



ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS EITHER EXEMPLIFY STRENGTH THEMSELVES, OR ENCOUNTER SOMEONE, SOMETHING, OR SOME PLACE THAT EXEMPLIFIES ANY KIND OF STRENGTH...

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## So Far, So Good, But...

The big changes discussed last issue seem to be working well. We've received positive feedback about the larger-resolution version of our website, the higher prize money got some attention, and we got more entries for Contest #12 than ever before.

In fact, I can't figure out why we don't receive even more entries. As of September 2010, according to Duotrope's database, 66% of all media that publish short stories (print and electronic) don't pay authors. The same research showed that 72% of electronic fiction magazines don't pay authors. And some of these are *really good magazines* that publish really good fiction. In the 2009 edition of Dzanc Books' *Best of the Web*, nearly all the stories in it came from magazines that don't pay. A couple of these were written by prize-winning authors like Roy Kesey and Stephen Dixon.

Why aren't these writers sending their fiction to the 28% of magazines that will pay them? (Well, sometimes they do.) The bigger question is, why aren't they (as far as we can tell) sending any fiction to OTP?

I'm considering an ad campaign saying "Hey, if you want to get absolutely no money for your stories, go right ahead, but OTP pays up to \$180 for short fiction. You might want to look into that."

What do you think... good idea or too adversarial?

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #12 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

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

#### Cartoons!

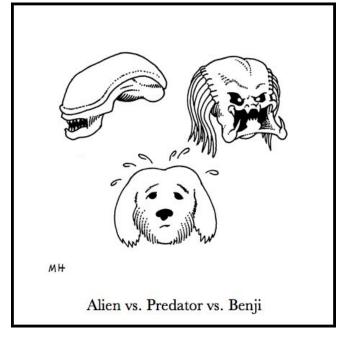
#### by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

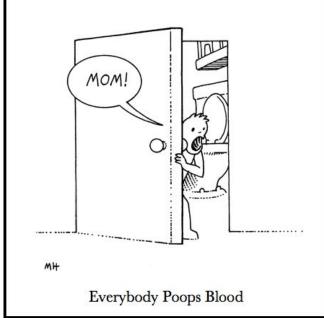
We've all received rejection letters, of course, and plenty of them. But my recent attempts at selling children's books and movie ideas have met levels of resistance usually seen only when repelling foreign invasions, or when women turn me down for a date.

Now maybe you're thinking I don't know anything about kids. Nonsense! I used to be one. And a friend of mine has *two* of them. So there!

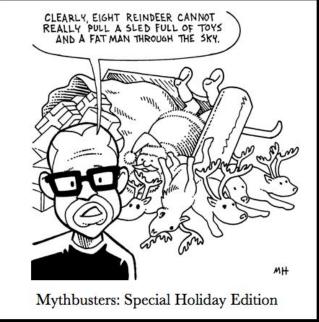
Anyway, since it doesn't look like these flashes of genius will be for sale any time soon, I had our staff cartoonist, Matt Howarth, draw up some "proof of concept" pictures. Here's his take on...

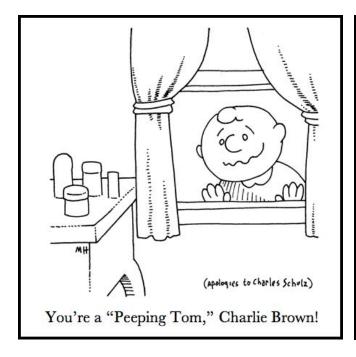
# Strongly Rejected Proposals for Books and Movies for Young Children













#### FIRST PRIZE

KJ Kabza's work has recently appeared in Beneath Ceaseless Skies and Bards and Sages Quarterly, with work upcoming in Daily Science Fiction and New Myths. His flash fiction has appeared in Flash Fiction Online, Every Day Fiction, Brain Harvest, and others, and he encourages you to visit www.kjkabza.com for links to these and more.

#### **Boulder Number III**

by KJ Kabza

When I awoke, I heard something moving.

At first I discounted it. Sometimes the rocks settle in the night. The arm of Eris is long, and can reach into even this private eternity, where she draws cracks through the stones at her fickle leisure. I have awoken before to see two smaller rocks where there once was one.

The sound kept going.

I sat up. I could not place the source; echoes leapt from wall to concave wall.

I stood and walked among the same-as-ever hills: six in a honeycomb pattern, with a seventh at the center. Each almost vertically steep. Each covered in dead earth, and thousands upon thousands of painful stones.

I circled the base of a hill. Nearby stood some of the 2,000 boulders, resting in the rocky valley where I had left them last. The hand of Eris never touched *those* stones.

I passed boulder number  $\Pi\Delta\Pi I$ , stepped over a sharp rock, and rounded the base of another hill, and there she was.

I watched her. She turned in a slow, bewildered circle, looking above her at the hills and looming wall that enclosed my world, or perhaps the white and sunless sky beyond. Her manner of dress was unfamiliar to me.

She noticed me and jumped.

She spoke in a language I did not know, then dropped her eyes to my nudity and trailed off in confusion. The clothes had moldered from my body over the countless years, but I had no reason to care.

I waited. She raised her eyes and tried to speak with me again, but I still could not understand her.

This hallucination was tame. "Boring," I said to myself, and walked away.

\*

Night came—the white sky turned black, and the place grew as dark as the heart of a burial mound. I lay on the painful ground in silence, waiting for sleep to take me, while I listened to her frightened sobs echo from the wall.

When I awoke, the sky was white again, and my hallucination had not left. She was standing atop the center hill and turning round again, trying in vain to see what was beyond the encircling barrier.

She noticed me and cupped her hands about her mouth. She shouted something.

I turned and walked someplace else.

\*

Perhaps a week later, as I sat on a numbered boulder, she came up right beside me and said something that sounded like a demand. I glanced at her and stood to move away as usual.

Her expression turned dark and menacing. She raised a hand, and in it, I saw a sharp rock.

I laughed.

She threw it and it struck me in the stomach.

I grunted in pain and surprise. She stamped her foot, and her shoe cracked on the ugly earth. I turned to move away again, more feebly this time, when she moved back into my field of vision. She struck her chest with a fist and spoke again. She repeated this.

Then she pointed at me.

I touched my stomach. I was bleeding. Madness can conjure many things and sustain them over many days, but not like this.

She took a step closer and touched her chest. "Eliza."

I cleared my throat. I had yearned for this, once, with what little I had, but I now felt ill-prepared. Uncertain, I set a filthy hand on my naked skin. "Sisyphus."

She nodded, gravely. Eliza bent over and picked up a rock. She held it out to me and tapped it inquisitively with a finger.

I stared at her.

She gestured with it, fiercely.

"What is it that you're trying to do?" I asked.

She roared in frustration. Chest strike: "Eliza!" Point: "Sisyphus!" Shake rock: glare at me.

I sighed. "Rock," I said.

"Rock," she repeated.

Satisfied, I turned to move away.

A barrage of painful stones rained about my calves. I jumped away, bewildered, while agile Eliza circled around me. She blocked my path. She held up a pebble, in demand.

I sagged.

"Pebble," I said.

"Pebble." She rolled it over in her hands, thoughtfully, then picked up another rock from the ground. "Rock. Sisyphus."

I grudgingly took a seat on boulder number XHHH $\Delta$ II and awaited another question.

\*

Eliza worked hard to unreel my language from my rusty tongue. Practicalities came first: dirt, hill, wall, sky, person. Man, woman. Parts of the body. Eliza was not shy about my nudity, and repeated the word "penis" with scholarly concentration.

After our short lesson, she went away from me, muttering words.

She was not gone for long. When she returned, she wanted to know the words for the parts and colors of her clothing.

This went in cycles: words, retreat; words, retreat. She was a fast study for a woman, though she overreached herself and forgot much. By nightfall, I had exposed her to hundreds of words, but when I pointed to things to test her she could only recall perhaps forty.

The cycles of lessons repeated, and soon grew more complex. We used pantomime for verbs, and we used a stone to draw pictograms in the dirt for the many objects we lacked here. I scratched out my alphabet and taught her to read and write.

I never tried to learn Eliza's language. Remembering my own words—*laughter, sun, house, family*—was painful enough.

\*

One day, as we each sat on a numbered boulder, Eliza asked me, "Are we dead?"

She asked this as if she already knew the answer, so I did not mind saying, "Yes."

She nodded. "How did you die?"

I tried to think of a way to answer her that would not invoke questions she could barely ask and prompt answers she could barely understand. "A man killed me."

She nodded. "A man killed me too."

I glanced at her. "Really."

"Yes. Why do you look alarmed?"

"Nevermind."

She looked down at her boulder (boulder number XII) and ran a finger over the edges of the X. "The man who killed me—his name was Zeus. I have a feeling. Did the same man kill us?"

I scrutinized her distracted expression. Something within me stirred—a tremor of the old cunning those monsters had all been so afraid of.

"Sisyphus? What is it?"

"Zeus is not a man. He is a god."

Eliza stopped tracing the numeral. "What is a god?"

"More than a man."

"Now you look ill."

"No. Nevermind." I stood from my boulder as if I had somewhere to go. "Eliza—it is difficult."

"I'm listening."

I watched her. She just sat and regarded me, her hands curled patiently in her lap. "Why did Zeus put you here?" I asked.

"Because..." Her brow knit. "Yes, it is difficult. Because I am..." She tapped her head.

I swallowed, then spoke in a knowing whisper. "Because you are too intelligent."

She nodded, guessing the meaning of the new word from the context alone. As would be expected. "Yes."

"I'm taking a walk," I said. I left her there so I could react to his sickening insecurity in peace.

\*

Another day, as we sat on the top of the tallest hill, Eliza asked me, "Why do the boulders have numbers?"

Her question startled me. We had been staring at the top of the encircling wall for twenty minutes in silence, each lost in our own longing for a face, almost any face, to peer over from the other side. "Pardon?"

"I said, why do the boulders have numbers?"

"I thought I already told you."

"If you had, why would I be asking?"

I looked away at a different part of the wall. "It's a long story."

"And I don't have the time?"

"You ask too many questions."

"I think it's important. Isn't it?"

I said, "It's part of my punishment."

Eliza listened.

I didn't look at her as I spoke. "I'm supposed to roll any numbered boulder up a steep hill. This is my punishment. From him."

"From the god who killed you? Zeus?"

How I hated that name. "Yes."

"And then?"

"I can be free if I get one to the top."

"Of any hill?"

"Yes. But before I can get to the top, the boulder always slips or I always drop it."

She nodded. Her eyes got that far-away look as her mind slipped beyond the great wall, or to some place within. Eliza looked like this often, usually before she asked a nosy question, and I had a feeling that I knew what was coming.

