



**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #3
NOVEMBER 2007



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ARE USING SOME KIND
OF PHYSICAL DISGUISE TO PRETEND TO BE
SOMEBODY OR SOMETHING THEY'RE NOT....**

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New Voices

Here in northern Virginia, the jack-o'-lanterns are turning black on the inside, the weather is cooler (finally!), and things at On The Premises are winding down after a very busy October. What a great contest! A record 98 authors entered stories that surprised and intrigued us, using the Disguised premise in ways we hadn't imagined (and not using it in ways we had).

Almost as surprising as the stories was the diversity of authors who responded to our challenge. For the first time ever we received entries from countries on four continents. Authors sent us their first-ever short stories, their first-ever stories in English, or even their first-ever fiction efforts. On The Premises strives to be a good place to start. Apparently our authors agree.

Bottom line? The competition was tough. Our winning authors told complete stories that used the premise well, grabbed our attention immediately, and held it all the way through. All six winning stories do that, whether they come from established authors like our second place winner, or someone making his first fiction sale, like our first place winner.

Adding to the diversity of our third issue, we bring you two special guests. One is writer Blanche Kapustin, a prize judge who uses her intimate knowledge of college mascot life to imagine what might happen if a school's mascot were a lazy slacker. The other is cartoonist Erika Moen, who shows us six Halloween costumes for the pathetically unmotivated.

(As Tarl says, none of the entries we received focused on slackers. We saw a gap, and filled it.)

Keep writing and keep reading!

Bethany Granger,
co-publisher of On The Premises magazine

Cartoons!

by Erika Moen (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

This issue, please welcome special guest cartoonist Erika Moen. She's subbing for our regular cartoonist, who was abducted by drunk female undergraduates in alien costumes who kept talking about "probes" and giggling a lot. I bravely volunteered to take his place, but Francis, being the gallant and selfless man he is, said "Out of my way, you idiot," and went back with them to their "flying saucer," which looked suspiciously like a 1967 VW van.

We at OTP hope to hear from him again soon.

In the meantime, we like helping lesser-known cartoonists as much as we do writers, so we gave Erika a chance and we think she came through for us big time. She handled the art while Tarl Kudrick wrote the jokes.

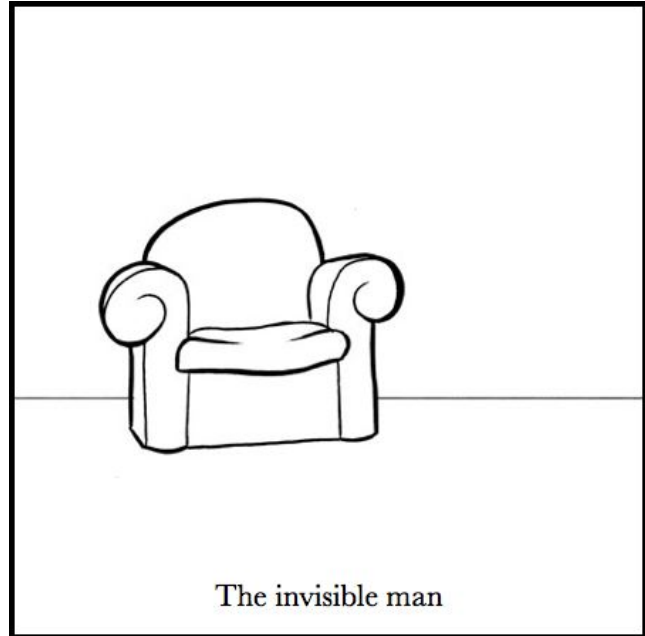
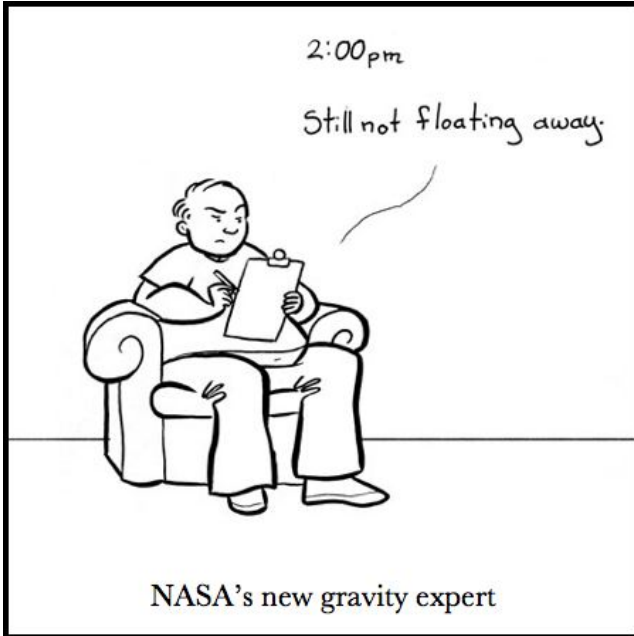
Halloween Costumes for the Pathetically Unmotivated



Motivational speaker



Rip Van Winkle



FIRST PRIZE

Max Gladstone currently lives, writes, and teaches in the Yellow Mountain region of southern China. You can find more of Max's work on his website www.maxgladstone.com, including samples from his two novels. This story represents his first short fiction sale.

The Mask on the Island

by Max Gladstone

Derrick Gaspard slept soundly because he did not believe in ghosts. His enemies were over a decade dead: his first wife slain in her bed, his younger brother poisoned by a dart in Shanghai, the Xu family irradiated in their undersea lair. He rested secure in his home on his island, surrounded by guards and the loyal sons he had raised with his second wife, and kept a gun under his pillow and a knife at his shin.

But when he woke in the night and saw the moon-cast shadows on his ceiling and heard the wind outside the great glass window, he felt death in the bedroom with him. He reached beneath his pillow and touched the handle of his gun, cold and heavy against the smooth cotton of the sheets.

A cool, sharp blade lay against his throat, and a silken voice slithered into his left ear. "Release the weapon, and sit up."

"You won't leave this room alive," Derrick said.

"Perhaps. But if you call your guards, you will certainly die, and perhaps I will escape."

“I’m not afraid of death.”

“You were not afraid ten years ago. Now you have nothing to die for. I’m invisible to your alarms. Guards will only come if they’re called. If you call them, you die. And I am not here to kill you.”

“Then take your knife away from my throat.”

“Sit up, slowly.”

The knife moved with him as he did so, its edge as gentle and sharp as the straight razor he shaved with every morning. The covers pooled around his waist, and moonlight from the window played on the graying hair of his chest. Beneath the hair, his flesh was crisscrossed with old scars. He didn’t look left. He knew the rules. The first thing he had to do was take control. Sometimes that was as easy as asking a question. “What now?”

“Stand.”

As he turned to obey, the knife left his throat for the instant he needed. He dropped and rolled forward, one hand darting to the calf sheath that held his own blade. He came up in a fighter’s crouch, and whirled to face—

Himself. His own face above a knotted tie, his own body clad in his own dark suit. Perfect, down to the scarring on his neck from when the Xu family left him to hang fifteen years ago. The black-bladed serrated combat knife probably wasn’t his, but he owned twenty of its doubles.

“Drop the knife, Derrick.”

“That’s not going to save you.” Derrick said with a glance to the other’s blade. He was old, but fast, and still strong. He had first killed with a knife at age seven.

“No,” the other acknowledged with a nod. “But this will.” And he raised his pistol—a silenced .45. “I can put a whole clip in your eye before you close with me. I don’t want to kill you now. I just want to talk.”

Even the voice was his own. He dropped the knife.

“Good. Now.” The other Derrick motioned with the gun to the red robe folded on the bedside table. “Cover yourself. We have a lot to discuss.”

He pulled on the robe. There were other weapons in this room, and silent alarms. He just needed to string this assassin along until he could get to one. He tied the sash around his waist. “What should I call you?”

“You can call me Gray,” the other said. “Now, would you please take a seat by the fireplace?”

*

The next morning, Derrick woke in a cold sweat and staggered to the shower, past the guards he had called after Gray left. Water steamed over and around him, but couldn't banish the cold from his bones. His reflection watched him from the chrome and steel fixtures of his shower stall, distorted and blurred by steam.

His assistant Gavriel met him in his office, precise as always and dressed in black, her iron gray hair pulled back from her round face. He watched her, waiting for her to say something, but knew she wouldn't. She always let the boss speak first when he was nervous.

“How long have you been with me, Gavriel?”

“In what capacity, sir?”

“Any capacity.”

“I was first assigned to coordinate efforts to track you down and kill you thirty-five years and eleven months ago last Tuesday. If I recall correctly.” And she always did. “I've always considered that the beginning of our professional relationship.”

“And during that time, what is the most intimate we have ever been?”

She raised an eyebrow, but answered anyway. “During the Christmas party the year after your first wife sold you out to the Company—that would have been in seventy-six—we spent a sloppy half-hour or so necking in a closet. After that we each established a policy against drinking champagne when depressed.”

Derrick leaned back in his leather chair. He had built his office underground at the edge of the island, safe from the prying eyes of satellites and spy planes, and from long-range missile attack. One window took up its entire back wall, affording a panoramic undersea view of the reef at the bottom of the bay. A manta ray swam by, beating its slick silver wings; schools of little bright-colored fish flitted through the razor-sharp coral. If he craned his neck, he could see the black bottoms of his patrol boats further out, circling the quicksilver surface of the ocean, wards against any threat.

“Last night, an assassin came to my room.”

Her face was grave. “I heard. But who—”

“It’s an old contract, I think. Maybe even from the Xu days. This ‘Gray’ has taken years, studied me. Waited. And now he’s here. He announced himself to make me sweat. He’ll bide his time, and strike when my guard is down.”

“We’ll find him if he’s still on the island.”

“Maybe. Maybe we won’t. When he came to see me, he was me. Disguised perfectly. It was better than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh.” She took a slight step back, crossed her arms, and looked at him for a long moment.

He returned her gaze levelly, searching her as she searched him. “I don’t have any proof that I’m not him. I don’t have any proof that you’re not him either.”

“Come now.”

“He’s studied me—us—for years. He may have been one of us for a long time; he might even be one of us right now. The closer people are, the less we can trust them.” He leaned forward, elbows on his desk, fingers interlaced, and stared at something that wasn’t there. “Bring me my sons.”

*

Gray stood by the mantle, gun in his hand, wrapped in shadow. He stared into the empty marble fireplace with an expression Derrick recognized from windows and mirrors he had passed while deep in thought.

“It’s impressive,” Derrick said, softly. “Your disguise.”

“It’s a technique,” Gray replied. “Like any other. Gained through pain and experience, practiced over time. Honed.”

No pride in that voice, no hubris. Try another tactic. “You use prosthetics?”

“As few prosthetics as possible,” Gray said. “It’s a whole body thing. Mental, physical. So much information is coded in a person’s walk, in their facial expressions, in the tilt of their head when they ask a question. Twitches in the corner of the eye. Prosthetics can cover that up, make true impersonation impossible if one isn’t careful.” His gun didn’t waver. The dark mouth of the silencer still pointed straight at Derrick’s chest.

Lies and half-truths. He wouldn’t have told his secrets, either, with a target at his mercy. He wouldn’t have spoken at all. Why this conversation? If he made any loud noise, guards would storm the bedroom, and Gray, or whatever his name was, would die—maybe both of them, in the confusion. Why talk to your target?

When Gray spoke, his voice, though still Derrick’s own, lacked its earlier menace.

“What’s in this life for you, Mr. Gaspard?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ve gone through a lot of trouble to remain alive. You worked for Aegis before most kids get out of high school. They taught you how to kill, and how to steal, and how to serve mankind. And then you went into business for yourself.”

“Then I went into business for myself.” He spoke the words out loud to taste them, and remembered Aegis headquarters burning, remembered the screams. “They taught me to serve mankind. They weren’t serving mankind. Nobody can.”

“So you serve yourself.”

“So I do what I can do, which is ensure strength and security for myself, for my family.”

A map of the island hung above his mantelpiece, installations marked in red, defensive perimeters in purple, roads shown as thick dark lines. Off the coast, whales spouted from the black deep, amid sea monsters and blinking beacons. “And from here, you build your world,” Gray said.

“Yes.”

“And that’s worth it to you? Worth your life?”

Derrick’s left hand was a quick strike away from the hidden catch in the second brick from the left corner of the fireplace, tenth from the bottom: the silent alarm. Gray couldn’t have deactivated that one. But he couldn’t spare the brick a glance, as long as the gun was trained on him. “Of course. I have power. Control. This world is mine to shape, and I have shaped it for years. My enemies are dead by my hand or hands I hired. My children and my forces rule the seas and walk unafraid on the land. The men and women of the cities know nothing of me, because their governments won’t let them know people like me exist. I have made myself a world.”

“And now you’re about to die.”

“You said you weren’t going to kill me.”

“I said I wasn’t going to kill you now. I didn’t say anything about later.”

Outside, the wind.

“Isn’t that what life’s all about, though?” Derrick asked the ceiling. “Making things? Becoming yourself?”

“Not always,” Gray said through Derrick’s thin, hard lips.

*

Derrick's sons came separately, and armed. Victor, the youngest, was the first to arrive. He wore a black blazer and pale slacks and moved soundlessly, dangerously.

"Father."

Marius was next, dark circles under his brown eyes, clothes and hair in disarray. He had been up late working on the Sri Lankan job. A bioweapons deal didn't plan itself, not when one intended to sell to both sides, especially not when the weapons in question had to be lifted from a government facility in Argentina. He grunted a hello, which Derrick returned with an approving nod. Enterprise.

And last came Alain, the dark-haired king of the sea. His skin was nearly black from the Pacific sun, weathered and pitted by the spray. Their military answered to him, as the arms business answered to Marius, and the assassins to Victor. His voice was deeper than Derrick's, his shoulders broader.

"Hi, Dad," he said.

Derrick looked over the three of them, tall and short, stocky and slender, all strong, all fast, all smart. They were the best of his genes, of their mother's genes; products of the finest education and martial training, hardened by wars and their own will. And here they were.

He saw their square faces, their strong jaws so like his, and loved them, and trusted them absolutely. But Gray might have counted on that.

"Give me your weapons," he said.

They did not pause to look at each other. In a moment, four handguns were on the desk—a pearl-handled .45, a Desert Eagle, a utilitarian Glock, and Victor's derringer, small enough to fit in the palm. Derrick picked up each in turn, popped their clips, examined both weapon and ammunition. Satisfied, he returned them to the boys.

