

ISSUE #13 MARCH 2011



ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS TRY TO ANSWER AN UNUSUALLY DIFFICULT QUESTION OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO THEM...

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Our Mission Statement, Four Words at a Time

[Note: this text was revised in Sept. 2015 to match what will appear on the 2015-era WordPress version of the web site. The mission has not changed, but the way it's expressed has been improved.]

We've always had a mission statement of sorts in mind for OTP, but we'd never written it before. When I started putting it into words, I ended up making short slogans to capture our goals. It turned out three out of the first four were fourword slogans, and it wasn't hard to turn the one that wasn't into a four-word phrase, either. So I decided all our mission statement slogans would be four words long.

Publish Stories, Not Authors

This is the idea that started it all. We don't care who wrote a story. We read all stories blindly. If we like one particular story better than all the others, it wins.

This goal also means that famous writers with great credentials can't expect to get published here just because they're famous and have great credentials. They have to send us a story we like better than the other stories.

Multiple Judges, Multiple Criteria

Multiple judges: We didn't want a magazine that could be called *Stories Tarl Likes*. We wanted several people weighing in on what stories we should publish, and we wanted them to have different tastes and opinions. Anything that's so good, we ALL like it, is a story that'll probably take first place.

Multiple criteria: Though this isn't my [Tarl's] job title, I am a professional expert in applied measurement theory. That means when someone once told me, "There's no way to measure if fiction's any good; you either like a story or you don't," I fought back. I said: Really? So a story with 500 misspelled words is just as good as one with none? A story that rips off Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is just as good as one that's so original you've never read anything like it? A story that's filled with bland, clichéd writing is just as good as a story that's filled with original, evocative writing? Ridiculous. Of course there are criteria, besides "I like

it," for deciding whether a story is any good. I'll admit it took us a while to come up with them, but we're rather proud of our four-pronged measuring stick of "creative," "compelling," "well-crafted," and "clearly uses the premise."

Having said that, taste still comes into play. For this issue, we turned down a story that had nothing objectively wrong with it, except that three of our five prize judges were thoroughly turned off by the (deliberate, well-executed) writing style. So the truth about rating fiction is, "There are objective criteria for measuring the quality of fiction writing, and in addition to those, you have to like the story."

The rest of our slogans, with much less explanation:

Admit It's a Contest

Every time you send your story into any magazine, it's going up against other stories. They won't all get published. So it's always a contest! But at OTP, it's your story versus everyone else's story, not your fame as an author versus everyone else's fame.

No Charge for Trying

We don't charge entry fees: not for the main short story contests, not for our minicontests, not for our newsletter. We do charge for critiques of your contest entry, but those are optional. Also, you can't buy one until the contest is over and your story has already failed to win a prize, so not buying one has no effect on your chance of winning.

Pay Our Contest Winners

OTP is a paying market. Always has been. Always will be.

Guest writers don't get any money, but their stories didn't win a prize in our contests winners. In fact, in many cases, their stories failed to win a prize, but we liked something about it enough to help the author improve it.

We Will Help Authors

If your entry gets published, we'll edit it with your input to make it even better. If your entry doesn't make the final round, we'll critique it for a surprisingly small fee. And if we love your story except for a couple of easily fixed problems, we might ask you to work with us to improve it and publish the revised version in our "guest writer" slot.

And finally...

Never Out of Print

For as long as OTP exists, back issues will be available, in their entirety, in our archives. Right now they're all in HTML or PDF, and we're planning to make e-book versions too. One way or another, as long as we're alive... and we hope, after... these stories will be available to anyone who can access them electronically.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #13 of On The Premises!

Keep writing and reading,

Tarl Roger Kudrick and Bethany Granger co-publishers of On The Premises magazine

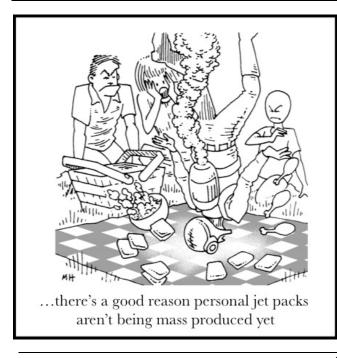
Cartoons!

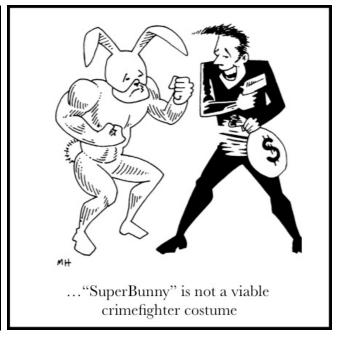
by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

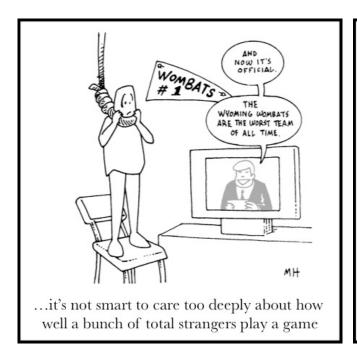
Every one of us struggles, at one time or another, to answer questions of deep, personal importance to us. Most of you are probably smarter than I am, so you don't have to ask yourself *this* kind of question on a regular basis.

Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) combine Matt's skill and Tarl's ineptitude to bring you true tales of Tarl banging his head against the wall and asking himself:

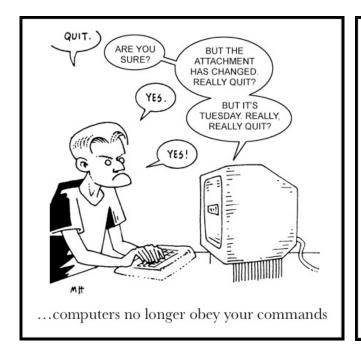
Why Didn't I Believe People When They Told Me...?













FIRST PRIZE

Ken was a programmer before he became a lawyer, and he still thinks about legal drafting like he thinks about code. His fiction has appeared in *F&SF*, *Strange Horizons*, *Lightspeed*, and *Clarkesworld*, among other places. A new short story based on his experience with the tax laws can be found in the upcoming IN SITU anthology from Dagan Books. For more information, please visit http://kenliu.name.

The Visit

by Ken Liu

In the streets, roommates and neighbors stood around holding ice-cold beers as hundreds of bright streaks lit up the night sky in the direction of the constellation Virgo. Unlike meteors, they did not burn out in a second or two. Instead, they crawled slowly down the dome of the sky like rain on a windowpane, their fiery tails fading gradually into darkness.

"What do you think?" I asked the girl next to me—black hair, brown skin, a light sheen of sweat glistening on her face. I thought her ethnic background was Southeast Asian. The early summer breeze brought the faint scent of her perfume: flowery, but not cloying. Probably a law student from the apartment below mine, judging by the books she hauled around all the time. Lots of them lived in this corner of Cambridge.

"Like watching the end of the world," she said. "You're the one doing jumping jacks over my head every night during Letterman, aren't you? I'm Lara."

"It's the only time I can find to exercise. I'm Matt."

We shared a beer and watched the sky rain fire.

*

Four hundred fifty-three probes arrived that night.

Each was the size of a small man. Five feet tall, a little more than a foot across, the vertical black cylinders tapered down to a rounded point at the bottom. The shape and dull finish brought to mind cartoon bombs hovering a foot or so off the ground, a millisecond before the strike.

All official attempts at establishing communication with the probes ended in failure. They moved away when people approached too closely, but, like wild animals, would stop once they were at a safe distance. The presentation of fundamental physical constants—via flashing lights, clanging bells, pulsing radio waves, even the blowing of gentle gusts of air against the probes—elicited no meaningful response. Neither did the playing of music or the display of art. Meanwhile, the probes' shell seemed to resist all remote imaging techniques (ultrasound, radar, more exotic beams). Close up, you could hear them making a humming noise like a wasp nest, but the sound seemed random, patternless. If it was intended as communication, we could make no sense of it..

For their part, the probes did not speak in a robotic voice, collected no samples, abducted no one, projected no holograms, and showed no interest in being taken to our leaders. They floated among the walking crowd on busy sidewalks or zipped along the highways, keeping pace in the fast lane. Sometimes, they stayed in the same spot for hours, motionless. Other times, they zoomed across the oceans, trailing sonic booms behind.

What do they want? The question was debated endlessly. The probes were clearly interested in us, as they were concentrated in population centers. But they stayed away from war zones. Was it because they were too fragile? Did whoever sent them abhor violence? Or was it all an elaborate ruse designed to trick us into thinking that they had no interest in our military capabilities so that we would reveal our weaknesses?

Some argued that evolutionarily, a race that could develop interstellar travel must be aggressive and dangerous. Applying the Golden Rule in reverse, they said if we did not want to follow in the footsteps of the Aztecs and the Incas, it would be prudent to destroy the probes, salvage them for technological advances, and then prepare for the retaliatory strike. But the probes were scattered over all the countries and continents, and it was impossible to secretly secure the agreement of all the governments to launch a simultaneous attack upon them. If we went at it alone, those who did not like America could offer sanctuary to the probes and hope to ally themselves with an alien force.

The President announced that the safest course was to leave the probes alone, make no threatening gestures, and keep our doors locked and shades drawn where we didn't want them to look.

*

After a few months, the camera crews stopped following them. The probes never seemed to do anything but hover and observe, and there were still hurricanes, floods, oil spills, car chases, wars, and celebrities to cover. The military and the scientists continued to monitor them, but most people had lost interest.

But I remained obsessed with the question: what do they want? I logged onto the Contact sites at all hours, where those like me congregated to share sightings and to debate theories about the probes. We plotted their movements across the continents and analyzed the harmonics in the recordings of their humming, trying to divine meaning out of noise.

Still, everyone tended to act more politely around the alien probes, laughed louder, spoke with more animation, picked up trash and disengaged from fights. Silly, when you really thought about it. What did we know about how to make a good impression on aliens?

Lara had accepted a position with a big law firm out in LA. The great corporations of the world waged war not only in the markets, but also in courts and capitols. Lara conceded it was not a particularly meaningful way to make a living, but that could be said about many jobs, and certainly few paid as well.

"I went to law school because I once thought that someday I'd stand in front of the Supreme Court and make an argument about justice for the helpless. I wanted to work in human rights. But law school loans piling up on your credit report have a way of changing aspirations."

She would leave in the fall. I wasn't sure what I would do. Things were going well between us, but we didn't speak much about the future.

It was a hot summer night. We were naked, my hands lightly caressing her back and breasts. The window was left open because I didn't have air conditioning. And there was no screen because my slumlord hadn't bothered to install any.

A car passed in the street below, and then, in the silence afterwards, a humming grew louder. Outside the window, a probe rose to our level and stopped. Tilting until it was horizontal, it entered the room through the open window and straightened to hover in the middle of the room.

"Hello and welcome," Lara said, in the way the President had suggested on TV.

I pulled up a blanket over us, but Lara threw off the blanket and got out of bed. Naked, unselfconscious, she walked towards the probe. In the faint glow of the streetlights below, she was beautiful.

The probe backed up as she approached, staying a few feet away. Lara stopped.

"Woman," she pointed at herself, between her breasts. "Man," she pointed at me. I waved at the probe, feeling silly. "We are a peaceful and loving species," Lara said. "With much to offer your people, or whatever you call yourselves."

I thought about how Margaret Mead was duped by the Samoan natives. When given the chance, we all like to craft and shape how we're seen, to engage in a bit of interstellar propaganda.

"People have tried this kind of thing already," I whispered to Lara. "They never respond."

She shrugged. "It doesn't hurt to try."

"This is how we make love," Lara said. She came back to bed, and straddled me. This was not part of the government's recommended protocol. Leaning down so that her hair cascaded around my face, she whispered, "Maybe this will be their first sex tape."

I pictured the aliens huddled around their screens, observing our slow, awkward, giggly performance, the way we had watched on our computer monitors the alien landscape of Mars through the lenses of the NASA rovers.

Things felt different when you were watched: more aware of the intensity of everything. "This definitely qualifies as a fantasy I never thought I'd enjoy," I whispered back. Lara laughed; we locked our lips in a kiss, a kiss I wanted to stay in forever.

In the background, the probe hummed.

*

Once you got used to the traffic, LA was not nearly as bad as I had feared.

Since I freelanced as a database administrator, my hours were far more flexible than Lara's. I did most of the chores and spent even more time on the Contact sites. We continued to make no progress on understanding the probes.

Lara worked the long hours she had expected. Sometimes, at night, when Lara called to say that she would have to stay overnight at the office, I would drive over, pick up Chinese or Thai on the way, and bring it up to her floor. We would pick a conference room, close the door, spread the food out on the smooth wooden surface of the conference table, and make fun of the partners she slaved under as we ate. Afterwards we would sit quietly and look out at the sea of shimmering lights spread out below. Sometimes, as we talked quietly during the contented haze after a good meal, I imagined us growing old together.

One night, she was unusually quiet as we ate.

Aware that my repeated attempts to engage her had all fallen flat, I finally asked, "What's wrong?"

For a while, she continued to eat quietly, sorting out her thoughts. I stood behind her, and lightly rubbed her shoulder.

"I had my pro bono deportation hearing today," she said. "I figured I had to do something meaningful so I can live with myself, you know? I spend my days selling myself, and I wanted to try to make it up with these pro bono projects that no one gives a damn about." Her voice broke and she dropped her face into her hands.

"Tell me," I said.

The client was an undocumented Cambodian woman named Sang: eldest daughter, poor rural family, chronically ill father. Growing up, she heard stories of women providing for their families by sending cash home from Phnom Penh and Bangkok's sex districts. When she was 14, a few men came to her village to recruit, and she agreed to go to Bangkok with them. The family was given an advance against her wages before she left.

Once in Bangkok, she was told that earnings from the first fifteen customers every night would be kept by her employer, while the rest had to go first to pay back the interest on the loan to her family.

The reality of sex work made her change her mind. She asked to go home and promised to return the advance. In response the men took turns raping her and then locked her into a windowless room with a mattress on the floor. She did not leave that room for a year.

When customers complained about her lack of enthusiasm, she was punished until her smiles and moans were deemed convincing. She was taught to beg for sex seductively in English, German, and Japanese. When she tried to explain to her customers her condition, she was told that men would go to her home and retrieve her sisters. Whether a condom would be used was up to the client, not her. Costs for abortions were added to what she owed.

Now pliant, she was smuggled first into Macao and then America through the Mexican border (the cost of these trips were also added to her debt). Her owners could charge a lot more in America for her services than back in Thailand. She

became the star attraction at a brothel that advertised itself discreetly in the right places online. When the police raided the establishment, the owners claimed that she had paid guides to enter America illegally so that she could make more money in LA.

"She was terrified of going home, where she thought her owners would come for her again." Lara said. "But she didn't qualify for a T visa since the government didn't need her cooperation to prosecute the brothel operators. I tried to get her asylum, but she didn't have a credible fear of persecution on account of a protected reason—race, religion, political opinion. The asylum laws don't care about her fear that once back in Cambodia men would come and take her back to that windowless room.

"The Immigration Judge didn't believe a word she said. The Homeland Security lawyer explained that customers saw no evidence that she was kept against her will. She had stellar reviews on the message boards, in which she was praised for being eager to please and going the extra mile. She was just an illegal alien Asian hooker sneaking in here to make more money. 'Cambodia and Thailand are democracies,' the IJ said, and that was the end of the discussion."

I could see how much effort it took for her to keep her voice so calm.

"I hear that a lot of asylum applicants do lie," I said. I wasn't trying to be contrary. Just wanted to give her some perspective. It was a sad story, but one that I thought an economic migrant might well adopt if she thought it gave her a chance to stay in America.

I should have been more sensitive. Lara had explained to me that though she was born in Louisiana, her family, refugees from Vietnam, could be considered Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, or perhaps even French, depending on who was doing the considering. She felt a connection to that corner of the world in complicated ways.

