



**STORIES IN WHICH SOMEONE OR SOMETHING
IMPORTANT TO THE STORY IS HIDDEN (FROM
CHARACTERS IN THE STORY, NOT FROM THE
READER)...**

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FIRST PLACE

Recently, Brian's short fiction has appeared in *Analog* (March/April 2018), *Fantasy & Science Fiction* (May/June 2018 and September/October 2018), *Galaxy's Edge* (May/June 2018), and *Terraform* (September 2018).

By the Moon Unblessed

by Brian Trent

It was Thursday. The giant millipede uncoiled from the depths of Mount Thegtheg and scuttled into the castle courtyard on Thursdays.

Most of the other kids liked watching its arrival. They would gather along the battlement between the two northward towers and gaze out to the green countryside where Mount Thegtheg rose in the distance. Waiting for the millipede.

Eduardo never joined them. He'd seen it once, and that had been enough. The sight of the immense, segmented body rushing at the castle on its many legs made him sick with terror, and he had fled back into the castle to hide under his bed. He imagined the creature crawling up the castle walls, sticking its head into his window, trying to grab him with its mandibles.

So he always stayed in his room, *away* from the window, and played with his toys until the creature returned to the mountain. The king's toymaker had given him little dinosaurs that walked and growled, and Eduardo sat cross-legged, safely surrounded by a reptilian phalanx. He liked the dimetrodons.

His bedroom door suddenly swung open. Aran, his older brother, came striding in and grabbed him by the arm. "Come on," he said. "Put your shoes on. We're going outside."

Eduardo stiffened. "I don't want to!"

"Too bad. You need to show everyone you aren't afraid of it."

"But I *am* afraid!"

Aran scattered the Triassic Era with a kick. "Put your shoes on, or I'll haul you up there barefoot."

Tears sprouted from Eduardo's eyes. "Aran, please..."

"Babies cry. Are you a baby?"

"I'm *not* a baby!"

"Then put your shoes on right now." Aran hesitated. "This is not like before, okay?"

Before was their codeword for the days before they came to the castle. *Before* was when he and Aran used to sleep in a watery Caracas basement, and how there were bugs down there, scuttling along the cracked and moldy walls. That included millipedes. Long reddish millipedes with yellow legs, and they would bite without provocation. You could be fast asleep against the basement's walls, and awaken to a burning feeling on your neck, and a millipede was hanging there like some grotesque necklace.

Aran bent, wheezing and coughing, to help him tie his shoes. "*This* millipede won't hurt you. I promise."

Eduardo muttered, remembering old wounds.

His brother seized his chin and lifted his face until their gazes met. "Did you hear me? I won't ever let anything hurt you or make you sick. Nothing will hurt you or make you sick ever again. Understand?"

“I understand.”

He followed Aran into the stone corridor, and up the winding stairs to the battlement where the other kids were.

The older kids weren't so interested in the arrival of the millipede anymore—it's unflagging appearance was old hat now. Instead, they pointed to the dark forests where smoke curled like ghoulish fingers from enemy campsites. The hideous, giant Maricoxi had taken the northern woodlands and were breathing down on the Enchanted Valley. That was bad. There used to be a herd of pegasi in those woods, and it was fun watching them fly about... until the Maricoxi swept over the defensive forts and now the pegasi weren't seen anymore. Eduardo had liked watching the pegasi spread their foreleg wings against the sky. Liked the way they landed together with a gentle thump of many hooves to drink from the streams crisscrossing the castle's valley.

Something appeared at the cave at Mount Thegtheg. An enormous head, followed by a lengthy body borne by numerous orange legs.

Eduardo reached for his brother's hand. Aran pulled it away.

The insect's hideous length emerged and then it was scuttling along strawberry fields, skirting by the Grand Lagoon. It disappeared a moment as it entered the deep woods of King's Forest, but Eduardo knew it was still coming.

“Here it comes!” sang the girl named Patricia, and she gave a cruel, taunting grin to Eduardo.

“It won't hurt us,” Eduardo forced himself to say.

Patricia glanced to Aran, saw that he had joined the older boys' discussion on the Maricoxi advance, and she mouthed:

It eats little boys. Tonight when you're sleeping, it'll crawl up the stairs to your room and—

There was a blur, and Patricia was suddenly on her back, her nose gushing blood.

Aran had moved so fast that it was like he had teleported. “You were saying something, Ratty Patty?”

She glared, dark fluid streaming messily over her face.

Eduardo waited for the counterattack. But Patty only stood, holding her bleeding nose, coughing and wheezing. Over the battlements, the millipede emerged from the woods and scampered onto Royal Road, through the courtyard gates to make its delivery.

Aran tugged at his brother’s arm. “Come on,” he said. “Amulet time.”

*

“Eduardo? Can you come with me, please?”

Eduardo blinked at the bearded, dark-skinned man who had intercepted him on the landing. The other kids continued down from the battlements, heading to the workshop and strapping their masks over their mouths—masks of wolf snouts, serpent fangs, oversized ruby lips... each one was different. Aran’s mask was the *best*—shark teeth set in glistening pink gums. Eduardo looked to his brother, but he quickly disappeared into the castle workshop, eager to make the magical weapons the kingdom needed to repel the murderous Maricoxi.

“Eduardo?”

He looked back in astonishment to the man who addressed him. The *Grand Vizier* was addressing him! Him! “Sir?”

The vizier’s tall, lank frame was sunk in scintillating blue robes with little stars and half-moons on them. He smiled kindly. “Eduardo? Please, come with me.”

Eduardo’s heart thundered in his small chest. This was not how Thursdays usually went.

“Sir?” he managed. “I have to make amulets now.”

The vizier shook his head. “You can join the kids later.”

“But the Maricoxi are in the woodlands...”

“Please come with me.”

Eduardo swallowed his protests and followed the vizier along the castle’s main corridor. He was actually relieved not to be making amulets today. It was always long work and it made his fingers burn and tingle and hurt. Still, he was afraid.

This had to be about Aran. It was against the king’s law to assault a fellow citizen of the kingdom, and Patty and Aran were constantly arguing. They’d never come to blows before, though. This was bad.

Eduardo’s palms began to sweat.

He trailed the Grand Vizier to the great man’s study. It was dark within, mighty bookcases half-glimpsed by the buttery, scented light of candelabras dangling in circles from the ceiling. Eduardo gaped at the chamber, mind racing. The air was spiced with aged parchment and wax.

“My brother is a good worker!” he blurted out.

The vizier gave a puzzled look. “Yes, yes he is. He’s going through his transformation very soon, isn’t he?”

Eduardo nodded.

“That’s wonderful! You should be so happy!”

“I am. My brother is the best. When we lived on the street, this one time, he used—”

Before he could continue, the door opened and Paladin Rosangela strode in. She looked magnificent in her silver armor, a griffin emblazoned on her breastplate. She exchanged a meaningful glance with the vizier, then stooped to one knee in front of Eduardo. Her greaves squealed with the movement.

“Eduardo, is it?”

His heart pounded again. “Paladin,” he breathed in awe, bowing.

She lifted his face, and her brown eyes were large and kind. The candlelight gleamed off her armor, the steel so highly polished that Eduardo could almost see his reflection—a small, blurry shadow replicated along the metallic scales.

“The vizier tells me you have never ridden on a pegasus.”

Eduardo’s mind went blank. “Paladin?”

“Do you want to go riding with me?”

He hesitated. Old street instinct stirred, warning him to be cautious when people promised him nice things. The perverts in the street alleys did that, and so did some of the ones who drove around Caracas, looking for guttersnipes to entice with food or water into their cars.

The paladin’s smile was radiant, but strangely, her voice sounded impatient.

“Eduardo? Did you hear me? Don’t you like the pegasi?”

“I like the pegasi.”

“I’m going for a ride. I was hoping you would come with me. No amulets today. Let’s go riding, okay?”

She wants me away from the castle, he thought. They’re going to send Aran back to Caracas!

His eyes filled up.

“Please don’t exile my brother!” he cried.

“Exile your brother?” Paladin Rosangela’s smile burned on her beautiful face.

“What the hell are you talking about? Your brother is... Aran, right? He’s not getting exiled. Why would he get exiled?”

Eduardo stiffened.

Idiot! You stupid idiot!

So no one knew about the fight after all. He was going to get his brother in trouble because he was a stupid idiot!

The tears fell. He couldn't help it.

Paladin Rosangela sighed. "Eduardo, we're not exiling your brother. Now do you want to go riding, yes or no? Last chance." She glanced to the Grand Vizier. "Maybe this isn't the kid we want."

"I want to go!" Eduardo blurted out. "I want to ride a pegasus!"

*

Seen up-close, the pegasus was huge, hairy, and a little frightening. It was a tawny brown beast with short bristly fur covering its body. The immense feathery wings were brown too, growing off the forelegs like speckled sails, and they snapped up as Paladin Rosangela approached; Eduardo felt the breeze of their movement. The bridle was avocado green.

Paladin Rosangela hoisted him into the saddle. Eduardo, with his short legs, could barely fit his feet into the stirrups, despite the paladin having adjusted the straps to try accommodating him. The animal's powerful, knobby muscles flexed beneath him.

The paladin settled in behind him, and her arms came around him to take up the reins.

"Ready?"

He swallowed hard and nodded.

She gave two kicks and the creature trotted forward, then broke into an outright gallop that made Eduardo squeal in fear and excitement. The windows of the castle were burnished copper in the morning sun as they raced past. The wings beat furiously, and Eduardo found himself grinning in their breeze, and then...

...then they were airborne.

His stomach lurched as the courtyard dropped away, and then he was clinging to the beast's neck as they climbed higher into the sky, the wings a mirage-like blur around him. Soon the castle was far below him, like one of his toys. He could see Mountain Thegtheg like a termite mound, and the searing orange dots of Maricoxi campsites in the woodlands.

Paladin Rosangela's voice was in his ear. "Are you happy in the kingdom, Eduardo?"

He was surprised by the question. "Yes!"

"You know, some kids aren't all that happy. They make trouble."

Eduardo stiffened. So this was about his brother after all.

"You like being here?"

"Yes, paladin."

"Is there anything you *don't* like?"

Eduardo had to think about that. In truth, he didn't really like the long hours making amulets. It was boring, and tiring, and his fingers were stiff and wet afterwards. You had to make sure the magic gemstones and runes were arranged just so, screwed into place and snapped into their little boxes. You passed your work to the old kids, who worked with magic potions that washed the amulets, while you turned your attention to the next amulet. And the next. And the next.

It was tedious, yes, but it was the only way the kingdom could be protected. And besides, it was better than starving in the streets. Better than running from scary gangs. Better than that moldy, abandoned basement. Better than waking up to see Aran stabbing another boy to death for the few scraps of food he had.

"Eduardo? Are you going to answer me?"

"The millipede," he said at last. "It scares me sometimes."

