



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #28
OCTOBER 2016



**WE CHALLENGED CONTESTANTS TO WRITE A STORY
IN WHICH "DARKNESS" PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE.
CONTESTANTS COULD INTERPRET "DARKNESS" ANY
WAY THEY WANTED.**

Table of Contents

The Stump	3
by Timi Odueso	
Bring Rope	11
By Liam Hogan	
Repentance	19
by Laura Ruth Loomis	
The Frayed Edge	25
by Annie Raab	
All the Types of Dark	35
by Katelyn O’Neill	
The Blood Sowers	43
by Jes Rausch	
A Woman in the House	58
by Mike Beasley	
The General	74
by Noel Cheruto	
In Case of Doubt	85
by Tarl Kudrick	

FIRST PLACE

Timi Odueso is nineteen years old and hails from Abuja, Nigeria. He says, "I love books. A lot. Writing and reading them both. I also love comedy and art."

The Stump

by Timi Odueso

It wasn't your first time watching young soldiers get cut. But this time was different because you were not only watching, you were also waiting in line to get your chance at the stump.

You would watch in horror as the RUF rebels lined the battered young men up in front of the already bloodied tree stump that had an axe in it. You would listen to Cash Tee's deep voice when he asked, "Long sleeve or short sleeve." You would listen to the cries of the young men as they begged and pleaded and you would catch Cash Tee's eyes when he would signal to Chopper on what to do with the crying man. Whenever he winked, the arm on the stump would get cut from the wrist and you would try to block your ears and your eyes as the blood would explode from where the hand had been severed and the soldier would scream and be kicked aside. Whenever Cash Tee raised his brow, then the arm on the stump would be severed from just below the shoulder.

"No more power in your hands," Cash Tee would always say with a resounding laugh to whatever was left of the already cut soldiers. Cutting was a weekly sport in the camp where you were stationed. The RUF would spend the week catching soldiers and then they would keep them close to the diamond mine and feed them their own shit for days before bringing them before the stump. Almost the whole camp would gather to watch the stump get bloodied and you always knew there

would be an orgy of happiness whenever the severed arms and legs were piled up to be eaten.

You don't complain about the stringy bitter taste of the meat again because the first day you were "recruited," you asked why the meat tasted so different, and three of the rebels took you to the stump and cut a soldier so you could see the source of your meat. When you began to cry, the one they called Chopper took his knife and gave you what he called "a pretty little scar" and rubbed a whitish substance on it. You don't remember what happened afterwards. You just remember waking up feeling sore all over. You don't question what is good and what is not anymore because Cash Tee had told all of you that the only way to get good things would be to be bad.

You were eleven when you first came here. They came in with two big trucks to your hamlet and started shooting. Your mother took to her heels and your father carried you and ran after her. But it was already too late. They surrounded all of you and dragged you back to their camp. You were teary-eyed and you fought the men. You only stopped crying when the tall man with one eye slapped you hard and dragged you off to the wet stump. You looked him in the face and you felt the warm liquid spread through your trousers.

"What is your name?" the one-eyed man had asked you. You were too scared to reply so they beat you up and took you to a dark place and did things to you.

The first time they brought you out, they took you to where your parents were. Your mother was holding onto your father and they were standing with their backs to you and facing a yellow wall with spattered brown designs but you knew it was them because everyone knows the backs of their parents. They gave you a gun and told you to pull the trigger. You said "Shoot where?" and they laughed and slapped you and called you names and pointed to the two people facing the wall. You dropped the gun and said you wouldn't do it so they took you back to the dark place, mutilated you again and made you eat sand. They brought you out three times, you said "No" three times and each time, your parents looked thinner and thinner. The fourth time they let you see your parents faces and this time you pulled the trigger and watched your parents bodies fall. You thought the fresh red spray of blood added a new depth to the dull brown on the yellow wall.

You ate meat and drank clean water on the day you shot your parents. It was the same day they cut a soldier because they wanted to show you where the meat came from. So the next time they put the rickety gun in your hands, you didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. You had decided you would continue to pull the trigger. As long as they gave you bitter meat and water. As long as they didn't take you to the dark room. As long as you stayed here and weren't dragged off to one of the diamond mines.

You tried to count how many "recruits" the RUF had. But you couldn't because almost every day a new face would be added. But you knew you were more than fifty. More than fifty boys who would kill for a piece of meat. More than fifty boys who had been filled with so much fear of having their parts cut off or being sent to the mines that they endured and tried to enjoy the daily mutilation they gave the patriots of Sierra Leone and sometimes themselves when they were trying to get "stronger."

You never said anything. You slept on the floor in the room where the boys slept while the mosquitoes had a feast out of you. You woke up, you raged, you pillaged and yet you didn't feel anything. You couldn't remember your name or where you came from so the boys called you Ghost. You followed the rebels on their missions and helped them recover diamond mines. But you didn't help them capture soldiers. You killed the soldiers you saw. Even when Cash Tee asked that they wanted some alive, you would kill as much as you could because you thought you were helping them. Helping them escape from a life of being long-sleeved or short-sleeved or shit-eating. Because you couldn't think of anything worse than the pain of having a body part severed.

The week before you joined the young soldiers at the line to the stump, you were sitting with the other boys in the sand awaiting the arrival of Cash Tee and Chopper. They had told you all they had fine meat for you. So you sat and waited, your face giving the same blank expression you wore all the time. The expression that got stuck on your face when you saw your parents faces before you put bullets in them. They arrived with two trucks full of young men. You saw the fear etched into the deep creases of the young mens' faces as they led them away. One of them had a piece of glass stuck in his eyeball but he kept walking because the rebels were using machetes on them. You watched as Chopper brought out two

girls who couldn't have been more than fifteen from the front of the truck. They told you that the commander had sent girls to the other camps too and this was your share. They told you all of you could have the girls but only after they were done with them. You watched Chopper slip himself inside the first girl while Cash Tee straddled the second one. You heard the girls scream and thrash and cry and you heard the other rebels chant and cheer and you heard the boys clap. But you didn't do anything, you didn't feel anything. While the RUF rebels and the boys saw two brutal men raping young girls, you saw a yellow wall with irregular red motifs all over it. You saw eyeless sockets and you saw what part of your father was sewn unto your mothers forehead before you shot her.

That night while the rest of they boys had their share, you went to your spot on the cold hard cement floor and you closed your eyes. The boy they called Ishmael came to get you. He shook you but you pretended to be asleep. He told you that they were almost done and you should come and have a "go." You didn't listen to him. You heard him but you weren't listening to Ishmael. You were listening to the voice of Cash Tee as he told you to shoot. You were listening to the resounding pop-pop-pop of the semi-automatic rifle that they shoved in your hands. You were listening to the plop sounds the red blood made when it splattered all over the yellow wall. You fell asleep to the sounds of howling dogs and the yells of boys high on the cocaine they rubbed into their cuts.

The next day was the day you did what would make your hand touch the stump.

Sometimes, the sound of their voices woke you up. Sometimes it was the stinging way the whip would bite into your back with malice that woke you up. You never had time to examine where the leather had bitten into your flesh. You simply assembled and did whatever you were told.

When they assembled you, Cash Tee announced that there would be meat that night. The boys cheered, the rebels smiled and you watched the dark face of Cash Tee and wondered what it would be like to pump bullets into his one good eye. You went to the well afterwards and took a soapless bath in the open room where the boys bathed. You went to the pit and you took a bowl of hot sugarless pap. You took a walk around the camp and realized that the yellow wall was only yellow at the top and the right edge. The wall was now bullet-ridged and spattered with

chunks of brain matter and blood. You didn't gag at the smell of the of the wall because you had smelled worse. The dark place they put you in when you first came here smelled worse. The way the festering flesh of unwashed bodies smelled when they mutilated themselves and rubbed powder on it smelled worse.

You ran to join the others when you heard them calling. You listened to Cash Tee's deep voice as he commended the boys and the rebels for their "hard work" yesterday. You were almost shocked when Cash Tee said that the girls were still alive so they would have to help them get to where the Insurgent Kabbah wanted all men to be. They brought the girls out and you almost couldn't discern if the mangled crawling shapes were human beings or animals. The shapes of the girls were dragged out on chains by two of the rebels and you marveled at how someone could survive that much brutality. You almost collapsed when you saw them fully. Their faces reminded you of blood-stained yellow walls, the metallic rusty smell of fresh blood and the gagging stink of already festering pus. The girls had bites all over their bodies; you couldn't tell if the dogs or the boys or even the rebels had bitten them. Their eye sockets were full of blood and one of them had an eye dangling. You looked around to check the faces of anyone to see if they had an ounce of compassion for the girls. But the boys were cheering, the rebels were smiling and you heard one of them ask if he wanted the boys to have another "go" at the girls. You heard Chopper reply that only animals could have them now and even that was immoral. You almost laughed at the irony of Chopper who cut hands of crying teenagers and ate them, Chopper who would be the first to disrobe a girl and fondle her, Chopper who had so many cuts on his own body that he didn't bother to line the cocaine carefully into them could know what was really moral or not. You heard the boys cheer louder when Cash Tee produced the semi-automatic rifle, the same one he had given to you when you stood before the yellow wall. You stared at the rusty iron on the base of the gun till you felt yourself being pushed from all sides and "Ghost" being chanted. You found yourself staring into Cash Tee's good eye and Chopper's hand patting you vigorously on your back. You watched as Cash Tee handed the rickety gun over to you and you watched as your scarred hands stretched forward to accept them like an athlete who had finally won a medal. You felt your legs follow Cash Tee to the yellow wall where the girls had been stationed and you heard him say, "Our Brother Ghost has been chosen to

help send these young women to where they will await the arrival of the Insurgent Kabbah and his followers.”

You didn't understand what was going on till he gestured to the wall and said “Aim well.” And so you looked at the shivering naked mutilated girls. The one with the dangling bloody eyeball and bite marks all over her breasts and the one whose sockets were filled with whitish substance and blood and you pulled the trigger and didn't stop till they hit they ground. The thud sound of their bodies hitting the dusty ground was exactly the same your parents made when their son set them free. The yells from the rebels and the boys louder than the yells Cash Tee and Chopper gave when you shot your parents.

So you didn't drop the gun. You watched as Cash Tee was cheering and the boys clapping and you pointed the gun and filled his good eye with metal pellets. He didn't drop like the girls or like your parents or like the soldiers you had shot before. Time stood still as he stood there and his arm twitched and you felt your face smile when you could see what was behind him through the new hole where his eye had been. You were dragged back to reality when you heard Chopper screaming and charging towards you. You knew he was too close to shoot his head so just before he got to you, you lowered the gun and blew out his bowels before turning the gun on the raging crowd. You didn't stop till you felt a painful blow at the back of your head and the darkness began to take you away before your hand left the trigger, before you even fell to the ground with your own slight thud.

You were very surprised when you woke up. The first reason was because you woke up at all. The second reason was because the only pain you felt was a hard headache at the right side of your head. The third was because you thought they had removed your eyeballs when you awoke but then you realized that you still had eyes but they had thrown you in the dark place. You were in there for a very long time; your tongue was a desert and you drank your own piss but then you regretted it because it only made you thirstier. Rats came and nibbled at your toes but you couldn't chase them away because you weren't strong enough to stand anymore. Your nose stopped working after what seemed like forever because you had shit yourself several times and you couldn't even find the strength to move from the shit. You knew you were going to die there so you prayed to whoever was

listening that your parents would understand why you did it when you got to the other side.

But you didn't die in the dark place.

They came for you and they gagged at the stench and dumped you in a tub of water. You swallowed as much as you could even though it was the same water that was washing your shit-stained body away. The ones who came for you were boys with faces so hard you could have sharpened a knife on them. They told you that you killed Cash Tee instantly and that Chopper died from his wounds after five days, yesterday. They told you thirteen boys and five rebels including Ishmael had died from gunshot wounds and several were still wounded. They told you what was to happen to you and you wished that the rats in the dark place had skewered your throat instead.

They dragged you to where the crowd of rebels and boys were waiting by the stump. You were pushed to join the line of soldiers that stood before the stump. You looked up and saw that a new leader had emerged from the rebels, one that was nick-named Tiger because of the tribal stripes that ran over his face. You saw a new cutter had also emerged, one you knew that had a face so pure but a mind as vile as the old cutter, the rebel they called Mercy. You watched as Mercy chopped arms and legs off soldiers and you felt yourself getting closer and closer to the stump.

You knew what the boys had told you was true. They wouldn't kill you instantly. They would kill you for a long period of time, slowly cutting pieces of you away, letting you heal and feeding you the charred pieces of your own flesh so you could grow stronger for them to cut you again. When all the soldiers were cut and all that was left was you, the boys cheered, "Mercenary, Mercenary" and clapped as Mercy took your right hand and laid it over the wet stump.

You thought it over and over in your head and you decided what you had to do. You didn't struggle like the other soldiers did because you were too weak and so no one held your body in place. When you saw the sunlight catch the bloody edge of the machete that Mercy raised up you closed your eyes and brought your head

to where your arm was supposed to be as the heavy cutlass came down on the stump.

But Mercy only used enough strength to cut an arm off and not nearly enough to chop a head off. You felt the cold wet metal cut into your neck and your head burst into a world of unimaginable pain. You felt as Mercy pulled and pulled on the machete that was stuck in the confines of the bones in your neck and your screams of pain drowned in the blood that was gushing through your mouth.

You were still drowning in pain when you heard screaming and shooting; you felt a fury of running as the boys and the RUF rebels ran away from the stump to fight off the soldiers invading the camp and left the machete in your neck and your neck on the stump.

The life drained from you for a long time while the shooting was still going on. You died slowly and painfully as the Nigerian soldiers shot and killed everyone that held up arms against them at the RUF rebel camp with the mottled yellow wall.

Copyright 2016 by Timi Odueso

SECOND PLACE

Liam Hogan is a London-based writer and host of the award winning monthly literary event, Liars' League. Winner of Sci-Fest LA's Roswell Award 2016 and Quantum Shorts 2015, he's had work published in *DailyScienceFiction*, *Sci-Phi Journal*, and over a dozen anthologies.

Find out more at: <http://happyendingnotguaranteed.blogspot.co.uk/>.

Bring Rope

By Liam Hogan

> *bring rope*

I texted back a single question mark, but there was no reply.

*

Julia lived in a converted warehouse out Docklands way. The artists weren't supposed to live in their studios, but, London rents being London rents and artists being artists, most of them had a *chaise longue*, a pull-out sofa, or some other suitably bohemian arrangement. Julia and I, we had an on-off thing, so much so that I wondered if I should have put a winky grin after the question mark, but most likely one of her fellow artists needed some chunky piece of salvage lifted, or a completed "artwork" lowered.

Chances were I'd not see the rope again and I weighed this against any possible return of favor from Julia. Then I remembered I had a climbing rope I didn't exactly trust anymore, so I chucked that one in my rucksack.

I was expecting Julia to buzz me in at the gate, but instead the crackly intercom voice told me: "I'll come down."

I twiddled my thumbs for a couple of long minutes, listening to the distorted sound of someone's radio cranked up to maximum volume, before she appeared and let me through. "Jeez Jules!" I said, "You been working lates?"

She looked haggard, her hair a mess and her face thinner than I remembered, eyes darker. She took one step forward and buried herself in my hug before breaking off and pointing at my bag.

"Got the rope?" she asked. I nodded and she chewed her lip. "Come up," she said, "Got something to show you."

All of which under other circumstances might have been highly promising, but we turned off before we reached her floor and entered darkened corridors I'd not been down before. The old tobacco warehouse had been carved up into odd shaped rooms, plywood passageways hacked between them any which way. But these corridors were more permanent and less lived in: no artwork adorned the walls, no lights shone behind the scant few doors, old newspapers and last autumn's leaves disintegrated quietly in the corners.

Julia yanked on a metal door, the hinges screamed in protest, and everything I'd imagined I might be about to see, disappeared.

"What the..."

The words dried up and I just stood and stared.

We were in an unconverted part of the warehouse. Wide and tall, it went all the way to the corrugated roof, three floors up. In the middle of this vast open space hung a cloud: a black, featureless, utterly impossible, cloud. Beneath it a gabble of the community's artist-types hung wearily onto ropes that arced upwards and vanished into the inky nothingness.

Julia threaded her way between them to where a length of coarse rope lay untidily on the concrete floor. She picked up one end and threw it towards the cloud. At

first I thought she'd missed—it was a clumsy, lazy throw—but the cloud snapped up the offering and pulled the rope taut with Julia gripping the other end.

“Now you,” she said.

I stared at her. Stared at the mind-warping cloud, at the other artists. Stared and slowly shook my head.

“Thomas!” she called out, breaking the spell. I dropped my bag and hauled out the climbing rope, untying the simple knot at its heart and pulling a section free. Holding on to it with my left hand I threw the coiled loops as hard as I could with my right and watched as it was taken up just as eagerly as Julia's was. I tested the rope—the pull wasn't a strong one, enough to lift my arm if I let it, but not enough to make me strain.

I looked around once again at the others and then at Julia, whose eyes were now half closed. There were a dozen people in the room, artists who could and would chew the fat about anything, any time of the day, and who were only normally this silent and still when they were stoned out of their artsy little minds.

“Julia!” I hissed. She turned slowly towards me. “What are we *doing* here?”

She blinked, looked up towards the hovering darkness, gestured with her chin. “Holding it down,” she said.

I thought about that for a while. I'm not sure how long. Time had a weird way of slipping by when you looked into the heart of that cloud.

“Why don't we just tie off the ropes?” I suggested.

She gave me a small, wry grin. “Try it.”

