



HUMOROUS PROSE IS NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY IN TODAY'S LITERARY WORLD. WE AIM TO RECTIFY THAT. WE DARE YOU TO WRITE A SHORT PIECE OF FICTION THAT MAKES US LAUGH, OR AT LEAST SMILE. IF YOU CAN MAKE US LAUGH AND THINK, OR LAUGH AND FEEL DEEPLY ABOUT SOMEONE OR SOMETHING, ALL THE BETTER...

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Uncle Tarl's Comedy Hour

Comedy has to be the most subjective genre of writing. A story about dying kids or something equally sad might or might not be written well enough to make you feel bad, but at least you can tell the story's supposed to be a drama. And if you're reading a story about cowboys and sheriffs and cattle rustling in the late 1800's, you're almost certainly reading a western. But different people can have such different opinions of what's funny, two co-publishers of the same magazine can read a contest entry and end up in an argument about whether it's even *supposed* to be funny.

We got several stories this time around where one of us would see a lot of humor, and the other one would see none at all. One of them even got published in this issue—the honorable mention “A Tissue of Lies” got two “favorite” votes from judges who couldn't get through it without cracking up and three “no”s from judges who just shook their head and went on to the next one.

Of course being funny was only *part* of the rating system. We look for stories to be creative, compelling, well-crafted, and to clearly use the premise. This time, “use the premise” meant “make us laugh.” But the other elements mattered even more, collectively, which is why this issue's first prize went to a story that nobody thought was the funniest... just the best, and funny enough to qualify.

I'm not sure we'll ever do another humor contest, though. We'll always be open to humor, but it really is a genre unto itself, and forcing people to try to be funny is like forcing people to try to write historical romance. Some people are really good at it, others will do their best and see varying degrees of success, and others don't know enough about the genre to even try.

The six stories that won prizes, we believe, were written by authors who know what they're doing. We're supplementing this issue with two more stories we solicited from guest writers whom we've worked with before, and who have proven themselves to have a sense of humor that works well on us. No matter what your taste in humor is, we think you're bound to like at least some of the stories in this issue, because once again, we're proving to be one of the most diverse magazines on the Web.

If you have an opinion on any of this, let me know by writing to Feedback@OnThePremises.com. In the meantime, enjoy Issue #17 of *On The Premises*!

Keep writing and reading,

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

Cartoons!

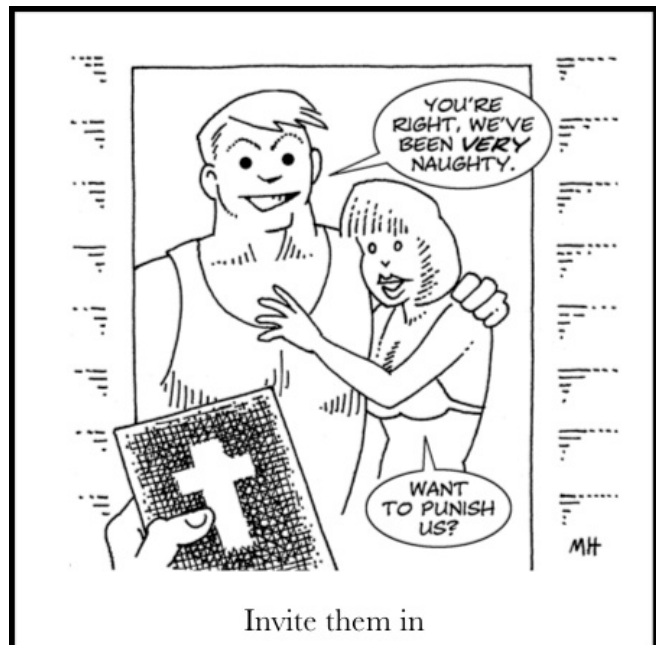
by Matt Howarth (art) and Tarl Kudrick (writing)

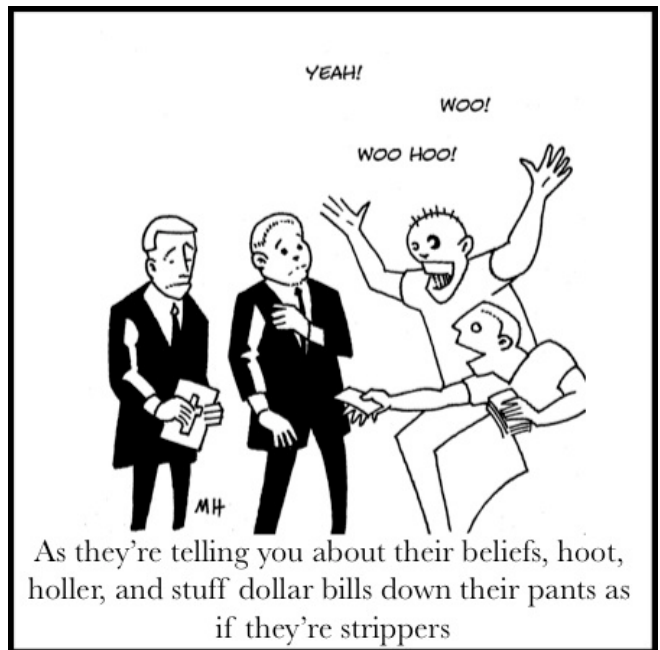
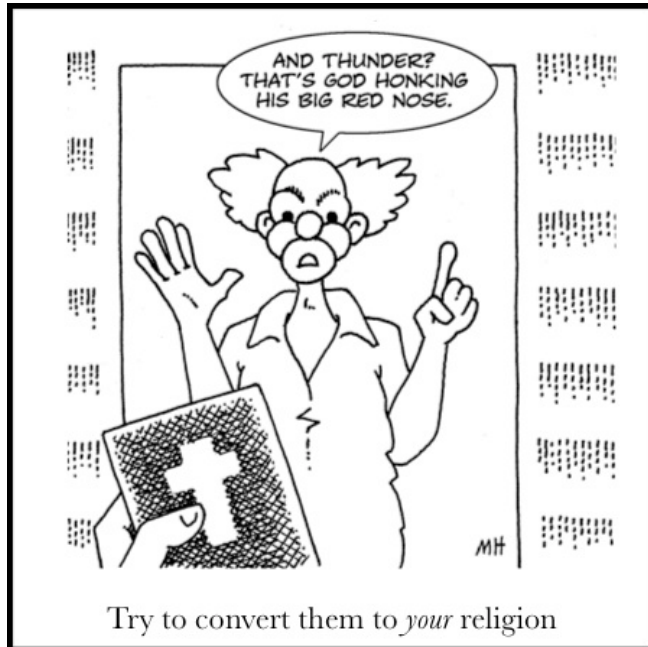
So last time we talked about the problems I'm having with my new house. It turns out I'm having problems with the neighbors, too. Every one of them thinks it's their solemn duty to convert me to their religion.

Now, we all know the old-fashioned ways of handling these kinds of pests—answering the door naked, swearing you worship Satan, etc. That worked against your parents' door-to-door religious pests, but not this new breed. For today's missionaries, you have to pull out all the stops.

Tarl Kudrick (writer) and Matt Howarth (illustrator) bring you:

Six Ways to Deal With Door-to-Door Missionaries





FIRST PLACE

Robert J. Sullivan is a Connecticut native who spent some time in New Jersey and New York, then spent many years in the insurance industry, then became a computer programmer in an obscure language and enjoyed it thoroughly. He's married with two grown children and is exploring the joys of poverty and writing.

He's published stories in several anthologies, and two science fiction detective thrillers, *In the Blood* and the upcoming *This Honest Man*.

Trust Me

by Robert J. Sullivan

Leonard Commons was ready to order at the donut shop when a small slip of paper appeared a foot above the counter and fluttered onto it. In his own handwriting were the words "*Have the Bran Muffin.*"

He snatched the paper, read it again and crumpled it in his fist.

"What'll it be?" asked the vacant-eyed girl with purple hair behind the counter. If she'd noticed the paper appear, she didn't think it was worth mentioning.

Leonard was a 26-year-old graduate student in English at the university, a little too tall, underweight, with dirt colored hair. He pretended his nose was noble instead of too big and ignored the question of his chin. He tightened his lips and took control of his destiny.

"Medium coffee, milk and sugar. A jelly donut and a chocolate frosted. With sprinkles."

As the young woman went off to retrieve his donuts, Commons looked around in guilt and fear, expecting Professor Ubermann or Professor Hullbreech to appear in a cloud of smoke to berate him for ruining their experiment. He paid, took the bag and wolfed down his goodies like a kid who'd gotten into the cookie jar.

Six weeks earlier, the professors had invited him to join them in Professor Charles Hullbreech's office. Since his academic career was unmarred by serious accomplishments, Leonard was expecting to be eventually fired, court-martialed or whatever else they did to grad students. That couldn't be what these professors wanted. He was working on an English degree, and these professors were from the Psychology and Physics departments.

"We'd like you to participate in an experiment we're running. As a subject, of course," Hullbreech began.

Leonard nodded. Grad students were a time-honored source of test subjects: cheap, compliant, and readily available. Many professors only switched to white mice when the experiment required the ability to follow directions and some intelligence.

"The university has decided to leap to the forefront of the synergy movement that's sweeping academia," continued Hullbreech. "That means combining the best minds in wildly disparate fields. For example, quantum physics," and here Hullbreech nodded to Professor Max Ubermann, who smiled thinly, "and my own field of psychology."

The psychology professor leaned forward, an intent look on his face, the same one he used on potential benefactors to his department. "As you know, people make bad choices in their lives. This costs them, and more importantly, society, incalculable money, time, effort, and mental anguish, and risks their health and lives. Psychology has been fighting a never-ending battle to combat the effects of these decisions and to get people to learn how to make better choices.

"But up to now, all we're doing is arriving after the battle to clean up. What if we could get there before the battle started?"

“One of the biggest problems with dealing with patients is to establish a trust relationship. Heaven knows, we’ve tried everything—charging money, then more money, then even more money— knowing that the more we charge, the more valuable our advice must be, and we still have problems establishing trust. And trust is crucial for getting the patient to accept our advice.”

Hullbreech rested his elbows on his desk and matched his fingertips. A small twig fell out of the loose weave of his tweed jacket. “Tell me, Mr. Commons, who do you trust to make decisions for you?”

Not you two overclocked simulacra, Leonard thought. Ubermann had the dispassionate look on his cadaverous face of an alien about to dissect his first human and Hullbreech was a back-slapping Machiavelli. He considered the question.

“Well, I trust my mother...” he began.

Hullbreech was already shaking his head. “I’m sure that was true when you were two, but since then, you’ve made your own decisions, correct? Even ones your mother wouldn’t approve of? A second glass of cabernet or sherry, hand-holding with a young lady of a lower social class, perhaps?” His eyebrows bounced up and down in a lascivious way. “You are the only one you trust! And we can get you your own opinion!”

Leonard tried to remember whether the red pill or the blue pill was the right one. “I already have my own opinion, sir.”

“Not good enough! Not good enough!”

Ubermann cut in in a portentous baritone. “Mr. Commons, I’m sure you know the universe is almost infinite. In that infinity, there are an infinite number of beings identical to you. Identical! Down to that poor choice of a shirt! They are all sitting in rooms identical to this one, talking to people identical to the good professor and me.” His smoldering eyes impaled Leonard. “And, due to the vagaries of time and space, there are also an infinite number of you who sat in that same seat an hour ago.”

“Do you see the possibilities?” Hullbreech asked. “Life is filled with events where you think ‘What I should have done ...’ or ‘What I should have said ...’ We can drop that future into your lap. No more regrets! No more mistakes! No more missed chances! We’ll have the benefit of perfect 20-20 hindsight.

“Will you sign up for this momentous adventure?”

They stared at him, waiting for his answer. He already wished he knew what he should do. The more he worked, the farther away from his degree he seemed and he was stalled on his screenplay. He took a deep breath.

“How much does it pay?”

*

Minutes later they were all in the basement of the Physics Building. There were papers to sign, including a blood-freezing dispensation for any and all damages done to him during the course of the test, holding the professors, the university, its students, faculty and possibly the lab rats blameless from any legal action or responsibility for his incredibly dangerous act of agreeing to the experiment. Once the papers were signed, Hullbreech shook Leonard’s hand, took his copy of the papers and left. Ubermann took his copy, smiled and turned Leonard over to *his* graduate students. One wouldn’t look at him, another wouldn’t talk to him and the third was the scary one. None of them looked like they were ever let out of the lab without a leash. They set about hooking him up to a jury-rigged apparatus, while the one who wouldn’t talk tapped furiously on a terminal.

“How long does the test last?” Leonard asked the scary one. He was careful to read all the ingredients in every candy bar he ate and he had no idea what this stuff was, let alone what it would do.

“Six months to a year. After that, we’ll have a proof-of-concept result and we can get funding to do a full wide-scale test.”

“What about equipment? Do I get anything?” Leonard had a vision of porting 300 pounds of dangerous high voltage equipment to the supermarket.

“I suppose you’ll need a notebook and a pen to record the choice, your actions and the results,” Lasch, the scary one, said.

“But then, how do I know what to do?”

Lasch smiled. “A slip of paper will appear in front of you, with the results of our survey of all the others of you. The majority opinion will be what you see. It’s triggered by any hesitation in your neural net. The answer will be on the slip.”

“Really? Who delivers the paper?”

“No one *delivers* it. When I said it appears out of thin air, that’s exactly what I meant.”

“Really? Wow!”

The scary one shook his narrow head, while the other two showed signs of amusement. “What are you, an English major? We build a device that assembles the consciousness of at least a thousand identical replicas of you, create pseudo-quantum entanglement with them, update the replicas with only those that followed your choices and you think it’s amazing that we can call a piece of paper out of thin air? That’s a laugh. Fred, there, wanted to print the results on a live squid. We would have, too, but Professor Ubermann vetoed the idea. Thought it would look funny in the scientific paper we’ll put out on this.”

Leonard pondered for a moment and was troubled. “What does this do to Free Will?”

Scary cackled and his two bookends laughed immoderately. “Free Will! The four humors! Phlogiston! The aether! Free Will, he asks!”

Suppressed for a few minutes, Leonard scraped his courage together again and asked, “If there’s no equipment, how do you turn it off when the experiment is over?”

The scary one went to a console. “It doesn’t work that way. What we’re doing is taking off a blindfold you’ve been wearing your whole life.”

He hit the switch.

*

Leonard was crossing the street with his coffee and spotted Rosemarie Dovecote. He froze in place, hypnotized by the most beautiful girl on campus, probably in the city and perhaps the country. He couldn't believe anyone could be more beautiful. She'd arrived on campus at the beginning of the semester, a transfer from California, with golden skin, thick, tawny hair that was always in disarray, and a body...

Leonard had been in love with her from the first time he'd seen her. They passed in the halls, walked by each other between buildings, had coffee in the same student union. He'd even proctored one of her exams. He'd never spoken to her.

She was wearing a light top in robin's-egg blue and a pair of short shorts. She was talking to another student and had slipped off one sandal. Her toes were on the sandal and her knee was bent. Leonard looked at the soft flesh of the side of her foot and lusted to nibble gently on that perfect flesh. He wasn't a foot fetishist where anyone else was concerned, it was only that it would kill him to visualize any more intimate portion of her body.

"Get out of the road, dummy!"

Three more slips joined the first one to indicate the urgency and conviction of his fellows. Leonard lurched into motion and made it to the other side as a truck made the corner and ran over the spot he'd been standing. He hurried by Rosemarie, afraid she'd noticed his clumsy brush with death. He had some thinking to do. He found a bench and sat down.

The last six weeks had been good to him. He'd completed his assignments on time, hadn't awakened with a hangover once, had lost five pounds, his system was regular, he'd gotten a compliment from his manager in his part-time job at the supermarket, and, in one exploit he hadn't reported, had followed up on a slip that said *'Hit on her'* that had proven remarkably successful.

On the other hand, he was bored to distraction. All the savor and adventure seemed to have been sucked out of his life. He was living in a re-run he hadn't enjoyed the first time. Four months more of this? Ten more? A lifetime? No, it was intolerable.

But the advice came from himself! Thousands of selves! All with his best interest at heart! What did it mean if he wasn't listening to his own advice?

Rosemarie was walking toward him, a textbook and a notebook in her arms. All his yearning, all his hopes in life, seemed to be wrapped up that one delightful package. He stood up.

A torrent of paper slips showered down on him, all with the same message:

"Don't even THINK about it!"

She smiled at him as he stood up. He fell in step beside her. He hoped that wasn't his heart in his mouth, it tasted more like his spleen.

"Hi," he said.

She tilted her head and said, "Hi."

"I'm Leonard Commons. I proctored one of your exams a while back."

"I'm Rosemarie Dovecote. I'm sorry, I don't remember. I must have been focusing on the exam. I remember seeing you around, though."

Another flurry of paper appeared in the air.

"That's funny," she said.

"Oh, it's nothing. Uh, look, there's a movie showing at the campus theater tomorrow night, and, uh, I thought I might ask you to go to it with me."

Rosemarie tilted her head and looked up at him. "Did you decide whether you will ask me?"

He floundered. It had never occurred to him that she might say something to him and he hadn't made a plan to cover the eventuality. He floundered on. "Uh, I guess I did. Would you like to go?"

"Well, thank you, but I'm going to a party tomorrow. Sorry." She turned at the steps to a building. "This is my stop. Nice talking to you." She hurried up the steps.

Another slip came down:

"Told you so."

*

An hour later he was huddled over a cup of bad coffee in the student union mulling over the latest disaster in his life. He examined the shredded remnants of his dignity, his ego, his prospects, his chance of climbing out of the rut of his life. Life wasn't worth living. He'd lost his only chance with Rosemarie and all other women on the planet were but pale reflections of her beauty. Why go on?

He waited for inevitable death and dissolution, his only option at this point. Ten minutes went by, then another ten. He went back and refilled his coffee cup. Was this what his other selves had been trying to prevent, his humiliation and the shattering of his life's ambition? Somewhere in the universe were his other selves congratulating themselves, knowing that at some future time, they would succeed where he had failed? To have missed his opportunity was difficult enough, but the idea of failing after knowing what to do was crushing.

Then a funny thing happened: he didn't die. He kept inhaling and exhaling, sipping rotten coffee, and watching students hurry by, chirping to each other, living their lives. A student in a class he taught came over and asked him a question about a novel from the class. He answered as if he wasn't already dead and the student went on his way.