It was hard to say the words, but he had to say them: "There is a traitor among us. An assassin."

They said nothing. They had been told.

“He came to my room last night, disguised perfectly as me—not to kill, yet, but to gloat. He is among us even now. Among those we trust—I trust.”

And they understood.

*

“Consider,” Gray continued, “yourself. You say you are what you make yourself. But which one of us is really you? No one who entered this room would be able to choose between us. I know your passcodes, I know the little things you hold as secrets—or think you hold as secrets. I have your identity, as I can have anyone’s, with only a little twist of the features. Like so.”

And something about Gray’s face changed—not the distance between the eyes, not the angle of the jaw or the wrinkles of the brow or the scars at the neck. Yet something was different, and now Derrick saw it, peering through the layers of makeup—

His first wife. He had ordered her death. He had seen her corpse. “Gwendolyne?”

“No.” The resemblance faded, and Gray was Derrick Gaspard again. “But you saw her here, even though it was just me.” Gray’s face changed, and Derrick saw his son Victor, and Oscar Xu, and Gavriel, and a host of others, men and women in his employ and out of it, enemies and friends, dead and living. And then they all submerged beneath his own face—a mask, like any other. “It’s a simple trick. Just be born...mutable.”

Derrick laid his hands in his lap, all thought of the alarm gone. “A man could make a lot of money with a talent like that. Or a woman.”

“I’m not for sale.”

“Somebody hired you.”

Gray began to pace before the empty fireplace, zebra-stripes of shadow rolling over him as he moved. “I didn’t take the job because I wanted money, Mr. Gaspard. I can get that whenever I care to. Nor did I take the job because I relish the kill. I’m here because I want to understand you.”

“Understand me.”

“Yes.” Still the deadly precision of that aim, intractable—the only thing about Gray that did not shift, no matter the face he wore. “What drives you to build? Or to destroy? You have killed your kin, you have betrayed any country that you might once have called home. And now I find you here, settled into your life of lordship and depravity, the man on the island, secure and absolute.”

And there it was—the opening. Not in a moment of distraction, but in a moment of eloquence. Gray was a professional, but whoever hired him had missed that edge of obsession, the wisp of vendetta or instability that, properly exploited, could shatter professionalism.

“You’re not here to understand me, Gray. You’re here to understand yourself.”

*

“What do you want us to do?” Alain asked.

Bare your thoughts to me. Open your mind and let me see inside. Believe in me more than I can believe in you. “I need to know if I can trust you.”

“Ask us anything, Father.” Victor leaned forward in his chair. “Ask anything and we will do it.”

“But anything I ask you, he may have thought of first. He’s prepared for us—when he showed me his many faces, you were all there, as were a host of our friends and enemies, some of whom have been dead for years. You all leave the island to carry out our operations. One of you could have been set upon shoreside, overpowered—”

Victor chuckled at that, but controlled himself when Derrick shot him an angry glance.

“Overpowered,” he repeated. “It is possible. And then they would have... examined you.”

“You can’t believe we’d—”

Derrick cut Marius off. "People talk, even when they don't mean to. You don't need torture. You three should know that at least."

"Yes," said Alain.

"And," Victor put in, "he wouldn't necessarily need information. Just some time to see how we move and handle trouble. Any information he wanted, he could get in other ways. There are files on us, after all."

"Which is the problem," said Derrick. He stood. His shadow extended before him, edges rippling with the underwater light. "There are files on us longer than *War and Peace*. This man could know anything, everything about us—scars, hidden bodies, birthdays, where we had our first kiss." His had been in the backyard of his orphanage, with a girl two years his senior, with beautiful dark hair. "He may have been here, on our island, for weeks, months, years for all we know, learning, studying. And now that he's announced himself, he'll sabotage our plans, become a canker in our mouth, stinging as we chew on the world. We must trust one another, and work together. And all I can do to be sure of each of you is ask this one question."

He turned to Alain and looked into his deep black eyes.

"Do you love me?"

*

"I understand myself," Gray said.

"No." Derrick stood slowly. "You don't. You won't kill me, because you want to know what drives me. Because you've never known what drives you."

"I'm driven to become. I make myself every day, every moment. I make myself in service, in your death, and in the destruction of what you've created here."

"But who are you, under that makeup, under your fancy face games? You're nobody. A fragment of a man, or of a woman." Derrick closed the distance between them as he spoke, his footfalls light on the red and gold rug. Gray was exactly Derrick's height, which surprised him more than he'd expected. Scars, eye color,

hair, voice, all these things could be faked, but height—he had thought that would have been harder. “You’re a bear cub before it’s been licked into form.”

They stood exactly eye-to-eye now.

Gray’s voice, when he spoke, was colder than Derrick had expected. He—she—it—was off-balance, but not enough to create an opening. “You’re a mass murderer, Mr. Gaspard. You’ve broken nations. You’ve killed your own family.”

“Yes. I did those things. Me. What have you done? Who are you? Aegis’ hound? Some last servant of the Xu family, hunting me down across the years? Who are you beneath your masks?”

“I am what I’m ordered to be. Or what I want to be.”

“You’ve never wanted, never decided. You’ve never known what you are.”

“No.” Gray shook his head. They were so close now that when Derrick breathed in, his chest brushed the barrel of Gray’s gun. “I decided. I lay broken and bleeding, young and abandoned, on an open plain beneath a driving storm, and I decided I would be what was needed. Whatever was needed, wherever it was needed.”

*

“What?” his son asked.

“Do you love me, Alain?”

He searched the young man’s strong face, the dark skin around his eyes, the pronounced muscles of his jaw, the smooth curve of forehead. He felt it within himself, the bond, the pull to protect. His world, all he had built, was bound up in this tight, muscular form. Don’t let it be Alain. Alain, who had fallen once, as a child, and sprained his ankle. Spent the rest of the month on crutches; by the end of that time he could kill with them. His arms had been strong ever since. Don’t let it be Alain. And yet in his son’s face he saw...what?

“Sir, I—”

And out of the corner of his eye, he saw Victor lean forward, focused, concerned, wearing an expression Derrick had never seen before. For a moment, Victor was something other than his son.

Derrick raised his weapon in a blur of black and grey—

Two loud noises.

*

Derrick told Gray: “And inside, under it all, you’re the same kid you were then, small, terrified, makeup streaked by the storm. You’ve become me, and you’re going to kill me. It’s a shame.” Gray’s expression hadn’t changed, but now, beneath it, Derrick could just see the outline of an alien face, formless and soft. “You’ve got talent. You could have become strong, but look at you. You can’t even tell me why you’re here, why you’ll kill me.”

“But I will.”

“Big deal. Many people have tried. And if one of them had succeeded before you, I would have died as myself. Evil, you say, but myself. You were nobody. And you’ll be nobody long after I’m gone.”

Gray closed his eyes then, but before Derrick could move, Gray fired. A tiny dart buried itself in Derrick’s chest, and the big man slowed and fell.

“But I’ll still be here,” Gray said, and dragged Derrick’s unconscious body back to bed.

*

Derrick felt the bullet enter him as a sudden weight in his chest, and slumped, his left side numb. He saw Alain fall too, blood leaking from a pea-sized hole in his breastbone. Victor’s weapons were small in caliber, but powerful. Love. Trust.

He could add it all up as he bled out on the floor, gasping for breath.

Alain, seeing his father turn on Victor, had believed, for the necessary second, that Derrick himself was the impersonator. And Victor, seeing his brother kill their father, had thought it was Alain.

And here he was, Derrick Gaspard, dying. He tried to speak, but blood filled his mouth.

He had been somebody, dammit.

*

Gray was one of the two orderlies who came in to clean up. Later, he was the coroner's assistant who conducted the autopsy. For a lark, he became a guard, and for the fifteen minutes necessary to get himself onto the beach, he was Gavriel. Gaspard's organization was already falling apart. Victor had disappeared, while Marius ran about trying to get guarantees of loyalty from his father's old friends and servants. Without Alain's charisma, the men wouldn't fall into line, and with Victor absent, there were already whispers Marius had initiated a coup, that there had been no assassin after all.

Gray started some of those whispers himself.

And in a way, they were true. There had been no assassin, no need to kill or even impersonate, not really. All Derrick Gaspard needed, all anyone needed, was a bit of a push, a bare hint that those he relied upon might not, in fact, be all they seemed. And after that, everything followed naturally, because people were always more than they seemed. Or less.

Gray stopped being Gavriel and became, for a moment, a man he had passed in Beijing years ago, thin and small and flushed, a drifter, a bum, a man without a past and without a future.

"I could become you," he said to himself, under his breath, to Gaspard's voice in his mind.

But Gaspard was dead.

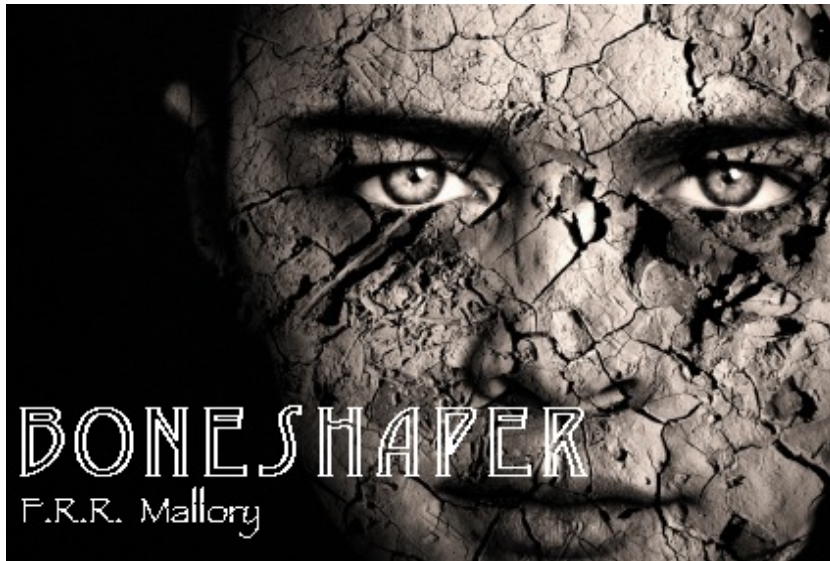
Gray dug his scuba gear out from the sand where it lay concealed and strapped it on over his wetsuit. He fastened the mask on his face and walked out into the water until it covered him.

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SECOND PLACE

F.R.R. Mallory lives in Northern California and is currently working toward an upper degree in Neuro-Psychology. She writes nonfiction articles/essays as well as literary, speculative fiction and erotica. She is the author of *Extreme Space* (nonfiction), and the erotica books: *18*, *Rhapsody*, and *Not Quite Forbidden*, and the gothic romance, *Gornoston*. Recent published short fiction and article selections can be found in *Freya's Bower: of Lilies and Cherie* (2007), *Fishnet Magazine: Folsom* (2007), *FATE Magazine: Let's Get Psychic* (2006), *Wild Child Publishing: When The Swords Fell* (2006) as well as others. Her author website can be found at <http://www.mallorywrites.com>.

[Editor's note: When she learned her story would be published, this author sent us a picture to go with her story. Good idea? Bad idea? Let us know at Feedback@OnThePremises.com.]



I hear Mam coming long before the steel door crashes open and pours exhaust fumes, blaring horns, and a child's screams down the basement stairs. As the door slams shut, the odors and sounds are trapped inside the circular stone room that is the womb.

The child tumbles down the masonry steps to slide face-first across the floor. She hiccups, then screams again as she sees me. I grin, knowing she'll see my missing

front teeth. She scrambles backward leaving a trail of blood smears until she's inside one of Mam's power rings. She reminds me of my own arrival and my great fortune of knocking out a baby tooth when I hit the floor. That tooth is why I'm still alive.

Once inside either of the two power rings, a child is safe. She can survive if she learns not to cross the inch-wide cuts in the cobbles that define the boundaries of each ring. It is a prisoned survival providing tutelage of all that Mam does and is. I have guessed this is why the rings exist, though I cannot imagine Mam creating them—they seem more a design forced on her. Inside each ring the floor slopes toward a five-inch drain fed by a channel worn into the stone by water that seeps through the wall. Only now, with four of my adult teeth woven into my growing necklace, do I have the ability to see the wall of energy that rises from the rings. I know Mam can see and hear me inside my ring just as I can see and hear her, but the energy is a boundary she can't cross.

The glory of Mam's teeth and hair robe sweeps aside all lingering thought. I rejoice as the teeth's chorus washes over me. The teeth speak of everything they've experienced, giving me a taste of the intimacy of connection I long for above all other desires. I bend and twist in a lover's dance as Mam, the Uja Boneshaper, enters the womb. When she's absent, I grieve the loss of the teeth for then I am truly and utterly alone.

We stand equal in height now, though I've no memory of when that happened. To me, Mam rises like the buildings of my distant memory, scraping the top of the world. Her body's sheathed neck to heel in the robe. Her head, bald from frequent plucking, is scarred with cut marks, as is my own. She spares me no notice, nor the child. Using her power she waves the cauldron's flames to life. She chitters at the moisture clinging to the ceiling pipes, urging the water to drip into the pot. Her cauldron burns on her energy.

My toes find my own ring's edge. I shuffle back and forth until I sway like a pendulous cobra seeking every whisper. Mam's robe tells me of the world above, the path of her journey, the wresting of this child from parents so lost to true sight that Mam flowed among them, a dark breeze, to carry off their daughter. The robe glories in its ability to mimic what people expect to see, its only telltale mark a

constant ripple of movement, as if the surface being looked at is crossed by a liquid film. It is this ability that provides the perfection of Mam's disguise, allowing her to invade and steal a girl right from the safety of her bedroom. The teeth mock, belittle and betray, their stories spoken from all sides for once, they too had been sundered by Mam. In the time before they were freed from flesh and silence, they had thought themselves wise and safe, their world known and kind. My broken tooth had allowed me to hear them from the first day I entered the womb and since then, they'd taught me everything about Mam.

Water boils. The child whimpers. She's not brave enough to flee toward the stairs. Mam has taken twenty-three girls since me, most from places I've never heard of. I remember my own pulsating terror when Mam drew me under the robe, inside the robe, disappearing me to the outside world. She only takes females. Bright with energy. The womb is crowded with ghosts, all stirring now as the girl's fear summons memories best left distant.