She seemed surprised by that. “Oh.” She took a breath. “Eduardo, someone from outside the kingdom wants to talk to you. They want to ask you about life here.”

“Why me?”

“Well, they’re going to be talking to a handful of kids. The vizier and I thought you might be a good choice.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No.” A hesitation. “And your brother won’t get in trouble, either. You don’t want him to be in trouble, right? What he did... that could get you *both* in trouble. Do you want that?”

Eduardo’s heart fell. *They knew.*

His voice was barely a whisper above the pegasus’ beating wings. “No.”

“Then talk to this person, and answer her questions. Be honest about how happy you are. Be honest about how good the food is, and how you get clean water. We treat you well, right?”

Eduardo nodded.

“Look there,” the paladin said, pointing. “In the lagoon! There’s a pirate battle below us!”

He had to twist in the saddle to see. Far below, the lagoon looked a puddle in a street gutter; two wooden brigantines were exchanging broadsides in a flurry of smoke, fire, and thunder.

Eduardo gasped and giggled.

He liked pirates.

*

He liked the moon too.

Later that night, he lay awake in bed, heart still pounding with excitement whenever he thought about the Pegasus ride from that morning. The moon floated beyond his window, a pale crescent spilling silver puddles onto the floor. His toy dinosaurs sat in pools of their own freakish shadows.

“Aran?” he whispered to his brother in the top bunk. “Are you awake?”

His brother didn’t answer right away, because he was coughing again. A wet, deep sound, like trying to dislodge bilge-water from pipes.

Eduardo looked back to the window. “Aran? I rode a pegasus today.”

“You already told me,” his brother said at last.

“We flew really high.”

“Lucky you.”

Eduardo reached to the ceiling of his bunk, as if trying to touch his brother through the mattress springs. “Maybe I could ride the pegasus up to the moon when you go there?”

Aran sighed. “They can’t fly that high.”

“We flew *really* high.”

“The moon is higher. When I go... I’ll be far away.”

A pang of terror filled Eduardo’s heart. “I want to go to the moon with you!”

“You don’t get to go to the moon until you’re older.”

“But you’re going!”

“I’m older.”

“How long until *I’m* older?”

Aran let loose another series of hacking coughs. “I don’t know. It’s not about how old you are.”

“You just *said* it was how old you are!”

“It’s about how many amulets you make. If you make enough amulets, you start to change. *That’s* why I’m coughing, and that’s why I’m going to change. And when you change... you fly up to the moon. Like a balloon at Noon.” He was quoting the song that all the kids had been taught on their first day in the kingdom—a cartoon rabbit had sung about the rules of the kingdom, what their duties were, what they could do on Free Time adventures, and finally, about the transformation they would all go through if they worked hard enough.

Eduardo thought about his morning ride. “You never rode a pegasus. You don’t know how high they can go.”

“Go to sleep,” Aran snapped, his legs sliding over the side of the bed. He climbed slowly down and hobbled to the bathroom, wheezing and holding his stomach. He went to the bathroom a lot now.

Eduardo closed his eyes. He wasn’t tired, but he didn’t want Aran to see him crying, because only babies cried.

*

She said her name was Meredith, and that she was a reporter.

“For a newspaper,” she added. “A very big newspaper.”

Eduardo said nothing. He still remembered the smell of newspapers in the moldy basement. Wet stock and ink, or dry as desiccated feathers that they used to stuff into the windows to keep out the colder nights.

But they weren’t in the basement anymore. They were in the castle courtyard, in the daylight. The pegasus was there, too, munching from a bucket of hay tethered to a post, and some of the newest, youngest kids—just arrived from Caracas or the surrounding cities—were petting it. They had let Eduardo feed the pegasus that morning. He had giggled at the touch of the creature’s nose when it nuzzled him.

Meredith had long black hair and the kind of clothing Eduardo remembered from *before*. She wore black-framed glasses and a sparkly necklace. Paladin Rosangela and the Grand Vizier stood behind her, wearing smiles.

The woman gazed at Eduardo and it seemed that she didn't like what she was seeing. "Eduardo, is it?"

He nodded, heart pounding again.

"Eduardo, how old are you?"

He held up his hands, ticked off his fingers. "Seven."

Meredith scowled. "Seven? Is that right?"

He nodded.

"Can you tell me what you do here? When you get up in the morning, what's the first thing you do?"

"I brush my teeth."

"Mmm-hmm. What else?"

"We have breakfast."

Paladin Rosangela said, "Every day they have breakfast. And lunch and dinner. Three meals a day. And fresh water."

Ignoring this, Meredith said, "What do you do after breakfast?"

"We make amulets."

She blinked behind her glasses. "What kind of amulets?"

"Magic amulets. Some of them shoot ice, and um, some shoot fire. And one makes tornadoes!"

"And how many do you make?"

“Lots. Until it says zero.”

The Grand Vizier cleared his throat. “We have a caseload management tool that is adjusted by age group.”

“What do you do when the queue reaches zero?”

Eduardo hesitated, trying to think. “Sometimes we visit the dinosaurs in the park. Sometimes we go to the strawberry fields and the enchanted cave. Sometimes we fight pirates!”

“Fight pirates?”

He nodded.

There was a strain in Meredith’s voice. “Eduardo, do you remember what you did *before* coming to the kingdom?”

He stiffened.

Paladin Rosangela said, “I’ve already shown you his file. He lived on the streets. He was starving. On average, they die before puberty.”

Meredith’s eyes went cold and she glared at the paladin. “And working with the chemicals here to make the latest and greatest smart-toys? How long do—”

Her mouth kept moving, but Eduardo couldn’t hear her voice anymore. And Paladin Rosangela’s lips were moving too, and she was getting red in the face, and Grand Vizier was talking, but it was all in silence. Adults in the kingdom did that when they wanted to have private conversations. Eduardo watched them for a while, the knotted cords in the reporter’s neck, the anger in the paladin’s face. He looked away and back to the pegasus. He waved to it. Maybe it would come over and nuzzle him. He liked that.

Someone touched his hand.

“Eduardo?” Meredith said sternly. “How is your brother doing?”

“Aran? He’s a good worker. He doesn’t get in trouble.” He swallowed hard. “And he’s changing.”

“Changing?”

“When you make enough amulets, you turn into an angel and go to the moon.”

The wrath in Meredith’s face was terrifying. “You *turn into an angel*?” She gave a caustic glower at the vizier. “Is *that* what you tell them? Do you even hear yourself?”

“We take care of them.”

“Like nineteenth century plantation owners took care of—”

Silence again.

The door flung open, and two paladins in glittering armor barged in.

Meredith grabbed Eduardo by the shirt and drew him to her face. “Do you know what Augmented Reality is Eduardo? Do you remember a surgery they performed on your eyes and ears when you first got here?”

Eduardo looked down to her necklace.

To the reflection in the necklace.

The guards yanked the reporter backwards, and Eduardo’s shirt tore from the violence, buttons flying and scattering across the table and floor. The woman was being carried away, and she was shouting at them, but it was in silence again.

The Grand Vizier took Eduardo by the hand. “Let’s have some pizza now, okay, Eduardo? Or... the pegasus. Do you want to ride the pegasus again?”

Eduardo bit back his sudden tears. He shook his head.

“You don’t want to ride the pegasus?”

“No.”

“Really?” the vizier sounded surprised, but he recovered quickly enough. “So, cheese pizza?”

The door burst in again.

He thought it might be the bad woman again who had ripped his shirt, but it was one of the castle clerics, and she looked distressed.

“Eduardo?” she cried. “Please come with me.”

The vizier looked at her. “Is it a happy day?”

The woman nodded. “A very happy day. Eduardo, you should be *very happy* today.”

*

Eduardo sometimes remembered a graffiti artist on the street, a tripped-out mad genius who colored bridges and buildings and skywalks and streets. He boasted that he had once painted on a highway—going back and forth between midnight traffic like a spider laying strands of web. Aran insisted Eduardo not listen to his mad ravings, but Eduardo found the man mesmerizing and terrifying in equal measures. “We are beings of light, burning up inside! Seize that fever and madness! All change is delivered through fire and pain!”

Now, as Eduardo knelt beside his brother holding his feverishly hot hands, he thought of that artist and his lunatic drawings. His brother breathed hard and fast. A mask, like a jellyfish, clung to his face. The room stank of blood, too, but Eduardo couldn’t see any blood.

“You’re changing,” he whispered.

Aran nodded, breathing in and out, in and out, fast. So fast.

“I’m so happy for you brother!” Eduardo cried.

His brother’s body began to glow. Paladin Rosangela stepped forward, drew Eduardo back.

“You have to say goodbye now, Eduardo,” she said softly. “Say goodbye.”

“I want to go with him!”

“It’s not your time yet.”

“I don’t care!”

“Your brother is going to the moon.”

Eduardo tore from her grip and threw himself onto Aran’s body. Despite how bright it was glowing, he didn’t feel any heat. Didn’t feel like it might burn him. His brother, in fact, felt cool to the touch, and he wasn’t breathing so rapidly anymore, and...

Paladin Rosangela wrenched him back, and Eduardo struggled wildly in her grip.

And then—in an explosion of light—Aran became an angel.

He was like molten gold, outstretched wings and scales as shiny as newly-minted coins. He ascended slowly off the bed, like a balloon, the light so radiant it stung Eduardo’s eyes.

And then he kept ascending, right through the ceiling.

Eduardo rushed to the window. The moon was there like a massive pale eye. The firefly-like dot of Aran’s new form swam through dark tides to reach it.

“I love you brother! I love you forever!”

*

It was the next Thursday. The day of the millipede.

Eduardo didn’t bother watching it arrive, but not because he feared it any longer. There was nothing any insect could do to inflict more pain than the suffering that festered in his heart every day.

They said he didn’t have to make amulets for a while. He could ride the pegasus if he wanted to.

"I want to make amulets," he said numbly.

"Really? No pegasus?"

Rather than answer, he shuffled towards the workroom, strapping his skeleton-teeth mask over his mouth.

No pegasus, he thought.

There's no pegasus.

He hadn't understood what the reporter woman had said to him when she grabbed his shirt and broke his buttons. He knew people, like that graffiti artist, who shouted nonsensical things. But he *had* seen her necklace. Had seen the reflections of the room around him in her necklace.

Had seen, in one of those reflective facets, the pegasus behind him.

It had looked like a mop, with a hideous rubber head. A man in black uniform held it, moving it when the kids got near. Nuzzling their arms with its fake rubber lips and stiff hair.

Fake.

It was fake!

So Eduardo padded to the workshop and wriggled into place between other children. A partial amulet was placed in front of him, with individual pieces that had to be assembled.

I can't take the pegasus up to the moon, he thought, *because there are no pegasi anymore. They must have been killed off by the Maricoxi. The Grand Vizier doesn't want the kids to know, so he was lying to them.*

And that meant there was only one way to ever be with his brother again.

Eduardo worked on the amulet.

