. The knobby green ball rolled to a stop in the opening and the buck perked up his head. Will held his breath.

"Easy," Jake whispered. Will's heart throbbed in his ears. The buck's ears flicked and turned, and he wondered if the deer heard it, too. The buck had surprised him. Will had frozen his muscles, his lungs, his eyelids and let the deer come so close he could count the points, down to the stubby brow tines. Now the buck tipped his muzzle to the air and steam rose in quick snorts from his nostrils. His wide head dipped and rose and he snorted again, chasing a warning snatched by the wind. But it was gone, and his head swung back to the earth.

"Get set," Jake said. He was bracing Will for the recoil and the vibrations in his chest resonated through Will's back. Will rested the barrel against the oak, his left hand supporting the stock, his gloveless right gripping the trigger, waiting for the buck to wander into the shooting lane they'd cleared months before with hatchets and chainsaws in the August heat. The rack appeared and twitched with the movement of the deer's jaw. Will silently pleaded for two more steps, two

tentative hooves on the clumpy farm ground that would return the deer to the earth and allow him to join his place with the men.

The rack disappeared into the brush. “He’s backed up,” Jake whispered in Will’s ear. “You’ll have to be ready. He may only come back for a second and you’ll have to take it when you can get it.” Will nodded. “Make sure it’s there. You’re the only one who’ll know.”

The deer did appear again, but thinner and it was a moment before Will realized he was walking straight away from the stand. The buck wavered slightly to his right, exposing a hint of broadside. “Can you do it?” Jake asked. Will shook his head. His left arm quaked from fatigue and his right hand stung with cold. The buck started to trot, crossing the field and nearing the opposite woods, almost out of range, safe and oblivious. Will held the trembling crosshairs on the buck, his burning arms forged in place by boyhood conviction. The buck reached the opposite edge of the field and Will loosened his grip, felt the blood return to his tingling hands.

Jake let out a whistle, one short, bright, high tweet flitting through the clammy air. The buck turned back to the forest, searching for the source of the noise. His hindquarters tensed and his spine lowered and he pivoted to bolt into the woods. A report erupted from the trees and changed the buck’s pivot into a grotesque hop, a sickly jump as the slug ripped through his hide, shattering his ribs and exploding his heart and shredding his lungs and breaking into jagged pieces that sliced muscle and sinew. He ran three steps before stumbling, like he’d reached some invisible waterway that swept his legs from beneath him and gripped his hooves in the undertow and submerged him, dragged him to where his breath was stolen and his legs were useless and strength was lost. He slumped to the earth, a static mass of brown and white on the crest of the open farmland.

Will was a killer.

His hands shook and his pulse raced in his neck and his mouth was dry and Jake swatted his shoulder. “Great shot! Great shot!” he said. “That was perfect!”

“I didn’t know you were going to do that,” Will said.

“Do what? The whistle?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t ready for it.”

“Really? ‘Cause you sure as hell shot like you were ready!” Will smiled to hear his father swear with him. He gazed at the lump among the bean stalk stubble and felt something unexpected. Not sadness, but not all pride.

“Should we tag him?”

“Not yet. Give him a second. I know he looks done, but you can’t really know from up here. Best to give him time. Your uncle Denny lost a deer like that once. Thought he was dead, so he scrambled down the tree right away and when he got there, the thing hopped up and ran off. Never found him.” Will had trouble imagining his uncle scrambling and thought the story must have been many years and pounds ago. “That deer wasn’t as nice as yours, though,” Jake said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Were you there?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know?” Will persisted.

Jake frowned slightly, ran his hand over his mouth. “Well, your uncle said his buck was eight points. We know that your buck in the field’s eight points. Since your uncle’s tales tend to grow as the evidence shrinks, and since no one ever saw that deer, and since we can see your deer right now, well, I’m inclined to believe your deer’s bigger.”

Clouds moved over the sun and the wind rose and fluttered a lonely leaf in the branch next to Jake. He braced against the chill, but Will, still warm with excitement, didn’t notice the cold. The boy peered around the trunk to check the deer, turned back, checked again. A gray squirrel ran down and around a tree in a stuttering spiral. It chattered wildly and seemed to rustle every leaf on the ground.

