



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #27
APRIL 2016



STORIES IN WHICH ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ARE GRAPPLING WITH SOME KIND OF CHANGE, HOWEVER SMALL OR LARGE, AND HOWEVER LOCALIZED OR WIDESPREAD...

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FIRST PLACE

B. C. Matthews battles mad scientists at a laboratory by day and finds sleep deprived moments to tend to her reptile herd, play her ukulele, and pen her stories by night. She is published in *Triangulation: Lost Voices*, the upcoming *Spark: A Creative Anthology VIII*, *STRAEON*, and an anthology of Lovecraftian-romance *Eldritch Embraces*. You can find her meanderings online at: www.bcmatthews.blogspot.com.

The Star-Tailed Fox

by B. C. Matthews

From the letters of Madeleine Wagner

January 19, 1940

Dear Keiko,

Papa said to me, "Madeleine, you've got smarts, so make sure you use your head for something besides a hat rack and an ornament." Like it's an old bit of Wagner wisdom he's passing down to his little girl who's flying the coop. Heck, I always wanted to fly.

Off to California.

Papa still can't understand why I want to leave, but I know you do, Keiko. Like when we were little and I *had* to climb Mrs. Brown's apple tree just because it was so big, so impossible.

California's my apple tree now.

And it's nothing like our farmhouse in Nowhereville, Washington.

So I guess it's not so hard to understand now why I packed my bags, said bye to you, Mama and Papa. Even Henry, who pretended not to cry, of course. That's what brothers do. You know that annoying twin of mine still insists he was born first? The damn rascal.

I wish you could have come with me. I think your inner fox finds all of this funny as hell.

I promise to write you all the time. Maybe you can come visit me soon.

Your friend,

Maddie

*

From the letters of Keiko Nakamura

March 16th, 1940

Dear Maddie,

Already I miss you.

Things here at the Wagner estate are as hectic as usual. Henry decided that with his twin sister gone, he's now man of the house. He's named himself King, and I am to be his Queen of course, which quite scandalized Mrs. Brown when she heard Henry declare it at your mother's church luncheon.

"You can't marry the help!" she hollered. "Oh my, Mr. Wagner, but you cannot let this continue. Henry might get the wrong idea about *those people*. It would be morally wrong."

"The only wrong idea," your father said, "is your idea, Mrs. Brown. Keiko is one of the finest and most humble ladies I know."

Me? Humble!

The doctors say Henry's spine is getting better. At times he doesn't have to wear the back brace, so I don't have to help him move around quite as much. And the

kids don't laugh at him when he isn't wearing it, though he always makes fun of himself. I still tell him to quit doing that.

I'll stop chattering on now. I want to hear about you. What is it like there in California? They say it's sunny all the time, and everyone is beautiful.

It sounds like the perfect place for you.

Sincerely yours,

Keiko

*

From the letters of Madeleine Wagner

May 3, 1940

Dear Keiko,

Oh, Keiko, I never thought I'd say this but I met someone. He's tall, big, strong, a great dancer, and, well, *dreamy*. He knows how to dance so well that I feel like a complete idiot when he asks me to dance. Who knew a Navy man could dance so well? Sometimes when we dance, I feel almost drunk, as if my head will spin clean off my damn shoulders.

You once told me it feels like that when the moon is full and the fox inside you comes out to play. You still let that happen, don't you? You'd better.

I sometimes dream of foxes jumping about in the yard at home. Their eyes always seem to glow, as if they knew something that I didn't. Do you remember when we'd go to play out in the fields, and the kits would run up to us all crazy? It was like they knew you were like them.

I have those dreams every time I think of you. Do you still swing on the tire out by the lake until you make Henry laugh?

Give all my love to Mama and Papa. And even Henry.

Always,

Madeleine

*

From the letters of Keiko Nakamura

November 21st, 1940

Dear Maddie,

It's Thanksgiving here, but somehow it doesn't feel the same without us stealing away at night after your mother and father are asleep. Henry's been reluctant to continue the tradition of our midnight wanders, but I can't help it, Maddie. I really can't. I have to play beneath the stars sometimes. It really hurts to keep the kit inside me, not let it come out to play, and it's when I don't let my inner fox out that I get in trouble.

I miss you, and not just because you encourage me to shift whenever it becomes too hard not to.

Henry is so morose now. Most of his friends have joined the Army, and I think part of him is jealous and ashamed that he can't serve. He calls himself a cripple, and he gets so angry when his spine seems unwilling to work with him and I have to help. He's yelled at me a couple of times to just leave him be, though he apologizes profusely afterward.

A few weeks ago, I couldn't help but play a trick on him. We were walking along the lake side, and Henry was being so shy and quiet that I wanted to throw him in the water! Instead, I slipped away from him behind a tree and out came the white fox. How good it felt to feel the grass graze along my face, smelling the thousand scents that I can never understand except as the inner me. It's like watching a movie, but all with smells.

When he saw the fox-me, he was shocked. I bounded high in the air, letting all four paws land in a big muddy puddle. The mud flew up and splashed right into his face! I made that laughing sound you always tease me about, that fox-squeak like the kits make when they're excited and playing. I bounded away from him, and pounced into the puddle again. This time the mud covered his clothes and completely caked my white hide.

I hope you're laughing as much as I was.

Henry got mad, but not for the reason I thought. He swiped the mud off his face saying, "Keiko, you can't do this. Someone might see. And then what? They'll hurt you. And I can't stand the thought of anyone hating you, fearing you, and doing *something* to you." He looked so serious and worried. His voice sounded that way he does whenever he's trying to sound like your father. "Promise me you'll never shift again. Not even for me."

How could he even suggest that? Doesn't he know that it *hurts* when I bury the fox? He used to insist that I run free in the fields, chasing rats, barking loud, jumping and running, and feeling the wind against that *other* me. How could he suddenly hate what he used to love about me?

Honestly, Maddie, it hurt my feelings. So much so that I hid out near the barn for a couple of days. I hate to say it but I chased your father's chickens all across the yard. They didn't lay eggs for nearly a week! But I couldn't help but chase them, not when I stuck to my *otherness* out of stubborn pride. When I finally slinked back to the house, your parents were furious.

I've never disappeared on them before. They asked me if I was running about with boys. Or doing something else young ladies shouldn't do. Drinking, I think. I can never tell them the truth. I was sure your father would fire me, and then throw me out, despite promising my mother that he'd look after me. Only you and your ridiculous brother know.

You don't agree with Henry, do you?

Oh, Maddie. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to go on like this—especially not on Thanksgiving.

How are you and your dashing Navy man?

Please come home for a little while, or I swear I'll change and run the whole way to California.

Missing you,

Keiko

*

From the letters of Madeleine Little neé Wagner

March 3, 1941

My best friend,

I didn't get your letter originally, because I moved again. Rick and I eloped! I wanted to call to tell you, but I was afraid Papa would get wind of it and put his foot down. He's always wanted a Wagner girl to marry one of those idiotic, good for nuthin' Barrow boys. But Rick is wonderful, and I'm having a wonderful time just being Mrs. Little.

As for my stupid brother...No, Keiko. I don't agree with him. But then again I usually don't. Mama said we fought like angry bears even in her belly.

He's just scared. He's always been scared for you, you know. You're just too stubborn to see it. And he's always liked you more than any girl around.

I think if you're careful, you can change every now and again. I know how much it pains you to hold back. Maybe you should remind Henry how much it hurts. Be honest with him and he'll appreciate it. He might even keep look out when you *change*, as long as you promise not to play tricks on him.

Just be careful, Keiko. A lot of things are happening right now. Papa says that he's lost a lot of patients because our last name is *Wagner*. He says someone in town busted out the windows of his medical office and wrote some really horrible things on the wall outside. He wouldn't tell me what, and that means it's nasty.

I want to bring Rick home to meet you all, but his ship is being deployed. And oh, you should have heard him the first (and only) time I accidentally called his ship a *boat*. Whoo boy.

Do me a favor, and don't keep lying to Henry about how you feel.

Gotta' run. I'll try to get home for Christmas.

All my love,

Maddie

*

From the letters of Keiko Nakamura

August 22nd, 1941

My Maddie,

I'm so confused. Oh, I want to blame that ridiculous brother of yours, but at the same time I want him to tell me that he doesn't hate me. Or what I am. You could always get him to talk when he gets all quiet like a good Wagner man does. But sometimes he just looks at me with those steely gray eyes of his, and he firms that proud jawline, and I feel just so wretched for having made him scared.

I convinced him that I need to shift so it doesn't hurt so much. I told him, "It's like your back, only all over. It hurts sometimes so much that it's all I can do not to scream and just run around all the time as a fox." Being like this—a person I suppose—sometimes just seems so wrong, as if my skin isn't real, as if the change is the only real thing. I just feel so helpless and different.

I wish I didn't have an inner fox.

I convinced Henry to sneak out of the house at night. He wasn't sure it was a good idea, but reluctantly agreed to keep a look out. I was so eager I didn't hear when he gasped, "No! Keiko don't!"

I shifted in front of your father.

For a moment your father just stood there, his eyes wide open. With my swiveling ears I could hear his heart thudding in his chest a little faster. Then he slowly sank to the ground with his head hanging down, and his fingers rubbing at his forehead.

"Your mother told me that you had some sort of special fox-spirit in you. But I didn't think..." Then he blinked again, his hands shaking. I've never seen his hands shake, not ever. "Oh God... I'm crazy as a bedbug..."

I sprinted away from his shock, running as fast as I've ever run. I don't think that any red fox can run as fast as I can. Before I knew it, and before I even got tired, I

wound up in the next county. And it felt glorious. I just wanted to stay out in the middle of nowhere beneath the winking stars, the smell of dust and growing wheat in my nose.

It wasn't until I huddled up cold in the dew that I started back.

Henry had been out looking for me all night, long beyond his physical limits. I felt more than guilty, Maddie. *I'm* the one that's supposed to look after *him*.

At first, your father tried to ignore what happened. But I could see that stubborn interest in his eye. You know the one. He asked me all sorts of questions, and boy was he surprised to find out that you and Henry knew since before my mother died. After we were finished talking, we went out to find Henry.

He was by the lakeside, and could barely move. But when I went to touch him, he snarled at me. An actual snarl as if he were a big angry dog barking at this little silly fox. Spit flew from his lips as he yelled at me, "What if it happens when someone else is around? What if they take you away and experiment on you? Why can't you just be normal?"

It hurt so much to hear him say that. Part of me has always been ashamed of the inner fox, even though my mother insisted that it made me special.

"Why don't you just run away?" He was screaming now, those muscles on the side of his neck straining even as his face turned red. "It's what you want to do! You want to run away and never come back, don't you dare deny it!"

Your father helped him to his feet, told him he was being childish. Henry's been taller than your dad forever now, but your father still seemed so surprised his boy was a big, tall, heavy *man*.

I told him—and your father—that the only reason I hadn't run away was because of them. Your family means so much to me, Maddie. I love them all. And you. I can't tell you what it means to me that you and Henry could see the real me. The inner me. That stupid hated fox.

Your father insists that we not talk about it, in case other people overhear. But really I think he doesn't want to deal with it. Part of him wants to forget it. And Henry...

Your brother isn't talking to me. And in that silence I can't help but hear him saying, "Why can't you be normal?"

I ask myself that all the time.

Please, Maddie. Come home. Only you can sway these Wagner boys. Or if you can't, tell me where you are now and I will ride the rails and run in the fields to be where you are.

Your desperate friend,

Keiko

*

From the letters of Madeleine Little

December 21, 1941

My dearest friend,

I desperately want to go home to you, and Mama and Papa, and even Henry. I called, but you weren't there. I talked to Mama, and I hope that she gave you the message from me.

But I will write it down.

Rick's ship was stationed in Hawai'i, and I had flown out to see him. I am so glad I did because that was the last day I ever got to see him, and the last day that he ever got to say that he loved the baby. You can't even see me showing yet, but he's in there, kickin' like a mad little bear.

And now he'll never get to see his daddy.

We were married for such a short time, but it seems like an eternity to me. And honestly, I have no idea what I'm going to do without him. You know I'm not the type to go about weeping, but everything I see reminds me of him. Every time I hear any kind of music, I remember how we danced. He was such a good dancer. Always the gentleman. He once brought me flowers from the fields just because I said wildflowers reminded me of home.

Every time I smell flowers, I think of him.

I'm not eating much, which I know isn't good for the baby. The doctor will get angry with me, I know, but just everything makes me cry like a little girl. I cry like that time you and I snuck into Mrs. Brown's barn, and I broke my arm falling out of the loft. I just feel so alone, Keiko. My world is disappearing, and the whole wide world is just so full of hatred and madness.

We're at war, and already the war has taken everything from me.

If there's one thing I've learned from this, Keiko, it's that you have to fly to where you're loved as fast as you can. If I hadn't decided to see Rick, I wouldn't have gotten to say goodbye. Don't be stupid, Keiko. Mama and Papa love you like one of us crazy Wagners. And Henry...

My brother loves you. You know it. You're both too stupid to admit it to each other. I don't want to sound like Papa, but you need to use your head for something besides a hat rack. Take what you can from this world. Do it now. I want you and Henry to be as happy as Rick and I were.

I wish I could go home, but no one is flying out of here right now and probably won't for some time.

All my love forever,

Maddie

*

Return to Sender, incorrect address

March 6th, 1942

I'm writing this quick, Maddie. Mrs. Brown has been ~~spreding~~ spreading hateful lies about me. That I'm the reason for all the crime in town, as if it weren't those Barrow boys running around a busting up things because of the war. Mrs. Brown has been ~~yelling~~ cursing at me every time I see her. She calls me a "no good evil Jap" and other hateful things. Maddie, I'm so scared. What will I do? Henry says that we can run away together, somewhere else, but I don't know where. I'm so sorry about Rick. I wish I could fly to you so we could be together through this, so I

can be there for when the baby comes. But your father says that they're gathering together people to send them away. I don't want to go, but I don't know what else to do.

*

From the undelivered letters of Mrs. Madeleine Little, FBI Archives

April 6, 1942

God, I'm so worried now. I had two big G-men wearing black suits come to my door, and that they wanted to talk to Miss Wagner. I informed them that I was still Mrs. Little, even if Rick was gone.

For a moment I could only think of one thing—that somehow Rick was alive and they had found him, and my baby would have a daddy. But I knew it couldn't be, otherwise someone from the Navy would surely tell me.

One of the men, a mean son-of-a-you-know-what, started asking me all sorts of questions. He asked me why I was writing to you. I told him in my most imperious Wagner voice, "I don't see why it's any of your business who I write to back home."

Then the other one, the smaller fellow and ugly-as-sin said, "Who is Keiko Nakamura, Miss Wagner? What do you write about?"

When I said I'd known you for most of my life, growing up with you, and then living with you when you came to work for us, they started insinuating our friendship was some sort of horrible ploy to send messages to Japan. His ugly little face pinched even more when he told me, "You probably married Rick Little because he was part of our Navy. What did he tell you in confidence, *Miss Wagner*? Do you have any communication with anyone in Germany?"

I got so angry that the little one in my belly seemed like he was doing back flips. I stood up and told him they could go to hell in a handbasket if they thought I'd put up with that nonsense. How dare he suggest I didn't love my Rick? How dare he say such things about Rick, and me, and you?

I don't know if any of my letters are getting to you. I think that they might be taking my letters and reading them.

I will just tell you to become your inner self. Run with the wind and the stars above, and just live as that *inner* you.

I love you, Keiko.

*

From the undelivered letters of Keiko Nakamura, Tule Lake Relocation Center

June 5th, 1942

Maddie,

I don't know if any of my letters are getting to you. I've sent letters to your family, but part of me wonders if the guards aren't opening them first, because of your family name.

So, I've finally arrived in California, not quite the way I wanted to run off to gold county. I'm exhausted, and herded in with so many strangers, though many of them are nice enough to me. I can't even begin to describe everything that happened. God, Maddie, they tagged me to come here as if I were something sitting in Mr. Gary's antiques shop. I could only take what I'd shoved in my bag, and honestly it wasn't much.

Henry insisted that I shift. Told me to save myself, that I had to stay forever as the fox. That he could come to visit me when I was prowling about the fields, hunting rabbits with predatory instinct. He grabbed me, Maddie, and he held me, saying that he loved me too much to let me be taken away like I was some horrible criminal. That I was a good person, and that he loved me as I was, and as I could be, and that the fox inside had always made me special.

I kissed that great fool. I couldn't help it.

Yet all I could think of was that if I became the fox I would be her forever. When I spend too long as the inner me, I start to forget things—people, places, reasons to think like a person. All I can think of is the twitch of my nose, the smell of wet

green things growing, the dusty, quick scent of a rabbit bounding in the underbrush. I forget everything but the foxness.