I eased over to the wall where there was a metal loop embedded in the brickwork. A quick figure of eight later I turned back to the watching Julia, letting go of the rope. As I did so it slackened and the end suspended in the cloud dropped back to Earth, bouncing off the shoulder of one of the artists who shuffled sleepily away from it.

“You need to keep hold of it,” Julia said. “Skin on rope. Otherwise... it does that.”

I untied the knot and made ready to send the loose end back up into the cloud.

“What if I don’t?” I said, “What if you all... let go?”

She shrugged. “Have you looked into it? Deep into it?”

I nodded.

“How does it make you feel?”

I looked again. Its center was a total absence of light or form, but the peripheries... the peripheries held swirling shapes that eluded description, tendrils of inky blackness that vanished as soon as I turned my attention on them, that gave rise to strange, dark, magical thoughts. I couldn’t tell you what these thoughts contained; they were as ethereal as the half-glimpsed forms. They held an odd attraction though, like the gentle pull on my arms, the pull that kept the rope tight, the rope I couldn’t even remember having thrown again.

I turned to try and explain these vague thoughts to Julia and was surprised to see more people had arrived; our numbers had doubled. Some were in painter’s smocks, others in dressing gowns, one in just his boxers, all linked to the cloud by whatever ropes they had managed to scrounge up.

“Julia,” I said, and her head reluctantly lifted once again from its slumped position. “Where did this... *thing*... come from?”

It must have been a full minute before she jerked her shoulders and broke her glazed eyes from mine. “I think Stefan made it.”

I looked to where she’d gestured. Most of the artists were in a rough circle fanning out around the fringes of the cloud, around the edges of the room, but Stefan stood alone directly beneath it. Though “stood” wasn’t quite right: the toes of his shoes dragged across the concrete, his arms spread wide as he hung from the pair of ropes clenched in his outstretched hands. I blinked. It looked like he was being crucified.

Maybe it was that. Maybe it was the unnatural stillness of all those people not talking, or eating, or drinking, or even smoking. Maybe it was because I didn't see the same thing they did when I stared into the cloud, my eyes closed to the artistic inspiration it offered them.

Whatever it was, I wanted out: a sudden, desperate urge to be elsewhere.

I felt Julia's eyes watching me and I looked back at her, feeling small, feeling guilty. "I'll, um, call a friend to come help, shall I?"

She nodded, just once. Didn't smile. Didn't say anything. But she knew. I forced my hand to let go and watched the snake of the rope fall between the artists. No one stirred. I turned, leaving my bag, leaving the rope, aware of the dark void at my back. As I walked out I raised my mobile to my ear, though I hadn't called anyone, though there wasn't anyone I could possibly call.

Outside a surreal dawn was breaking, the clouds lit pink, the whirr of an electric milk van and a few forlorn birds the only signs of life. With a shaking hand I reached for a smoke, but my bag was upstairs, with Julia, with the blackness. I felt drained, exhausted. The pit of my stomach was a hollow I was too weary to think about filling, but I couldn't ignore my thirst, nor the sudden urgent need for a toilet.

I thought of going back into the studios, up to Julia's room—I knew where she kept the spare key. I thought of going back into that cavernous space with its empty black heart and dragging Julia out of there. Dragging everybody out of there.

But I did none of those things. I ducked behind a dumpster to relieve myself and then got the train to the heart of the city, mingling with the early-morning commuters, doing my best to blink away the darkness lingering behind my eyelids, the darkness I could see wherever I looked.

*

I left a few messages for Julia. Tried to call her once or twice, but got no reply. Didn't try again. I guess I was wary of what she'd think of me for having bailed. It wasn't my fault. She must have realized that I didn't have an artistic bone in my

body, must have known that I always listened carefully to what other people said before voicing any opinions on the splattered mess of their meaningless paintings, their tatty sculptures or, worst of all, the reclaimed junk that made up their “installations.” She must have known that even my interest in her own dismal daubs was entirely feigned, and why.

It was almost a week before I summoned up the nerve to reclaim my climbing bag. The rope I didn’t care about, but the rucksack was nearly new and it had a couple of carabiners and a belaying loop that I could ill afford to lose.

The courtyard was quiet, nobody around. Nobody around at all. I pressed the buzzer but there was no buzz, no answer, and when I pushed the gate it opened freely, the magnetic lock inactive, the power out. The stairwell was dark, the timer switch for the lights did nothing but slowly, mechanically, wind down. Which was kind of creepy though it wasn’t so dark you couldn’t see. Wasn’t as dark as that cloud. Nothing was.

It took me a while to find my way back to that gaping space. I pushed the protesting door half open, my heart pounding, and squeezed through, dreading what I was about to see.

There was nothing. No cloud, no people, no climbing bag, and no ropes. No dust or cobwebs or leaves either. It looked like the place had been swept spotlessly clean. I crossed to the center of the room, staring up to the skylit roof, peering at the walls, looking for any sign of anything at all.

Two floors up I let myself into Julia’s workshop. It was cold and lifeless somehow, even though it was still full of her artwork, her clothes, her empty bottles of wine. I ran a finger over the hardened acrylic on a paintbrush, glanced into a coffee cup whose dregs had long since dried and cracked. Up the ladder in the attic space where she had her mattress I picked up a T-shirt of mine, left behind on a previous visit, or maybe she’d borrowed it after an impromptu stopover at my place. It felt damp and musty and I let it drop where I’d found it.

*

The story broke the day after: “Mysterious Disappearances at Artist Studios, 12 missing.” Twelve pictures on the double page spread, none of whom were Julia.

I kept quiet. A few of the missing turned up in the weeks afterwards, none of *them* had been at the studios for a while. And a lot more names were added, Julia’s included, but who knows what the real tally is?

As far as I know, I’m the only person who saw the cloud and hasn’t vanished off to whatever hell they all went to. There’s no one to talk to about it, no one to ask if they see the same black abyss when they close their eyes at night, if they feel their soul slipping into its gaping maw as they try desperately to sleep, if they wake with the same numbing sense of loss, the same emptiness reflected back in the bathroom mirror.

Except for Stefan, perhaps.

I saw his photo in someone else’s *Evening Standard*, assumed he was a latecomer to the roll call of the missing. But it wasn’t his disappearance that got him into the papers, it was his triumphant emergence on the premier stage of art. Stefan has been commissioned to fill the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern.

The art world is in shock: the biggest, most exclusive space in London, given to a nobody. No track record, no Turner prize, no previous exhibitions of any note.

A fraud or a PR stunt is suspected, rumour rife that “Stefan Wilkowitz” is Banksy’s real name, or perhaps a pseudonym adopted for this singular work.

People gather to see the huge screens behind which he labors, even though the piece isn’t due to open for another week. The dearth of information just adds to the hype, just adds to the building excitement.

Really, there’s only one thing anyone knows about him, or his art. It’s the name of his installation and his instruction to all who eagerly await its opening. It’s on the personalized invitation to the exclusive preview that dropped, unexpectedly, through my letter box this morning. And it’s emblazoned across the glass-top of the Tate Modern for all to see, in 14 foot high, dark-as-the-night letters.

“Bring Rope,” it says.

Copyright 2016 by Liam Hogan

THIRD PLACE

Laura Ruth Loomis is a social worker in the San Francisco area. Her fiction chapbook, *Lost in Translation*, will be coming out in November from Wordrunner Press. It contains stories previously published in *On the Premises*, *Flashquake*, *Alalit*, and *Many Mountains Moving*, as well as new stories.

Repentance

by Laura Ruth Loomis

When prayer became impossible, Irene silently repeated the things she was sure of. If she concentrated on her affirmations, she could remove herself from this place, getting through the hours from morning lessons to Repentance to evening prayers.

This will end. Someday we'll get to say what we really think. We'll pray the way we want to pray, only when our hearts are moved. And I'll choose not to pray at all, just because I can, and that will be the holiest of all choices.

Repentance was the worst. During mandatory prayers, she could just repeat whatever they said and pretend she was somewhere else. Think of it as a chant, a part in a play, back when plays were permitted. But Repentance required a detailed confession, not to a shadowy priest behind a wall, as a now-forbidden sect had once done, but to a room full of fellow sinners and the Spiritual Guide.

Today's Spiritual Guide was Brother Ezra, a scrawny lizard of a man who was impossible to please. "Let us think on our sins," he said, though the Spiritual Guide never confessed to any, "and humbly ask the Father's forgiveness."

Hands shot up. There were always a few people eager to be first. She suspected that some of them were planted. “My name is Margaret,” one woman began, “but I used to call myself Pomona, after a heathen goddess. I was a witch! I used to tell the future with a Ouija board and tarot cards, and I even wrote an astrology column for the local paper.” The rest of the participants gasped and muttered as if they’d never heard such a thing before. “But now I know that only God can tell the future, and it was a sin to try to usurp God’s place.”

“An abomination,” Brother Ezra said. “If you did that today, the penalty would be grave. Think on it further. Who else?”

“My name is Pedro. I was a homosexual. I used to have sex with men, total strangers, sometimes two or three of them a night. Once, five in one night.” Pedro’s tongue touched his lips. “There was just nothing I liked better than to grab a hot guy, get down on my knees, and—”

“But that was very wrong, wasn’t it?” Brother Ezra demanded.

“Oh yes. It was very wrong for me to love the feel of a man’s naked body next to mine,” Pedro said with utter sincerity. The only hint of rebellion was a glint of teeth in Pedro’s cloying smile.

“Guard, remove him,” Brother Ezra commanded, and Pedro was dragged from the room. Pedro cried out in protest, but his voice was drowned by the clamor of others volunteering to confess.

The next time she saw Pedro in Repentance was two weeks later. He told the same story, but without the insouciant tone. “I hope that God will forgive me for my former perversions,” he said, to murmurs of approval all around him.

“Very good,” said the Spiritual Guide. Today it was Brother Martin, a fat white-haired bulb who seemed less like a holy man than a politician who’d figured out which side was the winning one. Others were offering to share, but Brother Martin began calling on the people who didn’t volunteer. They offered up their sins: a drug addict, a Mormon, a woman who’d used birth control pills. If Irene was very lucky, they’d run out of time before evening prayers.

Brother Martin looked right at her. “Sister Irene?”

This will end, and I will once again live in a world where people know that prayer happens in the heart. Words are not prayer. Words are just words.

She swallowed, and said the lines she’d rehearsed in her head. “I was a minister in the Unitarian Church for twenty years.” She was supposed to add something about how women shouldn’t be ministers, but she couldn’t quite choke the words out. “I used to join in prayer with people of other faiths: Congregationalists, Buddhists, even Jews. Now I know there is only one God.”

Humiliation warmed her face, though technically nothing she’d said was false. She believed in one God, just not the one to whom she was legally required to pledge allegiance.

“And one faith,” Brother Martin prodded.

“And we are allowed only one faith.” She silently prayed forgiveness for one more passive lie.

Martin wouldn’t let it go. “There is only one faith.” The room went completely quiet as he waited for her to repeat it back to him.

“For God’s sake, Martin,” she said, dropping the ridiculous honorific, “you don’t believe a word of this. If they told you to swear there were ten Gods, you would do it. Twenty Gods. Six and a half. None. It’s all the same to you.”

Martin’s voice had the pleasant tone of a teacher dealing with a stubborn child. “I believe you need a private Repentance session, Sister Irene.”

He signaled to two of the guards, and they took her by the arms and dragged her backwards from the room. “I can walk,” she said, but they didn’t stop.

They deposited her in a small dark cell with a bench built into one wall. She lay on her back and concentrated on slowing her breathing.

This will end. We’ll be free, and if I want to say a prayer that’s nothing but curse words, I’ll say it right out loud.

She was hungry by the time Brother Martin arrived with the guards. He turned a switch outside the room, and a light came on. Without a word, the guards pulled her to her feet, and Martin planted his fat body on the bench.

“I can’t have you disrupting Repentance,” he began warmly. “People’s souls are at stake.”

“People’s souls are affected by whether they repeat whatever you tell them to say? That’s not prayer, it’s just noise. If I can tell the difference, do you really think God can’t?”

“There is one God and one faith, and He must be worshiped in the right way.”

“There are as many faiths as there are people, and what humans know about God would not fill a teacup. For all you and I know, God may want us to cover ourselves in molasses and make love to trees.” It felt good to finally say what she was thinking, even if it was only to Brother Martin.

“I am losing my patience, child.”

“Don’t ‘child’ me. We’re both old enough to remember what happens to people who try to remake the world in their own image.” She thought she saw a flicker at the corner of his smirk. “You know, Martin, I don’t think you’re really a bad person. Before the Purge, you probably had a nice life, a home, a job, a couple of vacations every year. You didn’t want to give that up. So you sacrificed other things, like freedom, honesty, and prayers with any actual meaning. Whatever keeps you in your comfortable little corner of the world. How long before the next Purge, Martin?”

Brother Martin got up, unhurried. “We are not going to argue about this. At your next Repentance session, you will make a full and proper confession.” The guards held tight as he moved closer, and for a moment she thought he was going to beat her. A martyr for Unitarianism; that would be absurd. He pressed his forehead against hers. “And it’s ‘Brother’ Martin.” He took the guards and left, killing the light behind him.

She waited in the suffocating dark, but they didn't come back. After a couple of hours—it was hard to guess at the passage of time—she felt along the floor to see if there was a hole, or something that would pass for a toilet. She hadn't seen one earlier when the light was on. She pounded on the door. "Hey! Bathroom break!" She got no response. "Hey! I know you can hear me! You don't want me to do it in here, do you?"

This will end.

She held out as long as humanly possible. And then a little longer. Finally there was no alternative except to use a corner of the room. Afterward she groped her way back, her eyes stinging with the stench and humiliation.

She drifted off to sleep, but was jarred awake by a pounding noise outside her room. It sounded like a jackhammer. The racket went on, rising and falling unevenly, for several minutes. Finally it stopped, then resumed a minute later. When it stopped for good, the echo continued to throb in her ears.

Days passed, punctuated by brief slivers of light when food was shoved through a slot in the wall. The meals seemed far apart, and she stayed hungry most of the time. The pounding resumed at irregular times, wrenching her from sleep over and over again. Exhaustion slowly pinned her down.

This will end. And when it does, I will never pray again, just to piss them off, and if I were God I wouldn't have a problem with that.

She had almost reached the point where she could sleep through the pounding, incorporating it into a feverish dream. Then the noise changed, a whirring like the whine of a saw. She fell back into consciousness, eyes still shut.

Irene rolled from the bench and crawled to the door. She reared up and beat her fists against the metal, screaming. "This will end! This will end! This will end!"

She collapsed back on herself, sobbing, hungry and exhausted and blind. "End this!"

The black silence pressed her from every side. When her bladder began to ache again, she didn't go to the corner or even pull up her skirt; just sat huddled as the wet spot on her clothes turned from warm to cold.

“There is one God!” she shouted. “And one faith! And one right way to pray! And one everything!” She pressed her cheek flat against the door. “Just tell me what to say!”

The door opened and Brother Martin knelt to embrace her.

“End this,” she whispered. It was the last honest prayer she ever spoke.

Copyright 2016 by Laura Ruth Loomis

HONORABLE MENTION

Annie Raab is a writer living in Kansas City, Missouri. Her work has been published in *alice blue review*, *Kawsmouth*, *The Bookends Review*, *Axolotl*, *KC Studio*, and others. She holds a BFA from The Kansas City Art Institute and writes local art criticism.

The Frayed Edge

by Annie Raab

Memory is like a puzzle. You have to slide all the pieces in the right slots. Sometimes you don't know what image you're after, or you create a hybrid of your memory and someone else's. At my age, I am afraid my memories have been altered. I remember some things from my youth, like my father needing a cane after the war. I don't remember when he left for the war, but I remember his return. Even those memories are faded. My father's old cane has taken on the qualities of the standing lamp in my living room. The knotty, stiff cane he used to support himself—and occasionally whack us with—has begun to straighten out and gloss over as the number of times I have seen my lamp lapse the number of times I have seen his cane, or felt it on my back. Most of my early memories are like that, as if there isn't enough room in my mind for new stuff and the old stuff gets pushed aside.

Where is that cane? Did I leave the lamp on downstairs? I can't go to sleep now thinking I left the light on.

I grip the rail and begin the slow, gentle wind down to the first floor. You learn to do things different when you get as old as I am. Everything slows down. Time is the only thing that moves faster. As the staircase turns to face the living room, a

soft yellow light travels around the corner. The glow of the bulb appears as I approach the tight end of the curve. I lift my other hand for balance against the wall, expecting to feel the heat of the light. Where my hand meets the wall, it meets a dark spot that looks like a shadow until I get up close. The shadowy stroke on the old paint was mine, my wife's, and our children's handprints all stirred together by time. I think about Richard when he was a little boy placing his hands on the wall, covered in grime. I think about my wife coming in from the garden, walking up the stairs with her gloves on, absently stroking the wall's inner curve. I stop and trace the outline of the dark blemish. It moves like a hand would. First lying flat on impact, then easing up to a brush of fingertips as the body travels forward. Where the color starts, it is dense and thick, and where the hand begins to lift the color pales until—where the hand reaches the tip of contact—it is hardly there at all. I back up a few steps and try to recreate the effortless motions of all our hands over many years. It's difficult because I am concentrating on the mark, and strenuous to back up on the steps without squeezing the rail as hard as I can. If I can step backwards up these stairs, I can reverse time itself. Even strangers, or distant family members probably used this spot on the wall to balance as the steps curved. It was uniting all of us more than a lifetime of words failing to connect over holiday dinners. I think of the times Rose and I walked down the stairs together, and how hard I felt her loss when she died. *Why hadn't we ever talked about the smudge on the wall?* I reach the first floor thinking about dinner. I try to put the pieces of the puzzle together. *I must have come downstairs to make something to eat.*

Richard comes over in the morning and wakes me up from the couch.

