

#### ISSUE #26 OCTOBER 2015



IN THIS ISSUE, EVERY STORY'S EVENTS ARE TOLD IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER... NO FLASHBACKS OR FLASH FORWARDS ALLOWED

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## FIRST PLACE

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# The Tale of King Edgar

by L. S. Johnson

When they bring the baby to him, Edgar looks down at the mewling creature, its face like a piece of crumpled, bloody silk, and feels the knot in his belly loosen. "Call him Bertram," he says, flicking aside the swaddling cloth to confirm the sex. "He'll do. Though I may have to pay someone to marry him, with a face like that."

The laughter of his retinue carries him out of his castle, onto his horse, and into the great sun-filled world that is his kingdom. A day without omens, and therefore full of possibility. He rides hard and far, his retinue bellowing his praises over the thunderous hoofbeats, shouting of a future of contented fullness. He has an heir. He has certainty.

When at last Edgar reaches his duke's smaller, shabbier castle, he leaves the parley to those with a bent for such things; he eats his fill and drinks far more; he is given a woman and his duke's own bed and so many skins of wine he trips over them in the night.

When he catches his reflection in the moat, chasing yet another of the wide-eyed girls that seem to await him in every niche and crevice—do they grow them here, he wonders, like the fields of flax they had passed—his reflection makes him smile.

He is handsome and strong; he is king, head of both a people and a dynasty, now. He can do as he pleases. The thought more exciting than the girl's unlaced dress.

\*

Upon his return he finds that the red-faced, squalling creature has been transformed: in its place is a plump, scrubbed baby with a somber gaze that makes Edgar look away. A gaze designed, it seems, for him alone; for everyone else Prince Bertram is all smiles. Sometimes Edgar, king of everything as far as his eye can see, is left standing for several heartbeats without proper acknowledgment while the women fuss over the cradle.

When Edgar looks upon that solemn, staring face—so like yours the women coofor the first time he feels the specter of death.

In honor of Bertram's first birthday, Edgar hosts three days of games and competes in them himself. He jousts and wrestles, shrugging off his retinue's concern. He even wounds one of his knights, crippling the man; still Edgar feels driven by some nameless thing in his belly, something serpentine and barbed whose squirming makes him fidget on his throne and toss in his bed. When the games end he turns himself from fighting to fucking: he takes his queen, he takes her ladies, he takes the women he sees in his halls and his kitchens and his cellars, he carries off pretty girls from the marketplace and the best whores right out of the brothel, and once he even snatches a woman straight from the fields, her skirts still full of seed and soil when he takes her in a nearby copse, his retinue politely turning their backs.

Only when his queen's womb swells again does the snarling, squirming thing in his belly grow quiet. A second son. Edgar would show no preference; he would hint, discretely, that the succession was an open question. Let Bertram and his brother fight it out with sword and wit; it would ensure the best man took the throne. Better still would be to have three, four, even five sons. Edgar would keep silent right through his dotage; only on his deathbed would he pronounce the name of his heir, the one most fit to take his place.

When he hears the first cries he goes to his queen's chambers, where an identical red-faced creature awaits him. He opens the swaddling cloth before anyone can speak, only to stare in bewilderment.

And when he comes out of the room again the first thing he sees is Bertram, standing upright like a tiny man, looking at him with the cool appraisal of a farmer planning to cull his herd.

\*

The hall is full, full of his household and his knights, full of his dukes and his earls and their households and their knights, all their voices mingling and echoing off the walls in a cacophony that makes his ears ring. Dozens of eyes follow Edgar's every move and note his every gesture; his words are squirreled away like the tastiest morsels, the better to be picked apart in the days to come. So many decisions will be based on a lingering touch or a casual remark. All day he has been praised to the skies, given chests overflowing with tithes, offered parcels of land and comely daughters.

He has never been so happy.

The servants bring food, piles of it on large wooden boards: roasted beavers, pheasants, a magnificent peacock with its tail in full spread; pies and cassoulets; the first sweet fruits from his orchards. At last the roar of voices quiets as they begin eating, scooping up the food with curled fingers. This too Edgar revels in: the sight of them all swilling like pigs at a trough, every swallow binding them more completely to his rule.

And then a high, lisping voice says, "But why shouldn't we negotiate?"

The sound stabs Edgar in the gut. He nearly rises from his seat at the sudden cramping he feels; he looks around the room, momentarily heedless of his effect on those around him, until he sees Bertram's small body at a nearby table. Flanked by an earl and his nephew, the two looking down in amusement.

"A king should be fair," Bertram blithely continues. "He should always negotiate first. That is the mark of a good king."

"Your son," someone says in Edgar's ear, "is forming alliances over his pap. Born to rule, that one."

Edgar can barely see for his rage. *Negotiating*. Just to say that word in the wrong ear. Just to *say* it. As if anything had ever been won with words, as if every inch of his kingdom hadn't been won with steel and blood. It is all he can do to keep from throwing himself over the table and beating the boy back into the bloody pulp he was born as.

Instead he seizes the nearest servant, swallowing to keep the snarl out of his voice. "It is time," he says, "for the prince to retire."

Watching the servant coax Bertram away, he doesn't notice the pie that is laid before him. Bertram protests, then starts to cry; those around him recoil and Edgar exhales, his anger slowly ebbing. See? he silently declares to the hall. See? He is nothing but a child, he can affect nothing, he might as well not even exist!

He hears, on the edge of his awareness, a strange twittering noise; he realizes a hush has fallen over the gathering. As Bertram and the servant leave he turns back to the pie and plunges his knife into the crust, eager to resume the feast.

The twittering changes to a high-pitched shriek. There are gasps of horror as the crust falls away, revealing a living raven, black-feathered and wild-eyed, its breast and wing now bloodied from the knife. Its garbled, wheezy cries scrape at Edgar's mind. It tries to hop free from the dish, its one good wing flapping impotently. Edgar senses the others' shock and revulsion; he remembers that the cook had mentioned a trick to entertain the guests. Now that trick has made him look a fool.

He tries to seize the bird, to break its neck and put it out of its misery; but the raven lunges at him, stabbing at his hand with its sharp beak. Again gasps go up; one of Edgar's knights makes to help, only to stop halfway, unsure of whether or not to intervene. Again Edgar tries to seize the bird, this time taking up his knife again, but with a mighty push of its uninjured wing the raven manages to propel itself out of the dish and off the table, landing wetly on the stone below.

Then everyone is out of their seats, the men crawling under the tables, the women twisting at their skirts. Cries go up as one or another nearly seizes the bird,

followed by more of those garbled shrieks; one after another the men reappear, holding bloodied hands and looking furious.

"It's a sign, an omen," someone gasps, but when Edgar turns to see who spoke everyone seems caught up in the hunt for the raven.

At last the hall quiets down, the men looking askance at each other; a murmur runs through the crowd that the bird has vanished.

Edgar feels sweat rising on his brow. Quickly he gestures to the empty crust. "Take it away," he says, his voice ringing with authority. "You, and you there, look for the bird; it is hiding in some corner. I don't want it stinking up the place." He sweeps the crowd with a look, silencing all murmurs. "And I want that cook put in chains; I will deal with him later."

Still there is only silence, until he pours himself more wine and drinks deeply. Only then do the others dare to resume their conversations; but Edgar knows they are speaking not of him but of what they just witnessed, and what it might mean.

Later, when he leaves the hall, he pauses by the open door of his daughter's room and watches her sleep. She never offers opinions, or insinuates herself with crafty earls. She merely smiles at Edgar, and gives him sweet little kisses, and tries to crown him with flowers. She is learning to sew and sing. Such a simple thing, to raise a girl.

When he closes his eyes that night, all Edgar can see is the raven, looking at him with that wild fury in its eyes.

\*

The women are singing. There has been a third child, another girl; they are singing to her in the nursery:

Lavender's blue, diddle diddle

Lavender's green,

When I am king, diddle diddle

### You shall be queen

Do they always do this? Edgar cannot say, but it irks him. In times past he left during this period, when his queen was still too weak to receive him. But this time he has lingered to see to Bertram's education, and he is regretting it.

Between them, on the broad oak table, lie scattered the papers of his rule, the terms of surrender and the divisions of land, the seals and marks of all those beneath him. Every scrap speaks to Edgar of the past: of the men he killed in battle, of the ones he cowed into obedience; of the houses scoured for goods and then burnt; of the fields piled with slaughtered livestock, their dead eyes following him. Of the screams of dying children, not unlike the cries of the raven.

All of it years ago now.

Yet Bertram sees nothing, hears nothing. Learns nothing. "Why are the tithes so uneven?" he asks, again.

Edgar sighs. How to explain that it is not a matter of abacus and paper, that it is a far more complex sum of harvests and goods, slights and favors, strategic values and strategic costs?

"I do not see," Bertram continues, "why we cannot come up with a fairer kind of reckoning. You are asking double here what you are here—" he holds up two documents— "yet the first has far less land than the second! It's completely arbitrary! No wonder we keep hearing rumors about a rebellion."

Edgar leans forward and smacks the first paper. "That," he says loudly, "is an asshole who must constantly be brought to heel, and that—" he smacks the second paper—"is a man who has known his place since I took the throne, and has a right to expect favor in turn. *That* is the reckoning."

In the ensuing silence the women sing:

There they did play, diddle diddle

And kiss and court

All the fine day, diddle diddle

Making good sport

He waits for some sign of Bertram's understanding. But he is met only with that somber stare, delivered under a brow growing dark and wide with age, framed by a widow's peak that Edgar knows matches his own. The boy has his jawline as well, the women tell him it is a shared trait, that when the prince becomes angered he is the spit of the king.

Now Bertram raises his chin, his lips compressed, and Edgar knows what this means: that his son thinks him wrong, only he knows it is not to his advantage to say so.

Edgar knows this, for he has seen his own face in exactly such a pose, when he has had to bide his time.

And when that time came, oh how he had reveled in delivering the blows—

Lavender's blue, diddle diddle

Lavender's green

Let me be king, diddle diddle

You be the queen

"Get out," he says, and turns away, rubbing his jaw as if he had been punched.

\*

At last he manages to break away from his retinue. A few knowing remarks, a couple of elbows to the ribs, and Edgar slips through his rooms and out into the narrower hall for his own private use. Right leads to his queen's chambers; left leads down towards his servants' quarters and the far side of his castle. Supposedly for escape during a siege, but Edgar uses it for a different kind of escape.

After all, his queen is with child yet again. There was a lost child after his second daughter, the women told him it was a boy, but Edgar has had his fill of sons. Already he is thinking to send Bertram away, on some kind of tour or campaign; he's sick of seeing that stare at every turn, he's sick of the endless questions he knows are waiting behind Bertram's compressed lips.

All that, and lately Edgar feels uneasy when he sees his son conversing in the hall. He was impatient at that age; he would have been more so if he had not felt such deep respect for his own father... and has Bertram ever felt a whit of respect for him? Has he ever seen Edgar as anything other than a thing to best, if not with strength then with his relentless questions, designed to undermine his king's authority at every turn?

But Edgar can think on that later.

There is, after all, a new maid. A choice armful, everyone agrees; even his queen's ladies have remarked upon her comeliness. Edgar has made a study of her: he thinks of her at the meeting table and in the pew, in his bed at night and when he would do his duty with his queen. He knows every swell of her figure, every drop of moisture when she sweats in her chores, and oh but he will make her sweat tonight.

At her door he pauses, listening. Instead of silence there are faint noises: panting and moans, a familiar creaking rhythm. The little trollop. He is at once annoyed and intrigued, for he made his interest plain from her first day, and he cannot think who would dare to trump him, no matter how obvious her invitation.

Edgar opens the door silently, and as the room becomes visible he feels a familiar pain in his belly. For he knows all too well the young, lean body pressed between her thighs, the cracking voice that sings out as he works at her:

I sow'd the Seeds of Love

And I sow'd them in the spring

This boy. This creature he spawned. The maid giggles and kisses Bertram and he's laughing as he sings, he laughs into her plump red mouth. Would that she could

have seen him at birth, seen the mewling, bloody flesh that he had been. Would she be giggling now? Oh she would not.