"Have the decaf," a note said.

He refilled his cup with regular coffee and tried to make sense of it. The advice to get out of the street certainly indicated his other selves had his best interest at heart. He thought back to the donuts and couldn't regret buying them, their sweet goodness. He shook his head. He needed a controlled experiment.

*

The casino was garishly lit, spacious, cool and well furnished. The Native Americans certainly seemed to be doing all right for themselves. He bought \$320 worth of chips with the money from his vacation fund and headed for the roulette table. There was a \$20 minimum on the table. He screwed his courage to its limit, took five chips and stepped up. The slip appeared.

"Red."

He put the five chips on the marker for Red and waited. The white ball went around and around and sweat dripped down his armpits until the ball stopped on red. He collected his winnings and the next slip said "27." He put another hundred down and collected \$3200.

Wow. Just, wow.

The next slip said "\$100 on 17." He put his money down and was already reaching for his winnings when the ball stopped on 6.

What? He looked at the slip again and it still said "\$100 on 17." Was the wheel crooked? No, that wouldn't matter. Or did it? He was getting reports from the future. It should have told him not to bet if he was going to lose. Why? He couldn't understand.

Go home? Consider the experiment a failure and try to figure it out? No, the casino was in the business of making money. If he won too often, they'd ban him. His future selves were making him inconspicuous by having him lose.

That had to be it. If he won too consistently, they could ban him. He swallowed hard and went back to the table.

*

The \$87,000 Leonard won in the casino restored a lot of the confidence he'd lost talking to Rosemarie Dovecote, but it didn't cure his longing. He spent his days going to classes (the ones he was taking and the ones he was giving) and alternating between watching for her and fleeing if he thought she saw him. In a panic, he spent a frenzied hour on-line looking up the legal definition of stalking and its various penalties. The paper slips were no help, vacillating between encouragement and cowardice. His other selves were as incompetent as he was.

A tall, muscular, handsome black cloud appeared in Leonard's life: Aldo Baron, a senior, captain of this sports team, president of that group, leader of the other association. Even Leonard's isolation and indifference to social interaction and mores weren't enough to make him unaware of Baron, and when he started to appear with alarming frequency near Dovecote, Leonard feared the worst. It was bad enough that she was emotionally out of Leonard's reach, to find her dating someone who was everything that Leonard wasn't confirmed his unworthiness. Rumor had it Baron was currently between cheerleader girlfriends and was scouting for a replacement.

As a respite from his other troubles, Leonard worked on his screenplay. Graduate students in English are required by long custom to be working on a novel in Ivy League schools or a screenplay in California or New York. Leonard's university hadn't decided which way to swing, so both options were open to him. His evening routine was to delete the emails from Professor Hullbreech complaining about the inadequate information he was providing, grade papers for two hours, spend two hours on the screenplay, vacuum up the small mountain of paper slips that appeared, and go to bed.

Leonard was eminently fair in his grading after the other grad students explained that college students weren't paying enormous sums to flunk out and convinced him to add a full letter grade to each paper. As he got to the end of the stack, he was already brooding about his screenplay and how badly it was going.

He finished the penultimate paper, brushed the slip away that said "C+" away, marked the paper "B+", added it to the other completed papers and there was Aldo Baron's paper. His brain boiled with fury.

Paper slip: “F.”

No, he couldn’t do that, he hadn’t even looked at the paper, and Baron usually wrote well. He felt guilty considering it.

Paper slip: “A.”

No, that was wrong, too. He started reading, his red marker poised.

Paper slip: “*Unclear*.” Leonard wrote that on the paper.

Paper slip: “*Good thought*.” He didn’t write that down, felt guilty and skipped the next two negative slips.

At the end of the paper he got his slip: “C+.” Leonard shook his head and wrote “C” on the paper, ignoring the standard upgrade. Another slip appeared: “+.” In an act of defiance, he wrote “-” after the “C.”

As penance, he attacked a fresh copy of his screenplay, accumulating paper slips by the dozen with “Competent,” “Mundane,” “Banal,” “Obvious,” “Workmanlike,” and “Average” printed on them. What was infuriating was that most of the work had been done with the help of his other selves. After hours of reading he gave himself the same grade as the last slip: “C.”

He’d kept the hard copy from before the experiment and pulled it out of his desk. He’d gone through it with his collective selves and marked it: “Confusing,” “Unclear,” “Strange,” “Elucidate,” “More needed here,” “Too pompous,” “Talking down to the reader,” and on the last page, their collective grade: “B+.”

What went wrong? How could they all agree, including his personal opinion, that the improvements had made it worse?

He paced and compared versions, looked at what had been deleted and added. The answer wasn’t obvious, but it became clear when comparing the versions in their entirety.

Together they had taken the clear route, the obvious route, flattening the high places, filling in the holes. They'd homogenized it. There were no risks, no daring leaps, no chances, no garlic, no chile peppers.

He left the paper slips on the floor, took two aspirin and went to bed.

*

Leonard was still despondent the next day, dragging himself around the campus, deleting the emails from Professor Hullbreech, and avoiding places where he might see Rosemarie. He had a four o'clock class to teach, the one for the papers he'd graded the night before. He prayed Baron wouldn't be there and when he got to class, found that like so many prayers the answer was 'No.' He dumped the papers on the first student's desk, who took his own and passed the rest along. Leonard was briefly revived by the thought that he was making someone else's day as bad as his own.

Leonard had given this lecture before and got through it with a minimum of prompts from paper slips. The students had noticed the phenomenon soon after it started and didn't comment on it. Eccentricity was the norm among the teaching staff and Leonard's oddity didn't even put him in the Top Ten.

He broke for the door as soon as the lecture was over, dropped his briefcase and was the last one out the door after he collected his papers. Aldo Baron was waiting in the hall with his paper in his hand.

"Mr. Commons, I'd like to talk to you about this grade."

It would have been undignified to run away, so Leonard stopped.

"What about it?" He still hadn't managed the professional's attitude that grades were a force of nature, immutable and unchanging, and guilt weakened his position even more.

"The grades you've given me up to now show that you've been satisfied with my work. This is much lower than the others and I think I deserve a better grade."

Bitterness sharpened Leonard's tongue. "I don't think so. Maybe you should spend more time studying and less time socializing."

"I wasn't aware that English grades were based on isolation and a lack of social skills," Baron said.

Leonard was on a roll and couldn't stop. "You're lucky we don't grade on how you dress. Were the lights off in the Salvation Army this morning? And don't even consider what would happen if we factored in rampant philandering as a cover for latent homosexuality."

Baron looked thoughtful. "Good comeback. Have you got one for this?"

Leonard's eye was drawn away from Aldo's fist to several paper slips and he didn't see the punch at all. He was sitting on the floor when the slip landed on his knee.

"*Duck!*" it said.

Leonard held out his hand to Baron. "Paper."

The student handed it to him. Commons changed the grade to "B+" and handed it back.

"I don't recommend this as a negotiation tactic for your other instructors."

"I don't plan to. Thanks, Mr. Commons." He stuffed the paper in his bag and left.

Leonard sat there contemplating his failures and his inability to live up to the promise he'd seemed to have.

"Are you hurt?"

Rosemarie Dovecote put down a notebook and sat on it gracefully, displaying incomparable knees under a short skirt. An explosion of paper showered them.

This was the end, then. Leonard's last broken shard of hope fell from the skies in flames and crashed to earth, the wreckage burning, and flickered out.

Embarrassment heaped on top of humiliation. He touched his tender nose.

"You saw?" he asked.

"I was down the hall. He shouldn't have hit you. Are you going to report him?"

"No, it was my fault, I insulted him," Leonard said.

"He'll survive."

"I thought the two of you were, uh..."

"Him? No. His world revolves around himself and he's got no room for anyone else." She flicked an errant strand of soft hair back.

There was a small silence and a brief flurry of paper. Leonard didn't look; that would have required some hope for the future and he had none.

"You must be very important," Rosemarie said.

"Me? That's a word nobody ever said about me."

"I've never met anyone who had their own personal ticker tape parade." She seemed amused.

"It's complicated," Leonard said and clawed desperately for some way to keep the conversation going. "What's your major?"

She laughed. "That's cliché."

Leonard winced. "You're right."

"That drew blood and I didn't mean to." She put a hand on his arm.

Leonard said, "I'm in the middle of writing a screenplay and I seem to be drawn to clichés."

"Really? You write? I'm a theater major. What's your story about?"

Leonard told her about the script and the two versions, the good one, the new one and how it hadn't worked. He showed her the copies from his briefcase. She read,

he explained and they scooted next to the wall to avoid a pedestrian and talked on. She jumped to her feet and began acting out one of the scenes, playing all the parts, hero, heroine, villain, sidekick, changing each reading, first from the old script and then the new. He laughed at the different things she did with the same words. The script came back to life for him, opening new possibilities. He began to see where he wanted it to go and remembered why he'd fallen in love with the idea in the first place.

The arrival of a maintenance man with a broom to sweep up paper slips pushed them out of the building. When they stopped a snowstorm of slips fell around them, some in colors. Leonard felt revived, on the brink of something wonderful, on the edge of a great fall.

"Do you like gambling?" he asked.

"I do!" Then her face fell. "But I never win."

"Come with me to the casino. I have a feeling something will change."

*

Several months later, Professor Hullbreech squinted against the sun reflecting off the hotel pool and continued his pleading. "You have to come back to the university! We haven't been able to reproduce the experiment with anyone else. Without your help, the whole program falls apart. This is a monumental discovery in human history and has to be continued. You have to tell the regents about how successful you've been following the advice of your other selves."

Ubermann added, "I need a few small samples of your brain tissue to prove what I did. The biology department assures me there is a better than even chance we'll get enough to continue the experiment. You'll barely miss the cells. Some local anesthesia, a little pinch, some passing incontinence and memory loss. What's that compared to science?"

Leonard scratched the beard Rosemarie had suggested he grow. She told him she thought he'd look better with one and hadn't mentioned his chin at all. She'd been right, he looked much better with it and he liked how gently and positively she'd

mentioned it. It confirmed that she was as nice as she was beautiful. He sipped his mimosa and looked beyond the two professors to where Rosemarie was levering herself out of the pool.

She walked up as she toweled off her hair, then stopped and kissed the top of his head. "I'll be up in the room getting ready for the party. Quentin said he'd be there and so did Keanu. I think Jack and Meryl will drop by and Bobby said he'd be there for sure. I think there's going to be a fight over your script, they all want it. Don't get sunburned, lover."

She walked on toward the hotel and Leonard dragged his eyes away from her as an exercise in self control. Hullbreech had a small trail of saliva running from the corner of his mouth and Leonard could sympathize; he'd only recently been able to suppress the impulse to drool when he saw her in that bathing suit. For the price she'd paid for it, you would have thought there would be more material.

"I appreciate what you did for me, but don't overestimate its value," he told Hullbreech.

"You wouldn't have gotten anywhere without your casino winnings. That was purely from the experiment," Ubermann said.

"And I appreciate the head start. That gave me the seed money I needed. The rest of it was all me."

"But you had knowledge of the future. That's priceless!"

"After the money, the rest was nothing more than a way to avoid immediate pain and that's no way to get ahead."

A familiar slender arm appeared on a third floor balcony and draped a wet bikini over the railing.

“As to what choice is the right one, I have to learn to trust me.” Leonard drained the last of his drink and stood up. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have something I’d much rather be doing.”

He headed for the hotel. No paper slips fell, then or ever again.

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SECOND PRIZE

Sharon Goldberg lives in the Seattle area and previously worked as an advertising copywriter in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Under the Sun*, *The Chaffey Review*, *Temenos*, *The Binnacle* and elsewhere. Her short story "Caving In" is a finalist in this year's Pacific Northwest Writers Association Literary Contest and her story "Ghost" was a finalist last year. Sharon is working on a short story collection.

The Boob Chronicles

by Sharon Goldberg

Sept. 4, 1985

Today is the first day of eighth grade and I still don't wear a bra. Every morning I check in the mirror to see if my boobs got bigger overnight. But I'm still flat, flat, flat. If my boobs don't grow by next year when I'm fourteen and start high school, I will go into hiding or kill myself. I most definitely cannot step through the doors of Fairview knowing everyone will laugh at me. Mom says don't worry, Kim, there's no rush. Mom says some girls develop earlier than others. Mom says I'm perfectly normal. If that's true, why don't I feel normal?

Sept. 16, 1985

The following are the girls in my class who already wear bras: Lisa, Heather, Michelle, Jennifer M, Amy, Nicole, Melissa, Jennifer D, and my best friend Shannon who finally got her bra two months ago. The following are the boys in my class who stare at the boobs of the girls who wear bras: ALL OF THEM. Especially Adam, a conceited CREEP with squinty eyes who gets sucky grades. He doesn't

stop staring even when he gets caught. At least Ryan tries to be subtle. He's sweet and smart and has big brown eyes and dimples. I really like Ryan.

Sept. 20, 1985

There's a boy in my class named Kevin Cleary who's fat. Not husky or chunky or chubby but FAT. I'd never say that to his face, but it's true. Adam and some of the other kids make fun of Kevin. They say he has boobs like a girl and should wear a bra. Kevin slumps through the halls, his Walkman in his ears, his eyes focused on the floor. He pretends he doesn't hear when kids call him fatso and lardo and hippo and Boobie Boy and Blubber Butt. But he hears. Everyone hears. At lunch, Kevin sits alone in the cafeteria and kids blow straw wrappers in his face and throw ketchup packets at his back. I think he should go on a diet, but every day he orders three burgers and two fries and a piece of pie. I feel sorry for him. It's worse to be a boy *with* boobs than a girl *without* them.

Sept. 25, 1985

My Mom has a whole drawer full of bras: underwire, push-up, demi-cup, strapless, halter, sports. Bras in white, black, pink, lavender, nude, and baby blue. Bras with lace and bras with satin and bras with flowers and bras with stripes. Bras from Bali, Olga, Lily of France, Vanity Fair and Victoria's Secret. Even one from Frederick's of Hollywood, which Dad calls her "come fuck me" bra but I'm not supposed to know that.

Oct. 1, 1985

It's official. Jennifer D has the best boobs in the entire eighth grade. Adam passed around a survey to the boys and Jennifer D got the most votes. I got no votes. ZERO. I feel like a total dork. To be honest, even I think Jennifer D's boobs are the best and I'm a girl! They're most definitely big but not gross. She doesn't try to hide them like Nicole who wears loose sweaters and hunches her shoulders because her boobs are gigundous. I think Jennifer D likes that boys stare at her boobs. She parades around with her shoulders back and her chin raised and her boobs pointing to the sky for the whole school to see. Mom calls this "flaunting." I wonder how it feels to have boobs like Jennifer's. Are they heavy? Do they get in

the way when she sleeps on her stomach? Do they turn super sore when she has her period? If Jennifer D is normal, how can I be normal, too?

Oct. 9, 1985

My grandmother and grandfather came over for dinner. Grandma hugged me then looked right at my boobs and said, how exciting, you're budding. I extracted myself from her bony fingers. Gross me out! I'm not a rose bush.

Oct. 11, 1985

Jennifer D's boyfriend is Scott. He's on the basketball team and looks like Simon Le Bon from Duran Duran. I wish I had a boyfriend. Would I have a boyfriend if I had boobs?

Oct. 15, 1985

In Science class, we're studying genetics. Mom has size 34C boobs. If I inherited her genes, maybe someday I'll be a 34C, too. But what if I inherited someone else's genes? My Aunt Laura's, for example. She's flat as a diving board and wears a padded bra. Does Uncle Ted love her any less because her boobs are miniscule? If you wear a padded bra and a boy feels you up, can he tell? Can you still feel him feeling you up? Should I even be thinking about being felt up? If I could pick anyone to feel me up, it would be Ryan.

Oct. 16, 1985

Jennifer D broke up with Scott. I wonder if she ever let him touch her boobs.

Oct. 23, 1985

Today when I was taking books out of my locker, I heard Adam talking to Ryan and Scott about tits. I hate that word. It's ugly, cold, crude. I don't ever want anyone to call my boobs tits. I also hate hooters, knockers, bazooms, and jugs. I know boobs should really be called breasts, but I'm embarrassed to say breasts. It's too personal. I hate Adam.

Oct. 25, 1985

Mom had one of her “little chats” with me. She talked about “maturing.” She says it’s natural to have concerns and questions and doubts as my body changes. She likes to “share her experiences.” She says she “identifies” with me and understands what I’m going through because she went through it, too. Crap! She doesn’t understand. NO ONE UNDERSTANDS.

Nov. 4, 1985

I’m a freak. An alien. A boobless troll.

Nov. 13, 1985

In the shower after gym class, I saw Jennifer D’s boobs. It’s not like I was staring or anything, but it’s not like she tries to cover them either. Wow! It’s hard to believe Jennifer and I are even the same species. She looks like a marble sculpture. She looks like a *Playboy* centerfold. She looks like a woman. I look like a boy.

Nov. 18, 1985

Sometimes when Mom washes dishes, Dad cuddles up behind her, slides his hands under her arms, and plays with her boobs. She giggles and snuggles into him. Gross! I’d rather not see my Dad feeling up my Mom.

Nov. 22, 1985

I sent away for some breast enhancement cream I saw advertised in a magazine when I got my hair cut. The cream is guaranteed to enlarge my boobs one half to one cup size. Results start to show within four weeks. I can’t wait!

Dec. 2, 1985

The Victoria’s Secret catalog came in the mail today for Mom—30% off selected bras. Why do all the models have massive boobs? My brother Matt grabbed the catalog and snuck it into the bathroom with him. Barf me out!

Dec. 7, 1985

I despise, detest, abhor, loathe Adam. In the cafeteria line, while Rosie was scooping mac and cheese onto my plate, Adam backed into me and pressed his arm against my left boob. I wanted to slug him but I didn't. Adam acted like it was an accident, but I know he did it on purpose. He probably told Ryan and Scott and everyone else he felt me up.

Dec. 14, 1985

Ryan waved to me in the hall. I wonder if he likes me. I wonder if he thinks about me when he's at home. I wonder if he'd think about me more if I had boobs.

Dec. 28, 1985

All I got from the breast enhancement cream is an itchy, red rash all over my chest.