“Dad, did you sleep down here?” His dark hair is halfway dry and stuck together in small, wet ropes. I look around the living room. The lamp is on and there is a sandwich on a paper napkin on the side table. “Dad, you shouldn't sleep on the couch. It's not good for your back.” Richard picks up the sandwich and turns it over. The bread flops to expose a slice of peppered turkey. He leaves the room and I pull myself up to a sitting position. *What was so important about last night? How did I end up on the couch?* Richard runs the sink in the kitchen. Pieces of sunlight sparkle through the vertical blinds of the front window. I feel the puzzle briefly come together, then fall apart again. Richard returns and helps me to my feet. His

face is dotted with small hairs on his chin and cheeks, each one of them concerned for my health. “Do you want me to help you back to bed?”

“No, I’m awake now. I have to let Geggy outside.” Richard gives me a curt nod and opens the back door. I don’t look at him when I step outside. Richard treats me like a child sometimes, but he is still the child to me. Geggy is already waiting at the window and seems disappointed to see me instead of his owners, who return tomorrow. My grandkids called the dog Geggy before they could say “Gregory”, just like I was Papa, and my wife, Nanie. In my stern, younger days, I would never have tolerated this baby talk, but grandkids soften you in ways your children only prepared you for. Geggy circles around the yard until he pees and we go inside to eat. I scoop his kibble in the bowl, making sure to close the lid on the food tight so it wouldn’t get stale or covered in ants. Richard is picking up the debris that blew onto my driveway during the night and I stay at the neighbors window for a moment to watch him. Richard looks like I used to, only slightly thinner. When he dips towards the driveway to remove a piece of trash that landed there in the night, I feel his movements in my body, in my hips or shoulders, in the puzzles of my muscles and bones. He looks weak underneath spindly muscles and the small pot belly forming under his shirt. At that age, I was already stronger than my own father. I have the cane to thank for that. Geggy chomped down his food. I guess I stayed at the window or watched the dog eat for too long because Richard comes in to get me. We leave the house together and stand outside, surveying the morning.

“Dad, do you need me to take you anywhere today? I can go into work a little later.” I think about it for a moment, but nothing important comes to mind. Either something important is on my mind, or nothing is on my mind. It’s frustrating a little, but I guess if you can hardly remember the important things, it doesn’t really bother you.

“I can’t think of anything. You go to work. I’m going to stay home.” He pats me on the back and I stand up as straight as I can, which is still sort of stooped. I feel small beside the span of his long shoulders.

“Ok. Call me if you need anything. I can send Julia over too. She’ll bring the kids if you want.”

“Yes. It would be nice to see the kids.”

I must have said something about the kids to Richard because while I was picking up the sticks from my lawn, Julia’s red station wagon pulls up the driveway. The back doors open and two kids sprint onto the lawn. They’re so small. Richard had his kids too late in life.

“Grandpa!” They shriek and wrap around my waist. Handfuls of sticks keep me from hugging them back. Julia is out of the car with her bug-eye sunglasses on and her hair in a ponytail. She looks like she needs another cup of coffee. The kids break free and run into the garage to get the sidewalk chalk, Big Wheels, and other toys I will probably have to pick up later. Geggy stares out the window when they empty the entire canister of chartreuse rubber tennis balls onto the cement and start to kick them around. I think he will go crazy from the sight. I put the sticks in the waste bin and Julia gives me a warm hug.

“How are you, grandpa?” she says and I look at my dual reflection in her sunglasses. I appear to be facing slightly away from her in both lenses. “Richard said you had quite the night.” Her smile is one I have seen before, when my mother would visit her father in his later years, when he could hardly remember her name. I hate it when they talk to me that way. I see the two sides of my face smile gently in her sunglasses. The man in her eyes is feeble, a threadbare blanket with stains hidden in the corners. A man that doesn’t know why he entered a room, or why he is thinking about her hands on his shoulders like they are dirty, and why he feels an odd sense of comfort at the thought. I hope I’m not the man in those glasses, with two sides of a face and a mind that won’t meet in the middle. “Do you have everything to make grilled cheese?” Julia turns away so I can see myself in only one dark lens. This time I am fatter in the protruding curve.

“I think so.” We leave the kids to tear around the backyard until they get hungry and want to watch a movie. *How long until they’re old enough to mow my lawn?*

My body slowly erases the house. I am afraid when I die, I will have taken more and left less. On my toothbrush, the bristles stick out. The couch is faded around the arms and seats. The doorknobs are polished and small. *What has my body contributed?* Something starts to form in my mind. A dark smudge appears but

everything goes white when I try too hard to remember. Something I have possibly created, a part of me I can leave behind so I won't be forgotten. The thought doesn't come to me anymore.

"What?" Julia says as she presses the first grilled cheese sandwich down onto the skillet. It sizzles with the warmth of bread and oil.

"I didn't say anything," I say.

"You did. You said something but I didn't hear you." Her sunglasses are pushed up onto her head and the hairs that are caught behind the stems are spread out like the yellow feathers of a royal penguin. Perhaps I did say something, but I certainly don't remember.

"It wasn't important." I settle for this compromise, just in case. Julia flips the sandwich over and turns down the heat. I open the morning paper and rub the newsprint between my fingers absently. A sentiment is aroused in me when the ink rubs off onto my thumb, but I have no idea why. It occurs to me I might smell a bit foul today. Julia is too nice to say anything about it, but I haven't been upstairs today so I must not have bathed. Julia has her back turned away so I bend my chin down and sniff. Not too bad, probably not noticeable to anyone else. I swipe a few potpourri from the bowl on the table and put some in my pockets just in case.

"Grandpa, are you ready for Richard to come over on Saturday? You remember we're going to touch up the paint in the living room." Julia sets a sandwich down in front of me. This sounds familiar, but I can't remember when we talked about it.

"Of course. I'll go out for the supplies tomorrow." My sandwich looks good. I wish I could smell a little better.

"You don't have to worry about all that. Richard found the same color paint and already has what you need, OK? You and I will go out to lunch and take the kids to the park. They should have more time with their grandpa." Her kindness still amazes me. For having kids so late, she looks great too. Richard got lucky. Julia is at the door, calling the kids inside for lunch. They are bouncing tennis balls at Geggy's face in the window and catching them with two of my old baseball hats they found in the garage. Geggy looks ready to leap out of his skin.

*

My Rose had trouble with words sometimes. After fifty-three years together, she never felt that she had said exactly what she wanted me to hear. I heard her say lots of things anyone not used to living with her would find strange or inauthentic. She told me once, as if fighting through a bramble of language seeking to pull out a rare fruit: “I wish you could dip your hand inside my heart, and when you drew out you would be covered in something thick and dark, like tar. That’s how I love you.” She struggled under her love and against her lack of words, fighting so hard to tell me a thing any man would find so much simpler. I could say “I love you,” and know exactly what I meant, and she knew too. But when she was facing me in bed, or at the table, or on the porch over a glass of Scotch, she got a look about her and I could see it was painful. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” I’d say, hoping she found those perfect words to use, the ones that would relieve her anguish. “Tell me, please.” She swirled her glass and seemed about to speak, but more often, she just squeezed my hand and looked in my eyes all the way through me until I squeezed back. This was the way she let me know.

She said something a year before she passed away, when the puzzle pieces of her own memory were dulling fast at the edges and slipping off the picture. She said something after breakfast while sitting at the table. I was headed into the living room to collect stray water glasses when she spoke. And I finally understood what she had always been trying to say. I felt as if the floor burned away and I dropped a flight in our house, down to the basement where the kids used to play and I kept a room of old hats. I looked back at her, slumped forward at the table over small splatters of syrup getting hard and sticky. Her favorite coffee mug spotted with dribbled liquid going dark at the edges. My once most graceful, composed companion was slipping away from me into the blurred dark of old age. Yet, she finally found the language to—not tell—but to show me with her words the exact way she had felt for me when we were young, and now old, and soon will be gone. Those words are still sharp in my memory, and I plan to die with them. I can never do justice to what she said to me, so I will never try.

*

After we eat, the kids ask to put on a movie. They speed ahead of me while I extract myself from the chair. They squabble while I make my way into the living room.

“I want to watch my birthday tape but Lindsay won’t let me!”

“I want to watch my birthday tape but Matthew won’t let me!”

“Well,” I start with my hands on my hips. They stare up at me, waiting for a verdict. “How about we watch *America’s* birthday?” They are puzzled. I rifle around the chest and pull out the Fourth of July party we threw in our backyard when the grandkids were toddlers. They lay on the floor and the tape starts a few minutes in. My son grins and waves a spatula at the camera through a light cloud of rising smoke. Behind him, my neighbors hold Gregory the puppy out for the grandkids to pet. Richard says something in French and leans in to kiss the camera lens. Julia giggles and swings the camera around to my wife and I. I lift a hand and Rose waves her little American flag. We both drink Pabst on this special occasion. Next we are watching the grandkids take turns holding the puppy, and putting him down, and picking him up and wobbling off with him. As the tape plays, I search for signs of my wife. Signs of her are muted in the background. The pink and red mums are alive on the side of the garage. The hanging birdfeeder is full and the seeds that have fallen off sprout underneath. Things I haven’t seen in years are suddenly young and alive.

Matthew rolls onto his side and looks back at me. “What’s *America’s* birthday?” he asks.

“July fourth. That’s why we celebrate it.” I can see the understanding eclipse his moon face. He turns back and we watch until the tape is over. Julia comes in and announces it’s time to go home. The kids jump up and give me another hug.

“Bye, grandpa!” they shout and I tell them there’s no need to shout. “Bye, grandpa,” they whisper and tiptoe out to the car. Julia hugs me too.

“Richard and I will see you on Saturday. Let us know if you need anything.” She kisses me on the cheek. In her bug-eye sunglasses, I look a little confused. Her face contorts. “You didn’t forget we’re painting this weekend, did you?”

The man in the dark lens hunches a little. “I’m not crazy.”

“Grandpa,” she says. She rubs my shoulders in long, tender strokes. “That’s not what it’s called anymore.”

It’s Saturday, not the day Richard usually comes over to see me. I try not to look surprised when he unloads the painting gear from his truck. If I look surprised, he will know I forgot about his plans to paint the living room, so I greet him at the top of the driveway.

“Dad, Julia will be here soon to take you out to lunch and to whatever else you want today. It shouldn’t take long to paint the room, but I can’t do it with you here.” He doesn’t mince words with me anymore, but he speaks in an even tone. He instructs me to move the couch pillows and cushions into the kitchen where they won’t get paint on them. He pulls the couch out to the center of the room. The change reveals lost artifacts that fell under the sofa long ago, but nothing of value. There is a receipt with the words and numbers faded out, a dead battery, and a bit of plastic that broke off something long gone. I bend down to pick them up. Dry sprinkles of mauve potpourri flutter from my shirt pocket to join the strange collection of debris. *How the heck did that get in there?* I scoop everything up and throw it in the kitchen trash. My couch pillows are on the kitchen table and I grab two and carry them back to the couch, but the couch is in a different place and Richard is putting blue tape along the base of the wall. He looks up from the tape and his face is very heavy.

“Dad, do you have everything you need for the day? Julia will be here soon. Could you check your bag again and make sure I packed everything?” I walk back to the kitchen with the couch pillows in hand and open up my duffle bag. There are some medications I take for my bladder, a granola bar with a running man silhouetted against a mountain, and a light sweater. I add a handful of potpourri from the kitchen table in case I get sweaty and smell bad.

“I have everything I need, Richard. Should I come help you?” But Richard is standing in the door of the kitchen. He still looks very sad. He moves forward to embrace me with his long arms and broad shoulders. He smells like the emerging musk of a construction site in the hot sun. My son has not hugged me for a long

time, I think since his mother died and we had a big fight. That was important once, but I don't remember what we fought about. Rose has been gone for two years. My son hasn't hugged me in two years. We don't fight now because we are men and we are strong and we don't need to fight about the past. I spend enough time fighting the past in my head, but there, I am fighting to hold onto it a little longer. Richard holds onto me while I think about these things and a horn beeps in the driveway. He lets me go and I can't touch him anymore or smell him. Julia helps me into her red car and we drive to a place with my favorite chicken noodle soup.

When we return, my son is standing at the top of the driveway with his hands on his hips, covered in fresh spots of paint. They both help me inside and offer to help me get changed. I decline and feign like I will watch TV tonight. Richard and Julia duck out of my house and instruct me one last time to wait before touching the walls as the paint dries. I watch their cars back out of the driveway and disappear from my block. The room looks clean and fresh and empty. Everything I had before is still here, but something is missing. Something is missing in the way I felt something existed when I saw my wife in the family video. I'm perplexed by this feeling, because in the video something I missed was present, but now...*something is missing, but what was present?* Of course, I can't hang onto this for long. All the color drains from the image like wet paint drips over old colors on the walls. Pictures slip out of frames and drift to the floor. Time leaves something you saw everyday gone and you fighting to remember what the frame first contained. It's late now in the evening and I'm tired from spending the day with Julia. The only thing I feel like doing now is going to bed.

Something odd comes over me when I reach the stairs. The house still smells like paint, but a cool breeze blows through the open windows, airing it all out and dispersing in the world. All the old smells of a single old man living alone have not resurfaced yet from the carpet, or the walls from behind the fresh paint. All the old has blown away through the open windows. I grip the rail and climb the stairs in an act that feels weighted by a sense of finality. The stairs curve and I brace myself with my hand against the wall. It is the first time I touch the new coat of paint, and a deep and unexplainable sadness rises in me. I stand on the stairs with my hand on the wall and try to understand why I feel so alone, and so sad, and so old.

The wall is cold like plastic in the way only fresh paint is cold. My memory is slipping through the cracks and leaving behind only sediment and sand. I struggle to retain the feeling and to connect it to some memory, but I grasp at nothing and there is nothing to remember. I lift my hand off the wall. It's dark throughout the house and dark outside too, but I can still make out the shadowy print of my large old hand, holding up the wall on its own and in some quiet way pleading to stay forever.

Copyright 2016 by Annie Raab

HONORABLE MENTION

Katelyn, 17, Ireland. Cancer. First time everything. A pessimist who remains hopeful. An optimist who remains doubtful. Interested in film, music, literature, memes and stupid inside jokes. Loves the ocean. Strives to be many things that do not come naturally to her. Happiness is the only worthwhile cause.

All the Types of Dark

by Katelyn O'Neill

“So this is finally it, huh?” Oscar muses quietly, holding a steaming mug of tea tentatively in front of Isaac’s face. “Come on, mint tea, it’s your favorite...”

Isaac blinks once, twice. Oscar sighs and places the mug on the bedside table, hissing minutely as he holds onto it a second too long and it burns him through ceramic clay, through molded earth. *It would be nice to be that mug*, Isaac thinks. Whether Isaac envies the mug for Oscar holding it, or for its ability to hurt Oscar, he doesn’t know.

Not anymore.

Isaac doesn’t jump when the bed dips beside him. He is expected to lean towards Oscar, as he used to, and so this is what he does. Isaac does not feel repulsed, as he should. Oscar’s shoulder is warm, and solid, and it does not allow Isaac to sink in the ever-melting mess of all that he can see. It is almost... pleasant.

Isaac throws his free arm around Oscar’s waist, and snuggles his nose further and further into Oscar’s chest, searching for warmth which he knows he will violently

curse if he finds. It is almost a relief to think that to find genuine warmth in Oscar would be to find clarity in himself; possible no more.

Isaac releases a breath he did not realize he had been holding—it rattles his lungs, leaves him feeling even more breathless than before. It is one of those days. Every day now is one of those days.

A gentle hand smooths his hair, once, then twice, and then again and again. His eyes flutter shut as breathing becomes not easy, but manageable. He attempts to match his breaths to Oscar's—they are almost in sync, but not quite. Oscar is a butterfly's wingspan ahead of Isaac, as always. This has not changed. Isaac allows himself to forget that the heavy badump-badump he hears through Oscar's ribs is not a *real* heart—simply a hive of wasps masquerading as one. Oscar starts crooning quiet strains of *Hey Jude* and from both the familiarity and the relaxing thrumming of what must be voice fighting through layers of blood and bone (what a miracle our voices are, Isaac thinks), he allows himself to forget *why* he shouldn't forget.

Isaac is so tired all the time, now. He sleeps all day and yet the mini-death will not release its grip on him. It tempts him even now, when he should be at his most alert, in the presence of the only other being that he ever sees out of his dreams. Isaac will sleep again soon. He knows it.

He is not the only one that knows it. Oscar shifts his shoulder to rouse him gently, and murmurs, “Hey, drink your tea before you fall asleep, wont you Isaac?”

Isaac grumbles, and goes to reach for the tea with the hand not twined with Oscar's. His fingertips come short.

His chains rattle.

And he remembers.

(Everything has changed)

*

Bizarrely, in this twisted parallel life, there is routine. Oscar brings him breakfast, with ‘mint’ tea. He refuses the tea, and wants to refuse the breakfast, on the suspicion that both are laced with drugs. But what does he have to stay awake for, anyway. He eats.

Oscar, for his part, is kinder to Isaac than Isaac deserves. After everything he had done, Oscar should have killed him. Isaac would have, if he was in Oscar’s shoes. Isaac had tried to. That was what had brought this around.

It was important to remember that this Oscar was a ruse—the boy Isaac had known no longer existed, broken and shattered along with his knee, along with his hopes of a scholarship, his hopes of leaving their small town and along with it—Isaac. That wasn’t how it was supposed to be. They weren’t supposed to leave each other.