"Yes, that's what I'm told," Lara said, her voice perfectly flat, emotionless. "Aliens lie because they want to live among us. There are videos of her posted in some of the sex forums as advertising. I'll show you one."

I started to object, but she stopped me. "If you're going to call someone a liar, you should at least see what she looks like."

She pulled up a video on her laptop. A naked Asian woman was straddling and writhing on top of a man whose face was outside the frame of the camera. She licked her lips seductively and smiled into the camera, reaching up to cup her breasts. She looked so young and thin.

I examined her face. Was she looking off-camera for threats that prodded her to redouble her efforts? Or was she simply enjoying the sensuality of her own performance? Or perhaps those threats were embedded so deep in her mind that she could no longer tell the difference between her will and theirs. I thought she looked a little like Lara. With a start and a hot blush of shame, I found that I was aroused.

We watched the video in silence. We behave differently when we are being watched, or watching.

*

Lara took on more asylum cases like Sang's. She stayed later at work, worked through more nights. The question consumed her: "How do I help them?"

The laws provided no answers. One after another, they were deported, sent back to their nightmares.

I certainly understood obsessions. I was a part of the Contact community.

Maybe there was a way to answer both our questions at the same time, I thought. I convinced Lara to take her first two-week vacation, and we planned it out.

*

Mary Marshall, forty years old, thin and wiry like a dancer, led us into the one-bedroom apartment that also served as her office. There was no air conditioning, and the heat and humidity of Bangkok sapped my energy. Looking at me with pity, Mary handed me a bottle of Coke. Her face was weary, hard, worn down by years spent trying to change the implacable.

"You don't get much funding, I take it," Lara said, looking around the small and cramped room: stacks of paper threatening to fall over, an ancient beige computer, photographs of young women, not smiling into the camera. We had found Mary on the web and corresponded with her a few times before we came.

"No." Mary's accent was flat, unobtrusive, comforting. Somewhere in the Midwest. "Trafficking in Thailand is not a cause that a lot of people care about. The Thai government likes the money that Western sex tourists pump into the economy, and most women being trafficked are from China, Laos, Myanmar, or Cambodia, not Thailand, so why should they care? Tourists think that there are only happy working girls and ladyboys here, and often it's hard to tell because consent comes in shades of grey.

"Often Americans and Europeans tell me that I shouldn't impose my puritan values on the Asians, because Thai women love sex and love *farang* men and their money even more. 'It's part of Asian culture!' They deny that slavery still exists in this world."

*

Mary was skeptical of our plan, but she agreed to help since we would fund it.

I logged onto a Contact site and confirmed that there were two probes wandering around the city. One was presently near the Chao Phraya River.

Mary sketched out on a map the path that we needed to follow to get to the go-go bar that she had selected. Then we took a taxi to the probe by the river.

It was hovering among the tourists and vendors bustling along the riverbank. The Thai government had driven all the beggars in the area away when the probe showed up, but now no one was paying much attention to it. The three of us fanned out and approached it purposefully.

Our deliberate movements alarmed it. The probe backed away and moved towards a more open area. I gestured for us to stop, adjusted our positions and directions of approach, and then we walked towards the probe again. This was a technique a few other posters on the Contact forums had experimented with, and they had

achieved good results. Slowly but steadily, we nudged the probe in the direction we wanted it to move.

It figured out what we were doing after a hundred feet or so. Then it sped up, dodged around us, and headed back towards the river. Some tourists had stopped to watch our strange dance.

"If you draw the attention of the police now and make them think we're bothering the probe, we won't get anywhere," Mary said.

Lara stopped moving, and waited until the probe also stopped, now about ten feet away. She faced it and whispered, "You have to come with us. We need to show you something." She bit her lips. As far as we knew, the probes had never shown any response to spoken requests.

"I know you," Lara said, her eyes widening. "Yes, that was us back in Cambridge." She grabbed my arm. Her grip was so tight that it hurt.

I looked at Lara in disbelief. No one had ever been able to tell individual probes apart. Was she fooling herself or had she seen something the rest of us missed?

"Please come," Lara said. She backed away from the probe, away from the river.

Miraculously, the probe followed.

*

The go-go bar was dimly lit and crowded. Dance music shook the floors and a pungent mixture of perfume and sweat filled the air. People shouted to be heard. I listened to the voices, trying to identify the languages and accents: the customers were English, Australian, American, German, French, with a few Japanese. The women danced nude on stage or giggled among the customers.

Mary handed small bundles tightly wrapped in cloth to the two Thai bouncers who had let us in. Knowing that they were with us, I felt safe enough to take out my video camera and began to film. I panned around, taking in the crowd, the nude women, and the probe bobbing along behind me. As people noticed the probe, a

circle of silence and stillness expanded around us. Only the music remained. A barman took out his phone and began to dial frantically.

She said something to the bouncers in Thai.

The men, large, bald, one with a long scar that cut diagonally across his face, stashed the bundles from Mary away. They walked towards the back of the bar, the crowd parting before them. We followed in their wake.

"We'll hand over the other half of their fee once we've seen the girls," Mary said to me. Lara glanced back at me and the camera, her face frightened but also determined.

Down the stairs, through a warren of twisting hallways and locked doors, we ended up in a short hall with more locked doors on both sides. From behind one of the doors, we heard a woman's intermittent screams. Between screams came moans that could be either pleasure or pain, and a man's voice. His tone was like a teacher's.

There was a pause and the man behind the door shouted a question, and the man with the scar on his face with us yelled something back. Then he laughed, and the man behind the door laughed too.

The men with us held out their hands, palms up. Mary shook her head. The scarred man began to argue with her in whispers. Mary shook her head again and pointed at her watch, pointed upstairs, and mimed making a phone call.

The men sighed, and Scar walked over to the door with the screaming woman inside. He knocked on the door.

A thin, naked man opened the door. He paused when he saw us, and as his eyes took in the probe hovering next to Lara, his mouth opened in surprise and the cigarette that was dangling in his mouth fell to the ground. Scar brought his arm down hard to strike him behind his neck, and the naked man collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Behind him, we could see a naked girl strapped down on top of a table, her legs spread open with a bar secured in place between her knees. She was moaning theatrically, her face locked into the rictus of an exaggerated smile. Electrical wires extended from a machine plugged into a wall, the naked copper contacts lying on the table next to her. I continued to film.

"The electric shocks leave no marks to damage the goods," Mary said. "I tried it on myself once. It's not something you forget easily."

The girl looked at us with no comprehension. She continued to contort her face into a smile, and bucked her hips suggestively. She moaned again.

Mary handed another two cloth-wrapped bundles to the men who took us down here. They quickly left the way we had come.

"Let's hope that the police show up before the gangsters do," Mary said. "I put the call in half an hour ago and they know this place very well. I annoy them, so I hope they believed me when I told them a probe would be involved."

While Mary stepped around the unconscious man on the ground, untied the girl, and wrapped a blanket around her, Lara picked up the wires and gestured to the probe.

"Come and feel this," she said. "So you know what she was feeling. This is not making love, though maybe it looks similar to you. But you must understand the difference. I'm ashamed to show you this: something that members of our species also do to each other."

The probe drifted towards her.

*

Loud shouts echoed down the corridors. We heard the sound of stumping feet and slamming doors, closer and closer.

The door to the short hall banged open. A crowd of men emerged, holding sticks and knives.

In the lead was a large man with cold eyes. He looked around the space, glancing in turn at me, at Mary who cursed at him, at Lara hugging the girl on the table. He paused when he saw the probe. But after a moment of hesitation, he gave an order.

The men rushed at me, for the camera.

Everything slowed down.

The probe flashed and disappeared from next to Lara. Then it appeared in front of me. Bright electric arcs unfurled from the probe, like spider silk, like strings of cotton candy, like winter breath, and extended towards the men running at me.

How can this be? I thought. Time is moving so slowly.

The electric arcs struck the men in the chest. They fell to the ground like puppets with their strings cut.

Time returned to normal. The probe bobbed.

The man with the cold eyes lay on the ground, trembling. His eyes were focused on some horror that only he could see. His lips twitched, but no sound came out.

*

The police arrived a few minutes after the probe struck down our would-be assailants. "What happened?" they asked.

I offered to play back the scene on my video camera. But the electric arcs, so vivid in my memory, did not show on film. My jerky camerawork only captured the men running at us and then suddenly stopping.

"Guess they thought better about attacking a probe," the police captain suggested.

*

"Thank you for convincing me to do this," Lara said, when we were back at our hotel.

"You cared about something important," I said. "And I was tired of the planet putting on a Potemkin village show for the probes. I wanted to see how they'd react to another side of us. It might tell us what they wanted."

Rationally, my experiment was a failure. Even if I had not imagined the probe's attack, it probably had done so only to defend itself. We were as much in the dark now about its creators' intentions as before.

"How did you recognize the probe?" I asked.

Lara lay on the bed, her hands laced behind her head. She looked tired, but radiant. "Maybe I'm crazy. But I heard a voice in my head. 'Thank you for showing us how you make love.' And then later, after the lightning attack, I heard the voice again. 'Thank you for showing us everything.'"

I stared at her. "You saw them too? There was nothing on film."

She nodded, and smiled. I didn't feel like a failure any more.

"You think they understood everything?"

"I hope so." Her face became serious again. "But sometimes it matters less that the audience understands than that an audience is present."

*

"This isn't going to make any lasting difference, you know?" Mary said. We were in her office again, the last day of our vacation.

"Corruption runs deep here. They shut down that bar and arrested the owners, and the Prime Minister will make a few speeches. People might pay attention to your video for a few days, but things will go back to the old ways soon enough. Many men are interested in paying to bed smiling girls without wanting to look behind those smiles."

"People behave differently when watched," Lara said. "And now that we've brought a probe in to witness it, maybe other governments will apply more pressure on Thailand. People care about the impression we give the probes, the

way you clean your house when guests arrive for a visit. The gaze of outsiders has a way of letting us see into our blind spots."

Mary laughed. "You're just talking about political theatre."

"No. The probes are reminders that whatever we do, we're always under the gaze of the universe."

"Like being watched by God and angels," Mary said. She stopped laughing.

"Faith does not require religion," Lara said.

*

The Contact forums exploded with our news.

"You should both rot and die in a dark jail cell," someone wrote. "It was reckless to engage the probes without knowing what they really want."

"What makes you think involving outsiders will help our problems?" someone else wrote. "Bangkok's red light districts began as R&R centers for other outsiders, American soldiers in Vietnam. The aliens are not the answer."

But other activists began to adopt her model, bringing the probes to mines in China worked by bought children, to refugee camps Australia where men were herded like animals, to places that the world preferred to forget, where the probes could witness things that many did not want them to see.

The governments of the world grew nervous and began to shut us down.

*

On the anniversary of their landing, the probes all over the world lifted off. We stood in the streets again and watched as the trails of fire and smoke slowly rose into the sky, like caterpillars climbing up a wall.

We never did find out what the probes wanted. But the answer didn't seem so important now. It was enough that we would behave differently, now that we had an audience in the universe.

"Maybe they've seen enough," I said. "And we'll hear their judgment soon."

Lara held my hand. "I hope they keep on watching."

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SECOND PRIZE

Edoardo Albert lives in London with his wife and sons. He sometimes gives tutorials to theology undergraduates, which comes in useful when writing about angels. He's had work published by *Daily Science Fiction*, *Untied Shoelaces of the Mind* and *Science in My Fiction*, among others.

Neighbor from Heaven

by Edoardo Albert

If you had any idea how much money a university chair is supposed to bring in these days, you'd forgive me for not paying much attention when Mr. Arcangeli moved in next door. How was I supposed to know he was an angel? I mean, apart from the wings. But mostly he kept himself to himself and though Sophie, my partner, did mention to me once or twice over a hurried morning coffee that we really should ask him over, somehow we never got round to it. We're busy people. I had the vice-chancellor breathing down my neck and Sophie was chairing two charities, three boards of governors, and the local allotment association.

The doorbell rang. It was late, I'd only just got back from the university and it was pouring outside. We looked at each other, then Sophie went back to answering her emails.

The doorbell rang again. I sighed, and went to answer it.

"Yes?"

Mr. Arcangeli stood there, dripping wet, water plastering his rather ill-matched clothes to his thin frame, the flight feathers of his wings trailing on the ground. He appeared to be crying, although that might have been the rain.

"You are going to hell and there is nothing I can do to stop it," he said.

I pushed the door and it gently swung back, shutting him out.

"Who was it, dear?" Sophie asked without looking up from her computer.

"The new neighbor. He's a nut. Worse, he's a religious nut."

Sophie nodded. "It's the wings."

The doorbell rang again.

"Ignore him," said Sophie.

And I tried, I really tried, but years of politeness training, my own insecurities and the fact that I didn't want a scrawny looking chap with wings dripping in the porch meant that I went back.

"Yes?"

Mr. Arcangeli spun back towards the door and I realized, to my immense annoyance, that he had been on the point of leaving. A rather desperate smile flashed across his drawn features.

"It doesn't have to be that way," he said.

"What way?" I said. "And what is it with angels and rain?"

The angel glanced up ruefully. "I was about to say I hadn't noticed, but that would turn you into Hugh Grant and me into Andie McDowell." He blinked some rain out of his eyes. "It's odd, being incarnate."

"Sure, that's what they all say."

"Do they?"

I nodded. "Yes. They do."

Mr. Arcangeli proffered his rather wet hand. "Rafa Arcangeli."

What could I do? I shook it. It was cool, and wet, and not quite as unpleasant as I had expected. "Pleased to meet you."

"About this hell business." (He still hadn't let go of my hand, and now I wanted it back.) "There's still time." (I began to pull.) "You can change." (Pulling harder.) "Repent." (Tug.)

My hand snapped free and I all but tumbled backwards.

"Go away," I said. "We don't want any."

"Any what?" Mr. Arcangeli stepped forward, coming too far into my personal space for comfort. "Life, love, bliss eternal?"

"Any of that stuff," I said. "Now please leave."

"Couldn't I at least come round for dinner—coffee—a glass of water?"

Anything to get rid of him in the here and now. "Coffee. Next week?"

"Thank you. When?"

"Oh, Tuesday," I said, knowing we'd both be home late.

How was I supposed to know he'd spend that Tuesday perched on the roof of our porch like some great, bedraggled bird. It quite upset the postman. And yes, it rained again.

Of course, I'd forgotten the invitation, so I didn't know the answer when Sophie opened the door while I was fumbling for my keys and said, brittlely, "Darling, you'll never guess who's come round for coffee."

Rafa Arcangeli sat shivering on our sofa. Sophie had spread a towel for him to sit on, another covered the floor and a third was wrapped around his shoulders, but even so he still trembled. Sophie smoothly took the cup and saucer from his shaking hands and set them on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Work. Didn't expect to be so late. Have you been waiting long?"

"All day."

"You didn't have to sit on the roof," said Sophie as she moved behind the angel, shifting lamps and vases out of wing range.

"I didn't want to miss you," said Rafa, turning to Sophie, his left wing nearly knocking his coffee cup on to the floor. With his back turned, I mouthed, "On the roof?" to Sophie and she glowered her answer back. This ball was now firmly in my court.

"We're home now," I said. "You still look cold, though. Can I get you something more warming?"

"Um, if you have any, er, spirits, they might help."

I poured a generous vodka for Mr. Arcangeli and a couple of G&Ts for Sophie and me.

"I didn't think angels drank," I said, as I handed him the glass. The ice tinkled as his hands closed around it.

"Oh, we don't drink," he said. "It's a symbolic refreshment: we're spirits and this"—he held up the glass and peered through the clear liquid—"is spirit too. And a symbol makes present the symbolized. Cheers!"

*

"Rishard, you're my only friend."