Weary of her noise, I chitter at her, my voice the crack and skree of extinct predators warning her primitive back brain that I'm hungry. Then I notice Mam has turned, her eyes not on the child but peering through the veil at me. Three times Mam has looked at me so directly. Once, when she dragged me from my bed with my ponytail in her hand. Once, when I ran out of screams and stood up in the ring to face her. And now. Her gaze registers me as competitor showing an interest in her prey. Around her the teeth dance and chatter, growing louder and louder until my skull reverberates under the impact of their sound. Instinctively I revert to the twist and sway of the snake, directing my consciousness to thread itself between the cords and hammers, between the hair and teeth, slipping along the power of her attack, but not letting it hit me fully.

When Mam stops, the child lays sprawled on the floor, blood leaking from nose and ears. She's dead—an unplanned casualty of Mam's energy assault. Mam only eats what her hands physically kill so it's no surprise when she summons rats to feast on the body. But now she can't harvest the girl's life force.

I step back, well within my ring's boundary and squat, hiding the new fear coursing through me. Using a noose I've created from rat bone and sinew I continue loosening my eyetooth. As I work, I watch the rats tear at the girl,

efficiently stripping her flesh. They are cunning and quick which is why so many of their teeth are woven into my necklace. By eating them and harvesting their teeth, I've taken on their power. I know their language, and their secrets. Then I think about the thought I've been avoiding. The thought before Mam looked at me. I wanted to eat the child. I'm hungry.

Mam glares at her workbench with its trough of bones waiting to bind a new client to her power cords. I can feel her anger at me clenching and unclenching like dark fingers wanting to snatch me from my ring. Unfed, she's not strong enough to do her work and she must hunt again. Though I watch her only through the sides of my eyes, I'm aware that I measure her as I've never done.

She flicks her fingers. The cauldron's flames die, and the water drops go back to hanging in wait. Then she's gone, taking the precious robe with her. I collapse to the floor, shaking as the reactions she must never witness thrust my body into spasms. My survival of her second attack feels as arbitrary as the first time, rebirthing my terror. I can't afford her true attention for I am certain she can destroy me, were she to think it through. I've survived by being ignored, by being nothing important, by the luck of my tooth and the protection of the ring's energy.

Through the night I chatter at the rats, making them eat around the hair, cleaning out the girl's brains without touching her teeth. Mam's never left a body before. I make the rats drag the leg bones and skull inside my ring, leaving the rest for Mam to deal with. It's the skull I desire most. It's my first opportunity to create my own cauldron. Mine won't be iron, but bone will do. I have human teeth to harvest, hair to weave and bones to boil. I waste no time. Every time Mam is absent I practice the nuances of all I've observed, and what the teeth have taught me, and I wait.

Her absence is brief, just long enough for me to clean and pile the bones against the back wall of my ring. I squat, braiding the dead girl's hair while her teeth hide in the cracks under my feet.

A new girl hits the floor too hard. There is the sound of breaking bone. I think it's Mam's temper so I don't look up as the girl's screaming bounces around the womb. Mam ignores her and readies the pot. I keep myself small as, once again, the robe's teeth flow across my consciousness, easing me.

As I weave new teeth into my necklace the effect is immediate. Where before I could distantly sense the power cords radiating from Mam's body, I now see them twisting into tight dreadlocks. I try to send my inner sight through the stone ceiling where they disappear, but I'm not strong enough yet.

I weave more teeth as Mam goes for the girl, dragging her hair first to the cauldron. Mam gums arcane words that a mouth with teeth cannot form. I've long cast this sequence to memory for I know it's the key to Mam's immortality; it allows her to harvest the girl's life force. I must remove my own teeth to gain such power.

Her fingers tear at the girl's throat, so strong that the girl's skin gives way immediately. Mam mutters as she drinks, allowing half the blood to spill into the boiling cauldron, vaporizing to coat everything in tiny droplets of condensation. Everyone feeds; all her dead eat as she eats. I tie another tooth and wrap it back to hide it beneath my rows of rat teeth. The girl dies before Mam gums away the flesh on her fingers and spits the bones into the pot.

Mam leaves the cauldron boiling and returns to the worn curved stone that is her seat; it matches the workbench that completes the circle with her in the center. She lifts a knife, finds a bone from the trough and begins to shape the small square pillows that will fit into the gutted wireless keyboard that waits.

Mam shapes the world by passing talent from one person to another. She shapes progress as she shapes bones. Humans lust for power and fame. Men and women both bargain with her in her shadow disguise, promising a yearly tithe and the gift of their own body once they die. Many think to escape this bargain as their death nears but the financial price they've paid makes it easy for Mam to hire enforcers whose sole job is to collect the client's body at death, along with whatever boneshaped device Mam has given them.

The man whose bones Mam now shapes is the latest in a chain of men going back hundreds of years, each who'd possessed a talent Mam wanted, each now jigsawed into the blended bones of others. This man designed artificial intelligence circuits. Mam carved his first keyboard before I arrived at the womb. It returned, with his body. She's found a new client, someone desperate for success. Mam reshapes

some of the old keyboard's pieces and fits new bones to them to combine the talents he'd borrowed with those he'd acquired. Mam adds other bones as well. Some human, some not. Mam's obsession is the evolving conversation generations of teeth provide. She grows Master creators who whisper their secrets into her mind until she possesses them, like a collective mind seeking the barely imagined edge of human creativity. I know, because my desire to join them torments me.

In the city above I know there is a distant building with vaults of bones dating beyond Mam's memory to the She before her. Though I've only been through the womb's door once, I know every inch of the building that rises above, of the streets beyond and further out, like a cobweb laid atop the world. The teeth chronicle the world each time Mam ventures beyond the womb. As they chatter, I listen.

Time floats on the drag of bone on stone, days become months. Mam cuts with steel. I shape by sanding the bones against all the tiny imperfections of the stone floor. It's familiar music and our rhythm blends into a single refrain. I know this would change in an instant should I step foot across the protective ring in which I live.

Mam leaves with the keyboard. I shape the words to summon flame beneath my skull cauldron. I chatter a rat out of hiding and practice ripping his neck open with my fingers, my mouth and mind shaping the words of life transfer. I suck his blood, making sure to drip a few drops into my new cauldron, to breathe in the vaporized spray. It gives me little of the force I hunger for—rats have short lives, but the practice carves patterns in my thoughts. I eat most of his flesh raw, and then finish by stewing his bones. For the first time since I arrived in the womb, I eat warm food. I prefer the raw. Three times I do this before I hear the approaching chatter of the robe's teeth. An hour or more passes before the door slams. My connection improves.

Mam dumps a bag of bones in her trough, and then sorts them. She takes a few, then leaves and returns with more. I file the girl's femur into a knife by the time Mam's satisfied.

The teeth tell me she's mixing cat, bird, and several musicians together. This client is a female pianist. I wonder how a cat can be a musician and the teeth tell me it's a chocolate Siamese and enormously self-centered. I remember cats. Soft fur. Sharp teeth. But birds aren't true memories. I think they must flutter like insects though the teeth tell me, No. They tell me a diva is a person utterly absorbed with themselves and I wonder: Isn't that a human?

I file the edge of my knife until it nicks my skin at the slightest pressure. I rub a rat pelt down to thin leather. I cut it in strips and sweat the skin on in layers to make a handle. Then I'm back to wriggling the last of my upper teeth out. It's a molar and deep in the gum.

I use a rat-tooth-tipped knife to saw through my gum. Then I break several of my bone tools by prying. Mam builds piano keys. I've got half my lower teeth removed and urgency tugs at me. My pain disappears under Mam's knife-song; my gums close even as the teeth leave them. I'm down to my final tooth when I feel Mam slowing. Soon, she'll leave. Soon, she'll hunt.

An impatient young woman waits in the world above. She'll pay to play Mam's piano-key-bones and the world will call her Diva and the cat within will snarl and bite while the bird incessantly twitters, longing to escape. She'll play notes that shape how people think, directing their thoughts along edgy paths, where some will fall while others rise to see a new idea. That's Mam shaping their bones without knife or stone, growing them new from inside their own skin.

Someday, Diva's bones will be mine. Everything she was will be harvested and carved into the shape of my desires. I jerk hard on my last molar, feeling the rush of blood flood the inside of my mouth. The last of them. Mam bags the keys. Then she walks into my ring and grabs for my neck.

As I fight against her I realize the veil is gone. My necklace catches against her fingers, its human teeth rising to chatter as the necklace breaks and Mam throws it toward the wall. In that split second of inattention I grab my knife and run.

This isn't my plan but I misunderstood the ring and how my last tooth freed my power, making me the same as Mam, something she can no longer ignore. My

molar digs into my palm as I take the stairs three at a time, hearing the chatter telling her where I am, as if she's now dependent on their knowledge as I have been for so long. I can't waste a moment to think out this new meaning, for terror now climbs my legs and back as I hear her thudding up the stairs behind me.

The latch...here. My fingers scrambling over the steel. Twist, then turn and push. A slight give. The door opens. I jump in that last moment and feel the whoosh of displaced air as one of her knives cuts the air where my calves should have been. I spin and slam the door as the chatter of the teeth escalate. I use my youth and height, forcing the latch to drive home. Then I race through a room furnished in dust and throw myself through a transparent panel my mind tells me is glass. It shatters, but I'm already running into the darkness of a street known purely from the detail of the teeth's description.

I slow to a stop when I feel the fade of connection telling me that Mam is now standing still. I can hear the teeth but with only a single tooth in my grasp, their voice is distant. I can't let her escape anymore than she can let me. I turn back, following the teeth as Mam heads away from me. The Diva and a child. I know Mam must feed soon or her power will wane.

As I trail her, I slow. There are people—not little girls. Some taller than I. Men. They stare. Words I've forgotten the sound of scatter toward me, clicking against the back of their teeth. I haven't the robe's power of disguise. I chatter and drive them back, and then retrace my steps until I find the shattered door. The womb is below. My necklace, too. But I need more.

I turn, tuning now to the sounds of a world forgotten. It's big and open with giant walls of glass and stone. Exposed. The girl in me fears. The She in me doesn't. I edge into the shadows and relax into the familiarity of the hunting rat, allowing every tiny scent and sound to flow through me. To my right a female. I trot toward the scent, passing men curled up in cardboard walls. Homeless; my memory fills the gap from the endless word trove the teeth have poured into me. Male - useless.

Ahead. Close. A narrow crack between buildings. Alley. More homeless. I chatter. They back away, their words indecipherable in that moment. Female. I find her leaning over a flaming cauldron. Trashcan. My knife in my hand, my molar in the

other. Momentum carries her backward against a wall. She screams as I rip her throat out, my words shaping the form of the transfer as I suck down a mouthful of blood. I use my knife to hack away her jaw and three handfuls of licey hair while around me the homeless close in. The knife breaks and I toss it into the flames. I raise my voice to chitter at them again, driving primal sounds into their minds until panic scatters them. I run back along my path, through the shattered glass, behind the steel and down into the womb.

It's Mam's cauldron I use. Mam's knives to cut until the female's teeth are loosed and woven into what's left of my necklace. I worry that I've not done the ritual correctly. I drink the soup knowing it's poorly done. At least, I'm young enough not to need a real transfer yet. I hear sounds behind the door. Men are shouting warnings. I finish my necklace. They thud at the steel like rams against a mountain. I send rats out through the walls, swarms and swarms of them. The thuds stop. I eat a rat and bind its teeth to learn the men have marked the door and boarded the outer one. It doesn't matter. Mam will come.

I'm sitting in the center of her worktable when the door slams open and a child tumbles down the stairs. As I unfold from the table, the child rises. She screams and twists, seeking escape.

Mam steps into the womb, but it's the absence of the teeth's chatter that holds me still. My fingers curl over her knife, well sharpened in the time she's been gone. I want to hear the teeth. I've done all of this for the teeth, yet they lay against her as silent as dirt on the floor. Uncertainty screams in my mind. I touch my necklace, reassuring myself that it's still there. Why can't I hear? I'd heard the rat with a new tooth. My necklace, worthless?

Mam begins a series of sounds I've never heard before. A hand seems to grab my brain, squeezing me back into the terrified girl I'd been when first I tumbled to this floor. I fight the wave of terror rising fast and hard, realizing Mam has a way to bind me to the girl who even now screams in futility. I tug and pull at the necklace until it's in my fingers. The only tooth I know that still works is my last molar. Mam steps toward me as my fingers count the teeth, seeking the one. The terror of the female I'd killed enters me too as I fumble with her rotting teeth.

Unclean. Wrong. Mistake. At last, it's there and I twist and tug before lifting the necklace to my mouth, grabbing the tooth with my gums to jerk it free.

Mam dives. I toss the worthless necklace at the cauldron's flames and spit the last tooth out in my hand as Mam's weight drops me to the floor. The teeth between us chatter. This time her fingers find my throat with only skin to break. Then I remember her knife still held in my fist. I thrust it up through the teeth, hearing it cut hair and sunder ancient connections. The teeth scream. My throat tears open and the steel door slams. Hands pull Mam away, her energy connection to the robe too weak for the robe to manifest its disguise as men scream words over teeth and Mam dies. One places fabric over my neck and tells me, "...thing...okay." The girl keeps saying, "that one, that one, that one," her finger jabbing at dead Mam on the floor.

I'm cuffed to a metal table, gurney, as they haul me up the stairs, uncertain of my role in the child's abduction. I keep my molar clutched tight in my hand. I hear the teeth chattering in the distance. Doctors, bright lights, bad smells and thin knives stab my arms and strobe through my world gone mad. People chatter at me, teeth so close yet bound to living silence in their mouths. I pluck clusters of words from the air. "...doesn't know her name...charnel house...feral?...dead woman...get psych down here...commit...no response...meds aren't knocking her out...keep her strapped down... murderer?...jail...who is she?...no wound can close that fast..." When they leave me alone I practice words, both Mam's and those of the outside world. The meaning of their words settle into me. Jail. Trade one ring for another? The isolated, silenced and acutely lonely live inside rings. The blind and manipulated live outside rings and believe themselves free. Then there's Mam...and the robe.

The teeth tell me men are pulling it apart.

It's easy to chitter a rat into cutting through my straps. I discard the thin fabric gown, the remains of the bandage on my neck and the thin hollow needles they'd jammed into my arm. Then I race through the hallways, the dead rat's teeth in my hand...guiding me. Screams echo.