They had been two halves of a whole, once. You did not see one without the other—you did not hear one without the other. But Oscar had tried to leave. Oscar had forgotten that they were equals, both venomous, both ferocious, both like starved animals.

Oscar had tried to leave, and so Isaac had broken him. But by doing so he had also broken himself.

*

It’s hard to keep track of the days now. It seems to always be dark. Isaac doesn’t much care, either. The only person he can think of that would miss him is right with him, as always.

Instead, Isaac muses on the passage of time by judging the shadows around Oscar’s eyes. By these faint, make-up like smudges, Isaac judges the passage of hours, and days.

Isaac also studies the passage of weeks by noting how Oscar is growing paler and paler, gaunter and gaunter. He is not worried, just disappointed.

It will not be half as much fun to kill an Oscar who is already half dead.

*

Isaac knows Oscar will slip. He sees it happening, dreams of it when Oscar unlocks his manacles to bring him to the bathroom after his breakfast. Isaac's feet are so unsteady now. He hobbles his way to the toilet, and he plots.

Isaac is right. A couple of days later (those shadows no longer faint, paleness no longer natural), Oscar coughs all through breakfast. He coughs when he unlocks Isaac's chains with shaking hands. He wheezes as he tightens his grip on Isaac's wrist as he leads him towards the bathroom, and he collapses when they reach the door. Isaac does not wait for another chance.

He runs.

Runs right out the door, bursting with a will to live he did not know he possessed, skids down the stairs, slips round corners and out through another door, reaching for *light, light, finally light*.

Darkness.

It is pitch black outside. Isaac is baffled, then assumes Oscar must have just been fucking with his mind, to mess with him, giving him breakfast at night. And yet...

There is something ominous about this place. In the middle of a suburb, yet not one car had passed nor was there any light to be seen. There were not even stars, which should be visible in their multitudes in darkness like this. And yet, not one.

Isaac hurriedly crossed the street, and ran down a couple of blocks, squinting to read the signs he knew would lead him home. Still, not one car, not even a hint of noise. Isaac's flesh is crawling. The earth feels shuddersome.

It's when Isaac rounds the corner that he sees them. All of the bodies, collapsed spontaneously around the street, hordes of them. Men, women, children. The very old to the very young. Newborns in prams, even. Not one of them escaped.

Isaac did not realize he was backing away until he bumped into something behind him. He whipped around frightfully fast; dread pooling in his very bones, only to curiously feel relief to see Oscar standing there.

“What’s happened to them, Ozzy?”

These are the first words he has spoken to Oscar in perennials. It is ironic he sounds like a small child again.

Oscar simply frowns and holds out a hand, eyes swept to some far off place. Isaac takes his hand, and Oscar begins to lead them back.

*

Oscar had left the door open in his haste to leave and find Isaac. Or possibly he just didn’t think there was anyone around to do any harm. He wouldn’t be wrong.

Isaac was tugged through the house and up the stairs into his room (cell), and flung onto the bed. He scrambled to sit upright in a corner as Oscar locked the door, only to leave the key in it as another coughing fit took him. His hand came away splattered in blood. Bright crimson blood.

Fresh. Good.

Instincts and years that grained memories into Isaac’s hands along with callouses make him reach towards Oscar, who stumbles to the bed and sits carefully apart from Isaac, propping himself against the wall once he is finished coughing.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Izzy,” he rasps. “It happened quick as Elmo’s fire. Bang, flash, boom. All of it over. Total annihilation.”

He paused for a moment to catch breath. “The reports started coming in about a week, maybe a week and a half ago. NASA in all its secret-keeping glory had to let this one slip: there was a huge asteroid about to collide with us, and take one whole side of the planet with it. It was mayhem. Massacres, riots, absolute bedlam. Those that did manage to get flights out of the target zone landed in America and various other countries on the other side of the world just to be told that it didn’t matter where you were—this asteroid was going to be the end of us all anyway. The impact would cause poisonous ash clouds to spread across the entire globe. No sun would be able to peek through. Not a one of us would ever see the light

again. No one would be spared. Those that didn't die choking would die from starvation, in the long run."

Isaac simply cannot believe what he is hearing. There is no way for him to comprehend this without snapping, and he was already brittle. Oscar smiled viciously, all teeth.

"For all our inventions, our wars, our higher thinking and morals and roads and rules, all of it was just an illusion. In the end, we're no better than those giant fucking lizards that used to wander the earth. What will come after us, I wonder? Hopefully something infinitely better."

Both of us are shaking, Isaac realizes. It is so, so cold. All that wanted to escape Isaac has frozen within him: he is both the mirror and the breath that fogs it, both the moisture that condenses and the hand that wipes it away. Isaac is everything and nothing and so is Oscar—in the end, they share even this. They grew together—roots forever tangled, twisted and twisted and twisting so that even when they had grown apart they knew where the branches were leading back to. They always knew.

"I'm sorry, Izzy. I tried to hide it from you. None of this—none of this was ever supposed to happen. By the time I had you here, I panicked, I couldn't let you go, and then the world just decided to end and—why? Why did you do that to me? How could you?"

Isaac does not know. He doesn't have any answer to this, and never will. The same as how Oscar will never have an answer for why he locked Isaac up here. They are both poisonous, and all they had ever loved was each other. That is the reason. Fear leads to all kinds of darkness.

Oscar took from Isaac his chance at a normal life because Isaac had taken his. Isaac took Oscar's chance because he could not imagine life without him. So much so that one night as they walked, Isaac tripped Oscar, took a branch, and beat his dominant leg over and over again. Oscar would never play again. He would never love Isaac again, Isaac also thought. But at least Oscar couldn't leave.

Isaac reaches for Oscar's hand, and squeezes it tightly, once, twice, hoping it conveys to him everything that Isaac cannot bring himself to say. Oscar squeezes back, and Isaac knows that he has been understood.

Just like that, they are all right again. The miracle of having loved someone all your life, with all your being. No mistake is too big, no wound unbearable, in the face of losing the other.

Isaac hears a noise, and thinks Oscar is crying. Fond memories of Oscar's crybaby childhood reach Isaac through the eternal human condition of noise and uncharitable territory that is the mind. He opens his eyes—not realizing he had closed them—and sees what he should have expected:

Oscar gasping, gurgling, trying to cough, lips strained wide open and splitting, eyes fish-wide. He yanks his hand from Isaac's and attempts to crawl to the bathroom. He does not make it. He is barely able to bend over the bed to empty whatever is crawling up him onto the floor. The retching is violent, the splatter a heavy wet sound, and the smell. The smell is rancid, fetid. Something is dying within him.

Oscar leans back up slowly, unable to lift himself fully. He slumps against the wall, panting. A line of blood runs down his chin. Through Isaac's haze of disbelief and confusion, he is afraid.

"Oscar," Isaac asks. "What's happening, Oscar?"

Oscar grabs Isaac's hand. "Listen to me. I don't have much time. The asteroid was not the end. Not completely. Some researcher in some scientific lab decided to put a 'humane' end to us all. They released some kind of mutant flu, mean to make people pass in their sleep once the virus takes hold. Instead, it makes them cough their own lungs up. Fuckery upon fuckery, huh, Izzy?"

Realization dawns. "You're dying," Isaac whispers. He cannot comprehend. How can Oscar die? This is not possible. Oscar smiles grimly at him. Isaac's lips are trembling. Oscar begins again. "It's highly contagious. When we ran out of food, I had to leave to go find some. I couldn't find much, barely enough to keep even one

person alive... but it was my fault you were trapped here, I was responsible for you. It was a day or two later that the coughing started. I knew I was done for.”

Numbness spreads through Isaac. So the probability is he had already contracted it from Oscar, then. Oscar reads Isaac’s glance, looks away and that is all Isaac needs to know. Oddly, he is relieved. He will not have to live without Oscar. Not for long, anyway.

Isaac grabs Oscar round the waist and props him fully against the wall. His skin is clammy with sweat and yet he feels so, so cold. Isaac leans against him, Oscar’s shoulder still so solid to him, still holding him up. Oscar reaches for Isaac’s hand and grasps it as tightly as he is able.

It is impossible to tell how long they have been sitting like that when the spasms begin. Oscar contracts and convulses and jerks and Isaac knows the end has come. Oscar is sputtering, trying so desperately to tell Isaac something before he goes. He mouths to Isaac: *I’m sorry*.

Isaac simply squeezes his hand tight as he can, taking his position on Oscar’s shoulder once again, and lets the darkness take them.

Copyright 2016 by Katelyn O’Neill

HONORABLE MENTION

Jes Rausch lives and writes in Wisconsin, with too many pets and too much beer for company. Nir fiction has appeared at *Crossed Genres*, *Apex*, and *Bastion Science Fiction*, among others. Find nem not updating nir Twitter @jesrausch.

[*On The Premises* editorial note: If you're unfamiliar with the terms "nem" and "nir," you can learn more at <http://nonbinary.org>]

The Blood Sowers

by Jes Rausch

Inana glanced around the small mess quickly before removing the vial from one of the pockets of her robes and uncapping it. Concealing it in her palm, she tipped it up over her drink and counted out six droplets of blood, six sacred droplets, and gasped as something bumped into her elbow. The vial slipped from her fingers, splashing precious Gnariti blood on the table, and she snatched at it, biting her lip to hold back a curse.

"Inana," said Sinclair Pahl, taking a seat next to her and setting a steaming mug down on the table. "Oh, I'm sorry—did I disturb you?"

"Not at all," said Inana, an obvious lie that they both ignored as she mopped at the spill with a napkin and Sinclair sipped from her mug. The smell of coffee assailed Inana's nose and she held back an expression of disgust. She hated the nauseatingly harsh liquid.

“Is that a Bloody Mary?” asked Sinclair, brown eyes in her terra-cotta face flicking over to Inana’s drink.

“Yes,” she said, knowing what was coming, how anyone with authority who saw her at breakfast seemed to think she needed to proceed to medical for an addiction screening. Sinclair, however, ignored that as well.

“Glad I caught you out of your room,” she said, setting her coffee aside but keeping hold of the handle with a hand. The ship rocked briefly and Inana clutched at her glass until it leveled out again. “Don’t mind that; the engineers are handling it.”

Inana blinked at her, the lack of explanation making her curious. Normally any captain offered some sort of incomprehensible description of a problem to her, but Sinclair Pahl was not like any other captain Inana had traveled with. Somehow that did not put her at ease.

“If we’re still arriving at Fortuna’s Child as scheduled today, I will be ready, captain.”

“Of course you will,” said Sinclair, her eyes strangely focused on observing Inana’s every motion. “You are aware of UPPP? They currently have a starship of considerable size orbiting Fortuna. I inform you only because I have to take precautions; you will be sent down with an armed guard to Fortuna’s Child.”

Inana frowned. The United Peoples for the Protection of Planets was not a fan of her kind, but had never done outright harm to any blood sower. They opposed mainly the four governments of Earth led by various corporations, and tried to halt further progress into the galaxy. They would not harm Inana, and she could not do her job while under guard.

“I must work alone,” she said, knowing Sinclair would not understand. “Captain, I cannot sow while in the presence of others. The Asoren culture forbids it.”

“The Asorens are not here, and you are being paid by the CWH government to do a job. So you will do it. There are too many contracts to mine Fortuna for this

operation to even be delayed; there are people already residing on Fortuna's Child, and they have waited long enough on a barren moon."

"There are people on Fortuna's Child?" asked Inana before she could stop herself. She had given life to dead moons before, under their newly created atmospheres like precious bubbles, but never had there been people already living in such a place. She understood now the buildings already present, her instructions to see to the public gardens and private lawns first.

"Yes, and all are very important. There are relatives of the CWH's first president taking up residence here. You will be escorted by an armed guard." Sinclair paused to finish off her coffee and flash a smile. "I'm so glad we had this talk. Shuttle bay at 13:00."

Sinclair stood and exited, leaving Inana feeling cold. She grabbed her drink and gulped it down, feeling the warmth of the love of life beginning to take hold of her. Gnariti blood was for renewal and joy; she drank the six sacred drops each morning, far better for her than any caffeinated drink, more potent when taken with alcohol. When she was finished she returned to her small yet private room to prepare.

Door locked, she spread her vials and jars out on an Asoren cloth on the floor, sinking down to examine them, sort them, connect with them. She had been an ambassador to the Asoren world for eleven years now, one of the trusted few that species would permit. The Asorens had been impressed with her personality, her education, and her asexuality, which set them at ease that she would not eroticize the act of creation. The bloods of the creatures with which they shared their world were potent, holy in ways that no human truly understood, for part of the non-conflict agreement between their species had been to prohibit any testing on the substances. Where the science was lacking, the blood sowers had filled in, links between the Asorens and the Humans, trusted with the ancient alien knowledge of how to take droplets of life to create further life.

Vampire, Inana was often called, although that was not accurate. Not really. She sampled her collection of bloods, yes, but only to ascertain whether they were still fresh enough to be of any use, and always in the most respectful of ways, in

accordance with Asoren tradition. The six drops of Gnariti she consumed daily was a spiritual ritual. She did not ingest the blood for any other purpose beyond those, not even for illness, for though she could treat it herself, she preferred to see a doctor.

Her fellow humans were mistrustful of her, never seeing what she did with her blood samples, not knowing what properties they had. But the truth was that Inana knew nearly as little as they; the Asoren knowledge, or that which the Asorens allowed them to learn, was spiritual, a series of actions and prayers they passed to her, and she could unlock how it worked no more than the disgruntled scientists. Her silence as a blood sower, and her aloofness, was partially to hide that fact from others.

It worked, as it worked for all blood sowers. Once robed in Asoren cloth covered in Asoren patterns, wearing spiritual jewelry, nearly everyone gave her berth. She unsettled them, how she went about, how they did not know what it was she was doing with her bloods. And so when she gathered up her supplies, the Asoren bloods, the herbs and incense and candles, the cloths and Gnariti feathers, and strode out into the ship's passageways, crew members stepped aside and averted their eyes.

Sinclair Pahl was in the shuttle bay when she arrived, looking formidable and very in charge despite being the shortest person present. Inana entered, not looking at the four armed guards, instead directing her displeasure at Sinclair. The woman ignored it.

"Supplies and additional weapons are aboard the shuttle," said the captain, indicating with her head that the guard should climb aboard, and they obeyed. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I need to sow alone," said Inana again.

"You know I can't do that. I would join you on Fortuna's Child, but what with the UPPP about, I'm needed here. I suggest you strap yourself in securely for the flight down—you'll be a target, too."

Inana had not considered that. The UPPP did not wish to kill her, but she was the person who would bleed life into the dead moon. She was the person who would make extraction of Fortuna's vast resources possible. She could become a hostage.

She nodded to Sinclair and ran her thumb over the back of her Gnariti feather-styled ring, wishing the captain would believe her. She would be safest alone. The blood would infuse the moon better with the rituals unmarred by presence of violence, of those who did not know the ways. But Sinclair seemed intent on protecting her.

Inana spent the shuttle ride reciting in her mind the various incantations and images associated with the Gnariti, the Bird of Life. According to what she had been told, the Gnariti was the first creature on the Asoren world, its feathers falling out and bringing to the planet all manner of life, spilling like drops of golden-green blood onto the dead ground and giving rise to everything. The Gnariti had shed six different feathers in six days. Inana would honor that by transferring life to Fortuna's Child in six-increment cycles.

Whether it was her reverence for the Gnariti or something else, the shuttle touched down on the sparsely-inhabited satellite with no issue. She disembarked and was met by a man who was clearly high-ranking, dressed in a moon-white suit, white teeth flashing in a too-tan face that should have been as white as the rest of him. Inana disliked these sorts of people, despite the fact that they paid her for what she did. She extended her hand to him but he failed to take it.

"Inana," he said, not calling her by any title. "Thank you. I'm sure you're eager to get started."

"You are?" asked Inana, not moving.

"Orion," he said, perfect smile unwavering. A common name, no surname; she was not to know who he was. He motioned slightly with his chin. "Follow me."

Concealing her irritation, Inana did so, and they moved from the landing area out into the small beginnings of a city. Orion paused for a moment, presumably to allow her the time to view the buildings from their current height, and she took the opportunity to see just what she would have to work around.

Spectacular works of architecture rose up, towers and arches made mainly of moon-rock, inlaid with metal, bits of machinery. It was all very magnificent, and very devoid of life otherwise. She followed Orion as he led her down a series of steps to a cobbled street, swept clean, and along it to an impressive fountain in a square that had to be the city's center. Inana saw several public buildings, museums and film centers, rising up around the square, and patches of dusty moon-ground left the way it was, free for her to work her bloody miracles.

“First you will see to this place,” said Orion, indicating the entirety of the square with a motion of a hand. He then pulled out a tablet and extended it to her.

“Specifications are listed here. There's a file with images if you have questions, or shoot me a message. My contact's at the bottom there. Time?”

Inana took the tablet and glanced at a few of the images, frowning.

“This space will take three days,” she said, and a warning flashed in Orion's eyes.

“Three? Make it one. I'll have someone up your compensation.”

Inana glanced up at him. They both knew he was lying. She would get no further compensation, but she was expected to speed up a process that could not be sped up. When she opened her mouth to tell him so, he turned and walked off, leaving her in a barren square with only the splashing of the fountain to break the silence. The guards had followed them and remained at the edge of the area, as motionless as statues.

The side of the fountain was smooth and cool, and Inana set her supplies down on it. It was clear from the information provided that Fortuna's Child was very strongly connected with the most powerful members of the Citizens of the Western Hemisphere—most places simply wanted some grass, stretches of soil made fertile to grow what they wanted. The requests Orion had handed her were for everything from moss to fruit trees to live fish in the fountain. Three days was generous for something like this, and she could only imagine what the residents wanted in their own private gardens.

