



ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS MUST EXAMINE THE INNER WORKINGS OF SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO THE STORY. THE “SOMETHING” CAN BE A PHYSICAL OBJECT, A PERSON’S MINDSET, A RELATIONSHIP, AN IDEA... ANYTHING, REALLY...

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Cartoons!

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

I'm addicted to TV shows like "Restaurant Impossible" and "Kitchen Nightmares." Just in case you don't know, these are reality shows that focus on restaurants run by people who have no qualifications for the restaurant business. Either Robert Irvine or Gordon Ramsey, world-class chefs and restaurant owners, help them fix their restaurants.

But why stop with restaurants? Aren't there other businesses out there run by people who are in over their heads? Yes there are, and I found one.

Scenes from My Upcoming TV Pilot, "Hospital Impossible!"

First we meet the host.



Then we meet the owner.





Next we get to see the hospital staff preparing for their busy day.



Then we get to the heart of the hospital's problems.



Finally we get a glimpse of the upcoming turnaround, and leave with the sense that things will soon be set to right.



FIRST PLACE

Sonny Zae lives in Colorado, USA, and enjoys speculating about the future and writing science fiction, fantasy, and darkly humorous horror. His horror short story "Girl with the Talking Tatt" was published on the website www.spinetinglers.com (UK). The zombie short stories "Zombie Under the Bridge", "Zombie Flashmob", and "A Zombie's Best Friend" were published in the webzine www.talesofworldwarz.com.

Pet Protection Laws and Poodle Impact

by Sonny Zae

The sign beside the sidewalk proclaimed, "CAUTION: Do not step on pet ants!" The lettering was offset and unbalanced, clearly home-made. Small writing below the main warning said "Robots—stepping on our pets is a criminal offense" and below that "see Pet Protection Laws."

Normby stared at it for two hundred milliseconds. He had encountered signs about pets before, of course, with the most common stating "Beware of Dog." It was not new for humans to use the pet protection laws as a shield against sales robots, including against his robo-sales company, Colossal Cow & Bully, the leader in humanless sales.

There was a high probability the sign was an anti-robo-salesman ploy. It was also likely that it had been sold to the homeowner by the competition. The robo-salesmen of Badger Profit Rockit (motto: "An army of remorseless selling

machines”) would stoop to any tactic to cause problems for him and the other robo-salesmen of Colossal Cow & Bully.

Nothing would stop him from making the sale except the ‘Automaton Regulations for the Safety of Humans and Robots.’ The Regulations dictated that robo-salesmen couldn’t deceive humans directly, couldn’t damage human property to make a sale, and couldn’t harm human pets. Humans in Colossal’s management occasionally referred to the Automaton Regulations as ‘Jim Crobot’ laws. The informal name puzzled him.

The pet protection laws were a lengthy subset of the Regulations. He consulted his pet procedures database, wasting precious milliseconds. He would expend the time. Homeowners desperate to keep robo-salesmen out were the best targets, as it was a sure sign of low sales resistance.

The database listed dogs, cats, ferrets, gerbils, hamsters, rats, mice, parrots, parakeets, macaws, wrens, snakes, turtles, ferrets, and lizards—but not ants. Ants were never kept by humans for company and emotional reward, according to his database.

Was this a new trend in human pet-keeping? Were insect pets maintained strictly inside and therefore not of any previous concern? He expended more time by accessing his internal robo-sales problem database, which stated that there were no known cases of pet ants. And no instructions on how to deal with the scenario.

He would have to request a ruling from legal analysis, despite the high alarm index in his elapsed time monitoring routine. Waiting for a response from the human legal analysts would take many minutes.

He would wait. He believed unfailingly in Colossal’s corporate motto, “*They Will Buy.*” He wanted the sale and the sales points. Even more, he wanted the sales points that he’d earn from finding a new anti-robo-sales ploy and devising a strategy to defeat it.

The reply from the Colossal Cow & Bully legal department arrived six minutes, twelve seconds, twenty-three milliseconds later. “Ants are not pets when outdoors or unconstrained by a container. This is a deception. Proceed cautiously.”

He switched to high visual magnification and scanned the sidewalk. A seasonal cycle ago, another Colossal Cow & Bully robo-salesman had stepped on a snake on a homeowner's driveway—a garter snake, according to Colossal's incident database—critically injuring the animal. The homeowner had won a sizable legal settlement, even though there was clear evidence that the homeowner hadn't been aware of the animal's presence. The robot prohibition laws were written to favor the homeowner.

He didn't encounter an ant anywhere on the entire length of the sidewalk, but having to carefully lift and place his metal feet was an annoying waste of milliseconds. It cost him forty-two seconds to cover the fifteen and six-tenths feet of distance. Robots were already restricted to moving at a walking pace of no more than three miles per hour. The anti-robot factions had claimed that running robots were inherently hostile.

Normby rang the doorbell and waited. Was the "beware of ants" sign the only anti-robot security measure? Maybe it was a cheap attempt to scare him away.

A small child opened the door—the most common attempt at no-cost robot deterrence. The little boy appeared to be less than three seasonal cycles in age. The recently-activated offspring stared up at Normby.

It was hard to believe that humans still thought sending a child to the door would discourage a robo-salesman. At least the pet ants sign was creative and new.

Normby pressed the doorbell button and held it. In a matter of seconds, an annoying amount of time for a robo-salesman, adult-weight footsteps approached. He activated his sales psychology routine and made a sale.

*

Many houses later, Normby encountered a bright red-and-white sign proclaiming "Beware of Dog," but there was no fence around the yard. Perplexing.

The dog was an adult poodle. Normby's pet identification database said the breed had been developed in Germany for hunting waterfowl and was typified by intelligence and agility. The animal rose to its feet as Normby approached. It

moved toward him, stiff-legged and with the hair on its back elevated, barking aggressively.

It must have been a young dog that hadn't learned attacking a robot was futile—and only dangerous to the dog. When he turned up the sidewalk leading to the front door, the animal began barking in a hysterical manner. It positioned itself in front of Normby.

Normby took a step forward and the poodle lunged mid-bark, snapping at Normby's metal wrist. Normby yanked his arm out of the way.

The dog stepped back, then launched itself, slamming against Normby's abdomen. The poodle fell to its feet and leaped at his head. Normby raised an arm to deflect it.

The force of the impact was surprising. Even more surprising, the dog wasn't deterred, even though the collision must have been painful. The dog threw itself at Normby again, as if to damage Normby by the force of the collision. Normby held both his hands up, jointed fingers outstretched, catching the dog mid leap. The animal twisted and thrashed, snapping at Normby's arm. The poodle bit down so hard it was in danger of breaking its teeth. Normby released the poodle and backed up quickly, stepping off the curb.

The dog stayed on the house side of the sidewalk, barking in a frenzied manner. Normby's visual processor detected a ripple in one of the curtains of the house. He moved back even farther. There was no way to get around the animal. Even if he did, the dog would pursue him and attack again. Normby walked away. The dog barked until Normby turned at the street corner and moved out of sight.

He reported the incident to Colossal Cow & Bully headquarters, as required by law. But it didn't make him feel any better. What was wrong with the dog? He had always interacted well with human pets. Even though robo-salesmen were programmed to like all the things that humans liked, Normby had a special soft spot in his empathy processor for dogs.

*

Normby contacted the legal analysis department.

“I don’t have a solution,” the legal analysis department human admitted.

“According to the database, Verbin15 encountered a similar dog reaction less than two weeks ago. Verbin15 logged the incident, but wasn’t able to get around the dog and reach the homeowner. That dog reacted in the same manner as what you’re reporting. This ... this ‘suicide poodle’ appears to be an animal that was bred and trained just for blocking robo-salesmen. I would suspect that it has brittle bones, a weak circulatory system, and an unnaturally high level of aggressiveness toward robots. I don’t know who is breeding and training them, or who is selling them. You will need to approach it carefully and not let it injure itself against you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Normby terminated the connection. Animals that had been specially bred and trained to injure themselves by furiously attacking robo-salesmen? The suicide poodles were merely the newest weapon in the struggle to sell humans the many goods and services they were not yet aware they needed.

Normby thought about various solutions during his darktime maintenance period. He had to get past the dog without letting it harm itself. He would wrap himself in heavy foam padding.

By re-activation time at sunrise, Normby had devised a wrap pattern that would cover all parts of himself that a dog could bite, making it impossible for the dog to injure itself. His programming included a self-imposed anguish routine that would trigger if the dog put itself in danger, and he had felt the edges of mental pain when the dog had thrown itself against him. Too bad it was illegal to drug the suicide poodle. But robots were prevented by law from tampering with pets, and the company who had developed this new anti-sales-robot weapon must know that.

Normby sped back as quickly as allowed toward the poodle house. It was too bad that humans spent all darktime recharging. He could sell many more goods if humans were active for a longer portion of a solar cycle. They spent large spans of time doing nothing and became surprisingly perturbed if interrupted during any of their frequent downtimes.

When he reached the house, the suicide poodle flew at him again. The padding seemed adequate. Then the dog latched onto the foam around his wrist and whipped its head from side to side, like a predator trying to rip a mouthful of flesh from its prey. A tongue of padding tore loose, as if the dog had rent Normby's skin. The dog bit again, further up his arm, and Normby whipped his arm upward to make the animal let go. But a tooth caught in the heavy foam and even the dog's frantic thrashing didn't pull the tooth free.

Normby's probability indices for impending dog injury and robotic mental pain rose rapidly. If the tooth didn't slip loose, it might break off. Colossal's legal analyst had suggested that the suicide poodles could have been bred for brittle teeth and bones. He extended a cutting tool from his other hand and quickly snipped off the strip of foam. The dog dropped to the ground, squealing when its feet hit. Normby spun his head to keep his eyes on the dog even as his metal legs churned, propelling him away.

The dog followed him to the limit of the yard. Normby boosted his visual amplification and inspected the dog's snout and eyes from a distance. No blood or bruises. That was a relief. It appeared to have suffered no harm. He hadn't grasped the full ferocity of the dog's training, but he wouldn't make that mistake again.

*

The meat wrapping was an even greater failure. Not only was it expensive, but Normby never made it far from the darktime robot depot. Cats and dogs appeared out of nowhere as he strode away from Colossal's facility, swarming him and making it impossible to move out of fear of hurting the mass of hungry animals. Several raccoons joined in, with fighting breaking out between animal species.

After he had been picked clean from the neck down and the four-footed animals drifted away, crows landed on him. Normby imagined himself as the scarecrow illustrated in his human garden facts database.

He returned to the maintenance bay for a high-pressure wash. He didn't want to be followed by sniffing, licking animals all day. In addition, stringy meat fibers were interfering with his arm and leg joints. The bacon had been a terrible idea.

*

Could he deploy an air bag around himself? It could be a big inflatable doughnut with him in the center. The dog would bounce off.

What if the dog managed to puncture the airbag, though? The dog had shown a willingness to injure itself while attacking him. The potential for failure was too high to risk.

Camouflage? He could carry a shield around himself, a tall tube that he could hold and walk inside. But then the dog would throw itself against the shield to injure itself. The tube would have to be opaque—at least from the outside.

Even with all the updates to his psychological routines, he couldn't understand why humans had designed easily injured animals to protect themselves from robots. After all, robots were designed by and made for humans. How could humans have so little control over their own creations? Even more puzzling was that humans exerted little control over each other, even with all their efforts to do so. And when occasionally successful in banding together to achieve a goal, human groups exhausted their energies in conflicts with other human groups, which was why they hadn't eliminated robo-salesmen. Fortunately, human merchants found great advantage in employing Normby's type.

*

The roll of thin LCD material could expand out into a tube of two feet in diameter and six feet tall, open at the top and bottom. The liquid crystal layer could be controlled to transmit light in only one direction. He'd see the dog, but it would only see a featureless gray cylinder bobbing up the sidewalk.

The dog went on full alert and moved up to the front of the yard as Normby approached. It inserted its nose into the gap between the bottom of the shield and the sidewalk and sniffed loudly. It smelled him! The visual blockage wasn't enough. The shield shuddered with a first poodle impact. He hadn't thought about masking his scent. The dog was probably more scent-driven than visual. He would have to come up with a way to hide his robot smell. Normby retreated again.