Jan. 10, 1986

Today was the WORST day of my life. During lunch, kids passed around a drawing that looked like this:



When I saw it, I felt like crawling under the table. Adam drew the picture. HE IS HEINOUS. I crumpled up the paper, spit on it, and threw it at his head. He just laughed. Ryan was sitting next to Adam and smiled at me. I wonder if he thought the drawing was funny or mean or both. As horrible and horrendous and humiliating as the picture was for me, it was worse for Kevin. He sank his head

into his sweatshirt like a tortoise and ran out of the cafeteria without finishing his fries. When I got home from school I locked myself in my bedroom and cried. Mom knocked on the door. "What's wrong, honey?" I told her about Adam's drawing. I said I want to transfer to another school or kill myself. Mom hugged me. She said kids can be so cruel. She promised I'd survive. She said she knows I think it's the end of the world, but it's not. She said when I'm older, I'll look back and maybe even laugh. But I'm not older and it feels like the end of the world. Who gets to decide when it's the end of someone else's world?

Jan. 16, 1986

I think my boobs are getting slightly bigger. My nipples stick out more; they're pink like a rabbit's ear. Some women have brown nipples. Some have very large nipples. Variation is normal. (I've observed this in *Playboy*.) Mammals have nipples so they can breastfeed their babies. I am a mammal. What if I have a baby and I don't want to breastfeed? And what if I never have a baby because no boy wants to marry me because I never grow boobs? Why are boys so obsessed with boobs if all they're really for is feeding babies?

Jan. 18, 1986

Mom and Dad saw a show at the Variety Arts Theatre called "This Was Burlesque." It stars Ann Corio, a famous stripper. I heard them laughing about the Tassel Twirler. She wore long, fringed tassels attached to her nipples. She wiggled and shimmied and twirled her boobs in two directions. Warped! How did she get the tassels to stay on? Glue? Duct tape? How did she get them off? Ouch! How do you get your boobs to twirl? Can you twirl one at a time?

Feb. 1, 1986

If I had boobs, they'd distract from my pointy chin which makes me look like a witch. Mom says I'm exaggerating, my chin is perfectly normal, it fits my face, it looks like hers and my grandmother's. Well, they look like witches, too! My Dad isn't repulsed by Mom's pointy chin, but Mom is a 34 C.

Feb. 3, 1986

I heard that Jennifer D went to see *The Breakfast Club* with a sixteen-year-old boy who's in Matt's class and she let him feel her up. Shannon says Jennifer is a slut. I wonder if that's true. I told Mom and Dad about the date, but not about the feeling up. Dad said if I ever go near a sixteen-year-old boy, I'll be grounded for life.

Feb. 4, 1986

Scott asked Shannon to be his girlfriend. Now she has a boyfriend and I still don't. I wonder if Scott will compare Shannon's boobs to Jennifer D's.

Feb. 11, 1986

Adam is the world's biggest PIG. After choir, I was drinking water at the fountain and he ran his pig finger down my back to see if I was wearing a bra. It felt like a tarantula crawled on me. I jumped about ten feet. I don't know what's worse—that he found out I don't wear a bra or if he'd found out that I did.

Feb. 14, 1986

Happy Valentine's Day! I think my boobs are getting bigger—most definitely.

Feb. 19, 1986

Scott broke up with Shannon. She says she doesn't care. I wonder if he was blinded by the memory of Jennifer D's boobs.

Mar. 3, 1986

Next month is the Spring Dance. I must convince Mom that a new outfit is crucial to my future happiness. Shannon and I studied the latest styles in *Seventeen*. According to one article, horizontal stripes emphasize body parts and make them look larger. We decided I should buy a dress with big stripes across my boobs. Preferably red because red is the color with the highest wavelength frequency, so it's brightest and attracts the most attention. Hopefully Ryan's. After Social Studies, Ryan and I talked about what we want to be in the future. He plans to be a Senator. I plan to be a Supreme Court Justice. Very compatible.

Mar. 5, 1986

I watched a video on MTV of Madonna singing “Open Your Heart.” She wears a black and gold corset bra with cups pointed like daggers and black tassels attached to the nipples. (I bet she could twirl them if she wanted to.) The bra is supposed to be sexy, but I wouldn’t wear it even if I did have boobs.

Mar. 8, 1986

Shannon and I shopped at the Galleria for a boob-enhancing outfit for the dance. (Thanks, Mom!) I didn’t see anything with red horizontal stripes. But I found a fantabulous dress, anyway. It’s white with a full skirt, skinny straps, and red polka dots all over. The dots should create an optical illusion of roundness and fullness.

Mar. 10, 1986

Jennifer D was late to English and raced into the room after the bell rang. She was stuffed into her Guess jeans and a red (red!) off-one-shoulder t-shirt. Bounce, bounce, bounce, bounce. All the boys in class stared as if they were watching a spaceship land. Later I heard Ryan and Scott making fun of Adam because Jennifer gave him a hard-on. I’m not exactly sure what a hard-on is, but I don’t think I’d want a boy to get one because of me.

Mar. 13, 1986

After French, I saw all these kids crowded around Kevin’s locker and I went to see what was going on. A page from a porno magazine was taped to his locker door. It showed a woman in a push up bra with huge boobs, but the woman’s head was cut out and a Xerox of Kevin’s class picture put there instead. Adam was lurking a few feet away laughing like crazy. I didn’t laugh. Later I noticed the picture had been ripped down, a corner of the page still attached. After school, at the bus stop, I saw Kevin. I wanted to tell him I thought Adam was a PRICK, but I didn’t. I don’t know why.

Mar. 16, 1986

My stupid brother left his new issue of *Playboy* in the bathroom. Are all boys like him and Adam—obsessed with boobs? I told him I thought he was a pervert. He laughed and said, “I’m not a pervert, I’m just normal. Guys like to look at pictures of naked girls.”

Mar. 21, 1986

Kevin has been absent for six days. I wonder if it’s because of the picture on his locker.

Mar. 22, 1986

MY LIFE IS OVER! Shannon had a pool party at the YMCA for her birthday. To create some boobage, I stuck Mom’s shoulder pads in the top of my yellow two-piece swim suit. When I dove into the pool, the pads popped out and floated on the water. Adam grabbed one and played catch with it. He yelled, “Kim wears falsies!” Everyone laughed. I climbed out of the pool and ran to the locker room and called Mom to take me home. I told her I can never show my face in school again. I want to become a Buddhist monk or kill myself. Mom said I should hold my head high and laugh along with everyone. That’s how I can diffuse the situation. Adam is a SCUMBAG.

Apr. 4, 1986

Yay! Mom says it’s time for me to buy a bra. I said I’d go to the Galleria with Shannon, but Mom said, no, she’s taking me to the new Nordstrom where a certified bra fitter can measure me. This sounds worse than going to the dentist.

Apr. 9, 1986

Something terrible happened. I was in the principal’s office to drop off a note for a doctor’s appointment and I heard the secretary whispering on the phone. Kevin swallowed a whole bottle of Tylenol and tried to kill himself! For real. I’ve never known anyone before who really, truly wanted to die. IT’S NOT FUNNY! His dad found him on the floor of the bathroom and called 911. Kevin was rushed to the

hospital and doctors pumped his stomach and saved his life. It's all Adam's fault for taping the bra picture to Kevin's locker. Well, maybe not just Adam's fault, but all the kids who made fun of Kevin. Maybe my fault too because I didn't tell Kevin I think Adam is a prick.

Apr. 12, 1986

I'm official! Mom and I drove to Nordstrom and crammed into the dressing room with the certified bra fitter, Irina with a Russian accent. (Are bras in Russia the same as bras in the United States? What do they call boobs in Russia? Do Russian boys make fun of Russian girls who wear bras?) I cringed half naked in front of the mirror while Irina wrapped a tape measure over my ribs under my boobs. Her hands were cold as Siberia. "Your furrframe is twenty-fife, I add fife and your burra size is theeirty." Then she measured over my boobs. "Here you are twenty-fife and a hoff, so yourr cup size ees double A. I can brrring you some bras to try on here or you could go to the leetle girrls department for a trrraining bra." I glared darts at her. "I'm sure we can find something here," Mom said. (Thank you, thank you, I love you, Mom.) I waited with my arms crossed over my boobs, freezing to death until Irina brought in a bunch of bras. She pulled a plain white one off a plastic hanger, unhooked the back, and asked me to stick my arms out like a scarecrow. She slipped the bra straps over my arms and hooked the back. "Now bend forrrward," she said and reached around and grabbed the bra cups and jiggled them around. Gag me with a spoon! A total stranger feeling me up. She adjusted the straps and said, "Guuud. Snug but not tight." I extracted myself from her Siberian hands. "Just leave me alone," I said. "I can do this by myself." "Fine," Mom said and she led Irina out. The bra I picked is a Maidenform as in "I dreamed I was Queen of the Eighth Grade in my Maidenform bra." It's ivory with little pink flowers, a satin bow in the middle, and a very, very light layer of soft padding so my nipples don't show through. I called Mom in to see. She planted her hands on my shoulders and got all teary and said, "Honey, you're becoming a lovely young woman." I wriggled away. "Can we just buy the bra and go home? I want to call Shannon."

Apr. 15, 1986

I modeled my new dress for Shannon *with* my new bra. We both think I look very mature. I hope, hope, hope Ryan asks me to dance.

Apr. 23, 1986

Kevin isn't coming back to school this year. Everyone is talking about it. I wonder if he's on a diet or seeing a psychiatrist. I hope he's okay. Maybe next year at Fairview he can start fresh since there will be lots of new kids there who won't know what happened. When I see him I will make a point of saying "hi" and engaging him in conversation. I made Shannon promise to be nice to him, too. No one should die because of boobs. No one.

Apr. 26, 1986

Tonight was the BEST night of my life. I was talking to Shannon and Lisa and Michelle, pretending I wasn't nervous, and RYAN asked me to dance. A slow dance: "Say You Say Me" by Lionel Ritchie. Ryan was wearing Aramis cologne. He held one of my hands in his against his chest and slipped his other hand around my back right over my bra. I guess he could tell I was wearing one, but that's okay. His hands were warm and he was sweating a little, but it was perfect—totally. I felt dreamy and tingly. We danced past Jennifer D and her new boyfriend, Shawn. Jennifer smiled at me and I smiled back. Ryan and I danced two more dances: "Crazy for You" (Madonna, slow) and "Power of Love" (Huey Lewis, fast). After that, I was feeling a little warm, too, and we decided to drink some soda. We strolled over to the snack table holding hands. Ryan poured me a cup of Coke. Then, like a rattlesnake, Adam snuck up behind me, stuck his hand down the back of my dress, and snapped my bra! I swung around and Coke spilled on me. "You turd!" I yelled. "Don't have a cow," Adam said. "I was just playing. You look pretty. I think you should be my girlfriend." I turned absolutely livid, madder than I've ever been in my life. "You're a pig!" I said. "A pervert! A prick! And it's your fault Kevin tried to kill himself. I wouldn't be your girlfriend if you were the last

boy on earth.” I poured the coke over his head. Adam’s face turned red as an atomic fire ball. “I lied,” he seethed. “You’re butt ugly. No one wants you as a girlfriend.” He stormed out of the gym, dripping Coke. Everyone saw. Everyone.

“Awesome,” Ryan said. He smiled and he put his arm around my shoulder.

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THIRD PRIZE

Camille Griep lives and writes wherever she happens to be, but mostly near Seattle, Washington. Her writing is colored by a persistent tendency to anthropomorphize everything from cars to cows. In addition to a middle-grade novel, she is elbow deep in a batch of flash fiction exploring favorite children's rhymes. Her nonfiction work appears monthly at *Used Furniture Review*. You can find more info at www.camillegriep.com or follow her on Twitter @camillethegriep.

The Spider

by Camille Griep

1.

In the morning, you open your eyes to find a spider idling on the ceiling above your bed.

2.

From leg to leg, the spider is the size of your palm. *Tegenaria duellica*: Giant house spider.

3.

You slam your right arm across the bed in the same protective motion made for the benefit of car passengers during a surprise application of the brakes. The comforter deflates with a *whumpf*, wafting skin and sandalwood and feathers. The bed is empty. Your partner is at work, en route to the gym, on the freeway, in Boston—not there.

4.

You curse your partner. You curse Boston.

5.

When you were small, you believed spiders were born from bathtubs because one or two were always located in the sunken jacuzzi of your childhood home. To this day, you distrust faucets and drains. Bathtubs require rigorous attention, as, you've now learned, do ceilings.

6.

It is possible that you are still dreaming. "Good morning," you rasp. While disappointing, the spider's silence is not necessarily a conclusive result. In fact, you often dream of voiceless spiders in forgotten rooms and secret passageways. Their webs, their legs, their jaws represent something dramatic in your subconscious, though you've yet to isolate the cause. To finalize the morning's corporeality, you squinch your eyes shut for as long as you deem safe, yet effective. You open them again.

7.

Bad: It is still there. Good: It has not dropped on you.

8.

Keeping the spider in your peripheral vision, you inch yourself to the right, to the middle of the bed, over a cold, partner-shaped indentation, and to the other edge. One pointed toe is stretched downwards until it reaches the smooth floorboards. You inhale through your nose and dismount with a swift, twisting motion.

9.

You realize you are naked. You cover your body with your arms and hands, shielding yourself from eight probing eyes.

10.

Jumping spiders have superlative arachnid eyesight due to swiveling, telephoto lenses in their eyestalks. You are pleased that this spider is not a jumping spider—and not only due to the visual acuity.

11.

T. duellica is known to meander through the house in the closing notes of summer and overture of fall in search of a mate. Otherwise they remain proximal to narrow, disorganized webs in rarely disturbed locations. You wonder if this spider belongs to the molting skins in the VCR cabinet. You shiver, remembering the little collection of not-quite-spiders and how you ran to find something long to poke them with.

12.

The spider skitters three or four inches toward the windows. You retreat backwards to the closet.

13.

Your arsenal: Three hatboxes containing thirty-four years' accumulation of bizarre haberdashery, three suitcases (two if partner is in Boston), thirty pairs of shoes, two lamps, one kleenex box, six hairbands, two economics magazines (one if partner is in Boston), one vuvuzela.

14.

You don a sweatshirt and pants with ribbing at the wrists and ankles, respectively. Nothing too loose to prevent in-crawling, but substantial enough to guard from *T. duellica*'s unique ability to break human skin. You cinch your sturdiest platform shoes to stockinged feet in order to better reach the ceiling. You add an old riding helmet to the ensemble, just in case.

15.

One economics magazine, two hairbands, and one vuvuzela are repurposed.

16.

You crane your neck to see the spider from under the brim of your riding helmet. You skirt the bed until you reach what feels to be a good tactical position. You take aim with your weapon.

17.

“I’m really very sorry,” you say. “But this is *my* house.”

18.

Giant house spiders live out entire lives in their birthplace and cannot survive the elements. If taken outside, they are fast enough to beat a person back into the house. Wikipedia lists their top speed as 1.73 feet per second.

19.

You close your eyes and visualize leaving the room for a cup of coffee: when you return, yours is now a bedroom without a palm-sized spider on the ceiling. The palm-sized spider is elsewhere, unaccounted for. It finds a mate, builds a narrow, disorganized web in the ceiling above your bed and procreates. Thousands of potentially palm-sized spiders greet you each morning. A few leave inspirational messages in their webs: “Some Human.”

20.

You close your eyes and visualize striking the spider: it dodges your blow, flies down from the ceiling, blinds you with green venom, binds your legs with silk, and calls for reinforcements. You reach for your cell phone, but it has been spirited away. The police arrive. “Are you some sort of monster?” they ask. “This spider’s family has lived here for 60 years! And what in the hell are you wearing?”

21.

You close your eyes and visualize striking the spider: “Don’t,” it shrieks. “I haven’t finished my novel yet!”

22.

You close your eyes and visualize striking the spider: it dances around your blows in eight tiny tap shoes singing “Mr. Bojangles.” A talent agent appears with a contract. Soon after, you attend its premier on Broadway. You are given free tickets and a front row seat. You throw red roses.

23.

You open your eyes and strike the spider: it falls, gutted and curled, onto the grey sheets below. It looks much smaller now. You collect it with a kleenex and flush it down the toilet.

24.

You look up at the smear on the ceiling. You are a murderer. An inverse smear on the economics magazine will alert the world of your cruelty.

25.

A sorrowful buffoon in a tiny riding helmet stares back from the mirror on the wall. Bleary eyes well up as it mourns the loss of Spider Hemingway, Spider Hines.

26.

But. You were swift and merciful. Resourceful. Self-reliant. You made your own weapon, for chrissakes.

27.

And there is nothing you can’t do today. You strip the sheets, re-stack the hatboxes, vacuum the VCR cabinet, fix the faucet in the bathtub. You buy yourself a plane ticket to Boston. You don’t pack the economics magazine.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Patrick Shannon has always found delight in the comedic side of human nature, and he can think of no higher honor than someday to be considered a bona-fide humorist. His award winning book, *Letters From Wheatfield*, celebrates life in a tiny Montana town. His other award winning book, *Viva Cisco*, is for Middle Readers. He is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi scholastic society and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

A Tissue of Lies

by Patrick Shannon

Headquarters—Central Intelligence and Anti-Terrorist Offices (CIAO)

Date: January 20, 2012

Time: Noonish Zulu

Davood Talasazan's attention is riveted to the newspaper's Puzzle Page—the Crypto Quote, to be exact. He is that close to finally solving one and, were that to happen, finally gaining a modicum of respect as a member of the crack Code Decipherment Unit within CIAO. The telephone's buzz shatters the silence of the otherwise empty office area, but Davood does not hear it. He must deduce which letter of the alphabet Q stands for. It is by far the most frequently used letter in the quote, therefore he suspects it must be rather important.

A few seconds of dead silence ensue.

The telephone sounds again with a curiously angry tone. Without lifting his eyes from the puzzle, Davood slowly gropes about for his phone and lifts it to his ear.

"Talasazan here."

“*You! Into my office! Now!*”

He leaps to his feet as if his swivel chair has suddenly become electrified. “Yes! Yes, sir! I have left before I am even speaking to you!”

As he starts to lay the phone back into its cradle, he can hear the Director of Operations shout, “Idiot!”

A full ten minutes later, Davood meekly enters the grandiose office of the D.O., who is on the verge of going ballistic. “Where in the hell have you been? Ten minutes ago you said you had already left.”

“A thousand pardons, sir. I pray for your forgiveness. I got lost.”

“Lost?! You work in this building, for Christ’s sake.”

“Yes sir, but since I have never been here to your exalted office, I had to look up your whereabouts in my Rolodex.”