Because if I live forever as the fox, then it would mean forgetting you all. And I couldn't give up you, or Henry. But the fox in me still beckons as it always did.

Here among strangers, I wanted to change. But couldn't. How could I? Then I found out I've grown another tail.

I'm housed with the Kirin family, and they're very quiet and nice people. To while away the hours, I tell their little boy, George, stories and I even write some of them down. I tell him about the white fox hunting in the fields who's looking for her friends, but all her friends were far away and she's unable to talk to them. Patrick Kirin, George's father, told me that it sounded like the stories of *kitsune* that his grandfather used to tell him. And even though Mom always referred to the inner me as that, it surprised me a little.

The need to shift became too great, it hurt *so much*, Maddie. I tried to hide in the corner of the room, under the cot, away from everyone else while they were out to view the night's newsreel.

So I changed. And that's when little George saw me. He just came up to me, placed a hand on my back, petting my fur, and said, "You can talk to me. I'll be your friend, and I'll listen. I know you're looking for your friends far away. So am I."

I didn't know that I could cry as the fox. I also didn't notice until just that moment that I had two tails. When they came together it was almost like a soft silver spark, as if I'd caught a winking star between them.

Then George said, "If I could leave with you, I would, *kitsune*. Can you fly like the other foxes? Why don't you fly to find your friends?"

I want to fly to you. To Henry.

Keiko

*

From the undelivered letters of Mrs. Madeleine Little, FBI Archives

September 11, 1942

My Keiko,

The baby is here, and growing so fast. He's beautiful and quite a crier. I've named him after his daddy, and I know he'll live up to the name. I've moved back home to be with Papa and Mama, but it isn't the same without you here.

Henry's a complete wreck. He's so quiet and sad, and I know it's because he can't be where you are. With you. The doctors say he has to wear the back brace again because he simply sits in the corner all day, staring out into the fields as if looking for that familiar fox we all know and love.

I've enclosed a picture of us. I insisted on it, even though little Ricky is making a face and snot is coming out of his nose. I took one of Henry all by himself, and I even managed to get him to smile a little.

Waiting until the day you return,

Maddie

*

From the undelivered letters of Keiko Nakamura, Tule Lake Relocation Center

December 23rd, 1942

This is going to be the last letter I try to send. Either I make it, or I don't.

I'm going to say goodbye to little George, and then I will try to fly to you.

This shift might be my last. Once they find out I'm missing they'll come looking for me, and if they find me as a person, I'll be right back here. I just don't know if I'll be able to change back after being the inner me so long.

It doesn't really matter. I can't stay here. Not alone, not hearing all of the sick coughs, not listening to all of the kids crying themselves to sleep, not wondering if all of the older men and women are alive inside, as if they've lost something vital.

Two tails, Maddie. Patrick Kirin says that means the fox knows magic and is getting older and wiser, that the *kitsune* gain tails as they age.

I don't know about wiser.

Here I go, flying as only I can. On four feet. Flying to you, Henry, Papa, Mama, and your little one, who must be born by now. I bet he's just as handsome as his dad, and just as perfect as his mom.

Four feet. Better than two.

*

From the diary of Madeleine Little

August 3, 1947

It's Ricky's birthday today and he asked me if I'd seen a white fox jumping around the field. He's seen her before, but he's really too little to remember. In fact, she's led him back to the house on a couple occasions when he's slipped out to go play with the chickens, despite that Papa scolds him gently whenever Ricky messes with his favorite hens.

Every time that Henry sees her, it hurts him. I know that his surgery didn't work for his back, and that he couldn't leave us crazy Wagners (and two Littles). He's stuck here with us. But he's being the best Uncle that he could ever be. Honestly, Ricky has taken to Henry, and the few times that I ever hear Henry laugh anymore is when Ricky is chattering at him, telling his Uncle stories that only make sense to a child.

I wish Keiko could've been here to see Ricky's cheeks puff up as he blew out his candles. I know she would've stuck some frosting on his nose, and laughed her yipping laugh.

That twin of mine met my eye, and I could tell he was thinking the same thing.

*

From the diary of Madeleine Little

November 28, 1947

I went out into the field at midnight yesterday, like we used to every Thanksgiving, wandering under the stars right next to the lake. I didn't expect it, but Henry was there too, and he smiled when he saw me. He pointed to the mud splattered on his clothes, and then to the three-tailed white fox with just as much mud on her fur.

"Come back to us, Keiko," I told the fox, hoping as I do every year for her to understand me.

Her tails made silvery sparks in the air, as if she were laughing at us.

Maybe she was.

Then her dark eyes looked at Henry and she flicked her three tails against his side, splattering more mud on his pants. The sparks—that crazy fox-fire—blazed, and it seemed to engulf Henry. I was scared and Henry cried out in surprise, but then his back arched.

He started to change. Before I knew it a bright red fox was standing next to her.

They ran off into the field together with all of the happy cries of wild foxes.

I have a feeling that Ricky and I will see them again when spring rolls around.

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SECOND PLACE

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Napa, California. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published in April 2013 by Ashland Creek Press and was short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award.

Savages

by Jean Ryan

The savages are waiting; they know I'm outside the door. Some I will feed, others I won't. It's not like dinner arrives with any predictability in the wild. This way they stay keen and ready, like nature intended.

The carnivorous plants I tend live in a long narrow room with glass on one side, and I control everything they need: light, temperature, food, water. I keep a close eye on each of them and can usually save the ones that get sick. I'm a better mother than most.

*

My mother gave me a feeble name, Carol Ann Walker, which I changed. I wanted something distinctive, with no ties or tracks, so I opened an atlas and let my finger fall on a town in West Africa called Masso. That sounded fine. My first name, "Kinra," I pulled out of the air. Kinra Masso. Try figuring that one out. You're stuck with your genes, but your name is a wildcard.

No, I am not pretty. My eyes are too small and I don't have much of a chin. What I have too much of are hips—I have those freakishly wide hips some women are

cursed with; otherwise I am normal and not fat at all. I don't use make-up because it's a lie, but I do keep my clothes and body clean—there was a time when I couldn't.

Aside from cold wet weather, that's what I minded most about living on the street. Sometimes, when I'm in my bathtub or sitting on my toilet, I remember when I didn't have either, when I took care of my business in Safeway restrooms, filling a plastic water bottle with hand soap on my way out. With a cardboard roof over your head you get canny in a hurry; you see that most everything has value, especially the people you spend your days and nights with. Sharing is how you stay alive.

We were all towing trouble. Some had been displaced by bad luck; others lived on the fringe by choice, preferring privation to whatever hell they came from. A few had lost their sanity, which reminded the rest of us how close that world was. We were cells of the same body, old and young and in-between. When we looked at each other, we saw ourselves.

I don't have friends like that anymore.

*

What separates meat-eating plants from other plants is the ability to digest. Methods of capturing a meal depend on the variety. Pitcher plants sit there with gaping mouths. Sundews ooze goo. Venus fly traps attack. Their teeth-rimmed lobes snap shut, and the world becomes a green tomb for the luckless bug inside. The terror thrills me every time.

Most plants move constantly, their stems twisting and turning, their blossoms opening and closing, but these changes happen slowly, beyond detection. Venus fly traps strike, *commit murder*, right before your eyes—you can understand why kids can't resist them. Not that I approve of children toying with these plants, tormenting them with pencil tips and dead house flies (individual traps—a plant makes several—can close and reopen only seven times before they die, and only three times if they actually digest something). Deadly though they are, Venus fly traps fight for their lives like everything else.

From their strange looks and behavior, you might think Venus fly traps are found in steamy, perilous jungles south of the equator. In fact they are native to North

America, the Carolinas specifically, where they flourish on the coastal plains—sunny wet savannahs or pine-studded grasslands. Of course we are robbing their habitat, draining the wetlands to harvest lumber and throw up more houses. Preventing naturally occurring brush fires is another of our blunders: fly traps are choked out by thick scrub and need the fires to give them room.

Why are we here? Seriously. Why were we ever allowed access?

*

My brother Matt died surfing, smacked in the head by his board. Hollowed out by the death of his only son, my father was unreachable, distant as the moon. When that phase ended, I wished he'd never come back to earth. He started drinking then, steadily and on purpose, and one night he slapped me around just for the hell of it: I wasn't pretty, I wasn't Matt. My father never liked me, only faked it when others were around, and after Matt's death, he stopped pretending and just said whatever hateful thing came into his mind. He was mean to my mother, too, sneered at everything she tried to do for him. One morning he shoved aside the breakfast she'd cooked and said her food make him sick, that *she* made him sick, and then he stomped out of the house. I walked into the kitchen and found her huddled in her chair, shoulders heaving. "Leave him," I said. She looked up and gave me this stricken look; it was clear I was my own. She loved me, I knew that, but love without teeth is no help at all.

I couldn't talk about Matt, or write his name, or look at pictures of him, or go anywhere near his room. My mother reacted differently. For hours at a time, she would lie in his bed. This amazed me, how someone who didn't have the nerve to leave a rotten marriage could be so brave.

*

Venus fly traps are precise. It takes just the right trigger to close up a trap and just the right insect—too small and they slip through, too big and the trap, unable to close, leaks bacteria and poisons itself. Large ants or tiny crickets work well, spiders too. The victims don't have to be alive, but a bug that struggles is more easily digested.

Fly traps don't need to eat; they absorb everything they require from the sun. Their snares are an add-on, insurance perhaps, in place if need be; or maybe a

reward system that benefits the achievers, the ones who bother to use what they were given. The plants that don't eat look fine, but you should see the difference a meal or two makes. The fed plants are not only greener and bushier, they hold their leaves higher. They move when my back is turned; when I face them again, their traps are wide open and canted toward me. They would speak if they could, and what they would say is: "More."

*

My father laid into me a second time, shoved me hard on his way to the bathroom. I banged my head against the wall and saw stars. He stopped and looked at me, his face red, his eyes like cinders. I thought he was going to hit me, but instead he staggered back a couple steps and started to cry. Disgusted, I brushed past him and locked myself in my room. I could hear him in the hallway, blubbering apologies, and then I heard my mother, who was crying too. I just kept shoving clothes into my backpack, and as soon as those two sad sacks went to bed I got away.

*

So this is what happens when a Venus fly trap gets sprung. The bug, usually an ant, smells the nectar and hikes up to a trap (in her shrewd way, nature spares the pollinators, who cruise past without interest). If the ant brushes two of those white hairs on the edge, or one hair twice in twenty seconds, the trap swiftly closes—in fact, it changes shape. An electrical current runs through the two lobes, and the cells on the outer walls lengthen, doubling their size in less than a second. The convex lobes turn concave, and the teeth at the top intermesh. The struggling ant stimulates the trigger hairs even further, and soon the lobes are pressed tight and the trap seals itself. Glands on the inside of the lobes begin to secrete digestive juices, drowning the victim.

It takes a week or so for the flytrap to digest its prey. When the trap reopens, all that's left of the insect is a dry exoskeleton. Spiders, lured by this crusty morsel, often become the second course.

When I think about the planning involved, from the eager ant to the unwitting spider, I get goose bumps. I wonder what I'm walking around with, what components I'm not using. Then I wonder who's pulling my strings.

*

Some folks live out their lives on the street, scabbed over with skin cancers, blinded by cataracts, hobbling along on ruined knees. It's surprising how many afflictions you can carry. When you have your health, you have everything, the saying goes. Not really. Health, beauty, those are extras; you can live without them; you can even be happy, or close to it. You're not alone, that's for sure.

I stayed on the streets of East L.A. for eighteen months. It wasn't awful. The weather was mostly tolerable, and there were quite a few places to get at least one decent meal a day. I spent a lot of time in libraries, and the churches were a comfort, too. Sometimes they let us sleep on the pews. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, scared at first, and then I'd see the stained glass windows, the light coming through the saints and angels, and my heart would slow down. You don't have to be Catholic to love those windows.

One morning when I was picking cans and bottles out of a nightclub dumpster, I noticed the owner, who was fat and sweaty, hauling out trash cans and rubber mats. I walked right up to him and asked if I could help him, and he frowned at me and shook his head. I didn't blame him—my hair wasn't clean that day, and I was wearing clothes that didn't fit me from a Goodwill drop box. But I kept at it, told him I'd hose off the mats and swab the bar floor and clean the toilets, whatever he needed, and he finally said okay. He gave me a little cash each Friday and let me sleep on a Naugahyde bench in the poolroom, and not once did he try anything creepy. In a few weeks, I was able to buy some new underwear and two decent outfits, which is how I got the job at Milo's Diner. Tammy, the other waitress at Milo's, told me I could rent a room in the house she was living in. It was a crummy house in Glendale, and nothing worked right, and you had to pass through the cubby I slept in to get to the bathroom, but I was fine with it. I had a bed, a real roof and an address. There were four of us in that house, all women, and we all waited table. I really wanted to be a cocktail waitress—they make gobs of money—but you need to be pretty for that.

*

People and animals begin with an egg. What I love about plants is that you can start one from seed or scrap—scraps are faster and more fun. You just pull off a leaf, set it on a bed of sand and peat, put a pinch of soil on the base and keep it moist. In two years you'll have a full-grown plant, whereas a fly trap born from seed takes about five years to mature. I use both methods, and right now I have a

total of 184 plants, some of which are ready for division, which is another way my collection grows.

They are not identical. Some are all red, some have red traps, some are saw-toothed. These variations can occur naturally or breeders can coax them into being. I've bought some nice specimens from a nursery near here, but I am not much interested in raising cultivars; my focus is quantity. Besides, whatever odd features I coddle here will be winnowed out in the wild. Left to their own devices, plants always revert to their robust origins. That's why you see variegated plants turning green again; the white parts can't make chlorophyll and are shouldered out.

Venus fly traps must be kept wet, and any black leaves should be trimmed off—that's all the care they require. They can go without food, or you can give them a bug now and then. *Never* fertilize. Most plants use their roots to suck up nutrients from the soil; fly traps live in wet sand and use their roots as anchors. They have no idea what to do with food that comes from beneath them, a meal that doesn't thrash. Still, I give them new medium each spring—equal parts sand and peat—to keep their lives fresh. It's a serious task. Each 4-inch pot must be inverted and refilled, and while I am doing this with my right hand, the fly traps wait upside-down in my left hand. I take great care with this event, and I am sure the plants trust me.

*

Working breakfast and lunch at Milo's left my evenings free, and I spent most of them at the Central Library. First I was studying for my GED (a breeze, by the way), then I moved into the natural sciences, which is when I learned about carnivorous plants and other strange things. For a while I was keen on books about viruses and bacteria, the plagues we miss by a hair's breadth (or not). We fight back with our pills and shots, but nature catches up: vaccines are hurdles she thrives on.

Some folks believe we'll be swamped by melting ice caps; some think rampant pollution will do us in; others say a maniac will pull the trigger and we'll bomb ourselves into oblivion. I say a microbe will get here first—we'll scarcely know what hit us. A few people may be left standing, subsets with lucky genes and a big responsibility. I'd like to think the wise will be spared—they are rare enough—but nature doesn't work that way.

*

Each year on Halloween I put the savages to sleep. It doesn't take much. I lower the humidifier a notch and pull a gray mesh shade over the windows so no bright sun comes in. Beyond keeping the water trays filled, there is nothing the plants need from me in the cold months. I always miss our time together and can hardly wait till Valentine's Day, when I wake them up again.

When fly traps go into dormancy all their summer leaves go black and are replaced by smaller, low-growing traps. This feral clump—just a waiting set of teeth—is what gets them through the winter. They don't eat during this period and will ignore any meal you offer. Imagine knowing yourself that well.

*

When I was homeless I used to walk up to telephone poles and study the photos of missing persons. My face was never there—not that I expected it to be. I knew my father wouldn't bother, and I doubted my mother had the gumption to go after me like that.

They're useless anyway, those photos. I could look at one and never realize I'd just shared a sandwich or gotten a haircut from that person. Minus certain amenities, people's looks change in a hurry. Men grow beards, and women, without make-up and hair color, are also hard to spot. Bodies change, too. A lot.

You can't tell that your body is adapting—it does that without you. One day you notice your nails are thicker, your skin tougher, your calves more firm than they've ever been; even your night vision becomes keener.

Oh—and your periods stop. Most of the women I knew back then had stopped menstruating. It was as if nature, seeing we were not equipped for motherhood, had taken away the option. Considering the mess and expense involved in fertility, we were grateful.

*

Have you heard of tissue culture? It's a way of creating quantities of plants, cheaply and quickly, in a sterile environment. Many people collect carnivorous plants, and without tissue culture, there would not be enough plants to go around.

There's nothing natural about making plants in beakers, but it does discourage poaching. There's a \$50,000 fine for digging up fly traps in North Carolina or collecting their seeds. That's how scant they've become.