Another squirrel crossed its path and the two fuzzy balls of gray nuisance chased each other from oak to oak.

“I didn’t even hear him,” Will said. “I thought for sure I’d hear him, he’s so big.”

“That’s why,” Jake said. “It’s the little things that make all the noise. Big things like deer step over brush and use trails. That and he was out in the field, just walking on dirt.”

“Oh.”

“Did you smell him?”

“Smell him?” Will crinkled his nose.

“Sure. When they’re close enough, you can smell them, these big old musty ones.” Jake looked to the deer and Will immediately joined.

“Now?”

“Not quite yet.”

“What do they smell like?”

“Like musty old deer.”

Will had asked his father to tell the story of his own first deer so many times that he knew the story by rote. Jake had found a huge oak on the edge of a bluff and sat beneath it. By the afternoon, he’d nodded off and didn’t wake until an acorn fell with a dull thud in the soft ground. He saw a doe and a fawn picking their way along the creek and, with one shot, killed the doe. The fawn, confused and naïve, stayed, walking around the doe’s body, nuzzling it. Jake had to shoo it away. Will wondered if his father had felt the same mixture of pride and sorrow and excitement and shame he felt now. Will had never asked and Jake hadn’t shared. But he had given explicit instructions to pass on does with fawns.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Was... uh...”

Will heard an engine hum and saw a green vehicle creep through the field.

“Is that uncle Denny?” he asked.

Jake put his hand to the brim of his cap and squinted. “No. No, I don’t think so,” he said. Will didn’t know the tone, but something like it came out whenever their truck stalled out or the cellar was full of water again. Through the trees, he watched the green mass become a pick-up with a light bar and “Illinois State Conservation Police” written on the doors in Caterpillar-yellow block letters. He tensed and sweat beat down his round face and made dark trails in his peach fuzz. “Relax,” Jake said. “We haven’t done anything. Let’s just see if he stops.”

“What if he does?” Will asked.

“Then we’ll go talk to him.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Why?”

“Uncle Denny said the conservation officers are all crazies. He said they’re just a bunch of rednecks who couldn’t cut it as real cops.”

“Did he.”

“Yeah, and he said that they’ll haul you off to jail just as soon as look at you. He said the best thing to do is to crouch down in a little ball in your tree, so maybe they won’t see you, ‘cause if they do, he said they’ll probably try to shoot you out. And he said that you should hoot like an owl because even though it’s daytime, they’re too dumb to know the difference. And he said—”

“That Uncle Denny says a lot.”

Will saw his father's raised eyebrows and slight grin and knew he'd been had. Again. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. He watched the truck park within inches of the kill. The lights turned and the door swung open and two boots pounded the dirt as if they were trying to sound menacing. Army camouflage pants ballooned from the boots' tops and a camo shirt bloused forth from a blaze orange vest. Beneath an orange ball cap, mirrored gas-station sunglasses drooped toward a thick catfish mustache. The officer glanced at the kill then scanned the trees, feet planted firmly, arms akimbo in a GI Joe stance.

"C'mon down, son," Jake said to a crouching Will.

"I don't think he sees us."

"Buddy, you're wearing blaze orange and you're twenty feet in the air. I think he sees you." Will scraped himself off the gray wooden planks, clumsy in his father's coveralls and extra layers. "Empty your gun and grab your license and permit," Jake said. Will pumped the gun to eject the slugs and patted a half-dozen pockets before locating the documents. He looped the supply rope around the gun and lowered it to the ground, then crawled down the weather-beaten two-by-four rungs.

"You come down outta there, now," the officer said once they were already walking through the brush. He stood over the deer, indignant, as if it were a freshly smashed mailbox. "You shoot this deer?" he shouted. "There's no tag on this deer. Who shot this deer? What's that? Who? You better speak up, now!"

"I said my boy shot the deer!" Jake said, out of breath from yelling during the brisk walk across the clumpy ground.

The officer glanced at the buck and at Will. "That boy shot this deer?" he scoffed.

"Yes, sir, I shot him," Will said.

"It's not tagged," the officer said. "Why ain't this deer tagged, yet?"