Still, she had taken the assignment. She set aside the tablet and rolled out her supplies, glancing at the guards and wishing they would leave. They might be far

enough away, but she was not certain of that, and even the slightest of disturbances to her rituals could mean failure. Asoren blood sowing was a powerful practice, but a delicate one. When she was prepared, perched kneeling on stitched cloth draped over the edge of the fountain, she kept the guards to her back and bled them out of her mind. She needed to be completely focused on her task, completely in tune with the blood.

Inana began with the Gnariti feather, waving it in the pattern she had years ago learned, reciting Asoren words, thinking Asoren images. She felt the emotions she was supposed to feel, skimmed the top of the water with her feather, pulled it back. To the fountain she added six drops of Gnariti blood, either the base blood that all things needed to produce life, or such an old Asoren ritual that it could not be undone from the ceremony. Inana was not sure what properties of the bloods caused them to work, or if it was a particular combination of the sacred liquids, or the ritual, but she would not skip any steps. When she had finished with the fountain, she moved to each plot of hard-packed moon ground and repeated the procedure, altered slightly for the different base matter.

None of the guards said a word as she worked, but by the time she was finished with the last plot of rocky soil and looked up, Orion had returned, carrying a small bag.

“I brought you a meal,” he said when she approached him. He was careful not to accidentally touch her when he passed the bag to her. His smile did not falter. “Is this all you’ve done?”

“Thanks,” said Inana, setting aside the bag. “It’s a complex process. Do you have the genetic matter for the plants and animals you want?”

Orion reached into a pocket and pulled out a box. Inana took it, opened it, looked through the small vials provided.

“The sooner this is completed, the better,” said Orion, and though his words sounded serious bordering on sinister, when Inana glanced at him he was still smiling that stupid smile. She shut the box.

“Oh?” she said, affecting the mysterious offended manner that she occasionally had to use to get a semblance of respect. People were sometimes more willing to listen to her if she seemed more like a woman guarding ancient knowledge, offended by their lack of understanding.

“A UPPP shuttlecraft has been found a few kilometers from the city. You may be in danger. Fortuna’s Child doesn’t want you to become a casualty. We’re doing what we can to manage the situation, but keep in mind we cannot completely guarantee your safety.”

Inana nodded and watched Orion walk away before opening up the bag and pulling out the food within it—a quesadilla, some dried fruit, purified water. She thought the entire situation ridiculous. Here she was, hired to put plants and animals on a moon, while on the planet below the CWH’s leading businesses would tear apart the native vegetation and life to get at whatever resources they could extract. She preferred sowing her bloods on colonization attempts. That, at least, kept more to the tradition of the Asoren, who used their knowledge of bloods to promote life on their planet. It was smart of them to only allow so much blood from each animal to be given to humans. Inana did not doubt the desire for destruction she saw burning so intensely so often among her own kind.

She returned to beautifying the square with life. She stared again at the fountain, intending to sow some of the fish first to give them time to grow. They required a combination of Asoren bloods in the right quantities, and genetic matter from the kind of fish desired. Inana sorted through her bloods, said her prayers, and paused for a curfew announcement projected to the city’s residents. While they slept, she would work.

Orion did not check up on her again for hours, and she suspected he had gone to bed. She eventually moved from fountain to a patch of dirt, clearing her mind as best she could to prepare for the next ritual. She was beginning to struggle with keeping it all straight; she would have to rest soon.

“Hey,” said one of the guards as she massaged her temple, and she turned. Bursts of gunfire ripped through the air, louder than anything Inana had ever heard, and then she was staring at the guards. Two were on the ground, motionless, bleeding

over the pale moon stone paving. Of the other two, one stood at the fountain near Inana's blood stores, gun pointed at the second, who was nearer to Inana, gun pointed at her.

"Drop it," said the guard by the fountain, and Inana waited to see whether she would die. She did not know what the situation was; she hoped only that neither of these people cared to kill her. As a blood sower, she had value. She hoped that was enough.

"You first," said the guard pointing a weapon at her, making a threatening motion with it. "Fine. She dies, then, and you won't get any greenery on your precious little moon."

"Right, right."

Inana watched as the guard by the fountain put down the gun, then, halfway through rising again, lurch and fall backward. The sound of the shot seemed to follow the guard's death, which was strange, but Inana knew it must be her mind trying to sort out what was happening. The guard fell, bleeding, into the fountain, and her mind snapped to again.

The bloods. The mingling of the bloods. Inana's were sacred, pure, laid down in proper ways, but now her ceremonies had been interfered with, the bloods tainted. That frightened her more than a hostile weapon. She dashed forward.

"Stop," said the last remaining person, the voice sounding like a man's, perhaps, but Inana did not listen. She heard his footsteps and felt a hand on her arm, restraining her. She whirled to glare at him but could only manage whatever expression she already wore. The knowledge the Asorens gave to her flashed before her eyes. She considered stabbing him with her ceremonial blade.

He shook her, waved the gun menacingly but did not point it at her again. His face was grim, his eyes wide.

"I don't want to have to kill you," he said as she gasped for breath, throat tight. "We don't have a problem with the Asorens, or you, if it comes to it, because you

give life, but really? To these people? The less they have to keep them here, the better.”

“I need to go,” said Inana, somehow finding her voice. Her mind screamed disaster at her, far more than this man could dream. “I should not have been interrupted. The fountain’s tainted.”

“Let them have tainted water—maybe it will cleanse them, or they can just choke on it. Wealthy bastards. If they want life around them they should settle on that planet down there, not exploit it like they exploit everything. Like they exploit you.”

Inana had no idea what this man was trying to do, perhaps win her over to his side—he had to be with the UPPP—but her mind could barely grasp at what he was saying. She had to act now. There was a dead person draped into the fountain, and she had no way of knowing until she looked where the blood from the other two guards had seeped. She tried to wrench her arm free again but he gripped her all the tighter and pulled her closer to him. Her hand went to the ceremonial knife she wore before the random thoughts that kept popping into her head reminded her that guards wore armor everywhere and her weapon would do nothing. She would need one of their guns. Spilling more blood was the wrong answer. Too much damage had already been done. She stared at him, barely blinking. Beads of sweat covered his face, betraying his nerves, the reality of murder sinking in. He spoke quickly, words growing shakier.

“Y’know their reasoning? No self-aware life. Great justification for busting apart an entire planet and killing everything there. Just great. You can’t possibly agree with it, either. You give life, not take it.”

“Let me go,” said Inana. “*Please.*”

Whether it was her pleading or something else, she did not know, nor did she care, but he let her go. Inana pulled her arm free, noticed him lower his gun before dashing to the fountain. Small droplets of blood were splattered over her collection of Gnariti feathers and she could not bring herself to touch them. She knelt to the vials, hands shaking as she gathered up those not broken, though

many of her bloods were now leaking out of shattered vials over the stones, staining her Asoren cloth. This was all wrong. Her mind tried to blank completely on her and she forced it to work again.

She feared what she would see in the fountain. She had to look.

“Hurry up and gather your things,” said the man. “We have a way off this rock, but we have to get going now. You can’t take your time. Come on. I won’t hurt you.”

She ignored him, swallowed, took a step toward the fountain. The waters, stained red, were churning. Not with the motions of the normal bubbling of the fountain, but with something more determined than that, something more motivated, bitter. Inana thought of what went into the waters, her mind replaying the sacred recitations she had given, the Gnariti blood, the various bloods of Asoren fishes and water life, the genetic matter of koi, the murdered human. Part of a guard force trained in violence for a government content to expand at whatever cost.

“Now,” snapped the man as her hands darted almost against her will toward the body of the guard. She yanked the corpse out, saw the face of a woman about her age, let her fall wetly, stiffly, to the ground. Inana’s entire body shook. She doubted removing the guard would help. The crimson waters churned.

She glanced up at the man. So he and others wished to save Fortuna, decided to make her part of their ongoing mission against exploitation and rampant ravaging. Decided to, and gave her no option, and she wanted no part of this, any of this. She had not become a blood sower to watch blood spilled for any reason other than enhancing life. None of the Asoren animals were ever even killed for their life-giving blood, and yet here she was, bending without realizing what she was doing, picking up the dead guard’s gun. She had seen them used. She pointed it at the man across from her. He swore.

“I don’t care about any of this,” said Inana, hearing her voice shake. “What you want, what they want—I want out of it. Just let me go. I’m only a blood sower.”

“You can’t get out of it,” said the man. He raised his gun again and Inana barely understood what that meant. “If you don’t come with me, you’re dead. We have people everywhere. We set charges everywhere. Our ship is safe, but this city isn’t,

and the ship you came in on is due to go off at any moment. Come with me. We would only use your abilities for ethical purposes. We'd respect you. Put the gun down."

Something inside the fountain splashed. Inana's mind raced. If she went with this man, with UPPP, she would never be able to return to the Asoren world. It was too guarded by government forces. Her bloods would run out.

"At least put the gun down and let me leave. I won't shoot you unless you make me."

Inana bit her lip. In the distance, an explosion went off, followed by another explosion, the wail of some kind of siren. She heard the sound of a gun, saw the man in front of her collapse, and dropped the weapon, staring at it. She would not be allowed to return to the Asoren world now, anyway. Not now that she had killed. She took a step back, bumped into the guard's body, took in a huge gulp of air.

"Inana."

Sinclair Pahl. Somehow Inana identified her voice, looked over to see her approaching, her own gun raised, several armed ship's crew behind her. They moved through the square as Sinclair approached Inana, tucking away her weapon.

"Not bad," said Sinclair. "Considering all you do is mix your bloody drinks."

Inana stared. She could not speak. The captain laughed at her expression.

"You didn't kill him. I did. You distracted him. You think you could have shot anyone holding a gun like that?" As Inana swallowed, she motioned to the others circling the area. "Come on, we have to get moving."

"The ship," said Inana, almost surprised she could talk again.

"We disarmed the explosives. Sounds like the team down here missed a few of theirs. I want to avoid a space battle, though, and that UPPP ship is en route. The

CWH can send their own forces to fight them. They didn't pay me for this. Let's get going."

The water in the fountain splashed, sloshed again, and Inana turned to look, trying to back away as she did. She heard Sinclair curse and whip out her gun again as the water rose up and fell back, revealing what had been given life in the fountain.

Several creatures broke the surface of the water, the size of housecats, scaled like fish, spotted orange and black and white like koi. They were nothing like fish, though, beyond that. They had strange, humanoid-shaped heads, scales pulled taut over them, eyes sunken and lidless. They had no noses, and what might have been teeth or fingernails protruded from lipless mouths. Inana stumbled backward, trying not to look at their other strange appendages, their hissing noises mimicking human speech. They roiled, scrambling over each other as they wriggled their way to freedom. Sinclair shot one once, twice, then grabbed Inana's arm and pulled her away.

Sinclair Pahl called a retreat Inana barely registered. Somewhere in the distance another explosion sounded, and the siren still shrilled through the air. They ran past the other dead guards, their blood having given rise to life that was beginning to cover them. Hair like mats of moss grew up over the bodies and through the cracks of the cobblestone near them, accelerated tendrils undulating in a mix of coarse and fine coils, dark and light, straight and curled. They stretched outward, grasping for purchase, advancing at a terrible rate.

Something else plantlike and glistening with a sheen of blood expanded near them, snaking along the ground as its leaves, fleshy like hands, covered in a hodgepodge of skin, slapped against the stone to hurry its travel. The vines were pale green and sickly, ridged as though knobs of bone lurked beneath the thin layer of plant matter. They cringed and snapped like determined spines toward Inana as Sinclair pulled her along, and she turned her face away, unable to look. She tried to block her mind from what was going on behind them, but occasionally one of Sinclair's people would turn and shoot at something, shattering her attempts.

Inana tried to breathe around her tightened throat as they reached a shuttle. Sinclair barked orders, sent word to Orion or whoever was listening about the situation at the fountain, which she could not properly describe. When she finally returned to sit next to Inana, she brought a cup of water.

“I need to sow alone,” said Inana, setting aside what few bloods and ceremonial items she had been able to salvage in order to take the cup. She was not sure whether she had actually meant to thank Sinclair for the water. She drank it.

“Well, it’s over now. We’ll give you a free lift until you know where you’re needed next. Last time I get involved with any of you vampires, though. Don’t care what the money is.”

“I need to get to the Asoren world,” said Inana, holding her cup tightly in both hands.

“Not likely. The CWH’s not going to want me or you—especially you—near there. When they know what grew in that fountain...”

Sinclair Pahl looked away, and Inana realized what had happened had unsettled her, too.

“I didn’t do it,” said Inana, knowing that was not completely true. She had added the Asoren bloods, had performed the powerful rituals. She wanted very much a drink and the sacred Gnariti blood, to make her feel connected to something not so monstrous, to soothe her. To heal her. She had lost all her other healing bloods. She drank the last of her water.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Sinclair.

A silence fell that lasted nearly back to the ship. Inana’s mind was finally shutting off after everything, nothing more to keep it working. She felt weary. Old. She wanted desperately to return to the Asoren world, stay there as long as she needed, but she knew Sinclair was right to assume none of the governments would want her near the place now. And her bloods were nearly gone.

“What does it taste like?” asked Sinclair as her crew went through docking sequence.

Inana looked up, confused, wondering if she had missed something the captain had been saying.

“Blood. Does it taste good?”

Sinclair stared at her like she had just asked something wonderfully taboo. Inana blinked, still confused. That depended on the blood, on the person, on so many things. She set aside her cup and took up her small bundle of Asoren items.

“You already know the answer,” she said. “Everyone does.”

Copyright 2016 by Jes Rausch

GUEST WRITER

Mike Beasley is a retired teacher. Years ago, he published fiction in little magazines and *The Atlantic*. He says, "Then I quit writing. Then I wrote again. I quit again and started again. I think I'm getting the getting the hang of it now."

A Woman in the House

by Mike Beasley

Jolly pink whales, captured in squares of moldy grout, grinned and stuck out their tongues as the plastic boat sliced a wobbly path through the tepid water. In gloomy silence C.K. Hadknot watched the toy, powered by a rubber band, skim the buoyant hair of his groin, halve the glaucous water between his legs, and putt-putt into the overflow drain. It halted there, bouncing nose first against the grimy porcelain. The milkman lowered his bald mottled scalp to the rim of the tub, tensed his buttocks and watched as an iridescent bubble was born in the soap scum between his legs. He dredged a cloth from the water and draped his homely face and closed his eyes against the glistening overhead light.

Willard Shue, his son-in-law, sat on the toilet, gently mocking: "Man your age? Playing in the tub?"

The milkman sank into the soupy water, descending to a nether region of soggy oblivion.

"What I'm saying, it's *hours* you been in the tub. *Hours*. Ain't normal, C.K."

Hadknot's ugly head reared: "Wahooabow—" He had removed the dentures from his mouth, and with them the "d"s and "t"s from his words. He reached for the bottle on the floor beside the tub.

C.K. Hadknot had gone to the tub eight months ago. Until then, he prided himself on his active retirement. He walked two miles daily, read four news magazines and two newspapers and could name the German chancellor or tell you the inflation rate in Brazil just like that. Twice weekly he visited the retirement center to play dominoes and argue world affairs with the other old men. Hadknot played "Texas 42" recklessly, and often poorly, but he thrived on the arguments. The other men were Republicans, devotees of Ronnie Reagan. Hadknot, a yellow dog Democrat, gleefully chided the Reagan bunch, tax breaks for the rich, Iran Contra, and Wall Street scandals. Often, the Center's director came to the table to quiet the old men. Hadknot would leave the Center in a huff, but always he returned. He had been a regular for six years, since shortly after his wife died. Eight months ago he went to the tub. He stopped walking. The reading petered out. He quit the domino games at the Center and took to making slighting remarks about the old fools who wasted their time there. His friends urged the milkman to return to the Center. You can't grieve forever, they told him. What are you doing, holed up in your house like a criminal?

Hadknot answered he no longer enjoyed dominoes—no longer cared for politics. "Don't call me," he said. "Don't bother me. You can go to hell with Reagan and Bush."

One by one his friends stopped calling. When they did call Hadknot insulted them. Eventually nobody called, which proved to the milkman's satisfaction that they had not been true friends after all.

Hadknot reached behind him for his choppers on the rim of the tub, inserted them in his mouth and poked the whiskey bottle in his face and drained the last ounce.

"I bet your liver looks like a brick," Willard said. "How come your belly sticks out."

Hadknot squinted at him. "Who you been talking to, Willard?"

Willard Shue's mind strained even the most trivial challenge through a loaf of fear. The outsized Adam's apple bobbed, his nostrils flared. "Ain't nobody."

"Where'd you get all that liver business?" A fecal odor blossomed in Hadknot's nostrils. "Flush it," he growled.

Willard flushed the toilet and reached for his pants. He was short, skinny, with stringy muscles and outsized hands. His mullet dropped to his shoulders in oily ringlets. "I don't like this," he said. "It ain't private."

"Be glad I don't make you shit in the yard."

Hadknot grinned. He was an ugly man, and the grin enhanced his ugliness, furling the meaty nose, exposing the yellow dentures. It was not a monster's face, only homely, and his homeliness had the effect of frankness on others, as if he could have nothing else to hide once his face was revealed. He had married a pretty woman in desperate circumstances, helped raise another man's daughter, and for practically thirty years put up with his wife stepping out any time she took the notion. Six years ago, Ida Lee died, horribly, of cancer. Her daughter Sissy, like her mother a wild one, fell out with her parents while still in high school, and ran off with a biker. Hadknot had not seen Sissy in years. Last year, Cathy, his birth daughter far as he knew, had died along with her son in a mobile home fire.