Sirens. New words collect in my mind as people on sidewalks jump away as I run past, chittering. Louder, the clatter of the robe summons me. A door marked with shields and lettering I can't read. Inside, past bellows to stop. Screams.

I chitter, driving back the men swarming at me. Sharp cracks of sound and sudden pain in my shoulder and thigh. I break another glass door. Stairs down. The thunder of their steps increase behind me as I twist and turn seeking the door to where the teeth are trapped. A cage and another man screaming, "Stop!"

I repeat Mam's power words, the ones she used to summon fear and panic during our final battle. The door shatters. Aisles and aisles of bags and boxes. I can feel bones in many of them. Then, a large box. I rip it open as men find the aisle, their arms raising, metal cannons, guns, lifting. I drop the robe of teeth over my shoulders to a sensation of intense prickling. Bullets punch the air where I'd been moments before. Bliss and power lend my throat true speech. My voice blasts through the hallways, into every corner, into every mind.

Together, we are freed.

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THIRD PLACE

Steve Mathes has published a couple of short stories in very small magazines, as well as articles about computer systems administration. He is bald, middle-aged and of average height.

Devices

by Steven Mathes

Karl and Maxine bought a small commercial property: six office units, something they could count on as a source of retirement income. The new building code required separate mechanical, plumbing, and electric for every tenant. Karl planned to save money by doing some of the work himself. He ached every night, but thanked his luck he could still do the heavy lifting.

He found the device while taking the walls down to bare framing. It was a black box the size of a dictionary with red printed warnings that said not to disturb the device and gave a toll-free number to call. He took it in his hands, and pulled. It had been bonded permanently between the studs, right where he needed to run wiring. He thought about removing the two studs, replacing them with clean ones. Then he thought better of it.

He called the number. The phone rang and rang while he took in the smell of dust and heat.

“Security Services,” a woman’s voice said. The noise in the background made Security Services sound like a hectic place.

“Yes,” Karl said. “There’s a box inside the wall of my building. It’s in the way. It said to call this number. I need it removed.”

“Thank you for calling,” said the voice. “Please don’t touch it.”

“So you’ll send someone out to take it?”

“Just don’t touch it, please. And thank you for calling.”

The line went dead.

Karl hated phones anyway. Calling anyone made him anxious. He found he did better when he got his calls over with right away.

He went out of the unit, out of the dust. He wiped himself off, washed his hands. His face itched. His hands hurt. He was ready for a shower and a glass of wine.

He called again.

“Security services,” said the voice.

“Yes. I just called. A box. Inside my wall. I asked for it to be removed.”

“Thank you for calling,” said the voice. “Please don’t touch it.”

She sounded more impatient this time. He needed to be firm. “Either you have it out of my building by tomorrow, or it goes in the dumpster.”

There was a long pause, some clicks. The noise in the background disappeared.

“Please don’t touch it,” a new, male voice said.

“What is this? Who are you people?”

“Do not touch it, whatever you do. For your own good. The device is government property, and disturbing it will result in mandatory prosecution. The device is for your protection. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to worry about. Thank you for calling.”

“What does it do?”

Again the line went dead. He redialed.

“Security services,” said the woman.

He felt his heart slamming, the way it did whenever he lost his temper. The government had nothing to do with this. This had to be one of those scams. He had reached the age where he would be targeted by scams.

“I just called,” he shouted.

“Yes, we know,” she said calmly.

“Get that damned thing out by tomorrow, or it goes in the dumpster!” he shouted.

He hung up fast and trembled, shaken by the phone, the disagreement.

He readied himself. He thought his phone would vibrate at any moment. It remained still. He drank a cup of coffee. Nobody called.

At least the coffee perked him up, worked at his appetite. His aches made him feel alive. Sweat ran over his hot, flushed skin. This kind of feeling was usually reserved for the young.

He had given them until tomorrow. He had given them a whole day, when he owed them nothing. This part of his remodeling would have to wait a day. Time was money, although there was plenty to do anyway, plenty more to demolish on the other walls. Still!

He went back into the dust and debris, set to work tearing up a different wall.

A little later he found a second box. Exactly the same: same warnings, same number.

He called again.

“Security services,” said the voice.

“I called earlier, and I just found a second box. You know who I am, I can tell. No matter how many more there are, I want them all out by tomorrow. All of them.”

He snapped the phone closed, hard.

Discouraged, he went home to his wife without putting the debris in the dumpster, without cleaning up. He left tools scattered in the dust.

“Did you run into problems?” she asked. “You’re early.”

Anxiety took him. He swallowed it back and put on a strong face. She did not need to hear this.

“I ran into problems. I thought I might make more progress if I take a break and think about the best approach.”

“Don’t you have someone coming to look at a unit today?”

He’d forgotten. In the frustration, he’d forgotten about the prospective tenant.

“I’ll go back in as soon as I clean up.”

He went up to shower before she could ask any further questions. Clean, dressed, and appetite still on hold, he returned to their new property. The prospective tenant arrived at the same time.

He was a short man with a bad toupee and tinted glasses. He wore plaid golfing pants, white shoes. Not what Karl expected.

“Good location,” the prospect said. “Can I see what’s inside?”

They went in and looked at the offices, one by one.

“How about this one?” said the man.

“I’m in the middle of demolition in there, so it’s messy.”

They went in anyway. The man stood at the window.

“Nice location, nice layout,” he said. “I really like this one.”

Then he turned, and his eye caught one of the devices.

“Oh,” he said.

“You know about those?” Karl asked.

The man headed for the door, saying, “This spot has a lot going for it. Still, I think I need to keep looking, compare a few places.”

“You know about those?”

They went out to the parking lot, to the prospect’s car.

“Maybe I’ll be in touch,” the man said.

“Those things will be in the dumpster by this time tomorrow.”

“Then you’ll be in jail,” the man said. “Landlords change, but the devices stay put. Besides, that wouldn’t be patriotic. Please don’t touch them, right?”

The prospect got into his car and started to drive away.

“Wait!”

Karl ran in front of the car, forcing the man to stop. The prospect opened his window just a crack.

“You know about them,” Karl said. “I need to know something. Are there other buildings that have them? I need to talk to someone. Are there other landlords stuck with them?”

The prospect sighed. He opened his window wide in pity.

“There’s a woman on Elm,” he said. “She’s a lot like you, doing her own work. You could talk to her.”

He handed Karl a business card. “Her place has the devices, too. Tenants want no part of that.”

Karl looked at the card. It had nothing to do with the prospective tenant. It identified the woman on Elm. April “Bud” George. Freedom Properties. So who was this prospective tenant?

“Who are you really?” Karl asked. “Who are you with?”

The man frowned. His window slid shut as he drove off.

Back home, Maxine had a glass of wine and a nice pink prime rib waiting, with ice cream and pie. Bad for cholesterol but good for the stress. Karl told her about the black boxes, about his failed telephone calls, about the suspicious behavior of the prospective tenant. He kept his head up but his shoulders sagged a little.

Maxine sagged also.

“What if we wasted all our money on a bad building?”

“It’s everything,” he admitted. “Maybe I can close up the walls and sell it cheap.”

On the best of nights he slept poorly. This could have been the best of nights, with the aching muscles, the second glass of wine, the wholesome feel of the roast lingering in his stomach. But it was the worst.

Karl enjoyed solving problems, but this felt like the incompetence of old age. He vowed something right then. He would keep up, stay aware. The kids called old folks “clueless.” He refused to be clueless.

So far, he felt clueless. He lay on lumps of bedding, feeling his thoughts spin.

Maxine got up with him, served him breakfast, went back to bed.

He drove to his building in the dark. He got there as the first, weak light of dawn shone over the site of his troubles.

The dumpster had disappeared. He sat paralyzed trying to think, to accept this.

He called the waste company from behind the wheel of his pickup. No answer. Of course. They could haul away the dumpster in the middle of the night, but they couldn’t keep someone on duty to explain why.

He went inside, into the mess he could have cleaned up the night before. He straightened up his tools. He went back out, backed his truck to the door. He

loaded debris. After only a few trips the truck was full, the tires bulging from overload. The inside of the demolished unit looked as messy as ever.

Cleaning it would require many, many trips.

He drove to the transfer station, paid a huge fee, unloaded.

He wondered how many trips his cleanup would require, whether he could afford the time, the dumping fees. The debris from one unit was one thing, from the whole building quite another.

On the way back, he swung by the building on Elm Street. He found it easily enough. There was a small truck backed up to the door, filled with debris.

He stopped. He approached a woman tossing some shredded slabs of drywall into her truck. "Hi, I'm Karl. I own a place a lot like this on Union."

The woman wiped her hands with a rag and came over. "I'm Bud," she said.

She was a little taller than Karl, heavily muscled, with a shaved head. Her handshake was gentle, her smile genuine.

"This guy came to look at my units," Karl said. "He said you have the same boxes in the wall that I have. I see they took your dumpster, too."

"Little bald guy?" she said.

"Yeah," Karl said. "I don't trust him."

She motioned him into her building. She gave him coffee without asking, black, the way he would have asked for it. She used cream. She appeared younger, maybe thirty.

"Today I threw those devices into the truck with the rest of the debris," she said. "I'm through playing games. Everything's going to the transfer station."

"I haven't worked up the courage."

“I don’t blame you,” she said. “I can’t say anything more than that. I can’t talk about it.”

They sat and drank coffee. She went to the counter and brought back muffins. The view from her building was nicer. He could see up and down the street. Her street had bigger trees, more green.

“Help yourself to anything,” she said.

He took a muffin.

“Do you think it’s real?” he asked. “Do you think it’s really the government?”

“Could be. On the news, these stories always get denied. The torture, wiretaps. You know what I mean?”

“But they deny it. Nothing’s proved. It’s just politics. Besides, those stories have died out.”

“Died out? But you found black boxes in your walls.”

“It could be anyone—pranksters, the mob, terrorists, scam artists.”

She ate her muffin.

“What do you think it is?” he asked.

“I tore them out. I can’t tell you anything more. No matter who works for whom, I get to be the example.”

She glanced through the window. Karl noticed her tears for the first time. She stood up.

“No matter who works for whom. Fear all the way down, from the man in charge to the victims, everyone’s afraid. Excuse me.”

She stepped out. Karl looked out at the street. Men in suits waited by a big black limo. One of them was the prospective tenant, but dressed well, and openly bald. Bud appeared out there, approached them, calmly, with dignity. They seized her,

cuffed her and stuffed her into the car. Just like in the movies, except that nobody said anything, not even Bud. Almost like it was rehearsed, except they handled her pretty roughly. Really roughly.

Why did she just surrender like that? Why didn't she just run? Who worked for whom?

He went down. When he got there, the limousine was gone, no sign of anyone.

He sat on the front steps of Bud's building for a long time. Then he went back in and cleaned her kitchenette. He put away her muffins, washed the coffee cups, wiped up the crumbs. He left the place the way he would have wanted it, and locked the doors behind him.

He returned to his own building, and stared at the devices in his wall. Then he went home to Maxine and told her.

"What can I do?" he asked her.

"You have to do something. It's our retirement. It's too much of what we have."

"What can I do?"

He could tell that she'd been crying, just like Bud. Almost as if she already sensed everything he'd told her.

"Do anything. You have to do something," she told him. "You have us to take care of. You might even help that woman. You have to be responsible."

He went back. Half a work-day remained. He took trips to the transfer station until it closed. He cleared the existing debris, but demolished nothing more. The red lettering on the devices tended to catch the corner of his eye. He felt it staring at him.

The solution came to him as he worked, without conscious thought. He installed several sheets of drywall before he noticed that he had put them on backwards, with the brown, rough side showing and the white, finished side hidden. He had just covered over one of the devices, replacing the wall he'd so recently torn down.

He closed in every bit of the exposed framing with the drywall. Then he framed, putting two-by-fours over the brown, backwards drywall. With this sleight-of-hand, he hid the devices while making it look like the original disaster, like everything was exposed, wide open for inspection. He'd do the same in every unit.

When he got to the other units, he did no demolition. He simply screwed the backwards drywall directly over the painted walls, then framed over that. It saved time and money. He created so little debris, he could easily cart it away in his truck.

Without uttering a single word, he had turned himself into a liar. He imagined the hidden devices now safe and humming and building their network.

He finished the adding the phony, extra framing. It was a sturdy building, more than capable of holding all those heavy, triple partitions. The hidden center of the walls contained the devices and all the original wiring, ducts and pipes. Windows and doors required lots of jogs and extensions. He brought the walls down to a single layer wherever he could, wherever there were no devices. Through careful probing, he found ten more.

Each unit became smaller. But it gave more character, made the building quirky.

Finally he was ready to bring in the electrician and the plumber, hire out the jobs he couldn't do himself. The plumber just did his job and took his money. It was the electrician who called him on the deception.

The electrician was a heavy man, so heavy it was a wonder he could do the work. Tall, too. There were holes and stains in his t-shirt. His stubble attracted lint and looked three days from a shave. But he was capable and smart. "You've got something hidden in those walls."

Karl felt his pulse go up. Was this another one, like the short bald man?

"I've run into those devices," the electrician continued. "Comes with the territory. But this is the best answer I've seen."

"The best answer?"

“A creative solution. And a good solution.”

“Really?”

“I’d recommend you leave the walls open like this while you show these units.”

“People will know I’m hiding something.”

“You give people too much credit. They don’t like to think. They just want to get by, live their lives.”

Karl nodded, feeling slightly sick.

“It’s something they can check off the list,” the electrician said.

*

The building inspector didn’t notice, or at least chose not to, and neither did prospective tenants. Many liked the character of the place, all the alcoves and corners. Soon all six units were rented and the money was coming in.

Karl returned to Maxine each night, and they went back to being happy. He limited himself to a single glass of wine, more modest dinners, and he slept better. His sore back and hands healed.

Still, uneasiness lingered.

The little man, the prospective tenant, came back, but not as the prospective tenant, nor as the man outside the limo.

This time he dressed like a telephone repairman. He had the uniform, the cap, the safety goggles, a belt with dangling tools. Karl challenged him on the disguise. The bald man said he was crazy, but with the bored eyes and voice of a man going through the motions. He knew he fooled no one.

He held a meter over the walls. The dial flickered over all the known but hidden devices, and over two that Karl must have overlooked. “Remarkable,” the man

said. "Your solution is elegant and creative. You've made triple walls the wave of the future."