Being poked by a boy. A mere boy. Clearly she sought his favor, perhaps she even sought to trick him into promises, get the king's son bound to her with vows and a babe and the things she could ask for then...

Edgar turns away, his stomach clenching so violently he thinks he will be sick. A mere boy, bedding that. He should storm in, thrash his son and throw her out into the night with only her sheet for a cover. A mere boy, in her bed. He cannot even think of her now without seeing Bertram's thin body rutting over her like some rangy jackrabbit.

Edgar stumbles down the hallway, clutching at his stomach; halfway back to his rooms he vomits, the sounds echoing in the darkened hall, bile spattering his shoes.

His rooms, though he only left them a few minutes ago, feel empty and cold. When he climbs into bed he is overwhelmed by a strange, musty odor: as if his bed hadn't been slept in for ages, as if he had died long ago.

\*

He spends his days with his daughters—three of them now, and each a pretty thing, he'll have no trouble marrying them off—letting them sing to him and read to him, letting them show him their dances and their embroideries. He tells everyone it is because his queen is dead that he spends so much time with them, but in truth their affection is the only thing that quiets the writhing serpent in his belly, the bright, sharp pain that bursts forth at the mere sight of his son.

That Bertram had sobbed endlessly when his mother died, that he had to be dragged from her bedside... Edgar could understand it; he could, perhaps, even wonder at it; but it did not soothe the beast inside him.

So instead he bides his time, and spends his days with his daughters, and at last one night he whispers to a single trusted man about his son, and then whispers to a second trusted man about the first. When Bertram comes to say goodbye Edgar makes a good show of it, hugging him and rubbing his head, speaking well of the figure he cuts in his armor, how he will impress everyone on his first tour of the kingdom. It takes everything Edgar has to utter that neutral *the*. He wants to say *my kingdom*, wants to scream it in Bertram's face; he knows for appearances' sake he should have said *our kingdom*; yet to pronounce the latter, he fears, would make the serpent in his belly burst agonizingly forth.

Bertram says something about making him proud, but Edgar barely hears him; he is distracted by the sight of his queen's eyes peering at him from beneath that dark brow. His youngest daughter is the spit of her mother, but how strange that he never realized Bertram has those same wide eyes—

"I still don't see why we should not go together," Bertram says.

The words cut through Edgar's thoughts like a blade. He nearly thanks the boy for this last challenge to his authority; instead he says, loud enough for the room to hear, "I trust you as I trust myself."

Only when Bertram is walking away does Edgar nod once to his man and make a hidden sign. And the matter is done; he thinks of it no more.

Three pretty daughters. Already he is contemplating possible matches for them, imagining the outcome of this or that alliance. After the mourning period he will hold games; that will incite some proper competition. Falling over each other to prove themselves the most loyal and obedient. A wonder he hadn't thought of it before: why leave such matters to fickle Nature, when you could cherrypick your succession?

He has learned a lesson, these past years, about like minds. He has learned many lessons—

"Father, will you not wave goodbye?" His eldest daughter beckons him to the window, her handkerchief fluttering in her hand.

He goes to join them, smiling as they press against him, and watches Bertram ride away. Every foot between them like a salve to his aching stomach. In a tree near

the window he sees a cardinal contentedly nesting and finds himself smiling with relief at such a clear omen.

The rightness of it all. His halls his own, his beds his own. No more staring, no more ridiculous questions. The lesson well and truly learnt: daughters are a far better investment than sons.

"I will miss him," his second daughter says. "But he'll have such a good time with his friends."

"Friends?" Edgar asks absently, still watching the cardinal.

"Oh, Bertram has lots of friends," his eldest says. "Dukes and earls from all over, and a whole host of knights. He said a grand company is waiting for him just a ways down the road. You should have gone with him, Father, you would have had a wonderful time."

Edgar stares at the road, watching his son disappear over the rise. *Dukes and earls*. *A host of knights*.

"I'm glad you stayed," his youngest daughter tells him. "Let Bertram be king out there. You can be king right here!"

"Silly girl," his second says, "there cannot be two kings."

She gathers up the youngest and they begin to drift away, still chattering among themselves, fluttering about each other like birds. Yet Edgar cannot move. *A grand company is waiting for him*. The serpent in his stomach has become as heavy and cold as stone, a dread so overwhelming it threatens to take his legs.

As he stares at the empty road, struggling to understand, a broad shadow flits across his field of vision. The raven curves upwards, then dives into the tree with a fearsome cawing, setting the branches into a blur of movement. When the leaves become still once more there is nothing to see: raven, cardinal, and nest have all vanished; all that remains are a few scarlet feathers, drifting away on the breeze.

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## SECOND PLACE

S.D. Bullard has been writing since the age of eight. While jobs and professions have come and gone, writing has remained a constant. S.D. Bullard primarily grew up in Ohio, but now resides south of the Mason Dixon line with a couple of canines and a never-ending series of words. This will be the first official publishing credit.

# Out of the Opened Door

by S. D. Bullard

She slept with two knives under her pillow, but she couldn't remember why. But then, she couldn't really remember anything. It wasn't that life was a question mark. It was blank. Questioning took too much energy, and she needed to conserve her energy. Though she wasn't sure what for.

She didn't come awake so much as become aware that she was aware. She let her eyes ease open against the heat. Dirt and ash attacked her eyeball. Something was burning. She thought it must be the world. She didn't bother blinking against the sting, but scanned her surroundings with a quick flick, checking for danger. She wasn't sure where it might come from.

Her scan complete, she let her gaze settle on the only other person in the area. He sat with his back against the remnants of what might once have been a building, head leaned back, eyes opened, but glazed with a weariness transcending exhaustion. She didn't know who he was, only that he would be there.

She pushed up, her hand sliding simultaneously and automatically beneath the pillow to grasp one of the knives, the move so instinctive and fluid she had it out and unsheathed before she was fully sitting up. She ran her fingers expertly along

the blade, pressing at just the right angle and with just the right force to feel the cold bite of potential without actually cutting herself. As if she'd done it a thousand times before. Perhaps she had. She slid it back into the sheath and tucked it into the tattered leather that served as a shoe, then reached for the other one. She checked its blade too, then slipped it into her belt, positioned against her lower back. Finally she tugged the pillow towards her, really just a pile of dirty rags, heaped together to cushion her head against the knives and the hard ground.

He watched her. "You slept."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway. "Your turn."

"No, we don't have time. It's getting dark. We should go."

She stood, picking up the pillow bundle, now tied neatly together with strings that formed the rags into a kind of pack. She slung the strings over her shoulders, leaving her hands free to reach her knives.

He was already on his feet, a similar pack on his back. He had knives, too. She wasn't sure why they needed them. He turned and started walking and she followed. They stumbled through piles of debris, bricks and mortar, plaster and wood. The hot air was so packed with particles it was hard to breathe. She chewed at it, trying to find the oxygen. They ducked through what had clearly once been a doorway and found themselves relatively outside. Mounds of structural skeletons still jutted up around them, but from a wary distance. There was no freshness to the air, but it was a bit thinner. She took several deep breaths, and looked up. There were no structures over her head now, but the air was clotted with a smoky fog that didn't allow much visual depth. It was a dusk colored fog. So, not dark yet, but on its way.

She took advantage of the little bit of light left in the haze to study him. He was half a head taller than she was, even with his shoulders hunched. The original color of his hair was indeterminable, crusted as it was with all manner of filth. It was long and rumpled and knotted. His eyes were dark and his skin was a dusty taupe. But that was just the dirt and ash.

For a second she gave in and let herself wonder. She wondered who he was. She wondered who she was. He glanced down at her, slowing his stride to match hers. She stopped wondering and looked away from him. It was time for the question. She'd seen it in his eyes. It had to be asked, but neither of them wanted to ask it. Well, it was his turn. He accepted that. He took a breath before speaking. "Do you remember anything?"

She allowed several steps to pass. Retreated into her mind, scraping the sides and corners, seeking something, anything. If only she had an idea what it was. She shook her head. "You?"

He looked forward. "No."

They didn't speak again as they walked, the dark pulling the edges of invisibility in around them. Conversation without context was difficult. And silence was important. She was sure of it, just not sure why.

They had walked several hours when their surroundings changed. Despite the darkness, she could tell they were edging away from the shattered buildings. The ruins of what must once have been a town grew sparse, the rubble they'd been weaving around smoothed away into uneven ground, pockmarked with craters and clumps of stiff, dead grass. For a while they seemed to skirt the edge of the town, keeping to its fringes, but then he angled off into the open expanse of emptiness.

She followed, but there was a hesitancy in her steps. Her feet fumbled at the ground, even though there was nothing to trip over. She slowed, aware that her body was experiencing some strange symptoms. Her breathing was even more difficult than it had been, rapid and shallow. Her heart had also increased in speed, thrumming against her ribs and chest, all the way up into her throat. Her skin felt tight, cold-hot tingles racing up her arms and down her spine. She didn't realize she had completely stopped moving until he turned to look at her.

He waited several moments, a shadow against the background of shadows. Then he made a move that might have been a beckoning gesture. "We need to go this way." She didn't argue with him, didn't ask how he knew where they needed to go. Neither of them knew where they were going, but his sense of direction seemed instinctual. But there was another instinct warring with her now. She didn't move.

He walked back towards her, stopping close enough she could see the outline of his features. He watched her for a few seconds.

"You remember something?"

"Fear."

"We've known about that one for a while." He turned as though to start walking again.

She grabbed his arm. "Wait!"

He waited.

"There's something out there."

He turned to stare in the direction he'd been leading, as though the threat might materialize in response to her words. Not seeing any immediate danger in the black expanse he looked back at her.

"I don't know where or what. I just know it's out there. Somewhere." Her hand spasmed with a cramp and she realized she was gripping the knife at her back.

"I believe you. But we still need to go that way."

She was trembling, her muscles fighting against her inexplicable knowledge that he was right. He had turned again, taken several steps.

"Don't leave me!"

He moved back to her side. "I'm not going to leave you, but staying here won't do us any good. If something can find us out there, it can find us here."

She shook her head, but didn't know what she was denying.

"Come here." He reached out and wrapped his hand around hers, weaving their fingers together. "Now, the knives."

She slid hers from her belt and he removed one of his.

"Stick together."

This time when he moved, she stepped along with him. She didn't know why, but the physical contact seemed to have a calming effect. Her heart and breathing slowed. The shivering eased off. His hand was warm and the warmth spread through her. The fear wasn't gone. But it was no longer overpowering her.

Time was a muddle. A lot of it seemed to pass, but the darkness was still palpable when she first saw it. Some chink in the solid black of their surroundings. She tugged at his hand.

"I see it." But he kept walking.

Sometime later, the chink had grown into a flickering orange blur.

"Fire." He said it, but she'd already figured it out.

"This isn't good."

"I know." He kept walking.

The fear was trying to choke her again. She wanted to stop. She wanted to turn and run back the way they'd come. She glanced up and was able to make out enough of his features to see the worry, the determination. She shook her hand loose of his.

He made some sort of sound, like he was going to call out to her, but caught the words and swallowed them.

She stood back up from her crouched position, both knives now in her hands, and hurried to catch up to him. She moved close enough that her shoulder pressed against his, still needing the assurance.

He glanced at her hand. "Right." He removed his other knife, too.

They slowed as they drew close enough to make out the details, approaching with oblique caution. The fire wasn't big, a few flames lapping at the remains of ashy fuel. Pockets of fire were not an anomaly; the world burned with regularity. But this pile had clearly been scraped together with intention. The ground swept clear of additional kindling. But that wasn't what drew their attention.

There were three of them. They formed a sort of barrier around the fire, lying in eerily similar poses. Legs bent askew, arms flung out, eyes and mouths wide in unseeing stares and silent screams. Their bellies had been slashed open, entrails ripped from the cavities. It was impossible to know what had caused the trauma, especially when they did not know their adversary. It could have been claws, or teeth, knives or stones.