*

I was tired of L.A. I had lived there twenty-one years, and every day it looked the same, a dirty playground stretching in all directions. I didn't think the city had anything left to teach me, and staying on seemed lazy.

I had heard some nice things about Northern California, that it was nothing like the southern half of the state, so I found a *Frommer's* guide and started looking at pictures. For sure, there were more hills and vineyards in the north, and the beaches looked mostly empty. I did not quite believe the blue perfection of Lake Tahoe—were the photos retouched?—or the proportions of a giant redwood looming behind a thimble-sized man. But what charmed me most was a photograph of Jenner Beach, where the Russian River meets the Pacific. There were sloping cliffs on either side dotted with yellow flowers and feathery stands of pampas grass, and sea lions were stacked along the shore like sodden logs, and sun spilled down on the whole scene, spangling the river and ocean. Everything looked exactly as it should, even the man and woman walking on the shoreline, a dog trotting beside them, and that big green river pouring itself into the sea. Surrender, that's what it looked like. Eternal surrender.

I changed my name to Kinra Masso, bought a used Corolla, worked my last lunch at Milo's and headed north. For a couple hours I kept checking the rearview mirror, as if I had stolen something and gotten away with it, but that was just freedom settling in.

I wound up in Guerneville, a town covered in redwoods just fourteen miles from Jenner Beach. First I found a cottage to rent, a damp little place that came with a greenhouse in which the owner had tried and failed to grow tomatoes. I scrubbed it clean and cut down the over-hanging branches, then started ordering trays and pots. There was never any question of what I would grow there.

I also got the job I wanted, a job with a future. If you think being a Safeway cashier doesn't sound like much, you have no idea what unions can do.

*

I miss Matt as much now as I did when he died, but these days I let myself think about him. I feel closest to him in the dark, with no hard facts around. Sometimes I lie in bed and conjure his image, and for a second I can see him clearly, his face a fleeting hope. “Matthew Curtis Walker” I say out loud, to make his name matter still.

I’ve seen my mother three times since I ran away. The first time she didn’t know it; I watched her from our backyard, after dark. She was making dinner, a pot roast, I think.

The second time was right before I moved up to Guerneville. I wanted to come clean, to be done with the secrets and the drama. Out of respect, I called first. I thought I’d give my father the opportunity to clear out, and he did, which pretty much answered the question of whether he was still an asshole. Being with my mother again was just what I expected: hugs and tears and long, helpless looks. We both apologized, for what it was worth, and then we sat there.

The last time I saw her was after my father’s funeral—I knew he wouldn’t want me there so I didn’t go. My mother was thin and listless. I tried to talk her into spending some time with me here, maybe even moving up this way, but she looked at me like I had asked her to spend the rest of her life on the International Space Station.

*

Next month, when the savages are still sleeping, I’m going to rent a box van and take them across country. When we reach the boggy plains of North Carolina, near Wilmington, I will take a spade and plant each one, letting the water flow in and claim them.

It makes me smile already, thinking about those fly traps and what they have in store. When they wake up in the spring they’ll be right where they belong. They will know it in an instant.

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THIRD PLACE

Rachel Rodman is an itinerant writer and lecturer, presently working in the U.S. She has two cats, no dogs, and a PhD in Biochemistry. You can link to more of her published fiction (and equally weird non-fiction) at her website, rachelrodman.com.

His Name-o

by Rachel Rodman

There was a farmer had a god, and Bingo was his name-o.

To appease Bingo, the farmer performed many sacrifices. Oxen, sometimes. Pigs, too. But dogs worked best. Large dogs, with thick coats. With big, strong hearts that would continue to beat even after their throats had been cut.

At planting, the farmer buried the hearts of these sacrificial animals, just beside the seed. Then, lifting his hands high, he delivered this traditional prayer.

Bingo, make my fields fruitful.

Bingo, bring rain.

Bingo, accept this blood as your due.

Every feast day after that, the farmer watered the wheat with additional blood. Whenever wilt threatened, he buried new dog hearts. Against the roots, these organs beat-beat-beat, according to their old rhythm.

It was a fair harvest, the year after. In the summer, the farmer made bread and beer. Their flavors were poignant, like wrath averted.

Everything, in addition, was tinged with dog's blood. There was a faint pinkness, evident in cross section, after the bread had been cut. There was a tinge of iron, too, persisting in the beer's foam.

*

There was a farmer had a god, and Ingo was his name-o.

As language shifted, and the "B" was dropped, the god became hungrier. He craved orthodoxy, in addition to blood.

To honor Ingo, the priests staged a great war aimed at converting the heathens. With the army, the farmer marched. A team of dogs bred to fight accompanied them.

During the war, the dogs bit and tore, frenzied for Ingo. After each battle, the farmer harvested the heathens' scalps, then anointed them with oil, in order to baptize them.

By the end of the war, all of the dogs had been martyred. On the long trek home, the farmer invoked them: "O, Chosen of Ingo..."

When the farmer returned, it was harvest time. He helped as best he could. But he had been maimed in the war: one arm lost, the second impaled by a heathen's spear. So he was mostly useless.

During that harvest, the farmer fought often with his wife. The trigger was always this: in his absence, she had brought a cat into the house.

Cats, said the farmer, were disgusting vermin, and hateful to Ingo. Beyond that: a proscription to kill them was written in Ingo's holy book.

Eventually, in a spasm of piety, the farmer did kill the animal. In return, his wife said terrible things. Things that no woman should say.

After that altercation, the farmer consulted with Ingo. And Ingo spoke to him, unmistakably, in a voice like thunder. So the farmer bowed to Ingo's will.

The next morning, the farmer brought his wife to Ingo's priests to be beheaded for heresy. It was a bloody thing. But the farmer forced his children to watch so that

they would remember. Years later, whenever they prayed, he told them that their mother's soul was burning, a result of the lie she had professed. At the end of each prayer session, he also directed them to chant a correction to that lie, in order to avoid being poisoned by it.

They chanted: "Dogs are dear to Ingo. Cats are not."

*

There was a farmer had a god, and Ngo was his name-o.

Over the next several centuries, the "I" was gradually omitted. Under Ngo's auspices, great ships were built, designed to carry trade good across the ocean. Ngo's missionaries accompanied them.

Every summer, after harvest, the farmer brought his grain to the ships to be packaged for export. Back to his farm, in return, he brought many curious imports. Networks of pipes to assist irrigation. Pallets of dry fertilizer collected from exotic creatures called "bats."

Most important, though, were the slaves. Each had been forcibly removed from its home continent. Back to the fields, the farmer led them, with collars around their necks.

With these tools the farmer was able to extend his farm, converting it to a sprawling plantation. It was unprecedentedly productive.

To acknowledge this bounty, the farmer crafted many hymns. He did not, however, care to sing them himself. So he assigned that duty to his slaves.

The language barrier was severe. It took many beatings before the slaves could be trained to repeat the hymns. It took many more beatings, after that, before they could be persuaded to pronounce the words correctly. Eventually, though, it became a daily ritual. On his balcony, looking over, the farmer would mind accounts, one of the farmdogs sleeping at his feet. Below him, the slaves labored, singing while they worked.

Ngo, you are bountiful.

Ngo, you are merciful.

Ngo, we are grateful to learn your truth.

*

There was a farmer had a god, and Go was his name-o.

When the “N,” too, was lost, the god became “love”. To honor Go, the farmer gave his surplus grain to the hungry. He rescued animals , too: dogs and cats, maimed and malnourished, whom others had left to die.

The farm was a ragtag operation, never profitable. But there was warmth in that life, and lots of barking and meowing, too, out of many throats. The farmer had scarred-up, two-legged dogs with rheumatism, which dragged themselves along. He had cats with skin diseases, covered in sores. To prolong their lives, the farmer applied all the latest remedies: chemotherapy to blast their cancers, and IV drips to hydrate them when they lapsed into comas.

The farmer saw the light of Go everywhere. In his fields, brown and rich, from which his wheat rose, in yellow spangles. Light, from the dirt, as he tilled it. Light, from his tractor, as it spun.

The light bathed him, gentle and personal. He gave a little cry, sometimes, at the intensity of that connection.

“Go, you are my dear friend.”

*

There was a farmer had a god, and O was his name-o.

The farmer rarely thought of O, at least not consciously. Language, though, had fossilized around the god. So the farmer did invoke him, almost daily.

He used O’s name as a curse, mainly, as when an outdated batch of GM seeds arrived, in error. Or as a cry of pain, when his prize milker, a cow-goat chimera, kicked him square in the stomach. Or as a series of O’s—O, O, O—preceding the moment of orgasm, when embedded in the body of his robot wife.

Along the side of the barn, as a nod to the past, the farmer maintained a series of tombstones. Each commemorated a family farm dog. Beneath each name—Claws,

Clara, Bones—there was also a standard inscription. Eight traditional words to which the farmer attached no literal significance.

“May she rest in the arms of O.”

*

There was a farmer had a god. But the god no longer had a name.

The farmer worked indoors, under sterile conditions.

In plastic dishes, he grew grain. Pure grain, engineered for laboratory growth. From it, the roots and stalks had been genetically excised.

The farmer also grew meat. Victimless meat: beds of tissue, absent skin or brain or body. Its harvest created no corpses.

Dog meat, in particular, was the farmer’s passion. It was a new field, postdating the advent of ethical carnivorism. Before that, “dog-meat” had made consumers think of puppies, or of big brown dog-eyes, pleading, and so they had eschewed it.

But this meat had no face, and it could not experience pain.

The farmer was always busy. At his bench he made hearty dumplings, filled with canine cardiac cells. He made iron-rich liver patties, perfectly sized for use on a hamburger bun.

To this work, there was often a rhythm. Flesh, parting. Tissues, yielding.

In the flow of it, sometimes, the farmer would experience an unaccountable feeling. A flash of rapture... and of *Presence*. Then his neck would prickle, and his heart would go faster, and he would fear, briefly, for his sanity.

Luckily, though, the feeling always passed.

*

There was a farmer.

In his ship, the farmer passed the Barrier marking the edge of the Intergalactic Republic. Behind him, he left a smear of light.

After passing the Barrier, he slept. Under the closed lid of his bed, a chemical bath sloshed. It kept him moist and young.

He dreamed the whole time.

When the farmer woke, millennia later, there was only emptiness. So he built a sun. Then a world, to orbit it, equipped with formulaic things. Air to breathe. Water to flow. Fields of grain, embedded into soil.

After that, the farmer built dreams. Creatures, out of myth and history, which the crowded cities of his homeworld had been unable to accommodate.

For the first, he began with an outline shaped from stone. Then he enlivened it.

After this conversion, the creature's eyes sparkled. Its tongue scraped, warm and rough against the farmer's hand.

"Dog," said the farmer, giving it a name.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Melon Wedick lives with her husband and a menagerie of small plastic animals in a mostly yellow house in Asheville, North Carolina. Her work has previously appeared in *Grasslimb Journal* and *Every Day Fiction*.

The End of the Oxen

by Melon Wedick

At 4:30 PM the setting sun paints the kitchen in improbable technicolor rainbows, but the living room, where Lily paces, is a washed-out nothing gray. She presses her palms against her mug and lets steam condense on her chin, bearding it in droplets that cool too quickly, chilling her face while her palms scald. Outside, the world is gray and brown, or at least it looks that way through the film of grime that coats the window. Brown leaves clatter on the stunted oak opposite; dead already, they cling to its branches out of sheer spite. *Why not just let go?* Lily wonders. They're all going to fall, in the end.

"We should have washed the windows," she says aloud. Not for the first time.

Behind her, Jason says nothing. Tinny sounds of electronic combat seep from beneath the giant black headphones that have swallowed his ears. She turns to watch him, mesmerized by the spastic dance of clicks and taps he uses to control a collection of war-hardened pixels she can't see.

"We should have washed the windows," Lily says again, pitching her voice to a frequency she knows will resonate in the bones of his face.

"Why? Is there anything to see?" He doesn't look up. The whites of his brown eyes glow eerily blue.

She looks out. Trash bags hump along the sidewalk, some ripped open by animals, their innards lain bare. A rat's tail, unmoving, trails between two bags. The body on the corner lies still, bloated, the wind ruffling its purple heathered T-shirt. One of its hands is gone. Other than the T-shirt, nothing moves. Lily sticks her nose inside her mug and inhales deeply. The tea is mint, oversteeped.

“Not really,” she says, lifting her gaze to the death-rattling leaves, the motionless upper stories of other buildings. If there's nothing to see, there's no reason to look at it. Except that she's not blind, and has to look at something.

“Why don't you sit down?” Jason says, his game paused.

There's a bird on the fire escape across the way. Do living birds lie down like that? She doubts it.

Jason is watching her. “Lily,” he says. “Read something.”

“Like what?” She doesn't want to read. She wants to run, she wants to smell grass, she wants to step on a bee and get stung, she wants to feel anything other than this damp-straitjacket tethering. Behind Jason, the ethereal glow drains from the kitchen, shading everything colder. He gets up and turns on the light.

“I don't know, a book. Something with words in it.”

“Pick me one.” He goes to the shelves and Lily swallows hard against the fear in her throat. The fear is always there, hovering, like a nosy upstairs neighbor with one ear cupped to the floor, listening for the sound that means you can't take it anymore, that you're weakening, crumbling, flaking apart. Behind the fear lurks pure terror, a senseless, headlong-running, trapped-rat panic. But in front of all that there's Jason, who is here, and real, and deserves better. Lily grinds her fists against her hip bones and slaps on a smile before Jason turns, offering her a hardback as thick as her arm.

“Did you just pick the longest one you could find?”

He pushes his fingers into her hair, but they get stuck in its filthy tangle and he has to pull them out the way they went in. “So what if I did? Long doesn't mean bad.” He leads her to the couch, puts her tea on the table. “You want some music?”

Music will help,” he says, leaving her for his computer. In a minute, a frenetic guitar theme crashes out into the room; Jason retreats to his battlefield.

Lily tucks her feet up under a dusty afghan and sits with her back to the windows, lets punk replace panic. She opens the book and looks at it, at all the words inside. She’s read it before, and liked it, but now her eyes slide over the words like jam on glass, frictionless.

The too-short album soon surrenders to bloodless quiet. After years of freeway noise underpinning her every thought, Lily feels lately like her brain has curdled, gone from liquid to colloid, pudding trapped in bone.

She throws off her blanket and walks over to the desk. Jason hunches in the blue light of his laptop, shooting zombies. He seems OK. She pokes him in the shoulder, hard, and he jumps. “Can I play?”

“I thought you were reading.”

“Can’t concentrate.”

“Did you try?”

She gives him her flattest stare. “Really?”

“Come on, Lily, I can’t entertain you all the time.”

“Do you even notice how it smells in here?”

Jason rolls his eyes. “Make some more tea.”

“We’re out of tea. That was the last cup.” She will not say ‘ever.’

“Can’t you use the tea bag again?”

“Let me play.”

“You suck at games like this.”

“I can’t think of a better time to learn.”

He sighs, but hands over the headphones. The chair and his knees creak in unison when he stands. Lily slides into the warm seat and hits NEW GAME. There's a tutorial, but she still asks him every few seconds what the controls do, and whether spacebar means shoot or jump, and why her character isn't automatically walking and looking in the same direction, so Jason stays behind her, bending over her and breathing in her scent, of scalp and sweat and just a tiny hint of fruity shampoo, leftover from who knows when. The apple smell of it nearly makes him drool. He crouches next to the chair and they play through the first chapter together, or sort of together, two minds guiding a single soldier as he lurches through an abandoned army base, killing zombies and munching ration bars.

Ration bars. Jason's stomach rumbles. He lifts his arm off Lily's shoulders and wanders into the kitchen to perform the ritual of counting. Two jars of peanut butter left. Three cans of sardines. A half-gallon of milk. Maybe a third of a five-pound cask of protein powder. Half a loaf of moldy bread. An open can of green beans. A third of an orange. He takes a swig of the milk, gags, spits in the sink, rinses the curdled film away. At least the water is working. He mixes up a glass of protein powder and water and breaks off two orange segments. He thinks back to the last of the meat, spicy lamb meatballs in a sauce with figs, leftovers of leftovers, long gone now. His mouth waters.

From the vacant lot beyond the kitchen window comes a sudden rattle, and Jason presses his face against the glass in time to see a feral cat perching on the chain-link fence, leaning hard against the wind. Jason forgets to breathe as he watches the cat, willing it to move. *Move*. He taps on the window and the angular face whips around to find him, green eyes flashing in the failing sun. The wind howls, gusting harder. Jason's blood thuds in his ears. The cat hunkers down, ears flat and eyes slits, but the wind pushes relentlessly until the cat falls to the ground like a stone.

Jason looks away.