"I live in fear," Karl said.

"That's silly," said the man. "There are creative people, and then there are steady people. Not many are both. You've proved to be both, and that makes you an uncommon asset. Valuable. Not like that lesbian."

Karl needed to show courage. He needed to ask. "What happened to her? To Bud? Did she work for you?"

The man gave him a look of warning. The walls creaked in the silence. It felt like being caged.

"Time for me to go," the man finally said.

He went to the door. He turned back just before he went around a triple wall.

"Keep up the good work!"

He disappeared.

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HONORABLE MENTION

With the onset of late middle age, Rob Hunter is the sole support of a 1999 Ford Escort and the despair of his young wife. He does dishes, mows the lawn and keeps their Maine cottage spotless by moving as little as possible. In a former life he was a newspaper copy boy, railroad telegraph operator, recording engineer and film editor. He spent the 70s and 80s as a Top-40 disc jockey.

Platterland

by Rob Hunter

It was a real nice laying-out—tasteful. Well, maybe not so much *tasteful* particularly, but neat. They'd got Ed's left arm attached to his head and not his shoulder. And they had the remaining right arm attached on the left side. To look like them, I supposed. Ed's critters had laid him out like a guy caught in one of those exercise machines you see on late night TV, an origami fold-up man, and without the pretty girl. I noticed they'd braided his nose hair. Artistic, a nice touch. His body was covered with a dusting of early frost.

The Maine Warden Service always figured sooner or later they'd be coming back with Flyin' Ed Moholland in a body bag. I used Ed's phone to call the wardens; they'd been looking for him for three weeks. No one expected Flyin' Ed to actually die; he was a monument to time—closing in on eighty and keeping pretty much to himself.

I'm Phil LaPointe. Ask anyone about me: reliable, a sober—well, usually sober—citizen and what the summer people call “a local character.” I should have checked in on Ed during the weeks he was missing but it wouldn't have mattered. I've been around and gotten pretty well insulated against the nasty surprises life throws at

me but I scrambled up the stairs and threw up clutching the sides of the kitchen door and bent over double. Between spasms of half-digested home fries, I stumbled down the porch steps.

Down by the road a trio of crows squabbled on top of Ed's sign: "Platterland: Thousands more inside." Sixteen shiny hubcaps hung from the sign, all from upscale cars: Mercedes, Cadillac, Tucker, DeLorean. Flyin' Ed kept the hubcaps shined up in case he ever got a customer. When Ed was a kid, back in the 1940s, his father's hubcap sideline generated maybe fifty dollars a year at best. Ed's regular business was selling and servicing vacuum cleaners.

The crows perched on the sign watched disinterestedly as I up-chucked. "Shoo!" I clapped my hands and they flew off.

*

It all started with an expired vacuum cleaner. That good old Electrolux that chugged away for years, even before I was janitor, finally gave up the ghost. Pilly Hennicott left me a note pinned to the door of the utility closet at the school: "Get the vacuum fixed. We clogged it up after the eighth grade dance. And for God's sake, clean up the rug in the pre-K room, it's been six months now."

I had been janitor and bus driver at the Meddybemps Elementary going on ten years. Pillsbury Hennicott was my boss and I generally did what he said. I stripped off the vacuum's chassis and got around the switch assembly with a pair of clip leads. Yep, the motor was fried. I set off up Meddybemps Hill after Flyin' Ed, the Electrolux man. I figured a new motor and a beefed-up power nozzle would fluff the rug where I couldn't get the stains out. Shirley Dilworth, our principal, suggested they were finger paint.

Anyway, I chucked the defunct vacuum cleaner in the school van and headed up to Ed's place. He was out back of the hubcap museum tinkering with one of his flying machines. He dropped his wrench and wiped his sun-blotched forehead with an oily hand.

"Hiya, Phil. Come on around to the front porch, I got some brewskis on ice." I was on school time, driving the school van, but I figured since it was summer vacation

the beers wouldn't count. We passed the time of day and I finally got around to the busted Electrolux. "Bring 'er in," said Flyin' Ed. I lugged the vacuum plus a carton of loose parts I hadn't bothered to put back in up the porch steps and into the cool confines of the front room that doubled as Ed's parlor and repair shop. I plomped the disassembled vac onto his worktable. Ed sighted down the hose, gave the pile of parts the once over and looked relieved. He gestured to the refrigerator next to a large screen TV. "I got a case in there."

Now neither Ed nor I were what you would rightly call drinking men, but summer was new and fresh with another Maine winter just behind us: reason enough. "Let's pop a couple and socialize."

We sat and drank, watching Ed's TV with the sound off for fifteen, twenty minutes.

"Phil, I got things to say. Put your can back in the cooler and let's get airborne. Then we'll talk. It's been lonely since I got banned from the school." That was when I took my first and only ride with Flyin' Ed.

*

At his visits to the Elementary Ed would stand before the whiteboard, a dashing figure for all his seventy-plus years: jump suit, safety helmet and goggles, ramrod straight. Flyin' Ed brought into that safe, snug schoolroom an element of secret, forbidden things for kids who came into town once a month, when their folks went shopping for groceries at the Pick 'N' Pay. These were country kids. But, though not yet allowed to cross the main road unaccompanied, they had been raised on cable TV and weren't easy believers. Ed had to promise them a ride. His trailer with the powerchute on board was parked out by the ball field.

In his late 50s Ed became addicted to flying powerchutes. Powerchutes are motorized parachutes as their name suggests, sort of a flying bicycle with a big sail up top. Flyin' Ed rode the rainbow, that's how he described it to the wide-eyed kids at the Elementary.

Word got around. The school board panicked about their insurance premiums. Pillsbury Hennicott called an executive session. Shirley Dilworth had allowed two

kids to fly with Ed on the strength of a parental consent form with signatures the kids had faked themselves. The parents were steamed. Seeing as how Shirley was their teacher, I felt she should have recognized the sloppy penmanship.

It was a short meeting. Parental consent slips were not worth the paper they were written on. The school could be sued.

“Well, I think Ed Moholland is a fine law-abiding man and no threat to the children,” Shirley huffed at Pilly.

Pilly Hennicott loved an attentive audience. “We are not impugning Mr. Moholland’s character, Mrs. Dilworth, but we *have* considered any impact he may have with the children. He obeys the laws of gravity just like the rest of us.”

Flyin’ Ed was grounded—stuck in Platterland with his vacuum cleaners as far as the kids were concerned.

*

Ed and I were up for about an hour on my first, last and only powerchute ride. Ed spun in to set us down, chute fluttering out behind him like neatly folded wash, and dropped the last foot or so to a landing that drove a chill right up my spine. It was a gentle hit, almost like getting out of bed but, like I said, I was not meant to fly and I was pretty shaky.

“Terra firma,” said Ed, opening the fridge and extracting two fresh cans.

We relaxed.

The telephone rang. Ed ignored it. After a couple more rings Ed’s recorded voice cut in, “Platterland, Flyin’ Ed Vacuum and Repair. Leave a message at the beep.”

Beep.

“Ed! I’ve got a *thing* in my vacuum and I can’t get it out. It’s dead in there.” A woman, middle-aged and desperate.

Ed chugged down his can and smiled apologetically as he went to pick up the phone. “This is Flyin’ Ed.” There was an agitated chattering that I could hear but not understand; the caller was talking fast and loud. “Yes, Molly. Yes?” More excited babble from the earpiece. Flyin’ Ed sighed and cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. “Molly Guphill.” A woman we both knew. “This is the heart of the problem,” Ed said. “Explaining.”

He removed his hand and keyed the caller in on the speakerphone so I could listen. Ed spoke in tones of calming reassurance. “Yes, Molly, this happens... occasionally.”

Full speed and full volume, Molly’s voice poured out of the tiny speaker in Flyin’ Ed’s fax-copier-answering machine. “I tried to get the thing open. To see if there was a mouse or something...? Let me tell you... remember that moose died last winter over near Ayer’s Junction? Stuck in the culvert? And no one knew until after the thaw? I mean by August you had to take a twelve mile detour.”

“Yes, Molly.”

Molly would not be pacified. “A jelly—gooey and the *smell*? Stinks to high heaven. Is there a way anything *that* big could get to the insides of a vacuum? Something that *grows*?”

“Suppose I come over this afternoon. OK?” Molly snorted assent. Even across the room I could feel the clunk as the phone slammed down at her end. Ed’s shoulders heaved as he slumped back into his chair. He gave a mighty sigh. “Phil, how long have we known each other—ten, fifteen years?”

I said that sounded about right.

From the determined set of his jaw this was not going to be about the lost loves and minor regrets that decorate every man’s past. I made myself comfortable. Ed started right in.

“Back from the Navy, I was; I served an eight-year hitch. That must have been ‘57. Mom had died three years before. Her funeral was the only time I got home in all those years. I caught the bus from Willipaq—they do that afternoon run up

Meddybemps Hill?—and there was the old homestead, the house I grew up in, all gone to hell and empty, weeds up to your ass in the dooryard.”

Ed scrunched his beer can in one huge hand as he reached for another. “Plowed ground gone fallow under last year’s rye grass and the yard overgrown. And the Electrolux vacuum cleaner.”

“What about it?” I was on my third beer and I guessed this was the hook to Ed’s tale.

“It was sitting in the middle of the driveway smack dab under my dad’s old Platterland sign and waving its hose at me. All frantic it was, like it had been waiting for me to come home. Like Lassie would, in those Lassie movies, when someone was in trouble. So I spoke to it, What’s the matter little fella? And it turned on its wheels, ran partway towards the house, waited, then ran back to me and waved its hose.

“I said Okay, little fella, I’m coming. The vacuum gave a sort of whir from its power nozzle like it understood and headed out behind the well house.”

“As it turned out, it had a companion—another Electrolux—and it was in trouble. Well really, it was dead. The poor little thing was some broken up. I sat and stroked its hose there beside the corpse until sunset thereabouts. The little one circled around—sniffed, like. Waiting for me to do some magic. When it started to stink, the dead one that is...”

“You buried it.” Here I was drinking Ed’s beer, and he believed he had space aliens on the old homestead. The beer made the story easier to accept.

“No, I put it in the freezer. Come along downstairs. And watch that first step.” I got to my feet, not as wobbly as I thought I should be about now.

“Phil? That little vacuum, the one that met me in the dooryard?” Flyin’ Ed beckoned me to follow him.

“Yes?”

“Turns out she was pregnant. Sure enough, come fall, she comes out from under the barn, tentative-like, with two little ones, just like her, in tow.”

Ed led; I followed.

It was a large cellar, some of its walls carved out of solid ledge, slate and granite, the way they did with those old Maine farmhouses. There must have been twenty freezers parked about in a circle. Ed had them on old wooden shipping pallets, the kind you see piled for burning out back of the forklift depots. Mostly Sears—the freezers that is. I asked Ed about his preference for Sears products.

“Sears minds its own business. Till they went local anyway. Sears used to deliver out of Bangor, different driver every time. No busybodies asking why I wanted a new freezer every two years without bitching about the old one.”

“And the freezers?” I had an idea where all this was heading but I wanted to hear it from Flyin’ Ed.

“Full of critters. Dead critters. They don’t have a lot of little canisters, just enough to replace themselves with a few left over to cover accidents. And they age and die. And once every year they come down cellar and visit their ancestors, like. I open the freezers and we have a silent moment together.”

“And what do you get out of all this?” I asked.

Ed turned, amazed that I hadn’t caught on. “They run the farm. And I get paid when I rent them out, sell them and fix them. I get the regular maintenance calls—a new hose, lube job, cord and switch. I sell a line of bags and attachments. They can spray paint, too, but not too well. They’re no trouble. They tend the fields—at night of course. God! If the neighbors ever got wind of that!” Ed drained his can and scrunched it. “I got a bottle somewheres,” he said hopefully.

“Bottle it is,” I replied.

We made it back, pretty well lubricated by now, to Ed’s porcelain-topped kitchen table. He retrieved a quart of J. W. Dant from the flour hopper of his late mother’s Hoosier breakfront.

“Thanks for sitting down and listening to me talk. I’ve been carrying the secret alone for way too long. I didn’t realize what a burden it was till now. Us talking and all.”

We drank and talked like two men will who are past the age of having to impress one another. This was an uncommon event—our conversation as well as Ed’s space aliens—and we paused to savor it.

“Something else I got to show you. I call it the Rug Suckers’ Ball.” He held one finger to the side of his nose, like Santa Claus in *The Night Before Christmas*. This was going to be top secret stuff. I tossed back what was left in my glass. Ed’s chair scraped the linoleum as he beckoned me back down the cellar steps. “I dug a tunnel out to the barn, so’s I could watch without disturbing them. This is their time, their mating time.” Ed fetched a lantern.

“Don’t rightly know how they figure their mating season. They all answer some call and come together here, probably something to do with the moon, the tides. Like the horseshoe crabs. Watch your head.” We were almost sober enough to navigate the steps.

I collided with a low ceiling beam. “Ouch!”

Ed held a finger to his lips. “I find good homes for ‘em,” Ed whispered. “Their real home must be far off. I figure they’re just waiting for a lift. They wouldn’t survive long on this world; they haven’t seen all the movies we have—alien invaders, and all? ‘Take me to your leader’ and total destruction follows. I figured the best way for them was to go under cover, as themselves, or close to it. They don’t seem to mind that I sell them. They eat dirt, stuff they suck out of folk’s rugs. They don’t really require plugging in but I figure all that electricity gets ‘em hopped up. They sure do love a good housecleaning. And when they need some companionship, they stop working and their owner brings them back home to me. Shhhh.”

An eerie dance was taking place. No music, but instead, a whir of pulleys and belts, servomotors from ecstatic power nozzles and an underscore of *flap flap* from their vacuum hoses as they twined, untwined, and stroked one another. And the light

reflected from their chrome trim made things wild and passionate even with the silence.

“They come to Meddybemps Hill to make little baby Electroluxes?” I asked in a hoarse whisper. I had to ask even though I felt silly from the moment I opened my mouth.

“Yep. From all over the world—the universe for all I know. They just *like* me. Most of the year they’re your normal, everyday vacuum cleaners. The canister type—a lot of folks prefer those.” Ed threw an arm across my shoulder, not unlike a proud dad at his daughter’s dance recital.