And then the next one.

And the next one.

And the ones that came after that.

He didn't think of Free Time adventures, or of playing with dimetrodons. Those were stupid lies for stupid babies, and Eduardo wasn't a baby. He worked and worked and worked, hoping for sickness and the moon.

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SECOND PLACE

Laura's short story collection, *Lost in Translation*, includes stories that were originally published in *On The Premises*. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Writer's Digest*, *Press 53*, and *Women on Writing*. By day, she's a social worker.

In The Flesh

by Laura Ruth Loomis

Protag1001 stepped onto the commuter train and found a seat between a bright blue dragon and a fierce-looking eagle. A few of the avatars on the train were human, all men except for one attractive pink-haired mermaid who was absorbed in reading something on her wrist computer. The insect-headed man sitting next to her kept trying to start a conversation, and was being resolutely ignored.

Protag1001 used the commute time to check messages on his wristcomp. There was a startlingly explicit text from Starlight07, with whom he had an online flirtation. They'd never met in person, which was just as well: Starlight07's avatar was a buxom young woman in a skimpy superhero outfit, but in the real world she could just as easily be a grandmother with blotchy skin and loose dentures. Protag1001's online image was stolen off a bit-part actor from a pirate movie, though in real life he preferred a more clean-cut look, fortyish, an avatar that could be taken seriously at work.

The second message was from his mother, who still used her real face even though she wasn't a public figure. Like most people these days, Protag1001 wouldn't consider himself dressed without flipping the switch on his wristcomp, turning on the avatar that everyone else saw when they looked at him. He'd warned his

mother endlessly about using a proper avatar; letting people see that she was an elderly woman was asking to be scammed. She did have the sense to go by a username online, but she gave out the real one far too easily.

The insect-man was still nattering away at the mermaid. She finally looked up and said, “I’m a guy, all right?” Might even be true: some men got off on wearing a female face, at least occasionally. A lot of women didn’t care for the aggravation, for reasons that became obvious when the insect-man loudly insisted he hadn’t been hitting on her, and anyway, why would she pick an avatar like that if not for the attention?

Protag1001 occasionally tried to guess why people chose a particular avatar. The blue dragon might be a short guy with authority issues, or a woman who read a lot of fantasy literature. The eagle, a practitioner of Native religion or a sports fan from Philadelphia. The insect-man... Protag1001 didn’t even have a theory about that one.

The rest of the messages on his wristcomp were work-related, regarding people who wanted their identities changed. The company he worked for, SelfExpressions, provided avatars and registered usernames. Online identities were easy to get, and some people had one for every mood, but in-person avatars were expensive. Customers were entitled to emergency changes if their identities became compromised, since exposure could easily give other people access to everything from their medical records to finances. The upgrade was only free if the customer could prove that the security breach wasn’t their fault. Some people had odd notions of what qualified as “not their fault.” As Protag1001 explained over and over, getting hacked because someone else had superior technology wasn’t your fault. Giving your real identity to a friend or lover who later betrayed you, sorry, that was your own bad judgment.

Protag1001 started typing a response to Starlight07, then looked up. Was he being paranoid, or was the blue dragon surreptitiously looking at Protag1001’s wristcomp? Protag1001 glared, then shifted positions to keep the screen away from prying eyes.

*

Protag1001's first meeting that morning was with a dissatisfied customer. Kevin4Now33 had retained the bearded avatar and masculine voice, though she'd been exposed as a woman two weeks earlier.

"I don't think this calls for a full identity switch," Protag1001 told her. "It's not as if your real name or face or anything got out."

"Everything's changed." The deep bass voice was at odds with the face Protag1001 pictured underneath the avatar. "Ever since they found out I'm a woman, I get treated differently at work. I can't finish a sentence without getting interrupted. Suddenly everyone but me is getting picked for the important projects. I'm up for a promotion next month, and I can't risk it."

"Let's not get carried away." Protag1001 tried to sound authoritative with his own mechanically-altered voice. "There's no reason to think there's any connection."

"Was I sounding too emotional?" Kevin4Now33, also known as Eileen Myles, rolled her eyes. "Have you ever lived under a female username?"

"No."

"Try it sometime and see what happens." She abruptly turned off the avatar, leaving a small thirtyish woman in a turquoise blouse and jeans. Protag1001 resisted the urge to look away, as if she'd suddenly torn off her clothes. The woman said, "I'd forgotten how often I used to get harassing messages for no reason. And the come-ons, oh my god, I'm getting twenty messages a day." She pulled up the screen on her wristcomp and showed the stream of comments, some of them going into far too much detail about body parts.

"Anything illegal or threatening?"

"Not threatening," she said. "Just endless stupid invitations for sex with men I wouldn't say hello to if I passed them on the street."

"So, nothing reportable." Protag1001 pointedly looked at the clock. He had more appointments today, and this one was completely unnecessary.

“I shouldn’t have to have my life turned upside down over one pronoun slip,” she said. “It wasn’t even anything in public. I was talking to a co-worker that I thought was female, and I accidentally said *we* instead of *they* when talking about women.”

“You know how risky that can be,” Protag1001 said. “Especially at work.”

Her delicate features grimaced. “I’ll bet the asshole really is a woman. Some women are like that, you know. They figure it’s safer to side with the boys. Just like you’re doing now.”

Protag1001 stiffened. “You don’t even know if I’m a man or a woman.”

She gave him a hard look. “Yes, I do.”

He stood up. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. If the situation gets more serious, let us know, but at this point there’s nothing actionable.”

*

After all the stress at the office, it felt dreary to come home to an empty house. Robin (known to the rest of the world as RedBird599) was a nurse who worked unpredictable hours, a fact that left Protag1001 lonely too often in their eight years of marriage. After a dinner of leftovers, he texted Starlight07.

They wound up watching a holofilm together. Not “together,” exactly, but they started the film at the same time, and sent each other comments every so often.

“Carita’s Fall” is my favorite, Starlight07 texted. *The ending gets me every time.*

The holofilm told the story of a woman whose identity had been stripped after she was tricked into disclosing personal information to a man who’d pretended to be in love with her. Too much like being at work, but Protag1001 kept watching. The love scene was beautifully done, capturing the intimacy of those first moments when they dropped their avatars and saw each other’s real faces. Of course, this being a holofilm, the real faces were also impossibly beautiful.

Then came the betrayal, and Carita scrambling to put her life back together. The people at the identity-restoration company were portrayed as heartless

bureaucrats. Protag1001 texted Starlight07: *Why do we always have to be the bad guys?*

Just wait, Starlight07 said. *The ending's worth it.*

They reached the point where Carita, already exposed and humiliated online, was walking down a twilight street, still hiding in her old avatar of a male Viking. A man stepped in front of her and called her by name. Not the lover, no one she knew, just some random man taunting her with everything he knew about her, where she lived, where she worked, what bar she frequented. A crowd gathered to watch the fun, and for a moment it looked like Carita was going to break down. Instead she pulled off her wristcomp, exposing the woman underneath, and stood with a quiet dignity as the music swelled. The man stared at her in shock.

Then another woman took courage from her courage and did the same thing, and another, and another, avatars replaced by human faces. Protag1001 spotted the heartless identity-company bureaucrat a moment before his avatar winked out of existence, replaced by a woman's face.

Soon the whole street was filled with women. They grabbed the man who'd been harassing Carita, held him down and tore off his wristcomp – only to find, when his avatar disappeared, that he too was a woman. The former harasser looked around her and dissolved into tears.

Wait, that's it? Protag1001 texted as the credits rolled. *That's just weird.*

Men never get this holofilm, she texted back. *It isn't supposed to be realistic.*

Yeah. Obviously. Protag1001's face felt hot.

Every woman's wanted to do that, Starlight07 went on. *To not have to hide behind avatars and usernames, to just be human and actually be SEEN as human.*

Protag1001 thought of Kevin4Now33, how she'd insisted that her pronoun slip had changed things. *Men use avatars too.*

It's not the same, she said. You don't ever have to hide the fact that you're a man. You know what my newest in-person avatar is? She sent a picture, and Protag1001 clicked on it.

The image was a sheriff straight out of a Western movie, with a beard and a pair of six-shooters. Protag1001 tried to reconcile this with the photo she'd sent him before, of a beautiful female superhero with long dark hair and a dusting of glitter above her almond eyes.

Starlight07 texted, *You know of any men who use a female avatar?* Protag1001 started to say yes, then saw that Starlight07 had added, *Besides the pervs, I mean.*

No, he admitted.

It would be so freeing, she said. You know why it would never happen? Because nobody would be the one to go first. We'll all spend our lives waiting for someone else to be Carita.

Even if Carita did it first, I don't think anyone else would, Protag1001 said. People whose identities got stripped could find their bank accounts emptied, their intimate personal affairs made public, their families targeted for harassment. Every so often, someone would commit suicide after one of those incidents, and there would be much talk in the news media about the need to rein in the harassment, but nothing ever changed. *I wouldn't do it, anyway. There's too much at stake.*

Really? Starlight07 asked. *Don't you wish we could just give each other our real names and faces?*

I showed you my real face, Protag1001 said.

Yeah right, she said. The sarcasm coming across even in plain text.

Of course he hadn't. Everybody in his line of work knew somebody who'd been stripped after getting into a romance or friendship with someone who turned out to be a professional identity-hacker. And Starlight07 bringing it up like this

automatically raised red flags for him. For all he knew, his online girlfriend could be a man sitting in the boardroom of a rival company.

It's all right, she said. I like what we have.

She didn't push for Protag1001's real identity. Which, strangely, made him want to tell it to her. Except that wasn't a possibility.

*

Six days later, Protag1001 got called into the main office. His boss, whose avatar resembled a sumo wrestler, asked, "Have you seen this?"

His boss turned the viewscreen to *In the Flesh*, a well-known online scandal site, one that the company monitored because it specialized in exposing real identities.

There, staring back, was Protag1001's face. Not the avatar. His—no, *her*—real face, with its wide brown eyes and narrow lips. Underneath was her real name, Antonia Renee Kelsey, her date of birth, her ID number, her address, and all of her avatars, realspace and online, past and present.

She stared in horror as the rest of her information scrolled by: bank account numbers, credit cards, property owned, the results of her last gyno exam. Her husband's name. Names of her exes, male and female. A transcript of the last conversation with Starlight07. And of course the name of the company where she worked.

She sank into a chair. "How?"

Her boss glowered. "Did you tell someone?"

"No, I swear, I don't know what happened."

"This looks bad for us. We need our customers to feel that their identities are safe with us, and here we have one of our own getting completely stripped. It looks bad, Antonia."

Antonia. He was already calling her Antonia.

“I need a new identity.” Despite the voice-altering patch, it came out in a squeak.

“You’ll get one, of course, as part of the severance package.” He made it sound like he was doing her a favor.

“Severance package?” She felt as if the chair had just collapsed underneath her.