"Looks pretty cold out there," he says aloud, shivering. "Nice and warm in here, though."

Lily doesn't hear him, maybe. She doesn't say anything.

Jason watches her as he drinks. Protein powder dissolves better in water than in milk, but it doesn't taste as good.

“The milk’s gone bad,” he says.

“Throw it out,” mumbles Lily, who can hear him after all.

“Maybe it’ll turn into cheese?”

“Don’t think it works like that,” she says.

Jason doesn’t think so either, but he leaves the milk where it is.

“You want to play a game?” he asks.

“I am playing a game,” she says.

True enough. He walks into the living room and picks up Lily’s book, but the words on the page are just words, not a story. He looks out at the body on the street. It’s turning slightly blue, or maybe that’s just the light. They should have bought blinds, he thinks, so they could shut this all out.

“I wish they would take it away,” he mumbles.

“Who, though?” asks Lily, standing at his elbow.

Jason’s eyes flash to the computer. “Are you done?” He can’t see the screen, but he can just make out the main menu fanfare.

Lily grimaces. “I died.”

He kisses the top of her head in mock sympathy. “Of course you did.”

“Can we—” Lily starts, but he’s already gone, spinning into the empty chair and clamping the headphones onto his ears.

Lily watches him play, her back to the frigid window. She does not look outside. It’s been over a week since the last message from the Mayor’s office encouraged people to shelter in place. Since then, nothing but silence. Were they stupid to stay? Was there any place they could have gone? Is it only here, or everywhere? There’s no news, no signal, no way to know. The electricity’s on, so someone somewhere must still be working. Unless there are fail-safes. Unless the power plants don’t need people to run them.

“Gotcha!” Jason says, frantically pounding the space bar. Lily’s mouth tastes sour, as if she’s been sick.

“Jason,” she says.

His eyes stay riveted to the screen.

“I’m hungry,” she says.

Nothing.

She goes to the kitchen, which reeks of sour milk. She wishes they could clean. Instead, she breaks off a segment of orange and puts it in her mouth, bursting the juice sacs individually with her tongue. The acidity makes her saliva glands cramp, a pain she savors.

A bulb in the overhead fixture dies with a “pop.” Lily jumps, and then blushes, although no one’s looking. She puts her cold hands to her hot face to warm them. Her stomach aches. She thinks, in a flash, about bicycles, about the year she got one for Christmas from her parents, green streamers stuck through plastic handlebar-ends, multicolored pop beads rattling in the wheel spokes as she flew down a hill after school in the spring. The thick perfume of mud and grass clung to her skin when she went to bed, and her illicit dirty feet smeared mud on her mother’s pristine sheets. The sheets always smelled of fabric softener; an intoxicating scent, like drunk butterflies.

Lily feels dizzy and sits on the floor. “Jason?” she says. Quietly, but he hears her and takes the headphones off. All the way off, on-the-desk off, not looped-around-his-neck off. She smiles, but only with her mouth.

“You want some sardines?” he says, padding over on socked feet.

“I want Thai food!” She dreams briefly of curries, of crispy duck and fried basil, thick coconut milk cloaking her tongue.

Jason smiles. “Well, Madame, tonight le bistro can offer an authentic sardine satay: room-temperature fillets of cold-water fish served with a chunky peanut reduction.” He grabs sardines and peanut butter from the cupboard, joins her on the floor.

“I’ll take mine plain, thanks.” She forks the fish into her mouth and wishes it were anything else, although her stomach grumbles in gratitude. “We’re almost out of oranges.”

“I think the multivitamin has C in it.” Jason stares at the sardine can, wondering if she will leave anything behind. Maybe a bone or two he can crunch between his teeth.

She passes him the fork. They eat in silence, trading the fork back and forth. He tries to eat less than she does, counting bites, making sure he doesn’t accidentally come out ahead. The darkness collects around their ankles like shed animal hair. If they could knit it into a blanket, it might help keep them warm.

“We could clean up,” she offers. “It might help with the smell.”

“I guess,” he says, knowing it wouldn’t. The trash rotting in the stairwell smells worse than the odor coming from the sink.

When the fish is gone, they suck the oil from their fingers. Jason mentally removes the can from their inventory, and tries to decide that he is full. Lily leans into him, all fish breath and elbows.

“Jason,” she says. “I’m scared.”

His stomach twists. He puts an arm over her shoulders. “I know.”

“Are you?” Lily tilts her head back, trying to read his face. All she can see is his chin.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says, as gently as he can. “Let’s play something.”

Lily blinks and pulls away slightly, so he can go back to his laptop. He tries out a light laugh.

“I mean let’s play something together. A game-game, a board game. Let’s play Scrabble.” He gives her arm a playful squeeze.

“You hate Scrabble.”

“Right? It’ll be fun!”

“How is doing something you hate fun?”

“I’ll make it fun.”

“You don’t have to humor me, you know,” she says. “This is happening to you as much as me.”

Jason closes his eyes and breathes out slowly, pushing up hard against the sinking feeling in his gut. He concentrates on the floor, how solid it is, planks of wood that don’t even creak beneath their feet. He is safe. He is not falling. Lily is right here. They still have food, the power and water still work. Later they will go to bed, and then the sun will come back and make everything warmer. Happier. He saw a cat today. It looked at him. It fell off the fence, but it might have walked away afterwards. Tomorrow there could be another one. *Don’t borrow trouble*, his mother used to say. Everything could still be fine.

Lily runs her hand over his cheek and he shudders. “I just said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, but you must be scared, it’s—”

“Lily,” he says, his voice shaking. “This is not helping me.”

“Well, you patronizing me isn’t helping me, either!” She rears back to look him in the eye, defiant. His heart pounds. Nothing he can say will make it better. He loves her with all of his being, but he sometimes wishes she could be someone else.

When he does speak, the conciliation in his voice grates on them both. “Can’t we just play a game? Think about something else? Ignore it?” He dislikes pleading, but it’s better than fighting.

“And what is that going to solve?”

“Nothing, but at least we’ll feel better.”

“What’s the point in feeling better if nothing changes?”

“Lily,” he says. “Just stop, ok? Please.”

Lily opens her mouth to respond, then closes it again. She looks at the floor. Curls of old onion skin and hair stick in the greasy scum beneath the stove. Jason puts his hand on her shoulder and the pressure of his touch is intolerable, but how can she push him away? She lays her head on his chest and listens to his infuriatingly steady heartbeat, pounding away inside his chest. Hers must be doing the same, thumping on and on, oblivious to the world. In the new-normal, no-traffic quiet of heartbeats and lung rustles, she realizes that she has never actually experienced silence.

Jason rests his head against the wall and stares at the buckled acoustical tiles of the ceiling, stroking Lily's hair and trying not to think of anything. He hungers for his game, glowing blue in the other room. Lily stirs on his chest.

"Do you want to play Go?" she asks, by way of apology.

He smiles at the ceiling. "You hate Go."

The muscles of her face move against him in either a smile or a grimace; he can't tell.

"It'll be fun," she says. "I can make it fun."

"I love you," she says. "I want to help."

"Let's play something else," he says.

"OK, what?" Lily asks, not lifting her face from his shirt just yet. All of her muscles feel brittle, tense and tired. The sour taste is back in her mouth, like sucking on river pebbles. She doesn't want to fight anymore. Whatever he says, she will agree to it. They will have fun.

"Hide and seek!"

Lily looks at their tiny apartment, able to see most of it from where she lies. The thought of hiding, of seeking, is exhausting. She just wants to sleep. "OK," she says. "I get to hide first."

Jason grins, puts his hands over his eyes.

"But you have to go count in the bedroom."

He goes to the far end of the apartment, and shouts his count from behind the bedroom door. Maybe they can make enough noise to drown out the silence. Lily heads to the bathroom and looks at the tub. It's full of water, a pointless precaution; cold water they've got plenty of. She pulls the plug and strips off her socks while the water swirls away. The bathroom tile is achingly cold. The water gasps and gurgles as it drains, a dead giveaway if Jason is listening, but the tub is the best hiding place in the apartment — a four-room railroad whose every behind-and-under is crammed full of packing boxes held in reserve for the day they would leave this place for their real home, their real life.

“READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!” Jason bellows, and his footsteps stampede through the apartment. He runs unerringly to the bathroom, flings the shower curtain aside, and yells, “I found you!” His eyes don't acknowledge the missing water, and Lily laughs despite herself. She heads to the bedroom to count.

Jason hits “play” on his computer's iTunes, and a new punk album stomps into the night. He can't hear Lily's countdown, which is fine. He crawls under the desk and huddles there, like a kid in the 50s hiding from the bomb.

“Too easy!” Lily shouts, laughing. The lines around her eyes crinkle with delight like she's never been sad or afraid, like she's light-years away from crying instead of seconds. He is winning. He can hold this together, hold her together. He sprints to the bedroom to count.

Lily casts around for somewhere else to hide. Under the kitchen table? Too easy. Behind a curtain? Too dumb. She ends up back in the bathroom, staring at the shallow linen closet, crammed to the door with their stuff. As fast as she can, she hauls everything out and puts it in the wet, empty tub, then slides inside and shuts the door just as Jason comes charging out of the bedroom shouting “OLLY OLLY OXEN FREE!” When he finds her, she says, “How could you lose ALL the oxen?” and he laughs and kisses her.

Jason tiptoes into the bedroom and hides on the bed beside her while she counts. Lily pretends not to find him until she has searched the entire apartment and flung herself back on the bed in despair. She pokes and tickles him, wondering aloud what he could be. She remembers the pink-amber light beneath mounded blankets on her parents' unmade bed, how she angled her face toward any gap in the fabric that would let in fresh air to breathe, laughing and smothering in equal measure. Jason writhes and giggles, begging her to stop, stop, please.

Lily hides in plain sight, sitting in their living room chair with a blanket folded neatly over her head and a throw pillow in her lap. Jason hides in the empty fridge, with the door hanging open and the shelves stacked on the floor. Lily spread-eagles on the rug with shoes on her back and a book tented over one ankle. Jason hides under the open door of the dishwasher, which rests lightly on the backs of his thighs while the rest of him sticks out into the kitchen. He poses casually, propped on one elbow, apparently deep in thought. Lily can't stop laughing, and he rolls over and kisses her calves, drags her down onto the floor.

"This was a great idea," she says. "Thanks."

"It's your turn to hide," Jason says, kissing the tip of her nose before running away. He counts slowly, smiling at his reflection in the window. The bedroom is freezing, but he thinks of holding Lily in his arms as they go to sleep, of making their own heat, of waking to a bright beam of sunlight. Tomorrow everything will be better.

Lily lies on the kitchen floor, wondering where to hide. Her mouth feels stretched from laughing, and she wants nothing more than to go into the bedroom and tackle Jason onto the bed. "Enough hiding; more smooching!" she could say. But it's her turn.

The wind howls outside the window. Her chest aches with thinking of Jason, of his eyes, his smell, the way he looks at her. From the bedroom he shouts numbers so she'll know she's not alone. So she will keep playing. So she will be all right, and morning will come, and it will be tomorrow. And everything will begin again.

Lily thinks of one last hiding place.

She gets to her feet and pulls on her socks and shoes. From the bedroom Jason calls out, "forty-five, forty-four, forty-three..."

Lily finds a scrap of paper and uncaps a pen.

Dear Jason, she writes. Went out for milk. Love you. Lily.

She sticks the note to the door and puts on a hat and gloves.

Jason calls, "Thirty-six, thirty-five, thirty-four..."

Lily eases the apartment door open and shut, and tiptoes down the stairs, skirting the trash pile and covering her mouth against the flies. In the echoing silence she hears, “twenty-three, twenty-two...”

She takes a last deep breath and opens the door.

“Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, sixteen...”

Lily steps out into the night and nearly gasps. The air is frigid and unforgiving, a hard slap against her overheated cheek. Only the unthinking stars can see her now. She thinks of night swimming, years ago when it was warm, in a river by a bridge. Jason pulled her close and she wrapped her legs around his waist, and the algae-green water ran into their mouths when they kissed. She thinks pointlessly of tastes: of crispy onions on a thick steak, the cloying assault of cotton candy, the sourness of beer. She stumbles across the street so she can look back at their windows. There are more bodies out here than were visible from inside.

“Nine, eight, seven, six...”

Lily’s breath runs out and she gasps for air but encounters only emptiness. It burns her lungs and her mouth, and she retches sardines and orange pulp. Wasted. The concrete is bruisingly cold when she falls. Her body convulses, but she keeps her eyes trained on the window where she will see him one last time, when he runs out of the bedroom, eager for her, eager to delight in her next ridiculous hiding place, the idea she will offer him like a gift. Her gut writhes with regret, with pity, with love. Too late now; it’s already done.

“Five, four, three.”

Jason stops the countdown early. The ends of countdowns don’t interest him anymore. Did he hear a door shut? He steps out of the bedroom, calling her name.

“Lily?”

He walks past the mirrored window, into the light.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Bebow-Reinhard felt so comfortable researching the mysterious dream that she called Arabus in her new novel now published by Solstice that she eventually earned an MA in history. Two historical novels are authorized by Bonanza Ventures; *Felling of the Sons* has twice been used as required college reading. A fourth historical novel co-authored is also available at Amazon, and a fifth has just signed with All Things That Matter Press. See more at <http://www.grimmsetc.com/>.

A Job as Told in Fortune Cookies

by Monette Bebow-Reinhard

Jamie stared out the patio doors at the bluebirds pecking at the suet, her coffee steaming up the glass. Where did bluebirds come from? There was no happiness here.

Her husband dropped the news and then walked out. He didn't put his arms around her to reassure her they'd be fine. How could they? He's always supported the family landscaping business without question, but suddenly they were told that their father's estate was used up and there was no more money to carry them through the winter months. That meant instead of salary, he'd have to go on a per-job basis, plowing snow for customers. Depend on snowfall? Jamie thought they were doing so well. He only shrugged and accepted, as he always did when it came to his family, without question. He'd failed to make his business, here in the country, successful after his father died.

Jamie took the blame, because that's what life was all about, right? He'd made a mess of the business by being unaggressive, but she'd made a mess of their future, too, by quitting too many jobs because she'd had to drive too far. Now the competition for office management was fierce, she was older and her résumé made

her look unstable. She'd been trying to find a professional job for two years, ever since finishing her master's degree in history, and knew the odds were against her, the older she got.

At least, around here.

Her step-mom Phyllis tried to be supportive. "You'll find something. You're youthful and skilled. Just don't let the gray hairs show." Jamie had picked up Phyllis for her doctor's appointment. Phyllis insisted on Chinese afterward, because she loved knowing her fortune after the doctor told her she needed to watch her diet for the thousandth time. "Too bad you spent so much on your writing career that's going nowhere. So much for a degree, huh? Here, this will help." She handed Jamie a fortune cookie.

"Thanks. I'd rather not think about that. Besides, I've worked hard all my life, going to college, all those jobs. Keeping the kids in clothes. Now look at me. Too old to be hired." Tears welled up so Jamie slipped on her sunglasses to finish eating. She did more than her share, but never paid attention where it counted, on her husband's family business. She should have helped them more. She should have stood up to their criticism, bit back on her pride.

Phyllis nodded. "Don't give up. Read your fortune. That'll tell you what to do."

Take that chance you've been considering. Jamie shared it with a laugh, and then tucked it in her bag. She didn't tell Phyllis but she had been thinking about applying in bigger cities, like Milwaukee and Madison. She had all but tapped Wausau out, and no one was interested in hiring her back. She'd made too many wrong turns in life.

The next day, without telling her husband, she packed a bag, got in her car and drove to Milwaukee, the printed fortune safely tucked in the coin compartment of her wallet. She planned to stay overnight to scour newspapers at the library and interview with employment offices. Even a long-term temporary job would help. She needed to prove what she could do. But the Milwaukee climate seemed no more welcoming. Employment offices all but shook their collective heads at her. They all wanted her to live here first.

Jamie found a Chinese buffet for dinner and anxiously read her fortune. *You will have good luck and overcome many hardships.*

She stayed one more night, and the next morning got a call. The temp agency had a job at *Senior Living* available—they helped seniors stay in their homes, provided them with job opportunities and social events, and they needed an editor/proofreader/researcher. Would she be willing to interview? Her résumé would still be hard to overcome, but she had all that writing and proofreading experience, and a history degree, so she was used to dealing with seniors and their stories. Writing the cover letter was a challenge but she remembered advice she was once given—focus on the positive. No apologies. Jamie gave them an updated résumé and went home to wait.

Back at home Jamie told her husband about the possible interview. She kept the idea upbeat. He could retire and live on her for a change. He could sell his shares to his brother. He only chuckled, wished her luck, and gave her a hug.

Jamie watched him walk away. He didn't believe she could do anything anymore. But she could. She had to. There had to be a life for her, somewhere out there.