Jake caught his breath. "It just happened a min—"

“I was asking the boy,” the officer snapped. “He’s the shooter, right?” He bent over and pushed his face into Will’s, his yellow teeth chomping gum in a noisy smile. “Answer the question, boy,” he said, releasing a rancid potpourri of halitosis, cheap coffee and Double Bubble that forced Will’s head to face the “S. Huffnagle” name bar. “Choose careful,” Huffnagle sneered. Will swallowed hard and looked at his father. Jake nodded.

“We were letting him finish, sir,” Will said.

“Finish what, boy?”

“Um, dying.”

“Dying!” Huffnagle said and laughed. “Hell, it ain’t moved for an hour, even I can tell that.”

“It’s only been ten minutes,” Jake said.

“Sir, I’m talking to the shooter,” Huffnagle barked. Jake glared back and Will thought he saw Huffnagle flinch behind the glasses.

“It hasn’t been long, sir,” Will said.

“Lemme see your license.” Will found his hunting license and Huffnagle held it close to his face and frowned. “Gimme the permit,” he said and snatched the deer permit from Will’s already outstretched hand. Huffnagle held it close to his face again. “This is a second season permit,” he said. “You can’t be out here this weekend with a second season permit. You gotta wait two weeks.”

“No, it’s not,” Will said.

“What did you say?” Huffnagle growled.

“It’s not,” Will replied. “Look. Right there. It says ‘Full Season.’ That means I can hunt first and second season.” Huffnagle sniffed and handed back the permit.

“Smart kid. Smart enough maybe to wait around for another deer to wander by? Do a little poaching?”

“No, sir,” Will said, rattling his head back and forth.

“Whose land is this? They know you’re here?”

“Yes, sir. It’s my grandpa’s, sir.”

“Your grandpa’s?”

“Yes.”

“He know you’re poaching?”

“We’re not poaching,” Jake said sternly. Huffnagle stepped over the buck and leaned into Jake.

“You’re not? Well, that deer ain’t tagged and if the deer ain’t tagged, then it’s shot illegal,” Huffnagle said, pointing at the trophy deer, chomping wildly.

“We were waiting,” Jake said, strong and calm. “He’s not even cold. Check yourself.”

“I don’t need to check it. I know a poached deer when I see one!” Huffnagle shouted. He was ranting at Jake like a fool, or like someone doing an impression of someone ranting like a fool. “And I didn’t even see this one! I heard it! I was driving by a few minutes ago on the blacktop when I heard the shots and I said, ‘Damn, that’s a poach!’”

“How can you tell from the shots?” Will said. “And I thought you said he’d been dead an hour?” Huffnagle’s head snapped to Will and he stomped to the boy, his boots making snappy thuds in the stalks and dirt.

“What did you say?” the officer grimaced.

Will swallowed hard. “Earlier, sir. You said he’d been dead an hour. But now you just said you heard us shoot him a few minutes ago.”

“You calling me a liar? You saying I don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“No, sir, I ju—”

“Your gun loaded?”

“No, sir.”

“Gimme it.” Huffnagle held out his hand and Will gave over the Remington 870 that his father had used since before Will was born. The officer opened the empty chamber and pumped the action once to load the shells that weren’t there. He started to hand it back to Will but thought better of it and pumped the action once more. A forgotten slug jumped from the magazine tube. Huffnagle pumped again and the slug ejected from the side of the gun, hurtling end-over-end through the air and bouncing off Will’s chest.

“Oh, Will,” Jake sighed.

“Well! What’s this? Seems like someone’s gun was still loaded!”

“That was an accident!” Will stammered. “I thought I had them all out!”

“How many permits you got? Remind me again?”

“One,” Will said. “But I—”

Huffnagle waved his hand to stop him. “So, you’ve already admitted that you shot this deer, and you only got one permit. Then, you told me you weren’t poaching. Then, you told me that your gun wasn’t loaded. Now, I find you’ve got another slug in your gun! You only keep a slug in your gun to shoot something. Can’t hunt anything else during deer season. Can’t shoot two deer on one permit. Shooting another one would be poaching. Why’d you lie to me, boy? Why didn’t you just admit you were poaching up front?”