*

Normby spent his darktime maintenance period tethered to a charge cable while experimenting with ways to compensate for his scent. He researched ways to cover his smell, but the research suggested that dogs' noses were too sensitive to conceal his robotic smell, whatever his smell was.

What scent had the dog keyed on? It had to be a scent that wouldn't be emanating from an automobile. Or household appliances. Or other machines. What was unique about a robot's smell?

It took several hours for Normby to isolate the unique scent component, a lubricant used in joints and pneumatic actuators of robots. Curiously enough, the lubricant used a vat-grown animal fat as an ingredient, a fat developed from an extinct animal called a mammoth. The animal had lived in very cold climates, so evidently worked as a lubricant over a very large temperature span.

It didn't take long to find a synthetic lubricant that had no organic smell. Normby applied the new lubricant generously, hoping to wash away all hints of the mammoth-based lubricant. Then he added a fan to the top of his tube and a membrane filter. Air would be drawn in at the bottom of the tube and expelled at the top. As an afterthought, he filled a spray bottle with a concentrated form of the mammoth lubricant and put it into his storage compartment. Maybe he could use it on a robo-salesman from Badger Profit Rokit, given an opportunity. Before leaving the darktime maintenance depot, he submitted to a high-temperature power wash to remove as much lingering mammoth lubricant odor as possible.

*

Back at the house of the suicide poodle, Normby deployed his tube and set it to be visually opaque from the outside. He turned on the fan, bending down and confirming that air was being drawn in at the bottom of the tube. The dog followed along the front boundary of the home. It sniffed at the tube, but didn't become agitated. So far, so good.

The dog didn't attack when Normby turned up the sidewalk leading to the house. At the front door, Normby uncurled the shield and placed the two ends against the

side of the house, sealing the dog from himself and the front door. The shield was transparent from the inside, so the person answering the door would see the poodle but not the shield.

The man who answered the doorbell looked to be about thirty-five years old. Sensors showed the man's pulse rate elevating and his blood pressure rising by seventeen percent. A reddening of the skin around the mouth and eyes was a visual indicator of growing agitation. An infrared scan confirmed the increasing blood flow to his face. "What do you want? How did you get here?"

"That's a fine dog you have, sir," Normby replied, gesturing at the poodle. It stood outside the shield with its head cocked to the side, hearing its master's voice but confused that it couldn't see the human.

"No it isn't!" the man snarled. "It's an expensive, worthless mutt! I'm going to complain to the company." He crossed his arms and stood in the center of his doorway. The little boy's head appeared beside the man's leg, pushing his way forward to see what was going on. The child stared up at Normby with big, serious dark eyes, a finger still up his nose. The man put a hand on the little boy's head to stop him from moving any farther forward.

Normby consulted his hostile sales strategy routine. The man's hostility index was far too high. Normby would not get anywhere if he tried to sell the man household goods. He would have to first offer the man a benefit.

"I am authorized to offer you one hundred creditons for information about your dog, sir. Do you have any brochures I can purchase?"

"Maybe." The expression on the man's face turned into suspicion. "Why do you want that? Are you trying to buy information so you can defeat the dog?"

"No, sir," Normby said patiently. "Didn't I already make it past your dog? It is not attacking me. It is not even alarmed."

"No, it isn't." The man stared at the poodle. "It cost me a huge amount, and for that it should be chewing your legs off."

“One hundred creditons, sir.” Normby extended his payment pad, magnifying the proposed payment amount. “I offer it as payment, but you may use it as credit toward purchasing goods.”

“I don’t want to buy anything,” the man said in a sour tone. “Stay here, I’ll go get it.”

The door closed and Normby heard the man move away. A slight scratching sound indicated that the little boy was still at the door. It was twenty five seconds, seven hundred and eighty milliseconds before he heard the man returning. The door opened and the man thrust a pamphlet at Normby. “Here. Now transfer the creditons.”

“Right away, sir.” But Normby took his time. The man’s anger would be ameliorated somewhat by payment for the pamphlet, but humans had a standard reaction profile. Judging from the man’s blood pressure and muscle tension index, it would be at least thirty more seconds before Normby could make a counter-proposal.

“Are you a pet lover, sir?” Normby used his most inoffensive voice template.

“No. I hate dogs! I only bought this one because ... because...”

Normby selected a neutral tone with a speech rate that was slower than normal.

“Because you hate robo-salesmen, sir?” Humans reacted poorly to cheerful chatter when they were still set on being angry. His sales algorithm dictated that he keep the target talking and make a sales move only when the target had cooled down.

Normby consulted his commiserate responses database. “I hope you did not pay a large amount of money for that poodle, sir. Is there some way I can compensate you?”

Normby paused two point five seconds for the man to absorb the statement. Humans took large amounts of time to be manipulated with words, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I have ... an idea,” Normby said in an intentionally tentative manner. He pulled out the spray bottle he’d filled with a ten percent mammoth oil solution. “I have this spray that should greatly increase the anti-robot response of your dog.”

“And you’ll sell it to me?” The sarcasm was evident even without a voice tonal analysis.

“Sell it to you, sir? I should think not!” Normby gave the statement a rising inflection to convey a certain amount of shock at the suggestion. The man would want the spray more if he couldn’t have it. “This is a brand new mixture, never used before. We shall have to analyze and test it before selling it to the public.”

“Then why are you showing it to me if I can’t buy it?” The man’s muscle tension index ramped up, warning that he might be thinking of slamming the door.

“Because it may be available soon.”

“How does it work?” The man put out a hand as if expecting Normby to hand over the spray bottle. “If I knew it worked, I’d buy it right now, just to keep you infuriating tin sales soldiers from ever ringing my doorbell again.”

“It is an olfactory enhancer.”

“So if you sprayed it on yourself, my dog would go crazy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want to buy it!” the man declared.

“I understand, sir. It will likely be approved for sale by the next time I come to your door.”

“But I don’t want you at my door again!”

“You wish me to send another robo-salesman instead?”

“No! I don’t want any robots at my door. Not another single metal salesman, understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Normby displayed a sad smile on his faceplate. “But no one else sells this spray.”

“I will give you one hundred creditons for the bottle.” The man thrust out his chin. The motion correlated to aggression—or defiance, a primitive reaction intended to cause another human to respond in kind.

“The one hundred creditons I just paid you, sir?” Normby displayed an upward twist to the corner of his synthetic mouth to signal refusal and annoyance.

“Two hundred, then.” The man fixed his stare on Normby’s faceplate as if he might discern some emotion or response there. “Okay, how about three hundred?”

“This is the *only* bottle of this formula,” Normby said softly but firmly. “Not only is it not for sale, but it is invaluable. A thousand creditons would not be nearly enough.”

“Twelve hundred!”

“Still not enough, sir,” Normby replied. The man’s blood pressure and respiration rates had not reached levels indicating that his desire for the spray had run up against a spending limit point. “It is worth at least two thousand on the open market.”

Normby felt an inrush current in his sales success chip. It was wonderful to have a product where the price was based only on how badly the target wanted it.

The man took a deep breath and his blood pressure jump one last level. “Fourteen hundred creditons. That’s all I can afford to pay.”

Normby nodded slowly, as if considering the offer. “Very well, then. Fourteen hundred creditons it is.” He extended his thumbprint pad and displayed the agreed-upon price.

The man glanced at the display and then pressed his thumb to the pad to accept and transfer payment. Then he tried to grab the spray bottle.

“No, you can’t have it yet.” It had occurred to Normby that the man might set the poodle on him to verify that the spray worked. “By law, I cannot let your dog injure itself by attacking me. And I like dogs. I fear that if I give you the spray now, you will not be able to resist the temptation to use it.”

And he couldn’t let the man see his shield. The man would tell other humans and the secret to defeating suicide poodles would be worthless. The man had to go back inside before Normby could disengage the screen. And the man couldn’t be allowed to see the opaque LCD outer surface as Normby left.

The man’s face darkened. “You’re not going to give me the bottle after I just paid for it?”

“That’s not what I meant, sir. I will give you possession of it. I am only worried about a potential standoff or injury.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Normby displayed a friendly smile. “You know that robots cannot lie or steal. So go inside your home, away from any windows. Wait for twenty seconds. I will leave the bottle outside your door. By that time, I will be far enough away that if you spray it, the dog will not injure itself against me. Agreed?”

“Whatever!” The door slammed shut. Normby’s sensitive directional microphone heard the man take several steps away, then pause, as if waiting to see if Normby would move. Then the footsteps moved again and Normby heard an interior door click shut.

He placed the spray bottle next to the door, disengaged the shield, and curled it back around himself. One point eight seconds consumed.

The spray would be a popular product for a time. The dog trainers might not even be aware of the unique robot oil component. But the secret would be discovered, especially when Colossal’s robots repeatedly defeated the suicide poodles.

He dropped an extruded bacon-flavored strip as he walked down the sidewalk, lifting his shield to let it slip underneath. The poodle stopped following him to

investigate. He told himself it was to distract the dog while he got away, but he would have done it anyway. It was a good dog, after all.

Behind him, twenty-four and nine-tenths seconds after leaving, Normby heard the front door open and the hiss of spray pressure, followed by agitated barking of the suicide poodle. Another satisfied customer!

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SECOND PLACE

Daniel Goldberg is an incoming Freshman at Emerson College, where he will be studying Writing for Film and Television. This is his first publication. When not writing, he works a nine-to-five job filing things, raps, edits fellow writers' work, and sings in a band—all things he enjoys doing on some level. He can be reached to talk about nearly anything at dan.goldberg94@gmail.com, or his blog, <http://www.realdangoldberg.tumblr.com>

Whispers

by Daniel Goldberg

*But his hands were sweaty
and his gaze was steady:
in jacket pockets
stillness staring.
A fire swept across his tender tundra eyes.*

—W. A. MacCready

Dedicated to W. A. MacCready
February 9, 1992 — June 30, 2012

1.

He was born in 1922. He was always a quiet man, suitcase in hand, glasses on face, hat on head. He would take off this hat each time he entered a building, a sign of respect engrained in him from the years of his childhood before his father had

died. Underneath the hat was a blond and trim crew-cut that his wife was wonderful enough to maintain, although he only thanked her when he was feeling particularly chipper, say, after his team had won a football game recently, or when the sun was particularly bright in the sky. Of course, it was rarely sunny anymore. His eyes, blue, normally remained open when he was out of his loveless bed (and in it, they quickly closed), a habit from his days storming the countryside of Italy, which he would rather not talk about.

Sleep tended to elude him anyway, as he saw faces and scenes in his dreams that he tried to forget.

Each day, he would put on his brown three-piece and his glasses, pick up his suitcase, and his hat that he removed from his head each time he entered a building, typically checking his watch as he walked out the front door. His co-workers admired him for his hard work, punctuality, and for being a man who could finish a job, no matter what it was, traits he inherited from his grandfather, a famous German writer who died while on his first true vacation. His co-workers admired his exacting manner, and the way he sometimes smiled, showing his more-white-than-average teeth, which put everybody at ease and made him a friend to many and enemy to few. For these reasons, among others, he'd been recently promoted to the position of Unit Manager, at a plant which produces the metal casings for ballistic missiles. The promotion gave him access to certain benefits, such as extra days off and permission to use the manager's break room, which he never took advantage of out of a strong belief of social justice and worker-manager solidarity.

He provided for his children. There was no doubt about that. There were two now, David and Mark. There were three at one point, but through the will of God one was taken from him. "God works in mysterious ways."

God appeared in the form of a river current, that carried his little princess headfirst into the rocks on a summer day. "God works in mysterious ways." That was what his fellow church-goers told him. He was having trouble with God these days, as those who can't sleep often do. And with the voice of a man who respectfully takes off his hat every time he enters a building, the voice of a man who could finish a job, no matter what it is, with the voice of a man who wants to

forget Italy, the voice of a man who is tired, with the voice of the bright blue eyes behind his half-framed glasses, he repeats with a sigh, as he puts on his hat after Sunday service, "God works in mysterious ways."

2.