She looked at their faces, one by one. She didn't know them. She wouldn't. She let her eyes rove back to the tragedy of their bodies. Without the basis of familiarity she had no cause to recoil. Still, some sort of subconscious instinct told her senses they should be offended at the sight. She looked away, absently noting the slick, dark puddles surrounding the bodies and the shiver it sent through her own limbs. She looked at him instead.

He was still staring, leaning forward, squinting. "They're holding something."

Ignoring the instincts, now, she looked back, focusing on their hands. He was right. Each had fingers curled about some roundish object, two-toned in the firelight.

"It's food," he said. "They were eating."

Now that he said it, she could see the teeth marks scoring the surface of the objects. Spherical, with a dark, shiny outer coating, whitish flesh showing where they had taken bites.

She looked back at him. "No."

"We need food."

He stepped forward, bent and swiped a piece of food from one of the dead hands. He held it up in front of her.

"If we don't eat soon, we'll be dead anyway."

A sweet smell spiked from food, overpowering the odor of ash and blood hanging heavy around them. Hunger had been relegated to an unnoticed ache in her stomach, a strange hybrid of tightness and hollowness. Now it stabbed at her, the painful need clenching all the way up her throat, making her mouth tingle.

He moved it away from her face, slipping it into a pocket. "Get the other ones from them, and let's look around for more."

She slipped her knives away and hurried to relieve the corpses of their food things, trying to ignore the streaks of juice on their hands. He had found several untouched objects and collected them. She lifted one to her nose, inhaling. The sudden urge to bite it was almost overwhelming.

He grabbed her wrist.

"I wasn't—"

"Shhh!"

They were close enough to the dying fire that his face was mottled with flickering orange. It wasn't the garish blotches of gray ash and dim light that made her flinch, though. It was the expression in the shadows. He looked as if someone had pulled the skin tight over his bones, eyes so wide, thick rims of white surrounded them, lips peeled back to show grimacing teeth. She spun to look in the direction he was staring. The darkness was still too thick to make out forms or movement. But her ears caught what her eyes could not see.

<sup>&</sup>quot;It could have been the food that killed them."

<sup>&</sup>quot;It could have been whatever ripped out their stomachs."

<sup>&</sup>quot;It could have ripped out their stomachs after they were already dead. I don't like the odds."

Something was out there. And it was coming towards them.

She didn't even know what happened to the food in her hands. Instinct had her knives out before she could take a breath. He had a different approach. Spinning, he grabbed her shoulders and threw her to the ground. She had enough time to curl her body to absorb the blow, enough self-control not to cry out, enough sense to stay down.

Turning back, he lunged towards one of the bodies, plunging his hands down. She thought, for one wild moment, he was grabbing the corpse. But when he stood, he grasped the edge of some kind of blanket or covering. With a violent tug, he yanked it from beneath its former owner, the mutilated carcass rolling roughly to the ground. He spun and flung the thing over her. It settled with sticky precision. The blood, still fresh enough to be wet, seeped into her clothing and clung to her skin. He scrambled under the blanket next to her, crawling on his belly. Wedged in beside her, he froze. She tried to be as still as she could, willing her muscles to relax, her breathing to slow. It wasn't easy. Fear raked at her senses and the smell of blood clotted her nose.

For a space of time she couldn't begin to measure, there was nothing. The only movement the shallow breaths they both took, the only noise her own heart pounding in her ears. Or possibly his heart. Maybe they'd been wrong. Maybe there was nothing there after all.

When she heard the first undeniable footstep, she was almost relieved. For a flash, the tension of waiting subsided. It was immediately followed by the fear of knowing the thing was there. And not knowing what it was.

The steps were slow and shuffling, scraping across the ground. She couldn't tell if the gate was deliberately methodical or just the natural pace. She tried to stop shivering, tried to focus on the steps.

They were heavy and deep. And produced by more than two feet. The dragging, shambling gait made it difficult to determine if there was one being with more than two feet, or more than one bipedal creature.

A new kind of panic started building in her chest. They should be doing something. They shouldn't be lying there, waiting for claws or teeth, knives or stones to pierce down through the blanket and disembowel them. They should at least see what they were up against. Fear without an identified source was worse than whatever she could possibly see. She needed just a glance, one quick glimpse. If she knew, she could formulate a better plan.

She didn't think she moved. Wasn't even aware of her muscles tensing. But he must have sensed something. Moving nothing but his hand, he grasped her fingers and squeezed. It was a reminder, a warning, and enough sense flooded back into her mind to overcome the reckless urge. She didn't stir again.

There was no noise besides the footsteps, no voice, no words, no sound of breath. And after a length of time that stretched until she thought her nerves would break, the footsteps slowly moved away. She strained to hear them long after they had faded. She let him decide when they should move.

When he decided, he did it with violence of action. He threw the blanket off as he jumped to his feet. Still holding her hand, he dragged her up with him.

"Run!" He shoved her, in what she thought was the opposite direction the steps had gone.

She ran. The sun wasn't up yet, but she blinked against the almost dawn light. The landscape was smeared in bluish gray, the vague illumination helping reduce the number of times they stumbled and fell as they pounded along.

By the time they decided they weren't being chased or followed, it was fully light and her lungs were burning. She slowed, coughing and gasping and he eased to match her pace. She bent over to grab her knees, sucking at the air. Putrid though it was, it was better than the smell of blood. He gave her a minute then nudged her. When she looked up, he pointed. She glanced, nodded, and they moved toward the line of trees.

Tired as she was, she knew he must be worse. He hadn't slept at all the day before. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as they settled just inside the trees,

leaning their backs against two of the bigger trunks. He was haggard, the dark smudges under his eyes clear even through the dirt.

"Time to sleep." His voice was rough.

"Your turn."

He nodded. For a moment, that was his only motion. Then he rummaged through the folds of his tattered clothes.

"I dropped the food somewhere."

She glanced down at her hands as if expecting to see the round objects in them. When they came up empty, she did a quick check for her knives. At least instinct had managed to save those.

"We'll find more."

"We know where to find it."

"We still don't know if those were safe to eat."

"That will be true no matter what we find, and we need to eat or we're going to starve."

She nodded in reluctant agreement.

He leaned his head back against the tree, closing his eyes. "Let me sleep a couple hours. Then we'll go back and find it."

"Or, you sleep and I'll go find it."

"No, we'll go together."

"That just wastes time. If I go now, I can have the food back here and we'll be ready to move again at night. Besides, I can test it and by the time you wake up, you'll know for sure whether it's safe."

He suddenly seemed much more awake. He leaned forward in a lurch. "No. We'll try it at the same time. Don't do anything stupid."

"It's not stupid. The stupid thing is for both of us to eat it at the same time. If it's going to kill us, it would be better if it only killed one of us."

"Don't talk like an idiot. We're going to stick together. We're going to survive together. We'll just try a taste, and that way if it's poisonous, we may get sick, but we shouldn't die. But together."

"Okay."

He narrowed his eyes. "Okay. Let me sleep a couple hours. Then we'll go."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Okay." He leaned back again, watching her suspiciously. "Just promise me you won't go back by yourself after I'm asleep."

"I won't go back."

"Don't go anywhere."

"I won't go anywhere."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

He gave a jerky nod and pulled his pack off. She watched as he used his hands to sweep a clear spot on the ground. He had saved her several times, risking his own safety for hers. He would have a chance of surviving on his own, maybe even a better chance than with her. She doubted she would have that same chance.

He curled onto the ground, head on his bundle of rags. His breathing evened out, deepened, as soon as he was still. She thought he'd been asleep before he was completely settled.

She leaned back against the tree, eyes on his face. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the object. The sweet smell flicked at her nose as she examined the shiny skin and white inner layer. She curled her fingers around it, looking back at him.

He slept with two knives under his pillow.

Her teeth sank deep into the flesh.

She wondered who he was.

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## THIRD PLACE

Edison McDaniels is a neurosurgeon and novelist living in the American South. His writing tends to involve ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, often informed by his knowledge of medicine and surgery. His most recent novels include *Not One Among Them Whole* and *The Matriarch of Ruins*, Books I & II of *The Gettysburg Trilogy*—an intense, engaging, and heartbreaking story of the insanity of battlefield surgery at Gettysburg in 1863. Not for the faint of heart.

## The Kowalski Scenario

by Edison McDaniels

One Friday night early in my training as a brain surgeon, a teenager came to the emergency room with a burning fever. He had a toxic look about him, with skin the speckled russet color of spoiled potatoes, and just that smell too. He took in long, almost lackadaisical breaths and the best that could be said of him was how listless he seemed, as if living was an afterthought soon to be a distant memory.

"That ain't tiddlywinks," as my mom used to say, and they called me because the kid wasn't talking and wouldn't—or couldn't—move his right side. I looked over his labs, saw his white count was off the charts, and discussed him with the peds resident on call. She had already seen him, had looked in his ears, and hadn't liked what she'd seen.

"Cherry red," she said, referring to his left ear drum. "A stiff neck and he's hot too. Temp's 106—the boy's a damn fire hazard."

His brain is boiling. I thought how a fever of 106 is a black hole. Nothing escapes. If we didn't do something—and fast—he'd never wake up. If he survived at all.

"I'm guessing he has meningitis," the peds resident said in some far off land I was barely a part of. My mind had wandered.

"Like hell," I said, thinking out loud. "Meningitis might cause a high fever, even seizures. But it doesn't cause paralysis. Sounds more like a stroke."

"Strokes don't cause a fever, certainly not 106, and why would a thirteen-year-old have a stroke anyway?" she asked in her junior peds resident naiveté.

I could think of half a dozen reasons right off, like maybe he had hydrocephalus and he'd had a dozen operations and now he'd bled in his head. Or maybe he had moya moya, a ruptured aneurysm, a congenital heart defect, a brain tumor, or a hundred other obscure but scary as the day is long diagnoses.

But, of course, I was hearing hoofbeats and seeing zebras when what was right in front of me was a regular old mutt.

My mind was off wandering again when I heard a woman scream. His mother. I nearly ran into her as I rushed into the room, the peds resident only a step behind. I looked past mom to the boy, felt the fire pouring off him like heat waves from a coal furnace. He looked possessed of a devil thing: deathly pale, shaking all hibbidy gibbidy, his arms and legs going up and down and every which way. His back spasmed taut and his head kept lifting off the bed and smacking back down again. His eyes were about the widest I had ever seen—and they were pupilless. They had rolled so far upward only the whites were visible. He wasn't quite doing the Linda Blair thing with his head spinning 360, but hell was in session in that room all the same. Any moment he'd start spewing that green pea soup shit from his mouth.

"Ativan, 1 mg IV stat," the peds resident said. "Seizure, we need a lumbar puncture tray."

"Let me see his CT scan first." She was thinking to do a spinal tap on the kid. I was thinking we needed to do something, but not a spinal tap. A spinal tap wouldn't extinguish whatever fire was raging inside his head.

While the ER doc treated the seizure, the peds resident and I checked out the head CT. Sure enough, a barely perceptible rim of fluid lay over the left side of his brain. The tell-tale smoke to the fire that was killing him.

"Empyema," I said.

"Huh?"

"Subdural empyema. Pus over the surface of his brain. Needs his skull cracked right now. That crap's poisoning him and inflaming the underlying brain, hence the stroke-like symptoms. He may have had meningitis yesterday, but it's way beyond that now. What we got here's a neurosurgical emergency."

In the next few minutes I spoke with his mom (she looked terror stricken when I told her he needed emergency brain surgery, a look I had come to know well after nearly a year in the trenches—nobody is ever happy to see a brain surgeon, go figure) and made arrangements for him to go to surgery with Charlie, my chief resident, who concurred with my diagnosis.

"The kid's got a fucking boil in his head. Let's pop it," Charlie said with his usual screaming candor when I showed him the films.

I invited the peds resident to the OR with us, but she turned a little pale at the idea and said she'd take a rain check and join us another time. I doubted that, but she did help me wheel him upstairs to the pre-induction area. His seizure had stopped by then, but his breathing had shallowed, and I feared it might shallow further if we waited too long.