“I didn’t lie! It was an accident!” Will shouted. “I thought they were all out! Dad, I thought they were all out!”

“It’s OK,” Jake said to him.

“No it ain’t!” Huffnagle shouted. “Everything I see says poaching. And my opinion’s the one that counts!”

“It was a mistake,” Jake said. “You know it was.”

“What I know is that deer wasn’t tagged and his gun was still loaded. I know he had shot that deer and was still hunting without a permit. I know that poaching’s a class B misdemeanor. You want a misdemeanor on you, boy? You ain’t even shaved, yet. You want that on you?”

“That’s enough,” Jake said, walking toward Will. “He’s a kid. He hasn’t done a thing wrong. You want to do something, then do something. But this nonsense is over.” Jake placed his hands on Will’s shoulders, felt him shaking through the dense, insulated layers, pressed gently.

“Do something? Fine, let’s do something. How about I take you in? Yeah, how about I take you in for poaching and hunting without a license and contributing to the delinquency of a minor and... and... what?” Jake and Will were staring at something far off and Huffnagle turned to stare, too. “Now what the hell is this?” he said.

A blue pickup bumped and clattered across the open field, its driver jostling and bouncing like a bareback rider. Banjos and slide guitars blared from the windows, picking and grinning their way through the tilled dirt and stubble. The brakes squeaked to an easy stop near the scene of Huffnagle’s imagined crime and Denny leaned out the window, his hulking frame filling the space. He nudged his dirty camouflage cap back on his head, spit tobacco juice, and smiled at the trio in the field.

“What’d you do, Willy?” Denny shouted over the music. “Your first hunt and you already got your dad in trouble! Goddamn!” He laughed and spit again. “Officer.”

“Turn down that music, sir,” Huffnagle barked.

“Huh?”

“Turn down the music!”

“I can’t hear you! Let me turn down this music!”

“Turn off your—”

“Y’know, I better kill the engine, while I’m at it, don’t you think?” Denny clambered down from the truck, slamming the door and ignoring the officer’s glare. With a hand front and back he hiked up his pants and walked toward the kill, spitting along the way. “Well, goddamn, that’s a buck!” he said. “That yours, Will?” The boy nodded. “I’ll be damned, that’s a nice deer. Don’t you think so, officer? I think so. Why’s he just lying here?”

“We were letting him finish—” Will started.

“I’ll ask the questions,” Huffnagle interrupted.

“OK, boss,” Denny chuckled.

“Who are you?”

“Denny Cushing. Non-hunter,” Denny said, extending a hand that was not received. He wiped it on his hip and put it back in his pocket. “Well, not today, anyway. See, I kinda tweaked my back at work, pickin’ up these pallets. Well, not really pickin’ up the pallets so much as swingin’ ‘em around. See, me and a couple of the other guys at work, we got this game where we try to smash each other’s toes, but it won’t hurt nobody, ‘cause we’re all wearing steel toes, and the other day I thought that I had a really good shot on Pete, ‘cause he’s the reignin’ champ—you get to be the champ by gettin’ everybody else’s toes without gettin’ yours hit—and so I thought I could get him with these great big—”

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, I guess you won’t get to hear the end of my story,” Denny muttered.

“Answer the question.”

“I’m just here helping my brother and my nephew on his first hunt.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all. Check the truck. There ain’t nothin’ in there.”

“I’ll decide what I’m gonna do. You just go stand over there and keep your mouth shut,” Huffnagle said.

“Alright, alright. Goddamn.” Denny leaned against his truck and spit again. Huffnagle turned and Denny winked at Will.

“Tell me again why this deer ain’t tagged,” Huffnagle said to Will.

“He already told you,” Jake said.

“Then he shouldn’t have any trouble telling me again,” the officer said, keeping his gaze on Will.

“We had just shot him, and we were waiting for him to die.”

“That’s a good move,” Denny chimed. “I shot one once and I didn’t wait long enough and up he ran and was gone. He was a big buck, too. Little bigger than this one, probably 12 points, if I remember, but this one’s nice, too. Good thinkin’ to wait, Willy. It’d be a shame to see a nice buck like—”

“I thought you said you don’t hunt?” Huffnagle sneered at Denny.