In the first year of his marriage to her, two years past the days in Italy, the bullets still whizzed in his ears, and the shelling still shook his head, but only during the night, when it was quiet, because it was always just before the same nighttime quiet in the war that the bullets would begin whizzing in his ears and the shells started shaking his head. There tends to be a sadness within people like him, the type waiting for the next bomb to drop. He had spent not only the first year back, but many later waiting for his final shell to hit his head when walking, or his car when driving, or his house as he was sitting down to eat the food that he worked hard to put on the table.

She came from a stubbornly middle-class family focused in the Midwest, and spent her childhood running through wheat fields, holding her father's hand, kissing boys on swing-sets, hiding in the back of pick-up trucks, and holding her arms up to the sky when it rained. When the war broke out, she grew a strong sense of civic duty. A cloud hung inside her. She joined the Red Cross and moved to Fort Leavenworth. He had returned from active duty, the bullet smashed a rib and lodged into his lung. He was her fourth patient of the day. Fort Leavenworth had one big room that she said reminded her of the pictures of Ellis Island she saw as a child, and it was her job (and that of eight other nurses) to visit the wounded. Sheets divided cots and dressers, and pushed each soldier into his own seven-by-five world. She felt like she could cure his fear and held his hand tightly underneath the fluorescent lights. He felt the need to settle down with her, that maybe that would stop his head from spinning off its track. This was the biggest fear of his, to have his head leave him because of the spinning and the fear.

They were married in the backyard of a family house in Connecticut. There was a steep cliff that led to a private beach that faced the sunrise and a small bridge. Many family members attended, and the reception was quaint and pleasant, he in a uniform of a soldier, and she in the uniform of a bride. White flowers were the theme, and contrasted nicely with the deep green grass.

They went on their honeymoon to Boca Raton, where they drank freely and made love. For a slice of time they were happy. Late one night, the third or fourth after the wedding, she awoke to find him gone. After waiting in bed for half an hour for him to return, she got dressed and searched the hotel. He was in the bar, hunched over a shot-glass in the company of ghosts. They whispered and screamed to him everything he feared: Regret. The blood. The friendly faces turned white then red then white.

“Where are they?”

“Move! Move! Move!”

“Artillery!”

“What the fuck?! What the fuck?!”

“Watch the trees! The trees!”

“Fuuuuuuck. Fuuuuuuuck.”

“Man down! Man down! Medic!”

“Where’s Ramsay? Ramsay? Where the fuck are you?”

“The trees! Artillery!”

“Fuuuuuuuck. Fuck me, man. Fuck me. I’m dying.”

“No you’re not. You’re not.”

“Die, you kraut fucking bastard! Die!”

Clack, clack, clack, whistle, boom, clack, “Die!” clack, boom, clack, clack.

“Fuuuuuck.”

“Christ, Reggie, you’re not about to die, I’m gonna apply some pressure. Hold this down. Stay calm. Look into my eyes, man. You’re going to be fine.”

He repeats: “You’re going to be fine.”

*

It was quiet in the bar. He was not in the war. He was alone in the company of ghosts. His empty eyes craved a warm bed. She placed her hand on his back, and he jerked to face her. “Honey,” he said, “hello.” His words floated into the bar and dispersed into the air. His eyes shook in their sockets for only a second—a bolt of fear and blood—there to remind him. She stared into them, trying to make contact with whatever was in his head. He dropped his gaze to protect her. She asked if he was okay. Fine, he told her, he was fine. She told him to come back to bed soon. He mumbled that he would, soon, kissed her on the cheek, and turned back to his flashing memories of faceless men in uniform.

3.

She attended church every week. She believed in God, and in the taming of man’s spiritual beast through prayer. She humbled herself through her bowed head, tears, and regrets that reminded her. Sometimes, she would trim her husband’s short hair with a small hair-trimmer that she purchased at RJ’s mini-mart, a small place in the small town where her small house was located, and the hair trimming became a bit of a ritual for her and her husband, and it made her happy to help, because she wanted it all to work out, for her husband to remain happy, and so she could remember why she continues. Beneath the smile and the carefully applied lipstick, her eyes shook in their sockets, and her brain burst into flames, but soon the flames subsided, and you could see the open gas pipes underneath the tracks, like on those Disney rides that her children had loved. The pipes leaked the smell of gas constantly, and you could only really notice if you committed your senses to it, to see the small length of metal under the track, and to notice the twinge in your nose as the smell floated by, waiting for the spark. Maybe she thought this was good. Fire is energy, she remembered. Fire gives life, that big ball of fire in the sky is where we come from, one of God’s greatest gifts. She remembered being in a field when she was a little girl and staring up at the sun and the wheat was tall then and golden like the rays from the sun and the weather was warm and sunny and it’s not sunny often anymore, and it would make her cry, and cry, and she never thought it was going to get better, but she hoped and prayed, and prayed,

and whispered pleas to God in silent churches at moments where it was quiet, and even though there was this fire in her brain, and a constant gas leak, and she worried all the time that her head would explode from the pressure, she still carefully applied lipstick to her lips and smiled brightly to show all of her teeth, and trimmed her husband's short hair, because of tradition, because of habit, because of safety, because of , because it helped her remember why she continued, that she does it for love, that it's not all going to fall apart, that God loves her, that it's about expressing care, that if she keeps giving it will come back around, that she's worth caring about, that she's worth . She's worth it.

So she hoped.

4.

“ ”

“ ”

“Mom?”

’s eyes shot open, and she stared into her mother’s. They were underwater now, it was quiet, and they spoke in whispers, but they could both hear the rapids overhead. She was with her.

’s hair floated around her, forming a constantly shifting auburn halo, and the sunlight shone through it, which only made the comparison more true, and so her mother swam to her and held her, and even though they were underwater, she could feel the warmth of her daughter’s tears as they passed by her face, floating to the surface, where they were taken downstream by the rapids, past the rocks, and into the ocean. She watched them as they dispersed into the water, and followed each particle as it cooled and diluted, and she tried to keep track of as many as possible, but soon all the water started to look and feel the same, and they began to float away and assimilate into the wide swaths of blue, but she kept searching for some trace, some remain that was still .

She awoke with a jolt. He had already left for work, his side of the bed a knot of linens. Nightmares again. She knew it. She looked at the clock on her nightstand.

Six o'clock. She could sleep for another half-hour, but knew it would be no use to try. She got out of bed and went downstairs to begin to cook breakfast. The dream didn't go away. She cracked two eggs and broke them over the pan. Why do they keep coming back? She stared at the pan as the eggs bubbled and jumped. What does it mean? She broke the yolks, and scrambled them together, sighing and praying.

She called for her boys to wake up. They lived in a blue ranch house that the government had helped them pay for, he says, and that it was a blessing that the men in Washington cared so much about a little family like them. Her boys heard her call, and exited their shared bedroom. They were getting older, and should likely each have their own space, but it made her too sad to go into the now vacant room at the end of the hall. It had been five months, and it still made her too sad to move anything that she had touched. Maybe soon. The bed in there was always too heavy. Maybe she would ask him to do it. He was always the stronger one. Strong and silent, like her father.

5.

He had seen his daughter's sleeping face embedded in hers. It was just like 's. Nearly every morning he awoke before her. He would turn his back to her, put on his glasses, and walk to the bathroom, without once looking at her face. He had trained himself to avoid her face. It was just like , but bigger. Too heavy. It was all too heavy. He would drive to the company parking lot, a square half-mile of nothing but white lines next to the looming plant where he worked, empty when he first arrives each day. He would sit and watch the cars come with the sun, each spot filling up, workers leaving their cars, and talking, talking, talking, gossip, jokes, rumors, secrets, talking, and the sun lit the sky like fire, because the sun was fire. A big ball of fire. Had he ever told her about the sun? His grip tightened on the steering wheel, but the car was parked. Maybe he should go home for the day. The sun was rising higher now, and he hated the time that passed, even though he knew that it was good that time was passing, because he knows first hand the truth of that old adage "time heals all wounds," but he still hated the march, because wanted the wound to stay with him forever, because if it wasn't there then he couldn't remember, because he needed to remember, to keep her alive, because he needed to keep her alive. He squeezed the wheel and released it, his hands

turned white then red then white. His face, a mess of pulsing veins, blood under the surface, and tears, as he gripped now harder. Silently.

Where are you? Honey, princess, where are you? Nothing answered back, “Time heals all wounds.”

Where are you? Time heals all

Time. It needs time, Reggie. Keep pressure, just keep pushing down.

Is this it? Am I dying? Is this it? His heels dug deep into the ground, pushing up dirt and grass and mud. Blood had soaked through the first bandage.

Here’s something for the pain. We’ll get you patched up in no Time.

Here’s something for the pain.

Something for the pain. No time.

No time.

Somethin—

He had nearly an infinite amount of questions answered by nothing. Spaces and silences. He existed within them. The moments of silence and transition helped him remember, helped him feel for a moment. Then he would wipe the sweat and tears off of his face with his hand. Wipe his hand on his pants, and leave the car, nodding to the people who walked into the plant with him.

6.

She had left the church retreat early because of a turning in her stomach that she worried was the onset of a sickness. It was winter and very cold. The screen door hung open, and she made a note to tell her husband that it does that, that it must need a new spring, and walked inside. He was not in his chair in the living room, so she went to the kitchen, and he was not in the kitchen, so she went to the window to look outside in the garden, and he was not outside in the garden, and then she noticed a sound, faintly at first, the soft pulsating of the ceiling above

her. The soft pulsating of floorboards that touched ceiling plaster, and made her walk up the stairs. She heard the bed-springs creak and the moans of a woman from their room. The door to the room hung open, and she peered in. She watched as the woman's back rose and fell, and the black curls of her hair bounced slightly with each pulse. The woman threw her head back and moaned in pleasure, riding him slowly and consistently, and she didn't recognize her, but she didn't feel like she should, or should even be watching this, felt as if she were violating his privacy, and for some reason started to think about , but really wished she hadn't because then she would start crying, and now was not the time to cry, not the time to cry, but to stay strong and think, like her father had taught her, and her husband, who she loved so much, she was nearly certain loved her would have wanted. He had shut his eyes, and his face was slightly flushed, but calm, steady. He was a steady lover, the father to her children, a provider, a steady provider, she knew he was steady. She backed away without a word, went downstairs, and walked back to the car, on the way noticing that the mesh on the screen door was ripped, and made a note that she would have to tell her husband about that too.

7.

Time moved fast, as it does with people who live in places without love. And for many years, there was not love. During the ten years, the children went off to college, the country went to war again, and the house stayed quiet and content with the quiet. She donned her nurse's outfit once again—something to keep her out of the house. He was now Assistant Head of Plant. He worked hard hours that were long, but it made him feel better. It had been years since he had stopped seeing the other woman, the wife of Ray, his subordinate and friend. Something still lingered, but it was less. He had spent the years expanding like a star. Astronomy had become a hobby for him. He lived most of his life in the stars. The company now built intercontinental ballistic missiles, which required knowledge of earth's rotational patterns, a knowledge he was only so happy to learn. He liked the quiet of the night. The darkness of his backyard, only the stars and moon in the sky. The ordered movement of stars made him safe. There was an unacknowledged contentedness to watching the world turn, which he had grown so accustomed to that he knew every constellation in the sky on a given night.

Everything that happened was very far away, and like him, it took years for him to see it.

They supported each other, which, she reasoned, was better than so many other couples could do. In February of 1962, she had almost died of influenza, and he sat by her bedside in the hospital every day after work until he fell asleep, and she would be awake wondering what he was dreaming about. When the sun rose, he was always gone. She was alone in rooms lit by fluorescent bulbs.

8.

Him:

He had covered the walls of the house with maps of the stars. As per her request, he framed them neatly, so they meshed with the wallpaper, a series of thin blue stripes on tan, which she had proudly picked out from many patterns.

On Tuesday, she walked into the living room and he had his rifle in his mouth. She asked slowly what he was doing. She was scared. He had shut his eyes, and his face was slightly flushed. Instead of seeing ghosts, he saw stars. The room had the tension of a damp summer night, even though it was winter ("Why is it always winter?"). He took the gun out of his mouth, licked his lips, and slowly said,

"I don't know."