“You can’t keep working here,” he said. She knew this, but all she could do was sit in numb silence as he continued. “Everyone knows everything about you now, Antonia. It’s not safe. I can’t be responsible for that.”

She blinked. She was not going to let him to see her cry. If he was even a “he.”

“You’re just afraid of the bad publicity, if someone finds out an employee of your secure avatar company got stripped.”

“Of course I am. It’s bad for business. I’d prefer if you resign quietly, but if I have to fire you, consider yourself fired.”

Her throat tightened. “This is wrong and you know it.”

“A new life isn’t always a bad thing. You’ll be fine.”

She wanted to slap that smug, dismissive look off this face. Instead she said, “You fire me, and I’ll keep you tied up in court over it for years.”

“You resign, or you don’t get a new avatar.”

Even as she stormed out, she knew she should have given up and taken the new avatar. She could already feel her co-workers’ eyes sliding over her as she walked to the elevator. They managed to never look at her face. Which wasn’t even her face.

“Protag?” She felt a hand on her arm. It was her assistant, LatrSkatr15. “Are you all right?”

She choked out the word. “Fine.” She pulled her arm away and fled for the elevator.

*

The message she left for Robin was terse. On the train ride home, she forced herself to look again at *In the Flesh*, trying to get a sense of how much damage had been done. She'd frozen the bank accounts before leaving the office, but it would be a mess untangling any fraudulent charges. There were details about Robin, including a lot of old information from when he'd had his identity stripped once before, in college.

In a small mercy, there wasn't much posted about Starlight07, other than the fact that she really was a woman. Antonia sent her a message: *I'm sorry. Please, we need to talk*. If nothing else, she wanted to explain posing as a man for the online relationship. It had felt safer, pouring her heart out to a woman. Feeling like someone else was taking care of her for a change.

Not surprisingly, the message bounced back: *Blocked by recipient*.

She got home to find the bed covered with suitcases, and Robin tossing clothes in. He looked small with his avatar off, a slim, freckled man with thinning red hair.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

He didn't look up from packing. "I can't go through this again." Robin's voice shook at the memory. It had taken him years to fight his way back from the financial and emotional damage last time, and he'd never learned who betrayed his identity. "I can't stay here wondering who I can or can't trust. Who did this to us?"

"I don't know." Her mind had been whirling, trying to figure out if she'd let anything slip. It could have been anyone: Kevin4Now33 wanting revenge, Starlight07 if she wasn't who she seemed to be. The blue dragon avatar on the train. "I swear, I don't know how this happened." She reached for him. "I'm sorry."

"I know." He kissed her cheek, then backed away and reached for the suitcase.

She realized he was waiting to turn his new avatar on after he got in the car with its dark tinted windows. Robin didn't want her to see his new identity. He wasn't coming back.

*

The next morning, she boarded the train and headed back to her former workplace. There was no chance of getting the job back, but if she asked nicely the boss would give in about a new identity for her. The sooner she was out of the news, the better for the company.

She scrolled through the messages on her wristcomp, deleting most of them without reading, but still having to see the subject lines: *Serves U right U dumb bitch*, or *I'm waiting at your house at 47654 Griffon Street*. It was cold comfort that most of them weren't from disgruntled customers, just random people in some other part of the world, who had already moved on to the next victim before she'd even read the message. This was a sport to them, a video game where she was just like one of the computer-generated characters they could shoot down for points.

In between the garbage messages, there was one from LatrSkatr15. *I'll miss working with you. And if you don't have another job lined up, here's a couple of leads that I found*. She sent a quick thank-you message back.

A new message came in from her mother. *Did you get a call from National Security people? They called me yesterday, and they asked all these questions*.

Shit.

Her mother had leaked their identities to some con artist. It was a scam that targeted elderly people, and her mother had fallen for it.

Every wristcomp in the train car pinged.

She looked down at her screen, and saw the message: *Local News Interest*. Followed by a picture of her, and a rehash of the details of her life.

She started getting a flood of messages, all from the same sender, all with subject lines like *You must have wanted it, attention whore*. She heard a whinnying laugh,

and looked up to see a man nearby with a horse's head and a very human sneer. He made an obvious show of taking a picture of her.

"Grow up," she said.

Several of the other passengers were watching. One, a man dressed as a Western sheriff, was ignoring them, staring straight ahead with a resolutely grim expression. Maybe it was just someone else with a similar avatar; what were the chances that Starlight07 would be on the same train? But Protag1001 was sure it was a woman, and something in the expression was familiar.

"You know you love it, bitch," Horse-Head said.

"What is wrong with you?" she said. "These are people's lives you're messing with. This isn't a game."

"This isn't a game," he repeated, in a high-pitched, childish voice. "That's what the losers always say."

Something inside her broke open. She'd spent her whole life carefully constructing a wall of secrecy, false names and images, her real identity hidden at the core. And in an instant that wall had been knocked down, her whole life a raw wound, just to give some troll a moment's entertainment.

"Enough," she said. "I'm sick of this shit."

Protag100—no, dammit, *Antonia*—stood up and switched off her wristcomp. The train car descended into embarrassed silence. She knew what they were seeing: a plain-looking thirty-three year old woman in a pink sweater, with a big nose and sharp chin that looked nothing like the people in holofilms.

Back in the corner, the sheriff avatar was watching hungrily. Antonia risked looking at him. (Her? Could it really be her?) *Come on, Starlight07, this is what you said you wanted!* The sheriff reached for her/his wristcomp, as if to pull it off, but there were too many eyes watching, the fear as tangible as the rails beneath them and the motion of the train. The moment slipped through their fingers, and there

was no second, no sudden tidal wave of people tearing off their disguises. There was only Antonia.

Horse-Head bust out laughing. Everyone else seemed to be looking away, pretending interest in their wristcomp screens.

The train pulled up to the station, and Antonia walked out, stripped bare and alone.

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THIRD PLACE

Beth McCabe lives in University Place, Washington. McCabe is a graduate of the Barnard College Creative Writing Program, where she placed second in the Elizabeth Janeway Fiction Prize. Her stories and blogging have appeared in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Liquid Imagination*, *Blue Monday Review*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Youth Imagination*, and other publications.

Mildly Anxious, Overweight

by Beth McCabe

“We’ll need an x-ray, but I’ll tell you right now: it’s broken.” Doctor Barbie flipped her hair and started typing at a laptop. “How did you do it?”

“Wine coolers.”

“You broke your pinky drinking wine coolers?”

“No, but if I hadn’t had three of them at the company picnic, I wouldn’t have tried to play volleyball.”

“Hmm.” She kept typing. I sent my fourth text to my husband, Wiktor, but he still didn’t reply.

Finally the doctor got up and patted my arm. “I’ll be right back,” she said.

Two hours later my pinky was the size of a bratwurst, there was no sign of the doctor, and Wiktor was still missing in action. Out of boredom I hit a key on the computer and the screen came to life with the doctor’s intake notes.

There was my name, CeCe Wodjiewski. Next, my address and date of birth. At last I saw something juicy: OBSERVATIONS. I scrolled down, hoping for a lurid description of my injury. What I saw was this:

Mildly anxious, overweight.

I flopped on the treatment table and tried to banish the image, like when you catch a glimpse of porn on a co-worker's computer. But, as I was x-rayed, splinted, and medicated, those three little words followed me like pigeons waiting for crumbs. *Mildly anxious, overweight.*

I had always known there was a better, calmer, thinner CeCe living inside me. Even an overworked intern could see it.

When I was ready to leave, the nurse told me someone was waiting for me. Oh good, I thought. Wiktor is here. But when I got to the waiting room all I saw was a terrifying apparition in a babushka and support hose.

My mother-in-law.

"Mama," I croaked. "Where's Wiktor?"

"Wiktor is wery important man at University. He has no time for your foolishness." She clamped a malformed claw onto my arm, sending arrows of pain into my damaged hand. "Come. We take bus. Taxi is too expensive."

But I'd already summoned a Lyft. Off we went into the Chicago rush hour, me woozy with pain and medication, Mama vibrating with fury over my extravagance. When we got to my apartment she made me a tea from nettles and mushrooms. When she flew back to her cave to feast on the bones of innocents I poured it into a houseplant.

Therapy, I'd decided, curled up in bed like a boneless chicken on an opioid cloud. That was the ticket. The time honored talking cure would bring out the new improved me.

When Wiktor came home from his lecture, I didn't say anything about that. Shrinks were verboten in the Wodjiewski clan. Apparently, something had

happened to Mama's brother, Uncle Stanislaw, in an asylum in Warsaw. Not that they ever talked about it.

Wiktor inspected my pinky, nodded, and went off to read some abstruse physics journal. Compassion is not his strong suit, but I love him anyway.

*

Two days later I found a therapist on a website. People recommended him highly for his calm, soothing manner.

"Off to Book Club," I lied on the day of my appointment. I shouldn't have bothered; Wiktor was deep in the madcap antics of quantum particles. "Mrrrfff," he replied.

I boarded a northbound bus, picturing Uncle Stanislaw on a cold metal table with electrodes stuck to his head. We arrived at a sketchy stretch of North Halsted. I craned my neck to check building numbers and got off at a Korean take-out place. I pressed the buzzer in the doorway. When it buzzed back I mounted a flight of decrepit stairs.

My new therapist met me with a wide smile. We settled into rust-colored Ikea armchairs and I took a deep breath.

"Doc," I said, "before we start. If you call me and my husband answers, say, 'Wrong number', OK?"

"Do you feel you can't tell your husband that you're seeing a therapist?"

"I *could* tell him. Just not yet." (Not ever.)

"I see." He scritch-scratched on his pad. "CeCe, I'd like to make sure you have a support network, especially if you don't feel comfortable sharing your process with your partner. Do you have family? Close friends? Church, synagogue, mosque?"

"Atheist. No family. Of course I have friends. Well, *a* friend."

"Are you in close touch?"

“Yes, definitely! Well, occasionally. Christmas cards.”

He tapped his posh incisors with his pencil. “Do you have a congenial work atmosphere?”

“I’m a web designer. I do most of my work at home in the middle of the night.” (Pause for dramatic effect.) “But Rolf hangs out with me while I work.”

Dr. Soothing Vibes looked hopeful. “Rolf?”

“A stuffed dog that I picked up at a flea market—get it? Flea market! Rolf is excellent company. He doesn’t drink wine coolers or play volleyball.”

“It’s a valuable gift to be able to offset uncomfortable situations with humor,” Dr. Vibe said. “But I’m thinking group therapy might be a constructive treatment venue for you.”

Ugh, I thought. Bare my soul to a bunch of losers? But I found myself mildly anxious to please Dr. Vibe.

And dying for a doughnut.

*

The following Wednesday night I squeezed into Dr. Vibe’s office along with two other people who, as far as I could see, shared nothing except a penchant for dubious wardrobe choices. I helped myself to a cup of weak coffee and some cookies. With the same hopeful look he’d gotten when I mentioned Rolf, Dr. Vibe asked me if I’d like to tell the others a bit about myself.