“Sure, I hunt. Just not today. I might get out second season, but like I said, my back ain’t right since I went after Pete’s toes. See, it was this great shot, one you only see come along once or twice a month, and—”

“Shut it,” Huffnagle said and glared at Denny.

“Yes, sir,” Denny said. He spit deliberately and wiped his chin with his sleeve.

Huffnagle turned back to Will. “So, I’m supposed to believe you weren’t poaching? That you were waiting for it to die and didn’t unload your gun on accident?”

“Yes, Officer Huffnagle, that’s what—”

“Do you know me?”

Will glanced at his father. “No, sir, I don’t think so.”

“Then why are you using my name?” Huffnagle shouted. “How do you know my name? How in the world can you know who I am?”

“I, I read it on your shirt, sir,” Will stammered, pointing to the name bar. Jake let out a snort and turned it into a clumsy cough. Huffnagle’s face became crimson behind his flared nostrils and he inhaled and opened his mouth wide.

“Hey, I know that name,” Denny said.

The officer cringed. “I don’t think you do,” he said.

“Sure, I do. Stanley, right? The one who got into all that trouble? There was that wreck, over on Judd’s Hollow Road. Something about a bridge. What was that? Jake, do you know?” Jake shook his head and watched the officer shrink with each word Denny struck. Of course Jake knew. Even Will knew.

“Yeah, you didn’t see that the bridge was out. How’d you miss all them signs anyway?”

“It was dusk and I didn’t have my glasses.”

“Yeah, you did. You had them mirrored ones, ‘cept they wasn’t prescription. You know, the ones you bought at the Gas ‘n Go back in town? I remember ‘cause it was in the paper, and Shelly and I was talkin’ and she said she sold ‘em to you. We figured the state didn’t have no prescription cop glasses, mirrored and all that, and we thought that was funny.” Denny laughed. “Yeah, it’s crazy what people remember, ain’t it? What they see?”

Huffnagle clenched his jaw.

“I bet your bosses didn’t like it. I bet they was fit-to-be-tied. I know the feeling—man, do I ever—‘cause that’s how my boss is every time I get caught playin’ Toe Smash. That’s what we call it, Toe Smash, ‘cause the point is, well, you’re a smart guy, you get it. Anyway, he yells and screams and gets all red and pissed and then we gotta act sorry and cool it for a while. I bet they was tellin’ you to cool it, huh? Must have you on a short leash. That’s how things get for us, anyway. We have to be real, real careful and make sure we don’t do nothin’ stupid. We gotta make sure

we're on the *straight and narrow*," he said, punctuating the phrase. Huffnagle stood, fuming, watching Denny spit and hike his pants and spit again.

"Ahh, but you don't want to hear about my problems. You had some other business here with my nephew. What was you talkin' about when I showed up? Somethin' about taggin' the buck and poaching? Seems kinda hard to prove to me. There's one buck and there's one tag. 'Course, I'm not an officer of the law, not like you, but that's a tough one. I'd hate to be wrong, 'specially with a kid involved. 'Specially after that whole bridge-out, car-crash, Dukes-of-Hazzard-jump thing. Might not look so *straight and narrow*." Denny paused, watched his boot scuff the dirt, lifted his eyes to Huffnagle.

Will didn't know everything that was happening, but he knew this was some kind of showdown. He could hear Huffnagle huffing and blowing and ferociously chewing, searching for a way out. He saw Denny breaking dirt clods with his boot, gently tapping them into piles of subdued dust. He heard his father's teeth grinding above him. Will tilted his head back, prepared for the shock of a bristling Jake. Instead, he saw his father's head turned away, over his shoulder, turned as far as possible from the tension in front of them.

"I'm sorry, here I go runnin' my mouth again," Denny said with false camaraderie. He made a sweeping gesture with his arm and maneuvered next to Jake and Will. "You're the man. We are at your disposal." He stood with a hand on Will's shoulder, a broad smile on his face. Jake, his hand still on Will's other shoulder, reluctantly turned to face the scene. He dropped his gaze and counted the hairs on Will's head. Will moved his weight from foot to foot and his eyes shifted in time, from the deer to Huffnagle to Denny's truck to the blue-gray November sky.