After the fire, Willard Shue moved in with his father-in-law. Originally the idea was to provide Willard a brief retreat, but he lost his job, and another job, and with it the possibility of replacing his mobile home. Hadknot regretted his harshness. This young man had married, suffered and endured the milkman's wretched daughter. He had been a loving father, an obedient husband; and it was rather a vast incompetence than an aversion to work that sent him repeatedly to the unemployment line.

"You need a job," Hadknot told him. "Something you can do. Like a home milk route." There had been no home milk routes in New Bethel, Texas, for thirty years. After Boylan's Dairy laid him off, Hadknot held a half-dozen jobs, fitting shoes, peddling debit insurance, even sacking groceries at the Piggly Wiggly.

The milkman pulled the plug from the drain and watched his grandson's toy boat sink with the water. As he began to push and pull himself out of the tub, his body remembered he was 76—the sciatic ache in his back, chalky old bones clicking like false teeth. Willard handed him a towel.

“When does your unemployment run out?” Hadknot knew; he wished to remind Willard.

“A month?” Willard could not dissemble. He tucked his chin. “More like two weeks.”

Hadknot rested on the side of the tub, his hard round belly crowding his diaphragm. His sagging titties, the flaccid meat on his arms and legs, shamed him. He covered his embarrassment with a reprimand. “You been out of work too long.”

“It's rough times around here since the oil bust.”

“Don't let that be an excuse. You got to look. Knock on doors. I wasn't too good to sack groceries after Boylan's laid me off. Now I got my home paid off, my truck. I'm a free man.”

Willard said, “I wanted to tell. Employment office might got something for me.”

If language were a meat, Willard would cut it with a baseball bat. Hadknot mocked him. “What might they got?”

“Burrito-Burrito. I interview tomorrow. I expect I'll get it.”

“Bully! Maybe you'll make manager.” This was a sham. Willard did well to manage his socks and shoes.

The young man leaned against the doorjamb and mumbled: “I met somebody.”

“What?” Hadknot cupped his ear in his hand.

“I met a woman.”

“A woman?”

“A woman.”

Hadknot was suspicious. Since Cathy’s death, Willard had been alone, passing most of his time watching television in the room once claimed by Cathy and Sissy. Before Willard, Cathy had had several other men, but no boyfriends. Her mother was pretty. Her older sister was pretty. Cathy resembled her father, but Willard had been plenty happy to get her, and if, years later, he was not sorry to lose her it was not the fault of the Hadknot brow or the Hadknot jaw. After the mobile home burned, Hadknot offered his pictures of Cathy and the boy to replace those Willard had lost in the fire. Willard displayed the boy’s pictures around the house. He stuffed Cathy’s pictures under old clothes in a dresser drawer, but, unlike his wife, Willard’s resentments were mild and temporary. A few weeks later he retrieved and exhibited everybody’s favorite picture of the murderer. She stared shyly at the camera as if she feared the smile, on her lips, was indecent. Nevertheless, the image projected an aura—a glimmer of hope and decency in her eyes, an instant of sanity, sole survivor in her long hour of madness.

“Who’s this woman you met?” Hadknot asked.

“Her name is Yondell—only that’s not her real name. She changed it. Her real name is Beverly, only that’s too plain vanilla for her. I met her at the employment office.”

“By which name does she get her welfare checks?”

Willard winced. “A little older than me. She has a kid.”

How old is she?”

“I don’t know. Seven or eight?”

“I meant the woman.”

“Yondell. She’s thirty-six.”

A sneaky idea. “You’ve seen the kid? You been to this Vonzell’s house?”

Willard looked caught. His Adam's apple wriggled. "Yondell," he said. "Her mama and her rent a trailer."

"How come you hiding her from me?"

"I ain't hiding her. I only met her last week."

"Thirty-six a little old for you isn't it?"

"Not like she *looks* thirty-six. She's a little heavy. Kind of like Cathy. Don't look thirty-six. More like thirty, thirty-two." The Adam's apple moved. "She's had her troubles. Her first husband? He got her into drugs."

"Oh, hell, Willard, like you need to hitch up with a drug fiend."

"No!" Willard held up his hands as if to bat away the words. "No, C.K.! She's clean, now. Her second husband was a preacher. He helped her clean up."

"What become of him?"

"She run him off. He hit her. She said, No man hits Beverly Lee Dodson the second time. And run him off." Willard puffed up, as if he'd borrowed Beverly Lee Dodson's grit.

"She wants to meet you. I kinda told her she can come over tonight."

"You can kinda tell her you changed your mind."

"Aw, C.K. She wants to meet you."

Hadknot was curious. "What did y'all have planned?"

"Nothing. She just wants to meet you. Say hello."

"No big supper—nothing like that?" Typically Hadknot ate his sandwich or microwave dinner in his bedroom.

"No sir."

“And leave the kid at home. What is it—boy or girl?”

“A girl—she’s a sweet kid.”

“Leave her at home. I’m too old to put up with a kid.”

“Yes sir.” Willard backed into the hall. He was happy. For the next two hours he would work furiously to tidy the house.

Hadknot shuffled to the toilet. As he waited for a few syrupy drops to ooze from his penis, he remembered longingly when he could fire a stream of piss that would blast the porcelain from a urinal. He leaned over, reaching for toilet paper, and glimpsed the capsized plastic boat in the tub. It happened again. A breathless weltering moment during which he saw a splashing child as real as the clap of water and the shrieks of childish delight that rang in his ears. Hadknot gasped and leaned against the wall, his heart pounding. He lowered himself to the toilet seat, squeezing his eyes shut. Again the child called, this time distant, as if from another room. *Papaw!* The sound jolted Hadknot; his eyes sprang open, the goofy whales spitting their pink tongues at him.

A collection of toys had used to line the rim of the tub—the plastic boat, a rubber duck, a squirt gun—tools and props of an aquatic theater created by his grandson during extended stays with Papaw. Willard had often placed him with Hadknot when Cathy was on a tear. Usually the boy stayed a day or two, but if, as happened increasingly toward the end, she had to be committed, the stay was extended for weeks. On the last such occasion, Cathy drove from the psychologist’s office, steered the car through the shrubbery lining Hadknot’s driveway, and rammed his front porch. Hadknot locked the doors. His daughter retrieved a tire tool from the trunk of her car and stood on the porch screaming obscenities, beating the door with the tire tool:

“Piece of shit! Devil! Give me my son!”

Hadknot placed the boy in a closet, dialed 911, and stood in the hallway with a broomstick. Presently two squad cars arrived. As the officers approached she lifted her free hand palm-up, supplicating.

“Oh my,” she said quietly, smiling. “See what happens?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the first officer said. “May I have the tire tool, ma’am?”

“Certainly. But don’t let that old man fool you. He’s the devil. May I show you my breasts?”

“Ma’am? Hand me the tire tool, please.”

“Just a peek!” Cathy said, and wagged a finger.

As the officer turned to his partner she flung the tire tool in his face, crushing the cheekbone under his left eye. “*Son of a bitch! Piece of shit!*”

Hadknot remembered standing on the porch, watching his daughter’s struggles as the officers shoved her into the squad car. He remembered her face pressed against the window, the grotesque distortion of her features, the obscene movement of her mouth. He turned and saw the child standing by the door watching his mother, looking at once puzzled and terrified, chewing a corner of his shirt collar.

*

Willard exited Hadknot’s bedroom as the old man entered the hall. Hadknot eyed him. “What are you up to?” He suspected Willard of filching a fiver from his wallet the other day. His wallet was in his pocket, but the hidey hole containing \$1,236, last count, was in the closet in the old man’s bedroom.

Willard held a wad of clothes against his chest. “Just looking for dirty clothes.”

“Stay out of my room.”

“Yessir. I was just getting the wash together.” Willard tucked his chin and stared at the floor, mumbling. “I was wondering could you loan me a little something tonight? Maybe enough me and Yondell could catch a movie?”

“You can watch TV. Don’t cost a buffalo nickel to watch a movie on the TV.”

“Aw, C.K.”

Hadknot pushed past him and shut and locked the door and went in the closet and counted his hidey hole cash. \$1,236. Good. He sat in the chair by his bedroom window, sipping whiskey from a newly opened bottle, chasing the liquor with saltines. The window provided a view of his backyard and, beyond the pines, a vast purple sky in which Venus occasionally appeared. Already, early evening, the snow on the ground drew a tincture of blue from the purple sky. Four snake-eyed blackbirds fed under the small oak nearest the house. They labored for their supper, scratching and pecking through a hard crust of snow to get at the few acorns overlooked by other birds and squirrels. Hadknot was reminded that he had not fed the birds. This time last year he would send the boy out with crumbs of bread, cups of cereal, and watch him from the window. *Looky Papaw! Looky!*

He sipped the whiskey, sent a saltine after it. One of the birds found an acorn and lifted off to a lower branch of the tree, where it cracked open the nut to get at the meat. Hadknot watched and whipped himself with old regrets. *Had she ever been happy? Ever known a purely joyful moment?* Cathy doted on her angers. Coddled her fears and nourished her grudges. In her strict economy the payback for suffering was more of the same.

It seemed now utterly bizarre and unforgivable that he failed to see what would happen when the child was returned to her. Not that he was hoodwinked by the clinquant jargon of the “professionals.” Hadknot was skeptical but in the end he trusted—if not the competence of the doctors—an even slippier presumption that the past predicted more of the past, and not something new and monstrous. The milkman closed his eyes on the unforgiving image of Cathy holding the child’s hand, leading him to the car with the creased fender, which was parked in Hadknot’s drive by the crushed shrubbery. Two days later another cop came to his door and announced the boy and his mother were dead. The trailer had burned. Maybe arson. Hadknot thought, *Oh yes. Of course.* And days later, as he dressed for the tedious double funeral: *Yes. Yes. Of course.*

He stood shakily, holding to the chair with his free hand, clutching the pint of whiskey in the other. The tips of his fingers were numb, forcing him to confirm visually that the bottle was secure. His belly was large, round, and tight, like a late

pregnancy, but his legs were thin, so that he teetered on a pinpoint of gravity. He shuffled forward reeling, holding out a trembling hand to catch a bedpost or chair if he should begin to fall. He stopped at the foot of the bed, holding to the post, and lowered himself carefully. He noticed a wet spot near his zipper, cranked his head up and stared at a family picture on the bureau: two pretty, smiling women, a homely man, and an undulating space where Hadknot had cut out the image of Cathy, in the process cropping an ear from his own image.

Willard tapped on the door. The bottle of whiskey slipped through Hadknot's numb fingers onto the bed. Willard stood in the doorway and shivered. "It's freezing out." He sniffed. "Damn. Smells like a brewery in here."

"I spilled some on my shirt."

"Got a clean one? Yondell's here."

Hadknot pointed to the closet. "In there. The red flannel." He fumbled with a button but his fingers were too numb to force it through the button-hole.

"Dammit," he said. "Dammit."

Willard said, "You peed in your pants, C.K. I better get you another pair of khakis."

As they entered the living room, Yondell rose to greet them. She was a large pretty woman, with heavy shoulders and a gap-toothed grin framed in layered red lipstick, her cheeks rosy from the cold night air.

"He ain't feeling good," Willard said. "We might ought sit him down."

"I guess son-in-law told you I drink too much," Hadknot said.

"It's not like he's drunk all the time," said Willard.

Hadknot loosed the ugly grin. "Sometimes I run out of liquor."

Yondell said, "I take a little sip myself sometimes."

"Hear that, Willard? Get a glass for Lindale."

“Yon-dell.” The big woman settled heavily into the sofa, as if dropping anchor. “Used to be Beverly, only that’s too plain vanilla for me. I’m a chocolate, strawberry type of gal.”

“How about it, son-in-law? Get her a glass.”

“We can’t stay,” said the big woman. “Only I had to meet you. Willard told me how you been so kind since your great tragedy. I saw it on television. I bet you could sell that story to the movies.”

“He’s been here eight months.”

“That’s a awful long time to stay with your father-in-law, Willard.” Yondell puckered, sipped a kiss from the air. “I might ought take you off Mr. Hadlot’s hands.”

“Hadknot,” Willard said.

“It’s awfully wonderful you two got each other to take care of each other.”

“We’re all we got,” said Willard. His Adam’s apple bobbed crazily.

“That’s like *so* sweet.”

“What do you do?” asked Hadknot.

“I’m like in-between right now.”

“You mean like in-between welfare and poverty?”

Yondell smiled bravely. “In-between jobs.”

“I always worked,” said Hadknot. “I was with Boylan’s Dairy more’n twenty years. After they laid me off, I took anything I could get. I wasn’t too proud to sack groceries, and I never cashed a welfare check.”

Willard looked miserable. “Tell her about Boylan’s, C.K. C.K. used to buy milk for the poor kids on his route.”

“You done told me that one,” Yondell said.

“Grendel’s right,” said Hadknot. “Anyhow, it’s a dull story.”

“Yondell.” The big woman’s mouth stretched, tugging at the edges of her nostrils. “Sir, is it me or my name you don’t like?”

Willard’s face was pale grey.

“It’s a fine name,” the milkman muttered. “A damn good name. Excuse me.” He pushed against the chair arms as if to rise but he did not move. Willard tugged the old man’s arm.

“You wanna go to the bathroom, C.K.?”

“No. The kitchen. I want some crackers.”

Hadknot shuffled into the kitchen and sat in darkness at a table with a chipped Formica top. A dim square of light bent around the door from the living room and dropped on the linoleum floor, shaping a limey rhomboid.

Willard came through the door and propped his hands on the table, whispering, “You ought not treat her so mean, C.K. She ain’t a bad person. Just unlucky—like us.”

“I’m not unlucky, Willard. I just lived too long.”

“You’d feel better if you didn’t stay in the tub all day.”

“I feel okay. I’m worried about the birds. They’re practically starving, all this snow on the ground. Last year I let the boy feed them. He loved feeding the blackbirds. *Looky here, Papaw! Looky! Looky!*” Hadknot grinned yellowly.

“He’s dead. The boy is dead, and life goes on.” Yondell filled the doorway, blotting out the light from the living room. “Willard, I want to talk to your daddy-in-law.” She seated herself, waited for Willard to leave and said, “I wished we could be friends, sir.”

Hadknot leaned back, making space between him and the woman. "I got enough friends. I don't need anymore friends."

"Do you got enough enemies?"

"I am an old man. Most of my enemies are dead."

"So will you be," said Yondell. "Willard told me how you drink. Look at your belly. That's your liver causes that. I know. My daddy drunk hisself to death."

"You're rough."

"I got that way taking care of myself."

"You're too rough for that boy."

"I'm just what that boy needs, Mr. Hatrack." Yondell pushed forward, resting her breasts on the table top. "He needs me. You need us."

"You could've fooled me," said Hadknot. "Carry a pot and ring a bell, you want to get in the charity business."

"What I want is Willard, and I'm fixin to get him."

"You know what you're getting? Boy can't hold a job."

"I'm no fool. I took his measure before I ever spoke to him." Yondell sat up, poking out her chin and breasts. "I can make something out of Willard."

Hadknot flashed the gruesome yellow grin. "You and your girl live with your mama?"

"Yessir."

"I guess son-in-law told you this house is paid for?"

"He did."

"Did he also tell you my daughter in Houston gets it when I die?"

“She the one sent flowers when her mama died?”

“She and her mother never got along.”

“How long since she’s visited you?”

“She lives in Houston. Works for the light company. It’s not easy when you have a job. Something you might not know about.”

“If she wanted to see you, she’d figure a way to get it done. That girl wouldn’t pee on you if you was burning in a ditch.”

“You sure know a lot. Is there any damn thing you don’t know?”

“I’m thirty-six, give or take.” Yondell smacked her lips and came back sassy: “Old enough to know more than some old buzzards.”

“It’s six years older than son-in-law. Give or take.”

“Don’t you worry about me and Willard. It’s yourself you better worry about. When you get sick, that daughter’ll put you in a home and sell this house.”

“You’d do better?”

“I would if I was living here. I may be rough but I got morals.” Yondell stiffened her spine and placed her hands primly on her lap, as if that were the posture appropriate for a woman of morals. She inclined toward the old man, big red lips puckering, flirty. “You left everything to Willard, didn’t you?”

“Did I say I did? Did you hear me say I did?”

The big woman laughed big. Everything big about her. “Oh my, you did!” She slapped the table like slamming the trump domino in a game of “42.”

Hadknot tugged at his meaty nose. “Wills can be changed. How come they call them *wills*.”

“You won’t change it. That boy’s all you got.”

“In which case I might live another ten years just to piss you off.”

Yondell cocked her head and eyed him. “Me and Willard is talking about a permanent arrangement.”

“You ain’t arranging to live here. I had two girls and a wife. I got my fill of women in the house. You and Willard decide to shack up, you can figure on making your own arrangements.”

Yondell stood from the table. “I’m gonna pray for you, sir. I always pray for folks which don’t like me, so I won’t hate them back.”

“Myself, I don’t pray much,” Hadknot said. “My luck, I called up God I’d get the wrong number. I might get the devil, and I don’t have a damn thing to say to him, either.”

As she left, the big woman looked over her shoulder and winked. “You ain’t half as mean as you like to act,” she said.