I wondered if it was too late to go for antidepressants. “Not really.”

“OK. Who’d like to start?”

Skinny Guy in Checkered Sport Jacket leaned forward and propped his elbows on knobby knees.

“I was down in Frisco last week,” Skinny said, “and I saw some of my former associates. I nearly ran for it. It’s not really safe to quit my line of work, you know?”

Dr. Vibe nodded encouragingly. “Did you speak to them?”

“We said hello, no big deal. The boss owes me so they left me alone. But I’ll never stop looking over my shoulder.”

“Nick, did this encounter bring up your feelings of anxiety over the incident?” Dr. Vibe asked.

“You mean, did I have flashbacks about that kid watching his dad get beaten up?”

“Hold on,” I said. “You beat up a guy in front of his kid?”

“No, no. I was *involved* in an *incident*. It was an associate of mine that did it. It gave me panic attacks so I quit my job. Russian Mafia.”

“You don’t sound Russian.”

“I’m Italian. But they own the game now.”

What had I gotten myself into? I zoned out until I heard Dr. Vibe say, “Our time is up.”

*

The following week I again demurred from Dr. Vibe’s invitation to spill my guts.

“I’ll go,” said Too Small Pink Pantsuit.

I pegged her for maybe thirty-four. She looked like an overstuffed Pepto-Bismal burrito topped off with a ginormous *Charlie’s Angels* hairdo. The TV show, not the movie. Jaclyn Smith, not Farrah Fawcett.

“Sheri,” the doc said, “why don’t you give CeCe a brief recap of the events that brought you here?”

"I have a little trouble with body image," Pink said. I tried not to snicker.

"When I look in the mirror," she continued, "I see a beautiful princess. I know that's my true self and I wish to share my destiny with those less fortunate."

Dr. Vibe: "And what happened when you were at Disneyland with your family?"

"I attacked Snow White. I tried to rip her dress off and screamed at her for stealing my clothes. My family was mortified. I still feel like that's the real me, you know? But I had to agree to counseling."

Well. Pink's body image problems were evidently a little different from mine.

"What's been happening this week, Sheri?" Dr. Vibe asked.

An extra chin or two waggled and Pink started to sniff. "My husband told me he wants a divorce. He says he's tired of living with a nutcase. He's threatening to take the kids."

"Everyone, let's tell Sheri that we support her." I mumbled along with Skinny and Dr. Vibe. Next thing I knew, the doc was telling us our time was up.

On the way out I stopped to talk to Skinny. "What happened to the guy and his kid?"

"The guy's fine. He was no angel. I hear the kid's OK. And the asshole who did the deed did his time." He gave me a look. "So what's your story?"

"No story. Just in for a little mental health tune-up."

"Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth."

A mob goon who quotes *King Lear*?

He laughed at my expression and grabbed a handful of cookies for the road. "You'll talk when you're ready," he said with his mouth full. "G'night, Cordelia."

I almost said G'night, Skinny, but then I remembered his name.

“Good night, Nick.”

*

Captain’s Log: Week Three. Nick raised his hand but when he tried to speak he choked up. He was sweating right through the horrible sport jacket.

“It was me,” he said. “I beat up the guy. I had no idea his kid was there until after, I swear. I sent the kid’s mom some money but I’ll never forget his little face.”

Fat man tears rolled down Nick’s cheeks. He said, “I wouldn’t give the boss up to the cops and that’s why he let me disappear.”

Pink turned on Dr. Vibe. “Did you know?”

“Yes. But it wasn’t mine to tell.”

Nick wiped his face with a huge cotton handkerchief.

“That was very brave, Nick,” Dr. Vibe said. There was some more chit chat back and forth, and then the doc said, “Our time is up.”

*

Of course, I was terrified that Wiktor would figure out that I was in therapy and get mad, or worse, blab to Mama. I wanted to get the confession over with, but when I tried to script it my mind skittered off until I went back to designing web sites or looking up recipes that I would never prepare.

Being in therapy while married to Wiktor had done wonders for my avoidance techniques.

*

In our next session Pink—Sheri—raised a plump hand.

“What’s up?” Dr. Vibe asked.

“If Nick can tell it straight,” she said, “so can I. I never told you guys what really happened at Disneyland. I left the kids with my Mom at the park and went back to the hotel for some quality time with my husband. On the way in I saw him with my sister in the bar, sharing a giant mai tai and swapping saliva. I went nuts. I started acting crazy, claiming I was a princess and going after that poor Snow White. Once I’d started, things got kind of blurry and it was hard to stop.” She stared at the floor. “I never meant to hurt my kids. I know I’m not a princess. I’m a fat boring Walmart clerk.”

“Honey,” Nick said, “you’re not fat, you’re curvy. The Russians would kill over you.” His forehead creased. “Wait, is that like a Me Too thing?”

Sheri shook her head and flashed Nick a trembly smile. “Thanks.”

*

The day after the session I received a registered letter from the Illinois Psychotherapy Licensing Board.

It is our understanding that Mr. Elias Conrad has been treating you as a patient. Please be advised that this individual is not a licensed psychotherapist and is not eligible to practice in the state of Illinois. We have ordered him to cease activities immediately and to refrain from contacting you. You will be notified of any further actions taken in this matter.

Sincerely,

Etc. etc.

I was stunned. Dr. Vibe – an imposter? I took out my phone and touched the photo of him laughing with Nick. My hand shook as I listened to it ring.

“You shouldn’t have called, CeCe,” he said.

“What’s this crap?”

“It’s true. I never had the money for grad school.”

“But I’m ready to talk! Do you have time now?”

He snorted. “You haven’t said a word in the past month. And now you’re ready? Listen. Don’t call me again.”

*

On Wednesday night I paced the apartment like I was waiting for a lover. As our usual meeting time neared I threw on a jacket and went out for some air. I got on a bus that just happened to be heading up Halstead. At Dr. Vibe’s block I saw two people on the sidewalk. I jumped out at the next stop and ran back.

“*Hola*,” Nick said.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked.

“Something just drew me,” Sheri said. “Like I couldn’t believe there wouldn’t be a session.”

“Likewise. Maybe there are some good shrink vibes floating around in the ether,” Nick said.

I said, “There’s a pie place nearby.”

“Real pie?” Nick said. “I don’t eat hipster pie.”

“Real pie.”

Nick got blueberry. I got banana cream. Sheri got a monstrous apple fritter. We all got coffee.

“He was such a great shrink,” Sheri said sadly.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I tried to talk to him on the phone and he was kind of a poopie-head.”

“Poopie-head...” Nick stroked his chin. “Is that a Freudian or Jungian term?”

Sheri said, "If it's either one of those my four-year-old is a hell of a lot smarter than I figured."

Just then I had a terrible thought. "Sheri, does this screw up your counseling requirement?"

"I got cleared by the court shrink a while ago. I just liked coming to group."

"How about custody?"

"My rat-ass husband realized if he got the kids he'd actually have to take care of them."

"Hey," Nick said, "at least we got everything off our chests before the Good Doctor got caught. No offense, ladies," he added.

"We did," Sheri said. "CeCe didn't."

I blotted my mouth with a flimsy napkin and opened it to make my usual speech. Just along for the ride. Everything's cool.

"My mother left when I was eight," is what came out of my mouth. "My father never said another word about her. My husband is brilliant but he can be cold. And don't get me started on my mother-in-law."

Sheri and Nick let me cry into my coffee.

"One more thing," I sniffled. "We forgot to have kids."

"Well, CeCe," Nick said finally. "I guess you really *don't* have any problems."

I laughed and mopped my eyes with another napkin. Sheri patted my hand.

My banana cream pie, so inviting in the case, looked like yellow Play-Doh covered with soap suds. I pushed my plate toward Nick. Sheri passed him the fritter she'd hardly touched. He piled it all up and tucked in.

"I called you Skinny before I learned your name, Nick," I said. "If you keep eating like this I'll have to come up with something new."

“You gave us nicknames?” Sheri clapped her hands. “What was mine?”

I didn’t want to tell her she was Too Small Pink Pantsuit. “I called you Jaclyn Smith. You know, from the original Charlie’s Angels. You look a little bit like her.”

Sheri misted up.

We hung out a while, speculating about Dr. Vibe. Nick polished off the last crumb of the Tower of Pie and said, “Ladies, I’m afraid our time is up.”

We cracked up.

“Next week?” Sheri said. Nick and I nodded. We got up and hugged and I headed for the bus.

*

When I got home Wiktor was exploring the nature of space and time with Mr. Peabody and Sherman.

“Wiktor.” He opened his mouth and laughed soundlessly at Mr. Peabody dressed as a Roman legionnaire.

“*Wiktor!*”

He muted the TV and looked up.

“I’ve been seeing a shrink. Only, he wasn’t really a shrink but it doesn’t matter because I made friends and now I don’t need one anymore.”

Wiktor heaved a sigh. His heavy eyebrows descended like thunderclouds. I held my breath.

“I have a confession to make too, CeCe,” he said. “I’m taking Prozac.”

“What? Why?”

“Have you met Mama?”

He shuffled over and gave me a big bearish hug. “I’m sorry you didn’t think you could tell me about your shrink.”

“That’s OK. I’m sorry you didn’t think you could tell me about the Prozac.”

“Hungry?” He showed me the dinner that Mama had brought over. It looked like innocent stuffed cabbage. But I knew it was a pan of evil fat-laden torpedoes seasoned with a curse on the head of every living thing.

“No thanks,” I said. “I had pie.”

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HONORABLE MENTION

Amelia Slempp is currently a freshman college student in Ohio, majoring in Sacred Music, with a concentration in voice. This is only the second story she has submitted for publication, and the first to be published. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing (obviously...), singing, and exercising in preparation for "American Ninja Warrior".

Not Here

by Amelia Slempp

My vampire mother was tired of me before I was even born, inducing labor at four months. After my three following months in the hospital she gave me to a couple on her street and forgot about me. Mr. and Mrs. Baker were in their mid-fifties when I was left with them, and had never wanted children. They weren't really given a choice. Considering the situation, they did a fine job raising a vampire/human mutt. I spent most of my childhood in the back of a dingy coffee shop while Dad worked the night shift, or on Mum's green, shag carpeted living room floor, doing school work and reading *Harry Potter*.

It would have been easy for them to hate me.

But they didn't.

*

I close the door to my basement apartment and toss my bag of groceries on the kitchen counter. It's still early in the night, around 11, and I push the thick, heavy curtains back from the windows set high in my living room wall, letting the moon shine through. It casts white rectangles of light across the room, leaving the rest in

darkness. I walk back to the kitchen and start putting food into cupboards with a little more force than necessary. The Steersman's six year old boy went missing today. That makes three kids from my apartment building in the past two weeks. The police have been overwhelmed by gang drug dealing in the Walmart parking lot, and don't have a clue to follow even if they had time. I leave out a can of cat food and crumple the empty plastic bag in my fist.