She asked, "What if you make a little hill out of the littler rocks, and roll a boulder to the top of that one? Does that count?"

I sighed. "No. I've tried it."

"What if you roll a normal blank rock to the top?"

"Tried it."

"What if you scratch a numeral into a blank rock first?"

"Tried that too. Eliza, I've tried everything. If what you've told me about the passage of time is true, I've had 3,000 years to think of different ways to do it and none of them have worked."

"Maybe you haven't found it yet."

I snorted. "I told you, he put me here for my intelligence. He was jealous of it. If I can't think of a way out, then there is none."

"Well-"

"No. He put me here so I would be frustrated. But I refuse to play his game. I quit trying long ago."

Eliza's far-away look returned to our hilltop with sharp and sudden focus. She searched my expression. "Oh?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy?"

"I-what?"

"Are you happy? Are you really beating him?"

"What are you asking me?"

Eliza stood and brushed the dirt from her odd garments. "Nevermind. Do you think that if I rolled a boulder to the top of a hill, I would be free too?"

"I suppose. I hear that people with similar punishments are put in similar places. But I've never had anyone in here with me before, so I don't know. And anyway, there's no way out—it's a trick."

Eliza began her climb down the steep hill, moving backwards on her hands and feet. "I'll see about that."

"You're wasting your time!" I called down to her, but she ignored me.

I snorted again. Let her feel frustrated. She'd figure it out for herself eventually, after growing weary of being made a fool of.

\*

At first I watched her. I took some pleasure in it. She could be a terribly uppity woman, and I figured that some years at the task would wear her down until she was ready to admit that I was right.

She began with the classic approach: roll up a boulder and trust that, this time, it won't slip. This occupied her for many, many weeks. Then she tried a systematic approach: try to roll each boulder up each hill, to see if, in one combination, there lay an exception.

"I've tried that," I told her, but she wouldn't listen.

She tried keeping track of where each boulder slipped on what hill, to see if there was a pattern anywhere. She tried positioning boulders partway up hills while rolling up others. She tried rolling up two at once, creeping up each one a few inches at a time, or three at once. She tried building a chain of them up the slope of each hill, hoping that the mass of the others behind the one at the top would stop the foremost boulder from rolling back. I'd tried all these things, and told her so, but she was too obstinate to do anything but see for herself.

I grew irritated with trying to dissuade her, and instead I watched her scratch her records all over the great wall in her unreadable language. When she grew tired, we spent our time as we always had, in instruction and talk.

Despite her mule-headedness, I grew to like having her around. I won't lie: the isolation had hurt me badly, and the monotony had hurt me worse. Her presence unthawed my soul. I began to be interested in her accounts of the world above, and in the wild and fantastic ways Man had changed while still remaining much the same.

I wouldn't call my emotion for her love, however. Death irons out all physical need, including desire. And anyhow, she was too much like a man.

\*

On the morning that Eliza tore a gash in her forearm, she tried the last solution.

I was idly stacking stones atop each other when I heard her cry out. I looked up, to the slope of one of the outer hills, to see a boulder caroming down a rocky path while Eliza stood near the top and clutched an arm to her chest. "What fool thing have you tried now?" I called out.

Eliza didn't answer me. She bent her head further into herself.

I stood and made my way over. I climbed up the hill, on my hands and feet near the top, sliding over scree and scraping my palms. "Are you alright?"

Eliza sat down, still clutching her arm, and started to cry.

I sat next to her in silence. I did not know whether to feel sympathetic or alarmed; Eliza rarely wept. "Let me see."

She curled it closer to herself. "As if you can do anything for it!"

"I'm sorry...I was just curious."

"That's all it is to you!" she cried. "A curiosity! Nothing I ever do matters to you—it's just some piece of entertainment for you to mock!"

"Not from now on," I said. "Didn't you say that you were trying the wedge technique with the last few boulders today? You're out of options. There's nothing else to try."

"To hell with your negativity," she said bitterly, as she squeezed her arm. Blood was soaking through the tatters of her odd upper garment. "And to hell with your superiority complex and arrogance. There's a way out of here. Somehow."

"Eliza," I said gently. "I don't say these things to be hateful. I say them in the spirit of truthfulness."

She spat on the ground by my feet.

I was too surprised to speak. She stood and stumbled down the hill.

I let her be for the rest of the day. I had needed time to come around when I had reached this stage, myself.

\*

The next morning, I awoke after Eliza as usual. I found her sitting atop the center hill, her favorite place. She was facing the tallest hill as if watching it.

I climbed up and joined her. "How's your arm?"

She rubbed the flawless skin. "It healed in the night. Like everything else does."

"I thought it would."

"Sisyphus, I've been thinking."

"That's good."

"About what I've been doing wrong with the boulders."

"Eliza—"

"Maybe you're right," she said, "and maybe you aren't. There's one last thing I can try. Though it should've been the first."

"Trust me, you've tried everything."

"I don't know. I think I might've been wrong about this, and in a fundamental way."

"Mmm."

Her face soured. "I know what that look means. Forget it—you're obviously not interested. Let's change the subject."

"Yes, let's. Tell me again about skyscrapers."

We had a short chat. Eliza then excused herself, and climbed down the hill to pace along the inside of the great wall. Over the years, she had worn a track into the earth doing this. I watched her, then grew weary of it, and took a nap.

\*

The next morning, I found her sitting atop the tallest hill, facing the wall. Her eyes ran over the stones, as if she were trying to make out writing that had faded with the eons.

I followed her gaze but saw nothing. Her lips moved slightly, as she half-spoke to herself.

Eliza sometimes did this when she thought hard. I let her continue at it for some minutes. When she refused to come out of her trance, I cleared my throat.

She turned to me and scowled. "What, Sisyphus?"

"Good morning."

"I was busy."

"I'm sorry. It looked to me like you were staring at the wall and talking to yourself."

"I would say I wasn't talking to myself," she said archly. "But since you claim to be the smartest man who ever lived, I guess you can't be wrong."

"There's no need to be rude. I didn't know I interrupted anything important. It's not as if you were actively rolling a boulder up a hill."

Eliza rolled her eyes. "Can't we talk about something else?"

"Certainly. Could you tell me more about television?"

\*

I found Eliza in the same place on the following morning, sitting on the top of the tallest hill and facing the wall. This time, she was looking upward at the high edge

of the wall itself, her lips moving in soundless concentration, as if whispering to an invisible spirit.

I saw nothing.

I sat and waited, determined this time to catch her in a pleasant mood. The minutes stretched on. I let them. I've had much practice at waiting.

Eliza ignored me. I leaned back on my hands; refolded my legs; stacked some stones atop each other. I whistled very softly, old songs that I could never forget, and new songs that she had taught me at my request. I tossed pebbles down the steep slope, seeing how far I could get them to roll.

Eliza stared at the edge of the wall with her whole being.

I yawned.

Her lips started moving again.

"Eliza," I whispered.

She ignored me. A line of concentration formed between her brows.

"Eliza?" I whispered, a little more loudly. "Eliza—can't you take a break?"

She finally lowered her head and turned to glare at me.

"Good morning," I said. "How are you?"

"Fine," she said flatly, and stared up at the edge of the wall once more.

"Eliza, honestly. This has got to stop."

"I'm not done yet."

"Doing what?"

"Being sorry."

"Feeling sorry for yourself won't get you anywhere."

"I didn't say feeling sorry," she said darkly. "I said 'being sorry.'"

"Don't be ridiculous. You have nothing to be sorry about."

She looked at me strangely. "Maybe I do. Maybe I've unintentionally offended someone."

"What, all that?" I gestured at her years of writing that sprawled across the enclosure. "I never really expected you to find a way out. So you haven't disappointed me. Please, don't worry about it."

Her look took on a shade of incredulity. "You really think everything is about you, don't you?"

"Eliza, this is my own personal torment. Everything is about me."

Eliza snatched up a rock and threw it down the hillside. Its clatter punctuated her outburst. "You are an arrogant, pig-headed idiot. Can't you see? Maybe this whole thing isn't about cunning. Maybe this is simply about hurting someone's feelings and having enough humility to say you're sorry."

"I already told you, you have nothing to be sorry about, and my feelings aren't hurt." I spoke more gently. "Eliza, please. Don't torture yourself on my account. Torturing yourself is exactly what he wants you to do. Haven't you learned the lesson by now?"

"Ha!" Eliza laughed at the sky, in a short, ugly bark. "Haven't you?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to explain! He put me here because he was jealous of my mind! If a man with cunning to rival the gods' can't figure a way out, then there *is* no way out. That's the lesson: cunning can't solve everything."

Eliza shook her head. "No, Sisyphus."

"Yes, Eliza."

She scowled and turned back to the wall. "I probably have to push up a boulder while feeling it," she said to herself. "I guess it wouldn't matter which one."

"Eliza-"

She shook her head again, fiercely, as if trying to block me out.

"Please. I hate to see you getting so worked up over nothing. Let's climb down from here, alright? I'd like to play some checkers on that board we made."

Eliza finally looked at me and sighed.

"Okay, Sisyphus," she said. "You know, I feel sorry for you."

"Don't be," I said, as I extended a hand to help her up. "I've got the solution, and I've accepted it. I'm content."

\*

The next morning, I awoke to the pain of the rocks and the whiteness of the unchanging sky as always. I pulled myself up from the hard ground, then wound my way through the valleys and numbered boulders.

When I came within sight of the tallest hill, I looked up for Eliza, but did not see her sitting on the crown.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Eliza!"

No response except echoes.

I finished my walk to the tallest hill and climbed. I pulled myself up to the crown, over the last of the jagged rocks, then stood and surveyed the eternal hills.

I didn't see her on any of the hilltops, though from where I was I couldn't see all of the enclosure. She'd be on the other side of one of the hills, then, muttering and scratching in the dirt.

Once again, I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted her name. "Eliza!" Echoes, then silence.

I climbed back down and walked the valleys to the other side. Once there I climbed the far hill, and surveyed the place from its barren crown.

Nothing moved.

I stood still and listened. Sound carries eerily well within those walls, and if she were banging around somewhere, I'd hear her.

Nothing.

I began to grow annoyed. I climbed down and wove among the hills, checking all sides and slopes. "Eliza! Are you still upset with me?" I walked along the path she had worn next to the wall, looking inward to the central hill. "Whatever the reason, stop hiding. That won't accomplish anything."

I made it halfway around, back to the base of the tallest hill, when I noticed something enormous etched deep into the stones of the enclosure.

Unlike all else, it was written in Greek.

THAT'S THE LESSON: CUNNING CAN'T SOLVE EVERYTHING.