While she waited and the weather cooled, while she feared a winter of tightening their belts because there wasn't enough money to last, she got the phone call. *Senior Living* wanted to interview her. Jamie left early for Milwaukee and stopped for lunch. Chinese, of course. She forced herself to wait until she got done eating, because it was bad luck to read a fortune ahead of time. *Everything will now come your way.*

What if she actually got the job? He'd be lost without her. Maybe they won't pay her enough. He can't sort socks or balance the checkbook. Maybe they won't hire her. He keeps windows open even on humid nights until the house starts to smell moldy. He can't figure out what the cats want even when they give him the look. That was her home, too, their investment of over 30 years.

Maybe the fortune meant something else. Maybe it meant she would get him to listen to her. Maybe she would sell that novel she's been marketing. But why can't his family let her manage the business? She was good with numbers and very honest. She could even market the business. Making new contacts would keep them solvent in the winter months. They could pick up indoor clients who wanted their plants cared for—something his family refused to consider. And he always sided with them.

The interview with *Senior Living* went well enough, she thought, considering how she had to defend her long career of job hopping. She had kids, got her degrees, lived too far out of town and hated to drive in the winter. She did a lot of writing and research, and would be perfect for them. The interview lasted longer than most, especially once she assured him she was in this for the long haul, in case the job became permanent. They told her about other duties she might do in the future, if things went well. They had her do a small editing exercise. She felt she held up quite well. Don't rearrange their thoughts, just fix their grammar and make sure it makes sense.

She refused to eat Chinese on the way back home. "Hiya kitty kitty." Her two cats were happy to see her. "You need water?" She added water to their dish. "Oh, I'll bet you're tired of that food." Her husband tended to be a cat food conformist, and always overfilled the bowl. "Time for a walk?" She opened the patio door and they both ran out. A lot of her friends kept their cats indoors but hers loved to go for walks. They never wandered away, and unlike theirs, hers caught rodents.

She followed them outside. As usual, Lee anticipated the route and was often ahead, while Lou, older and more complacent, needed to be waited for.

"Oh, you're home."

She ran into him on their walk. "Yeah."

"How'd it go?"

"Okay."

"I bet you were great."

"You think?" Jamie shrugged. "I'm past having hope."

"At least you try. A lot of people stop trying at your age." He started for the house, but turned back. She always envied him his home business, where he could walk to his equipment shed. She always had to drive to work—snow, sleet, rain, an hour a day on dry days. "Want to go out for fish tonight?"

"I don't know, can we afford it?"

"I sold a piece of machinery today. So we can."

For the next week or so, as the trees began to change color, she forgot about the job and concentrated on what she liked about her life out here. True, she still felt like the least important item on his totem pole. But they talked, watched movies, and one day called their eldest daughter on Skype and got the news they were going to be grandparents.

Jamie woke the following morning with an inexorable sadness that traveled through her day. She did some research, worked on a novel—anything she could to get her mind off how useless she felt. She was going to be a grandma, but they lived so far away. Finally she left her husband a note that she wouldn't be home for lunch and went to the library, did some shopping, and finally stopped for Chinese.

Look for the dream that keeps coming back. It is your destiny. When her phone rang she felt sure it was her husband and answered without looking.

“Is this Jamie?” After some small talk she was offered the job in Milwaukee.

She stared at the fortune cookie. “Yes, I want the job. Yes, I can start in two weeks.”

She drove home nervous. In these late fall months he took a lot of tree-trimming jobs, working until the sun set as the leaves fell for home owners who feared tree limbs had grown too close to the house. Jamie was afraid to tell him. Her husband was generally an even-handed kind of guy, but she knew that his temper simmered deep down.

This fear dwindled, replaced by “I've got a job!”

She was told she'd work for a week with the lady who was retiring, and pictured someone her age ready to live off her well-planned savings. At home Jamie greeted the cats and sat down with paper and pencil. “Work until I'm fully eligible for social security, maybe to age 70. Travel until I'm 80. Then write my memoirs.” She sat back, satisfied. No bucket list for her. She'd planned a life for her next 30 years.

When he came home he was cranky and not willing to talk. So she didn't tell him.

The next morning she threw an overnight bag together, left him a brief note, and took off for Milwaukee to find an apartment. She'd turn the job down if she couldn't find a place, so why worry him now?

On the way Jamie called her step-mom. Phyllis told her to sublet "in case things don't work out." Jamie found a few but they were pricey, filled with someone else's goods and too many rules. She wanted something close to work so she could walk, bike or take a bus. All the places in the paper were high priced and most only included heat.

She drove to the *Senior Living* building and circled the area. At the top of the hill there was a "now leasing" sign, so she wrote down the phone number. At a Chinese restaurant she stared at the number as she ate. She wasn't making a ton of money—almost turned the job down when she heard how much. She even considered answering an ad for a live-in-nanny. The idea still made her shudder.

Back in the car Jamie allowed herself a good cry. She didn't know what she wanted anymore. She opened the fortune cookie.

You will live a long, prosperous life.

"Not without effort, I won't." She dialed the number and made the appointment. This one so close to work was actually affordable, and the apartment had been freshly painted. How much detail should she ask about maintenance, how to control the heat, how does recycle work? Jamie hadn't had an apartment since they got married. She conjured up all sorts of horror scenarios from those days, because this place seemed too good to be true.

When they offered her a year-lease signing bonus, Jamie signed. She could walk to work. The savings in bus fare and gas would help with the food budget, too.

She called her husband and told him she'd gotten the job and signed the lease.

"You think you'll *last* a year?"

She was glad she didn't do this in person. "I plan to keep this job as long as they'll let me."

"I've heard that before."

“Okay, I know, but that’s only because I hate driving in the winter. This time the job is something that’s right for me, and I can walk there. You know, like you do.”

“So you sign the lease without even checking with me.”

“Was I supposed to? You knew about this job. Did you expect me to commute?”

“What do you want me to do now? Move away from my family?”

“You do whatever you want. You always do.” She hung up on him before the yelling match started. She knew her life was her problem and her mistakes belonged to her. But for so long she swallowed her needs for him and their children, and she just couldn’t listen to him anymore.

She had to start work before she could move in, and booked motel rooms for the first couple of weeks. The first day of work had her both jubilant and terrified. What if she failed? The lady she was replacing didn’t seem able to do the advanced work they were hoping for. She also didn’t want to train Jamie, so Jamie sensed a little unhappiness here. But she’d been in this position before, and kept her cool. *Just a week*, she kept telling herself, even as the week began to disintegrate.

She had Chinese the fourth night and opened her cookie with breath held. *You will be awarded some great honor.*

Jamie couldn’t figure that one out, and suddenly felt silly leaning on fortune cookies like a trusted mentor.

By the end of the week, Jamie had had enough. With yet another criticism over her “lack of ability” she blew up. The lady scurried away. Jamie knew she’d just screwed up, but she’d been trained so often in the past and always caught on well. She braced herself for being fired. Of course the boss found out and intervened, in a boss-like kind of way, to smooth things out.

Jamie headed back up north that Friday swearing all the way. What a way to have to face her husband, who hadn’t said much to her since she left. But she had nowhere else to turn.

He wasn’t there when she got in. She got right to work cleaning the kitchen, but paused when she saw a window was cracked, right in the center of the pane. When

he got home, she gave him a hug and a kiss, and asked about his week. And then she mentioned the window.

“Oh, that. Yeah, a bird hit it.” He excused himself to shower. He had been spraying chemicals, a tradition this time of year to prepare lawns for the winter.

When she heard the shower running, she felt the glass. They’d just put in these extra insulated panes a few years ago. She could ask him how the bird managed to get *inside* the house, but instead knew the truth.

She wondered what her fortune cookie would have said that day. *Don’t go home again. Ever.*

The next week she was on her own. Nancy, the girl she worked closest with, avoided her, and Jamie felt Nancy was afraid of her, after hearing her blow up the week before. But then one of the guys in the field called her, and he was laughing.

“Heard you gave the old battleaxe the what-for.”

“The what?”

“Listen, don’t feel bad. It wasn’t your fault you blew up at her. She liked to yell at everyone. That’s why they got her to retire, by giving her something she couldn’t handle. Glad you gave her a good send-off.” He was still chuckling when he hung up.

Jamie sat back. If she was going to be awarded a great honor, that was as good as any. “Welcome to the work world.” She started doing again what she’d always done—learning the hard way, asking questions, analyzing what had been done before, lots of reading, and improving processes. She prided herself on efficiency and was not about to let them down.

Her next fortune cookie did not surprise her. *Your mentality is alert, practical and analytical.* She still had moving ahead of her and hoped to stay practical, at least. She was afraid to ask her husband to help, but finally she did. He said he was too busy. So she asked her brother, Bill, and rented a truck.

You will be taking a relaxing journey to a far-away land. Jamie was treating Bill to Chinese on the way to Milwaukee with the filled U-Haul, and laughed at this.

“Relaxing?”

“Far away?” Bill was supportive, although he had been divorced himself. Jamie was surprised he said he’d help. “You’re close enough to go home every week. If you were moving to Santa Fe, I wouldn’t be helping.”

Jamie had no intention of going home every weekend. “Did you know he has to file for unemployment?”

“Not surprised. You’re the aggressive one of the family.” Bill read his fortune and they laughed. *You are rich because everyone loves you.*

“Probably why his family hates me. I had to take the job, Bill. How many offers could I expect to get anymore?”

“He’s pretty upset, you know.”

“I suppose he blames me for his business failing, too.” Jamie tucked her fortune into her wallet. “But he can move here with me and start another business, right? Or take a job with someone here.”

“Sure. Just what a guy wants. Follow his wife around.”

Jamie knew her husband took after his father, who also had difficulty with change. She had to face it—she made this change for herself, not for them.

*

The next chance she got after the move-in she took her step-mom out to lunch. Phyllis wanted Chinese, but Jamie pushed the fortune cookie aside. “Am I wrong in doing this? He’s trying to be supportive but I can see he’s fighting his anger.”

“Oh, you know men. They get used to being taken care of.”

“It’s more than that, though.”

Phyllis eyed Jamie. “You telling me that at your age he still wants sex every day?”

They shared a laugh. “I’ve forced him to confront the fact that he can’t support us anymore. Maybe I never understood how upset he is that the business is failing.”

Phyllis leaned over and whispered, “Do you want a divorce?”

Jamie sighed. “I think I would... if he did. We’re so different. And now here I am with a leg in two worlds, having to go home every other weekend, pay his bills, clean his... our house. I don’t know how long I’ll last. And I can’t take the cats with me.”

Phyllis pushed her fortune cookie at her. “You’ll figure it out.

You are compassionate and understanding. “If only that helped.”

“It means you won’t do anything wrong, or at the wrong time.”

When Jamie dropped Phyllis off, she gave her step-mom a hug. “Always good talking to you.”

“Any time, doll. Listening to others is good for you. Even if you still do things your way, your way will change a little, by listening.”

The crying didn’t stop, but seemed to return every week at the same time. If she called either of her daughters, she fought back tears. Every time he called, he asked her something that would have to wait until she got back home. Sometimes he hung up on her. Sometimes she hung up on him. Sometimes they made plans for the future. Neither of them mentioned the D word.

And work, well, once she was left alone to do what she did best, she amazed them with efficiency. She improved one process after another, and kept asking for more work, every bit as determined as a twenty-year-old. Sometimes she didn’t have enough to do. Into the winter now, walking to work was a challenge, and still she remained a temp.

After her three-month review, she took herself out for Chinese. She remembered the few times she and her husband got Chinese and he always got useless fortune cookie messages. Her favorite was *Your favorite uncle will die and leave you a fortune*. She remembered the two of them trying to guess which uncle that was. “Yeah, if he left me money he’d be my favorite.”

While having her buffet, her younger daughter called. “I saw your message on Facebook. Did something happen today?”

“Oh, they just told me I needed to slow down.”

“Because you’re making mistakes?”

“No, because I’m running out of things to do.”

“Didn’t you tell them you’re not fast, you’re efficient?”

“No. I just said I’d try.”

“Still being pushed around, eh?”

“Yup, no backbone.”

“Oh, I’m kidding. You’ve got tons. Look where you are now.”

“Yeah, just look. It’s hard, you know?”

“Mom, for years you’ve done whatever Dad’s told you to do. You’ve put up with driving through blizzards, taking any miserable job you could find. Now you’re in the big city. It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“And the world is my oyster.” Jamie plunged ahead. “At what cost, though? Will you hate me if this ends in divorce?”

There was a long silence. “I think Dad will come around. You’ll find a way.”

“Or he will.”

“Right. Just hang in there. You need this job. They’ll make it permanent, you’ll see.”

Tears rolled down Jamie’s cheeks but she kept her voice steady. “I hope so. I don’t want to job hunt anymore.”

“Listen, I gotta go. Bruce is taking me to an opera tonight. Can you imagine? Never thought I’d find a guy who’d sit through an opera.”

“Happy for you, Hun.” Jamie hung up and slipped her sunglasses back on. She stood to get another plate of food. Supportive wasn’t always supportive. Didn’t they know she was lonely? Tired of fighting life? Why did his family have to hate her? All she did was make the suggestion several years ago at a Christmas gathering that they start picking up some indoor landscaping and they all blew up at her. And her husband sided with them. Nothing’s been right ever since.

When she got back to her apartment she opened her fortune cookie. *Flying is simple. Not hitting the ground is hard.* She felt like she’d taken a leap off the cliff and the ground was coming up hard. But at least someone knew how she felt, even if it was just a fortune cookie.

As the days passed she adjusted, even though her adjustment was more toward not thinking. One co-worker made the remark that her situation must be like dating her husband again. No one could figure her out, and she really didn’t know what to say. She passed on lunches with the gang because she couldn’t afford it. She took on some of the bills because her husband couldn’t pay them. He occasionally offered to buy her some groceries or gas for coming home. But little by little, they were getting bills paid off, even with him on unemployment.

She wanted to take one of the cats, but they would hate being separated and her apartment was too small for two. The lonely never went away. If she flirted with the bus driver, did that mean she was ready for someone else? Or just looking for friendship?

Her next fortune slapped her in the face. *Be adventuresome. Try a new look.*

Jamie looked at herself in the mirror. How long since she’d gotten her hair cut? Gray was showing. Maybe it was time to look and feel young again. She asked around and got the name of a stylist. She brought in a photo of her favorite hair style from years ago, but the stylist balked. So Jamie just shrugged and said you’re the expert.

She left with a new style, feeling reborn. She started saying yes to lunches and chose the smallest item on the menu, with water. She started telling people about why she moved, and where she thought her future was going.

One day she said a little too much, and her boss called her into his office.

“Are you sure everything’s all right? Jamie, I want you to know we really appreciate having you here. I almost didn’t hire you, knowing I would be taking you away from your home. But you seemed to believe this was the right step for you.”

Jamie didn’t know what she’d told anyone that would have resulted in this meeting. And she didn’t ask. “Well, I signed a lease. I am determined to make it work.”

“Is it true that you came because you want a divorce?”

“I needed a change. Divorce might happen. But I’m not looking for it.”

“Good. We’d like you to make this job permanent. Are you willing? It means a raise and full benefits, and those extra duties you’ve already started on.”

Of course Jamie accepted. She was so excited, but at the same time, it meant permanence here. No longer could she dream about the job ending, as so many have in her past, so she could go home. She couldn’t go home. If she did, it would mean she failed. The question was, could her husband live in her new world?

Jamie didn’t realize she had been sitting with her head in her hands at work until Nancy stopped in. “Everything okay?”

“Sure, yeah. No, I guess I’m just ... a little worried.”

“About your job? You’re doing great.”

Jamie laughed. “No, just managing two households, and worrying about my husband. Can I share a secret with you?”

“It’s okay. I can keep a secret.”

“My husband scares me sometimes. You think you know a guy, right? I mean, if I ever did consider divorce, I knew I’d have to mention it to him from far away, not face to face. I don’t know how he’d react.”

“Well, we only know a guy as much as they want us to know.”

“I suppose they say that about us, too.”

“I suppose.” Nancy patted the doorframe. “It’s not much fun living two lives. From what I can tell, this is the best thing for you. Right here.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Jamie didn’t know how to start the conversation with her husband. She wanted him to see what she saw. They were both young enough to start new lives. But as she headed home that weekend she was determined to avoid the negative.

On the way, she wrote her own fortune. *You are living now. You don’t need permission.*

While he still insisted on their usual TV viewing, he made her favorite steak dinner, with a bottle of wine. They spent the entire weekend avoiding any real conversation.

Before she left she told him to consider his needs carefully, as she considered hers. They were living separately, and they should try to make that work, but with careful consideration of what they both wanted in the future—like seeing their first grandchild together.