“And?”

“And, sir, I ended up on the twelfth floor.”

“Even though my office is on the twenty-first.”

Davood begins nervously fumbling with the cut-glass golf trophy at the front edge of the desk. “Yes, well you see, sir, I am just the tiniest bit dyslexic.”

The Director snatches the trophy from Davood and clutches it protectively against his chest. “Dyslexic? And you’re in the goddam Code *Decipherment* Unit?”

“Oh not to worry, sir. I have never deciphered a single thing so far, so no harm done.”

The trophy drops to the desktop and smashes into a hundred glittering shards.

“Oh—my—*God!*”

“Do I detect a hint of disapproval, sir?”

“Dis—! Oh no, Talasazan. It’s far, far worse than that. *Far* worse. You see, I have to send you out on a *field* assignment. You’re absolutely the only one left here right now.”

“Field assignment? You—you mean as in—*spy* stuff?”

“No, Talasazan. Not as in *spy* stuff. As in *assassination* stuff.”

Davood’s bulging eyes and gaping mouth are fair indicators of his profound state of shock. His bladder is about to remove all doubt.

“Oh sir, I suddenly remembered a prior engagement that just popped up. I urgently need a pee. May I be excused?”

“No! Get hold of yourself, man. Sit down and cross your legs. It’ll pass. This happened with every one of your colleagues in Code, and they got through it.”

“All my colleagues? You mean that is why they are missing?”

“Yeah. Where’d you think they were?”

“Oh, just avoiding me as usual. They don’t seem to see the whimsy in my slight touch of dyslexia.”

The Director sighs. “Well, that isn’t the reason this time. After I assigned the last of my operatives to covert missions, I had no choice but to use you Code nerds. And just when I thought everything was under control, this red hot project came down. Frankly, when I realized you were the only one left, I seriously considered sending my secretary instead. But she’s Civil Service, and you know how that works.”

Davood collapses into one of the chairs in front of the D.O.’s expansive desk.

“But—but, sir. I’m not trained for field work. And *assassination*? You actually think I could kill anyone?”

The D.O. silently curses himself for letting that term slip. “Oh, Davood my boy, I misspoke. Should never have used that term, because that isn’t what this mission is about.”

“It is not? But you used the word assassination. I clearly heard you say that. It is, in fact, what brought on my near-pee event.”

“Oh my boy, I am so sorry for that unfortunate choice of words. I—I just couldn’t think of an appropriate term on the spot like that. This mission—well, it’s difficult to describe what it’s about in one word.”

“Well, perhaps you will use a few more words and help me to understand what is like assassination but isn’t. And please, do not hurry on my behalf. Take all the time you need.”

The D.O. inhales deeply and lets the breath slowly escape in an audible stream.

“All right, I will lay the details out for you *if* you accept this mission. But before we get to that, I want to ask you something. When we got you out of Iran and granted you political asylum—after the Ayatollah took over—you were grateful, weren’t you?”

“Oh, yes indeed. As a follower of Bahai, my days were numbered.”

“And do you feel you owe this country something for saving your keister like that?”

“Oh, indeed I do. That is precisely why I joined CIAO and diligently attempt to solve the Crypto Quotes in the good old Yankee Doodle newspapers.”

“Ahem! Yeah, well enough of that. Now, let me put one last question to you. Knowing how unscrupulous this organization is, and how we leverage the Patriot Act so as to completely avoid any Constitutional restraints, is it just a teeny weeny bit conceivable that we could find, oh I don’t know, maybe a gazillion reasons for deporting you back to the land of your birth?”

Davood leaps to his feet and barks, “*Sir!* I accept the mission, *sir!*”

The D.O. leans back in his throne-like leather chair and casts a fraudulent smile upon his prey. “Excellent Talasazan! Excellent! Oh, I can’t tell you how deeply moved I am by your patriotism.”

“Uh, sir. Just for my enlightenment, you understand, does this mean I will be patriotically assassinating someone?”

“Oh!” The D.O. throws his head back and chortles. “No, Talasazan, no. What we want you to do is sneak back into Iran to inflict—to inflict—*extreme discomfort* on a very high official.”

“Extreme—”

“Discomfort, yes.”

“And which high official will I be discomfiting?”

“The Grand Ayatollah.”

After a long, agonizing silence: “Sir?”

“Yes, Talasazan?”

“I am sorry to report that that pee event has just occurred.”

“Oh, forget that. You’re not the first guy that’s happened to. That’s why those chairs are covered in vinyl. Now, here’s what’s going to happen. You will be inserted back into Iran where you will make your way to Tehran and get yourself hired as the Grand Ayatollah’s valet, or whatever they call it over there. Once you are in his employ, you will plant a device—which you will smuggle in—and that device will give him the ‘extreme discomfort’ we’re talking about.”

“Just like that? I just go to the Ayatollah and get hired?!”

“Easy, easy. Settle down. We’ve already got a man inside his household, and he will see that you get the position.”

Davood is clearly on the edge of a panic attack, his wild eyes and hyperventilation a hint of that condition, and so the D.O. tries to reassure him. “Get hold of yourself, man. We’ve worked out every step of your mission. We have people in place, and they will do their part in getting you in safely. All you have to do is

follow the directions I give you to the letter. Good Lord, we've been doing this kind of thing since before you were born."

Davood decides it is not politic to reveal that he is, at that very moment, regretting that he had ever been born. But there is one trivial detail he feels compelled to raise. "Okay, okay, you get me in. I plant the device. How the *hell* do I get *out*?"

"Not to worry. Not to worry for one second. That, too, is all worked out. Listen, let's start at the beginning and I'll give you instructions for every step of the way. Okay?"

"Okay." Davood pulls out a writing pad and a pencil.

"*No!* No, no, *no!* Put those away. Listen up, agent, and listen good. None of what I'm going to tell you is to be written down, *at any time*. This is one of the most sensitive operations this agency has ever undertaken. So put that stuff away and memorize every detail of what I'm going to tell you. You screw up on so much as a single word and you'll be dog meat. Got that?"

Unable to speak, Davood nods weakly.

"How is your memory, by the way?"

"It will be adequate, insch'Allah."

"All right, well get it into gear and remember everything I'm about to tell you. The instructions aren't all that complicated."

Another feeble nod of the head.

"You will fly from here to Cairo on KLM and check into the Cairo Hilton. You will be carrying fake papers, of course. The next day, at precisely 10:27 AM, you will proceed to the Cairo Museum. Be sure to avoid Tahrir Square as best you can. The place is crawling with Egyptian military. You with me so far?"

For some reason, all Davood can remember is his cat's name. "Yes, sir. Yes. I am memorizing like crazy here."

“Good. Now, when you get into the museum go and view the King Tut exhibits. One of the museum’s guards will come up to you and say, ‘Do you want to see Rameses?’ You will respond by saying, ‘My mummy done Ptolemy.’”

“What?”

“Don’t interrupt. Just remember, the wording must be exact. Now, if all this goes right, the guard will take you far back into a part of the museum that is not open to the public and he will give you the device.”

“Please sir, forgive the interruption, but I must insist on knowing what the device is. If it is to inflict extreme discomfort on the Ayatollah, surely I must know how to trigger the thing.”

“Oh, you don’t have to trigger it. After you become the Ayatollah’s valet, just put it into its proper place in his bathroom.”

“His bathroom? What in the world is it?”

“Toilet paper.”

“Toil—That is what will discomfort him extremely? His toilet paper? How is that to happen?”

“Itching powder.”

“Wha—? You are sending me on a dangerous—? You ask me to risk my life to smuggle *itching powder* into the Ayatollah’s bathroom?”

“You don’t get it, do you boy. This is an operation we call Desanctification. You’ve seen how he sits up on that platform and gazes down at his followers. Those nuts think he’s some kind of saint. Well, he isn’t gonna look very holy sitting up there scratching his ass. Now, is he?”

“You have done this before? This is a for real?”

“Yes, yes. Now shut up about the TP. You’ve got a lot more instructions to memorize. Remember, your life depends on getting every detail right.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Director draws in a deep, calming breath before continuing. “Once you have the device—Oh, by the way, the roll of toilet paper will be concealed in a lead cylinder. Don’t open it until you’re ready to place it.”

“Lead? Why?”

“That’s your cover. If anyone asks, tell them it’s your brother’s ashes. You’ve retrieved them from the land of the infidels and you’re going to bury them in the holy city of Qom as soon as you’re able to get there.”

“Oh, sir, that is just brilliant.”

“Starting to realize that we know what we’re doing, eh?”

“Oh, yes sir. That is devilishly clever.”

“Okay. Now, once you have the device, catch an Egypt Air flight into Tehran and go straight to the Zurkhaneh—the one dedicated to Ali. Know it?”

“Yes, I have been there. The House of Strength.”

“Okay. There you will be contacted by Fredoun Fassa. He’s our man inside the residence. He will make himself known to you by saying, ‘How much wood could a woodchuck chuck?’ You will answer, ‘I take it you refer to the marmota monax.’ You with me?”

Davood suddenly remembers that he hasn’t fed his cat. “Uh huh.”

“Fredoun will then take you in hand and get you hired as the old man’s valet.”

“Okey dokey.”

“All right, listen up. Plant the toilet paper as soon as you can, and the next day say you are going to Qom to bury your brother’s ashes. Then get the hell out of there and work your way, by back alleys, to the Avenue of the Prophet. Now, listen to this very carefully. This is your extraction procedure. On the Avenue of the

Prophet, go to number 21. Knock on the door with three short raps, three long raps and then three short raps.”

“SOS?”

“Yeah, kind of appropriate, huh? Now, to the person who opens the door say, ‘I’m Troubador. I need extraction.’ From that moment on, you will be on your way back to us.”

Davood’s brain is reeling from all the instructions which he must memorize, all in the proper sequence. It is well and good to be discussing extraction, but he is in serious doubt about even getting there in one piece. The D.O.’s voice halts his ruminations.

“I’m so sorry this has to fall on a total idiot like you, Talasazan, but the fate of the entire Free World is in your hands, and I know you will do what you have to do.”

“Okey dokey.”

“Stiff upper lip!”

“Yeah!”

“Semper Fi!”

“Yeah!”

“Pair of serious cojones, eh?”

“Yeah!”

“Only one life to give for your adopted country!”

“Oh my God!”

Davood Talasazan steps out into the cold.

✱

Memo to Director of Operations, CIAO

From: Agent Two-By-Four

Date: January 26, 2012

Time: 0900 Zulu

Dear Director:

It is I, Talasazan, and I appear to be decidedly in captivity here in Tehran. I told my captors how anxious you would be for a full report on my mission, but that I could not rely on them to refrain from peeking at its contents. I wish to assure you that that risk has been circumnavigated. Let me explain.

At first, these fellows were exceedingly rough with me, doing indescribable things to my person. But as they came to know and understand me, a remarkable transformation took place. A new interrogator was assigned, and to my great relief he turned out to be most friendly and sympathetic to my predicament. When I explained that my strong sense of duty compelled me to send you a full report, but that such a report must remain confidential, he was most forthcoming with a solution. He suggested that instead of sending it as an official document, I should send it as a personal letter. My interrogator—Faz Ali is his name—explained that he had every right to read an *official* report by an enemy agent. But—and I blush to admit I did not know this—the Koran forbids every good Moslem from reading anyone's *personal* mail. Isn't that wonderful? I must say I am in awe to think that the Prophet could have foreseen even the Postal System. So anyway, you need have no fears about my revealing the information which follows. I have clearly printed the word "Personal" under the agency's address.

There was an incident on my KLM flight to Cairo which gave me several moments of panic, I can tell you. Even though it turned out to be just an innocent mistake, I feel obliged to include it in this report.

We were well out over the Atlantic and, with a couple of cocktails under my belt, I was actually beginning to enjoy myself. The fellow next to me finally folded up his newspaper, pushed his seat back a little and began conversing with me. He was most amiable and our dialogue was cordial and relaxed. At one point he asked how

long I was going to be in Cairo (since I had told him that was where I was going). I said, “Oh, just one day. I am going to visit the Cairo museum.”

“Ah yes, well you’ll want to see Rameses.”

Well sir, I cannot begin to describe how I felt, hearing the password given at that time and place. I almost swooned. And I am afraid my response was a bit amplified. “What?!—My Ptolemy done—. What did you just say?”

He wore a very quizzical look as he replied, “I just said that you will want to see the Rameses mummy while you’re at the museum. It’s very popular with the tourists.”

My eyes bored into his as I wondered what to do next.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“What?”

“The toilet paper, man. Where is it?”

The fellow seemed genuinely perplexed. “There in one of the restrooms. Where else would it be?”

“Good God! You left it in—? But any one of these passengers may have already used some of it!”

“I think that’s a pretty safe assumption.”

“The agency will hear of your behavior!”

I squeezed past him out of my seat, rather rudely I am sorry to say, and I proceeded up and down the aisle to see if I could spot anyone excessively scratching his or her posterior. It was a great relief when I ascertained no one behaving in such a manner, and so I returned to my seat.

I was in a quandary. Was he my contact, or wasn't he? He hadn't given the password exactly as you gave it to me, sir, but it was so close. And it certainly was not to be given on the airplane. I had to know.

"Tell me, do you work as a guard in the Cairo museum?"

"No, I run a gear manufacturing plant in Sandusky, Ohio."

He fished his business card out of his briefcase, and I crumpled with embarrassment. "I am so sorry," I said, barely above a whisper.

The awkwardness of remaining in his company all the way to Cairo was resolved to our mutual relief when he arranged with the flight attendant to change his seating.

Everything went perfectly in Cairo, probably because of the rehearsal on the plane. I saw Rameses and got the device. At Tehran, the Customs official questioned me about the lead container, but the story about my brother's ashes worked like a charm. He dropped it like a hot potato when he learned what it contained.

I went straight from the airport to the Zurkhaneh in the city and settled down to watch those powerful fellows do their ritualized exercises. I enjoyed the drummer immensely. He was a cool cat and really boogied.

Presently, a young man sat down beside me and gave the recognition challenge: "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck?" I immediately responded with the correct countersign: "I take it you refer to the manic marmot."

He then said, "You're that idiot from CIAO, right?"

I said, "Right."

He said, "Close enough. Come on." And off we went to the Ayatollah's residence.

I underwent two days of intense scrutiny, but thanks to the false employment history you provided, I got the job.

I was understandably anxious to plant the device as soon as possible and get out of there, and so on my first afternoon in service I was delighted to find that his toilet paper roll had gotten pretty low. I decided to replace it with ours that very night. When the time came, I left all the lights off, tiptoed into the bathroom and installed our device. I must admit that I was startled to see it glowing in the dark, but then I realized you would need to use an especially strong itching powder for such a critical mission.

The next day, I asked permission to take my brother's ashes to Qom. I explained that I wanted to get that obligation out of the way so I could give the Ayatollah my undivided attention. They bought the story, and I left to go to the safe house on the Avenue of the Prophet. But that is when things became a bit unraveled, resulting in my present incarceration.

I had no trouble reaching the avenue without being followed, and I readily found number 21. Since that is where things began to fall apart, I really must try to acquaint you with all the factors that contributed to the unfortunate outcome.

By the time I came to be standing in front of that door, and after enduring all the stress of carrying out this mission, my mind had become razor sharp. I had developed all the instincts and mental acuity of a real operative. So, as I gazed at the numerals of the address, I suddenly remembered how my dyslexia had caused me to go to the 12th floor, when your office is on the 21st. Oh, yes! It was crystal clear now, and thank God I caught it in time. This was *not* the safe house. Fact: I am dyslexic. Fact: I had a dyslexic event only a few days before. Fact: That event involved my transposing the numbers 21 and 12. Fact: My dyslexia must be especially sensitive to that combination of numbers. Fact: The real safe house will appear, *to me*, to have the address of number 12. QED.

So I walked down the block and did the SOS rapping on the door of number 12, knowing for certain that it was actually 21. A man in a white coat answered my knock and invited me in. I gave the correct password, "I am Two-By-Four, and I need extraction." To my immense relief he smiled warmly and said, "Of course. Just relax. You're in good hands now. Come with me."

Safe at last!

He led me to the back, and I was surprised to find myself in a dentist's surgery. My handler told me to climb into the dental chair and get comfortable, which sounded pretty good to me by that time. But I was no sooner in the chair when he clamped a mask over my nose and mouth, and the gas knocked me out in no time. Perhaps dyslexics are unusually sensitive to the effects of nitrous oxide. I don't know.

I learned later on from my captors that the man is really a dentist, and his offices are at number 12 Avenue of the Prophet. They verified this for me by showing me where the scoundrel had actually extracted one of my perfectly sound molars. *Oh, where is the justice?* They also said that the Laughing Gas had acted like a truth drug on me and, according to them, I blabbed every detail of my mission. The terrified dentist, hearing me spell out a dastardly plot to inflict extreme discomfort on the Ayatollah, immediately summoned the Secret Police, and here I am.

Now, sir, at this point I must risk incurring your anger by raising a rather ticklish subject. Back when you were briefing me for this mission, did you perhaps forget to tell me something? Something of a *nuclear* nature, maybe? I only ask because my interrogator, Faz Ali, swears on the Koran that our toilet paper was radioactive. He further swears that the Grand Ayatollah is presently driving the Geiger counters crazy, so you see my concern. I have insisted, all along, that this was just an irresponsible American prank involving itching powder. Utterly tasteless, but a prank nevertheless. If you can confirm this by return mail I will be ever so happy. If you cannot—for the obvious reason—then I have one last request:

Please tell my fellow operatives that I was a real dandy Yankee Doodle.

Talasazan

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HONORABLE MENTION

Sheila Crosby lives on a small rock in the Atlantic. She's a mother, writer, photographer, tour guide, and translator. She's too busy writing a non-fiction guide to the astronomical observatory at the Roque de Los Muchachos to clean the house, do laundry, or revamp her website at <http://sheilacrosby.com/>. You can read excerpts from her science fiction anthology at <http://dragontree.sheilacrosby.com/blog/the-dodo-dragon-and-other-stories/>, and there's more about the small rock at <http://lapalma-island.com>.

Agent Hammer: License to Kibble

by Sheila Crosby

The van pulled to a halt in a part of Liverpool where the dreams had gone sour. Most of the shops were boarded up; most of the paint was peeling. A lanky young man carrying a hamster in a cage got out. "Are you sure about this, Hammer?" he muttered.