It was in her handwriting. I glared at it. "Eliza, this is not amusing! Stop pouting and come out!"

I trotted along the wall, looking inward for a sign, a sound, a scrap of her disintegrating clothing. Nothing.

I ascended the center hill and shouted my lungs out. I shred my voice into tatters, calling, demanding, almost pleading. I heard nothing but my missives bounced back to me by the impenetrable, encircling stones.

When my voice gave out I sat and rested.

When my voice came back, I climbed down and searched the place again.

Empty.

I ascended the hill and repeated the whole thing. And I did this until nightfall.

I slept on the crown of the hill that night, listening to the total blackness, for any sound at all—even the stones settling. But this night even Echo left me.

The next morning, I descended, and put my hands on a numbered boulder.

I rolled it along the rocky ground to the wall, and left it there with its numeral face-up: X $\Pi$ HHH $\Pi\Delta\Delta\Delta\Delta\Delta$ I. When I looked up, I noticed that I had placed it directly beneath her mocking quotation.

I found a nearby boulder and rolled that one against the wall as well.

I did this every day, for perhaps two years, until all the valleys were cleared and his hideous game pieces lined the barrier. Then I took another two or three years to rearrange them, until I had them all close to each other and lined up in a loosely linear order. Just as I had, immeasurable eons ago, when I had first begun.

When I was done, I looked up at the walls, at all her foreign calculations and notes. The mystery was locked in a tongue I could not understand.

But that's fine. I am the smartest man to ever walk the earth or beyond, and if a mere woman who accidentally stumbled upon the solution—and dared to flaunt her lucky victory by throwing my words back in my face—could make it out, then so could I.

So I began all over again.

And as I cut my hands and feet, bruised my bones, and felt the old lonely madness squeeze out the tears from my eyes and the vitality from my soul, I remembered how in the early days, he himself would prop his folded arms on the wall, and look down and ask, "Have you realized anything today?"

It took me decades to notice that boulder number III was missing.

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#### SECOND PRIZE

Dawn Rae, a part-time Church secretary, has always been an avid reader and has written many poems and short stories. In 2007 she self-published a children's book, *Rory's New Coat*. She admits to being addicted to the international writing event NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) (www.nanowrimo.org) through which she has written 2 novels, unpublished as yet. Dawn enjoys crosswords, sudoku, jigsaws and oil painting, but she avoids domestic stuff like cooking and doing dishes!

This story represents Dawn's first official fiction sale.

#### Blind Faith

by Dawn Melodie Rae

Mavis Swanepoel lay in the dark of the South African night, listening.

Yes, there it was again, that scratchy little noise that didn't belong in her house. It was coming from the kitchen. She pictured the kitchen in her mind, moving around it until she located the source of the sound. It was the back door. Someone was jimmying the lock.

She quietly climbed out of bed and reached for her old flannel gown. Ignoring the fluffy slippers, she moved barefoot to the old wardrobe. The shotgun was on top, and Mavis realized she wouldn't be able to reach it. Mindful of her sensitive back, she moved toward the dressing table, picked up the stool and, thankful that she knew every inch of the house by heart, turned again to the wardrobe. Silently she took the old shotgun down. Then, she stopped again to listen.

The kitchen door squeaked as it opened, and she knew that they were inside. She heard the old strip wood floor groan, but only once. So there was only one in the

house, at least. Goodness knew how many might be waiting outside. Silently thanking Paul for always keeping the old shotgun spotless, she opened the chamber, and carrying the gun like that in the crook of one arm, she started toward the door. The gun was heavy, and her shoulder would probably ache like blazes tomorrow, but she needed the other hand free—just in case.

Mavis came into the passage and stopped. Her bare feet made no sound on the worn carpet. She took the six steps that would put her just outside the kitchen, then stopped again. That was the latch on the fridge door—an insignificant sound, but she knew it well. So, he was at the other end of the kitchen. Time to go in.

She hugged the wall as she stepped into the kitchen, and closed the chamber of the shotgun. The noise was deafening in the silence, almost drowning the sudden intake of breath from the other end.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mavis growled in her most threatening voice. "Get away from the fridge—move to the table right now." She followed his clumsy movements with the end of the gun. "Now sit."

Once he was settled in the chair, and with the end of the gun still trained on him, she moved across to the door, closed it and slipped the bolt that she had neglected earlier. That should keep any others outside—at least for a while.

"Now, speak," she commanded. She could smell the fear coming off him. "What do you want?"

"Please, nKosikazi, please don't shoot! It's only food, nKosikazi, I only want food—please."

Mavis was stunned. He couldn't have been more than her little granddaughter's age—twelve or thirteen. She had known that he was black and slightly built—he hardly made any noise crossing the floor—but she hadn't expected a child. At least his parents had taught him respect for his elders. These days many children on the farm refused to use the courteous "nKosikazi" when she passed them on the dusty roads.

"What's your name? Where are you from?" she barked, and had some satisfaction in the way the chair creaked when he cringed.

"No, nKosikazi, I can't tell you... they'll kill me if I do!"

"Who will?" She felt a shiver of fear down her spine. How many were there? There wasn't a sound from outside, but they could be further away, just watching and waiting. She pushed the fear aside. She stabbed the air with the gun and the chair scraped back. "Who?"

"The others, nKosikazi, the *skebengers* who steal from us. They come in the night to the village and take the food—all the chickens are gone, and the mealies, and they laugh when we say we will bring the Police. They say they will kill us first. Please, nKosikazi..."

"So, you're hungry, you say..."

"Yes, nKosikazi, and also my family. My mother is working in the city and my gogo, my grandmother, is trying to keep us, but the baby is always crying and my sister, too. There is no food."

"So why did you choose me to steal from, hey?" Mavis struggled to keep her voice stern. It wouldn't do to show any weakness.

"nKosikazi, because they say you have a room where there is always food, as if by magic it is always full, and they say you are only one and you are old. Aiyee, they didn't say you had a big gun!"

"Yes," Mavis added, "And they didn't say I had a big dog with jaws like a lion and feet swift as a cheetah, did they?"

"nKosikazi," came the uncertain reply, "there is no dog here. I know there is no dog..."

"Well, there will be tomorrow, you can tell them that."

"Yes, nKosikazi, yes, I will tell them." Silence. Hesitantly, tearfully, "Will nKosikazi please let me go?"

"You sit there till I'm finished with you. You said you were hungry."

Keeping the gun pointed at the boy, Mavis moved around until her back was against the fridge. With her empty hand she opened it and reached backwards to take out the leftover stew from supper. She put it onto the table and slid it across to him. Fetching a spoon from the drainer, she slid that across too and said, "Now eat."

Mavis didn't know about the room that "by magic was always full" but it seemed by magic the plastic dish was emptied. In no time the spoon was scraping the bottom and being sucked clean.

"Thank you, nKosikazi," said the small voice.

"Now, your gogo—she is a good woman?"

"Aiyee, yebo, nKosikazi. If she knows I am here she will beat me all the way to the church for confession. Please, nKosikazi..." The fear in the voice touched Mavis. She had grown up on bushveld farms, and she had seen the wrath of a good black woman when a child erred.

"She is how old, your gogo? Can she clean house?"

"She is not so old, nKosikazi, she can clean very nicely—but there is the baby and my sister."

"Right. Well, for tonight you will take bread and mealie meal for them to eat, and tomorrow you will bring your gogo and the baby and the sister and you will come here. If you don't come I will find you—me and my big dog. Understand?"

"Yebo, nKosikazi," the voice hopeful, bordering on excited. "I will be here, nKosikazi, I promise."

"Yes. Well. Go now to that cupboard," she waved with the gun barrel, "and take one—just one—bag of mealie meal, and that bread over there," she waved again. "And go quickly, before I change my mind."

There was a scurry of cautious movement, the mealie meal and bread were tucked under arm and the boy was at the back door. Then he turned. "Thank you, nKosikazi," he whispered, "God bless you."

As the door closed Mavis was there to slip the bolt. Trembling, she made her way throughout the house, checking every window and door. That done, she collapsed into an armchair and wept with relief. When Paul had died, their son had wanted her to move into the city, to be safer and closer to the family. She'd considered it, but in the end she couldn't leave the farm. This had been her home through thirty-five years of marriage; she was comfortable here.

Tomorrow, she would speak to the sergeant at the Police Station—he must do something about the thieves stealing food from the tribal village. And, of course, now she would have to get a dog—a big one! But if the child turned up tomorrow (and she knew it was an if) and if she liked him and his family in daylight—well, it would be nice to have help with the cleaning, and she fancied the idea of having children around again.

Meanwhile, she wouldn't sleep again tonight, so she might as well make a cup of tea. First, she'd better put the shotgun away. As she moved through the dark house again, she thought of Paul and his loving care for the old shotgun.

She had been blind long before he died, and she fondly remembered the sounds and smells of the weekly cleaning ritual and the running commentary that accompanied it. Paul always talked her through the process, and insisted from time to time that she actually do it.

So often he had emphasized the importance of keeping both the shotgun and the ammunition out of the reach of the grandchildren. As Mavis reached up to put the gun back on top of the wardrobe, she wished, not for the first time, that she had asked him exactly where he had kept the ammunition.

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### THIRD PRIZE

Manuel Royal has returned to the Commonwealth of Letters after a refreshing quarter-century vacation. This is his first publication at *On The Premises*. He's previously appeared in the online magazine *The Clockwise Cat* and various other spots on the Internet (feel free to Google), as well as a print anthology for charity. (*The Winter of Our Mixed Content*; the story was "Freddy's Letter.")

#### Chamomile's Cake

by Manuel Royal

Mealticket was showing the picture of me in the teacup. Hilarious. It was Bridge Night, with all her fat lady friends. Their snorting, coughing laughter hurt my ears, and I wanted to tell all those perfume-drenched women, "Stop laughing! I was a puppy! You're fat."

"Teacup Chihuahua" isn't a real breed, it's just a made-up thing. I'm a registered smooth-coat.

I grew up, and I fill a big soup mug now. But they love the teacup picture, and they think it's funny Mealticket named me Chamomile. My real name is a short harmonic series that goes above the hearing range of you half-deaf humans.

So, it was my birthday today. I'm supposed to be goddamn happy about that. More days behind me than in front of me. Ten years. No, it's not "70 in dog years." There aren't any dog years. I get the same years as you people do, just not so many. Ten is old for a Chihuahua. So what?

I knew Mealticket was planning a party. Partly because she loves parties, but also because she chattered about it while she was giving me a bath, and besides, she and Vicente had talked about it when they went in the bedroom.

I even knew there'd be a cake. She'd said the word "cake" fifteen times. I didn't salivate once. I'm not a puppy anymore, I don't need a bunch of sugar to keep from going into hypoglycemic shock. Jesus, woman.