He seemed to listen.

The first chance she got, after telling him she wouldn’t be back for a few weeks, she had Chinese. *The skies above will rain success on you.*

She was ready.

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HONORABLE MENTION

T.C. Powell is a Los Angeles native now braving the rains of the Pacific Northwest alongside his beautiful wife and daughter. He loves both reading and writing all kinds of literature, and has been fortunate enough to have short fiction published by venues like *Flash Fiction Online*, *New Myths*, and *Grimdark Magazine*, as well as *On The Premises* in our previous issue. He has also had poetry published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Strong Verse*, and others. His woeful web presence can be found at <http://tcpowellfiction.blogspot.com>.

Game Ball

by T. C. Powell

Marshall stretched for the football as it flew overhead, willing his feet to stay on the right side of the white out-of-bounds line. The ball was sailing. He pushed on tiptoes, straining his gloved fingers. It would be close.

Just... there.

He had it on his fingertips, then secure under the first knuckles. Just had to keep his toes down for a split-second, the way Dad always told him, and—

Impact. From the side. The football flew from his hands and the world spun. Something (someone) had slammed full-force into his ribcage, rocketing him into the opposing team's bench.

At first, he was only aware of the grass lodged in his facemask. Then there were cries from the stands (Dad). Then pain. Ribs, yes. Expected. One, maybe two, broken without question. But also pain in his leg. No, not pain, *pain*. His leg felt as limp and unresponsive as a marionette with its strings cut. *Uh-oh*.

Marshall tried to get up, but hellfire surged from his left knee into his heart. The brown sod under Marshall's helmet deepened into a moonless night sky, dancing with stars and comets. He found himself locked onto one of those comets as it grew bigger to swallow his entire field of vision. A gigantic flaming thing, pulsing red and yellow with a tail stretching forever. It became the sun, beautiful and terrifying. He felt himself fall.

*

The third time Marshall woke, he was still in the hospital bed. His father was there with a football in his lap, eyes closed, like he was saying grace over Thanksgiving turkey.

Marshall tried to say hello. The words came out too husky and sounded unnatural, but it was enough.

"My son, my boy," Mr. Reed said, standing from the waiting room chair and half-hobbling to Marshall's bedside.

It was obviously night; the room's lights were dimmed low, and only the light from the hallway let Marshall see his father's face. Mr. Reed's eyes were bloodshot and his face was covered in a salt-and-pepper stubble, which meant he wasn't going into work. The factory had a strict policy about showing up neat.

"We win?" Marshall croaked.

Mr. Reed laughed, but it was not the full, open laugh Marshall was used to. "Yeah, you won. That catch you made set your team up. Ran it in, next play."

Marshall tried to think back; the memories were fuzzy but still there. The hit on him was brutal, but legal, and he never had complete possession of the ball... so Dad was lying. The team had been down three scores anyways with just a few minutes left.

"There's no way we won."

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. I didn't stick around to find out." Mr. Reed was crying, looking away to hide it, but the light from the window in the door reflected off of his tears.

Marshall looked down at himself, stretched out on the bed. White bandages around his ribs glowed ghostly against the dark skin peeking out from under the hospital gown, and his left leg was elevated in a sling, sealed in a cast. “Am I gonna make the Jackson Hill game?”

“Afraid not.”

That was the rivalry game, biggest game of the year unless they made playoffs. Marshall was angry at himself for extending himself like he had and getting caught in that tackle. The game was a lost cause. He should’ve just let it go. Stupid.

“Well, what then? Can I come back for the end of the season? Playoffs?”

“No playoffs, son.”

Great, the entire year shot. That only left his senior season for impressing the college scouts. Sure, a few of the small places were already interested, and they’d forgive him missing some games, but the big name schools wouldn’t like it. Tennessee wouldn’t like it.

“I guess I’ll just have to dominate next year, huh?” Marshall smiled up at his father, but Mr. Reed wasn’t smiling back. Marshall felt his chest turn to ice. “Next year’s okay, right? I mean, my leg it’s...”

Mr. Reed walked from the bed and set the football down onto the waiting chair. Then he turned back and rested his hand on Marshall’s right foot, the healthy one. “This summer, I want you come to the factory with me and check it out. See if you like the vibe.”

The factory? No, that wasn’t the plan. Marshall was going to football camp over the summer, later on the University of Tennessee. After that, who knew? But, turning pro or not, the one place that he wasn’t going to wind up was the factory.

Just thinking about it made him remember Mom in the kitchen with her arms crossed, crying about how Dad wasn’t making enough, how she needed to get a job herself. How she thought it was going to be so different, with him in the NFL and her having the time to take care of Marshall.

It made him think about the football Dad kept at home in the glass case: a ball from an honest-to-god UT game, the one against Vandy where Dad tore up the tendons in his ankle. He wasn't supposed to keep it, but did anyways. He called it his "game ball."

Marshall looked at the football resting in the chair.

"Where's that from?" he asked.

"You know where."

A few seconds of silence passed. Then Mr. Reed spoke again, wiping his tears away. "Listen, I have to get myself cleaned up a little bit. You okay?"

"I'm not keeping it," Marshall said. The football looked black in the shadows of the room and he could barely make out the stitching. At the edge of his mind, it reminded him of something (the comet), but he couldn't bring it to mind. "I don't want it."

Mr. Reed hesitated in front of the restroom door. "Maybe not now, but we'll hold onto it for a little while and see what you think in a year or two."

"Why? What's the point?"

Mr. Reed looked Marshall in the eyes. "Ten, twenty years from now, out of all those other kids on the field tonight... one, maybe two, will still think about this game from time to time. The rest will have moved on to their families and careers. But you? You'll be going up for that damn catch every single night. This game was your game. It always will be. That ball belongs to you."

With that, Mr. Reed stepped into the bathroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

Marshall lay in bed, the room dark and still around him, and concentrated on the black shape on the chair. The football. His game ball.

"Whatever," Marshall said, and closed his eyes.

*

Marshall came home two hours late from his normal shift at the factory; they needed the overtime. Dinner was put away, but there would be a plate waiting for him in the fridge. His wife always made sure of it.

He took out the plastic-wrapped dish—pork chops, mashed potatoes and Gracelyn’s famous green beans—and a small tureen of gravy, and turned to the microwave on the counter, kicking shut the refrigerator door.

As the door closed, a shape standing behind it startled Marshall, and he almost dropped the gravy.

It was Devon, his eldest child, and only son. Devon had on his Titans jersey (Grandpa Reed’s Christmas gift). Already the boy threatened to outgrow it.

“Hey Dad,” Devon said. “You ready?”

Ready for...? Suddenly Marshall remembered that Devon had asked that morning if they could play some catch after Marshall got home. Marshall was tired, but he was always tired, what with the new baby girl and the extra shifts he was picking up at work. Also, even though it was eight, there would still be at least another half-hour of daylight. Marshall realized there were no excuses. No good ones anyways.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m ready. I’m gonna put this stuff away. You meet me out there.”

“All right!” Devon said, suddenly enthused. He shot out of the kitchen, leaving Marshall standing there with his leftovers.

Marshall laughed to himself and put the food back. It would still be there later, after all. Then he gathered a couple of battered gloves and a baseball from the front closet and went out to the backyard.

Devon was waiting at the far end of the grass. He held a football.

“No,” Marshall said. Dropping the ball and gloves, he turned to go back into the house. “I’ve told you, Devon—”

“But, Dad, I want to learn how to play. Grandpa said you could teach me, that you were really good.”

Dad. How could he? “I don’t play football, son. Neither do you. Now do you want to throw the baseball around, or should I go have dinner?”

“Fine. Go ahead. But next year is middle school and there’s a team. I’m gonna try out.”

Marshall hovered in the doorway, staring at Devon in the yard. The boy looked so pure holding that ball. So natural. Even at eleven years old, the fading summer light made him out to be some kind of a colossus, his shadow almost stretching all the way back to the doorstep.

In the sky above, the first star had just appeared. So many people in so many places would look up to that star and put their wishes on it, their hopes and their dreams. Marshall looked from it back down to his son, a reckless would-be hero ready to take on the world, not knowing how impossibly big the world really is, how unforgiving. Icarus came again and again, it was the way of things. But did it have to be his son, too? Did it have to be Devon?

Even across the yard, he could meet his boy’s eyes. And, once he did, Marshall knew.

“Wait here,” he said.

Marshall scooped the gloves and ball from the ground and ran them inside the house. A few minutes later he returned, carrying a football still covered in dust from the recesses of his closet. For years it hid in the darkness, only occasionally catching the corner of his eye, lurking like an enormous spider. In the twilight, it regained some of its natural color. It came back to life.

“You mean you have your own ball?” Devon asked. “You won’t let me play, but you have your own ball? That’s not fair.”

No, it wasn’t, Marshall realized. Better, perhaps. Safer, for sure. But not fair. Come what may, every child of the earth deserved to fly as high as his wings would carry him. “Put that thing down,” he said. “We’re gonna play with this one. This here’s my game ball. It’s from the most important game of my life.”

Clearly impressed, Devon didn’t say anything, but knelt down and set his own football onto the grass.

“Now the first thing I want you to do is to cup your hands in front of your chest, like this.” Marshall tucked the football under his arm and made an ‘o’ shape with his hands, to demonstrate.

Devon duplicated the position. Marshall nodded, then raised his arm as if to pass, holding the football above him like a sword. “You catch with your fingers, got it? Not your hands, your fingers. And no matter where the ball goes, keep your toes on the grass, one foot at least, two if you can. You ready?”

Devon said that he was. Marshall knew that he wasn’t.

Marshall threw the ball.

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GUEST WRITER

No bio of this author is available.

Tomorrow's Not Looking Too Good

by Gary Hoffman

“You’ll get over this, you know.”

“I guess.” Hank paused, while sighing. “I’m just damned tired of gettin’ over things. Why can’t I just have a nice normal life like most folks?”

Jenny laughed. “First of all, we both know what Thoreau said about the majority of just humankind, and majority usually means the normal group. I’m not sure anyone has a normal life. If you didn’t have somethin’ goin’ on in your life, you’d be bored to more than just tears. Maybe waterfalls.”

“Might like to give it a stab.” He poured another shot of bourbon in his glass and sloshed it around for no good reason. He wasn’t mixing it with anything. He put it to his lips, but set it on the table before drinking anything.

“Doubt it,” Jenny said.

The glass was suddenly up and moving. All its’ contents seared their way into his stomach. “Might as well go get this done. Rhonda won’t be any nicer if I wait any longer. In fact, probably the opposite.”

“She really think you and I been messin’ around?”

“That’s only part of it.”

“Usually isn’t just one thing that causes people to split. Any idea what the other things are?”

“At this point, don’t know, don’t care. Most of them just kind’a snuck up on us. When my son was about three... Funny, most of the stories about him always seem to start that way. He’s always about three...”

“Yeah, I might’ve noticed that.”

“Anyway, when he’d do something he really didn’t mean to do, he’d say he didn’t mean to do it *onapurpose*. Hell of a word really. I don’t think I ever created any of the problems between Rhonda and me *onapurpose*, but they’re there. I’m just glad we never got officially married. Makes dividing up our stuff a little easier.” He looked at the table like all of the answers to his problems were written there. “The way I make money never appealed to her. We never wanted for much, but it wasn’t steady and sure as hell didn’t have any of them perks people talk about. She kept talkin’ ‘bout a real job.”

“Hank, I can’t speak to all the problems between you and Rhonda, but I think I can about us messin’ around. I’d say a better way to explain you and me is we’ve been messin’ around with the idea of messin’ around. Haven’t you ever thought about it?”

“How long have we known each other, Jenny?”

“Don’t ever remember not knowing you.”

“I don’t ever remember not thinking of messin’ with you at some time or other, at least when we were old enough. It would sure just shoot a friendship all to hell.” He looked into her green eyes, then at his watch. “I better get rollin’. She might have a heart attack if I’m early. Solve the whole problem.”

Jenny laughed, and louder than most folks. She was a large girl, not really fat, just big. She had long brown hair she usually wore in a ponytail and brown eyes that always seemed to be searching for something. Hank felt she could look inside his soul. She ran a small floral and gift shop, specializing in objects most people called arts and crafts. Most of them came from local people.

“Good luck,” she said.

*

The road to where he and Rhonda shared a house for six plus years turned to dust during dry spells and to mud when it rained everyday for two or three months at a time. It was far enough back few people bothered to drive that way unless it was important. All Rhonda wanted now was to split what they bought together and move away from there. She hated living that far removed from what she called the real world. For him, it was what the real world was all about.

Hank knew this road and all its little side roads like he knew his own name. He grew up out this direction and spent as much time as possible in the woods. He had to pee, so he pulled off onto a side road. He had about as little chance of another vehicle being on the road as he did of meeting a politician who kept his promises.

He did his business and headed for his house.

About half a mile before getting to his driveway, the road curved and ran close to the Kissimmee River. That was just one of the reasons he liked living where he did. Easy access to the river and all the hunting and fishing there. A pick-up was backed up to the front porch as he came to the house. He recognized it immediately as being Zeb Hermid's rig. Rhonda was carrying a box from the house and loading it in Zeb's truck.

"What the hell's he doin' here?" Hank said as he stepped from his truck.

"Just came to help me move," Rhonda said. "Figured he'd be finished by now. You're not only not your usual late, you're early. I figured he'd be gone by the time you got here."

"Yeah, and sometimes hell freezes over. Can we get rid of him?"

Zeb came on the porch carrying another box. He put it in the back of the truck and shut the tailgate, all the while keeping a watchful eye on Hank. "I'll get out 'a here."

"Good move."

Neither of them said anything as they watched Zeb drive away. When he was far enough that the sound of his engine couldn't be heard, Hank said, "Got a new one lined up already, huh?"

"It ain't like that. He just came out to help me move. He's a good guy."

"Most of us are when we're tryin' to get in a woman's pants. Or has he made it already?"

"No more than you and Jenny have, at least according to you."

"Well, then he hasn't made it yet." He picked up a small branch and threw it at a tree. "How am I supposed to know what he hauled away from here?"

"Just come on in and look around. You see anything special you want or had when I moved in, I'll make sure you get it."

There were several seconds of silence as they stared at each other. "Can we talk about this?" Hank said.

"Just be a rehash. I tried lots of times. You either didn't care or didn't hear."

"I do care, Rhonda. Probably more than I ever told you or should have told you."

"Had a piss-poor way of showin' it."

He moved some dirt around with the toe of his boot. "Probably God's honest truth there."

"Look, come on in and let's get this started. Draggin' it out ain't gonna make it any easier."

Hank had built the house during his second marriage. He hit on a deal he worked on for over a year, and he had plenty of money to pay cash for all the materials. Even had enough to build a small barn out back. He and Lucy had raised some animals and a large garden. Most of what they ate, they raised or grew. He thought that might have been one of the better times of his life.

The inside of the house still had all the furniture which had been there when Rhonda moved in with him, but all the pictures and other stuff he used to call crap was gone. It looked yawningly empty.

“I guess everything looks okay to me,” he said.

“Go look at the rest of the rooms.”

He looked around for less than three minutes. The only thing he really checked on was in the kitchen. All his iron skillet were still there, even the deep chicken fryer. That was his favorite, not for chicken, but for fish.

“Where you gonna go?” he said.

“Over around Tampa. Think I’ve got a job lined up over there.”

“Got a place to stay?”

“Not yet. Found a cheapie motel for now.”

“Didn’t know they had such a thing around Tampa.”

“Well, they do. I’m out’ a here, Hank. Want ‘a get to Tampa before dark.”

“Be safe. If you get the urge, let me know how you’re doin’ once in a while.”

“Gonna be a strange urge for me. Sorry, but that’s the truth.”

“Better than a lie.”

*

Hank sat in one of the Adirondack chairs on the porch. He’d built the chairs from looking at others he had seen and was proud of them. They were still the most comfortable chairs he ever sat in. When they first moved in the house, they bought some of those plastic, stackable chairs. He quickly decided they were a one size fits none. Rhonda sold them at a yard sale she and her sister had in town.

It got quieter than he would have liked for it to when Rhonda’s car was out of sound.

When his cell phone rang, he had no idea of how long he had been sitting there looking out at the woods. “You okay?” Jenny said.

“Guess so,” he said.

“I just saw her car heading out of town. Looked like a lot junk loaded in it.”

“Must have sat here longer than I thought.”

“Things better?”

“Not sure things ever get better any more. But they are different.”

“Want some company?”

He paused before answering. “Don’t think so, just yet. I’m trying to run some things through my little mind and sort them out. So far, it hasn’t worked.”

“Well, you know where to find me or how to get ahold of me.”

“Yep.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Me? Stupid? Thought that might be my new middle name.”