She didn't either.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said, his voice the hum of a gas planet.

She didn't either.

He put the gun down next to him. "I don't know," he said. He clenched his fist. He loosened his fingers. He hid his head in his hands. "I'm trying to figure it out." He looked at her and pushed up his glasses, which were slipping off of his face, a function of loose screws. He exhaled deeply.

"You know I love you, right?"

His world started to spin

He looks up and looked and saw and sees n e's face, embedded in hers, not sure when it was or is and it made and makes him shake with tears, but here it is and here it was, and it's everywhere. All the love turned and turns into fear, and back and forth, he thought and thinks about Italy, and back and forth and he remembered and remembers the gun, but he couldn't and can't stop looking at her, the ghost of a daughter, the body of a wife, a woman that he wanted and wants to help stop his head from spinning. Now it spun and spins, and he cries.

Her:

The years of neglect had rotted the prospect of true love, making his question difficult to answer, but she still wondered about this concept of love which she still held up as a wall against the future and the pain it would cause, and the past and the pain it caused, and the present, which was easy to forget, but in that moment, she felt as if the wall was validated, as if he knew she was there behind it, alive.

"Yes," she said, "and I love you too."

He winced as if being hit, and covered his face once more.

"I'm broken."

"I know," she thought.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm not sure."

Maybe it's because of guilt. Maybe it's because of shame. Maybe it's because of regret. The smell of gas was strong now in her nose, but she was certain that the oven was off. Maybe it's because we're running out of time and realizing it every day, that we can't get what we want back, and she thought about her daughter in the same wheat fields as her, running with the sun's rays hitting her hair like an auburn halo, and she thought of the water, and she thought about speaking:

“I still think about her too.”

He starts shaking harder, noises coming out of him foreign to both, a couple of over thirty years. The room was silent.

“I’m weak,” he said. “I’m weak and alone.”

“You need to be strong,” she said.

“You’re shutting down,” she said.

“Look at me,” she said.

He looks at her.

“I do love you, but you need to be strong. For the both of us.”

But she was there and realized something. That all of the fire in her brain and the sacrifices are worth it because of their silences. Even if the world never realizes it, she can remain strong, because she has enough, and maybe someday the world will come together and thank her, and throw a big party with confetti and ticker-tape cheering, and banners thanking her for the small gifts of love she shares because it’s those small things that give life, but even if she doesn’t and keeps still, then she will still be there giving and providing and she will become like the sun, a provider, that the blanks, silences, and breaks are not about nothing, but the opposite: they are about everything, the nothing is a blank space, a canvas, the earth before Eden, and perfection comes but we can’t express it, we can’t put it into words, so we sit with it and we pray for God, because he’s just an idea, some blank space we named, and we are thankful, because without that blank space that we infer is God, or Love, or something, we would have something worse than a blank space: Death. And that scares her, rightly so.

Them:

So, she held him in her arms, and he told her about the moments of weakness, about the ghosts that sat with him in the bar in Boca Raton, his friend Reggie, the guns and the blood, the day at the park when he lost her under the water and he swam and swam and yelled and cried and almost died himself looking for her, and

the days at the factory early in the morning before everybody arrived, and he told her about Ray's wife, and the pain, and why he loved to be alone with the stars, because he wondered if that's where she could see him, because it made him feel a part of something, and she told him about the heaviness of the last ten years, and the heaviness from before, and the heaviness that hung inside her, and she told him how confused and scared she was, and angry, and angry, and he was in her arms for hours.

On June 20th Anne Behringer, passed away near Independence Park. She was swimming in the river, when a current took her under. She is survived by her brothers, Mark and David, mother Deborah, and father, Andrew. She was twelve years old.

Afterword:

After their night, they did not fall in love again, as one would have hoped. The love which they would have fallen back into was rotted and swollen too much to be saved. They did not, however, exile themselves to the silence and solitude of deep space. Something different happened. Their love was new and ever changing, and as they grew and changed over their next thirty years together, so did their love. They did not fall in love again, but love fell into them, a love in flux, constantly moving and changing, but never leaving its essential truth, like the surface of the sun or the current of a river.

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THIRD PLACE

Yin Lin's work is featured in *Across the Fingerboards*, *The Word's Steepest Street*, *Escape*, *The Temptation of Sunlight*, the Australian Medical Journal, *The Taj Mahal Review*, *Foreign Encounters* and the (online) *La Campanella* awards, *Australian Literature Review*, and *Navigating the Heavens*. "Home from Escape" is also out in audio-version. Yin is currently balancing medicine, writing, sport, sleep, and is self-diagnosed with literature deficiency.

Blended

by Yin Lin

Sitting in the rigid bus seat, shopping list crushed in my fist, I watch Leo argue back and forth with the bus driver. I've seen him at University before; his English is tattered, and the driver gets redder and redder.

I should have been able to go up and gone hey mate give him a break. What's the big deal?

But I hesitate.

The bus driver is still frowning, and Leo glances around the front of the bus. I drop my gaze one moment too late.

Sliding off my seat, I approach.

"I might be able to help," I offer to the bus driver who only grumbles in return, and to Leo, I ask, "Where did you want to go?"

"The sho-pping cent-re."

Even before I open my mouth, the bus driver growls at me, “His card needs recharging.”

When I tell Leo, his face is open and blank. I try again, breaking up the words. “Card. No money. Need add money.” I feel stupid.

Stupid because I know this isn’t going anywhere.

Stupid because I know how to make life a lot easier.

The bus driver looks like he’s going to throw us off.

My Mandarin is a little stiff on my tongue. “Your card,” I say. I ignore the wonder that lights Leo’s face. “It needs recharging.”

Leo pulls out his wallet and hands over a twenty-dollar note.

With a poker face, the bus driver takes the money, swipes the card, pushes it back to Leo and waves us away. The bus accelerates and swerves and I jam myself back into my seat.

Despite empty rows in front, behind and adjacent mine, Leo slips into the seat beside me. I stare out the window, past the translucent dotty ads stuck on the glass. The shops in this street haven’t changed in ten years. Woolies, on the corner, its W now sexily modern, but it’s battered trolleys and choked car park still recognizable. The Chinese restaurant with its faded paper New Year’s decorations in the window, the *fu* stuck the wrong way down. The two-dollar shop peeping from a palisade of fake bamboo plants and plastic trays. I stare at them all in turn, concentrating. This is normal. This is home.

The bus stops, and two young Caucasian young men saunter in and flop into the row behind us. The stench of alcohol clings to my nostrils. The men grunt words at each other over the aisle; the one behind us kicks against the back of our seats.

“That’s annoying,” I mutter. This would never happen back at home since the buses would be too packed and people had more things to do than just drink.

Leo doesn't reply and I study his expression, trying to figure out if he's also irritated. I wondered if I could possibly turn around and ask the man to... to do what? Lower his legs? That equals a demand to stop being drunk.

"Hey thanks for helping me back there." His Mandarin reminds me too much of Zao, Yu-Wei, Jei-Ya, and a whole lifetime's worth of friends back home.

"That's alright." It's English that slips from my lips. I'm reluctant to speak the other language though I'm aware I'm potentially being rude.

"Your Mandarin is so good!"

My lips curl upwards, smiling at the irony of it. How bad does a Caucasian's Mandarin need to be for an Asian to say that? My Mandarin might not be half as good as Leo's English yet he offers me the compliment while no one would even appreciate the work he's put in.

"Your English isn't too bad either. And anyways, I lived in Taiwan for eight years." I say this slowly, wondering how much English he understands. The foot behind us kicks once.

"Whereabouts?"

"Kaohsiung." I say it in Mandarin. The foot kicks again.

"Ah, Love River." He's grinning. "85 Sky Tower. Leihu Night Market." Thumps on our seat punctuate his words.

Images rise to mind while I pull my back away from the seat. Of the coiled dragon overseeing the river, lit up with couples, cyclists and cafes. Of the iconic building of Kaohsiung designed to look like the first character *kao*, watching over the city. Of the night market, seemingly chaotic and yet at each turn you see a story—a father teaching his skill to his son, a daughter making dumplings while her child writes homework alongside, an old husband and wife serving customers for more than sixty years. The familiarity of the names has me warming to him. I'm wary though. I'm *here*, in Australia. I'm *white*, not Taiwanese.

"Hey, and you're Wen-dy right?" He nudges my forearm.

I nod, hesitantly. My English name mars his perfect Mandarin. “And you’re Leo?”

He grins, his teeth white against his darker complexion. “So how come you were in Taiwan?”

“My father had work there. How come you’re here?”

His eyes twinkle. “Secret.”

I stare. What cheek.

Travel, work, or study. It had to be one of those, and he had to go conjure up ‘secret’? Typical boy.

The duo behind us are starting to exchange swearwords. I hope that Leo’s English isn’t good enough to understand what they’re saying; I search for a topic to better ignore them.

“You’re from T—” The word dies on my lips. For a moment I realized I’ve just assumed, never actually heard it from him. He could very possibly also be from certain parts of China where the accent was not as prominent. My ears could be out of practice and unable to pick up the slight nuances.

“Yeah, Taiwan.”

Relief washes over me. So it was right that I felt a certain intimacy to him. Then, unease spikes down my spine: I’m not supposed to have that feeling at all. I am Australian and Australians aren’t supposed to be afraid of China.

Leo is staring out into the distance, face glazed. The roads here are bare with only trees and houses and zebra crossings. Back at home, there are dogs, cats, cars, motorbikes and people. This is all new to him. All foreign. A voice at the back of my head nags at me to talk to him, he’s all alone like you. At least you can speak the goddamn language.

But I’m not alone. I should be home.

I give in and speak in Mandarin, “Hey, call me... *Lian*.” For some reason I offered him my Mandarin name, the character for the lotus flower. My friends called me that, joking that I was like the lotus flower, tall and white and skinny. “So what are you going to the shopping center for?” The language rushes so easily back to my tongue. And I feel comfortable. Almost.

“Grocery shopping.” He pauses. The guys behind us are grabbing and stabbing at each other.

We’ve gotten to our stop. More than relieved, I hurry down the bus.

*

“You don’t have anything that needs to be put in the fridge right?” Leo asks as we walk out of the shopping center. The warm evening air wrapping around us is welcome after the fierce air conditioning.

“No.” Further down the road, orange rays dip down the horizon. I find myself trying to find the sun, because back home, every evening when I walked home, I faced west and watched it descend like a distant, glowing Chinese lantern.

“It’s a nice evening. Let’s go to that park over there.”

A beat. Then, “All right.”

Leo grins. “Here, let me take that for you.” He takes the plastic bag of fruit from me and slings it over his shoulder. I follow him across the pedestrian crossing.

The park is near empty, bar a family walking their dog near the lake, some kids playing soccer at the far side. We walk side by side for a bit, comfortable in each other’s silence. I notice his footsteps slowing, and then stop.

“You know,” he murmurs, and I glance at him, then follow his gaze to the opposite side of the lake. “If only my English were good enough, I’d have given those two guys on the bus a good talking to.”

I don’t speak. Wind gusts across, sending birds in trees flying.

He takes in a deep breath, and then says, “If they’d touched you, or me, I don’t think I’d have cared about my English, I’d show them. I would.”

I can’t speak. The familiarity of his childlike passion strikes me to my core. That will to do something just because it’s right, and not thinking of the consequences. That time when Jei-Ya stood up to the local bullies when they targeted Mei surfaced to mind because she’d told the teachers they were using drugs in the school bike shed. They were four guys, tattooed and smoking and sneering, and Jei-Ya was one. Jei-Ya could’ve pretended he didn’t see them and just walked away. But he didn’t.

“What’s going on?” he’d asked.

“Nothing,” one of the bullies grunted. “Just talking to this lovely young lady here. You get out.”

Jei-Ya glanced at us, then back at them. I remember thinking what would happen next, how this would resolve?

Jei-Ya stepped between us: his face only a hand’s width from theirs’. “Hey brothers, I don’t know what they’ve done. But they’re with me. Let them go please.”

The air hung stale for moment.

A couple of them grumbled, but they were sizing him up. They knew he’d taken first place for the karate nationals. Mutters rustled between the boys.