I grumbled up at Mealticket, who laughed and held me up so she could blow on my tummy. "Grumble, grumble, Chamomile! Oh, you're so angry, Chamomile! Oh, my little strongman, *mi palomito*!" (Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with her? But I like her laugh; it's soft and low. And she never forgets to put in my eye drops.)

You've got to remember where your food comes from. So I crooned for her, whimpered and wiggled, and let her treat me like an infant. No one can say I don't give her what she needs.

No one except Vicente. I didn't like him. He used to say, "*Chingada*, that's not a dog, it's a rat! My dick is bigger than that thing. You need a man in the house, not a rat-dog." Vicente was skinny as a stick himself.

He first walked in a month ago. That was a few weeks after we lost Papito.

He was a red-shouldered macaw that used to live with us. Lively, playful, described himself as a pretty bird about eighty times a day. Affectionate in his way—but he practically split my skull open with his tinsnip beak while I was napping on my hypoallergenic pillow. Macaws are supposed to be smart, but this one mistook my head for a walnut.

Two stitches at the vet, an itchy scar and that stupid cone on my head for a week—no big deal. But then he took a piece out of my ear; hell of a way to wake up. I don't mind a little rough-house, but he had no restraint and I had to do something.

Papito loved his pumpkin seeds, and couldn't resist a large mound of them on the sofa. Then Mealticket's big knit cushion with the crocheted image of Yosemite Falls fell on him, and I took a three-hour nap on top of it.

Mealticket found him on her bed, peacefully expired.

I liked Papito, I really did. Bird might have lived to be 30. But Papito wouldn't learn, so Papito went down for the dirt nap.

Birds have two legs, like humans. They bear watching. Of course it's not as simple as "Four legs good, two legs bad." Once a Labrador tried to eat me: four legs and no brain. And some bipeds are okay.

Like Angel. Bass player, apprentice carpenter. Liked to smoke his weed, but he made Mealticket happy, and he always carried snacks. He went all over her big house, replacing the old wainscoting.

You think you know your house? Describe it from the floor to six inches up. That wainscoting was in bad shape, especially where I pulled a piece out once because I heard a rat.

I tagged along to watch, and Angel talked to me while he worked. He just called me Dog; that's fine. After we took care of the wainscoting, he even built the shelf over the Jacuzzi and a set of little steps so I could get up on it.

But the good ones don't stick around. Angel took off on the road with a fusion band called Plato Caliente; never came back.

Mealticket gets lonely. She misses her dead husband. I never knew him, but I can smell him. He kept his cigars in a fancy wooden box. The cigars are gone, but the box smells good and I like to get in it. Mealticket says that when Death comes and gets me, she'll put me in that box with one of her silk powder puffs to pillow my head.

Anyway, couple months after Angel, here came Vicente. Mealticket came home from the market, and he was right behind her, carrying her bags, walking in like he lived there. Young, smooth-looking. She likes them young. They like the way she spends money, and the well-furnished house her husband left her.

They came bustling in, yackety yack, Mealticket leading him to the kitchen, walking right past me. No belly-rub. Her eyes were shining, her face rosy under the powder, like always at the beginning of one of her flings.

She'd be ignoring me for a while, I knew. I might as well be the toy bobble-head dog that sits in the back window of the car. (His head doesn't bobble anymore. I keep it under the loveseat.)

I followed them to listen. From the conversation I learned that he had simply walked up to her at the market and smooth-talked his way into her car and now her home. The woman cannot resist male attention.

Right off, Vicente didn't smell right. For one thing, there was weed on his hands but not on his breath. To me that said "dealer."

In five minutes she was giving him a tour of the house, showing him this vase from her great-grandmother, that lamp from her father's side.

She asked him about where his "people" came from and without hesitation he started spinning stories of great-grandfathers. She likes it if they know who their ancestors in Europe were. Some of the boyfriends, she knew more about their breeding than about mine.

I don't know why she doesn't just date Anglos, because she likes the most European-looking Latino men she can find. Hell, Angel was blond.

Vicente probably made up the ancestors. He was a liar.

He kept up his flirty chatter with Mealticket, smiling, talking loudly because she's hard of hearing (even for a human). But his eyes swept each room as he talked, resting for a second on every little delicate polished item in its display case or nook. I think he was figuring dollar amounts in his head.

Then Mealticket showed him the paintings in the parlor, and his smile took on a predatory slant. Trust me.

Mealticket doesn't know anything about art, but Vicente did. Or at least he knew when something was worth money. (I like the pictures. There are interesting smells in the old paints and the varnished frames.)

Vicente took a good hard look at all the paintings, but when Mealticket held up the smallest one, sweat broke out under his arms.

It was just a little picture of a woman taking a bath, in a teak frame. She held it up to the light. "Look how tiny the brushstrokes are!" she said. "And you can't even see the grain of the canvas."

He murmured, "That's because it's vellum." She didn't hear him. When she set the picture back down, he let out the breath he'd been holding.

That evening, Vicente charmed her further by cooking dinner. (I have to admit he cooked a good dinner—but he wouldn't let me eat in my special chair at the table, so fuck him.)

Then they spent time on the sofa and then both got in the Jacuzzi. I got up on the shelf to continue taking stock of Vicente. I didn't see anything to change my opinion. Mealticket seemed to like him just fine, though.

He spoke into her ear: "Hey, *mi amor*, does the mutt have to be in here? I don't like the way he looks at me."

She laughed. "Here, watch him do his trick. Chamomile! Chamomile! *Musica*!" I can't pretend the name has no effect on me. Anybody can be conditioned. Ears up, tail switching. *Fine*, *I'll do the trick*.

I stepped over to the CD player that was Velcroed to the shelf, and flipped its big front switch with my paw. The red light came on and Mealticket's favorite Frank Sinatra CD started up. She'd actually bought that model of stereo in the hopes of teaching me the trick. (Also it was loud enough for her to hear over the Jacuzzi.)

Vicente wasn't impressed. "That's no trick."

For the first time, we locked eyes. He looked away and said, "That damn dog has to go! He looks at me with my grandmother's eyes!"

Mealticket stroked his face. "Ah, maybe your abuelita has come back to us!"

Vicente snorted. "I hope not! We called her Buela. Hey, I don't like that dog looking at me naked."

She laughed, but shooed me away and I was locked out at bath time after that.

It was the start of a month of vigilance for me. I kept an eye on Vicente. Every time he walked in, his eyes would drift toward the parlor; every chance he got he would look at the paintings.

And my evenings with Mealticket were shot. I used to get an hour a night of just being petted in her lap. Vicente acted like he owned her lap.

It must have been a frustrating time for him. Mealticket had one ironclad rule, probably the only thing that had kept her from being ripped off by any of her previous boyfriends: they never spent the night, and never stayed in the house without her. She was generous with her body and her money, but guarded her house like a virgin daughter. I think she felt it still belonged to her husband.

Vicente was over almost every day, though, usually right at five in the evening, pulling up in the convertible she'd "loaned" him. (More than one of her boyfriends took a car with him when it ended.) He would stroll in with a smile and a single rose, and she would ignore me for the rest of the evening.

After they spent a whole day shopping, he started showing up in a silk or white linen suit instead of scruffy jeans and vaquero boots. He always had a story about his day, but he was a liar, so they were probably lies. Somehow the stories always ended with him needing a small loan, which she handed over with no questions.

Then dinner, then he'd try to hump her into a coma. But she would always rouse herself enough to see him out. He did take advantage of any five-minute period when she was in the bathroom, though; during that month he studied each painting intently with a lens, checking details against a paper he pulled from his pocket.

He kept coming back to the miniature. Every time he rechecked it, he would shake his head and mutter, "Stupid woman's got no idea. Worth the whole house."

God knows what Mealticket saw in him besides a pretty face, but within the month, he'd gotten deeper into her life than any previous boyfriend. That became clear when they started talking about my party.

Every year, my birthday party had been with Mealticket and her Bridge Night friends along with the current boyfriend. I'd wear the stupid hat, they'd pass me around for cuddling, and I'd play my part, crooning and licking the ladies' powdered faces. There'd be wine and music, and Mealticket would be happy in the middle of it.

My birthday with Angel, he danced with all the ladies, holding me in the crook of his arm. It was nice.

But this time it was to be just the three of us; that was how Vicente wanted it. For the first time, there were raised voices. She was close to tears, but Vicente got his way.

He said he had a special day planned. "And a special night, *Amante*," he said. Mealticket's face, flushed from holding back tears, brightened a little. What I saw there was fear of being left yet again. She wears her heart on her sleeve, as they say. Vicente didn't wear his heart anywhere, if you ask me.

So I knew there'd be a cake. Vicente said he knew a special bakery for dogs. "Leave it to me, *Mamacita*." (She likes being called that. She should have been a mother. But she has me, so she's okay.)

Vicente joked about getting "a little Pomeranian *puta*" to jump out of the cake and surprise me. (What surprise? Did he think I wouldn't scent a Pomeranian bitch inside a cake?) Then he bent down and looked at me and said, "You wouldn't know what to do with her, would you, Little Man?"

*Fuck your mother, Pendejo.* I tried to communicate that sentiment with my eyes. He turned away first. *That's right*.

When I was three or four, Mealticket's then-boyfriend Rolando used to arrange stud visits for me through his pet store. He called me the Little Brown Love Machine. He even got me a sweater that said *Love Machine* in glitter.

Rolando was okay. Also one of the few former boyfriends who kept in touch.

On his way out that night, Vicente stopped to wink at me as I glared at him from my pillow. He whispered, "You, Little Man. You're the Achilles heel."

I didn't know what that meant. But the sooner Vicente took a hike like his predecessors, the better.

I could give a shit about my birthday, but it's a big deal for Mealticket, start to finish.

When I got up, she gave me steak, chopped up small, in a fancy glass bowl with my supplements mixed in. Can't complain about that. She put down about a pound of sirloin. That's half my body weight, but fuck it, I dove in there and did my best.

Totally worth the diarrhea. That's why we have a little door just for me.

I was outside eating bugs when Vicente showed up, driving a plain van instead of the convertible. He put it in the garage instead of parking in the driveway like he usually did.

Early afternoon was time for the party. This time it was a little cowboy hat she put on me instead of the usual cone. She had the round mahogany table covered with a lace cloth, and Vicente had come through with the cake. Ten candles. He turned and smiled at Mealticket, and said, "Let's go ahead and serve my little friend, I hear his tummy growling."

I'd just come in from squeezing out my bowels, so I was feeling a little empty. But Mealticket said, "Presents first, always!" She doesn't have a lot of rules, but she's firm about traditions. Like the special stew she always makes; I could smell the beef and peppers cooking in the pot.