“I’m off of here.” He put his phone on the table beside him. Another drink was sounding good. He remembered seeing some under the kitchen sink, but he didn’t feel like drinking in the house. He got in his truck and headed out. He took back roads so as to avoid going through town. He wasn’t interested in Jen or anyone else seeing him. The only person he was interested in seeing was Jerell, the guy who bartended most afternoons at Hobo’s.

Hobo’s was so much of a country honky-tonk it looked like someone had staged it. The first thing a person noticed when they walked in the door was the lighting. It was provided by beer signs, some that were new and worked well, and others had only parts of them that worked. Some of them advertised beer, like Stag and Falstaff that had both been out of business since Hank was a kid. The smell came next. It was a combination of sweat, urine, beer, and stale cigarette smoke.

Like almost every bar in south Florida, there was a stuffed alligator hanging on the wall, along with a couple of mounted wild boar's heads, a few deer heads, and several large bass.

The mirror behind the bar was usually dirty enough it was hard to recognize your own face in it, let alone anyone else's. The silvering on the back was flaking off making the world look like it was passing in strobe lights. But there was one thing that mattered; they had super cold beer and the best hamburgers Hank had ever tasted. Hobo's menu consisted of two items—a hamburger or a cheeseburger. He did serve those as doubles. You didn't want any one of those, go somewhere else.

When he walked in, there were two older men sharing a booth near the rear, a younger man throwing darts but not against any competition, and a woman named Maureen, who was well known in this part of the county, sitting at the bar's far end. Her hair had been attacked and invaded with so many different chemical procedures it looked like a pinkish-red glob of steel wool desperately clinging to the top of her head. Her flowered yellow and red dress was slightly beyond wrinkled.

"Bud, long-neck," Hank said as he wiped some crumbs from a bar stool. "Better get me a cheeseburger goin', too. The works."

"Comin' up," Jerell said.

Hank laid a twenty on the bar. His Bud came and so did Maureen.

"Buy a lady a drink?" Her cheap perfume drowned out all the other smells in the place. Rhonda always said it was to cover up her body odor. She made sure one of her breasts pushed against his arm.

"One. One Maureen. No more."

"Bless you, Hank Stram."

"I'm not Hank Stram. First of all, he was a football coach. I've never even touched a football. Second, he's dead. Third, my last name is... Oh, hell never mind. You wouldn't remember it anyway."

Jerell set a beer for Maureen in front of her.

“The lady is sitting down there,” Hank said as he pointed. “Please serve her her drink there.”

Jerell smiled. “Sure thing... coach.” He put his hand up to his mouth as he left. Maureen didn’t wait for an argument. She went after the beer.

After a couple long draws on his Bud, Hank turned to look at the room behind the main bar. It was a dance hall, and anyone who was into country music, country dancing, or just being around other country folks was there on Saturday nights. A small platform about the size of a ping-pong table served as the bandstand. Most Saturdays, a group calling itself Jimmy’s Country Band played there. Jimmy Nelson was the leader. Hank and Jimmy had a long discussion one night about how long it took him to come up with that name for his band. Jimmy said he didn’t want one of those fancy, stupid names many bands were taking today. Hank had to agree he succeeded.

Rhonda had loved this place on Saturday nights. In his mind he saw her on the dance floor wearing one of those dresses that got other men to looking at her. She always said if a woman was showing a lot of boob it was because she wanted men to look. She ate up that kind of attention. Other than Saturday nights, she avoided Hobo’s. She always tried to talk Hank into doing so, too, but it didn’t take. When Hank was pushed, he always pushed back. Cornered was one place he never wanted to be—no matter how trivial or stupid the reason.

All those thoughts led him to Lucy, his second wife. After four years, she left a message with Jenny when she dissolved their union. “Tell him I went to Texas with a guy in a Cadillac.” That was it, end of discussion, end of marriage.

“I’m not even sure she knew his name,” Jenny had told him.

Two years later, Hank filed for a non-contested, spousal-absent divorce and was granted it after five minutes in court. All he could tell the judge was that he thought his soon to be ex-wife was in Texas. The judge decided it was too big a place to go looking. Afterwards Hank and the judge went to Hobo’s for a brew.

He still had his back to the bar when Jerell brought his cheeseburger. As usual, it had enough extra stuff on it to almost qualify as being obscene. He squashed it down to a manageable height. Just as the grease from his first bite was running

down his chin, his cell rang. Caller ID showed Jen was calling. He used his cleanest finger to swipe across the screen and answer it.

“Hum.”

“Hello to you, too. You okay?”

“Hum.”

“Boy is that good news, whatever the hell it is. You at Hobo’s?”

“Yep,” he managed to get out. He chewed a few more times. “How’d you know where I am? Am I that predictable?”

“Pretty much, but I’m actually out in the parking lot looking at the back end of your truck.”

From the rear Hank’s truck was hard to miss. It was a dark blue, but he had wrecked the tailgate when it was down, and he backed into a tree. He got a replacement from the junk yard. The new one was painted what Hank called a Baby-Shit-After-Eating-Peas green. He cogitated on painting it someday and doing several other small chores, but that day was still sometime in the future. He figured after two years, it really didn’t matter.

“If you know I’m here, why’d you ask?”

“Mainly to see if you were ready for company yet.” She paused. “We could use this as an excuse, you know.”

He shook his head. “Just come on in, Jen.”

He continued devouring his burger as she slipped onto the bar stool next to him. She ordered a double bourbon, neat, and told him she was going to pay for her own and not to argue about it. He shrugged and kept chewing.

After a long silence, she said, “Any idea what’s next?”

He was using his second napkin to clean up his face and shirt. “What the hell’s wrong with me, Jen?”

“If you mean why do your relationships always seem to go down the crapper, I got no real answers. I wasn’t there, Hank. That old Indian thing about walking a mile in another man’s moccasins isn’t far from the truth.” She took a sip of bourbon. “Maybe it has something to do with your disappearing every once in a while.”

“I...”

“I know, I know, you say it’s connected to how you make money, but to be real honest, it scares me, too. I’m constantly checking to see when you get back.” Another sip. “You ever gonna tell me exactly what you do out there?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, if I was your wife, that would certainly satisfy me. Is there a hand motion here for sarcasm?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Like?”

He took a long pull on his beer. “Hell if I know.”

“Ain’t we two somethin’? If that ain’t a good start, I don’t know what is.”

A large cloud of silence hovered over them longer than was comfortable..

Jen slid off the stool. “If we’re just gonna sit here and look at each other in that shitty mirror, I’m out’ a here.”

*

Jerell came over to Hank. “I wasn’t really trying to eavesdrop, but I was kind’a waiting for her to leave. Clay wants to see you.”

Clayton “Clay” Upshaw was the owner of Hobo’s. He was a balding man in his fifties or maybe sixties who always had the stub of a cigar in his mouth. If he could grow a couple inches taller, his weight would catch up with him. He always wore a tie, but it was never tight around his neck.

Hank stepped into his office. “You remember Ray Rawl?” Clay said.

Clay always got right to the point. Never tap danced around what he had to say. "Ole Rawhide, sure," Hank said.

"Haven't seen him around here lately, have ya?"

Hank studied a moment. "Come to think of it, no."

"Well, he bailed out of this part of the country."

"Oh?"

"Yep, and owing me money. I backed him on the kennel deal he put together, and when it went bust, he took off."

Hank grinned. "Let me guess. You want me to go find him."

"Damned straight, I do. Now I got a few friends around the country who been on the lookout for him. One of them saw him at a dog track in West Memphis, Arkansas, last night."

"Just what do you want done with him?"

"I want him back standing in front of me, alive and well. Then I'm gonna make him wish you'd killed him before you brought him here. When he gets well, I'm gonna do it all over again."

Hank flopped in a chair in front of Clay's cluttered desk. "What kind'a money we talkin' about?"

"He owes me twenty-five grand. I'll give you ten percent, plus expenses."

"Bullshit."

"What?"

"Bullshit. That's what ten percent is. Bullshit."

Clay rolled the cigar stub around in his mouth with his tongue. "So just what do you have in mind?"

“Half.”

“Half?”

“Yeah, half. You getting’ hard of hearin’, Clay?”

“I been robbed once. Don’t intend to let it happen again. Twenty percent. That’s my final offer.”

“Fifty-five percent.”

“What? You’re not supposed to go up.”

“Why not. You did.”

“Look, Hank. I know you could use the money, and I want my revenge on this guy. I may even get some of my money back, if he’s got any. Maybe he hit it big at the track. Let’s be reasonable. Thirty percent.”

“A third and you got a deal.”

Clay leaned back in his chair. Hank figured it might go over backwards, but it hit a file cabinet first. After a few seconds, Clay said, “Okay. A third.”

“Plus expenses.”

“You drive a hard ass bargain, Hank.”

“Who else you got lined to do this job?”

Clay scowled. “A third, plus expenses. And I want this done ASAP.”

Hank stood and extended his hand across to shake Clay’s. One thing he knew, if Clay shook on a deal, it was a solid deal, and Clay shook.

He rented a car for the trip. His old pick-up just wasn’t trustworthy enough. Once he got to I-10, he headed west just north of New Orleans and took I-55 north. He made sure he stayed within a couple miles of the speed limit. He didn’t want some state trooper finding the sawed-off shotgun loaded with double-ought buckshot underneath the driver’s set.

The dog track was easy to find. It was a monstrous structure sitting just to the east of the interstate 55. After two days of watching, Rawhide showed up where Hank figured he would if he was at the track—at the betting windows. Hank stood on a walkway above the betting windows and waited. He knew a gambler wouldn't be at a dog track and not bet.

When the races were over, Hank followed his prey into the parking lot. As Rawhide was opening the driver's door, Hank stepped up behind him and grabbed his right arm and pulled it up on his back. "Now put your left arm behind you nice and slow, or I'll push my knife through your kidney."

The man obeyed.

"No noise now, Rawhide. Noise will mean trouble." Hank tied the man's hands together with a plastic tie.

"What the hell do you want?" Rawhide said.

"You."

"Me? Why? Who the hell are you?"

Hank turned the man around, but kept his body against him enough to hold him against the car.

Rawhide looked into Hank's face. Hank removed the old baseball cap he wore along with the tinted glasses. That was the only disguise he ever tried to use.

"Hank Peterson? So this is what you do when you leave town? Go out and hold up innocent folks?"

"Guess Clay Upshaw might disagree with you. Says you owe him fifty big ones." Hank opened the car door and pushed Rawhide into the driver's seat.

Rawhide scoffed. "That's crap. I owed him fifty at one time, but I already paid him back ten. I just owe him forty. I came up here trying to get the rest."

Hank thought that extra five thousand was looking real good about now. "Long way to come just to bet on dogs. Might be interpreted as you runnin'."

“Huh. I knew he’d come after me. Ain’t nowhere to run from that man. I used to work for him, remember. I seen some of the things he done.”

Hank was silent for a few seconds. “Do any good at the track?”

“I hit a few. Couple of good ones.”

“Got any left?”

“What you thinkin’, Hank.”

“Well, the first thing is that good ole Clay tried to screw me. He offered me a third of twenty-five thousand to come get you, plus expenses. I figured that’d be a little over eight K. If you’re tellin’ me the truth, the better number would be a little over fifteen K.”

“Why would I lie? I know what’s gonna happen if you take me back to him. I might still be alive, but I’ll have a shit life. I don’t know just what you think of Clay Upshaw, but let me tell you, he’s worse. He killed a guy once with a claw hammer.”

Both men paused.

“I got some money, Hank.”

Hank scratched his head. “How much we talkin’ about?”

“I got almost twenty grand. You can have it all. Just tell Clay you couldn’t find me. I must have left this part of the country.”

“Don’t want it all. In fact, I’m not sure I want any. Crap, this is a mess.” Hank hit the roof of the car with his hand. Rawhide jumped.

“My hands are getting’ kind of numb,” Rawhide said. “Think you could untie me?”

Hank did what sounded like a drum roll with both his hands on the roof of the car. “Get out.”

Rawhide wiggled and stood. He turned his back toward Hank. As soon as Hank cut the ties, Rawhide started rubbing his wrists. “Thanks.” They were both silent. “Now what?”

“Get the hell out of here.”

“What?”

“You goin’ deaf? Get the hell out of here.”

“You don’t want any money?”

“Get out of here before I change my mind.”

Rawhide slid into his car, fired the engine, and sped across the now almost empty parking lot.

*

After he returned the rental car and got receipts for all his expenses, Hank headed back to Hobo’s to confront Clay. He had a nine mm Glock tucked in the back of his pants and under his shirt that was hanging loose. He decided to drive through town and tell Jen he was back.

She was in the process of displaying some pictures painted by local artists in front of her store. “Well, look what the cat drug in,” she said as he got out of his truck.

“Yeah, good to see you, too.” They hugged.

“Where you headed?”

He explained everything to her—what had happened and what was about to happen.

“So let me get this straight,” she said. “He owes you what twelve, thirteen hundred bucks for expenses?”

“’Bout right.”

“You go out there to collect, he’s not gonna pay you. From the bulge behind you, I’d say you plan on shootin’ him. If that doesn’t work, he shoots you. So choice A is you go to jail for killin’ Clay. Choice B, you end up dead. That about right, too?”

Hank was looking at the sidewalk like he was looking for a hole to crawl in.

“Look, I’ll give you the damned money. Forget this badge of honor shit about being so macho. I’d kind of like to have you around, alive and free.”

“I ain’t gonna take any money from you.”

“See, it’s not the money that’s important. It’s the macho stuff. Sure, Clay tried to screw you over. Walk away. I’ll screw you blind, and you’ll love it. And after a little recuperation time, you’ll be able to walk away.”

They starred silently at each other for several seconds.

“You got a Plan B in mind?” Jen asked.

“Actually, I do. I did a lot of thinkin’ on the drive back from West Memphis. I could sell everything I own here, and you and I could take off down to Mexico. I hear you can live real cheap down there.”

“You and me? Down in Mexico?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“If I been keepin’ score correctly, you’re zero to three in women relationships. Number three sure as hell wasn’t a charm for you. I see nothing on the horizon to convince me number four is gonna be the charm. ”

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong...”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that.”

“...but you’re the one who’s been pushin’ us to get together.”

“Not for the rest of our lives, Hank. I still want to be your friend, no matter what.”

He walked toward his pickup.

“Where you goin’?” she asked.

“Think I’ll go home and think.”

“Good plan. Let me know if I can help.” She paused. “In any way.”

*

The following evening, Hank porched and settled in one of his favorite chairs. Clay was mad as hell, but he'd paid for the expenses—Clay's handshake never lied. He got in one sip from a glass of Wild Turkey before Jenny pulled up in front of his house.

“You gonna run me off?”

He chuckled. “Nope. Could use a drinkin' partner. If I go through this whole bottle, tomorrow's not lookin' too good.”

After two glasses each, they were in the house. They had sex. Animalized sex. The second time, they made love. Slow, exploring love. Hank was snoring before she could prod him into another round.

“Guess number three just never works for you.”

Hank grunted.

She got out of bed, dressed, and went home.

*

A week later, Hank sold his house for less than market value just so it would be gone. He drove north again to I-10 and headed west. When he got almost to the coast in California, he made a sharp left turn and crossed the border at Tijuana. He bought some cheap tequila and continued driving south into the Baja.

He hadn't called Jenny all week, and she never heard from him again.

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GUEST WRITER

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Sapphire

by Daniel LeBoeuf

Jerome was studying his menu, trying to decide between a Reuben and a blue cheese burger. Conversations and the clink of silverware on china buzzed around him. He was so intent on his choice that he barely noticed the waitress standing next to his table. She placed a glass of water in front of him and laid a straw next to it.

“I’m Sapphire and I’ll be your server today. Are you ready, or do you want a drink first and take another minute deciding?”

He sat stock still, feeling the blood drain from his face. Sapphire? Really?

“Hon? You want a drink? Are you ready to order? Or should I come back in a few?”

He slowly raised his head, first seeing her legs, long and tanned, firm and muscular. There was a tiny, familiar scar on her left knee. His eyes traveled upward, taking in the pink uniform dress, the curve of her neck, and the blonde, almost white, hair that hung in a long pony tail.

She was not a pretty girl. She had a strong, jutting chin and a pronounced jaw. High cheekbones gave her face a flat look, like a pie plate. A good nose sat between pale blue eyes and heavy lids.

“Hello Sapphire.” A disappointing opening line after all these years, but he was caught by surprise.

Her eyes opened wide and her lips formed a little O. “Oh my god. Jerome?” Her voice came out as a squeal. Then she leaned over and threw her arms around his shoulders and neck. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

His memory awoke. Her powerful hug. Her cheek brushing his. Her scent, like wild cherry blossoms. Everything was familiar.

“You’re still using that Suave body moisturizer.”