"Yes, yes," snapped the hamster. "It's what they pay me for. Stop being so patronizing, Kevin."

Kevin swallowed. "Sorry, Boss."

"Is my belt hidden?"

Kevin lifted the cage up to eye-level and inspected the hamster from all sides. "You'd have to know it was there. I mean, it's just a faint line in your fur."

"Good," said Hammer. "Let's get on with it."

They crossed the road to an empty shop with a line of thistles growing along the base of the building. Empty plots gaped on either side of it.

As Kevin walked, he said, "You're not going to like this, but—"

"But M says to remind me I'm there just to look," finished Hammer. "Find out whether it's Dolores Suarez or not, and if it is, get some idea of what she's up to. No heroics. God forbid I should get the idea I'm a secret agent or something. M said so herself, this morning. Seven times. I was counting."

"Um. She insisted I say the whole thing. Regardless of you saying you'd heard it."

Hammer sighed, which sounded like the opening of a freezer with a good door seal. "Get it over with, then."

The young man went around the back, and up the iron steps to a door with peeling blue paint. "She says to remember you cost a fortune, so don't go risking your expensive skin."

He knocked, then stood shuffling his feet and darting glances at the street.

"I didn't ask to be terminally cute," snapped the hamster. "Now put me down. And look bored."

Kevin gently put the cage on the step and leaned against the doorway. Hammer climbed into the hamster wheel to look busy.

"It's rubbish, you know," puffed Hammer. "I cost a fortune, but once you've got one or two genetically modified hamsters, the next five hundred are a whole lot cheaper. I won't be special for long."

After several seconds, the door opened a crack and a drippy nose appeared in the gap. Hammer could see right up the nostrils. It wasn't pretty.

The owner of the nose snapped, "What?"

Kevin waved at the hamster cage. "Dream Deliveries. Here's the hamster you ordered."

This was greeted with a snort. “Nobody here ordered a hamster.”

“Of course you did,” Kevin said. “I’ve got the order right here.” He waved a clipboard.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” sniffed Nose. “What would we want a hamster for?”

Good question, thought Hammer. He jumped off the wheel and pressed the secret button which opened the door of the cage.

Kevin scratched his head. “Is it your birthday? Maybe it’s a surprise.”

With a quick wriggle, Hammer jumped out of the cage and shot through the crack in the house door. He caught a glimpse of frayed trouser hems as he dashed over Nose’s scruffy trainers.

“Hey,” shouted Kevin. “Your hamster’s escaped.”

Still running, Hammer scanned the hallway. An old-fashioned umbrella stand stood guard beside the door. Perfect!

Hammer scampered behind it.

“Go away!” shouted Nose, slamming the door.

Kevin pounded on the door. “You’ve still got to sign for that hamster. What’ll my boss say?”

Your boss says you’re shaping up nicely, thought Hammer. We’ll make a secret agent of you yet. He was busy taking things out of his cheek pouches and clipping them onto his belt. A few had to be assembled first. As he worked, he looked less and less like a pet.

Hammer heard a door further inside the house opening and heavy footfalls coming towards him.

“¿Que?” snapped a woman’s voice in Spanish. “Who was it?”

Hmmm. Spanish fit in with the allegations as far as it went. Which wasn’t very far.

Nose's voice changed to a whine. "Some idiot trying to sell us a hamster. I got rid of him."

The new voice snorted. "Good. Get back to work then."

"Of course. Certainly."

Hammer twitched his nose derisively. No prizes for guessing which one was the boss here. And the boss didn't know there was a strange hamster on the loose in the house. So far so good.

Now he just had to confirm that they were harmless immigrants, acting suspiciously because they felt persecuted.

He wasn't going to find out anything while he was hiding here. He risked a quick peek. He saw the two humans walking away down the hall together.

From his low viewpoint, he saw Drippy Nose's trainers with faded jeans rising above them like tree trunks, and above that, a striped shirt that wasn't tucked in. He couldn't see the head from down here, because Drippy Nose stooped.

Beside him walked a pair of suntanned heels in something gold and strappy, with lipstick pink trousers rising above it to a slim rear end which swayed as the owner walked. Long black hair cascaded down the back of the tracksuit top. From down here, there was no way of telling whether or not this was Dolores Suarez.

He followed them.

The woman turned to open a door and Hammer got a clear view of her face. She had a nice neat nose and a cruel twist to her mouth which reminded Hammer of a member of the Spanish inquisition.

And yes, it was Dolores Suarez, deputy head of the Association of Scientists Who Love Everybody (ASWhoLE). And the poster on the wall was Steven Smith, her boss. Together they had created an organization of scientists who would do anything for money. Since the average IQ of ASWhoLE was around a hundred and eighty, the police had asked the Secret Service for help.

So Hammer's job was over. No more excitement. He just had to wait for Kevin to knock on the door at nine tomorrow morning. He should be able to slip out then.

Dolores and Nose went through the door and Hammer managed to scurry through with them, at the risk of being stepped on. The shutting door almost trapped him.

It was the living room, and it smelled of roses. He was far too exposed. Hammer made a dash to his left for the dark space in the open cupboard under the TV, and ran headlong into a wall of silky fur.

"Mearrrow," said the fur.

Hammer was startled enough to use the F word. "FELINE!"

Hammer's eyes adjusted in time to see sharp teeth lancing down at him. He dodged in the direction no pet hamster would ever have taken—towards the teeth and under them. He took something the size of a match from his belt and jabbed it upwards.

Zapth! A blue spark leapt up into the cat's belly, between its back legs.

With a wild caterwaul, the dark shape shot out of the cupboard like a bolt of inky lightning.

Breathing hard, Hammer returned the electric prod to his belt. He crept back to the cupboard door and peeked out.

The cat was right on the other side of the room. When it could go no farther, it had turned and arched its back. Hammer watched it spitting.

The two humans stared at the cat. "What's up with Tiddles?" said Nose.

"Stupid animal," said Dolores. "Probably scared of a cockroach. Bring the money in here. I want to check it."

The young man nodded and left.

He came back with a heavy sports bag which he dropped with a thump on the floor beside the coffee table.

The woman moved a vase of roses to one side. Then she opened the sports bag, and took out a fat wad of lilac banknotes which she plunked on the table. "Two thousand."

Pounds? It looked about right for a hundred twenty-pound notes.

She took out another wad and put it beside the first. "Four."

And a third. "Six."

Hammer began to wonder if the whole heavy bag was full of twenties.

It was. The woman went on counting until the bag was empty and the coffee table buried. Two hundred thousand pounds. Hammer didn't think she'd earned it working at a supermarket.

"Right," she said. She handed one of the two-thousand-pound bundles to the man and started putting the rest back in the bag. "Take a train to Carlisle and spend this lot. You know, buy a packet of matches with a twenty pound note and pocket the change. And for pity's sake, don't use these notes to pay for the ticket. The whole point is to get the police looking for the funny money in Carlisle, not here."

Hammer's mouth dropped into a cute little "O." So many forged banknotes hitting the streets would do Carlisle's economy no good at all. People would avoid shopping there, so as not to get funny change. Shops would go bust. And that was just one of the bundles.

The young man said, "I'll check the train times."

Dolores put the last bundle back in the bag. "Check Preston, too. That's where I'm going."

Hammer thought: If I wait for them to leave before I get out of here and report, it'll be too late for Carlisle and Preston. And they might take the rest of the money

with them and not come back. If they manage to spend the whole lot, it could destabilize the currency. I have to stop them before they leave.

Then he grinned. He had the perfect excuse to take some direct action for once. If he did it well enough, maybe M would stop patronizing him.

Hammer didn't often wish he was human—they seemed a pretty stupid bunch—but right now, it would be nice if he were big enough to grab the money and run.

Nose said, "Right," and walked over to the computer in the corner of the room.

The woman went over to watch Nose work.

Well, if Hammer didn't have a human's strength, he had a rodent's talents. He jumped into the money bag and started kibbling for all he was worth.

Hammer didn't have to turn it all into confetti, just chew a good hole through each note. All ten thousand of them. Nose's voice floated down into the bag. "The next direct train doesn't leave until ten. So we've got at least fifteen minutes before we have to leave. Shall I make tea?"

Heavy footsteps crossed the floor and the door opened and closed.

Hammer kibbled away, eyes half closed in ecstasy. The notes were in tight little bundles, which made them harder work. After a few thousand pounds, the pleasure reflex wore off, but he chewed on, getting bored. Then he chewed until his jaws ached. It was quite comfy in here. The stuff would make good bedding when he'd finished, and he'd fancy a nap by then. If only!

He burrowed right down, until it was very dim.

The light grew brighter, and he heard Dolores shout, "What the—"

Whoops! thought Hammer. Time to go.

He scrabbled to the surface and leapt for the opening, which was now held wide by Dolores's hands.

“Hey!” she shouted as Hammer scampered over the canvas and shot down to the floor. “It’s a damn hamster in the money bag. It’s been chewing up the money.”

Hammer bunched his muscles and concentrated on getting out of reach.

“WHAT!” Nose must have come back into the room.

Something crashed on the floor behind Hammer. He was in a thicket of roses and covered with stagnant water. Looking cute wasn’t enough today. He needed a dark hole. He scrambled out of the roses and dashed behind the bookcase. To his enormous relief, there was a crack in the skirting board.

Blessing the landlord who hadn’t kept up with the maintenance, he squeezed in.

He wasn’t the first rodent to find the place. It smelled of mice. And it was probably the mice who had enlarged the hole so that it went under the floorboards and came out in the next room. Great.

“Tiddles,” yelled the woman. “Here, kitty, kitty. Lunch!”

Somehow the living room didn’t appeal to Hammer at the moment. He peeked out.

The floor was linoleum. He could smell apples, which made him hungry.

If they worked out that Hammer had got through to the kitchen, they’d expect him to be on the floor. He couldn’t stay here long enough to radio in.

To his left, cupboard doors rose up like cliffs. He could see a window above with dirty net curtains drawn across it.

He took a miniature grappling iron off his belt. It already had the fishing line tied on. At the first throw, it caught on the top of the cupboard door. He climbed up and threw again.

The counter-top was dirty, but not enough to leave clear paw-prints, thank goodness. The kettle was on the gas cooker, beginning to hiss.

Up here he could smell—yes—rum. An almost full bottle stood on the counter. The window was shut tight.

He scurried into the bread bin. Of course it was full of crumbs, but Hammer sighed and ignored them. Maybe there'd be time while he waited to get picked up.

He took the antenna off his belt and unrolled it along the length of the bread bin. Then he took the miniature radio out of its pouch.

The “waterproof” pouch was full of smelly water. From the roses Dolores threw at him, of course.

With a sinking heart, he plugged in the antenna and switched on.

A small blue spark went *ptht!* The LEDs flashed and then it went dead.

Oh great! He was trapped, he couldn't call for backup, and the bad guys knew he was in here.

Of course they thought he was an ordinary hamster. They'd just go off to Carlisle and Preston. He might manage to use the phone eventually, but there was Tiddles to contend with.

He could be stuck in here for weeks. Hammer crammed his cheek pouches with bread crumbs while food was available.

What he needed was a diversion.

Hmmm.

The humans were still in the living room, making a lot of noise. If they came in, he'd be horribly exposed, but he'd just have to risk it.

He scurried out of the bread bin. Yes, there was a kitchen towel dispenser on the wall, just about the right height, beside the cooker and right behind the bottle of rum. He used his grappling iron to get up there, biceps aching. Hamsters weren't built for this, not even genetically modified ones.

At the top, he paused to get his breath back. But not for long—Dolores or her sidekick might be back any moment to make tea.

Hammer ran on top of the roll so the paper unwound. When it reached down to the worktop, he leaped at the bottle of rum and landed on the neck.

The bottle swayed and made a *thwunker* noise. Breathing hard, Hammer swung from the neck so that each swing was larger than the previous one.

Thwunker. Thwunker. Thwunker.

Finally, the bottle swung to the point of no return and crashed to the worktop. Hammer jumped clear, but as the bottle smashed, he got sprayed with rum. Not good. He would have to be very careful indeed. But the rum had formed a puddle on the top of the gas cooker, running towards the flames under the kettle.

Hammer dragged the end of the kitchen towel towards the stove. By the time he got back, the rum was on fire. The kitchen towel was just stiff enough for Hammer to poke a corner into the blue flames. Once he was sure the paper was alight, Hammer climbed down from the counter to the floor and hit the ground running. The mouse gap was six feet away. He made it in fifteen seconds.

The other side of the hole held fresh air, freedom...

...and a pair of green eyes with vertical pupils. Tiddles lay just outside, claws extended and eyes fixed on the only exit from the burning kitchen.

He reached for the electric prod.

It wasn't there. He must have dropped it on the counter, in the center of the fire. He could smell the rum fumes rising from his fur. If he went anywhere near the flames, he'd be the first hamster in history to go "Woof!"

Hammer stared back at the cat. She wouldn't get bored and leave, not now that she'd seen Hammer. She wanted flambéed secret agent for lunch.

He edged back into the kitchen. The curtains were blazing and the ceiling was already lost in smoke. If he didn't do something quick, he could chose between the cat and the fire. There were no other exits he knew of.

Well, he'd just have to make an exit, and fast. He might have time, seeing as the smoke would take a while to reach down to his level.

Dolores said angrily, "I can smell smoke. You've left something on the stove."

She'd be in here any second.

Skidding over floor tiles, Hammer sprinted to the tumble dryer. To a human, it stood against the wall. To Hammer, there was plenty of space to get up onto the wide pipe where the hot, damp air vented.

Just in time. The door opened and he heard Nose yell "Fire!" and start coughing.

Hammer set to, using a rodent's favorite weapon, but the plastic was tough.

The woman shouted, "You don't throw water on burning rum. You're just spreading it. And get down on the floor where there's less smoke."

Nose must have done as he was told, because he stopped coughing. He said, "It's no good. I'm out of here. Call the fire brigade if you want to."

I bet they don't, thought Hammer.

Dolores shouted. "Don't you dare call the fire brigade! Get a blanket."

The smoke crawled down from the ceiling towards Hammer. He tried to hurry. It was getting hot in here.

"Where's that blanket?" shouted Dolores.

A door slammed. It sounded like the front door. Nose must be cutting his losses.

"¡Cobarde!" muttered Dolores. Hammer heard her crawling, then the kitchen door shutting, which meant less oxygen for the fire.

It also meant less oxygen for Hammer. He began to cough as the smoke thickened, and still the hole was too small. At least a trickle of clean air flowed through it.

It was really hot now. Narrow tongues of flame flickered in the smoke, like demon's fingers. Any moment now, the fire would reach flashover, when the whole room would turn into an inferno.

Arson hadn't been such a great idea.

His eyes watered and his chest burned as he gnawed away. Lack of oxygen made him dizzy. If he fell, he'd never be able to climb back up to the hole he'd started.

Finally Hammer took his tool belt off and dropped it onto the pipe. Without it, he could just squeeze in. He lay gasping in the clean air for several seconds before he put his belt back on.

The vent had to lead outside; that was the whole point of it. But he was on the second floor and it was too high to jump.

He crawled into the dryer, hoping to find one of those perfume sheets. Instead, he found a pair of lacy nylon knickers staticked to the inside of the drum. He tucked one corner into his belt.

He heard the kitchen door opening, followed by a soft *whumph!*

Flashover. He had perhaps five seconds before this plastic pipe melted.

Hammer forced his aching body into a run until he reached the vent.

Holding the edges of the knickers in his paws, he launched himself into the air.

"Oh look Mummy," called a little girl, pointing up. "A hamster using a parachute."

"How many times have I told you not to point," said the mother, smacking her daughter's finger down. "And don't tell fibs."

By the time she glanced at the building, Hammer was hiding in the patch of thistles, pulling the thorns out of his butt and still coughing.

“Parachuting hamsters indeed,” said the mother.

To Hammer’s relief they hurried off.

His assistant was sitting in a parked van two hundred yards up the road. On Hammer’s tiny legs, it was quite a hike and he had to stop for breath several times.

He reached the van and jumped into the exhaust pipe. He took several deep breaths before he pressed the intercom button hidden just inside. “Kevin, call the fire brigade and police, quick!”

*

Mango, head of British intelligence and known as M, sat on her desk and crammed sunflower seeds into her cheek pouches. The sunlight glinted off her sharp, pearly teeth and caressed her pale, silky fur as she finished scampering over the report the humans had typed in order to read it.

She glared at Hammer. It was like looking down the barrel of a gun. Hammer’s heart pounded with terror and lust.

He tried to look nonchalant.

“Why get involved if she’s not a terrorist anymore?” she shot at him.

“Because there was a real chance she’d get to Preston,” drawled Hammer. “And then it would get in the press. And then there’d be a panic. You know what humans are.”

“Why didn’t you just call in?”

“Because the waterproof pouch around the radio wasn’t.”

“Why? Why? Why?...” The questions went on and on until Hammer thought he’d have to ask for a bathroom break.

Eventually M just stared at him for several seconds in silence, which was worse.

Then she said, “Suarez got away, but we’ll find her. You’ll be pleased to hear they got hold of the computer and a sports bag full of confetti, so she won’t be forging any more currency for a while.”

Then to his astonishment, she smiled and twitched her nose bewitchingly. “Well done, Hammer. Perhaps you’d like to share my carrot tonight?”

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HONORABLE MENTION

Edoardo Albert is a writer of Sri Lankan and Italian extraction based in London. He would like to have as many animals as Timothy. He's had stories published by *On The Premises* (another one apart from this, which actually came second), *Daily Science Fiction* and quite a few other places. Find out where at www.edoardoalbert.com or follow him at twitter.com/EdoardoAlbert.

Timothy and the Animals

by Edoardo Albert

Timothy loved animals. He loved all sorts of animals, but big fierce wild animals were his favorites. Unfortunately, the fiercest creatures near where he lived had tattoos. Still, Timothy had introduced himself to every dog and cat, every pigeon and sparrow in the neighborhood. But even the biggest dog couldn't howl like a wolf, nor the wildest cat roar like a lion. So Timothy had to make do with watching them on television, or looking at his father's drawings.

Dad was an artist. Not that Dad would admit to being an artist.

"Oh, I just dabble," Dad would laugh, but their house was full of his paintings and they even had some of his sculptures in the back garden, which was really big because the house was built right on the bend of the road.

Anyway, Timothy thought, if Dad just dabbled how come the council had asked him to do up the local playground? At the moment the back garden was full of old wooden horses that Dad was painting red and gold for the merry go round. Timothy quite liked the horses. Well, they were all right for wood.