"Casper," I call, digging through the junk drawer for the can opener. "Casper, food." I open the can and dump it into his bowl. "Casper!" No cat. I grumble under my breath and walk back into the living room.

My apartment is not big. The kitchen is the size of a pool table, and the living room maybe three times that. The single bedroom wouldn't fit a king sized bed, and the water heater for the apartments above me is squeezed into my bathroom between the shower and sink. My point being, there's not a lot of places for a cat to hide. I look in my bedroom closet and squeeze around the water heater to check the shower. I lay flat on my stomach and peer under the couch. No cat. Now not only do I have to worry about neighboring children being kidnapped, my cat has gotten himself lost. I rest my forehead on the shag carpet and take in the smell of dust, cat, and burnt coffee beans.

There is a knock on my door. I turn my head to the side and give it a hard stare before pushing myself to my feet. I leave the chain in place and crack the door open. The fathers of the three missing children are standing on my rug, shuffling their feet. It looks like every other tenant in the building, maybe twenty people, is gathered in the alley up my stairs. I close the door and take several deep breaths before I undo the chain. It rattles in my fingers, and I keep my hand on the door handle as I reopen the door.

"I'd welcome you in, but I don't think you'd all fit in my apartment."

"We've come to talk about our children, Bristol," Steersman says, ignoring my comment. He is the tallest and broadest of the three men. Mathews is standing on his left, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, staring at the door frame above my head, and Bartlebee is on his right, sweating more than the heat of the night allows for, the collar of his shirt several shades darker than the rest of it. All

three men have their hands in their pockets, and I get the feeling that they're hiding something in their fists.

"What about your children?" I say, looking Steersman dead in the eyes. He holds them for a second, then lowers his focus to my nose.

"Somebody's kidnapped them, Bristol. Someone's stolen three of our children in the past two weeks." He waits, but I don't say anything. "We thought you might know something about it."

A bit of me in the back of my mind starts grinding its teeth and putting on its fighting gloves. It was obvious what they wanted from the moment I opened the door, but it still makes my blood pound harder to hear them say it. "I have no idea what has happened to your children." I say, trying unsuccessfully to make my words sound sympathetic. Mathews looks down at his feet and continues to rock. Bartlebee tightens his grip on the thing in his pocket.

"We don't want trouble." Steersman says, his jaw tight. "Just give us back our kids and we'll leave you alone."

"Check with the police. Maybe they've turned up something."

"The police?" Steersman lets out a huff of air through his teeth. "Three children missing near dark just months after a vampire moves into our building, when nothing like this has happened for years before. Do you think we're idiots?" A look has come into his eyes—the lion-like look of a man who is ready to do something he won't regret—but the blood is raging in my ears and I don't much care what he does.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do." I say, dropping all pretense of courtesy. "I'm not a vampire, and I. Don't. Have. Them. Why would I want three kids? If you haven't noticed, I'm not much of a father figure and I haven't eaten meat since I was four."

Steersman takes two steps forward, right into my doorway.

He's only an inch taller than me, but he's twice as big in the shoulders and blocks out most of the light from the streetlamp in the alley outside. I take an involuntary step backward, into my apartment.

"I don't know where you've put them, and I don't care what twisted reasoning you have for taking them. If our children aren't home by sundown tomorrow we'll come back with the police. And if they won't do anything, we'll take care of it ourselves." He glares straight into my eyes, but I don't blink and again he is the first to look away. He reaches in and grabs the door handle, pulling it shut behind him. I hear their feet crunching up the steps, and the murmur of voices in the alley outside. After several seconds of silence I step forward and push the dead bolt into place. My breath is coming fast and my face feels hot. I stare at the closed door another minute before walking back into the kitchen and grabbing a bottle of orange juice from the fridge. My hands are shaking and I set the bottle down without taking a drink, so it's harder for me to notice.

*

A half hour later I leave my apartment, black baseball cap pulled over my eyes and a wooden bat resting against my shoulder. The bat feels less than reassuring in my hands; I may have some minor healing abilities and more muscle than the average guy who doesn't go to the gym, but that doesn't make me any good at fighting monsters. Maybe I'm lucky and it'll just be some human creep, hoarding toddlers.

The moon is a perfect crescent tonight; the shape you always see in pictures and movies. I thank my guardian angel that it's not whole. Whips of smoke and fog from the city block most of its light, but there's plenty for me to see by. I look around the alley outside my apartment building and turn left, away from the main road. I don't have a clue where to look, but luckily whatever is stealing the children is out at night and seems to have some fascination with my apartment building. If I'm going to find them anywhere, I'm willing to bet it's in the maze of alleys around my apartment. That's the direction children run off in.

After a quarter of an hour aimless wandering I stop. I'm not well in tune with magical energies, not being completely magical myself, but something inhuman has been in this alley. I frown. There are no vampires, werewolves, or any other

kind of semi-civilized creatures living for blocks. That's why I moved here. That's why my rent is so expensive. I close my eyes and feel the energy in the air. It's faint. Almost more of a taste than anything else. A slight lemony, metallic hint on the tongue. Like window cleaner. Whatever left this trail isn't powerful, perhaps even less powerful than me. I walk, following the energy around corners and through alleys. The taste leaves and I come up short, opening my eyes. I'd forgotten I had them closed, and looking behind me see an oddly green mattress and several discarded televisions I was lucky not to have broken my shins on. I inch back the way I came and the taste returns. I look around the alley. There are no doors around, and the walls are too high and smooth for anything I know of to climb. I look down. There's a grate in the ground, leading to what I assume is the sewer. I crouch down and set my bat on the concrete next to me, wrapping my fingers around the bars of the grate. I pull, the rusty metal groaning, and the grate grudgingly comes up. I manage to move it over a foot before releasing it with a clang. I lower my head to the hole. Whatever left the trail of energy is down there.

"Brilliant," I mutter, grabbing my bat in one hand and lowering myself into the hole. I love wandering around sewers after mysterious magical creatures with no protection but a stick and my own insignificant physical prowess. Give me more, please.

I drop down a couple feet and land on a cement walkway, not wide enough for two people to walk side by side. Goosebumps raise on my arms, and the sweat brought on by the heat of the street above suddenly feels cold and clammy. To the left of me is black, rushing water. I give it a long stare before following the taste of lemon to my left, baseball bat held at the ready. I don't know how the running water rule applies to me. I'm not anxious to find out. Close to an hour passes as I walk through the dripping tunnels. The trail is twisting and convoluted, making turns whenever possible. More than once I pass through the same stretch of tunnel, walking the opposite direction. If I didn't have the same trail to follow on the way out I'd be worried about getting lost. As time passes I lower the bat from my shoulder and swing it by my side. There is a gentle swish on every other step, as it goes past the leg of my jeans.

I stop.

There is a flame bobbing ahead of me, cotton candy blue against the black of the tunnel. It is barely bigger than that of a match, and moves first to the left, then the right, as if wanting to get my attention. I take a step forward, squinting at it. After complete darkness the flame is almost blinding. As I step forward the flame bobs back. I take another step and it retreats again. As my eyes readjust to the light I see a small shape behind the flame, an outstretched hand bobbing left and right with the light. Anyone without my night vision wouldn't have been able to see it there. It's a Will-o'-the-wisp. Will-o'-the-wisps live in dark, damp places and lure children and animals off with their flames. I think they eat them after that.

I narrow my eyes and raise my baseball bat. Just as I am about to take a step forward, I pause. It would be easier to find the children if I followed the Will-o'-the-wisp. He would probably lead me right to them. I rest the bat back on my shoulder and walk forward. The flame waits for me to get within a couple of yards and bobs off around a corner. I have to stop myself from quickening my pace to catch it. Though I know it won't leave me behind and has every intention of eating me later, it's still infuriating to see it bobbing just out of reach. I pull my hat further down, set my eyes on the concrete just in front of the flame so as to not completely ruin my night vision, and follow it in a measured, even pace.

I haven't heard of Will-o'-the-wisps in the city before. They usually live in marshes and swamps, but with the quick urbanization of farmland I suppose even marshes aren't safe anymore. I look around at the damp, dripping walls and gurgling water beside me. I have to admit, if a marsh was my home this would be the closest thing I could find to it in the city.

There aren't many magical creatures in the world; creatures like vampires and werewolves and ghosts and elves. No one knows for sure, but I would guess there are only ten thousand in the States. We would really be happier as far from each other as possible, but, as I said before, magical beings can sense each other. They can taste each other on the air. For some reason—maybe an ingrained herd mentality—they always seem to gather in the same places. Maybe it's not so much herd mentality as hoard mentality: if there's a mob with torches and pitchforks, I'd rather not be alone, no matter how ornery and temperamental you are the rest of the time. Maybe they just don't want to feel so much like monsters. And so they build their own hierarchy within cities. Vampires become lords and ladies of

blocks, and the rest of us either find a vampire to serve in return for safety or keep our heads down and try not to be noticed. I fall into the last category. I grew up living on the street where my mother was Lady. It was buying your safety every day, trying to keep your head under the radar, hoping she didn't decide you were worth more as blood.

I remember people walking into her house and never walking out. People like my biological father.

My head snaps up and I look around. There is a smell in the air, something other than the lemony tint of the Will-o'-the-wisp ahead of me. Something rotting. I begin to salivate, sickeningly sweet, as I see a crumpled pile on the walkway a dozen yards ahead of me. I fight down the urge to throw up and continue walking forward, my eyes on the form. I get within a couple yards before I see the body of a raccoon, nothing left but a pile of bones and matted, bloody fur. The sight of blood hits me like a wall and I double over, vomiting into the water rushing by on my left. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to block out the smell, but it drives its way into my head, like a shovel through wet sand. Rage wakens in my chest. And desire.

Burning desire to tear something.

I grit my teeth and push them down, burying them under thoughts of something else—anything else. I throw up again. When I straighten, panting, the feelings are still there, still struggling to get out, but they're under control. At least for the moment. I edge past the carcass, not looking at it. The Will-o'-the-wisp is waiting for me at the next corner, and bobs along on its way when I get near.

*

I don't know how long we walk for after that. My mind is a boiling, twisted mass of thoughts and emotions, like a pot of spaghetti about to boil over. I distract myself by kicking stray pebbles along the walkway ahead of me, until they bounce off into the rushing water.

I come to a halt when I realize that the blue flame has gone out. I raise my bat from its resting place at my side and walk forward, looking left and right.