She backed off and straightened up. “You remember that?” She looked shocked. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I smelled it on you every day while we were together. I think of you every time I see the bottle in the store.”

Another waitress came over, this one heavy set with iron grey hair and eyeglasses set in orange frames that clashed with her uniform. “You on a break, Sapphire? Hustle up, girl, we’re slammed.”

“Yeah. Alright Wanda,” she shrugged and grinned at Jerome. “I’m sorry, I have to get back to work. Can we meet later? I get off at nine.”

“Sure. Nine’s fine. Should I meet you here, or what?”

“Here’s best.” She turned to walk away, tucking her order pad into the black apron tied around her waist.

“Um, Sapphire?”

She turned, her hair brushing across her shoulder. “Yes, Jerome?”

“I’d like a Reuben please, with fries for my side. And a Coke.”

She smiled, the creases around her mouth deepening. “Sorry about that. It’ll be up soon.”

He watched her walk away. Her hips swayed, moving with fluidity and assurance. Her sensible shoes did not take away from his enjoyment of her legs. He was enthralled. Again.

The sounds from the kitchen were loud. Banging pans and staccato Spanish floated out to the dining room along with the smells of bacon, toasted bread, and greasy steam. The painted walls had a murky brown film. The whole place looked like it was in need of a good scrubbing. He watched Sapphire absentmindedly as she threaded her way through the tables, delivering orders here, clearing plates there.

“Order up,” someone called from the kitchen. Sapphire retrieved it and approached him carrying a somewhat skimpy sandwich with a small clot of fries next to it. In her other hand was his Coke.

“Here you go, Jerome. Hope you like it. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Do you get a break?”

She looked around, probably searching for the redoubtable Wanda. “I do, but I’m not supposed to take it out here with customers. I have to go out back.”

“Couldn’t they make an exception, for an old friend?”

“Friend? Is that how you remember it?”

He felt his face flush. “Well, you know...”

“God, you’re still so lame. Meet me here at nine, okay? We’ll catch up then.”

Grudgingly he said, “Fine.” He left a big tip when he was finished.

There was no way for him to return to work after finding her at the diner. He spent the afternoon at home, catching up on her life as much as he could. Her Facebook page was private, limiting him to her photos and some basic information. Her relationship status was “it’s complicated,” which didn’t help at all. The photos showed him a woman who liked to party, took a lot of selfies, and spent time in

Key West where she apparently never wore anything other than a bikini. He downloaded all of those pics to his computer, but remembered that there was much more to Sapphire than a party girl.

The Twitter handle he had for her didn't work anymore, and her new ID was private, so no help there. Nothing showed up on Instagram or Pinterest for her. After a string of web searches found nothing, he went back to peruse the photos he'd snagged off Facebook. There were several guys in the pictures with her, but none of them seemed to be any more important to her than the others.

He sorted through his flash drives until he found one labeled "2010" and popped it into a USB port. He scrolled down the thumbnails, enlarging and studying his pictures of Sapphire as she had been. They'd had a lot of good times and looked very happy together. Most of the pictures were just the two of them in selfies at various sites, but there were some with more distance. He looked at one of Sapphire on a hike with him on a day trip to the "Ding" Darling Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel. He remembered that they'd spent far too much money for lunch at a highly recommended and utterly disappointing diner there. Others showed them at Disney doing typically Disney things, at Busch Gardens drinking beer and riding coasters, and at Lowry Park mugging with the manatees.

They'd had a lot of fun together, a lot of good times, a lot of really great sex. She was the most adventurous and uninhibited woman he'd ever dated, easily the best girlfriend he'd had. Their breakup had been his fault, and he regretted it now, looking back.

At six o'clock he was showered and shaved, ready to go, wondering what he'd do for the next three hours. At 8:30 he was waiting in his car outside the diner. A misty rain fell, causing the light from the windows to reflect and refract like a snowstorm of diamonds. He was in his best knit shirt and his cleanest pair of jeans. His sockless feet were jammed into well-worn boat shoes. He kept his aged Honda Civic running, letting the AC do its thing.

He watched as the servers finished up their chores: wiping the counter, sweeping and mopping the floors, putting the clean silver in the bins. Sapphire wiped down the tables, and then the windows. She caught sight of him, hesitated, then smiled and waved. He waved back.

Finally the lights snapped off and the front door swung open. First Wanda came blundering out, fussing with her handbag, not looking where she was going. Next came three men, brown-skinned and lean, each with a black goatee and dark hair. Then Sapphire floated through the door, followed by a hefty man with a bald head and large framed glasses. She waited while he closed and locked the door, walked with him to his car, and gave him a hug.

When he'd left, Sapphire came straight to the Honda, the rain flattening her hair against her head. He reached across the center console and opened the door for her.

"Thanks," she said, pushing the clutter of soda cans aside with her foot, "I see some things never change."

"Sorry, I meant to clean that out but..."

"I know, something came up. Probably some video game, or you got lost on YouTube. I know you, Jerome. We dated for 13 months."

He felt sheepish and stupid. Earlier that night he'd gotten a phone call from Christa, his current girlfriend, who was not amused when he broke their date.

Sapphire said, "At least you had time to change. I'm still in this ugly ass uniform. Can we swing by my place before we go out? I need to get the diner funk off me."

"What about your car?"

"Do you see a car in this parking lot?"

It was true. Wanda had left in a minivan, the three cooks had climbed into an old Cadillac Seville, and the large guy had departed in his Lexus. The lot was now empty except for his Honda.

"So how do you get to work and back?"

"Usually I walk to work and Pops drives me home."

"Pops?"

“He owns the place. That was him I walked out with. I worry about him.” She tapped her head. “He had a mild stroke last year, and he’s a little unsteady these days. I worry that he’s going to fall down on his way to the car.”

“Hmph. That’s nice of you. You always were concerned with the welfare of others.”

She pegged him with those pale eyes, “I used to be concerned about you. Until you dumped me.”

“I was wondering how long it would take you to bring that up. I haven’t even put the car in gear yet.”

“Well, you did. And it hurt me. It hurt me bad.”

He felt his face flush, embarrassment and shame flooding him with adrenaline that had no outlet. “I’m sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am. Let’s get you changed and find someplace nice to eat where we can talk.”

“You mean, nicer than where I work?”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant...”

Her laugh interrupted him. “It’s okay. I have no delusions about Pop’s diner. The cooks don’t give two craps about quality, and Pops tends to skimp on the portions. But it’s decent food, mostly.”

“Yeah. That pretty much describes my Reuben.”

“And that was one of our better ones. I told Carlos ‘*mas carne*.’”

“Hmph. Thanks, I guess.”

“Don’t mention it. So, does this car move, or do I have to walk home?”

“Sorry,” he said, shifting the transmission into drive, “you still live in the same place?”

“No. I’ve moved. Take a right here.”

She now lived in an apartment complex that had seen better days. The parking lot was full of junkers and low-end cars, six of them up on blocks. Half the streetlights were out, and only two spotlights on the five buildings were lit. There were no lights in the outdoor stairwells at all. Six men loitered in the children's playground, silently watching them as they walked up to Sapphire's second floor apartment.

"Ugh," he said, "I hated living on the middle floor."

"I know, right? It's the worst of both worlds. I can hear my neighbors stomping around on top of me while the neighbors below me play their music too loud, but complain if they hear my toilet. You still where you used to be?"

He nodded, then surveyed the tiny living room as they walked inside. Standard apartment-issue beige carpet and white walls. She'd furnished it with a black leather love seat, a smallish flat screen TV, an arm chair covered in a flowered fabric, and a glass and chrome coffee table in the middle of it all. A four seat dining room table stood in the cramped dinette area.

"You want something to drink while I change? I've got some beer. Or maybe a soda?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Well, if you change your mind just make yourself at home. I'll only be a couple of minutes."

She walked down a short hallway that had two doors opening off to either side and a louvered door at the end. She turned right. He sat on the loveseat, heard her walk across the hall and close the other door. A couple of minutes later he heard a toilet flush and a shower turn on.

When she emerged from the bathroom 10 minutes later, he was still in the loveseat, staring at a painting of a sad clown and a happy walrus standing in a field of daisies. It was amateurish and colossally stupid, and was the only artwork on the walls, which also had a clock and some ornamental iron doodads.

She came out wearing hip hugger jeans and a light green button up shirt. She'd left her hair loose and put on a pair of simple white sandals.

“Are you ready?” He stood and pulled his car key out of his pocket.

“Yeah. I think so. Where are we going? Am I dressed okay?”

“You look fantastic.”

“Hmmm. I’ll just grab my bag. Oh, and I need to send a couple of texts real quick. But I can do that in the car.”

On their way out, he stopped by the painting. “Who did this?”

“I did. I took one of those free classes they give down at the Art Warehouse and Studios, you know? This was my project. My instructor said I have a latent talent and wanted me to take the four month course, but it cost too much. Do you like it?”

“Of course I like it. Who doesn’t like clowns and walruses?”

Her mouth turned down in a grimace. “It’s a seal.”

“Oh! Right. My bad.”

They made their way to the car. “Crispers okay?” he asked, partly because it was a step up from his lunch that was still refluxing, and partly because he could have beer with his meal.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever is good for you. I can eat anything. Except beets. I can’t stand beets. But you probably remember that, too.”

He smiled and nodded. They caught up over salads.

While he listened to Sapphire tell him about her life, he was distracted by his cell phone vibrating every few minutes against his leg. It was probably Christa, trying to change his mind about seeing her tonight. He felt badly about breaking their date, but that was nothing compared to the elation he felt about being with Sapphire again.

When she was finished with her tale of dropping out of college because of money and taking jobs at two diners to try and save up some more, he commented “We haven’t done so well since we broke up, have we?”

“You mean, since you dumped me, right?”

He sighed and rolled his eyes, figuring the best way to handle this was to force it out of the way. “That was five years ago. We were 20 and I had some personal issues going on. Can you just forgive me and let’s move on?”

“Oh, I’ve moved on, Jerome. I did some hard thinking after you left the diner. I was so excited to see you, at first. But then I got angry. Angry about the past, and angry that you showed up again. I’ve built a decent life. Nothing spectacular, sure, but I’m okay with it, and I’ve got plans for the future. But, when I saw you again, I realized that I still care about you. Even after all this time and you dumping me. And I’ve been wondering what to do about it since you left. How stupid is that?”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“I think it’s the most beautiful thing anyone’s ever said to me.” Jerome grinned. Sapphire had always loved his grin.

“You don’t think I’m stupid?” she asked.

“No. Because, as soon as I saw you, I knew I still loved you, too. And that I was the one who was stupid for dumping you.”

There was a pause as they stared at each other. Jerome let the pause grow, waiting for her to speak first, knowing there was power in the silence. She shook her head and asked, “So, what do we do now?”

“How about we go for a walk around the mall here? Talk a little bit more. See where that leads us.”

She smiled. “Are you playing me? I think you’re playing me. You’ve probably got someone right now that you’re blowing off to see me. Right?”

He felt himself blush and hoped she didn’t notice. “Look, the past is the past. I screwed up. Let’s just talk, okay? Nothing more.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Fine. We’ll talk.”

They strolled aimlessly around the mall, looking in windows, talking. His phone vibrated again and he pulled it out to check the text.

“You know what? Why don’t you just pay attention to me for right now?” Sapphire slipped her hand into his. He slid his phone back into his pocket, feeling like he was in a dream. Sapphire was coming back to him. He felt it. They’d fallen into the easy camaraderie they’d always had. It was like no time had passed at all.

“Do you think I could follow you again on Twitter?”

She stopped and turned to face him. “Whoa, slow down. Answer me this—what do you hope to accomplish tonight, Jerome?”

Her question made him pause. What *did* he want? There was Christa to consider. She was great and totally into him, and he liked her a lot. He didn’t want to hurt her, but Sapphire was the one that got away. He wondered if there were a way he could have them both. He decided to answer with a version of the truth.

“I don’t know. I know it’s great to be with you again, to hold your hand, to walk with you and talk with you. I missed that. I missed everything about you.”

“Do you want to talk about getting back together? Because it’s going to be hard for me to trust you again.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, Jerome. You always have a plan.”

“I really don’t know. Maybe, if things go well tonight, we’ll have a better idea of where we’re going next.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” she smiled at him, her teeth bright in the artificial lighting. It was a strange smile, one he’d never seen before from her. “In fact, I think I want to see something now. I mean, if there’s no spark between us still, it’s kind of a moot point, don’t you think?”

She pulled him behind the movie theatre, pushed him against the wall and kissed him. It was light, just a quick meeting of the lips, then she backed away.

“How was that?” he asked.

She moved in again, mashing her lips more forcefully against his. When she darted her tongue into his mouth, his vision was filled with green and red pinpoints of light. There was definitely still a spark between them. Sapphire pushed away.

“Damn it! This is crazy after what you did to me. I can’t believe I’m doing this, but you still get me going. Do you want to go back to my place?”

Her place! “Yes. That would be good.”

He drove back to her apartment complex like he’d stolen his own car. She seemed subdued on the way, deep in thought. She even ignored the phone he could hear chirping in her pocket. He felt like something had changed. It wasn’t like her to be this quiet for this long.

“You okay, Saph?”

“Yeah. Just thinking. Remembering old times. Stuff like that.” She took a deep breath and let it out explosively. “Did you come looking for me at the diner? Did you know I was there?”

“Nope. Just happened to be hungry and was driving by. I’ve probably passed that place a hundred times, never knew you were working there.”

“Have you tried to find me in the past five years?”

He wondered where she was going with this, and decided to try honesty. “No. I guess fate just brought us together again.”

She nodded and sighed. “That’s what I thought.”

He pulled into the same parking spot as before. The same six men were still on the playground.

“What are they, neighborhood watch or something?”

“No. They’re drug dealers, part of the Los Lobos gang. This is, like, their territory.”

“What? What the hell?!”

“No. It’s cool. They watch out for us residents. I mean, yeah, they’re scary and we all know that if the cops come around we didn’t see or hear anything no matter what we saw or heard, but other than that it’s a safe place.”

He knew he was wearing his skeptical face.

“No, really. It’s probably the safest place I’ve ever lived. Outside of the gang stuff they’re pretty good guys. You want to meet them?”

“No.”

“Oh, come on. Besides, it’ll be good to have them know your face, so they’ll recognize you the next time you come over. You know, reduce the hassle factor? They’re like my protectors.”

“Fine. I guess knowing one more drug dealer won’t hurt me.”

The six men stayed seated as they approached, four of them on the bench where parents could sit to watch their children play, one guy on top of the slide, and the last man perched on a yellow plastic rabbit. All wore blue jeans, black shirts, and had red bandanas wrapped around their heads. Jerome was uneasy, but Sapphire seemed calm and sure of herself.

She stopped in front of the man on the rabbit. He was huge; big arms and a big chest caught Jerome’s eyes first, followed by his big gut and the big scary gun in his belt. But when Jerome looked him in the eyes, his breath caught. They were the dead eyes of a man who’d discovered early in life that he liked killing people.

“Hi, Manny,” Sapphire said.

“Sapphire. Who’s this?” the big guy grunted.

Sapphire hesitated, looking from Manny to Jerome.

“He’s an ex.” She paused again, staring at Jerome. “He dumped me for another girl five years ago, then today he shows up at Pop’s for lunch. I think he’s been playing me all day. In fact, I’m sure of it. So, if he ever comes back here again, you have my permission to shoot him.”

“Wait! What?” Jerome turned from nervous to nonplussed in one second. His mouth went dry and his eyes bugged out.

The four men on the bench stood as a unit and moved around to encircle Jerome and Sapphire. Each of them carried a gun in his waistband. The man on the slide remained where he was, as did Manny.

Sapphire said, her voice tight. “Go home, Jerome, and don’t ever come back. Not here, not the diner, not anywhere near me. Because, if you do, I’ll ask Manny and his crew here to hunt you down.”

“But...” He was having trouble breathing.

“I’ve tried all day to get over it. Tried and tried, but you know what?” She advanced toward him, her right index finger stabbing the air until she was close enough to pop it into his chest for emphasis. “Everything has changed now. I loved you, Jerome. I really, really loved you. I still love you. But it’s not going to happen. Not again. You had your chance and you blew it. For both of us. And now you show up and think you’re in and... Damn it! I’m so pissed off at myself! I can’t believe I was thinking about taking you back! You need to leave.” She pushed him. When he didn’t move, she shouted “Now!”

He stood there, not believing what he’d just heard. A deep, guttural growl came from Manny, so menacing in tone and timbre that the words it formed weren’t necessary. “Sister here said to leave now, boy. You need some help following directions?”

Jerome didn’t. His mouth hanging open, his mind wheeling with surprise and fear, he retreated backwards to his car, seven pairs of eyes watching his every step.

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