



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS HAVE A PLAN. THEY  
THINK IT'S A GOOD PLAN, BUT SOMETHING GOES  
TERRIBLY WRONG WHEN THEY TRY TO EXECUTE IT...**

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## About First-Time Authors

We started On The Premises as a way to showcase good stories from writers who aren't big names in the short story world. I think we've succeeded, but a recent trend bothers me. In 2009, we published significantly fewer first-time fiction authors than in our first full year, 2007.

Intellectually, I know that about 30,000 short stories get published every year from at least a couple of thousand publications (both print and web). So it stands to reason that there are thousands of published short story writers who can write decent stories even though they've never won an *O. Henry* award or anything similar. I can't even imagine the number of writers who have sold a story or two, then quit writing. In the mid-1990's, I fell into that category. (I got much more serious about writing around ten years later.)

I'm still bothered, though, by how few stories we're publishing by authors who have never sold fiction before, even to an outlet that only pays \$5 or so. It's a drawback to the way we refuse to learn anything about an author before reading each story—we have no way to identify unpublished authors.

We are considering asking writers to identify themselves as having sold fiction before, or never having sold any, and we are considering reserving an honorable mention spot or something like it for the best story by an unpublished author.

If you have an opinion on this idea, let me know by writing to [Feedback@OnThePremises.com](mailto:Feedback@OnThePremises.com). In the meantime, please enjoy this issue, and don't forget to check out the cartoons drawn by this month's guest cartoonist, Matt Howarth! (Yes, fans of *Kief Llama* and *Those Annoying Post Bros.* and all the rest, THAT Matt Howarth!)

Keep reading and writing,

Tarl Roger Kudrick  
co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

# Cartoons!

by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

In the 1980's, Matt drew music reviews in the form of comic strips for Heavy Metal magazine. Since then he's written several independent comic book series including *Savage Henry*, *Those Annoying Post Bros.*, and my personal favorite, the sci-fi adventures of the xeno-psychologist *Kief Llama*. He's written scripts for DC Comics, provided illustrations for novels by Philip K. Dick and the 1984 version of the *Dune Encyclopedia*... really, he's done more than I have space to say. Check out <http://www.matthowarth.com/> to learn more, and <http://www.bugtownmall.com/> if you want to buy his stuff. (Start with *Kief Llama*. I did.)

Matt illustrated, and Tarl Kudrick came up with, six very...

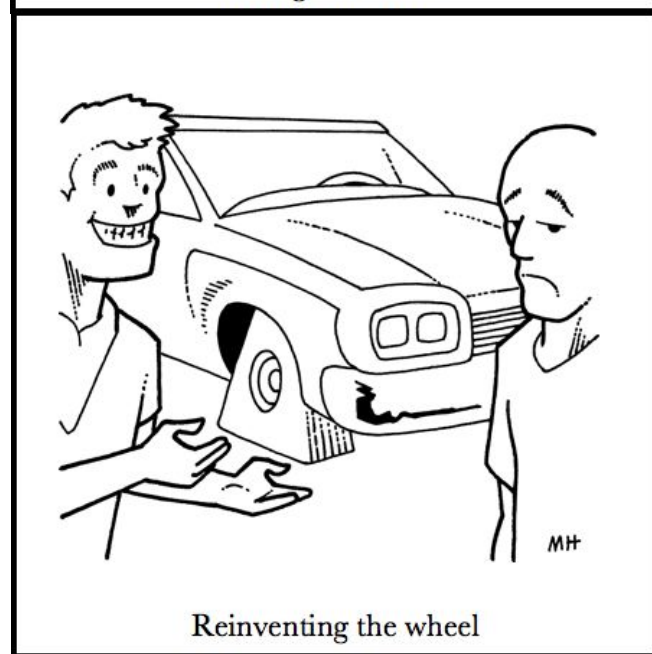
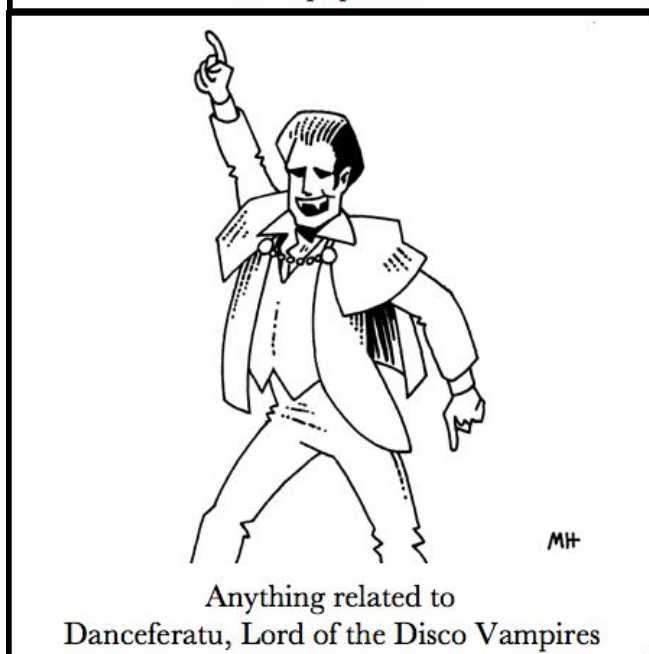
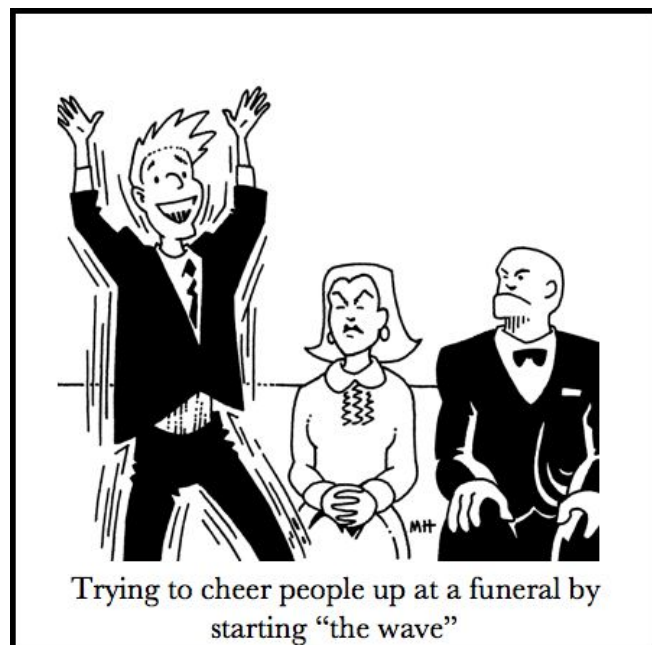
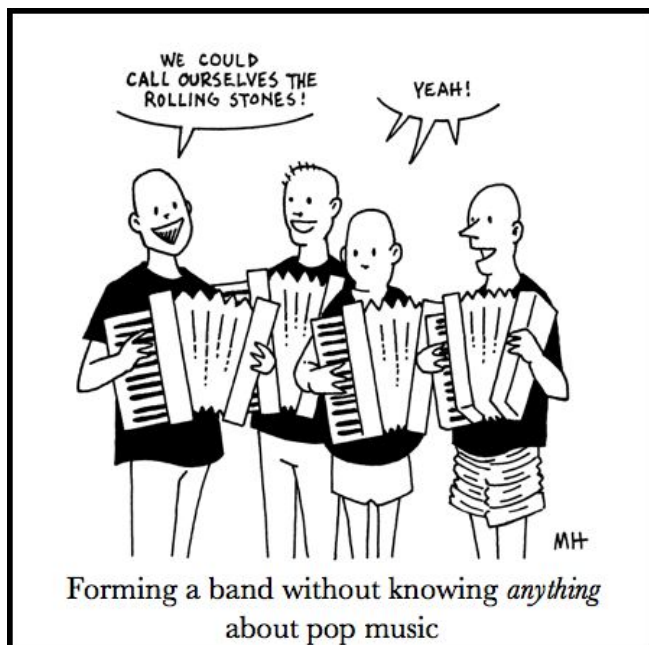
## Bad Plans



Inventing a whistle that only angry buffalo  
can hear



A Disney-themed strip club named  
"Bibbity, Bobbity, Boobs"



## FIRST PRIZE

Denver writer Bonnie McCune has had several short stories published in small publications, received prizes in three fiction contests, and was an award-winner in the 2009 Writer's Digest short-short contest. She recently completed a novel, *The Company of Old Ladies*. She also has been a nonfiction freelance writer for many years, primarily in local publications. She is a dedicated and enthusiastic urbanite.

### Corazón de Mi Vida, St. Teresa

[Heart of My Heart, St. Teresa]

*by Bonnie F. McCune*

Yolie and me, we sneak out of Burger King about seven. After the dinner rush, but before we have to do the crap at the end of the shift.

"Gotta get our *niños*," I tell the manager. His mouth gets all scrunched together like he has something up his ass. But what can he do? It isn't like he has people lined up outside his office wanting a job. And me and Yolie, we're real steady. Oh, we may be late once in a while, but we show up regular. We got to. Those babies need clothes and food, our mamas told us even before our stitches healed.

Yolie and me've been tight since sixth grade. First year of middle school, when we were the only Chicanas in the fast reading group. We sat by each other in reading, huddled together on the playground during lunch, walked home arm in arm. Took turns braiding our hair, tried on make up, whispered back and forth to each other what our big sisters had let loose about sex, periods, boys and how to attract them. And finally, at fifteen, we got pregnant together.

Was my mom pissed! Not Yolie's. Her mom's got so many, what's one more, she says. But my mom goes on and on about Saint Teresa, how she named me for her so I'd choose the right path, yadda-yadda. What a load! This guy showed me on the computer at school, Saint Teresa, she was one wild girlfriend when she was young. So I don't bend my mind over my mom's bitching any more.

"Am I glad to get out of there," Yolie says. "It was about a hundred and fifty degrees in the back. And that bitch Tina, I could see she was ready to play her little game again. Diddling around filling the napkin holders so she don't have to scrub the floor or clean the stove." She strips off her Burger King shirt right there on Fifteenth Street. We started wearing tube tops under our shirts at the beginning of summer, partly to get cool as fast as we can when we leave, partly to save time changing.

"So, how I look?" she asks, running her hands down the sides of the tube.

"Good. Real good. You're almost as skinny as before the baby," I say. Yolie always been thin but built on top, got *chichis* out to there. That's why guys always been hot for her, won't leave her alone.

"Yeah, but you should see my stretch marks." She's still pissed I got none.

We cross the street to the bus stop and stand next to this guy whose boom box is so loud it's giving me a headache. Yolie rolls her eyes and mouths "Ass hole."

I say, "Let's walk. It's faster than taking the bus."

We set off toward our *casas* in northwest Denver, dragging our bodies through the July sun. It's still so hot your feet kind of stick to asphalt in the street, and the air shimmers over the surface. I'm really moving. I don't feel a thing, not the sun, not the traffic's shaking on the road, not sore muscles from reaching and carrying at work. I've got a bubble of anticipation in my gut that's nearly ready to burst from my throat.

"What's your hurry?" says Yolie. "I'm gonna get heat stroke." She's panting like a puppy. Trickle of sweat run down the sides of her face and shoulders.

“Baby,” I say.

“Baby, nothing,” says Yolie. “The damn baby’s there all the time. What’s up?”

I don’t look any where but the viaduct overpass we’re starting to cross. It’s flung across the canyon below of railroad tracks and metal skeletons for new buildings called “lofts” instead of “apartments.” The overpass does have a sidewalk for pedestrians, about a foot wide and crammed between the crushed metal guard rail supposed to save us from getting run over by cars and the web of more metal of bridge supports that soar high in the air.

“I want to get to El Taqueria,” I yell over the roar of the cars going past at six hundred miles an hour.

“To see Amando?” Yolie says. “Don’t you got a date with him tonight anyway?”

“No, not to see Amando. And, no, I don’t got a date with him. He just thinks ‘cause he’s Miguel’s father, I should drop everything whenever he shows up. He don’t own me.”

“Maybe it’s ‘cause he also thinks you two are getting married.”

“Well, we ain’t. I haven’t decided. I’m too young to get stuck in some cruddy two-bedroom apartment dropping a brat every coupla years, only thing for fun watching tv and going out for a beer once in a while. Maybe I wanna see something different from this ‘hood, same people every day, same dirty streets, same broken windows in the houses, same music blaring from the doors.”

“You’re old enough, you *loco*. What else is there to do?” Yolie’s guy disappeared when he learned her baby was on the way. She never had a chance to get married even though her mom and her had a fancy white dress all picked out and her dad was talking to the priest.

“Anyway, Amando got a ‘tude. Thinks he’s tough shit, doing me a favor by sticking with me. He’s not so great. Ain’t even got a job.”

“If not to see Amando, then why?”



“Okay. I have like this kind of appointment with Lalo.”

“Lalo? That geek. You still hanging with him? I thought when school let out, you gave him up. You don’t need his help for tests and shit now.”

“Nope,” I say. “I want to see him.” I start scrambling down the weed-choked embankment at the end of the viaduct, fighting through broken bottles, shredded newspapers, cigarette butts, used condoms, to cut off a couple of streets from our route, a path over a lonely vacant lot, then through the backyards of some neighbors. Yolie follows me.

“Why you like him so much?”

“He talks to me about stuff,” I yell over my shoulder.

“What stuff.”

“Oh, about how he’s gonna study computers and what do I think about what the mayor’s doing, things like that. About St. Teresa, she was boy-crazy when she was young, but she also had charm and imagination and intelligence, like me. He acts like I have a brain, not just a cunt,” I say.

“Sounds boring. And he’s a dog. Don’t know how to dress at all.” I stay silent. I think Lalo is very sexy, but in a quiet Jimmy Smits kind of way. No, he don’t wear his pants pulled low around his butt or have an earring or put on those shiny shirts, but his eyes look right at you, like you’re the only thing he’s seeing. I used to run into him at the library, and he’d show me shit on the Internet, not dirty stuff but answers to questions for class and then places for moms, how many shots their kids should get, what babies are like when their teeth come in. We’d giggle and laugh and poke each other.

As Yolie and me cut through the Gomez back yard, ducking under the laundry, Mrs. Gomez comes out. “Hi, girls. How are the babies?”

Yolie is always ready to talk about Gabriela, like that kid’s the only thing she’s ever done she’s proud of. She yaps and yaps, how much Gabriela weighs, how she grabs her spoon to try to eat her food, that kind of shit. I shift from foot to foot.

Is Lalo waiting at El Taqueria? Drinking the iced tea he prefers to soft drinks? Licking sugar off the rim of the glass? Pressing the cool tumbler against his hot cheek? Is the waitress flirting with him, throwing him bold looks from the corner of her soft dark eyes? Saint Teresa, help me.

Sure is hot. I remember the day Lalo gave me a ride home in a snowstorm last winter. Cold then. When we got to my house, he parked his car and started talking about where he was going to travel after he left school. Places where it never snowed. Deserts full of nothing but sand and stones and snakes and sun. Jungles with tangled trees and vines, tigers hunting deer, sudden showers of warm rain. Talked so real I could see the places in front of me and him in them. Then he asked me what I was going to do. Until he remembered and looked at my belly sticking out hard and full as a basketball.

“Guess I’m not,” I said, and I rubbed the lump that was my baby. He was kicking like crazy in there, like he wanted to jump out and join Lalo in a jungle.

“Not right away,” Lalo said. “But things can change. Anything can change.”

And in that minute, I believed him. How could I not? His hands, usually gripping a load of books or the straps of a backpack, now stroked the steering wheel with fingertips. His dark eyes, which in school stared hard and long at teachers, now grew heavy as he seemed to be drifting away from the car in front of my house into strange, different settings. When he turned to me, it was like he invited me to come with him.

Then he kept talking. And that man sure can talk. About how the service could make life clean and straight-shooting. He had an uncle who’d signed up who swore it was the best fuckin’ move he’d made in his life. Steady good money, rules and bosses that made sense, lots of space from people who used to disrespect him. Lalo said his uncle was planning to study computer repair; if you were interested, free training in all kinds of jobs. A man could have a great life and raise a fine family in the service.

I look around at the Gomez yard. Over here, a kid’s hard plastic wading pool, its colored bottom making the water in it look blue between the load of toys and the

scattering of yucky limp leaves floating on top. Then a long smear of mud in a path to the square cement patio by the back door where a bunch of white plastic lawn chairs look like they've been abandoned the night before. Some rickety metal TV trays still hold beer cans, and on the ground around their bent legs scutter an empty tortilla chip bag and a bunch of other junk. Nothing new or clean. It's no different from any yard, any house in this neighborhood.

Sometimes this 'hood looks like it's the dumpster of the whole city, crap all over the alleys. Smells like it, too. I never noticed until I was pregnant. The greasy tang of fat floating in the air as mamis fry tortillas or grill meat, the constant tang of cilantro and chili made me sick to my stomach. Then, one time Lalo talked about the air in Texas, how clean it smelled, and how in the Army, trash don't even hit the ground before it's picked up.

"We got to go," I say, first in a whisper, then loud.

They keep talking. "And Miguel?" Mrs. Gomez says to me. "How's he?"

"Fine, fine. Mrs. Gomez, we got to go," I say.

Nope they keep talking. Their flapping jaws stir up the only breeze in the city. Finally I pull Yolie's hand. "*Hasta la vista*, Mrs. Gomez," I say, "*los niños*, ya know," and actually drag Yolie away.

I tell her, "Girl, you made this short cut into a long cut." I race into my house and grab Miguel, feel his diaper, not too wet, stuff him into his stroller, wriggle my fingers at my mami, and am on my way out the door before Yolie can finish putting on more lipstick. The screen door bangs behind me, off half its hinges, and the crumbling concrete of the front steps tries to trip the wheels of the stroller. I'm used to dodging these screw-ups, so I fly.

Yolie pokes along after me. "Chill. Everybody will still be hanging. The cafe won't burn down."

"Told you, I have this thing with Lalo. I was supposed to be there at 7:30. His last night in town. He's going into the Army tomorrow." Right now I don't care if Yolie gets pissed off at me, don't care about my mom's shout to take the baby clothes to the laundromat, or if I'm uncool jogging to meet a guy. I promised, I

promised, I promised to meet Lalo to say goodbye, to find out his new address, a phone, even an e-mail. Yesterday he came into BK and didn't order nothing, not even a pop. He must have dropped by just to swear that he wanted me to stay in touch with him. If I don't make see him tonight, he'll disappear like a puff of smoke, or a TV show you switch off and it's gone.