We didn't. Charlie and I had the boy in surgery within thirty minutes and had his skull cracked in another twenty. It was pus city in there all right, and, this was Charlie talking again, "smelled like an unwashed toilet." We irrigated the bad humors off the surface of his brain for another half hour—extinguishing the flames, so to speak—before piecing his skull back together with a few metal plates and screws.

It was after ten when I came out, just in time to hear the *chop, chop, chop* of the helicopter landing. It carried a twenty-eight year old man who'd shattered the

windshield of his car with his head thirty miles down the freeway. He was drunk—God watches over such fools, or so they say—and he didn't have a scratch on him otherwise. He wasn't waking up though, so after an hour I pretty much had no choice but to drill a hole in his head and place a pressure monitor. It showed normal and I tucked him into the ICU confident the major issue was alcohol. That whole process took about two hours, by which time there were two more waiting for me in the ER.

They were also men, both under thirty, and had fought each other outside a downtown bar. One of them had a hyperacute epidural hematoma, a huge clot of blood needing urgent surgical attention pressing inward on his brain. The other was lethargic but still conscious. His scan showed a contusion, a bruise really, in his left temporal lobe. I thought he could wait.

I called Charlie again and for the second time that night we did an emergent craniotomy. It was a quick case, maybe ninety minutes, and undoubtedly saved the man's life. Two-thirds of the way through that operation, a nurse called from the ER to say she was having trouble with the contusion guy. He had grown increasingly agitated and now she couldn't get his blood pressure down.

When I'd first seen him, he'd been lethargic but arousable, and his blood pressure hadn't been an issue. That it had become so was not only disconcerting, it might be lethal. I scrubbed out and ran downstairs to check on him. He wasn't just unconscious, he was unarousable. When I pulled his eyelids back, his pupils were big as frying pans and didn't react to light. I ordered mannitol and got a follow-up scan, but it was too late.

What had been a tolerable bruise—tolerable meaning he could get by without surgery if it didn't enlarge—was now a massive clot distorting his brain beyond any tolerability whatsoever. I was almost certainly looking at a dead brain on that scan. Even so, his heart was still beating and I couldn't bring myself to write him off completely. He was my age after all, and he had been awake on arrival—lethargic, but awake. I couldn't help but think his demise was my fault. I decided I couldn't let him die.

As if I had that kind of power.

I called Charlie. He had just gotten in bed and I hated to wake the guy, but that's how it goes. I explained the situation.

"The Kowalski scenario," he said, his voice betraying how deeply the sandman dogged him.

"Operating on a dead man. After Tommy Kowalski. He had a thing for operating on the dead. Don't recall him ever bringing one back though. You wanna operate on the dead, Dozier?"

"You don't think we should do it?"

"Fuckin A, Dozier. Did you call to tell me you were seeing a dead man in the ER? Or because you think you can save him?"

"All right then. Rack 'em, stack 'em, and crack 'em. Get started. I'll be there before the blade parts the flesh." I heard not a wit of sleep in his voice now.

I brought the guy upstairs for our third crani of the night. His heart was still beating, maybe just out of habit. His brain, a substantial part of it anyway, oozed out of his head like toothpaste under pressure as soon as we opened a window on the innards of his skull. Awful to watch.

I thought how a head full of pus was preferable to toothpaste brain.

The Kowalski scenario, no doubt about it. I was operating on a dead man. His heart was still beating, but only because it hadn't got the memo yet. His bruise had

<sup>&</sup>quot;How's that?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Didn't say that."

<sup>&</sup>quot;But you—"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Because I want to save him."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Want's got no goddamn place in it. You ain't God."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I think we can save him."

blossomed massively—filling his skull with blood and squeezing his brain as if it was a sponge you could wring out—while I had been in the OR with the other guy, who, incidentally, was his assailant. By saving the assailant, I had put the victim beyond all hope. I suddenly hated my job.

#### Why hadn't I taken him first?

Charlie and I got him through surgery and the dead guy's heart kept beating. His heart was still beating when I made rounds later that morning, as well as when I came back after lunch. He was a mushhead, a dead head on a ventilator with a beating heart.

He was never going to recover and I knew it. He would die, no doubt about that, but not before his family went through their own private little hell. That first morning, I met his wife Dana at his bedside. As we spoke, she held his hand and would steal small glances at him, which made the walls seem they were closing in on me. It wasn't about me, of course, but the walls closed in just the same.

"Me and Tony, we got three kids. What am I gonna tell them?"

I wished she hadn't used his name. Using his name made him real. Made him a person. Then I thought *persons—people—die. This person should have died. I should have let him die.* 

I had no answer for her.

They had three kids and he coached the oldest one's T-ball team. Tony was a crane operator, the sort used to build high rise buildings. He was in good shape too, probably from climbing those tower cranes every day. For the next week and more, when Dana wasn't around, one of his crane buds was.

It was obvious to all, except perhaps Dana, that he couldn't survive long like this. A bowl of spaghetti had a higher IQ, and a bowl of Jello more spontaneous movement. I couldn't believe I'd done this to him. I wished he'd die.

I could hardly stand it. I lost my appetite and couldn't sleep. In my sleep deprivation, I had a dream of walking into the ICU and every bed was filled by

mushheads. Every goddamn one of them was named Tony. Tony Kowalski. Then I looked again. Not Tony but Tommy. Tommy Kowalski.

Fucking Tommy Kowalski, who never met a dead man he didn't want to operate on.

Not even Grace, my girlfriend, was able to comfort me. Every time she tried I pushed her away, told her she just didn't understand.

"It's the goddamn Kowalski scenario."

Grace had no idea what the hell I was talking about. She tried to understand though, I have to give her that. But in the end she always looked at me the way you'd look at a street person who hadn't bathed in days. I think she pitied me. To her credit, I think her feelings were aroused out of what she perceived as me suffering. Grace wanted to relieve my distress. But of course she couldn't do that. It was my own private little hell. Separate and distinct even from Dana and her kids.

I thought about quitting.

\*

The final night of this torture, for the record the eighth day since Tony's brain had turned to cornmeal under my watch, Charlie and I were sitting in a Chinese diner across from the hospital. I sipped soup and ate won-tons in a state one ratchet short of catatonia. My head throbbed and the odor of poo poo chicken, or whatever the hell Charlie was eating, wasn't helping.

"That chicken really stinks," I said after picking at my food for what seemed an eternity but was probably no more than a few minutes.

"Thanks Dozier. I get one lousy meal in twenty-four hours and you gotta piss on it."

"I ain't cut out for this."

"Really," Charlie said. I couldn't tell if it was a question or a confirmation. "You think that guy would be walking and talking if you'd taken out that contusion?"

"I do."

"Why didn't you take him first then?"

"Cause the other guy was dying."

"No. Not right."

I dropped my spoon and it plopped soup on the table. I leaned back in my chair. "What the fuck? You were there that night. The other dude was dying in front of us."

"Yeah, he was. But he wasn't just dying. He was dying *faster*." Charlie looked up from his stinking chicken.

I felt like I was going to vomit. I doubt it was on account of his chicken. "I don't get it. That guy's dead because of me."

"Did you hit him over the head?"

"Of course not."

"Exactly. We're surgeons Zach, not gods. You didn't put him here. We don't get to decide who lives and who dies. We treat the stuff we can and are humbled whatever the outcome. You didn't take this guy first because the other guy was dying faster. You triaged. You—we—did what we could. If we'd have taken the contusion first, the epidural would have died."

I sat upright in my chair. He had a point.

"Early in my training, I might even have been an intern, I saw old man Gifford take a large tumor out of a retarded woman's head. I think her name was Sandy or some such." He thought a moment. "Well, her name doesn't matter. It turned out to be benign, a meningioma. The poor woman hadn't been able to participate in the decision to operate though, on account of her being retarded like I said. The tumor itself wasn't really a problem, though it likely would have been down the road. A year? Five years? Ten years? Who the fuck can say. Anyway, her sister made the choice and we cracked her open. The surgery went well. She woke up no problem a

few hours after we came out, in the ICU of course. But by the second day she was sucking wind. Brain swelling. No matter what we did we couldn't control it and she just kept slipping away. On the fifth day she bought the farm. That really fucked her sister up. There was no consoling her and she wouldn't stop crying. Old man Gifford wasn't exactly the comforting type though I guess you couldn't know that since he died before you came on. Anyway, he walked up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, right there in the fucking ICU waiting room in front of God and country. She said again how it was her fault and he said no, it damn well wasn't. He asked if she'd put that tumor in her sister's head. She, of course, said no. 'Exactly,' Gifford said. He told her she was no more responsible for her sister's death than she was for her getting the tumor in the first place."

#### I nodded.

Charlie went on. "That kinda shut her up, or at least she stopped bawling, and we walked out leaving her in a heap on one of the chairs. But I was curious and so had to ask, 'Dr. Gifford, do you feel responsible for that woman's death?' Of course Gifford was old as dirt even back then, and he wasn't ever one for saying much to us residents. If the man ever uttered a sentence longer than five words to one of us residents, I never heard it.

"Except put me in my own grave right now if he wasn't feeling talkative that day. He kept right on shuffling down the hall like he used to do, didn't lose a beat so far as I could tell. 'Son,' he said when I was beginning to wonder if I'd made a grave mistake—literally. 'I didn't put that tumor in her head either.' Then he did stop, and he turned real slow like and looked me in the eyes.

"I thought he was gonna fire me for asking that question, truth be told. It was the Queen's rule—you didn't ever disturb Gifford, and you sure as hell didn't ask the old man a question. I stood there looking back at him, and I swear I could feel the blood solidifying in my veins. I thought I was a goner.

"But he didn't fire me. What he did was the opposite really. He said, 'The thing about neurosurgery, son, is sometimes you do everything right and things still go belly up. Like a fish in a stagnate pond. There's plenty of water, but no oxygen dissolved in it. To the fish, it seems like they have control, like they've done

everything just right. But that's a goddamn illusion, isn't it? They can suck all the water they want, but in the end they're still going belly up. Us doctors—neurosurgeons in particular—we're like the fish. Us having control is only a goddamn illusion. You'd be well advised to remember that. You do your best and if that isn't enough, well, don't beat yourself up over the result.'"

My pager went off. I almost chucked it, but that would only have made my head hurt more.

"And you know what?" Charlie asked.

"What?"

"That arrogant dead sonofabitch was right."

I nodded, then thumbed the button on my pager when it shrieked at me again. I squinted through my headache to read the message on the screen.

Tony died 5 min ago.

I read it again and took a deep breath. The pain in my head receded, and for the first time in over a week I relaxed.

"You knew that guy wasn't going to survive before we took him to surgery, didn't you?" I asked.

"I suspected."

"Then why the hell did we operate?"

"Because you gotta see this shit for yourself, Dozier. That's what the goddamn Kowalski scenario is all about. You don't do seven years of residency to learn how to operate. Hell, give me twelve months and I could teach a bright chimp to operate. You, being somewhat smarter, could learn operating in six solid months. You do seven years of residency to learn *when* to operate."

So there it was, I thought. The Kowalski scenario wasn't so much about operating on dead people, it was about when it was appropriate to operate at all. More to the point, it was about knowing when enough was enough.

I wish to God the lesson I learned that night had stuck. Knowing when enough is enough would have made things a hell of a lot easier down the road.

But that's a story for another time.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Ben Leib spent twelve years as a waiter, a student (both undergraduate and graduate), and an alcoholic intravenous drug user. He now happily works at sea five weeks out of every ten. You can check out his publication history at benleib.com.

## **Tenderness**

by Ben Leib

The old cardroom was closed and the windows looked onto a wall of darkness that made the city seem inside out: after midnight, the public world should have been dark and invisible and all dwellings should have been lit from within. The doorway was three glass walls cut into the storefront from the sidewalk.

Audrey slapped me in the face. "You fucking son of a bitch." She was laughing.