I tried to dodge as a very drunk angel attempted to embrace me. I was leading, supporting and sometimes carrying him back to his house, and never can a front garden path have felt so long. So far he had: burst into tears; fallen over; attempted to fly; climbed on the bonnet of our car; and begun to roost in a large hydrangea—presumably on the basis that he had wings and was therefore a bird. And all this as a result of one, not very stiff, drink.

Sophie, having seen him safely out of our house, was watching proceedings from our porch with more amusement than I thought strictly necessary. But, as she'd pointed out when I helped Rafa out of the door, "You invited him."

At last I got him to his front door. He stood, swaying but upright, and felt for his keys in—I must say—some rather unexpected places. Thankfully he didn't need any help putting the key in the lock.

Rafa pushed the door open and a golden light streamed out, illuminating him and producing an extraordinary iridescence in his, previously rather dull, wing feathers.

"Itsh heaven in there," he said, swaying to the pulse of the light. I went to peer in round the door but he stopped me.

"You mushn't." He leaned closer and attempted to focus his drink-clogged eyes on me. "It'd blow your mind. Into eeny weeny, tishy little bitsh." He shook his head. "Not good."

Under the bureaucratic layers that had accumulated over the years was the scientist I once was. Of course I wanted to see what was producing that strange light. If my eyes did not deceive me then there were at least two colors in the light for which I had neither name nor, afterwards, memory, other than the impression of their existence. Anyway, how difficult could it be to get past a drunk angel?

"Look!" I pointed off in to the distance. Rafa turned his drink-addled wits in that direction. I ducked under his arm and...

And the next thing I knew I was sitting in the hydrangea. The angel stood over me in a posture I recognized from my childhood: the wagging finger of doom.

"That" wag "wash very" wag "naughty" double wag. I'd not had such a finger wagging since I was six.

I struggled out of the bush, accompanied by more laughter from Sophie than seemed appropriate.

"But it wash a good night," admitted Rafa, swaying extravagantly.

"So when are you going to invite us back?" I don't usually chase invitations so blatantly, but this was for science.

"Yesh." He nodded, as if listening. "Thurshday. Eightish," and then disappeared, closing the door before I had a chance to accept.

*

Ring.

I stepped back from the doorbell and glanced over to Sophie who raised her chin, looking, I must admit, really rather fine. I'd opted against a tie but I was wearing a jacket.

Ring again.

"You're sure it was Thursday?"

I nodded and rang a third time. Still nothing. I rapped the door knocker, rang, knocked with knocker and knuckles, but still no answer.

"The light's on."

"I can see that." Although it appeared to be a perfectly normal electric light. I peered through the frosted glass beside the door but saw nothing moving, then tried the letter box.

"See anything?"

"Catalogues and pizza boxes." Some of the piles were reaching architectural proportions: how Rafa stopped them from being blown over when he opened the door I couldn't see. But it didn't look like he was going to open the door today.

We found a note on our door mat next morning, apologizing for letting us down but not inviting us round again.

"What do you think is going on?"

Sophie shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea, and I'm not sure I particularly care."

But I did. It was over two weeks before I spotted Rafa again—he had taken to leaving and returning in darkness—so when I did see him I rushed over before he could gun his motorbike into life.

However, having cornered him, I was faced with the problem of what to say. Asking about the abortive invitation would seem desperate, so in the end I settled for a leading greeting. "Good morning. We haven't seen you for a while."

Rafa settled himself atop his motorcycle.

"Nice bike," I added.

"It does the job." Rafa caressed the casing as if it was a horse. "I'm sorry about the other evening."

"Oh, don't worry." But when Rafa put on his helmet, ready to depart, I realized he was going to take me literally. "But you never did say what happened."

Rafa snapped the visor up.

"Orders." He pointed upwards. "From above. I wasn't to let you in." The engine shrieked into life.

"Why not?"

For a moment a tear glittered in the angel's eye, and then he snapped down the visor. His voice emerged muffled from within the helmet.

"It'd be cruel. Why give you a taste of something you'll never know." He twisted the throttle, slipped the bike into gear and disappeared down the road, a leatherclad angel with his wings folded back.

"You're not claiming God's a Calvinist, are you?" I shouted after him, but of course he couldn't hear.

*

That was when I became a spy.

First, I kept a log of Rafa's comings and goings. It quickly emerged that he was hardly ever in during the day, and most evenings he'd be out until late. However, the house lights appeared to be on timer switches, as they switched on at dusk whether Rafa was in or not.

"No. Surely not." I was sitting in our front room with the lights out, watching the angel's home. "Sophie, come and see this." She came in, finger marking the page in her book, and I pointed at our neighbor's porch. Standing on it under the glare of halogen lamps were Phillip and Rebecca Franks, Rafa's other neighbors. She was holding a bunch of flowers and he was carrying a bottle of wine and as we watched, the front door opened and they were bathed in a heavenly light of which they seemed quite unaware. A hand—Rafa's I presumed—emerged from behind the door and ushered them in, closing out the light behind them.

I shook my head, almost unable to believe what I had just seen. The Franks were reasonable enough people, I suppose, for what they were, but...

"They're not exactly out of the top drawer," I said. "They take the Daily Mail."

"Did you see the flowers she was carrying? Gladioli. I ask you," Sophie snorted.

"Why would Rafa let them into heaven and not us?"

"By the look of them they didn't even realize where they were." Sophie looked down at the book she was reading and *tskked* briskly; she had lost her page. "In any case, would you want to stay somewhere that welcomed them? Eternity in a place as tacky as Benidorm." She headed out of the room to continue her reading, leaving me to my lonely watch. Of course, she was right. Anywhere that allowed the Franks in, even temporarily, was not likely to be suitable for us. But still, it was galling to see them emerge, an hour and forty-three minutes later, pink-cheeked with wine and sparkling with laughter. And even through our triple glazing I heard Rafa call after them, "Please, do come again."

I decided I was going to get into heaven, with or without an invitation.

Unfortunately, an academic career had not furnished me with many of the necessary skills for breaking and entry, but it's astonishing what you can find

online these days. I rejected the tried and trusted, but crude, brick-through-back-window option as too dependent on no one hearing, but there were plenty of others. All the authorities agreed that best of all was simple carelessness on the part of the burglee and sure enough, when I got home from the university the next day, I saw an upstairs window at the back of the house had been left open. Rafa's motorcycle was nowhere to be seen and if he kept to his usual pattern, he wouldn't be home for hours. And, best of all, Sophie had meetings all evening and wouldn't be back until after dark.

Did I have the nerve? More to the point, did I have the ladder?

The answer I realized, as I laid out my stepladder on the lawn and mentally compared its length to the height of the window, was no. I couldn't tell if I was disappointed or relieved. But then I saw it, lying against the side of Rafa's house as if forgotten: a two-stage aluminum ladder. That would be long enough.

The window was still open. I went to check at the front: no sign of Rafa. I telephoned his home number and heard the receiver faintly ring, and got the message: "This is Rafa Arcangeli. It's heavenly to hear from you, so speak after the tone and I will get back to you."

I don't remember any definite decision to climb over the fence. One moment I was standing in our garden, the next I was scrambling over with some nonsense that I was looking for a ball our grandchildren had kicked over the fence running through my mind as a response if challenged. Of course, we didn't have any grandchildren, but Rafa didn't know that. I'd have thrown a football over the fence first if I had one.

It was a perfectly normal suburban garden and I strove to look perfectly normal too as I walked towards the house. And rather than check if I was being watched, I simply picked up the ladder and extended it up to the window, as if I often engaged in this sort of thing. But I couldn't refrain from a last look and listen before starting to climb.

And climb.

And climb. The window wasn't getting any closer. I looked down, then wished I hadn't. The ground was a long way away—maybe three stories. That was strange, since Rafa's house, like our own, only had two stories. I looked up again. The window stood open and I thought I could see, reflected in the frosted glass, the unearthly colors of heaven, diffusing through what must be the toilet. I started climbing again, but I counted the steps this time.

"One, two, three..." I stopped when I got to fifty and clung to the ladder, my chest heaving so much it threatened to knock me from the ladder. But whatever happened, I wasn't going to look down, I definitely wasn't going to look down...

I looked down.

I believe at that point I emitted a small, shrill noise, rather like a child's squeaky toy being trodden underfoot. I emitted a second such noise when I realized that the small shape I saw on one of the more distant rungs was, in fact, a pigeon, roosting. Below me. Several hundred feet below me.

That was when I made the mistake of looking around. The ring of suburban gardens and houses had gone. I was surrounded by clouds. Oops, no. Observation soon told me I was wrong there. I wasn't surrounded by clouds. I had surmounted the clouds. I was surrounded by sky. Blue, empty sky. Apart from the plane...

I believe a child, sitting on the port side of the plane, saw me clinging to a ladder in the air and turned to tell his mummy, but I don't know if he persuaded her to look at "the man climbing to the sky"; by then I had my eyes closed and my arms locked.

Cracking one eye open, I looked up, which was the only safe direction. The window was still open, and there definitely seemed fewer steps to go. And if I just looked straight ahead I could fix my eyes on bricks. But although my mind had decided to continue climbing, my body was determined to stay exactly where it was. That was when my left leg started pistoning and I knew that if I didn't start moving I was going to fall off. So I made the move. One rung, then another, then another, until, finally, I could see that the window was definitely getting closer. I began counting

down the remaining steps. "Twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three..."

As I came to the penultimate rung I reached up to grab the window sill. That was when the window closed. A hand, belonging to somebody I could not see, pulled it shut, crushing my fingers. I jerked backwards, trying to pull the fingers clear, and my hand flew free, momentum carrying me back and back and back as I reached desperately for the stepladder, opening my mouth for the longest, most drawn out scream since Icarus.

And put my foot down on the ground. I blinked at the suburban surroundings. They stared solidly back.

The back door swung open and Rafa stood there, looking at me.

"Ah..."

He lobbed a football to me. "You were looking for this?"

*

I didn't tell Sophie. For her part, she maintained some interest in the doings of our neighbor but I could tell, when she started suggesting we take weekends away together, that she thought I was becoming a trifle obsessed. But then, her background was in the arts. I was a scientist, and I was on the track of something to rank with Newton splitting light. I wasn't about to let go of that.

So I kept trying, but no more ladders. The tried and trusted brick-through-a-window routine proved less trustworthy than I'd hoped. The brick bounced. As did stones, crowbars and a broken laptop.

In the end, I was left with no option. If I couldn't break in, I'd have to trick Rafa into letting me in.

There appears to be a class of people for whom fires and arson are obsessions. Over the next few days I learned more about accelerants, fuses and combustible materials than I ever wanted, and certainly more than enough to cause a small fire in a suburban house without it getting out of control.

Rafa still disappeared in the morning on his motorbike. He'd taken to belting his wings around his waist after a momentary lack of concentration on the M25 had seen the wings unfurl and immediately produce enough lift to hoist angel and machine into the air. He'd had to clamp his thighs tight and hook his toes under the footrests to stop the bike turning into an unexpected plane. (I heard all this from the Franks one morning, apparently now bosom pals with Rafa.)

My preparations ready, I waited until Rafa had gone and the road was quiet. It's a dead end, so only the residents come down here and most of them were now at work. Pulling a pair of surgical gloves on, I walked casually over to Rafa's house holding what looked like a few items of misdirected mail.

A quick glance around. All clear. I rang the bell. No answer. Again. Silence. Another look. Everything was still and quiet.

I pushed the letters through the letter box, flicking the flame of a lighter over them as they went in. I'd soaked them with a slow-acting accelerant beforehand. Through the frosted glass of the door I saw a yellow flicker.

Walking briskly but casually, I went back to my house and carefully set fire to another few items of junk mail that I had arranged over the doormat. Once they were burning freely enough to scorch the door and char the mat, I doused the fire with a pan of water.

Vandals, pushing burning letters through the letter boxes of neighboring houses, were not unheard of. Lucky that I had been working from home and so was on hand to extinguish the fire in my house before it took hold, and raise the alarm with my neighbor.

I checked the time. I'd done everything in less than ten minutes. Rafa couldn't have gone far. I rang his mobile.

"This is Rafa Arcangeli. It's utterly divine to hear from you, but I can't take your call right now, so please leave a message and I'll get right back to you."

I stared at the phone. Rafa *always* answered his mobile. I tried again. Still the same answer.

"Er, Rafa, you'd better get back home fast. Um, your house is on fire."

I put the phone down and checked outside. Smoke was beginning to trickle through Rafa's letter box. I tried again. Still no answer. The smoke was thicker now, and blacker. This was all going horribly wrong. God damn it, Rafa was an angel, how dare he be unavailable when I needed him?

I'd never had to ring 999 before. I didn't realize that it was like trying to ring your bank.

"All our operators are busy at this moment. You are in a queue and will be answered as soon as possible."

By the time I got through, flames were licking up the outside of Rafa's house. The fire brigade arrived just as the first section of the roof caved in. There wasn't much of the house left when they departed. The walls still stood, but the roof and floors were gone, and the house contents were a charred and sodden mess. The police and fire investigation officer remained behind to examine what was left. I'd already shown the fire investigation officer the scorch marks on my door when Rafa returned.

I heard his motorcycle before I saw it, its high-pitched whine changing down to a grumbling cough as it turned into the road. So I saw the angel as he slowly came to a halt near his house and pushed his visor up. A flicker of immense pain passed over his face. Rafa heeled down the footrest, switched off the ignition and stepped off the bike. He took off his helmet and stood looking at the burned out shell of his home. Standing behind the curtains in our front room, I found that however much I wanted to look away, I could not.

Rafa suddenly threw his helmet at the ground with such force that it shattered. His wings broke free of their restraints and spread out on either side of him, huge and flashing with brilliant red reflected light, as if the flames of the extinguished fire still burned. On the angel's face I thought I saw the play of fire light.

And then he turned and looked at me.

The angel strode up the path. I made a dash for the back but his knock caught me in the hall. I froze. If I moved, he'd hear me. And even though I knew he knew I was there, I couldn't let him hear me.

Rafa knocked again. Without moving feet or body, I turned my head. His shadow loomed over the front door, blocking out the sunlight but sending sparkling chiaroscuros of brilliance flashing through the glass and into the hall.

Rafa knocked for the third time. Perhaps if I moved very slowly and quietly away...

I never got the chance to find out.

"Darling, something terrible's happened." Sophie opened the door. I froze, one leg in the air, looking, I suspect, rather like some long-legged bird caught making the first steps of a ritual mating dance to the wrong female.

"What *are* you doing? Never mind, Rafa, do go in, and if there is anything we can do to help."

Suddenly the angel was standing in our hallway, his wings threatening to knock down mirror and vase.

"There is," he said. I tried not to look at him but I failed, in part because, although he was talking to Sophie, he was staring at me. "I need a new gate to heaven and I'd like to open it here."

"B-but, you said we weren't going to heaven," I stuttered.

"So I did. Well, things change."

"But they can't. They were orders from up there, those can't change."

Rafa smiled. "Wouldn't that make my life easier. But just because things are destined doesn't mean they can't change."

I must have looked rather blank, for Rafa leaned closer and whispered.

"You didn't think you could force your way into heaven by anything you did?" The angel wagged his finger. "It's given, not earned."

"But what about the Franks? Don't you want to move in with them?"

Rafa shook his head. "No. Besides, here I won't have to worry about the house burning down, will I?" And the angel winked at me, slow but none too solemnly.

I didn't wink back.

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THIRD PRIZE

Award-winning writer, Debra Purdy Kong, has been publishing short stories, essays, and articles for thirty years. TouchWood Editions has just released her first Casey Holland mystery, *The Opposite of Dark*. More information about Debra and her work can be found at www.debrapurdykong.com.

Inside Out

by Debra Purdy Kong

I'd ask the vendor how much this exquisite silver and turquoise bracelet costs, but she's busy staring at the approaching slim, middle-aged redhead.