I gallop down the street so fast, the baby's head bounces against the back of the stroller and he giggles. With each step I chant, Saint Teresa, Saint Teresa. The evening wind is coming up, and for a few seconds, through waves of dust blown out of the gutter and off the drying lawns, I think about me and Lalo and Miguel in an even hotter place, say, Texas. In a little apartment, Lalo peeling out of his uniform, me jiggling the baby and holding a beer for Lalo. I can see the heavy, tasseled curtains at the windows, a big mirror with gold trim over the velvet couch, on the wall lots of pictures of us and Miguel and our families, a major TV and entertainment center in dark wood with shelf after shelf rising to the ceiling. I feel absolutely safe but somehow excited, too, like I been drinking too much Sprite and my ears are buzzing.

Way down the street by El Taqueria, I can see a group of people standing out front or propped on their cars, smoking, sharing a soft drink, but I can't tell if Lalo is one of them. Coupla them got their radios turned up real high with songs rocking the air. Closer, closer, I'm breathing really fast and humming along with the song. Then I see someone come out of the cafe, tall, thin and graceful as a young cat, he gets into a car, that's Lalo's car, oh, no, and pulls away off down the road, going the other way away from me and Miguel.

For a minute I can't inhale, can't see, can't talk or feel. Miguel beats at the air with small fists as if he's the challenger in a fight, which brings me back to life. "Now see what you did," I shriek at Yolie. "He's gone. He thought I stood him up."

Yolie shrugs. "No big deal. One man is pretty much like another."

Now she's leading and I'm dragging behind. I feel like crying. Goodbye, Texas. Goodbye, little apartment with a thirty-six inch TV, king-size bed, tiny crib for Miguel in his very own bedroom. We come up to the cafe, and there's Amando,

talking and bragging like he always does. Miguel starts whimpering, and I pick him up and pull out a piece of chocolate for him to suck on.

After Amando shoots the bull for a while with his friends, he comes up to me. "There's my *mamacita*. How you doing? Ready to party tonight?" He grabs me around the shoulders and squeezes me.

I shrug. "I guess."

The baby screams and rubs his face with his hands. His fat cheeks, mouth, and chin are covered with sticky chocolate.

"What's wrong with him?" asks Amando. "Need more candy?"

"Naw, he's teething. Fussy. Maybe running a temp. Maybe I shouldn't go tonight."

"Don't be *loco*. Give him to me." Amando takes Miguel and jiggles him up and down. "That's my *hijo*." Miguel yells louder and spits chocolate-colored drool all over Amando's shirt. Amando hands him back faster than you can flip a tortilla.

"We got to go talk to my mama first, before we hit the road," says Amando. "She wants to know how many people from your side coming to our wedding." He strokes my arm, nuzzles my neck, something he's done since the first time we got together. I used to think it was sweet, kinda protecting me, kinda putting moves on me. Guess that's why I started doing it with him last year. He wanted me so bad and I was curious.

I'm still wiping the spit off Miguel. It's making his plump rosy cheeks shiny. He's trying to stick all ten, fat, chocolate-covered fingers into his circle mouth at once. Everything about him is round—his head, the tip of his nose, his eyes, his cheeks, all over his body—like he's made of a bunch of squishy balls all molded together.

"Hey," says Amando. "The wedding? We can get my cousin's band for nothing."

I look at Amando and can see some of Miguel's roundness in him, his belly, his chin. No lie that he's Miguel's father. Lalo's kid would be skinny and long, with

eyes so big you can fall in them, and a nose and chin like a statue. Then I'm staring down the street in the direction of Lalo's car, then over the tops of buildings, past the mountains, at nothing. "Whatever," I say.

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## SECOND PRIZE

Kate Delany's previous publications include a book of poetry, *Reading Darwin*, published by Poets Corner Press. Her poetry has appeared in such journals as *13th Moon*, *Barrelhouse*, *Chicken Pinata*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Lilith*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Spire Press*. Her fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Antithesis Common*, *Art Times*, *Jersey Devil Magazine*, *Long Story Short*, and *Sotto Voce*. She lives in Collingswood, NJ, with her husband Seth, daughter Samara, and cats Esmeralda and Emile Zola.

# How To Win Friends and Influence People

by Kate Delany

There were these older kids, see. And they had stuff. All kinds of stuff. One of 'em supposedly had a shotgun and a whole box of bullets. But that wasn't what interested Reese and Dakota. These older kids, they had firecrackers. And for so long, so, so long, Reese and Dakota had been trying to get their hands on firecrackers. So as far as Reese could see, they had to make friends with them. Then maybe they'd sell them their firecrackers.

It's just these older kids, they weren't so interested in talking to them. What do babies like you two think you're doing talking to us, asked a chubby boy who seemed to be in charge? Around him stood two other kids, flanking him tight. Hesitantly, Reese mentioned the firecrackers. Did they really have some? Because that's what they heard.

What would I tell babies like you for, the boy said and the two kids beside him shook with laughter, as if they'd caught it by standing too close. We got money, Reese explained as he opened his palm, displaying the saved allowance, the banked lunch money, the extra funds Dakota had gotten somewhere, probably

stolen from his dad's wallet or skimmed from one of those take-a-penny, leave-a-penny jars on store counters, though he refused to say because that's how Dakota could be sometimes, annoying. The chubby boy frowned, unimpressed, then the lanky kid next to him made a big show of cupping his hand around the chubby boy's ear and whispering something to him. The chubby boy's gaze shifted from Reese's palm to Dakota's face. Well, we're not gonna just sell them to anybody, he said. Then looking directly at Dakota, he added, and I sure ain't gonna sell 'em to the Mayor's son. How dumb do you think I am? Before Reese could reply, Dakota answered, I don't know. How dumb are you? The fence of older boys rumbled a little and from where he stood, a good arm's length away from Dakota and wishing he was even further, Reese rumbled a little with irritation too. What was Dakota doing? He was gonna mess everything up!

We won't tell anyone, Reese said. We swear, really, we won't! The chubby boy "hmmphed." Yeah right, he said, like you two babies aren't gonna run right home and tattle, sure! Reese turned and stared meaningfully at Dakota who at last chimed in weakly, we won't. The tone wasn't that friendly or enthusiastic but at least the words were right. Well, you gotta pay double, the older boy insisted, on account of his dad being Mayor. Alright, Reese said. Then suddenly a few more words slipped off his tongue, unbidden: You know my dad's Deputy Mayor. All the kids turned and gave him a quizzical look then, Dakota included. But it was just he was so sick of hearing all day long about Dakota's dad being Mayor when no one mentioned his dad being second in charge and that was still pretty good, even if his dad wasn't as important as Robin, who was Mayor and Reese's dad's best friend; even if he wasn't fun or cool or popular like Robin. Well you can pay triple if you want, the chubby boy said. No, Reese muttered, I was...never mind. Anyway, the chubby boy continued, you gotta do something first to prove you're worth selling to. Alright, Reese said hesitantly, what? At this, the three older boys decided they needed to have a secret powwow and walked a few paces off. Reese and Dakota just stood and watched them whisper, since their own private meeting just consisted of Reese hissing, don't do anything stupid, Dakota, and Dakota responding, shut up, Reese.

When the boys returned, the chubby kid said, okay, what was gonna happen was they were all gonna walk over to the creek, which Reese noticed the boy



pronounced “crick,” just like his own dad did. Then one of you’s gonna hold his breath underwater till we say so, and the other’s gonna hold ‘em down to make sure he don’t cheat. Then you’ll switch. So what do ya say? the older boy asked Reese, leaning forward and leering. Can you do that? Or are you babies too scared? Part of Reese, a big part, wanted to say no, never mind, they didn’t want the firecrackers that bad since he had a serious, abiding fear of water ever since the time his father decided to teach him to swim by throwing him in a pool and Reese hit his head and nearly drowned. But Dakota gave the older boys a simpering, almost bored looking smile then began walking towards the creek.

Dakota would do anything, anything stupid thing at all. No one knew that better than Reese. A lot of the time, Reese used this for his own personal amusement. He could egg Dakota on into doing most anything, pulling any stupid prank where inevitably he’d not just get caught but most likely break his arm in the process too. Their fathers bickered sometimes jokingly, sometimes more bitterly, about who encouraged who. Usually Reese figured it was him but maybe this time it was Dakota. After all, Dakota knew all about Reese’s fear of water. You’re not afraid of anything, Reese remembered saying to Dakota once. He meant it as a compliment, thought it was a nice thing to say. It was something Reese would love someone to say to him, at any rate. But Dakota answered back, no, I’m afraid of everything. It just looks the same. Reese didn’t know what that meant and that always irritated him, when he couldn’t figure out what Dakota was talking about and had to just sit there and watch his friend stare wistfully off into the horizon like there was something Dakota saw there that Reese couldn’t.

When they got to the creek, Dakota whispered to Reese, don’t worry, I’ll go first. Oh, he guessed he was supposed to say thanks! As if this had been just his plan! As if Dakota didn’t want the firecrackers too! Well, he wasn’t gonna say thanks! Instead he just muttered, whatever, and Dakota gave him a look like he had x-ray vision and could see Reese’s stomach all knotted up in fear as soon as they waded into the creek, as soon as his little toe dipped into the water. How was he going to do this? How could he even begin to feign Dakota’s fearlessness? He had no idea. He just hoped, just prayed maybe if Dakota did what the older kids wanted, they’d be satisfied, give them the firecrackers and let them go.

Okay, go! the chubby boy commanded and while Reese held Dakota down underwater, he thought of all the strange, stupid stuff they'd done together, not unlike this. For a lot of the stupid stuff, Rosie had come along with them except now it was like she didn't want to hang around them as much or something. You forget Rosie's a year older than you, Reese's mother sometimes reminded him. Besides, she doesn't want to do all those ridiculous things you boys do. He guessed maybe that was true but why? Why all the sudden? It used to be good enough, the stuff they did together. Recently, it had occurred to Reese that things were changing, with Rosie in particular but maybe the world in general, but he wasn't sure why and certainly wasn't sure what to do about it. One instance stood out in his mind: he'd been outside playing basketball with Rosie when he noticed she had pink polish chipping off her nails. You paint your nails, he asked? She answered with a shrug and a quick "sometimes" then she slapped the ball away from him, shot and scored. What did it mean, he thought later? What did it mean that Rosie had polish chipping off her nails? Later that night, he mentioned it to Dakota. Had he ever noticed? But Dakota just gave him a weird look so as far as Reese could tell Dakota hadn't noticed a thing, probably also hadn't noticed that sometimes when they were all playing together outside you could see the criss-cross of straps underneath Rosie's shirt. But here was the troubling part: when Reese and Dakota fought, which happened a lot, somehow they seemed to be almost magnetized into tumbling into fist fights with each other, Rosie always took Dakota's side, always, which Reese told himself must be on account of Dakota being so small, the smallest kid in their class, so small he had to sit up front with the girls for class pictures.

The chubby boy began to count backwards slowly—ten, nine, eight... Through the water, Reese studied Dakota's face. He'd been down there a long time. Reese felt sweaty, dizzy, just thinking about it. He'd never really forgiven his father for trying to teach him to swim like that but then again, his father never really apologized, only his mother had, as if she'd been the one who did it. His father believed that's how you learn things, the school of hard knocks. He said it all the time. Reese hated when he said that.

Seven, six, five... Reese listened to the counting then decided to distract himself again from the impending horror of his turn. He thought of something else,

something that had happened since Rosie's painted fingernails. The three of them had decided to break into this house in town, this old guy's house. They weren't gonna take anything. They just wanted to know what it looked like inside since it was all creepy and weird looking from the outside, like the Addams Family's house or something. It was Reese's idea but Dakota did all the work because no one could pick a lock like Dakota. They snooped around the house and then in this one room, there was this bar mounted to the wall, the kind you do pull-ups on. At first, just fooling around, Reese pretended to be the old man, trying to do pull-ups, all shaky and rickety. Then he started to do them in earnest because he could. He was one of the biggest kids in his class. Maybe a little chunky, okay, but also tall and maybe gonna be muscular one day. Rosie watched while Dakota heckled. Oh yeah, like you're so tough, Reese snapped back. Instead of answering, Dakota fished a cigarette butt out of an ashtray, relit it with an adjacent lighter then stomped it out on his own arm. For a second, there was this horrible smell of burning skin then both he and Rosie starting yelling, oh my God, Dakota! What's wrong with you? Rosie ran into the old man's bathroom and came back with first aid cream and a band-aid. They had to leave after that, Rosie was so upset. On the walk home, Reese whispered to her that maybe they should tell Robin, ya know, just because? Rosie nodded and told him she thought they better because that was really scary. She looked at him like he'd just done something really nice, thinking of this, and smiled at him. Later, when Reese asked to speak to Robin confidentially, Robin gave him the same smile, ruffled his hair and told him he was a good friend. Reese guessed Dakota didn't agree though because for a week they didn't speak or play together. When he tried talking to Dakota, Dakota just stared right through him in that Dakota-like way. When at last they did start speaking again, Dakota told him that now his dad made him go to counseling twice a week, on account of the cigarette thing, not just once anymore.

Four, three, two... Reese smiled down at Dakota, who squirmed under the water the way people do when they have to pee. In another second, it would be Reese's turn to do this. He wondered if doing something like this was as destructive as burning yourself with a cigarette, if afterward he'd have to go to counseling. But no, his father would never do that. He'd just shake his head and grunt, what's the matter with you, boy? They were so different, his dad and Robin, the Mayor

and Deputy Mayor. Reese's dad was his real dad though while Robin was just Dakota's adopted dad, a fact Reese sometimes dwelt on with acute satisfaction. Really, when you thought about it, Robin hadn't even been Dakota's adopted dad for that long. Reese had known Dakota a lot longer, back when he lived in other houses, with other families. People got paid for taking Dakota in. He knew that for sure because Dakota told him once. Watching Dakota underwater now, he thought of the first time they'd ever met. Reese caught Dakota eating out a trashcan. His parents had thought there was a raccoon getting into their garbage so when he saw Dakota there, Reese just strolled back into the house and announced to his parents that it wasn't a raccoon. It was a kid. He thought they'd be pleased to learn the truth but instead they just shoved him right back out the door and told him well, invite him in! And that was the start of it, the start of everything. After that, Dakota was always at their house. Reese's parents gave him food, Reese's old clothes, sometimes even shirts from one of Reese's little sisters since Reese's sister's clothes fit Dakota better than Reese's did, what with Dakota being so little and all. Sometimes Reese liked Dakota hanging around, having him for a constant playmate, but sometimes he got tired of it. When he was in one of those moods and when his parents weren't watching, he'd stand out on his front porch and wait for Dakota to approach. Then he'd start throwing stones at him like he sometimes did with the bony stray dog that slunk around the neighborhood sniffing for scraps. Reese's dad told him once that someday somebody was gonna have to put that mangy thing out of its misery. One time, a few days after he'd stood on the porch, waiting for Dakota, rocks in hands, Dakota reappeared, cautiously and opened his own cupped hands, offering Reese a pocket-watch, a fancy lighter and a twenty. Reese took these offerings and let Dakota back in again.

One! the chubby kid yelled, finishing his count. Alright, your turn, he said to Reese but Reese didn't respond. Instead, he just stared down at Dakota, lost in thought. He pictured that pocket-watch, that lighter, that twenty dollar bill. Then he gazed over at the muddy bank of the creek where he and Dakota had both left their stuff. What was some junky watch and some dumb old lighter to Dakota now, now that Dakota had expensive new sneakers and an iPod resting in one of them, now that he had anything he wanted, anytime? Reese knew exactly how much all this stuff cost because Dakota told him, as if he wanted Reese to

know that now that he was the Mayor's son he wasn't eating out of trashcans anymore.

And now everyone at school seemed to totally forget that Dakota used to eat out of trashcans. They seemed to forget too that there used to be this woman Lesley who visited Dakota at school, who Dakota tried to pass off as his aunt but Reese, on the sly, informed the other kids that Dakota didn't have an aunt, that she was his social worker. The afternoon Reese leaked that information, Dakota was silent all day at school but then after the bell rang and they walked outside, he pounced on Reese and bloodied him up good. Well, Reese's father said, you have to remember people act the way they've been treated and Dakota's been kicked around a lot. Reese didn't really think that was a good enough excuse for what Dakota did but months later, he thought back to that remark when Lesley made a surprise visit to his house one night. She asked to talk to his parents alone but Reese listened in from the hallway. He couldn't hear everything but the gist of it seemed to be that Dakota was in the hospital and when he got out, he'd have to move again, go live with some new family. Reese's parents refused to fill in the gaps, which is why Reese asked to go visit Dakota in the hospital. He figured he could find out the whole story from Dakota himself. His mother, whose eyes were already red from crying, stared crying all over again when Reese asked this and told him what a sweet boy he was but no, Lesley said that he and Rosie shouldn't visit just yet, not until Dakota was... not so sick. So Reese never found out the whole story. But he did find out that Robin went to visit Dakota everyday in the hospital, even though it was Reese that had introduced Dakota to Robin, even though they both idolized Robin, even though they both followed him around, hoping to do little favors or be invited along on errands. As soon as he heard the news that Robin had decided to take Dakota in, to adopt him, Reese was livid. It was so unfair! He'd met Robin first! He'd tried to establish clear rules. Dakota was allowed to hang around Robin's but just as long as Reese was there too. But then Dakota went behind his back. He started hanging around Robin's even when Reese wasn't there. And then, when Reese pointed this out to Dakota, that he'd violated the rules, he went and told Robin what Reese said! Reese was so embarrassed, and was embarrassed even now thinking about the day Robin told him it really wasn't up to Reese to decide who could visit him and who couldn't. Reese insisted he never said such a thing. It was Dakota. Dakota

lies, he told Robin. Everyone knows that. And he steals too. Reese thought Robin would be glad to know this, especially if Dakota was going to be allowed to be in his house without Reese's supervision. But Robin didn't thank him. Instead, he said if Dakota was his friend, he ought to treat him nicer.