I took hold of her wrist; she flailed to free herself and stumbled into me. She took advantage of that off-kilter momentum and jammed a shoulder into my chest, pressing me backwards so that I bumped the doorway window.

"Hey." I smiled but my amusement was dwindling. "Careful now."

I grabbed her around the shoulders. Audrey shrieked and wriggled away, but fell into another window as she did so. It boomed in its frame but did not break.

"Ouch," Audrey said as her ass bounced on the pavement. "You motherfucker."

The bouncer from the Asti was upon me before I knew that anything I'd done could have been interpreted as an act of violence. He had been perched upon his

stool in the next doorway over, and we'd nodded to him moments earlier, when leaving the bar. The bouncer had been indifferent then, but now looked violent. Without asking any questions he grabbed me by the collar, twisting the fabric of my shirt into his fist. He had his right arm cocked.

Audrey jumped to her feet and took hold of the bouncer's elbow. "No, wait."

"What's going on? Are you all right?"

"We're just playing. He didn't hurt me. He's just playing."

The bouncer looked me in the eyes, and I was made to understand that he would remember and hate me always.

\*

Audrey smiled at me from behind the counter of Pergolesi. "Double espresso?"

"Triple. I don't know how I'm moving."

I looked around at the other baristas working there—tattooed guys with too much body hair, and handsomely curved women wearing high-assed jeans. Audrey had on a black blouse that showed off the two doves tattooed on either side of her chest. Her eyes squinted. Audrey had the most delicate blue eyes, lovely and melancholic and incapable of other emotions because of that crystalline blueness. But her bee-stung lips smiled in a way that I interpreted as genuine pleasure, and I was happy that she was happy to see me.

"You were drunk last night." She passed my coffee across the counter to me.

"Just another one like all the others." I didn't even think to reach for my wallet anymore when Audrey served me.

"Where you gonna be?"

"Around. I'll meet you when you get off work?"

\*

"I had an accident last night," Audrey said. I could tell from her voice that she was crying, though she would never admit to such a thing. I'd been lying on my futon, in my cube of a bedroom. The landline rested on a shelf mounted to the wall over my bed and the cord dangled down from above me. I sat up with the phone to my ear. She said, "I fell. I think I passed out."

"I was blacked out." Her voice cracked. "My face is pretty fucked up. I have to go to the dentist in a few days." I didn't say anything. "I knocked out the four teeth on the top. I'm not very pretty right now."

"What can I do? Do you need anything?"

"I might need to stop drinking."

\*

Audrey and Bri were acting strange when they showed up. I was glad to see Bri, because I considered her one of the better influences Audrey had, but I couldn't figure out what was going on with them. They were sitting beside each other, kind of sprawled out on the floor of my bedroom, sifting through my vinyl.

"Play something for us," Audrey lisped.

"Yeah," Bri said, staring over my shoulder at the wall behind me. "Be our DJ."

I eyed them, one then the other. Bri wouldn't meet my gaze, but Audrey stared at me with a mix of lovingness and apology and concern... There was too much I read in that stare—so much that it must have been more a reflection of my own gaze than anything Audrey was feeling.

Her top lip curled in, but it was so swollen you couldn't quite tell she was missing her teeth until she spoke. The rest was a network of scabs that became densest along a fault line that bisected her face vertically—down her forehead, nose, mouth, and chin. I understood that she'd passed out on her feet and had fallen straight forward, straight down. "Play us something cheerful but still dark."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You don't remember?"

I stood, riffled through my CDs, pulled out a Pixies album, and put it into my CD player.

"Fuck this. I want something that I've never heard before. Put some effort into this."

I found a Stooges album, queued it up, and played Search and Destroy.

"A little better."

We sat there for a moment and the girls talked amongst themselves in a coded speak that I could not decipher. I searched through my records and found Irma Thomas. I was hovering over them, queueing up the record, when Audrey jumped to her feet and ran to the bathroom. I stared down at Bri when I heard Audrey begin throwing up. "We split a quarter of mushrooms," she said. "We didn't drink anything."

I shook my head.

"Audrey told me not to say."

\*

We closed out the bar. I was smiling because it was a good night. Both Audrey and I were drunk, but we were the right drunk. We were still laughing—her ceramics shimmering a few shades too pale. We were still using language in the ways that people expect language should be used. "I have to walk home," Audrey said. We left the Avenue, nodding to the bouncer who sat on a stool in the doorway. "Are you going to walk me tonight?"

"Sure."

We stumbled down Pacific Avenue and turned up Laurel away from the river. We walked a few blocks and then took a right on Center Street. Audrey shoved into me while we walked.

"Watch it now, little girl." I took her hand in my hand

She held my hand for a few seconds and then shook free. "Don't be such a bitch," she said.

We walked up the hill, across the wooden railway bridge, and onto Westcliff Drive. I could hear the surf washing into the cliffs below us and could see moon and stars reflected chaotically against the pulsating surface of the Pacific.

"You're a fucking pussy." Audrey shoved me again.

She shoved me one more time. I grabbed onto her and we fell into the lawn of the small park that lined the pathway there. We wrestled, rolling over each other. Audrey was small but she was wily. Also, I was invested in drawing this out for as long as possible so I only did my half-best to subdue her.

We both stopped. I had her hands pinned over her head and was straddling her. She'd been trying to escape and putting up a good fight. Audrey wasn't easily defeated. She always had her dukes up.

When I let go of her, she drew a hand to her mouth. She pulled it away and looked at it. "You made me bleed." She sounded sad, and I understood that I'd been too rough, understood that Audrey would never have said, *You're playing too hard*. She pulled her fingers from her lip and showed me the blood on them. Then she crammed the fingers against my mouth so that we were kind of tit for tat.

I could see where her top lip had split against the new teeth. She must have hit her face on my shoulder. I leaned over her, examining, and then I lowered my face to hers. She held my head there for a moment. I tasted a hint of the saltiness from the wound.

It didn't last long—less than a minute. Then we stood and we kept walking. After a couple more blocks, we arrived at Manor Ave. We took a right and soon we were standing in front of the small house that Audrey shared with a few of her friends.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm gonna kick your ass."

<sup>&</sup>quot;In your wettest dreams you could kick my ass."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Ow," she screamed.

She didn't hesitate for a moment when we reached her driveway, just kept on walking straight up to her front door. "Well, good night."

"Sorry for hurting you."

"It didn't hurt." She was already at her doorstep and I remained standing at the edge of her yard. "See you tomorrow," she hollered as she let herself into the house.

When the door closed behind her I turned around and began walking back towards town.

\*

We'd been drinking together in an alley and then decided to head over to The Avenue. Audrey had her tip money from the day, and I had thirty dollars or so. We got ourselves drinks when we arrived. Audrey ordered a three-dollar well vodka and cranberry and tipped a dollar. I bought a Budweiser and a shot of Ancient Age. I'd sip that pint of beer all night, but I'd return for more shots.

We found a booth and took a seat. We stared at each other from across the table.

"Don't look at me like that," she said.

"I wasn't."

Within a few minutes she'd drained her glass. "I need another drink." She sidled up to the bar beside a young-ish guy who was smiling. I watched as Audrey pressed against him ever so subtly. He said something to her. She was beaming up at him. He put a hand on her shoulder, and then she touched his shoulder. Another minute or two passed, and he pulled out his wallet and flagged down the bartender.

Audrey returned to the table with a full vodka cranberry.

She was smiling. I was not.

\*

We walked together from the coffee shop to the bar. Audrey had finished her shift an hour earlier, but we'd killed time on the employee porch of Pergolessi Café, sipping bourbon and malt liquor while Audrey smoked endless weed. Though no stranger to other drugs, I did just fine with booze. I didn't smoke weed before going out—it was a rule for me. We all had our rules. They helped us survive, I figured.

It was still early and we found an empty booth towards the front of the bar. "So, we're hanging out then?" I said.

"Uh, yeah. That's what we're doing, right?"

"I mean you're not going to bail on me?" It was a mistake, for I was planting a little seed in Audrey's mind that leeched nourishment from vodka cranberries.

\*

"I'm going to say hi to my friend," Audrey told me. There were several tumblers littering the table top, each with different levels of ice melted in them. There were several empty shot glasses as well. Audrey had the familiar lilt to her voice. Her pretty eyes drifted through squinted lids. "Watch my purse."

I nodded, but I was already beginning to feel like a very small man, like a man whose love could only be harvested for pennies.

\*

Strangers joined me at the booth. At first it was a couple who asked if they could share the seat, seeing that I was sitting alone. I told them I was holding the place for a friend, but they were welcome to sit. In time, their friends joined us, squeezing me further against the wall, and I held Audrey's things in my lap to make space.

I knew where she was because I'd been scanning the room all night. I kept hoping that she'd move on. She hadn't. She was squeezed into a booth with five men. She sat between two of them. A lech with tattooed forearms had an arm around Audrey's shoulders. I could tell by the look on her face that she was drunk to the

point of delirium, which also meant that she'd become irrational and potentially hostile.

Three strangers had to stand up to let me out of the table. I grabbed Audrey's purse and her sweater.

"You coming back?"

"No, the table's all yours." I was embarrassed that I'd sat there for so long. I walked to the bar. "Hey Danielle."

"What do you need, hon?"

"Jim Beam double, Bud back."

I downed the drink as soon as it was poured, and followed it up with the little glass of beer. I let it settle, experiencing an unpleasant wave of heat in the already crowded barroom. Audrey's purse dangled by its strap from my elbow. I had the sweater in my fist.

I walked over to the table where Audrey sat. "Here's your shit." I held her stuff over the middle of the table and dropped it.

Audrey said nothing, just gave me an icy blue stare of drunken hate. I couldn't meet that gaze. Instead, I eyeballed the tattooed guy until he blinked, and then I walked out of the bar wishing I'd punched him in the face.

\*

My phone rang. I picked up my alarm clock. It was 7 a.m. The phone rang again. "Fuck." It was Audrey's voice. "I need your help."

"Again?"

"Fuck."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know the address."

"Go into the living room," I said. "Find a piece of mail."

"I'll call you back," she whispered.

\*

It wasn't a long bike ride, less than ten minutes door to door, but I'd ridden hard. Audrey was sitting on the front porch. She was in the same clothes she'd worn the night before. She spotted me, stood from the porch, and made her way to the curb. Her hoodie was the warmest thing she had on, and it was a chilly morning. Her cheeks and chin were pink. I should have ridden with an extra jacket but as it stood I only wore my thermal and a t-shirt. My fingers hurt to the point of numbness, and my knuckles were stiff.

"I want to go in there and say something to him," I said.

"C'mon." She took me by the elbow. As much as I wanted to hurt this stranger, I recognized my weaknesses and capitulated. I stared at Audrey and she nodded. "I'll be fine."

I let her hold my arm for a bit while I pushed my bike, and then we just walked side by side as we made our way back to her place. I resisted the temptation to scold her, though my heart was breaking and rage seemed a symptom of that. Then Audrey said, "Thank you for coming," and all my resentment melted to self-loathing, because in this, of all moments, Audrey felt I was the one who needed tenderness.

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<sup>&</sup>quot;Just walk me home."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Audrey, I want to say something to that man right now."

## HONORABLE MENTION

Thomas Cannon's story about his son is the lead story in the anthology *Cup of Comfort for Parents of Children with Autism.* He also has his humorous novel *The Tao of Apathy* available on Amazon. His poems and short stories have been published in many print and electronic journals. He volunteers as a presenter and the social media director for The Lakefly Writer's Conference in Oshkosh, WI.

# The Common Room

by Thomas Cannon

Holding his coffee mug and jiggling his foot, Victor sits in the common room of the psychiatric wing to avoid the nurses on staff. He is also waiting for a chance to talk with Chrissy, who is doing the same clinical rotation on this wing. She is a thin girl with thinner blonde hair and Victor's sole goal for the morning is to get to know her better.