“Hello?” I whisper, the word bouncing around me, quieter every time. The flame had been almost cheery. Without it the tunnel feels colder, more menacing, like it’s waiting for me to make a mistake. “Hey,” I call, this time with my full voice. I hear a half strangled cry, and the scrabble of claws on concrete. I move forward. As I round a corner something small and bony slams into my shins, knocking me over backward. I break my fall with my hands, skinning the heels of my palms, the bat bouncing out of my fingers into the gurgling water beside me. The thing that ran into me jumps up onto my chest, scrabbling with small, sharp fingers, trying to reach my throat. I roll onto my back and grab its arm, pulling the thing away from me. It lets out a high, thin screech, like wind whistling through tree tops, and claws at me with its free hand and both feet, drawing long scratches on my hand and arm. I hold it up in the air, away from my face.

The Will-o’-the-wisp is the size of toddler. Its bones are easily outlined through its dull gray skin. The arm in my hand feels fragile, but the fingers it wraps around my wrist, trying to free itself, are long and sharp, almost cutting off the circulation in my hand. I would have had a problem had it gotten them around my neck. Its face is pinched, with a pointed nose and rows of teeth that remind me of a shark. It wriggles in my grip, hissing at me with that same high pitched whistle. I push myself to my feet and look into the flow of water where my bat had disappeared. The water isn’t deep. I can practically see the outline of my bat at the bottom. After a long look I turn away from it and continue down the tunnel, the Will-o’-the-wisp held out in front of me. Several yards later the tunnel reaches a dead end. A rusty grate beckons the water through and out of sight. Leaning up against the damp cement of this wall I see several wiggling forms. I crouch down to get a better look at them. The wide eyes of three children, two raccoons, and Casper look back at me. They are all tied and gagged with twine, yarn, grocery bags; evidently anything the Will-o’-the-wisp could get its hands on. My cat seems able to get into almost as much trouble as I can. I look appraisingly at the creature struggling in my hand.

“An industrious little fellow, aren’t you?” I look back at its crowd of prisoners. “Were you going to eat all of these?”

“Shut up. Let me go,” The Will-o’-the-wisp says in a reedy voice.

“Why’d you get so many?” I ask, almost laughing.

“Winter’s coming, idiot,” it says, glaring at me, still trying to free itself. “You don’t save up, you don’t last.”

Now I do laugh. “You’re not going to run out of things to eat in the city.” I say. “All these people and animals aren’t going to go anywhere when it gets cold. They live here. All winter.” It continues to glare at me. I stop laughing and look it in the eyes. “I’m going to put you down so I can untie these kids and my cat. If you attack me again, I’ll kill you.”

The Will-o’-the-wisp lets out a low, rumbling gurgle of a laugh. “You can’t kill me, human. I’m not a bug you can squash.”

“I’m not human.”

The Will-o’-the-wisp bares its teeth at me. “You look human.” It hisses.

“I’m not. I’m a vampire.”

It squints. “Vampire?”

I nod. “You can feel it, if you look.” The Will-o’-the-wisp closes its eyes for a moment, finally pausing in its struggle for freedom. When it opens them, they are a little wider than before.

“I won’t move,” it says. Its voice still sounds like the rubbing of reeds, but there is more of a creek to it now.

“Good.” I set it on the concrete floor, not taking my eyes from it. I doubt if it could tell I’m only half vampire, and it’s best for it not to find out. I turn back to the prisoners. I untie Casper first. He lets out a purr and rams himself against my hip as I untie the children. They are all too scared to move, and stay sitting where they are, not making a sound, staring at me with glassy eyes. After consideration I leave the two raccoons tied and turn back to the Will-o’-the-wisp. It is watching me, its long fingers slowly forming and unforming fists. I stand up.

“You won’t lure away any more children,” I say, looking down at it, doing my best to sound used to giving orders. The Will-o’-the-wisp grinds its teeth but doesn’t say anything. “And no house pets, either,” I say, as Casper rams himself into my shins again.

“What will I eat?” it croaks, its fingers now twisting the air.

“There’s plenty of raccoons and mice for you. You could even try a coyote if you can find one. But leave the kids and cats and dogs alone.” The Will-o’-the-wisp looks from me to the wide eyed children.

“You would order me? You would protect them?” I nod. It lets out a growl of frustration and rage, like a pile of stones being knocked over. “Then I have no choice, Lord.”

My face goes blank.

Is that what I had just done? Had I just declared myself lord over these people? Had I, Bristol, the half vampire with no power to fight half the magical creatures in this city, just sent out a challenge? It would appear I had, and there was no way around it. I scoop the three children into my arms and walk down the tunnel, Casper following, still purring, at my heel. At the corner I look back. The end of the tunnel is drenched in darkness, and I can only barely see the glint of the Will-o’-the-wisp’s eyes, watching me.

*

When I climbed out of the sewer the moon was almost gone, and there was a glint of rose peeking over the rooftops in the east. I tried to explain the Will-o’-the-wisp to the kids parents. Bartlebee listened with a blank stare, his hands shaking so badly he was making the door handle rattle, and Steersman shut the door in my face as soon as his son was in his arms. Mathews wouldn’t even open the door, and I had to leave the child on the hallway floor. I walked down the steps to my apartment just before the sun broke over the city like an egg yolk, rushing down streets and over rooftops.

I fed Casper. I washed my hands and arms in the kitchen sink, dozens of red scratches burning when I rubbed soap into them. I emptied the dishwasher. Easy, automatic things my body did while my mind was elsewhere.

*

I fall onto my powder blue, corduroy couch and shove half a peanut butter sandwich into my mouth. The room around me is pale yellow, lit by light sneaking through the now heavily curtained windows. I watch the shifting shadows of feet move across the shag carpet as people walk by outside.

A Will-o'-the-wisp doesn't belong here. It belongs in a marsh somewhere, or a swamp. It belongs in the dark, luring off rats and opossums. It doesn't belong in a city. It doesn't belong in a sewer, stockpiling children and cats for a hungry winter that is never going to come.

I don't belong here.

I belong in a castle on the top of a mountain, speaking with extra "v"s and laughing maniacally whenever lightning strikes. Well, maybe not. But I don't belong in the basement of an apartment building, eating peanut butter sandwiches because I can't stomach the sight of meat. I don't belong in a city where not being shot by my neighbors means finding kidnapped kids. I don't belong where stopping children from being eaten means putting myself in the open for every creature who wants to challenge me for my street.

I don't belong as Lord of anyone.

*

I'm going to need a new bat.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Jeff Hagerstrand is a career high school teacher, husband and father of six kids.

Oyster

by Jeff Hagerstrand

Gretchen Halliday smokes her twelfth cigarette of the morning. The women of “The View” snicker and snort on the TV set about lovelorn Hollywood stars. Gretchen listens without interest. The ceiling above her chair where she sits at the breakfast table is stained yellow from nicotine in the shape of a pear, a giant, sick, bumpy, two-dimensional pear. Gretchen sits here in the mornings to watch TV and smoke; dinners are eaten on a TV tray in the living room, near the gas fireplace no one ever uses. Gretchen sucks on the filter and exhales. The smoke billows up to the ceiling, adding another coat of tar.

What to do today? Gretchen wonders, as she does every day. There is nothing pressing on her agenda. Retired the last three years, Gretchen has found fewer and fewer reasons to venture past the mailbox hanging on the wall outside the front door. She has increased the number of channels available on her cable subscription four times now, this last time buying the maximum number available. I could move over to the armchair a bit early, she thinks. Her cigarette is nearly out. Taking the last drag, she feels sudden acute loss and grief overwhelm her. Tears spring to her eyes and the drag becomes a convulsive sob. The smoke chokes her and she coughs violently. Blood rushes to her face and neck as she hacks again and again with her whole body. When she finishes, nearly a minute later, her body continues to shudder uncontrollably, exhausted from the effort.

She sits back, eyes blurry. There is a commercial for toilet paper on. The grief, so intense just moments before, is gone. She is empty. She slumps down in the vinyl chair, her pants making a farting sound as she slides forward. The inside of her fore and middle fingers suddenly burn; she is still holding the lit cigarette. She stumps it out.

Her fingers are painfully singed. She gets up to find some salve but cannot. She runs her fingers under cool tap water in the sink. "Goddamn it," she says aloud, then lights another cigarette.

When she sits back at the breakfast table, the TV goes blank and the lights go out. Power outage. Her TV screen reflection is distorted, dark, shadowy. Her hair is scraggly and unkempt, a sort of blond-gray explosion. She touches it. She has always hated her hair. It is thick like a horse's tail. Lovers have never enjoyed petting her hair, or running their fingers through it, or even grabbing onto it as they fucked her from behind. Not that there were that many lovers, she broods. Larry, Fedor the Latvian mailroom boy, and Henry McCallahan. That charming Henry. So good at everything, so admired.

Oh yes, and Frank. She shouldn't leave out her husband Frank. God rest his soul thank God he's dead.

She wanders into the bathroom and pees. She rubs her sagging cheeks, pulls on her floppy neck wattle. Life ends in slow declension, she thinks. Her chest has wrinkles and strange little lumps, like someone is hiding little packets of Jell-O under her flesh when she's not looking. She begins undressing on the toilet. Her nipples point down, almost invisible without turning them up. Thighs thick and lumpy, gray pubic hair, varicose veins running like broken tributaries down her legs to her papery skinned feet. Her body is tearing itself to pieces. "Ah, Henry, if you could see me now," she whispers.

The grief suddenly comes back, so powerful that she puts out a hand to brace herself against the wall. The tears pour out and she cries silently. She touches her lips. They are dead, limp, rubbery. She imagines Henry kissing her, cupping her left breast through her one-piece bathing suit in the warm sun on the beach blanket.

She can picture it, but it is happening to someone else. She can spectate but not participate. She cries out in frustration, in horror.

“Mom?”

Antoinette. Beautiful, prime, long sleek blond hair, da Vinci face, porcelain skin, draped in complementary fashions. Gretchen is proud and viciously jealous in one twisted moment. I love her I hate her I love her Goddamn her. “Get out,” she manages.

“Mom, are you ok?” Antoinette is hesitant, her hand on the doorknob.

“OUT!” Gretchen screams. She grabs the first thing she sees and hurls it at her daughter. It strikes Antoinette in her right eye and thunks to the ground: a new bar of soap.

“Fuck! Jesus, mom!” Antoinette looks at herself in the mirror. Her eyebrow already sports an angry purple spot, which slowly spreads as they watch it. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

Gretchen walks out. She takes her longest coat from the front closet, slips on sandals and mashes a sun hat over her spiky hair, and exits the apartment quietly.

She is halfway to the park when laughter catches up to her. The whole scene is suddenly uproariously funny to her and for the second time this morning she is putting her whole body into convulsions, this time from joy. As she recovers, the light seems brighter, the colors more vivid, sounds resonate as though they had been muted until now. She is naked under her coat. The secrecy of it thrills her. The city bus is pulling into the stop at the end of the block. “Wait!” she shrieks, flailing one arm. She hustles up the sidewalk at a skip-trot, trying to hurry and not lose the sandals at the same time.

“You a damn sight, lady,” the bus driver greets her. He has midnight black skin stretched tight over a hatchet nose. His white teeth gleam in his smile.