There was a courier envelope with a ribbon around it. She made a big deal of opening it, and read me the card inside. Apparently I was supposed to have a

"dog-gone good birthday." It showed dogs playing cards, which makes no sense. But I liked it, because it was from Angel. I barked when she read the name; she laughed. "He remembers!"

Vicente's smile didn't waver. He was probably a good poker player. Dogs don't play poker. (I still don't get that.)

There was a CD with the card. When she saw it her face lit up. "Plato Caliente! It's their first album." She showed me the disc: the label made it look like a little hot plate of carne asada. Now my stomach really was growling.

She handed the CD to Vicente, and said "Baby, go put this in the stereo in the bathroom, okay?"

He squeezed her ass, which made her blush. "I'll do more than that, I'll get the Jacuzzi going. For later." When he turned away, his smile vanished and showed something hard and cold. My hackles went up. (You bipeds don't have hackles. I have hackles.)

Hey! Somebody was coming up the walk. I knew those footsteps—Rolando! I ran to the door and barked, and then the doorchime rang; Mealticket smiled at me and said, "Who is it? Who is it, Chamomile?" I was up on my hind feet and dancing around when she opened the door.

Rolando didn't come empty-handed: he was holding a big thing covered with a cloth. I could smell what was under the cloth. Another bird had come into our home.

Mealticket hugged him, kissed him on the cheek. Behind us I heard Vicente coming back down the stairs; his steps paused before the bottom. I looked back at him and caught him glaring flatly at the two of them before they both looked up. Then the smooth white-toothed smile was back.

He already didn't like the reminder of Angel; now Rolando was in the house. Vicente was peeved, and I was liking it.

Vicente made a show of shaking the other man's hand and acting like an instant best friend. When Rolando and Mealticket headed for the birthday table, Vicente glared down at me. He whispered, "This changes nothing!" He held my stare for a few seconds. "You never even growl. *Chingada*, mutt, just growl!"

I don't growl. A growl is a warning, which strikes me as indecisive.

The new bird was a budgie. Gray on the back, with a gray head shading to a gray chest. He already had a name, Cicero, and—this really was a surprise—Rolando had taught him to say "Chamomile!" Over and over. Just kept doing it.

Mealticket doesn't believe in keeping birds caged up. (Too bad for Papito.) She coaxed Cicero onto her finger and let him nuzzle her face.

With Cicero on his perch stand, Mealticket took Rolando in the kitchen to taste the stew, leaving Vicente glowering at their backs. He turned and looked intently—at the cake. Then at me. I gave his stare back just as hard. *You don't like that? Good.* 

He looked at the cake again, suddenly picked up the knife and cut a slice, put it on a paper plate and set it down in front of me. He spoke through his teeth: "You eat up, Little Man. Eat your cake, right?" Without looking at me, he turned and stamped into the kitchen.

"Chamomile! Chamomile!" Cicero certainly had my name down. I ignored him and gave the cake a sniff. Seemed harmless enough. Wheat flour, peanut butter, honey, bananas, cinnamon. And I really was hungry.

Cicero suddenly fluttered off his perch and onto the table. What the hell, if he could eat on the table, so could I. I got onto the chair, then up onto the table. Cicero was already head-deep into the cake, pulling the crunchy bits out of the chunky peanut butter. I came closer for a taste. Cicero turned and rubbed his beak against my head.

Hmm. Much smaller than a macaw's beak; not a scratch. Cicero might die of old age. "Chamomile! Chamomile!" I was starting to like this bird.

Then Cicero froze, wobbled and fell over.

I don't believe in coincidences. Vicente knew what a good eater I am; Mealticket was always praising me for cleaning my bowl. He put something in that cake. If it dropped a one-ounce bird with one bite, my normal gut-stuffing feed would surely take care of a two-pound dog.

I poked Cicero with my snout; no response. *Goddamn Vicente*. He hadn't counted on Rolando bringing the bird into the house. Rolando! He'd know if Cicero was poisoned.

I began barking furiously. A Chihuahua can make plenty of noise when he wants to. Vicente was first out the kitchen door—he came to a halt when he saw me still on my feet and Cicero fallen. He looked at the plate on the floor with its untouched slice. Rolando came out behind Vicente and darted around him.

"Cicero?" Rolando picked up the limp bird.

By now Mealticket was at the kitchen door, her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. "My God, why can't I keep a bird alive?"

"It's not your fault." Rolando was holding Cicero to his ear. "He's still alive. I don't know, it's like poison. What did he—" He saw the gouge in the cake. Rolando stared at Vicente. "Hey, what's the story with this cake, *amigo*?"

Vicente thought fast, I'll give him that. "I don't know, my sister-in-law got it for me! Oh, no, Chamomile—I saw him eat it too!" Which was a lie. Mealticket gave a little gasping cry.

Rolando made up his mind. "We take them both to my vet. He'll know what to do."

In a minute we were all in Mealticket's big car, Cicero and I together in the padded basket next to Vicente in the back. Then Vicente jumped out. "The stew! You take the animals, I'll turn off the stove!" His timing was perfect; with Rolando's foot already touching the gas pedal and Mealticket close to panic, they didn't wait to argue, but pulled out of the driveway.

I jumped up in the back, next to the headless bobble-head dog, and looked back. I saw Vicente smile before he turned and disappeared back toward the house.

This was what he wanted. My whole birthday party was a setup. But Vicente must know I hadn't eaten the cake. If he wanted me dead—no! What he wanted was for everybody to leave. He had the house to himself now! Mealticket had broken her own rule.

*Motherfucker*. I turned and looked to the front. We'd come to a stop at a red light. I had to get out. The windows? Rolled up.

One must use the resources available. My gigantic gut-bomb of raw beef that morning was still having an effect. I'd never once shit where I wasn't supposed to, not since I was that puppy in the teacup. But we do what is necessary. I squatted and let it go on the soft leather back seat.

"Ai!" She turned to look. "Oh, no, Chamomile! He must be sick, Rolando, he never does that!" Rolando didn't answer; holding his breath, he pushed the buttons to lower all the windows.

Good luck and good timing. The windows came down, the light turned green, Rolando pressed the gas and Mealticket turned to face front again—and I was out the window, onto the grass between the curb and sidewalk, and then speeding back home. I heard the car receding behind me; they weren't stopping.

Good. I must do this thing alone.

I got back to the house and stopped to catch my breath. Years since I ran that far. I was starting to tremble—hypoglycemia. *Fuck it*. In through my little door.

The door through the kitchen to the garage was open. Where was Vicente? The parlor!

From under a chair I watched Vicente taking down a painting from the wall. He slid it into a big metal case on a dolly. The case had slots to hold the paintings separately; several were already full, and the wall was looking bare.

Then he held up the miniature painting that fascinated him so much. There was a small metal box on the table, already open and ready for it. He stopped to stare at the picture for a moment, holding his breath as he held it close to his face.

I've always had a temper. Now I was shaking with anger as well as low blood sugar. *This is our house. You don't come in here!* 

I charged ahead through a red haze, and I was across the room and all over Vicente's ankle, gnawing at his Achilles tendon. "Jesus Christ!" He dropped the miniature painting. "Fuck!"

He tried to shake me off, but I was climbing his skinny calf like a tree inside the leg of his loose, expensive linen suit. He tried to kick at his own leg as I made it up to his knee and sank my teeth into the soft flesh at the back. He overbalanced and went down, yelling and cursing.

My world went dark: he was rolling over to try and crush me under his weight. Suddenly I missed Papito. *Sorry, bird*.

No! I wouldn't go down like this. I closed my eyes tight and scrambled around to the front of Vicente's thigh, and kept scrambling, digging in with my claws. Something struck my hindquarters: a fist. It struck again, but I kept clawing at his flesh until I'd pushed myself head first into the crotch of his pants.

No shorts; classy. *Oh, Vicente. You lied about that dick.* With a clear target in front of me, I didn't hold back.

Now his yelling turned to screaming, high like a six-year-old girl. With bloody testes in my teeth and my heart pounding fast in my ears, I thought, *this is it*. I kept biting, waiting for what was to come, enjoying Vicente's little-girl shrieks, when suddenly there was light and air. He'd somehow kept it together enough to unzip his fly.

Maybe it was adrenaline, or hypoglycemia. I knew a moment of great clarity. I knew what to do.

Now! I leapt out of his pants even as he clawed at his own bloody crotch, trying to grab me. In front of me—the miniature! I picked it up, clamping down on the wooden frame. I'd left a tooth in Vicente's balls.

I looked back. He was sitting up now, his hands cradling his shredded wreck of a nutsack, his teeth clenched and eyes squeezed shut. He opened an eye and saw what I was holding. "No!"

I was off, heading for the stairs. Something not right with my leg. Behind me I heard Vicente, moving as fast as he could while vomiting on himself. Neither of us was in great shape. Every stair step felt like a mountain.

He crawled behind me, trailing blood, and made it to the second floor as I limped into the main bathroom. Good: Vicente really had started the Jacuzzi. Up the steps—thanks, Angel. Up onto the shelf. There.

Now I didn't want to wait. Shaking hard, exhausted. I set the miniature down on the shelf and barked, calling my enemy to me, stopping between barks to pant.

Finally Vicente was there. He pushed himself up, leaning against the doorframe, holding his crotch. Blood soaking his nice pants, dripping on the floor. Tears, snot, and vomit smearing his pretty face.

He spotted me, saw me holding the miniature. Saw me lean out and drop it into the Jacuzzi.

"No!" He lurched forward, stumbled on the fuzzy rug and pitched headlong into the tub. He came up coughing, with the miniature in his hand, and lay there in the water, squinting at the painting and blowing on it. Red was spreading in the water around him. He moaned, weeping like a child. "That dog, that fucking dog. Buela, look what he did."

Watch me do my trick. I flipped the switch on the stereo. The debut album of Plato Caliente started up loud, opening with a song called "Corazón Criminal."

Vicente's head snapped toward the sound; he stared up at me, eyes and mouth wide. It came out in a hoarse whisper: "Who are you?"

There was just enough space behind the stereo for two pounds of dog. I put my back against the wall and used all four legs and the very last of my strength to push on the box. It moved, tilted—it peeled up from the Velcro and dropped down into the water.

Vicente didn't make a sound, but there was a great sizzling pop and a white flash. The lights went out, the water jets stopped. It was quiet and dark and I could lie down and sleep.

\*

I didn't wake up when Rolando and Mealticket came back to the house. I woke up here at the vet when they were popping my leg back in the socket. They gave me glucose, stitched me up and said I'd get better, and Mealticket has been holding me in her lap for the last hour, petting me like she used to. It feels good.