Hey, the older kid yelled! Hey, I said let him up! Reese wondered if Dakota could hear him because he started to try and come up for air, to get loose from Reese's grip. It would be his turn as soon as Dakota came above water. It would be his turn to do this. Reese thought this, then with all his might, his jaw locked in a determined grimace, he shoved Dakota back down, keeping him underwater and pressing as hard as he could. Shit, Reese heard one of the older kids mutter, he's gonna kill that kid! Hey, man, you gotta let him up! Hey, I said enough! But Reese didn't listen. He just pressed harder, harder, harder. Dakota looked up at him through the water for a second like he was confused. Then he started to struggle in earnest. Reese heard one of the older kids speak up again. We better get outta here, one of them yelled to the others. And just like that, they took off running. It surprised Reese how glad he was to see them go.

So was this it? Reese thought. Was this what it was like to kill a person? It was kind of eerie, but felt surprisingly good. He felt a rush of power, a confidence he never felt at school, not in class or during gym, not even at home around his parents and too many sisters. For a second, Dakota almost got the better of him, almost fought his way to the surface because Dakota was wiry and tough but not tough enough this time. This time, Reese felt invincible. He didn't even wince or yelp in pain when he saw drops of his own blood as Dakota clawed at him, digging impossibly hard into Reese's arms and hands to get free. Usually, Dakota was so smart in a crisis but this time Reese just watched dispassionately, as if from very far away, as bubbles floated up through the water. First the bubbles seemed to be strings of sentences, threats, pleas. Then there just seemed to be one word repeated; Reese figured it was his name being called again and again. It was stupid for Dakota to use up his air like that. Didn't he know that? He watched Dakota flail frantically, his eyes wide, terror-filled like some animal in a nature program on TV. Under his grip, the tightest grip of his life, Dakota's body convulsed in a way that reminded Reese of something he'd heard once—that the reason people's bodies still tremble even if they've hung themselves is because

your body never quits trying to live. Reese guessed this was Dakota's small body still trying to live, even though it was the same body Dakota had stubbed that cigarette out on once.

In another second, Dakota's body went still. No more bubbles. His eyes shut and his head bobbed back in a way that reminded Reese of the head of a dandelion about to snap off in a rough breeze. Reese wondered if he'd killed him. He hoped he hadn't because he wouldn't know what to do next. He let Dakota up and Dakota just floated there for a minute. Reese yelled, Dakota! It would be just like Dakota to kid at a moment like this, to play some terrible trick. Reese decided to pull him out. He drug Dakota up on the muddy bank and tried to focus on what to do next. All he knew was he wasn't gonna put his mouth on Dakota's mouth. Eww! Instead, standing over Dakota's still body, Reese nudged him with his toe, first gently then a lot harder, almost a kick. And just like that, Dakota came back to life, coughing and sputtering.

He coughed a few times, really hard, coughed, and coughed and seemed to choke. Then he rolled over on his side and threw up a lot of water and other stuff too, what looked like chunks of food. Eww, Reese said out loud, gross. Still oozing creek water out his mouth and nose, Dakota looked up at Reese. He drew a few ragged breaths then attempted to speak: you...you...you... And that, Reese decided, was all Dakota was gonna be allowed to say. He pounced on him, knocking Dakota, who'd just begun sitting up, back onto the ground. I saved you, Reese said, grabbing Dakota's hair and pulling as hard as he could. Say it! Say it! No, Dakota panted, no, you...you... you...No, Reese yelled, I saved you! Say it, Dakota! Say it! Furious, he banged Dakota's head hard against the ground. It made contact with the rock just below it. I saved you!, he shouted. I saved you! Say it! Again, Reese slammed Dakota's head down against the ground. After the second time his head crashed against the rock, Dakota quit fighting. When Reese heard him mumble okay, you...you saved me, he let Dakota go then he watched him roll over on his side and curl up, all small and soggy, his arms wrapped around his head. Reese watched as Dakota, the same Dakota who once stubbed a cigarette out on his own arm without flinching, now whimpered into his muddy sleeves.

It was an uninteresting scene. Reese stood up and dusted himself off. I'm going to get help, he announced cheerily to Dakota, and when I get back you can tell everyone how I did it, how I saved you. Reese walked off in the direction of town. That's where he'd find his father and Robin, he knew. As he walked, he started to plan what he'd say. He'd tell them something terrible had happened and immediately they'd know it was about Dakota. After all, wasn't it always? He'd lead them to the creek. They'd follow, panicked. Even Reese's dad would be panicked, as if it were Reese in trouble. When they reached Dakota, Reese knew Robin would make a big fuss over him. More than once, Reese had overheard Robin call Dakota baby, as in, baby, what happened? Baby, what did you do to yourself this time? Reese tried to tease Dakota about that because after all, it was weird. Reese's dad just called him by his name or called him boy or, sometimes when Reese got the feeling his dad was trying to be really nice, he called him son. But Dakota just shrugged. He wasn't embarrassed by that at all. Now though, Reese knew they'd all look to him. And now when they all looked his way—his dad, Robin, even Dakota himself—he'd start to tell them how he'd done it, just how he'd saved Dakota. Oh, he'd tell them a wonderful story. And he'd start like this—there were these older kids, see.

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## THIRD PRIZE

Kathryn Allen has been published in *Abyss & Apex* and the protest anthology *Glorifying Terrorism*, while forthcoming appearances include a short story in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. She resides in a town recently named as being one of England's nicest places to live and visit, but doesn't believe the judges can have taken into account the declining number and quality of bookshops when making their decision.

### The Hard Place

*by Kathryn Allen*

He wasn't just working out his contract in a dead-end job. Piloting the nozzle of an icebreaker was fun and a challenge, Mike reminded himself, easing the nozzle-head deeper into the crack and pulling the pump trigger. It was the kind of demanding, hands-on ride you couldn't get shepherding power stations in Earth orbit or flying transport shuttles across the plains of Mars—where automated systems did everything but take the heat for a foul-up.

Icebreaking—guiding the end of an insulated hose into an asteroid's collision fractures and pumping pressurised hot water deep into the cracks to create ice wedges that split the big rocks into smaller rocks, piece by piece—called for the skill, judgement, and high-quality sensory data processing power that only human brains could provide. At reasonable cost, anyhow.

And eighteen months ago, asteroid mining was the smart move for any pilot looking for a bit more spice and a lot more space. Mike had been very happy when he signed on with TiamatCo and joined *Leviathan's* crew.

Of course, back then Europa Station was still a bad joke. No one sane thought the ProGeny buyout could turn it around, or that mankind's next giant leap—the Jupiter push—would be happening this soon.

Nor that *Behemoth*, one of *Leviathan's* sister ships, would end as a scatter of metal and broken rocks that none of her crew survived to explain. A mystery the insurance companies hadn't been particularly happy to pay out on—as if industrial accidents weren't still a part of life back on Earth.

Beside him, Leah cleared her throat.

Mike kicked the retract pedal. Ice shards followed the nozzle-head, chipping and cracking from endless collisions as they swarmed out of the gully into sunlight, twinkled like new stars, and vaporised. In dark shadowy crevices, the bulk of the water froze, expanding within the tiniest fault lines, stressing the fabric of the rock.

But nothing broke off.

“Tough,” Leah said. “Looks like I scored the big split this shift.”

Mike didn't spare his co-pilot a sideways glance. He wanted Europa, but losing his edge on this job wouldn't help keep his third application out of ProGeny's bitbin.

Pushing the nozzle-head forward, continually fine-tuning the tiny two-man pod's directional thrusters so the high-pressure hose they rode didn't writhe like a salted worm, he released another brief spurt of hot water into the crack.

He didn't need to check any read-outs. A slice of rock—nickel and iron and silicate—shuddered and drifted free.

Mike retracted the nozzle-head, carefully waltzing clear of the predicted trajectory, but the slab twisted slightly and a trailing edge clipped the asteroid. The impact broke the section into three smaller pieces, each moving a little faster...straight at the pod.

The hose made going backwards the hardest direction to move, and the nozzle-head had limited retraction. Already at that limit, Mike jockeyed the ride—cutting left lateral thrust and letting the hose’s unopposed contortion add an extra sideways jerk. He resteadied the pod once they were clear. The rocks sailed on past to be scooped up and funnelled through *Leviathan*’s primary processing mill—smashed, sorted, and stored in her hold.

Ice often stuck to a section, and when the ice caught sunlight—instantly boiling to vapour—the rock behaved like it had briefly fired directional thrusters.

“Showboater,” Leah said.

Mike glanced across, to check out her smile, and grinned. “Only work with the best.”

“Chance would be a fine thing.” The smile barely faded, but Mike noticed, and knew why.

Lately, everything came back to the *Behemoth* disaster.

TiamatCo was new on the asteroid mining scene and still paying off start-up loans. Scuttlebutt said they needed cashflow to cover the raised insurance premiums, so two of the six remaining icebreakers would be rented out as service freighters for a traditional rockscraping operation. Their bridge crews would be kept on, but the nozzle-head pilots... With seven years’ job experience, Mike reckoned he’d be okay. Unluckily, tethered-flight hours didn’t count for much on a pilot’s résumé and Leah’d joined TiamatCo right out of training.

There wasn’t a word of comfort he could offer that she wouldn’t know for a lie. “Let’s give Ross and Wang a start on the next slice.”

She chuckled. “You’re such a bitch.”

“Bastard.” Mike corrected, forcing a deadpan. “Bitch would be if I pointed out that they make their best shifts after I’ve given them the clue.”

“Bitchy,” Leah confirmed. “But true.” She checked the overheads. “And we just lost the water.”

At the other end of the insulated hose were *Leviathan*'s massive storage tanks, full of melted main-belt comet ice, but it was the icebreaker's bridge officers who controlled the supply. And—since the loss of *Behemoth*—they'd been pushing the cut-off dead on shift-change, even if the nozzle team was only a wedge short of making a split. There was no leeway, no corner cutting, and by-the-book adherence to the operations manual and duty rosters.

Overnight, half the fun had drained out of the job.

Mike powered down and turned off the window display. Secure in his chair, he loved that the entire front half of the pod pretended to be glass, but when he had to move around inside the three square meters of pod space he preferred to lose the illusion of being “out there.” He put on his gloves and helmet, and struggled from his station.

Leah was small, better sized for getting in and out of the nozzle-head's cramped confines. She always had to wait for him, and would stand by the hatch, grinning like he was a comedy routine. A couple of weeks back he'd asked if watching him do the cockpit stumble hadn't got old yet—and she'd grinned at him across the lunch table too.

He checked the pressure gauge on the hatch before he opened it. The pod was too small for the icebreaker's designers to have bothered with an airlock at the head end, and anyhow the hose was filled with air for the shift change—it stopped fragments of ice forming. He and Leah climbed down into the pipe, pulled the hatch closed behind them, and followed the tracery of green LEDs to the *Leviathan*, single-file. Leah went first because Mike's mother had raised him right and he liked the view better that way.

Ross and Wang were waiting by the hatch when Mike climbed out. Gloved but not helmeted. He touched fists with Ross—the official hand-over—then kicked the hatch closed, planting one foot on it, and took off his helmet. Not exactly regulation, or what a safety inspector would want to see, but better than standing around with their helmets off and an explosive decompression on standby. “What's up?”

Wang glanced at Ross. “Word is any icebreaker that’s not meeting productivity by the end of their current trip is history,” he said. “The bridge crews don’t give a monkey’s because they’re not about to lose their jobs.”

“Old news.” Leah shrugged and started for the locker room. Wang got in her way. She didn’t barge through, but Mike was tempted. If the other two men had looked less nervous about the confrontation he might have.

“The rest of us want to try shaking a rock,” Ross said.

Mike counted to three. “We’ve good cracks, she’s shedding nicely, and I can’t see what we’d gain by—”

“There’s going to be a locked box swinging past us in about thirteen hours.” Ross crossed his arms, but there was nothing casual about the rest of his body language.

“The perfect size and packed with valuables,” Wang said. “If we do the magic trick, we’ll be way beyond just meeting productivity.”

Ross nodded. “And even if we only get a good partial...”

But a partial wasn’t the goal.

Locked boxes were tough-nut asteroids—ones an icebreaker wouldn’t normally waste time on. Except, six months ago, a couple of TiamatCo’s geologists had drawn up a plan for cracking one. Drill the right pattern of holes, fill them with ice, and then wedge a full thickness split through the top layer of rock, and a locked box would shake itself into bite-sized rubble. In theory.

Breaking a locked box was about meeting up to a challenge, taking the tough option, being a man. And shaking a rock to pieces would be—one of those things you did because walking away wasn’t in your nature.

Almost as tempting as the idea of propositioning Leah—a hell of a gamble, but a heck of a prize.

Of course, chances were you'd end up knocked on your arse and feeling stupid. The big prizes came with serious risk factors.

"And if it isn't ripe, and doesn't crack." Mike shook his head and started for the lockers. "We could lose an easy rock and a couple of days sectioning we'll never make back."

Ross didn't get out of his way. "You're the best nozzle-jockey aboard—"

"Don't think you get a veto on this." Wang's lip curled and trembled, like a dog nerving itself up to bite. "Just because you're some hotshot blue-sky project chaser who doesn't—"

Ross grabbed his shift-mate's shoulder. "Let's go break rock and give the man a chance to think it over."

If Wang had said another word, or jostled Leah, or... but they shuffled round, and went down the hose, without Mike finding a snappy retort or an excuse to hit back.

Everyone knew about his Europa applications. Air, water, and gossip were the three essentials of space travel, and privacy was a luxury even money couldn't buy. But people got along living in each other's pockets by pretending not to know. Plain new-fashioned good manners.

He checked the hatch seal before following Leah into the locker room.

"Wang's only got a couple of hundred training hours on Mars freight shuttles," she said, shimmying out of her pressure suit. "Not much more than me."

Mike stripped out of his own, carefully not looking at her. "You taking them seriously?"

"Not them." She hung her suit, and checked it for wear and tear. "It's Esposito's idea, and I don't want to lose this job. Even if you'll be skipping off for something better."

"Not better, just..." He could never explain.

At the first whisper ProGeny was recruiting, he'd sent off an application. Filled and sent the forms again after all the fuss over them taking on workers from outside the membership of traditional 'spacer' associations. He didn't care. He paid his dues to ISPA because it made life easier, not so they could tell him to boycott a company for hiring catering staff whose job experience was sub-ocean.

And Europa had an ocean, anyway—under ten miles of ice.

He wanted Europa. And then, he'd be after the next job that got him—

"Further out." Leah grinned. "Yeah, I know that's your drug." She patted his shoulder, and put her suit away. "I'm starving. Get a move on, big guy, so we can go eat."

"You want to risk the locked box." If she did, then Mike didn't have any reason not to go along for the ride.

"Doesn't matter," she said. "The bridge crew'll never go for it and they control the water."

\*

Mike poured himself into the pod's pilot station, pulled off his helmet and gloves, and turned on the window display. He stared out at UT-4589—the locked box Esposito had named Phyrre—and waited for Leah to get settled in.

The bridge crew weren't worried about losing their jobs, but freight hauliers didn't pick up the kind of productivity bonuses they'd got used to. Rumour had *Chamrosh*, or maybe *Ziz*, looking to crack a locked box and *Hadhayosh* working a small shoal of rocks that were as crumbly as good feta cheese. Which meant the only way *Leviathan* could be sure of staying in the race was to risk everything on Phyrre.

Once the bridge crew gave their nod and wink, the guys in processing agreed to pull long-shifts as ground crew, capping off the stressor holes. By the time Phyrre came calling, and for three days as they followed her, *Leviathan's* entire crew was working at Esposito's crazy plan.

Mike and Leah spent their pod hours drilling and filling—weakening the top layer of rock and putting in ice to keep up the pressure when they moved on to the next shaft. Then they helped drill the split line—a string of holes like the perforations on a credit receipt slip.

If they were lucky, when they filled those holes the entire surface layer of the asteroid would shed. If they weren't lucky, they'd have spent four days creating a humorous monumental artwork titled "Stable surfaced rock with ice-filled drill-holes."

Once the groundwork was laid, Wang insisted on a ballot for who'd tear the split. After the count, Ross and Staats bundled him across the mess and Esposito turned up the music so, officially, no one could hear them explain the facts of life. He'd been the only dissenting vote. The rest of the crew wanted Mike in the pilot's chair.

Latest word was *Chamrosh's* split hadn't taken their rock apart, but that they'd a good enough partial to still be peeling sections.

*Leviathan* needed better.

"The quickest, easiest way would be to start in the center and go left, center again and go right," he said, trying to memorise the exact position of each hole in the split line.

"Shortest time between fills, and orderly," Leah agreed.

Mike took a deep breath. "But I'm *Leviathan's* own ace hotshot blue-sky project chasing nozzle-jockey."

She nodded. "That you are."

"So I figure we start at the center and alternate filling left and right and see if we can't put a real wedge to her." He glanced across the pod.

Leah grinned. "They'll have to sedate Wang."



Flicking the power switches, he wrapped his hands round the joysticks as the nozzle-head responded. "Esposito can sit on him."

Taking his time, Mike lined up with the row of drilled holes and then hovered over the middlemost, as if it was a practice fill. Too close in and you could get ice on the nozzle, too far back and the water would evaporate into vacuum. He delivered short, well-aimed spurts of water and didn't waste a drop in splashback.

He was good, and he could prove that any time he liked.

Leah checked the overheads, and the clock, and pushed back into her seat. "The Captain's blind-eyeing you taking both shifts, but don't count on him sticking his neck out beyond that double-shift."

"Won't be any need." Mike took another deep breath, and grinned. "Hold on to your hat."

Aiming at the hole to the right he half-filled it with two shots and then dodged the nozzle left and did the same. Then he filled the right hole, half-filled the next over, and went left again. Swing and aim and fire, and swing and aim and fire, and swing and aim and fire.

As he got into his stride, Leah wedged herself harder into her seat. The pitching didn't bother Mike, because he knew exactly when he was changing direction.

Thirty fills later, Leah swore. "I think there's a visible crack."

And there was, the slightest line, almost nothing more than a shifting of the surface dirt. Mike didn't take the time to try and gauge if it was shallow and clogging, or the dust particles were tumbling merrily into the dark and adding further pressure on the split. Springing from end to end was precision steering, and stalling on the rhythm to admire his handiwork wasn't going to get the job done.

"Okay," he said. "Now we get rough with her."