Jei-Ya leaned forwards and whispered something about the pretty girl in the year below. The four faces relaxed, broke into smiles, and a couple started chuckling.

The ringing of my phone breaks the haze of the schoolyard memory, and Australia’s evening envelops me once more.

“The house, it’s sold!” Mum’s excitement jumps through the receiver from Melbourne. I can hear our dogs yapping in the background, smell fresh paint and sawdust. And yet, I can’t quite visualize the two story, brand new house withering under the strong Australian sun.

“That’s great, Mum, that’s great.” Loss pinches at me.

Mum’s laughing and telling me how the dogs love the new place, love being able to run around in the garden. “Dad’s made half the garage into a workshop, you and your sister will have to make him clean it up if you guys want to park your car. He’s also really taken to the grill and is making me dinners when there’s good weather in the evening, like tonight...”

“Yeah Mum, that’s cool.”

She finally pauses for a break. “Oh, are you busy, love? I can call back another time.”

“I’m out shopping with a friend. Another time’ll be good Mum.”

“Bye sweetie.”

“Bye.”

Thoughts solidify as I slip my mobile back into my pocket: My home.

Sold.

“Your mother called?” Leo peers at me.

I nod.

He “hmm”s an invitation to continue.

“She’s sold our house in Kaohsiung.” There, I said it. And now I feel I’m being torn by the roots.

“So?” Leo swaps the plastic bags to his other hand.

“I suppose that’s good. I should be feeling happy for my parents. Dad had to stay there to look after the house, to take care of things, but now they’ve sold it Mum and Dad can live together here.” I’m aware Mandarin’s practically flowing off my tongue. I’m aware how abnormally natural it feels. “But...” I feel his eyes on me, his silence probing, so I go on, “Well, I’ve practically grown up there.”

Once the house is sold, I have no tangible ‘home,’ nothing to go back to. My room at Uni is just a place to stay; the new house in Australia is... just a house. And home in Taiwan—now there’s only a household’s memories left.

“Well, you can go back.” Leo is speaking casually, watching me. “Even if the house is sold, you can still go back to the city, walk around, get that feeling of what it was like again.”

And he’s right. My friends are all there, even though they’re scattered around Taiwan because of Uni. Almost five years down the track, they still have reunions, I see their photos on Facebook, and the heavenly sweetness of *digua* we had together the last time I went back’s still earthed in my senses.

He sits down on the grass, then lies back. I just sit, and think. Trees, grass, lake, the night here is so still and almost dead. It is the difference that strikes me: you’re in touch with nature so easily, but in Taiwan, despite glass buildings and skyscrapers and gray skies, you address a stranger as brother, sister, auntie, uncle. You’re in touch with humanity.

“I’m homesick,” I murmur, my fingers tearing up blades of grass, “Taiwan-home, homesick.”

He doesn’t say anything, and I hear the children laugh, dogs bark. I blink at the stretch of grass in front of me.

“Don’t you ever get homesick?” I murmur. It’s so wrong of me, to dwell on a thing like this. I should be home *here*. I was born here, and my ancestors lived here, nurtured in this raw red earth for several generations. So why am I yearning for sour dried plums, bubble tea, and *gyu* spirit? What will it take for my roots to take hold here?

He rubs at his hair, spiking it. “Ye-ah.” He pauses. “Out here I feel more that I can’t do anything. A bit helpless, really.” Sighs. “Like just then with the bus driver. Like then with the drunk guys. When things like that happens, what can you do?”

The question hangs unanswered.

The silence is only broken by Leo speaking again. “We all look at the same moon.”

For the second time, I can’t speak. Those words strike too close to my heart, roping in a famous song in Taiwan. He has his eyes closed and now in wake of my quietness, he squints up.

“Just think about it, we all look at the same moon so we’re not that far away.” A satisfied smile smoothed across his face and his eyes closed again.

I stare up through branches of the trees at the sky. I can’t see the *Tangyuan*-like moon, but it is there.

Then, I feel the back of Leo’s hand brushing against mine, pressing something into it.

He props himself up. I glance down: a clip-on koala with AUSTRALIA written on its red vest cuddling a boomerang, and he says, “For you to keep, to remind you who you are when you forget.”

This is for tourists, something I should be giving him, not the other way. His words make no sense to me either. “Uh, thanks?” I say, but I’m talking to air as he’s already walked several paces away. Pondering over what he’s said, I don’t understand if it’s the Mandarin that’s confusing me or if he’s just trying to be cheeky again.

I turn the ornament around, and it takes a while for the meaning of the black print on a white tag to sink in: Made in Taiwan.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Richard Zwicker is an English teacher living in Vermont with his wife and beagle. His short stories have appeared in *Stupefying Stories*, *NewMyths*, *LocoThology*, and other paying markets. In addition to writing, he likes to read, jog, and fight the good fight against middle age. Though he lived in Brazil for eight years, he is still a lousy soccer player.

Doll's House Darkness

by Richard Zwicker

I don't like being crowded, and the first thing I saw was a wall of eyes bearing down on me as if I'd just walked into the Longhorn Saloon, my hands hovering over a pair of six-shooters. Except this was a small, white room, the walls bare except for a mounted computer. Towering over me to my left, about twelve times my size, stood a thin middle-aged man in a raincoat. To my right was a pudgy guy with a pencil mustache I would have erased. In the center was a pretty brunette thing in a business outfit I thought she had no business being in. I didn't recognize any of 'em, but they sure seemed to know me. I then realized someone had perched me on top of Thunderbolt, though he bore little resemblance to my famed steed. This horse was stiff as plastic, which literally threw me, because when I reached for his reins, I lost my balance and crashed to the floor. I heard a gasp, and the next thing I knew, a large hand scooped me up. It belonged to raincoat man, who set me standing onto a chair. It wasn't the most dignified pose, and my limbs felt like broomsticks, but I managed to sit.

It was time to cut to the chase. "What do you fellers want?" I asked.

Raincoat man took over. "My name is Sgt. Ed Salazar. I'm a detective."

"I'm Sheriff Augustus Majors, and buddy, you're in the wrong game," I said. "The only private thing here is the hole the gravedigger puts you in if you break the law."

Salazar glanced at mustache. "He's got the lingo right."

"The boy has a good imagination," the woman said. "That may or may not be a good thing for us."

I noticed both mustache and the woman had cell phones in their hands. Mustache was texting someone. Nate's parents were always on those things. I hated them.

"Where is Nate anyway? While I'm on the subject, where the heck am I?" I looked behind me and, on a bed, I saw Nate, all ten-years-old of him, asleep. I'd never seen him asleep before.

"This is a hospital room, Mr. Majors," Salazar said. "Ever been in one?"

I thought for a second. "Once. Nate had his tonsils out. Not my kind of place, but I can work with it."

"Good, because we need to work with you," Salazar said. "We found Nate three days ago, alone, in his family's living room, blood splattered on his clothes, not saying a word."

"He got shot?"

"No, it's his father's and mother's blood. Something happened, but we haven't been able to wake Nate up and find out."

"Where's his father?" I asked.

"We don't know where either Mr. or Mrs. St. Pierre are. We've canvassed the neighborhood, followed every lead, and come up empty. We hoped to find something out by doing a brain scan on Nate, but the experience was too traumatic. He's blocking it."

"I don't know nothing about brain scans."

“Because a direct approach didn’t work, we decided on a more unorthodox method. Instead of scanning for the events of three nights ago, we scanned for everything in his brain about you.”

“That would be quite a bit. Nate and I are like this.” I tried to cross my fingers but they felt clumsy. God help us if I had to plug someone.

“You’re right. So we put all that information on a chip, but that still just gave us fragmented bits of information that we couldn’t figure out. Dr. Bloch, who’s an expert on such things, suggested we insert it into a small robot and make it look like an Augustus Majors doll. It’s the closest we can get to questioning an actual eyewitness. So here we are.”

I wasn’t following until I noticed something Nate had pressed against his chest: me. Except I was over here. It was too much for me to chew.

“Gosh-dern it. I asked you what you wanted five minutes ago and you still haven’t told me.”

Salazar put his hands in his pockets, a dangerous act in my world. “We’re hoping somewhere inside you is the answer to what happened to Nate.”

Well, inside myself was not a place I spent much time. Nothing could hurt me inside unless I let it. Outside was a whole ‘nother smoke. Danger lurked behind every door and every tree and that’s what I’ve always focused on. I glanced at Nate’s unmoving body and realized I was up against a different kind of enemy, one that threatened everything I was.

“You want me to think about three nights ago,” I said. “And everything I can remember, you put in my head today?”

“That’s right,” Dr. Bloch said, in a funny accent that made me suspicious. “But it should be no different from any memory. You access it today though it refers to something that happened in the past.”

I turned to the woman. “Do they let you speak, missy?”

She smiled, lighting up the room. “They couldn’t stop me, but I’m here to listen.”

Salazar frowned. "Oh, I'm sorry. That's Jeri Thompson. She's a psychiatrist."

"Jeri?" I said. "Crazy name for a woman."

She kept smiling and, like she said, listened. So I gave her something to listen to.

"I was in Nate's bedroom. That's where we always start, though we don't stay very long. Not much elbow room in there. I was ready to light out, but we heard Nate's parents arguing."

"In the bedroom?" Salazar asked.

"No. Outside, and the door was closed so we couldn't see anything."

"What were they arguing about?"

"Derned if I know. They're both the good guys, so what's to argue about? He works and supports the family. She cooks and keeps the house clean and works at a job. They don't have to worry about hombres coming in and shooting up the town. That's my department."

"So you didn't hear any other...hombres in the house?" Salazar asked.

"No, but like I said, the bedroom door was closed. On one side is Nate's and my world, where everything makes sense. On the other side is the adult world."

"Where things make less sense," said Salazar.

"Where I don't know who the bad guys are. Who am I supposed to shoot? What happens after I do it? Usually that door is enough, but sometimes the adult world horns in. That day we both felt powerless. I wanted to go out there and drill some sense into them, but my bullets have no effect in the adult world. I tried to talk Nate into forgetting about it. We could have had a showdown with the James Gang, but he wasn't into it. 'What difference does it make?' he said. 'What difference does it make?' I repeated. 'It's everything!' But even I could feel that it wasn't. It was like one of those musical numbers with dancing girls that nobody cares about because they want to get on with it. So as much as I wanted to bust

down the door and plug both his parents—well, maybe just threaten them to stop this nonsense—I knew I couldn’t. I’d just be making a fool of myself.”

“So what did you do?” Salazar asked.

“The only thing I could do. Listen. Their voices got higher. When Nate’s mother gets upset, her voice goes through the roof like buckshot. His father usually stays lower, unless he’s been drinking.”

“Was he drinking that night?”

“No doubt. Some people can drink and other people just get drunk. He can’t handle his liquor. I couldn’t understand his words because they were slurred. And as the argument went on, it was like someone tightened a screw. At first his sentences seemed loose, like wandering cattle. But eventually it turned into a stampede. Then I heard some dull thuds and gasps—nothing life-threatening. I figured it was her fists bouncing off his flabby chest. Then I heard a gun go off, and she didn’t say anything after that.”

“But he did?”

“No one did, though I heard scurrying footsteps.”

Dr. Bloch turned to Salazar. “So he did kill her.”

Salazar didn’t say anything. I felt disgust that I hadn’t put two and two together, but maybe I hadn’t wanted to. I always had mixed feelings about St. Pierre. Nate loved him, but I couldn’t get a handle on him. He was like a God that did things you didn’t understand, and you figured he must have a reason. But as I thought about him now, with Nate unconscious, I felt someone had yanked the dark glasses off my face. Mr. St. Pierre drank too much, tormented and maybe killed his wife, and didn’t protect his son. He needed to be taught a lesson, and it galled me that I’d never been the one to do it. But maybe Salazar was giving me the chance.

“So how did Nate end up with blood on his shirt?” Salazar asked.

“I’m getting to that. We heard his father walk down the stairs and go to the garage. For half hour, though I’m not the best when it comes to time, it was silent.