I can hear a voice from another room: "Chamomile! Chamomile!" So Cicero made it. We both did, this time.

Someday soon, I'll hear footsteps up the walk, and I'll know it's Death coming for me. I'm not afraid. I'll be waiting. "Remember me, Death? I introduced you to Vicente!"

And he'll call me by my real name, and take me for a walk. You think Death doesn't have time for a Chihuahua? He's got time. He knows me.

Who am I?

Fuck you, Man.

I'm Chamomile.

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### HONORABLE MENTION

Doree Weller lives in sunny Arizona and finds inspiration in all the weird, wonderful, ordinary stuff in the world around us. She has had a short romance story published on www.over4000words.org. She also has a poem published on *House of Horror*, which will appear in their *Best of 2010* anthology. Two of her short horror stories are pending publication through *Spinetingler Magazine* and BloodBound Books.

She can be found online at www.doreeweller.wordpress.com.

# Visitation Day

by Doree Weller

Emma loved visitation days as much as she hated them. She dressed up in her best jeans and nicest blouse, then rode the bus for the two hours through two transfers. Her shirt stuck to her back as she walked into the Child Services building. The building seemed designed to depress her with its gray walls plastered in posters about domestic violence and shaken baby syndrome. It reminded her a little of her high school. She hadn't wanted to be there, either.

The secretary gestured for Emma to sign in, and Emma did before settling back into a cold plastic chair. A dusty fake tree drooped in one corner, and some children's books and parenting magazines sat scattered on a fake wood end table. She looked at her lap to avoid looking at the other moms, who might be like her, or might be foster parents who could read the invisible sign she wore everywhere: "Bad Mom."

Emma's caseworker, Patricia, opened the security door, and. Emma sprang up from her chair, then tried to slow down to a walk as her heart raced. Although

Patricia smiled at her, Emma compared Patricia's skirt and blouse to her own wilted outfit. Patricia's eyes burned a hole into her back as she wondered if she were walking too fast or too slow. *Is there a right way to walk? Did I put enough deodorant on this morning?* She wanted to take a discreet sniff, but worried that she'd lose points for that in whatever scorecard the caseworker kept.

Emma paused before rounding the corner into the visit room. *You can do this*. Maya sat on the floor surrounded by blocks. She looked up at Emma and grinned. "Mommy!"

Maya launched herself at Emma and wrapped her arms around Emma's legs. Emma picked Maya up and hugged her. "I missed you," she said, forcing her lips into a smile. Did she get bigger? She feels heavier. Please, God, don't ever make me have to let go again. Make it so she can come home with me.

"I missed you too."

Out of her backpack, Emma pulled the Barbie doll she'd bought instead of cigarettes last week. "This is for you."

"Thanks," Maya said, but put the doll aside and sat back on the floor with the blocks.

Emma sat stiffly in the child- sized plastic chair, wishing someone would tell her what she was supposed to do. She liked watching Maya play, but had the sense that she was supposed to do more than just watch. As a child, her only playtime had been spent trying to guess whether her mom or her latest "uncle" would pass out first.

Am I supposed to sit on the floor? No, I'm supposed to be a grownup. It won't help if I look like a kid, playing with her. Should I talk to her? I hate when the caseworker asks me questions, so I don't want her to feel like I'm interrogating her. Maybe I should...

"She doesn't like dolls," Patricia whispered.

"What?"

"She doesn't like dolls anymore."

Emma looked at the Barbie doll lying on the plastic table, bit her lip, and tried not to cry.

Patricia wrote something in her notebook, and Emma wished she could read upside down.

Emma drank in the sight of Maya playing first with the blocks and then with a dollhouse. She talked to herself as she played. Emma felt like the room looked: once brightly colored but now faded, used up, and old. The once-white bookshelves held games, books, stuffed animals, and infant toys. Smudges and peeling vinyl flowers decorated the green walls.

Emma listened to the clock tick as her one hour with her daughter faded away. Her stomach knotted as it got closer to 2 p.m., and she wished she had brought something to wet her dry mouth.

At exactly two, Maya's foster mother, Gail, entered the room. Maya jumped up and tackled Gail's knees. "Mommy!" she exclaimed.

Gail picked up Maya. "Did you have a good time, Angel?"

Gail looked over at Emma, and Emma felt herself shrink. *She's judging me. She doesn't think I'm good enough for my daughter. Look at her with her perfect life. Must be nice.* She raised her chin and frowned. Gail frowned in return.

"Love you too." Emma pressed a kiss into Maya's hair, and watched her leave the small playroom, chatting with Gail. Maya left the doll untouched on the table, and Emma didn't pick it up.

Emma blinked back tears as she followed Patricia back to her office. *I wish she'd* give me five minutes to get it together and have a cigarette before *I have to listen to* everything *I did wrong*. She perched on the wooden chair on the other side of

<sup>&</sup>quot;I played with the dollhouse!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Say goodbye to Mommy," Gail prompted.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Okay." Maya slithered down and ran over to Emma. "Bye Mommy. Love you."

Patricia's beige metal desk. She studied pictures of Patricia's family to avoid meeting her eyes.

Patricia followed her gaze and picked up the photo. "My daughter, Kelly, my husband, and our dog, Muffin," she explained.

"It must be nice to be able to tuck your daughter in every night," Emma said without thinking. *Stupid. Piss off the caseworker. Mom always said you were dumb.* 

Patricia frowned. "I'm not the enemy."

"You aren't my friend, either."

"No, that's true. I want what's best for you, but my responsibility is to your daughter. I have to make sure she's safe."

Emma dropped her eyes back to her lap. "I'd never hurt her."

"I didn't say you would."

Emma didn't answer, and the silence stretched out. Emma didn't know what she could say to convince this woman to let her daughter come home.

"How do you think that visit went?" Patricia asked.

Emma studied her hands and fought the urge to bite her nails. She twisted her fingers in her lap. "Um...okay I guess."

"Did you schedule to take the parenting classes?"

Her stomach churned. "No, I um, couldn't get off work."

Patricia sighed and leaned forward on the desk. "Emma, I want to help you, but I can't if you won't cooperate."

"I want to take the classes," Emma protested, "but they don't schedule them during the day. I have to work at night." *Not that I'd learn anything anyway. I was too dumb to even graduate high school.* 

"How do you expect your daughter back if you don't cooperate?"

Don't cry. Don't cry. "What am I supposed to do? Lose my job? They won't give me day shifts. I asked." Begged was more accurate, but there were a million waitresses with no education willing to work any shift they asked.

"Emma, you haven't taken parenting classes. You haven't completed your drug treatment program, and you're still living with Eric. He's told me that he's not willing to cooperate with us, and if he won't cooperate, we can't allow her to live with him. Maya has been in foster care for a year now, and she hasn't lived with you for two years. It's time for us to think about what's best for Maya." Patricia's tone was kind, and Emma wished Patricia were mean so she could hate her.

"What's best for Maya is to be with her mother. I love my daughter."

"I'm sure you love your daughter, but I'm not sure that her being with you is the best thing for her. If she came home tomorrow, who would take care of her while you work at night?"

"I'd work something out." Emma knew it was a lie. She wouldn't leave Maya with Eric, and there was no one she could count on. What would I do if Maya came home? How would we live?

Patricia shook her head. "I know you love your daughter. I don't question that. But you aren't being realistic. You can't take care of her."

"I can. You just haven't given me a chance."

"Your daughter is almost five years old."

"I know how old she is."

"And you haven't taken care of her since she was two. Don't you think it's time to let go?"

"You don't understand. I won't lose my daughter. I can't." Emma had given up smoking the day she found out she was pregnant. I nursed her for six months, just

like the doctor told me. Even when it hurt. I promised her that I would always give her everything. Look at me now.

Patricia smiled almost kindly. "You don't even know what toys she likes."

Emma left the building in a daze. She knew, of course, that after a certain amount of time, they would start talking about taking her daughter away from her permanently, but she somehow hadn't given much thought as to when that would happen. She took the bus another two hours to get home. *If I lose Maya, how will I survive? What will I have to look forward to?* 

Emma trudged the two blocks home, seeing the grimy sidewalks with litter caught in the gutter. Cigarette butts dotted the ground. Men and women sat on porch stoops or on bent plastic chairs half on and off the sidewalk. Catcalls followed her as she walked, head down.

She walked into the lobby of the apartment building, and up three flights of stairs, taking care not to grab the railing, as it wobbled. The spotted linoleum cracked under her feet.

Her apartment smelled like pot, garbage, and stale beer. Eric sat in front of the TV, flipping through channels as a cigarette smoldered in the ashtray. He didn't look up. "What's for dinner?" he called as she walked in.

She didn't answer for a moment, pressing her fingers to her eyes. "You'll have to warm something up. I have to get ready for work."

In the bedroom, she changed into her black skirt, black sneakers, and black shirt. She wrapped her green apron around her waist, and dragged herself to the restaurant to start her shift.

Emma tried to focus on her customers, but she gave a woman the wrong soda and traded meals for customers more than once. She stood outside and smoked a cigarette. *Is this the life I want for my daughter? It's not the life I wanted for me*.

Emma thought back to earlier in the day. At Child Services, Gail had been dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that somehow looked nicer than Emma's best outfit. Maya's

mahogany colored pigtails gleamed, and she smelled like soap. Her jeans had been scuffed at the knee, but her pink blouse had fresh lace curling from the neck.

Emma had been 18 when Maya was born. She told them that she didn't know who the father was, even though she knew it was a 21-year-old crack addict named Lenny. She hadn't wanted Lenny anywhere near her baby. For the first two and a half years, Emma lived with her Aunt Edna, who was probably the only member of the family who didn't do drugs. Instead, she collected things. Newspapers, bottles, jars, and old margarine tubs. When Emma first moved in, it hadn't seemed so bad, but later, she found herself waking up from dreams of all the stacks of things crushing her.

Aunt Edna loved to watch Maya, and Emma quickly fell back into the party scene. She thought Travis loved her when he offered her heroin, so she'd taken it, and liked it. A year later, she was in jail for burglary and possession. Maya had stayed with Aunt Edna until someone saw her stacks of clutter and called Child Services. By the time Emma got out of jail, Maya had been living with Gail and her husband for a year, and Emma wondered where her life had gone so horribly wrong.

She no longer did heroin, but she did smoke some pot. Who didn't? Child Services hassled her about it, claiming that she couldn't smoke if she wanted Maya to come home. Emma smoked because she missed Maya, and it seemed to dull the constant ache inside. If they'd just send Maya home, she'd stop smoking.