Leah's laugh was cut into a gasp as the nozzle-head lurched, and then she caught her breath again. "Sensors show the crack goes down."

Another ten fills each way and the split was wide enough to send water into without risking any bonding would be greater than the cleaving effect.

"It's going to go," Leah murmured. "It's going to do it." She was staring out at Phyrra. "Do it. Do it."

Mike grinned.

The communicator bleeped, and Leah's hand paused over the switch. She didn't want to hear any bad news and neither did he.

Her finger flicked, and they heard a babble of excited voices. "She's going guys. The surface sensors are pinging like crazy." Mike thought he heard the pop and fizz of a drinks can. "She's shaking like a jelly."

He pumped the next crack, and the next, and back for two more holes each way, and then there wasn't one crack anymore—the surface beneath them looked like crazy paving.

Leah beamed. "You did it." She slapped his shoulder, her voice rising to an excited squeal. "You did it."

"Just... a little..." Mike pumped water.

Water that vanished down into the rock faster than it could freeze.

All the way down.

Phyrra wasn't just going to shed the top twenty meters.

Mike backed up. Backed away, letting the hose curl a little.

Leah glanced at him. "Mike?"

"She's going to go," he said, and looked at her.

Her grin was a sunburst. And he shivered down deep, as the rock started falling to pieces—massive fragments of the surface pulling apart from each other—because the pieces in his head were coming together.

They'd focused on what they'd get out of the rock. But over the past few days *Leviathan* had pumped thousands of tons of water into Phyrra. Water that was now ice, lying in deep dark holes.

And if the whole asteroid broke open, separating so sunlight hit the ice and it boiled, the fragments would be pushed further apart, and more sunlight would vaporize more ice... That could happen very quickly. Not with any explosive force, but big chunks of rock would spin off faster than anyone aboard the icebreaker was expecting.

Mike hit the intercom. "Back her up." No one acknowledged. The party on the bridge was louder. "Back. Her. Up. Back the goddamn ship up."

*Behemoth's* crew hadn't been desperate to keep their jobs, but being the first icebreaker to open a locked box... Wouldn't that have been tempting enough?

"Mike?" Leah's hand reached to touch his—or stop him uselessly jabbing at the switch.

"She's going to go," he said. She stared at him. "She's going to do the one-in-a-million thing and go completely. And then the sun hits the ice and she really goes."

Leah paled. Mike felt his crazy mad instinctive couldn't-be-happening panic turn into a stone cold certainty.

All he had to do was look at Phyrra to see the truth. He hit the emergency alarms; hoping that it would get them noticed and not be taken as a celebratory prank.

"Helmet and gloves," he told her. Grabbed at his own—even knowing that *Leviathan* itself might not survive, which meant they'd just die slower.

"Mike..."

He didn't look at her. "Helmets work better closed."

"Mike, couldn't we open up the nozzle, let her steam, and blow what's coming our way aside?"

He wondered if Leviathan had noticed yet. What they'd do. If they backed up fast... they could all be saved.

He took a breath. "Maybe."

They might be able to keep themselves out of trouble. But *Leviathan* was a big target and pushing aside that many rocks—the nozzle-head couldn't be everywhere. Unless.

"I've got an idea," he blurted, because he didn't want to say it at all. "We could die. And it wouldn't be any kind of fairground ride."

"We can be heroes." Leah chewed her lip. "Or we can sit here and find out whether we die anyhow."

If they survived, he should be a sure thing for Europa. Everyone loved a hero. They got the good jobs, the big bucks, and they got the girls. He could even push his luck and ask Leah out. She might just be reckless enough to say "yes." There wasn't anything to lose.

Mike would have reached out to touch Leah's cheek, but the gloves made that pointless. "You know all those stories about people biting through their lips?"

She nodded, already looking sick.

He closed the visor on his helmet, opened up on the nozzle—water streaming out and turning to vapour—and did his best to wedge his fingers so the trigger wouldn't release when he blacked out.

But he knew firing vapour might not be enough to deflect the rocks. Which was why he powered down the directional thrusters.

The hose bucked, and twisted, and writhed. And Mike wished he'd thought to turn off the window display, because the stars and rocks spun and jerked and blurred dizzily.

He felt the first impact. The hose should bat enough rocks aside to keep *Leviathan* from being smashed to pieces while she backed off. But he was a rag doll being shaken by a terrier, and there was pain, and the sick dizziness, and a terrifying numbness. And darkness.

They were going to live, he promised himself.

He had to, because he hadn't kissed Leah yet.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Shereen never dreamed of becoming a writer, imagining instead an adventurous life studying bizarre animals in the jungles of Africa. Despite attempts at skydiving in Ontario, white water rafting in British Columbia and horseback riding in Spain only after she signed up for a writer's course, did her true life-long adventuring begin. She currently works full-time and writes on weekends and holidays. Her other published works can be found at [www.shereenvedam.com](http://www.shereenvedam.com).

### The Starling

*by Shereen Vedam*

Too bad Heramba hadn't seen fit to take away his father's ability to speak when he turned him into a bird for insulting him. Now, that would have been a magnificent spell worthy of a great magician like Haramba.

"You're going the wrong way," Manu said, eyes tightly shut and head stuck into his feathery back.

Nirad ignored his father's cutting comment. Heramba had been born in Nelgira and it was his favoured haunt. It was also rumored the mage had headed this way not two days ago. So he was sure to find him here. And inside Nirad's pack was the emperor's writ ordering Haramba to turn Manu back into a human. The moment Nirad delivered the writ he would be free of his father. Free from slaving away at innumerable never-ending chores. Free of his constant criticisms.

"Starlings have short life spans, a mere twenty years." Manu fluffed his feathers and looked around. "You've now cut that by twenty-four sunrises with this aimless wandering. Anyway, you're running out of time. Take my advice and give

up. As long as you have me, you have no need to win Ishani's hand in marriage. If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times, women are but a boulder strapped to a man's ankle as he attempts to swim upstream."

Daylight loomed and the day lightened. On either side of the road, tall Sal trees bordered the pathway toward a seaside village. A rabbit, startled by Nirad's sudden appearance, scampered down a warren. Thankful the rainy season hadn't started yet, and unable to repress a bubbling happiness that accompanied his every step, Nirad slid his way down the dry gravelly ground.

The first sight of perfectly aligned rows of squat brick houses to his right took Nirad by surprise. Where were the gargantuan gold columns bordering the streets? The mage's palace surrounded by high walls with enormous statues of lions and elephants guarding the gates?

Not a single multi-tiered building dared to kiss the clouds. None shouted, *Come, travelers, to the home of the great and revered mage Heramba, Most-Beloved-of-God.*

Could his father be right?

His old life closed in like a steel cage. He shook off the oppressive sensation, hoping that around the next corner he'd see a sign indicating a mighty magician lived in this little backwoods village.

Instead, each humble abode only boasted a small walled central garden where the tops of bamboo, mango and citrus trees waved a cheerful welcome. To the left, on its hurried path toward the ocean, a river had been split and splintered to feed rice terraces. At the foot of the village, a wide sandy beach held back the lapping blue waters of the Bay of Sandhal.

Nirad tilted his shoulder to alert Manu. "We're here," he said with more confidence than he felt.

"Doesn't look like a mage's home. Sure you're not lost?"

"We'll ask a local if we're in the right place."

“Don’t tell them you’re rich.”

“I’m not rich.”

“Keep to that story, and don’t waste any more of my money.”

Nirad’s unauthorized pilfering of a big handful of coins from his father’s secret stash before their departure had been added on early to the surfeit of complaints.

Few people were about so early. The crisp air carried the ocean’s tang. Nearby, a dog barked ferociously. Nirad jerked in alarm and Manu flapped on Nirad’s shoulder to keep his balance. Realizing the dog was tied to a post, Nirad relaxed and continued, his pulse returning to a steady rhythmic thud.

Far to the left, past the rice terraces, men stood waist deep in the ocean, flinging nets into the white-tipped water. Nirad, who’d never set foot in the ocean, stared in wonder, for they seemed not in the least worried about sea predators.

Closer to the village, men had just hauled rolled up ropes, nets and sail cloth over to long, wooden, flat-bottomed boats and pushed the loaded boats toward the ocean.

Breaking into a sprint, Nirad ran down to the beach hoping to catch the fishermen before they left. He waved. “Ho! I need to talk to you. Do you know of a mage named Heramba?”

The men looked back at him and then hurried off.

“Wait!” Nirad shouted. “I need directions to Heramba’s house.” Reaching the beach, he slogged through the sand and arrived at the waterline only to find the men deep into the ocean, rowing as fast as they could.

“That’s strange.” He turned to Manu who had deserted his bouncing shoulder to fly overhead. “Go ask them where Heramba lives.”



Manu headed across the water. The moment he drew close, the fishermen threw buckets, wooden rods and even oars at the bird. Manu ducked a flying knot of rope and headed back to shore.

“What’s the matter with them?” he squawked, huffing and fluffing his feathers in agitation as he settled on a log on the beach. “Lunatics! They almost killed me.”

“Something’s wrong,” Nirad agreed.

From beside a house near the beach, a head peeked over the top of a narrow sheep pen and just as quickly disappeared.

“Did you see that?” Nirad asked.

“See what?”

Nirad crept up toward the house. Then leaned over and snatched at the boy’s scruff. “Don’t be frightened. I only want directions to Heramba’s house.”

His victim squirmed to release himself. When his captor wouldn’t let go, the boy said, “It’s gigantic.”

“The house?” Nirad looked around, thrilled at the news. “Where is it?” Surely he’d see it towering over these lowlying dwellings.

“Twenty five fishes worth,” the boy answered.

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s as mad as those fishermen,” Manu said with disgust and landed on the stonewall.

“Look, my name is Nirad.” Seeing the young boy staring at the starling, he added, “Don’t be frightened. The bird’s been spelled. He’s really a man. That’s why we’re here, to turn him back to a human. Have you heard of a mage named Heramba?”

The boy nodded vigorously.

“Good. Now, I’ll let you go if you won’t run away.”

The boy nodded. The sheep in the pen he stood in baa’d.

“Promise?” Nirad asked.

“Don’t let him go till he talks,” Manu warned.

“Twenty-five fishes.” The boy held his arms wide. “This big.”

Disappointment sank inside Nirad like a stone. As his father said, the boy was deranged.

“Want me to peck the sheep boy till he talks?” Manu asked.

“Ahhh!” the child screamed, squirming.

“It might help if you didn’t threaten him, father.”

“You were always such a disappointment,” Manu replied. “I wanted a warrior for a son, not a pacifist. Hit him in the gut, he’ll talk sense then.”

Nirad sighed and turned to the boy. “No running?”

The boy nodded.

He released the child, who fell and scrambled backwards, shuffling sheep out of his way.

“Now,” Nirad said as the boy, with his back end covered in dung, gained his feet. “Where is Heramba?”

The boy pointed to his right.

Nirad followed the direction to where the beach curved out of sight around a grove of Sal trees. The boy took advantage of his captor’s distraction to run among the sheep, jump over the low wall and race round the side of the house.

“That went well,” Manu said, landing on Nirad’s shoulder.

“The sun’s risen, so the villagers should be awakening. We’ll find someone more sensible to talk to.”

“Just like your mother. Full of optimism that gets one lost in the middle of a barmy village.”

“Leave mother out of this.” Nirad flicked the bird off his shoulder.

Manu squawked and flew a circular path before dropping onto Nirad’s head. He then used his son’s left ear as a ladder to climb down to the shoulder.

“I’m your father, boy.” Manu fluttered his feathers. “A little respect, please.”

“Then don’t talk about mother.”

“Sensitive, sensitive. The woman’s been dead ten years, you should be over it by now.” Eyeing Nirad’s forefinger curl around his thumb and his hand rise, the starling wisely shut its beak.

The main road led to the village center where a large fountain spewed clear water, spraying droplets into the air. As he’d hoped, people awakened. Men and women called to each other and children ran out to play. The cheerful chatter mingled in a magical sense as if Heramba himself had waved his magic wand and brought the place to life.

Vendors opened stalls. Carts were rolled onto the street, tents set up, and bags and barrels of rice, wheat and dates arranged for sale. Prawns fried in ghee over a small potable brazier scented the air. A few women spread mats and placed baskets of salt beside them, in readiness for drying and salting fish or fish eggs their men would likely bring later that day.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Manu asked. “Time’s a wasting. I’ve got customers to get back to. Every day you squander on this useless mission, I’m losing money. That cheap bastard won’t ever turn me back to a man and we both know it.”

“Then how much money you lose doesn’t matter, does it, father?”

“Doesn’t matter? Who raised you? No wonder you’re frittering away precious time here. You sound like a lunatic who belongs in this village. Money is what keeps this world revolving, boy. And how will you support your precious Ishani without my money?”

“I don’t need your money to marry her, just you returned home in human form. That was the bride price her mother demanded.”

“Think Ishani will want you poor?” Manu asked. “Then you do belong in this crazy village. Not that it matters, she’ll be married by the time we return.”

That last barb struck its intended target, and Nirad stopped at the next tent, a fish fryer’s stall. “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning,” the vendor replied. “May I interest you in a palm-full of the most delicious fish in the entire empire for the lowly sum of one thin dremha?”

The starling snorted and muttered, “Thief.”

The vendor, with a face covered in wrinkles, sent the bird a dark glance.

Nirad smiled to ease the sting of the bird’s muttering. “I’m looking for a mage, good sir.”

“Ah,” the merchant said. “Go five stalls down and three to the right and you’ll find the talented Sagi. Tell her I sent you and she’ll give you a reasonable price for a reading.”

Nirad shook his head. “I’m looking for Heramba. Can you guide me?”

The old man stared wide-eyed.

“Are you deaf?” Manu asked. “Speak up, man. Where is that charlatan Heramba? We’ve a quarrel to finish.”

“Quiet,” Nirad whispered to the bird. “We’ve no quarrel. I merely wish to ask the mage a favor.”

“Show him the emperor’s writ,” Manu said.

Nirad flicked the bird off his shoulder and turned back to the merchant. “Truly, good sir, I wish the mage no harm.”

“The rain is coming soon,” the fish fry merchant said.

Deciding to humor the man, Nirad nodded. “Yes, the monsoon season should start in a few weeks. But the weather is nice for now, thanks be to God. So, I thought today would be a great day to visit the mage Heramba. Do you know where he lives?”

The man held out a platter of fried fish. “Rain will be coming soon.”

Manu returned to his son’s shoulder. “This whole village is crazy. We should leave before we catch whatever they’ve got.”

“I’m not leaving until we find Heramba,” Nirad said. But, disappointed at his lack of progress, he moved away from the fish fryer.

A few stalls down, a vendor catered to those with a sweeter tooth. Here, rasabali made from milk, sugar and wheat, or pitha cakes were on offer. Nirad purchased some rasabali and moved on.

“That’s a wasteful use of our last few remaining funds,” Manu said.

“I’ve still a healthy bagful left.” Nirad pointed to where the bag lay hidden within the folds of his robe.

“Shush,” the bird said. “Are you trying to get us robbed? And I expect you to pay back every last piece you use once we’re home.”

Nirad held up a pinch of the rasabali on a finger for the bird, more to stop his father’s squawking than from any concern about his hunger. A monkey squealed

from atop a tent. It shook its tiny fists at Nirad, apparently scolding him for wasting good food on a bird.

An old woman with a white streak running through her gray hair peeled prawns beneath that tent. At the noise, she looked up and shouted at the monkey to go away. When it ignored her, she picked up a stick and threw it at the animal.

The monkey evaded the strike, brushed by Nirad and scampered over nearby tents to reach the safety of a Sal tree.

Nirad looked down to find the remaining rasabali missing from his cupped hand. A glance up showed the monkey licking his fingers, thoroughly enjoying his stolen treat.

Manu wiped his beak on Nirad's collar, muttering in disgust.

Nirad licked the remnants of the treat off his fingers, giving the monkey a resentful glare.

"Be thankful he didn't take your pack too," the prawn woman said, returning to her work. "That one is a shameless bandit. He'd steal your robe if you left it untied."

"Thank you, good mother, for the warning," Nirad said. A stingray lay on a mat beside her, drying in the sun. Its belly was split open and the underside filled with salt. The sight reminded him of the men he'd seen standing waist deep at the edge of the ocean, fishing. "It must be dangerous to wade into these waters," he said, nodding to the stingray.

The old woman shrugged. "Like the monkeys and the herons and the cougars, earth's creatures are part of life's challenges. The stingray decides who is friend or foe. But God decides who lives or dies. And man..."

Nirad's eyebrow rose at her hesitation. "And man?"

"Well, my son," the old woman said, "man is the mystery element in God's creation. He can befriend the stingray or bargain with God." She gave him a keen look, head tilted to the side, prawn shells snapping under her expert fingers.

“Look into your heart, traveler. Is there a stingray you want to befriend, or a bargain you wish to make with God?”

The question unsettled him. Before he could reply, Manu gave an annoyed squawk. “Have we wasted enough of my time today?”

The old woman looked at the bird with startled eyes.

“I’m looking for a friend, good mother,” Nirad said, not mentioning Heramba’s name this time. “A powerful man, and as dangerous as that stingray. Do you know of whom I speak?”

The old woman’s hands stilled. “Are you prepared for the rainy season?” She blinked up at him.

“Happy?” Manu’s sarcasm dripped from his beak like sugar water. “May we go now?”

Nirad gave a frustrated sigh and bid the woman good day. “Seems odd that everyone speaks normally until we ask about Heramba. The mage must have put a spell on them.”

“And what if he has? It gets us no closer to him. I told you this was a waste of time.”

“It means he must be nearby. And don’t you want to be turned back into a human?” Nirad asked, exasperated. “How will you make your money if you remain stuck as a bird?”

“I don’t need to be a man to accomplish that. You can follow my direction and do all the work for me.”

That unpleasant image settled on him like a death knell. “But Ishani’s mother is hoping you’ll marry her when we return home.”

“Ishani’s mother can trick some other fool into wedding and seeing to her lavish comforts. We’re better off on our own.”

Nirad shuddered. He had to find Heramba. The mage was here. Perhaps as someone they'd already met? One of the fishermen in the boats? The fish fryer babbling about rain? Or the prawn woman chasing away the monkey? No, not the fishermen, for true fear had darkened their eyes. And both the fish fryer and the prawn woman seemed innocent enough. But how about that boy spying on Nirad from the sheep pen?