"Hello, Lynn," the woman says to the vendor. "Gorgeous day, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." The vendor looks at the woman's open straw bag, then at the woman, then back to the bag... Oh. I put the bracelet down and automatically check my purse as unwanted memories spring up: a relaxing lunchtime stroll until the brutal tug on my purse strap. Falling. Weeks of physio for a frozen shoulder. And that creep with the mirrored sunglasses holding my purse in his thieving hands.

"It's a scorcher already." The woman dabs her brow with a handkerchief until she notices me. "Hello, you're new."

But I feel ancient. "To Dawson Island, yes."

"Welcome to the home of the artistic, retired, and displaced," she says. "I'm Asia. Where are you from?"

"Vancouver." I'll come back for the bracelet later. The last thing I need is chitchat. Three tables down, a display of jams and spreads catches my eye.

"The blueberry marmalade's good," Asia says behind me. "What's your name?"

Oh, hell. "Evelyn."

This vendor also looks at Asia with distrust. I pay for boysenberry jam and move on.

"Are you staying long?" she asks, still trailing.

"No."

"Too bad. You'll miss our autumn fair. It's much nicer than these dusty market thingies." She picks up a red pepper.

I should stock up on salad fixings, things I won't have to cook. I don't like cooking for one, but sitting alone in a café with happy, vacationing families would be worse.

"Are you staying at Cally Bay?" Asia asks.

"Yes." The island's only resort.

She picks up a yellow pepper. "Which cottage is yours?"

No way. I will not have my privacy invaded. Not by family, not by friends, and certainly not by strangers. "Where do you live, Asia?"

"At Luna Point, five miles south." Her glossy lips smile. "I'd love to live at Cally, surrounded by people having fun."

"Unless you're buying," the third vendor says to Asia, "you had better put those down."

Her cheeks turn pink as she puts the peppers back, then fiddles with the yellow chiffon scarf around her waist. A pink one's draped around her neck and a periwinkle scarf circles her straw hat.

"This table's for paying customers only," he adds in a surly tone.

"Yes, well, I must be off. Much to do." Asia's mouth twitches as she barely meets my eyes. "Nice to meet you, Evelyn. Maybe I'll see you again."

"Bye."

Even if she is a thief, was it necessary for the guy to be rude?

Asia hurries past two seniors who stop their conversation as they watch her leave. One shakes her head. It seems Asia has quite the reputation, but is it really warranted? Lord knows there was enough sordid, behind-my-back chatter until the truth came out.

Mrs. Easton, we now have proof that the rumors about your husband and your employee are true, the private investigator reported. The enclosed documentation shows that Jared Easton has visited Miss Melissa Tran at her apartment once a week for the past three months and have engaged in sexual

"Watch out for that crazy broad," the vendor says.

Broad? "Sorry?"

"She took a bag of cherries from me and claimed she forgot they were in her bag."

"Has she taken other things from people?"

"There's been stories."

"But no arrests?"

He lines up heads of cauliflower. "The cops don't care, she doesn't take anything major, and she talks to herself a lot. What a nut job."

What a jerk.

*

Why aren't you answering my emails? Emma writes.

Hard to say.

I'm worried, Mom. Are you all right?

No clue. Friends and employees ask the same thing. Half the bloody world wants updates on my emotional state.

Jared can't run things without you, my assistant writes. He hides in his office and won't return calls.

Melissa quit, our controller says. Nobody wants her here. We're all on your side.

Sides... My side, his side. My assets, his assets, to be itemized and valued, divided into legal halves. Meanwhile, the question—the one that won't go away—is where did I go wrong?

I delete all e-mails, wishing real life could be as easily banished. Finally to Emma, *I'm fine. Enjoying down time. Don't worry*.

On the sundeck, I try to take in the serenity of the marina below and the mountainous backdrop on the other side of the bay. The resort's pool is empty. Should I squeeze into my old one piece? Get back into shape?

Ten minutes later, I'm unlatching the pool's gate when a voice from behind says, "Hi."

I turn to find Asia approaching. Damn it, still not up for chit-chat.

"Don't I know you?" she asks.

"Evelyn, from the farmer's market."

"Oh, yes. I came to visit a friend but an old couple's in the cottage now." Asia grimaces. "I hate being around seniors, they make me think of dead husbands."

Hers or someone else's?

"Which cottage is yours?" she asks.

Not again. Is it selfish to want to keep my privacy?

"It's over there, with that group on the slope." I nod toward three tiered rows of cottages. "I'd better get my swim in before the kids invade."

"Have fun."

I fling my towel on a chair while Asia wanders toward the tennis courts, apparently without plans this weekday afternoon. Is she is a widow? Is that what you do when there's no one to go home to?

I dive into cool water and keep going until my feet touch the bottom. It's so peaceful down here that I resent my lungs for craving air. If I inhaled, how long would it take someone to notice? No. Wrong thinking. I push off, grapple to the surface... Break free and breathe.

Get a grip, girl. You lost a man, that's all. Not your whole world. Not completely.

*

After six days of solitude, the grocery store feels crowded. I spot Asia strolling past the deli counter, carrying a small paper bag and a Styrofoam cup. Maybe a little socializing wouldn't be so bad.

"Hello, Asia." She blinks a couple of times. No sign of recognition. "It's me, Evelyn."

Awkward moments, then a smile. "From Cally Bay; well, hello there. I'm off to the hairdresser with my rum and coke." Grinning, she raises the cup. "Actually, it's coffee."

Is it? She's acting a little stranger than usual.

"If you're ever at Luna Point, come for lemonade and biscuits. Or maybe I could pop by your cottage."

An uneasy thought. Still, prolonged isolation might not be smart after all, and why worry about theft? A wallet's easy to hide.

"I'm in number twelve."

Asia stares into her Styrofoam cup. "Where was I going?"

"Your hair appointment."

"That's right." She walks away, pink skirt flowing and waving like she's the Queen.

It's then I notice the blue flip-flop on her right foot, a green one on the left.

*

Have you hired a lawyer? my sister writes. I know a good one and don't listen to Mom, she's full of crap.

From Mom. You should keep your phone on, or just come home and work things out. Twenty-seven years is too long to throw away. Think about Emma.

Jared's asked me to try contacting you again, my assistant writes. I told him you're incommunicado, but can you make an exception just this once? Jared's dumped all your meetings on Mike, but the clients want you.

A knock on the door saves me from the fifty remaining emails. Asia's nose is pressed against the small window in the upper half. I'd wondered if she would remember the number I gave her yesterday.

"Come on in. I'm afraid all I can offer is coffee or orange juice."

She hands me a rectangular silver tin with a red bow taped to the lid. "Which goes with peanut brittle?"

Neither. "Thank you. Let's try coffee, though it's only instant."

"Of course." Asia removes her sun hat with the periwinkle scarf. "What's the point when you're alone. Hermione and Oscar don't drink coffee."

"Your kids?"

"My cats." She bites her lower lip. "I don't have children anymore."

One hell of a question. "I'm separated, but I have a grown daughter at university back east."

Asia stares at the peanut brittle. "Endings are devastating."

No shit. "I'll get the coffee."

Still carrying the tin, Asia wanders onto the sundeck. When I return with the coffee things, she's at the railing watching kids in the pool.

"Never, Rudy's buried here." She turns around. "Oh! I forgot to feed Oscar and Hermione today. Sorry, I have to go." Asia rushes to the door. "Please come for a visit. I'm the mauve house on Tidal Lane. It's the only mauve house around."

Somehow this doesn't surprise me.

*

There's been no sign of Asia all week and now I almost wish she'd drop in. An email from that tramp has triggered an angry adrenalin rush. I didn't plan to fall in love with Jared and I didn't plan my pregnancy. He and I need to make plans.

I fetch the car keys. The further south I drive, the less populated the island becomes. Soon there's only a few cottages and cow pastures surrounding the

[&]quot;Anymore?" I plug in the kettle.

[&]quot;Rudy was twenty years older than me and already had four from his first marriage. They don't keep in touch."

[&]quot;Your husband's passed on?"

[&]quot;Eighteen months ago."

[&]quot;How long have you lived here?"

[&]quot;Three years." Asia pries off the lid. "Are you alone too?"

[&]quot;Asia, do you ever think about leaving the island?"

occasional home. The mauve house on Tidal Lane is easy to spot. Orange marigolds and violet petunias border the gravel drive. Asia's kneeling in front of an enormous coral rose bush when I pull up. She rises slowly. A trowel dangles from her hand as she ambles toward me. At least her flip-flops match today.

"Hi, Asia."

A blank stare, then "Evelyn from Cally Bay!" She removes her hat and fluffs up her dark red curls. "Do you like the roses?"

"They're amazing." Enormous crimson, pink, and golden blooms fill the yard.

"Rudy's favorite flower." She attempts a smile. "Come inside."

Following Asia, I spot the label on the outside of her T-shirt, the protruding seams across the shoulders. Oh dear, should I tell her it's inside out or would this embarrass her? In the immaculate kitchen, she hands me a glass of lemonade and then ushers me into a spotless living room with a panoramic view of the rippling ocean.

"What a gorgeous, tranquil spot," I say. "No shouting kids or wailing babies."

"Want to switch?" Her expression is serious until a plaintiff meow brings out a smile. "Hermione, darling." Asia picks the Siamese. "This is my friend, Evelyn."

A chubby tabby wanders into the room and rubs against Asia's leg. While she fusses over the felines, I study photos of grinning kids on the mantle above the fireplace.

"Those are my Cally friends." Asia puts the cat down and picks up one of the photos. "These are twins, Mark and..." She hesitates. "It's so hard to remember everyone's name."

Where are the family photos? "Asia, do you have any relatives nearby?"

"My sister's in Ontario but we've never gotten along." Asia sighs. "You know what the worst part about being alone is?"

"No." Not yet.

"It's how you always worry that what you do or say will be misunderstood, like when you've forgotten to pay for something as you're leaving the store." She places the photo back on the mantle. "Or when you're pulling away from the curb and a Jeep suddenly crunches your bumper. Everyone assumes it's your fault because you're a little batty anyway." The corners of her mouth droop. "There's no one looking out for you, telling you that everything will be fine. So you wonder if things ever will be fine."

"But they are when you're in your own home, aren't they?"

"If you can stop analyzing every mistake."

Thoughts of Jared surface. I push them down.

"Wouldn't it be lovely to simply die in your sleep?" Asia stares at the ocean.

"Nature's euthanasia."

But we aren't supposed to admit that, are we? "May I use your bathroom?"

The doorbell rings. Through the vertical glass panes flanking the door, I glimpse an RCMP uniform. Uh-oh. Maybe I should have told her about her T-shirt.

"My, two visitors in one day." Asia rubs her hands on her lemon capris. "The bathroom's down the hall, first door on the right."

Five minutes later, I'm stepping out of the washroom and hearing Asia say, "Why would I take a camera when I have my own? I don't even know how to use those digital thingies."

"Three people saw you in the area the day it disappeared, Mrs. Browning," the officer replies. "So, I'm asking you to stay away from Cally Bay Resort. It's private property for paying guests only."

"What if I'm invited there?"

"Let the manager know. Meanwhile, I'd like permission to search the premises, or do we do this formally with a warrant?"

"Go ahead, Constable. I'm sure my guest won't mind."

A cue if ever there was one. Stepping into the room, I return the officer's cautious stare and tell Asia that I should go.

"Please don't. Constable Tomlinson wants to search my house which is perfectly fine since he and I get along well."

The officer zeroes in on the photos on the mantel.

"I took those with my own camera." Asia removes a camera from the cupboard beside the fireplace.

Tomlinson examines it a moment, then begins to search the room. When he's done, Asia and I follow him down the hall and into a room with a laptop and printer.

"This is the tidiest office I've ever seen," I tell her.

"It's Rudy's."

The officer conducts a half-assed search here and in Asia's bedroom before opening the door across the hall. I follow them over the threshold and into a kaleidoscope of colorful fabric covering every surface. To my right, dolls dressed in ethnic costumes fill floor-to-ceiling shelves. A table in front of the shelves is covered with trays of buttons, ribbons, beads and other bits and bobs. A sewing machine sits in front of a window exposing another incredible ocean view.

"I don't know where you'd begin, Constable," Asia says with a slight smile.

Tomlinson hesitates before starting in on the drawers. "Do you have an attic or basement, Mrs. Browning?"

"Just a tool shed out back and it's unlocked."

Once he's rummaged through cupboards he says, "I don't think I need to see anything else, but stay away from the resort, all right?"

"Certainly."

We watch the young officer drive away.

"Whew, that was close." Asia grins. "He's a nice man, though, isn't he?"

"What do you mean by close?"

Her smile becomes mischievous. "Come with me."

With trepidation, I follow her back to the doll room. If she does have the camera, should I report her? "The dolls are fantastic, Asia. How long have you been making them?"

"Most of my life. Rudy and I earned a nice little profit at craft fairs."

"Do you still sell them?"

"No, Rudy made all the arrangements and kept records on his computer which I don't know how to use."

Asia unzips the back of a large doll in a gingham dress. She removes a purple bag with a white draw string, opens the bag, and hands it to me. No camera, thank heaven; just a plastic yellow bracelet, two Hot Wheels, and a yo-yo.

"Souvenirs from friends," she says, "but not always with their parents' knowledge or approval."

The depth of her loneliness is unfathomable. Is this my future? It doesn't have to be this way, does it? Asia puts the bag back and then places the doll on the rocking chair.

"Asia, I could find the records you need. My husband and I own a software company and I'm pretty good with computers."

She waves her hand dismissively. "I'm retired from sales now."

"But you have all this stock and you'd meet lots of people. I could teach you how to find things easily."

She stares at me. "Why did you come by, Evelyn?"

The question catches me off guard. "To see how you were doing."

"What about you? How are you doing?"

What's going on here?

"I think you're trying to run away from hurt and uncertainty," she adds.

Somehow, I've crossed a line. "I should go."

"No, don't." Asia follows me to the door. "I'm sorry, I'm always saying the wrong thing."

But it wasn't the wrong thing. A pang of guilt stops me from leaving.

"And my memory's failing," she blurts out.

I glance at her inside-out shoulder seam. "Have you seen a doctor about it?"

"Several doctors a number of times." Asia gnaws on her lower lip. "They say fiftyeight is young for Alzheimer's, but the medication's supposed to slow things down."

It is young, too damned young. "This isn't public knowledge, is it?"

"Of course not. I'd rather people ridicule me than pity me."

"I could help you find a support group on the net and access to good information." Her blank stare is frustrating. "You don't need a good memory to use a computer, Asia. Everything can be saved or written down."

Her stare doesn't let up. "How are you really managing, Evelyn? You never said."

Lord, I wish I knew.

*

A groveling email from Jared contains one interesting bit. *If Melissa contacts you about a baby, it's a lie. She's lashing out. I need to talk to you. Please???*

Not until I can answer Asia's question. Wasn't this trip supposed to be about sorting things out? Making plans? Am I that desperate to avoid the future?

You need to stop hiding and come home, Mom wrote yesterday. Talk to Jared. He came to see me last night. He's so lost without you.

I typed back, Jared's girlfriend told me she's pregnant. Any advice about that?

How am I supposed to make life-changing decisions with only five vacation days left? I don't want to return home without some kind of plan. Anything would be better than this relentless, indecisive maelstrom. I rush out the door to avoid complete implosion.

Minutes later, sweat's trickling down my body and a headache's started under the blistering sun. I'm marching down the road toward the village, not ready to turn back although this would be the sensible thing to do.

A car slows beside me. "Evelyn, what are you doing out here without a hat or sunglasses?" Asia calls through the passenger's window. "Are you even wearing sunscreen?"

It's been three days since our last conversation. At least she remembers my name.