The week passed. Eric didn't find work, and Emma didn't think he actually left the apartment to look. He stayed drunk and high most of the time. She hated being alone, but wondered why she was still lonely with someone there with her.

Visitation day again. Two-hour bus ride to the Child Services building. Avoiding the stares of other people. Maya coloring a picture of a dinosaur in a coloring book.

Emma took the first deep breath she'd been able to all week as Maya launched herself at Emma's legs. "Mommy!"

"Hi baby," she said, lifting her to smell the scent of shampoo and child. The words almost stuck in her throat as she choked on tears. "How was your week?"

"Come color with me." Maya grabbed her hand and pulled her to the table. *Should I color? Who cares what they think? It doesn't matter any more.* 

Emma ignored Patricia sitting by the door, and colored with Maya, asking her all the questions she wanted to ask but was normally too afraid to. "Do you like your preschool? What do you watch on TV? What's your favorite movie? What's your favorite food? Favorite color? Are Mommy Gail and Daddy Ed nice to you?"

Maya answered all the questions and seemed to like the attention. Emma's heart swelled as she thought that maybe she'd just had her first successful visit ever.

At the end of the hour, Emma felt full of hope again. Maya was happy and loved. When Gail picked Maya up, Maya flew at her the same as she did at Emma, and Emma blinked back tears. "Mommy!"

"How was your visit, Angel?"

"Mommy and I colored pictures. See?" She picked up a picture of a flower that Emma had colored meticulously and signed, "To my baby, Maya. I love you and miss you every day."

"That's beautiful," Gail said, meeting Emma's eyes. "How about we get a picture frame so we can hang this in your room?"

She wants to take my daughter away from me. But maybe it's not her fault.

"Okay," Maya agreed.

Gail reached into her big bag and pulled out a packet. "I had copies of her projects and reports from preschool made for you."

Emma grabbed the folder and stared at it. "That was nice of you," she said. Who is this woman who wants my daughter?

"I want to make sure you know how well she's doing."

You mean how much better off she is with you.

Patricia and Emma met in her office after the visit. Patricia asked the same question she always did. "How do you think the visit went?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Maya." Emma sucked in a deep breath and held it, trying to find courage.

"Is anything wrong?" Patricia cocked her head.

Emma shook her head and opened her mouth, but couldn't get the words out at first. "Can she...stay...with Gail?"

Patricia smiled. "Of course she can. Gail and Ed love her."

"I mean..." She blew her breath out in a great whoosh and fought the tears that burned behind her eyes. "For good. Can she stay there for good?"

"Oh," Patricia said, drawing out the word. "Are you saying you'd be willing to let them adopt her?"

Emma closed her eyes and saw Maya curled up on her ratty chair with stuffing poking out behind the cigarette burns. Her fresh shampoo smell drowned out by smoke and garbage. Not able to have her favorite cereal because Mommy didn't have enough money that week. Maybe she could get her life together. Maybe. But could she do it as fast as Maya deserved?

"Yeah, I want them to adopt her. Can I still see her?"

"This isn't an open adoption state, so the court has no way to enforce that, but they can agree to it. Is that what you want?"

"No. I want her to live with me. But it's what Maya deserves. I can't..." Emma broke down and sobbed. "I don't...know how to be a mom. My parents sat on the couch...and drank...all day. They smacked me...whenever they felt like it. I can do that. But I don't want to." Emma took the box of tissues Patricia handed her and blew her nose loudly. "I don't want that."

Patricia looked down at her desk, then looked back up and nodded. "So few parents make that decision, but I believe that it's the most unselfish decision a

parent can make for their child. Some people weren't meant to be parents, or at least not now, and that's okay. As long as the child doesn't pay for it."

"I've never made a good decision before."

"How does it feel?"

"Like hell." She smeared her eyeliner as she swabbed her eyes. "But I'd do anything for her. She deserves better than me."

"I'd say she's going to be lucky enough to have two moms who love her. How many kids are lucky enough to have that?"

"I just wish..." Emma looked down at her lap where she shredded a tissue. "I wish I wasn't such a wimp."

"Wimp? Emma, this is the hardest decision you'll ever have to make, and most parents aren't strong enough to make it. I've seen parents hang on and hang on to children long past when it's best for the child. In your case, you're giving your daughter a chance at a life she couldn't have with you. I know you love her, but you're not ready to be a mom, and she needs one right now. One, two, five years down the line, you're going to be a great mom. You'll grow up a little bit and realize you don't have to settle for a guy like Eric."

"You really think this is the right thing to do?" Emma asked between sobs.

"Yes, I really do. And Emma?" Patricia waited until Emma looked up at her before continuing. "I'm so impressed that you're doing this for your daughter."

She didn't remember walking to the bus station or getting on the bus. She didn't remember the transfers, or walking the two blocks home. Emma felt like someone had beaten her up. Her body ached all over, and her eyes burned. She opened the door to the sounds of canned laughter and the smells of smoke and stale beer. Eric didn't turn away from the TV. "What's for dinner?"

Her life ended today, and he wanted to know what was for dinner? Who could eat?

"Leftovers," she replied mechanically. She opened the refrigerator and saw the meatloaf she'd put into Tupperware sitting beside a torn open case of beer and a greasy container of Chinese food. She closed the door without pulling out the meatloaf, went into the bedroom, threw her clothing into a suitcase, and walked out without another word.

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### HONORABLE MENTION

J.E.A. Wallace is an English writer who recently moved to New York City. He has been published on both sides of the Atlantic in *The Write Place At The Write Time*, Four Cornered Universe, BlankPages, and Volume and Brand Magazine among others.

Visit www.myspace.com/jeawallace/blog for more poems and stories.

## Or Even Up

by J. E. A. Wallace

The building was twelve miles high. It stood alone, hemmed in by a snaking line of flying silver cars that stretched from one horizon to another. The long shadow the building cast over the empty city was the same black it had once been, but every inch of the immense structure was covered in graffiti, suffocating beneath anti-corporate slogans and bored obscenities. Things, important things, were still done here; the building buzzed behind the old glass perhaps now more than ever. And the powerful people inside did what they could to see daylight. Halfway between the waste-ground the building grew from and the dirty clouds it disappeared into, two men stood outside upon a hovering metal platform: window cleaners.

Some said it took five years to get from the bottom floor to the top, although no man had lasted long enough in the job to say for sure. The older of the two window cleaners had come closest; he was now only four floors away from a full circuit. He wondered now whether this would merit anything. He put his cloth into his bucket and twirled it lazily around.

There was a crack and a splash.

"Hey!"

There was a fading of laughter as a car disappeared along the floating throng. The older man picked a drinks cup off the top of his head and wiped the sticky black liquid from his face. The younger man didn't know what to say; his heart was still racing from the surprise. The older man turned to him and raised a dripping finger.

"Always duck when you hear the hum of a window winding down."

The younger man nodded and, very slowly, offered him a clean cloth from his belt. The older man took it, put it to his face and exhaled with an angry sigh.

"Does that happen a lot, Herbert?"

"Worse is when the graffiti gets you and you go home painted yellow."

"I don't think I'd be very good at that."

"Don't worry, George my boy, they try not to hit you." The old man Herbert said. "It would leave a big gap in the letter."

Herbert bent over, picked up his cloth and reached back up again. And the two men scrubbed away at the I of a giant PIG as the hands on their watches ticked round.

\*

At day's end, back down on the ground, the two men walked among the detritus that littered the street, heading for Herbert's regular café. Their footsteps clattered between boarded-up windows and long forgotten doors, the twisted rubbish from the car-filled sky above fluttering gently in the breeze.

"So how did I do on my first day?" George asked him.

"You did fine. And as long as you remember the golden rule..."

"Don't look down, or even up, if you want to stay alive."

#### "Good lad."

Herbert seemed ill at ease with the street's solidity, and walked as if he expected the ground to have more give. But George was looking forward to a cup of green with his new friend and he was smiling as they headed towards the only light for miles. It was an empty world now the sun had gone down, though it was practically empty when it was up. Anyone who wasn't in the air was probably in prison. These days, there were just so many ways you could go wrong.

"Good evening!" said a girl with a half-metal face, opening the door of the café.

Inside was empty, but bright. Herbert walked in and took a seat at the counter, but George hung outside the doorway and stared. The girl looked down at the floor. She waited for George to pass before she looked up again, ready to greet the next customer. Herbert was already pressing the buttons for green tea on his monitor as George sat down beside him.

"What's wrong with her face?"

"She's from one of the wars I think."

"Which one?"

"I don't know; one of the ones overseas."

"How can she afford to be over here?"

"I think she's one of those projects. You know, they get saved and healed by a news channel to remind everyone watching we're the good guys."

"Oh yeah, I've seen those."

Herbert studied George with an I'm-thinking-about-saying-something look in his eye.

"You should stay away from the news," he said finally.

"Why?"

"Because it's depressing and inaccurate."

George leaned in close.

"Are you allowed to say that?" He whispered.

"I don't know," said Herbert. "Am I?"

There was a small pause before a plastic cup cracked down in front of Herbert and began to fill up with green tea.

"Think I'm safe." Herbert sighed "Get your green."

George put his fingers to the greasy surface of the monitor and softly tapped out his order. While he waited he watched the greeter. In the window of the door she saw him staring with something she had forgotten in his eyes; for the first time since she'd come here she felt pretty.

"So who do you fancy for the cricket this year?"

"I don't know," said George, "I was never very good at predictions."

\*

Next morning, six miles up, they were rubbing at the edges of a new word.

"What do they do here?" George asked.

"Here?"

"Here; in this building here. What do they do?"

"I have no idea. Careful!"

George had moved a little to his left and the hover-cart shuddered slightly.

"Sorry."

George shuffled back into an outline of footprints, marked by little muddy lights, where he must stand if the cart was to keep its balance.

```
"Don't ever look at them." Herbert said.

"Who?"

"Them in the building."

"Why not?"

"Because we are out here, and in there is... their place. Just don't ever look at them." The old man turned to him. "O.K.?"
```

George continued scrubbing at the paint, his eyes fixed on the back of his hand. After a while all he could feel was the noises; the scratching of disappearing paint, the faint hum beneath his feet and the roar of the cars' flow behind him. So he turned his head to let the wind fill his ears, and looked out over the city. After the hypnotic back and forth of his hand, its stillness was a comfort. The vast jumble of grey below him seemed less abandoned, more forgotten.

```
"How long have you been doing this for, Herbert?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know."

"Did you have grey hair when you started?"

"Probably."

"You don't like to think about these things?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Is that best up here?"

"I should say so."
```

"O.K."

"What should I think about?"

"Whatever you like; just do it quietly."

"Right you are."

George looked back to his hand. After a while the rhythm of his scrubbing matched Herbert's, and the sound of squeaks and swooshes became quite soothing.