The dance stopped. The assembled Electroluxes pivoted towards Ed and me. There was a long moment of what I could only call respectful silence. They then turned their backs and reformed their circle, completely ignoring us.

“We’d better go,” Ed said.

*

Ed believed he had space aliens in his cellar. Well, I *had* seen them. And the Electrolux community seemed to appreciate Flyin’ Ed. They ran his farm for him. Stranger things had happened in Willipaq. Well, no... maybe they hadn’t. I took another pull at my can.

Ed bent over his workbench saying, “Tsk, tsk,” as he removed a continuity checker from my old motor.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You call up with a customer’s vacuum all fixed up like new, but a different one actually goes back to the happy housewife.”

Ed installed a rebuilt motor as he talked. “You got it,” he said. “They don’t mind getting separated and they’re generally well-behaved away from home. That’s here with me, I guess.” Ed removed his Willipaq Historical Society baseball cap and wiped his speckled forehead. A trickle of sweat ran into one red-rimmed eye.

“Damn!” Ed rubbed away the salt sting. Going on eighty years in the out-of-doors had decorated his face, neck and forearms with spots, splotches and furrows.

“Have you asked about those white spots?”

“Yep. The doctor cautioned me and said it might be good if I had a biopsy. Or two. What would that change? I’d still have it. Cancer. Or not. And I’m 78 years old. Why worry?”

“But...”

“When their time comes, *they* die.” Ed bowed his head, a slight incline, showing respect. Ed was that sort of guy.

“That woman on the phone,” I said, “Molly.”

“Yep.”

“Molly’s old vacuum will go in one of your freezers?”

“Yep.” Ed snapped the vacuum shut and picked up a rag. He popped a blemish on the chrome polish of the donut-shaped cord winder that straddled its rear end.

“Done. Good as new.” He gave my carton of leftover parts a shake. “But it has issues.” He looked thoughtful. “Now what do you think? Do you want your plain old mechanical vacuum cleaner like it came from the factory? Or would you like your very own living unit?”

He was offering the Meddybemps Elementary an organic vacuum all its very own. If Pilly Hennicott ever twigged there was a space alien living in the janitor’s closet, I was going to be in for some heavy-duty explaining. I opted for what I already had: the traditional wheels, cogs and pulley unit that plugged into a wall.

Ed reached down a factory-sealed carton with a brand new power nozzle assembly.

“It’s yours. No living tissue inside, guaranteed. My gift to the school district.”

“Sorry, Ed. Got to pay you for it.” The purchase order was already made out. I handed it over.

“Bye, Phil.”

“Bye, Ed.”

It had been a full day. I had that all-over queasy feeling you get after a lot of beer and cut-rate bourbon on an empty stomach. I thought about hitting Ed up for dinner but saw his eyes were drooping. Nap time. With a man like Ed you tend to forget his age.

“Don’t forget the vac,” Ed called after me. I loaded the repaired vacuum with its brand new power nozzle in the van and drove very carefully under the Platterland sign, under its hubcaps, and down the hill. And sure enough, the Electrolux was as good as new. But I hired a commercial rug cleaner to shampoo the finger paint out of the rug in pre-K. Pilly grumped but signed the purchase order, no questions.

Summer faded into fall, and a new school session. The refurbished vacuum cleaner died yet again—Pilly had been using it to spray paint over at the fire station. I gave Ed a call but got the answering machine for three consecutive days. I figured he was off on a toodle with some of his powerchute buddies. Not wanting to take any chances with a possible dead alien in the vac, I locked it away in the closet for a few weeks. When I checked back, there was no smell. It was the genuine, factory-made variety Electrolux, gathering dust instead of sucking it.

It was Thanksgiving break, a four-day weekend and no push for immediate cleanliness at the Meddybemps Elementary, when I headed up the hill with the school van.

*

The place reeked. And no Ed in sight. On a hunch I checked the electric meter. It was locked off and sealed. The freezers had been left to melt. The stench was appalling. I got as close to the house as I could without gagging, then headed to town. Sure enough, Eastern Maine Electric Co-op had shut off the power. Non-payment of accounts, etc. The buzz at the Co-op was Ed’s powerchute had been observed hitting a power pylon in a freak upward thermal gust. The Maine Warden Service was called to pick up what was left of him. They returned empty-handed. I had the power turned back on and visited a week later when the smell was under control.

There were a few crows picking at what looked to be an Electrolux canister vacuum cleaner in the weed-clogged gravel driveway. I checked the electric meter out back behind the kitchen. The seal was removed; it was spinning at a furious pace. Service restored. I covered my face with a bandana soaked in mineral spirits and started down the cellar steps.

The smell was less powerful down among the freezers than it was upstairs. The cellar was cold and damp, the air thick with condensation. A rime of frost several inches thick spilled over the bulkheads of the open freezers. It would be a good day for the Electric Co-op's shareholders, dividend-wise, when and if I paid the bill. I did pay the bill, by the way. Sort of a tribute to Ed.

Except for one, the freezers were empty.

I had feared what I might find down there. The reality came as a welcome relief. It was a kind of spiritual moment, if that's what trips your trigger. It did for me and I stayed on for a while. Then I was dizzy and made for the stairs that promised warm air and sunlight. I sat on the porch to get my bearings, just a little sick—probably more from the mineral spirits than from the smell of death. The place had gone to weeds just as it had when Ed's mother died all those years back.

I noticed an overgrown path, Ed's route to behind the barn where he launched his powerchute up and over the tall stand of white spruce his dad had planted to celebrate his birth. Tracks criss-crossed flattened patches of chickweed and plantain. Tracks made by many tiny wheels, headed for the cow pasture where a cover crop of rye grass was on the mend from where something large and heavy had sat on it. Not long enough to obscure the rain and the sun, not long enough to kill the rye grass, but long enough to load some freight, perhaps.

I returned to the cellar to pay a final farewell to Flyin' Ed. This time I looked closely at the frozen, reassembled corpse. The Rug Suckers had got it right, by and large. The Rug Suckers he had cared for in life and in death had returned him to their own now emptied burial freezers, one last gesture, and they'd done the best they could putting him back together.

I headed back to my truck and jumped at the creak of rusty wheel bearings close behind me. It was one of Ed's critters and it was in trouble. It had lost its cord winder. A pair of eyes on stalks, like a snail's, stared intently out at me. The pupils were yellow and the irises slits, more like a goat's eyes than a cat's if you've ever looked a goat in the eye. Spooky. But these were more melancholy than spooky, all rheumy and runny at the edges. Old eyes. It had been left behind, I guessed, too sickly to make the trip. It wobbled to me on off-center wheels, got stuck in a muddy rut left by my pickup and rolled half over on its side. Its eyes were clouding over; its hose lay limp in a spring rivulet of ice melt.

I carried it back into Flyin' Ed's cellar and placed it gently beside his body. Showing *respect*. Ed would have liked that.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Laura Loomis is a social worker in the San Francisco area, currently looking for a publisher for her novel. Her fiction has appeared in *Flashquake*, *Out of Line*, *ALALIT*, and *Cuivre River Anthology*. A story in *Margin* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Rule Number Three

by Laura Loomis

“Rule Number Four,” Robert Merlin told a half-filled conference room, “figure out what you don’t need.” He was going too fast; he’d finish early and would have extra time for questions. A listless heat filled the stuffy room, making Robert feel like his head was poached. From the look of them, his audience felt the same way. “I used to say Rule Four was to prioritize, but that’s being too nice. Wussy. You need to be ruthless. Those five dollars you spend on a double cappuccino every day? Think about how much money you would have if you put that into your investments instead. And you wouldn’t believe how many people tell me they don’t have time to build their business, when they always have that hour to watch TV at night.”

A rustle of whispers went through the room. Right then, he realized he’d forgotten to do Rule Three. He’d gone through Rule One, *know what you want*, Rule Two, *know what your customer wants*, and somehow skipped to Rule Four. Not that any of the losers in this little strip-mall town would care. If they’d had any brains, they wouldn’t be here getting a motivational talk from a self-described “Bad Boy of Wall Street” that they’d never heard of.

There was nothing to do but finish up Rule Four and continue. “Rule Number Five: there is no such thing as a crisis, only an opportunity. In fact, the Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the ones for danger and opportunity.” He’d have to stop using that chestnut pretty soon; everyone had heard it, and he wasn’t even certain it was true. One of these days he’d get shot down by some audience member who was fluent in Chinese.

He finished Rule Five on auto-pilot. Playing the Wall Street businessman brought decent money, if less than he pretended, but it was losing its charm. He needed a new challenge, and he’d already decided what it would be. If he could just escape this mindless seminar before the collective stupidity in the room throttled his brain.

“Now, if you were paying attention, you may have noticed that I skipped Rule Three. There’s a reason for that.” He took a long drink of bottled water, to create suspense and to get his patter down. Improvising helped him stay on top of his game. “I call it Rule Three because it was the third one I discovered, but I save it for last because it’s the most important and powerful rule, the one that can really change your life.” Actually Rule Three was *Plan your time*, and he kept it sandwiched in the middle because he didn’t have anything particularly colorful to say about it. Certainly it wasn’t going to live up to an intro like that.

The whispering had stopped. He opened his mouth without knowing what he was going to say. “Rule Three is to live as if you’ve already succeeded. You want to be a CEO? I don’t care if you’re the intern, you show up in a CEO suit, you talk like a CEO, think like a CEO, and oh yeah, work like a CEO.”

Now that he knew where to take it, the words rolled along like the Porsche he rented for these speaking engagements. “A few years back, there was a con man named Marlon Roberts who printed up a fake medical diploma and opened a clinic specializing in weight loss. He had hundreds of patients, and some of them still swear he did more for them than any other doctor. Not one of them guessed he’d never been to medical school. Why? Because he acted more like a doctor than a doctor does.

“Now, I’m not suggesting you go that far.” He got a few chuckles from the audience, so apparently some of them were still awake. “But that same guy, he went on to impersonate a psychiatrist and even a Catholic priest, and no one ever suspected, because he lived as if he were already a success at both.” Until that devout young couple discovered that they weren’t really married, and hired a detective to track him down. He’d wound up doing a nickel in Huntsville Prison on an assortment of fraud charges. Personally, Robert thought his homily at their wedding had been excellent, five simple rules for a happy marriage.

The question-and-answer period was usually Robert’s favorite part, especially when the audience had some energy. Today it was excruciating. After a few variations on “What was Rule Two again,” a curly-haired man raised his hand.

“Your whole thing about finding a nicer name for a crisis seems like a lot of hokum,” he said in a Deep-South drawl. “I had my own clothing business in Biloxi, and we lost everything when Katrina hit. You can stand up there in your knockoff suit and call that an opportunity, but I can’t get it all back with wishful thinking.”

“That’s not wishful thinking, that’s winner thinking. And what you’re doing is victim thinking. We’re all going to hit challenges in our businesses. The question is, are you going to handle them like a loser, or like a winner?” Robert flashed an ingratiating smile before adding the real stinger: “And by the way, your business will do a lot better when you learn the difference between a knockoff and the real thing.”

There was a clumsy silence; no one wanted to be the next to feel the wrath of the Bad Boy of Wall Street. Finally a heavysset woman offered a simpering smile and said, “I just want to tell you that your program is wonderful, and I think it will really help me.”

He got out of there as quickly as he could. His malaise went deeper than the challenge from the hurricane guy, or the kiss-ass woman who was probably trying to get laid. Robert knew the symptoms when he was getting tired of his current persona. He was starting to take risks, daring someone to catch him, like when he mentioned a con man with a name oddly similar to Robert Merlin. He’d been caught at the priest gig when he got his face on TV at a charity fundraiser, and

someone recognized him as the fake doctor Marlon Roberts. He might still have gotten away, if that couple hadn't been so outraged to learn that they'd been living in sin three months after the wedding.

Robert drove back to the rental agency and traded in the Porsche for a Crown Vic, then returned to his hotel to change costumes for his new gig. He removed the knockoff suit and put on a realistic-looking police uniform with badge, handcuffs, and a gun that he kept unloaded. He'd gotten his hair cut extra short this morning, and he completed the look by gluing on a thick moustache, the color of a German Shepherd.

Robert—or as he now thought of himself, Officer Robert Merle—cruised around town for the next couple of hours, looking for someone to pull over. At first he couldn't find any speeders worth bothering about. Finally, as it started to get dark, he came across a battered red pickup weaving erratically in and out of its lane. Drunk or high, for sure.

Robert put the light on top of his car and cranked up a CD with a recorded siren. The truck jerked from side to side, then pulled over. Something—a baggie, maybe—flew out of the passenger side window, into the bushes.

Normally Robert pulled over speeders, gave them a lecture and then hinted that he'd forget about it for a twenty. It didn't make enough money to be more than a sideline, but the rush was incredible. The best cons were the ones he shouldn't have been able to pull off.

Excitement raced through him. An intoxicated driver would be worth more than a twenty. How far could he take it? For a crazy moment, Robert considered hauling the driver down to the police station and pretending to be a new rookie cop. No, that was ridiculous. All the cops in this town probably knew each other. Hell, he didn't even know where the police station was.

One thing at a time. He'd give the guy a field sobriety test, make him walk a straight line and recite the alphabet backwards. Afterward, he'd figure something out.

He approached the driver's side window and barked, "License and registration, please." The driver, a rangy young man with a scraggly beard, handed over his ID. Willis Thorndike. What the hell kind of name was Thorndike for a druggie in a Southern cow town? Thorndike was a name Robert would use if he was impersonating a high roller at some upscale casino.

Thorndike's hands kept twitching. Robert had assumed it was marijuana in the hastily thrown bag, but the man looked like he was on something stronger.

"What was that you threw out the window?"

"I didn't throw nothing." The driver leaned out the window and squinted at Robert's flashlight. His reddish-blond beard was in desperate need of a decent barber. "Don't I know you?"

Oh. No. He'd been at the seminar, sitting in the back with a vacant look on his face. Probably looking for pointers on increasing his drug business.

Robert tried to make his voice sound deeper. "Step out of the vehicle, please."

Thorndike opened the car door, and—it happened so fast Robert had no chance to react—he was pointing a gun in Robert's face. "Guess this changes things, don't it, officer," he said with a wheezy laugh.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Robert heard his own voice in its most mocking tone: *There is no such thing as a crisis, only an opportunity.*

It took a lot of effort to inhale, as if he had to pry open his lungs. *Rule One*, he reminded himself, *know what you want*. What he wanted was to be out of here, away from any drug-dealing psychos, alive and preferably with no holes in him. Somehow he would have to reason with a man too tweaked to think about the consequences of shooting a police officer.