Then, one day, Timothy had a brilliant idea. “Dad,” he said, running into his father’s bedroom, which doubled as a studio.

“Yes, Timothy?” said Dad, looking up from the wooden horse he was painting.

“Can I have some paper, please? For letters?”

“Sure,” said Dad. “There’s some in the drawer.”

Timothy rushed over and pulled out lots of paper and envelopes.

“Who do you want to write to?” asked Dad. “Father Christmas?”

“Come on, Dad,” said Timothy. “It’s summer time. No one writes to Father Christmas in summer.”

“Oh, right,” said Dad. “Who are you writing to then?”

Timothy smiled. “Wait and see.” That was one of Dad’s favorite phrases. And before Dad could ask any more questions Timothy was out of the door and running for his room.

The door safely closed, Timothy sat down and began to write.

Fifteen minutes later Timothy signed his name and read what he had written.

Hm. It was not quite right. He added a PS, then read it again. Still not quite right. A PPS.

That was it.

Timothy ran back to his Dad. “Here’s my letter,” he said.

Dad straightened up, wiped his forehead (leaving a bright red streak) and began to read.

1st June 1980

Dear Mr. President/Prime Minister - please delete as applicable

(Timothy had seen this on a form once and thought it looked very official.)

I love animals, but we've only got cats and dogs round here, unless you count Megs and his gang. Please could you send me one of yours,

Your Friend,

Timothy.

PS. I promise to vote for you when I grow up.

PPS. And say nice things about you to the papers.

Dad laughed. "Well, I see you already know the way to what passes for a politician's heart."

"If I write some more can you post them for me?" asked Timothy.

"Sure," said Dad. "But don't forget to write our address down or they won't know where to send the animals."

Timothy groaned. How could he have forgotten that? He rushed off to write some more letters.

Dad smiled. It was good to see Timothy happy again.

That evening, Timothy and his father walked down to the post box and posted six letters to the Presidents/Prime Ministers of six countries in Africa and Asia, America and Australia.

"How come only places beginning with A have lots of animals?" asked Timothy as they were walking back home.

"Hm," said Dad. "Maybe it's because animals begin with 'a' as well."

*

Each morning Timothy would rush down to see what the postman had brought but weeks went by and there were lots of brown envelopes with windows in them, but

no animals. He knew Dad did not like getting those sorts of letters so sometimes Timothy hid them.

Then one morning, weeks later, there was a ring at the door.

“Parcel for Mr. Timothy.”

Timothy looked out and there was a van with a huge crate on the back. There were stickers on it saying, “Handle with care,” “This side up” and “Watch your fingers, this parcel bites.”

“Where do you want it?” said the delivery man, chewing his pencil.

Timothy stared at the crate. It was huge.

“Er, the garden,” he said.

“All right.” With much panting and puffing the delivery men carried the crate into the garden.

“Sign here.”

Alone in the garden with the parcel Timothy stood and stared. It was so big. What could be inside? Timothy ran into the house and emerged with a pair of scissors. Two minutes after that paper was strewn all over the garden and Timothy was standing in front of the open crate with his mouth hanging open.

A lion blinked, stood up, shook his great golden mane and stretched a long, long stretch. Then he padded out of the crate and over to Timothy.

The lion looked down at Timothy. Timothy looked up at the lion.

The lion said, “*Bonjour, monsieur. Comment appelez vous?*”

“Er, pardon?” said Timothy.

“*Bonjour,*” repeated the lion. “*Je m’appelle Leo. Comment appelez vous?*”

Timothy shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "I don't understand what you're saying."

The lion blinked. "*Mais, non,*" he said. "You are ze Engleesh?"

"Yes," said Timothy, nodding big nods. "English."

"Oh, *non, non, non,*" said the lion. "Ze president, he say to me, go abroad, you will eat like ze king. I am ze king already, *mais oui*, I weell go for ze honor of ze country et for ze *bouef bourgignon* et ze steak tartare. *Dans Afrique* ze cows are, how you say, thin? So, I go. *Mais maintenant*, I am in ze England." The lion sniffed a haughty sniff. "Ze land of ze bangers et ze mash. Ze land of ze keepers."

"Keepers?" asked Timothy. He didn't think you ate them.

"*Oui*, keepers," said the lion. "Ze leetle fish."

"Oh, you mean kippers," said Timothy.

"*Oui*, keepers," said the lion. "Zere has been un mistake terrible."

"Well, we don't eat kippers," said Timothy. "Or bangers and mash—we're vegetarians."

"Oh, *non, non, non,*" said the lion. "Tell me zis is a dream."

"But we do eat fish, sometimes," said Timothy.

"Keepers," said the lion gloomily.

Timothy was trying to think of some culinary encouragement he could offer when the doorbell rang. "Excuse me," he said to the lion. "I'll be back in a sec." But the lion was not listening. He was shaking his great golden head and muttering something about little fish.

Timothy rushed to the front door.

"Delivery for Mr. Timothy," said the man standing there. Outside in the road was another lorry with a huge crate on it. "Where do you want it?"

“Er, the garden, please,” said Timothy. He was beginning to wonder what Dad would say when he got home.

Five minutes later Timothy had unwrapped the next parcel. The boy and the lion peered inside.

“G’day,” said a cheerful voice, then a kangaroo hopped over their heads. “Strewth, what a journey. Made me wish I was still a joey and could climb back into me old ma’s pouch. The name’s Bruce, mates. Put it there,” said the kangaroo as he stuck out one of his paws.

“A bonzer free trip to the other side of the world said my mate, the PM. The other side, says I, but how comes they don’t all fall off?”

The doorbell rang again.

Timothy left Leo to explain gravity to Bruce while he went to answer it. This was beginning to get a little out of hand.

Although Timothy did not know it, things were about to get a lot more out of hand.

*

Mrs. Ramsbottom—she pronounced it Ramsbotham but it was definitely bottom—had spent the morning in a frenzy trying to work out what was going on next door. Whatever it was, she was sure no good would come of it. The way Mr. Robinson had let that boy run wild since his wife had died. Still, what could you expect from an artist? But at least Mrs. Ramsbottom had to admit there had been no naked models wandering around the garden—if there had been she would have spotted them. However, she’d seen the delivery men, so decided to take the chance to see just what was in those crates while Timothy was busy at the front door. She crept up to the garden fence and peered over.

“Ah, *bonjour, Madame*,” said the lion.

“Eeek!” shrieked Mrs. Ramsbottom. She ran.

The animals watched her go. “Strewth, mate,” said Bruce. “The sheilas down here pack some lung power.”

The lion shook his head. “*Monsieur*, I am ze king of ze beasts. *Je ne suis pas votre...* mate.”

“No problem, cobber.”

Leo groaned.

While Timothy was showing the delivery men where to put the new crate, Mrs. Ramsbottom was calling the local police.

Finally Sergeant Jenkins managed to get her off the phone.

“It was that Ramsbottom woman again,” he said to Constable Jones. “You’ll never guess what it was this time. Claims her neighbors have got a lion and a kangaroo in their back garden.”

The phone rang again. Sergeant Jenkins looked at it, then at his junior. “One guess.”

“Mrs. Ramsbottom, what a surprise. Yes, we’re on our way. Soon, soon. Really, as well? Don’t worry, we’ll check on that too. We’re on our way, Mrs. Ramsbottom. Good bye, Mrs. Ramsbottom.”

He put the phone down.

“Add a wolf to the report sheet, constable.”

*

“Well, hello,” said the wolf. “I sure am glad to meet you all, ayuh.”

“Oh, you’re American,” said Timothy.

The wolf stiffened. His lips rippled over his teeth. His neck arched. He howled.

“Un faux pas,” whispered Leo to a quailing Timothy. *“Monsieur Wolf est un Canadien. Ze ‘ayuh’ geeve it away.”*

Bruce hopped over to the wolf and slapped him on the back. “Something stuck, mate?”

The wolf coughed and glared at the kangaroo.

“Transported, insulted, assaulted,” he stuttered. “A free trip to see the Queen, they said, ayuh. And who do I get to meet? A kangaroo.”

The doorbell rang again.

*

Sergeant Jenkins put the phone down.

“Add a tiger, an elephant and a camel to the report sheet, constable.”

“Yes, Sarge.”

The two policemen did not dare look at each other. If they did, well, it would not do their promotion prospects any good if a superior officer came in and found them rolling around on the floor.

*

The doorbell rang again. Timothy groaned. Things were getting severely out of hand. He left the animals in the garden arguing about seniority, an argument the elephant threatened to settle by sitting on everyone.

“You can put it in the garden... Dad!”

“I forgot my keys,” said Dad.

“Oh,” said Timothy.

“What are all those lorries doing coming down our road?”

“Er,” said Timothy.

“And what have you been doing to upset Mrs. Ramsbottom? She was hysterical. Couldn’t get a word of sense out of her.”

“Um,” said Timothy.

“What’s wrong, son? Cat got your tongue?”

“A lion, actually,” said Timothy, pointing.

“Oh,” said Dad.

“And a kangaroo, a wolf, an elephant, a tiger and a camel.”

“Er,” said Dad.

Leo padded towards the back door. Having been the first to arrive and being King of the Beasts—whatever the elephant and tiger might think—he thought it was only fit for him to make the introductions.

“*Bonjour, Monsieur,*” he said, bowing his great golden head.

“Timothy,” said Dad.

“Zees ees a great honor, to meet ze papa of *mon ami*, Timothy.”

“Timothy,” said Dad, unable to move or turn away.

“They answered my letters, Dad,” said Timothy.

“G’day, mate,” said Bruce, hopping forward. “The name’s Bruce.”

“Er, hello, Bruce,” said Dad.

“Put it there, mate,” said Bruce.

Dad, rather to his surprise, found himself shaking the paw of a kangaroo in his back garden.

“Nice place you got here,” said Bruce. “Any eucalyptus?”

Leo winced. “*Monsieur* Bruce, if you please.”

“What? Oh, sorry, mate.”

“Pardon, *Monsieur*,” said Leo. He leaned forward to whisper. Dad was not sure he appreciated having a lion whisper into his ear. “He ees un Australian.”

Dad nodded. His throat seemed rather dry.

Leo turned back to the other animals. “Ze wolf, he is called Wayne.”

The wolf nodded.

“He ees un wolf *Canadien*,” Leo whispered.

“He gets really upset if you call him American,” Timothy added.

“Oh, right,” said Dad.

“Ze elephant...”

“My name is not important...” said the elephant.

“It’s Eric, only he doesn’t like it,” whispered Timothy.

“...suffice to say that it is an honor and a privilege to meet you, sir. Unlike some,” and here the elephant glared at Bruce who was investigating the edibility of rhododendrons, “I have not forgotten my manners.”

“And my name,” said the tiger, “is Khan. Shere Khan.” He padded over, moving like flame.

Behind him the camel snorted and rolled his eyes.

“*Monsieur* Camel, his Engleesh is not so good,” said Leo. There was a rapid burst of Arabic between them. The camel rolled his eyes again.

“*Monsieur* Camel, he say he thought zees was un trip to the seaside. But he ees happy to be here.”

“Can I keep them, Dad? Can I? Can I?” said Timothy, hopping up and down.

Dad looked around the garden. The animals looked back.

“*Monsieur* Timothy, he ees our friend,” said Leo.

The animals all nodded, apart, of course, from the camel. But before Dad could say anything they all heard something from the street outside.

Mrs. Ramsbottom had not been idle.

*

The phone rang again in the police station. The two policemen looked at it.

“It’s your turn, Constable,” said Sergeant Jenkins.

“Do I have to, sarge?”

“That’s an order, Constable.”

Constable Jones sighed and picked up the phone. He listened for a minute, then put it down again. “You’re not going to believe this, sarge.”

“Listen, Jonesy. I’ve been a policeman for thirty years. Nothing can surprise me anymore.”

“There’s a riot outside Mrs. Ramsbottom’s.”

“What?”

“Said you’d be surprised.”

*

Timothy and his Dad peered out from an upstairs window.

Mrs. Ramsbottom had been very busy. The whole street was full of people, and at their head was Mrs. Ramsbottom, megaphone in hand. "Are we going to let wild animals loose on our streets?" she yelled. Her white face was getting quite flushed.

"No," yelled the crowd. Some people even waved their fists at Timothy's house.

"Are we going to let them terrorize us in our homes?"

"No," yelled the crowd.

"Or eat our children?"

"She hasn't got any children," Timothy said. He was getting angry, but Dad waved at him to be quiet.

"No!" yelled the crowd, even louder.

"So what do we say?" shouted Mrs. Ramsbottom.

"Er," said the crowd.

"Animals go home!" shouted Mrs. Ramsbottom.

"Oh," said the crowd. "Right," said the crowd.

"Animals go home!"

Mrs. Ramsbottom started the chant but soon the crowd started shouting as well.

"Animals go home! Animals go home! Animals go home!"

They were all shouting now, and waving their fists. Some people were even looking around for something to throw. Mrs. Ramsbottom stood in front of the crowd, her face flushed, her chest heaving. This was the most fun she'd ever had.

"Stay here, Timothy," said Dad.

"But Dad..."

"Stay here!"

Dad went downstairs to the front door. Timothy watched from the window. The crowd fell silent as the door began to open. Suppose it was a lion or a tiger? Or a whole pack of wolves?

But it was only Dad.

Their courage restored, those who had been most nervous now waved their fists at Dad. Even from the upstairs window, Timothy could hear the strange noise the crowd was making. It was growling. He always thought only animals growled.

Mrs. Ramsbottom spotted Dad and raised the megaphone. "There he is," she yelled. "The animal lover."

More people waved their fists. Some booed. Dad held up his hand. The crowd waited, watched.

"It's all a mistake," he said. "They're going back."

The crowd growled. Mrs. Ramsbottom smiled. Timothy, watching, did not like her smile at all. It showed all her teeth and they were sharp and shining.

"What's going on here, then?" said a stern voice.

Mrs. Ramsbottom turned around.

Sergeant Jenkins and Constable Jones stood in front of her, tapping their size twelve boots.

Tap, tap, tap.

And disappearing as fast as it had appeared, the crowd dissolved into individuals going about their business, which mainly involved getting away from there as quickly as possible.

But Mrs. Ramsbottom was made of sterner stuff than that. "About time, constable," she said to Sergeant Jenkins. "Arrest this man at once." She pointed at Timothy's father.

“Me?” said Dad. His voice squeaked.

“Note this down, constable,” said Sergeant Jenkins.

Constable Jones took out his notebook very deliberately. He licked his pencil.

Sergeant Jenkins said, “Perhaps you might like to tell me what the charge is to be, Mrs. Ramsbottom?” He was very polite.

“Charge?” said Mrs. Ramsbottom. She rolled her eyes in a I-pay-my-taxes-for-this-idiot kind of way. “Importing dangerous animals, disturbing the peace. I don’t know, constable. You’re the policeman, make something up.”

Sergeant Jenkins looked at her long and hard. “Make something up, madame?” he said. “Well, let me see what I can come up with. Disturbing the peace, wasting police time with stupid stories about wild animals—are you taking this down, constable?—criminal damage, conspiracy against the public order. Hmm, constable, can you think of anything I’ve missed?”

Constable Jones tapped the pencil against the brim of his helmet.

Tap, tap, tap.

Mrs. Ramsbottom’s gaze switched from one policeman to the other and back again. She was slowly realizing things were not going to plan.

“Riot, sergeant,” said Constable Jones.

“Oh, yes,” said Sergeant Jenkins. “How could have I forgotten that? Add it to the charge sheet please, constable.”

“Yes, sergeant.” Constable Jones scribbled on his pad, then, looked up. “What name shall I put down on the charge sheet?”

“Now, that is a good question, constable,” he said. And he smiled at Mrs. Ramsbottom.

"You wouldn't dare," she said. But for the first time there was uncertainty in her voice.

Sergeant Jenkins's smile grew even wider.

Mrs. Ramsbottom took a step back. "You wouldn't," she repeated.

Sergeant Jenkins's smile would have swallowed an elephant.

Mrs. Ramsbottom took another step backwards.

"He's the one you should be arresting," she said. But Sergeant Jenkins did not even look at Timothy's father.

"I seem to have forgotten obstructing the police, constable," he said.

Mrs. Ramsbottom turned and ran.

The door to her house slammed. The policemen looked at each other, grinning.

"Well done, sarge," said Constable Jones.

Sergeant Jenkins nodded. "Not bad if I say so myself." He turned to Timothy's father. "Now, I know it's a stupid question, sir, but do you by any chance have any wild animals in your back garden? Namely a lion, a kangaroo, a wolf, an elephant, a tiger and a camel?"

A hunted look came into Dad's eyes.

"It's all a mistake," he said. And began to explain.

*

"*Monsieur* Timothy, what ees ze matter?" asked Leo as Timothy ran into the garden.

Timothy's eyes were red. "They're going to make me send you back," he sobbed as he flung his arms around the lion's neck.

“Yes,” said Eric the Elephant in his deep but nasal voice. “I heard what was said outside.”

“Strewth, mate, those ears aren’t just show,” said Bruce.

The other animals glared at the kangaroo.

“Sorry,” said Bruce.

“It ees better zis way,” said Leo. “If we stay, zhere will only be trouble.”

“I don’t want you to go,” wailed Timothy.

“I am sure I speak for us all,” said Eric, “when I say we don’t want to go either.”

All the animals nodded, even the camel.

“But sometimes, *Monsieur* Timothy, even ze king of ze beasts must go though he does not want to.”

They were all silent for a while, standing around the boy. But the strain of keeping quiet proved too much for Bruce. “Strewth, mate, why the long face? We’re not going ’til tomorrow. Let’s play.”

The animals glared at Bruce again. But Timothy raised his head from the lion’s mane and a smile began to twitch at his lips.

“We could play leap elephant,” he said.

“Humph,” rumbled Eric.

“Bet I can jump higher than all you blokes,” said Bruce.

“No one can leap higher than the tiger,” said Shere Khan.

“Oh, yes,” said Bruce. “Watch me.” And he hopped clean over Eric’s back.

Timothy began to laugh. He laughed as he rode on Bruce's back, he laughed as they played hide-and-seek (Eric always lost), he laughed and laughed as they played through the day in the bright summer sun.

But night came eventually, as it always does on even the brightest day, and Dad called him to come in. It was time for bed.