"We must find that boy again."

Before his father could crush his idea, Nirad raced back to the outskirts of the village. Manu took flight, complaining the entire way.

Out of breath, Nirad came to a crashing halt by the pen. The sheep backed away, bleating. The boy wasn't anywhere in sight.

Manu landed on the stone fence. "Now what?"

Nirad walked over to the house next to the pen and knocked. An old man in a bright blue robe opened the door and then tried to shut it fast.

Nirad jammed his foot against the door. "I mean you no harm." He spoke rapidly; afraid the old man's cane would crash on Nirad's intrusive foot. "I'm looking for a boy about seven years old. He was inside the sheep pen earlier."

"Ah," the old man said and opened the door wider. "Are you a friend of Rama's?"

"He helped me this morning. Do you know where I can find him?"

"A neighbor's child. Takes care of my sheep." The old man gave him a considering look, as if gauging his intent.

Nirad painted an innocent expression and offered a friendly smile, thankful Manu with his caustic tongue had chosen to stay by the sheep pen.

Nodding as if he had come to a decision, the old man pointed toward the beach. "Once Rama's chores here are done, he goes to fish along there. Keep to the right."



Nirad turned to go and the old man said, “His father’s protective of him. Harm him, and you will truly have need of a friend.” The door slammed shut.

“Made another good impression on the locals, I see.” Manu landed on his son’s shoulder.

Nirad hefted his bag and walked down to the beach. As they passed a grove of Sal trees, something smacked Nirad on the side of his head. He ducked, using a boulder as protection, and the next volley flew over his head. From up high in a Sal tree, a monkey with a white streak on his head hurled seeds, shaking his arms, and screeching in fury.

Manu flew up to shout at the monkey and a handful of seeds were sent winging in his direction. Nirad wondered how good his own aim would be. He grabbed a handful of seeds to fling back at the irate monkey when a cry came from down the beach. All three turned to see a boy out in the water, shouting for help.

“It’s Rama.” Nirad dropped the seeds and his bag and sprinted to the water.

Manu flew ahead. Just as the bird reached the boy, Rama sank beneath the surface. “Over here,” Manu shouted and hovered, marking the spot.

Nirad splashed in, fear for the child obliterating his earlier concerns about wading into the ocean. He dove and felt blindly for Rama. His hands brushed cloth. He grabbed it and hauled the boy to the surface.

As Nirad waded back to shore with him, Rama sputtered and shrieked in pain. Once on the beach, the child hugged his foot, crying.

Nirad pushed the boy back. Ignoring Rama’s horrendous howls, Nirad practically sat on him to stop Rama’s squirming while he examined the injured foot.

“What’s wrong with him?” Manu asked. “All that screaming can’t just be for a leg cramp.”

A steady stream of blood oozed out of a finger-width hole on Rama’s foot.

“Fly to the old man’s house,” Nirad said to Manu. “Tell him we’re coming and the boy’s been bit or something.”

Manu took off, a black streak against the blue sky.

Carrying the squirming, crying boy, he was almost at the sheep farmer’s house when the bird returned.

“The old man’s waiting for you.”

One quick inspection of the foot and the old man proclaimed the wound a stingray attack. He treated the foot with steaming hot water. Rama fell unconscious before the poison solidified and oozed out of the opening. The leg bandaged, the old man tucked the child into a cot to sleep off the pain.

“You did good, Nirad,” Manu said, the first compliment his father had ever given him.

Stunned by that praise and starting to recover from his dread about the boy’s injury, Nirad sank onto a nearby chair before his shaking legs gave out.

The sheep farmer turned to him. “The bird is right, you saved that boy’s life.”

“And for that I am most grateful,” a voice replied from behind.

Nirad jumped up and swung around. A tall figure barred the light from the doorway.

The old sheep farmer bowed low to his newest unexpected guest and murmured, “The rain has come.”

The stranger, a golden turban covering the top of his head, and a matching robe falling from shoulders to sandal-covered feet, waved his hand at his greeter.

The sheep farmer then added, “Welcome to my humble home, Lord Heramba, Most-Beloved-of-God.”

“Thank you for taking care of my son.” The mage’s glance encompassed not only the old man, but Nirad and, reluctantly, the bird perched on the back of the chair.

“About time,” Manu said.

“Quiet.” Nirad blocked Heramba’s view of the bird. He had to get the Emperor’s writ that would force Heramba to change his father back. His pack, where had he put it? Then he remembered. He’d dropped it on the beach.

“Looking for this?” Heramba asked, and held out his hand. Nirad’s pack suddenly appeared hanging off the mage’s fingers.

Nirad looked from the pack to the mage. He stepped up to take it, but the pack disappeared. And in place of the mage, the old prawn woman with the white streaked hair now stood.

“What is it you want, traveler?” she asked. “To befriend the stingray or to bargain with God?”

Nirad swallowed, his throat dry. How had he ever imagined he could trick or force this powerful mage into doing his bidding? In the wise old woman’s eyes, Nirad saw that only true sincerity and humility would be accepted.

Before he could say a word, however, Manu landed on Nirad’s shoulder. “Turn me back, you thief!”

Fury built in the old woman’s eyes, and Heramba re-appeared.

Alarmed his father was about to get himself killed; Nirad grabbed the bird and shut his beak with his other hand.

“Most honored mage,” Nirad said, “please forgive my father for having insulted you.”

The mage pointed at the bird. “Why should I? He is not sorry.”

Manu squirmed his beak free and bit the tender part of Nirad's skin, between thumb and forefinger. Nirad clamped his teeth to keep from crying out. He wasn't sure he could hang on to the bird much longer, but Manu loose was unthinkable, so Nirad shoved his father inside his robe.

"Lord Heramba, you asked me a question earlier. Did I wish to befriend the stingray or bargain with God? I have an answer for you now."

The mage's eyebrow rose. "What is your answer?"

"My answer is that I cannot befriend the stingray, for he is my father. A creature of earth, his painful stings are a challenge I live with every day. Nor can I bargain with God, for His judgments are beyond my earthly understanding."

"Then what will you do?" the mage asked, surprising compassion in his eyes.

"I am a man," Nirad said. "I stand between the stingray and my God, and ask Heramba, Most-Beloved-of-God, to forgive my father, for he is incapable of asking this."

The mage stared at him in silence. Then slowly a smile curved his lips. "And thus man affects the outcome of his life. Well spoken, young silversmith Nirad." And Heramba vanished.

Relieved to still be alive but disappointed Manu was still a bird, Nirad brought out the starling and set him on the chair. When Nirad stepped away, the bucket of water they had washed Rama's bloody foot in sailed up and dumped its contents over Manu.

"Well, that was completely useless," the bird said, shivering and fluffing his wet feathers. "And don't ever grab me like that again. I'm your father; I can speak for myself. I don't need my son to apologize for me. You've no concept of bargaining. You had saved the man's son and could have bargained for anything. Instead..."

"Father."

"What?"

“You might want to put some clothes on.”

The old sheep farmer chuckled and fetched a robe for the merchant, who was no longer a bird.

Manu checked over every body part. “I still think we could have gotten that silver conch shell back or more money for it. I can’t believe you’re the eldest son of the best merchant in all of Candhana.”

“I’m your only son.” Secretly, Nirad was thrilled, for his future with Ishani was now assured. Feeling generous, he handed the old sheep farmer a silver coin.

Ignoring Manu’s protests over that, Nirad went in search of his pack. It wasn’t where he thought he’d dropped it. A sound made him look up. The monkey up in the tree was rifling through his pack. Caught, it squealed rudely and threw the pack down.

Nirad caught and slung the pack over his shoulder and headed out of the village.

“Remember, we didn’t use the emperor’s writ,” Manu said, joining him. “That means the emperor doesn’t get to keep my silver elephant. Let me do the talking when we get home.”

“Yes, father.”

“Once we’re home, I’ve decided you may marry Ishani. But we’ll do it quietly. Money shouldn’t be wasted on one day but savored and spent judiciously over a lifetime.”

Nirad bit his lip. He had wanted to give Ishani a grand wedding. One she would remember for the rest of her life.

“And there’s no need for the two of you to live by yourselves. You’ll live with me.”

“But you’ll be married yourself,” Nirad protested.

“Not me. One wife was enough. Besides, with you and Ishani to look after me, why do I need a wife?”

Nirad’s gall rose at that idea, but without his father’s help, he and Ishani could not afford to live on their own. That painful realization slowly settled, stirring a new wave of depression. Nirad looked around at the peaceful surrounding, the rice paddies, the river, and the houses with their Sal trees waving in the wind. And knew he didn’t want to go back home. Didn’t want to take up his old life. Didn’t want to let his father control him again.

“Father.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to marry Ishani just yet.” The words punctured his heart the way the stingray had stabbed Rama’s foot. The pain was as intense, and he felt his blood drain away from his body. He wanted to cry out as deafeningly as Rama had.

“Smart boy,” Manu said. “Maybe this trip wasn’t completely wasted. We’ll be fine on our own, just as always.”

“No!”

“No?”

“No, father. I will apprentice with another silversmith. Until one day, I own my own shop. Then, I’ll ask for her hand.”

His father choked, sputtered, and burst out laughing.

“I will succeed, father. You’ll see.”

“Course you will.” Manu wiped at his eyes. “But Ishani won’t wait for you, boy. She’s after my money. The minute you tell her you’re leaving me, she and her mother will disappear.”

Nirad smothered that fresh gush of blood. "If she won't wait, I'll find another wife who thirsts for adventure as I do."

"Adventure, huh?" Manu gave his son a sideways look. "I spent my life giving you an easy life and you want the hard road. That lunatic village did rub off on you. I suppose I can't fault you, for that path also brought me my wealth. I'll wish you luck, instead, boy."

His father's agreeable response surprised and pleased Nirad. "Thank you, father."

"Now give me the writ," Manu said. "I don't trust you anymore."

Nirad bandaged his hurt and dug into the bag. His hand fumbled against an unfamiliar object.

"What's this world coming to," Manu muttered, "where children abandon their elders just when they need them most?"

Nirad explored the odd shape. A conch shell? Smooth as silver? And beneath it, layered among his spare robe...coins?

"If you leave, who'll cook and clean for me?"

The size, heft, and indentation of the emperor's face on the round flat pieces suggested gold! Enough for a splendid marriage ceremony. Possibly even for a journey across the entire empire. In his mind, the images of the white-streaked monkey, the old prawn woman, and Heramba, all merged.

"Hurry up with that writ."

With a hidden smile, Nirad handed over the writ.

"That's better." Manu tucked the rolled parchment inside his robe. "Who knows, by the time we're home, you might rethink this wild decision."

"Maybe, father." Once he and Ishani married and moved to their new home, perhaps as far away as Nelgira, Manu might agree to marry Ishani's mother. It

would give the lovelorn widow the second husband she desired, and Manu the housekeeper he apparently wanted.

Enveloped by such happy thoughts, Nirad walked on in the company of a stingray that had suddenly lost its barb.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Mark D. West is a professor of communications at a southern liberal arts college; he is the author of five non-fiction scholarly books, plays the mandolin, and misses the Oldsmobile brand. West is perhaps the last person in North Carolina to actually write on a typewriter, often using a Royal KMM. The Royal has the ideas, but is kind enough to let Mr. West use them for his own purposes.

### Oldest Plan in the Book

*by Mark D. West*

“So you’re telling me we got a plan.”

“Yes. That is what I am telling you. And I am telling you to keep the lights out, as that is how the police know that people is in buildings that they thought was abandoned.” Two-Fingers Ianucci spread out the rolled-up blueprints. “Light that lantern.”

Tupac struck a match, the sharp sulfur smell passing through the little room. “I don’t see why we can’t use our flashlights.”

“Hold up your flashlight to your ear and shake it, if you please,” Two-Fingers said. “And tell me what did you hear.”

Oscar did so. “I heard some rattling.”

Two-Fingers picked up the lantern and shook it. “I hear an hour and fifteen minutes of kerosene. And you haven’t no idea how long those batteries will hold out. I, my young friend, spent five years at Ossining for just such an error.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Tupac looked at Oscar.

“It is like my lead-tipped sap,” Two-Fingers said. “It lays your opponent out cold, but does not kill them. And it does not run out of bullets, or get jammed, or anything like that there.”

“I think he’s saying he’s old-school,” Oscar said, shrugging. “But he’s the one with the plan.”

“So here is the ventilation system for the Criterion Building, which we intends to rob,” Two-Fingers continued. “This is the main ventilation shaft. You will thank the rehabilitation people at Ossining for teaching me a trade, which is heating and cooling systems, by which means I got this blueprint.”

Two-Fingers waited.

“Uh, thanks.” Oscar said.

Tupac sneered.

“Now, we go in here, at the base of the heat exchange tower, using the jam ladder as I have showed you.” Two-Fingers traced the route across the blueprints with one of his remaining fingers.

“You’re getting blood on the blueprints,” Oscar said, folding the top bars of the flimsy jam ladder so it could be jammed up into the ventilation shaft, holding itself in place by the weight of the people climbing upwards .

“That is a little thing, which I do not mind,” Two-Fingers said. “I cut my finger with the glass cutter when we came in. Sometimes you have to break an egg to make a salad.”

“That’s not the saying,” Tupac said, but Oscar shook his head.

“We go up to the fifth floor, where there is the medical records firm. We drop down through the ventilation duct, right here—” Two-Fingers pointed — “and Mister Tupac relieves them of the data on their main data drives, using the video and wiring skills of Mister Oscar to do so without the noticing of the security

personnel downstairs. This personal-type data they will pay for the returning of, handsomely, as it is their business to maintain privacy.”

“Did the map jump or something?” Oscar held out a hand, as if to steady the map. “I could have sworn it moved or something.”

“It is you, my friend, who is what we used to call jumpy. Now let us proceed with the burglary, which I do not mind to say should make us all rich.”

\*

Oscar and Two-Fingers sat at the bottom of the secondary ventilating shaft, chilly air drafting down around them.

“There is supposed to be a shaft right here, as it says on the map,” Two-Fingers said.

“I don’t get it. We saw Tupac go out here. I went up there—” Oscar motioned down the shaft— “and you let me down with the rope. I spliced in the video feed, he got the disks, and he was supposed to come out here.”

“Well, sometimes they change things. Go back to the other shaft and...”

“Look.”

“I can not see that far, due to my astigmatism, what ...”

“Just fucking look, would you?” Oscar pointed down the shaft with his flashlight. The bright blue light reflected off the plain aluminum shaft for about fifty feet until the shaft split. “No side shafts. Nothing.”

“That is not possible,” Two-Fingers said. “You went down one side shaft, and Mister Tupac went down the other. There are two side shafts.”

“*Were* two. There aren’t two *now*.”

“I am feeling dizzy, as I have a heart condition.”

“Shut up. So the building has changed somehow.”

“That is not possible, as it is a scientific impossibility.”

“Impossible or not, the shafts are gone. I’m going to have to call Big Papa. Let’s go.”

“I’m the boss of this crew.”

“Fine. You want to sit here?”

The two sat for a minute, hunched over in the ventilation shaft.

“Let’s go. And you should call Big Papa.”

“Fine,” Oscar muttered. “Let’s just do that.”

\*

Oscar pushed aside the bead curtain that obscured the way into the back parlor. The room was done up in hideous red velvet wallpaper, with dark walnut fittings and heavy dark furniture. A plump woman sat at a table, a fat red candle to either side of her on the table, a deck of big pasteboard cards spread in front of her.

“I see trouble,” she said, her voice indistinct. “How may Marie Laveau help?”

“Can it,” Oscar said. “Big Papa sent us.”

“Oh,” she said. “The light switch is to your left. Who’s the little guy?”

“I am Two-Fingers Ianucci, the planner. I am pleased to...”

“Save it. Big Papa said you had lost a guy. ‘Lost’ as in ‘misplaced.’ If this is some scam you’re running, forget it. I’m not for messing with Big Papa. He’s some mean shit.”

“I know,” Oscar said. “I just wish somebody had told me Tupac was his nephew.”

“Good climber, too,” Marie said. “Shame you lost him.”

“The building changed. No shit.”

Marie looked at Oscar, her expression quizzical. “While you were in it.”

“Yeah.”

She gestured at the two men. “Either of you guys do any fooling around with the occult? You know, spells and stuff?”

“Hell, no,” Oscar said. “Waste of time.”

“I am a rationalistic person, myself,” Two-Fingers said, nodding. “But I do not disparage the beliefs of another.”

“Well, that’s good, because you may learn some things tonight. You brought the blueprints?”

“I have them.” Two-Fingers leaned over Marie’s table, spreading them out.

“What a mess. This stain here?”

“Um, I guess that’s from the pizza. We had pizza when we were going over the plan.”

Marie looked at Oscar. “Just regular pizza?”

“Sure.” Oscar looked at Two-Fingers. “Right?”

“From Patelli’s, down on 31st.”

“I’ve always liked that name. Their real name is Patel, you know. Those guys are Pakis.”

“Pakis?” Two-Fingers grimaced. “You mean Pakistanianis. Being an Italian, myself, I do not hold with racial abbreviations and the like, as they may be construed to be an offensive thing.”

“Yeah,” Marie said. “But who knows what they put in the sauce, like as a secret ingredient? Cardamom, fenugreek?”

“It was a good pizza.” Oscar looked at Two-Fingers. “I’m no Julia Child, so I don’t know from cardamom.”

“That’s not the point. And this is blood, here?” She pointed at the blueprint.

Oscar nodded.

“And what about these lines?”

“I was tracing the sight lines, lest some busy-body type see us as we perpetrate the crime.” Two-Fingers looked at Marie. “You are perhaps coming to a conclusion here?”

“The one thing missing,” Marie said, looking up from the blueprint, “is some fire. Not like a cigarette, though. You’d have needed an open flame.”

“Talk to Mister Old-School about his lantern.” Oscar looked at Two-Fingers, then back at Marie. “So we did what?”

“You did a thelemic pentagram offering,” Marie said, rolling up the papers. “You drew a pentagram, did a minor sacrifice of blood, food, and spices, and offered them with fire. So your target vanished. Pretty good for amateurs.”

“Shit,” Two-Fingers said. “Pardon my French, but shit.”

“So where’s Tupac?”

Marie raised her hands. “Poof.”