"Get in," Asia says. "I have air-conditioning and you look a bit of a mess, if you don't mind my saying."

I do what I'm told. "Got anything for a headache?"

"Thank you." I lean against the headrest, close my eyes, and enjoy the sweet relief of air conditioning.

[&]quot;Always."

"I've been thinking about computers," Asia says. "Is it as easy to meet people on the net as you said?"

"Sure, there's doll-making groups and people who grow roses or live on islands. It's like bringing them into your home."

"I think I'd like that."

*

After a couple of days of instruction, I watch Asia log on and show me her bookmarks for a dozen groups she's already joined. When I hand her the notes I've typed up for logging in and email usage, she hugs me. I'd forgotten how good a hug can feel.

"You're a fantastic teacher, you should do more of it. Change can be a good thing."

"For a lucky few."

"They say successful people make their own luck."

"Luck and success was always a joint thing in my life, but now, who knows?"

She peers at me. "Your separation really is brand new, isn't it?"

I answer her by divulging all the highs and lows of my life: falling for Jared at university, building our company, Emma, success, and then the third-party fracture. Asia listens without interruption, even during the sobbing ranting bits. When I finally wind down, she squeezes my hand and says nothing. I'm not sure whether it's her silence or that I dumped everything on someone who has no emotional stake in my life, but for the first time in days I feel better.

*

Please, talk to me, Jared writes for the third time. Finally, I reply.

We'll talk soon, I've made some decisions. Over the past twenty-four hours, desires and priorities have begun to gel. It's time to break free, sell Jared my half of the company. Asia's right, change can be a good thing.

An hour later, she and I are in one of the island's two restaurants, gabbing about her new online acquaintances and laughing. People gawk at us now and then, as if to remind us that we're two fish out of water at this family vacation spot, but who cares? Asia's joy is contagious.

"What will you do when you go home tomorrow?" she asks.

"All the things I couldn't do while building our company. Make new friends, pursue hobbies, maybe try teaching."

"You'll email me, won't you?" Asia asks with a hint of uncertainty.

"You and my immediate family are the only people I will email."

Smiling, she removes a camera from her handbag. Digital. "May I take your picture?"

I gape at her a moment, then raise my martini glass and grin. "Cheers, sweetie."

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HONORABLE MENTION

Neil James Hudson last appeared in *On The Premises* with "The Haunting of Joselyn Seacroft" in July 2010. He lives in the North Yorkshire moors in the UK and can be found online at http://neilhudson.livejournal.com.

A Brick Wall

by Neil James Hudson

A brick wall can be much more interesting than you'd imagine. The bricks themselves have an almost infinite variety if you study them closely, each one a slightly different shade from the others. Some are bright red, almost as if blood wouldn't show up on them, but some are much duller brown. These ones I don't find interesting. Even within an individual brick, there can be differences in color. Sometimes you find a dark patch showing a flaw (I suppose) in the brick, but even an ordinary brick can display a whole range of shades. And the same goes for texture. Some parts of the wall are rough, so rough that you can become sore and even draw blood by rubbing a hand against it. Other parts seem smoother than my own flesh.

If this isn't enough, there are patterns in the mortar that holds it all together. Small discolorations and voids, sometimes a gap big enough for me to put a finger in. If all these holes were moved around a single brick, nothing would keep it in place.

The other three walls are the same.

So is the floor. So is the ceiling, except for its single lamp that provides my light. It's a good thing the bricks are so interesting.

I was more interested in what was on the other side.

After I first came here, I thought I could hear someone behind the wall. For hours I would sit with my ear up against it, unsure if I was hearing another prisoner, or if it was only my own movements against the wall. Sometimes I tried calling out, but I heard no reply. I found myself obsessed by the question of what was behind the bricks, but couldn't think of a way to get through. I wasn't alone here.

I'm glad to be writing again. I suppose they're kind to me. I'm well fed, though I've no idea how the food arrives. Usually it appears when I'm not looking, although more rarely it appears in front of me, suddenly existing where a split second earlier there was nothing. It can vanish just as quickly, so I don't hang around when I'm eating. These are my busiest times. Waste products disappear just as quickly, for which I'm always grateful.

Sometimes I wonder how I got in here in the first place. I have no memory from before this cell: I presume it was taken as part of my punishment. (I believe that I'm being punished, but my only evidence for this is my belief. I think the belief was given to me in exchange for my memory, so that I'd know why everything was taken from me.) There is no method of entry or exit: this chamber seems to have been built around me. I have enough space, my cell is a cube of about six meters. Plenty of room to move around: I keep fit. And every now again, they give me something to amuse myself. One time, they gave me a hat. It just appeared when I was expecting dinner, and I wondered what kind of mind game they were playing with me. But dinner arrived as well, so I wore my hat (a green trilby) while I was eating, and for a few days after, until I woke up to find it had gone. Another time I found a tennis ball. I loved that: there were so many uses for it. I invented all kinds of throwing and catching games. I tried to see how many walls I could bounce it off in one go. I pretended to be two different people, and played against myself.

I don't know how things appear and vanish. I've tried to study the process, but it happens so quickly. I have a theory though. I think my jailers are four-dimensional and can move in and out of this cell without having to pass through the walls, just as if I placed a crumb of dinner inside a square on this paper, or took it away again.

That's presumably how they got me in here in the first place. This is a prison only for the three-dimensional.

*

This morning, I couldn't believe my luck. A writing-pad and a pen. Perhaps they're showing a little pity for me. The last time I had paper, I filled it with speculation with what was on the other side of the wall. I wonder what they made of it.

Hello paper. I'm going to tell you a story.

At mealtimes, I'm not just busy eating. Only half of my attention is directed on my food. The other half is on the knife. I have wondered if I should just open a vein, but I'm too scared to die, and besides, I don't think they'd let me. Instead, I've been using it to open a vein in the wall. Ten rows up, about a third of the way in from the right, was the brick with the largest void in the mortar surrounding it. Still no larger than a finger, but I thought it was a start. At first I wondered if this was my infernal punishment, constantly to try to free a brick whose cement would grow back in the night. But I could see the grains of dust fall, and over the months I saw the gap around the brick become bigger. I can only scrape away for a few minutes at a time before the knife is removed along with the fork and plate, but the purpose filled me with a new hope. Slowly the cavities deepened, and finally I began to see that this wasn't idle fiddling, that one day I would actually be able to free the brick, and find the answer to my question.

And do you know what, paper? That day came, only six or seven dinners ago.

I could feel that the brick was becoming loose, and I was filled with joy and, frankly, fear, as I realized that my plan was about to succeed. And then suddenly I cried out in frustration as the knife disappeared from my hand without warning and I grazed my hand painfully on the wall. I couldn't bear to have my victory snatched from me, and I pounded on the brick. It shifted. I gave it a sharp rap, there was a snap as the remaining mortar broke, and to my astonishment, I was able to push it out of the wall. I heard it tumble to the floor on the other side.

At first I couldn't move. I stared at the gap in the wall, amazed at my own achievement. Then I came to my senses. I knelt before the hole and put my face against it, peeping through.

On the other side of the wall was a pair of eyes. I couldn't tell if they were male or female, but I think female. The lashes seemed feminine. I couldn't tell the color of the eyes, it was too gloomy and we were both blocking the light, but I stared into them, and felt as if I were dying of thirst, saved at the last possible moment.

The eyes stared back at me, and I tried to read the other's thoughts from them.

With a sadness greater than mine, she put the brick back in the wall.

*

Sometimes I wonder what crime I'm being punished for. I don't know, but I've never doubted for a minute that my punishment is just.

I no longer scraped with the knife. I no longer did anything. I had nothing to do and no reason for doing it, except to eat when the opportunity arose. I could try starving but I don't think I'd have the willpower. I may go hungry for a while though, just for a change. Perhaps if they see I'm not eating, they'll know there's something wrong.

But now I have the paper. I had no idea I would take to this so quickly. Look, I'm on my third sheet already. Perhaps writing will give me some purpose. Perhaps I can spend my time with words, expressing my thoughts and dreams, writing poems and letters. I hope so. I have nothing else now. I couldn't bear it if the paper suddenly vani

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HONORABLE MENTION

Rona Yohalem sits in front of a window overlooking Monterey Bay where she tries to make sense of her life by writing short stories. Sometimes it helps. The view, however, is always satisfying. While writing is her current passion, her background is in everything else.

Also, this story represents her first fiction sale to a paying market.

What Do You Want?

by Rona Yohalem

It's only 7:15 when the phone rings but Virginia doesn't want to answer it. She lets her head fall back on the couch and massages her forehead. Her feet are stretched across the coffee table where she is arranging photos of her vacation in Tulum. The view of the empty hammock lazing in the sun is a stark contrast to the ice crystals patterned on her windowpanes. Ruben Blades sings La Vida, the longing in his heart palpable. The voice on the answering machine begins, "This is Ft. Lauderdale Hospital calling. I'm looking for..."

Spilling a pile of prints, she grabs the handset. "This is Virginia Bernstein. What's happened?"

"It's your mother. She's in the critical care unit... a heart attack."

When she hangs up, her heart beats so rapidly, she's afraid she'll collapse. Maybe it's a mistake. No, they wouldn't call her if they didn't know. The radiator pings its staccato stammer over the music.

Galvanizing herself, she opens her laptop, finds a flight leaving La Guardia at 10:00 and books it. Now she calls her sister in Indiana and they agree to meet at the hospital.

Withdrawing her suitcase from the back of the coat closet, she lifts it onto the bed. Sand and scrunched plastic bags litter the bottom. Unable to decide what she needs, she opens every drawer and snatches the most available layer: underwear, socks, pullover, sweater, jeans, a scarf.

The phone rings again. She continues packing until she hears the voice of her daughter Amelia, and races over. "I'm so glad to hear your voice."

Her daughter interrupts. "Listen Mom, I know you said no more money but I'm in trouble."

"What is it? Where are you?"

"My landlord says if I don't pay him by tomorrow he's gonna kick me out."

Virginia steels herself. Her daughter recently completed a second go at rehab. Cocaine. "Sweetie, I'm on my way to Florida. Grandma's in the hospital with a heart attack."

"Just leave me \$800 in an envelope. Please, I've got to have it tonight. Gran will be fine." A pause. "I'll call her tomorrow. I promise." Her voice is dry and shaky.

Virginia closes her eyes and silently hears the voice of the counselor in her head. "You know I can't give you money." Silence. "Listen, why don't you come with me. I'll get another ticket."

"I can't. Not now."

"Amelia, wait..."

The connection is dead.

She calls back the unfamiliar number. A busy signal.

Scenes flash through her mind. Amelia sitting in this living room, face pale, nose red, weeping. An angry teenager stomping out the door. Living with some friend in a dingy tenement. It still doesn't seem possible. She'd been so careful to avoid the mistakes her mother made, but she must have found a whole other set. And now, she has been told, it is her job to let go, to allow her beloved daughter to hit bottom, and find her own way back.

Amelia, the ache that never leaves her.

And tonight her mother is alone in a hospital room. Her mother, who is furious with Amelia and who thinks Virginia isn't tough enough.

"You were always too easy on Amelia. It's time you demanded that she clean up her act."

"Mom, she's twenty-eight. I can't make her do anything. I know. I've tried."

"Bring her down here. I'll sit on her."

The hall clock strikes eight. She can't help Amelia and she doesn't want to fail her mother too. This time she could die. It's her second attack. A black dress? She shudders. No, bad karma.

Her mother doesn't believe in karma; she knows what's what.

"Listen, Virginia, you don't have to be a beauty to do better than Max," her mother had said after meeting her husband-to-be. "He'll run off and leave you." It didn't help any that she turned out to be right.

To top it off, Amelia blamed her for the divorce. And then there was Barry. A nice guy but the family therapist said that Amelia didn't want her mother to be sexual. It was too much like competition so Virginia kept her distance.

She races out the front door, forgets to turn on the alarm and has to go back. When she finally gets to the corner of West End Ave, every passing cab is occupied. It's sleeting and she has forgotten her gloves. Maybe she should run to Broadway. She catches sight of an empty cab up ahead but it stops and picks someone up before it can reach her. She hadn't noticed if there was a later flight.

She circles her head around to relieve the tension. Spotting another taxi, she drags the suitcase into the street to make sure the cabbie stops for her.

The turbaned driver mutters something about the Triborough Bridge.

"No, take the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. It's faster."

He snarls a few words she can't understand and makes a sudden U-turn cutting off another driver. The smell of leftover curry fills the air but the window will only come down halfway. Her internal thermostat rockets. Scrounging through her handbag she searches for tissues. It's a reminder of age she doesn't want right now.

The clock on the old bank building says 8:35. It's going to be close.

Her mother is only seventy-eight and she's a tough old broad. Always sure of herself. Always right.

Images drift through her mind. Her mother's engagement present, a bus trip to Atlantic City for a wild night of drinking and gambling. The three of them, her mother, sister and herself. "Better than a string of pearls or a Cuisinart." And she'd won \$260 at the craps table. High school, when they played Russian Bank, an obscure form of double solitaire until midnight. "C'mon, one more hand," her mother always said when Virginia's eyes were closing and she had to get ready for school the next morning.

Now they're whizzing down Second Avenue as she predicted but there's a delay on the on-ramp. The driver's dark eyes and beard are visible in the rear view mirror, a jewel clasp on the front of his turban. The name on his license makes her think he might be Indian or Pakistani. What happened to all the Russian drivers? She wishes he wouldn't beep his horn. Her head is already throbbing. In the window she sees her pixie short hair frizzing around her head, her mother's cupid lips and long nose with her father's dark coloring. The bags under her eyes are her own.

She peers out the window willing the cars out of the way. Maybe there's a game at Shea. Her mother still roots for the Mets. God, she got so excited that time when Virginia came home with box seats, a gift from a client.

Traffic is at a standstill. She has to make this plane. Their final words were an argument.

"How come you know how to lead my life better than I do?" Virginia had been angry.

"You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself. Get out there and find yourself a man. Go to a baseball game or a boxing match. Lots of men there."

"I'm hanging up now," she finally said. She had put down the phone and shut the ringer off. She knew it drove her mother crazy.

And now she's alone. They should never have let her move to Florida where she has no family. Of course her mother never asked their advice and wouldn't have listened had they offered it. She had to do everything her own way. Even the kids couldn't get her to answer if they called her Grandma. No, only if they addressed her as Ruthie.

The meter is ticking as they inch across the bridge. They creep forward, the driver hitting the horn and leaning his head out the window. And abandoning Amelia like this. It's too much. Trying not to get her hopes up, she dials the number she has for her daughter.

"You know the deal. Leave a number. I'm not a phone book."

Well at least the phone is still connected. It was easier when she was in the rehab center. Then, Virginia knew Amelia was safe.

"Hi sweetie. I don't want to leave it like this. Are you all right? I'm on my way to the airport. Call me, please. Let's talk."

Maybe she would, but Virginia wouldn't bet on it.

[&]quot;Are you sure this is legit?" her mother asked as she checked the seat location.

[&]quot;All the buyers in the store get them. Stop worrying." Actually Macy's discouraged such gifts but Virginia couldn't resist.

*

As they make it over the bridge into Long Island City, the driver pulls onto local streets. Fortunately, he knows the back way. Virginia stretches her shoulders once they reach 31st Street. It is a straight shot from here. But it's 9:25.

Oh, God. Should she call her son? Her head throbs. If she waits until she gets to Florida, it will be late. They pull up to the terminal. Later. Once she's through security, she feels the desolation of the airport late at night. A vise-like weight presses her temples as she races past the empty gates and shuttered shops. Who knows which of her mother's endlessly changing wills is in force? She must be making one Florida lawyer rich as she disinherits and reinstates children and grandchildren, one by one. Actually Virginia thinks there's not much left, but her mother is cagey.

When she sees people milling around at the last gate, she rushes up to the counter but they've shut the doors already.