"No, the lion can't sleep on your bed."

"Good night," said Timothy.

"Good night," chorused the animals, apart from Leo, who said, "*Bon nuit*," and the camel, who just grumbled in Arabic. However, a good grumble is the height of manners for a camel so Timothy did not mind.

*

As Timothy lay in bed he stared at the ceiling. The animals were going tomorrow. He did not want them to go. He went to sleep not knowing what to do.

When he woke, he knew what to do. He crept downstairs so quietly even the animals didn't hear him.

Leo and Wayne and Shere Khan were all curled up together. Eric stood behind them, fast asleep even though he was standing up. Bruce sat propped against the camel, snoring quietly. In fact, only the camel was awake. He stood still, calmly chewing, and looking up at the stars. But feeling Timothy's glance, the camel looked over. Timothy smiled.

The camel looked around carefully. All the other animals were safely asleep. He would not ruin his reputation.

The camel smiled back.

"Leo," Timothy whispered as he approached the pile of sleeping fur.

Leo yawned a great big yawn. He could have swallowed Timothy in one gulp.

"*Monsieur Timothy? Pourquoi* you wake us at zis hour?"

“Shh,” said Timothy. “I have a plan, but you must be quiet.”

He gestured for the animals to gather close and in the moonlight he explained his plan.

*

“Timothy, where are the animals?”

“Huh?” said Timothy.

Dad pulled back the curtains and the morning sun flooded the room. “I said, where are the animals?”

Timothy sat up.

“Well?”

“Er, Dad...”

“Yes?” said Dad, in his I’m-not-sure-I-want-to-hear-this tone of voice.

“You know the playground...”

*

Ten minutes later they were there. But they were not the first. Timothy and Dad stared, one smiling, one open mouthed, at the scene before them.

One of the children ran up to them. “Hey, Tim,” he said.

“Hey, Mark,” said Timothy.

“I didn’t know your Dad was so good at making animals.”

“Neither did I,” muttered Dad.

Standing statue still on the merry-go-round, with laughing children riding on their backs, were Leo and Bruce and Wayne and Shere Khan. Eric was using his trunk as a slide and the camel was a shaggy climbing wall.

“How did you do the fur, Mr. Robinson?” asked Mark. “They’re almost real.”

“Oh, it’s a secret new process,” Dad said weakly.

“Cool,” said Mark. “Come on, Tim. Let’s have a go on the elephant.”

Timothy looked up at Dad. Dad nodded and the two boys ran off to join the other children.

What could he do? If he stopped them, said the animals were not statues but real living breathing animals, there would be panic. Maybe if they could get through the day then he could smuggle them out of there during the night.

“So this is where you’re hiding,” said a voice.

Dad turned to see Mrs. Ramsbottom tapping her umbrella on the ground. “I hope you’re satisfied.”

“Er, hello, Mrs. Ramsbottom,” said Dad. “What can I do for you?”

“You can apologize for a start,” said Mrs. Ramsbottom.

“Oh, of course,” said Dad. “I’m very sorry for whatever it is you want me to apologize for.”

Mrs. Ramsbottom glared at him. Dad looked innocent—something he had learned from Timothy.

“Really, it’s all your fault,” said Mrs. Ramsbottom.

“What is?” asked Dad.

“The misunderstanding yesterday.”

It was just as well Timothy arrived at that moment. It meant he could hit Dad on the back when he choked.

“Misunderstanding?” said Dad when he could talk again. Timothy glared at the woman.

“If you had just explained that you were sculpting animals...”

*

A little while later father looked at son and son looked at father. They were trying to work out if they had just received an apology. If it was one it had mainly consisted in being told how stupid they were.

But then Dad and Timothy glanced at the animals and back at each other. Father smiled at son, son to father.

“Mrs. Ramsbottom,” said Dad, “thank you for that heartfelt apology and just to show we don’t harbor any ill feeling—do we, Timothy?”

“Oh, no,” said Timothy, grinning a very big grin.

“—we would like to invite you to take a ride with us.”

Mrs. Ramsbottom looked at the merry-go-round. “What me? Climb on one of those animals? I couldn’t.”

“But we insist,” said Dad, taking Mrs. Ramsbottom’s arm. “Don’t we, Timothy?”

“Yes,” said Timothy, grabbing her other arm.

They led the protesting woman over to the merry-go-round. “Now, what will it be, Mrs. Ramsbottom?” asked Dad. “The wolf, the kangaroo, the tiger or the lion?”

“I really don’t think...”

“The lion,” said Dad as the merry-go-round slowed down.

“His name is Leo,” said Timothy.

“There you go, Mrs. Ramsbottom,” said Dad, as he helped her onto the lion’s back.

Leo winked at him. Dad winked back.

“Please, I really don’t think a lady of my age...”

“Mrs. Ramsbottom, you’re in safe paws, believe me.”

“Enjoy the ride,” said Timothy.

Father and son stepped back and watched as Mrs. Ramsbottom clutched hold of Leo’s mane. The merry-go-round began to turn. Faster and faster it went and as it did a very strange thing began to happen.

Mrs. Ramsbottom’s hands loosened. A smile began to creep across her face, unsure of this strange new ground. But it did not seem so bad here and soon the smile invited its friend, laughter, to come and visit.

“Looks like she’s enjoying herself,” said Dad.

“Ride ’em cowboy!” whooped Mrs. Ramsbottom as she passed by in front of them.

In fact, Mrs. Ramsbottom was enjoying herself so much that she refused to get off. It was only when Dad pointed out that there were children waiting their turn that she got down.

“He feels so real,” said Mrs. Ramsbottom. “How did you do it?”

Dad coughed.

“It’s a secret,” said Timothy.

“Well, I’m very impressed,” said Mrs. Ramsbottom. “Very impressed indeed. Oh, look, it’s stopping. My turn, my turn,” she said, jumping up and down.

Timothy felt a bit embarrassed.

“You’d better let her go,” he said to Mark, who was at the head of the queue.

Mark shook his head. “Grown ups,” he muttered.

The merry-go-round started up again. Faster and faster it went, with Mrs. Ramsbottom yelling and shouting and waving her arms just like she was a cowboy on a bucking bronco.

“At least she’s enjoying herself,” said Dad.

But Timothy did not answer. He had just seen something. He gulped.

“Dad, I think we’re in trouble.”

Wayne’s big bushy tail was waving gently under Leo’s nose. The lion’s nose began to twitch.

Father and son held their breaths.

Leo’s eyes crossed. He tried to hold his breath. Slowly, slowly, his nose settled down.

Father and son breathed out.

“It’s all right,” said Timothy. “He’s not going to...”

“Aaaaaatchoooooooooo!”

Everything stopped.

“*Je m’excuse*,” said Leo.

Everyone stared.

“Oops,” said Leo.

Everyone ran.

“It’s alive!”

“A lion!”

“Help, a lion, help!”

“Eek!”

Everyone except Mrs. Ramsbottom.

“Well,” she said. “Why have we stopped? I was enjoying myself.”

“*Madame, je m’excuse,*” said Leo.

“Aren’t you scared?” asked Timothy.

“He’s a real lion,” said Dad.

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Ramsbottom. “He’s just a big pussycat, aren’t you, dear?”
And she tickled Leo behind his ear.

Leo began to purr. When the fleeing children heard it they began to slow down, and some even stopped and turned to look back. And what did they see? Mrs. Ramsbottom scratching Leo’s tummy as he lay with his paws as big as dinner plates in the air.

“Very dignified,” said Shere Khan.

“Ze king must meet ze people,” said Leo, between purrs.

“What do we do now?” Dad asked.

Timothy looked around. One by one the children were creeping back.

“I think we should introduce them to the animals,” he said.

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GUEST WRITER

This is Frank's third appearance in *On The Premises* and his second go around as a guest writer. He has so many publication credits that listing them all would exceed the word count limit for this bio. He would like to mention his recent appearance in *Daily Science Fiction* and soon to be published work set to appear in a future issue of DSF. He is currently serving as an associate editor for the upcoming humor anthology *Unidentified Funny Objects* and is the lead reviewer for the ezine *Diabolical Plots*.

Intergalactic Nuisance

by Frank Dutkiewicz

Harold Travis opened his front door a crack and poked the barrel of his rifle through the gap. He did a quick scan of the area. No flaming bags on his welcome mat. No signs of toilet paper—or any other similar type of decoration—hanging off his roof. No buckets of liquid in position to dump on his head. The Nagoona already pulled those pranks on him before. They never did the same thing twice, but one could never be too cautious.

He kicked the door open and swung his rifle from side to side. Nothing jumped out at him. He probed the floorboards of his front porch, half expecting a trap door or something to spring up. Nothing. Satisfied, he stepped off his porch and onto his bone-dry land, peering up at the city-sized purple monstrosity that was still in the same position it had been for the past year.

Harold's eyes narrowed as he viewed the ship. The Nagoona had robbed his ranch of nourishing sun and life-giving rain. They had chased away his family and neighbors. Everyone he knew and trusted were gone.

He lifted his hunting rifle and pointed it at the ship.

The gun kicked. The sound of a dog yelping boomed down from the floating behemoth. Yesterday it was the dinging of a bell from a carnival game. The day before it was a woman's scream. It was never the same.

They think they're so funny.

Harold found nothing funny about the intruders. They ruined his life. The Nagoona tormented him the first day they arrived and no one—the police, army or government—did a thing about them. How he wished they were dead.

A cloud of dust in the distance captured his attention. He tracked the black limousine as it bounced on his rut-filled dirt driveway followed by a jeep carrying soldiers. They stopped a few yards from his front door. The soldiers jumped out and pointed their weapons at him. Harold dropped his gun and held out his arms; he knew the drill. One of the soldiers did a quick pat of his clothes and grabbed the rifle. Satisfied, he signaled the limo.

Out stepped a Nagoona alien and Captain Charles Bellamare. The alien resembled how a man and lobster might look if you mated them together; two thick legs under a red exoskeleton frame, a pointed head with two beady eyes, segmented antennas that twitched, Popeye-like-forearms, and tentacles for fingers with an opposing claw for a thumb. Its head swiveled on broad shoulders with no visible neck.

"What is he doing here?" Harold asked the Air Force officer as they approached.

"Kazur asked to be here, Harold. Let's talk about the cows."

Harold spat out a gob of tobacco juice and glared at the mismatched pair. Without saying a word he walked over to his pickup truck and climbed in. He drove the old Ford a couple of miles to a pasture with the limousine following close behind. The field used to be his neighbor's, but now the government owned it and allowed Harold to use it. Unlike his, this one got sun.

Harold parked and got out. The limousine stopped a few yards away. Harold, Captain Bellamare, and Kazur walked to the closest cow. It greeted them with a hound-dog's howl. The one next to it meowed. Another squawked like a goose. One answered it with a donkey's bray. The variety of sounds went on and on. The pasture sounded like a zoo: a hundred cows and not one moo among them.

"They ruined my herd. The whole lot of them are completely worthless."

Captain Bellamare set a hand on his forehead and shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with them, Harold. The Nagoona are playing another prank. Their interpreter device changed the sounds of the cows to make you think they're making those noises."

"You don't know that, Chuck. You cut one of these things open and a jack-in-a-box will jump out. Mark my words."

Captain Bellamare sighed and looked toward Kazur. Harold knew Bellamare couldn't deny it.

"Why don't you leave like your neighbors have, Harold? The government will compensate you and find you a nice place to live." It was an offer Harold had heard a hundred times before.

"I don't want to leave. This is my homestead." Harold pointed at the hovering purple ship. "Make *them* leave."

"We've gone over this before, Harold. The ship needs to stay here. We can't allow it to get closer to Houston, and sending it over someone else's house doesn't make sense now. Besides," Bellamare said as he swept an arm toward the alien ship that spanned half the sky, "the Nagoona like it here."

Harold spat a wad of chaw at their feet and pointed with his chin at the ship. "I'm hoping that hurricane in the Gulf will come up and blow them bastards away."

"We are currently taking steps to avoid that," Kazur said. On cue, a hatch opened on the ship. An anchor and chain that should have been attached to an aircraft carrier dropped out, crashing into a barn on Harold's land.

Captain Bellamare threw his hands up and glared at Kazur. "Sometimes I really wonder why you Nagoona came to us."

"We are here to serve man," answered Kazur.

"I wish someone would serve you in a hot pot of water," Harold said to the lobster-man.

*

Captain Bellamare kept shaking his head at Kazur in the limousine long after they drove off of Harold's ranch. "Why do you torment that man?"

Kazur looked up from a book with a steaming iron pot on its cover titled *How to Serve Man*. "In our culture, we find the one with the least sense of humor to be the funniest," Kazur said, closing the book. "Although the metal holds no real value for us, in human terms, Harold Travis is worth more than his weight in gold."

*

The next day Harold didn't leave his house until mid-morning. When he walked out his front door he found three aliens in a bubbling hot tub pouring melted butter over their heads. Four soldiers stood close by, just to make sure Harold didn't start an intergalactic incident.

Captain Bellamare talked on a cell phone next to the tub. He hung up when he saw Harold. "I spoke to my superiors. They agree that these pranks have gone on long enough. The negotiators are going to bring up how you're being mistreated and are going to demand that they stop."

A *whump, whump* noise cut through the air, catching the two men's attention. From a distance, Harold could see a helicopter heading their way. It slowed as it neared the Nagoona ship, dipping below the purple vessel. It flew within a hundred yards of Harold's house and landed. The pilot cut the power and the passenger jumped out. Harold raised his eyebrows when he noticed it was a woman. Her brisk walk looked angry. The closer she got, the angrier she looked.

Captain Bellamare straightened to attention as soon as he recognized her. The Nagoona in the tub greeted her with catcalls and whistles.

“Morons,” the middle-aged woman said as she walked by.

Bellamare snapped a salute. “Colonel Barnett! Glad to see you, Ma’am. This is the man I told you about, Harold Travis.”

She ignored Bellamare and addressed Harold. “You should have taken the Government’s offer while you had the chance, Travis.” She turned to Bellamare. “Captain, you are hereby ordered not to assist or try to convince Mr. Travis to leave this residence.”

“I—I don’t understand, Ma’am.”

“It’s like this, Charles,” she said through gritted teeth. “The Nagoona called our bluff and raised us. As soon as we demanded that they leave him alone, they broke off talks and said they were going to the Chinese unless we gave them the right to do what they wished with Mr. Travis. Starting ten minutes ago, Mr. Travis and his ranch fell under the jurisdiction of the Nagoona until the conclusion of these talks.”

“They must be joking, Colonel.”

“Who knows? They probably are, but *I* don’t want to learn Mandarin bad enough to call their bluff.”

A loud long grinding noise from the barn with the anchor that still stuck out of its roof interrupted the Colonel. It sounded as if lumberjacks were sawing through a log. Harold went to investigate and the two officers followed. Inside, a Nagoona alien stood near a workbench where a large two-handled tree saw, with one end mangled, lay. The alien held Harold’s brand new handsaw and was attempting to cut the mangled end off.

Harold put both hands on his head and shouted over the noise. “What are you doing!?”

The Nagoona alien stopped and motioned with the handsaw as he attempted to explain. "I saw the saw couldn't saw, and I was sorry the saw couldn't saw. So I sought a saw, so I could saw the saw, so the saw can saw. See?" The alien held up the handsaw. All the teeth were worn off. The edge was as smooth as a baby's bottom.

Harold's face flushed. "You ruined it!"

"Take it easy, pal. This will make a fine cheese knife. Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck," the alien replied in a perfect Curly Howard impersonation.

The three humans made a quick exit to escape the insanity of the barn. Outside, the Nagoona in the tub were dropping lemon wedges in with them.

"Can't you just shoot them down?" asked Harold.

"Believe me, we already tried," said Colonel Barnett. "You're on your own, Travis."

Colonel Barnett marched toward her helicopter. The Nagoona in the tub howled like construction workers enjoying the view. She gave them the middle-fingered salute as she walked past.

"Get off my land," Harold said to Captain Bellamare. Bellamare shrugged and left in his car. Harold now had an idea why these aliens were here and why the military wasn't doing anything about them. Just how hard have they tried to shoot the Nagoona down? He watched Colonel Barnett's copter take off. One of the soldiers standing guard over the hot-tubbing aliens snickered when a Nagoona cracked open a jar of cocktail sauce and took a swig.

Not very hard.

Harold began to form a plan in his mind. Tomorrow he would take matters into his own hands.

*

The next morning Harold woke up hours before the sun rose. He got in his pickup and drove east. Three hours later, he arrived at a fireworks place he knew as a kid.

Jimmy's Fireworks stand was now *Big Bangers Fireworks Emporium*, a supermarket for firecrackers.

After searching for thirty minutes he approached a clerk. The clerk listened to Harold then went into the back room. Harold went out the front door, walked behind the building and waited at the back. The clerk brought out a large dark package. With his wallet five hundred dollars lighter, Harold took off with the package that occupied most of the bed of his pickup.

Harold pulled his truck near the center of his property just before noon. He reached into the bed of his truck, struggling with the heavy package as he dragged it out. Harold drove the truck a quarter of a mile then walked back to the package and ripped off the covering.

The "Mountain Breaker" stood five feet tall. It promised to be the biggest, loudest, most explosive rocket ever sold, legal or otherwise, in the western hemisphere. Harold placed it upright and carefully read the directions. A blue Buick pulled up next to Harold's pickup and Captain Bellamare hopped out.

"Harold, what are you doing?"

Harold ignored him and unraveled the ten-foot fuse.

"Get away from that thing before you blow yourself up."

Harold lit the fuse and scurried over to where the Captain stood. "Let's see how funny those bastards think this is," he said to the Air Force officer.

Bellamare crossed his arms, shook his head, and watched the fuse burn toward the rocket. "I got ten bucks that says that thing isn't going to do more than sparkle."

The rocket roared when it ignited. Smoke trailed the missile as it traveled the entire five hundred feet straight up, just like the clerk promised. With a brilliant blast, it exploded under the Nagoona ship. The sound boomed off the purple monstrosity. Other explosions webbed away from the initial impact site. Smoke billowed out of every porthole and latch covering. The alien ship creaked like steel girders buckling under enormous strain as the explosions intensified. One end

started to dip. Lights flickered throughout the ship's surface. Then they all went out at once.

One end of the Nagoona ship started to fall. It let out a whine like a B-17 just shot out of the sky. Both men screamed and grabbed onto each other, seeing their impending doom at hand. The north end of the alien ship was going to impact with Harold's house. He closed his eyes.