Hadknot sipped his whiskey, sent a saltine after it and chewed. He was appalled to think he might like this big woman. What was her daughter’s name? He wished he’d asked. Little girl crawling into your lap, wanting a story, telling a story. Girls! Always a story. He could hear the TV in the living room. He stood and tucked the bottle in his back pocket and exited the kitchen through the dining room, avoiding Willard and Yondell. He shuffled into the bathroom and peed. He thought of the big woman and her girl, pictured the house with women in it. Panties and brassieres in the wash. Make-up, rollers, tampons in the bathroom, the smell of bath salts and cologne. *What else? What else?* Voices, the melody of women. He heard them. They sang. He answered but his own voice was weak and palsied. He thought he heard Willard and Yondell in the hall. Leaving already? He hurried out of the bathroom. The hall was empty, but the television was yakking in the living room. The old man chided himself for refusing Willard a few bucks. What was he thinking? \$1,236 in the hidey hole and nothing worth buying! *Would you miss \$36? \$100? You ain’t half as mean as you like to act.*

Hadknot crept into his bedroom, mentally rehearsing the words of a big-hearted man: “*Go some place nice. Buy your woman a steak. Get the little girl a*

candy.” Looped and giddy, he opened the closet and shoved clothes out of the way, his old overalls, shirts and trousers, Ida Lee’s favorite house dress. He removed the black funeral suit and hung it on the door. He poked his hand into the lining and retrieved the roll of cash. He counted the bills and flipped them and counted again. His heart seized. *\$200 light.* He stuffed a hand into the jacket lining and clawed at the seams and withdrew the empty hand and made a fist. *Fool! You damn fool!* Him wrangling with Yondell in the kitchen while son-in-law rummaged through the closet. It would be like Willard to think himself clever, to think the old man wouldn’t miss a few bucks. Hadknot grinned. *Damn fool. Stole his own gift.* He stuffed the remainder of the roll in his pants pocket and wandered into the hall, the house silent but for the wisecracks and canned laughter from the television. He turned off the television in the empty living room, moved on to Willard’s bedroom, and retrieved the picture of Cathy. He dropped the \$1,036 wad of cash on the dresser and left the room.

Copyright 2016 by Mike Beasley

GUEST WRITER

Noel is a flight attendant who enjoys the art of story telling. Her last story, a folktale, was shortlisted for "Africa re-imagined folktales contest." She lives in Nairobi where she spends most of her free time practicing Bikram Yoga.

The General

by Noel Cheruto

I once saw my father cry. On the day time stood still.

My inauguration day. I stood proudly on a podium at Kasarani National Stadium, a Bible in my right hand. It was not yet noon but the heat was relentless. The crowd—millions of Kenyans, as far as my eyes could see—sat in silent expectation. Their tiny flags hung limp in the still, sticky air. On my left was my wife Amina, her big colorful head wrap sitting precariously atop her round face. She looked radiant. Like she had swallowed the sun, and now it glowed from within her.

Further left stood my father, The General. He was at attention, completely still but for the occasional blink. I took him all in. His shoes were highly polished. His khaki uniform freshly pressed. The gold ornaments adorning his uniform glistened in the morning sun. Then I saw his eyes under his red cap with the black top. One teardrop danced on his lower left lid. Then another on his right. He blinked rapidly in a vain attempt to stop the tears. Mistake. Suddenly he was crying quietly, tears running down his face, falling on the gold stars on his red collar. He could not stop them. He could not hide them. He was standing at attention.

I felt his pride wrap around me softly, like a woolen blanket on a cold night. My heart exploded in joy. I finally had everything I ever wanted.

“I, Musa...”

Wait.

Why was there turmoil within me? In this moment—the highlight of my life—why did I feel so strongly that my darkness was on the brink of snuffing out my flame?

How did I get here?

*

“Aaaah! You are back.”

I smiled and hugged my jacket tighter around my torso. I had spent five years in England, studying political science at the University of Leicester. Lost in the backdrop of bitter winters and rainy summers was the memory of Nairobi in July. Chilly.

“I am so happy to see you!”

I watched silently as Kimani, my father’s driver, stashed my bags one after the other into an old white Toyota Land cruiser. He drove me straight to my father’s house in Lavington where Mama met me at the front porch with dramatic hugs and kisses.

My mother snatched my bags and shepherded me into the living room, to the two giant leather arm chairs by the window. My father was seated in one, his face buried under a Nation newspaper. He peeked over the paper, swept his eyes along my body from head to toe, then grunted heavily and went back to his reading. Mama held me by my shoulders and forcefully sat me on the opposite chair.

“Sit,” she commanded. “Talk to your father.”

I smiled at the irony. All my life I had heard not more than a thousand words come from my father’s mouth. He mostly spoke in grunts and sighs. And eyes. When I was a boy I lived in perpetual fear of those eyes. You see, my father was a powerful man. He was a high ranking general in the Kenyan army. Diplomats and politicians

alike sought his advice. He had lunch with the president at least once a week. He did not need to speak; his power spoke for him.

We sat there in easy silence. He, grunting and sighing behind the newspaper. I, sitting quietly by his side, enjoying the feeling in my heart. That feeling an only child—an only son—gets when he is finally home after five years away.

Mama came running down the staircase, screaming. Her hair disheveled, her clothes in disarray. She held my wooden treasure box against her hip, like a village woman would a dirty baby. I quickly realized what she had uncovered.

“Musa! What is the meaning of this?”

She set it on the wooden stool between the two giant chairs. I held my breath as The General opened the box slowly, cautiously. Mama had taken to whimpering softly from across the living room. She lay on the Persian rug, her face down, her hands strewn about awkwardly. The little dark patterns on the rug looked like ants marching toward her.

As usual, Mama had made it her business to unpack my luggage. While at it she had stumbled upon the treasure box. In it were pictures of my lover and me. Little pieces of memory I had brought home with me. In some, we were naked in bed. In others, kissing in the park. All this would have been acceptable were my lover a Kenyan girl from a good family. As life would have it, however, my lover was a beautiful Danish man with piercing blue eyes and a perfect set of teeth. I shrank into the armchair as The General looked through the photographs. He held each one delicately by its edges, studying it keenly, before setting it down and picking up the next.

Mama had long since collapsed and been carried away by the help.

The General studied the last picture then gathered them all in a neat stack. With a blank expression on his face he put them back in the box and silently went back to reading his paper.

We sat there for hours. The General, sighing and grunting behind his newspaper. I, watching the sun as it travelled excruciatingly slowly across the sky, until, finally,

it fell from exhaustion. Right there, in the transition between light and dark, The General walked up to me. I flinched, expecting him to hit me. Instead he rubbed my head gently, as he used to when I was a little boy.

“Musa,” he started quietly, still rubbing my head. “You are now a grown man. You will run this country one day. I saw it in my dreams before you were born. You have to learn to hide your darkness, lest it swallow your light.”

With that, he moved slowly towards the dining table, a signal that it was time for dinner.

Two weeks later my aunt Norah, The General’s sister, came to visit. With her was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her skin was darker than the honey Kimani brought from the plains of Kitui. There was something magical about that skin.

“This is Amina,” introduced Aunt Norah, giggling like a school girl. She was my least favorite aunt, an opportunist who masqueraded as a problem solver. She shoved Amina unceremoniously toward me.

Mama joined in on the obviously pre-planned skit.

“Musa, show her around. I need to talk privately to your aunty.” She used her lips to point us in the direction of my bedroom.

I turned to the General in slight desperation. He was watching me carefully from his big armchair by the window. He did not utter a single word, but I understood him immediately. I was to marry Amina.

I went upstairs toward my bedroom with Amina behind me, walking slowly. She had a very light step. It felt like she floated, not walked. I sat on my bed and glowered at her as she carefully perched herself on a stool by the door. Her face was perfectly round. Her nose, impossibly small. She was breath-taking.

She did not say a word. She looked shyly at the floor trying in vain to pull her short skirt toward her knee.

I glowered at her some more, hoping to scare her away.

“I am gay. Homosexual,” I spat out.

And just like that her demeanor changed. She stopped pulling at her skirt and moved to the large gray sofa in the corner, sitting with her legs folded under her like a yogi. She saw my packet of cigarettes, Embassy lights, reached for one and without asking lit it. Two thin streams of silver smoke drifted from her nose toward the open window.

My interest was piqued. She laughed gently as she told me her story. Her Muslim father had been hopelessly trying to marry her off because she brought a lot of shame to her family. In his opinion, she drank too much and wore tiny skirts, a symbol of rebellion that frustrated him to no end. His solution was to marry her off as she would then stop being his problem. We both laughed at our hopelessness and right then a strong friendship began.

A few days later, she called me.

“I will marry you.”

“Ok.”

“I never want to work again. Ever.”

“Ok.”

“You will provide everything I need, no matter how outrageous.”

“Ok.”

“You will keep your indiscretions secret. I will do the same.”

“Ok.”

“In public, in front of my family and friends, you are to hold me and kiss me. We will act like a perfect couple.”

“Ok.”

*

We married a year later in a beautiful ceremony by the sea. It has been a perfect partnership, better even than most marriages around us. She runs the home effortlessly and has a good spirit about her. She still makes me laugh, twenty-four years later. And my family loves her. Better yet, I gave her my sperm and she went about the business of getting herself pregnant. Twice. Two amazing daughters with perfectly round faces and impossibly small noses.

Now she was sitting on our bed, my wife Amina. Her hands were shaking. Her eyes bloodshot with anger.

“We have all worked hard, and sacrificed to get you here, Musa,” she hissed. “The General, your mother, and I. You want to give it all up because of your sexual desires? Your achievements are not yours alone! Don’t be selfish!”

She flung a brown envelope across the room toward me. It landed on my chest with a hard thud. I looked at it, afraid to open it. I had no doubt what it contained.

Amina looked at me, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Clean up your mess! I do not want to know how you made it, just clean it up!”

*

The big mess started a year before at Club Kiza along Galana Road in Kilimani. Through twenty years of hard work and careful strategizing, The General had gotten me the most enviable position in Kenyan politics. I was a tribal kingpin. I commanded the votes of Kenya’s largest tribe and with that came intoxicating power. It was a year to the general election, and tribal leaders were pushing and shoving. Everyone was looking to form an alliance that would win the elections. Everyone was looking to make an alliance with me.

We had locked out Club Kiza’s eighth floor balcony, making it accessible only to those we needed. We sat there overlooking Nairobi’s upmarket Kilimani drinking Tusker and smoking Embassy lights, listening to rhumba, and laughing a little too loud.

Being a politician is easy. The trick is to say a lot of empty nothings, to speak a lot. That way you play on the human need for affirmation. Everyone will pick out whatever it is they long to hear. To be a good politician you have to be completely empty, egoless. Do that and all people will see when they look at you is a reflection of themselves. And they will love you.

I excused myself to use the bathroom, which meant walking through the bar. Kimani, my father's old driver, walked with me. He went everywhere with me. He was now my bodyguard and right hand man, having been given to me by The General on my thirtieth birthday.

As I walked, my vision was pulled to a young man. He was on the dance floor, moving his slender hips beautifully, his hands up in the air, his eyes closed, lips syncing with the music. He had a big brass chain hanging from his slender neck. I was enchanted. I needed to know him.

I made a signal to Kimani and went about my business. Back to the balcony. Laughing loudly, making promises I did not intend to keep, and listening to blatant lies while pretending to believe them.

Being a politician is easy.

Later that night I made my way to a furnished apartment I rented along Statehouse Road. He was there, the young man from Club Kiza. He was waiting for me on my bed, naked, except for a silly pair of Mickey Mouse boxer shorts. I silently thanked Kimani. He had done this many times. We never spoke about it. He never failed me.

His name was Silas, and he was younger than I thought. Maybe eighteen, though he claimed to be twenty. Silas smiled uneasily at me as he sipped on red wine. I sat on the rug by the bed and looked at him. His presence took me back years.

When I was nine, my grandfather got me a cow. I called her Lelkina—the one with a white breast. Silas' eyes reminded me so much of Lelkina. He took me back to when I was young and free and did not have to live behind The General's shadow. I thought I would be a photographer then. I still remember the day Mama sat me down and told me that I did not birth myself, therefore I did not have the freedom

to choose my dreams. I would run this country. It was The General's desire that his only son run this country. She bought me a camera shortly after, I think because she felt sorry for me. I never touched that camera. It still lies unused in my old bedroom, in my father's house in Lavington.

It was a beautiful night, that night with Silas. We did not make love. I sat there on the bedside rug with Silas looking down on me from the edge of the bed. We drank and talked about everything, from photography, to lost dreams, to Machiavelli, to Obama. We did not notice the night softening into dawn. We did not notice the gentle light of sunrise sifting in through the windows. We did not notice anything but us.

I was startled by Kimani's call at eight in the morning. I had to be at a press conference in thirty minutes. He was waiting to take me. I got up and sat back down, laughing a little because I was drunk.

"Lick some sugar!" screeched Silas, jumping up and down on the bed like a child. He was so slender, his knees looked like door knobs.

"What?"

"Just do it!" He ran into the kitchen and brought a palmful of sugar, held it up to my mouth. I licked it, and felt the alcoholic haze clear in my head like mist on a warm morning.

That day, through the press conferences, the meetings, and the photo sessions, I thought of the young boy with silly Mickey Mouse shorts who knew how to sober up an older man in an instant.

What else did he know?

Would he be waiting for me when I got home?

He was.

I was so happy to see him. I ran up to him and hugged him again and again and kissed him passionately. We had dinner together, before I ran off to say goodnight

to my family then settled in at Club Kiza for another long night of brokering and politicking.

He moved in that week. Moved everything he owned to the apartment along Statehouse Road. I didn't ask him to. I didn't mind it either. In fact, I liked it. I spent most of those days, the crucial days before officially hitting the campaign trail, looking forward to dinner with my boy, the one whose eyes reminded me of my old cow Lelkina.

Days turned into months and the wear of being on the road started getting to me. I became moody, and irritable. I came home to Silas less and less as I preferred to spend the few hours a week I had in Nairobi with Amina and my daughters.

It was not really a matter of choice. I needed Amina. She had a cold but necessary way of analyzing my political moves. She spent whole days obsessing over every one of my words and actions in the news and online. When I came home, we would have dinner with the girls. After they went to bed we would sit by the pool, drinking Tuskers and smoking Embassy lights. She would hold my hand and gently guide me through the next day's strategies and moves. Of course she consulted with The General.

Silas became very unhappy. I tried all I could to appease him. I loved him, I just did not have the time to spend with him.

I bought him a new car. He was happy for a few days, then moody again.

I paid for a holiday in Dubai. I even gave him my credit card. He was happy for a few days, then mad again.

Finally, a few days before the elections, with tensions running high, and my blood pressure held down from killing me only by the promising polls, Silas sat me down.

"Musa, I am leaving you." I could see he had been crying. His long eyelashes were clumped together like tufts of grass. His large eyes were the color of a muddy river. "I am not happy."

“You can’t leave me. I won’t allow it.”

He looked at me, confused.

“You do not understand. What we do, you and I, is a secret. How can I trust that you will keep it after you leave? I might have to kill you, you know.”

I reached out to hug him but he shrank away, as if I were a snail.

“Please don’t leave me, Silas. I really do love you.” I meant it.

He ran out of the apartment like a frightened little mouse. I stood there for a long time after he left, trying to soothe the hopeless sadness I felt in my heart. That was the last time I saw him.

The next day, the envelope was delivered to my house by courier. The envelope threatening me and my career.

Amina was right. It was time to clean up my mess. I called Kimani.

*

We won the elections.

On inauguration morning, my whole family was gathered at The General’s house for breakfast. I went out to the garden to share one last cigarette with Kimani before leaving. Big, shiny limousines were lined up elegantly, ready to ferry us to Kasarani National Stadium.

My wife, Amina, came out of the front door, breathtaking in a long, colorful *kitenge*. Her head wrap hovered precariously, threatening to fall as she bent down to gather her skirt on the hook of her left index finger. She turned to me and smiled as my teenaged daughters joined her on the door step. One on either side. My mother walked out behind them, growling about her seamstress.

“*Pto!*” she cursed, spitting on the gravel for effect. “Foolish girl. Ordinary dress, she can’t sew!”

“Now the whole country will be looking at my backside, wondering whether I am deformed. Eh! Me! The General’s wife. Mscheew!” she turned her lips downward into a sneer. “Stupid girl, face like a *pundamilia*.”

We all burst out laughing at the idea of a seamstress with a zebra face who couldn’t sew an ordinary dress. Even The General laughed softly behind her. I stood back and beheld the sight of my family. My three ladies with their perfectly round faces and impossibly small noses, trying hard not to let happy tears ruin their make up. My mother with her dress that did look abit askew around her hips. And The General, in his full uniform, gold buttons glistening in the sun. This was my light, my joy.

I looked away and tried not to think of Silas, his body lying in Karura forest, probably being devoured by wild dogs. His throat slit open the Kimani way. I tried not to think of the twelve others that had come and gone like Silas. I tried not to think of the others who would inevitably come after.

Today was my inauguration day.

Copyright 2016 by Noel Cheruto

BONUS GUEST WRITER

Tarl Kudrick is the founder, co-publisher, and chief editor of *On The Premises* magazine. He has had about a dozen short stories published in various markets, including professional rate markets, and has had two stories accepted for publication by markets that went under before the stories could be printed. He isn't writing much anymore, but he might start again at some point.

[*On The Premises* editorial note: This story was originally sold to and published in *Chiaroscuro* magazine, also known as *Chizine*. *Chizine* doesn't publish short stories anymore, and almost none of the short stories it did publish can be found on the web. Tarl didn't want this story to vanish from the world, and it fits the "darkness" premise quite well, so he put it here.]

In Case of Doubt

by Tarl Kudrick

The smell of eggs, toasted flatbread, and ham woke the man, and his first thought upon waking was that he could no longer remember his name.