"My mother is dying, I've got to get on that plane."

The counter woman looks toward the gate but shakes her head. "I'm so sorry but we've given away the seat."

"Oh, no. Please, I've got to get there tonight. Is there another flight?"

"That's our last until tomorrow at 7:15. Do you want me to see if there's a seat on that one?"

Virginia closes her eyes and thinks. "What about another airline?"

"Let me check." She types into the computer, reads, and then types some more.

Virginia is breathing hard. Perspiration drips down her chest inside her blouse. She watches the attendant move her lips slightly as she reads.

"There's a flight at 10:45 on Continental but it's in the next terminal. If you hurry you might make it. I'll call over to get you on stand-by. Just go out the front of the terminal and make a right. It's the next one over."

"Thank you," she says as she turns and half-runs towards the entrance. Now her neck and back are killing her. She has to slow down or she'll end up in the next bed. The sweat on her body turns cold as she crosses the walkway outside. What if there's no seat? Maybe they'll put her at the top of the list. A dying mother. Is it true?

*

The security line moves slowly but she gets to the gate before boarding has begun. The gate agent is non-committal. "It's a full flight. If we have a no-show, I'll call your name."

She takes out the phone and calls her son.

"Oh Mom. Are you all right?"

What can she tell him? That she's scared? That's she's exhausted and frustrated.

When she doesn't respond, he says, "Grandma's not going to go so easily. Call me as soon as you can."

Virginia knows how lucky she is to have a son like Reggie. He has always been a love and now he's a man she can count on. And he's so good with her mother. Everyone loves Reggie.

The boarding process begins and Virginia checks her watch. Two and a half hours, if she gets on this plane, and then another hour to rent a car and get to the hospital. She could be there by two-thirty or three at the latest. Eleanor may have a tougher time coming from Bloomington. If only Max were here. Should she call him? No, Marilee, the new wife, probably wouldn't appreciate it.

At 11:35, the agent calls her name and she boards gratefully. She searches for 32B, a middle seat.

She finds her place between a young woman with a ponytail and ear buds, and a business man who's scrolling through some bulleted thoughts on his computer. Good. She can't manage any polite conversation. The overhead is full. She adjusts

the bags to make room for hers, always a problem for her short stature and shoves her coat into a corner but it tumbles down onto the man.

After a tall passenger gives her a hand, she settles in, buckles her seat belt and closes her eyes. Her jeans are too tight. She should have worn sweat pants. Lose a few pounds her mother would say and you won't have this problem. True, but she has no willpower and gets ravenous watching TV after a Lean Cuisine dinner. Somehow her mother never had any problems with weight. She untucks her blouse and rolls up the sleeves. Then she rummages around for the tissue pack and wipes the sweat off her neck and face. Well at least she didn't have time for make-up. It would be a mess by now.

As the plane taxis down the runway, her seatmate carefully replaces his computer in a zippered bag and turns to face her. "Business or pleasure?" he asks.

"Death," she says. More bad karma but she's too tired to care.

"Oh, oh, I'm sorry," he says covering his mouth, then reaching into the seatback for the magazine, leaning as far away from her as he can, giving her the whole armrest.

*

Virginia finally dozes, her head falling sideways. Later, lights wake her. Her lips are dry and caked. They're approaching the airport. She checks her watch. In an hour she'll be at the hospital. Her arms, neck and back are knotted in tension. She rolls her head from side to side. Her feet move and shift back and forth, toes up, toes down. She cracks her knuckles, a habit she discarded years ago. If she doesn't get up soon, she's afraid she'll scream. Shpilkes, her mother calls it. She opens the book she has been carrying but the letters refuse to form words.

Inhale, exhale. She needs to calm herself. What's that thing that can happen when you sit too long? Blood clots. And they float to your brain and kill you. Just her luck, she'll drop dead on the way to say good-bye to her mother. But her mother is probably fine. No, not fine. A heart attack. And her mother has a big heart. She's always been a sucker for every cause. African children, hurricane victims, Guatemalan women, whales, HIV, she's on every mailing list.

And what if her mother can't be alone now, then what? What if she needs a caretaker? This thought suddenly takes root as the buzzer dings arrival at the gate. Virginia grabs her suitcase and makes her way to the rental car counter where she fills out the endless printout, initialing wherever the desk clerk points. When she finally gets in the car and sets the GPS, this thought begins to grow. What if her mother is incapacitated? She'd never go to a nursing home. Move in with her sister? No, Eleanor wouldn't stand for it. Come to live with her? Oh. God. That would be the end. They could not survive under the same roof for more than a few days. And that's what her mother would want.

*

She turns into the nearly deserted parking lot. Finding a spot near the emergency entrance, she sits with her hands on the steering wheel, window open to the moist night air. What in God's name will she do? Crickets chirp in the solitude of the night. She pictures her mother expecting to play cards with her for the rest of her life, day after day. Shuffling two decks and dealing. Lining up the rows of cards. And Mexico. That might have been her last vacation. Ever. Or at least as long as her mother lives.

She hears her mother's voice, "What did I do to you that was so terrible? Tell me." And indeed, it is the same question she has for her own daughter. Amelia. She's been over this so many times.

And the truth is that she can't answer either question. Only in the movies is there one pivotal act that changes everything. Rather, it's the accumulation of hurts, misunderstandings, missed signals. Resentments that pile up over time. In fact, Virginia's discontent is more about the recent past, what happens now between them. Her mother is difficult, imperious, even overbearing but Virginia is sure of her love. What do we expect from our mothers? That they have no frailties? Virginia is still fighting for her own independence, her right to her own life as though she needed her mother's permission. And whose fault is that?

Amelia had shouted at her, "This is who I am. I'm not the person you wanted me to be." She never told her daughter who she had to be but Amelia saw it

differently. And now, of course, it's true, she doesn't want her daughter to be an addict. It's too much to sort out.

It's past three o'clock and her head feels too heavy to hold upright. She leans forward, head against the steering wheel. She could be asleep in a minute. Maybe tomorrow it won't seem so hard. Now it's her mother who needs her attention. She forces herself to sit up and open the car door. The effort drains her last reserves.

*

A janitor mops the empty space, swooshing against the chrome legs of unoccupied chairs. A dark skinned man has curled his large frame into the corner and dozes fitfully. A slight whistle accompanies his breathing and invades the quiet. The nurse at the front desk tells her she can go in only for a few minutes. Her sneakers squeak across the clean linoleum as she heads down the corridor, her heart pounding. Standing in the doorway she sees her mother hooked up to monitors, tubes and wires snaking around her body. Would Ruthie really want this?

"Just shoot me when the time comes," her mother said frequently. "I don't want to drool my life away."

Oh, God. Is this the time? How could she pull the plug? No, her sister is coming. She can't do this alone. She stands there watching the monitors beep and listening to the hypnotic whoosh of the life-sustaining machinery. Her heartbeat slows.

Finally, Virginia tip-toes to the head of the bed. She brushes stray hairs off her mother's face. Her skin is ashen but her eyes blink open. Confusion crosses her face as she lifts her head. She tries to sit up. "What are you doing here?" It comes out like an accusation.

"Mom. You've had a heart attack." Could she not know?

"I'm fine. You didn't need to come all the way here. It's ridiculous."

The relief flooding through her is darkened by anger. Why can't her mother appreciate her efforts? Because this is who she is and only a fool would expect something different.

She runs her fingers along her mother's age spotted arm. "We'll talk in the morning. Now go back to sleep."

Virginia kisses her mother on the forehead and goes out to wait for her sister trying to focus on the fact that at least her mother will be fine. She will try to stay awake. It is all she can do for now.

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HONORABLE MENTION

A Dead Profession marks Frank's 14th short story publication and his second with On The Premises. His latest works include a story in this January issue of Bards and Sages Quarterly and one in the humor anthology Library of Science Fiction: Probing Uranus. He has a 15th publication set to debut in the print anthology Library of Horror: Ghostology, very soon. Frank also does reviews for the ezines Diabolical Plots and Rise Reviews.

A Dead Profession

by Frank Dutkiewicz

My mouth fell open as I slid into my chair. The knot in my stomach matched Ianie's hard news.

"Peter Wingalt is dead?"

She nodded. The blood had drained from her face. She'd been sitting at the kitchen table when I walked in, and I had to know what was wrong. I wished I never asked.

I shook my head. "I talked to Peter recently, couldn't have been a decade ago. Hell, we were in the same room. How?"

"They don't know." Her eyes were as wide as the full moon, before it was mined out. "No one's died in over eighty years, Paul. What if he's not the first? What if they can't find out what happened? What if...?"

I stood. "Let's not jump to conclusions, Janie. There must be a logical explanation. I'm sure they're looking for the best person to find out what happened."

"They have. You."

I fell back into my chair. "Me? Why me?"

"They said you were in the med-da-cal field, whatever that is."

I swallowed hard. Long buried memories surfaced. All that was over eight hundred years ago. Nursoids and immunoerics eliminated any need for the medical field. It had been centuries since I needed to think about that stuff.

Janie leaned in and whispered. "They said you had experience with an out, ought, all-top..."

"They were called 'autopsies.'"

"What's that?"

I told her. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell to the floor. The wall behind us opened and a nursoid came out to treat her.

*

The nursoid revived Janie in time for her to witness the hoverlift from Public Safety and Hysterics land outside our door. Two large men in black jumpsuits barged in, bypassing the security system as if it didn't exist. They each grabbed an arm and dragged me out the door. They threw me in the lift without so much as a "hello" and were equally helpful when we landed at Observation Central. I stumbled when they pushed me past a steel door deep inside the building. It slammed behind me and I heard the lock snap shut.

There were four men in the room. Three stood near a wall furthest from a table. Peter Wingalt was the fourth and he lay on the table. Two nursoids circled him. The thimble shaped, four-foot tall units were retracting scanning rods and inveringes from small ports in their sides then putting them away without using them. They acted in a manner uncharacteristic for a medochine: confused.

"They're waiting to see if his condition changes," a redheaded man said. He followed me as I approached the table. "Will his condition change?"

I walked within a few feet of Pete. He was stripped to the waist, his unblinking eyes staring at the ceiling.

"He's dead. That's pretty much permanent," I said. I looked into Pete's eyes. A vague recollection of a conversation we shared flickered in my mind.

"What are your plans for the next thousand years, Paul?"

"I don't know, Pete. I like to take things one decade at a time."

I had a firm idea what 'ole Pete would be doing for the next thousand years. I turned to look at my fellow visitors.

A man in a blue-jumpsuit faced the wall. His bottom lip quivered and he trembled. I once saw a co-worker with an expression identical to his. A nest of spiders fell from the ceiling of an old structure we were restoring and landed at her feet. She screamed when a dozen crawled up her leg. The nursoids had to sedate her to the point of unconsciousness.

The third man in the room wore a long white coat. He kept a distance from the table but looked on with interest. He had a strange type of necklace dangling down his chest. Silver metal wrapped around his neck in a V-shape. Where the ends met, a rubber type of tube trailed down. At its end, a shiny disk dangled.

"Pete always knew how to throw one hell of a surprise party," I said to the group. I sized up the white-coated man. "What are you supposed to be?"

The man took a step back, his curious expression fell. The redheaded man stepped up.

"This is Professor Lonstone, Mr. Nexphon, he's a historian. I am the one responsible for you and him being here. My name is Jim Cole, the lead investigator for Crimes and Disturbances."

"A policeman," Lonstone said.

"That term hasn't been used in millennia, Professor," said Cole. "It caused anxiety in ancient times."

I gave Cole the once over. "I can see why people would feel anxiety when they get dragged out of their homes and get thrown into a closed room with total strangers."

"They called them prisons back then," said Lonstone, twirling the silver disk on his necklace.

"And they called you a dictionary, except it was a book with black and white pages," I said to the professor. I ran my eyes up and down his long coat and I ran my fingers inside its folded flap. It was coarse like old bed sheets. "Which made it more colorful than your choice of clothing, I see."

Lonstone yanked his coat from my fingertips.

"Please, Doctor Nexphon, I would have thought you'd have respect for the relics of your profession. This is called a lab coat."

"My profession is in ancient structure restoration. Medicine is an obsolete career that once piqued my curiosity, centuries ago."

Lonstone turned to Cole. "I told you we needed a doctor, one that performed an autopsy."

"He's the closest thing we've got," Cole said, pointing a finger at me. "All the real doctors died millennia ago, before they cured the last obstacles to the death disease."

Cole was still pointing at me. I wanted to break that finger off at its second knuckle. "Death is not a disease. It's the result of what happens when disease goes unchecked." I turned my head toward the man in the corner. "Death is what happens when you *cease* living."

The man bellowed in anguish. He curled up in the corner and cradled his head inside his arms. "Let me out of here, please. I've got to get out of here."

One of the nursoids went over and placed an inveringe to his bicep. His arms fell and he relaxed into a sitting position. The terror in his face was gone but anxiety still remained.

I hitched a thumb his way. "What's with him?"

"He's Mike Chezik, the nursoid serviceman that found Mr. Wingalt," Cole said.

"Nursoids need servicemen? I thought they were self-sufficient."

"Mr. Chezik's job is similar to mine, Mr. Nexphon. In the rare event a nursoid has a problem, such as not being able to treat someone, a technician is called in to see why. Mike found Peter Wingalt in his present state. My job as a disturbance investigator is to find out how this happened so it can be corrected."

"There is no correcting this problem," I said. "He's dead."

"How can you be sure?" Cole stepped closer to the table. "I saw the last person who died. He managed to disable the safety protocols on his hoverlift so it would go faster. His body was shredded to bloody ribbons." He closed his eyes and shuddered. "This guy looks okay. There's not a mark on him. How can he be dead?"

"That's why we need a *Coroner*," Lonstone said, walking up behind Cole. "That is what they used to do, find out how someone died."

"I was never a Coroner and I never knew one," I said. "I saw my teacher perform an autopsy once on a cadaver he found in the suspended animation portion of a closed hospital. It was part of my education, a requirement to receive a doctorate."

"What's a doctorate?" Cole asked.

"It's a title. They're meaningless but I wanted one, just for kicks. When the previous Crime and Disturbance guy found out what we did, he charged me with third degree porn-knowledgery. My teacher got first degree. That's when my *education* ended. They demolished the hospital shortly after."

"I know about your record, Nexphon," Cole said. "But what's not clear to me is what an autopsy is or how one will help us."

"An autopsy is when a doctor would dissect someone to look for clues on how they died," Lonstone explained.

Cole's mouth fell open. "Dissect? As in cut them open and look inside?"

We nodded.

His face looked like he wanted to spit out bile. "No wonder why they kicked your teacher off the planet."

"And it's why I'm not performing one now. That charge has left a black mark on my life. You know how hard it is to keep that a secret? I've had to move four dozen times. Getting a job's almost impossible. No one wants a *sicko* working for them. Now I'm a dirty old building restorer. Even if I knew what I was doing, I wouldn't do one. They'd ship me to the edge of the system, just like they did my teacher."

Cole crossed his arms and stared at Pete. He had one of the cushy careers on the planet, investigating accidents in a society where they didn't happen. It was up to him to make sure they couldn't happen twice. Thousands of years of improving safety protocols through the trial-and-error of human ingenuity—and stupidity—made his job almost unnecessary. He had to know what happened so it wouldn't happen again.

"I'll guarantee you won't be charged with a crime if you help us, Mr. Nexphon," Cole said.

"Not good enough," I replied. "I've lived with this stigma for eight centuries. I want vindication."

He looked at me through one eye. "Spell it out for me."

"Doctors used to be looked up to and hospitals were buildings that people needed. Now they're remembered as horror chambers where evil monsters tortured and killed innocent people. People went to the hospital and saw doctors because they were sick.—Doctors didn't make people sick as everyone chooses to remember. I want my record wiped clean, and if my service as a doctor is needed again, I don't want another porn crime on my head. I want to be absolved from any crimes while acting as a doctor from this point forward."