Nothing.

Harold opened his eyes and saw the city-sized ship balancing on the tip of the weather vane on Harold's house.

Just another joke!

He gritted his teeth. Bellamare still held Harold in an iron embrace. Harold shoved the man away.

A hatch on the ship blew open and a blizzard of confetti jetted out, raining on top of the two men. Harold spent the next minute digging, spitting, and coughing his way out from the confetti mound. When he got his head free, he saw the Nagoona ship perched back above his ranch as if nothing happened.

Captain Bellamare's head popped out of the hill of confetti and he spit out a mouthful of shredded paper. His dumbfounded expression said it all.

"Get off my land," Harold ordered.

Harold spent the rest of the day on his tractor. With the front-end loader, he scooped up the shredded paper and put it in a pile under the center of the hovering spaceship. Just as the sun went down, Harold set the pile of paper on fire. A probe the size of a small car floated down with a skewer attached to it and a marshmallow as big as a washing machine at its end. The probe stuck the marshmallow in the flames to roast.

"I'm done with you. Do you hear?" Harold said to the probe while it hummed "Kum Ba Yah."

"I'm done being your clown." He turned his back on the probe and walked to his house. Once inside he locked the door and pulled all the shades.

*

Harold stayed inside. He wouldn't step out the door. He wouldn't look out the window. He refused to answer the phone. The plumbing still worked and there was plenty of food stored in the basement; he had everything he needed. There was nothing out there for him.

For months he lived in silence. Every so often, someone would knock on the door. He ignored it, for he was sure a pie in the face would be there to greet him if he opened it. One day the door banged violently.

"Harold! Harold! You got to get out!" The voice belonged to Captain Bellamare. "Harold! Listen to me! It's the sun! It's the reason why the Nagoona are here!

"Go away!" he said in a raspy voice. They were the first words Harold spoke out loud in months. "It's just another one of their jokes!"

"No, Harold! You need to listen! The Nagoona are here to save us! They're going to take us to their Dyson Sphere. The sun is going to go nova! Come see for yourself!"

Harold opened the door. The shadow still covered his ranch. He pointed his rifle at Bellamare's chest.

"Harold, there are only a few people left on Earth. The sun is going to explode. You need to come..."

Harold cocked the rifle to place a bullet in the chamber. He lifted the weapon and aimed it between the captain's eyes. "Say one more word and I'll blow your head off."

Captain Bellamare retreated slowly, and then ran to his car. Harold watched long enough to see the Buick spit gravel under its tires and head down his driveway. He shut the door and locked it. No one else bothered him.

*

Two weeks later, while lying in bed, Harold heard a hum from outside. Sunlight shone through the window once again. Harold ran down his stairs and threw open the door.

The purple alien ship that had cast a shadow on his home for so long disappeared into the blue skies. After two years, sunlight returned to his land. Harold stepped out to take a look.

The sun looked sick. Sun spots dotted its orange surface. A Nagoona ship, twenty yards in diameter, descended from the clouds and landed near Harold. Six Nagoona aliens came out.

“Your bravery has inspired us,” said the leader of the group. “We six have decided to stand with you.”

“What?” Harold started to say.

“It is time.”

The six aliens turned to face the sun. It suddenly went dark, then brilliant. Star matter flew off its surface. It made a pattern that resembled a rose.

“Oooooooo,” cooed the six Nagoona.

The sun went dark again, then brilliant. Two flares shot off its surface. They became rings: one red, the other blue.

“Aaaaahhh,” marveled the aliens.

Matter blasted out from the star. A kaleidoscope of colors bathed the sky. It reminded Harold of a grand finale to a cheap firework show.

The Nagoona raised their arms and cheered, “YEEAAHH!”

Two black spots appeared on the sun's surface. A black U-shape traced across the sun and under the spots. Earth's star was now a smiley face staring back at Harold. The next instant the face faded away and the sun returned to normal.

Harold looked away. Spots filled his vision. He rubbed his eyes while he yelled at the aliens.

"You crazy, insane, lunatics! You tricked all the people to leave and faked the sun exploding for a *joke*?"

"That would be a great joke," admitted the alien's leader, "but even we Nagoona wouldn't go to those lengths for just a laugh. We need your Solar system's raw material for our Dyson Sphere."

"Even the Earth?"

"Especially the Earth. It has a natural wealth of oxygen and water. It would take a lot to change the atomic structure of other elements to create oxygen and water as pure as Earth's.

"It will take some time before we extract them. We plan on stripping the ice rings from Saturn first. We're then going to smash it into Jupiter. It should be a great show."

Harold looked around. Everything seemed so empty. No people. No animals. Only the sound of wind on the plains remained.

"Why me?" he asked.

"It is because you are loved by trillions. You are our most popular entertainer on our Transmaglaticormiger Visuamalholothon."

"Transmagla what?"

"We just call it TV."

All the people; gone. The Earth now a rock of raw material, all more than Harold could soak in.

The trembling Nagoona of the bunch approached Harold with a sheet of paper and a pen. "Excuse me sir. I am your biggest fan. It would mean so much to me if I could have your autograph."

Harold took the pen, and in big letters, wrote two words that summed up just how he felt. The alien gazed at the paper and clutched it close to its chest.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. You. Can I call you by your first name?"

Harold stared at it, expressionless. He shook his head and turned to the leader to ask, "What will happen to me now?"

"You are the last person left on the planet. Technically, that makes you the Ruler of Earth. What is your wish, Sire?"

It took Harold a half of second to think of his one and only edict. "Get off my planet and never set foot on it again."

The aliens walked back to their vessel and filed in. The ship rose twenty feet in the air and positioned itself directly over Harold, the sun's rays once again blocked from Harold's view. He started to walk away then ran as the ship matched every one of his steps.

Harold gave up and looked around. He saw nothing. No cows in his field. No birds in the air.

Am I really the last one on Earth? He needed to find out for himself.

Harold started walking toward Houston. Aside from the foliage, he saw no living things along the way. *Could they have taken all the animals as well?* Harold reasoned that if they could fake the sun going nova, they were probably capable of anything.

For miles he marveled at the silence and calm. The world felt empty. Aside from the wind, Harold only heard the sounds of his footsteps. Harold walked the entire way from his isolated ranch to the outskirts of Houston. His unwanted shadow, and the one it cast, followed him every step of the way. He walked the rest of the

day. He walked all night, sticking to the road, for there were no lights left to illuminate the night.

When the first light of dawn appeared, the Nagoona saucer positioned itself to block Harold's view.

Can't even let me see the sunrise, can you? You pricks.

The city skyline appeared right in front of him. He walked down the boulevard to where the tallest buildings stood. The saucer hovered above the towers, maintaining a shadow over Harold.

"Hello!" he shouted. The echo in the deserted city went on and on. Harold walked through the downtown area, hoping to find a sign of life. When he came to a department store he walked inside. The shelves were emptied of all but a few products. He made his way to the sporting goods section. Behind a glass display, he found what he needed.

He grabbed a baseball bat from a shelf and smashed the display. Harold reached in to seize the lone Colt .45 left behind.

Why go on? Harold stuck the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

He gagged. Harold pulled the barrel out and saw a flag with "BANG" written on it. He threw the gun and for the first time in three decades, began to cry. He grabbed a handkerchief nearby to dry his tears. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror. His face had ink all over it from the handkerchief.

Harold screamed. He grabbed the bat and swung, shattering the mirror. He marched through the store, bashing things as he made his way toward the exit. He smashed the glass door, went out into the parking lot, pointed the bat at the saucer, then stopped.

No. This is what they want.

It suddenly dawned on him that he was dealing with children. Starved-for-attention children, not much different than the drunken idiots that would tip his cows for kicks.

I am not going to play their game anymore.

The only way to deal with beings that thrived on misery was take away their fun. If he ignored them, they'd get tired of tormenting him, and eventually leave him alone.

He spied the bench across the street. He discarded the bat and walked toward it. It all became clear to him. He knew what he must do.

I am just going to sit here like I'm waiting for the bus. No matter what happens from now on, I am going to ignore it.

Confident that he came up with a solution to foil the Nagoona, Harold took his seat and resolved never to move again. No matter what happened, he would ignore it.

He wasn't even going to acknowledge the whoopee cushion he sat on.

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GUEST WRITER

You descend to level 3 and encounter a Bryce! Oh no!

Bryce (Half-Ogre Writer Nerd)

HP: 38, AC: 10, Chaotic Neutral

STR: 15, INT: 10, WIS: 15*, DEX: 3, CON: 12, CHA: 15*

* = -10 vs. ex-wives (or potential ex-wives)

Special Abilities: Win Stuff at OTP (+3), Get Published in *The Best of Necrotic Tissue*, Win International Film Festivals (+1 vs. Las Vegas 2012), Write Silly Bios and Get Away With It (+2 vs. *OTP* magazine).

Equipment: Toshiba Laptop +1, Visa Card of Perpetual Indebtedness, Cat (small, fluffy).

Like, the Title Goes Here and Stuff

by Bryce Albertson

Underwear. Socks. Vibrator. More socks... Shit!

Marjorie rifled through the top drawer of her Day-Glo orange dresser as the knocking at her door grew louder and more insistent. She yanked the drawer out and dumped the contents onto the tie-dyed comforter.

Not even a seed! For the love of St. Ringo! Not today!

She rushed to her daughter's room. If she was a normal kid, or at least as smart as she was square, things would be okay. But she wasn't.

Addison was a rebel. Marjorie had to practically force the state-mandated ten-strip onto her tongue on her tenth birthday. Sixteen now, she'd probably even go to a Christian church if the Love League hadn't deemed them unhip, and therefore, illegal. There was no way she'd have a stash. Marjorie was screwed.

"We know you're in there," the mellow voice called from the other side of the front door. "Open up or we'll, like, break it down or something."

Marjorie heard the giggle and knew they meant business. The three allergy pills she quickly chewed would contract her pupils enough to pass a spot inspection. Combined with a heaven-sent case of sniffles and shaky hands from nerves, maybe they'd buy the old tweaker bit again.

She ratted her hair, ran to the kitchen and stuck her face in the box of powdered sugar donuts before rushing into the living room. Jerking the door open, she stood tiptoe and shouted in her unwanted visitors' faces.

"What the fuck do you want?"

The agent reeled, practically knocked out of his government-issue Birkenstocks by the blast of negative waves and Marjorie's deep orange words. He blinked a few times and shook his head, feeling the beads at the ends of his righteous dreads tap against his shoulders.

"Hey... I'm, like, Special Agent Moondog Cunningham." He held out his badge for Marjorie to inspect. Upside down. "My partner here is... uh... hey! Dude!"

Moondog turned to find his partner running his pudgy face up and down the wall. Moondog tapped him in the middle of the forehead. "Dude! Like, what's your name again?"

The agent continued to slowly rub his wide-eyed face against the stucco. He slumped and the wall pulled his open mouth up into a gaping half-grin. "The texture... the teh... xtuuurre..."

Moondog returned his bloodshot gaze to Marjorie. "Special Agent Texture. We're DEA. Can we, like, come in and stuff?"

Marjorie was quick to think on her feet. “If you got blow, then yeah. Otherwise, fuck off!”

She tried to slam the door, but Moondog snaked a sandal into her apartment before she could.

“Outta blow, eh?” Moondog smirked. “Musta been out for a while. If you were tweaked, you’d have, like, all broken my foot and stuff. That totally didn’t even hurt.”

Marjorie cocked an eyebrow. “Ludes?”

“Duh! The luuuudes...” Moondog rolled his eyes and slapped his forehead hard. “Feelin’ no pain, baby, but that doesn’t prove *you’re* high.”

Moondog leaned against the door and rolled into the apartment, falling face-first onto the gold shag carpet. He rolled over, laughing. “Dude! Help me up. I am soooo fried.”

“Someone puked up Big Bird.” Moondog’s partner crawled into the apartment. His head snapped up and he stared at Marjorie with murder in his eyes. “You bitch! You ate Big Bird and then puked him into your swimming pool, you and your baskets! Tiskets! Taskets! The lemurs! Nooooooooo!”

“Take a chill pill, Texture.” Moondog sat up, reached into his hand-woven, hemp fanny pack, and took out a bottle. He shook three large tablets into his hand. “Take three. Chew ‘em. They’ll hit quicker.”

Texture took the pills from Moondog’s hand like a puppy would take a treat, using a slobbery mouth, not his hands. He rocked himself as he chewed, his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. “Daddy! Daddy! Lemurs, Daddy! Oh whyyyyyyyy...”

Marjorie just *knew* Texture would either leap from her balcony or have a massive coronary and die right here, and it would all be her fault. God! Why couldn’t she control her thinking problem? It was hurting innocent people, Addie most of all. If

Marjorie wasn't careful, her love-child would wind up a mess, just like her.
"Anything I can do to help?"

"Hooch," Moondog said. "Quick!"

Booze! Thank St. Janis for good old booze.

Marjorie never touched the stuff, but her ex had left a bottle of scotch when he ran off to follow the Grateful Dead. She rushed to the kitchen and there, behind the bread, it was.

"And brownies," Moondog shouted from the living room. "And some of those mini-marshmallows! Snickers! And Hot Pockets! Yeah... Hot Pockets..."

Marjorie returned with only the scotch and an excuse. "I'm vegan."

Moondog smiled. "That's like, totally noble of you to not wanna hurt the little puppies and kitties and birdies and stuff. Animals are, like, people, too, right? Especially lemurs. Those are the shiznit!"

"Lemurs!" Texture leaped from the floor and pulled at his greasy bangs. "Lemurs! Bad touch! Baaaad touch lemurs!"

Moondog grabbed the bottle from Marjorie and put it to Texture's mouth, pouring so that Texture would have to shut up and swallow. Texture wrapped both hands around the neck and suckled like a healthy newborn, visibly relaxing.

"There ya go, fella. That'll make 'em go away." Moondog turned and glared at Marjorie. "That's twice you've harshed my buddy's trip, lady. Know what I could do to you for that?"

Marjorie swallowed hard. She knew all about the re-education camps. She wasn't about to point out that it was Moondog who had brought up the lemurs again.

"Yes, sir."

"You mean, 'yeah, dude.'"

“Sorry, sir... I mean, dude. Yeah. That would totally suck.”

“You bet your bippy it would.” Moondog giggled at the word. “Bippy. Bippybippybippy.”

Marjorie looked around, hoping Moondog was high enough to forget he hadn’t already seen her stash. “So... Thanks for stopping by. Y’all take care. Don’t be a stranger. No stranger than me, anyway, ha ha.”

“Okay, bye bye,” Moondog said and turned on his heel, then immediately turned back.

Marjorie froze. She stammered. “It’s cool. You can take the scotch.”

“I gotta pee,” Moondog said and then stumbled toward Marjorie’s closet. He unzipped and began to urinate into her daughter’s galoshes. He shook, tapped, zipped and turned around. “Hey... wait a sec. We ain’t seen your shit yet.”

Texture belched, then, ever the professional, swallowed the little bit of scotch that made its way back up his throat. “Yeah, lady. What are you feeding the crayons? Pigeon-holed any posies into cups?”

“I... I used it all,” Marjorie said, wiping frantically at the powdered sugar on her nose. “Fresh out.”

“Pfff! Whatev. Don’t hold out on us, lady,” Texture said in a rare moment of clarity. He leaned in and licked Marjorie’s face. “That ain’t Columbian Marching Powder!”

Moondog ran his finger under Marjorie’s nose and then licked it. “Lady, something tells me you’ve been ‘fresh out’ your whole life. Either cough up some drugs, or we’re taking you in.”

Marjorie sank to her knees, pleading up from the gold shag into Moondog’s bloodshot eyes. “I can’t help myself! I have a thinking problem. I like to read and learn and I can’t do that when I’m high!”

“Cuff her, Texture,” Moondog said, then went to her entertainment center. “For the love of St. Jimi, would you get a load of this? Not a single *Cheech and Chong* movie. Where’s *Help*? Where’s *Head!*? No cartoons. Not even a copy of *The Wall*.”

Texture pulled his cuffs from his fanny pack and eyed them warily, as if they could bite at any moment. He quickly cuffed Marjorie’s hands in front of her and stuck her index fingers into a Chinese finger puzzle for good measure. “And on April 20th, even. You act like the War For Drugs never even started!”

“What’s this?” Moondog picked up a DVD. “*Savannah Smiles*?”

“It’s way fucked up, I swear,” Marjorie said, quivering.

“You’re sick, lady.” Moondog said and narrowed his eyes, which practically closed them. “You ever even *heard* of *Naked Lunch*?”

“I eat in the nude all the time!” Marjorie threw herself upon Moondog’s Birkenstocks. “Please! Don’t take me to the camps!”

“Sorry, lady,” Moondog said. “Don’t blame me. Blame Nancy Reagan.”

“But I say ‘yes’ all the time! I swear!”

Just then, some of Addie’s friends dragged her through the door. She fell, threw up on the gold shag and curled into a fetal ball. Even her eyes were shaking.

“Mama, help me,” she whimpered. “I’m so scared. I think I took too much.”

Moondog laughed. “Better to *take* too much than *think* too much.”

“St. Ringo!” Marjorie crawled to her daughter on knees and elbows. “What did you take?”

“In... in my bag,” Addie said. “Make it stop!”

Marjorie dumped Addie’s purse onto the floor and out spilled a bag of shrooms, a half an ounce of grass, a sheet of Hearts and Ankhs, a dozen amyl nitrates and so

many different pills it looked like a box of Mike and Ike's had exploded. Thinking quickly, she grabbed a handful and stuffed her mouth.

"Atta girl!" Moondog applauded. "Texture, like, take those cuffs off her. She is now *officially* cool. Let's party!"

Addie threw up again. There was blood in it. She began crying. "I'm sorry, Mommy!"

"Don't be. This is all my fault," Marjorie said, beginning to cry herself. "I was so busy thinking, I never taught you how to handle your high. I even had *you* hooked. I'm such a terrible mother!"

"Leeeeemur!" Texture braced himself against the wall then rammed his head through it. Addison twitched and mewled.

"It's okay, sweetie," Marjorie said, pulling her daughter into her lap and rocking her like she did before she developed her thinking habit. She smiled as she watched her daughter age in reverse, back to the sweet, innocent little baby she so cherished.

When Addie stopped breathing, her face morphed into Betty Boop and then melted. That's when Marjorie knew everything was going to be okay.

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