“Poof?” Two-Fingers looked at Oscar. “Poof is not good, my friend. Poof means that we end up in a bridge abutment, courtesy of Big Papa.”

“I heard that.” Oscar looked at Marie Laveau. “And Tupac was his favorite nephew. Please don’t tell Big Papa.”

Marie laughed. “Boys, he’s my boss. If I don’t tell him that Tupac’s gone poof, I’ll end up in the abutment with you. You’d better run while there’s time. He knows

you're here, so he'll expect me to call him. You'd better go poof, too, and in a hurry."

\*

The light was just beginning to break over the dreary coast of South Carolina when Oscar elbowed Two-Fingers, hard, as the Greyhound bus ground to a stop in the parking lot of a Short-Stop filling station. A couple of dispirited chickens fluttered toward shelter as the bus wheeled toward a gravel parking area.

"Wake up, you dumb-ass."

"I am not sure I appreciate you calling me a dumb-ass." Two-Fingers sat up, stretching his neck to one side. "And considering my powers with the magical, it might not be smart to do so, either."

"Shut up. We've been scammed."

"What?" Two-Fingers's eyes opened wide. "How do you think that is so?"

"It was pretty easy, considering we're both championship morons. Tupac went into the data room, and I went to the server side. I climbed back up and out, but Tupac came over to the server room from below. You probably wouldn't ever have seen them, but they have mylar sheets that are flexible plastic that, when you stretch them, are reflective like aluminum. They use them in photo shoots."

"So you think ..."

"Yeah. Tupac got up and taped one up over the ventilation shaft entry where I'd crawled out. Or he'd made a frame or something. He did the same on the shaft he'd climbed out, while you and I were setting up the drop ladder down at the exhaust shaft. By the time we came back to see where he was, it looked as if the two side shafts were gone. Poof."

"But what about Marie Laveau?" Two-Fingers frowned. "It was she who educated us about the magic aspect."

“Yeah.” The bus passengers were filing back onto the bus. “And it was Big Papa who sent us to her. And Big Papa has enough friends in Sing Sing that he knows all about both of us. Like the fact that you always use a lantern.”

“Hell, if you’ll excuse me for saying so. So Big Papa, Tupac, and Marie were all in on it. And they currently have all the money from the robbery, some share of which is rightfully ours.” Two-Fingers looked out the window. “I liked thinking I could do magic. I was going to suggest we go to Vegas and go legit.”

“I think the next bus stop is Myrtle Beach,” Oscar said. “They have an airport, and I bet there’s a non-stop to LaGuardia. That means we have about six hours to come up with a really good plan.”

“Do you have an idea?” Two-Fingers asked, turning to Oscar.

“Nope.” Oscar looked out the window as the Short Stop Super Saver retreated in the distance, with endless fields of cotton and corn replacing it in the big window of the bus.

“I believe that I, myself, do,” Two-Fingers said. “Perhaps I may explain it to you as we make our way back to the Big Apple.”

\*

“That’s a terrible plan,” Oscar said as he flagged down a cab. “The worst. The oldest plan in the book.”

“I do not see it as such. I say, ‘Big Papa, the police have been in on this all along,’ and you say, ‘look behind you,’ and when Big Papa turns around to look, you over-power him.” Two-Fingers loaded his bag into the cab.

“That’s the oldest one in the book. And it would get us killed. What I’m wondering is whether we have any advantages over Big Papa and his crew.”

“Advantages? No, my friend.” Two-Fingers eased himself into the cab, which smelled of stale sweat and fast food. “We are, as they say, dealt out.”



“Well, maybe not,” Oscar said, looking at the skyline of the big city in the distance. “They think we’re really stupid. Really, we’re only somewhat stupid.”

“I fail to see how that advantages us.”

“But our main advantage is that Marie probably believes this hoo-doo crap.” Oscar tapped his fingers on the armrest.

“You have maybe a plan?”

“Sort of. I think, if she does palm readings all day, she probably thinks, somewhere deep down, that this spiritualism crap is for real. And maybe we can use that.”

“I do not follow your train of thought.” Two-Fingers shook his head as the cab picked up speed onto Ditmars Boulevard.

“Maybe they won’t, either,” Oscar muttered. “Not until it’s too late. So what we’re going to need is some of that flexible drainage pipe. The black, accordion stuff. And some rubber cement. And a big-ass wrench.”

“Now I am really lost,” Two-Fingers said, shaking his head. “I will never understand you younger generation. First your Vin Halen, now this.”

\*

“You’re ready?” Oscar pulled down his sleeves, the darkness of the early morning almost obscuring the mess the two had made in front of Marie’s basement apartment in the 119th street brownstone.

“Does that itch?” Two-Fingers nodded at Oscar’s arms. “You may get poisoning of the blood, or some such.”

“I’d rather get my money. Anyway, it’s 4:55. At five, you know what to do.”

“That’s right.” Two-Fingers nodded. “This reminds me of a long con we pulled in 1962 on ...”

“Not now.” Oscar turned and went down the steps to Marie Laveau’s apartment and knocked.

“I’m not open. Come back later,” a voice yelled.

“Marie! This is Oscar Rivas!”

“Oscar? Like the kid who lost the building?” The door opened a crack, multiple chains festooned between door and frame.

“Yeah. I got some bad news for you. For me. We’ve been hexed.”

“What the hell do you mean, hexed?”

“Look at my arms.” Oscar rolled up his sleeves. The skin, where he’d painted it with the rubber cement, looked ghastly—wrinkled and pustular, as if he had leprosy. He’d dotted it with splotches of red food coloring under the cement, and, as he pulled, the goo oozed out, looking positively pestilential.

“You got the ick,” Marie hissed.

“It ain’t half what he’s going to do to you,” Oscar whispered. “He sent me here to tell you. You better let me in, or you’re as dead as I am.”

The door closed, and there was the sound of fumbling, then chains rattling. Then, the door swung open. “Come in. But don’t ooze on the upholstery.”

“Doubt I’ll live that long.” Oscar stepped in, and was gratified to see a couple of candles in front of a figure of the Virgin Mary, her robes painted pink. “Reason you fooled us is that Two-Fingers is a real-live voodoo man.”

“That stuff is fake.” Marie pulled her bathrobe close around her ample figure.

“You and me, we know better. They call him ‘Two-Fingers’ because he sacrificed two fingers to—to Louisie. That’s what he said. Louisie. Like on the *Jeffersons*.”

“He must have meant Erzulie. Oh, sweet Jesus. He is a real voodoo man, for sure.” She looked closely at Oscar’s arm. “He sacrificed half his hand for voodoo powers. That is some powerful ju-ju.”

“He said he had sent plague to me, and he was sending water to you. And he was going to fix Big Papa, too. But he said you was a woman, and there was favor in Erzulie’s eyes for women-folk. So he would give you a chance.”

“A chance?”

“He’d take his money. And he wouldn’t kill you.”

“He can’t kill a priestess. That would take more ju-ju than he or any man has.”

“You think?” Oscar said, pointing to the window. “You are as dead as I am, and I tried to warn you.”

The below-street window was flooded to about six inches deep in water, which was rising at an alarming rate. Water was pouring in, seeping through on every side, shooting through in a sheet the width of a hand between the two sliding panes of glass.

“At least now I will die quick,” Oscar said, trying to keep his voice somber. “They say drowning is peaceful, not like having your flesh rot from the plague.”

“That voodoo man is going to kill me!” Marie shrieked as the smaller pane gave way, letting a torrent of water into the apartment. “No amount of money ain’t worth dying for!”

There was a pounding on the door. “It’s him,” Oscar intoned. “He has come for you.”

“What do I do?” The water was to Marie’s ankles.

“Drown, I suppose.” Oscar shrugged. “Or open the door.”

Marie opened the door. The water from the fire hydrant on the street above shot in every direction around Two-Fingers, spraying theatrically in a corona, the

effect heightened by the all-weather shop lamp they'd duct-taped to the back of the hydrant.

"Give me the money," Two-Fingers said, sounding to Oscar like Bela Lugosi in *Bride of the Monster*. "Give me the money, or drown."

Marie sloshed into the bedroom, returning with a suitcase. "It's all here. I can't believe Big Papa didn't wake up through all this. You put a hex on him, too?"

Two-Fingers looked at Oscar, who turned to Marie. "The curse of the night." Oscar turned back to face Two-Fingers, moving back a little so she couldn't see, then motioned toward the door.

"Oh, yeah. The curse of the night. Anyways, since you have done right by me, I will reward you the same. The waters will stop soon. Close the door behind me, and pray fervently for forgiveness. An hour should do. And as for you—" Two-Fingers motioned dramatically at Oscar—"you must come and assist me, for the little time you have left." He turned, with a flourish Lugosi would have envied, and headed out the door.

"Thank you, Mister Two-Fingers," Marie said, then nudged Oscar, shoving him towards the door.

"Yes. Thanks."

Marie closed the door behind the two, and they both staggered up the stairs, finally emerging from the gouts of water from the hydrant.

"I thought I would bust my guts from the temptation to laugh, it was so comical," Two-Fingers said, slicking his hair back.

"Me, too," a voice said from the darkness.

"Tupac." Oscar turned, to see the little man come out of the darkness.

"You know, you guys are the kings of over-planning. You stage these dramatic-ass events. Me, I just walk up with a gun to people." Tupac held out his right hand, in which he held a massive and quite lethal-looking automatic. "It helps

them take a little white kid like me serious, you know? I point this gun at them, and I take their shit. Then, maybe I shoot them. The only question in the whole thing is the shooting them.”

“I think I see where this is going.” Oscar looked at Two-Fingers. “You figured out we’d come back.”

“Hell, I *knew* that. I knew you’d come up with some crazy shit that wouldn’t fool a blind wino with a meth habit. Some big-ass dramatic deal, like you old-timers like. But I guess it fooled Marie.”

“So it was you who took care of Big Papa.” Oscar nodded.

“You got that,” Tupac said, smiling. “Roofies are, like, my dating tool of choice. And it put him to bed just like the little sweeties downtown. I hope Marie got her some. But, now it’s time for *our* business transaction.”

“But, we must mention our last plan, which you has forgotten about,” Two-Fingers said, setting down the suitcase. “As you has said, we tend to over-plan. As such, we estimated that you would not fall so readily for our little theatrical effort, being street-wise and such.”

“You’re right about that, old man,” Tupac said. “So now give me the suitcase.”

Oscar tried to shake his head at Two-Fingers.

“But what you did not estimate is that our planning would include confederates. Accomplices. Such as those who are now approaching you, from the backside.”

“What the hell is he saying?” Tupac turned to Oscar, his face registering annoyance.

“You work alone. But we have a posse.” Oscar pointed. “Right behind you.”

Tupac turned. “Shit.”

With a fluid motion, Two-Fingers pulled the sap out of his jacket pocket and hit Tupac in the back of his head. Tupac stood for a second, then collapsed.

“We should run,” Oscar said.

“While we are running, you should mention how that plan worked like a dream,” Two-Fingers said, picking up the suitcase.

“I’m just glad one of our plans finally did,” Oscar said. “Even if it *was* the oldest one in the book.”

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Ramesh is based in Bangalore, southern India, and writes full time, both fiction and nonfiction. His work has appeared in the university journals of Chicago (*Contrary*), Drexel (*Dragonfire*), California (*Gastronomica*), Liverpool (*The Reader*) and Western Australia (*Westerly*). He contributes to *World & I Journal*, *Reptilia*, and numerous other non-fiction magazines. He is currently at work on a novel and also enjoys photography, nature walks, and gossip.

### Avatars on Tirumala Hill

*by Ramesh Avadhani*

The man at the desk looks no different from the thousands of pilgrims swarming this temple town atop Tirumala Hill in southern India. His head is shaved except for a small tuft at the back, and his brow is adorned with a thick *nama*, a trident-shaped mark in chalk. It's the symbol of the reigning deity, Venkateshwara, avatar of Lord Vishnu, protector of all life.

"I made a reservation over phone," I say. "Ravi Kumar Iyengar, Cottage 121."

"Alone?" the man asks, as his pen scans a register that's spread over half the desk.

I gesture at the far end of the lobby. "The maroon dress, she's with me."

He looks there. About twenty men and women are in anxious huddles on the sofas but Meenu is like a formidable goddess on a separate chair. Her bust is an excessive blessing and her long legs are splayed as if any obeisance is welcome.

"Your wife?" he asks.

“Just married,” I lie.

“She would have to wear a sari to enter the temple,” he murmurs, still staring at her.

“I know. Look, just give me the cottage. We want to freshen up.”

“Of course, of course.” With visible effort he tears his gaze away and turns the giant register around. I scribble my name and address. He hands me the key.

Meenu sees me approach but makes no attempt to get up. Either she’s tired, because it’s taken us six hours by bus to come here, or she’s playing one of her favorite games: *Show Me That Only I Matter*. Or *Who Do You Think You Are?*

I nod at her and walk past. *If You Want Me, Follow Me*.

\*

She is 23, same as me, and both of us live in Bangalore. I met her on a dating website some months ago. I have proposed marriage but she wants more time. I am impatient though, that’s why I have brought her here; maybe this sacred environment will help her decide. After all, I told her, even Lord Venkateshwara got to marry his sweetheart, Padmavathi, on this very hill, though not before he underwent a lot of difficulties and penance. The story is that Venkateshwara, as an avatar of Vishnu, struggled to win back Padmavathi, who was herself an avatar of Lakshmi, Vishnu’s wife. Lakshmi had deserted Vishnu from their heavenly abode because he forgave a sage who kicked him in the chest. Vishnu’s chest was where Lakshmi resided.

Meenu had laughed at that, saying how could I believe such a complex cock and bull story? What were these avatars anyway? Avatars, I said, were incarnations or manifestations of the supreme being. Vishnu himself is an avatar! He assumed several more forms for several tasks—to act as the noble son and husband even at great personal cost (Lord Rama), to bring justice in an unjust world (Lord Krishna), or to preach the right path (Lord Buddha). In this case, the avatar of Venkateshwara was showing us how important love is and once lost how difficult it is to regain it. Meenu laughed some more at that, but in the end, agreed to



come to Tirumala, saying at least she would get to see the famous temple; she hadn't been there before.

\*

I stand outside and look around. It's almost a year since I was here last. Some things have changed. To the right, construction work is on for two new *choultries*—massive buildings that provide free accommodation for pilgrims. The main bazaar to the left has enlarged; more shops, more pavement vendors. But beyond them, the richest Hindu temple remains unchanged—a high wall of granite, a white tower at the entrance crowned with seven golden spires, and like a backdrop borrowed from a painting, an undulating stretch of misty green hills. The air resonates with Vedic verses from loudspeakers fixed to electric poles and rooftops. The Sanskrit beats into my ears with a stridency that seems to ask: *So, hoping for better luck this time?*

I sense someone approaching from behind. It's Meenu and she's sliding her cell phone back into her purse. The goddamn cell phone. Who has she been talking to now? She has so many friends and I know nothing about them. She works in a big call center. As for my phone, it hardly rings; I am an insurance salesman; I am the one who makes all the calls.

"How far is the cottage?" she asks.

"Ten minute walk," I reply.

"Let's get a taxi."

"No taxis here. We are supposed to walk. Or use the free buses."

"That's silly!"

I refrain from saying anything. By evening she should be in a better mood. This place is like that; everyone changes here.

\*

We go up the main road. The weather is surprisingly hot; summer is still a month away and this is supposed to be a fairly tall hill. Midway to the right, several cottages come up—compact structures in arched rows, painted a super white, each fronted by an elegant porch, a tidy garden. It's as if Venkateshwara himself has designed the entire place to promote love and peace.

Cottage 121 is the twenty-first in the first row. By the time we get there my shirt is pasted to my body. Meenu is worse; her creamy face has reddened and the fabric under her armpits is wet with sweat.

The cottage has two rooms. I choose the one I occupied a year ago. Even before I close the door, Meenu starts undressing. I gape; I didn't expect her to do this. Her black bra and panties are so full and tight that my throat goes dry.

"I hope the water is cool," she says with a dramatic sigh. She rummages for a towel in my suitcase and walks off as if I don't exist. I can only stare at all the jiggling and swaying. Moments later I hear the shower turned on. I imagine water negotiating firm hills and mysterious valleys. Just then the sound of a muffled ring-tone. It's from Meenu's purse. I quickly take out her cell phone and press the answer button.

It's a male voice, eager and strong. "Hi sweetie! When are you coming back?"

I don't answer.

"Meenu?"

I peer at the display. AJN. Obviously an acronym.

"Who is this?" I ask.

The line disconnects. It's happened several times before. Different voices, different acronyms. There's no point in asking her about them. The first time I asked, she flared up, saying I was invading her privacy. Meaning: *I can do what I please.*

\*

I sit at the small table near the window. This is where I worked in my first job as Public Relations Officer of a spiritual organization. We had organized a camp to teach yoga and meditation. Forty-five men and women enrolled for the course. And Kiran was one of them, a stunning dusky beauty from Delhi. I wonder what she's doing now.

"You are Kumar, right?" she'd asked, a little breathlessly when she stepped into this very cottage. She was in a shimmering cream and gold sari, her complexion like coffee seeds roasted to a perfect brown.

I almost fell off my chair in my haste to get up. "Ravi. Ravi Kumar Iyengar."

"Great! Where do I stay?"

I picked up a file.

"Kiran Rao," she said from behind. I could feel warm puffs of her breath on my shirtsleeve.

"Cottage no 337."

"Will you take me there?" Her eyes were lined with kohl and the big dot of a crimson *bottu* in the middle of her forehead was like a third eye.

"It's my duty," I said.

"You are so cute!"

I must have flushed because she giggled.

Cottage 337 was farther up the hill, and as we trudged towards it, her sari flirted with the irregular breeze, exposing a large navel and a vignettted cleavage. She appeared so vibrant, so adventurous. What made her join this course? Was she looking for some fun? Or was she under some emotional stress?

"Give me that," I said, reaching for her suitcase.

"I was waiting for you to ask," she laughed. We walked on for some time. "Somu would have loved this," she said.

"Somu?"

"Somashekhar. My husband. He is a lawyer. Criminal." A pause. "I meant criminal lawyer." Another laugh.

"You seem too young to be married." I thought she would confide her age.