He'd fallen asleep fully clothed, in a brown suit and tie, in a hard wooden chair behind a large wooden desk in a room he somehow knew was exactly eighteen by twenty feet. The room had steel walls, a concrete ceiling and floor, and no windows. He couldn't remember how old he was, where he'd been born, where he was now, or why he was there. As he looked around, his eyes settled on a glass panel embedded in the steel wall to the right of the desk, not far from a toilet and circular shower stall. Behind the glass panel, a gold-colored computer disc sat on a plastic stand. Above the glass, a wooden sign with white, hand-painted letters hung from two iron hooks soldered into the wall. The sign said: IN CASE OF DOUBT BREAK GLASS. Below the sign, a small hammer lay across two more hooks.

The man stood in front of the glass panel, which shined in the light of the three two-hundred-watt bulbs screwed into sockets bolted to the ceiling. The man scratched his neck. He should have been far more frightened than he was, waking in a place so strange and unfamiliar. Except it wasn't unfamiliar. He knew the toilet wouldn't flush unless you reached into the septic tank and pulled the flush valve directly because the chain connecting the flush valve to the handle kept falling off. He knew the shower's hot water knob couldn't be turned too far or it would stick. Without looking, he knew that along with his breakfast, there would be a large white pill and a tall glass of water. He looked, and was both gratified and disturbed to be right.

He returned to his desk and searched for memories within his thick, foggy mind. He ate the egg and nibbled the ham. The desktop was empty save for breakfast, the pill, a telephone, and a laptop computer. The telephone had a wire that came out of its back and snaked down through a thin hole in the desk. So did the laptop.

The phone rang with an old-fashioned *br-rr-rr-ring* sound. The man wondered how he knew that sound was old-fashioned. The phone's two large pieces, a receiver and a base, were connected by a curly black cord. Hadn't phones once been so small they could fit in a pocket?

He answered the phone. A mechanical voice said, "Goat. Yellow. Pittsburgh. I don't like milk."

He slapped the space bar on the laptop's keyboard. A white cursor appeared on its screen. He typed in what the mechanical voice had said and pressed "enter." Something whirred. The words *315 Market Street no yes bring a gun* appeared. Acting on instinct, he spoke those words into the phone and hung up.

The man had no idea what time it was. Hadn't computers once had clocks in them? The laptop didn't. It did, however, have a thin slit in the right-hand side with a button next to it. He pushed the button and a gold-colored computer disc slid out. He knew the desk's large drawer contained such discs, all in transparent plastic cases. He opened the drawer and counted forty cases, thirty-nine with discs in them.

The computer sat, quiet and still. The man sat, just as quiet, but no longer still. He tapped the desk with his fingers to fight the room's silence. He stared at the glass panel and at the translucent reflection of his face. He looked about fifty. He thought about the large white pill still sitting on the tarnished, dull silver tray, next to the plate of eggs, toasted flatbread, and ham.

He flushed the pill down the toilet, walked over to the glass panel, smashed it with the hammer, and fed the IN CASE OF DOUBT disc into the laptop.

A recorded image of a man who looked almost exactly like him appeared. This man was a bit younger, less bald, and scowling. "So," this man said. "You want answers, right?"

The man who couldn't remember his life leaned closer.

"You don't want answers. I'm quoting you—me—when I say, 'Answers don't answer anything.' You have no idea how lucky you are. So quit whining and do your damn job."

The man's stomach tightened.

"Oh, and those white pills?" the recorded version of him said. "You'd better not be flushing them down the toilet again. They're keeping you alive, dumbass. Which reminds me. Breaking that panel triggered a sensor. Someone's going to bring you a drink soon. It'll smell like a piss milkshake and taste worse. Drink it."

The man said, "But—"

"No buts! You *begged* for a way to redeem yourself. Now you've got it, you lucky son of a bitch."

The screen blanked. The man who suddenly remembered he was forty-eight years old shook so hard he had to grip the sides of his chair.

He looked around the room. A curved, brass handle he hadn't noticed before stuck out from the farthest wall.

He crossed the room. The handle felt cold and solid. He turned it. With a click, a portion of the steel wall slid open like half of an elevator door.

The man looked into a hallway lit by one weak bulb. The hallway stretched farther than the light.

He entered it, feeling his way as he left the light behind. The hallway turned, then turned again. Now total darkness surrounded him. A few slow, careful steps later, he felt another steel wall in front of him. He felt for, found, and twisted another handle. The wall opened.

He stepped into a room a hundred times larger than the one he'd come from. This room was lit by bulbs scattered across the ceiling like stars. Vast sections of the room were dark. He couldn't see any more door handles in the steel walls.

A woman asked, "Did you deliver his breakfast?"

The man turned. A woman sat at an old wooden desk with a large black phone and a laptop. She wore a gray dress as plain as the walls. Stringy, possibly unwashed hair hung stiffly from her head. Her dull eyes stared.

"Yes," the man said, to see what would happen.

"Good. There's been an alarm." She headed straight for him. He backed up instinctively. Her low heels clopped unevenly as she walked, and she bumped into him as if drunk. Moments later, she said, "Excuse me."

He followed her into a dark area. He heard a click. Another hallway appeared. She stepped into it and he slipped through the door just before it closed.

This hallway was also lit by one bulb that didn't reach far enough. He walked behind her and was soon in such utter blackness that he reached for, and grasped, the woman's shoulder so he wouldn't lose her. She didn't react to his grip.

He tried to map, in his mind, how far they went in every direction and how often they turned, but the unlit maze defeated his soft, slow mind. Twice, he asked her name and got no answer. Finally she stopped and opened another door.

The room they entered was small and so alive with electric light, he winced. It had a table, two chairs, four cabinets, a wooden counter with a marble top, and a cast iron stove whose stovepipe went right into the concrete ceiling. A pale young kid, maybe seventeen, was feeding wood into a brick oven embedded in the steel wall next to the stove.

“Hi, Darrell,” the woman said.

The kid nodded. “Eliza.”

The man took his hand off Eliza’s shoulder and stared at the brick oven. He’d seen ovens like it in restaurants, a long time ago. The memory of restaurants thrilled him.

Eliza said, “Excuse me,” and headed for a wooden door in the opposite wall. She opened it and stepped into a pantry. She shuffled cans on a shelf.

Darrell slid closer to the man and whispered, “I heard Jeremy didn’t really die.”

“Jeremy?”

Darrell lowered his voice even more. “I heard he went to the other side. I always thought he was a traitor.” Then he looked at the man harder. “Wait. Are you a spy?”

The man had no idea.

Darrell grabbed his arm. “Eliza, I’ve caught a spy!”

She came out of the pantry with a can of diced tomatoes. “He’s with me, Darrell. He’s one of us.”

“But I’ve never seen him before!”

“He delivered Dr. Nivek’s breakfast.” She stared at Darrell for a while, then turned and bumped into the stove. She went back into the pantry, then said, “Excuse me.”

Nivek, the man thought. He knew that name.

A faint whistling caught his attention. He looked up and saw a hairline-thin rectangle in the ceiling. “Is that a door?”

Darrell lit a fire in the stove. “Sure. The farm’s up there.”

“The farm?”

“Sure. Where the eggs come from?” Darrell drew in a shocked breath and raced into the pantry. “Eliza, I think that guy’s a spy.”

“He’s not a spy,” Eliza said.

“Oh.” Darrell came out again.

Eliza exited the pantry with the same can of tomatoes she’d held before. “Please excuse him.” She pointed to her own head. “He was wounded.”

“I’m lucky to be alive,” Darrell said.

The man who was beginning to think his name was Nivek nodded. “I’d like to see the farm.”

“You can’t,” Eliza said. “That door only opens from the outside.” The tomato can slipped from her hand and banged against the concrete floor. She bent down, picked it up, and said, “Excuse me.” She gave the can to Darrell and re-entered the dark hallway.

The man knew he’d never find his way without her. “Eliza, wait!”

The darkness absorbed her. From some distance he heard, “Excuse me.”

The man gripped what was left of his hair in frustration. “Darrell, do you know how to get back to that big room?”

“Which big room?”

“How many...” No, that could wait. “Eliza’s. Where she sits at her desk.”

Darrell remained by the stove as if chained to it. “I have to stay here.”

The man looked at the door in the ceiling again. “Have you ever met Dr. Nivek?”

“Sure. Lots of times.”

Doubt filled the man again. Maybe he wasn’t Nivek. “Can you tell me about him?”

“Sure. I heard he built this place when the other side got everybody. This was his retreat, but he lets us stay because he’s really nice. Also, he needs our help.”

“He does?”

“Sure. He’s a lousy cook.” Darrell gave him that distrusting look again. “Are you some kind of spy?”

“I work for Dr. Nivek.”

Darrell nodded. “Well, go get Eliza, will you? I need more tomatoes.”

The man who thought he could easily still be Dr. Nivek stepped into the hallway. He remembered something called the “right-hand rule.” Any maze could be navigated by sticking close to the right-hand wall and following every turn it made. He put both his hands against that wall and sidestepped through the darkness.

He entered an area that smelled like decaying corpses. He pressed himself against the wall and stepped away from it one slow, sideways step at a time.

Two turns and two long corridors later, he found a door handle. He opened the wall and entered a room diffused with a different kind of light—light not from bulbs, but windows.

The room was about the size of a standard corporate office. He no longer wondered how he knew what that was. Windows in the wall opposite him were higher than usual; he could have rested his chin on the windowsills. The windows were dirty and scratched on the outside, at least two feet thick, and were sunk directly into the steel walls. Through them he saw dense mist up close, and mountains far away.

Wherever he was, he was high up. He might have been looking out the side of a mountain.

The room's only other distinctive feature was a seven-story bookcase. Each shelf held at least two hundred computer discs, each in a thin, transparent case. The cases had deep notches carved into their hinged side. He ran his fingers over the notches. They felt familiar.

He heard a phone ring. The room had no phone. He could just barely hear someone talking.

A few moments later the wall between the windows and the bookshelf slid apart. A black man wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and blue tie stepped forward. Behind the black man was a desk with a telephone and a laptop computer. A red and gold rug lay in front of the desk.

The black man smiled at him. "That didn't take long."

The door to the dark hallway opened again and Eliza stepped through. "Wallace," she said to the black man, "Dr. Nivek isn't in his room. He ate his breakfast but—"

"I'm aware of the situation," Wallace told her. His voice was as soft as a pillow. "Everything is under control."

Embarrassment flickered in Eliza's flat face. She retreated into the hallway. She said "Excuse me" from a distance down the corridor.

The man who thought he could still be Nivek stared into Wallace's accepting eyes. "Look. I left myself a message saying I didn't want answers, but I do. Everybody here seems to have some kind of—I don't know, mental problem or something, and—"

"Really?" Wallace asked.

Was Wallace taking him seriously? "Yes, and all this business about the farm, and what's outside, and—"

"You can see what's outside." Wallace gestured to the windows.

“I don’t see much out there.”

“There’s very little left to see. I can show you more, if you want—”

“Good, because—”

“—but I have work to do first. I have a very important message to deliver. It’s vital to our survival.”

Wallace went to the bookcase, studied it carefully, and pulled out four cases, each from a different shelf. Then he went back to his office.

The man followed. Wallace slid one of the computer discs into his laptop. Some kind of list appeared on the screen—titles, it seemed like. “Disc B-166, eleventh book, fiftieth page, fortieth word,” Wallace said, navigating through the menu of titles, then through the pages of a scanned book that filled the screen. Wallace counted the words on page 50. “Lighthouse,” he said. He ejected that disc and put the next one in.

The man looked around Wallace’s office. Like him, Wallace had a toilet, shower, a closet, and a clothing rack full of suits. Dark blue suits.

“Splendid,” Wallace said as he ejected the second disc.

“What’s splendid?”

“Why, the eighth word on page 102 of book five on disc A-16.”

The man nodded and stared at the windows in the other room. “Wallace, where do you get your instructions about what words to look up?”

“Why, over the phone, of course.”

“Do you know who calls you?”

“No, and it’s best that I don’t.” He tapped keys and the pages of another scanned book spun by. “Anyone who captures me will learn nothing useful.” A few moments passed, then Wallace said, “I have faith in the plan.”

“What plan?”

Wallace chuckled. “That’s the fifteenth sentence on—”

“I get it.” Irritated, he jammed his hands into his pockets.

Wallace put in one more disk, said “elephant,” then put the last disc back in its case. “I don’t wish to be rude, but I must deliver this message. Our side is depending on it, you know. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Please wait here.” He walked through the room with the windows and entered the dark hallway.

The man looked at Wallace’s desk. It had only one drawer. He opened it and found a large yellow envelope with “To banish doubt” written on it in red marker.

He pulled a gold disc out of that envelope and put it in Wallace’s computer. A recorded image of Wallace, perhaps four or five years younger and with brighter eyes, appeared. “I see the bad thoughts have returned,” the recording said. “My friend, you simply must trust yourself—you are performing a great service that will save all who remain from a terrible enemy. If I say more, both you and your vital mission will be endangered. But look behind me. Do you see anyone holding a gun to my head? Do I seem brainwashed? I record this of my own free will because I know that I... you... will occasionally succumb to weakness.” The recorded Wallace sighed and spoke as if pleading. “Dr. Nivek says people cannot be happy unless their lives have purpose. You have a purpose, Wallace Hundy. When the phone rings, answer it, and look up the right words. You know how. You put the notches in the cases. The future of humanity depends on you.”

The man gripped the desk as his legs weakened. He remembered a video camera in a small room somewhere, and a line of people waiting to use it. He remembered standing in that line.

“And the white pills,” the recorded Wallace added. “There is a terrible sickness in the air. You must swallow a white pill every day, or you will die, and your mission will fail.” The recorded smile was brighter than the computer screen. “Someone will bring you a thick yellow drink soon. It will be truly distasteful, but drink it anyway. It will give you the strength your mission requires.”

After a few moments in which the world seemed utterly empty and he could not feel himself breathe, the man put Wallace's disc back into its envelope and the envelope back into the drawer.

He walked over to the bookshelf of discs. The feeling that something had gone disastrously wrong would not leave him. The messages. The phone calls. Who was sending Wallace orders? When he relayed his own messages, who was listening?

Someone outside.

Someone had put him here, drugged him, and made him work the phones. He remembered a group of them, maybe ten in all, walking through the underground bunkers. He remembered more than one bunker. He remembered having a choice, once.

He needed to contact the outside world. The messages he received and gave made no sense to him, but someone—someone outside this place—understood them. He wondered what would happen if the messages stopped making sense, even to whoever needed them.

He pulled a disc case off the shelf. The disc itself had no markings on it. He put it back and examined another. It was the same. There was no way to tell the discs apart by looking at them, just at their cases. Relying on the cases alone was a foolish indexing system, but maybe there hadn't been time for anything better. And it gave him the perfect way to catch the attention of whoever eventually got all their messages.

He grabbed cases at random and switched their discs without changing the cases' layout. Wallace's next message wouldn't just sound like nonsense, it would *be* nonsense. Whoever received such a message would have no choice but to come out here and see what was going on. Grinning, the man swapped disc after disc.

He'd mixed up over a hundred of them before hearing footsteps in the hall. He slapped two final cases shut, put them back, and stepped away from the bookshelf.

Wallace came in, carrying a glass of yellow, milky liquid. “This will calm your soul and energize your mind.”

The man took the glass. “I’ll drink this if you answer some questions. I suspect you’ve been given this liquid, too. Who gave it to you?”

Wallace tilted his head. “Maybe someone did. I recall the smell... but it was a long time ago, I think.” His plastic smile returned. “I don’t remember.”

The man steadied himself. “Wallace, am I Dr. Nivek?”

Wallace’s surprise sank his heart. “Of course not!” Wallace looked down the dark hallway behind him, then lowered his voice. “Eliza is Dr. Nivek. Please don’t tell her. She’s confused enough already. She’s been... injured.”

The man who once again knew nothing about his life felt the glass in his hand grow heavy and cold. The phone in Wallace’s office rang its old-fashioned ring. Wallace walked towards it.

“Wait!” He grabbed Wallace’s wrist. “The other side. Who are we fighting?”

Wallace yanked his wrist away, ran to his desk, answered the phone, listened, wrote notes on a small pad, then hung up.

“Wallace?”

Wallace’s voice was tense. “Never interrupt my work again. It’s vital.” He went to the bookshelf and selected four cases.

“Wallace!”

“Madness.”

“What?”

Wallace relaxed and held the four cases to his chest. “We fight madness, my friend. Humanity is fighting to remain on the correct side of sanity. Drink your medicine.”

Wallace went back into his office and shut the door.

The man turned back to the thick, long windows. Sunlight had burned away the fog outside. He stared down into an open, desolate valley that looked as if steamrollers had crushed everything in it. Tiny, unmoving dots spilled over the land. They might have been tree trunks. He might have been looking at a felled forest.

Something was moving down there. Two vague masses on the ground.

He thought he heard a shrieking wind.

The two vague shapes crashed into each other and scattered into pieces, like debris from an explosion. They seemed smaller than insects, and that was what made him realize he was looking at people, two mobs of people, slicing into each other. By the dozens, the little pieces stopped moving. The vague shapes thrashed and wobbled, then—little by little—settled.

Now the landscape had even more of those tiny, unmoving dots that were not tree stumps after all.

The man heard giggling from the other side of Wallace's door.

The man who knew almost nothing felt condensation form on the glass in his hand. He had another memory, a faint one, of previously ransacking the bookshelf behind him, switching dozens of discs around just like he'd done a few minutes ago. He remembered a time before that when he'd switched every single one. Always hoping to get someone's attention. To make someone come and fix things.

He wondered how much pain he felt when no one ever came.

The glass pressed against his lips. The yellow liquid touched his tongue. He stared out the window, at all those little dots. The liquid smelled like a piss milkshake and tasted worse. He drank every drop.

Copyright 2012, 2016 by Tarl Kudrick