Rule Two: know what the customer wants. "I know you don't want any trouble. And I'm not sure I saw anything get thrown out the window. Even if you did, no one can prove it's yours now. Why don't you just go about your business."

Another wheezing laugh. “Yeah, right. I leave, and you’re on that radio telling your buddies at the police station that I held a gun on you.” Thorndike shifted from one foot to another, clearly unsure what to do next. If he’d wanted to shoot, Robert would already be dead.

Rule Four: figure out what you can let go of. The whole business of living as a cop wasn’t looking so good anymore. “You were right, you do know me. I’m not a real cop. I’m a con. You were at my seminar earlier today: Five Simple Rules Millionaires Don’t Want You to Know.”

Thorndike squinted again and frowned. Slowly, avoiding any sudden moves, Robert peeled away the fake moustache.

“Well, I’ll be gol-damned.”

Robert’s heart started beating again. “So what do you say we just forget the whole thing, you put that gun down and we both walk away?”

“Not a chance.” Thorndike used his free hand to pull out a cell phone. “There’s gotta be a reward for your ass.”

Rule Number Three, Robert thought bitterly, *plan your time.* Another nickel in Huntsville.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Ken Rand lives in Utah where he writes fiction and nonfiction full-time. Upcoming titles: *Where Angels Fear*, a short story collection from Fairwood Press (February 2008); *Fairy BrewHaHa at the Lucky Nickel Saloon*, a novel from Yard Dog Press (February 2008); and *Pax Dakota*, a novel from Five Star (May 2008).

See <http://www.sfwa.org/members/Rand/> for his blog, bio and bibliography—and a FREE short novel titled *Rock 'n' Roll Universe*. His writing and living philosophy: Lighten up.

Plan 9 From Planet Hollywood

by Ken Rand

Eliot Hollingsworth looked into the dresser mirror and did not see Bugs Bunny. Instead, he saw Elmer Fudd.

Fudd.

Elmer Doggone Fudd.

He tried to say, “Eh, what’s up, doc?” to complete his daily morning ritual, but it came out, “Gwacious, dat’s a dweadful woad of cawwots.”

He tried a laugh. “Huh-uh-uh-uh.”

Wrong laugh.

“Dis will wiwwy wuin my day.” Annoyance made his weak Fuddy voice squeak even more.

A glance down at his roly-poly body sent bile to his throat and he looked away. The smell of fresh carrots in the bowl on the dresser amplified his nausea—Fudd’s reaction, not his. Eliot liked carrots. Fudd hated them.

Deep inside, where he was Eliot Hollingsworth, he still *felt* like Bugs Bunny. He’d morphed into his favorite Warner Bros. cartoon character six thousand years ago, moved here to Planet Hollywood, and had never had a problem.

Until now.

Services started in half an hour and Bugs Bunny looked like Elmer Fudd. What if he’d gone On The Air without checking his image? What if, for some reason, this particular day, he’d skipped his morning ritual, a lifelong habit, hadn’t seen the offensive image, and gone in front of billions of faithful, worshipful viewers all over the galaxy?

His too-round shoulders shuddered. He couldn’t continue the blasphemous thought.

Spontaneous morphing.

It had never happened to him before. Never in six thousand years. He’d risen slowly but steadily from a common acolyte among billions of common acolytes to his current lofty position as Fourth Assistant Associate UnderHigh Priest in Charge of Saturday Morning Worship Services, rotating vacation relief shift, and never in all that time had he ever experienced a spontaneous morphing. If anybody discovered the lapse, Eliot could kiss goodbye his dream of one day becoming First Assistant UnderHigh.

Why today of all days? Today the First Assistant was at the dentist and Eliot was on call. He was to administer the Services rituals as Saturday morning cartoon show host for the galaxy. Spontaneous morphing was morally reprehensible, but spontaneously morphing into Elmer Fudd was, was—

The word “blasphemy” came out in his thoughts as “bwasphemy.”

He shuddered again, concerned that the mirrored image reflected his true, inner self. He pinched his button nose in disgust. “How atwotous.”

Eliot screwed up his face and grunted in concentration, willing himself to morph back into his beloved Bugs.

Nothing happened.

Eliot’s failure didn’t particularly surprise or annoy him. He hadn’t needed to consciously morph from one image to another in six millennia, since he took his Oath of Fealty.

He tried again, harder, grunting aloud and mentally straining.

Elmer Fudd still looked back at him in the mirror.

Eliot tried again, harder.

Fudd.

The finger-in-the-light-socket trick didn’t work either.

The stage manager knocked on the door and called out, “Twenty minutes, Mr. Bunny.”

“I’ll be weady—” Eliot stopped. “Okay,” he said.

The door was still closed. “Are you all right, Mr. Bunny?”

Eliot quickly grabbed the water glass, tipped it to his mouth, and started gargling. “Unh-hunh,” he gargled, “I’ng ogay.”

The stage manager went away.

Desperately, Eliot tried one more time to morph into Bugs and failed.

Long, long ago, Eliot remembered, he’d suffered from stage fright. Besides boredom, it was one reason he morphed into Bugs. The Rabbit feared nothing, so neither had Eliot Hollingsworth. Until now.

Had his long-forgotten stage fright been this intense?

He checked and confirmed he hadn't pissed his pants.

Fifteen minutes to showtime and Bugs Bunny was Elmer Fudd. *What to do, what to do?*

"What would dat waskewwy wabbit do?"

Desperation and fear prompted an experiment: he tried to morph into Daffy Duck. No good.

"Dwat the wuck." He moaned and paced, mincing little steps on big feet, trying to think.

A light went on over his head.

At least that still works, he thought.

In his closet, he found some old socks and a bag of cotton, some thread, and a needle. He set to work making a Bugs Bunny costume, the way prehistoric, premorphing humans might have done it. Poor old humans, living their miserable lives in the bodies they were born in. Mayfly lives, short, brutish, and unimaginative.

"But they did make pwetty good cartoons." He laughed. "Huh-uh-uh-uh."

He cut and sewed and sewed and cut, his swiftness fed by panic. He waddled to the mirror to see the result.

Grim.

The stitches looked like something from a Frankenstein cartoon and the costume fit like Tweety Bird might fit in a Sylvester the Cat suit. It looked—comic.

"Oh, gowwy, gowwy, gowwy." And only ten minutes to showtime.

He began stuffing clothes, towels, bedding, and his pillow into the make-do costume to puff it out, shape it up. Not enough.

“Five minutes, Mr. Bunny.”

With a cry in his throat, Eliot wadded up pages from his priceless collection of antique real-paper comic books and finished stuffing the costume.

He stood before the mirror.

The costume was good enough, he decided at last; he looked like Bugs Bunny. “But I don’t sound wike dat wabbit for diddwy.”

“One minute, Mr. Bunny.”

Thinkthinkthinkthink...

The light over his head went on again.

Eliot yanked out one of the costume’s two front teeth and tossed it aside. One-toothed, he went out to face the cameras.

*

Things did not go as planned. Thirty seconds into Services, the producer called for a commercial break and Eliot was hauled off.

The Warner Bros. Most High Inquisitor had traded in his original cartoon name for one he liked better, now that he was in charge: Major Rooster.

“Siddown, son,” the rooster said, nodding his floppy red topknot toward a chair in front of his desk, “make yourself—I say make yourself home. I don’t stand on ceremony here, no sir. Keep it casual, the way I like it, like in the old days, back on the farm. You ever been to a farm, boy? You’ll have to talk louder, son.”

“Weww, actuawwy—”

“Get to the point—the point, I say.” The rooster’s beak turned down and his eyes narrowed. “Boy, did anybody ever tell you you look like—” he looked at a paper on his desk, and reading glasses appeared on his beak as he read, muttering.

Eliot fidgeted. His feeble try to morph out of Fudd failed as he expected and he shrugged, resigned.

“Say, wait just a doggone minute here,” Rooster said, “ain’t you the one, I say, ain’t you the Assistant Blah-de-blah that spontaneously—that’s what it says right here, and you know I wouldn’t make such a thing up, no sir—”

Eliot nodded vigorously, hoping to speed the official inquiry along, take his punishment, and be done with it.

“Speak up, son, I can’t hear you.”

“Huh-uh-uh-uh—”

“Don’t give me that doggone Fudd jabber. Gives me a headache. I know what you’re going to say...”

Rooster kept talking and talking. Maybe this was part of the punishment? Eliot’s awareness faded in and out.

“...tell you why, son, if you’ll just be quiet and listen for a second—”

“Weww—”

“—so we keep our shapes so the great unwashed out there in videoland, whether they be Warner Bros fans, or whether they favor our colleagues at the Disney Studios—why heckfire, boy, even Walter Lantz fans—all of them need guidance to know what the Sam Hill to look like when they get bored looking like their own selves and want to be whatever plonks their twanger—”

“Weww—”

“—and if spontaneous morphing ain’t bad enough, you got to go and get yourself stuck—*stuck* is what you are, take a look at yourself, go on ahead and look.”

“Weww—”

“You keep interrupting me, son. But you’re right. Good thing we got to edit that broadcast. Be a doggone shame if it went On The Air, you in that ridiculous get-up, all moth-eaten and droopy. What made you think you could get away with it?”

“Now you’re wondering whether I’m going to make you clean the henhouse with a toothbrush for a thousand years or such deviltry. Well, I ain’t. If you’ll just stop your doggone yammering, I’ll tell you what I’m gonna do...”

*

It took Eliot Hollingsworth a thousand years after he was excommunicated to leave Bugs Bunny behind and adjust to never being able to morph out of Elmer Fudd. Still, it took another thousand years before he stopped trying to say, “Eh, what’s up, doc?”

In another thousand years, he began to stop missing Planet Hollywood, and a thousand years after that, he started to like the desert planet to which he’d been exiled. Planet Wyoming, they called it.

A thousand years later, he met another Fudd, wandering around lost and lonely, exiled just like him. A thousand years later, he met another. Then another and another.

Hundreds of them.

Thousands.

Millions.

They called themselves “Stuckies.”

All the Elmer Fudd Stuckies exiled to Planet Wyoming milled around aimlessly, passing endless days in boring pursuits—Trivial Pursuits as often as not—without coherent goals, aspirations, ambitions.

Leaderless.

Eliot Hollingsworth passed the millennia with such thoughts among his brothers, his fellow-fallen.

On Planet Hollywood, among his peers there, his highest aspiration reached only to First UnderPriest. Here, among his fellow Fudd Stuckies, he more than aspired. He *achieved*.

In time (a long, long time), the former Assistant Associate UnderWhatever (he'd managed to forget the exact title) promoted himself to the rank of the OverPriest, First and Only, His Fuddness.

In time (a long, long time), His Fuddness, the former Eliot Hollingsworth, stood alone on the edge of a high, flat mesa on his desert planet and gazed out. He looked down to his devoted armies of Fudds in the valley below, marching to and fro in clompy hunting boots, stubby shotguns bobbing on their shoulders, in tidy little rows.

He looked up at the garish pink lights of distant Planet Hollywood, "The Planet That Never Sleeps," and thought how unfortunate were those on that planet, and in the galaxy in general, those who didn't know the blessings of Stuckness, of Fuddness.

He looked up, and made plans.

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GUEST WRITER

Blanche Kapustin accidentally became Princeton's tiger mascot and stuck with it through graduation. She looks forward to penning her memoir when the statute of limitations expires for certain alleged events involving a UPS truck, a dozen other schools' mascots, and something loosely known as a keg hunt. The story below is pure fiction, however.

The author also says, "If you ever get the opportunity to don a secret identity, make the most of it!"

The Costume

by Blanche Kapustin

When Ginny reviewed her accomplishments over the past three years—which she did more often than most college students brushed their teeth—she felt her legacy to Thompson University was the cheer squad. Under her tenure, it had soared from four female cheerleader hobbyists to a fully committed team of seven men and seven women who practiced almost daily. And one irritatingly inept mascot.

No matter how spectacularly her cheer squad performed, the photographers, fans, and alumni focused on Opie the Octopus. The eight-legged, beat up, lavender and pistachio contraption just had to make an appearance and the crowd roared. Her cheerleaders could beg for forty-five minutes and not hear a peep. Worse, when Opie ran off with the cheer squad's poms or bungled their dance routines by walking through them in his own private game of dodge-the-cheerleaders, the crowd cheered for him! And they booed Ginny's squad for not playing along.

With the thought, "When you can't beat them, join them," Ginny invited Opie to learn the cheerleading squad's routines, dance with their songs, and participate in

their stunts. But Justin, the slacker inside the costume, never returned her calls and shrugged her off in person.

Getting rid of Justin and introducing a proper mascot would be the finishing touch on her legacy. Ginny had dressed in full cheer uniform and stuck her most convincing spirit smile on her face to talk it over with the athletics department. She explained why the school mascot should fall under her jurisdiction as cheer squad captain. She even posed as various disgruntled alumni to write letters to the school newspaper denouncing Opie as a disgrace to Thompson University and hinting a new costume would be bought if Opie became a solid member of the school spirit team. But the newspaper editors never printed her letters, and the athletics department said Justin was in charge of who wore the mascot costume until he graduated or no longer wanted to play the Opie role.

One year remained until they both graduated. Ginny was not that patient.

*

Thousands of students attended Thompson University: nerds, party animals, future politicians, future farmers, geeks, Greeks, jocks, elitists, and all the other usual college stereotypes. Each had their costumes: the jocks wore letter jackets, the future politicians sported ties and lapel pins, and the elitists dressed in the latest styles from Milan. Justin saw them every day—eating in the cafeteria, sitting in lecture halls, walking around campus—and he realized their clothes defined them, told them to behave like the people in their respective cliques should. Only he was immune. Only he had the secret identity that allowed him to sit on the gym floor at basketball games, snatch free popcorn from the concession stands, and “accidentally” slap campus security guards. He was Opie the Octopus.