\*

That evening on the way to the café George found a bunch of flowers on the ground.

"Look at that," said Herbert. "Some things do survive the fall."

He looked up at the faraway line of cars with a wishful look on his face. George bent down and pulled one blue flower out.

"What are you going to do with that?"

George shrugged.

"I don't know."

"Come on then."

The café door swung open for them when they were still a few feet away. The girl with the half-metal face came out smiling.

"Good evening!"

"Hello dear," Herbert said.

As the old man walked around her to get inside, George looked down at the thin green stalk in his hand.

"Are you coming in tonight?"

He looked up at her. The light from the café was sparkling on the artificial side of her face. He held up the flower.

"Yes," he said, and handed it to her.

With small and paint-free fingers the girl gently took the flower. She found herself lost.

"Nice," Herbert said as George sat down beside him.

"Be quiet."

\*

At the bottom of the building, the day about to begin, Herbert and George loaded up the cart with their equipment and put their feet inside their outlines. Herbert hit the big red button and they started to ascend. George watched as the higher they went the deeper the city became, until it stretched all the way to the horizon where the tall grey prisons stood. Then the cart juddered to a halt and the window-cleaners started work.

"Beautiful day," Herbert remarked.

George preferred to look at the view while he was cleaning but had not got the hang of knowing when to stop. So after a while he had to turn back to the glass to polish off the last bit of graffiti. As the circle in the paint cleared he could see into the office, and George watched as one man in a suit stabbed another man in a darker suit several times in the face with a pair of scissors. The blood kept splattering until it covered up the freshly scrubbed hole in the glass. George dropped his cloth.

"What?" Herbert said.

"What?!" Herbert said again, urgently this time.

"Move."

Herbert's widening eyes made the rest of his face fall.

"Move along!"

Herbert hit another red button and the cart lurched ten feet to the left. When it stopped George was still staring straight ahead, breathing in and out heavily with great concentration.

"Did you see something?" Herbert whispered.

"I don't know."

"Did you see something?" Herbert hissed.

"Yeah."

"Did they see you?"

"Me?"

"You! Did they see you?!"

"No. I don't think so. No."

"Good."

Herbert took out his cloth and started cleaning again. George watched the old man in disbelief.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm only four floors away from a full clean. No one has ever done one and, believe me, I aim to be the first."

"Who's going to stop you?"

"They are," Herbert said, nodding his head towards the glass.

"Not reporting a crime is an offence."

"How can it be if no one knows there's a crime to report?"

"It's an offence, Herbert."

The old man scrubbed harder. George looked back at the window ten feet to his right. He watched it for a moment, waiting for the man with the scissors to open it. But it remained still.

"George. It's a different world in there. Law doesn't apply to them because they make everything work. They do what they like, and we... clean their windows."

"But Herbert!"

"Don't get involved."

Herbert's voice was pleading. George picked up his cloth and put it to the paint.

\*

The two men said nothing as they sat side by side at the café, watching their tea grow cold between their hands. Eventually Herbert downed his in one go, putting the cup back down with a bitter expression twisting his face.

"Well... Good night."

"Good night."

Herbert pushed away from the counter. He put his hand gently upon George's shoulder; his eyes were full of his age.

"I'm sorry."

"See you tomorrow, Herbert," George said kindly.

He watched Herbert go, past the greeter's desk with a blue flower in a glass on its top, and through the metal door. It hung open for a moment, a dark rectangle of the night threatening something outside the café, but then the door closed and it was gone.

"Your friend seems sad today."

George turned to see the greeter hovering at the end of the counter.

"We had a difficult day."

"Yes! I know difficult."

She smiled, and even though all of her mouth was there, only one cheek above it lifted up, the other remained sculpted flat.

"I'm George." He gave a little wave.

"Svetlanka."

"Set ...?"

"Svetlanka," the girl said again, pointing to a name-badge on her chest.

"I think it's broken."

The girl looked down at the blank name-badge and tapped it a few times. Eventually a few letters blinked on.

"Vela, it says now."

The girl continued tapping, a little frantically.

"Vela is nice."

"Oh!" she said, and stopped.

"You kept the flower." He nodded towards her desk.

"Yes." She threw up her hands in a helpless sort of way. "I like the color."

"It is pretty... white here."

All of the café was white, like an idiot's idea of heaven.

"It doesn't have to be."

"No?"

Vela flitted behind her desk and fiddled around beneath it. After a few moments the whole place turned blue; the walls, the floor, everything. "See?"

George laughed. She fiddled beneath the desk again. Everything turned orange.

"Maybe not orange."

Tap tap tap. Everything turned red, the warm deep red of Christmas Night indoors, and for a moment George forgot where he was. Vela watched his very slightly open mouth and felt a surge of pride.

"Beautiful," George said eventually.

"I found the switch the second day I worked here. No one said that I could use it, so I only turn it on when everyone has gone."

"You work alone here?"

"Only me."

"It's a strange place," George said, looking around at the seemingly living walls.

"I think it used to be a different place. It does other things as well."

But George was not really listening; the color had reminded him of something else.

"What is wrong? You look just like your friend."

"I saw something today; something bad."

Vela touched a finger to the wall and said: "Blood."

George's mouth fell open again.

"I have," she said, "seen that look before."

"Where are you from?" George said quietly.

She thought of rubble and screaming and unstoppable machines.

"Somewhere else."

Vela turned her face quick a couple of degrees, snapping herself back to the café.

"Would you like some tea?" she said.

"No." He smiled. "Would you?"

"No."

Their hands were as busy as their brains just then, but try as they might the tiny flicks of their fingers couldn't conjure any words. The only sound in the room was the gentle buzz of the monitors, and the only color was red. After a little while, Vela approached the seat next to George's and sat down with her eyes on his face.

"What did you see today?"

"The city, the cars, the graffiti, the windows."

"What did you see today?" she said again so gently, George thought he might cry.

"I saw someone killed," George said, lines puzzling his forehead. "I saw one man kill another."

"Where?"

"In our building; in the building we clean."

"Have you... told anyone?"

"No," George said, as if he hadn't thought of it.

"Will you tell anyone?"

"No," he said. "It's best not to get involved."

Vela said nothing, but her whole body moved with a breath.

"Herbert, my friend, told me it is wise to keep quiet about such things."

After a moment, Vela stood and walked to the desk and reached below it again. The red disappeared and returned to white again. George was almost sad to see it go. But it changed again, into the purple of a midnight clear. And then lights that looked like snow began to fall down the walls, drifting towards the floor that had stayed white.

"That," said George, "is really something."

"I think this used to be a fun place," Vela said.

"Fun?"

Vela held a finger up while she fiddled below her desk. In the corner of the café, something sprang to life.

"Ghosts?" George said, peering at the shimmering things.

"Nice ghosts," said Vela.

And sure enough the man that appeared from the flickering light was smiling; a black man with a smile so big his eyes were hardly open. He was holding a trumpet. And behind him more ghosts came to life, see-through men holding other musical instruments. One of them sat behind drums.

"What was this place?" George said.

"Somewhere fun," Vela replied.

The trumpeter bowed and came back up with his arms held wide.

"Beginning," he said, "of song."

And the ghost band played. It was music unlike George had ever heard; it was so carefree it made him want to giggle. He felt then as if every moment he had spent in the city was graffiti; and as the music played the letters were coming away from

<sup>&</sup>quot;I can believe that."

his bones and falling to the bottom of his feet. If he would move them, he could leave it all behind on the floor. So he stood, and walked to the girl behind the desk.

"Vela," he said, and she smiled. "Shall we dance?"

"Yes," she said, "we shall."

He led her into the center of the café, put his left hand upon the small of her back and his right hand within hers. He had never held anything so lightly and she had never felt so safe.

"Just dig that scenery floating by," sang the trumpeter.

The two dimensional snow fell all around the window-cleaner and the girl with the half-metal face as they turned in slow circles on the floor. And just for a few minutes the Earth was flat, the sun revolved around it and there were still animals to be named.

"End of song." The trumpeter smiled before flickering and disappearing.

George put his hand up to the sparkling side of Vela's face. He ran the tips of his fingers across the cold metal and tried to imagine the pain held underneath. But she did not need to imagine, and felt it wiped away in the streaks of his touch. She closed her good eye then, and to George it looked for a moment in the silvery light of the snow as if her face were whole. He moved towards her, closing his eyes as well. In the blackness he felt the warmth of her breath, then the yield of her mouth. And for the first time in their lives, they were not alone in the dark.

"Step away, please."

The light of the world flooded back to both of them. They turned to see a group of policemen. They grabbed George by the arms and dragged him outside.

"No!" Vela screamed.

But the door shut and he was gone.

\*

Near the top of a building nine miles high George stood facing a dirty metal wall. There was a small man dressed in black next to him.

"Who are you?" George said with a voice hoarse from talking.

"The prison priest," the man said. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Is there anything you can do?"

"No," he said after a while. "Probably not."

George went back to staring at the wall and tried with all his might not to think about music.

"How long did you get?"

"The computer gave me a thousand."

"That is standard for not reporting a crime."

"I forgot," George said, "that they are always listening."

"Yes," the priest said with a sigh, "they are always listening."

The metal creaked open to reveal a wall-sized window at the end of a small grey room. The policeman behind George shoved him inside.

"I'm sorry," the priest called out as the wall clunked shut.

\*

The black and white read-out on the wall of George's cell read "998" when he heard the noise. He got up from his bed and walked to the window and tried to see through the huge red streak of graffiti that covered it. Whatever it was, it was getting closer.

"I wonder what that is," George said, and then it stopped.

Before his eyes a tiny circle of daylight appeared, and got bigger and bigger until he could make out a face.

"Herbert?"

The old man was rubbing at the graffiti with all his might. He had tears in his eyes and was mouthing the word "sorry" over and over again.

"Herbert! It's all right! It's not your fault!"

George banged on the window and the old man looked right at him.

"It's all right."

Herbert tried to smile, but gave up and instead nodded to his right. George looked over at the other side of the window to see another hole had appeared. He ran over to it and there she was.

"Vela."

She mouthed "George" and started scrubbing with renewed vigor.

He put his ear to the window, she said "George" again and this time he heard her. He stood back and watched his friends scrub all the red away until they were standing there, floating in the panorama of the city. Vela put her hand flat upon the glass. She tried to pour all the heat inside her into her palm. And when George moved towards her and put his hand over hers, he swore the glass was warm.

\*

The prison stood at the city's edge, one of many in a row. The cars did not fly too close for fear what was inside would reach out and grab them. But they always looked when they passed. And when they did, the flying cars' occupants would wonder why there was one window that was always clean.

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