Huffnagle chomped. He pointed at Will. "You tag this buck."

"Yes, sir," the boy gulped. The officer gave them all a pathetic glare, sniffed, and climbed into his truck.

"Thank you so much, sir," Denny shouted as Huffnagle drove away. "We do appreciate it. And I like your new glasses!" He turned triumphantly to Jake and Will. "Well, that's that!"

Jake exhaled loudly. “Tag your deer, Will,” he said. He crouched and rummaged through his pack with quick, sharp movements.

“Now c’mon, Straight. Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being like anything,” Jake said.

“All pissy, that’s how you’re being. He’s gone! It’s done!”

“I was taking care of it,” Jake said. “Will, tag that deer.”

“Hey, is this a big brother thing?” Denny said. “Don’t like little brother savin’ the day?”

“It’s a right and wrong thing, Denny. I was handling it.”

“I know, I know, but there’s lots of ways to handle it, Straight.”

“Why do you keep calling him that?” Will asked. He stood over the deer, absently holding his permit and knife.

“Cause that’s how he is!” Denny laughed. “Straight as an arrow. You never heard me call him that?” Will shook his head. “Yep, that’s him. Keeps things straight. That’s why he never wins throwing dice.”

“I don’t throw dice, Denny.”

“And that’s why you never win!”

Jake looked up from his pack and shouted, “Tag the damn deer, Will!” Will shook with a jolt and dropped to a crouch by the buck’s hind leg. He pierced the hide between the bone and the tendon and sliced up, then peeled the permit sticker from its backing and slipped it through the slit, wrapping it around the leg and back on itself.

“Now, don’t take it out on him,” Denny said.

“I’m not,” Jake said. “He needs to tag him before another officer comes along.”

“Hell, there’s no other officers, Jake. There’s only that one jack-ass for the whole county and he ain’t comin’ back, I promise!” Denny laughed. “There’s different ways, Straight.”

“Well, your way is practically blackmail,” Jake said, standing up with the long-sought skinning knife. “And I don’t want Will to start thinking that’s OK.”

“But, he *is* gone, Dad,” Will said. “I think Uncle Denny’s right about that.”

Jake furrowed his brow. “A man old enough to know what’s right is old enough to clean his own deer.” He walked toward Will, dropped the skinning knife next to the buck and strode on.

“But I don’t know how,” Will whimpered.

“Ask your Uncle Denny. Seems like he knows everything.”

“Hell, I don’t know!” Denny said. “That’s why I always get you to do it.” Jake kept walking. “Where are you going?”

“To get the truck,” Jake said without turning.

“But it’s right here,” Denny yelled.

“My truck!” Jake shouted.

Denny shook his head and turned to Will. “You’ve seen him do this before, right?”

*

Will rested his head against the bench seat and let it bounce along with the gravel road. He scraped the dried blood from the base of his fingernails and smelled them. The crude rinse at the old farmhouse pump had left his chest aching with cold and his hands still rich with the gamy tang of wild blood. A candy bar slid across the vinyl, one of a few snacks forgotten in the pre-dawn black, and Will captured it and nibbled. The truck droned a steady hum and the cab was warm and he nodded. His father was quiet.

“Thanks for taking me, Dad.”

Jake looked at his son. “You did a good job, buddy,” he said gently. “You did everything right.”

Will looked out the window. The cut bean stalks moved by more rapidly than the taller corn stalks on the hill behind, which moved more rapidly than the aluminum-sided farmhouse on the hill beyond that, and it all reminded Will of one great carnival shooting gallery. He remembered last year’s fair, how Uncle Denny told him that the targets in the back, the ones with the big prizes, were heavier than the rest; that nobody ever won those because the guns weren’t powerful enough to knock them down. “You can’t win playing that way,” Denny had said. “So, you got to find another way. You got to pump the gun a ton of times or lean in close when they ain’t lookin’. Take advantage when you can. That’s how you win.”

Will had pondered this advice for days before asking his father. Jake had studied his son for a long while, then frowned slightly and ran his hand over his mouth. “Seems like time to find a different game.”

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