Not for the first time, he does the math. Chrissy is a traditional student, which means he is at least eight years older. It makes him announce in his head what he has already decided—he can still be young. There is no other option. And not pass for a college kid, but be one. He keeps himself clean-shaven and gets an expensive haircut every two weeks. He holds his phone low in his lap and texts and twitters with the best of them. I'm more of a slacker than any of them, he thinks, those amateurs actually initiate one to ones with their patients to keep busy. Victor does not see how that will make the day go any faster.

Unlike the clients on AODA, the Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse unit where he wants to work, these patients seem hopeless to him. Victor can see that they will be in and out of treatment facilities their whole lives. Sure, they might make

improvements, but only until they decide to stop taking their medication or their medication stops taking them to reality. Their psychotic disorder, their personality disorder or their anxiety disorder circles them and waits for a door to open.

Still Victor tries to look dedicated because Chrissy has an older sister that is bipolar and this is the population she wants to work with once she graduates. It's the reason he is sitting alone. He had gotten Chrissy to come and talk to him, but then she responded to the first chance to help a patient out.

Nothing is getting me off this couch, he thinks to himself. His next thought is that he just jinxed himself because an eighteen-year-old suicidal comes over and sits down next to him. Her name is Merry and aside from the stupid name her parents gave her, she is all right in Victor's reckoning. She tends to be morose, but has a dark sense of humor. He doesn't even mind that she has a crush on him. Women in general like his good looks and his handsomeness makes him popular with the patients. His instructors tell him otherwise, but popularity with the patients does have an effect on evaluations. Still, he doesn't even give her a noncommittal head nod in hopes she will go find someone else to talk to—like an animal playing dead so that a predator moves on.

She turns towards him and, with an elbow on the back of the couch, forks her unpainted nails firmly into her long red hair. "Dude, you got a cigarette?"

"Merry, you don't have privileges. Even if I had a cigarette, it wouldn't do you much good."

"Oh, you have cigarettes. You smoked over lunch. I can smell it." She pulls her hand out of her hair and flicks her fingers to let the entangled strands fall from them. "What do you care, anyway?"

He half-shrugs his shoulders before he catches himself and changes it to stretching out his neck. "Listen, those things don't do anything for you except mess up your lungs. I know. I'm a nurse, remember?"

"You're just a student. Come on, Victor. You're as bored as I am. It will give me something to do."

Merry slides a leg, wrapped in tight faded-to-white jeans, up on the couch towards him. "I have a plan. I have a friend here that's leaving soon and she's going to give me her shoelaces."

"Yeah, every suicidal patient here has a plan. But the staff knows all the tricks. They will stop you. They always do." He takes a big sip of his coffee. He is supposed to ask her questions about her plans and then get her to commit to safe behaviors. To him, his comments are more direct and effective.

She scoffs. "I thought you were cool. I guess you're even older than you look. I have you pegged as someone that washed out of other careers and just landed in the nursing program." She bites her pinky nail. "Come on, Victor. You're a loser just like me."

"I'm not a loser." At this point he decides that he should have included her in the 'not being a loser' category. But he said what he had said. In fact he wants to add that he has not failed at other careers. They just did not keep his interest. "You know, you really don't want to kill yourself. You're just attention-seeking. I can tell by your stupid plan."

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to talk shit to me that way." Merry's last comment is pretty loud and Victor looks around the room to see if it has turned

<sup>&</sup>quot;Still. I don't want you to get addicted."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Don't worry about that. I'm killing myself long before cancer sets in."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sure you are. All talk like that does is keep you here." There goes nurse of the year, he thinks to himself, but he continues. "I should talk like that to get some attention. Am I supposed to think you're serious?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I got the scars on my wrists to prove it."

<sup>&</sup>quot;So you do. Why don't you go talk to your assigned nurse about it? They can help."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Why don't you give me a sip of that? I need caffeine."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Also against the rules."

heads in their direction, but there are just two elderly patients at a table across the room. A guy reading *Field & Stream* and a battered old lady coloring pictures of Sponge Bob Square Pants. They have both, on separate occasions, tried to flush their hearing aids down the toilets, so now their back-up hearing aids are locked up in the nursing station. Victor knows that if you want to converse with these two old people, which he didn't, you basically have to yell. Still, the last thing he wants is a confrontation, so he looks down at his watch.

Merry laughs at his reaction. Then she whispers, "Shit is better than the condescension everyone else gives me. Jesus. I can hear the staff in morning report bragging about the pithy advice they give to us patients."

"Listen." He looks around again for anyone witnessing the conversation. This time he sees Chrissy looking in on them from the doorway. She must have heard Merry laugh because she gives him an approving nod. Victor can see in that nod what Merry meant. It pisses him off too. "A real plan would be 'do what you had to do to get out of here.' Go to groups, take your medication, and stop talking about wanting to hurt yourself." Victor sees that getting out off the psychiatric wing is a key to getting better. He sees that for himself as well. The sooner he gets off this unit, the saner he will stay. In fact, he decides that once he gets rid of Merry, he will sneak off to the AODA unit and talk to the director about a job once he graduates.

"Well that was almost useful advice. I already got that speech. Several hundred times. I should be the poster child for mental health programs. They took me from a sad depressed child to a sad depressed adult. All it took was time."

"Fine, I take it back. I'm just telling you what I'd do if I were you. To me, going around telling people how suicidal you are seems kinda boring." He looks around the room again and then whispers, "I know this unit doesn't help anyone. You're going to do what you're going to do. I know that. You know that. You just can't do it here. The staff here keeps too close an eye on you. So you have to be not here if you want to end it all."

Merry looks at him. She opens her mouth, but doesn't say anything.

Merry participates in her groups and learns her medications and side-effects. After her talk with Victor, she engages with the other patients and helps the elderly patients walk down the hall and open their mail. Staff keeps an eye on that kind of activity so that patients did not take advantage of the more vulnerable. But they do not find any hint that Merry is insincere.

Neither can Victor, although his money is on her following his plan. This worries him and he decides to not call it his plan. After all, she could have figured things out on her own and chances are that her suicide attempts (past and future) are just cries for attention.

She never mentions their talk, but she likes to ask him, "Do you know what I want to do when I get out of here?" Then she poses different scenarios each time. "I want to go swimming. I want to get my driver's license. I want to go on a trip." Others praise her for making plans. Victor, however, hears, "I'm going to drown myself. I'm going to drive my car into a tree. I'm going to just disappear." He honestly can not tell if she was being devious.

He cannot pull her off to the side because he is not assigned to her. He can not tell the doctor that she is just doing well to get enough freedom to kill herself. She would tell them that he gave her the idea. He would flunk out of his clinical and Chrissy would stop seeing him since his success with Merry had been the right flourish to get her attention.

At the beginning of Merry's last week, he gets to talk to her. He comes late to her staffing and as long as he is up already, he can go get her. She is putting a puzzle together with another girl in the common room and jumps up when she sees him.

"Victor, they're going to tell me I can go home soon. They said I'm a real role model for the other patients and they are all proud of me." She looks up to him, her long hair clean and shimmering, and smiles. "I spent a long time in this loony bin, but finally they're going to let me get out of here."

"About that, Merry." He walks her into the hallway. "You haven't been following my plan have you? I just wanted to get you to participate in your treatment."

"Don't worry about me, Nurse Ratched. I know all about reverse psychology."

He likes her answer and the way she loops her arm around his and dances into the meeting room. He sits in for the rest of the meeting, smiles when she smiles at the good news and then spends the rest of the day chasing Chrissy. It is not until he was in bed with a good buzz on that he wonders if she had been performing the reverse psychology.

The next day is his day off. He spends it on Chrissy's front lawn smoking a brisket on her grill and drinking beer. He tells himself that he will talk to Merry the next day.

But the next day, Merry is gone. Her aftercare plan had come together easily so there was no reason to keep her. She is gone and afterward there is no bad news so he decides he has gotten lucky for once.

\*

It is August when Merry comes to his apartment door. He almost does not recognize her because she has cut her hair down to a jaw-length bob and is wearing bright red lipstick. He has not forgotten about her and guilt had pinched him in the days following her discharge. But he has his own things going on. He has graduated, so this is his last possible summer as a student and he is trying to live it up.

He feels his heart pound to see her. For a moment, he tries to figure out if he can just tell her it is not appropriate for her to be there and shut the door. "Merry," he says. "How the hell did you find me?"

She smiles and pushes past him. "I bet you thought you'd never see me again. In this lifetime, anyway."

Victor tosses his Taco Bell meal off the couch and makes a spot for her to sit down. Then he plops himself on the dirty-clothes-covered recliner. "Okay. Let's talk."

Merry walks into his kitchen and disappears from his view for a moment and then when she sits down, she drops a carving knife onto his coffee table. "It was important that I come here. You got anything to drink or some weed?"

"Jesus." He pushes himself razor straight and tries to read her face. She sits composed and comfortable, waiting for his answer. "My roommate has a stash. But he hates when I dig into it."

Merry smiles again. "I don't want any. I just wanted to see if my hunch was right."

"I'll get to the knife, Merry. We're going to discuss it. But first tell me how you know where I live."

"I found your profile on the university website. There's still not too many guys in the nursing program. Maybe, you think I've been stalking you, but—"

Victor hasn't been thinking that. He thought her plan was to kill herself in his living room, but now he has to consider that she wants to knife him. "The thing is, Victor. I know you're broken. That you agree with me that life isn't worth the pain you have to go through. You've thought so for a long time. Otherwise, you wouldn't have given me that advice. You fake being happy just like I did to get out of the hospital."

"Merry, you need to let go of your obsession with me. And your plan." Victor moves, but Merry grabs the knife long before he could have got to it.

"What a fucking thing to say to a suicidal girl." Merry gets a good grip on the knife after turning it so that the point touches her chest. "Our obsessions are the only things we have."

Headlines run through his head. Teenage girl found dead in man's apartment. Suicidal girl kills her nurse, then self. "I saved you," he says. He is loud and that scares him. "It got you past your depression. Gave you time to think and change your mind."

"No. I followed your plan. Right up until you didn't show up on my last day. I actually expected you to be waiting for me in the parking lot. I thought all along that we had a death pact. Or would at least fuck. Strange as that was... what was stranger was that even though I was working your plan, I did get caught up in my treatment. I felt happier than I've ever been. I just looked at it as a taste of peace that would disappear as soon as I got out."

"Despite being chock-full of coping skills; turns out my shithole of a life was still a shithole."

"Then why didn't you... kill yourself? I mean, right away?"

"I wondered if you'd have the guts to ask that." Merry twirls the knife end over end. "But of course, you do. Insensitive question but Victor gots to know, so Victor gots to ask."

"Okay. So you're not going to tell me." He looks around and decides he cannot make it out the front door, but he could get his bedroom door shut before she could get him. He glances at his door. Then he folds his arms. "It's okay. As long as you are okay. Forget me, Merry. You have so much going for you. Enough to make me jealous."

"You know, I was just trying to kiss ass by walking Mildred and Henry back and forth to their rooms, but it made me feel good. It made me realize... I was going to say something to you. That's why I'm here. But I don't feel like it anymore."

"No." He swallows. "I want to hear it."

"Oh, If Victor is interested, I better tell all." She stops spinning the knife in her hand and points it at her gut like a game of spin the bottle. "It made me see I was a good person. Or at least I was when I wasn't pitying myself. I could be a good person. But you. I figured." Her mouth clamps tight for a moment. Her painted lips the color of her hair. "You seemed to be living a life. And you're not a good person. If someone like you was allowed to have an all right life, then why shouldn't I? I mean you have chances for a good life. You just squander them."

"Really. Tell me about these chances I blow."

"You graduated with good grades, but don't have a job yet. You were dating that skinny blonde Chrissy, but she left you. Left you pretending you were happy to be single by going out drinking."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Did it?

"How do you know that?" For a moment, he wishes she would take the knife and kill herself right then and there.

"Sorry, but you asked me." She looks at him. "I didn't have to look hard."

"Fine. Let me have it. Describe my life as Merry sees it." His hands trembles with rage, but also with anticipation. An anticipation that he felt as a kid when he crashed his bike and hoped he had broken a bone. Otherwise, no one in his family would acknowledge he'd been hurt.