In some ways that drove us more crazy than the arguing. Somehow I knew Ten Strike—that's where I'm sheriff—was never going to be the same. It was as if a flying saucer came down on top of it, and when it took off again, the town was gone. So where could we go? There was nothing except that bedroom. All I could do was keep my eyes and trigger finger pointed toward the door.

“Eventually, it opened. In walks St. Pierre, blood all over him, eyes wild. In his right hand he's waving a pistol, something I'd never seen him carry before, though I'd heard he liked guns. I didn't have to be a sheriff to know guns and alcohol are a bad mix. At first he glared at me. ‘That damned doll,’ he muttered, and I thought he was going to toss me out the window. But he focused on Nate, who was crouched up in the right corner of his bed. His pillow had flopped onto the floor.

“‘I'm sorry, Nate,’ his father said. I thought, you miserable piece of trash, you're going to kill your own son? I unloaded every bullet in both my six-shooters into his worthless carcass, to no effect. Fortunately, either I was wrong or he couldn't do it. Instead, he staggered up to the bed and embraced Nate like a bear. Nate pulled away, and his father's gun went off. It was the loudest gunshot I'll ever hear. St. Pierre screamed and a red stain formed at the bottom of his shirt, adding to what was already there. I'd absorbed plenty of slugs in my time and am still here to tell the tale. I wasn't sure about him though, whether he was made of the right stuff. He said, ‘Dear God,’ then rushed out of the room, leaving the door open. I said to Nate, ‘We've got to go after him,’ but Nate wouldn't have it. He just sat there, like he is now.”

Salazar nodded, and they all stared at me, as if I was some kind of circus freak. I didn't like it, but maybe they had a point. The chip made me more than a toy, and children always added worlds to a toy. But what was I if Nate never regained consciousness? What world was I defending if he wasn't in it?

“What do we do next?” I asked.

“We circulate images of St. Pierre and his wife, watch for credit card and cell phone activity, continue canvassing,” Salazar said.

I didn't know anything about that. “I mean, what do I do next?”

“You’ve been helpful,” Salazar said, “and it’s possible you’ll be more helpful later.” He glanced at Bloch, who reached behind my back, but I pushed him away.

“What the heck are you doing?” I asked.

“For now we have to turn you off,” Bloch said.

I didn’t like the sound of that. It would be like drinking too much whiskey, passing out, and not being able to wake up until someone decided they were ready to rouse me. What if they forgot? I don’t like to owe anything to anybody, yet I started to realize how much of my existence depended on others.

“Look,” I said. “You turn me off, I can’t do anything. You leave me on and I can keep thinking about what happened and maybe come up with something that will help.”

“I can’t be responsible,” Bloch said. “What if he walks out of here? Or he could scare a nurse just enough so she makes a lethal mistake with a patient.”

“I don’t get my thrills scaring women, mister.”

“It could be a male nurse,” he said, then grimaced. He didn’t like talking to me.

“We’re up against time,” Salazar said, “but I have to say...”

“I’ll take him,” Jeri said.

Salazar hesitated. “A sentient male doll in a single woman’s apartment? I’m not sure I like that idea.”

“Oh c’mon,” she said. “He’s six inches tall, the product of a ten-year-old boy. What’s he going to do?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time a woman got into trouble with something six inches long,” Bloch said.

“That’s enough, Bloch,” Salazar said. He looked at Jeri, then me, and sighed. “There’s toy action figures present.”

We decided Jeri would take me home for the time being. While we rode in her self-driving car, I wanted to sit where I could see out the window. She wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not.

"Tarnation, lady. The more information I have, the better. We want to find the St. Pierres. Well, they're out here somewhere."

She reluctantly placed me on top of the dashboard, where I soon admitted I'd been outfoxed. The skyscrapers, speeding cars, and flashing billboards came at me like bullets. The car took a fast left-hand turn and I landed on my squash. That didn't hurt because they hadn't bothered to put any feelings into my body, but it convinced me to spend the rest of the ride from the limited vantage point of the carpeted floor.

Jeri had a little three-room apartment on the fourth floor of a building. The interior was neat, soft colors, organized. Not my kind of place. She set me on the floor in her living room and after telling me to let her know if I needed anything, she kept busy, either microwaving a meal or speaking into her computer. I felt like the fifth wheel on a stagecoach.

After she got done talking to someone, a man, I asked her if that was her boyfriend.

She blushed and said, "No, that was my brother actually."

"A good-looking woman like you ought to be married. You're not thinking of marrying that Salazar, are you?"

She laughed. "Only if he was the last man on Earth, and even then, I'd have to think about it."

"Good. He's too old for you."

"I agree." I wasn't about to ask her how old she was, but I couldn't imagine what she was waiting for.

She asked me if I'd got any more ideas about the St. Pierre case. I told her I'd reserved the night for that. While she was sleeping, it'd be quiet enough for me to

think. We made a little more small talk, but it was really small. Whenever I asked her anything she'd turn it around and say, "Well, what do you think?" That got old fast, and I was relieved when she excused herself to take a shower and go to bed. I could hear her watching a movie behind the closed bedroom door, but it was quiet enough for me to ignore it.

I replayed in my mind, or whatever it was Bloch put into my head, every adventure I'd ever had with Nate. The crack of the gunfire, the dying words of the bad guy, and the clip clop of Thunderbolt's hooves had never been so clear. Despite the wealth of detail, I noticed a sameness to these adventures. The bad guy always beat someone up. I'd go find him and we'd beat on each other. I'd take a lot of hits and get knocked to the floor, but I always got up and won the day. One man I repeatedly faced was Johnny Barth. I'd shoot him, knock him to the floor until his arm wrenched from its socket, and send him to jail, but he always got out as if each day was a new slate.

I was like an out-of-place city slicker dude except in Ten Strike. I needed to go back to my strength. It seemed wrong to pretend I was there without Nate, but if what Salazar told me was true, all of me was a part of Nate.

I willed myself back into that dim, smoky saloon. I was surrounded by seated men in dark clothes and cowboy hats, their hairy fists around bottles of whiskey. Painted women dressed like birds hovered at their shoulders, laughing. Someone was playing honky-tonk piano. This was my world, where right was might, and the only shades of gray were cigar ash. Center stage sat Johnny Barth, one eye on his cards, the other on his pistol laid flat on the table. Beer foam whitened the bottom of his long black mustache. Flanking him were his goons, Mudd and Crank, who didn't have enough brains between them to light a gas lamp. A fourth man I didn't recognize had a flat hat pulled over his eyes. In a business suit, he stood out like a blue ribbon on a bleached bone. My eyes met the shifty glance of the bartender, a spineless bystander whose good will was all about how many bullets you had in your holster and how quick you used them.

Johnny didn't look up from his cards, but he didn't have to. "Look what the cat dragged in."

“You need a new line, Johnny,” I said.

“Why? Same old you.”

I glanced at Mudd and Crank, both looking at their cards as if they were printed in Chinese. “Is Johnny letting you boys win any money today?”

Mudd grunted and Crank sputtered, “What do you mean?”

A guy could waste a lifetime answering any of Crank’s questions, so I asked my own. “Who’s your fourth? Didn’t anyone show him a copy of the dress code?”

The man pushed up his hat. It was St. Pierre. He showed no surprise at seeing me. “Augustus,” he said in the fluttery voice. “We’re having a friendly game of poker. Why can’t you leave us alone?”

I glanced at the others and despite St. Pierre’s defense of them, their looks of disgust matched mine. “Why don’t I just let Johnny kill innocent people? What kind of man are you?”

Mudd and Crank echoed my second question, while Johnny laid his cards face down and lit a cigar.

“You don’t understand,” St. Pierre said.

“Why don’t you help me then,” I said. I wanted to ask him about the night that put Nate into a coma, but something told me if I forced the outside world onto this one too fast, it would break apart.

St. Pierre took a slug of his wine cooler, the first time I’d ever seen that drink in Ten Strike. “I don’t need to justify my life to you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Johnny sneered. “Here you have to justify your life to everybody. And you haven’t been doing a very good job.”

St. Pierre laughed weakly. “Now I’m getting a lecture from a stereotyped villain? I defended you.”

With a brutish swipe, Johnny knocked St. Pierre's drink off the table. The crash stopped all talk and piano playing. "I don't need your defense. I shoot people and rob banks because I'm bad. It's as simple as that." He stuck his gun barrel under St. Pierre's throat. St. Pierre froze. "You, on the other hand, are a father and husband. You're supposed to love your son and your wife. Also simple, but too much for you."

I sensed St. Pierre wanted to say it was more complicated, but he wasn't playing to a sympathetic audience. I kept my eye on Johnny's trigger finger. I'd been through this enough times to know if he killed St. Pierre, the dead man could easily return the next day. I didn't want to wait that long though. I pointed my gun at Johnny's heart.

"Just once I wish you guys could play cards without blowing someone's head off," I said.

"This ain't your fight, Majors," Johnny said. He was wrong about that. I felt inclined to shoot St. Pierre myself, but I had a job to do and couldn't let my emotions make my decisions for me.

Before I could act, a woman came up to St. Pierre. I'd seen her before and remembered her name was Laurie. At first she was just another painted woman sitting in the corner, jawing with hard men. Her place in my adventures gradually increased though. While the other women dressed in colored feathers, she was in black like a vulture. You could see the different colored roots of her blonde hair. Her figure wasn't perfect, more like the letter B than an hourglass. From the first time I saw her, I wondered what the heck she was doing here. She didn't fit in our western adventures any more than St. Pierre did. I watched as she bounced over to Johnny and knocked his gun away. If I'd done that, there'd be dues to pay. But Johnny would never shoot a woman, and he was so surprised he just left his hand on the table.

"Johnny, why don't you go home?" she said.

"This is my home."

"Then you're going to have to live with me."

They glared at each other, and for the first time in my life, I felt sympathy for Johnny. He was bad, but he was right. This was his home, and she had invaded it.

“Lady,” he said. “I got unfinished business with St. Pierre here. I would hate to get blood all over your pretty duds. You got five seconds to move away.” He picked up his gun and pointed it at Nate’s father.

“He’s going to kill me!” St. Pierre said, shaking.

Laurie shrugged her puffed up shoulders. “I tried,” and she returned to her seat in the back, draping her arms around a staring, unshaven man. Her retreat had a big effect on St. Pierre.

“That’s all you can say, after all we’ve been through? I risked everything.”

I’m not the smartest guy, but that’s when I figured out why I’d been seeing so much of her lately.

Before Johnny could do anything, I shot him dead. My heart wasn’t in it, but he had more lives than an alley cat, and I didn’t want him plugging St. Pierre before I was done with him. Mudd and Crank unloaded against me but they couldn’t hit a target if it fell on them. After I shot Mudd in the leg, everyone cleared out except St. Pierre, who sat rooted to the table. I stared him down with my eyes and my pistol.

“What’s Laurie’s last name?” I asked. Somewhere inside me I knew Nate’s mother had cursed it in Nate’s presence, but I couldn’t remember it.

St. Pierre’s face twitched like a squirrel. “Forget about her.”

“Tell me her last name or I’ll...” And for once, I didn’t have a snappy line. I took a step closer. “Just tell me.”

“No need to get upset,” he said, his body slumping. Then he told me.

I walked out of the saloon and back into Jeri’s apartment. I had to knock on her bedroom door for a nearly a minute before she heard me. “We need to look for a Laurie Wilson,” I told her.

She gave the name to Salazar and while St. Pierre wasn't at her apartment, Laurie coughed up the address of the motel he was hiding in pretty fast. St. Pierre had been stepping out with her for about a year, but that didn't win him any loyalty points when the heat was on, in Ten Strike or here. Though Nate had heard about her, he'd never met her, and it turned out she didn't look much like we thought. She was a bit pudgy and rather plain. If St. Pierre wasn't happy with his wife, he should have left instead of trying to have it both ways. Same as when he accidentally killed her. Rather than owning up to it, he tried to hide it. He eventually led the police to an abandoned house where he stashed the body.