She didn't. "Yeah? Well...thank you. I told Somu I wanted to do this course. He said, 'Go ahead, perhaps when you come back you can teach my clients yoga and meditation. I can charge them more.'" She mimicked a flat voice and glanced at me. I felt confident that she expected me to laugh, so I laughed, but she looked away as if I had done something terribly unacceptable.

We reached cottage No. 337. I opened the lock and placed her suitcase on the floor. She stooped to pick up the suitcase and her sari fell away from her shoulders. The half-moons in her blouse swayed a little. She caught me looking and straightened up. "Why don't you come in?" she said, not making any effort to cover her blouse. She went on, "But if you're busy, we can meet some other time." Then she went in and all I could do was mumble a "yes" that she didn't hear, and stagger away.

\*

Meenu emerges from her bath. The white towel is woefully inadequate for her bursting curves. The aroma of sandalwood soap is sharp and teasing. I remember another aroma that had clouded my mind a year ago.

"What? Dreaming again?" she taunts.

She accuses me of that often, that my mind wanders, that I sometimes forget she's with me.

"I...I was waiting for you to finish," I say and go past her. It's only when I finish my bath that I realize I have forgotten to bring a fresh pair of briefs. I have only a towel and it's thin. I can imagine Meena glancing at the towel, her nose

wrinkling. “Something on your mind?” she might say in her usual taunting manner.

I slide down along the wall and sit, my naked bottom soaking in the cold of the tiles. I remember the last time I sat like this. One afternoon, after lunch at the *choultry*, I was returning to my cottage when I saw Kiran pacing the portico of my cottage.

“Ravi!” she called out even before I reached her. “Thank god you came. There’s an an...animal in my cottage.”

“Animal?”

“It made an awful lot of noise. Like...like...I don’t know.”

We rushed to her cottage. “In the bathroom,” she whispered. I went there. “Here take this,” she said, pressing a plastic ruler into my hand.

I put my ear to the door. Nothing. I slid open the latch and pushed the door a couple of inches. No sound, only Kiran breathing behind me. I pushed the door some more. A wall of green tiles spattered with water and a blue bucket beneath a tap. I pushed the door all the way back. A mop, another bucket under another tap, a small window to the left, a bottle of shampoo on the sill. Then it started; a shrill *hut-hut-hut-hut*. Kiran held me, her softness pressing my back at several points.

*Hut-hut-hut-hut.*

In the dim light I could make out a cone-like yellowish object behind the smaller bucket. A snake? It moved out an inch. Two large eyes and a bluish bead at the throat. What animal was this? I took one more step.

That’s when it emitted a piercing cry. From behind, Kiran clutched me so tight my knees wobbled. No woman had held me like this. I tapped the ruler hard on the tiles. The yellow object leapt and went smack into the wall. The animal fell back on the floor and was still. Just the beady growth at its throat inflated and

deflated. It was the Indian bullfrog, an ugly bloated creature. The large eyes closed and opened, like blinks in slow motion. Kiran was still holding on to me.

I laughed and gasped. “Why...why don’t you sit while I chase this fellow out?”

It took me ten minutes to urge the amphibian out of the cottage.

Kiran clapped her hands. “Thank you, Ravi!” Then she gestured at the bed. “Sit for sometime,” she urged. Her gaze traveled down my shirt, my pants. God, was the stiffness in my pants showing? Apart from the bed there was just one chair. I went there and my legs crossed automatically. From outside the loudspeakers started their metallic twang. It was an ode to Venkateshwara, hailing his compassion towards sinners who surrendered to him.

“It’s so peaceful here, isn’t it?” Kiran murmured. “This yoga course. This cottage. This...this entire atmosphere. Back home it’s hell. Each day is a torture.”

I waited for her to go on but she reached up to hold her hair. Up and down her arms moved like engineering tools. She coiled her hair into a knot and when she jerked tight, her twin mounds shook like jelly being tossed in a bowl.

“Your husband,” I said. “Does he, I mean, doesn’t he mind you being away?”

“Let’s not talk about him, okay?”

I gazed at my fingers. They were intertwining by themselves.

“Sorry for speaking like that,” she said. Then she went to close the door.

“Ravi, look at me.”

I obeyed.

“You haven’t had a girl, yes?”

I knew then what is meant by a husky voice.

“Poor boy!” she murmured and came to stand near me. Her lavender perfume enveloped me in heady swirls. The folds of her sari, the rise and fall of her blouse, the large and deep navel, I felt faint. Her hands came on my temples. She pressed lightly, as if I were a fragile sculpture, and raised my face. The next moment her lips were on mine. I stood up, and this time she crushed herself against me. Her hands roved all over my back. Then one hand came to the front and traveled in an unthinkable direction. God, it was there, stroking the hardness. I let my own hand stray all over her blouse and squeezed lightly. I wondered if I was causing her some pain too. As if on cue, she moaned. Her fingers searched frantically. Then her hand was in, her sharp nails grazing. I felt my head dissolve and then, suddenly, something scorched through all that storm. I drew away.

Her eyes went wide. “What?”

“I don’t think...I...” I was unable to continue because the room started to tilt and something flapped in my chest. Her gaze flicked down to my nakedness. I turned and zipped up, nearly getting caught in the zip.

“Ravi!”

I opened the door and stumbled out. If only she hadn’t been married. Back in my cottage I stood under a cold shower for a long time.

\*

When I emerge from the bathroom, Meenu isn’t bothered about the thin towel wrapped around my hips. She is examining herself; she has changed into a sari. A splendid blue silk with a silvery border. She adjusts the pleats at her waist.

“Nice?” she asks.

“Very nice,” I say.

“Let’s go to the temple.” There’s enthusiasm in her voice. I am pleased. She looks so much like Kiran now, except for her hair which is short and silky. Kiran’s was long and dense.

We walk down the main road, amidst a babble of Malayalam and Telugu, Kannada and Tamil, the principal languages of southern India. We go past the terminus where mud-caked buses stand exhausted, past a shed-like structure where barbers squat in military rows and shave penitent heads, past vendors surrounded by diligent heaps of flowers and fruits, vermilion and turmeric powders: all the requisites for a proper salutation to Venkateshwara. Then we are in a huge quadrangle the size of several football grounds.

Groups of pilgrims stream up and down like confounded armies. Farther, near the stone walls, hundreds more are lined up in a queue behind steel railings, eager to receive what Venkateshwara guarantees: absolution and success. All he requires is a donation; he's still paying back only the interest on a big loan taken from Kubera, the wealthiest god. Venkateshwara was quite the pauper when he wanted to marry Padmavathi.

"It's so damn hot here," Meenu says. Her face streams with sweat and some of her silky hair is plastered to her cheeks like wayward tendrils. "Do we have to stand in that queue?"

"I know a priest," I tell her. "Wait here."

I sprint to the main gate. Inside a group of half-naked priests are in discussion. I think I see the one I know but I am not sure; he looks plumper now. Just then a policeman approaches from the left. "What?" he demands, waving a wicked baton.

"I want to meet Acharya Kesavan. He knows me."

"So?"

"Acharya permitted me to use the special gate. Just call him. I think he's standing there."

Another wave of the baton. "No, no, we have stopped all that. Everyone has to be screened thoroughly. Security concerns. No cameras. No cell phones. Go stand in the common queue."



It would take at least four hours to reach the sanctum sanctorum by the common queue. I go back to where I left Meenu but she isn't there. I look around. There she is, near a vendor of tender coconuts, talking into her blasted cell phone. Who is it this time? She sees me and shoves the phone into her purse. I go up and tell her about the security concerns.

"Four hours in the queue? Not worth it, Ravi. Let's go back to the cottage." She holds my hand and pulls.

I resist. "It's an extraordinary experience, Meenu. You shouldn't miss it."

I tell her about the dimly lit sanctum sanctorum, the heady smells of joss sticks and oil lamps, the priests drawing great circles of honor with a flaming spoon of camphor, and Venkateshwara, black and serene, swathed in gold and diamonds, silks and flowers, and apparently blind; an enormous *nama* covers much of his forehead and all of his eyes. I tell her about the legends associated with those covered eyes. One is that they are so intense they can scorch the entire universe. Another is that since this is *kaliyuga*, the era of strife, he won't open his eyes unless humanity as a whole improves. And a third is that he wants to show us that only he matters, everything else is *maya*, an illusion.

Meenu giggles so much that my face goes hot. She comes close and whispers in my ear, "Well, I can show you something that's absolutely real." For a moment I am puzzled and then a heavy softness presses against my left arm.

\*

After that passionate afternoon, Kiran and I avoided each other. The few times we couldn't, we exchanged little nods and little smiles like two strangers compelled to be well mannered. Then one evening everything changed. I was walking towards the temple. The sun was setting rapidly, evoking long shadows and imparting a yellowish tinge to everything around. The bazaar came up and an urchin approached, holding out muddy fingers. I gave him a coin. He scampered away and almost collided with a woman in a bottle-green sari. She was facing the other way. The drape of her sari, so low at the hips, and the deep

cut of her blouse at the back, showing off shoulder blades like satiny wings, looked familiar.

“Looking for me?” said a husky voice at my elbow. I whirled around. Kiran! And how different she looked. In one hand she held a plastic basket: a half coconut, a couple of bananas, some asters, and little round packets of turmeric and vermillion powders. Her forehead was devoid of that third eye, but in the parting of her hair a streak of crimson powder cried like an exclamation mark. Her sari was the traditional favorite—yellow silk with a gold border the size of one hand span. The fabric was wrapped around her body in such a way that not an inch of flesh showed. Padmavathi must have looked like this on the day of her wedding to Venkateshwara.

“Just passing time,” I mumbled.

“Let’s have some coffee. At Woodlands.”

“I don’t think—”

“Oh, come on, Ravi. Don’t act so uppity. What have I asked? Just a coffee, not your life.”

We went past the temple to reach Woodlands, a large restaurant surrounded by numerous Flame of the Forest trees.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked after I ordered coffees.

She shrugged. “Nothing. I went to the temple. Offered prayers. Then I watched a procession where they took the gods in a palanquin. All that chanting and marching and dozens of lamps, it was all like a movie set. I believe they shoot a lot of movies here. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Did you know that last year the temple got something like ten billion rupees in donations of all kinds—money, gold, diamond studded crowns, even property deeds made out for the temple?”

I shook my head. Why was she saying all this?

“Do you know that I love you?” she said.

I stared. Those big, black eyes didn’t blink.

“Kiran, you know nothing about me.”

She smiled. “Are you a criminal?”

“What!”

She sighed a sigh that said she hadn’t met a stupider person than I. The waiter came with our coffees and I was relieved to look at something else. The froth was a good one-inch thick. I watched the bubbles die at unpredictable points.

“Ravi, mine was an arranged marriage. Somu is twelve years older. I married him because my parents owed his family a lot of money. His parents said they’d forget the loans if I married him. What could I do?”

“I... I’m sorry to hear that.”

She laughed. “You speak like a politician! Anyway, I thought you should know something about me. Before you make a decision.”

Decision? What was she talking about? She puffed her cheeks and blew in her cup. The froth lifted in a wave to reveal the coffee—brown and rich. Just like her skin.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Your future.”

“I just want to establish myself in a good career.”

“In *this* place?”

“Of course not. I want to work in a good company. In marketing. I think I’ll do well in that field.”

“Come to Delhi. All the top companies are there.”

I didn’t know what to say. Kiran laughed and the sari over her bust heaved. “You don’t trust me or don’t like me?” she asked.

“Kiran, it’s not—”

“You men are such duffers. Can’t you recognize genuine love when you see it?”

I just looked at my coffee. I wondered about her husband. Was he also a duffer? How could he permit such an attractive wife to be away from him? Was he in love with someone else?

“What sort of a girl do you want?” she murmured.

I shook my head. “I am not thinking of—”

“Ravi, look at me.”

I looked.

“Come with me to Delhi. I’ll put you up in an apartment. Let’s see how it works out between us. For three months, six months. Then you can decide.” There was again that frank intensity about her face that took my breath away.

“Kiran, I like you. I like you a lot. But—” I groped for the right words, and before my eyes her face shrank and her throat bobbed as if she’d swallowed something hard and large. She waved at the waiter, asking for the bill.

We came out of the restaurant. “I... I have to go to the temple,” I said, although my feet seemed chained to the ground.

Her hand came on to my wrist and there was just the gentlest of pressures, a fraction of what she’d exerted on the day of the bullfrog. She stepped up close. Those black eyes were filling. I bent my head and stared at the ground between us.

“Thank you for liking me,” she murmured and then her hand dropped away. She turned and walked off. I watched her till she disappeared in the throng of pilgrims. She left Tirumala the following day.

\*

Back in the cottage, Meenu does it again: unraveling her sari even before I close the door. It disturbs me but before I give more thought to it, she says, “Switch on the light. It’s so dark.”

I do that.

She unbuttons her blouse and steps out of the pool of silk on the floor. Then her hands go to the back to unclasp her bra. Twin mounds tumble out in relief, and the tips are like exotic betel nuts.

“Nice?” she asks. The half smile on her lips is so mysterious, so taunting.

I nod and remove my shirt. She waits, eyeing my pants. I can’t do this with the light on, so I go to the switch.

“No!” she commands.

I hesitate. She comes up and hooks a finger into my waist and tugs.

I push away her hand. “You first.”

Without much ado she slips her panties down her thighs. It’s a geometry I have never seen before, flawless curves ensconcing a tidy triangle.

“Your turn,” she says. I quickly unzip my trousers and she eyes the bulge in my briefs.

“Go on,” she urges. But I can’t do it; there’s a sudden heaviness in the air; it’s as if Venkateshwara has penetrated the walls right into this cottage. I switch off the light.

She mutters something under her breath and goes to the bed and lies there, her legs drawn up, her eyes riveted to the ceiling. There's a change in her, I can sense it; I am not sure if I should approach the bed. Just then her damn cell phone rings. Her shadowy figure sits up in a trice. She leaves the bed, finds her phone and goes to the bathroom.

I sit on the bed. Minutes pass; she's still talking. There's no point, I tell myself. This is stupid. This is really my desperation to seek out an avatar of someone I lost, and for her I am just a convenient form in flesh rather than a digital acronym on her cell phone. I put my clothes back on and go out. I can still hear her talking.

\*

Outside the air echoes with the dulcet tones of the south Indian classical singer, M. S. Subbulakshmi: *O Venkateshwara, bestower of all benefits, closest kin of the universe, bottomless ocean of compassion, tireless worker for the world's equilibrium...*

There are fewer pilgrims on the main road. The bazaar, however, is noisy and crowded. A *dosa* stall comes up. The man is brushing clean a hot griddle on which he has splattered water. He pours a cup of the rice batter and spreads it out expertly, swiftly. The perfect round begins to show innumerable tiny holes. He picks up a spatula and clangs the sides of the griddle.

"Hot dosas, hot dosas!" he shouts at the pilgrims streaming past. But it's clear that only Venkateshwara matters. The man turns to me as I approach, his eyes gushing hope. "Dosa, Sir?"

I shake my head and walk on. Ah... the post office. It's closed but there's a bench outside. I go and sit there and close my eyes. I don't know how long I keep them closed. I sense the crowds lessening. Then the holy verses stop abruptly, as if they have accomplished something. I open my eyes. Everything is still and

remote, the buildings, the bazaar, the streets. Only a few pilgrims move about but even they seem to be floating in another world. I rise from the bench and head back to the cottage.

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## GUEST WRITER

Since making his fiction debut in OTP, Bernard has appeared in several other publications and was a finalist in *The Guardian's* Short Fiction competition. He's just finished collaborating on a screenplay, continues to work on short fiction and would love to get some sleep some time soon. His website is <http://thebiroofdestiny.blogspot.com>.

### Cot

*by Bernard O'Leary*

They walked up the stairs in a good mood, not caring that the elevator was broken and they had to climb fourteen floors. The babysitter was annoyed they were late but Gordon tipped her and sent her away in a taxi. The baby hadn't woken for his late night feed yet. She poured two large gins. Gordon was looking especially handsome tonight. He kissed her passionately and they had sex on the sofa.

Later, he was smoking a cigarette by the window when he said, "The fog's covering all the buildings down below. Feels like we're in an aeroplane."

"I not like that," she said. "It makes feel like we're alone here."

"You know, I think your English is getting even worse," he said. "What happened to those language CDs I bought you? They still in the wrapper?" He laughed but she didn't.

"How does it get to be good? I'm here, all the day. I don't meet peoples or go out."



“You’ve just been out.”

“With only you.”

“Not this shit again.”

She looked away, holding the glass to her lips.

“I’m going,” he said. “Kiss the baby for me in the morning.”

“Stay tonight. Kiss him yourself.”

He pulled on his jacket and muttered, “You’re starting to sound as bad as my wife.”

She wanted to hold herself as still as rock, show no emotion while he tied his shoelaces, and let him leave in silence. But when his hand touched the door handle, she shouted, “Hey, you leave me money for week!”

“Yeah, let’s not forget about what’s really important.” He counted out the bills, then tossed them so they rained down around her like confetti. He marched out, slamming the door behind him. She threw her glass after him and it shattered against the mahogany. For a moment, she continued sitting still, determined not to cry, but then she thought of the baby crawling around on the carpet the next morning. Stumbling a little, she took a brush and pan and tried to sweep up every fragment. One thick shard gashed the side of her left hand, leaving a bright splash of blood on the carpet. She finished cleaning and put a compress on the wound. The baby was still asleep.

She picked up the money, counted it carefully, broke it into two piles, then slipped the slimmer pile into her handbag. The larger one went into a Tupperware box in her freezer that was already bursting with notes. After closing the freezer door, she took the postcard from its hiding place above the washing machine and sat on the sofa.

All she wanted now was not to cry. She read the postcard a couple of times then stared out at the shrouded city, dark as space, and drank straight from the gin bottle until she went dark too.

\*

When the baby woke up, she was so drunk she could barely open her eyes. Something that was more habit than instinct forced her to get up and stumble through the darkness, searching with her arms outstretched until they found the cold metal rail of the heavy cot. Picking up her son, she comforted him in her own language and took him to the kitchen and prepared a bottle. Once or twice, she almost fell asleep and relaxed her grip on him a little, but the movement jerked her back to wakefulness. She walked back to the nursery, lay him down and moved the bottle to his lips.