"That's just the thing. I thought you were happy. You want people to see this cool life. But you actually try so little that someone like me that hates computers could find out the truth. I found out how long you've been going to college, and your police record. I followed your Facebook page like a soap opera. I saw all your pictures of you with that Miss Perfect that was too young for you. Then I saw she got a job in Michigan on her page and then your status go to single. Yet you still posted things on her page at all hours of the day and night. Until she blocked you. To top it off were all the mobile pics of you drunk with your buddies. You know if you want to be an AODA nurse, you can't have those up."

"There's nothing wrong about living it up before you're old. That's what you should be doing. Kill yourself when your thirty, but not before."

"Admit to me that's all you think about doing."

He feels all his blood and everything he ever felt rush up to his pounding head. "I'm talking about you. Make a new plan to put it off for a few years."

"Say it out loud, Victor. For once to somebody. It will feel good. It will feel so good." She brings the knife to her chest. "Admit it to me. I'm going to kill myself so I'll take it to the grave. No harm done."

"Yes. Yes." Victor lets out a sob. "Thirty God-damn years is enough to know if you're cut out for life or not. I gave myself that. I gave myself until I was sixteen, then twenty. Then I allowed myself until thirty. But thirty shit-filled years is enough.

"Maybe you're here to do what I am not brave enough to do."

Merry extends her arms as far as she can while holding the knife. Victor reaches out and grabs it so that they both hold it.

She brings it down as hard as she can into the coffee table. It stops just into the wood. Her hand slips so that the blade slices into her palm. Her blood rushes onto the table and the knife, and through his fingers.

For a moment, both stare at the knife and her bleeding hand. The blood belongs to both of them. Merry asks a question then, a question that is right to ask at that moment, but will still be good a good question after Victor goes and gets everything he needs to stop the blood or even after Victor drives her home. "What do we do now?"

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## HONORABLE MENTION

T.C. Powell is a Los Angeles native now braving the rains of the Pacific Northwest alongside his beautiful wife and daughter. He loves both reading and writing all kinds of literature, and has been fortunate enough to have short fiction published by venues like *Flash Fiction Online*, *New Myths*, and *Grimdark Magazine*, and poetry by the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Strong Verse*, and *jerseyworks*, among others. His woeful web presence can be found at <a href="http://tcpowellfiction.blogspot.com">http://tcpowellfiction.blogspot.com</a>.

## What He Loved Most

by T. C. Powell

Miklos watched through his window in annoyance as the moving truck rumbled into the neighboring driveway. A family emerged from the truck's cab: a couple in their early thirties, and a little girl. She wore a sparkly purple-pink fairy costume and carried a star-tipped plastic wand, though Halloween remained months away. Immediately the child began to scamper around her new yard, striking flowers with her wand, trampling the grass, laughing and making other such distractions.

Miklos shut the window, drew down the blinds, and turned back to the nearly-finished canvas: a discord of angry, streaking colors, like woes freshly released from Pandora's box. Dark, moody and violent.

It was no worse than what he had been doing thirty years ago, when his works were discussed at cocktail parties in high-rise apartments in the city. Then again, it was no better than his last forty paintings, the bulk of which moldered under canvas cloth in the garage.

But this one had to sell.

He phoned Kathy, his agent, and she sounded excited to hear from him... though of course it was her job to sound excited. While she promised to drive over immediately, Miklos knew that he no longer rated the kind of service that the younger, hipper artists in her stable received. "Immediately" could be a couple of hours or longer, so he felt in no hurry as he made the final brushstrokes on the painting he called "Obsolescence."

\*

A few days later there was an unexpected knock at the front door. Miklos opened it to reveal the smiling young family from the adjacent house, come to introduce themselves.

They had been "saying hello" with their noise for some time now, but Miklos introduced himself and shook the hand of the parents, Steven and Jennifer. It looked as though they expected an invitation inside, so Miklos stepped aside, trying to remember his manners.

"I'm afraid that I don't get much company, so I don't keep things as clean as perhaps I should."

The couple came into the living room with their daughter in tow. She was dressed up again, apparently a regular occurrence, but today like a pirate.

"Oh, don't worry," Steven said as Miklos led them to his sofa. "It's better than we're doing. We still have boxes everywhere. We have to move a lot for Jennifer's job and sometimes I feel like it's just better to leave everything packed."

Miklos smiled. "Would you like some tea? I always have tea in the house. It helps me to relax."

Both Steven and Jennifer said they would like a cup, so Miklos had turned towards the kitchen when the young girl spoke up.

"What else you got? Any juice or anything?"

"Caitlyn," Jennifer said, "remember what we spoke about outside."

"Sorry," she said. "Never mind about the juice."

Miklos nodded. "I can't make any promises, but let me see what I have. For juice, I might only have grapefruit. Would that suffice?"

Caitlyn wrinkled her nose. "Eww, no. Grapefruit's disgusting."

Jennifer tittered nervously. "Please forgive her. She's excited from the move."

"I understand," Miklos said and walked to the kitchen.

He returned minutes later bearing a tray with mugs of hot tea, a plate of buttered toast, and a small glass of pink-orange juice. He sat it on the coffee table.

Caitlyn eyed the juice distrustfully.

"Yes," Miklos said, "it's grapefruit, but try it anyway. You might like it this time." He put a hand aside his mouth, to whisper fake-confidentially to the parents: "I put sugar in it—two whole teaspoons—it'll taste like candy."

"So, Mr. Spielman," Jennifer said, taking a piece of toast, "Steven and I were just admiring your artwork."

She referred to the canvas still in the corner of the room on the easel. Kathy had taken one look, smiled, and said that she would work tirelessly to see that it got sold. That meant she thought it was junk; his real successes had always been met with silence.

Miklos had put off moving the thing to the garage, and now it had cost him. "Oh? Were you thinking about maybe purchasing it? I can give you an excellent deal—a real 'welcome to the neighborhood' special."

Jennifer laughed politely and Steven said, "We haven't discussed decoration yet, or color scheme, but we'll certainly keep it in mind."

"It's very interesting though," Jennifer said. "What do you call it?"

"I call it 'Grapefruit Juice.' Speaking of, what do you think, little girl?"

Caitlyn had finished the entire glass and set it back on the tray. She was now at work on her second piece of toast, the buttery evidence smeared across her lips. "The real juice, you mean? Pretty good. But I don't like that painting at all. It's ugly."

Jennifer sat up stiffly. "That is simply the last... Caitlyn, we're going." Jennifer stood from the sofa and pulled Caitlyn to her feet. "I'm really very sorry, Mr. Spielman."

Caitlyn followed her mother to the front door without complaint, but also without any apparent shame.

"Wait one second," Miklos said, "I have a question for little Caitlyn, here. It's been a long time since my work has received such a harsh review, and I'd like to know: what makes you say that it's ugly?"

She looked at the painting. "It just is. Look at it. All you did was take some random paints and wipe them across without even trying to make it look like anything. The colors aren't even pretty. It's like a cat threw up."

"Oh my god," Jennifer said, yanking Caitlyn hard by the arm, "you are never leaving the house again. Steven, are you staying?"

Steven set down his tea. "No, I'm afraid we've worn out our welcome. Mr. Spielman, I hope we'll be allowed back sometime. We'll leave our daughter at home."

Miklos smiled. "No, that's quite all right, she's welcome back."

"You're too kind."

As the family walked out to the porch, Miklos called after Caitlyn, "Little girl, do you think that you could make a better painting than I have?"

"Easy," she said.

"Then do it," he called. "Bring it to me."

Miklos regarded her as her mother dragged her home. Caitlyn didn't try to fight free of her mother's grasp, but neither was there surrender in her demeanor. If he asked her again what she thought of his paintings, he knew she would tell him straightaway. She carried her pirate get-up properly.

Miklos nodded to himself, chuckling, then closed the door.

\*

Caitlyn returned to Miklos' doorstep the following Saturday dressed as a firefighter. She carried a sheet of notebook paper, carefully turned away, so that Miklos couldn't see what was on it.

"Ahh," he said, "the masterpiece. The work to put all of mine to shame. I'm very excited to see it. Your parents know that you're here, little girl?"

"Yeah. They didn't want me to come over. Afraid I'd hurt your feelings or something. But I reminded them that you invited me. That you wanted to see this." With a flourish, she thrust the piece of paper forward at Miklos. He had to stop himself from laughing.

"Quite right. Please come in so I can take a look at this properly." He took the thin piece of paper from her as though receiving a blessing from the Pope and led her to the sofa. "Now, before we get started, can I get you anything? Juice?"

Miklos paused a moment on hearing that, then continued, "One grapefruit juice, sweetened, coming right up."

He returned a minute later with the juice in hand and gave it to Caitlyn. Then he took a pair of slender eyeglasses from his sweater pocket and slipped them on.

"You wear glasses?" she asked. "Do you use them when you're painting?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes, please."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I have orange. I have apple. Fresh from the store."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Grapefruit?"

Miklos winked at her. "The stuff I paint, it works better without them. Now, let us see."

He examined her drawing. It was in crayon, and he could tell what it was right away. It was his own home. It was awful, technically speaking. The proportions were all wrong. There was no attempt at perspective. The straight lines weren't straight and didn't meet up, and color bled across them. It was strictly the handiwork of a typical seven-year-old child.

It was beautiful.

"Ahh," he said, affecting his most pompous art gallery voice. "Yes, I see what you've done here with the composition, how it draws the eye across, nice, nice. It is an elephant wearing a tutu, yes?"

"What?"

"No, wait, I was mistaken. How could I not see it before? It is an abstract portrait of your mother. See here," he pointed to the windows, "these are her eyes, though I'm afraid you have not been flattering to her nose," he said, tracing the door with his finger.

"Come on," Caitlyn giggled, choking on juice. "Really, what do you think?"

"What I think is that there is something terribly important missing, without which, I'm afraid, it will never be very valuable."

"What?"

"Your signature of course. Van Gogh, Picasso, yours truly, all the big-time artists do it." He got up from the sofa and went to his desk, returning with a pencil. "Lower right-hand corner, big as you please."

Caitlyn wrote her name out with the precision of practice in neat little letters and then handed the pencil back.

Miklos looked down at the drawing. "All right," he said, "I'm sold. How much?"

"You want to buy it?"

"Well, of course! Artists never work for free, if they can help it. Since we're colleagues now, let me tell you a little trade secret. When someone offers to buy your work, never act surprised. Don't say anything until you've heard their first offer, then act insulted."

"Okay," Caitlyn said, "well then, how much?"

Miklos looked at the drawing as though studying it, punctuating his silence with "hmmm" and "ahh" and "yes." "I think I shall purchase this drawing from you for the princely sum of one quarter."

"One quarter?" She brought her mouth down in fake shock. "One terrible, lousy, stinking little quarter?"

"Good," he said. "A bit over-the-top, but good. Now we're negotiating. Tell me, little girl, what do you think this drawing is worth?"

"A hundred bucks?"

Miklos laughed such as he hadn't in years, deep to his belly. He lifted his glasses to wipe away tears. "Yes! That is perfect! A hundred dollars, exactly the right amount to ask for."

"Really?" Caitlyn asked, pushing up the brim of her firefighter's helmet.

"Well, yes and no. Yes, you should absolutely ask for a hundred dollars; no, I will absolutely not give it to you. But how about this? Five dollars."

"Ten," she said. "Take it or leave it."

Miklos grinned. "Deal."

\*

Caitlyn came by every Saturday after that, always costumed in something outlandish, always with a new drawing to sell. They would haggle over grapefruit

juice and toast and every time Miklos would wind up with a new drawing, which he used to decorate the walls.

Soon his living room was covered in Caitlyn's artwork, filled with vibrant primary colors depicting trees, lakes, mountain ranges, and every manner of creature that had graced Noah's great ship.