Salazar was so pleased with my help—and maybe a bit embarrassed that a doll solved the case—that he allowed me to stay in Nate's hospital room. I kept talking to the boy, since I never got tired, hoping he'd snap out of it. Five days later, he did. I heard him moan, watched him turn over, then open his eyes. He took in the white walls for a minute or two before he asked where he was. I rushed over, wanting to tell him everything, but the moment he saw me, he screamed and wouldn't stop until a nurse came in and stuck a needle into his shoulder. As I again watched him sleep, the real Austin Majors doll clutched in his hands, I wished there was something the nurse could stick into me.

Later Salazar got me out of there. We had a powwow in his office on what to do. "Are you sure?" he asked, leaning back in his desk chair.

"Sure as shootin'," I said. "You made me so we could find St. Pierre. We did that."

"You don't want to say anything more to Nate before we..." He didn't finish.

"What's the point? I am Nate. Or at least I was until you put me into this doll. I figure the longer I hang around, the less I'll be like him. When you get down to it, I prefer the way it was. Everything black and white. Things are too complicated here." I could have gone on, but I didn't want to bore the guy. The truth was, beyond the tragedy of St. Pierre cheating on his wife and drunkenly killing her, there was something else that really bothered me: the total lack of imagination on the part of everyone.

I wasn't fooling myself. A dark experience like this couldn't help but change a boy. Nate's childhood days could be over. Long days sitting in a closet with other discarded toys, analyzing myself, wasn't my style. I tapped Salazar on the knee, which was as high as I could reach.

"Point me into the sunset, hombre. I'm riding west."

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HONORABLE MENTION

Anne Carly Abad writes poetry and stories when she's not training in Muay Thai. Her work has appeared or will appear in *The Asia Literary Review*, the *Philippines Graphic Magazine*, *Star*line*, *The International Poetry Review*, and *Strange Horizons*. Find out more about her at <http://the-sword-that-speaks.blogspot.com>.

Haze

by Anne Carly Abad

Within the converted grocery store, the radio crackled and hissed—noises that coalesced with the murmured conversations and muted grumblings of refugees. Between the static buzz, Mills could make out the broadcast message that had been sounding since 3 a.m. *Beast in... MM Sector 5... subdued. Beast in MM Sector 5 subdued.* The message was repeated several times in English, Ilocano, Filipino and Bisaya. MM Sector 5 was the code used to designate the two Metro Manila cities Makati and Pasay. A Beast of the haze had been rampaging in Sector 5, and residents had to be evacuated to areas as far as Parañaque and Laguna. Before their sole television conked out, Mills was able to glimpse the monster, if only for a few seconds. The camera had been shaky and the footage blurred with smog. The Beast, a great hepatitic yellow nudibranch thing, slung a tentacular appendage over a white colonial mansion in Forbes. The monstrous arm throbbed and salivated with a colorless liquid. With each sluggish undulation, the Beast digested a portion of the house. Mills watched the glass windows and adobe walls dissolve into waxy glop, and then the TV died.

“Come on, that should be ready by now, don’t you think?” said Pepe, a young, dark-skinned man who sported a crew cut. He was one of the defenders, though

Mills didn't get why the men accepted him. How could a frail bag of fish bones possibly fight? It wasn't that they needed complex skills to defend the camp, but they had to have strength at the least for hacking at Beasts, throwing rocks and occasionally driving robbers away from the supplies.

"The heat's set real low. Really takes a while. Thought you're used to it by now." Mills stirred a large vat of pork and beans with her good hand. It wasn't much of a job. All she needed to do was heat some food on the smokeless stove, but it wasn't as easy as it looked. The task of a cook was to warm the food without bringing it to a boil.

Paper bowls in hand, the refugees and defenders sighed.

"Just joking, it's ready."

Mills smiled at the sight of faces lighting up. Despite their excitement, no one scampered to get in line. Women spanked children who made sudden movements.

"Slowly now."

"Don't stomp your feet. One step at a time."

Every one of them calculated their movements so as not to disturb the dust.

"God, this is impossible," said Pepe. It seemed to take him forever to walk toward Mills. "Made it. A bowl of beans, please." He grinned, handing over his bowl.

Mills offered her other hand. Pepe hesitated.

"Still not used to this?" asked Mills, eyeing his sooty, pimple-peppered face.

"Can't help it, Mills. I mean... your hand... or hook."

"Put it here. It may look funny, but it's good for balancing."

"I didn't say it's funny."

Mills extended her arm, opening the body-powered pincer of her prosthesis, which was formed by two steel hooks connected to a lever thumb. She scooped the bowl

out of Pepe's grasp. Without taking her eyes off him, she ladled a serving of warm beans. "See, how hard was that?"

"Will you hurry up?" said a couple of older men in line. "What's one got to do to get some breakfast around here?"

"At least let us die in battle with some food in our bellies!" said Victor Baltazar, the somewhat-leader of the defenders.

The room erupted in laughter. Mills felt herself blush. Victor was a man of average height, with smiling eyes and a deep commanding voice. Leadership wasn't a formal position in their group, but when he spoke, people listened. He came to be known during the first attack of MM Sector 2, Quezon City. Five years ago, a fire broke out in the DPWH building. The very first Beast in the country sired itself within a womb of billowing black smoke. Back then, the monsters were sighted only in Russia, Vietnam, China and Korea. Everyone thought they were just a new (ugly) marine species, until the nudibranchs started sprouting everywhere. Wherever there was haze, hordes of the gangrenous creatures eroded bridges and structures like giant, crawling stomachs.

At ground zero, the Filipinos' knee-jerk reaction had been to gun the monster down and bomb it with grenades and pill boxes. They learned the hard way that while they could kill a Beast with this method, they only paved the way for more of the vile creepers to birth themselves out of the haze of combustion fumes. Victor led a team back then, armed only with slingshots and rocks they'd gathered from creeks and construction sites. Their crusade won them several victories, and since then, many considered him a hero, though he didn't look it. When he wasn't speaking, he looked like the average university student who would join the occasional political rally during those years when corruption, price hikes and human rights were all that they had to worry about. Now, politics was the least of anyone's worries.

Pepe stuttered, taking his share. He gave Mills a thumbs-up and walked away with the steady movements of a praying mantis. She filled bowl after bowl with the much-awaited food. She caught men and women stealing glances at the food stores behind her, longing written all over their faces. Bags of rice, oats and

crackers, and cans of meatloaf, corned beef, beans, and tuna were stacked against the wall, guarded by a few defenders. These folks were as grimy as it could get, having not bathed for days. Mills averted her gaze, crinkling her nose.

Her shoulders began to stiffen with the repeated motions. She craned her neck to relieve some tension. This felt good, she thought. She was glad to help out in any way she could.

There was a sucking sound. She looked up from the vat. A bald, shirtless man pursed his lips. He was studying her chest. "What're you doing, Ben?" She pulled up the neckline of her shirt.

"What? There's nothing there," he pointed out, coughing.

A chubby woman wearing one of those free election shirts that read *Bumoto nang Tama!* smacked the man on his smooth shiny head. "Instead of ogling her tits, why don't you make yourself useful and take out those empty cans?"

"But I haven't eaten," Ben protested.

Election lady stood her ground, flaring her nostrils.

The man scratched his head and spat. "I'm tired of beans, anyway. Can't even have any of that there rice." He threw down his empty bowl. A slight blur of dust rose from the floor. Gasps broke out from those who saw. Mills stared wide-eyed at the grayish wisps, unable to breathe. The spell of that unending moment finally shattered when the dust resettled and nothing happened.

"Watch it, Ben!" Victor's hand rested on the sheathed machete on his hip.

"Fucking, stupid, good for nothing—" Rising, the men rained insults and curses upon Ben. If they could only move faster, they might have beaten him to a pulp, and Mills would have jumped into the fray all too willingly.

The other refugees stopped eating. They strained their necks to see what was going on.

Ben's entire body shook with a fit of hacking. "Cut some slack, will you? Look, no Beast. And I'm not even going to eat, 'kay? Getting too worked up on a little dust."

"You don't understand." Victor's brow darkened.

"It's happened before, Ben," said another.

Ben stuck out his lip at the men. Mills thought he looked even stupider.

She put down the ladle. "They thought the Beasts just emerge from steam or fog or smoke. But there have been attacks in the absence of these. They're saying even the haze that dust forms might be a medium!"

"They're probably just saying that. If it were true we should've encountered those slugs by now. It's been windy outside," Ben rasped. Mills could hear him wheezing. He'd had that cough for weeks.

"Exactly why we should all remain alert!" Victor chided. "Remember Taguig City? It was wiped out during the dry months. People panicked. It was a stampede!" The other defenders nodded and spoke in agreement.

"Right, and if you consider all the open spaces there, all those fields and unpaved parking lots, that's a lot of dirt. Just imagine, clouds and clouds of dust."

"It's all about the haze, Ben. It's all about the haze."

"If a Beast takes you, no one will even know about it. It leaves nothing behind."

Ben hunched up, a glint of fear in his large eyes.

Victor patted him on his bare, sweaty shoulders. "I get you; you must be thinking that a little haze shouldn't hurt. But do you really want to risk it?"

"I'd at least like to find out," Ben sputtered. "At least I can maybe sleep a bit more peacefully. And we can maybe cook us some rice?"

"Well there's only one way to find out, right?" Victor challenged.

There was nervous laughter across the room.

Ben swung his arms in a wide arc. “I hear you, I hear you. Nothing happened, ‘kay? I’m taking out these here cans now.”

*

“I smell like shit.”

“I smell like bean fart.”

“I smell like cheese, and sardines *and* beans. All the damned canned stuff we eat.”

“So I guess I smell like the cans!” Mills cut in.

The men guffawed. There were ten of them, lounging on the raised platform that used to be a parking space for Puregold grocery, their present base.

“Hey, Mills, you been standing there long?” asked Victor, nursing a bottle of San Mig in one hand. She sat beside him. He did smell like shit.

“The poso is right over there, Vic.”

“Whoa, when did *you* last take a bath?” he retorted, taking a long swig.

“Drinking again, I see. That’s not even cold.”

Pepe handed her a beer, but she refused.

Victor swallowed noisily. “What I’d give for ice-cold drink.” He laid back on his elbows, a faraway look in his eyes. “Those Beasts took everything away. Can’t even use refrigeration. Causes mist.”

Mills followed his gaze, taking in the vast flatness of what used to be the 18-lane killer highway—Commonwealth Avenue. The sun hung low and lazy. Next to overturned cars, dead Beasts that had fallen from the clouds littered the road like piles of turd. They were yellow alive, and brown when dead. To the north, under a crumbling overpass, she observed the white tents of another refuge community. East of their camp, the remaining half of a dead acacia stood black and forbidding against the light. Remnants of exclusive villages were five blocks away, and farther

off, buildings that used to be fast food joints, a police station, and a shopping mall lay like stubs of melted candle. She'd gotten so used to it all. She couldn't even imagine what better days smelled like.

"Well?" said Victor, facing her.

"Well, what?"

"When did you last take a bath?"

The men giggled.

"Last night."

"Huh, how'd you do that? We never see you taking a bath."

"That's because I do it when everyone's asleep."

"Why don't you just join the old hags?"

Mills raised an eyebrow in mock surprise. "You kidding? And risk having guys like you peep on me?"

Pepe gave her a playful shove. He was surprisingly strong. "Oh, come on, Mills. You're not a girl. You're one of us!"

The men sniggered. Mills pouted. She was getting tired of these jokes. She was about to say something in retort but settled for pinching Pepe's skinny arm. It wasn't like she was trying to look good for anyone. Pepe let out a resounding yelp. Mills, Victor and the other defenders laughed so hard there were tears in their eyes.

Mills noticed Victor massaging his forehead. "LOL! Isn't it too early for a hangover?"

"You kidding? I never get drunk! And who says LOL these days?" His irises had a hazy look about them. His lids were also a bit swollen. "That's a nifty hand you got there, Mills," he remarked, changing the subject.

“Thanks. I think it made me a lot cooler.” Mills stared at her prosthetic, her lips curling in a smile. She tensed and then relaxed her shoulders to flex the pincers.

“How’d you lose the hand?” asked a defender whose name Mills couldn’t remember. She just knew him in her mind as Defender B since he had bright brown eyes and a beefy physique. He received a cuffing on the head as an answer from the men.