There was a dull, wet sound, then silence, then the baby began spluttering, sounding terrified. She switched on the light and looked down. He was soaked from head to toe, thrashing like a freshly-landed fish. In her hand was an empty baby bottle.

She lay him on the floor, changed him, and changed the bedding. There was nothing about her actions to indicate that there was a bellowing voice in her head, screaming at her for getting so drunk that she forgot to put the lid on the bottle.

\*

The baby woke at 6 a.m. She forced herself through the morning routine, trying to be every more cheery and nurturing than usual, as if suffering her hangover without complaint would atone for the night before.

At eleven, it was time to go to the shops. The lift was still broken, so they had to trudge down all two hundred and eighty-six steps while she held the buggy in the air. Each step went through her aching body like a whiplash, each one a sweet pain that helped drown out the incessant voice asking, *what kind of mother are you?*

At the bottom, she put on her headphones and listened to her language CDs. Not Gordon's dry and dusty CDs, filled with words and absent of meaning, much like Gordon himself. These were CDs she'd bought herself, where the tutor spoke in a sensual baritone as he unveiled the language. She imagined him as heavy man

with a thick beard, a man who liked red wine and young women, a man who had travelled a lot. She dreamed of meeting him one day.

They went to the nearest play park for a while, then headed into town. Ignoring the two nearest supermarkets, she walked to the discount store and began gathering the same items as every other week. Her shopping list was planned to the nearest penny and she had exactly enough in her purse. The bright lights and smell of decaying vegetables made her feel nauseous, but aisles were mercifully empty and the girl behind the till made no attempt at conversation.

The rain was setting in as she began the walk home. Everyone seemed to be going the other way and they jostled her as if she wasn't there. She gripped the handle of the buggy tightly and focused on the confident voice in her headphones.

*"Tengo que irme,"* said the voice. *"I must go away."*

*"Tengo que irme,"* she repeated.

*"Quieres ir conmigo? Would you like to come with me?"*

*"Quieres ir conmigo?"*

*"Muy bien. Very well."*

\*

The baby refused to go to sleep that night. Her hangover was still lingering and she felt like she was going to shatter into tiny fragments if she didn't sleep soon, but he kept fighting to stay awake. Around ten, he drifted into a light sleep, enough for her to sneak away. She lay fully clothed on her bed and passed out.

She was having another nightmare when the baby woke up. She ran to him, cradling him until he stopped crying. His nappy was thick with urine, so she changed it quickly and took him with her to the kitchen.

He sat in the crook of her arm, pressed tight against her right breast as she prepared his milk. He was drifting off again as the kettle built to a crescendo,

rattling as the water boiled. She poured a little into the milk to warm it, splashing a little scalding hot liquid over her hand. It was a small pain, but a bright intense one and it made her swear out loud.

The noise made the baby cry again. She stroked the back of his head and said “hush, hush” while finishing the bottle. It took her a moment to realise that something wasn’t right.

The baby she held—the one breathing gently, the one whose soft, sparse hair she was stroking—was silent. She could hear him breathing over the other sound, the dreadful piercing scream of a baby in anguish. For a few moments, she couldn’t move. She wondered if she was still dreaming. But she could feel the burn on her hand and she knew she was awake. “I must be going crazy,” she said out loud, in English, and her voice sounded as alive and real as the crying.

Slowly, she followed the sound to the nursery. She reached inside and flicked the light switch. The crying paused, then returned even louder. She couldn’t see anything at first, but then saw something thrashing around in the heavy metal cot in the corner. *A rat*, she thought. She would have pushed the whole cot out the window if its metal frame hadn’t been so monstrously heavy.

Moving closer, she could see more of the thing now. Two tiny pink hands waved frantically in the air. Edging closer still, she could see the thing’s arms, then a foot kicking. The crying grew more desperate. She stepped even closer until she could fully see the thing in the cot, and was so shocked that she almost let her son slip out of her grip.

It was a baby, just like hers. Exactly like her son, in fact, almost a twin. Every inch of him was repeated there: the flat nose, the thin mouth, the tuft of ginger hair. Even the pyjamas were identical. The child in her arms began to cry and the child in the cot mimicked him perfectly.

A dark shiver ran through her and she raced to the front door, clawing at the lock while holding her baby so tight she almost crushed him. Her footsteps echoed around the deserted landing as she ran from door to door, pounding on each one, pleading for someone to help her. Each door had a silver nameplate with the

identity of the occupants—Turner, Singer, Taylor, Carter—but the apartments within were silent and her knocking and yelling rattled around in them without result.

Her baby was screaming now, and so was the other one, the thing in the cot. Almost against her will, she slowly walked back in. Her mobile was on the kitchen counter so she grabbed it and called Gordon's mobile. It rang six times. Her stomach twisted when she realized that he might not pick up, but then there was a crackle and a tired voice saying, "Hello?"

"Please, Gordon, please come help. Is baby. Something strange. I don't understand."

She could hear his voice in the distance say something like, "Sorry love, work emergency. Back in a tick." While he trudged downstairs, she tried to focus. She needed to find the right words in English to explain what was happening, but it felt like her mind was coming loose and every time she reached for a word or phrase it darted out of her grasp.

"This better be good."

"I don't know. I am not understand. Maybe I am crazy. You have to come."

"I told you not to call me at home. She'll take me to the bloody cleaners if she finds out about you."

"Please, please, there is no one else to help."

"I've had enough, love. I'll keep sending you your money, but I can't have you risking everything like this. Don't call me again."

The line went dead.

She ran to her desk and pulled out a piece of paper tucked away at the back. Gordon had given her his home number once and it was still there, scrawled in his nearly illegible handwriting. She held her phone, ready to call, but paused.

Calling him on his land line would only make him angrier and he wouldn't come anyway. She was alone now.

The cries from the cot dragged her closer and closer until she was standing right over it. It was him, it was him; it was her baby in there and yet it was also her baby in her arms. She didn't understand, but she couldn't resist. She picked him up.

He calmed and settled against her chest, mirroring the position of the other baby. She looked from one to the other, almost unable to breathe. They even weighed the same. Their heads both fit into the crevice of her collarbone as if it had been handcarved for them. She sank to her knees, then rested against the nursery wall. Both of the babies were asleep, enjoying her warmth. She didn't know what to do next, so she just sat there, looking at their identical fontanels, until the sun began to creep back in under the curtain and she fell asleep too.

\*

The three of them woke up at the same time the next morning. She took them to the living room and placed the babies side-by-side on the playmat while she prepared breakfast and thought about her options. Gordon was the only person she knew well enough to ask for help in all of Scotland. She hated him for that. But even if he did come over, what would he do? Take his real son and walk out probably, leaving her with the other baby.

She froze. She had placed the babies carefully, her child on the left and the new one on the right, but what if they rolled around? She would never again know which one was her real son. She ran back into the living room and frantically looked from one to the other. There wasn't a single thing them to tell them apart, not even a strand of hair. She thought the one on the left was hers, but couldn't be sure. Picking them up, she inspected them both, turning them around so roughly that they both began to cry. She almost began to cry too as a small voice in her asked her over and over again, *what kind of mother can't even recognise her own child?*

There was only one difference, which was that the child on the right had a nappy which was full to the point of bursting. The one on the left needed a change but was a little more comfortable. She had changed him, hadn't she? Yes, she was sure she had.

She picked up her son and moved away from the other thing, terrified, thinking herself mad for holding it when she didn't even know what it was.

He stared back at her, oblivious, blowing little spit bubbles the same way her son did.

*Every mother knows their own child.*

Breathing heavily, she slowly inched back towards him. He smiled, showing her his gums, bright pink with white edges where the teeth were slowly pushing through. She picked him up again and gave a deep sigh.

Later, when the babies were playing together, she took an indelible black marker and on the back of the knee of her original child, small so no one would see it, she wrote the Roman numeral *I*. On the second child, she wrote *II*. This innovation made her feel proud, but she realized that she would still need names. "From now on," she said to her son, "I shall call you 'Uno'."

"You will be 'Dos'," she informed her other son.

\*

Looking after two babies was easier than one, in a way. Uno and Dos played happily together, neither one crying for attention when she went to the kitchen, the way Uno often used to do by himself. As the day wore on, she convinced herself that what had happened wasn't all that strange. It was no odder than giving birth, really. Lying on that bed, insane with pain; then suddenly a tiny cry and, from nowhere, another person had appeared in the room. She remembered first holding her son. He was tiny and shrivelled and filthy, covered in mucus, his limbs moving more like an insect's than a person's. She remembered thinking that this is what a cockroach would look like if you tore its shell off. She had

been terrified of him, for a while, but grown to love him. She was sure this would happen with her new son too.

After lunch, she sat down with the boys and showed them the postcard.

“This is a postcard from your Auntie Marina, my sister. I haven’t seen her in six years, but then last year she sent me this. Listen, boys:

*“¡Hola guapa!*

*“That’s ‘Hello beautiful’ in Spanish. I’ve left Madrid and live in Granada now. It’s so pretty! You must come visit, I miss you so much, little sister. Come stay with me, I’ll get you a job, maybe a man too!*

*“Hasta Luego,*

*“Marina.”*

She explained to them that she had been saving every penny she could spare so that they could walk out one day, step onto a plane, find her sister and never think of Scotland again. When she finished talking, she took a deep breath and sank back into the chair. It was the first time she had ever discussed her plan with anyone and now it seemed so real it was intoxicating.

When the boys fell asleep, she stayed a while to stare at them and offer a prayer of thanks to whoever was behind this beautiful, bizarre miracle.

\*

They woke up around one.

She picked them up, carried them into the kitchen and juggled the two bottles into the microwave. After the oven went ping, she carefully shook both of the bottles, remembering a gruff nurse at the hospital complaining about modern mothers relying on microwaves. That nurse had left her feeling foolish and incompetent, like she was just a girl playing with a doll. She wondered how that nurse would have reacted in this situation. Would she have been calm enough to get both babies to sleep at their normal bedtime on the first night?



“No, my sweethearts,” she whispered, “she would not.”

She walked back to the room and placed the two boys in the cot, side-by-side, on their backs. She sat in the chair next to the cot and felt them both grab at the bottles and begin to suck hungrily.

One of them placed his tiny hand on her thumb. It was so strange to think that these fragile, helpless things had adults somewhere inside them, in the same way that a tiny seed has a thick-trunked tree in it. She wondered what kind of men they would become. She daydreamed for a little while about old women stopping her on the street, saying, “What handsome twins you have! How do you ever tell them apart?”

The hand squeezed her thumb, a little desperately. It was pulling at her, desperate for attention, and soon the tugging was followed by a low cry, like a baby waking up. Yet both of boys were sucking at their bottles. The gentle cry became a wail.

She reached into the cot and picked up the third child that had appeared between her boys. “Hush,” she said, stroking his hair. “Why don’t we get you something to drink?” While waiting for his bottle to heat, she took the marker and inscribed a tiny *III* on the back of his knee.

\*

Every night, another one came.

By Wednesday, she’d stopped sleeping. She chain-smoked by the window and tried not to look at them. Uno and Dos were lying on their backs, listlessly playing with the baubles hanging from the toy arch. Tres was playing with a squeaky yellow hammer. Quatro was crawling towards him, trying to claim it as his own while Cinco sat still, pulling at his nappy. Seis simply lay on his back, crying. The other five babies ignored Seis, and so did she.

Her weekly budget had fallen apart. Empty milk carton filled the overflowing trash can. The tub of vegetable puree, intended for the week, had been scraped dry. There were a dozen nappies left, barely enough for the rest of the day.

She could hardly look at the babies now. They were demons or monsters or something worse. They scared her. Yet the only thing that scared her more was the thought of losing even one of them. Several times, she had started to leave with a clear plan in her mind: pack a few things, take Uno, and leave the other five to their fate. Part of her was sure that they would just evaporate like a bad dream when she was gone. She got as far as picking up Uno and making for the door, but Tres got his fingers around the hem of her skirt, and she was caught again.

She lit another cigarette and wondered how hard she would have to run at the window to break through the glass, and how long she would fall for.

\*

There was nothing in the house to eat, not even a piece of stale bread.

*“Tengo que irme,”* she whispered.

She moved quickly. The simplest thing to do would be to pack for an overnight stay: one change of clothes for her, one for each of the boys, some basic toiletries and bottles. They could buy milk on the way to the airport, and once in Spain she could work on building up their wardrobes again. They must have charity shops in Granada, she told herself.

When the bag was ready, she went to the kitchen and took the cash from the freezer. She recovered her sister’s postcard, kissed the writing on the back, and whispered, “Pray for us now, Marina.”

Everything was ready, but transporting six babies out of the apartment would be difficult. She sat Tres in the small buggy and strapped him in, then went to the closet. Deep in the back was a huge pram which Gordon had bought her while she was pregnant. She had cried when he’d presented it, asking how she was supposed to get the thing down the stairs. She yanked it out from under a pile of junk with all her strength and placed Dos and Cinco inside.

She had a papoose which she wrapped around her back, and tied Quatro in so tight his chin rested against her neck. In the forward facing harness she placed

Uno, taking a moment to breathe and to kiss him. It felt more important than ever to have him where she could see him.

That left Seis, still lying on the ground, still crying. The other five babies were ready to go, but there was nowhere for him. He hadn't stopped wailing since he'd appeared. It would be easier to leave him than any of the others.

She unstrapped Tres and wedged Seis in next to him, then fiddled with straps until they were just about holding both children in. The two boys cuddled together and fell asleep.

She pushed the huge pram and smaller buggy into the hallway, pulled the suitcase, and shut the door. The elevator was still broken. There was only one way to get everything down the stairs. She started with the suitcase, running down to the next floor, dropping it, then running back up again. She brought the small buggy down next, then the huge pram.

By the time they were down to the tenth floor, sweat dripped over every inch of her. The babies in the prams were sleeping, but other two screamed and wriggled. Her calves were burning. She tried to focus on the logistics.

Taxis went by the apartment block all the time. She would flag one down and the driver would stare at her and say nothing, and she and the sleeping children would sit in perfect silence until the airport loomed into view. She would pay in cash, then go to the standby ticket desk and book seven tickets. Would they allow her to take the buggies on the plane? She worried how she would do it. Then there was the issue of how she would carry the boarding passes and passports.

Passports.

She knew exactly where they were, sitting in the small drawer under the dining table. She kicked the brake on the pram and the buggy. "Stay here, my darlings," she said, "and stay quiet."

She struggled back up the four flights of stairs and let herself back in. She rummaged through the drawer for both passports, then raced back to the door. Her hand was on the door when she stopped.

Two passports. Only two.

It was a long time before she could summon up the strength to drag the other babies back up the stairs.

\*

Gordon's mobile didn't even ring any more. It went straight to cold, female voice that said, "The number you are calling is unavailable, please try again later."

There were eight babies now. There was no food, so she simply had to leave them crying while she went to the shop. She expected, maybe hoped, to come back to find policemen and ambulances looking for the terrible mother who had abandoned her children, but returned to only the screaming babies.

The clock on the oven said it was 19:45. Five hours until the next one. She could sense them before they came now. They lingered in the air like static electricity for hours beforehand and she could hear them, crying for her in the darkness, arms desperately searching for her. And behind each one, she could sense the others; further away but so many of them. One for every day of the rest of her life.

She got out Gordon's home number again. He had only conceded it to her when she'd threatened to kill herself, and as he handed it over he said, "If you hassle me at home, it'll be the last thing you ever do." She dialled it.

The oven clock flicked to 20:00.

It rang and rang with no reply. Each unanswered ring made her sound like she was falling further and further into space but she didn't dare to hang up.

The oven clock said 20:02 when someone picked up. An old man said, "Security?"

“Can I speak please to Gordon.”

“No Gordon here, hen, sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

“This is a warehouse, love. No one here except me.”

She placed the phone down. The phone book might have his real number, but she didn’t have his address. She wondered if she even knew his real name.

Most of the babies were asleep now, except for Uno who stared at her as if expecting something. She went to the bathroom and got some surgical spirits and cotton wool. Uno smiled at her when she approached. She rolled up the leg of his pyjamas and wiped at the number written on the back of his leg until there was nothing left but a spot of red skin. She did the same to the others. They were all equal now, all anonymous. She tried to forget which one was originally hers.

The oven clock said 20:30. She would have to hurry before the next one arrived.

\*

Moving them almost killed her. The stairs were exhausting and it took over an hour to crawl through the city with the two prams until she arrived at the hospital.

She sat on a park bench nearby for an hour before she could bring herself to do it. For the first time ever, all eight were simultaneously asleep and she kept wondering if she was making the wrong decision.

She removed the babies from the sling and the papoose and slipped them next to their sleeping brothers, then swaddled all of them in blankets. She didn’t dare to kiss them.

Each step hurt. The pain was intense, physical, like a gunshot to the stomach and she was sure she would bleed to death before she walked away. She found a nearby pay phone and called the hospital to tell them where to look.

The next morning she sat with last night's baby, flicking through the TV channels. Only when a regional news report announced the search for the mother of a set of abandoned octuplets did she allow herself to breathe. Only when the report concluded that all eight babies were safe did she allow herself to cry.

\*

Maybe it was normal. Maybe there were mothers like her all over the city, abandoning babies every night. It was the only reason she could think of for the lack of interest. The octuplets story vanished from the news and nobody ever mentioned the other babies that she abandoned, a new one every night. The babies just seemed to vanish into the same blackness they came from, swallowed up by the city.

She was clever, finding hospitals, police stations, orphanages, trying not to use the same place twice. Sometimes she'd see a happy family playing in the park and follow them home, then leave her baby on their doorstep. It never got any easier. She was always sure she would die before she got to the end of the street. She always sighed with relief when was home and heard the sound of crying from the cot.

A few months later she saw one of them. It was definitely him, although he had grown now and his red hair came out in uncontrollable curls. He was being held by a fat, middle-aged woman, a woman who looked like a real mother. She ran before they spotted her, clutching the most recent baby close to her.

She sat on a park bench near a church and tried to calm herself. She should be grateful, she told herself. Her baby would never grow up now, would be reborn each night, cleansed and uncorrupted. What mother wouldn't want that?

She was aging though. How old was she now? She couldn't remember, although she remembered her last birthday being her twenty-second. Surely she was much older than that now. Her date of birth would be in her passport, but she wasn't sure where it was any more.

When nobody was around, she left the baby on the bench and walked away, into the thickening mist.

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