Through narrow slits Cole glared at me. He looked to Lonstone for answers. His blank expression wasn't helping.

"Alright, you got it, on two conditions. First, you will be the only one. I don't want you training other people to be doctors. We don't need them and legends about them make people nervous. Second, you better come up with an answer about what happened. No answer, no absolution. Agreed?"

It was my turn to glare right back at him. "Agreed, provided I get your full cooperation and I call the shots."

*

The professor had a black bag with him. He took out a large silver disk with a rubber-bandish thing attached to it. He stretched out the band and put it on his head.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Assisting you. Doctors used these when they did their doctor things."

"Do you dress up like a fireman on the weekends as well?" I pointed at the strange object around his neck. "And what is the deal with that ridiculous necklace?"

"This is a stethoscope. They could tell what was going on inside the body with it."

He placed the silver ends in his ears and then placed the silver disk on Pete's chest.

"I don't think it works anymore," he said.

I yanked the necklace away and threw it across the room. "Do you have anything in there I can use?"

He started pulling things out. Some of it I recognized from the junk I would find while restoring old buildings. An oversized Popsicle stick, a cylinder with a needle attached to it, bands of brown-rolled cloth, tape with a cushion in the middle,

tubes of goo, plastic jars with really old tic-tacky things, and a pair of scissors with flattened and curved ends.

I took the bag from him and dumped it out. Sifting through it I found what I was looking for. The slender knife was still sharp. Lonstone took good care of his relics. I stood over Pete and pressed on his belly.

Lonstone leaned in to get a closer view. I'm not surprised a historian would be a closet porn-knowledger. Ole' Pete was one too. He wanted to know about everything that had to do with medicine. I recalled he had an interest in nursoid technology as well.

I made a horizontal cut in Pete's abdomen. The skin opened up like a tightly wrapped cover on a dinner servo-tray. I expected blood. There was none.

A nursoid stopped on the opposite side of the table. A probe unfolded out of its side and shone red light on the cut with thin blue ones crisscrossing over the opening. The wound closed and the scar vanished.

I turned to Cole. "Can we disable the nursoids?"

"No, we can't," he said. "Nursoids are designed so they can never be tampered with. Nursoids keep us all alive. If someone could disable a nursoid, they could conceivably kill someone."

I smelled an acidic odor. White foam bubbled on Pete's belly where I made my incision. The other nursoid sprayed a gel on Pete's belly. It placed a tube over the gel and cleaned Pete. He was as good as new, or would have been if he weren't still dead.

[&]quot;What are you doing?" Cole asked.

[&]quot;I'm trying to remember where I need to cut to get to his stomach."

[&]quot;Why?" Cole asked.

[&]quot;I want to find out what Pete ingested last."

Cole, and Lonstone, and I all exchanged glances. We then look to Chezik. He was still inebriated from being sedated. I walked over and slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Snap out of it, Mike. We need a nursoid expert."

"No, we're in quarantine," he said, walking up to us. "We can't be exposed to the public in case the death is contagious."

"You put me in quarantine? You bastard!" I balled up my fist and delivered a punch to Cole's nose. I felt it crunch under my knuckles. He stumbled backwards and fell on his back. A nursoid came over to treat him. It pulled out a scanning rod and an inveringe. Pain inhibitors were administered, his broken nose was repaired, and his blood was cleaned off his face. I felt a warming sensation on my hand as the other nursoid repaired the cuts on my knuckles.

"I'll charge you with assault!" Cole shouted back.

"You can't," I said with a crooked smile. "I just performed facial reconstruction on you. As a doctor, all crimes are absolved."

Cole frowned. "I am refusing any additional *treatment* from you. I'm not your patient. He is," he said, pointing at Pete.

"I'll try and remember that."

Cole got his goons to close off an adjoining room. We dragged Chezik into it and ate from servo-trays while we waited for him to come out of his fog. When his sedatives wore off, Chezik got up and reached for a tray. I snatched it away.

"Hey! I'm hungry!" he said.

[&]quot;I want to get out," he whimpered.

[&]quot;Let him out, Cole. We need answers," I said.

[&]quot;See that you do." Cole got to his feet.

[&]quot;Quarantine another room, Cole. Chezik is useless like this."

"You're our ticket out of this...," I looked to Lonstone, "prison?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Screw you," Chezik said. He crossed his arms and stuck his chin out. "I'm not helping until I eat."

I nodded to Cole. He opened the door.

"Fine, Mike. You can dine with Pete."

Chezik couldn't have been more cooperative at that point.

*

"The incision had something bubbling in it after the nursoid closed it. Are you sure someone didn't replace one of its inveringes with a poison of some kind?" I asked.

"Impossible. They're tamper proof. Once a nursoid is compromised it shuts down, permanently. You can't get in one without compromising it."

I crossed my arms and rubbed my chin. "Something caused a chemical reaction after the nursoid treated the wound. Its inveringes need to be refilled. What about when they run out? Could a toxic substance be substituted then?"

Chezik shook his head. "This stuff was thought of a long time ago. The stations are off limits to people. Everything is processed and analyzed in there. And Nursoids are aware of what they put in a person. They analyze to see if any one thing they have will interact with something someone has ingested. They are perfect and have been for hundreds of years. Besides, those are the two nursoids that were in Wingalt's place. If one of them poisoned him, we'd be dead too. They treated you two and me."

I got a spark of an idea. "How many different types of solutions does a nursoid have?"

[&]quot;Nursoids can't kill people!" Chezik said again.

Chezik shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Hundreds of synmeds, immunoerics, and scanners are needed to treat any kind of aliment or injury that may happen."

"I want a list." I turned to Cole. He was listening carefully to my interrogation. "I need to see Pete's place. Arrange a quarantined hoverlift for us."

Chezik crossed his arms. "I'm not going."

"Fine, you can wait in the other room with Pete."

Chezik uncrossed his arms.

Chezik was the first one to board when the hoverlift arrived.

*

I gawked at the list. Hundreds of a solutions ended up being a low guess. Almost every one started with "syn."

"They're synthetically created," Chezik said. "They're copies that are indistinguishable from the originals. They all have a syn nuclei, it's the same as any original antidote, anti-bio agent, and additive. Only the immunoeric anti-viral agents and cellular-clone scans are different. What makes synthys better than the originals is that they're designed for only one purpose. They're sterile and free of imperfections."

"What's different about the immunoeric anti-viral agents?" asked Lonstone, as he sifted through his bag of toys.

Chezik looked as if he didn't know. I did.

"They're modified white-blood cells. Except they're cloned, engineered to match the atom structure an invading viral threat. Super anti-bodies."

Lonstone had the stethoscope in his ears again. He kept turning it over, looking for an on switch or something. I grabbed the small silver disk and shouted, "Does it work now?"

He jerked his head back and yanked out the earpieces.

"What is your fascination with doctors?" I asked while he rubbed his ears.

"They have a rich history in our civilization. What they did and how useful they were is still debated. Legend claims they had a license to mutilate. It's said they got rich off of other people's pain and misery. Only lawyers and vampires were considered as evil."

"I thought lawyers and vampires were the same thing?" Chezik said.

Lonstone shrugged for Chezik, then turned back to me. "Entire sets of laws were passed governing doctors. They even had an oath. Some of its promises were incorporated in their law system. Here, see for yourself."

He pulled out a pamphlet titled "Hippocratic Oath." My old teacher mentioned it before. Lonstone said, "The laws are still active. They never removed them."

Cole stepped away from a communicative panel near the sealed exit. "Everything is set."

A force field created a corridor to a waiting hoverlift. Another force field waited for us at Pete's house. A crowd formed around the quarantined site. Black-jumpsuited C and D goons ringed Pete's house. We needed to force Chezik out of the lift and into the house.

It had been at least a decade since I last saw his living room. We used to talk for hours on philosophically abstract questions such as the purpose of man.

"I found him over there." Cole pointed to a spot behind the couch and in front of an antique desk constructed from priceless wood.

I did a quick visual scan. On the desk I saw a sharp object. Dried blood was on its blade.

Cole stood next to me. "I saw that but dismissed it as an instrument of death. Nursoids have repaired people with worse injuries."

It's what's under the knife that captures my attention. Paper.

Interesting.

Paper is the only way you can record something with it escaping scrutiny from the powers that be. Complicated formulas were on its top pages. Notes on immunoerics and cellular-clone scans were on the next few. Most of the equations dealt with the rate of accelerated growth of cells under a clone-scan and how quickly an immunoeric viral-agent could adapt. I found one note describing micro-amounts of acid the viral-agents would excrete. The last set of pages were a list of synthy solutions. It was identical to mine, except there were details on the synthy structure of each solution.

"What does this all mean?" Cole asked over my shoulder.

I shuffled through the pages. "I'm not sure. Could I get a list of what jobs and activities Peter did for the past few decades?"

While Cole dug up the information, I looked around. Pete and I shared an interest in knowledge. He was the most brilliant person I ever met and the only one that knew about my conviction and didn't shun me because of it. He wanted to know about all that I learned. He was particularly interested in the autopsy. I thought he was just a closet porn-knowledger. I began to suspect another motive.

Cole held a vidscreen and offered it to me. "Your friend had a hard time holding onto steady work. He's held fifteen different jobs and had eighteen separate hobbies over the last two decades. He wasn't very committed."

"Or very bored," I added. His jobs and hobbies demonstrated a pattern. Xeno-biologist, quantum mechanic, hydroponic designer, botany, chemical analyzer, bacterium growth specialist, microorganism exterminator; basic studies if you wanted to become an expert in synthy replication. It all pointed to where my suspicions led.

I opened the bottom drawer of the desk. I saw three tubes with needles like the one I saw in Lonstone's black bag. An itch in my brain told me the one I was

looking for wouldn't be in there. I gave the drawer a hard yank. The tubes flew out and rolled onto the floor.

"Don't move!" I said, as I held out my hands. "I'll find them. Don't move or you might step on one."

I got on my hands and knees. I found each one and a fourth I suspected would be under the couch, near where Pete had lain. I palmed it carefully, so I wouldn't poke myself, and put it in my pocket.

Pete had a chemical analyzer tucked in the corner. I took the other three tubes and held them up for Lonstone to see. "Syringes?"

"Very good, Doctor Nexphon," he said sincerely.

I placed them in the analyzer and isolated the components in each one. Moltid, a poison that attacks the heart. Nervanide, a toxin that destroys the nervous system. And Cholarald, bacteria that infects the liver. All three were fast acting. All three had a synthy solution to counteract them.

I sat and leaned back in the chair at the desk, smiling wide for Cole. "I know how and why Peter Wingalt died. Suicide."

"Su-what?"

Lonstone's mouth fell open. Judging by Cole's blank expression, a further explanation was required. "He killed himself on purpose."

Cole shook his head in disbelief. I wondered if he heard marbles rattling when he did that. "How?" he asked.

"An overload of his system, too much for the nursoids to handle all at once. By the time they corrected the problem, Peter was already dead."

"Then why the knife?"

"One more thing that kept them preoccupied," I said. "Could have been the final thing that killed him."

Chezik looked at me sideways. "I don't know. Nursoids have repaired people in massive wrecks and healed chemical burns in seconds."

"These are three agents that work really fast. They shut down the infected organs immediately. Healing three simultaneously is a lot even for a nursoid to handle."

"Still..."

"You're welcome to disprove my theory if you like," I said while holding the three syringes.

He shook his head and backed away.

"How am I going to correct this so it won't happen again?" Cole asked.

"Suppress information. You can't improve the nursoids to operate quicker. As long as this isn't discovered, I doubt it can be repeated. Only us four know."

Cole seemed to accept that but he still had another problem. "There are reporters outside waiting for answers, what am I supposed to tell them?"

"I have the answer." I told him about the oath and got Lonstone to back me. With that Cole lifted the quarantine. He now had work to do: Destroy everything that had anything to do with Peter Wingalt.

I exited the building and greeted the eager reporters. They fell silent when I put my hands up.

"My name is Doctor Nexphon."

Murmurs circulated. They grew into shouts.

"At 5:06 yesterday afternoon," I shouted louder, "Peter Wingalt was found dead in this house."

I put my hands up to silence the avalanche of questions. "His death has been ruled a suicide. Details will not be forth coming. Rest assured that his death is not a threat to the public."

"Did you kill him?" A reporter yelled above the rest.

"No. I did not kill Peter Wingalt." I took a deep breath. I could feel the weight of a once proud profession wishing to be vindicated on my shoulders. "Despite what you may believe, doctors did not perpetuate suffering. It was our role to end it. Healing was what we did. Advancing technology has eliminated the need for doctors, but a misguided belief, fueled by fading memories and myth, have done a disservice to our history. A doctor was needed to determine Peter Wingalt's cause of death. With my help, his death has been solved."

"Why can't you tell us how he died?" another reporter asked.

I smiled and silently thanked Lonstone for showing me the old oath. "Doctorpatient confidentiality," I answered, and walked away. Questions followed me but I ignored them. There was nothing left to add.

*

I wasn't surprised to come home to an empty house. Janie, like many, wouldn't want to live with someone who worked so close to death. I decided to follow her lead. I have been exposed as a porn-knowledger. A knock on the door interrupted me while I shoved my belongings inside a hovercube.

Expecting the press, I was shocked to see Professor Lonstone.

"I saw you pocket that syringe," he said. "Chezik was right, the nursoids could have handled those three poisons."

"You are a bright one," I said as I continued to pack.

"If they had no effect, why did he take them?"

"They did indeed have an effect. They flooded his system with synthy-nuclei atoms. His organs and blood were filled with it."

Lonstone rubbed his chin. "Then what was in that last syringe?"

"What Pete spent his last two decades learning how to make, his own synthy invention, a syn-virus."

Lonstone blinked. "I don't understand."

"Pete flooded his systems with fast acting poisons and toxins so the nursoids could pump his system full of synthy solutions. He then injected himself with the syn-virus. A nursoid injected him with a tailor made immunoeric anti-viral agent, the only agent that wasn't made of synthy. He then cut himself over the spot he injected the syn-virus. The healing cellular-clone scan, designed to repair his tissue, accelerated the growth of the antisyn-viral agent. The agent spread through his body and attacked anything with a syn nuclei."

Lonstone eyes lit up. "Every organ would have been filled with synthy molecules. Death must have been instantaneous."

I nodded. "If Mike Chezik hadn't been so scared of a dead man he might have known what significance the acid on Pete's belly meant. The foam was a waste byproduct of the accelerated growth of the anti-viral agent."

"Why would he go through so much work to die?"

I sighed and looked out my window. I've lived in this city for three centuries and so little of it has changed. The skyline was as stale as the human condition.

"Pete spent decades looking for a way out. Living for thousands of years was too much for him. Nursoids and safety protocols made death impossible. He was determined to not let that stop him."

I placed a hand on Lonstone's shoulder. "Thanks to Pete, I have a new career. I could use a man like you, professor. How would you like a new job?"

*

There are many people like Pete, and I'm the only one with the syn-virus. With it, I can end man's greatest affliction, the pain of going on. Thanks to Jim Cole, I'm absolved of any crimes while performing my role as a doctor, and I seek patients.

More learn of me every day. So if you do not wish to go on, come find me. I'm not cheap. Then again, you won't need your money anymore.

Lonstone even found a name for me, buried in the old historical records.

They call me Doctor Death.

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GUEST WRITER

Thomas Cannon lives in Oshkosh, Wisconsin with his wife and three children. His story "Part of the Gift" is the lead article in the book *Cup of Comfort for Parents with Children With Autism*. He has had poems published in *Literary Mary*, *The Poetry Explosion Newsletter*, *Leaf Garden*, and *Wisconsin Calendar*. His short stories have been published on the websites *Battered Suitcase*, *Santa Fe Writers' Project*, *Fictional Musings*, and *Long Story Short*. Please check out his website at https://sites.google.com/site/wisconsinmusings/.