Gretchen fishes in the coat pockets and comes up empty. “That’s alright,” the driver says. “You have a seat now.”

*

Antoinette dumps into the sink the melting ice cubes from the dishtowel she had been holding to her forehead. “What the fuck!” she says for the umpteenth time. She turns to the kitchen table, where her mother’s cigarette sits askance in the ashtray, burned to a column of ash. She dumps the ashtray and rinses it out, setting it in the sink. She picks the phone off the receiver and dials.

“Jeremy? It’s Toni. Mom’s taken off again. I don’t know. She hit me in the face with a bar of soap. Yeah, soap. It fucking hurt, too. Yeah, okay. Okay. Bye.”

*

Gretchen trudges up the immaculately pruned Rose Walk of Wreath Haven Mortuary and Burial Grounds, sneezing periodically from the pollen laden foliage. Her sinuses clogged, she is mouth breathing heavily, her smoker’s lungs protesting with each breath.

Sweaty and wheezing, she arrives at the hilltop and makes her way to an unassuming headstone amidst a sea of identical grave markers. She collapses to her knees in front of it. It takes her a long time to get her breathing under control, and the day turns old while she waits. Wispy clouds crowd the slanting sunlight. A cool breeze blows through the gaps in her overcoat, chilling her. Finally, she looks directly at the headstone.

“Francis Beauregard Halliday. Beloved father and husband.” Her voice surprises her. It croaks out the name. It is as though she is listening to herself for the first time. That’s not my voice, she thinks.

“Beloved father and husband.” Like a goddamn toad. Is that how I sound?

She shrugs. So my voice is running down, like the rest of me. “Listen here, Frank,” she croaks. “You put food on the table and a roof over our heads. You died flat broke. You fucked around on me every chance you got. You were a lousy father. You tried to fuck my sister. You were nothing but a goddamn brute and bastard every day I knew you.”

It comes out naturally, like vomiting.

She stands up and takes off her sandals. Hiking her overcoat up over her hips, she steps one foot over the headstone so that she is straddling it, her bare crotch inches above the concrete top. She closes her eyes, tilts her face into the sun, and pees.

“I piss on your grave, Frank.”

*

Jeremy meets her in the parking lot of the police station.

“She was doing what?”

“Dancing on dad’s grave.”

“Really?” This stops Jeremy as they are walking in. “How do they . . . who saw her dancing?”

Antoinette shrugs. “Maybe it’s Alzheimer’s. Maybe she’s gone crazy. Or has dementia. All she’s done for three years is watch TV and smoke. Then today, she’s naked throwing lady.”

“Oh yeah, how’s the forehead?”

“I’ll live.”

Inside, Gretchen sits patiently in the waiting area. Officer Garcia explains that Wreath Haven Mortuary and Burial Grounds doesn’t want to make a complaint against their mother, but they asked that future visits be with an appropriate escort. Also, there would be no urinating in public citation issued.

“She peed? In the cemetery?” Antoinette is embarrassed.

“Yes ma’am. On the grave marker, according to the assistant manager.”

“Oh my God.”

“Not to worry, ma’am. Old-timers sometimes get, you know, confused about where they are.” Officer Garcia hands her his card. “If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call. Anytime, really, Mrs. . . ?”

“It’s Miss. Actually, it’s Toni.”

“That number’s a direct line, ma’am. You folks have a good night.”

“Jesus.” This from Jeremy, under his breath, as they turn away.

The walk to the car is silent. Gretchen is put in the front passenger seat and buckled in, like a toddler. As Jeremy pulls out of the parking lot, Antoinette starts in.

“Jesus Christ, mom, what the hell is going on? The cops say you pissed on dad’s grave? Is that true? Is it? And what about –”

“Not now, Toni. Get on the freeway here.” She indicates a freeway sign to Jeremy. He looks at her for a long moment. The sun hat, the wild hair. The overcoat, which now covers police trainee sweats. The set of her mouth. The look in her eye. He decides.

“Where’re we going, mom?”

“What? Don’t listen to her! Don’t indulge her, for Christ’s sake!”

“Quiet, Toni,” Gretchen and Jeremy say together.

“Just take the freeway for me, would you?”

*

On the drive, the grief pounds her again, oceanic waves of crushing pain. Her heart swells to bursting and caves in, over and over again. The world rushes away from her, and it is from the end of a long dark tunnel that she hears:

“Mom? Are you crying? What’s wrong?”

Then it passes, as suddenly as it came. She fumbles in the pockets of the coat for her cigarettes and comes up empty. It occurs to her that she hasn't smoked since she left the house.

"Funny." She says this out loud. Jeremy and Antoinette look at each other in the rearview mirror. Gretchen sees the look. "Either of you two got a cigarette on you?" Her voice is still unrecognizable to her.

"I quit last week."

"I don't smoke, mom. For Chrissakes."

"Don't be a quitter, kid." Gretchen pulls the ashtray open and sifts through the butts. There is a stubbed out half-cigarette. Gretchen punches in the electric lighter and cracks her window.

"Do you have to smoke, mom?"

Gretchen turns around and stares directly into her daughter's pretty blue eyes.

"I'd like to see you find someone to love who loves you back. I'd like to think that all those years I spent teaching you not to whine – that's right, little miss thinks she's so goddamn clever, you are a whiner I'd like to think that those years paid off. I'd like to see you be a mother, because I think you're going to be a great mother. Better than I was. Now, be a good girl, and shut up."

The lighter pops out. Gretchen smiles, a real smile, natural, and for a rare moment Antoinette sees her mother as beautiful. This must be what she looked like when she was young. The thought has never occurred to her before. Then Gretchen turns and lights her cigarette, and the old woman is back.

"Why were you crying, mom?" Jeremy waits. Gretchen smokes. "Do you want to tell us what's going on?"

"No."

*

The crescent moon is rising behind them as they pull into the Pacific Ocean overlook and park. “Wait here,” Gretchen orders, and gets out.

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere between Monterrey and, I don’t know, Big Sur?”

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know. What’s she doing?”

“Standing by the wall. I don’t know. She’s just standing there.”

They are silent. Antoinette shifts around. “This car is small. It’s uncomfortable back here.”

“Why don’t you stretch out?”

“Then I can’t wear a seat belt.”

“Then don’t wear a seat belt.”

“That wouldn’t be safe.”

“Then don’t complain. Wait. Are you saying I’m not a good driver?”

“No, you’re a great driver.”

“Don’t be sarcas –”

“Holy shit!” Toni sits bolt upright. “You don’t think she’s going to—”

“What? No! I mean, she wouldn’t...”

They look at each other. A second later the car doors fly open and they are racing toward Gretchen.

“Mom!”

“Mom! Don’t do it!”

They are yelling and waving their arms. When they reach her, they each clutch an arm.

“What the hell is the matter with the two of you?” They are panting, breathless. “I’m not suicidal. Well, not today, anyway.”

They stand there together, children holding mother’s hands, looking out at the ocean. It occurs to both children that this is the first time since they were very small that they stood this way with their mother. It quiets them to think this, and they both stay very still to preserve the moment as long as they can.

Gretchen, however, is elsewhere. She is 23 and in love with Henry, who has just parked his Lincoln Continental at the Highway One mile 287 viewing point and is currently working one of his hands up her left inner thigh and undoing the clasp on her bra with the other. Gretchen is resisting none of this, because since she met Henry she has walked on air. She has smiled cramps into her cheeks, and she can’t help it. He is wonderful. He makes her feel wonderful. Life is wonderful, wonderful everything.

She drops their hands. “Okay kids, let’s go.”

*

La Bonne Vie Retirement Community is the dingiest of rest homes. The wallpaper is yellowed like the nicotine stain on Gretchen’s ceiling. The popcorned ceilings are too low, and too many of the light fixtures are missing, so that naked fluorescent light is everywhere. The carpets are worn and stained. Residents—old, old people—litter the hallways like bums on a street. Mismatched inmate pajama sets and knit robes hang on bony frames that wobble and inch about on walkers and in wheelchairs. There is wheezing and coughing and the drone of medical machines filling the air everywhere. The smell, ammonia and peroxide masking shit and death.

Jeremy and Antoinette have given up asking questions. They tag along behind Gretchen. Jeremy, who dresses like Kurt Cobain, on purpose, tries to be cool with all the sickness and dying around him. He looks extremely uncomfortable. Antoinette doesn’t hide her horror. She covers her mouth and nose with a scarf

and tries not to touch anything or anyone, including the floor, tiptoeing after her mother and brother.

Gretchen stops at room 193. "You two need to wait here."

"Whose room is this?"

Gretchen turns and enters the room. She closes the door behind her.

"H. McCallahan," Jeremy reads off the name card next to the door. "Who's that?"

Henry's bed sits next to an impressive array of modern medical technology. Tubes run between Henry and the machines, keeping Henry alive, breathing for him, feeding him, disposing of his waste. They seem to have formed a mutually interdependent relationship.

Gretchen sits down next to Henry and squeezes his skeletal hand. The thrill of his touch is long gone.

"That night," she whispers. "That night..."

That night she needs to pee. Just as he's getting his pants off and they're pawing each other, she has to pee. She jumps out and squats near the back tire. Henry leans into the emergency brake release, whether in frustration or anticipation, Gretchen never finds out. The back tires roll off the cliff before Henry can stomp on the brake, and then it's too late. The Lincoln slides slowly backwards off the edge. Henry jiggles at his door handle, realizes it's locked, reaches up to unlock it, gets the door open, and then the car tips up and disappears out of sight. There is a long quiet, broken suddenly by the horrifying crunch of automobile smashing into rocks.

"I'm sorry," Gretchen says.

In the ambulance. On the way to the hospital. You begged me.

"I couldn't. I couldn't." Her voice cracks.

Don't let them, you said. You woke up and looked at me.

Her voice steadies. “And you said don’t let them. You said I don’t want to be a vegetable.”

She isn’t crying when she barricades the door by shoving a plastic chair against the door handle. She isn’t crying when she unplugs the machines. She isn’t crying when she kisses Henry’s forehead. She can feel the grief again, but lifting this time. She sighs, and lies down next to Henry. They find her asleep next to his corpse when they finally get through the door.

*

For the second time in a week, Gretchen walks out of police custody and into the custody of her grown children. Her court appointed attorney, a young man who has experience handling murder cases, gets the charge reduced to manslaughter in exchange for Gretchen’s guilty plea. She stands up when the judge addresses her. Gone are the cyclical grief tsunamis; gone even is the underlying tension that another one could hit her any minute.

Manslaughter. Conviction carries with it a mandatory seven year sentence. Antoinette and Jeremy keep emphasizing that, according to her attorney, with good behavior she could be out in three years, maybe fewer. Gretchen, her pain at rest, smiles kindly at her anxious children. “It’s going to be just fine now,” she tells them, exhaling the delicious first drag of her afternoon cigarette.

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