Mills shook her head. “It’s totally fine. Actually, I thought everyone already knew.” She made her voice sound flirtatious just for the fun of it.

“I don’t,” said Victor.

“Well...” She shrugged. “Got bitten.”

The men waited for her to continue.

“Wait, like, was it a dog?” asked Pepe.

“A mosquito,” she laughed, but no one laughed with her. “I know it sounds ridiculous, but it’s the truth. The bite got infected. Lost my hand. Now I’m super!”

She didn’t tell them about her poverty. How she had been a scholar in a prestigious university, how her father had been a tricycle driver, how he had been shot dead by a random drunk who’d never been caught, how she hadn’t the money to treat the infection before it led to her limb getting amputated. She couldn’t afford getting a prosthetic back then, so she had gone on YouTube to look pitiful and talk about how she had so many dreams; how, without her hand, she couldn’t achieve anything. A foreign philanthropist had answered her plea and wired her money to get herself fitted for an artificial limb.

She didn’t tell the men any of this, but she sensed that they understood. They smiled at her, making her feel like she could just curl up under her flimsy blanket and imagine herself wrapped in warm, silk sheets.

Victor put an arm around her and squeezed. “Yes, you’re super, Mills. Super Mills.”

She held her breath. “You stink.”

*

Evacuation of MM Sector 1 and 6 ongoing... Is someone there?... w-we’re going to die... Follow escape routes specified in your respective disaster booklets. Two Beasts spotted in MM Sector 1 at 11 p.m., medium unknown... The slug was inside him... Five Beasts spotted in MM Sector 6 at 5 a.m., medium unknown. Evacuation of MM Sector 1 and 6 ongoing... Please... help us we’re trapped here... Follow escape routes... The radio droned on with distress calls and interference. It was 9 a.m. and Mills was on edge. The death toll climbed from 15 to 50 people in the course of a few hours, and that probably wasn’t even counting the bodies that weren’t and would never be found.

“Mills! Psssst!”

The thing... came out of her... we saw... Ha— Screaming followed, but it was cut short, as though the speaker had been gagged. The signal scrambled.

“Hey, you!”

Standing, Mills pulled herself away from the radio. “You hear that? It’s chaos in Manila and Parañaque! Can’t make out what they’re saying.”

“Yeah, yeah, now come with me,” said Victor. He had a beer in hand. Again.

“I need to hear this,” Mills hunkered back down on the crate she’d been sitting on.

Victor kneaded his forehead. “Come with me or I’ll have to drag you out. You’re making everyone nervous.”

Mills scanned the refugees. Some were napping on their mats, while others were playing jackstones or cards. “No, I’m not.”

“Mills.”

“Fine.”

Mills followed the perpetually-drinking-but-never-drunk Victor Baltazar. They exited the converted grocery through the front and walked around the chipped green walls of their refuge. His constant glugging began to fray at her nerves.

Mills frowned. "Baltazar! That habit's going to get the better of you one day."

"Surprise!"

Mills jumped. She made a face. What in the world was that five-foot high plastic-wrapped cylinder before her eyes? Pepe and the beefy Defender B hopped out from behind the weird contraption.

"We made you a shower room!"

"No one can ever peep on you now, Mills." Victor grinned, raising his beloved beer.

"Seriously?" Mills was incredulous. She swept aside the white, plastic 'shower curtain,' which hung from a makeshift clothesline, and stared at the poso inside. Before the pipe's mouth was a tub full of clean water and a dipper, ready for use.

"Just imagine it's a shower, okay?" said Defender B.

"This is," Mills paused. "Real sweet of you, guys," she said in a deadpan manner.

"I think she actually likes it. Right, Victor?" Defender B looked genuinely disappointed at her reaction.

Pepe pushed a damp towel into her hands. "Here, I washed it myself."

Mills took it without a word. She didn't move, either.

Victor patted Defender B and Pepe on their backs. "Good job, peeps. Now let's go back inside and give the lady some privacy."

When they had gone, Mills realized she hadn't even thanked them for their gift. "What's wrong with me?" she muttered. She entered her personal shower 'room,' unable to believe that someone would do this kind of thing for her. She peeked out

of the curtain just to make sure this wasn't some dirty prank. Seeing that the coast was clear, she first shed her T-shirt and shorts. Next, she slipped off her prosthetic's garterized harnesses that fastened about her shoulders. She flinched. There was some chafing on her back, where a harness constantly rubbed against the skin. She hung her belongings on the clothesline so they wouldn't get wet.

Using the plastic dipper, she scooped water onto her tender back and enjoyed the delicious coolness. She washed her hair and the rest of her body. She sighed. Who would have thought a decent bath would be one of the hardest things to come upon these days? It was difficult to imagine that just five or six years ago, water was in such abundance that they could take a bath anytime they wanted during summer. As she cleansed herself of dirt and soot, she felt the fatigue leaving her tired muscles. She stopped for a moment, studying the smooth, pink skin of her stump, cut off just below the elbow. It had been a long time since she looked at it. Without the pincers, the stump appeared strange. And ugly. Like it wasn't even a part of her. Hurriedly, she finished up with her bath. She couldn't wait to put her limb back on and feel normal again.

A sharp, burning smell wafted in the air. Mills' heart raced. "Fire?" she breathed. In her haste to get dressed, she put her shorts on inside out. She didn't even have time to reattach her prosthesis. She ran out of the bath and followed the smoldering scent. Her slippers squelched as it sank into the softness of a dead Beast. She kicked it off, its ochre juices sucking at her feet. Making her way to a cluster of residential ruins, she passed an archway that read 'San Lorenzo Ruiz.' This used to be a private subdivision. There, she spotted a line of smoke, rising behind the verdant walls of a roofless blue house.

"You!" she shouted. "Whoever you are, put that fire out before we're killed!" But no one answered. She rounded the corner of the house. Finding an opening where the walls fell away, she perceived scuffling inside. She entered the house and found Ben cowering in the corner. A few paces away from him, a fire burned; over it, an aluminum canister bubbled with boiling porridge. A familiar sallow profusion cascaded out of gray plumes of smoke. "Beast," she mouthed. Her tongue was thick and useless with fear. When the creature stretched its body, Mills spotted a bright red spot in the center of its ribbed midsection, a bump similar to a boil. But the spot was quickly hidden away under its bulging tissues. With a loud

thwack the Beast landed on the house's cracked tiles. It was the size of a water buffalo, much smaller than the creatures that first appeared in the country, yet nonetheless fearful. A clear liquid seeped out of its mucosal underbelly, dissolving whatever was left of the tiles.

"I just wanted me some rice, Mills! I did it before, and no Beast, I swear." The Beast shivered. A corpulent arm shot out of its flank, catching Ben's leg when he tried to run. The man collapsed, screaming in pain. "Please help me! Oh, God!"

Mills was screaming as well. She grabbed rocks, branches, whatever she could get her hand on, and threw them all at the rippling monster. Each time she wounded the Beast, it just produced thick yellow blood or mucus that made its injuries scab over and heal within seconds.

Mills' blood ran cold. Ben's left foot, ankle and calf disappeared within the gelatinous coils of the Beast's arm. Without thinking, she grabbed the white-hot canister from the spit. She tossed it at the monster, its boiling contents searing its undulating flesh. The creature flinched and loosened its coils, but there was nothing in there. Ben's leg was gone.

"Haze! It's here!"

"Hurry!"

Mills' mind swam. Her palm smarted. Someone handed her the prosthetic hand she'd left behind earlier. She couldn't stop her legs from buckling underneath her. Men pulled her away, ordering her to go back to camp. She saw Victor kick the fire, sending ash and embers flying. Armed with rocks, wooden planks and machetes, they hacked at the Beast. Pounds of fat-like chunks flew at them and over their heads. Lying there wide open, runny and absent of innards, the thing made weird squirting noises. Mills watched in horror as the creature scabbed over again, its juices turning opaque, transforming into new skin. At the site of the extinguished fire, another creature was emerging from the haze. Victor shouted something about falling back. Supporting the injured Ben on their shoulders, the defenders retreated, Mills following behind them.

*

Mills could hear Ben's labored breathing. His cough was worse than ever. He sat against the wall, defenders pouring alcohol all over the stump of his leg. Everything below the knee was lost, but the skin was so smooth it seemed he'd been prepared for prosthesis.

The camp was nearly empty. A handful of whimpering refugee children hugged their mothers. Pepe led them out of the converted grocery. At the exit, another defender handed them plastic bags filled with food and other essentials for evacuation.

"It's painful. God, please stop it!" Ben cried. The men pulled cardboard boxes up to hide him from view.

Mills had been tuning the radio since she got back. "Did somebody touch this?" she hollered. "Who touched the radio?" She cursed and struck the instrument. The device retorted with a whirr. She lifted the handheld transmitter and spoke into it. "Beasts in MM Sector 2. There might be two or three of them." She waited. Nothing.

"Been like that," Victor slurred, finishing another beer. "Maybe...one of the radio towers fell." He knocked empty bottles from a table. Glass shattered all over the floor. Mills yelled at him: "Did you finish all that? How can you be drunk at a time like this?"

"Not drunk," he growled, doubling over. "Never get drunk!"

Pepe ran up to him, breathing fast. "We'll pass Katipunan road to get to Marikina. We're going to warn the nearby camps."

Victor responded with a grunt.

"We don't have a stretcher for Ben." Pepe touched Victor. "Hey, are you all right?"

Victor held his head in his hands. Groaning, he fell facedown on the floor. Mills and Pepe scurried to his side. Pepe turned him over. Victor's eyes were open but unseeing. Something murky moved in his light-brown eyes, and then it was gone. Exchanging nervous glances, Pepe nodded to Mills. She checked his pulse. His skin

was burning hot, and his pulse was racing. He blubbered things Mills didn't understand.

"He's wasted." She bent down until she was just an inch from his face. Mills examined his eyes and saw it again, something squirming in them. It pressed against his eyeballs until the membrane broke open.

"Watch out!" With her prosthetic hand, Mills shoved Pepe out of the way. Her heart drummed within her chest, threatening to explode. The Beast oozed out of Victor's sockets slowly at first. When enough of it had surfaced, it began to liquefy his skull.

"What's happening?"

"Oh, shit, oh shit!"

The defenders who had been tending to Ben became aware of the monster in their midst.

Mills thoughts raced. This couldn't be. Beasts couldn't be born this way. "The eyes? Or a haze of the mind?" she whispered. The monster was huge, and it wasn't even finished emerging. Pepe let out a cry and lunged at the creature with his machete. The others hurried out the building to retrieve rocks and other items that could be thrown as weapons.

She saw it again—the tiny red boil in the Beast's midsection. Following her instincts, she charged and dug her pincers into the monster's flesh before the boil could disappear under its corpulent folds. The Beast flinched. Its muscles tightened up as though hurt. Mills pulled out her arm and thrust in again. Pepe was yelling at her, but she couldn't understand. Her arm was wet and burning but she didn't stop. The creature ceased crawling out of Victor's lifeless body. Feeling it go limp and sink down on the floor, Mills clawed at it with renewed fervor.

"Mills. Mills, enough." Pepe held her back. She looked down. Her arm was missing. The plastic limb had melted away, and she'd lost the rest of her forearm and elbow. Yet numbness was the only thing she felt. By the time the rest of the

defenders came, the Beast was no longer moving. It gave one final hiss, and was stilled with death.

She sank into Pepe's arms, sobbing. "The haze, it's inside us, too," she kept saying between breaths. She lifted her head. The defenders stood there, their faces unreadable. Suddenly, they looked much older and lined. Ben's coughing and the intermittent white noise from the receiver echoed around their abandoned camp. She pushed Pepe away. "Destroy all the alcohol," she instructed in a weak voice. They nodded wordlessly and left.

The sun was setting outside. An alien warmth glowed in her chest, a flicker of hope, perhaps. They had survived today. They would move to a safer place. Perhaps the Beasts would stop coming. Perhaps they'd live to see that day. But in the darkest corner of her mind, she glimpsed nothing but a wall of murk. The landscape of her imagination became overcast, and the closer she looked, the more she saw the vainness of their strife.

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