The faded pastel octopus looked ridiculous heaped in a corner of his room and even sillier actually on him. The costume had two long legs, one purple and one green, and two sleeves, also one purple and one green, and the other four octopus appendages were padded wiring attached inside the torso so the fake arms moved when the person inside the costume maneuvered his real ones. The whole thing was topped by a purple felt head wide enough to fit two human heads inside. Two large green eyes hid the slits where he actually looked out of the mask, just a few

inches above a hinged jaw painted with a bright red smile and sporting a faded pink felt tongue.

Each time he put on the costume, Justin promised himself he'd wash it after the game. Once a semester or so, he did. The easiest way was to jump in the shower—in full costume—and lather up with a strong shampoo. Justin figured the dandruff kind might even kill bugs hiding in the costume's folds. Drying the suit was more difficult. He'd tried drying it inch by inch with his hair dryer, but the room quickly smelled like wet burnt dog hair, and he was worried he'd scorch the costume. The whole ensemble was too big to fit in a laundry room dryer. And he couldn't hang it out his window—that was no way to keep a secret identity. So, he tossed the dripping costume over the backs of two chairs, wrung it out as much as possible with some bath towels, and let it air dry for a few days. If he sprayed lots of deodorant around the costume, it almost didn't stink up the room.

He was careful to keep his door locked and not invite anyone over while the costume was exposed. He protected the Opie costume like some students harbored illegal pets. As a freshman, he had jokingly worn the costume as a favor to a friend and swore it was the most disgusting thing he'd ever done and would never do again—but it wasn't. He loved the adrenaline rush, the freedom to do anything and not get chastised.

He'd made a list of the most awesome things he, Justin, would never do but Opie the Octopus could do: ask out hot chicks, smuggle beer into basketball games, and more. As Opie, he was invulnerable. Maybe this year he'd go to all the sports events, really live it up. He intended senior year to be his finest of the four school years—and Opie's finest in a century.

*

Ginny's one and only goal for senior year was to convert Opie, one way or the other.

Ginny went to Justin's dorm room the day before classes began. "We need to talk about working together, cheerleaders and mascot. Look, I'm just thinking about posterity."

“Posteriors?”

She ignored his smirk. “Posterity. What’s going to happen next year, when you’ve graduated? You do plan to graduate, don’t you?”

Justin shrugged and leaned his thin body against the doorframe like he didn’t have the strength to stand and hold his body up himself.

Ginny tried again. “You need to find a—what do you call a baby octopus? Someone you can train so he or she can take over next year.”

“Sounds like too much work. I’ll just let the athletics department take care of it when they get around to it.”

“Oh, well, yeah,” Ginny tried not to screech. She ground her molars and faked a less concerned, conversational tone. “It’s a ton of work. I know because I organize cheerleading tryouts each year, and it’s tough. So, the cheerleaders want to help. We’ll find your substitute.”

“Why?”

“We want to make sure the school gets the best spirit squad it can possibly have.” She smiled.

Justin arched an eyebrow. “Ever thought that maybe you have too much school spirit?”

Ginny dropped the smile. “You missed four home football games this season. You only hit seven men’s basketball games last year, none of the women’s games. And I don’t want to hear the crowd asking, ‘Where’s the mascot?’ at every game. You *need* a substitute. And *we* need you to agree to it.”

Justin stared across the hall. “Sometimes I don’t feel like going to the games, okay? I’m not all rah-rah-rah. You know?”

“You and the rest of the school. Look, let’s make a deal,” Ginny tried a fourth time. “Cheerleaders hold a tryout. You get to decide the categories—dance, endurance, stunts, whatever. But the cheerleaders act as judges. So, the person we pick gets to

be your substitute when you can't go to a game. And in exchange, the cheerleaders will put Opie the Octopus at the top of a stunt, just for you."

Justin grinned. "Nahhh."

"Think about it." Ginny smiled sweetly. "It would be pretty cool, right? Top of the pyramid, standing on the shoulders of two of us cheerleaders?"

"That, that would make an awesome photo." He waved an arm into his dorm room. Above the dirty floor and cluttered desk were framed photos of various athletes and public figures. "There's a photo contest on the Internet I'd like to enter. Opie up that high—that could be a winner."

"So you'll do it? Give permission for the tryouts for a substitute Opie and join the cheerleaders for one big stunt?"

"Okay, it's fine if you want to do the tryouts. Just don't expect me to help out."

"I didn't. And the stunt? Come on, wouldn't that be the coolest thing any mascot has ever done?"

Justin tilted his shaggy head, thinking about it, or perhaps picturing himself as Opie on top of the stunt. "Nahhh. Too dangerous. I'd fall and break my neck. Then I couldn't be Opie anymore."

Ginny brightened. "Justin, that's why we practice. We're very safety minded—we rehearse each stunt, safety mats on the ground, spotters to catch you before you hit the mats. We're professionals." She watched Justin twist his lips and shake his head slightly. "Hey, nobody on my team ever gets hurt."

"Yeah, but I'm not really on your team, am I?"

Ginny's smile stiffened. "The school needs an understudy mascot. And I want you to feel like you're part of the team. We'll hoist you on a pyramid. It's no big deal—but it'll look really cool. Just come to a few practices and you'll see it's perfectly safe. You're in good hands."

Justin laughed slightly. "That's funny, because an octopus has eight hands."

Ginny struggled to keep the polite smile on her face.

*

Justin showed up to the next three practices. Ginny suggested he try the stunt without the costume. The first time the cheerleaders built the pyramid for Justin to mount, he couldn't stop laughing and wound up breaking the pyramid apart before he'd climbed past the base level's shoulders. After a few more failed attempts, Justin promised to be back the next day.

"I have never met someone with so little sense of balance," whined one cheerleader, rubbing her shoulder, which still carried the imprint of Justin's sneaker.

"Balance? What about coordination? He may have eight hands, but he's all thumbs," another girl griped.

"And how come a guy your size weighs three times as much?" one of the guys asked Ginny.

"We just have to heft him up there one time, at one game," Ginny assured the squad, "and then we're done with him."

"No, we still have to put up with him for the rest of his senior year," replied the girl with the bruised shoulder. "Think about it. So we find him a substitute Opie. So what? Justin is such a slacker he won't remember to call the substitute and tell him which games to attend or give him the costume or whatever."

"This is going to work," Ginny told her squad, trying not to grind her teeth. "Have I ever let you down?"

*

Seventy-three students showed up for the tryouts. The cheerleaders took care of everything—advertising, reserving the gymnasium, coaching the applicants through what would and would not be considered acceptable mascot behavior. Justin sat on a metal folding chair to one side of the judges' table and watched the proceedings with a little surprise at the range of talent.

“Man, I’m glad I didn’t have to try out,” he remarked to the male cheerleader next to him. “I never would have had a chance.”

“We know,” the cheerleader said.

Justin didn’t catch the slight. He watched applicant forty-two trot into the gymnasium. Dressed in the costume, they all looked alike, but Justin enjoyed guessing which candidate would be his substitute. When Ginny turned on the dance music, Opie trotted across the gym, dancing with all eight legs. He turned an eight-legged cartwheel, and then popped upright and waved all eight arms to the imaginary crowd. A few of the cheerleaders gasped and clapped.

“This is what we’re looking for,” Ginny murmured loudly. Her peers jotted their scores on their tally sheets and smiled at each other as contestant forty-two returned to the locker room to hand off the costume.

“Who was that?” one of the cheerleaders asked, bending over the judging table so he could see Ginny.

“I think I know, but everyone’s anonymous in costume—at least till tryouts are over.” Ginny smugly penciled a smiley face onto applicant forty-two’s score card.

Quickly the others guessed, “Is that your sorority sister? Is that Susan? Why didn’t she try out to be a cheerleader?”

Pretending to resist the questions, Ginny sighed, “Well, I don’t know who that was, of course, so I don’t know if number forty-two was Susan or not. She did cheer in middle school but was strictly into dance and gymnastics—no cheer—throughout high school.”

“But why would she want to be the mascot?” pressed the guy next to Justin.

“We don’t have a dance team. And have you seen the gymnastics group? Amateur. Very amateur.” Ginny tilted her chair back and gazed toward Justin. “I think you can leave now if you want.”

Justin snorted. “Your sorority sister? I thought this was a real tryout, what a joke. When you said it was all about school spirit, I believed you.”

Ginny stood and yelled back, “It is totally about school spirit. Susan has it—you don’t. In fact, I bet all 73 of these people have more school spirit in their little pinkies than you’ve had in your entire four years here. You are a joke. A real joke. You don’t do anything. Opie the stoner mascot. I’m glad you don’t go to the games, because now we’re going to have a real mascot, a professional, a part of the team!” The gym door squeaked open as contestant number forty-three made his entrance—waving Opie’s six upper arms excitedly—but the cheerleaders’ eyes were all on Ginny and Justin.

“Whatever.” Justin’s chair fell over as he twisted away from the table and strode toward the exit.

Ginny watched with smug satisfaction then raced after him. “Wait! Justin, wait!”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. Look, I didn’t mean it that way.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Ginny, I think you’ve got too much ‘school spirit.’”

“Yeah, uh, maybe. Look, no hard feelings. You said we could have a tryout, and now you’ve got a substitute Opie. Susan, or whoever gets the highest score, will sub for you anytime you don’t want to go to a game. It’s win-win, right?”

“Whatever.”

“Please, don’t be like that. We still owe you. You’ll be at the basketball game this Friday, right?”

“Why?”

“Opie’s going to be the top of the pyramid for the first timeout. You said it would be a prize photo.”

“Yeah.” Justin softened. “It’d be one awesome photo.”

“Game starts at 7 P.M. You going to make it?”

Justin grinned. “Cool.”

*

“What if Opie the Oblivious doesn’t show up?” one cheerleader asked.

“He will.” Ginny glanced at the clock—ten minutes till game time. “And if he doesn’t, replace the stunt with dance routine number four. Everyone got that?”

One of her teammates pointed. “He’s here!”

Justin ambled through the gymnasium door, a dirty laundry bag strung over his shoulder. When he saw the cheerleaders, he nodded and walked toward them. “Hey.”

“Justin, it’s ten minutes till the game starts. Don’t you think you need to get ready?”

“Wow, already? Oh, okay. When are you building the pyramid-wall-thing?”

Ginny balled her fists under her poms, restraining herself. “The first timeout. The first time you hear the little buzzer sound and the announcer says ‘Timeout,’ go stand in the middle of the court. We’ll drag out the safety mats and build the pyramid and signal you then.”

“Awesome.”

“Yeah, ‘awesome.’” Ginny seethed. “Now go-get-ready.” She spun Justin around and shoved him towards the locker room.

“So, dance routine number four?” one of the cheerleaders asked hopefully.

Ginny threw her poms at her megaphone, toppling it over. “No, he’s here. We’re doing this.”

*

The buzzer sounded, the announcer called for the timeout, and the cheerleaders dragged a set of safety mats onto the basketball court. A few spectators got up to

visit the concession stands but stayed in place when they saw Opie the Octopus dart across the court toward the cheerleaders.

Ginny guided Opie to his spot as she lit up her face with a spirit smile. Then she let one of the male cheerleaders hoist her to position as one of the top girls in the stunt. She glanced down to see if Opie would chicken out. He lifted his six arms out of the way so two cheerleaders could lift him high enough to step on the second level's shoulders.

The audience gaped and pointed as Opie climbed to the top of the pyramid. "Climb, climb, climb!" they chanted.

As Opie planted two of his eight feet on the final two cheerleaders' shoulders, the crowd screamed with delight. And then with horror—as Opie plummeted down the front of the pyramid, past the startled cheerleaders' noses, and onto the bouncy mats.

"Dismount!" Ginny ordered over the cacophony. The cheerleaders leapt safely to the floor in a synchronized flurry of green and purple.

Several rushed to their mascot, who lay unmoving on the mats. One real arm and two more costumed arms stirred slightly. EMTs raced onto the court and broke through the ring of cheerleaders. "You okay?" "What hurts?" They searched for the costume's zippers. "How do you get this off?"

"I don't know," a cheerleader panicked. "The zipper's on the back!"

"We can't roll him over to find it—into the stretcher, now!"

"Here, the mask comes off like this." Thin hands plucked Opie's mask out of the fray. Ginny followed the arms and the voice to a short student bending into the mess with a camera dangling around his neck—Justin!

"Ju—what are you doing here?" Ginny screeched with a sick turning in her stomach. She looked back to see the EMTs wheeling away the stretcher. "Who was that?"

“I can’t believe it! It was just like I warned you.” Justin rushed past the cheerleaders to accompany the EMTs. Ginny ran to keep up. They followed the EMTs to the health room, off the main locker room. Opie’s costume lay limp and empty in a corner. A petite brunette in purple and green shorts and T-shirt sat crying on an examining table.

Tears swelled in Ginny’s eyes as she gasped, “Oh, Susan, what were you doing in the costume?”

“Are you okay?” Justin asked, then he addressed the EMTs, “Is she okay?”

Susan cried and cried as the EMTs bandaged her ankles. “Little lady here sprained both ankles. That was some stupid stunt, putting a mascot up at the top of a jumble of people. Didn’t you practice? Didn’t you figure it’s not safe in a costume?”

Ginny hugged Susan. “I’m so sorry. We’ll find a way to make it up to you.”

Susan pushed Ginny off. “I can’t even walk.”

“Just for a month or two,” an EMT said. “After that, you can walk and do some light exercise. Of course, you won’t be running around in that mascot costume till January at the earliest.”

“But that’s all of football and basketball seasons!” Susan burst into tears.

Ginny turned on Justin. “This is all your fault. Why weren’t you in the costume?”

“Hey, Ginny, you sound like you almost wanted it to be me who got hurt,” Justin countered.

“No! Of course not! Don’t say that! I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. But you were supposed to be in the costume, not Susan!”

“I was getting my prize photo. See?” Justin held up the camera. “Opie at the top of the pyramid. That’s all I wanted.” He switched on the viewfinder and pressed the buttons with his index finger. “See? Prize photo—no, that one’s blurry. There.

That one.” Justin stared at the photo on the two-inch screen. Ginny and an EMT stepped closer to look.

The EMT backed up and took another look at Ginny. “What in blazes would make you do that?” he gasped, his eyes fixed on the cheer captain.

Justin enlarged the photo and saw Ginny’s hand pushing Opie the Octopus’s purple leg off her shoulder. He gaped at the cheer captain and realized he wasn’t the only student wearing a mask. His thread-bare octopus costume was nothing compared to the smiles-and-school-spirit costume Ginny wore to hide a self-centered, evil interior.

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