There was also a new canvas on the easel near the window—a fresh piece of art that Miklos had begun. He made sure to put it away when Caitlyn was over, but when she left he would immediately set to work on it again. It was different from his usual style, which scared him slightly. For the first time in decades he didn't feel in control of his art, but controlled by it, as though something larger was looking for escape into the world, through his hand, through his brush.

On one particular Saturday, Miklos had set out a plate of oatmeal cookies and two glasses of grapefruit juice in anticipation of Caitlyn's visit when the doorbell rang. It was unusual for Caitlyn to use the doorbell; she normally knocked.

Miklos opened the door to find Caitlyn's mother, Jennifer.

"Ahh," Miklos said, "the prodigy's mother. I was expecting the little girl. It is time for her usual art showing. I hope she's not sick?"

"Can I come in for a moment, Mr. Spielman?"

"Certainly."

Jennifer walked into the front room and paused for a minute, staring wordlessly at the row of hand-drawn pictures lining the wall.

"Do you like them?" Miklos asked. "If you would like one of your own, I could put in a word with the artist."

Jennifer shook her head slowly. "Do you really think she has talent? Steven and I have taken note of this sudden passion of hers, but every time we've asked if she'd like to take an art class, she's ignored us. She refuses to take anything seriously."

"Ah," Miklos said, rubbing his chin, "is that what art is? Something to be taken seriously?"

Jennifer stared at him for a moment, then laughed. "Oh, but you know all about it, don't you? That's what I keep trying to tell her—that to be successful in life, like you obviously were, you have to bear down. Apply yourself. Work hard and keep focused on your goals. That's actually why I came over today. I was hoping you could help me."

Miklos gave a small bow. "Tell me how I can assist."

Jennifer left the paintings and sat down on the sofa, pushing the plate of cookies to the side.

"I really don't think Caitlyn's going to be an artist when she grows up, do you?"

Miklos cocked his head. "We are all of us artists in our way."

"Yes, fine, but I mean, I don't think she's going to make a living selling art."

"Ahh," Miklos nodded. "Those who are lucky enough to do so are rare."

"Right. So I feel... that is, Steven and I have discussed the matter, and we've come to the conclusion that Caitlyn should spend her time doing... more practical things than pretending to be an artist."

"More practical?"

"It's not that we aren't appreciative of fine art—I've spoken with Steven, and we might just want to purchase that painting of yours after all... Grapefruit Juice, was it?—it's just that Caitlyn spends her days with her head in the clouds. I mean you've seen it. You know. Like the ridiculous way she dresses. I plan to put my foot down about that, too."

Miklos shook his head. "She's seven."

"Precisely. She's not a little girl anymore, and the competition out there is harder than ever before. If she wants to have a chance in the world, we need to get her on track now, before it's too late."

He sighed. "So what is it I can do exactly...?"

Jennifer smiled. "I just wanted you to know our wishes. We've already told Caitlyn what we expect of her, and I've told her point-blank that I don't want her bothering you anymore. You're clearly a man who wants his privacy and we mean to respect that."

Miklos inclined his head. Jennifer stood to go, and he was not sorry to see her leave.

"Oh," she said, staring again at the pictures. "You know, it might send mixed signals for you to have these up, in case she does come by in the future. You don't have to keep them up any longer for her sake, at least, and I can take them off your hands if you'd like?"

Miklos sniffed. "For the rest, I will endeavor to respect your wishes, seeing as how you are Caitlyn's mother. But in this, I must refuse. These drawings are mine, paid for with my own money, and I like them just where they are."

"You paid her for them? With real money? But they're just a child's drawings. What could you possibly see in them?"

"I cannot tell you how much I see in these drawings." *And you wouldn't understand if I tried*, he didn't say.

Jennifer chuckled as she opened the door to leave. "To each their own, I suppose. In any event, I'll tell Caitlyn that you fully support our decision. Thank you for being understanding."

She closed the door behind her, leaving Miklos alone. He sighed, then took the tray of food from the table into the kitchen and poured the grapefruit juice down the sink.

After that day, Miklos' work on his new painting grew infrequent.

He would meditate on Caitlyn's drawings, seeking inspiration, but it usually never came. Her drawings were an incomplete expression—they held some part of her spirit, her enthusiasm, her innocent-yet-exacting mind—but never all of it, never all at once.

Every so often, Miklos would hear the sounds of Caitlyn playing in her front yard. These were the best times, the most productive. He would raise his blinds and open the window, and move his brush to her laughter. And so, by small measures and as summer deepened, Miklos' new work neared completion.

It was a Saturday night in late July. The sunlight stretched on towards nine and the children of the neighborhood took advantage, playing basketball and catch, long-shadowed in the streets.

Caitlyn was in her own yard, dressed as a doctor with a miniature white lab coat and a full-sized stethoscope draped around her like a necklace. Miklos was proud of her, to see that she had withstood whatever attempts her mother had made to get her to limit her self-expression. He admired her resolve.

He looked from her to his painting and nodded. It was done, only needing his signature to be truly complete. It was a new direction for him, a real departure. It was his best work in years, perhaps decades.

#### Perhaps ever.

An approaching car took Miklos away from the painting. It was familiar, a cobalt blue Mercedes—Kathy, his agent. Miklos quickly shut the window, then scrambled to get his painting covered. He hadn't decided whether to call Kathy about this particular work; as it neared completion, he felt more and more reluctant to put it up for sale.

The doorbell rang. Miklos drew in a deep breath and answered.

"Miklos, love, it's so great to see you," Kathy said, coming forward to embrace him.

Miklos received it along with her customary air kisses. "Kathy. This is unexpected."

"Oh, darling, I was in the neighborhood and I just wanted to pay my respects."

In the neighborhood? Kathy lived an hour away, in the city, and there was nothing local to entice an urbane woman like her to make the trip. Nothing but Miklos.

"If that truly is the case, I am happy to see you, but I hope you won't be disappointed if we don't visit long? I was just about to turn in."

"Oh, no, not at all... Say—" she said, pushing her way past Miklos' elbow and into the room, "is that a new piece?"

"It is, but I—"

"You old devil," Kathy said. "I knew you had some secret project. Last time we spoke, I could hear it in your voice. Practically bubbling over!" She walked up to the shrouded canvas.

"Please, it's not finished," Miklos lied.

"I just want a peek."

She unveiled the canvas.

"Oh, my," she said. "This is... different, isn't it?"

"You hate it," he said.

She laughed. "Miklos, angel, we've been working together for I don't know how long. You know I love everything you do, though I must admit that I'm not certain I'm as fond of this *style*. It seems very..."

"Young?"

"Straightforward," she said with a smile. "Honestly, I'm glad this happened because this is something I've meant to discuss with you for a while. I'm not completely certain that I am the ideal person to represent your new line. You

know that I do everything in my power for you, Miklos, but another agent may be better suited to handle the new demographic you're obviously targeting."

"You're dumping me."

Kathy laughed again, looking away to the shadowed corners of the room. "Why must you choose to put everything in such stark terms? 'Hate.' 'Dumping.' No, of course I'm not 'dumping' you; I think the world of you and your art, you know that. I just feel you might be better served by someone else at this juncture of your career. I'm only trying to be fair to you, my sweet."

"I understand."

"I knew you would. That's why I love you! So you know, and I hope this doesn't offend, but I've already shown pictures of your last few paintings to some colleagues of mine, and I'm happy to report that there is interest out there. Though maybe I should take a quick snapshot of this, if this is the direction you're headed... Is this going to be a new period for you?"

"I don't think so."

She stood in front of the canvas, squinting. "For the best, I imagine. I just don't think there's a market for this kind of... Frankly, it looks something like these atrocious children's drawings you have plastered up, though obviously far more skillful in the execution. Bold, yes, and colorful, but..."

"Straightforward?"

"Exactly," she said. "Well, I don't want to take up more of your time. I'm going to have some of the colleagues I'd mentioned get in touch. I know one or two of them are very excited at the prospect of working with an artist as distinguished as yourself. Keep me informed on how things progress."

"Of course, Kathy," he said. "Thank you for stopping by."

"Always a pleasure, Miklos." She kissed his cheeks again then opened the door.

"Oh," she said, "it looks like you have company."

Standing in the doorway was Caitlyn.

Kathy laughed. "Well isn't that cute, a little nurse!"

Caitlyn rolled her eyes as Kathy walked down the pathway to her car.

Miklos smiled to see her; she had not come to visit since her mother warned her away. "You're collecting for the blood bank, perhaps, little girl?"

She looked down at her feet. Something was the matter. "I don't mean to bother you. I just wanted to see you is all."

"It's no bother," he said. "Not in the slightest. Grapefruit juice?"

"Yes, please, only no sugar this time."

"Really? My, my, next time it'll be coffee, I suppose."

Caitlyn screwed up her face. "Ew, no. Coffee's gross."

"Glad to hear it. One grapefruit juice, straight, coming up."

When he returned with the two glasses of juice, and cookies that hadn't been touched in months, he found Caitlyn staring at his uncovered painting.

"No great shakes, I know," he said. "Tell me, how are your own drawings coming? I sincerely hope you've continued to draw."

Caitlyn kept quiet, looking at the painting.

"All right, well, at least come have your juice. I've almost stopped drinking it myself, you know. I seem to have lost my taste for it."

Caitlyn didn't reply but continued to stare.

"Come on, little girl, you're starting to frighten me. What's going on in that mind of yours? Or is it like the Medusa, and my artwork has frozen you on the spot?"

"I'm sorry," she said finally, slowly bringing her eyes away. "It's just... beautiful."

"Pffft," he said, waving her away. "Flattery doesn't suit you. I liked it better when you were telling me how ugly my paintings are."

"But this one's not ugly. Really! It's like, the drawings I've been doing for you... they were fun, but I didn't really care about them all that much. But looking at this, I don't know, it makes me feel happy somehow. It makes me feel like maybe I want to be a painter after all, you know?"

He did know, though he had forgotten for a time.

"How much do you want for it?" she asked.

"What are you talking about? If you want this—really, actually want this—I will give it to you."

"No way," she said. "An artist never works for free. Not if he can help it."

"Fair enough," Miklos said, laughing. "Okay, how much will you give me?"

"One dime."

"A dime? I offered you a quarter, first time out of the gate! Parking meters in the city won't even accept a dime anymore."

"Well, what do you think it's worth?" she asked.

*Everything in the world*, he was going to say, when suddenly they heard Jennifer's voice, echoing down the street: "Caitlyn? Where are you? Time to come home."

"I gotta go. I'll pay you back someday, I swear."

Miklos lifted the canvas off of the easel and put it in Caitlyn's arms. It was unwieldy in her grasp, rising two feet above her head. "Are you sure? What will your parents say when they see this?"

"I'll just tell 'em I made it," she said. "They don't pay enough attention to know the difference." Set with the painting, Caitlyn eased her way out of the door. She paused. "Oh. What do you call it?"

Caitlyn. "What I Love Most," he said.

"You need to work on your titles," she said, and giggled, and then she was gone.

\*

By the middle of the next week, the moving van had reappeared; he realized that Caitlyn had come by that night to say goodbye. Miklos watched as they loaded their possessions into the back of the van, Miklos' painting, he noted with a smile, included.

As they were getting set to leave, Caitlyn turned to Miklos' house and put her hand up in a wave. She was not wearing a costume today, but blue overalls with the tell-tale spatter of dried paint. Or if it was a costume, maybe this one would stick.

Miklos made to wave back, but then Jennifer pulled Caitlyn away, and the girl went into the van obediently... but still unbowed.

Miklos always considered "What I Love Most" to be his finest work and, not wanting to follow it with anything lesser, decided that it should also be his last, though he lived for many more years.

In December of the last of these, word came to him that a showing was going to be held in the city for a promising young artist who had taken the scene by storm. The name of that show was also "What I Love Most," and Miklos made certain to attend.

At the show, he did not make any attempt to seek out the artist—a driven young woman that rumor held was strikingly passionate and uncompromising about her work—or make his presence in any way known. Instead, he took up a glass of the complimentary grapefruit juice, said to be what the artist drank while creating, and offered a silent toast to a little girl that he once knew.

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