SPECIAL NOTE: This story uses the premise from Contest #12, "Strength"

Mornings with AJ and Jen

by Thomas Cannon

The gunman waved the gun between Adam and Jenny. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny could see Mark, their producer, yelling into the phone. Her main attention, however, was on memorizing the guy's features—his large gut in a thread-bare T-shirt, his long, gray hair in a ponytail. Adam, her co-host, had his eyes on one thing only. The gun held his attention like a naked woman.

"Do you know why I picked your show?" the gunman asked.

For a moment, everyone seemed content to let the question go unanswered. Jenny tried not to think of how, in movies, the captives that beg and grovel are always killed. Not that she would give the guy that satisfaction, but Adam seemed freaked out. She reached over and flicked his arm. It was the sign she used whenever

something had gone wrong on the air such as a losing a live spot and she needed him to fix it.

"Of course we do," Adam finally answered, jerking his line of vision from the gun. "We have the number one morning radio show in Madison. Killing us will make you famous. Where else were you going to go, Buddy? WIFT?"

Jenny could tell Adam was using his radio voice, although the Adam you got on the radio was pretty much the Adam Sather you got in real life. Quick-witted, sarcastic, and sweet all at once, just turned up a few hundred notches. This made him someone that could think on his feet, but she didn't think cocky was the way to go with this guy.

"No," the gunman spat out with a sour look on his face. "I don't care about that. I'm taking a stand against posers and you two are the biggest ones."

"What are you doing? Don't make him angrier." Jenny gave Adam the quickest glance. Her co-host sounded confident and he was still sprawled out in his chair, as always in his T-shirt and Kahki shorts looking more like a college student than a thirty-seven year old man. But his flushed cheeks and jittering leg showed her that he was scared.

"Both of you shut up."

Fearing that Adam would keep going, she used the friendliest affect she muster and asked, "What's your name, guy?"

"Kevin. Kevin—" The guy stopped.

Jen said, "It's okay. Kevin's fine." Jen kicked Adam's foot to say *let me handle this*. But that was how they worked best. Jenny delivered the show with Adam doing the color commentary.

[&]quot;Adam. Let's not make the gentleman angry."

[&]quot;Oh, I think he's already mad."

"We just wanted to know what to call you," Adam added, "instead of just crazed gunman."

"What?" The gun wobbled. Kevin's whole body tensed up.

"Nothing, Buddy. I was just making a joke."

"A joke, huh? While I go one for you. Knock. Knock."

"Ah, who's there?" Adam answered, sounding less and less confident.

"Shut up before I blow your head off."

Jenny leaned forward and put her hand in front of Adam to take Kevin's attention. "Hold on, now. What do you mean posers? How are we posers, Kevin?" Adam was trying to humor this guy out of being angry and she wanted to let him do it. He had talked her into putting the pin back into the many metaphorical grenades she had pulled in her life. But Kevin's reaction told her the only thing to do was keep him talking until the cops busted in.

Kevin's bushy eyebrows went up. "You guys are supposed to be like a couple, but you're not."

"Now wait a minute, Kevin." Jenny patted the air. "We never said we were a couple."

"Come on, Jen. You guys act like it. Monday mornings, you always tell Adam 'There's my honey. Come give me some sugar, AJ."

"I say that sarcastically."

Adam shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, but that's how women usually say that to me."

"No," Kevin said, waving the gun like wagging a finger. "Quit making jokes. You guys act like you love each other and that your audience is part of your family. Like your children. People like to listen to you because you guys are so great

together. I thought I could tell that you two really loved each other. But then that newspaper article comes out and it's all an act. You tricked me."

"But we do love each other," Adam offered, putting his hand on Jen's knee. "We've been partners for 15 years. The way we get along on the air is how we get along. It's genuine. But platonic. With Jen's pretty face plastered on the side of every bus, you're not exactly the first guy to ask if I was with her. Well, you *are* the first with a gun." Then Adam gave his standard joke line. "Can't you tell that I'm not married to her by the way we get along?"

"With your comments like that, we would have been divorced along time ago," Jen responded, but not in the warm tone Adam had used.

"See," Kevin said. "You're doing it right now."

"What?" Jenny demanded. "You don't think we planned out lines in case of being held hostage by a gunman, do you?"

"You both took the same improv class. That's how you met."

"We hate improv," Adam and Jenny said together.

Now Jenny clutched Adam's hand. "What are we doing?"

Adam was still splayed out in his chair. "It's our schtick. It's automatic. We are not the crazy ones."

The gunman said, "Listen. Listen now. I'm going to tell you what's going to happen. I am going to shoot Adam and you get to watch. I'm going to get some real emotions out of you."

"Why shoot him?" Jenny asked, deciding that Adam was trying to be obnoxious enough to get shot first and that the police wouldn't allow Kevin a second shot. "Because I'm a woman, you think I'll cry? I'll be all emotional?"

Adam fidgeted in his chair like he was going to shoot out of it, but managed to maintain his slouch. "Jenny, here's one time not to argue with a sexist."

Kevin looked at her. "Why are you saying these things? I'm serious."

"Adam, we've been together for a long time. So you know that if you don't shut up, I'll kill you before he does." Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny could see Mark gesturing now, but couldn't really tell what he was relaying. Either he was making a cop car light gesture or changing two light bulbs.

Kevin thumped his chest with the gun. "I decide who dies first today. And I said you die second. Then I'll see how much you care about him. But before I kill you, I want you to go back on the air."

Adam drummed his fingers for a few moments and then leaned toward his mike. "Mark, switch us back over."

Kevin glanced between Adam and Mark behind the glass window until Jenny was sure he was getting dizzy. "What do you mean? You better tell me right now what you two are talking about." He aimed the gun at Jenny. "Forget it. If you want to die first, fine with me. Let's just get all this over with."

"Wait. Wait, Kevin," Adam yelled. "The station has a policy against putting—someone such as yourself on the air. So you wouldn't be able to, you know, kill us or anything on the air. If we did that then there would be a lot of copycats doing it. But if you promised not to say or do anything rash on the air, we could try it."

[&]quot;He's making me mad." And so are you, she thought.

[&]quot;Yeah. I'm not disagreeing with you. But shut up so that you get out of here safe."

[&]quot;Are you being sexist, too?" she asked him, pointing her finger. "Trying to sacrifice yourself for me just because I'm a woman. Listen, Kevin, Adam will cry like a little girl if you kill me first. Maybe poop his pants."

[&]quot;She knows, Buddy. She's just trying to save me."

[&]quot;The policy," Mark said back over the intercom.

[&]quot;We'll be all right if Kevin promises to keep things on the down-low."

Jenny put her headphones on. "Let Adam and I do our job and work with us, and we'll let you have your say."

Adam said, "How does that sound, Kevin? We can do it if you promise."

"Yes. Okay. But you break your word and I break mine."

Adam nodded and then looked over to Mark. Waited for his finger point. "Good morning, Madison. Good morning. Geez, I just said good morning twice. That's a little annoying. You have AJ and Jen in the morning. It's 7:43. How you doing this morning, Jen?"

Jenny froze for a moment and then scrambled to get her microphone up to her mouth. "I think you know, AJ. Besides peeing and showering by myself, you've been with me. And before you get any ideas, folks, we car pool together."

AJ laughed into the mike. "But the fact of the matter is that Jen has been my best friend for the last fifteen years."

Jen smiled because Adam was always the one to say something wonderful. And right now, she really needed to hear it. "Recently," she said, "someone asked, not for the first time, if we were a couple. My answer is why would we ruin our friendship?"

"Not that it hasn't crossed my mind. I've certainly thought about it."

[&]quot;So great then."

[&]quot;I wouldn't go right to great. 'Bout an average morning with you."

[&]quot;You know, Jen. People often ask me how we really get along. Usually, I just say something dumb."

[&]quot;Really, AJ? Not you."

[&]quot;Really, Adam—AJ. That's so sweet."

[&]quot;It sent shivers down my spine, but I've thought about it."

She laughed. "Gee, thanks, AJ."

"Hearing that raspy laugh is the best part of my day," Adam said into his mike, but peering over at Kevin to gage his reaction. Kevin was leaning against the wall and didn't seem to be paying attention. "Nothing can change that." Adam reached behind him and pulled a CD. "Let's play a song not on the playlist. Here's Green Day with *Time of Your Life*."

Jenny and Adam took their headphones off. "After doing that with a gun to my head," she said, "I guess I can't call in with PMS anymore."

"Don't talk like that," Kevin said, now just behind her. He didn't have the gun pointed, but his voice burned her like a flamethrower.

"Hey, Buddy. She was just making jokes in a tense situation. We both do that."

"You know, why did you really pick us anyway?" Jen got the indignant tone she was going for, but couldn't catch her breath. "There are plenty of other morning shows you can terrorize."

"You really don't know, do you?" He looked at Jenny who could only look at him with her mouth open. "Well, part of the reason, I already told you. Because I like your show."

"Lucky us," Adam said.

"Another part of the reason is that I will get the most news coverage. Those other shows, you'd have to expect trouble. I'm not a prude. I read *Mad Magazine* growing up. But morning radio is disgusting. They use the a-word and the b-word all the time. When they're not talking about every part of a woman's anatomy. Then all that laughing at things that are not funny."

"Kevin," Adam began. He wanted to do something to make Jenny less afraid. But his own fear made him hesitate. He glanced at the console to see that the song was about to end and then moved the mike back to his mouth. "Good Morning, people. It's the AJ & Jen show." Without wanting to, he left a short stretch of dead air. "Off-air, Jen and I've been talking this morning to our good friend, Kevin. Kevin,

would you mind throwing on those headphones and talking into that mike right here and share with the audience what you were just talking about?"

"Maybe later. There's a teaser, listeners. Stay tuned and find out what our friend Kevin is planning on doing or hopefully will decide not to do. But let's keep that a secret for now."

Kevin responded, "Ah..."

Jenny stepped in now. "Yes, Kevin was giving us the state of radio nowadays."

"It's not just radio." Kevin had been too far away from the mike and then moved too close. Jen leaned over and adjusted it to the right distance. Kevin touched the microphone in front of him, but didn't dare move it. "And it's not all radio. Generally, I liked your show. Adam didn't talk in a sexist way to you. And you didn't act like he was dumb just because he was a man."

Adam said, "I don't think I like you talking about us in the past tense like that."

Kevin pursed his lips and stared at Adam blankly.

"What else, Kevin?" Jenny said to cover the dead air.

The gun trembled in Kevin's hand. "I thought you guys were different. I've been listening for a long time and it was pretty clear you were a couple. You were always talking about how long you guys have known each other and making jokes about spending all your time together. I... I thought you were sharing while still being private.

"It was refreshing, you know. Nowadays, everyone has a relationship played out for the public on those reality shows. I don't want to see relationships that are played up on camera and plotted out to hook the audience. It's pathetic. Whether it's their real life or that they're putting on a skit, it still just seems sad. More pathetic are the people that love it and pay more attention to those talentless, attention-addicted celebrities than to real people in their lives.

[&]quot;About what I'm doing here? Because you told me I can't—"

"I worry about my daughter having grown up in this mess. She says the stuff she heard in church doesn't ring true to her so she doesn't go. I'm worried that she won't go to heaven and that somehow I failed her. And the thing is, I no longer believe in what goes on in church either. It just seems like a desperate need to hold on to the past. But I go and I give them the money they demand of me. I believe in sacrifice. I believe in going because it's the least I can do for all that God has given us. It's important to be counted righteous.

"It used to be that people worked hard and wanted to give to others. It was before my time even, but from farmers to car dealers, people did things without looking for a reward. Nowadays, people are all about positioning and looking good. Why work hard when you can kiss up to the boss? Why be polite when the store down the street has cashiers just as rude? I just want something real and good.

"I just want something real," he said again, his voice straining. He put the gun up and cocked it. "I asked you out to give you something real, Jenny. That's what I thought I could get from you. Instead I got lies."

Jenny had been staring at Adam trying to figure out why they were feeding into the madman, but the cock of the gun shot her up straight in her chair. Then her face flushed. "Me? You don't even know me."

Kevin gave her a pained smile. "You really don't remember. I thought you were pretending."

"Sorry?" She was not apologizing for whatever offense she was making and she didn't want to. It was her way of saying, 'come again?' But if he wanted to take it as an apology, if it would save her life, then let him.

"Please don't do this." Kevin swallowed. "We were in group therapy together. Until you dropped out."

There was silence. Then Adam said, "I think you're mistaken. If she had been in therapy, I would know."

Kevin folded his arms the best he could with the gun in his hand and sat on the edge of a table. Jenny looked away. Not to the console or Mark or the door. Just to

a blank wall. Kevin leaned down towards her. "So your best friend doesn't know that you had to take anger management classes. Maybe you can't treat anyone with respect."

"Stop it," Adam told him. "You can't see that you're wrong because you're crazy."

"I had to take those classes," Jenny finally said, working hard not to speak through clenched teeth. "Of course, now, thanks to you, everyone in the city will know, but I was ashamed. It was the only way I could get any visitation with my daughter. I was getting a divorce and fighting for my daughter, so sorry if I don't remember you or if I was rude to you."

"You lied to me. You told me you were in a relationship with Adam. I'm no looker. But why not even give me the consideration of being honest and not telling a lie that I would find out was a lie. Why spurn me like that?" He cocked the gun. The sound made Jenny reach for Adam's hand. His was reaching for hers.

Kevin put the gun in front of his face. Stared at it. "That thing I was going to have you two do." His face was still near his mike and the audience could hear how his voice was faltering. "I'll just do it myself. It will be better for everyone."

He brought the gun to his temple.

"Kevin," Jen yelled, the mike picking up her voice, but making her sound far away. "Wait."

Jenny knew that her Adam was actually shy and could only be outgoing and bold through his radio persona of AJ. She swung Adam's boom arm over to him so AJ could say something and stop him.

"What's your daughter's name, Kevin?" AJ asked.

"Lindsey. She's a freshman at the university."

"She goes to the UW? You must be very proud of her."

He looked at Adam and then Jenny; his eyes rimmed with red, and he lowered the gun. "I am, Adam. But she can't be very proud of me. How do you make up for a lifetime of not being there?"

Jenny and Adam kept their mouths to the microphones, but didn't say anything.

"Should be," Jenny said with a set jaw. She was sure Adam was on his way to getting through to this guy. But Kevin's word showed her how Kevin had tried to move past bitterness and resentment and that it made him, despite the gun and the failure and the anger, better than most. Better than herself. "But it's not," she said. "Your daughter's there for you. I know she is. But it's not the same because she depends on you. As for God—"

"Who else was there for you?" Adam interrupted.

The gun trembling in his hand was his answer.

"We were. Jen and I. That's why you felt betrayed that we are not a couple." Adam scoffed. "You know we didn't go into this for the money. We did it to connect with people. Develop a relationship. Not with you personally—"

"But give us a chance, now." Jenny had been going on with the conversation just to buy time until the police could come in and shoot him. But like Kevin, she had seen too little of her daughter. And just as Adam was shy without the transmitter tower and more significantly, without her; Jenny's heart would freeze without Adam to keep it thawed. They had discussed it. Decided they were like a peanut butter and mayo sandwich. An absurd combination that was somehow great. "Give me a chance."

[&]quot;Exactly," Kevin replied to their silence.

[&]quot;Who's there for you?" Adam asked.

[&]quot;My daughter. God. That should be enough."

"Don't," Kevin shouted and pointed the gun at her. She walked up to him so that he had to pull the gun back. She looked him in the eye. In Kevin, she saw herself without Adam.

She reached out and took the gun.

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